Summary

Lexa is going to drag her country into the modern age kicking and screaming if she has to. Enter Clarke Griffin, United Nations election observer.

Notes

With thanks to my friend who encouraged me all through the writing of this despite falling months behind schedule. This story takes place in the near future. Some liberties have been taken with the election observation process, but there is a UN Electoral Assistance Division.

"What infinite heart's-ease
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!"
- Henry V, Act 4, Scene 1
Chapter 1

As flights go, it hasn't been a bad one. Clarke has always liked flying in general and this one has been smooth. They're even a little ahead of schedule. But as they descend through the cloud layer over the kingdom of Markenland and the deep, mysterious green of the country’s heralded forests comes into view, she feels a lurch of dread in her stomach. This is her home for the next several months, possibly longer, and her entire career and a nation’s future are resting on her shoulders.

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Two heavy black cars wait on the tarmac, gleaming and polished, with several equally polished dark suits standing nearby with their hands folded placidly in front of their bodies. The rest of the private airport that serves the royal family looks practically empty. Clarke trips lightly down the steps, glad to be moving again, and watches the rest of her team come down. First Raven, probably happier than Clarke to get off her ass, then Octavia, Monty and Jasper, Harper and Zoe, and Wells bringing up the rear, dependable as ever in keeping an eye on everyone else.

"Welcome to Markenland," says a large man in lightly-accented English, stepping forward from the lead car. Most of his face is hidden under a pair of sunglasses and a thick, neatly-trimmed beard. "I'm Gustus. I'll be in charge of your security while you're here."

"Hi," says Clarke, adjusting the strap of her satchel and switching her duffel to her other hand so she can shake with Gustus. "I'm Clarke Griffin. UN Department of Political Affairs."

"Please," he says, holding up a black handheld metal detector.

"Of course," Clarke says, obligingly holding out her arms and stepping her legs shoulder-width apart. The rest of her team follow her example, getting wanded along their arms and bodies and legs, a few them receiving gentle pat-downs to confirm the beeps are innocuous, belt buckles or loose change. Gustus and his people are efficient, scanning and checking everyone against a list, and a few minutes later they're all crowding around the luggage being offloaded from the plane's cargo hold.

"Everything has been arranged, Ms. Griffin," says Gustus. He gestures to the cars. "It's about a twenty minute drive to the palace."

"Oh, I was told arrangements would be made at a hotel," Clarke says, not liking how things are going off the rails from the very start.

"It's easier to secure the palace, ma'am," says Gustus. He offers no other explanation.

Clarke looks over her shoulder at her team, still collecting their luggage and re-grouping. "We really would prefer to stay at a hotel outside of the palace."

"My instructions are to bring you to the palace." Gustus quietly clasps his hands in front of his body. He doesn't move. He’s so large it would probably take her entire team pulling and pushing to get him to budge.

They can clear this up later. Right now her team is tired and hungry and they could all use a shower. "Okay," Clarke says. "When we're there would it be possible to speak to whoever is in charge of accommodations?"
"Of course," Gustus says in a blandly polite tone that tells Clarke he just wants to get the nice visitor lady into the car so he can do his job.

"Guys," Clarke says. She motions to the two cars. Trunk lids pop open, waiting.

"I'm starving," Raven says, heaving her roller bag into the trunk first. "I hope the hotel restaurant is good."

"Yeah, about that," says Clarke.

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The car ride is quiet, the only sound the tapping of fingers on phones. Clarke has to update her bosses, has to make sure the rest of her team are on the same page, has to check on their original accommodations. She could delegate some of it but being in a foreign country and having their plans already meandering in the wrong direction has her nervously tightening her grip on the reigns.

Gustus sits up front with the driver, ignoring them to focus on the road and their surroundings.

When Clarke manages to look up for more than a few seconds, she realizes they're passing through some of the most beautifully verdant countryside she's ever seen. Markenland is renowned for its forests, lush and dark and mysterious, running right up against the mountain range that forms the northern border. They even have a genre of literature solely dealing with forest themes, and their renewable timber industry has long been one of the prime suppliers of jobs in the country.

"You could get lost in there and never come out," Octavia says, not sounding all that horrified by the notion.

The road they're on has been hewn through the forest and Clarke can see just how much effort it takes to prune back the encroaching moss and trees. Infrastructure here is a matter of constant maintenance. "I think they have a couple of novels about that," Clarke jokes.

"Several hundred," Gustus says from up front, with no trace of humor.

Octavia shoots Clarke a humorous uh-oh glance and they resume their silence all the way to the palace.

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The palace isn't as big as some as Clarke has seen. But it's still very much a palace, built around the beginning of Markenland's renaissance period, when the current ruling family came to power. Two hundred and fifty years of unbroken bloodline and now here they are, staring up at the bright brick and sandstone of the rear entrance, which backs up onto a multi-tiered terrace that leads down to acres of manicured palace grounds, all surrounded by that same dense forest. Clarke can spot metal guard towers in the distance with tiny figures moving hazily within, no doubt keeping watch during this tumultuous time.

Gustus gets out first and opens the doors for them. Clarke steps onto the neat gravel driveway and stretches, still feeling a little cramped from the plane.

A small stream of staffers comes scurrying out of the palace to take their luggage.

"Oh no, that's okay," Clarke says, but she's ignored and her luggage is carted off and the staffers disappear almost as quickly as they appeared.
"Your luggage will be put in your rooms," Gustus says. "You may decide amongst yourselves which rooms you want."

"That's very generous of you," Clarke says, not a little effort needed to hold back the sarcasm.

"Please." Gustus gestures with his hand for Clarke to go ahead. "The housekeeping staff will be waiting for you inside."

"And I'll be able to ask one of them about our accommodations?" Clarke asks.

"They've been instructed to answer all your questions," Gustus says, and Clarke notes how he hasn't really given her anything.

They avoid the terraces and follow through the service entrance, going through a moderately-sized mudroom first before emerging into a long hallway with doors spaced down it at regular intervals. It looks like staffer quarters. A middle-aged woman in a dark suit is waiting for them, a pleasant smile already on her face.

"Welcome to the palace," she says. "My name is Alla and I'll be your palace liaison while you stay with us. Please allow me to show you to your rooms."

"Yes, about that," Clarke says, just as Alla starts walking, apparently not of a mind to listen. They set off at a brisk pace and Clarke tries to keep an eye on her staffers, but it gets harder when they suddenly emerge into the palace proper, their footsteps echoing off the marble floor and up into the high, frescoed ceilings. Elaborate columns line the large hall, creating alcoves along the sides where people can gather and watch what happens on the main floor. Tall windows draped in rich velvet curtains let in slanting early evening light. At the far end, a thick red runner zigzags up marble steps to a second floor that leads to a dais topped by a heavy wooden throne crowned with a massive set of sharp antlers.

Alla veers off to the right, taking them into another wing of the palace that eventually turns into another long hallway divided into rooms, though these quarters look more fitting for an ambassadorial visit. The floors up here are polished wood, no doubt from the local forests.

"I was told I could speak to someone in the palace about switching our accommodations," Clarke says to Alla, who has finally stopped her brisk pace for a moment.

"I'm afraid I only know what her majesty has ordered," Alla says with a placid smile, undoubtedly perfected over long decades as a staffer accustomed to dealing with all ranks of fussy officials. "Please, allow me to show you the amenities."

Clarke swallows her sigh and puts on an equally polite smile. "Yes, please. Thank you."

Alla opens a set of white double doors trimmed in gold to her right, revealing a thoroughly modern-looking bedroom. Clarke had been expecting something more ornate based on the carefully preserved museum-quality palace interior, but this bedroom has a comfortable-looking king bed with a tall headboard, covered in a white-and-gold patterned duvet. The rest of the decor matches the gold and white theme, with a few hints of red, complemented by light wooden furniture, including a small sitting area and a desk against a window overlooking the gardens. Her luggage is arranged neatly at the foot of the bed.

The bathroom is equally modern, with simple, sleek fixtures. The walk-in shower is separate from the enormous clawfoot bathtub, which is the only thing in the room that looks older than ten years.

"How do you like it?" Alla asks from the door, where she’s stayed.
"It's very nice, thank you," says Clarke.

"Your credentials have been left with your luggage. I'll get the rest of your people settled then." Alla bustles out and Clarke takes the moment to sit down on the bed, feeling the slight give of a plush-but-firm mattress. She flops back and finally lets out the sigh that's been building inside of her since they landed.

Raven finds her like that a few minutes later. Clarke hears the click of a camera and shoots up to find Raven gleefully saving something on her phone.

"God I wish I could post this on social media," Raven says.

"This is why you're not allowed to have social media," Clarke says. She pushes off the bed and goes to the window, taking in the view. A few gardeners move slowly through the hedges and topiaries; beyond them, the dark and greenning forest. Even here, in the lap of luxury and power, the forest is barely held back in ranks of thick trunks that obscure vision past the first score of yards. It's no wonder so much of their literature is focused on it.

"We should stay here," Raven says. She hooks a thumb over her shoulder. "My bathroom is really nice. I've never used a bidet before, but maybe I could start."

"We're moving to the hotel we originally booked as soon as I figure out who to talk to about it," Clarke says, her chin coming up with determination.

"Okay, well in the meantime, I'm gonna take a shower," says Raven. "It's the type with a waterfall, Clarke. Waterfall." She mimes water flowing down with her fingers as she backs out of the room.

Clarke takes a moment to look in her own bathroom mirror, pulling her blazer straight and finger-combing her hair. She scoops up the lanyard with her ID badge on it, then she steps out into the hallway, where the staffers have all vanished as easily as they appeared. She's starting to get the feeling that the queen really doesn't want them leaving the palace.

A bit of wandering through some doors and down a flight of stairs brings her into a slightly less ornate part of the palace. There are thick runners protecting the parquet flooring and a lot of very elaborate moulding, but the furniture looks modern and functional. It feels like people actually use these rooms, perhaps as offices. Clarke is trying to duck her head into a room when someone clears a throat behind her, sending her banging into the door in a surprised panic. "Jesus Christ," Clarke says, trying to disentangle herself from her own mixed up limbs, clumsy with embarrassment. She turns around and finds an angular woman in an entirely black business suit glaring at her.

"This wing is restricted to visitors," she says. "I need to see some ID."

"Oh, I'm Clarke. Clarke Griffin. I'm-"

"The UN election observer. Yes." The woman scans Clarke from head to toe and Clarke feels uncomfortably like she can see right through all of her clothes. She tries not to squirm. "You'll still need ID."

"Oh." Clarke fumbles again, pulling her ID free of her jacket and holding it up.

The woman takes it, pulling it hard enough that the lanyard tugs painfully at the back of Clarke's neck. She releases it with a light snap. "How can I help you, Ms. Griffin?"

"I need to speak to whoever's in charge of our accommodations. We made arrangements to stay at a hotel nearby."
The woman cuts her off again. "Her majesty prefers that you stay at the palace."

"I don't answer to her majesty," Clarke says pleasantly. "And she's the one who asked for our presence to ensure a fair election, so it would be very much appreciated if we could stay at the neutral location we originally requested."

"You can bring it up with her," says the woman. "Your team is scheduled to dine with her tonight."

"We haven't gotten any kind of itinerary yet-"

"You would have been provided one if you'd simply stayed in your assigned room," says the woman.

Clarke narrows her eyes. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'll have one of the staff escort you back to your room," says the woman, quite deliberately ignoring her and not appearing especially bothered by it. A young staffer appears around the corner as though magically summoned. "Please make sure Ms. Griffin has everything she needs." The tone of her voice very much indicates she desires the opposite.

"Thanks for your help," Clarke says, still pleasant even though her annoyance has caught a spark and turned into outright seething in her gut. It galls her how carefully she has to tread, mindful that beginnings are the most delicate times.

The staffer motions with one hand, indicating Clarke should go ahead, and doesn't take his eyes off her until she's once again in her room. It's not a second after he's left that Wells knocks and comes in.

"They searched our bags," he says, holding a wrinkled dress shirt in his fist. He seems more resigned than indignant, but he always was the cooler head of the two of them.

"Probably standard palace security," Clarke says, eyes sliding towards her own luggage, still at the foot of her bed.

"They messed everything up though. I hope they have dry cleaning. And they've got us penned up in here instead of taking us to the hotel." Wells lowers the shirt. "It kind of feels like we're being detained."

"Just...keep everybody calm," Clarke says. "We're meeting the queen tonight and we'll get it all sorted out then."

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This is not Clarke's first private meal with a head of state. But it is her first as the leader of an election monitoring team, and she agonizes over whether to overdress in her nervousness. Alla had finally delivered itineraries, passing out tablets to everyone containing basic palace guides, touristic information about Markenland, and some local apps for weather and news in addition to the schedule. Business casual, it said, and Clarke is a grown adult who knows what business casual means but finds herself staring at a very conservative evening dress and then a full pantsuit before Raven wanders in and helps her pick out a nice silk blouse and slate trousers.

"I'm so hungry," Raven says impatiently as Clarke changes in the bathroom.

"You could've asked for a snack or something," Clarke says, buttoning her blouse. She pokes her head out. "Makeup?"
"You look fine."

Clarke finds the rest of her team assembled in the hallway, hemlines getting adjusted and cuffs getting pulled into place. She holds up a forestalling hand. "I'm asking about the hotel. Everyone just be on their best behavior tonight. If we make a good impression first it'll be easier to get what we need later on down the line."

Octavia pastes on a charming smile; she might be one of the younger team members, but she's always been the most adaptable of them. "Lead on, McGriffin."

A staffer comes along exactly as scheduled on their itinerary and leads them to other side of the palace. "This is the residential wing," he says, like a practiced tour guide, pointing out a few objects of historical note as they pass. "When the queen is in residence, she stays here."

Their destination is a small dining room on the second floor - small by palace standards, anyway. The long table dominating the center of the room is enough to seat twenty; Clarke's team will only take up half of that.

"This feels formal," Raven says out of the side of her mouth. Clarke takes the chair to the right of the head of the table and her team fills in behind her. Raven, Octavia, and Harper on one side and Monty, Jasper, Wells, and Zoe along the other.

They're waiting five minutes, then ten, then twenty. Monty and Jasper are fidgeting, never a good sign, and Clarke is about to get up and find someone when a staffer enters. "My apologies," she says. "Her majesty will not be able to join you for dinner tonight. She requests that you eat and enjoy yourselves."

The staffer bows out without waiting for questions or requests, immediately replaced by a small stream of servers who bring out baskets of fresh bread and the salad course.

Raven is already whipping out her fancy cloth napkin and settling it over her lap when the first of the food lands in front of her.

The others are also enthusiastically digging in, although Octavia is making a disgruntled and unsurprised face at Clarke.

"I know," Clarke says, nevertheless picking up her salad fork.

"What if we like, never see the queen in person?" Jasper asks sotto voce.

"We have to see her, she's the one who requested us," says Wells reasonably.

"I heard-" Jasper begins, his tone one of impending high gossip.

"Everybody dig in. I want us to get an early start tomorrow," Clarke interrupts.

Jasper sheepishly turns to his food; he and Monty make a great technical team, but there's a reason why Jasper doesn't handle the more social aspects of their work.

Raven leans over so only Clarke can hear her murmur. "I heard her father had a man flogged to death in front of her when she was a kid."

"That's an urban legend and you know it," Clarke murmurs back, trying not to let on that Raven is gossiping about the queen in her own palace, where she undoubtedly has eyes and ears everywhere.
The real story, as far as they know, goes like this: Markenland, one of the last absolute monarchies in the modern world, is ruled by a family whose bloodline goes back over two hundred and fifty years. The country is fairly isolationist although they do permit journalists in and out without too many restrictions, as well as moderate tourism from neighboring countries and decent if uninteresting trade throughout Europe and Asia. But the first word most people associate with Markenland is usually "traditional" if not outright "obsolete."

The king of Markenland is known for his autocratic tendencies, which seem to get worse as the years go on, culminating in a failed coup that kills his wife and all his children but one. The borders slam closed and communication is done through their one remaining embassy in Switzerland; all news is filtered through state-run media.

Five years later the borders suddenly re-open with the announcement of a new ruler; the king is dead, long live the queen. There are rumors of a second coup, this one successful, though at the behest of disgruntled nobles or at the hand of the king's own daughter, no one is really sure. The new queen is barely of legal age and there's a spike in worldwide fascination with the country now being ruled by a teenager. Independent journalists are invited inside the country again. Pictures of the queen standing stone-faced at her father's funeral, then still and statuesque at her coronation, disseminate rapidly online. “Ice queen” puns run rampant.

For seven years Markenland embarks on a progressive course until the queen announces she'll be transitioning her country to a constitutional monarchy, placing power in a duly elected prime minister and legislative representatives. Markenland will have its first ever free elections. After years of referendums and political negotiations and logistical work, the elections are only a few months away. Enter Clarke Griffin.

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After dinner they're all escorted back to their rooms, with the strong implication that wandering at night is frowned upon.

Clarke pulls Octavia into her room when the guards have retreated back down the hallway, taking up posts somewhere unobtrusive. “What do you think?” Clarke asks, letting herself sit heavily on one of the chairs in the sitting area. Octavia lowers herself a bit more gracefully on the couch opposite.

“You want my professional security expert opinion?” Octavia asks.

“This feels like we’re under house arrest,” Clarke says.

“It’s not great,” Octavia agrees. “I don’t think we’re being monitored here, but they’re definitely keeping an eye on us whenever we leave our rooms. Palace isn’t under lockdown, though, from what I can tell.” She eyes Clarke critically. “So no need to call Kane and ask for peacekeepers just yet.”

“I didn’t think we were there,” Clarke says a bit defensively. “I just don’t like having our plans unilaterally changed without our permission.”

Octavia holds up her hands. “Hey, I’m with you there.” She stands up again. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll keep my ear to the ground. Maybe see if I can buddy up with one of our handlers.”

That at least is somewhat reassuring, and the very fact that Octavia hasn’t gone stalking around telling them to watch their heads and stay close to her is perhaps the best sign that they’re safer than
Clarke feels.

Still, she’s exhausted from the traveling but mixed up from the time difference, leaving her lying awake in bed until nearly three in the morning. She pores over the briefing materials on her laptop, searching for any tidbit of information to help her figure out the situation until her brain finally manages to shut down.

When she wakes up she feels like she's barely slept at all. The mattress is extremely comfortable but just different enough from the one in her apartment to confuse her back and leave it with a lowkey ache that doesn't entirely relent even after a hot shower. She's almost mad at herself for telling everyone they had an early start time; another hour of sleep right now would be amazing.

Alla materializes in front of Clarke's door just as she opens it. "Ms. Griffin, we've taken the liberty of setting up breakfast buffet style for you and your team," she says.

Clarke blinks, wondering if Alla is somehow watching her through a hidden camera, Octavia’s inspection notwithstanding, or if she's just one of those superbly competent staffers. "Thank you," she says.

"Your schedule has been updated to include a morning meeting with her highness after breakfast."

"Yes, I noticed," Clarke says, tapping the binder she holds under one arm where her tablet is safely stowed.

"Perfect. Allow me to show you to the dining area. I'll make sure all your team members join us there."

Clarke is ushered along to a room one floor below, once again styled in modern decor. A long banquet table is set up against the wall, lined with warmed tureens. Clarke waits for her team to trickle in one by one, some of them rubbing their eyes sleepily, most of them beelining for the carafe of coffee at the end of the serving line.

Once they're all seated around a table, hunched over their steaming mugs, Clarke takes out her tablet, already queued up to the day's schedule. She tries to act as though this is all according to plan but from the moment they've arrived, the unseen hand of the queen has dictated their every move, and it's got them all a little on edge. There is more going on in country than they were briefed to deal with.

Alla returns to them ten minutes before eight to take them to their first official meeting with the queen. Clarke tries to set the example: head up, confident. They're representatives of the United Nations and there's no reason for them to feel nervous, not when the sitting monarch of the country has personally requested them and can't afford to piss off the UN at a time when her country is searching for international respectability.

They head for the north wing of the palace, where the furniture once again returns to its preserved, ornate style. They're taken through a long hall lined with dark oil paintings of past kings and queens, most of them posing against a forested backdrop in full military regalia. A few of them wear what look like quasi-religious robes instead. All of them look dour bordering on severe.

Alla eventually ushers them into a modest waiting room with no windows and rows of books lining the built-in shelves. They're volumes of Markenland history, dating back to the 1500s, and the nerd in Clarke is curious to pull one out and start leafing through it. But at eight on the dot the inner door swings open and a familiar face appears in the doorway.

Clarke does a quick double take at the woman who asked for ID the day before. Once again she's in
a dark suit with sharp lines, her hair pulled back in a severe bun. "You've all been briefed on our royal protocol?" she asks without introduction.

"Yes," Clarke says, a little taken aback by the very abruptness of the question.

"Fine. If you'll come with me," she says. Her eyes land on Clarke, daring her to say something.

They file in, lining up in the middle of a large office. An imposing wooden desk sits at one end, lit by windows overlooking the forest, while a pair of couches and antique fauteuils sit at the other end around an elaborately carved coffee table. A large oil painting dominates one wall, depicting some sort of historical battle between cavalry and foot soldiers.

A woman gets up from the desk, buttoning the front of her dark single-breasted blazer.

Their guide stands next to the desk with her hands behind her back. "Allow me to introduce Her Majesty, Queen Lexa of Markenland." The woman gestures with one hand towards Clarke and her team. "May I present Clarke Griffin, of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division, and her team."

Clarke takes her first look at Queen Lexa: a woman only a year older than Clarke, shorter and slighter in person than Clarke thought she would be. Her hair is caught up in a neat chignon, pinned at the bottom with a simple golden V-shaped brooch. And though her suit is obviously expensive and well-cut to her slim lines, she could be just another rich businesswoman in Manhattan.

Of course she's been photographed and televised before, usually in similar attire, but Clarke was expecting - she's unsure what. Someone more in line with all the whispers of strict militaristic behavior, someone more befitting of the rumor that she killed her own father to take the throne. No matter how much she’s done to move Markenland forward in the past ten years, rumors of violence and intrigue have followed her for her entire adult life. As she walks gracefully around her desk, offering her hand to shake, Clarke feels her perspective shift again. The queen carries an aura of easy power and her eyes are keenly intelligent, cutting across Clarke towards the rest of her team and seeming to come up with a lengthy summation in moments.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, your majesty," Clarke says. The queen's grip is very firm, calloused in spots except where an understated signet ring bands her middle finger. To Clarke it almost feels like when she shook hands with a pro hockey player a few years ago, the strength casually there from a lifetime of hard work. They’re of a height with Clarke in heels and the queen in polished oxfords.

"The pleasure is all mine." Her voice is quiet, measured, the enunciation excellent. She speaks perfect English, no hint of accent like some of the staff around the palace. Clarke has watched her speech to Markenland announcing the election several times; it was a good speech, delivered cleanly, with a pleasing cadence. Clearly she's had lessons in oratory. She was educated entirely in-country, a product of her father's isolationism and borderline xenophobia, but Clarke doesn't have the best measure of the local university system, or whether the queen simply had the finest tutors money could buy.

Clarke introduces her team members one by one and the queen goes down the line, shaking hands with each, firm up-and-down with eye contact. Jasper audibly stammers over his name.

"I apologize for the change to the schedule last night," says the queen, coming to the end of the line and turning back to Clarke, hands folded behind her back. Posture is crisp but not overly deliberate, habits Clarke has seen in those with military training. "There were matters that required my immediate attention."
"Of course," Clarke says graciously. "I look forward to working with you during this historic time for Markenland."

"I'm grateful to the United Nations for agreeing to my request," says the queen. "It's important that the process and results of this election are as legitimate and transparent as possible so that my people can be confident in the change in leadership."

The aide next to the desk clears her throat; Clarke still hasn't managed to catch her name, but apparently she can interrupt the queen's conversation without immediate consequence.

"Ma'am, the duchess is waiting."

Clarke could swear the queen rolls her eyes, just the barest flicker of disdain. But it must be a shift of the light because she's turning smoothly and nodding at her aide. "I'll be right with her." Then back to Clarke. "I trust everything in the palace has been to your satisfaction?"

"Actually-"

The throat clearing this time is much louder and more insistent. Clarke is not deterred.

"We made plans to stay in a hotel close to the palace as part of our neutrality as observers, so that the election results are as legitimate and transparent as possible." The queen doesn't react to having her own words used against her. Clarke's heart is starting to beat faster of its own accord, but she maintains her calm. "I'd appreciate it if we were allowed to move there at the earliest convenience."

The queen's face hardens instantly and the little peek of humanity Clarke thought she might have glimpsed is immediately subsumed into the cool, distant attitude of a ruler considering a request she considers beneath her. "Your objection is noted," she says. "But as part of my duty to safeguard you while in my country, I must insist that you remain in the palace, where my security will have a much easier time protecting you."

"If I may ask, ma'am, from what?" Clarke asks. She can see the aide clenching both hands into fists and out of the corner of her eye, her entire team anxiously swiveling their heads between Clarke and the queen.

"As you said, it is a historic time. Historic times bring immense change, and in a country as conservative as mine, change is especially frightening for those with the most to lose."

"You're not suggesting-"

"I suggest nothing. I'm protecting your team from undue influence where they could be reached by anyone."

"Exactly what kind of undue influence?" Clarke asks, more a challenge than an actual question.

Queen Lexa frowns. "You're sure you were completely briefed on Markenland's history before you came here?"

"Yes of course."

The queen turns again towards her aide. "Anya. See that they're properly briefed. Any questions, you're to answer. I want you to head up the liaison team while they adjust."

The aide, Anya, visibly bristles. "Ma'am, I believe Alla is more than capable-" She stops abruptly mid-sentence. Clarke can't see the queen's face but whatever Anya sees there has her looking down
at the floor. She doesn't want to imagine the kind of woman who can control Anya with a look. "Yes, your majesty."

When the queen turns back to Clarke she's once again polite and formal. "If that will be all Ms. Griffin, I have an anxious noble to reassure."

Clarke is actually all for fighting this out, but now is clearly not the time, and she's not entirely certain the queen won't just toss her in jail for speaking out of turn. She inclines her head once with a short jerk of her chin and shakes hands with Queen Lexa again, perhaps trying to squeeze back more firmly this time, and follows a seething Anya from the room. Clarke just hears a new voice in the office as the door closes behind them, someone who came in from another entrance, and she catches a glimpse of tall blonde from behind. The duchess, she assumes.

Anya doesn't return them to their quarters, but to a section in the north wing a few floors below the royal office. She pushes open the double doors to reveal a reception area with two empty desks, with another set of double doors leading deeper into the suite. "These offices have been set aside for your use," Anya says, practically through gritted teeth. "I'll have an aide get you set up on our wifi. You'll have a small staff of your own from her majesty's office to help you with anything else, and you're scheduled to meet the election commissioner later today."

"Thank you," Clarke says sincerely, trying to keep Anya from tipping any further into disliking them.

Anya's eyes flick down to the ID hanging from Clarke's lanyard. "Keep your ID on you at all times, don't wander, and you'll be fine," she says. She pivots and marches out in one smooth motion.

"She really does not like us," says Jasper.

"She wasn't in any of our dossiers," says Octavia. "She's not a military commander or high noble, not that we know of. That usually means intelligence service. They're probably one of the most paranoid agencies in the world."

"For now, the queen is trusting her with us, so let's all do our best to get her on our side," says Clarke. "And let's get this office set up. I have to make a report."

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Kane, her immediate superior at the Political Assistance Division, is more than disgruntled to hear the news that there is more unrest in Markenland than previously reported. Some analyst is going to be getting a serious reprimand, Clarke is sure, and she feels sorry for them. At the same time she's somewhat stuck in a foreign country where all their briefings and intelligence have left them unprepared for the actual situation on the ground.

"We can bring you home right now if you want," Kane says via a secure conference call. As secure as Monty can be certain; Clarke can't afford to assume that someone isn't monitoring all communication in and out of the palace.

"No, it's not that bad. And I think that would just destabilize the country even more," Clarke says. She rubs the bridge of her nose, trying to think of some way to ameliorate the situation. "Let's just continue with the daily scheduled check-in, but from now on missing one will be cause for concern."

Kane looks at her gravely for a moment then nods. "All right. If you think you can handle it."

"I can handle it," Clarke says firmly.
"Sorry your first time in charge had to be like this."

"I'd better get my pick of assignments when I get back," Clarke says, only half-joking.

"You got it. See you tomorrow."

She closes her laptop feeling slightly better. At least her superiors are on notice and she'll have backup as close as Geneva if she really needs it.

Raven pokes her head into the office Clarke has chosen for herself. "Clarke, we've got the election commission meeting in ten."

"I'll be there," Clarke says, preparing for the first of what will be months of no doubt arduous days. But before she can get up, another knock sounds on her partially open door. The knock is just for show, as the hand that made it immediately pushes open the door.

It's the woman from this morning, the duchess. Up close, she's almost intimidatingly tall, with a face of cold patrician beauty that looks just as humorless as the headshot in the dossier Clarke read on the plane. She's older, old enough to be a mother to someone Clarke's age, and she wears a simple silk blouse and slacks, all in black. Clarke picks out the expensive but understated jewelry on her fingers and around her neck. She looks at Clarke with pale eyes, studying her in return with a calculatedness that makes Clarke glad for the desk between them.

"May I help you?" Clarke asks. She braces her hands on the desk and stands up. There's little known about the duchess - indeed, about many of the higher-ranked nobles of Markenland - but it doesn't take a genius to figure out she's a formidable figure with influence if the queen is taking one-on-one meetings with her.

"Clarke Griffin," the woman says, a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Nia De Sever, Ninth Duchess of Istfal." She holds out a well-manicured hand, which Clarke is obliged to lean over and shake.

"Your grace," Clarke says. For a woman like the duchess, formality is usually the right call.

"I understand you're here to observe the election," Nia says. There's something in her tone Clarke can't quite pin down, but it doesn't sound positive.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to working with your people."

"Not my people," Nia says, beginning a slow circuit around the room, examining the small paintings on the walls, all pastoral winter scenes.

Clarke feels dangerously off balance. The duchess is clearly here on her own agenda, and though Clarke is doing her best not to tip her hand one way or the other, she doesn't want to inadvertently pick a side. She chooses silence as the best option.

Nia brushes her fingers along the frame of one painting, a dark copse at night piled heavily with snow, illuminated by a ghostly moon. "This reminds me of home," she says. "The kind of place every child of Markenland remembers." Her hand drops. "Lexa's father did his best to expose her to our traditions, but she was always a strange child. Quick to anger, never very interested in learning about her own people."
"Is there something in particular I could help you with?" Clarke asks with a bland smile. She doesn't miss the lack of the queen's honorific out of Nia's mouth.

Nia looks at her again, eyes sharpening like an owl in a tree, knowing mice are scurrying below. "An election implies that a ruler wants to listen to her people. But if Lexa were truly listening, she would know our country needs strength at the moment, not uncertainty."

"I'm sure the queen is considering a lot of things," Clarke says.

Nia just hums skeptically. "Lexa is a dreamer. Dreamers can be dangerous, especially in a country as used to tradition as ours. I think it's only right that you understand just what kind of situation you'll be dealing with. You're outsiders, being asked to validate a foreign process. Don't expect the people to welcome you with open arms."

"I will certainly keep that in mind." Clarke continues her bland, pleasant expression.

"You should also keep in mind that I personally feel maintaining good relations with the United Nations is important, even though I disagreed with becoming a member state. Should things become...politically turbulent, you can count on me to protect that relationship. I'm not so sure Lexa would say the same. After what she did to her own father." Nia's mouth tics up in a humorless smile.

Clarke very much wishes there were witnesses around but keeps her voice steady. "Thank you for the information."

Nia gives her one last once over, lips thinning as though she expected more of a response from Clarke, then tilts her head in farewell. She leaves without another word.

Once Clarke is certain she's gone, she collapses back into her desk chair and reaches for a pad and pen to record what just happened.

*Clarke is late to her meeting with the election commission thanks to Nia which hardly endears her to them, something she's not sure Nia didn't do on purpose. She's hardly left the meeting before Anya pounces on her and drags her back into her office. Clarke can see Raven and Wells slide helplessly out of view as the door slams shut.

"What did Nia want with you?" Anya demands.

Clarke shakes herself free of Anya's grip, incensed at this treatment and ready to lash back at Anya, scary glare or no. "This is completely unacceptable," she says.

"I don't care," says Anya. "I need to know what the duchess said to you and then you can yell at me or go tell your superiors or whatever you want." She's leaning forward intently, ready to pounce again.

Clarke pauses. "Why is it so important?"

"You really did do a bad job scouting us before you came here," Anya says with a snort. She folds her arms. "Will you tell me or not?"

"I'm not here to get involved in your internal politics. If you need to know, you can ask her," says Clarke, mirroring her posture.
"Wake up blondie, you're already involved just by being here and being part of the election process," Anya says, snapping a few times.

"First you have to tell me why you need to know," Clarke says.

Clarke doesn't know what it is about the women of Markenland, or perhaps those in the palace, but Anya is just as adept as Nia and the queen at drilling into people with the intensity of her stare. Still, she relents, perhaps even with what Clarke likes to imagine is a hint of grudging respect.

"Nia has always hated Lexa. She's always been jealous of the royal family too. The De Sever clan is large and influential but they've never been able to claim the throne and now with Lexa dismantling the monarchy, they never will." Anya lifts an eyebrow. "Your turn."

It's not nearly as much information as Clarke would like, but she can sense how thin the ice under her feet is. "She made several implications about the queen and said the country doesn't want an election."

Anya's eyes narrow. "What implications."

"That she's not in touch with the people. That she has a temper." The implications Lexa wouldn't protect them in case the country grew unstable, Clarke keeps to herself, hoping to limit her involvement here as much as possible while also getting Anya to relent.

"Of course." Anya seems to think to herself for a moment, and then her body relaxes fractionally. "Sorry for grabbing you." She says it rather robotically, like someone who's been told that apologies are customary after causing offense.

"As long as it doesn't happen again, we're fine," Clarke says.

"If Nia speaks to you again, tell me. The queen has to know what she's up to."

"What's to stop me from telling her everything you just said to me?"

Anya scoffs. "I haven't told you anything she doesn't already know and she knows where my loyalty lies. Tell her if you want. It's probably even for the best she thinks you're truly neutral or on her side."

"I am neutral," Clarke insists.

"Then you'd better pick a side soon," Anya says. "We all need to be ready for whatever Nia is planning."

* *

Dinner that night is taken as a group. Things have been so disquieting that no one feels much like being on their own, and in between the usual banter they start exchanging what they learned over their first full day on the job.

"I heard the queen poisoned her father," says Harper.

"I heard she had her lover poison her father," says Zoe.

Jasper nods. "Then she had the lover killed too to keep the secret."

"Guys," says Wells, quelling the murder talk momentarily. Silverware scrapes at plates for a moment.
Then, Octavia: "I heard she executed her father's entire senior military staff when she took over."

"Isn't that just Markenland tradition?" Raven asks, only half joking. Despite the longevity of the ruling family, they've had their share of attempted coups.

Glances go around the table as they realize just in whose palace they are while they gossip, and focus returns more to food than to rumor.

"What did the duchess want with you?" Wells asks, ever the cog that keeps their group working together.

"The situation is a lot more complicated than we thought," Clarke says. She pushes her rice around on her plate. "I think there's a power struggle going on in the palace. I want all of you to be as alert as possible. Don't let anyone draw you into taking sides. We need to figure out who supports the queen and who doesn't."

For all that they've just been discussing bloody rumors of murder, this is what gets everyone to sober up. She can see Wells drawing himself up in determination, and that gives her a little boost.

"Trust me, I'm keeping Kane in the loop," Clarke says, not wanting them to be so on edge they can't work. "Just stick together and keep your eyes and ears open. We'll get through the election together. I really think what we're doing here is important."

"You got it, boss," says Raven.

Clarke keeps up the facade until everyone returns to their rooms; when she's alone, she obsessively pulls out her dossiers and begins annotating them with everything they've learned so far. Information is control, and she definitely doesn't have enough of it.

*

Anya is not Alla, that's for certain. No one comes to gather them for breakfast or pass out itineraries; instead it's all waiting for them in the same room where they ate the day before. Anya isn't in their offices either, although the election team is, and at least Clarke likes their leader, a softspoken man named Lincoln who has already been on the job for the past two years and clearly loves his work.

There are a couple of TVs in the lounge area tuned to BBC and Al Jazeera pretty constantly, plus another for the local media. Most local coverage is dedicated to the election, how they've drawn up regions, determined who votes and how, the expected divisions in government, the candidates for prime minister, and at the forefront of it all the queen. Speeches, public appearances, meetings with other heads of state.

Clarke blinks. "I didn't even realize she was out of the country."

Lexa is standing next to the British prime minister, posing solemnly for the cameras while a reporter discusses her "historic trip to London."

"Just a day trip," says Lincoln.

She looks so much larger-than-life on television; Clarke almost can't believe she and the queen are just about of a height. The stories, the news reports, the rumors that constantly swirl around her, they've always combined to make her seem like a figure out of myth. In person she's a woman - undoubtedly powerful, but human, albeit just barely based on Clarke's meeting with her.

"She's really pushing her openness agenda," says Octavia.
"The queen believes in diplomacy and free trade," says Lincoln, then shuts his mouth as though he's already said too much. It's the most opinion he's really expressed on the matter as a supposedly neutral party in charge of elections.

There are more rumors that night at dinner, though slanted towards economic policy this time.

"Lincoln says the nobles are divided on free trade," says Octavia.

"When did Lincoln tell you that?" asks Raven.

"After lunch," Octavia says, dismissing the details with a little wave of the fork in her hand. "He says most of the traditionalists don't really care about profiting, although that's changing with the way the queen abolished a lot of tax immunities for nobles. There's some kind of religious taboo against outsiders and they hate her religious freedom reforms."

"They're pretty hardcore on their theology," Raven says.

"Guys," Clarke warns, not wanting people to start stepping on extremely sensitive turf.

"I mean, in an interesting way," Raven adds. "The ancestor worship and the pantheon and stuff."

"Well it's not so much a pantheon as it is a collection of hallowed elders that can vary by family and..." Wells trails off as everyone at the table looks at him. "You all agree it's interesting," he says defensively.

"Let's maybe just keep any discussion amongst ourselves, or respectful questions for any scholars if we meet them," says Clarke.

There are some mumbles of assent around the table, but she knows they'll continue to talk amongst themselves. There are too many history nerds and politics wonks among them to not go digging into the background of a country that has always been a source of fascination for scholars.

"I heard the duchess is big time into the old ways," says Octavia.

"Duchess Nia?" Clarke asks. She can feel the phantom of a shiver going through her at the thought of the woman.

"Is there any other duchess?" Octavia asks rhetorically. "Anyway that's why she's so against the election. She thinks it'll throw the country out of whack or something."

"How do you know all this?" Clarke asks.

Octavia shrugs. "Just talking to some of the election staff. You know, keeping my ears open like you said."

But Clarke doesn't miss how Octavia keeps her head down thereafter and just focuses on her plate.

*  

For the next month they're scheduled to tour through each voting district, meeting the organizers on the ground and asking the locals about the process on the grassroots level. Most of the team is practically bouncing, happy to be leaving the palace, excited at the prospect of seeing the country up close. There are plenty of tourist accounts of rugged countryside beauty and charmingly interesting locals, but there are also the dark urban legends about hikers disappearing in forests and unwary visitors being taken by unfriendly mountain people who never entered the modern age with the rest
of the populace. She knows Wells has a checklist of tourist sites he's hoping to visit in their off hours.

Lincoln is their guide for these trips, and he first brings them into the capital city, Polis, which is a ten-minute drive from the palace. They take a small convoy of SUVs, security in front and the rear, even though Clarke was hoping for something a bit more inconspicuous. The forest suddenly opens up after a few curves and they're able to see a mid-size metropolitan area, classical stone architecture mixed with newer steel and glass buildings along the river winding through the city. To the distant north Clarke can just about make out the blue haze of snowy mountains before they descend into the city proper.

They're driven to a government building near the business district, a large and imposing Neoclassical structure of stone and brick behind a black wrought iron fence. The gates are left open, though, giving them less of a feeling of being trapped in yet another ornate prison, and she can see plenty of people walking around, including a small tour group with cameras pointing in every direction.

"The queen prefers to stay here when she can," Lincoln says, escorting them into the building and through security. "But it's easier for her to come and go from the forest palace. Easier on the city too."

Clarke can only imagine trying to get the royal procession through some of Polis' narrow cobblestone streets. The city as she's seen it seems well-preserved, with that distinct sense of hundreds of years of history compressed into the walls and the sidewalks and the roads.

Wells comes up to her shoulder. "Did you know parts of the city burnt down over two hundred years ago? This used to be the site of the old keep, but it was destroyed during the civil war," he murmurs. "Calm down, nerd," she murmurs back, earning her a shoulder nudge.

The leader of the local election team is very enthusiastic about meeting them; Clarke's arm feels like it's been wobbled out of its socket after her vigorous handshake.

"We are so happy you are here," says the election team leader, a tiny woman named Inga with hair gone white and deep crow's feet around her eyes. Her Markenland accent is quite thick, but her smile beams through it all. "The election will change our country in ways we can't even dream." She shows them around the offices, ending under a large official oil painting of the queen herself, posing in her office in her usual dark business suit. One hand holds an open book while the other rests on a globe spun so Markenland is facing outward; a far cry from the martial images of her predecessors.

"I've waited a long time for something like this," Inga says, looking up at Lexa's stern face and sighing.

"For an election?" Wells asks. Inga has taken a shine to Wells and he'd gallantly offered her his arm for most of their tour. Wells has that effect on people, and Clarke had discreetly snapped a picture of the two of them from behind on her phone.

"For change," she says.

*  

The more far-flung election sites aren't as enthusiastic as Inga, but most of them are happy to see Clarke and her team until they hit the northern districts.

"Had a hell of a time even letting people know there'll be an election," says their host, Echo. "Most of the population around here is scattered, outside of the mining towns. Many of them live in the mountains, only come down to trade or catch up on news."
"How do they get mail?" Clarke asks.

Echo snorts. "Mail? Who would send the mail? Everyone they know is on the mountain with them."

The towns here are much smaller than Polis as well, the buildings older and rougher, many of them built of timber and covered in heavy insulation. The mining towns have a distinct air of being thrown together rather slapdash, houses all repeating the same architecture in that company town style. The people there are hardy and quiet and interested in mining and things that will affect the mining industry, but not much else. The only time they really perk up is when Wells tries to ask them about foreign interest in their largely-untapped resources, but inevitably someone will shush any further attempt at discussion, leaving Wells iced out.

Their last stop in the north is halfway up a mountain, in a small town that serves as the main hub for most of the nomadic farmers and hunters in the region. It's high enough that Clarke is shivering in her suit jacket, although Lincoln looks fine in nothing but a button-down shirt. She doesn't think she's ever seen him perturbed about anything.

The election center here is almost perfunctory, just some dimly-lit rooms with lonely-looking phones and a couple of outdated computers.

"How do you feel about the election?" Clarke asks one of the volunteers, a wiry woman with a face that looks chapped from years in the wind and a balanced sort of squint in her eyes. She seems to weigh Clarke up, then glances around cautiously before speaking.

"The duchess commands. We obey," she says.

"The duchess? Not the queen?" Clarke asks.

The woman will only purse her lips tightly and shake her head.

The rest of the town is similarly cautious, keeping a distance from the outsiders as they go about their day. There are no tourists here, no cameras. Clarke can see Wells trying to talk to people, most of whom simply mutter or move away from him. He looks at Clarke, obviously baffled and a little bit frustrated. They'll debrief back at the palace.

At the end of the day, they stop at a sparsely grassed meadow that rolls downhill until it hits a sharp dropoff. At the edge, they can see the country laid out before them, the miles and miles of dark forest stretching away from the foot of the mountains to the horizon. "Your country is very beautiful," Clarke says to Echo, who is also taking in the vista below.

"It hasn't always been," Echo says. She stuffs her hands in her jacket pockets. "But we persevere in the north. No matter what."

Clarke thinks back to the war memorial in the center of town, an enormous stone obelisk carved with the dates of the Markenland civil war, and the numerous buildings and homes with the regional flag of the North proudly displayed with the national flag nowhere to be seen. "Is this election seen as something to endure?" she asks.

"Everything in the north is something to endure," Echo says. Clarke can't tell if she's bitter; certainly the words carry the air of a local saying. It seems Echo is done with the conversation, in any case, because she abruptly turns her back on the forests and begins trudging back up to the cars and the rest of the group. Wells sidles up to Clarke in her place.

"So," he says.
Clarke doesn't have to look at him to know he's concerned. "Yeah."

The long drive back to the palace is quiet, most of them tired from hiking around at elevation. Clarke is almost relieved when they drop below the tree line and their convoy is swallowed up by the forest, like returning to a friend's embrace after time amongst strangers. None of them has said it aloud, but they all feel it: the North is dangerous.

*

Their last district visit has them circle back around to the royal district, encompassing the lands by the palace but excluding the capital city itself.

"These are the ancestral homelands of the queen and her family," says their guide, Niylah. She's blonde, pretty, smart. She keeps looking directly at Clarke in vaguely disconcerting but not altogether unpleasant ways.

Wells wants the tour of the queen's family home, a large manor built in the traditional style with lots of dark timber that crouches menacingly in a clearing a few miles from the closest town. But they're here to meet the locals, to get a sense of how the election will impact them, so Clarke has to deal with his gentle pouting while they meet and greet.

Niylah stops in front of Lexa's official portrait, the same one hanging in all the election centers since they're technically government buildings. "What's she like?" Niylah asks. There's something in her voice like admiration, but distant, and impersonal.

Clarke looks at the painting, at Lexa's somber expression and the way the only lightness in the canvas comes from the way the artist has highlighted her face and eyes. "I've only spoken to her once. She's...formidable."

"They say she used to play in the woods on the edge of town." Niylah seems charmed by the image. Clarke has noticed the distinct difference in the way people in the royal district react to Lexa compared to some of the others. She can't imagine the queen, blunt and imperial to her core, charming anyone.

"They?"

"Some of the people who live out where the town border ends and the royal family's private land begins."

There are precious few images of the queen as a child. Her father was already paranoid and jealously guarded his family's privacy, and it was rare that they would appear at state occasions with him. But there is one that Clarke remembers from her dossiers, taken when Lexa was eight, five years before a bomb would kill her mother and two siblings. Already she seemed solemn at that young age, staring into the camera from behind her father's leg, but seemingly unafraid as he greeted a new Swiss ambassador amidst a small crowd of officials. Clarke can't imagine that child running freely through the trees, laughing, smiling, enjoying a carefree youth.

"Maybe they just like to imagine it," Niylah says, now a little wistful. "Things were different twenty years ago. The town was smaller, basically a garrison for the soldiers who guarded the royal home. The people here, maybe it was nice to see the softer side of that family. They say she was a happy child. She wasn't supposed to inherit the throne, so his majesty didn't pay as much attention to her..." Niylah seems to realize she's perhaps said too much, although she isn't nearly as cagey about it as the Northerners. She simply sighs, just a muted little exhalation through her nose, and takes Clarke back to the group.
After a month in the palace, Clarke has gotten comfortable. She's also mostly given up on being allowed to move to a hotel in the city, although she reminds Anya once a week and receives a deep glare once a week. The others are comfortable too – as much as they can be while surrounded by guards and staffers. They're friendly with a lot of the locals, perhaps even genuine friends with a few. Wells goes into the city as much as he can, bringing back local food, books, and trinkets. There might be a cute bookseller involved. And Octavia is not being at all subtle about her crush on Lincoln. Clarke is keeping an eye on it; she'll only interfere if she senses Octavia is on the verge of unprofessional, but for now it's harmless.

