

Fae are jerks.

They're deceptive, manipulative, and pretty much the worst—and I should know, because I'm half fae.

I had done my best to avoid the Fae and all of their petty court politics and scheming, but one hot June day I hopped out of my parents' house, and my life inescapably collided with fae, changing me forever.

The screen door thumped shut behind me, almost smacking my heels as I yanked on my paddock boots.

The horses neighed in the barn—demanding to be let outside.

"I'm coming! Hold your horses—or really, yourselves!" I laughed at my dad joke, stupidly carefree as I zigzagged across the lawn, which was still soaked with dew.

The morning air was so humid my hair—yanked back in a ponytail—puffed immediately, and already my jeans felt hot and stifling.

When I noticed Bagel had escaped to the second big pasture, I stopped by the wooden fence—its white paint was starting to peel a little, Dad and I would have to paint it again.

"Bagel!" I shouted to the miscreant donkey. "How did you get out? I chained the latch to your stall—have you figured out how to undo it already?"

Bagel swished his bony tail at me and flicked his enormous ears.

I squeezed through the wooden fence and was about halfway across the pasture before I noticed he wasn't alone. "You're not going out in this pasture today. I'm letting the horses loose in the first...pasture..." I trailed off and stopped walking.

Bagel peeled his lips back and smiled ridiculously at me, wholly unconcerned with the dark animal that stood behind him.

It'd be wrong to call it a horse, though it was equine in shape. It was skeletal—I could see every rib and its knobby spine stuck out on its back. Its neck was too thin, making its head appear abnormally large. It flicked its wispy tail—and its mane was just as thin and limp, though its coat looked crusty and dull. Pupil-less eyes that were a curdled yellow added to the animal's ghastly appearance, especially because it stared me down with the vicious intelligence of a fae creature. Obviously—there was no way this thing was natural.

"Oh," I exhaled deeply as I broke out in goosebumps. "You have a *friend*."

The fae horse snorted at me, showing the red of its nostrils and pulling its skin taut so I could see the lines of its skull.

Bagel—the idiot donkey—hee-hawed happily at me, then grabbed another mouthful of grass.

"It's fine. This is fine. I can totally get you safely out of here before your friend kills us both."

Bagel didn't look up from grazing, the gluttonous pig.

"I'm glad one of us is calm about this," I sourly said.

The fae horse took a step closer to Bagel, and my stomach belly flopped.

How am I going to do this? That thing looks capable of murder!

I studiously looked off to the side—trying to make myself appear unintimidating while still keeping the creature within eyesight in case it tried to harm Bagel. The donkey was the biggest pain on my parents' hobby farm, but I loved the fuzzy pain all the same.

That was how I saw the spiders.

They were gathering under the shade of the treeline that the pasture backed up into. They were a writhing mass of black, and each one was at least the size of a dinner plate with a bloated

body covered in a sort of hard shell and hairy legs that had more joints than they should have. Their eyes—all eight of them—glowed an unnatural neon green, and ooze that was the same green color covered their front fangs, which were as big and thick as my thumbs.

I'm enough of an animal person that I'd venture to call some spider species cute. These spiders, however, were bloodthirsty fae creatures through and through. And at their size, they wouldn't have a problem taking out my mom's chickens, or even one of our cats.

"Nope! Nope. Not happening." I glanced at Bagel's unlikely companion—it was just as creepy but mercifully *still* even though Bagel was now sniffing its thin tail. "Yep, the spiders are the bigger threat. It's time to prioritize!" I sprinted across the pasture and hopped the fence in record time. When I clattered into the barn the horses neighed their morning greeting, but I ignored them and grabbed the big shovel I used to clean stalls and the can of wasp spray Dad kept in the barn.

I was back out in the pasture before Bagel finished inspecting his friend's tail, stalking across the pasture after double checking that my jeans were pulled down, giving my legs at least a little cover.

I peered back over my shoulder at the fae horse, but it thankfully didn't seem inclined to move, even when I got between it and the treeline that shaded the spiders.

The spiders' oddly jointed legs made a clicking noise as they skittered in the shadows, crawling over what looked like a few dead animal carcasses.

I sprayed the underside of my shovel with the wasp killer, my stomach curdling with my nerves. A few of the spiders crawled towards me, their fangs parting in a sign of aggression.

That was enough to prod me into motion. "For the chickens!" I smashed my shovel into the two closest spiders and was incredibly relieved when I raised my shovel to see I had successfully flattened them. I'd been half afraid I wouldn't be able to kill them.

Two more rushed me, but I sprayed them with the wasp killer—I'd have to tell the guy at the hardware store that the can really did have the fifteen foot reach it advertised.

The sprayed spiders stopped and started wiggling out, waving their creepy legs and giving me enough time to smash them.

That became my pattern—spot a new target, spray it, and smash it.

I had to be fast. When I stopped to breath a spider actually reached me and tried to bite me, but it couldn't get me through my leather paddock boots, and I was able to crush it before it moved up my leg.

It seemed like there was *no end* of the spiders. More came out of the treeline, rustling leaves and clicking their legs as they rushed me.

Sweat dripped down my spine and made my shirt stick to me as I smashed spider after spider.

How can there be this many? I sprayed one spider, stopping it instantly, then smashed my shovel down on another, shivering when I heard the disgusting crunch of its abnormal shell. *And why are there here? Fae creatures don't usually venture outside the fae realm.*

I crushed the spider I had sprayed, then wiped my forehead off on my arm. *I should tell Mom to hire a pesticide company.*

Another three minutes of spraying and crushing, and the spiders finally dwindled.

The ground was gross, and the air had a disgusting, bitter scent to it.

I planted in my shovel in the ground and made a face at the gore. "One thing's for sure—I'm not letting the horses in this pasture until we get at least two rainstorms. Do you hear that, Bagel?"

I turned around to address the donkey, but he'd wandered off and was playing with water in the water trough up by the barn.

The fae horse-like animal, however, was where I'd left it. And scuttling towards it was a stray spider I'd missed.

I choked on my own spit as I snatched up my can of wasp spray and wrenched my shovel out of the dirt, then ran after the spider.

It didn't seem like the fae horse saw it—it was too busy glaring at me, its ears pinned to its skull as it made a very hoarse, bark-like noise that sounded pretty ominous.

“Spider!” I panted as I ran towards it. “Watch out for the spider!”

I was catching up fast, but the spider was almost to the nightmare, its nasty legs joints clicking as it hopped a few steps.

I shook my can of wasp spray and tried to aim for it.

The can fizzled, but nothing came out—I had used the whole thing.

Snarling in irritation, I threw the can and narrowly missed smacking the spider, but it veered to the side, giving me just enough time to raise my shovel above my head and smash down hard.

