

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 61 - Tips

"You are glowing, lady Shyla."

"And fat." I smiled at Carlytte's reflection behind my own, my chubby cheeks bearing witness of the fact. I sat in front of my chamber's large mirror while she combed through my hair. It still felt strange to have someone do such simple things for me. All protests over it had fallen on deaf ears. Everyone was bent on making sure I did not lift even a finger to get anything done. I bet if one could breathe on my behalf, they would have willingly done so too.

"Not that I have served many pregnant she wolves, but you are the first of whom I've seen taking that fact with more enthusiasm than usually portrayed." Carlytte flashed her usual bright smile that fit like a glove in my mood today.

"What is there not to like?" I caressed my little bump that was very noticeable in my night gown. "I'm growing someone special right here." While Xatis was excited over their incoming heir, my joy stemmed from the simple fact that a part of me was growing inside of me. Someone I would love and who would love me simply. It was the knowledge of that that had brightened my days and helped keep all the sadness at bay.

Thanks to Zillah too. It had been days since I saw her and since she'd said her usual goodbyes that were as strange as her personality. But as always, her visit had left my soul feeling lighter and brighter. While she was known as the village's crazy lady all over the forgotten village, she'd been more than that to me. And apparently to my mate as well.

I hadn't yet wrapped my head around that fact. Having them share a bond similar to the one I shared with Zillah was still as unbelievable as the possibility of it having been shared among the three of us. Of course Zillah had merely scratched her head when questioned over the matter, leaving either of us with more questions than answers.

"Which do you prefer?" Astryn appeared holding two gowns that I thought were beautiful. Both were bright and covered in prints of lovely blooms that reflected the inviting weather outside and my own mood. Either would be fine. But even if they weren't, they would still be lovelier than the few gowns I possessed in the forgotten village, so I was not going to make a fuss either way.

"You know I do not care much about that, Astryn. I've worn little to nothing and I was never bothered."

Astryn's eyes widened. "Oh, but my lady, you are the future—"

"The mother to the future heir of Xatis, I know."

"Not what I was going to say." Astryn scowled. I knew what she was she intended to say, but I did not wish to hear anything of it. Simple. That is all I longed for as I went about my day today and all my days in the palace. If I did not need to face the grim and rainy part of my life, I'd bask in the sunshine without apology.

"You yourself said this was nothing more than a rehearsal, surely I'm not expected to be overdressed for something so simple." I pointed out, but the maid merely shook her head.

"You do not understand, my lady. Simple is far from it. The rehearsal for the banquet still remains a formal affair and should be treated as such. Besides, his highness will be in attendance." Astryn blushed and I rolled my eyes at the sight.

"I could be in sack cloth and his highness would still think I was the most beautiful maiden to enter the throne room's doors." I meant the words to be sarcastic, but as always they seemed to mean something utterly different to the hopeless romantics that surrounded me. Carlytte couldn't stop her mischievous grin, while Astryn kept sighing dreamily. Even Samara and Norae wore subtle smiles on their faces.

"You are right. He would not care." Astryn mumbled when she found some semblance of composure. "But we wouldn't be doing our duty if his highness only admired and didn't shake in his boots at the sight of his queen."

Carlytte was in stitches as I gaped at the maidens that surrounded me. "Has that been your aim all this time?" I'd witnessed the darkening of the gold in his eyes, the utter approval that sent his need souring together with my own, but this was not about enticing my mate. As glorious as it felt to be wanted, I did not wish to make invitations I was not ready to entertain. No matter how much I desired to have him pleasure me to no end. Again and again.

"Do not look so scandalized, my lady. It is only fitting for one to desire their mate." Carlytte cooed. "Moon goddess knows that once I meet mine, chosen or not, I do not intend to let them stray from my bed."

"Carlytte!" Colour bloomed in my cheeks while the noble lady merely giggled.

“It is the natural order of things among wolves, my lady. Mates especially.” Astryn added nonchalantly and somehow I knew that with all this talk, facing my mate later would be something of a thirsty challenge.

