

CHAPTER 15: SWEET ESCAPE

BRIAR'S POV

He takes me back to the room I ran into yesterday, which turns out to be his own, and feeds me warm food laid out on the table, similar to what I had eaten before.

Only now, there's no need to rush and stuff myself like before.

I take my time savoring every bite of food in front of me, feeling the warmth of the soup and sipping the lovely herbal tea like a civilized person.

I haven't realized the luxury of eating a meal without haste until now.

Meanwhile, he watches me silently with a pleased expression, something one would have while watching a hungry pet eat to their satisfaction.

It seems I am the pet now.

"Do you like it?"

I pull away, exercising restraint and clearing my throat.

"Well... it's okay, I guess."

He breaks into laughter unexpectedly, his boyish charm lighting up the room.

He seems to find joy in the smallest things, always watching with a playful smile, his mischievous eyes crinkling at the corners as he chuckles at every response.

"I love an honest woman. One not scared of speaking her mind. That kind is very rare to find." His fingers gently brush against my hair, twisting a lock around them.

He lifts it to his lips, his eyes never leaving mine, and plants a slow, deliberate kiss on it, a sly smile playing on his lips.

I don't inch.

I guess in many ways, I'm used to this kind of adoration.

Still, I pull away a bit, putting more distance between us.

I still don't know why he's being nice to me, why he hasn't treated me like a criminal like everyone else, so I'm wary of him.

"Based on our encounter yesterday, I'm sure you know more than just a few women, given the company you enjoy keeping," I comment, alluding to the fact that Tavian had mentioned the only reason Eli missed the banquet was because he was... busy after all.

"Please ignore my cousin's nonsense. I just appreciate women, every bit of them—their strength, their resilience, and all the... delightful things they bring to the table. Every inch and curve, perfectly crafted by the goddess, is a masterpiece in my eyes."

"That's a nice way of saying you've slept around with more than a few." I tease him and watch as he falters for a second with a nervous laugh.

He nally lets go of my hair and avoids my eyes.

"Enough about me though," he cuts in, changing the topic. "I want to learn about you, Briar. What goes on in that pretty head of yours and, of course, why my cousin has it out for you."

Now I frown.

The remnants of my appetite leave me at the mention of his name.

A brief memory of camp ashes in my mind, bits and pieces of things I made sure were buried in my past. Things I put in a lot of effort to forget.

Most of them I successfully did, including Tavian and Dario.

"I don't know... it's a long story, but whatever the reason is, I don't deserve any of this."

"Tavian can be cruel and unfeeling, but never without cause, Briar... maybe if you apologize to him...?"

"There's nothing to apologize to him for. I didn't do anything!" I snap uncontrollably, raising my voice in the process, which echoes against the walls of the large room and is followed by a moment of silence.

I swear at myself the second I realize my outburst. I've let him get into my head. I've let him affect me so much.

I shouldn't have.

None of it was my fault, none of what happened at camp was my fault. I tell myself this over and over again, reinforcing my mind.

I was just a child.

I didn't know my actions would hurt him. How could I? I never intended for things to go so horribly wrong.

"Look, I know he's your cousin, but I need your help. I need to get out of here before he does something worse that could kill me."

"You want me to help you?" He raises a brow, staring at me like I'm crazy.

I might be. Crazy enough to put my bets on someone I just met because I'm that desperate.

There's no time to think up a complicated plan. I need something easy and simple.

"Yes, I know it's crazy but... please, I just need help. I'm begging you. No one knows I'm here with you, so they won't find out you helped me."

His features turn serious, deep in thought for a while before he sighs in defeat.

"Well, with a face like that, how can I say no?"

"Wait... really?" I didn't think he would be so gullible.

"On one condition, of course," he cuts me off. The mischievous grin forming on his lips leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

"I will help you only as far as I can. The rest of your escape is up to you, and regardless of the outcome, you owe me a favor."

My eyes narrow, watching him with suspicion.

"What kind of favor, Eli?"

"Anything I want."

I recoil, putting more distance between us while shielding my body with my hands.

I'm desperate enough to do anything to get out of here, but not desperate enough to sleep with someone I don't know.

I tried that already before, and look where that got me.

"Relax..." He raises both hands, his smirk playful and condescending. "I'm not that kind of guy. I prefer it when the other person craves it just as much as I do."

He winks at me, a blend of sweet and seductive that's disarmingly cute. My guard slips, just a little, as he leans back casually in his chair.

I've thought it through only briefly, something simple that will have to do on such little notice.

"Fine - we have a deal."

"So what's the plan, sweetheart?"

