

K. M. SHEA



CROWN
OF
MOONLIGHT

COURT OF MIDNIGHT AND DECEPTION
BOOK TWO

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Chapter One

Leila

I squinted at the crumbling Night Court Castle and wondered if all of Skye's antacids were finally starting to affect her mentally.

It was dark—it was *always* dark in the Night Realm—but at least for now the moon was out, which shed just enough light to illuminate the disintegrating castle walls, the broken windows, and all the weeds that jutted out of the massive stone patio we stood on.

“Skye,” I said. “There’s no way we can use this place for my crowning banquet. We’d need a year to get it ready, and I’m not willing to spend the money to get it fixed when the Night Court’s finances are already terrible.”

Skye glanced down at the screen of her tablet, which cast a blue light on her face and her brown hair that made her look like a movie star. Her hair was cut in a bob that went just past her chin and curled in the most amazing, thick, frizz-free curls I’d ever seen on a living being. “Yes, I figured as much.”

I pushed my own hair—long and dark black—over my shoulder and eyed my steward. “Why, then, did you insist on dragging me here?”

“Because I wished to show you the preserved weapons of the first few Night Court monarchs, and I knew if I said so you’d refuse to come,” my steward said—proving she could scheme like the best of her kinsmen, even if she was half fae/half human, like me.

“Skye,” I groaned. “I need to talk to the Court accountants to see how much of the deficit I’ve covered since I’ve sold the Chicago condo *and* the cabin in northern Wisconsin. I also have to mediate a talk between the head representative of the mermaids and the head representative of the naiads because they’ve gotten in an argument about the mansion’s lake—and Indigo said she’d make a *cake* for that occasion!”

I mournfully stared at the star spattered sky, even though it was barely past ten in the morning. “The point is, there’s a ton of stuff that’s way more important than being dragged before the weapons of some long dead rulers!”

“It’s vital that you understand the history of your Court.” Skye was all serenity and grace as she gave me a slight smile that accented the beauty of her heart-shaped face. “It will further your understanding of current Court politics.”

I glumly stared at the tiny, cat-sized griffins that were half pigeon half raccoon and roosting on the roofline. “But I don’t want to learn about the original Night King who lived and died centuries ago. Particularly not when he’s the reason why I’m stuck in this mess, because of those stupid laws and agreements he made when he established the North American Night Court!”

Skye made a choking noise, and I heard the familiar rattle of her mint tray—which was stuffed with antacids.

As I waited for my steward to collect herself, I looked from the pigeon-raccoon-griffins—I needed to come up with a shorter name for them—to Kevin and Whiskers who were lounging by my feet.

Kevin—a shade—stood about waist high and was wolfish in shape...if wolves had glowing crimson eyes and looked like they were wrapped in shadows that made his shape almost flicker.

Whiskers—a gloom—flicked his tail before he twisted and licked his back, smoothing out his black fur which was swirled with tiny red hairs. He was a cat, but like all the glooms that hung out with me, he panted, and was so skinny he looked diseased.

I eyed his patchy fur, then Kevin’s spine—visible even through the haze of his fur—with displeasure.

Dusk and Dawn have been diligently feeding all the glooms, shades, and night mares a high fat, nutritional diet. Why haven’t they put on any weight?

I petted Kevin, smiling even though his fur felt greasy and thin. The shade wagged his tail and leaned into me, almost knocking me over in his exuberance.

Indigo shuffled across the far end of the patio, cradling a magic-made orb of light that acted like a lantern. “My Sovereign,” she drawled. “I’m afraid you might have broken Skye with that response.” She strolled up to me, hesitating when she came face to face with Whiskers before offering her hand to the feline—who plopped his chin in her palm for scratching.

Indigo bravely scratched, even though she was barely taller than Kevin, and the glooms and shades had a bit of a wild reputation among our Court.

“Sorry, Skye, I don’t regret it,” I said. “I’ve had enough time to think about it, and I’ve concluded every problem—my getting picked and *forced* to

become the Night Queen, the fact that I can't abdicate, and getting married to a freakin' assassin—is all the original king's fault, because he made all those stupid laws when he ruled. The creep.”

“Hey, you only have yourself to blame for getting hitched to an assassin,” Indigo said. “Skye went through all the half decent candidates with you, but you *had* to go for the bad boy.”

“Because he doesn't have any political connections,” I protested.

Skye had regained some of her spirit—or at least she stopped crunching antacids. “The first king made those laws as a way to limit the power of the Night Court because he saw—in his immense wisdom—that as the sole Night Court in North America, it would have too much power.”

“And because the Night Court and Day Court are inescapably linked given that they rule day and night together, the limitations on the Night Court would force limitations on the Day Court even if their monarchs did nothing,” I recited. “I know, I know—you've spent *a lot* of time tutoring me on history, and because I'm highly motivated to move on to new subjects I'm not going to forget it all.”

“Don't worry, Skye,” Indigo assured her. “It's not that she doesn't listen to your lessons—our queen is too diligent for that. It's merely that she's a heretic.”

Skye looked contemplatively at the mint tin in her hand, the golden skin of her forehead puckered with thin wrinkles.

I vaguely noted that even when in distress, Skye still looked gorgeous and graceful—and far more queen-like than me.

Sure, my fae blood made me pretty enough for a human. It was also responsible for the unusual purple-ish-blue shade of my eyes, and I'd inherited my height from my fae biological father. But while I was prone to flashing my emotions across my face, Skye was far more controlled and better at hiding her expressions. Or she usually was, unless she was getting out her antacids because of something I did or said.

But that might have had something to do with our upbringing.

Skye grew up among the fae, living with her fae mother's family. I lived with my human mom and dad—or step-dad, really, but he practically raised me. To me he would always be Dad.

Fae are pretty vicious supernaturals. They play all sorts of games—mental and political. And even though they can use magic and have certain limitations that you *think* would improve their personalities—like the

inability to lie—they're all about power. Both obtaining and keeping it.

“You can't tease Skye like that,” I told Indigo. “You'll give her ulcers.”

Indigo kept scratching Whiskers' chin, eliciting a deep purr from him. “I wasn't teasing.”

I made a noise of dissatisfaction. “I see how it is around here. There's no respect!”

“Probably because you're the most disrespectful person I know,” Indigo said.

A brownie, Indigo was short and bird-like with her thin legs and arms. Her hair was a wild mess of the most glorious russet red color I'd seen—though today she wore it shoved up in a ponytail.

She wrinkled her slightly up-turned nose as Whiskers rubbed his head on her shoulder. “Stop it,” she fussed. “You're going to get black hair all over this shirt.”

Today's t-shirt was bright white and spattered with several superhero insignias. Indigo was something of a closet nerd. She'd applied for her role as my companion—which was basically a fancy title the fae used for personal assistant—because she wanted the hefty salary to buy more movie, book, and TV show merch.

“We may as well get this over with...” I trailed off and curiously peered around the expansive, half-dead gardens when I heard heavy footfalls.

Kevin, his shoulder pushed against my hips, lifted his head and scented the air. He didn't seem worried, and neither did Whiskers—who was half draped over Indigo by now—so I didn't think whatever was approaching me was bad.

But I didn't expect the creature that trundled around a corner of the castle and marched straight toward us.

Even though I'd never seen one before, I knew what it was on sight because of all its heads. It was a hydra.

With four wedge shaped heads sitting on four arched necks and a thick, sturdy body, the hydra was a mixture of a flightless dragon and a water serpent.

This one was a little bigger than my truck. Its plated scales were a dark blue mottled with watery gray—I had a feeling it could effortlessly blend in with water or rock, its primary territories.

Indigo stiffened and dug her hands into Whiskers' fur, and Skye took a step closer to me. “Queen Leila,” she whispered.

I slipped my glass prism—the royal magical artifact I used to channel magic—out of the pocket of my blue jeans, but I smiled as the creature approached.

“Hey there, cutie,” I greeted.

Indigo made a high-pitched squeak, like a balloon losing air.

The hydra stopped just short of me, tilting its four heads as it studied me with yellow eyes.

I stepped forward, offering my hand. “How are you?”

No, I’m not an idiot. I know wild animals are dangerous. But fae have natural magic that effortlessly oozes out of them. Typically it’s something that makes them extra beautiful or graceful, but I was lucky enough to get something useful—I have natural magic that makes animals like me, and any creature I work with long enough gets smarter.

Plus, as Night Queen, I had dominion over the Night Court and Realm. While Skye reminded me frequently that my subjects’ inability to kill me—locked in by the magic that made the foundation of the Court—didn’t extend to the creatures of the Night Realm, I was pretty sure it was what had attracted the glooms and shades to me—and now possibly a hydra.

I wasn’t too surprised when one of the hydra heads inched forward enough to sniff my hand, and then the creature thumped its massive tail on the ground like a happy dog.

A second head invaded my space, resting its large chin on my hand, before a third head slammed into it, knocking it out of the way, making room for the fourth head to stretch out and lick my hair.

“I’m glad you approve,” I said.

The soft sensation of my natural magic flowed around me as I patted large, stone-like scales.

All four of the hydra heads settled down to sniff me, which—not gonna lie—was pretty intimidating. Having four serpent heads—accented with glittering teeth that I could *see* because the fangs poked past the hydra’s lips—sniffing my shoulders, waist, and legs was enough to make my belly flop around in my gut.

I wasn’t sad when all but one of the heads retreated. I fondly patted the last head. “Do you need something?”

The hydra’s heads looked down at Whiskers and Kevin. Whiskers screeched at it—which sounded like a goblin getting run over by a golf cart—then purred deep in his chest.

The hydra's stretched out head gently nudged my cheek, then as fast as it arrived, it marched off, heading into the gardens.

I dusted my hands off on my thighs. "Do creatures just meander around the castle? Or was that a tame hydra?"

"There is no such thing as a tame hydra," Skye said. "And no. The creatures of the Night Realm typically do not wander around the castle grounds. They have been wild for decades, and most of them are extremely dangerous."

Oh. Well. Would have been nice to know that before I greeted it. But I suppose everyone freaks out about the night mares all the time, and they're as sweet as ponies. Maybe the hydra just offends the fae's obsession with beauty and power?

"It's fine," I said.

"You most often say 'it's fine' when it, in fact, is *not* fine," Skye said.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure it was just greeting me. I don't think it's going to go on a murder spree. It was actually a lot smaller than I thought it would be."

"That was a juvenile," Skye said.

"A what?"

"It's not full grown." Indigo used her artifact—a ring slipped on her thumb—to create a second orb of light—one for each hand. "Although it's still dangerous—especially because that was the one Queen Nyte used an enslavement spell on and forced to fight when she faced off with the Drake Family vampires and the House Medeis wizards. Wasn't it, Skye?"

"I believe so." Skye tapped her tablet screen. "There are only a few hydra that technically belong to the Night Court. Most of them live in the Night Realm and are rarely seen."

"Wow, poor thing. I should have seen if it wanted to stay in the stables with the night mares," I said.

"Hydra prefer a landscape with access to large bodies of water," Skye informed me.

"Oh. Then it would have had to stay down by the mansion's lake, and I'm guessing the mermaids and naiads wouldn't have liked that," I said.

"A possibly dangerous creature that will continue to grow for most of its life? Yes, they would not like that," Skye confirmed.

I absently patted Kevin's head. "It seemed like it accomplished whatever it was that it wanted. Shall we get going?"

Indigo pushed her cat eye glasses farther up her nose. “You’re willingly going to see the first king’s artifacts?”

“The sooner I get it over with the sooner I get back to work—and I really need to meet with the chef. I’m a bit concerned we won’t have enough food for the party-banquet-thing,” I said.

Skye extended her arm and pointed to the shabby castle before she led the way up to it. “I doubt it will be a problem,” she said. “You already have enough food to cover all the guests on the list I made for you.”

“Yes, but I invited some other people, too,” I reminded her. “And they RSVP-ed with me.”

“Perhaps.” Skye tried to yank open a wooden door, but it didn’t move. “However, it saddens me to say this, Queen Leila, but I highly doubt any of the other Court monarchs will come, even though it’s tradition and you sent them invitations.”

Although I’d been officially crowned—and *married* because of those annoying laws from that stinking first king—almost two weeks ago, my official first royal banquet was in three days.

Technically I’d been made queen and bound to the Court months ago—the Night Court monarch was picked out by magical horses called night mares. Usually they just found the next monarch, but six of the night mares had decided they liked me enough to use their magic on me, inescapably binding me to the Court and making me queen long before I usually would have been crowned.

It was complicated.

The important thing was the other Courts wouldn’t recognize me until I was officially crowned—and to be officially crowned I had to be married, hence my unusual ceremony with my assassin-husband. On the bright side, said assassin-husband seemed to be tolerating my presence well enough these days that I didn’t think he was going to kill me in my sleep—and now I was crowned.

But, as I said earlier, fae were all about power plays.

I’d learned since being made queen that, to the fae, everything was a game for power.

They would cheat, kill, and betray one another to obtain more power—both in their own Court, and among the others.

I’d fought to subdue my Court enough that I could reasonably say they’d follow me and wouldn’t betray me—especially not when my *dear* husband,

Lord Rigel, the famed assassin known as the Wraith, would inherit the throne if I died. But my power place among the other Courts?

Hoooo boy, that was a different basket of crazy.

Not that I care. My personal goal is to destroy these games of power. They only divide the fae and make everything worse.

But saying that out loud would make Skye guzzle all the antacids in her mint tin in one go. So, I kept the conversation a little more...limited.

“Yeah, I’m counting on the other monarchs playing mind games and skipping my banquet,” I said. “That’s why I’m actually planning *fun* stuff. But with my personal guests it’s still going to be a pretty large party.”

I helped Skye pull the oversized door open, then let Indigo through. When I turned around to close the door behind us, I saw Lady Chrysanthe.

She was sitting on one of the crumbling stone bannisters, the picture-perfect night fae with her blond hair, tapered ears, olive toned skin, and expressive hazel green eyes. She was wearing a dress—she *always* wore a dress—that was artfully ruffled and accented with fresh flowers, and was gazing up at the moon like a heroine from a tragic ballad.

I furrowed my eyebrows as I studied her.

Lady Chrysanthe had been downright antagonistic to me for most of our acquaintance. She and her family thought she would be named the next Night Monarch, and they hadn’t taken kindly to a half human occupying the throne instead.

But she’d been...weird ever since I’d uncovered a plot laid out by one of her so called “friends” who tried to take her down by making it look like she was attempting to kill *me*. Yeah, fae went for nine layers of confusing with their plots and schemes. It’s what made them stretch the truth and interpret it differently since they couldn’t outright lie

I’d seen her at least half a dozen times since I’d been married/crowned. She was always standing or sitting by herself, looking beautiful and soulful. She must have had some kind of goal in mind—fae did *not* act without a reason—but there was nothing logical about her actions that I could see.

Fae are weird.

I shut the door and followed Skye and Indigo through the massive ramshackle ballroom.

Indigo held her two orbs of magical light over her head, illuminating the inch of dust that coated the place, the broken glass spattered everywhere, and the gouges in the fancy wooden flooring which was cut in zigzagging

patterns.

Most of the castle was decrepit and dirty. Only a few rooms were kept relatively clean—and I was certain it was only because they were required by “tradition.” Ugh.

“Here we are,” Skye announced after leading me through a puzzling maze of hallways. She stopped outside a set of fancy glass doors—which were framed with polished wood and covered by wrought-iron moon and star designs—and nudged them open.

Magic, triggered by our presence, lit up the magic-fed wall sconces, brightening the place up and creating spot lights on all the glass cases arranged in the space.

There were so many of those glass cases and displays that it felt like a museum.

A single glance through the wood paneled room revealed weapons, armor, a few faded robes and dresses, some books, and a huge variety of magical artifacts, the closest being a monkey statue with glittering jade eyes, and the biggest being a gigantic claw that hung on the wall and was almost as tall as I was.

Skye expectantly looked to me, and I obliged her.

“Wow—this is really cool.” I slipped far enough into the room to admire the row of halberds bolted to a wall. “The craftsmanship on this stuff is incredible.”

“Elf work,” Skye said, sounding greatly satisfied. “Though those halberds were made by dwarves, if I recall correctly.”

While the four major supernatural races were werewolves, vampires, wizards, and fae, there were lots of less populated species—like dwarves, dragon shifters, trolls, etc.

Trolls, pixies, and the like were technically fae, so they swore themselves to a Court which they served and in return were protected by.

In *theory*.

The wizards had their own subspecies—like the oracles, hunters, and slayers—and the werewolves typically spoke for most of the shifters. Except the dragon shifters, anyway.

There used to be elves, but they died out over a century ago—it was around then that magic started to die out, too, and the various supernatural races stopped working together as each one struggled for its survival.

It was only relatively recently that we’d even remotely started to work

together, and that was all because our community had outed ourselves to the humans. It had happened before I was born, but not much before then—supposedly the upper crust supernaturals looked at human pop culture and saw how popular vampires and werewolves were, and decided it was the ideal time to reveal ourselves.

The humans didn't mind us—mostly because together the supernatural community did everything we could to appear beautiful and interesting rather than cutthroat and desperate like we really were.

But no one wanted the humans to fear us—outnumbered as we were, they could wipe us off the face of the planet.

“The original king's artifacts are down here.” Skye strode to the far end of the room, her stilettos clicking on the floor. “I think you will enjoy seeing the real thing, instead of the drawings in your textbooks.”

I obediently followed after her, stopping when she did.

The original king's artifacts weren't kept in a glass case—at least, not all of them were. A crown, several necklaces, bracelets, and a bunch of rings all bearing the crescent moon and star insignia of the Night Court were arranged in a case. But his sword, shield, and bow—it seemed he was a very battle-happy king—were all arranged under a blinding spotlight.

“His most recognizable artifact is, of course, his staff.” Skye gestured to the tall, magically powered weapon.

Topped with a crescent moon the size of a dinner platter, the staff was bigger than I imagined based on the drawings in the history books Skye used to tutor me. It was about my height, and forged out of a golden metal that was so finely worked it looked like it had been poured or sculpted rather than hammered. Metal and gem stars clustered around the top of the moon, and a clear crystal was positioned at the base. The crystal was surprisingly small—the books had made it look a lot bigger—but it might have been damaged or something over time, since the crystal's perfect formation was a little bumpy and cracked at the top.

“It's a lot prettier than I expected,” I said. “Did he really use all of these weapons?”

“He did,” Skye confirmed.

I rolled my own royal artifact—my glass prism that I was pretty sure was the least impressive artifact I could have picked but was the only thing that synchronized up with me during the selection process—around in my palm. “He must have had a lot of teachers. Which reminds me, Skye, do you think

it's possible for me to get a magic teacher?"

"A magic teacher?" Skye repeated. "But you are already versed in magic."

"I know, but after all the assassination attempts on me I'm thinking it wouldn't be bad to learn more. And I'm a little worried about my abilities to strengthen the realm ward," I admitted.

Since magic started dying, the fae realms—a world separate from earth but accessible to the fae—started shrinking. Each Court had its own bit of the realm, and I was responsible for the Night Realm.

Already I'd seen the realm lose land as the wards—struggling to hold back the toxic miasma that otherwise covered the fae lands—failed. I was determined that wasn't going to happen again.

Which meant I needed help.

"In that case, I shall make a note of it." Skye tapped away on her screen.

"No need! I'll help my darling daughter." The doors creaked as Lord Linus stepped inside, a sunny smile on his face as his hair—the same dark black color as mine—streamed behind him in the high ponytail he'd gathered it in.

I scowled. "What are *you* doing here?"

Lord Linus planted a hand over his heart. "Your words hurt me, Leila. Why else would I come except to see your smiling face?"

"Because you're avoiding whoever you owe money to," I flatly said.

Lord Linus avoided my gaze and crouched down to pet Kevin before Whiskers wandered over and rubbed his head on his shoulder. "You are devastatingly clever, my daughter!"

I held in a disgruntled groan—it would only encourage him.

Lord Linus was my biological father and the source of my fae blood. He'd been married to Mom, but when I was a toddler, he abruptly divorced her and split.

Even though they had a confusingly positive relationship these days, it didn't change the fact that Lord Linus had abandoned my mother and broken her heart. She didn't marry Paul—my step-dad—until I was about ten.

I have no idea what she ever saw in Lord Linus in the first place.

While he could charm just about anyone, he was useless in every other way. He had a terrible gambling habit, too, and he was so deeply in debt his home had been stripped of his possessions—hence why he was living with me at the night mansion as my "fae advisor."

I didn't like the guy, but as the Queen of the Night Court, the last thing I needed was Lord Linus running loose, throwing my name around as he got himself in worse and worse debt. At least now I could have Chase—my director of security—keep an eye on him.

“You can't be my magic teacher,” I said. “To teach me you'd actually have to *know* advanced magic.”

“I know a great deal of advanced and difficult magic!” Lord Linus boasted, flashing his eyes—the same purply-blue shade as mine—at me. “You have fae blood of greatness! Why else did you think the night mares chose you?”

“Because I fed them apples and carrots,” I deadpanned.

Lord Linus rolled his eyes. “No, it's because you have great potential. Don't worry about finding her a teacher, Skye. I'll handle it.”

“Yes, Lord Linus.” Skye slightly bowed her head, taking the fae lord's word for it.

I grumbled under my breath, but it was better to let things ride out. Working with Lord Linus would help me figure out what I specifically needed help in, and that would make Skye's search for a *real* teacher that much easier.

Lord Linus slung an arm over my shoulder. “We're going to have such fun—just you wait.”

“I'd rather not,” I said.

Indigo—passing in front of me so she could also get a good look at the original king's artifacts, patted my hand.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Now you know how Skye and I feel when we deal with you,” she said.

“*Thanks*,” I repeated, sarcasm lacing my voice.

Indigo cackled, but Skye ignored our conversation and moved ahead like a museum tour guide.

“If you come this way, Queen Leila, you'll get to see the artifacts that belonged to the original king's consort,” she called.

I shrugged Lord Linus's arm off and rolled my shoulders back. “Coming!”

Chapter Two

Rigel

I waited in the shadows of a tree for the imbecile fae that thought he could kill me.

I'd received an offer for a contract—which immediately raised a warning flag.

Although I was a famous assassin—and I was still known as the Wraith to all—the contracts for my services had dried up over the past few weeks. A necessity given that I was now consort to Queen Leila of the Night Court.

As consort, I couldn't go around killing supernaturals—or at least I couldn't let it *publicly* be known. The monarchs of the other Courts were ruthless. At least one of them would construe any paid assassinations as an act of war by the Night Court. And while I wasn't certain I wanted to help Leila with her insane quest to end infighting among the fae, I had no desire to make her life—and mine by extension—more difficult by introducing a war to it.

Our wedding was at the beginning of the month, and given the stir it created, everyone knows and probably has their own theories on my loyalties. The only supernaturals who have offered me contracts since the wedding have all been traps. Though none of them were so badly disguised as this one.

I glanced at the pile of rubble that had once been a tiny, thumb-sized sculpture of a knight.

When I'd arrived at the meeting place—a weed-riddled parking lot behind a factory in the manufacturing sector of the city of Magiford—at the agreed upon time—sunset—I could feel the death spell the tiny statue held from two blocks away.

It was a clumsy spell—one of fae origin. It could be keyed into a specific target—me, in this case—and once sprung it sealed the target in a confined area with a ward, then blasted the target with magic, killing it.

Not the subtlest of disposal methods.

Deactivating the statue was a simple matter of destroying it. I'd done that bit by throwing my twin daggers at it. Since they were artifacts, a spell that increased their destructive powers went off on impact, and they'd blown the statue to bits.

This, obviously, would have also not been a very subtle disposal method. Except I knew better and raised a ward that sealed the spot off and silenced the explosion.

I shifted, growing bored, and idly wondered what new trouble was spawning back at the mansion.

Was it yesterday Leila made the chef mad when she refused to drink the celebratory tea he made her, or was that when she nearly knocked out Lord Hermes when she hurled a riding helmet at him?

I couldn't tell Leila I found her amusing. She'd point out her humor was a hidden bonus to marrying her and would insist our rather one-sided bargain for marriage had been fair all along.

In reality, despite my "queen's" ability to lie—and her unusual personality—I was surprised to discover that moving to her mansion and all the changes in my life weren't entirely negative.

I tilted my head when a car pulled into the parking lot, stopping at the crater where I'd destroyed the statue.

Ahh yes. My would-be employer, it seems.

A fae slipped out of the car—a mid-sized car from the early 2000s, so he most likely lacked significant funding in addition to intelligence.

His blond hair and blue eyes weren't distinctive to a single Court, except that he wore a gold pin of three interlocking leaves—a symbol of one of the local unseelie Courts.

That somewhat surprised me.

Seelie and unseelie Courts were much smaller and far less powerful. They typically only presided over a single city or even a portion of a city, and didn't often attack a regional Court like the Night Court or any of the seasonal Courts...*except* when they thought the regional Court was weakened and they could beat it and jockey for a new level of power.

Which was probably the case here.

It seems I'll have to send a message.

The fae turned around in the middle of the parking lot, peering blindly at the shadows as he practically shouted into his cellphone. "No, I don't see a sign of him anywhere. No body, either."

Silence.

“Yes, I set up the trap as instructed, Your Majesty, and made contact with him. He should have come already. I’ll look for the statue.”

The fae folded in half as he tried to look for the statue in the dim light the stars produced, unknowingly walking through the remnants of the statue he was seeking.

“Yes, he could have caught wind of it, but my advice remains the same to you—we need to eliminate the Wraith before you can kill the new Night Queen and secure more power.”

Leila? They want to kill Leila?

Something foreign squeezed my chest, and I moved without thinking.

“Else, as her consort, the Wraith will inherit the crown, and he’ll be far harder to—”

One careful strike—a blade to the neck—was all it took to kill him.

He collapsed, dead before his body hit the ground.

I found the cellphone—it had slipped from his grasp and skittered a foot away.

The foreign—and unwanted—sensation continued to roam around my chest as I picked up the cellphone.

“*I say, Drust—what happened?*” a stuffy voice demanded through the phone line.

“Drust is indisposed,” I said. “Permanently.”

The caller wheezed and released a gurgle of fear.

Good. He knows who I am.

“Listen *very* carefully.” I glanced up at the sky. The moon was starting to rise, lightening the sky from fathomless black to a deep blue. “Leave the Night Queen and her Court alone, or I’ll come for you.”

“*Apologies, Lord Rigel,*” the unseelie fae babbled. “*This was my subject’s plan! I have no wish—I would never—*”

In his fear, the fae couldn’t spit out a reply that would be a truth that wouldn’t get him killed.

“This is your only chance,” I said. “Inform the other unseelie and seelie Courts, or I’ll wipe you out.”

I tossed the phone on the ground then stabbed it through with one of my daggers. It sliced through the phone—killing it instantly—but the twinge in my chest was still bothering me. “Aer.” I activated the dagger, and it sparked with magic, frying the phone until it sputtered with fire and was little more

than twisted metal and melting plastics.

I pulled the dagger free of the wreckage and frowned.

The twinge was mostly gone, thankfully, but I still wasn't pleased.

It was uncomfortable—both the sensation itself and the knowledge that I had experienced something that made me break my iron control.

I had acted—killing the unseelie fae on instinct alone—after hearing the threat against Leila.

Why? What about her would drive me to act irrationally?

Frowning, I entered the shadows and used my magic to jump—hopping from shadow to shadow—until I reached my hidden car.

Rather than leave the mess behind me, I remained disturbed on my drive home.

The unseelie Court's actions didn't bother me. Frankly, it was predictable. And while I would inform Chase—Leila's director of security—I was almost certain the lower Courts would take the hint and leave the Night Court alone. They knew better than to face the consequences I would rain down on them.

But that I moved the second they mentioned killing her...

It's not like the outcome was any different. I was going to kill him regardless.

It was a very thin line of reasoning, but true.

I entered the sprawling lands the Night Court had bought up on the outskirts of northern Magiford, passing apartment buildings, then houses, which grew into mansions until I reached the largest of them all, which was home to Queen Leila, and now my home as well.

I parked my car and entered the mansion through a second story window—I may have been consort, but I was going to move through the mansion undetected. Even Chase had difficulty tracking me. Only Leila's pet glooms and shades seemed to be able to spot me no matter how I hid myself.

I swapped out some of my weapons in my bedroom then—feeling slightly bemused—skulked through the mansion, looking for the queen. My wife.

I found her in a meeting room with Chase.

Every monarch—from the lower seelie rulers to the powerful Midwest Winter Queen—received their security reports in a very formal way which typically involved lots of standing, bowing, a throne, and their ever present crown.

Leila received her report from Chase as she and the werewolf ate their way through what looked like a plate of cinnamon rolls and squares of gelatin.

“Finally, regarding the ongoing investigation of your father, Lord Linus.” Chase ripped a chunk off his cinnamon roll and dunked it in his tea.

Leila made a noise that sounded like a cow in distress. “Okay, hit me with it.” She paused and looked down at her feet where a gloom—a large, cat-like predator capable of killing a fae with ease—was sitting on her feet like a kitten.

The gloom twitched its tail and looked at me, standing in the shadows and undetected by even the werewolf’s keen nose.

Leila turned around and peered at the shadows. “Rigel?”

If I want to move about as freely as I wish, I’m going to have to learn how to fool those glooms—and the shades.

I shook my magic off and drifted out of the shadows.

Leila smiled at me. “Hey there! Want a snack? Chase was just about to tell me what a snake Lord Linus is.”

“I’m not much of a dessert person.” I crossed the room and hesitated for a moment before I sat in the chair next to Leila.

“You sure? The Turkish Delight tastes like bathwater since it’s rose flavored—I’m only eating it out of loyalty to the Chronicles of Narnia. But the sweet rolls are really good—Indigo said she was inspired to make them by a video game she’s crazy about.” Leila popped one of the pink gelatin-like squares in her mouth and made a face as she chewed it.

As I amusedly observed, it occurred to me that perhaps *this* was what had inspired that undesirable twist in my chest—her oddities were strangely charming.

It must be her human blood.

Leila seemed to be expecting a reply.

I shrugged, and Leila let the matter drop. “Go for it, Chase,” she said.

Chase studied me as he rubbed his square jaw.

Werewolves were weak to fae magic, which had made Leila’s decision to hire him as her director of security somewhat of a surprise—though she’d loaded him up with charms and potions to raise his defenses against our magic.

He did cut an imposing figure given the breadth of his chest, and the way his yellow eyes glowed—amplified by his brown skin tone. Meeting his gaze

would make any idiot aware of the wolf Chase Washington kept under careful control and channeled for the sake of his job.

I wasn't stupid. The director of security was reluctant to trust me—an intelligent instinct of his. But he must have judged the risk-factor of the matter as small, because he wiped his hands off on a napkin and continued.

"I have an official report for you to read, but it can easily be summarized," Chase said. "Regarding Lord Linus and his rumored gambling addiction and severe debts...I can find no proof that such things exist."

"What?" Leila said.

Chase handed a packet of papers off to Leila. "I combed through all known bookies and gambling rings in fae society—across several regions, even. No one has Lord Linus as a client, and he has no outstanding debts."

"I don't believe it," Leila said. "He openly admitted he wanted to be my advisor because his utilities had been turned off at his house since he didn't have any money to pay them!"

"The utilities are turned off at his family mansion," Chase confirmed. "But they've been off for over a decade. Lord Linus spent the past twenty years traveling across North America, South America, and Europe. His house was winterized and shut down since he never returned to it."

Leila nibbled on a sweet roll. "But I've *seen* him actively try to start card games, and place bets. And he always loses!"

"He does," Chase confirmed. "But he always pays out his account by the end of the night—typically after winning everything back with one or two lucky games."

"So he is still a gamester or gambler or whatever you want to call it," Leila said.

"Yes. Just one that isn't in debt," Chase said.

Leila licked frosting off her finger. "How the heck could he lose so badly, and then suddenly win?"

"It seems rather suspicious that he always makes enough to cover his deficit and nothing more," Chase confirmed.

"And you're *positive* he doesn't have any outstanding debts?"

"We traced his accounts, bank transactions, cashflow—nothing," Chase said.

Leila whistled. "That sounds illegal. How did you pull it off?"

"A wolf in my pack is good at this kind of thing. I asked him for some help," Chase said. "And I asked Lord Linus for access to his banking

information.”

Leila choked on her sweet roll. “And he *gave* it to you?”

Chase nodded.

Leila groaned and flopped an arm across her eyes. “I can’t tell if he’s a genius, or an absolute idiot!”

Chase passed me an empty teacup—probably meant for Leila, but as she disliked tea it was an empty hope she’d ever drink it—and poured me a cup as Leila complained under her breath.

I nodded my head in thanks and took a sip. It was a white tea—soft and delicate with a faint tang of pineapple.

Once she finished, Leila sighed and sat up straight in her chair.

“Your orders?” Chase inquired.

“Keep monitoring him,” Leila said.

“Yes, Queen Leila.”

“Thanks, Chase. I’m so grateful you’re my director of security.” She blessed the werewolf with a bright smile, then turned her unusual charm on me. “How are you, Rigel?”

“Fine.”

Chase twitched his nose—he was probably picking up the faintest whiff of blood, or something else from my night’s excursion. The blasted werewolf.

Leila caught Chase’s movement, then narrowed her eyes at me. “Please don’t tell me you were off working tonight?”

I shrugged. “Very well.”

Leila rolled her eyes. “Thank you, darling. Your respect for my feelings is inspiring.”

“What good consort wouldn’t be concerned for his wife’s wellbeing?” I asked, neatly sidestepping any personal implications with my phrasing.

Leila laughed. “Very true. Okay, Chase. I think we’re done.”

“Agreed. Unless you wish to go over the security measures we are taking for the celebratory party of your crowning?”

“No, thanks. We’ve reviewed that three times today alone. I think we’re good.” Leila shivered.

Unable to resist baiting her, I adjusted my teacup. “But, Queen Leila, one can never be too prepared. And your security is of utmost importance.”

“It is,” Chase agreed.

“No—no.” Leila jabbed a finger first at Chase, then me. “You two can’t

gang up on me like this.”

“But I’m your consort. Your safety should matter to me,” I said with zero conviction.

“If we just go over the patrol rotations one last time,” Chase tried.

“Chase, how can you let him use you like this?” Leila asked. “He just wants to annoy me!”

Chase blinked. “If it means you review security protocol again I don’t much care what Consort Rigel earns out of it.”

When Leila thumped her head on the table and groaned like a wounded hippo, I took another sip of my tea.

Perhaps it’s not wholly unexpected I would act on a threat to her life. She has made daily life more...interesting.

Chapter Three

Leila

The doorbell was ringing, and even though the party only started about twenty minutes before, I'd already greeted a number of nobles and common fae from the Night Court, and the Day King.

Of course, because I was *fae*, this meant the party had to be a huge production and was a big deal. Big enough that Indigo had talked me into ordering a custom dress for the occasion.

Typically I bought clothes off the rack and paid a seamstress to tailor them for me, but for my first banquet and my "introduction" to the other fae Courts, Indigo insisted we get something made for me, even though those other Courts weren't likely to show up and see it.

The gown was a deep blue color with silvery star-spattered lace covering it. Purple and white roses were set into the bodice and the hemline, and silver chains crisscrossed across my back. It matched my crown—a silver circle studded with opals and topped with a silver crescent moon—and since it lacked sleeves I was pretty comfortable in it despite its flowing skirts.

I'd never tell her, but I secretly loved it.

"Eventide, if you would open the door?" I asked the faun.

Eventide bowed to me, tugged his dark blue vest—which was the same color as my gown—then turned to the door.

As he opened it, I belatedly realized that while I had forced Indigo to make sure *I* wore cheaper, store-bought clothes, I had never made the same declaration about the servants' uniforms.

For Heaven's sake, no wonder the Court is up to its eyeballs in debt!

Eventide pulled the door open, his goat hooves tapping nervously as he bowed to the guests and took their invitations.

He turned to me, his eyeballs popping out of his head. "The Eminent, Killian Drake of the Drake Family and Adept Hazel Medeis of House Medeis," he announced.

"HAH!"

I turned around to scowl at Lord Linus, who had clapped a hand over his mouth, but his mirth was obvious. He stood with Skye, Chase, and Indigo a few feet behind me.

I shook my head at him, then grinned at Hazel and Killian—who also happened to be my parents' neighbors.

"Hazel, it's good to see you!"

Hazel—wearing a beautiful sky-blue dress—squealed and jumped across the door's threshold to hug me.

"I'm excited for you! I've been dying to see your place!" Hazel said.

"I'll give you a tour, and don't worry. I actually managed to set up some *fun* entertainment."

I swung my gaze from Hazel to Killian and his First and Second Knights who entered behind him—a Latina beauty named Celestina, and a rather depressed looking vampire named Josh. "There's a shooting range outside with bow and crossbow artifacts," I said. "There are a few fae attending to it—they'll get the weapons powered up for you so you can see what it's like to shoot magic."

About half a dozen additional Drake vampires crowded behind Celestina and Josh. They flicked their eyes from me to Killian Drake.

Killian nodded, and the vampires stampeded over one another in their rush to the shooting range.

"Which way to the back?" a sweet-looking vampire asked, her red eyes bright with excitement.

I gestured to Eventide. "Eventide will be happy to show you."

Eventide quivered a little under the vampires' intense gazes, but he bravely trotted out in front of them. "This way, esteemed guests."

"Queen Leila, thank you for your invitation to tonight's banquet." Killian's slight British accent was barely noticeable as he nodded his head to me.

"And for inviting our people," Hazel chimed in. "That was really thoughtful."

I tried to discreetly check to make sure my crown wasn't tilting. "I know the Drake Family and the Medeis wizards so well, and I think of you as my friends. It would be pretty shabby if I *didn't* invite you all!"

"Nah." Hazel shook her head. "I don't know about vampires, but we wizards don't get invited to anything like this."

"Nor do vampires," Killian confirmed.

They probably don't get invitations because Hazel is the protegee of the Midwest Elite—the highest-ranking wizard in the Midwest—and Killian as the Eminent is the top vampire in the Midwest. They outrank everyone who is coming tonight, except for the Paragon!

I awkwardly cleared my throat. “I’m glad you guys came. I figured the shooting range would most appeal to the Drake Family, but I did make arrangements for a karaoke session—since that seemed like something the House Medeis wizards would enjoy.”

“Did someone say karaoke?”

An old woman, holding the arm of a sour-faced, red-haired vampire, stepped through the door, with a dozen other House Medeis wizards surging around her.

“Great Aunt Marraine,” I greeted the older woman with a smile. “I’m happy you could make it tonight!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, dearie! Especially since my bridge group didn’t believe me when I said the new Night Queen lived next door to young Killian! We have to take a picture before the night is over,” she said.

The red-haired vampire looked to the side, as if he was contemplating slinking off, but one of Hazel’s childhood friends—an angelic-looking guy who could have given the most beautiful fae a run for their money—gave the vampire a half hug. “Sounds great. We should make it a group picture!”

The vampire shivered and glared at the wizards holding on to him. “I insist you release me.”

“Not a chance,” the male wizard said.

“Indeed,” Great Aunt Marraine said. “You agreed to be the date of all the House Medeis wizards tonight.”

“I agreed to nothing!” the vampire said.

Great Aunt Marraine cackled and patted his cheek. “It’s adorable you think you can get out of this. Come on—let’s go find this karaoke. I’m sure you have a wonderful singing voice, Rupert!” The older woman—dressed in a gold dress with gold shoes, a gold handbag, and a gold hat, marched down the hallway, dragging “Rupert” behind her.

“Yeah, Rupert,” another House Medeis wizard laughed as she followed behind him. “It’ll be a blast!”

“Someone should record this—for posterity.”

“We have to take a picture—we can add it to our Rupert photo album!”

The House Medeis wizards fearlessly swept off into the innards of my

house, not minding the gawking fae as they dragged the protesting Rupert behind them.

“I’ll go after them and take them to the karaoke bar,” Indigo said. “This looks like it could be entertaining, anyway.”

“Thanks, Indigo,” I called after my retreating companion.

She waved and hurried after the wizards.

“Rupert—the vampire my family swept off with—has become something of my House’s pet project,” Hazel told me. “Everyone was concerned he didn’t get enough love in his life as a vampire. They’re determined to lavish it on him now. He secretly loves it.”

“Indeed,” Josh said. “You can tell because he hasn’t killed anyone in ages.”

“And he seems merely slightly grouchy on the days we spend at House Medeis,” Celestina said. “Grouchiness—or a lack of—is how he expresses his love.”

“Huh,” I said. “I’m glad the Drakes and Medeis’s are melding like that.”

“It hasn’t been without its...issues,” Killian said. “But overall, it’s been pleasant.”

“I told you that if you stop bad mouthing the House on its own land, it will stop hiding your suits.” Hazel arched her eyebrow at him, then brightened. “Oh—that reminds me, Leila! I want to meet the lucky guy!”

Confused, I looked behind me at Skye, Chase, and Lord Linus, then looked back at Hazel and Killian. “Lucky guy?”

“Your husband.”

“Oh! Rigel! Yes. I’m sure he’s around somewhere,” I said.

Killian blinked. “You speak of him as if he is a cat roaming the house.”

I scratched my cheek. “Yeah, sort of. He’s very quiet and comes and goes as he wants.” I threw my hand wide to gesture, and I smacked my knuckles on something hard. “Ouch.”

I twitched in surprise to find Rigel standing just behind my shoulder. His sense of style hadn’t changed since becoming my consort, so he was dressed in black—including black boots, pants, and a fancy black shirt that buttoned at the shoulder. He also still wore his leather bracers that held hidden daggers, but I’d be willing to risk my Court’s hard-earned money that he had some hidden in his boots and belt, too. “Ah. Rigel. Hello there.”

Rigel nodded to me, then glanced at Hazel and Killian.

“You’re right, I should make the introductions. Hazel, Killian, this is

my...er...husband, Consort Rigel. Rigel, these are my dear friends, Adept Hazel Medeis and her fiancé Eminent Killian Drake.” I made the smallest grimace—a little upset that I still stumbled over calling Rigel my husband. It seemed weird and foreign, but if I wanted to learn to keep a straight face around the other monarchs, I needed to build a bridge and get over it.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Lord Rigel,” Hazel said.

Rigel wordlessly nodded. With his slightly tapered ears, copper skin, and intimidating wardrobe, there was something about him that seemed *wild*, and out of place among the modern conveniences of my mansion.

The doorbell rang.

Skye glided across the room to get it in Eventide’s absence, and I smiled apologetically.

“I really need to greet the other guests, but I’ll find you later tonight—I want to introduce you to my new pets!”

“Great! We’ll keep an eye out for you. Come on, Killian. Let’s go see that shooting range.”

“I would have thought you’d want to witness Rupert’s humiliation at karaoke.” Killian offered his arm, and Hazel took it.

“I want to see that, too,” Hazel assured him. “But I’ve never had the chance to fire a weapon loaded with fae magic! It’s going to be so cool.”

Killian smirked down at her. “I really do love you more and more each day,” he announced with zero sense of embarrassment—good for him!

Skye opened the door before the power couple left, so when Lady Chrysanthe and her grandmother Lady Demetria entered the room, they could see the pair.

“I *told* you it was a waste to come this early,” Lady Demetria barked at her granddaughter, ignoring me. “No being of fashionable taste and reasonable power would deign to arrive at this—” Her lecture ground to a halt when Hazel laughed at something Killian said as they strolled off.

“That’s Eminent Killian Drake and Adept Hazel Medeis,” I helpfully supplied. She obviously already knew, but I’d made it a hobby to troll my dear subjects since becoming queen.

Lady Demetria’s face was set in stone as she stared—which was about equal to shrieking and gawking for a fae since they were usually guarded in expressing their feelings.

“Good evening, Queen Leila, and congratulations.” Lady Chrysanthe ignored her grandmother’s stunned silence and curtsied to me.

“Welcome, Lady Chrysanthe and Lady Demetria,” I greeted. “Please come in.”

Lady Chrysanthe glided inside without hesitation, but Lady Demetria was a few moments delayed, which is how the Paragon almost ran her down.

“They’re here already, aren’t they?” the Paragon panted as he stood in the door.

“Killian and Hazel?” I guessed—the Paragon was famously attached to the pair. “Yes. They went out back to the shooting range.”

“I knew it! I knew they’d come early!” He twisted around to scowl behind him and shouted to his traveling companions. “This is all your fault, Bellus!”

Sulking, the Paragon stepped through the door, making way for the head wizard in the Midwest, Elite Bellus.

Well dressed in a navy-blue pinstripe suit with a crisp handkerchief poking out of his pocket, Elite Bellus gave off a professorly aura, but I was pretty sure he had the twisty sort of mind that could keep up with a fae—though he was far more kind.

“Queen Leila, what a pleasure it is to meet you.” Elite Bellus offered me a slight bow, then extended his hand. His smile was pleasant and obviously well used, and his silvery hair was slicked back while his goatee was meticulously trimmed.

I shook his hand. “The pleasure is all mine. I was quite excited when you sent in your RSVP. Hazel has told me a lot about you.”

I only invited Elite Bellus because Hazel was his protegee and she asked me to, but I was glad to have him here.

Behind me, Lady Demetria made a strangled noise.

Ahhh, yes. Shocked at the quality of my guests, hmm?

Before Skye could close the door, four more guests filled the doorway. I curiously studied them—three of them were werewolves based on the gold and brilliant-blue eyes they sported—before making the decision to call for backup. “Chase?”

My director of security was at my side in an instant. “Queen Leila, allow me to present Pre-Dominant Harka, her mate Beta Colton, my alpha and the leader of the Northern Lakes Pack Alpha Greyson, and my packmate, Phillipa.”

“Welcome, I’m glad you could make it.” I tried to give them my warmest smile to make up for the noises Lady Demetria made—which had me

wondering if I needed to call for a healing potion because she sounded like she was having a heart attack.

“Thank you for the invitation!” Pre-Dominant Harka stuck her hand out, then shook mine with a firm but relaxed grip. “It was pretty cheeky of me to call and *ask* for an invitation.”

“Nonsense,” Elite Bellus laughed. “With Killian and me attending, you’d be left out otherwise—and this promises to be a fun party!”

Pre-Dominant Harka didn’t move her painfully bright blue eyes from me, so I offered her my own reassurances. “The Elite is right,” I said. “I am glad you requested an invitation—it would have been rude of me to leave you out of it.”

It was a bit of a lie—that was the plus of being only half fae, none of the restrictions applied to me—but one that didn’t make my conscience prickle.

It never would have occurred to me to invite the Pre-Dominant—the most powerful werewolf in the Midwest.

Right now, the Night Court wasn’t powerful enough to be noteworthy to her—or to the Elite—and she had absolutely no reason to be here *except* that they were probably curious about Killian and Hazel choosing to attend.

I could have saved them the trouble and just told them I’m pretty close to Hazel, but since I’m half fae they probably wouldn’t have trusted me anyway.

Regardless, I was glad they could make it for the sake of Alpha Greyson and Phillipa, whom I *had* specifically invited. Since Alpha Greyson led the pack Chase belonged to, I wanted to invite him and a few other werewolves from their pack as a gesture to show how much I valued Chase.

I eagerly turned to the pair, curious to see what kind of packmates Chase had.

“And thank you for accepting the invitation as well, Alpha Greyson and packmate Phillipa,” I said.

“Everyone calls me Pip—and I’m a human and not an actual packmate.” Phillipa—or Pip as she said—fidgeted in her shoes in a way that told me she didn’t often wear heels. “But thanks for the invite, anyway! Hi, Chase!” Her grin was bright and affectionate, but I didn’t miss the way she yanked her hand from Alpha Greyson.

The Alpha—he looked shockingly young, maybe just a few years older than I was—dutifully bowed to me. “Thank you for the invitation, Queen Leila of the Night Court.”

“Thank you for coming all this way,” I said. “It must have been quite the

drive. Chase can show you two around.”

Chase frowned at me, as if I had personally insulted his mother. “I’m on duty.”

“It’s fine, you can go. I’m sure they’re very eager to catch up with you.”

Alpha Greyson gave me the same frown Chase did. “Not if he’s on duty,” he said. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“Fine. Okay. Chase, I officially give you tonight off. There, you’re off duty,” I said.

Chase pressed his lips together in displeasure. “Which of my men, then, will replace me?”

“Someone will,” I vaguely said.

“Someone is not a name,” Chase said. “Your security detail must have structure—your safety is our top priority.”

Alpha Greyson nodded in agreement.

Gah, werewolves!

I glanced behind me where Rigel lingered, making no attempts to talk to anyone—though he was watching the Paragon hoist his dark blue robes to his knobby knees and go darting deeper into the mansion.

“Rigel will stick with me.” I took a step backwards to stand shoulder to shoulder with the assassin, and grabbed his arm. “I’ll be the safest person in the world, then. Will that work?”

Chase, unconvinced, looked from me to Rigel.

Dang it! I know Rigel isn’t going to back me up in this—he can’t lie!

“Chase, I *promise* I’ll be fine,” I said.

“Of course you will.” Lord Linus strolled up to our little meeting and smiled winningly. “Because I’ll stay with her. You go have fun, Chase.”

This—shockingly, *confusingly*—seemed to actually reassure Chase. He nodded. “Very well, then. This way, Alpha Greyson, Pip.”

My jaw dropped as Chase ushered his packmates away. “Seriously? He trusts *you* more than he trusts me?”

Lord Linus smirked and adjusted the lapels of his dove gray suitcoat. “Maybe he sees what you don’t!”

A few other fae nobles from my Court had entered while I greeted Chase’s pack. They giggled when Lord Linus stuck his hands in the pockets of his slacks and looked irritatingly charming.

There was something deeply aggravating about the fact that although Lord Linus was my biological father and pretty much a wastrel, he looked

like he was barely in his mid-thirties and was irritatingly good-looking.

“It’s a mystery I’ll certainly never understand,” I grumbled.

“But never mind Chase’s and my bromance. I’m more interested in your party—I see what you did.” Lord Linus grinned at me.

I tightened my grip on Rigel’s arm, which made me realize I was still holding said arm. I abruptly dropped it. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The other Courts are snubbing you by ignoring this party—they should have shown up by now, and as a fellow monarch they *should* have come to acknowledge you,” Lord Linus said. “Normally their iciness would make you look bad and lower your prestige, but instead you made arrangements for guests *far* more powerful than they to come, giving everyone who does attend the chance to forge new alliances and connections while casting the other Courts in a pretty poor light. Well done indeed, my sly daughter!”

“I didn’t actually do it on purpose.” I waved to a cluster of pixies who fluttered through the door, their wings dazzling flashes of light in the dim mood lighting. “And it’s really all just because I’m friends with Hazel. And Killian I guess. And I wanted Chase to feel free to invite his family, which was how Pre-Dominant Harka found out about it.”

“Of *course* she found out about it.” Lord Linus dramatically rolled his eyes. “Do you know how many crowning banquets werewolves are typically invited to? None!”

“Yeah, I guess not many werewolves work for Courts.” I glanced up at Rigel. “Did you have a nice day?”

Rigel’s forehead twitched so fast I almost didn’t see it. But after being married to him for more than two weeks—and more importantly after confusing and annoying him for over two weeks—I was getting better at seeing the tiny reactions he’d show. If you looked fast enough, anyway.

“Are you really attempting to exchange pleasantries in the middle of a party?” he asked.

Did I mention Rigel was as sarcastic as he was handsome?

He cut a nice figure in his dark clothes with his tall, lean build, but he was also blessed with staggering good looks and perfect silver hair that, unlike the rest of the fae, he usually cut short in something closer to human styles. His eyes put a bit of a dampener on his handsomeness, though. All the chiseled abs in the world wouldn’t make up for the dead, lifeless look that usually settled in his black eyes.

“I thought it was the polite thing to do instead of asking if you’d been murderizing,” I said.

“Lord Dion asked me to come over to see a sword he purchased,” Rigel said.

Lord Dion was Rigel’s best and only friend—although Rigel would never own up to the relationship. Lord Dion was charismatic, bright, and had a law practice for supernaturals.

In other words, he was the total opposite of my dark, brooding, assassin husband.

“I see.” Before I could ask anything more, another cluster of Night Court fae slipped through the doorway.

I slapped a smile on my face and grinned. “Good evening—and welcome to our celebration!”

Since none of the other fussy Courts are coming, tonight is going to be fun! I’m determined to enjoy it!

Chapter Four

Leila

“How are you holding up, my Sovereign?”

I glanced down at Indigo and flashed her what I hoped was a pleasant smile, even though I was so exhausted I was desperate enough to consider drinking *tea*.

“I could really use a latte, but it’s been enjoyable!” I backed up a few steps and pushed my back against the wall, barely avoiding one of the exuberant wizards who was dancing wildly to a song.

“Are you hungry?” Indigo asked.

I glanced from my sharp-eyed companion to the guests. “Nah. I’m okay —”

“I’ll make something for you.”

I hesitated, caught between the hunger gnawing at my stomach and my unwillingness to make Indigo work tonight. “That’s okay. Your parents are here tonight. You should have fun with them.”

“They won’t miss me for the twenty minutes it will take to make you a quick meal,” Indigo said. “In fact, I’ll tell them, and they’ll come with me—my mother would love to see the kitchens.”

“I couldn’t ask you to—”

“Leila, I want to.”

I chewed my lip. “Okay. Then yes, please. Thank you, Indigo.”

“You’re welcome.” Indigo had already turned away from me, adjusting her cat eye glasses as she looked over the crowd.

“I really mean it—and I want you to know I’ll never take you for granted.”

Indigo shot me an amused look. “My Sovereign, I don’t think you’re capable of truly using people. I see my mother—I’ll get her, and we’ll be back with food for you.”

She was off, her green skirts twirling around her—yes, she’d deigned to wear a dress for the occasion instead of one of her much beloved t-shirts—as

she hunted down her parents.

Warmth fluttered in my chest, and I smiled like a goof.

Although she'd taken the position for the salary, Indigo had become someone I counted on, which was fantastic, because she was the only one I trusted enough to cook for me.

I hadn't eaten anything all night because fae can easily bespell food and drinks. I'd actually nearly died at my first Night Court social with my nobles because I'd tried eating a bit of food a fae had bespelled.

I'd lived off protein bars for weeks before Indigo started cooking for me—she was an *excellent* chef, and loved to recreate food she'd seen in her favorite movies, books, and TV shows.

A faun and a dryad who were walking together paused long enough to bow to me.

“Good evening, Queen Leila!”

“Such a marvelous party, Queen Leila!”

“I hope you enjoy it!” I said.

They moved on just in time to avoid Pre-Dominant Harka displaying wrestling techniques on her husband for Hazel's benefit.

The mansion air conditioning was blasting, but the room was still pretty warm.

Between the heat, the thumping music, and the colored flashing lights, it was starting to be a bit much for me.

I skirted the edge of the room, smiling whenever one of my people bowed to me, and just about gasped in relief when I made it to one of the French doors that opened onto the extensive back patio.

I staggered outside, waving to the three fae who were stationed there—Chase's men.

I wandered up to the closest one, rubbing my ear. “I just need a few minutes of quiet.”

The fae nodded, her ponytail bobbing. “I'll let Lord Linus know.”

“Why?”

“Chase informed us he is in charge.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course he did. Yeah, okay, please go ahead and tell him.”

She nodded to me, then turned slightly away to mutter on her wireless headset.

I stretched my arms above my head, turning around when I heard the door

click. “King Solis, hello!” I beamed at the monarch of the Day Court.

Like the Court he ruled, he was handsome, warm, and golden with copper hued robes, and a golden crown that was similar to mine both in shape and the way it had a sun emblazoned in the center.

He was tall and lean with the typical smooth/ageless fae beauty, except for the fine lines around his eyes that made him look more approachable and kinder than other fae. He looked a bit older than Lord Linus—maybe in his early forties—but I wouldn’t have been surprised if he was old enough to be my grandfather. Fae weren’t immortal, but they aged really slowly and lived a lot longer than humans or even werewolves did.

“Queen Leila, I offer you my congratulations for your official crowning ceremony.” King Solis’s golden hair gleamed in the dim, solar powered patio lights the gardeners had strategically placed. “Your banquet will certainly be something talked about for years!”

“Thanks. I’m glad you could come.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” King Solis said. “Our Courts—and fates—are intertwined.”

I grinned up at the older monarch. “It’s just that our Courts are connected, it’s not that we’re friends or anything?”

King Solis had a bright laugh that practically glittered. “As humorous as always, are you? Yes, we are friends. I would have moved the sun to come just because today is *your* banquet.”

I patted King Solis on the hand. “Thanks, King Solis. I’m glad our Courts are besties, too.”

“*Ahem.*”

King Solis twisted around. “Ahh, yes—you wanted an introduction,” he said. “Step forward.”

