

Enemies, Friends, or Terror?
A Court of Midnight and Deception Short Story
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Eventide and Azure weren't entirely certain what to make of the relationship between Queen Leila and Consort Rigel.

Queen Leila had been a surprise enough of her own—and admittedly a bit of a challenge given her propensity to break tradition and—worse—her abhorrence for tea.

But attempting to categorize the intricacies of the relationship between the fae queen and the assassin who had tried to kill her—and was now her *consort*? That was beyond their reckoning.

“Do you think they get along?” Azure asked.

Eventide poured her a cup of her favorite Earl Grey tea. “Impossible,” he said. “I asked Indigo—they only ever spoke to each other at Court events and mostly argued.”

Azure peered into her cup of tea. “Well...as long as they don't *hate* each other.”

“I agree.” Eventide worriedly rubbed one of his small horns that poked through his curly hair. “I quite like Queen Leila. And I would hate for her to...”

Azure nodded grimly. “Yes.”

What went unspoken was the fear that *if* Consort Rigel came to hate Queen Leila, he would eliminate her.

To the faun's and naiad's surprise, the royal couple seemingly had a good relationship. They even *joked* together. Before witnessing it for themselves, both of them would have sworn up and down that Consort Rigel couldn't have a sense of humor. But Leila seemed to effortlessly pull it from him.

“Hello, Azure!” Leila waved as she trotted down the front sidewalk, holding a hot pink leash that was clipped to a purple collar fixed to Steve, one of the Queen's pet shades. (Azure spent a solid week of her free time studying the Queen's animals after deciding it would probably be excellent job security if she knew all of their names.)

Azure bowed. “Queen Leila.” She opened the back door of the Porsche in preparation for the Queen and her pet.

“Sorry, can she ride up front with you? Rigel is coming with, and the three of us can't squeeze in the back seat.”

“Of course.” Azure turned her gaze to the shade and slightly nodded her head. “Steve.” She opened the front door, and the shade hopped in and sat down, her fluffy tail tapping the seat as she smiled up at Azure with teeth suspiciously spattered with red.

“You can tell which one she is?” Queen Leila's voice warmed with delight.

Azure carefully shut the door for the magical canine, then turned back to the queen. “Yes, Queen Leila.”

“You're the best, Azure. Oh, and thanks for changing the oil on my truck—I didn't want to have to run into town for that.” Queen Leila lightly touched Azure's arm.

Azure almost jumped in surprise at the touch, but was able to keep her expression serene. “Of course, Queen Leila. It is my job to maintain all the vehicles you own. And regarding your truck, may I purchase snow tires for it? All your vehicles have snow tires that I change over in mid-December.”

“Nice! Sure—just submit the receipt to accounting. Thanks for thinking of it.” Queen Leila flashed Azure a bright smile, and Azure nearly sighed in relief.

When Queen Leila first arrived and started making budget cuts everywhere, Azure had been terrified she’d be among the first to go, particularly once the queen started talking about selling some of the cars. But it seemed that Queen Leila valued Azure more for her mechanic skills than the luxury of having someone drive her around, and the queen herself assured Azure of her position.

During Azure’s internal introspection, Queen Leila had turned around to peer back at the mansion as Consort Rigel emerged from the shadows.

He was clothed in all black—as he always was—and while Azure didn’t see any obvious weapons, she was almost certain he had at least three magical artifacts on him.

Azure bowed to him with as much calmness and respect as she could muster when she faced the assassin. “Consort Rigel,” she murmured.

Queen Leila, it seemed, shared none of her hesitation over speaking to the lethal fae. “You know, you could mix your color scheme up a little instead of wearing all black every waking moment of your life.” Leila wriggled her eyebrows. “You’d look amazing in dark blue—just sayin’.”

Rather than killing her—as expected—Rigel merely blinked when he reached her side. “I wouldn’t look nearly as intimidating, and where would you be with a less intimidating Consort?”

“If it’s intimidation you’re going for, you should walk around shirtless,” Leila advised.

Azure was frozen in fear for the queen she was swiftly coming to respect—if not adore—so it was Consort Rigel who opened the car door. “Are you certain your personal preference isn’t coloring that opinion?” he casually asked.

“Maybe a little.” Queen Leila climbed into the car with a laugh, and Azure was almost certain she briefly saw a curl to Consort Rigel’s lips.

When the assassin slipped into the car and closed the door, Azure breathed easier as she retreated to the driver’s seat.