As for Clarke, she's been doing her best to catalogue everything, down to the least detail. Dutifully she sends it all to Marcus at the end of each day. He's eased off on suggesting they pull her and her team out of the country as they settle in, and now it's almost like any other assignment. She hasn't seen the queen in person since their first meeting, and the duchess is similarly absent, though every now and then people mutter if she's been through the palace.

She almost can’t believe a month has gone by so quickly, but looking at the folders spread out on the comforter around her, she realizes how much knowledge she's gained in such a short time. She could run circles around the Clarke who arrived in Markenland on her first day. Not that she's an expert by any means; the balance of power between the various nobles and the crown still feels delicate for her, and she flops back into her bountiful pillows, wishing she'd turned down that last coffee at dinner. But she’d needed it at the time to get through a couple solid hours of work and now she’s paying the price. Her brain is still racing, filing away notes, making connections, and somewhere in the back of her mind is the thought that this might make a great book one day.

She glances at the clock: past one AM. She pulls on her slippers and a light robe to cover her camisole and shorts, hoping a walk will get her brain to settle down. She won’t wander far in her night clothes, but she feels certain enough she won’t run into anyone at this hour. As empty as the castle can seem during the day, it's practically deserted at night, and she’s gone for short walks before with no one else the wiser.

Clarke feels a little eerie, padding through the guest quarters and back into the rest of the wing. The busts and statues lining the long hallway leading to the ballroom are barely illuminated by moonlight, and Clarke nearly screams when one of them moves.

"Oh my god, your majesty," Clarke says, one hand over her heart, the other clutching her robe front. "I'm sorry, Ms. Griffin. I didn't mean to startle you." The queen turns away from the window and her view of the dark forest, still in her shirtsleeves and slacks. But her hair is down from its usual fastidious bun and her hands are in her pockets and she looks younger than her age. Not exactly soft, but somewhat approachable. Clarke still feels extremely underdressed all of a sudden.

Clarke stands there, trying to come up with something to say. "Sorry to have bothered you-

"You haven't." Queen Lexa once again turns her gaze on the forests of her homeland, blue moonlight sliding across her smooth features. "I was just taking a walk. Clearing my head."

"Oh. Me too." Clarke still can't figure out what to do here; go or stay, talk or be silent.

Queen Lexa pushes away from the window first, politely not looking at Clarke below the neck. "I'll let you continue your walk. I apologize again for startling you."
"Please, no." Clarke feels compelled to give the queen this moment to herself. She must not get very many, if she has to take one here, at this time. "I was just wandering. Don't let me interrupt...whatever you were doing."

Queen Lexa tilts her head, one eyebrow going up. "Perhaps we should both continue what we were doing."

Clarke looks down at her feet, smiling a little at what barely amounts to a joke, but finding it charming nevertheless. "Yeah. I mean, have a good night, ma'am."

"Ms. Griffin," the queen calls out before she can fully turn away. "You're not wearing your ID."

Clarke's hand waves in front of her chest, grasping at empty air. "Oh. I mean, I didn't really mean to wander this far without it."

"The palace is safe, but I'm sure Anya would appreciate it if you wore it at all times," says Queen Lexa, voice mild, words pointed.

"Yes, of course. I'm..."

"I'll walk you back to the guest wing," says Queen Lexa, setting Clarke nearly to stammering.

"No, I'm fine. Please don't bother, I can find my way back," she says. She can only imagine how awkward the silence will be.

But Queen Lexa just holds out one hand in an after-you gesture, folding it neatly behind her back when Clarke begins walking. To continue protesting would be churlish and she'll take every single chip of goodwill from the queen that she can scrape together. Footsteps click quietly behind them, two bodyguards shadowing Lexa as they walk.

"You're up late," Clarke says, trying to fill the silence, cover the sounds of their footsteps echoing up to the high ceilings.

"I imagine for many of the same reasons you are. The costs of leadership," says Queen Lexa.

They keep a steady, measured pace. Clarke doesn't feel like hurrying and the queen doesn't seem like she's eager to get back either. "You've been doing this a lot longer than I have though," Clarke says.

"Did you always dream of joining the UN?" the queen asks.

Clarke hums as she thinks. "Not really. But it's where life took me, and I like it. I get to travel. Sometimes I get to make a difference."

"The difference you make in my country will be felt for generations," says the queen, so solemnly that Clarke almost blushes. She's glad for the near complete absence of lighting.

Clarke attempts to demur. "We're just observers."

"Building the international legitimacy of Markenland is critical to building a modern, democratic nation," Queen Lexa says, and though it sounds as though it should be in a speech, she seems to honestly believe it. There's a quiet conviction in the words that makes Clarke think Lexa would put the country on her back and crawl on her hands and knees towards her goal if she had to. Or get rid of whatever –whoever – would try to stop her.

"This is me," Clarke says, pausing outside of her door.
Lexa stops a polite distance away, hands still behind her back, posture impeccable even though Clarke knows she must be tired. "Good night, Ms. Griffin."

"Good night, ma'am," Clarke says. She slips into her room, but stays wedged behind the door for a few moments as she watches Lexa go, somehow completely alone despite the bodyguards trailing her.

Chapter End Notes

Please feel free to yell at me about the slow pace and overenthusiastic worldbuilding at badlance.
Most of the time Lexa is too exhausted to dream. But when she does, it’s either stress dreams about needing to accomplish something but never quite being able to reach her goal, or some random memory, usually from when her father was still alive.

She remembers the way the sun slanted across the courtyard where they executed the conspirators who killed her mother and siblings. She was at the beginning of a growth spurt and there was an ache in her legs that kept her from drifting too far away. She was in a black suit, modeled to resemble a junior army officer, and it was too hot in the direct sunlight, but she didn’t dare move even to wipe at the sweat beading on her brow. The stone was hard under her boots but she kept herself still and her back straight. Her father was a step in front of her and to her left, just as ramrod straight, in his own dark suit of mourning.

One by one they marched out the conspirators and asked for their last words. Most of them were defiant, lifting their chins in silence, and if Lexa admired their stoicism she didn’t let it show. She mirrored them instead, a face of stone, hands behind her back at parade rest. Her father couldn’t see her but plenty of other people were watching. Silent nobles, military officers, and clergy were all lined around the sides of the courtyard.

Some of the condemned cried, or protested their innocence. The priest said the rites over them all the same, and then retreated to the side to allow the firing squad a clear line of fire.

She remembers the way gunsmoke drifted towards their dais, how the crack of the rifles bounced against the walls and up into the bright spring sky. The sound hurt her ears every time but she didn’t move. She didn’t take her eyes off the post where each prisoner was shackled. She did them the courtesy of witnessing them, remembering them. It was only afterwards that she looked to the side, where each prisoner’s family was gathered, also forced to watch. She remembers the way some of them would stand up almost on their tip toes, as if hoping until the last moment their loved ones might get a reprieve. She remembers how some of them wept, and how a few shielded their children’s eyes. Most of all she remembers how they would turn their faces towards her father, full of poisonous hate. It wouldn’t be the last time she saw those faces.

* 

Lexa wakes up in silence and darkness. The sun isn't up yet, but she likes to start early, to be the first one acting instead of reacting. And she likes the utter stillness of everything around her, the sensation that things are waiting for her to set them in motion and if she can manage to get it all set up just right, everything will go exactly as it should. After years of dreading the day to come, now she wakes up and savors the potential.

A cup of strong tea is already waiting in her drawing room and she sips at it while she begins paging through the day’s newspapers on her tablet. An aide has synthesized any news clips she should prioritize from overnight and her schedule is loaded up, but otherwise she's left alone.

When she first took the throne, there was a constant stream of servants: servants to feed her, help bathe her, pick her clothes, do up her hair, advise her on makeup and prepare her for the day. Now she enjoys her space, the only real luxury she affords herself. She values palace staff who are unobtrusive and respectful of her privacy, not the ones who bowed and scraped in borderline fear. It
wasn’t their fault that her father made them that way but they were all quietly reassigned to other duties, or recommended for new jobs outside of the palace.

She showers and picks an outfit while her hair dries. She remembers her mother showing her how to pin it up, helping her apply the lightest swipe of makeup when she was eleven for the first ball she would be allowed to attend past her usual bedtime.

Her suit today is simple as usual, for all that it is bespoke. Just a crisp white button-down, dark trousers, and matching two-button jacket. Hair is simple as well, twisted and pinned up, although the pin is a curved band of platinum that shines brightly in the dark nest of her hair. Watch and royal signet ring last, sliding onto the middle finger of her right hand. There’s a band of lighter skin there that feels almost permanent, as though even a summer spent baking in the Markenland sunshine without it on wouldn’t even out the tones. Her hand feels naked without the slight press of metal.

She shrugs into her jacket and checks herself in the mirror. It’s the last of solitude she’ll have for the rest of the day, and she takes the moment to straighten up, to get her mind right. She is the queen.

*

There are perhaps three people in the world who can get away with calling Lexa by her given name, no title. One is General Indra, who went from her father’s advisor to her commandant at the military academy to head of her joint chiefs. One is Gustus, head of her security detail since the day she was brought home in swaddling clothes. And one is Anya, childhood companion, daughter of her father’s closest military ally, and now intelligence chief very much resenting that she’s been made to coddle these foreigners staying in the palace.

Of the three, Anya is the only one who has actually ever called Lexa by her name after the coronation, and it was just the once, the night Lexa felt the slightly-too-large crown settle on her head. She doesn’t like to think of that night often, especially not the panic attack she had at one in the morning, too anxious to sleep but too afraid to call for anyone. Except Anya.

"How are they today?" Lexa asks at their morning briefing. Her suit jacket is carefully draped over the back of her desk chair and she’s enjoying a second cup of tea in her shirtsleeves.

"Touring Strommark," Anya says without having to consult the tablet under her arm. It’s with her everywhere she goes, protected in its understated leather folio, and yet Lexa never sees her consulting it. She sometimes wonders if Anya just sleeps with it under her pillow and absorbs the information inside by osmosis.

"Precinct readiness?"

"Lincoln says almost to seventy percent."

Lexa leans back in her desk chair, fingers steepled in front of her.

"That’s exactly on schedule," Anya reminds her.

"We should be ahead."

"I agree, but without more staffers-"

Lexa waves her hand, a minute tilting at the wrist with her fingers motioning in Anya’s direction. "Whatever they need to be ready two weeks ahead of schedule. Make it happen."

"Yes ma’am."
Lexa gets up, a restlessness in her legs that she knows from experience can only be settled by a long horseback ride through the forest or a good fight. Neither are appropriate options for her at the moment. She stares through the window, longing for something that others might call home. For her, she's not really sure what home means to her, except that Markenland is her home, from the icy slopes of the north to the lush riverbanks of the south. Sometimes she wishes she could disappear into the depths of the forest, become one of those fabled wandering crones who supposedly granted favor to virtuous travelers and punished selfish ones. "The duchess?" she asks, voice soft, as though they might be overheard even here.

"Returning to the capital today. Supposed to meet with Countess de Strom this afternoon."

Lexa makes a mental note, adding it to the tally of nobles suspected to be working against the election. Nia has vocally opposed it, but there’s a shrinking middle ground that hasn’t declared one way or another, perhaps waiting to see how it all shakes out – or perhaps not wanting to tip their hand as to their true numbers.

"Keep an eye on it." She doesn't have to look at Anya to know she's making one of her subtle faces. Of course she's keeping an eye on it. She keeps eyes on everything for Lexa; she has enough dirt on the combined nobility of Markenland to build her own mountain.

"Anything else, or do you need me to go spoon feed the UN group?" Anya asks, making this now nearly a month of non-passive all-aggressive inquiries as to when she's done being reprimanded.

"Just the usual status update from Lincoln," Lexa says, perfectly pleasant. If she’s honest with herself, she wants more than that. She hasn’t stopped thinking about Clarke Griffin since their nighttime walk through the palace. Since their first meeting almost immediately devolved into an argument, really.

But there's no point in anything more than the odd idle fantasy. She's found women attractive before and let the moment pass, just as she will with this woman.

Anya stomps out, not bothering with niceties when it's just the two of them. She's replaced by Lexa's secretary with the rest of the day's schedule, as well as a breakfast plate to eat at her desk.

"Another long day, your majesty," Mrs. Landhas says sympathetically, setting down Lexa's usual toast, eggs, and fruit, along with a strong coffee.

"They're all long days," Lexa says, not without humor, though it falls flat to her ears. She taps aimlessly on her toast with the prongs of her fork. "Is Sela first today?" Off the affirmative nod from Mrs. Landhas, she resists the urge to sigh. "Let's start with her."

At least Sela is easy; as the palace's social secretary, she's a good way to ease into the work day. She's also loyal, not prone to gossip, and terrifyingly organized – perhaps moreso than Anya, making her perfect for handling dignitaries in social settings where alcohol, money, and egos are all at play. "Your majesty," she says as she enters, thick binder cradled in her arms. "Unification Day planning is all on schedule. I also have the updated guest list."

Lexa scans the highlighted new names, various ambassadors and the like, and nods her approval.

"You still would like for me to invite the-"

"Yes," Lexa says, not quite sharp, but leaving no room for misinterpretation. She's struck with a sudden urge to take the invitations over to the guest quarters herself, but she can't. She knows how Anya would scoff at her, tease her for her susceptibility to pretty faces. It's a surface-level crush; it'll pass.
There are a couple of details that need her approval, but Sela is briskly efficient and on her way out after only fifteen minutes. Lexa wishes it would have taken longer, because the rest of her day is guaranteed to be much more difficult. She wolfs down the last of her breakfast and buzzes her secretary for the next meeting on her schedule.

* 

She would be lying if she said she didn’t think about walking through the palace near the guest quarters again in hopes of running into Clarke. But she assiduously avoids that part of the palace now when she feels the need to ramble, head too full of plans and scattershot information that needs to be sewn together into something coherent.

Unfortunately, Anya still delivers a daily briefing on their guests, including clips of any press coverage as they make their way through the country and visit random polling stations, and Clarke is usually front and center.

Their last stop in the royal district draws plenty of attention and Lexa finds the local news coverage of the visit all queued up on her tablet the morning after. There’s Clarke, looking interested and attentive as she’s escorted around by a woman Lexa has met in passing since she’s the royal district’s polling chair. She feels something grey and unpleasant when they laugh together, even if it is just a few polite chuckles over something innocuous.

The camera catches Clarke saying something in piecemeal Markish. Her accent is actually quite good for someone who isn’t fluent and she’s complimenting Niylah on the quality of the local forests. To be sure, the forests of the royal district have always been well-tended, but Clarke is clearly unaware of the subtext, that to talk to someone about the forest can sometimes carry an undertone of flirtation or implication. There’s an entire subgenre of romance literature in which young milkmaids and farmboys run away together to return to the trees, not that Lexa was allowed to read such trash when she was growing up. It’s not something she would expect an outsider to know but Niylah clearly does from the way she clears her throat and guides the subject back to the polling location.

Her first instinct is to call the polling office and berate Niylah herself for absolutely no good reason. Her next is to realize exactly what is happening and to resist slumping dramatically over her desk. If Anya were to catch her behaving in so undignified a manner, she would dine out on it for the rest of Lexa’s life.

* 

The entire palace is literally buzzing as they prepare for the Unification Day Ball; there are tree-trimmers going nonstop as they prune back the forest, touch up the gardens, and bring in fuel for the massive bonfire that always stands as the centerpiece of the celebrations. She wishes she could escape for a day, just take a horse and ride until the palace is a dot on the horizon. She hasn’t been able to do that since she took the crown, and the few times she tried, Anya tracked her down and dragged her back before she’d gotten two miles.

Right now she has to soothe anxious nobles yet again, knowing that Nia is stirring them up to keep her distracted and irritated. She remembers how her father would deal with them, watching like a silent wolf until one of them grew bold enough to put a foot wrong. The many arguments that nearly led to a string of executions. That had been two months before the assassination attempt. Her father had wanted actual beheadings; his advisors had managed to negotiate him down to firing squads. She momentarily tightens her right hand into a fist, feeling the pull of the signet ring against her skin.

It's tempting, so tempting, to impose her singular will on the entire election process. She could tell her people to go and do this thing and not come back until it was done and it would be so much easier,
accomplished exactly the way that she wants it. But the whole point is to remove herself from the process. Everything must be completely transparent. Everything must be of the people, for the people. It’s time her family’s name faded away into history.

Lunch is a sandwich from the kitchens, eating while she reviews paperwork. A very nice sandwich to be sure, but far from the formal meal her father would sit down to no matter when or where he was. When she was younger, sometimes she was excused from meals, allowed to play or attend a lesson or eat with a friend. After the assassination, she sat at his right hand for every meal, listening and learning.

There’s other nobles, this time on her side of the aisle but all grasping for as many slices of the pie before their worlds change forever. She’s had to parcel out so many pieces – of herself, of the country – to gain the support she needs to push the vote through. Then tea with the Swiss ambassador as they politely discuss trade issues and then the finance minister and then one of her generals is unhappy about upcoming talks to discuss allowing foreign militaries to stage out of Markenland and then she has to notify her existing French ambassador he’s being retired to make way for a new ambassador as a political favor to a rival and and and – when she manages to remember she’s hungry, it’s nearly ten PM.

Dinner is waiting in her drawing room. She elects to take her plate out onto the balcony, where she can enjoy the night breeze and watch the fairy lights go up in the gardens. She’s so hungry she can barely taste the salmon and greens she’s forking into her mouth as fast as dignity will allow. Someone on the kitchen staff has also thoughtfully included a small glass of white wine. Not enough to even feel a buzz, but a nice light pairing with the fish that helps take a little of the edge off. She sweeps her eyes around back to the palace itself and catches movement a few floors down and to the left.

Clarke Griffin is out on her balcony, leaning on the balustrade with her elbows. She seems also to be watching the gardens as they take shape. Her hair is down and she’s in a t-shirt and shorts and she looks terribly soft and inviting. Lexa stops peeking over her own balcony edge before she can be spotted. The balconies are designed so she can’t really be seen from below but she prefers not to take chances.

There’s some shuffling, and then she hears voices drifting up from below. Someone has joined Clarke on her balcony, and Lexa catches a few snippets of their conversation.

"-their Unification Day ball," Clarke says. "The two-hundred-fifty-seventh anniversary of the end of Markenland's civil war."

"Full of history blah blah, an honest to god ball,” says another voice, feminine. Raven Reyes, Lexa thinks.

They murmur some more, then Raven again. "You know, we could always make an excuse to go shopping for formal wear. ‘Oh, I forgot to pack my dress.’ Take a weekend, fly to Paris and overnight it, be back in twenty-four hours."

"There is no way you would limit yourself to less than a day in Paris," Clarke says.

Lexa smiles to herself. She likes the thought of Clarke Griffin in Paris, wandering happily through the side streets, sipping espresso and snapping photos for her family. Before she can really second-guess herself, she slips back inside and signals for a staffer. Anya is probably going to yell at her when she finds out, but she might as well get away with things like this while she can. She won’t be in charge forever.
With only a few days until the ball, the palace is as busy as it ever gets. The whole place receives its annual deep cleaning, decorations go up, menus get finalized. She knows Sela is at her busiest but still doesn’t take back her request from the night before. At lunch, her secretary buzzes her with someone off the schedule waiting in her office. The reproach in her tone is clear; she does not like when things are off schedule. “It’s Clarke Griffin,” she says.

Lexa hastily swallows her bite of sandwich, nearly choking as it goes down in an overlarge lump. “Send her in,” she says, then hastily brushes herself off and scoots the plate with its half-eaten turkey sandwich to the side.

Clarke enters just as Lexa finishes swigging some water to clear her mouth. She stands up as smoothly as possible as the door swings open, hoping there aren’t any crumbs left on her pants. “Ms. Griffin,” she says.

“Your majesty,” Clarke says. She stops just inside the door, suddenly seeming awkward, as though she doesn’t quite know what to do or how to relate to Lexa.

Lexa gestures to one of the chairs in front of her desk. “Please.”

When they’re both seated, Clarke crosses her legs, hands folded on her thigh. She still looks awkward, eyes darting between Lexa, her desk, the plate of sandwich remnants.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Lexa asks.

“I uh…” Clarke hands fidget minutely. “I wanted to thank you. For the clothes you sent.”

Lexa can feel her mouth quirking at the corner in spite of herself. “You’re welcome. I hope they were helpful.”

“You kidding me? Raven flipped out,” Clarke says, smiling, and the tension ebbs a bit.

“I hope you don’t think it was too forward. I’m not much for…fashion. I had my social director pick the selections.”

“No, the clothes were great. Wells thinks he looks like James Bond in his tuxedo,” Clarke says, an obviously fond smile slipping onto her face.

Wells is the young man who’s been making friends with all the palace staffers, Lexa recalls. Alla clearly likes him; Anya thinks he’s spying. “I’m told tailoring is everything,” she says. It’s idle chit-
chat; she, who’s been trying to make her coltish little frame more imposing since she was seventeen and still getting the very last of her adult growth, knows exactly the benefits of a great tailor. It took her a long time to learn to fill a room with her presence without having to physically be the largest or strongest person there. A thought occurs to her. “If you or any of your female staffers would also prefer suits—”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I mean thank you for the offer. I’ll ask them, but I think they all found dresses they like,” says Clarke. She pauses. They’ve fallen out of the rhythm again.

This isn’t like walking back to Clarke’s room. Perhaps they were both too tired then to maintain their usual barriers. And there’s always been something about the palace late at night that has Lexa lowering her guard. In the dark, lit only by the moon, it’s less as though the weight of her people rests on her and more that she’s just Lexa, wandering the halls and avoiding the ghosts of her childhood. She wants that easiness back and she doesn’t know how to find it.

Clarke doesn’t seem to want to go either, perhaps aware how abrupt it would be, and Lexa doesn’t want her to leave. But she has to, with no other good reason to be speaking to the queen, taking up the half hour she usually spends on lunch. She pushes against the arms of her chair with both hands and gets to her feet. Lexa leaves her desk and opens the connecting door for her. “I hope you enjoy the ball, Ms. Griffin.”

Clarke pauses next to her. “Thank you again.” Then she’s gone, leaving the office feeling empty, and Lexa more restless than ever.

*

The ball is one of the earliest memories Lexa has of the palace. When she was four, she sneaked out of bed and managed to hide away in the antechamber behind the dais, peeking out through a crack in the door. Her oldest brother was allowed to attend; as the heir to the throne he had responsibilities, and at eleven he was already a year into his tutelage at the junior military academy. She could see him tugging uncomfortably at the high collar of his cadet jacket when he thought no one was looking and felt glad she was allowed to run free in her nightgown. Her mother turned around and spotted her little face in the crack at just the wrong moment, but instead of swooping in and carting her back to bed, her mother smiled and continued speaking to someone else in a very fancy tuxedo. She fell asleep sitting on the floor and only woke up an hour later when she felt her mother pick her up and carry her back to the bedroom. She remembers the feel of her mother’s dress fabric, the soft silk of her evening gloves, the light waft of her perfume. She remembers thinking her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world that night.

She still has her mother’s dress from that night, carefully preserved and stored away. Sometimes when she’s feeling particularly sentimental she finds it in the back of her closet and imagines she can still smell that perfume.

No perfume for Lexa, though. Not tonight. Tradition states that the king or queen dress in full military regalia as a reminder of the cost of the war – and in her father’s case, a none-too-subtle reminder of where much his power lay. For her, it’s about not making too many waves at the moment, of reassuring them all that she is as devoted to her country as she ever was. That she was already a year into her military service when she took the crown, just like the first sons and daughters of the rest of the nobility, if on a slightly accelerated timetable. After all of her father’s other heirs died, he had her fast-tracked to a commission, something she did her best to earn. Still, there was grumbling when she graduated a full year early.

Her valet fusses over her uniform, pulling lines straight, making sure ribbons and pins and epaulettes are all millimeter-aligned. She hates the Markenland army uniform and wishes she could change it
but there was always something more important to take care of, something higher up on the budget list. At least it’s plain black, with only the sash in red and gold. And the Unification Day ball isn’t so starchy and formal so she doesn’t have to add all the brocade and frippery. But the high collar chafes and if it gets even slightly too warm inside, she’ll sweat beneath the wool. She can appreciate the flat dress shoes, at least. She won’t be tripping or twisting any ankles tonight.

When her valet is satisfied, she takes one last look at herself in the full-length mirror, making sure the red-striped black trousers lie straight, that her hair is properly done up above her collar, that her makeup is light and tasteful and hiding the last of the bags under her eyes after a couple of bad sleeps. There’s a last brushing off to remove any lint or dust, so visible on a dark uniform, and she straightens her back and sets her shoulders. She takes one last sideways glance in the mirror, for a moment seeing her brother, so smart in his uniform at his last Unification Day ball. He’d just been promoted and both he and her father the king were flush over his successes.

No one will be clapping her on the back and pushing glasses of champagne into her hands tonight. She’ll show up, make a symbol of herself, shore up her political alliances and hopefully gladhand her way into a few new ones, and try to get to bed at a reasonable hour to make up for the bad nights before this one.

Anya arrives to escort her to the antechamber, also in her dress uniform. Before Lexa became queen, Anya technically outranked her, and her colonel’s bars under the embroidered crown insignia look very smart. “Let’s get this overwith,” Anya sighs, white gloves standing out against her dark uniform as she folds her arms.

They take their time walking over, escorted discreetly by Lexa’s bodyguards. She’s sure Gustus has more bodyguards scattered throughout the ball room in civilian dress, in addition to those visibly stationed around the room and the usual complement of ceremonial military guards.

“Excited?” Anya asks, her wry tone giving the lie to the inquiry.

“It’s just another Unification Day ball.”

“It’s our last Unification Day ball,” Anya corrects her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Lexa says, wanting to laugh but refraining from doing so.

“Technically. Technically you’ll be here,” Anya says with half a sneer on her face. She’s expressed her dissatisfaction at Lexa’s decision many times, arguing that the country isn’t ready, that the nobles will cause more trouble than it’s worth, that Markenland needs Lexa. That Lexa needs Markenland just as much.

They reach the antechamber and now it’s Anya’s turn to fuss with Lexa’s uniform. “We should be wearing swords,” she grumbles. “Why didn’t you make this more formal so we could wear swords.”

“Anything I can do to lessen the risk of you stabbing someone is worth it,” Lexa replies, finally fidgeting away from Anya’s hands. She shifts in her uniform, trying to get it to lie easy after so many people have tugged and poked at it.

“Gloves,” Anya says.

Lexa doesn’t like wearing the gloves either, but she dutifully pulls them out of her pocket and slides them on one after the other, buttons them at the wrist, then flexes her fingers a few times to put some stretch in them.

“Now remember,” Anya says, face as deadpan as ever. “If you get in trouble, give me the signal, and
I’ll have Nia thrown off a balcony.”

It puts Lexa in a darkly humorous mood as she signals a staffer to get things started. They both hear the muffled sounds of someone announcing her arrival through the door a minute later.

“Here we go,” Anya mutters.

*

Nia has kept her distance throughout the ball, and Lexa is glad for it. She doesn’t feel like gritting out a smile and circling warily while the nobles watch and hope for blood. She’s even had a moment to eat, thanks to Anya smoothly stepping into a conversation and allowing her to accept a few canapes from a server. She’s almost done a full circuit of the room when she comes upon a little knot of people slightly apart from the rest.

“Your majesty,” says Clarke, more formal around others. Lexa draws up short at the sight of her in a lovely red off-the-shoulder evening gown. The silhouette is simple, and her only jewelry is a glittering diamond necklace that draws Lexa’s eyes towards her collarbones and the graceful line of her neck.

“Ms. Griffin,” Lexa says, falling back into a loose parade rest.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Clarke says while the rest of her team watches.

“How are you enjoying the evening?” Lexa asks, addressing the question to the entire group.

One of the young men speaks up, sounding as though he’s just barely avoiding a stammer. “This is a great party, your majesty. The food is awesome.” She can see his compatriot step on his foot, both of them wincing.

“I’m glad. Most of them are variations on traditional dishes.” She runs her eyes over the group again, coming up short on the total number. “I hope the rest of your group is enjoying themselves.”

“Oh.” Clarke scans the center of the room, where about a dozen couples are moving sedately around the dance floor in time with the string quartet in the corner. She points. “Octavia is dancing with Lincoln, and Wells is dancing with…”

Lexa spots the man in question, a huge smile on his face as he chats easily with- “The daughter of Baroness De Gras. I wish him luck. She’s known to be a handful.” She adds a little smile to let the others in on the joke.

“Oh god,” Clarke says, sounding mortified anyway. “Should I go-”

“No, it’s fine,” Lexa says. She’s taken by a strange urge, the same thing that ran through her the night on the balcony. She offers one gloved hand, bowing slightly at the waist. “Perhaps you’d like to dance as well?”

Clarke stares at her hand, mouth opening slightly. Lexa knows others are watching them, wondering what the queen is doing with this foreigner, if it’s just a polite dance to make nice with the UN representatives. She finds she doesn’t care enough to stop, she only cares if Clarke takes her hand. And Clarke does, though she’s clearly surprised by the gesture, and Lexa can sense her looking over her shoulder at her coworkers as she’s led to the dance floor.

Lexa settles one hand on Clarke’s waist while Clarke’s hand lands on her shoulder, then takes up Clarke’s free hand with the other. She doesn’t dance often, but it’s a useful tool of state and her
etiquette master snapped her across the palm of her hand plenty of times teaching her various ballroom dances. She tests out her lead with a gentle suggestion at Clarke’s waist and finds her responsive, already moving in time, feet assured. “You’ve done this before,” she says.

“You don’t get into diplomacy and not know how to waltz,” Clarke says, the shrug in her words if not in her shoulders.

“Forgive me, I’ve underestimated the skillset of your average United Nations representative.”

“Average,” Clarke repeats, mock offended.

“It seems you have me in full retreat,” Lexa says wryly. “I surrender.”

“I don’t imagine you say that very often.”

“It’s an interesting feeling.”

Lexa guides her through a few more turns, the two of them flowing easily with the other dancers. “You look lovely,” she says in a quieter voice, just barely audible above the music and the general hum of conversation in the room.


Lexa is suddenly glad for her gloves; she can feel her hands wanting to go a bit clammy. Instead she squeezes Clarke’s hand, just a quick dab of pressure. She wants to say she hates this uniform and the reasons why she has to wear it, but there are far too many curious ears nearby. “Is this one of the dresses you picked out?”

“Yes,” Clarke says. Her shy smile is so incongruous with the businesslike demeanor Lexa is most familiar with; it makes her seem almost like a completely different person. “I brought a dress with me, but I liked this one. And I guess when will I have a chance to wear couture again? Even if it is a loan.”

The offer to keep it is on the tip of Lexa’s tongue, something about designers sending her things for free all the time even though they mostly stopped after a polite but firm press release a few years after her coronation. But that’s just another thing that she can’t do. She can’t give gifts to pretty girls, can’t even make an excuse for it by burying it in gifts to the entire UN team. “You’ll have a chance to wear the dress you brought at the election day ball,” Lexa says.

“Two months until election day,” Clarke says. She tilts her head a bit. “How are you feeling?”

Lexa opens her mouth to answer, something polite but boringly neutral, something that couldn’t be taken out of context or put any other way but what she meant. What comes out instead is, “I’m nervous.”

Clarke seems just as surprised as her at the honesty of it. “You seem like you’ve got it under control,” she says.

The song is coming to a close but Lexa doesn’t want to stop dancing or talking. She knows she must. But that urge rises up again and she murmurs, “The gardens are particularly nice tonight. If you have a moment, you should explore them.” Nothing else, just a lingering hope Clarke will take her meaning, and an undercurrent of nervousness if she actually does show up. She’s felt it here and there over the years; beautiful women are always coming and going through the court. But she’s kept to herself since her coronation and she feels adrift, unsure of how to relate to another adult woman in this context. Especially one who isn’t her subject and in fact has some degree of power over her.
The song fades out, replaced by applause for the quartet. Lexa and Clarke swirl to a gentle stop and Lexa takes a measured backwards step. Her small bow is textbook perfect; her etiquette master would probably give one of his grudgingly rare compliments on its crispness and the appropriateness of it with an acquaintance of lesser rank. “Thank you for the dance,” Lexa says. She turns and walks away without waiting to see what Clarke says.

* 

It takes another hour for the party to wind down. Many of the older guests have left and the younger ones are more interested in one last drink and the night’s leftover gossip than in any politicking.

Lexa tries not to hurry, instead telling her bodyguards she just wants a moment to clear her head in the gardens. They sweep ahead of her, and she requests that Gustus be the only one to follow her. Normally he assigns two guards on rotation to shadow her, but he doesn’t comment or complain other than a slight twitch in his mustache.

Lexa doesn’t know where or if she’ll find Clarke, but her feet take her off the main paths, far away from the fountain centerpiece and the ceremonial bonfire, towards a grotto with stone benches around a small pond. She spent her childhood summers pretending the grotto was a treasure cave, though it was hardly deep enough to count as such, and that she was a clever thief from the fables, stealing from corrupt nobles and hiding the money for the people.

As she approaches, she can make out a lone figure on one of the benches, fidgeting with the fabric of her red dress. Lexa’s heart jumps a gear or three until she almost feels lightheaded. “Wait here,” she tells Gustus, close enough that she could still be in his line of sight if he peered around the corner of a tall hedge, but far enough for some privacy. As much privacy as she’ll ever get with Clarke.

For a moment it seems foolish to be here and she nearly thinks better of it, stepping back out of sight before it’s too late, but then Clarke catches her movement and their eyes meet. Watery light shimmers off the pond and over her face as she stands up, trying to see better in the dark.

Lexa licks her dry lips and starts forward, gravel path giving way to smooth flagstones as she enters the grotto. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“I wasn’t here long,” Clarke says. Her hands clasp in front of her body, fingers fidgeting in a tangle. “Honestly I almost didn’t come. I didn’t really…know what to make of this.”

“Please don’t feel you have to be here,” Lexa says right away. “I’ll have one of my bodyguards escort you back to the palace if you want.”

“I’m not one of your subjects, ma’am. I’m here because…well I guess I was curious.” And Clarke does look curious, on top of her nerves. “Is there something you needed to discuss about the election?” To Lexa’s hopeful ears, she sounds as though she doesn’t want that to be the case.

“No, I wanted to talk to you,” Lexa says. She balls her hands into fists, releases them again. “Just…talk.” She gestures to the benches, letting manners carry her a little bit. Clarke arranges herself again, legs neatly draped over the edge of the bench, ankles crossed, hands in her lap. Lexa sits on the other edge of the bench, gloved hands rubbing down her thighs a few times. She stares at the pond, which glows dimly from a submerged light and casts everything in the grotto in an ethereal blue-green palette.

“Can you-”

“Do you-”
They pause, then smile at the false start.

Lexa tries again. “Can you…while we’re here…would you call me Lexa?”

Clarke’s smile grows warm and her body softens its posture. “Sure. If you call me Clarke instead of Ms. Griffin.”

Lexa smiles back, and finally it’s like it was that night when neither of them could sleep. But better, closer, more on the surface. She can say what she means. “Clarke,” she says, trying out the name in her mouth. Not the first time she’s said it, but the first time it’s just for her. “How was the rest of the ball?”

Clarke shifts, leaning back on her hands and thinking for a few moments. “Fancy,” she says, and Lexa barks out a laugh.

“That’s a good word for it,” Lexa says. She leans back too, her body opening up towards Clarke. “I hate these things. They’re expensive and exhausting. But they have meaning, and it’s a good way to blow off some steam.”

Clarke tells her about the rest of her staff, how Wells danced with so many people he had to go back to his room early, how Monty and Jasper spiked their punch with a flask of the good local rum. She speaks fondly of her coworkers, and Lexa senses perhaps they’ve all been together long enough to have bonded into a unit deeper than just the work itself. She tells Lexa about changing majors in college, about growing up in the United States, her boss at the UN. She talks until she lets out a sudden yawn, and then she covers her mouth in embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. It’s late.” Lexa can feel her body rhythm has been disrupted a bit by the ball so she’s not sure how late it is, but the moon is high in the sky and she can tell her own yawn is imminent.

“I kind of went on for a while,” Clarke says.

“I enjoyed hearing about your life,” Lexa says. Her hand slides forward a few inches on the cool stone bench, stops.

“What about you?” Clarke asks.

Lexa knows it shows on her face how thrown she is by the question but can’t stop the frown from forming. “What about me?”

“I told you all about my childhood and work. What about you? What’s it like being, you know.” Clarke makes a vague hand gesture that Lexa supposes to encompass everything about being the sole ruler of a formerly isolationist militaristic monarchy.

Later Lexa will be hard-pressed to explain what it is that bypasses her usual tendency towards privacy and has her telling Clarke the truth. In the moment, it feels like the unburdening of a confessional to say, “It’s lonely.”

There’s no pity from Clarke, just a simple and honest attentiveness.

“I’ve been queen for ten years. It never gets easier. I thought, after the first few years, maybe things would settle down but…” Lexa sighs. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m doing all this, the election, for selfish reasons. Because I can’t deal with the pressure anymore. But then I think, that’s selfish to feel that way too. It’s not about me, it’s about my country. My people.”

“It doesn’t sound selfish at all to want a break,” Clarke says. Her hand creeps closer to Lexa’s. “Most
people need a vacation after working at their regular nine-to-five jobs. You’re responsible for a whole country. When was the last time you took a break?”

“I’m taking one now with you,” Lexa says, which earns her a bashful smile. “A real vacation?” She thinks. Her family used to take irregular vacations when her mother could convince her father to go somewhere for a few days. “Two…no, three years ago, I spent a weekend in Berlin after I finished with a summit there.”

Clarke stares at her. “You haven’t gone on vacation in three years?”

“Is that a long time?” Lexa asks uneasily. “I take days off, sometimes. Every few months.”

“I guess that’s not so bad,” Clarke says, even though she still seems somewhat horrified. She watches Lexa, eyes catching at the medals on her chest. “If you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?”

“I’ve been a lot of places-”

“I mean on vacation,” Clarke says. “Just you and no responsibilities.”

“I’m not sure I could imagine not having responsibilities,” Lexa says, meaning it as a joke, but hearing it almost physically fall flat between them. She doesn’t want to see if Clarke has found that pity, so she abruptly pulls away, standing up and tugging at her uniform jacket. “I’ve kept you long enough.”

Clarke stands up too, but this is worse, because now they’re standing close and Lexa can see how Clarke’s breathing has started a gentle heave of her bosom which should honestly be outlawed in that dress. She folds her hands behind her back, though it doesn’t stop her from feeling drawn forward. She could take a step and have Clarke in her arms, and she’s acutely aware how long it’s been since anyone touched her just to touch. Not fussing or making sure she was presentable; just touching her because she’s Lexa. Not many people see her as just Lexa. Perhaps no one; to Indra she’s the commander in chief, to Gustus she’s the one person he must protect at all costs, and to Anya she’s the only thing holding the country together.

She feels young for the first time in a long time, unsure even what she really wants, what she would do if Clarke touched her. What she does know are the consequences if she gives in to the impulse. She swallows once. “I’ll have someone escort you back to your room.”

“Thank you,” Clarke says, quiet and soft. “I had a good time tonight.” She’s got one hand holding her other arm, and Lexa really did mean to walk away. But what she does instead is reach for that dangling hand, fingers sliding over the delicate bones of her wrist and squeezing. Just once, just a second, but it’s like a zap of static electricity to her. Clarke looks down at the way Lexa’s fingertips trail away from hers. Her voice is barely a breath. “Lexa.”

“I’m sorry,” Lexa says, yanking her hand back.

“It’s okay,” Clarke says, but Lexa is finally backing away as she should have all along.

“I’m sorry,” she says again. She twists around, turning on her heel with drilled precision, and walks as fast as she can back to the palace.

*  

She’s cranky in the morning. Not enough sleep and the anxiety from what she did with Clarke kept her awake until nearly dawn, and she’s not about to sleep in just because of her own poor judgment.
So she wakes up and drags through her routine, and even though she’s certainly had to function on less sleep and under more dire circumstances, it gets harder with every year.

Her secretary at least instantly catches her mood, which is what makes her such a good secretary, and she’s very discreet and quiet in going through the day’s schedule with Lexa. She’s also thoughtfully left a shot of espresso along with the usual tea, brewed quite strong from the smell of it.

Anya comes in for her daily briefing, takes one look at her, and raises her eyebrows. “I didn’t think you drank that much last night.”

“I didn’t,” Lexa says, teacup huddled in her hands not far from her mouth. She needs it too much to fully set it down.

The eyebrows descend into a narrowed, calculating frown. “Then why do you look like-”

Lexus is only talking a calm sip of her tea, but her warning for Anya not to finish that sentence clearly translates as she bites off her words. “Election update?” Lexa asks.

Anya delivers it with a minimum of suspicious side glances, but then has to get in a dig at their visitors at the end. “Our UN delegation didn’t look too bright either. Some of them more than others.”

Anya undoubtedly has complete dossiers on every single member of the delegation, updated daily by her spies. “Oh?” Lexa prompts her.

“I think Lincoln is having an affair with Octavia Blake,” Anya says, and that is completely not what Lexa was expecting at all. The tea in her mouth goes down in a hard lump, making her eyes water.

“An affair?” she repeats hoarsely.

“I can’t be sure, but they’re closer than they should be.”

Lexa finally sets down her cup, one finger tapping on her desk. “Continue watching for now. If things get more complicated, then remind him what’s at stake here.” She looks directly into Anya’s eyes, feeling a bit of a hypocrite. “Gently.”

Anya doesn’t grumble out loud, but Lexa knows she feels it.

“Anything else?”

“Other than gossip? Not really. Wells Jaha may become a problem but for now he hasn’t done anything improper.”

Lexus actually wants the gossip; Anya always has the very best in the palace. But gossip is beneath the dignity of the queen, so she has to hope that Anya will bring it up on her own, or else try to come up with a disguising request that Anya will probably see through anyway. “Yes, he certainly is charming.”

“Clarke Griffin also left the party early, but she didn’t meet with any of the nobles I’m watching,” Anya says.

“Good,” Lexa says briskly. She can play along here with the best of them; let Anya get even a sniff of her strange inclination towards Clarke Griffin and it’ll be trouble for them all. “As long as she and the rest of her team stay away from Nia’s people, I have no issue with them.”
Anya gets up from her chair, meeting over. “Take a nap, you look awful,” she says, and leaves before she can be reprimanded.

*

Lexa can’t really afford to take a nap. She has back-to-back meetings all day with just enough time to eat lunch without scarfing it down like an animal. There are hundreds of things to take care of in a governmental transition that she can’t – or won’t – delegate. On top of it all, her office has promised a half-hour with a reporter from The New York Times as part of their continuing coverage of Markenland’s first free elections.

At least there’s no photography required, so she just has to have her makeup retouched to hide the worst of the bags under her eyes and doesn’t bother to wear her suit jacket. Still, she finds reporters exhausting, and sometimes feels the father-shaped devil on her shoulder whispering that it would all be so much easier if she canceled the elections and tossed out foreign press. But they were a nation in decline when her father ruled, and most of the world didn’t take them seriously as an economic or political power. Her father-the-devil again, beating his chest about how military expansion would demand international respect, and in any case no true son or daughter of Markenland needs the opinion of an outsider for validation.

She answers all the questions about economic development, re-emphasizes that she will still be present to help guide the new prime minister, and once again declines to endorse a candidate. She’s made clear her positions on what she thinks is best for the country, and voters and observers can draw all the conclusions they want about who aligns with those ideals.

She’s looking forward to the end of her day, with the reporter being last on her list. Lunch feels like a distant memory and she knows the chef will have something good for her. But her secretary buzzes, and Lexa is obliged to answer, though she stabs her finger at the phone unit rather more forcefully than necessary.

“No photography required, so she just has to have her makeup retouched to hide the worst of the bags under her eyes and doesn’t bother to wear her suit jacket.

“Send her in,” Lexa says. She does a quick check to make sure she’s not too rumpled and manages to tuck a few strands of hair behind her ear before Clarke enters with a hesitant little smile on her face.

Lexa rises to her feet. “Ms. Griffin.”

“Your majesty.” Clarke waits until Mrs. Landhas has pulled the door shut, staring at the floor between them in the meantime. When they’re alone, she continues to keep her eyes down. “Um. I… don’t really know what I was thinking, interrupting you.”

Lexa really has no energy for this. And she doesn’t know what to do, which makes it all the more draining. “I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s been a long day–” Clarke’s face begins to fall. “–so can we possibly continue this while I eat? You’re welcome to join me, if you haven’t eaten already.”

Clarke looks intrigued, and possibly happy for the invitation. “Oh. Yes. I already ate, but please don’t let me stop you.”

Lexa pulls her jacket from the back of her chair and slips it on, buttoning it up neatly as she heads for the office door. She opens it just wide enough to poke her head out. “Good night, Mrs. Landhas.”
“Good night, ma’am,” she says. Lexa knows she’ll be another half hour at her desk, getting the next day’s work prepped. She probably should have just named Mrs. Landhas as her heir then abdicated; the country certainly wouldn’t be any worse off with her at the helm. She closes the door again and crosses to the other side of the office, where she opens her private entrance. Her bodyguards come along at their usual discreet distance, murmuring into their cuff mics that they’re on the move. Lexa sets a brisk pace down several floors to the kitchens, where the staff have already set a table for two. It’s a utilitarian setting, and one she’s used quite often by herself when she just wants a quick meal with minimal hassle. But she doesn’t feel as though she can invite Clarke back to her quarters, and she doesn’t want to give anyone in the palace a chance to spread gossip that would turn incendiary very quickly. Dinner in the kitchen is already pushing it.

The head chef bounds over, as pleased as ever to see her.

“Whatever you have prepped already,” Lexa tells him in English. She looks at Clarke. “Terik is a genius, Ms. Griffin. He can cook you almost anything you can imagine.”

Terik beams at them both. “It’s my pleasure.”

“I guess something light, please. A salad, maybe?” Clarke requests, too polite to decline in the face of someone who so obviously enjoys his job.

“Salad course to begin, right away,” he says, and swivels away, already barking something at his sous.

“I’m afraid he has the soul of a grandmother who thinks we’re all terribly underfed,” Lexa says wryly.

Clarke seems to relax as the minutes go by and good cooking smells start to waft towards their little table. “Do you eat down here a lot?”

“Sometimes. If it’s not too late. I like the solitude,” Lexa says. She looks at the bodyguards in the corners and the slightly removed bustle of the kitchen. “As much solitude as I can find, anyway.”

“The garden…”

Lexa’s eyes flash a warning. The people down here she trusts implicitly, but not enough to know something like this. Clarke looks taken aback, but is too smart and too diplomatically inclined not to take the hint.

“Um, it seems nice,” Clarke finishes lamely. “Do you spend a lot of time there too? It seems more isolated.”

Lexa settles back in her chair somewhat. “Not much time for long walks in the garden. But if there’s a formal event outdoors, I’ll try to spend some time there. Our gardening staff is excellent.” There just isn’t much they can say to each other besides these little pleasantries, and Clarke doesn’t seem inclined to bring up work. Lexa wonders if they were just two people sitting in a restaurant if this is the moment where she would slowly reach across the tablecloth and rest her hand on top of Clarke’s. Or would she boldly run her toe up the side of Clarke’s calf? No, Clarke would be the one to do that, she’s certain. Queen or not, Lexa has always been reserved in her emotions. Perhaps she was freer with them as a child, but even then she was always the least boisterous of her siblings.

Terik brings their salads, setting them down with the classical unobtrusiveness of a trained waiter. “Local wild greens, herbal pine nut dressing, and mushrooms I forage this morning,” he says. He backs away a few steps, but then stands there with his hands clasped in front of his chest, giving
Clarke encouraging looks.

She unfurls the napkin from her place setting, drapes it across her lap, and picks up her fork, admirably casual under Terik’s intensely eager focus. She forks up a bite and takes it in her mouth. “It’s very good,” she says, one hand covering her mouth as she continues chewing.

