

## Chapter 19

Third Person's POV

The atmosphere in the dining hall dropped to freezing.

Everyone's movements halted as though suspended mid-breath.

Alpha Alaric's brows drew together, but he said nothing.

Zara shifted uncomfortably in her seat, clearly caught off guard.

Kael, however, slammed his utensils down with a sharp clang, making a nearby servant flinch.

"What is the meaning of this?" he barked.

The servant, pale and trembling, bowed her head. "Master Kael, the household has only ever prepared four portions... I didn't realize—"

"Didn't realize what?" Kael's voice was a low growl. "That my sister is back under this roof? Or did you know, and decide she didn't deserve to eat?"

The woman opened her mouth, but Kael cut her off.

"You're dismissed."

Terror flickered in her eyes. She turned instinctively to Scarlett, silently pleading. But Scarlett merely kept her head down, expression unreadable.

Alaric cleared his throat. "Mia, prepare another plate."

Mia gave a relieved nod and hurried to the kitchen.

Scarlett, always quick to seize an opportunity, pushed her plate toward Riley.

"Here, sister. You can have mine."

Riley didn't look at her. She didn't say a word.

But she also didn't refuse.

She picked up a fork and began to eat with calm, measured movements, as if nothing had happened.

Scarlett stared at her, clearly expecting something. A nod. A word. Gratitude.

Riley gave her nothing.

The silence stretched. Scarlett's hopeful expression withered into a pout.

Alaric rapped his knuckles against the table. "Riley."

Still eating.

He cleared his throat pointedly. "Riley."

Zara stepped in, gentle but firm. “Riley, your sister gave you her food. Shouldn’t you say thank you?”

Riley finally set her fork down.

She looked up, sweeping her gaze across the table, her eyes sharp as shattered glass.

“Thank her?” Her voice was calm—dangerously so. “Should I thank her for stealing my life? For framing me? For five years in a cell?”

A crackling silence followed.

She leaned forward slightly, her voice now a blade. “You all want gratitude over a plate of breakfast? For three years I wasn’t given one. I ate your scraps—if anything was left. I came home to insults. And not once, not once, did any of you offer me thanks or apology.”

“You demand more of me than you’ve ever demanded of yourselves.”

Zara looked hurt. “But that’s all in the past. Can’t you just—let it go?”

“The past lives in my body,” Riley said. “It lives in my limp, in my ear that barely hears, in every scar. You don’t get to tell me when to forget.”

Zara clutched at her chest, as if Riley’s words had physically struck her.

Alaric lost his patience.

“I am your father!” he roared, rising to his feet. “You will show respect!”

“And I’m your daughter!” Riley shot back, standing too. “Yet you’ve treated me like dirt beneath your boots. You never wanted me back. Don’t pretend now.”

“You think I came back here by choice? You dragged me here to fix your problems with the Blackmaw Pack.”

Her eyes flared with fury.

“I’m not your pawn.”

Alaric’s face turned crimson. Without warning, he lifted his hand and struck her across the face.

Smack.

The force of it knocked her against the table, plates and silver crashing to the floor.

Riley’s head snapped sideways, lip split open. Blood slid down her chin and dripped onto the pristine white tablecloth.

Her right ear—already damaged—rang with deafening static.

She didn't cry out.

She didn't cry at all.

But her chest rose and fell like a storm was building beneath her ribs.

Kael stared at her, unmoving. Zara wrung her hands but stayed seated. Scarlett blinked in stunned silence.

Then Riley stood—slowly.

And flipped the entire table.

Dishes, cutlery, glasses—all of it went flying in a thunderous crash.

Everyone backed away, stunned.

Scarlett shrieked. Zara gasped. Alaric looked ready to explode.

“You think this is about rebellion?” Riley shouted. “It's not. It's about survival. I've done everything to earn a place here, and you still spit on me.”

Zara tried to approach. “Riley, please. We're still your family—”

Riley shoved her arm away. “You are a prison sentence with a family name.”

Alaric pointed a shaking finger. “You disgrace this house. You're an ungrateful, disobedient child!”

Scarlett peeked from behind him, her voice trembling with faux remorse. “It's all my fault, sister. I never meant for any of it to happen...”

Riley didn't hear her.

She didn't hear any of them.

All she could hear was the high-pitched hum in her right ear, the chaos in her chest, the thundering echo of her heartbeat.

She stumbled for the door, vision blurring, limbs shaking.

Then everything spun.

And she collapsed.

Kael moved fast—faster than anyone thought possible—and caught her before her head hit the ground.

His voice cracked. “Riley...”

Zara rushed forward. “What's happening? Is she—?”

Alaric scoffed. “She's pretending.”

Kael's head whipped around. "Pretending? She passed out! You're more concerned about your damn ego than your own daughter's condition."

And with that, he lifted Riley in his arms and carried her upstairs without looking back.

Alaric shouted behind him, "If she weren't mine, she wouldn't have the privilege of talking to me at all!"