

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 51 - Tips

"A word my king."

I tensed. Was there no end to their shameless behaviour? I'd just helped Shyla sit comfortably in the carriage when the timid request came from behind me. Both her parents stood heads bowed in submission. The very sight of them roused the anger I had swallowed for my mate's sake since we've been here.

"We promise to take as little of your time as possible." The father insisted and despite my own desire to punish them as they deserved for what they'd done to my mate, I nodded. Because as strange as it would seem, I had had every intention to pay them a visit once I got Shyla back safely to the palace. While she may have declared that she'd heard enough, the anguish in her heart that I'd felt as though it were my own had been the one to speak. Not her. I knew she'd merely shied away from facing the ugly truth. I couldn't blame her for it either. Because, what was the point of facing anything that would change nothing of your circumstances but only make them worse? What was the point of getting your heart broken all over again by things one could not change?

I on the other hand had countless questions. Because while the truth still remained, it did not explain anything of their actions. Besides, something told me there was more than met the eye. And if by any chance it had anything to do with the hell looming over Xatis, I couldn't let this moment pass.

My decision made, my gaze found my mate. Shyla sat quietly, a far away look in her eyes that intensified the ache in my heart and highlighted my own inadequacies. I was failing her still. While I was doing everything I could to protect her from the trouble that threatened to take her away from me, I couldn't shield her from the monster that was heart break. The beast had dug its claws in so deep that every attempt to make it let go would result in more heart break.

It pained me to know that I had been the one to give the vicious monster life in the first place. I'd tried to vanquish it the best way I knew how, but that had barely made a scratch on its hide.

"I'll keep her safe." Rakon's mind link drew my attention.

“Keep your eyes open.” I repeated the words that had become our mutual way of parting from one another since my attack. The wounds inflicted may have healed, but that did not exactly mean the danger had been averted. If anything, everything was only beginning. That much I knew and the events that had sprung up all around Xatis and kept me awake and on my toes in the recent days were evidence of it.

Rakon nodded, eyes full of promise. It was the only way I could step away from them even right now. I gave her one last glance, taking in the motherly figure that was slowly taking over her maiden body. She was beautiful, but also very very broken.

“Lead the way.” I all but growled at the couple.

“Most certainly, your majesty.” They led me back into their tiny home and there lay my very first question, but I was not about to get into it yet.

“If you think I will go against her wishes, then you can think again.” I had noted the longing in their eyes when they noticed my mate’s bulging belly. They couldn’t even hide it when they shamelessly asked to be invited to the banquet. She’d said no. That had caught me by surprise but I understood her regardless.

“We wouldn’t dare conceive such a thought, your majesty. We have hurt her enough.” I only snorted to that. “You have to believe us when we say it was not our intention to hurt her.” They both bowed lower than necessary and it only served to annoy me.

“Tell me in what realm that makes even the remotest sense.”

They both stared at each other before their gazes dropped to the floor.

“Perhaps if my king would listen to our side of the story.”

“Your side of the story?” I arched a brow. “Tell me why I should bother to listen to criminals like you. Do you perhaps hope to sway the sorry image of parents you’ve painted of yourselves by your actions?”

“Of course not, your majesty. We are aware that no amount of words could ever erase that.”

“Then why bother?! Why would you do this to your own flesh and blood?!” I had thought nothing of it the time I rejected Shyla. Blinded by my own rage, I

had not cared for their actions. When they had emerged from their little home and offered their congratulations to Myrna and I. Not even when Rakon had pointed it out.

“A chance at a better life, my king.”

“A chance at a better life?!” Not that I thought there was ever going to be a fitting answer to their regratable actions, but– “You sold your own flesh and bl00d as livestock at the capital’s open market and for what?! A chance to eat warm bread?!”

They flinched at my tone. “We did not say we were proud of it, my king.” Their heads hung lower, but it was not enough to avert my growing rage. “Why don’t you tell me how exactly you meant to accomplish that?” I growled. I’d been aware of only bits of it from what had been exchanged between my chosen mate and mate.

“It was always meant to be something to benefit us all.” Shyla’s father began and the more he spoke the more I realized that referring to them as sorry parents was a compliment they did not deserve.

“You have to know that it was always Shyla’s choice. If only she’d said no–”

“You preyed on her love for her sister, her love for you! Does that speak of choice to you?!” Silence remained their answer. “You asked to have a word, what is it you seek from me?” Annoyance prickled.

