

A New Year's Celebration
A Court of Midnight and Deception short story
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“Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoy the party—I mean ceremony.” I tried to smile in a queenly manner at the Day Court nobles who were bowing to me.

“Indeed, we shall,” one of the nobles said. “It is always a blessing to bask in your presence, Queen Leila.”

I had to stifle the desire to awkwardly scratch the back of my neck. “Great. Glad to hear that.”

Normally I would have thought that was a bit of fae wordsmithing, but the truth was the Day Court had turned into a bunch of saps ever since Solis came clean with his Court way back when we captured Angstra and Manith.

Not that I minded! It was just sometimes their admiration made me feel really, really, *really* awkward.

Rigel handled it better. Or, really, he handled it the way he handled almost everything Court-related: with no reaction at all.

The Day Court nobles turned to Rigel—who stood so close to me his shoulder brushed mine. “And we greet you, noble King Rigel, as well. May the heavens shine down upon you with blessings on your marriage.”

See? *Awkward!*

Rigel stared at the fae, who were beaming at him like proud parents.

“Er, right.” I cleared my throat. “If you’ll excuse us, there are more guests we should greet.”

“Of course, of course! We look forward to your greeting of the new year, Queen Leila!” They sashayed off with a lot more bobbing and bowing than was necessary, and I waited until they were out of hearing before I let out the breath I was holding.

“Wow. Let me tell you, this is only the second one of these pointless ceremonies I’ve thrown, but I can already tell this year is going to be really different than the first year—and not just because you’re actually here this time,” I said.

Rigel ignored the faun from the Summer Court who was staring at him with wide eyes that bordered on hero worship and turned his back to the line of guests. “I have already vowed to be at every ceremony hence forth.” He took my hand and threaded his fingers through mine.

“Which I’m really grateful for,” I assured him. “I didn’t mean it as a criticism, actually. It was supposed to be an observation of how your mere presence can inspire a great atmosphere.” I winked at my husband. “It’s the charm of your taciturn personality.”

“It’s better than being admired for my abs, I suppose,” Rigel said.

I grinned at him as I played with some of the charms hanging from my belt.

Indigo had really leaned into the Day Court/Night Court theme of the party and had dressed me in a beautiful sapphire blue gown studded with fake gems that were bespelled to

sparkle like stars. A leather belt draped with golden suns and bronze stars cinched around my waist, holding in place a veil-like overskirt that was dyed blue, purple, orange and gold to resemble the sky shifting from night into day.

The dress was gorgeous, but I was mostly thrilled I'd talked Indigo into using cheap fake gems instead of the real thing. (Yes, it was over a year and a half into my reign and the Night Court was *still* broke. Debt like what Queen Nyte had gotten us into was going to take a while to crawl out of.)

Farther down the line, Solis greeted more guests. "Welcome, welcome!" Solis boomed in his warm, joyful voice. "We're so happy you're here!"

I watched him with a fond smile as he beamed at the long line of attendees. "Solis seems even happier this year—which is saying something, because last year he was so thrilled he would have worn out his smile if he had a personality that was even a tiny bit less sunny."

Rigel studied the Day King. "He has many reasons to be happy."

I smiled and sagged against Rigel's chest. If we'd been alone I would have kissed him, but in a roomful of fae? Not happening. (He snuck a kiss before this year's Magiford Midsummer Derby and all the Night Court fae in the area started clapping. I just about died from embarrassment.)

"We have more guests this year," I observed. "I think most of Chase's pack came, again. We'll have to see if we can get them to do some karaoke again this year."

Since Solis and I were stuck observing this stupid ceremony, we'd decided to make the celebration as fun as possible.

Though, I'll admit, the actual ceremony was kind of cool. At sunset—which was in about ten minutes, so we'd have to get moving—Solis and I stood in this giant ballroom he had in his mansion (why were ballrooms such common features in monarch households?!) which had huge windows that overlooked the western horizon.

As the sun set, Solis had to sing a song—he had a really nice voice so it was soothing to listen to—and go down the stairs of this little temporary dais he'd set up for the occasion, while I climbed the stairs on the other side and then officially welcomed the new year.

After that we had karaoke; some human movies running in a few different rooms as my Court had spread their love of human forms of entertainment; bowling, because I once took Solis bowling when we had a Night Court outing and then he decided he *needed* a bowling alley in his house (seriously, HOW DOES HE HAVE THIS MUCH MONEY?!); photo booths since recently the fae had gotten obsessed with social media and taking selfies; so much good food I'd be in pig heaven all night and—most importantly—a full service coffee/espresso bar attended to by Rhonda and Landon from Queen's Court Café!

I smiled at the next cluster of guests who were waiting to greet us—a bunch of Autumn fae, who looked like they were trying to decide if they should bow to us or be snotty like their dear monarch—who'd almost gotten peed on by a shade when he told me I had no class upon his arrival.

I chuckled at the thought as I waited for them to decide how to act.

“It seems the party will be predominantly fae—with some werewolves,” Rigel observed.

“Yeah—it’s because of the Curia Cloister party,” I said. “I’m still miffed at Killian.” I adjusted the shawl Indigo had given me to serve as my wrap for the evening—it matched my colored overskirt. The wrap wasn’t strictly necessary since Solis heated his mansion like a man with a vaultful of money to burn.

“Why?” Solis asked.

“He banned Hazel from coming,” I said. “She has to attend the Curia Cloister’s party, but she figured she’d go super early for just half an hour like I did and then come over to our party,” I said. “Killian told her she couldn’t. He said something about me corrupting her—I have *no* idea why he’d think that...”

“I CAN TASTE COLOR!” Verdant toasted her coffee drink above her head. I was pretty sure that was her second red eye—a coffee/espresso drink.

