

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 56 - Tips

Despite my protests over dinner and my not so wise decision to stay away from her because of my own guilt, I had found myself looking forward to spending the day by Shyla's side. More so because she had not changed or hinted at changing her mind even after the regrettable way the night had ended.

Morning would not come fast enough, however. I had tossed and turned a thousand times, but the night was bent on taking its damn time before it let the daylight through, turning my anticipation for the day ahead into anxiety. And when I could no longer take the knots in my belly that only seemed to get tighter, I'd decided to get planning. Which involved nothing but me ensuring that our little intimate journey did not get interrupted by unwanted guests. I would not have a repeat!tion of Dovah even though it was highly unlikely to happen in the capital.

An intimate journey... I smiled to myself as my eyes finally welcomed the dawn of the day meant to be spent in my mate's presence. Even when I had no idea what she wished to do in the capital, I'd already decided I would make the most of it.

That is why I'd sent more soldiers into the capital of Xatis. It was not the whole army as Liira had suggested, but it was a considerable number. Rakon had thought I was insane for doing so knowing how many more guarded the city, but this was my mate and child. I would not be taking any chances, my pride be damned.

"That's the last of them." Rakon yawned when he walked back into my study. I had left him to handle the final security details while I proceeded to bathe and dress up. "Woah!" His eyes widened before a smirk settled on his lips. "I'd really hate to be your mate today. What are you trying to have her do, devour you at first sight?"

That would be very preferable. My wolf and I would glory in that, but we would settle for the way she'd taken me in last night. The surprise that had morphed into total appreciation, ogling as Astryn had rightly blurted out. If I'd known less was more in her eyes, whatever I wore last night and right now would have been my daily gift to her. "That's okay. You are not that pretty anyway."

Rakon's lips curled in a pout. "Perhaps you'd prefer a new head of the king's guard then?"

"We both know that will only be acceptable with your death." I swung around, eyebrow raised, hand on my blade. "Are you offering?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps." He straightened up, armed with seemingly new determination. "Right now I have to ensure that my king does not trip on his own toes or make a fool of himself in front of my future queen."

I scoffed at that, but still accepted the thing to keep me from making a fool of myself.

"To you, your majesty. And to your success at staying on your feet as long as it's called today." I shook my head as I toasted to my best friend's ridiculous words.

Perhaps wine was not the best way to start the day. Or maybe it was having more than one cup of it as I waited for the sun to completely rise before I excitedly rushed to knock on the doors to mate's chambers.

"Your majesty?" Astryn's panicked gaze took me in before she dropped her head down. "Good morning."

"I'm here for my mate." I declared with all the enthusiasm in the realm.

"About that."

"What, has she changed her mind?" My gaze shot past the maid and into my mate's chambers, disappointment nipping at my insides.

"Oh no, it's not that. It's just..." The maid craned her neck towards the room before pulling the doors shut. "It's just that she did not sleep very well and is in a bit of a mood today, so be forewarned. Although, if you are not her sister or say nothing of her sister, you should be safe. I think." The maid's apologetic look was not very promising, but I was her mate and would definitely not be speaking of my chosen mate. I should be able to calm her down, right?

Wrong. The doors pulled wide open, the force speaking of the annoyance of the person on the other side. When her gaze met mine, I smiled, but her lips pressed in a thin line. "You are late." I could have defended myself. Could

have pointed out that it was still too early for us to be riding for the capital, but I held my tongue, choosing not to have my head bitten off.

“Forgive me, if my lady is ready, we can leave right away.” I held out my hand. A brow lifted, seemingly in protest, but a beat, then two and those beautiful eyes sparkled with appreciation at what she saw. It did not linger for as long as I had wished for before she slipped her arm in mine. Our contact drained out some of the tension as I felt her relax and the edge on her wolf fade.

