



# The Trouble With Trying to Hook a Harbinger (Murder Sprees and Mute Decrees Book 4)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Romily:

Welcome back to Will-They-Won't-They? The Engagement: The Foxily Edition. That's the name of the show that I'm planning to pitch to a producer that's based on my life. Will Fox ever give me a ring? Who knows! I don't, and I don't think Fox does either. If the rock currently sitting not-on-my-finger is any indication, we might be doomed.

In the meantime, let me introduce to you my new best friend: a cherub. (Are we surprised by this turn of events? No. I flipping love cherubs.) Akile Aristide walks into my life, declares that I'm his bestie, and then flips the world on its three way axis. What's a Harbinger to do except announce, "Incoming!" and hope everyone's buckled in?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

The portal from Santanos's basement leads directly into his suite in the Palace of the Crescent Moon, where his parents live. Not sure why he has a portal into his old closet, if this room the size of a small house can be called a closet.

Oh wait, I just jumped right in, didn't I?

Ok, quick recap: I, Romily Butcher, fell hard for Arlington Fox, we adopted Bellamy Jones, saved some cherubs, Bellamy was abducted and tortured for a few hundred years, we adopted Edovard Folange (aka, Pupper), he mated Santanos, the Avatar of Evil and a prince of Hell, whereupon we learned my pupper is basically a snack for Santanos's parents, so we're here to kill them.

Edovard also decided to keep Santanos's bodyguards, Gregory and Hassan, so now we have seven people in the Foxily family. Well, and apparently we're counting Darcy Hellspinner as a distant cousin or something. (He's the tracker that Bellamy had a one-sided crush on, who's kinda unlikable but also kinda my people.)

Yep, those are the important plot points, I think. There are side characters we're keeping track of like a Luna wolf named Tala, a guy in my contacts nicknamed DB Cooper who stole Dakota's phone right out of his pocket while Dakota was talking to him (Dakota talks to a lot of people and has no idea when his phone went missing), and Edovard is keeping tabs on the assassin that Santanos hired to replace Bellamy, Gaanbatar Batbayar, because he thinks the man is supposed to be part of our family. I'm all for stealing another one of Santanos's assassins, so I'm just waiting for the opportunity.

Anything else I'm missing? If so, I'm blaming Gregory because he has a blamable

face. If you need a reminder of who's who, there's a character sheet around here somewhere that you can reference. Check the TOC.

Anyway, back to why we're in Hell: Santanos thinks it's safest to not take any chances on his parents behaving, so here we are. In his closet. Where he has an abundance of clothes.

Oooh, I figured it out. He has a portal from his mansion on Earth to his closet in Hell so he has access to his wardrobe without having to move it into his house nor alert his parents of his presence every time he needs to grab a shirt. Obviously.

Hmmm. We're about the same size, I wonder...

Do you think Santanos would notice if some of his clothes made their way into my closet?

I send that text to my future husband, my eldest son, and begrudgingly include Darcy in the text thread. For an unfathomable reason, I keep ending up with this tiny Arkansan twink of Asian descent in my circle, and sometimes I think I might learn to like him, but then he opens his mouth, something crass comes out of it, and I remember why I keep him at arm's length. Well, in his case, it's at dick length, because he's got a flagpole between his legs; yes, I have seen it, and yes, it is impressive.

Darcy starts grabbing clothes and chucking them through the portal indiscriminately, cackling like a mad man. "We won't have time to grab them on the way out, so might as well collect them before we assassinate the queen and prince."

Actually, he's probably right, so I start picking out clothes too, tossing them through. My Fox, being the amazing man he is, also grabs some clothes and tosses them through the portal. His choices are sexier than mine, but that's to be expected; he

likes decorating me.

Oh. That's right. I failed to mention the most important part of the recap.

Fox hasn't presented me with my huge diamond ring yet. Apparently something happened to it, and I haven't had the time, opportunity, or nerve to corner him and get the answer out of him. Bellamy knows, though.

Maybe I should focus my efforts on my son instead of my lover?

Food for thought.

When about half the hangers on the bar are empty, I snap my fingers and point to the door, satisfied with my haul. I don't have space for the amount of clothes we confiscated, but I can cull them when we close the portal after our daring escape from Hell. I assume it's going to be daring. I mean, it's about as likely as us walking home unimpeded. With a partner like Fox, life keeps me on my toes.

Fox finishes tossing a sheer something through the portal and comes to my side, sliding his arm around my shoulders and walking with me to the door. Bellamy joins us behind and Darcy skips ahead, cackling under his breath.

"I've been wanting to do this for years."

His comment doesn't seem to be directed at anyone in particular, but I glance at the man, curiously. In this world, age is literally just a number that can be as meaningless as a person's shoe size. I've seen a teenage cherub several hundred years old revert back to infancy. Darcy's desire to kill Lilith and Bacchus having a multi-year history is only surprising because he looks like he's about my age. Which is ridiculous to think since he and Bellamy have known each other for a decade, and I'm twenty-one... so unless Bellamy was hanging out with an eleven year old, Darcy is older

than he looks.

How old are you?

I shoot that text into the group message, and everyone checks their brand new smart watches that we bought to free up their hands from having to hold their phones.

“A gentleman wouldn’t ask, but since we’re talking about you...” Darcy snarks, eliciting a warning growl from Fox.

Honestly, I’m not sure who would win in a fight between those two. Darcy’s a one-punch man for violence when he’s feeling merciful, and a volcano monster when he’s feeling mean. Fox, on the other hand, is actually immortal and very, very good at killing people.

Have you ever died by a single punch or volcano monster magic?

Bellamy groans behind me. “Why? Why did you ask that? You realize now Oppa is going to make Darcy kill me.”

I suppose it’s important to remind everyone that my son is newly immortal, but that only makes him immune to deaths he’s already died. Fox is set on immunizing him from as many ways to die as possible as quickly as he can.

Darcy snorts. “He can’t make me do anything. I won’t kill you unless you ask, Red. What happens between us happens with enthusiastic consent or not at all.”

“Would you prefer another fire-dancing hearth witch slash jinn kill him?” Fox asks, stopping Darcy at the bedroom door with a hand on it to prevent him from opening it.

Darcy glowers at him. “I prefer he stay alive and his ward active. Since he’s had

hundreds of years to recover from the nutmeg poisoning you let happen to him, and since I am almost certainly the only one of my kind, I'm content with risking it."

"That's not—" Bellamy interjects. "You know what, let's shelve this discussion forever or at least until we're not in the middle of a mission, shall we?"

I still want to know how old Darcy is.

Bellamy gestures at Darcy as if to say, "Just fucking tell him," but of course my proper child would never cuss like that.

The lies parents tell themselves, amiright?

Darcy rolls his eyes and knocks Fox's hand off the door. "I'm older than Fox, but not as old as his fathers, and I'm not sure where I fall between them. Can we go kill Lilith now?"

So basically old enough to really dig in with his grudges and ferment them like a dark lager.

(I'm trying something new with my descriptions. It might not take; it might be the best thing since the tech upgrade that lets me text my family on their smart watches—we're going to find out together.)

Fox pulls his sword out in response, Bellamy does the same, and Darcy opens the door. I follow them out into the hall. I'm not here to fight, nor am I announcing Fox's imminent arrival; I'm here purely as decoration. Window dressing, so to speak. I'm the pretty thing Fox gets to look at when he needs motivation to continue fighting. Plus I just love watching the man work, and I genuinely need to see the threat to Edovard dead.

Lately I've been unsettled, and I've recently realized it's because when I was homeless and living out of a backpack, I had very little to lose that I couldn't replace within a few days. Don't get me wrong, I got extremely attached to that backpack of things, but my survival instincts knew if I lost it, I wouldn't have lost much. Now, I have too many things that would destroy me to lose, and as a result I'm struggling with my emotional balance.

I've decided to embrace the need to see the people that matter to me safe. Hence accompanying Fox on a mission to kill the threats against Edovard before they make themselves a problem. I know my future husband will do whatever it takes to keep our family safe, because I witnessed the lengths he went to for Bellamy when a mysterious cult abducted him.

First, they paid a cherub to poison Bellamy's magical bonds with nutmeg overdosing, then they put a contract out for him, and Tala the Luna wolf abducted him, then Jaime Gordon (one of the evil councilors on the council that runs the supernatural world) tortured him for no discernable reason other than he's evil, and then the cult nailed him to the ceiling of the prison for supernatural criminals for more unfathomable reasons.

We rescued him, of course, but during the course of finding him, Fox spent his one chance to make someone immortal to turn Bellamy immortal. That coin he spent was meant for his mate so that Fox would have a companion through eternity, and he spent it on our Bellamy. It's comforting to know the lengths he'll go for the people he loves.

Yes, yes, I'm his mate, and it was meant to be for me, but Fox assures me that we don't need a coin to turn me immortal; I'll be joining Team Immortal the same way his human father did. I don't know—it involves a family ritual, and they have to save up their power or something to do it. They're working on it.

We're still looking into the whole thing with Bellamy, but honestly there just aren't a lot of leads that we haven't already interrogated and killed. I figure we'll eventually meet those fuckers again, and this time we won't have to make a huge example of them before we get real answers.

Anyway, back to the current mission: kill the queen of Hell and her consort.

I don't know why I thought palaces should be quiet and cavernous, but my biases are clearly misinformed because this place is hopping. As we step out of Santanos' bedroom, we nearly run into a whole group of demons dressed in those ridiculous maid costumes that every Halloween store has in stock for anyone wanting to sex up their celebrations. The skirts are so short, I can see buttock, bush, and/or dick, depending on which demon I'm eyeing.

One lucky person has a generous endowment hanging between their legs on full display plus a buxom chest held up in a bustier that doesn't bother to cover their nipples. They're gorgeous enough that I really hope we don't have to kill them. It'd be such a waste of beauty.

"This is why working for a sex demon is an HR nightmare," Darcy snarks, waving at the housekeepers (??? For all I know this is how bodyguards dress in Hell). "Where's the queen? We have an appointment and we can't be late," he demands, spinning fire in his hands because threats of violence always work out so well.

One pretty demon with a bush but no breasts, points their tail down the hall. "She's holding court in the throne room. Why were you in the prince's bedroom?"

"Santanos asked us to find a shirt for him since we were coming anyway," Bellamy replies, holding up a shirt on a hanger that I didn't even realize he'd grabbed.

Well, I was distracted by the revelation of Darcy's age and recapping what happened



to Bellamy, so I forgive myself for not noticing.

Darcy is waaay over thirty-six hundred years old. It's hard to look at that tiny man and think "older than Fox." That'll take some getting used to. Omigod, why does he sound like he's from the Ozarks? Does he just affect that accent or is he somehow responsible for it? I can totally see Darcy doing that for shits and giggles—making up an entire regional accent.

The demon eyes the shirt, shrugs, and the group continues on down the hall opposite the way we're headed. That's not a hole in palace security. Not at all.

With Darcy basically dancing ahead of us, we make our way through the palace, stopping twice to ask for directions before we finally make it to the throne room.

Lilith sits draped over the throne in a pose meant to seduce her onlookers. It reminds me of the first time I met Santanos, so now we know where he gets his flair for the dramatic. She's also nude, just like Santanos was, with three men (one of whom is Bacchus, the prince of Hell slash queen's consort we're here to kill) who have huge erections attending her. Somehow I'm not surprised that she has to have an extra body; she seems like the type to want to show up her own son.

The supplicant on their knees before the throne looks about two seconds away from either an assassination attempt or running away. It's hard to tell with the demon eyes, but I don't have the chance to figure it out because our entrance causes a wave of awareness that results in a V formation of people getting out of our way, opening up a path straight to the throne.

Lilith notices us when the sea of people parts enough to pull her attention to us, and she arches her manicured brow at us. "Why are you here?" she questions curiously, glancing behind us. "Did my son change his mind about mating with that snack?"

I step forward and wave at everyone to get their attention. I point to the three men with swords that no one was worried about while we sauntered through this palace. I make the universal death by beheading sign with a crrrrrk sound that's as good an approximation as I can make, pointing to Lilith and Bacchus one after the other.

For a disappointingly long minute, everyone just looks at me like they have no idea what I could possibly mean. Bellamy sighs loudly, lifts his sword, and crrrrks off some poor demon guard's head.

The throne room takes a shocked breath and erupts in chaos. I let it flow around me, relying on my personal ward to keep the crowd and the fight from injuring me. I turn my eyes to our two targets, keeping them in sight. Darcy does that thing where he one-punches anything in his way, and he and Fox work together to clear a path to their targets while Bellamy guards their backs against anyone smart enough to stay away from Darcy's fists and Fox's blade.

Lilith and Bacchus stand there, arrogantly watching the fray as if they can't imagine a world in which an assassination attempt would actually work. They're allegedly ten thousand plus years old. Obviously we couldn't possibly succeed where thousands of others have failed.

If I could scoff, I would. Instead, I smile wide and toothy and follow my boys straight to the throne. It's only when Darcy and Fox clear the close guards and their bodyguards start indicating that maybe it's time for a strategic retreat that Lilith and Bacchus start looking a little worried. Unfortunately, by the time they realize that we significantly outmatch their entire royal guard, it's too late for them.

Darcy knocks the last of their guard away, and Fox goes straight for the queen. She materializes a sword and armor—of course she does; the fight would be boring if she couldn't defend herself; no one here is surprised the naked demon has a few tricks up her metaphorical sleeve.

When her sword clashes with Fox's, sparks fly. Why, you ask? Because friction, and that's all I know about the subject. To be honest, I'm a little surprised by the sparks myself. Maybe Lilith's weapon is subpar and has flint in it? Who knows?

Fox moves supernaturally fast, matching Lilith's energy and keeping her on the defense, I assume. I know almost nothing about sword fights, but based on the backward steps she's taking, I'm assuming Fox is winning. It's hot, and I not-even-a-little-subtly rub my hand over my cock.

What? Fox is the sexiest when he's drenched in blood and on a killing spree. Well, maybe he's the sexiest after he's showered all the blood off—Fox riding my cock after a bloody fight is an image that will live in my head for the rest of my immortal life.

While Fox revs my libido into overdrive, Darcy leans over Lilith's consort, very clearly winning against Bacchus. The fire-dancing hearth witch cum jinn slash nightmarish volcano monster holds the prince's neck in one hand while he shoves fireball after fireball down the demon's throat. Bacchus's struggles weaken with each fireball, and then Darcy kisses his victim (eww), sucking all the life out of him (impressive and terrifying). Bacchus collapses, Darcy takes a step back with a smug grin, and the collapsing continues. Bacchus' face crumbles to ash first followed by the rest of him. It looks like he desiccates and crumbles to dust in a few seconds.

Lilith's scream pulls my attention away from the gruesome sight just in time to see Fox lose an arm to her sword at the same time he takes her head with his other arm. My stomach roils at the sight of Fox's blood spurting out of the end of his severed arm. Once Lilith falls, I take two steps toward my future husband, but I stop when he picks up his arm (which is covered in blood that isn't just his, by the way) and holds the severed ends together.

Hurk.

I know Fox isn't prone to blood borne illnesses, but still, it's gross.

His eyes find mine, and I shake my head at him, miming myself vomiting.

He rolls his eyes, then flips me off with the previously unattached arm's finger. It's impressive how quickly his body takes back control of the limb. I suggest that he might enjoy finding a better use of that finger by making a circle of my thumb and forefinger and thrusting my middle finger through it a few times. I make sure to lasciviously wag my eyebrows a couple of times to really get the meaning across.

Darcy jumps onto the throne, interrupting my flirting, and whistles louder than necessary. "Hey fuckers! Your queen and her consort are dead because they threatened the life of one of the Foxilys. Tell your next monarch not to fuck with Romily Butcher's sons, and we won't have to come back."

Someone bumps my back, startling the fuck out of me, but then I take a deep breath, remind myself that it can only be Bellamy, and check; it's my son, standing back to back with me, with a pile of dead demons at his feet.

Darcy jumps off the throne and starts toward the exit. "Time to go," he announces, as all the leftover demons jump back with a mixture of fear and shock.

Bellamy follows him, and I turn to follow my son, knowing Fox will cover our retreat, even with a weakened arm. No, wait. You know what? I have a personal shield against attacks because I'm a Harbinger, so Fox is going to walk in front of me so that I can make sure no one stabs him in the back.

I hop around him and push him forward, attaching myself to the belt hanging off his hips as I push him to follow the tiny Asian dude back to Santanos's closet.

Edovard is safe now, and that's what fucking matters.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Me: Lilith and Bacchus are dead.

DB Cooper: I didn't realize they were killable.

Me: Turns out the rumors of their immortality were merely rumors.

DB Cooper: I guess I will avoid Hell for a few years until the new ruler establishes themselves, whoever they turn out to be. Did you know that Hell has been a monarchy and authoritarian regime since before humans started writing their stories on cave walls? I learned that recently.

Me: Where did you learn that? Is there an internet for supernaturals?

DB Cooper: Oh, I took my brother to the Museum of Supernatural History and Planetarium. You should check it out. The Favorite Foods Across the Realms section is both fun and delicious!

"I didn't know the Planetarium had food service," Bellamy comments, reading over my shoulder.

My family has no boundaries and often assumes I'm typing to them when I have my head in my phone. They're usually correct, obviously, but he's risking his eyeballs eavesdropping. Well, whatever the texting equivalent to eavesdropping is.

I could have been sexting Fox.

Bellamy shifts away when I pull up the text thread that is only for Fox. The first text

in it is a dick pic. I love Fox's dick, and he always sends me something to look at when I have to go ahead of him to announce his immediate arrival. The life of a harbinger is so hard.

Speaking of...

My phone lights up and buzzes with a text from All That Is Wrong With The World aka The Depot, announcing the deaths of Lilith and Bacchus, because they were important enough to require a general announcement to the world. Also, I get a notification from my bank that informs me of a new deposit. Considering I haven't worked today, that's an unexpected message.

"Fuck yeah! All the bounties on those fuckers just paid out!" Darcy announces as he and Fox sort through the clothes we stole from Santanos. They're creating Keep-Maybe-No piles for me. I don't know why Darcy is sorting; he's not really the type, you know? It's the goth punk aesthetic; he just doesn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be all that interested in fashion for the sake of fashion.

Fashion for the sake of petty revenge, however... that's definitely more his style and probably where we're at right now.

"How much was it?" Bellamy asks, taking a shirt Darcy put in the No pile and transferring it to the Keep pile.

I show him a number that means I could stop working for several hundred years if I lived on a modest budget. I didn't even do any of the actual work and I still got paid a portion.

"There were five active contracts and forty five archived contracts. We got the deposits on all the archived ones and the full payout on all the active ones," Darcy adds, straightening after he finishes sorting through the clothes.

Bellamy immediately sorts through the No pile and moves a few things to the Maybe pile and one back to the Keep pile. “I think I’m going to take a vacation.”

“You want to hit up the Planetarium?” Darcy suggests, wiping his hands on his ripped black jeans.

Bellamy glances toward me. “We could,” he replies, and I narrow my eyes at him.

I know he doesn’t have a thing for Darcy anymore, but there’s always a chance of relapse with these kinds of things, and I am not going to put up with that.

Maybe we should take a family vacation. I bet Edovard would love to try all the foods.

“You want to take Edovard, the Avatar of Evil, a Hell dragon, and an evil gnome to the Museum of Supernatural History?” Darcy scoffs, pulling something out of the No pile and putting it in the Keep pile.

Bellamy shoots him a glare and moves the item back. I think it’s a see-through club shirt. “Who’s a Hell dragon?” he questions, staring at Darcy as he holds the No-shirt on the pile.

Darcy tugs the shirt out of Bellamy’s hand, answering placidly. “Hassan.”

Bellamy jerks the shirt out of Darcy’s hand and lifts it up, pointing to a suspicious stain on the mesh. Darcy snorts, releases the shirt, and lets Bellamy put it in the No pile.

Satisfied, Bellamy starts picking up pieces from the Maybe pile and holding them up for me to yea or nay with my thumb. “How do you know that?” he asks Darcy. “I worked with him for years and absolutely no one said anything about him being

anything other than human.”

I thumbs-up a shirt that looks alright, and Bellamy puts it in the No pile as Darcy replies, “I’m a fire dancer and a jinn; I can smell power running through the veins if I’m in the same room as someone. Hassan is a Hell dragon, and he’s from one of the original families. He’s not a purebred; one of his ancestors got a little frisky with a demon, but that’s been all but bred out of him. Only a witch like me or an actual DNA analysis would pick up on it.”

Bellamy puts a shirt I reject into the Keep pile.

When I thumbs up another shirt, he puts it in the No pile.

I quirk an eyebrow at him. I don’t believe for a second that this is some kind of miscommunication. He’s deliberately rejecting my keepers.

Bellamy smiles pleasantly at me and holds up a pair of pink sweat pants with the word “Juicy” on the butt. I wouldn’t wear them out in public, but they do look comfy enough to lounge around in.

I thumbs them down, and Bellamy barely manages to hide his grimace as he puts them in the Keep pile.

Gotcha, fucker.

“Why are we letting Edovard run around with a Hell dragon?” Bellamy asks, looking straight at me as I thumbs up an ugly, collar shirt with camel print that’s been bedazzled with two inch vertical stripes of rainbow rhinestones.

Why does Santanos have such a weird shirt?



Bellamy turns it around and the back reads “Twink-le Camel Toes” on it.

I tilt my head to the side and thumbs it down, curious about what the hell Santanos is doing with it. I need it now. I need Santanos to see me wearing it (although I definitely want him to see me wearing all of the clothes we’re stealing—ah, redistributing).

Bellamy starts moving it to the No pile, and I snatch it up, hugging it close to my chest as I type a quick message.

You aren’t stealing this from me. I’m keeping it forever. It was practically made for me.

Bellamy looks aghast, and moves in close enough to reach out to try to steal the shirt from me. “It most certainly was not!”

Fox joins us, standing between us, and tugs the shirt out of my embrace, holding it up to examine. His face barely twitches with what would be an epic smile if he allowed himself that in mixed company (Fox doesn’t trust Darcy enough with his private expressions). Instead of saying anything, he tosses the shirt straight into the Keep pile and stares at Bellamy as if challenging him to object.

Bellamy looks like I just handed him a box of Grape Nuts and told him he has to eat the whole thing before he can have ice cream, and I spring into Fox’s arms, rewarding my future husband with a passionate kiss.

Dammit.

I need to get this enthusiasm for Fox curbed because getting blood out of my beautiful suits is expensive, and my tailor yells at me every time. You’d think he’d give up on lecturing me by now, but keeping my hands off Fox when he’s being a

good boyfriend is impossible. I believe in positive reinforcement for behavior that lets me live the life to which I wish to become accustomed.

Instead of focusing on the lecture coming my way when I drop my suit off, I give Fox my full attention until Darcy's deep voice pulls me out of a haze of lust. "I could probably get off from watching this, but I'd rather be buried deep in someone's ass while I do."

The suggestive leer in his voice breaks the moment with Fox for both of us, and we turn together, me with a sour look and Fox emanating an aura of violence. I point to Darcy and narrow my eyes in warning. We've talked about him not propositioning Bellamy—we have a blood oath between us that prevents him from offering to fuck Bellamy—and even though I trust my son, I don't want to risk a relapse of him falling into bed with Darcy.

"I wish you all the luck in your sexual endeavors," Bellamy responds, lapsing into the formality that he uses when he's uncomfortable or angry.

Darcy huffs, rolling with the unsubtle rejection. "Thanks, Red. Let's get this shit to the car. I'm—" Darcy's phone chimes, cutting him off, and he pulls it out. His eyebrows draw together as he reads and then he grabs his athame from his hip, shoving his phone into his pocket. "Gotta go. It's been fun. Call me next time you're in the mood for slaughtering annoying royals."

He cuts a line from elbow to wrist on his own arm and paints a circular array in blood around his feet. The array glows red with magic, and he disappears, flying off to do whatever he does when he's not with us.

The rest of us stare at where he disappeared for a moment before shrugging off his quick exit and gathering the keeper clothes. Darcy does what Darcy wants to do. He's a busy man and the best tracker in all the realms. If he needs help, he knows our

numbers, and we would probably help. He's been surprisingly available for us when we've called.

I should probably get to know him better, ask questions at least. He's technically a Foxily. (Edovard claimed him for us, and I will never disappoint my pupper by rejecting anyone he claims for our family.) I feel like I know Gregory better than I know Darcy, and I don't even like Gregory. I at least like Darcy enough to want to know what he's up to when he's not around.

With one hand I shoot off a message to my men, Vacation? Museum, planetarium, and confessing to what exactly happened to my ring? Oh, and food.

Fox stalls for a moment, but if I wasn't watching him so closely I might've missed it. "I'm hungry," he announces, heading out the door with an armful of reappropriated clothing.

I eye Fox, narrowing my eyes at him as we sit in silence across from each other while Bellamy's gaze ping pongs between us and we wait for the Captain to send us food. I don't even know what I want, but I know when my order comes it will be perfect.

Fox brought me here for the first time the day I learned that the depot is evil and will send me to work before the sun rises. The restaurant is called "Diner," and it's a hole in the wall kind of place where the food is so amazing it makes up for the decor. Somewhere behind the doors that lead to the kitchen is the mysterious Captain. They send out food without taking orders, and for some reason are against leftovers.

Do I know who the Captain is? No. Never seen the person, don't know anything about them, and I've never asked, but maybe if I think about it hard enough Fox will give in and tell me, breaking our silent standoff.

I mean, he's going to lose one way or another; being mute has to have some benefits,

even if it's being the all-time world champion at the silent game. No one beats me at the silent game.

I concentrate really hard on imagining the Captain, who they are, why they care at all about leftovers, and how they enforce the rule that leftovers aren't allowed.

Fox stares at me without giving away a single thing, but I know he knows what I'm communicating. He's mildly telepathic. We've been working on our mental connection, and he's gotten pretty good at reading me. The more we use the connection, the better we'll get, until eventually we'll be able to effortlessly mindspeak to each other as long as we're within range of his telepathy, which isn't even limited to this specific realm. He can mindspeak with his demon dad across realms.

It's impressive and sexy, and when I think about it, it makes me want to jump his bones, so I'm not thinking about it right now. Nope. Right now I'm trying to get him to tell me what the hell happened to my ring, but first I need to break the silence.

Hard to do for a mute boy, but I'm determined. I cannot go all day without sex, and I'm not having sex with Fox when our lines of communication are plugged up like it's allergy season and all the Mulberries are in bloom. Omigod, did you know that city planners plant male trees on purpose so they don't have to deal with the logistics of cleaning up fruit from female trees, and that's why we have an allergy season. Because pollen is plant sperm. Sperm, ha.

I glance at Fox thinking about the last time he painted me with his sperm.

No. Nope. Not thinking about that.

I'm not horny for Fox, especially right now when I'm annoyed with his insistence that nothing is wrong even though he hasn't told me what happened to the beautiful,

gigantic diamond he bought me the day after I became his Harbinger.

Listen, concentration is sometimes a challenge for me and yesterday I started meditating to improve my focus. I fell asleep, but I'm going to get this, because telepathic communication with Fox is a life goal I didn't know I had until recently.

Fox's phone does something it almost never does. It rings. For real. Not just the ping of a text message. It doesn't startle me, of course. I'm way too cool for a random phone ringing to startle me out of the silent contest with my future husband. The jerk of my limbs was me trying to control the urge to throttle him just a little. That's it.

Fox looks at the caller ID, but the blank expression on his face tells me it's an unknown number, and then Bellamy's phone rings—this one doesn't startle me either—and the server arrives with a tray full of food. Fox stands, answering the phone with a brief mutter of, "This is Fox."

Bellamy does the same with a very similar greeting, and I watch the server place food all around the table while my company disappears outside.

I blink down at the platter the server sets in front of me. Confused, I look up at her, but she shows me a set of fangs with a tense smile, and then slides a flight of shots in front of me. "The Captain says you eat from left to right and drink the mead after each bite from right to left," she explains, then turns on her heels and leaves me with... my meal?

I look back at the platter, cataloging each single bite from left to right:

A bite of fresh chopped salad, but all the vegetables are diced and piled on a single small lettuce leaf

A mini quiche with spinach and feta

Five marinated beans in a small pile

A single chicken nugget with a dollop of mashed potatoes, five corn kernels, and a half teaspoon of brown gravy

A tiny single bite of filet mignon wrapped in bacon

A skewer with karaage, cucumber, and a sugar snap pea

A single bite of sweet potato with a small amount of melted butter

A skewer with squares of watermelon, cantaloupe, and honeydew

A spoonful of banana pudding

And a bite of baklava

Are you hungry yet? Me too.

I take my first bite—the salad—and it has a citrus dressing on it. When I sip the shot of mead after the bite, the citrus really comes out in the mead too, and holy shit balls, it's perfect. Yeah, no. I have no idea who the Captain is, but they're amazing.

I eat each bite of food and savor each mead, and I'm halfway through my meal before Bellamy returns, red in the face and carefully sitting like he's irritated or possibly embarrassed. It's hard to tell when the redhead gets worked up what the matter is.

Care to explain why you look like someone ruined your supper?

He glances at the message as it pings his watch and picks up his fork. "My cousin will be in town sometime soon—he wasn't clear on the timing—and he wants to meet

you.”

I blame the alcohol for the predatory grin that makes its new home on my face. I swear I’m not going to adopt another Jones, but I also had no idea Bellamy had a cousin, and I desperately want to meet him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Bellamy warns me, stabbing his pot pie and mixing the crust into the piping hot innards.

Fox rejoins us, and there is a definite glower on his face—not that anyone else except me and Bellamy would be able to tell. I’m sure everyone else might be able to pick up on the glowering aura, though. Fox isn’t trying to hide his annoyance.

Bad news?

I’m not going to not talk to Fox when something’s upset him just because I want him to tell me what the fuck happened to my ring.

Fox’s eye twitches, and he types into his phone.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: A dozen cherubs ran away from school, and their parents want us to find them and bring them back.

Me: This sounds like a Darcy job.

I’m not against working with the goth twink volcano monster, but we did just get rid of him; he might not even answer if we call him back so soon.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: The parents have requested that we track them down without alerting the authorities if possible, because they’re fairly certain the cherubs are doing something illegal.

Our First Child: Illegal to what governing body?

Bellamy sends that with a wry smirk on his handsome, freckled face.

I love my kid. I think he's amazing, but sometimes I forget that he was, in fact, an assassin for the Avatar of Evil for almost as long as I've been alive before I adopted him.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: Ours, at least.

Suddenly a young guy who looks about my age with a huge amount of thick, elbow-length, curly sable hair and rich dark brown skin appears out of nowhere and drops into the extra chair at our table. He smiles widely, clearly an extremely friendly person and so adorable I bet he gets away with murder on a regular basis. "Hi. I'm Akile Aristide."

All three of our phones suddenly buzz with text messages, and with a glance at mine I see that the depot has greenlighted us for a whole month of vacation.

I didn't realize any of us had actually asked for vacation.

"Oh good. Now no one will be expecting to be able to get in touch with you for work." Akile's joy radiates from him, and he claps. "Finish your food. The Captain doesn't allow leftovers, you know. Then we'll be going. There's so much to do."



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Who the fuck are you?

I stare at the adorable interloper and shove my phone at him. He says his name with the stress on the first syllable, by the way, since I know you're wondering. AH-kee-lay, but drop the last syllable like you're trying to get rid of a stage ten clinger. Or like you're saying the le in Pepe Le Pew.

Akile glances at the message on my phone and steals the karaage skewer off my plate along with the mead to go with it.

I didn't want that one anyway.

"I'm your new bestie, Bestie," he replies with a little too much glee in his voice.

A very sharp dagger presses against Akile's neck, held by Fox, who stares at him with dead eyes.

Akile eyes Fox, takes a deep breath, and rolls his eyes. "Nutmeg poisoning was my idea, but that is all I'm going to cop to. I'm not the big-idea person. I'm just the person who knew nutmeg would sever the delicious redhead's bonds." He licks his lips at Bellamy.

Woah. Did that just happen?

Bellamy stares at Akile, and his voice is level and polite even as his ears turn bright red. "Who did you give your idea to?"

Gah. How did I raise a kid who gets embarrassed every time someone flirts with him? Actually, I bet this is his previous parents' doing. Yeah, I'm definitely blaming someone else for this, even though it's incredibly cute. Wait. No, if it's cute—

I'll have to think about this further. I want to take credit for all the good things, and let the blame for the bad fall where it belongs (not on me), but this could go both ways.

Fox hasn't moved the dagger, but that doesn't seem to bother Akile, who reaches under his arm to snag Fox's plate of sushi, stealing a bite off it and feeding it to himself around the dagger as he replies, "Gave it to Jamie; you killed him, remember?"

Bellamy did kill Jamie, who trades time being the representative of evil on the council that rules the supernatural world with his twin brother, Jeff. (He's more likable than Jamie.) Oh, I suppose I should mention that Jamie didn't stay dead. He had a resurrection in the wings, so he's unfortunately alive and well. I've heard that his wife, Julie, who's also a Reaper like Fox, is thinking about divorce. I don't know what she expected when she married one of the evil councilors in charge of making decisions that affect the community of supernatural species, but if it was anything other than "My man is going to do evil things while I'm married to him," she was absolutely delusional.

So you're saying that you should have been in that sand pit with Bellamy too.

Akile's expression transforms into the cutest, most hurt expression I've ever seen on a man's face. "Excuse me? I didn't poison Bellamy's bonds. How could my bestie even consider putting me in a sand pit with people who have the tendency to kill first and never ask questions later? Where's the love?"

I—I don't know what to say to that. I'm all for making new friends, but...

“What is happening right now?” Bellamy asks for me, staring in horror at Akile as actual tears well up in our guest’s eyes as if he’s genuinely distressed.

He’s definitely faking.

I shoot that text to both of my men, and the tears drop to Akile’s cheeks as their phones chime with my text.

“The least you could do is add me to your text thread,” Akile sniffles, shaking his phone side to side.

Fox moves the knife away from Akile’s neck and grabs the phone out of his hand, tapping at it. He unlocks it on the first try, and I’m impressed and a little bit horny until he turns his deadly gaze to Akile. “You’re the thief.”

Akile turns wide eyes toward Fox, blinking innocently at him. “He gave it to me!” he protests. “Handed it right to me, and he didn’t insist I give it back.”

Oh my gawd.

DB?

I send that to my text frenemy, and the phone in Fox’s hand beeps.

I drop my jaw, staring at Akile. I’ve been texting this guy since he stole Dakota’s phone a few weeks ago.

Actually...

I snap my jaw closed and turn to Fox, smiling at him as I think with as much enthusiasm as I can muster, “Hey look! We found him before your dads did! No

possibility of getting a new step dad!”

Fox barely glances at me, but I see the utter incredulity in the glance. I kind of love having direct access to Fox’s mind. And hey, look at that! I’m getting better at this whole mind to mind communication thing already!

“Who’s DB?” Akile asks, taking the phone back from Fox, who lets him since Dakota has a new phone already. The dads are still paying for this line, and probably won’t stop even after they meet him because they’re total pushovers and Akile is super cute.

I create a new text thread, including him with Bellamy and Fox.

