

## The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 26 - Tips

This was so much better than his cloak that I had searched for like one mad when I needed it.

I inhaled and melted some more into my mate's embrace. Just a few more moments. I would let him go just as soon as I was calm enough. As soon as I had my fill. But then he ran his fingers through my hair and got my wolf purring and me biting back a moan. Perhaps I would need more than a few moments.

Having awakened to the feeling of loneliness and utter emptiness, I had longed for him. For my mate. The urge was as strong as my need to breathe and it had taken everything in me to keep from shifting and wandering through the palace hallways sniffing him out. I had however ended up sniffing my bed, because, for a very strange reason, I had been picking his scent on the sheets each morning I woke up. It was already fading, but I had still inhaled until it was no longer enough. The urge had become too strong and I needed more. His cloak that he had used to cover me while we headed to Dovah had been my next option, but I could not find it. I had searched the entire room and when I came up empty, I simply broke down and cried. Liira and Astryrn had rushed in to comfort me, but I was as a little girl who refused to be comforted until she got what she wished for.

Then he waltzed in with all his majestic glory and as if he knew what ailed me, opened his large perfect arms in an invitation I could not refuse even if I wished to. I did not think twice as I slipped in, shamelessly begging for him to hold me and when he did, all was right in my world. Well, not all, but every emotion that had overwhelmed me faded with each passing moment spent wrapped up in his arms.

No more words were spoken and I preferred it that way as I basked in the warmth and comfort of my mate. He'd carried me over to the couch and wrapped me in his arms as though I was some precious treasure that he did not wish to slip from his hands.

"Have breakfast with me." I froze at his invitation, heart hammering in my chest. Surely he wasn't really— And was that a command or a request?

A moment later, I realized that neither mattered except that he actually wished to dine with me. He wished to dine with me? Why would he? I looked up, eyes seeking to search for answers, but then his gaze, that deep mysterious abyss of his captured my every being, making me forget what it was I sought.

“Will you have breakfast with me, Shyla?”

I knew what my answer should be. If only he would stop staring at me as though he was gazing right into my soul. If only my belly would not flutter so much at the sound of my own name from his lips or if only my wolf would stop howling in my head at the thought of being wanted by our mate.

“Isn’t that a privilege reserved for your queen?” The words burned even as they left my mouth, but I endured it. No matter the obvious longing in his tone, I did not wish to delude myself, thanks to a sensible part of me that fought through our bond. He had a chosen mate, a wife, a queen. A pregnant queen. And I was just the mate who carried his heir. Could I even call my child that? His heir? With Myrna pregnant too, I had no doubt she’d label my child as nothing but a bastard.

“I wish to dine with you!” Possessive in every way, his growl sent my heart melting in my chest and my resolve wavering. I attempted to pull away, to save myself from drowning in the pull of our bond and the allure of being wanted, but his gentle embrace got replaced by a tighter grip that left me trapped by him.

“Let me go.” My feeble plea only served to plunge me into the very thing I wished to escape. His grip gentled and I wished it hadn’t, because then his soft caresses that replaced it disarmed me in ways that left me at his mercy. Despite all of my troubles, I did not wish him to stop. Instead I longed for more. Much, much more.

“Please?” His plea tugged at something in me and I found myself nodding, giving in to him. I was right after all. I needed a few more moments... with him, and I did need to eat too.

“An excellent idea, your majesty!”

Liira? Had she been listening? Panic washed over me at the thought of having someone else witness my moment of weakness. I was no lady, but I knew very well that the position I was in with the king was not decent and I couldn’t stomach being labelled a loose maiden even if I already carried his child.

I wiggled in his arms, desperate to be free of him. “Thank you, your highness for...” I blushed when I realized that there was no decent word to describe what had just happened between us. “...I feel fine now.”

“No.” My face paled at his protests and I anticipated looks of reproach, but Liira only strolled in, a wide smile pasted on her face. Astryn was equally grinning from ear to ear as she trailed the older nurse. But not even that could put me at ease.

“Stop trying to escape from me, Shyla.” His warm breath and his raspy command caressed my insides and left me frozen in the very position I sought to get out of. How could a bunch of mere words weaken me this much? My body burned with desire and I wished for nothing more than to lean back into his chest and letting him caress me in every place that was screaming to be touched by him.

“All better dear?” I attempted to escape my mate’s grip again, but just as before, it only got tighter and I could only blush at Liira who flashed me an approving smile. She approved? “It’s good to know that you are still good at some things.”

“I-I am?” I mustered some semblance of composure as I frowned at Liira, wondering what was this thing I was supposedly good at.

