

Parents' Night
A Court of Midnight and Deception Short Story
By K. M. Shea

After freeing Solis from his shady bargain and restoring the Night Realm with my Court, I assumed my life would be a lot less exciting.

It wasn't.

No, I had a different kind of chaos invade my life—one that was potentially disastrous in a different way: my parents.

Oblivious to the impending doom that was about to torpedo me, I was relaxing with Rigel and one of my subjects, Lord Iason.

The fae lord was helping me plan my next court outing—we were going to go view flowers in Verdant's gardens at her mansion, but this time I was taking snacks so I wouldn't burden the other monarch.

We were just finishing tea—or rather Rigel and Lord Iason were finishing their tea. I'd finished my chai tea latte a while ago—my chef was greatly expanding his caffeinated-beverage making skills, and I was *thrilled!*

“So we have the menu set, we're making everyone get their own rides to Verdant's place, and we've got the time figured out. I think that's everything!” I said.

Lord Iason frowned slightly. “Are you certain *sandwiches* is the typical human entrée for such an activity? Typically at flower viewings we fae eat salmon or lobster—or a roasted pig.”

“Yeah, no. I am totally certain,” I said. “Flower viewings mean a lot to me, so I am set on celebrating it in the human spirit of a picnic,” I said.

“I see...” Lord Iason slowly said.

Rigel flicked his dark eyes at me in a way that said he knew I didn't care at all about human picnics and I was just being cheap. But that's why he's my husband!

I winked and blew him a kiss.

Rigel stared at me for several long moments, which most would interpret as irritation or bafflement. But I knew better, because he had his arm draped over my shoulders and brushed his thumb across my arm—which is the equivalent of screaming “I love you!” for Rigel.

I grinned at my husband like a cheesy sap, and I probably would have lost a ton of brain cells staring at him, but Lord Iason saved me with a question.

“I wanted to ask you, my Sovereign, how one might go about obtaining a pet.” He set his empty teacup down and slightly pursed his lips.

“Finally gave up on that stray black cat you've been stalking?” I asked.

“Indeed. She has not been in the neighborhood for the past month or so. I have decided that—in preparation for Pet Appreciation Day—I shall need to move on and find a different animal to save,” Lord Iason said.

“Magiford has an animal shelter, and there are a few local rescue organizations, too, that you can apply to,” I said. “But you don't *have* to get a cat or a dog. They've got all kinds of animals—rabbits, ferrets, I think some even have a random goat or two.”

“A rabbit can be a pet?” Lord Iason asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.” The fae lord seemed intrigued by the idea.

I dug my phone out of my jeans pocket—intending to find the shelter’s website so I could show him—when Skye breezed into the parlor.

“Forgive the interruption, my Sovereign, but I wanted to assure you that the chef has finished the refreshments for your parents, and they will be entertained until you end your meeting,” Skye said.

I squinted up at my steward. “My parents?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“They’re here?”

“Yes.”

“...What?” I slipped off the couch and checked my phone to see if either Mom or Dad had texted me about visiting—they hadn’t.

“They said they’d arranged to visit you,” Skye said. “There must have been a confusion in your schedules?”

“No, they’re just wordsmithing like a fae. It’s fine—we finished planning the flower viewing.” I turned around to smile at Lord Iason. “I apologize, but we’ll need to have our pet conversation later. But if you think about what kind of domesticated animal you’d like, I’ll help you get it.”

Lord Iason bowed his head. “Of course. Thank you for thinking of me, Queen Leila. Enjoy your visit with your begetters.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I held my hand out to Rigel, intertwining my fingers with his when he rose to stand next to me. “You’ll come with me?”

“Of course,” Rigel said.

I smiled up at my husband, then turned to my steward. “Where are they, Skye?”

“I left them at your private study with Lord Linus.”

Instantly, all the blood in my body turned ice cold. “You left them with *Linus*?”

“Yes,” Skye confirmed.

I dropped Rigel’s hand and booked it out of the parlor so fast I almost skid out when I hit the marble tiled hallway.

I sprinted all the way to my study and nearly rammed into the door when I reached it. I flung the door open, gasping for breath.

My mom was sitting on the couch, holding a cup of what I imagine was coffee—she didn’t care much for tea. She smiled when she saw me and set her drink down.

“Hi, sweetie!” she said.

I relaxed. “Hey, Mom.”

“It’s so good to see you! You haven’t been out to visit us in a while.” Her expression was cheerful as she stood up and wrapped her arms around me in that special, comforting hug she always gave me.