“A king’s protection.”

Curiosity replaced my annoyance. “Why would you need that and who from?”

“Your queen?”

Myrna? “She’s your daughter.”

“And yet here we are.” I studied their faces, searching for any indication that he was not serious about it. There was none.

“Not here. And whether you get my protection or not depends on what you have to say.” They had my protection. I’d already decided that. By virtue of my mate’s love for them that I knew had not faded. It was bruised, but it was still

there. For her sake I would protect them, but I wasn't about to tell them of that yet.

"I do not know if this is of any significance." Something lit up in the man's eyes. I refused to acknowledge it and kept walking. "There is a reason we call her our moonlight." I could have walked out, but the mention of my mate made me stop and face her father. "The night she was born, a terrible storm was raging and unfortunately she'd needed the attention of a physician if she was to survive the night or survive at all. The roads were treacherous, but having no choice, we braved the bad weather and journeyed for the closest district to the forgotten village. We'd barely stepped out of the boundaries of our village when my wife could not go on any longer. The birth, it turned out, had taken a toll on her and her wolf healing was not working fast enough so we searched for shelter. Just something to shield them from the storm while I proceeded to get the physician. Miraculously, there was an empty cottage nearby. But that would not be the only miracle to be had that night. When I did finally return with the physician, the storm had ceased, the moon was shining and right there in the moonlight, lay my wife peacefully, our daughter in her arms and in need of no medical attention at all.

"It was a miracle we've always been grateful for. Until now."

I could have easily dismissed his words as coming from someone grasping at straws while they sought to escape the burden of their actions, but I couldn't. Because whatever he'd said held a hint of significance. Whether it was actually significant I did not know.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 52 - Tips

"There is absolutely no doubt those wretched beings are her mother and father!" Liira ranted the moment she entered my study. "Even though, after today, I gather they'll think twice about making it known openly."

I leaned back in my seat. "Are you certain?" I had seen it in their eyes, felt the conviction in their words. There was no struggle against my command, but I thought a second opinion from probably one of the best wolves I knew could sniff out a lie couldn't hurt. Liira had been more than glad when I had laid out the entire events leading up to my rejection of my mate.

"Is that not the reason you'd let me at them?" Liira tugged at her cloak a little too forcefully, an indication of her frustration. "Although, I can't promise that I stuck to your expectations of me." That meant many things, but I wasn't going

to linger on any of those she'd chosen. Because whatever it was, I was sure it was still less than what they deserved.

"Well, that settles their surprise at their own daughter having shifted too soon." Rakon mumbled from beside me.

Liira scoffed. "With what they have done, I wouldn't put it past them to use that fact for their own benefit." That had been another reason I'd agreed to their request. Despite Shyla's parent's seemingly repentant hearts, I still did not wish to give them a reason to use their daughter or anything about her as a reason to secure their own safety.

"Unfortunately, this still leaves us pretty much in the same position." I sighed. It still left Shyla in the same position. If not, worse.

The ride back to the palace had been quiet, with her gaze lost on the world outside. She had not even once asked what her parents had asked of me. I was grateful for that. Because even when I knew that she did not wish for them to suffer, knowing they'd asked a favour of me so soon and that I had granted it would have only added to her anguish.

Once we got back, she had wished for nothing but sleep and my presence. I had been happy that she'd asked me to stay, but my happiness had faded with the sight of how the events of the visit to her parents had taken a toll on her. She'd tossed and turned almost the entire night when she slept. Her whimpers had filled the vast room of her chambers, not even my touch meant to comfort felt enough.

"Not exactly." Liira wore a satisfied smile. "Your would be inlaws, as promised, had quite a bit to say besides trying their hardest to convince this old wolf that they spoke the truth."

"Which is?"

"Your queen, it turns out, has not always been the selfish piece of work that you wedded. Even though quite ambitious, once upon a time she was just as sweet as they come. Until the day she'd set her eyes on the palace." Liira paused at the sound of a knock on the door while I tried and failed to picture Myrna as anyone sweet.

"Your tea, my lady?"

“Oh thank you Astryn.” Liira sipped before continuing. “It so happened that after shifting and during a trip to the capital, she caught sight of a prince and fell in love at first sight. Oh so she’d told her parents. The tale would not end there either, as even when she was certain she was not mated to you, she already saw herself by your side.”

