

CHAPTER 2: DEMOTED AFTER REJECTION

BRIAR'S POV

But as Lucas starts to pull away, I reach for him, desperation springing forth suddenly.

I can't let him go, not like this.

The thought of losing him, the one person I believed was my destiny, is too much to bear.

"Lucas, please don't do this to me," I cry, my voice breaking. "You know the consequences." My fingers curl into his forearm, holding on with all the strength I have left. "Please don't turn me away!"

Tess snickers in amusement at my desperate display, and the betrayal of her laughter stings so badly it feels like it's coated in lava before reaching my skin.

"For f**k's sake," she scoffs.

Lucas growls, pivoting on his heel and ripping my hand off him.

He shoves me away, hard, and my body drops to the floor with a dull thud, pain shooting up my tailbone from the impact.

Sinking my teeth into my bottom lip to keep from crying out, I let the tears fall freely.

Tonight... was meant to be perfect.

"Don't follow me," he says. "Take a hint, Briar. I don't want you. I never have, and I never will."

And with that, he leaves. With her, right by his side.

He just... leaves me there.

"Poor Briar, he's made such a mockery of her. There's no way her family can bounce back from this."

"He left her for her maid. How shameful."

This isn't fair. Nothing about this is fair!

I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole... but it seems as though I'll get no such mercy.

I lift my head at the sound of incoming steps, expecting to see Lucas returning, but instead, I'm met with my father's angry glare.

He wraps an arm around my wrist and roughly yanks me to my feet, dragging me towards the front doors and outside the ballroom.

I let him pull me towards our waiting car, shoving me into the backseat as he gets in behind me.

"Drive."

The car moves, and I sink into myself, hiccuping as the grief of everything that happened mere moments ago washes over me.

I've never been so humiliated in my entire life. Never been so hurt. So shaken by the actions of others.

My father is quiet, but the waves of anger pour off him intensely. His only child just faced a rejection.

The most public rejection to have occurred in the last few years.

And to say he's not happy about it would be the understatement of the century.

By the time the car slows to a stop, there's too little left of me to cry anymore.

A soft snie escapes me as I reach for the door handle, but that's when my father nally chooses to break his silence.

"I'm selling your hand."

What?

With furrowed brows, I mumble weakly, "Selling my hand?"

"Yes," he says. "I'm selling your hand. For marriage."

What?

My entire body pivots in his direction as shock and panic take hold.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I believe I articulated myself correctly."

"I don't need an auction held on my account to find a partner." My words come out watery and broken even to my own ears. "I don't want to find another partner."

"This is not about you or what you want," he says, speaking intentionally slow, as though talking to a child. "It's about rectifying the mockery you made of my name. You and I both know the consequences of a rejection, regardless of the circumstances."

I may have chosen to ignore the lasting outcome of what transpired at the ball, but having it thrown in my face this way stings way more than I should let it.

The realm has laws.

Rules that guide our way of life, rules that must be abided by, no matter how barbaric.

One of those rules came to pass just moments ago when Lucas brutally rejected me in front of everyone.

After facing a rejection, you don't just go back to your normal way of life. You don't just rub dirt on it and walk it off.

Over here? You wallow in the impact of what was done.

When a mate chooses to reject their fated, it just goes to show the latter's value, which is less than nothing.

The fact bleeds into the eyes of everyone else, and for as long as I can remember, once you face a rejection, your rank is automatically decided.

Regardless of your previous station or standing, you fall all the way down to the worst of the worst—the omega rank.

I grit my teeth to keep my emotions at bay.

"I know what happened tonight was less than savory, but I'd rather you not toss my feelings or wants aside like any of it was my fault. You were there!" I lose my composure on the last bit, raising my voice. "You saw it! I begged him. I begged him not—"

"Exactly!" His fist slams down on the car seat between us, burying the words in my throat immediately. "You begged him. You. Begged. And you were still tossed away like nothing! Tonight, you were an embarrassment, and it shames me to call you my only child!"

My chest tightens, and I feel the waves of sadness thundering inside me, even as I hold his gaze.

"Your worth is nothing now!" he bellows. "No one will want you here! You've been made a mockery of, and to be seen with you might as well be a death sentence. The only thing I can possibly think to do with you is to wager your hand to anyone who's interested in claiming your innocence. Because as of now, that is all you are worth!"

The oxygen in my chest thins. He doesn't mean what I think he does, does he?

"My innocence?" I whisper.

His eyes are harder than steel as they meet my stare.

"If you need me to spell it out for you, then best believe I'll humor you," he says. "A girl like you, rejected and reduced to the lowest rank in the blink of one second, has no use other than the fact that you're untouched. Unsullied. The only value you have is solely because of the fact that you're a virgin, Briar. You're nothing more than that."

He could have branded me with silver, but even then, the action would have scarred a lot less than everything he just said to me now.

"You will not attend the auction," he continues. "You will not mouth off to your buyer, and neither will you act unwilling to be his wife."

"Dad, can you even hear yourself? You're selling your only daughter off to a man you don't even know? For...because... because I've never had s*x with anyone before?"

"Yes," he deadpans, the lack of emotion behind his words leaving me feeling like I'm pulling at straws.

"That's horrible, Dad! You can't—"

"There will be an auction, and you will be married off to the highest bidder," he cuts in, his tone leaving no room for discussion. "You will relocate to their home and continue living as a doting, obedient wife. Have I made myself clear?"

"Dad, I can't—"

"Have I made myself clear?" he repeats, cutting me off.

Like ashes, everything that went down tonight assaults my mind aggressively, until I can't think past the pain or the hurt.

My words are bitter as I choke out, "If you do this," I start, my damndest to keep my voice steady, "you'll have yourself to blame for losing any kind of relationship with your daughter."

My father laughs cruelly, the sound echoing off the car's interior and chilling me to the bone.

"You think losing you would matter to me?" he sneers. "You were never even my daughter to begin with."

The words hit me like a physical blow.

Despite knowing he hated me because of the accident that happened years ago, he had never uttered such cruel words before.

The shock paralyzes me, leaving me unable to speak.

He arches one brow as he turns to face me, appearing ruthless in every light.

"Have I made myself clear?"

Keeping the tears at bay, I lift my chin. Like hell I'd let him see me lose it again after everything that's transpired here today.

"Briar?" he presses.

Through clenched teeth and a broken resolve, I bite out, "Crystal."