

CHAPTER 14: EXCEPT BRIAR

TAVIAN'S POV

The intense feeling of terror rips me from my dreams yet again, and I wake up with a start, ying forward and breathing uncontrollably hard.

I can't even call it a dream... more of a night terror.

I'm covered in sweat, trembling despite the heat, and reliving the last moments of my nightmare as though I'm still inside, stuck in a reality of pain and torment, high on alert.

Until the content of the dream begins to fade into a fog, eluding me as it does every single time, leaving behind the bitter feeling of intense trepidation.

An elevated pulse rate, a trembling, perspiring body, and a strong, rage-fled desire for blood.

I feel my mental state unfurling, on the brink of a mental breakdown that pushes me to the edge of madness.

My room is in complete disarray, with claw marks dug into the walls, ripped furniture, and broken windows. All things I had xed already the previous day.

The wide space is completely torn apart and unrecognizable as always.

I never remember the night, what happens, what I dream about, or what I do.

Only the sensations I'm left with, along with the wreckage, and the insidious voices in my head begging me to go on a rampage.

I don't waste any more time, knowing the longer I remain like this, the less control I have over my thoughts and actions.

I move into the bathroom, opening the medicine cabinet and pulling out a bottled elixir. The bright, vibrant gold liquid I dread so much, the only thing that now works in calming my madness.

I drink it all at once without thinking, staring at my reection in the mirror as I watch it take effect.

My eyes, glowing with an inhuman beastly blood-red glow, slowly return to the gray color they're supposed to be.

The murderous thoughts telling me to kill myself and everyone around me calm down and almost disappear.

Almost.

Residues of it lter into the back of my mind where it's suppressible. The trembling in my hands disappears, and my breathing is suddenly lighter again.

A sigh of relief escapes me, knowing the drug still works and it hasn't fully lost its effect yet.

After years of sifting through medications that worked at rst and soon lost their potency, I learned to be grateful for the days I can go with my sanity intact.

The next few minutes, I take my time preparing for the day before the usual set of servants enter and begin cleaning up the place, replacing the broken things with materials in the store kept aside for this specic purpose.

Then, I move to my oce.

Today is like every other day, and I revel in the uniformity of it. The control in having things work as they should also helps in maintaining my sanity.

For that reason, I like to plan. I like to be steps ahead of things, prepare for the worst possible situations so nothing can shock me... nothing at all.

Nothing except Briar.

I spent countless years planning my revenge, countless years plotting all the ways I could make her suffer for Dario.

He was pure, innocent, the only light I had left after our parents died in that horric accident.

The memories of that day are seared into my mind, a scar that never fades, a wound that never heals. It was the kind of horror that left us both broken, but Dario, just a boy, had it the worst.

He lost his ability to speak—or perhaps he chose never to speak again—and his wolf was ripped away. The trauma was too great, the pain too immense.

He always needed me - his big brother. And I owed it to him—my sweet, little brother.

Yet, I failed to protect him from her.

I was too pathetic to make a difference. I couldn't stop him. I wasn't there when he needed me the most.

I was weak.

Thinking about it now has my condition acting up again.

My thoughts swirl around bloodshed, my hands tremble, and my entire body itches to break her into pieces and watch her bleed out.

But no, I won't.

I'd rather wait patiently and make her suffer for as long as possible. Make her entire existence miserable, after all, she got to grow up and fall in love, to get a mate and get married.

Dario can't ever do any of that.

In my oce, I approach his picture hanging over the replace, paying my respects as always. I remind myself to never forget how he died or the pain he endured—and to make her suffer tenfold.

I nd my seat, getting ready to handle the day's work, sorting through documents that keep this place running.

Sadly, I don't get very far into it before the doors to my oce burst open and a guard rushes in, hyperventilating, breathing hard.

His eyes stare at me erratically with worry and fear.

I can already guess what it is without him speaking, having calculated the possibilities and deduced the possible outcomes of today. I already know what's going on and how it's going to happen.

Nothing can surprise me today.

"Alpha... the Luna, she's disappeared again."

The title appalls me for a moment. It's something she doesn't deserve or could ever earn, yet because it was the only way to get her here and begin her torture, I have to bear it for now.

She escaped the rst time without the guards guring out how; of course, she'd disappear the second time.

Our little lamb still believes she can leave my fortress, so she'll continue to try without fail unless I completely break her spirit and make her realize that she's trapped here forever.

Being tortured and ridiculed by her years ago, having to live through her taunts, had given me a glimpse into her head to know what drives her, how she thinks and behaves.

And having met her recently, she's proved to me that she may have grown up, but she is still that same little girl on the inside.