“Not you dear.” My frown only deepened when I realized that Liira’s gaze was set on my mate. How was she able to address him so casually? “Now, unless you wish to portray yourself as some uncultured beast and not a gentleman, I suggest you let her go and get changed before your meal.” She could also order him around? I marvelled as my mate’s grip loosened and he actually let me go without so much as a word.

“I will see you in a bit, my lady.” He gave me a little bow that sent my belly fluttering and as if he was intent on proving Liira wrong, he bowed impossibly lower than I had seen any of his own people bow to him. “Grandmother.”

Wait, grandmother? Even when there was now a decent distance between me and my mate after gaining my freedom, I felt myself blush all over again.

## **The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 27 - Tips**

“Will you relax?” Rakon’s words jolted me out of my thoughts and brought my pacing to a stop. “Even if she did refuse your escort, Astryn assures me that they’ll be here soon. So there is no need for all this panic you are enduring.”

It still stung to know that Shyla had adamantly refused my escort, but I knew my mate would come. If not for me, then for our child. Because she had to

eat, Liira would ensure it as her personal nurse. So that was in no way why I was panicking or pacing about so nervously.

I had invited her for breakfast, wishing only to spend more time with her and seeking to appease my wolf that had whimpered with the loss of contact with our mate, but that simple invitation had turned into something I was not so sure my mate would welcome as much as I had. I no longer just wished to stuff my belly while I basked in her presence. I wished for this moment to be our beginning. As awkward as that sounded and with the many sins I still had to atone for, I wished for us to begin our journey anew, right here.

Having chosen an intimate garden that overlooked the forest that I'd caught her staring at dreamily, I hoped the setting would ease us into a more friendly flow of a conversation. Lying down on that couch and as I had stroked her hair, I had wished we could have that kind of mundaneness. The two of us chatting an afternoon away, or perhaps our wolves having a run in that forest she gazed on so much or better yet, waking up to her lovely smile while she curled in my arms the way she'd done on that couch.

"It has been too long since I saw one of those. A genuine one too!" Rakon's smirk only served to widen my smile. I was not about to argue or offer a smart reply to that as merely thinking about my mate made me wish to break out in song.

A door opened and my heart sped up as I turned hastily expecting to lay my eyes on my mate. But disappointment awaited me when it turned out to be Liira instead. My disappointment, however, quickly turned to utter surprise when I beheld my grandmother clad in perhaps one of the least garments I ever thought would flow over her frame ever again.

"I should have known that it would take my mate to make you step out of the shadows." I couldn't help but tease her over the unexpected sight. Even after so many years, she still looked magnificent in purple, Xatis's royal colour for every queen ever crowned. And as the matriarch's royal gown swayed with everyone of her steps, I couldn't help thinking of that being Shyla. My mate would look just as beautiful...and as powerful.

"That poor child has been through enough pain to last her a lifetime." I flinched even when Liira's words were not aimed to blame. Knowing I had been the source of that pain was enough. "She needs someone on her side." That would be me! I wished to protest, but my past reminded me of how far I had before I could make such a bold statement.

“And well, she has kind of grown on me.” A broad smile graced Liira’s lips as I pulled up a seat for her on the table that was set for two. “And I absolutely think we do need one more strong she-wolf to keep the royal men in line.” I rolled my eyes at that, knowing what that meant. My poor mate would soon be enduring being educated on how that got done for my own torment. Though I had an inkling that Shyla would not be enduring that much as she was pretty much there already. And why was I finding that mere thought extremely...desirable?

“Will you wipe that stupid grin off of your face? I’m here on more important matters.”

“Isn’t this the part where I remind you that you are not invited? I huffed.

“I need no invitation in my own palace.” She sipped her tea like the queen she was, earning a smile from me. “Besides your mate will be a while and why waste a perfectly good moment for some chit chat?”

“I missed you, grandmother.”

“Me too. Although I must point out that you are wrong for thinking it took your mate for me to get here. Perhaps it took my grandson becoming king and his mate is simply a bonus.”

“Father must have been a handful, I suppose.”

“Well, sons are meant to be that, while grandsons are meant to be the sweetest things and if it so happens that they are not, well—”

“Grandmothers are meant to use any means necessary to ensure that they are.” An approving smile slipped out of Liira’s lips, making me shake my head. “You are impossible.”

“I taught you well.” Liira beamed with pride to which I scoffed, much to her annoyance.

“And what is this?” My eyes widened when I saw a familiar figure behind her. “Gol?”

The savage stood tall behind the closed door that had been opened momentarily by a servant. He’d lost part of his outlaw look and was now

dressed in a soldier's garments and instead of my insignia on it, it bore my grandmother's. "How in God's name did you get him to do that?!"

I remembered his conditions of not being answerable to anyone in and outside the palace.