"All you need to do is sneak me out through the front gate. From there, I can find my way through pack territory, maybe jump on a moving bus or something that leads to anywhere. The only problem I have is how to get out of here."

He ponders on it for a brief moment before a smile plasters across his face.

"Leave that to me."

Eli leaves me for a few minutes, giving me the chance to freshen up, take care of my injuries with a balm, and change into the fresh clothes he's left for me.

I don't even let myself wonder why he has a clean pair of female clothes in his wardrobe as I put them on.

They fit perfectly—a pair of jeans and a snug-fitting button-up pink T-shirt. I also tie my long golden hair into a high bun, keeping it away from my face for now.

A knock on the door draws my attention before he shows up again with a food trolley and a black cloak for me to wear.

"Put this on and get in. Let's sneak you out of here." He pulls the curtain underneath the trolley, revealing a hidden space I can fit into without being noticed.

His eyes sparkle with excitement and enthusiasm, a genuine eagerness that reassures me more than any words could.

I get into the lower part of the trolley, hidden by a curtain of black cloth, and we begin to move.

At first, it's all silent, with Eli whistling some silly song to himself in an attempt to act casual. Then we move out into a more open area with more maids and servants walking around.

I can hear their footsteps and chattering, and I remind myself to breathe more quietly.

It all goes perfectly well for a while... until we stop.

I freeze, high on alert, ready to run out if need be, listening carefully to what's going on out there until I hear... giggling?

It's light and airy, a soft feminine laughter followed by Eli's deep and playful tone.

"You look especially lovely today, Rachel. Has anyone ever told you that maid's uniform makes your eyes sparkle like dark diamonds?" He coos in a disgustingly icky tone.

"Oh stop it, sir... you're going to make my cheeks red." She giggles at the poor excuse of a compliment, and I peek through the curtains to see her twirling her hair.

I hold the urge to gag or even make a single sound, but I'm furious. He decides to flirt with a maid right now? While my life is on the line?

"I'm sure you've heard this a hundred times, but there's something irresistible about that smile of yours. It just pulls me in. I want to know everything about you, every little thought that crosses your mind. It's been ages since anyone made me feel this way."

"Really?"

"Who I lie to you? How about we meet up later today? We can talk more comfortably, and would you know, maybe I could show you—"

I swing my left leg forward and swiftly kick his, cutting him off in the middle of his pathetic speech.

I hear him fall forward, clutching onto the trolley to hold himself up while making short gasps of pain.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"Yes, yes... I'm fine. Never been better." His voice comes out muffled and tortured.

"Well, let me help you with the trolley then."

"No... I, uh... I'm taking it with me. It's a top-secret assignment from my cousin." He offers an excuse quickly, moving forward again. "I'll see you later... preferably 1 PM at the back of the castle?"

He calls out to her as we move, and her response calls out from the distance.

We're moving again for a few more minutes until we finally stop, and the curtain around me lifts up with Eli's head popping through.

"A little higher, and you would have crushed my chances at being a father. You would have ruined my grandma's dream," he whines as he helps me out.

I scoff. "Maybe it's for the best that you don't get to reproduce. She'll understand."

It's all open air around us outside.

The coast is clear, and just ahead around the corner are the exit gates with guards and servants going about their usual business.

My heart begins pounding hard, brimming with excitement.

I'm almost free. I can taste it on the tip of my tongue, just an arm's stretch away.

"I can escort you out from here once your cloak is up. The guards won't ask who you are once you're with me," he explains, helping me set the hood to cover my hair and half my face.

He tucks my hair in, his fingers lingering as he pauses to look at my face, a warm smile spreading across his lips.

The gentleness in the gesture is instantly appreciated.

"I assume you've sneaked more than a few girls out of here with this method, haven't you?" I tease him habitually.

He laughs nervously by my side without answering, and I let myself smile this time. Why not? It's only thanks to him that I got this far.

Finally, I can escape from my oppressor and be free...

"To be numerically specific, by my count, he's done it exactly 25 times."

The mate bond screams at the back of my mind, a tingling urgency announcing his cold, intimidating aura directly behind me, seconds too late.

My entire body stiffens, turned to stone without breath. I sense the same reaction from Eli, his eyes going wide.

None of us sensed him creeping up behind until he spoke.

None of us had noticed Tavian watching from behind until now.

"Tell me, cousin..." he casually places a hand on Eli's shoulder. "Did you enjoy trying to sneak my mate out of my territory?" His tone is playful, yet it drips with a heavy, underlying threat that makes my blood run cold.

That's it.

I'm royally f****d.