

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 76 - Tips

Pain and pleasure had taken on a whole different meaning since claiming my mate. It would no longer be the famed experience between lovers where one endured pain while ridding waves of pleasure, but a battle of wills. A war against oneself. Two extremes embodied into one that I'd never experienced before and that had threatened to tear me apart. I had never imagined waging war with oneself being possible. When you were both the enemy and the defender. Yet that was exactly what I'd done once our bodies had merged.

It should have been a pleasurable affair whose only threat should have been drowning in ecstasy. Claiming my mate, however, was anything but. My chosen mate had made sure of it. I had been stupid enough not to think more over what Myrna had done. I had thought that it would be nothing but a waiting game. That all it would take was avoiding Myrna's feminine wiles to bed me, until such a time as when my mate would freely mark me. Wrong did not even begin to describe my misjudgement. I should have given my former queen more credit for her dark efforts. Knowing to what depths she'd already gone to become queen, I should have known that she would not give it up so easily.

A treacherous tether, a dark prison of some sort. That's what Myrna's mark turned out to be. And Shyla did not know it, but giving myself to her was the only way back. Her kisses had been my lifeline. Back in the void, where a part of me had been cast the moment I uttered my captor's name, my mate's kisses and her body's warmth had been the things to keep me from being swallowed whole.

After fighting a losing battle against the pull embedded in the spell, I had not thought twice when a voice in the darkness had urged me to surrender. To give up my fight already and my ordeal would soon be over. For a king whose expectation was never to surrender in a battle, I had swallowed my pride and caved. Surrendering whole, yet not to the allure of the darkness, but to the one I knew I could entrust my heart to.

I blinked at my reflection that had stared back at me with equal intensity since stepping out of my bath. The water had been ice cold and yet sweat still dripped just as it had when I'd reached my pleasurable c****x. The thing to grant me the freedom that had brought me back to my mate.

Desire still hummed in my bones. Even after the most satisfying encounter, I could not fathom how it was that I longed for my mate still. Having not had release for so long aside, I was as satiated as I was still in need. But then so did the pain. Hidden deep in my bones, it hummed. Just like desire, it still plagued me after wrestling against the most potent magic to ever grip my soul.

The war within still raged, making me realize that coming back to my mate was apparently not enough. Choosing her and rejecting the darkness came at a price. One I was willing to pay until she could mark me. I'd already chosen to stick to my word to have Shyla make that particular choice. But until then, Xatis needed its king. Because besides pain and desire, I felt something else in my gut. A darkness that was much more than the politics of a kingdom.

Wiping at the pouring sweat for the umpteenth time, I turned to my mate. She was a picture of being thoroughly pleased and satiated as her chest rose and fell with a gentle rhythm. She was at peace. A smile tugged on my lips at the sight, glad that she had found her release as she'd desired. Seeing her shatter at my doing would always be the best of my accomplishments, I'd decided.

Unknown to her, however, was my predicament. And I intended to leave it at that. I did not wish for her to be burdened by it. "I will see you soon." I finally said. Fingers caressed her flawless skin and that hum of desire intensified effortlessly, making me release her. As much as I still longed for her, there would be none of that. Not just yet.

"Come to me..." A faint, but alluring voice carried over the quietness of my chambers, drawing my attention and sharpening my senses. Whoever it was, they were bidding me to go to them. It was by no means a voice I could recognize, but something deep in me longed to heed their call regardless. Just as I would my own mate's call. "Come..."

I turned to look around as the second call carried with it an urgency, but besides my mate and I, no one else was there. Deciding it was probably nothing or a fiction of my imagination, I turned back to my mate, but still it came. Louder and tugging at invisible chords I seemed to now possess, getting me moving. I longed to fight it as I helplessly watched the distance between my mate and I widen, but for whatever reason I couldn't. Because whatever drew me felt like a strong tide and going against it just felt unwise.

"Are you alright?" Outside my chambers, Rakon stepped in my way.

"I need to be some place." I mumbled almost absent mindedly.

"I should come with you." Rakon started to move, but I held him back.

"No."

"But—"

"You need to watch over her." It was a marvel that I was still sensible enough to make that suggestion. "I will be around the palace. No need to be so overly concerned." I reasoned at Rakon's appraising look before stepping away.

"Elian?" Concern laced my best friend's tone, but I did not stop to ease his mind. Or whatever drew me away would not let me. This was by no means like the void where I could fight. I felt more like a puppet and whoever was calling out to me, the puppeteer. My feet moved as I made no attempt to protest, mind set on only getting to the one who called for me.

The hallways were littered with guards, but remained quiet still. Heads bowed at my presence with neither, as always, not questioning my actions. "Come to me..." There it was again. Calling out to me in the shadows this time around. I stopped to listen before deciding which way to turn. The hallway that would lead me to the path heading down to the dungeons called to me and I mindlessly turned there. A few steps, however, I made another turn into yet another hallway that I could not quite remember where it led.

"Your majesty?!" Someone practically snatched me out of my daze and brought me back to my senses, thankfully. Although it would appear that after the short trip, I wasn't feeling quite like my usual self.

"Gol?" Confusion clouded my judgement as I was sure the outlaw that stood before me had no desire to be found out. His demeanour spoke of it. "Was it you? Did you call me?" I asked even though my mind was clear enough to remember that the voice had been that of a maiden. One couldn't blame me either as it was unexpected to have the outlaw anywhere around here. Had he followed me? Perhaps on Rakon's orders?

"Call you?" The outlaw frowned before his eyes widened at some kind of realization.

"Well?"

"I did no such thing, your majesty. But if you would come with me, I will bring you to someone who might just be able to grant you those answers."

The man sounded strange as he gave me his hasty reply, but...answers. That sounded like something I desperately needed at the moment as my mind suddenly felt foggy and more sweat dripped. "Answers, you say?" The world beneath my feet shifted and if it wasn't for the outlaw's quick action, I would have probably k!ssed the ground, albeit in a less than graceful manner.

"Yes, answers. Have you been drinking your majesty?" I felt Gol struggle against my weight, making me realize how pathetic my state was.

