

## Bowling Alley Romance

### A Court of Midnight and Deception Short Story

By K. M. Shea

“Strike! Yes—take that!” My Sovereign, Queen Leila of the Night Court, punched her fist into the air and swung around to face those of us seated in the wobbly chairs surrounding the computer that organized our bowling game.

I clapped obligingly and crossed my legs—happy that I’d worn trousers like my queen—who was wearing human casual clothes with her dark jeans and purple sweater. “Nicely dealt,” I said.

Skye—who sat next to me and was tapping her fingers furiously on her tablet, looked up for the first time since she’d chucked her bowling ball down the lane two turns prior. “As Lady Chrysanthe said, well done.”

“Thanks! I have to start with a splash.” Leila tossed her head, making her black hair that was pulled into a ponytail sway. “That’s my first strike of the night—but it won’t be my last!” Her purple eyes glowed with happiness in the dimness of the bowling alley, and around us the Night Court cheered, nearly shaking the already crumbling building until Leila motioned for silence.

A smirk slipped across Leila’s lips as she wriggled her eyebrows at the Court. “It’s fine.”

The Night Court cheered again and stopped only once Leila laughed and slapped her knees. “Rigel, bae. You’re up!”

Our king held a bowling ball—which was very fittingly black. Though by the way he held it I wasn’t sure if he meant to throw it down a lane or use it to bludgeon someone.

I glanced up at the television screen—which displayed a picture of dancing bowling pins with cartoonish faces before it faded to our score sheet.

*I went just before Leila, which means—if I recollect the rules of this game correctly—that I don’t have to go for a while.*

I twisted my fingers together as I stood up and looked around the darkened bowling alley, searching for a particular someone.

I spotted him—he was standing on the upper level of the bowling alley by the concession stand and the shoe rental counter, talking to three soldiers.

I glanced at my “team,” which consisted of myself, Indigo, Skye, Azure, Rigel, and Leila, then slowly drifted away, climbing the stairs.

The carpet—black with lime green and neon pink stars emblazoned on it—was so worn it was slippery in my smooth-bottomed bowling shoes, which smelled like must and cleaning spray.

I waited until the guards saluted Chase and strode off—it looked like they were reinforcements for the guards already posted at the doors—before I approached the werewolf Chief of Security.

Chase’s yellow eyes glinted when he glanced at me, the dark color of his uniform a complement to his sepia-colored skin, and his hair—which always held the hint of dense curls despite the short haircut he opted for—was a tiny bit longer than usual. “Chrysanthe.” He slid his arms behind his back and nodded to me.

“Hello, Chase. How is everything?”

“Safe,” Chase said. “The owner was not pleased that I strongly requested one of my men be allowed in the surveillance room, but after meeting Guard Brokken he seemed to accept the idea.”

*Considering Guard Brokken is a troll who is possibly twice as tall as I am, I can't say I'm surprised. But, judging by the spark of humor in his eyes—even if he's not smiling—Chase knows that as well, and finds it amusing.*

“I'm glad he proved amiable,” I said.

Chase slightly tipped his head and said nothing more.

I stood next to him, feeling awkward as I laced my fingers together and watched the bowling games.

The clatter of falling pins, the low rumble of rolling balls, and the Court's laughter filled the dingy building, but not so much I didn't hear Lord Linus where he was standing at concessions, waiting for the basket of chicken wings he'd ordered.

“The next bus trip to Timber Ridge is next week Tuesday,” Lord Linus said.

“Splendid—I'd like to purchase five tickets,” Lady Moonflower said.

Lord Linus shook his head. “No can do. I'm almost sold out, there's only two seats left.”

“Sold out? *How?*”

Lord Linus held his hands out and wriggled his fingers in excitement when the chef—who appeared tired and a little grumpy having cooked for four of our Court bowling nights over the past year, while his wide-eyed assistants, two teenagers, hadn't previously had the pleasure—ambled up to the counter bearing a red plastic basket of chicken wings liberally doused in sauce.

The chef handed the wings over and Lord Linus beamed at Lady Moonflower. “I assume what you meant to ask was how could this next tour already be near maximum capacity when I only announced it was open just before we all left for this delightful time of merriment here at this quaint bowling alley? Please allow me to assure you that you will understand the demand for the bus tour when you set eyes on Timber Ridge.”

Lord Linus grabbed a wad of napkins, then wandered towards the set of stairs directly in front of Chase and me, Lady Moonflower trailing behind him.