Someone knocked and I was grateful for the distraction. As long as it did not turn out to be my mate. It wasn't, thankfully. The familiar scent that flooded my chambers still kept my heart too calm to be him.

“Oh, the purple would be lovely and fitting. Don't you think?” Liira waltzed in looking every bit like the queen she was and one look at her made me realize what Astryn really meant about the rehearsal still being formal. I was also beginning to realize that royalty was always big on everything. Something that would take me a while to get used to. “Purple is the queen's colour and as my great grandson's mother it is only fitting that you wear it.”

Great grandson's mother and not 'future queen'. That was acceptable in my ears. As for being dressed in purple which was basically referring to me as future queen still? That, I realized, was something acceptable to everyone else who outnumbered my protests.

“You do not understand, my lady. Simple is far from it. The rehearsal for the banquet still remains a formal affair and should be treated as such. Besides, his highness will be in attendance.” Astryn blushed and I rolled my eyes at the sight.

“It's perfect!” Liira beamed once I was done and I couldn't very well disagree with her. Because the dress was. I did not hold lord Quent's expertise, but even I could tell that purple agreed with my skin tone and for whatever reason I couldn't wait for my mate to see me in it.

Walking out of my chambers, I was met with another reality my protests could do nothing about. The guards meant to watch over me had more than doubled. And that was apart from Gol, Samara and Norae who watched me like hawks. After my little escape of which Gol had more than a few words to say over, the three would not let me out of their sight even without being commanded to by my mate.

The walk towards the throne room left my heart skipping more beats in between the closer I came to seeing him. It had been a few hours since we'd had breakfast that was had over a casual conversation. Mostly concerning what I should expect during the rehearsal for the banquet. The desire to speak of more interesting matters was not lacking, save for the courage to do so. In

the end he'd left with a sure promise of seeing me soon. It was a simple goodbye that I had not realized meant much more. Up until now, I did not realize how much I had been looking forward to seeing him soon.

The doors to the throne room were gigantic, towering over our little group by miles, leaving me feeling very small. That coupled with the multitudes gathered inside whose gazes landed on me the moment our arrival was announced. It seemed I had underestimated Astryn's words.

"So many people." Anticipation to see my mate faded and I couldn't help but clutch onto Liira's gown as though I were a little girl. "Are there meant to be so many of them?"

"It is usually the case." Sensing my discomfort, the matriarch reached for my hand and squeezed. "Although I can assure you that most of them are merely here to satisfy their curiosity and get a glimpse of the mother to be before the actual banquet."

That did nothing for the cold feet that suddenly plagued me. "That is not encouraging." I mumbled.

"Your highness, my lady." Guards spilled out of the now open doors, each bowing low in greeting.

Liira acknowledged them before turning back to me. "Remember child, there is nothing to it. You might be the center of attention which can be overwhelming, but that is only because you are carrying the most precious gift Xatis could ever receive."

"Not to worry lady Liira." I froze at the sweet sound of the voice that had dripped with venom the last time I'd heard it. "As her elder sister, I will make sure she gets it right." Familiar hands slipped into mine naturally, but there was nothing natural about the contact that sent my wolf growling.

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"Oh, don't be shy sister." Myrna cooed, deepening my wolf's annoyance as I contemplated which parts of her I should bite off first. Her stupid mouth that bore her stupid grin while she uttered those stupid words or those hands that dared to wrap me in that very unwelcome embrace. "The throne room can be quite overwhelming. Take it from one who's had to walk down its very long aisle once before." Myrna pulled back, faux understanding glittering in her

eyes. "Of course, it's not like you are about to wed my husband or anything, but I do understand and as your elder sister—"

She was baiting me. With everyone of her words and fake smile, she sought to drive the knife of betrayal deep into my heart. Deep enough to bring out the beast in me that was barely holding on. She hoped I would give the multitudes a show. I could see it in her eyes. Beyond the pretense she'd mastered so perfectly. I could see her, the sister that never was. Could see the thirst to paint me as the tainted maiden I was. The uncultured beast that was not fit for their king. The unworthy mother whose blood would only taint the royal blood line if the bastard I carried was ever to be accepted.