Another smile from Terik. “Next course whenever you are ready,” he says.

As soon as he’s gone Lexa reassures Clarke. “You won’t have to eat. I’ll make your excuses. He won’t mind.”

“If he’s anything like my grandma, he definitely will mind, but thank you,” Clarke says, and continues to gamely make her way through the salad.

“So, Ms. Griffin,” Lexa says. She crosses her legs at the knee, one foot sticking out from behind the table. “What brought you to my office?”

“Oh.” Clarke has to cover her mouth again and finish her bite. “I guess I just wanted to talk to you. About…”

And here Lexa regrets warning her about bringing up the garden, because it’s clearly on both their minds. She tries to fill in the gaps. “I heard your team is getting along very well with the election team. Everyone seemed to have fun last night,” Lexa says.

“Yes. They did,” Clarke says, slowly, carefully. “It was a lovely ball. I hope it’s not the last time I get to see a Unification Day celebration.”

Lexa stares at her. She can barely let herself hope that Clarke is saying what she thinks Clarke is saying. “Things will be different in a year, but I’m sure you would be welcome to attend again. Markenland has so much culture and history to share with the rest of the world.”

“Learning about your country, your people…I’ve enjoyed it,” Clarke says. She toys with her fork. “I…I may have had certain unfair expectations when I first arrived.”

“Whatsoever our reputation is beyond our borders, we more than earned it,” Lexa says, her tone shading darker. Clarke, perhaps wisely, lets that lie between them until the mood lightens somewhat again. But they’re also still dancing around what they really want to say and it’s frustrating Lexa into silence. Of course she has wanted women in the past ten years, moreso lately than right after her father – well, she tries not to think about that. But there’s never been anyone she trusted enough, or wanted enough, to throw over all her caution. Things are different now. She doesn’t need to produce an heir for the continued stability of her country, and she doesn’t need to make a political alliance to keep her stranglehold on power. But the election is the single most important thing she will ever do for her country. Lexa pushes away her plate. She can’t be here with Clarke. She’s a fool, and Clarke doesn’t deserve the hassle of her indiscreet attentions.

“Are you okay?” Clarke asks. She puts down her fork.

“I’m sorry, it’s been a long day. My stomach is just a bit unsettled from all the…caffeine.” This is a lie. Lexa could drink coffee or tea from sunup to sundown and be fine; her old friend caffeine has kept her functioning for a decade.

Terik, who hears everything in his kitchen, comes bustling out. “Perhaps ginger root and seltzer, ma’am.”

“No thank you. I’m going to go lie down,” Lexa says. Her stomach is growling terribly, the salad
having barely put a dent in her hunger, but she ignores it. She’s gone to bed hungry before. She stands up and so does Clarke. They’re caught in another moment, vibing on a strange but somehow familiar wavelength. “May I walk you to your quarters?” she offers.

“If you don’t feel well…” Clarke seems just as lost but desperate for some kind of resolution as Lexa. There are the things they’ve said, and the things that they really mean, surrounded by expectations and responsibilities and too many observers who might let slip a careless word or two. Clarke is reserved, but her words are soft and inviting. “Maybe another time, when you’re feeling better. You could tell me about the palace.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Lexa says, her words just as soft. “Good night, Ms. Griffin.”

“Good night, your majesty,” Clarke says.

Lexa leaves first. She doesn’t need the tingle at the base of her neck to tell her that Clarke is watching her until the kitchen doors swing shut behind her.

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Normally she would bring some work back to her suite, but tonight she simply strips her clothes, washes her face, pulls on a nightgown, and lies in bed, stewing in her frustration. As tired as she is, she can’t stop thinking of Clarke’s face as she invited Lexa to walk her back next time, the inherent promise in her words. The implied desire for her company.

Perhaps it’s ten years of loneliness. Perhaps she’s just feeling reckless with the end of her reign approaching. Perhaps something else, something about Clarke Griffin. Whatever it is, Lexa changes out of her gown and back into dark trousers and a slate grey button-down so that if she gets caught she can at least feign that she was returning to her office. But she knows the palace from long years as a child climbing over and through every square inch. Left to her own devices by her father, indulged by the palace staff, she knows the layout as intimately as the architects who built it. Perhaps moreso, with the additions and renovations over the years. And as cliché as it is, there are several secret passages for both safety and discretion; she’s certainly not the first monarch in this building who’s wanted to pay a visit to someone she is not supposed to be visiting. There are ways in and out of the royal suite that are known only to her and to Gustus, and Gustus is not standing outside her door tonight.

She emerges in the guest wing, padding along in her slippered feet. And then, a moment of panic as she can’t figure out which door is Clarke’s. She hasn’t thought this through at all and now she’s caught out in the open, no nearby alcove or corner to hide her, calculating frantically. That day she overheard the conversation – the one on the balcony. She knows that balcony, she knows the room to which it’s connected. She can only hope that it belongs to Clarke and not her companion, Raven.

Lexa pauses in front of the door, hand poised to tap discreetly. She almost has second thoughts, body turning away, brain starting to babble that she could be wrong about this whole thing. But the part of her that likes to defy expectation, the bravado that Anya and Indra have both insisted will get her killed one day, kicks in. She taps before she can talk herself out of it.

It’s not that late, but it’s certainly past the time for decent calling hours. She hopes Clarke isn’t asleep. She hopes with all her heart that this won’t turn into a disaster.

The door opens just a crack and a slice of Clarke’s face appears, one eye peeking out. It widens almost comically as she sees Lexa standing there.

“May I come in?” Lexa whispers.
Wordlessly, Clarke opens the door and stands aside, letting Lexa slip in, closing the door behind her. Lexa doesn’t miss how she throws the latch. She’s already dressed for bed in a worn white undershirt and shorts, hair loose and tousled as though she’s just taken it down.

“I’m sorry for showing up like this,” Lexa says, which is all she gets out before Clarke steps into her space, slides her fingers into Lexa’s hair, and pulls her down for a kiss.

Lexa takes a second to respond, shock giving way to the feeling of Clarke’s warm mouth pressing to hers, fingertips digging in lightly at the base of her skull. Her heart beats so heard she’s sure they can both hear it, rhythmically pounding through the stillness. She pulls back, though Clarke doesn’t let go of her. “Are you sure?” she asks, still whispering, though now as much as to avoid shattering the moment as to avoid being overheard.

“No,” Clarke admits. Her hands slip down to Lexa’s shoulders. “There’s so many things that could go wrong.”

“I’ll leave if that’s what you want,” Lexa says, her hands coming up to take hold of Clarke’s wrists. Not to pull her away, but to touch the only thing she believes is real in this moment. To help her stay focused, to keep her heart from floating to a place where it’ll get her into deeper trouble.

“I want you to stay,” Clarke says.

“Tonight,” Lexa proposes.

Clarke closes her eyes, tilting her forehead against Lexa’s. “Tonight,” she agrees.

Lexa slides her arms around Clarke’s waist, pulling their bodies flush, and tilts her head to kiss her again. It’s so much better than vague memories of intimacy that have faded over the years. The closeness, the sensation of a woman. The sensation of this particular woman. Clarke licks at her bottom lip and she opens her mouth and feels a current run directly between her legs. She tries to take it slow, to let her body re-learn all the things she tried to forget. But as ever, Clarke makes her abandon caution. Clarke, with her soft body and her lush mouth and hard desperate breaths. She pushes in the vague direction of the bed and Clarke follows her lead, until she takes over and becomes the one to tug Lexa along in her wake. She hits the mattress and sits down on the duvet, crawling backwards while Lexa mounts her, one leg swinging over Clarke’s thighs.

Clarke lies back beneath her and Lexa hovers, balanced on her hands and knees. They’re both still breathing hard and Lexa has a vague notion that there’s time to end this, if they wanted to. They haven’t gone so far they couldn’t simply pretend nothing happened in the morning. She looks down at Clarke, her golden hair sprawled out underneath her, and knows that thought for an utter lie. “You’re very beautiful,” she murmurs.

Clarke reaches up with her left hand, tracing her fingers along Lexa’s cheek. “So are you.”

Lexa dips down to kiss her again, body slowly settling against Clarke’s until most of her weight is off of her arms. Clarke’s body feels incredible and her hands are massaging along Lexa’s back, right down to her bottom, encouraging Lexa to rock her hips forward. It feels brazen, which excites her even more, and before she knows it Clarke is tugging her shirt free of its tuck and she’s sitting back up to work at the buttons. She has just enough presence of mind not to pop them; she knows she can’t be caught walking around with a torn shirt, or wearing one of Clarke’s. But she nearly loses any coordination in her fingers as she watches Clarke sit up at the waist and pull her shirt over her head, revealing her naked breasts.

She feels a bit of a dope, thinking right away that Clarke’s breasts could probably end wars, but then
Clarke is yanking her shirt down, trapping her arms until she manages to tug one, then the other free. Clarke flicks the clasp of her bra and pulls it over her arms, tossing it to the foot of the bed. In half a breath they’re skin to skin and Lexa doesn’t know how she lived so long without this. She’s not entirely sure if she means this, just the sensation of another warm body beneath hers, or this, Clarke Griffin and her perfect breasts. Lexa sits in Clarke’s lap as they exchange wet, heated kisses, hands roaming, hips starting to work into a rhythm together.

Clarke is panting hotly into her mouth. Fingers dip below her waistband, move to the front of her pants, work the button and the zip in the negligible space between their bodies. But they’re pressed together too tightly and eventually Lexa pushes Clarke onto her back again. Her fingers curl in the elastic waistband of Clarke’s shorts. “Okay?” she asks, and Clarke nods. The shorts slide down her legs and join Lexa’s bra, leaving Clarke in her underwear.

Lexa just wants to touch Clarke everywhere she sees bare skin, her belly up to her ribs and those breasts and her shoulders and lovely neck. Clarke has other ideas. “Take off your pants,” she says.

Lexa can’t think of just how to obey for a second, but then reluctantly rolls off of Clarke so she can lie back, arching slightly to work her pants down and kick them off. She turns onto her side, allowing herself to finally indulge in touch, only to find Clarke smiling at her. “What?” she asks, feeling her own face returning the smile quite of its own volition.

“You. I’ve never seen you this…human,” Clarke says.

Lexa almost wants to dive under the covers in embarrassment.

“No, I like it,” Clarke says, turning onto her side as well. She scoots closer, slipping one leg between Lexa’s, a hand running down the outside of her thigh, pulling it over Clarke’s hip. She kisses Lexa, and Lexa’s arm goes automatically around her waist, pulling Clarke as close as possible, seeking out that skin-warm intimacy again. It’s the surprise of her life when Clarke rolls them both, putting Lexa on her back. Clarke surges her hips forward, dragging her thigh up against Lexa, and she feels herself get as wet as she’s ever been. Clarke kisses down her body, hair trailing over her chest and her breasts and her stomach. A bite at her hipbone has her inhaling sharply. Clarke peeks up, tucking hair behind one ear. “Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Lexa breaths out. She finishes the tucking Clarke’s hair on the other side of her face, letting her fingers linger along her jawline. “But no marks.”

Clarke assents with a kiss to the spot she just bit, before dragging Lexa’s underwear off of her body, leaving her bare and open and wanting. She kisses back up the inside of Lexa’s thigh, another bite to the softness there for good measure that has Lexa’s entire body twitching. “Mouth,” she says, and bites the other thigh. “Or fingers?” A kiss now to soothe the bite. “Or both?”

Lexa feels herself grow even wetter at just the thought, at the sound of Clarke’s husky voice. “Mouth for now,” she manages in half-strangled words. And then, because Clarke is still kissing at her thighs, she adds a single, desperate, “Please.” She feels Clarke’s hands gripping at her waist in response to that word, and then the liquid heat of her tongue gently licking up the length of her labia, and she nearly bucks into Clarke’s mouth. Clarke presses her down and keeps licking until her tongue is pushing inside of Lexa and she almost comes right then. There’s a tightening at the base of her spine that has her urging Clarke on with two hands on the back of her head and hips bucking in rhythm, body desperately seeking release. And then Clarke licks hard at her clit, over and over until Lexa’s entire body clenches hard and she comes in Clarke’s mouth, stifling a moan lest she wake anyone on the other side of the wall.

Her mouth and throat are dry, she was panting so hard, but she can’t do anything except lie there
while Clarke patiently coaxes her through the aftershocks. She avoids Lexa’s sensitive clit, lapping with shallow, broad strokes a few times until Lexa is finally still and able to open her eyes. “Clarke,” she says hoarsely. “Come here.”

Clarke climbs up her body and kisses her deeply, sharing the taste of her while Lexa combs fingers through her hair.

“Did that feel good?” Clarke asks, but in an almost shy way, as though checking to make sure she did it right.

“It felt incredible,” Lexa says. “I want to show you how you made me feel.”

Clarke’s response is a sweet kiss that rapidly turns into her tongue against Lexa’s, slow and deep and dirty. Lexa can feel herself growing aroused again but she is not about to wait a moment longer to see and hear Clarke come. She repeats Clarke’s question into her ear in a low voice. “Mouth? Fingers? Or both?”

Clarke shudders, arching into Lexa’s body. “God, anything. Anything you want.”

Lexa kisses Clarke’s neck at that, licking and sucking. Not hard enough for a mark, just as Clarke didn’t have the luxury of marking her, but hard enough to have Clarke writhing against her. On a hunch she licks the curve of Clarke’s ear and is rewarded with another shudder. Her hand massages down, first finding Clarke’s breast and squeezing, enjoying the weight of it, then sliding across her stomach and right between Clarke’s legs.

She’s so wet that Lexa’s fingers slip. It’s gratifying, and incredibly hot. Lexa slips through Clarke’s folds, sliding her fingertips up to gather the wetness and slick her fingers, and even that much has Clarke trying to push down on her hand. Lexa keeps paying attention to Clarke’s neck and the slope of her shoulder and her breasts as she eases two fingers inside and absolutely relishes Clarke’s moan. But they are who they are, and Lexa shushes her, hand stilling.

“I know, I know,” Clarke says, her frustration evident underneath her arousal. “Just…don’t stop. Please.”

She couldn’t stop now if Nia herself burst in with all of her generals. She works her fingers in and out of Clarke, sensitive to her cues when she likes something and when she doesn’t. Her pace picks up, harder and faster, and then Clarke lets out another moan that has Lexa clamping her free hand over her mouth just as she comes, muffled sounds collecting against Lexa’s palm until her body collapses back onto the covers, bringing Lexa with her.

“Oh my god,” Clarke says. She lets out a whimper as Lexa withdraws her fingers, but no longer loud enough for alarm. “Sorry,” she adds in a whisper, though her smile is anything but.

Lexa lets her head sink into the pillow next to Clarke’s, bodies half entwined. She can feel Clarke playing with the hand she’s left draped across Clarke’s stomach. “It’s okay,” she says.

Clarke kisses at her knuckles, one by one. “What now?” she asks, settling their joined hands on her chest.

“Now.” Lexa snuggles a little closer. “We pretend for another ten minutes and then I leave.”

“Twenty,” Clarke counters.

“Fifteen.”
“Deal.” And she smiles again, though it wobbles a bit. Now that the first rush of passion has left them, all they have is the reality of their situation.

“Thank you,” Lexa says, wondering if Clarke really understands everything Lexa encompasses when she says that. She doesn’t want to move at all, not her body draped over Clarke’s or her hand feeling Clarke’s heartbeat. But already she feels guilty. “It was selfish of me to come.”

“You’re allowed to want things for yourself,” Clarke says. She strokes down Lexa’s forearm, back up again, stirring the fine hairs there and smoothing them.

“What I want and what I can have don’t always align.” Lexa looks down for a moment. “We’re pretending, remember?”

“Right. You’re not the queen. You’re…” Clarke’s eyes take on a playful gleam. “You’re the hot local and I’m here backpacking through Europe, trying to discover myself.”

Lexa snorts indelicately. “You’d never do something so banal.”

“The first rule of improv is don't say no,” Clarke says, squeezing Lexa’s hand. “So how did we meet, miss hot local?”

Lexa thinks for a second. “You asked me for directions. We were going the same way so I said I’d show you.”

“Very smooth,” Clarke teases. “I’ll bet you were actually going the opposite direction.”

“You think very highly of yourself in this scenario,” Lexa says, nevertheless placing a kiss on the curve of Clarke’s shoulder.

“Maybe asking for directions was a ruse. Maybe I was watching you at a café for an hour and finally worked up the nerve to speak to you,” Clarke says.

“I would have noticed you watching,” Lexa says. She can picture it, the altered course of their lives landing them outside on a sunny day with Lexa reading or perhaps working over an enormous latte. Perhaps she would be finishing her Ph.D., or just fretting over regular work problems. Things that only mattered to her and her boss, or a client. Not to an entire nation. “I would have wanted you to come talk to me.”

“And I would’ve asked you on a date, and we’d go to dinner at your favorite place. Somewhere the tourists don’t go.”

Lexa picks up the thread easily. “And you’d stay for a while, instead of continuing on with your trip.”

“We’d have a lot of fun. And then I would leave,” Clarke says, a gentle sadness about her face.

“And then you would leave,” Lexa agrees. She pulls herself closer, close enough that her nose brushes Clarke’s cheek and she doesn’t have to look into those soft, sad eyes, and holds her in silence until the fifteen minutes are up.

Chapter End Notes
You can yell at me over how thirsty Lexa is at badlance.
Clarke is alone when she wakes up in the morning. Not that she expected otherwise; she watched Lexa pad into the bathroom naked to clean herself up, then gather her clothes and dress meticulously. She wonders what it would be like to wake up with Lexa. To share the small intimacies of new lovers, to smile and remember the night before as they flirted over breakfast. She doesn’t let herself hope for any kind of maybe, someday. The reality is last night can never happen again.

She drags herself out of bed, showers, picks an outfit for the day. Makeup, hair, quick glance over notes from the day before, itinerary check on her tablet. At least their interaction with the palace staff has smoothed out nicely, making their work unobtrusive and efficient.

She’s quiet at breakfast, picking over her eggs and bacon, wondering if Terik made this down in the kitchens. Probably some lower-level cooks made it, turning out their breakfast en masse. It’s still quite good, and she can appreciate the effort that goes into making the palace comfortable for them. Her team have all settled in and there’s no more talk of moving out to a hotel, but-

The idea hits her brain full force, making her grimace down at her food.

“You okay?” Wells asks, sitting across from her with a large stack of pancakes.

“Just thinking of something I’d rather not do,” Clarke says.

“About today?”

“No.” She pokes at her egg again, watching the yolk run all over the white. “About asking the queen again to let us go stay at our hotel.”

“But it’s great here,” says Wells. He pulls a face. “And it keeps Nia off our backs.”

“I know, but I should ask again.”

He stops eating and watches Clarke with a measured tilt of his head. “What makes you think she’ll say yes this time?”

She shrugs, casual. “Just a hunch.”

*

This time Clarke sends a request to be added to Lexa’s schedule at her earliest convenience. She hadn’t missed the very pointed glare from Mrs. Landhas either time she showed up unannounced at Lexa’s office and in any case she shouldn’t be barging in there so often. It looks suspicious and probably draws a lot more attention than either of them need.

The notification pops up on her palace tablet, an addition to her schedule that she has fifteen minutes with the queen precisely at 1830. It barely gives her time to get settled; her schedule shows the group returning to the palace at 1815. But of course Mrs. Landhas knows that.

“You seem distracted,” Raven says as they’re shown through an office where a lot of very eager-looking interns are bustling around, preparing reports, gathering polling data, running off copies for
get out the vote workers, all the things Clarke remembers from volunteering on her first campaign at
sixteen.

“I’m not distracted. There’s a lot going on in here,” Clarke murmurs back.

“You’ve seen offices like these a hundred times. You were weird this morning too.”

“Just didn’t sleep well,” Clarke says, and Raven is at least nice enough to leave it at that.

She gets a little antsy towards the end, seeing that their time is ticking down, but no one else in the
group seems to notice. Or at least no one cares enough to call her out on it, and she does her best not
to hurry to her room. She’s aware she could just go directly to her appointment, still dressed in her
suit from the day, but there is something about going to see a girl she slept with the day after that girl
sneaked out of her room that makes Clarke want to look as good as possible. She refreshes her
makeup and pulls her hair down from its ponytail and switches from her serviceable flats into a pair
of heels. It’s so foolish and not a little vain but it’s not every day your one night stand is the queen of
a whole country.

Mrs. Landahs looks at her as disapprovingly as her own mother ever did when she enters Lexa’s
offices. Clarke offers a wan smile, which Mrs. Landhas ignores as she buzzes the intercom. “Go
ahead,” she tells Clarke, her tone very clearly meaning the opposite.

Clarke dodges around her desk and skitters into Lexa’s office as quickly as dignity will allow. When
the door shuts behind her she can see that Lexa isn’t at her desk, but on the couch across the room,
sipping from a cup of tea. Her eyes are crinkled in a smile over the rim of the delicately-patterned
cup, as though she knows exactly why Clarke is less than collected.

“Hi,” Clarke says, staying where she is for the moment.

“Hello, Ms. Griffin,” Lexa says, the picture of composure. Clarke supposes of the two of them, Lexa
would have more practice at pretending nothing is wrong. She wonders, not entirely without
jealousy, how many people the queen has bedded in secret. Lexa doesn’t seem the type to risk
indiscretion, but then again, Clarke hadn’t really pegged her as the kind to give in to passion either.
“How can I help you?”

“I just.” Clarke looks around the room for inspiration, composure. Whatever it is that lets Lexa sit
there so calmly with her teacup. “I just wanted to see how you were doing today.”

Lexa’s amusement fades into something soft and grateful. “I’m fine. Are you okay?”

“I’m…” Clarke hasn’t really processed last night. She woke up and went directly to work and split
her mind for most of the day, not coming to any conclusions one way or the other. “I think so.”

Lexa watches her for a moment, then sets down her teacup with a faint clink. “Is there anything I can
do?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Clarke admits. “I don’t think there’s really a rulebook for how I’m feeling.”

“There doesn’t have to be,” Lexa says. She looks down at her coffee table. “Whatever you feel, I’m
sure it’s justified.”

“It’s not bad. I don’t think it’s bad,” Clarke says in a rush. “I just don’t know what it is.”

The crinkles return to Lexa’s eyes, just a bit. “Neither do I.” She looks up again. “Would you care to
join me for tea?”
“I only have fifteen minutes and I’m sure Mrs. Landhas is out there with a stopwatch,” Clarke says, pointing back at the door with her thumb.

“She’s always been very protective of my schedule. She may be the only reason the country is still standing.” Lexa says this with utter solemnity, showing off a more complete sense of humor than Clarke credited her for and she laughs, wishing more than anything she could just go to Lexa and join her on the couch. But they agreed last night would stay last night for a reason. Perhaps Lexa has more at stake in the greater scheme of things, but Clarke has a lot on the line too. Her laughter fades out.

“I came by…” She doesn’t want to ask, but she thinks she has to. “I came to ask again if you’d reconsider letting my team relocate to our hotel.”

Any remnant of good humor slides off of Lexa’s face. Clarke remembers how coldly distant she was at their first meeting, almost as though she were putting up a physical barrier between them. “As I’ve said, it’s highly preferable that you remain in the palace.” She looks at her tea. “But if you really wish to leave, I’ll see about security arrangements.”

“It’s not that I want to go,” Clarke says, desperate for Lexa to understand her. “But just that I…I don’t want to impose. And if things are different now, if you thought it was best for us, our teams, to have some distance…” She stops herself before she can descend into a full babble.

Lexa’s face thaws somewhat. “I see.”

Clarke wants to go to her, touch her with reassuring hands like any couple having a misunderstanding. But they’re not even a couple; Clarke is Clarke and Lexa is Lexa, two people stuck on opposite sides of the room.

“I think,” Lexa begins delicately, “You are better acquainted with our political situation, so if you would still like to leave, then you are making an informed decision. But you are more than welcome to stay here.” She looks directly at Clarke as she speaks.

She should leave. She should take her team and get out and set up in the hotel. There are election commission offices in the city. They could work just as efficiently there. There’s too much temptation here, regardless of what’s at stake. All of this flashes through Clarke’s mind while Lexa looks at her as though she’s ready to have her heart broken. “If it’s not an imposition,” she says.

“Never, Ms. Griffin.” Lexa says never, but Clarke hears something more like a promise, and she doesn’t know if she’s ready for promises, or even wants them. She’s already risked so much. They’ve risked so much, and at least if they leave it at once and never again, they can pretend like it was the magic of that night, with the ballroom and the gardens, the lights and the dancing and the glamour.

“Well,” Clarke says, her heart suddenly tripping into a faster rhythm. “Then I guess we should stay.”

Lexa’s slow half smile is full of such beautiful hope that Clarke wonders at ever thinking her barely one step removed from a despot. “Good. Please let my staff know if they can do anything to accommodate you and your team.”

“I will.” Clarke is hard pressed not to feel some of that infectious hope; the corners of her mouth tug at her until she’s smiling back. “Well. Thank you for seeing me.”

“Thank you for coming by,” Lexa says. Ever the diplomat, she stands up to escort Clarke on the short walk to the door. Her hand skims Clarke’s elbow and they both freeze.

“Thank you for coming by,” Clarke repeats, not even daring to look at Lexa, but needing her to
know all the same.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Lexa says, hand still hovering, but not touching, as if she knows what might happen if they’re skin-to-skin again.

Clarke can feel that hand hovering all the way the door, right through the clothes at the small of her back. She nods to Mrs. Landhas on her way out. To her surprise, Mrs. Landhas does not scowl, but looks at her with something akin to pity. Clarke thinks she would have preferred the scowl.

*

On rare days off, most of the time the team likes to go into the capital. The place is rich with history and there are trains to neighboring cities. But for once Clarke just wants to shut herself in her room and read, perhaps with the balcony doors thrown open to let in the warm breeze. She knows she’s been a bit distracted lately and this will be a chance to re-focus herself. Wells promises to bring back something from that bakery she likes, but the group otherwise leaves her be. They’ll all be sick of each other’s faces before the end and it’s good for everyone to have some breathing room on their own.

She opens up the balcony doors as wide as they’ll go and drags a chair over onto the smooth concrete surface. She arranges her book and a glass of water on a stand and sits down with purpose, only to find herself fidgety and distracted the moment she flips to the first page. Talking to Lexa helped a little bit, but the way her body reacted in that office – she can’t forget the intense temptation to just cross the distance between them in every sense of the word. She doesn’t know who this person is, who would risk everything for - what? It’s not like they could really be together. Even after the election, if it came out that they’d had an affair then any UN report on the results would immediately become suspect. They’re probably seen together too much as it is.

She should have gone into town with the others. She’s suddenly restless, and she tosses her book on the bed in favor of slipping on her shoes so she can go for a walk. She still hasn’t fully explored the gardens, extensive as they are, and she can admit to herself that she wants to revisit the grotto from the other night.

She navigates her way down to ground level and emerges off the rear terraces, feet crunching over the gravel path. The places looks so different during the day, no bonfire, no lights from the palace. She tries to retrace her steps but one wrong turn leads to another, and eventually she’s completely turned around in a section she’s never seen before. At least she can still see the palace standing high in the sky, an easy beacon by which to navigate. She won’t truly get lost in here, but she certainly can’t figure a way out at the moment.

She decides to sit down for a moment, get her bearings, catch her breath. This part of the garden is as lovely as any other, with banks of flowers and shrubs all around her. There’s a stone bench off to one side and she finds herself wishing she’d brought the book with her. For a few minutes she forgets that her life is a mess, that she now has a huge secret looming over her. She enjoys the sunshine and the gentle fragrance of the flowers.

A throat clears itself a few yards away and Clarke’s eyes shoot open. Lexa is standing just around the corner of a tall hedge in her usual dark suit, looking apologetic. “Oh,” Clarke says, sitting up straight, suddenly feeling slightly underdressed in her twill shorts and v-neck.

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” Lexa says.

“No, I was just…” Clarke looks around. “Taking a moment.”
“I can leave if you—”

“No, that’s okay,” says Clarke, even though every instinct inside her is screaming to just let Lexa walk away.

“It’s just, I saw you from up there.” Lexa turns and looks vaguely in the direction of the top of the palace, where her quarters are located. “And you seemed a little bit…”

Clarke can imagine how she must have looked: pausing at every intersection, backtracking, sometimes turning around on the spot. “Your garden’s a lot bigger on the inside,” she says, somewhat sheepishly.

“Can I walk you out, then?”

Again, her instincts are blaring at red alert that this is bad, but Clarke just lets a smile spread across her face. “Are you often in the business of rescuing women from getting lost in here?” She thinks she’s starting to recognize the smile Lexa uses most, the one that’s more something pleasant about her mouth than a single recognizable gesture. She tries not to let herself believe Lexa only does it for her.

“I’m not in the habit of letting women wander through my garden at all,” Lexa says. She seems not to realize the double entendre so Clarke swallows the near-guffaw that almost erupted out of her. She’s been spending too much time with Raven.

Clarke stands up, brushing off her pants, and joins Lexa as they head back towards the palace. As always, bodyguards are a discreet distance away, far enough for the illusion of privacy but still never out of eyesight.

“Why aren’t you in town with the others?” Lexa asks, as though she knows exactly where Clarke’s team is at this precise moment. She probably does, which is a bit unsettling.

“I think I just needed a little time to myself,” Clarke says.

Lexa makes a sympathetic sound, but doesn’t give Clarke any more than that, merely continuing with her hands behind her back and her eyes on the path ahead. Clarke imitates her, if only to keep herself from reaching out and holding Lexa’s hand. It would be nice, the two of them just lovers walking hand in hand through beautiful gardens on a sunny day. She shifts her hands into her pockets.

“How do you like the gardens?” Lexa asks.

Clarke wonders if the question might have another meaning. “They’re different from when I walked through them the night of the ball. More…cheerful, I guess.”

“Were they particularly sad at night?” Lexa asks, one eyebrow askance.

“No,” Clarke says. She looks around them, the beautifully manicured young trees and subtle fountains. She misses the grotto. “They were more mysterious. Almost…” She hesitates. “Romantic.”

“I would imagine most gardens by moonlight are romantic,” Lexa says, though her face has gone studiously blank.

“I haven’t been in a ton of moonlit gardens so I wouldn’t know,” Clarke confesses. “Have you?”
Lexa turns her head to the side so that Clarke can’t see her expression for a moment. When she turns it back Clarke can’t tell if she’s angry or sad or just lost in thought. “I used to spend a great deal of time down here, actually. Whenever we were in residence at the palace, I liked to be outside as much as possible. I….there was a…” She goes quiet a moment, struggling for some word or phrase that won’t come easily. “I liked to play outside with my friends.”

Clarke can’t believe how much effort it took Lexa to say something so banal, something anyone else could utter without thought. Nothing – not the guards, the palace, the omnipresent obedience from staffers – has hammered home for her just how different Lexa is from other people. “I did too,” she says, casual, not wanting to make Lexa feel as though what she said was strange, even though it did sound strange coming from her mouth.

“Friend,” Lexa amends. “I didn’t have many companions. None that my father trusted.”

“Oh.”

“He was a paranoid old bastard, for all the good it did him,” Lexa says, and her short laugh is heavy with the bitterness of too many memories. Clarke can at least recognize that, how the sum of so much hurt can be boiled down to a short reminiscence, quick and sharp like a stiletto.

At last they emerge from the gardens. Clarke stares up at the palace once again, wondering if she might not turn right back around once Lexa is gone and lose herself amongst the hedgerows again. Her talk with Lexa has put her in a strange mood, restless and intense. “Thank you for the escort,” she says.

“It was my pleasure,” Lexa says. Still, they stand about a foot apart, not looking each other in the eye. “Will you be all right from here?”

“I think so,” Clarke says.

“You think?” Lexa is laughing silently at her, she’s sure, the only sign the brightness of her eyes. “Perhaps I could have a ball of twine delivered to your room so you can mark the labyrinth?”

“I’ll be fine,” Clarke says firmly. “Don’t let me take you from your work.”

“I’d much rather be down here taking a walk with you,” Lexa says. She’s quick to add, “Today is more boring than usual. No one’s tried to demand I abdicate early or that my father is rolling in his grave yet.”

“De Sever?” Clarke asks, not bothering to hide her sympathetic tone.

“One amongst several concerns,” Lexa admits.

Clarke offers her a tight smile. “I’m sorry I can’t help you there.”

“You help more than you know,” Lexa says. She takes a breath, body subtly leaning away from Clarke. They both have to go and they know it; no more excuses to linger.

“Thank you again,” Clarke says. And then, because the restlessness is making her bold: “I’m glad you found me.”

She really can’t tell what the look is on Lexa’s face, what the slight tilt of her head means. She gives Clarke a slight bow, heels clicking together as she stands up straight. “Have a good day, Ms. Griffin.”
Lexa walks off, surrounded by her security, and Clarke returns to her room and stares at her book without reading a single page.

* 

She’s not expecting the discreet little sequence of taps on her door that night. But she already knows who it is as she pads over, opening it and finding Lexa waiting, looking much the same as she did the first time. They don’t need words; Lexa slips through the door and Clarke silently locks it. She watches as Lexa paces into the room, but not towards the bed.

“What happened to just tonight?” Clarke asks.

Lexa watches her, still but for the idle flexing of her hands. “You can always tell me to leave. I’ll do whatever you want.”

It’s hard not to feel a little thrill at Lexa, the queen, the most powerful woman in the country, offering to obey whatever comes next out of Clarke’s mouth. She could tell Lexa to leave, never speak to her again, and Lexa would do it. But she doesn’t want that. “I want you to stay,” Clarke says.

Lexa holds out her right hand, no longer flexing but steady, waiting. And Clarke slowly walks over and slips her hand into Lexa’s, feeling her squeeze once. They breathe together in the silence, faces just barely aglow from the small bedside lamp. “I can’t stay long,” Lexa whispers.

“I know. It’s okay.” Clarke squeezes back, then leans forward for a kiss. Something soft and quiet for the two of them, no bodyguards, no palace, no expectations. Lexa kisses back with an answering softness, seeming to feel the same need to go slow, to take their time with each other. It’s time they don’t really have, but the frantic coupling – it makes it feel like even more of a secret between them, instead of something real, something honest.

Lexa lets go of her hand so she can circle her arms around Clarke’s waist, pulling her close, tilting her head to deepen the kiss. Clarke is content to be touched like this for a while, the two of them drifting slowly towards the bed. She lies down first, pulling Lexa on top of her, pulling Lexa’s shirt out of its tuck so she can slide her hands underneath it. She likes the feeling of Lexa’s strong back, the smooth flex and sway of it under her hands. She likes the weight of Lexa’s body on hers, legs slotted together, stomachs and chests pressed close. She unhooks buttons one by one until Lexa’s shirt is open, and Lexa pulls up to remove it. First one arm, then the other, letting Clarke enjoy the reveal of her body.

There’s a scar on her stomach that Clarke didn’t notice last time, a rough patch of scar tissue scratched along the curve of her waist. Clarke traces it with her fingers, Lexa’s stomach tautening at the touch. “What happened here?”

Lexa looks down at Clarke’s hand, her fingertips still running over the scar. “The assassination attempt that killed my family – I was the only survivor. My father wasn’t even in the car with us.”

Clarke’s hand goes still, palm resting over the scar. Lexa looks solemn, but not particularly sad or angry. Just as though it was another thing that happened to her. “I’m sorry,” Clarke says.

Lexa covers Clarke’s hand, pressing it against her side for a moment. “It still hurts sometimes, but it helps me remember.”

“Remember what?”

Lexa pulls Clarke’s hand away at last, placing it on the mattress by her head and holding it down by the wrist. Not hard enough to truly pin her, but enough to give the illusion of control. “The cost of
being a bad ruler.”

She seems so young and yet not really Clarke’s age either. She’s lived and felt and done enough for more than one lifetime. “Come here,” Clarke whispers, and when Lexa leans down, gives her the sweetest kiss she knows how to give. There’s something in it that must remain unspoken between the two of them, if they’re to get out of this with their hearts intact, but Clarke wants to at least give her this much. Sweetness, and safety, and maybe healing. As much as Lexa can be healed.

Their clothes go over the side of the bed, one by one. Lexa takes her time, kissing long trails all over the map of Clarke’s body, hands exploring her dips and peaks. She uses her mouth on Clarke, patient and attentive, and rides out the first rolling orgasm without ever stopping. It’s half an hour before Clarke even manages to get her hands on Lexa in return, and she returns the favor with not a little curiosity of her own. There are other scars, though none so gruesome as the one on her waist.

Clarke kisses the thin slice on her tricep then looks expectantly at Lexa.

“Fencing with Anya,” she says, smiling at the memory.

Another kiss for the patch on her left kneecap.

“Fell off a horse when I was ten.”

And another kiss for the thin line down back of her left hand.

“Hunting accident. I was being taught how to skin a deer and the knife slipped.”

There are other scars, Clarke can tell. But none visible, and not the right time to bring them up. Perhaps she shouldn’t assume there’ll be another time to talk about them, but she knows in her heart of hearts they missed their chance to stop.

*

Lexa leaves in the middle of the night again, slinking away without much more than a whisper. Clarke watches her blend into the shadows, feeling an ache somewhere inside her chest that she desperately tries and fails to ignore. She lies in bed for a while, staring through the French doors leading to her balcony; she hadn’t yet drawn the curtains for the night when Lexa found her, so moonlight streams freely into her room. She can just barely make out mountains in the distance, mountains that remind her of Nia and the intrigue and maneuvering she can sense just under the surface in the palace.

Nia hasn’t bothered with her since their first meeting, but she watches the news the same as the others. There’s a bloc of nobles opposing the election, playing up the old xenophobia and isolationism that once ruled the country in a bid to protect their own interests. If they can’t stop the election outright, at the very least they want their candidate to end up in control. But polling data has shown a surprising amount of pro-election sentiment amongst the older generation, who perhaps better remember the economic decline and suffering under Lexa’s father.

All of this and more churns through Clarke’s head, mingling with what she just did in this very bed with the queen of Markenland. She’s caught up in desire and fear, the pull and push of Lexa and their responsibilities. She doesn’t manage to fall asleep until nearly three in the morning, and when her alarm blares at seven it runs for several minutes before it manages to shake her out of her stupor.

When she shuffles into the bathroom she can see there are bags under her eyes, but they don’t compare to the very faint bite mark she discovers on the inside of her thigh in the shower. It’ll fade within the day, but still it’s a flattering reminder Lexa couldn’t quite control herself enough to obey
her own rules. Clarke blushes under the water, recalling now how it came to be there, brushing her fingertips over it and feeling her body react instinctively with the beginnings of arousal. With a vicious twist, she turns the shower as cold as it will go.

*

“You look like shit,” Raven says at breakfast.

Wells is better, as usual, and just hands her a cup of coffee already with two sugars poured as she sits down across from them at the table.

One sip and she looks at her mug with mild interest. “Is this different?”

Wells tips his chin at the serving table, where something new is sitting next to the usual carafe of hot coffee. “Shot of espresso. They put the machine out this morning.”

Clarke looks at it, a block of chrome and black sitting neatly on the table with Monty and Jasper excitedly crooning over it as they load up on caffeine. “Did they say why?”

Raven shrugs, mouth full. “Maybe they had a spare, or they got a new one and we’re getting the leftovers. Who cares why, unless the espresso is poisoned?”

Wells makes a noise of agreement, but Clarke can’t help but think it was a gesture for her.

*

She doesn’t dare visit Lexa again. And in any case they’re busy, going over poll notification methods and more voting district boundaries. They have meetings scheduled with interest groups all week long too, from women's rights to racial minorities to religious advocacy and child welfare. She watches Lexa give press conferences on television, tour her country, meet with foreign diplomats and work town hall meetings with citizens. Nia and her faction aside, Lexa is young and charismatic, and she's greeted everywhere with increasingly rousing sentiment.

“Oh my god,” says Octavia during a lull in the office.

Clarke automatically closes the tab on her browser displaying yet another video clip of Lexa answering questions from students.

Octavia turns her laptop around, showing everyone the screen. “Buzzfeed just posted a thirst article about the queen,” she announces.

Raven gleefully darts over to Octavia’s desk and leans over, scrolling through the page. “The seventeen hottest pictures of Queen Lexa of Markenland from Wednesday’s university town hall,” Raven reads aloud.

“Guys,” Clarke says feebly.

Raven continues to run her finger over the trackpad. “They didn’t lie though, she has the GQ thing working for her.”

By now everyone else in the office has already navigated to Buzzfeed, where the top article is definitely from Lexa’s Q&A session. Clarke gives up and clicks on it too, even though she should be reprimanding Octavia for not working in the first place. She and Octavia both know that everyone in this office has spent their own fifteen minutes mindlessly scrolling through listicles of memes in the middle of the workday. She’s even caught Lincoln lazily scrolling through something that is
definitely not polling data.

“Look, I respect her brain and stuff, but with that body I definitely would,” says Raven, Octavia making halfhearted attempts to shush her in case someone from the Markenland team happens by and hears them. Raven ignores her and looks at Clarke at the next desk over. “Clarke?”

Clarke freezes for half a second before continuing to idly look through the pictures. “What?”

“I know your type,” Raven says, one eyebrow cocked insinuatingly.

Clarke does her best not to blush. She knows exactly what lies under that crisp button-down, those fitted slacks. “Do you want me to lie and say objectively she’s not hot? Also Anya is probably listening to us all right now.” She purses her lips at Raven for emphasis.

Raven blanches somewhat, knowing that with Anya it’s only half a joke. “Shit.”

The office quickly returns to work, browser tabs closed or bookmarked for later. Clarke sneaks one last look at Lexa, shirtsleeves rolled up, listening intently to someone with a mic in her hand. She saves the picture to her hard drive and tries not to think too hard about it.

*

Lexa is away from the palace for two weeks, and for two weeks Clarke keeps her head down and works and convinces herself that they really have stopped. It’s easy with Lexa gone and Anya lurking in the hallways and around corners, watching all of them with that mildly disapproving yet somehow icily polite expression on her face.

But then one day she misses the feeling of being watched, and a quick check with Lincoln confirms that Lexa is back in residence.

Clarke doesn’t know why she expects Lexa to come to her that night. She just hopes, and lies awake past one in the morning just in case that tap-tap sounds at her door. But Lexa, it seems, has much better self control than Clarke, and that night she sleeps alone and lonely, feeling strangely flung out of place in her empty bed. The palace has been home for nearly two months at this point and is as familiar to her as any place she’s lived, but suddenly she can’t get comfortable. She can’t relax.

In the morning she’s surprised to see a notification pop up on her tablet – a change to her schedule. She has a meeting with the queen at the end of the day. A note at the bottom says that Lexa wants an update on her team’s observations, on their assessment of where Markenland is in the election process.

Clarke feels her heart speed up. This meeting was originally scheduled for a week from now.

She picks her outfit with more care than usual, a dark pencil skirt and a white three-quarter sleeve blouse she knows drapes well on her. Hair and makeup get a little more attention too, though she keeps it professional. Nothing that would stand out, that would draw attention. But as she leaves her room, she knows she looks good.

The workday crawls by at an agonizing pace. She wishes Lexa could have scheduled her for the morning, but she’s undoubtedly busy. Clarke buries herself in reports from the women’s interest committee, telling herself she owes everyone better than her distraction. But the moment her tablet chirps a fifteen-minute warning for her appointment, she’s stacking her papers and securing them in her desk, getting everything clear and telling Wells not to wait for her at dinner in case her meeting runs long. She just barely remembers to grab her tablet with the necessary reports on it.
Mrs. Landhas sits in her usual perch right outside of Lexa’s office, eyes tracking Clarke the moment she steps into the waiting area. “She’s expecting you,” she says, and Clarke has to tamp down the impulse to rush to the door. She smiles politely and walks at a sedate pace like it’s any other evening, any other business meeting. But her pulse is pounding under her fingertips and she’s sure Mrs. Landhas can hear the hard thump against her breastbone. She almost feels like she hasn’t eaten all day, lightheaded and a bit disconnected.

As soon as the door closes behind her Lexa stands up from her desk.

“Welcome back,” Clarke says, standing in the middle of the room with her tablet in front of her body.

Lexa doesn’t respond, but slides around her desk and swiftly crosses the space to Clarke. Her hands curl around Clarke’s neck, thumbs smoothing along her cheeks, pulling her in. Clarke goes willingly, her eyes closing as Lexa kisses her, lips parting and tongues connecting. It’s the kiss of an absent lover, someone who’s been thinking about her every day for two weeks. She finds herself rather breathless at the end, reluctant to open her eyes and leave this feeling of melting into another person. But her tablet is still in her hands, and as Lexa pulls back, she holds it up. “You needed this?” she murmurs.

Lexa cradles her face in her hands for a moment longer, then drops them and pulls back to a more respectable distance. “Yes. Thank you.”

They move to the couches, Lexa at one end and Clarke at the other. Desire here is tempered by the knowledge that Lexa’s bodyguards are just outside the doors, that Mrs. Landhas could interrupt at any moment. Clarke takes a second to smooth down imaginary wrinkles in her skirt, to compose herself into something vaguely adult and detached on her end of the couch. Only then does she turn on the tablet and call up the progress report she and her team have been compiling over the past month.

Lexa is respectful while Clarke lays it out for her. She pays attention – Clarke thinks she could probably smush Lexa’s face into her breasts and Lexa would still ask pertinent work questions while her people’s interests were the topic. But as soon as she wraps up, Lexa is looking at her steadily, one hand resting on the couch between them, waiting only for another hand to join it.

“You missed me while you were gone,” Clarke says boldly.

Lexa’s mouth twitches. “Perhaps.”

“I missed you while you were gone.”

The twitch becomes a definite smile. “If it helps, I was very productive.”

“I know. I saw the news.”

Lexa seems quietly happy that Clarke followed her on the news, even though it’s Clarke’s job to be on top of the political mood of the country. “I thought of you when I was at the university.”

“Oh?”

“The students asked a lot of questions. It reminded me of you.”

Clarke looks down at her lap, fighting a laugh. “You looked good at that town hall.”

“So I’m told.”
Clarke pauses, squints at Lexa with a calculating tilt to her head. “You saw the Buzzfeed article,” she accuses.

Now it’s Lexa’s turn to look away, just long enough to give up the ghost.

“Oh my god,” Clarke says, delighted. “You complete egotist.”

“Anya showed it to me,” Lexa says defensively. “She already made fun of me, if you must know.”

“You know what the next step is,” Clarke says. She pauses just long enough for Lexa to pay attention, and then she deadpans, “Most eligible bachelor lists.”

Lexa flushes, just a hint of rose to her cheeks, and pushes the tablet into Clarke’s thigh. “I think you’ll find I’m not particularly looking.” She flicks her gaze up, through her eyelashes, and Clarke feels it lance right through her. “I’m quite satisfied with my life at the moment.”

They stare at each other, knowing they’re coming to a decision together. Clarke eventually slides the tablet back onto her lap. “Don’t stay away so long next time,” she says, her voice just loud enough to carry between them. Then she leaves, past the watchful Mrs. Landhas, back to her room, where she changes the bedsheets and tidies up. She’ll be having company later.

* 

“You really did look good at the university town hall,” Clarke says, playing with Lexa’s hair while she lies with her head on Clarke’s stomach. They’ve stretched this period afterwards longer each time, fifteen then twenty and now thirty minutes. Every time it gets harder for Lexa to leave, for Clarke to let her go.

“I enjoyed it,” Lexa says drowsily. Her hand idly massages Clarke’s thigh, touching just to touch.

“Maybe if this queen thing doesn’t work out you could become a teacher. Political science or something.”

“That might be something,” Lexa says. “I had many teachers growing up. The good ones stay with you.”

“Was Anya one of them?”