"It's a bl00dy banquet. Of course I've been drinking." I snapped, hating my current state. Something was definately wrong. "It wasn't enough to be this wasted, however. Besides, I can handle my liquor just fine." I added, wondering what else could have been in my drink. Poison perhaps? Surprisingly, the thought did not alarm me.

"Then take this."

"What is that? More poison?" I laughed bitterly.

"I would never do that to Shyla." The outlaw said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah right. It's always about my mate with you, huh?" I arched a brow, to which the outlaw only scoffed. "Give it. It can't be worse than how helpless I feel right now." I held out my hand, trusting him. Actually, it was her I trusted. My mate. I thought there had to be a worthy reason that had made her make the choice to trust and bring the man to the palace. I downed the contents. Bitter as hell, but as potent as the magic that had threatened to devour me. "What in God's name was that?" I questioned as I found my strength and my feet moments after.

"The devil's tonic." Gol appraised me. "Is that better?"

"I should have this to go with my wine." I eyed the now empty vile with fascination.

"I'm afraid now is not the time to speak of wines and tonics, your majesty."

"Oh, yes. Answers." I raised a finger in acknowledgement, but tensed in the same moment when awareness caught up with me. "Shyla, I need to get back

to her.” Finally back in control of my own mind, thoughts of Shyla being harmed got my feet moving, heading to my chambers. I couldn’t shake the feeling of her being manipulated the way I had been moments ago. For all I knew, they could have her jump to her death through my chamber’s windows. The thought had me practically wishing to fly back in an instance and when Gol held me back, I let my wolf at him.

“She’ll be fine...for now.” The man did not even flinch at my intimidation. It was as if not even death would keep him from accomplishing what he’d sought to do. That in itself, made me stop and stare questioningly at the man.

“And what is that supposed to mean? How do you know she’ll remain unharmed? Are you in on this?!” I sneered at the outlaw, not letting his Aldean warrior frame intimidate me. And now that I was paying attention, I noted the tension oozing from his seemingly calm self. “What is that supposed to mean?!”

“If you would only come with me, you will get all your answers and more.”

“More?” I frowned, wondering if these were not mere words meant to tempt me. Something meant to lead me away from my mate and leave her unprotected. She is protected. My mind countered, but it wasn’t enough to settle me. “Have Samara and Norae watch over my mate.” Knowing I’d made my decision, I linked Rakon with that one last order. With the two warriors having eyes on Shyla, I would breathe better.

“I am not in a position to say anymore. Especially not...here.” The outlaw searched the surroundings, no doubt aware of walls having ears.

“Lead the way then.” It was too much trust to put in one man, a foreigner at that, but when instinct did not protest, I followed after him.

“And why in God’s name are we leaving the palace?” I was by no means afraid, but Gol’s demeanour was too odd for my liking. Not to mention the stealth with which he moved and evaded every guard stationed on the perimeter. The Aldean was a weapon in himself that highlighted a weakness in my own palace security.

“I may have dragged your guest’s behind further from the palace than intended.”

“Wait, guest? What guest?” Surely he didn’t mean the hooded one who’d gotten away from Rakon? I stopped to stare at Gol, but the man chose not to furnish me with an answer and merely scurried through the forest surrounding the palace. I followed, spurred on by the desire to unravel the mystery of my hooded guest. Gol may not have confirmed it, but I knew that it had something to do with that being.

A hooded figure bound to a tree came into view not long after and something resembling relief oozed from Gol’s frame as he hastily moved to undo the binds.

“You bound them?” Wondering why, I came closer, senses sharpening in the darkness. I caught sight of the emblem of Carene first and every part of me tensed. Another spy?! An ambush? I was getting ready to attack and defend when the figure once freed, took off the hood of their cloak and revealed the crown atop their head.

The king of Carene!

“Your Majesty.” The figure gave a little bow, but I was too stunned to utter anything. Not only because I was I not expecting to see the ruler of Carene yet, but because I had never seen such a frail looking man. Especially not a king of Aldean descent.

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Rakon was right. Even at such a close a encounter and with all my senses sharpened, I couldn’t pick even the tiniest whiff of the foreign king’s scent. If it were not for the fact that my eyes beheld him, the man would be a pure ghost, if only he could move as stealthily as his older brother did on our way here. The entire idea left me on edge as I couldn’t decide why he’d need to go to so much trouble in the first place.

He’d been invited for the banquet. That meant no harm would come to the wolf even if he were an enemy. As long as he was on Xatis’ soil, every guard in the kingdom was bound to come to his aid in the event of danger. Hell, even I, as king, was bound by the same expectations. It did not even matter that one of his own had made an attempt on my life. So why in God’s name would he have the need to hide his true self and sneak into Xatis?

And, had Carene fallen on such hard times that its king had been reduced to a form that was that of a commoner’s in Xatis? Of course none of this had been

heard of the kingdom that had gone into seclusion after the death of its royal house, but with the sight before me, it was impossible not to entertain such thoughts.

“Forgive my less than gracious entrance, your majesty.” The king bowed even lower, while I, still unable to utter a word, stared between the two men who bore an uncanny resemblance, wondering what in God’s name was going on.

The king, despite his frailty and lack of grace in his entrance as he’d confessed to, still held a gracious posture, while the other brother who still held the burly figure of a true Aldean warrior appeared as though every word from the king’s mouth was a bitter pill to swallow.

“Get to the point, Zastan!” Gol growled at the younger brother, making him flinch. The reaction was subtle, but clearly visible and odd. It was as if the king had no control over it. I wondered if that was because of the less than glamorous reception the outlaw may have granted the foreign king.

Zastan, however, only shook his head as though the action would shake off the regret painted on his face together with the weight of his older brother’s command. “It is by no means the honourable way to answer to your generous invitation.”

In that he was right and seeking to understand, I finally found my voice. “Why do it then?” The crispness of my own sound surprised me.

“It is purely because of the point my brother is so eager to have me get to. But apologies first.” Bent on sticking to his royal manners, the king moved, but his intentions to apologize as I would expect, were lost somewhere in the middle of a sword being drawn and a figure slipping inbetween us.

