

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 31 - Tips

"She could have chosen anyone to befriend and yet she chose Evarius's niece!" I growled as I paced in my study, betrayal threatening to lodge itself in my thoughts and heart. I was aware of my mate's innocence in this, but by the gods I couldn't move past Shyla standing for any one who shared any relations with the one person I loathed and one I would never let near my mate and child.

"Is this really about Carlytte, your majesty?" Rakon, who stood guard in his usual position in my study arched a brow that spoke of him seeing right through me.

"What else can it be?" I collapsed in my seat, avoiding his gaze before he saw what lay deeper than the thing I was currently annoyed about. He was not my best friend for nothing, but perhaps I was not ready to share that part yet.

"Oh, you tell me. Because we both know that the maiden in question is nothing like her immediate family and she would make a perfect friend to Shyla."

I huffed, knowing that to be true. "Evarius is a sneaky bastard and we both know how persuasive he can be. For all I know, he could be way ahead of me and Carlytte might just be the thing he uses to hit me where it matters the most." My wolf growled in my head at my statement, hating what my every word meant. We may not have claimed her already, but the thought of losing our mate for whatever reason roused pain in my chest. I blocked that pain out and focused on my best friend instead, determined to stick with my own version of what was supposed to be angering me.

I frowned when I noticed Rakon walking away from me and going towards the door. It was by no means him abandoning me because of my sour mood. He'd handled me in worse moods, so instead of demanding for an explanation for his behaviour or commanding him to stay because I did not look forward to being left alone with my troubled mind, I merely watched his actions.

"Are you sure this is it?" I arched a brow at Rakon's question. I could not see the one he spoke with, but whoever they were, they smelled of wine and I couldn't help the smile that spread on my lips. I would hug him for getting me just what I needed, I decided.

"Mixed to perfection just as I asked?"

“Yes, my lord.”

“You may leave then.” Rakon mumbled before walking back in, a long pitcher in his hands. “Why don’t we talk about what is really bothering you now your majesty, hmm?” The loud bang with which he placed the pitcher on my table made me smirk.

“Father would have your head for providing this kind of intoxication for me.”

“You are the king now, so unless you too wish to have my head, I have nothing to be concerned about.” Rakon poured a cup and handed it to me. “Drink up, your majesty.”

I did and once the contents hit my throat a growl tore through my lips. “What in God’s name is this?!”

Rakon smirked. “Something to loosen you up.”

“More like something to kill me.” My body buzzed as I sniffed my drink, taking in its weird smell that matched the unusual taste. If Rakon was not my best friend, I would have thought it to be a poison meant to end my life. “What exactly is it?”

“You should care more about what it does for you.” Rakon filled my cup and his. “To loosening up.” He raised his cup to mine, toasting with a mischievous grin that I knew all too well. This was going to be a long night.

“To loosening up!” I emptied the cup with one gulp, relishing its taste this time around. And just as advertised, my body buzzed even more, easing the tension I was currently feeling, if only it could ease the frustration of having my mate in front of me and not being able to claim her. “Pour.” I presented my cup to be refilled and Rakon did without questions asked.

“She’s killing me.” The confession slipped out of my mouth effortlessly after emptying the contents of my cup. I would have thought it a truth potion too, if only I was not familiar with the effects of wine. Whatever Rakon had brought might have tasted strange, but it still remained wine, only more intoxicating.

“By she, you mean Shyla, I suppose.”

“The most beautiful creature to ever grace my eyes!” I stated proudly as visions of her striding me down in the garden transported me to the very

moment, leaving me aching with need. The feel of her body molding perfectly in my hands had plagued me the entire day and made me mentally slap myself countless times for the stupid suggestion to slow down that I had offered just when she'd been ready to indulge in what I had long thirsted for.

"I do not know how much more of this I can take." I sighed, my gaze on my cup of wine. The drink was perfection, but I realized it wasn't exactly what I needed. I longed for my mate. I wished to take her and every moment of her rejecting me was eating me and my wolf up.

"She's your mate who happens to be carrying your child and you have the bond on your side, so why aren't you using it?" I met Rakon's gaze with surprise. I knew he did not like Myrna at all, but to be careless in such a manner was so unlike him.

He only shrugged to my surprised expression. "I'd rather have you happy and focused, than this regrettable version of you that will soon enough put Xatis at risk. And forgive my bluntness when I say that my queen is not the one to give you that."

My blood pulsed at his suggestion while my heart hammered in my chest. "I can't believe you are using the security of the kingdom to sell this ludicrous idea." I gave myself a moment for anything in me to register some kind of a protest. I had wished to be a gentleman after all, not some sneaky bastard who would lure my mate into surrendering herself to me. The very thought sent my blood rushing in the right places.

