

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 71 - Tips

Taken at barely a day old! Why would anyone do that? The thought had plagued me to no end and if I did not stop, a terrible headache would be my sure reward. Except, no matter the possible consequences, I couldn't bring myself to stop. The need to know the reason such had befallen me had gnawed at me ever since my mate had narrated the ordeal. Not knowing felt like a void in my soul that insisted to be filled. And the longer that did not happen, the deeper that desire to spill the culprit's entrails dug its claws into my flesh.

I had barely suckled from my mother's breast! They couldn't even let me lay in her bosom even for a day. To relish her warmth before I was snatched away.

Then there was my magical tattoo which I now understood was no tattoo at all or family mark, but a birthmark. Staring at it, I still found it beautiful, but more than that, I found it strange. Because, how in God's name did a birthmark disappear for years on end only to reappear now? And why now?

Someone cleared their throat, barely drawing me out of my unending thoughts. "My lady, you have not touched your tea." I did not answer to that as another question burned on my tongue.

"Why would anyone separate a wee child from its mother so cruelly?" Something landed loudly on a surface and it took me a moment to realize that that had been my doing.

"Perhaps you should gulp this all at once." Eyes wide, Astryn shoved a warm cup in my hand before reaching for the head of a very beautiful dagger I had apparently slammed onto the wooden surface of the dresser. "I will keep this...safely. Until you have to step out of his majesty's chambers or until you are done with your tea."

Understanding her intent, I sighed. "I would never hurt you." Eyes watched me with scepticism, making me roll mine. "Besides I am not even sure I wish to carry that thing around." My mate had gifted me the dagger. The first of his gifts I had merely stared at when he'd presented it to me. It was beautiful, perfectly crafted and perfect in my hand, but it was still a weapon. And as much as I desired to spill the blood of the person responsible for snatching me away from my parents, beholding one of the things to aid me in that task had

left me shaking. Yet not because it intimidated me, but because in a way it called to me. Or perhaps it was I who was drawn to it. I was not sure.

My mate had merely given me a knowing smile and wrapped my hand around the sheathed weapon.

“Have this on you at all times.” He’d commanded and I had wished to protest. To point out that he’d made sure I had enough men watching over me and that the palace was safe, but the way he’d looked at me had kept my lips pursed. He did not have to say it as I could see it clearly. Even when he’d tried to mask it, the truth seeped through the gold in his eyes.

He feared that history would repeat itself. Now that he’d realized that I and the pretty baby were one and the same, he feared I would be snatched away. Not only from my parents this time, but from him too. And I would not be alone this time around. The dagger, I gathered, was his hope of it being my last line of defence if it came down to it. I shuddered at the thought. Thinking of my own child and the possibility that that could happen to us, had me changing my mind. “Perhaps I will carry it after all.”

“Then please have another cup of this calming tea.” Astryn reached for the teapot and got ready to pour, but I pulled my barely empty cup away.

“I do not need it.” I growled, making Astryn eye me with a knowing look. “I’m sure I will be calm after this cup.” I conceded. Partly because even if I wouldn’t be, I hoped my mate would come and his scent would create enough calm to keep my temper from flaring as it had been after learning of my unfortunate past. And partly because, I did not wish to have to keep excusing myself as I sought to relieve myself of the pressure the liquid would put me under if I had too much of it. That was one part of carrying my child I had regretfully realized was not desirable. Liira had said it was because my child was growing bigger and heavier by the day. And while knowing that filled me with immense joy, the side effects still left much to be desired.

“If you say so.” Astryn gave in reluctantly. “Should I link Lord Rakon and inform him that we are done here?”

“Do we have to?” I whined, my body suddenly craving the comfort of my mate’s very comfortable bed. It had been my comfort before I had been brutally awakened and reminded that the night was still young and so were the celebrations that characterized the royal heir’s banquet.

The festivities would be going on for a few more days, but barely two days into the merry making, I already felt too tired to indulge in any of it.

“As tiring as it is for you, my lady, I’m afraid it has to be done.” My maid gave me an apologetic look. “But I’m sure his highness will whisk you away if you so wish at any point.” The suggestion coupled with Astryn’s mischievous grin, left me blushing and very reluctant to protest or scold her for even thinking what I knew she was thinking. Because, well, time alone with the king was desirable in so many ways. Thanks to our bond, although I knew that was not the entire truth.

Astryn sighed dreamily. “You could ask for the moon and I have no doubt his majesty would—”

“Uh...perhaps you should link Lord Rakon.” I finally agreed seeing as neither one of us was in their right mind to keep from being distracted by the mere thought of the king of Xatis. It did not even matter that Astryn’s and my distraction were oh so very different.

“His highness is on his way.” Astryn announced just a moment after and that familiar kick in my chest at knowing of my mate’s approaching presence shifted my gaze to the mirror in front of me. I did not know what I sought there. Perhaps to ensure that I looked perfect? Which was quite ridiculous as I knew that the maiden’s who’d gotten me ready for tonight would hardly leave a hair out of place.

They were perfect at what they did, and somehow knowing that I was the heir to a noble house, expecting Xatis’s heir and was the king’s mate on top of it all, had left them being extra careful, impossibly gentle. Hell, if I had decided to be readied while I slept the bunch would have only nodded in submission without so much as a protest and still been able to present to their king the flawless maiden that now stared back at me.

“Do not fret, my lady. You are perfect.” I agreed with Astryn. “Today the third noble house will be standing an inch taller than the rest of them.”

I frowned at that. “Why is that?” There was no hiding from all the politics that came with my new found position. This I knew from all the lessons I’d had with Liira. I just did not expect to be plunged into any of it so soon.

