

## Chapter 23

Ronan's POV

She knelt in front of me, blood smeared across her face, hair matted to her skin, hands trembling as she slammed her forehead against the floor.

Over and over.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Each sound echoed like a hammer in my skull.

I should've felt satisfaction. This was what she deserved—the girl who lured my sister into the Black Forest, who left Tessa half-dead and comatose in a hospital bed. This was justice.

But watching her grovel, filthy and broken, didn't feel like justice. It just felt... wrong.

Annoying.

Pathetic.

Disgusting.

My temples throbbed. My fingers itched to crush something.

“Get out,” I snapped.

She didn't move.

“Are you deaf?” My voice rose. “I said get out!”

Still nothing. Her head just kept hitting the floor, leaving a smear of red that stained the marble like a curse. It was like she couldn't even hear me—like she wasn't even here.

I stepped forward, grabbed her arm, ready to drag her out like the disgrace she was. But the second my hand moved, she flinched. Hard.

She recoiled like she'd been electrocuted, curling into herself, arms thrown over her head.

“Please don't hit me!” she cried. “I'm sorry, don't hit me!”

I froze.

For a split second, my breath caught. Her voice—raw, terrified, broken—ripped through the room like a blade.

What the hell had they done to her?

No. No, I wasn't going there. I wasn't softening.

She wasn't the victim.

Tessa was.

Tessa—the bright, fearless, brilliant sister I raised. The one who followed Riley's message into the woods. The one we found barely breathing. Ripped apart.

And Riley? She was the one with Rogue blood. Raised by criminals. Born in shadows. It didn't matter if we shared a Pack name. That girl was a stain.

But still...

That voice. That flinch. That reflex.

She wasn't faking it. You can't fake that kind of fear.

For the first time, I hesitated.

And like a damn fool, my mind betrayed me—flashing back to years ago, when I first heard her name. Riley Vale, the prodigy from Mooncrest Academy. The girl who beat me in every single physics competition, year after year. The one who walked onto the national stage with dirt on her shoes and brilliance in her eyes.

She never smiled much, but when she did, it lit up the whole damn auditorium. I hated her back then too.

Not because she was a Rogue. Not because she was dangerous.

Because I couldn't catch up to her.

Because she didn't care about the spotlight, and somehow, that made her shine even brighter.

And then the Ebonclaw Pack brought her home.

The real daughter of the Vale family. The one with Alpha blood.

And just when I thought maybe—maybe—she could be something more than a rival, more than a threat...

Tessa ended up in a coma.

And Riley was to blame.

So why the hell was my hand still frozen midair?

Why was I hesitating?

Her body was curled tight, shoulders trembling. She wasn't looking at me anymore. She wasn't even present.

She was back in prison. Or wherever the hell they sent her. Reliving something I'd never seen.

I lowered my arm slowly, the weight of it suddenly unbearable.

"You can go," I said, quieter this time.

My voice sounded foreign to my own ears.

She didn't move.

Part of me wanted to grab her again. To throw her out. To scream until she remembered who she hurt.

But another part—one I didn't want to name—just stood there, watching the girl who used to be a legend, now reduced to a ghost.

I clenched my jaw. Turned away.

"Leave," I said again, this time with steel in my voice.

She wasn't hearing a damn thing I said.

I could see it in her face—blank, distant, smeared with blood and tears. Her eyes were glassy, wide with panic, scanning for something, anything to hold on to.

Then she lifted a trembling hand and roughly wiped her face, smearing crimson across her cheek. Her gaze snapped to my mouth.

And then—clarity.

She read my lips. Understood.

"Leave."

Her body flinched. For a second, she looked like she couldn't believe it.

Was that hope flickering in her eyes?

The girl who had crawled in here like a shattered thing—now staring at me like she'd been handed a second chance at life. As if my dismissal was mercy, not disgust.

Her lips trembled. "I'll go. Right now," she choked out, voice raw, hoarse—more breath than sound.

She scrambled up from the floor, using both hands and knees. Her injured leg buckled, nearly giving out beneath her. Twice she stumbled, nearly fell flat again.

But she forced herself upright.

Didn't even look back.

She bolted.

Like a hunted animal finally released from the cage.

And I let her.

I didn't move. Didn't call her back. Just stood there, jaw tight, fists clenched, watching her figure disappear into the hallway until there was nothing left but silence.

I didn't know how long I stood there before I turned and sat beside the bed. The air in the room had grown heavy again, thick with the sterile scent of medicine and something deeper—grief.

I reached out, fingers brushing over the outline of my sister's face.

Tessa's cheeks had grown hollow.

Her once bright eyes remained closed, lashes unmoving, sunk into bruised shadows.

So still.

Too still.

"I let her go, Tessa," I murmured, my thumb tracing the curve of her pale brow.  
"Just like that. After everything she did to you... I let her walk."

I swallowed, throat dry.

"Would you hate me for it?"

But there was no answer.

There never was.

Only the quiet hiss of the ventilator. The steady beep of the machines. The crushing weight in my chest.

I'd told myself for months that I hated Riley.

That I wanted her to pay.

But when I looked her in the eyes just now—saw how broken she was, how terrified, how ruined—I didn't see a predator.

I saw a ruin.

And still... I couldn't figure out whether that made things better or worse.

I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against the edge of the mattress.

"I should've finished her," I whispered.