I felt it crunch. When I lifted my shovel a leg twitched, but the thing was clearly dead.

The adrenaline that had propelled me across the pasture in record time left as abruptly as it had arrived. I had just enough time to dig my shovel into the ground and then lean on it for support.

“I take it back. Mom needs to hire a pesticide company run by a *wizard!*” I wheezed and flicked my ponytail over my sweaty shoulder. “Or maybe we should just burn the whole treeline down. Talk about *creepy!*”

I shivered, but froze when I heard the muffled thump of a hoof stamping on the grassy ground. Slowly, I raised my eyes, and my stomach iced over when I finally noticed the fae horse had moved.

It was facing me head on, its eyes eerily shining as it tossed its head and showed the red of its nostrils. It pawed at the ground, and I swear the grass under its hooves turned brown and died.

Ah. It's mad.

Slowly, carefully I picked up my shovel—the can of spray was closer to the fae horse than I was, so I was going to have to abandon it for now—and I took a slow, shuffling step to the side.

The fae horse charged, rushing past me like a streaking shadow. It neighed, but the noise broke off into a piercing shriek that could have broken glass.

I heard the tell-tale click of spider legs, and I spun around just in time to see the horse-like creature savagely attack a giant spider that had been creeping up behind me.

But this wasn't a plate sized spider—oh no. It was much more horrifying given it was roughly as big as a Saint Bernard.

A few of the smaller spiders scuttled around it—probably the monster had laid its eggs in the treeline and I'd come outside just in time to discover them.

The spider stretched its fangs, trying to bite the attacking fae horse, but the equine reared up and slammed its front legs down on the spider's hardened exterior, forcing it to the ground.

The fae horse shrieked, revealing a mouth full of teeth that were much more jagged and sharp than any horse's, and clamped onto one of the spider's back legs. It whipped the massive

spider back and forth—lifting it off the ground even though the monster had to weigh nearly fifty pounds—then slammed it on the ground so it crushed its own offspring.

It did this twice, and once all the smaller spiders had been killed and the mother was half dead, the fae horse stomped the spider's front end into the ground.

As I watched in shock, Bagel marched up to me and began inspecting my pockets, looking for the carrots I usually gave him and the horses once they were turned out for the day.

The spider's bloated abdomen deflated as it died, and its legs spasmed a couple of times.

The fae horse pawed at the dead spider, sniffed it, then made that weird, hoarse barking noise again.

"I guess this solves where all those other spiders came from," I said with numb lips.

I should call the neighbors once I get this cleaned up. They had trouble with the fae Night Court last fall. Maybe the Night Court is starting something again...

The fae horse finally left the dead spider and slowly came back to me, stopping a few feet away and swishing its tail as it watched Bagel twine around me.

I looked from the crumpled spider carcass to the fiendish looking horse, my brain still trying to catch up with everything that had happened.

This... "horse" saved me from that spider. I didn't even hear it behind me—it must have been stalking me.

Cautiously, I pulled out half of a carrot from my front pocket. I fed a piece to Bagel, then slowly took a step closer to the fae horse and held out the remaining carrot chunk.

The fae horse was still for a long moment that seemed to last forever, then it crossed the space between us and picked the carrot off my palm with a muzzle that felt similar to a horse's, but was somehow rougher.

"You're a good boy—or a good girl? Doesn't matter." I smiled as the fae horse slowly swiveled its ears, listening to the sound of my voice.

"How'd you get out here?" I kept my voice soothing and quiet. "Did someone dump you off?"

It had happened before. There were some seriously irresponsible people out in the world. All of our barn cats had been tossed out of cars out by the road before we took them in. It wouldn't surprise me if a fae lost interest in its plaything and decided to dump it off in the country rather than act responsible and take care of it.

I mean, there was no way it was wild. I live in the Midwest, halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee. We don't have wild horses around here.

I grimaced as I saw the individual ribs in its side. "You need to put on some weight. Your owner half starved you." I fed Bagel another carrot, then offered another piece to the fae horse. "I'll get some hay for you—you deserve it after helping me out. Thank you."

The fae horse crunched on its carrot, and surprisingly followed after me as I headed for the barn.

It walked fast enough that it caught up and walked at my side, its head bobbing a little since it had a jolting walk.

I made myself breath normally as I slowly raised my hand and eventually brushed its neck with one figure.

The horse threw its head and shied to the side.

I calmly stopped, trying not to alarm it.

The fae horse arched its neck, but after a few moments passed it ambled up to me, blowing hot, almost sulfuric scented breath on my fingers as it sniffed my hand.

I held my hand up for better inspection.

Once the horse was satisfied it bumped my shoulder with its muzzle, then reclaimed its spot next to me.

This time, when I placed my hand on its neck, the fae horse shivered, but it didn't react.

I pressed my lips together. "Whatever was done to you, I'm sorry," I said. "Now, let's go get you that feed."

The horse made a noise in its throat that sounded weirdly like a chortle, but it didn't so much as flick an ear even when Bagel released his gusty, deafening hee-haw.

As I patted the horse, it didn't occur to me to be wary of it for any reason besides the possible physical threat it could be.

I'd never see a horse like it before, and with good reason. Almost no one outside the fae realm had ever seen a night mare before, so I had no way of knowing that its presence was a harbinger of the worst kind of trouble and misery I'd ever encounter.

For a second I wondered if she was going to kick me, and then I heard an odd thrumming noise.

An opaque shield made of pale-yellow magic snapped into place in front of Eclipse. Something small that glowed red hot slammed into the shield, producing a thundercrack that made my ears ring.

Eclipse shrieked a challenge, and the yellow of her shield grew stronger as multicolored lights crackled where the two forces collided.

Large letters of fae script burned into Eclipse's shield, and she reared up on her hind legs, striking out with her front legs as her skin pulled tight and I could see almost every bone in her body.

I don't know if I'm more surprised that something is attacking me, or that Eclipse has magic?

Apparently Eclipse wasn't alone in this rare ability. The other fae horses screamed and rearranged themselves, forming a protective ring around Bagel and me, and I saw flickers of yellow shields sprout in front of them.

Between their legs, I saw the round object Eclipse had block cool from red hot to a blackened orange color. It slid down the surface of Eclipse's yellow shield and fell to the ground with a *ping* my still-recovering ears almost didn't pick up.

The orange light—which I finally recognized as magic—condensed to a few swirly lines and wrapped around what a large, slightly smashed looking piece of metal.

It took me several long moments to recognize it was a *bullet*.

My stomach rattled in my gut, and I jumped in place when there was another odd thrum, and a second bullet slammed into Eclipse's shield.