"I can't believe you have not thought of it yourself." I had thought of it, except, I had not wanted to hurt her even more after what I had put her through. But what if I did not hurt her? What if I could make this the best experience she'd ever had with a man...with me? What if I could show her that Myrna was not the one I longed for? That the mark she'd placed on me meant nothing.

My hand reached for my neck, brushing the spot. My skin still remained smooth as though nothing was there, but I knew those prints from my chosen mate's lips still remained. Whatever it was that she'd applied on her lips had stuck like a second skin to mine, ensuring that I could not get rid of it no matter how much I scrubbed. It was the first thing I'd done after my mate's refusal of my proposition to court her. The mark had been the thing to snuff out all the hope I had seen in her eyes, making me spend the rest of the morning seeking to get rid of it.

I had to hand it to Myrna for her brilliant idea to lay a claim on me after my reluctance to mark her. But this would only last for the next few hours as come sunrise, someone from the capital would be coming in to get rid of this problem for me.

Until then, I would be taking advantage of the bond I shared with my mate.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 32 - Tips

I thought being angry at him would be enough to keep my mate from invading my every being. I was wrong. It was most certainly not.

Even with everything going on with Myrna, I seemed to be stuck in the moment I strode his laps while anticipation at what was to come had left me desiring every bit of him. It did not even matter that he had been the one to pull away. My body seemed not to have cared about that at all as it still indulged in the memory of his strong large hands caressing my back. Something I had found myself craving for all the way through breakfast which I had consumed with half a mind as the other half had chosen to day dream about the king of Xatis.

I had hoped that that would be over soon but I should have known better.

I tossed and turned on my bed. I had done so for hours since the moment I had decided to retire to bed in hopes of escaping my own thoughts and desires.

No amount of tossing or turning was helping with that however, and after doing it for so long, frustration was beginning to seep right into my bones. I wanted him. I wished to breathe in his scent and if I did not get a grip on my unfulfilled desires I would lose my mind before morning came.

Getting a grip was not what I wished for however. I longed for release. This was not me at all, but it was as if each interaction with my mate only served to thicken the pull towards him and I found myself stuck in moments where having him close was all I cared about. Was that the moon goddess's idea to keep mates together even when they did not wish to be together? If it was, then it was brilliant of her and a definite curse for me and my wolf. Because no amount of need or desire would bring our mate to us as he was probably too occupied with his chosen mate, leaving us to waste away in our state.

Bitterness trickled at the thought and I abandoned my bed for the large window that held a sight I hoped would serve as a distraction. Disappointment was waiting for me however when I stared out the window. With the moon long hidden behind the clouds that covered the night skies, the sight of the peaceful forest down below was nothing but an expanse of darkness that even my wolf sight could not penetrate. Emotions flowed and tears prickled at being denied such a simple thing too. I was probably being silly, but I could not help how I felt.

“Why do you insist on torturing me?” Instead of insisting on catching a glimpse of the forest, my teary gaze turned towards the heavens as a heaviness settled on my heart. What may have began as a desire for my mate had quickly turned into the kind of torture that brought every other misfortune that had befallen me to remembrance, bringing with it a lump that lodged in my throat.

I had been brought up to believe that the moon goddess was good and yet everything that she had laid out in my path did not speak of that goodness at all. Neither did she have the courtesy to answer my desperate question.

A knock at the door echoed in my quiet room instead, making me wipe away my unshed tears as I did not wish to have to explain what ailed me to whoever that was. “You may enter.”

Thinking that it might be Gol, I reached for my gown to cover my thin night garment, but the incoming citrus scent had me letting go hastily and turning fully towards the door.

He was here... In all his majestic glory, my mate stood by the entry way as though he'd been conjured up by my own feelings of sadness. Unbelief flooding my senses at the coincidence, my eyes darted between my mate and the skies above. Was this her answer?

Had the moon goddess decided that I had been tortured enough? I did not wait for an answer to my thoughts as that citrus scent invaded my space, making me realize that he'd come closer.

“Are you alright?” Of course he would sense my sadness and before I could decide what my reply should be, I got wrapped up in his embrace. Just what I needed. I let out a sigh of relief as I fisted my hands in his shirt and held on. “Shyla?”

At his inquiring tone, I nodded. "I'm alright... now that you are here." I did not know why I added that last bit. Perhaps it was because it was the truth. A truth that was received with the most alluring smile that got me weak at the knees. It was a stark contrast to the person who had stormed out of the garden this morning simply because his proposal had not yielded the answer he'd sought, among other things.