“Where exactly in the capital should we be headed?” I took in her beautiful form as I helped her into the carriage. She was dressed in a less formal, almost ordinary gown, but she still looked amazingly beautiful. Something I could swear grew with her growing belly. The only flaw was that the gown concealed her bulge almost completely and the sight of it had annoyance bubbling. Just as with every wolf, my wolf and I wished for nothing but to show off the part of us that our mate carried and this gown deprived us of that.

“I do not know yet.”

“You do not know?” I noted how she shifted uncomfortably in her seat and wondered why.

“I will, by the time we get there.” It was a weird way to journey, but I nodded regardless. It was her day after all.

Advising Rakon accordingly, the ride to the capital began as a slow march out of the palace gates and eventually picked up when we got to the main road. Inside the carriage, silence ensued, with my mate getting lost in the views outside. My gaze stayed on her the entire time. I meant to relish the opportunity to just admire her beautiful face, but every so often her features contorted painfully.

“Are you alright?” I couldn’t take it anymore. Something was wrong and I was not going to just sit by and watch.

“Actually, no. My back won’t let me be this morning. It is a bit sore.” For someone who was in a bit of a mood, her answer was surprisingly calm and completely unexpected.

But a bit? It did not seem like it to me. As it was taking her everything to hold on when that spell took hold. “What can I do?” I knew heading back would not

be an option if she'd decided to still get in the carriage even with all the discomfort.

"Do?" Her eyes widened in response, as if the very idea was preposterous, but I wouldn't let that stop me.

"I mean there is something to be done, right? If not to stop it then to ease the discomfort."

"There is." The colour that filled her face only meant the thing to be done was something uncomfortable or improper. At least for her.

I, however, wouldn't let her suffer just so she could keep to some useless etiquette. "Well?"

Her eyes went everywhere but on me. "The carriage is not exactly as my bed chambers."

"We can stop if space is what is needed—"

"No!"

"No?" I frowned. "You did just say—"

"I will not have the whole world watch their king while he caresses a pregnant she wolf." Somehow I doubted that was her concern at all. I was not about to point it out either, least I made her discomfort worse by uttering something that would be embarrassing.

"Why don't you tell me what it is that needs to be done and I'll be the one to see how I can get it done.

"It is nothing more than a message of my lower back." That I could do and before she could say anymore, I positioned myself behind her.

"What do I do?" I followed her instructions, but nothing seemed to work. She was still in pain, no matter how much I pressed as she'd asked. "Are you certain this is the way to do it?"

"It is!" She all but snapped, but not because she was mad. "I mean, I'm usually undressed when she does it, but that is definitely the way." I froze, hands resting on her tiny waist while the rest of me got assaulted with visions of her back. Bare and inviting.

I swallowed hard, reining in my desire before it ran wild. I could do this. There was nothing to it. If only she wasn't my mate and I had not spent every night since the day I pleased her thinking of her naked, in my bed, moaning my name. "May I?"

The King's Tainted Mate Chapter 57 - Tips

I was tripping over my toes and I had a feeling I would be doing that for the rest of the day too. I had seen her naked before, but being served with the semi-naked body of my mate, I knew I would be utterly distracted for days on end with no hopes of it ever fading from memory. Nerves and excitement accompanied my hands as fingers dug into her lower back. Every moan at the relief she got each time my hands worked, excited me in ways I shouldn't have been. But what was a mate to do when all that I desired lay in front of me, tempting and inviting even when that was not the intent?

Shyla on the other hand couldn't be bothered, surprisingly. Well, she was bothered. But only by the pain I was working to ease and by something else that had nothing to do with the exploration of my hands. Between the moans, the curses and low rumblings directed at my chosen mate had kept her attention the entire time. Astryn had been right. It was one of those rare moments my mate let her emotions about her sister show. I'd sought to comfort, but choosing to heed Astryn's warning, I had held my tongue, concentrating on bringing her the more immediate relief she needed.

"That is all." She suddenly pulled away, leaving my hands grabbing onto air. "Thank you. I feel so much better already."

Disappointed at the loss of contact, I nodded. "Glad I was able to do this much." Despite all the things I'd felt while at it, the satisfaction came from knowing I had been useful and that she was feeling much better. Her new posture spoke of it too.