She sought to make the stark contrast between me and her. The graceful queen versus the other maiden. The one who'd dared to disrupt hers and the king's love story. The one their beloved queen should hate and yet here she was, selflessly offering her enemy support. She hoped I would slap that support in her face ever so dramatically.

Unfortunately for her, I had been stupid once before. I had fallen head first into her trap of betrayal and lost the most important part of me while at it. I was not about to make the same mistake. And as painful as those memories were, I let them guide the storm brewing in my insides to a surprising calm. A calm that had me mustering the sweetest smile. "Your concern is truly admirable, Myrna, but rather misplaced, don't you think?" I peeled her hands off of mine ever so gently, while my wolf whined at being denied a more violent option. And yes, I might have been calm, but that did not mean I was feeling very respectful to stick to titles or formalities.

"Misplaced?!" Temper flared before she could compose herself. But it was too late.

"I did not mean to anger you, but merely intended to point out that I did not need you to hold my hand. It is merely a rehearsal after all. Besides, I have everyone I need right here. I turned to Liira, refusing to entertain Myrna a second longer. This was about my child, I was not about to grant her a piece of the moment by indulging in a meaningless exchange of words. "I'm ready."

"That you are." Pride sparkled in Liira's eyes, making me wonder what I had done to deserve it. "Remember, there is nothing to it and he will be right at the end waiting for you." Liira held her hand out, guiding me to the beginning of my journey while I felt every gaze settle on me. I was tempted to scan my

surroundings, but that would only make the easy task that much more difficult. As Liira had said, there was nothing to it.

My eyes instead, trailed the impossibly long aisle, all the way to the front and met golden ones. They were glowing with something beyond need. Something that seemed to reach deep into my heart and drew out my smile. It was the subtle invitation he needed to display his own pearly whites. Someone behind me cursed, but I paid them no mind as I focused up ahead. The sight of my mate grounded me and wiped at any lingering nerves, leaving only a desire to be by his side.

Bells rang signifying the start of my journey that without that golden gaze that held mine would have been a nerve wracking affair. I knew the multitudes were still present. Watching...judging, deciding on whether the gods had truly granted this seemingly simple girl the honourable task to birth their future king. I was the centre of their attention, but I also knew that I was the centre of his attention. That pleased my wolf to no end.

“Such poise and grace. A true queen if you ask me.” Someone marvelled as I walked past them. A compliment that should have left me beaming, but it turned out to be something I did not care for at all as my focus remained on my mate.

“Misplaced?!” Temper flared before she could compose herself. But it was too late.

Someone chanted in a loud voice. The high priest, I assumed. Whatever words that proceeded out of his mouth were in an unknown tongue. But even if they were in the common tongue, I doubted I would have heard them at all, because with every step, everything around me faded except for my mate.

This was by no means the wedding march Myrna had boasted about, but there was something about the way he took me in. The continual flexing of his muscles, the clenching and unclenching of his fists that spoke of his own anticipation. Eyes never leaving mine. “Was he perhaps shaking in his boots too?” I blushed at the thought that served to draw my attention away from my mate. It was only for a moment, but when I looked back up, he was no longer there. The spot where he’d stood a moment ago was empty.

“What in gods name is he doing?” Liira came to a stop right beside me, her expression displayed the confusion I felt. This was not meant to happen. At least not according to what Liira had said to expect.

“Probably realized what a mistake this whole charade is.” Myrna spat and only then did I realize that she’d stayed still. For what reason, only the gods knew.

“This is no time to let that bitter tongue of yours to run wild.” Liira glared at Myrna, before turning back to me. “Stay here. I’ll see what in God’s name is going on.” But before she could take another step, my mate reappeared, sending the whole assembly to their feet and their mouths breaking out in praises to their king. He’d had a change of clothes! Where there sat a much simpler gown on his shoulders before, now sat a more sophisticated royal gown in deep scarlet with a train that covered the entire floor behind him. His head bore the heaviest of crowns while his once empty hands held on to a golden sceptre.

