

Chapter 97

Enter The Fae

"Think there are enough flowers here?" Dylan muttered, casting a derisive glare around the impressive field of assorted fae-approved flora and fungi gathered around the moonlit lake. "There has to be enough fort parfum de fleurs here to choke a bull elephant."

Xavier snorted but opted to keep his opinions on that particular matter to himself. "I wouldn't say that too loudly if I were you, Miller," he advised. "All of this shit was a special order."

"And they'd better fucking appreciate it," Dylan spat. "The last two weeks of my life have been hell, putting together this dumbass little garden party. Do you know how hard it was to find flowering rowan trees in October? Apparently, plants don't just bloom whenever you want them to."

Xavier nodded, acknowledging the impressive showing. And to think that it had been cobbled together on such short notice, no less. Three days ago, the field of flowers surrounding this pond hadn't been here, and given the fact that they'd had to complete this particular, extreme garden makeover in the dead of October, in another three days, it would be gone.

It had been a feat to gather the hundreds of flowers and herbs, all requested by the Seelie Court to greet them upon arrival. The Council had spent the better part of a week and a half sourcing, transporting and planting a veritable grove of foxglove, honeysuckle, primrose, and hawthorn.

They'd gone to great logistical lengths to figure out how to best transport a grove of apple, fig, and rowan trees, all of which needed to be in full bloom and bearing fruit at the time of the fae's arrival. Since the lake they'd chosen to host the Court's arrival sat in Dark Moon territory, much of the planning fell on the Dark Moon Alpha.

And, unfortunately for Dylan, that subsequently meant that the responsibility of organizing the Seelie Court's arrival party had been left up to him.

"If it makes you feel any better, I don't think that they requested the garden for vanity's sake alone," Liam added. "I'm fairly certain that we share these plants in common with Axis. This garden is supposed to protect the fae from feeling the Earth's drain as acutely as they would otherwise."

"So, it's making them stronger?" Xavier asked, "Is that something that we want?"

Liam shook his head, "Not stronger, I don't think. It'll just keep them from weakening. At least long enough for us to get the information we need and send their asses back across the veil."

"Do you think the rogues had to wade through all this pomp and circumstance to get their hands on the Pixie Dust in the first place?" Dylan asked.

"If we're lucky, we'll find out soon enough."

As the words left his lips, the field brightened as the moon finally reached its apex over the center of the lake, making the placid water glow like the surface of a mirror, perfectly reflecting back the garden and glade, along with the eight representatives impatiently awaiting the fae's arrival.

The field was dead silent as the Wolves gazed cautiously at the lake, searching for any movement that might give away the Court's presence. Faint misgivings began to trail through Xavier's mind just as he noticed the reflective glow on the surface of the lake turn mercurial, almost solid, and begin to grow, spreading across the lake water like a brilliant moonbeam road. The beam of light created a pathway leading from the center of the lake to the shore just before them, growing in intensity, quickly becoming too bright for direct eye contact.

Xavier had spent his life around what humans would call 'magic.' The world's natural wonders were second nature to him, and even the wonders that weren't were still familiar to him. What he saw now was...utterly foreign, in a way that makes you suddenly feel outside of yourself, as if you've never truly perceived reality until this very moment.

The light grew blinding and, even though he'd equated its path to a road, the last thing Xavier had expected was for figures to emerge from the luster, rising from the depths of the lake as if ascending an invisible staircase. The fae arrived two-by-two, rising into view and then spreading out on either side of the entranceway, creating a protective phalanx flanking the portal. There were more fae than they'd expected there to be, their security detail easily outnumbering the gathered Wolves.

And they were security; there was no mistaking that. The ten guards were dressed in head-to-toe plate armor that looked as imposing as it was intricate. Made of what looked to be genuine silver and gold, each suit of armor was uniquely molded and etched with detailed murals and script. While no one seemed to be on guard, Xavier noted the hilts and shafts of weapons on each person - a clear showing of both warning and armistice.