Liira gave me her mischievous grin. "We have an understanding."

"An understanding?" I frowned, but her pursed lips kept anything from slipping out. "I'm curious."

She placed her cup of tea down reluctantly. "Well, I couldn't have him standing out and if he wished to protect my future daughter in law, which is admirable by the way, he needed to blend in."

Now why hadn't I thought of that? "I thought it was something dark." I scoffed, knowing my grandmother's famed persuasion skills.

"Among other things." I arched a brow as she beckoned a servant to her side. "Things unfit for a young king's ears." She shot me a disapproving look. "The less you know, the better."

Definitely dark things. "I'm beginning to wonder if I should even celebrate your return to my palace."

"Only a useless king wouldn't celebrate gaining a powerful ally who would not b.utter them in any way during their reign and you, my king, I do not consider useless."

"You do know that I have no intentions of having her stay in your wing for the rest of her days, right? Which means he will not always be at your disposal."

"With what you have on your plate, you will have to prove that my grandchild and its mother will be safe before I let them be by your side?"

"Let them be by my side, you would keep them from me?" I teased, knowing I wouldn't put that past her. Fortunately it was something I approved of. As much as I wished to have my mate close, now was simply not the time.

"I would do worse to ensure the future of this kingdom." I was treated to that deathly expression Liira wore when I hit a nerve and something in me filled with pride to know that I was descended from her.

“And to think the noble houses think that charge of protecting the future of this kingdom lies with them.” I scoffed.

“It is to our advantage that they keep thinking so. Now will you tell your grandmother what treachery has befallen you so far?” She sat back, face set in a serious expression and I felt like a spoiled child narrating all the evils that had befallen him in his grandmother’s absence just so he could get some punishment for his enemies. I knew Liira better than that, however. My enemies would get their punishment no doubt, but this was more than petty revenge. It was Xatis’s future.

“You have one strong she wolf for a mate.” Pride seeped out of my being at Liira’s statement once I was done. “Not that there was any doubt if her pregnant self was able to handle her body shifting and a battle without any harm coming to the child in her belly. And as much as I hate your father’s tendencies to be carried away with being a politician, thinking about his words, I do understand.”

“You agree with him? You would have me take Shyla as my mistress” That would be the first and only time I would hear Liira agree with father and his craziness.”

“I understand, there is a difference, child.” Liira seeped her tea.

“But—”

“Imagine what value such a strong wolf would fetch with those wretched traders.” My chest rumbled at the mere thought of Shyla being taken from me. “And God help us if they know that she carries your child that bears those qualities and more. But if she had the protection of the king, however—”

“It would lessen the number of those who would dare to seek to commit such a crime even from my own palace.” I sighed unhappily, now that it all made sense.

“You would only be doing this because replacing your queen is one messy political affair, especially when she has committed no crime at all. Not in front of the people of Xatis anyway.”

“You’ve been keeping an eye on Myrna?” I frowned.

“What? Do not give me that look. I was not the one with a broken heart. And it’s not like you are innocent either.” Liira shrugged and my eyes landed on Rakon who only shrugged too. “I just wish I’d done it sooner, she’s proved to be rather...resourceful too. But no matter, I’m very patient. I will leave you to enjoy the rest of your morning peacefully, now that your guest is here.”

I wished to continue this discussion, but my mate’s scent hit me before Liira finished her statement, plunging me into a sea of need. And when she stepped through the door, I was undone while my wolf howled possessively. Mine! I no longer desired the mundane in the moment, I wished to devour her whole.

“You do look lovely my dear.” Liira complimented my mate, but I strongly disagreed with her words. Lovely was not it at all!

“Thank you.” She curtsied, perfectly, then blushed and giggled, setting me on a path of destruction. She was beautiful, but this... enchanting, extremely alluring, totally desirable, sexy as hell and I wished for nothing but to drown in her.

“What did they do?!” With my mouth suddenly dry, I turned to mind linking.

“I believe the words you seek are thank you, your majesty.” Rakon smirked, but I disagreed with him too. That was not it at all either. “Just shout if you need saving.”

I would definitely need saving, I was just not certain that I wished to be saved. Not from the goddess that stood before me.

## **The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 28 - Tips**

I had never sweated this much in my whole entire life. It was still morning. The sun had yet to unleash its fury, but sweat trickled over my skin. Just as it would if I was banished to soak up the fury in its rays once it did.

I could blame it on the layers upon layers of very expensive clothing that layered my simple frame, but I couldn’t. Even if their worth would equal to years and years worth of food a simple family in the forgotten village would need to survive. A fact that had me loathing the idea of being clothed in such fine apparel just for breakfast.