I yipped like a startled down, but I finally recovered my balance enough that I hopped to my feet and peered over Eclipse's back.

The bullet had left a streak of magic in the air. Although it was faint and fading fast, it made it easy enough to draw line back to the shooter, who was hiding in a barely visible big tree that lined our driveway.

I yanked my phone out of my pocket and, with shaking fingers, got past the lock screen and tried to get to my contacts list.

That was when two brightly colored luxury cars pulled into the driveway.

When they drivers saw the fae horses, the magic, and me, they gunned it, almost ramming into the fence before they screeched to a stop.

By this point, there was so much going on, I didn't know what to feel, much less think. I should obviously be scared of whoever was trying to kill me, but what kind of idiots casually drive into live rounds?!

A guy in a suit, a woman wearing a layered dress that would have been more appropriate for a high school prom than my parents little hobby farm, and two guards hopped out of the first car. An older, distinguished woman aided by a guy in robes exited the second car with three guards shadowing them.

They must have really been squeezed in there.

"Stop—no, you can't! She's our queen!" The guy in the suit waved his hands at the would-be-killer hiding in the tree.

One of the soldiers pointed a glowing halberd at the wooden fence, then chopped through it with one strike.

"No—our fence!" I shouted as the soldier made an opening for the old lady—who was caring a pillow covered with black cloth. She and the guards hurried through, their faces pinching with disdain when they edged their way around a few piles of horse poop.

The shooter in the tree didn't give up at suit guy's frantic handwaving. Instead he released another shot, which the wonderful, fabulous, and amazing fae horses blocked again.

"What's going on?" I demanded to the old lady and her escorts. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"We are here to raise you out of this squalor," the old lady said. I wondered if she was half deaf and blind—she didn't blink even when another shot ricocheted off Eclipse's shield. "To a station beyond your imagination."

She was fae—only jerk-fae talked like that. Plus her slender build and beauty—which shone through her gray-ish white hair and the few wrinkles she had—made her a shoe in for the gorgeous liars of the supernatural world.

"Whatever fae Court—or *cult*—you're recruiting for, I'm not interested," I said.

"You have no idea who you're addressing, girl," the older woman said.

The lady in the fancy dress joined us, her expression the typical pinched look most fae wore in the human world. "The night mares have been searching for months and *this* is what they come up with?"

Nebula lunged at the fae woman and neighed so loudly I had to cover my ears.

The fae woman screamed and ran back across the pasture, fleeing to the cars.

I watched with a sort of detached interest—I was still trying to figure out if I should be terrified or amused in all of this.

“The night mares of chosen!” The older woman dramatically lifted her cloth covered pillow to the sky.

“The what?” I frowned. “Wait, do you mean the horses? Do *you* own them? Because, Lady, I am going to set the Curia Cloisters on you for abuse. Fae realm or not, the Cloisters will give you the smack down for abusing animals!”

Now it was the fae’s turn to look confused. “What is it you speak of?” She peered at me, the few wrinkles she had around her eyes creasing in her bewilderment.

I waved my hand at the fae horses, which were still gathered around me. “These guys—they’re starved!”

She sniffed. “Nonsense. It is merely that they have taken on the state of the court,” she said. “As the Night Court is unwell, so are the creatures embraced in its bosom.”

I rubbed my face. “I always thought the fae courts sounded like cults. Now I know they are—wait. Did you say *Night Court*?”

She lifted her chin up, shoving her nose even higher. “I did.”

I was an equal opportunity hater of fae, and I distrusted all of them. But there was one court I loathed more than any others, and that was the Night Court.

They’d caused a lot of trouble for my neighbors—whom I happened to like a lot—and they were also the court my useless bio father belonged to. As far as I was concerned, I never wanted to interact with a night fae if I could help it.

“Get out,” I said.

“You cannot mean—”

“Leave!” I narrowed my eyes and kept my voice firm and unwavering. “You’re not my guests, nor are you my family! You have no right to be here!”

Although I didn’t like fae, I didn’t believe in being ignorant when it came to them.

Since I was half fae there was always the chance one of the courts would randomly decide I *had* to join them—and the courts had almost absolute jurisdiction over all fae, half or otherwise. So I had learned what I needed to in order to protect myself.

The fae woman lost her superior look long enough to gape at me. “But, you’re the—”

Another bullet hit Eclipse’s shield and ricocheted off it with a crackle, bring an end to the fae horse’s patience. Solstice took off like a shot, Twilight on his heels.

They moved faster than any horse had a right to, and when they reached the wooden fence they jumped it, landing on the fancy cars and *denting* the hoods.

Suit guy squawked as they defied horse intelligence and ran up over the roof of the cars, hopping off the trunks—leaving scratches, cracked sunroofs, and dents in their wake.

Fancy-Dress lady screamed her head off in the car—I could hear her even though the closed doors and all the way across the pasture.

Solstice and Twilight reached the tree at the same time and made their weird, coughing bark noise at it. Twilight turned around and kicked at it while Solstice reared and struck the trunk with his front hooves.

The shooting stopped, but the horses seemed unable to shake whomever was attacking us out of the tree. Instead they settled for circling it like sharks, their eerie yellow eyes fixated on the now trapped assailant.

The fae dressed in robes had cowered behind a water trough as Solstice and Twilight thundered past. But once he was certain they were fixated on the tree, he scrambled up to us, his robes flapping.

Now that the older fae woman had given me their court, I could see the signs of their heritage in their skin and hair.

Most night court fae have copper toned skin—like me. Night Court nobility usually had extremely light-colored hair—pale blondes or even shades of gray or white—but a few family lines had dark hair.

I had inherited my black hair—which was so dark it almost had a purple tinge to it—as part of my fae blood since my mother had glorious red hair.

The skin tone and hair color aren't a certain guide—some fae do cross courts and join a different one than the one they were born into—but that's pretty rare.

The fae in the robes reached us and frowned so deeply it made his forehead wrinkle as he looked me over from head to foot. "*Her?*" he asked. "But she lives in the human world!"

"Yes, because I'm human." I folded my arms across my chest and eyed the duo.

"Nonsense," the guy said. "You have to be a full blooded fae—"

"So sorry, but I'm only half. Which means whatever you're here for, you're obviously mistaken. So buzz off." I made a shooing motion.

Robe guy gaped at me. "T-that's impossible! You can't be only half fae!"

"The night mares have chosen," the woman's expression tightened for a moment before she returned her expression to severe austerity. "We must crown her."

Crown me?

That didn't sound like anything I wanted to be a part of—I had made it my life's mission to avoid fae politics. There was no way I was letting them drag me into whatever they had planned.