“Yeah, sorry.” I hunched over a little to make it easier on her to hug me since she was so much shorter, and then froze when I realized she was the only one in my study. “Where’s Dad?”

“Hmm?” Mom leaned back, breaking our hug. “Oh, he and Linus went off.”

“Together?”

“Yes.”

“And you *let* them?” My voice cracked as my voice reached a pitch so high it was barely audible to humans.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Mom widened her eyes. “They get along so well.”

I scrambled back to the hallway. “Steve! Kevin! I need your help!”

It took a minute, but my shades eventually appeared, trotting down the hallway towards me.

Since the Night Realm had mended, their appearance had drastically morphed.

Gone were their skeletal forms with matted fur. Now they had blueish-purple fur that was soft and puffy. Silver markings dotted their backs, and Steve's front paws were the same pretty shade of silver.

They wagged their fluffy tails as they approached me, then sat on their haunches and perked their ears in a way that typically invited me to kiss their cute fuzzy faces.

"We don't have time for that right now," I said. "Dad and Linus are together. I need you to sniff them down. They were in my study—can you pick up their trail from here?"

Steve and Kevin stood and started sniffing the ground.

I poked my head back in the study to talk to Mom. "I can send some more coffee up for you while you wait if you want, Mom."

My mom grabbed her purse off the couch and joined me in the hallway. "No, I'll come with you. That was the whole point of our visit—to see you!"

"Okay. If we go too fast let me know—we can go grab Fax and you can ride him," I offered.

My mom squinted at me. "We're indoors."

"Just don't tell Rigel," I said. "He gets fussy about having animals inside."

Kevin and Steve howled, and we were off, on the trail of Dad and Linus at a fast walk.

"Do we really need to be so concerned?" Mom asked. "Linus and Paul get along quite well."

"I'm not concerned about Dad *or* Linus," I said. "I'm concerned about *everyone else* in the mansion!"

"Oh." My mom thought for a moment as we hurried after Kevin and Steve. "Yes. That might be a legitimate worry."

Kevin and Steve first led us to the enormous Portrait Gallery.

When I saw where they were taking us—the hallway opened up into the giant gallery so it was kind of hard to miss—I sprinted ahead.

Sure enough, there was a swirl of chaos in the room—a siren, a gnome, and a brownie were alternately swooning and clucking over a line of royal portraits—but I didn't see Dad or Linus anywhere. (Linus is pretty hard to miss, and Dad sticks out like a sore thumb in his usual jeans and flannel shirt among the fussy fae.)

"Is everyone okay?" I trotted up to the trio, glancing from the portraits to my subjects. I had to scramble around a bunch of paints and easels—it looked like the siren, brownie, and gnome were in the middle of touching up a few of the older paintings.

"That is a difficult question to answer right now." The gnome ruefully shook his head as he gazed at a portrait.

"What happened?" I asked.

The swooning siren recovered long enough to curtsy to me. "We were gifted with the presence of Lord Linus and Sir Paul—"

Sir Paul? Dad is going to be chuffed to hear he's been unknowingly knighted.

"They observed the portraits with us for a time," the siren continued, "when Sir Paul noticed one of the portraits appeared to be lopsided. And he, he..." she trailed off, rapidly blinking in what looked like confusion.

The brownie picked up the story with great relish. “He whipped out what he called a ‘pocketknife’ and used a tiny pliers in it to tighten the wire on the back of the portrait, then rehung it.” He rubbed his hands together. “Could you tell us where one might obtain a ‘pocketknife’ my Sovereign?”

“Um...I’m not sure?” I said. “I know Dad likes the ones made in Switzerland.”

“Switzerland, that is a European country,” the brownie said.

“I have heard of it,” the gnome said.

“We must go there and buy many of these ‘pocketknives’,” the brownie said.

“You don’t have to go to Switzerland to get them, you can buy them online—” My jaw dropped and I stopped talking when I flicked my eyes back to the siren—who was wiping away a tear or two—and I saw the portrait behind her. “What the...?”

What once was a royal portrait of a particularly snotty looking Night King from years ago dressed in resplendent robes with an excessive amount of light shining on his handsome looks had been painted over with what looked like a blobby potato man.

The brownie saw where I was looking and grimaced. “Ah, yes. That is Lord Linus’ work. He said the painting needed...*restoring*.”

“Restoring...huh.” I stared at the new paint job as my mother joined me.

She pointed to the nameplate embossed into the ornate frame. “King Breck?”

“A particularly unpopular ruler,” the gnome dished. “No one liked him much alive or dead as he was a rather terrible ruler.”