I wondered if that was the reason he'd found his way here. Was he perhaps seeking a way to get me to change my mind or perhaps he'd sought me out because he'd been driven by his need too.

Whatever his reasons were, or whether he was the moon goddess's gift of comfort to me, I decided that I would enjoy this moment and everything it would bring my way.

"I couldn't stay away." He began, sending my belly fluttering at his confession. "Neither could I sleep." I got pulled away from the comfort of his chest and I almost whined if not for the deep golden gaze in his eyes that fed the need pulsing in my bones. He needed me just as much as I needed him! My wolf purred at the realization and together deciding to be reckless and giving in, reached up and brushed my lips against his in invitation.

The action caught him so off guard I became aware that he had not expected anything of the sort from me tonight. I had not expected anything of the sort from me either.

The surprise, however, lasted but only for a moment as he accepted my invitation with a kiss that ignited the ambers of need into a raging storm. A storm only he could calm. And as he scooped me up and laid me on the bed, sweet anticipation dripped right into my bones and erased every trace of the frustration I'd felt earlier.

"God you are beautiful!" He mumbled against my skin, his warm breath sending delicious tingles that only drove me crazy. I had whined when he'd broken off the kiss, but as his lips explored every inch of me that was now exposed to him after ripping my night gown, I could only arch my back, pressing more into him and moaning with pleasure. His own pleasurable growls, groans and grunts were like music to my ears. I relished a whole tune as he expertly kissed his way down my body, lingering hotly over my jewels that graced my chest, earning himself countless moans as I couldn't seem to keep those from escaping my lips. It was shameless, but honour was not what

I cared about in the moment. A beast had been unleashed in me and only he could tame it.

His assault extended all the way to my belly and I wished it hadn't because that would be the end of all the pleasure he'd had raging in me as he froze, lips still resting on it.

I was about to protest but held my tongue and merely watched as my mate eased back and gave my belly a long stare while an obvious conflict ensued. Was it regret about tonight?

His demeanour was enough to knock some sense back into me, making me realize how close to making a fool of myself I had come. I shifted on the bed, hoping to escape the embarrassing situation, but something heavy settled lightly on my belly and when I looked, my mate had his head pressed to my skin as if he were listening for something. It took me a moment to remember that I carried his child and another to remember that his heir was the most important thing to him. Not tending to my needs.

The sight should have warmed me too. Should have had me relishing what was supposed to be a sweet moment between my mate and the child I carried, and yet only pain came of it.

I wiggled in his hold, wishing for nothing but a way of escape before the tears fell.

My struggling caught his attention and when he looked up, his eyes were clouded with an emotion that would have swept me off my feet, if only it were directed at me and not his child.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 33 - Tips

"I expected you to be in a better mood this morning." Rakon came and stood beside me out on my bedroom's balcony as I stared out into nothingness. I was in a better mood. If deciding not to be a sneaky bastard and giving up the chance to devour one's mate in one heated night of passion for her sake could put one in such a mood, then I was.

I shifted my gaze for the first time since I had gotten lost in my thoughts. "I am." I mumbled, a reluctant smile on my face. Rakon only arched a brow at my answer before his gaze fell on the cup of wine I had forgotten to bring to

my lips for the longest while now. "Helps with maintaining the mood." I mumbled.

Because I did not know of any other way to keep from being assaulted by visions of her glorious body that would have definitely made me go back on my decision, I had turned to wine. Not that it had helped. As much as I longed to be intoxicated, wine was just not the thing to do it. I still longed for her. Longed for that sugary scent to fill me the way it had as my lips pressed to every inch of that silky smooth skin. I longed to relish the sound of her moans that rang beautifully in my ears and had my own need souring each time she reacted to my touch. The desire in her eyes and how they sparkled with need. A need for me and my wolf. The whole sight was as sacred as it was arousing.

"Hmm. I take it last night did not go as planned then?"

"It did. Better than I had hoped." The memory of her innocent invitation sparked something in my blood. If only it was not just the bond speaking at the time.

"Then why the long face?" Rakon leaned on the balcony's railing, facing me.

"Because she deserves better." That was a bitter sweet pill I had had to swallow last night. I realized I would have to swallow a lot of those before she let me into her heart. A price I had decided I was willing to pay, no matter how steep it became.

The bond would give me her body, but not her heart and that was what I was after, more than anything. The moment my lips had brushed her pregnant belly, that desire had become oh so clear, making me abandon luring her in such a manner. If...when I did claim her, love is what I wished to be making to her. I still had no clue how I was going to accomplish it. How I was going keep my hands to myself until then, but I was willing to try.