"No, you are not," I said. "I already reminded you that you aren't my guests, so you have no reason to be here. Get. Lost." I pointed to their dented cars for emphasis.

Abruptly, the tree-assassin shot off another magical bullet at me.

Eclipse screamed and blocked it, but for a moment I saw terror on the robed guy's face.

That wasn't good.

In fact, that scared me more than the trigger-happy enemy in the tree.

Fae don't scare easily because for them *life* is all about backstabbing, manipulations, and machinations.

But if he was scared, that meant whatever was going on was ugly.

I opened my mouth to tell them off and harass them into going when the older woman abruptly whipped the dark cloth off her pillow, revealing a coffee mug sized bottle of an oily, dark blue substance.

She pulled out the glass stopper and she flung the contents of the vial at me, getting it all over my face, shirt, and hair.

It was laced with magic—I could feel the electric kiss of it everywhere the liquid touched me. The magic slipped down to my skin, burrowing deeper and deeper in an uncomfortable sensation I didn't like.

What did they do to me?

There was a thrum of another magical bullet going off, but as the oily blue liquid dribbled down my nose, the thrumming noise changed. This time, the bullet—which had always been

perfectly aimed for me—passed high above me, high enough that it didn't even clip Eclipse's shield.

Robed guy barely managed to contain his shiver, and gave the fae woman an affirming nod.

"Now," the woman said. "As I was saying..."

Dripping with whatever potentially hazardous liquid the fae lady had thrown on me, I ignored her and angrily wiped off my cellphone. I found the contact I was looking for, and pressed dial, waiting impatiently for the other line to pick up.

"Leila! What's up?"

"Hey, Hazel. Are you at Drake Hall right now, or House Medeis?" I asked. Since becoming engaged to Killian, the pair split their time between the vampire hall and the magical wizard house.

"We just arrived at Drake Hall today! Did you want to come over for dinner?"

"Thanks, but no. I could use a little help, though."

"Sure! What's up?"

"I have half a dozen fae at my house that have broken my horse fence, thrown some weird liquid stuff on me, and someone is shooting at my horses from the trees."

"KILLIAN!" The line cut off, ending the call.

I slowly exhaled and slipped my phone back in my pocket as I glanced at the house—grateful my dad hadn't emerged from his woodworking shop to investigate all the noise. It was fine. If I couldn't get rid of the fae on my own, Hazel and Killian would provide the extra...*motivation*.

"Okay." I put my phone back in my pocket and faced down the older fae woman and robed guy, barely able to keep my irritation in check. "I've been very clear that I want you to leave. As this land belongs to my parents, and none of us want you here, you have no right to be here."

The robed guy curled his upper lip at me. "You are mistaken—"

"Which is why," I kept on going, ignoring his interruption. "If you don't leave—*now*—I will call the Curia Cloisters *and* the human police to inform them that you're breaking cloister law."

It was a bigger threat than it sounded.

The only thing that united the supernatural community was a general wish for humans to *not* know about our darker sides. While we had revealed ourselves decades ago thanks to a bit of PR help from various movie, TV, and book genres, if humans knew just how terrifyingly powerful vampires really were, or how horrible fae were, or even how wild werewolves truly were, they'd freak and try to wipe us out.

Because of this, the Curia Cloisters came down *hard* on anyone that toed the line of conduct that would reveal the seedier underside of the supernaturals to the human public. And dragging in the human police as I had threatened would give the Magiford cops a front seat show to their bad behavior.

"Wait—you fail to understand!" Suit guy had left trigger happy assassin in the tree and came hurtling across the pasture. Even in this heat and with all the activity, his long hair—pulled back in a braid—was perfectly in place, and he didn't have a single drop of sweat on him. "You're our queen!"

I scrunched my eyes shut. "Your *what*?"

“You’re the new Fae Queen of the Night Court! There is supposed to be a ceremony as we anoint you, but it appears Lady Demetria was...overcome.” Suit guy glanced at the older fae woman.

She sniffed and stared at her now empty vial. “I would have, but she failed to grasp the severity of the situation and acted in ignorance. Typical human.”

“That’s right—she’s only half fae!” The guy in robes self-righteously shook his head. “She *can’t* be our queen. There’s never been a *half* fae monarch.”

Solstice and Twilight had apparently decided the shooter no longer was a threat, because they came wandering back to the pasture just in time to hear robe guy’s remarks.

As if he could understand, Solstice smacked the guy’s back with his massive head, sending him sprawling.

Blue Moon released a shrieking neigh that made everyone wince—except for me.

Normally I would have been grinning like mad, but my attention was focused on the no-longer-a-threat-shooter.

He’d dropped from the tree with the grace of a jaguar, but I knew before he’d straightened up to his full height that he was a fae.

His silvery-white hair was probably the biggest giveaway. It practically glowed in the hot afternoon sun, and it magnified the warm copper tone of his skin. He was devastatingly handsome, even though he was dressed in a dark jacket that was a nondescript shade of gray.

But what most interested me was the giant rifle he was toting, and his glowing dagger.

Suit guy followed my gaze and gulped. “Ahh, yes. Lord Rigel is here to *respect* your new station.”

Ahhh yes, the classic example of Fae manipulation. They can’t tell lies, so they just speak so vaguely you can’t exactly interpret what they say, leaving them free to mislead you because they didn’t *really* speak anything untruthful.

“He was trying to kill my horses,” I said. “That doesn’t sound like respect.”

“His target was likely *you*,” the fae lady—Lady Demetria, apparently—said. “It is because of my actions that he was stopped.”

“Yes,” Suit guy agreed. “Anointing you as our new monarch made it so a member of the night court cannot raise their hand against you.”

“If I’m his target, I really don’t know that I feel all that reassured by your guess that he can’t hurt me,” I said.

“It’s not a guess, it’s the truth,” Lady Demetria tiskied.

“If you say that, then I *know* I don’t feel like testing that guess,” I said.

I thought the guards might do *something* to the trigger-happy-fae-lord-assassin. Apparently, they were only for decoration. They bowed to him instead, and didn’t stop him when he walked off, heading towards the road.

“Are you seriously just letting him go?” I asked.

“He is Lord Rigel,” Robes said—as if that was even a half decent explanation.

I scooted deeper into the cluster of my fae horses, and was unspeakably grateful when Eclipse shuffled around so she could stand next to me.

“We still have not addressed the issue of her lineage,” Robes hissed.

“The night mares chose her,” Suit said. “We have no other options.”

I wiped blue oil off my cheek and rested my hand on Eclipse’s neck for reassurance.

Something happened to me, I decided. When I ran out to the road I was actually hit by a car. Or maybe I fell and hit my head, giving me a concussion. None of this makes sense or is at

all logical—me, a queen? And an assassin who waltz around in the daylight? I'm losing it—no, I've lost it.