“I said I would let you speak with him, nothing more.” Gol sneered while I only marvelled at what the outlaw had just done. He’d vowed to ally with Xatis, but seeing him sticking to his word and his clear intent on laying down his life for me was awe inspiring. It made me deathly curious too as to the reason why the king of Carene had sought me out that the outlaw felt the need to protect me. I was beginning to realize too that my invitation may have served two purposes instead of one.

“Right.” The man stepped back, subtly eyeing Gol’s large sword with a hint of amusement. “However, you should know that drawing that thing is not necessary.” Despite looking so frail, the king of Carene also possessed an

annoyance of a younger sibling that going by Gol's gritted teeth, one would clearly tell how much he annoyed the older sibling. Although, annoyance and impatience were the least of emotions I expected from the outlaw when it came to the man who'd dealt him the worst of betrayals.

"You should also probably know that even your binds were not necessary. Your order for me not to go anywhere would have sufficed." At that, Gol lifted his eyes to his brother, clearly dumbfounded by what he'd said. I was equally struck by the meaning behind the frail king's words.

"What did you say?" Something lit up in the outlaw's eyes and for the tiniest moment I confirmed what it was the king's words meant. Being an alpha myself, rank was something I was familiar with. And right now, despite the kingly position held by the younger brother, Gol still outranked him. How that was still possible after what Gol had narrated of the tale of Carene, eluded me. It would appear many things seemed to be eluding me yet again. I gave my neck that was feeling a little numb a squeeze as if that would get my own head working as it should.

"You know for a man who always sang about paying attention, you yourself did a sh!tty job at it, brother." The king chuckled, earning himself a growl from the outlaw.

"Zastan!" Gol glared at the king who only sighed.

"Did it ever occur to you as to how I was able to do the entire thing?" The king held my gaze, but his question was clearly meant for Gol. But that would not stop me from trying to figure out the 'how' even when I knew the answer had eluded me from the moment word of Carene falling had reached Xatis.

"That knowledge changes nothing." Pain and failure laced the outlaw's words as it always did when Carene was the matter at hand. "And I did not spare you so that you could dwell on the past."

Regret. Tons of it overshadowed the king's face before focussing his attention on me yet again. I couldn't hide my confusion at the emotion displayed by the usurper of Carene's throne. Did he now regret his act or had he also done so over the years?

The king only offered an understanding smile. "You see, unlike my brother, I do believe that dwelling on the past, having knowledge of what has been, could be the thing that gives power to change the future. Your future."

My future? Now it was my turn to be impatient as the king's words sounded more like riddles. Riddles that my now tired mind refused to solve. "Whatever do you mean? Xatis is clearly not Carene." I rubbed at my neck yet again. It felt heavier than numb, making me wonder if this was the effects of Gol's tonic wearing off. Was it meant to wear off? I couldn't for the love of God remember if he'd said anything of the sort.

Abandoning my fruitless endeavor to remember, I turned my focus back to the king. It proved to be one hell of an effort to make, making me realize that something was deeply wrong. And I had not been the only to notice.

"Your majesty?" The king of Carene rushed towards me, but my bared my teeth and Gol kept him at bay. Or so I thought as I felt a heaviness settle on me. I was slipping. Into what, I did not know. "He got to you too?" The king's words were filled with horror. They spoke of defeat too. And whatever they meant seemed to have swallowed his earlier determination, leaving only fear as the man eyed me with a knowing look.

"What in God's name are you talking about? Who got to me?" I rubbed at that annoying feeling in my neck that was beginning to give me an unusual itch and an unsettling amount of dread.

"Zastan, what is it?" Gol turned to his brother with a tenderness the outlaw had only ever shown to my mate.

"It is too late." The king merely shook his head refusing to look up. An action unbecoming of a king in charge of a whole kingdom.

Feeling infuriated by the entire matter, I eyed the man with indignation. "What kind of king are you that you can only sob in the face of whatever this is?" He was by no means sobbing, but he might as well have been. "You did sneak into Xatis with an intention to change, warn or whatever... and did you just now decide it was all pointless?"

"That is the thing, your majesty. I am no king." Truth shone in those tired eyes, leaving me utterly confused. "I am nothing but a mere—"

"...puppet of the actual king."

My head, as heavy as it felt on my shoulders, snapped to the side at the sound of that voice. "You!" I growled at a very familiar face and despite the heaviness I felt, I shifted, something that I would consider an overreaction on

my part, but instinct decided this was very necessary. Gol followed suit without question and for the first time since I'd walked in here, I regretted not having listened to Rakon.

"It appears I made a deal with the devil." The king of Carene seemed to lament from somewhere beside me. "And as we know of the wretched being, he is out to get everything."

Everything... Being on four legs should have been better than being on two, but as everything melted into nothing but darkness, so did my wolf form.

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The winds of fate were blowing yet again and I had thought they would be less harsh with their dealings this time around. I was wrong...

"Why did no one wake me earlier?" I glared at the bright light from the high noon sun as though it were in anyway at fault. I couldn't believe that I'd slept this much.

"Well, after last night we figured you'd need extra rest and decided to let you sleep in until such a time that you would wake of your own volition." Norae offered her answer with that emotionless face of a warrior, but I blushed still, thinking of last night and what else the guards may have been forced to endure as they stood guard outside of the king's chambers.

And speaking of the king... "His highness?" I tried to sound as casual as possible when I inquired of my mate whose absence when I awakened had been a bit of a prick to my heart. Only my mind reminding me that I'd overslept and should have not expected him to lay around in bed, cuddling while the kingdom awaited on him, kept me from succumbing to the many thoughts of what his absence after our glorious first time together could mean. Our first time... I felt my cheeks heat up as I suspected they would be doing for a long time to come each time I thought back to the moment that everything had shattered into oblivion, leaving only desires fulfilled.

"Perhaps my lady should bath and eat first—" Before Samara could even finish uttering her thought, the doors to the chambers burst open, letting in a flood of maids led by Carlytte and Astryne. The noble maiden beamed as she floated gracefully to my side while the maid wore a very pleased smile that I did not need guessing as to what its source could be. I wondered how much of the

palace knew of mine and my mate's escapades last night. The thought left me blushing even more.

