

Chapter 98

One Enchanted Evening

"You know, if your earthside stories are to be believed, it is quite the scandal that we sit here and share a meal as we do," Ore said with a twinkle of sly mischief in his eye as he bit into a sumptuous strawberry. "At least, it would be if my people were the ones to provide such a fine meal. It is funny how stories always seem to shake down in favor of the teller?"

The fae king's voice spoke in that strange, evocative frequency as if even the tone of his words held the power to effect a physical change in the atmosphere. In an unwitting victim's very soul. Xavier held back a shudder as his mind filled unbidden with a litany of those very stories the king just chided.

"To be human is to be intrinsically flawed," Xavier offered with a tip of his wine glass. "Do you keep up with all of the stories that have cropped up over the millennia about your people?"

Ore smiled, his wide grin showing far more teeth than strictly necessary, giving him the appearance of a particularly captivating bull shark. "You could call it a favored pastime of mine in particular," he glanced lovingly at his partner, the queen, who sat holding court at the other end of the table. "My Queen is much more of the present than I tend to be. She has no patience for tall tales."

From the looks of things, including the ashen looks on the Dark Moon and Silver Moon representatives' faces, that side of the table was currently locked in a battle of charm between Dylan and Queen Orlaith. While the Wolves looked to be sat on the precipice of their seats, awaiting the worst, it had to be said that the queen and her entourage seemed to be enjoying Dylan's signature irreverent flirting.

Fortunately for their party, King Ore didn't seem to mind the overt dalliances taking place mere feet away. The indulgent look that came across his face was one of quiet amusement. Never one to let a potential lead of exploitable information slip by, August leaned forward to address the king.

"If I may, how do you come by these stories, King Ore?" He asked, the deep well of suspicion Xavier knew laid within, expertly concealed by the carefully curated veneer of polite courtesy his father had honed through decades of social deception. "It's a shame how little we've been able to retain on our side of the divide. It's no wonder that the only knowledge we have of your people is these so-called tall tales."

"Indeed, it is no wonder," Ore agreed. "I pose the answer to that lies within the limited way your people see not just my world, but your word. Hence your phrasing. The Divide. That word has such a finality to it, don't you think?" From across the table, Rhys Bennet openly sneered, and beside him, the advisor who'd come with him to help keep things civil foolishly did the same. "There, at least, is one of our stories that apparently holds true. Do all of your people on Axis enjoy mincing and twisting words, or is that another of your particular pastimes?"

Such a blatantly disrespectful display would have surely caused an altercation among the Council, evident by the thickening of the air around the table as the Wolves present noted and promptly took offense to the Eclipse Alpha's tone. Xavier hoped that their guests weren't keyed into the same extrasensory wavelength that allowed their kind to communicate sans vocal communication.

The slight tensing of shoulders, the sharp edge of warning that subtly transformed a smile into a baring of teeth, all of those would have been present and enough to turn the tide on any casual conversation amongst a group of males. For the King of the Seelie Court, however, his smile was as open and jovial as ever, his eyes holding nothing but mischief and mirth.

"Perhaps one needs to be of a certain mind to fully understand the power held within a word, it's true." The king quipped and turned back to Xavier and his father, who sat in identical, carefully relaxed poses, "On Axis, we believe that after the Sundering, our worlds split, yes, but not so abruptly as your people believe. To us, Earth is merely hidden, not lost to us."

Ore's metallic amethyst eyes briefly cut toward the Eclipse Alpha before flicking back to his more gracious hosts, "Therefore, we have more ways of interacting with your world than we suspect you do ours."

A sudden silence overtook the table as the revelry at the other end paused, every ear keenly tuned into the turn their conversation had taken. "Ore, my wave, are you sharing secrets?" The queen asked, her tone deceptively airy.

"Merely making friends, my rock." Ore reassured her, "After all, this is an unprecedented opportunity for both of our peoples to reconnect. If we can dispel even a fraction of the fog that separates us, this will have been a worthwhile venture." "Then how about we start with how your Pixie Dust has made it over to our side in the first place," Rhys demanded, sending accusative glances between the Ore and Orlaith. "I don't doubt you know exactly the threat that substance poses to us."

