

## The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 18 - Tips

My heart had stung. When she had practically fled from my presence and disappeared into the carriage, I felt that familiar piercing to my wretched flesh. It did not even matter that I had been the one to ruin the beautiful atmosphere my simple hunt trophy had gifted us. I just couldn't bear hearing of her concern for my men, no matter how well meaning or innocent it was. She was mine and if she was going to care about any man, it would only be me.

Again, I hated how easy it was for her to just walk away in that manner, when all I hoped for was for the night to never end. To keep listening to that beautiful voice of hers that awakened me in ways I could have never imagined. She would have spoken the entire night and I would have sat there relishing every beautiful sound from her beautiful mouth. A mouth I so wished to devour pretty much like the way she had done with that piece of rabbit meat.

My lips curved at the thought. She'd been embarrassed about it, but if only she knew how much I relished the sight. If only she knew the sinful thoughts that had been going through my mind while I watched her dive in again and again. I had dined with countless noble ladies before. Beautiful ones, sophisticated ones, others who'd shamelessly invited me to their beds, but none of those meals had left me begging for release the way watching my mate had. There was just something about the animalistic way that she devoured that piece of meat that had me wishing to take its place.

A weight shifting in my arms made my lips curve even wider, the sting to my heart long forgotten. Having been rewarded with the only thing that was better than listening and watching my mate the entire night, all was right in my world. Well, not all, but finally having my mate in my arms did feel as though everything was indeed right in my world. An endless supply of the most alluring scent to inhale up close to my heart's content, the feel of her delicate body wrapped in my hands and that occasional fisting of her hands in my garments as though she sought my comfort desperately had me grateful for her decision to flee.

I had found her curled up against the carriage's wall fast asleep, making me realize the real reason she'd left me behind and that so hastily. She'd hoped I'd find her asleep and all the reasons I could think of as to why, had left me grinning from ear to ear and feeling a couple of inches taller.

She'd thought of everything as he curled up against that wall, no doubt wishing to leave as much space between us as possible too, but thank the gods for the bumpy terrain to Dovah that almost toppled over our mode of transport, sending my mate right into my hands. For the longest time I had sat without breathing or moving an inch, afraid of waking her and being forced to relinquish the best chance I had gotten to having her so close.

Since then, my eyes had been glued to her frame, taking in her beauty that made me wish to wh!p myself a million times for almost losing her... for rejecting her. I had my son or daughter in her belly to thank for still binding us and I may have done so a thousand times already. I may have promised to do everything to win their mother's heart too before I got to meet them. I was not sure how, but I would.

Her chest rose and fell gently, the peaceful sight making me swear another promise only to her. I couldn't undo my mistakes, or the pain I'd made her endure, but I would do everything to protect her henceforth. Even when she did not wish to have me by her side yet, I would be her shield, her protector even from death itself.

My belly fluttered when she snuggled even closer as if to agree with my promises and I wished the moment would last for an eternity. But that was not to be had as Rakon chose that particular moment to announce our arrival in Dovah.

As I had predicted, it was daybreak and as much as I wished for my mate to remain glued to me I needed to wake her to find out which way we were supposed to be headed. I did not wish to stay longer than necessary lest we ran into trouble. It wouldn't be much of a problem for me and my men, but I was not willing to put her and the baby in any danger.

"Shyla?" I gently shook her, loving the sound of her name on my lips.

"Go away Myrna. I do not wish to speak to you." I froze at her words. It wasn't so much about what she'd said, but the hurt that accompanied them. Even while she slept, there was no mistaking that emotion that was undoubtedly deep seated in her heart. The one I'd placed there. The one I would continue nurturing now that I decided on keeping her as my mate. I was a fool, I realized.

"Where are we?" Her raspy voice jolted me out of my regrettable epiphany, making me face her reluctantly.

"We are in—" She pulled away in a flash and it took me a moment to realize why.

"I did not mean to." She scooted to the furthest point of the seat. Away from me. If she had awoken just a few moments earlier and done that, I would have held her in place, but now with the lump forming in my chest at what I'd just learned, I thought it was probably for the best.

"You do not have to apologize." I mumbled when what I really wished to say was that it was the best night of my life. That having her lean on me made me the happiest man. "The seat was bound to get uncomfortable. You know with the baby and all." She was about to smile, but my words seemed to keep her from it and I wondered why.

"You were about to say something?" She looked away, that familiar guard back in place. In just a few moments, I had completely lost the maiden who'd made my last few hours worth living. Knowing it was my doing, I sucked it up and decided to focus on the task at hand.

"We are in Dovah." She craned her neck to the side at my words and looked through the carriage's window, a smile on her lips that brought a bitter taste to my mouth. Was she that happy to see him? For a moment, a tiny moment, I considered turning around and heading back to Xatis. "Which way is it?" I all but spat. If she noticed my change in mood, she did not let me know.

"Right here!" The excitement in her tone, the unmistakable curve of her lips, all served to sour my mood even more. What was it about this Gol? I hated him even before I laid my eyes on him.

"It's just around here, we don't live that far in."