“My king?” I heard Myrna mumble in surprise.

“By the gods!” Liira exclaimed, while I would not even blink as his gaze held mine totally.

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Ever since Liira had taken me under her wings, I’d learnt many royal Xatian customs. I’d spent days on end listening to the old matriarch speak of times past, present and future. What had been, what was and what would forever be for the royal wolf house. This, she’d always said was something I would one day repeat to my own sons and daughters. But no matter how much I’d learnt, whatever was unfolding before me was as strange as the tongue the high priest had used while he chanted.

It was meant to be a rehearsal. Nothing about it was to be ceremonial. Nothing would require the king of Xatis to be over dressed, and yet he had appeared in his ceremonial attire bearing his sceptre. The one thing kings had to possess when declarations or pronouncements or anything of the sort was to be made. When a king’s word was to be received as law. I wondered which it was.

The look in my mate’s eyes was equally strange. As I stood frozen by Liira’s side, my gaze holding his, it was as if the entire realm around us had shifted, leaving him bound to only me. We were mated, with a bond that had refused to break twice before, but whatever it was that made his gaze so deep, strange and mysterious spoke of something more.

“My king, are you certain?” Someone inquired urgently, drawing my mate’s attention. Yet not in a demanding way. A man dressed in a long robe appeared at his side, bearing a little wooden box that appeared to be as ancient as himself. For a wolf whose form was meant to stop aging once they reached adulthood, the man seemed to have aged considerably, making me think him to be really really old. Was that even possible? Perhaps I would inquire from Liira once all of this was over. Whatever this was.

I watched as the man inched closer to my mate. Long hair framed his aged face and cascaded all the way past the middle of his back. I wondered how long it had been since it had seen a cutting tool. Probably years, I decided.

“What you seek to do, can never be undone, so I will ask again. Are you certain, my king?” Even as the man asked and bowed towards my mate, I couldn’t help wonder about his questions and how odd the whole sight appeared. With how old the man seemed, I would think my mate was to be the one to offer such reverence. And yet it was not so. My mate remained standing tall in his majestic glory, while the man was as a servant in front of him. “What say you, King Elian?”

The king’s gaze fell on me once more. “I am.” Something flashed in his eyes as he said that. “I would not have summoned you ‘bond keeper’ if I wasn’t.

“The bond keeper?” The simple question slipped out of both mine and Myrna’s mouth at the same time, yet the reason for it was by no means the same. Myrna’s tone was full of excitement while mine was laced with confusion and curiosity. I had no idea who the bond keeper was. Myrna on the other hand was grinning from ear to ear as though everything in her world had finally aligned according to her stars. The sight of it unsettled me and I couldn’t help but turn to Liira.

“Oh child, it is hardly the time for me to lecture you on such matters.” Liira sighed, her voice so low I barely heard it. “But if you must know, the bond keeper is just that. The bond keeper.” When I frowned still, she gave in and turned fully to me, voice low. “This is similar to how the moon goddess grants us mates and mate bonds. Except for the royal house of Xatis, as much as we acknowledge the moon goddess and the mates she gifts, we go beyond the idea of accepting mates and chosen mates when we do find or wed them. Because many in times past had reached points in their existence where they claimed they had no choice in who their mate was, a blood pact was made to signify that choice by both kings and queens. It by no means overrides the moon goddess mate bond—”

“But also serves to declare for a second and final time one’s undying love and unwavering devotion to their wedded mate for all eternity.” Myrna sighed dreamily.

Was that what he was intending to do? Complete their bond in the face of his people. In my presence? The ground below me shifted at the invading thoughts. It did not even matter that nothing of what he’d done in the days and moments leading up to this had hinted at him making such a decision.

“You are pale child.” Liira looked me over, her gaze scrutinizing.

“I am alright.” I lied, but perhaps I should have known that I could never get away from Liira with such.

She merely arched a brow and shook her head. “Whatever it is you are thinking, it is not it.” I nodded, but only because if she kept looking at me like that I was afraid my own eyes would betray what my heart felt at the moment.

