

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 4

My saving grace had turned out to be a devil in disguise. The moment I hit the water, it had sucked me in, drawing me down deep and violently taking the little breath meant for the life I was so desperate to hold on to.

I had kicked, thrashed, fought in its belly, but it would not let go. For a beat, then two and eventually more, leaving it to pronounce its victory. With nothing to hold on to I had given up for the first time that day. My tears blending in with my unlikely enemy as it carried me to wherever those who lost to it were doomed to spend their eternity.

"You are so far away from home, little wolf."

Little wolf?! My eyes snapped open to a tall dark figure hovering over me. It turned out the moon goddess had somehow given me another chance. I was alive, but I might as well have been dead. I felt dead...tired. My body was not my own. Not even lying down could mask the aches I felt all over me. And the beast's eyes who's gaze on me never wavered reminded me that I was not out of the woods yet. He'd found me!

My heart leapt in my throat while sweat prickled all over my body that was naked? I was naked, save for a blanket that I had surprisingly kept holding on to even as the surge of fear I felt soared.

Plagued by the need to escape, my eyes flickered to my surroundings and every drop of my blood drained when I found myself trapped. The place was small. A shack, barely lit, with a door bolted from the inside. I was his prisoner. After everything I had suffered to get away, I still ended up in the beast's lair. My throat tightened. How much more was I meant to endure? I could feel my fight wavering, heart seeking to surrender to what fate had in store for me.

"W-What did you do to me?" I shrunk back in the bed and I yelped when something pricked my naked back.

"Save your life?" His tone was rough and intimidating, but it instantly had me relaxing an inch. I had never heard it before, which only meant one thing. I squinted my eyes to confirm my suspicions.

"You are not him." Relief washed over me. Despite being locked up with a stranger who could do whatever he wished at any moment, I forced myself to

sit up on the bed and let out a breath. It was foolish of me or perhaps it was the words he'd just spoken.

"You saved me?"

"What in God's name is a young thing like you doing in these lands?" He demanded, his concern surprising me.

"I live here. My fa—" I stopped myself when I realized what I was about to say. "I have lived in the forgotten village all my life." A life I don't have anymore. I looked away from those piercing eyes before a lone tear fell. I shouldn't have been wasting my precious tears on them, but everything was so very raw and my heart was still bleeding.

"Except this is no forgotten village, little wolf. You are a long way from home."

My eyes snapped back to his. "W-What did you say?" He held my gaze, eyes searching mine as though I was a riddle he was meant to solve. In the dim light, I could not see much of him except his eyes. He was a wolf, no doubt, but without my own wolf, I could not tell any other thing about him. That left me with a dangerous option. Trusting a stranger.

"What were you doing floating in the devil's waters?" His voice assumed a scolding tone that had me wishing to offer an explanation. But remembering he was a stranger, I held my tongue. My trust could only go so far.

"Dying. Until you saved me apparently." Only then did I think of searching my body for injuries. Torn flesh or anything of the sort. There was none. Apart from the aches I felt, I was unharmed.

"It's a wonder everything is still intact." He scoffed.

"Everything?" I clutched the blanket close to my chest, my eyes widening.

"Should I have left you to freeze to death or with some deadly injury hidden somewhere?" He arched a brow, looking every bit unrepentant for having laid his eyes on my naked self. It would make him the second man to see my nakedness and I did not know how I felt about that. Fate seemed determined to make that choice for me.

"You could have shut your eyes." I glared at him and he only rolled his eyes in response before reaching for my dress that had been neatly folded.

"You would not wake up and were not bleeding on any part of you, I had to make sure you were okay. Hard to do that with my eyes closed." He handed me the dress which I grabbed forcefully. I hated that he kept making sense each time he opened his mouth.

"Do you mind?" I raised a brow when he just stood there waiting for me to change. He reluctantly faced the door and once I was sure he would not peek at me, I dropped the blanket.

"You said I was a long way from home." I asked, my hands fumbling to get my garment on quickly. "Where exactly am I?"

"Dovah."

I froze. "Dovah?" His earlier concern finally made sense. I had heard tales of the land filled with outlaws. A land of thieves, murderers and every kind of filth spat out of the worst of places of kingdoms like Xatis. A land where each man was his own law and death followed you like your own shadow. It was certainly no place for a youngling like me. I was definitely far from home. "H-How did I end up here?"