Two fae—a female and male standing arm in arm, glided forward, sharp smiles settled on their lips.

“Good evening,” the female said.

“Queen Leila, this is Angstra and Manith.” He gestured first to the female, then the male. “They’re acquaintances of mine who came with me tonight.”

“It’s a rarity to meet the new Queen of the Night Court.” Manith offered me a perfect bow and then a dimpled smile. “On behalf of our region, please let us express congratulations.”

“Your region? You’re not from the Day Court?” I asked.

“No, though we consider the Day Court our own.” Angstra laughed a little. “We’re not from the Midwest region, but rather the Mid-Atlantic area.”

“You’re just visiting the area, then?” I asked.

“Indeed,” Manith confirmed with a wink. “Though quaint Magiford has attempted to charm us. But that is why we were especially intrigued to meet you—since yours is the only Night Court in the United States.”

Yeah, that was why the Original Creep of a king laid all the extra rules down—so the Night Court and Day Court wouldn’t go crazy in the future being that we technically ruled Day and Night everywhere in the USA.

Obviously he wasn’t the saint Skye made him out to be, or he would have just crowned additional kings or queens and established other Night Courts, but nooo. That would be giving up too much power, I’m sure.

I tried to keep my inner tirade from showing on my face as I nodded and rearranged my gown. “In that case, I’m glad you could come.”

“Your mansion is beautiful—and I enjoy the energy of your party,” Angstra laughed.

“I watched some of the wizards join in...what was it called? Karaoke?” Manith looked to King Solis for support.

A smile briefly twitched at King Solis’s lips. “I believe that is what the great matron of House Medeis said, yes.”

“Fascinating,” Manith said. “I’ve never seen a Court so aware of the human world.”

“It’s not that we’re aware as much as it’s my world, too, since I’m half human,” I said.

“Ahh yes, King Solis told us of your story,” Angstra said. “It must have been shocking to be made queen.”

“In more ways than one, yes,” I nodded.

Although Manith and Angstra seemed pretty nice—especially for fae—I was keeping a bit of my guard up as I glanced at King Solis.

He called them acquaintances, not friends...after he’d just confirmed that we were friends.

I was probably overthinking it, but I hadn’t survived this long among the fae by being impulsive in my friendships.

“King Solis also told us you were recently married,” Manith said.

“Yes. I married Consort Rigel the day of my crowning,” I said.

“He seems like an unusual—and remarkable—choice,” Angstra said.

“You’ve heard of him, then?” I asked.

Angstra glanced at Manith, her eyes a little wide with panic in them.

That's something to remember; even out in the Mid-Atlantic states they know who the Wraith is.

I couldn't help the little smirk that played on my lips. "We have the most romantic love story ever! The first time we set eyes on each other, he tried to kill me."

I laughed as Angstra and Manith clutched each other in apparent horror. Even King Solis froze and seemed shocked.

That was fun—I'll have to do it again!

I tapped my thigh, patting my skirts. "Best meet-cute story ever!"

"I'm glad you think so."

I almost jumped out of my high heels when I heard Rigel purr behind me, but was able to course correct at the last moment and just wobbled instead.

"Darling," I said. "Hello. Hi."

I managed not to ask him the question that burned in my heart.

What possessed him to come out here?!

After greeting the guests Rigel had gone off and done his own thing—which pretty much summed up our relationship. He did whatever he wanted and didn't kill me, and I was free to muck up all the stupid political games the fae played as I wished.

"Your father is looking for you," Rigel said.

"So?"

"He's concerned."

Yeah, for his meal ticket.

I sighed. "I suppose I should go back inside. Indigo is probably looking for me by now anyway, and if Chase finds out Lord Linus left my side he'll never take another day off again. It was a pleasure to meet you Angstra, Manith. I'll see you around, King Solis?"

"Most assuredly, Queen Leila. In fact, let me accompany you. I was hoping to see if I might speak with the Paragon for a bit. I have a few questions I'd like to ask him about this year's Summer's End Ball." He strode after me, and together we ambled back to the French doors.

"Good luck with that," I said. "Last I saw him, he and Killian were playing laser tag in the gardens around sunset."

"Ahh. Killian won?"

"And kept winning, until the Paragon started crying," I confirmed.

King Solis opened the door for me, and I glanced back, a little surprised

to see that Rigel was not following us.

He'd remained behind, thoughtfully studying Angstra and Manith. His hand strayed to his bracer for a moment, before he dropped it, then turned in my direction and stalked after me.

Curious, I glanced from him to the fae couple, but waited until I stepped inside and the loud music and whooping wizards could screen our voices.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

Rigel shook his head.

I hesitated, but while I was reasonably sure Rigel wouldn't hurt me, and I wasn't too afraid of him, I was very aware of the hard boundaries between us, and I wasn't going to push it for the sake of seeing how he felt about the pair.

No—I'd save that little push for something far more important.

Like figuring out who had hired him to try to kill me when the night mares first started showing up around me.

* * *

The party lasted until the early hours of the morning and—according to Skye and Indigo—it was a hit.

I was just glad everyone had fun—the Drakes wouldn't have stayed that long if they weren't—and I'd even found a spare half hour with Josh, who took me out to the shooting range for a quick practice session.

Everything I'd learned about pistols and sidearms—including the one I owned and carried to all Night Court social functions—was taught to me by Josh. Needless to say, it was an extremely instructional half hour.

As a result, I was in a really good mood the following day, whistling to myself and jingling my truck keys as I left the cool, air-conditioned mansion for the hot, mid-morning, August air.

I clutched my folder of papers and made a noise of dislike at the back of my throat as the day's building humidity swept around me like a soggy blanket. "Steve, Muffin, are you two sure you want to come?" I asked.

The shade and gloom—who'd spent the scant hours I'd slept silently prowling around my room—skulked after me. Steve's shadowy black fur was more of a charcoal color under the glare of the sun, and a tuft of fur fell off

Muffin as I watched.

Both of them determinedly followed me down the excessively long driveway—Steve’s front paws were a distinct shade of gray, which made her trot adorable.

“I’ll leave the truck running for you so it won’t get hot, but I’m pretty sure it’s going to be a boring wait,” I said.

Steve peered back over her shoulder, looking at something behind us, so I wasn’t too shocked when Rigel spoke.

“Where are you going?”

I paused at the edge of the driveway, next to a bunch of tulips that were flowering out of season—fae magic! “Rigel—good morning.”

Rigel stood behind me, a well cut figure of black in the bright and cheerful morning. I wasn’t thrilled to see he’d changed to the long, fitted jacket with the slit going up the back which he only seemed to wear when doing assassin-y things, but his silvery hair was pushed back, giving him a slightly more casual air as he stared me down.

Since he didn’t seem likely to return my greeting, I cleared my throat and set one hand on Steve’s shoulders. “We’re going into Magiford. I have some paperwork I need to drop off at the Curia Cloisters.”

He blinked. “You are the Night Queen. Send one of your employees.”

“Ahaha, it’s not quite that simple.” I wagged my folder at him as Muffin affectionately butted her head against my thigh. “I need to renew my registration as a half fae half human. If I don’t get it submitted correctly there could be trouble.”

“And you don’t trust your people to do it?”

I shrugged. “It’s important. And while I’m sure Skye or Indigo could do it, they might be bothered by other fae.”

He watched me for several long moments, the darkness of his eyes completely unreadable.

I fidgeted and took one side step closer to the giant garage that my truck was parked in.

Is he done? Can I leave, or do I need to say something else to him?

“I’ll come with.”

My stomach did this fun flippy thing it does when my anxiety spikes. “You’ll *what?*”

“I’ll come.” Rigel passed me, ghosting toward the garage with soundless steps.

I gawked at his back for a moment, then hurried to catch up. “But I was also going to stop at my favorite café and get some coffee—and go to the library.”

Rigel glanced at me as I caught up to him. “The library?”

“I have a bunch of books about leadership on hold and ready for me to pick up.”

“And you didn’t just buy them?”

“Yeah, because it’s *free* to borrow them from the library.”

Rigel stared me down. “You’re concerned about buying books after all the money you spent on last night’s party?”

“Yes, Mr. Judge, I am! You might not know since no one ever tried to drag you into the political muck due to your...previous career, but the Night Court is dead broke! I have to be economical where I can. And don’t think I won’t impose budget cuts on you, too. Even if you are pretty!” It was when I finished my ramble that I realized I might have gone a little too far in my teasing.

I hunched my shoulders and watched Rigel for any signs of murderous thoughts. But he just tapped the keycode for the garage door into the keypad and waited for the door to rise.

When the door was only half open, he ducked under. “Are you coming?”

“Yes! Yep! I’m coming.” I slipped under the door, Steve and Muffin following me. “We’re taking my truck, if that’s okay? I told Azure she could have the morning off since she had to drop off a few guests after last night’s party.”

The rising door shed sunlight on the cars tucked inside the massive garage, and the Porsche Azure had taken out in the early morning was parked, a sure sign my chauffeur had returned.

I should set my accountants on selling some of these cars.

“Your truck is fine.” Rigel’s voice shook me from my money schemes.

“Great. Hop in—though it’s going to be tight. Steve and Muffin sit in the back bench seat, but whenever I park they like to crawl into the front seats.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Just watch out for Steve—she likes to lick people.”

“Of course.”

* * *

My trip to the Curia Cloisters was stress-free—particularly after Rigel got bored waiting for me in the hallway and entered the office area I'd gone into to get my paperwork processed.

The aide I was working with had turned sheet white—which is saying something because she'd been pretty scared of Muffin and Steve who had come in with me—and suddenly there were four people working on getting my paperwork worked out. I was out of there in record time!

Rigel had stayed in the truck with Muffin and Steve—I left the truck on with the air conditioning blasting for them—when I stopped at the library, and I assumed he'd stay in the truck again once I parked at my favorite café, King's Court.

"I'll only be a minute." I slipped some sunglasses on and hopped out of the truck, leaving it on.

"Chase said King's Court Café has a drive through," Rigel said.

"Chase says all kinds of interesting things to people who are not me," I complained. "But yeah, he's right. I just don't want to take it right now. Rhonda, the owner, should be working the front. I want to stop in and say hello."

I swung my door shut and checked my pockets for my wallet, when the thump of the passenger door shutting rocked my truck.

Curious, I peered around the front of my vehicle as Rigel strolled up. "I'm coming in," he said.

"Oh." I stopped, my hand half tucked in my butt pocket. "Are you sure? This is a human café. There won't be any other supernaturals."

"What is it you are always saying at inappropriate times?" Rigel asked.

"It's fine?"

"Yes." Rigel swept toward the café, his stride long and smooth.

Chapter Five

Leila

I trotted a little to catch up with him and twisted around to wave at Steve and Muffin in the still running truck. I wasn't worried anyone was going to steal the truck—not with Muffin licking her enormous claws off and Steve flashing her teeth at anyone on the street—but I wanted to reassure my pets.

I jogged the last few steps to get to the café door before Rigel and pull it open.

The inside of King's Court—which was named after the little side street it sat on—was cozy and bright with brick walls accented with planters of ferns and tendrils of crawling ivy. Strings of tiny lights hung from the ceiling, which had been painted a dark blue color, and one of the three rustic wooden fans squeaked quietly like a familiar friend as the wonderful, amazing, and perfect scent of coffee swept around me like a hug.

I closed my eyes in delight. “Coffee, baby, I have missed you.”

“You are inexplicably strange,” Rigel said.

I popped my eyes open to give Rigel the necessary look of disapproval. “We'll get you set up with a good coffee drink, and then I'll challenge you to say that again.”

“Your great love of coffee is possibly the least odd thing about you.”

“You are *such* a supportive husband.”

“Night Queen—where are your demon horses?”

I jerked my gaze to the tall, gangly teenager standing behind the counter, wiping it down with a rag. His blond hair sprung straight up, half covering the drive-through headset he was wearing. His freckles seemed extra prominent as he looked from me to the door.

“The night mares stayed home today,” I said.

He tossed the rag over his shoulder. “They're not sick, are they?”

“No, they're fine. But they'd be delighted to know you're worried for them.”

“Leila!” Rhonda, the owner, stepped out of the little kitchen walled off

from the rest of the café with a grin. “Or I should say, Queen Leila. Welcome back!”

I leaned my hip against the counter and grinned. “Hey, Rhonda! Thanks. You’re looking good!”

“Yeah, drive through business has been excellent since you dropped by with your little horses. Who’s the handsome escort?” She nodded her head at Rigel and gave me a sly grin.

“Yeah, um. This is...Rigel. Rigel, this is Rhonda—she owns this café.” I laughed nervously.

“Welcome to King’s Court Café,” Rhonda told Rigel before she fixed her too-sharp gaze back on me. “What happened to the cute werewolf?”

“Chase is still my director of security,” I said. “Rigel is just, ahah, he’s—well. He’s my husband,” I said, feeling amazingly awkward.

No one from fae society would blink at that announcement. They knew the laws I had to follow—*thanks*, original king! But humans wouldn’t know that, and since Rhonda was a good friend of mine she knew I would have mentioned if we were dating previously, so this was awkward.

“Your husband?” Rhonda repeated.

I gave her my most winning smile. “Precisely.”

“Him.”

“Yes.”

“The fae noble who looks like he stepped out of one of those fae-human romance books like he’s a wild hero come to rescue you.”

I glanced back at Rigel, looking rather deadly in his black clothes. He hadn’t even blinked over the conversation. “*Rescue* is a strong word,” I said.

Thankfully, the conversation was interrupted by my truck’s blaring horn.

I dashed to the door, bumping it open.

Steve sat in the driver’s seat, pushing down on the steering wheel with a paw as she watched the café door. Muffin was next to her, sniffing the car dashboard.

“Steve! Stop that—I’ll be done soon!” I shouted. “And Muffin, don’t think I don’t know that you’re egging her on!” I shook my finger at them, then retreated indoors.

“More pets of yours?” Landon asked.

“Yes.”

Rhonda rested her hands on her hips. “You can bring ’em in, you know. This is a pet friendly café.”

Through the glass door, I could see Steve's glowing orange eyes and her flickering fur. "Um. You're not this kind of pet friendly," I said.

"Leila, I *insist* you go bring those poor things in," Rhonda said.

"I'll bring them up to the door for you, and then you can tell me what you think about them." I paused in the doorway and held a finger out to Rigel. "Don't you dare order tea. I want to help you pick out a drink."

Something flickered in Rigel's eyes. Previously I'd only seen boredom, but I was fairly certain the light I'd briefly seen was amusement, which I hadn't been entirely sure was possible.

"I didn't know you were that invested in what I choose to drink," he said.

"Of course I'm invested! I need you to like it, because the chef won't dare say no if I tell him *you* want a coffee machine at the mansion. Be right back."

I hustled out to my truck, going around to the passenger side and opening up the glove compartment.

King's Court Café required collars and leashes for all animals. Thankfully, I was in the habit of stowing some in my truck back from the days I used to train the Drakes' dogs. I dug out two nylon collars—one pink, one purple—and their matching leashes and put them on the shade and gloom.

I felt pretty ridiculous leading them on leashes that would have been more appropriate for a chihuahua than the enormous predators that prowled on either side of me.

I paused at the glass door and reluctantly opened it when Rhonda motioned for me to come in.

Landon had been working on wiping down some of the café equipment, which he clutched when he saw Steve and Muffin. "You have *other* monster pets besides your demon horses?"

"Yes. The dog is Steve, the cat is Muffin."

"You're certainly using those species classifications loosely," Landon grumbled.

Rhonda leaned over the counter to beam at my pets. "Hello there, cuties! I have a treat for you!" She fed them each a cookie—the homemade ones she baked for customers' pets. Steve got a bone-shaped cookie while Muffin gobbled up a fish one.

"Are we seriously not going to talk about how terrible their names are?" Landon asked.

"They have good names!" I protested.

“You’ve already shown your understanding of words is flexible,” Landon said. “This just proves it.”

“Why did you choose these particular naming patterns?” Rigel asked.

I turned toward him in surprise as Muffin licked her chops. “What do you mean?”

“The other gloom that commonly follows you is named Whiskers, and I’ve heard you call the other shade that shadows your steps Kevin,” Rigel said.

“Yeah, I gave Whiskers and Muffin the most common cat names I could think of—same with their little friends who usually stay out in the stables, Patches and Fluffy. I thought that might make people think they’re cuter.”

“And the shades?”

“I gave them really bland human names,” I admitted. “I figure calling any creature—even a shade—Larry or Barbra would make them seem less... fierce.”

“It didn’t work,” Landon flatly said.

“Landon,” Rhonda growled. “What have I told you about insulting customers’ animals?”

“You told me I couldn’t tell dog owners that their fluffy purse dogs were runty. You didn’t say anything about deadly—what did you call them? Shades?”

Rhonda shook her head as Steve sat like a perfectly obedient dog, her dark tail swishing across the wood floor. “Go check on the drive through.”

“Happily!” The teenager shuffled off as Rhonda slipped Steve another cookie.

When Muffin screamed like a goblin, Rhonda chuckled and gave the cat another cookie as well.

“Okay, Leila. What’s your choice for today? Your summer usual?”

“Nope, I’m going to go with an iced miel today. The sixteen-ounce, please.”

“You got it!” Rhonda went to wash her hands at the sink as I turned to my deadly hubby.

“A miel is made of espresso and steamed milk, and is flavored with honey and cinnamon,” I explained. “But, here’s the important question. Do you like your drinks sweet, or do you prefer something more bitter?”

Rigel shifted, his eyes flicking from me to the menu written out on chalkboards that were bolted to the walls. “I despise sweet tea.”

“Pretty sure everyone in the south just cried out in a great shared pain at that one, but okay,” I said. “Do you add milk to your tea?”

“Occasionally.”

“Great—Rhonda, can you make a cortado for Rigel?”

“Any flavor shots?”

I glanced at Rigel; he was looking down at Steve, who was sniffing his boots. “I’m going to go with no.”

“Gotcha.”

The chortles and gurgles of the machinery sounded like sweet music to me as Rhonda set about making our drinks.

Muffin purred as she leaned into me while Steve continued her investigation of Rigel’s boots.

“Thanks for coming with me today,” I said.

Rigel shrugged. “It’s been interesting.”

“And educational?”

Rigel gave me the side eye. “Getting coffee to the mansion is your battle. You’re not dragging me into it.”

“Come on, you’re the best chance of an ally that I have,” I complained. “This is the most important fight I want you to be a part of!”

“No.”

Again, I thought I saw that flash of amusement in Rigel’s eyes.

“What is it?” I asked.

Rigel minutely shook his head. “More of your strangeness.”

“What about this could you *possibly* think is strange? I just have different tastes!”

“It’s not the café,” Rigel said. “It’s that your ongoing fight for coffee is the only real fight you’ve asked me to enter.”

“And?”

“Given your position and my *abilities*, it’s strange.” Rigel said.

“Maybe, but it’s a good strange, right?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

Rigel briefly glanced at me, before he turned to the door. “Yes. A different...but good strange.”

Before I could ask him any follow up questions, the bell above the door jingled as someone entered the store.

I started to reel Steve in—worried the new customers might be scared of my pets’ presence.

“Oh my gosh! Is that the Night Queen?”

Surprised, I turned around.

Two women—one of them holding the hand of a toddler—were crowded in the door. They removed their sunglasses so they could gawk at me, their shock turning into smiles.

“It is!” the toddler-toter said. “Hi—we’re big fans. We cheered for you at the races!”

“Your horses were so sweet with you!” the second woman said.

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate your support.”

“And you were at the races, too.” The woman stooped over and picked up her toddler, balancing him on her hip as she peered at Rigel. “The screens showed you greeting her.”

Rigel stared at the women and said nothing.

“This is Rigel, my consort,” I said.

The second woman’s face lit up. “You’re married—to a fae warrior? That’s perfect! And you look great together!”

“Yeah—with your opposite hair and eyes you really look like the rulers of the night sky!”

I glanced at Rigel to see how he was handling their enthusiasm, but he’d returned to peering down at Steve—who was looking up at him and wagging her tail.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Can we take a picture with you?” the second woman asked.

“Is that okay with you, Rigel?” I asked.

“Yes,” Rigel said—unexpectedly.

“Okay, then. Come on closer. Landon—can you take our picture?” I called back to the teenager as I backed away from the counter.

“Yeah—as long as I don’t have to get near your beasts!”

One of the women came to stand by Rigel.

He stared at her until she meekly moved to my open side with her friend.

Satisfied, Rigel inched closer to me, and I slightly tipped my head in his direction—I figured I should make it *look* like we’re in love, or at least friendly.

Surprisingly, the woman without the kid kneeled down by Muffin and Steve, resting a hand on their backs without any hesitation. The woman with the toddler passed her phone over to Landon.

“Everyone say ‘Night Court’,” Landon ordered.

“Night Court!”

“Leila, Rigel, I’ve got your drinks,” Rhonda called when we finished.

“Wow, you really do order coffee here,” the second woman said.

“Yep. It’s my favorite café in Magiford,” I said.

“Make sure you tell that to everyone you know!” Rhonda said.

I laughed. “I will, but we should probably head out. Rigel, can you grab my drink for me?”

Rigel retrieved my miel, but to my surprise he took Steve’s leash from me and passed me my drink. Still holding Steve’s leash, he picked up his cortado and led the way out, Steve trotting at his side.

“You two look like those adorable celebrity couples out in LA!” one of the women laughed.

I laughed nervously. “Thanks?”

“You’re welcome! Just think—we’ve got the only Night Queen and consort here in Magiford! Isn’t that thrilling?”

“Absolutely!”

The door swung shut behind us, and I sipped from my drink, humming in joy. “Oh, espresso. I’ve missed you so much!” I tried to nonchalantly give Rigel the side eye. “What do you think?”

Rigel took a cautious sip of his cortado. “The froth is an interesting texture.”

“And the flavor?”

“It’s earthier than black tea, but I can see why you like it.”

“You just won major husband points there. But does that mean you think it’s okay?”

Rigel nodded once, then stepped off the curb and into the parking lot. “What is your regular order?”

“It changes every season, but in summers I love iced caramel lattes—though I’m unashamedly a pumpkin spice girl come autumn!”

“I see.”

I opened the back door to my truck cab. Muffin easily sprang in, but Steve just put her paws on the flooring and wagged her tail at me, hoping I’d boost her giant butt into the seat, which so wasn’t happening. Steve was so tall, she barely needed to hop to get into the truck. “Ready to head home?” I momentarily left Steve and put my drink in a cupholder as I leaned between the front seats to unclip Muffin’s leash and collar.

“Yes.” Rigel said.

I almost hit my head on the side of my truck when he scooped Steve up as if she was a puppy, set her in my truck, then unclipped her leash and collar.

“Thanks,” I said.

Rigel shrugged. “I’m still not helping you get your coffee machine.”

“You are *such* a tease.”

“At least I’m not strange like you.”

* * *

I thought I was done with fancy shindigs for at least a few weeks, but it turns out I was wrong.

Every year the Curia Cloisters had an annual Summer’s End Ball. It was extravagant, and while Hazel swore it had really great food, the only thing to do there was talk and dance.

I knew it existed, but it didn’t occur to me I was going to have to go... until on the morning of the ball I learned that—as a fae monarch—I *had* to attend.

It was supposed to be pretty safe—the Curia Cloisters were considered a safe haven area, no fighting was allowed—so I only had Chase, Indigo, Skye, Lord Linus, and Rigel with me for the night. Well, Rigel had come with us, but he’d disappeared into the crowd of shifters, wizards, vampires, and fae about an hour ago.

There were a few other Night Court nobles, but they’d already said their hellos and were mingling with the other fae. Hazel, Killian, and the Paragon were still being waylaid by adoring crowds. I hadn’t had a chance to greet them yet, leaving me with plenty of time to contemplate the important things in life.

“Chase, do you think it’s safe to eat the food here?” I asked my director of security as I stared at the massive buffet of desserts.

“I wouldn’t recommend risking it at this time.” Chase never stopped scanning the crowd of the local supernatural movers and shakers. “Considering someone attempted to kill you at your own wedding not long ago.”

I gloomily sighed. “Good point.”

“It’s just as well,” Skye said. “I would expect tonight you will officially meet the other monarchs.”

“Yeah, except we’ve been here for nearly two hours already and none of them will even look at me.” I tried to discreetly twitch my skirts, which had gotten a slight wrinkle in them.

Indigo had stuffed me in a mermaid gown—which was fitted all the way from my hips to my knees, making it a little hard to run away and was probably why Indigo had chosen it.

Tonight’s dress was a dove gray color, with silvery lace applique over the bodice and sleeves. My crown was nestled into my thick hair—which Indigo had braided and pinned up—so the metal band didn’t squeeze my head.

“Patience,” Lord Linus advised. “They’re trying to assert their power station by refusing to greet you.”

“Does that mean I should remind them how the night mares absolutely *trashed* all the other Courts in the summer race?” I asked.

Lord Linus grinned. “Absolutely!”

“No—she should not!” Skye loudly and firmly said.

Lord Linus immediately shook his head. “I mean, no. Nooo, definitely not. Wouldn’t be a very mature thing to do.”

I cracked a smile at Lord Linus, but before I could say anything, King Solis joined us.

“Good evening, Queen Leila, Lord Linus—and to you as well, obviously, Skye, Indigo, and Chase.” King Solis smiled as he warmly greeted my employees, his golden hair twinkling in the radiant light cast by the chandeliers.

“Hello, King Solis,” I said.

Skye, wearing a peach colored dress that wonderfully complimented her golden hued skin, bowed. “I am gratified you remember me, King Solis.”

King Solis laughed. “Of course I remember you—you and Indigo were backup singers for Queen Leila during our karaoke sing off, and I believe even Chase sang a line or two. You’re all very skilled singers, and I look forward to a rematch.”

“Even if we do, no one could defeat Pre-Dominant Harka, her mate, and Chase’s pack,” I said. “They were amazing—I almost cried.”

Chase bowed. “Thank you, Queen Leila.”

“They were unbeatable,” King Solis agreed. “But each performer brought so much to the table. For example, I also deeply enjoyed Lord Linus’s

rousing song.”

I eyed the fae lord. “Ahh, yes. You mean his *drinking* song?”

“It’s an *Irish* drinking song that I learned while touring the UK,” Lord Linus said. “That makes singing it a cultural celebration!”

“Whatever. The important thing is, I’m glad you enjoyed it, King Solis,” I said. “I know it was a bit of an unusual party by fae standards.”

King Solis laughed. “Of course! It was a marvelous time. I hope you hold similar functions in the future.”

“You can plan on it,” I promised. I blinked when I saw two familiar faces in the crowd. “Oh—did you bring your acquaintances to this party as well?”

“Angstra and Manith? Yes, they’re somewhere around.” King Solis peered around the room without much concern.

“Do I need to let you leave so you can entertain them?” I asked.

“Nonsense,” King Solis said. “They’ll be pleased with their activities tonight regardless of whether I’m with them or not.”

“I see.”

I didn’t, actually, but it was my prerogative as a half fae to lie as I liked, and I was willing to agree for Solis—the one monarch I actually liked.

I glanced at the nearest fae ruler—Queen Verdant, who was laughing with enough enthusiasm that she could be heard above the stringed quartet and the accompanying piano player.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” King Solis said.

“Recommend what?” I asked.

“Approaching the other monarchs,” he said.

“I wasn’t planning on it, but now you have me curious. Why shouldn’t I?”

King Solis’s lips quirked in a cryptic smile, and for the first time since meeting him months ago, I saw the renowned fae cunning make his eyes glint. “Because.” His voice was far deeper and less balmy—more like the enigmatic way Rigel talked sometimes. “They were the ones who underestimated you and attempted to give you the cut by failing to attend your party. Your rather illustrious guest list was a far bigger coup, which means their showmanship was for nothing and *they* are now the ones who look foolish.”

I glanced at Queen Verdant again. “I understand it, but I don’t like it,” I said. “I hate double meanings, and when people use innocent things to struggle for power.”

“You’re the Night Queen. This will be your life from now until the day you die,” King Solis said.

I shivered. “Don’t say it like that, please.”

“My poor daughter,” Lord Linus soothed. “Don’t worry. They’ll approach you soon anyway, just wait for it.”

“What is she to wait for, Lord Linus?” King Solis asked.

At that moment Hazel popped out of the crowd. “Oh good—you’re still here!” She beamed, totally oblivious to the giant vampire that flanked her. “I’m sorry, Leila, I want to catch up, but Elite Bellus keeps dragging me off to meet more people. But he said I should tell you he and Pre-Dominant Harka enjoyed themselves, and he hopes you throw another party again, because he’ll be the first to arrive.”

“Thank you, Hazel. I hope you and Killian had fun?” I asked.

“Oh yeah.” Hazel wildly nodded her head, making the perfect curls her blond hair was coiled in tumble over her shoulder. “That shooting range was excellent, and next time I’m bringing a change of clothes so I can really fight dirty against Killian in laser tag.”

“No burning my shrubbery next time,” I warned.

“Got it!” Hazel gave me a thumbs up, then made a face. “I better get back to Elite Bellus—but call me!”

I waved to the petite wizard as Lord Linus made a show of adjusting his cufflinks.

“She was waiting for that,” Lord Linus smirked.

Ahh yes. More politics. It’s now obvious that we’re friends, and our conversation was a reminder that all the big players in Magiford came to my party. I’m sure there’s some kind of power play there—at least the other fae will interpret it that way.

I wanted to massage my forehead. Seriously, the fae could turn a bowling game into a political maneuver if they were given the opportunity.

“Queen Leila.”

A cool breeze tickled my side, and I turned to the side to greet the monarch who had first approached me, Queen Rime of the Winter Court.

Chapter Six

Leila

I was aware that Queen Rime was considered the most powerful monarch in the region both personally and politically since she was also the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic—Skye had endlessly quizzed me about the monarchs, after all.

Queen Rime was known for her reluctance in politicking, and held on to her power through the impassable alliance she had with her siblings, each of which ruled over the Winter Courts in the various regions of the USA.

But it was one thing to know that—and to even have seen Queen Rime from a distance—and another to actually meet her.

I was unprepared for the icy air that flowed around her, and this close her paleness—her light-colored eyes, fair skin, and hair that was a pure shade of white—seemed to almost make her eyelashes glitter.

Not married, and no children, I mentally recited from Skye’s list.

“Good evening, Queen Rime!” King Solis was back to his bright personality, all warmth and dazzling once again as he grinned at the fae queen. “Might I introduce you to Queen Leila of the Night Court?”

Queen Rime raised an eyebrow at him.

I glanced at Skye, who nodded at me, before I spoke up. “Good evening, Queen Rime.”

Queen Rime slightly closed her eyes in acknowledgment. “I believe this is our first official meeting.”

“Yes, it is,” I said.

“You rode admirably in the races,” Queen Rime said.

“I appreciate the compliment,” I said. I had to carefully pick my words—saying thank you to a fae could be tricky as some of the nastier ones might construe it as you admitting that you owed them a favor now.

I could feel the gazes of everyone in the area as they watched us, murmuring to one another.

Queen Rime stared at me for several long moments.

I couldn't figure out if she expected me to say something, or if she was thinking—she was too good at veiling her expressions.

But she nodded, and as abruptly as she arrived, she left. “Enjoy the summer ball,” she said. “I look forward to seeing you at upcoming events.”

She swept off, the tapping of her shoes producing little crackling noises, as if she was walking on a thin layer of ice.

Before I could ask Skye if I made her proud, another fae appeared before me—a male who had the classic handsome appearance of the fae with his smooth skin, flawless brunette hair that was short with just enough hint of a curl to it to give it a disgustingly perfect amount of body, and otherworldly grace. Oh, and enough smugness to warrant breaking his nose.

I recognized King Fell of the Autumn Court—he was way too obnoxious *not* to know.

“You're the new Night Queen.” He looked me over from head to foot. “It's a sad thing to see just how low some of the most illustrious Courts have fallen.”

Coming just behind Queen Rime in power, King Fell was arrogant and loved to yank the rest of the Courts around as long as Queen Rime chose not to exercise her power—as illustrated by his thinly veiled insult.

I smiled, but before I could respond, King Solis spoke. “King Fell of the Autumn Court, Queen Leila.”

I offered King Fell a brittle smile. “Good evening.”

King Fell actually snorted at me before another fae monarch appeared just behind his shoulder.

“What's this, Fell? Greeting the neophyte, I see.” This fae had an elaborate tunic that was such a vivid and bright blue that it made my eyes almost hurt, despite places where the fabric was shot through with a few shades of yellow and orange.

His long blond-brown hair was tangled in a complicated braid, and his crown was wrapped with tendrils of a plant I didn't know which draped down over his temples.

That's King Birch of the Summer Court—I recognize him from the pictures. He's third in power behind Fell. But where's his consort?

“She's not much to look at,” King Fell said.

I openly rolled my eyes. “Puh-leaze,” I said. “You'll have to do better than that if you want to insult me.”

“And why would we want to do such a thing?” King Fell smirked.

I shrugged. “Probably because your head is so far up—”

King Solis cut in with his warm laughter. “Ahh Queen Leila—you have such a remarkable sense of humor.”

“Thanks. But that wasn’t an attempt to be funny.” I was tempted to say more, but Skye—standing directly behind me—managed to discreetly kick my ankle in a warning.

“Humor—that must be a human trait.”

Apparently Queen Rime’s visit opened the floodgates, because the new conversation intruder was none other than the beautiful Queen Verdant of the Spring Court.

She was easily recognizable with her long, curly blond hair that cascaded loosely around her shoulders, her bare feet, and the flower crown she wore that was ornamented with a small set of antlers.

She came behind King Solis in power and just ahead of me—which, yeah, I didn’t understand, considering Solis’s and my Courts were supposed to be fatefully linked to preserve the power balance, but whatever. The fae were all about being unfair anyway.

“Humor *is* a human trait,” I confirmed. “The fae got the short end of that stick. But at least people will still listen to fae because of their great beauty, even if they’re dead bores.”

It took Queen Verdant a few moments to work through that and see it was an insult. Thankfully, by the time it dawned on her, the conversation had moved on.

“Ahh yes. Such sharp wit you believe you have.” King Fell clasped his hands behind his back—a move I thought would be uncomfortable given that he wore a gold chestplate, and it looked like he was jabbing himself in the process.

“Since you are new to your title—and to the refined elegance of fae society, being that you are human—I’ll look past your brashness for now,” King Fell continued. “But in the future, endeavor to do better. You cannot possibly face the true consequences of your so-called *clever* words, because you could never afford to pay them.”

I’m pretty sure that was a threat. I don’t like threats, and I don’t care what the other Courts think of me. But between the Night Court’s massive debt, the crumbling castle, and the shrinking realm, he’s right that I can’t afford to tick them off.

That was somewhat maddening—that Pretty McSnooty Pants was right

about something, I mean.

“My respect for the Night Court has dropped even farther,” King Birch announced—as if I’d care. “I didn’t think it was possible after Nyte so badly botched things with the vampires, but I guess you could never expect better from a half human.”

“Oh, you could from some half humans,” I said. “Unfortunately, my other half is fae. I guess that means it’s a lost cause.”

“She sounds like a mutt, howling to the wind.” Queen Verdant sighed and pressed her fingers to her mouth.

“Indeed,” King Birch said.

Skye scuffed her feet behind me, and then I heard the tap of her shoes as she stepped away.

Skye’s backing away. Why is Skye backing away?

I felt a moment of panic, particularly when all the monarchs settled on a point just behind me.

“Ahh. Lord Rigel,” King Fell said. “I never imagined meeting you here.”

Surprised, I glanced over at Rigel as he stepped past Skye’s spot and stood shoulder to shoulder with me.

“Good evening, Lord Rigel.” King Birch said.

“Lord Rigel.” Queen Verdant wouldn’t quite look at Rigel, but her voice was polite if distant.

I looked from the monarchs to Rigel. *How on earth would they all know him—oohh. They’ve hired him for jobs in the past.*

The grim realization dawned on me as King Fell eyed my husband.

“I was...surprised to receive news of your nuptials. Perhaps even more surprised when the Night Court power structure remained the same.”

Is he implying he’s shocked Rigel didn’t instantly kill me? Or is he talking about the spiders sent to assassinate me? Was that his doing?

I wanted to groan.

The past three-ish weeks with my Court had been gloriously simple. No one had tried offending me or offing me, and it seemed like my people accepted me as their queen.

But the fun, the insults, and—probably—the assassination attempts are about to start all over. Whee!

Though the thought made me groan, it also fueled the fires of my goal to shatter the fae’s obsession with power and the way it ruled their lives.

If they let things continue like this, they weren’t going to survive many

more generations.

“Leila is the queen,” Rigel said. “I am her consort. Since the power still rests with her, there has been no reason for change.”

“I never pictured you as the diligent consort, protecting his queen’s back,” King Birch said. “But it sounds as if that is your role, now.”

Rigel shrugged. “She has people for that. And I still have *activities* of my own to see to.”

Dang it—he is still out there, murderizing! I was hoping his new title would make the fae less willing to hire him. Apparently not!

I slightly shook my head, and my earrings—obnoxiously big gemstones Skye had dug up from the mansion’s jewelry vault—banged the side of my face.

King Fell smirked. “I see. How reassuring.”

As fun as the conversation was, I was long past ready to leave. I scanned the crowd of party goers, looking for an out. A few of my nobles had gathered just behind the monarchs, their expressions flickering with worry and concern—how sweet!

Although I suppose I don’t know who they’re concerned for—me, or our Court. I stifled a deep sigh that almost escaped me. Maybe we should just leave. I can always call Hazel.

“I was also surprised to hear of your marriage,” King Birch said. “It didn’t seem like you to enter a failing situation, Lord Rigel. I would have thought you were too intelligent for that.”

Yep. A phone call is better. I’m sick of listening to this.

“This has been a barrel of laughs, but it’s high time I say my farewells to my friends and leave,” I announced.

“Oh? What do you have to rush off to?” King Fell asked. “Unless we’re making you uncomfortable?”

As I stared at the Autumn King, I was pretty sure King Solis was getting concerned that I was going to blast him with another insult because he was glancing at me with flickers of worry. Really, I was just trying to picture what would most horrify Fell and the pack of jackals surrounding us.

“You’re so thoughtful, King Fell,” I said. “But, no. It’s just because I was hit by inspiration.”

King Birch raised judgmental eyebrows and fell right into my trap. “Inspiration? For what?”

“I am so glad you asked,” I sincerely said. “It is undeniable that my

husband is a fine fae specimen. Or, as humans would say, he's *gorgeous*. Drop dead gorgeous to be precise. I mean, look at his face—and his abs! Wouldn't you agree, Queen Verdant?"

The blond queen backed up a step. "I—yes," she haltingly said, unable to lie, and unable to easily wriggle out of the question.

"Exactly. His gorgeous self—and those chiseled abs, I can't stress that enough—have inspired me to try my hand at artistic expression."

King Fell stared at me. "*What?*"

"That is, I want to attempt to draw Rigel and record his attractiveness for all of history—he is that good looking that an attempt must be made," I rattled, having more and more fun trolling the monarchs as they looked increasingly more uncomfortable. "Though I will admit it is my own selfish whim, because then I'll also have something to look at during the times he leaves me, for I do miss him then."

Queen Verdant had backed up another step, and King Fell looked like he was about to toss his cookies, while King Birch had settled for swinging his gaze back and forth between Rigel and me.

"Wait, you really *love* him?" King Birch asked.

Ho-ho-ho, yep, they've totally forgotten I can lie. Or maybe for all their sneaking and maneuvering, they never found out that I could.

"Does the moon hang in the sky at night? Of course I love him—I adore him! He's my Bae!"

"*Bae?*" King Fell repeated as if it was an infectious disease.

"Before anyone else," I explained. "Obviously we are a true blue, love-at-first-sight pair! Besides." I turned my trolling up a notch and blinked innocently at Birch. "Why else would I want to marry him?"

Movement behind the monarchs caught my attention, and I saw my Court members peering at me, their jaws slack and their eyes wide with horror.

Haha, the monarchs are too oblivious to recognize my outright lies, but my Court does! I considered wiggling my fingers at them, but I didn't want to point their reactions out to the monarchs.

I glanced at Rigel, trying to gauge how he was taking this fun.

He blinked, but he didn't seem bothered, or prone to violence.

"Wait." Thin lines edged Queen Verdant's eyes. "Do you mean to imply that the pair of you were a love match?"

Crap on a cracker—that was the one question I was hoping to avoid, because there's no way Rigel is going to play along when asked something

directly. I mean, he can't lie!

I was trying to figure out how to invent a reply, when Rigel offered me his arm.

When I took it, I gaped up at him.

“If you are that eager to get home for your art, we can leave now,” he said.

I fidgeted. “Is it really okay?”

“Of course.” The edges of Rigel’s lips curved slightly. It was barely noticeable, but considering how expressionless Rigel was, it was the equivalent of a smile for him. “As our whole Court knows, your fits of inspiration are a wonder to behold.”

Oh. He is good. I'm glad he's on my side—for trolling, anyway.

King Fell had lost that glassy, expressionless beauty the fae have due to his deeply furrowed brow, and his royal cohorts were similarly shocked.

Even King Solis was staring at us now—which was silly because he *totally knew* Rigel and I were the least likely “happily-ever-after” pairing ever.

“That’s how it is. It was lovely to meet you all—I do hope you call upon the Night Court soon. I’ll show you the drawing—though you have to promise not to be overcome by Rigel’s shirtless beauty,” I said.

The monarchs stared at me, and behind them my nobles looked in danger of experiencing heart attacks. A few of them slapped their hands over their faces, and I saw one fae lady plant her hand on her heart and swoon a little before her husband caught her.

I grinned—in a way better mood than I had been five minutes earlier—and winked at them. “Enjoy your night!” I trundled off—or I tried to. The mermaid skirts of my dress only let me get away at a graceful but quick sweep.

“Do you really think he loves her?” King Birch asked as we walked off.

“Impossible,” King Fell said. “He must be wielding the power in their relationship and purposely seduced her.”

His guess was so very far from the truth I couldn’t help but cackle as we fell out of hearing. “That was beautiful, Rigel. Well done!”

“I did nothing,” Rigel said, back to blandness now that the playful moment was gone.

“Sure, sure. Then thank you for doing nothing,” I said as one of our nobles, Lady Korinna—I really liked her because she owned a petfood store

and dabbled more in human society than most of my nobles—and Lord Dion hurried up to us.

“Good evening, Lady Korinna, Lord Dion. I hope you are both enjoying the Summer’s End Ball?”

“Yes, indeed, my Sovereign,” Lady Korinna said with the automated perfect manners of a fae.

“Queen Leila, while your daring is to your credit, you really must be more careful not to blatantly *lie* to the other monarchs!” Lord Dion kept his voice to a whispered hiss. “They’ll find out the truth!”

“Nah—we’re talking about matters of the heart. They’ll never really be able to prove I’m not head over heels for Rigel. Especially when everyone knows I adore him.” I hugged Rigel’s arm to my chest and batted my eyelashes, trying to look as insipid as possible.

Lord Dion shuddered. “I pray you never do that again.”

“They’ll find out if you’ve drawn such a portrait or not,” Lady Korinna pointed out.

“What you’re trying to tell me is that I *should* go ahead and try to draw a picture of a shirtless Rigel to hang up in the main entrance of the mansion,” I innocently said.

“NO!” Lady Korinna and Lord Dion said as one.

I cackled some more. “You guys are so much fun to tease. But seriously, don’t worry about it. None of this is stuff they can call me out on—and if they realize the truth, maybe it will teach them a thing or two about the tenacity of humans.”

Lady Korinna looked pained, but when a fae from a different Court called out to her, she curtsied. “If you’ll excuse me, my Sovereign.”

Huh. Indigo started calling me that after she swore loyalty to me. Is it a special title or something?

I magnanimously smiled, then glanced at Lord Dion. “Still sticking around?”

“In hopes that I can tell you how dangerous this is, yes.”

“Oh, please. You’re a lawyer—you dodge the truth all the time.” I glanced back at my entourage, which had rejoined me. “I think the important question is if my fae advisor agrees with you or me,” I asked Lord Linus.

Lord Linus winked. “When in doubt, lie through your teeth.”

“Why is it you only ask for his advice when you *know* it’s going to be improper?” Skye asked.

“Because that’s the only time I would ever want to hear his advice,” I said. “Shall we head out? Or do I have to mingle longer?”

“I think it would be best if we finished for the night,” Skye delicately said.

“Yeah.” Indigo adjusted her cat eye glasses, which would have made her look disapproving, if not for the smile she was trying to hide. “No telling what you’ll do if we stick around.”

“Really? I was hoping I’d have the opportunity to dance with you, Skye.” Lord Dion gave her a smile, which was more dazzling than usual thanks to the way his crimson red hair flickered like flames in the soft light of the ballroom.

“I’m sure it will be an easy thing for you to find a different dancing partner,” Skye said.

I twisted back to look at Skye—she was fussing with her clutch and paying zero attention to Lord Dion, who was staring at her as if he’d never been refused before.

Hmm, now that’s an attraction I’m not sure I would have guessed. But maybe I’m jumping ahead a little bit.

“If we’re good with leaving, I’ll find Hazel and say my farewells, and then we can head out,” I said.

“I’ll send word to Azure to bring the car around,” Chase said.

“Thanks, everyone. You’re the best!” I said.

All of them laughed, and there was something *fun* about the moment.

I didn’t feel like I was scrambling like I had a month ago, because I trusted them.

Yeah, I was going to have to do something about the other Courts, yes someone was trying to assassinate me, and yes, the shrinking Night Realm was a major problem.

But at least I finally had friends.

“It’s just as well we retire earlier than typical from tonight’s ball,” Skye announced. “Tomorrow you have magic lessons with Lord Linus, an appointment with the accountant, a meeting with several pixie representatives, and you’re to attend the reopening of a garden in one of the apartment complexes built on the land owned by the Night Court in the human realm.”

I frowned. “I thought you were supposed to be teaching me about the annual Night Court functions and fae functions tomorrow.”

“I intend to—when we’re in the car driving between appointments.”

“Greaaat.”

“Cheer up.” Indigo patted my free hand—the one I wasn’t holding on to Rigel’s arm with. “I’ll buy you something from the supernatural market if you’re good for the next few days.”

I perked up. “When is that?”

“In two weeks.”

“I want to go!”

Skye pressed her lips together. “Monarchs don’t attend local markets.”

Chapter Seven

Leila

It turns out, Night Court monarchs attend local markets!

I grinned and clapped with the humans as I passed a werewolf juggling knives at the very front of the market. “This is going to be fun!”

“The supernatural markets are enjoyable—if not a little misrepresented,” Indigo said. She walked at my side, eyeing up the stalls with interest.

“Everything okay back there, Chase...and Rigel?” I asked.

Chase had his ear piece in and was dutifully scanning the crowd, though he stopped long enough to give me a reassuring smile. “My people are in place. You may proceed as you wish, Queen Leila.”

Rigel was loitering behind us, drawing whispers and looks from all the humans who saw him.

I wasn’t entirely sure why he’d come. He’d actually been MIA for two days, but then abruptly showed up when Indigo and I were hopping in the car to leave and wordlessly joined us.

But Rigel wasn’t the only one drawing stares.

Kevin and Whiskers—my male shade and gloom—walked perfectly on their blue leashes and collars I’d purchased for the occasion, not reacting even though some of the market goers were frantically taking pictures of them with their cellphones.

I’d been reluctant to bring the pair, but they had been really excited about the car ride, and Chase had very enthusiastically pointed out that pets were allowed at the market as long as they were on a leash. Though I was pretty sure he just wanted them around as an extra security measure and an easy way to keep people back.

Thankfully, the humans seemed more fascinated by Kevin’s wispy fur and Whiskers’ massive claws. I mean, my Court reacted with more fear than the humans were showing.

I took a deep breath and inhaled magnificence. “I smell apple cider donuts.”

“Oh, yeah—there’s a stall run by brownies just for baked goods,” Indigo said. “We should check it out. Since this is the fall market, they should have caramel apples, caramel corn, pumpkin bars—”

“Consider me on board,” I said.

“Only if Indigo purchases the food without you in sight,” Chase, ever diligent, said.

“It’s okay,” Indigo said. “My mom is working in the stall—she made some special for my Sovereign.”

Chase tilted his head back for a moment, then nodded. “That will be acceptable.” Feeling my eyes on him, he turned his golden gaze in my direction. “I apologize for these necessary steps, Queen Leila, but I will always remain most concerned with your safety.”

Since we’d paused in the middle of the street, Whiskers sat down and licked his massive paw, then lifted it up and rested it on my thigh like a house cat requesting pets.

I stroked his furry head, used to the thin, greasy feeling of his patchy fur—the poor boy. “It’s fine, Chase. I really appreciate your loyalty, and I’m glad to have you with us.”

Chase bowed his head to me. “I am your loyal subject, my Sovereign.”

His reaction caught me a little off guard—as a werewolf he was technically primarily loyal to his pack, and it was unusual that he’d adjust to calling me by a fae title since we supernaturals typically clutched our dividing lines close.

I didn’t think a market would be the best place to have that conversation, though, so I just smiled at the werewolf and resolved to ask him later.

Music threaded through the air, along with the fragrant smell of baked goods, freshly popped popcorn, and—if my nose was correct—fried meat, which I was willing to bet was being sold by a werewolf.

The supernatural market was held about once a season in downtown Magiford and was basically the magical version of a farmer’s market.

The local police would close off Main Street for the day, and supernaturals were encouraged to set up stalls and bring produce and goods to sell. Except—since we’re supernaturals—those good could be anything from a fae potion to make your hair silky to a wizard frying corn dogs over an open flame.

This gave the humans a chance to see and purchase supernatural goods, and get them mixing with us in a fun way that wouldn’t at all be

confrontational or let them know how dangerous supernaturals really were.

Basically, the market was a PR move.

But I wasn't certain the market assured humans we were all cute, harmless beings as I admired a stall of knives—both hunting knives and some really fantastic kitchen knives—run by a werewolf.

“Oohhh, hey, Rigel. Want your picture taken with a giant pumpkin? Looks like a fae spelled it to grow extra big.” I pointed to the stand where a pumpkin the size of a small car was set up on a white drop cloth so people could take selfies with it.

Rigel stared at me.

“Well *I* think it looks fun.” I rolled my eyes and moved on to the next stand—a fae selling soaps and low-grade potions.

The fae had been staring at Whiskers and Kevin with terror in his eyes, but when he met my gaze he hastily folded in a deep bow.

I wove around a scarecrow the city had set up to decorate the base of a streetlight, and passed by another row of stalls—a naiad selling sushi, some trolls with a cartload of organic vegetables, a wizard selling slivers of what he claimed was a wizard House that had been destroyed a few decades ago, a werebear that was selling knitted scarves and gloves that were lined with fur, and a werewolf selling what she swore were toy bows, but they came with arrows that looked awfully pointy for being a toy.

A couple pushing a stroller passed me when we reached the end of the market and stopped.

“See anything you liked?” Indigo asked me. She was watching two mermaids sitting in dunk tanks who were performing the most incredible duets.

“I saw a fae stall with some dog biscuits—I'll want to visit that right before we go,” I said.

“Should I go get our baked goods, then?”

“Sounds good. Here—take cash.” I dug my wallet out of my pants pocket—I was super casual today with blue jeans and a flannel shirt. I was a little hot, but if we were going to the fall market, I was going to celebrate like it was fall!

“They have the chip scanner thingie,” Indigo said. “Most of the sellers here do.”

“Yeah, but those things have a surcharge and eat into a seller's profits,” I said.

Indigo squinted at me. “Has anyone told you that you’re cheap?”

“I’m being an informed consumer!”

Indigo took the cash and disappeared into the swirl of the crowd.

Kevin reached the end of his short leash and sniffed a rustic barrel the city had planted flowers in while Whiskers panted and peered up at the gargoyle statues settled into the sides of the city police department.

I, however, was drawn to a stand run by the only vampire in the whole market.

“Life Advice?” I read the sign.

“Yep,” the vampire said. She had a pair of reading glasses perched on the tip of her small nose and was holding a worn paperback book. Her hair was ink black, and though her eyes were red it was obvious she was Japanese due to her beautiful dusty orange kimono, which was emblazoned with a beautiful white and black crane.

Her outfit wasn’t that surprising. Given vampires near immortality, fashion wasn’t a concern for them, and they typically wore whatever garb they felt most comfortable in.

But the vampire herself was unusual because supernatural markets—or at least the ones I had been to—weren’t typically the vampire scene. Vampires didn’t like being out in the daylight since it made them weak, and most of them were way too snobby—like fae nobles—to even consider coming.

Intrigued, I drew a little closer to the stand, tugging on the leashes so Kevin and Whiskers followed. “You sell life advice? How?”

“You live as long as I do, you will see *it all*,” the vampire drawled. “That’s the thing about life. Humans, supernaturals, doesn’t matter. We make the same mistakes over and over. History endlessly repeats itself even if the names and players change.”

“Okay, I’ll bite.” I held out a ten dollar bill—which was the middle tier of advice according to her prices listed on her sign. “What advice do you have for me?”

“That depends, do you want romantic advice, financial advice, career advice—you name it, I’ll do it.” The vampire gracefully gestured to the pamphlets she had sitting on her table.

I scanned the list. “Advisor’s choice?” I asked.

“I give you what I think you personally most need to hear,” the vampire said.

“How does that work?” I asked. “I think an oracle would be more

accurate.”

The vampire opened a cloth bag made of the same silk fabric as her kimono and pulled out a lip gloss. “Buy it and find out.”

I pressed my lips together for a moment, then set my ten dollar bill on the table. “It’s worth a try then. Hit me with your best advice.”

“Right, then. Come here.” She beckoned me closer. “You don’t want anyone else hearing this.”

I glanced at Chase, but though he was watching, even his werewolf hearing would probably have a hard time hearing the vampire if she whispered due to the hum of the crowds, the music, and all the market noise.

Rigel was hanging back even farther than he was, looking absolutely bored.

Reluctantly I leaned over the table.

She whispered directly in my ear. “That silver-haired fae warrior of yours—you constantly second guess him and push him back.”

“*What?*” I drew back slightly and gaped at the vampire. “How did you know I’m with Rigel?”

“You’re a smart one, so use that noggin of yours,” the vampire scoffed. “How many other people do you think strut down the street with a tame shade and gloom on leashes? Besides, the whole city knows who you are! Your picture was spattered everywhere after you swept the races and beat all the other fae. Of course I’d know who your consort is, Night Queen. Now get back over here!”

She waited until I leaned close enough that she could whisper. “Stop assuming he dislikes you. Take a look at his actions and you’ll see he occasionally steps out of his inaction to help you, and for a fae, that’s huge.”

“If you know me then you must know what he does,” I said. “There’s a big risk if I misread him.”

“It’s often been my experience that in relationships—whether it’s romantic, friendship, or familial—the biggest danger is always in staying silent and trudging on assuming you know what the other person is thinking rather than speaking up and voicing your own feelings.” She shrugged. “But what do I know? I’ve just been around since before your little Court was formed.”

I glanced back at Rigel. He yawned and looked disgustingly like a fae from an epic poem despite the mass of children that scampered past him, and the harried looking dad that almost collided with him.

“Is that relationship advice or romantic advice?” I asked.

The vampire adjusted her glasses and smirked as she sat back in the chair. “That’s up to you, Queen Leila. But if I were you, I’d be far more interested in getting *much* closer to him.” Her smirk grew for a moment, before—like quicksilver—it was gone. “You need him to survive the kind of odds you’re facing. Good luck.” She stuffed the cash in her kimono bag and went back to reading her book, totally disinterested in me.

I stared at her for a few moments, until Indigo popped out of the crowd.

“Here—I got a hot apple fritter. You’ll want to eat that now.” She handed me the donut, juggling a giant paper bag. “Mom says hello, by the way. She gave us a ton of goodies—she said you need it, and that Chase should be eating more, too.”

We wandered back to the werewolf and the assassin—Indigo yipped and held the bag over her head when Kevin gave it a sniff.

I took my first bite of the hot apple fritter when we reached Chase. “I love your family. I want to adopt you all.” The warm frosting melted in my mouth, and I hummed in appreciation.

“She’ll be glad to hear you enjoyed it. Here, Chase—and I have one for you, Consort Rigel, should you like to have one.” Indigo pulled an apple fritter out of the bag and gave it to Chase, then slowly held one out to Rigel.

He shook his head.

“I’ll take his!” I volunteered.

Indigo passed it off. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” I said with deep gratitude.

After I finished my apple fritter, but before I could suck down the second, I glanced at Rigel. *I wonder why he decided to come today.*

* * *

I got my chance to ask a little over an hour later.