The reason for my discomfort had a more hot reasonable explanation. Eyes stared at me with the glow of the hot golden sun. A golden gaze so intense it threatened to turn the little drips of sweat into streams overflowing from head to toe, making a mess of the impossibly perfect look Astryn and a couple of other maids had achieved on me. And the little audience present only served to worsen my discomfort.

Liira, looking every bit as the queen I had no idea she was, was beaming at me, approval glistening in her eyes. But even when I had no doubt she held nothing against me, I still felt ashamed at how I had repayed her kindness by running away. Would this be an awkward moment to offer my apologies? I focused all my attention on her even as I used the moment to escape my mate's intense gaze.

A faint growl followed my action and I held on tightly to my gown, hoping to hide my own reaction to his protests. My wolf, it seemed, did not care to be subtle about how much she enjoyed being our mate's centre of attention.

"Your maj—" I paused not knowing the right way to address the king's grandmother. His grandmother. I was still trying to wrap my head around that. While I dressed, Astryn had gone on and on about the fond bond between my mate and Liira. And the more she had spoken, the more I had begun to realize how much I had misjudged him. How much I had misjudged his intentions.

When we got to the palace from Dovah, I thought he had simply tossed me away in that empty forgotten part of the palace, far enough to keep my presence from bringing his queen discomfort, but now... Discovering that he'd actually tucked me away with one of the most important people in his life and in the safest place I could be in the palace had softened a part of me towards him. That and the comfort he'd granted me earlier. My belly fluttered at the mere thought and something blossomed in my heart.

"Forgive me for repaying your kindness with my, uh, foolish act of running away." I gave Liira an awkward bow, but she simply waved me away dismissively.

"Every one is allowed a few stupid decisions during their lifetime. Besides, nothing was going to keep you here unless you wished to stay." She came closer and took hold of my shoulders. "Whatever happens, you are always welcome here."

My heart squeezed and my eyes prickled at her words. "Thank you." I rasped, eyes failing to hold back the tears. Twice. This would make it the second time a stranger had opened their home to me. I couldn't help think about my own family that had been quick to abandon me for a life of luxury. It was true that I had a piece of Liira growing inside of me, but like with Gol, I had no reason to think there was more to her words than she was letting on. And if ever I had any doubts, her warm embrace that now engulfed me chased them all away.

"No more tears now." Liira patted my cheeks, while her smile comforted my insides. "I will see you later. And do enjoy your meal. If nothing is to your liking, feel free to say so." I nodded as I lost the comfort of one embrace only to land in another. A stronger one that held me both tightly and gently at the same time. He'd given me no chance to choose or to protest, but with his scent totally engulfing me now, protesting was the last thing on my mind even as my discomfort eased.

"You look absolutely amazing." My wolf purred at his compliment and me? Well, I melted into his embrace, choosing to have the moment too. My acceptance earned me an appreciative growl from him. Mine... His chest rumbled with his declaration and it sent my wolf howling in my head and me for whatever strange reason seeking the spot where I was to make such a declaration physically clear.

His neck was hidden under the cover of his cloak and with trembling hands, I reached for the note that held it together. I felt him freeze and I almost did too, but I was like one possessed as I undid the note impatiently seeking that part of his skin.

"Shyla?" His voice trembled with need even as a questioning look settled on his facial features. I had no answer to give, only a desire to sniff that part of him that drove my every action.

"I..." The cloak fell and I buried my face in the crook of his neck, finding instant comfort there in. He purred at the contact and I found myself being lifted as pleasurable growls rumbled in his chest. I liked it, more than I should have. And when we settled on some kind of a seat, excitement bubbled when he placed me on his lap striding him. I marvelled at how I felt no ounce of shame at the indecent position. It was so unlike me and I wondered if perhaps the tea I had been consuming while getting dressed had been laced with something. Oh perhaps it was just the fate of the bond existing between us.

Whatever the reason was this morning, I was an unwilling party to fight any of it. Breakfast forgotten, I wished to indulge in the sinfulness of it all, but I was in for a disappointment, however. With his hands caressing the small of my back through the layers of fine apparel and his lips inches from mine, my mate suddenly froze before pulling back away from me in a swift motion that left me surprised. If I expected either one of us to pull away, it certainly wasn't him.

His chest heaved as he looked up. "Not that I don't want this, but perhaps we should slow down."

Slow down? I met his gaze with annoyance rather than hurt. Was he rejecting me and my advances? My advances? Had I been— His conflicting look pierced something in me and I rushed to abandoning my position on his laps, but he kept me rooted on the spot.

"Please...will you just...listen?" He let out a shaky, needy breath. Desiring me was not the problem, I noted and it calmed some of that annoyance. Together with the war I noted raging in his eyes. Him and his wolf wished for this, but for some strange reason he was fighting it and now I wished to know why.