“Oh. Well. Then. It’s probably fine,” I said.

“But the history?” The siren started to protest before she swooned again.

“Who cares since he was a bad king? Forgetting him is probably the best punishment we can lay on him—unless we want to use him as a moral lesson,” I said.

“Lord Linus said something rather similar.” The brownie grinned a little. “He said history shouldn’t remember King Breck so handsomely since he was so terrible.”

“Well Lord Linus isn’t an unstable fruit pie *all* the time,” I said.

At the portrait gallery entrance, Steve and Kevin howled.

“Looks like they picked up the scent again,” I said. “Come on, Mom. Good luck restoring the portrait—if you can. Or want to.”

The trio waved and Mom and I were off, following my shades once again.

This time, they led us to the other end of the house—the kitchens.

I’d expected to find chaos, but when Steve bound into the kitchens, I was surprised to see it was silent and empty.

I hadn’t ventured down to the kitchens too often. Before Solis revealed himself, Indigo had made all my food—which greatly offended my chef. And even though I was now willing to eat food/drinks that Indigo hadn’t prepared, I still avoided the place. The chef was a lot kinder since he’d gotten into coffee, but he could still be quite scary—and bossy.

Hey, I might be the Night Queen, but even queens have certain people they won’t cross!

“Hello?” I cautiously took a few steps inside the kitchens, looking around the spotless domain.

The counters were piled with food, and something delectable smelling was bubbling in a pot positioned over a gas burner, but otherwise it was empty.

“Did Dad and Linus chase them out?” I wondered as Mom scratched Kevin’s chin.

“Queen Leila?”

I jumped when a head popped up over the counter, and put a hand on my heart when I recognized Eventide. The faun's curly hair looked a little more wild than usual, but he wasn't trembling—which was a good sign.

"Hey, Eventide. What's going on?" I made my way around the marble-topped island counter in the center of the kitchen and screeched to a stop when I nearly stepped on my chef—a big, burly fae who sprouted enough hair from his head and face to weave a rug. I suspected he had a bit of troll and dwarf blood in his family.

The chef was passed out cold, splayed across the spotless kitchen floor with his arms and legs spread wide like a starfish.

Eventide was flapping a cloth napkin in the unconscious chef's face while Azure, my naiad chauffeur, adjusted the ice bag she was holding against his head as she crouched down at his side.

I grabbed the edge of the counter. "What happened?"

"Lord Linus and Sir Paul," Azure said—apparently Dad's knighthood was official.

"Sir Paul asked if there was any instant coffee powder available," Eventide said. "The chef was able to respond with a polite no."

I eyed my downed chef. "Wow, talk about improvement. I didn't know he could *be* polite!"

"Yes," Azure tactfully said. "Unfortunately, when Sir Paul then enquired if they had any...twinkies? He described them as prepackaged snack cakes?"

"Yeah, Dad does have a thing for twinkies," I confirmed.

"Chef's nerves couldn't take it," Eventide said. "He felt faint—though I believe it was Lord Linus taking a picture with his cellphone that was the final straw and made him pass out."

"The other kitchen staff members are breaking into the emergency cache of fine vanilla the chef hides for special baked goods," Azure added. "The scent should wake him up."

"Right. Okay." I rubbed my temples as Steve whined at the kitchen door that led outside. "Sounds like you two have things in hand. Do you mind if I keep going? I'm trying to catch up with Dad and Linus before they bring the mansion down around us."

"Go swiftly," Azure said. "I believe Lord Linus mentioned taking Sir Paul to see the night realm."

I was halfway to the doors before Azure finished speaking. "Come on, Mom. We've gotta book it!"

"It was lovely to see you, Azure, Eventide." Mom waved at them as she trailed behind me. "I hope to see you again before we leave!"

I wrenched the doors open and Steve and Kevin trotted outside, their noses to the ground. I'm not going to lie, when they turned in the direction of the gardens—where the permanent gate to the night realm was located—I started sweating.

"What a beautiful spring day!" Mom shaded her eyes and peered up at the sky, very obviously not sharing in my spiking anxiety.

"Glad you're enjoying it," I said.

"You seem stressed."

"I kind of am, yes!"

"Why?"

I gaped at my mother in disbelief. "Are you really asking me that when Dad and Linus are on the loose, causing chaos in my already admittedly chaotic home?"

Mom sympathetically patted my shoulder and made a soothing, cooing noise.

I frowned as Steve and Kevin led us through the winding gardens, into a maze constructed of tall hedges.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve used my adrenaline more since being crowned than I have in my entire life,” I grumbled.