Her hips curved. Just slightly, but perfect still and it did wonders to erase the frown lines that had graced her face moments ago. "Do not think this a small thing. A few more miles and I would have probably asked to have the carriage turned around." At that, her gaze shifted to the tiny window in the carriage and whatever it is she saw, drew that full priceless smile and it brightened her face even more. "How far from the capital are we?" She hastily tugged on the back of her dress covering up and I regretted not having offered to do so for her. Perhaps one more view of that amazing back would keep the longing at bay.

“How far out are we?” I linked Rakon.

“Almost there.” His reply was immediate.

“We are almost there.”

“Perfect!” With her perfect smile still on, she got that look that said she was mind linking someone. “Gol is not here.” I said through gritted teeth. It was not my intention, but I still hated the fact that she could link him. And what was it she sought from him that I couldn’t grant her?

“He is not?” Her disappointment pinched at my heart. There was no reason to be jealous of my new found ally, but my heart seemed not to have embraced that truth yet.

The tapping of her fingers on the wooden part of her seat drew my attention. “Is there something you need done?” I offered with a smile and she merely looked at me. All of me. As if studying and wondering what to do with me. The mere thought had an interested part of me want to rear its head and voicing a few suggestions of its own.

“Can you do without your crown?” She pointed to the top of my head where the said crown sat. “And that?”

“My robe? Why?”

“Can you or can you not? Just for the day.” I liked that she was being demanding at the moment, more than I should have, but her questions still confused me.

“Perhaps if you tell me why—” She rolled her eyes and it was the most refreshing sight that had me struggling to stifle a laugh. “I guess I could.” I gave in, not understanding why and not caring either. I just had a feeling that I would soon be in for an adventure. Whatever form it took.

“Great, thank you.” She mumbled, excitement written all over her face and I wished I could freeze time just then. Just so that that happy expression remained her forever face for the rest of her days. “Stop, please!” She yelled next and this time I couldn’t help but laugh at her preferred mode of bringing the coachman to a stop.

“Next time, three taps right here should do it.” I pointed at a medium size metallic ring attached to the carriage’s wall, right behind where the coachman would be seated outside. “It’s usually easier than risking to lose your voice by shouting.”

“Oh, thank you.” She blushed when she realized what she’d done.

“My lady, we are still a few miles away from the capital.” Rakon bowed when the door to the carriage opened.

“That’s okay. We’ll walk from here onwards.”

“We are what? We can’t do that! You are with chil—”

“What, your majesty? Can’t take living as a commoner just for a day?” She challenged, eyebrow raised and arms folded.

“You are the one burdened with another life within you.”

“And Liira did say I’m perfectly fine. The walking will actually be good for the baby.”

“She wha—”

“Oh that reminds me.” Rakon interrupted my outburst and I glared, but he merely carried on without a care in the world. “This is for you. From Gol.”

“Oh yes, thank you.” She beamed at the package that I was tempted to grab and toss deep in the forest. No one gifted my mate anything, but me.

“What is that?” I frowned when she pulled out an ugly looking cloak.

“Your disguise of course. I won’t have you distracting the people and ruining our day.”

Our day. I smiled at that. “You do realize my wolf’s scent cannot be disguised by a mere cloak.”

“No one expects your visit today. Especially not dressed in this manner.” She stepped back satisfied. “There. Anymore concerns, your majesty?” She wore a mischievous grin and for the second time today I wished I could freeze time. “Lead the way, my lady.”

"Titles won't do, your majesty. Just Shyla." She pulled up her cloak and was about to begin walking to the capital, but I stopped her. "Your majesty?"

"That will be Elian to you." I pulled her closer, making her gasp. "And for today, I'm your betrothed."

"Betrothed?" She frowned. "Isn't that too obvious?" Eyes landed on my ring that sat proudly on her slender finger. "Why can't you be my brother or something."

"I won't have some pretentious noble or commoner setting their sights on my maiden." She scoffed, but I did not miss the sweet smile that followed.