The very idea unsettled me. “How in the world did she get exactly what she wished for?” Not even fate was that thorough.

“That, my dear king, is what brings me to my second point.” Liira suddenly lost all her charm as she moved closer to the edge of her seat. “Gol’s theory is apparently not so far from the truth. Fate may have had something to do with how you met your chosen mate, but that is not all there is to it. According to her parents, it began with simple jewellery, a few fancy dresses, small pouches of gold. It by no means made them rich, but it was enough to entice them into agreeing to her plan of being the one to be chosen. Their assumptions place whoever had been the one to whisper such thoughts into their daughter’s ears right in your palace.”

“That makes no sense. Why drag my mate into their plot? Why couldn’t they do this without her?”

“I think the question should be why Myrna who happens to be the sister to the mate you almost did not find? The mate they made sure was unacceptable even if you did find her.” All eyes landed on Rakon, but it was Gol who seemed to have the most ridiculous answer, yet terrifying for me.

“I think the question should be why Myrna who happens to be the sister to the mate you almost did not find? The mate they made sure was unacceptable even if you did find her.” All eyes landed on Rakon, but it was Gol who seemed to have the most ridiculous answer, yet terrifying for me.

“Because whoever it is, knew or knows something about your mate.” Memories of the attack in Dovah, the demands the attackers had made rang in my head. I still did not know why they were after Shyla. All my investigations had been dead ends.

I turned to Liira. “Grandmother?”

She cursed in response. “Perhaps we’ve been looking at this wrongly all this time.”

“You must focus on every noble house. Important or not.” Gol spoke up. I’d done that. A thousand times already and still nothing.

The riots that seemed insignificant were growing in size each day and the restlessness of the people had become something that could not be ignored. And those strings I knew were being pulled in the shadows, were getting tighter as even those districts unknown to get rattled by such were slowly being sucked in.

Council meetings held to try to sniff out the culprit holding the other end of the leash had yielded nothing. The noble lords still remained their usual pain, but none had let anything incriminating themselves slip. Not even Evarius had stepped a toe out of line. The only thing unusual was his unwavering support for the upcoming royal banquet that he seemed willing to empty the entire coffers of his noble house for, just so the event turned out grandeur than those held in times past.

I could drag Myrna out. Force a confession out of her, but even I knew from history that the enemy never showed their hand so easily. Not if their eyes were set on a high prize like the throne of Xatis. Perhaps I could take a lesson from history once again. I turned to Gol. “Tell me about Carene.”

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 53 - Tips

“Carene had always been a safe haven.” Gol spoke of the once peaceful yet powerful kingdom that had fallen unexpectedly. In a matter of hours to be exact. Despite the heaviness of his words, he smiled. It was the first time I’d seen him do that in the absence of my mate. The pain was evident on the edges, but it was a smile regardless. “The noble house of Alde was its proud protector. Under Alde’s watch, Carene had known peace, abundance.”

I’d learned of Alde. The famed warrior house of Carene as early as I had began my own military training. The house of Alde, descendants of noble warriors and protectors of the royal house. It was a task they prided themselves in generation after generation and with good reason. They were perfect at it. Some even believed that the moon goddess together with the gods had shared their very essence with the first Aldean warrior of whom the house of Alde had descended from. They were gods in their own right. For generations, plots against kings had been foiled, wars waged had been won, battles that raged had been quelled with so much ease that choosing to anger Carene by any kingdom had been considered a suicide mission.

So then how did a perfect generation of perfect warriors suddenly fail and let its kingdom fall in a matter of hours?

“Everything had began just as simply. An angry mob here. Unhappy kingdom folk there. Unhappy over the simplest of things. It is such that saddened the king the most and he had wished for nothing than to ensure his own people were always happy.” Admiration for his king dripped with every one of Gol’s words.

“To keep the king happy, one of such had taken me from his side. I’d gone on a diplomatic mission when a seemingly simple boundary dispute had tensions rising between the northern region of Carene and our neighbours. Those present at the negotiations from our neighbouring kindgom had demanded for nothing less than a lord from Carene and being the lord of the house of Alde, I had been the one to ride north.