“Very well then.” The man I knew now to be the bond keeper drew my attention, saving me from Liira who opted to take my hand in hers still. It was a comfort I did not realize I needed as I watched the ancient man’s hands reach into the wooden box and retrieve what I knew was sacred cloth twined by those who wedded.

Myrna’s gasp did not leave me guessing as to who that particular one belonged to. Two strands. Scarlet and purple. The king and queen’s colours twinning over each other, signifying their marital bond that I despised.

Carefully, the priest held it on both ends and placed it in front of my mate. When his hands reached for it and caressed it along its length, my heart sank and my wolf whimpered. We were losing again.

“Oh my love!” Myrna exclaimed, her voice carrying over the now quiet multitudes in the hall as she raced down the aisle, clutching to her gown. My mate answered her not, neither did he look up from the strands. A part of me relished in that and sparked a flicker of hope. Perhaps Liira was right.

This was Myrna, however. She still remained underterred by his lack of response or what it meant. I envied her in that regard. She was a maiden who knew what she wished for and went after it. I on the hand could only wish and hope.

I watched as she approached. Everything about her speaking of her elation at what was to happen next. It was only when the bond keeper drew a shiny blade that Myrna's steps faltered. "My king? Bond Keeper? What is the meaning of this?" For the first time ever, her voice shook.

But even then my mate remained quiet, his focus on the blade that had been handed to him. When he did finally look up, an undecipherable expression was painted on his face. "I Elian, King of Xatis..." I froze. Even when his gaze was not rested on me, I was thrust back in time. To the moment my life forever changed. "...I strip you Myrn—"

"No!" Myrna's loud plea was the thing to pull me out of the hurt that had been unearthed by my mate's pronouncement.

His pronouncement? Eyes widened when I finally caught on. And despite Myrna's protests he remained calm, the blade in his hand resting on their beautiful chord of colourful strands, ready to sever whatever existed between them.

"No. Please! You can't!" Myrna threw herself before my mate. Her graceful composure non-existent. "I love you Elian, your majesty. Please do not take that away from me! I...I—"

Desperation. It echoed throughout the throne room. Something I'd never imagined would be heard of Myrna. And yet it was perhaps the first time I thought she was totally genuine. The reality of that stirred something within me. "Your majesty?" My call was quiet, but he heard me regardless. Eyes meeting mine with that fiery golden glow. He meant to protest whatever was going to proceed from my mouth. I could see it in his eyes. When he dared me to side with her.

"I am with child, your child... Please do not take this away from me."

Pregnant? Heads, including mine snapped towards Myrna while gasps erupted from those who'd been quiet. I had expected my mate to be among those taken by her announcement. I was wrong. His approaching figure towards where I stood pointed me to that fact.

"Come with me."

"B-But—" My protests barely registered as he led me out of the throne room in one hand while the other still held his sceptre.

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She was all I wished for. For all eternity. I'd known it, but when she stepped through those doors, the desire had become something of a pressing matter, making me wish a rehearsal for my child's banquet was not what we were there for. Her slow march, that mundane placing of one foot in front of the other, while she held my gaze, had drawn me from this realm and thrust me into worlds unknown. Worlds where she was both my light and my darkness and everything in between.

Dressed in that purple gown, the sight of her was of perfection. A queen. A vision of a future whose longing went as deep as my bones at the sight of her. By my side, that is where she belonged. There was no doubt about that, only conviction that grew with each step taken towards me.

My chosen mate had been by Shyla's side, but she was as an unwanted shadow. An unwelcome presence.

"Will you not even stop to comfort your pregnant queen?" My mate all but snapped the moment the door to my chambers closed. This was by no means the way I'd dreamed of having her back in my chambers again, but in the wake of what I'd decided, it couldn't be helped. Well, it could be as between my chambers and the throne room lay many saloons that would have served for this very purpose, but for whatever reason my feet were drawn only to my chambers. And I was glad they did. The sight of her, with her growing belly in the confines of this personal space brought memories and painted more visions that had my wolf and I vowing to protect till death. That however, was not the reason I'd dragged her all the way to my chambers. The bitter question she'd asked was a huge part of it.