The hustle and bustle of the capital left me feeling uneasy. Not because for the first time I was visiting as a commoner and I had been almost trampled on countless times, but because this was a risk. Danger I knew was lurking everywhere. I'd considered ending it, but the sight of her lips curving in that beautiful smile and eyes twinkling at the most mundane things distracted me enough to relax. She was as a different person. So carefree...so happy. I actually dreaded taking her back to the palace where she'd have to face the grim part of her life.

"If you wish to have it, I'll buy it for you." I offered when I caught her caressing a piece of silky material, but she merely shook her head as she'd done countless times before. "What is the point then?" She wouldn't let me buy her anything and yet she'd longingly touched, stared more times than I could count.

"I do not need it." What I thought was sadness morphed into another smile. "We have the baby to think about and may I remind you that the landlord is a harsh man. We simply cannot afford to spend so lavishly." When I only scrunched up my nose at that, she slipped her hand in mine and dragged me to the next store. "We are but commoners, Elian, my love. We fancy things, but they are meant only to please our eyes, never to dig holes in our pockets." She was pretending and it would have been so easy to fall in character beside her, but I did not miss the roughness to her voice as she spoke.

"Why do it?" The fun was over, I could feel it in the tension that invaded her body, except her next statement made it clear that tension was by no means anything to do with our day's events.

“Someone is watching me.” I swung around to face the crowd, body tensing at her observation. Her silver eyes were shining, displaying her wolf. And if I was not rattled by the implications of her words, I would have stopped to purr at our mate’s wolf.

“We have guests.” I mind linked Rakon even when my sharp observation skills had not landed on anyone suspicious. “They have eyes on my mate.”

“That is—”

“I know.” I could feel and understand the confusion clouding my best friend’s mind. It was the certainty in her words that was astounding and made me not question what she saw.

“There.” Her eyes went past my shoulders and into the crowd. My gaze followed, but nothing. Whoever it was was as a ghost in the crowd. But then there was no panic in her tone, only deep emotion that left me frowning.

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 58 - Tips

Perhaps exploring the capital in the face of company was not the best way to do it. Not the royal kind when I was in desperate need to forget, if only for a moment. My mate was not bad, but he wasn’t Myrna. Not that I wished to be beside my sister while at it either. What I wished for Myrna was to claw her eyes out for daring to put a spell on my mate and binding him to her.

I couldn’t deny, however, that being in the crowd, pretending to be something we were not, was always more fun with her, more fulfilling...more distracting. Of course now that I knew the real her, I’d realized that that was because her pretense went deeper than the laughter that the whole experience promised. While I indulged in the fun of it, my sister had gone ahead and coveted, schemed until the pretense became her reality.

My mate on the other hand, as much as I had relished his presence, had seen it more for what it was not, making the whole reason I’d chosen to visit the capital almost pointless. He was not half as bad, except he said the right things, worried about the right things, worried about me, reminding me of everything I wished to escape just for today. But perhaps I couldn’t blame him solely for the unfulfilling experience as the day would not have been the same either way.

Truthfully, it was strange to have to pretend that we were poor. The very idea was a constant reminder of the change that had graced my life. Forgetting was easier before as we took on roles that were the very opposite of the life we led in the forgotten village. Pretending to be noble ladies dressed in our less than glamorous garments claiming that was so because we came from a far away kingdom, had been fun. Many saw through it, but kept up with the pretense because it was a good source of laughter.

As I stood in front of the window to my chambers, eyes staring out into the darkness, I wished I was still laughing now, or still keeping up my pretense. I wasn't. Because fate had yet again spun its wheel and my life had taken another unexpected turn. One that I had hoped would be a possibility once, but was now hating with every fibre of my being.

"Here you go child." Liira handed me a cup of something warm that I sipped mindlessly. She had come running once called upon when we reached the palace. I had insisted I was fine and not to trouble the matriarch, but Elian wouldn't have it. Not until his grandmother declared the same verdict.