"Sister." I melted into Carlytte's embrace, loving the genuineness of it and the sense of family that her address inspired. Unlike with Kerina, I did not mind her calling me 'sister' at all. Apart from my own parents, she was the first in my newfound family that I knew was genuinely happy about my return and I couldn't wait until we had the chance to really get to know each other and build on the sisterly bond. "Are you alright? How's my niece, or is it a nephew? Is everything alright? You left the banquet so suddenly last night and—"

"I am fine, Carlytte, I promise." I patted the back of the young maiden and only when I felt her relax did I realize that she'd been seriously concerned of my well being.

"Oh thank the gods." She pulled back and seemed to assess my frame as if wishing to prove my claims for herself. "With everything going on—"

"Everything going on?" I arched a brow and Carlytte slapped a hand over her mouth, realization shining in her eyes.

"I simply meant that in your state and given what you've had to endure in the recent past, being expected to play host to all those guests must have taken its toll." Her observation was correct but somehow I felt that it had nothing to do with the 'everything going on' she'd alluded to.

"My lady, your bath is ready." Astryn did not wait for my reply before she gently tugged me to my feet and started helping me out of my sleeping garment. I couldn't help thinking this was my maid's way of distracting me from thinking more about Carlytte's words. "I took the liberty of placing some fruits next to the bath for your enjoyment and to get the replenishing of your strength started before you can have some actual food." She mumbled as she draped a bath robe on my now naked frame.

"Thank you." I offered my maid a smile before curiously scanning the rest of the bed chambers. A nagging feeling I could not shake had settled on me after Carlytte's words. And my own observations of my surroundings would not put the feeling to rest as they made me realize that I was missing something. Or that something was wrong.

I noted with alarm that apart from Carlytte and Astryn, every other figure that had stepped into the chambers, even though dressed as maids where no

maids at all. Their warrior like figures and stiff nods as I passed them enroute to the bath betrayed their cover.

“Why do I need so many guards?”

“M-My lady?” Panicked expressions painted both Carlytte and Astryn’s faces at my question, inspiring dread in my heart when they made no attempt to even deny what I’d observed. And now that I thought about it, Samara had not answered my question regarding my mate either. Had something happened while I slept? An attack maybe that had taken him from my side and forced him to place such heavy protection to watch over me in his absence.

“It was his highness’ choice.” Norae stepped up, volunteering the information with that emotionless face that gave nothing else away, leaving me feeling a little frustrated. “He preferred his trusted warriors to serve you, unlike the usual palace maids who can easily be infiltrated while the castle is filled with so many guests.”

“So Xatis is alright then?” I asked after the kingdom, when what I really wished to ask after was my mate.

“Yes, my lady.”

“But you and this precious niece or nephew won’t be if you keep putting eating off.” Carlytte dragged me to the bath against my protests. And after warning me not to think anymore of the politics of the kingdom, she helped me in and once I settled, handed me a cup of tea.

I should not have enjoyed the hot beverage on such a hot afternoon, but whatever was in it tasted like heaven and coupled with the magic of Astryn’s hands on my overworked body, I found my bath time quite relaxing. So much that heeding to Carlytte’s warning was the easiest thing to do as peace settled in my soul.

My bath time ended with brunch that I had apparently managed to eat while I bathed. Thanks to Carlytte who insisted that it was not fair to keep the child I carried waiting after a mean growl from my stomach had filled the room, speaking of my own hunger.

“What is this?” I felt the peace I’d gained drain away at the sight of an exquisite gown that was laid out on the large bed for me. It wasn’t its beauty that earned such a reaction from me, however, but its colour. The deep shade

of purple made me aware that the winds of fate were blowing yet again and this time around, heavier than before.

“A gift from the queen mother. She insists that you put it on.”

“Sarabeth insists?” Not Liira? I stared at Samara who stood besides the bed. I realized she had been the one to deliver the gown.

“Yes, my lady.”

“I can’t.” I declared, even when I knew that refusing such a gift was impossible. Because it was no gift in the literal sense, but a symbol of an end of an era and the beginning of another. I’d learnt that much from Liira. Apart from the many deeds to be done, a former queen of Xatis was expected to gift the new queen a gown meant to be worn on her first official engagement. Of course I did not even know whether this was it, but I couldn’t help feeling unusually right to think it was. “You have not been crowned anything yet.” I comforted myself, but all that went out of the window when Samara’s words confirmed my fears.

“My lady is expected in the council chambers.” The guard’s words were expected to sway my decision and accept the gift, but hearing of my presence being waited on in the council chambers only made me sick to my stomach and had me drawing further from the bed and the gown.

“I think it matches your eyes. Don’t you think so, Astryn?” Carlytte jumped in with her usual charm, clearly seeking to ease my discomfort. It was not enough.

“I think it suits my lady perfectly, unlike—” My maid’s eyes widened with realisation, before slapping a hand over her mouth. “I-I think you and this gown are perfectly suited.” Astryn sighed. “And whether my lady wears it today, tomorrow or a thousand years from now, this is a future that is certain for you.” An apologetic smile was cast my way, but I knew my maid was anything but apologetic over her words. Because they were true. I knew it and so did everyone else who surrounded me in the king’s chambers.

“His highness, where is he?” Because I was desperate for his comfort, my inquiry was more of a demand than a question.

“I’m afraid he can’t be here.”

“Right,” I nodded at Norae. “Then perhaps I will meet him at the council chambers.” At my resolve, a strange look passed between my two personal guards, but before I could catch onto what it meant, they both nodded. And that served to be the cue for Carlytte and Astryne to spring into action, getting me dressed at a speed that had me suspecting they expected me to change my mind at any moment.

As much beauty as the gown wrapped me in, it also draped me in a heaviness that only increased in weight the closer I was led to the council chambers. And the sight of Sarabeth pacing outside the doors leading to the chambers only served to add to the weight of my burden.

“Thank the gods you are finally here.” The former queen exhaled as she rushed to meet up with my small entourage. “And you look absolutely beautiful.” She beamed, but I couldn’t help notice the worry lines on her beautiful face.

“Thank you. Although, I am not sure why I’ve been summoned or why my lady insisted I be dressed in the queen’s colour.” Because not knowing for a moment longer felt like the anxiety in my bones would begin cracking things, I held on tightly to Sarabeth while I hoped for an answer.