We reached the center of the maze, where two guards were stationed by the gate.

“Linus and my Dad?” I called to the guards.

Kevin and Steve passed by them, following the trail out the other side of the little clearing.

“We told them no,” one guard said. “They moved on.”

I would have hugged them if I had more time. “Thank you!”

“You might want to hurry,” the second guard called. “Lord Linus mentioned asking the night mares for a ride since we were ‘unreasonable and unhelpful.’”

I hurried after Kevin and Steve as they led us through the other end of the maze.

“I’m sure it’s fine, sweetie. They won’t do anything to embarrass you—they’re both very proud of you and love you very much,” my mom said. “Paul tells everyone about his daughter the fae queen, and Linus sends us at least a picture a day of you. Which I enjoy—you are a very good queen, just like I knew you’d be.”

Despite the possible calamity Linus and Dad could bring down together, those words made me stop just after I stepped outside the sheltered hedge maze.

Just like I knew you’d be.

I never doubted my mom was proud of me, but those words had taken on a different meaning ever since I’d had a heart-to-heart with Linus and he told me about how he’d barely avoided being crowned Night King.

A night mare had shown up on the front lawn one day when I was just a toddler. Linus knew what it meant—and he was convinced that being crowned would mean Mom and I would be made targets and killed.

He’d fled—to keep us safe—and traveled across Europe. Ever since seeing the night mare, he’d never returned to his family home, and he’d never come to see us.

When mom saw Eclipse—the first night mare that had shown up on my parents’ hobby farm—she knew what it meant.

And she never told me.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” The words popped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

My mom strolled ahead, staying behind Kevin and Steve. “Tell you what?”

I took a few quick steps to catch up with her. “Tell me that the night mares were there to crown me.”

“Ah.” Mom slowly nodded. “Is this why you haven’t come home since your conversation with Linus?”

“No—I’ve been busy,” I said.

“You know Paul and I would gladly come to you instead,” Mom said.

“It hasn’t been safe,” I protested. “People were trying to kill me—”

“And all of that stopped over a month ago when Solis ousted himself,” Mom said. “And you still told us not to come—though you have called us plenty.”

We followed Steve and Kevin at a much more sedate pace as I fought to find the words.

“It’s not that I’m mad at you,” I said. “I’m just...confused? I would have liked to have known, so I could have had a choice.”

“That’s precisely why I didn’t tell you,” Mom said.

“You *wanted* me to be the Night Queen?”

“No. I knew enough from Linus to never want anything of the sort for you.” My mom snorted and shook her head. “No, I didn’t tell you because I knew your dislike of fae would drive you to run.”

“Would that have been so bad?”

Mom took my hand and squeezed it. “For you, sweetie? It would have been your ruin.” I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Once safely in Canada or Australia, or wherever you decided to go, you’d research the Night Court out of curiosity. You’d follow the politics, and you’d watch them spiral into ruin. And then—no matter how much you disliked fae—you would have felt guilty. Because you would have thought you might have been able to do something to help.” My mom gazed across the perfect grassy lawn as we slowly made our way to the stables. “That would have tortured you for the rest of your life. I saw it happen to Linus; I wasn’t going to let it happen to you.”

“What do you mean? Linus had the time of his life in Europe,” I said.

Mom shook her head. “Cut off from the Night Realm as he was, and far from all of his friends and family, knowing he abandoned it all for us? Linus was suffering. *You* being made Queen was what revived him, sweetie. For you he would risk coming back. Fighting for you, working in the realm—all of that was a lifeline for him. And you are a hundred times more noble and kind than Linus. For you, that kind of pain would have been far worse.”

I draped my arm across my mom’s shoulders. “It’s because I’m your daughter,” I said.

“Maybe. But this—your people, the Night Realm?” Mom motioned to the mansion grounds. “All of this is because you’re *you*. You’ve always been capable of great things, Leila. It just took a crown for you to see that.”

“I’m not that great,” I said. “It’s just because I’m half human and half fae that I could see how screwed up fae politics were.”

We were almost to the stables now. Steve and Kevin loped ahead of us, disappearing in the shadows of the opulent building.

“Leila, you changed the way the fae in the Midwest operate and saved the Night *and* Day Courts. You’re wonderful.” My mom winked playfully. “And I’m not saying that just because you’re my daughter.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Mom had to stand on her tip toes so she could hug me. “Of course. I’ll always be in your corner.”

Something tight in my chest eased, and I felt *better*.

