

FAIR HARBOR'S ANNUAL PICNIC BASKET AUCTION

The picnic basket failed to move when Avalon lazily attempted to lift it. She paused, surprised, and hefted the thing with two hands on her second try. What had Lyra filled this thing with?

Avalon swung the basket into the trunk of her car, a brand-new green crossover she could not stop Elden from buying for her.

“Hey! Let me do that!” Elden hurried over from inside the Refuge on the Moor, long legs stretching as far as they could go in his haste.

Avalon sighed, but wasn’t actually annoyed. Although, if Elden didn’t stop leaping to her rescue every time she had to lift something over ten pounds, people were going to think he’d knocked her up. “It’s already done.” Avalon moved aside so her boyfriend could place blankets and a cooler full of drinks alongside the basket. *Boyfriend*. That term was still wild to her—Elden did not seem like a “boyfriend”. He seemed like a “husband” or nothing. Her cheeks turned pink just thinking about it.

“You shouldn’t be lifting that. I saw Lyra packing it this morning. There’s enough food to feed an army in there.”

Elden leaned against her car, eyeing her obviously. Avalon looked away from his pleased stare. She was embarrassed enough already.

“I’ve never seen you in...pastels.”

“Well, this auction thing seems very small town. I wanted to fit in.” She smoothed her pale blue skirt nervously.

“I like it,” he announced, and added with an equal amount of seriousness, “I *also* like those scary band t-shirts you wear, though I can’t say the music appeals to me.”

“And I like the t-shirt you’re wearing right now.” She touched the sleeve at his wrist and pushed it halfway up his forearm. “Keep it like that, please.” He so rarely wore human clothing—Avalon had to take advantage when she could.

“I swear I didn’t throw this in the dryer, but it shrunk anyway.” Elden scowled as he pulled at the tight material. The shirt was black with a red logo of two crossed firefighter axes and the words “Fair Harbor Volunteer Fire Department”.

“That’s so strange.” It wasn’t. Avalon had thrown the shirt in the dryer herself and put it on the hottest setting. The effect of the cotton stretching tightly across Elden’s chest and arms was very distracting. If only the ladies of Fair Harbor could know what she had done for them.

Lyra came bounding from the inn’s kitchens, her smile wide and mischievous. Her long, dark hair was woven into a single plait, flowers poking out of it sporadically. “Let’s go! I can’t wait to crush everyone else’s picnic baskets. I hope someone cries.”

“Once again,” Elden sighed, “this is not a competition. This is a charity auction.”

“How does this work again?” Avalon settled herself in the driver’s seat, checking the cash in her purse for the auction before starting up the vehicle. Elden sat next to her, and Lyra climbed into the back. The twins, Tahoma and Kenan, were going to meet them at the auction.

“Everyone in the fire department makes a basket, and the town bids on them. Whatever basket you win, you and the basket’s owner have a picnic together.”

“And this is the first year Elden’s ever participated in,” Lyra said, her town sharp. “For years, my skills have been wasted!”