“Well, you are his majesty’s mate. You carry the future heir of Xatis. You are practically the queen. All the things the other houses could only dream for

their daughters. The things that grant power more than any amount of gold a noble family could ever hold in their vault.”

“More than gold?!” My jaw dropped at Astryn’s words. “You mean—”

“Oh, you should see just how envious the other maids and noble ladies are of mine and lady Carlytte’s position now.” Astryn smirked and I could only blink at her. My maid was by no means the stuck up kind and I knew this amused her more than anything. What I did not understand, however, was why there should be so much envy. “Many wish to be you right now, my lady. I bet many noble houses wish you were descended from theirs. They will say nothing of it, but they will surely be thinking it while you get introduced tonight.”

Oh and then there was that. My introduction to the noble society of Xatis. I groaned at the very idea meant to happen tonight too.

After reuniting with my family in the presence of many kingdom folk, word had already spread far and wide, announcing the return of the daughter of the third most powerful noble house in Xatis. Many knew of me already, but apparently that was not to be had for the elite of Xatis.

Introductions among noble houses had to be formal and proper. And because my parents simply refused to wait for anything, knowing how quickly precious moments could be taken away, a suggestion by the king to introduce their not so little girl to society was met with their hearty approval.

It had been decided that since they couldn’t very well hold that fancy ball meant to introduce me in the midst of the festivities, the first royal banquet dinner would have to do. It seemed for this, they did not mind me sharing the spotlight with my child. Of course I wished for nothing of it, but I had realized that with such traditions that were deemed important, I had little say.

A knock on my chamber’s doors drew my attention. “I’ll get it.” Astryn announced as she took short quick steps towards the bed chamber’s entrance. Knowing who that was gave my belly a little flutter. “Your majesty.” I was already on my feet by the time my maid acknowledged my mate’s presence. Just in time to note his serious features morph into a very appreciative gaze that raked the entirety of my form, eyes lingering brightly on my belly before stepping inside.

I too was not without a sight of my own to relish. As my mate closed the distance between us in those sure strides, my own appreciative gaze took him

in a manner that was both appreciation and pride...and something else that had my wolf purring.

He'd discarded his royal garments in favour of his armour that fit him so perfectly he looked deliciously battle ready. My cheeks heated up at my own thoughts. It was not my fault, however. Because if I did not know where we would be headed once we left his chambers, I could have sworn he was headed into battle. And having seen him battle twice already, I longed to see the flex of those beautiful muscles I knew hid under his armour. Yet not in a bloody battle, but perhaps right here, right now.

"Your majesty—Elia..." My greeting was a needy sigh that on any other day would have left me embarrassed, but not today. Not when he'd let out a needy sigh of his own that was almost painful when he'd finally stood in front of me, barely inches away from my unsteady breath. It was a delight to note that he lacked the usual steadiness associated with the mighty king of Xatis while he battled.

"You are perfect." Astryn had said it. I knew it, but hearing that compliment from his lips while he stared at me like that, as though he'd devour me whole in the next breath, did things to me. Beautiful things that drew a breathy smile out of me.

"Thank you." His gaze settled somewhere where my audible thanks had proceeded from and I wished he'd do more than stare appreciatively. He did. As if he'd read my mind, he took my lips in the sweetest yet consuming kiss that drew me into him and never wishing to let go. I wished to drown for all eternity, but that was not to be had as it ended ever too quickly for my liking. My only comfort was that I happened not to be the only one.

On a deep sigh that spoke of regret and annoyance, he gave my hands a warm squeeze. "Ready to meet the stuck up society of your kingdom?"

A hearty chuckle escaped my lips at his rather unflattering description of the most revered members of the kingdom after the royal family. It also did not escape my attention how he'd referred to Xatis as my kingdom. It was a rather blatant way of stating what many of the kingdom folk of Xatis had relayed with their impossible bows at the sight of me. A heavy path that was...well, heavy. "I would never think the king shared such...sentiments."

Eyes shone with mischief. "Well, it's hard not to. They can be a pain." I stared eyes wide, still not believing his words that he'd let out so casually. His whole

demeanour painted a side of him that I could have never imagined existed. A side I found strangely appealing and totally not what I had imagined each time someone gushed over the prince of Xatis. That time, back in the forgotten village seemed like centuries ago now.

Then get to know me, Shyla. His pleas to start over echoed yet again and coupled with what I'd just witnessed reminded me that I knew so little of him. Well, the side of him I had not met yet anyway.

"Shall we?" Gladly tucking away my new view of him, I slipped my arm in his at the invitation. "Aren't you forgetting something?" I was about to step forward when the hint of anger in his tone drew my attention to him. His gaze was not on me, however, but on the dresser. Or more specifically on the dagger, that it seemed Astryn had forgotten to put away.

"I meant to carry that." I simply stated and whether he believed me did not reflect in the manner he reached for it and sought to put it away for me. I watched with a frown as he searched my gown for something. Realizing what the something was, I pointed to the little fold on my gown that opened to a concealed pocket. Liira had mentioned that noble ladies tucked such small weapons within their gowns as a protective measure. Mostly to be used if anyone sought to take their virtue without their consent. "I believe it's meant to be placed right here." I offered, but my mate merely shook his head.

"That is too obvious." He then crouched low and parted a couple of folds on my gown before he apparently found what he was looking for. An unusual hiding place that left me blooming with colour as his hands carefully slipped in the dagger.

"I did not know that was meant to conceal a weapon." Hell, I had not even realized I had been putting on such a pair of scandalous stockings until he'd laid bare my leg to him. And was it odd that he seemed unaffected by the sight while I, even with the careful way he'd slipped in the dagger, was left feeling hot and bothered?