His gaze went to the door, as if to make sure no one would be listening. I wished he hadn't, however, because then he exposed something to my eyes while at it that pierced my heart. He'd been marked!

A growl tore through me as I inspected it, my eyes refusing to look away. Right where I was meant to place my precious mark on my mate, sat two prints of lips in a crimson colour that I instantly loathed. It wasn't a wolf's mark but a mark regardless and it angered me to no end. Did they belong to Myrna? I wished to rip the mark out of his skin and her along with it.

"What is it?"

"You've been with her." I hissed, sounding every bit like a jealous possessive mate while pain and anger clawed at my chest. Was that the reason he was asking to slow down? He didn't wish to cheat on her...with me! Did he care for her feelings too? Did he care for her?

Realization flashed in his eyes and if only he hadn't reached up to cover his neck almost instantly, perhaps I wouldn't have flown out of his embrace and almost endangering our child when I tripped and fell while escaping him.

“Shyla? damn it!” It had taken him a moment to wrap his head around what was happening and I used the opportunity to rush for the door. Once I slipped past it, Gol and Rakon stood at attention.

“My lady?”

“Keep him away from me!” Were I got the courage to bark orders from, I had not idea, but Gol, Rakon and a few guards posted outside the door to the garden stood up straighter and acknowledged them still. All with a short bow that I had no moment to acknowledge as I broke out in a sprint down the hall, my hands at my sides lifting my gown and aiding my escape.

He wouldn’t even deny it. My hands clutched the fine material of my garments tighter as the thought burned through my head. In my heart of hearts I knew he would choose her still. He was hers. They were wedded after all. I knew my life at the palace would by no means include him, but seeing the evidence and reality of it thrust me into an unacknowledged desire that had been hidden deep in my soul.

My eyes stung as I now marched down the hall not caring were I was headed as long as it was far from him. Sounds of heavy growling accompanied me, but I did not bother to look back at what he was doing to those I had charged to keep him from following.

“Shyla!” His voice rang out of the wing almost bringing me to a stop. Pain, anger and rage laced it, but I chose not to stop for either and kept going.

She’d k!ssed and left her mark on him! Somehow I could not move past that and the more I thought of it the more annoyance bubbled within me just as easily as I had felt the pleasure of burying my face in the crook of his neck.

The sight of the doors I had walked through the time I had escaped came into view and I practically ran towards them, hell bent on putting as much distance between me and my mate. I needed to calm down. Needed to find myself a distraction as thinking of him and my sister only annoyed me even more. And with Gol whom I expected would come after me, I knew I could afford to be distracted. That was until I bumped into something, or rather someone. A bitter someone with a fairly familiar voice too.

“Are you are so blind you could not see your queen coming?!”

Myrna? My first instinct was to scan my surroundings wondering if I had strayed too far from Liira's side of the palace and ended up intruding where I shouldn't have. When I noticed the familiar doors once I looked back, I knew I hadn't which begged a more urgent question. What was she doing here? Searching for him, perhaps? The thought morphed my annoyance into raging anger in a flash and I struggled to keep from growling.

"Apologize to your queen!" A maiden's voice demanded and I did agree that an apology was the right and honourable thing to do. I had been the one to bump into her after all, but fate had chosen a wrong moment to reunite me with my wretched sister. Not that there was ever going to be a right one.

## **The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 29 - Tips**

My every instinct was on guard, my emotions running high and I had every intention to stand up to her, but I was blown away by the sight of my sister. The sight of a queen. Now that I was this close to her, I was made painfully aware of how deeply buried her desire to be queen had been and to what lengths she would have gone to gain it.

This is me making certain I'm the only one worthy to be chosen.

Her words echoed painfully from memory. She did look worthy. Dressed in an exquisite gown in fine purple, a shade darker than Liira's, Myrna stood with the grace of an actual queen. Back straight, shoulders square, her beautiful neck elegantly stretching out even as she glared at me.

Her hair that I was used to seeing cascading down her back was perfectly pinned together in a manner that made room for the most beautiful crown on her head. She was beautiful. More beautiful than I remembered. Royal life had most certainly been good to her. I would even dare say she was born for it.

Flanked by a group of maidens dressed just as exquisitely and a band of guards looking ready to defend their queen at the slightest sign of trouble, Myrna seemed to have it all.

The thought brought a bitter taste in my mouth and unearthed strange feelings in my heart. Shameful feelings that the Shyla I was before being betrayed would never have entertained. Then I had simply adored and worshipped my sister, but now? Now I couldn't help the desire to compare myself to her. To discover what it was my mate was drawn to. What made him defy our bond even when I was finally by his side.