“But, in the meantime, I shall paint a picture for you,” the honored fae lord continued. “Imagine this: a charming town that contains a candy shop filled with human sweets, a café where one can be served by actual werewolf hunters in their hunting gear, and a welcome center filled with adorable wolf merchandise, including print photographs of our very own Chief of Security: Chase Washington.”

I glanced over at Chase, curious to what his reaction would be.

Chase blinked and showed no outward reaction to the conversation.

Lord Linus wasn't done, yet. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he added, “That doesn't even touch on the idea that you get to tour the town responsible for the work ethic and advanced abilities of our Chief of Security—and even see the mini golf range where he learned his advanced skills we have no hope of ever matching. Moreover, a good portion of the city is filled with handsome and/or beautiful but unreasonably athletic werewolves to gawk at...”

Lord Linus' voice was soon lost in the hum of Court conversation. For me, anyway. I was fairly certain Chase could still hear him.

I studied Chase's yellow eyes—which methodically scanned the room.

“Does it bother you that the fae see Timber Ridge as a tourist destination?”

Chase stopped his constant scan and dropped his eyes to meet mine. “Not particularly,” he said. “It doesn't harm anyone. Queen Leila is overjoyed about it because it provides another

Court activity that she doesn't have to pay for—though I am surprised she has not realized she could get in on Lord Linus' business if she asked.”

“But what about your Pack?”

“My Pack?” Chase repeated, a note of confusion in his voice.

“Won't they be bothered by it?”

“Ah, you are referring to the Northern Lakes Pack,” Chase said. “My werewolf Pack. Not our Pack.”

I felt a blush heat my cheeks.

I was overjoyed that Chase considered me—and others from the Court, like Queen Leila, of course, and Lord Linus—Pack. Though I wasn't entirely certain if being “Pack” would help or hinder my dream of establishing a relationship with him. One of a romantic foundation.

Pip—who belonged to Chase's werewolf Pack—had told me she believed Chase cared for me in that kind of way, but I hadn't witnessed anything to support such a claim and was more than a little discouraged.

Chase glanced at Queen Leila, his posture relaxing when he saw her seated with Rigel, the ex-assassin's arm draped over her shoulders.

“No, the Northern Lakes Pack won't be bothered,” Chase said. “Quite the opposite, I imagine. It's a new market to sell products to. They wouldn't be so welcoming to the fae otherwise. Especially now, while Alpha Greyson is busy keeping the Pack safe and in control while all the other foolish Alphas make an attempt to lure Pip away—as if she would leave the Pack.” He glanced at me again. “At least...I assume my werewolf Pack was welcoming to you?”

“Very,” I said. “Even when we took the first tour bus. They're a joy to visit. They've started stocking some loose-leaf teas, which has delighted the Night Court.”

“Good.”

Together we watched the games in silence for several moments.

Normally, this would have made me think he no longer wished to talk to me and that I should leave, but I'd grown bold since my association with Pip, who made a good coach on werewolf psychology.

*Pip would say wolves are content to sit in silence. So I should sit.*

“I am confused, however,” Chase said, breaking the silence and startling me from my thoughts. “As to the reason for the Night Court's fascination with Timber Ridge, when there are other similar tourist towns that are easier to reach.”

I frowned a little. “The Night Court doesn't like Timber Ridge because it's a good tourist city,” I said. “It's because it's where you grew up.”

Chase scratched his jaw. “That interests them?”

“Of course,” I said. “You're beloved by the Court. It's natural we'd be curious about where you grew up.”

“Is that why you went with Linus when he took a message to the Pack at the end of summer? Because I'm...beloved?” Chase stared unabashedly at me with no embarrassment at all. If anything, he seemed puzzled.

I wanted a night mare to show up and portal me away. Ideally to the outside where I could stick my head in a snowbank and scream.

*But, I must embrace the shame! This is a chance to speak my feelings—I can have courage!*

I cleared my throat and hoped my blush was a fetching pink and not blazing vermillion. “Yes, I wanted to see Timber Ridge because you are important to me.” My lips felt numb with anxiety, but I forced more words out. “I like you.”

I stared at Chase, expecting some kind of reaction.

I’d seen enough human films with Our Sovereign to know that ‘I like you’ was a magical phrase humans uttered to convey their feelings.