Perhaps they are friends? The naiad mused. *That would be good for the future of the Night Court.*

“*Friends?*” Eventide gaped at Azure as he added a sugar cube to a teacup of mango black tea. He set the teacup in front of Azure and shook his head. “I don’t believe Consort Rigel would be interested in such a thing.”

“He’s friends with Lord Dion,” Azure said.

“Yes, and I don’t believe Lord Dion would ever dare tease Consort Rigel in such a manner.” Eventide sat down and sipped his own cup of mango black tea, then pushed a lemon-blueberry scone around his plate.

Azure pursed her lips. “Then why do you think he would respond playfully, if they aren’t friends?”

“Perhaps he has ulterior motives?” Eventide grimaced, disliking the words even as he said them.

Azure rubbed the handle of her teacup. “I don’t think so. It fully appears to be that Queen Leila is the decision maker in their relationship.”

Eventide shrugged. “We can only hope.”

The following day, Eventide was given the opportunity to witness the “proof” of friendship for himself.

He was serving tea to Consort Rigel—Indigo had already given the royal couple snacks since the Queen remained reluctant to eat anything that was not crafted by her companion, and had left.

Eventide intended to follow after the companion as swiftly as possible, but while Queen Leila was not a tea drinker, Consort Rigel was.

As a result, Eventide was almost sweating with worry as he carefully poured a cup of green tea for the Consort. Additionally, he was horribly aware of Queen Leila’s thoughtful gaze that lingered on him as Consort Rigel stared at the teapot.

Queen Leila leaned across the table and playfully tapped the back of Consort Rigel’s hand. “So, on a scale of one to ten, how close am I to convincing you we need a coffee maker or—dare I say it—an espresso machine?”

Consort Rigel blessedly stopped staring at Eventide as the faun finished pouring. “I already told you; I refuse to get involved in your conflicts with your staff.”

Eventide’s ears almost perked at the statement—or they would have if he weren’t so blasted nervous.

Leila shrugged. “They’re your staff, too, you know.”

“No, they’re not,” Rigel said.

“How can you say that? They work for us.”

“They work for *you*. And I say that with great firmness, because I imagine you’re planning to write Christmas cards to each and every one of them, and I refuse to take part in such a show of...*cheer*.” Rigel took his teacup from Eventide and gave the Queen a withering look.

Queen Leila didn’t seem to take his critical words to heart. She was already looking over the assorted cookies Indigo had baked. “Wow, am I that predictable?”

Consort Rigel looked up from his tea with a slight frown. “You intend to send them Christmas cards?”

“Well yeah, I gotta give them their holiday bonuses.”

Eventide tried to keep a calm façade, but wished he was anywhere besides present as the royals discussed the matters of their employees. He hurriedly packed up the tea tray and was about ready to push the tea cart from the room when Consort Rigel held out his cup.

“Couldn’t you send out a group email?” Consort Rigel asked.

Eventide wanted to moan as he unpacked the teapot to refill the Consort’s cup.

Queen Leila caught Eventide’s eye and winked at him. “That’s not personal enough.”

“Thus, they are *your* staff.” Consort Rigel nodded slightly to Eventide once his cup was filled.

Eventide hurriedly slapped the teapot on the cart—grimacing when the porcelain pot clacked against the empty cup the chef had *insisted* on sending despite knowing the queen wouldn’t drink anything.

Queen Leila smirked at her husband. “Fine, I see how it is. Next time I go to King’s Court Café, I’ll take Indigo or Chase with me.”

Consort Rigel sipped his tea and looked unimpressed. “If that is the best threat you can fathom, you need to improve your skills.”

“No, thank you,” Queen Leila said.

Eventide started to relax as he pushed his tea cart across the room. *Almost to safety...*

“I see. You prefer different methods.” Consort Rigel said.

“Oh? Like?”

“Bragging about my abs.”

Eventide was so surprised—and shaken—it was the *Consort* bringing his abs up that he almost rammed the tea cart into the doorframe.

Queen Leila laughed. “Well, now that *you’ve* brought them up—”

Eventide hustled out of the room as fast as he could, shutting the door behind him.

Perhaps Azure is right. If Queen Leila and Consort Rigel were not friends, he would not have brought up...his appearance.

Eventide sucked in a breath of air and stood a little taller. *Although I have no wish to witness private banter, I am relieved. Friends—only my Sovereign could have made Consort Rigel a friend.*

With a spring in his hooves, Eventide pushed the cart back to the kitchens, eagerly awaiting Azure’s daily teatime when he could tell her what he’d witnessed.

Neither Azure nor Eventide were aware that the royal couple had proceeded to anything warmer than friendship, until the day Eventide and Indigo burst into Consort Rigel’s room looking for the missing Queen, only to discover her snuggled up under her deadly—and *irked*—Consort.