Confident of my own expertise and knowing of the approaching feast of the moon, I had only ridden north with two of my best riders. Leaving my brother as per custom to stand in for me as lord of our house and ensure the royal house’s safety. It was the worst mistake of my entire life.” Anger came off in waves as Gol narrated what I was already beginning to comprehend as the worst betrayal to befall a man, a leader. “The dispute was resolved quicker than I had even planned and armed with good news I had ridden back to the capital in haste. The views of smoke, of burning buildings in the capital had been the ones to greet me on my arrival, however. The news I bore forgotten, I rode for the palace as one mad, all the while trying to link my brother. My mind link has never been as silent as it was that day. It was only when I’d been refused entry to the palace gates that what had befallen Carene had dawned on me.” Gol finally held my gaze. His, was marred with pain. The sight of a man who had been burdened by his own failure to do the very thing impressed upon his heart. “It is always those close to you, those that covet what you possess that are the most dangerous. With the entire royal house poisoned during the feast of the moon, my brother had ascended to the throne without opposition. Those of the house of Alde who refused to stand with him were met with the same fate as the royal house. My own household included.” A deep painful sigh and he was done.

I could only store of the mon that I now held in deep respect. Not only because he was the true lord of the house of Alde, but because he’d remained strong even after the pain. Strong enough and lasted long enough to be my mother’s savior when she’d washed up in the devil’s river.

His was a tragedy. One that could have driven many wolves insane. How he hadn't gone mad only the gods knew. What did one say to such a man?

"Xotis does not have to suffer the same fate." Liiro declared, thankfully.

Gol nodded with more conviction than I had expected. "It doesn't." The sound of a sword and another being unsheathed brought my guard up instantly.

"Drop it, or I'll send your head tumbling away from your wretched body." Rokon let out a menacing growl as the tip of his sword rested on Gol's neck. The two men's movements had been like a flicker of light. Gol's own sword glimmered in the light.

"It is not what you think, soldier." The outlaw did not even flinch, displaying the fearless Aldeon blood that flowed in his body.

"Drop it." Rokon may not have been a lord nor a descendant of Alde, but the head of my king's guard was equally impressive. Spurred on by a weapon being drawn in the presence of his king.

"Oh knock it off you two." Liiro scolded and only then did the two relent, with Rokon returning to my side reluctantly.

Gol on the other hand took on an unexpected position as he dropped to one knee before laying his large sword on the ground before him. Surprised by his action, my gaze darted to Liiro before falling back on the outlaw. "The house of Alde maybe no more, but I, as its lord, today offer to be protector of the royal house of Xotis."

Liiro grinned, Rokon gaped and me? Well, I couldn't wrap my head around what would make him change his mind at all. I recalled his demands clearly when he'd agreed to remain by Shylo's side. His recent ones when he'd agreed to help in exchange for revenge.

I could only stare at the man that I now held in deep respect. Not only because he was the true lord of the house of Alde, but because he'd remained strong even after the pain. Strong enough and lasted long enough to be my mate's savior when she'd washed up in the devil's river.

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“For her.” Gol spoke and I knew who he meant. “Because of her, the house of Alde can once more reclaim its glory. I no longer wish to run from the ghosts of my past.” I could do nothing but nod, yet not out of pity, but out of admiration and respect and the fact that I knew that even though he was one man, he was a worthy ally.

“Well, that was unexpected.” Liira was beaming as Gol and Rakon walked out, so much one would think we had just won the war. I on the other hand was still overwhelmed by what had just transpired and I couldn’t help my mind shifting to my mate. No lands, kingdoms, not even titles and yet a lord swore to protect me in her name. And what had I done?

"This should make you happy."

"It does."

"It doesn't seem like it."

"I am." And that was the truth, but—

"When will you stop punishing yourself?" Liira looked askance at me.

"I am doing no such thing."

She scoffed. "Because burying yourself in all these kingdom matters just comes naturally to you and it is something you desperately need to do."

"Incase you have forgotten, I happen to be this kingdom's king." I shoved at whatever lay in front of me on my table, rearranging them in no particular order as Liira's words struck a nerve.

"You forget that I have known you since before you were barely a pup in your mother's belly. Spit it."

"There is nothing to spit and I'm afraid—"

"You have barely slept in like forever, working day in and day out. Do you perhaps think k!lling yourself will right your past wrongs and maybe magically mend what has been broken?"