You are. In my phone I named your contact card DB Cooper after that guy from the 70s who hijacked that plane and got away with 200k in ransom money.

Not everyone has heard of famous criminals who were never caught.

Well, Akile basically turned himself in, so...

I change his name to Bestie in my phone because I feel like we’re going to get along like socks and sandals now that we’re face to face. We’re as inevitable as Dad-fashion; people will see us and just accept their fate because we’re happening now.

So, what are we doing after lunch? I’m excited about this new development. I don’t know; it just feels right.

Akile checks my message on his phone as the waitress deposits a Dagwood Sandwich in front of him that’s taller than any sandwich I’ve ever seen. His eyes widen happily and he smiles up at her. “Thank you! Tell the Captain it’s perfect, as always.”

The waitress gives him a sweet smile and assures him she will before she refills water glasses and leaves again.

Akile smashes the sandwich down, picks it up, and takes a huge bite. His broad smile becomes a big mouth when he opens wide; it's actually pretty impressive. My new bestie has a really big mouth, but he's clearly not going to use it to explain what the fuck is going on before he eats.

I'm not even surprised.

Fox pays for our meal with a swipe of his hand over a reader that deducts the bill from his bank account. We have chips in our hands that give us the ability to pay without carrying cash or cards around if we don't want to. I keep a couple hundred dollars on me in a cash clip because there's no way I'm going to find myself stranded away from the technology of the supernatural community with no way to pay for a ride home or at least a phone call. I mean, I'd have to be stranded with no phone or wallet and only my cash clip, but hey, if I can worst-case-scenario it, it can happen.

Once we're outside, Akile starts walking with purpose northward. I consider my options, glance at Fox, then at Bellamy. All three of us stand together as we decide if we should follow, but then Fox turns toward the street and raises his hand. I think I would follow Akile, but I'm going to defer to Fox because he's older than me and probably wiser, you know?

A taxi breaks from traffic and comes to a stop next to us, and we all climb in together. Akile continues to walk away, but I figure if he really wants us to go with him, he'll find us again. We've got a whole month of vacation, and we're planning to hit the Museum of Supernatural History at his suggestion, so he probably knows where he can find us.

Fox tells the taxi driver to take us home, and I watch Akile as we pass him. I wave

with a bright smile, catching his attention. He stares at me with his mouth wide open until I can't see him anymore.

My phone chimes.

Bestie: I'm not sure if I should wonder how my bestie could abandon me in the middle of a mission or if I should be impressed with Fox's resolve not to do anything he doesn't want to do.

Me: I think both, really. Why not?

Bestie: I suppose I could do that.

Me: \*thumbs up\*

I hate getting thumbs up with no follow up. It's even worse that I spelled it out because I don't send actual emojis.

Bestie: I'm not sure how you wiggled your way into bestiehood without me knowing how mean you are.

Me: \*laughing to tears emoji\*

"He's a bit dramatic," Bellamy comments softly with a contemplative look in his eye.

I nod and shrug. I think I deserve a dramatic bestie. I've never had a real best friend. I have Fox, but lovers is not the same as platonic friends, and I have Bellamy, but he's family more than friend, and honestly, one of the most dramatic people I know...

Pot meet kettle.

Bellamy stares at that text for a long moment before shaking his head. “I’m not dramatic.”

A soft breath escapes Fox, and if we weren’t in a taxi with a stranger, he would have laughed. I reach over and squeeze Fox’s leg, appreciating his muscles as I do. He’s so hot.

You’re pure drama all the time.

I reassure Bellamy that I love him with a pat on his leg, and then I’m holding both men’s legs and the taxi driver gives me a curious look in the rearview mirror.

I shake my head at him.

“We are not a threesome,” Fox tells him for me.

I smile at my man and kiss his cheek. I love it when he gives me a voice, especially when it’s because he can read my thoughts.

“Ah,” the driver responds softly and looks forward, intimidated by the Reaper at my side.

“There’s something familiar about Akile,” Bellamy mutters, shaking his head.

I didn’t recognize him, and I look at Fox who minutely shakes his head, and we all fall silent while Bellamy tries to work it out.

The rest of the drive passes in silence, and when the driver pulls up in front of our brownstone, Edovard is standing outside with Gregory and Hassan and they’re talking to Akile, who somehow beat us here.

When I get out of the car, Edovard's telling Hassan, "He's a nice person. He's really bright and happy, and he's not going to hurt anyone. He likes us."

Akile's wearing a sappy little smile, staring at Edovard like he's the most precious pupper he's ever seen, and he is. Edovard is the best, most precious pupper to ever exist, and yes, this is the hill I will die on. I already knew Akile would fit right in with us, but the expression on his face as he looks up at Edovard cements that knowledge in me.

Gregory turns to us and glares at Fox as soon as we're all on the sidewalk. "Stop letting your boyfriend bring home strays. We don't have room for another roommate!"

I step into Gregory's personal bubble and point to the completely unoccupied bedroom window in the part of the brownstone that he, Edovard, Hassan, and Santanos occupy. They have three bedrooms and only use two of them, one for sleeping and the other as a dressing room. Then I point to the unoccupied bedroom in Fox's part of the building, and the third unit we haven't decided what to do with yet, and then I point to the whole other brownstone building that Fox is in the process of buying on the other side of our house.

We're running out of room for tables, and Fox hasn't really slowed his buying habits, so we're going to buy the brownstone next door. We're just waiting on the other party to sign the papers. There's some kind of hold up that the realtor hasn't explained to us.

Gregory scowls at me. "Why are you pointing at that building?" he demands grumpily.

Edovard reaches for him and wraps him up in his arms. It's a hug, but it also looks like Edovard decided to become Gregory's backpack, and I smile at my pupper. I



reach over, patting his head and leaning over to kiss his forehead. He's a good boy.

"Stop putting your lips on my boyfriend," Gregory grumps, but there's little heat to it now that Edovard has him in hand. Gregory is a huge softie for Edovard, even though he basically hates everyone he isn't currently sleeping with.

Ok, that's not fair. Gregory loves Edovard, Hassan, and Santanos—hurk—and he hates everyone he doesn't love.

"Why are you pointing at the other building?" Bellamy asks curiously.

Fox explains as he starts walking to our front door. "We're trying to buy it. Romily thinks we're going to need the extra space in case we adopt anyone else."

I look around at the incredulous looks on Bellamy, Gregory, and Hassan's faces and shrug, then point to Akile, who is my new bestie and who I have clearly adopted.

Edovard gives me an approving nod. "I thought that he belonged to us too," he agrees, then reaches out a fist to Akile. "I'm glad you're here. "

Akile bumps his fist with a happy, joyful smile. "Thank you, Edovard. I'm really happy to be here too. I'm Akile, Romily's bestie."

Gregory snorts, turns in Edovard's arms and pushes him toward their front door. "Come on, we need to check the wards before Santanos can come home."

Edovard kisses Gregory before slipping around him to hug each of us.

"There's nothing wrong with the wards," Fox tells him at the same time that Bellamy asks, "What's wrong with the wards?"

Edovard has Bellamy in a hug when he replies, “Gregory sometimes checks things he knows are alright when Santanos makes us leave him behind. He doesn’t like it when Santanos is out of sight.”

Where is he?

I send that to the group text that includes everyone who lives in the brownstone after adding Akile to it.

“Like we’re going to tell you,” Grumpy Gregory spits, pulling at Edovard’s hand once our pupper has finished giving us each a hug.

Edovard pats Gregory’s butt. “They’re family. It’s ok to tell them that he’s in a closed door meeting with Granddaddy Annette.” Edovard smiles and waves at us. “Don’t worry; he’ll be home soon. Hassan will go get him when he’s done.”

Hassan is a portal maker, which means that he’s likely been making portals in and out of the brownstone. That’s not worrisome.

Edovard, Gregory, and Hassan disappear through their front door, and I turn to Fox, who looks like he’s contemplating murder, which is one of his happy places, so he looks happy, but those are our pupper’s boyfriends, so we should probably use non-violent means to make sure they’re not violating the ward that protects the brownstone. I wouldn’t want to hurt Edovard’s pure heart by killing his boyfriends and neither would Fox.

Fox sighs, looking less happy, takes my hand, and pulls me to our front door.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

When I get inside, Fox hands me a small box, and I open it, pulling out a miniature table and a matching chair. I smile at my man, grabbing my tool box from the linen closet as I skip to the table that exists in Bellamy's bathroom that these minis are modeled on. Fox follows me and watches as I place the mini-table on top of the big table. He loves these miniatures as much as he loves the full size tables he collects.

I pull out a small hammer and tiny nails, and I find a wall stud before hammering two nails into the wall, using a level to make sure they're even. Then I hang the chair on the wall above the table and pull out three more chairs from the cabinet below the sink. I've been collecting small chairs for a few weeks now just so I can surprise him with this. I take my time to mount them on the wall in an appealing pattern, and when I'm done, I turn to Fox, who looks like I've given him the most amazing gift anyone's ever thought of.

I knew he'd love the wall mounted chairs. It was the logical next step.

He reaches for me, pulls me into his body, and ravages my mouth, pouring all his gratitude and love for me into that kiss. I wholly approve of this positive reinforcement. I definitely deserve kisses.

"Why are you kissing in my bathroom?" Bellamy deadpans, interrupting what could easily become a reward quickie.

Fox squeezes my ass and ends the kiss, pulling away so I can shoot Bellamy a disgruntled glare.

Bellamy's eyebrows shoot up when his eye catches on the mini chairs hanging on the

wall directly over the table in front of the commode. “Just what in the ever loving fuck is that?” he demands, pulling Fox out of the way so he can push in between us. “You are not decorating my bathroom with wall chairs!”

Oh. Oh no. Bellamy’s yelling. I’ve finally found the limit of his politeness.

I take out my phone and immediately hit the record button.

“You already have way too fucking many tables all over the house; you are not starting up with chairs. There will be no room to walk! Papa, this is not happening, you are not—”

Fox grabs Bellamy’s hand to stop him from ripping the chairs off the wall, spinning his Acolyte to face him. “No.”

Fox’s one word order sends a shiver of distilled desire through me, a potent, heady sensation that makes my already raring cock pulse with need.

Bellamy’s face pales and then he flushes bright red, and then he tips his head back and knocks it on the wall. “Why are you so obsessed with furniture, and why did you decide to feed it with minis?” he demands of me.

I smile brightly and hug Fox from behind, pushing my hard on into his ass so he knows what he does to me.

Fox releases Bellamy and with a small smile replies, “Because he loves me.”

That’s exactly right.

Bellamy huffs with indignation, shakes his head, and takes a deep breath. “You have a guest, and it’s rude to make out in the bathroom while they’re snooping around our

house,” he points out, reminding me that we do actually have a guest, and maybe Fox and I got a little distracted with the fires of our eternal passion.

Fox snorts a laugh, turning to kiss my temple. “I’m going to shower; you go figure out what Akile wants.”

We washed up in the Captain’s bathroom to get the blood and grime off, but Fox could definitely use a shower. Bellamy too. I point to the shower behind my son and give him a meaningful once over.

Bellamy rolls his eyes. “Of course I’m going to bathe. I don’t actually like being covered in the blood of my enemies.”

I give him a wink to make sure he knows he looks good covered in the blood of his enemies, because there’s nothing sexier than competence (I’m an expert on this kink), and then I follow Fox out of the bathroom and go in search of my new bestie.

I find Akile in the living room sitting on my couch and reading my latest romance book. I’ve been on a ‘cest/pseudo-cest kick lately and have fallen down the fantasy/paranormal rabbit hole. Don’t side-eye me; taboo is exciting, and this one is about a young alpha who puts a mating bite on his omega brother to save the brother from a miserable life with a cruel alpha. It’s fun, I swear. You should read it if you’re into that kind of thing.

Anyway.

“Who’d have thought I’d be into brother-cest,” Akile comments, setting the book down.

He can’t have gotten that far into the book. I swear it’s only been fifteen minutes since we got here, if that long.

It's a good book and a fun taboo.

I send that after sitting down on the couch with him. There's room enough for Fox between us, but we're close enough that we don't look like strangers either. I like that. It feels right for us. Besides, we're not total strangers; we've been messaging back and forth, and that's given us a firm foundation for this blossoming of bosom buddies.

Hmm. That brings up the image of sharing a pair of boobs like pillows. It's a little weird; I think I'll try a different way to describe our friendship.

So what exactly is it that you want us to do? And did you ask the depot to give us vacation?

I'm using the group text thread so that my men know what I'm up to while they're showering.

"Do you want me to answer aloud, or should I type it out into the group text?" he asks curiously without a hint of teasing. He's at least serious about communication, and I like that about him.

Me: Text it, that way Fox and Bellamy aren't excluded.

Bestie: Sure thing. Give me a minute to type things out. And no, I didn't ask for vacation for you; but my friend did, and then my other friend approved it.

I'm sure he will explain who his friends are and why they need us to go on vacation.

I wait, watching him type out a long message. It takes him at least five minutes to get his first message typed out the way he wants it before he sends.

Bestie: Have you noticed how much the world is changing right before our eyes. We've gone from a struggle to rebalance good and evil to a complete balance in a matter of days, but before that, something started happening when the first Acolyte to appear in so long we forgot that Harbingers can claim Acolytes popped into existence. Before that, a Reaper who's worked without a Harbinger for a decade (and struggled to keep one for hundreds of years before that) finally found one that wants to stick around. The world is changing quickly, and it has the attention of the cherubs.

Bestie: The older generation of cherubs, the ones who put in place the power structure that we currently have, are so entrenched in the power structure that they're fighting the change, but the young cherubs, the ones like me, know that what's happening is good and have started working for it behind our parents' backs. We've been actively seeking the right Harbinger. I was recruited into the organization I work for specifically to find and make contact with The Harbinger, but like I told you before, I'm not one of the decision makers. I'm one of the cherubs that have been looking for the right Harbinger. And I found him. Well, you. I found you. You're The Harbinger.

Bestie: Huh. I don't have to say "with caps" because it's written out and seeable. That's fun.

Me: The written word does have some benefits.

It's true.

Me: What is the organization you're talking about?

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: What are the requirements for Romily to be the right Harbinger?

Our First Child: What is Romily the right Harbinger for?

I guess my men are done with their showers, or possibly they're texting from the shower; both of their phones are water resistant, and we installed phone holders in all the bathrooms because Gregory "gets bored when he's washing his ass."

Bestie: Good and Evil are thought of as two sides of the scale. We want everything to be in balance, right? But there's been research done by some cherub scholars that suggests that there's a problem with that metaphor.

Akile sends that and looks at me as he thinks.

Our First Child: What's the problem?

Akile huffs and types again, shaking his head.

Bestie: The problem is that people don't take into account the scale that good and evil are balancing on. Sometimes we call it justice and it's represented by a blind person, but that's not right. The scale is neutrality, and we've completely ignored that universal force. We understand and work for the force of good, and we understand and fight against the force of evil, but we ignore the force of neutrality, and ok, yes, this has worked for three thousand years, ever since the cherubs instituted the system of governance that we currently have, but it's the hard way of working for balance.

The scale. That's interesting. I've never considered that the universe might have a neutral force like good and evil, but that makes sense. There are plenty of things that don't have a moral value. My socks are completely neutral and wearing socks isn't a matter of good or evil unless you're wearing them with sandals. There are a lot of things like that that aren't governed by good or evil, and so it makes sense that there would be a universal force that rules over them.

Oh wait.



Me: Does that mean that there's a neutral Avatar like Annette and Santanos?

Bestie: It means that there should be, and there isn't.

Me: Well shit.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: Well shit.

Our First Child: Well shit.

I laugh at the texts that appear almost simultaneously.

Me: I AM NOT THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE JOB.

I put that out into the universe because there is no way I want to be an Avatar, thank you very much. I've already got my hands full with a single Reaper, an Acolyte, and an Auger. Sure, I'm waiting to find my Arbiter too.

Arbiters are the people who run the depot. They assign tasks to the Reapers, run the banking system, and apparently payout on assassination contracts. Most recently they've been charged with sending aid to the people affected by the balancing act of Good and Evil. Edovard went before the council to petition for an aid program, and the council agreed to make it happen. Arbiters are responsible for providing that aid.

I look over at Akile, wondering if he's the next in line to be adopted. I really am on the lookout to complete the set, and all I need is an Arbiter.

Well, I guess I also need another Avatar. I've already got Santanos as a son-in-law, and Annette is my Daddy—I wonder how the neutral Avatar is going to fit in.

Akile shakes his head at me and snorts, typing out his next text.

Bestie: Don't look at me like that. I'm not the next Avatar. We haven't even freed the magic that would unleash that back into the universe so that it can pick a new Avatar.

Wait. What? The neutral universal force is trapped?

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: Did the cherubs trap a universal force with magic when they instituted the current system of governance?

That text chimes in as Fox walks into the living room with wet hair finger-combed backwards. He's wearing his usual black-on-black yoga pants and an A shirt even though he's technically on vacation. I don't blame him; it's looking like this is going to be a working vacation for us.

His face probably looks blank to Akile, but to me he appears grim, and through the connection we have, I get the sense that he's on the edge of furious. Fox isn't the type to allow injustice, and if someone locked up and caged a natural force of the universe, he's not going to allow that to stand.

Huh. Our telepathic connection is growing by leaps and bounds today. I just got a real sense of his inner emotions through the bond. Meditation really works! I don't know how it did when I fell asleep, but look at us go!

Before Akile starts texting again, Bellamy follows Fox in, and Akile looks at me. "Is it ok to talk now?"

Again with the deference to my preference. Gah, no wonder we're besties.

I nod as Fox sits next to me and pulls me into his lap. Bellamy sits in an armchair, and Akile gives me and Fox a sappy look before talking. I love that he's happy for me about the love of my life.

“The short answer is yes. We’re still researching what happened, but we’ve only been looking into this for about a year, so you’ll have to excuse us. The cherubs who instituted the council and created the system that we use for keeping the balance appear to have imprisoned the force of neutrality,” Akile replies with a grimace and a shake of his head. “It wasn’t very forward thinking of them.”

“Why would they do that?” Bellamy asks in a tone that reflects the shocked appallment in me too.

Akile crinkles his adorable nose. “Because they didn’t see a need for it, and they didn’t like the Avatar of Neutrality at the time. Did you know that cherubs are supposed to fall under the purview of neutrality? We’re meant to be neutral.”

I can’t say I’m surprised that my bestie is a cherub.

It makes sense to me; I’ve been completely enamored of all the cherubs I’ve met since I started up with Fox. It totally makes sense that I would pick one to be my best friend.

Bellamy sighs. “You’ve decided to keep him.”

I smile brightly at him, wiggling on Fox’s lap because I can’t really contain all my joy inside myself, and sometimes wiggles need to escape.

Fox immediately relaxes under me, subtly pressing his hard dick into my ass.

“Obviously he’s keeping me. I’m his bestest bestie forever. We’ve been through so much together. You can’t just ignore the bonds that we’ve forged in the fires of adversity. We are connected at a soul level. Romily and I will be friends until the end of time, if not longer.”

I nod in agreement with my new best friend, and Bellamy gives us both a deadpan look. “Adversity? What adversity?”

Akile’s eyes go wide and he looks like that question hurts him in the depth of his heart. “How could you question the trials and tribulations that we’ve been through? We’ve been through death threats, abductions, murder, massacres, and even actual trials. Everything that we’ve been through together and you’re questioning my loyalty?”

We texted on and off every time something important came up since he stole Dakota’s phone, so I guess that counts as going through trials and tribulations together.

I point to Akile and nod, staring at Bellamy to make sure he knows I’m on the cherub’s side.

Bellamy stares at me awestruck by how welcoming and wonderful I am.

(This is my story, I’m allowed to describe my family’s emotions the way I see them.)

“Your willingness to overlook the red flags of cherubs is going to get us into trouble. This guy is the reason I was abducted, remember?”

He didn’t abduct you. Although, you do bring up a good point. Why did your organization abduct Bellamy?

“Well, that ties into your being the right Harbinger. We’re looking for the next Avatar. We think we need them to unleash the magic, so we were testing whether Bellamy was the next Avatar of Neutrality,” Akile replies, dusting his shirt as if there’s something there marring his button up. He’s wearing a brightly colored peacock patterned shirt with complementing blue slacks, and the clothes definitely

match the personality of the wearer. I could never get away with it, but he looks fabulous.

“You think Romily is going to find the next Avatar?” Fox questions suspiciously.

“Yes,” Akile replies, eyeing Fox like he’s not sure if Fox is going to kill him or not. Or maybe he’s measuring if Fox is the next Avatar.

Fox better not be. We are not to the point in our relationship that we would gracefully handle disruptions to our mating dances. I would figure out a way to get loud and annoying to The Universe real fast if that happened. (No yeah, Akile is right about the caps thing.) No one would rest until the responsibility of avatariness disappeared from my Fox. I’m not sharing him... except for with our family who deserve the best oppa Fox can be. Family beats Universe.

I kiss Fox so that Akile knows he’s safe (hopefully he was worried about that, and it wasn’t the Avatar thing), and because Fox is sexy as fuck and I really want to dick him down. Plus, I’m literally sitting on my lover; it would take Fox at least a few seconds to move me, and that might give Akile enough of a head start to get to safety before Fox caught up. I mean, Fox is definitely going to win in a one on one with Akile, but he’d never actually hurt my bestie; it would hurt me, and Fox would never do that on purpose.

Akile continues, “Romily is The Harbinger. He’s the omen of change. He’s gathering all the elements we need to establish the force of neutrality in our system of governance. If he hasn’t already found the next Avatar, he’s going to find them soon along with a new Arbiter. The depot is going to go through some major upheavals as soon as we unleash the force of neutrality, because Arbiters are meant to be cherubs and those of cherubic descent. In the past, about half of the Arbiters were cherubs and the other half were of mixed descent.”

My bestie smiles at me again, but it's slightly pained. "You're of mixed descent you know. We looked into your ancestry because you can see past glamour. So far we've found a fae grandparent and a cherub ninety-seven generations back. Your cherub ancestor was one of the few who opposed the new system and met with a convenient accident days before the new system was implemented."

The cherubs killed my ancestors? That seems a bit extreme.

Akile huffs in disgust. "They needed every cherub alive in one accord in order to imprison the force of neutrality. They killed every cherub that didn't agree with them because they needed a unanimous vote. It took a thousand years before anyone started questioning the imbalance of power. Even the people most directly affected by the change didn't notice right away."

How far back is the fae grandparent?

Akile shrugs. "Just a grandparent. Your mother was half-fae. The report said you're a quarter elf of the Haegan line."

I blink at him. I'm not. I'm human. I have absolutely no magic at all except I can see through glamour.

Akile smiles adorably and reaches out to squeeze my hand. "We did notice that you were lacking some basic elven magic. We can see what's going on with that if you want."

Yes. I absolutely want.

If I'd ever had even a drop of elven power, I would have had more than I've ever had, and I would never have ended up homeless and on the street. Everything is ok now, but it wasn't four months ago, and I think I need to know if it could have been.

“We’ll have someone check you out. We just have to vet someone who can do it,” Akile promises

Silence bounces between us as we digest everything, then Bellamy gets us back on track, asking, “How did you find out about what your parents did?”

Akile presses his lips together in a grim line. “The cherubs didn’t. The cherubs who were alive when they did this refuse to talk about it, and the people who’ve been trying to figure out how to fix it have only been moderately successful in discovering what happened. We still don’t have any confirmation from an eye witness, but we’ve figured out what happened based on the information we’ve uncovered and the voids in it. The cherubs wiped the community’s collective memory about the Avatar of Neutrality, and the blank spaces fill in a lot of the gaps for those of us who’ve been researching this.

“We’ve had to hide all of our activity from our parents, and it’s gotten more difficult since Romily became a Harbinger. With things speeding up, it’s more difficult to keep up with the security needs.” He looks between the three of us. “So, are you in? We assume you want to restore what was stolen from the world, but I suppose I should ask if you’re interested in correcting a great injustice.”

“We’re in,” Fox confirms for all of us.

Was there ever any doubt?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

“I’d like to know how you’re going to justify abducting me and nailing me to the ceiling of the prison cell for centuries.” Bellamy is really hung up on the abduction, which, valid, right? Even I threatened Akile while we were avenging the abduction, because yeah, no one fucks with the Foxilys without consequences, and that was unusually cruel.

Akile bites his lower lip, squinting at Bellamy from the front seat of the taxi we’re taking to the base of operations that Akile’s organization has set up here. Apparently the taxi driver is another cherub in the know; the cherubs have reassigned my permanent taxi driver and put this one in his place. She’s cute, and her smile melts my heart. I can’t say I’m opposed to having another cherub friend.

“First, it’s important to tell you that the cherubs did not choose the way you were detained. That was fully the cultists that took delivery of you. The only limits we put on the contract were that you had to be alive so Fox could make you immortal, and the cultists knew you needed to be in that prison cell out of view of the cameras. The only blind spot was unfortunately on the ceiling, but they made the choice for how to attach you to the ceiling.” Akile widens his big, hazel eyes and tries to look as blameless as possible. He’s as adorable as any cherub, so obviously we believe him.

What? I like the cherubs even when they’re naughty. Maybe especially when they’re doing things that they shouldn’t.

“A hammock would have sufficed,” Bellamy points out, outwardly calm because he’s all but over it.

Akile has the grace to look abashed. “The cherubs don’t work with the cultists, and as



per their deity of choice, they're sometimes cruel in the name of their god."

Bellamy makes a noise of acknowledgment. "Why that prison cell and why the human cultists?"

"The easiest way to see if you're a potential Avatar was to put you in the same place as the previous Avatar, and you had to be exposed to the imbuing magic long enough for it to wake up. It's nothing but a dormant seed at this point, trapped in the prison of a mostly dead body. We theorize that the seed of magic should be able to transfer to the next Avatar through the wards keeping it trapped. The draw would be strong enough to overcome the wards with some time, so we couldn't have your location discovered too quickly. You had to be in that cell for at least an hour, and Kristie is an extremely competent warden. She would have gotten you out of there before you had time to wake the magic up if she'd seen you on camera."

I hold up a staying hand to everyone as I work this out for myself. Fox and Bellamy both know what I'm doing and why I enjoy unraveling the mysteries of the paranormal for myself.

(It makes me feel smart, and I deserve to give myself good things, including the feeling of pride in myself.)

Are you saying that the previous Avatar, the one that the cherubs deposited three thousand years ago, is in that prison cell right now, and you put Bellamy in there with him? The cherubs trapped the magic of neutrality, a whole universal force, in a corpse?

"Partly. We don't think they could trap it in a corpse, but trapping it in a mostly dead body that hasn't given up its soul yet would be possible. It's probably under a preservation spell that's keeping the body on the line between life and death, and our parents hid it in an impenetrable cell behind some seriously heavy warding and then

built the prison on top of it to make sure there was always a warden in place even if the warden doesn't know what they're guarding," Akile explains.

"You think?" Bellamy questions with that look that says he's hiding his annoyance.

Akile shoots us an apologetic grimace. "We've only been working at this for a year, and we only found the prison two months ago. We're making educated guesses, but we're cherubs, Sexy Red."

Bellamy's ears turn red and his freckled cheeks flush, but he ignores his own embarrassment. "And a cherub's guess is as good as fact for the rest of us."

Akile shrugs and nods in agreement, smiling brightly at my son.

Gah, they're cute, right? Every time we meet someone new, I can totally see them and Bellamy hitting it off. I really need to stop shipping him with every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes along. Dick... hehe.

"Impenetrable?" Fox asks as intrigued as he ever sounds when in the company of strangers, so not at all. Clearly he hasn't decided if he's going to let me keep Akile yet. I don't mind. He can take his time coming around. Akile's ours, of course, but Fox can take his time realizing that.

Akile looks disgruntled with a cute line of frustration between his manicured eyebrows. "We have no idea what material our parents used or how the cell was constructed, but nothing we've tried has been able to penetrate the physical or magical barriers around the cell. It's really annoying, but we can't ask our parents, because then they'll know what we're doing. No one wants to alert them to our activities before we fix this idiocy."

"Why would you think that the seed of magic inside would be able to get through the

warding?” Bellamy questions dubiously.

“We put soldat worms on the cell to eat away at the warding,” Akile explains.

Fox considers this for a moment before saying, “I might be able to help. I’ll have to look.”

Akile smiles happily at him. “We would love the opinion of someone who was alive when the new government was instituted.”

“I was a child when the new government was instituted,” Fox responds flatly.

“Really?” Bellamy asks, surprised. “You were over six hundred years old then.”

It takes a hundred years for demon babies to be born; it’s not really a surprise that it takes a few hundred years for them to grow up.

Reminding them of that also makes me eye Fox. We’ve recently agreed to stop using condoms because it’s really unlikely that he’s going to get pregnant any time in the next thousand years, but still. I’m not father material for babies. I love them, but I also love handing them back to their parents when they’re upset.

“Demon spawn mature in about a hundred years. Elflings take a thousand,” Fox corrects. “I didn’t split the difference.”

Oh. He spent a thousand years growing up. That’s difficult to conceptualize, and if we ever have biological children that better not happen to us. I can’t imagine parenting for eighteen years, much less a thousand. I’d prefer the cherub way of doing things (the parents apparently get to choose how fast their babies grow up).

The taxi turns into the parking lot of what looks like it used to be a big box store

that's only a few blocks from Diner (where we had lunch), and the driver takes us straight to the front doors where she lets us off. Akile leads us inside to a reception area where a couple of toddler size cherubs are manning the front desk.

They. Are. Soooo fucking cute. Imagine Boss Baby irl. They have headsets on, and they're wearing office attire. One of them has a little green suit and the other is wearing slacks and a polo shirt. They're chatting with their heads together, and when we enter, they look up, smile, wave, and go back to their conversation.

Akile leads us past them, through an employees only door, and into a huge space filled with desks and the cherubs working at them. There are no walls, not even cubicle walls, except the four enclosing the space, and those four are covered in white laminate with colorful writing, formulas, and doodles drawn all over them. Every wall has at least eight cherubs at it working in pairs or groups, and the space is incredibly noisy.

It's amazing.

"Akile!" The exclamation comes from what looks like a teen girl, but these are cherubs. She's probably in the latter half of her first millennium.

Akile turns toward the girl, opening his arms before he sees her and catching her when she jumps at him. He squeezes her and spins her in a circle, kissing her cheek before releasing her back to her feet. He slings an arm around her shoulders, turning her to face us. "Meet Ace Aristide, my little brother. That's not his forever name; he's still choosing the right one, but Ace works for him for now."

Oh. Ok. He, not she; got it.

I reach out and shake Ace's hand, then look at Fox, who says what I'm thinking, "He's happy to meet you, and he thinks you're as adorable as your brother."

I nod to confirm his words since Ace might not know that Fox speaks for me.

He laughs. “Thank you. I’m really early in my transition and today felt like a cute boy day. I’ve only recently come out, and the only people who know are in this building.” He smiles, but it’s clear he’s telling us not to out him outside of this building. “So, like, if we meet on the street, call me Talia.”

“We will keep your confidence,” Fox says for us both. “Congratulations. We wish you well on your journey.”

Ace blushes with a smile. “Thank you.” He turns to Akile then. “Stacy is ready for you.”

Akile kisses Ace’s cheek again and drops his arm off his shoulders. “Thanks, bro.”

Ace flushes again, waves at us, and races off back to where he came from.

Akile beckons us to follow. “Stacy is the coordinator in charge of my division of the project. She’ll want to meet you, and then she’ll pair you with interviewers who are going to compile the data you provide into workable files that will become actionable plans.”

It’s all very organized.

Akile glances at his phone when the text goes through and he laughs. “We’re cherubs. No one is better at organizing than we are.”

Ace is a whiz with data management. He’s been interviewing me, and so far he’s let me tell him the (very truncated) story of how I fell in love with Fox and what happened when Bellamy was abducted. He’s been making notes and reading my story. He hasn’t asked any questions yet, but we’re finally finished with the retelling,

and he turns his attention away from his notes.

His curly hair is up on top of his head in a big puff, and it sways with his movement in a hypnotizing way. He's wearing a blue and pink crop top with a white butterfly on it, and I honestly should have picked up the transgender pride signs all over his person immediately upon meeting him. When Ace smiles, there's enough similarities between him and Akile that there's no mistaking them for anything other than siblings.

"Ok, next I'm going to ask some questions about the people you've met or mentioned," he explains congenially.

Being interviewed by a teenager is both strange and hits all the aww-how-cute buttons in me even though I'm only a few years out of my teens myself. I guess I feel like I'm more of an adult because of the whole homeless thing, and probably because I've adopted two people who are both older than me, or could be the surviving of three mass murders... There's a few things that make me feel more adult than my age would suggest.

"As a reminder, I'm visually recording this interview because you are unable to speak. We did the first part mostly via text, but with the question and answer section of this interview, I would appreciate it if you would use text to speech. It will be helpful for the other cherubs if they can see that all of your answers are your own. Some of our friends like to analyze body language, and you would make a wonderful study for them. Please feel free to be as expressive as you like during the interview, that would delight them to no end, and happy friends are always better friends."

We're not alone in this big room by ourselves. We're sitting in the middle, and one of the cherubs in the desk directly next to us turns around and confirms, "It's true. Jessie would be really happy if you did your best to act naturally. She's my friend, and when she's happy she bakes cookies. Cookies are the best, don't you think?" This

cherub looks like he's about eight years old.

"Cookies are the best," I agree via voice-to text. I hate it, and I grimace at the robotic voice. I wish I could just use Fox, but he's twenty feet away at a different desk with a different interviewer.

Ace gives me a sympathetic look. "Yeah, that's awful, but let me make some calls. I bet I can find a cherub who wants to make something that will give your voice-to-text a more natural sound."

"That would be great." I exaggerate my smile to let him know that dead-robot is not the tone I would choose. Not that any kind of reading machine is going to be able to intone the way I would if I could speak.

I would be amazing at intonation if I could do that, just saying.

"Ok, I'm going to ask about the people in your spheres of influence. We're going to start with the ones you know the best and move outward to the ones you know little about. We've already dismissed Bellamy and Fox as possible candidates for the avatar we're looking for. So let's start with Edovard."

He asks for basic vital statistics about Edovard, then does the same for Gregory and then Hassan. I tell him what I know, which isn't as much as I know about Edovard, but when I ask, he tells me that anyone with a clear alignment with Good or Evil isn't going to be an eligible avatar, so basically he's just gathering data so he can rule them out.

"Tell me about the Luna wolf you met, Tala," Ace says after he finishes filing Hassan under the heading of Never-Gonna-Be-More-Than-Santanos's-Lackey. Ok, I made that up. I'm sure the column is really just labeled Low Probability or something.

“Tala is-slash-was a bounty hunter. Last time I saw him he was screaming in agony as the bonds that tied him to his pack melted under Darcy’s magic.” Apparently it’s painful to have your pack bonds severed, and Darcy was angry enough that the magic he used to do it drew out the pain. “He saved Tala from three months of nutmeg poisoning to erode the bonds, but he wasn’t nice about it, and Tala has a blood bond to Darcy now too.”

I bet he’s still eating those nutmegs, because if I were him I’d be doing the same thing to get rid of a bond to Darcy. I mean, I have an unwanted bond with Darcy, but...