Lexa makes a sound almost like a snort. “She would tell you she was. Don’t bring it up, she loves to remind me that she once outranked me.”

“Sounds like Anya,” Clarke agrees. She keeps carding her fingers through Lexa’s hair, fingertips scraping along her scalp. She loves Lexa’s hair, thick and soft and so easily poofed into something wild and mane-like.

“The country is almost ready. I felt it while I was traveling around,” Lexa says. Clarke feels her clench around her body in a sort of half-hug, half-hold on her, before she lets go. “I’m ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To not be queen,” Lexa says. She sighs. “I guess, technically, I’ll still be queen. But to not be the only one responsible. Does that make me a bad person?”

Clarke massages the base of her neck. “Of course not. It makes you human.”

“I’m ready to be human, then,” Lexa says, and she means it as a joke, but neither of them really feel
it that way, and she watches as Lexa’s face goes slack again.

Clarke continues to massage, getting up the nerve to ask Lexa the thing that’s been on her mind since the second night they spent together. “When you’re human, do you think you’ll travel more?”

Another pause, Lexa’s scrutiny making her want to squirm a bit. “Perhaps to New York?” she asks, clearly understanding the real question.

“Yeah.”

Lexa shifts around until their bodies are parallel again and her head is back on her pillow. “I would like that, to see a friend.” And here she caresses Clarke’s face, but with the tenderness of an apology. “But probably not for a long time. Not until I can be sure no one will contest the results of the election…or a neutral report validating it.”

The election. The country. Clarke feels the dynamic shift between them, until she’s no longer lying in bed with a pretty woman, but with the queen of Markenland. She rolls onto her back. “I know.”

Lexa dresses swiftly, but before she leaves, sits down on the edge of the mattress by Clarke. “Thank you,” she says, cupping Clarke’s cheek, then brushing stray hairs away from her eyes. She drops a kiss onto Clarke’s mouth with self control enough to pull back without deepening it. Clarke watches her pause by the door, listening for any sound, and then she’s a ghost slipping into the dark hallway.

* * *

The last thing Clarke needs in between trying to finish her election prep and trying to forget about Lexa is a visit from the duchess, but a visit she receives as Nia sweeps into their office suite. **Sweep** is exactly the word for the way Nia moves about, all six feet of her imposing frame, boosted even higher in heels, with a few extra inches for good measure from her updo. She somehow manages to look like she’s towering over even Lincoln, though to his credit the man simply offers a calm, polite nod of his head as she interrupts his meeting with Clarke. “How may I help you, duchess?” he asks.

“Consider this a spot inspection,” Nia says, looking around the office with something like distaste, if her face could properly be said to be making any expression at all.

“I wasn’t aware you would be conducting inspections,” Lincoln says, still calm. Clarke thinks Nia could probably flip a desk and Lincoln wouldn’t crack.

“A tour, a review, a check up. I have a vested interest in these proceedings,” Nia says.

Clarke wouldn’t believe that even if Nia had bothered to visit any time in the past two months and change. After her first meeting with the duchess, she definitely doesn’t believe it. But there’s nothing they can do but acquiesce; she is, after all, the highest ranking noble in the country and in close contention for the throne unless Lexa produces an heir. Not that the throne will be of much import after the election.

Clarke and Lincoln take turns guiding her to various offices, asking staffers to introduce themselves and give brief details on what they’re doing. Clarke expected Nia to act bored, above it all, but instead she listens with keen interest and sharp eyes. Quite frankly, it’s a bit terrifying, though that doesn’t stop Clarke from emphasizing the true scope of the momentum involved at this stage of the election. It would take an act of God now to legitimately halt things, so close to the vote.

Nia sniffs around for nearly an hour, leaving puzzled glances and not a few puckered butts in her wake. But at the end the sneer has dropped from her face and if anything, she looks concerned.
“So,” she says. “This is the future of the country.”

“This is the first step towards a truly modern Markenland,” says Lincoln. Polite as ever, but with a firm, civil conviction.

“It seems you have everything in order,” she says, her tone that of a woman swiping her fingers along the furniture for dust. “I’d like a final report on my desk this evening.”

“Ma’am-” Clarke begins.

“Whatsoever you were preparing for Queen Lexa,” Nia says with a wave of her hand. She raises one imperious eyebrow as though she’s been doing it all her life. “It’s all public record, I assume?”

“Yes,” Clarke says, “But our final report won’t be done until after the election.”

“Whatsoever you have now is fine,” Nia says, and leaves much the same way she came in without giving Clarke a chance to answer.

She and Lincoln watch the double doors she left open in her wake.

“That was weird,” he says.

*  

If Clarke thought the palace was turned inside out for the Unification Day ball, it’s nothing compared to the election ball. There’s very much an end-of-an-era vibe going around, and it has the palace staff in a state of frenzy. Even Lincoln is starting to show cracks, lecturing one of his staffers about incomplete work, albeit in his usual measured tone of voice. Clarke imagines it hurt all the more coming from Lincoln, who isn’t prone to anger or frustration.

Even though they’ve been at election prep for months, in the final week everything seems to come down to a flurry of last-minute work that is somehow all on schedule yet feels like it might teeter out of control if they miss a single thing. It’s like going down stairs too fast; if they try to stop they’ll go tumbling head over ass. Clarke begins dreaming in checklists, sometimes waking up in the middle of the night convinced that she hasn’t gotten a report from a regional team leader or that she forgot to make a call.

But the day before election eve everything is in place. They’ve had their test runs and delivered their reports. Lexa has signed off on the elections, the candidates have given their final speeches and rallied their supporters. Get out the vote workers have been knocking on doors, making sure everyone knows their polling location and the rules and responsibilities of voting. There’s even a Markenvote hashtag.

Clarke can hardly believe she’s done. Well, almost. They’ll be observing and collecting data for their final report to the U.N., but the actual process of putting a working election in place is done. Now they just have to actually get through the voting and collect the results.

Raven still wants to hit Paris for a quick shopping trip, but they all brought suitable formal clothes with them, and Clarke isn’t going to bother Lexa again to ask for a selection from her social director, who probably already has enough to do for three people let alone cater to the needs of a bunch of random guests. It’s also better they stay apart, as far and as much as possible. Lexa hasn’t returned to her bed, and she hasn’t thought about asking. It’s a miracle they weren’t caught, and on top of her stress dreams Clarke feels guilty about potentially derailing the political progress of an entire country.

The guilt hasn’t stopped her from thinking about it any moment her brain isn’t fully occupied with
something else. Lexa was tentative with her in many respects, but passionate and interested and – Clarke can feel a blush even now – extremely receptive to instruction. She has to consciously struggle against fading into daydreams about having the time to really explore one another, to establish the kind of deep bond that would turn their trysts into something more.

In the middle of getting ready for the ball, she stops by Wells’ room to help him with his bowtie. He’s never gotten the hang of the real thing, and would probably wear a clip-on if he thought he could get away with it.

Her entrance is greeted by an exaggerated whistle from Wells. “You look great,” he says.

Clarke ignores him and swishes forward in her fitted strapless gown, its silver accents flashing dully as she moves through the light. The matching cream white shawl is still in her room, waiting with her jewelry and a last touchup with Raven and Octavia. Wells obligingly lifts his chin as Clarke works on his bowtie, making sure the side work out evenly.

“Can’t believe we’re here,” he says.

She hums her general agreement, focusing on the cloth in her hands.

“You thinking of where we’ll go next?”

She grins. “You don’t want a vacation after this?”

“I know we were busy all the time, but being here kind of felt like a vacation at times. I mean, we’re staying in a palace by a city with a thousand years of history.”

“No poli sci major gets to call anyone else a nerd ever,” says Wells.

Clarke tugs the ends of the bowtie, perhaps a little harder than necessary, and steps back to inspect her work. Wells lowers his chin, comically attempting to look at his own neck, before ducking sideways to check the mirror above his dresser. He tugs the bowtie as well, but in satisfaction. “You tie a mean tie, Griffin.”

She starts to leave but Wells catches her eye in the mirror. “You gonna walk in the gardens again tonight?”

Clarke freezes, then forces herself to relax. “Maybe? They look nice at night when they’re lit up. Why?”

“Remember in college when my room was on the other side of yours?”

Clarke thinks for a moment, then drops her jaw, shuts it, and blushes in rapid succession. “You don’t have to worry. I’m…I just want to finish our work and make sure the report is good.”

Wells watches her in that way of his, knowing but without judgment. “Was it worth it?” he asks.

Her feelings hit her in a rush, a pang in her chest that takes her by surprise. “I think so,” she says.

“Okay,” says Wells. She nearly tears up at how much it means to hear him say it, not sarcastic or angry, but like he understands. Like he still trusts her. He lets her go without any more questions.

*
The ballroom is ablaze with light and color when they arrive – on time and therefore unfashionably early. The room is only about half full, people mostly milling around by the food and drinks. The doors leading to the veranda have all been thrown open, letting in the night breeze and giving a glimpse of twinkling fairy lights in the distance. People are out on the terraces too, leaning on the balconies and enjoying themselves.

Clarke grabs a passing glass of champagne, more to have something in her hand already in case anyone tries to offer her a drink or ask for a dance, and leads the way towards the edges of the crowd.

Everyone is in their absolute finest state wear tonight; the ball is white tie, and there are plenty of gloves and coattails to go around. She imagines Lexa will also be in full evening dress and smiles to herself at the image, letting it linger in the back of her mind while she shakes hands and makes small talk in between little bites of hors d’œuvres going around.

Half an hour later the room is just about full, Nia having finally arrived with a small entourage of guests. No one approaches her first that Clarke can see; instead Nia takes a glass of champagne, stakes out a bit of territory opposite the dais, and then deigns to speak to those who make it through the screening of her retinue.

Clarke has already made one full circuit of the room, so she sticks with her group and sips her champagne and waits for Lexa to make her entrance. It’s not long until the herald gets up before the dais and announces her majesty with her very long list of titles – Clarke has to hide her sudden amusement at the thought of the “defender of the realm” bargaining with her for more snuggles. She has to turn away for a bit, champagne glass in front of her mouth, Wells giving her a strange look, and so she misses the moment Lexa actually steps out on the dais and takes center stage.

Clarke turns back and feels stuck to the spot, transfixed by the sight of Lexa. No uniform tonight, nor a white tie and tails. Lexa has chosen a sleeveless dress tonight, all in white, draped straight down to the floor for a simple silhouette. The v in front drops just low enough to draw Clarke’s eye, stopping above a broad silver girdle cinching the dress at the waist. Her hair is mostly loose, curling around her shoulders in shining waves.

“Throwback,” Wells murmurs.


“It looks like it’s based on their traditional dress.” Wells leans closer to Raven, going off on a historical tangent that Clarke tunes out.

“Tonight,” Lexa says, and even the low-level hum of noise going through the ballroom ceases. Every shuffle, every clink of silverware is instantly audible. “We celebrate a new era for Markenland. Tonight we celebrate a country that belongs to its citizens. Tonight we celebrate the future.” She pauses for the applause that ripples through the room, then continues in a clear, ringing voice.

“We also thank the election team that has worked so hard and so faithfully to make real what was once only an idea – that a modern country calls for a modern government, that power derives from the consent of the governed. The passing of wealth and power through a handful of bloodlines has disenfranchised the citizens of Markenland for too long. Tomorrow, we embrace our new beginning as a republic where every citizen is entitled to the same rights and opportunities regardless of wealth, regardless of race, gender, orientation, ability, or creed. The strength of our country lies in its people, in every individual’s freedom to pursue their potential to its fullest. For too long has power resided in the hands of the few. I return this power now to you, my people, and hope that you will do great
things with it. Our destiny will be what you make of it. So.” She reaches for the flute of champagne on a small table at her side and raises it. “Let us toast to tomorrow, and a stronger Markenland.”

The entire room responds with their glasses and a collective “To Markenland.” Clarke is just sipping at hers when there’s a wriggle of motion, someone slipping through the center of the room. A slight girl in a nondescript dress, raising her arm. Clarke doesn’t clock what’s in her hand at first, at least not on a coherent level. Her brain can’t connect a word to the object, just a sudden intense shock, a jolt of fear that drops the glass right out of her lifeless hand.

Clarke feels like everything is happening very slowly – the girl, Anya charging forward from the dais with her ceremonial sabre halfway out of its sheath already, people ducking, bodyguards converging.

“For the one true Markenland!” the girl cries.

The gunshot is astoundingly loud, followed by more. Clarke doesn’t know, doesn’t count. She’s temporarily frozen, lost in the chaos of the rest of the room as people scatter and shout. Almost instantly bodyguards swarm the girl, unable to shoot her with so many bodies milling in all directions. Clarke watches Anya stagger backwards, clutching at her side, Lexa with her arms outstretched to catch her, bodyguards and soldiers in dress uniform everywhere. Something tugs at her and then she’s on the floor where Octavia is crouching.

“Clarke,” she says, then louder, right in her face. “Clarke!”

She snaps to.

“We need to stick together,” Octavia says, eyes flicking back and forth, checking to make sure Clarke is really with her.

She nods and turns away, taking the other side of their little huddle to make sure she and Octavia can keep them herded together. Octavia’s security expert training has her taking the lead, guiding them to cover.

Raven is cursing fluently, a neverending stream of profanity, while at the same time ducking with Octavia’s hand on the back of her neck keeping her head low. Clarke holds her arms out, trying to get them to push to the side, to an exit, just away. She hears another gunshot behind her and whirls on her knees, sees the girl with her arm in the air and the gun pointed at the ceiling while three bodyguards wrestle with her.

She whips her attention back to the dais, her heart forgetting for a moment that it needs to beat. Anya is struggling feebly in Lexa’s arms as she’s pulled backwards towards the royal entrance, her unsheathed sword still in her hand, the tip dragging along in their wake. Clarke wants to go to them both but she has a responsibility to her people, and there’s dozens of people fleeing in all directions, making it impossible to cross the room. It’s all she can do to keep them pushing generally in one direction while trying to keep track of the struggle with the shooter and Anya and Lexa.

She can see Lexa kneeling over Anya now, laying her out flat. Anya is still moving while Lexa keeps a hand on her shoulder, as though they’re arguing. A hard shove lays Anya flat and she finally stays still. Lexa snatches up the sword from her hand and stands up, marching off the dais, parting the crowd as she approaches the still-struggling knot in front of her. With her saber, with her hands stained red with blood, she looks like a vengeful goddess of war. The people around her slow down, heads turning to follow her path.

The bodyguards wrestle the girl to the ground, getting her on her knees. One of them cruelly bends her wrist until she's forced to drop the gun. They all still as Lexa stops in front of them. The sword
tip rises unflinchingly, landing under the girl’s chin and forcing her to raise it so that she and Lexa are staring eye to eye. Movement ceases and sound drops out of the room, leaving behind a deathly silence.

The girl is still spitting defiant. “Kill me if you want but—”

“Oh no. I’m not going to kill you,” Lexa says. The sword presses against her throat, hard enough for her to try to pull back. But the bodyguards hold her in place.

“Torture me then. Just like your father,” says the girl.

The blade stills, and Lexa’s voice and expression are the icy unbroken calm of a frozen lake in deepest midwinter. “My father would behead you where you kneel.” She pulls the sword back, letting the flat of the blade tap the girl’s cheek a few times. “You will face the justice of our courts. After the election.” She tips her head and the bodyguards wrestle the girl away.

Lexus scans the room then, and Clarke can feel a skip in her chest as Lexa pauses on her for the barest fraction of a moment. Then she’s swiftly walking back to the dais, snapping out orders, spurring her people to detain guests, lock down the palace, get Anya to a hospital.

Bodyguards in dark suits corral them in mostly orderly streams now. Clarke tries to stick her head above the flow to at least get a glimpse of Lexa, but they’re moving too fast, being herded back towards their quarters.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to remain locked in your rooms for now,” says one of them, a face Clarke knows from passing by him from time to time in the palace. She wishes she’d ever asked for his name so she could use it now, plead with him for information. Any little tidbit, surely something has been relayed to him over the wire curling into his earpiece. Instead she’s forced to back into her room with the door shut in her face. She wants to pull one of her team in with her – Wells, Raven, anyone – but there’s no time. They’re sequestered away and then she’s stuck alone in her room in her fancy dress.

She kicks off her heels and heads for the balcony to check if she can at least see if there’s activity on the terraces below, or in the gardens. She opens the French doors and creeps up to the balustrade, not wanting to give any on-edge palace guard a reason to snipe her on the spot. She can hear a faint commotion below, and when she peeks over, there are lights swinging through the gardens, spotlights from the guard towers, dogs barking, plenty of movement. She looks to the left and sees that Wells had the same idea, peering down from his own balcony. They shoot each other matching grim looks; it’s going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

You can yell at me about these two dumb dumbs trying not to carry on a torrid secret affair at badlance.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The royal rage is something not often seen around the palace, at least not since Lexa’s father died. Tonight it makes a roaring return as she convenes her security council and election commission in the situation room. General Indra is stiff, still in her dress uniform from the ball. Gustus is down in the palace security command center, coordinating the lockdown and interrogation of the guests before they’re allowed to leave, as well as setting up prisoner transfer so the girl can be taken into custody by the National Intelligence Service. Normally that would be Anya’s job, but she was whisked away to a hospital in the city for immediate surgery despite her increasingly feeble complaints that she could just be sewn up, at least for the next few hours.

That much, at least, is a relief. If Anya is complaining, then Lexa has to believe that she’ll be fine. The bullet went into her side and didn’t come out, but she was still badgering Lexa as they loaded her into the ambulance and raced away. She’s been using the sound of Anya still trying to lecture her on security to crowd out darker thoughts of loss, death finally finding her after she escaped it ten years ago.

As for the council, Lexa glares at them from her seat at the head of the table. Anya’s deputy, Tris, is smart and capable but not quite as wily as her mentor. At the very least she’s managed to uncover their would-be assassin’s identity, and presents it to the group.

“Ontari Sten, twenty-three, living in the capital for the past three years,” says Tris as she hands out copies of the dossier. “Recent university graduate, was working a nondescript job as an office manager for a lumber company.”

“Which company?” asks Indra.

“HB Timber. They’re small, domestic only. Their owner has never expressed strong political opinion, just some generic facebook posts about voting. The usual.” Tris flips the page in her folder. “Sten hasn’t expressed strong political opinion either. Very low profile, not much information on her from before she arrived at university. Her school record said she applied from Trellend. We pulled her birth certificate from the hospital there. Parents died when she was four, raised in the local orphanage. No other family to speak of.”

“Trellend is river country,” says Indra. “That’s historically been a stronghold for us.”

“I have men sweeping her apartment now,” Tris says with a shrug. “If there’s more to find, we’ll find it.”

“Lincoln,” Lexa snaps. “Everything remains in place for the election tomorrow?”

“Yes ma’am,” he says, “But-”

“But?” she repeats, a clear warning in her tone that whatever follows had better be worth her time.

To his credit, Lincoln lays out his argument in direct, unflinching tones. “Ma’am, it may be prudent to wait? Tonight’s incident will certainly affect voting. There may be other disruptions planned. I believe we should wait at least a week to give the country time to process this and calm down.”

Lexa isn’t so deep into her fury that she can’t consider his suggestion. She swivels a few degrees in
her chair, fingers steepled in front of her face, to give herself a moment to think. When she turns back she can feel her answer down into her gut. “No. We go ahead as planned.”

“Your majesty-” Indra begins.

“No,” Lexa says. “I will not be bullied or intimidated. I will not send the message that democracy can be delayed by terror. NIS will investigate and alert local law enforcement to unobtrusively increase their presence at polling stations, but tomorrow’s election proceeds on schedule.” She can see there are objections still wanting to be made, but she knows they’ll remain unvoiced unless one of them thinks she’s beyond reason. After her father’s tyranny, she has always valued a staff that knows when and how to check her at her worst. “I’ll send in the army if I must. But we will have an election tomorrow.”

Murmurs of “yes ma’am” go around the room.

“Lincoln, anything your office needs is at your disposal,” Lexa says. She looks at Tris. “And bring me Clarke Griffin.”

* * *

Clarke is still in her gown when she’s escorted into the waiting area outside of the situation room. She’s not cleared to see anything inside, and besides which Lexa thinks she would probably not enjoy being surrounded by half a dozen suspicious military and intelligence officials. Lexa, at least, has been able to scrub her hands of Anya’s blood, though red still flecks her white dress. She doesn’t stand up from her chair, paging through the latest report run over from Gustus.

“How’s Anya?” Clarke asks, mindful of the guards all around them. There will be no privacy tonight, no one asked to step away to give them space and they can say what they really mean.

“Still in surgery,” Lexa says. She pushes her stack of paper away. “And you, Ms. Griffin?”

“I’m okay,” Clarke says, sinking into a chair on the other side of the room. “I guess still in a little shock, but I’m okay and my team is okay.”

“Good.” Lexa wants to give her more time to absorb it all, at least a night to sleep it off and get some distance from the fear. But neither of them have that luxury. “The election is continuing as scheduled.”

Clarke doesn’t object, doesn’t even blink. “I see.”

“I’m sure a delay is exactly what the opposition wants. We won’t be giving it to them. I need your team ready to go in the morning,” Lexa says. She watches Clarke, who doesn’t seem particularly shaken. Perhaps she burned it off in her room; perhaps she’s made of sterner stuff than an assassination attempt. Lexa isn’t entirely surprised.

“If you’re sure that it’s safe, then we’ll be ready,” Clarke says. She stares at Lexa, almost daring her to say otherwise.

And Lexa hesitates. She has no qualms asking for more from her own people, but Clarke is an outsider. She has no stake here, and no duty to Lexa or to this country. Tris is investigating as quickly as she can and signs point to a single assassin, but they still don’t know how the girl got the gun into the palace, or how she was able to secure a ticket. She was one of over two hundred thousand who entered through the national lottery to be a citizen guest at the ball, and she couldn’t have been counting on luck. Someone helped her, and though Lexa has her suspicions, she has no proof.
But there would be no point to further disruptions if the assassination had succeeded. With the queen dead, the government would automatically suspend functioning and enter a period of mourning. Mission accomplished. Still, the kind of meticulous planning that could get one specific person into the palace with a weapon might not leave anything to chance. Or perhaps they only need make Lexa think that, without having to actually go through with it. Circles within circles within circles – her brain is spinning, trying to parse everything out.

“You’ll be as safe as any other citizen of this country,” Lexa says at last. “The people will vote.”

“You don’t think this will affect voter turnout?”

“I think,” Lexa says darkly, “That the people of this country are not easily phased by assassination attempts.” And that’s the bald truth of it; though it’s been ten years since the last one, the history of her family is rife with violence. Markenland can’t wait a day longer for the end to their bloody legacy.

Clarke doesn’t seem to have much to say to that and so Lexa thinks to walk her out. But she doesn’t have it within her to just turn Clarke away like that, all business. Not when she was a single nudge away from death, when her closest and oldest friend might be dying in a hospital. Not when her first thought wasn’t even of the danger to herself or of her country, but of Clarke. “Don’t worry Ms. Griffin,” she says, and she hopes Clarke can understand what she’s trying to say. “I’m confident in my security team. You should try to get at least some sleep. Tomorrow is a big day.”

“I need to speak to my team. Could you have one of your people release our quarters?” Clarke asks.

Lexa looks to one of her guards, who nods at her. That part of the palace is considered secure now. “Yes. I’ll have someone see to it.” She pushes herself up from her desk, noting how Clarke’s eyes flick to the blood on her dress, then away. She wonders if Clarke has reverted to her earliest opinions; she did her best to hide them and her team cultural liaison was excellent as outsiders go, but Lexa knows what she thought. Backwards, paranoid, obsessed with violence.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Clarke says, just before Lexa can open the door for her. “I hope…well, Anya’s probably the toughest person I’ve ever met.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back to glaring at you in no time,” Lexa says. The humor is the tiniest relief, but for a moment the acid in her stomach churns a little less and the band of stress around her lungs eases half an inch. “See you tomorrow, Ms. Griffin.”

When Clarke is gone she collapses back into her chair, head tilted back. A moment, just a moment, not anything long enough to actually let herself feel panic or anxiety, but enough to let herself pause and take a breath. Then she stands up again and pushes open the doors to the situation room, ready for the next update.

* 

It’s terribly indulgent of her, but she finally finds time to change her clothes and demands to be taken to the hospital to see Anya. Now she waits in Anya’s room while security roams outside. The injury was minor, or minor as Anya would classify wounds anyway. The damage to her liver was negligible and now it’s only a matter of time until she wakes up. Lexa wishes she would hurry.

Gustus is still at the palace, coordinating the security sweep. Tris is out with her agents, and Lexa can at least try to justify being at the hospital since she’s closer to NIS headquarters in the city. Indra is probably clawing at the walls in the situation room since this is not yet a military matter; the most she can do is have the local base on alert.
There’s a knock on the door – Tris, starting to look pale with exhaustion and the beginnings of bags under her eyes. Lexa checks her watch; almost two in the morning.

“No change,” Lexa says as Tris looks at Anya. “But the doctors say she came through the surgery as well as can be expected.”

Tris holds up another file. “We completed the deep background on Sten. Her apartment was filled with nationalist literature. She was careful with her internet search history, but we managed to recover some of her activity. A lot of nationalist message boards, anti-election stuff. We talked to some of her professors and they said she was mostly quiet, though she had one literature professor who said she definitely felt a nationalist streak in her. Lots of civil war authors, a thesis on themes of home and purity.”

Lexa accepts the file and begins scanning through it. “Any update on how she got a gun into the palace or an invitation?”

Tris brightens, though it looks more like her scowl taking on a happily murderous glint. Like mentor, like apprentice. “We checked the guest registry. There’s no sign of hacking or tampering with the website we used. But one of my agents noticed something. A hundred citizens were picked through the lottery. One hundred and one guests were accounted for, when you include Sten.”

Lexa looks up from the file. “She wasn’t added through the lottery.”

“I have everyone involved in interrogation.”

“Sela?” Lexa asks, not wanting to believe it. And thankfully Tris shakes her head.

“Unlikely. Guest list approval went through someone else in her office. She had to sign off on it but she wasn’t responsible for every name on the list.”

“Everyone on the list went through a background check,” Lexa says. “Do you suspect someone on my security team or in your office?”

Tris scowls. “I haven’t ruled it out.”

Lexa doesn’t bother to feign surprise. Paranoid Anya might be, but usually with good reason, and she’s long fretted over the palace being infiltrated by noble house loyalists. They employ enough people that some certainly could have gotten through the cracks. There are some ministers and lower-ranked officials who were installed as compromises. This certainly could have been an inside job. The wonder is that they waited so long. Perhaps it was for maximum dramatic and disruptive effect. Perhaps it was the only way their chosen patsy could get close enough to Lexa.

"Other security threats?"

A shake of Tris’ head. "None so far, but going through Sten is dead-ending a lot. She was definitely meant to take the fall, nothing traced back to her masters."

“Find them,” Lexa says, and Tris bows her head before leaving.

Lexa leans forward in her chair, her hand resting on the bed close to Anya’s. “Any time now,” she says.

Her only response is the gentle hum of machinery.

*
She falls asleep in spite of herself around three, suit jacket draped over her top half. It’s an adrenaline crash as much as anything, though she’s also adept at sleeping almost anywhere and at any time. But she’s awake in an instant the moment she hears the door handle turning, body going invisibly tense before she knows whether this is friend or foe. Anya would surely chastise her for not picking a better position to take a nap, and for not having a weapon on her.

It’s Tris again, her head poking into the mostly-dark room first, as though she’s aware Lexa was sleeping. “Ma’am,” she whispers.

Lexa straightens up and lets herself yawn, jacket sliding down to her lap. She motions for Tris to come in, then checks her watch. Just going on four. “Progress?”

“We think we found who added Sten to the guest list,” Tris says. She pulls a tablet from under her arm and activates the screen so she can show Lexa a picture. “Her name is Echo Esk. She worked in the social secretary’s office, been there for two years.”

Lexa stares at the picture; the face is familiar, but only as an underling of Sela’s. “Two years.”

“We think she was a long-term plant, as opposed to recently converted. She’s from the mountains, some family still up there.”

“A loyal daughter of the north,” Lexa says, not nearly as bitter as she feels.

Tris pulls the tablet back, fingers fiddling with it around the edges. “Ma’am, do you suspect the duchess—”

“Of course she does.”

Tris and Lexa swivel their heads in unison towards Anya, who is groggily moving in her bed. Her eyes are only half open, but it’s enough to see that she’s glaring at both of them.

“Lie still,” Lexa says, standing up and placing a hand on the blanket over Anya’s shin.

Even coming out from under general anesthesia, Anya can register the words as an order, and she stops moving.

“I’ll go get a doctor,” says Tris, hurrying out of the room.

“Nia,” Anya says, her tongue thick and energy coming in little heaves. “Has to be.”

“If it is we’ll get her,” Lexa says, trying to get Anya to settle down.

“Stop….’lection…”

“I can’t. I won’t. I won’t let Nia or anyone else keep us in the dark ages.”

Anya utters a weak little grunt at that and lets her head flop to one side on the pillow, rather more dramatic than necessary. Lexa almost smiles to herself. Anya will be fine.

* 

Anya is in and out for a while, responding to doctor’s commands and nagging Lexa in between bouts of unconsciousness. Early dawn breaks over the city, the sun rising whether Lexa has had sleep or not. She knows she has to make a statement, reassure people that she’s alive, encourage them to vote. Tris barges in without knocking before Lexa can stand up.
“Ma’am,” she says, face pale, breathing hard as though she’s run all the way.

Lexa feels her blood run cold; Tris wouldn’t break protocol like this unless it were serious. Unless it were enough of a shock to send her to the hospital in a rush. “What is it?”

“Ontari Sten is dead,” says Tris.

Lexa shoots to her feet, grabbing her jacket off the back of the chair and stuffing herself into it. She’d planned a more sedate goodbye with Anya but now that’s become a luxury. “Tell me,” she says, walking with Tris, bodyguards falling in line with her.

“She asked for religious counsel. It’s an old law but we couldn’t refuse her. The priest…” Tris shakes her head, as though she still can’t understand what happened. “He was searched before he entered the observation room but he had a garrote in the cuffs of his sleeves. Extremely thin, extremely sharp. By the time we got in the room he’d severed every vein and artery in her neck. Damn hear took half her head off.”

“A priest?” Lexa repeats, the double shock of it reverberating with Ontari’s death into something almost bigger and deeper than she can comprehend. The clergy of the national church of Markenland have long been a peaceful order – not by choice, originally, but as a way to ensure that religion would always serve the crown with minimal threat of revolution. Since then the head of the order has been a member of the crown’s inner circle, to varying degrees. There’s been some pushback against her reforms from various priests, mostly in the more rural areas, arguing against diluting the religious purity of the country. But Titus has always been loyal, and he’d assured her he had his flock well in hand.

“We have him in custody. He’s refusing to speak.”

The motorcade is waiting for her out front. “NIS headquarters,” she tells the driver. Then, to Tris, “Make sure Father Titus is there to meet us.”

*

Lexa ignores the increasingly frantic messages from her press secretary that she’s needed to make a statement to the press. They’re releasing as much information as they can, but nothing will substitute for the real deal live on TV. Instead she stares through a two-way mirror into the interrogation room holding the priest, shackled to a metal ring in the table, his bandaged hands held out palms-up on the tabletop. Even through the material of his sleeves, the wire cut into his palms as he strangled Ontari to death.

“Brother Semet,” Tris supplies, standing next to her, waiting for orders. “He’s a member of the city order. One of the foundlings raised by the church.”

“With loyalty only to the church,” Lexa mutters.

Semet is calm and quiet, seemingly content to await his fate. Someone has provided him with a standard prisoner jumpsuit, his robes now elsewhere being processed as evidence. She has no doubt he will plead guilty at trial and accept full responsibility for his actions, even if it means execution. She folds her arms, tapping one finger on her bicep, her only outward sign of impatience.

Finally two knocks at the door, and an agent sticks in her head. “Your majesty, deputy director. Father Titus is here.”

“Show him in,” Lexa says, still watching Semet.
The door opens fully to allow Titus to walk in, announced by the familiar swish of his robes. Lexa knows his footsteps as intimately as any of her advisors; he’s been a constant presence her entire life, advisor to her father before her. “Titus,” she says, purposely omitting his title. “Do you know this man?”

Titus approaches and stands stiffly next to her at the window, his hands folded behind his back. “Yes, your majesty. His name is Brother Semet. He’s one of the brothers in the Polis church.”

“How well do you know him?”

“As well as any of the members in the city. He was taken in as a child and raised there. I speak to him regularly.” To his credit, Titus’ voice is even and regular, clipping along in its regular timbre.

“Perhaps you would be so good as to speak to him and ask him why he murdered a prisoner in NIS custody,” Lexa says.

Titus’ lack of reaction is all the confirmation she needs. His eyes drop to the floor, perhaps accepting that there will be no lies now, or perhaps simply not wanting to draw this out any further.

“Why?” Lexa asks, letting the pain of this betrayal come through in her voice, letting Titus know how deep this cut goes. He was the one who first planted the seed of an election in her mind, before she even took the crown, when she was preoccupied day and night with what her legacy would be as queen. He was the one who told her she was destined for greatness, that she would go beyond anything her father ever contemplated.

“Because our country is changing. Too much change, and we will no longer be who we were,” he says softly, like an admonishment. An admission.

“Those are Nia’s words,” Lexa says. It’s a bald accusation, but she has no energy left for subtlety now. The sudden loss of trust is like the blood draining suddenly from her body and it’s all she can do to stand straight, to keep her hands from trembling.

But Titus shakes his head. “No. My words are my own.”

“So you claim responsibility for this act. You and you alone?” Lexa asks, trying to give him an out, a lifeline, anything. It’s as much for her as it is for him.

He folds his hands in the sleeves of his robes, the stance she remembers so well from years of lessons, years of mentoring. Years of encouragement and belief she never got from her father. Titus tried to keep her at arm’s length but she knew he was proud of her by the way he began to speak less and listen more. Even as he withdrew from her in more recent years, she thought he was merely allowing her to keep to her own path, separate from the influence of the church. Perhaps this failure is truly hers, if she couldn’t see what was happening to Titus under her very nose.

“I bear responsibility. I will bear the punishment,” he says.

Still, a lifetime of service buys one last chance. “Change is necessary,” she says, almost begging him now. “We were dying a slow death under my father. You knew it. It’s why you helped me become queen. I am who I am today in part because of you.” She doesn’t dare take her eyes off of Semet because if she does she’s just as likely to strangle Titus as to cry.

“Somewhere along the way…you weren’t the queen I knew anymore.”

She feels it like a knife in the back of her throat, bringing up a magma of hot rage. It’s the end, then.
Lexa can feel the ghost of her father rising within her, the urge to tell Tris to take both priests somewhere private, kill them, and get rid of the bodies. But she struggled too hard for a new Markenland, for a better way, for a place outside of her father’s shadow. She turns her back on Titus without another word and leaves the room, Tris in her wake.

Once outside, she takes a deep breath. She can still feel tears threatening in the corners of her eyes. “Take Titus into custody. Around the clock protective detail for Semet. And I don’t care how you do it, but you’ll find what you need to link him to Nia.”

Tris betrays her rawness with a slight widening of the eyes; Anya would have been a step ahead of Lexa, ready with dirt on Titus going back two generations. Perhaps Tris will be visiting her mentor in the hospital to get exactly that information. “Yes ma’am,” she says.

Lexa nods at her and then she’s on the move again, back to the palace. No time to mourn. She has a press conference to give.

*  

Her press secretary’s assistant is waiting for her when her motorcade pulls up at the royal entrance. “Ma’am,” she says, “Jaya is already in the palace briefing room. Reporters are asking a lot of questions. They want a statement from the UN representative too.”

“Have you informed Ms. Griffin?” Lexa asks, stride lengthening just that little bit so the poor assistant is forced to hurry along in her heels or get left behind.

“Yes ma’am. She’s waiting for you in the ready room.”

The wave of grief she’s been keeping frozen inside of her through sheer force of will nearly crashes through her at the thought of Clarke. Nothing makes her want to let down her barriers more, but now is the time when she can least afford it. She tugs at her cuffs, runs her hands through her hair, very aware her image will be going out to every television nationwide. Probably internationally as well; small Markenland may be, but assassination attempts on heads of state tend to draw outside attention. “Have you briefed her?”

“Just the information NIS released to us.”

Which isn’t much, Lexa already knows. Tris will be playing it extremely conservative without Anya’s guidance. She accepts a sheet of paper from the assistant, typed up with bullet points of Jaya’s bare bones press briefing. Her valet is already in the ready room with a selection of freshly-pressed shirts and suit jackets just in case, which is just as well, since her shirt is wrinkled from sleeping in it.

Clarke Griffin stands up from a chair, looking slightly nervous but hiding it well, changed into an appropriate dark suit. “Ma’am,” she says, inclining her head with well-practiced familiar deference.

“Ms. Griffin. Did you manage to get any sleep?” Lexa asks, more out of polite habit than anything. The answer is already written in the puffy skin under Clarke’s eyes, the drawn quality of her face. She quickly points at a shirt and jacket and then ducks behind a privacy screen her valet has set up for exactly this purpose. She almost wishes she could cancel this election just to personally give him a raise. Her old coat and shirt go over the top of the screen; she ignores the tutting from her valet, who is forever on her about hangers and wrinkles. No matter that someone tried to kill her last night, or that the fate of the country hangs in the balance this morning. What really matters is that she’s put creases in her shirt.
“Not really,” Clarke says while Lexa pulls on her new shirt, already feeling better just from changing. If she can’t shower, at least she can be in fresh clothes. “I’d ask you the same but I think I know what the answer is.”

Quickly Lexa shrugs on her blazer, makes sure everything lines up straight, and emerges while buttoning the front of the jacket. A quick warning glance has her valet forgo any fussing. “Do I really look so tired?” she asks.

Clarke starts to apologize until she realizes Lexa is joking. A grim joke, with nary a smile, but still a little piece of levity for the two of them to lessen the stress before they have to face the press.

Makeup darts in and does as quick a job as possible masking the worst of her exhaustion, then approaches Clarke.

“Let her,” Lexa says as Clarke looks warily at the fresh sponge wedge in her hand.

“It’s my first press conference,” Clarke says, tilting her face just so under the careful dabbing hands.

“You’ll be fine,” Lexa says. “I assume you’ve done your share of public speaking.”

“Not on this scale,” Clarke says. She holds still a moment longer until she’s assured that she’s good to go, and then readjusts her body, blinking a few times. Another aide comes by and holds out an earpiece that leads down to a small pack that she can clip onto her waistband at the small of her back.

“For the translator,” says the aide.

“Oh, right.” Clarke slips out of her jacket and lets the aide get the pack clipped to her waistband and the wire looped up under collar and over the shell of her ear. Jacket back on, she fiddles with the earpiece until it fits right and then adjusts once more.

Jaya’s assistant goes ahead to signal from off stage that they’re ready, and then the door is opening and Lexa is being announced. She strides out, head up, shoulders confident. She’s relieved to see Jaya has thought of everything, including another podium for Clarke with the United Nations symbol on the front. It helps preserve the image of her as separate from Lexa and Markenland, instead of being a spokesperson for Lexa’s cause.

Flashbulbs go off all over the room, mingling with the general shuffle of everyone standing up. Once Lexa is at the podium, they retake their seats and the flashes subside somewhat. There’s already a short statement on the teleprompter, a text Jaya sent to her tablet for approval on the car ride over. The clock on the back wall shows five thirty.

“Good morning,” Lexa says. The words trigger an automatic sort of mental switch, putting her into speech mode. Don’t look at the reporters, look at the cameras. Don’t fidget. Speak slowly, enunciate. Breathe. “I’m sure Jaya has done a thorough job briefing you on the facts. As you know by now, last night there was an attempt on my life at the Election Day ball. The head of the National Intelligence Service, Colonel Anya De Kampa, was wounded while protecting me. I’m happy to report that she has had an operation to repair some internal damage and is recovering well. I want to thank the doctors of Markenland National Hospital for their excellent work and dedication.” She pauses, and so does the scroll on the teleprompter.

“In spite of this attack on our progress as a nation, today’s election will continue. Extra security will be in place, though we do not believe at this time that the safety of voters is in question. The polls will open in ninety minutes and it is my hope that every eligible citizen of Markenland goes to those polls and exercises the right to vote. The ability to participate in one’s government is the hallmark of
a nation that values and believes in its own citizens. Vote for your representatives, vote on your laws, vote for your first ever prime minister. Vote for the future of your country. Do not let fear influence you. Believe in the potential and promise of our tomorrow. Believe in the idea that any Marken child can go on to accomplish great things, without the need for patronage or great wealth. Believe in these things, vote for these things, and I promise you Markenland will prosper and grow.”

Another pause, this time to bring herself back to the room and be present with the reporters she can see straining at the edges of their seats. “I’ll take your questions now. Clarke Griffin from the United Nations is also here to clarify her position as a neutral election observer and answer any questions you might have about that process.”

Hands shoot up, voices clamoring. Lexa picks a local outlet first, as is her habit. “Yes. Euna.”

The woman, one of the first and most vocal in taking advantage of Lexa’s loosened restrictions on press, stands up, her steno in hand and glasses low on her nose. “Your majesty, several sources say that the assailant you have in custody is linked to the radical nationalist group Markenland First. What can you say about her motivations?”

Internally Lexa gives a small sigh of relief. If Euna doesn’t know that Ontari is dead, no one else in the room does either. Security was extremely tight on the prisoner floor but they’d had to call in a medic and there was a terrible mess from Ontari’s murder that Tris wasn’t entirely certain she’d kept locked down. Anya would have been certain no one who couldn’t be trusted saw or said a single thing.

“At this time there is evidence that she was frequenting Markenland First websites, though that group has not issued any statement taking responsibility that we know of. But did she read their material, yes she did.”

The next hand she selects is Reuters. “My question is for Ms. Griffin,” he says in English.

Clarke nods. “Go ahead.”

“Can the United Nations truly guarantee the neutrality of an election that takes place under the threat of violence?”

Lexa watches Clarke, ready to interject, but Clarke is more than ready. “This is not the first time the United Nations has observed elections in a country where violence has only recently ceased. What matters is that citizens feel free to vote without fear of intimidation or reprisal, and that all citizens have equal access. As to the security around polling, I’ll defer to the queen.”

Lexa picks up the thread smoothly in Markish. “There’s no reason at this time to believe there was any other plan but the one on my life. Local law enforcement nationwide has been notified. Everyone can and should feel safe at their local polling station today.”

There are only a few more questions once it becomes apparent that Lexa will offer no more juicy details about her would-be assassin and Clarke is not going to comment on what she personally thinks one way or the other. Nothing about Titus either; that’s too new to have filtered down through sources to the press. Lexa stays on message and continues to offer the reassurances that Tris has passed on to her that they can’t find any evidence of threats against polling locations. There’s a dicey moment at the end, though, when she decides to close the conference out with a question from another local reporter, but this time from one of the smaller independent national papers.

The reporter is young and relatively new to the press pool, but no less bold for it. “Your majesty, despite all the progress you’ve made in the past decade, yet again assassination was the preferred
method for unseating a ruling monarch in this country. Do you think this is, at least in some part, the legacy of your family coming home to roost?"

Lexa’s grip tightens around the edges of her podium, but she is otherwise still. She can sense Clarke next to her, not quite grasping the rapid Markish, but definitely getting the vibe. The entire room is tense. “I think,” she says, slowly, deliberately, “that if I were to truly continue the legacy of my family, we would not be entertaining questions from a free press, nor would there be any official record of an assassination attempt. My father would have been judge, jury, and perhaps also executioner in one night. Instead we have a court system in this country and rule of law, laws which even the queen must obey. Was the attack a remnant of our past? To that I must answer yes. Past generations have not set a good example for a proper transition of power. Which is exactly why these elections are so necessary. Our citizens need to be able to trust in a regular and peaceful transition of power that represents their needs.”

“All right, thank you everyone,” says Jaya, coming forward exactly on cue.

Lexa turns and exits stage right, holding her hand up in a goodbye wave to the press as she takes the two stairs and disappears back into the ready room, Clarke close behind her.

“What was that?” Clarke asks when the door has been closed, sealing them off from the cameras and inquisitive faces.

“A question about my family,” Lexa says, unbuttoning her jacket. She gives Clarke a appraising look. “You did well for your first major press conference.”

“I think you got all the really hard questions,” Clarke says, though she’s clearly gratified by the compliment. Her voice lowers, surrounded as they are by security and staffers. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’ve worked a lot harder on a lot less sleep,” Lexa reassures her, even though the idea of a nap right now is heavenly. Nothing some espresso won’t fix up. Still, she can’t move on without making sure Clarke is set for the day. “Make sure you eat. The kitchens will provide anything your team requests.”

“Make sure you eat,” Clarke shoots back, as sassily as their relative stations will allow. It’s not much, but the glimmer of something like friendship makes something twist pleasantly inside her heart, lightening the load she’s been carrying into something a little more manageable.

“Busy day, Ms. Griffin.” Lexa’s smile is real; all the smiles she's managed today have been for Clarke, who makes it just that little bit easier to breathe. “The first day of a new country.”

* 

She could return to the palace’s election offices, hover over Lincoln and his staff, pretend she wasn’t micromanaging. But the point of today is to remove herself from the process. So it’s back to the hospital to watch the election unfurl in real time on the TV in the corner of Anya’s room.

Anya is remarkably lucid, though clearly still weak and prone to drifting off into small naps. She would vehemently deny it if asked and each time Lexa pretends there was no lapse in their conversation.

“Your last day as queen and you’re spending it in the hospital,” Anya says.

“I’ll still be queen,” Lexa reminds her, much the way she’s reminded Anya nearly every day since she first announced elections three years ago.
“In name only,” Anya mutters, but desists. If she couldn’t convince Lexa this was the wrong course of action three years ago, she won’t do it on the day of the election.

“Where else would I be,” Lexa continues conversationally, not really thinking about it.

“Perhaps with the Griffin girl,” Anya says, not taking her eyes off the TV.

Lexa is caught between wanting to freeze, attempting to deny it, and sighing into her hands. Anya knew. Of course Anya knew. “When did you figure it out?” she asks, as though this is just the next bit of banter between them. As though she didn’t just see her life flash before her eyes.

“The secret passages?” Anya asks scornfully.

“No one else saw me,” Lexa says, feeling a bit childish. She refuses to fold her arms or pout over it, but she’s sure Anya can sense her sulking anyway.

“I hope it was worth it. Must have been, if this was the first girl you were willing to take a risk on in ten years.”

“I think we should increase your pain medication,” Lexa says, making as if to get up and head for the morphine drip next to Anya’s bed.

“Don’t you dare,” Anya warns her. “Bad enough what they have me on now. Who’s going to keep you alive if I’m passed out on drugs?”

“Tris has done an admirable job without you.”

Anya grumbles. “We’d still have Ontari in custody.”

“You don’t know that.”

“She knows I never trusted Titus, that traitor.”

“You don’t trust anyone.”

More grumbling.

“She’s a credit to your training,” Lexa says. Overhead there’s the sound of muted clapping as some mayor goes to cast her ballot, one of the first to vote as polls open at seven AM sharp. Someone in the election department is keeping her updated on voter turnout and she has to resist the urge to swipe open her tablet. The country is just waking up and only early birds will be lining up right now. Perhaps it’ll be a slow start for everyone; this is a national holiday now, so that everyone has time to vote.

Anya doesn’t have much to say that really, though perhaps the thin line of her mouth is, for her, the equivalent of a proud grin. After a moment – Lexa thinks she might have drifted off again, though she would never admit it – she says, “You could do worse than Clarke Griffin. For an outsider.”

“Now I know we need to increase your pain medication.”

“As you keep reminding me, you’re the queen in name only after today. You should take a vacation.”