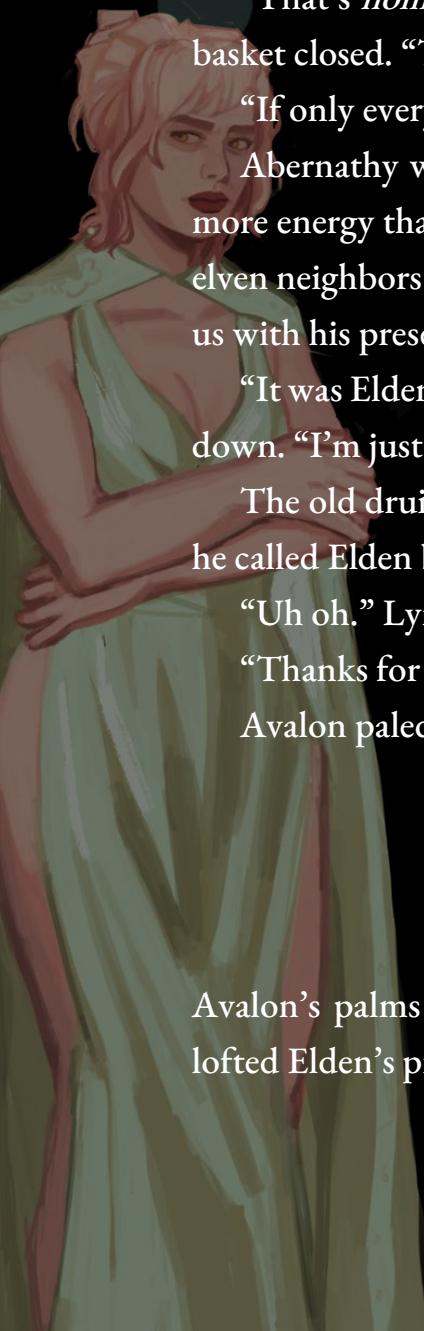
“Half the town is Abernathys, and they can see through my glamour. And the other half of the town somehow also knows I’m fey.” Elden crossed his arms. “Arawn help me, I’m about to rip out of this. Anyway, I have no desire to attend such an event with a town that must be terrified of me.”

“I’m sure Nora Lee would have bid on your basket,” Avalon said gently. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m here, *and* I brought cash.”

“Does the basket that earns the most money win a trophy or a ribbon?” Lyra poked Elden in the shoulder as they drove into Fair Harbor, a small coastal town set in western Washington. “Maybe a gift certificate?”

“I don’t feel that’s the right spirit for this.”





There were only a few hundred people living in Fair Harbor, and Avalon thought every single one was jammed in the city park. There were a few folding tables stacked high with baskets, and she watched Elden head in that direction with his. A lemonade stand sat brightly on her left, and to her right was a woman selling punch whose alcohol content she could smell from where she was standing.

The rest of the crowd milled about, waiting for the auction to begin.

Tahoma caught Avalon's arm, dragging her over to where Kenan and Lyra were chatting. The twins wore shirts that matched Elden's. Kenan showed Avalon his basket and its contents.

Avalon was not impressed. "A sixpack and some jerky?"

"That's *homemade* elk jerky." Kenan defended it and then snapped the lid to his basket closed. "The right woman will recognize its worth."

"If only every woman in town didn't already know you," his sister laughed.

Abernathy walked over, smiling and greeting town members along his way with more energy than a man his age, whatever age that even was, should have. "Hello, my elven neighbors. I'm guessing the newest fair one is who convinced the prince to *grace* us with his presence."

"It was Elden's idea," Avalon shrugged, pointing at Elden and the basket he just set down. "I'm just here with my wallet and an empty stomach Lyra's about to fill."

The old druid's eyes widened. "The *chef*made Elden's basket?" In his excitement, he called Elden by his actual name.

"Uh oh." Lyra shifted from foot to foot.

"Thanks for the tip," Abernathy chuckled, slipping back into the crowd.

Avalon paled. "No one tell Elden."



Avalon's palms were already sweating when the auctioneer, after a strained grunt, lofted Elden's picnic basket into the air. "Let's start the bidding on basket number 11

with—dear gods, that smells good—twenty dollars!”

Avalon waved her hand in the air as Abernathy, just as she feared, shouted, “Forty!”

Elden blinked, his hand on her waist giving her an involuntary squeeze. He stared at the druid as Avalon yelled, “Fifty!”

“Why is *Abernathy* bidding on *my* basket?” Elden asked, his voice loud enough that he drew the attention of the townspeople around him.

Her bid was topped again. Avalon waved a hundred-dollar bill frantically.

Elden snapped. “Abernathy! That’s *my* basket! Stop bidding on it, dammit!”

Lyra whispered, revealing Avalon’s mistake, “Elden, he knows that I made it.”

“WHAT?”

Avalon held every dollar she had in the air. “Two hundred!”

The auctioneer even paused. “Are you sure—”

“Two hundred dollars, and...” Abernathy paused to count. “Twelve dollars and seven cents!”

The auctioneer glanced at Avalon, shaking his head as she tried to remove her earrings for payment. “Sorry, miss. Sold to Mr. Abernathy for whatever the hell he just said!”