Well, the tracker is useful, and with how things have been going recently, I wouldn’t be surprised if the moment I broke the bond I suddenly needed it. Plus, it’s an ally agreement that means I can call on him any time if I need him, and he won’t offer Bellamy sex, which is important to me because Bellamy has terrible taste in men. So yeah, I’m keeping the blood bond with Darcy.

Ace quirks an eyebrow at me. “Darcy saved him from pack bonds he didn’t want, but he did it as painfully as possible?”

I nod because that’s an accurate summary, then I type out my response because he wanted my answers out loud. “Yes.”

“What do you know about Darcy?” he asks with an excited twinkle in his eye.

I have to think about that, because Darcy’s been with us almost from the beginning. “He’s like a distant cousin that no one likes.” I say that with an exaggerated grimace, and then I add, “Except, sometimes I think I do like him, and it pains me to admit that.” So much pain.

“So he is a Foxily?” Ace checks, and if I could groan I would.



Instead I slap my hand to my face and slide it down in exasperation, then nod with a grimacing frown. “Technically yes, he is a part of the Foxilys. Two of us have blood bonds with him. Bellamy and me,” I clarify. “He doesn’t live with us, but yeah, if he asked, we’d add him to the household.” It’d probably be in the basement, but Fox wouldn’t deny him a roof over his head.

“Would you classify him as generally good or generally evil?” Ace asks with more of that excitement.

Would I classify him—

Oh hey, that’s not a bad thought.

“Neither,” I answer, giving Ace exactly what he’s looking for. “Darcy falls firmly on neutral ground. He doesn’t abide any kind of great evil, but he’s not a good person. He’s the kind of person who does things for himself and to mold the world into what he wants it to be. Like, he thinks cherubs need to be protected, and he will track them down with alacrity, but he also has no qualms about threatening one with violence to get what he wants.” (Read my previous narration to see this in action.)

“Oh yeah, I heard about what he did to Verity,” Ace laughs. “She reverted back to a baby, and her parents were so upset with her that they kept her as an infant until yesterday. We rescued her as soon as she was potty-trained again.”

He points to an adorable toddler with a halo of ginger curls in a yellow and blue polka dot jumper sitting on the floor and drawing something on a blueprint.

“So, she took the job as a barista just to poison Bellamy.” That tracks—cherubs are probably the right people to be trying to find the Avatar of Neutrality; they have no issue doing sketchy things to accomplish their goal.

Gah. It's a good thing they're so fucking cute; people probably wouldn't let them get away with so much if they didn't have pretty-privilege.

Ace shrugs. "She liked the menial break, but she's an engineer with a background in architectural design. She's working on deconstructing the arctic prison blueprints to see if there's some part of that helping to keep the prison intact. We suspect it's acting like a funnel, feeding magic to the cell it's built on."

I'm not going to feel lesser because I'm looking at a toddler with more education than me. It's hard not to, but I remember that she's over five hundred years old, and I mean, even if she did get her education, the likelihood is that she didn't get a formal education until recently. It's not like there were a lot of good options for schooling five hundred years ago.

Huh. I wonder what she did before.

"What did you do with yourself before the modern age?" I ask, tilting my head in curiosity.

Ace mirrors my expression. "I was in school until I came here to work."

"Right, but what did you do before you could attend school? I'm not trying to be insensitive, but people presenting with female parts weren't exactly allowed to get formal education until the last century."

"Oh, you're thinking like a human. No, I didn't attend school on Earth. I spent most of my childhood at Potts University, which is on another planet in a different galaxy."

I stare at him like he didn't just drop a bomb on my perception of the universe. Is there any expletive stronger than HOLY SHITCAKES that would work in this situation? I can't think of one; I'm stuck on the whole planet in another galaxy thing.

Am I supposed to know that non-humans travel between galaxies? How? Seriously. HOW???

Fox appears by my side, resting his hand on my nape.

I blink a couple of times and take a deep breath, then Fox says. “He wants to know how.”

Ace frowns in confusion. “How what?”

Fox probes the connection between us, and I get my thoughts clarified, picking up my phone to rapid text. I hate the digital voice, but it gets my questions across.

“How did you travel between galaxies? How did you even find out about another whole civilization that far away? How do you even get a visa to go study on another planet?”

Ace’s confusion clears up and Fox snorts, letting me go and returning to his interview like this isn’t life-changing news.

\*eye roll emoji\*

I’m good with change because my life before this was ever-changing, and adaptability is basically my middle name (don’t say it, Capricorn is a terrible middle name), but this is pretty big even for me.

“Cherubs are from Yael; we migrated to Earth about three hundred thousand years ago, but we have an open gateway between our planets that any cherub can use. I asked my parents if I could study at Potts, and they moved our family there while I was too young to commute. When they decided I was old enough to commute, we moved back here.”

“You’re telling me that two different planets in two different galaxies evolved bipeds that look like us?” I give him a very skeptical look, because the monotone just isn’t conveying the doubt in my question right.

Ace laughs and shakes his head. “Not really. Cherubs are chameleons. We look like humans because that’s what it’s safest for us to look like. Cherubs are born with the ability to blend in. Here we look human because humans are the most dangerous species on the planet. The cherubs born on Yael look a little different because the most dangerous species closest to them isn’t humanity, but there’s been a quirk of evolution over the last few hundred millennia. Cherubs here evolved to look like humans and the cherubs on Yael also evolved to look like humans because of all the intergalactic travel and exchange, and the predatory Bourin, who hunted cherubs before we started keeping records, evolved to blend in with cherubs, so they also look human. It’s been a fascinating evolution for some of our scholars to watch.”

I drop my jaw and shake my head in small movements to get across my absolute shock at the evolution of species on two different planets because of humans. “That’s unbelievable. Two different planets have humanoids because of humans?”

Ace laughs. “More than two. Bourin are a species from a different planet in our galaxy, but most species look humanoid, if you hadn’t noticed. Interspecies procreation has been happening for a long time. Most of us look alike because of that. Shall we get back to Darcy?”

Right. Bunny trails are dangerous. (I hear bunnies are also pretty dangerous.)

“So you would categorize Darcy as a true neutral?” Ace asks, getting us back on track.

I exaggerate a nod. “Yes.”

Ace makes a note and asks about some of my encounters with Darcy, both the professional ones and the personal ones, and then he moves on. We talk about Julia, Jamie, Lionel (my friend who owns a food truck), all of the cherubs I've encountered, and as we get to people I barely know, he finally asks, "What about Elijah Penn."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

I blank for a moment because I have no idea who he's talking about until I suddenly remember. Elijah's the guy whose apartment I was squatting in when I met Fox. Huh. I bet he's back from his trip overseas by now. I wonder how he's doing. I hope he's safe from his stalker ex-boyfriend. That guy was a douche nugget.

"I stalked him for a few days after I overheard him talking about going abroad for the summer so that I could house sit for him. He's nice. Cute. I don't know much about him. He's studying kinesthetics, whatever that is. He has a lot of textbooks on the subject. Walks with a limp. Not too smart, though. I mean, he left his apartment wide open for a house sitter like me, you know?"

"You don't know anything about his ethical alignment?" Ace adds.

I shrug as my phone reads the message I type out. "He was just some guy. Nice enough, and I'm a little worried that he might not have taken my note seriously about his stalker, but I did my due diligence, so it's on him if he didn't. Well, it's possible that he's not back yet, I suppose."

Ace does a few typey-type things on his computer, and then frowns prettily. Handsomely? I wonder if he cares what descriptors I use. I should ask.

"Do you mind being called pretty or do you prefer handsome?"

Ace smiles at me. "I'm gorgeous, and sometimes I feel handsome and sometimes I feel pretty, and I'm ok with either descriptor as long as you respect my gender identity."

Awesome. I'm glad my thoughts wouldn't offend him. They're important for the story since I'm, you know, unspeaking, but I still want to get it right because: respect.

"Looks like Elijah is due back today."

Should someone go check up on him? Maybe I'll take Fox over there just to see how he's doing.

Ace smirks at me. "We're going to send someone to observe him," he informs me like he can read my mind.

"That's good. Let me know if he's still got a problem with the stalker."

Ace nods and makes a note. "I think we've talked about everyone I'm interested in."

"We should probably talk about Akile, since he's also a part of my circle now. He claimed me as best friend, and I'm down for that since I've never had one before."

Ace stills and looks at me for a long moment, and I see the calculations happening behind his eyes. He's thinking, Akile? But he's a cherub. Surely not. He's been trying to find the Avatar for a whole year, there's no way we missed this. Did we? Were we so involved in searching out the next Avatar that we didn't see the one amidst our own ranks?

Yeah, I know, I'm so good at reading people's nonverbal cues.

"The easy way to check is to send him to the prison to see if he wakes up the magic," Ace mutters, grimacing. "It won't hurt him."

"And you. You should also go too, since you're now a part of my sphere of influence." I point that out with a wide smile. "Cherubs would fit into the neutral

category.”

Ace stares at me with horror in his face. “We never should have brought you here. We’ll have to take everyone over there to see if the magic wakes up for them. Fuck.”

I laugh silently and shake my head. “I think you’re mostly safe. It seems like I’m bringing the right people into the family, so you can just exclude anyone who isn’t a Foxily for now.” If the avatar doesn’t make an appearance in a reasonable amount of time, then we can test all those tertiary characters.

Ace grimaces but accedes to my logic. “Yeah, that’s reasonable. So Darcy is in the full running, we’re eyeing Hassan and Gregory, but not seriously, and we’re keeping an eye out for the next Foxily to join the crew, though we do have to test Akile. He decided to join your family when he claimed the spot of best friend. What a moron.”

I laugh because that’s such a brotherly reaction that I might actually have to make Ace an honorary member of the Foxilys, and wouldn’t that just piss him right the hell off.

\*rolling on the floor, laughing emoji\*

One of my least favorite things to do is flying with Fox in his thunderbird form. There are a few ways to travel to the arctic where the prison for supernaturals is, but I’ve only ever traveled via Fox, and that was awful. Fortunately, the cherubs have a better way to get there: a portal that we pretend isn’t super illegal.

It opens to an ice cave where the human cult members who put Bellamy into the prison cell busted a hole in the wall of the prison. The cave is big enough to fit our group and probably another eight people, and it’s kept warm with hanging stationary balls of light that emit enough warmth to keep the cave comfortable without melting the ice surrounding us. The floor is covered in gravel to keep us from slipping on the



ice. The hole into the prison is hidden by an illusion that makes it look like the wall is whole on both sides, but Akile reveals the illusion by sticking his hand into the hole for a moment.

You realize that your hand is now slightly older than the rest of you.

I point that out, glad to be back in text mode. Letting RoboRom speak for me is the worst.

Akile looks at his hand like it's a foreign object. "Yeah, that's weird. Thanks for that thought; pretty sure it's going to keep me up at night."

You're welcome.

I smile brightly at him.

Only the best thoughts for you.

Akile shakes his head at me, clearly in awe of my love and friendship. "So I guess I'll just go hang out in there for a hundred years?" He looks at the illusion with some distaste. "I feel like I already mentioned that I am definitely not the avatar."

You can't decide that on your own; we need proof of concept.

"At least you won't be nailed to the ceiling," Bellamy points out helpfully.

Fox walks to a hole in the cave wall that presumably leads to the prison cell where the body of the previous avatar is kept. He struggles with how long Bellamy was in the prison, and even though we've killed everyone we knew for certain was involved in the imprisonment, I'm sure he's feeling at least slightly murderous toward the cherubs for their part in it. I bet he would put a cherub in the arena if he could pin

down who made the decision to put a contract on Bellamy.

I'm not sure if I want him to figure it out or not. On the one hand, no one fucks with the Foxilys, and if we haven't made that clear, we will happily make another high profile example, and another, and another until the whole world finally gets it. On the other hand, it's really foul to think about killing a kid, even if that kid is five hundred or more years old.

Yeah no, we're not killing cherubs. That's just wrong.

Me: If you figure out who made the final decision about the contract on Bellamy, turn them over to their parents for a time out or whatever. Like maybe they can regress them to infancy again or something.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: I understand.

Me: That is not an agreement.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: You're right.

Me: You can't kill a cherub.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: I assure you I am fully capable of killing a cherub.

Me: No.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: I understand.

Me: Hard limit.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: I won't kill a cherub unless they are adults and the depot has put the bounty on them.

Me: Acceptable.

Whew. He almost had me worried. Fox probably doesn't need me to tell him not to kill a cherub, but I feel better knowing for certain that we're on the same page about that.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: Or they do something to our family, but I will still limit my revenge to adults.

Me: Ok, yeah, that's fine too.

I look up from my text conversation with Fox and smile at the other two. They also look up with me as they finish reading the messages. I included them in the chat because it's rude to have a private conversation where other interested parties can't eavesdrop; I'm just nice like that.

Akile widens his eyes at me. "You know that technically I'm an adult."

I pat his shoulder and then hug him for emphasis.

It would hurt me if Fox hurt you, so he won't. What are you going to do for a hundred years?

He didn't bring anything with him, and it's not like there's anything in the cell.

Akile side-eyes me. "Hibernate."

Bellamy scowls at him. "You're going to sleep for a hundred years?"

Akile shrugs. “It’s a better way to pass the time than, um—” he stops talking and shrugs.

Bellamy snorts in disgust and follows Fox to the other cave.

I give Akile a look of sympathy. He didn’t know what was going to happen to Bellamy, and I’m sure he wouldn’t let anything like that happen to another Foxily now.

“He’s going to hate me forever, isn’t he?” Akile whispers wistfully. “Such a shame.”

I blink at him twice before replying.

He’s not off limits, but it would hurt me if anything hurt him.

The only person not allowed to fuck him is Darcy, unless Bellamy asks for it, of course. That’s part of the blood oath I have with Darcy.

Akile sighs. “Fine. I won’t flirt too much. So, come wake me up in an hour, please.”

I nod once, and Akile steps into the prison cell that’s going to age him a hundred years in about an hour. I set the alarm on my phone and go in search of my men, walking down a steep tunnel in a curve and finding them in another ice cave, staring at a wall of glowing green. It’s not a building material; the wall is crawling with bioluminescent bugs emitting green light. It’s both amazing and gross.

What is happening right now?

Fox reaches out and pulls a worm off the wall, showing it to me. “Soldat worms. They were created by a sorcerer to eat magic.”

These worms are fat and healthy, glowing brightly.

The cherubs are trying to use these to break through the magic.

Fox nods. "That's what they said."

Akile's hibernating, but I need to go get him in an hour. What are you going to do with this?

I wave at the wall of magic bugs.

Fox drops the soldat worm and then swipes a swath of them off a part of the wall. Underneath the bugs the material looks like stone, except it's glowing black. Don't look at me like that, how else am I supposed to describe a blackness that feels like it's emitting a glow? It's not purple like the misnamed blacklight. It's black for real, and my eyes are telling me it's glowing, hence glowing black.

"Well, that's not what I expected to see." Bellamy's dry declaration matches my thoughts, though I'm much less inclined toward understatement than my son.

Fox presses a hand to the material, closing his eyes and concentrating. I don't know what he's doing, but this is an opportunity. I loosen my muscles by shaking them out, close my eyes, and open my mind up to the telepathic bond between us. Maybe if I meditate on him I'll be able to hear his thoughts again.

Meditation isn't easy. It is, unfortunately, a precursor to sleep for me, so I have to practice it without letting my mind wander so far that I fall asleep.

Don't worry, I'm going to become the best at meditation just so I can telepathically communicate with my man. Practice makes better, right? And the last time I meditated I developed our telepathy way further than expected. This will be good for

me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

I open myself up to Fox and let my mind relax. My thoughts take me from a focus on my future husband to wandering through the processing of all I've learned today because of Akile and the interview with Ace. I catch a few stray thoughts that might be from Fox:

...feels soft.

...ward is woven deep.

That's a problem.

It's like—

A thought that sounds a lot like Amos, Fox's demon father, interrupts:

Never seen anything like it.

Then Dakota's voice breaks through, but it's staticky for me:

Where did—f—act—katie—oid

Fox's thought floats through my head:

We're under Arktis.

Dakota's static overwhelms my concentration, and I lose the connection to Fox, though I'm not jerked out of the meditative state completely.

My processing brain reminds me that Akile never answered the question about the human minions. Then it reminds me that the warden, Kristie, who helped us get Bellamy back, knows about the hole in the prison cell and it still hasn't been fixed. What's that all about?

I open my eyes, looking at Bellamy, who's turned his back on both me and Fox and is guarding us with a gun in one hand and his sword in the other. It's a bit overkill, but there are some bad guys who can't be killed with guns. Bullet holes apparently heal faster than they kill for some people, but only an immortal can survive a beheading.

I check my phone. It's been about forty minutes since Akile went into the prison cell to see if he can wake the magic up, so I type out a message to Bellamy and shove it under his nose so he can read it without having to put one of his weapons away.

Akile didn't answer the question about why humans. And you didn't ask about the person that hid themselves from you. The cult deity. We should ask about that.

Bellamy's eyes narrow as he reads and then he frowns. "That is rather strange. He's been more transparent than not."

Bellamy and Fox killed the human cult leaders that were responsible for digging the tunnel to the prison, although now that I'm looking at it, I realize this is a cave. Yes, it was dug out, the tools marks are clear, but this isn't a tunnel.

The cherubs have expanded this from a tunnel to a cave.

Bellamy uses his sword to point to a small opening hidden across from the tunnel we walked through to get from one room to the next. "I believe that was the first tunnel dug, and the humans dug from here up to the prison cell above."

I move closer to the smaller tunnel and use my phone's flashlight to peer into it. It's



smaller; I would have to crawl to move comfortably through it. I could knee walk, but I'd have to duck under any jutting ice. It's the perfect tunnel size for a small cherub, but the humans that we killed would have had a hard time with it.

Honestly, I'm good with that. They nailed my son to a ceiling, any suffering they went through was not enough.

Turning away, because it's cool but not that interesting in the long term if you're not a kid playing in it, I frown, heading back to the cave with the hole into the prison cell. Time to go wakey wakey Akile-bakey.

I step into the prison cell where Akile is asleep on the cot. Turning the volume up on my phone, I blast a rock cover of Bad Habits. I've been really into rock covers of pop songs recently, don't ask.

It's about halfway through the chorus before Akile opens his gorgeous hazel eyes. He blinks at me as the fog of his hibernation lifts. His hair has grown out like Bellamy's did, reaching the longest length it can. He's surprisingly fresh considering he's been asleep for a century. There's got to be some kind of preservation magic on this cell, because Bellamy wasn't rank when we got him either. He should probably smell worse than he does for being a century older than he was an hour ago.

He sits up and stretches out, popping all his joints and neck before standing. He runs his hands over his knee length curls and quickly braids them into a loose rope as thick as his neck. He pulls a black hair tie from his pocket and secures the braid by pulling the hair through the tie once. Just once. That's how big the braid is: it's secured in an elastic without having to twist it at all. Honestly, it's impressive.

"Ok, so I'm definitely not the next avatar if the theory that having the next one in proximity would be enough to wake the magic up," he informs me cheerily. "Let's get out of here before I get hangry."

We leave the cell and I point to the other cave where Bellamy and Fox are, so we join them. Bellamy's still standing guard with a gun and a sword, and Akile whistles as soon as he sees him.

"Look at that ginger hottie ready to rumble. Gah! To have a man look after me like that."

Bellamy's eyes flick to Akile, but he otherwise ignores the comment even though his face flushes.

I push Akile's back and move him behind Bellamy.

Done. A man looking after you like that.

I show Akile the message instead of sending it. I know from experience that when Fox's phone vibrates when he's busy, he becomes unbusy very quickly. He refuses to ignore text messages in case I'm trying to contact him. I love that man more than anything even if he somehow misplaced my ring.

Akile laughs. "I think that just makes me collateral."

Bellamy's dry voice interjects. "You're supposed to read his messages aloud. Papa doesn't like to disinclude anyone in the same room from his conversations."

I point to Bellamy's back because that's true and he's not facing us.

Akile nods. "He said, 'Done. A man looking after you like that.'"

Bellamy makes a pained sound. "Papa, stop. Seriously. I'm not... I'm not there yet."

I grimace. Bellamy is emotionally and mentally ok after his torture and confinement

in the prison, but he's not exactly the same as he was when he went in. He's more protective than he was before, more focused on creating the life he wants to have. When we pulled him out of that cell, his hair was so long he looked like a Disney princess. He didn't cut it. He braided his rich ginger hair into two ropes and he wears it hanging down to his calves. He fixed his beard, though. He doesn't look like merlin, just like a badass ginger Viking with beard braids. Beard. Braids.

Who then turns red every time someone flirts with him.

It ruins the aesthetic, honestly.

I hold up my phone to Akile to read.

"I'll stop when you get a shave and a haircut."

"No!" Akile protests as soon as he finishes reading my text aloud. "He looks like an angry old god, and I love the aesthetic!"

Bellamy turns enough to shoot me a look that says he'll cut his hair when he's good and ready and no sooner, and then he returns his attention to the doorways where no one is going to come. It makes him feel better to guard us, and I'm not going to discourage him, especially when he has a ward to protect him as long as he's Fox's Acolyte.

"Romily," Fox's voice pulls me away from those concerns about Bellamy, and I turn to the love of my life with an expectant expression.

Done talking to your fathers? I think toward him.

It must work because his gaze turns approving. "The prison is made of the remnants of an asteroid. Dakota thinks it may date back to the K-T boundary. It's been molded

into this prison by a master alchemist and metallurgist and the wards were set by a cooperative group of magic users from each discipline. In order to break in we need”—he glances toward Akile, calculates whether he’s going to actually accept Akile like he has everyone else I’ve brought into our family, and decides he’s still all in with whatever makes me happy— “a group of magic users at least as powerful as Darcy, but from all the possible disciplines. Darcy covers blood magic, hearth magic, fire and dance magic, but there are more disciplines of magic than I can easily name off the top of my head. I’ll be able to stand in for the magic of my parents, but we’ll have to first find an exhaustive list of magic types, and then we need to find people with enough power who’re willing to sacrifice some of themselves to break the wards on this prison.”

“An exhaustive list? Where are we going to find something like that?” Bellamy asks, holstering his gun now that Fox is back with us. He keeps his sword out.

Fox eyes Akile.

Akile shrugs with a bright-eyed smile. “We can ask the friends to find one for us, but last year the cherubs found a new class of magic users, so what we really need is an exhaustive list from the time our parents put the ward up.”

Fox shakes his head. “No. We need a current list. The ward is living and adaptive. Dakota said he felt a strand of technomancy in it, and that’s only a few hundred years old.”

Akile’s smile transforms into a grimace. “Let’s go back so we can start the friends building the list of magic. We might have to track down the rare users, but I’m sure the friends will be able to do most of the work.”

“Perfect,” Bellamy drawls, leveling Akile with a look that makes me worry for my bestie. “Now, it’s time to explain the human cult, and the person who broke through

the wards of this prison to put me here.”

Akile narrows his eyes at Bellamy and his lips press together like he’s thinking of keeping his silence.

Fox draws his sword with the ominous sound of the metal leaving the scabbard, punctuating Bellamy’s expectancy.

Honestly, RIP, Bestie, if you don’t answer my son’s question.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Akile sighs. “The cherubs didn’t notice the problem on our own, remember. We were recruited to the cause. Well, it takes money to have a cause, you know, and humans like to belong to organizations.”

“The cult,” Bellamy grunts, shaking his head. “Who’s leading it? And how are they convincing the humans to work for them?”

Akile runs his hands over his long braid in a nervous movement. “Apophis, Loki, Eris, and Tiamat have four cults that all work together for them. They have human followers that worship them as their deities, and they each have companions that function as oracles for the humans.”

I recognize those names. Those are gods, except I’ve been assured that no one knows if God actually exists, but there are very powerful beings capable of forming spiritual connections to worshippers; hence the appearance of cults. They’re usually unstable and fail after some time, but that’s how cults are formed.

Bellamy looks taken aback, and Fox’s sword arm drops a full inch. What the fuck is happening with my boys?

“Those beings are recorded as permanently dead,” Fox states firmly.

Akile folds his hands in front of himself and gives us a cute nod. “I know. They spread rumors of their deaths in order to hide their activities. They made sure that the cherubs thought that they died of suffering in the wake of losing the universal force that defines them.”

“They’re all gods of chaos,” Bellamy murmurs, shaking his head. “You’re working for the gods of chaos.”

Akile shrugs cutely and nods, batting his eyes innocently. “So are you.”

I point at Bellamy because Akile’s right. Fox committed us to this adventure. Although I wonder if we should be worried about that.

“Which one nailed me to the ceiling?” Bellamy asks in that polite tone he gets when he’s trying to mask his emotions.

Akile blinks at him twice then his lips spread into a wide mischievous smile. “Oh, that was Apophis.”

Fox and Bellamy slide their swords into their sheaths at the same time, and the mirroring reactions give me a chubby I am not embarrassed to admit is because of them both. Fox is just going to have to be ok with the fact that his training is making Bellamy more attractive. I promise I won’t cheat on my man, but there’s no way I’m denying that Bellamy is sexy.

Fox snorts and pulls me into his arms, dipping me backward to kiss me like the stunning princess I am. I wrap my hands around his shoulders and lose myself in his amazing lips. His hand slides down my side to my leg, lifting it until I’ve wrapped that leg around his waist. If we don’t get to go straight to a bed where we can consummate our love after this, I’m going to tell Fox to cut someone. (I wouldn’t do it; that would negate my personal ward.)

Fox suddenly pulls me upright and slings me over his shoulder. “Go on ahead,” he tells Bellamy and Akile as he walks through the opening into the prison cell where time is sped up.

Oh, hmm, are we fucking now? Nice.

Fox sets me back on my feet and immediately strips off his shirt. He pushes his yoga pants off along with his shoes but keeps his belt and sword on. God, I'm the luckiest mute boy on the planet. Look at him. He's ripped like a fighter, covered in scars and tattoos, with the most beautiful cock ever seen on a man, and I'm not even worried anymore about the fact that he doesn't have a ballsack. (His species has internal reproductive organs.)

I reach out to his cock and he interrupts my reverie by pulling at my shirt. I'm not wearing a suit because those are my work clothes, but I did put on a Santanos shirt. It's a designer blouse and Fox rips the shirt open, sending buttons flying. I'll be annoyed with him when I'm half dressed in front of the cherubs later. Right now, oooh, I'm hot for his enthusiasm.

He wrenches my shirt down and tosses it away, and before he can ruin the buttons on my pants, I get them open and pushed down to my thighs. Fox takes over from there, pulling them down as he takes a knee and sucks my cock into his hot mouth. He insists I remove my pants completely, which means he takes my shoes off too.

While he sucks my dick.

Competence, amiright?

He's so fucking sexy, and I think those complimentary thoughts very loudly in his direction.

He moans, letting go of his usual stoicism because he knows how much I love the noises he makes when we're together.

As soon as my pants are off, he tosses them away and tackles my nuts, licking them,



sucking one and then the other, driving me wild with need as he runs his hands up and down the back of my legs.

His hands make their way to my ass, and he squeezes my cheeks, swallowing my shaft and pulling me in so he can push his nose into my neatly trimmed hair. He swallows around me again and again until I'm so close I'm starting to wonder if he wants to get off like this, and then Fox retreats, leaving me hanging on the edge.

He stands, pulling me in for another deep kiss as he backs me up. The back of my legs hit the cot and Fox helps me down. He sits me against the wall and climbs on with me, straddling me. I hold my cock up for him as he sits on it, pushing me into his hot, wet hole in one quick motion.

He groans in relief. "Yes," he rasps, tilting his head back, exultant.

I shift my hips, thrusting up as he presses down, and he hums his enjoyment. I pull back as he lifts. We slam back together, and lightning pleasure shoots through me as we hit a perfect rhythm. Fox bounces on my cock like it's his job, and I meet him thrust for thrust like it's mine. We're the most perfect team, always have been. This man is my perfect match, a soulmate if humans could have them. (We don't, but he assures me that fae have something like it. A soul's mate. It's not the same, he swears, but it is. It totally is.)

Fox gasps and his body tenses. I grab his cock and jerk him as he erupts, painting me in his silky, white cum. I thrust in deep and hold as he pulses around me. My orgasm blasts through me, and if I could, I'd be yelling to help dispel the intensity of the pleasure.

Fuck. Every time with this man is better than the last.

Fox takes his cock in hand, jerking himself off with rough fast strokes. I reach up and

tweak his nipples, playing with him as I rock my slowly softening cock inside him. His second orgasm comes quickly, before I've even gone fully soft, and he groans with it, panting and curling in on himself as he empties his balls all over me.

After the tremors and aftershocks run their course, Fox stands, pulling me to my feet with him. Looking down at me with a soft smile on his kiss-red lips, he wipes a bit of cum off my chin and into my mouth. "I love you," he murmurs.

I swallow the evidence of his love and mouth the words back to him.

He chuckles like he always does when I pretend like I learned how to talk at any point in my life. (I haven't.)

"A thief stole your ring while it was in transit from the jeweler to the store, and the fence who acquired it sold it out from under me to some fuck named Jethro. I decided I didn't want to cut the ring off some asshole's hand because you deserve better than a second hand ring. I found another jeweler who's making you another ring, but it's a custom design and I ended up on a waiting list, but I should be able to pick it up at the end of the week."

It sounds like he's been on an adventure without me. When did he have time to go tracking down a fence without me?

He chuckles softly. "You go shopping with Bellamy, Edovard, and Annette."

Oh. Yeah, ok. Bellamy, Daddy, Pupper, and I go shopping on Tuesdays because Daddy likes to spoil her sugar baby and her grand sugar babies. We meet for brunch and mimosas, peruse some of the stores owned by non-humans, and spend more of Annette's money than we really should. We usually catch a matinee, and then have an early dinner with Daddy's wife and Fox. Since I adopted Edovard, he's joined us once and dinner ended up with Santanos, Hassan, and Gregory joining us too. It was

actually a nice family meal even with Gregory grumping about the company as much as the food.

Ok, so Fox used the time away to track down the fence. Loudly, I mentally wonder if he caught the thief since my phone is in my pants and they're on the floor.

Fox's mouth splits into a rare smile. "I caught the thief before I found the fence. She won't be stealing anyone else's diamonds any time in the near future."

Is she in this prison?

"Why are you naked in my prison?" Warden Kristie asks, stepping into the cell.

Fox and I both turn at her entrance, and his mask of stoicism returns. "We've only been in here a few seconds," he says levelly.

"I happened to see that someone was in here about ten minutes ago, and came down to check it out since there shouldn't be anyone in here."

Ah, that makes sense. She probably saw Akile, and we're just unlucky enough to have been the ones she caught.

"I'm conducting an investigation," Fox explains, and she gives him a pointed once over.

We are naked, after all. I don't know of any official reason why an investigation would occur naked and end with me covered in spunk. Yeah, she's not buying it.

Fox maintains eye contact for several seconds before reaching down to grab my pants and hand them to me. "Why haven't you repaired the hole in the wall?" he asks like he isn't gathering our clothes after two definitely-not-government-sponsored

orgasms.

Kristie watches him as he pulls his pants on. Honestly I don't blame her, he's very watchable. "I was told that the council would take care of the details."

Fox hands me his A shirt and uses my buttonless blouse to wipe up the cum all over us. I should be embarrassed about this, I'm sure. That would be the normal human reaction, wouldn't it? I just...

I can't seem to muster shame for getting caught after an interlude with Fox. Kristie is a warden in a prison where privacy doesn't exist. Surely she's seen worse than two people messy from expressing their love.

"Expect to see me and my investigators in and out of this cell. Keep the cell door locked. If you see someone in here, you can call me to confirm it's one of my people."

Kristie presses her lips together and narrows her eyes at Fox. "Sure. I have to call the council to make sure this is a sanctioned investigation."

Fox pulls his phone from his yoga pants pocket, taps out a message, and ushers us out into the prison proper. His phone immediately starts ringing on speaker.

There's a click, then, "Switchboard."

"Please connect me to the first available councilor. This is Arlington Fox."

A few moments later, we hear, "Councilor Patervulpis here. Arlington?"

How did he get his own dad using the switchboard?

“I’m here with Kristie Quarles, the warden of Arktis,” Fox says, then holds his phone up for Kristie to talk into.

“Hello, Warden Quarles. What can I do for you?” Dakota asks in his official councilor tone. He never speaks to his family like that, but no one speaks to business associates like they do with their family.

“Mr. Fox says that he’s conducting an investigation and will require use of the compromised prison cell. I’m just checking that his investigation is approved by the council.”

“Arlington has the council’s approval to pursue justice for his Acolyte by any means, including an investigation of the compromised cell,” Dakota confirms.

“I found him and his Harbinger naked in the cell. They didn’t come through the front door,” Kristie deadpans, skeptically.

Dakota is silent for a moment. “Ah. I’ll have a conversation with Arlington about that.”

“Yes, sir,” she agrees, then steps back from the phone.

Fox pulls the phone back to him. “I’ll stop by before I go home,” he tells his dad, then hangs up.

Kristie looks between me and Fox. “I’ll ignore any flickers I see in this cell until the hole is fixed.”

Fox acknowledges that with a small dip of his chin, then he pushes me to the cell door. “Lock the door behind us,” he commands, and we step back into the cell.

I grab my shoes and socks and get them on while Fox does the same. He's shirtless now, and he hands me my blouse to carry, which is fine. He might need his hands free to kill someone. Don't know what we're going to find on the other side of the illusion, even though it's barely been five minutes in real time, and most of that was spent talking to Dakota.

Are we really going to talk to Dakota about fucking in semi-public places?

I text that to my Fox because I'm not sure about getting that through telepathically.

Fox snorts, shaking his head as we head through the hole in the wall. "No. We're going to talk to him about unleashing the Avatar of Neutrality, and how he and my fathers can help by keeping the adult cherubs away from Arktis."

That's a good idea. No matter their current alignment, the fathers will support Fox's decisions. They trust their son and will follow his lead.

We step through the portal and into the antechamber the cherubs have secured specifically for this portal. Bellamy and Akile turn at our entrance, and since we're both disheveled and Fox currently doesn't have a shirt, it's pretty apparent what we've been doing.

"How could it possibly have taken five minutes to get your rocks off? That's almost a decade. I cannot image you spent a decade fucking." Bellamy's dry remark is accompanied by an arched eyebrow.

We had to speak to the warden so she wouldn't get suspicious of activity in the cell.

I'm not going to tell them that she caught us post coitus. That's between me, Fox, and Kristie.

Bellamy's brow doesn't return to a relaxed position.

Akile nods knowingly. "Oh, that's a good idea. It's nice to have a Reaper on our side to take care of details we hadn't worked out yet."

Yep. That's exactly what happened.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Daddy: Did you get caught naked in Arktis?

Me: Dakota cannot keep his big mouth shut, can he?

Daddy: I pay him to give me all the council tea.

Me: I think that's illegal.

Daddy: I'm the Avatar of Good, not the Avatar of Law.

Me: I'm not sure if bribing councilors falls into the category of "good."

Daddy: It does if it helps me maintain the balance.

Me: Gawd, I love you. How's the waifu?

