

How to Train with Vampires
A Court of Midnight and Deception &
A Hall of Blood and Mercy short story

By K. M. Shea

“Good. Now slightly tilt the gun so you have the leverage to press down on the magazine release with your thumb,” Josh said.

I stared at the handgun I held in my right hand, and flicked my eyes to my left hand. “Can’t I just use my free hand to press the button?” I asked.

“No. Your free hand needs to be reaching for your filled magazine which should be hooked on your belt,” Josh said. “You want to make magazine replacement as swift as possible so you don’t give your enemy time to strike.”

I tilted my handgun as instructed, pressing down on the magazine release with my thumb. The emptied magazine slid out of the gun and fell to the ground while I grabbed the pre-filled magazine from my belt—where Josh had made me clip it when we first started my refresher course on what I meant to be target practice, but had somehow turned into giving me the gun skills of a super spy.

I shoved the new magazine in, which effortlessly clicked into place.

“Good. That’s the basic movement. Now you just need to get faster,” Josh said. “Practice it again.”

I pressed down, releasing the filled magazine, and hooked it on my belt again before I squatted to pick up the empty magazine. “While I appreciate that this will make me look super cool, are you sure we shouldn’t do more target practice? I don’t intend to have to shoot so many bullets that I need to be reaching for refills.”

I only had one week before the Paragon would return to my parents’ farm to take me to the Night Court. I had to make my practice time count.

Gavino shook his head and crossed his arms across his chest, making the impressive muscles of his arms bulge in his suitcoat. I have no idea how the hot afternoon sun wasn’t roasting him. “You’re going to be Queen of the Night Court, Leila. It’s better for you to be prepared to protect yourself than be caught unguarded,” he said.

“Besides, you are already a fair enough shot.” Josh tapped the paper target he’d removed from the hay bale we’d hauled from my parents’ farm and set up outside at the end of one of the outdoor shooting ranges on the Drake property. “While you have plenty of room for improvement, the effects of practice will have diminishing returns for you, particularly because if you’re resorting to shooting it doesn’t matter if you merely maim or kill as you are now a royal,” Josh said. “We’re better off teaching you methods that will allow you to stay active in combat longer, until your guards are able to reach you.”

My shots riddled the paper target—which Josh had taped to the table he’d carried outside to hold some necessary items, like a cleaning kit, extra magazines, and more cartons of bullets than I’d use in the whole week of practice.

Based on the target, I wasn’t a sharp shooter by any means, but my aim hadn’t rusted as much as I feared. I was actually pretty likely to be able to hit anyone at close range. “That’s a fun thought,” I said.

Josh shrugged. “It suits your temperament.”

I set my shoulders and practiced tilting my gun and releasing the empty magazine while I reached for the full one clipped to my belt. “What do you mean by that?” I slammed the full magazine into place, relaxing when it clicked.

“You are a fighter. You will fight to survive,” Josh said. “If it were the average half-human half-fae that had been chosen as the new Night Queen, I would suggest meditating and cleansing your mind so that when death inevitably enfolds you—likely a gift from a hateful subject—you might kick off from this mortal coil in peace.”

“Thanks?” I released the full magazine and prepared to practice the move again.

“He means it as a compliment,” Gavino assured me.

“Leila, back again for some more practice?”

I set the gun on the table—Josh had endlessly drilled me when he first taught me how to use a gun to never hold or point one unless you were willing to shoot whatever you were aimed at, so there was no way I was holding it when greeting any of the Drakes. “Hello, Celestina! Yes, I’ll be coming over as often as you guys don’t mind it this week.”

The Drake Family’s First Knight—essentially the second in command and one of Killian’s two most trusted vampires, the other being Josh, the Second Knight—beamed at me.

While Josh and Gavino had pasty pale skin—a typical mark of a vampire—Celestina’s brown skin had retained some of the warmth she had in life, giving her a brighter appearance, even though she shared the same ruby-red eyes all vampires had.

“Don’t be silly. We’re happy to be of assistance to you as you prepare for the battle ahead of you.” She swerved around a waist high shrub and stopped at Gavino’s side, offering me a smile.

Celestina—tall and model like—wore a pair of high heels I’d never be able to manage without breaking an ankle, and looked like she’d stepped out of a high-power board room with her impeccably fitted suit.

If I had her air of competence and power, I’m willing to bet the upcoming fight for my life would be a little easier.

As if aware of my thoughts, Celestina propped her hands on her hips. “Have you thought about my offer of giving you more advanced personal defense training?”

“I still believe you ought to learn how to fight with a knife,” Josh said. “There is a simplistic elegance to stabbing an opponent.”