“Well, then, I suppose we should go right in.” My hope was deferred as the former queen took my hand and led us the remaining steps towards the council chambers.

“This is not usual of my son so forgive me, but I have to ask.” Sarabeth suddenly stopped in front of the chambers, forcing me to a stop too. “Did you and the king get into some sort of a fight?”

“My lady?” The question caught me off guard.

“Rakon here says the king didn’t seem quite himself when he stepped out of your chambers last night.”

“Last night? He’d left the chambers last night?” I’d spent the entire night alone? The knowledge of that brought a familiar sting to my heart. What was it? Regret? Disappointment? Did the experience not live up to his expectations that he’d had the need to run?

“Shyla?”

“Hmm?” My gaze darted between the former queen and the head of the king’s guard. Expectation was written on Sarabeth’s face while Rakon eyed me with a strange look. One I would have never expected from the guard who’d accepted me from the moment we met. It was as if he suspected me of having done something. It was that thought that made me turn to Sarabeth and made a confession I wouldn’t have made in front of an audience. No matter how small.

“I was going to take you up on your offer for tea this morning.” When she frowned at my unusual answer, I bit my lips nervously, wondering how to speak of the thought that had been the last thing on my mind as I slipped into dreamland last night. “I wished to speak to you about mine and the king’s mating ceremony.” Because banishing Myrna had still kept her in our lives, the mating ceremony was the only way I could think of ensuring that the only bond to continue existing would be mine and my mate’s. At least that is what I hoped for.

“Oh...” The former queen’s eyes brightened, but only for a moment.

“Why, was I too forward?” I felt my cheeks heat up. “Liira did mention that the king’s mother was meant to oversee the ceremony and—”

“Liira was right in saying so and you are in no way too forward over it.” Hands tightened over mine as the former queen’s voice shook with emotion, rekindling the uneasy feeling I’d felt back in the king’s chambers. “Perhaps, it’s time we went in.”

“Did something happen? Did Elian say something?” Was that why he’d abandoned me last night, why I had been brought before the council? Had he accused me of something? My own thoughts made no sense. Neither did my presence here nor the queen’s gown I had been gifted. And Sarabeth was yet to give me a reasonable explanation as to why I had been summoned.

“I wish he were here to say something.”

“He is not?” I frowned at the council chamber’s doors that were just as heavily guarded as every inch of the route we had used getting here.

“The king has been missing since last night. And as his future queen and mother to his heir, your presence in the council will be of utmost importance while he is still yet to be found.”

“Missing?!” A growl tore from my lips, surprising even my own self. The news of my missing mate should have knocked me to the ground or something, but it only served to awaken something else. My tattoo and a beast deep within that wished for nothing but to find our mate. “What do you mean he’s missing?!” Hand clutching tightly to my arm that chose that moment to burn, I ran after Sarabeth as she disappeared into the council chambers. “How can a whole king go missing under the watchful eye of a kingdom’s entire guard and in the middle of a feast?!”

“That is exactly what we wish to know. Since the last person to be seen with my son refuses to speak to anyone but you.” I stopped in my tracks at the former king of Xatis’ address as realisation of where I was hit me. And was that accusation in my future father in law’s tone?

“Me?” Eyes took me in after my noisy entrance. Some with genuine curiosity, while others like Elian’s father, eyed me with that accusatory gaze. Liira was there too and I could not decipher the look she gave me even if my life depended on it. The matriarch sat next to a man who looked as ancient as life itself and who eyed me as if I was an enigma. The ancient man, I quickly gathered, was no noble and his penetrating gaze was not something I wished to endure.

“Bring in the traitor!” The sound of shackles and painful grunts drew my attention from the ancient man to the chamber’s entrance. Curious to discover the person who would only speak to me, I turned fully. “I should have known that an outlaw’s word would always be worthless!” The former king spat, but I paid him no mind as his words ignited panic in my heart. And before I knew it, I was rushing back to the entrance, praying that my outlaw was not the one to have betrayed my mate.

“Gol?” My own sound was but a whisper when I came face to face with a bloodied face, hands and feet bound by silver.

“I swear, I do not know what in God’s name they are talking about.” He had not lost the fierceness that made him the man I’d known since the day I woke up in his shack. That comforted me in more ways than one. “Whatever it is they think I know—” His chest heaved as his eyes shut momentarily as though he were searching his mind for answers. “I—I do not know any of it Shyla. I maybe an outlaw, but I’m no traitor!” Bitterness dripped with his words, slipping right into my heart and unearthed my own. I knew what it felt like to proclaim your innocence and not be heard. To be accused of crimes you had no knowledge of.

“Release him.”

“B–But my lady–”

“I.said.release.him!” Canines elongated as my wolf snarled at the guard’s disobedience.

“O–Of course, as you wish, my lady.” The guard looked over my shoulders in apology to whoever had probably given him the orders he’d been following. I did not care for who that was except the familiar clicking of metal as the shackles fell off.

“Are you alright?” Not caring for all the bl00d or the priceless gown I wore, I flung my body at Gol wishing to learn for myself that he was really alright. What I learned however, had nothing to do with my saviour’s well being.

“Hello my dear...” At mine and Gol’s contact, his mind link ripped through mine with a force that knocked me out of my own reality. Except this would not be a conversation shared as we’d done many times before. No. I had been plunged into what I would only consider to be a sea of memories. His, my mate’s and someone else’s that had been locked away and meant to be discovered by me. As it turned out, the outlaw did indeed know who had taken my mate and the culprit had taken the liberty of laying out his demands for his safe return.

“Dear child, are you alright?” I awoke to the worried faces of Liira and all the noble lords that had gathered in the council chambers. Gol too. They had a right to be worried, but not about my well being.

“The king of Carene has made demands.” I said in a single breath and the knowing faces made me realize that I did not need to explain myself. I was grateful for that because I wouldn’t know were to start speaking of what I’d seen and heard.

“Such sorcery! Zastan! What in God’s name does Zastan want with my son? A war?” The former king of Xatis bellowed, breaking the silence that had fallen over the chambers.