Daddy: Bonnie's as beautiful as ever. Having a brat day, though. I'm taking her to the opera tonight and got us reservations at Hint for dinner afterward. Why are you distracting me from your sexscapades in a prison cell in Arktis. Why were you even there?

Me: Investigating Bellamy's abduction, and we decided to take advantage of the situation. You know we're still in our honeymoon stage.

Daddy: Well, at least you didn't end up getting arrested for public sex acts. The Patervulpises had to fake their deaths with the humans last time they got caught fucking in public just to avoid getting their faces and pictures up on the sex registry.



There is so much to unpack in that paragraph. Fox and I were in a semi-private cell in a private prison. If Akile hadn't spent an hour there, we wouldn't have gotten caught at all. Fox's parents seem like the type to get frisky in a public park.

Me: You know what, I'm just going to use that if they try to lecture us about getting caught. What was their last name before Patervulpis?

Daddy: Steinfar.

Me: Thank you, Daddy!

I run that word through a translator that detects language and come up with a translation of "stone father."

I eye Fox from the stairs to the basement as he and Bellamy spar. It's the only time that Fox can attack Bellamy without regard to Bellamy's ward. Somehow the ward knows when it's supposed to allow Fox to hit Bellamy.

Was your previous last name Stone?

I think that very loudly.

A few minutes later, Bellamy hits the floor and Fox backs up, turning to me. "Yes."

Bellamy looks between us as he pops up onto his feet, and Fox explains, "He guessed my previous surname."

Bellamy reties his braids into a bun on the back of his head as he catches his breath. "Stone? How did you guess?" he asks.

Instead of thinking loudly to Fox, I type out my response and let RoboRom talk for

me. “Daddy told me what your grandfathers’ previous name was and I put it through a translator.”

Bellamy’s accepted the family dynamic I’ve built in the last few months and doesn’t even blink at my words. I love that for him. “What was it?”

“Steinfar,” Fox answers for me so we don’t have to deal with RoboRom. “It’s Norwegian. It means ‘stone father.’”

“Do they just pick a language when they’re making up their name?” Bellamy asks.

Fox sighs, grabbing two sweat towels and tossing one to Bellamy. “They usually pick a language that makes their name sound reasonable.”

“What did they choose when you were Blackblade?”

I want to know that too, so I’m glad Bellamy asks.

Fox grimaces. “Dadelanndubh. They went Irish on that one, sort of.”

“They are not allowed to pick their name when we all change our name to Foxily,” I insist.

My men both freeze in their tracks at the thought of that, and then nod in full agreement.

“What would they do with that?” Bellamy drawls, grabbing his smartwatch and slipping it on his wrist.

Fox does the same, and now I don’t have to let RoboRom speak for me.

“Corrupt it beyond recognition, and they’d be proud of it,” Fox predicts with a look of disgust.

Yeah, I’m seeing that happening too. I’ll just have to intercede to save my good name from the corruption of overzealous fathers.

Speaking of, we’re meant to meet Dakota in about an hour, so we should get a move on that. I stand and Fox joins me on the stairs, stopping to kiss me before murmuring. “Join me in the shower?”

If I do that, we’ll be late meeting Dakota. I’m ok with that. Dakota can be ok with that too; Fox is more important to me than a meeting with his omp is.

Dakota works in the same building we go to when we meet with the entire council, which has happened twice. Most people in the non-human community don’t ever meet with the council, and I’ve attended two council meetings because the people in my family keep needing council approval for things that we require for our happiness and/or survival.

I wonder if they’ve replaced the council person we killed yet. They should probably wait on that considering we’re about to unleash a whole Avatar and there will need to be representation on the council for that Avatar. Huh. Funny how the plot works out, isn’t it? You’d think I was making this up.

Inside the nondescript building in the middle of an open field that we have to portal to because it’s located somewhere in Australia, we make our way to the floor where Dakota’s office is. I’ve never actually been to visit him at work before, and when we arrive, Tag’s behind the secretary’s desk, talking into a headset as he types on his computer. I knew Tag worked with Dakota, but seeing the blue elf in his professional setting solidifies the nebulous idea of Tag and Dakota working together.

He waves us through to Dakota's office without breaking the stride of his typing, which is impressive since he switches from two handed to one handed typing. Talk about multitasking; this is why I aspire to grow up to be like him. He's an organizational miracle.

Fox strides through the door separating Dakota's office from Tag's domain, and I follow him through, closing the door behind me. Bellamy chose to stay home since it doesn't take all of us to get the fathers on board with overthrowing the machine. I came because I was curious and Fox deserves to have my company as often as possible. We travel separately for work most of the time, so this is a treat for me.

"Arlington, Romily," Dakota says in a detached manner. It's not widely known that Fox is related to the Patervulpises. For a reason that no one has yet explained and I haven't guessed, Fox and his fathers don't claim each other publicly. That's something to research later.

"We need privacy wards," Fox tells him without preamble. "And Tag should be in here for this."

Dakota barely reacts, but a spark of electricity jumps from his nose to a lightning rod on his desk.

I blink at that.

My future father-in-law has a lightning rod on his desk, and now that I'm looking at it, his computer is in a faraday cage. Hmm.

Is this why you don't have a computer at home?

I send that to the group chat that includes Fox and his fathers. If we're going to include Tag in this conversation, we might as well invite Bear and Amos too.

The hair on my arms rises and goosebumps creep up my spine as the air in the room electrifies with Dakota's magic. Another burst of electricity arcs to the lightning rod, and then Dakota's formal mien relaxes slightly. "The room is warded. Tag is waiting for Bear and Amos, and they'll join us in a few minutes."

Fox sits across from Dakota on one of the armchairs available for his guests, and he pulls me into his lap. I cannot overstate how much I love being Fox's lap boy. "I don't have any use for a computer when a phone can do everything I need," Fox explains. "And it's easier to protect my phone from magical surges than it is to protect a computer."

Dakota scoffs. "You stopped having emotional surges when you were a mere four hundred years old. Still a child. When was the last time you surged? I think we were traveling through Asia at the time, weren't we? Hiding behind glamour to fit in with the local population. You were such a cute boy, and everywhere we went, the hospitality of the people kept us comfortable. You charmed a warrior who wanted to buy you for his wife. You were having none of that. The people thought he was struck down by Tengri and that you were one of the universe's chosen ones. We didn't disabuse them of that notion. I think that was your first kill, actually."

Dakota in a nostalgic mood is amazing. He remembers Fox's first murder. His. First. Murder.

Can you imagine? It's 1200 B.C.E and you're Fox, traveling the world with your family, and some guy decides to try to buy you. I'm not even surprised four hundred year old Fox decided death was warranted. I mean, I'm sure the buying and selling of people was common back in the Bronze Age (Might've been the Iron Age for Asia, what do I know? I didn't graduate high school, and I didn't do well in school when I was in it, so... let's just say Google is my friend when I need to know something), but Fox wouldn't have stood for that. He probably had half of his ethics figured out by then, and he would have decided that slavery was unethical.

“He didn’t want me for his wife. He wanted me to be his wife. How did you forget that?” Fox questions, staring at Dakota like he forgot the most important detail, which to be fair, seems like he did.

“Surely not. You were a child,” Dakota disagrees, but he doesn’t sound completely sure about that.

Fox squeezes me as I do a quick calculation on my phone.

By child do you mean you looked like you were about eight years old?

Chris (aka Bear, Fox’s human father): Are you talking about that time he killed that warlord in Mongolia?

Me: Dakota was telling us about Fox’s first murder.

Drama Llama (aka Amos, Fox’s demon father): That wasn’t his first murder. He killed an imp that snuck into our house in Hell when he was barely fifty years old.

“It’s only murder if it’s intentional. You were an infant. I don’t count the imp you electrocuted because she decided to try to kidnap Amos’ baby. You electrocuted all of us when you were upset. If we hadn’t been immortal, you would have killed us. You did kill Bear. He’d never died that way before you were born.” Dakota smiles fondly.

Fox was a murder baby.

“You’re both wrong,” Fox says as his other fathers join us.

“Wrong about what?” Bear asks, pulling me off Fox’s lap to give me a hug.

He pulls back, examining my face. He's the parent who looks like Captain America and Thor figured out how to have a baby together, and he was the result. He's literally classically handsome, and honestly, it's no wonder the other fathers fell in love with him and decided to immortalize him. He's so handsome that he definitely deserves to be immortalized for all eternity.

"The Mongolian warlord was not my first murder, and it doesn't count as murder if it's a baby reacting to his environment. My first murder was an elf on Fae before you decided to drag me all over this planet. Her name was Aiste, and she eviscerated my dog, so I eviscerated her."

Fox's stoically delivered words drop like a bomb among his fathers, but I can't say I'm all that surprised. It would be love for a pet that launched Fox's career; that just makes sense to me. He's very loyal to the people he loves; I imagine he would have the same loyalty to the pets he loves too.

"You killed Aiste?" Tag gasps, horrified. "She was forty thousand years old. She was—"

"She killed Agatha," Fox interrupts with ice in his voice.

Tag stares at him in horror. "Agatha wasn't even your dog! She was Aiste's dog!"

Fox shakes his head. "Agatha adopted me, and Aiste killed her for it. I have no regrets."

I live for this family drama. I love these men so fucking much. I would kill for them all. Or rather, I would sic Fox on anyone who needed a final life lesson about fucking with my family, which includes Fox's fathers.

"Son." Tag emphasizes that like he might want to throttle Fox right now. I hear that.

Parenting can be so difficult sometimes. Like, you love your kid, but sometimes...

“Athair,” Fox returns steadily.

“Maybe we should leave the past behind us and talk about why Arlington called a family meeting in Dakota’s office,” Bear suggests, pulling Tag into his arms and then sitting with him on his lap.

Tag is so like me. If there is a lap to sit on, we’re there. Maybe I should say I’m like him, since he is an indeterminate number of thousands of years older than me. I’m honestly afraid to ask, knowing that Fox killed an elf who was in her forty thousands. That’s... not an amount of time I can conceptualize yet.

Yet, because I’m effectively immortal now, and I will become actually immortal after Fox retires from reaping. When that happens, I’ll be around for when crows evolve into the dominant intelligent species on the planet. What? You think I’m joking? They’re already using tools and teaching their friends and offspring how to make and use them. I’m pretty sure they’re going to go big-brain eventually. Crows are up-and-comers in evolution’s Survival of the Fittest arena, and I’m here for it.

“Arlington?” Dakota asks with some authority, moving us on from Fox’s first murder.

Fox, being the loquacious and verbose man that he is, says, “My fated mate is the chosen one, and we’re going to unleash the neutral force and force a government overhaul.”

I make sure everyone can see me pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh as loudly as possible, shaking my head at my soulmate like I can’t believe I let him even start this conversation. I drop my hand to stare dryly at my future husband, hold up my hand to the fathers so they will give me enough time to type things out properly, and then I



send them all a real explanation.

We're working with the cherubs to correct the great injustice that their parents perpetuated on the world when they established the current system of government here 3000 years ago. The cherubs at the time mostly killed the Avatar of Neutrality and trapped the universal neutral force in the almost all the way dead body, imprisoned it in the arctic ice, and built Arktis on top of it to keep it from being discovered and probably to feed it magic to sustain the prison.

The air in the room grows heavy with the weight of Dakota's electric magic. I really hope that lightning rod is good at its job.

Now we need a group of magic users that represent every known discipline of magic to break the ward on the prison, and it would be helpful if they're all like Darcy Hellspinner, representing multiple disciplines. The cave that was dug out by the cults that belong to a bunch of not-so-dead deities of chaos isn't that big, so we need to limit the number of people we invite to help break the ward.

Before they can ask, I check with Fox if it's ok to out the beings that have been hiding their living status for millennia, and he nods.

Tiamat, Loki, Apophis, and Eris.

Lightning snaps from Dakota to the lightning rod, the crack of it making me jump.

"How did we forget about the Avatar of Neutrality?" Amos demands, looking around at his husbands as if they're going to have the answers to all life's mysteries.

They might, but I think I can answer this one.

The cherubs somehow made it so that people forgot about the neutral force.

“But how?” Amos says, completely unhinged by this. “There have been neutral Avatars since before I was born, and I remember when my people started counting time in longer segments than ‘seasons.’ How did the cherubs make every realm forget about a universal force?”

I peer at Amos because what does that mean? Longer segments than seasons? Has he been alive long enough for demons to define what a year is? That’s... fuck. That’s another difficult-to-conceptualize time thing.

“It’s possible that trapping and imprisoning the universal force may have resulted in the unintended consequence of forgetting that it existed,” Tag suggests, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

Dakota shakes his head, grim and pissed. “No. The only way that we would have forgotten about the universal neutral force is if the force of good and the force of evil participated in this atrocity. Now that I know what you were doing under Arktis, I don’t think you need representatives of every type of magic to break the ward. I think all you need are the three avatars.”

But we don’t have an Avatar of Neutrality, I remind him, because that seems important.

“You don’t have an active Avatar, but the force is there; that should be enough as long as you also have the Avatars of Good and Evil there as well.” Dakota stands from behind his desk and comes around, leaning against it and pulling Amos to his side. “You’re going to have to bring the Avatars into this, but I assume there’s a reason we’re having this meeting behind the privacy of a ward?”

Fox’s hands flex on me like he thinks he needs a weapon in hand. “We’re overthrowing a system of government.”

Someone's going to try to stop us.

Maybe. Probably. Overthrowing a government seems like the kind of thing that someone is going to try to stop, you know?

“You're remodeling it at worst,” Tag scoffs. “And that's only to put it back to the way it's supposed to be. But we will be here to help and run interference for you however you need us to. Dakota, you're going to have to make sure the council doesn't fill the open position for now. I have a feeling we're going to need it for a representative of neutrality.”

Ha! Called it, didn't I?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Me: We're having a family meeting tomorrow at 7. Fox just harvested eight eggplants, so we're having an Italian themed eggplant dinner. Don't let anything make you miss this meeting so I'm not forced to send Fox and Bellamy to hunt you down.

I send that to the entire family.

Daddy's Waifu: We'll be there. I love eggplant!

Daddy: I have gifts!

Me: I love gifts! Are they shiny?

Daddy: So shiny.

Me: I'll make eggplant rollatini and an extra eggplant lasagna that you can put in your freezer.

Daddy's Waifu: This is why you're my favorite kid.

Daddy: Happy wife. Happy life.

Evil Son-in-Law (aka Santanos): Does this have anything to do with the ruckus Dakota caused when you visited him this morning?

Me: We will not discuss the topic until we're all behind wards and not being spied on by Big Brother.

Evil Gnome (aka Gregory): We will have to leave all our devices in a different building or I can bring a signal scrambler.

Pupper: What is a signal scrambler question mark oh shoot no don't

Edovard was probably trying to use his text-to-speech and accidentally sent the message instead of searching google.

Evil Eye Candy (aka Hassan): I've got this one.

Evil Gnome: I've put the "family" (hurk) dinner on the calendar.

Evil Son-in-Law: He's adapting so much more quickly than any of us thought he would.

Evil Gnome: \*middle finger\*

Evil Son-in-Law: If I wasn't in the middle of a meeting with Clive, I would already be naked, my dear.

FuckFace (aka Darcy): Since I'm not part of your weird family, I won't be available for dinner tomorrow or any other night for the foreseeable future. I do have a life that doesn't revolve around every Foxily emergency, you know.

Future Husband Even If I Have To Buy The Ring Myself: Your presence is required.

I immediately edit Fox's name to Future Husband in my phone because it's not his fault that someone stole our ring.

Our First Child: Actually, yeah. You have to come.

FuckFace: How dire is it that you require my presence, Red?

Our First Child: I'd consider summoning you, but I wouldn't.

FuckFace: I'll be there blood willing and the creek don't rise.

Someone is going to have to explain to me how a person older than Fox sounds like he's a native of the foothills of the Ozarks even in text messages, because the more I get to know Darcy, the less that fucker makes sense, and I am, unfortunately, completely intrigued.

I look up from the family conversation, switching to the thread for the people in the same space as me. Bellamy is sitting on the sofa with Ace. Their heads are bent together and they're talking like they've been friends for years. Bellamy's face is full of happiness. I don't think I've ever seen him so keen about someone. I really like seeing him like this.

Ace is leaning against Akile's knees. My bestie is taking up half the couch, reclining with his knees up to support Ace and reading one of the other books from my shelf of spicy 'cest. That one is pure uncle-nephew smut. It's a good read for making yourself horny, which I warned him would happen before he picked it up. He decided to read it in the company of others, so if he's uncomfortably hard, that's on him. He could be reading in his room.

That's right, I have officially assigned him and Ace their own rooms in our home. I haven't told Ace yet; I think it's ok to wait until we unleash the universal neutral force before telling him he's my little brother now. That's how besties work, right? They share sibling responsibility? That's what the media tells me, so that's what I'm going with.

"I promise I am not lying." Bellamy's declaration draws my attention back to him.

Ace shakes his head. “That doesn’t sound possible.”

“I swear to you it happens every time,” Bellamy insists.

Akile looks up from his book. “What happens?”

Ace turns to explain over his shoulder. “He says that trans shifters take on the physical sex characteristics of their gender identity. I’ve never heard of this.”

Akile shrugs. “I don’t usually pay attention to the weres.”

“It only happens in their shifted form, and it only happens if the trans person becomes a shifter. Luna wolves who transition don’t shift into the physical sex characteristics of their gender, but trans werewolves do,” Bellamy adds. “There are studies on the phenomenon you can read about. The magic seems to take into account the person shifting. So, a trans man who becomes a werewolf would shift into a wolfman with a penile appendage. It’s not a penis, it just looks like one. The studies say it’s an enlargement of the clitoris to look like a penis, but physically it looks the same as a cis-wolfman’s appendage. The same thing doesn’t happen to cisgender female werewolves.”

“I’m going to have to look this up, because if that’s true, it’s awesome. I bet it gives such trans euphoria for those weres.” Ace smiles happily as if the imagined joy for his trans siblings is his own.

I don’t know anything about werewolves, but maybe Ace can figure out a way to do that for himself if he wants it.

It’s weird waking up on my own for the second day in a row. I’m on a month-long vacation from my work as Fox’s Harbinger, but I’m still surprised when I wake up naturally instead of waking to a text message letting me know that I have to be

somewhere in a couple of hours.

I roll over, but Fox is already out of bed. A glance at our en suite tells me he's already showered for the day, and the pile of laundry on the chair we keep next to our dresser so he doesn't have to fold his clothes looks like it's slightly smaller now than when we went to bed. My man is up and about and has been for—I reach for my phone and unplug it from the charger—at least three hours. Fox is an early riser and it's late morning.

There's a text waiting for me on my phone, which means that Fox turned my phone to silent when he got up. I usually keep my phone's ringer on so I don't accidentally miss any messages, but Fox thinks I deserve to sleep uninterrupted if he's available for urgent messages.

Ace: The friends have made a list of possible Avatars, and we decided that the best person to check them out is you. Your instincts about people will help cross them off the list.

Me: My instincts think Darcy is your best bet.

Ace: And we trust that, but we still have to give you other options. Plus, you're still looking for an Arbiter, and these are also candidates for that position as well.

Me: If the role of Arbiter is usually fulfilled by cherubs and their non-cherub descendants, then shouldn't we be looking at you and the friends?

Ace: We all plan to become Arbiters when we grow up, but you're looking for someone who's already an adult and fits into your family like Bellamy and Edovard do.

Me: Ok. That's valid. I'll let Fox know that we're going to be meeting new people



today.

Ace: You might ask Hassan to accompany you. Some of these people aren't in the area.

Hassan is capable of opening portals, which is illegal, but he works for the Avatar of Evil so, no one really expects him to be law-abiding. He's also not exactly a big fan of Bellamy. My son once slit his throat, and Hassan bears the scar of that. We haven't told Edovard that Bellamy did that, and for some reason neither have either of Edovard's boyfriends.

Me: We'll figure it out. Send me the list.

Ace: Incoming. See you later!

I open the spreadsheet he sends me.

What the fuck? There's more than a hundred and fifty names on this list. I don't even know a hundred and fifty people. Where did he get the names on this list?

They're arranged by region, and one of the first names on the list is Tala Sunderland, the Luna wolf that we didn't kill even though he took the bounty on Bellamy to abduct him and deliver him to Jamie Gordon, the evil councilor guy who tortured Bellamy. Every time I think of that guy I wish we could've killed him twice.

Well, Fox did say that he was a true neutral, so I guess it makes sense that he should be in the running, but the name just below his is Jo Silva, and I'm pretty sure that's a girl I met in middle school who did my homework for me in exchange for me hanging around so she could tell her parents that she had friends.

I think that made us actual friends, but she was insistent that I was just a paid actor.

She wrote my homework left handed so it looked like I wrote it. Honestly, her off-hand writing was better than my main hand writing, so even if our teachers suspected she was doing the work, they didn't say anything.

This is going to be a weird couple of days, I can already tell.

The spreadsheet had morethan columns for names and addresses, it also had a column for warrants and bounties. The first name on our list is a girl who once donated her hoodie to me when I was cold and shivering on a street corner deciding if I should go panhandle on a busier street corner or find a library to take shelter in. She gave me her hoodie, took me to breakfast, and paid for me to have a motel room.

Then she hooked up with the guy in the next room over (who'd been waiting for her) and stole his clothes, wallet, and car. I heard later that she went straight to his house, seduced his son and wife, and ransacked his house. It sounds like a taboo romance, doesn't it? Well, if there is one like that, I haven't read it.

Anywho. There's a bounty out for Samantha Broughton, and when we arrive at her approximate location—an apartment complex surrounding a well-maintained park—she's there with a bat, beating some guy who's already on the ground and unconscious or maybe dead, screaming with primal rage with every swing.

Bellamy runs ahead as soon as he's out of the taxi and catches her bat, tearing it from her grip. She turns, attacking with more screams, and he puts her on the grass, pinning her down with a boot on her sternum and a gun in her face.

She stops struggling and screaming pretty fast.

Fox and I join Bellamy as soon as she's under control.

“Who the fuck are you?” she demands, eyes bouncing between the three of us.

I bend closer so she can see my face, and her expression changes to immediate recognition. “Oh hey! I remember you.” She takes in my designer label clothes (I’m wearing the clothes Santanos doesn’t know he gave me), and she smirks. “Looks like you’re doing pretty good for yourself. Congratulations, blonde.”

That’s what she called me because I couldn’t tell her my name.

“What’s up with Tweedledee and Tweedledum?” she asks, indicating Bellamy and Fox.

I press my lips together and shake my head at her. She has seven different bounties on her from the depot and four contracts from various human sources. I’m fairly certain she balances as neutral because she does things like give the clothes off her back to strangers in need and donates most of what she steals to charities like Partners in Health that pour money into healthcare for people in need. She’s responsible for saving actual lives, and here she is beating some poor guy to death too.

I look over at the person she was killing—yeah, he’s totally dead. She’s a true neutral, but her neutrality is too focused to be adequate for being the avatar.

I point to Fox, grab his hand and kiss it.

She gives him a second look, grimaces, and then shrugs. “To each their own, I guess.”

I point to Bellamy and smile. It’s a mean smile.

Samantha runs her eyes over him from face to the danger end of his gun. “Yeah, ok. I can get how having muscle with skill would be useful.”

See. She gets the gist of what I’m communicating, and this is why I like her.

I point to the guy she killed and straighten, pushing Bellamy's gun aside so he'll stand down. She takes the hand I offer her, and I pull her up. She's about half a foot shorter than me, but she's dense and almost pulls me off balance when she rises. "Yeah, so that fucker agreed to pay me fifty for a blowie, and then after I spit his splooge out tried to stiff me. I mighta overreacted."

Considering he's not recognizable anymore? Yeah maybe a little.

I wince at her and shake my head.

She shrugs. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

I reach out and pat her blood spattered shoulder, nodding in sympathy. He didn't deserve to die over fifty bucks, but for people like her, fifty bucks might be the difference between life and death, so... I get it.

"Anyway, there a reason you came 'round, or you here by chance? Because I gotta jet. Got me a date with a capitalist who's gonna pay for a new hospital in Peru. He doesn't know it yet, but last week he wasn't too careful about his pin numbers, if you know what I mean."

Bellamy sighs beside me, so I pet his beard, shushing him.

He shakes his head at me. "Is the dead fuck a human or non-human?" he asks, because he knows me so well.

Oh wait, she might not know about non-humans.

She looks down at the remains and shrugs. "I don't usually pay attention to that kind of thing when I'm trying to make a quick buck."

“We’ll see if the gargoyles want to clean up,” he tells her. “Good luck with the hospital thing.”

She smiles widely at him. “Thanks. I’ve been working on getting that hospital funded for like three weeks. Almost there!” She shimmies a little in excitement and salutes me with two fingers. “Nice seeing you again, blondie. Don’t be a stranger!”

With that, she jogs off, waving over her shoulder.

“We should probably clear her bounties,” Bellamy suggests as Fox whistles for our invisible gargoyle friends to come eat the body.

I smile broadly at him, sending him a quick, Good idea, as the gargoyles descend to take care of the mess. How did you know she knew about the supernatural community?

Bellamy touches a spot on his cheek where Samantha has a beauty mark. “That freckle is a tattoo that the companions graduating from an elite school in Hell get upon completing their training. She’s probably the child of nobility. Not an heiress; the nobles of Hell send their third children to trade schools.”

Are we talking companion as in a professional escort?

“Yes,” Bellamy nods as the gargoyles disappear again, leaving a clean crime scene.

Well. I don’t know what to say about that, but it does explain her methods.

I cross her off the list. One down, a hundred and fifty three more to go.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Tala freezes in place as he opens the door of his fifth story walk up. For a second his purple eyes skid across all three of our faces, and then he releases a heavy sigh and steps back, swinging his arm out to begrudgingly invite us in.

I thought we were friends.

I shove that message into his face as I walk by. I didn't get his phone number the last time I saw him, so I have to improvise until I can get him added to my phone.

The lavender ropes of his long hair are tied up in a tall bun on his head, and he's wearing a thin, cherry blossom patterned kimono open over soft pink lounge pants. He shuts the door, takes my phone, and reluctantly adds his contact info even though I didn't ask.

"I didn't do anything," he announces, heading to the kitchen in the small studio apartment and pulling down four tall glasses from his cabinet.

"You haven't done anything since the last time you did something," Bellamy corrects slowly, casually leaning on the back of Tala's navy sofa with his sword in one hand and his gun in the other.

"I haven't done anything to draw attention from the Foxilys. I learned my lesson last time," Tala responds, pulling a pitcher of tea out of the fridge and holding it up to us. "It's sweet like they make in Alabama."

I make gimme hands, and Bellamy nods his assent, putting his gun away but not the sword. Fox says and does nothing, but Tala pours for him too anyway.

“So, what do you want?” he asks after we all have our drinks. He hasn’t invited us to sit, but that doesn’t stop me from pulling out a chair from his two seater kitchen table. I pat the table across from me, inviting him to sit as well.

How’re you doing without your pack?

It’s a sore but legitimate subject. Fox and Darcy killed his entire pack, and Luna Wolves are pack-oriented as a species.

Tala reads my message, takes a minute to think about his answer, and then replies. “I’m lonely. Other packs won’t have me because I’m the sole survivor of the Humphreys Massacre, and they’re suspicious of my loyalties now that I don’t have any bonds left. I’m not old enough to create a new pack. I’m not sure I would even if I was. The pack structure didn’t work for me when I was in it, but not having the underlying connection to the pack is difficult to adjust to.”

That’s a lot more vulnerability and honesty than I was expecting, but I’m not going to shame a person for voicing their truths. I reach over and squeeze his hand, holding it for a moment in solidarity.

Fox lets me get away with it for about three seconds before he moves, picks me up out of my seat, and drops down with me in his lap.

That’s my possessive lover for you.

I kiss his cheek since I don’t want to get too distracted from Tala’s needs, but Fox needs to know that his behavior is fully acceptable and not at all a red flag.

Listen, you have your green flags and I have mine. They don’t always have to be the same shade. Possessive-obsessive Fox = a big green flag for me; I like it when he shows me how wanted I am. Yes, I know it’s probably the result of childhood trauma,

but I'm ok with that. I've worked through my issues with a therapist; what's left is just who I'm going to be for now, and I think we can all agree that I'm fabulous as is.

"So I've been staying home, minding my own business while I adjust to being so alone. It's hard, and I'm sad," Tala adds, standing up and grabbing a bottle of peach vodka from the fridge and adding a heavy pour into his sweet tea.

I slide my glass toward him and he tops my tea with a small bit of the liquor as I type out my message.

We should go on an adventure together soon. After you're done grieving your loss.

Tala reads my message on his phone. Fox watched me type it out, but Bellamy tips his wrist to read it on his watch.

"Sure. I'll let you know when I'm ready for it," he says dryly, then he takes a deep breath and looks at Bellamy for the first time. "I shouldn't have taken that contract just to fuck with you. I was flirting with you, and I regret it. If someone else puts a bounty up for you, I'll encourage my contacts not to take it."

Bellamy stares at Tala as his ears turn beet red, and he takes a drink to cover his embarrassment, sipping too aggressively and choking on his drink.

Gah, I hate that for him. He's so bad with flirting. Poor child. I'm going to have to teach him how to flirt back instead of losing his grip.

It takes him a few moments and a second drink before he clears his throat and replies. "Uh, thanks. That will probably save their lives now that my ward is back in place."

A hint of the Luna Wolf who laughed at me when I landed face first in mud and stole two of Fox's kills right out from under him peeks out at Bellamy's reaction. He



smirks, but it fades and then disappears altogether, and he gulps down the last of his tea.

I frown because I get it. He's been through a lot, and his life is drastically different than it's been since he was born. It's a burden that he'll have to grow strong enough to carry. He'll eventually get his swagger back. I believe in that. And when he does, I'm going to be here for him. I think he's going to be part of my family eventually. There's a bond between us. It's not ripe yet, but he belongs with us somehow.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here now?" he asks, refilling his glass with mostly peach vodka and a splash of sweet tea.

I shake my head. Just checking up on you.

My gut tells me he's not the person we're looking for, so I send him another question and follow it up with some friendly chit chat. I finish my hard tea, Fox doesn't touch his, and Bellamy drains his glass, then we leave. Tala isn't the next Avatar if my gut is to be trusted, but it was interesting to catch up with him.

It's surreal being back in Modesto. Last time we were in this part of California, we literally went on a murder spree. Since then, I've heard from Modestonians(?) that it actually made a lot of sense that Modesto needed a deep clean, but honestly, that still surprises me. It just has this All-American vibe, you know? Maybe that's just an outsider's perspective and things are a bit grimmer from the perspective of a resident.

"I honestly thought Gaanbatar killed her," Bellamy drawls as he pushes the doorbell of a mid-sized home with a manicured garden and a porch with hanging flowering plants and a swing.

Hassan makes a disgusted noise. "Gaanbatar decided to wait until Edovard needed that to happen rather than doing so preemptively."

I asked Edovard if I could borrow Hassan to make a few portals for us over the next few days, and because Edovard was very excited that we wanted to spend time with his boyfriend, Hassan agreed to help. Why yes, I did emotionally blackmail him with his love for my son, and if a father can't do that, then what's even the point of being an in-law?

Hmmm. I might have to rethink that philosophy; I wouldn't want Tag doing that to me... buuuut, then again, I could probably do it right back, and as long as everyone knows what's happening then it's probably fine.

Hassan didn't say no, and he definitely knew what I was doing when I went straight to my pupper.

The door opens and a statuesque woman with long red and gold box braids wearing a red pantsuit and a frown opens the door. Her face looks like it was done by a makeup artist, and her nails clack on the door frame as she grabs it to unconsciously block us from entering uninvited.

"May I help you?" Manon Folange asks icily.

Edovard wasn't kidding when he said his sister had no love in her. Even I'm getting that impression, and I can't see auras like he does.

I have a text prepared, and I let RoboRom read it instead of letting her have access to my phone. "I'm Romily Butcher, this is my fiancé, Arlington Fox, and his Acolyte, Bellamy Jones. Our friend is Hassan Su; he's your brother's boyfriend."

Manon grows colder. She's definitely not a part of my family, and she is not the next avatar of anything. I don't even think she'd make a good Avatar of Evil.

She sneers at me, looking at my phone with disgust. "I was told I don't have a

brother, and to be honest, it's for the best. I like to surround myself with people of a certain... quality."

Oh, the insinuation that Edovard isn't good enough for her. I don't often hate people on sight, but here we are.

She looks at us like we're dirtying her porch by standing on it. "Why are you here?"

Bellamy, my good and perfect son, steps up, pushes her into the house, and follows her inside, shutting the rest of us out.

I look at Hassan, who frowns before turning away with a nod of approval. Ok, that's not—um...

I turn to Fox, who's on his tiptoes peering into the transom at the top of the door. He doesn't look bothered that Bellamy is inside alone with a woman he thinks doesn't deserve to live. Our son killed a councilor for calling our pupper stupid, and Edovard's sister has done so much worse to him.

I'm pretty sure Bellamy's doing what Gaanbatar decided not to do...

OMIGOD.

I slap Fox's ass to get his attention, and then squeeze it for good measure, since I love this ass.

He turns, dropping to his heels. "Yes."

I love that the answer is yes even if he doesn't know the question. I wasn't projecting, though I guess it's possible that he was paying attention anyway.

Edovard thinks Gaanbatar is part of our family! He could be the next Avatar of Neutrality. Or he might be an Arbiter. I haven't even met him. I totally forgot about him because he's not in my circle. He's in Edovard's!

Fox considers that for a moment, dipping his chin in agreement when he decides I might be right. He and I both look at Hassan, who stares stoically at us.

"We need to go to Gaanbatar next," Fox informs him neutrally.

"You can't have Santanos's assassin," Hassan denies immediately.

I exaggerate a frown at him and send him a text message. Edovard thinks he's part of our family. I'm not taking him away. I'm adding him.

Hassan's not falling for it when Edovard isn't actually here with his big puppy-dog eyes. "Edovard says the minions are part of our family. Gaanbatar is ours, not yours."

He can still be yours. We just need to meet him. He's the next person on the list. That's a lie, but since my voice can't give me away, Hassan doesn't know if it's true or not. Benefits of being mute: along with winning every silent game, my voice can't give me away.

My face is a completely different matter, but I'm a child of the system; lying is a skill I learned young.

Hassan stares at me, face unreadable, and then he clicks his tongue. "Tch."

I win.

What is taking Bellamy so long?

I must think that really loudly because Fox looks through the transom again, and curiosity must get the best of Hassan because he does too.

The door's not locked, but they're respecting Bellamy's choice to deal with Manon alone.

Personally, I probably wouldn't kill her. She can't do anything to Edovard now, and Gaanbatar got back all the things that Edovard wanted from inside this house. There's no reason to end her life now. It's not going to make an example of her, and she hasn't had any contact with Edovard since he joined our family. Bellamy probably just needs a more concrete resolution than I do, and I respect that. It's not really fair of me to judge him when he's a fully trained career assassin. That's who he is, and I chose to love the person he is when I chose to adopt him. In this family we take people as they are without any ulterior motives like trying to change someone to fit into a box that wasn't made for them.