Done with his task, he let the gown fall back in place before holding my gaze. "I chose the design."

Wait, he what? Had he chosen the stocking's too?

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“Hail to the King!”

The loud proclamation from beyond the doors leading to the grand reception hall, jolted me out of my unending thoughts and brought my focus back on my surroundings. We had stopped and I was greeted by the sight of the king’s guards flanking us in more numbers than those that had initially escorted us from his chambers. Two more guards pushed open the doors, revealing a fully packed reception hall whose guests cheered happily, ready to receive their king.

Hand holding tighter to the said king, I shifted my gaze to him and was met with his. The golden gaze was serious and assessing, his form unmoving. He’d lost the carefree side to him that I had a glimpse of earlier in his chambers. And while I understood the need for this change, I wished it had not happened, as having him all serious inspired my nerves to go all rigid with my impending undertaking.

“Shouldn’t we go right in?” I croaked out even when that was not what I wished to do at the moment. Turning back and walking away felt like the easier thing to do. To remain Shyla. The once care free maiden who had not been bound by titles, houses or thrones. It had been what I had contemplated once I was able to steer clear of every hot consuming thought of my mate.

“It gets easier.” If there was anything I expected from him, it was not those words of comfort that were clearly spoken from a heart that had had plenty experience. The mere idea was unfathomable given the figure that stood by my side. Nothing about my mate spoke of having struggled with embracing who he was born to be. A King... Confident, steady, sure of himself. He was the king of not only his castle, but the entire Xatis. And with the way my wolf puffed up with pride as we appraised our mate, there was no doubt that he was a king of so much more.

Choosing to trust...a first for me when it came to him, but surprisingly not the strangest, I held on tighter, earning myself a reassuring smile. “Ready?”

“As we’ll ever be.” I let out a breath, my free hand caressing my belly.

“Welcome home.”

As heartwarming as my mate’s words sounded, my throat tightened at the statement. Home... Was I really...home? The thought had not occurred to me until now and I could not help but think of what had been and what could have

been. Twin lives that had been marred with regret. An undesirable ending and a stolen beginning, both a loss that made the tightness in my throat grow tighter.

“You belong here.” Warm hands wiped at the tears I did not even realize had fallen. “You both belong here.” Those warm hands covered mine that still rested on my belly, the feeling stirring something in my heart even as his scent engulfed us both. “Always.” I got pulled into a warm embrace then, the strength and comfort therein loosening that tightness in my throat faster than any stream of tears. I should have let go then, but I held on, basking in his presence.

“Perhaps we should proceed.” I mumbled when I gave thought to the fact that we were not the only beings that stood before the doors to the reception hall and that hundreds more were probably watching from beyond. My mate, it seemed, couldn’t care less as he chose to ensure that I was really okay first. I was met with his scrutinizing gaze after my words and only when I nodded in assurance, more than a couple of times, did he link whoever was on the other side to continue. I had not even realized that the whole procession had come to a halt because of me. My eyes shifted to my surroundings again, but there was no frown or annoyance on any face as I expected.

“Introducing Lady Lily. Heir of the third noble house of Xa—”

My foot that was meant to step forward once my introduction began came to an abrupt stop. “Lily?” I frowned at my mate. “Is there someone else being introduced?” Even when every other piece of information mentioned related to what I had come to know about myself, the name was simply not me.

“Lily is your birth name. It’s what Florithe and Lydo have called you.”

“Oh. It’s a beautiful name...” I mumbled. It truly was, but it was just not me and while I knew I couldn’t change my origins, I was not about to lose that part of my identity. My life may have hit an undesirable end with the family I’d had, but that did not mean I regretted all of it, enough to want to erase it entirely. I was still Shyla. But then...I was Lily too. The realization birthed something in me that kept me from rejecting the entire name altogether. I could be both. Me and this Lily that like everyone else, I would be meeting once I stepped through the doors to the reception hall.

“Shyla? If it’s a problem, there is no need to insist on it.”

Glad my mate did not insist on calling me by this new name, I smiled. "I am Shyla. Lily too." I tasted it on my tongue before nodding. "Lady Shyla Lily. I wish to be introduced as that."

"Very well then." A hint of a smile graced my mate's features as he mind linked once more.

"...Lady Shyla Lily, heir of the third noble house of Xatis..." My heart was content. As I fell in step with my mate and let him lead me into my new identity. The crowds still cheered as we headed towards a long line of men and ladies whose dressing spoke of their nobility. The loud cheers only ceased once we stood in front of the nobles.

"Your majesty..."

"Lord Lydo and Lady Florithe. Lord and lady of the third noble house of Xatis and also your mother and father. My lord and lady, I present to you Lady Shyla Lily." I curtsied at my own parents after my mate's introduction. Their faces held not a hint of resentment over my name choice and it made me glad.

"Awww, you are so beautiful! Isn't she Lydo?!" My mother gushed. And as one would expect from a mother who had spent years separated from the child she'd birthed, my mother was in tears.

"She is perfect." I had not known my father long, but I could tell that if he were no lord, his stream of tears would have flowed as swiftly as mother's. He stood tall and proud instead. "Welcome home." Hands stretched out in invitation and I melted into them as though I were his little girl.

"I'm glad to be back home." Meaning every word, I hesitantly pulled back from the one embrace I knew I would never tire of.

"Lord Hadwyn, lord of the first noble house of Xatis." My mate resumed his introductions once I reclaimed my position by his side.

"Pleased to meet you my lord." I nodded at the said lord in greeting. A man whose presence embodied the word serious. Being from the first noble house, my thoughts wandered to Astryn's words, wondering if he was indeed one of those who'd be wishing his daughter stood in my place.