“And how in God’s name did he manage that?” Many more wolves voiced their opinions while I, I only marvelled at everyone as they directed their anger at the wrong person.

“Who is this Zastan?” That name had been a part of Gol’s memories, but he’d been nothing but a figure in the shadows.

“The king of Carene, of course! That insufferable twerp had been the one to wipe out the royal house of Carene!”

The king? He’d wiped out the royal house of Carene? A new dread settled in my belly as visions of my royal mate lying lifeless assaulted my senses. “No, he is not. This Zastan, is not the king of Carene.” I shook my head as I struggled to my feet, wishing to let everyone know of the truth that even my own mind refused to accept. “We have all been deceived. Well, except the king.” I should have trusted my mate’s instincts, but as usual, I chose family.

“What are you talking about?”

Instead of furnishing the former king of Xatis with an answer, I turned to my father as panic washed over me. “Where is my uncle?”

“Evarius? Why?” A puzzled look graced his face.

“Because his were the demands left in the crevices of Gol’s memory. He is infact the king of Carene.”

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 79 - Tips

Merrymaking had continued around the palace with the guests oblivious to the tension brewing in the host kingdom together with the fate of its king. I loathed the idea of it, knowing my mate, their host, was bound and probably suffering at the hands of my own flesh and blood while they ate, drank and danced.

It had, however, been decided that it was for the best that the merry atmosphere be maintained. With the guests being continually filled with wine, none or few would notice the absence. It would also speak of Xatis still standing despite the capture of its king. A message clearly meant for his captors.

“Your highness, my lords and ladies, the tenth search party has returned empty handed.” Rakon’s strained voice carried over the the council chambers as he bowed before my mate’s father. He’d given the same report over and over again with the former king of Xatis asking to search one more time each time.

Derian had not believed a word I'd said. Well, the part that named my own uncle as the king of Carene at least. He'd implied that mine and Gol's narrations were nothing but the outlaw's ploy to keep Xatis from storming the gates of Carene and destroying his own brother. And each time he'd growled his orders to search the palace and its grounds again, I merely sat back and waited for his unbelief to waiver.

I held on to the little sanity that a wolf in my position could possess. It was a wonder how I'd accomplished that. Perhaps it was the feel of my mate's invisible touch I'd held on to from the moment I'd taken his seat at the head of the long table. Or perhaps it was the faux embrace that surrounded my own body by the seat he'd sat in many times before or that faint whiff of his lingering scent.

Initially I'd refused to take the seat when Liira had offered it, but the matriarch had simply pointed out that I had no choice in the matter. As the mate and future queen to the king, I was meant to hold his place until his safe return.

"Lord Evarius and lady Kerina have not been seen since last night either. Not around the palace or the lord's residence." That little detail tied in with whatever was hidden in Gol's memories. My uncle and his daughter still remained the culprits, but the former king of Xatis still seemed to have a hard time giving in.

"This is madness! Evarius can't be— How did we not know this?!"

"My brother has always been ambitious." My father was the one to speak up. "But I thought being the lord of our house would be enough." Being lord was never his aim. I had seen it in the darkness that resided in my uncle's eyes when he'd laid out his demands for me. The man desired something much much more. I had realised that that was the reason giving up being heir apparent had been easy for him.

"And what are these...demands?" Derian spat. The bitterness in the former king's tone mirrored my own even when its roots were not the same.

"The safe return of his mate and child." My words were met with mumblings around the table.

"His mate and child?" My father's confusion spoke for the many around the table. "What have we to do with his wife? And did you not say Evarius was in the company of Kerina when they took your mate?"

“He speaks of Myrna...” Her name was as ash on my tongue. “She is his true mate and carries his heir.” Gasps filled the room at my statement.

“Wait, the banished queen?” Liira exclaimed as more gasps and mumblings carried over the council chambers. “They are mates?” I felt myself stiffen as that dagger of truth pierced my heart yet again. While everyone took in the news with shock, bitterness filled my mouth. She was someone else’s mate, had been banished from the palace, but my mate had kept her...close. When my own wrongful banishment had seen me fighting for my life as I was driven out of the only home I knew. I was never one to compare, but he’d done the total opposite when it came to my wretched sister. He’d kept her within the borders of Xatis...the comfort of the palace walls. I did not know what to do with that.

“Shouldn’t he be out there searching for her himself then?”

I turned to Rakon at Derian’s question. “I believe you know where his highness chose to hide his chosen mate.” I said bitingly and the guard at a loss for words, could only offer a regretful expression meant to let me know that whatever I thought, was not so. However, I was unwilling to hear anything of the sort, so I ignored him and pressed for an answer. On a sigh, the guard stood up straighter and nodded.

“She’s still here?!” My mate’s father bellowed, clearly unimpressed with his son’s actions. It was the first time we agreed on anything since the moment I’d stepped into the chambers. “What in God’s name was that boy thinking by sheltering a traitor?”

“Perhaps this might work to our advantage, your highness.” Lord Hadwyn’s calm voice drew mine and everyone’s attention. “If indeed, she’s his mate and carries his child, she might be a card to be played in this predicament.”

“We can’t.” I hated protecting Myrna, but my uncle’s demands had been clear. “If I wish to see my mate alive, I am to deliver my sister to him. Unharmmed.” A mate for a mate, he’d said. “That is the other part of his demands.”

“He’s insane!” Derian shot up from his seat. “He already has my son and now he expects me to just hand over my grandson too?!”

“Because his ambitions, I’m afraid, go beyond men’s thrones.” A familiar voice filled the room, drawing my attention to the chamber’s doors. “Zillah?!” Surprise did not even begin to describe what I felt at the sight of the crazy wolf

that did not appear...crazy at all? Her old and filthy rags had been replaced by a long dark cloak that even from where she stood one could tell was clean. Her usually matted hair had been washed and pulled back neatly. But perhaps those were not the things to surprise me the most. "How are you here? In the palace...the council chambers?" I rose to my feet, the matter at hand momentarily forgotten.

"You called for me." Her usual smile was a comforting sight, but her response made me stare at her in confusion.

"I did?"

"Well, not exactly. Your tattoo summoned me."

