

## Chapter 14

Third Person's POV

The door slammed open.

Alpha Alaric stormed in, already shouting. "Kael Vale, get up right now! Why the hell did you unilaterally terminate—"

His words caught in his throat.

Lying in the center of Kael's massive bed was Riley.

Pale, groggy, her limbs tangled in silken sheets, she blinked against the dim morning light, clearly startled from a restless sleep.

Alaric stood frozen, the fury in his expression slowly morphing into stunned disbelief.

Behind him, Luna Zara gasped aloud. "Riley? Why are you sleeping in your brother's bed?"

Brother?

For a heartbeat, Riley forgot where she was. The scent of cedar and smoke, Kael's scent, still clung to the sheets. It was surreal.

Why had he brought her here?

He had always hated her. For years, she had been forbidden from even stepping past the threshold of his room, while Scarlett had wandered in and out as if she owned the place.

Now, suddenly, this.

Alaric's expression darkened again as he scanned the room, clearly searching for his son.

But Kael was nowhere in sight.

"Where is he?" Alaric demanded, his voice sharp and clipped.

Riley didn't answer. Her face was unreadable as she slowly rose from the bed, her movements hindered by her injured leg. She limped toward the door, expression impassive.

But Alaric and Zara stood in her way, blocking the exit.

Riley paused, brows slightly furrowed. "Step aside."

Alaric's jaw clenched. His earlier anger, fueled by the crumbling alliance with Ronan's Blackmaw Pack, surged forward in full.

"I'm your father," he snapped. "Is this how you speak to your elders? No shame, no discipline. Just like always. A disgrace."

Zara tugged on his sleeve. "Alaric, please—"

He cut her off. "Why wasn't she in her own room? What is she playing at? This is the very first night she returns to Ebonclaw, and she's already causing problems."

"She's not a child anymore," he growled. "And even if Kael is her blood brother, sneaking into his bed like this—what the hell is she thinking?"

Luna Zara's face paled. "Enough! Don't say another word."

But the implication lingered, venomous and vile.

Riley's fingers curled at her sides. She felt it—the bitter sting of humiliation, the slow burn of betrayal rekindling in her chest. The way Alaric looked at her—it wasn't the gaze of a father. It was the stare of a hunter sizing up a threat.

Her voice was calm but cold. "Are you done?"

Her father's breath caught. Riley's tone had the razor edge of someone who had long since stopped begging to be loved.

"Then step aside. I'm leaving."

Alaric refused to move.

When Riley attempted to edge past them, a cold, brutal grip clamped down on her forearm. Without warning, she was shoved backward.

She crashed to the floor with a muffled cry, her injured leg twisting beneath her. The pain was immediate and blinding.

"Alaric!" Zara shrieked. "You've lost your mind!"

"She's not going anywhere until I get some answers."

Riley pushed herself upright with shaking hands, biting back the pain. She lifted her head, forcing herself to meet Alaric's gaze.

"Why don't you call Kael if you're so desperate for answers?" she said through gritted teeth. "Maybe he can explain why I'm here. Because I sure as hell can't."

Zara fumbled for her phone, quickly dialing. The ringing began—nearby.

From the study next door.

The two of them turned in unison and burst into the adjacent room.

The lights were off. The scent of alcohol hung heavy in the air.

Zara turned on the lights.

Kael was slumped against the wall, legs sprawled, surrounded by empty whiskey bottles. His eyes fluttered open at the intrusion, and he squinted against the sudden brightness.

Alaric was livid. "Look at yourself. Look at what you've done."

Kael didn't answer. He only lifted a bottle, realized it was empty, and let it drop with a hollow clink.

"Why did you dissolve the alliance with Blackmaw?" Alaric roared. "Do you know what this means for Ebonclaw? For Scarlett?"

Kael's eyes gleamed with something like contempt. "Did Ronan consider all that when he turned the prison into hell for Riley?"

Everyone fell silent.

Kael rose, swaying slightly but focused now. "He ordered his people to beat her. They snapped her bones. Forced her to drink from toilets. Zapped her with silver needles. You want to know why she limps? Her leg was shattered with wooden clubs. That's why."

Zara staggered back, hand clapped over her mouth.

Alaric blinked, stunned.

"You're lying," he said weakly.

Kael pulled out his phone, tapped the screen a few times, then held it out.

Their own phones buzzed simultaneously.

Alaric's eyes scanned the screen. Cold, clinical notes. Hospital logs. Surveillance stills. Photographs of injuries that should never have been inflicted in a licensed detainment facility.

Zara sobbed openly.

Alaric stared at the images, color draining from his face. "You... were too rash. You should've consulted us. Ending the alliance like that will cost us—"

"It already cost us," Kael said quietly. "It cost her five years of her life."

Alaric's phone rang again. He stepped aside to answer it.

His expression collapsed into horror. "What?"

Zara moved toward him. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve lost ten billion,” he muttered. “Overnight.”

Zara’s knees gave out. She caught herself on the desk. “What are we going to do?”

“There’s only one option,” Alaric said after a pause. “We need to restore the alliance. Grovel if we must.”

“And the price?”

Alaric hesitated.

Kael’s eyes narrowed.

Alaric exhaled. “Ronan says... Riley has to kneel before his sister’s hospital bed and beg for forgiveness.”

A chilling silence fell.

Then Scarlett’s voice rang sweetly from behind them. “Sister, it’s so late—why are you loitering by Kael’s study door?”

Riley turned slowly, her eyes meeting the girl who had taken her place.

Scarlett’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.