"The pleasure is mine, my lady." The man bowed, impossibly low, his gesture reminding me of a little detail I seemed to have forgotten. I was above him. At least in rank. I may have been an heir to a lesser noble house, but being the king's mate and the mother to Xatis's heir placed me above him. Above all of them. My eyes fell on three more noble lords, whose demeanours were less serious than Lord Hadwyn's. Among them, Lord Quent who was clearly beaming at me even when he was further in line before his own introduction.

"...My lady..." A Lord Nevan, lord of the second noble house followed Lord Hadwyn's lead and bowed too.

"...The fifth noble house celebrates with the third noble house today..." A Lord Rhanes reached for my hand and placed a noble kiss there in greeting. It did not matter that it was chaste, however. My mate looked ready to commit murder, but somehow the lord remained unfazed, giving me the impression that the two shared a somewhat close relationship.

"...A perfect fit for you, my lady." Of course Lord Quent would gush over his creation. "My house is honoured to serve you."

"As I am to be dressed in such fine and exquisite gowns." I marvelled at my own eloquency and I couldn't help imagine Liira's proud look. I knew the matriarch was watching from wherever she was seated with the former king and queen of Xatis

"And this is Lord Evarius." I could have sworn my mate's tone held a hint of sourness at that introduction. "Former heir apparent of the third noble house." The man needed no introduction. He was my uncle after all and I had been the one to take away his right. I wished to say something when the air suddenly got awkward, but my uncle beat me to it.

"Oh, do not make it sound as though it is such a regrettable occurrence, your majesty. I probably might be the happiest of us all to have my dear niece returned to us. Just look at how bright the countenances of my brother and sister in law are." The lord stared in my parent's direction, his strangely delightful infectious smile shining as the sun. It was almost impossible not to smile along, so I did. My mate, however, remained unaffected and merely watched unamused. I wondered why that was. Surely the two weren't at loggerheads? "No good anyone could do would even stir a hint of happiness on their grief stricken faces for so long. It warms my heart that our house will be filled with laughter once again. Giving up being heir to the rightful heir is a choice that gives me immense joy." Hands stretched out in a similar manner

as my father's, but before I could melt into that embrace, a strong hand held me back.

I glared at my mate before I could stop myself. "He's my uncle." I pointed out, making him release me, albeit grudgingly.

"I should have known that you'd still grow up with the fire of our noble house in you." My uncle was clearly amused at my little display, but I was also not oblivious to the fact that he was in a way baiting my mate.

"I'm afraid it will do nothing to appease the king's wrath once stirred." I glared at my uncle too, my tone surprisingly firm. And for whatever reason the lord bared his neck in submission. It was subtle, but oh so very clear to me and my wolf who acknowledged the action, leaving me flustered.

"I can see why his majesty insisted on keeping you. Such a rare wolf." My uncle gushed before pulling me right into his embrace. "And nothing makes me happier than to know that it is my own niece whom the moon goddess chose to bestow such a rare honour."

A rare honour? I blinked at my uncle. Something had to be wrong. At least with my own expectations. How was he not upset over what just happened? I could understand his wish to willingly give up the title of heir, which was equally a surprise after his earlier protests, but to submit? The occurrence was strange even for me, and yet he still remained so calm as though nothing of the sort had happened.

"Your majesty! Such a pleasure. It's been a while." Still wrapped up in my uncle's embrace, my eyes went wide at the impossibly soft sound that came from a familiar face. The witch could smile too? And what was she doing standing in line, next to my uncle? She couldn't possibly be one of my—

"I'm sure you have met Kerina. She is—"

"We are sisters now!" I got pulled away from my uncle and into the most awkward embrace after the bitter red head threw herself at me.

"That would be cousins, actually." A familiar voice snorted, reminding me of the first time our paths crossed.

“Wait, Carlytte?” With all the stuff I had endured in my recent past, I had forgotten all about her. And now she was what?! My eyes darted between her and Kerina, realization dawning on me.

“We are cousins actually.” Carlytte remained composed, but I had known her long enough to know that was only because of every eye now present.

Kerina glared at that, but quickly composed herself, reminding me so much of Myrna. “Well, sisters, cousins or whatever, we are still family, aren’t we? I just wish I had already shifted, then perhaps our meeting would have been less awkward.”

“Less awkward? Such an understatement!” Carlytte muttered under her breath.

“We have met.” I replied hastily before the situation got even more awkward or before someone noticed my unwillingness to acknowledge Kerina as family.

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“I must say, you were right after all.” My mind link buzzed, tearing my attention from my mate to my mother amidst the sound of cheer and happy conversation that characterized tonight’s dinner. Sarabeth’s tone was every bit satisfied and happy as could be expected when every plan to host such an event fell into place. Seated next to father, who was deep in conversation with a dignitary from a city I did not care to remember, her face spoke of her delight too.

“I would have never expected this cold, empty and forgotten space to spring to life so beautifully.” She beamed, reminding me of our not so little argument about breaking tradition. She and father had been displeased over my sudden decision to shift this dinner from the traditional reception hall that had served to host such similar important events in times past.

“It’s quite remarkable.” I noted. But while I agreed with my mother’s new sentiments, the reception hall’s beauty, however, had nothing to do with my reasons for shifting the banquet’s dinner from the usual reception hall to this maiden hall. My decision had everything to do with the one person whose presence here probably mattered more than anyone else’s. It was the beginning of the rest of her life as the noble heir to the third house and the only maiden in my life and I wished for this moment to be perfect for her. That

meant not letting even the tiniest of memories of what had been before now to get in the way.

It had been an assumption on my part, but when Shyla had merely eyed the golden platform meant for me and her once the introductions were done, it confirmed what I had suspected.