“I’ve notified the human police, and sent word to the Curia Cloisters. They’re now aware of the...situation.” Skye clutched her cellphone as she glanced out at the much bigger crowd that had amassed in the last few minutes.

Apparently my Court had gotten word that I was at the market, because tons of Night Court fae, both nobles and common, stormed it. This drew admiration from the human attendees, who frequently asked my people for pictures.

I had called Skye to ask if it was okay, and she'd jumped into action, gathering more of Chase's security team and sending them to us while she rushed to let the local government know that an entire Court was about to descend on Magiford before coming here herself.

I scratched under Kevin's chin, making him wag his tail. "Sounds great, Skye. I think we're all good, then. I saw two of Chase's people directing the trolls so they could safely see the market, and the pixies were entertaining the group of school kids that the banshees accidentally scared," I said.

Skye let out a whoosh of air. "Yes. I believe everything has been righted."

I patted her shoulder. "Thanks, Skye. You were amazing with all of that."

"It was an unexpected task." She slouched a bit, making me believe I'd made a good decision a few minutes ago.

Skye—always graceful, always put together—had looked so troubled I'd sent Indigo off to get an apple fritter for her.

I waved to Lord Dion, who arrived shortly after an extremely harried Skye. "Why don't you go find Indigo? She's at the brownie bakery stand—I gave her cash, she was going to put an order in for you and get you a hot apple fritter."

Skye wrinkled her forehead. "But then you'll be alone."

"Nah, Rigel's here." I jerked my thumb over my shoulder at the fae assassin. "And so are Kevin and Whiskers—and I can see Chase from here."

Kevin and Whiskers looked with me to Chase, who was about a market stand's length away, talking on the phone as he finished organizing security for the impromptu "the Night Court Visits the Supernatural Market" excursion.

"Okay," Skye reluctantly said.

"Or if you're that tired, there's a café right here on Main Street. We could get you some coffee."

Skye made a face. "I'll find Indigo."

"Enjoy!" I called after the beautiful fae, but she was already gone.

"Well. This has been...something." I adjusted my hold on Kevin's and Whiskers' leashes as Whiskers yawned, flashing his mouth full of glinting

teeth. “You okay back there, Rigel?”

Rigel glanced in my direction. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not upset by all the Court people who showed up?”

He shrugged. “It makes no difference to me what events those from my Court decide to attend.”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that,” I said. “Why did you come?”

Rigel stared at me.

“Not that I don’t want you here! You’ve just looked bored. It made me wonder why you wanted to come in the first place.”

Rigel stared at the crowd, and I waited patiently for a response.

And waited.

And waited.

We sat in silence so long Whiskers actually lay down to people watch, and Kevin tried his paw at begging for more chin scratches.

“I wanted to know,” he finally said.

I rubbed Kevin’s ears. “Wanted to know what?”

Rigel rubbed a spot on his leather bracers. “What your goal was. That’s what the point of coming was.”

“I could have told you why—it’s to have fun!” I said.

Rigel slightly tilted his head. “Fae don’t,” he paused and looked out at the crowd. “Previously fae didn’t attend something like this for fun.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well, you guys don’t exactly have me convinced that we’re the most fun supernaturals ever. No one had played mini golf before I took the Court this summer.”

“You didn’t come for the sake of showing off, or asserting your power,” Rigel said.

“Correct. Besides—even if I wanted to make this into a political statement, I don’t think I could. King Fell would die before he’d come out here—though I’d pay a lot of money to see him take a picture with the ‘King Pumpkin’.” I nodded in the general direction of the giant pumpkin we’d seen previously.

“We don’t often do anything for the sheer fun of it,” Rigel said.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed. Why not?”

Rigel shrugged. “Every event is a chance to gather more power and further your personal machinations.”

“But what’s the point? No one seems happy.”

I frowned a little when I noticed Lady Chrysanthe lingering near us. She

was looking out over the crowd of people with a moodiness select to overdramatic actors, and seemed to perfectly prove my point.

Why is she standing so close? Is she trying to overhear what we're talking about?

A flash of light caught my attention, and I realized a group of teenagers were trying to take Rigel's and my picture, but they'd forgotten to turn the flash off.

I slapped on a smile and waved.

The teenagers took another picture, then ran off, laughing.

"Did you see she had her pets with her?"

"They're cute!"

"Don't worry, Whiskers and Kevin. Humans think you're cute, even if the fussy fae don't," I cooed to my animals.

"It's because fae know better," Rigel said.

I almost stuck my tongue out at him, but realized a guy in his thirties had stopped a few feet away and was very obviously trying to get a picture of us.

Wow. I never thought I'd be picture-worthy famous.

To my amusement, a fae noble saw the guy taking a picture of us; naturally *she* stopped to take a picture with her cellphone.

That got the attention of a couple that were walking behind her, who then stopped to take a picture...basically, a crowd was starting to cluster around us.

"Should we maybe go to a less popular area while we wait for Chase to finish?" I asked. "I think we're clogging up the traffic right here."

Rigel leaned back, and when Chase happened to glance over at us, Rigel slightly tipped his head back, then stalked off, getting out of the street and sauntering onto the less populated sidewalk.

I followed him, and Chase—still on his cellphone—followed after me.

We walked a little farther, stopping when we reached a tiny city parking lot shoved between the police department and the city post office.

It was a little cooler in the shade the buildings cast on the lot, and with the strong breezes rolling off the lakes, I was thankful for my flannel shirt.

"Once Chase has everyone in place, I want to go buy the dog biscuits, and maybe another pumpkin donut," I said. "Is there anything you wanted—a dagger, perhaps?"

Whiskers got intrigued with something on the opposite side of the parking lot and meandered past me, twining his leash around my legs. I spun in a

circle to free myself, then glanced at Rigel when he didn't respond. "Rigel?"

Rigel wordlessly slid his hidden daggers out of his bracers. He whispered a word under his breath, and both of the daggers pulsed with magic.

Oh boy.

I swung around, and got to see the terrifying sight of ten creatures detaching from the shadows of the building and stalking toward us.

Chapter Eight

Leila

Like the one I'd fought during the race, they were vaguely humanoid in shape, except their shoulders were broader and their hands were clawed. Their feet ended in dragon-like paws, and their heads were about half the size they should have been. Shadows writhed where their faces should have been. The only visible features were three pairs of narrowed red eyes, and a wide mouth of gleaming white teeth that split their heads.

I dug my prism out of my pocket with one hand and got it activated as I unbuckled Kevin's collar, and then Whiskers'. "Chase!"

The werewolf was all over it. "We need back up—in the parking lot between the police station and post office. Ten shadow monsters!" Chase barked into his earpiece as he ran down one of the monsters. He unsheathed a saber and stabbed it into the creature's gut, then ripped it upwards, eviscerating the monster.

Black spilled from the wound. The creature howled as it folded in on itself and dissolved. I could feel the magic that made up the creature—it was slick and oily, and while it held the feel of fae magic—whisper soft and a little sticky like a spider web—it had something else to it. Something fully encased by the fae magic, hiding it so I didn't get more than a faint impression or two that there was something different to it.

Kevin jumped the nearest one, grabbing it by the throat and ripping. The monster fell as if it no longer had bones to support it, then it disappeared like shadows blasted by light.

Whiskers pounced, clearing the long distance and jumping so high he attacked from above, digging his claws into a monster's face.

Rigel moved like a shadow himself, appearing everywhere seemingly at once.

He stabbed one creature in the back, instantly killing it. It dissolved like the others as he stepped back into the shadows. He reappeared in front of one that was making a beeline for Chase's unprotected back.

My stomach shivered in my gut as I created a barrier around myself. A monster jumped me, but the barrier held, and it bounced off, hitting the ground with a splat.

Thinking back on the monster I'd defeated in the middle of the Magiford Midsummer Derby, I spun magic into a ward—which glowed purple around the fallen monster's feet. When I finished the spell and tied it off, the ward bloomed into a barrier that vertically cut through the monster.

It gurgled, then dissolved.

I made myself turn in a tight circle, confirming that the monsters were sticking to the parking lot. "They're after us—it doesn't look like they're going to go after the public."

"Of *course* they're after us," Chase growled, his voice rough as his gold eyes gleamed in the dim light. "They waited until you were around fewer people to attack you!" He stabbed a shadow monster, and behind him Kevin bit into the leg of another—holding it even as it dug its claws into his back.

"Kevin!" I shouted.

Whiskers launched himself at the monster's back and bit its neck.

The creature collapsed and folded over.

That should have been the eighth out of ten monsters. But why are there still ten of them?

My stomach still rattled around in my guts as I narrowed my eyes and forced myself to stop moving and *watch*.

Rigel stabbed two creatures at once, digging his twin daggers into their guts.

The monsters fell, dissolved, and then two more detached from the shadows of the building.

"They're multiplying!" I yelled. "They keep coming out of the shadows."

"Should we move to a sunny area?" Chase asked.

I shook my head as I tried thinking of all the magic I knew. "We can't risk hurting everyone at the market."

My prism hummed in my clammy palms as I held it out in front of me, channeling magic through it into something useable. "I'll try to blast the place with light, but it's going to take me a little while."

Soft, gleaming light that was cool but clear like stars drifted out of the ground beneath my feet, spiraling out around me in a beautiful, intricate design.

I steeled myself, so I didn't flinch when another creature flung itself at

my barrier before Chase killed it.

I'd learned the basics of magic as a kid, and while I was strongest in my natural magic—like my ability to befriend animals—I'd improved a lot since I'd become Queen of the Night Court. I mostly practiced with barriers—which was why mine was holding even though a couple of the creatures tried to dig their claws into it. But since my run in with a monster during a race a few weeks ago, I'd become much more interested in offensive magic so I could protect myself.

But I've only practiced a few times since then, and I still don't know much. But I've got to try!

I frowned as one of the monsters flung himself at my barrier, then skidded down the side, making a squeaking noise and leaving a trail of drool behind.

“Are we taking any bets who sent these guys?” I eyed the fallen monster as Whiskers pounced on it. “I don't think it's anyone from my Court—probably.”

“They're the biggest suspects given the way they swarmed the market once they found you were here.” Chase camped out in a shadow of the building, continuously swinging his sword in a complex movement pattern and slicing through the two shadow monsters that kept trying to sprout where he stood.

My light spell had almost reached the sides of the post office and police station—it was nearly ready! “You could be right. But I bet it's one of the other crappy monarchs,” I grumbled.

“Are the two of you seriously discussing suspects as if this is a casual afternoon stroll?” Rigel asked. He killed two shadow monsters, then cast a black, net-like magic spell that tore through two more.

Oohhh, I should learn that spell! I wonder if he would teach me if I asked nicely?

“Because it practically *is* an afternoon stroll given how often I'm attacked,” I said. “You're just not used to it because you're terrifying, and no one would dare try to kill you. Just give it some time and you'll develop an inappropriate sense of humor, too.” I flexed my fingers, trying to hurry my magic as it crawled across the last few inches.

Irritatingly, it moved more slowly the farther it got away from me.

But why? When I used my old charm bracelet to cast spells, I don't remember having any problems like this.

A whimper, then a scream ripped through the air.

I spun around, my stomach dropping to my feet.

Three of the monsters had Kevin cornered—one had its claws stabbed deep into his side. Whiskers launched himself at one of the creatures, but he hadn't been able to rip out its throat, so he still hung from its back as a fourth monster ambled up and slammed its meaty fists into his head.

"Kevin!" I screamed. "*Whiskers!*"

"Don't drop your barrier!" Chase barked.

I took a few steps, but I had focused on learning how to pour power into barriers—not how to make them portable, so the magic didn't move with me.

"Queen Leila," Chase warned.

I dropped my barrier and sprinted to Kevin and Whiskers.

I wish I brought the pistol the Drake vampires gave me—it was supposed to be for times like this!

Angry tears stung my eyes, and I yanked magic from my excruciatingly slow spell and threw it at the monsters.

Light flashed like fireworks, and the ground shook.

Two of the monsters staggered backwards and disappeared—weak to light.

But the one stabbing Kevin and the other that was harassing Whiskers had their backs to my spell, and it didn't seem to bother them.

Blood trickled from Kevin's side, and Whiskers screamed weakly before he toppled to the ground.

No!

I reached out again with my magic, but before I could even think of a spell to throw, pink magic zipped in front of me, slicing through the two monsters terrorizing my pets.

I spun around, shocked to see Lady Chrysanthe standing just inside the parking lot.

She held three jeweled hair pins, and all of them glowed with magic, giving her power as she directed a flurry of spells to the shadowy monsters.

She's...helping?

It was such a foreign idea it made me freeze.

Lady Chrysanthe *hated* me—I'd unwillingly taken the crown she thought would be hers. She hadn't even tried to disguise how much she hated me. And now she was helping?

I protectively stood in front of Kevin and Whiskers, grimacing at their

wounds.

They'll be fine—Chase's men carry healing potions for situations like this.

The point of my prism dug into my palm, and *finally* I felt my magic reach the farthest edges of the parking lot.

"I'm lighting 'em up!" I announced.

Rigel frowned in my direction. "You're what?"

I mentally tapped the extensive, glowing network of criss-crossing lines, and they flared to life, glowing brighter and brighter.

Pure, white light that made my eyeballs ache invaded every corner of the parking lot.

The monsters growled and dissolved as the light ruthlessly tore through them. I had to shut my eyes against my own spell as the light grew brighter and brighter.

Please work.

When I tried to peel an eye open everything was white. I couldn't make out anyone, or even the shapes of the buildings perched on either side.

Everything was just light.

There were hisses and these awful guttural growls, and then I felt the fae magic of the spell crack and disappear.

For a second I felt a very old, very foreign magic, that was somehow sharp like a sword and wild like a forest. And then it was gone.

I cautiously opened my eyes, my shoulders settling in relief to find it was just us in the parking lot.

The monsters were gone.

I whirled around, my heart in my throat as I dropped to my knees next to Kevin.

The shade had collapsed on the ground, blood oozing from his side wound, though when he saw I was looking at him he tried to wag his tail.

Tears stung my eyes. "Oh, Kevin!"

Chase's men careened down the sidewalk, nearly running Lady Chrysanthe down in their hurry.

"The threat's been taken care of," Chase said. "But the cat and the dog need medical attention. I want the rest of you to start an investigation."

A sharp faced dryad zipped across the parking lot, unbuckling the satchel that smacked her side as she ran.

She had two crystal bottles of blue healing potions out by the time she

crouched next to me. She whistled when she saw the nasty gash in Kevin's side, and plucked a third potion from her pack—this one bright purple. "Does he need to be restrained?" she asked.

I petted Kevin's head, sniffing a little when he licked my hand and whined. "No—he'll stay still for you."

The dryad nodded, then glanced at Kevin's crimson eyes and gulped before she poured the purple potion on his wound.

Kevin flattened his ears, but he rested his chin on his paws as Whiskers meandered up to us and started licking the top of Kevin's head.

When Kevin sighed, I knew he was going to be fine. I stood up, thoughtfully rolling my prism between my fingers as my forehead puckered with worry.

Why was my magic slow? It was kind of a strain to pull more of it through the prism, too.

I frowned at my prism, then glanced across the parking lot. Lady Chrysanthe still stood at the entrance, awkwardly fidgeting as she watched Chase's men swarm the area.

"I'll be right back. Both of you, be good." I dropped a kiss on Whiskers' head and gently stroked Kevin's neck, then moseyed on over to Lady Chrysanthe.

"Lady Chrysanthe," I called out to her as I got closer.

She curtsied. "Queen Leila."

"I appreciated your help in the fight." I was careful to phrase my thanks so she couldn't construe it as a debt—just some more fun that came with living among fae!

Lady Chrysanthe lost her awkward stance and straightened, growing as stiff as a plank of wood. "It is the duty of a noble fae to protect their ruler." She sniffed, looking dignified and beautiful in her floral print dress and her white hat that tilted fetchingly over the side of her head.

I cleared my throat to keep from laughing—not at her beauty, but her words. Before today I would have said Lady Chrysanthe was about as interested in saving me as she was in becoming a worm farmer. Duty was *not* an especially strong call to her.

But I managed to keep a straight face. "All the same, I still appreciated it. Kevin was in trouble, and I'm grateful you helped him."

Lady Chrysanthe gave me a tiny nod.

I smiled at her and nodded a few times, expecting she'd leave.

She didn't.

She kept standing there, her posture straight as she watched me.

Is she waiting for a reward or something? Except she said it was her duty, and I was pretty careful in my wording.

I inspected her clothes more carefully—I'd come to learn that fae clothes were all about choosing the narrative or act they wanted to impress upon the day.

Lady Chrysanthe's floral dress was a lot simpler than anything I'd seen her in before, same to her sun hat.

And what is that supposed to say?

Deciding it was a lost cause, I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "I better go talk with Chase about...this."

"Naturally," Lady Chrysanthe said. Her voice was a scoff—but not the disgusted one she usually used around me. It sounded hollow—or like a motion with no thoughts behind it.

I shook my head slightly as I left her and headed for Chase.

Something weird is going on with her.

I strolled up to where Chase was speaking with a few of his men. "Any clues?"

Chase's golden eyes glittered in the shadows—a striking comparison to his warm, sepia-brown skintone. "Not this soon into the investigation. The perpetrator did not conveniently leave bits of evidence out in obvious spots that are easy to collect."

"Sorry, I know I'm impatient." I glanced over at Kevin—who was now standing with his nose raised in the air.

Whiskers had rolled on to his back, baring his belly for the very hesitant dryad that was dribbling the blue healing potions into the gloom's cuts.

"I've made arrangements for you to get home," Chase said.

I frowned a little. "Isn't Azure still here? She can drive me—unless you meant you were calling for back up security."

"No," Chase said. "I sent for transportation of a different kind."

There was a metallic clang, and when I swung around again, a metal archway with a fancy iron gate stood in the middle of the parking lot. The gate swung open, and the archway was filled with misty black magic.

Six night mares, one sun stallion, and a donkey hee-hawing loudly enough to alert the entire market of his presence drifted through the door.

I ran to the night mares and flung myself at the closest one, hugging its

thin, bony neck as a couple of muzzles nudged me.

The night mares—due to years of neglect under the rule of the previous queen—were all emaciated with scraggly manes and tails and coarse hair. They all looked sickly and rather...well...*nightmarish* since they had glowing yellow eyes, nostrils that always flared red, and mouths filled with serrated teeth that weren't natural on any sort of equine.

Their presence made the fae leery, though I'd noticed that since I'd won the race with the six of them—five of them going riderless—my peoples' fear seemed tinged with respect. Now they nodded to the horses as if they were fellow fae.

I made my way around the circle of night mares, cooing to every mount—including Fax, my placid but adorably giant sun stallion I'd inherited as queen; and Bagel, the long-eared donkey I'd brought from my parents' place.

Bagel smiled up at me, peeling his lips back as I itched a spot on his forehead while Solstice rested his scratchy muzzle on my shoulder.

"Thanks for coming, guys. Did Dusk and Dawn tell you?" I asked, referring to the brother/sister dryads who were in charge of the stables, but also cared for all the glooms and shades, too.

Fax nodded, and his mane—made of blue and white flames—flickered higher than usual.

I spun around and had to stand on my tip toes to drape myself over Solstice's back. "Thanks for sending for them, Chase."

Chase shrugged a little. "It's the safest way to get you home, and I thought their presence might reassure you."

"Aww, you big softie!"

I heard a noise at the gate, and turned around to see a gloom and two shades wander through.

It wasn't the ones that had declared themselves house pets, but the ones I'd named that lived in the stables. I recognized the gloom as the one I'd named Fluffy, and Bob and Larry were the shades that were now industriously sniffing in the shady spots where the creatures had emerged.

Chase's people very respectfully stepped backwards as the shades marched through, following a scent trail of some sort. Fluffy padded behind them, pausing long enough to emit one of his angry-goblin screams that I was about 90% sure was supposed to be friendly but came off as intimidating, the poor kitty.

"It looks like you're getting help?" I said.

“So it seems,” Chase said. “You ought to head back.”

“Yeah, I will. But where did Rigel end up—” I yelped when I turned back around and found Rigel standing with me in the center of the equine huddle. “Sheesh—you’re like a ghost.”

Rigel raised an eyebrow at me. “One would almost think that’s how I got the name of the *Wraith*.”

I don’t know if it was just because he usually had the facial expressions of a particularly handsome statue, or what, but there was something about the eyebrow that got me.

Like, I’d always known Rigel was drop dead gorgeous—he was a fae, for crying out loud. But his eyes rarely looked anything but dead, and right now...

This is that vampire’s fault, I decided. I wouldn’t be ogling my husband if she hadn’t put stupid thoughts in my head. I mean, do we even count as friends?

I’d been looking away, but when I glanced back at him that slight hitch to his eyebrow was still there.

Oh, yikes. I can’t imagine how handsome he would be if he gave a full on, true blue smile.

I’d seen his eyes brighten once, and it had been enough to throw the dial on his looks into deadly.

He could probably kill people with his good looks alone if he actually smiled.

I briefly scrunched my nose, irritated with myself for allowing myself to be bamboozled.

Obviously, this meant I had no choice but to be annoying.

“Oohh, yeah I wondered about that. I just assumed everyone called you *the Wraith* because you’re gloomy and silent, but this makes more sense.”

The look in Rigel’s eyes didn’t shift. “It does,” he agreed. “Unlike your very mistaken belief that you’re funny.”

“Ouch.” I clamped my hands to my heart. “Hubby, you wound me! You need to make it up to me.”

Rigel purposely shifted to face the gate. “If you’re going to suggest I talk the chef into allowing a coffee maker into the kitchen, my answer remains no.”

“Even more hurtful! But no.” I had to trot to keep up with him when he took a few steps toward the gates, he was that much taller than me. “I was

going to ask if I could feel your abs.”

All of Chase’s people—except for the dryad, who was now in the middle of a Whiskers-and-Kevin-love-sandwich—stopped and gaped at me.

Even Rigel flicked his eyes down at me, and the dead light in his eyes flickered with curiosity for a moment. “Why?” he asked.

“Well, I figure if I’m going to wax poetry about your muscles—in particular, your abs—to the other monarchs, I should probably touch them so my lies can be extra convincing.”

“You mean to imply that’s going to be a repeat performance?” he asked.

“Yeah—it is too funny not to.”

Rigel turned away from me. “You have a death wish.”

“Nah—oh, hey, hop on Fax and you can come back with us,” I called to him as I scrambled up Eclipse’s back.

The mare had a very slight build, and due to her emaciated look, her spine uncomfortably poked my butt; however, instant transportation beat out waiting for what Chase considered a proper number of guards.

When I was situated well enough that I could look for Rigel, he was already also mounted, riding Fax without a saddle or bridle.

“Ready?” I asked.

Rigel nodded, and our mounts turned toward the gate.

I glanced back to make sure Kevin and Whiskers were okay—they were, Kevin had joined the other shades in their hunt while Whiskers was licking the rather startled dryad.

Chase waved to me, but continued to chat with his men. Most surprisingly, though, was Lady Chrysanthe. She was still standing at the parking lot entrance.

Yeah, I thought as Eclipse stepped up to the gate. Definitely weird.

* * *

The next day—or, as I should admit to, at roughly five AM—I put my life on the line and tried twisting the doorknob of the door between my master suite, and Rigel’s.

The door had a lock on it, and I’d always assumed that Rigel kept his side

locked, but when the knob turned, I pushed it in and gaped into the dark, unlit shadows of Rigel's room.

“Huh. I didn't think that would work,” I said.

“If you say it's fine, I'm going to impale you.” Rigel's voice was rough with sleep.

I peered around the darkened depths of his room before realizing he was actually *in* bed! “What are you doing?” I asked, shocked.

Chapter Nine

Leila

Rigel lifted his head off his pillow long enough to stare at me. “You break into *my* room and then demand to know what I’m doing?”

“The door was unlocked.” I wandered a few steps in, and was nearly knocked on my butt when Whiskers and Muffin—who’d been stretched out on my enormous bed less than two seconds ago—pushed past me to explore Rigel’s room.

Steve and Kevin came in as well, but they sat on either side of me, their tails wagging when I glanced down at them.

I set my hands on Steve and Kevin. “But that’s not important. You’re actually *in bed*?”

“As most people are at five in the morning,” Rigel said.

He sat up and pushed his sheet off, shocking me farther.

He slept shirtless—which gave me enough of a show to see that I hadn’t completely fibbed to the other monarchs because Rigel most assuredly had muscles worthy of recording—but I’d also assumed he’d sleep with...I don’t know...knives strapped to his pecs or something.

But he looked shockingly casual with black lounge pants and his hair devilishly mussed.

It shocks me that he doesn’t have every fae girl after him—though maybe it’s that dangerous aura of his.

“If you’re trying to catch me with my wings out, it’s not going to work,” Rigel said. “I woke up before I heard you stomp up to the door.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know why you think I’m obsessed with your wings. I’m not! You’re the one who keeps bringing them up!”

“Then why are you here?”

“I was thinking about yesterday.” I found a light switch on the wall and flicked it.

Once my eyes were adjusted to the light, I was surprised by the normalcy of his room.

It was nicely decorated in hues of dark blue and silver. He had his bed, a couch and leather chair, a TV, and lots of locked chests that I was betting held some of his personal armory.

Whiskers disappeared through a door that I was pretty sure led to the bathroom.

I wandered over to the couch and plopped down.

When I realized Rigel was staring at me, I sat up straighter. “Sorry, would you prefer if I stood?”

“I’d prefer to find out why you woke me up at this hour.”

“Sorry—I actually assumed you’d already be awake,” I said. “Sleeping doesn’t seem very assassin-y like.”

“I’m open to any suggestion you might have that would entail surviving without sleep,” Rigel said.

“I meant sleeping at night. I would have thought that’d be a good time to go out and get your stabby on,” I said.

“Five in the morning is too early.” Rigel stared down at Steve, who had wandered up to his bedside. “Early morning shift workers are already up—and they’re annoyingly alert, as you appear to be. A target is better taken off in the late hours of the night—when most are sleeping or too inebriated to be proactive.”

“Okay, that took a dark turn,” I said.

“You asked.” Rigel slid off his bed. He must have a hidden pocket or something for weapons, because he pulled a dagger seemingly from nowhere and tossed it on his nightstand. “What about the shadow creatures brought you stomping into my room at five in the morning?”

“You’re really hung up about the hour, huh?”

“*Leila.*”

“Okay, okay. Sorry.” I made a wheezing noise when Muffin decided to join me on the couch and used my stomach as a landing pad. “Wasn’t it kind of weird that the shadow monsters waited to attack until we were away from the crowd?”

Rigel folded his arms across his chest. “Because it would have been easier for the monsters to get you in a large crowd—particularly since you would be overly concerned about your Court and the humans present?”

“I hadn’t thought about that part—it just occurred to me we wouldn’t have had as much room to maneuver in a crowd. But you’re right. I would have been easier to kill because I would have been worried about the public.”

I held my breath as Muffin purred and breathed in my face—her breath *stank*.

“You think this lack of foresight implies whoever sent the monsters after you is stupid?” Rigel asked.

“Maybe?” I frowned sharply enough to make my forehead wrinkle. “I don’t know what it could mean—I was just hoping you’d confirm it’s weird. Chase wasn’t able to uncover much yesterday, even though he swept the area for magic. He thinks the attacker stood on the rooftop seating area of a restaurant across the street—there were traces of magic there, anyway. But even the shades weren’t able to find a scent to track.”

“Does he think the attacker is from your Court?”

“Chase refuses to make any sort of guess without more evidence—he tells me I’m constantly jumping to conclusions. I think he’s just too nice, because this is almost certainly the work of one of the other monarchs. Probably Fell—he’s enough of a puke to try something like this.”

“Gaining the upper hand over the other monarchs and increasing the Night Court’s power should be your primary focus,” Rigel said. “If you manage it, and if you are right about your guess, it will solve the assassination attempts as well.”

“No, no, no,” I said. “I told you before, I don’t want to win the power games you fae play—I want to *end* it.”

“It *may* be possible for you to end political strife in the Night Court—at least during your reign,” Rigel said. “But the idea that you’ll ever be in a position to stop the other Courts from inciting fights and struggling to top one another is folly.”

Rigel, obviously, didn’t share my aspirations to end the infighting.

In fact, before we’d gotten married he’d told me that he was marrying me just so he could more easily kill me if I ended up being bad for the fae.

He’d relaxed on that vow—or at least I was assuming he had since he’d protected me in two different assassination attempts. Maybe he realized I wasn’t going to purposely bring ruin down on everyone?

Anyway, the point was I was still the only one cheering to end the games of power the fae played. Indigo, at least, was on my side. And I think Skye *wanted* to believe it was possible, but was afraid to hope I could pull it off.

“Rigel, Rigel, Rigel,” I sighed. “You are such a killjoy.”

“I grew up among the Courts of nobility,” Rigel said. “I’ve had to do terrible things to survive. That’s why I know your vision—though admirable—isn’t possible.”

I'd been playing with one of Muffin's giant paws, but at the grimness in Rigel's voice, I shifted on the couch so I could see him.

Rigel wasn't looking back at me—he was staring into his bathroom, totally unaware of how sad his statement sounded. “Did that gloom turn on my shower?” he abruptly asked.

“Huh?” I said.

Rigel flicked his eyes to the door between our rooms, and threw a magic dagger. It hit the door, digging in hilt deep.

The door creaked open, and I barely had enough time to see a shocked and terrified Eventide standing on the other side of the door before Rigel stepped out of the shadows *behind* him.

How did he even get over there that fast?

“I assume he's one of yours?” Rigel asked.

Eventide screamed and whirled around, his shoulders shaking as he peered up at Rigel.

“Y-yes,” I said once I found my voice. “Eventide—he's a butler.”

Rigel glided around Eventide, stepped back into his bedroom, then closed the door in Eventide's stunned face.

He wrenched his dagger from the door, leaving a gash in the door, then casually strolled back over to his bed.

My mind was still trying to catch up with him.

I hadn't even seen where he pulled the dagger from.

I gulped.

I guess I really did take my life in my own hands when I burst in. But he doesn't seem to mind too much?

Rigel tossed the dagger on the bed, then glanced in my direction. “I assume from the presence of your employee that you have something to see to? He was in your room and appeared to be holding a book.”

I hadn't noticed the book, either. Wow, this has been a fun morning for my confidence!

“Yeah, I do a lot of studying this early in the morning, and I'm starting morning magic classes with Lord Linus this week, too.” I trailed off a little as I studied Rigel.

He had no qualms about terrifying poor Eventide, but he hasn't made any indication that he really doesn't want me busting into his room—besides complaining about the hour. I think...I think I trust him.

I cleared my throat and pushed Muffin off me so I could stand. “Yep,

busy mornings. I need to get moving. Thanks, Rigel.”

He shrugged casually and turned his back to me.

I paused in the doorway of my room as it occurred to me I’d thanked Rigel several times, despite the dangers of saying thank you to a fae. I guess I trusted him a lot more than I even realized.

I bit my lip. “Hey Rigel?”

“What?”

“I really mean it.”

He peered at me over his shoulder. “What?”

“Thank you,” I repeated. “For everything.”

Rigel waited a moment, then nodded—acknowledging everything my thanks meant.

I gave him a super awkward smile as I tried not to ogle his abs, then closed the door.

Okay, maybe the “life advice” vampire wasn’t too far off. Maybe we are friends.

* * *

While I agreed to Skye telling me to take on Lord Linus as my teacher for my supplementary magic classes, I’d been planning to jettison him within days—I just had to give him enough time to prove his incompetence.

However, after two weeks of classes, even I had to admit the guy was a lot more knowledgeable than I would have thought.

And even though I purposely scheduled our classes for early mornings—or at least what *other* people would consider early mornings, as Rigel had witnessed I was usually up before five these days—he never once arrived late.

Lord Linus rubbed his chin as he watched me rotate a glass bottle, spiraling the last piece of a healing spell into it. “You’re doing well.”

I frowned as I tied the spell off and watched the magic dissolve into the liquid, creating a healing potion. “It’s a very weak spell. I can only make the lowest graded kind of potions with it.”

“Yes, but you haven’t been trained in potion making,” he reminded me.

“This is as well as a beginner can expect to do.”

I cautiously sniffed the potion.

Most potions tasted amazing, but my potion smelled faint. The raspberry scent I was supposed to reproduce was muted.

Is it even capable of curing a papercut like this? I tried to brush off the nagging sensation that this—my practice and my magic—would never be enough.

“It’d help, you know, if you told me exactly what you want,” Lord Linus said. “While you’re able to cast a low-grade healing spell to create potions, it’s obvious your magic is far better applied to taming your pets, and you’ve gotten fiercely good at barriers.”

“I know. I wasn’t very good at potions even when I took my magic classes at the Curia Cloisters as a kid. It’s just...” I looked out over the Night Realm—where we’d held all of our magic lessons. I’d chosen the spot because it was way less populated and I didn’t have to worry about accidentally hurting someone, but also because although the castle was crumbling and the plants were shriveled, I’d come to love the beauty of the quiet place.

I glanced at the sky, and my shoulders sagged as I studied the thousands of stars hanging there. “The Night Realm is shrinking, and I’m getting attacked. I need to be ready so I can stop our lands from disappearing and keep others from getting hurt.”

“That’s a pretty tall order,” Lord Linus said. “At its base, fae magic is hard to wield like a weapon. Wizard magic is a lot easier to strike with—it’s faster, and wizards can use the elements. We fae either have to be more physically trained—like Rigel—or more...strategic.”

I set the potion down on the table we’d assembled for today’s lesson. “I know the barrier needs to be my main concern, but I would have thought that to be Queen of the Night Court I’d need strong magic.” I picked up the next liquid filled bottle that was waiting for a healing spell—when you mixed up the ingredients it was better to batch them and pour a bunch at once, so I had several more to bespell—and wondered how much I could tell him.

Lord Linus narrowed his eyes and studied me. “You have strong magic, Leila. Becoming queen only would have amplified it.”

Unlike the barrier spell—which was all about throwing a lot of magic into a very simple but solid spell, potion work required lots of fine tuning. You had to drizzle the magic in, like a barista making latte art. I rotated the

container as I slowly poured magic into the vial, watching my purple magic swirl through the potion. “What do you mean by that?”

Lord Linus sat on the little bit of the stone patio bannister that hadn't crumbled. “Since you became queen, every blade of grass in the Night Realm, every star you see in the sky above us, every Night Court fae—noble or common—resonates with your power. It began when the night mares bound you, and it's what called the glooms and shades to your side.”

“Wasn't that my natural magic?”

Lord Linus shook his head. “Your natural magic might have helped you win them over faster, but they came because they felt your power call them. They stayed because they like *you*.”

“But it's not like I have magic myself,” I said. “I just use artifacts to wield the wild magic.”

“As all fae who use magic do,” Lord Linus said. “But you still have an innate power and magic—it's your natural magic, but it's also what makes your reign unique and individualistic to you. Your whole Court will tune into your power, and that can build them up, or shatter the whole realm.” He motioned to the crumbling castle for emphasis.

“Technically, then, I should have more power because I'm queen,” I said slowly. “Even though I don't feel like there's a difference in my magic level?”

Lord Linus frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Everything feels the same way it always has,” I said. “I don't feel new gusts of power or resonating or whatever.”

“My understanding is limited, but there ought to be a significant difference in using your royal artifact than a regular artifact.” Lord Linus rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, his face—the handsome, male version of my own—lined with concern.

He acts like a clown, but then I see him like this...

“No,” I said. “There's no difference. Maybe there's something wrong with me?”

Lord Linus frowned. “Why would you believe that?”

“Because my prism has been slow to react,” I said. “Sometimes it feels like I'm dragging it through my prism instead of channeling it.”

“That sounds like a problem with your artifact. It can happen if an artifact is damaged—which would also affect the power level. May I?”

I finished the healing spell and put the cork stopper in the bottle's

opening. My magic made the potion glow for a few moments, until the magic dissolved. Finished with my work, I handed my prism over.

Lord Linus held the gem up to the glowing orbs of light he'd erected around us so I could see what I was doing with the potions. "The base looks chipped. Did something happen to it?"

"It was like that when I picked it."

"I see. We'll have to talk to Skye about getting you some supplementary artifacts."

"Is that allowed? I thought this was my royal artifact, and I'm only allowed to use it."

Lord Linus scoffed. "Nonsense. Can you see any fae king or queen willing to limit themselves to a single artifact in their obsessive struggle for power? Hardly! Traditionally the royal artifact is your main weapon, and strongest. But I'd wondered before if we'd have to get you something different. None of those artifacts were built with half fae in mind."

I felt like I needed to take some of Skye's antacids as I listened to him.

Not because he was wrong, but because he just sounded *intelligent!*

Considering he acts like he has the sense of a chicken, this is shockingly coherent of him.

I frowned as I looked back and forth between the two finished potions. Even though I'd used the same ingredients—potions from the same batch, even—my magic had turned the first potion a deep wine-red color—very fitting for its raspberry flavor. My second potion, however, had turned the bright red of a crisp apple.

I held the two potions up to Lord Linus. "How is this possible?"

He only glanced at the potions. "Potion making is an art—there will be some inconsistencies."

I set the potions down and worriedly rubbed my forehead. "It's fine," I muttered.

"At least they're both red," he said. "That's the shade this spell should be. It means they're both still edible."

"I'm never going to be a good potion brewer," I said. "I don't have the time for it."

"Do I need to remind you that you're the Night Queen? You're not in the market for a second career."

"No—it's just...I thought I should improve my magic *because* I'm queen, but I'm rethinking that strategy."

“Leila, you’re top notch at using your natural magic, and you’ve gotten impressively good at wards.” Lord Linus stood and made the motion as if to set his hand on my shoulder, then yanked it back at the last second. “You don’t have to be good at *everything*. Just use the magic you like to support your reign.”

Can I really do that? My rapport with the night mares, glooms, and shades kind of won over my Court if you want to get technical. And I’m happy about my wards—I desperately need to keep us safe from the toxic areas outside the barrier.

I mashed my lips together.

Lord Linus held the prism up. “Why don’t we go take a spin through the castle? There are a few secondary artifacts in some of the rooms that are still preserved. We can try snatching some for you. Come on!”

He grabbed one of the balls of light—cradling it in his bare hand—then trundled across the patio, and hopped through a broken door.

I followed at a slower pace. “I can’t say I’m surprised you’d support stealing.”

“It’s not stealing if you’re taking something that’s yours—and everything in the castle is yours!” Lord Linus looked back at me long enough to wink before he picked his way across the half-destroyed ballroom that looked out over the patio.

I shook my head, but followed him anyway.

He was sort of right—even though I suspected the nobles would have a heart attack if they knew. But I didn’t care about my reputation, I cared about the survival of my Court.

“How’s everything with that assassin of yours?” Lord Linus asked.

“Rigel?”

“Unless you have another husband stowed somewhere, yes.”

It was even cooler inside the castle. I rolled down the sleeves of my blue shirt—which I’d pushed up for potion making. “We’re getting along a lot better than I expected.”

“He’s not being cruel to you—or doing anything weird to you?” Lord Linus asked.

I laughed. “Rigel doesn’t have the ability to do weird stuff—his conduct is too rigid. Well—except he’s got this strange obsession with his wings.”

Lord Linus stopped so fast I almost ran into his back. “He *what?*”

“His wings—he seems convinced I want to see them and am trying all

sorts of tricks to catch a glimpse at them.” I awkwardly fidgeted as Lord Linus stared at me. “Is there something about wings that I don’t know? Because he seems really protective of them.”

Lord Linus leaned back on his heels. “I suppose that depends—what do you know about fae wings?”

“The nobles have them—and some of the lower ranked fae do, too, like the pixies. I know the nobles rarely reveal them. They only show them to those who are really important to them—which is why I was surprised Rigel seems to think I’m bent on seeing them to the point of tricking him into showing me. Wouldn’t that defeat the whole point?”

Lord Linus stared at the wall for a few moments, which was illuminated by the glowing orb he held. “In a way,” he finally said.

“Am I wrong about wings?” I asked. “I never researched them much because as a half fae I don’t have any.”

It was one of the few drawbacks to being a half fae—no wings. But besides pixies, the fae didn’t use their wings to fly so I’d never cared anyway.

Just like I hadn’t cared about fae monarchs before I was crowned because there had never been a record of a half fae monarch before, and didn’t that explode in my face?

“No—it is an expression of importance.” Lord Linus whipped around and started marching again.

“Is that all it is?” I suspiciously asked.

“More or less,” Lord Linus said. “It seems that Lord Rigel is, perhaps, extra vain about his wings—I wouldn’t worry about it.”

I narrowed my eyes at his back. “Are you sure about that? Rigel isn’t vain about anything else.”

“You seem certain on that point.”

“Yeah—because his thing is all about being deadly. I don’t think he’s even aware just how shatteringly handsome he is.”

“Oh-ho-ho! My daughter thinks her husband is handsome, does she? Will I soon be greeting my first grandchild?” Lord Linus turned up a different hallway and peered over his shoulder to waggle his eyebrows at me.

“Has anyone ever tried to explain to you just how annoying you are?” I asked.

Lord Linus laughed. “It is the duty of a parent to annoy and embarrass their child—it’s good for their soul.”

He just very successfully got us off the topic of wings. Is there something

he's not telling me about them? Or is it just that he is that much of an idiot?

The subject of wings had come up once with Skye, and she hadn't given me any additional information, which probably meant there wasn't more to it—at least that she knew of—and Lord Linus really was just an idiot.

But maybe I should look into the topic. Skye is half human half fae, she might have never learned much about it anyway. Yeah, I'll research it—after I master barriers, figure out if there's something wrong with me or my artifact, quell whoever is trying to kill me, and get the other Courts to play nice.

Ugh. I felt tired just thinking about my to-do list.

“We can take a short cut through here!” Lord Linus chirped.

He'd led us to the chamber that held the original king's artifacts, and all the other extra special Court items that Skye had shown me.

He strutted past the displays, then paused, and circled back. “Actually, here. Touch the original king's staff.”

“Are you insane? I'm not touching that!”

“Why? It's not like it's going to zap you—see?” Lord Linus reached over the velvet rope that cornered off the display and touched the original king's crescent moon topped staff.

“Stop it,” I snapped. “Skye would guzzle an entire bottle of antacid if she knew you were touching it.”

“It's not like the original king cares,” Lord Linus told me. “He's dead.”

This guy. I refuse to believe that I inherited any significant portion of his DNA!

“I don't care about him—personally I think he was a creep. But everyone in the Court is fanatical about him,” I said.

“They aren't going to know! Besides—there's a point to it. Even though it doesn't resonate with you, you should be able to feel the huge difference in how much the staff can channel compared to your chintzy, broken prism.”

“My prism isn't broken—it's well loved.”

“Yeah, I bet. Just touch the staff.”

I stubbornly folded my arms across my chest.

“It will help you see how the issue isn't you or magic itself, but the tool you're using.” He held out my prism and waved it for emphasis.

If it helps...I need to be able to defend myself and support the barrier when the Night Realm shrinks again.

I wavered for a moment, then gave in. “Fine. But if I don't feel anything

different, obviously the problem is—”

I set my fingers on the staff, and my brain exploded.

Chapter Ten

Leila

Not literally, but it certainly felt like it. Magic rattled around in my skull. It felt like it was pouring out of my eyes and fingers as it surged through me. But it wasn't just magic, it was...everything.

I couldn't describe it, it just felt like I was drowning in my own mind.

I yanked my hand back, fell to my knees, and gasped for air.

"Leila?" Lord Linus crouched next to me, his voice tight. "What happened—are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I wheezed. "It's just—that was." I shook my head. "I should have known that creep of a first king wielded a seriously strong artifact. That rush was something."

Lord Linus frowned. "Rush? You should have just felt its capabilities—the staff is empty of magic."

I shook my head. "That's not what I experienced. Its power slammed into me."

Lord Linus passed me my prism. "Perhaps we ought to save artifact picking for another day—when the Paragon can help. It sounds like your human blood might be mucking up the artifacts."

"Is that a common problem with half fae?" I asked. "I don't remember the teachers mentioning anything at the after school program I belonged to in the Curia Cloisters."

As part of their mission of good will, the Curia Cloisters held classes for all the half supernaturals or supernaturals that were abandoned as kids to teach them about their abilities.

I hadn't had any problems with magic then, either.

Ahhh, those were simpler times.

"Let's head back to the mansion." Lord Linus stood, then offered me his free hand. "Unless you wanted to practice more potions?"

I let him pull me up. "I had one left to bespell to finish the batch."

"Then we're good to go?"

I scowled at him. “No! I want to finish that last potion—then we can leave.”

Lord Linus groaned, turned around, and headed back in the direction we’d come from. “Sometimes I worry you inherited too much of your mother’s sense of responsibility.”

I glared at Lord Linus’ back and considered kicking a rock at him.

It’s not worth it—he’ll just squeal and then say I’m going through a rebellious phase.

I sighed and hurried after him before he could disappear through the doorway with his orb of light.

Just one more thing to add to my to-do list, I guess.

* * *

The end of September arrived faster than I thought possible, and with that came the first official day of fall.

In my pre-queen days, this wouldn’t have meant anything to me—except that I could finally drink my pumpkin lattes and no one would harass me. But now, as the Queen of the Night Court, it meant it was time for an occasion I was fast learning to dread: a ceremony.

“This is stupid.” I leaned my head back against the “throne” prepared for me and batted a dried corn leaf out of my face. “I don’t see any point in it whatsoever.”

“It’s tradition,” Skye said. “Every year the fae monarchs mark the changes of the seasons, and hold a ceremony with each transition.”

“What for? It’s not like fall isn’t going to come if King Birch over there doesn’t give King Fell a pumpkin.”

I pointed to the Summer King, who was standing at one end of a crimson carpet that had been unrolled over a quaint field. Food—pumpkins, sweet corn, gourds, cucumbers, and onions—was mounded up in a pile behind King Birch, but he held in his arms a few heads of wheat, some green vine-y plants, and some colored leaves arranged in a rustic bouquet.

The Autumn King stood at the other end of the carpet, wearing a cocky smirk with a thin wreath of golden leaves pressed into his russet hair.

Apparently, to observe the “passing of the seasons,” King Birch was supposed to present a “harvest bouquet” to King Fell, officially passing the season off to him.

Yeah, I’m pretty sure some heavy drinking was involved when they came up with this idea.

I rested my chin on my fist. “Sheesh. I should have been suspicious when Lord Linus insisted on staying home—he had the right idea.”

“The ceremony has existed for centuries,” Skye said. “And it’s tradition for other monarchs—*especially* those in the Fae Ring—to be present to witness. You had to come.”

“You’re just being quarrelsome,” Indigo said. “Because you hate socials.”

She and Skye stood behind me, in the shadows of my temporary throne. King Fell had assembled four of them—one for me, King Solis, Queen Rime of the Winter Court, and Queen Verdant of the Spring Court.

We were the “lucky” monarchs who made up the regional Fae Ring—basically the monarchs who made all the decisions for fae in the Midwest, including which monarch would serve as the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic.

Being a part of the Fae Ring isn’t random chance—heck, no, that’d be a waste of power plays and politics! No, we were the Fae Ring because we were the most powerful Courts in the Midwest, and had been for decades, if not centuries.

I scowled as I shifted in my stupid temporary throne—I’m pretty sure Fell designed them to be as uncomfortable as possible, and whoever was in charge of decorating had hot glued a ton of dried corn stalks to the wooden thrones, making them the perfect home for bugs.

“Yes, I hate socials, but if someone could give me a legit reason for this, I wouldn’t be so bitter,” I said. “But as far as I can tell, this is just another way for monarchs to show off their power to each other. I mean, there isn’t even a human audience that they’re performing for!”

I glanced to the side, where more onlookers stood—though calling them that was possibly a little misleading since I didn’t think they wanted to be there any more than I did.

King Fell had recruited a bunch of his nobles to watch, but he’d also made *all* of the unseelie and seelie monarchs in the Midwest come to the ceremony.

The seelie and unseelie Courts are different from the bigger Courts—like

my Night Court or freakin' Fell's Autumn Court.

Their territories are a lot smaller—usually just one city—and there's a lot of infighting and wars because you can sometimes get multiple seelie and unseelie Courts competing for the same city.

The real seal to their power, though, is that they don't have land in the fae realms like the rest of us titled monarchs, and in general, they just have to live with whatever rules the more powerful Courts decide on.

Since they're easy to push around because they can't really say no—even to the less powerful monarchs like me—none of the seelie/unseelie rulers could refuse Fell after he told them to come. It was just a way for him to remind them they were subservient to him—the jerk.

I'll give him what he deserves—it might not be until I'm an old granny, but I will persevere!

Weirdly, a few of the unseelie and seelie monarchs saw me looking at them. Their complexions turned ashen, and they bowed deeply to me.

Huh. I wonder what that's about?

“After the ceremony, there is a celebration feast. You can leave after that,” Skye said. “I'm confident you can last that long.”

I glanced one last time at the still-bowing unseelie and seelie monarchs, then straightened in my chair. “Easy for you to say that—you're wearing slacks and a suitcoat,” I grumbled. “I'm doing historically-inaccurate-punk-Greek.”

For the ceremony, Indigo had piled my hair on top of my head in messy ringlets and used pins and a headband to keep it there. She'd then stuffed me into a gown Fell had sent—which was a deep, purply-black, and fit kind of like a toga, except it was more fitted through the waist and gathered at my neck like a halter top, completely baring my shoulders.

Apparently, this was the dress code for Fell's ego trip, because Queen Verdant and Queen Rime were dressed similarly—although Rime wore a white gown and Verdant wore green.

Solis—the lucky duck—got to wear a comfortable golden robe that didn't look too different from his regular stuff.

The fae used clothing as a sort of manipulation—they put them on for whatever “role” they wanted to portray for the day, which was probably why I hadn't seen many fae wear jeans and t-shirts. I didn't know what “role” Fell was going for with this getup. Historically Inaccurate Ancient Greece, maybe?

“You look beautiful,” Skye said.

“Just wait until you see what you have to wear when the season passes from spring to summer,” Indigo cackled.

I twisted around in my throne and looked back at them. “You mean there’s a required outfit for each ceremony?”

Skye felt in the pocket of her jacket. “For the passing of the seasons? Yes.”

“We have to do this ceremony four times a year? Even though no one is around to watch it, and it’s just for personal gratification?” I asked.

“Yes,” Skye said. “Although it is not entirely without reason. It’s generally accepted that whatever the current season is in, that Court is viewed with extra respect.”

“Huh, now I think this ceremony is even stupider,” I said. “And if Fell tries to throw his weight around because it’s fall now, I’m going to wait until nightfall and then jump him and say it’s my right since it’s night.”

There was a rattle as Skye opened her mint tin and retrieved an antacid.

“You know,” Indigo said. “I don’t think anyone’s actually thought of it that way before.”

“Do *not* encourage her,” Skye hissed to my companion.

“You don’t say, Indigo? Hmm, that’s it.” I whipped around in my throne and peered at King Solis—who sat closest to me since Fell had put me on the far end of the lineup.

I was pretty sure he meant for it to be an insult, but I was deliriously happy, because I could chat with Indigo and Skye without getting snotty looks from Queen Verdant.

“Solis, we have to attend this shindig four times a year?” I called to the Day King.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“If that’s the case we should have a nightly and daily ceremony—since everyone seems sooo eager to mark the transition of power!”

King Solis chuckled. “We do have our own, shared ceremony on the first day of the new year—I set on the old year and you bring forth the new year.”

“For real? Well, this year we’re going to make ours more fun. None of this sitting around and staring.” A corn leaf detached from my throne and drifted past, stirring up my allergies enough to make me sneeze.

“I am always open to suggestions for our ceremony,” King Solis said. “I never liked it much—the Curia Cloisters throws a New Year’s party I’ve

always wanted to attend, but have never been able to.”

“That solves it,” I said. “We’ll do something big this year.”

“If you are done leading the Day King down the path of corruption, it is time to observe the ceremony, Queen Leila,” Skye gently reminded me.

Music—consisting mostly of drums and some trumpets—started up, cutting off any other warnings Skye might have given.

King Birch—with his wife, Consort Flora, trailing about five feet behind him—walked down the carpet.

Both Fell and Birch were wearing the terribly-inaccurate male versions of our togas—which fastened over one shoulder, though they each had these little sash things emblazoned with their royal colors and Court crest.

I boredly watched Birch hold the harvest bouquet out to Fell.

Fell stared him down, and the music kept playing as the two rulers stared at each other.

What is going on? Why aren't they moving?

Finally, Birch ever so slightly inclined his head, and Fell snatched the bouquet from his hands.

That's what we were waiting for? For Birch to nod to Fell?

“Did they seriously just have a little power tiff in the middle of this all-important ceremony?” I turned to Rigel since he was sitting on my other side and was probably the only one able to hear me above the pounding drums.

Rigel—who was *not* wearing one of the little togas but was still dressed in all black; everyone was probably too afraid to try to make him wear the required outfit, including King Fell—shrugged. “In order to preserve their power—or try to raise it—a monarch will take every opportunity possible to make their stake.”

“Unbelievable.” I shook my head as I looked back at the ceremony. “These people need to get hobbies.”

King Fell triumphantly carried the harvest bouquet over his head as he walked through the field and stopped at a burning torch.

He thrust the bouquet in the torch. The plants caught on fire, and he held it aloft again, like he was a torch bearer in the Olympics for Ego Maniacs.

“Autumn reigns!” he shouted.

“Autumn reigns,” the seelie and unseelie Courts said back to him with zero enthusiasm.

The whole thing felt like an elementary school play, to be honest.

I glanced at the other monarchs, wondering how they were able to keep

from laughing at the sheer ridiculousness. Verdant and Solis were watching, but Queen Rime was playing a game on her cellphone—I didn't know if that was her throwing her power around showing she didn't have to pay attention, or if she was just that bored.

With Rime, it was hard to know for sure.

"Pst, Rigel." I leaned closer to him again. "What do you say we skip out on the banquet and go get donuts?"

Rigel stared at me. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

I wrinkled my forehead. "Dude, we're married. Also, if I take you with me, Skye won't complain—she'll be too scared to."

Rigel shifted his gaze back to the Olympics for Ego Maniacs. "It was a joke."

"That's a no to the donuts, then?"

"You should be scoping out your competition," Rigel said.

"For what, who can best wear this getup?" I slumped back in my chair, and a corn cob poked my spine. "No thank you!"

"Your competition for the hunt," Rigel clarified.

"Hunt?"

King Fell made a little circuit with his burning bouquet, and he finished just as I asked Rigel to clarify.

The seelie and unseelie fae clapped, interrupting our conversation.

I halfheartedly clapped, too—it seemed rude not to, especially since Queen Verdant and King Solis were.

King Fell glanced in our direction and seemed satisfied, though I was pretty sure I saw a vein in his neck when he noticed Queen Rime was still playing her cellphone game.

It must bother him endlessly that she's more powerful. I hope he gnashes his teeth and is up late at night, bitter that she's the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic.

I studied Rime as she kept tapping away on her cellphone, playing her game.

Having her as the fae representative is probably the only bit of luck I've had since being crowned. Fell would be unbearable as the representative—and he'd probably get us all killed in record time with his awful personality annoying all the other supernaturals on the committee.

Distracted by the thought, it wasn't until after the ceremony finished and we were walking to the banquet that I was able to ask Rigel, Skye, and

Indigo, “What hunt are you talking about?”

“The annual Fall Hunt,” Skye supplied. “It happens every year.”

“Is this just a Midwest thing, or does every region have an annual hunt?” I asked.

“It’s Midwest only—to my knowledge,” Skye said.

“I heard one of the other regions has a fishing tournament.” Indigo didn’t have to wear one of the toga-dresses, so she stomped at my side in a cute black skirt with a red cable knit sweater—I’d bet a lot of money she was wearing a superhero t-shirt on underneath her sweater, those seemed to be her favorites. “That sounds like more fun.”

“It does! Maybe we should start one of those,” I said.

“The hunt is for the seasonal Courts—and the Day and Night Court—only,” Skye said. “Each Court is allowed a handful of riders, mounts, and hounds the Courts personally train.”

“I take it I’m supposed to use the shades?” I guessed.

“You can,” Skye acknowledged.

“And then we just go for a jolly hunt?” I asked.

“Not quite,” Skye said grimly.

But it seemed like an evening for interruptions, because before she could further explain, King Birch decided to approach me.

“Queen Leila—I am glad to see you dressed appropriately,” he said. “But I thought you might need a model of decorum due to the savagery of your pedigree, so might I extend introductions to my wife, Consort Flora?”

I glared at King Birch, but shifted my gaze to Consort Flora, who wasn’t at all what I expected.