"Must have floated all the way here." I almost laughed at the irony of it all. Perhaps the devil's waters may have had an inkling of fate's plan for me. I was an outlaw after all.

"We are in the outer parts of Dovah. You get some peace and quiet around here, unlike the inner parts." I perceived his words where meant to comfort me, but I knew better. No place was safe in Dovah.

The man got up and walked up to the door to open it. Light flooded the inside of the shack when he did and one look at him sent me shifting nervously on my spot. I was hit with a clear view of his appearance that fitted the very idea of an outlaw.

He towered over me by what seemed like miles, his own roof was not high enough, leaving him to bend a little while he stood. His hair was shaved off, save for a thick line of locks that ran from the front to his nape where its entire length was braided. Tattoos covered every inch of his shaved head, down to his neck. Scary images of beasts littered the layers of his skin like it was his second skin. His arms were not left out too, making me think the ink could extend to his entire body. His face, however, was surprisingly free of that scary art, save for the scars from injuries sustained in a fight no doubt.

He caught me staring. "Do I scare you?"

"No." He should have, but for some strange reason I was not scared. A bit uncomfortable being alone with him, but that was all. Perhaps it was because he had had every opportunity to do anything he wished to me and yet all he had done was take care of me. Or perhaps that was the naive maiden in me speaking.

He studied me with those piercing eyes for a moment and I wondered if he could see past me and into my shattered soul. "I have something for you." He opened his hand and took my breath away.

"I...I...what is that?" I gaped at a very beautiful ring that glistened even in the very little light that covered his little home.

"A ring?"

Surely he wasn't asking me to – "Is that the price I have to pay for you saving me?" Realization sparked in his eyes and they widened.

"I do not need anyone." He snorted.

"Then what–"

"It's yours."

"You are giving it to me?" My mind raced, seeking to understand why he would choose to freely give me such a priceless jewel. We had only met and I was no one to him, except a burden he had been forced to watch over by fate.

"It fell out of your garment while I sought to dry it."

My jaw dropped. "I have never laid my eyes on it before in my life."

"Well, neither have I before it fell out of your garment." When I wouldn't take it still, he shoved it in my hands.

"Why don't you take it?" I blurted out the moment I held it. The ring possessed a heaviness I was not willing to carry around. The heaviness was not in weight, but something else. For some strange reason, I felt bound to it even when I had never seen it before in my life. "Take it as a payment for saving my life." I hastily placed the ring in front of me.

"I have no need of such fancy things. Besides you look like you need it more than I do. You know, when you leave and all." His words reminded me of my predicament. I had nowhere to go even if I wanted to. I had no family, no place to call home. I had nothing even when he insisted I owned the precious ring.

"Do not look so alarmed. I have no intentions of chasing you." My eyes flickered to the stranger I had woken up to. His features had softened as he spoke. "You can stay as long as you wish, and you can leave whenever you wish. That is if you can stomach living with a disgusting old wolf."

I smiled at that. With all the betrayal I had just gone through, it was somewhat refreshing to encounter someone so brutally honest. Against my better judgement, I threw myself at him in a hug that was more for me than him. His kindness overwhelmed me.

"Such stupid things get many killed." He snorted. "Trust must be earned, not assumed after a bunch of empty words."

"My being here is enough trust earned on your part and your words are not empty. Perhaps they are the first honest ones I have heard in my entire pathetic existence." If I was being honest, I was drawn to his forwardness. It served to make me comfortable around him and to strangely trust him. It made me wish to stick with him, while I pondered on how to sail through my shattered life. If fate had brought me to him, perhaps this is where I needed to be.

He angled his head and stared thoughtfully. "Not the response I was aiming for, but it will have to do." He wasn't going to pry. I appreciated that. "Hungry?"

"Depends."

"On what exactly? Are you the choosy type?" He looked almost ready to take back his offer.

"On whether it's poisoned."

His lips twitched, softening his features further. "You are alright, little wolf. This way." He held out his hand and I took it, wincing a little at the pain that came with abandoning my sitting position.

“My name is Shyla.” I mumbled, thinking it would be ungrateful of me to eat his food without him knowing my name, but he stared at me as if I was still insisting on being stupid.

“Gol.”

“What?”

“If you insist on being stupid then you might as well call me by my name which happens to be Gol.”

My lips twitched. “Nice to meet you Gol. May I ask for one more thing, however?”

“Anything.”

“Please do not call me little wolf.” His expression changed from surprise to confusion, but like with everything else, he only nodded without another word.