"Believe me, if I even thought there was a slim chance that such a thing were possible, I would have slit my own throat—"

"Don't be ridiculous." Liira scolded. "If you think that your death would somehow undo what you have done then you have so much to learn about the bond that binds you to your mate." She'd hidden it. To someone who did not know her, they would have clearly missed the quake in Liira's voice, but I hadn't. It had been years since grandfather had passed and even when she spoke not of him, coming close to speaking of him in a conversation had always given me a glimpse of the pain Liira had tucked away in the crevices of her heart.

Lips pursed, not knowing what to say, I merely stared as her words made me realize how stupid my decision to stay away from Shyla had been.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 54 - Tips

I was no cry baby. Even when life got tougher back in the forgotten village, tears were never my source of relief or an outlet for my frustrations or pain. But that was when I had what I thought was the perfect family. When all I had to do was seek out a sister who'd always listen, a mother who'd comfort me with the best embrace, a father who'd help me dust myself up and encourage me to keep going. That was when everything was perfect.

Now...? Now I was all alone and that perfection was marred with betrayal, leaving me drunk on distractions to keep going each day. To keep the tears at bay, to keep from drowning in the lie that had been my life, I had turned to distractions. Etiquette lessons with Liira, Tea and long walks with Carlytte, Naps that Liira claimed were good for the child I carried. And right now, I was as a doll draped in fine material.

"Oh, my lady, this is absolutely beautiful! Total perfecti—"

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you." Lord Quent snapped at Carlytte whose hand froze inches away from caressing a piece of cloth attached to my body.

"I had no such intentions, my lord." The maiden bowed to which the usually calm god of design only snorted.

"Whatever your intentions lady Carlytte, keep them away from my very important work." The man dismissed her with annoyance.

Lips curled in a pout, Carlytte shot the lord a displeased look. "How then is one supposed to admire a master's handiwork."

"Your house is well vested in this art, why don't you go and appreciate your own—"

"Oh, but lord Quent, Xatis may appreciate being dressed by the third noble house, but nothing places sophistication, elegance, out of this realm beauty in one garment quite like the fourth house. Please do not let my uncle get wind of his niece singing praises for the competition." Carlytte whispered the last bit which was quite pointless in a room full of wolves.

"Well—" Lord Quent paused, his posture suddenly taking on the shape of a man proud of his accomplishments.

And that was how the beast was conquered. I watched with amusement as the noble lord of the fourth house drove himself deeper into Carlytte's trap as he delved into speaking of the intricacies of patterns and designs. Laying out fancy materials for her to admire, parchments bearing patterns of more pieces that were meant to be added to my gown. And each time her big brown eyes grew wider in fascination it only served to spur the noble lord on.

"I do not know how she always gets him to loosen up. More so for someone who belongs to a rival house." Astryn observed when she joined me in the large room that had been turned into lord Quent's work space.

"It is so much easier than you think." I grinned, thinking of how Carlytte had merely preyed on the man's pride to get it done.

"And quite entertaining for you, I see?"

"Well, I can't say I am not." My admission of guilt slipped out of my mouth before I could put a rein on them. "That is not proper for a lady, is it?"

"It beats sore eyes and a puffy nose by miles. For you, I'd say it suits you." The understanding that lit up my maid's eyes warmed my heart. "How did today go?"

Appreciating the change in topic, I turned to stare at my reflection. "There is finally something to fit. Well, if the bits and pieces that are being pinned to my body count." As the days neared the one set for the banquet, the fittings had become more frequent and a bit tiring, but I was not complaining as they were one more distraction from thoughts I wished not to indulge in. I could do with a break, however. And as if Astryn read my mind, she came to my rescue.

"I'm afraid dinner will be ready soon." She apologized to a maiden who was about to place one more piece over my shoulders. "My lady here needs to freshen up before then."

"Of course, I will just get these." The seamstress worked with ease as she carefully unpinned every piece of fabric and once I was finally free, a cloak replaced them.

"Will his majesty be joining us?" That perhaps remained the best distraction of all. It was just food and silence and yet in his presence I found the best comfort. Since the visit to my parents, I'd seen less of him during the day, but he'd made sure to dine with me each night. Well, me and Liira.

“He will.” I froze when that did not sound like Astryn at all.

“Your majesty.” Astryn bowed hastily in greeting while all I could do was stare.

Was it possible for men to dress to impress? Or was it that by virtue of him being our mate, I and my wolf would always find him so...so irresistible?