Both Fox and Hassan flinch at the same time.

I don't think I want to know. They're not rushing in there to save Bellamy, so I assume he's fine, and that's all I need.

I wander off the porch, perusing the garden. It's pretty, well kept, and the gate to the back is wide open, so I stroll back there. The back garden is even prettier than the front. Huge trees line the yard on either side, and between them, it's a haven of beauty with a flowering garden that...

Wait a fucking minute. It's September, and yes we haven't officially gotten to fall yet, but it's late summer. This looks like a spring garden. What the hell is going on here?

An insect buzzes by my ear, but I've learned not to slap at things I can't see.

Gargoyles look like bats to me when they're not in their stone form, and I don't want to accidentally hit any of them, so I've learned to just ignore the buzzing.

I walk down the grassy path, studying the out of season blooms, surrounded by buzzing insects, except I don't actually see any buzzing insects. There's plenty of buzzing, but I don't see any bees or flies or dragonflies or anything on the flowers themselves. All the buzzing, none of the bugs. What is going on?

I stop in the middle of the garden and turn, looking around in confusion. Buzzing but no bugs. And the things buzzing are definitely flying around my head. I can hear them as they pass.

I take a deep breath and think really loudly to Fox. The garden is in bloom and things are buzzing around my head, but there aren't any insects here.

Less than thirty seconds later, Fox stalks through the back gate into the garden. He stops three paces in and a look of horror creases his brows. Not an exaggerated expression, but the subtle change in his face makes me freeze.

"Don't touch anything. Look at me. Don't look anywhere but at me, Romily. Walk straight back to me. Don't do anything else. Just walk in a straight line back to me."

I've never heard fear in Fox's voice like that. Anger, yes, when Bellamy was taken. Rage when he was standing in front of the council. Fear? Never.

I stare at him, heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer, and walk toward him. I don't glimpse sideways. I ignore the buzzing around my ears. I'm only a few meters from him, it's a quick walk, but somehow not. Somehow I take a step toward Fox and he doesn't get closer. Somehow I walk for five full minutes, staring at the love of my life, and he never. Gets. Closer.

I'm not stupid. I read extensively. I know the mythology that people base their stories in. Somehow, I've wandered into a fae trap. I know it.

Fox beckons to me. "You can do it. You're getting closer. Keep walking. Just look at me. I'm right here. Believe that, Romily. I'm right. Here."

He's right there. If I could reach out, I would be in his arms in two seconds. He's right there. Right. There—

"Gotcha!" the whispered voice right in my ear startles me, and I smack at it, hitting something away from my ear.

I glimpse Fox's eyes widening just before something hits me from the side, pushing me into the bushes. I stumble off the path and fall face first onto the ground, scrambling back to my feet.

Shit.

The sky's orange red, and not because the sun is setting. The plants around me have changed. They're different, more vibrant and alive, but ominous and moving closer.

I turn in a circle, looking for Fox, but the path that brought me here is closed, and instead of my fiancé, I find a purple elf grinning at me like I'm the most delicious thing they've ever seen.

Fuck.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

“Lose your ward, luv?” the elf cackles, rubbing their hands together super villain style.

They’re wearing loose cotton clothes in the style that people who lived a few hundred years ago would wear. They even have suspenders, which probably means they’re too poor to afford a tailor to fit their clothes right. I assume that’s why suspenders were invented anyway. Who knows. I doubt Google is going to work for me in Fae.

How do I know I’m in the land of fairies?

Well, that buzzing that I couldn’t see? I can see the source now. Fairies or pixies or whatever they call themselves—little winged people with huge bug eyes and antennae instead of ears, hands, feet, clothes—zip around us, darting between us and flying overhead. They’re everywhere, landing on the moving plants and doing fuck knows what. Guiding the plants maybe? I don’t know. Tag doesn’t talk about his home realm very much.

“Come on, then, let’s go. I’ve been tasked with bringing the Harbinger to The Mab, and that’s you.”

The elf takes a few threatening steps toward me, but they’re not getting past my ward unless I fight back, which is how I ended up here. I should have kept my wits about me. If I hadn’t smacked that damn fairy I’d be in Fox’s arms right now.

I cross my arms and shake my head. I am definitely not doing what this person wants just because The Mab decided they didn’t want to go through proper channels to meet me. And also, the last time anyone mentioned the word ‘Mab,’ it was in reference to



seeing through a Mab's invisibility glamour, and Fox told us that Tag was a Mab himself, so who the fuck is The Mab?

The elf reaches for me, but my ward stops their hand about three inches from my skin. They make a frustrated noise and try again. They increase the force, and their hand bounces off my ward with the same force. They narrow their eyes and slowly reach out. The ward stops them.

I'm not going anywhere I don't want to go. The ward knows this person is a threat, and that's all it needs to keep them from doing anything to me.

"Fairies, help me!" they order the fairies flying around.

The little creatures take off from their perches en masse and swarm around me, buzzing loudly. But as long as I don't hit any of them, they too can't get past my ward. They got lucky when they startled me before. I'm not making that mistake again.

Since I'm relatively safe, and this realm isn't unaffected by my ward, I choose a direction at random and start walking. I'm literally going off path, but since the last path I walked down ended up being an interdimensional portal, I think it's ok if I stick to creating my own.

"That is not the way! The Mab will see you! You must go to The Mab!" the elf cries out, frustration but no real fear in his voice. He's upset, but not so upset that I think The Mab's going to kill him if he fails to bring me to her.

Tag hasn't ever indicated that his people are genuinely monstrous, and he was appalled that Fox had killed one of them, so I assume failure isn't going to be a death sentence for the elf sent to fetch me.

Honestly, if The Mab had just asked, I probably would have visited out of curiosity. Now that she's tried to abduct me, I have to resist on principle. It's upsetting really. I'm finally in another realm that isn't Hell, and I still don't get to enjoy it because someone decided it was too hard to use their words.

I'm mute and even I know how to ask people to come visit. I did it yesterday when I invited everyone over for a family meeting. It's not that hard.

And now I'm annoyed because all my plans for an egg(plant)cellent vegetarian dinner have been ruined. All the myths say that time runs differently on Fae. What's a few days here would be weeks on Earth. By the time I get home all the eggplants will be ruined.

"Just turn this direction!" The elf hasn't stopped nagging me since I started to complain in my head about all this inconvenience.

I turn on my heels and point my finger at them, thinking really hard about how they've ruined my plans for dinner. I'd type it all out, but I'm not sure they deserve that much of my effort. Instead, I shake my finger and frown viciously at them.

They take a step back, because obviously my frown is the stuff of legends and they know to be very afraid now that I've invoked it, and out of pure spite, I turn ninety degrees to the direction they want me to go in and start walking.

The elf makes another noise of pure frustration, which delights the shit out of me. The fairies give up their buzzing and fly off, leaving me and the elf who can't control me to walk aimlessly through the—I don't know what kind of landscape this is. Is it a jungle? A forest? A dense grassland? I don't know! There's a lot of foliage that I can't see through, but it moves out of the way every time I take a step. I haven't touched a single plant since I started walking, and everywhere I place my feet is on soil, but as soon as I lift my foot away, plants fill in the gap. It's magnificent,

honestly. No path, but the plants aren't bothered about that, they're just letting me walk through.

"Listen, I apologize for pushing you into the wilds. I could have probably gone about this differently, but I'm an elf! I'm meant to play tricks and make a nuisance of myself. I promise if you just turn this way that The Mab will probably talk to you. She said she wanted to meet you, and if you go there now, she can!"

I'm not sure what part of that pseudo apology is meant to make me feel better. Promising The Mab will probably talk to me doesn't preclude her trying to kill me. Not that she could with my ward intact, but I don't think I want to risk her being one of the people who knows how to disrupt a council ward. Darcy knows how; I've seen him do it to Santanos's ward. If he wasn't on our side, I'm fairly certain Fox would have killed him just because he could potentially destroy my ward, and my man wouldn't want to risk it.

I'm certainly not going to risk The Mab knowing how to disrupt my ward. Does this elf think I'm stupid?

"Ok, no. I can see how that doesn't sound very reassuring. The problem is that elves have to speak the truth in our home realm, right? So I'm bound by the magic of this realm, and I can't really speak to the queen's motivations."

That's interesting. Does that mean he can lie when he's on Earth?

"So, if you turn this way and start walking with me, we will be in The Mab's lands in a few hours, and someone there might send you back to earth after you've met with her. The direction you're walking now leads straight to goblin territory, and they've been known to eat their visitors."

I don't want to get eaten, but they mentioned that it's only a few hours to The Mab's

land, so we're not in The Mab's land now, and they said this path leads to goblin territory, so we're not in goblin territory yet. Where are we now? I don't know and I'm not going to ask, but I'm fine with finding out since they don't seem to want me to know.

My brain is on fire today with the reading between the lines thing. I'll probably never be this good at it again, but today I'm winning at it.

You know, I might not be able to call for help, but Fox taught me how to put my hands together to make bird call whistles. You know what I'm talking about? You put your hands together and line your thumbs up and blow hard enough to make it whistle? Well, Fox taught me how, and now I'm going to do it. Maybe someone the elf doesn't want me to encounter will hear my whistle and come investigate.

I put my hands together and start blowing sharply.

The elf cries out and runs at me, trying to physically stop me, but they bounce off my shield and onto their butt.

I stop in my tracks, turn to peer at them on the ground, put my hands to my lips, and blow. The whistle is ridiculously loud.

A horn blows in the distance.

The elf scrambles to their feet, wringing their hands. "If we're here when he arrives, I'll be in trouble. He might kill me this time."

Am I supposed to feel sorry for my abductor?

I drop my shoulders, annoyed with myself because now I do feel sorry for them.

Still, I whistle back in response to the horn.

The elf looks around, eyes wide with worry. It's not fear, as in they're worried for their life, but they are definitely anxious.

The horn responds, closer this time. So I whistle again. Hopefully whoever he is will help me.

The horn sounds from so close I would swear it's right next to me, and then the plants part and an indigo skinned elf with long shimmering midnight blue hair appears riding a wave. The look on his face is arrogance personified, and he glares down his upturned nose at me. He forgot to wear a shirt but remembered his BDSM belts, and his soft leather pants are somehow water resistant because they're not soaked from the wave. His broad shoulders and huge biceps are on full display as he hefts a golden trident with glowing tips. The ivory horn he kept blowing hangs from his neck with the blowie end pointed at his shallow belly button.

My elf squeaks, "Kelpie," and it takes me a few seconds to remember what that is. It's a fae, shapeshifting water horse, which I guess explains the whole riding a wave, which by the way is still roiling around his bare feet even though he's no longer moving—honestly, it's an epic entrance.

The kelpie sneers down at my elf. "What have you done, Tova?"

Ah, my elf's name is Tova! Nice. I like it when I get information I didn't have to ask for.

"The Mab wants to meet the Harbinger," Tova explains, cowering under the weight of the kelpie's disdain.

The kelpie heaves out a heavy sigh and rolls his eyes, shaking his head. "You need to

stop trying to gain Gwendolyn's favor. She is never going to look twice at you. You are beneath her and nothing you ever do will be good enough."

I really hate hearing anything like that out of anyone's mouth. No one is beneath anyone else, and I'm already reaching for my phone to put this beautiful fucker in his place when he says, "Have more self-respect. You deserve for someone to see you from above and lift you to your place beside them."

Ok, it's better, but why the fuck would he say that Tova's beneath anyone at all.

Tova whimpers and lets out what sounds suspiciously like a sob.

The kelpie turns his attention to me. "I'm the lord of these lands, Ashley Thane. Who are you?"

I hold up my phone and shake it at him before typing out a message and letting RoboRom read it out. "My name is Romily Butcher. I am Arlington Fox's Harbinger. I would like to get back to my Reaper as soon as possible."

He stares at me with a blank expression for three whole seconds before answering. "That is unfortunate. Macfilsenghe will have to retrieve you. Come."

He holds out his palm to me. It's as big as my head, so when I tentatively take it, my hand is dwarfed like I'm a child. He pulls me up onto the wave, tucks me into his side, holding me firmly like I'm one of those old romance cover heroines, and then we're off. Riding a wave, and to be honest, it's better than any other non-conventional mode of travel I've been on since I met Fox.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Ashley's ride stops at the edge of a body of water. He lowers me to the waterline, and his wave runs into the murky depths. He stands there, looking out over the lake for long enough that I start to wonder if this is it, but then the water starts roiling a fair distance into the lake, and I watch in awe as a palace emerges from beneath the surface like Atlantis rising from the sea.

It's far enough away that it looks green as it rises, and when it's done and the water stills, Ashley steps out onto the water without falling in like there's a glass bridge just under the surface. "We'll await Macfilsenghe within my palace," he commands.

I tentatively follow him, not sure if I'm going to fall into the water or if whatever is keeping him atop the water will work for me. It does, and I follow him, walking across the lake to the palace, which is significantly further away than I thought. The palace didn't look huge when it rose, but it is, and it takes us at least fifteen minutes to walk to it.

Is it atmospheric lensing that makes objects on the horizon appear closer than they are?

I don't know. I saw a short about it last week. It was this building in the middle of a lake that looked like it was at the top of a hill when the people were driving up the hill, but it was actually on an island or something below the hill. Commenters were shouting about atmospheric lensing for like five thousand comments.

Eh. The palace is bigger than I thought and when we finally reach the front gates, they're covered in seaweed, moss, and barnacles. Is this the underwater equivalent of ivy-covered walls? Yeah, I'm going to say it is.

Ashley leads me through a courtyard up a ramp to an open doorway. There are no doors, but when we pass through, I see that there's a gate that can descend and lock into place. Inside the foyer, another man, this one a deep forest green with hair the color of that blueish rock lichen you find on boulders when you go hiking in mountainous forests, stands waiting for us. He also forgot his shirt, but the leather straps seem to be a popular replacement, so he's dressed appropriately. He's dry, considering this place was underwater half an hour ago, so that's something.

The new guy examines me curiously.

"Make up the guest room. This is Macfilsenghe's Harbinger, Romily Butcher. Send a message to Merith. Invite them all, otherwise they'll show up without one and I'll be forced to make an example." Ashley sounds both arrogant and resigned at the same time. He gestures to the green man. "Harbinger, this is my brother, Conall. He will accompany you as you need until the Silverdover Clan arrives to retrieve you."

I don't know who Merith is, nor do I know who the Silverdovers are, but I am going to assume that someone is going to get Fox to come get me.

Conall holds out his giant hand to me. "You're smaller than the rumors made you out to be," he comments as his brother walks away.

I shrug, shaking his hand, because I don't know how else to respond to rumors about my size. I mean, most people have at least seen an image of me because of the picture that the depot sent out when Fox made me his Harbinger, and then plenty of people saw me when I live-streamed Fox's meeting with the council and again when Edovard met with them.

Ashley bellows into the depths of the palace, making my ears ring from the loudness of it, "Prepare a feast! The Silverdovers come!"



Conall grimaces behind his brother's back, and when Ashley is good and gone, he shakes his head at me. "He hates that we're beneath the Silverdover Clan. Your clan frustrates him with their insistence on existing without territory or title." He shrugs. "His discontent has served us thus far. Maybe someday we will rise above your clan too."

Considering I didn't know I was part of a clan, I'm happy to hear that we're not one of the small, powerless ones. I'm pretty sure it's saving my bacon right now. I'm not powerful enough on my own to save myself from these guys. The ward would obviously help, but finding myself in the company of people insistent on getting me back to my family is a bit of luck I'm more than happy to discover I have.

Also, I guess when Ashley said that Tova was beneath Gwendolyn he was talking about some kind of political ranking, not his value as a person. So that's better than I thought.

I type out my two questions and let RoboRom read them aloud. "How long before my family gets here? What is going to happen to Tova?"

"Ah. I forgot you were unspeaking," he confesses, gesturing to indicate we should walk down a different corridor than the one Ashley went down. "I will send the message, and I expect your clan to arrive within a few hours. Is there a reason anything should happen to Tova?"

"He's the reason I'm in Fae and not in California."

Conall grunts when he hears that. "He will likely slink back to his clan to plan his next attempt to convince The Mab to elevate him. Did he offend you?"

I shake my head because Tova was more pitiable than my first impression of him made him out to be. "I was more inconvenienced than offended."

Conall leads me up some very ADA compliant ramps to a corridor on the third floor. He stops at a door with two glowing lamps on either side of it and opens it. Inside, while not opulent, the room is comfortable with a lot of soft places to land: a double bed, sofa, overstuffed armchair, a nest next to the window, and a few spots on the floor with piles of pillows.

“You can rest in here until your clan comes to retrieve you. I’ll send for you when they arrive.” He points to a table along the wall and a spread of snacks and drinks appear there. “Feel free to eat and drink without obligation to the Thane Clan nor the realm of the fae.”

The invitation has the weight of magical importance to it and recalls the rumors that eating in Fae has everlasting consequences. I think he just gave me permission to consume without trapping myself here, and that’s more of a relief that I was expecting. I didn’t even know it was a danger, and I might not have thought about it if he hadn’t made a big deal about it.

I put my hand to my heart and bow slightly to express my thanks.

He smiles widely, backing out of the room and leaving me alone.

The lock on the door clicks into place.

I reach for the door handle, and my hand passes right through it. It doesn’t exist except as an illusion.

Ok. I guess I’m not as much a guest as I am possibly a hostage.

Aaand I walked right into this plush prison.

Hopefully I’m being dramatic and they just don’t want me wandering the palace

unchaperoned. Yeah, that's probably it.

I sigh, looking at the food. Can kelpies lie in the fae realm? Do I want to risk it? Ashley bellowed about preparing a feast and said my Macfilsenghe would have to come retrieve me. Oh, maybe I should remind you that Macfilsenghe is what the fathers named Fox originally. That was his birth name, and it literally means "son." They had a hundred years to come up with something better, and they did that to him.

I think we all know why Fox is bad at naming himself, and I'm going to have to name him going forward. I've been thinking what to call him when we change our surname to Foxily. I haven't decided on anything yet, but we have another decade before our deadline. We'll have to pick first names that mesh together well again. That way we have a nice surname built in for the next time; it's just a good standard practice to start now.

I pick up the pitcher of water on the table and pour some into a fancy goblet. I think if Conall was lying and there's a debt to pay for this, Fox will save me. After all, that's the terms he agreed to when he decided to keep me: I bring him joy and smiles, and in exchange, he keeps me safe.

Everything's going to be fine. Trust me.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Ok,so water was the most I could convince myself to consume before I went and made myself comfortable in the nest by the window. It overlooks the courtyard, so while I read another kind of taboo book on my phone (I think the author was trying to straddle the line so she wouldn't get banned), I keep an ear out for any commotion and look up occasionally to make sure I don't miss my family's entrance.

Eventually, there's a knock on the door, and after a few seconds it opens. Conall peeks in like he might find me naked or sleeping or something.

"The runners have spotted the Silverdovers. Would you like to meet them at the entrance?"

That's a good sign, right? Locked in the room, but he's offering to take me out to meet my family.

I roll out of the nest as gracefully as I can (if anyone knows how to gracefully get out of a papasan, please let me know, because so far I've never found a way to do it), and cross the room, following Conall out into the hall. I point to the door handle and shake my finger at him, letting him know with a disapproving frown that I did not appreciate him locking me in.

Conall glances between me and the door, then understanding dawns on his face. He shrugs, unaffected by my disapproval. "You're not exactly an expected guest, are you?"

I suppose that's true, but still. Do I look like a spy? No. I look like a boy who deserves to be spoiled by his fiancé and his sugar daddy, and I am as I appear.

Conall takes me to the front entrance and we stand at the top of the ramp, watching the front gate for the appearance of my family. I'm so busy watching the gates that I don't immediately notice the shadow of clouds incoming. The loud crack of thunder startles my attention to the sky, and that's when I see two large bird forms backlit by constant lightning inside a huge storm that's coming in faster than it should be possible.

Fox and Dakota arrive within a minute of my spotting them, and then the two thunderbirds dive out of the storm straight toward the courtyard, which is big enough for them both to land, but they're coming in fast and do not look like they're going to stop in time.

I step out onto the ramp, watching the thunderbird I'm certain is Fox. He spots me, pulls up, and shifts mid-air, dropping from higher than is sensible onto the ground, rolling to his feet, and jogging up the ramp, fully nude. My heart nearly beats out of my chest watching him, first because that's a really long fall, and then because he's naked, and that gets my motor revving, if you know what I mean.

I step out to meet Fox, and just as I'm ready to wrap myself around him, he bounces off my ward and tumbles backward, rolling down the ramp to the bottom before he gets his feet under him.

Shock rolls through me as Dakota lands next to him, fully dressed—his pure thunderbird magic allows him to shift his clothes, unlike Fox, who has to disrobe or tear his clothes when he shifts.

“Oh, good. I was wondering if the ward would recognize the threat,” Conall says from behind me.

I turn, stunned to see a smug little smirk on his face.

“Did you enjoy your refreshments?” he asks, like that’s more meaningful than I was led to believe.

Seriously? He tricked me even after telling me to eat with no obligation to his clan or the realm? That’s frustrating, but also, why would my ward switch sides on me?

Conall reaches out and rests his hand on my shoulder. “There is no such clan as Clan Thane,” he explains, and then his grip tightens painfully and he twists me around.

My ward’s defensive magic flares up and his crushing grip is lifted off me. I step away from him. I try to walk away, but one step is as far as I get before he barks, “Stay,” and I’m forced to stop.

Dammit. I should not have had that glass of water.

Ashley joins us, and he rests his massive hand on my shoulder, looking down the ramp as the rest of my family thunders into the courtyard riding...

Unicorns. They’re all riding unicorns.

W-O-W.

Tag’s unicorn is huge, bigger than the rest, and it jumps over Dakota and Fox’s heads, landing on the ramp and trotting up it until Tag is looking down on us from his mount. He narrows his icy blue gaze at Ashley. “I see you haven’t learned not to fuck with me yet, Ash.”

Ashley’s hand on my shoulder slides down my front and he steps up behind me, wrapping both massively bulging arms around me. “I didn’t bring the little one to Fae, and he came here of his own accord. I didn’t force him to enter, nor did I tell him he was safe. He is here because he chose to be, and he is my prisoner because you

didn't educate him. He agreed to my hospitality under no duress, and you know that according to the laws of this realm, he's mine now. I'll happily sell him back to you for a fair price."

Fuck me.

Tag sneers down at Ashley. "Swear to that before we start negotiations and I won't consider this an act of war."

Ashley snorts. "My army is prepared for you, Merith. You've brought your most beloved family. I've brought every person willing to sacrifice for the glory of Clan Caryn." It sounds like Karen. I swear to you it sounds like Karen.

"And it still won't be enough to save you," Tag scoffs. "Give me Romily, Ashley. Don't make me cut you down. You've risen so high, I would enjoy seeing you fall again, but I would rather have Romily without having to put in the effort."

"Romily is my mate," Fox states clearly and with some kind of magical intention, because there's a weight to his words that I feel as much as I felt Conall's when he said eating and drinking wouldn't indebt me to Fae.

I blink, and suddenly Amos is right there next to Tag's unicorn. He somehow dismounted and walked up the ramp without me noticing. He smiles kindly at me and holds out his hand. "Come here, son."

The weight keeping me in place and under Ashley's control lifts off me and I reach out, taking his hand and letting him pull me into his comforting, parental hug. I love these hugs. They're tight and warm and remind me that I've found my forever family. I don't always need the reminder, but when I get it, it's so lovely.

Ashley makes a noise of protest. "No! Come back, Romily. You are mine!"

Those words have no effect on me at all.

Tag shakes his head. “Ash, you underestimated us again. No one in this family is ever going to be so low that consuming your hospitality is going to indebt us. You are beneath us. If we deign to partake in your hospitality, it is an honor to your household that we have.”

Um, if that’s true then how did he manage to trap me for even a moment? I’ve been a part of this family for months.

Fox takes me from Amos’ arms. It’s my fault, he says, speaking into my mind as he presses his nose into my hair and breathes deeply. I had to tell Fae that you’re my mate. We haven’t made it widely known, and the magic doesn’t pay that close attention to us. We have to tell it things before it recognizes having the knowledge of the thing.

I think about that for a second while Tag continues to talk down to Ashley.

So the magic knew that we were mates, but you have to tell it before it acted like we are mates?

Correct, Fox responds.

I squeeze his butt, because yes, my hands have wandered down to his naked cheeks. I love you.

We’re going to have to stay here for dinner to prove that we are still above the Caryns.

Well, considering that the obligation I felt to the Caryns fell off as soon as Fae understood my place, I don’t think I mind.



How did our family rise so high? And also please explain if this is a magical or social or political height advantage.

Amos's voice breaks into our private conversation, so I assume Fox brings him in because he's better at explaining complicated systems to make them understandable to outsiders. It's a mix of all three, but the first factor that is considered is the collective power of the clan. We're a small clan, but collectively we are more powerful than all but one clan on Fae. We don't live here because if we did, we would be required to rule a part of this realm, and we're not interested.

The second factor that is considered is social reputation. We are actually ranked third in the realm, because even though we're the second most powerful, we're not as well known among the people. If we did claim the right to rule, we would quickly climb to second place because our name would become commonly used.

The third factor is our political leverage. As a clan we have more political leverage in more realms than most fae clans. We could probably rise to first rank on political leverage if we chose to rule here.

Since we have no interest, we remain ranked third, and Clan Caryn has been trying to overtake us for thousands of years. Maybe eventually Ashley will succeed, but he's more likely to rise by killing off the clans above him than he is to succeed in consolidating enough power, leverage, or popularity to rise above us.

"Please, do come in and feast with Clan Caryn this evening, should you dare." Ashley's disdainful invitation pulls me out of the baffling mental conversation.

Tag's answer is just as baffling. "It would be our pleasure, Ash."

So now we're going to prove that our clan is better than their clan by eating their food without garnering an obligation.

What even is the point of this? I should have gone to see what The Mab wanted instead.

Aaand as soon as that thought passes through my head, the world tilts in a sickening way and suddenly I'm no longer on that ramp with Fox. Instead I'm in a throne room, swallowing to keep from tossing the water I drank, and looking at a black and gray elven person wearing a white bodysuit and a cape with one of those things that stands up and fans out like a huge villainous throne back. I don't know what they're called. It's a really big dramatic piece of art attached to the back of the cape.

Their lips are painted black, or they're actually just naturally black, who knows? Their eyes are black, and so are their hands except for their nails, which are white.

"Hello, Harbinger. I was wondering if you were going to decide to visit," the elf greets me. "I'm Gwendolyn, known as The Mab, the queen of the Court of Bones. Will you walk with me?"

She rises off her throne, standing twice my height, and gestures to a pitch black doorway. "I swear on my throne to return you safe, healthy, and unhurt to your family."

The weight of that promise locks into my bones.

My instincts tell me I can trust her, and so I nod and follow her into the darkness.

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Gwendolyn's hand on my shoulder grounds me as all my other senses are turned off. I see nothing, I hear nothing. Even the taste of bile at the back of my throat disappears. The only thing to focus on is her hand on my shoulder, which she placed there as we walked into the hall.

My legs move, but I can't feel them, not really. I'm aware of the motion of my own walking because I'm making myself do it, but it feels like my entire body is numb, well, not even that. It doesn't feel like I have a body at all, except for where her hand is on my shoulder. That's it.

Then a pinprick of light begins to glow ahead, and it grows larger as we move toward it, eventually revealing itself to be another doorway. A doorway of light as opposed to the darkness that encompassed me when I followed Gwendolyn.

When we step through the light doorway, we enter a serene glade with wild flowers in full bloom and a babbling brook complete with a small herd of deer drinking from it. Frogs croak, unseen, and the background hum of life permeates the peacefulness. A picnic is laid out on the grass, and Gwendolyn lowers herself to the cushioned blanket, inviting me to join her.

"This is my private realm. I created it when I was young to escape the tyranny of my mother. She's dead now, but back then she was the most powerful witch in three realms. I feared her as much as I loved her, and I often needed an escape, so I made this place for myself."

"That's amazing. What the—? What is happening right now? Am I talking?"

Gwendolyn's benevolent smile is full of sharp black teeth, but I genuinely have no fear of her. She looks like a Big Bad, but she's clearly one of the good ones. "The glade makes up for any lack. In your case, the lack of voice means that it gives you one."

"Holy shitcakes! This is amazing! I've only ever been able to borrow someone else's voice. Is this how I would sound if I had vocal cords? My voice isn't very deep, is it? And how do I have an accent? It's not even the one my parents had. I don't think in accents... The stream of consciousness happening aloud is going to get annoying—"

"Focus, darling," Gwendolyn interrupts. "Make a rule in your head that the only thoughts that get spoken aloud are the ones you want spoken aloud. Just set your boundaries and the realm will adapt."

"Ok yeah, no more talking unless" I decide I want to say a thing aloud.

Whew, that's better.

"Thank you," I intentionally think aloud. This is amazing.

Gwendolyn smiles kindly. "Magical problems can be fixed with magical solutions."

"What magical problem is that?" I ask curiously.

She points to my neck. "Your voice is missing, yet you have no other issues. I recognize the scars of a magical drain. You were young, a baby perhaps, and someone stole your fae heritage, leaving you magically scarred. They left just enough to keep you from dying, but they closed the wound so that you'd never be able to take your magic back."

As she speaks, my mind goes numb, taking the words and refitting them into the

narrative I was told in whispers by people who followed my stepfather to their deaths. A cult that ended violently at his hand, a man who in turn died because he thought he was invincible against bullets.

“God damn it.” The curse echoes around us.

Gwendolyn reaches out, offering me her hand, and I take it because I need something to help as rage—deep, visceral rage—floods through me from my heart to the tips of my fingers. I want to scream, but I can’t because that fucker didn’t just take my voice, he took my magic. I’m the fucking little mermaid, giving up her voice to the evil witch, except I was a baby and did not consent to having my magic stolen from me.

“I’m sorry, my dear. I thought the injury seemed so old that you would have investigated it already. Unfortunately there is no way to recover your magic, but the small kernel you still retain is helpful.” She peers at me like she can see inside me. “It offers you a small amount of protection in the form of good luck, and your elven lifespan is still intact; you’ll live unless you’re killed or you choose to end your life, and with your good luck, you’ll likely never find yourself in true mortal danger.”

I suppose that having survived so many massacres, that makes sense. I take a deep breath and let the anger go. It’s useless and far too late. After a few deep breaths, and reminding myself that I have an excellent life even without magic, I open my eyes and focus on Gwendolyn. “Thank you for telling me.”

Gwendolyn pours wine into two crystal goblets and hands me one. “There are no obligations between us, and you may freely partake in my hospitality,” she informs me before sipping her wine. “This isn’t Fae and the rules are different here, however, one rule I did keep was that no one can lie or be deceived here. The magic will warn you if you believe something is true that is not. I’ve brought all of my potential lovers here, and none have left here with any hope of becoming the Consort of the Throne of

Bones.” She chuckles softly. “Someday someone will love me without ulterior motives.”

“I’ve heard that Tova is enamored,” I say, since he did abduct me in order to impress this woman.

She snorts and shakes her head. “He is too far beneath me. I have standards, my dear.”

I slowly blink at her. “It’s pretty crass to dismiss a potential partner because of their social status. You want someone who complements you personally. You’re not your career, and your partner isn’t a business decision. If you want someone to love you for who you are, you need to consider that the right person might not be in your social circle.” Classism isn’t one of the things that I’m going to dismiss out of hand. “I was homeless four months ago, so I’m not the person to sympathize with you if you’re classist.”

Gwendolyn’s black eyebrows rise as she assesses me again in the light of my chastisement. “You make a valid point. I will be less dismissive of potential partners with a lower status.”

Since she can’t lie and I can’t be deceived in this realm (if she’s not lying about the rules of the realm), then I believe her because there’s no indication that I shouldn’t.

“Why did you want to see me?” I ask, sipping the wine experimentally.

I feel nothing, but then I felt nothing before until I tried to do something Ashley didn’t want me to do.

“I was the Avatar of Neutrality ten thousand years before the cherubs killed the Avatar and locked the magic away,” she begins, opening the picnic basket and

producing some bread, cheese, and berries. She spreads the food between us on the cheesecloth wrapped around each item.

“I’ve never really considered that there would be other Avatars out there if they survived,” I admit. “How many previous Avatars are still alive?”

Gwendolyn cuts the cheese into bite-size chunks with a cheese knife and breaks the bread with her hands, handing me my half of the loaf. “I know of three living ex-Avatars of Good. All previous evil Avatars were killed by their replacement—I believe that is the requirement for becoming the Avatar of Evil. And I am the only living ex-Avatar of Neutrality.”

“Are you looking to become the Avatar again?” The information is interesting, but it doesn’t explain why she wanted to meet with me.

She chuckles and shakes her head. “No. I was the Avatar for as long as I needed to be, and I will not be chosen again. I’m not quite as balanced as I was in my youth.” She gives me a wry smirk. “However, the universal force never fully abandoned me. When the cherubs locked it up, the force stopped being interactive, but it still exists within me. It’s a tiny kernel, nothing but the seed of a memory, but it is there. I’ve heard that you are looking for the next Avatar, and I think I can help you find them.”

Oooh, there’s an idea. “You think that the kernel of the universal force inside you would react to the next Avatar?”

“I do love a smart elf,” she remarks, impressed. “I think that every time there’s been a new Avatar, the magic in me resonated with them, so yes, I believe I can identify the next Avatar. But more importantly, I believe I am the only one who can awaken the power that sleeps. If you take me to the place where the living dead Avatar is, the power inside me will connect to the power in the trapped body. I will pull it out of its prison and unleash it into the next Avatar. I don’t think breaking the prison is enough.

I've thrown the bones and interpreted the readings, and having the other Avatars won't be enough. You need the third Avatar, but you can't make one without me."

I don't really know what to say. If she's lying about not being able to lie, then she could be lying about this, but if she's not, then we're going to need her, but there's a caveat she isn't telling me.

"I won't say no to the help, but I think you better tell me the catch." Because there isn't a fae alive that does anything for free.

Popping a berry into her mouth with a bit of cheese, she looks out over her realm as she chews and waits until her mouth is clear to respond. "My kingdom has been subject to the clans above us for thousands of years. I have never leveraged enough power, reputation, or influence to elevate our ranking above the seventeenth most powerful. The clan of the Silverdovers is passively powerful. Merith has never sought to rule, and yet he leads the third most powerful clan. I want to adopt him, bring our clans together, and form the Clan of Silverbones of which I would be the matriarch and ruler. I would require nothing of the Silverdovers. The Clan of Bones on its own is large enough to defend a higher ranking without the Silverdovers, but we cannot rise because of what we lack in power, reputation, and influence."

"I am not the right person to negotiate with," I admit instantly. "Tag would be the person you want to talk to."

She gives me a pitying look. "No, my dear. I do not have the ranking to approach Merith. I have to talk to a peer or someone of a lower ranking than me from his clan. I do not have the ranking to talk to anyone but you, and only you because you are new and unknown. You must bring my petition to your clan leader, and then if you convince him to, he may choose to meet with me to negotiate."