I watched as she stared everywhere but me, laying bare what was really in her heart. Despite the obvious bitterness in her tone, she cared. Even when she had no business to, she did. Even when she had all the rights to want Myrna dead and discarded to the very depths of hell, that heart that beat in her chest would not let her. It was as if the gods had made it incapable for her to wish the worst even of her enemy.

I had seen it in her eyes. The moment my chosen mate's desperation trickled to my mate's heart, her expression had been one of pity and not satisfaction as Myrna's would have been. I had seen the pain of her expectation when she thought I'd choose Myrna again.

"I have." I couldn't help the fierceness in my tone, because it was the truth. She was the only pregnant queen I longed to comfort. Hers was the only heart I wished to tend to. She was the reason I'd gone ahead and summoned the bond keeper. Because, damn the consequences, she was the only one I wished to be bound to in any manner, in this realm and the worlds beyond.

Eyes clouded with confusion and hurt snapped up at me, searching my own. Whatever they found there only deepened those emotions, forcing her to look away as her feet carried her deeper into my chambers. "You shouldn't have."

Despite her words, I knew that to be the sort of thing that would crush her. I'd made that mistake before when I chose Myrna, never again. "It was my decision to make."

"She's carries your child." Her weak protest struck a chord in my heart.

She'd believed her. I knew she had the moment those words had left my chosen mate's mouth. I would have believed it too if not for the reason that I'd not touched her in that manner ever since Shyla returned. Because, Myrna was indeed pregnant, the scent was unmistakable once she'd declared it and drawn my attention to her. And if not for my desire to comfort, to let Shyla know that the child was by no means mine, I would have been having a different conversation right about now.

"Something that the acceptance ritual at the banquet can prove. The child is not mine, Shyla."

"It's not?!" The utter shock should have angered me, but I could not blame her for thinking anything else but me staying true to her. "B-But, she just said- It's not yours?"

"I never touched her. Not since you've been here." That only added to the shock my mate was currently feeling and again I could not blame her. I was glad however, when it faded after following a few thoughtful expressions. Perhaps the lack of the evidence of it, the pain of me mating with anyone else but her had dawned on her. Whatever it was, I was just glad she believed me.

"Will you complete the ritual?" Her voice was low, unsure, almost timid. "Will you strip her of her position?" I thought that would make her happy, but those beautiful eyes only looked at me askance.

"I have made my decision, Shyla."

“Can it wait?”

“Wait?” If I expected her to make any request of me, it was not that I should wait to cut off Myrna from my life. To strip my chosen mate of the position that rightly belonged to my mate. “Why would you ask that of me?”

“Just until the banquet. You did say it could prove the child is not yours right?” Apparently that was not something I needed to do with her. She believed me. The reality of it had something loosening in my chest. Perhaps we would be alright after all.

“Besides announcing the coming heir during the banquet, a part of it is dedicated to a ritual of acceptance. It’s nothing more than a display confirming that the child is truly of royal blood. So yes, it will prove that Myrna’s child is not mine.”

“It’s a test?”

One I was sure she would not fail. “Yes.”

“Then perhaps you should inform the bond keeper that you will be waiting until the banquet. That is if you still wish to—”

“I do.” I closed the distance between us. “More than you know.”

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One would think me stopping my mate from publicly stripping Myrna of her position as queen was out of the goodness of my heart. It wasn’t. At least not the part of my heart that had my mate thinking of me as one incapable of hating anyone. An angel.

I’d seen the curiosity in his eyes each time he looked at me. Eyes wondering how that it was possible for one to be capable of such a noble thing when they had been hurt over and over again. But perhaps that was not the entire truth.

He was not wrong to think that I still cared for Myrna even after all the hurt she’d brought in my existence. Except that was but a piece of the reality. As it had been known in every realm, the gods gave everything in pairs. Light and darkness. Life and death. Joy and pain. One could not exist without the other, making it impossible to have love exist on its own. Where there was love, hate was bound to be present.