Someone sighed. My mate perhaps, I was not sure, as my mind could think of nothing else but the presence I'd felt in the market place. A familiar presence. Family. I had family!

I had not seen their face, but their scent and their very presence was something that even now was as clear as day in my mind. There was no mistaking it. My wolf had wished to rip out of me, the desire to bond burning, but my fears had come true, yet again. I was not wanted...

As magically as they'd appeared in the crowd, they'd disappeared too. Leaving me with a gaping hole in my already fragile heart. How unlucky was I?

"How is she doing?" My mate inquired. It was a simple enough question, but the concern that laced his words eased some of the hurt that had lodged itself in my heart. He did not know it, but his presence and all the soothing words he'd whispered in my ear the entire ride from the capital, had been the thing to keep me sane.

"She's strong. They are both fine." There was no hint of worry in Liira's tone, thankfully. The last thing I wished for was to have my grief affecting the child I carried. My only true family.

“Thank you. grandmother.”

“I will see you both in the morning.” Liira left and my chambers were once more filled with silence. If only my heart would be as silent too or if only there was a way to keep it from beating at all.

“Your mother and father have been nowhere near the capital. Neither has your sister.” My mate said and I only hummed to that. I had expected it. Fate was responsible for many things that had befallen me, but even I knew that there was no way what I’d felt at the capital had anything to do with my regrettable family. Not that the new one was any better. “The search around the capital yielded nothing too, but that does not mean I will simply give up. Whatever is going on, we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“Perhaps I’m just unlucky.” I let out a painful chuckle. Despite his resolve, the words of comfort, I still felt as though something was wrong with me.

Warm hands took mine and spun me around. “No you are not.” The conviction in his tone did nothing for the hole in my heart. And the more he sought to dispel what I thought or believed, the more anger bubbled. I had seen it with my own eyes, walked the dreaded path, felt it as life squeezed out of me, leaving me dangling at hell’s doors.

“How do you explain no one wanting me then?” I held back the tears that sought to spill. I would not cry. Not for anyone who’d not cared about me as they should have.

“Anyone who lets you go is the fool and the unlucky one. I should know.” Regret flashed in his eyes, but it was gone just as quickly. “Besides, we still do not know what the truth is.”

The truth. He kept saying that. Had even begged me not to rush into making any conclusions, but how could I not when everything pointed to the very fact.

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 59 - Tips

“Lord Yanric?!” My father’s eyes were as wide as saucers after the introductions while the subject of his shock remained as calm as ever.

“It is Gol now, your majesty.” The outlaw said with a low bow.

My father merely waved him away dismissively. "Bless the gods!" The former king of Xatis ate the distance that separated the two men and took him in a fierce embrace that surprised not only me, but Gol too. "The fall of the royal house of Carene was a bitter pill to swallow, but hearing of Alde's betrayal had left many royal houses' trust wavering in those entrusted with seeing to their safety. Xatis was not spared either. Our only comfort lay in the fact that no particular noble house was charged with watching the royal house. The sight of the lord of the house of Alde and hearing of its innocence serves to restore that trust even if it's only in this old soul."

Gol flinched at the praise. "If only my being alive was enough to restore the royal house of Carene and indeed my own house."

"Mereen and Lavina's bravery are forever remembered by every noble lady." My mother said with a smile that lit something in the outlaw's otherwise sad eyes.

"Thank you, my lady. Your words about my wife and daughter are truly a source of comfort." Gol respectfully bowed in my mother's direction. "Although, I'm afraid Alde's betrayal has flourished over the years and it has unfortunately extended to the royal house of Xatis."

"What is this?" My father looked at me askance.

"The reason I requested for your presence here." I reached for the piece of armor I had ripped from the spy who'd attacked me and placed it on the table that separated us.

"The emblem of Carene?" My father frowned, his eyes darting to every other face present in my study before landing back on me. "By any chance is it supposed to mean anything to me?"

"A few days ago, I was attacked in the palace grounds. That piece of garment was ripped from the assailant's armor."

His eyes widened. "And you are only telling me this now?!"