Being thrown into a socio-political system that I did not grow up understanding is



wild, amiright? Here I am, minding my own business, and suddenly I'm the only person that a fucking queen is allowed to talk to because the clan I'm a part of, which I didn't know even existed until today, ranks higher politically, socially, and magically, than she does. That's crazy. From a homeless mute boy to talking—out loud—to actual throne-sitting queens! Talk about a turn of fate.

“I will talk to my clan, and someone will let you know. I expect you will hear from us quickly.”

She gives me another benevolent smile. “I expect so as well. When you're ready to return to your clan, just will it. The teleportation curse on you is two-way. It will teleport you to your mate and to my throne room as often as you will it, no matter where you find yourself.”

“I—I didn't know I was cursed with teleportation,” I admit, confused. “When did you manage that?”

She smirks. “Fairies eat bone, you know? That fact is the root of the Earth myths about tooth fairies. I am well-known for providing swarms of fairies with as much bone as they desire, and they often show their appreciation.”

Ah. Ok. Note to self: the Queen of Bones is allies with fairies.

I'm going to have to tell Fox—

The world tilts, nausea strikes, and I find myself bending over and vomiting all over someone's shoes. Not mine. Mine only get a little spatter on them.

The expletives that color the air as the shoes step out of vomit range are noteworthy, but my brain is too preoccupied with puking that I don't manage to note a single one. Dammit. It would be cool to be able to curse with the creative grace of the elves.

“Romily,” Fox growls, boots stepping into my line of sight. He rubs the back of my shoulders as I finish dry heaving, and when I’m done, I take a deep breath and slowly stand.

We might have to break this teleportation curse because I cannot be teleporting to Fox every time I think about him. My shoes won’t survive it.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

“What just happened?” Amos demands, examining my face without taking me out of Fox’s arms. I love that he knows when I need to be held by my mate and when it’s ok to steal me from him for a hug.

Suddenly my mouth tastes minty fresh. I didn’t know Amos could do that, but I’m happy to not have to wait to brush my teeth to clean out the grossness. Another thing to love about my father-in-law.

The convenience of talking stayed in the private realm of the Queen of Bones, so I’m forced to think really loudly toward Fox.

“Gwendolyn snatched you?” Amos demands before I even try.

I narrow my eyes at him. Are you able to hear my thoughts too?

Amos nods like I should have already known that. “I’ve been attuning to you since Arlington started attuning. It’s taken me longer because I’m not around you often, but I’m getting there. In a few months you’ll be able to call to me from across the realms.”

I see. Thank you, that’s very sweet of you. And no, Gwendolyn didn’t snatch me. She had some fairies curse me, and now I’m able to teleport to her throne room and to Fox. She wants to negotiate with Tag.

Amos snorts. “What could she possibly have that would be worth his time? She’s merely The Mab.”

Yeah see, I don't get that. She has a whole title: The Mab, yet she ranks low enough that she doesn't think she could ever overcome the clans above her in rank.

“My love, if you don't tell us what he's saying, I'm going to cage you for a year,” Tag threatens.

Amos's mouth drops open and he turns a shocked and offended expression on his husband. “How could you threaten such a thing? I'm helping.”

As he explains our short conversation to the rest of the rescue squad, I take in the scene I popped into. Fox holds me with his left arm, and with his right hand, he holds his medium-big sword (I think we've established that I know nothing about swords—this one is curved with a wickedly pointy tip), though he doesn't appear to be threatening anyone specific. Dakota is holding Conall up on his tiptoes by the neck but appears to have forgotten his captive, who's red in the face but not blue, and is struggling to pry Dakota's fingers away. Ashley is wiping my vomit off his boots; it's nice that my landing ruined his shoes and not anyone else's. Bear is holding a warhammer that I promise you he forged himself back when humans were first learning how to work with iron. Holy fuck, that thing is both huge and old. And there's some fresh blood on it.

I grimace at the poor dead guards scattered around with their skulls caved in.

Apparently my disappearance resulted in a little skirmish.

“What does The Mab want?” Tag asks when Amos finishes his recount.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, but the damn thing is dead, so I look at Fox, who gives me a negative response. “Battery life here is seconds, not hours.”

That's annoying.

I think loudly at him, recalling the conversation with The Mab and asking again why we think she's a nothing person when she has a well-known title.

Fox interprets for me, and Tag answers my question first.

"The Mab is an inherited title. She is the oldest surviving witch of the Mab line. We call her The Mab, but when she dies, the title will go to my cousin, Laina." As soon as he finishes that explanation, Tag asks, "Do you believe her?"

I couldn't say why, but I really do. I think she wouldn't come to us without something worthwhile to leverage.

"He does," Fox replies for me.

Tag narrows his eyes as he considers his options. He looks at Ashley, who's scowling at me. I smile at that fucker because he needs some sunshine in his life. Obviously living under a lake has turned his insides as murky as the water.

"I shouldn't have responded to your call for help," Ashley decides, annoyed.

I pout at him. Of course he did the right thing by responding. His mistake was trying to take advantage of the situation.

"Romily disagrees," Fox says stoically.

Tag interrupts whatever Ashley was gearing up to say. "Ashley, unfortunately, your hospitality will not be needed today. Shall I send recompense for the soldiers lost, or will your clan care for the families of the fallen?"

That sounds like an innocent enough question, but with the way Ashley stiffens and curls his upper lip, I get the feeling that Tag might've just insulted Ashley and all his

ancestors. “Clan Caryn does not need the coin of others to care for our own,” he spits.

Tag’s smile impresses me with how bloodthirsty it is. “I’m glad to hear it, and if I hear otherwise, I’ll return.”

That right there is a threat. I may not understand the rules of the byplay, but I know a threat when I hear one.

Dakota suddenly drops Conall, and we all look, having forgotten that he was holding a hostage. Dakota ignores our collective stares and moves to stand in front of Amos’s unicorn. “Will you escort my sons home, my friend?”

The unicorn snorts, and Dakota runs his hand over the unicorn’s nose from horn to muzzle.

“Thank you,” Dakota murmurs, then turns to me and Fox. “This is Trude. She will carry you home. When you arrive, tell Jerome, and he’ll take care of her needs. They’re friends, and he knows what to pay her.”

I get the distinct feeling of dread from Fox, but I don’t have time to ask before he and Dakota work together to get me on Trude’s bare back. Fox jumps up behind me, wraps his arms around my waist, and gets a grip on Trude’s mane.

It’s probably a good thing that he decided to get behind me. I definitely would not be able to keep my hands from wandering with him naked in front of me. But, uh, oh... he’s naked on the back of a unicorn. I doubt that feels good on his bits. Poor Fox. I’m going to have to kiss everything down there better when we get home.

Sigh. The responsibility of loving this man is so heavy...

Trude turns, trotting down the ramp and gaining speed as she runs out of the

courtyard. The landscape flies by, blurs, and then the speed with which we're moving gets to me. I close my eyes and concentrate on not puking again. That would be horrible to do to someone giving me a ride home. Although I admit that I never would have guessed that getting home was as easy as riding a unicorn.

Fox laughs in my head and his mental voice fills the space inside me that is empty when we're not connected like this.

Unicorns are the snobbiest creatures in Fae. The fact that Omp has a unicorn friend is far more concerning than it is impressive. I don't want to know what he did to make friends with her.

I consider the last time Fox had anything to say about his father's relationships. He was worried about Akile becoming his next stepfather. Apparently the fathers occasionally bring a temporary fifth into their polycule. It feels like that would be too many limbs for me. Keeping up with Fox is enough for me; I'm not sure how the fathers manage with the four of them, and adding a fifth seems like more work than it would be worth.

Trude is a girl according to Dakota's pronouns for her, I point out, hoping to dispel his dread.

He's never been picky when he's in a monster-fucking mood.

Now I'm conflicted. On the one hand, Dakota is hot as fuck, and when he gets going with one of his husbands, it's a joy to watch. On the other hand, the image of Dakota fucking an equine, even one as majestic as this unicorn, doesn't bring up good, sexy feelings for me.

Does she shift into a more peopley form?

Fox's feelings on that question come through loud and clear: ick. So much ick.

I've had several unicorns assure me that there is no form more majestic and perfect than their true form and they would never ruin their beauty by taking up shifting, he responds solemnly.

Well, as long as all parties are consenting adults... Maybe we don't think about it too hard?

Trude slows to a stop, and I open my eyes, finding myself outside the front doors of the fathers' estate. The door opens, and Jerome, the butler that takes care of the house, steps out, greeting us formally. "Master Fox, Mister Butcher."

Fox helps me off Trude and holds my hand as he dips a bow to Trude. "Thank you, Trude. Jerome will see to your needs."

Trude snorts, and Jerome descends the steps, greeting the unicorn. "Hello, my dear friend. Would you join me in the stable house?"

As they walk away, Fox leads me up the front steps and into the fathers' mansion. He turns as soon as the door closes behind us and pushes me up against the entryway wall. "You're ok," he says, lifting me up so I can wrap my legs around his bare waist.

I'm ok, I agree. You're very naked and we're not in a private enough room for you to be pressed this close.

Fox chuffs, relieved and amused.

I smile, staring into his intense brown eyes. I play with the back of his longish hair as I slowly rock my hips to press my quickly hardening dick against him. Fox's amusement turns to fire in an instant with the flash of his demon magic in his eyes.



Occasionally fire erupts in his eyes like a fun Hollywood graphic, an indication of the intensity of his feelings.

“I didn’t like it when you teleported out of my arms,” he confesses, pressing in close enough for our noses to touch.

I was also not a fan, though now I have the ability to teleport. I wonder if that’s restricted to Fae or if the curse works across the realms.

Omigod. I have magic that responds to my will!

Sure it’s a curse, and it makes me sick, but most non-conventional modes of transportation have that effect on me. If I use it sparingly, then I will always have a way to get to Fox. If nothing else, it might be worth keeping because of that. I know, I know, I wanted to break the curse ASAP, but...

Fox huffs again, running his nose along mine. “Romily, curses are meant to be broken.”

I’m pretty sure that the people who put curses on others hope they aren’t broken.

Fox doesn’t respond verbally. Instead he kisses me like he hasn’t seen me in a month, and I kiss him back with just as much enthusiasm. It doesn’t matter how many times our lips meet and our tongues tangle, every kiss is better than the last. I live for his kisses, exist to bring his life joy and pleasure. No matter what else the universe has planned for me, Fox is my fate, and I am his.

“Hey—oops!”

Our kiss comes to an abrupt end with the startled yelp behind Fox.

I tip my head to the side to peer at Akile wearing nothing but a speedo and a damp towel over his shoulders. Dayum. My bestie is a total twunk.

Fox rolls his eyes at me and releases me. I remain attached, reaching between us to pull his erection between us, and give him a quelling look. He might be fine with everyone seeing him nude and aroused, but I'm not old enough to have gotten over my possessive streak.

It was fine when it was Kristie because we were already finished and she was an authority figure. I know, but it was like being naked in front of a doctor. It happens, and we just ignore it.

That is not how it is with Akile.

Fox returns his hands to my ass, holding me to him like a front-hanging backpack. "We'll join you in a few minutes," he says.

Akile smirks at us as Fox passes him. "Sure. Everyone's in the pool. I was sent to let you know."

As soon as Fox is walking away, I look over his shoulder at Akile, who shoots me a bright smile with two thumbs up, pointing to Fox's ass.

Yep, this is why I'm protecting my future husband's virtue. We're surrounded by thirsty men.

I know, I know. It takes one to know one, but can you blame me? Fox is hotter than an August heatwave.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

After a fun little froth in the shower, Fox and I join Akile, Bellamy, Edovard, Santanos, Hassan, Gregory, Annette, and her wife, Bonnie. Everyone but the fathers are here. When I disappeared to Fae, Fox informed the family and they gathered here to make a plan to get me back. When the invite from Clan Caryn came, the fathers told everyone to stay put while they fetched me.

I wonder if Tag is going to agree to Gwendolyn's terms, but maybe I should tell the other Avatars what's happening to get their take on things.

My phone's at forty-seven percent charge (that's all it got while we were showering), but I brought my charger down with me. I find a plug for my umbilical behind the wet bar on the far side of the room, but I'll wait to plug my phone back in until things are dire.

"So you called a family meeting and then got yourself abducted by the fae," Santanos greets me, studying me for damage from where he's sitting on Edovard's lap in the shallow end of the pool.

Santanos and I didn't have the best start, but we have something very important in common now (Edovard), and I participated in the murder of his parents for that thing (person), so he's obligated to be concerned about my health and safety now. Edovard would be devastated if something happened to me. He would also be devastated if something happened to Santanos, so I'm just as obligated to be worried for the evil Avatar.

Speaking of the evil Avatar. Did anyone else notice that according to Gwendolyn, Santanos became the Avatar of Evil through murder?

I heard from a previous Avatar of Neutrality that you killed your predecessor and inherited the job that way.

The volley of pings and buzzes from my message to the group makes me giddy. Every person reading their phones or watches (except Edovard, who has his phone read it aloud), takes me from giddiness to joy. I love seeing my family make me important.

“Avatar of Neutrality?” Bonnie asks, and her question is echoed by everyone except the other two Avatars.

Annette and Santanos both freeze with looks of shocked horror on their faces. Annette unfreezes first, drains her plastic highball glass, stands up in her miniscule nude bikini that makes me do a double take because: Naked Sugar Daddy? Yes. But no, she’s just wearing a skin-colored bikini. Then she strides back to the bar for a refill of whatever she’s drinking. Looks like bourbon.

Santanos pushes his damp blond curls off his face and stands as well. He’s not wearing a swimsuit. He’s wearing a dick cylinder that’s just wrapped around his dick. He doesn’t have testicles, so it’s just a trouser snake tube covering. It’s... a very Santanos thing to wear.

I wonder if the other men in their polycule are also as comfortable with exhibition.

I glance at Edovard. It would be wrong of me to beckon him for a hug just to see if he’s covered, right? I mean, there’s something, but the water is distorting the view.

The sound of Annette’s litany of expletives draws my attention to less morally gray territory. Maybe it’s more gray considering we’re talking about neutrality.

“How did we forget that there’s supposed to be a third Avatar?” Santanos questions,

following Annette to the bar with his ass on full display.

It's a nice ass. The most perfect ass in all the world according to my son. I begrudgingly agree. Fox's ass is magnificent, but Santanos's was literally made to be perfect.

Fox's arms come around me, pulling me into the water with him. Honestly, everyone here is hot to look at, so I don't know what he expects from me. He knows he's the only one I'll be fucking, but not even a saint would be able to ignore the aesthetic beauty of the gathering here. If anything, Fox should be grateful, because this means I'll be ready to dick him down as soon as we're done here, and he loves getting dicked down.

Fox sits on the edge of the pool and pulls me in front of him, pressing his half chub into the crack of my ass. Well, now I'm almost as hard as he is. It's distracting to be this turned on while I'm trying to bring everyone up to speed.

I peer at Bellamy and frown in disappointment at him.

"He's disappointed that you haven't brought everyone up to speed already," Fox chides him.

Bellamy's gaze deliberately slides to my bestie, who's very involved in a fruity yellow frozen cocktail with a skewer of pineapple, orange slice, and maraschino cherry.

I want a fruity cocktail.

"The most qualified person to explain the situation to the other Avatars is the one who understands it the best," Bellamy protests slowly.

I have to admit, he makes a good point, but he should have at least nudged Akile in the right direction before Akile got his cocktail. At this point, I'm fairly certain Akile is in love, and I don't think that anything is going to distract him from his new affair.

The noise of the blender echoes through the room, and my head snaps toward the bar where Santanos is blending a fruity yellow cocktail and preparing skewers for plastic cocktail glasses. Behind him Annette is drinking straight from the bottle, staring into the void. She's processing.

I send a text to Santanos only. Are you going to share the deliciousness with me or are you going to make me cry on Edovard's shoulder?

Santanos stops cutting and skewering fruit to check the message. He lifts his head to peer at me through the bluest of blue eyes. "Romily, would you like a Sunshine cocktail?" he asks dryly.

I nod enthusiastically and send the next message to the whole group. Thank you for offering, I would love one!

Edovard perks up. "Oh good. I wasn't sure if you were making enough for Papa and Oppa."

Santanos's expression melts into deep affection as he turns a smile toward Edovard. "I'll make two batches, sweetie. Do you want anything or are you still sticking to water?"

Edovard reaches over and pulls Gregory into his lap, smiling sappily at Santanos. "I'll stick with water."

Gregory huffs, settles, stiffens and then smirks, and somehow manages to look grumpy through the whole thing. He wiggles on Edovard's lap and reaches into the

water, and my Pupper tightens his grip on his boyfriend.

“Stop,” Pupper complains.

Gregory snorts. “You’re the one who decided to use me as a shield. I reserve the right to use you right back.”

Hassan rolls his eyes, standing. He’s wearing nothing at all and sporting a hard on. I’ve seen him naked before, so I can’t say I’m surprised, but I thought they only did that when Santanos needed him in bodyguard mode, and I thought that Edovard’s presence made Hassan and Gregory redundant because of the excess energy available from Edovard.

Why are you naked?

If they’re going to be comfortable being nude in front of me, they have to be comfortable answering questions about why.

“Because he’s beautiful, and I’m kind enough to share his beauty with everyone,” Santanos answers for him, handing him a tray of cocktails.

Hassan takes the tray and starts back toward us.

“Now, explain what is happening and how we’re going to fix this,” Santanos says as he refills the blender with ingredients.

My phone pings with a text message from Akile. It’s a long, full explanation of everything going on as far as he knows.

I skim it, taking a drink from Hassan, and then add what I know about Gwendolyn, what she wants, and how she can help if Tag negotiates successfully.

I won't force you to read our messages since they're basically a recap of the last sixteen chapters, so you're fully up to date.

Annette rejoins us in the pool, sitting next to her waifu, handing the pretty woman a Sunshine cocktail, and wrapping her arm around her. "The Mab thinks that she needs to be present with me and Santanos, and possibly Darcy because he really is the most likely candidate for becoming the next Avatar of Neutrality. We all need to go to Arktis to unleash the force of neutrality, and this is going to change the world back to what it should have been before the cherubs decided we didn't need the neutral universal force. And when are we planning to make this happen?"

As soon as Tag gets done negotiating with Gwendolyn.

There's no point in delaying. If we make a big production of it, something might come up to delay us or stop us. Something like the cherubs that locked the universal force away.

Actually, how likely are the cherubs to get in the way of progress here? The old gods faked their deaths to avoid detection, but that doesn't tell me how dangerous the cherubs who did this actually are.

Being the person with less knowledge of this world means I have to ask questions about what might be basic knowledge when I can't guess.

Akile whines and pouts adorably. "Our parents are fully capable of taking us out. Cherub kids are known for their mental prowess right? Well, as we get older we get stupider, but our mental capabilities change from knowledge acquisition to psychic powers. My dad is fully capable of mind controlling anyone within ten meters of him. My mom is telekinetic, but don't make the mistake of thinking she just turns lights on and off. She moved a whole mountain from Mali to Tanzania for fun when her powers first developed, and she's gotten more powerful since."



I exaggerate confusion, tilting my head to the side and peering at him curiously. My bestie should definitely know what I'm asking.

Akile releases a put upon sigh. "I'm still waiting for my mind to catch up. We have to be adults for a few centuries before our minds switch modes from knowledge acquisition to practical application."

Aww. Just like humans there's a time between body maturity and mind maturity.

"Are we expecting to have to fight the cherubs?" Annette asks Akile. "You made it seem like you've been keeping your parents in the dark about your activities."

Akile slugs some of his frozen drink before he answers. "I think that hiding anything from our parents has always been an exercise in futility. It might take them some time to figure us out, but they always catch on eventually. We might be able to unleash the universal force and create a new Avatar, but how are we going to keep them safe once we do? Our parents convinced the world to go along with their stupid plan to begin with; who's to say they won't do that again?"

"Did they convince the previous Avatars," Santanos adds, rejoining us in the pool with Hassan, "or did they replace the previous Avatars with supporters to accomplish their goal? Who was the Avatar of Good before Annette? The previous Avatar of Evil was a cherub that I killed."

I was going to ask about that, so I'm glad he brought it up himself.

"That was just after the imbalance happened, wasn't it?" Bellamy points out.

Santanos nods, seating himself on Hassan's lap now that all the cocktails have been passed around. "When the axis of power tilted in favor of evil, I elected myself to fix it. The previous Avatar created the imbalance and tried to convince the rest of us that

it was for the best. The problem is that disrupting the balance on this planet caused a shift on every planet and in every realm under the influence of the universal forces that rule us. Eighty/twenty on this planet became ninety-nine/one on another planet and wiped out a whole species of intelligent creatures. It became fifty-eight/forty-two on another that was previously such a stabilized society that they were on the brink of world peace. My realm was thrust into seventeen/eighty three; which isn't good for a thriving society. The universal forces couldn't balance, and the cherub in charge of evil was satisfied with the imbalance, so I killed her and took her job."

You don't really think about the far reaching effects that an imbalance in the world creates, but why was it so extreme for some places?

"Why would the imbalance on Earth affect Hell?" Gregory reads my message to Edovard instead of making Edovard use the text to speech function on his phone.

Look at my son's lover giving me a voice. I know he's only doing it because he loves my pupper, but still. I appreciate it.

Santanos and Annette exchange a cringing look and Annette explains. "It has such a huge effect because we were trying to balance good and evil without neutrality. We were unknowingly assigning moral significance to things that shouldn't have ever had them. This pool isn't good or evil, but in a universe without the neutral force, it has to fall into one of those categories. So pools are good because they're places where the community can come together and socialize. They built cohesion for communities."

"Unless they're private pools and then they're pretentious and evil because they're a sign that the person who owns them has taken advantage of someone else to get ahead."

"Unless they're an above ground pool that middle income families can afford, and

then they're only evil if someone has drowned in them," Annette finishes.

Santanos makes a frustrated noise. "It's hard to balance the universe when every neutral thing is swinging from good to evil, but we forgot that there was a better option. How did the cherubs come up with this plan? It is clearly the less practical and efficient mode of operating the balance."

Annette snorts. "Oh, I know what they were thinking. Trapping the neutral force here on Earth has had one practical effect that would appeal to the cherub's sense of organization." She leaves us hanging while she takes a gulp from a plastic bottle that she filled with her bourbon.

"Annette," Santanos reminds her.

She blinks at us. Huh. I think my daddy is drunk, which shouldn't be a surprise considering how much bourbon she's downed in the last half an hour. She doesn't sound drunk when she says, "It forced the Avatars to stay on one planet in one realm. Before, the Avatars would move between the realms and planets. One of my predecessors lived in a private realm and conducted all his business from there. His contemporary Avatar of Evil lived in Fae, and the Avatar of Neutrality was a sentient crystal on a diamond planet at the edge of this universe."

Santanos squints, pressing his pouty lips together. "That would have made organizing difficult."

Akile tips sideways, and Bellamy catches him before he ends up underwater. Akile doesn't react to the save, announcing, "That's the most reasonable explanation I've heard of our parents' motivation for this catastrophe. We shoulda talked to you months ago."

I agree with that, at least.

Can you imagine? Reorganizing the entire universe and all the realms because having the Avatars in one place is more convenient?

Honestly, that makes more sense than the some-kind-of-megalomania I was imagining.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:57 am*

Jerome announces an hour before dinner that it's time for us to get out of the pool. Ok, he tells us that dinner will be happening in an hour in the formal dining room and that clothes have been laid out in the guest rooms for us. How he knows what sizes we all are and where he got clothes for us is a mystery I'm content with leaving unraveled. Sometimes magic is just magical and that's all we need to know, and besides, I would be hella disappointed if it was some kind of non-magical thing.

Fox and I retreat to our room, and I assume everyone else knows where they're supposed to go. As soon as we're behind closed doors, Fox drops his speedo and grabs his cock. "We have time," he murmurs in a low, guttural voice that goes straight to my dick.

It's the way he sounds when he's turned on and wants me, but he's willing to forgo sex if I'm not up for it. He's more than happy to jerk off and share the spoils in the form of pictures or videos if the frailty of my humanity gets in the way of my good time.

I haven't had that much to drink.

I'm not even tipsy at this point.

I drop my booty shorts and stroke my chubby, watching Fox's hand do the same for his. I lick my lips thinking it might be nice to have him in my throat before he rides me, but Fox likes to be in charge, so whatever he wants is what I want.

"Get on the bed," he orders me, reaching out to pull me closer to the bed. "On your back."

I obey with alacrity, jumping onto the bed and landing on my back with my head on a pillow.

Fox follows me up slowly, kissing the tops of my feet, the insides of my calves and thighs, all the way to my balls. He sucks on each of them and noses my cock, sucking it into his throat and swallowing around it.

Fuck, everything he does is perfect.

He releases my cock and moves up my body, licking up my happy trail and swirling his tongue into my belly button. He gives my nipples attention for a few minutes, then pushes my arms above my head and kisses my hairless armpits. He leaves a hickey on my collar bone before finally making it to my lips.

But the time he pushes his tongue into my mouth, I'm squirming with need, leaking a puddle of precum into my belly button, and so, so ready to get inside him. He grabs our cocks together as he kisses me and thrusts into his hand, dragging his silk over mine.

He groans and suddenly releases us, jerking. He moves so quickly, I'm not sure what's happening before his thighs are already on either side of my head and he's pushing his cock into my mouth.

I open for him, encouraging him with the press of my hand on his ass to fuck my mouth. He'll go as slow or as fast as he wants, but I'm here for whatever he's into right now. His teeth appear as he sucks in a hissing breath, and the intensity in his eyes as he stares down at me taking his cock makes mine jerk in excitement. He's fully focused on me and nothing else, and it wrecks me at the same time it makes me fly. I love his attention on me, when there's nothing else in the world for him except me. He's beautiful when he's like this.

His cock slips into my open throat and he thrusts as deep as he can get, pulls out, and does it again. Over and over. I gag and choke, tears form and fall, and Fox takes me to a buzzy place where I feel like nothing can touch us no matter what else is happening.

He growls, and that's the only warning I need before his movement falters and his cum paints my tongue. I swallow every drop until he pulls his cock out of my mouth, scoots down my body, holds my cock up, and sits on it, taking me all the way to the root in one swift slide.

He threads his fingers through mine, swiveling on my cock, and leans in close, staring into my eyes. "Mine," he rasps.

The warm, wet heat surrounding my cock, the look of love and need in my Fox's face, the sound of desperation in his voice—everything about this moment takes me straight to the brink of orgasm, and then he shoves me straight into ecstasy with one word.

"Romily."

How am I to ever resist my name on his lips?

I never will.

I unleash the torrent of my desire for him inside him, and he works me over until I'm almost too sensitive, then he moves off me, dropping to the bed beside me and pulling me into his embrace.

We'll be ready for dinner after a short nap.

When we walk into the dining room, the fathers are all there, looking a little worse for

wear. Tag looks immaculate as usual, but Bear has a slash across his face that looks a few days old and one of Amos's horns is broken at the base. Dakota has dark purple circles under his eyes, and he's paler than I've ever seen him.

I rush toward them with Fox on my heels and silently demand an explanation for the wear and tear by holding my hands out expectantly.

Tag runs a possessive hand down Bear's chest and explains, "There was some upset when the rankings reordered. Neither Gwendolyn nor I anticipated what combining would do to our new clan rankings. We both expected to land around the tenth ranking because Clan Silverbones should have been an average of our rankings, but combining put us in second place, one rank up from where we were before, and then when the Summer Court demanded that we pay obeisance, my new mother didn't think the demand was reasonable since the Summer Queen had never asked obeisance from any of the lower ranks before, and we ended up in a bloody little battle. Clan Silverbones is now the highest ranked clan in Fae, and the Summer Court is fourth, under Clan Caryn. Ashley was delighted to say the least."

So what you're saying is, I have a grandmother now.

Yes, I know that Fox and I aren't married yet. Trust me, I am well aware of the lack of ring on my beautiful finger, but that's just a technicality.

Tag smiles, and while it is genuine, it feels tired. I think maybe my future father-in-law is using glamour to hide whatever he looks like right now. "Please call her Grandma. I would love to see the look on her face when you do that."

Bone Grandma, I text—I've already decided that's what she's going to be to me. She can be Great Bone to Edovard and Bellamy.

I huff in laughter at that thought, turning to find Bellamy, who's going to hate calling



her that; I can't wait to hear him do it.

"Bone Grandma?" Fox questions skeptically.

I shrug at Fox, communicating with my bright smile that he better not tell Bellamy about my plans before I introduce him to his new great grandmother.

Fox huffs a laugh and pulls me in for a kiss. He runs his hands up my suit-clad arms and rubs the tip of his nose against mine. "I would never."

That's true. He's my soulmate. He gets me.

The others come in as we take our seats (which are assigned with little note cards that have our names on them), and the staff serves us a dinner of comfort foods made by the most amazing brownie chef to ever exist. Everything that Chef Trellis makes is beyond amazing, and they will occasionally let me have a recipe, but mostly they keep their secrets. I think it's so that I keep visiting, but they tell me it's because they don't trust the fathers not to replace them. As if they're replaceable.

As dinner progresses, we rehash everything we already have while catching everyone up on all the updates. Then we make a plan for when we're going to get everyone together to go free the universal force of neutrality (tomorrow). Once we're all on the same page, dinner's been eaten, and dessert consumed, the fathers call for cars and we all head to our various homes. Except Akile, the fathers invite him to stay, and I try not to think about Fox's previous concern that Dakota might try to seduce the guy who stole his phone.

Honestly, if Akile gets into Dakota's pants, more power to him, because that man is hot, even if he possibly fucked a unicorn.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:58 am*

I'm not the type of person who usually remembers my dreams, but this morning I wake up with my heart pounding and the taste of fear on my tongue, as the memory of my entire family getting into a taxi and driving away with The Bad Guy fades. It was just a dream, but watching Fox, Bellamy, and Edovard get abducted by some nebulous Big Bad woke me up hard.

It's still dark, and Fox is snoring softly beside me, so I roll into him and hug his body like it's my very own life-size body pillow. I heard those boyfriend pillows are excellent bed companions for some people. My boyfriend will just have to do, because we don't have room for another boyfriend-size thing in our bed.

"What's wrong?" Fox mumbles, pulling me half on top of him and holding me like the precious treasure I am.

Thinky-thinks aren't really on my agenda right now. I'd like to clear out the nightmare with more sleep and better dreams.

"Mmm," Fox mumbles. "Sex?"

I bounce with a giggle. He's not even really awake, but he's fully onboard with anything that ends in orgasms. Who even has that much energy before the sun comes up?

Fox relaxes again, falling back into deeper sleep, and I relax with him. I'm drifting when my brain takes the opportunity to remind me of what Bellamy looked like when we found him in Arktis, only this time he's not as alive as we found him, and I startle awake again.

Dammit.

C'mon, Brain. We need sleep more than we need to process trauma! We are not going to lose our family. Bellamy and Edovard are safe. Fox is right here. They're fine.

As I'm trying to calm down, my brain supplies the image of the fathers after their battle, superimposes those fading injuries onto my men, and I give up. My brain is not going to upset me with random fears; I won't let it.

I roll off Fox and get out of bed, pulling on a pair of pajama bottoms and grabbing my phone. I think I might need a bit of retail therapy.

I head down to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. It's three-thirty in the morning, but if I'm going to make it through the day on three hours of sleep, it will be with copious amounts of the elixir of life flowing through my veins.

As soon as it's brewing, I open my email app, take a picture of the table in the breakfast nook, and send it to my miniature maker. Then I browse through the tiny chairs available on Etsy and pick a few that will make me happy to put on the wall in Bellamy's bathroom. He needs to know I think about him all the time, especially when he's alone, naked, and vulnerable.

Once I've ordered those, I get a cup of life, scroll to the soft side of Etsy, and go a little nuts ordering handmade things for my pupper. I'm not going to give them all to him at once, but I like having a stash of things in case I need an emergency blanket or stuffie or soft socks. Edovard might not know it yet, but I am going to shower him with soft, lovely things. Things that go on his bed, and hey, if that means there's less room on there for Gregory, so be it. I'm sure they'll find space for him somewhere.

I happen to know for certain that their basement is as dark and dank as that gnome. I

bet he'd feel right at home down there if we got him one of those spike beds.

Oooh.

Search results reveal that if I want a spike bed for Gregory, I'll have to make it myself. I'm not the DIY-Husband. I'm the Food-Husband. I might not be able to make Fox his own tables (that's what I spend my money on), but I can make him food that is "good enough to eat" from dawn to dusk and every hour in between. He might not enjoy food—he eats with efficiency but not pleasure—but I've got his nutrition in hand. Thankfully we have a Bellamy who's eventually going to make an excellent Chore-Husband. Hopefully when he becomes the Chore-Husband he brings with him a DIY-Husband to round us out.

What's Fox? I'm glad you asked. He's the Spoils-Us-With-Expensive-Things-Husband, the Fashion-Husband if you will, and we are not trading him for any of the other types of hobbies.

Refilling my cup and sighing happily at the overly sweet concoction of expensive brew, I take myself to the sofa in the living room, weaving through the random tables everywhere. I settle down, looking through random occult items in case I see something that would fit with Santanos's angelic Avatar of Evil aesthetic, and I've just gotten comfortable when there's a light knock on the door followed by the church bell sounds of the gargoyles outside.

The clock on my phone says it's fuck-no o'clock, and there's no way that anyone knocking on the door at this hour is a good person. Of course, my heart starts beating out of my chest as my brain reminds me of all the drama it's put me through tonight, so I'm on my feet, spilling my coffee and dashing to the front door in seconds.

I really need to calm down.

I swing the door open and stop dead at the strangers standing on my stoop. I'm not sure how many adorable blondes one person should have in their lives, but if this one is here for a reason and hasn't mistakenly knocked on my door at four in the morning, Fox and Bellamy are in surplus. He's really fucking cute in a Rainbow Brite t-shirt and leather riding pants. He waves at me with a... uh... I don't know what the right word is. Is it a residual limb? It's not a whole arm, but it looks underdeveloped like he was born missing the rest of the arm.

Next to him is a less cute, more sexy guy wearing a net club shirt and miniskirt. His lips are painted black and there's glitter all over his face.

Behind them is a giant that looks like he eats the sausage made with the intestines of his enemies and drinks his breakfast whiskey from the skulls of those same enemies. He puts a hand on the blond's shoulder, staring at me like I'm a threat.

I lift my phone, and snap a picture of the trio.

"Hi! The gargoyles said you were awake, otherwise we would have waited until a less dark hour. I'm Sterling. This is Hennessey, my bestie, and this is my husband, Jethro." The blond waves his hand at the others, but I barely notice.

My eyes lock onto the rock on his finger. Dammit. It's as big as mine should have been. Now I'm just mad that someone stole my ring. I should be able to show off my hand to Sterling. We should be able to compare rings. We should be bonding over the size of our men's love for us, but nooo. Someone had to steal my ring. Assholes.

Wait.

Did he say Jethro?

I narrow my eyes up at the asshole behind the cutie, wondering if Sterling is possibly

wearing the ring that should be on my finger.

Jethro stares back, completely unaffected by the accusation in my eyes.

He is somewhere in the vicinity of three times my size. I wouldn't be intimidated by me if I was him either.