“Considering it’s fae she’s facing, a gun is her fastest and best option for close range personal defense,” Gavino said.

Celestina briefly puffed her cheeks. “Maybe, but it’s empowering to know you could toss a grown man over your shoulder.”

“It would be pretty awesome,” I agreed. “But I don’t think I have the right base for you to teach me stuff like that. The only self defense class I took was a gym class elective in college, and it was pretty bare bones.”

Celestina sighed. “True. If only we had a month to get you into fighting shape—you already have decent strength and stamina given the daily chores you complete for your farm.”

“What are you all doing here?” A red-haired vampire strolled around the shrubbery Celestina had dodged. His name was Rupert—he was pretty recognizable as he was the most sour-faced of the Drake vampires. I hadn’t interacted with him much, but I got the feeling he didn’t like humans—or at least that he *hadn’t* liked humans, until Hazel Medeis and all the wizards in House Medeis had become the Drake’s live-in allies.

“Afternoon, Rupert!” Gavino grinned at the slightly shorter vampire. “Ready to return to House Medeis tomorrow?”

Rupert scoffed. “Never. I dare say I despise the place.”

“Is that so?” Celestina nonchalantly inspected her nails—which were painted a pretty coral-orange color. “I suppose we could add you into the patrol rotation here at Drake Hall so you could stay here.”

Rupert shoved his nose into the air. “No need. I am willing to make great sacrifices for the Eminence.” He peered from the target-less hay bale to the gun on the table, to me. “Why are you all out here fraternizing with the dog trainer?”

Josh—the shortest of the vampires present and, honestly, the least intimidating based on appearance alone—casually reached up and grabbed Rupert by his necktie, yanked him forward so he folded over into a bow, and cuffed him upside the head in a smooth, seamless movement that had Rupert choking on his shirt collar.

“I would advise you to watch your manners, as you are addressing the new Queen of the Night Court,” Josh said.

“The what?” Rupert was red faced when Josh finally let him go and he stood up straight.

“I don’t think he heard the news yesterday,” Gavino said. “He was too busy playing bridge—cards, that is—with Great Aunt Marriane last night. He wasn’t present at the debriefing meeting.”

“I was not *playing!*” Rupert adjusted his tie. “That old bat had me captive!”

“Oh, yes. It would certainly make sense that one wizard would be able to hold you, a Drake Vampire, against your will,” Celestina said.

“It was more than just Marriane!” Rupert huffed, then glanced at me and bowed his head. “Congratulations on the position, Queen Leila,” he said stiffly, but with genuine respect. Rupert wasn’t the type to lower his head easily, but he’d become a lot less muleheaded since the Drakes and Medeis started intermingling more.

Josh patted him on the shoulder like an older brother rewarding his toddler brother. “Well done, Rupert. You are learning.”

Rupert eyed him. “Since when did you become so worried about how I address others?”

“I am always concerned with your social manners,” Josh said. “It is my greatest fear that they shall one day prove to be the reason you escape to death due to your propensity to speak impertinently to important supernaturals.”

As he rearranged the cleaning kit, Josh looked anything but anxious. But I was smart enough not to question the Second Knight, so I fiddled awkwardly with the magazine clipped to my belt.

Gavino coughed into his elbow—probably to hide a laugh, and Rupert looked increasingly sour, so I scrambled for a new topic.

“Ah, Celestina! I love your nails—did you get another manicure?” I asked.

“I did!” Celestina excitedly held out her hands. “Hazel, Momoko, and I went to a spa—it was so delightful! I got a pedicure, too.” The vampire smiled down at her fingers, the picture of feminine grace. “And best yet, I asked for a gel nail polish this time, so they shouldn’t chip even when I’m reduced to hand to hand combat. I broke a nail last week when I disarmed a mad vampire.”

“Disarmed?” I asked.

Celestina elegantly waved her hand. “He only had a sword, and was a very old vampire so he had very traditional views of dueling. It was an easy thing to break his sword with a few well-timed strikes and shake him senseless.”

“A few well-timed strikes of what?” I asked.

Celestina’s smile was a bright white against her warm skin. “My fists, of course.”

Knowing Celestina’s strength, it wasn’t *too* surprising to hear just what she was capable of, but it was still hard to fathom. “Way to go,” I said. “I hope next time you get a recording—I’d like to see something like that!”

Celestina tapped her lip. “I suppose it would be useful for training purposes.” She glanced over at Josh, who was straightening the boxes of ammo.

“I will not volunteer, unless we buy several boxes of cheap blades,” Josh said. “I have already lost far too many of my deadly life companions to your strength.”

“But the cheap swords shatter easily,” Celestina argued. “Even Rupert could break them!”