“Paint with ‘em!” I held my own drink—my second macchiato, but this one had four shots of espresso—up in a salute to my fellow monarch.

Fell was dancing with a surprising amount of abandon as he finished off his umpteenth caramel frappe—he’d fought me *so hard* in trying it, but who looked stupid now? Hmm?

I bound past him—I was aiming for the werewolves who were holding a competition to see who could stuff the most scones in their mouths—but skid to a stop when I saw Rigel.

“Rigel! Hey, Rigel! Hey.” I had to reach up to throw my free arm over his shoulders. “You know, this is the first time I think I’m going to successfully stay up for the *whole night* so I can greet the first sunrise of the new year!”

Rigel wasn’t listening—killjoy. He was too busy staring at my almost empty drink. “How many coffee drinks have you had?”

“Not enough.” I took a noisy sip. “My blood isn’t solid caffeine.”

Rigel took my hand—which was sweet—until he pushed my bracelets back and I realized he was checking my pulse.

“Whatcha doing?” I asked.

“Making certain your heart isn’t about to explode,” Rigel said.

“You’re too calm. You should try some more drinks!” I wisely advised. “Thankfully Rhonda doesn’t have any super embarrassing names for them this time—she said it would be too confusing. So! What kind do you want?”

“I’ll pass,” Rigel said. “Some intelligence must remain in a group this large—in case of an emergency.”

“Oh come on, it’s just the wonders of caffeine!”

Rigel eyed me as he side stepped a bumbling troll who was carrying a thermos of coffee that was the size of my head.

“This is a *real* celebration of the Night Court,” I said. “Everyone is embracing the thing I love most, coffee. Well, it’s the thing I love most *after* you.” I slickly winked and pressed my palms against his chest. “But I’m not willing to share you.”

“How gratifying,” Rigel said.

“Hey, Azure, where you going?” I called to my chauffeur as she made a beeline past me.

“Out for a jog,” she called. “I feel as though I can run five miles!”

I toasted her with my drink. “Now that’s the power of espresso!”

Eventide frolicked around behind her, waving a little Night Court banner. “My Sovereign—I finally understand why you claimed a lack of coffee would eventually ‘slay’ you!”

“Right?” I called. “Nobody lives forever!”

I laughed as Eventide and Azure pressed their way through the crowd.

“I suppose I ought to congratulate you,” Rigel said. “This is the first time I’ve seen such a massive group of fae all trash their health together in one evening.”

“Coffee,” I said wisely. “Actually, no. Scratch that. It’s the espresso. We had coffee last year and it wasn’t quite as much fun as this year! Adding in espresso drinks and hiring Rhonda and Landon was sheer *brilliance!*” I sagged against Rigel. “I can feel my heartbeat in my mouth.”

“You and everyone you’ve corrupted with your coffee drinks will pay heavily for this once morning comes,” Rigel said.

I sniffed and stuck my nose up in the air. “Yeah, we’ll see about that!”

“It’s not fine,” I groaned. “It’s not even *close* to fine.”

I glared at the bright, midmorning sun and felt approximately a hundred years old.

As I’d predicted, everyone made it to dawn. And then about forty minutes after we came down from our caffeine high.

As a caffeine veteran I wasn’t feeling *too* terrible. I was just thirsty enough to chug several bottles of water, but I was so tired I would have given away my French press at my mansion just to take a nap.

“I warned you.” Rigel nibbled on a breakfast sandwich the brownie caterers had made since most of the party attendees were still hanging around—they were nursing headaches or passed out on couches.

“Yeah, well, the fae drink so much tea all the time, I didn’t think espresso would affect them so badly.” I scowled—more on the principle than because I was actually upset.

I crouched down to pull a blanket up over Verdant, who was leaning against Consort Flora. The duo looked beautiful—all delicate in their fancy dresses and curled up on the couch together. Except it turned out Flora was a *huge* snorer. I was impressed it didn’t wake up Verdant.

“Do you plan to repeat this madness next year?” Rigel asked.

“Heck yes,” I said. “We’ll just have to be smart about it.”

“Imbibe in limited quantities?”

“No! We’ll have to have a table full of potions we can swig through the night to mitigate the after effects!”

Rigel released a puff of air—which was his version of a deep sigh. “I shouldn’t have expected any less.”

I grinned up at Rigel. “Admit it, despite all the hyped up nobles, it was fun.”

Rigel waved at Chase—another party killjoy, though he’d fed me the excuse of *‘being unable to join as it was his responsibility to work’*. “It was an experience.”

I made a noise in the back of my throat, but when I took a step forward and felt a little whirl of dizziness the noise of skepticism became a moo of distress.

Rigel easily caught me, scooping me into his side to stabilize me.

I was plastered against his side, but I felt a suspicious thrum in his chest that I only feel on the very rare moment he’s about to laugh. Surprised, I peered up at him.

He was staring at me, one of his slight but dangerous-for-my-health smiles curving his lips. “And it had its moments of joy.”

“Huh?” I intelligently said.

Rigel bent over so he could whisper, his lips brushing my neck. “Happy New Year, Leila.”

I made a big show of peering around the room—Chase was the only one awake, he was checking on a few Night Court nobles—then I stood on my tip toes. “Happy New Year, Rigel.” I kissed him, leaning heavily against him so he could take more of my weight as I fought to keep my head at the intensity of our kiss.

I heard a feeble few claps and the click of a camera and I broke away with a squawk.

“Our monarchs!” a Night Court siren gave me a feeble thumbs up as he held his smartphone with a trembling hand.

“Such romance,” mumbled a pixie nestled in the siren’s hair.

I beat a hasty retreat from the room, but Rigel’s laughter—deep and addicting—followed me out.

Happy New Year, indeed.

The End