Lexa can’t help but feel a wave of soothing fondness for her oldest friend. After this morning’s betrayal, at least this one thing can be a fixed point in her life. “Let’s make sure Markenland has a functioning government that’s accepted by the international community first. Then we can see about
vacation.”

* 

Anya’s doctor insists, as much as anyone insists to the queen, that Anya would probably rest better and in one continuous piece if Lexa weren’t there. Lexa has to admit the truth of it; as generally impervious to pain as Anya is, no one is fine literally the day after being shot in the gut. The brave front she puts on for her queen is interfering with her recovery, and so Lexa quietly takes her leave the next time Anya slips into unconsciousness, just before lunch.

Her stomach is growling, and she heads directly for the kitchens upon arrival at the palace. Terik is only too happy to see her and upon her guidelines of “something comforting,” returns to her with a lovely clear broth soup of in-season vegetables and fresh, crusty bread. Dessert is grilled fruit glazed with honey and liberally dolloped with cream. It’s sweeter than Lexa would normally eat, but she feels like an indulgence today. Definitely she deserves it.

And then there’s nothing left for her to do but follow the election without interfering. Tris and Gustus are handling the investigation into the assassination, Anya needs her rest, and Clarke is both busy and best not seen around her too much. She hasn’t felt this much as though she’d be underfoot anywhere she went since she was a child.

A sudden and powerful longing for her mother hits square against her breastbone, a throb of sorrow that settles in her heart as she remembers when she would be dismissed from lessons for the day and find her mother, wherever she was, and climb into her lap. Her mother never professed favorites – unlike her father – but she always had the sense that she was the baby, the one her mother doted upon most. No one has doted on her since – not Anya or Gustus or Indra, not even Titus, who for all that he once might have loved her, was also training her for an extraordinary life that didn’t have room for indulgence.

And so she retreats to a place that reminds her strongly of her mother: the stables. She waves off a stable hand who hurries out, offering to get a horse tacked up.

Indra finds her there, grooming her personal horse, a beautiful white mare meant for royal parades. She hasn’t ridden at the head of a procession for a long time; they were usually vulgar military displays, and so this horse has entered something of an early retirement. Lexa regrets that she didn’t come down to visit more often, but there was always something else that took precedence.

“Majesty,” says Indra, stopping outside of the stall.

“General,” Lexa says, working a body brush along the horse’s coat. She’s already gone over her with a curry comb and worked out most of the dirt; now the brush adds a nice sheen, and the horse stands still and patient, clearly enjoying the attention.

“I thought you’d be watching the election results.”

“Just a short break.”

Indra watches her work, dark eyes the only thing about her that moves. Lexa learned the discipline for stillness from Indra, who called it the patience to gather as much information as possible before action. “You deserve a break.”

Lexus raises an eyebrow, though she stays focused on her work. “That may be the first time you’ve ever said that to me.”

“It’s the first time you’ve ever been able to follow the suggestion.”
Lexa tips her head, acceding to the truth.

And then because Indra is Indra, she plows bluntly forward. “I don’t think you’ve truly thought through what it would mean to stop owing everyone your time and effort.”

“We’ve been preparing for this election for three years,” Lexa says, frowning.

“The election, yes. For the transition. But for you, personally, I think not. Do you even know what you’ll do after the transition period is over?” Indra asks.

“As so many of you seem fond of pointing out, a vacation is in order,” Lexa says with mild sarcasm.

“You don’t know how to take a vacation. I know because I made sure of it.” Indra doesn’t sound particularly guilty about it, nor would Lexa want her to. But it’s out there now, how Indra was part of the forces that shaped a young girl into a queen, someone who could never entirely be herself because her people needed her to be something more, something not entirely human.

“You also taught me to learn. I can learn how to relax.” She finishes up with the body brush, tossing it into a bucket just outside the stall, and returns to the horse’s front to rub its forehead a few times. It lips at her, expecting a treat, and Lexa is forced to show her empty hands, which earns her a snort. A few more indulgent pats and she pulls back so she can latch the door.

“Perhaps you can. You always were a fast learner,” Indra says.

“You’re in a strange mood today,” Lexa says, suspicious of the compliment. Compliments from Indra have always been rare, though given justly and with appropriate gravitas.

“These are strange times.” Indra follows Lexa out of the stables and onto the long gravel path leading back to the palace, bodyguards fanning out fore and aft to give them some space. The afternoon sun beats down on them, casting shadows angling off the path. “Let an old warrior give you some advice. You’re still young enough to figure out who you could be beyond all this. Not like your father. He was king and only king. There are parts of you that you haven’t yet had to give away. Learn to be Lexa.”

It's perhaps the most words Indra has ever strung together outside of a strategy session.

“As you say, I’m a fast learner,” Lexa says, not quite with good humor. Only a few hours on, Titus’ betrayal is a gaping wound, the pain of which she can barely push down while she occupies herself with other things, but which always springs back sharp and throbbing if she has a moment to think. She doesn’t believe she’ll actually be in a good humor for a while to come. But the potential is there. Anya and Indra both seem so determined to keep her focused on the future – probably Anya bullied someone into letting her use a secure line at the hospital and updated Indra on everything – that it’s almost enough to know that one day the pain will end. And perhaps, after all is said and done, there will be actual happiness as well. "Did you come all the way down here to tell me to take a vacation?"

"I actually thought I might propose something else," says Indra. She doesn't smile, but her tone is delightfully mercenary. "I think it's time we finally recalled Major De Sever from his liaison post in Greenland."

* 

“Two weeks into the transition of government, Prime Minister-elect Aden Fre of the Trade Party has made a statement that he will be offering a position in his cabinet to opposition party member Lord Roan De Sever, who came forward with information on his mother Duchess Nia De Sever, linking her to the recent assassination attempt on the queen. Lord Roan has already.”
Lexa mutes the television as Mrs. Landhas walks in. “The UN delegation farewell is in five minutes, ma’am,” she says.

She hasn’t been looking forward to it. Technically the delegation leaves in the morning for an early flight out of Markenland, but they’ve scheduled the farewell party for this afternoon. Tea and finger sandwiches, handshakes, photo ops. The usual.

Lexa pulls on her jacket and automatically runs through her check for wrinkles, straight lines, hairs out of place. Then she follows Mrs. Landhas from the office, though the woman returns to her desk with a faint “enjoy” and Lexa continues on with her bodyguards.

The UN office suite has been cleared back to its bare bones again, desks empty and ethernet cables going nowhere. The delegation is all assembled, waiting for her in the bullpen with Clarke Griffin front and center.

“Please,” Lexa says as she enters. “Let’s not stand on formality. I’m here to thank you for your hard work and to steal some cake.”

Light laughter ripples through the group.

“But while I have you,” Lexa continues, “What you have done here will not soon be forgotten. On behalf of my country, thank you. I believe that you have done an outstanding job in observing our first election and have undoubtedly delivered a full and fair accounting to the UN. I hope this is not the last time that I work with some of you. I have no doubt that many of you will go on to do just as important work all over the world. May we meet again.”

Applause now, which dies out as Clarke presents a bottle of champagne. There’s the usual tense pause as her thumbs press into the cork, then a few cheers as she manages to pop it out without breaking anything or taking out an eye. Quickly, flutes get passed around; with only one bottle between all of them there’s just enough for a single toast. It is, after all, still the middle of the day.

When they all have a glass with a sip inside, Clarke raises hers towards Lexa. “To Markenland’s beautiful and prosperous future.”

“To Markenland,” Lexa repeats. She quaffs the champagne in half a gulp, keeping her eyes on Clarke as it goes down in a pleasant fizz. And then, because she knows she’s stared at Clarke too long, she puts aside her glass and begins circulating through the room.

She can gladhand on autopilot, though for this team she makes an effort. She remembers names, small personal details, poses willingly for both the palace’s official photographer and various cell phones.

At last she comes to Clarke, standing near the back by a large window.

“You most of all, Ms. Griffin. Thank you,” Lexa says. The urge to touch, even just to brush her fingertips along Clarke’s forearm, is so achingly intense. They’ve stayed apart these two weeks for good reason, and regardless they’ve both been so busy there’s only been time for sleep, showers, and quick meals in between meetings.

“I wish I could stay longer,” Clarke says. “I barely got to see the country and it’s so gorgeous here in the summer.”

“Perhaps you’ll return some day and be able to see the countryside. Markenland is beautiful in any season,” Lexa says, the words coming out sultrier than she intended if the sudden widening of Clarke’s eyes is any indication. “Harvest festivals in the fall, skiing in the mountains in the winter.
Planting festivals in spring.”

Clarke looks down at the windowsill. “I hope so.”

“And the rest of the palace gardens. I believe you said you didn’t get to see all of them.”

“It would be nice to get the full tour without getting lost,” Clarke says. They don’t have to do anything but share polite smiles on the surface; Lexa can feel everything that they need to say already sparkling in the air between them.

“Someday.”

Clarke leans against the wall, arms folded. “Someday.”

Lexa wishes she could have her champagne back to hide behind, the way Clarke is looking not quite at her, but just beyond her to the forest framed by the window. For a moment it’s the face of a lover contemplating a long separation, much more than two colleagues respectfully exchanging farewells. “Is your flight very early?” she asks.

“To catch our connection in London, unfortunately.” Clarke shrugs through a rueful little smile. “I’m sure my team wishes we were flying chartered out of here too, but since security isn’t an issue this time, we couldn’t justify it in the budget.”

“Then I’ll leave you to enjoy your last evening in country and hopefully get at least a little bit of sleep,” Lexa says.

“I think,” says Clarke, now looking directly at Lexa, “I’ll probably just stay up tonight and sleep on the plane tomorrow.”

Lexa’s mouth goes a bit dry, redoubling her wishes for more champagne. “It sounds like you know your body rhythms best.”

“It happens when you travel as much as I do,” Clarke says.

“Well then. Have a good flight,” Lexa says, holding out her hand. She and Clarke shake, with a squeeze and a light swipe of her fingertips against Clarke’s palm that sends a tingle up to her wrist.

“May we meet again,” Clarke says.

* 

Lexa feels rather pettily like holding her middle finger up as she slips out of her suite to make her way to the guest quarters for the last time. However Anya knows, however she watches, she would likely get a kick out of that. But she’d rather not give Anya the satisfaction, or the blackmail material.

Clarke is waiting by the door when she taps, pulling her in and pressing her back up against it. “This isn’t goodbye,” she warns Lexa.

“It’s not goodbye,” Lexa agrees, pulling Clarke close against her. Her hands slip under Clarke’s blouse. In her bare feet and Lexa still in her shoes, the height difference is just enough to tilt her head back as Lexa kisses her. For a moment, she soaks in the press of Clarke’s body against hers after weeks of keeping her distance, weeks of waking up with an ache between her legs and half-remembered dreams of a woman in her bed. But soon enough she needs more and she pushes off the door, flipping positions to pin Clarke. Her hands slide down, gripping the curve of her bottom, then her thighs. Clarke knows what she wants; she wraps her arms around Lexa’s shoulders and hops up
so that Lexa will catch her.

Having Clarke wrapped around her, pressing kisses down into her mouth, it’s enough to almost make her arms and legs turn to jelly. But she keeps hold of Clarke, kisses her neck thoroughly all the way to the bed, and tumbles her down onto the mattress. Her hands shoot to her shirt buttons right away, pulling them loose as fast as they’ll go. She strips her shirt while Clarke works at her waistband, pulling her pants down as she slips out of her shoes. Clarke kisses across her stomach but what she wants is Clarke, naked, now. A nudge has Clarke leaning back so Lexa can pull the fastener of her pants then start tugging them down. Clarke lies back, lifting her hips so Lexa can pull her pants loose, tossing them on the floor. She strips Clarke’s blouse, pulling it up from the hem and over her head. Lexa reaches behind Clarke and flicks the catch of her simple grey satin bra, helping her pull it down her arms. She urges Clarke onto the bed proper, climbing up after her and straddling her legs so she can hook her fingers under the edge of Clarke’s underwear and slide it down her legs. She’s just as fast to pull off her own bra too before she pounces on Clarke, bodies crashing together skin to skin. Clarke arches up into her in one hard undulation, pulling Lexa back down with her by her hips.

There’s so much Lexa wants, things she wants to say, but she can’t think of doing anything else at the moment but making Clarke come. She leaves a hot kiss on Clarke’s mouth, tongue licking deep, kisses down her throat, over her chest, on both her breasts, her soft stomach, across her hipbones, down through the hair leading to the heat between her legs. Clarke’s hands shoot into her hair and grip as Lexa’s tongue parts her labia, pressing into her as deep as she can go. She stifles a moan when Lexa moves up to find her clit with firm strokes, setting up a rhythm that starts slow and builds until Clarke is bucking against her, nearly sobbing with the need to come.


Lexa nearly comes just from Clarke’s needy voice, the words hoarse and trapped in the back of her throat. She pauses, running two of her fingers through Clarke’s wetness, then presses them into her in one smooth stroke. Clarke immediately clenches around her and it only takes another minute, Lexa licking and thrusting into her, until she freezes and then shudders with a gasp.

Lexa has barely pulled out of her before Clarke is jumping on her, pushing her onto her back with her head at the foot of the bed. Her mouth is hot and insistent, hips rocking against Lexa. “Fuck,” Clarke says, feeling Lexa’s wetness through her plain black underwear. She gropes with one hand, managing to snag the elastic band and pull it off with a little help. Right away her hand searches out the smooth slickness between Lexa’s legs, fingers drawing up through her labia, rubbing generously at her clit.

“Clarke,” Lexa says, desperate for her, trying to pull her closer as she spreads her legs wider. Clarke doesn’t waste time either, her fingers curling inside of Lexa. Two at first, but she’s so wet it isn’t enough and she whispers “please, more” in Clarke’s ear. She adds a bite to her earlobe for good measure and Clarke shudders against her before filling Lexa with three.

Lexa lets Clarke take care of her, fingers clawing at her back, bodies moving together until she squeezes her eyes shut and comes hard with Clarke inside her, teeth biting at Lexa’s breast. “Clarke,” she says again, body sinking into the bed. Clarke collapses on top of her, head on her chest, body cradled between Lexa’s legs.

They lie together for a long time, Lexa idly running her hands up and down Clarke’s back, sometimes sliding up to scratch through the hair at the base of her skull. She has half a mind to call and shut down the airport just so Clarke can’t leave, if only for one more day.

“You know what I dream about,” Clarke says.
Lexa hooks her finger around the curve of Clarke’s ear, pulling hair away from her face. “What?”

“Spending an entire night with you. Falling asleep together.”

Lexa has sudden, wild fantasies about abdication. The romantic inside her that she thought she’d subdued long ago wants to offer up the throne in exchange for a real life together. It might be nice, on their last night together, to pretend. But if it’s not a goodbye, then better for both of them to only promise each other real things. “I dream about that too,” she says.

“It’s gonna be strange trying to re-adjust to being back home.”

“You’ll manage,” Lexa says. “You’ll have work, friends, the city. You know I’ve only been to New York once?”

“Really?”

“If I’m in the States I’m usually in Washington. I actually visited when I was a child, before my mother and my siblings died. I had just seen that movie, the one with Tom Hanks. Where he becomes an adult?”

“Big,” Clarke says, sounding amused.

“Yes. That one.”

“Lexa I know you’re not that old. That movie came out last century.”

“Hush. American entertainment took longer to get to us.” She waits for Clarke to tease her more, but none is forthcoming, so she resumes speaking and combing her fingers through Clarke’s hair. “I wanted to go to the toy store in that movie more than anything.”

“FAO Schwarz.”

“Mm-hmm. Even though I had everything I could want as a child of royalty, I wanted to visit that toy store. We don’t really have anything like it here.”

“So your parents took you to FAO Schwarz?”

“Somehow my mother convinced my father to let us take a vacation in New York. He could snub all the American generals who were badgering him about opening an air force base in our country and she could go shopping.” Lexa smiles at the memory of her mother telling her to pack a bag because they were going to America for a week. “I was so excited. I don’t think I slept at all the night before we left. It was my first time flying but I was so tired I fell asleep the entire way. I woke up just before we landed in New York.”

“Your mom sounds amazing.”

Lexa feels the same old pain at thoughts of her mother, but it’s bearable now. She welcomes it in a way, letting it connect her to the past and honor how much her mother meant to her. “She was. She made me realize there was a whole world outside of Markenland. If it weren’t for her I might have ended up like…”

“Like your father.” Clarke squeezes her arm reassuringly. “From what I know about your father, you’re nothing like him.”

“My mother did her best with all of us. And my father wasn’t so bad while she was alive. I think she
brought out the best in him.” Lexa drops a kiss on the top of Clarke’s head. “You’re like her in many ways.”

“That’s saying something. Your mom sounds like she was the Jackie Kennedy meets Grace Kelly of Markenland,” says Clarke.

“You know, she was influenced by Jackie Kennedy,” Lexa says, letting herself sink a little deeper into the memories. They don’t hurt quite so much when Clarke is with her, instead becoming more like comforting stories that keep her love fresh and whole. “I remember as a child she had a book on Jackie Kennedy that she let me look at. There were pictures inside. I thought she was very glamorous. But a bit sad. My mother told me she’d lost her husband and some of her children.”

“Was your mother sad?” Clarke asks gently.

“Perhaps. She could be very private, when she wanted to be. But the part that’s most like you is her stubbornness.”

Clarke laughs, just a silent shake and quick exhalation that blows across Lexa’s chest. “Thanks.”

“Her determination,” Lexa continues, smiling now. “Her ability to make anyone see her side of the situation.”

“Not you,” Clarke points out. “When we first met you shut me down cold.”

“Well, perhaps I inherited a little stubbornness too.”

“What are we gonna do then, two stubborn asses like us?”

Lexa gathers Clarke in her arms, wrapping them around Clarke’s body and sighing. “The only thing we can do. We wait each other out, until the time is right.”

Clarke clutches her in return and Lexa feels a wave of simpatico run through them. Clarke is willing to try, which is thrilling and scary and almost too daunting to contemplate. But the reward for their patience - oh, the reward. “It’s not a goodbye.”

“It’s not a goodbye,” Lexa says, and holds her for a while longer.

Chapter End Notes

You can yell at me about Titus being a shitlord in any universe at badlance.
New York is sweltering when Clarke returns. The city practically groans during the height of summer, sidewalks bleeding heat at night, windows open and fans desperately sucking in warm air. Clarke’s little window unit chugs along in her bedroom, where she passes out after the long trans-Atlantic flight and wakes up far too early, her body convinced she’s running late though it’s three in the morning.

She spends the next two days forcing herself to stay awake until at least eleven, getting her internal clock ticking over. She has multiple debriefs with Kane and a host of very interested European policy wonks who all want to know what it was like to live in Markenland for three months. Long-term residency there is still very rare; it’s hard to get a visa, much less permanent residence. Citizenship is right out, though that’s apparently being hammered out in an upcoming legislative session.

There are also multiple interview requests – the Times, the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and several others – all wanting a first-hand American account of the assassination attempt. She said no to them while she was in Markenland, and she says no again back in the States, even when a very nice but very persistent Times reporter calls her three times just to “follow up.” The official UN statement on the matter will be all they get from her.

Clarke sticks to work and does her best to describe the palace, Polis, the various regions she toured and the differences between them. She talks about the food, the weather, the architecture, the music, all the cultural signifiers that act as clues to the psyche of the country. Wells has brought back an entire suitcase of just books by local authors, hard-to-find editions that aren’t on Amazon, and apparently has at least three pen pals from Polis that he emails regularly.

“Everything is changing there,” he says as they sit at a café a few blocks down from their offices, avoiding the afternoon sun under a large umbrella.

Clarke sips her iced coffee, watching him scroll through his phone and smile at whatever his new friends are sending him. “It sounds like you want to go back.”

“Don’t you?” he says. She can’t tell how he means it, if he really understands what she left behind.

“Someday,” she says, and lets him get back to his email.

*  

The city feels different to her. She has to reacclimate to all the sounds, the traffic and the planes overhead and the occasional distant ticking thump of a subway train. The palace was always so quiet at night, isolated in the forest, no one shuffling around or sometimes slamming into their apartment late at night. She misses her waterfall shower, her giant bed, being able to put out her dry cleaning and have it returned that night, neatly pressed and folded. She was, in fact, spoiled.

She spends her week of downtime watching the news and setting up google alerts for Lexa until she realizes she can’t obsess like this for however long it is until she sees Lexa again.

At the very least she doesn’t feel the need to talk about it, not quite just yet. For now it’s a secret she holds close to her heart, something that makes her feel connected to Lexa as though there’s some
kind of unknown wavelength between them wherever they are in the world.

Summer stretches out, hazy and golden, and she manages to establish a rhythm again by the time the heat breaks and autumn comes sniffing at the door. She and her team are almost done compiling their Markenland mission into a case study when the first letter arrives.

The envelope is very discreet, but for the return address: Royal Palace, Markenland.

Clarke nearly drops her mail on the floor of her building’s foyer before she manages to bundle up the letters and hurry up the stairs, not even wanting to wait for the elevator. Her thighs are burning by the time she reaches the fourth floor but she bursts into her apartment without stopping, tossing her bag on the kitchen island and pulling a knife from the block by the stove. She slits the ends of the envelope, mindful enough in her rush to avoid cutting the letter inside, and slides the sheet of paper loose.

Her eyes skim over the official letterhead, Lexa’s family coat of arms printed neatly above a handwritten “Dear Ms. Griffin.” The rest of the letter is printed, with only a dashed off “Lexa, Queen of Markenland” at the bottom adding any personal touch. But for all that it’s a form letter thanking her for her service – and she’d bet the rest of her team got one of these in the mail as well – she clutches the piece of paper in both hands and re-reads every single word.

She thinks - she can’t help but hope - that this was an invitation. The next day she stops by a stationery store and picks up some nice paper, heavy off-white sheets with matching envelopes, and then locks herself in her home office, turns off her phone, and sits down at her desk with a pen.

Dear Lexa-

No, too personal. She tosses the paper into her scrap bin.

Your royal majesty-

Too formal.

She chews on the tip of her pen, staring at a fresh blank sheet.

Madam,

That’s better, even if a distant cry from what she really feels. What she wants to say.

I was flattered to see correspondence from you in my mailbox. Your kind thanks are much appreciated, by myself and by my colleagues in the Department of Political Affairs. It was our pleasure to be present for such an historic moment, and we have all formed lasting memories of your beautiful country. We continue to follow your progress in the news, and wish you and Markenland every success as you begin a new era of government.

It's enough for now, Clarke decides as she reads it over. She makes sure her return address is neat and legible, and then seals up her letter and tucks it in her leather satchel, to be dropped off at the post office in the morning.

* 

It’s not that she expected a reply right away. Lexa is busy. Clarke is busy too; she might be traveling again soon, and there’s an offer from NYU to teach a class as a visiting lecturer, using her case study of Markenland as part of the curriculum.
But the days pass and news comes and goes and she watches as more and more ceremonial and social events creep into Lexa’s life as she transitions into more of a figurehead and she can’t help but feel a little insecure. It’s easy to believe sweet promises whispered into her ear in the grandeur of the palace. It’s another to be across an ocean, not even able to call or email. Meanwhile, Wells Skypes his Markenland friends weekly; they’ve even started to talk about coming to New York for a visit.

The first autumn leaves are blowing up against her building entrance when the letter falls out of her mailbox. The feel of the heavy material makes her heart jump before she can even check the return address: Royal Palace. The urge to rip it open right there almost overrides the desire to take her time with it, to savor it in private. It’s all she can do to patiently take the elevator up to her floor, bouncing on her toes, mail clutched in both hands in front of her body.

Bag tossed carelessly on the floor, office door closed, she slits open the envelope with a letter opener and finally unfolds the single page within.

Dear Clarke,

I hope you will not think me forward. Now that we no longer work together, I would like to call you by your first name. I find the work of transitioning the government leaves me few chances for informality and to address you as a friend now, I would consider it a favor. The new prime minister, Aden Fre, is fiercely intelligent, very quiet, a quick study, and completely devoted to his country. I think the people have found a good leader in him, and with time he will grow more comfortable in the role. He is, after all, the first prime minister, and to be first at anything can be quite a lonely, confusing thing. I am doing my best to advise him without telling him what to do, though sometimes I fear I fall into the habits of a lifetime as the queen.

Thank you for your correspondence. Though I may not write back regularly, your letters may find me at the palace, where I will be sure to respond when I can. My best wishes to your colleagues at the United Nations, and to you in New York City. I hear Central Park is quite beautiful as the leaves turn. Perhaps I may bother you for a picture or description?

Yours very truly,

And underneath, Lexa’s fine signature inked with carelessly beautiful penmanship.

Clarke reads it again, and then, feeling a bit foolish, raises the paper to her nose. It doesn’t smell of anything in particular, just paper, and perhaps a hint of whatever was used to seal the envelope. Perhaps it would be too scandalous to be sending some American woman scented letters, if anyone were to find out. Perhaps Lexa isn’t quite that sentimental, although Clarke knows her for a secret romantic. No one who could hold Clarke so close, so privately, could be anything but.

Again, her first instinct is to hurry. But at least the saving grace of a letter is that she can’t dash off the first response that comes to mind, and the round trip wait time makes every word precious.

After dinner and a nice glass of wine, she gets comfortable, selects a pen that won’t bleed, and sits down at her desk.

Dear Lexa,

I think first names would be nice. Sorry if it’s taking liberties since you’re the queen and I’m me, but I guess that’s the nice thing about a friendship.

I received your letter after another long day writing up our Markenland case study. It will be added to our records on election observation and will be used by future observation teams to train and
provide context for other elections. I like the idea of my work helping other people, becoming part of their education. In fact I may accept an offer to teach next semester at NYU. You can imagine that our adventures in Markenland are the subject of some scrutiny here in the States.

On that note, I hope Colonel De Kampa is all right? She seemed to be recovering well when we left. Please pass on my regards to her and my wishes for a speedy recovery.

She can just imagine Anya’s face upon hearing that Clarke is thinking of her, and it makes her snort indelicately before she can continue writing.

Prime Minister Fre seems promising, and I’m glad you find him good for Markenland. After everything you went through to make the election happen you deserve a leader who can be what the country needs.

As for Central Park, it’s still mostly green, although I see a few trees fading into orange and yellow around the edges. My friend Octavia likes to run through the park during the season and always encourages me to come with her, but I’ve never really enjoyed cardio. I get enough cardio walking to and from work. I like to walk when the weather is nice, even though it’s about half an hour on foot. It lets me see parts of the city I might miss, although if it rains I’m all about the subway. Yesterday I saw a cat steal an entire fish from the back of a delivery truck. I can admire ambition when I see it.

Hello to everyone in the palace, especially Lincoln. He was a great choice to head up the election commission and I hope he continues in the new government.

Yours very truly,

She signs her full name with rather less care than Lexa; she inherited her mother’s unfortunate doctor’s scrawl, and the letters most legible are the large C and G. At the very bottom she adds a small pencil sketch of one of her favorite bridges in the park, leafy trees all along the edges of the water. She wants to add two little figures on the bridge, but that’s enough for now. She goes to bed that night thinking of when Lexa will write to her next.

* 

Lexa writes back regularly all through the fall and the start of winter. She sends Anya’s regards, which has to be a polite fib that nevertheless makes Clarke smile. She walks through the city collecting little sights and sounds for Lexa, thinking of how to describe the pieces of life that all fit together to make up New York. She starts to bring a sketchbook with her too, so she can jot down little impressions to include.

She accepts the guest position at NYU for the spring, and then her letters also take on anecdotes about her students and all the questions they have about Markish life and about Lexa specifically.

They have this idea of you as a figure of enlightenment, although some of them also have clearly romanticized you as some kind of…war maiden. Maybe that’s exaggerating and it doesn’t reflect too kindly on their preconceived notions about the country as a whole, but I’m doing my best to correct that. It doesn’t help that picture from the election ball got out.

Clarke refers to one of the few images from the night of the assassination attempt outside of those released by the palace, a grainy magnified image clearly taken by an unsteady hand on a cell phone. Everyone’s phones were supposed to be checked at the door, but clearly some noble or other managed to duck the restriction, and had sold the image to a newspaper. In it Lexa is lowering her sword after the confrontation with Ontari, turning away in her blood-speckled dress. Her face is hard
to read and Clarke’s memories of that night are blurry with adrenaline, but to her Lexa seems almost sad, rather than angry. She has no desire to ask Lexa about that moment, and can’t imagine such a question would go over well.

Lexa is amused by the somewhat prurient interest in her from Clarke’s students, and teases back that she should let on that she has entered private correspondence with the queen of Markenland, which is sure to make her a celebrity on campus. But Clarke can detect the uncertainty too. She writes to Lexa before dinner while a nice thick stew simmers, huddled in a cable-knit sweater by the stove.

Your letters mean a lot to me, and I like that they’re just for me. I like that we can speak without scrutiny (I guess they screen these letters but you know) and we can say honest things. I like reading something you’ve written knowing that no one else in the world will read it or know about it. I like that I can probably write things to you that no one else gets to say to the queen.

And because she deeply needs Lexa to know how much this letter is for her and her alone, she finally gives in and spritzes it with perfume like the total sap that she is.

*  

Dear Clarke,

Tomorrow is Unification Day. It feels like the true end of an era – the first Unification Day since the end of the civil war that my family has not been in power. It is a strange feeling, but a good one.

It is also nearly a year since you left Markenland. To think it has been that long since I last saw you. So much has changed since then, and for the better, but I sometimes find myself wishing to return to that time and place. As selfish as it is, I sometimes think fondly of the days when I had only to add your name to the schedule and I could see your face at the end of the day. How much I looked forward to those days, even if it was only to have a disagreement. Even then I admired you for your intelligence, your willingness to speak for your beliefs.

Your absence was much noted whenever one of us was gone from the palace on business. And now your absence is all the more pointed for how we have come to know each other better. Your friendship means something to me that I cannot fully express. Perhaps there is a language barrier; perhaps it is something beyond my capacity for words. Forgive me, I am full of sentimental reflection today.

I will have to put on my old uniform tomorrow night, though it weighs less heavily now. Anya still asks me to allow her to wear a sword to these things. I will have to see if I can get her to drink a little more and scowl a little less.

Sincerely,

Lexa

*  

Dear Lexa,

I am never teaching again. Even though they assigned me a grad student to help TA and grade papers, wading through forty twenty-page essays on the political climate of Markenland is a nightmare. Why did I make the final paper so long? Whose bright idea was this to teach? Weren’t you supposed to be the teacher? I can just imagine Anya grading essays as your TA. She would never give a grade better than a C+ and anyone who didn’t like it would be welcome to try her office hours. Some of the entitled kids who try to come to me and demand better grades could do
with a sit-down with Anya.

I’ll be glad for the end of the semester. Balancing teaching, even just one class, with my work has been a grind. I suppose I shouldn’t complain to you about workloads, although I did see you attended a charity concert thrown by Beyoncé, so maybe one of us is having more fun than the other. Does Beyoncé smell as good as she looks? I know that’s kind of a creepy question but it’s very important that I find out, or so Raven tells me.

I am only on paper number twelve of forty and I am using this letter to procrastinate. I mean of course you’re worth more than procrastination, but I really couldn’t wait until I was finished with FORTY essays to write you. I’ll probably end up writing you another two or three or pages before I finish grading. ‘Markenland’s civil war began during the annexation of the river lands by the northern chieftan Jurik, who some say was nearly seven feet tall.’ No sources, just ‘some say’. Also that’s incorrect as I’m sure you’re screaming to yourself. Can I just mail these to you for Anya to mark and return? Thanks.

Buried in paperwork,
Clarke
*

Dear Clarke,

I hope this letter finds you before your American day of independence. I’m told July 4th is quite the occasion for you and that this holiday is most often celebrated with fireworks and outdoor gatherings. That sounds to me more relaxing than a Unification Day ball, though perhaps you will allow me to say I think Markish food is better than your hamburgers and hot dogs. I hope you will not mind that I have sent you a gift to commemorate the holiday. Please also consider this a belated birthday gift. This Annotated History of Markenland is the same version I learned from as a child, and could perhaps be of valuable instruction to your students, though the semester is over and you have boldly sworn never to teach again. Imagine though, whole classes of students blindly believing absolute falsehoods and mistruths about my country when a resource like yourself sits idly by.

I have had it signed by the author, who was properly horrified to hear some of the details of your students’ writing. I apologize for betraying your confidence in such a fashion; please trust that I only quoted some of the worst excerpts to her, as part of ‘correspondence received from an American scholar.’ She is of a mind to write NYU herself and demand they review their curriculum concerning Markenland. I was able to persuade her that this American scholar of mine had things well in hand. A year and more has gone since you left. I wish now I had some memento of you, a token to keep near. Perhaps you will consider this book a token from me. It has several beautiful illustrations of my family’s coat of arms, as well as pictures of most of my family. There is a picture of me near the end which I am told is quite dignified, though Anya says I look angry. Your thoughts on the matter are, as ever, most welcome.

Yours truly,
Lexa
*

Dear Lexa,

The seasons are turning again. It’s fall, and we’ve been writing for a year. I keep all your letters in a drawer by my bed and I dug out the first one because I was feeling sentimental and that’s what I do
when I feel sentimental. Would it be too much to say sometimes I open up the book you sent and look
at your portrait? Anya was wrong. You don’t look angry. You look like a leader. You look like the
person I miss most when I’m by myself and it’s late.

I’ll be traveling for work again. I’ve been temporarily assigned to Geneva to help the political
bureau there. Wells is coming with me and I know he’s already planning a few trips into Polis by
train. I know how busy you are, but I have to ask. I would be crazy not to ask when I’ll be so close to
you. I would like to see your face again, speak to you, catch up on all the things we couldn’t fit into
our letters. I’ve enclosed my timetable. Please write back soon.

I miss you,
Clarke

*

My dearest Clarke,

The one time you ask something of me, and it is not in my power to give. A figurehead I may be, but
even a figurehead must succumb to the demands of state. Perhaps especially a figurehead, who must
demonstrate to her prime minister what it is to subsume every part of yourself to duty. For once I am
not being asked to cut a ribbon or bestow a simple blessing. I will be traveling for several weeks to
protect state interests that I cannot at the moment name — that sounds very dire, as though it were a
matter of national security. It is more banal than that, but of importance to our economy
nonetheless, and I still have good working relationships with several heads of state who do not yet
know or entirely trust the prime minister. I have no doubt he will earn their trust in time, but for now
when my country calls, I must serve.

I see in your itinerary that there are two days between the end of your stay in Geneva and my return
to Markenland, if all goes according to plan. If you think you can stay in country a little while
longer, I will do all that I can to ensure I will be at the palace or in Polis.

Know that I will think of you. On the plane, in the hotel, at the negotiation table. I sometimes feel you
like an invisible presence over my shoulder and if I close my eyes I think your hand will touch along
my shoulder, and then it does not. Some days I think of you walking alone through the city, over the
streets you have described to me so often I think I know them almost as well as you now, and I wish I
could walk with you. Or I wish you were here as we walk through the city and I show you the shops
and the university and the riverfront, with the smells from the restaurants and the breeze. To simply
spend time with you, in whatever way we could, that would be my greatest desire.

I will write when able, but mail will not be forwarded to me from the palace while I am gone. Please
forgive me for this lapse in our correspondence. I cherish hearing from you, and hope to hear from
you upon my return — if not to see you whole and beautiful, once again in the palace.

Yours truly,
Lexa

*

Lexa,

I can’t believe we missed each other by two days. Two. Days. I couldn’t stay in Geneva any longer;
Marcus recalled me to New York. And you — I saw you on the news, and I’m glad it worked out for
you in Ukraine. But god. Two days. I just want to stomp around my apartment yelling ‘two days!’
over and over again. Two days!
I just want to talk to you. Skype. Even a phone call. I’ll pay you back for the international rates, I promise. (Please don’t actually make me do that, the UN doesn’t pay me enough for that.)

Can you call me? I’ve written down my contact info below. I made a separate account with a random name just for us to use, you’re welcome Anya.

All I could think about while I was in Geneva was getting to see you. Take a walk through the garden. You could finally show me all the places where you must have played as a child. We could just be. You know, when you just sit there with someone and you don’t have to talk or do anything in particular because you’re spending time together and that’s all that matters. That’s what I want.

Two days. I’m so mad at the world. Not that I’m mad at you, because I respect so much that you are who you are, and I love my job a lot, but this sucks.

I don’t want to end a letter on such a sad note. It was raining today and I saw a dog wearing a raincoat and little matching boots on the subway. I think it was a husky mix; I’m not great with dogs, even though I’ve always wanted one. Maybe we can talk dogs when you skype me. I think you’d look great with a couple of corgis.

Missing you,
Clarke

*

A single sheet of paper with a date, a time, and a username. It’s all the information that Clarke needs. She’s ready half an hour too soon, feeling a little ridiculous for having showered to talk to someone online. But if she can’t physically be there, she at least wants to look as good as possible, with a little curl in her hair and makeup just right and natural morning lighting not washing her out.

She waits nervously in her bedroom, leg jiggling under her laptop, skype window open. She alternates between jumping around to random websites and darting back to skype, convinced she’s somehow missed the call.

Her speakers ring at exactly the appointed time and she hastily clicks the receive button right in the middle of the tone. And there she is, slightly washed out by the computer screen, but smiling at the camera.

“Hi,” Clarke breathes. “Can you hear me?”

“You look beautiful,” Lexa says and then Clarke smiles too. Idiots, the two of them, smiling at their computers and not saying a word.

“Why didn’t we do this forever ago?” Clarke asks at last.

“We were both busy,” Lexa points out. She looks down somewhere at the keyboard. “And I…well it’s different now. It’s been almost eighteen months.”

Clarke can hear what she doesn’t say; eighteen months since the election, and they both have a little breathing room now. Just in case. She wonders if Lexa is paranoid about someone overhearing their conversation. For sure Anya will be worried about that. Clarke wonders, not for the first time, what it would be like to be able to simply talk to Lexa without all the layers of security, without having to think how it might reflect on them or their countries. “How long can you talk?”

“I’m done with my day,” Lexa says, her smile returning full blast.
“It’s only…” Clarke does the mental math to account for the time difference. “Five o’clock over there.”

“I’ve started to end early on Saturdays,” Lexa says.

Clarke’s eyes go as wide as they ever have. “Every Saturday?”

The smile turns slightly sheepish. “Almost.”

“That’s amazing.”

“And you?” Lexa asks. “Is it very cold there yet?”

“Not yet,” Clarke says. “But I can feel it. I’m enjoying wearing a single layer inside while I still can.”

“It already snowed here,” Lexa says. “Early snow. It might be a bad winter.”

“You might get trapped in the palace by the snow, like Geral and Tena.”

Lexa looks scandalized. “Who told you about Geral and Tena?”

“Wells brought back like ten romance novels,” Clarke says. “How do you know about Geral and Tena?”

“It wasn’t all History of Markenland all the time,” Lexa says drily.

“Well I’ve been making my way through them trying to get a better handle on Markish literature. I was planning on finishing one today, actually, since I have the day off. But later, since right now I’m kind of busy. And if you don’t have anywhere to be…” And another minute ticks by as they stare happily at each other.

Lexa clears her throat. “So. Tell me about Geneva.”

Clarke is only too eager to tell her all about it: her work, Wells dragging her around a tour of the University of Geneva and walking through Bastions Park, going out for cocktails in Plainpalais, buying little trinkets for her friends. “The only way it could have been better…”

Lexa’s mouth twists in rueful understanding. “I’m glad you at least had a good time there, though. Ukraine was…less of a good time.”

Clarke pushes her laptop onto the mattress and rolls onto her side, head resting on one hand. “Can you tell me about it?”

“Not really, not like this. Just what you heard on the news. But suffice to say I would have much rather been having cocktails with you.”

“I guess I always imagined you as more of a wine kind of woman. Or maybe really expensive brandy.”

Lexa lets out a small laugh. “My first drink was a sip of – what do you call it? Moonshine? Anya brewed it up with some of her cadet friends in a still just beyond the academy grounds. It’s a wonder we didn’t all go blind.”

Clarke makes a gagging sound at the thought, her tongue hanging out in disgust.

“Let me guess,” Lexa continues, brow furrowing comically. “You would drink something very
American. Bourbon?”

“I don’t discriminate in my tastes,” Clarke says, turning her nose up in the air. “I’ve heard that Markenland brewers make some intense schnapps.”

“Among other things.”

Clarke can feel the conversation turn on a dime and suddenly she’s very aware she’s lying in bed in just a thin t-shirt, albeit a nice one. Lexa looks to be in a personal chamber of sorts, less formal than an office but not a bedroom. She clears her throat lightly. “Um.”

Lexa’s mouth works, caught between amusement and something else. “If only we could be so bold,” she says.

Clarke feels her hand want to reach out, touch Lexa’s face. But it’s just a screen, and Lexa is in her palace thousands of miles away, not to be touched, nor held, nor kissed. “Tell me about your day,” Clarke says instead, and gathers up all the pillows on her bed to prop up her head while she listens. Lexa is animated and charming and funny in her reserved Lexa way and Clarke can just about visualize all the details, almost as though she’s back in the palace. If she closes her eyes she can imagine she’s in her guest room, in her big, soft bed, and when she opens her eyes she’ll hear a tapping on her door. But then a garbage truck rattles by outside, followed by a cacophony of startled honks, and she remembers where she is.

The call lasts just over an hour. Clarke thought she would feel better for talking to Lexa, as close to face-to-face as they can manage, but the prospect of losing even this minimal connection is suddenly worse than the two-week wait between letters. “Will you call me again?” she asks, curling up closer to her laptop.

“As much as I can,” Lexa says. “Will you still write to me?”

“Every day if you want.”

Lexa tilts her head just so, obviously enamored with the response. “I’ll write to you as well.”

“Every day?”

“If you want.”

“A girl could get used to that kind of attention, a letter every day,” Clarke says, the teasing only half-hearted for how it reminds them both of the gulf between desire and reality.

“I wish I could give you more,” Lexa says, and Clarke knows how badly she means it.

“Don’t worry about that,” Clarke says. “Just…focus on getting everything in order. And then you can come to New York and I can show you around my city.”

“The café you like, with the chocolate croissants,” Lexa says, remembering a letter from early in their correspondence.

“And my favorite spot in Central Park,” Clarke says. She indulges in an illusion and lets her hand drift close to the camera, as though it could possibly be enough after knowing what it is to really touch Lexa, to feel warm skin under her fingers.

Lexa’s face freezes on screen for a moment as she cuts the connection, and then it goes dark. Clarke closes the lid of her laptop and lies in bed for a while longer, listening to the silence in her apartment.
True to her word, Lexa writes her a letter a day. Clarke doesn’t know why she expected anything different from an old romantic like Lexa. Sometimes she gets two letters in one day and she has to force herself to save one, so that she won’t be stuck going a day without. The letters don’t get any shorter, though sometimes they repeat as Lexa jots down her daily life, which for all that it is on a grand scale, has its own routine. Lots of dull meetings interspersed with surprisingly gossipy details about the various nobles all trying to figure out how they fit into this new world, and occasional asides about Anya that summon the perfect mental image of a solid eye roll.

She’s thankful for the consistency of the letters after Lexa is forced to miss a skype call, and then another time Clarke can’t find room in her schedule to match up with Lexa’s without one of them staying up criminally late or early. They try that only a few times before admitting it’s not good for either of them. The calls remain an irregular treat, and slowly the seasons turn again, snow melting and freezing and then melting for good, leaving the city feeling renewed and, if not exactly clean, at least much cleaner than the pitted ice and dirt crusts that clung to all the curbs. The letters now go into a basket underneath her bedside table, having long ago outgrown their single drawer.

At least with the letters, she can go back and re-read them, smell some of the pressed flowers Lexa sent from her garden. Seeing the growing hoard of them is a tangible reminder of Lexa’s feelings that is sometimes one of the most gratifying parts of her life, but sometimes is a bit frightening for what it represents. She hides the basket in her bedroom closet when she has company over, unsure what it would mean to confess to anyone about their relationship. Except for Wells, who can tell sometimes that she’s distracted.

“Let’s go out,” he suggests one day just as they’re finishing up at work. “It’s Friday and this week was wrecked. First round’s on me.”

“Can’t say no to that,” Clarke says, and they meet at a spot on the edge of the East Village that they’ve haunted on and off over the years.

Wells keeps it light over a few pints at the bar, until he has to use the bathroom, and then a guy she doesn’t know slips in next to her. “Can I buy you a drink?” he offers, smiling and pushing hair out of his eyes. It’s a nice smile, and nice hair, which she thinks that he knows very well.

“I’m here with a friend,” she says, pointing to Wells’ glass with its coaster covering the top.

“But not a boyfriend?” he says, keeping up the smile.

“No, not a boyfriend,” she says, surprising herself by going along for a moment instead of shooing the guy off and going back to scrolling through her phone while she waits for Wells.

“I don’t want to interrupt though,” says the guy, holding up his hands good-naturedly. “If you’re here with your friend.”

He’s easygoing, and seems kind, although she’s known plenty of guys who got nasty the moment they heard “no.” But he’s here, standing close enough to almost feel his body heat, and she considers it. Just for a moment, enjoying someone’s company for the night again. Being held, holding someone in return, physically being with someone. It’ll be two years soon.

“How about this,” he says, when she’s been silent for too long. “I’ll just leave my number here, and if you want to use it, then I’ll consider myself lucky.” He reaches over the bar to snag a pen and jots his number down on the back of a coaster, sliding it towards Clarke. “Enjoy the rest of your night with your friend.”
Then he saunters off, sitting down with a couple of other guys who seem to razz him playfully.

She hasn’t been hit on in a bar for a while, and it’s kind of a nice feeling. The guy is still making eyes at her every now and then and she taps her finger on the coaster a few times, staring at the ten numbers lined up neatly.

A whistle sounds in her ear. “I was gone for like five minutes,” says Wells, heaving himself back into his high chair at the bar. He finds the guy pretty quickly; none of them are being at all subtle about looking at Clarke. “You gonna call him? He looks rich.”

She nudges his leg with hers. “Stop. Rich guys in New York are assholes.”

“You could retire from this life of nonstop drudgery and organize fundraisers. Design handbags. Buy a share in that new Gwyneth lifestyle brand.”

The nudge turns into an actual shove, making him laugh. “Shut the fuck up,” Clarke says. “I’m not gonna call him.” She flicks the coaster a few inches away with her fingernail.

Wells shrugs. “Why not? He’s your type.”

“What, rich New York asshole?”

“Nice hair, doesn’t seem to be pestering you.” Wells squints a little. “Looks like he works out.”

“Stop ogling him,” Clarke says with some exasperation. “Maybe you should call him instead.”

“I’m just saying, you haven’t dated anyone in a while. That I know of,” he adds, rather cheekily.

Clarke suddenly finds it prudent to bury her face in her pint glass. “I’m not looking at the moment.”

“Clarke,” Wells says kindly in his best Best Friend voice, “You deserve to be happy. Are you happy?”

The automatic ‘yes’ is on the tip of her tongue, but the way Wells looks at her asks her to really consider the question. She can feel a sudden fork in her road as she imagines calling the stranger, going out on a few dates, kissing, sleeping together, seeing each other on weekends and the odd weeknight until they’re spending more and more time together and they cross that threshold into couple and then there’s talk of exchanging keys, moving, life plans. She senses it, how it could happen, just like a real normal couple.

“Ask me again after another drink,” Clarke says, trying to keep it light, and flips the coaster over.

* 

Spring in New York is lonely without you.

* 

Do you ever think about who we could be by now if we weren’t waiting?

* 

I don’t know if I’m as strong as you, Lexa.