We? A vein ticked, my fists clenched and only Rakon's appearance at the carriage's door kept me from blowing up.

"Good morning, my lady. Your majesty?" Because he knew me all too well, Rakon arched his brow in a what do think you are doing gesture.

Not in the mood for his scolding, I ignored him and walked out. "Lead the way then." Again, if she noticed my aggressive tone, my mate did not let me know. Instead she simply pulled my cloak up to cover up some more and started moving. The sight softened my flaring temper, but it was not enough to stop

my growing need to punch this 'Gol' for making my mate smile that much. Something I had terribly failed at.

"I do not speak 'maiden', but I do know this is definitely no way to win her over."

"Shut up!" I growled at Rakon, as I watched my mate break out in a sprint when a tiny shack came into view. I on the hand froze at the sight. Was that it? Was that where I had banished her to? The tiny thing was worse than her humble home back in the forgotten village. The least of my servants' shelters were palaces compared to this.

"I, uh, um— Is that—"

"Do not say it." It would not erase the self loathing that overwhelmed me, but I wouldn't let Rakon put it into words.

"Where else did you think a traitor like me would end up?" Her words struck me anew, highlighting the monster that I really was.

"Gol!" My gaze shifted from the shack and to my mate and the approaching figure.

How was he someone she trusted? I tensed as the savage stopped in front of her. He was huge, towering over her by miles and yet she still held out her arms inviting him for an embrace. "Is she insane?" I growled, deciding to march towards them. If he decided to attack her, I would be too late to save her if I stayed where I was.

"Wait." Rakon held me back, earning himself a glare. "Look." I followed his gaze back to my mate. The savage still stood in front of her, his arms folded while she looked a bit at a loss for words.

"What is this?" I frowned when no word escaped their lips but I was sure as hell they were having an actual conversation.

Mindlink! I froze, my mind panicking instantly. I only knew of two ways that our kind could mindlink each other. One of them I was very certain was impossible as she did not have any ties to the savage. Which only left me with the painful obvious one. She would have to take his mark. The mere thought had me seeing red as I struggled against the truth I knew.

I had spent the entire night staring at her beautiful slender neck, imagining my mark there. I had even had moments when I almost lost it and came close to marking her, but as I stared at my mate and that beast, I wasn't so sure it still remained unmarked.

"Is that what I think it is? Are they actually mindlinking?" Rakon was just as shocked as I was, but unlike him, I wasn't about to remain standing here marveling at something that was supposed to be impossible.

I marched over and grabbed my mate's hand and dragged her away from the brute, much to her protests that I did not care for. I needed to make sure before all hell broke loose.

Without a word, I pulled back her hair, leaving her neck bare.

Nothing! She was still unmarked! Relief washed over and I let out a breath I didn't even know I held.

"What is this?!" She was ready to bite and I couldn't help wishing to be overtaken by the storm in her eyes. She was still mine!

"Just checking for something." I mumbled.

"And what might that be, your majesty?" Her brows drew together in confusion.

"Nothing." If she had not realized it yet, there was no point in embarrassing myself.

"Did that satisfy your curiosity?" Amused. That's what the brute was after my display. He'd understood my intentions clearly, but I was not about to indulge him.

"Are you done here?"

She scowled at me. "I would be if you hadn't interrupted me."

"Be my guest." I huffed before stepping back. The sooner she accomplished this, the sooner we could journey to Xatis.

"You are the only one I trust, Gol." I couldn't blame her, but hearing she trusted some outlaw stung. And because I did not wish to have any more competition in that regard, I hoped he'd decline. I was in for disappointment.

"I knew I should have let you die." The brute grumbled and only my mate's effortless smile kept me from punching the man for wishing for her death. "And who is this lot?" The man appraised me with a suspicious eye and while I wasn't one to flash my royalty, I expected him to tell. If not for anything else, then my fine clothes and the whole entourage I had waiting on us.

"This is King Elian." I flinched at the flat introduction. She wasn't even hiding the hate she felt for me.

"Oh! So this is the arrogant beast that broke your heart?" I swallowed the insult for the knowledge that my mate had a broken heart by my hand. It was weirdly comforting after believing she had not cared for me at all.

"I never said he did!"

"Didn't have to." The man dismissed her before focussing on me, his expression serious. "I will do this, but only for her. I will only ever answer to her." I had to admire how my mate had inspired such loyalty from a beast like him. I nodded.

"And that goes for you and everyone else who might think I am to submit to them."

My father would throw a fit, but perhaps knowing he would be there to protect his own heir might do the trick. I hoped.

"Well then, shall we your Majesty?"

"I'll ride with him." I stiffened at my mate's declaration and was about to protest when he cut me off.

"What kind of man would I be for letting a pregnant woman endure an uncomfortable saddle or a run through the woods?"

"I'm no damsel." She protested and he shot her a look that resembled a father's concern for a daughter. He did love her, not just in the way I had imagined.

"That you are not, but you are still pregnant with that kingdom's heir. I may not care for that lot, but I do care for that little pup and his future." It was the first time he acknowledged my kingship but I did not care for it, knowing he cared for her and my offspring was enough. Perhaps we'd get along someday.