It was this fact that my mate had overlooked whenever he beheld me and thought me incapable of that dark emotion. I couldn't blame him, however, as the matter was still quite strange to me too. I still marvelled at how calmly I had entertained the thought when it occurred to me. When I had thought that the rehearsal was not public enough for Myrna's downfall. It still surprised me that I had been the one to make the request of my mate too.

But perhaps it was inevitable after being reminded of her own plots to have me give the multitudes a humiliating show. When she'd lied that she carried his child. It was time she gave her own show. She did love attention after all. Except her show would be something of a final curtain.

Strong hands firmly squeezed mine, jolting me out of my many thoughts. "Are you alright?"

I wasn't. Not in the very sense of the word and definitely not in the tone he implied, but I wasn't about to speak of any of it, lest he decided to have us turn around and return to his chambers. Not that I dreaded the place, if anything, stepping into my mate's bedroom again had left me with a deep longing to return and perhaps stay a little longer.

"You have barely said a word since we left my chambers." My mate added when I still did not answer him. "Do you still wish to stay ba—"

"I do not." I placed my free hand over his that held mine in assurance. It did nothing to convince him.

"If you are tired, or something aches, anywhere at all, please say so and we'll head back. Whatever I need to do can wait."

"We are already here." I gestured for the doors leading to the throne room. My action was received with a scowl, however.

"That is not what I asked." His chest rumbled and I barely held in a purr at that display of care.

"I promise if anything of the sort does cause me problems, you will be the first to know." His annoyance still sizzled, but he conceded anyway, more so because of the appearance of the head of his guard. Rakon wore an unreadable expression, but I had no doubt there was some mind linking going on between him and his king. I assumed they were done when my mate turned to me.

“Ready?”

Was I ready to face Myrna after her little display? “Yes.” I nodded without a second thought. I was ready to watch a display of tantrums from the usually composed queen when she realized how that nothing would go her way henceforth.

“I’ll be quick.” Lips brushed mine in a surprising motion that left my belly fluttering terribly.

“Okay.” I croaked out. It had been too long, I realized. Too long since I’d had a taste of his lips...a taste of him. And I longed for more! It was an odd time to be desiring more of anything of the sort, but what was I to do when whatever beast lay peacefully under the confines of my flesh had been awakened in such a manner?

“Your maje—” Lips... glorius and warm and delicious took mine in another surprising toe curling conquest. It was as if he’d read my mind, giving me the object of my desires whole heartedly and if he did not stop now there was no telling how much more I could take before I was utterly undone, just by his lips. This was so not part of the rehearsal I had left my chambers for, but—

“Call me Elian.” Chest heaving deliciously, he pulled me close in one swift motion, caging me between his muscled chest and arms. “Not your highness, not your majesty, just...Elian, Shyla.” His ragged tone slowed and softened at the mention of my name. As though it were his own personal calming elixir. “I will see you soon.” That wretched satisfied smile did nothing for my racing heart. And as I watched his retreating back that was still covered by his grand royal gown, everything within me kept screaming that soon would be too long.

“My lady?” Rakon cleared his throat and it took me a moment to remember that we hadn’t been the only creatures present in front of the private doors leading to the throne room. “You must not be too far behind him once he re enters the throne room.” Rakon’s head remained bowed, as if he couldn’t bear seeing the remnants of his king’s assault of my lips. I appreciated that, because I could not hide them even if I wished to.

“Right.” Heat still flooding my cheeks, I followed the way Elian had gone. Elian... I blushed at the mere thought.

When I returned to the throne room, everything had remained as it had been before my mate had dragged me out. Well, every being still sat or stood in the

positions they had been, as though they'd been glued to those spots. It was quite surprising, knowing how long it had been since then.

The king, my mate, stood facing his people, his presence domineering. The fact was written on all the faces that gazed on him in expectation. A figure stirred in front of him and a low growl escaped my lips when I discovered who.