There was something about him. He’d definitely had a bath, but that was not was it. Not even the lazy way he leaned on my chamber’s door waiting for me, which I found weirdly attractive too and struggled to keep my wolf from purring.

“Does my lady perhaps wish to dine by herself tonight?” Concern flashed in his eyes.

“Of course not!” I blushed at my own forceful answer. “I merely wished to know if you would be joining me— us tonight.”

“Well, I’m pleased to let you know that I am.” He smiled, pointing me straight ahead to the something I thought was different about him. He smiled. He was here. All of him. He seemed more relaxed and more at peace. Definitely different from the man who’d seemed as though the weight of the entire realm was on his shoulders the past couple of nights. I wondered what brought on the change.

“Are you just going to keep ogling his majesty, or are you actually going to walk into your chambers and take that bath after all?”

“Astryn!”

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 55 - Tips

I needed a distraction from my distraction. As insane as that sounded, it was the truth. My mate’s presence had been the best distraction from my sorrows and every other unwanted thought, but now I was afraid I would make a fool of myself, yet again.

Thanks to Astryn’s loud mouth, walking back out to meet him after I’d bathed and being held by him had left me too aware of his presence. It was expected, him being my mate and all, but not to the depth that had left my legs all wobbly. Not to a point where remaining upright was a miracle made possible only by his capable arm that he’d slid around my waist as he led us to dinner.

Despite being all here, my mate was awfully quiet still and it did nothing for my erratically beating heart.

“Your majesty, my lady.” Guards straightened up and greeted us on one more turn. And just like the last bunch, those whose eyes strayed to the way their king held me were left eyes wide or clearing their throats unnecessarily while others blushed like maidens. I on the other hand wished I could disappear.

An appreciative growl rumbled from his chest, drawing my attention and when I looked up to understand why I realized that in my quest to hide from every eye, I’d unknowingly drawn closer than intended to him, leaving our bodies impossibly close.

Attempting to pull back and leaving whatever amount of space possible between us was met with resistance. While his gaze was set on the path that led ahead, I learnt that that did not exactly mean so was every part of him. The very idea left me blushing all the way to the dining hall.

“Welcome, your majesty, my lady.” A guard swung the doors leading to a room I was now familiar with open.

“Thank you.” I rasped while my mate grunted a response. Liira was nowhere to be seen, but I knew she would be showing up sooner rather than later. The matriarch I had observed loved making grand entrances but was never late while at it. My usual seat was a welcome sight but judging by the reluctant way my mate let go of me, it clearly wasn’t for him. I watched with relief as he put the much needed distance between us. It was however short lived as he chose to sit right opposite my seat, his gaze meeting and holding mine for one spellbinding moment. No words were spoken and yet my heart fluttered to no end.

“Have you been waiting long?” Liira waltzed in, followed by a trail of maids bearing dishes of mouth watering food.

“We haven’t.” My mate rose in greeting as did I, but Liira was quick with sending me back into my seat with a disapproving look.

“Do not trouble yourself child.” Her scolding reminded me of something I’d been meaning to ask them both. It would have to wait, however. “Seeing you here looking so beautiful is all the greeting I need.” I blushed. Not so much because of the words, but who else heard them. I could feel his gaze on me the entire time. Probably agreeing with his grandmother totally.

“Shall we?” Liira’s gaze swept across our sitting arrangement, but if she thought anything of it, she did not voice any of her thoughts. But she did shoot her grandson a weird look. It was subtle but I saw it. I wondered what it was about. Their body language after also spoke of them mind linking, but judging by the unhappy look that graced Liira’s face, I knew she was not getting what she wished for.

“So stubborn.” She mumbled before looking up and instructing the maid’s to begin serving.

The food as always was to die for. The taste matched the aroma in equal measure and for the longest while it held all of my attention. The realm would have exploded and I would not have cared one bit. I was about done when a plate got shoved my way. I meant to shove it right back knowing from whom it had come. I really did. But then that smoky flavour of rabbit meat cooked on an open flame wafted straight up my nose and gave my hands a mind of their own. Didn’t Liira say my cravings should have eased up by now? I cared not for the answer to that as I dug in, tearing, biting at the soft flesh, satisfying my craving. Only the sight of the empty plate had me sitting back. “That was—” I bit back my compliment when I was reminded that I was not dining in my chambers and Astryr was not my audience. I picked up a napkin instead and patted my mouth as I should have done while I ate, instead of licking every drop of juice that had threatened to escape my mouth.