"Are you alright?" My mother, as expected, fussed more than everyone.

"I'm fine, mother. Thanks to my wolf healing."

“Why did you not say anything?!” My father demanded. “A spy in the palace is no small matter.”

“And that is precisely why I did not.” I straightened up. “It is not as if the palace of Xatis is so pourous, one from the kingdom of Carene would simply waltz in and stab its king.”

A thoughtful look graced my father’s face. “Do you suppose we have been betrayed?”

“That is the obvious thought and convenient too.”

“But?”

“Shyla’s parents may not be her parents at all.” My mate’s sadness over that discovery still haunted me. I had no part in it, but I was determined to ease the hurt. For whatever reason, I did not share her sentiments of her not being wanted. I was hopeful there was a reasonable explanation. And I hoped to the gods I was right.

My father frowned. “What has your mate and her parents got to do with anything? And didn’t you just ensure that they were speaking the truth?” My father’s confused gaze settled on Liira.

“That was before the poor girl’s wolf recognized someone else as her family in the capital.”

“Family? The capital?” Exasperated, my father shot me a demanding look. “Why don’t you start from the beginning, boy. Because it sure as hell sounds like your mate has a lot more do with this than anything.” I hated to think of it like that, but with the recent discoveries, my father’s conclusion did not sound so far from the truth.

“The mercenaries that attacked us in Dovah had demanded that we hand her over and up until Gol’s recent trip to Dovah, I had thought it was one senseless attack with the brutes only seeking to acquire the maiden whom they would sell to those despicable brothels in the outlaw city.” The mere thought sent my wolf growling.

“It was not?” My father looked between me and Gol.

"It so happens that that particular group has enjoyed Carene's gold coins more than a few times. But whether my brother has any personal interest in his majesty's mate or not, I cannot say."

"That matters less when it comes to kingdom politics." My father sighed. "Carene has attacked the royal house of Xatis twice. That in itself is enough to wage war."

"Which I am certain has been someone's hope." I stated. "The same someone who had not anticipated that Shyla would be mated to me in the first place."

"The same someone who is very aware of your mate's origins and is bent on keeping her from interfering with their plans." My father caressed the base of his chin thoughtfully. "I wonder if this attack was meant for you at all." The thought had already occurred to me, hence the presence of Samara and Norae to accompany my mate everywhere she went if I couldn't be with her.

"Great! Now that we are on the same page, I think it's time we extended an invitation to the kingdom of Carene." Liira declared with her usual excitement that came with her mischievous plotting.

"What on earth for?" Father protested. "Why would you wish to be allied with those traitors? No offence lord Yanric...I mean Gol."

"Because, dear son, this royal house that you are so proud of may end up just as the royal house of Carene if we don't."

"How does inviting them to my grandson's banquet keep that from happening?"

"Because, dear son, there is so much to learn when men party and make merry." Liira beamed and I hoped that would turn out to be true. Not only for Xatis, but for Shyla. I was hoping that ghost in the crowd would make their presence known as my search back in the capital had yielded nothing.

"That will be all." I rose to my feet, heart itching to behold my mate. It had taken everything to keep my focus on the matter at hand, but now that we were done, I wouldn't be wasting anymore time.

"Mother, father, grandmother." I bid them good bye before either of them stopped me for anything.

“One look at you and one would think hell was hot on the heels of their king.” Rakon wore a smug smile when he caught up to me. I was practically running towards my chambers, mind set on freshening up before I spent the rest of my day with my mate. She had not mentioned it, but I saw the relief in her eyes each time I showed up. And if I was being honest, seeing her eyes light up like that had become the favourite part of my day.

“It is not my fault you cannot keep up.”

Rakon only scoffed at that. “I guess you will not be needing me then.”

“Not for a while. You are free to take a nap and gather your strength.” I grinned before disappearing behind my chamber’s doors.

“How long will you keep punishing me my love?”

“Myrna!” I swung around quicker than I could let out a breath, wolf snarling. “What the hell are you doing here?” That much was clear by the little pieces of clothing that made for her garments.