Rupert angrily sniffed. “I rank high in the Drake family. Naturally I would be strong enough to break a mere sword.”

“No,” Celestina said. “You’re ranked high in the Drake family in terms of deadliness, but if we’re going purely on strength, Gavino would beat you.”

“That’s nonsense!” Rupert scoffed.

Gavino shrugged. “I can’t break blades like Celestina—I’m not fast enough to track the motions. But I dare say I have the strength.”

Rupert pressed his lips into a thin line. “You’re just saying that because the wizards are forever hero-worshipping you for your weightlifting abilities.”

“Oh-ho-ho—is that jealousy I hear?” Celestina chuckled as she prodded Rupert’s cheek like an affectionate older sister. “You’ve come to finally admit your love of the wizards, have you? Little Rupert is growing up!”

“Hardly,” Rupert scoffed.

At that moment, I heard a male voice call out over the gardens. “*Rupert! Where’d you go? We’re going to start our Mario Kart Tournament and you said you wanted in!*”

The flair of magic in the air assured me the speaker was a wizard.

Rupert took a step towards the voice, then scowled when Celestina and Gavino smirked. “It’s not what you think!” he said.

Gavino’s smile grew.

Celestina draped an arm over Rupert’s shoulders. “I don’t know if it’s the wizards’ influence over me, but you’ve become increasingly more adorable and markedly less annoying—which is all you used to be. Come on—let’s go see your little friends.” Celestina hauled Rupert a few steps, then paused long enough to look back at me. “I’ll be back in a bit, Leila. I’ll let Hazel know you’re here.”

“Thanks—have fun!” I said.

Celestina chuckled. “Oh, we will.”

Rupert grumbled under his breath as she hauled him through the expansive gardens.

Josh sighed morosely as he watched them go. “I had hopes of attending the next time there was a Mario Kart Tournament.”

Gavino pushed his eyebrows together and studied the shorter vampire. “Because Momoko likes those tournaments?”

“Partially, yes,” Josh said.

I squinted as I stretched my memory. “Isn’t Momoko one of Hazel’s childhood friends?”
“Yes,” Josh said. “She is a very deadly wizard—practically poetry in motion with the careful precision of her strikes. She can kill quite easily—it’s very beautiful.”

Unsure of what to do with a seemingly love-struck Josh, I looked to Gavino for help. He very *not* helpfully shrugged.

“Ah. I see. She sounds lovely,” I said. “So, time for target practice?”

“No,” Josh said. “You should practice switching magazines for several minutes. Then we’ll move on to something fun.”

I picked up my gun—carefully pointing it towards the hay bale—and tilted it so I could press the magazine release button. “And what would that be?” I asked.

“We’ll take you into the downstairs shooting range, blindfold you, and then have you attempt to shoot Gavino and me so you start learning how to use your other senses to pinpoint targets,” Josh said.

Gavino slightly bowed his head to the Second Knight. “A wise idea. Considering you are to be the Queen of the Night Court, Leila, it is wise to learn how to shoot in darkness.”

“That’s...great,” I said.

I switched out my magazines—I had to admit I was a lot better than I had been when I’d been practicing just a few minutes ago—and settled in for a week of extremely *interesting* training from the Drake Vampires.

Odd training or not, I’d do whatever they told me. I trusted the Drake vampires a million times more than I trusted anyone from my Court. I was thankful for their friendship, and even though I hoped they were wrong about needing practice in all these areas, I wasn’t overly optimistic.

They’d trained Hazel—who had become the fiercest wizard in the Midwest and returned to train a house of combat-ready wizards.

If they thought I needed to know how to shoot in the dark, I would.

I’m going to survive. I promised myself. Assassins, hatred from my own people—I’ll make like a cockroach and outlast it all!

Several months later I was going through the cards and gifts sent to me—and Rigel, technically—congratulating us on our marriage and my official crowning.

I was pleasantly surprised when I opened a boring, white envelope and found the card inside was emblazoned with swords and guns. The card was signed by all the Drake vampires I knew best.

*Congratulations on this strategic and wise marriage,
Gavino

*Good luck not dying,
Rupert*

*I’m so excited for you! An assassin will make the PERFECT husband!
~ Celestina*

Seducing your enemy is an excellent way to reduce your number of foes. Well done. Remember to practice switching out full magazines, and try to avoid the sweet call of death.

Josh

I laughed at the notes, but truthfully, they made the tension in my neck ease a little bit. Marrying Rigel was the right thing to do. I'd followed my instinct, and if the Drakes approved, that meant it was the best choice I could have made.

Now I just have to survive meeting the other monarchs...

The End