I’d assumed Chase—having once been a human before he became a werewolf—was familiar with this tradition. Judging by his small nod and the way he went back to scanning the bowling alley, he was not.

*Perhaps he is aware of what the phrase meant, and he’s just choosing to ignore it to not hurt my feelings.*

I tried not to shrink in on myself—fae do not cower when faced with defeat. I’d just have to regroup with what remained of my dignity and try again at a later date.

I held in a sigh and glanced at my bowling team, frowning when I saw that Rigel was going again.

*That means Leila must have just gone, but I was supposed to go before her. I am surprised Skye did not text me to let me know it was my turn.*

As Rigel tossed his ball down the bowling lane—which seemed dangerous and not quite how one was meant to bowl, but I was hardly an expert in the matter—Queen Leila happened to turn around in her seat and look back, her eyes meeting mine.

She grinned widely at me, her gaze flicking from me to Chase, then back to me. She gave me a thumbs up.

I stared at her, trying to wordlessly communicate that I was requesting backup with my eyes.

She adjusted her ponytail and the smile started to fade from her lips, until she glanced at Chase and her expression grew into a smirk.

Before she could give me any more encouraging motions, King Rigel settled down next to her and she turned to him with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

I pressed my lips together and wracked my brain for a way to graciously leave.

*I can’t say I need to get back to the game for my turn—that’s too close to a lie. What straddles the line that is somewhat excusable? That perhaps the others need me?*

“Can I buy you something to eat?”

I almost jumped I was so surprised by Chase’s sudden question. My eyes widened as I stared up at him. “Aren’t you on duty?”

“Ah.” Chase rubbed the back of his neck, and a tiny quirk of a smile briefly settled on his lips—which was enough to make my toes curl in my musty bowling shoes. “No, actually. Queen Leila made me promise to attend as a member of the Night Court and not actively patrol—she said she might need my bowling skills to pinch hit.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I knew Chase—despite having the strength of a werewolf—was a veritable whiz at mini golf and bowling due to growing up with Pip, who frequently settled arguments with sports, so Leila was likely referring to some sort of human sports jargon.

“I decided to come in uniform, just in case,” Chase continued. “But, strictly speaking, I am a mere citizen of the Night Court tonight.”

“You could never be mere,” I said. The words popped out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying.

Chase raised an eyebrow at me, then turned in the direction of the concession stand. “Then, is there anything you’d like?”

As a fae, it was my first impulse to refuse—taking gifts from fae is a risky thing, even for another fae.

But something Pip had told me when I’d last seen her stuck with me...

*“Buying you lunch like this is the subtlest way he can attempt to care for you. A werewolf is driven to protect and serve those he loves.”*

Hope bunched up in my throat, making it hard to swallow.

*I’ll do it. And if he’s only caring for me now as a packmate, that’s a fine start. I can progress from there.*

“Is there something you recommend?” My voice cracked with my nervousness. “I haven’t eaten at a bowling alley before.”

Chase watched the chef pass off a basket of fries to an excited brownie. The basket was bigger than the brownie’s head, but he carried it off—his bowling team cheering for him as he tottered in their direction.

“I’ve been told the Bavarian pretzels are especially good here,” Chase said. “But—being a wolf—I’d probably go with something that’s...heavier.”

*Maybe...could I use food to show him I care about him, too, in the same way a werewolf would?*

“In that case, perhaps the chicken wings are best.” I smiled, leaning into my acting ability that I’d been forced to master living as a child among the cutthroat fae Courts. “Then we can share them!”

Chase stared down at me, his yellow eyes unblinking. He tilted his head to the left, then to the right—I suspected he was thinking through my answer.

*Maybe...did he get it?*

It seemed unlikely after the failure of “I like you,” but I could hope.

“Normally you would have refused the offer of food. As you have numerous times before.” He didn’t exactly dash my feeble dreams, but the way he phrased it was not encouraging for my aim. “Why did you accept this time?”

I opened and closed my mouth, floundering to come up with a reply. “Pip...suggested?”

“What did she suggest?”

I felt my blush return, and it was a fight to meet his yellow eyes.

Chase tilted his head again, then he adjusted his stance so he for once didn’t have perfect posture and seemed more relaxed. “Never mind—you can disregard the last question.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes you uncomfortable. The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable.”

Now, it was my turn to be curious. I couldn’t help the wrinkles that spread across my forehead—if my grandmother saw my expression she would have smacked me with one of her fans. “My comfort is important?”