Among many others: selsh and entitled, a low self-esteem she hides behind her pompous attitude and lavish tastes, and crippling daddy issues.

I know Briar, and therefore I know what she's going to do next. So why should I panic when I know she cannot escape from me?

"Worry not..." I say casually, ipping through the pages of a document.

I can already hear his heart beating three times faster than normal, hear the fear in his breath from the possibilities that I might kill him for not doing his job.

I should kill him right now. But it will be a waste of resources by my calculation.

"She's currently desperate, so she won't settle to think hard enough for a proper escape plan..." I skim through more pages, deciding where the next budget cuts will be directed.

"She's going to try something easy and simple, and she'll think it's a perfect idea to nd someone who's gullible enough to fall for her pretty face and help her." I add, closing the le and looking up at the man again, patiently waiting for an order.

Of course, the answer to my question is simple.

"By the way, where exactly is Eli right now?"

BRIAR'S POV

I wake up in this mysterious and extravagant vault room again, despite vividly remembering falling asleep in the hall after cleaning up from pure exhaustion.

My back hurts more than ever once I stand up. The pain and cuts from my skin stab me with every motion I make to get on my feet and dust my dress.

I'm too much in a sour mood to stare at the pretty jewels or expensive paintings hanging around as I did before.

I'm pissed off and furious after last night, after what that bastard Tavian did to me. I know he's acting out in the name of revenge, but I'm sure now that he's gone way too far.

At this rate, he's going to kill me, and if I'm lucky enough, I'll nd a way to escape before he has the chance to.

I step out of the room using the same way I did yesterday, pressing against the loose wall tile until the wall slides to the side for me to step out into the same main hall, closing shut behind me.

Just like yesterday, it's empty and silent.

Today, I gure out that I must be in some part of the castle that has limited access to the maids, which makes me wonder again how I got in there.

My thoughts are disrupted when I hear my name and feel a presence towering behind me.

"Briar?"

I freeze on impulse, terried that whoever it is will report me, drag me off to Tavian for trespassing. Knowing the bastard, he won't listen to what I have to say.

Looking behind me, I let out a breath of relief once I see the same guy from yesterday with chocolate brown hair and eyes so similar to Tavian's.

Now it makes sense why he reminded me of him when I saw him yesterday—the resemblance is there, clear enough to gure out without being told.

Only, where Tavian's cold eyes and sharp features describe an allure of mesmerizing beauty of a god made man, his face has more of a boyish attraction to it.

Playful in a way that would make you lose your guard around him. Especially with the smile now dancing across his lips, somehow he seems non-threatening.

"It's you again, the mysterious woman from yesterday... Briar." He looks at me with amusement and wonder, saying my name as though he's tasting ne wine and immediately guring out he likes it.

Grey eyes take every bit of me in from head to toe.

I imagine I must look like a mess, my white apron not so white anymore, my dress stained with lth and dirt from having to lower myself and do a maid's work.

My golden blonde hair is a mess, probably more knotted than yesterday. Still, I smile, offering something warm, knowing even while covered in lth I am beautiful.

A beauty not commonly seen around.

"It's you... the cousin."

"Please call me Eli." He offers his hand like a gentleman. The rst respectable response I've received since coming here shocks me.

Here I was thinking no one here has common human decency.

I take it.

"I'm Briar Ashwood... well, I expect you already know that."

"Yes, well, your reputation precedes you. You do have the entire castle turned upside down searching for you right now. You seem to be good at disappearing, I hear."

His words hit me hard with realization. They're looking for me... again?

A million questions rush through my mind, none of them having an answer, so I push them all aside, deciding to do something about it while I can.

The last time I supposedly "disappeared," I was forced to clean a room too big for one person before that whole asco began.

If I am caught again, goddess knows what cruelty Tavian has in store for me.

"Excuse me, I have to go now." I cut our meeting short and move away briskly, wanting to search for a way out right now.

He doesn't let me get too far, holding me back by my arm.

"Wait..." his voice is more gentle and soft, a bit worried too.

For a second, I consider that he might be part of those searching, yet meeting his eager eyes, charmed to say the least, I know he isn't.

"I cannot see a beautiful woman such as yourself in distress and not offer you my help." He smiles again, offering assistance... something I nd too hard to believe.

"You sure about that? I'm hiding from your cousin after all."

Not just that, doesn't he hold some grudge over me as well? Doesn't he hold Dario's death against me?

"Well, I'm not inclined to help him, am I?" He raises a brow as if answering my question.

No, he doesn't know what happened.

For some reason, Tavian didn't tell him.

"First off, you need a change of clothes, Briar. You look like a mess. Come with me." He tugs me off in the other direction without another word, and I let him.