Everyone spoke of it—even Skye and Chase got in on the conversation.

But while the taciturn director of security only listened to the story and then went on his way, Skye remained behind to lecture the staff that the interactions between the Queen and Consort were none of their business.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Indigo said. “But do you think they’re a *thing*?”

Skye frowned at her. “A thing?”

“Do you think they’ll be involved romantically,” Indigo said.

The half fae narrowed her eyes. “Did you not listen to a word I said? It’s none of our business if they are or not.”

Indigo leaned over to whisper to Eventide. “It means she thinks they’re not. I’m not so sure—I guess we’ll wait and find out. But with Leila’s ability to lie we might be waiting for a while before we know for sure.”

Azure and Eventide exchanged looks and nodded.

But it turns out “a while” was not long at all. In fact, it was only a day or two after the annual hunt that Azure and Eventide knew the Queen and Consort were emotionally intertwined—even if the pair themselves were unaware.

“Where are we going, today—Queen Leila, Consort Rigel?” Azure bowed first to the Queen and then to the Consort as she opened a car door.

“Just a quick coffee run to King’s Court Café,” Leila said. “Thanks, Azure. Oh! Unless!” Hanging half in and half out of the car, Queen Leila turned around and shouted to Eventide. “Eventide! Do you mind ordering some more of those plush dog beds you got me? Or should we just stop and pick some up at the pet store today?”

Eventide—who’d trotted outside to give Leila a folder of paperwork so she could go over some work on the drive—paused halfway up the sidewalk, then scurried back to the car. “I beg your pardon, Queen Leila, what did you say?”

“Dog beds,” Queen Leila said. “I need some more.”

Consort Rigel rested his hand on top of the car door. “The majority of your room is already covered in beds, as is your personal study. You want *more*?”

Queen Leila nodded. “Not for my room—for yours.”

Azure and Eventide yanked their gazes down to study the fine cracks in the driveway instead of gaping at the statement. As such, neither of them were prepared for Consort Rigel’s response.

“Ah.” The Consort shifted his weight. “I suppose that makes sense.”

I suppose that makes sense? Azure mouthed to the ground.

This was Consort Rigel. He was a deadly assassin, yes, but he was also infamous for his loner personality. He *barely* tolerated Lord Dion, and now he was discussing the necessity of getting more dog beds for his room because it seemed *Queen Leila* would be spending more time there?

Everyone is wrong. They’re already ten steps beyond friendship. There’s no way Consort Rigel would give Queen Leila the chance to be with him when he is most vulnerable if they were barely friends.

She risked sneaking a peek at the assassin. He was watching Queen Leila. While his expression was not sappy—or even warm with affection—his actions were still a dead giveaway.

Perhaps it is a kind of love that has not yet bloomed into romance, but he is allowing her in. And he obviously doesn’t care who knows it, or he wouldn’t say such a thing in front of Eventide and me.

Leila finished sliding into the car. “Don’t worry—I’ll make sure we get black or gray. It won’t mess with your room’s aesthetic.”

Consort Rigel shrugged. “You could likely get hot pink. As long as a shade is sitting on it, it will be more intimidating than my chests of weapons.”

Queen Leila laughed. “You’re not wrong, but I’ll still make sure. I guess we’re going to the pet store, Azure—so you don’t need to worry about getting more beds, Eventide!”

“Yes, Queen Leila.” Eventide folded himself into a bow so deep he almost lost his balance.

Azure remembered herself and darted forward to push the car door. Before it shut, she heard Consort Rigel speak.

“I draw the line at water bowls. I don’t need your dogs drooling across my room. Particularly since the glooms already turn on the showers whenever they want water.”

“Fair enough!” Queen Leila said.

The door closed.

Eventide and Azure stared at each other.

“What do you think the Night Court will look like in five years?” Azure asked. *When these two are fully in love and ruling over the Night Court?*

Eventide understood her unspoken question. He smiled and tapped his goat hooves on the driveway. “It will be beautiful.”

As the chauffeur and butler, Azure and Eventide never expected to be invested in their employers’ relationship. But when fall began to fade and Consort Rigel left, everyone wondered if the Consort had really been as fond of the Queen as it appeared. Azure and Eventide knew.

Every day—over a cup of tea—they affirmed the truth.

Consort Rigel would return. He’d never leave Queen Leila—the one person he’d shown a shred of vulnerability to—alone.

And maybe, just maybe, they'd see the royals progress to the next step...

The End