“Regardless, we must take you to the Night Court,” Lady Demetria said.

I snorted. “Hard pass.”

“We insist.” Suits grabbed me by the wrist.

“Let go!” I yanked my arm free, but he just grabbed me again.

“We really have no time to waste,” he said.

“Indeed,” Lady Demetria said.

Robes tried to yank me across the pasture, but he severely underestimated the strength of a farm girl.

I dug my heels in, ripped my wrist from his grasp, and then kneed him in the gut.

He toppled like a tree, gasping as his eyes bulged in surprise.

I guess for all of their manipulations, fae don't fight dirty.

I wiped my hands off on my jeans. “Try that again, and next time I'll break your nose.”

“*You,*” Robes growled as he peeled himself of the ground, dead grass and dust liberally coating his clothes.

Eclipse charged him, stopping only when he jumped backwards.

“We do not intend to harm you,” Suits shouted.

“Then why don't you just say you *won't* harm me?” I suggested.

Suits gulped.

The lady in the prom dress who had run back to the car rolled down the window and shouted, “What are you waiting for? Drag her back!”

“Guards!” Lady Demetria shouted, proving my point.

“Yes!” Robes pulled out a red garnet bracelet from a pocket of his robe and brandished it at me. “We must take her regardless of her wishes—”

“Oh, you *must*?” Asked a sweet, clear, feminine voice.

Robes turned around—probably thinking to tell off the interrupter—but clamped his jaw shut and turned mute when he saw who it was.

A male vampire—lethal with dark hair and eyes such a dark shade of red they were almost black—was cradling a petite blonde who was roughly my age.

She held a ball of crackling electricity in her hand, making her black wizard mark appear, so the swirls crawled up the side of her face and down her neck.

The exact same mark appeared on the vampire's skin, telling the fae who they were dealing with.

Even if they had never seen this famous couple—unlikely considering the Night Court's dodgy history with them—there was only one vampire/wizard pair in the Midwest: Killian Drake—Eminent of the Midwest Vampires—and Hazel Medeis—Adept of the wizards of House Medeis.

The tension and fear that had been building in my gut left me with one great whoosh. “Thanks for coming.”

“Absolutely,” Hazel wriggled until Killian let her go, but even when she landed she didn't release her fizzing magic.

“It's the neighborly thing to do,” Killian said.

“Neighbor?” Lady Demetria croaked.

Killian raised an eyebrow. “Did you really come here to terrorize Leila, *not* knowing this land is next door to Drake Hall?”

The wobble in Robes' knees said they hadn't known at all.

"Now, let's get something straight," Hazel said. "You're going to explain what you're doing here and why you're manhandling our friend in the most succulent—*unembellished* way possible. Understood?" Her ball of magic stretched out, forming a sword made of magic.

Killian almost lazily withdrew a pistol from his suitcoat jacket, turning off the safety and wracking the top of the gun, loading a bullet. Behind him, at least a dozen vampires—all dressed in black and white suits and every last one of them carrying a bare blade or a gun, lingered around the faes' dented cars.

Suits cleared his throat. "Understood." He turned to Robes and Lady Demetria, but Lady Demetria was so afraid, I could almost *feel* her fear and Robes had collapsed to the ground on his knees.

Reluctantly, Suits faced me. "Er, it is as we started to say—you're our new queen. The Queen of the Night Court."

"How?" I asked.

Suits gestured to the night mares. "After a monarch and their partner dies, the night mares are released to search through all members of the night court and find the next ruler."

"It's not inherited by children?" Hazel asked.

"No." Suits deeply bowed to Hazel after quaking under Killian's red eyes. "In each new cycle, the nightmares choose the next ruler. That ruler chooses their spouse, who may co-rule if allowed, and otherwise will rule if the monarch passes away before them. Their children do not inherit the title or crown. Each time a royal couple dies, the cycle starts anew and the night mares find the next monarch."

"There's a few problems with that." I held up a finger as I started my list. "First of all, I'm not a member of the Night Court. I'm unpledged. Secondly, as I said earlier, I'm half human. I don't ever recall a case of a half human half fae ruler—in *any* court."

"One does not strictly *have* to belong to the Night court to be considered a candidate." Suits nervously eyed Eclipse as she pawed at the ground and gnashed her teeth together. "As long as you have blood from the Night Court, it's allowable. As for you being half fae..."

Comet snorted and reared up.

Suits flinched. "We crown whomever the night mares choose. There have been no exceptions since the founding of our court."

"That's nice. But there's the third problem: I don't *want* to be your queen." I tapped my third raised finger for emphasis.

Suits studied the ground with great care.

"Did you not hear her?" Killian asked with a dangerously pleasant voice.

"It's just...I'm not...it's not..." Suits gulped, then bent over in a bow to Killian. "The chosen candidate is not given a choice."

"I *what*?" I snarled.

"And Lady Demetria has already confirmed her as queen," Suits hurried to add—eager to throw someone else under the bus. "Since she was anointed she is officially the Queen of the Night Court. We'll have a ceremony where she can be sworn in in front of the whole court, but she's been marked with magic."

"She *flung* a bottle of mysterious liquid at me," I said. "That can't count!"

Suits returned his gaze to the apparently *fascinating* ground.

I shook my head, barely aware of Hazel when she approached me—still holding her magic-forged sword—and rested her hand on my shoulder. “No. No way,” I said. “You can’t just forcibly *make* someone your monarch—that has to be illegal!”

“Is the Paragon aware of your little...*expedition?*” Killian asked.

The Paragon was the most powerful fae in all of America. He didn’t belong to a specific court, and he was considered the national representative for all fae. Recently, I heard he’d been hanging around in the Midwest.

“Ahh, to an extent,” Suits said. “It was he who finally corralled the night mares after they’d run wild for so long so we could prepare them to choose the next monarch. He is aware we would soon be conducting the search, but we did not specifically inform him that the night mares had found a candidate and we were coming to anoint her.”

“Call him,” Killian ordered in a tone that offered no alternative.

“Ahh, yes. Yes, we should.” Suits frantically patted his suitcoat, eventually finding his cellphone. He tried to smile at us as he fumbled, searching through his contacts list. Eventually he dialed the right number, and I could hear the ringing noise that signaled he was making a call. He nervously switched the phone from one hand to the other, then brightened when the call connected. “Ah, yes! Greetings, Paragon—”

“*The number you are trying to call is not available,*” a tinny, female voice recited. “*Please try again at another time.*”

Suits ended the call with a swipe and laughed nervously. “It seems he is not answering his phone at this time.”

Hazel looked expectantly up at Killian.