“You are my king and I am your queen, surely that should answer your question.”

“Get out!” I roared while I linked Rakon.

“You do not mean that.” Myrna purred as she approached and before I drowned in the incoming wave of her invading scent that threatened my very sanity, I held the door to my chambers open.

“Escort her to her chambers or wherever she wishes.”

“My king?” Rakon gaped at me. “She happens to be unclothed!”

“I do not care.”

“You are throwing me out?!” Myrna hissed as reality dawned on her.

“Be glad that is all I’m doing.” I glared before walking away.

“But my love— Elia—!”

“My queen, perhaps you should—”

“Do not touch me, guard!”

“Forgive me your majesty, but we cannot find your mate.” The urgency in Norae’s tone sent a cold chill down my spine and I was out of my chambers before she could say anymore.

The King’s Tainted Mate Chapter 60 - Tips

He would find me eventually, I was aware of that. If there was anyone to sniff out my scent even after attempting to mask it perfectly, it would be my mate. But until he did, I would keep going. My feet carried me deeper into the forest while my hands clutched tightly to my gown, lifting it higher to keep from tripping or getting caught on the roots or twigs that littered the forest floor.

This was by no means an escape attempt. Well, it was, but not in the very sense of the word. I was escaping, but only from the ghosts from my past and present. Those that wouldn’t let me be and kept reminding me of things I’d rather forget. I was escaping from the pitiful eyes that viewed me as a pretty fragile thing that needed taking care of. While I appreciated all the care that surrounded me, I felt smothered to an extent. I was escaping it all just so I could experience the freedom I’d enjoyed once before. I only wished to breathe without someone inquiring if I was alright when I did.

I knew that by now Samara and Norae had noticed my absence and were probably on their way to report their failure. That is if they had not chosen to mind link their king. I hoped they had chosen the former just because it would give me more time to myself. If only I could find what I was looking for.

I came to a stop, eyes darting left and right, wondering which way to turn. This had seemed so much simpler when I watched the forest from my chamber’s window. When it had beckoned me with the strangest of feelings to explore it.

A twig snapped to my right causing my heart to leap into my throat. “Who’s there?” Despite the courage I’d had coming into the dense forest my voice shook at the thought of someone stalking me. I knew guards had been tasked to watch the place, but I had evaded many of them already and doubted they had been the ones to follow. Or had my mate found me so soon?

“I thought I would have to wait for eternity before you finally decided to leave your comfortable tower and come down.”

The voice was very familiar, but so out of place and what did they mean they thought they would have to wait for eternity? "Zillah?" I let my gown fall.

"Such a comfort to know you still remember."

"Of course I remember." Surprised and relieved, I drew closer to the person I'd not laid my eyes on in too long but was glad to see regardless. Their hair was still so matted, I knew detangling it would come at a cost of a lot of inches. The familiar old gown they wore was in dire need of a wash. Had no one taken care of her at all?

The maiden's entire sight was a vision of one needing a mental physician, but their smile was as bright as ever. "What in God's name are you doing here?"

Annoyance marred her facial features that were in dire need of a wash too. "Why do you always ask me that? Do you still not believe that I'm your guardian?"

"Forgive me. It seems I needed reminding." I pulled her in for an embrace and as always the comfort spread in my own soul. Just what I longed for. "How is it that you always find me at the right time?" I had never understood it.

"I'm your guardian, silly." Her hands were calloused, but against my cheeks, her touch was warm and comforting. "I came because you needed me."

I pulled back, remembering her words. "How long have you been here?"

"Oh, I do not know." Zillah shrugged her shoulders and I knew that was as good an answer as I would get.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, but you can't be here." Despite her state, Zillah was intruding and I had no idea how she'd be treated once she was found out. And speaking of which, a familiar growl ripped through the woods, letting me know that I'd lost my advantage.

My mate was obviously angry, if the way he furiously ate the ground between us was anything to go by.