"You came back!" On a dramatic sigh and a smile, Myrna wiped at her tears, before rushing over to my mate's side. "I knew you would." She cooed while I glared at her form that now rested against my mate's body. Why was I expected to go in after him again?

"Will you calm down?" Someone invaded my murderous thoughts and craning my neck to my side I was met with Gol's steady eyes.

"I am calm." I snapped even when I knew he was right.

"The banquet will be held tomorrow—" My mate's pronouncement brought a stop to the ensuing argument I was about to have with my guard. And the sight of the king peeling Myrna off of him gave me some semblance of control. Just enough to witness Myrna's look of horror that had only been an assumption on my part when I'd requested to have the banquet set for the following day.

"Wait, tomorrow?! So soon!" Myrna bellowed. A rare sight for the multitudes gathered. "I mean—" Her tone softened when she realized that. "Why the rush, my love?"

My love... I hated everything about how that sounded.

"I'd think this would make you happy. Aren't you eager to have my son or daughter welcomed by his or her people?" Elian stood back, arms folded, leaving that welcome distance between them. "I know of someone who is."

Myrna glared my way, right before she pasted on a sweet smile. "It's just that there is so much to do and so little time. Couldn't we—"

"Nonsense! What is the point of being queen if you can't get such simple tasks done, hmmm?" Someone I had not expected appeared at Myrna's side. Her gentle smile shining.

“Queen mother?” Myrna was taken aback when the former queen of Xatis embraced her.

“Oh child, just call me Sarabeth.”

“I can? Really?” Confusion marred Myrna’s features. It was clear this was totally unexpected for her. Just as it was for me. Had my mate linked his mother and they had somehow worked out a plan I did not know about? I wished to ask my mate what in the world was going on, but his focus remained on whatever was unfolding before him.

“Of course, child. Now, seeing that we do not have that much time, I suggest that you come with me.” Sarabeth gently tugged on Myrna’s arm.

“But– his majesty, my king...”

“Oh, we do not require his presence. Besides, you are the mother, you are the one who deserves all the pampering.” Sarabeth cupped Myrna’s cheeks and I could have sworn I saw her flinch at the loving touch. The entire sight was almost laughable as Myrna barely let the former queen lead her out of the throne room.

Once they walked out, my mate turned to the bond keeper who I only noticed then still stood with the wooden box open. My heart ached at the sight of the two strands still twisting over each other.

“Why don’t you hold on to those. Just until tomorrow.”

The ancient man nodded quietly before closing the box. “As you wish, my king.” Elian nodded in acknowledgement.

The high priest was also dismissed in a similar manner and when he seemed about done, my mate’s gaze found mine. Many emotions swam in that golden gaze, leaving my heart skipping too many beats. And when he stalked towards me, I did not know what to do with myself.

“My lady...” Hands took mine and I was certain every wolf before us could hear the senseless rhythm with which my heart hammered in my chest.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” My voice was barely a whisper which was pointless in a room full of wolves. And before I could be furnished with an answer, someone tugged on my hand.

“Speaking of pampering, it’s time you came with m—”

“Uh, about that grandmother, a word?” My mate snatched my hand away from Liira, making both Liira and me frown.

“Would I—” Golden eyes darted to me and then back to Liira while my curiosity grew. But whatever that was about, I was completely cut off when the conversation was had in their mind link. A lot of head shaking and scowling later, Liira let out a huff.

“Fine. But one word of complaint, anything at all to suggest something was not done right and you’ll hear from me.” Liira warned, while I remained oblivious as to the what.

“What was that about?” I inquired the moment Liira walked away.

“Nothing to worry about. I may or may not have just assigned myself a role in helping you get ready for tomorrow.” Eyes widened, but my mate made it clear he would speak nothing of it.

“And what was that with your mother? You could give me that at the very least.” I protested.

“Let’s just say the former queen seen openly fussing over her daughter inlaw will dispel any protests the said daughter in law might have if things do not go her way.”

He was playing her game. That should not have made me smile, but as I said, I had not stopped my mate from stripping Myrna of her position out of the goodness of my heart.

“What now?”

“Now we get ready for the banquet.