"Um." Sterling's uncertainty reminds me that they probably don't know I'm mute. "Did we get the wrong address? Jethro said the gargoyles said this is where Bellamy lives."

I shake my head at Jethro and point, giving him my most I-will-avenge-my-ring expression.

"Oh! Do you know my husband?"

"I've never met him," Jethro interjects quickly.

I roll my eyes, grab Sterling's wrist and pull him into my house, putting myself between him and Jethro.

To my surprise, Hennessey is the one who takes umbrage with my kidnapping of the adorable Sterling. His fist comes flying and bounces right off my ward because I didn't attack him and I certainly don't mean any harm to Sterling. I was honestly hoping that Jethro would react. Just a little revenge for stealing my ring. I planned to invite him in afterward.

"What the fuck?" Hennessey howls, backing into Jethro, who sets him aside.

Jethro peers at me with a frown. "You a Harbinger or a councilor? You're not one of the Avatars, but that ward was set by the council."

I roll my eyes, annoyed, and step back, jerking my hand to tell them to come in. I catch Hennessey's eye and press my hand to my heart, bowing in apology. Hennessey gives me a sour look as he passes but otherwise doesn't say anything.

The crash of a table into another table and a yelped expletive don't even phase me as I look out front to the gargoyles and blow them kisses. I get a response in church bell speak, assume it's declarations of reciprocal love, and go inside, locking the door behind me.

Moments later, Fox leaps onto the landing at the bottom of the stairs, naked as he was when I slipped out of bed and wielding his fancy sword, the one that's as big as he is and drips black smoke as a cast off the magic that it draws from him but can't use. It's overkill, honestly, since he knows that anyone who means us harm can't cross his wards. Or maybe it's not overkill because he needs to face anyone who does mean us harm and gets past our wards with his most deadly best.

"What the fuck?" Bellamy demands, stomping down the stairs with both a gun and a sword.

Sprawled on the floor with two overturned tables, Sterling smiles up at the two men. "This is the best morning ever even if we had to drive all night to get here and I'm still marinating in population pudding."

Population pudding? What does that even mean?

"Oh no," Bellamy suddenly gasps, eyes shooting to Sterling. He immediately rounds on me. "You let them inside the house?" He immediately turns back to the trio and points to Hennessey as Jethro picks Sterling up. "Do not touch anything. If I find so much as a button missing on any of our shirts I will hunt you down, strip you naked, and leave you tied up and hanging from a bridge."

That's the most evocative threat I've ever heard out of Bellamy's mouth. I might be a little proud of that.

Fox's sword disappears into the ether and he turns, trotting up the stairs to get dressed. Bellamy, however, does not put his weapons away.

Hennessey smiles widely at my son. "Threatening me with a good time again, Bella? You know you can tie me up any time you like." Hennessey uses the same accent as Bellamy; it's beautiful and mocking, but he pulls it off like a Southern native.

Bellamy exaggerates a gag, pointing his gun at Hennessey and raising his sword toward Jethro. "Who are you?"

"Jethro Jones. I lead the werewolves that serve the Avatar of Good. For some reason the magic that invested me with leadership requires me to be here, and my husband wanted to visit his cousin."

Excitement bubbles up inside me and if I could shout, I would be exclaiming "Fuck yeah!" because: werewolves!

I want to see them shift so much.

I start toward them because I need their phone numbers right now, but Bellamy swings out his arm to bar the way. He shakes his head at me before returning to his interrogation. "You took my family's name?"

Sterling bats big blue eyes up at Jethro, answering Bellamy's question. "He didn't have to. We had the same last name before we got married."

Bellamy's extremely freckled face pales. "Did you at least check to make sure you weren't related?"



Sterling gives him an absolutely befuddled look. “Why would that matter?”

Oh. My. God.

Bellamy makes a noise that is one part frustration and two parts despair. He looks Jethro dead in the eye. “You realize that he’s not right in the head, right? He abducts people, and they don’t even realize it until they try to go home. Did you willingly marry him? Do you need someone to help you get home?”

Sterling squawks in protest, but Jethro pats his butt and lets his hand linger there. He meets Bellamy’s gaze and replies. “He’s my fated mate. I already turned him.”

Bellamy finally lowers his sword, though he keeps the gun trained on Hennessey. I’m beginning to think that maybe he doesn’t trust Sterling’s best friend. “So, you’re just as fucked up as he is, then,” he decides as Fox makes a reappearance.

Sterling stares adoringly up at Jethro. “He’s absolutely perfect for me.”

“Coffee,” Fox tells me as he moves to put the tables back in place exactly where he wants them. He points to the kitchen table. “Sit.”

I move to get started on coffee, and since everyone’s up and we’re not going to get back to sleep today, I also start thinking about breakfast. I’m sure these guys are hungry considering they apparently drove all night.

Behind me as I start filling up the coffee maker with filtered water, I hear Sterling ask, “Oh hey, where’s Re?”

And Hennessey replies, “He needed a time out.”

I’m not sure if I want to know what that means. Ok, that’s a lie. I really, really do.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:58 am*

“So, you’re like non-verbal or something?” Sterling asks as he leans up against the counter while I pull out ingredients for pancakes.

That shiny diamond ring is mocking me.

I eye my phone, but decide to think at Fox since my hands are busy.

Is this the Jethro that stole my ring? Is my ring currently sitting on this beautiful twink’s finger?

Fox’s head snaps toward me so fast, it breaks the sound barrier. There’s a crack of thunder in the house, so it could be his thunderbird magic making an appearance, but we’ve already established that Fox doesn’t accidentally surge like that according to Dakota, so it’s got to be the breaking of the sound barrier, right?

“Show me,” he demands, garnering the attention of every person in the room.

I drop the pancake ingredients, grab Sterling’s wrist, and lift his hand, showing Fox his ring. I point to it with emphasis, and my son, my beloved son, gasps. His beautiful lavender eyes widen and he—makes a weird noise. He couldn’t possibly be laughing at this situation. He wouldn’t do that.

Fox spins on Jethro, picks up the closest table, and throws it at the giant man.

“Hey!” Sterling protests. It’s a weak protest because Jethro catches the table just before it hits and transforms into a wolfman, tossing the table aside.

I'm not into hairy men, but even I can admit that the ripped wolfman is hot. Not as hot as Fox, of course, but there's no comparison when it's the love of your life versus the love of someone else's. I'm sure Sterling thinks his man is the hottest of the two; that makes sense even if it's objectively wrong. Listen, Fox cleans up nice, but he isn't the most handsome man on the planet, but he's definitely hotter than a wolfman, who is objectively ugly (but also really fucking hot too).

"First blood and not a drop more!" Bellamy interjects and points toward the stairs to the basement. "And we have a sparring room for a reason."

Fox sort of ripples with power and points to the door that leads downstairs. I couldn't guess Fox's motivation for pursuing violence against Jethro, but it may be out of frustration because that ring would have looked so good on my finger.

Tomorrow.

Fox said he would get the new ring tomorrow.

Jethro makes a huffing sound, and then that fucker talks through the muzzle of a wolfman, and he doesn't sound like you'd think, growly and slurry. Look, I know "slurry" isn't a language description, but let's just go with it this time.

"This is stupid," Jethro announces, pointing to Sterling. "He needed a ring; I contacted the only person I knew who could do it on short notice."

Sterling wiggles his fingers, admiring his ring. "I do deserve the best things in life. Jethro treats me the way I deserve, and I do the same for him. We're fated mates, you know?" he says to me.

I have no doubt. There's a strange surplus of those in my life right now considering that humans don't have fated mates.

I push Sterling toward the basement, following our men down there. I don't think Sterling has figured out that he's wearing a ring that was meant for me. It's huge, by the way. In case you don't remember that Fox was like, gimme the biggest rock you can find, when he ordered it. It's big enough to dwarf a Ring Pop. Ok, maybe that's a small exaggeration. It's only slightly bigger than a Ring Pop, and it's a better cut. Don't ask me what the cut is. It's round with a lot of pretty sparkles.

I really don't need to be jealous. That ring was ordered specifically for me, and Fox assures me that he has a better one coming. Ugh. Jealousy isn't a good look for me, is it? Besides, that ring is used goods now, and I am worthy of brand new goods... or I would also accept diamonds of historical significance, if I'm being honest about used goods.

Bellamy stands to the side of the sparring mat, watching like he's going to referee, and Hennessey joins him, standing there with a smug little smirk on his lips. Sterling and I sit on the chairs I've set up down here for when I want to watch my men spar. I put him in the chair I haven't cleaned up since the last time Fox and I got a little spicy after practice. Out of respect for Bellamy, we only ever use that chair for when Fox gets aggressive down here, so he knows the one I'm sitting on is safe for him.

Sterling doesn't need to know any of that, and I'm not sure he'd care considering he's openly touching his dick (over his clothes) while watching our men circle each other.

Admittedly, my pajama bottoms aren't going to hide my own hard-on when Fox gets moving, so I have very little room to judge.

Sterling leans over. "You never answered me. Are you non-verbal? Should I not talk to you? I've got this little nubbin and people get awkward around it, and as fun as that is, when I meet someone else with a disability, I prefer to know how they want me to interact with them."

There is literally no way I could ever not like this adorable twink. He's my age, maybe a year or two younger, and clearly of my tribe.

I type the answer out and hold it out to him to read. I'm mute because my stepfather mutilated me when I was a baby. I don't have a voice, and my main form of communication is text message. Put your number in the To line and send this message to yourself.

Fox suddenly darts forward, and my attention is drawn to the fight. Fox moves fast, faster than my eye can truly track, especially when he's up against an opponent who's obviously physically superior. Jethro in wolfman form isn't clumsy like I would expect. He's just hairy, bulky, and weaponized. He moves with Fox, though not as quickly, and while I'm no expert in hand to hand combat, I think maybe Fox is winning. Which we expected, right? Because Fox is a Reaper, and it's literally his job to kill people. I don't know what Jethro does for a job, but if he was a Reaper like my Fox, someone would have mentioned it.

Also, can we all just be in awe that my Fox is fighting a wolfman right now? A. Wolfman. My life is amazing. If I'd known that having the luck of being in the wrong place at the massacre time would get me to this point, I probably would have gone seeking out the crazies. I know that would put me firmly in the category of insane, but c'mon: werewolves.

Not to mention cherubs, Avatars, Reapers, immortals, thunderbirds, elves, demons...

My life is amazing.

"So why are our men fighting over my ring?" Sterling asks, holding his phone now that I have his number.

Fox ordered that ring, it was stolen, and the fence that sold it to you gave him Jethro's

name. Fox is just avenging my romantic engagement story that never happened.

Sterling reads that, looks at the shiny on his finger, and smiles. “Yeah, I don’t blame him. It’s a great ring. He should get a replacement, though I don’t know how easy it’s going to be to find a diamond this large again.”

He assures me he’s already ordered a custom ring with a bigger diamond.

“Hopefully that one doesn’t get stolen too.”

He says that in such a way that he expects it to get stolen, and I swear if it does, I will take vengeance into my own hands. Well, I might get my family involved so that it’s not just Fox beating up a werewolf.

Fox darts under Jethro’s claws, comes up behind him, jumps on Jethro’s back, and then Jethro’s on his knees with a broken, bleeding nose, and I have no idea how that happened.

“Match!” Bellamy shouts, jumping into the fray and pulling Fox off Jethro.

“Woah. That’s hot. I’ve never seen anyone put Jethro on his knees. I’ve got to try that.” Sterling stands up, completely unbothered by the way his pants hide nothing at all. In fact...

A zipper on the back of his pants catches my attention. That’s a sex zipper. 100% a BDSM zipper.

“Love of my life, my lil’ smokey has some baby-cue sauce for you!” Sterling announces, marching straight to Jethro and stopping with his bulge millimeters from the end of Jethro’s snout.

“You are not getting a BJ while I’m in the same room,” Bellamy insists.

Sterling turns a devastated pout on Bellamy. “You know I like being watched.”

“I know you’re completely insane if you think I want to see my baby cousin’s dick.” Bellamy narrows his eyes at Sterling. “Do you remember when I found you with that coal miner?”

Sterling gets a nostalgic smile. “You cut his fingers off one knuckle at a time and then made him eat his own dick.”

I widen my eyes at Bellamy. What did the coal miner do to deserve that?

Bellamy meets my gaze. “Sterling was a precocious kid.” That’s all he says before he moves his eyes to Jethro. “I told you something very important, Sterling.”

Sterling freezes for a second, then takes a step back from Jethro. “Right. Sorry, husband, we have to wait.”

Now I want to know what Bellamy said.

Bellamy makes sure that Fox isn’t going to keep fighting Jethro, and Jethro shifts to his human form, fully clothed. Oooh, look at that! Another shifter whose clothes shift with him. Poor Fox, doomed to naked shifting for all eternity.

“What did he tell you,” Hennessey asks. He’s clearly on the same page as me, and once he forgives me for the hurting knuckles, we’re going to be friends.

Sterling eyes Bellamy and takes another step away from Jethro. “He said if he ever saw my dick again, he’d feed it to me like he did poor Bill.”

Jethro growls, takes two intentional steps to Sterling, and pulls him into his arms. “I wouldn’t let that happen,” he promises, and to be fair, I don’t think any of us would let Bellamy do that either.

It’s a good threat though.

Sterling shakes his head. “Not risking it,” he replies seriously. “Bellamy’s sneaky. Do not trust him with your pogo stick.”

Jethro snorts a very animalistic sound, then he turns his attention to Fox, who’s wiping up Jethro’s blood with a rag. Bellamy will clean it with bleach later. Fox is less bothered by blood spatter than Bellamy is, but he still tries to be conscientious about Bellamy’s preferences.

“You done?” Jethro asks.

Fox looks at him without replying, but that’s his affirmative stare, not his I-will-kill-you glare.

I clap and point up the stairs. Breakfast, then we need to meet everyone at the cherub warehouse to go to Arktis to free the neutral Avatar. Don’t know what we’re doing with Sterling and Co. while we do that, but we can discuss that over food.



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“I’m going with you,” Jethro says, setting his fork down as if he’s expecting a fight.

The cavern isn’t big enough for the number of people we already have planned, I point out.

It’s not a large space to begin with, being person-made, but fitting all the Avatars in there plus the fathers, Bellamy, Fox, and me is already too many people. I mean, I suppose I don’t need to be there. I’m not the next Avatar. I’m just the omen of change, the portent of vicissitude, the Harbinger of Fox. I don’t actually need to be there, but I want to be, so I’m not going to suggest that I leave myself out.

Jethro gives me a stare that rivals Fox’s when he’s doing things that end in death and dismemberment. “Add me and Sterling to the list of participants because we have to be there. I told you the magic was insistent that we come north, we’re here now, and it’s insisting that I need to go with you.”

“The magic talks to you?” Bellamy questions skeptically.

Jethro considers that question for a moment, feeding Sterling off his plate. Since Sterling decided to sit in his lap for breakfast, they’ve been sharing food. Honestly, I feel like I should have figured out that I could sit on Fox’s lap during meals before now, but then again, Fox isn’t the type to romanticize food consumption.

“No. It doesn’t talk to me. It communicates, but not in words. I trust my instincts, and the magic uses them to direct me. I need to be at Arktis with you.”

“I’m not going,” Bellamy corrects. “The only people who need to be there—”

“You need to be there,” Jethro interrupts. “I don’t think those two need to be there, but you do.” He points between me and Fox, which is bullshit.

I’m The Harbinger. Of course I need to be there. If anyone can skip it’s Fox’s fathers.

Fox reads that message and immediately stands. “I’ll let them know.”

And the award for most excellent Future Husband goes to Arlington Fox for making sure his soul mate gets to be in the room when we unleash the universal force of Neutrality.

“Why would I need to be there?” Bellamy demands, turning red around the ears. He suddenly jumps, bumping the table, and I look just in time to see Hennessey all too casually move his hand out from under the table to pick up his fork.

Sterling, being the most wonderful angel I’ve ever met in real life, says, “Is Hennessey molesting you again? You want me to ask Jethro to make him stop?”

“Why would anyone want me to stop molesting them?” Hennessey demands, completely affronted. “Men far and wide stand in lines miles long for the opportunity to beg for my attention. Why would Bellamy want me to keep my hands to myself? When you all go off to save the world, he and I are going to have a private celebration.”

Bellamy’s face flushes beet red, and Jethro intervenes on his behalf even though Sterling is clearly delighted with his cousin’s embarrassment.

“No, you aren’t. Bellamy is coming to Arktis with me and Sterling. You’re going to go rescue Re from whatever torment you’ve left him in.” There’s a quality to Jethro’s voice that rolls with power, and Hennessey shudders before reluctantly nodding. “Fine. He’d probably appreciate breakfast anyway.”

I look at the platter of pancakes that we've demolished. There's only about five left, and Sterling reaches for another one while I'm counting, explaining, "Leftover pancakes are shit. Take him somewhere good."

Take him to the Captain.

I send that, adding the address to our favorite cafe.

"Who's the Captain?" Sterling asks, feeding Jethro a bite of pancake he dipped in syrup.

"The owner of Diner. Take Re there. There's only one rule, and that is that no one leaves leftovers. You won't be welcome back if you don't eat everything the Captain serves you," Jethro explains. "Do not make yourself unwelcome there because I will beat you if you offend the Captain."

There's a dire warning in that threat, and I get the impression that Jethro will follow through even though friends don't beat other friends unless they're beating off.

"I just won't order anything," Hennessey shrugs. "I'm not going to be hungry anyway."

I smile at that, since no one orders at Diner. I'm not going to ruin the surprise, and apparently neither is Jethro.

Fox returns and sits next to me, sliding his arm over the back of my chair. "My fathers agreed to stay with the cherubs."

Yay, we get to attend the awakening!

"Why do I need to be there?" Bellamy asks again even more insistently than the first

time.

“You know as much as I do,” Jethro responds.

I reach over and take Bellamy’s hand, jerking him in close and then wrapping him in a side hug and kissing his temple. Fox moves his arm from around me to around Bellamy too, leans over behind me and kisses the top of our son’s head.

“Why do they get to kiss you, but I can’t?” Hennessey demands.

“We’re his parents,” Fox says, pointing at me to indicate that he’s speaking for me. I didn’t even think that, but my soulmate knows exactly what I would’ve said if I could have responded as quickly as he did.

Hennessey gives him a very skeptical expression. “I’ve known Bellamy since Sterling was a teenager. I’ve met his parents. In fact, I had lunch with them three months ago.”

Fox points to me again. “We adopted him last June. Whoever his genetic donors are, we’re his parents now.”

“Why are you pointing at Romily?” Sterling asks, curiously.

Even Edovard didn’t need this explained, but I suppose he has some extrasensory abilities that would make it obvious that Fox talks for me occasionally.

“Oppa and Papa have a telepathic connection that allows Oppa to talk for Papa. When he does that, he points to Papa to let us know who’s actually talking.”

Whew boy. Bellamy just deliberately drew a line in the sand about who he’s claiming as family, and it is not the people who donated their genetic material. He doesn’t talk

about his family besides occasionally mentioning things that make me think the first part of his life was not a pleasant or easy time. He definitely doesn't consider his birth parents a part of his family.

Honestly, I'm a little surprised that he still has enough of a relationship with Sterling that he gave him our address.

Fox stirs at that thought, speaking in my head. My address is publicly available to anyone that asks the depot for it. All my contact details are.

I didn't know that.

I glance at him as Sterling raises his hand and his nubbin. "Gotcha, cuz. You're a—" He looks at me and Fox. "What's your last name?"

Bellamy sighs. "We're the Foxilys. I will officially change my name to that when they do in about a decade."

"Love that name. Foxily. It's a great ship name. So, you're a Foxily now. And these are your dads. Nice. I'm a Jones werewolf, and this guy's my sugar Daddy."

Jethro's grin is feral. "Anything you want, baby, as long as I'm the one buying it for you."

Hennessey eyes Jethro with a satisfied smirk. "I like them together," he tells us as an aside, then turns his attention back to Bellamy. "After you get done saving the world, I'll take you out and show you a good time. I won the lotto and have a little extra to spoil you with."

Sterling laughs. Jethro arches one eyebrow at Hennessey, and Bellamy shakes his head. "Nope. I'm good. Way past my party days."

He's only thirty seven (give or take a few centuries spent in Arktis), and he literally has an eternity of time ahead of him; he should not be past his party days. Actually...

I never had party days. I want party days. Where do I sign up for party days?

Bellamy's reply is as dry as the mummies found in the walls of old houses on crime TV. "Responsible parents leave their party days behind them when they have kids. You lost your chance when you started adopting."

This is bullshit. My kids are adults; I should be allowed to party once in a while.

Bellamy gives me an exaggerated shrug. "Them's the rules."

Anyone else notice how Fox doesn't comment at all. It's almost like he doesn't want me to have party days. I mean, he would never withhold anything I want, but his silence is as suspicious as Hennessey's smirk.

"Well, being the responsible parent, you wouldn't want to leave your kids at home unattended, and since they're adults, you can just bring them with us. Better if the kids party with you than go off and do who knows what with who knows who, right?"

I nod sagely because that right there is how I'm going to have my cake and eat it too.

Does anyone know what that idiom means? I've literally learned everything I know from reading fiction and the internet, and that idiom is so weird. Like, why wouldn't you eat the cake you have? It makes no sense.

Hmm. It's worth a Google.

I type my question into my browser on my phone and the internet tells me that it

comes from a letter written by Thomas the Duke of Norfolk to Thomas Cromwell (I'm just going to gayify this and believe that these two were secret lovers and not asinine politicians fighting over how much power the church should have over the monarchy in the era of the Tudors), and he was just saying that you can't have a cake and also eat it, it's one or the other, so I guess it's like saying you can't have a house and burn it down.

That makes sense I guess.

I look up from my dive into the letters of dead men to the expectant faces of my tablemates.

Ooh, they thought I was typing to them. Yeah, that's one of the downfalls of communicating primarily via phone. Sometimes typing is an internet investigation, not a part of the conversation.

Meh, they might be interested in my random facts, so I type up a brief explanation of the idiom and the original usage and send it to them. Now we all know a fun bit of useless trivia.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:58 am*

“It’s really difficult to have a secret base of operations when you tell everyone and their fathers where the secret base is.” Ace accompanies his accusation with a finger to Akile’s chest when he leads us and the fathers back into the cherub’s work area.

Akile grabs his brother’s arm and jerks him into a tight hug. “They wouldn’t let me leave their mansion until I agreed to bring them with! I was in Tag’s private realm. No one enters or leaves without his permission.”

This is new information to me. Listen, I know there was a little um, hiccup, in the first book with the time zone calculation because time zones are hard. So yeah, I never really followed through with the whole where-is-the-mansion located thing. Since I’ve never made a mistake in my life, it didn’t occur to me to even ask.

So now we know, the fathers live in a private realm.

Hey, if you live in a private realm, why is the time zone different, and also, can you do what Grandma Bone did that made it so I could talk in her realm?

Everyone here reads my message, and then Tag raises his eyes to mine curiously. “What did she do?”

I shrug.

Magic.

Obviously.



Tag snorts. “Obviously. I will ask her what she did to enable you to ‘talk’ and see if I can adjust the realm to allow for it.”

Grandma Bone: If you’re talking about me, 1. I protest anyone calling me Grandma Bone, and 2. It was a simple evocation spell combined with a translation spell that allowed Romily to project his thoughts into the language of any being capable of hearing and understanding within the realm.

Me: Does that mean that I heard English but you might’ve heard Elvish?

Grandma Bone: I do prefer to listen in my native language.

I look up to Tag with pleading eyes.

He’s staring through me thoughtfully. “I think I understand how she did it. I will work on weaving that spell into the rules of the realm,” he promises.

Clapping my approval, I jump to give the tall elf a kiss on the cheek in thanks. I love the idea of being able to “talk” to my family sometimes.

A small gaggle of tiny cherubs descend on our group then. With me are Sterling and Co., Bellamy and Fox, Fox’s fathers and Akile, and Edovard and his evil polycule. As I’m counting everyone, Annette and Gwendolyn walk in together. Daddy presses her lips together when she sees all the cherubs and looks like she’s seconds away from calling their parents. She doesn’t like to see the cherubs without adult supervision.

“What the fuck is happening here?” she demands, indicating the cherubs that are now each taking one person by the hand.

“Interviews, Ms. Killian,” Ace replies with an adorably innocent and disarming

smile. “We’re interviewing all of The Harbinger’s people just in case one of you is the next Avatar of Neutrality.”

Daddy peers at him skeptically. “I thought we believed that Darcy is the most qualified.” As soon as the words exit her mouth, she smirks. “Where is he, anyway. Did anyone record his reaction when you told him about being the next neutral Avatar?”

I look at Akile, since he’s the one in charge of this, but he looks at Ace, who looks at Bellamy, and Bellamy turns to me.

I get the impression no one has actually spoken to Darcy.

Who told Darcy that dinner last night was going to happen at the father’s house, and now that I’m thinking about it, why wasn’t he there?

The silence between us is disheartening.

I was abducted!

I was definitely not in charge of messaging Darcy.

Bellamy holds up his hands in protest. “It took us three days to track you down. I canceled dinner with Darcy, and it’s completely reasonable that I didn’t think of inviting him to the mansion. I was certainly not in charge of informing him that we think he’s the next neutral Avatar. I value my friendship with him, and that would strain our relationship.”

Oooh yeah, Darcy isn’t going to be happy if he is the next Avatar of Neutrality. He’s not the social responsibility type.

“We may not need to tell him at all,” Grandma Bone points out. “The universal force is perfectly capable of finding its Avatar across multiple realms and universes. It doesn’t necessarily need proximity. The only people who need to be close are the ones doing the awakening.”

Jethro shakes his head. “No, you’re wrong. I need to be there. Sterling needs to be there with me. Bellamy needs to be there. The magic is insistent on those. I don’t have any feelings about Darcy being there, but my instincts know that some of us who aren’t doing the awakening need to be there.” He stops and looks around the group, then points to Akile. “You and Ace. Your presence may not be strictly necessary, but you wouldn’t be unwelcome, and...” he trails off, looking around. Shaking his head. “There’s someone missing, but I get the feeling that they’re also not necessary, just absent. Maybe it’s Darcy.” He says Darcy’s name with a familiar sort of disgust and grudging respect. He clearly knows our wayward tracker.

Annette cocks her head at Jethro, narrowing her eyes skeptically. “You think that magic is talking to you?”

Jethro reacts by mirroring her expression. “No. The magic uses my own instincts to communicate.”

Santanos steps into the conversation, holding the hand of a little cherub who’s about knee height on him. “That is similar to how magic communicates with me. I wouldn’t call it instincts for me, though. Usually it’s my first thought that is the correct course for me.”

Annette glances between the two of them thoughtfully. “I don’t think the magic has ever communicated with me.”

“How do you know what the right thing to do is?” Edovard asks; he’s holding two cherubs in his arms and has two more on his shoulders.

I lift my phone and snap a photo of the adorableness of my pupper being the cherubs' current jungle gym.

Annette smiles at Edovard with affectionate love. "I have always had a strong sense of right and wrong. I always choose what will do the most good or the most immediate good. Sometimes those two things are not the same and I make a judgment call on that."

Edovard smiles back. "Yes, I can see that now."

"Since the magic seems to be instructing Jethro," Ace begins, redirecting the conversation, "who is going to Arktis? I want a list, and then everyone else is getting interviewed. I will not be going if I'm not needed."

"I'm going," Akile announces immediately.

Jethro lists off the people he thinks should be there: Santanos, Annette, Gwendolyn, and Bellamy, Sterling, and then he hesitantly points to Edovard. "I think you would be helpful, but not necessary," he tells my pupper.

Edovard starts helping the cherubs down. "I like being helpful."

Fox and I are going. We are not letting our sons and my bestie go wake up a universal force without us.

Ace nods, making notes on a tablet, and smiles when he looks up. "Ok, everyone going can follow Akile to the portal room. The rest of you will get to answer interview questions with the friends. We're compiling data at this point, so your cooperation will be helpful as we move forward into the next stage."

With that, we all break into our respective groups. I slip my arm through Akile's at

the lead and arch an expectant eyebrow at my bestie. He stayed with my in-laws last night, and I want to know if anything happened. We have time for tea before we change the world.

Akile, being a very smart bestie, rolls his eyes at me. “I went to bed by myself last night and I woke up alone.”

I narrow my eyes to communicate that that doesn’t mean nothing happened. It just didn’t happen in the bed he slept in.

He chuckles and bats my hand. He glances over his shoulder before leaning close to my ear. “Ok, Dakota is a total Daddy, and between him and Bear I will be walking crooked for a week. Tag is the sluttiest slut to ever slut; I definitely learned a bunch of new tricks from him, and Amos... I don’t even have words. He’s got a little bit of incubaccha in him at least. He kept us going for hours until we were literally too exhausted to stay awake. They showered me with water and praise and then escorted me to my own bed.”

I stare at my bestie in awe of him. I am so fucking happy for you.

Akile and I share a wide grin. “It was a magnificent night,” he sighs, dreamily. “All my dreams came true.”

I huff a laugh. You’re going to have to find bigger dreams now, but I can’t imagine what’s bigger than an orgy with four of the sexiest men on the planet.

He laughs with me, kisses my temple, and releases my arm so he can open and hold the door to the portal room while the rest of our group follows me inside.

I’m learning that the cherubs never go halfway with things, so while the portal room is empty except for a couple of portals, the walls are filled with colorful drawings that

the cherubs did themselves. They put up sheets of paper and filled the room with their art. Some pieces are incredibly lifelike, while others look like refrigerator art done by kindergarteners. Every inch of color delights the hell out of me.

After we're all in, Akile takes us through the portal to the ice cave under Arktis, and soon we're all standing around the exposed prison covered in glowing worms.

"Now for the hard part," Akile says, waving a hand at the prison. "We have no idea what you should do."

Gwendolyn steps forward. "If the Avatars don't mind, I'd like to take the lead," she says.

Santanos and Annette agree, and Gwendolyn swipes away some of the worms, pressing her hand against the prison. She stands there like that for several quiet minutes, then she steps back. "I don't think we can break the ward without the full force of the third Avatar, but we can reach through it."

Santanos touches the prison, shaking his head. "How do you propose we get through that?" he asks curiously.

"We treat it like a maze and weave our way to the other side," she explains.

Annette's wavy red hair bounces side to side as she shakes her head. "That ward isn't going to allow neutral magic through it. It's specifically designed to keep it inside. Santanos and I can easily pass through the ward the way you're describing, but bringing neutral magic back out isn't going to be possible."

Gwendolyn holds out her hands to the Avatars. "If you two work together to create a bypass, I can get through and bring the magic out. Make a tunnel, like a straw, and I'll go through with my magic and hopefully awaken the neutral force and lead it

back out through the tunnel you two make.”

After a beat, Santanos nods. “Ok, I see it. We can do that.”

Annette nods her agreement, and the two Avatars take Gwendolyn’s hands.

What follows is two hours of those three not moving a muscle.

I snap a picture about five minutes in and send it to the group chat. Then I remember that no one has told Darcy what’s happening, so I send him the picture too with the caption, “Incoming!”

Darcy doesn’t respond, but if he’s on a job, he wouldn’t necessarily get back to me right away.

The image of him doing some random tracking job and then suddenly finding himself invested with the universal force of neutrality gives me a little bit of schadenfreude. He is going to hate being the Avatar of Neutrality at first, but he’s old enough to get over it and learn to take some responsibility.

At about the two hour mark, Edovard shuffles toward Santanos with a frown. We were all quiet at first, but after half an hour, Sterling was bored, so he turned to Jethro and started making out like the rest of us didn’t exist. Akile decided to entertain Edovard with some magic tricks—not real magic; he started sleight of handing a quarter—and the rest of us have been conversing over text.

Edovard places a tentative hand on Santanos’ shoulder. Santanos doesn’t move, but Edovard blows out a sigh of relief, and then moves behind Gwendolyn and puts his other hand on Annette’s shoulder. Gwendolyn moves slightly, straightening her back, and Edovard visibly relaxes, joining the avatars in whatever they’re doing.

I guess it's time to hurry up and wait some more. Yay. I'm so glad I decided I needed to be here for this.



## Page 23

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Five minutes after Edovard joins the avatars, Annette and Bellamy drop like their strings have been cut at the same time. I freeze in indecision, not sure who to go to, but Edovard drops to his knees next to Annette, so I check on Bellamy.

“Oh,” Sterling exclaims, wobbling a little.

Jethro steadies Sterling as I watch Fox check Bellamy’s pulse.

“They’re ok,” Edovard says, and I turn to see that he’s holding Annette in his arms. “Their auras are fine,” he explains.

Santanos wobbles but stabilizes with his hand on Edovard’s shoulder.

Gwendolyn appears completely normal, but I don’t know her well enough to know how well she hides her fatigue. “The Avatar of Neutrality has been invested,” she announces.

“No kidding!” Sterling agrees, looking around with a manic smile.

Jethro looks at Sterling like he’s hung the moon. “You’re going to make an excellent minion,” he tells the cutie.

Sterling beams at him. “I totally am!”

What is happening right now?

I think that at Fox, who points at me and repeats the question.

Jethro replies. “We’re no longer aligned with good. I’m no longer the werewolf pack leader for good. We are now aligned with Neutrality, which makes a hell of a lot more sense, because non-corporeals aren’t morally good or evil most of the time.”

“That’s why we needed to be here,” Sterling explains. He shuffles toward the prison, touches it, and a doorway folds up like you see in sci-fi movies when the effects people are all like, Look at this door fold away like magic! It’s like that, but, you know, more realistic.

As soon as the door is open, Sterling pokes his head in. “Alright, this is a mummy. I mean, it’s breathing, I think, but it’s a mummy. Who’s going to do something about this?”

Jethro steps in, there’s a significant crack like he just broke a dry branch over a rock, and then he steps out. “The mummy isn’t breathing,” he explains with a look of disgust. “I broke the preservation spell keeping that poor soul trapped in a dead body and set the soul free.”

Sterling looks up at him like... well, probably like I look at Fox, and movement under my fingers brings my gaze back down to my son.

Bellamy’s eyes pop open. He stares blankly for a long minute and then his face pales. His freckles lose color.

Annette moans at the same time, sitting up woozily. “Fuck me. I did not expect that.”

Fox points at me. “What happened?”

Annette pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “I’ve been divested.”

I snap to attention at that. Does she mean...?

Bellamy pushes us back enough to sit up, and I fret over his paleness and the fact that he went down when Annette did. I let my face ask him what's happening and even mouth the words as best I can.

Bellamy leans over and rests his forehead on my shoulder, reaching out and taking Fox's hand. "I've been invested."

I turn wide, shocked eyes on Fox. Bellamy is the Avatar of Neutrality?

Fox shakes his head, also slightly more wide-eyed than usual. "You're the Avatar of Good, aren't you?"

Bellamy groans miserably. "Yesss."

My assassin son who has no qualms killing people, and who worked for the Avatar of Evil for his entire adult life, is now the Avatar of Good? I can't say I expected that. Anyone else? No? Didn't think so.