"Then all hope is not lost."

"Hope?" I frowned at Rakon.

"I was afraid your queen may have rubbed off on you." Rakon reached for my cup and downed every drop of its contents. "It's good to know that my best friend is still in there some place."

“This was a test?”

“I prefer calling it a war strategy. As it stands and as head of your king’s guard, I needed to be sure that you would not stick to your regrettable path of mistakes and doom Xatis along with it.”

I scoffed. “And you concluded all that after learning about my cowardly exit from my mate’s chambers?” Shyla’s pained expression still haunted me. She’d tried to conceal it, but I’d seen right through her mask. I could have given her what she desired, but she would have only resented herself more than she resented me. I couldn’t have that. Of course, I would be needing a way to smooth her over after what I knew she thought was another rejection from me.

“You are many things, your majesty. A coward is not one of them.” Rakon smirked. “And if you are quite done with whatever this is.” He gestured towards my lone drinking party. “Your visitor from the capital awaits.”

“That was quick.” My gaze shifted to the horizon. The sun was still only peeking out. I had not expected my visitor until way after breakfast.

“It seems your predicament is something of intrigue as the man couldn’t wait for sunrise and chose to ride for the palace at once, together with the messenger who’d delivered your request.

My own curiosity at that led me out of my bed chambers and into my private study.

“Your majesty.” A man who was as ancient as history itself and yet did not look a day over most of the young wolves in Xatis stood to his feet and bowed. “I came as soon as I heard.”

“Cerus.” I acknowledged his greeting before taking a seat. “What can you tell me of it.” If there was anyone who would know why I could not get rid of Myrna’s mark, it would be him. ‘Cerus the wise’ as he was fondly known by those who’d sought him and drank from the vast well of knowledge he possessed.

“If I may, your majesty.” I bared my neck at the old man’s request and held the position as he inspected the mark.

“Well?” I broke the silence when the man uttered nothing after his inspections.

"It is a thing of beauty, I must say." He was obviously fascinated, a fact that I did not share and one that made anger bubble.

"Can it be erased or not?"

"I do not understand." Confusion spread on the old man's face. "Why would you seek to erase it at all?"

"Because it is not meant to be there." I growled as a memory of my mate's painful look at the sight of it flashed before my eyes. I needed to get rid of it and keep all that pain away from her.

"Was it not placed there by your chosen mate?"

"It was, against my will." I all but growled.

"Oh, I see." The man nodded, but still appeared thoughtful.

"Forgive me, but what kind of mark is it that it refuses to be erased. A pigment or something of the sort perhaps?" Rakon asked from beside me.

At that the man's eyes brightened as they always did when he spoke of the treasures that were our past. "It is indeed a pigment of sorts. One found on a very rare tree." I frowned at the simple explanation leaving Cerus's mouth. But if the man noted my reaction he made no attempt to utter anything about it. "The tree was believed to be a gift from the moon goddess as it had many healing properties that aided our wolf healing, among other things. The pigment being one of those things that in times past those with chosen mates used to mark their mates to mimic the natural mate bond."

I frowned at that. "Why would they need it when they could easily mark each other and complete their bond."

"Because my king, for many, a chosen mate was just that, chosen. The maiden's knew it and because they longed to be cherished just as those naturally mated were, they combined the unusual properties of the pigment together with a bit of sorcery to come up with a seemingly harmless cream that an unsuspecting wolf had applied on them and the result? I'm sure his highness's imagination can conjure up a vision of what that might be."

Everything sounded ridiculous and if this was not Cerus, I would have thought the man in front of me to be totally insane and think nothing of his words.
“Would a witch be able to undo it?”

“Because it is clear that you do not accept this mark, the spell should not have held, it only does because you share share a bond with her.

“Bond? I share no such thing. Not even my mark rests on her skin.” For once I patted myself for dragging my feet over that.

“I did not mean your mark, your highness. Your having wedded her was enough. That is if that is your queen’s mark.”

“So you mean there is no way to get rid of it?” The dread in Rakon’s voice reflected my own.

“Am I stuck with this?” I could see my chances with Shyla evaporating right before my eyes.

“Not exactly.”

“Well speak then!” Impatience prickled.

“Your mate’s mark has the power to erase even the most dark of spells, your majesty. That is if you were ever to find her.” An apologetic smile crossed the old man’s lips and it only served to remind me that Xatis had yet to know about Shyla. I did not care for it, only that she would be my saving grace.

“Thank you for taking the trouble of coming all the way out here.” I had heard enough.

“It is no trouble, but an honour, your majesty. It is not everyday that one gets to serve in such a manner.”