The sudden rumbling that came emanating from the Eclipse representative's chest was a clear, if not utterly unsubtle, indication that Rhys had finally said too much. King Ore may be of a sharing mind, eager to make friends with the curious aliens from across the way, but letting slip their weaknesses was a fool's folly that Xavier was certain that the fae king would never make. Unfortunately for the Council, Rhys Bennet had never displayed his father's head for cunning. Queen Orlaith raised a delicate eyebrow, "Pixie Dust? I'm afraid we've never heard of such a thing."

Liam cleared his throat, a cue to the rest of them to reign in their emotions regarding Bennett's slip and to move forward. He pulled the small pouch from the inside of his jacket pocket and placed it on the center of the table, "I'm afraid that we don't know its formal name, but even our admittedly short memory recalls how devastating an impact it made during the last war. Needless to say, we were concerned when we found this and an active portal to Axis on our land." "Ah, Estrellite," Ore said, looking more reserved than he had the entire evening. "Suddenly, the need for this meeting is quite clear."

"Not that we aren't open to trading what resources we can," August said with a deliberately disarming smile. "After all, a millennium has passed since we last tried. But this particular resource is a hell of a place to start." "Indeed," Queen Orlaith conceded. "I must admit that this is a concerning revelation."

Xavier noted that while the fae rulers both looked perturbed to see the Estrellite sat before them, neither looked particularly surprised. "A concerning revelation, yes," he posed. "But perhaps not one that's particularly unexpected?" Orlaith cut him an evaluating gaze, tinged with subtle approval. "No, it is unfortunately not such a shock to us that Estrellite is somehow involved in whatever events prompted this meeting. Admittedly, it's become quite the bane over in Axis, as well."

"How?" Liam asked, "We've believed that it's only dangerous earthside."

"It's only toxic earthside," Orlaith clarified. "It's danger is universal."

"Now, now," Ore interjected with a wave. "You'll find that this is one topic where my wave and I tend to differ. I am of the opinion that Estrellite is but a tool."

"And I am of the opinion that if a hammer had the capability to level an entire city block, it's best to leave it tucked away in a drawer," Orlaith quipped. "What is Estrellite, exactly?" Liam asked.

"It's nothing short of raw potential," Ore exclaimed. "A naturally occurring mineral found on Axis that heightens the effects of our mana, what you call our magic. It makes spells stronger, gives power to those without...." "It's also extremely volatile and highly combustible. Which poses a significant threat when an overwhelming majority of your populace can create fire at will."

"Which is why we have very strict regulations regarding the procurement and usage of," Ore posited.

"Then how did it get here?" The Silver Moon representative asked.

"Simple. We are not the only ones in Axis with access to Estrellite," the king said.

"The Unseelie Court," Xavier said definitively. He didn't need the royals' simultaneous nod as confirmation. After all, they'd invited the Seelie Court here for one specific reason, the Unseelie Court's reputation

preceded them. "Yes," Ore nodded. "Far be it for me to give too much away, but we've seen an uptick in Estrellite-related...events near some of our farther-reaching borders."

"As well as an increase in cases within our own lands of unlicensed citizens having possession of the substance as well. It's been an ongoing issue that, due to a veritable mountain of ancient treaties with the Unseelie, we cannot fully rectify, only regulate within our own territory," offered the queen.

Xavier staved off a derisive snort. That sounded familiar, being bound by the narrow ideals of the long-dead.

"And you believe that the Unseelie Court is to blame for the interdimensional bleed?" He asked.

"Almost assuredly," Ore said. "We would be able to tell you more if we could see the portal through which the Estrellite was transported."

"If you'd like to extend your stay, we could take you to the portal, but I doubt that we'd be able to make it tonight. It isn't close."

Orlaith smiled and gazed past the line of fruit trees to the lake beyond, "Neither were we."