

## The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 1

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"You are not dying?" I stared at my older sister, stunned at her flawless beauty that greeted me the moment I walked into our small house. After the regrettable night I'd had and the tears I'd cried, I couldn't put it past my eyes to deceive me.

It was not that I was so jealous of her and wished her dead, but up until I left our small village house last night, she had looked almost dead. Eyes sunken, her usually glowing skin was paler than a wee lad's bottom that had stayed too long in a wet napkin. Her lips were so cracked, I could not let her smile as I was afraid they'd split into pieces with the effort.

She had smiled anyway. It was a weak one, but it was enough for me to know that she was grateful for what I was about to do for her. I had finally gathered my courage and decided to do what needed to be done. To do whatever it took to have her with us for as long as the potion would grant her. To save our parents the heartache of burying their daughter ahead of hers and their time. I would save Myrna.

"Did it work?" Hope flooded my heart at the thought that whatever I'd done, my sacrifice, had not been in vain. But then Myrna laughed. A sinister sound that I had never ever heard leave my sister's mouth. "Is anything the matter?" Confused, I angled my head as I waited for her answer.

"Oh my sweet sweet Shyla. You were always so gullible." I frowned at the tone my sister used. Something was not right. And why would she say I was gullible? The head I carried on my two shoulders was my pride as it had never failed me or let anyone outsmart me at anything. And yet staring at my sister, she looked more than convinced that between the two of us, I was the stupid one. Had I been...stupid?

"Did you like it? Your first time, I mean? Or was it as painful as everyone claims it to be?"

We had agreed never to speak of my sacrifice. It was not something I wished to remember. Having my sister well was all that mattered. Not the future that I had so selflessly given up and yet here she was, with a smile on her lips forcing me to relieve one of the most painful moments of my life.

“Was he at least good to you? He promised that he would be gentle.”

Was it possible to be gentle when taking one's innocence? The man who'd deflowered me was most certainly not. Perhaps it was because he was drunk. I had been drunk myself. The moment I had stepped into the inn where I was to meet him and witnessed all the sinful sights before me, I knew I wouldn't be able to do it while I was sober. I was a few minutes early than the agreed time so instead of heading to the room where I was to meet him, I lingered in the main hall and bought myself a mug of beer. I had never drunk before, so one mug was more than enough and as I stumbled to the room, I was sure I would feel nothing. But when it came to the moment I became a woman, it had hurt. No amount of alcohol could shield me from that pain, I had realized. Or the pain that came with the shame of my new status. I was forever tainted. Damaged goods not deserving the love of a decent man, the love of my mate. Never to be celebrated the way virgin maidens were the day they wed. I would be lucky if an old widow who'd lost his mate looked my way once rejected by my mate. I had decided not to ponder on that lonely road as long as my sister got to live, but now—

“He promised to be gentle? How would you know—” My words got stuck in my throat as I willed that good head on my shoulders to think.

“It was the least I could do for you.” My sister shrugged her shoulders and it took me too long to realize what her words meant. And another eternity to piece together what was happening. I had been stupid.

“Y-You were never dying?” My world shattered with that simple question.

“Mother said the poison was too much for your wolf healing and you needed the potion to aid your healing or you would die. Lies... were they all lies?” I couldn't breathe as the sting of betrayal impaled my body. How could I when I was faced with a possibility of the worst betrayal anyone could suffer. Had my family really betrayed me? A memory of my mother in tears while father comforted her hit me. They had begged, sold their lie so perfectly I had bought it.

Something watery and warm fell on the hand that clutched tightly to my dress over my chest. I hated showing my weakness, but this was too much even for the strong willed maiden my mother always claimed me to be.

“Why?” I croaked out. Nothing made sense. My sister loved me. She'd protected me all my life. Comforted me when I needed comforting. I owed a lot of who I was to her, that was why as difficult as it had been, as painful as it

had been, I had chosen to sacrifice my very essence of being a woman so she could live. I had given up a future with my mate...my mate.

"I do hope when you find him, he'll be forgiving. I mean your mate."

"Why would you do this?!" I spat, hating to be ignored. I needed this to make sense or I would go out of my mind.

"The prince finally decided to pick a maiden, a chosen mate. You do know he hasn't been able to find his mate, right?"

I frowned, wondering what some spoiled royal's decision had to do with my sister or more importantly me.

"Must I spell everything out for you?" Myrna rolled her eyes. "This might be the forgotten village but the moon goddess certainly hasn't forgotten us." A wide grin formed on Myrna's face as she pranced about our small living room, causing my frown to deepen. "Because none of the noble ladies were good enough in those districts, the prince is now looking for his mate or chosen mate in our little village, and this is me making certain I'm the only one worthy to be chosen."

This is me making certain I'm the only one worthy to be chosen. Her words hit me hard and I shook with anger. "You ruined my entire life because you thought I'd be your rival in some stupid bridal selection?!"

"First of all it's not stupid. Secondly, yes. You've been nothing but a thorn in my side ever since you barged into my life and I wasn't about to let you take away what rightfully belongs to me." I blinked at my sister, wondering if she wasn't really poisoned because whatever spewed out of her mouth sounded like the rumblings of a mad maiden. "I had been a thorn in her side?"

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Something wet and cold fell on the hand that clutched tightly to my dress over my chest. I hated showing my weakness, but this was too much even for the strong-willed maiden my mother always claimed me to be.

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"I demand my payment back!" Startled, I spun around at the sound of a deep furious growl. It belonged to a ghastly man who stood in the doorway to our tiny house, his large frame barely fitting in the opening. His eyes blazed, revealing his angry wolf that I was certain would tear us to shreds if he shifted.

"You promised me a maiden and you lied." I gulped even though his furious eyes were not set on me. They went beyond me towards Myrna.

My own predicament momentarily forgotten, my gaze snapped to Myrna at the accusation. "Tell me you were not stupid enough to get mixed up with the likes of him." Despite what my sister had done, I worried for her. Owing the likes of the beast that stood in our doorway was inviting misfortune for one's entire family. The band of brutes that terrorized lone maidens found with no protection while it was still daylight was a nightmare in itself. Was my sister that stupid? The way he marched into our home said she had been stupid indeed.

"Stupid? I could never be you Shyla." I blinked at my sister's haughty attitude. For the first time in my life, Myrna looked down on me before totally ignoring me.

"I promised you a maiden and I gave you one. I'm a woman of my word."

"Do I look satiated to you?" The brute roared so loud, I thought the old roof to our house would cave in. I would have run too but more realization kept me rooted on my sp0t. She'd sold me to a beast that would have taken me apart and shuttered my very soul.

"Were you actually so stupid you walked into a different room?" Myrna was no longer smiling. Rage burned in those eyes that had looked at me lovingly not so long ago. "Shyla!" She roared when I didn't answer, but I only stood frozen, heart breaking with every passing moment. "No matter." Myrna dismissed me like I was an insignificant pest. "You losing your innocence is all that matters. I don't really care who had you. As for you..." Myrna turned to the brute who had surprisingly been quiet. "Here is your payment. If you did not get your money's worth, it's only right that I give it back." Coins clinked when the bag landed in the brute's hands but I was no longer interested in that exchange. I kept replaying my sister's admission that she had spat so carelessly.

The banging of a door snapped me out of my painful thoughts and I found my sister wearing an annoyed look. "If you did not walk into his room, then which low life did you end up in bed with?"

"You are the low life." I wished to scream, but the heaviness of the lie that had been my life weighed heavier than my need to insult my sister.