She did not wish to be my chosen mate's replacement, at least not in the way sitting next to me in the seat meant for my queen would. With Myrna gone, Xatis had naturally acknowledged her as queen, a fact that had delighted me to no end. She'd needed no crown or royal pronouncements for my people to accept her, but what should have delighted her, unlike Myrna, had only brought her discomfort. I'd seen every wince and unnatural smile each time many made it known how they perceived her. The discomfort had only deepened when she'd found out that she was of noble birth too.

And because I knew I could do nothing to erase the thought from her mind, I'd instead settled to have the event in the one place I had not shared in any way with my former queen. If only to ease some of that discomfort. Letting Shyla know of that fact had been the thing to get my mate's feet moving. And while I knew that it by no means erased anything, I was glad that it was somewhat enough to make her stay.

Nodding at my mother, I shifted my gaze back to my mate, my wolf instantly purring at the sight. She'd left my side at her father's request for a dance and now she was the thing of beauty to grace the dance floor.

"Undeniably mesmerizing!" I decided.

Her beauty was blinding, a sight I could not decide on whether it was so because of her own flawless beauty or the protruding belly that sang of my strength as a man...and wolf.

While music filled the hall, I watched with longing as she swayed beautifully to the soothing sound. There was an innocence to every one of her moves, but not even that could keep my mind from indulging in visions that were anything but. And if wasn't for Lord Lydo's delightful smile while he danced with his daughter, a smile I knew the lord had not worn in so long, I would have reclaimed her already and perhaps satiated my own longing with her closeness.

But having already decided to let the father daughter duo have their moment, my gaze settled on her form that I would not tire from beholding.

Lord Quent had outdone himself yet again. The gown he'd created for her was meant to highlight the heir she carried, but unlike the old boring gowns of old which only ensured the protruding belly was visible, Quent had brought fourth not only the belly, but the goddess of a maiden too.

I did not even know that someone so very heavy with child could be so very alluring...enchanted.

Her every curve that most would cover up with layers and layers of fabric still whispered sinful things to me just as they had back in my chambers. I still wished to devour her now as I had when I beheld her then. When I noted her own thirst while she'd raked my form with a needy gaze as I walked up to meet her.

I had had no business kissing her then, but I knew that the night would be too long without a taste of her. Not that that had helped matters.

I brought a cup of wine to my lips, the liquid doing nothing to quench the thirst that was no longer just in my loins, but in every crevice of my body that beat with life.

A figure in the crowd caught my attention and my wolf perked up, reminding me of the second reason I had chosen to dine here.

"What is it?" Rakon stirred beside me, hand still on the hilt of his blade.

"Nothing or something." I could not tell as the hooded figure gave me no other reason to be suspicious once they stopped to greet guests in their path.

"I will check it out anyway. Just to be, you know...sure." I watched as Rakon stalked the figure. It was probably nothing and I could have asked him to stay, but the unsolved mystery of my mate's a*****n had kept me on edge. While I thirsted after her, my instincts still remained on high alert too. She was back in the palace and I was intent on ensuring that history did not repeat itself.

I had not only chosen to dine in this hall whose weaknesses were unknown by my would be enemies and thereby lessening the chances of an attack, but food and wine had been tasted a countless times before it was placed in front of us. Samara and Norae were on serving duty instead of the usual maids

who attended to my mate. And apart from Gol, I had guards whose sole focus was my mate at any given point. Hell, I had even decided she needed a dagger on top of all the protection.

My gaze fell on her at the memory of her scandalized expression when I'd strapped the small blade to her thigh. The hiding place was unusual, but I'd known of many maidens who'd been disarmed way before they could get to their weapon simply because their attacker knew exactly where it was hidden. I would not risk such happening to Shyla. And that was not to say my choice was void of benefits or consequences.

Desire rang out in my bones, speaking of the punishment I'd bestowed on myself.

"May I have this dance, your majesty?" I would have welcomed the distraction if only it had come from someone other than the owner of that voice. Kerina, Myrna's confidante and Evarius's spawn appeared before me, a flirtatious smile gracing her face.

On any other day her bold request would have been unbecoming of a noble lady, but not today. While Xatis was still in a celebratory mood, it was customary for the king to grant such requests to his esteemed guests. But that did not mean I was in any mood to entertain any close contact with any she-wolf that was not my mate.

"I'm afraid I have to decline, lady Ker—"

"Oh, please do not refuse me, your majesty. And it's just Kerina, not lady—" Three distinct growls sounded when my mate's cousin dared to lay her hand on me. My own that sent her freezing on her spot, Liira's that registered the matriarchs' disapproval of the maiden's actions and the almost feral one that sought to mark her territory. Shyla still danced with her father, but there was no mistaking the murderous intent that hid in the shimmering silver that now clouded her eyes. I gloried in that sight even as she kept glaring.

"I'm sure there are plenty unmated wolves dying to entertain such shameless advances." Liira scolded before either me or Kerina uttered a word. Not that I would have as I spent the fleeting moment assuring my mate from this distance that I would be doing no such thing.

“Lady Liira.” At a loss for words and the obvious knowledge that she could simply not go against the matriarch, Kerina merely bowed before she retreated in defeat.

“I can take care of myself.” I scoffed at grandmother.

“You know I never pass on an opportunity to put anyone wishing to overstep in their place.” Liira smirked. “Now, will you ask your grandmother to dance?”

Desiring to be closer to my mate after her possessive display, I jumped at the opportunity. “May I have this dance, my lady?” I gave Liira an exaggerated bow that she acknowledged with a wide grin. My grandmother, however, had other reasons for requesting a dance and they had nothing to do with relishing the beautiful sound of music that graced the hall.