“What?” he said.

“You try calling him,” Hazel said.

Killian’s eyebrow twitched. “You’re joking.”

“It’s for Leila.”

“He’ll never shut up about it.”

“It’s for *Leila*,” Hazel repeated. “She helped me when I needed it. You can put up with a clingy friend on her behalf.”

I’d never interacted much with Killian—even though I considered the Drakes to be great neighbors, I mostly saw his First and Second Knights, who were his second and third in command. But I’d heard enough rumors that even I was impressed with Hazel when Killian narrowed his eyes and got out his cellphone.

When he dialed the phone rang once before it clicked, picking up.

“*Killian! Such a pleasure to finally here from you, bestie. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten how to use a phone in your dotage. How are you? Did you have a fight with Hazel? Is that why you’re calling me? I am something of a romantic consultant you know.*” The speaker blared so loudly Killian actually held it back, away from his ear.

“If I had a fight with Hazel you’d be the *last* person I’d call,” Killian snarled.

“*You said you wouldn’t call me ever, too, and yet here we are! So, what did you do? Did you insult her House again? It’s not wise to insult sentient magical houses.*”

Killian closed his eyes, resembling a parent counting backwards so they keep their temper. “I’m calling because I’m standing on my neighbor’s lawn, staring down a few psychotic fae who are claiming she’s their queen.”

“It sounds like a cult,” Hazel shouted at the phone.

“Yes—thank you!” I swung around to scowl at Lady Demetria and Robes. “See, I’m not the only one who sees how creepy this is!”

“*What court are the fae from?*”

“Night Court,” Killian said.

“*Ew.*” The Paragon said. “*Omw.*”

“What does that even mean—Paragon?” When his screen flashed, showing that the call had been disconnected, Killian wordlessly squeezed the phone, making its plastic case creak alarmingly.

Hazel gave me one of her brightest smiles. “The Paragon is on his way. Once he’s here he can smooth everything out, I’m sure.”

Suits exhaled in relief. “Yes, good. The Paragon can explain things.” He actually offered me a slight nod and an even slighter smile.

I didn’t like that—any sign of relief from these crazies was a bad thing for me.

Suits straightened his jacket, regaining his confidence with every passing moment. “We can escort you and the night mares to the Night Court estate and—”

“Wait a moment.” I held up my hand to stop Suits. “With all of the bizarre stuff you’ve dropped on me, I almost missed it. Did you say these guys belong to the Night Court?” I waved my hand at the fae horses surrounding me.

“Yes.”

“And you supposedly ‘prepared’ them to come find me?”

“Yes.”

“And you let them come here looking like *this*?” I pointed to Eclipse.

Suits tugged at the white collar of his shirt. “Ahh, the nightmare’s outward appearance is a reflect of the court’s wellbeing. They might appear frightening, but—”

“They’re emaciated!” I shouted. “You can see her every rib! You *starved* her!”

“Um,” Suits said.

Unfortunately, it was then that my mom pulled into the driveway.

She stopped the car, and I could see her eyes flick from the dented cars—fancy-dress-fae-lady was still inside the car, looking petrified as a few of the vampires had taken it upon themselves to circle and stand *on top* of the car she was hidden in—to the well dressed vampires, to the fae standing in the pasture with me.

I scratched the back of my neck as I tried to figure out what I should say, but to my surprise she leaned back in her seat as if the display pained her, parked her car, then got out with a shaky smile.

“Is something wrong, Lelia?” she asked.

“Yeah, there’s been a huge mixup,” I said. “But Hazel and Killian are helping me figure things out.”

“There is no mix-up,” Suits said—he was starting to be a big pain. “You are our queen.”

I swung around to snarl at him. “*No*, I’m not!”

My mom clutched the shoulder strap of her massive purse. “I’ll go get Paul.” She disappeared around the corner of the house—heading for Dad’s woodshop.

Seconds later, a black SUV with tinted windows pulled into the driveway, rolling to a stop just behind the faes’ cars.

A back passenger door popped open, and an old man hopped out with a shocking amount of spryness.

The Paragon was the epitome of how a human would describe an elderly, aged fae. He had long, silvery white hair, a white mustache that drooped past his chin, spectacles with thin wire frames, and always wore some variation of silk robes. Today's were in muted forest green colors and were embroidered with gold leaves.

But it was that picture-perfect appearance that made me a bit wary. He appeared to be exactly what one would imagine, but it's been my experience that reality doesn't often match the imagination.

Still, he had a reputation for being remarkably good humored for a fae, and his short patience for his own people was legendary, so he had my approval—even though he didn't even know I existed.

The Paragon put his fists on his hips and beamed up at the cloudy sky. "What a fine day is it not, Hazel, Killian?"

"It is," Hazel agreed. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Of course!" The Paragon paraded across the yard. When he reached the fence he yanked his robes up—revealing knobby knees and skinny legs—and casually hopped over the fence despite his aged appearance. "It is always my pleasure to come to the rescue of my dearest friends!"

A wrinkle sliced across Killian's forehead. "Why did you arrive in one of *my* cars?"

"The fastest way here was to use my gate to your house," the Paragon said. "And though I will do much for you, I will *not* walk over here in this heat. One of your vampires agreed to drive me, and a delightful House Medeis wizard kept me entertained on the drive over."

"You have a gate that drops you on *my* property?" Ice formed at the edge of Killian's words.

The Paragon huffed. "Of course! Do you know what kind of a drive it is from Magiford out here? Annoying, that's what it is. I don't wish to waste my time, so I invested in making a gate so I can pop over whenever I want."

"That's a great idea!" Hazel said.

"No, it is not," Killian growled.

"Did you make a gate that can drop you off at House Medeis, too?" Hazel asked.

"I considered it since you two spend so much time there." The Paragon pushed his glasses further down his nose so he could peer at Hazel of the tops of the frames. "But you are located so conveniently in Magiford, it seemed excessive."

Hazel pressed her lips together in thought. "Really? Because I think—"

"The Paragon is here for your *friend*, is he not?" Killian said.

"Oh, that's right." Hazel grimaced, then came to stand by me.

Being even half fae gave me a real shot in my height, but I felt extra tall as Hazel—a particularly petite wizard—didn't even come up to my shoulder. "Paragon," she began, glancing curiously at one of the fae horses. Eclipse and the others had backed off a little, giving us space, but they stayed clustered around us. "This is our neighbor Leila—she helped me the day I took back my House from Mason and is a good friend of mine. These weird cultist fae are bothering her."

"We are *not* from a cult!" Robes muttered, his voice going higher and higher with every word.

"Wise and glorious Paragon." Suits, busting out his best manners for the occasion, bowed deeply to the Paragon. "We have found our new queen."