Her hair was a beautiful shade of coffee brown, and with her delicate and willowy build she had fae stamped all over her...except for her eyes. They were too raw for a fae. Looking at her light green eyes, I could tell she was nervous, but relieved the ceremony was over.

How has she survived this long among the jackals when she’s genuine in her expression?

She was a beauty—that was obvious. But in addition to her expressive eyes, compared to the other monarchs she was quiet and soft.

“It’s nice to meet you, Consort Flora,” I said.

She curtsied—her movements had more of a sweet gracefulness to them than Queen Rime’s stateliness or Queen Verdant’s coy playfulness.

“Good afternoon, Queen Leila. I hope you enjoyed the ceremony,” she

said without any ounce of snark.

Yeah, I have no idea how she hasn't been eaten alive. I mean, I'm glad—but I didn't think it was possible for fae to be like her and survive.

“It was interesting. Are you okay?” I abruptly asked.

Consort Flora's eyes widened fractionally. “I beg your pardon?”

“Are you okay? You seem...sad?”

“Queen Leila, you overstep your boundaries,” King Birch snarled.

I shrugged. “Sorry, but my human bluntness prevails. And it's really bothering me that she hasn't said if she's okay or not.” I studied Birch, then flicked my gaze to Flora.

Surprisingly, she edged closer to him, her shoulder disappearing behind his. “Thank you for your concern, Queen Leila, but I am in fine health.”

“I'm glad to hear that.” I let a servant steer me over to a seat—once again I was not at all sad to be sandwiched between Rigel and King Solis.

As I sat down in my chair—no corn stalks this time, yay—King Fell plopped down in his seat at the head of the table—which of course was bigger and taller than all of ours.

“It honors me that you have come to witness today's ceremony and passing of power.” He allowed himself a handsome smile. “May we feast in the presence of autumn!”

Apparently that was the cue to start eating, because after he raised his cup, Queen Rime and King Birch started picking at the food servants had doled out.

“May we feast in the presence of autumn?” I repeated with a scoff. “He sounds like a high school student trying to sound sophisticated while summarizing a book they didn't actually read. Ow!”

Even though she stood behind my chair, Skye was somehow able to reach my ankle and kick it. “Not here, Queen Leila,” she said in a voice that was all rainbows and sunshine but really held a death threat in it.

I meekly sat in my chair and stared longingly at the food.

Fell had gone all out with the autumn theme.

There was steaming rye bread, pumpkin pastries, roasted chicken, squash soup, oven roasted apples, and heaps and heaps of more platters. Everything was piping hot and smelled amazing...and I couldn't have any of it.

I woefully watched a basket of rolls travel from monarch to monarch, but rather than eat, I just moved food around my plate to make it look like I was.

I need to end these stupid power games, just so I can actually eat fae

food. This is torture!

While the other monarchs seemed to have no concerns about getting poisoned and dug right in to their plates, Rigel only picked at his food—though he drank the mysterious “pumpkin juice” concoction.

I was tempted to try it, but I’d almost died by eating bespelled food once. I wasn’t going to risk it again—especially when I was so disliked among the monarchs one of them was obviously already trying to kill me!

“It could be worse,” Rigel told me after I sighed for the third time. “They could be serving coffee, leaving you able to smell it but unable to drink it.”

“Just rub salt in my wounds, why don’t you?” I abruptly straightened. “But that’s an excellent point. Solis! We need a coffee bar at our New Year’s party!”

King Solis grinned at me, but before he could say anything Queen Verdant dragged him into a conversation.

I turned around in my chair and peered at Skye and Indigo still standing there. “Can I ask for chairs for you guys or something? This feels unfair to have you standing behind me.”

“If you bring any attention to us, I’m going to ask Chase to ban you from all non-official fieldtrips—including your drives to your favorite café.”

“Ouch—why the threat?”

“Because she doesn’t want anyone noticing us since we’re *not supposed to be here*,” Indigo said through gritted teeth.

I looked up and down the table, and was surprised to see no one else had an attendant or companion standing behind them.

Ah. Okay.

Obviously, since Skye and Indigo didn’t trust me not to run my mouth, I did my best to make them proud and kept my mouth shut while I focused on ferrying food around my plate.

The banquet was only about halfway over when the verbal cat fights began.

I assumed I was relatively safe—they were talking about that annual hunt Skye and Indigo had mentioned.

“I have three new hounds for the hunt this year.” King Birch smirked. “I’m eager to see how they do on the field.”

“It will be more imperative we make sure Verdant doesn’t *cheat* this year.” Fell shook a finger at the Spring Queen. “You were naughty last year, Verdant.”

The Spring Queen's expression was still merry and bright, but for a split second I thought I saw her grip on the stem of her wine glass tighten. "I'll win again this year."

"You win most years the way it is—it makes one wonder just how long you've been cheating," King Birch said.

"Ahh, but this year we have a true *horsewoman*, don't we?" Queen Verdant cast her eyes in my direction. "Isn't that true, Queen Leila? You did, after all, win the annual derby."

I'd been watching Queen Rime—she'd stopped eating just as the conversation shifted to the hunt and gotten out her cellphone game.

I was wondering what she was playing, but at the sound of my name I unwillingly jolted back to the conversation. "Saying I won is a bit incorrect. My night mares did all the work—and technically five of them won all on their own since they didn't have riders."

King Fell leaned back in his chair. "Yes, the rapport you have with those brutes is remarkable. I cannot imagine how you can fathom communicating with such dark creatures."

I stiffened in my chair. "King Fell, surely you didn't just insult the night mares? They're precious members of my Court."

The Autumn King laughed. "Indeed, given the state of your Court I don't find it too surprising they are dear to you."

"Ahh, yes." Queen Verdant smiled radiantly. "The Night Court—is it doing any better? I'd heard you lost a great deal of land in the last shrinkage, and that the castle stands on the brink of collapse."

I was fairly sure they were trying to embarrass me. And yes, it was a sore point for me—only because the Night Realm was a very vivid reminder that the previous queen had left my Court in shambles and I had to do something or we were going to crumble even if I managed to scare all the infighting out of my people.

But she brought up a good point.

"We did in the last shrinkage—which was a few months ago. How often do you guys experience your barriers faltering?" I looked from monarch to monarch.

Silence.

The monarchs stared back at me, their expressions dark—except for Solis. He was yawning.

Do they think I'm trying to get dirt on them or something?

“I’m trying to figure out how often I should expect it,” I explained. “I’m not trying to make anyone look bad.”

Fell scoffed. “With *your* current reputation level it is not within your abilities to make any other monarch shamed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I got it. But how often? Are we talking just once or twice a year? Or more?”

As one, the monarchs looked away from me.

“Consort Flora, you’ve hardly said a word all night,” King Fell said. “Tell me, how is your health these days?”

Fear flickered across Consort Flora’s expression, and she glanced at King Birch.

He didn’t even look at his wife. He was too busy inspecting his half-filled wine chalice. “Very thoughtful of you, Fell, to ask—except you know how shy Flora is. She has no wish to bother anyone with concern for her.”

My eyes bugged—at both Birch’s callous comment over his own consort, and the way they’d sidestepped the conversation.

Are they really so at odds with each other that they’re not even willing to answer a simple question about something we’re all dealing with? Things are this bad, and they won’t even pretend to work together?

Their unwillingness to even help me a little was a bitter taste in my mouth.

This was what I’d have to deal with for the rest of my life? I was *never* going to get them to stop struggling for power. I’d be better off hoping they all died before me and then swooping in and befriending whatever fae took their place.

And isn’t that conniving in a different way?

Chapter Eleven

Leila

I glumly stared at the food I couldn't risk eating.

It was then that Solis, in his seat next to me, leaned in. "The frequency of barrier failures depends on the Court," he said.

I glanced at the Day King, fighting my instinct to hug him like I would a favorite uncle or cousin.

The other rulers may be pukes, but Solis makes up for it.

Solis quietly continued—though I could barely hear him over King Fell and King Birch. "If it's unstable, the barrier will fail more often."

Great. The Night Court is the textbook definition of unstable with our money issues, the assassination attempts against me, and everything else going on.

"On average I'd say you can expect it at least once a season, if not more," Solis said.

My shoulders slumped. "That's what I was afraid of. I appreciate the information, Solis."

He winked at me, which was dazzling enough to blind me temporarily. "Of course."

"What are you two conspiring over?" Verdant demanded, interrupting Fell's latest soliloquy and frowning at Solis and me.

"We're talking shop—since no one seems to be able to carry on adult conversation here," I said.

King Birch frowned. "Shop?"

"A bizarre human idiom, I am sure," King Fell sneered.

I didn't take the bait, but I did glance at Rigel, who was picking at his food nearly as badly as I was.

I leaned a little closer to my husband, and King Fell continued his tirade.

"It isn't bad enough we have to bow and scrape to human law outside our lands, now we have to deal with them invading our Courts."

King Birch lowered his eyes and smirked across the table at me. "It's no

wonder magic is dying, eh?”

“How soon do you think we can leave?” I whispered to Rigel, ignoring the scavengers.

Rigel shrugged. “The feast typically carries on well past dark.”

“Oh heck no, I’m not subjecting us to this for that many hours,” I hissed.

“I am more concerned with our region.” Verdant pressed her lips together in a pout. “We shall be a laughing stock once the West Coast learns of all that has happened within the Night Court.”

“We ought to prepare for the likely wave of night fae seeking to swear themselves to a new Court,” Birch said. “For who could stand *her* as their monarch?” He nodded his head to me.

“Fae should have a ruler they can respect and fear,” King Fell said. “An individual of tradition and power.” He glanced at me and narrowed his eyes. “And proper pedigree.”

That’s it. I’m not staying for this, even if they are more powerful than me.

“Well, this has all been a bucket of laughs, but it’s time for Rigel and me to leave,” I said.

“You intend to leave before those honored today close the festivities?” Queen Verdant stuck her nose up in the air. “You really are a half blood.”

“It’s true—my human half makes me much weaker to fits of love,” I said.

Queen Rime lowered her cellphone. “Don’t—”

“Fits of what?” Queen Verdant frowned, and a curl from the mass of gold ringlets piled on the top of her head in a style similar to mine slipped free and framed her face.

Queen Rime sighed and went back to her game, effectively checking out of the conversation. Again.

“Fits of love,” I helpfully repeated. I could practically feel Skye’s eyes boring holes in the back of my head, but if I was going to be dragged to these ego-filling ceremonies, I was at least going to get a laugh out of it. “It’s *love* that drives me away from such a fascinating, admirable, and wonderful ceremony like the one we witnessed tonight. My love of my husband to be precise.”

Queen Verdant frowned and looked from me to Rigel. “Love of the Wrai—I mean, Lord Rigel?”

“Yes. We are deeply—and madly—in love!” I leaned against Rigel’s arm.

Rigel played along in that he didn’t shake me off or do anything besides

look stone faced and intimidating.

“Which is why I made the discovery that my artistic skills are not equal to capturing Rigel’s incredible handsomeness, and the light of his gaze.”

“You’re babbling about art again?” King Birch sneered. “Your love is...” he trailed off when he glanced at Rigel, who stared at him from across the table.

He cleared his throat, then grabbed a steaming roll from a tray. He took a bite of it, then carelessly tossed it on his wife’s—Flora’s—plate.

She didn’t seem bothered by it. She ate the roll without complaining.

There is something weird about that.

“You truly expect me to believe the two of you *love* each other?” Queen Verdant scoffed.

“To be frank, I don’t care what you believe, but I’ll tell the world a thousand times over, I love Rigel!” I boldly declared. “Which is why I’ve come to the realization that drawings, paintings aren’t good enough to capture my fae-bae’s true likeness.”

I passionately clenched my hands and positioned myself so I could see their reactions, because this was going to be fantastic. “It can only be properly taken and recorded by a statue—because only statues can show off Rigel’s chiseled abs to perfection!”

Queen Rime actually spat out her drink, and King Fell, who’d been smirking as he cockily chewed on a cut of meat, choked.

Consort Flora’s eyes widened as she put her hand on King Birch’s arm, but Queen Verdant was probably my favorite reaction. She’d been about to bite a tiny roasted potato, but because of my announcement she missed her mouth and smeared butter across her cheek.

Indigo coughed into her elbow to cover what sounded suspiciously like a snicker. “Well played—that’ll give the fuss budgets a heart attack,” she whispered.

When I glanced back at Skye I thought for sure she’d be guzzling antacid, but the corners of her lips were folded in a very distinct smirk as she gazed at the monarchs.

I’m not the only one bothered by their insufferable quest for power.

Pleased with the chaos I’d caused, I stood up and brushed my toga off. “Let’s go, Rigel. The sculptor will arrive at the mansion before us, and it took me *forever* to find an artist worthy of you. It’s time to go!”

Rigel was already standing, and he held out his arm for me.

“I don’t believe it,” King Fell said in a “whisper” that was clearly loud enough for us to hear. “I’ll never believe *the Wraith* is in love!”

I placed my hand on Rigel’s forearm, and was surprised when he picked up my hand and—meeting my eyes—kissed my fingers.

A glimmer of humor brightened up the darkness of his eyes. They weren’t black, but more of a playful obsidian.

I was momentarily speechless—and I wasn’t the only one based on all the choking noises emitting from the table behind me.

When Rigel turned to walk away, I *had* to take a peek behind us. It was too tempting—and all too vindicating.

King Birch had actually dropped his glass chalice, which shattered on his plate and marinated his food in red wine and flecked his consort with droplets.

Queen Verdant was wildly coughing—she’d apparently inhaled something during Rigel’s display, and King Fell had pushed his chair over in his shock and was frozen in a half-rising, half-sitting position as he stared.

Even Queen Rime was staring at us, delicately pressing her hand over her heart.

I smirked as I wagged my fingers at them. “Bye everyone—enjoy the banquet!” I might have cackled a little as I hopped a few steps to catch up with my consort.

Skye and Indigo were ahead of us—carrying on like champs, of course. Looking at them, you’d never guess they were just as shocked as the monarchs—perhaps even more because they knew the truth.

“That was a lot of fun. Thanks, Rigel.” It was hard not to skip in my glee. “If I were a less scrupulous person, I’d ask for a repeat performance to see if we can get Fell to choke!”

Rigel glanced down at me. “It might be worth a shot.”

“A fellow Fell hater, huh? Stick with me—he doesn’t know it, but I’m going to be cheering *a lot more* when he has to hand off his power to Rime, haha!”

* * *

“A *royal portrait*?” I repeated.

“Yes. Every monarch has one—they hang in the portrait gallery,” Skye said.

“We have a *portrait gallery*?”

“Yep. It used to be in the castle, but when the hall’s glass ceiling collapsed Queen Nyte had them moved here.” Indigo marched up to my chair and gave me a plateful of assorted donut holes.

“What’s this?” I stared at the plate and tried not to drool.

“Donuts. Have some—though I’ll warn you they might not be top of the line. This is my first attempt,” Indigo said.

I licked my lips as I peered over my donuts. Some were chocolate, others were covered in a glaze, and a handful of them were rolled in cinnamon sugar. “What inspired you to try?”

“You seemed to really want some when we were at the ceremony last week,” Indigo said.

I ripped my gaze from the amazing desserts. “And you made some—just for me?”

Indigo coughed and looked away. “Yeah.”

“Aww! Thank you, Indigo!” I squealed and threw my arms around the brownie, hugging her tight.

“I get it, I get it, you’re welcome.” She squirmed in my grasp, but when she paused, she patted my back.

“You’re the best.” I grinned at her as I let go. “What’s this one?” I pointed to a donut at random.

Indigo made a point of brushing herself off and straightening her sweater. “A chocolate yeast donut with raspberry sauce and a line of chocolate frosting going down the center. I call it the eye of Sauron.”

I laughed—most of the food she made me somehow referenced superheroes, books, or movies—but then I took a bite of my donut and lost the ability to sit up right—it was still warm, and the outside had just a slightly crisp texture while the chocolate matched with the raspberry made a brilliant taste. “Wow. Indigo, these are just wow.” I closed my eyes. “You win forever with these. Wow!”

I finished my donut and shook my head. “Okay, sorry Skye. I’ll be serious now.”

A slight smile played on Skye’s lips. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Have a donut—they’re filled with Indigo’s love for me.”

Indigo rolled her eyes, but Skye took a misshapen cake donut that had so much glaze on it, it looked almost waxy.

“That’s a Gollum donut,” Indigo said.

Skye nodded—even though I doubted she knew what Indigo was talking about—then she bit into it and hummed. “Indigo, this is delicious.”

“Yeah, yeah, suckups. I’ll make you more donuts even if you don’t flatter me.” Indigo took a blueberry donut hole when I offered the plate to her. “But I’ll tell my mom—the base recipe is my grandma’s.”

“Bless your grandma.” I licked my lips and eyed another donut. “Okay. Focusing. There’s a portrait gallery of all the dead royals, and you want me to get a portrait to match.”

“It’s tradition,” Skye said.

“How surprising.” I clutched my plate of donuts to my stomach and stood up. “Let’s go tour it, shall we?”

“Right now?” Indigo asked.

“No time like the present.”

Skye was already trotting off ahead of us, opening the door for me, leading the way away from my private study and down the hall. “I thought you might be interested in seeing it. I have an appointment scheduled with an artist this afternoon, but I imagine you’ll want time to think it over.”

“What’s the deal with the portrait?” I asked. “Why do you have them when cameras have been around for a while. Wait, let me guess—”

“It’s tradition,” Skye, Indigo, and I said together.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I helped myself to another donut—this time I tried a Gollum. “But what’s the point?”

“To record the leaders of our Court,” Skye said. “It’s useful for history, and in some ways it can be a lesson to the Night Court itself not to judge our monarchs based on their images, but rather what they did for us.”

“Oh really?” I followed her around a corner, through an archway I vaguely remembered—yes, even though the massive mansion was mine and I knew my way around it, I didn’t remember every single room. My schedule was too packed for me to stroll around and admire it, and there was *no way* I was exploring the place in the middle of the night. Lone girl going through a house filled with magic? No way—I’d seen that movie before!

The archway opened up into a large, sunny chamber. The walls were covered in a beautiful fern green wallpaper and decorated with light gray baroque swirls. I spotted the requisite tea equipment—every room in my

mansion had to have at least one tea set or teacup, apparently.

The portrait gallery had a glass case of tea implements that looked like they belonged in a Japanese tea ceremony. There were several shallow, off white bowls that each had a brush of blue glaze on their sides—I was guessing those were the teacups. A bamboo tea whisk and an ivory tea scoop were set off to the side with a beautiful lacquered box and a square of white linen.

The tea implements were a stark sort of beauty compared to the overwhelming walls upon walls of painted portraits.

Starting at about chest height and reaching high up to the ceiling were dozens and dozens of portraits of long-dead fae monarchs.

All of them were solemn faced—though they kind of looked like they sat on a thumbtack—and more beautiful and perfect than I’m sure the monarchs were when they were alive.

Perfect skin, flawless hair—what, am I supposed to think they’re elves?

I frowned as I studied the portraits, looking at a few familiar faces from paintings that had been showcased in my history textbooks. “Are they out of order?” I asked.

Skye linked her hands behind her back. “Yes. They’ve been arranged in the order of, how to say it delicately...”

“Popularity,” Indigo bluntly said. “That’s why they stuck Queen Nyte all the way at the top up there.” She pointed to one of the enormous portraits that was in the top row—barely viewable because it was up so high and there was a glare from the lighting.

“Hah—that is hilarious!” I turned in a slow circle, taking the gallery in.

The room didn’t connect to any other chambers, and besides the portraits, the tea stuff, a few benches, and several palm-tree type plants placed strategically around the space in giant pots there was nothing in the room.

“I’m not going to lie. With so many portraits that look ridiculously perfect, they all start to look alike after a while,” I said.

Indigo snorted. “You’re not wrong.”

“Your portrait may include Consort Rigel, if you wish. But having a couple’s portrait is not required—or even common.” She indicated to the wall of paintings. Only about half of them were of couples. Lots of them were of a single monarch—even though I knew from personal experience that they had to be married.

And each and every one of them—including the original king everyone

was obsessed with, man I'd like to give him a piece of my mind if he was still around—looked icy and other worldly.

No wonder so many members of my Court are formal with me. When you have such beautiful but cold leaders like this, there's going to be a clear line of distinction between the Court and its monarch.

“Do these get shown to the other Courts?” I asked.

Skye tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“Are these portraits used for press releases or anything like that? Maybe for official ceremonies or something?” I asked.

“No, we take annual photographs—you had to sit for yours with Rigel the day after your wedding, remember?” Skye prodded.

“What you're saying is *no one* besides my Court and maybe a few curious visitors will see the portrait?” I asked.

Indigo and Skye exchanged looks.

“Yes,” Skye slowly said.

“But this portrait will be how your Court remembers you once you're gone,” Indigo said.

I ate a donut hole to cover my smirk. “Oh—I understand that perfectly. In fact, I'm *counting* on it.”

* * *

“And as I'm leaning theatrically into Solstice and Eclipse like this, Rigel should be just behind us, daggers—and abs—out. Sound good, Rigel?” I turned away from the possibly traumatized artist to give my husband a thumbs up.

“Why is it so important to have my shirt unbuttoned?” Rigel asked.

“Because you are *incredibly* ripped, and it's going to make you look wicked cool next to these guys.” I gestured at one of the portrait walls.

“Um...” The artist—an unsuspecting gnome who had shrunk about four inches since I started describing to her what I wanted—clutched her box of oil paints to her chest. “The portrait will take multiple sittings to complete... Are...are you sure you want this?”

She motioned to the little stage I had set up for the portrait.

I'd brought Solstice and Eclipse inside, and I planned to dramatically press myself against Eclipse's shoulder and rest my hand on Solstice, preferably with an expression that would make me look like a heroine in a gothic romance.

Muffin and Whiskers were going to be lounging near Solstice's hooves, while Steve and Kevin would be at Eclipse's.

Rigel would probably look normal—as much as I teased him about his abs I didn't think he'd agree to it—but that was fine. It would make him a good foil to me. Since all the monarchs in the portraits were wearing dark, somber colors, I'd decided on the one lilac colored dress I owned as my outfit.

The whole thing was going to be ridiculous, and *perfect*.

"Yeah, it's exactly what I want," I said.

Rigel was standing next to me, and he'd been thoughtfully studying one of his daggers, but he looked up when the gnome tottered back to the canvas. "You don't desire a ridiculous portrait just to stir up your Court?"

"That's an added side benefit," I confessed. "But it's deeper than that." I paused. "I wanted Killian and Hazel at my crowning party because they're my friends, obviously, but I asked Hazel to bring a bunch of the wizards because I knew they'd lighten up the crowd. Our Court—our *people* are scared of me. And it's not because of the way I took down Myron, but because fear of powerful monarchs is all they know. And I'm going to change that—one ridiculous portrait, one hilarious personal seal at a time."

Rigel stared at me for several long, uncomfortable moments. "You really do care about the Court."

"Yes," I said.

He thoughtfully went back to studying his dagger. I took the opportunity to sneak a peek at Skye and Indigo.

The duo had set up shop just behind the artist at a heavy table Eventide and some of the other servants had dragged in. Skye was typing away on a wireless keyboard I'd bought her, and Indigo was reading a comic book.

"I'm surprised you two don't have any objections," I said.

Indigo turned a page in her comic book. "You do you, my Sovereign."

"Since coming to work for you, I have realized even your most outrageous of actions have viable reasons behind them, my Sovereign," Skye said.

"I'm really glad, but I was hoping *someone* would be upset."

“Don’t worry—I’m sure some of the nobles will faint,” Skye said.

“Faint in awe, right?” I winked at her, then glanced up at my consort when I felt his dark eyes on me.

“My shirt stays closed,” Rigel said. “But I’ll wear my jacket.”

“The one you wear when you’re in your *Wraith* mode? Really?” I squealed and clapped my hands. “Great—you look awesome in that. Oh—and then we can say it’s in memory of our first meeting!”

The subtle light of Rigel’s rare humor sparked in his dark eyes.

“Though—don’t get me wrong—I’ll mourn the lack of your abs,” I said.

“It has come to my attention that you mainly seem to esteem me for my appearance,” Rigel said.

“Nah.”

“Given how often you carry on over my abs, I must disagree.”

“He’s not wrong,” Indigo piped in.

“I can’t be that bad.”

“Before your marriage, I don’t believe the term ‘ripped’ or ‘amazing abdominals’ had ever been uttered by any fae,” Skye said.

“Ah. Okay, I see your point. Very well! I shall endeavor to start bringing up your other good points, Rigel! I’ve gotta be a supportive wife, after all. Though I wish you’d quit your day job.”

The gnome artist made a mewling noise of distress as Rigel shrugged on the slitted jacket that made him look even more wild and spectacular.

“Would you rather I hold a sword for the portrait?” he asked. “It’d be more imposing and impressive.”

He was changing topics—a tricky fae...trick—but I knew this was a battle I wasn’t going to win. I gave up and took the offering. “That is an excellent idea! Want to borrow my pistol, too?”

“No, thank you.”

“Your loss.”

As I took up my place with Solstice, Eclipse, and my other pets so the poor artist could begin, it occurred to me that I was actually happy.

I’d been miserable those first few weeks after being queen. But I’d come to trust Skye, Indigo, and Chase. Rigel, surprisingly, had become a fun addition to our group.

He’s willing to play along a lot more than I thought any fae would.

I smiled, and I felt warmth settle in my chest.

We’re going to be okay. We’re in it for the long ride. The other monarchs

are poisonous, but eventually I'll wear them down. It might take years, but eventually I'll get the other Courts to stop fighting.

Chapter Twelve

Rigel

All my life, Night Court socials and events were occasions I dreaded. When my parents and brother were alive, it meant being dragged to a stuffy party filled with insincere people who insulted me or even slapped me if they felt it fortified their position of power above my family's.

Once I was the sole member of my family, they became things I despised.

Queen Nyte always skulked around, whispering in my ear as she tried to lure me into a contract or bargain while the rest of the Court was too terrified of my reputation and the bodies I left in my wake to approach me.

They were suffocating, cloying, and I knew I wasn't the only one who hated them.

How did things change in such a short amount of time?

"No, no, no. Don't get two small popcorns, get one big tub," Leila instructed Dusk and Dawn. "I specifically rented the three theaters today because it's Discount Wednesday when their popcorn and drinks are half off. That means the large tub is—for this event *only*—the better buy."

The stable managers nodded in unison. "If you do the math, you can see it."

"Exactly," Leila agreed. "Remember to tell them to put it on *my* tab. You guys are my employees. I'll pay for your snacks. But for crying out loud, do *not* tell Lord Linus!"

I let my arms fall to my side, casually checking that the artifact I had slipped into the top of my right boot was still secure. It was a prized piece of my weapons collection because, although it appeared to be a butter knife, once magic touched it, it transformed into a full broadsword.

It was one of the few weapons I could easily smuggle into the facility.

"Yes, Queen Leila," the siblings chorused. They bowed to her, then ambled off to join the line at the concession counter.

Leila smiled fondly at their backs, then spun around to speak to her steward. "Skye, how long until the movie in the third theater is over?"

“Half an hour,” Skye said.

“And the movie in theater one already started?”

“Yes—it is a romantic comedy, I believe. Theater two has another children’s animated film starting in ten minutes,” Skye said.

“Good! The second round of movies has started—I’d say we’re about halfway done today.” Leila pumped an arm, then took a sip from her soda.

From our spot in the movie theater lobby, I could see the entrances to the three theaters Leila had rented for the afternoon’s Court event.

A pixie flew out of theater one and darted into the bathroom while Indigo led a group of naiads to theater two.

Humans gawked from the other side of the lobby, slowly moving over to the theater rooms Leila hadn’t rented for the afternoon.

“Any complaints, Skye?” Leila asked.

“None so far,” Skye said.

“Excellent. I thought this would be a fun change of pace since the mini golf outing was unexpectedly popular.” Leila rattled the ice in her paper cup and chewed on her straw.

“I’m surprised you were willing to spend the money to rent out the theaters,” I said.

“Well, it’s the afternoon. The rental fee is cheaper since it’s matinee shows. And I just had to pay for the room rental. Since most fae won’t know any better, I decided not to rent new movies because they are so expensive, and just got the theater to put up movies that came out about five years ago. To top it off, I’m making everyone buy their own food as ‘part of the experience’!”

Leila placed a hand over her heart. “My accountant was really impressed with my ability to cut financial corners. But—most importantly—everyone seems to be enjoying themselves!”

“It is a well-planned event,” Skye said. “Each of the two showings per theater is sold out.”

“Yeah, I thought having the two rounds of movies would give fae more flexibility to come when they wanted, but it seems like most everyone is attending two showings.” Leila waved to a troll that ambled past.

“Indeed. Next time we should perhaps begin earlier to fit three rounds of movies in?” Skye asked.

“I was actually considering taking everyone bowling, or maybe going to a play or musical or something. But after the popularity of the movies, there’s

no way we could do that. There are too many of us,” Leila said.

“You could limit it to the nobles,” Skye said.

“No—that’s not fair,” Leila said.

“Then limit it to everyone who is not noble, and make the nobles pay to go,” I said.

Leila slowly turned toward me, as if moved by a crank. “Rigel, you are brilliant!”

“Now that’s something you don’t hear every day!” Dion laughed as he descended on us. “Good afternoon, Queen Leila. You look very stylish today!” He bowed to her before he draped an arm over my shoulders.

“Thank you, Lord Dion.” Leila smiled. “I’m glad you could make it today.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world!” Dion winked. “I’ve been to many theaters myself, but it’s rare to see my kinsmen in a place like this. We should get some good laughs. Wouldn’t you agree, Skye?”

I was almost positive Skye knew Dion was interested in her. My guess was confirmed based on the way she stared at him and spoke in a flat tone. “We should not wish for laughs at the expense of others due to their ignorance, but strive to help them learn and understand.”

“You’re right, of course,” Dion said, ever able to shift in hopes of finding favor with her. “I am lucky to call you a friend so you can correct me like that.”

“I would not presume to call each other friends,” Skye said.

Leila sidled up next to me and tapped my elbow. She looked at Skye and Dion, then grinned.

I shook my head.

No. Not going to happen—at least not anytime soon.

“Oh, then what would you call me?” Dion gave her his best smile, helped along by a tiny bit of illusion magic that made his teeth sparkle.

Skye furrowed her brow. “The suitor of Queen Leila who was not worthy of her?”

Leila snorted into her mostly empty soda, then violently coughed to cover her strangled laugh.

I was similarly amused—Dion hadn’t been turned down by a woman a day in his life. Leila had never responded to his compliments and attempts at winning her over, but he hadn’t really wanted to marry her, so it hadn’t bothered him much.

But this would.

Dion opened and closed his mouth several times. “You—that is...what?”

Skye bowed her head. “Quite.”

Dion was my friend—however reluctant I was to admit it. He was my only friend, actually. But there was still something about the crack of his ego that was deeply satisfying.

“Clean up required on the third line of the concession stand.” Indigo marched up to us and pointed back at the concession stands. “One of the lords is attempting to pay for his popcorn in gold coins.”

Leila frowned. “Like, real gold?”

“Yes.”

Leila rubbed her forehead. “Maybe I should just make all the nobles hand in a fieldtrip fee next time. They seem the least capable—none of the others had any problems with purchasing concessions!”

“I’ll handle it.” Skye gently touched Leila’s elbow, then hurried off in the direction of the concession stand.

“I guess I’m chopped liver,” Dion laughed.

“You should follow her,” I said.

“And leave you here alone? What kind of friend would I be?” Dion gave me a friendly slap on the back. “Besides, even I’m not so pesky to venture where I’m not wanted. Perhaps I’ll be able to catch her in the next movie.”

Leila checked her cellphone. “She mentioned she wanted to see the last movie in theater three—it’s starting in an hour, one of the Star Wars movies I think.”

“Thank you, Queen Leila. *You* are a true friend.” The way Dion slapped my back again clearly communicated that he was aware I wasn’t setting him up for success.

Leila saluted him. “Good luck! I hope you succeed—she needs to take more breaks.”

“I shall certainly try. But I must tell you how greatly impressed I am with your social functions. I think these have been the most well attended socials in years, and that’s impressive considering everyone was scared to death of Nyte and was terrified to miss a party.”

Leila’s features softened into something warmer. “I’m glad to hear that.” Her usual bright, “monarch” voice was gone. She was talking how she sometimes talked to Skye and Indigo—or the night mares, glooms, and shades.

“I was hoping to take everyone out kayaking sometime before it gets really cold. But the lake by the mansion is way too small. The lake in the Night Realm is plenty big, though,” she said.

Dion shook his head. “Even you would have trouble getting us out on that lake, Queen Leila. Tradition has it that there’s a sea monster in those waters.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that before. Maybe we can just rent kayaks in downtown Magiford, then. Their lakes are plenty big for a decent sized party.” Leila tilted her head back and appeared to stare at the ceiling as she thought.

There was something about her voice when it was like this that was intoxicating. It wasn’t sultry, but listening to it made one feel...

A scream ripped through the theater.

Two creatures made of shadows streaked across the lobby. They were serpentine in appearance, but their bodies were made of black, insubstantial shadows.

They weren’t attacking anyone, probably because they hadn’t seen their target, Leila. They had to be after her; these monsters had the same feeling as the creatures that attacked in the parking lot.

Leila turned toward the noise just as the creatures spotted her.

The shadow monsters hissed, then slithered across the carpet, their glowing eyes locked on her.

As I thought.

I yanked my hidden knife from my boot and activated it. “*Austero!*” Tapping into the wild magic around us, the knife transformed in a glowing sword.

Humans screamed and ran from the theater. Some of the fae did as well—the pixie emerged from the bathroom and shot off to the theaters. Others, like Dusk and Dawn, dropped their popcorn tubs and soda drinks and fumbled to grab their artifacts.

I stepped backwards, intending to sink into the shadows, but Leila’s reaction was almost as fast as mine. She activated her prism with a shout and threw down a ward that bloomed into one of the biggest personal magic barriers I’d seen as it covered herself, Indigo, Dion, and me.

I edged my way out of the barrier—I couldn’t attack the two creatures from within it, at least not the way *I* liked to fight.

The two snake-like monsters crashed into the barrier. It shook, but held strong—all of her practice was paying off.

I cloaked myself in shadows, and magic spilled over from the sword as I

tapped my natural magic.

Shadows flickered across my eyes, and in a heartbeat I was standing in the shadow of one of the creatures.

I tried slicing through the monster's tail, but the blade only made the monster's shadowy innards swirl as it passed through it as if it were a smoke cloud.

That's going to make things more difficult.

"Look at me," Dion commanded the monster. Even through the purple haze of Leila's barrier, his magic was strong enough that the second snake creature actually turned its head to him.

Dion's eyes narrowed, and his poppy red magic flowed from his artifact—a bejeweled pin forged in the shape of a bird.

The creature I was attacking rammed into Leila's barrier again.

The surface didn't even ripple, but Leila growled. "These suckers pack a punch." She shook her head as if shaking off pain—and maybe she was—and arranged her feet in a solid defensive crouch. "I can't cast anything else at this rate."

"I've got a bit of a line on them," Dion shouted. "They're forged of magic, and they're controlled by a fae compulsion spell."

"Can you break it?" I tried stabbing my blade through my snake's head, but it was also insubstantial, and I did no damage.

"Nope—too powerful," Dion said through gritted teeth. "I can hold this one here, but that's about it."

I briefly flicked my eyes at him. *Dion is very powerful in compulsion magics. For him to be unable to do anything...whoever made these is incredibly powerful.*

"Try blowing them away," Indigo suggested.

"How?" Leila asked. "Fae can't use elements—like wind."

"No." I yanked one of my hidden daggers out of a bracer. "But we can make things explode. *Aer.*" I jumped backwards and threw my activated dagger at the snake. Just as the blade started to pass through the creature's head, I activated an anti-theft spell on the dagger.

The magic stored in the dagger exploded, blowing the smoke that made up the shadow across the lobby.

The creature flopped to the ground, then the rest of its body lost its definition as the shadowy-smoke dissipated and it disappeared altogether.

"Oh," Leila said. "Yeah, that'll work."

Chase came shooting out of the theater, the pixie hovering over his shoulder. When he saw the creatures he ran toward the chaos.

“Now!” Dusk shouted.

The Night Court fae in the lobby all threw the little glowing orbs commonly used to light up rooms at the remaining monster.

The orbs that landed in the snake lit up its innards. Everywhere the light touched, the monster’s smoky flesh faded away.

Only half gone, the snake swung around to face Dusk and the others.

“Oh no you don’t.” Leila’s eyes glowed purple, and with her jaw clenched, she forged another ward that protected her people.

When did she get this skilled at wards? I saw her practice, but it normally takes more than one fae to keep barriers like this going.

“Again!” Dawn yelled as she threw her own orb.

Since all fae were capable of the low-level spell, the lobby was soon bathed in the glowing light cast by every member of the Night Court present as they pummeled the creature.

The snake tried to strike at Leila again—ramming her shield.

But she held out—though I could see her muscles were shaking.

I retrieved my dagger just as the fae finished off the second monster.

Indigo made the killing blow. She crept around the edge of Leila’s shield and tossed an orb of light that was the size of her head at the monster.

The snake dissipated, leaving no evidence of the monsters behind.

I cut off my magical connection to my sword, instantly shrinking it back into a stowable size. I tucked it back in my boot and sheathed my dagger into my bracer as I looked around the lobby.

The wreckage wasn’t as bad as I had expected.

The monsters had slithered through the front doors and knocked over a stand filled with pamphlets that were strewn across the theater’s sticky carpet, but it seemed that they hadn’t caused any damage to the building—or to the theater’s other customers.

I scanned the area, looking for anything—or anyone—unusual.

Chase was the better investigator—with his nose and his men he was able to cover more ground and at a more thorough pace. I merely killed things. But it had occurred to me that the person who’d hired me for the original contract on Leila might still be trying to kill her.

It seemed odd—why be halfhearted about it?

Regardless, I couldn’t tell Leila—or her people—anything about my

contract due to the geas on me, but I could confirm my own suspicions.

Or I would have liked to, but since only creatures of shadow and smoke had attacked us—and they disappeared, leaving behind no evidence—it was proving to be difficult to suss out the perpetrator.

I stopped scanning when I saw Lady Chrysanthe.

She was standing by the soda dispensers. Though her expression was haughty and her chin was slightly tilted up, she was wringing her hands and her eyes were fastened on Leila.

Is she concerned for Leila? She had a similar expression at the supernatural market, too.

Mulling over the implications, I rejoined Leila.

Chrysanthe did not seem like a threat. I didn't really care what she was up to—or how she felt. But I *did* want to see how Leila was handling this latest attempt on her life.

Chase was already at her side, barking into his earpiece. “Sweep the area—Team Gloom, I want you checking on the theaters—turn on the lights if you have to.”

Leila was speaking with Indigo, her hands clasped together tightly enough to make her fingers white. “—thank you, Indigo. Though I would have been happier if you stayed behind the barrier.”

“I haven't the arm—or the aim—to throw anything over a wall like that.” Indigo frowned up at Leila. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. It's fine,” Leila said.

“Do you need anything?”

Leila gave a gurgle of laughter. “No. If we could just figure out which of those nutcase monarchs is doing this...” She sighed, then forced herself to smile when she saw me.

“Do you want a coffee?” Indigo asked.

Shocked, Leila gaped at her friend. When she recovered, her smile held a hint of its usual sparkle. “A coffee would be great. Thanks, Indigo. And thanks, Rigel, for taking out that first snake.” She and Indigo turned to me.

I shrugged.

They stared at me, clearly expecting words, but I wasn't going to say anything.

I wasn't wholly certain how I felt about Leila.

She amused me, and I'd come to appreciate the chaotic but clever way she lived her life. She'd made more progress with our Court than I thought

possible. I married her because I'd been concerned she'd be our unending, but—as today had proven—she'd turned into a rally point for us fae.

But it wasn't her success in ending the game of power in the Night Court that had me seeing her differently—and it wasn't her friendly personality. I looked at her differently from how I did Dion, after all.

There was something *else* there—and whatever it was, it drove me to protect her without thinking. I wasn't sure how I liked that. I had lived my life with rigid control. It would be dangerous to lose that.

“So, is it just me, or can you teleport?” Leila asked, apparently having decided to nudge the conversation along.

Indigo looked like she was about to march off to order that coffee, but she stopped at that question. “*What?*”

Leila took a step closer to me, and we almost brushed arms when I fixed one of my bracers. “Yeah, Rigel can teleport—or something like that. I thought it was just my slow human eyes, but today I saw him disappear in the shadows and pop out behind the snakes.”

“Teleporting is impossible magic,” Indigo said. “It can only be done by creatures—like your night mares.”

“Then what is it that you do, Rigel?” Leila and Indigo looked expectantly at me.

I shrugged. Everyone who hired me knew what I was capable of. There was no harm in telling them as I wasn't trying to hide my abilities.

“Shadow jumping,” I said. “It's my natural magic.”

Leila's purple eyes widened in interest. “You can jump from shadow to shadow?”

“For short distances, yes,” I said. “It has to be a shadow in my immediate surroundings.”

“No jumping to a mountain shadow that's miles away—got it,” Leila said.

Not knowing any better, Leila accepted my magic. Indigo—being raised in the Night Court—had a better idea just how rare and deadly that particular strain of magic could be.

She stared at me, her eyes slightly magnified by the lenses of her glasses.

I met her gaze, and she hurriedly looked away.

She cleared her throat, then did her best to cheerfully smile at Leila. “I better go rustle up a coffee for you.”

“Thanks, Indigo,” Leila said. “Oh—and—”

“Ahem.”

Indigo and Leila turned to Lady Chrysanthe.

She had positioned herself between the pair—notably as far away as she could get from me while still being part of the circle—and held her folded hands at her waist.

“Good afternoon, Queen Leila. Companion Indigo,” she said.

I had noticed Lady Chrysanthe approaching us from the corner of my eye, but I didn’t think she’d actually speak up—that wasn’t the style of most fae nobles. They were too important to make the first move.

“Hello...Lady Chrysanthe,” Leila slowly said.

“You appear to be uninjured,” Lady Chrysanthe said.

“Yes. Everyone moved so fast, no one was hurt. Though I don’t know if the theater is ever going to let us rent from them again.” Leila laughed, trailing off when no one joined her.

“I see.” Lady Chrysanthe nodded slightly. Eventually she peered in the direction of the concession stands, but she didn’t move on.

Leila looked first to Indigo—who discreetly shrugged—then me.

I blinked back at her. *Cutting off political maneuvers and nonsense is your domain. You’re alone on this one.*

“Are you okay, Lady Chrysanthe?” Leila finally asked.

“Of course.” Lady Chrysanthe frowned at her. “As a daughter of a noble house I could never be injured in such a distasteful scramble.”

Leila opened her mouth and flicked up a finger, her expression alone showing she was going to remind Lady Chrysanthe of the plot her “friend,” Lord Myron, had cooked up against her that nearly resulted in her being killed. She must have thought better of it, though, because she tilted her head, then dropped her hand.

“I’m glad you are unhurt,” Lady Chrysanthe abruptly said. “I was very worried for you.”

It couldn’t have been a lie—she was fae, after all. But the line came out so canned-sounding it was still unbelievable.

Maybe she’s just twisting words? But I can’t feel any animosity coming off her. She really appears relieved—she’s not holding any specific guarding pattern; her muscles aren’t even tensed.

“Thank you, Lady Chrysanthe,” Leila said.

Lady Chrysanthe nodded to her, and as abruptly as she had arrived, she left—her chin high and her movements graceful.

“What is up with her?” Leila waited until the fae lady was on the other side of the lobby before she asked. “Was it just me, or was that weird?”

“She’s an odd one,” Indigo said. “But I don’t think it’s an act.”

Leila snorted. “How can it *not* be an act? She hated my guts just a few weeks ago.” She flicked her eyes up to me. “What do you think, Rigel?”

Do I want to tell her? This is the sort of thing I don’t like getting involved in.

Her eyes were bright with curiosity as she peered up at me, and in the fight with the snakes some of her hair had slipped from its elaborate braid, giving her a slightly disheveled look. It was strangely disarming and made a foreign emotion needle my chest.

I can comfortably blame her appearance for this moment of leniency.

“She no longer appears to hold any animosity for you,” I said.

Leila speculatively watched the lady in question. “I suppose, fae can change alliances in the blink of an eye.”

“I don’t think she’s doing it for political reasons,” Indigo said.

“What makes you say that?” Leila asked.

Realizing we were both staring at her, Indigo blushed slightly. “It’s, it’s the way she’s going about this. She lacks tact and is being kind of awkward. If this were some plan of hers it would be a lot smoother. And it’s just...” She trailed off and shook her head.

“We’ll keep an eye on her,” Leila said. “But I agree with you guys—I don’t think she’s got any tricks up her sleeves. But that almost makes me more worried.” She threw her shoulders back. “Wish me luck. I’m going to go do some PR until I get my coffee.”

“PR?” Indigo asked.

Leila nodded to the humans. “If we ever want to be invited back here, I need to make sure the humans aren’t upset about this. I’ll chat with the movie attendees for a bit and offer to pay for all the damages to the theater once they get a manager down here. Hopefully that won’t set my budget back too badly.”

“In that case, I’ll go get that coffee for you,” Indigo said.

“Thanks, Indigo.” Leila waved to her companion, then turned her hopeful eyes on me. “I don’t suppose you feel like doing PR with me?”

“No.”

She mashed her lips together, and for a moment I thought she might press it.

Try it. I'm not going to let myself be swayed by your eyes for a second time tonight.

Abruptly she sighed, and the fight went out of her. “Yeah, I don’t blame you.” She patted my arm as she passed. “But thank you for killing one of those snakes. And just so you know, I’m totally going to brag about you to all the monarchs next time we see them!”

She was smiling, but it didn’t feel true.

For a moment, I argued with myself—I was *not* a lenient person, and I’d already volunteered more than I normally would have on any given night.

But I’ve come to like her. That’s a rare thing—rare enough that she’s a special existence. No one from the Night Court is going to see me as soft for playing along with her, anyway.

Reluctantly, I said, “If you mention my abs to them, I’m going to skip the next three Court parties.”

Leila laughed, and her smile grew just as I wanted it to. “You drive a hard bargain, Consort. I’ll see what I can do!”

“You could just not mention my abs—how difficult would that be?”

“I suppose you’re right. Your abs are only one of your many charms.” She winked at me, then called out in a louder, attention-grabbing voice that made everyone around us look. “I shall miss you dearly, my love! I count the moments until I get to return to you!”

The fae around us shivered, while the humans “aww”-ed and put on sappy expressions.

Leila grinned deviously at me, then turned to the humans. “I’m sorry about all of this—”

I inhaled and exhaled a little stronger than usual—which is about as expressive as I get since body language can easily be used against you.

She is an unusual queen. But somehow—with all of her strange lies, sharp intellect, and unusual manners, she’s managed to fortify the Night Court. One has to respect her.

She laughed at something one of the humans said, and I fought the very foreign urge to smile.

But respect is all I can offer, I reminded myself. Anything more is too dangerous.

Chapter Thirteen

Leila

Blue Moon jumped a fallen log—which was a bit of fun I could have done without, as I almost got flung onto his neck.

“Hey, guys, please don’t overestimate my riding skills,” I called to the herd of night mares that swarmed around me. “I didn’t even get a full year of jumping lessons, so if we could *not* jump that would be great!”

Blue Moon lined himself up with another fallen tree—they were everywhere in the barely functioning Night Realm—and jumped again.

“Hey!” I yelped after all four of his feet were on the ground and I’d managed to peel myself off his neck. “What did I just say?”

Twilight—who still looked sickly and underweight even though I’d been pouring every kind of food supplement I could find into his grain at night—loosened a typical night mare call that sounded like glass breaking. Due to the unusual musical tone to it, I suspected he was snickering at me.

“You guys are mean,” I grumbled.

Comet pranced next to Blue Moon and threw her head.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” I tried a dramatic sigh, but in the end I grinned at my deadly herd.

I’d just finished another magic lesson with Lord Linus—who was still proving to be a surprisingly skilled instructor—and was taking a few minutes for an early morning ride. Which was sort of disconcerting considering we were cantering around in the Night Realm where it was always night.

The alarm on my cellphone went off, and I gently tugged on the reins.

Blue Moon obediently slowed from a canter to a trot, and then a walk.

I let the reins dangle loosely from one hand as I yanked my cellphone from the front pocket of my light sweater. “Time to call Chase,” I announced to my night mares as I pressed speed dial.

That was part of the bargain: I was free to ride alone as long as I called him every fifteen minutes for a check in. The Night Realm was the only space Chase was willing to let me walk around without an escort.

I think he figured anything stupid enough to try to attack me here would get torn to pieces by the night mares, shades, and glooms.

Which was fair enough. Even the wild versions of my pets had displayed such a positive interest in me that I was fairly sure I was safe. I mean, I kind of doubted much could get past all my pets anyway, much less their wild counterparts.

I pressed my heels down in the saddle stirrups and half raised myself out of the saddle, peering around as I listened to the ringing line.

Sure enough, several wild glooms had come out to investigate us, their eyes glowing in the dim light. When I waved to them they distinctly bowed their heads, then slunk off.

One of the so-homely-they're-almost-cute pigeon-raccoon-griffins narrowly avoided flying into Solstice's flank. Its tiny orange pigeon front feet and racoon back paws scraped the top of Solstice's rear before it got some more air and flew higher.

There are some weird parts about being queen—a fae queen—that I will never get used to.

The line clicked when Chase picked up. “*What’s your position?*” he asked.

“Uhhh, on Blue Moon’s back?” I peered around, squinting in the darkness. My eyes had adjusted, but the night mares had way better night vision than I did. “I can see the barrier over the tree tops, and we rode due east from the castle.”

“Good. Any concerns?”

“Nope. Unless you count dive-bombing pigeon-raccoon-griffins—do you think I should call them piffins, or piggins?”

“I have heard some of the guards refer to them as trash griffins,” Chase said.

“Yuck, I’m not referring to them as trash!”

“Because you intend to turn them into pets?”

“I don’t know. They puke too much for me to really want to bring them inside the mansion.”

“I see. Any other concerns?”

“Nah. My lesson went well, all in all I’m pretty psyched. Another fifteen minutes, and the night mares and I will come on back.”

“Excellent,” Chase said. *“I’ll have a team waiting for—”*

A rumbling noise rolled over the land—it was loud, like crashing rocks.

The night mares threw their heads and shrieked—though Blue Moon very thoughtfully refrained from moving.

“Shoot—the wards,” I cursed.

“*What’s going on?*” Chase asked.

“The wards are failing—the realm is going to shrink if I can’t supplement its power. I’ll call you back!”

“*Wait, Queen Leila—*”

I ignored Chase and ended the call, then crammed the phone back in my pocket. “Get me to the barrier,” I shouted to the night mares as I shortened my reins.

The magical equines bolted, moving like shadows.

I had to hold on for dear life and trust the night mares as they galloped at their top speed. I closed my eyes from the whipping wind, and I clamped my legs around Blue Moon’s sides.

When I felt the gelding start to slow down, I started blinking, trying to clear my vision. I flung myself off his back before he came to a complete stop and landed with a stagger.

My sense of direction was swirling because we’d left the trees far behind and popped out in what looked like a long-abandoned farm field, but I saw the one thing that mattered most: the wards.

Constructed of pale yellow magic held together by the fae symbols and letters burnt into it, the ward marked the Night Realm’s property line. The symbols and letters were the bones of the massive spell previous generations had cast to keep back the toxic force that had torn through the fae realm and ravaged its lands.

I don’t know if it was because so many years had passed, or because magic was dying off, but the ward spell weakened occasionally, and the toxic forces outside pushed it in, claiming precious acreage and laying waste to it.

Even now, through the barrier, I could see the continuation of the farm field into the toxic area.

The soil on the other side of the barrier looked gray, and as dry as dust. The air was hazy and clouded with smoke. There was no plant life, only destruction.

“*Astrum!*” I shouted, making my prism ignite with magic.

Because of all the frequent attacks, I’d taken a leather bracelet and used it to tie the crystal to the underside of my wrist—that way I wouldn’t have to bother pulling it out since it just needed contact with my skin to be used.

Normally, I'd have been pretty psyched that it worked, but the stakes were too high for me to give it more than a split thought.

The night mares shrieked behind me as I started pouring magic into the wards.

Since the barrier's spell was intact, all I had to do was add my power to it, strengthening it as the spell weakened and sputtered.

I planted my hands on the barrier, which heated my hands even as my purple magic spilled into the spell, mingling with the soft yellow light.

I could tell I was doing a better job than the first time I had tried this, during the summer.

My magic came much faster, and now that I knew ward spells like the back of my hand, I knew exactly how to channel magic through my prism.

The barrier flickered, the glowing symbols on it alternating between scorching with magic and dying to a dim flicker.

No. I'm not giving up any more land.

I set my shoulders and dragged more magic through my prism.

My purple magic now liberally coated the section of wall in front of me.

But it was a drop in the bucket.

The ward enclosed the entire Night Realm. My bits of magic were swirling down the length of the barrier, but I couldn't pour magic in fast enough. I might be able to fortify a small section of the ward, but it was too big. I'd never be able to fortify the whole thing.

I peered up and down the length of the wall, my heart squeezing painfully when I saw the yellow magic shake and tremble.

This is impossible. There's no way I could ever pour enough magic into it to power the whole barrier.

"No!" I screamed.

I leaned into my palms, as if I could pour more magic in through sheer will, but my powers were starting to falter.

Just like it had in the parking lot at the market, magic flowed through my prism at a slower and slower rate.

"Come on—I need more magic!" I shouted.

The barrier shook under my hands, and the rumbling grew louder and louder as the black smog on the other side of the barrier pushed.

The magic wall shoved me back about a horse length, almost pushing me off my feet when I locked my knees.

"No! Not again! I've practiced so much—I *won't* let it happen again!" I

shouted, my voice hoarse.

The barrier vibrated, and it hurt my hands to touch it. Pressing my shoulder into it, I ignored the pain. I tried yanking on more magic, but it barely trickled through my prism now.

My purple magic had spread farther down the barrier, but it was a pathetic distance compared to what it needed to be.

No—no! I vowed I wouldn't let this happen again! I can't!

“Leila!”

Someone grabbed me by the arm and yanked me backwards. “We have to run!” It was Lord Linus. He dragged me off, pulling me away from the barrier.

“I can't!” I shouted. “I can't let us lose any more land! I have to support the ward!”

“You aren't strong enough!” His callous but true words ripped my heart open.

“I have to try!” I argued.

“Not if it's going to get you killed! Ready, Chase?”

I tried to yank my arms from Lord Linus's grip, and even managed to elbow him in the throat, but he somehow managed to throw me up to Chase—who was mounted on Fax.

“Chase, put me down—*now!*” I snarled.

“Forgive me, Queen Leila, but you *have* to leave. It's not safe.” Chase wheeled Fax around.

“But I'm the queen—I have to protect this realm!” I tried to wriggle free, but Chase, with his werewolf strength, had an iron grip.

I would have considered using magic on him, but when he'd become my director of security I'd outfitted him with every anti-magic charm, potion, and talisman I could find. The guy was practically a walking anti-magic blanket.

I looked back at the magic barrier and saw it tremble. The ground shook, and the wall started collapsing inward. “*No!*”

Chase heeled Fax, and the gelding took off, the night mares effortlessly surging around him.

The sun stallion was a blazing spot of light in the endless stretch of the Night Realm, as he fearlessly galloped on, illuminating everything around us.

We rode for what felt like forever, and the whole time the barrier shrunk behind us, giving up land to the toxic air on the other side of the barrier,

which incinerated what little life remained in the realm.

We passed the ruined skeleton of a cabin—marked out by timbers, a half-caved in roof, and a door that hung off its hinges.

When the barrier passed over it and the toxic air on the other side touched it, it turned to dust and caved in.

I was crying by the time we stopped, my heart breaking.

I failed. We lost land—so much land.

I watched in misery as the ward finally ground to a halt behind us, the wall once again strong and bright.

But it didn't matter. The realm hadn't just lost a bit of land. The diameter of the barrier had shrunk horribly, and we'd lost *acres* of the realm.

I slipped off Fax's back once Chase let me go and was only vaguely aware that Lord Linus circled around us, riding Twilight.

My knees gave out, and I sat down on the ground hard.

"I couldn't stop it," I whispered. "I was supposed to—I *have* to. And I couldn't stop it. I couldn't do anything."

"Leila, this isn't your fault." Lord Linus knelt in front of me. "The degradation of the Night Realm has been going on for decades—you can't expect to come in and in a matter of months be able to hold up the wards!"