“Of course,” Chase said. “Because I like you, too.”

I gaped at Chase, and it took every ounce of dignity in my body to keep me standing.

Chase didn’t seem to notice—he was eyeing up the chef. “You are probably unaware due to the cultural differences between fae and werewolves—though I suspect by now Pip has given you at least one or two pieces of advice that I can only hope did not overly traumatize you—but as a wolf my biggest drive will be to see to your comfort.”

I nervously licked my lips. *That's what Pip said...and I could see it, but I wasn't certain that I believed such a thing was limited in scope. This is the perfect opportunity to ask.*

"You mean the comfort of the Pack?"

"No." Chase took a step closer to the concession stand and removed a thin, black wallet from his pants' pocket. "I seek to protect the Pack, not provide comfort like I wish to for you."

My body reacted without my permission, my left hand shooting out to grab Chase by the sleeve when it looked like he might abandon me to order those silly chicken wings. "Are you saying..." I choked on my words—there were too many in my mouth for any of them to escape.

*Danger, there is danger in reaching too far. Who would love me, when I'm a fae who once taunted and insulted her own queen?*

But Leila loved me. As did Skye, and Indigo.

I had friends—who valued and appreciated me. And perhaps Chase did as well. And if he didn't...

*I'd rather ask and risk it all, than to keep being safe. Besides, if I fall, my friends will be there for me.*

I glanced at Queen Leila—who was holding her bowling ball and standing in front of her lane, oblivious to the value I put on her, not as my queen, but my companion.

*She fell in love with the assassin who tried to kill her. I think a werewolf falling for a previously snotty fae is an easier thing to imagine.*

Emboldened, I swallowed and tried again. "Are you saying you have feelings for me of a romantic persuasion...like I do for you?"

"Yes," Chase casually said, as if he wasn't fulfilling my most cherished hopes.

I gaped at him, resembling—I imagine—a confused bullfrog with my open mouth and bulging eyes.

Chase finally looked away from the chef and gave me a curious look. "Did Pip happen to ever explain to you that werewolves are physically affectionate?"

This was happening...in a human bowling alley with the cheers of the Night Court around us as Leila scored her second strike of the night.

*I can't think of any place more perfect.*

Laughter bubbled out of my chest. The fae instinct to conceal my emotions died, smashed by the boulder of knowledge that Chase felt the same way about me that I did for him.

I launched myself at him and was overjoyed when he smoothly caught me. I didn't know exactly what I was doing—fae don't really hug. I'd been embraced by Leila probably more than my own parents.

But my embarrassment fell away as Chase slid his arms around me.

I was pretty sure we were skipping several steps to a regular relationship—the ones humans often modeled. But I didn't care.

I was a fae, and Chase was a werewolf. We'd be an unusual couple with an unusual story—one I wouldn't trade for the world.

Chase pocketed his wallet again before he rested his hands on my lower back, watching me with an expression that I dimly registered as both protective and comfortable.

"I love you," I blurted out.

A rare smile played on Chase's lips—one that made him shockingly handsome. "I love you, too."

*Well, at least he knows that human phrase!*

I stared up at Chase, and all my thoughts went silent when he leaned over and brushed his lips against mine in a gentle kiss. The kiss grew firmer when I didn't pull away, and I flung my arms around his neck as I leaned in. It felt like fireworks were going off in my head. I swear I could *feel* magic crackling between us, and my heart squeezed in my chest as Chase held me closer.

As the kiss continued, I was faintly aware of someone wolf whistling, and more cheers from the Night Court. It wasn't until I heard the chants that I realized that they were cheering for *us!*

“Sweep her off her feet, Chief!”

“Yeah, go Chief!”

“Finally! Bravo, I say. Bravo!” That sounded like Lord Linus.

“You did it, Chrys! I knew you could!” (That had to be Leila.)

I couldn't stop smiling when we finally ended the kiss. My face was hot with a blush, but when I glanced at our friends and Court who were cheering for us, I didn't feel embarrassed. Rather, I was unbearably happy. “What now?” I asked Chase.

“I buy you chicken wings,” Chase said. “Because you're hungry.”

I blinked. “Am I?”

“Your stomach growled when you picked out your bowling ball.”

Laughing, I kissed Chase on the cheek—eliciting another round of whistles from our Court.

*We'll be like those human stories,* I decided as Chase took my hand in his and threaded our fingers together. *We're going to be happily ever after.*

THE END