The royal guard stood at attention as the final two shadows emerged from the portal, moving side-by-side through the ethereal doorway. They didn't appear to walk, so much as glide, as if the air beneath their feet moved of its own accord.

Xavier forced his muscles to remain loose as he felt Alexandre's hackles rise at the extreme surge in energy that suffused the glade as the figures finally exited the portal and fully set foot on their land. With an electric rush, the portal retreated, the light dimming and the lake returning to normal, lit only by the bright light of the moon.

They were tall, much taller than Xavier had expected faeries to be, anyway. Lycans were generally built bigger and brawnier than humans, but the fae's size was more an air of importance than a physical presence. They were lithe and lean, and even the guard looked as if they'd never had need to lower their chins in their lives.

There was something distinctly...off-putting about that fact. In the Lycan hierarchy, there was always someone casting their gaze downward in an overt show of submission. For the Seelie Queen and King, their presence was thick enough to ensure subordination. There was no room for challenge, no need for intimidation.

A sole guard stepped forward and addressed their group, announcing, "Queen Orlaith, Keeper of the Summer Sun and King Ore of the Tuath Dé!"

The Seelie royals were draped from head to toe in whisper-thin gossamer topped with strategically placed gold and silver armor plates. The two monarchs were polar opposites of one another, with the Queen's pale skin giving off a pearlescent sheen under the touch of the moon, while the King's skin was pitch black and shone with the same luster of a dark opal.

Tall, ornate crowns made of antlers and precious stones sat atop heads of stark white knee-length hair that looked as soft and elegant on the Queen as it did otherworldly and striking on the King.

For a few long, tense moments, the two groups stood in silence, taking each in, no doubt gathering as much information as they could on their new allies.

It was Dylan's father who stepped forward first with one hand raised in greeting. "Esteemed guests," he began. "On behalf of the Northeastern Allied Territories, I, Wyatt Miller, reigning Alpha of the Dark Moon Pack, would like to welcome you Earthside."

"And it has been a gracious welcome, indeed."

When the Queen spoke, her voice was unfathomably lovely even as it carried the crackle of ice on a frozen pond, thinly veiling the frigid depths below with delicate veins of frost. The effect created a divergence within Xavier, as he felt his human self be drawn in by the arresting nature of the fae's voice while Alexandre actively rebelled against its pull.

"We are glad to see that your full company has been represented tonight, as we have much to discuss, it seems." Said the King, his deep voice rippling like the slow burn of molten magma. "If only that were true, Queen Orlaith and King Ore," Rhys sniped as he stepped forward. "Unfortunately, only four of our territories could be represented tonight."

His crass tone aside, Rhys was right in the fact that Grave Moon, in spite of their word otherwise, couldn't be bothered to send an emissary to the most important meeting in a fucking millennia.

The Queen smiled a secretive smirk and nodded toward the tree line created by the orchard of imported fruit and berry trees. When she spoke, it was seemingly to the trees, and none of the males gathered before them. "We see your talent for the covert crafts is superior indeed. Perhaps you might impart on some of your compatriots the merits of a... gentler tread."

Xavier followed her gaze and squinted into the darkness. Even with his Wolven eyes, he could only just make out the outline of a house cat slinking through the grass, while his heightened hearing narrowly caught the feathery shifting of a raven settling into the branches of a fig tree.

Careful not to make an outward reaction, Xavier cut his eyes toward Liam and Dylan to see if they'd gleaned the same thing he had. Liam's nearly imperceptible nod confirmed that he had, while Dylan's agitated gaze was settled on Rhys and his emissary, whose hackles were beginning to visibly rise.

A soft chuff in his ear from his father sent Xavier stepping forward, taking all focus away from Eclipse's childish gripes, as well as their strange woodland visitors.

"If you would, the Alliance has prepared a meal in your honor," he announced with his most accommodating smile, extending an arm behind them where a full spread awaited them in the middle of the orchard. "As you've said, we have much to discuss. But first, we feast."