I slowly shook my head. "It doesn't matter how much I practice. I'll never be able to stop it. I'm not powerful enough, and my artifact won't work for me." I turned to the night mares, who were all ringed around us. "Why did you choose me? You should have chosen someone who could have *stopped* this!"

Chase dismounted Fax and stood near Lord Linus and me. "Yes, she's unharmed—but she's upset. Tell Rigel, and come as soon as you can," he rumbled into his phone.

I shook my head, unable to reckon with this ugly truth.

I'd been daring enough to take on the Night Court. I was crazy enough to think I could one day outmaneuver the other Courts before I died of old age. But this...there was no escaping the bitter truth.

I'd never be able to save the Night Realm. No amount of scheming and plotting could.

I was going to fail at the most important part of my duties.

Lord Linus gently touched my shoulder. "Leila?"

I tipped forward, slumping against Lord Linus.

He smoothed my hair and rocked me slightly. "It's okay, Leila. You did

great. You're an amazing queen," he said.

I shut my eyes, holding in tears that made my face burn. *No. I'm not any kind of queen at all.*

* * *

Late that night, I sat in my bedroom, rolling my prism back and forth across my palms.

My alarm clock read 2:58 am. I'd said my goodnights to Skye and Indigo sometime around midnight—they'd spent the majority of the day with me, trying to encourage me after I'd gotten back from the Night Realm.

But my initial estimation hadn't been off. According to my aides and officials, this was the largest land shrinkage the Night Realm had seen in fifty years.

And I couldn't do a thing to stop it.

Indigo and Skye had tried to put a positive spin on it and pointed out it might have been worse without my support, but I wasn't fooled.

I saw how much of the spell my purple magic had covered. It was *miniscule* in comparison to what it needed to be.

I sighed and paced back and forth in front of my bed. I'd tried exercising and then soaking in my bathtub—which was practically big enough to swim in—but while I was mentally exhausted, the bitter knowledge of my failure kept me up and moving.

Kevin and Steve were sitting on their two giant dog beds. When I stopped to turn around in front of them, Kevin sighed and Steve whined.

I paused long enough to pet each one of them, then went back to pacing.

Muffin was sitting on my bed, looking generally crabby as I passed her. She purred easily enough when I scratched under her chin, but when I went back to my pacing, she growled and flicked her tail.

The lights were mostly off in my room—I still had my bathroom lights on, but I hadn't wanted to disturb the glooms and shades in case they wanted to sleep—so it was pretty dark.

I glanced at the door separating my room from Rigel's.

A thin line of light was visible in the small slit between the door and the

flooring.

Rigel was up.

He'd been up ever since he'd entered his room at about one—I'd heard his door open and close and saw the lights flick on.

There was something comforting about knowing I wasn't the only one up.

I paused in front of the door and reluctantly reached out and rested my hand on the knob. "Rigel?" I was pretty sure he could hear me through the door—fae had better hearing than humans and halves like me—but I still opened the door slowly.

Rigel was standing over by his couch—which was covered in daggers, darts, knives, and arrows. A large chest was positioned next to the couch, and he placed the dagger he'd been cleaning back in the chest, then flicked his eyes in my direction.

"I saw you were up, and I just..." I trailed off, not really sure what else to say.

Rigel picked up another dagger and started cleaning it. "You can't sleep?"

I shrugged. "I can't stop thinking about the barrier."

"You're still upset?"

"Well, *yeah!* I failed the whole Court! I'm not just going to forget about it," I snapped.

Rigel stared blankly at me.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm sorry—you didn't mean it like that." I popped my eyes open and forced myself to smile.

Rigel picked up an arrow and inspected it. "There's nothing to apologize for. I am surprised—though I should have known better by now. You are different."

"What does that mean?" I stood awkwardly in the threshold of his bedroom and leaned against the doorframe.

"It means any other monarch would have found a way to blame someone else, or shrugged it off by now. But you genuinely care. It's why you do so many unexpected things."

"Thanks. I think." I glanced back over my shoulder at the unbearable darkness of my room and cleared my throat. "If you're going to be up for a while, could I—um—hang out with you?" I hated the way my voice sounded hopeful and went up at the end.

Rigel gestured to his bed.

I fidgeted. “Uhhh...?”

“You’ll have to sit on my bed,” Rigel clarified. “All other spaces are taken.” He motioned to the small armory spread around him.

I picked my way across his room and hopped up on the bed. He had a pile of pillows nestled against the headboard. I rearranged a few to lean into and prop me up.

“Are all these chests filled with weapons?” I asked.

Rigel loaded a bolt into a crossbow and checked it before unloading it and putting the bolt in the chest. “Mostly. They’re not all mine, though.”

“How does that work?”

“At least half of them are pieces from my family lines. I decided it was better to bring them here than leave them at the family house since I will no longer be in residence there,” Rigel said.

“And all your family members are deceased?”

“Yes.”

“Ahh.” I wriggled deeper into the pillows and watched Rigel at work.

Muffin came inside a minute later.

She almost knocked a dagger off an end table, but a look from Rigel was enough to discourage her.

Steve and Kevin came in shortly after that. They sniffed around but settled on a rug by the foot of the bed.

An hour ticked past, and Rigel had almost finished putting all of his weapons back in the chest.

There was something soothing about watching him work, even if he was as silent as a shadow.

The cheerful light of the room and the warmth of the pillows had me yawning as he started on the last remaining item—a quiver of arrows.

“Thank you,” I said, breaking the silence of the room.

Rigel gently pulled the arrows from the quiver, then glanced in my direction. “For?”

“For letting me stay in here.” I paused, unsure if I should continue. “And for helping and supporting me. I didn’t really think we’d ever be like this.”

Although his facial expression didn’t change, a mischievous light glittered in Rigel’s eyes. “You never pictured curling up in an assassin’s bed while he cleaned his weapons nearby? How disappointing.”

I gave the obligatory chuckle.

“I support you because I can see what you’re trying to accomplish for the

Court, and everyone can see that you care about the fae. That's something *I* didn't expect." He cleaned an arrow and slid it back into the quiver.

"Maybe, but this has turned out drastically different from what I told you it would be like when we got married," I said. "I know it's your choice, but I still appreciate it. I'm glad you said yes."

"To marriage?"

"Yeah."

Rigel put the last arrow in the quiver. He stowed it, then shut the trunk.

When he left the chest where it was and started to saunter across the room, I made myself sit up.

That's my cue. He probably wants to be done for the night.

"Thanks for letting me—"

Rigel interrupted me. "You can stay."

I blinked. "What?"

"If it really does help, you can stay."

We stared at each other for a very fragile moment, and I wasn't sure how to react.

Despite all of my trolling, we'd kept a pretty strong line between us. His invitation to stay wasn't really crossing that line, but it moved it.

We were married, but Rigel wasn't romantically interested in me. I was pretty sure I could do the salsa with daggers—a thing he *was* deeply interested in—strapped over every inch of me and he wouldn't even twitch.

But this invitation was almost a bigger deal. He wasn't just supporting me, in a way he was letting me in.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes." Rigel slapped my feet as he passed by. "As long as you *stay* on that side of the bed."

I knew how to deal with joking, that put us back on familiar territory. "Oh come on. I'm not going to ravish you in your sleep." I rolled my eyes as I rearranged the pillows for sleeping.

"You have an obsession for my abdominals," Rigel said. "I'm not taking any chances."

He met my gaze, and I cracked—laughing in a night I didn't think it would be possible to find joy in.

I slid my feet under the covers. "You're a pretty perfect consort, Rigel."

"I don't know that anyone else would agree with you."

"That doesn't matter. *I* think so, and you're *my* consort," I said.

Rigel lay down on the top of his bed, still fully clothed.

Considering the time I'd busted into his room in the early morning and he'd been shirtless, maybe he really was worried I was going to try something.

I grinned, and my eyelids slowly shut.

The endless tirade in my mind that reminded me of the day's horrible failure quieted, and I drifted off, thinking that it really was better to be with someone than alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Rigel

I'd been fairly certain there was no way Leila was going to stay on her side of the bed.

I'd heard enough of her restless sleeping habits through the walls—she kicked at her covers, rolled across her mattress, and moved around a lot—to know better.

What I *hadn't* expected was that she would creep her way across the mattress and burrow down in the covers half underneath me.

Between using the blankets and my body, she'd made a cave for herself. Only the top of her head poked out of the blankets, and she'd snuggled into me and pressed her head into the bottom of my jaw and my neck.

I glanced at the window. Even though I had heavy draperies, I could see the light around the edges. It had to be mid-morning by now.

And even though the queen had invaded my space within an hour of falling asleep, I hadn't woken her up.

Why not?

The answer was pretty simple: because I didn't want to.

She'd looked wrecked the day before. The failure of the wards had all but debilitated her.

I'd been surprised she'd taken it that hard.

It's only the second ward failure she's been in power for, and it's an incredibly difficult thing to withstand.

The other Courts only managed to minimize the loss when their barriers failed. As far as I had heard in the whispers of rumors, Queen Rime was the only one who managed to hold her barrier strong, and that's because her siblings—the Winter monarchs in other North American regions—came and helped her.

Leila was trying—which is more than I expected after the rule of Queen Nyte.

That had to be the reason why I was willing to support her—and play

along with the little jokes she liked to make. She was a legitimately good monarch. Although, yes, I found her amusing to spend time with on a daily basis as well.

It helps that she's clever. I don't mind doing a few small acts if the payout is an interesting life.

There was a faint part of my mind that understood that despite the fact Leila liked to burrow like a fox, the night had been one of the most peaceful few hours I'd experienced in a long time.

But as I'd always known, those kinds of thoughts were dangerous. It was an easy thing to identify them as such and silence them, but the process was greatly aided by a giant wolf head.

One of the shades—Kevin, I think—rested his head on the mattress and soulfully watched me.

The shade wagged his tail like a dog, even though he was roughly the size of a small pony and looked capable of biting a man in half.

He whined in the back of his throat and licked his chops.

I shook my head.

Kevin set a paw on the bed and whined again.

“You wake her up, then,” I said.

Kevin slid his paw off the mattress and sighed.

Why am I fighting with a dog?

There was a quiet knock—not on my door, but hers.

Must be Indigo or one of her people.

The door creaked when it opened, and the tap of steps crossed her room. The footsteps hurried through her room, then left as abruptly as they came.

It really must be late if someone came to look for her—though she is an early riser.

I wasn't going to extend myself to notify them of her presence. She'd either wake up, or they'd eventually figure it out. The staff's stress levels were hardly my concern anyway.

Whispered voices filled the hallway, but they were muffled through the doors, and I couldn't quite make them out.

The mattress dipped as the gloom, Muffin, jumped on top and sauntered up to Leila and me.

I would have rolled away, except as I started to move, Leila popped an arm out of her cave of blankets. She grabbed on to my shirt, loosely holding it.

Yes. An interesting life.

Muffin—her mouth open and panting—breathed on me with breath that stank of fish. She licked the top of Leila’s head, arousing only the faintest noise from her victim, then turned with the clear intention of giving me the same treatment.

I stared the oversized cat down.

She flicked her tail back and forth then grumbled in her throat as she turned around and hopped off the bed, hitting the floor with a thump.

I shifted, intending to see if I could slide my shirt from Leila’s grasp. As soon as I moved, she tightened her grasp and burrowed deeper so she was almost entirely underneath me.

I was pondering my new position when footsteps pounded up the hallway.

Someone flung my door open—without even *knocking*.

“We can’t find her!” the faun, Eventide, shrieked.

Indigo elbowed her way past him. “Sorry to interrupt your sleep, Consort Rigel, but the queen is missing!”

“We’ve looked everywhere—someone’s taken her!” Eventide moaned. “She’s not answering her cellphone, and Chase can’t find any trace of her leaving the premises.”

“Maybe she went to visit her parents, we should call them,” Indigo said.

Eventide nodded vigorously as he yanked his cellphone out of his pocket and started tapping away on it. “I’ll send Chase a message suggesting such.”

I stayed in my bed, waiting for one of them to actually *look* and see the unlikely menagerie that had taken up residence in my room, but neither seemed inclined to do so.

“But her truck is here—as are the night mares—or I’d say maybe she left for a coffee shop.” Indigo tapped her foot on the floor.

“But this is Queen Leila—there is a very distinct possibility she befriended a wild night mare and has gotten a ride from it,” Eventide said.

It is a little maddening that they barge into my room without hesitation considering my reputation. They fear Leila’s absence more than they fear facing me, I reflected.

The second shade joined the far side of my mattress and wagged its tail as it peered at me. It whined, finally getting Indigo’s and Eventide’s attention.

Their eyes, wide with curiosity, flicked from the shades to me.

I sat up—being careful not to crush Leila under me—revealing the

queen's headful of eye-catching black hair.

Indigo sagged with relief. "Thank goodness—she's here. Tell Chase that she's here."

Eventide briefly planted a hand on his chest. "My heart is beating again—it was terrifying to search her empty room, you know."

Indigo fanned her face with her hand. "I didn't know what we would have done—but it's okay. She's safe."

The duo glanced back at me, but I was finished with the peep show.

"Out," I said.

To my pleasure, they both turned pale and fled, leaving so fast they slammed the door behind them.

I haven't completely lost my touch.

Leila stirred, then popped her face above the blanket line and yawned. "Something wrong?" she sleepily asked.

I watched her for a moment. "No."

"M'kay." She pulled her other arm out of the blankets and stretched. "Good morning."

I pushed off the bed, giving her more space to stretch. "Good morning. Feeling better?"

"Yeah. I'm still disappointed, but I can't really sit around and mope forever, or things will just get worse." She rubbed her eyes then blearily opened them as she smiled up at me.

I was unwilling to move away from my bed—it was oddly peaceful to look at her like this. "Focus on the next thing," I advised.

"Is that how you got through all of the trouble in the Night Court—with the previous rulers and everything?"

I nodded.

"Hmm. It's good advice. But my brain is a little too addled to remember what's next." She sat up in bed and frowned, her forehead wrinkling deeply. "Wasn't I supposed to sleep on the other side of the bed?"

"You were," I acknowledged. "Once you were asleep you didn't seem to care much for the rules—such a surprise considering your *obedient* day time persona."

That got a grin from her.

"And the next thing you should probably most focus on," I continued, "is the annual hunt."

"Ugh, that thing. It's in about a week, isn't it?"

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. Are you going to come for that?” Her hair was silky and soft, but all the blankets had mussed it a bit. She was trying to push it back behind her shoulders, but it still spilled around her.

I had the strange desire to reach out and brush at some of the lines her mashed pillow had left creased on her cheek, but I strangled it. “Yes, I’ll come,” I said.

There was no way I was going to miss the hunt.

Not because I cared about the results—no. But because I was interested in seeing just how my mischievous queen would next bait the other monarchs.

Chapter Fifteen

Leila

Although the annual hunt had all the trappings of a fun and beautiful event, I was pretty sour as I adjusted my riding glove and picked up my helmet.

Indigo took one look at my face. “Don’t you look just jubilant. Am I to interpret by your puckered face that you disapprove of hunting?”

“No, not really,” I said. “My dad hunts every year, and every Wisconsin kid knows deer will have huge over-population problems without hunting. But *that* kind of hunting and *this* sort of hunt are two totally different things.”

“Then it’s the chase you are dissatisfied with?” Skye asked.

Since the hunt was just for royals, both she and Indigo were dressed seasonably for this mid-October weather with bright blue sweaters. Skye was wearing a gray-colored knit cap, while Indigo had chosen a complimentary shade of purple.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I can’t say I’m super excited about the idea of running after a poor creature until it drops from exhaustion.”

“It is a common-held feeling about fox hunts here in the USA,” Skye acknowledged. “Most fox hunts here are called fox chases because the actual purpose of the hunt is typically to chase the fox until it returns to its burrow. Unfortunately, the annual hunt is more in the ancient tradition, which is why it ends when the prey is slain.”

I let my helmet dangle from my fingertips as I tried not to openly shiver. *And yet again I really, really believe these monarchs need better hobbies. Or they should just be working. I cannot, for the life of me, figure out how they have all this free time! I mean, what the heck?!*

“You can release it, though,” Indigo piped in. “Queen Verdant of the Spring Court wins most years, and she always releases the prey.”

I brightened. “Really?”

“Yep.” Indigo nodded and impatiently pushed her curtain of red hair over her shoulders.

I relaxed. “That’s fantastic. Good for Queen Verdant. I never would have

guessed she had a kind bone in her body, but that just goes to show me!”

Indigo and Skye exchanged glances.

“Well...” Skye slowly started.

Before she could continue a few dryads emerged from the trees, bearing gleaming trumpets.

“Anyone want to take bets that King Fell arrived?” I asked.

The dryads blew the trumpets, and yep, King Fell came striding through the trees.

He was extra festive today, with some kind of bronze paint or makeup artfully swirled around his eyes and his temples. He was more armored-up today, too, since he was wearing a fancy bronze chestplate, copper colored pauldrons covering his shoulders, and leather bracers that covered his forearms.

The King of Summer, Birch, with quiet Consort Flora, were just behind him. The Summer duo were dressed in long sleeved tunics that were a bright blue in color, though it had fancy golden leaf embroidery, and they also wore leather doublets over their tunics.

Huh. I wonder if hunting “accidents” are common based on the way everyone is dressed?

I was really starting to regret my choice of a breathable long-sleeved shirt—and before my fashion choices get questioned let me stress just how much work it actually is to ride. The chances that I was going to be a sweaty mess once this was all over were really high.

I glanced at Queen Rime—she and her underlings had already set up shop in the nature preserve we were holding the hunt in by the time I had arrived. At the moment, she was lounging on a pile of white furs under a gauzy white tent her people had built for her. She was wearing a gorgeous blue and gray dress that seemed like it was going to be a pain to ride in, and I didn’t see her mounts anywhere near her tent.

The Day King’s people had built a tent for him nearby, as well. His was bright and golden and was much bigger—it probably had to be, because King Solis stood under its awnings not by himself, but with five sun stallions that all nickered and perked their ears as they pressed into their clearly adored ruler.

For the record, King Solis was also wearing a sort of minimalist kind of armor—a gold chestplate and metal wrist bracers.

“I find it interesting that everyone is apparently concerned about

protecting vital organs, but it seems like—once again—I’m going to be the only person smart enough to wear a helmet,” I said.

Indigo shushed me.

“The day of the hunt has arrived—and such a perfect day for a hunt it is!” King Fell laughed as his trumpeters retreated and some more of his servants scrambled forward, hurriedly erecting a tent just behind him.

Other summer servants were similarly building one for Birch and Flora.

Skye had mentioned something about tents, but I thought even the fae couldn’t possibly want to act that asinine and lounge around like French nobles just before the revolution. It seems I overestimated them.

“Good day to you, Queen Rime,” King Birch said. Behind him, Flora curtsied.

Queen Rime flicked her eyes up from the book she was reading. “Good day.”

King Birch scoffed at me and turned his back to me, so I was surprised when Consort Flora gave me a small curtsy.

“Good day, Queen Leila,” she said in a soft but pleasant voice.

King Birch whipped around to stare at her.

I was half prepared to throw my helmet at him if he yelled at her or something, but all he did was stare at her. I smiled. “Good day, Consort Flora. Are you joining the hunt today?”

Consort Flora shook her head. “My presence is not required.”

“Huh.” I rested my hand on my hip and glanced at Skye. “Did we tell Rigel that? I just assumed he had to come.”

“Consort Rigel is aware,” Skye said. “He opted himself to ride with you.”

Very briefly, King Birch’s ruddy complexion turned pale.

Ah, I thought with satisfaction. Maybe I don’t have to worry about wearing armor. Having Rigel riding around me should be a good deterrent!

“Ahh yes, where is Consort Rigel?” King Fell asked with a bit of a sneer as he finally deigned to look in my direction.

“Here,” Rigel said, stepping out of the shadows behind Fell with my seven shades—Kevin, Steve, Bob, Larry, Barbra, Mary, and Tom—whom he’d taken off for a quick bathroom break since they seemed to make Queen Rime’s servants upset.

Fell managed to keep his expression calm, but he revealed his touch of fear based on how fast he swung around to face Rigel.

Surrounded by flickering shades and wearing his assassin coat, Rigel

looked exceedingly deadly today.

Larry and Bob peeled their lips back, baring their stained teeth at Fell and Birch as they obediently followed after Rigel, who slipped between the two rulers on his way back to me.

“You’re going to use *those* monsters in the hunt?” King Birch sputtered.

I frowned. “Yeah. They’re dogs.”

“You won’t be able to control them!”

“Sure I can. We’ve been working on obedience ever since they came to live in the mansion. Watch.” I snapped my fingers, and my shades all looked to me. “Sit.”

Obediently, they sat.

A few of the over exuberant shades—Tom and Barbra specifically—couldn’t help but enthusiastically wag their tails as they watched me.

“Down,” I said.

The shades dropped to their bellies.

“You’re so good! Who are good puppies—you are!” I went down the line, petting each shade so none of them would feel left out.

King Fell watched in disgust. “Wild creatures such as shades cannot be trained. They are almost certainly biding their time so they can turn on you.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re just jealous.”

“You cannot possibly think you can control them when they scent the prey,” King Fell said.

I sighed deep in my throat, which made my shades all peer at King Fell. Their eyes were slightly narrowed and their ears were flicked to the side in what I thought of as their “judgy” pose, because they were usually hardcore judging whoever they were looking at. But when I thought about it, they probably looked pretty scary to those who didn’t know them, because Consort Flora backed up and hid behind King Birch.

“If you insist on using them, I will not be held culpable if one gets injured because it goes mad in the hunt,” King Birch said.

“What creatures are you using that are oh-so-superior, then?” I asked.

“We *honor* the ancient tradition of the hunt and use hounds,” King Fell said.

“This hunt is not an ancient tradition.” Queen Rime turned a page in her book. “You were the one who founded it.”

“Yes, because we’re following the traditions of our ancestors, who were known for their hunts,” King Fell snarled.

“Ooh, someone’s defensive,” I told Mary as I scratched her throat for her.

King Solis finally left the adoration of his horses and joined us in the meadow. “Well met, King Fell, King Birch, and Consort Flora.”

The usual round of unnecessarily wordy greetings were exchanged between the Day King and the other monarchs.

“Hey, Solis, what animals are you using in the hunt?” I asked when it was all over.

“Hounds,” Solis supplied. “And my sun stallions, of course. Most of us will ride sun stallions—they’re best suited for this sort of thing.”

“Makes sense,” I said.

King Birch sputtered. “You dare refer to King Solis without his title?”

“Because he’s my *friend*, yeah,” I said.

King Fell narrowed his eyes. “Do not ever endeavor to refer to me without the respect of my title.”

“No problems there,” I assured him. “I would *never* mistake you for a friend.”

King Solis made a hacking sound that seemed suspiciously musical like his laugh. “Queen Verdant hasn’t arrived, yet, has she?”

“She’ll be here,” King Fell declared. “The hunt cannot proceed without her.”

King Solis sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes, I suppose.”

Rigel had gone back to the night mares, and returned with a bundle of black. When he gestured for me to come closer, I curiously wandered up to him.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No. Just a precaution.” Rigel tugged the black cloth over my head.

It was actually a leather doublet with quilted padding. Fancy silver buckles connected the back and front half, and made it easy for Rigel to fit the long, vest-like clothing item to my body.

“Do you think I need to worry about getting shot at—or another attack?” I asked him in a lowered voice.

Rigel adjusted the buckles, cinching the doublet tight. “We are with the other monarchs—who are dangerous,” he said. “But I’ll be with you.”

And with that one sentence, my rapidly spiking anxiety dropped.

“How does it fit?” he asked.

I moved my shoulders and tried twisting at the waist. “It feels great.”

“It has several protection spells on it, but it would be best not to test

them,” Rigel said.

“That’s fine. It looks like everyone has either a bow or a crossbow.” I glanced back at the other monarchs, who were still clustered together. “Obviously they didn’t hear about the time I nearly shot Lady Chrysanthe.”

“You brought your pistol?” Rigel asked.

“Yep! Skye helped me find a way to hide it in the fancy tack of my saddle.”

Skye slightly bowed her head when Rigel glanced at her. “Chase helped,” she said. “He was highly motivated to have Queen Leila properly armed.”

“Good,” Rigel said. A breeze brushed his silvery hair. “Just don’t shoot Fell because he irritates you.”

“That’s a really difficult promise, but I’ll try.”

I happened to glance over at the monarchs and had to do a double take when I noticed Spring was approaching them.

Barely recognizable with a dull brown tunic that would let her blend in with the forest, and her beautiful blond hair tied back in a no-nonsense knot tied low on her neck, Queen Verdant strode toward the other monarchs.

Like me, she held a black helmet, and she wore knee-high black riding boots.

“Whoa,” I whistled. “Someone is serious about winning this hunt.”

Skye’s forehead wrinkled. “Yes. She is well motivated.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Queen Verdant, I am so very happy to see you have finally arrived,” King Fell said. “You certainly took your time.”

Queen Verdant slowly tipped her head to the Autumn King. “King Fell,” she said, her voice husky and rough.

I glanced at Skye, who nodded encouragingly at me, then meandered up to the other monarchs. “Do we get started now?” I asked.

“Not hardly,” King Birch sniffed. “The prey must be brought here.”

Birch and Fell had done an extra good job of annoying me today, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch to force a bright expression for what I had planned next. “We have some time, then? Excellent! Oh Rigel!” I called in a sing song voice.

“If you start to praise his abs or the width of his shoulders or rattle on about artists and portraits being unable to properly capture his glory, I will retch on you,” King Fell grumbled.

“Fret not, King Fell.” I rubbed my hands together as I eagerly started

rolling out the bait.

This is going to make him squeal.

“I’ve turned over a new leaf,” I said.

“Have you?” King Birch said with disinterest.

“Yes.” I planted a hand over my heart. “I realized that by focusing on his admirable—yes, even beautiful—physical traits, I was doing a disservice to Rigel. One might have thought the only thing I valued about him was his physical appearance.”

I waited until I saw King Fell relax slightly, then I struck. “Because I love him for so much more than that! The nobility of his temperament, the loyalty of his personality—and he is dead charming. That doesn’t even touch how skilled he is at fighting and magic—and so knowledgeable, too!”

King Solis stared at me as if I was a creature he’d never seen before, but I thought I saw Consort Flora’s lips briefly twitch—in a smile or a frown I wasn’t sure.

“And he is very thoughtful,” I continued, glancing at Fell out of the corner of my eye to see if I’d flummoxed him yet. “And attentive—he is truly a dream husband. I can’t even say I’m sorry that I’m bragging, because I’m not! No one will ever be able to silence me because of my great, overwhelming love for him—which I just can’t help!” I gave the dreamiest sigh I could muster—which I’d actually been practicing in my bathroom for the past two weeks.

I snuck a peek at Fell and Birch again.

Bingo—their brains are broken.

I tried not to smirk as the two gaped at me, their faces warring between horror and disbelief, which put a crack in their otherwise stunning looks.

Past them, Queen Rime merely rolled her eyes as she took a porcelain teacup from a servant.

“Yes, I am a lovesick fool for Rigel.” I smiled up at Rigel. “Isn’t that right, bae?”

Rigel stared down at me for a moment, and then proceeded to make my heart explode.

He wrapped one arm around my waist, then gently kissed me on the temple.

King Fell made a choking noise. King Birch did, too, but I barely heard them over the thundering of my heart.

Why? Why? Why? Why?

The thought zoomed through my brain in an endless loop.

What was that?!

I was so startled my smile had thankfully remain etched on my lips. I leaned into him—I wasn't sure if it was because of shock or...shock—and rested my hand on his chest.

Of course *his* heartbeat was normal. Hah!

It's fine. Totally fine. I mean, I guess a gesture of affection makes sense? It's not like he can lie with me. He probably thought this was the best thing he could do to help me to keep up my lovebirds joke.

I still couldn't look up at him—I risked blushing like a Christmas light.

I'll ask him about it. Later. A lot later—once I can ask without my insides cramping up like I'm in high school.

I glanced at the other monarchs.

Verdant's face was stretched in a grimace like a mask from Halloween. King Birch appeared to have died standing upright. Consort Flora's face was a blank mask, although she glanced at her husband when a wheezing noise escaped his throat.

King Fell's forehead was wrinkled, and his eyebrows were raised halfway up to his hairline. His eyes traveled ceaselessly from Rigel's face to mine, and he absently shook his head, rejecting our act.

I cleared my throat. "Yes. Thank you, darling. I love you, too."

I was trying to figure out how I could extract myself from this sticky situation, when a long note was blown on a single horn.

The horn bearer kept blowing—it looked like his instrument was made from the ringed horn of an animal. The noise it produced felt ancient and magical, and it made my bones shift in my body.

A servant—someone from the Spring Court based on the flowers woven through her hair—led a massive white stag through the meadow.

It was easily the size of a horse, though it more resembled a reindeer. Its antlers were enormous and beautiful, and its coat looked as fine as silk.

"Ahh, the prey has arrived." King Fell shook off his disbelief and put a smirk on.

I stepped out of Rigel's arm and let my hands slide off his chest. "*That's the prey?*"

"Yes," King Birch said.

Every alarm bell I had was going off inside me.

The white stag was too big and beautiful to be a normal creature, it had to

be of fae origins. There was no way the brightness of its eyes was an accident, either—it was *smart*. Like my shades and glooms.

“No. No way. Nope. I’m out,” I said.

King Fell raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re afraid?”

I pointed at the stag as it was led into the forest—like a lamb to the slaughter. “That creature is *intelligent*. It’s not just—no! You can’t kill something like that!”

King Birch shrugged. “It’s tradition.”

“I don’t care if the skies opened up and the last elf ever seen descended from the clouds to give their blessing on the hunt—I’m not doing this!”

“You don’t have a choice,” King Fell said.

“What, you think you can *make me*?” I scoffed.

“I can, actually,” King Fell said. “You are the weakest Court—and monarch—here. Do you think you’re the only one that’s reluctant to join? Your counterpart is nearly as much of a do-good-er as you.” He curled his lips back in a sneer as he glanced at King Solis.

“You’re not going to risk a fight over a hunt,” I said.

“You overestimate my good will, Queen Leila,” King Fell said. “I’d do *exactly* that. Autumn is my time—my reign. I’ll do whatever I please, and make you go along with me.”

I felt Skye’s worried eyes on me, and Indigo slightly shook her head, terror flashing in her eyes.

It seems Fell really is that ego-centric that he’d bring ruin just because I refuse to play his little games.

I glanced up at Rigel.

My consort leaned forward and murmured, “While Birch and Fell usually opt to kill the stag, Verdant and Solis release it.”

He was giving me an out—a reason to participate in an event I already despised.

I wanted to scream. *I hate that the fae are like this. I hate that they have this never quenched desire for power that makes them do despicable things.*

“Fine.” I gritted my teeth. “Then I’ll just catch the stag myself and let him go.”

“Don’t be stupid, Queen Leila,” King Birch said. “Hunting a stag is a once a year opportunity. If you bag him yourself, the magic of ending its life will grant you a wish.”

The magic of—do they even hear themselves talk?

“I’d *never* want a wish born of spilled blood,” I snapped.

King Fell darkly laughed. “It won’t matter. Do you really think you could *release* the stag when you’re hunting with *your* hideous, bloodthirsty animals? Not a chance! They have a killing instinct even our hounds don’t have.”

“I don’t *even* care what you think of me and my actions, King Fell. Get that through your pretty head.” I turned around and stalked off to the edge of the meadow where four of my night mares were nibbling on grass.

I tucked two fingers in my mouth and whistled, getting their attention and calling the shades to my side. “Listen up, my lovelies,” I said. “We’ve got a change in plans. And, Eclipse, can you head back to the mansion? I left a few things behind that I’m going to need...”

* * *

The hounds bayed as we raced after the stag.

The servant had released it ahead of us, and it had managed to keep its lead, so we’d only seen a glimmer of silver through the trees or at the far end of the open fields we rode across.

Comet snorted, the muscles of her neck bulging, making her pale yellow dapples stand out on her coal dark coat. “Just hold it for a little while longer,” I coaxed as we cantered along.

King Birch—riding just a tiny bit ahead of me—peered over his shoulder at me.

I ignored him, my eyes fixed on the dirt trail we galloped down.

He, Verdant, and Fell all rode sun stallions. The horses flickered like flames as they streaked along the trail.

We had to go with stretches of trotting and cantering or we’d outpace the hounds. That gave me plenty of time to glare at the back of King Fell’s head. He led us, with Verdant right behind him.

The hounds surged around us, barking like crazy. My seven shades were strategically placed among them, occasionally howling—which always made the other dogs whimper and whine.

Solis was behind me, and Rigel brought up the rear on Twilight.

Since the gelding had let *Lord Linus* of all people ride him, I thought he'd be willing to carry my consort. He didn't seem upset by it, even if Rigel was a little tall for him, as he easily kept pace and gave me his high-pitched nicker whenever he noticed I was looking back at him.

Queen Rime wasn't with us. She wasn't even mounted when we left.

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. No one had ever said if she enjoyed killing the stag like Birch and Fell obviously did.

Once we had our next trot break—this one in a forest that closed in claustrophobically on the trail—I hung back to ask Solis.

“Queen Rime didn't ride with us,” I said. “Will she catch up? Or does she lay traps or something?”

Solis shook his head. “Queen Rime doesn't outright refuse to participate. Instead she rides at her leisure. Since she became the top Court in our region, I've never seen her actively ride in a hunt.”

Well, at least that's something.

“I see it!” Birch said excitedly.

Dang it!

I heeled Comet, who shot forward. We streaked in front of Birch just before the woods opened up into another field, blocking his way.

The hounds—my shades included—kept running, but Birch had to stop his horse to keep from colliding with me.

“Watch it!” he shouted.

Up ahead of us, Verdant urged her horse into a canter. Unfortunately, Fell was the better rider of the two. He urged his horse faster, and even jumped a fallen tree trunk with expert ease as he pulled out in front of her, blocking her.

At a muffled command his horse briefly slowed. He nocked an arrow in his bow and shot it at the stag, which had just reached the tree line on the other side.

The stag dodged it, and it dug into a tree instead. But I could see the stag's nostrils were flared, and the whites of its eyes showed in its fright.

This isn't going to work. I made Fell too angry when I argued with him. He's not going to let Verdant get through.

“Move it!” Birch snarled.

“So sorry—I'm just such a clumsy rider.” I attempted to sound as apologetic as possible. If he figured out I was doing this on purpose it was going to be harder to pull off—but I didn't think I could keep it going much

longer anyway.

They're catching up to the stag. I thought Verdant would be more competitive, but it looks like Fell is just overwhelming her. I'm going to have to act.

The anger that had been boiling in my stomach flared.

I was still enraged by this needlessly cruel act. But if I succeeded at this, it was going to be incredibly satisfying.

"That was a rather poor shot, King Fell." Birch pointedly reined his sun stallion past me as he hurried to catch up with the other two monarchs. "Can't you do any better?"

"Patience. The key to a good hunt is all in the thrill of the chase," Fell boasted. "Wouldn't you say so, Verdant?"

"Not particularly," Verdant said.

"Ahh Verdant—you are always such a drip on these thrilling adventures." Fell rolled his eyes, then nudged his sun stallion into a trot, taking the lead again before Birch could catch up.

"Come on, Verdant. Can't you smile even once? It's one of the only tolerable things about you," Birch sneered.

I frowned. *Why are they picking on Verdant? I know they said she normally releases the stag if she catches it, but doesn't Solis, too? They haven't said a mean word to him.*

It was also interesting that, even though Solis was in the middle of the pack in terms of power, all the other monarchs took *great* care to gently handle their horses in front of him.

Verdant ignored the Summer King and cantered after Fell.

I trotted after them. "Steve," I called. "Now, please." I nudged Comet into a canter as my shade—who had been bounding behind me—let out an eerie, soulful howl that made the sun stallions scream and briefly upset the hounds.

We raced across the far side of the field, easily catching up with the other monarchs.

As much as Fell liked to mock my poor night mares for their skinny appearance, the fact was they could easily outpace the sun stallions—something I intended to use to my advantage shortly.

This forest wasn't quite as tightly planted as the other, and there were a few trails that wound through it.

I strained my ears to listen over the baying dogs and the pounding hooves as the other monarchs slowed to a trot—with Verdant and Fell jostling for the

lead position.

And then I heard it—a noise that sounded like an angry goblin drowning in a swimming pool.

Chapter Sixteen

Leila

I pressed my leg into Comet's side, and she burst sideways, taking the dirt path that split off from the main one the others were on.

"The hunt is this way, Queen Leila," Fell called after me.

I ignored him and whistled for my shades, who split off from the pack and joined me.

Only Rigel thundered after the other monarchs, as he had agreed to when I first came up with this plan.

With no one around us to box us in, Comet zoomed down the dirt path, sending clods of turf flying as the shades loped behind us.

Kevin howled again.

Comet casually cantered for a few strides, and then the angry goblin cry came again—this time from slightly east of the original cry, but still farther north.

My heart pounded in my throat, and my palms were sweaty in my gloves.

I hope they understood everything I wanted. Is this even possible? It means they have to communicate. I know they're smart, and with my magic that should only be amplified. But is my magic strong enough?

Something deep inside of me—the thing that had been gnawing at my insides ever since I'd failed to hold the barrier—washed over me.

I can't do this—I can't even save my people. I'm going to fail.

"No," I said out loud. "No! I don't care what I can and can't do—I'm not going to let that stag be killed because Fell has the personality of a farting gorilla!"

Comet snorted, and I hunkered down over her neck as I listened.

A shade howled, and I pulled Comet to a stop just where our path split with another.

I couldn't see the other monarchs anymore, but I could faintly hear them.

And now we wait.

I held my breath as Comet stood in the shadow of a massive tree. The

shades paced for a little bit, settling farther down the trail.

The sounds of the hunt grew closer as hounds bayed and sun stallions neighed.

“What happened?” Birch shouted above the chaos.

“Something spooked the stag, it’s running west now.”

Well done—we’re doing great.

Something crashed down the path, snorting in its effort to breathe. A flash of white, and the stag passed us.

“Comet!” I shouted.

My night mare took off after it, the shades falling in behind us as we neatly cut around to the front of the hunt, blocking Fell and the others.

“Leila? What the—” Fell broke off into a string of expletives that were actually the sort of thing I’d like to scream at him as I shook him until his teeth jostled loose.

But violence is never the answer! Until it is, anyway.

Unlike Fell, Comet and I kept pace with the stag, practically riding on his tail.

The shades with us surged forward, creating a half circle behind the stag as they kept pace.

I saw the stag move to follow a much more narrow trail that broke off to the left, and I shouted “*Block him!*”

Whiskers leaped from a tree, his body stretched long as he released his angry goblin scream. He landed in the center of the path that split off, and the stag veered straight again.

“Hey, hey, hey!” I called into the forest.

Please be there. Please be there!

Three night mares emerged from the dark patches of the forest, streaking ahead to box the stag in.

They didn’t stop him—we couldn’t risk him slipping out of our trap because this was likely going to be the only chance we had.

But with the stag completely surrounded, we could more easily control what direction we wanted him to go.

The trick was finding a spot where we *could* corner him.

Come on, Eclipse. My heart pulsed in my throat as I looked over the formation.

Faintly, I heard the high pitched, glass-shattering scream of a night mare.

“There!” I shouted. “Next left!”

The night mares obligingly parted, creating a slight gap in our formation.

When the stag charged left, they let him zoom up the path, running shoulder to shoulder with him.

Please, please, please, please. My breath hitched as the stag almost left our careful circle.

Like shadows, Muffin, Patches, and Fluffy surged out of the underbrush, screaming at the stag as their fangs gleamed in the faint light of the forest.

The stag jerked back, falling back into our formation as we moved in the direction Eclipse had called from.

We did it. The trickiest part of our trap was over. Now for the most dangerous part.

I loosened my death grip on my reins and ignored Fell—who was still complaining loudly somewhere behind us.

I could see the bright line ahead where the forest opened up into another field. A smear of black marked out Eclipse.

We bore down fast on the field—the stag’s breath sounding more and more labored.

Once we burst out of the forest I had to blink in the early afternoon sunlight to adjust my eyes, then I saw the giant rock formation.

A pile of massive boulders the size of cars had been clustered in a curving line, creating a sort of rock wall.

That was our target.

“Drive him!” I shouted.

The night mares opened up at the front, creating a clear path to the rocks, while the glooms pressed hard from the side.

My shades started snarling and howling behind the stag, driving it into a frenzy. Frantic, the stag turned toward the rock formation.

The night mares held back just long enough for the stag to get closer to the rocks before they surged ahead, cutting the stag’s path off to the left.

Eclipse barreled across the field, joining the glooms and neatly pinching off a gap between the boulders and the cats—who couldn’t move as fast as the night mares—blocking the right side.

Flanked, and with no way to run, the stag backed into the rocks, its hide twitching and quivering as it struggled to catch its breath.

Behind us, the baying of the other monarch’s hounds grew closer.

And this is where the danger begins.

I slipped from Comet’s back and shoved my prism into my right glove.

It was bulky and made the glove uncomfortable, but I didn't want to have to worry about holding it with what could possibly come next.

"Easy, boy, easy," I called to the stag, hoping against everything that my natural magic for animals would be able to calm him despite the scare we'd put him through.

The stag stamped a foot and shook his head, his dark eyes glassy with fear.

"How could they do this to you?" I murmured as I took a few steps closer to it, my hands held up to show I was unarmed—which would help if the stag was as smart as I suspected it was.

I thought my Court was bad. These bloodthirsty monarchs are a new level of horrid.

With a perfect sense of timing, Fell and Birch popped out of the trees.

I heard the creak of wood, and I activated my prism and threw up a barrier.

An arrow pinged harmlessly off the surface.

"Leila, that's cheating," Fell said tauntingly. "You're breaking the rules."

"I was unaware you actually cared about that sort of thing, since *you* broke the rules by shooting at the prey I have cornered," I said.

Fell and his hounds cantered closer to us, and I eyed Muffin and Whiskers, who were slowly closing in on the stag.

"Easy," I warned them.

"Perhaps," Fell called out to me. "But you can't stop another monarch's hounds or animals from approaching with magic," Fell said. "You are about to lose control of the prey anyway."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," I said sweetly.

I waited until the hounds—who were now baying so loudly I couldn't have heard anything the King of Autumn said—were about a horse-length away before I shouted. "*HOLD!*" I yelled, putting every ounce of strength I had in the command.

The night mares, glooms, and shades screamed, hissed, and snarled as they swung around. Facing out of the formation, they snapped and growled at the hounds.

The hounds pushed forward—driven by the bloodlust Fell had stupidly predicted in *my* animals.

Patches smacked a hound in the face with enough force to send it sprawling.

Larry—more than double the size of the hounds—grabbed another by the scruff of its neck and *tossed* it.

Two hounds tried to rush Nebula, and they narrowly avoided being crushed when the mare stomped at them.

The glooms screamed—their throaty howls made the hounds whine and turn away.

Even the sun stallions freaked. Birch almost fell off his as it burst sideways, fighting to get away from my pets.

“How?” Fell demanded as he fought to control his sun stallion. The way he glanced behind him as Solis and Verdant popped out of the woods underlined just how aware he was that the stallion’s *true* master was watching.

“Ahhh, King Fell. Sweet, simple King Fell.” Although I spoke to him, I was watching the stag.

It swung its head from the left to the right as it watched the night mares, glooms, and shades fighting to protect it.

Fell snarled and unsheathed a sword.

It didn’t have magic, but with the enraged glower he was giving me, I didn’t think the Autumn King intended to use any magic on me. He just wanted to kill me.

“Look out!” Solis shouted.

The sun stallions *freaked*.

Birch’s threw him with ease, popping him over his front shoulder before prancing away. Fell had to drop his sword and cling to his mount like a monkey as the stallion’s flaming tail and mane flared and grew so bright I could barely stand to peer at him.

Verdant’s horse surged up from behind him then screeched to a halt. Verdant slammed into its neck over the abrupt stop as the horse trumpeted.

Heck, Solis sounded so panicked and terrified, even I swung around to look at him.

The Day King was perfectly fine. He was sitting as calm as could be on the back of his mount, observing the chaos his cry had thrown the majority of the hunting mounts into.

“Oh my. I’m deeply embarrassed,” Solis said, his melodic voice unreadable. “I’m afraid the stallions still react to me when I have heightened emotions. How untimely.”

Birch wheezed on the ground, and Fell struggled to hold on as his horse

continued to lose it.

I waved my thanks to the Sun King, then turned back to the stag.

He's bought me time—I have to use it.

The stag was looking past Fell, but it finally swung its gaze toward me.

“I’m sorry,” I crooned to it as I carefully approached it. “I didn’t want to scare you, but I didn’t know how else to stop you. It’s going to be okay.”

I slowly approached him, aware my window of time to act was quickly closing.

“Solis!” Fell snarled. “What was that?!”

“What was what?” Solis asked, sounding bewildered.

I tuned out Fell’s sharp reply and stepped closer to the stag, stretching my hand out in front of me. “I’m here to help,” I said. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

My stomach twisted nervously in my gut as I drew close enough to the stag that I could touch him.

The stag still eyed me with fear, but its breathing had slowed a little.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said. “In fact, I promise no one will hurt you. Can you trust me enough to get you out of here?”

The stag snorted, but I could feel it when my natural magic started to reach him. He relaxed; the muscles in his neck and shoulders were no longer rock hard.

When I touched him, his hide twitched, but he didn’t retreat or try to knock me over—which he easily could have done.

He was *gigantic*. I wasn’t aware just how big he was until I was standing in front of him, his impressive antlers stretching high above my head.

“You’re beautiful, aren’t you?” I cooed. “So noble and well cared for—someone loves you very much, don’t they?”

I sank my fingers into his soft coat and released a sigh. “One of my night mares is going to take you home. Blue Moon?”

The gelding stopped snarling at the hounds and trotted into the protected semi-circle. He swished his tail, then struck the ground with his hoof.

A door—one made of a stone archway with a fancy wrought-iron gate—formed. The gate swung open, revealing its misty innards.

I smiled at the stag when he peered at me, his eyes finally soft.

“Go on,” I said.

The stag stared at me for a moment that seemed to stretch on. I could hear my heart beat, the muted buzz of Fell’s angry protests, and the howls of the

hounds.

The stag reached out and pressed his lips to my forehead, and there was a moment of silence, before magic ripped free around me.

I felt the warmth of sunshine after what felt like the eternity of cold, my head filled with the song of birds welcoming the first flowers, and I could feel the soft caress of new grass.

Magic poured through me, so concentrated I could *taste* it—sweet and fresh. And for a few moments I lived and breathed spring—the birth of a fawn, the melting of snow, the world waking up from its slumber.

The magic didn't leave me, rather it seemed to settle deep into my bones. Once it had made a place for itself it released me, and I jerked with surprise.

I stared wide eyed at the stag. It breathed in my face, then walked shoulder to shoulder with Blue Moon through the gate.

I relaxed, until just before the gate shut, and I thought I saw a flicker of massive trees and a carpet of flowers through the mist.

What? I told Blue Moon to take him home—I meant the Night Court! That was not the Night Realm, or any of our properties!

“No! You—” Fell wordlessly howled his frustration. “You!” He snarled at me. “You cheated—there’s no way you won the hunt in your first year.”

“You’re being a sore loser, Fell,” Solis said.

“I am not! She’s *nothing*! It’s impossible that she won—she used night mares!”

I exhaled; all the tension that had been holding me upright was leaving me in a strength-sapping wave. “I checked—there was nothing in the rules that said my ‘hounds’ had to be dogs. Using the night mares and glooms was totally legal.” I leaned against Comet before I slid my foot into the stirrup. I smacked into her back, unable to fully heft myself over her, and had to scramble to right myself. “Sorry, Comet.”

Comet tucked her chin and turned her head, gently lipping my boot.

“You turned this into a mockery of what the hunt is supposed to be—it was a laughingstock,” Fell sneered.

I made myself sit up tall in the saddle. “Really? Who is laughing?”

“I’m not,” Rigel said from *right* behind Fell.

Fell actually twisted in the saddle and audibly gulped when he found my consort at his back, casually cradling a loaded crossbow.

“I’m not laughing either,” Solis said. “You’ve lost, Fell. Accept it.” The Day King was in his element in the bright afternoon sun—particularly with

Birch's horse nuzzling his thigh and Verdant's sun stallion crowding his other side.

The Spring Queen was clinging to her horse, her face buried in his neck. I was a little curious why she hadn't sat up or anything—her horse was obediently standing there as it was gazing at Solis with adoration.

Is she scared of her own horse? I mentally shrugged—it wasn't my problem.

I whistled to my animals and started back in what I *thought* was the direction of our base camp. "Someone should check on Birch," I suggested. "He probably has a concussion."

"I do *not* have a concussion," Birch complained.

"You have no way of knowing that. You just thumped your head into the dirt and couldn't talk for like five minutes. You should have worn a helmet." I tapped mine for emphasis. "Just saying."

Birch staggered to his feet and veered in his horse's direction.

"Though the hunt is over, I refuse to recognize the Night Court as the winner," Fell announced.

"Nobody cares, King of *Fall*," I said.

"I'm the King of *Autumn*!"

"Nobody cares about that either." I leaned back in my saddle and glanced around.

The shades were happily trotting among the night mares, their tails wagging wildly as their tongues hung from their mouths—it made them look a little scarier than normal as it meant the shadows of their fur seemed extra ethereal, but they were happy!

The glooms were just as content. Whiskers was practically strutting through our little pack, and Muffin's purrs sounded like a chainsaw.

"Thank you," I whispered. "I couldn't have done that without you."

The night mares twitched their tails, the glooms chuffed, and the shades panted happily. But in the back of my mind, I wondered...where had Blue Moon taken the stag?

My question was answered when we got back to the base camp.

I hopped off Comet and had just enough time to pat her neck and step back before Queen Verdant threw herself at me.

For a wild moment, I thought she was trying to kill me. Her arms were around my neck and she was squeezing me *hard*.

And then I heard her sobs and felt her tears as she cried into my neck. “Thank you. *Thank you!*” She repeated again and again, her voice trembling as she held tight.

“Um?” I looked to Rigel for help, but my consort was purposely caught up in rubbing Steve’s head and wouldn’t look at me.

Thankfully, Skye and Indigo were not so shy.

They approached me, looking from the crying monarch to me. Indigo’s eyebrows were impressively high up her forehead, and Skye was patting her pants pockets—looking for her tin of antacids.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” I whispered. “I caught the stag and had Blue Moon take him to safety and now this?” I patted Queen Verdant’s back.

Skye briefly tilted her head back, then nodded. “I see.”

“Do you? Because I don’t.” I spoke a little louder this time, because Queen Verdant didn’t seem to mind. She was still crying, though her hushed thank yous had become more sobs—of relief, I think?

Indigo took Comet’s reins and led her off, but Skye remained behind.

“You saved him. You *saved* him,” Verdant said once she could breathe again—though she still hadn’t let me go. “Thank you!”

I opened my mouth to ask who I had saved when Skye—the best steward ever—explained.

“I believe she is referring to the stag,” Skye said.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Skye said. “Because it is from her Court.”

I had to digest that for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Just as the night mares are important to the Night Court, and the sun stallions matter to the Day Court, so do the spring stags belong to the Spring Court,” Skye said.

“But the sun stallions and the night mares are Court treasures,” I said.

“Yes.” Skye waited until I met her gaze. “As are the spring stags. Queen Verdant has a stable of them. According to gossip, they are her mount of choice for Court outings.”

All the thoughts careening around my brain quieted as I struggled to piece

together what was happening.

If the white stag was supposed to be treasured—like my night mares—then the act of hunting one, of chasing it down and *killing* it was a thousand times more brutal than I'd thought.

There was no way it could be viewed in a good light. And suddenly Verdant's desperation to win the hunt, Fell's and Birch's snippy comments at her, they all started to make sense.

And that forest—Blue Moon didn't take him to our home. He took the stag to the stag's home!

I twitched, barely holding myself in check as my anger stirred. *Steady. Find out who is doing this first.*

Verdant finally let me go and took in a shivery breath. "T-thank you. I owe you a debt." Her gaze was strong and resolute as she uttered perhaps the most dangerous lines for a fae.

No fae liked to be indebted to another. It was dangerously open-ended, and it gave another power over them.

Putting herself in debt to *me* out of all the monarchs—and willingly—made me question everything I'd thought about her.

The air was filled with ghostly howls, and as I watched with a detached sort of feeling, Queen Rime of the Winter Court entered the base camp. She wasn't riding a sun stallion, but an enormous gray wolf that was almost as big as Twilight.

Skye bowed to the Winter Queen. "As you can see, Queen Rime is mounted on a winter wolf—the royal treasure and animal of her Court's crest."

Faintly, I remembered learning as a kid the seasonal Courts' crests and matching animals.

I had no idea...

"Verdant," I asked in a voice that was pleasant and calm above the clamor of Queen Rime's howling wolves. "Do you *willingly* bring a spring stag to hunt every year?"

Verdant miserably shook her head. "No." She hiccupped. "I'm less powerful than the previous Spring King. When I c-came to power King F-fell said I had to, to, to show my fealty to the stronger Courts."

Chapter Seventeen

Leila

The last shred of control that was holding me together snapped.

“*FELL!*” I screamed.

I whirled around and stormed in the Autumn King’s direction.

“Filled with righteous indignation, are you?” Fell rolled his eyes as he dismounted his sun stallion. “Run along. I haven’t the patience to deal with you right now.”

“Do you force Spring to bring a stag for you to hunt every year?” I asked.

Fell scoffed. “Oh please, you’re going to fall for her sniveling about this? She could be manipulating you and playing her own game.”

“There’s one thing about fae—you *always* care about your appearance and about how others see you.” I glanced back at Verdant, which made me angry all over again.

The Spring Queen had red splotches on her face, her eyes were puffy, her clothes wrinkled—she looked *miserable*. Her grief was raw and open, and she’d willingly put herself into debt to me because I’d rescued one of her treasures.

This was no act.

This was a victim being crushed by a bully.

“Answer the question, Fell. Do you force Queen Verdant of the Spring Court to provide a spring stag for your stupid hunt every year?” I was almost on the Autumn King by now.

He laid his glowering eyes on me, his handsome looks twisting. “I do.” He stepped into my space once I stopped so we were practically touching. “What of it? The Autumn Court is the second most powerful Court in the Midwest. You cannot possibly call rank to stop me, and you’re too weak to do anything about it.”

He was vile and awful, and I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face. “If you want a war, I’ll happily answer. I will *crush* your Night Court. I don’t fear you—rather, Leila, it is you who needs to fall in line and fear me.” His

hair stirred in the faint wind as he took a step closer to me.

This is how he does it, I realized. This is how he keeps everyone in line. He frightens them with war, and no one is strong enough to stand against him.

Fell smiled. “Now, if you apologize for your behavior, I shall endeavor to overlook your gross misconduct—”

I activated my prism—which was still shoved in my glove—and made a barrier in front of me. Right where Fell was standing, to be precise.

Fell ricocheted off the magical wall and was flung backwards. He slammed into the ground with enough force to stir up a cloud of dust, and he choked on his own air.

“Let’s make something clear,” I said. “There will be *no* hunt next year, or the year after, or the year after that. I’m permanently discontinuing it.”

The meadow we were in grew dark as something covered the sun, and I stalked toward Fell.

“You,” Fell cursed and coughed. “You wouldn’t risk yourself and your Court for someone else!” He struggled to sit upright, and I crouched down next to him.

“Oh, no. You’ve got me totally wrong, Fell.” I lazily scratched Kevin’s head and petted Muffin when the two moved to stand on either side of me. “I’d risk it *all* if it means stopping beasts like you from hurting people.”

“You could never stand against the Autumn Court in a war.” Fell tried to scramble backwards, but he smacked into Nebula’s legs.

I’d noticed the plants in the area seemed...*different* somehow. They were less brown and dry from the cold season, and more skeletal. I briefly glanced at the sky and noticed that somehow, the bright afternoon sun had transformed into a silver moon and hung in the haze of dusk, even though it wasn’t even three in the afternoon yet.

Something to ponder later.

“Who said anything about a war?” I asked.

“Indeed.” Rigel must have used his shadow magic, because he appeared at Fell’s side and pressed a dagger to the monarch’s throat. “We could kill you *right now*.”

“No one will stop us, either.” I glanced back at the other monarchs, who were all standing as still as stone. I leaned in to whisper to Fell. “That’s the funny thing about being a tyrant—it doesn’t win you friends.”

My purple magic twined around my fingers—active and ready. Rigel’s

magic—a pale gray—skated around him, and his eyes seemed extra dark.

“So, tell us, Fell. Is there going to be an annual hunt next year?” I asked.