*
Dear Clarke,

If I could, I would get on a plane and fly to New York right this minute. I would be on your doorstep in twelve hours, heedless and windswept and out of breath from running all the way. I would hold you and try to make up for these years that we could not have each other. You deserve every happiness, and it has been the joy of my life that for a time I could be that happiness for you. It is not within me to give up anything without a fight, yet with what can I arm myself? I can make no promise beyond the corners of this paper. I cannot show you the life of beauty and sophistication that should be yours. Not now, while every eye would be cast upon us and all our work thrown into doubt. I know how that sounds, as though I am choosing my country over you – and I cannot deny it. I love my country, Clarke. Until I know its future is assured through the next election, I must stay the course I have chosen for myself. My only regret is that I placed you on this course as well, when perhaps we should have chosen our own paths and left it to hope and chance that they would cross again. What I feel for you, it tells me that surely we would meet again no matter what. Such a thing could not possibly be left unfulfilled. It would be an injustice against the universe.

I can only tell you how I feel, and that I have hope. These are perhaps poor offerings in the face of yet more years when loneliness shall surely be your frequent companion. But I will not ask you to do anything which I am not prepared to do myself, and you must know that I would wait a lifetime and more.

Yet what is fair for a queen is not necessarily fair for anyone else, and if you should decide that you must move on to what else life may offer you, I am content that I was able to know you for at least a little while. You are extraordinary, Clarke Griffin.

With love,
Lexa

*

Clarke doesn’t know how to write back. Every day she stares at Lexa’s last letter she feels a terrible coward, and yet she can’t seem to find the words. Lexa doesn’t send other letters, perhaps not wanting to badger her, perhaps not wanting to pretend that things are the same after such a confession.

Two years now they’ve been separated. Her career is flourishing and NYU wants her back; her class was wildly popular and there have been repeated inquiries about another one or a higher-level continuation. Kane has offered her a promotion, though it would mean much less travel as she heads up a division at New York headquarters. She’s nearly thirty and most of her friends are either in serious relationships or contemplating them. Wells has met a nice girl who teaches at Fordham and Clarke joins them for dinner up in Washington Heights, fulfilling best friend duties to bestow her official stamp of approval.

Wells is a goner, Clarke can already tell. Her name is Louisa and she shares Wells’ love for obscure literature and even more obscure historical facts and he spends most of dinner with one hand holding hers or hovering somewhere near her.

“Wells says you guys lived in Markenland for a few months,” Louisa says. She leans forward over her plate, voice low and eager. “What’s the queen like?”

Clarke feels like kicking Wells in the shin under the table for not making Lexa a forbidden topic ahead of time, but then she couldn’t pretend anymore that things are fine. “Uh,” Clarke begins inelegantly. “She’s very intelligent.”
“Intimidating,” Wells supplies.

“But a visionary,” Clarke says.

“Obviously,” Louisa says. “Giving up all that power, I really admire that. Did you get to interact with her very often?”

“Not really,” Clarke says. “We mostly worked with their election commission. She tried not to be involved as much as possible. You know, impartial, so it didn’t look like she was just picking a successor.”

Louisa is still far too enthusiastic about the subject, though Clarke can’t really blame her for her curiosity. “Wells says she’s shorter in person.”

That, at least, earns a laugh from Clarke. “Yeah, she is. But she has good presence. It’s pretty hard to ignore her when you’re in a room with her.”

“Do you think you’ll ever go back? You know, to see how things are going?” Louisa asks. It’s such an innocent question from someone with equally innocent enthusiasm, but it completely drains Clarke of any will to continue the conversation.

“I don’t think work will let me go anywhere for a while,” she says, as nicely as she can, because it’s not Louisa’s fault the subject is sticking so sore with Clarke.

“I was thinking about a vacation there. You know, maybe together,” Wells says, verging on shy. Already he’s talking about vacations with a girl he’s only been dating for a month. “The food is amazing. The liquor is…” He wobbles one hand in a seesaw gesture.

Louisa laughs and for a moment the two of them are enamored of each other enough to third-wheel Clarke into a second of non-existence before they come out of it and continue eating and talking.

“I think she’s really brave,” Louisa goes on, though she’s sensitive enough not to directly bring up the election night ball. She at least knows that Clarke and Wells were both in the room with a would-be assassin, and that perhaps asking them about the night a crazed shooter tried to kill someone in front of them might not be great dinner conversation. “I’m not sure I could do something like that.”

“I think you could,” Wells says earnestly. “You told that guy on the subway to give his seat to a pregnant lady.”

“That’s just basic human decency,” Louisa says, though she clearly loves the praise. “I mean, going against all that tradition and history. How do you even start to think of doing something like that?”

“Sh“She’s pretty single-minded when she wants to be,” Clarke says. She thinks again of Lexa’s letter, the terrible honesty she offered to Clarke within it. The next election isn’t for another two years and she sometimes worries, deep in her heart when she’s awake in the dark of night, that she’s misremembering what she felt. Perhaps it was the intensity of the situation, the forbidden nature of it all. Who wouldn’t feel the flush of romance being wooed by a queen in a palace? Could they ever sit in a restaurant like Wells and Louisa, idly touching, ignored by everyone else around them and ignoring the world in turn? She’s been so focused on the wait that she hasn’t really thought of what happens when – if – it ends.

Wells and Louisa want a nightcap after dinner, but Clarke makes her excuses and heads home. She has a letter to write.

*
“I wish I was going with you,” Wells says, hugging her next to her pile of luggage. They keep it short, aware of the cars backed up behind Wells’ sedan in the drop off lane.

“Someone needs to keep the office running until I get back,” says Clarke. She hefts her enormous camping backpack over one shoulder and grabs her duffel with the other. “And it’s only six months.”

“It’ll all be here when you get back,” Wells promises before leaving her to check in for her flight to Haiti.

All during the direct flight to Port-au-Prince, she tries not to think that she’s running away. But guilt chases her across the latitudes, helped by the awful letter she sent to Lexa in return. She had half a notion that she should do it over skype, so that at least she could look Lexa in the eye, but in the end she dropped the letter in the mail and took off. Like a coward.

Six months with the ongoing stabilization mission in Haiti will clear her head, hopefully. No letters, no calls, just solid and unrelenting work.

It seems fitting that they land in the middle of a rainstorm. A woman greets her at the airport, holding a sign that has her name written on it. She’s taller than Clarke, with a solid build under her jeans and Star Wars t-shirt, and pretty enough that Clarke can’t help but notice right away before automatically shoving it down to the bottom of her mind. “I’m Fabienne,” she says, grabbing Clarke’s duffel for her without being asked and leading her out to a car in the parking lot, holding an umbrella over the both of them.

Fabienne is generous, very funny, and very willing to criticize the UN mission in her country when called for. Clarke likes her right away and is glad she works in the same office, helping with translation and coordinating with various relief groups on the side. She’s open with her emotions, quick to tell Clarke exactly what she’s feeling, and even quicker to drag her home for dinner to meet her mother and brother, both of whom ask her lively questions about the United States and her work in between teasing Fabienne in the small, warm kitchen.

After work Fabienne is their unofficial guide to nightlife in Port-au-Prince as well, and she pulls them in groups of four and five and six to local bars and restaurants, until one night she and Clarke end up sitting together at a small high top while the rest of their group watches a soccer game on a projection screen across the room.

“You have been here two months now,” says Fabienne, chewing on the plastic swizzle stick that came with her drink. “I don’t think I’ve seen you laugh the whole time.”

Clarke has long since learned not to be startled by the frankness of Fabienne’s observations. She finds them refreshing, in their own way. “I laugh all the time,” she says.

“You make the sound, but you’re miserable. We are this boring?” Fabienne asks, although with a smile to let Clarke know it’s a joke.

Clarke slumps in her chair. “No, it’s not you at all. I actually love it here.”

“You love my mother’s cooking,” Fabienne says, continuing to joke in her easy way. “But you don’t notice I tried to ask you out twice already.”

Clarke blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“Like a date,” Fabienne clarifies.

“A…date,” Clarke repeats, frantically flipping through her memories to find any instance of
Fabienne asking her out or flirting. There was a lot of smiling for sure, and the dinners with her family, and sometimes a suggestion that they should just go get a drink, the two of them without the rest of the office – oh.

“You have dates in America,” Fabienne says, slightly exasperated, then she shrugs. “I figure I am asking you now instead of waiting to see if you can figure it out.”

“Oh. I’m. Uh.” Clarke pushes her glass around the tabletop, getting condensation all over her hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice sooner.”

Fabienne looks at her and Clarke is suddenly and very vividly reminded of Anya in the way she seems able to weigh Clarke out with a squint of her eyes or a tilt of her head. “You’re noticing now. But I think I should ask you why you don’t laugh.”

And before Clarke can realize what she’s doing it all comes pouring out. Not the really personal details, but the important information, the big beats that have been weighing on her for months. “I’m in love with someone but she lives really far away and we don’t get to see each other at all because she’s really busy all the time and I’m really busy all the time and basically we haven’t even been in the same room for two years so I told her I wanted to end it because I don’t know if she’ll ever stop being really busy and decided to come to Haiti on a six-month mission but I’m still in love with her even though I think I don’t want to be and I ended it in a really shitty way so I feel bad about that and I guess that’s why I’m miserable all the time.”

“Oh boy,” says Fabienne. She tosses back the last of her drink. “I think it’s time to go home.”

Clarke can’t argue with that. They say their farewells to the group watching the game and go outside to walk back towards the office, where it’s easier to catch a tap tap and Fabienne knows most of the drivers. But first Fabienne walks Clarke to the UN housing cluster a few blocks away from the office, and they enjoy the warm night air and the mingled sounds of traffic and voices and the occasional rhythm floating out of the dance clubs.

“I want to ask to come in, but also I don’t want to,” Fabienne says at the doorstep of the plain two-story apartment building. She seems more amused than anything, as though Clarke’s confession has shifted her perspective a bit to that of someone glad not to be involved in a mess, but still willing to listen.

“I don’t blame you,” Clarke says. Now that the seed has been planted, she finds herself wondering again about saying yes. A random guy in a bar is easy to dismiss, but Fabienne is a whole person who makes Clarke laugh, brings her leftovers, calls her out on her mistakes. She would be good to Clarke; good for Clarke. She pulls her keys out of her pocket and fiddles with them a moment. “Can I think about it?”

“My brother would say if you give a woman time to think you only get into trouble,” says Fabienne, then adds a wicked grin. “But my brother is an idiot.” She leans forward and drops a kiss on Clarke’s cheek. “Sleep first, then think. I’m not looking for a wife.” She walks back the way they came, passing in out of streetlights until she rounds a corner.

* 

Tomorrow is a day off, which is good for Clarke, who can feel the tendrils of a hangover wanting to latch on to her brain. She only had a few drinks but she’s not in college anymore, and her first step is to chug an enormous glass of water over the kitchen sink and wait for it to kick in. Then she crawls back into bed and curls up, replaying last night in her head on a loop until it all gets so muddied that she pulls her phone from where it’s charging on the nightstand and opens her chat with Wells.
A girl asked me out last night

The typing ellipses pop up almost immediately. There’s no time difference with New York, and he’s probably already had brunch as is his wont on a Saturday. *She cute?*

*Yeah but I don’t know if I want to say yes*

*Usually that means you want to say no*

She stares at the screen for a second and Wells adds on, *It’s not fair for you to date someone if you’re hung up on someone else*

She types back right away. *I know, I told her the deal*

*The whole deal?!??!?!?!

*NO just the stuff about being in love with someone else and she was like no shit because I’m super pathetic about it I guess*

*Maybe you should go out with her she sounds smart*

*omg fuck you*

Wells sends back a string of winky emojis.

*I don’t know what to do*

There’s a very long pause and Clarke is contemplating going to find some real food when a new bubble pops up. *I know feelings are complicated but in the end it’s kind of a simple decision. You get over her or you don’t. I mean that’s hard to do either way but it’s one decision. Just a really big decision.*

Get over Lexa. Didn’t she come to Haiti to do that? No letters, no calls, no distractions. And after two months she just feels worse than she did in New York. *Is it dumb to say I don’t want regrets?* she asks.

*That’s the least dumb*

She cradles her phone in her hands, missing Wells suddenly with a surge of incredible fondness. *Thanks. I think I figured it out*

*Any time. Call home more often your mom is bugging me*

*Clarke*

*Clarke I stg*

*CLARKE*

*

*Dear Lexa,*

*I’m sorry. I had a freakout. But I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering if I gave up on something because it was hard. The new election is less than two years away. If you tell me that’s how long you need, then I can wait. But there has to be a light at the end of the tunnel. I wish I could say I would wait a lifetime too, but I can’t. And I wouldn’t ask you to wait a lifetime either. Please, if I haven’t hurt you too badly, write back.*
Love,
Clarke
*

Fabienne is very understanding, although still somewhat disappointed. But she shrugs when Clarke pulls her aside before work on Monday. “You can’t help it if you feel something,” she says. “Better you tell me and we know instead of both of us waiting.” Clarke knows she made the right decision from the relief pumping through her veins and respects Fabienne’s space for a little while. Fabienne is as good as ever at her work and doesn’t stop pulling groups of them to bars in the evenings, and doesn’t take long to bring Clarke home again for dinner, though firmly just as a friend.

The letter arrives after an interminable month-long wait, waiting for her when she pushes into her apartment building’s foyer after work. The mail is sometimes a little unreliable here, but not that unreliable, and an ache has grown in Clarke’s chest for every day that she imagines Lexa sitting in the palace and not knowing what to say to her.

But when Clarke unfolds the single sheet of paper, it’s not Lexa’s graceful swooping script, but a page that looks to be cut from a book.

Whereupon she entered the forest, silent and knowing all men’s hearts,
There among ancient trunks thickly mossed lay the truth of her heart beating.
For to search faithfully undeterred by any hand of man or lie
Was to know her own self like the axe knows its edge cutting.
Then she was not afraid and boldly embraced the green shadows
For whither the truth goes, there follows like great blows feet firmly planted.
Therefore she was gladdened to hear naught but the creak of mighty leafed bows.
For silence, long companion of a lonely heart, held no fear for her.

Clarke reads it three times, trying to parse the meaning and wishing that Lexa could sometimes just deign to send back an easy *we’re cool*, but she doubts that Lexa has ever used colloquial chat in her life, English or Markish. It finally occurs to her to google the passage, which turns up a few scattered results, and then another ten minutes of clicking around trying to get the text to match up as closely as possible. Her best guess is that it’s from a Markish epic poem from the mid-1800s, which in turn gives her the idea to text Wells.

He texts back in minutes, though she hadn’t expected it; in New York they usually stayed at least an hour later than everyone else. But in Haiti she’s taken to leaving more or less on time when she can, especially with Fabienne judging her from the doorway for staying after everyone else.

*Are you home already?* she asks.

*Yeah date night with Louisa can’t be late*

That is definitely something to add to her “Wells is getting very serious about this girl” file. She snaps a picture of the page Lexa sent her for Wells. *Do you know what this is from? Internet says it’s an epic poem called Elana*

Wells replies immediately. *YEAH Elana is a classic of Markenland but it only just got translated into English a few years ago, every student is supposed to read it. It’s about a woman who is faithful to her lover even though everyone tells her that her lover is dead after he disappears in the forest. It’s about how like the true of heart don’t have to be afraid of the forest and the forest will always protect true love.*
Clarke stares at her phone for a second, absorbing the implications. *Okay so. Lexa sent me that page from the book*

**wowwwww**
**she’s really serious about you then**
**I thought you needed space**

*I did but it cleared some stuff up for me*

*I’m glad you figured it out then, does this mean you’re coming back early?*

She smiles. *No, I’ll finish here and be back on schedule in December*

*okay PLS CALL YOUR MOM*

* *

With Lexa back in her life – Clarke doesn’t think she ever really left it – suddenly her time in Haiti takes on new dimension and color. Port-au-Prince comes alive for her, especially with Fabienne’s guiding hand, and she starts to really engage instead of drifting between work and home and wherever Fabienne has brought everyone for the night. Fabienne’s mother, Roseline, teaches her to cook a few things and her brother, Jean-Jean, invites her to watch some local soccer games. She picks up a tan, sitting outside in the sun and sipping on bottles of Coke with Jean-Jean while he yells at various players. She makes more friends in the office, and even manages to skype her mother a few times.

At first Lexa seems hesitant, the letters appearing at a very sedate pace of one or two a month. Clarke tries to make up for things with very long letters in return, sometimes with pictures of Port-au-Prince enclosed. She even wafts some of the pages over her stove while trying one of Roseline’s recipes. She doesn’t feel like she has the right to ask Lexa to be more prolific, and she doesn’t want to be the only one asking for things here. She doesn’t think Lexa even knows how to ask for what she wants, not from a relationship. Or the promise of a relationship.

So she writes more letters, at first twice a week, then three times. She wants to write every day, but doesn’t know if it would be too much or too suspicious. Surely someone else in the palace has noticed by now how much correspondence they’ve exchanged. Unless Anya is intercepting all of Lexa’s mail, which Clarke would fully believe is the situation.

The waiting in between letters is still as tedious as ever, but somehow marking her calendar out in terms of days with mail and days without seems to make time jump forward in bunches, and before she knows it the dry season has come and the air is nice and cool at night.

“I will be in America next year to start my masters,” says Fabienne, dropping her off at the airport. “Perhaps Chicago, perhaps New York.”

“Call me,” says Clarke, hugging her tightly. “Even if you’re in Chicago. We’ll find a way to hang out.”

“I hope by then you are introducing me to this woman who caused all the trouble,” Fabienne says.

“We’ll see,” Clarke says, feeling a little lurch in the bottom of her heart at the idea.

Wells is at JFK to pick her up, folding her in a giant hug for a long time. “Your mom bothered me so much,” he says, rocking her side to side. “Thank god you’re back.”
Dear Lexa,

I accepted another offer to teach at NYU. Stop laughing. I know what I’m getting into this time.

It’s just a repeat of my first class, but I learned from my mistakes. This time I will delegate as much as possible to whatever poor grad student they assign to me. I’m hoping to convince them to assign two grad students this time since they had to increase the class size limit, which is incredibly flattering but also means so much more work. My boss says I should think about taking a sabbatical from the UN to teach full time for a whole year, but I’m not sure I want to do that. I still love working at the UN and I kind of want to return to Haiti at some point. But teaching is really interesting too, and I have tons of ideas for classes about Markenland and political science in general.

You might be interested to know I’ve assigned some cultural reading in class this time, a selection of Markenland’s most popular books so that the students can get a more rounded idea of the national zeitgeist in certain time periods. You wouldn’t happen to know of any epic poems that every kid has to read in school would you?

Love,
Clarke

* 

Wells just so happens to have a copy of Elana written in the original Markish with the new English translation next to it, and loans it to Clarke on condition that she not make fun of any of his annotations. She clasps his hands between hers, looks him dead in the eye, and very solemnly says, “You know I can’t promise you that.”

He loans her the book anyway, soft heart that he is, and she spends the next two weeks wading through relentless forest imagery, with a sojourn into the cold, grave mountains for good measure. In lieu of a letter Lexa sends her a much-battered version of the book which Clarke paws over curiously until she realizes it was Lexa’s, saved from her childhood and now entrusted to Clarke, with a lengthy inscription on the blank page in the front.

Clarke,

With your improved Markish and a translation nearby, I trust this will not be too dense for you. In any case it is yours to keep, a token of my affection that I hope you will not take too much to heart as the story, after all, does end with both lovers disappearing into the misty woods, never to be seen again. I hope our story will have a rather more banal ending, just the two of us enjoying a life well-lived, with as few regrets as possible.

Be sure to ask your students about the symbolism of Elana’s axe, especially as a gift from a holy man at a time when the clergy were supposed to be completely unarmed. There were several different orders at the time attempting to create an ecumenical treatise that King Timit tolerated as a reformist-

Forgive me, but I sometimes get carried away discussing the history of my country. We were not always for the battlefield, as you know; my line has seen a few reformers among the autocrats, and it was during these times that Markenland would flourish. The arts and sciences benefited most, and there was a boom among young artists shortly following the first World War-
I seem to be unable to stay on track today. I hope at least you find it amusing, and that you find this book useful in your work.

Clarke traces the slight indent of Lexa’s signature, and then spends the rest of her night flipping carefully and methodically through each page, imagining a much younger Lexa forming all sorts of ideas about love and devotion as she absorbed the tale of Elana and her lover. It was just her luck to fall for a literature nerd with an extreme romantic streak. At least the students in her class, most of them young idealists feeling out the possibility of a political science degree, are going to love this book.

*

Dear Lexa,

It’s three years since I left. Not to the day, as I’m sure you can tell from the date. Do you know I forgot about it? I was so busy making sure I got grades in on time that I completely forgot. That’s not a bad thing. It’s like carrying your absence was something that I had to work so hard at for the first couple of years, but then I got stronger and now it’s – not easier, exactly. But it’s something I know I can do, and when you just know in your gut that you can do something, that makes it bearable. Thank you again for your faith in me. I know it’s not all roses for you either.

Let’s think about what we’ll do when we’re together again. I wonder if we’ll meet here or if I’ll come to Markenland, maybe to watch the election. Aden’s campaign has been very exciting. You must be proud of him and the work he’s accomplished in the past three years. If he wins another term, I’m sure he’ll continue to make progress.

As for us, I imagine surprising you at the airport with flowers. Not realistic, I know, but this is a fantasy so let me fantasize. I’d pick you up and bring you back to my apartment and we’d take a nap because I know the flight is pretty long. But Clarke, you would say, you didn’t fly. Ah hah, but I’m always ready to take a nap. Wells says I’m like a cat. I can catch fifteen minutes anywhere. It’s a gift. So we would take a nap, and you would say something unintentionally snobby about the size of my apartment and how charming it is (you can say small, it’s ok), and then we would get changed and I’d take you to dinner at my favorite bistro where the mussels are always really good. Then we’d go for a walk by Central Park and look in the windows of all the shops and get gelato and eat it together on a bench while we people watch.

Start thinking of gelato flavors you want to try.

Love,

Clarke

*

Dear Clarke,

The election season is nearly in full swing. It was an unusually warm summer here, so the cooler air of autumn is a relief, even if parliament itself is becoming quite heated. I must say I enjoy the idea of you as a teacher because I think you would be good at it, but of course you should do what you love.

I think it is my turn to try my hand at this fantasy of ours. I have never been one to take many naps, not even as a child, although on my worst days one of my staff would sometimes force me to take one. Once when an avalanche buried half of Kolsmark, General Indra locked me in a room until I slept for forty-five minutes after I spent two days awake.
But I would like to nap with you. I imagine your bed is very comfortable. Someone who takes many naps would not stand for an uncomfortable bed. I also assume you would resist attempts to wake up and be on time for dinner, which means such duty would fall to me. I cannot think that you react well to being woken up, no matter the circumstances. Would we be late for our reservation because someone was bad at rising in a timely fashion?

Markenland does not have a strong tradition of seafood, so I would enjoy trying the mussels. Perhaps we would share our dishes, or do you jealously guard your food? I would like to share meals with you, though I am no great chef.

And afterwards we could walk wherever you wanted, so long as I was allowed to hold your hand and stay close by your side. Perhaps a stop at your favorite bridge would be in order, and we could try to look for sleeping ducks on the water. The two of us, alone amongst the water and the trees; that is a fantasy to which I cleave. I think of you every day, Clarke, and sometimes feel that there is a little answering thought from wherever you are.

And I have always enjoyed lavender and honey in my sweets.

Love,
Lexa

*

Clarke puts in an intense effort at work, letting her morning walks in the crisp fall air liven her up and put a snap in her step. Haiti beckons again, and Fabienne has emailed her several times to update her on the status of her applications at Syracuse, Chicago, and NYU. It would be nice to go back one more time before Fabienne is in the States; of course Clarke would work with anyone in the office, but they would have more than a hard time replacing Fabienne. And then there’s her teaching, which seems to take up more and more of her time whether she’s actively dealing with a class or not.

Kane calls her in for a meeting when she e-mails him about being asked to come back for spring semester at NYU.

“ Seems like this might be turning into a regular thing,” he says. “I really think you should think about that sabbatical. It might give you time to see if you really want to teach.”

“I love it here,” Clarke insists.

“I know, and I want you to know that I don’t want you going anywhere,” he says, holding his hands out over his desk in a soothing gesture. “But I don’t think you should close off any opportunities for yourself. If you decide teaching isn’t for you, you’ll just return to us full time.”

“Is it still okay for me to teach this spring?” Clarke asks.

“You’ve been managing fine until now, I don’t see a reason why it has to change,” Kane says. He smiles. “I’m really proud of you no matter what you do.”

“Thanks,” Clarke says, trying not to blush a little. Kane has always been her biggest cheerleader in the office, encouraging her and talking her up to his superiors. He’s the reason she was chosen to lead the Markenland team, and she knows he’s not trying to get rid of her. But if he can sense that she might do better somewhere else, it’s at least food for thought.

They’ve capped her class size despite requests to once again increase the limit, and she rolls into one of the smaller lecture halls at the end of January, cheeks pinked from the cold air above her scarf. “I hope you all did the reading,” she says to a full room, setting down her coffee thermos and
unwinding her scarf. Lexa’s copy of *Elana* goes on the lectern, carefully tabbed with notations on post-its inside. It stays there for almost every lecture that semester, whether it’s relevant to that day’s talk or not, like a little bit of Lexa sitting in on her classes.

She follows the election in Markenland like a hawk. Her morning starts with a roundup from her google alerts, and then in the evenings she crawls through the country’s newspaper websites. Aden is once again looking like the frontrunner after a successful first term marked by solid economic growth and steadily decreasing unemployment, combined with infrastructure improvement projects around the country. She can sense Lexa’s guiding hand here and there, and has a collection of favorite articles she would never admit to bookmarking, including a wildly inappropriate one in which a photographer caught her from an angle emphasizing certain of her assets.

She tactfully doesn’t mention it in any of her letters, although Raven and Octavia bring it up at a group dinner one night when they all manage to be in the city and have a night free at the same time. Clarke spends that discussion focusing very intently on her tamales.

Election day brings a strange feeling of jitteriness. Even though she’s in the office, she spends most of the morning and afternoon refreshing election results until it’s announced that Aden Fre has won another four-year term. Lexa is nowhere to be seen in the news camera shots of his election headquarters, where he’s giving a victorious speech to the assembled crowd. There’s a generic release from the palace, congratulating Prime Minister Fre. Clarke checks skype just in case, wondering perhaps if Lexa might pop up there for even a minute. But nothing. She closes up early, encouraging her staff to go home too, and prepares to get ready for dinner with Wells and Louisa. She genuinely enjoys their company and making better friends with Louisa keeps it from feeling too much like a third-wheel situation. She suspects Wells appreciates that she gets on with Louisa too, if his completely unsubtle habit of checking the ring box in his desk at work thirty times a day is any indication.

The shower gives her time to contemplate just canceling. It’s almost four years now, election in hand, and she hasn’t heard from Lexa all day. Surely she can’t be busy again getting Aden settled; the man has been in office for a full term already. Clarke doesn’t much feel like being around two people who are almost sickeningly in love with each other, no matter how happy she is for them. She doesn’t know if she has the energy.

She’s just twisting up her wet hair in a towel when someone knocks on her door. She frowns, checking her phone to see if Wells had texted her about letting himself into her building to pick her up. If the honking she keeps hearing echoing down her street is any indication, there’s some kind of traffic snarl down the block and driving is not happening. Their restaurant isn’t too far off the A train anyway so they’re better off with the subway. She yanks the tie on her robe into a secure knot and heads to the door, getting up on her toes to check through the peephole.

Her eyes go as wide as they’ll possibly go and she completely forgets that she’s barely presentable, nothing but a terrycloth robe between her and indignity, and flings open the door.

“Hello,” says Lexa, sounding slightly winded, perhaps from running up the stairs. Behind her, the hallway is filled with security. “May I come in?”

Chapter End Notes

You can yell at me about Lexa’s overdramatic ass at badlance.
Lexa has imagined this moment many times. In bed, at work, alone, in a crowd, eating, sleeping – she’s rehearsed it in her head so many times that sometimes she’s convinced it actually happened. Except faced with the reality of Clarke Griffin, the stunning and complete realness of her, the fantasy fades away and she can do nothing but smile.

“You’re here,” Clarke says, one hand on the edge of her door, the other landing on the knot at the front of her robe.

Gustus leans in from the side. “Ma’am,” he prompts.

It’s a little snap of reality, and she tempers her smile somewhat. “I’m sorry, but is it all right if my security…” She gestures towards the rest of the apartment.

“Oh,” says Clarke. “Um, sure.” She steps aside, allowing four bodyguards in suits to hustle inside. At the very least they’re fast and professional, and they file out only a minute later with Gustus bringing up the rear.

“I’ll be right outside,” he says, and takes off to an unobtrusive distance while leaving two men on the door itself.

“May I?” Lexa asks, hoping Clarke isn’t too shell shocked by everything.

“Yeah, of course,” Clarke says, ushering her inside, casting one last slightly dubious look at the dark suits in the hallway before closing the door.

And then they’re alone together in Clarke’s apartment, a door’s width apart.

“You’re here,” Clarke says again, rushing to her, throwing her arms around Lexa’s neck. Lexa takes half a step back to absorb the impact, arms coming around Clarke’s waist and lifting her off her feet for a second before setting her back down and melting into her. She buries her face in the crook of Clarke’s neck, smelling her shower-fresh scent and feeling her warm, soft skin.

“I came as soon as I could,” Lexa says, muffled by the collar of Clarke’s robe. But she can’t find the strength to pull back. She just wants to stay wrapped around Clarke for the rest of the night and possibly into tomorrow morning. The rest of the week would also be nice. But eventually they separate, just far enough to stand face to face with Lexa’s hands still on Clarke’s waist, Clarke’s hands still curling around her neck. Her heart feels like it might pop at any second, ballooning inside her chest almost to the point of discomfort. They’re breathing together, eyes searching until they click into place like two puzzle pieces and Lexa leans down, Clarke meeting her halfway, mouths coming together in a kiss four years in the making.

It might as well be their first kiss for how different and new and incredible it feels, standing in the privacy of Clarke’s apartment with no deadline and no secrets. Clarke’s mouth opens under hers, tongues touching tentatively at first, then with more confidence as they remember. Lexa pulls her close once again, licking against Clarke’s tongue and feeling lightheaded at the contact, the wet heat of her kisses. She pulls back with a gasp, sucking in a huge breath. “Clarke.”

“Right, right. We should – I mean, I should…” Clarke looks down at her robe. “Just, don’t go
anywhere, okay?” And she scurries away before Lexa can say anything, disappearing down the short hallway and into the bedroom. Lexa flaps her hands once, then sticks them in her pockets and tries not to feel awkward standing there by herself.

A few minutes pass, then a few more, and she hears a thump and rattle from the back. “Clarke?” she calls. “Are you okay?”

“Fine!” Clarke calls through the door. “Just give me another minute.”

Lexa settles back on her heels and tries to look around the apartment without seeming like she’s snooping. The living room and small kitchen are one open plan block, with a door leading into a back area that must contain a bedroom and bathroom. She could reach the two windows in the far wall of the living room in six or seven big steps; it is, in fact, smaller than her bedroom in the palace. The kitchen barely has room for a stove, refrigerator, and cabinets, all crammed along the walls, with pots and pans hanging over the small island. But the place is neat, with a few paintings hung on the exposed brick, and decorated with cozy-looking furniture and a large bookcase crammed from end to end. Lexa takes to examining the books, which seem to be organized rather haphazardly, or at least by no system with which she is familiar. To the right, though, about eye level, she finds a dozen Markish books lined up, including one *Annotated History of Markenland* which shows signs of regular use. She smiles to herself as she hears the bedroom door open and Clarke comes padding out in her bare feet.

“Hi, sorry,” Clarke says, slightly breathless. Now she’s in jeans and a cotton v-neck tee and her hair is out of its towel, looking like it’s been rubbed dry and combed somewhat.

“You look beautiful,” Lexa says without thinking.

Clarke pauses, then looks thoroughly charmed, as though Lexa has given her the world’s best compliment. “Come here,” she says, holding out one hand.

Lexa takes it without question, letting herself be led into the bedroom, where Clarke pulls her to the very comfortable-looking bed in the middle of the wall. Lexa thinks she can recognize parts of it from their skype calls, but completely forgets any of it when Clarke sits on the edge of the mattress. Her mouth goes dry.

Clarke must see the borderline panic in her eyes because she rubs her thumb soothingly across the back of Lexa’s hand. “Did you sleep on the plane? Because otherwise I was thinking we could lie down for a bit. Maybe have a nap.”

Lexa nearly laughs. “I thought you were supposed to be bring me flowers at the airport first.”

“If you want, you can go back to the airport and I’ll go get some flowers from the bodega-”

Lexa lays a single finger on Clarke’s lips, doing her best to ignore the tingle that runs through her hand at the contact. “Yes, a nap would be appreciated.”

“Come on,” Clarke says, scooting up until she can reach the pillows and patting the soft-looking sheets next to her. Lexa pulls off her jacket, folds it in half, and drapes it at the foot of the bed before sidling around and sitting down to toe off her shoes. She swings her legs up, gingerly lying back on the pillows. Clarke immediately slides closer and Lexa doesn’t know how she spent four years without touching Clarke, breathing her in, running her hands down Clarke’s arms and tangling their fingers together as they lie face to face. Clarke looks at her expectantly and Lexa wonders if maybe “nap” is an American euphemism.
“Let’s go, little spoon,” Clarke says, which Lexa has to process in her head a bit until she gets the meaning.

“Aren’t all spoons the same size?” she asks.

“Not in this bed. In this bed I’m the big spoon,” says Clarke, nudging Lexa, who doesn’t really need much nudging at all to turn onto her other side and shift around a few times until she’s comfortable, hair pulled out of the way over her shoulder. Clarke is a warm mold against her back, knees fitting into knees, stomach to back, arm around her waist and nose nudging against her neck.

“How long do we have?” Clarke asks, her breath puffing against the sensitive skin at Lexa’s scruff.

“As long as you want,” Lexa says, closing her eyes.

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They’re woken by very discreet knocking at Clarke’s bedroom door.

Lexa hadn’t meant to drift off. She wanted to stay awake, simply to touch Clarke and enjoy being in the same room with her. But Clarke was so warm and smelled so good, and the bed actually was quite comfortable, and so she had closed her eyes and gone into a hazy slumber that drifted just below consciousness. Her eyes snap open at the knocking before she remembers that she is exactly where she’s supposed to be, and then she relaxes a bit before sitting up, which elicits an awfully cute whine from Clarke. “Come in,” Lexa says.

Gustus pokes his head in. “Ma’am, we have a Wells Jaha at the front door.”

Clarke bolts upright next to Lexa, fully awake in an instant. “Oh my god.” She scrambles off the mattress and patters out of the room, dodging around an unperturbed Gustus. Lexa follows at a more sedate pace, pausing to pull on her jacket and button it neatly. She finds Clarke in the living room, apologizing profusely to the young UN deputy she remembers from the palace. He looks distinctly ruffled, physically and mentally, glancing back and forth between Clarke and the blank-faced bodyguards on either side of him who have undoubtedly just searched him. She clears her throat, sending her bodyguards back a few paces.

“I apologize, Mr. Jaha,” Lexa says smoothly. “The delay is entirely my fault.”

“Uhhhh…your majesty,” says Wells. He looks caught between nodding politely and having a small but intense outburst. "Clarke was late for dinner and wasn't answering her phone so..."

“I wasn’t aware Clarke already had plans tonight or I might have called ahead,” Lexa continues, at which point Clarke lets out a snort of laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “But Lexa you can stop pretending this isn’t really weird.”

Wells, at least, cracks a grin and relaxes. For her part, Lexa hadn’t been expecting to be discovered so soon by any of Clarke’s friends – indeed, by anyone at all, outside her handpicked retinue. She waits to take a cue from Clarke, whose laughter quickly tapers off. “Can I take a rain check?” she asks.

Wells glances at Lexa, then looks back at Clarke as though she’s just reached the height of absurdity. “I think this one time we’re cool,” he says. To Lexa, at last that polite nod, befitting someone charming enough and quick enough on his feet that he had half the eligible bachelorettes of the court buzzing for a week after the Unification Day ball. “Ma’am.”
“Mr. Jaha,” she says courteously.

He slips out, although not without another grimace at the guards.

Clarke waits until Gustus has cleared the room out again and shut the door behind him to walk over to the couch and sprawl onto it. “That was so weird,” she says.

Lexa watches her, hesitating to join her even though she just wants to curl up again next to Clarke’s body. ‘I’m afraid that’s the sort of thing that tends to follow me around.’

Clarke leans her head back, trying to get a glimpse through the window of her street. “Oh wow, are the cops still here?”

Lexa shifts uneasily. “Yes, to escort me back to my residence.”

Clarke keeps looking out the window until she parses the words, and then she looks very curiously at Lexa. “Residence? Not hotel?”

More shifting. “I have a penthouse.”

Clarke’s eyes widen fractionally. “On Fifth Avenue?”

Lexa snorts. “Nothing so prosaic.”

“Well where then?” Clarke demands.

“Central Park West,” Lexa admits.

Clarke throws a pillow at her, missing by at least two feet. “Lexa! How is that any less prosaic? Oh my god.”

“It’s been in my family for generations, and Markens like to be close to trees,” Lexa says defensively. "My great-great-grandfather bought it when property prices were more reasonable."

“Oh my god,” Clarke says again, covering her face with a pillow. Lexa doesn’t really know how to interpret this highly dramatic reaction. She has always had money; she’d thought the palace and private plane had made it abundantly clear to Clarke. Perhaps it stands out more here in America, although New York is hardly one to make judgments about ostentatious wealth. Clarke finally peeks over the top of the pillow. “I’m done, I promise. Please come sit next me.”

Lexa does so, half-perched on the edge. Really, she hadn’t been expecting to fall madly into bed with Clarke at first sight, but this is so completely afar of what she imagined that she has no idea how to proceed. Clarke takes her hand, pulling it onto her lap and squeezing. “How about this,” she says, now conciliatory. “Let’s just figure out the next step. Dinner, maybe? Did you eat on the plane?”

“Yes, but it was a while ago,” Lexa admits.

“I think making a delivery guy come here right now isn’t a good idea,” Clarke says, not without humor. “Is there anywhere you want to go?”

In the palace they had to turn the volume so far down on who they were, what they wanted from each other, and now Clarke is at full blast and in her natural element. Lexa doesn’t know how to relate to this Clarke, who seems to so easily navigate the idea that the two of them now exist in the same space. Gestures, she can do. Little things, mundane things, like figuring out where and how to eat – this is becoming baffling on multiple levels. “My security team would have to go ahead to
She trails off, feeling that she’s disappointing Clarke. It’s impossible to miss Clarke’s slight frown and again she wonders if perhaps she ought to have eased back into Clarke’s life instead of this mad impromptu cannonball. She was thinking of herself and the gesture and the immediate feeling, not of what Clarke would need, what Clarke would be comfortable with. But she’d been willing to be a little selfish after four years apart, willing to finally cut a corner and just act. Haste has made a bit of a fool of her.

Clarke leans back into the couch, leaving Lexa still rather upright on her side of the couch. It’s suddenly too quiet in the apartment, with Clarke watching her and only the ambient sounds of traffic and someone shuffling around in the apartment above them. “You okay?” Clarke asks.

Lexa tries not to shift uncomfortably. “I’m fine.”

Before, they would have agreed to table the discussion, aware of their lack of time. But after four years and – Lexa doesn’t know how many letters, hundreds probably, Clarke takes a moment and then says, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

There’s something thrilling in that, Clarke knowing her after so long. But she also isn’t used to anyone asking after her feelings – not so openly, and not for no other reason than because she seems uncomfortable. Clarke doesn’t need her to have a steady hand because to act otherwise might impact an entire country. She only needs to be Lexa for one person when she’s with Clarke and for all that it sounds simple, it’s entirely daunting.

Lexa tries to think of a way to put it. “I think,” she says, “When I was writing to you and thinking about the day we could finally be together, I may have…started in the middle.”

Clarke frowns thoughtfully.

“We always talked about what we would do after all of this…” Lexa turns her hand palm up in a gesture to herself, to Clarke, the apartment, the blockage out in the street. “Was past. When we were past the awkwardness of meeting again and already set towards the future.”

Clarke relaxes a little, as though she agrees, and Lexa subconsciously mirrors her posture. “Yeah, it’s kind of bizarre. I mean. You’re here.” She can’t help but smile as she says it, pushing herself across the couch to press herself along Lexa’s side. “And I guess it’ll be kind of awkward learning to be around each other because you’re you and I’m me but after the last four years, honestly nothing fazes me.” She leans in just enough to press a kiss to Lexa’s cheek, perilously close to the corner of her mouth. “I can do that now too,” she says.

Lexa feels a flush start to creep up her neck. “Would you—” She can hear Anya laughing at her, mouth so dry she’s gone hoarse and has to try again. Lexa clears her throat. “Would you come back with me? To my apartment, I mean.”

Clarke pulls back. “Tonight?”

“Yes. If you want. As long as you’d like to stay,” she says, meaning it to show Clarke wouldn’t be imposing, but hearing how it sounds as soon as it leaves her mouth. But it’s true, and she won’t let herself be shy about wanting Clarke anymore. They did their waiting, served their people. Now she can reach over to Clarke’s wrist, clutching it and sliding down to her hand where it rests on her thigh.

It’s Clarke’s turn to look a little embarrassed, but in a pleased sort of way, as though Lexa’s attention is slightly too much but Clarke would rather she not stop. “Okay. For tonight at least.” She leans her
forehead against Lexa’s for a moment. “Let me go pack a bag real quick.”

“Of course,” Lexa says, closing her eyes while Clarke is so close, eyelashes fluttering against hers. Then watching Clarke get up and walk into the bedroom, slightly stuck to the spot until she blinks and also gets up to tell Gustus they’re leaving.

“About that, ma’am,” he says, and holds up his phone so she can see the giant notification there that Anya has sent. An ocean away, and still keeping tabs on her.

Clarke is back in a minute with small duffel slung over her shoulder. “Ready,” she says.

“Clarke,” Lexa says, somewhat delicately. “There may be paparazzi downstairs.” She watches carefully; this is another reality of hers that she’d hoped to put off facing with Clarke for a while yet, but they must have lingered too long here. Anya found the first tweet with a picture of her car with its flags and diplomatic plates, followed by a bevy of speculation as to who it could possibly be. There was no press release from the palace that she would be traveling since this is not an official visit, so they at least have that small buffer of privacy.

Clarke sort of pauses in her tracks, brain clearly working its way up several gears. “Oh.”

“You don’t have to come with me tonight,” Lexa says, fully prepared to put on a brave face about it. Of course this would happen, but she’s barely been with Clarke for an hour.

“No. No way, we’re not spending a single second apart while you’re in New York,” Clarke says, now clutching the strap of her duffel with determination. “We’ll go out the back exit. The alley lets out on the street over.”

Lexa looks to Gustus, who nods confirmation. “Okay then,” she says, trying not to give in the sudden giddiness bubbling up inside of her. She’s never really had the luxury of giddiness, the ability to just be unabashedly and openly happy at something without regard for dignity. She’s not quite sure how to deal with it.

She turns from the front door, open and ready for them to leave, and holds out her hand with a smile. It’s entirely magical how Clarke’s hand is already reaching for hers, locking their fingers together as she follows Lexa down to the street.

*

Her driver is a longtime member of Gustus’ team - he wouldn’t pick anyone new for a trip out of country - so the car is waiting for them as they emerge from between buildings. Lexa waits for Clarke to toss her duffel on the floor and duck in first and then follows her into the back. The two of them look mismatched against the rich black leather, Lexa still in her suit and Clarke in her jeans and shirt. She likes the look of Clarke so relaxed, just as she would be on a normal Friday night. When she looks up she can see Clarke has caught her staring and she smiles, one of the many smiles that have been stored away inside of her heart for the past four years that she was only waiting to share.

“So what are we going to do back at your place?” Clarke asks, her voice heavy with implication.

“I thought you were hungry,” Lexa says.

“I could make a really bad joke but I kind of don’t want to waste any time,” Clarke says, letting her foot nudge Lexa’s.

“Me too,” Lexa admits, at which point Clarke pushes across the middle seat and tucks herself into Lexa’s side. Lexa lifts her arm to wrap it around Clarke’s shoulders and pulls her close, letting their
bodies press together warmly. She’s tempted to raise the privacy screen, but even if everyone knows why she’s here, that still feels a bit too forward. She can wait a little while to be alone, truly alone, with Clarke.

They spend the half-hour car ride quietly touching, Lexa’s free hand playing with the one Clarke rests on her thigh, tracing tingly little patterns just above her knee. When she finally twitches from the pressure, half tickles and half arousal, Clarke squeezes her thigh once to calm her down and then lets their fingers twine the rest of the way.

The police motorcycles in the lead peel off as they pull into the garage underneath the building. Gustus is there to open the door for them before Clarke can even reach for the handle. He also has her duffel in hand, somehow grabbing it before she can.

“I can get that,” she says.

“It’s no problem, ma’am,” says Gustus.

“I’ll take it,” Lexa says, taking it by the strap to head off any further protest.

“Apartment’s clear for you to enter,” Gustus says, and hands over the bag without a fuss. They load into the elevator together, Gustus and another guard in front who inserts a keycard for penthouse access, Lexa and Clarke against the wall. Clarke leans back with her hands braced on the railing, leaning just close enough to be improper. Lexa finds she doesn’t really care if Clarke is ever proper with her again. Whatever Clarke is comfortable giving, Lexa is happy to receive.

The elevator dings at the top of the building, letting them out onto Lexa’s floor. Gustus and his subordinate take their leave, headed for the small security office to the side. Lexa uses her own keycard to scan in at the front door, pushing it open so that Clarke can walk through first. She follows, leaving the duffel by the door, watching Clarke as she looks around curiously. Lexa is curious too; she hasn’t been here since she was a child, although she had the place renovated and redecorated a few years ago. A panel by the door lets her gradually bring up the lights, revealing the modern interior.

Gone are the oppressive dark woods her father favored; instead the entire apartment is light and warm, the mostly-white scheme reminding her a bit of the palace. Furniture is somewhat sparse, but what there is of it is plush and comfortable. The small foyer lets out into the living room, where Clarke is standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, giving her an enchanting view of Manhattan at night. She stares down at the darker trees of Central Park, bordered by brilliant buildings and tiny headlights flowing with traffic. “We can go outside if you want,” Lexa says, indicating the terrace off to the right.

“Not yet,” Clarke says, taking her hand. “Show me the rest of the apartment.”

“This is my first time in it since I was a child,” Lexa says. “We’ll be seeing it together.”

“You didn’t even stop here before you came to my place?” Clarke asks, but in a clearly pleased manner.

Lexa just tugs her along, wanting to see this place where she’ll almost certainly be spending a lot of time in the future. They hit the dining room and kitchen, the counters done in polished beech wood imported from Markenland, and circle back into the library, also with a view of the city and its own entrance to the terrace. The shelves are mostly full, the work of generations of collectors dating back to just after World War I. Lexa runs her fingers across the spines, coming to a section closer to the window that starts to carry familiar titles. “These were my mother’s,” she murmurs.
Clarke joins her, still firmly holding on to her hand, watching as Lexa pulls one of the books loose and flips it over to show the cover. The title is in Markish and the embossed leather cover shows two children under a tree. “Collected fairytales,” Lexa translates. “I remember my mother reading this to me while we were here. She must have forgotten it and left it behind when we returned to Markenland.” Silently, she returns the book to its slot. There will be time for reminiscence later.

They take the curving stairs together, Lexa leading by a step, and emerge into the private quarters. The first two bedrooms are empty, clearly for guests, but then she enters the study. Once her father’s, nearly every single reminder of him has been stripped from this room. His mahogany behemoth has been replaced with a sleek glass-top desk, the windows behind it framing the city. It feels clean and open, with a large painting of a forest clearing on the wall opposite the shelves giving the impression of even more space. The master bedroom is down the hall, and it’s here that Lexa pauses after she turns on the lights.