“So, who do you think is the guilty one?” We had barely swayed to the music when Liira spoke, gaze shifting to my future inlaws that seemed to be comforting a sulking Kerina at the dinner table. “One of those did encounter your mate at the capital and yet they did not think to come forth and embrace their long lost heir.”

I stared, knowing I had failed to put a finger on the guilty party. None of the individuals from the third noble house had hinted at anything of the sort. Their faces only reflected the joy they claimed to feel at Shyla’s return. “I do not know yet.” I admitted. “But for the record, I do not believe for one second that Evarius’s world is finally blooming with flowers at the return of Shyla and that he is more than glad to give up the title of heir apparent. The man had flaunted that title for far too long to claim otherwise.”

“The roach is as clean as those pesky creatures can be.” Liira’s frustrated tone reflected mine. Looking into Evarius’s dealings had revealed nothing as usual.

“And unfortunately I can’t even glare at the man without being scolded by my mate.” Interrogations would have been appropriate, but no matter the suspicion towards my mate’s family, that was simply not something that could be done. Not without inviting her resentment that would widen the gap to winning her heart.

“Oh, she’s turning out beautifully.”

I scowled at that. “You are supposed to be on my side.”

“Not against your mate, no.” Liira’s matter of fact tone reminded me of father’s words and I knew arguing was a lost cause. “I would not worry if I were you, however.” When I only frowned at my grandmother’s statement, Liira smiled. “Evarius may have won her smile now, but that is not remotely enough to earn her affections. In due time she’ll come to realize what her dear uncle truly deserves.” I hoped that would be sooner rather than later. Because no matter how clean Evarius turned out to be, there was still something unsettling about him.

“What the hell?!” Rakon suddenly linked, the tension in his tone rousing mine.

“Rakon?” Eyes snapped towards the last place I had seen the hooded figure, expecting to see my best friend at the very least. I was in for a disappointment that was enough to cut the dance with Liira short and urge my feet towards my mate as I waited for Rakon’s report.

“Either your guest is a ghost or they have finally found the magical formula for masking their scent completely and...mastered the art of disappearance.”

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“That was quite...overwhelming.” My mate sighed the moment the doors to my chambers closed. Liira, the last of the ladies to have insisted on accompanying us had finally left, letting me relax a fraction. The trio that included Sarabeth and Florithe had insisted on being our escorts, both as extra protection and as a distraction for the crowd who would figure out that something was wrong when their king exited the hall earlier than expected. And while the ladies’ efforts were appreciated, their fussing over my mate was not. It was understandable, especially for Florithe, but that did not make it any easier to watch the discomfort it brought Shyla and her attempts to conceal it.

“I should probably feel guilty for being happy to leave all of it behind, but I don’t.”

At her confession, I mustered a smile, hoping the tension that had wound every muscle in my body because of the looming threat remained concealed too. “I assure you that except those close in relation to you, the rest of Xatis probably only cares about the delicacies set in front of them right now.” My statement may not have held the entire truth, but I was not about to plunge her into the guilt of abandoning her duties as host and the reason the reception hall was filled with celebration. Especially not when I had welcomed her decision without question.

Nothing unusual had happened yet, but once Rakon had narrated how he'd lost sight of my hooded guest, I knew I did not wish to have Shyla anywhere near what would or wouldn't happen. Not even the presence of so many guards was enough to get me to change my decision as the vastness of the reception hall would leave her exposed still.

Her request to abandon the dinner had come at the perfect time. Right after Rakon linked me with feedback, Shyla had bid her father goodbye and met up with me as I headed in her direction. For a moment I had thought she'd wished to switch dance partners, but the regretful expression that'd graced her face once I'd offered her my hand and bowed towards her had made me stand up straighter. I'd thanked the gods when her only words indicated that she'd had enough of the banquet.

"And you...what do you care about?" She blushed even as those words left her beautiful mouth and I couldn't help but draw closer. More so because I could clearly sense the hint of longing in her tone. And it was the thing to get most of the chords of tension around my muscles to relax. Something about her open curiosity made me think of the request I'd made to her in the garden. Would this be it? Her finally wishing to get to know me? Had she decided to give us that chance...to give me that chance? Her words were merely a question, but I could hope.

Hand cupping those beautifully tender cheeks, her chest heaving in anticipation, I wondered if she was really ready to know what I cared about. "Is it not obvious?" I hoped it was. I may not have pressed my intentions to court her, but I hoped that my intent since fate brought her back to me had been clear with every deed meant to let her know of that fact.

"Oh, how silly of me." She wiggled out of my hold, catching me off guard. Was it something I said? "Of course it should be obvious. We are mates after all." Apparently it was something I had said.

"It is not like that at all." I reached for her before anymore distance could be created between us. "I—" Deciding to swallow whatever had intended to slip from my mouth, I held my mate's gaze realizing too late that her question was not a mere question. It may have sounded casual, but the utter discomfort that now graced her face made it anything but. "Forgive me."

"It's fine." Apparently apologizing was the wrong thing to say yet again. The bitterness in her tone pointed that out perfectly.

“Shyla...” She flinched. The least reaction I could have expected from my touch.

“It’s late.” She pulled away before I could utter anything more. “It has been a rather long and eventful day, your majesty.” Now it was my turn to flinch at her very formal address. And for the longest time I merely watched, helpless as she furiously peeled layer after layer of her garments.

She was mad and intent on ignoring my very existence, but bless the gods or was it Lord Quent for those straps that held her gown in place. Something she clearly needed my help with and before she could shout for her maid’s help, I came up behind her and took the hands that furiously worked at getting the straps loose. “Let me get those for you.” Eyes glared at me through the looking glass, stirring something in my blood.