Fell’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “There will be no more hunt.” He grunted when Rigel’s blade pricked his skin. “It’s abolished.”

I patted Fell’s knee. “Smart choice.”

I stood up and started to turn away, but Fell gurgled, “I’ll pay you back for this, Leila. I’ll see to it—you’re going to crush yourself under your self-righteous behavior.”

“Autumn,” Rigel said in a voice of death. “Do not overstep yourself. I know where you rise and where you sleep. If I come to think of you as a *threat* to my queen, I will silence you forever.” He glanced up at me. “Perhaps we should just kill him.”

Based on the light of fury in Rigel’s eyes, I didn’t think he was trying to intimidate him.

With his knife balanced on the monarch’s throat, Rigel was asking me *for real*.

“Nah.” I offered him my hand. “I can’t stand the twerp, but we can’t kill him just for being annoying. If he tries to bully anyone again, though, we’ll need to revisit this talk.”

Rigel looked doubtfully down at Fell. “If you say so.” He leaned in to the Autumn King and whispered something that made Fell turn bone pale.

Then he stood and took my hand, and together we walked under the three o’clock afternoon-night-sky.

I rubbed at the spot on my forehead where the stag had pressed me with his muzzle—it still felt warm.

Rigel glanced at me. “What is it?”

“It’s—”

“Fine,” he finished with me.

I laughed and swung our joint hands, then scooted a little closer to him. “Thanks, Rigel.”

He shrugged.

“It’s not shrug-worthy. Even though I’m furious with Fell, the other Courts deserve it, too. Rime is more powerful than Fell, and she didn’t put him in his place. And if Solis had teamed up with Verdant, I’m pretty sure he could have gotten Fell to back off, too.” I shook my head in disappointment and disbelief. “How can they live with themselves?”

“They have their own Courts to worry about,” Rigel said.

“But *why*?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be amazing if we were united together as *fae*? And if we didn’t invest so much time and effort into political sabotage and ruin?”

Rigel let go of my hand. I thought he was making a statement, but then he lowered his arm over my shoulders. He stopped about halfway through and glanced down at me.

I stepped into his half embrace—which might have been just for acting purposes because Rigel didn’t react at all.

“You should ask them sometime,” Rigel said.

“Who, the other monarchs?”

“Yes.”

“Icky—no thanks.”

“You may find it educational,” Rigel said.

“Or it will fill me with an even *bigger* desire to knock out Fell’s front teeth. Which, by the way—do you get that feeling around him? That you just *need* to punch him in the nose, or is that just me?”

“Fell has a very punchable face.”

“Yes! Thank you!”

By the end of our exchange, the meadow had returned to normal. The sky was still more of a dark, dusty blue than its typical bright shade at this time of day, and Skye was looking at it very ponderously, but as far as I was concerned, things had returned to normal.

That was my mistake.

* * *

About a week later, I was finishing my magic lesson with Lord Linus when Skye found us.

“Hey Skye.” I glanced at her just long enough to smile before I went back to focusing on my prism. “Is something up? I have just a few more minutes I want to practice—dang it!”

I sighed and stood up when I hit the proverbial wall, and the rate I was channeling my magic through my prism slowed to a crawl. “What is up with this thing?” I shook the prism for emphasis.

Lord Linus narrowed his eyes and scratched his chin. “The prism is definitely the problem,” he said. “You were fine on the dozen other artifacts we tried.”

“I’m not resonating with it like I need to—even though it was the only one that responded when I was supposed to choose my artifact,” I gloomily said.

“Nonsense!” Lord Linus scowled. “My amazing daughter, not resonate? You resonate with the whole world! No, the problem is the prism. It’s defective. We ought to throw it out.”

“It’s a royal artifact, you can’t just junk it!” I groaned. “But I’m going to officially switch to a different artifact. I might have been able to better power the barrier if I had an artifact that worked with me. We can’t risk losing another huge chunk of land. Next time I *have* to be ready,” I said.

Skye frowned. “You’re having problems with your royal artifact?”

“Yeah. When I channel magic through it, it eventually slows down. Just my luck, huh?”

“No matter. I’ll find a worthwhile secondary artifact for you,” Lord Linus said. “I shall consult with Indigo on the matter.”

“Indigo?” I frowned. “Why? You’re not going to buy it off Amazon or something, are you?”

“No!” Lord Linus scoffed. “If you want cheap artifacts, eBay would be the way to go—most people have no idea what they’re posting, and you can get it for a real bargain.”

“Lord Linus, we are not buying rando artifacts off eBay!” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “Obviously! When I said I needed to consult with Indigo I meant I needed to discuss your *wardrobe* with her! I need to find an artifact that will best fit your general style. It’s all about the aesthetic.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I’m more concerned about getting an artifact that actually *works*.”

“Believe me, I know,” Lord Linus said. “It’s why I’m the concerned party on your behalf—I will make sure your image is not tarnished!”

I pinched my prism between my fingers. “Are we done, then?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be off so you two youngsters can go exchange secrets and chat.” He winked, as if he was an eighty-year-old grandpa rather than the *barely* mid-thirties-looking fae that he was.

I bit back my sarcasm. “Thank you for the lesson, Lord Linus,” I genuinely said. “You’ve been a big help.”

“Anything for my darling daughter!” Lord Linus called over his shoulder, too far away for me to correct him.

“I can never seem to really commit to either liking him or hating him,” I said to Skye.

“You used to despise him,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, he’s worn me down a bit. What’s the problem?” I turned to my steward and slapped the dust off my jeans.

“I wanted to speak to you about the annual hunt,” Skye said.

“Gonna warn me about Fell and that he’s likely planning revenge of some sort?” I asked. “Don’t worry, I know. That’s what I’ve been discussing with Chase in all our extra security meetings this week. When the slimeball makes his move, we’ll be ready!”

“That actually wasn’t what I wanted to discuss, but I’m very glad you are aware of such a possibility.” Skye paused, then gestured to one of the few stone benches that could still seat two people on the cobblestone patio. “May we sit?”

“Sure.” I plopped down—facing the castle—and patted the spot next to me.

She sat down and carefully straightened her slacks. “I wanted to confirm that you were aware of the surroundings when you confronted Fell.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” I said.

“Your surroundings, in particular the weather, perhaps? Or the surrounding flora...” she paused, then blurted out, “The sky. I mean the way the afternoon sun disappeared and it became night.”

“Oh, yeah, I checked the headlines, and no one complained about the sun disappearing in the middle of the day. I reckon it was just an illusion,” I said.

“It was not just an illusion,” Skye said. “But neither was it a wide spread phenomenon. It was the Night Realm.”

I nodded slowly. “I’m really struggling to follow you right now.”

“In an expression of your power at the moment, the Night Realm temporarily fused with the human realm. The Night Realm was responding to *you*—which was a huge display of power, and one of the reasons why King Fell backed down.” She paused. “That, and Rigel holding a dagger to his throat.”

“Okay, so the Night Realm is...bonding with me, right? That should be a good thing,” I said.

“It is—and everyone would interpret the situation as a positive one

because it indicates you are extremely powerful,” Skye said.

“That I don’t buy,” I said. “I’m having problems with my magic, and I can’t keep the barrier up. I’m not powerful.”

“I expected you’d feel that way, which is why I wanted to discuss it,” Skye said. “And after hearing what Lord Linus has to say, I think it’s more important than ever to talk about it.”

“Why? Because my half fae half human blood is making it difficult to resonate with my royal artifact? Presumably, anyway. We don’t really have proof *what* is making it such a poor magical conductor.”

“What Skye will eventually get around to saying,” said a recognizable, proper, and feminine voice, “is that because you brought the Night Realm forward, you are obviously very powerful, but due to your obvious struggles with your artifact, there is something blocking your full powers.”

Skye and I stared at each other, then turned around and peered over the crumbling stone bannister.

Sitting on a half-destroyed wooden bench placed at the bottom of the patio overlook was Lady Chrysanthe.

She was wearing a knee-length skirt patterned with black and yellow flowers, black ankle-high boots, and a perfectly fitting black sweater while she was sipping from a porcelain teacup, her hair arranged in flawless curls.

She rested her teacup in its saucer, then glanced up at Skye and me. “Don’t mind me. I just happen to be sitting here.”

“*Happen* to be?” I asked.

Lady Chrysanthe slightly pursed her lips. “Yes.”

I wonder if the stress of Lord Myron targeting her made her lose it. She’s been acting weird for weeks.

I shook my head.

“She is correct,” Skye confirmed. “Although I am loyal to you, and I believe you are the *best* monarch the Night Court could hope for, I always imagined your powers lay in your charisma and your cleverness. I was shocked by the display of power that was the hunt.”

“I’d say ouch, but I agree with you,” I said. “As a half fae, my mom enrolled me in magic classes for years. I was okay at it, but I never showed a real affinity for it.”

Down below, Lady Chrysanthe sniffed. “This is why children should be taught by those from their Court. They’d better recognize the signs.”

“I don’t suppose you could *happen* to go away?” I called down to Lady

Chrysanthe.

“I was here first,” Lady Chrysanthe said.

“No you weren’t! Linus and I have been practicing magic since seven in the morning here!”

“Precisely! I arrived at six!”

“She’s crazy,” I muttered. I shook my head and made myself refocus. “Can there really be that big a difference in power anyway? I mean, all fae have to use artifacts to use magic—isn’t it more dependent on the artifact you use?”

“You are correct to an extent. Fae do not have individual metrics of power like the wizards do. But it can still be said that there are levels or degrees of power. Some fae can only manage low grade magic like glamours and illusions. Those who are particularly skilled can do things like brew potions. Those with more skill can use higher grade artifacts—like the nobles.”

“That’s fine and dandy, but why—then—am I having problems with my royal artifact?” I asked.

Skye hesitated. “I’m not certain.”

“Here’s the thing.” Lady Chrysanthe topped the last step on the patio staircase, still carrying her teacup. “I think you’ve actually resonated to something bigger, but *that* was the only thing in that room capable of reaching you.”

“How do you know all of this? What are you even doing here?” I asked.

Lady Chrysanthe shrugged elegantly. “I’ve just happened to cross paths with you occasionally and see and hear things.”

“Our security is not tight enough if you’re able to keep wiggling through,” I grumbled.

Lady Chrysanthe ignored me and primly drank from her teacup while pointedly not looking at me or Skye.

She is unbelievably awkward. She obviously wants me to ask her about her theory.

I sighed. *At least she isn’t trying to kill me anymore.*

“Okay, I’ll bite. What else could I resonate with, Lady Chrysanthe?” I asked. “My night mares? Maybe the shades or glooms?”

Lady Chrysanthe triumphantly tilted her head back. “I think it could be an artifact used by a past ruler that’s on display!”

I wrinkled my forehead. “What?”

Skye leaned forward, intrigued. “Why would you believe that?”

“She’s powerful enough to pull the Night Realm out. Wouldn’t it stand to reason she’s powerful enough to use one of the treasured artifacts?” Lady Chrysanthe said.

“We could certainly test your theory out,” Skye said.

“I’m not convinced—and I’m not super eager to touch royal artifacts either,” I snorted. “Last time Lord Linus had me touch one it lit me up like a Christmas tree! It *wasn’t* fine.”

Wrinkles spiderwebbed across Skye’s forehead. “An artifact reacted to you when you touched it?”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said? It fried me with power!” I mulishly crossed my arms across my chest.

Skye set her hands on my shoulders. “Which one?”

I sucked my neck into my shoulders. “The staff of the original king.”

“I’m going to go get it, then you can show us what you mean.” Skye stood up and was halfway across the patio before I realized what she was saying.

“Wait—is that okay? I thought those artifacts were super sacred or something.”

“They are sacred, but it’s not that Night Court monarchs aren’t allowed to touch them—there’s just never been anyone who resonated with them. I’ll be back!” Excited, Skye hopped through one of the many shattered windows, disappearing into the castle.

About ten seconds passed before I realized this meant I was stuck on the patio with Lady Chrysanthe-the-awkward, and I regretted not following Skye.

The fae lady was admiring her teacup with great care—just enough so she didn’t have to look at me.

Why is she being like this? Weird.

I cast around for a conversation topic so I didn’t have to sit and watch her stare at her teacup the whole time Skye was gone. “I hope you liked going to the movies—despite those shadow snake things.”

“The movie theater was very enjoyable.” Lady Chrysanthe sat on a rickety wooden chair that I would have sworn wasn’t stable enough to use. “I had not bothered to view human entertainment prior to the excursion, but it was interesting and educational. Many members of the Night Court were deeply intrigued by the concept of human entertainment.”

“By the movie theater, or the actual movies themselves?” I asked.

“Although we all agree the movie theater was delightful—even if it did not accept gold coins as legal tender—the movies in particular were intriguing.”

“Huh. Maybe I’ll have a monthly Netflix night at the mansion—popcorn and snacks would be a lot cheaper than the usual meals I have to provide,” I grumbled.

Lady Chrysanthe sipped her tea and said nothing more.

Well. That topic died quickly. Am I reading her wrong and she doesn’t actually want to talk?

I arched my back and casually stretched my arms above my head, figuring I should settle into silence.

Lady Chrysanthe stared expectantly at me, her blond hair dappled by the ever-present moon.

Okay, silence is not what she wants.

“What brings you to the Night Realm this early?” I asked.

Lady Chrysanthe set her teacup in the saucer with a quiet clack—speaking of which, where was she getting hot tea from if she’d been here since six?

“I have taken to pondering and reflecting more as a new part of my day,” she said. “The Night Realm is a wonderful place to think.”

I eyed the crumbling castle, dry fountain, and half-dead gardens. “Is it?”

“Indeed. I feel that this space reflects my inner mood.”

I almost rolled my eyes, figuring this was just another way she was implying she would be a better queen than me, until I rewound what she’d said and chewed through it a second time.

It reflects her inner mood? This barren, dead place? I peered at her with a new thought dawning on me. Is she...is she lonely? Is that why I’ve seen her around more?

I felt stupid even wondering about it.

I just assumed fae—being what they are—could never feel something like loneliness. If they could they’d be lonely for most of their lives. Was I wrong?

I thought of Indigo hiding her interests, of how Skye used to use her serenity as a mask, and even Rigel and the way he used his lethality to draw a line between him and everyone else.

I could be horribly wrong. She could be attempting another political maneuver. But I don’t think her pride would allow her to be this awkward even if she was.

I scratched my arm and wished Skye would hurry up and get back. “Yeah, is everything okay with you? I’ve noticed you haven’t been hanging around with your friends much.”

I expected a huff, maybe a sharply worded rebuttal, or perhaps an overly cloying reply if she really was doing this for politics.

Instead, Lady Chrysanthe stared at her teacup. “They weren’t my friends. They were fae roughly my age and from appropriately powerful houses—social connections. We weren’t particularly close, but I didn’t realize how much they hated me until you revealed Myron’s actions.”

I didn’t want to pressure her, so I studied one of the castle’s shattered windows. “That seems sad.”

“It is the way of the fae,” Lady Chrysanthe said. “We must use every connection to our advantage. Personal preference means nothing compared to political power. Who cares if the one you call a friend may betray you in a week—you just need to make sure you use them for your causes before then.”

Whoa, that is dark. What do I even say to that?

“But you act differently,” Lady Chrysanthe abruptly said. “You treat your inner circle with kindness and trust. You know your people—not because you wish to use your knowledge against them, but because they’re important to you. I want that.”

She rested her saucer on her knee. “I’m *tired* of pretending, tired of playing a game no one is ever going to win. That’s why I’m telling you this.” She met my gaze. “Because I don’t wish to keep living for power.”

She held my gaze, but she still swallowed nervously, and her hands trembled a little.

Is that what she’s been doing this whole time since she got weird? Trying to talk to me?

I studied the fae lady, who had previously mocked and laughed at me. “You wanna be friends?”

Chapter Eighteen

Leila

Chrysanthe blushed such a bright pink she practically glowed in the soft light of the Night Realm. “Friends? You are *incredibly* forward, Queen Leila, to think your offer of friendship would matter.” Though her voice was haughty, it was impossible to miss how happy she was.

She ripped her eyes from mine and peered around, her nose up in the air, but her hands had stopped shaking, and the tiniest smile—a *real* smile, not one of spite—played at her lips even though she tried to smooth it out.

Aw, there’s no harm playing with her a little—she needs to loosen up anyway.

“Oh? In that case I’ll apologize for my forwardness and rescind the offer of friendship,” I said.

“There’s no need for that!” Lady Chrysanthe rushed to say. “I happen to be very understanding. I’ll look past it.”

“No, no. I couldn’t possibly leave it—based on what you’ve said it seems like a terrible faux pas!”

“The mistake has already been made. You cannot take it back,” Lady Chrysanthe primly said. “You merely must strive not to repeat it.”

“Admit it, Chrys,” I said. “You really want to be my friend.”

Her nose went up a little higher, and her blush deepened to a shade of red. “Hmph!”

“You’re not even going to protest your nickname? Now I *know* you want to be friends. Don’t worry—everyone will warm up to you. Well, except Rigel. I’m pretty sure he only warms up to animals.”

“I would never presume to correct a queen on the way to address me.” Lady Chrysanthe sipped her tea—which had to be cold by now.

“I have no idea how you just managed to say that massive lie. Was it because you didn’t name me specifically?” I asked.

“Rude,” Lady Chrysanthe sniffed.

“Hey, you were the one who wanted to be friends with me.”

“I never!”

I laughed loudly enough to stir the night mares from where they’d been inspecting the half-dead gardens. “Sorry, my lovelies,” I called to them. “It’s fine!”

I grinned as I watched them go back to nibbling on some of the few half-alive shrubberies. “They still are skinny. Why can’t I get them to gain any weight?”

“Their appearance reflects the state of the Court,” Lady Chrysanthe said.

“Yeah, so I’ve been told. But I don’t think things are in that dire of straits anymore. I mean, they should *at least* be able to stop drooling blood!” I said.

“I have brought it,” Skye announced. She reverently held the staff in front of her, her hands wrapped in what looked like a silk banner so she wasn’t touching the staff with her bare skin. She went through the door this time—can’t be casual and hop through a broken window while carrying the staff of the Original Creep. No, no!

“Great,” I said with as much sarcasm as I could muster. “I’m stoked.”

“It’s a worthwhile experiment,” Lady Chrysanthe said.

“Yeah, except neither of you have to touch it, and I do,” I grumbled.

“If it works, it means you’ll be able to defend the lands better,” Skye—knowing just where to poke me—said.

“Okay, okay, let’s get this over with. I’m staying seated this time though,” I grumbled.

Skye held out the staff for me. I gritted my teeth, then set my fingertips on the crescent moon top.

Again, the world rocked as magic pulsed through my brain. It felt like I was simultaneously on fire and drowning. I felt the wild magic everywhere—it was so strong I couldn’t even *see*. My brain was too busy trying to cope with the magic that flooded my body.

Someone yanked my hand off the staff, and I wheezed, finally able to breathe again.

Once my eyes recovered, I discovered it was Chrysanthe who had plucked my hand off the staff. She and Skye watched me, their worry apparent in different ways. Skye’s forehead wrinkled, while Chrysanthe’s eyebrows traveled halfway up to her hairline.

“That was not a normal reaction—not even for something like resonating,” Chrysanthe said.

“I agree,” Skye said. “I expected it would have been calling to you, and

you just didn't notice until you touched it. But that was...not what calling looks like. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it seemed to be an incomplete resonance."

"But how could that be?" Chrysanthe asked. "The staff is whole. A part of it would have to be broken for an incomplete resonance."

I coughed. "It's that Original Creep. I seriously dislike him."

"The original king has nothing to do with your reaction to his staff," Skye said.

"Maybe not, but I'd seriously love to deck him for all the trouble he's saddled me with," I grumbled. "Then I'd feel a lot better about life."

"If you feel that strongly about him, we could egg his gravesite," *Chrysanthe*, of all people, suggested.

I widened my eyes to the point of goggling. "You'd do that? But you're from the Night Court! Everyone in the Night Court belongs to the cult of the Original Creep!"

Chrysanthe shrugged. "When Grandmother believed I had a chance of being the next queen, I read over the rules for becoming the ruler. I also did not think highly of the law that required the monarch to marry before being crowned."

"I'm glad we're friends now," I said.

That got another blush out of Chrysanthe, but I was surprised that Skye didn't react at all. She was staring at the small, chipped crystal that jutted out of the tip of the staff.

"Skye? Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, I just think I have some research to do." Skye shook her head, then bowed to me. "Thank you for showing us what happens when you touch the staff, my Sovereign. I'll go return this, and then we should head back to the mansion. You have many important tasks to complete today. Foremost, you need to respond to a correspondence from the Paragon. He's invited you to his personal pocket realm for tea."

"Gotcha. Thanks, Skye."

"My pleasure." Skye smiled at me, but when she turned to go back into the castle—still carrying the staff with her cloth-covered hands—I caught her frowning down at the staff, deep in thought.

She'll tell me if she finds something. Whatever it is, though, I hope it's not bad.

Based on her expression, I wasn't sure.

* * *

I was initially pretty excited when Skye told me about the Paragon's invitation, because I liked him a lot. But when I took a look at the fancy card, I read the fine print and saw it was an invitation for the Fae Ring. In other words, Solis, me, and the four season Courts.

I didn't like tea, but it was the idea of getting stuck in a small space with Fell and Birch that inspired me to try to wiggle out of it.

Skye wouldn't let me—said it was too important, and then got Indigo to back her up.

They did let me protest the event in my own small and—as Indigo told me—“unimportant” ways.

First of all, I drove myself to the meet up point in my truck—don't get too excited. Chase had installed a wireless camera and a hotspot in my truck for outings like this.

But I also got to wear comfortable clothes—jeans and a leather jacket I'd gotten pretty fond of—and, most important of all, I first drove to King's Court Café and got myself a large pumpkin latte so I didn't have to drink any gross weed water with the rest of the monarchs.

All of these things combined into one glorious picture as I drove up to the meeting point—the parking lot of the local library—where the other monarchs were waiting with their much fancier cars.

Fell—leaning against a Rolls-Royce and looking shockingly modern in a black suit—arched an eyebrow at me as I climbed out of my truck. “Is the Night Court so poor you've had to take up farming?”

I fished my latte out of the door cupholder, then locked my truck. “Nah. I just figured if I got the chance to run you over, I should bring something that could get the job done.”

Fell looked mildly alarmed at my statement of violence.

I sipped my latte, reveling in the pumpkin flavor. “Oh, that's good stuff.”

Fell leaned back and put on what were probably ridiculously expensive sunglasses. “You are worse than a savage mongoose.”

“Yeah, thanks. What are we waiting on?” I waved to Verdant, who offered me a timid smile before she left her car—some kind of Mercedes, I

think—and joined me in front of my truck.

“The Paragon has to take us to his pocket realm.” Verdant glanced around the parking lot, looking fit for the red carpet with her beautiful green evening gown.

“I see. Hey, King Birch, is Flora okay?” I asked.

Birch—dressed similarly to Fell, except he *committed* to his Court, so his tweed jacket had threads of blue, and he’d chosen a sort of burnt orange slacks—stiffened. “Why do you ask?”

I squinted at him. “Because she’s not here.”

“She opted to stay home,” Birch said.

“And where is your dear consort?” Rime of the Winter Court asked. Besides me, Queen Rime was probably the most casually dressed as she was in dove gray slacks and a white sweater that looked incredibly soft.

Apparently, tonight the fae had chosen costumes appropriate for “sophisticated business moguls.” Given that their clothes were usually a cue on how they were going to act, I dearly hoped we weren’t going to be making and breaking alliances all night.

“He didn’t want to come,” I said. “Said he had some stuff to do,” I lied.

In reality, Rigel had just informed me he wasn’t coming, and that was that. But it was always fun to tease the other monarchs, particularly because it made Fell’s tan complexion turn as pale as a ghost.

“I’m glad you came regardless, Queen Leila.” Solis strolled up to me, looking very fatherly with his gold turtleneck and wool coat.

Birch made a noise of dissent, drawing Verdant’s ire.

“Are you an animal, now, that resorts to grunts to communicate?” she demanded.

“You’re rather brave considering only a few weeks ago you would have *groveled* to me on behalf of your stag,” Birch said.

Verdant stiffened. “Take that back!” she snarled, green magic curling around her like vines.

“As if you could make me.” Birch shook a finger at her, his magic—a sparkly blue—clouded around him like smoke.

“That’s enough, children!” The Paragon popped up in the center of our circle. Unlike us, he was not dressed for modern times, but wore a silvery blue robe and a massive scarf that wrapped at least three times around his neck. He adjusted his spectacles and peered around at us. “I must thank you for coming, but remind you all you are *my* guests. There shall be no

threatening each other during this—what is that?”

The old fae zeroed in on my drink and clutched his long gray beard as he stared at it.

“Pumpkin latte,” I explained.

The Paragon tilted his head at me, then relaxed. “An excellent choice. Right, then. Gather around, children! It’s time to go—to my pocket realm!”

Once we’d all gotten within a step or two of him, the Paragon yanked out a pink coin purse and snapped it open.

Either the coin purse contained a gate, or it *was* a gate itself—I didn’t know for sure, because a puff of air made me squeeze my eyes shut. I felt the ground move under my feet, and when I cautiously opened an eye, we were in a room.

I should explain. Since he’s the top dog of the fae, but isn’t sworn to a Court, the Paragon got his own personal slice of the fae realm. It was small in comparison to a Court’s realm—rumor had it that it included a whole house and several acres of land—but that’s why it’s called a pocket realm.

This particular room of the Paragon’s pocket realm—which I was betting was a study of some sort—was a bit of a mish-mash, much like the Paragon himself.

Of course, there was the necessary desk for anyone involved in fae politics—you needed a place to sign the thousands of papers that were destined to cross through your hands. But rather than something old, or fancy, or leafed with gold or something equally gaudy, the Paragon’s desk was crafted out of thick tree trunks, with rough branches supporting a wooden table top. Both the trunk of the desk and the sturdy branches that made up a chair that was pulled up to the desk appeared to be alive. The chair grew a couple of roses for a headrest while I watched, and the desk grew another supporting branch.

But just beyond the desk was a massive TV and a beautiful bookshelf that was stuffed with what appeared to be movies and video games.

An air hockey table was shoved up against a massive gold statue of a dragon head, and a model of a phoenix hung from the ceiling, as did a wooden *swing*.

The walls were mostly hidden by massive bookshelves—although a cooking station and racks of rainbow-colored potions took up a large chunk of the far wall. Some of the books, scrolls, and items on the shelves looked old. Like, *really* old. Like, possibly as old as the Original Creep.

“You have an awesome study, Paragon,” I said.

“Thank you!” The Paragon beamed at me. “I am fond of it. Now where is she...Aphrodite?”

“*Mmert?*” A pink skinned cat that lacked any fur at all—the Paragon’s much beloved pet cat, Aphrodite—peered over the shoulder of the phoenix model.

“There you are! Come down, my wild guardian! We have guests.”

Aphrodite yawned, showing off her white teeth, then hopped off the model—making the bird spin wildly—and into the Paragon’s arms.

“*Oof.*” The cat—she was a little overweight—landed on his chest. “Yes, hello. You are as beautiful as always!” He briefly cuddled his pet.

“*Mert,*” went the cat as he kept on hugging her.

“Ahem,” Queen Rime said after several long moments.

“Ah, yes! That’s right—you’re all here for tea! And I am going to bestow a very rare custom upon you—Aphrodite, our guests need tea!”

The cat touched her nose to the Paragon’s.

“Aren’t you sweet?” he said. “Yes, we’ll make a big pot of tea for them all.”

“*Mmert.*” Aphrodite leaped from his arms and landed on the ground. She flicked her bony tail straight up, then trotted up to Solis. She sniffed his shoes for a moment, then mine. She took a cursory peek at Verdant, pawed at the tassels on Rime’s boots for a moment, inspected Birch, and finished off with Fell.

The petty part of me smirked when Aphrodite sniffed Fell’s pant leg and then made a gagging noise.

“Have you got a good feel for everyone?” the Paragon asked the cat.

Aphrodite meandered over to the cooking station, where the Paragon was opening a locked cabinet.

He swung the doors open, revealing shelves of tin tea canisters wrapped in pretty blue fabric, and the cat picked her way through the tea.

“I’m surprised no one is complaining about drinking tea picked out by a cat,” I said.

Fell glanced in my direction. “You’re not just savage like an animal, you’re ignorant, too.”

“Fell,” Solis said in a warning tone.

“It’s fine, Solis. Ignore his squawking. But I still don’t get this.” I waved my hand at the cat, who was precariously hanging out of the cabinet as she

stood with her hind legs on a lower shelf and her front paws hooked on an upper shelf as she sniffed a few tea canisters on the edge there.

“This is a treat—no—an honor I don’t often bestow upon others!” the Paragon said. “I have asked Aphrodite—with her superior taste and infinite understanding of relationships and emotions—to pick out a tea for our evening together.” He puffed up with pride. “My angel knows best what sort of tea folk need.”

I watched Aphrodite struggle to heft herself onto the upper shelf so she could begin sorting through the tea tins there. “Ah, yeah, I could go with that,” I said.

Dimly, in the back of my brain I remembered Hazel Medeis complaining about some unexpected downsides to drinking the Paragon’s tea.

Just as well I have my latte.

King Solis leaned in. “As strange as it might be, Aphrodite is very intuitive, and the Paragon asking her to choose for us indicates that we are high in his esteem. It is an honor, despite what one might believe.”

“Oh, no, I believe it,” I assured him.

“*Mert!*”

“You’ve chosen, have you? Share, Aphrodite. What shall the kings and queens delight in today, hmm?” The Paragon looked at the label on the canister. He stared at it for several long moments, then abruptly reached out and placed his hand on his cat’s back. “Truly, you are the most brilliant, wondrous, and amazing companion a fae could have.”

Aphrodite purred and jumped out of the cabinet as the Paragon bustled over to a tea machine—the same one he’d purchased for Rigel and me when we’d gotten married, if I wasn’t mistaken.

The tea machine thing consisted of a glass pot, a metal basket—which the Paragon dumped teaspoon after teaspoon of the tea leaves into—and a fancy base that heated the water, and controlled the brew time and temperature. It was sort of similar to a coffee machine.

“What tea shall we be blessed with today?” Fell strolled up to the counter as the Paragon put the metal basket in place, put the lid on, and then started the tea.

Fell tried to pick up the canister to look at the label, but the Paragon plucked it from his hands and tossed it into the cabinet. “Ah-ah—no peeking! Half the fun is figuring out what Aphrodite has picked for you!”

The Paragon locked the cabinet, then turned around and smiled

benevolently at us. “Now, if everyone would sit down.”

Verdant peered around the study. “Where?” she asked.

“Oh, good heavens. I almost forgot!” The Paragon playfully smacked his own forehead, then bustled over to a wall of bookshelves. “Let’s see here. Shakespeare’s tragedies...The Brothers Grimm fairy tales...Harry Potter... ahah! Recipe books!”

The Paragon pulled a recipe book forward on the shelf.

Something in the wall clanked, and the entire bookshelf shot straight up, disappearing into the ceiling with a gust of air and dropping a dozen books on the Paragon in the process.

“Ouch!” The Paragon rubbed the top of his head and scowled up at the ceiling. “I ought to adjust that so the spell isn’t quite so *enthusiastic*. Nonetheless—this way!”

The Paragon marched through the hole the bookcase had left behind, which led into a new area.

Rime went first, and when no one else seemed inclined to go after her I went next, followed closely by Solis.

We walked through about twelve wooden archways that were covered with vine-y plants, and gorgeous flowers that I was pretty sure were out of season.

Hey, I may be a fae, but plants are not my thing.

I thought we had gone outside, but when the archways ended I peered around and saw the bright greenspace was entirely enclosed by brick walls and a glass ceiling.

Green moss covered the ground, and there was a pond with a little waterfall that trickled out of the wall on the far side of the room.

Colored glass orbs were spread around the garden, and wherever the Paragon passed, the orbs lit up.

Ferns peeked out of one corner, while rose bushes arranged in front of ivy—which covered that patch of the wall—took up residence across from it.

The garden seemed like a swirl of concepts—part Japanese garden, part English tea garden, and fully the Paragon’s style.

Since the only windows were the ceiling, you couldn’t see anything outside except for the cloudy afternoon sky.

I wonder where the Paragon’s Pocket Realm is relative to the Night Realm—not that it matters. He has dominion here, so he wouldn’t experience our endless night even if we were next door neighbors.

I clutched my pumpkin latte closer as I peered around the garden with awe.

“Come along, come along. The table is over here,” the Paragon called. “Every spot has a plugin for the latest smart technology—including cellphones, tablets, and computers! Though I suppose you lot are all like Killian—unable to admire the genius of this.”

I crashed between Fell and Birch in my enthusiasm. “Really? How did you do that?”

The Paragon brightened and rubbed his hands together. “Ah—I forgot! As a citizen of earth, you would appreciate this, Leila! I don’t mind telling you, this took a lot of delicate magic work—and some loose interpretations of patent claims.” He winked at me, then froze. “Ah—the tea finished brewing! Everyone sit down—I’ll be back momentarily. Aphrodite, save my seat.”

The pink-skinned cat jumped onto a large wooden seat—which was closer to a throne than a chair—as the Paragon trundled off, disappearing through the archways.

The table was long and wooden. It was partially set with glass vases of brightly colored flowers, teacups and saucers, and empty serving trays. The impressive part of it was the plastic panels that jutted out of the edge of the table at each spot. The panels had cords attached to them, and it looked like all of them were for the newest cellphone models, and a couple of different tablets.

I was still examining the plastic panel when the scuffle for seats began.

Rime claimed the wrought-iron garden chair while Verdant chose a plastic chair that was shaped like a gigantic leaf. Birch selected a rustic chair made of rough branches and sticks that still had the bark on them, while I gratefully plopped down in a chair constructed of bamboo and covered with silk cushions. Solis took the chair next to me—a modern wooden design with a thin cushion—leaving Fell with the last spot, a low stool painted to resemble a toadstool.

Fell scowled at his stool. “Verdant, switch with me,” he ordered.

Verdant tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Bite me.”

“It certainly hasn’t taken long for the Night Queen’s foul ways to contaminate you,” Fell sneered.

“There’s no use pretending we ever got along,” Verdant said. “We might have been temporarily united against Leila, but I have *never* liked you, and I’ll *never* forget what you’ve made me do.”

Fell rolled his eyes. “All these dramatics for such a *little* deal! Just a hunt once a year, and now I’m the bad guy!”

“Oh, *do* shut up, Fell,” Rime snapped.

Fell gaped at the usually impartial Winter Queen, but did as he was told and sat down.

We were quiet until the Paragon came bustling back, clutching his giant glass teapot.

“Do you need help?” I half stood up, the manners my mother instilled in me prodding me to move.

“No, no. You sit down. This will take just a moment!” The Paragon worked his way around the table, pouring tea in each individual’s porcelain teacup.

I could have sworn the teapot didn’t have enough in it for everyone, but by the time he reached his chair, he still had plenty left.

“There. Now we may begin!” The Paragon nodded his head in satisfaction and sat down on his chair.

Aphrodite sat on the arm of the chair until the Paragon was seated, then she jumped in his lap, and instantly all the silver serving trays filled with food.

Carrot cake, finger sandwiches, scones, éclairs, and slices of spice cake generously topped with frosting filled up half the trays, while Japanese snacks—I recognized mochi, castella cake, and manju buns—filled up the other half.

“Queen Rime, I insist you try a sakura mochi cake—I got it because I know you like it,” the Paragon said.

“You are too kind, Paragon.” Queen Rime served herself a piece of pink mochi cake as the other monarchs loaded up their plates with goodies and added sugar and/or cream to their teacups.

I smiled benevolently and sipped my latte as I watched.

Solis glanced at me as he elegantly dropped a sugar cube into his tea. “Don’t you intend to have any, Leila?”

“Maybe after I finish my latte,” I evasively said.

Truth was, since the food just *appeared* like that—and Hazel’s complaints already made me doubt the tea—I wouldn’t touch any of this stuff with a ten-foot pole.

Yeah, sure, eat food that just magically appeared on a table. The monarchs obviously haven’t read enough fairy tales, because that’s how you

get bespelled and then fall asleep for fifty years.

“I invited you all here today because I am well aware of enmity between a few of you.” The Paragon tucked into a thick slice of carrot cake, though his eyes flicked from Verdant—who was sipping her tea—to Fell—who had just set his teacup down after drinking some.

“I want to make sure that we’re clear on one thing,” the Paragon continued. “Fight between yourselves all you like, but the *moment* an innocent gets tangled up in these spats of yours, I will intervene. And you won’t like how I’ll do it.”

“Please, Paragon,” Fell simpered. “You’re our leader—we should be embarrassed to shame you.”

“I am *not* your leader,” the Paragon said. “That role belongs to the fae emperor—if we can ever find a poor wretch capable of filling that position again.”

“There hasn’t been an emperor in over fifty years.” Birch held his teacup nestled in his hands and blinked at the Paragon. “And you’re the top fae.”

“I’m a representative,” the Paragon said. “But I hold no power over you, except—perhaps—that I am the strongest fae!” He stuck his chin up with pride a little bit with that statement. “Queen Rime—as fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic—has more power over you.”

Does she?

I glanced around the table, but no one said anything against the statement.

Huh. I always knew the representatives on the Regional Committee of Magic had a lot of power, which is why it’s those of us on the Fae Ring that get to decide who the rep is. But I didn’t think it was that big of a deal as the representative would act for the betterment of their people.

Although I suppose now, having a front seat to all the politics, I could see a fae representative purposely striking disadvantageous deals that would affect a Court they dislike.

Aphrodite stretched her skinny paw high—claws out—and tangled it up in the Paragon’s beard, then yanked.

“Ouch, Aphrodite—please take more care with your claws,” the Paragon complained.

“This tea is divine.” Queen Rime stared at the flower pattern on her cup with great concentration.

“Isn’t it, though? Drink up!” the Paragon cheerfully said. Once he got Aphrodite’s paw out of his beard he saw me, leaning back in my chair and

still nursing my latte. “Come now, Queen Leila—join the fun!”

“I want to finish my pumpkin latte first,” I said. “But everything looks delicious.”

The Paragon swatted my compliment away. “Does your pumpkin latte happen to be from Starbucks?”

“Nope—I got this one from my favorite local coffee shop, King’s Court Café.”

The Paragon perked with interest. “I have not been there before. I shall have to amend that.” He stood and refilled Fell’s teacup, and then Solis’s, the teapot still magically containing enough for both of them, and some leftover. “Here, Queen Rime, allow me to top you off.”

“Thank you, Paragon,” Rime said in a relaxed tone I had never heard her use before.

“Back to the point of this afternoon tea. I must inquire to the source of this constant strife between you all. I don’t understand it—you all face a similar set of problems.”

Similar? He’s got to be joking.

I hid my scoff in a sip of my latte.

“Paragon, you wound me!” Fell held a hand to his chest. “In what way am *I* like *them*?” He glared openly at me and then Verdant before sipping his tea like a prim-and-proper grandmother.

The Paragon—ever a gracious host—eyed everyone’s teacups. He got up to add a splash of tea to Verdant’s and Birch’s cups. “Have some self-respect, King Fell.” He eased himself back into his chair and affectionately rubbed Aphrodite’s head. “Everyone knows the fae realms are shrinking—not just in the Midwest, but nation-wide.”

“The Autumn Realm has stood strong!” Fell set his teacup down with a clack. “I’ll challenge anyone who says otherwise.”

“Oh, sure it was strong—decades ago, before the rate our realms were attacked dramatically increased.” Birch sighed morosely and moodily stared at his reflection in his tea.

“The shrinking realms are certainly a problem,” Queen Rime said.

“A problem? That’s easy for you to say,” Verdant scoffed.

Queen Rime narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone knows the only reason the Winter Court hasn’t shrunk in years is because your siblings come and help you whenever your ward falters!” Verdant tossed back the rest of her tea. Before she even set her cup down the

Paragon was at her elbow, refilling it.

“I’m not ashamed of the support my siblings and I offer to one another,” Rime said.

Birch traced the edge of his cup. “Except you’re too high and mighty to help any of us do the same.”

“Oh please.” Rime snorted like an angry horse.

That got my attention—because Rime was usually as emotional as a snowman.

“It’s hardly my fault the lot of you are a bunch of warmongers,” she continued. “If I offered to help, you’d use it as a chance to exploit me.”

“How could we exploit you when you have all the Winter Courts in North America backing you?” Solis asked.

Chapter Nineteen

Leila

I held my pumpkin latte to my chest as I looked up and down the table.

The heck? Why is everyone suddenly being open and airing out their dirty laundry?

“You really should try the tea, Leila,” the Paragon encouraged. “I think you’ll quite like it.”

“Still not done with my latte, but thank you.” I held up my half-filled cup—which I was going to make sure I never finished. This might be special fancy tea prepared by the Paragon, but tea was tea—not coffee!

“It’s an unfair advantage!” Fell nodded with enough force to make his upper body twitch, then downed the rest of his tea—which the Paragon promptly refilled.

“As if you have anything to worry about.” Verdant bit into an éclair, then took another swig of her tea. “Queen Icey over there might be more powerful, but she’s let you run free and grind the rest of us under your heel even though she could blast you into last week.”

“Hey, I leave Solis alone,” Fell said.

“Only because you’re terrified I’ll take back my sun stallions if you anger me.” Solis held out his teacup for the Paragon to top him off. “Which would put you at the mercy of your Court griffins if you needed to do any kind of portal traveling.”

Fell puffed up his chest. “The control I have over my Court is obvious!”

“That’s why no one outside the Autumn Court has seen you near an autumn griffin since you were crowned—because you have *such* excellent control over them, is it?” Solis asked.

Fell sputtered, and Verdant ate a mochi cake and looked on with interest. “That’s why you’ve left Solis alone? Here I thought you were just scared because he’s managed to hold on to all of his realm’s land despite the Night Court bottoming out and dragging the Day Court down.” She glanced at me. “No offense meant.”

I pushed myself against the back of my chair, feeling uneasy with this new level of sharing we'd achieved. "None taken?"

"Bottoming out? Hah!" Birch snorted with laughter. "The only reason we aren't all scared stiff of Leila is because she's still losing land like a leaky pot."

"Scared of *me*? What do you all have to be scared of?" I asked.

"They're talking about the way you beat the *crap* out of everyone in the races—even Birch's cheating rider," Solis said with relish. "And you got your Court under your thumb in a season *and* married the Wraith—that was enough to make Fell scared of you, even before he nearly wet himself when you trotted out the Night Realm at the hunt."

"I am *not* fully scared of her," Fell announced. "Rime is still more powerful than she is! I'm just suspicious. I mean, come on! She's a half fae who came out of nowhere! Even if she is Linus's kid, who could do everything she's pulled off and survive? She *must* have a motivation of her own—she's going to try to take us all out!"

"Yeah." Birch scowled in my direction. "And she's trending on social media. I don't even know what that is, but it has to be some kind of human wizardry!"

Fell and Birch are just volunteering these suspicions? This is next level weird.

Concerned that either I was losing my mind or everyone else was, I looked to the Paragon.

He was chilling, holding his cup of tea—which I wasn't entirely sure he'd ever sipped. He smiled when he met my gaze. "Try some treats, Leila," he encouraged. "And allow me to compliment you on your trending status! Your popularity with the local humans has put the Curia Cloisters in quite the kerfuffle!"

"Thanks." I reluctantly put an éclair on my plate, but I wiped my fingers off and didn't even try to eat it.

"I knew you'd be a force to fear once your engagement was announced and you survived the wedding," Rime announced. "That means Rigel approves of you. And I don't know that he's ever acted on anyone else's behalf before—not even Lord Dion."

"I barely have any power in my Court." Verdant dabbed at her dewy eyes. "It's only because the spring stags favor me. My nobles think it's my fault the Autumn Court bullies us—but none of them helped me when I tried to fight

against the horrible hunt!”

“It’s because magic is dying,” Rime said. “The faster magic dies off, the faster our realms shrink. In a decade or two, even my siblings and I won’t be able to strengthen our wards.”

“Yeah, but do you have to hide your own child?” Birch asked. “I get to see my daughter once a month because I can’t let my own Court know she exists—someone would have killed her by now.”

“You have a *kid*?” I shrieked. “And why are you telling us this?”

“Leila, are you displeased with my hosting skills?” the Paragon asked in a wheedling voice. “Eat—please!”

I swung to the Paragon. “Why are you not shocked by this? Who cares about food at a time like this—” I stopped mid-tirade and stared at the Paragon.

Everyone started talking like this once they started eating and drinking, and the Paragon’s been an excellent host, making sure everyone has plenty of tea and that he provided their favorite treats...

“You bespelled the tea—and the food!” I shouted.

The Paragon innocently fluttered his eyelashes at me—and, I gotta say, it was creepy beyond words to have a dude who looked like he was in his eighties fluttering his eyelashes at me. “How could you accuse me of something like that?” he asked.

Next to me, Solis snored.

King Fell grabbed his russet hair and groaned. “If I trip up even once, my Court will eat me alive. They follow me only because they know the other monarchs are scared of me.”

I pointed to Fell. “That. That is how I can accuse you of this. What’s in the food—and the tea?”

“Nothing harmful,” the Paragon innocently said. “It’s only one of my stress relief tea mixes. I call it ‘Get it Off Your Chest.’ It’s a very refreshing and therapeutic mixture. Aphrodite must have chosen it because she felt everyone could use the stress relief.”

“Solis is the only one who looks remotely less stressed,” I sourly said.

“That’s because he’s a sleepy drunk,” the Paragon said. “Watch out for Verdant—she’s a sloppy drunk. Cries the whole time.”

“*Drunk?*”

The Paragon winced. “I wish I hadn’t said that.”

“You got them *drunk!*”

“Not technically,” he said. “I didn’t add any alcohol. It’s just the spell used on these tea leaves has a similar effect to the consumption of spirits.”

Solis slumped forward and hit the table with a thump.

“*Heavy* spirits,” the Paragon amended.

Birch was still morosely staring into his teacup. “Someone tried to poison Flora again. Even though I’ve been so careful—they slipped it into her bathwater instead of her food. I don’t know how to keep her safe anymore.” He smashed his head into the table and groaned.

“There might also be a little bit of a social spell,” the Paragon said when I stared at him. “Just a tiny little harmless one. It’s supposed to encourage shy people to talk.”

“They’re spilling their guts!”

“They won’t remember it in the morning,” the Paragon said. “The tea leaves perhaps also have a tiny forgetfulness charm added to them.”

“You mean you’ve done this before!”

“I do it to every region, actually,” the Paragon said. “For informational purposes only, of course.”

“You’re *drugging* them!”

“Yes, well, this is a much faster way of tracking their feelings and goings on than trying to send out spies to watch them,” the Paragon said. “It’s more efficient and less time consuming. Besides, Aphrodite obviously thinks it’s appropriate, or she would have chosen a different tea.”

I scooted my chair back so I was farther away from the spelled tea and drugged food. “This has certainly been illuminating.”

“What do you mean?” The Paragon absently patted Birch’s back—the Summer King was now sniffing into his finger sandwiches.

“I knew you had to be crafty to keep your spot as Paragon, but I didn’t think you’d fight *this* dirty.” I pointed to Solis, who was still passed out on the table.

“I resent that remark!” The Paragon flicked his glasses off and jutted out his lower lip. “You forget, I have to deal with *all* the fae Courts in North America—which means I have to deal with the bickering between all the local Courts. I wouldn’t have any time for my quest if I played nice. And besides—we’re fae. It goes against our nature to play nice.”

“Quest?” I asked.

The Paragon balefully eyed me. “If I tell you, will you refrain from running your mouth about my teatimes to anyone?”

“No way,” I said. “I’m telling Rigel *everything*.”

The Paragon grunted. “I’m fairly certain he knows. I think he broke into my pocket realm once, but I have no proof—the whippersnapper.”

“Then what’s your quest?” I asked curiously.

The Paragon rubbed his eyes and sighed. “I’m looking for someone. The information trail led me here to the Midwest, but my current source is proving to be *maddeningly* tight lipped.”

“Who are you looking for?” I asked.

The Paragon shook his head, and for a second I could have sworn his appearance—the silvery hair, wrinkles, and beak-y nose—wavered. “I dare not say—not because I don’t trust you, but because I’ve gone through a great deal of peril to get this far, and I dare not risk *anyone* overhearing.”

I leaned back in my chair. “Okay.”

“Okay?” The Paragon peered in my direction, surprise flashing across his face. “You’re going to give up just like that?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I already have plenty of issues to handle,” I said. “In particular, I’d like to figure out who keeps trying to kill me, and why the Night Realm hasn’t recovered at all. I don’t need to involve myself in your drama, too,” I said.

Wait. Couldn’t I use this as my chance? Even if the other monarchs are out of it, they still can’t lie!

“Huh. That’s admirably logical,” the Paragon said.

“Hey, Fell!” I said.

“What?” The Autumn King balefully glared at me over his teacup. “What do *you* want?”

“Are you the one who keeps trying to kill me?”

Fell pushed his nose up in the air. “I—” he started, but his words were cut off when his bones suddenly gave out, and he face planted in his carrot cake, getting frosting all over his face.

“No, no, no! Fell—Fell!” I stood up and stretched across the table to shake him by the shoulder.

Fell snored loudly.

I voiced my displeasure for several minutes as the Paragon watched in admiration.

“I’ve never heard someone so creatively use the term ‘hat’ before. Well done.” The Paragon politely clapped for me.

“Do *any* of you know who’s trying to kill me?” I asked with zero hope.

Birch was too absorbed with his pity party, and Solis was snoring with Fell, so I didn't think they even heard me. Verdant's big eyes started to pool with tears. "Someone's trying to *kill* you?" she asked.

"Better watch out," the Paragon said. "If you get her crying, there's no stopping her."

"It's fine. What about you, Rime, do you know?" I tried not to hope too much, but what little bit I was nursing came crashing down when the Winter Queen shrugged.

"I heard of the attempts on your life—I assumed it was Fell," she said.

"Did he ever say anything about it?" I asked.

"No."

"That's just *great*." I sighed. "What do we do now?"

"We wait for them to sober up," the Paragon said. "And then you all leave."

"Didn't you have any specific questions to ask them?"

"No. I didn't really expect to get anything useful out of this meeting," the Paragon said. "I mostly invited you all over because Fell would *not* stop sniveling. Now—even if he doesn't remember the tea—he'll at least stop coming to me complaining about you."

"Why am I not surprised?" I grumbled.

"It's a ruthless time to be a fae." The Paragon raised his teacup to his lips, then shook his head when he realized what he was doing, and poured out the tea on a nearby flower bush. "What about you? Did you learn anything?"

I was about to give him an emphatic no—I'd stupidly wasted my moment to find out who the heck was plaguing me. But I paused when I saw Birch cram another finger sandwich in his mouth and Verdant salute Rime with her teacup.

"They're scared," I said. "Just as scared as I am. They're afraid of losing their power and their realm—not because they want it, but because of the consequences. They're scared of magic dying out." I paused. "Does Birch really have a daughter?"

The Paragon nodded. "Indeed. He's kept her a secret—though he and Flora told me when she was born."

"But why?"

"Birch dearly loves Flora. She's everything to him, and he nearly lost her shortly after they were married when a servant poisoned her food. Once she was pregnant, he was terrified he wouldn't be able to protect her. He sent her

into seclusion until their daughter was born. Of course, when he set eyes on his daughter he loved her, too.”

“Is that why he tries a bite of everything Flora eats?” I asked.

“His worry for them has made him something of a paranoid lunatic,” the Paragon said.

I scowled at the Summer King. “He’s still a jerk.”

The Paragon spread his hands out in front of himself. “All of them are scheming and cunning—and they’d cut your throat out without a second thought. Except Solis, in your case, I think. He’s finally stopped coming to me and crying about the Night Court ever since you became queen. You’ve been good for his nerves.”

“I don’t understand—why don’t they work together?” I asked. “Like Rime and her siblings?”

“Fear is a terrible thing, Leila. It can isolate you, and play to the worst parts of you so you can’t even see logic anymore because you are too paralyzed,” the Paragon said. “And even worse, if left to fester, fear will produce bitterness and then hatred, which will lead you to strike out against the very thing that could save you.”

I looked from Fell to Birch, and almost against my own will, I could feel a tiny sliver of me understand them. “I’m pretty freaked out about my inability to save my shrinking, decaying realm, so I guess I can understand why they’re scared—though I’d never be such a mule about it like they are.”

“Pah—you worry too much about the state of your realm,” the Paragon said. “Just lean into your connection with the realm, and the land will start to mend.”

Connection with the realm? What the heck is he talking about?

“Connection?” I asked.

“Yes, you know how you can feel the land itself?”

I didn’t, actually. But before I could ask him to clarify, the Paragon continued.

“There’s a reason why Fell bitterly hates you, Leila,” he said. “It’s the same reason why all of the Courts snubbed you initially. Because you have done things differently, and you succeeded where they are still locked in a constant struggle.”

“Have things always been like this?” I asked. “This hopeless?”

The Paragon shook his head. “We fae have always been blessed with cunning, but when magic started to die out we saw Courts turn against one

another. Those who lost land resented those who didn't, and the bigger Courts started to take advantage of the smaller..." He shrugged. "It's an inescapable cycle. Or at least, I thought it was."

I clutched my now tepid pumpkin latte. "There's got to be a way out."

"One can hope, Leila," the Paragon said. "One can hope."

* * *

"What do you mean I have to take them home?" I crossly demanded.

"You were the one who was *rude* and didn't eat the refreshments I provided. You can take them back to their domiciles," the Paragon said.

"No way—they won't all fit!" I pointed to my pickup truck.

Dusk was settling on the horizon, but the library was still open, and a few of the patrons were giving the Paragon and me weird looks.

Well, either us, or the still-addled monarchs in various stages of recovery around us.

Birch and Fell were sitting together, swaying slightly as they glared at me.

"You know, I was betting on the Wraith to kill her after they got married," Birch announced. "Rumor has it he killed his own family to get his title. Obviously you'd think he'd be willing to kill a half fae for a throne!"

"Unbelievable," Fell agreed.

I rolled my eyes—I'd heard that rumor before, and I believed it even less now that I knew Rigel better. With his dislike of politics, he'd probably done everything he could to keep his family alive so he *wouldn't* inherit the title.

Verdant bumped my shoulder. "I happen to love human country music," she whispered at the volume of a shout. "But don't tell anyone, okay? Shhh!" She leaned into me and giggled.

"I'll take Verdant home, you can take everyone else," I said.

"No deal. They're out of my pocket realm, they're not my problem," the Paragon said.

"I'll leave Fell out in the country on the side of the road," I threatened.

"As if you could do that," he scoffed. "You haven't the heart to do that to an animal—even a snake like Fell."

I clenched my jaw and scowled at the bespelled monarchs.

“Look, you can leave Rime here. I’ve already called her oldest brother—he’ll come pick her up,” the Paragon said. “And if you take the others home, they’ll owe you one.”

“Fine, fine. But Birch and Fell are *not* riding in my truck.” I dug my cellphone out of my leather jacket and dialed Rigel with zero hope that he would pick up.

“Whatever you like. Toodles!” The Paragon snapped open his coin purse and was gone before I could object.

I was still glowering at the place he’d stood when my phone crackled and my call picked up.

“*What.*” Rigel said on the other end of the line.

“Hey, bae! I could use your help,” I said. “The Paragon got everyone drunk, and he wants me to take them home. Could you come help me? Please?” I asked.

I wasn’t stupid. There was no way it was going to be safe for me to take everyone out to their properties around Magiford, even if they were drunk. If Fell really was responsible for the shadowy monsters, there was a possibility he’d spring a trap on me.

Rigel is my first choice of backup, but I can give Chase a call after he refuses me.

“*Where are you?*” Rigel asked.

“The public library’s parking lot.”

“*I’ll be there soon.*”

I blinked in surprise. “Wait, you’re going to help me?”

“*You think I’d come just to watch the drunken antics of a bunch of useless monarchs?*”

“When you phrase it like that, no.”

“*Obviously I’m coming to help. Don’t touch Fell.*”

“Yeah, no argument there.”

My phone beeped, alerting me that the call had ended.

I stared at my phone for a few moments, and something in my chest warmed.

He’s coming to help me. It’s not even something that could be politically required of him. He’s just doing it.

I smiled a little, and that rush of affection for Rigel that I was swiftly becoming familiar with swamped me again.

He's different from Indigo and Skye. He doesn't need me to fix the Courts, he'd survive without me. But he's still willing to help.

I'd written it off as trust and friendship, but while I adored Indigo, Skye, and Chase, I wouldn't have felt nearly as melty if they'd been the ones to pick up the phone and agree to come.