“Well, you have my utmost thanks. Rakon here will see to it that you are rewarded for your service” The man bowed and headed for the door, only to stop abruptly and turning back to me.

“Anything else?”

“Do not underestimate the power of this spell. There is a reason only a pure mark from your moon goddess’s given mate can counter it. And if you have no

intentions of forever belonging to the queen, now would be a good time to keep away from her.” I would be keeping away from Myrna, but not just yet.

The moment Rakon and Cerus walked out the door, I followed suit. Except I headed in the direction of my chosen mate’s chambers, anger driving my every step.

“Your majesty?” Shock graced the faces of the guard’s faces posted on Myrna’s door as they straightened up. “Welcome.” They bowed when I only glared. I chose not to acknowledge them and barged into the room instead. The moment I did, I froze, realization that I had underestimated the power of the spell even after being warned hit me instantly.

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 34 - Tips

“Rakon, get the hell over here!” I did not care that I sounded desperate as I mindlinked my best friend. Nor did I care that I felt like the coward he’d defended me from. I needed him now. To keep me from that regrettable path of mistakes he’d spoken of because I sure as hell did not trust any part of me right now to accomplish that all by myself.

I did not even like Draxuin, but that bitter poisonous plant had never smelled so sweet and so alluring as it did now. I was bathed in it the moment the doors to Myrna’s chambers swung open, making me and my wolf almost howl in jubilation. It took me biting down on my lips to keep even the smallest of sounds from escaping as the strange rumblings made by Cerus became a reality right in front of my eyes.

It was not that I had not believed the man, or maybe, perhaps, I hadn’t as everything caught me off guard. Mimicking the bond was not what this was. If not for Cerus’s words, I would have been casting a confused look towards the heavens wondering if the moon goddess had just made a mistake by gifting me with another mate.

“My love... I had hoped that you would come by today.” Myrna, dressed in nothing but a flimsy gown that hid nothing from my eyes sat up on her bed and smiled. The most seductive splitting of her lips that made everything in me want to devour every inch of her. I was not unfamiliar with her body, but as she swayed seductively, coming my way, it was as if I was beholding her for the very first time. “Do you like what you see?” She stopped and let her gown drop to the floor. Not that that changed anything, but the action, the illusion of

her undressing right before my eyes was the hottest invitation to indulge in the sinful view of her nakedness. And what a view it was!

Blood pulsed, desire raged, my wolf growled, itching to claim the false mate that stood before us.

A false mate... That should have snapped me out of the false allure, but then she spun around, flaunting her flawless skin, her long hair following the action too, making me wish to touch. I wished to explore every inch of her. I had never done anything of the sort each time I claimed Myrna. Not even on the night we wedded. But now...now I wished to start by claiming her lips all the way to tasting her very essence. Devouring her until she begged and screamed my name over and over again.

"She'll have you go to the depths of hell to search for forgiveness if you hurt her this time around."

Shyla... I blinked, Rakon's words turning all the heat I felt at the moment into anger as they snapped me back to the reason that had made me march into my chosen mate's chambers in the first place.

"What did you do?!" I growled.

Innocence flashed across her face. "Do?"

"Do not play coy with me Myrna!" I growled, earning myself a mischievous grin from my chosen mate. She seemed to have outgrown her pleas for me to bed her and give her a child. I should have known that the distance she had given me only spelled something much worse. A plot meant to trap me.

Unrepentant, she batted her eyes at me. "And what exactly does his highness think I did?" Myrna resumed her walk towards me, giving nothing of her transgressions away and that only served to anger me even more.

She was toying with me. This back and forth would just not do, I decided.

"What is the meaning of this?!" I bared my neck and exposed the mark just as I stopped her from placing her hand on me. If only I could stop her scent from threatening to overwhelm me too.

"It is a thing of beauty, wouldn't you say?" She smiled sweetly at her handiwork before her face scrunched up. "Though, I was not entirely

convinced on where to place it, but now..." A dramatic sigh escaped her lips. "Now...seeing you wear it like this, I am certain that I chose right. It is perfect."

"Do you think this a joke?" Her carefree attitude only angered me even more.

"It most certainly is not, your majesty. Not when it brings you right to me. To my bed. It's a shame that it's not the real thing, but it will have to do until you mark me and I you." She stopped all attempts to lure me and walked back to where she'd dropped her gown. I would have been glad about that if only it didn't speak of my loss to her this time around. While she stood so close to me, tingles had erupted. The desire to have her reignited and almost made the little control I had left slip. I hated how easily that happened even with the knowledge that this was nothing but a spell cast on me.