I pat Bellamy's head and look over to Annette, who's still cuddling Edovard. She gives me a wan little smile. "Bonnie's going to be pleased," she tells me. "I've been the Avatar of Good our entire marriage, and now I get to be Bonnie's wife. I'm not upset, if that's what you're thinking, and you're still my sugar baby. I'm not giving up daddy status just because the universal force of good needed someone else to work with the new Avatar of Neutrality. Apparently Bellamy's the most qualified candidate for that."

"This is bullshit," Bellamy whines, face still buried in my shoulder.

"Make it stop," Akile whimpers, shifting into view and falling to his knees.

His face is scrunched up, eyes closed, and he's rubbing his temples.

“Make what stop?” Fox asks.

“There are people in my head,” Akile whimpers. “Shut up! No, stop talking! Dakota? What. The. Fuck?”

He stops suddenly, and goes completely blank. His face loses the defining twinkle and mischievous smile that lives in his expression. He looks like the essence of him disappeared, leaving nothing but a breathing husk. It doesn't last long, only thirty seconds, maybe, and then he's back, waking up like he fell into a deep coma.

He blinks, confused, and then his eyes widen at me. “You're never going to believe this. The council? You know, the one that has been running our government for thousands of years? They weren't even supposed to be good or evil. The council was supposed to be neutral this whole fucking time. And invested with power. Guess who's been elected the leader of the council? Guess who's now telepathically linked to twelve other people?”

I point to Akile. My bestie, leader of the new world order. Damn, my life is crazy. Conspiracy theorists would be salivating over me if they knew.

Akile nods vigorously and speeds through the next information dump. “Oh yeah. By the way, the magic liked having Dakota on the council, so he's still there, and so is Jeff Gordon, if you can believe that. I need to get to the council building. We need to disband the current council and make sure everyone knows that there's a new council. We also have to replace seventy percent of the Arbiters. Fuck, there is so much to do.”

He stands, wobbles a little, and then heads toward the tunnel that leads to the exit.

Fox and I help Bellamy up, and as a group we traipse back to the portal. I glance over my shoulder at the prison and the glowing worms climbing from the floor into the

exposed prison cell. I feel sorry for the soul they trapped in there, but I'm glad we fixed it.

I type a text message to Darcy. You ok?

I don't get an immediate reply, but if I don't hear from him in a day or two, I will happily track his tiny ass down. I've got a whole minion army at Edovard's disposal; if I tell him Darcy is missing, Edovard will rally the troops to find him. I'm not worried.

I'm not sure how this keeps happening, but here we are again, marching into the council chamber again, to make sure the whole world knows now is not the time and we are not the people. Again.

This time we have a new Avatar of Good, a newly invested High Councilor, and ten new councilors, because as soon as we made it back to the cherubs, Akile got everyone onto the task of tracking down the new council and gathering them all in one place. We also have people in the audience who came to watch over us. There's a whole section of little cherubs in the audience, a section for Edovard and Co. plus a slew of Santanos's minions, and Jethro, Sterling, and their packmates—I'm not sure how many of them are actually werewolves, because apparently, werewolves lead packs, but they don't necessarily lead packs of other werewolves. Werewolves are a rare species.

Annette kissed us all goodbye and went home to celebrate her new freedom with her wife, and we discovered that Ace turned into a wolfman while we were gone. Why? Because the leaders of the werewolves are invested by the universal forces and the universal force of good decided he'd make a great leader of the good pack now that Jethro belongs to the neutral force. He hasn't actually shifted back to his cherub form because "it feels more natural" in his wolfman form, and he along with some of his new pack are also in the crowd.

Anyway, all that to say: we have a lot of supporters in the audience today.

Bellamy was right, by the way—werewolves genitals are out there in the open for all to see, and Ace has a very big dick to go with his new body hair, claws, and fangs.

So, yeah, there's been some rather abrupt and unexpected changes in the last few hours, and we're about to do it again, livestreaming the apocalypse. Ok, maybe that's an exaggeration, but it feels like an apocalypse.

Fox tells me that we need everyone in the supernatural community to know that the system of government is being changed by the universal forces that rule us, so I start the livestream before we're even in the council arena. I aim the camera at my face, and in short order our livestream viewing audience goes from zero to ten, then three hundred, then four thousand, and it keeps climbing. It's at over three million when I walk into the council chamber with the group, led by Dakota and Jeff Gordon. I turn the camera around and watch the number of viewers climb, because the supernatural community loves nothing more than the tea, and when they see Fox's tag on a livestream and my face, they know they're about to get all the tea.

The announcer calls out the council's names, leaving out the ones currently standing in the middle of the chamber facing the dais where the councilors get to sit in judgment over all.

“Sheeva Taylor. Killigan Buzzo. Homer Rivera. Zile Elliven. Falmer Jones. Balgur Plummer. Alexie Hiron.”

We wait while the councilors take their seats, and then the announcer calls out the reason for this meeting. “Akile Aristide here to unseat the current roster of councilors and install a new council.”

Who the fuck decided to lead with that?

The council arena erupts. Zile grabs the gavel and bangs it loudly, calling everyone to order. “Silence!”

The chamber falls into silence as Zile glares around the room, then they turn their attention to Akile, who’s now standing in front with Dakota and Jeff flanking him. “What are you doing?”

Akile steps up and addresses everyone. “Three thousand years ago, my parents and all the living cherubs at that time executed a coup. They killed the Avatar of Neutrality, broke the system of governance that had guided all the realms and universes until then, and installed a binary system that relied solely on the universal force for good and the universal force for evil. I, along with the cherubs of my generation, became aware of the injustice committed by our parents last year, and today we unleashed the universal force of neutrality. As soon as we did that, the new Avatar of Neutrality was invested, a new Avatar of Good was invested, and I was invested with the leadership of the council. I’ve brought with me twelve councilors that have been invested with the right to lead and the magic to do so, and we’ve come to thank you for doing a job that you were not properly qualified for and to take our place.”

Immediately the far left councilor, Alexie Hirons, says, “That’s what happened. I felt something had changed.”

“As did I,” Zile agrees, looking down the line of councilors on either side of them. They find all the councilors nodding and return their gaze to Akile. “We will need proof of the investment before we can transfer power, and you will need to produce the Avatar of Neutrality for the whole community. We can see that Bellamy Jones is the new Avatar of Good.” They eye Bellamy skeptically. “I can’t say this doesn’t surprise me.”

Bellamy steps forward, grimacing. “You and me both, Councilor Elliven.”

The view count on our livestream is at a record high. After the last couple of times I livestreamed, word has gotten around that we always bring the best drama to the council arena. It's true.

"Does anyone know where the new Avatar is?" Falmer asks, curiously. "Or who it is?"

Akile shakes his head. "We have a theory, but it's unconfirmed yet. As for proof of our investment..." Akile gestures to Hassan. "Santanos, may I borrow your bodyguard?"

Santanos inclines his head. "You may, Councilor Aristide."

Ooh. Santanos knows how to make a statement, doesn't he?

Hassan steps into the fore, pulling a sword from the ether. Does everyone have special little realms where they store their swords? Everyone except Bellamy, obviously, who keeps his weapons in a safe in his room.

Swinging his sword in powerful arcs, Hassan practically dances down the line of the new councilors, proving that each of them has a ward to protect them from attack. He even swings at Bellamy, who also has a ward. Then he turns to the people sitting behind the council bench.

"Shall I test your wards?" Santanos asks as Hassan waits. "He is very talented with a sword. I can guarantee no blood as long as you don't flinch."

"How about a slap instead of a sword?" Sheeva suggests drolly.

I don't think she thinks that he'll be able to hit her.



“As you wish,” Santanos agrees, and Hassan moves to the councilwoman and slaps her. Not too hard, but the slap connects and she gasps in shock.

Yeah, that was predictable, and predictably the room erupts again. It takes longer for Zile to bring the room back to order, but eventually the audience falls quiet again.

“As you can see, you are no longer protected by the council wards,” Akile says, looking over all the councilors. “Please step down and allow me and my co-councilors to take our places.”

The door at the back of the room bangs open. “This is an absolute farce!” A guy who looks a lot like my bestie rushes in with twelve other people. They push into the space where Team Neutral is waiting to take power, and the guy addresses not only the defunct council, but also the wider audience. “The cherubs object to what our offspring have done, and we formally request the council allow us to set the world back to order. We do not need the neutral force as long as good and evil work together. It’s unnecessary to leave the governance of the universe in the hands of neutrality, and doing so causes good and evil to go to war. Without neutrality to weigh the scales, good and evil have to work together, and in the end the net effect is the perfect balance without the never ending contention between the two sides.”

“Father,” Akile sighs. “Don’t pretend like trapping an entire universal force was done to stop the war between Good and Evil. Good and Evil are at odds because that is the nature of free will; you did it to force the governing body into one location, and you chose Earth because of your own biases. It was organizational convenience, not some noble cause to force Good and Evil to work together.”

“You’re joking,” someone in the audience blurts.

Akile shakes his head. “I wish I was. Father, we’re not going to allow you to disrupt the entire universe again. You’re not even going to be in charge of the Arbiters

anymore. You've already been replaced, and if you want me to prove it, I will."

"Giuseppe," Zile calls. "The new council has proven they've been invested. Sit down."

Well, would you look at that, Akile's dad was the leader of the depot.

Giuseppe's eyes narrow. "Councilor Elliven, investiture is unnecessary to rule with fairness, don't you think? The council has been doing it for millennia already."

Zile looks a little confused for a moment, and then their face clears. "That is true. There's no reason to change what has worked for so long."

Their thoughts are mirrored by all the councilors beside them as well, then Zile looks Akile in the eye. "We will not be giving up our seats and reorganizing the entire government because you took matters into your own hands."

Akile makes a noise of protest, interrupting the councilor. "They trapped an entire universal force because it was inconvenient for the cherubs. It's not what is right, it's not what is good for universal balance, it was terrible for Hell and for many other realms and planets. We are not going to allow you to continue this way. The magical forces have made it clear that we are the new government." He pauses, for a moment, gesturing to all the people backing him up. "We're the people who've been invested. We've proven it. Please step down."

Zile gestures to the guards. "We will not. We do not recognize your authority. Escort them out of the council chambers."

"We're not leaving," Akile announces, daring anyone to try to remove him.

The guards, of course, come to shuffle us away, but we have wards, and we're not

moving until we decide to move. The first guard to try to use force falls onto his ass. There's a beat where everyone in the chamber processes that he's fallen, then something strange happens.

"You must leave. You must leave. You must leave..." The guard on his ass starts the chant, and as he stands, the other guards join him, their voices insistent, almost desperate.

All together the guards run at us, as if they think that they can overwhelm our wards through force of numbers. They bounce off and go flying into the crowd. The audience—the people here to stand with us—help them up and join them, running at us to beat against our wards. Every person in the room joins the chant, "You must leave. You must leave. You must leave."

I watch in horror as Edovard stands, catches my eye, and joins the crowd, running at me. What the fuck is he doing? What is happening?

I turn to Fox to find out what the hell is happening, but Fox, my Fox, is pounding on his father's ward with the sword he apparently snuck into the council chamber. I pan the camera around agog. Every person in the room without a council ward is trying to get us to leave, including the people in our own party. Except the old council is watching passively, and so are Giuseppe and the cherubs he brought with him.

Giuseppe...

Fuck me.

I move to Akile's side, shoving people out of the way with my ward, and I point to his father with one hand, gesturing to our friends and loved ones pounding on our wards with the other. Yes, I jostle the camera, but I feel like a steady camera view isn't the most important thing right now.

Akile confirms my suspicions with a nod. “Yes, he’s a very powerful mind-control psychic.”

I knew it. We’re going to have to take him out. Well, eesh. I don’t know how Akile feels about taking out a parent.

We have to stop this. They’re going to hurt themselves if they haven’t already.

I type that into the chat bar of the livestream and show Akile before turning to look around the fray.

I try to find Edovard, and yeah, his knuckles are bloody from punching Bellamy’s ward. Bellamy is trying to talk to him, but there’s nothing but the imperative to expel the new council in Edovard. I push down the immediate anger at seeing my pupper in such a state. I’m offended that anyone would mind control another person, but especially not my Fox and my pupper.

Akile shakes his hands out, looking around with a grim set to his usually smiling mouth. “Right. I don’t have any way to stop them. We might be able to knock my father out, but that would negate our wards. We can’t do that. We can’t...” he stumbles and shakes his head. “I don’t want to hurt my dad. I don’t want to hurt my dad.”

What—?

“I don’t want to hurt my dad.”

Oh no he did not.

He did. He’s got his mind control hooks in his own son. That asshole.

I turn, finding Fox in a stupid fight with a council ward as if he has the power to negate one, and I march my ass straight to him. I don't know how I'm going to snap him out of this. Giuseppe is powerful. Powerful enough that I probably can't stop him. It's probably pointless, and we should surrender. Leave and let things be...

Whose voice is that talking such shit in my head, because I know that isn't mine. I don't talk like that to myself. Ever.

I turn toward the man with the mind control powers, seeing the shocked look on his face.

Do I look like the kind of person who would think I've been defeated before I even tried?

I think very fucking loudly at him. I don't know if he can hear me, but if he can get thoughts into my head, surely he can hear the ones that are already there.

I am Romily Butcher. This sunshine and sass was forged through adversity. I have faced down death around every corner of my life, and I survived because it was the choice between moxie and death. You don't have enough experience to get in my head and think thoughts for me. You can't even mimic my inner voice enough to try. Allow me to demonstrate how little power you have.

I turn to Fox, standing on my tiptoes to get in his face and holding the camera so the world can see this, I use that mental connection between us that exists beyond the reach of some mind-controlling cherub.

Love of my life. Soul mate. Fox. Future Husband. What the hell are you doing?

Fox's battering stutters with every word and finally stops. His eyes focus on me, and suddenly he's back with me. It barely took any effort at all.

His eyes narrow as he looks at me and takes in the rest of what is happening. He ducks a kiss to my lips. “Thank you.”

As soon as the words leave his lips, he moves. So fast I can barely track him, but I get the camera up in time to see his sword arc as he comes to a stop in front of Giuseppe. Every person in the room comes to a dead stop, then Giuseppe’s head falls off his shoulders and his body collapses.

I really hope Akile and Ace are the forgiving type.

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“What the fuck?”

The question rings loud in the sudden silence. Fox turns to the remaining cherubs, holding his sword threateningly.

“My husband!” one of the cherubs wails, but that’s not despair in her voice. That is outrage. Like she can’t believe we would defend ourselves against his mind-control. “How dare you!”

Ace bounds over in his wolfman form. “Mother! He literally used mind control on all of us. How else was the Reaper supposed to react when his entire family was in danger?” Ace sounds just like his mother and just as offended.

The woman rears back, face full of disgust. “I am not your mother. I don’t even know you!”

Ace sighs. “Mother, it’s me. Your youngest child. I’ve been invested by the universal force of good to be the werewolf leader.”

Bellamy, Edovard, and Akile join us as Ace’s mother looks him over and shakes her head. “No.”

Ace sighs and shifts back to his cherub form. “Yes.”

His mother’s face clears. “Talía.”

Ace’s face falls. He was angry; that one word defeated him. “I told you. It’s Ace.”

The woman shakes her head, looking away. “I named you Talia. I’ve called you Talia for eight hundred years, I am not calling you Ace.”

I place an arm around Ace, Fox lifts his blade, holding it under this idiot’s chin, and Bellamy pushes both Ace and Akile behind him, stepping into that woman’s very personal bubble. Bellamy puts his mouth next to her ear and whispers. I don’t know what he says, and it doesn’t matter either, because the result is exactly what I need to see.

The woman pales, all the blood drains from her face, and her hands start shaking. She darts a glance at Ace, and then looks away before giving Bellamy a jerky nod.

She swallows hard and stammers as she says, “I-I-I’m sorry, Ace.”

That’s it. That’s all I have the patience to hear. A forced apology is fine, but hearing her call Ace by the name he’s chosen is what I needed. Bellamy turns away from the woman and wraps his arm around Ace like me. “You’re a Foxily now,” he tells him.

I grin at them both, typing into the chat, I decided he was my newest little brother yesterday.

Bellamy eyes that. “I’m not calling him Uncle Ace.”

I roll my eyes. Of course not. He hasn’t picked his forever name yet. Just call him Uncle for now.

“Absolutely not,” Bellamy hisses.

“If everyone will please return to their seats or report to medical. We have a ceremony to perform before anyone else interrupts.”



We all turn to where Zile is calling the room back to order. I don't think anyone is seriously injured, and as everyone returns to their seats, my observation is proven right. Well, there's one casualty, but the guards pick the body up and take it away along with the widow, who I'm not sad to see the backside of.

Once everyone is reseated and quiet, Zile stands, announcing loud and clear, "I hereby revoke my oath as Speaker of the Council."

As soon as the words leave their mouth, the world changes. I couldn't tell you how, but it's different. Even I, a human with a bit of elf, feel the change.

Alexie stands as well and repeats the revoking. "I hereby revoke my oath as a member of this council."

The world changes again.

It's creepy and good at the same time.

Each councilor behind the bench repeats the oath, and the world keeps changing. As soon as they're done, they file into the audience, and Akile and the other new councilors take their places.

"I hereby swear on the magic of my investment that I will lead this council, dedicated to maintaining the universal balance between Good, Neutrality, and Evil."

The world shifts. It changes so dramatically that I lose my footing, caught by Fox who helps steady me. Things are the way they should be, they're better than they were before; the world is right. Holy shit, the world is finally right. I hadn't even known there was something wrong until it was right. It's like I've gone my whole life in constant pain and suddenly I'm pain free.

And it only gets better with each new oath made by each new councilor.

Holy fuck, we just changed the world.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:58 am*

As soon as the new council is sworn in and the councilors introduce themselves, explain the changes in government, and reassure everyone that the world is not, in fact, ending, Fox grabs my hand and hauls me out of there like a man on a mission. He up nods Bellamy, who nods back like he knows what's going on, and then we're out of there.

We dressed for the occasion with the council (Fox in his usual battle ready yoga pants, and me in a gorgeous white and cream suit with gold jewelry decorating me), but when we get into the elevator, Johnny (the only person I've ever seen Fox treat with the kind of care that he does the rest of our family) hands Fox a suit bag. They chat about Johnny's new publishing deal, and then Fox leads me to the restroom, where he changes into a hot as fuck charcoal grey, three piece suit. His hair is long enough that he slicks it back into a low ponytail, and after adding diamond cufflinks and a matching tie pin, he holds out his hand and I take it, letting him lead me out of the bathroom.

I have no idea what is happening, so I ask through our telepathic connection. What are we doing?

He responds in kind. We have a reservation at Las Jefas de Cocina.

I've never heard of it, but if Fox changed into his nice suit, it means fine dining. About twice a month Fox treats me to an upscale experience. Sometimes it's luxury dining, sometimes it's a show, and once we went to an escape room experience that was hosted by an off-season ski resort in New Hampshire. He and I like to experience interesting dates, so whatever Fox has planned, it's going to be memorable. I could look up the place, but I like to be surprised.

We portal from Australia back to the US, and Fox casually holds my hand as he walks me out of the building that headquarters the Avatar of Good's operations. Directly across the street is the headquarters for the Avatar of Evil, and while I don't usually go in there, my pupper works there and I've visited him at work a couple of times. The minions are cuter there, and I'm actively working on recruiting at least a few of them to the side of Good.

On the curb outside, Fox leads me to a white limousine. The driver is the cherub that has been newly assigned to us, which is interesting considering that we've basically accomplished this whole coup, and I don't think we need the cherubs anymore, right? We unleashed the universal neutral force, the Avatar of Good was invested in someone new, and we even managed to make other family members important to the whole thing with newly invested werewolf leaders.

I'm not going to question the driver though; she's cute, and I trust her. The limousine is an interesting change. We've never taken a limo. The dads send cars of the Rolls-Royce variety, so this is the first time I've been in a limo. It will be a new experience for me, which I bet is the point.

You realize that you're perfect in every way, and I'm going to have to kiss you as soon as we're in the limo, right?

Fox shoots me a glance but says nothing as he helps me into the limo like the fairytale princess I am. I scoot in and Fox joins me, then the driver closes the door. The separator is already up, so I'm guessing our driver knows where we're going. Once our privacy is ensured, Fox turns toward me. He gently fingers my tie, pulling me close for that kiss I promised him, but I slide to my knees between his legs, smiling up at him.

I didn't say it was your lips I was interested in rewarding. But I do love them, so don't stop kissing me.

I have to make sure he knows that lip kisses better not stop just because his dick needs a French kiss.

Fox smiles down at me, brushing the curls off my forehead. “You’re beautiful.”

If I’m beautiful just looking up at him, I’m going to blow his mind when I get his dick in my mouth.

I unzip his trousers and pull his quickly hardening cock out. I think we both know this is going to be a quick blow, so I get to it, licking his shaft up and down to get it nice and slick before taking it into my mouth.

Ng. I’ve always known I was bi, but Fox’s dick is the only one I’ve ever had and the only one I ever want. It’s the perfect size and length for sucking. The taste of him makes me hornier than a goathed sticker, and every time I get him in my mouth it’s like I’ve been starving for it. I love sucking his cock almost as much as I love it when he fucks me.

Fox’s breath comes in pants as I bob on his cock, pushing the soft head to the back of my throat over and over. The noises that come from him match the pattern of the wet sounds coming from my throat. I love the symphony we make together and milk this moment for every note, tone, hiss, and groan.

“Coming,” Fox rasps, pressing up with his hips.

I take him deep, and when the first pulse of his cock swells in my mouth, I pull back to get the taste of him on my tongue. I jack his cock, swallowing every drop of his release, and look up to find him watching me with his brand of intense passion. I will never get enough of that expression.

After he finishes and softens, I suck the excess wetness off his cock and help put him

away, zipping him back up and sitting back on my heels. I'm hard and desperately want to come too, but I'm going to wait to get inside my man because he'll be ready for that before I am if I get off now. Well, I could probably do both, but if I save it, then I can dick him down twice tonight.

Fox helps me up and onto his lap, kissing me deeply. His mental voice drifts through the haze of lust clouding my resolve to wait for my next O. I love you, Romily. My soul's mate.

I smile at that, pausing our kiss. And you said humans don't have soulmates.

You're not human.

The reminder makes me think of all the things I've learned that I haven't told him yet.

Gwendolyn told me that the scar on my neck is a magical scar, not a surgical scar like I'd been told. I'm voiceless because my stepfather stole my elven magic. Most of it. There is a kernel that protects me and gives me the long life that elves usually have.

Fox studies me, looking for what, I don't know. Well, I bet he's looking to see if he can figure out how I feel about my power being stolen from me when I was a baby.

I was angry about it for a few minutes, but I'm over it. Anger isn't going to change anything, and the man who stole my magic and mutilated me is dead. I can't ever get it back, and I'm still ok because I'm here now. I should have had a different life, but who knows if that different life would have led me to this moment, and I'm not going to sit around moping when I have you and our family, our beautiful life, and everything in between. I mean, we changed the world today. I'm putting that on my resume. Unique qualifications like that don't just spring out of nowhere.

Fox chuckles softly as the car comes to a stop and our driver informs us through the speaker that we've arrived.

I love Fox's laughter because he so rarely does it, and I revel in having made him laugh as he rearranges us. The door opens and Fox steps out, turning to offer me a hand. I take it and let him pull me out of the vehicle, then take in the classic design of the restaurant. A doorman opens the door for us, and Fox leads us in, taking us to an elevator. A bellman takes us up to the top floor of the building, and we step out of the elevator into the quiet din of a cozy restaurant with a view over the city.

The ma?tre d" gives Fox a polite bow, inviting us to follow him to our table without Fox even giving him a name. My man is famous—well, probably infamous, but it counts.

The ma?tre d" takes us through the restaurant to another elevator, and accompanies us up to the roof where there are candlelit tables set spaced far enough apart to ensure privacy; there's no one else out here except a violinist playing softly on a raised dais. Fox holds my chair out for me, and I sit, then watch him take the seat next to me rather than across the small square table.

The ma?tre d" introduces our server, a beautiful woman in her mid-thirties with a long dark braid. Her name is Jana, and she offers us a wine selection, but Fox tells her to bring the house wine. After she goes, his hand slides to my thigh. "Amos is a silent partner here. It's run by a couple of Argentinian sisters who have each earned the three star Michelin rating. We're going to have the house special tonight, because that's what you do when you're presented with the opportunity to dine like this."

I love that Fox knows me well enough to know I have no idea what to do. He's not shy about acknowledging my inexperience and educating me.

Thank you for bringing me here, I tell him, leaning over to kiss his scruffy cheek.

His deep brown eyes meet mine, and he looks at me like the world would end if I wasn't in it. Mine certainly would if he wasn't in it. "When you disappeared, I would have ripped Fae asunder to find you. I would have left a trail of blood and bodies a mile wide in my wake. I did not like not knowing where you were."

Gwendolyn cursed me so that I can teleport to you from anywhere. I can also teleport to her throne room, but she's smart enough to make you my final destination. I will always return to you. Nothing can keep me away. So you should take that into account when you're making plans for the future, my love. I can always get to you now.

"Good," he declares in a rough, gravelly voice that makes my dick twitch.

Jana returns then with table bread and our wine, and Fox goes through that tasting ritual that I've seen in movies, which is weird, right? He's not a—what's the word for wine connoisseur? Sommelier? I don't know. Anyway, he's not an expert here. Unless...

Well, he's been alive since the invention of wine. Maybe he is an expert?

Either way, he approves the wine and Jana pours us both glasses of it, leaving the bottle with us. Fox tells her that we'll each have the house special, and she leaves again.

Fox cuts the bread and butters it, then instead of giving it to me, he tears a little piece off and holds it to my lips.

Awww, is my man trying to be romantic? How cute is that?

Also, he is romantic, so I open my mouth and let him feed me the bread. It's amazing, the best bread I've had since the last time I had bread made by Chef Trellis at the



fathers' house, but more than that, it's Fox doing something for me that he's never done. He must've caught me thinking about it when Sterling and Jethro were being lovey dovey at breakfast.

Fox alternates feeding me bites and taking his own, kissing me between each. After the slice of bread, he pushes his chair back and invites me to my feet with an outstretched hand. I take it, of course, because I always want to hold his hand, and I'm always going to want to do what he wants. He pulls me to his body and moves, leading me in a slow dance to the violin music.

I love being this close to him. I love being in his arms and swaying, and I've even gotten better at actually doing a box-step with him. He's a patient partner, and when I get a little frustrated with myself, he has me step on his shoes, dancing with me that way.

Gah, he's the perfect date.

After a dance, our appetizers arrive, and he feeds me small amuse-bouches from a plate with six little bites. Silently we talk as we eat; we talk about anything that floats through our heads—the mental connection between us growing stronger as we do. My brain is never quiet, and we end up Googling some things, like what a sommelier is.

Fox tells me that he enjoys wine. He discovered grape wine as a young man and at one point, he collected wine. He stopped when his wine cellar was trashed by an enemy in the fifteen hundreds. Now if he buys wine, he drinks it so he can enjoy it. The way he treats food, I didn't expect that from him. I love learning new things about him. I'm not in a hurry to learn everything; we have an eternity together ahead of us. We have time, but I do love when we get to converse about things that aren't work related.

After a delicious meal, there's a bit of a bustle from the dais, where a familiar figure now stands behind a microphone. His dark mahogany skin shines as a spotlight is set up on him, and he smiles at us, his only audience. It takes me a second to remember that he's the siren that sang during my first date with Fox. The violinist starts a new song, and the man starts singing.

The music pulls all the romanticism of this date to the surface. I let myself get lost in how truly special this night is, how much I love Fox, how amazing every moment with him is, and that longing inside me to never be parted from him. I move in as close to my Fox as I can get and am rewarded with my lover's arms coming around me. He presses his forehead to mine, and together we revel in the magic of the music, the deep connection of the moment, and the beauty of our love.

Fox's breath hitches, stirring me from the reverie, and I open my eyes. He's staring at me and slowly lowers himself to his knee, holding up a ring with a diamond so big it looks like a rose in full bloom. "Romily Capricorn Butcher, you are the joy that brings sunshine to my life, a radiance that I have never seen in three thousand years of life. All that I am will always be yours, and I want nothing more than to call you my husband. Will you honor me with your hand in marriage?"

There is no reality in which my answer is anything but an enthusiastic yes.

Yes!!

I shout that in his head and nod so that the witnesses on the dais can also see that I am fully committed to marrying this man.

I hold out my hand and he slides the ring on my finger. It fits like it was made for me (it was) and shines beautifully in the candlelight. The cut of it is round and sparkly, and that's all I know, but damn, it's perfect. The band is wider than the usual engagement ring and is formed from a gorgeous Celtic knot pattern.

I lean down and kiss him senseless, and applause erupts like we have an audience. It startles me enough that I jerk back from my fiancé. Near the entrance, our family is grouped, clapping for us. I didn't even notice them arrive. Everyone important to us is here, even the people new to our family, Gwendolyn, Akile, Ace...

Well, almost everyone. Darcy is missing, and it strikes me that his absence is notable. He really is part of this family, isn't he? Dammit. I'm going to have to do something about that.

Fox huffs a laugh, standing with me as the crowd of our family joins us, offering us hugs and congratulations. Champagne appears, toasts are made, and the people who matter the most to me, the people who're going to be a part of my happily ever after, celebrate the beginning of it with me.

Life's good, isn't it?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:58 am*

I run my hands down the besparkled shirt with the words “Twink-le Camel Toes” bedazzled on the back. I’ve been saving this one for a special occasion. Santanos hasn’t mentioned anything when I’ve worn some of the other shirts I reappropriated, but he will either have to admit that he’s ignoring the theft, hasn’t noticed, or he will have to comment on it after seeing me in this wonderfully hideous shirt.

Bellamy grimaces at me, shaking his head as we head up the elevator to Santanos’ office. He’s not technically supposed to be here, but since this is a family affair and not work-related, he’s making an exception. “I cannot believe you put that hideous thing on.”

I rub the rhinestones on it and wiggle a little to show him how pleased I am to be wearing it right now. It’s not pleasure in the article of clothing; it’s pleasure in the anticipation of what Santanos is going to say or do.

The elevator dings, and Edovard greets us as the doors open. “Papa, Oppa,” he rumbles, opening his arms for hugs. Fox and I step into his arms, and I pull his face down so we can kiss his cheeks. Hugging Edovard always makes me feel lighter than I was before. My son likes to push his love into us to help make our hearts lighter, and I love that about him. His magic is a gift in this world.

After we let him go, he greets and hugs Bellamy as well, then turns, revealing a shortish man of Asian descent. His brown eyes wrinkle in the corners as he smiles at us. He shaves his head and wears the traditional habit of Eastern religious monks, and that tells me that this man must be Gaanbatar Batbayar, Santanos’ new assassin.

I smile brightly, offering him my hand. He eyes my shirt, but politely looks back up

to my face.

“Papa, this is my friend Gaanbatar. Gaanbatar, this is my papa, Romily. And this is my oppa, Fox, and this is my brother, Bellamy. He’s the new Avatar of Good,” Edovard says as we all shake hands with the man.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all. Pupper speaks highly of you,” Gaanbatar says with an affectionate smile for Edovard.

I like him already.

Edovard says you’re supposed to be part of our family.

I show him my phone after typing that. I could rely on Fox right now, but it’s good to make sure new people know how to deal with my main method of communication.

Gaanbatar’s almost non-existent eyebrows rise. They’re dark, but sparse, yet still expressive enough to convey that he’s not surprised by Edovard’s statement, only by the fact that I would bring it up immediately. “I have heard that from Pupper. He’s certain I belong in his family, but I believe I have found my place for the time being.”

Things change so quickly, so when you’re ready, we’re looking for a new Acolyte for my Reaper.

I have a feeling that taking him by hand and leading him out won’t have the same effect that it had when I did that to Bellamy. Gaanbatar doesn’t need a rescue yet. He’s content being Santanos’ assassin. For now.

I wonder what kind of people the Avatar of Evil’s Assassin kills. Does he kill good people to advance the agenda of Evil? It’s food for thought. Having the Avatar of Evil and the Avatar of Good in the family makes for some moral gymnastics that I don’t like thinking about too hard. It wouldn’t help anyway, especially when we’re

here to kill someone who probably isn't expecting us.

Shall we?

Gaanbatar dips his head and turns. I slip my arm through his because I'm eventually going to win him over and turn him into an Acolyte, and he should get used to my love and affection. He's going to be part of our family; I'm going to treat him like he already is. He leads us past some desks and to what looks like a conference room. Inside, Santanos, Gregory, and Hassan are waiting for us.

When Santanos sees me with Gaanbatar, his eyes narrow. "Let go of my assassin. You do not get to take my—is that my bowling shirt?"

This day could not get any better.

I release Gaanbatar's arm and run my hands over the rainbow rhinestones again, exaggerating a confused expression.

This ol' thing?

I send that to the entire group, smiling when Edovard shares his phone with Gaanbatar.

"This old—" Santanos cuts himself off and looks at me levelly. "Did you steal my bowling shirt when you went to kill my parents?"

I found it just hanging around. It looked lonely, so I brought it home. You know how I am about rehoming things. You live in my house.

The only people in this room I haven't rehomed are Gaanbatar (because he hasn't accepted his fate yet) and Fox (because I rehomed myself into his house).

Santanos stares at his phone for a moment, shakes his head, and takes a deep breath, looking up to me. “I see. Well, the bowling league starts up in November, and if you’re going to wear my shirt, you’re going to join the team. I’ll let you know when we start practice sessions.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” Edovard joyfully exclaims. “We can all be on a team! I love bowling. Maybe there’s too many of us for a team, though. Santanos, should we make another team?”

Santanos smiles sweetly at him. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just me and Hassan right now. We have room for you and Romily.”

“Great! This is going to be so fun.” Edovard’s happiness helps with the despair of being outmaneuvered by Santanos. Clearly he’s using Edovard to force cooperation, and since I did that earlier with Hassan, I guess turnabout’s fair play, right?

It’s going to be so fun, I echo my pupper, laughing at myself.

Santanos looks to Hassan, who turns and draws a portal on the conference room wall. “Would you like company?” Santanos offers, looking at me even though I’m only here to spectate.

Well, I suppose Santanos would also be a spectator, though he has some magic that he can use without losing his ward.

Sure. I don’t mind the company of my son-in-law.

Santanos looks slightly queasy at that label, but replies. “Then I will accompany you.”

Smiling, I offer him my arm since he’s the only person in this room shorter than me besides Gregory. Santanos takes my arm and we waltz through the portal together.

On the other side is a desert oasis with a man reclined in a nest under a gazebo being attended to by scantily clad men and women who all seem weirdly happy. The serene smiles are off-putting, not reassuring. When the man looks up, he's surprised to see us but doesn't look worried. "To what do I owe the pleasure of the Avatar of Evil's company?"

Lol. He thinks Santanos is the important one here.

"Hello, Apophis. Unfortunately, I'm not here to keep you company. I'm here for him," he gestures to me with his head, and the rest of our party comes through the portal.

We step out of the way as Fox, Bellamy, Gaanbatar, and Hassan all bring their swords to bear.

Apophis fucked with the Foxilys, and we don't let that shit slide.