Stop it. I have never been the lovesick school-girl type. This is silly.

I shook my head and slipped my phone back in my pocket, then turned around to face my bespelled colleagues. "Okay, Verdant, let's get you into the truck."

"I've never ridden in a truck before!"

"Can't say I'm surprised. Come on, step up!" I got Verdant to sit in the bench seat in the back of my cab, then went around to the other side. "Solis, wake up."

Solis snored on the bench the Paragon had set him on.

"Solis, come on, please?" I nudged his shoulder.

More snoring.

I grumbled under my breath as I pulled him up by his arms to sit him upright. He popped his eyes open, and helped me a little when I yanked him to his feet and frog marched him to my truck.

He leaned heavily on me, and I thought I was going to fall flat on my face. We made it to my truck just in time, and I was able to twist Solis so he fell into the truck.

"Come on. Hop in," I coached.

I tapped his foot, and it still took a couple minutes before Solis stepped up and collapsed into the seat, almost smacking into Verdant in the process.

Rime watched with some curiosity—she was doing the best out of everyone, but I think she had a massive headache because she was rubbing her head and winced whenever anyone talked.

I rubbed my neck as I meandered around to the back of my truck and lowered the tailgate.

"You're going to put them in the *back*?" Rime asked.

"Sure, why not?" I shrugged. "It's not illegal since they're over 16 years old, and I'm not going to go speeding around on any highways."

Headlights skidded across the side of the building as a sleek, black car pulled up. Rigel got out, wearing his Wraith jacket and looking all around fantastic.

He stared at Birch and Fell, who were slumped together and singing a

nonsensical song. “You have to take these two, as well?”

“Yeah. Can you help me throw them in the bed of the truck?” I jerked my thumb at my open tailgate.

Rigel shook his head. Effortlessly, he picked Birch up, slinging him over his shoulders in a fireman’s lift. He carried the giggling monarch over to the truck and dropped him in with a clang.

Fell shrieked a little when Rigel carried him the same way, and the assassin might have dropped Fell with even less care, so the Autumn King smacked his head on the side of my truck on the way down.

Once I knew the duo were clear of the door, I closed the tailgate. Rime wandered up and joined me in peering over the side of the bed at the pair.

“This doesn’t seem right for a pair of royals,” Rime said. “Even two as shameful as them.”

Fell managed to peel his head off the rubber mats I put in the back of the truck and peered up at us. He pointed to me, “Weasel,” then pointed to Rime. “Hag.”

“Okay, that’s enough out of you, Fell. Back to sleep.” I pushed him back in the truck bed as I could *feel* the anger roll off Rime. “Rime, do you have any idea when your siblings will arrive?”

A gate erupted out of the ground. It was made of fogged ice that I couldn’t see through, shed flecks of snow, and was ringed in by icicles. The doors opened with a whoosh of icy cold wind, and a giant black wolf stepped out.

A man with frosty white-blue hair that was plaited in a braid similar to Rime’s slid off the wolf’s back. “Let’s go home, Rime.”

Rime had still been peering in the back of my truck, but when the fae called her name she turned around. “Yes, brother.” She shuffled in his direction, still massaging her head. “Good luck, Leila.”

Her brother boosted her onto the wolf’s back, and then led the pair back through the portal, which shut and then shattered—disappearing entirely.

“We should get going, too. Hop in,” I told Rigel. I got in the driver’s seat and started the truck up.

“Where are we going first?” Rigel had to talk loudly to be heard over the purr of my truck.

“Verdant’s place,” I said. “The Paragon told me her home was the closest when we were dragging everyone out here.”

Rigel nodded. “She’s on the west side of town.”

“Great. Just tell me when I need to turn.” I started backing up and blinked when I heard a terrible crash that sounded suspiciously like two fae crashing into the sides of my truck.

Twisting in my seat, I owlishly peered through the back window, into the bed of the truck.

It glittered in the dim light, and it looked like the floor of the bed had been covered with a thick coat of ice.

I laughed. “I guess Rime holds grudges.”

“Do you want to bring them in here with us?” Rigel asked.

“Heck, no. I don’t mind if they get a few bruises to remember the night by!” I finished backing up, then took the corner more sharply than necessary, eliciting more thuds from the bed.

It was dark by the time we reached the Spring Queen’s home. I couldn’t see much of her house—not because of the lack of light, but because the place was covered in vines, flowers, and enough plants to outfit roughly ten city parks.

Verdant was singing at the top of her lungs when I helped her out of the truck. She landed on top of me—and let me tell you, for a petite fae she had a lot of muscle, because wowza did she hit me like a rock!

I righted myself in time and helped her up the winding sidewalk. “No, Verdant. No air guitars. You have to figure out how to get inside—AH!”

I screamed when three white deer stepped out of the thick underbrush.

“Babies!” Verdant cheered. She let go of me and flung herself at the nearest stag. She scrambled up its back, and hung over its shoulder. “Thanks, Leila!”

“Um, yeah. Goodnight?”

The stag and a doe walked off, leaving the last stag with me.

It nosed my arm, and it took me a moment to realize it was the same stag I had saved from the hunt. “Are you happy to be home?” I scratched its forehead, ducking when he swiveled his head and nearly took me out with his antlers.

The stag flicked his tail, then followed his brethren.

I shook my head and jogged back to the truck.

“Who’s next?” I asked Rigel.

“Summer is the next closest.” Rigel watched as I scrambled into my seat.

“Then summer, here we come!”

Birch’s place was less than fifteen minutes south, and was an easy drive.

Rather than pull up to his house, we got stopped at these massive gates and had to wait for a car to come pick him up.

The gate guard seemed to think I was going to steal all of Summer's valuable artifacts if they let me in, based on the way he was suspiciously eyeing me.

I didn't mind—I was just happy he wasn't having a massive heart attack because his distinctly ruffled monarch was cruising around in the bed of my truck!

When the sent for car finally arrived, I lowered my truck tailgate. "Come on out, Birch. This is your stop."

Birch—frost in his hair from the ice—groaned and turned away from me.

"What happened to your good cheer and happy songs? Come on!" I climbed into the bed of the truck and grabbed Birch by the ankles.

Rigel got out of the truck. "Do you want help?"

"Nah. I'm just going to let him fall since none of his people seem inclined to help." I sat on the side of my truck and shoved Birch off the back with my heels.

No judging—I'd backed up to the grass, and as King of Summer it seemed like Birch took his landscaping seriously because the ground was practically a cushion. He didn't even thump when he hit it, he bounced and rolled.

But I felt a little guilty anyway because the car door opened and out came Consort Flora.

"Oops," I said.

Chapter Twenty

Leila

Birch groaned into the ground.

“Birch, stand. We should return to the house,” Consort Flora said.

To my surprise, Birch managed to sit up, and the judgy gate guard helped him into the passenger seat of the fancy car.

Consort Flora waited until he was safely strapped in, then she bowed to me—the redneck who’d brought her husband back in the icy bed of a truck. “Thank you for bringing him home, Queen Leila. I am certain he will be grateful for your assistance when he wakes tomorrow.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell him I assisted him,” I said. “In fact, I think I’d prefer if you didn’t.”

Consort Flora smiled serenely and got back into her car.

I scrambled into my truck and waited for Rigel before I stepped on the gas, purposely gunning it for a few spaces so Fell crashed around in the back and smacked into the side of my truck.

“Whoopsies,” I said. “Sorry about that, Fell,” I called, even though he couldn’t hear me.

Solis laughed.

“We’re dropping off Fell next?” I asked.

“Yes. Solis lives closest to the Night Court,” Rigel said.

“Great! I like having good neighbors. Oh, but won’t we need to double back to the library to pick up your car?” I asked.

Rigel shrugged. “We can use the night mares to go pick it up after we finish.”

I sighed deeply. “Good point. Okay, fine. How do I get to Fell’s place?”

Rigel gave me directions, and Solis seemed to come out of it a bit. He leaned forward between our seats and sighed.

“You know, Leila, you’re too good.” Solis braced himself on our seats. “We fae don’t deserve you.”

“Aww, that’s very sweet of you to say, Solis,” I said.

“It’s the truth!” Solis nodded emphatically.

Rigel twisted slightly to study the Day King. “All the monarchs appeared to be inebriated as you said on the phone. The Paragon fed them some of his charmed tea?”

“Yep!”

“And you didn’t drink any because you hate tea.”

“And I brought a latte with me, and I remembered Hazel complaining about the Paragon’s tea,” I said. “I’m really glad I didn’t try any. I can only imagine what sort of things I would have blurted out to everyone the way they were gushing.”

“You don’t have any secrets,” Rigel pointed out. “You’ve been very open and blunt.”

“Well, I don’t know if people know I’m having troubles with artifacts, but you have a point. Everyone already knows I can’t keep the ward up when I need to.” I sighed deeply.

The reminder of my failure made a sour taste in my mouth, so I was distracted and didn’t even mean to take the corner as fast as I did, sending Fell careening around the bed of my truck, sliding on the slick ice.

Solis had sprawled out in the backseat again. “Maybe we’ll make it. I’ve never been optimistic before, but now I might be!” He laughed at himself, then coughed abruptly.

“Can you check to make sure his seat belt is on?” I asked Rigel. “I thought I strapped him in, but he might have wiggled out of it.”

Rigel stared at me. “You’re odd.”

“What? Why?”

“None of the other fae monarchs would care if he wore a seat belt or not.”

“I care because it’s Solis—obviously, or I wouldn’t have Fell skidding around back there.” I slammed on the brakes for a four-way stop sign, and Fell smacked into the back of the cab, plastering his face on the window. “Sorry, Fell!” I called in a singsong voice as the Autumn King slid down the window.

“You care about Fell to some degree,” Rigel said. “Or you would have left him in the parking lot.”

“True,” I agreed.

“You care too much,” Solis said. “It’s a danger to you. But I’m still glad you’re the Night Queen. I’m glad the night mares picked you...” Solis trailed off and snored again.

Thinking back to the secrets the monarchs had spilled to me, I frowned and gripped the steering wheel with more strength than necessary. “Rigel, you met the monarchs for work before we got married, right?”

Rigel mutely stared at me, which meant he totally had.

“Are they *scared*?” I asked.

Rigel was silent for several long moments. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Do they act out and fight and have these power struggles because they’re afraid of what will happen if they mess up, or if they’re perceived as not having enough power?” I thought back to something Rime had said. “Are they afraid of magic dying out?”

“Of course,” Rigel said. “Everyone dreads the death of magic. As for their struggles, it’s a part of it, yes. They had the desire for power, or they wouldn’t have been made a royal. But they do have fear. A lot of it.”

“How can you tell?” I asked. “They can’t lie, but most fae are good at carefully hiding their expressions.”

Rigel shrugged. “Perhaps. But they give themselves away in the small things. How fast their heart beats, how shallowly they’re breathing, any nervous ticks they might have, things like that.”

“You can hear their heartbeats?” I asked, shocked. “I thought that was just a vampire and werewolf thing.”

Rigel shrugged. “I can typically get close enough to a target that I can hear what a werewolf would be able to hear halfway across a room.”

“Ahh. Right.”

We were silent for a while—except for Rigel giving me the occasional direction.

“Does it matter?” he abruptly asked when we reached Fell’s mansion—of course the Autumn King had the biggest, gaudiest place *ever*. He also had a gate that barred the way, but I didn’t even try to pull up to it. I wanted as little to do with the Autumn Court as possible, and I didn’t want anyone tattling to the Autumn King that I was responsible for his bruises.

“Does what matter?” I asked.

“Does it matter if the other monarchs are scared?”

I hopped out of the truck, waved to the guards who were watching me suspiciously, lowered the tailgate, then hopped back in the truck. “Yeah, it matters,” I said. “It doesn’t excuse their behavior—Fell deserves to rot for what he made Verdant do. But then I’ll know how to help them, since they’re

too stubborn to ask for it themselves.”

“You’d help them?” Rigel asked. “Why?”

I tapped my finger on the steering wheel. “Just because I don’t like them, doesn’t mean I want to see them and their people suffer. And that’s how *humans* roll.” I slammed my foot on the gas, gunning my truck, and abruptly swerved.

The sudden burst of speed—combined with the slick ice layer—made Fell go hurtling out of the bed of my truck.

He squawked like a bird and flapped his arms before crashing into the massive hedge I’d been aiming for.

I waited long enough to make sure his feet were kicking in the air before I drove off at a normal pace.

“You don’t want to see him suffer, is it?” Rigel said.

“Suffering is *not* the same as facing the consequences for being despicable,” I said.

“Right.”

I grinned at Rigel, and almost got us into an accident when he smiled back.

It wasn’t a huge grin. It was barely a sliver of his white teeth flashing against his bronze skin. But the light in his eyes was...warm? Affectionate?

Those were the words I was looking for, but everything fell pathetically short of *whatever* it was that I saw in his eyes.

I stared at him even after his smile was long gone. Even after I clipped something with my truck and was driving dangerously.

“I believe you just knocked Fell’s mailbox over,” Rigel said.

I coughed and shook my head, trying to regain my inner zen—or just trying to *stop* ogling my consort. “Right. Something for him to discover tomorrow.” I cleared my throat. “Okay, Solis. Your turn!”

“Hurray!” Solis called from the backseat.

“Yep, yeah,” I babbled. “All kinds of hurray!”

* * *

Three days later, I stood in front of the door that connected my room to

Rigel's.

Should I knock? Should I even go in? I don't really need comfort tonight. I'm just lonely.

I looked back over my shoulder. Kevin was splayed across a giant dog bed, lying on his back with his legs poking up in the air. Whiskers was sitting down on a rug, vigorously cleaning himself. When he caught sight of me watching, he stared at me with his rough tongue hanging out of his mouth.

Nah. I shouldn't bother him for something like this. I mean, we're friends, but that doesn't give me the right to invade his room whenever I feel like it. That'd be something a lot more understandable if we were in love—

The door swung open, and Rigel, nonplussed, cocked his head at me. "Are you coming in or not?"

"W-what?" I stammered.

"You've been standing in front of the door for the past fifteen minutes. Decide: are you coming in or staying out?" Rigel swiveled slightly, opening up a space for me to squeak past if I wanted to.

I sucked my neck into my shoulders, but darted into his room.

Rigel still didn't move. "I assume you two are joining us?"

Kevin rolled to his paws and wagged his tail as he followed me inside. Whiskers started to follow him, then turned around and set a paw on top of Kevin's abandoned bed.

"What?" Rigel said.

Whiskers patted the bed with his massive paw.

I opened my mouth to say what Whiskers wanted, but Rigel beat me to it. "You're asking me to bring the bed."

Whiskers purred deep in his throat.

Rigel said something about "spoiled pets" under his breath, but he went into my room, got the bed, and casually tossed the giant thing down on the ground at the foot of his bed. He briefly furrowed his eyebrows when Whiskers sauntered into the bedroom—purring—and wound around Rigel's legs.

"You've over domesticated these two." Although Rigel's words were a tad harsh, I noticed he knew just where to scratch Whiskers' chin to elicit even louder purrs from the cat.

"Thanks for letting me come in," I said.

Rigel shrugged. "You do better being with people when you're upset. What's wrong?"

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been thinking about something. You get a wrinkle right here whenever something is bothering you.” He almost brushed my skin when he pointed to the spot in between my eyebrows. “What is it?”

He’d long ago shed that dead-eyed look he used to use all the time. Typically, whenever he looked at me it was with humor shining in his dark eyes, but today I thought I could see a shred of concern, and something in my chest warmed.

Oh, don’t you dare, I warned myself. He’s an assassin. That’s, like, the bad boy stereotype to end all stereotypes.

Of course my traitorous feelings didn’t listen to me, and as Rigel waited expectantly for an answer, the warm sensation spread all the way to the soles of my feet.

The truth was, I’d been on a slippery slope as far as Rigel was concerned for a while. Probably since he’d killed those monsters in the market. His smile the night we dropped all the monarchs off had been the beginning of the end.

And now, as I watched him close his bedroom door, peel back the covers and point to the mattress in a wordless invitation to me, and then stop to stare down Kevin—who had both of his front paws on the bed—I knew I was a goner.

“I love you,” I blurted out.

As soon as the words left my lips, panic rocked my inner world.

Why did I say that? WHY did I say that?! I regret it—edit, undo! Backspace! Escape! How do I get out of this?

My thoughts bounced around in my skull, and I stared at Rigel with growing horror.

The silver-haired fae stared at me, then nodded once. “If you don’t want to tell me what’s wrong, you don’t have to break out your bluffs. Just tell me you don’t want to talk about it.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

“Go to bed.”

I stared at him, not quite believing I’d gotten away with it, but also kind of offended he didn’t believe me. “But I love you,” I said again without thinking.

“And if you follow up that statement with a request to touch my abs, I’m going to bundle you up in a blanket and toss you outside,” he warned.

“You don’t believe me,” I said.

“Leila,” Rigel said in a no-nonsense tone. “You’ve declared your undying love to me and unwavering loyalty to my physique to a roomful of royals. I’ve seen the best of your—what do you call it? Trolling? Whatever it is, I know you are excellent at it. It’s not going to work on me.”

For a moment I was just relieved I was getting away with my little confession with no consequences. That’s when I realized I was dead wrong.

In fact, I was staring down a whole flood of consequences.

This is punishment, I realized as I stared at Rigel like an idiot. Finally, I’m getting payback for all the lies I’ve casually spouted. I should have listened to Mom when I was a kid, and not delighted in my ability to lie to the fae. Or maybe I just shouldn’t have casually lied 80% of the time whenever I was with the other monarchs.

I felt lightheaded in a twisted combination of relief and deep disappointment.

Rigel was right—had I ever really given him a reason to think I felt anything for him beyond friendship? Would he even believe me after the dramatic ways I’d carried on about him?

Wow, this feels like a really cruel ending to a children’s fable—and then they didn’t live happily ever after because he didn’t believe her since she was a lying-maccheater-pants.

Rigel picked up a pair of daggers and casually twirled them as I wandered up to his bed.

“Nice daggers,” I said.

“They’re actually Chinese butterfly swords—made for dual wielding.” Rigel held the swords up to inspect their thicker blades in the dim light. “Very effective against unarmored opponents.” He casually held them by their metal hand guard and twirled them twice with a twitch of his wrist.

“That’s...great.” I pulled on the hem of my sleeping shorts and sat down on his mattress.

Rigel watched me for a moment, then put his dagger-swords away. Wearing his black shirt and pants, he sat down on top of his covers, then smacked the area next to him. “Come on.”

I hesitated a second—I didn’t think snuggling up to my strictly off-limits hubby was going to change my feelings—but when he flipped on his side and stared at me, I gave in.

I slipped under the covers and scooted my way across the bed so I was

next to him.

Rigel casually draped an arm over my side. “Whatever is worrying you, we’ll get through it. You have Indigo, Skye, Chase, and Lord Linus supporting you.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“Don’t you support me?” I risked glancing up at Rigel and was treated to the sight of the corners of his lips twitching in an infinitesimal smirk.

“I do. But my method of supporting you would simply be to wipe the problem out. Permanently. Something tells me that’s not a method you would favor,” he said.

I stared up at him, the inner alarms of my mind going off.

All hands on deck—it’s official, I’m smitten with my husband. I regret my lies, I repent fully. It’s not fair—how can he be a murderous assassin and this thoughtful? It shouldn’t be possible!

“Your silence leads me to believe Fell is the problem, and you’re contemplating if murder would really be so bad,” Rigel said.

I laughed. “No. For once, Fell is not behind my problems. I’m just contemplating how my dear husband came to be suspicious of my advances.”

“It’s because you talk like that,” Rigel said. He stroked my mid back with his thumb. “Sleep, Leila. Whatever battle you’re thinking of, it can wait until the morning.”

Hah, the morning? It seems like this is going to be a battle of many, many, many months. Oh well. Faint heart never won the fair...er...assassin?

My eyes drifted shut as I scooted just a little bit closer to Rigel.

His fingers traced a path across my back with a gentleness I didn’t know he had, and I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

About a week later—in early November—I decided to take advantage of the unusually warm fall afternoon and study outside in the garden.

“What would you like to study next?” Skye asked as she set a rock on a stack of papers to keep the wind from carrying them off. “The nobles of the

Winter Court, or learn about the festivals most celebrated by the Winter Court?”

I slipped the housing report we’d just finished—since I technically owned the apartment buildings some of the Night Court lived in, I took my responsibilities as landlord very seriously—into a manilla folder. “I don’t get why I have to memorize Rime’s nobles. The Night Court, yes. Absolutely. I need to know my own people. But why do I have to know Rime’s?”

“Eventually you’ll need to memorize all the top players in the various Courts as you have more and more to do with them,” Skye said.

“And due to the constant shifts in power, the top players change all the time. You’re better off just memorizing most everyone,” Indigo advised.

I groaned and leaned back in my chair. “This stinks. Why can’t they wear nametags?”

Skye ignored my whining. “It is particularly important to know the most important nobles in the Winter Court since it is the strongest Court in our region, and Queen Rime serves as the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic.”

Deciding it was time to buck up and get to work, I sat up. “Yeah, I remember that. Is she the representative because she’s the strongest?”

“Yes and no,” Skye said. “It’s an important position because it gives that monarch the power to support and veto regional laws and bills on behalf of all fae kind. The representative has the power to greatly affect the future of the fae, so typically the spot is filled by powerful fae, but regions are known to rotate through.”

“Let me guess, the Midwest doesn’t because of Fell, Mr-stick-where-the-sun-don’t-shine?” I asked.

“Yep,” Indigo said. “He blocked Birch when he made a push to be made the new rep a while ago.”

“How very like him.”

I studied my teacup. Since Indigo knew I didn’t like tea, she’d made hot cider, and kept it warm and steaming with magic even though it’d been in my teacup for a few minutes.

I heard a distant crash, and the ground shook with enough force to make ripples appear in my cider. “What was that?” I stood up, turning around as I slipped my prism artifact out of my blue jean pocket.

“I don’t know.” Skye had her cellphone out and waved to the two guards who were watching us from a distance.

“I think it came from the maze.” Indigo pointed to the giant hedge maze stretched out next to us.

Ice crawled up my spine. “The gate to the Night Realm is at the center of that maze,” I said.

Another dull roar, and the ground shook again.

“I’m calling Chase.” Skye’s voice was tight with worry.

“I’ll call Lord Linus, then.” Indigo had her phone out and was speed dialing.

“Maybe I should call Rigel, so I don’t feel left out.” I laughed weakly at my own joke, but worry twisted my stomach when Skye nodded.

“A sound idea,” she said.

Before I could unearth my phone, a gate sprang out of the ground—a rounded archway made of stone with a familiar wrought-iron gate.

The gate was thrown open with such force it groaned and almost sagged on its hinges.

Three of my night mares—Eclipse, Solstice, and Blue Moon—burst through the gate. Solstice and Blue Moon were honking with the hoarse, bark-like sound the night mares used to warn off trouble. Eclipse, however, screamed loudly enough to shatter ear drums.

Kevin and Steve came bursting out of the mansion, and Whiskers and Muffin appeared from the maze shadows where they’d been lounging.

Blue Moon charged back through the gate, the shades and glooms behind him.

“Something’s wrong with the Night Realm,” I said. “Get Chase, Rigel, and the guards, and come through after us—Solstice, wait for them before you come after us.”

“What are you going to do?” Indigo demanded as Skye started shouting into her phone.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on.” I grimly threw myself on Eclipse’s back. The mare’s spine was bony and uncomfortable to sit on, and I didn’t have a helmet, but there wasn’t time to remedy either situation at the moment, so I’d have to deal with it.

I clung to Eclipse’s neck as the mare turned in a tight circle. “Let’s go,” I urged her.

She shot through the gate, taking me to the Night Realm before I’d even had the chance to register the gate’s magic.

The realm was in chaos.

The ground shook, and a horrible, whistling noise that sounded like the wind screaming through trees violently sliced through the air. Night mares—both mine and the ones that had chosen to remain wild—were galloping around. I even saw Bagel and Fax in the mix.

I turned Eclipse in a circle before I saw it: the monster.

With a pale, paper white skull that glowed in the darkness of the Night Realm, and feathers and fur the same color as blood, the monster was a sickening mash of animals. The skull of a cow was melded to the front shoulders that resembled a lion. Its legs turned into the clawed feet of a hawk, and its torso narrowed into a scaled and feathered tail that was vaguely reminiscent of a snake. Two sets of antelope horns jutted out of its skull, and a pair of prominent fangs jutted from its jaws.

It was massive—easily as big as a two-story house—and shadows danced and writhed around it, connecting the body parts together to form the entire creature.

It was dead—magic was powering it. The sticky, whispery sensation of fae magic brushed my mind, but as it had been for the snakes that attacked me in the theater, the shadow monsters that attacked me at the supernatural market, and the monster Myron set on me in the Midsummer Derby, I could feel another magic underneath it. An ancient, foreign magic that felt simultaneously wild and controlled. It was sharp like the edge of a blade, and filled the air so strongly it made my teeth ache as the thing jerked around like a puppet on strings.

But how did it get here?

I activated my prism and started filtering the wild magic in the air.

“Of course, you’d overestimate your abilities and try to fight that *thing*.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Leila

I whipped Eclipse around and was shocked to find Fell, holding the bridle of a glowing sun stallion, standing behind me. “*Fell?*” I said. “What are you doing here?”

Fell smirked at me. “I brought that,” he nodded to the creature. “It’s my *gift* to you. I saw it in the Autumn Realm and decided, since you’re intent on playing hero, *you* could deal with it. Though you won’t be able to.”

I wanted to grab the Autumn King by the collar of his shirt, but the monster exhaled on a clump of trees, instantly turning it into ash.

Clearly, I had bigger issues to deal with. “What is it?”

Fell scoffed. “That ignorant, are you? Of course you would be—”

“*Fell!*” I shouted. “Just tell me what it is and how to beat it!”

“It’s animated by shadow magic—the same kind from the movie theater.”

Lord Linus stepped through the gate, Chase and the others right behind him.

The fae lord’s eyes locked on the monster with worry. “But it looks like it’s been combined with necromancy of some sort. Beating it is going to be next to impossible given its size.”

“How would I defeat something like that, then?” I asked.

Lord Linus rubbed his chin and shook his head. “Beheading would be the simplest matter, but unless you can get yourself a sword big enough to stab through its limbs, it won’t work on a monster that size.”

“Light, possibly,” Chase said. He looped a lead rope around Fax’s neck, and then a second around Bagel’s, securing the less fierce geldings for their safety. “The shadow snakes reacted negatively to light.”

Lord Linus shook his head. “The amount of light you’d need would be extraordinary.”

“I’m calling in my men. We’ll get multiple warriors on it,” Chase said.

“Fine. I’ll distract it in the meantime,” I said.

“You’re wasting your time,” Fell said. “You can’t beat that thing.”

“Then what do you suggest we *do*?” I snarled.

Fell shrugged. “The only thing you can do. Dump it in the human world.”

“Are you *insane*?” I shouted. “I’m not doing that! It will kill people! It could smash its way through half of Magiford before the Curia Cloisters could contain it.”

I pointed to the monster, which was clacking its teeth.

We’d popped out by the massive lake in the middle of my territory—a good distance away from the monster—but even this far away I could smell its putrid, rotting scent.

The monster whipped its tail in a wide arc, smashing into the magical barrier, which sputtered and flashed.

My stomach dropped, and fear made my ears ring.

If we don’t do something, it will take out the wards.

“You’ll have to choose, *Leila*. Sacrifice your realm, or set it loose on the humans for the Curia Cloisters to deal with,” Fell sneered.

I turned Eclipse toward the monster. “I *hate* you,” I told Fell. I then squeezed my heels into Eclipse’s sides, and she was off like a bolt of lightning.

I wanted to whistle a call to the others, but there was no way I was letting go of Eclipse’s neck, so I just screamed at the top of my lungs all the way to the monster.

I probably sounded like I was officially losing it, but I didn’t care. I had bigger problems to behold.

Eclipse was the fastest of my night mares. Effortlessly, she took the lead even as the rest of the night mares charged behind us.

We closed in on the monster—its putrid scent was thick enough to make me gag.

This close, I could hear the way its body unnaturally clicked whenever it moved and better see the shadowy magic that tied it together and made the monster jolt along.

This is either proof Fell is the one who has been trying to kill me, or proof that it’s someone else entirely.

When Eclipse braced her legs and skidded to a stop, I licked my lips, tucked my fingers in my mouth, and whistled.

Glooms and shades burst out of the shadows, their eyes glowing and their snarls ripping through the air as they joined us.

“Surround it!” I shouted. “We need to drive it away from the barrier!”

The night mares trumpeted, the shades howled, and the glooms screamed.

My prism warmed in my hand, as did my old charm bracelet artifact—which I'd taken to wearing under my long sleeves.

I can do this.

Using the prism, I forged the biggest ward I could make, stretching it far across the ground between the monster and the realm's barriers. When I felt it had enough power I activated it, sprouting a shield, and then pulled it toward me.

I was hoping to drag the monster away from the realm barrier. It was a good plan, until my ward actually touched the monster.

Pain popped in my skull, and I shouted as it radiated down my arms and legs. I thought it was because the monster smashed its tail into my spell or something, but when I peeled an eye open I saw the monster had lumbered around and faced the barrier, its jaw hanging open.

It was *inhaling* the ward, making the magic evaporate.

I shoved more magic into the spell, but I couldn't keep up. The monster sucked the magic down with too much greed, and the barrier grew smaller and smaller.

The pain continued, hot and electric. My spine arched, and the pain sloshed around in my brain until I couldn't handle it anymore.

I let the sputtering ward go, sobbing with relief when the pain left.

Before I could draw myself upright, an arrow—blazing with magic—soared past me, striking the monster in its empty eye socket.

Rather than exploding, or reacting in some way with magic, the arrow disappeared into the shadows of the empty eye socket, and nothing happened.

Somewhere off to the side, Rigel swore.

He caught up pretty fast. "It's eating magic, isn't it?" I asked.

"Eating or burning it somehow," Rigel confirmed. "It doesn't seem to grow stronger from it."

Thinking of the way I'd destroyed a couple of shadow monsters I forged a ward underneath the monster and activated it.

The ward sprouted into a barrier, and instantly evaporated when it touched the monster, leaving me with an intense wave of pain that made me stagger a few steps.

It seemed like my old tricks weren't going to work on this monstrosity.

"How do we kill it?" I asked. "Would overwhelming it with magic work?"

Rigel shook his head. "Maybe Rime and *all* her siblings could, but it

would take most of the Court to achieve the same effect here.”

The monster whirled around, dragging its tail across the ground and cutting huge trenches in the dirt.

Dust filled the air, and I coughed into my sleeve, but headlights cut through the smog.

Three trucks—the beds filled with armor-wearing fae warriors—pulled up behind us.

Chase popped out of the front seat of one of the trucks. “Into position,” he shouted. “Go!”

“Chase?” I shouted. “How did you get trucks in here?”

“The night mares helped me bring them in a month ago,” Chase said.

His men leaped from the trucks and formed organized ranks, unholstering what looked like *highly* altered—perhaps even magical—rifles.

The monster took a swipe at one of the groups of guards with its clawed feet.

Using my charm bracelet, I formed a barrier, protecting them. But when the monster raked its claws across my purple shield, pain ripped through my mind, and I screamed as my barrier shuddered, fast losing magic due to contact with the monster.

When it pulled back, Chase shouted. “Fire!”

The two dozen guards opened fire on the monster, peppering it with shots that exploded on contact.

Even then, they did no damage.

The fires that licked at the creature’s body winked out, and its fur and feathers remained unsinged.

Shadows swirled around the creature, and it exhaled on a tree, turning it into ash, and then it swung its pale skull around to face us.

A gloom screamed and leapt at the monster.

“NO!” I shouted, putting every ounce of my will behind it.

If they touch it, it will kill them—suck the magic right out of their essence.

The cat twisted midair, cutting its leap short.

I sagged with relief, but it was short lived. The monster took a swipe at the cat with a clawed foot and barely missed it.

“We need to get it away from the realm wards,” I shouted to Chase and Rigel. “We have to split up.”

“Absolutely not,” Chase said.

“How do you expect to defeat it?” Rigel asked.

“Get the Day King,” I said. “He should have enough light in him to stop it. Maybe.”

The creature lunged at us. I barely grew a ward in time, screaming in pain as it sank its claws into the shield.

The pain was so intense I fell off Eclipse, but the monster didn’t back off. Its claws sounded like nails on a chalkboard as it tried to poke through my shimmering barrier.

Blood dripped from my nose, and it felt like the building pressure in my brain would make my head explode. Even worse, the magic flowing through my prism was slowing to a sputter. Just a few more seconds, and I wouldn’t have enough to keep the ward protecting us activated.

Rigel brushed past me.

There was a horrific crunch, and the pain retreated.

The monster raised its skull to the sky and screamed—a horrible, wet noise that made goosebumps pop up on my arms and legs.

When I could finally see straight Rigel was jogging back around the barrier, carrying a glowing sword.

“It seems it can be hurt,” Rigel said. “You just have to cut straight through.” He nodded to the chipped claw that lay just past my barrier.

He’d cut straight through it.

“Lord Linus said if we had a way to do it, we could behead the monster which would cut off the magic...” I trailed off when I finally got a good look at Rigel and realized the left sleeve of his jacket was torn, and blood dripped down his arm. “You’re hurt!”

Rigel shrugged. “It’s just a scratch,” he said. “It nicked me when it pulled back.” He rolled his shoulders back, not even a flicker of pain showing on his stoic face.

He’s hurt. Rigel is hurt. Rigel!

That, more than anything else, scared me.

I’d never seen Rigel injured before. That his left arm now dripped with blood was a very, very bad sign.

“We split up,” I repeated as I clambered onto Eclipse’s back. “Get help.”

I turned Eclipse away from Chase’s protests and shouted to my animals, “Scatter!” I put my magic behind the command, pleading with my night mares, shades, and glooms for their cooperation.

It worked.

The cats and dogs peeled off, fading back into the shadows, and the night

mares took off—calling to one another as they wove through the ruined landscape.

I need to make sure it follows me. Eclipse might be the only one that can stay ahead of it.

I yanked magic through my prism and created a common light-orb with my magic. I held the glob of light in my fist and waved it at the monster. “Hey! Ugly! Come and get me!”

I didn’t think it would actually react, but the monster peered back and forth until its skull was pointed in my direction. Then it dragged itself forward, clawing its way along, destroying everything in its path.

Eclipse bolted, thundering across the barren Night Realm land.

“Sorry, Eclipse,” I apologized when the mare snorted.

She tossed her head, then tucked her muzzle so it made her neck bulge with muscles, and went faster.

She galloped so fast the air stung my eyes, and I couldn’t see a thing—just hear the thumps as the monster sank its claws into the ground and dragged itself after us.

What do we do? What do we do? I can’t just let it run around the realm. If Solis can’t kill it, I’ll need the Cloisters’ help. But they’ll never get here in time, and dumping this thing in the human world isn’t an option!

Eclipse abruptly adjusted her stride, drastically slowing down.

When I blinked the tears out of my eyes, I realized we were running along the shore of the large lake. My heart leaped into my throat when I saw Skye and Chrysanthe running toward us, carrying something covered in a purple banner between them.

“Eclipse, stop,” I called to my mare, who was already slowing down.

She’d barely slowed to a trot before I took a flying leap off her, landing next to Skye with enough force that I had to hop a few steps or risk falling over. “What are you two doing?” I snarled to the steward. “We need to clear the area—that thing’s out of control.”

Chrysanthe shook her head. “No—you can handle it.”

“Are you *insane*? What—with my broken magic—has you thinking I can do that when I can’t even save our realm!”

Skye whipped the purple banner off the long thing the duo carried, revealing the original king’s staff.

The crescent moon gleamed in the dim night light, and the crystal glittered.

“It’s yours,” Skye said. “Your prism? It’s not an artifact unto itself—it’s why you’re having trouble with it. It’s a part of the staff.”

“*What?*”

Chrysanthe held the staff up to my face and pointed at the crystal at the bottom of the crescent moon. “It’s chipped and bumpy because *your* prism connects here.”

“The prism didn’t call out to you in your selection ceremony, the *staff* did,” Skye added. “If you reconnect the two, they should re-meld.”

“No way!” I said.

“Leila!” Skye shouted in a voice that was the angriest I’d ever heard her be. “You have to trust me on this!”

“Skye found records.” Chrysanthe’s olive skin paled as she stared at the oncoming creature. Fear glazed her eyes, but when she turned to me her shoulders were set. “If you can’t believe in yourself, believe in Skye!”

The creature was going to be on us soon. It was clawing up chunks of earth and sending them spiraling through the sky, and flattening whatever trees and undergrowth had the unfortunate luck to be in its way.

“Leila!” Skye barked.

I turned in her direction.

“It’s fine!” she said.

I scowled. “You’re insane! When we get home, I am going to make you listen to Chase’s talk on workplace safety!”

I snatched the banner from Chrysanthe and used it to take the staff from the pair. My stomach did flip flops as I deactivated my prism, then set it on top of the staff’s stunted crystal with shaking fingers.

My prism exploded with light. I squeezed my eyes shut, and when I peeled them open again, my artifact had flawlessly melded with the staff, looking like one seamless crystal that popped out of the crescent moon.

What the—no. Think about it later.

I sucked in a breath and made myself focus. “You two need to get out of here—Eclipse!”

“No—no, I’m not riding one of those things,” Chrysanthe objected.

“Then you should have thought about that before you strutted out here like an idiot!” I said.

Eclipse pranced up to me, stopping next to us. Cupping my hands together, I nodded to Skye.

She put her foot in my hands, and I boosted her onto Eclipse’s back, then

practically threw Chrysanthe up behind her.

“How am I supposed to use this thing?” I asked.

“The same way you’d use any artifact,” Skye said.

“Even though it’s the Original Creep’s?”

“All an artifact does is transform wild magic into a usable force, and perhaps amplify it,” Skye said. “It will be like your prism, just more powerful. Use whatever you’re most confident in!”

The dirt and broken trunks the monster scattered had reached the lakeshore.

I had about three seconds before it would be on us.

“Eclipse, go!” I shouted.

The mare tossed her head and took off, carrying a grim-faced Skye and a screaming Chrysanthe far away.

I peeled the banner off the staff and—fear curdling my stomach—touched it with my bare hand.

I felt magic *everywhere*. But instead of feeling overwhelmed as I had before I’d reunited the prism and the staff, this time it felt controlled and solid.

I could feel the ripples on the lake, the soft light of the stars in the sky, and could sense the heartbeat of every living thing in a mile radius.

And I could *see* wild magic—flashes of it, anyway. I could see it drift in the air and churn through the staff, which made it glow a beautiful purple color.

I didn’t even have to use an activation word to activate the staff. As if it recognized my touch, it started pouring magic to me—like a river. Half addled by the beauty and all the new sensations, I created a ward.

This time, when the monster collided with it, I only felt a twinge of pain.

I just had *so much* magic at my disposal, it didn’t matter that the monster was guzzling the magic straight from the barrier. More flowed in to take its place.

When the monster backed up, I dismissed the ward and created a huge orb of light—one the size of a car.

I flashed it in front of the monster’s skull. To my disappointment, it shook its head and chattered its teeth at me, but it didn’t seem hurt by the light.

In fact, it barged through the light to ram me again.

I scooped up magic from my staff and created another ward, forged of purple runes at my feet. I activated it just before the monster struck. It

smacked with enough force to send me skidding backwards, my feet kicking up pebbles and sand from the lake shore as the water lapped at my heels. The barrier, though, held, and the pain was about equal to a weak headache.

I could hold the monster off, but we were locked in a stalemate. And even with all of this magic on my side, I wasn't sure I could wield it well enough to win.

I gritted my teeth as the monster pushed me another inch or two into the lake.

I abruptly released the barrier and ran up the shore, splashing through the shallow water as I tried to come up with an idea.

The monster crashed after me, carelessly slapping the water with its tail. It lunged for me, and I created another ward.

"Leila!" Lord Linus shouted.

Skye and Chrysanthe had apparently stopped and gotten off farther down the shore. Indigo, Rigel, Chase, Lord Linus, and—most annoyingly of all—Fell were with them. Eclipse and a few of the other night mares swarmed around the crowd, but the idiots had all apparently decided to risk their necks and stay behind.

"Give it up, Night Queen!" Fell shouted. "Drop it in the human realm!"

Sweat trickled down my back as I held the barrier up. "Words can't describe how much I'd like it if the Autumn King would be temporarily disposed of," I snarled.

"Got it," Indigo shouted.

"What? No—get back!" Fell shouted.

There was a skittering of pebbles, then a metallic clang, followed by a thump.

"Okay, he's out of it!" Indigo said.

"Perfect—!" I broke off in a shout of surprise when the monster shoved me knee deep into the lake water.

"Solis is on his way!" Chase shouted. "You just need to hold it off until he gets out to his sun stallions and ports in!"

"Yes, that's great, except I don't know that light is going to work like we hoped." I leaned into the ward, the muscles in my arm straining as I clutched the unwieldy staff in my other hand.

It was so *annoying!* With all of this power at my disposal, you'd think I'd have a fighting chance!

Skye said it amplifies magic, and I should use whatever I'm most

confident in. The thought drifted through my brain. *Besides wards, what magic am I most confident in?*

I gritted my teeth and poured more magic into my ward, making the barrier triple in size.

It smacked into the monster, catching it off guard and pushing it back a few steps.

I dropped the ward, planted the staff in the mucky lake bottom, and reached for the magic I was most confident in—my connection with animals.

Please—help!

Chapter Twenty-Two

Leila

My magic rushed across the Night Realm like a cresting wave as I reached out, searching for anything that could help me.

Please, please, please! I begged my magic. *Find someone to help!*

HELP WITH WHAT?

I felt the question in my soul rather than heard it with my ears, but the question was said in a rusty, echoing voice that reverberated around my head.

Help me protect them!

Desperate, I glanced at my friends who had gathered on the lake shore.

Whatever I was talking to, I felt its heartbeat—slow, but achingly *loud*.

Help me protect everyone!

A few heartbeats passed.

The skull monster roared and started to lunge for me.

I began to shift my magic, preparing a ward, when the voice spoke deep in my bones again.

YOUR REASONING IS ACCEPTABLE.

Behind me, something burst out of the water.

I swung around and gaped at the creature that had surfaced. Its wedge shaped head topped a long, sinewy neck that stretched impossibly high.

The creature landed somewhere between dragon and snake with its scaly neck, and the winged fins/frill that extended across the top of its head, behind its gleaming horns.

As I watched, another head shot out of the lake, spraying water everywhere. Then another head surfaced, and another.

In the end, nine serpentine heads popped out of the lake—which was now significantly lower and left a huge ring of lakeshore dry with flopping fish.

The heads roared together as one, and lightning crackled around them as clouds covered the sky and thunder rolled.

A hydra.

I stared in shock.

Lord Linus said an ancient creature lived in the lake. It's a hydra. It must be as old as the realm itself to be that big and to have that many heads!

The hydra's necks and heads bobbed and wove in a soundless song as its abrupt appearance sent huge waves crashing across the lake. Each head was the size of a small house, and my brain was having a hard time processing that.

YES, LITTLE QUEEN, the hydra said in my soul. WE ARE HYDRA. WE WILL DEFEAT YOUR ENEMY.

The skull monster shrank back, then chattered a challenge to the hydra.

It was the last thing it did.

The hydra—like the lightning that danced up and down the scales of its necks—struck.

Two heads shot past me, so close that if I had flinched they would have taken a limb off.

Another shot over my head, and the rest convened on the shadowy monster.

One hydra opened its mouth and closed it around the white skull of the shadow creature. A vicious yank, and it ripped the skulled head free from the magic that held the monster together. Its silver teeth gleamed as it crunched down on the skull—which drained of shadow magic. Bone splintered, then shattered entirely.

Another hydra head ripped one of the clawed legs free, destroying it with a chomp of its teeth. The biggest head went for the tail, ripping it off and biting through it. The tail turned into shadows, then disappeared like darkness retreating from light.

The hydra made quick work of the rest of the monster, ripping the body apart and separating the magic, which drained away.

In seconds, they'd dismembered the monster, and the only trace of it left was the path of wreckage it had left behind it when it chased after Eclipse and me.

I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as I looked from the empty shore, to the hydra heads stretched high above me.

Oh boy. I hope this wasn't a mistake.

The lake water churned, as the hydra's many necks moved. The creature roared—a deep, throaty noise that shook the realm.

T-thank you, I stammered, trying to project my thoughts to the creature, even though I had no idea how.

One of the heads lowered until it sat just above the lake water, and then it inhaled deeply.

“Leila!” Lord Linus shouted.

I stayed still as the monster brought its head closer, letting me see the lake scum and seaweed that was caught in the crevices of its scales.

YOU ARE THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT COURT, the hydra said. *AND YOU HAVE SEEN ONE OF MY KINSMEN.*

It took me a moment to remember the much, much, *much* smaller hydra I’d seen in August. *Ahah—yes. Yes I have. He was very...um...cute?*

A few of the heads swiveled around, taking stock of the realm.

WE WILL RETURN TO OUR SLEEP. WE DO NOT CARE FOR THIS REALM NOW THAT THE ELVES DO NOT WALK IT. BUT YOU INTEREST US, LITTLE QUEEN. WE WILL LISTEN FOR YOU, AND RISE WHEN WE WISH TO.

That’s great, I weakly thought. *Just wonderful. I’ll keep an eye out for you.*

The hydra abruptly retracted the head closest to me. All nine heads gave me a tiny nod, and then the necks lowered, snaking downward. The hydra dove back underwater, splashing up enough lake water to create waves bigger than cars.

I lifted the staff above my head and ran farther up the sandy shore, making my way to my friends as the last hydra head disappeared underwater. I had to run as water surged up the shore, splashing my already soaked blue jeans.

“It’s fine,” I called to my friends as I cleared the water and staggered closer.

“Fine?” Fell sneered—evidently he’d woken up, though it looked like Indigo had bashed him pretty hard because a bump was forming on his forehead. *“Fine? You just woke up a hydra—and you call that fine?!”*

“It’s going back to sleep.” I frowned, then scowled. “And what are *you* complaining for? You brought that monster here! Do you have any idea how much that thing could have damaged my realm or hurt my people?”

“It would be your fault for being weak,” Fell haughtily said.

“That’s it,” I said. “I can’t stand hearing his *annoying* voice anymore. Someone knock him out, again, please.”

“Knock me out?” Fell narrowed his eyes. “I am the King of the Autumn Court and a member of the Fae Ring! You can’t just—”

Rigel became my second favorite person of the day—Indigo was going to stay first due to Fell’s original beatdown—and struck Fell on the side of his neck.

Fell’s eyes rolled back, and he crumpled. To keep him from smacking the ground, Rigel caught him by the back collar of his tunic, so the Autumn King dangled in his grasp, choking and helpless.

“I did a good day’s work when I married you,” I said.

Rigel very expressively shrugged.

“Eclipse!” I called to my mare. “I need your help—I want to throw Fell at his realm before he wakes up and I contemplate killing him. Can you make me a gate?”

“Are we seriously just going to skip over the fact that you’re using the Original King’s staff and that you just called the biggest hydra I’ve ever heard of from the realm lake—which, I’m not embarrassed to say, I am never going near again.” Indigo shivered.

“Isn’t the skull monster proof that Fell’s the one who’s been trying to kill you?” Although Lord Linus was asking me, his eyes flicked to Chase.

“The monster used the same magic as the shadow snakes from the movie theater, and the shadow creatures at the market,” Chase confirmed. “I can smell it. But I don’t know if it’s as clear proof as one would think. Those other two attacks were laced with fae magic, but this one lacked it entirely.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It had that ancient magic I’ve felt a few times now. Do you know what that is?”

Chase shook his head. “Nothing I’ve come across. I asked my packmates, and none of them recognized the scent, either.”

“That’s troubling,” Skye said. “Though perhaps it is merely an indication that King Fell is taking more serious action against my Sovereign?”

I tried to shove the staff deeper into the ground—the thing weighed a ton and was going to be a pain to drag around. But even I—a vocal hater of the Original Creep—had to admit as far as artifacts went, it was top notch. “Someone call the Paragon and tell him to get over here—he might be able to help us, and he owes me after that tea party of his.”

Chase nodded, and got on his phone.

“I must admit, I thought you’d be madder about this.” Indigo nodded to the gurgling-and-blessedly-still-unconscious Fell.

“Oh, I’m *furious*,” I said. “But I just had an ancient hydra speak with me mind to mind. I’m kind of numb at the moment—or I’d be beating the

stuffing out of Fell like he's a scarecrow. Eclipse?"

The mare swished her tail, and the familiar archway of stone and iron appeared.

"Wait, you *spoke* with the hydra?" Skye asked.

"Yeah—I had to ask it for help somehow." I peered around the lakeshore—which had seen better days; the hydra's waves had pretty seriously mucked the place up. "What happened to Fell's sun stallion?"

"We'll drop it off later, or he can get home by himself." Rigel fearlessly entered the gate when it opened, dragging Fell along by the tunic and jostling the Autumn King over every large rock that was between them and the gate.

I seriously love that fae.

"You *spoke* with the hydra," Skye repeated—this time as more of a statement than a question.

"It's fine," I said. "He—er, they?—seemed okay."

Skye's eyes were huge. "Leila, that hydra had to be ancient!"

"Yeah, he said something about not liking our realm anymore since the elves were gone."

Lord Linus made a wheezing sound, and I'm pretty sure the only reason Skye wasn't emptying her entire antacid tin in her mouth was because she was still processing the shock.

I held one finger up to them. "Hold that thought, I'll be right back."

I hurried through the gate with Eclipse trotting along behind me and walked straight into the Autumn Realm.

Dazzling with massive trees dropping colored leaves the size of my head, and a white castle that was decorated with splashes of crimson red, flaming orange, and shining yellows, the Autumn Realm was a place of beauty.

And it was *crawling* with fae so frenzied, they didn't even notice our arrival.

A bunch of fae rushed around, carrying bottles of potions that they handed out to the injured. Others were trying to lift or dispose of some of the colossal trees that had toppled over.

In my second inspection of the area, I realized it looked like something had torn a path of carnage through the realm.

Besides the fallen trees, there were huge gaps and holes in the ground where it looked like entire trees had been turned to ash. Something enormous had raked its claws across one side of the castle, slicing deep gashes in the *stone* walls and destroying a dozen windows.

On the second inspection, I also noticed a few spots on the outer walls of the white castle that were distinctly singed, and the wispy feeling of fae magic remained in the air. Previously I'd assumed it came from the fae using their magic to handle the trees, but if I concentrated, I could feel it ripple out from the castle as well.

I looked from the castle to the trees. "Rigel?" I stepped closer to my consort. "Do you think...?"

Someone—a black-haired fae—finally caught sight of their monarch dangling from Rigel's grasp. "King Fell," she said, seemingly in shock.

She looked from Fell to us, and while her expression didn't change she took a step back. "Queen Leila, Consort Rigel." She bowed her head to Rigel, but didn't do anything to me.

Seems like the Autumn fae are just as charming as their king.

"What happened here?" I asked.

"That is the business of the Autumn Court," the fae said. "I should think it would be rude of us to burden you with such information."

I thoughtfully studied the claw marks on the castle and watched as a stone loosened and dropped from the wall. "I don't think Fell just stumbled on the monster. It looks like it attacked the Autumn Court first. Where did it come from?"

"Your question is rather vague—I can't answer you for certain," the fae said.

I rolled my eyes. "Can we stop playing around? Fell dropped the monster in the Night Realm and announced his presence. I know the monster was in this realm and he brought it to us. So, where did the monster come from?"

The fae folded her hands in front of her—which made me think her response was going to be useless. "I still cannot say for certain I know to which monster you are referring."

Yep. Useless.

Rigel twitched the collar of Fell's tunic, and the sagging king groaned. "It came from the south," Rigel said. "And moved toward the castle."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

Rigel pointed at the fallen trees with his free hand. "The pattern the trees fell in. They indicate the direction the monster moved in—it was clearly heading to the castle. There are signs of a fight by the castle—that's likely where Fell opened a gate to the Night Court."

Huh. Does that mean Fell didn't spawn the creature, but someone

dropped it here instead?

“Was Fell in the castle when the monster attacked?” I asked the unhelpful fae.

She lifted her chin. “My king’s movements do *not* concern such a small and disrespected Court as yours.”

The thin string of patience I had with the Autumn Court snapped. “Okay, let’s start over from the top—and this time I want some serious answers.” I kept my voice pleasant even though I activated my staff, and I let my purple magic wrap around me. “I just summoned a giant hydra to deal with the monster drudged up by your still unconscious king, so I’m not in the greatest of moods. *What. Happened. Here?*”

I wasn’t a huge fan of intimidation, but I didn’t believe in letting people push you around just because they’re rude, snotty, and malicious—which seemed to be the exact description of my small sample of the Autumn Court.

I didn’t know if it was my comment about the hydra, my magic, or Rigel slipping one of his daggers out of his bracers that inspired the previously-unhelpful fae to finally speak.

“It appeared in the woods and came to the castle, laying waste on its way.” She swallowed and glanced at my staff.

“*And?*” I prompted.

“King Fell was in the castle. He came out with some of the soldiers and did battle with the monster. The monster...King Fell...” Her mouth opened and closed a few times as she tried to phrase her next sentence without lying. “When the monster proved it could not be destroyed, King Fell opted to relocate it.”

“Huh. Spoiler: you can kill it,” I said. “You just have to separate its limbs to cut it off from the magic that powers it. Or find something bigger than it to destroy it.”

I peered up at Rigel. “You wanna drop King-Irresponsible over there and head home? I don’t think we’re going to get much more info just yet.”

Rigel nodded.

The fae curtsied. “If you would allow me to call for servants to tend to King Fell—”

Rigel ignored her and casually *tossed* Fell, as if the tall king was a dog toy.

Fell flew through the air and landed on the leaf-padded ground with an oomph, then rolled an extra foot or two.

The fae stared at us in horror. “How *dare* you treat King Fell with such disrespect?”

“Oh, we’ll dare as long as he keeps dumping his messes on us.” I said.

The fae frowned and seemed like she was going to yell at us—or just me, because there was no way she was brave enough to yell at Rigel—when a shadow passed overhead.

I had just enough time to wonder what caused the shadow, before three autumn griffins landed in the grass—their wings up and the talons on their front feet digging into the ground.

The autumn griffins—the animal that graced the crest of the Autumn Court—were beautifully frightful. Roughly horse sized, with a seamless meld of hawk and feline grace, the griffins had the head and front legs of a hawk with the body, back paws, and tail of a lion.

Their most stunning feature was their enormous wings, but their colorings were gorgeous, too. The one closest to me had dark brown feathers that looked like a burnt red under the sun, and had cream accents. One in the back seemed to glow orange, while the last was a meld of gold and brown.

I love my trash griffins...but wow, seeing these autumn griffins makes me realize how adorably homely mine are.

The orange griffin preened itself while the gold-brown griffin looked at Fell and then pointedly hopped away from him.

The black-haired fae we’d been talking to backed up a few steps—which was not at all reassuring.

At the same time, the burnt red griffin prowled closer to me.

I swallowed, but did my best to smile and remain relaxed—animals always respond better to someone who is calm and chill. “Hey there,” I said. “We were just going...”

Words died in my throat as the griffin invaded my space, his beak—orange with brushes of black—was uncomfortably close to me.

I jumped when he lowered his head—pointing the top of it at me—then thumped it into my forehead.

What the—

Magic that started at my toes and bubbled up shot through me like a geyser.

Leaves crunched under my feet, and the cool tang of the first autumn frost filled my lungs while the sensation of a crisp breeze played in my hair. The dry chuckle of leaves slapping each other teased my ears, and I could *feel* the

days shorten.

When the magic released me I stumbled, suddenly able to see and hear again.

The griffin caught me, leaning in so when I flailed I smacked into its chest, feeling its sleek feathers and the downy softness of its fur.

It was a familiar sensation—I'd experienced it with Verdant's stag and my own night mares—but I was more than a little confused as to *why* the griffin had done it.

Are they thanking me for bringing back Fell, or for taking care of the skull monster?

I jerked away as soon as I recovered, almost bouncing into Rigel. "Thank you? That was, uh, thank you," I babbled.

The burnt red griffin bowed its head to me while the orange griffin glared at the black-haired fae.

All three griffins folded their wings against their backs and then prowled into the forest, disappearing as the colored leaves camouflaged them.

"What do you think that was about?" I asked Rigel when I could talk again.

"It appeared to be a thanks, of a sort," Rigel said.