Ignoring the rest of the auction, Elden stormed over to Abernathy and his smug grin. Avalon followed along, praying she could prevent Elden from freezing the old man on sight.

Elden had no longer any control over his volume. “That basket was for Avalon and I!”

Abernathy shrugged, and Avalon knew he was barely holding back his laughter. “Should have brought more cash, your highness.”

“I’m not going on a date with you!”

“Listen, elf, I couldn’t pass up on a basket made by that lovely chef of yours. And relax. It’ll be just like one of those Daddy-Daughter dates.”

“Stop calling yourself my daddy.” His words caught Elden off-guard.

“Well, did that frozen elf-king ever teach you how to change your oil? Who taught you how to shave?”

“That doesn’t make you—”

“I don’t have any sons, elf. Can’t you spare a few minutes to eat with an old man?”

“Don’t give me that old man routine. I saw you throwing hay three days ago.”

Elden’s tone was harsh, but Avalon could see his temper was dying down. Gods, Abernathy had Elden right where he wanted him. But Avalon couldn’t bring herself to stop the old man’s victory. Even if that meant she missed out on the lunch of a lifetime.

Tahoma elbowed her in the side. “Bid on my basket. It’s filled with leftovers I stole from the inn.”

Avalon snuck away, following at Tahoma’s heels.



Avalon won Tahoma’s basket, and she, Tahoma, and Lyra settled underneath a large, shady tree. The park was filled with families and couples, all eagerly cracking open their own hard-won baskets. Elden and Abernathy were seated at a picnic table twenty feet away—Elden shot Avalon a longing glance every five minutes until Abernathy smacked him with his hat.

Lyra took a very large and unladylike gulp of the wine bottle Tahoma had shoved in her picnic basket. She passed it over to Avalon to do the same.

Emboldened by the alcohol, Avalon asked Tahoma something she’d been wondering for months. “Did you ever answer any of Jin’s disturbingly bloodthirsty love letters to you?”

“No, I made Elden tell him I wasn’t interested in being kidnapped to the fey realm. I don’t even think they have modern plumbing.” Tahoma was lying on her stomach, her feet in the air. “And, it turns out, Jin was just trying to, in a very weird and oddly romantic way, recruit me into the Unseelie army.”

“Disappointed?” Lyra teased.

“Relieved. I couldn’t live in the fey realm, despite my blood. I’m not about to wipe

my ass with an enchanted flower.”

Avalon howled with laughter as Lyra sniped, “We don’t do that!”

“Sure, sure.” Tahoma snickered. “We need to have girl dates more often.”

“Yes! You!” Lyra pointed sharply at Avalon. “You and Elden spend every waking second together. You’d think you were a pair of nymphs with the way you’re acting!”

Avalon shrugged, stealing another drink. “I’m sure we’ll slow down in a century or two. But, yes, you’re right. We *should* do girl dates more often.”



“I was supposed to go on a date with a pretty girl in a skimpy sundress,” Elden snarled, snatching the last biscuit out of Abernathy’s hand. “Not with a mustached man in overalls.”

“I think I’ll get over the guilt.” Abernathy dug through their basket once more, pulling out the dessert tray nestled inside. “You know I don’t like macadamia nuts.”

“This wasn’t made for you!”

Abernathy shrugged, continuing to eat. “I can tell.” He handed Elden a wrapped sandwich. “Now, stop pouting and enjoy yourself. Your pretty girl is having a good time without you. You don’t want to ruin that with that scowl, do you?”

“I’m going to get you back for this, Abernathy,” Elden promised, his voice comically low.

The druid simply grunted. “Don’t try that with me, boy. I dated your mother. Now, *she* was terrifying.”

“I wish you’d quit bringing that up.”

“When it stops pissing you off, I will.” Abernathy considered Elden as he chewed. “Does this mean you’re going to participate in the fire station’s calendar this year?”

“This list of things that I would rather do than take my shirt off and get oiled up for a calendar shoot is *very* extensive.”

“Avalon already signed you up. Bring your own oil.”