Despite her instructions to keep furnishings simple, the massive California king against the far wall could not be described as anything less than opulent. Perhaps she had been imagining the comfort of a bedmate when she signed off on the designer’s proposal; right now all she can think is that they are finally alone, and there’s nothing left to do but be together. The curtains in here are all drawn, giving them the illusion of being tucked away in their own corner of the city.

She turns around and finds Clarke’s level, expectant gaze waiting for her.

“It’s really you,” Lexa says, touching Clarke’s cheek, thumb swiping from the corner of her mouth to the cut of her jawline. When she looks at Clarke, Lexa can tell that she’s older, hints in her skin at the passage of time. But those warm, intelligent eyes are the same, that smile is the same, the very feel of her is the same and Lexa leans in, just wanting to sink into her and never leave this room.

Clarke meets her halfway in a gentle kiss, still reacquainting themselves, learning who they’ve become without each other. Lexa returns the affection, simple and soft, standing together in her bedroom in near silence. Just the sound of their kissing and their breaths, and then the rustle of clothes as Clarke starts to push them both towards the bed.

“I missed you so much,” Clarke says, words coming out nearly in a sob, as though the emotional reality of it all is finally hitting her.

“I felt it too,” Lexa says, hands gripping at Clarke’s waist. She kisses along Clarke’s neck. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Clarke grasps her face in both hands, pulling Lexa’s focus. “You don’t ever have to thank me. We both waited. And it was worth it.”

Lexa manages a tiny nod, and then Clarke pulls her close again, her kiss turning into something deeper and more exciting as her tongue pushes into Lexa’s mouth. Lexa slips her hands under Clarke’s shirt, and it’s as though her hands are burning at the feel of Clarke’s soft, smooth skin. Clarke pants a little breath into her mouth, and pushes her jacket off of her shoulders. She doesn’t even wait for Lexa but yanks off her own shirt, pulling it up by the hem and letting it drift to the floor. Lexa’s shirt takes a little more effort but with both of them attacking the buttons it only takes a few moments until Lexa is stripping it off. She hooks her fingers into the front loops of Clarke’s jeans and wrenches their bodies together for another kiss, unable to even wait a moment longer to feel Clarke’s body against hers.

Clarke opens her mouth right away, letting Lexa set the pace with a thorough, heated kiss. But eventually the urgency returns and Clarke dips her fingers under the waistband of Lexa’s trousers, and then under the elastic of her underwear, fingers digging into muscle, hips bumping together.
They rip apart by some mutual unspoken agreement and strip as fast as they can, pants and underwear landing in a tangled heap. Lexa beats Clarke by a second; as soon she finishes toeing off her socks, Lexa is tumbling her onto the covers, crawling forward over her body at the same time that Clarke scoots up towards the headboard. And then she’s lowering herself, letting their bodies come flush. She has to close her eyes at the sensory near-overload, the firm body underneath her and the sound of Clarke gasping at the way Lexa’s hips twitch against hers. She kisses everything she dreamed of the past four years: Clarke’s neck and her mouth and her breasts and stomach and thighs. She doesn’t linger so long though; patience is for letters and lovers who must bear it. Here, now, with someone she loves and who loves her in return, she shows Clarke the full intensity of her ardor with her mouth against Clarke’s wetness until Clarke bucks against her and cries out, hands tugging at Lexa’s hair as she’s suddenly oversensitive.

Lexa lingers between Clarke’s legs, dropping comforting little kisses along her thighs, until she manages to drag herself away and find Clarke’s mouth again. Clarke is slightly subdued, in a passionate daze, kissing on instinct while her brain still comes back into focus. She doesn’t seem to want to stop kissing Lexa, who would be content to do exactly that for the rest of the night. The throb between her legs is needful, though, and she can’t help but rub against Clarke’s thigh, slow and in rhythm with their kisses. For a while Clarke helps her work her body into the motion, hands on her hips urging her along. But then Clarke groans and pushes her onto her back. “That is so fucking hot, it’s driving me nuts,” she says, before sucking a nipple into her mouth, driving a shock of arousal down Lexa’s spine. Then there’s a hand between her legs, rubbing a few times, and two slick fingers pushing into her. Her legs fall wide open, hands clawing at Clarke’s back, and she pants breathless moans right into Clarke’s ear.

It doesn’t take long, with Clarke inside her and Clarke’s mouth nipping at the sensitive flesh of her breasts. Her body tenses, thighs clamping down, and it’s every release she’s chased for the past four years, alone in her bed, thinking of Clarke. She seems to clench around Clarke’s fingers for a long time but she doesn’t really know; she only knows that Clarke is holding her and kissing the side of her head when she opens her eyes again.

“I love you,” Clarke murmurs in her ear, like someone who has waited a very long time to say it. The words are quiet, meant just for her, not a single scrap to escape into the quiet apartment or the warm New York night outside.

“I love you too,” Lexa says. She can feel her heart thumping hard in her chest, almost as though it wants to reach out to Clarke’s own heart. Or it could be the afterglow making her dopey. Either way, she’s not done yet, and when she snakes her hand down, finding Clarke soaking and ready, she knows she’s not the only one.

*  

They pass out in the early morning, Lexa barely mustering the energy to yank the covers loose and pull them over their naked bodies. Her body clock is telling her it’s time to get up, get moving, attend to business, but for the first time in a long while she ignores it and curls close around Clarke.

Still, she wakes up first, unable to really disrupt her rhythms after a lifetime of discipline, a lifetime of pressure over needing to be awake on time. The few times she was sick enough to need to sleep in, she had stress dreams about waking up and trying to get ready for her day, and her valet once found her halfway to her office haphazardly dressed in a suit jacket over her pajamas, feverishly convinced she was late for a meeting.

Clarke is a sprawl of limbs splayed out on front of her as she sleeps on her side, the tip of one foot poking out from under the covers. Lexa watches her with a ridiculous smile, tired as she is from an
improper sleep. It’s a few hours past dawn from the angle of the light, and bright yellow glows against the curtains. She can feel the room heating up a bit, despite the temperature control, but doesn’t budge an inch. She just dozes and stays close to Clarke, who eventually shifts, makes cute little waking up sounds, and rolls over wiping the sand out of her eyes.

They don’t speak for a while. Clarke looks at her from her pillow and Lexa looks back. They lie in the quiet, the very faintest sounds of the city floating up towards them every once in a while. Their legs and feet touch under the covers but they don’t make a move towards each other, letting this moment between them linger until it feels more and more real.

And then Clarke’s mouth quirks at the corners. “Hi,” she says.

“Good morning,” Lexa says.

“We fell asleep.”

Lexa has to bite down on the biggest cheek-splitting grin, teeth pulling at her bottom lip. “We did.”

Clarke doesn’t say anything more, just wriggles a bit until her head is resting on Lexa’s chest and her arms are around Lexa’s waist.

“We have to get up eventually,” Lexa says.

Clarke makes an immediate shushing noise. “No, we can stay in this bed for the rest of the day. And probably tomorrow too.” She tilts her head a bit, looking up at Lexa. “Unless you had plans.”

“You were my only plan,” Lexa says, arms wrapped firmly around Clarke.

“A girl could get used to being your only plan.”

“You’ve been my only plan since the beginning,” Lexa says.

Clarke wriggles again and Lexa worries perhaps she said too much, desire not to hide her feelings notwithstanding. But Clarke has pulled eye level with her and gently bumped their noses together. “I could get used to you saying stuff like that to me all the time too.” She pecks Lexa once before burrowing against her again.

Lexa feels all desire to suggest they get up wash away. Breakfast can wait. It’s everyone and everything else’s turn to wait now.

* 

Eventually, hunger drives them from bed. The apartment was fully stocked before she arrived, and so they find eggs and butter in the fridge, along with a good rustic wheat loaf and a bowl of fresh fruit. Clarke has pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt from her overnight bag; Lexa has a comfortable pair of black leggings she used to wear to work out and its matching tank top, both of them having lost a bit of elasticity to multiple washes.

“Today is full of firsts,” Clarke says, raising an eyebrow as she enters the kitchen and finds Lexa digging up a pan and crockery and utensils.

“Oh?” Lexa asks, wishing for a moment that she kept an on-site household staff. But she’d wanted her time in New York to be just her and Clarke, no servants to potentially interrupt. If she could she would get rid of her security as well.
“First we got to fall asleep together, and now I think this is first time I’ve seen you in casual clothes.” Clarke joins her at the counter, bumping their hips together and adding a little kiss to her cheek for good measure. “It’s not a bad thing. You look good.”

“You’re welcome to see me in any state of dress you like as often as you like,” Lexa says, this time meaning it in exactly the way Clarke thinks she means it, if the little smirk on her face is any indication. She pulls down a mixing bowl after getting it wrong two cabinets in a row and then lines up her ingredients on the counter. Clarke watches her for a moment.

“Are you gonna ask breakfast to make itself?” Clarke asks.

“I’m just…thinking,” Lexa says.

Clarke catches on almost instantly. “You’ve never made breakfast before.”

Lexa can feel her back getting up, just a bit. “I’ve seen it done-”

But Clarke heads her off with another kiss to the cheek. “Come on, champ. I’ll show you how. You start cutting up fruit and I’ll take care of these. You want scrambled? Over easy? Sunny side up?”

“Scrambled is fine,” Lexa says, attempting to remain nonchalantly dignified, or something that is more even-keeled than embarrassment at not being able to do something as simple as cook breakfast. This is something that adults do with their partners, she knows, and she wants to give Clarke that experience. There are some things about them that will never be normal, not as Clarke defines it, but as much as possible Lexa wants to be the nice, reliable girlfriend Clarke didn’t get to have for the past four years. She’s watching Clarke crack and whisk the eggs so intently that she doesn’t notice when the chef’s knife slips just as she’s sectioning an apple.

The blade is sharp – sharp enough that at first she doesn’t even wince. She looks down at her finger and a moment later blood wells up, just enough to leak a few dots of red onto the white cutting board. “Clarke,” Lexa says, voice calm. “Could you hand me the dish towel?”

“Did you spill someth-” Clarke turns from the counter spots Lexa holding her hand up, the blood carving a little rivulet down her finger and towards the back of her hand. “Oh my god are you okay?”

“It’s just a cut,” Lexa says.

Instead of handing Lexa the towel, Clarke brings it over herself and wraps it carefully around Lexa’s hand. “Come on,” she says, leading the way towards the bathroom they passed during last night’s tour.

“Clarke, I might not know how to cook eggs but I can handle a cut on my own,” Lexa says, caught between further embarrassment and perhaps secretly enjoying the attention, just the tiniest amount.

“You’re a disaster,” Clarke says, but fondly, rummaging through the medicine cabinet and finding a first aid kit, still in its plastic shrink wrap. She pulls off the plastic, tossing it in the little garbage pail by the toilet, and has Lexa sit on the edge of the marble tub with her hand hanging in the sink.

“I was successfully running a country at seventeen,” Lexa grumbles, not looking at Clarke as she runs Lexa’s finger under the faucet to clean it off. And perhaps it has a little more bite than good-natured pout, because Clarke pauses in ripping open a bandaid.

“You okay?” she asks.
Lexa struggles for a moment. In a way, the letters were easier, because she could take her time and think and present exactly what she wanted to say to Clarke. Face to face, everything is so much more on the surface, so immediate. She could pretend and Clarke would maybe pretend along with her, but if Clarke is already this perceptive to her moods, then they won’t survive long just the two of them in this apartment with Lexa bottling up her feelings. “I want you to have a normal life,” she admits.

Clarke looks as amused as she is nonplussed. “Okay. Me too.” She holds Lexa’s hand still so she can squirt antibiotic ointment on the cut.

“I mean, I’m aware that I disrupt your life. You say it’s worth it but I want you to know exactly what you’re getting into,” Lexa says. “We can’t just go out to dinner with your friends on a whim. I can’t – I haven’t done any of the normal things you’ve done. I’ve never cooked for myself. I’ve never…” She can’t even think of something that Clarke would consider normal. There’s such a gulf of lived experience between them that she can’t begin to define all its edges.

“Whoa, just slow down,” says Clarke. She rips the backing plastic off the bandaid and gently, deliberately wraps it snug around Lexa’s index finger. “First of all, if anyone disrupts my life, they don’t keep doing it unless it’s something that I want. And I want this. Second, there’s lots of stuff you’ve done that I haven’t. It just means we have more to learn about each other.”

“Clarke,” Lexa says, wanting her to really understand. “I haven’t dated. I never could. I have never had an adult relationship and I didn’t plan to until I met you.”

Clarke smooths her fingers around the edges of the bandaid, then raises Lexa’s finger to her lips to press a light kiss there. “Well I can’t exactly be mad at you if you’re gonna say stuff like that.”

“I trust you and respect you. I just want you to be prepared.”

“You think I haven’t considered that my life is going to be different after I saw you shaking hands with Beyoncé?” Clarke asks, nearly laughing. She drops another kiss on the back of Lexa’s hand, and she could never get used to Clarke’s easy affection. Every single time it’s a delight, and every single time it makes Lexa’s heart skip. “If you trust me, then trust that I know what I’m doing. If it gets to be too much, trust that I’ll tell you so we can figure it out. Does that sound good?”

Lexa really can’t do anything except lean forward and press a kiss right into Clarke’s mouth, her bandaged hand still held in Clarke’s. “Yes.”

“All right. I’ll finish the eggs and you can tell me about all the famous people you’ve met since the last time we saw each other,” says Clarke, and Lexa happily follows her back to the kitchen.

* 

“I’m out of clothes,” Clarke says on Sunday night, coming out of the bedroom and down the stairs with a sock in her hand.

“Is this…a problem?” Lexa asks from her spot on the couch, reading the English translation of one of the books Clarke taught in her class and muttering over inaccuracies.

“You saying you want me to just hang out naked all the time?” Clarke asks, sock on her hip, eyebrow raised.

Lexa shrugs. “If the option is available…”

The sock lands very close to her face. “I can’t just keep washing the same two shirts forever.”
“I can have a car take you back home. I’m sure you need to prepare for work tomorrow,” Lexa says, finally closing the book and setting it aside, although she still has several notes in her mind that she needs to send to the translator.

Clarke settles on the couch with her head in Lexa’s lap. “About that. What would you say if I took some time off work? I mean, how long are you in town?”

“Indefinitely,” Lexa says. “Although officially I’m on a three-week vacation.”

“Three weeks,” Clarke says, impressed. “I guess you’ve been saving it up.”

“To answer your question, you know I’m happy to have you stay here as long as you want,” Lexa says, lightly scratching her fingertips against Clarke’s scalp. “And even though I won’t be going back to Markenland for a while, any time I’m gone you’re welcome to use this apartment.”

Clarke makes a noncommittal sound.

“I’m also very happy to stay inside with you for as long as you want, but if you’d like to go out, we can plan for that,” Lexa adds.

That gets more of a reaction as Clarke sits up so she can lean her head onto Lexa’s shoulder. “Is it okay if we stay inside just a little while longer? I do want to show you stuff, but I’m really enjoying, you know. Just us.” The implication that the opposite of “just us” includes a certain level of public scrutiny remains unspoken, but Lexa hears it all the same. By now it’s known that she’s visiting New York and that the car with the Markish flag seen in the East Village was likely hers, but according to Anya’s watchful internet trawling, none of it connects back to Clarke. Yet.

“As long as you want,” Lexa says. “But for now I can call a driver to take you back to your apartment. There’s a private car service since you can’t take my diplomatic vehicle—”

Clarke stops her mid-sentence with a darting kiss. “The subway will be fine.”

“It’s dark out,” Lexa says doubtfully.

“It’s the C to the L train and a little bit of walking. I’ll be back in an hour and a half,” Clarke says. She adds another kiss for good measure. “But if you really feel weird, you can always send Gustus with me.”

Lexa is tempted, if only to see the look on his face when she tells him to leave his queen and follow the American, even for ninety minutes. But she also doesn’t want to smother Clarke, and not in her own city, where she’s successfully lived for most of her adult life without an anxious girlfriend hovering over her. “All right. Pack as much as you want. Don’t forget there’s a pool if you’d like to swim.”

“Only if you come in the water with me,” Clarke says. Her kiss this time is much longer, full of promise, and Lexa almost grabs her around the waist to haul her down onto the sofa. But Clarke pulls away, swiping her duplicate key card from a table in the foyer. Lexa watches her slip through the door, and then lets her head fall back, already counting the minutes.

* 

It’s astounding how quickly Lexa adjusts to having Clarke in her space all the time, sunup to sundown, and nights in between. They have a routine after only a few days: waking up together, making breakfast, quietly reading for a while – Lexa reads several papers back to front and Clarke always has work emails and reports – then showering and figuring out how to spend their time until
lunch. Sometimes they’ll laze, or Clarke will take Lexa through her Netflix subscription, or they’ll go down to the building’s gym and pool. Lunch is light, taken out on the terrace where they can watch Central Park and enjoy the sun, and afterwards they’ll read some more, or work a little bit, whatever can be done remotely. Inevitably this will end with Clarke shutting her laptop and twining herself around Lexa much like a cat until Lexa must also put away her work, and they’ll kiss like teenagers – the teenager Lexa never got to be – or look through the library, or play a little chess or scrabble, or just lounge and talk. Then dinner and a nightcap – the wine cellar here is particularly well-stocked and Clarke had laughed when she found a fine selection of bourbons waiting for her.

And then they’ll fall into bed, sometimes laughing and playful, sometimes so intense Lexa doesn’t ever want morning to arrive. Those are the nights she wants to stay awake and make sure that all of this – New York and Clarke and their love – doesn’t fade into a dreamy morning mist. But those are also the nights when they wear each other out, so that they sleep sound and late and get up just in time to pretend they’re having brunch, not lunch.

“I think,” Clarke says on Thursday night, lying in bed with Lexa between her legs, “We should go out this weekend.”

“Oh?” Lexa says, not committing one way or the other, just letting Clarke feel out the situation for herself. She’s still content to spend most of her time lying naked in a bed with Clarke, and to take her fresh air on the terrace with Clarke wearing her bathrobe, rather scandalously biting into ripe strawberries.

“Yes. We should go to dinner. I think I’m getting a little stir crazy, not that I don’t love hanging out with you in your incredibly nice apartment. Is tomorrow night too soon for your security guys to vet a place?” Clarke asks.

“Technically they’re trained to sweep anywhere I need to go a couple of hours ahead of me, so twenty-four hours is plenty of time.” Lexa pulls one of Clarke’s arms closer over her shoulder, so that it rests between her breasts. “Where would you like to go?”

“I want to take you out on a nice date. Like get dressed up, make a reservation nice date.”

“That sounds agreeable.”

Clarke squeezes her in pretend aggravation. “There’s a place in Greenwich Village that Wells and I go to for all our big celebration dinners. We went after we graduated from Columbia and then when we both got accepted to the UN. We’ll probably go there after he proposes to his girlfriend. I want to take you there.”

Lexa is touched that Clarke would want to share a place like that with her; even though she’s only met Wells a few times, Clarke speaks of him so often that she feels she knows him, and that she understands the unique space he holds in Clarke’s heart. He is, in a much less violent and intimidating way, Clarke’s Anya. “Give Gustus the details and he’ll make sure we’re set,” she says. “What should I wear?”

“Those pants that make your butt look good,” Clarke says instantly.

Which would normally require further interrogation, but she recently discovered Clarke’s “Lexa” bookmarks folder on her laptop and had lasted about ten minutes being shown increasingly horrifying articles about herself before shutting the computer and seriously considering asking Anya to destroy the internet. Clarke, who was at first a bit abashed, had eventually owned it and spent a further ten minutes telling Lexa which article was her favorite and why. “I think,” Clarke had said that night, crawling up Lexa’s sweaty body after making her come twice in a row, “That at this point
I am allowed to objectify you.” And Lexa had not had the energy to disagree.

So at this point, she knows what pants Clarke means, and is already putting the outfit together in her head. “What will you wear?” she asks.

“Something that makes my butt look good,” Clarke says. Lexa can hardly wait.

* 

Lexa has seen enough movies to know that the proper thing to do is show up with flowers. She can’t pick up Clarke from her own apartment, but she does have one of her security staff run down to the nearest florist to get a bouquet of lilies of the valley. She’s ready first, nervously fiddling with her cufflinks in the living room and thinking about a drink. It shouldn’t be normal to be this nervous about greeting a woman she’s already seen naked, but this is their first time leaving the building. They’ll be as discreet as possible, but there’s every chance they’ll be spotted. That’s the risk that Clarke has agreed to, but she’s worried that the reality of strangers with cameras flashing at them will be worse than whatever Clarke has imagined.

Clarke descends about ten minutes after Lexa, the click of her heels signaling her coming. Lexa waits with the bouquet behind her back, eyes widening as Clarke is revealed from the legs up. Black strappy heels, black dress with a hem just high enough to land on the side of night-out-on-the-town rather than work cocktails, shoulder-hugging neckline cut in a shallow V across the top of her décolletage. Hair up, with a few wavy tendrils around her face, and simple silver jewelry accents at her ears and around her neck. The dress does indeed make her butt look quite good.

Lexa holds out the flowers, glad she has them in her hands to give her something to do other than stare at Clarke. “You look lovely.”

“You too,” says Clarke, who busses her on the cheek, a ghost of a kiss to avoid leaving a lipstick print. She smiles down at her flowers, pressing her nose into them for a moment. “These are lovely too.”

“There’s a vase in the foyer,” Lexa says, offering her arm. Clarke drops the flowers in the waiting vase, primping them a bit, and lets a slim paw slide into the crook of Lexa’s elbow. Gustus is already waiting by the elevators.

“Ma’am,” he says to Lexa, with an accompanying nod for Clarke.

There are some things they can’t avoid; the police escort is non-negotiable, and Gustus’ security went ahead to sweep the restaurant and the private room where they’ll be dining. So staff there already know someone important is coming, and the flashing lights and dark SUVs are bound to give it away, if not the heavy sedan with the Markish flags. Lexa really has no expectation that they’ll be able to get in and out without being spotted, but she can’t be apprehensive forever, so when they pull up in front of the tavern, Lexa doesn’t hesitate to get out and offer her hand to Clarke.

Clarke takes it and doesn’t let go as she emerges from the car. Already a few people on the sidewalk are gawking, cell phones up and pointed between the gaps of the bodyguards blocking off a clear path for them to the door. The tavern’s manager is waiting to greet them, escorting them past the main dining room and into the back before anyone can really get a look of them. Lexa already likes the place, the deliberately rustic interior with exposed wooden beams in the ceiling and warm, low lighting.

The private room, originally meant for larger parties, has been set with a small, intimate table for two, and a waiter is already standing against the wall, along with a sommelier. The menu is also fairly
rustic, which Lexa finds pleasing. The restaurant is nice, but without too much pretension, and she holds hands with Clarke across the white tablecloth as soon as the waiter has taken their orders and the sommelier has poured them both a nice glass of Bordeaux. “This is perfect,” she says.

“I’m glad you like it,” Clarke says, smiling down at their joined hands. Her smile fades a bit and her gaze grows unfocused, as though she’s thinking of something, and eventually she speaks again. “Can I ask you something?”

Lexa squeezes her hand. “Of course.”

“This is your first date, right? I mean your first time going on a real date?” Clarke asks. Not out of ego, Lexa can tell, but real curiosity. And why not, since they’ve been asking each other all sorts of questions for the past week.

“I asked one girl on a date before I met you,” Lexa says, and Clarke tilts her head, paying rapt attention. “I was sixteen, and her name was Costia. She was the daughter of a minor house. We met at a function in the riverlands. She was, shall we say, unimpressed by my status as royal heir. I was taken with her right away.”

“Sounds like you have a type,” Clarke says, a good-natured little verbal poke.

“I couldn’t make many excuses to see her, but I knew she would be attending the Unification Day ball with her parents. So in secret, I asked her if she would be my date, and she agreed. Looking back, I’m not sure what I expected would happen. We couldn’t step out openly at the ball. And I knew my father would disapprove.” Lexa props up her chin in her free hand, letting herself remember that bittersweet spring.

“We didn’t have much. A few stolen moments here and there. She was at school in the city so sometimes I would be able to sneak away and meet her. But every time it was a risk, and I knew if my father caught us there would be consequences. But I was sixteen and in love for the first time.” She quells a sigh, not wanting to sink into melancholy. She is, after all, with Clarke, both of them free to be as in love as they want.

“Did you end it?” Clarke asks tentatively.

“No. We ended up getting caught in the end. My father was outraged. She wasn’t a good marriage prospect. Wouldn’t strengthen our claim to the throne, and certainly couldn’t help me provide heirs. He exiled her family from the country.” She can see Clarke’s eyes widening as she grows more and more dismayed by the story. “It’s all right. After my father died, I ended their exile and restored their family title and lands. They were only gone about a year. But by then Costia had had a taste of life outside our backwards little country and she wanted to attend university in England. She went to Oxford and I stayed in Markenland. I believe she’s currently in a research post in Amsterdam and quite happy.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that though,” Clarke says. “You were just sixteen.”

“It ended up being for the best,” says Lexa, and meaning it. “The irony is that losing Costia is part of what made me begin to think of ways to end the monarchy. So I could love whoever I wanted.”

Clarke scoots her chair closer and grasps Lexa’s face with both her hands. “You are.” She plants a kiss on Lexa’s mouth, heedless now of lipstick. “The most.” Another kiss. “Disgustingly romantic.” Kiss. “Person I have ever met.” One last kiss for good measure, and then she pulls back, using her thumb to wipe at a few errant smears around Lexa’s mouth.
Lexa almost doesn’t notice the waiter returning with their food.

* 

A full meal, a split dessert, and three glasses of wine later, Lexa is relaxed and happy, laughing easily with Clarke and unable to stop touching her thigh under the table.

“I thought the waiter would have brought the bill by now,” Clarke says, tracing one finger around the rim of her near-empty glass.

“Oh.” Lexa realizes she never asked about this part. “That’s been taken care of.”

Clarke purses her lips slightly. “I asked you out. It was going to be my treat.”

“I’m sorry,” Lexa says, starting to feel the good mood fading and not wanting to let it go. “It’s just how we normally organize it if I go out to eat. I don’t carry a wallet.”

Clarke finishes off the last of her wine before leaning in towards Lexa. “We,” she murmurs, “Are going to talk about this later. But right now you look really good so we’re gonna go back to the apartment and you’re going to peel me out of this dress and we’re going to enjoy the rest of our date.”

Lexa’s contrition transforms into a slow, lopsided grin. She stands up and pulls out Clarke’s chair, once again offering her hand. “I’m happy to do whatever you ask, Ms. Griffin.”

The restaurant staff thank them both profusely on their way out – tipping isn’t a common practice in Markenland but Lexa has been in the States enough to know to tip and tip well – and they find Gustus waiting for them just in front of the door. “Paparazzi found us,” he says. “Nothing too bad, couple of guys keeping their distance.”

“Back way?” Lexa asks.

“Wait,” Clarke says. She tugs Lexa to the side a bit. “This was going to happen sometime, right? If you’re okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

Lexa searches her face. “Are you sure? We’ll have the car go around, the same as before.”

Clarke shakes her head. Her voice is low, but firm. “We already did our sneaking, Lexa. I’m tired of it.”

Still Lexa holds off on letting them leave. “Only if you’re absolutely certain. Once they find out who you are they’ll dig, not just with you, but your family and your friends.”

“My friends can handle themselves and my mom won’t tell them anything. Let’s go.” Clarke’s chin is coming up, a look Lexa recognizes all too well from their clashes in the palace.

Lexa’s grin returns and her hand lands at the small of Clarke’s back. “Brave new world,” she says.

“That has such assholes in it,” Clarke says.

Lexa laughs as she pushes open the door, and that’s how the photographers behind the line of security catch her at first, before they focus in on the woman next to her. At least there’s no yelling, dissuaded by her extremely frosty security and her status as a foreign dignitary. And the walk from the entrance to the waiting car is short. Lexa opens the door for Clarke, gives an obliging wave to the small crowd on the sidewalk with their phones out, and gets in the car herself.
“Not bad,” Clarke says, curved comfortably into the leather seating.

“Don’t jinx it,” Lexa says, nevertheless earning a lazy smile from Clarke.

“Let’s not think about it until tomorrow,” Clarke says.

It’s hard to keep her hands off Clarke for the ride back, and indeed a few times she fails at it, letting a finger or two slip up the inside of Clarke’s thigh, brushing just under her hemline. But each time she stops and returns to Clarke’s knee or her hand, and by the time they’re back at the penthouse they’re just barely able to hold off until the apartment door clicks shut and then Clarke throws herself on Lexa, arms around her neck, Lexa wrapped around her waist. They only stop kissing urgently when they trip up the stairs together, Clarke tossing her heels somewhere in the foyer.

In the bedroom Clarke pushes off her suit jacket, but she spins Clarke around before she can do anything else and presses her against the window. Lexa’s fingers nimbly find the zipper and draw it down, revealing a lacy black bra and matching underwear. Lexa smooths her hand over Clarke’s back, then pulls the dress at the shoulders, kissing along her shoulder blades and trapezius until the fabric is around her waist. The clasp of Clarke’s bra is next, the whole thing only held in place from being trapped between Clarke’s body and the glass. Clarke turns in her arms, coyly holding the bra up over her chest with one hand, and tilts her head at the rest of her dress. “Go on.”

So Lexa pushes at the bunched up material, getting on her knees to slide it down to the floor, where Clarke steps out of it, still leaning back against the window, still holding up that damned bra. Lexa tugs at her underwear next, staring up at Clarke the whole time. Clarke raises an eyebrow.

Lexa can take a hint. She leans forward, nipping along the tops of Clarke’s thighs, pulling gently until her stance widens enough. A tentative lick at first, just barely dipping into Clarke, skimming over her clit, but eliciting a sharp gasp. And then another, and another, delving deeper each time until her face is buried between Clarke’s thighs with Clarke’s hand fisting in her hair, bra abandoned to the floor. She doesn’t even feel the ache in her neck or the hard floor under her knees, there’s just the taste and smell of Clarke on her tongue and the ever-louder cries of her voice until she’s shuddering against Lexa’s mouth and sliding, boneless, down to Lexa’s level.

Clarke pushes against her in a sloppy kiss, licking her own arousal off Lexa’s tongue. “We should go out more often,” she says.

* 

Normally after a night like that – the kind where they both seem determined to keep each other in a near-constant state of arousal until they pass out – they’ll sleep in and get a late start to the day. But Clarke’s phone rings at nine AM, still inside her clutch, which is somewhere on the floor in the heap of clothes they left behind. Lexa can hear Clarke groan, then feels her roll out of bed. More sounds as Clarke fishes around for her bag, then fumbles the clasp and drags out the phone. “What?” she barks.

Lexa pulls a pillow over her head, hoping the call will be over soon.

Clarke stumbles back to the bed, getting under the covers again. Whoever it is must be a friend or a superior if Clarke hasn’t hung up yet. “No but I’m not surprised," she says.

Something tinny on the other end of the line that Lexa can’t make out.

“We went out to dinner last night and the paparazzi found us but I don’t care.”

Lexa un-turtles from her pillow at that, finally opening her eyes.
Wells Clarke mouths at her and Lexa understands. “I’m really tired of hiding,” Clarke continues out loud. “So it’s fine. But thanks for calling.” A pause for whatever Wells says next. “I’m literally in bed with her right now so I’m going to hang up on you in like three seconds.”

Lexa can hear his laughter from her side of the bed, abruptly silenced as Clarke jabs the red button and tosses her phone on the night stand. She groans and closes her eyes. “Can we just go back to sleep.”

Lexa actually feels fine after six hours, but Clarke needs a full eight or else she takes an entire morning to work out of her grumps. “If you want,” Lexa says.

Clarke grumbles a few incoherent sounds before making full sentences again. “No, I’m up now. Stupid Wells.”

Lexa rubs her foot down Clarke’s calf. “Why did he call?”

Clarke continues to keep her eyes squeezed shut. “We’re on the front page of the Post.”


“Queen of Markenland and mystery blonde. You’d think they would know considering I worked on the election and we gave that press conference. I guess it’s the Post though.” Clarke sounds slightly affronted that she’s been relegated to “mystery blonde” but Lexa wisely decides not to bring it up.

“Perhaps you should warn the rest of your friends,” Lexa says.

“Ugh. You’re right.” Clarke finally opens her eyes and rolls onto her back. “Maybe we should have gone out the back last night.”

Lexa waits and watches, knowing this isn’t something she can take back for Clarke, that even though the regret stings a little, what Clarke is feeling is natural. Lexa has been dealing with the spotlight most of her life. Clarke wouldn’t be the first person who thought she was ready, but didn’t realize just how harsh that light could be when it was on her.

“But it’s done now,” Clarke continues. She turns her head to look at Lexa. “You okay?”

“I should be asking you that,” Lexa says. “Your life is about to change significantly.”

“It’s already changed,” Clarke says, albeit with a smile. “And I wouldn’t take that back for anything.”

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“It’s already changed,” Clarke says, albeit with a smile. “And I wouldn’t take that back for anything.”

Lexa is just scooting closer for a morning kiss when Clarke’s phone erupts again, this time with the dings of several text messages. They both sigh, Lexa face down in the gap between their pillows, and Clarke into the open air. “Let me take care of this, and then we’ll get breakfast?” Clarke asks.

Lexa manages to sneak in a peck. “I think I can remember how to make the pancakes you showed me.”

“You’re the best,” Clarke says, with a last fond smile before reaching for her very insistent phone.

* 

Lexa, who would not even upon pain of death ever admit to googling “simple pancake recipe” on her tablet, has a stack of them keeping warm in the oven and a bowl of fresh fruit waiting by the time Clarke comes down to the kitchen. “Everything settled?” she asks, pulling out the stack and pouring
a fresh mug of coffee.

Clarke grimaces and wobbles her hand. “Sort of.” She slides onto one of the tall chairs at the island and accepts her coffee, along with a plate of food. Lexa also slides over a dish of butter and little carafe of maple syrup. She brings her own food to the seat next to Clarke and makes a sympathetic, listening face.

"The New York Times managed to figure out who I am, so there's a bunch of calls from them I'm ignoring. Also apparently we are both trending on twitter."

After a mental note to have Anya keep an eye out for Clarke's name, assuming she hasn't been doing so for the past four years, Lexa continues to listen. No matter how much Clarke was braced for it, she knows this is all very much new and disorienting.

“With my friends everyone was mostly fine with it but, uh.” Clarke stabs her pancakes a few times with her fork. “You have to meet my mother.”

Lexa promptly chokes on a blueberry.

Chapter End Notes

You can yell at me about having to constantly add just one more chapter because I underestimated how many feelings Lexa would have at badlance.
The hottest couple to hit the streets at the moment is royal! Half royal anyway – Queen Lexa of Markenland, featured on every eligible bachelorette list for the last 14 years, is off the market. Sorry ladies and delusional men! The queen has been seen stepping out with a blonde woman, identified as one Clarke Griffin, who heads up a department at the United Nations (see girls, smart is sexy). Last weekend it was three-star Michelin sushi experience Masa, and yesterday it was humble Tapas Room in Washington Heights. Looks like the queen has a girlfriend who wants to show her the more authentic side of New York, although Queen Lexa is certainly capable of squiring her new gal pal about town in style. Last year on our own Most Eligible Bachelorettes list, we cited a report from Forbes that has her personal net worth pegged at around US$350 million, and the couple have been seen ducking into a very exclusive building on Central Park West after their escapades through Manhattan’s night life. No word yet whether this is just Queen Lexa sowing her royal oats—"

Clarke closes the tab in mild disgust. Honestly she shouldn’t have even clicked the link in the first place after Raven emailed it to her. But it’s almost the end of the work day and she’s basically counting the minutes until she can zoom out of the office and head over to Lexa’s. Using up all her vacation on short notice has her working slightly longer hours after two weeks away, and with Lexa scheduled to return to Markenland at the end of the week, she resents every single second that they have to be apart. But she has a job and a demanding boss who was understanding enough to grant her vacation request with only two days’ notice and she’s doing her best to balance her life even though she’s dreading Lexa leaving again.

And there’s the fact that Kane made it official she can longer work on anything European. She can’t exactly be a neutral party to European affairs when she’s dating a European monarch. It doesn’t matter how attenuated the relationship between Markenland and whatever country she would be dealing with; someone would find some reason she couldn’t possibly be impartial and that would be it for her. It’s fine; she expected it and planned for it. She can shift her focus to planning for fall semester now, perhaps even an extended program in Haiti. Fabienne is beginning her masters program at NYU in the fall as well and will be moving to the city soon.

In the meantime she watches the clock hit five and is ready to go as soon as the minute hand ticks over. Tonight is extremely important, at least to her. Lexa has been annoyingly laid-back about it, once she got over her initial surprise.

There are a couple of paparazzi lurking downstairs, but they continue to keep their distance. The United Nations doesn’t exactly encourage people with long-range lenses to snoop around all day and there’s also Lexa’s reputation. Ten years a reformer and four more transitioning to a figurehead is evidently not enough to overcome the rumors that she killed her own father – rumors which the palace didn’t do much to dispel in the first year of Lexa’s rule. Sometimes Clarke wonders who came up with that policy. Was it Anya, seeding fear through disinformation? Titus, trying to solidify his young student’s position? Lexa herself, searching for every pound of leverage as she tried to keep the country from descending into chaos? Clarke hasn’t asked about it and doesn’t think she ever will.

She gets a double-take or two on the subway, but otherwise when she’s on her own she tends not to draw too much attention. It’s really only when she and Lexa are out together that the cameras descend and the snide articles show up the next day. The walk back to the building is uninterrupted all the way to the private back entrance, leaving her with her thoughts and the mounting anticipation she always feels before seeing Lexa again, no matter how short the separation.

L Lexa is in her study when Clarke keycards her way into the penthouse. She’s working more too,
now that Clarke is away for the day, and holds up a finger to keep Clarke at the door while she
listens to whoever is on her computer screen. It only takes another minute before she signs off and
Clarke is free to come around the desk and plop down in Lexa’s lap, arms twined around her neck.
“Hi,” she says, dropping a kiss on Lexa’s mouth. Which prompts another kiss, and then another. It’s
very rarely just one kiss with them, especially with their deadline in mind, and Clarke would say she
was being clingy if Lexa weren’t just as touchy every second of the day.

“How was your day?” Lexa asks when she can get whole sentences out. She swivels in her chair so
they’re both facing the window, able to enjoy the view.

“It felt really long, but it was fine. You ready for tonight?” Clarke asks.

“It’ll be fine,” Lexa says, squeezing her. She adds a nice, soft kiss to Clarke’s throat for good
measure, reassuring and sexy at the same time. Clarke melts a little against her.

“Okay. Give me a minute to shower and get dressed.” She kisses Lexa again, although this has the
opposite effect of letting her get ready, with Lexa tightening her grip and chasing after her mouth.
Clarke is obliged to continue kissing her, fingers carefully tilting her chin up into just the right
position. Long minutes later she finally pulls back, though with half a mind to just call and cancel.
“Seriously. We can’t be late.”

“You can get up any time you like,” Lexa sasses her, holding her hands wide open.

Clarke fakes up a glare but manages one last kiss, this time on the apple of Lexa’s cheek, before
darting away.

* 

Clarke can’t figure out why Lexa isn’t nervous. She has to clench her leg muscles to stop herself
from tapping her foot in the elevator on the way up to her mother’s apartment. Lexa stands there
calmly, holding the bottle of wine she pulled from her collection. Clarke hasn’t looked it up, but it’s
good odds the wine is not eight-buck chuck from Trader Joe’s. Gustus is a solid, silent presence
behind them, keeping Clarke from really leaning into Lexa. She still hasn’t quite figured out how to
just be when Lexa’s security is around, but at least with Gustus she feels safe, not intimidated.

“Ready?” Clarke asks, watching the numbers on the floor panel tick up one by one.

Lexa grasps her hand and squeezes it. “I’ll do my best to impress your mother, Clarke.”

“Just…you know. Be yourself. I like you when you’re…yourself.” Clarke swallows and looks at the
elevator door.

“Thank you,” Lexa says, and squeezes her hand one more time. It’s a small comfort, but just enough
to get Clarke through the rest of the ride and down the nondescript hallway, Gustus following
discreetly.

Abby Griffin answers the door almost immediately. “Clarke,” she says, wrapping up her daughter in
a hug.

Clarke hugs her back; it’s been over a month since she last saw her mom face to face. They live in
the same city but they’re both so busy all the time, which neither one of them has ever really
bothered to change. They’re not especially close and that works for them. “Hi mom,” she says,
hugging back for a moment. Then she steps aside. “Uh, this is Lexa.”

Abby holds out her hand. “Your majesty,” she says, although not quite in the usual deferential tone
that comes with the words. A polite acknowledgment that Lexa is technically a queen, but for all that is a guest in Abby’s home.

“Please, call me Lexa, Dr. Griffin. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Lexa says smoothly.

“And Gustus,” Clarke says, indicating all 6’5” of him.

“I’ll be outside, ma’am,” Gustus says, and somehow makes himself unobtrusive to the side of the door.

Clarke and Lexa go in, though Clarke doesn’t miss how her mother looks askance at the burly presence now lurking in her hallway. Inside, Lexa presents the bottle of wine. “I hope this will suit for dinner.”

Abby accepts it, scanning over the label, still with that polite smile. “I’m sure it will.”

They walk through to the kitchen, where food has already been ladled into larger dishes. Lexa helps set the table without being asked while Abby pours the wine into a decanter to let it breathe. “She’s shorter than I thought she would be,” Abby murmurs to Clarke while Lexa is carrying a casserole dish into the dining room.

“She gets that a lot,” Clarke murmurs back.

They follow along eventually with the wine and a few dishes of their own. Abby takes her place at the head of the table, Clarke to her right and Lexa to her left. Clarke wonders if her mother put out the place settings like this on purpose and wishes more than anything that she could hold Lexa’s hand under the table.

“How have you been enjoying New York?” Abby asks. Clarke thinks she can see a little bit of nervous tightness around her mother’s mouth, but Dr. Griffin has done her fair share of idly chatting up rich people at fancy soirees and it seems tonight is no different.

“Very well, thank you,” Lexa says, and begins to describe some of her visits around the city. She sounds so formal, like when Clarke first met her at the palace. For a moment she’s distracted, studying Lexa as she once again resumes that mask of professional charm that seems to come with her royal persona. When it’s just the two of them, Lexa is warm, genuine, affectionate. She has an obvious fondness for being held and just listening to Clarke speak and tends to dote. She sent a large bouquet of flowers to Clarke’s office the day she returned to work, and had surprised her yesterday morning with breakfast in bed – a very nice frittata that Lexa later admitted to practicing seven times while Clarke was at work, explaining the giant pile of eggshells in the garbage and the guards’ distinctly eggy breath.

Clarke switches to watching Abby after a minute, trying to gauge her reaction, waiting for the slightest disapproval. Distant they may be, but her mom has been overprotective ever since her dad died, and she can only imagine what kind of motherly instincts are flaring up over her only child showing up in tabloids and gossip rags and being followed by an armed bodyguard.

But dinner flows from one dish to the next, eased along a bit by the wine. Lexa seems genuinely interested in Abby’s work and asks detailed questions that seem to impress Abby, leading them to continue discussing differences in American and Markish hospital systems as they clean up the food and get out small plates for dessert.

Clarke feels confident enough she can leave them alone to use the bathroom, but pauses before returning to the kitchen, hearing how the voices there are now low and serious. She leans on the wall
just around the corner, listening in, ready to break things up with a big, cheerful entrance.

“You can’t always be here,” Abby says.

“No. The nature of my life dictates that I have to stay in Markenland much of the time,” Lexa says. She still sounds even-keeled; she’s been confronted with much worse, Clarke figures.

“Is that really fair to either of you?”

“Not much about our circumstances is fair, but I respect Clarke to tell me if it becomes too much. She knows what she wants.”

“And what do you want.” Abby’s voice is flat, almost challenging. A mother protecting her daughter, not a random American confronting a queen.

“I want to make Clarke happy for as long as she wants me,” Lexa says, mild but sincere. “And I hope that will be for the rest of our lives.” Clarke has to suppress a harsh inhale at that, self-consciously wrapping her arms around herself.

“Clarke has always had her own dreams, her own plans. Are you telling me she would be able to pursue the life she wants and still be with you? She already told me they’ve placed limits on her at work because of your relationship.”

A pause from Lexa. Clarke is on the verge of intervening when she says, “I would never ask Clarke to give up her career for me. And you make a fair point that a long-term relationship between us will probably ask for more change from Clarke than from me. But my respect for her means believing her when she says she is doing what she wants to do.”

Another pause, perhaps this time so they can both have a long drink of wine.

Clarke has to take a moment to compose herself before backtracking and making obvious noise with her feet on the floorboards. “Dessert ready?” she asks brightly, joining Lexa at the island. She stands close, close enough to have their legs and hips pushed together, and she lets her hand fall lightly on top of Lexa’s where it rests on the marble countertop. For a moment she ignores that Abby is watching, forgets the days of stressing over her mom and her girlfriend getting along. Her smile is for Lexa and Lexa alone. “Maybe I’ll teach you to make pie next.”

If Lexa is surprised by this sudden flare of affection, she doesn’t show it. She responds with that smile that Clarke loves, so genuinely and completely smitten that she suddenly looks ten years younger and a bit silly. “I would like that.”

Clarke manages to pull her focus back to the apartment, with the three of them in it. “I’ve, uh, been teaching Lexa to cook. She’s getting the hang of it.”

“Clarke is an excellent teacher,” Lexa says, which is mostly true. They tend to get sidetracked with touches and kisses in the middle of most of the lessons.

“Well I’ll send you some of nana’s recipes then,” Abby says, very carefully observing the two of them as they stand together in her kitchen like a little unit.

“My grandmother wasn’t much for cooking either,” Lexa admits. “I’m afraid we don’t have many domestic traditions passed down in my family.”

“You can start the tradition,” Clarke says, and doesn’t miss the way Lexa blinks at the implication. It still feels early to be talking about forever, even if they can both feel the inevitability of it. They
didn’t wait four years for a fling. But the right time will be soon, and in the meantime, there’s this: standing over a store-bought tiramisu in her mother’s kitchen, taking turns to fork bites from it while they talk, Lexa holding her hand under the counter the entire time.

*

Later that night, lying in bed next to Lexa, Clarke feels the need to confess she eavesdropped. But instead, a question forms and wriggles its way around her confession and out of her mouth. “If you could give up all this and just run away, would you?” she asks.

Lexa, who she can tell was on the verge of dozing off, takes a moment to properly respond. “I don’t know,” she says, voice thin and quiet with sleepiness.

“What if you had a successor in place, someone you trusted, and you could just take off.”

“Someone I trusted? Then yes, I would leave the throne to them and we could go wherever we wanted.” Lexa trails off, still about to fall asleep.

“But there isn’t anyone. That you trust.”

A sigh. Then the covers rustling in the dark as Lexa turns over, sensing that Clarke needs an actual conversation. Her face, gently concerned, perhaps a dash grumpy from lack of sleep, is just barely visible by the faint moonlight glowing through the curtains. “What is this about, Clarke?”

Clarke doesn’t quite know. The conversation she overheard has unsettled her, making her feel as though she’s struggling to find her way back to her usual certainty about what they’re doing, like someone fumbling to push a key into a lock in the dark. She knows for a fact that it’s only a matter of time until she finds the lock, but until she does, it’s frustrating and a little embarrassing. “I guess…” She takes a minute to think; Lexa waits patiently, or perhaps she’s snoozing. Either way, there’s no interruption or pressure as Clarke tries to process the evening. “I guess after we finally got over how to start, we maybe stopped talking about where we’re going. I mean, we deserve to just relax and enjoy us, but don’t you…” Clarke can’t figure how to phrase the question.