My answer was, she was perfect. At least on the outside. Even when I was dressed in similar fine clothing and could easily pass for a noble lady, I knew I could never come close to the figure standing in front of me. If I didn't know better, she could have passed for a noble lady of a noble birth and heart even in my eyes.

But I knew better, as her darkness had been the light to illuminate my life ever since she'd conceived the idea of being chosen as Xatis's queen. And that darkness was now feeding the burning rage that was threatening to consume me whole.

"Apologize to your queen!" Some maiden with a sharp tongue hissed, sending my fists balling at my sides and my furious gaze colliding with hers.

"She's no queen of mine!" I hissed back, my tone surprisingly more menacing than I intended, sending the maiden's sharp gaze momentarily faltering and gasps erupting around us.

"How can that be? Is she not from Xatis?"

"A guest from a far kingdom, perhaps?"

"Shyla?" The shock in Myrna's tone jolted me out of the deathly staring contest that had ensued with the maiden who had dared to intimidate me. "Is that you?"

Was she only recognizing me now? I found that quite annoying too as no amount of fine apparel or cosmetics would keep me from recognizing my own sister at first glance and she'd had more than that already.

"Oh my sweet Shyla!"

Anger flared. Sweet? Her sweet Shyla? I was definitely none of those things at the moment. Neither was I feeling anything close to sweetness. I hadn't been that since the day she made certain my life meant nothing to those I had cared for and thought cared for me too.

"What a pleasant surprise!" Arms stretched out Myrna approached, a pretentious smile pasted on her lips. Did she think I would fall for it. The insult drew a menacing growl tearing from my lips, making her flinch. I could swear I saw her cower in fear too, but she was Myrna. She masked it before the world around her could even get a glimpse of it.

“Oh, you got your little wolf?” She sneered instead while losing a considerable amount of that graceful composure she’d held before.

“Not so little if you ask me.” A new maiden’s voice interrupted, amusement lacing their words and if I wasn’t so angered by how Myrna attempted to dismiss my wolf too I would have hugged whoever had uttered them.

“I swear if your mother was not father’s beloved step sister, I would have your tongue cut out right this minute!” Someone scolded and I found myself growling at them too. A noble maiden with fiery red hair that fitted her just fine for the witch she was had been the one to speak. Like Myrna, she stared down at the poor maiden who stood at the back of their little group. “You must apologize to her majesty.”

“Apologize?!” The poor girl’s eyes grew impossibly wide. “But I do not think I have done anyth—”

“Nobody cares what you think, Carlytte.” The witch chided. “Apologize or I’ll have to tell—”

“It’s quite alright, Kerina.” Myrna sounded calm, but I knew better. “It’s nothing important. We best be on our way. Giving my thanks to the person who saved the love of my life is more important.”

I could have let her go. Could have stomached her uncaring attitude that she’d put on to hide the shock of seeing me in the palace, but referring to my mate as the ‘love of her life’ fueled my anger as Myrna spoke proudly. I was not going to utter anything either, but her haughty attitude, that thing that she used to make me feel like I was nothing but dust and her clear intention to ignore me altogether made me speak up.

“I have no need of your thanks, his majesty’s—” I paused, feeling every bit vengeful and spiteful, I held my sister’s gaze. “My mate’s safety is all that matters.” I declared with more emotion than expected as confusion, realization, shock, disbelief, anger and a whole host of other emotions crossed Myrna’s face before she spoke, or more specifically, roared.

“You?!” The devil in me smiled at her utter discomfort. “He’s been singing praises about you?! You are the outlaw Xatis is beginning to admire?!” I knew nothing about anyone in Xatis hearing of the attack or care about what they thought of it, but Myrna choking at the news and the expression of disbelief



and jealousy forming on her face was so priceless I thanked whoever had carried the gossip out of the palace walls.

Were her words worth an answer from me? I did not think they did. And just because I wished to give her a taste of her own medicine, I ignored her and resumed my earlier quest.

“You! You can’t turn your back on me Shyla! I am your que—” Her tantrum was cut short and when I turned to understand why, my eyes widened. Her hand was held up in the air by a larger armoured one.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, your majesty.” Gol! My heart was close to bursting at the sight of him protecting me in the manner he did. Wherever he’d come from, I thanked the gods for him too as he’d just saved me from an ugly fight with my own sister. My wolf had been begging to be let at her and if her slap had landed, holding back was not going to be my first instinct.

“How dare you! How dare you touch the queen of Xatis!” Her flawless skin took on a bloody shade as she spat her demands. Gol merely arched a brow as he dropped my sister’s hand and that seemed to infuriate Myrna even more, making her turn to her band of men.

