

CH 5 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

Dinner at my aunt's house was always a cozy affair. The walls of the old cottage were lined with shelves full of antique books, dried herbs, and framed photos that smelled faintly of lavender and memories. The worn wooden table, scarred with decades of laughter and late-night meals, sat under a brass chandelier that icked with amber light. It cast a warm glow over the dishes—rosemary chicken, roasted root vegetables, and soft rolls glistening with melted butter.

It was the kind of evening that made the Wisteria Pack feel like home. Comforting. Familiar. Safe. Mine.

Except tonight, I couldn't taste a thing.

The food sat untouched on my plate. I pushed a carrot around with my fork like a bored child, barely hearing Tessa's voice as she animatedly recounted something about her training session that morning—something about a clumsy wolf and a misred arrow.

I wasn't clumsy. But lately, I did feel misred.

My aunt, Elira, sat at the head of the table, her dark hair swept into a loose bun, the silver strands at her temples catching the light like threads of wisdom. Her sharp hazel eyes icked between us.

"You two are awfully quiet," she said suddenly, setting down her glass of water. "What happened?"

I exhaled slowly, the knot in my chest loosening just a bit as I straightened up in my chair, my ngers tightening around the fork.

Tessa shot me a look, one eyebrow raised as if to say, -your turn to talk, cousin.-

I sighed and straightened up in my chair. "The rotation assignments came in today."

Elira's expression shifted in an instant. Her jaw tightened. "And?"

I glanced at Tessa again for support, then looked back at my aunt. "I'm going back to Canada."

Elira's face darkened. The warm glow in the room seemed to dim around her. She set her knife down carefully, too carefully, and folded her hands in front of her plate.

"Where?" she asked, voice clipped.

"Winter Pack," I added quickly. "Not Bloodhound. I'm not going anywhere near Jonas."

Relief passed through her features like a icker of candlelight, quickly replaced by wary calculation.

Tessa grinned and shoved a piece of bread in her mouth. "She's not just going anywhere. She's going to the *Savage Quadruplets* pack."

My head jerked toward her. "Not again!"

"I already told you! I don't care," I said atly, spearing a carrot with unnecessary force. "I'm not interested in any unmated Alpha in this life. Or the next."

Tessa laughed. "Still, you're lucky. Most people would kill for a six-month rotation there. If not for the training facilities, then just to get a glimpse of those four."

"They're not just a pretty face," Elira added thoughtfully, dabbing at the corner of her mouth with a napkin. "They have a reputation. No one messes with them. Not even rogues. Rumor has it their pack even harbors a couple of dragons."

I blinked. "You're joking."

She shook her head. "Not one bit. There are whispers that some of their ranked members mated with draconic bloodlines. You can see it in the way they move—sharp, heavy, elemental. The quadruplets lead with strength, and they don't tolerate nonsense. Especially not from outsiders"

Tessa leaned forward, voice dropping into something softer. "Sounds like the safest place for someone like you."

My stomach twisted, but I stayed silent.

"And let's be honest," she added, "nobody's going to dare mess with the girl living under their roof."

Not that I needed protecting anymore.

Not really.

Still, I gave a small nod. "Better safe than sorry."

I looked down at my plate, the food still untouched. My appetite had vanished days ago, and this conversation wasn't bringing it back.

"I won't be shifting," I said after a pause. "Not unless absolutely necessary. The fewer people who see what I really am, the better."

Elira looked at me carefully, her gaze searching. "That's wise. Maybe too wise for your age."

I gave a crooked smile, hollow at the edges. "Trauma tends to age people fast."

She hummed in agreement, leaning back in her chair as she twirled her napkin between her ngers. "Maybe you should go see Naeva before you leave. Her magic might be able to mask your aura. Even just enough to keep the elders from noticing something... off."

I swallowed hard. The idea of someone—anyone—sensing what I truly was made my skin crawl. What Hator truly was. The name itself made something shift inside me, something ancient and hot and waiting.

I swallowed. The idea of someone sensing what I was—what Hator truly was—made my skin itch.

"Will it be strong enough?" I asked.

Elira's eyes narrowed slightly as she thought. "It should be. Naeva is one of the best witches I know. She works quietly, discreetly. Her cloaking spells aren't ashy, but they're deep. Subtle. If there's even the slightest risk that someone might detect you—especially with a bond like yours—it's better to cover your tracks."

She leaned forward again, elbows resting on the table. "We don't know how old your bond really is, Kat. There might be elders out there who can feel it. And we both know—curiosity can be dangerous."

I nodded, slowly.

"Okay. I'll go tomorrow."

"Good," she said softly.

Her eyes lingered on me for a second too long.

And suddenly, I felt like prey again.