"My what?" My eyes widened at the woman. Perhaps I had dismissed her craziness too soon.

"Your tattoo, it—"

"Zillah?" My father's gasp interrupted the woman. "Is that you?"

"Lord Lydo." Zillah bowed as a servant would to a master. One she'd served once before.

"Wait, father, you know her?"

"She was always meant to be your nanny. Your mother chose her long before you were born, but..." My father, overwhelmed with emotion turned to stare at Zillah, deepening my confusion. "...We thought you were dead. The night our daughter was taken—"

"Guardian." Zillah flashed her easy smile at my father. "I always told you that I was her guardian and as you can see, I'm still alive doing that very duty."

Your mother chose her long before you were born. My father's words rang in my ears. Zillah knew? She knew who I was! "Wait, that was real? Your being my guardian was real?"

"How else would I be able to heed your call each time you summoned me?" The ground I stood on shifted while waves of emotions flooded, sending me sinking back in my seat at her question. I remembered each time she'd appeared as if by magic. Always ready to comfort me. All the times she could

have told me who I was. All the opportunities missed where she could have brought me home and ended mine and my parent's pain.

"All this time..." a lump lodged itself in my throat as betrayal nipped at my heart. As crazy as I thought her to be, Zillah had been my safe haven when life dipped and now? Lies! "You knew and yet you what, pretended to be crazy and for what?"

She gave me that look that was annoyingly comforting. "Eighteen wolf moons."

"What?"

"That is how long I needed to wait." Another one of those annoyingly comforting smiles. "I had to wait for the right moment. This moment. Your birthday." Eyes beamed. "Happy birthday, my lady. And no, your highness..." Zillah lost her smile as she faced Derian. "Evarius does not wish to take your grandson, but your son's mate."

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 80 - Tips

I'd been drifting. Like a lost soul in the deep dark void, oblivious to the time of day or even their own name. That however, was not the worst part of my newfound reality. It was not the thing that threatened to consume my mind, but the silence. That stillness. The coldness and the loneliness that extended deep into my soul. I'd been stripped of my very essence and left to wallow in the unknown as my mind fought to get back to the light...to her.

"Rise and shine your majesty!" A voice rang out in my ears, pulling me out of the darkness and into the light. As unpleasant as it was, I was still grateful to be reunited with reality once again. Although that only lasted until I beheld the annoying traitor's face.

Evarius! He was no longer just an annoying thorn in my side, but an enemy. It did not even matter that he was Shyla's uncle. After this, it would be just a matter of time before I severed his head from his body. As memories of my recent past flooded my mind, it took me a mere moment to scan my surroundings and I quickly noted that I was in no dungeon. "How thoughtful." I glared at the bastard.

"I know it's nowhere near fit for a king, but definitely so much better than a cold and filthy dungeon. Don't you agree?" Evarius grinned, looking every bit pleased with himself and I couldn't help the desire to get a taste of his blood.

"What did you do to me?!" I growled when my attempt to leap and tear his throat apart ended with me realizing that I'd been shackled to a seat. Except, there were no chains. No shackles.

"Just a little tether. Stronger than before, embedded right there."

A tether? Stronger than before? I wondered what the traitor was on about. My answer came as a jolt of pain. Something stung in my neck, right where I'd been stabbed by the spy from Carene as realization hit. I was tethered. The attack in the palace...the spy... "It was you!" Still forgetting my predicament, I lunged at the traitor and this time I was treated to a searing pain that shot through my entire body and left me panting.

"I needed something to tame the mighty king of Xatis." A pleased look still graced the face of the former heir of the third noble house and I hated the fact that I could do nothing about it. While I could speak freely, willing my body to do anything else proved to be an impossible task. Whatever Evarius had done was working perfectly. And I hated that I had listened to Rakon all those times and let the bastard go, unharmed.

"Rakon!" The thought of my best friend had me digging deep into my mind, searching for a link to him. Wherever Evarius held me, if I was able to link Rakon, it would be what he'd need to find me. My wolf struggled, but I kept at it. If only I could reach h—

"I'm afraid your wolf is useless around here. Which makes your mind link equally useless." I did not wish to believe the bastard, but the unnatural silence in my head was no mistake. What was it? Another spell?

"Let me go!" I growled, but Evarius only chuckled.

"You should probably know that your alpha voice means nothing too." I was defenceless and all on my own. That is what those words meant, but I refused to bow to that. I needed to get back to my mate and I would, even if I died trying.

"I must say magic in the right hands does yield the most glorious results."

“Magic?” I spat. “Is that where you’ve been hiding your cowardly self? Behind your wall of spells, while your victims do your dirty work?” My current position aside, the real story behind the fall of Carene still had my head reeling and as far as plotting went, I had to hand it to Evarius for the best or rather, the worst plot of any usurper in the history of the realms.

I thought of the riots that had been springing up all over Xatis and I knew that it would have only been a matter of time before my own kingdom had suffered the same fate. So what had changed? Why had Evarius been forced to alter a perfectly laid out plan that won him Carene and instead opted to capture me and reveal himself in the process. I needed to know more. Gol had been right. War had already been waged and if I was going to see the bastard coming henceforth, I needed to get in his head. “Why Xatis?” I suddenly asked when a dismissive look had been the only answer to my previous questions. “You have Carene—”

“Oh, but Carene is but a city compared to Xatis.” He offered a dismissive wave to stress his point and I should have been flattered by the comment, if only the lunatic had not decided to exercise his lunacy over my own kingdom. “I was never one to aim so low. Carene was only good for the loyalty of the Aldeans.”

“A loyalty you do not have, apparently.” I happily pointed out, thinking of Zastan’s words, but the man merely smiled.

“I am a very patient man, your highness.” The smile grew wider, unsettling me. But then again, a thought to his words gave me hope. If Evarius still had to be patient, then Gol, as lord of the Aldeans, must have ensured that that loyalty still remained with the dead royals of Carene. One battle won in the incoming war! I did not know how the outlaw had accomplished that, knowing he’d suffered a similar fate as mine. Wherever he was being held, I and Xatis owed him a great debt. “I’m so glad I do not have to fake my smile with you any longer.” Evarius suddenly exclaimed, the split of his lips rousing my anger.