“Defend your queen you imbeciles!” Myrna roared at the guards that had accompanied her. “Get this brute out of my sight!” The guards hesitated, getting even me curious. “What is this? You dare disobey your queen too!”

The guards still made no attempt to heed her demands but threw themselves at her feet. “This brute bears lady Liira’s insignia and unless you wish to go up against the Matriarch, we cannot touch him anymore than you can command him, my queen.”

I had yet to speak to Gol about how he came to be dressed in Xatis’s armour, but with the guard’s words I could guess Liira’s intent and it warmed my heart to no end.

“What?! I am the queen!”

“And you are in lady Liira’s courts. Uninvited, if I might add, your majesty.” The guard dutifully pointed out and nothing was more satisfying than the look of utter loss that settled on my sister’s face. “Not to mention that the whole of Xatis is truly indebted to the lady here whose bravery has saved the kingdom a lot of heartache.” The guards offered me grateful bows that caught me off



guard. The reverence with which they did so unsettled me too. I may have saved their king, but this...this was too much. And it seemed I was not the only one to notice.

“This is not over!”

Not by a long shot. I wished to say, but settled for Myrna’s not so graceful walk as she angrily marched away from me.

“I may have angered her highness.” I sighed as I watched her go while an unexpected feeling settled in my heart. I hated everything she’d done to me, all the hurt that was plaguing me still, but I couldn’t help being sad at how this fight reminded me of how much I had lost. And it was only the beginning.

“From what I witnessed, you were perfect.”

Mustering some semblance of calm, I playfully glared at Gol. “Witnessed? You mean you were here all this time and yet you left me to fend for myself?”

“It is time you learned to do that all by yourself. This place is worse than Dovah.”

“How so?” I scoffed at the smile that graced Gol’s face, no doubt glad about the opportunity to give me one more of his lessons.

He offered a hand that I gladly took. I hadn’t noticed it yet, but all those overwhelming emotions seemed to have taken their toll on me and I felt a little drained of my strength. “In Dovah, your enemy is everyone who is not you and protecting yourself is easier in such a place. While here, your enemy might be the one you share your bed with.”

I was aware of the treachery that could exist within palace walls but I wondered if he meant Myrna or my own mate. Either way, after the disaster of a morning, treachery was not what I wished to be pondering on. I longed for some peace, quiet and food. But that was not to be had yet as someone suddenly stepped in front of us.

## **The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 30 - Tips**

“You stayed?” My eyes widened at the sight of the maiden who had defended my wolf in front of Myrna.

"My lady." She bowed impossibly low in front of me, the action rubbing me the wrong way. She was a noble lady who did not need to do such a thing, especially not towards me. I would have scolded her for it too, but I had had enough of that and did not wish to let my emotions run wild all over again. Was I even in the position to scold someone in her shoes?

"Please rise. This is so unnecessary." I pulled Gol to the side with every intention to be on our way, but the maiden blocked our way keeping us rooted on our spot.

"Please, my lady, at least let me have some semblance of good news for my mother who expects me to make allies in the palace."

I frowned. "Allies?" I turned to Gol who seemed to have understood the maiden's weird request but clearly refused to get involved.

"My mother expects me to make allies here." The maiden sighed, her eyes taking in her surroundings as if the whole place overwhelmed her. "You happen to be the first noble lady my heart has genuinely sought to befriend." A timid smile graced her lips, making me think that in another lifetime, one where I was actually a noble lady, she would be someone I could befriend too.

"I do appreciate what you did for me and your desire to befriend me, but I am no one, so I might not be the ally you seek." I was not searching for allies, neither did I wish Myrna's wrath to fall on this poor maiden for my sake, even though I had a feeling that was already too late.

"If you can put the wretched witch...I mean her majesty in her place so spectacularly, I care not for your status in this wretched world." She scooted over and clasped my hand desperately. "If not an ally, then a friend, please, my lady?" I was at a loss for words and Gol's refusal to interfere was not helping me at all.

"Lady Carlytte?" A familiar voice drew all our attention, rescuing me from having to give an answer I did not possess.

"Astryn?!" The desperate maiden suddenly had her eyes lighting up at the sound of the loudest person I'd met in the palace and what followed left me mesmerized.

"I thought you'd been sent to the gallows!" The two maiden's embraced in the fondest of embraces that painfully reminded me of what I had lost. Once upon a time, that was me and Myrna. Best of sisters, best of friends.

"I would have, if it were up to my aunt." Astryn scoffed before a bright smile graced her lips. "But thank the gods who made me bump into his majesty instead. He was the one to save me as he needed something from me." Astryn turned my way, her face flushed and I growled at the thought of what that could mean. It did not even matter that I was annoyed with him at the moment.

"He needed something?" The words slipped out of my mouth before I could put a rein on them.