I did not understand why she'd given up and walked away either. She'd laid her snare and I had walked right into it. So then why was she giving up so easily? I frowned.

"I'm a patient maiden when it comes to what I desire, Elian." She peeked over her shoulder as she put her gown back on. It was as if she'd read my mind and understood the confusion that swirled in there. Her demeanour, so sure and her words both a warning and a promise.

What did she desire, if not to have me in her bed? I could only watch as I sought to understand her. Up until now, she'd only played the damsel in distress to get my attention. Something had changed. Something that had made the person Rakon had warned me about to rise to the surface. I was playing catch up, but I was determined to uncover what that was. I had an inkling of what or better yet, who that was. If my chosen mate's refusal to even reference the person in our encounter was anything to go by.

"Anything else, your majesty?"

"See you at dinner?"

Surprise flashed in her eyes but she masked it just as quickly with a smile. "You wish to dine with me?" This would make it the only time I invited her to share a meal with me.

"If you would do me the honours."

"I'd be honored, my king."

I marvelled at how easily she accepted and all the enthusiasm that came with it. "See you tonight then." I turned to leave, tearing myself away from the pull of her presence.

"Dinner? What the hell do you think you are doing?!" Rakon glared the moment I stepped outside. "Aren't you supposed to be running the other way?"

"Be a coward you mean?" I arched a brow at my best friend.

"You know what I mean." Rakon sighed audibly. "Besides, I would understand if you chose the cowardly route, if that would serve any purpose at all."

"Would knowing that I have no intentions of dinning alone with her help with your distress?"

Rakon stopped and shot me a confused look. "What exactly are you planning?"

"Testing a theory." Cerus's words had proved to be true so far, but I needed to be sure that that extended to everything else.

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 35 - Tips

"Why do I have to go and dine in the main palace when this place has enough food to feed a whole army?"

"Because his highness invited you, my lady." Astryn's lips broke out in another huge smile. She'd been doing that the entire time since she got wind of my mate's invitation. "I would think nothing of it, but his majesty is not one to do such a thing. Except for his parents of course. Not that that goes with such a beautiful invitation. Which goes to say a lot."

"You are not helping." My belly fluttered as my eyes flickered to the simple yet exquisite note that Rakon had delivered to my bed chambers the moment I opened my eyes. It contained nothing extravagant. Just an invitation to dinner and yet after reading it I had gotten lost in a fantasy that spelled something much more. There was just something about him seated behind a table and penning those few words to me that had me swooning.

I should have felt something else other than what I was feeling right now after last night, but a dream, one with my mate and the most adorable small

versions of ourselves running around in front of the most beautiful cottage had changed all that. And waking up to his invitation had charted the way for my emotions for the rest of the day.

So then, why was seeing him tonight making me uneasy?

“They are just nerves, my lady.” Somehow I had spoken my thoughts out loud, making me blush. “Do not worry. Your secret is safe with me.” Astryn winked, her action deepening my blush. “And come sunset, nothing of them will remain, I promise.”

I doubted Astryn’s words as that feeling had kept on getting worse each time thoughts of seeing my mate surfaced. And what if that was not it? What if it wasn’t just my nerves making me uneasy. What if it was the frustration that still plagued me after what he began last night that I longed for him to finish. Would I be able to endure being so close to him when I felt that way, or would I make a fool of myself?

Or perhaps it was fear. Fear of him looking at me the way I had been longing for him to. Not just with desire, but with a more deep seated emotion that I knew went beyond the mate bond.

What if the look he gave me last night was not for the heir I carried? What if it was meant entirely for me?

Knots tightened in my belly at each thought and I doubted they would be gone by sunset. I would definitely make a fool of myself tonight.

“Can I decline the invitation...respectfully?”

Astryn stopped styling my hair, an apologetic look on her face. “I think you gave up that chance when you let lord Rakon return to his highness with nothing but your lovely smile.”

“I-I... could... send another guard.”

“Someone lower than lord Rakon?!” Astryn’s eyes widened. “Do you wish to have someone’s blood on your hands, my lady?”

“Blood?!” I frowned at my maid whose face had suddenly gone a shade pale.

“Being caught lying invites death, which is what that guard’s words would be if he repeated them to the king after his most trusted head of his guard had spoken otherwise.”

“For a mere invitation?” Now it was my eyes’ turn to go wide. “Surely, the king is not that merciless?” His pleas for me to get to know him, for us to start over rang in my ears and ignited a desire to do just that.