Not the time! I chastized my wolf, but it was as if the beast had developed a mind of its own as it purred at every strap I loosed, stirring my need even more.

Desperate for distraction, I stole a glance at my mate while I worked at loosening her gown. “I would be lying if I claim the bond has nothing to do with anything.” Not the words she needed to hear. I knew that, but we would be fools if we took away that fact from whatever it was either of us longed to share between us.

“The damn thing is a curse.” She growled, but somebody else seemed to disagree as they caused her to yelp right after her bitter statement.

“Are you alright?” I was before her in a flash, eyes assessing every inch of her. My mate, however, was not bothered by all the fuss as her gaze remained on her belly. “Is she—he alright?” Panic washed over me when I realized that whatever it was that had made her yelp had everything to do with the child in her belly.

Another yelp was my answer. “Did you see that?!”

The excitement in her tone confused me. “See what?” My gaze dropped to her belly, but I saw nothing unusual. “I can’t—”

“There!” Her hand wrapped around mine excitedly, drawing my attention. But whatever it was that had gotten my mate so excited had simply escaped my notice. “You didn’t see that?” Disappointment replaced her excitement, but

only for a moment as she suddenly stood to her feet and wiggled out of her gown.

And by the gods!

My mouth went instantly dry at the sight of her in nothing but a pair of those scandalous stockings that still held the dagger in place. I'd seen her unclothed before, but this...dear God! It wasn't something I'd considered when I had chosen their design. My interests lay in her having a place to conceal her small weapon that was not so obvious. Of course a glimpse of them when I'd slipped the dagger in had left me thirsting and cursing the fact that there was a banquet to be attended, but nothing could have prepared me for this.

I couldn't help but entertain visions upon visions of the many ways I could take her. How I could have those slender legs wrap around me as I—

“Elian...”

“Huh...” Gold...deep and dark, as I knew the shade of my eyes would be at this point, met silver. It too shimmered. Just as it had the night I'd pleased her. The mere memory plunged me into a sea of tempestuous need. Desire raged in every inch of me, my wolf wishing for nothing but to claim her.

“I thought you might see better without my gown.” The colour that bloomed in her cheeks spoke of her shyness, but it did things to me that stirred me to want to reach out and touch. It took everything in me to focus on the thing she wished for me to see. And I was glad I did as the most precious sight greeted me once I really looked.

A little movement here and there. Almost as if my mate's heart were beating right in her belly, but at very awkward intervals.

“She's...moving?” Emotions rushed in, the wave bringing with it a lump that lodged itself in my throat. And as if the little royal knew that they had an audience, the movements became even more distinct, leaving me in awe of their presence. It was as if those tiny movements were the thing to solidify their existence and my own position as a father.

I was going to be a father! The feeling was more overwhelming than the day I was crowned king. And the intimacy of it, experiencing this moment with only my mate, in the confines of our chambers made it even more special.

“Liira had said to expect it, but with all that’s happened, I may have forgotten to be on the look out.” My mate wore the most beautiful smile as she reached to touch her belly where it seemed to gently vibrate. “Beautiful...”

Hand rested on delicate skin and caressed. “You are beautiful.” I rasped, emotion coating every one of those simple yet profound words. I could not imagine sharing this moment with anyone else but her and for the first time I thanked the gods for denying Myrna the chance to carry my child. I thanked fate for bringing back the one meant for me even after my very regrettable decision to reject her.

Those alluring silver eyes looked up at me, the action every bit enticing. And because I couldn’t turn away from the invitation therein, I drew closer and took her mouth, her warmth dragging me down deep at the first contact.

Her lack of protest had me scooping her up and carrying her to my bed. The expanse of comfort that was covered in the best silky material Xatis had to offer would have to wait however, as I chose to sit at its edge, my mate straddling me.

The position had her blushing all shades of scarlet and I had never seen a more glorious sight.

“So beautiful.” Like a kid let loose in a candy store, I longed to explore every inch of her all at once, but in the end I could only stare. And inhale the sweet scent of her desire that in this position was mine for the taking.

Mine...My wolf declared, earning us a very se.xy purr from our mate. It was the thing that got my mouth exploring. Lips and tongue took in every inch of her within their reach, earning me the glorious sound of se.xy m0ans from my mate’s mouth.

My hands had gained a skill I did not even know I possessed as they explored her n.aked back, the taut jewels gracing her c.hest that were fuller than the last time I’d pleased her.

“Elian...” She arched that back, bringing closer the fullness of her c.hest that had my mouth gladly taking her in and indulging in the feel of her warmth. The ensuing m0ans threatened to drain the very essence of my own mind. I did not care for any of it, however, as all I wished for was to drown in her. Body, mind and soul. “Make me yours, Elia...” Her request was soft, yet urgent, sure and everything in me wished for nothing but to fulfil her every desire.

Gently, I laid her down and made quickwork of losing what was left of my armour. Every inch of it. "So beautiful..." I froze at her statement that was full of wonder at whatever she beheld once I was totally n.aked. And I could almost swear I blushed a bit too when I realized just how much those silver eyes worshipped the sight of me. I stood up straighter too, mightier even as pride filled every inch of me at her hungry look. I was bursting at the seams and if I did not take her now, I would die.

What I did not know, however, was that I would die either way.

Ready to have her in every way possible, I slipped in, claiming every inch of her inner walls that recieved me with a glorious promise of pleasure. That, however, would not be as the most excruciating pain claimed my neck, making me utter the one name that I knew would tear my mate apart, but one I could not for the life of me keep from my l!ps.

