

Chapter 24

Riley's POV

The fluorescent lights of the Healer's Ward burned into my eyes. I could barely see through the blood and tears that blurred my vision, but I didn't stop. I couldn't.

I stumbled down the corridor, slamming into walls and brushing past startled wolves. Some of them gasped, others recoiled at the sight of me—bloodied, limping, barely upright—but I didn't care.

Let them look.

Let them see what the Ebonclaw Pack does to its own.

There was only one thought in my mind: get away from Ronan. As far as possible. Before he changed his mind and decided he hadn't had enough.

I ran harder, heart pounding, lungs burning. My injured leg screamed with every step, but I ignored it.

So I didn't see the man coming out of the private consultation room.

Not until I slammed straight into him.

The impact jolted me back, and I nearly fell to the floor—but a strong arm snapped around my waist, steadying me before I hit the ground.

“Riley.”

That voice.

Familiar. Soft. Careful.

Terrifying.

I looked up and found myself staring into Maddox's eyes.

His amber gaze reflected the panic in mine, like he'd already seen the fear before I even knew it was there.

He reached for me like I was something fragile.

But all I felt was revulsion.

I shoved him away with all the strength I had left.

He barely budged, but he let go. I turned without a word and tried to walk away, only to feel his hand clamp down on my wrist.

Firm. Unyielding.

Just like him in the courtroom five years ago.

“You’re hurt,” he said, voice low, gaze flicking to the blood on my forehead.

There was a flicker of something—guilt? Concern? I didn’t care.

He had no right to look at me like that.

No right to act like I mattered.

“Who did this to you?” he asked, eyes narrowing. “Tell me, Riley. I’ll make them pay.”

I almost laughed.

He was serious. He thought this was how it worked.

But I remembered it all—how he had stood across from me in the Court of Elders, not beside me. How his voice, once soft and warm, became the blade that slit my throat.

He was the one who defended Scarlett. Who called me a liar. Who listed every false accusation like it was scripture, until they caged me like a rogue and threw away the key.

He could’ve been my shield.

Instead, he helped gut me alive.

Now he wanted to protect me?

I kept my eyes on the floor, silent.

“You’re still mad at me, aren’t you?” His voice cracked.

He didn’t wait for an answer. “I had my reasons, Riley. I didn’t want to hurt you. I had no choice—please, just let me explain.”

Explain?

As if an explanation could give me back the years I lost.

As if words could fix a shattered leg, a deaf ear, a missing kidney.

As if anything could erase the humiliation of sitting in that courtroom, looking into his eyes, and realizing I was completely alone.

I tried to pull away again, but his grip didn’t loosen.

So I lifted my gaze and looked him in the eye.

Cold. Empty. Done.

“Let go,” I said flatly.

He didn't. His hand only tightened slightly, like he thought I'd crumble if he held on long enough.

"I'll take you to a healer," he murmured. "Let them patch you up, okay?"

His voice was almost a whisper, soft and trembling, like he was scared I might disappear.

It made my skin crawl.

I didn't want softness. I didn't want sympathy. Not from him.

"Did you not hear me?" I said, louder now, ice lacing every word. "Let. Go."

Something in my tone must've hit him, because he flinched like I'd struck him.

I saw the pain in his eyes.

Good.

He deserved it.

But it wasn't enough.

I had reached my limit. My fury boiled over.

Without thinking, I yanked my head to the side—and slammed it into the wall.

Blood erupted down my face. Pain exploded behind my eyes.

Still, I didn't stop.

"Let go?" I hissed, blood running down my chin. "Or do I keep going?"

He was frozen, horrified.

"You think I won't?" I slammed my head again. Thud.

And again. Thud.

The sound echoed through the hallway. Sharp. Sickening.

I didn't care.

If hurting myself was the only way to make him let go, I'd do it again.

And again.

His face had gone pale as bone.

"You're insane," he choked. "You'd hurt yourself—just to get away from me?"

Was that really so hard to believe?

"I said let go," I growled, the taste of iron on my tongue.

Blood dripped from my forehead onto his arm. I saw it land. Watched him flinch.

He finally released me.

I stumbled back, nearly collapsing. But I caught myself before he could touch me again.

“Don’t you dare come near me,” I spat. “We’re done. We’ve always been done.” I didn’t wait for a reply.

I turned and limped away, dragging my useless leg behind me. Every step felt like knives under my skin, but I didn’t stop.

I wouldn’t stop.

Behind me, I heard nothing. No footsteps. No pleading.

But I knew he was still there.

Following. Watching.

Like a ghost too cowardly to speak.

I didn’t want to go home—not yet.

The Vale estate would only bring more cruelty, more silence, more blame.

So I collapsed onto a bench outside the Healer’s Ward and stared blankly at the road beyond the trees, where the moonlight painted the pavement silver.

I didn’t cry.

There were no tears left in me.

I was just... tired.

Behind me, I felt his presence again. Maddox. Watching. Hovering.

I didn’t look back.

But when a strange woman approached me with a quiet voice and a small medical bag, I knew it was him.

“I saw your wound,” she said softly. “Mind if I help?”

I stared at the supplies—gauze, disinfectant, cotton swabs.

Then I looked over my shoulder.

He was gone.

Coward.