"And she's not cooperating," Lady Demetria added.

“Because I *can*’t be the next Night Court ruler,” I said. “I’m a *human*.”

“Half human, half fae,” Lady Demetria corrected—as if she was the expert on everything me.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I can’t be your queen—and I never would want to be, either!”

“The night mares chose you?” The Paragon asked.

“They did,” Suits chimed in.

“How do *you* know?” I asked.

“They are congregating here.”

“Yeah, because *you nutsos* are obviously terrible pet owners!”

“They marked you!”

“They’ve done no such thing!”

“Ah,” the Paragon said.

I turned to him, my spine stiffening with dread. “What?”

“They have, actually.” The Paragon tapped his forehead. “They marked you on the forehead with trace amounts of their essences. That is the sign of their approval.”

“How could they have marked me?” I asked. “I never felt anything...” I trailed off as I remembered how each of the horses had nuzzled my forehead after they first arrived.

“It would be hard to feel unless you are very deft at magic and have a proper artifact on you,” the Paragon said. “The night mares are fae creatures—they don’t use magic, they *are* magic. Marking you is a simple matter of shedding some of their essence on you.”

Mom and Dad came around the corner in time to hear the Paragon’s explanation, both of them looking a lot more worried and much less confused than I thought they’d be.

“Paragon.” Mom bowed her head in respect.

Dad was a second behind in copying her, but I was mostly shocked that Mom knew who the Paragon was.

I didn’t think they paid much attention to the supernatural community. I mean, I tried to stay aware of the supernatural community and fae politics—because my general wellbeing depended a lot on who was in power.

Unpledged fae like me, typically don’t last long. Usually a fae *has* to swear to a court because otherwise they’re easy pickings for any supernatural—fae or otherwise. There are deeper, longer lasting reasons, too. But the average fae is pretty low on power in the supernatural community pecking order, so a lot of Unpledged lived precarious lives.

Fae like to swindle humans into thinking courts exist to protect the different fae—because they couldn’t survive without the protection of their monarch. In reality, the monarchs *make* the courts a toxic and dangerous place, but given the back-stabbing nature of fae, it’s nearly impossible to exist without pledging.

I’m pretty sure I survived only as long as I did because I lived next to the Drakes, and because I’m half fae.

“Hello, and who might you be?” the Paragon smiled warmly at my parents.

“We’re Leila’s parents,” Dad said.

The Paragon blinked as he studied my clearly human parents. “Aha...is that so?”

“She’s my daughter from a previous marriage,” Mom said.

Lady Demetria sniffed. “And her father?”

“I’m her father. I adopted her,” Dad’s usual easy, warm smile was gone. Instead the slight downturn of his lips and his lowered, thick eyebrows gave him a watchful look as he moved closer to me.

He stopped to pet one of the fae horses or...night mares or whatever.

This elicited a mewl of alarm from Suits, but Comet—the night mare he was stroking—didn't even twitch a nostril.

"I see!" The Paragon's cheer was back. "What a quaint childhood here on a farm." He gestured to a few of my mom's black and white speckled chickens that had wandered over and were roosting on the lowest bar of the wooden fence. "Very idyllic, I'm sure."

"Who fathered her?" Lady Demetria interrupted, her chest puffed with self importance. Mom and Dad exchanged glances, and Mom's cheek twitched.

It struck me as a little weird—she hadn't ever given me the impression she hated my bio father. But *I* did, so I had never asked about him.

"He was a Night Court Fae," I said. "What's it to you?"

Robes finally picked himself off the ground and straightened his clothes. "If you have proper parentage then—"

"Parentage doesn't matter," the paragon interrupted with a cackle. "The night mares chose her, so Leila is the next monarch of the Night Court."

"I refuse my claim to the throne," I said.

The Paragon blinked. "You what?"

"I don't want to be the queen. Good luck in finding the next real monarch, and thank you for coming all this way to clear the matter up," I said.

"Leila..." My mom said.

"I'm afraid it's not a position you can refuse," the Paragon said.

"Of course it is." I tried to keep the veneer of good manners—it wouldn't do to anger the Paragon when he was my best bet at surviving this. "You can't *make* someone be a ruler."

"You were selected," the Paragon said. "The Night Court has no way to override the night mares' choice. You are the only option."

"Hear, hear," Lady Demetria said. "She's been anointed, too!"

The Paragon glanced at the blue stain the oil had made on my shirt. "Yes, I can see that. It looks like she was anointed in a very...*hurried* manner?"

"She wouldn't listen to me!" Lady Demetria grumbled.

It was in me to argue about freedom and personal rights, but I had a much faster—much more potent—argument up my sleeve.

"Except I'm half human," I pointed out. "Only full blooded fae become monarchs."

"Not necessarily," the Paragon said. "It's merely that there have *only* been full blooded monarchs. The option was always there—Europe and South America have each had a number of half-fae monarchs in their long and ancient history."

"Technicalities don't matter," I bluntly said. "The Night Court would *never* accept a half human monarch."

Suits's, Robes's, and Lady Demetria's silence was veery telling.

The Paragon made a few scoffing noises, and waved his hand—his attempt to deny my claim since he couldn't disagree, which would be an outright lie.

"Paragon," Mom said, drawing his attention. "Please."

"There *has* to be a way for me to refuse this," I said.

The Paragon scratched his chin and sighed. "I'm afraid not. It was recorded into the very foundation of the Night Court. *You* are the next queen. Whether you accept it or not."

No...he has to be wrong. They've overlooked me this long. My human blood should protect me!

Naturally, the superiority-complex fae would say that means I only have half of the power of a fae because my blood is “sullied” or something stupid like that. But really what it meant was a lot of the fae limitations and requirements didn’t apply to me.

I could totally lie—unlike all full fae—I was only half as rotten tempered, and I didn’t need to visit the fae realm to stay healthy.

That was probably the most dangerous fae limitation, actually—that in order to replenish their lifeforce, fae had to visit the fae realm...which was a toxic soup of deadly magic *except* in the lands owned by the courts—who kept the dark magic at bay.

It was also the long-term reason why fae had to pledge themselves to a court—to get access to the fae realm.

But I didn’t need to visit it, and between squatting at the edge of the Drakes’ property for safety and being only half fae, I was pretty safe as long as I kept clear of the fae in general.

My human blood had protected me for so long...this couldn’t be possible!

Eclipse bumped her head into my shoulder, using me as a scratching post.

I absently patted her neck and turned to my parents. “Mom, I...”

I trailed off, because Mom was crying.

There was a hopelessness in her eyes. She didn’t think we could fight this.