"That's what it felt like, but why? Do crest animals frequently extend their thanks?"

"Not as far as I know." Rigel glanced at the black-haired fae, who was approaching her king. "But if you still want to leave before Fell regains consciousness, I'd suggest we go."

"Yeah, that's important. Let's move out!"

Rigel offered me his now freed arm. I took it, patted Eclipse as we passed her, and then entered the gate again, where my thoughts strayed from the griffins to the attack on the Autumn Realm.

Why would my would-be assassins attack Fell? Unless the other monarchs have been fielding assassination attempts from this shadowy magic all along? But I would have thought they'd spill their guts at the tea party if that was true.

My problems had just gotten a lot bigger. And as long as the other Courts were fighting, it was only going to get worse.

* * *

“I find the entire situation troubling—and dangerous,” the Paragon announced. “A monster that essentially devours magic? Very troubling indeed.”

“The hydra had no problem taking him down. Perhaps the key is that you have to have enough magic to overwhelm the spell that allowed the monster to feed on magic,” Indigo pointed out.

The Paragon shivered, nearly jarring Aphrodite from where she was draped over his shoulders. “Ew. The hydra. I would prefer not to dwell upon such a creature—we do not wish for it to stir again.”

“He—they? Whatever, the hydra helped when we needed it,” Lord Linus said.

“Indeed,” King Solis said. “And it returned to sleep willingly. I believe the creature is to be commended—preferably without reawakening it.”

I fussed with my dessert plate—today Indigo had made unicorn cupcakes and gingerbread cookies decorated like Star Wars characters—turning it in a slow circle as I thought.

We were seated in one of the mansion’s dining rooms—yes, the gaudy place had more than one—and had been discussing the monster since Chase read Solis and the Paragon into the situation about half an hour ago.

We hadn’t gotten very far, mainly because we had so little to go on. The Paragon had busted into the Autumn Realm, but Fell hadn’t told him much more than his crabby citizen told Rigel and me.

The skull monster came out of the woods and attacked the palace. Fell and his people couldn’t fight it off. Rather than call for help, he decided to be a twerp and lure it into the Night Realm.

“I still can’t believe he just dropped that monster on us,” I said. “What kind of creep does that? He could have called for help—we would have fought with him.”

The Paragon smiled uncomfortably. “I’m afraid not all Courts would have responded with such honor, Leila.”

King Solis nodded in commiseration.

“Then that means this probably was an attack by another monarch,

right?” I asked. “Solis, have there been any attempts on your life?”

“No,” Solis said. “No monsters have been set upon me. I haven’t heard of anything from the other Courts in our region, but there’s a chance they’d try to cover them up so as to not appear weak.”

I tapped my fingers on the table—which was of course a monster of a furniture piece and had rearing unicorns sculpted into the legs—as Eventide scurried around, distributing tea for the second time since our meeting started.

“Tea, my Sovereign?” Eventide asked when he got to me.

“No thank you, Eventide.”

“It’s masala chai tea.” He picked up a handle-less clay cup and held it out to me, wafting the aroma toward my nose. “Cooked with milk, sugar, and spices.”

Oh, ho, ho—they’re starting to figure out how to make tea appealing to me.

Truthfully, the drink smelled fantastic—an earthy combination of ginger, cinnamon, and cloves. But I wasn’t going to drink tea in my mansion until the chef let me buy a coffee maker. If I broke and drank tea now, my tea-obsessed staff and Court would *never* let me have coffee again!

“I’m sure our guests will appreciate it,” I said.

Eventide gave me a sad look with puppy-dog eyes, but moved on to serve tea to Solis, his goat hooves tapping the marble tiled floor as he scurried along.

“Who else besides royals would have the ability to do something like the skull monster?” I asked.

Solis sighed, and the lines around his eyes that always made him look happy seemed tired and discouraged. “I can swear an oath that I had nothing to do with this skull monster.” He took a clay cup of tea from Eventide and rubbed his thumb on the unglazed exterior.

“You’re not a suspect, Solis, or you wouldn’t be here.” I smiled at the Day King.

His returning smile was wan, but when he took a sip of his tea some of the tension eased from his shoulders.

“But, Paragon, I’d appreciate a hot tip, then—since you are *knowledgeable*,” I continued.

The Paragon scowled at me. “What?”

“Please share, are there regional fae wars that I don’t know about?”

“Ah. Good question.” The Paragon settled down—he must have thought I was about to out him to Solis. “At this moment there aren’t any wars between the various regions. Oh, sure, there are the deep rivalries and other such nonsense, but no one has declared an actual war.”

I turned to Chase, thinking the Paragon had finished.

“But…” he started and trailed off. He stared at a painting of the Original Creep on the wall, then drank a sip of tea.

“Yes?” I asked when he finished.

Aphrodite jumped from the Paragon’s shoulders and sat on the table just in front of him. The Paragon busied himself with adjusting her pink sweater she wore to combat the cooler temperatures.

“What I am about to say must remain in these halls,” he finally said. “Solis is aware of my suspicions because I questioned him when tracking information. The crux of the situation is, I believe Queen Nyte—the ruler just before you who essentially ruined the Night Court—had backers. That was how she had the means to wage war on the Drake Family.”

I nodded slowly. “That makes sense—the Court finances were terrible, and we’re still fighting to pay off all our debt.”

But the Paragon wasn’t done. “While it would *seem* the backers were intent on getting rid of the Drakes, I believe the real point in goading Nyte to attack Killian was to topple the Night Court.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Leila

I blinked. “Okay, now I’m not following you anymore. How could that topple the Night Court—unless the backers assumed Killian would wipe them out? But in that case they don’t know Killian. He’d rather blackmail them and keep the Court under his control. Then he could make them dance to whatever tune he likes and have an in with the fae.”

Everyone stared at me.

“What?” I said. “Hey, I consider him a friend, but I’m realistic about the guy.”

“It is an accurate portrayal,” the Paragon agreed. “But I don’t think they planned for Killian to kill off the Court. I believe they assumed that if they made the situation unstable enough, the next ruler would naturally escalate the Court’s situation, and eventually the Night Court would be torn asunder by internal fights and wars.”

Skye traced the rim of her clay cup—she’d already finished most of her tea. “Do you believe they have a grudge against the Night Court?”

“Not at all,” the Paragon said. “It merely is an easy target—and one with big results. Because if the Night Court fell, the Day Court would not long survive it.”

“This is true,” King Solis said. “We are too intertwined for it to be otherwise.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “You’re not giving yourself enough credit—the Day Court is doing great, even though the Night Court has been slumming it for a decade.”

“Perhaps, but day cannot exist without night,” the Paragon said.

“That’s one of those wise-old-man useless platitudes.” I winced when Indigo kicked me. “Ouch.”

“If both the Night Court and the Day Court fell, it would have resounding effects on the fae in the Midwest, and nationwide, given that they are the sole Courts of their kind in the USA,” the Paragon continued. “And not just for

the fae. Though the various supernatural beings proclaim not to care about each other, the fact is that if the fae fell, healing potions, glamours, and all their magic would be a thing of the past.”

And that is a serious problem.

For the most part, the supernatural community barely edged into the human world, but we needed magic to survive. Not just for healing potions, but fae specialized in wards, charms, and all kinds of magic. Even when I was in my moody teenager stage and I most hated my fae bio father, I knew the fae were still needed for the rest of the supernaturals to survive.

“In my research of the shadowy operation that backed the Night Court, I found that they commonly preyed upon the weak and those who are easy to smite—the kind of supernatural that doesn’t matter,” the Paragon continued. “They target the weakest Packs, the most desperate Courts, the least respected Families—it is believed they may have also backed the wizard who attempted to take over House Medeis.”

I stiffened up. “Hazel’s cousin? The one she had to duel to free her family?”

The Paragon tossed back what he had left of his original cup of tea before taking masala chai tea from Eventide. “The one and the same.”

“Then they must have a motive.” Chase ran a hand through his precisely cut hair—short on the sides and just long enough on the top to show a hint of curls.

“I’m sure they do,” the Paragon agreed. “But I have been unable to discern it through their wanton destruction.”

Chase growled like the wolf he was, and his golden eyes glittered with anger.

“The only positive thing I can say about them is that they are a small group. They target one spot at a time,” the Paragon said. “I thought they’d moved on from Magiford, but I suspect they either never did, or they returned because they thought the Night Court would still be easy pickings. They hadn’t realized what a powerful queen they’d have to reckon with.”

“While I appreciate the compliment, it’s not quite true,” I said. “The real reason why the Night Court is surviving is because I’m different—I do things differently. I’m willing to cut expenses and kill traditions.”

“Perhaps.” Lady Chrysanthe spoke up for the first time in the whole meeting—she’d been hanging low since Chase had been reluctant to include her. “But that’s only a portion of your charms, my Sovereign. You are

undeniably powerful—we don't need to look beyond this afternoon for proof. I'd long heard stories and jokes about the monster that lived in the lake, but in all my schooling and tutoring, I'd *never* heard anything to indicate it was more than a fairy tale told to mischievous children. We didn't know it was real. But you called, and it not only helped, but it slept again without causing havoc."

"I do have animal magic," I felt bound to point out.

The Paragon laughed so hard he almost spilled his clay cup of tea. He actually slapped his thighs and had to gasp for breath after a while. "My dear Queen Leila," he said when he finished. "Using animal magic on a hydra would be like throwing a cup of water on the surface of a star. There is no way you had control of the hydra. It *chose* to listen to you because of who you are."

Solis smiled proudly. "Indeed. It is why I am proud to call you a fellow monarch."

"Aw, you guys are going to make me blush." I waved to Eventide as the faun butler backed out of the dining room. "But I'm worried about these backers. I take it you think they're behind the monster, Paragon?"

"Probably," the Paragon said. "It's possible they're behind more shenanigans, but the monster seems like something they'd do—particularly because they knew they could cause damage between the Courts by using Fell as their delivery mechanism. The other Courts won't take that news lightly—which is probably what they hoped for, though I don't imagine they ever dreamed you'd raise the hydra to deal with their creation."

I pressed my lips together as my thoughts rolled around in my head. I'd learned I was better off letting things simmer than trying to forcibly connect them. But I still listened to the table conversation with half an ear.

"Obviously we will prepare differently now that it seems we're dealing with a magical organization," Chase said. "Do any of the other supernaturals know it exists?"

"Of course," the Paragon snorted. "I didn't track down all this information on my own—and when I first stumbled upon their existence, I thought perhaps they were tied to a specific person or supernatural race. Unfortunately they are not. It seems like fae, vampires, shifters, and supernatural beings in general belong to this plague of a group." The Paragon scowled, which softened to a smile when Aphrodite leaned her head against his shoulder and purred. "The Dominant, the Ancient, the Magister, and

myself have long been working together to observe the situation.”

He seemed pretty casual considering he'd just name dropped the top werewolf, vampire, and wizard in the USA. But I was just glad to know the other communities were aware of it.

“They are the top priority?” Chase asked.

“They weren't,” the Paragon said. “Everyone is far more concerned about the inevitable death of magic than these shadowy beings. But recently the vampires have taken a bigger interest—I expect in no small part due to Killian Drake.”

Chase was taking notes—on a pad of paper this time. “Do you have any suggestions on how to combat them? If they're behind the attacks on Leila, I imagine they're the source of that unknown magic I have scented and Leila has felt.”

“No, I'm afraid I have no more suggestions. They have on occasion used powerful elf magic, but those were contained spells preserved for decades. The magic you've faced are new creations.” The Paragon narrowed his eyes. “The skull monster couldn't have been created by an old elf relic or spell laying around. It took actual creation—which is what I find worrisome about the magic you're facing.”

“Is there anything about them as a group that would be useful to know and apply to combat?” Lord Linus asked.

The Paragon jutted out his lower lip as he thought. “They are a small organization, and they are intent on their secrecy. We've seen it in the past, and I believe we witnessed it again in the way the backers dropped Nyte once the fight got too big, but it seems they don't lack firepower but personnel.”

“Gather enough people to your side, and they'll abandon their attacks against you,” Chase summarized.

“Exactly,” the Paragon nodded.

Gather people...

“I imagine power is helpful,” Solis said with a trace of bitterness. “At the very least it would make you a poor target that they'd rather avoid.”

“Also true, so choose excellent allies,” the Paragon advised.

More thoughts rattled in my head. I rubbed my forehead and glanced at Rigel, who was sitting next to me with an unreadable expression.

He glanced at me—his eyes unreadable at the moment. “It's possible this society is behind the skull monster attack, but the organizer of the previous attempts on Leila and the skull monster are different entities,” he said.

Chase swiveled to Rigel, his pen poised for taking notes. “Why do you believe this?”

Rigel stared at him for a moment, then said—carefully, “The style of the attacks is very different.”

“Rigel is right,” I said. “Whoever set the monsters on me in the market and the snakes on me in the theater directly attacked me, but did it in a way that limited the danger to others. If this dodgy group dropped the monster—which I think is likely, because there are a heck of a lot easier ways to kill me than to drag Fell into this and make it a bigger thing than it already is—then I don’t think they could possibly be behind the original attacks.”

“They’re designed with too much care,” Skye said. “It sounds like this group wouldn’t have cared about limiting damage. I imagine they would have even preferred that there be some human casualties.”

“Bingo!” I proudly said.

Skye tilted her head. “Bingo?”

Indigo sipped her tea. “Isn’t that an obscure human song?”

“No, no. It’s a game,” Lord Linus said excitedly. “Unfortunately, it’s typically not something you can stake money and gamble on—which of course I would not too often think of doing, ahahah.” He caught me staring at him and broke off in a laugh.

Chase said he’s not in debt. Is he purposely trying to make it seem like he is, then?

“How did you come to know all of these obscure human references, Lord Linus?” Lady Chrysanthe asked.

“I’ve lived in the human realm for over twenty years. You pick up a thing or two in that sort of time frame.” Lord Linus cleared his throat. “But the two assailants brings up a new problem. If the sketchy group is one of them, who is the first attacker? And why, then, do they both use that foreign magic?”

“We can likely rule out Fell,” Rigel said. “Based on the fact that he was attacked.”

“Which means it’s probably not another monarch, right?” I asked. “Birch is the only other one with a vendetta against me, but based on what I’ve heard about his family life, he’s got too many worries to think about taking a shot at me.”

“Rime has the power,” Lord Linus pointed out. “She’s more powerful than Leila—even with her staff.”

“She also has no motive,” I said. “She let Fell run around for years—not

to mention Queen Nyte. I'm pretty sure she prefers to pretend the other Courts don't exist."

I glanced at Rigel and asked him in a whisper, "Can you tell me if whoever hired you was a monarch?"

Rigel glanced at me, but said nothing.

That's a no.

"I think this shadow group is a greater risk than whoever originally tried to kill Leila," Rigel carefully said. "As we can see from the ambush styles, they are far more cautious, and seem prone to attacking when Leila is quite guarded."

"You mean they're really bad at tactics?" I asked.

"I would not say that," Rigel said.

"Is there a chance the perpetrator is from your Night Court?" the Paragon asked.

"No," Rigel, Indigo, Skye, and Chase all chorused as one.

"The Court is loyal to Leila," Lord Linus said. "Even the few that dislike her are too loyal to step out of line in this way."

How does he know that?

"Maybe the original attacker worked together with the Paragon's shady group?" Indigo asked. "It would explain why the attacks have that unknown magic in them."

"But why attack separately?" Skye asked. "Surely if they just teamed up they would be stronger?"

"I don't know that the original attacker would *want* to team up." Chase moved his emptied clay teacup out of the way so he could spread his notes out. "Given the respect to life they've shown thus far. Whoever made that skull monster was going for maximum damage. As Rigel said, it's a very different strategy."

"We'll have to put our investigation on hold for now," I reluctantly said. "We need to stop whoever created the skull monster first—and maybe if we scare them off, the original guy will stop coming after me, too," I said.

Chase tapped his pen on his pad of paper. "I agree we should prioritize the organization since it seems they have the power to take out a realm, but I still want us to be prepared in case the original traitor tries his hand again. That's going to make preparing for future encounters much more difficult."

"I think any of us who accompany our queen on her adventures need to start carrying kits," Indigo said. "Some health potions, maybe a backup

artifact or two.”

A rattle of a tin announced Skye had finally broken out the antacids. “We’ll need to figure out a discreet way to transport the Original King’s staff—or, as it is now, Leila’s artifact.”

“Yeah, she can’t put it in her pocket like she’s been doing,” Lord Linus said.

“Maybe we could just remove the metal topper—that’s what the actual artifact is, right?” I asked.

Indigo, Skye, and Chrysanthe stared at me, as if I’d just asked them to surrender their first-born child.

“We cannot *behead* the staff of the Original King.” Skye had been in the process of putting her tin back, but now she flipped it open and grabbed another chalky tablet. “That would be utterly disrespectful!”

“Indeed,” Chrysanthe added.

“Sorry for offending you,” I muttered.

“It was an understandable idea,” Indigo said. “But even if you *did* only take the top, that would be pretty unwieldy to use. Perhaps we could put a shrinking spell on it?”

Skye audibly gasped.

Indigo rolled her eyes, and again proved why she and I were in tune. “Be scandalized, but the fact of the matter is I’m not hauling that thing around—it’s twice my size! And Leila obviously can’t carry it into the middle of meetings. King Fell will purposely construe it as she’s declaring war.”

“The staff does present a problem,” Chase agreed.

I glanced at the staff—which was leaning against my chair—but I’d gotten distracted when Indigo had mentioned Fell and a possible war.

That’s right. The Paragon said gathering allies is the fastest way to make these people back off. But while I’m highly motivated to get them to stop coming after me, what if they just switch their target to Verdant? Or one of the seelie or unseelie Courts that are too small to defend themselves?

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, tuning out the conversation as they discussed the possibility of getting me a staff bearer—whatever that was.

If I’m reading the situation right, they’re targeting us fae because they see us as the weakest. Not physically, but emotionally. There’s already a ton of infighting. If they can tip the scale just a little, we’ll finish ourselves off.

I didn’t so much feel as sense something was near my leg. I opened my

eyes, expecting to see Kevin or Steve had crawled under the table, but I was surprised to see Rigel's thigh near mine.

When I looked quizzically at him, he held out his hand.

Acting like a complete teenager, I shyly put my hand in his. I hoped I wasn't blushing when Rigel curled the fingers of his free hand around my wrist.

Stop it. No fussing, I told myself. I just chatted with a hydra. I'm pretty sure I can handle holding someone's hand—even if it happens to be the hand of the guy I like.

I grimaced a little, and forcibly refocused.

But if the infighting is such a problem, does that mean my original scheme to stop the Courts from playing all these stupid power games could actually solve the problem? Is it really like one of those kids shows where the answer to the quest is 'the friends we made along the way'?

It seemed corny, but if I could bind everyone together, wouldn't that make us too difficult a target? But I'd hoped I'd be able to accomplish that goal by the time I was a granny—could I really get anything done when I was dealing with sneaky, conniving, and selfish fae?

Maybe. But it would probably mean risking my neck more than I do already. And when I was first made queen, I promised myself I'd survive for Mom's sake, if not my own.

"Your heartbeat remains steady—you aren't contemplating murdering Fell, I take it?" Rigel asked.

I gawked at him. "Can you seriously hear my heartbeat over all these conversations?"

Indigo and Chase were still discussing the puzzle of my staff, but Skye and Chrysanthe had moved on to determining who should carry what when accompanying me to official situations, all while the Paragon yacked at Lord Linus and Solis about Aphrodite's diet—which involved chicken livers and fresh fish.

Rigel tapped his finger that rested against the underside of my wrist. "No, I felt it."

"Huh. Missed your calling as a doctor, did you?"

"Hardly."

I laughed and studied Rigel's profile.

The assassin did have looks that could kill—as Dad would say with his great love of dad jokes and puns.

Rigel went from assassin to consort in a matter of months. That's a huge change. But how could I inspire a similar change in the other Courts?

When I thought of the hunt and of all the bullying Fell had done—with Rime doing *zero* to stop him—I was inclined to think it was impossible.

Except.

I'd remained sober at the Paragon's tea, and heard my fellow monarchs' deepest worries.

“Rigel, you know the monarchs—and presumably you've seen them at their worst with your, er, job being what it is.” I glanced at my husband. “What is your impression of them?”

Rigel let go of my wrist, but he kept holding my hand. “What in particular are you referring to?”

My gaze wandered to Chrysanthe. “I thought fae were jerks because they had a natural thirst for power, and were never satisfied. But it seems more like they're *scared*.”

I'd seen it in the way Birch tried to protect Flora and his hidden daughter. I'd seen it in the way Verdant attacked me because she thought she couldn't risk being the lowest Court in the region. And a part of me wondered, after seeing the wreckage of the Autumn Court, if Fell had come to the Night Court because he didn't know what else to do.

“They don't trust anyone but themselves,” I continued. “They're too afraid to risk showing their cards for fear that they'll be betrayed. They fight and struggle and kick one another down because they don't think there's another way.”

“You're not wrong,” Rigel finally said. “There is some thirst for power among them—or they could not be rulers. But they fear a lot: the future, each other, their own demise, the demise of their Court.”

He shifted in his chair. “Fear is a powerful emotion—stronger than anger and courage. It can make a person ruthless in their objective, or spur them into inaction.”

“But how can we get them to *stop* being suspicious of one another when they have such a bloody history?” I asked.

Rigel shrugged—a barely visible twitch of his shoulders. “You did it with the Night Court.”

“Oh, please,” I snorted. “I scared them into obedience. Marrying you was enough to make the most deviant of them toe the line, because they knew they'd end up with an assassin king.”

“Fear is not what drove them to follow you to the market, or go to the movie theater as a Court outing,” Rigel said. “The Night Court lived in terror of Queen Nyte. But you? They have come to believe in.” Rigel flicked his eyes at Chrysanthe, then Solis.

“Huh.” I leaned back in my chair.

That trick won't quite work for the other monarchs. But am I really sure I want to do anything? If I make a public alliance with the Drakes and House Medeis—and I could probably get something with the werewolves if I ask Chase—that alone might be enough to get my would-be-killers to back off.

If I could pull that off, I'd be able to survive, and still plan to end these stupid power games by the time I died—a much more doable deadline.

But what about everyone else?

For a moment, Birch's miserable expression, Rime's bleak face, and Verdant's puffy eyes from crying hit me much the same way I wanted to run Fell over with my truck.

They don't want help. Verdant accepted it for the sake of her stag, but they're too afraid. They'll never ask for help—Fell proved that.

I felt it deep in my bones. No one—except possibly Solis—would ever ask for help if they badly needed it. They would rather suffer in silence than alert others to a potential weakness.

But does it really matter if they won't ask for help? Shouldn't I act anyway because it's the right thing to do? ...And then possibly get stabbed in the back because hah-hah, turns out one of them was behind the attacks the whole time?

I sighed, and nearly jumped in my chair when Rigel squeezed my hand.

“You forget, Leila. You're half fae and half human,” he said. “And—as you once told our Court—you got the best of both bloodlines. You can do things others can't.”

“Like lie?” I asked.

“Like see how the scramble for power is bred out of fear,” Rigel said. “And since you are not part of it, you can act outside of it.”

I stared at Rigel, and couldn't help but smile. “Thanks, Rigel. You're brilliant. That's another reason why I love you.”

“If you want the Day King to hear, you'll have to say that louder,” Rigel said.

Ahaha, once again my confession is given the smack down. It's fine. Totally fine. Besides, that's an issue to deal with later. I've made up my mind

—*I'm going to help those squirmy, twerpy monarchs whether they want it or not. I'm getting rid of their silly games, immediately. Even though they'll probably keep trying to kill me as a result. Sorry, Mom, but it's probably on you anyway for raising me this way.*

Yes, that sounded like a totally healthy coping mechanism—blame someone else.

I smirked a little as I rotated away from my sadly-not-infatuated husband. “Hey, Solis!” I called out to the Day King. “Remember how I dragged your drunk butt back to your house after that boozier of a tea party the Paragon threw?”

“It was *not* a boozier,” the Paragon huffed into his clay cup.

Solis slightly inclined his head. “Indeed, a servant reminded me the following day when I woke up.”

“Great. I'm calling in that favor,” I said. “I want you to call a meeting with the other monarchs—those of us in the Fae Ring specifically—and host it in the Day Realm.”

“That's all?”

“It'd be great if we could have it in a week, maybe. But yeah, that's all,” I said.

Solis lifted a teacup to me in a sort of salute. “Consider it done. What excuse should I give them for such a meeting?”

“Say we have to talk about the skull monster or something—just *don't* tell them I asked for it,” I said.

The Paragon peered at me over the top of Aphrodite's head. “What are you planning?”

I grinned, purposely showing more of my teeth than a regular smile. “A good old fashioned coup d'état!”

I'm not sure what was louder. The rattle of Skye's antacid tin, Indigo's indignant “*What?*” or Aphrodite's pleased “*Mmert!*”

Obviously, I had come up with a simply brilliant plan.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Leila

My palms were sweating like crazy as I stared at the door to the meeting room Solis had designated for us.

Rime was the last monarch to arrive—besides me—and I’d watched her go through the doors about a minute ago.

It was almost time for me to make my move.

I exhaled and fanned my sleeves slightly. While the autumn air was cold and icy in the human world, here in the Day Realm the sun beat with extra strength—I was going to become a sweaty mess if we stayed out here much longer.

I gripped the white stone bannister and tried not to look down—the Day Palace was made of several *really tall* towers that stretched high to the sky in an effort to take in as much sunlight as possible. We were pretty high up here, and while I didn’t know if I was afraid of heights or not, now was not an ideal time to find out if I was.

Indigo patted my hands. “You’ll do fantastic,” she said.

I tried to smile, but my lips wouldn’t move. “Thanks. Is the tea ready?”

“I’ve got it brewed—just keeping a charm on it so it stays warm,” Indigo nodded to the tea cart parked next to the room. She put her fists on her hips as she looked me up and down. “And I don’t mind saying so myself, but you look gorgeous. Doesn’t she, Consort Rigel?” Indigo turned to Rigel for confirmation.

I maybe would have felt awkward under his careful consideration, but I was too wound up about the meeting to feel anything besides the somersaults my stomach was performing.

Something—fondness, maybe—played in Rigel’s dark eyes. He took a step closer to me. “You look ready for the battle you’re about to enter—and win.”

I stood a little straighter; the slight weight of my crown made me more aware of my posture, and I pulled my shoulders back. “Thank you. And thank

you, Indigo, for your help.”

Indigo waved a hand through the air. “Think nothing of it—it was fun! This is the first time you’re really showing off your fae blood.”

What she meant was it was the first time I was wearing a gown by a fae designer.

Of course, this meant the dress was made of gauzy material with enough gems sewn into the torso of my gown to make it sparkle, but it did give me that extra flair that human gowns lacked.

The dress itself was somewhat reminiscent of human fashion—a mermaid gown with a v-neck, made of dark purple fabric and accented with silver detailing that looked like stars if you squinted just right. The fae flair came in the gauzy cloak—the same dark shade of purple as the dress, but see-through except for the silver star embroidery—that settled over my shoulders like sleeves and cascaded down my back.

It had the very pleasing effect of billowing with my hair—long and loose—whenever I walked.

That was the vibe we were going for—wild, unbound, and hopefully dangerous. Or bossy—whatever worked best for the moment.

“It’s time.” Skye looked up from the stopwatch app she’d been using on her phone and nodded to me.

I nodded, and gathered up my cloak/train a little so I could walk up to the meeting room without getting it dirty.

“Good luck, my Sovereign,” Chrysanthe said.

I frowned at her in surprise. “Aren’t you coming in with us?”

Chrysanthe’s cheeks turned the faintest pink, and she snuck a peek at Chase, who was standing off to the side with a small band of Night Court guards. “My presence will not help you. I’d rather stay out here and maybe be of use in other ways?”

Oohh, someone has a thing for Chase!

It wasn’t shocking—the werewolf was as attractive as he was likeable. I mean, I married above my league with Rigel—especially when he smiled—but Chase was handsome with his yellow werewolf eyes that set off his sepia-brown skin and warm grins.

It was maybe a little surprising because supernaturals don’t tend to mix romantically, but it wasn’t taboo or anything.

In fact, Chrysanthe’s little revelation was the cute moment I needed—it made me relax a little.

I could embrace my new friend developing a crush on my director of security. That was way more fun than the smack down I was about to deal.

But I'm not going to stand by and let the fae get wiped out because the other Courts in the Midwest are stubborn, I reminded myself.

"It's fine," I said. "I'm just glad you're here."

Chrysanthe stopped giving Chase a sappy look, and her expression turned serious as she bowed to me. "Of course, my Sovereign. I'll follow you wherever you go."

"Thanks, Chrys." I smiled at my unlikely new friend, then set my shoulders, and strode up to the meeting room.

If I thought about it, I'd talk myself out of it, so I didn't stop at the doors, but shoved them in, striding into the meeting room with all of the false bravado I could muster...and was totally unprepared for what I found.

All the monarchs were present, and Solis had chosen a pleasant room, well-lit by sunlight from the giant windows on either side of the door, which bounced off the many mirrors hammered into the white plaster walls.

A round table was placed in the center of the room—with a massive sun design cut into its wooden surface. I had imagined the monarchs would sit around the table and exchange insults.

Instead, they had erupted into a brawl.

Verdant jumped on Birch's back, and was attempting to put a choke hold on the Summer King. "You killed my *stag!*" she screamed at the Summer King—whose veins were starting to pop on his forehead.

"Verdant, this is not the wisest course of action." Solis tried to pry her off without injuring her, and he got elbowed in the nose for his trouble.

He slapped his hands over his nose and staggered backwards a few steps as Birch roared and tried to shake the determined queen off.

"Then you shouldn't have been weak—urk!" He yelped in pain when Verdant grabbed a lock of his hair and ripped it out of his scalp.

Rime, of all people, gripped the front of Fell's tunic, and the pair was growling at each other like territorial dogs.

"You dropped an undefeatable monster into another Court's territory!" Rime snarled.

"It was just the Night Court—I didn't know she had a hydra under her sway!" Fell tried to brush her off, but Rime just grabbed him by his gaudy pauldrons instead.

"You could have wiped a whole Court out!"

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Call the Curia Cloisters for help!” Rime said.

“And let them trash *my* realm? Besides—why are you upset? I just used the Night Court.”

“Because you obviously are willing to do it to *any* of our Courts, which means you’re a liability!” Rime snapped.

Fell scoffed, and glanced at Solis, who had recovered enough from the elbow to the face to stand upright again. “Solis, back me up—it was within my right to act as I did.”

“No.” Solis shook his head. “I agree with Queen Rime. That you were willing to sacrifice an *entire realm* because you refused to call for help signals you are not of sound mind. What would you have done if Leila hadn’t defeated it?”

“Last I checked you were *well* below me on the power structure.” Fell turned away from Rime and poked a finger in Solis’s direction. “Don’t forget to whom you speak.”

Solis caught Fell’s wrist. “Of course I know whom I’m talking to—you’re a puppy that’s constantly yapping.” He shoved Fell’s arm away with enough force to make the Autumn King stagger.

“What?” Fell snarled.

I stared at the scuffle in a mixture of awe and shock. I figured the other monarchs hid themselves behind their fancy costumes and pointless ceremonies like all the other fae, but I never suspected that when it was stripped away I’d get to see how *emotional* they really were.

Huh. This is educational.

I watched Birch fall to his knees then keel over backwards, crushing Verdant underneath him. “Well,” I said. “There goes my big entrance.”

“This is an unusual situation,” Indigo agreed.

“Congratulations,” Rigel told me. “You are so heretical, you are able to get the most powerful fae in the Midwest to brawl like drunks in a bar.”

“Hey, I wasn’t even here when they started this,” I said.

“Indeed,” Skye agreed. “But how are you going to use it?”

I hesitated, and looked back at the fighting monarchs. “Rigel, could you get their attention?”

I don’t know how he did it—I didn’t even see him pull his daggers from his bracers. He just casually flicked his hands and threw one dagger between Fell and Solis, and another that almost nicked Verdant on the arm.

Verdant let go of Birch and scrambled to her feet, and Solis, Fell, and Rime all turned in our direction.

“It seems like we have some repressed feelings,” I said as Birch’s color slowly returned to normal. “We should talk about it and get them out in the open.”

“What’s there to talk about—why are we even *having* this meeting?” Birch asked.

“Because.” I tried to sound as nice and sincere as possible, even though I really just wanted to punch Fell—I still hadn’t gotten over him dropping the monster in my realm, so it did my heart good to see Rime and Solis take him to task. “I’m formally requesting that the Fae Ring make me the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic next year.”

Verdant frowned a little. “Why would you want that?”

“The Autumn Court objects!” Fell announced.

“As does the Summer Court,” Birch added.

Of course the two bozos would. I glanced at Rime—she was the one I was most interested in hearing from, given that I suspected she would be the tie breaker.

Rime straightened her grayish blue dress and cleared her throat—putting her figurative mask back on. “I would also like to hear why you wish for such a position.”

I sucked in a breath and tried to steel myself—because here was where it got scary.

When I first made the Night Court truly recognize me as queen, I’d used a combination of intimidation tactics, cleverness, and brute force.

That wasn’t going to work with these guys.

They were fellow monarchs and had their own Courts. I couldn’t dominate them, and I didn’t want to become a regional tyrant. Not to mention trying to scare them into following me would only make these stupid political games that much worse.

No, I needed to do something terrifying.

I needed to tell them what was really going on.

“The fae are being targeted. Someone wants us out of the picture,” I said. “You can ask the Paragon and Solis to confirm it, but basically, there’s a group out there that would love to see us kill one another in our quests for power. I want the representative position because it’s the best chance I have at stabilizing our position, and reaching out and making alliances with other

supernaturals.”

My desire to be the new fae rep was the only reason why the Paragon had given me permission to tell everyone. If I failed to snag the spot, the Paragon had given me a back up plan that I *had* to follow, and I wasn't too keen on it.

Rime frowned. “Wait—there's a *group*?”

We all sat down—though I shook my head when Indigo asked if we wanted tea—and Solis and I, with some help from Rigel, explained everything the Paragon had told us about the shadowy organization.

Rime pressed her long, slender fingers together. “And you think they're targeting us?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” Verdant asked.

“What was your estimation of the Night Court before I took power?” I asked.

Verdant looked away.

“That's why. Because the Night Court was a bleeding, wounded seal surrounded by sharks,” I said.

“And what has this to do with the position of representative?” Rime asked.

“I want the position, because it's become apparent to me that we are our own worst enemy,” I said. “In all our infighting and backstabbing we don't secure more power for ourselves, we condemn the fae to an earlier and earlier end.”

“And *you* think you can lead us?” Birch scoffed.

“Yeah,” I said. “Because I'm the only one who knows what it's like to live without that kind of weight on them, and because I've managed to do it within my own Court.”

“I don't like it,” Fell argued. “The hierarchy system has existed for years, and we've flourished under it! Nothing needs to be fixed.”

“Fell, it's *not*, in fact, working,” I said. “My people have thwarted more assassination attempts against me than I care to remember. Rigel and I *met* because someone wants me dead. I love my Court enough that I'm willing to bust a few heads to save it.”

“And as for us?” Rime asked.

I shrugged. “Consider it your lucky day. I'm going to save you all whether you want it or not.”

“There is nothing I wish to be saved from,” Birch grumbled.

“Oh, not even the death of magic?” Verdant asked.

Birch looked away and avoided her gaze.

“I still think this is a plot. You wish to lull us all into a sense of laxness, and then you’ll snap up the power all for yourself,” Fell declared.

“Or that you exaggerate, and you are the only one in danger,” Birch said.

I glanced back at Indigo, but refrained from giving in to the temptation to ask for refreshments. I *needed* them to agree to this.

“I am in danger,” I agreed. “But the monster dumped in the Autumn Court should make it obvious that it isn’t just me they’re targeting.”

“I don’t know that we need other supernaturals,” Rime said.

“We do,” I bluntly disagreed. “I know it’s been our instinct to hunker down with our own kind as magic gets weaker and weaker, but I’ve seen what happens when supernaturals work together. I was part of it—if only a little. If we reach out to them, the wizards will help us, and then the vampires will, too, because they’re nosy and more than a little bossy.”

A faint smile twitched on Solis’s lips, but he was the only one.

“Don’t misunderstand, I don’t intend to beg,” I said. “They need us just as we need them. They need our potions, wards, barriers, and magic. And we need their friendship so when giant Godzilla monsters attack us, we don’t just dump them on the nearest neighbor, *Fell*.” I couldn’t help that one little verbal smack, but Fell wouldn’t look at me. Who knew if he was even listening?

“What, then, are you asking from us?” Rime asked. “This seems like more than merely making you the representative.”

“Merely?” Birch sputtered.

“I want your cooperation, and your promise that we’ll *stop* this stupid fighting,” I said.

Birch snorted.

“No more targeting what’s important to each other,” I said. “No more stag hunts, and the next person who tries to poison Flora is going to discover just how *dark* the Night can be,” I growled.

Birch gaped at me, his eyes wide, his expression frozen somewhere between horror and...hope.

“We work together,” I repeated.

“Under your leadership?” Rime asked.

“Yes.”

Quiet enfolded the meeting room, and I held my breath.

This was the defining moment.

It was here that I found out if I alone was strong enough, and if they believed in me.

Solis stood. “The Day Court nominates Queen Leila of the Night Court as the fae representative for the Regional Committee of Magic.”

Verdant shot to her feet. “The Spring Court seconds this nomination.”

The quiet shifted into a stifling silence that threatened to choke me.

“The Winter Court approves of this nomination,” Queen Rime finally said.

I mashed my lips together, and almost sighed with relief.

Three Courts. I can be made representative with that. It'll be a start.

“Do you promise?” Birch asked.

I blinked, unwilling to willy nilly offer a promise—that was a dangerous thing to dole out to the fae, who took their promises seriously. “Promise what?”

“That you’ll work to protect Flora?”

For a moment, my heart melted for Birch.

Even though he was a jerk, and I’d let him fly out of the back end of my truck a dozen times without feeling bad, he loved his wife—I could only imagine how terrified he was for her to ask me that in public.

“I swear I’ll do everything in my power to protect our Courts—including Consort Flora,” I said.

Birch spoke almost before I finished saying Flora’s name. “The Summer Court approves the nomination.”

I smiled.

“I won’t.” Fell pointed to me, an ugly look of hatred flickering across his face. “I see the truth, unlike the lot of you. She just wants power!”

“Actually, I would most love to be left alone in my big mansion with my handsome—and charming, smart, and witty—husband,” I said, adding a few descriptions when Rigel glanced in my direction.

Fell shook his head. “I don’t believe it!”

Don’t, or can’t?

I briefly closed my eyes and wondered if I should end it here, or keep trying to reach him.

Something in my gut said I almost had him, if I pushed just a little more.

Rigel shifted his chair closer to mine. “Yes,” he said.

I gaped at him. “How do you even know what I’m thinking?” I

whispered. “Is that another one of your natural magics?”

“No. I just know you. Keep pushing,” he advised.

I squared my shoulders and glanced back at Skye and Indigo, standing together. They nodded encouragingly.

“Fell, if I can have a moment with you?” I beckoned for him to join me in a corner of the room.

He sauntered over to me, his chin held high—though he did step aside for Rigel when Rigel stood up.

“I will reaffirm the information Leila has presented on the unknown organization,” Rigel said. I didn’t think he was planning on saying anything important—knowing him he was just covering up my conversation with Fell in hopes that the Autumn King would be upfront for the first time in his annoying life.

I rested my hands on my hips and waited for Fell to reach me before I asked him. “Fell, why did you bring the monster to the Night Realm?”

“Because I don’t care what happens to your Court,” he said.

Wow. This guy has zero charisma to go with his punchable face. He’s lucky he didn’t go to public school in the human world.

“That wasn’t the only reason,” I said.

“Because it occurred to me it might successfully *kill* you,” he added.

No wonder he’s still single.

“And?” I asked.

“There is no other—” He was cut off, unable to utter the lie.

I wriggled my fingers at him. “Let me have it, Fell. Why did you choose the *Night Court*?”

Judging by the way he was pursing his lips, he was going to simply not answer my question and duck his inability to lie.

That was fine. I still had a few tricks I could use.

“If you don’t tell me I’m going to assume it’s because you’re secretly madly in love with me and it was all a ploy to get my attention.”

Fell growled. “You infuriating woman! Fine! It was because I knew out of all the Courts you were the only one who would have acted.”

Whoa. That is not what I was expecting—I thought he was going to say he did it because he figured Rigel could kill it. But this is shocking.

I could tell Fell was already regretting the outburst. He scowled at me and looked ready to march off in his anger.

“Fell,” I said.

“What?”

I stretched my arm out, and in a half playful/half serious move, I lightly punched him in the chest, resting my fist over his heart. “I want that position, because I don’t want that to happen to any of our Courts again. The same way I was ready to pound you for Verdant’s stag—which you are still not off the hook for, by the way—I will go after any monster that tries to ruin your realm.”

Fell shook his head. “No, you won’t.”

“I will,” I said. “Write it off as my weak human blood, but I’ll do it.”

Fell narrowed his eyes as he studied me. “You are insane.”

“Yep!”

“And weak.”

“Oh, for sure. That’s why I had to call my hydra bro.”

Fell growled like a cat, then turned away from me and stomped off. “The Autumn Court approves of this nomination—with a great deal of misgivings.”

He threw himself down into his chair while I was still tottering back to my seat.

I couldn’t believe it—*Fell*, the twisted king of twerps—agreed to make me the representative. I almost couldn’t believe it!

My ears rang, and it felt like I was walking on clouds. I reached out and clasped Rigel’s hand, just to anchor myself.

“Then the nomination is unanimously approved by the Fae Ring,” Queen Rime said. “Come January, I will step down as the fae representative, and Queen Leila of the Night Court shall take my place. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Birch said, his forehead split with wrinkles.

“Agreed!” Verdant proclaimed.

Solis glanced at me and smiled like a proud father. “Agreed.”

Fell sank deeper in his chair. “Yeah, yeah, agreed.”

“Thanks everyone,” I said. “I look forward to working with you.”

It took all my control not to grin like a crazy person as I clung to Rigel’s hand.

We’d done it. We won.

The Courts would work with me. I’d have to make sure I stayed on top of them to keep them from petty fights, but the position of representative gave me some power.

I can handle this—with help.

I glanced at Skye and Indigo, and then grinned at Rigel.

He slightly inclined his head, acknowledging my glee.

The best thing is, I didn't have to bust out the Paragon's tea like I promised I would if they voted me down!

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rigel

I stood next to my bed and stared at Leila.

Since I'd slipped off the bed, she'd burrowed under the mound of blankets I'd prepared for her. Only her face peeked out the side of a blanket—the rest of her was covered.

She looked ridiculous—like a hamster.

And somehow this hamster managed to drag me into politics, ruin everything I've worked for, turn the Night Court on its head...and make herself important to me.

I was tempted to rouse her just to hear her voice—I still hadn't been able to pinpoint what it was about her voice that was so enticing.

But I knew she'd become an important entity to me—something I hadn't ever thought I'd have.

Sure, Dion had been my friend since we were kids. But my relationship with Leila went deeper.

Out of everyone in the world, she'd become the one person I trusted, and the one person I believed in.

It was something I couldn't ever recall experiencing before.

And they were still after her.

A lock of Leila's hair slipped over her face, and her nose twitched.

I crouched down and tugged the blankets back just far enough that I could push the black lock to join the rest of her silky hair.

I had spoken the whole truth when I'd said I thought the person who set the skull monster loose in the Autumn Court and the person who sent the shadowy creatures after Leila were different people.

I was positive the one who had hired me was the same person who sent the snakes and the shadow creatures from the market, and based on the evidence and what I'd seen, I was equally positive that person had not sent the monster to the Autumn Court.

However, both attacks undeniably used the same magic. Which means

they're using the same supplier, or the one who hired me is just a front.

I sat on the edge of the bed, making the mattress dip.

As if she had some special sensor for my presence, Leila crept across my pillow and grabbed onto my jacket—still sleeping soundly.

I'd wanted to tell her on at least twelve different occasions who had hired me to kill her when I first saw her. I'd tried finding ways around the geas that made me hold my silence—but writing didn't work, neither did texting her, or even drawing pictures. I couldn't even *think* the name, and my body froze up whenever I tried to give her a clue.

Which, I was starting to realize, was a greater danger than I thought.

She had no idea who was after her. And I couldn't warn her.

I tried to tug her fingers off my coat, but she latched on, her fingers white with strain as if she knew what I was about to do, and was trying to stop me.

I was about to break another one of my "nevers" for her.

When I'd first taken on the name of the Wraith, I had vowed I'd never work without a contract—and my services would never be free. There was no one I cared enough for that I'd ever hunt, track, and kill for.

But she'd changed that.

Sliding my fingers under her palms, I managed to get her hands to release my jacket. "I won't be gone long," I said. "I'm just going to investigate whoever is behind the monsters."

She didn't wake up, of course. She was the heaviest sleeper I'd seen. Or at least she was in my room.

"If possible, I'll end them. Then you'll be safe. But I will come back to you as soon as I can."

I'd also talk to the person who had originally hired me to kill her, but the geas wouldn't let me say that out loud.

Leila was still for several moments, and then she half sat up and wrapped her arms around my neck. For a moment I'd thought she'd woken up, but her breathing was deep and even, and I was positive she wouldn't cuddle into me with quite so much abandon if she was conscious.

She was warm, and there was something about the way she was a perfect fit tucked against me—her head leaning against mine—that made me slide my arms around her.

It was foreign, but utterly intoxicating to have her so close. That she trusted me this much, but also that I *enjoyed* her weight leaning into my chest, was unexpected.

Yes, she was sleeping, but if she was frightened of me I doubted she'd get this near to me—much less sleep in my bed.

This close, I could smell the scent of the shampoo she used, and her hair brushed my cheek as she snuggled into me. I reflexively tightened our embrace, and went still when Leila released a happy sigh.

This is why I'm willing to leave—to protect moments like this.

As I half prepared myself for rising, some kind of emotion twisted in my chest, and I felt a warmth I hadn't experienced before.

I allowed myself the luxury of embracing her for a moment longer, then I forced myself to unhook her arms from my neck. "I need to go," I said—as if she were awake to hear me.

It took some maneuvering, but I got her tucked back into her cave of blankets, with just the top of her head poking out.

I slid off the bed before she could reach for me again. "I'm doing this for you."

Even in her sleep, Leila was so unimpressed that she flipped over onto her stomach and smashed her face into my pillow.

I exhaled in what could have been a laugh and was filled with the desire to delay my plans, stretch out on my bed, and drape my arm over Leila when she inevitably crept closer again.

I wasn't much for touching—or allowing others into my personal space. I knew when I married Leila that I'd have to allow her some degree of PDA, but I hadn't expected to enjoy it to the point where *I* would initiate it.

I'm losing my edge—what a shame.

I checked to make certain my handgun, extra magazines, and sword were properly secured, and then I released the magic that held my wings in.

They stretched high above me, even though I had them folded neatly. I only glanced at them—I'd never liked my wings. I didn't like what they revealed about me.

A feather fell from one of my wings, drifting through the air.

It landed on the bed, and I almost retrieved it—I'd killed the few fae who had seen my wings, and I didn't want proof of their existence lying around.

But it's Leila.

I paused, then left the feather on the bed.

I flipped Leila on her side—knowing her she'd end up smothering herself if I didn't—then sauntered across the room.

I opened the windows and crouched on the window sill, then looked back

over my shoulder at the Night Queen.

“Don’t do anything impulsive—or stupid,” I warned her. I then stepped out into thin air and tapped my magic, slipping into the shadows.

I hid my wings as I unsheathed my sword strapped to my belt.

It was time to hunt.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Leila

I petted Barbra—one of the shades that had taken up residence in the stables with the night mares—then put a fresh water bowl in front of her, dodging when she tried to lick me her thanks.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Barbra,” I said.

Lord Linus dumped out another water bowl and refilled it at the tap before joining me, setting the water down in front of Larry, who happily wagged his tail. “I’m pleased with your progress in magic lessons—there’s been a great deal of improvement since you are finally using your full artifact.”

“Yeah, I’m hopeful it will make a big difference the next time I have to strengthen the barrier,” I said. “Can we practice that next week?” I glanced at the fae lord.

“Most assuredly,” Lord Linus said. “We can even go to the barrier and have you practice directly with it. It won’t do anything to shore up the defenses, but familiarizing yourself with the steps should help build confidence.”

I weakly smiled as I put two fresh bowls of water down for the glooms—who were still licking out their dishes from breakfast. “Yeah. I guess I need all the help I can get.”

“Hey, Leila.”

I’d been watching Fluffy try to steal Muffin’s bowl, but I looked up when Lord Linus said my name.

“Your royal artifact is the Original King’s staff,” he said. “You are undoubtedly the most powerful monarch the Night Court has had in a long time. But you’ve only been queen for half a year. Give yourself a break—you won’t be able to fix everything immediately,” he said.

I relaxed, and my smile grew stronger. “Thanks. You’re right.”

Somehow—between all the lessons and socials, and yeah, possibly Chase’s investigation into him—I’d come to begrudgingly like Lord Linus.

We had a weird relationship—it certainly wasn't father/daughter—but it worked, and I was thankful that he'd become my fae advisor.

Lord Linus winked. "Of course I'm right! You're my darling daughter, the light in this cold, dark world, the brightest and most beautiful—all thanks to your fantastic genetics, I might humbly say."

I laughed this time instead of rolling my eyes like I would have as I headed to the stable door.

I meant to grab a brush—I'd sent one of Chase's guys out to a local pet store, and they picked up this special brush that was supposed to stimulate hair growth in pets—but I paused at the open door and looked out over the lawn.

Since Lord Linus and I kept to our early morning lessons, the lawn was still frosted over since the sun wasn't high enough to melt it.

The morning air was especially chilly, and almost all the trees had lost their leaves, leaving a thick carpet that the gardeners had promptly raked up.

"Yeah," I absently said. "I bet you regret missing my childhood."

"No. Not at all."

Surprised, I spun around. "What?"

Lord Linus was staring back at me, and for the first time he really looked like a *fae*. His expression was blank, almost *cold* in the lack of emotion—which looked alien on his normally smiling face.

He'd always had the appearance and charisma of a fae, but now, stripped down, I could see that same ugly ruthlessness, the same selfishness that plagued most fae, had been hidden deep within him as well.

"I don't regret missing your childhood," he factually said.

"But you're always going on about how you missed out seeing me grow up," I said, my stomach souring.

He blinked. "I wouldn't change a thing, even if I had a chance."

I didn't know what to say—he'd caught me off guard because his words *hurt*. It felt like he'd stabbed me in the gut, and I didn't know what to say.

He'd taken my side when others hadn't, he had never tried to curb me, he'd even been helping me with magic.

I thought that meant something.

Obviously, I thought wrong.

So...I ran.

It was either that or burst into tears in front of him, and that wasn't an option—especially after what he'd just said.

I knew I was right to hate him.

I sprinted across the lawn, running for the mansion.

I passed a perplexed Eventide, and Indigo—who was carrying a breakfast tray for me.

I would have stopped to talk to Indigo, but something pushed me on. I thundered up a set of stairs, dodged a maid, and skidded to a stop in front of Rigel's room.

“Rigel?” I opened the door—my heart rising.

Maybe he's finally back?

I stepped inside, and my hopes collapsed.

Nope. The room looks the same as it did when I woke up yesterday morning.

I closed the door behind me and sagged against it as I stupidly looked again.

Nope. Even the giant white feather I'd found on the middle of the bed was still sitting on the chest of weapons that I'd set it on.

I sighed and slumped my way across his room, aiming for the door between our rooms.

I furrowed my eyebrows as I rested my hand on the door knob and felt a familiar, wispy sensation.

Is that fae magic?

I pushed the door open, and the sensation of magic flashed stronger.

That was when the dagger bit into my shoulder.

I shouted with pain as I fell into my bedroom, almost tumbling on top of a second dagger that had fallen to the ground.

My palms sweated, and I tried to look back in my pain to see who had hurt me, but I was alone. No one was there.

The back of my throat burned, and blood dripped down my arm.

“Leila?” Indigo opened my bedroom door. Still holding my breakfast on a tray, she took a few steps in, but dropped it with the crack of shattering dishes when she saw me. “Chase!” she screamed. “*Chase!*”

My body trembled, and I tried to nod at Indigo. But in my mind, the truth had already dawned on me.

That was a trap, set with fae magic. A trap that sprang when I opened the door.

* * *

“It was rigged with magic so it would trigger when the door was opened,” Chase explained to me about an hour later. “It is fortunate you were going from Consort Rigel’s room to your own, or you would have been struck in a way that could have killed you.”

I was seated at my desk in my study. My shoulder barely ached. My staff had it bandaged with cloth that had been soaked in such a strong healing potion, I could taste its floral scent.

Lord Linus stood with Chase—I had no idea why he decided it was necessary to come. I wanted to see the fae lord about as much as I wanted to see Rigel at that moment.

I looked from Chase to the weapon that was used in the trap.

In the moment I’d thought it was a pair of daggers, but since Chase had set the weapons on my desk, I recognized the thicker blades and their eye-catching metal hand guard.

Rigel had told me himself, they were Chinese butterfly swords—the very same ones from his collection.

“Do you recognize the swords, my Sovereign?” Chase asked.

I ignored the question. “Rigel didn’t set the trap.”

Chase hesitated. “It’s to be hoped that he didn’t. Have you used the door since he was last seen?”

“Yes. Once,” I said. I’d used the door when I’d gotten up that morning to go get ready.

Rigel was already gone—or at least he wasn’t around. But his magic would have let him disappear if he wanted to.

“At this point, it’s more likely whomever is trying to eliminate you set it. You said you felt fae magic?”

“Yeah.” I stared at the swords—which had been cleaned of my blood.

Chase nodded. “Consort Rigel is loyal to you, my Sovereign. When he returns, I’m sure we’ll be able to clear the matter up.”

“It’s fine,” I said robotically. “Thank you, Chase.”

Chase bowed. “My men have almost finished sweeping the mansion for additional traps. I’ll let you know when it’s safe.”

I smiled, but it was difficult—like I couldn't remember how. "I appreciate it."

Chase sauntered off with his smooth, werewolf gait, but Lord Linus stayed behind.

He shifted from one foot to the other. "Queen Leila..."

"Leave," I said.

Lord Linus hesitated, bowed slightly, then followed after Chase.

I rubbed my eyes, but didn't let my shoulders fall until the door clicked shut behind him.

This doesn't mean Rigel did it. Just because Lord Linus is a jerk doesn't mean Rigel is. I have to believe in him.

But when a day passed, and then a week, and then another week, and then a month, and Rigel still hadn't returned...what little hope I had withered and died.

Rigel had left me.

Some stupid, optimistic part of me insisted he hadn't been the one to set the trap. Given my life, it probably would have been easier to forgive him for something like that.

Instead he'd disappeared without a word.

I loved him, and he left.

I either had the worst luck, or the worst taste in men.

*To be continued in *The Queen's Crown: Court of Midnight and Deception*
Book 3*

For free short stories and more information about the Court of Midnight and Deception Series, visit kmshea.com!

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Crown of Moonlight*, I hope you enjoyed Leila's story! If you want to read more of my work, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive my **free** *K. M. Shea Starter Pack* ebook.



It contains:

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My newsletter is released every month, and contains information about the books I'm working on, new freebies, and exclusive content just for newsletter subscribers!

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I am proud to say I have the best readers. Therefore, it is my dearest wish that Leila and her friends made you laugh and warmed your heart. Thank you.

Leila's adventure continues in...



The Queen's Crown
[Available on Amazon!](#)

Since the day I was crowned Queen of the Night Court, someone's been trying to kill me. Yay, me!

Finding my would-be-killer has been last on my to do list for a long time—which should tell you what a dumpster fire my life has been. But I can't ignore it anymore. Whoever is after me is getting serious, and if I don't do something soon I might not survive their next attempt.

Normally, I'd count on Rigel—my Consort, who also happens to be a deadly fae assassin—to have my back. But he's been gone for two months and when he finally returns he won't say where he's been. Great, that's totally not sketchy.

To make matters worse, I love Rigel—and he doesn't believe me when I tell him! How's that for romance?

New to do list: catch my would-be killer and convince my own husband I love him. All in a day's work for the Night Queen.

I knew I should have demanded a job description before I took on this gig...

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About the Author

K. M. Shea is a fantasy-romance author who never quite grew out of adventure books or fairy tales, and still searches closets in hopes of stumbling into Narnia. She is addicted to sweet romances, witty characters, and happy endings. She also writes LitRPG and GameLit under the pen name, A. M. Sohma.

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