Deciding to stand between him and Zillah, I braced for his thunderous scolding, but he merely watched me, his gaze a golden tempestuous sea that seemed to calm only when he beheld the person hidden by my form.

“Zillah?” Of all the things that could have come out of his mouth, Zillah’s name would have never crossed my mind and neither would I have ever imagined the ensuing interaction.

“My prince, or is it your majesty?” Zillah showed herself and bowed shyly.

“You know you do not have to do that.”

“Oh but I do. You are my king now.” Zillah approached my mate and I was sure he’d growl in warning to keep her away, but I was in for a surprise. Their embrace was as natural as one shared between friends. When they finally pulled back, Zillah went away, giggling like a little girl while I fought to keep my jaw from hitting the forest floor.

“Should I be thanking Zillah for keeping you here?” Hurt laced his words and my wolf did not like it.

“I merely sought a moment alone. Away from...everyone.” Unbelief flashed in his eyes. “The palace can be overwhelming at times.” I mumbled and his unbelief morphed into understanding.

“Did you find it?”

I didn’t, but my heart had lost the heaviness I felt. “I found Zillah.”

“She always did have a habit of showing up in the most unusual places.”

“Oh?” I was curious. “So how did you meet? Was she a maid in the palace before royalty drove her insane?” Despite our many interactions, Zillah had still remained a mystery to me.

“Is that what you think?” He gave me an amused look to which I only shrugged my shoulders.

“If you must know, an apple was the thing to make our paths cross.”

“An apple?” I couldn’t keep the surprise from my tone.

“She swiped my apple while I was distracted. It was the first time I had ever been to the capital and I had just run away from my nanny. Rakon and I were bent on exploring the busy world by ourselves, but our adventure was cut short by the incident. My nanny was furious, but instead of me being scolded, her anger was directed at Zillah. Despite being scolded she took it well as she

kept on smiling during my nanny's speech. I was fascinated by that, so each time I was in the capital I would still sneak out, but only so that I could gift her an apple."

My curiosity piqued. "How often was this? I mean gifting her this apple."

"I do not know. Why do you ask?"

"Just...please try to recall." A sinking feeling gripped my insides.

"It was so long ago, but perhaps weekly. Sometimes a whole month or more. Whenever father was willing to entertain my endless questions and carried me along. Why do you ask?"

"Because believe it or not, our paths crossed because of an apple too. Except she did not swipe mine, but offered me one. It was the sweetest apple I had ever tasted and so was every other one she claimed to have saved just for me." I stared at Zillah who was minding her own business as she pranced about. "I was always worried she was stealing them, but each time she swore she wasn't and well, I was always hungry when she appeared so I did not dwell on the matter as I should have. I merely ate and relished its taste while I looked forward to having the next." Eyes as wide as saucers stared at me once I was done talking.

"Do you by any chance think—?" The entire thing was absurd. But what if it was true?

"She always claimed she was my guardian. Of course I never took her seriously. I always thought those were the rumblings of an insane mind. But apart from my family, hers is the only face that has been constant in my life over the years." The realization left me at a loss for words. Was she really it? A guardian? Why would I even need one in the first place?

"When last did you receive an apple from her?"

"I do not know." I shrugged my shoulders. It had been a while. "A year or two perhaps. I have not laid eyes on her until today."

"As have I."

"You found her!" Zillah suddenly beamed. "I told you that you would."

“What is she talking about?”

My mate merely smiled. “I did, didn’t I? I have you to thank.”

“It was nothing. As long as you are happy.”

“What is this?”

“The last time I saw her, it was in these very woods. My heart was heavy, I had come for some air, or perhaps I was hiding. I had no apple with me, but she did not mind. Instead she had something to gift me. A promise.”

“A promise? What kind of promise?” I frowned. Zillah always had things to say. Many that made no sense, but she’d never made me a promise.

“That I would find the one meant for me. My mate.” His deep gaze fell on me. “Of course I did not believe a word she said. I assumed they were the rumblings of a crazy wolf.” Warm hands cupped my cheeks. “I should have known there was truth in the craziness.”