“Then the night mares chose wrong.” I turned back to the Paragon, loosing my forced politeness. “It’s just because I gave them carrots—I’m not—”

“It doesn’t matter *why* they chose you, Leila,” the Paragon gently said. “They marked you. They chose you as the ruler of the Night Court. No one can refuse or **** their choice. You were anointed, you *already* are Queen”

I shook my head, unable to accept it. Terror made my heart pound with so much force it felt like my ribcage was rattling.

If I was made Queen of the Night Court...they’d kill me.

It’d be a miracle if I survived a year.

The night fae would hate me for my blood, hate that someone who hadn’t even been *raised* as a fae was now their ruler, and that didn’t even account for the general nastiness and betray of regular fae politics! I’d spend the rest of my short life looking over my shoulder.

I was *doomed*.

Hazel took my hand and squeezed it, but I stared unseeingly at the leaf pattern in the Paragon’s robes.

“I understand,” my mother said, shocking me.

“Mom—we can’t accept this!” I started.

She ignored me and instead fixed the Paragon with a steely gaze I’d only seen her wear half a dozen times. It was her grimmest expression—the one she wore whenever things were bad and she knew we were in real trouble.

“Then I want you to *swear* that you will help my daughter—that you’ll show her how to be safe, and you’ll teach her all she needs to know to survive and be happy—as long as she feels she needs your help.”

The barnyard was silent.

It was a weighty promise. Fae couldn’t lie—and they couldn’t break promises. They got around that by making technical loopholes for themselves, but Mom’s demand was iron clad. It wouldn’t allow him to conveniently “forget” to tell me anything, and it would tie him to me until I was satisfied.

There’s now way he’ll agree to it, but how did Mom even know how to phrase that?

Robes puffed up like a roosting chicken. “How *dare* you make such demands of the Paragon—human! He—”

“I’ll do my best,” the paragon said.

My mom narrowed her eyes. “Swear it,” she said in a cold, clear voice that shocked me almost as much as her demand.

I stared at my mom, shock temporarily overriding my fear. This wasn’t my mom who made me cookies when I got home from school as a kid. This woman was a warrior. And—human or not—she was going to fight for me.

Suits, Robes, and Lady Demetria were practically shaking with anger.

The Paragon, however, glanced at the night mares. He studied them for several long moments, then swung his gaze back to my mom. “I swear I’ll show Leila how to be safe, and I will teach her all she needs to know to survive and be happy as the Queen of the Night Court, as long as she feels she needs my help.”

He had fitted a bit of a loophole in there—he’d said he’d help me as Queen of the Night Court, not myself. But I could work with that—it was being queen that was going to endanger my life. And I was still just shocked he’d made the promise.

Mom nodded, and the edge that had sharpened her disappeared as her eyes turned glassy with tears and Paul put his arm around her.

The Paragon awkwardly scratched the back of his head. “Arrangements will have to be made for you to move to the mansion that belongs to the ruling of the Night Court monarch. I imagine there is much you don’t know, so we had best start immediately—”

“A week,” I blurted out. “Give me one week here at home, first.”

Lady Demetria huffed. “You are our Queen! It is your duty to take up your position!”

“I’m certain this has been a surprise,” the Paragon said. “We can give Queen Leila a week.”

“But, Paragon!” Robes scowled at me. “Our court is already in such a dire condition! We need our Queen—”

“It’s been months since Nyte died and you survived this long,” the Paragon said. “You can survive another week. She deserves a chance to prepare herself.”

He glanced pityingly at Mom and Dad.

I, however, stared at the line of gun wielding vampires lining my driveway, the wheels in my mind turning. “Yes, thanks,” I said.

“This will also give the court a chance to prepare and gather in welcome for you.” The Paragon tried to scratch his chin, but his fingers got tangled in his long mustache, and he grunted in pain when he tried to pull his hands free and instead yanked his head forward.

“I’m sure they’ll welcome her with open arms,” Killian said in a voice sharp enough to cut through cement as he stared Suits, Robes, and Lady Demetria down.

That suitably cowed the trio, and brought another sort of stillness to the pasture.

“Right,” the Paragon said. “Well, then, Killian—what say we retire and each get a pint?”

Killian pointedly glanced at the sky—which was still cloudy, but showed patches of bright blue. “I did not peg you as a day drinker.”

“You thought I was referring to alcohol? Gross—no.” The Paragon shivered in revulsion. “I meant ice cream! We can go to my private study—I have a pint of Sinfully Dark Chocolate and Caramel Peanut Cluster. Hazel, if you like I can have Aphrodite pick out a tea for you.”

“No thank you,” Hazel firmly said.

The Paragon jutted his lower lip out in a pout. “You never let me serve you tea anymore.”

“That’s because you *drugged* me the last time I did!” Hazel said.

Suits turned to the night mares. “Shall we attempt to bring them back—”

The closest horse—nebula—trumpeted her glass-shattering scream at him and reared up. I swear the red hairs mixed in her black coat glowed as she tossed her head.

“It seems the night mares shall remain with the Queen.” Suits rapidly backed up, stopping only when his back hit the fence. “We shall leave, and begin preparations.”

“I’m sure you will,” Hazel scoffed. She peered up at me, concern darkening her usually bright face. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I admitted as the Paragon continued to bicker with Killian, and the other fae cleared out. “But it seems like I’ll have to be—unless I can find a way out of it once I get there.”

“If you need anything, just call me,” Hazel said.

“Thanks. Actually, I do want to ask you about something, but that can wait until tomorrow.” It was hard to swallow when I looked away from Hazel and glanced at my parents.

Hazel stood on her tip toes so she could hug me. “I understand. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She was gone before I even thought to hug her back, vampires flanking her as she marched up to the waiting SUV.

Killian followed her, and the Paragon trailed after him.

My unwanted fae invaders seemed inclined to hang around...until they realized that none of the vampires had left with Killian, and all of them were stationed in the driveway, bearing weapons of different shapes.

That got the fae piled into their dented cars awfully quickly, and as soon as they disappeared down the driveway and hit the road, the vampires bowed to me and then streaked off, returning to their land and leaving me, Mom, and Dad alone.

It had taken seconds to change my life forever. It seemed weird that “normal” could return so quickly...even if it was only momentarily.

“Oh, sweetie,” Mom said, her voice crackling.

She and Dad swept me up in a hug, as if they could hold me together while my world fell apart.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I whispered. “Can I run?”

“You’re anointed; they’ll find you wherever you go,” Mom sighed.

“You’ll make it, Leila,” Dad said with a confidence I wish I felt. “The Night Court has no idea what its in for with *you* as it’s Queen!”

Mom agree, but my mind screamed the truth.

Being Queen? It was going to get me killed.