“When it comes to you, I believe he would kill for much less, my lady.” Astryn smiled, but a vision of my mate’s wolf tearing his own guards apart the night I had escaped from the palace kept me from returning her smile. She was right and all thoughts to decline the invitation melted with that truth. I would endure this. Whether I would make a fool of myself or not.

“Besides, Lady Liira is many things, and as much as she has warmed up to you, she will not take kindly to you declining the king’s invitation. When it comes to matters of the throne, she tends to lose her charm.”

Oh yeah, there was Liira too who had spent the entire morning fussing about what I would wear. Even when my closets were full of fancy gowns, she’d insisted that none of those would do and had gone ahead and brought in merchants who came bearing more fine material together with more seamstresses. Chaos had ensued around me as everyone got to work, jumping and nodding at Liira’s instructions until she was satisfied. The result was something I could never even dare dream of. Perhaps the thought of the king’s reaction when he would see me in the creation had also added to my uneasiness.

“All done, my lady.” Astryn announced as she stepped away from my view of the mirror, leaving me to gaze on my reflection.

“I love it, thank you.” The hair style was as simple as I had wished for. Even though it exposed my neck and gave a view of the beautiful earrings Liira had insisted I wear. The beautiful wolf shaped jewellery made the whole style look more sophisticated than I had expected.

“And now to get you all put together.”

“May I have some tea before then, please? One of those prescribed by Liira, perhaps?” I called to Astryn before she reached the door. The knots in my belly made me long for the calming tea. They seemed not to be easing up even as the sun lingered on the horizon.

“Of course, my lady. I will have everyone hold on until you are done.”

“Thank you, Astryn.” An effortless smile spread across my face as I watched her go, thankful that she had pressed me to have her stay as my maid. A carefree soul like her was definitely what I needed to cope with all the royalty and the life that came with it. My mate was right to choose her. A warmth engulfed me at the thought and I wondered what else he’d done to ensure I was happy, or safe or had everything I needed.

“Your tea, my lady.” Astryn pulled me out of my thoughts when she walked back in, a tray in hand.

“That was quick.”

“Oh, you have lady Liira to thank. It seems she had an inkling of your state and had already ordered for tea and all I did was pick it up.”

A familiar lump formed in my throat. It was just tea, a little thing, but it was these little things that more than anything sang of the fact that I was cared for around here. And it was becoming increasingly hard to hold on to my hurt or to the idea that everything was being done because I carried the heir of Xatis.

“I will be sure to thank her.” I croaked out, emotion coating every one of my words.

“Oh I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Astryn grinned as she poured me a cup. “Not unless you wish to be scolded for mentioning useless things.”

Useless things. I chuckled at that. “You are probably right, I shouldn’t.” I had gotten scolded countless times already as Liira still insisted she was the one who was grateful to the moon goddess for bringing me under her care. Something she loved doing without question.

With those thoughts, I sipped my tea with a happy smile on my face. And by the time I was done, knots had loosened considerably and was ready to get all dressed up.

Those charged with getting me ready poured into my chambers working round the clock to bring Liira’s vision to fruition. Having no experience with royal fashion, I had been nothing but a spectator, marvelling at how I transformed into someone I hardly recognized. Someone whose beauty I knew I

possessed, but had never really been brought forth the way it had been done tonight.

“Am I done now?” Any more of anyone poking, pulling to ensure everything was perfect was going to drive me insane.

“With this, you are.” His smooth deep voice floated right across the room and straight to my heart, making it quicken in response.

“Y-Your Majesty?” I turned reluctantly as every other figure exited my chambers.

“My lady.” He gave me a subtle nod, the appreciation in his eyes making everything I had just endured well worth it. And that citrus scent with a hint of wine was so much better than Liira’s tea.

I curtsied. albeit awkwardly, but if he noticed it, he did not bother to show it. He instead closed the distance between us in calculated strides that were slow enough for me to take him in whole. He was a delicious sight that had my wolf purring. Dressed in the scarlet colours of Xatis, his kingly crown on his head, he was as delicious as he was overwhelming. Right there I decided that I would never cease to be amazed and overwhelmed by the splendour of his majesty.

“Forgive me, for having this delivered late, the jeweller had gotten some details wrong and I insisted it be redone.” He opened a fancy looking box and revealed a shiny necklace that sent my heart skipping beats. Was it him all along?

“D-Did you gift me these?” My hands trembled as I reached for the beautiful pair of earrings I had thought came from Liira. Staring at the necklace, I was sure she was nothing but a messenger as the wolf design in the necklace matched those on the earrings I wore.