“I’ve felt it too,” Lexa says, saving her the trouble. “But I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel at all unsure about our future.”

“It’s not that, not really,” Clarke says. The back of her hand strokes Lexa’s stomach under the covers. “I mean, I think I know the end. Maybe it’s just figuring out how we get there that’s making me a little anxious.”

Lexa stops the hand against her stomach, clasping it and snuggling a little closer to Clarke, foreheads almost touching across the little gap between their pillows. “I’ve been thinking about that too. But I didn’t want to rush you. You’re right, we do deserve to relax.”

“We don’t have to talk about it right away. But I guess I just need you to know it’s on my mind,” Clarke says, body starting to loosen up and settle into the mattress. “And I’m glad it’s on yours too.”

“All the time,” Lexa murmurs, once again sounding like she’s drifting. Clarke can’t bear to keep her awake any longer and lies still and quiet until she can hear Lexa’s breathing deepen. Normally the sound would lull her right into sleep, but she lies awake for some time afterwards, stuck with an overabundance of thoughts.

*

The end of the week is approaching far too quickly for Clarke’s liking. Even as she pulls together her
fall syllabus and consults Lexa on texts she should be using, she’s hyperaware that soon they’ll have
to resort to letters and skype and perhaps the odd phone call, international rate be damned. She feels
so ill-prepared for the reality of actually being able to be with Lexa. They should have spent some of
their time apart actually planning out the logistics of a trans-Atlantic relationship. But what, really,
can they do now that they didn’t already? Clarke has her work and Lexa has hers and in between
they’ll write and call, perhaps now with more open affection, but certainly not with less frequency or
ardor. And perhaps, as much as Clarke doesn’t want to admit it to herself, she almost didn’t expect
that her waiting would ever be over. She grew used to it, living with hope for a nebulous someday.

Or it could be that her girlfriend, lightly snoring next to her, is secretly an impetuous romantic who
showed up on her doorstep without warning and now they’re having to make plans on the fly instead
of the measured collaboration Clarke originally envisioned once their waiting was up.

She finds she can’t really be mad about it. Three weeks together can’t make up for the years apart,
but they’ve been weeks Clarke wouldn’t give up for anything. She watches Lexa sleep on her
stomach, one arm flung up over her pillow, mouth half open, hair in total disarray. As much as
Clarke loves her tiny East Village apartment, it only took a few days for Lexa’s penthouse to start
feeling like home. In the back of her mind she can hear Raven snickering that it’s not Lexa, but the
luxury to which she’s now accustomed. Still, she’s uneasy with the idea of staying her after Lexa has
left, though Lexa has offered several times.

She’s struck with a sudden desire to see Lexa in her space, puttering around her cramped kitchen,
sleeping in her bed, coming in through the front door with coffee and bagels. But those are not things
Lexa can do, as much as she would want to give them to Clarke.

She flips her pillow, the solace from the cool side only temporary as she spends yet another night
lying wide awake, contemplating the future. Sleep comes in the early morning, and by the time Lexa
is shifting around, sleepily cuddling against her body as she gradually wakes up, Clarke feels groggy
and irritable. She doesn’t want to go to work. She doesn’t want to have to plan for another
separation. She doesn’t want to wait anymore.

Lexa picks up on her mood, quietly letting Clarke sit with her coffee while she sips her tea and reads
the news. The dark puffiness under Clarke’s eyes is not subtle, and she’s grateful when Lexa hands
her a cold compress for her face before she starts getting ready for work. The soothe of it against her
tired, gritty eyes helps her grumpiness subside, leaving her literally and figuratively cooler headed.

“Come have lunch with me today?” Clarke asks before leaving, feeling a little bad about her distance
over breakfast. The UN building is probably one of the most hassle-free places for Lexa to visit in
the city.

“Of course,” Lexa says, walking her to the front door. She pecks Clarke once, twice, succumbs to a
deeper kiss, and is just pushing her against the wall of the foyer when Clarke manages to stay on
track.

“I’ll see you at lunch,” she says, voice wobblier than she would like, and they part with Lexa
grinning at her, hair still disheveled from Clarke’s hands. The sight of her is something Clarke wants
every single day and it sticks her with her all through work, carrying her along until it’s once again
time to go home.

* 

“This place is wild,” Raven says, bustling into the penthouse and handing off a paper bag filled with
dessert to Clarke. She looks around curiously, craning her neck without shame. Octavia is hard on
her heels with a hug for Clarke.
“Thanks for coming. Wells is already in the living room,” Clarke says.

“Along with her majesty?” Raven asks, sounding too focused to really be teasing.

“Lexa,” Clarke says, emphasizing her name, “Is in there too.”

“Good, because one of the guards who searched me was really cute and I need his number,” says Raven. She slips away before Clarke can hope to even attempt an objection.

“Don’t worry, we talked about proper behavior on the way over,” Octavia says, following her. Clarke is not reassured.

She hefts the bag and takes it to the kitchen, pulling out plastic containers filled with pie slices and stacking them in the fridge for later. She can hear the low murmur of conversation drifting in from the living room in little waves, interspersed with some laughter. Laughter is good. She tosses the bag in the recycling and leaves the kitchen, finding Lexa pouring drinks for the group from a very expensive bottle of bourbon that was bought specifically for tonight. Calm she may appear, but Lexa knows this matters to Clarke, and she has perhaps spent an inadvisable amount of money on amenities. Clarke smiles at her and walks in, sitting on the arm of Wells’ chair while Octavia and Raven are ensconced opposite on the couch.

Raven waves her glass under her nose appreciatively before sipping it. “We,” she declares, “Are going to finish that bottle tonight.”

Over the rest of their pre-dinner drinks, Wells politely but insistently badgers Lexa with questions about Markish royal history, and Lexa tries to pretend she’s not overly delighted to answer every one in stunning footnoted detail. Clarke actually has to interrupt the two of them to let them know it’s time to eat, and then during dinner they continue their conversation, almost to the exclusion of everyone else. Clarke watches her two nerds fondly, and lets herself catch up with Raven and Octavia instead.

“I have no idea why you haven’t quit and moved in here yet,” Raven says. “If you don’t, I will.”

“Raven Reyes, rich trophy wife?” Clarke asks skeptically.

“I am a really great trophy,” Raven says. “I would be the Stanley Cup of trophy wives.”

Octavia lowers her voice. “You guys have talked about the…w-word?”

Clarke realizes the assumption she made and scrapes her fork on her plate self-consciously.

“What about that sabbatical you were talking about with Kane?” Raven asks.

Lexa and Wells are still talking, but Clarke can sense that Lexa is paying attention to their conversation now, attending with half an ear. “I don’t know if I want to teach full time,” Clarke says. “I’m not complaining. Work is better with you around,” Raven says, and focuses on her food. Lexa hired a private chef for the dinner, although her initial plan had been to cook it herself. For days she insisted she was learning quickly enough to produce something enjoyable, only to hire someone two days before deadline. Lexa framed it as just wanting the best for Clarke’s friends and Clarke loves her enough not to call it vanity over making a good impression.

Dinner ends with a nightcap, Wells and Lexa staying in the library an hour after Octavia and Raven have said their goodbyes, going over books that haven’t yet been translated into English. Wells ends up leaving with a small satchel weighed down with loaners that he promises to look after with near
“I think you’ve earned his loyalty for life,” Clarke says as they finish cleaning up the kitchen. The rag she was using to wipe down the counters gets tossed at the sink and Clarke sidles up behind Lexa as she slides wine glasses back into their rack. Arms go around Lexa’s waist and hair gets pulled aside so Clarke can place a very careful, deliberate kiss on the back of her neck. “They loved you.”

“Your friends are interesting people,” Lexa says, accepting the hug and leaning back into Clarke. “I enjoy their company.”

Clarke presses on Lexa’s hips to get her to turn around so Clarke can bracket her with her arms, hands braced on the counter behind Lexa. “So. You’ve met my mom and my friends. Was it as bad as you thought it would be?”

“I think perhaps one of us was more worried than the other,” Lexa says diplomatically.

“And it was definitely you,” Clarke says, nudging Lexa’s cheek with her nose.

“There are truths we must tell ourselves in order to sleep at night.”

Clarke pulls back indignantly. She finds Lexa grinning at her, eyes crinkling with silent laughter. “So you didn’t make the same roast chicken recipe five times and then hire a private chef?” she asks.

“I wanted to avoid food waste,” Lexa says smoothly. “There’s only so much chicken Gustus and the others can eat.”

“Hmph,” says Clarke, and swirls away in a mock grump to take a shower.

Standing under the stream cascading from the waterfall shower head, she replays dinner and the look Octavia had given her when she brought up wife. For now, Lexa can return to the States in irregular chunks, weeks here and there, and Clarke can take vacations and sabbaticals to go see her. Will that be enough a year from now? Two? She’s quiet again as they wind down and get ready for bed, and by the time Lexa slips under the covers next to her, she just wants to be held. Lexa is only too ready to oblige when Clarke scoots backwards towards Lexa, one arm going around her waist and pulling her tight.

“You’re leaving in two days,” Clarke says.

Lexa shifts a bit, aligning their bodies so they’re touching as much as possible. “I’ll be back in a month.”

“I know. I’m not mad you have to go.” She lies in silence for a minute, struggling to turn her feelings into words. “I’m just…it’s on my mind, I guess. But it is what it is.”

“Clarke.” Lexa’s voice has an odd hesitation to it. “I want you to know I respect how much you enjoy your work. It’s one of the things that attracts me to you.”

“Okay,” Clarke says slowly, not sure where this is going.

“So please don’t take this is as what I would prefer that you actually do. But…if you were to decide to live in Markenland, I would welcome you no matter what. And I wouldn’t ask that you live in the palace or at my family home, or even with me if you didn’t want. An apartment in the city, since I know how much you like being in a city-”
Clarke turns over so she can look at Lexa face to face. Her eyes are wide, mouth still half-open from her ramble. Clarke has no other option but to push forward and kiss that nervous lower lip, enjoying the plump softness. “Thank you,” she says. “I get what you mean. I think it’s good for us to discuss our options.”

“I wish we could live anywhere we wanted, do anything we wanted,” Lexa says in a near-whisper, as though to say it out loud might summon disapproval all the way from Markenland.

“I respect how much you love your country. It’s one of things that attracts me to you,” Clarke says.

“Someday,” Lexa says. It’s a word they’re both familiar with by now. But it’s a different someday from the ones that have come before. It feels more real, more certain. Clarke can tell that Lexa feels it too and their little shared smile puts her at ease. Even a month ago she couldn’t have imagined they would be here, lying together after dinner with Clarke’s friends.

“It’s just a month,” Clarke says. “Anya can keep you out of trouble for a month.”

It’s Lexa’s turn to feign indignation, but she consents to hold Clarke once again, the two of them fitting together nice and easy.

*

Clarke wants to go with Lexa to the airport, but they both agree that even leaving from a private airfield, all the hoopla that surrounds Lexa every time she travels makes it better for them to just say their goodbyes at the penthouse.

Clarke gets up as usual on Monday morning, automatically managing the steps of her routine. She showers while Lexa makes breakfast, and they quietly touch their hands and legs together while they eat at the island.

“Are you sure you won’t stay here while I’m gone?” Lexa asks.

Clarke shakes her head. “There’s too much of you here,” she says. In a way, this will be worse for Clarke. Of course Lexa remembers Clarke’s stay in Markenalnd, but it was almost entirely business. They had very few places that were solely theirs. But Clarke has reminders scattered all over New York now: the restaurants, the shops and museums, the spots in Central Park. And this penthouse, where the sheets no doubt smell of Lexa and every room has its own indelible memory. She can’t be here without Lexa.

“Okay,” Lexa says. They pause at the door, foreheads leaning together, arms around each other’s waists.

“Write to me?” Clarke asks.

“Every day if you like,” Lexa answers.

Then there’s one last kiss, one last hug, one last glimpse of Lexa as the door closes, and Clarke is in the elevator to the ground floor, her leather work satchel in one hand and a duffle of clothes to bring home over her shoulder. Even though the back entrance lets out into a small private courtyard, beyond that is a public street and the few ever-present paparazzi who linger around Lexa’s building. The number has dwindled pretty significantly since no one is really interested in her by herself, but they still take the pictures and she still ducks her head and walks at a brisk pace to the A train. Lexa had offered to have Gustus “look into” them but Clarke hadn’t wanted to escalate things, and so they remain.
Lexa’s plane is scheduled to leave in two hours, and Clarke imagines the tiny jet she spots in the distance at about the right time is Lexa’s Dassault, winging its way home.

She tries to focus on work just to get through the day; Wells brings her lunch at her desk with an overly cheerful smile and that helps pass an hour, but the rest of it she twiddles her pen in front of her computer and loses sight of the words every fifteen minutes whenever a new random memory from the past three weeks wanders into her consciousness. At five she logs off, turns off the lights, and trudges back to the East Village, not liking the thought of how dusty her apartment must be.

As expected, there’s a fairly intimidating backlog of mail waiting for her, and she grabs the thick stack in one hand without really looking at it before riding the elevator up to her apartment. Inside, the space feels a bit cold and empty, as though it’s lost the essence of being a home without someone living in it.

Bags on the ground, refrigerator not even an option after she hasn’t gone grocery shopping in three weeks, she tosses the mail on the kitchen island. The envelopes and magazines cascade apart, revealing one letter that catches her eye for the very familiar crest embossed into the envelope.

She can hardly believe it as she picks it out of the stack, seeing Lexa’s familiar handwriting, the return address the same as the penthouse, her own East Village address neatly inked in the center. She doesn’t even bother with a letter opener, using her index finger to slit open the envelope from side to side.

My dearest Clarke,

By the time you read this, we will already be separated, me to my home and you to yours. Yet I feel oddly stateless at times, because home now is wherever you are. A remote hut in the forest or a castle on a mountaintop or a place between; as long as I am with you, I am content. So please know that every mile I fly away is merely a mile I must retrace when I return to you. Were the world to suddenly plunge into an era without technology, I would walk the breadth of Europe and build a ship to cross the ocean. These things would be easy in comparison to life without you.

Anya would stop me here to call me a sap who spoils you with sentiment but I like to spoil you. I like to tell you my feelings. I like to know yours. These past three weeks have been the happiest of my life, if only until we are reunited. Let us spend our time not in sad reminiscence of what we miss, but in joyous planning for the future. A weekend in Martha’s Vineyard with the smell of salt water in the air and a sea breeze through our window. A rainy day spent in, just the two of us, reading and perhaps learning one of the recipes your mother sent. A trip to the Strand where you once again convince me that you need more books than you can possibly read, only to end up giving half of them to Wells to “hold for you” until you can get to them.

Think of our future and know that I am doing the same.

With all my love,
Lexa

Clarke doesn’t realize she’s crying until she feels something drip off her cheek and onto the letter. Hastily, she swipes at the tear, scrubbing both her eyes for good measure. The letter gets folded up and tamped back into its envelope, to join its sisters in the basket in her bedroom. For herself, she makes her way directly to her office and sits down to compose a letter of her own.

* 

There is a plan, dreamt up in vague pieces, that Clarke has kept in a fuzzy kind of “to do” bin in her
brain for over two years now. Now that “someday” is today, she starts to lay out the pieces, seeing what’s missing and pulling together the resources she’ll need.

There’s Kane, who listens quietly to her as she explains herself and then actually stands up to hug her once she’s done. There’s Wells, who doesn’t even need to finish listening to hug her. There’s her mom, who listens, but asks tough questions that Clarke knows are meant in her best interest. And there’s the head of the NYU Department of Politics, who is only too glad to do her a favor.

The month is a blur. One day Clarke is just starting to count down the time without Lexa, and the next she’s talking a half day from work and returning to the penthouse, nervously riding up the elevator so she can wait for Lexa to arrive from the airport. Lexa’s advance security team greets her in the front hallway, letting her in and then leaving her alone.

The penthouse is, unfortunately for her, spotless, so she can’t even tidy up in order to deal with her restlessness. As fast as the month went by, it’s still been a month. Thirty letters from Lexa later and she’s more than ready to reunite. And there’s her plan, too many balls now set in motion for her to take it back without a serious amount of trouble. Her brain and her heart can’t wait for Lexa’s reaction, but her nerves whisper doubts. Too soon, and yet, not soon enough. It feels like they’ve been together for years, but at the same time this stage of their relationship is brand new, still balanced tentatively on both their busy lives.

She can hear the elevator ding almost exactly on schedule. There’s no point in being coy or setting some kind of scene; she dashes for the front door and yanks it open. Lexa is barely out of the elevator, Gustus a few steps ahead of her. For such a large man, he makes a graceful sidestep, clearing a path so Clarke can practically jump into Lexa’s waiting arms.

“Nice to see you again, Ms. Griffin,” says Gustus, leading his troupe off to the security suite.

“Thanks Gustus,” she says over Lexa’s shoulder.

The hug goes on for a while, both of them enjoying the feel of a solid, warm body pressed close. This separation was nothing like their first, but the feeling of being together again is as good as Clarke remembers. “I missed you so much,” she says, feeling Lexa squeeze around her waist in response. She cranes her neck so she can press a kiss to Lexa’s cheek. “Thank you for the letters.”

Lexa lets go just enough so she can kiss Clarke; a proper kiss, heads tilted together, eyes fluttering shut. Clarke’s eyes remain closed for a moment after Lexa pulls away. “You’re welcome,” Lexa murmurs against her mouth.

“You just got in,” Clarke says, voice gone low, almost scratchy with sudden desire. “Did you want to eat or take a nap?”

She can practically see Lexa’s pupils dilate on the spot. “I would like to be in the bedroom, yes,” she says, beginning to walk Clarke backwards into the apartment, kicking the door shut behind her. A burst of giddiness takes Clarke, pulling her loose of Lexa’s grip and sending her traipsing backwards, challenging Lexa to follow her. Lexa stalks after her in thrillingly predatory fashion, one hand already unbuttoning her suit jacket. Clarke toes off her shoes one after the other and turns to begin her ascent up the spiral staircase, hyperaware of the woman on her heels. She does her best not to trip, padding quickly towards the bedroom, just out of Lexa’s reach. But as she crosses the room’s threshold a pair of strong hands slip around her waist, turning her once again so they’re face to face.

“Why your majesty, this is most untoward,” Clarke says, rather breathless at being handled so.

Lexa responds by nipping at the base of her neck, just where it curves into her shoulder. Clarke
gasps as Lexa works her way up, pausing to nose at her ear before kissing along her jaw and then switching to the other side of her neck. Lexa’s hands roam freely, slipping under her shirt, fingers teasing at the top of her waistband.

“People will talk,” Clarke manages to get out. She tries to angle her head so Lexa will kiss her on the mouth, but she continues to deliberately focus on Clarke’s throat, her jawline, the curve of her ears.

“Let them,” Lexa says, and pushes Clarke just enough to overbalance her backwards onto the mattress. She strips off her jacket in two quick jerks; Clarke whips her shirt over her head and grabs Lexa’s collar in order to yank her down.

Clarke would rather they were never separated, but hot, desperate reunion sex is something of a consolation. They’re both worked up, eager to connect, to remember how they make each other feel in ways big and small. They come together once, twice, impatiently chasing release. Patient, tender lovemaking will come later. For now, the one thing Clarke needs is to forget they were ever apart.

* * *

“When do classes start again?” Lexa asks as they eat dinner in the kitchen, still half-dressed after stumbling out of bed and an unplanned midday nap.

Clarke breaks off ogling Lexa’s flat, bare stomach and looks at her amused face. It takes a moment to remember. “Uh. September fifth.”

“I’ll still be in town,” Lexa says casually. She pokes around in her takeout container with her chopsticks. “If you thought it was appropriate, I could stop by your class. I would clear it with the university, of course. But it could be educational.”

“You can visit me at work any time,” Clarke says, deliberately acting obtuse just to catch the Lexa’s consternation as she looks up from her food. Clarke’s grin gives it away in a second and Lexa scrunches her face in what she wants to be a scowl, but is too good-natured and too cute to be anything like it. “Yes,” Clarke adds. “I would love if you would talk to my students. I’m pretty sure NYU will say yes. Just a hunch.”

Lexa seems pleased by the idea, if the way her crinkled brow smooths out is any indication, and she takes on a bit of a faraway look as they finish eating.

The rest of the evening they spend in the living room, soft music in the background as they catch each other up over the past month. Lexa finally gives her all the gossip that was too scandalous to be written down and Clarke relates her work stories and friend adventures. She’s not surprised that Wells and Lexa have kept up correspondence as well, and are currently in an argument over the symbolism of something or other in a 19th-century novel on the waterways of Markenland. Clarke honestly zones out a little bit as Lexa lays out her position and the seven ways Wells is wrong, with subsections.

“What?” Clarke says, feeling someone prod her. “You’re right, I agree.”

“I think,” Lexa says judiciously, “It’s time for bed.”

Routine comes easy again; teeth are brushed and faces washed side by side as though they do this every night, navigating the space together, bodies taking account of each other. Clarke thinks perhaps she never stopped moving through the city as though Lexa were with her, the constant subtle ache of missing her taking up the space until Lexa could fill it again. And perhaps Lexa felt the same, the way she holds Clarke that night, nose buried against the back of Clarke’s neck. She strokes
Lexa’s arm where it falls over her stomach and thinks about telling her the plan, but there are a few steps yet to take. Soon.

*

“Yes queen! It’s not every day NYU receives royalty, but Queen Lexa of Markenland - yes that Queen Lexa - popped into a poli sci lesson on campus yesterday, surprising a class of 50 freshmen. She gave a brief lecture on the state of politics in her country and then took questions for 40 minutes from the starstruck students. It wasn’t just a gesture of largesse from her majesty though; the class is taught by none other than the queen’s own girlfriend, visiting lecturer Clarke Griffin. Guess dating the queen of the country you teach about has its perks? Ms. Griffin and Queen Lexa were seen that night at Michelin-star Indian restaurant Junoon, where a source informs us they left a $200 tip on a $90 bill. Our source also said they were sitting quite close despite a certain cold royal image-”

Clarke really has to stop reading articles about her love life. And in any case she has much more important news to deal with today. She spends the rest of the bus ride with her phone off and makes her way to the penthouse with an armful of groceries. Lexa has offered to have a personal shopper take care of it, but while Clarke is at the penthouse she likes to do these things for herself. It helps her pretend like at least some part of their relationship is still normal, like any other couple. She’s just Clarke, bringing over dinner ingredients for her girlfriend. Lexa has clearly been practicing at cooking while she’s been away, producing a couple of sous vide steaks with a side of stir-fried vegetables a few nights ago. Desserts are still rocky going with her, though, and so tonight Clarke has stuck with store-bought baklava.

Lexa is in her office as usual, finishing up work, and Clarke bustles around the kitchen putting things away, humming idly to herself. She hears Lexa padding in before she feels her, two strong arms slipping around her from behind and a chin landing on her shoulder. “Hello,” she says.

“If you wait two minutes you can have me,” Clarke says, still trying to get a bag of apples into the bowl on the counter.

Another squeeze around her middle and Lexa withdraws, but just to help her with the groceries. “You’re in a good mood,” she says, watching Clarke practically sashay around the kitchen.

“It’s just nice out,” Clarke says easily. She closes the pantry and hops up on the island, pulling Lexa between her legs. “All done. Where were we?” Two fingers under Lexa’s chin tilt her head into place so Clarke can ease into a kiss, wanting nothing more than to pass the time until dinner just like this. Young and in love in the summer is a heady feeling, and it’s easy to lose themselves in the connection drawing them together.

But eventually Lexa does pull away, and Clarke does hop down to her feet, and they set to preparing food and pulling a nice bottle of wine from the rack. Lexa spends a lot of the process giving Clarke doe eyes over the stove or the chopping board or wherever she happens to be as they work through the steps of pan-roasting the fish and vegetables. In the dining room, Lexa’s foot perpetually touches Clarke, not moving much above her calf but keeping them connected. She only has a few more days left in the city, a shorter trip this time, and they’ve both been saturating themselves in touch.

“So I have something to tell you,” Clarke says over the last of their food, both of them a large glass of wine in and the lights a bit soft and hazy with it.

Lexa’s eyebrow arches minutely.

“I’ve been asking around,” Clarke says. “As it turns out, there’s no program of international relations at the University of Polis.”
The eyebrow reverses direction, slowly descending into a curious frown.

“And the president of the university was very interested in setting up a sister program with NYU,” Clarke continues, trying not to hurry to get it all out but wanting everything on the table after weeks and weeks of planning. “So next winter, they’re going to start a series of classes that could eventually lead to a new degree offering in poli sci. And I’m going to be in charge.” She pauses, waits, breath caught in the back of her throat while Lexa processes this.

“You’re going to coordinate a new program in Polis from NYU?” Lexa asks, slow and cautious, as though she doesn’t want to ask after what she thinks Clarke really means.

Clarke covers Lexa’s hand with hers, nerves still tempering her smile into a small half-grin. “Lexa, I’m moving to Markenland. I’m going to start at the university over winter break. My work visa is all set.”

It takes a blink or two for Lexa to process this, and then her answering smile is fresh sunlight breaking through clouds and she’s leaning over the corner of the table to hug Clarke long and tight. Still, when she pulls back, she scrutinizes Clarke, hands on her shoulders holding Clarke in place. “Are you sure?” she asks. “I know how much New York means to you. I can come back more often.”

Clarke pulls Lexa close again, a hand cupped around the back of her neck, urging her forward until their foreheads rest together. “I thought about this for a long time. I talked to a lot of people. And it’s what I want. I’m tired of not seeing you every day, and it’s a great job opportunity for me. I’ll be building an entire degree program from scratch.”

Lexa nods against her. “You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever known,” she says earnestly, appreciation clear in her voice.

“Just a little longer,” Clarke says. They cling to each other, a quiet charge in the air knowing now the change waiting just over the horizon for them.

“I’ve always wanted to go back to school,” Lexa says after a few breaths.

A little space between them finds Lexa grinning suggestively at her. “Why do I get the feeling you’d be a problem student?” Clarke asks.

“The role of the student is to interrogate the world around them,” Lexa says, skating perilously close smugness.

Clarke makes a skeptical sound. “You’re that student.”

“What student?” Lexa asks, smugness giving way to indignation.

Clarke affects a whiny voice. “Ms. Griffin, are you sure that the annotation on page one hundred forty-one is right? I was reading another source that contradicted this book and I just think it should be included on the curriculum-”

“I do not sound like that,” Lexa says, drawing herself up straight.

“I love you so much,” Clarke says. She places a comforting hand on Lexa’s knee under the table. “But you are a massive nerd.”

“I love you too,” Lexa says, utterly sincere, utterly charming, completely flipping Clarke’s heart with four words and the adoring look on her face.
“I’m gonna have to learn how you do that,” Clarke says. She can feel Lexa’s hand slipping over hers, turning it over so that they can lace their fingers together.

“What?”

“Stop everything with the way you make me feel.”

Clarke likes to imagine that no one else in the entire world has ever seen the way Lexa looks at her now. She’s thoughtful in interviews, commanding or stoic with her advisors. She cracks a rare joke now and then and has an understated ease when handling public appearances. But this, tonight, is uniquely for Clarke, because of Clarke. The look that says Lexa would cross half the world for her no matter how long it took, and be glad of the opportunity. The look that says Clarke made the right choice.

“You don’t have to learn how to do that,” Lexa says. She stands up, food and wine forgotten, and holds her hand out to Clarke. “You already know how.”

Clarke can’t fathom doing anything but taking Lexa’s hand and following her upstairs to the bedroom. They’ll have to clean up dinner in the morning.

*

Wells hugs her for a full minute at the airport, no easy feat with the both of them wrapped up in their bulkiest winter overcoats. The late afternoon sun sends their shadows racing away from them, but sheds hardly any warmth. Clarke honestly can’t believe how quickly this day has come, but perhaps after all those years of waiting, anything less feels like a snap of her fingers.

Her mother hugs for slightly less time, but with no less vigor. “Remember, I’ll be there in March to see you,” she says.

“We’ll keep the guest bedroom ready,” Clarke says. She grabs her rolling suitcase – the rest has been shipped to Markenland ahead of her – and leaves them both to go through security, resisting the urge to turn around and wave one last time. It would be nice to take her girlfriend’s private plane, but they both agreed it was wasteful to send it empty to New York just to pick her up. At the very least she’s flying first class; her mother insisted on buying the ticket as a going-away gift.

The TSA guy recognizes her as she walks through the body scanner, another going-away gift that she appreciates far less, and she makes politely vague noises until she can grab her bag and roll away with her head down, hoping no other gossip aficionados spot her.

It feels a little strange, buying some magazines and snacks like this just another business trip to Europe, like she’s not about to go start probably the most different chapter of her life. She spends most of the flight ignoring her reading in favor of trying to sleep, or restlessly staring through the window at the moonlit clouds scudding over the Atlantic. She dozes off a couple of hours away from Markenland airspace, and by the time she feels the grind and chunk of the plane lowering its landing gear, the half-drawn window shade is letting in a flood of morning light.

She does her best to wake up, her overtired body resisting the jolt of adrenaline from realizing how close she is to Lexa. When it was weeks and months, the days seemed to flow away, but now that she’s down to her last hour, every minute crawls. She grabs her suitcase from the overhead, shoulders her purse, and practically dashes off the plane as soon as the hatch opens up to the jetway.

What Clarke isn’t expecting is the double-takes from so many people in the airport. She was just about a C-list celebrity in New York, though it faded as the months went on and she and Lexa didn’t
do much but walk around looking disgustingly enchanted by each other (Raven’s words, not hers). Here, it seems like every third or fourth person cranes their neck as she passes and she begins to think again that the private plane would have been the better, if less environmentally-friendly, option. She barely even notices the stylish, modern architecture around her, part of the rebuilding of Markenland’s tourism industry, just trying to make it through the airport without attracting any attention.

And then her heart temporarily freezes inside of her chest as she emerges into the arrivals area and clocks who’s waiting for her. Front and center, dressed in an unassuming grey suit with her arms loosely folded, is Anya. No sign needed; Clarke picked her out of the milling traffic like seeing a fox in a hen house.

“This is a nice surprise,” Clarke says, trying for sincerity. Anya is one of Lexa’s chief advisors, but more than that, she’s Lexa’s closest friend. Clarke knows she and Anya will never banter and argue and write each other like Lexa and Wells, but if Clarke is in Lexa’s life for the long haul, then Anya is in hers.

Anya rolls her eyes. “Don’t lie, Ms. Griffin. It doesn’t suit you.” She turns and walks off, even her very footsteps managing to click authoritatively on the floor.

Clarke does her best to keep up, suitcase rolling along behind her, occasionally banging into other people’s luggage in her haste. She tries to send apologetic glances over her shoulder, “sorry, sorry” in Markish trailing after her like breadcrumbs.

Anya is parked directly in front of the nearest exit, a rather ashen-looking police officer standing guard by the car despite the large “no parking, pick up and drop off only” sign nearby. She opens the back door, gesturing roughly with one hand. Clarke shoves her suitcase in and follows, getting seated and buckled in while Anya moves around to the front. “I thought,” Anya says, adjusting her mirrors before pulling out into traffic, “We could take this time to talk. One on one. No interruptions.”

“Ask me anything,” Clarke says in Markish.

Anya makes a face that Clarke catches in the rearview, probably by design. “Your accent is better,” she concedes. “But let’s just accept for the moment my English is better. I don’t want any translation errors.”

“Fine,” Clarke says, hiding her slight relief. Despite intense study and regular conversations with Lexa, she’s still not confident in her fluency, and she has a feeling specificity could be important here. She sits back, waiting for Anya to make her opening move. But Anya is silent for the next few minutes, content to stay with the flow of traffic and let the pressure mount, and Clarke is reminded that this woman controls the domestic intelligence apparatus of the entire country. Yet here she is, picking up her friend’s girlfriend from the airport. If it were simply a matter of security, Gustus would have come. Despite the interrogation tactics, it reassures Clarke somewhat to know that Anya is just looking out for Lexa, the same way Wells looked out for her.

“I’ve never seen Lexa this excited before,” Anya says eventually. “Not even when she first came up with the idea for the election.”

Clarke wants to feel flattered, but this is Anya, who is undoubtedly leading her right towards a hurt her and you’ll end up in a cell in the bottom of a dark hole threat. “We’ve both waited a long time for this,” Clarke says evenly.

“There’s a reason Lexa doesn’t get excited often. She’s always had to stay calm in order to make the
right choice for the country. She doesn’t let herself feel things the same way other people feel things.” Anya’s voice is flat, but with something like regret peeking around the edges. Another few moments of silence in the car. They’re starting to approach the edges of the city, though they won’t enter it proper, instead skirting around it as they head to the family manor in the royal district. Clarke has never been to the manor and she’s curious to see Lexa in her childhood home.

“You make Lexa happy,” Anya says, startling Clarke with her abruptness and with the words themselves. “I never thought she would get to be happy. Not the way everyone else gets to be happy.”

“She makes me happy too,” Clarke says. She doesn’t really know what else to say to that anyway.

“Good,” Anya says. Once again, her eyes lock on to Clarke’s in the mirror, each one like a dagger pointed at Clarke’s jugular. “Keep it that way.”

The threat has the rather perverse effect of making Clarke feel more at ease. She doesn’t know how to handle sincere, grateful Anya. Mean and scary Anya is much more familiar. “I missed you too,” Clarke says, earning her a smirk and a peaceful car ride the rest of the way.

Arriving at the manor is much different than when Gustus first brought her to the palace, all those years ago. There’s no search, no distantly polite aide, no confusion over why she’s there and who to ask for help. The car tires transition from asphalt to a well-maintained dirt road that winds deep into the forest, where sunlight has to turn sideways to slip through the gaps in the trees. Then they emerge into a clearing dominated by a house built of thick, dark timber, two stories high, a couple of chimneys poking from the roof. The main body of the house expands sideways on both sides with what look like later additions, judging from the weathering. A small grassy lawn fronts the house, eventually blending back into the surrounding forest. Things are wilder here, less manicured than the palace, and Clarke can see why Lexa would prefer it on top of the additional privacy. Two guards are posted on either side of the heavy front door, mounted with an imposing brass knocker in the shape of some kind of bird of prey, the ring dangling from its curved beak.

Anya doesn’t open the car door or help her with her bag, just watches as she gets out of the back seat.

“Thanks for the ride,” Clarke says.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Anya says, and Clarke has no doubt she means it literally. The car peels away as soon as Clarke reaches the first step leading up to the porch.

The door swings open before Clarke can reach for the knob or tap the knocker, revealing Gustus in all his suited bulk. “Ms. Griffin,” he says. “I hope you had a good journey.”

She has her suspicions about how Anya arranged to pick her up the airport in the first place, but she keeps them to herself. It’s clear the people around Lexa love her in their own ways. Gustus steps aside to let her in, taking her suitcase as she does so, though now out of politeness rather than to drag all her belongings through a thorough search. “She’s upstairs,” he says.

Clarke tries not to hurry, but there’s no point in hiding how eager she is. This is the last time they’ll ever have to wait, or so she hopes. She walks in the direction Gus indicates with a tilt of his head, the foyer opening up into an airy great room that extends up through the second story. Hewn wooden beams span overhead, while the polished wood floor is warm underfoot from the sun streaming through the windows and a sliding glass door leading to a back porch and a much larger clearing.
Clarke spots the staircase off to the left side, but before she can do much more than start across the room, a patter of bare feet turns into a hastening, rhythmic thump. Lexa lands on the ground floor, one hand on the banister holding her steady. “Clarke,” she says.

They’re drawn together, colliding in the center of the room in a hug, sunlight falling brightly on them. Clarke holds on as tightly as she can, arms squeezing so hard she thinks they might be sore in the morning. “Hi,” she says into Lexa’s shoulder.

“Hi,” Lexa says.

“Did you miss me?” Clarke asks, and Lexa laughs against her, the gentle heave of her body against Clarke’s a happy, steady reminder that they made it.
As flights go, it hasn’t been a bad one. Lexa spent most of it reading and trying to make sure Clarke didn’t sleep too much so they could both go to bed at the right time and get a head start on beating their jet lag. Not that a nap ever prevented Clarke from getting a full eight hours later that night; Lexa has found her curled up all over the manor in various patches of light, and once even at the kitchen island because Clarke insisted the baking bread smell lulled her into sleep. Lexa’s personal favorite is when they nap together in a hammock outside, although it’s far too cold now for that. It was an idyllic summer for both of them, Lexa touring Clarke around the countryside to show her all the beautiful hidden places she used to visit as a child. Clarke particularly enjoyed the lake house, with its private dock and stargazing uninhibited by light pollution.

New York greets them with a blast of snowy wind as soon as they step off the plane. Lexa raises her scarf over her nose and mouth, taking the steps down to the tarmac one at a time, conscious of Clarke behind her in case she slips. Clarke, New Yorker through and through, is fine on the stairs and lands next to Lexa, hand automatically finding hers as they walk to the waiting car.

The drive into the city is long enough and warm enough for Lexa to be drowsy by the time they pull into the underground garage, and Clarke carries most of their luggage on the elevator up. “Come on,” she says, helping Lexa get undressed in the bedroom, pulling off her pants while Lexa manages her shirt. By their body clocks, it’s early morning in Markenland, and all Lexa wants is to be snuggled in with Clarke. She doesn’t even brush her teeth or wash her face, simply burrowing under the covers while Clarke putters around in the bathroom. She’s half asleep already by the time Clarke slides in next to her, and the world fades away to just the two of them, wrapped up in a warm den while winter settles over the city outside.

*

“You’re gonna be great,” Clarke says, once again tugging at the lapels of Lexa’s suit.

“Thank you,” Lexa says, once again letting Clarke fiddle with her outfit.

As usual, Clarke is more nervous for her than she is for herself. Perhaps having most fear scared out of her as a child wasn’t ideal, but it certainly comes in handy as an adult. At least now it’s amusing, and she secretly loves having Clarke fuss over her. Perhaps not-so-secretly, if the way Clarke is looking reprovingly at her is any indication. She uses both palms in one final gesture to flatten the front of Lexa’s jacket and pulls away. But her left hand returns and slides down Lexa’s forearm to clasp her hand, so they can stay connected in the shadows between the curtains, just offstage.

A few meters away, the dean of NYU is at the podium while the very full Skirball Center listens to her introduction. “And of course who can forget the iconic meeting of queens in London,” she says, sending up a titter as the projection screen overhead shows Lexa shaking hands with Beyoncé, the latter still in her costume from the stage, the former in her usual dark suit.

“I transitioned an entire country to a constitutional monarchy and that gets a reaction?” Lexa grumbles quietly, so only Clarke can hear.

“You still haven’t introduced me to her,” Clarke responds primly.
“I don’t have her phone number, Clarke, it was just a charity concert—”

Clarke’s unconvinced look ends her protest. Perhaps Anya can find a way. Moments later an usher is with them, an arm held out towards the stage as the dean completes her introduction. One last squeeze of the hand from Clarke, and then Lexa walks confidently onstage, feeling the instant heat of the stage lights, hearing the hundreds of creaking chairs as the audience stands up to applaud her entrance. She shakes hands with the dean and stands center stage, waiting for the applause to subside.

Lexa is mic’d up so she forgoes the podium, moving around the stage to deliver her lecture - part one in a series of four, eagerly arranged by NYU when Clarke mentioned she and Lexa would be spending winter break Stateside and perhaps they would like to have a high profile guest. Unfamiliar as she is with American academia, Lexa still knows Clarke has made herself indispensable to the university with rather alarming speed. Someone who doesn’t know Clarke might say that she traded on her famous girlfriend’s name, but Lexa’s not sure anyone else could have really leveraged it the way Clarke has. It’s good for Lexa too, enhancing her image as an intellectual interested in higher education while laying the groundwork for further diplomatic relations. All Clarke’s doing; Lexa wonders that she never ran for office herself.

The lecture is about forty minutes, with twenty minutes for questions at the end. Most of them are serious; poli sci majors and grad students were given first preference when signing up, with the remainder going in a lottery system to the rest of the student body. The series is also being livestreamed for students in Polis, soon to be a sister university to NYU. But at the end, a girl who can’t be more than twenty approaches the mic in the aisle and introduces herself as a sophomore.

“Thank you for visiting our university,” she says with a nervous smile. “Um, my question is…are you wearing an engagement ring?”

The auditorium breaks out in murmurs. Lexa looks down at her left hand, which is currently fiddling with the front button of her suit jacket. Plainly visible is the platinum band on her ring finger, glinting in the spotlight. “Ah,” she says. A glance to her right, where Clarke is laughing at her from the wings. “Yes, it is an engagement ring.”

A few “ooohs” from the audience, while the girl at the mic appears to be slowly turning red, although it’s hard to tell in the artificial pool of darkness created by the contrast between the stage lights and the seating.

“Congratulations,” the girl says faintly, returning to a small cluster of friends who look to excitedly grab onto her. Every other person in the auditorium is already typing on their phone.

“I’m afraid that’s all the time we have for questions,” says the dean, returning to the podium. “This lecture will be archived soon for you to rewatch, and please remember that part two will be next Tuesday at four PM. I would like to thank our guest, Queen Lexa of Markenland.” She claps lightly, the audience responding in turn and standing to applaud once again. Lexa pauses to sweep the room with a wave and exits stage left, where Clarke is still laughing at her, and the dean follows, making apologetic noises over the question.

“It’s quite all right,” Lexa says. “We knew someone would notice sooner or later.” Next to her, Clarke laces their fingers together, still looking far too amused. They both still resent intrusions into their privacy, but this was inevitable, and Lexa suspects that Clarke actually enjoys the general public knowing that Lexa is very much taken now.

“Well,” says the dean, apologies replaced with a smile. “Congratulations.”
“Thank you,” says Clarke, pulling Lexa closer so she can slide an arm around her waist. “It’s pretty new. Of all the ways for people to find out, this is probably one of the better ones.”

“When’s the wedding?” asks the dean.

“That is…under discussion,” Lexa says, not quite up to explaining the current internal commotion over a royal wedding, and to a foreigner no less.

The dean seems to take the hint and escorts them to the little informal reception, where Lexa is introduced around to more NYU faculty, shaking hands, memorizing names and faces, making polite conversation. Clarke stays close to her side, accepting congratulations for both of them, occasionally feeding her the odd canapé or piece of fruit. Lexa likes watching as she describes the program taking shape under her careful guidance at the University of Polis, how the impressed faces around her react to her enthusiasm, her sheer intelligence.

"Polis is beautiful," Clarke says, describing the palace in the city where they stay during the semester. It's one of Lexa's favorite buildings, close to both the university and the parliament house, with all the comfort and not nearly as many bad memories as the family palace in the forest. Their fall schedule was the closest Lexa ever thinks she's gotten to regular domesticity, with Clarke leaving in the morning to teach and returning in the early evening, the two of them discussing whatever problem with unruly students or politicians, making dinner, and enjoying each other's company until bed.

There are plenty of questions for Lexa as well, surrounded as she is by fine political minds, and she eventually falls into a long discussion with another professor about Markenland's tariff system, at which point Clarke has to make their excuses and hustle the two of them out of there.

Once in the privacy of the car, Clarke slumps into her seat in exaggerated relief. “You were right,” she admits.

Lexa pulls Clarke’s legs onto her lap, massaging her calves. “Was I?”

A nudge from Clarke’s foot into her ribs. “It was more fun this way.”

Lexa stills her movement with a squeeze along the arch of Clarke’s foot. “I’m sorry it had to be public at all. But we might as well enjoy it while we can.”

Clarke holds out her left hand, fingers flared to expose the rather extravagant emerald Lexa gave her a week ago. “I like not having to remember to take my ring off every time we go outside. I’m definitely enjoying it.” She snuggles down a bit, enjoying the attention from Lexa. “The best part is no paparazzi allowed in the lecture, so the first image of you with a ring will be completely free from the livestream.”

Lexa continues massaging, enjoying the solitude and Clarke’s satisfied good mood at having, for once, gotten the jump on the American tabloids. Private life in Markenland is much easier; there’s still a lot of rather fearful respect for the royal family, and they have much stricter libel laws. Clarke is far more recognized when she goes out in Polis, but at the same time she’s less bothered, with only the rare overly-bold citizen asking for a picture. But they both wanted to spend some time in New York after nearly a year away; Lexa knows how Clarke has missed the city, and the people who live here.

“You biiiiitch,” says Raven as soon as they enter the private room at the restaurant they picked for dinner. She hugs Clarke and then Lexa, who hadn’t quite realized they were at the hugging stage yet, but figures an engagement dinner is as good a time as any to start. “If you hadn’t told us already I
would’ve been so mad at finding out about your engagement like that.”

“That’s one hundred percent why we did it that way,” says Clarke, following Raven to the table, where Wells, Octavia, and her mother are waiting. Wells hugs Lexa too, although she’s more prepared for it from him. Aside from Clarke, he might be her closest friend outside of the palace. At the very least, she considers him a peer. From Abby Griffin, a far more cautious embrace, basically the equivalent of a handshake anyway. Abby has warmed to her somewhat, especially after a vacation in Markenland over the summer, but Lexa suspects they’ll never be close. As long as it doesn’t matter to Clarke, she finds the arrangement acceptable.

“Show me the ring,” says Octavia, who has heard about the proposal – a romantic moonlit walk in the palace gardens and a very serious conversation in the grotto where it all began – but this is the first they’ll have any tangible proof. Clarke holds out her hand and the others crowd around it, making admiring noises.

“It’s lovely,” says Abby.

“The engraving is incredible,” says Wells, still turning Clarke’s hand this way and that to try and catch the ring at different angles in the light.

“It was my mother’s,” Lexa says. “And my grandmother’s before that. It’s been passed down in our family for a few generations.”

“Oh wow. Does this date back to the post-war cultural expansion when France-” Wells stops at the look on Clarke’s face and releases her hand. “Right, all about you tonight.” But Lexa catches his eye and gives him a little nod of confirmation; they’ll definitely be discussing the history behind the ring later.

Dinner lasts for several hours and just as many bottles of wine, ending in a happy toast led by Wells, whom Clarke is insisting on as her best man, adding to the wrinkles in the wedding planning from her etiquette-bound social secretary. But after years of balancing modern with traditional within Lexa’s administration, she’s fairly certain Sela will manage in the end.

“I’m so happy for you both,” says Abby as they make their goodbyes. She rearranges Clarke’s scarf a few times, a mother fussing over her child. “We’ll have dinner again next week at my place?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” says Clarke, going in for one last hug while Wells and Lexa make their own plans to discuss the latest book they read together, this time a pick by Wells from American literature as an exemplar of Depression-era writing. They’ll be comparing it to writing from Markenland’s own economic slump around the same time.

And then they’re driving home, all aglow with the good food and drink and company.

“Did you ever think,” Clarke says, holding her hand across the car seat, “That we would be here?”

“New York?” Lexa asks. “I knew we would come back eventually.”

“No, like. Here. With our life together figured out. Engaged.”

Lexa is quiet for a moment, watching the muted lights through the tinted windows. “Did I know? No. For a time I had my doubts, just like you.”

Clarke makes a sympathetic face, but doesn’t interrupt. They’ve made their peace with their struggles; they have problems enough without rehashing the years they were apart.
“But did I think of a day like today?” Lexa leans over, cupping Clarke’s cheek with the palm of her hand. She offers up a soft kiss, lingering gently with her eyes closed. “Yes. Almost from the moment I met you, I thought about who we might be when our lives were our own.”

“Liar,” Clarke says, smiling against her mouth. “You thought I was trouble the first time you met me.”

“You still are.”

Clarke’s only response to that is another kiss, one that lasts as the car continues on through the streets of New York.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who stuck with this story, even through the long wait for the final chapters. Feel free to yell at me about Lexa’s failure to introduce Clarke to Beyonce at badlance.

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