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"Myrna!" Her name from his mouth pierced us both, cracks instantly forming in my heart and by the sound of the pained tone from his l!ps, those undoubtedly reached somewhere deep within his soul. What should have been a precious moment shared between me and my mate was suddenly marred with pain.

I'd been lost in the wave of ecstasy even before he'd laid me down on his bed. Right when he took my mouth, I had slipped from the shores of safety and ridden the wave of want and need with every stroke of his glorious tongue. I'd held on when he scooped me up, heart beating in delicious anticipation of what was to come. But instead of his bed, he had me straddle him, a position that left me blushing, yet not regretting my hasty decision to discard my gown.

With his l!ps, tongue and hands he'd caressed every inch of my n.aked self, sparking desire that had me begging him to take me and make me his. And when he had, by the gods! I did not know what in the realm hit me. Nothing had felt more magical than the feel of his hardness as he filled me in a gentle, yet hasty move that left me undone. With the hungry way he'd taken me in right before he claimed me for himself, my name should have been the one to slip out of his mouth as our bodies merged into one, but that was not to be.

Frozen, I held his gaze as he held mine. It was, however, not the gold I'd come to love that stared back at me. It was not the deep that had once before beckoned me to dive to its depth with a deathly symphony. No. What I beheld

there was a darkness that still wished to devour me, yet not in the pleasurable manner my mate would have.

I was not familiar with sorcery, but whatever this was, had the markings of the magical craft written all over it.

I should have done the reasonable thing at the realization. Got away while I still could. Untangle my n.aked body from his before the beast I knew lurked in the darkness was unleashed, but somehow I knew that doing anything of the sort would merely have Myrna win. I would let the darkness win and be left with nothing but a broken heart once again. I couldn't have that. Not when I'd finally gotten a taste of what it meant to be alive. To be claimed by my mate. To be filled by him so beautifully. Something that my v!rgin and drunk self had missed out on when I'd first given myself to the stranger that was him.

So instead of running, instead of allowing myself to fall into trickery, instead of breaking that pleasurable contact that had my core already pulsing with unfulfilled need, I pulled him in and k!ssed him, hard, with a defiance I did not know I possessed. Bent on reclaiming him from Myrna's clutches, I let my boldness loose. Caressing every inch of him that was within my reach as I sinfully claimed his l!ps.

Something within him fought me, but I fought for him, for us. I fought for me. He'd wished to pull back, many times. To deny what I was offering, but I held on, drawing him deeper, unwilling for once to let anything or anyone take away what was rightfully mine. It was my turn to pleasure him as he'd done for me that fateful night.

The mere memory had me tightening around him, claiming him for myself and relishing his hardness that still filled me perfectly.

"Mine!" My wolf growled with a ferocity intended to intimidate even the worst of enemies. It would be the thing to get the gold glowing back in his eyes again. The thing to have him rake me in as he'd done before. With that deep hunger whose fulfillment lay in what or in who the gods had gifted him.

"Sh-Shyla?" His voice was a mix of surprise and a pleasurable m0an that drew a satisfied smile out of me. "I—" His h!ps buckled into me, grinding deeper, leaving me overwhelmed by waves and waves of pleasure.

I had him. Claws sunk into flesh as my wolf howled at the ensuing toe curling sensations, earning ourselves a possessive growl from our mate. He was mine...until he was not.

"I—I can't!" Jaws clenched while his hands flew to his neck. "It's... k!lling me!" His face contorted in a painful manner even as his wolf emerged. No doubt in a bid to help him bear the pain. It did little to help. Claws sunk into flesh, yet not as a means of granting pleasure. My mate furiously clawed at the sp0t meant to hold my mark, drawing bl00d. Myrna's mark!

It took me but a moment to realize just how Myrna, who should have been miles from the kingdom already after being banished had managed to sink her claws into my mate. It explained how her name instead of mine had been the one to proceed from his mouth the moment he'd claimed me.

The print of her l!ps on my mate mocked me as realization dawned on me. It was no simple mark to speak of her love for him, but a spell, a tether, meant to bind him to her. And keep me away from him while at it. At least when it came to moments such as these. She would not let me be intimate with him. Even when she'd been booted out of our lives, she'd made sure my mate and I would not live to enjoy what was left of it. With this, we would never truly know the beauty of our bond! The thought angered me and I wished for nothing but to snuff out the very life that held her existence in this realm and beyond.

I couldn't focus on that, however. Not just yet. Not when my mate withdrew from me and took away all that warmth that had filled me, albeit against his will. The struggle was oh so clear as he still clawed at his own skin, seeking to be free.

"Elian..." Fulfilling my own desires now forgotten, I only longed to ease his pain when I stretched my hand and laid it over the place Myrna had intrusively placed her mark. Not knowing what else to do, I hoped my touch would accomplish that task at the very least. What it did, however, left me marvelling at my own simple touch. And if not for his own hand that gripped mine in place, I would have withdrawn and searched the entirety of it for the presence of magic.

"Elian..." His name on my l!ps was but a whisper when gold, the deepest shade yet, took me in with a hunger that sent the entirety of my n.aked self melting under his gaze and rekindling my own need for fulfilment. It was as if my hand possessed a spell of its own that had rescued my mate from Myrna's

clutches and thrust him right into mine. All traces of his recent struggles were but a memory in time and all that remained was the alpha wolf who only longed to finish what he'd began.

"Need—you—now..." He breathed out, his rugged tone stirring something in my blood even as he drew closer. I should have done the reasonable thing yet again. Should have held him back until the spell had loosened its hold and we were both clear headed. Enough to figure out what in God's name had just transpired. But then his free hand fisted into my hair and tugged, bringing my mouth to his in a searing kiss that emptied me of everything but my need for my mate.