“If I may.” He guided me back to the seat in front of the mirror and once I was safely seated, he reached for the necklace. “I would have delivered them myself, but I was forbidden from laying my eyes on you until you were done.” I caught sight of a reflection of a smile and all that uneasiness crept back in. It didn’t even matter that he was so at ease as his hands went over my head and to my neck to clasp the necklace in place.

“Perfect.” My mouth went dry at his whisper and the heat in his eyes reflected in the mirror sent tingles shooting up in every part of my body.

“Tha-Thank you.” I shivered when he brushed his warm hands over the n.aked portions of my skin left by the design of the gown I wore. An action that I realized was more intentional than accidental when his c.hest rumbled at my reaction to his touch.

“Shall we?” Hand held out to me in a gentlemanly way, he smiled, the beautiful splitting of his l!ps that sent my heart fluttering and my hand slipping into his smoothly.

“Oh! Now, there is something you don’t see everyday!” Liira exclaimed once we emerged from my bed chambers. “You look absolutely breathtaking my dear.”

“Why thank you, grandmother.” My mate intercepted Liira’s hand that was without a doubt headed for me, earning himself a playful look of disapproval. I bit back a smile at that.

“That was in no way meant for you, even though you are not bad either.” Liira scoffed before bringing all her attention to me. “You my dear are simply a dream and forgive this old lady if she refuses to wake from it.” A warm k!ss on either of my cheeks later, I struggled to keep the tears from flowing. All this love...It was as if fate was hell bent on making up for what I had lost and all the pain I had endured.

“Thank you.” I flung myself at her in a desperate embrace and she caught me easily.

“No need to thank me.” She patted my back softly, spreading more of her warmth in my heart. “Just promise me that you will enjoy yourself.” Even when I knew nothing of where my mate was taking me, I nodded.

“Thank you, grandmother.” My mate reclaimed me from the matriarch in a dramatic manner and led us outside the palace. The faraway look on his face no doubt indicating a conversation in the mind link. I smiled knowing Liira had probably had tones to say over his action.

“Do we need a carriage to get there?” My eyes widened at the royal mode of transport, complete with well dressed guards in armor. Among them Gol and Rakon.

“About time.” Rakon grinned as he moved to open the tiny door on the side and invited us in.

I hesitated, but delicious tingles stemming from my lower back, got me moving as my mate led us towards it. Once we were safely seated, I thanked the gods that it was already night time, leaving very few eyes to witness the intimacy I was left to share with the king of Xatis in the tiny space. Though I highly doubted that that was an issue for my mate, seeing how he freely held me.

Of course the gods forgot to point out that the few eyes I was thankful for would not be the only ones for the rest of the night.

“I-I thought it would just be you and me, your majesty.” Not the whole of Xatis! I gulped, the action so unladylike, but it was all I could do when my eyes caught sight of almost every chair on the long dining table filled. When he said nothing, I looked up, my gaze clashing with his. There was no heat this time around, but concern.

“Forgive me. We will have as many of those as you wish...” He brought his free hand and traced the sides of my face gently, sending my eyes fluttering closed as I relished the calm they inspired for my racing heart. “Tonight, there are some people I wish for you to meet.”

“Forgive me, what?!” My eyes snapped open, the calm evaporating instantly. Surely he didn’t mean I would be the centre of attention the entire night?

He pulled me close, rendering me speechless. Did he not care for who would see him in such an indelicate position? With someone else other than his queen?

His queen! Would Myrna be there too?

“Do not think too much of this, it’s just dinner.” Just dinner? Easy for him to say. My gaze traveled back to the room we had yet to enter, my belly tightening once more over the obvious awkwardness I would have to endure...and the pain. I caught sight of Myrna, laughing and playing the role of host perfectly.

“Why would you bring me here?” Bitterness trickled as I struggled in his embrace.

“Because you are my mate and it’s time everyone knew that I finally found you after searching for so long.”

After searching for so long? What in the world was he talking about and what did it matter when he had a queen by his side? I couldn’t be here. “I do not know what you wish to happen here, neither do I wish to be a part of it.” I fought to escape, but his hold tightened, making a menacing growl to escape my lips. A growl that apparently drew everyone’s attention to us.

“Your majesty? Forgive our manners, we did not discern your presence.”

Someone apologized while I hid in my mate’s embrace as every other gaze from that room burned in my back. “Please...” I pleaded, but my mate chose the moment to tear me away from the only place that made me feel safe at the moment.

“I’m here, Shyla.” The comfort that washed over me at his words had me seeking his face. “Will you come with me?” My gaze flickered to his hand that he held out. I wished to leave here. Wished to head back to Liira’s part of the palace. To hide from the pain, but something in his voice, in the way he held my hand once I took his, gave me the courage to face whatever awaited me.