The maids and guards had somehow disappeared, leaving only Liira and my mate to witness the unladylike manner in which I ate. And despite their pleased faces, I wished the ground would swallow me at the ensuing feelings of embarrassment. I was grateful too when neither thought to say anything over it. When the silence stretched for too long, I couldn’t stand it.

“I wish to do something...” My voice sounded alien even as it carried in the silence and when it reached my very quiet audience, I was met with raised eyebrows. “...with my time. Perhaps see the capital and...”

“No!” It was my turn to arch a brow at my mate when he all but growled at my request. His features softened before I could read him. “The capital is dangerous—it is no place for a maiden in your condition.”

“I am with child, not an invalid.” Annoyance prickled. Being stuck in the palace was simply not enough.

He sighed. “I did not mean it in that manner. It’s— It’s just that it is not safe.”

"You could accompany me." I did not mean to invite him. Was it even proper to do so? My eyes flickered to Liira. The matriarch had a cup to her lips and her gaze seemed to go everywhere but on me and my mate. If she approved or disapproved of my request I could not tell. "Surely the presence of the king would be enough to guarantee my safety."

"My presence will only increase the risk of harm to you and the child you carry." He protested.

"Nonsense! You know she is right and as her nurse, I grant her all the permission she needs. Besides you need a break from that wretched throne of yours."

He scowled at his grandmother, but Liira paid him no mind and instead turned to me. "I will have Gol and Rakon prepare your day out. And if you must have the whole army of Xatis with you to ensure her safety, then an army you shall have." This she said to my mate and I could have sworn he took that as an insult.

"I can protect my own family, thank you very much." He all but growled and damn my stupid wolf and heart for swooning at his words. Family...

"Now that that is settled, I shall call it a night." Liira rose, a satisfied smile on her lips, making me wonder what she had to gain in my request being fulfilled.

"Would you care to join me gazing upon the stars?"

"What?" I was surprised by his invitation. Especially after being quiet for almost the entire time we ate.

"We have clear skies tonight and Liira swears that fresh air after a hefty meal is good for a goodnight's sleep."

I knew Liira's theories were true, but that was not the reason I accepted his invitation. "I would love to."

"Allow me." He helped me up and led me out of a set of open doors just as the maids came back in to clear up.

The breeze was colder than I expected, but my discomfort was shielded by his cloak that he placed on me. A smile broke out of my lips. "Thank yo-" My words died down in my throat as I was met with a sight I never thought I would

see ever again. My eyes sharpened in the little light wishing to make sure I was seeing right.

"It is not what you think." My mate was quick to point out and I hoped to the gods it was true. Because anything apart from that would plunge me into another sea of pain that would claim my soul anew.

"You don't have to." His hand rested on mine, sending those familiar tingles erupting along the entire length of it.

I ignored them and him. "But I do." I mumbled as I angled my head to get a better look. His jaw worked as my gaze settled on the mark, registering his displeasure at me seeing it. I ignored that too as I drew closer. A set of prints made by her lips. Myrna's kiss. A growl rumbled in my chest before I could stop myself. I hated the very idea of them sharing such an intimate touch, but unlike the first time I beheld it, I stopped to study it instead of running. I felt tension flow out of my mate's body too, making me realize he'd thought I would run.

How was it still here? It had not crossed my mind the first time I beheld the mark. Slipping my hand over it, he shuddered, and purred just as he would if my own mark rested there.

It was only skin deep and yet could not be erased? "How is this possible?"

"A spell." Bitterness dripped with his words.

"A spell? Can it be undone?" My wolf wanted it gone, I wanted it gone and before I knew it my tongue licked the spot and the most pleased growl escaped his lips, but also his grip tightened around me pulling me away.

Confusion and anger assaulted me. Did he not wish for it to be erased? He wanted her, more than me apparently. I struggled to get away, but there was no escaping him this time.

"Shyla, damn it! It's not what you think."

"Then what exactly is it, your majesty?" Shoving furiously at his chest, tears sought to spill, but I held them back. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"If and when you do mark me, I wish for it to be because you wish to spend forever with me. Not because you wish to erase my mistakes or your sister's."

I froze at his answer. It sounded honourable, but he was wrong. I wished for that mark to be gone, but not for the reasons he thought.