“For what it’s worth, I never found it pretty.” I spat while Evarius broke out in a hearty laugh. The sound was as annoying as always.

“Just so you know, I never held my breath thinking you would. I already knew your taste long before you became king. You found her pretty even when she was nothing but an ugly baby still.”

I froze, knowing exactly whom he meant. Could it be...? "What are you talking about?" I asked as my mind travelled back in time. To that night many years ago. I could not place his face in the room that night, however. No matter how much I sought to recall, Evarius' face was simply not among the faces present.

"Oh, I think we both know what I speak of." Evarius bragged. "She'd only been born. All wrinkly, like she'd just escaped hell, of which, yes, thanks to me, the comfort of her mother's womb came pretty close. But to you, she was the fairest and most beautiful creature your little princely eyes had ever beheld. And right there, I knew that she would be someone important to you. Perhaps even your mate."

"You knew that from a child's gaze? How perverse are you?" It had to be him. I thought. Even when I could not place his face anywhere in the room that night, something told me he was. The bastard had been the one to take her! My current position left no room for doubts. Evarius had been the one to take Shyla. Her own uncle!

"I assume the word you are looking for is observant." I couldn't argue that he wasn't. I had hated that quality about the bastard for too long. "And besides, you did make it easy when you insisted on seeing and watching over her each waking day. But I couldn't have it. My wretched niece, heir to my noble house's fortune and the prince of Xatis, heir to the throne I coveted the most."

And there it was...his confession to the age old crime and more, apparently. There had to be more. It couldn't just be about the family fortune or Xatis' throne. He already had both in Carene. "It was you." I stated.

"I'd be ashamed that you were my king once, if you couldn't figure out this much."

"It seems you failed." I taunted, knowing we'd both found our way back to each other and because, I wished for the bastard to keep talking and give me more. He had the upper hand at the moment and playing his games was the only way I was going to get anything or anywhere.

"A regrettable endeavor I'm about to rectify, your highness."

"What are you going to do? Kill me, break her heart and take the throne?"

“That would be the most logical...” The bastard seemed to consider it. “But where would the fun in that be? You should probably know by now that I have a flair for the dramatic.” I did not know what could be more dramatic than what I’d suggested. “Of course if only you had kept her away as I had asked. There would be no need for all of this. At least not you and I having this conversation in such a regrettable manner.” Somehow I doubted he regretted my position, but that was not what had suddenly put me on edge.

“Asked? What in hell is that supposed to mean?” His sinister smile shaved years off of my wolf years. “What do you mean?!” I growled, but the prick was going to take his damn time.

Finally he said, “You were so much fun to watch when you actually believed you were in charge. Elian, The almighty king of Xatis.” He cooed. “I must admit, however, that I liked Derian better. Your father was a more perfect candidate for my plans too, but the presence of Sarabeth made him unsuitable. I would wait for their heir. Besides, I had not found my secret ingredient either. It’s a shame she turned out to be my niece.” He looked almost remorseful, almost. I on the other hand could only stare, realizing how far his plotting had come. A day would simply not be enough to know it all. And as eye opening as his confessions were, it was not what I had asked of him.

“What do you mean when you say you asked?”

“Oh, there is simply so much to tell your highness.” The bastard seemed to sigh at what he perceived to be a mammoth task. “I do not think we have the time—”

“Evarius!” I growled, but the bastard merely stared, reminding me that I was at his mercy. A fact I would endure for now.

“Well, if you must know, for my plans to come to fruition, you and my niece could simply not be together. So I had to take her away from you. The plan was perfect. Keep her away from you until it was time.”

Keep her away from me? Is that why it took me so long to find her? He’d hidden her? “I know what you are thinking.” Evarius pulled me out of my thoughts. “But I can’t really take all the credit for you not finding your mate sooner. Well, I would have, if only that wretched crazy wolf had not crossed my path that night.”

“Crazy wolf? What crazy wolf?”

“Oh, we both know there is only one crazy wolf that we both know of. At least one of importance.”

“Zillah?” I blinked. “What does she have to do with any of this?” Of all the persons that could have been of importance in Evarius’ narration, Zillah was the least expected.

At my question, Evarius lost his pleased look and stepped away from my view. “I do not know how she did it, because storms never broke out so suddenly in Xatis.” I knew that about Xatis’ weather, and that was not the thing to get my head spinning as everything began falling into place. I finally found the significance to Shyla’s father’s story. “That night...” Evarius kept narrating while I listened to his every word, not wishing to miss out on a single detail. “As I beheld a sickly young child that was not my niece, while it stormed, I became a father and my barren wife who’d been faking a pregnancy according to my plans, became a happy mother. It would not be Shyla, but Kerina turned out to be quite the player in what I had set out to do too.” His pleased look was back, gracing his face by the time he stepped back into my view. While I, merely stared at him, eyes wide. “The crazy wolf thought she’d won when she switched my niece for Kerina, but she’d merely set my plans back a few years. I knew it would be just a matter of time before I found her again. Thanks to you, that time was shorter than I would have ever anticipated.”

“Me?” I blinked at him.

“Your meetings at the capital—” Of course. If Evarius was truly watching, he’d have known where I’d snuck off to as he had been the one to accompany father on some of those trips to the capital. Although, I wouldn’t put it past the bastard to have hired spies too. “They were too much of a coincidence and so I watched her, hoping she’d lead you to where she’d hidden my niece, but when she did none of that, I settled with following her. I was handsomely rewarded as you know and I could have taken Shyla then, but there was no need to fix what was not broken. I simply let her stay hidden in the forgotten village while I waited for the right time. But then fate interfered and you insisted on searching each district for your mate.” Evarius held my gaze. “I couldn’t let you ruin my plans. Not when I was so close. I needed you to reject her, so I asked.”

I should have been more concerned about what those 'plans' were, but for the love of God I couldn't shake what he'd said. "You asked me to reject her?" The entire idea was preposterous. I had been the one to reject my mate. It was my choice. Mine. A regrettable one, but mine regardless.

"Well, not as implicitly as that." He pointed a finger in my direction, a sinister smile forming on his lips. "I simply had to steer you in the right direction."