Or, at least I did, until I heard Linus’ and Dad’s voices.

“Are you sure about this?” Dad asked.

“Absolutely—it’ll be great fun!” Linus answered. “And this is the fastest way into the Night Realm since those fun-spoiling guards take too much after their Director of Security.”

I zipped into the stable and was treated to the sight of Linus, Dad, and Fax.

The patient sun stallion was standing in the middle of the stable aisle, wearing only a halter as Linus steadied the step ladder he’d dragged up to Fax’s side.

Dad was balanced precariously on top of the step ladder, struggling to kick his leg over Fax’s back as he leaned on the sun stallion’s neck.

“*What are you doing?*” I said in my best angry teacher voice.

Dad and Linus froze, then guiltily looked over their shoulders at me.

Linus slapped a wide smile on his face. “Daughter!” He spread his arms wide. “I am ever so surprised to see you!”

“Because you were trying to get out of my reach before I caught up?” I asked.

Linus planted a hand on his chest and looked wounded. “Would I do a thing like that?”

“All the time!”

“We thought you’d like some girl time with your mom,” Dad grunted when Fax subtly shifted his weight, standing patiently even though Dad was still half draped on him.

“Yeah, I *bet* you did.” I narrowed my eyes at Linus, then shook my head at Dad. “Do you need help getting down, Dad?”

Dad looked at his leg that was caught on Fax’s rear. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

“Paul, you should know better,” Mom lectured as I rushed to the stepladder. “You haven’t ridden in years! You *drive* your horses!”

“Yeah, safety, Dad.” I tugged on Dad’s leg, helping him slide off the sun stallion.

“You don’t have much room to complain,” Linus said. “He’s wearing a helmet.”

Dad patted the black helmet. “It’s a bit of a squeeze, though. I can feel my forehead throbbing.”

Linus balefully eyed Paul. “If you wish for us to avoid trouble, I advise against willingly confessing our secret sins like that in the future.”

Paul grinned at Linus as he shimmied down the stepladder. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” Linus said. “A few visits and I’ll have you schooled up like a proper fae!”

“No, you won’t!” I said.

Paul gave me a wounded look. “Why not? Don’t you want your fathers to bond and get along?”

“Yeah, Leila,” Linus chimed in. “Why?”

I rubbed my forehead. “I don’t want you two getting along like *this*.”

“Hurtful!” Linus said.

“Exactly,” Paul added. He shook his head at me, then abruptly brightened. “Oh, hey! Now that Leila joined us, we can head back to the car so I can get those cupcakes Bethany made for you, Linus!”

I swung around to face my mom. “You made Linus *cupcakes*?”

“My famous carrot cake cupcakes,” Mom confirmed. “Why?”

“*Why are you making Linus food?!*”

“To thank him for the pictures he’s been sending,” Mom said.

“And for that calming potion he sent us to use on Bethany’s chickens when they were getting broody,” Dad added.

“Broody chickens are the worst,” Linus said.

I can’t keep up with my own parents.

I leaned against Fax’s round rear and felt tired. “The three of you are so weird.”

Paul picked up the stepladder and set it out of the way so he could lean in and kiss the side of my head. “And we all love you, pumpkin.”

I patted Fax and peeled myself off him. “Yeah, and I love you guys. So what are we doing during this Parents’ Night?”

“We?” Linus asked. “I planned to keep Bethany and Paul company while you continue to ignore family relationships and work-life-balance in the many hours you toil as Queen.”

“Stop teasing her, Linus,” Mom said. “If you make her upset Rigel will feel the need to do something about it.”

“Such a good son-in-law,” Dad said. “He also sends us pictures.”

I squinted at him. “When did you get Rigel’s number?”

“Ages ago,” Mom said.

“It was my doing,” Linus boasted.

Yeah. There’s no way I’ll ever be able to keep up with them. Even if I become the fae empress, I still won’t.

Feeling that it was better to just give in than exhaust myself with more protesting, I numbly grabbed Fax’s halter. “I’ll just go take Fax back to his stall.”

“And I’ll go get those cupcakes!” Dad said.

“I’ll go with you!” Linus volunteered.

“I’m going,” Mom countered before I could even open my mouth. “You need to go apologize to the chef, or we won’t be able to have tea or coffee with the cupcakes.”

Linus groaned like a teenager as Fax and I clip-clopped our way back to the stall. “Fine,” Linus said.

I shook my head as I opened the stall door.

My life had changed so much since I’d been crowned Night Queen.

And I didn’t regret a moment of it.

The End