"I swore to never speak of it." Astryn mumbled and I growled, making her open her mouth quicker than I could blink. "Do you promise to protect me if he does come to cut out my tongue?"

"What?"

"Well, he did mention that that would be my punishment if I ever did let it out that he wished me to be by your side because you needed taking care of and you wouldn't be able to refuse me that easily."

"He needed you to convince me to let you stay?" I felt a little ashamed at the accusations I had leveled against Astryn in my thoughts.

"Well, you can be quite stubborn, my lady. And I suppose his majesty knew that when he sought my help." My lips twitched, making the other maiden relax a fraction. "So it wasn't about me then?" My stupid heart leapt at the real reason she ever came at all. He wished for me to be taken care of...

"But it was my lady." The maiden defended fiercely, earning a smile from me. "I knew I had to meet you as I said and his highness's request could not have come at a better time. And speaking of threats, perhaps it's time you headed back to the castle and have something to eat as lady Liira will surely have my head if you stay hungry."

My stomach chose that particular moment to make the most embarrassing noise. "My belly seems to agree with you." I muttered. I was not eager to face him, but I did need to eat.

"Oh thank the gods!" Astryn exclaimed, earning herself a questioning look that sent her fidgeting with her tiny fingers. "Well, after what just happened I thought I might have had to drag you back there kicking and screaming."

Carlytte's giggles kept me from adding a smart reply. "This is so refreshing!" The carefree noble lady sighed, making me frown.

"What is?"

"This palace has finally been graced by real people. Do you know how I have longed for that?" I did not, but as the maiden's smile grew wider, I knew I had to let her enjoy whatever that was a little longer.

"Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

"Well, it would be a little too forward of me and so unladylike, but I never did care for any of those rules anyway." Before I could stop her, Carlytte bowed. "I'd be honoured, my lady." I cringed at the formal way she addressed me.

"Please do not do that. And my name is Shyla. It would please me if you called me by that, instead of all that." I gestured at the formal way she addressed me.

"If you insist."

"I do."

"As you wish." A broad smile on her face, Carlytte straightened up as she reached for my hand but it got yanked away just as the ground disappeared from under me. And before I realized what was happening, I landed into familiar arms. His scent, a welcome assault on my senses as my annoyance towards him faltered. I inhaled to my heart's content, much to my wolf's delight. I would resume being annoyed at him later.

"Stay away from her!" His menacing growl sent Carlytte bowing in submission and me pulling back from the pleasureable endeavor and gaping at my mate. He offered no explanation, however, but merely marched towards the palace while carrying me as if I weighed nothing. And as much I loathed his actions at the moment, I knew attempting to escape his hold would be a futile endeavor. I could only wait until I found my feet on the ground again.

That seemed to take forever as silence stretched between us and questions about his harsh reaction towards Carlytte demanded answers. I did not know the maiden at all, but nothing about her had been questionable to warrant his anger. I made

certain to avoid catching the glimpse of his neck too so as not to unearth my own anger towards him.

“Why do you insist on putting yourself in danger?!”

Back in that intimate garden, my feet finally found the comfort of the ground again, but it was not as peaceful as I wished, nor was I completely free. “I am not a child!” I met my mate’s cold gaze with a glare. I did not appreciate his scolding tone. “Neither did I ask for you to take care of me.” Hurt flashed across his face that I was only noticing had several claw marks that were almost healed. Had he fought his way to get to me? I fought the warm sensations that sought to creep up on me at the thought.

“You are mine, Shyla!” He growled. “And whether you permit it or not, I will take care of you. As my mate—”

“What is this?!” I could not let him complete that declaration. Such things weakened me and I couldn’t have that at the moment, so I chose to defend the one I hoped would be a friend, instead of facing another moment that would only prey on my weakness. “Carlytte is my guest!” I was not even sure I was allowed to have guests, but I couldn’t stomach the distrust and rudeness being showered on someone who’d defended me and only sought to be a friend.

“You know nothing about her!”

“I know nothing about you either!” Except all the pain. I sought to push him away, but his grip on me only tightened.

“Then get to know me, Shyla.” His tone softened instantly and his fiery gaze turned a shade that glued my own gaze to his, weakening me still. Heart skipping too many beats at a time, I drowned in his gaze. What was he asking of me?

He cupped my cheeks and I froze as my body reacted, and yearned for something more than a simple touch. “We can start all over again. You do not have to forgive me...just...please give us a chance.”

Start all over again? A chance? Was he asking to court me? My belly fluttered at the thought. It was tempting, but he was no longer mine. Myrna's mark painfully reminded me of that fact. "I'm hungry." I shoved past him as I headed back to the table. I couldn't do this on an empty stomach. I couldn't do this at all.