

CH 7 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

The forest didn't whisper warnings.

Didn't reach for me with clawed branches or shiver under my steps.

It simply was—unchanged, eternal, existing with or without me.

And for that, I was grateful.

Because fear had a taste. And I'd had enough of it.

I stepped off the trail where my aunt told me to. Past the crooked birch that split like a forked tongue. Past the moss-covered boulder that looked more like a sleeping bear than any stone had the right to. The path was old, barely there, more suggestion than direction, but my feet found it like they remembered.

Maybe they did.

The forest accepted me. Not warmly, but not unkindly either. Like an old neighbor who didn't ask questions and didn't care for your drama, as long as you didn't bring it to their doorstep.

It was peace, in a brutal kind of way.

And peace was rare when you carried a beast like mine.

Hator. Daughter of bloodlines better left buried.

Marked not by violence or darkness—but by re and death.

She stirred under my ribs, quiet but alert.

She liked it here. The pulse of the earth, the lack of judgment, the faint trace of old magic in the air—it resonated with her. She wasn't a monster, despite what most would believe if they ever saw her awake. She wasn't cursed either. She was ancient. Untamed. Sacred in a way the modern packs no longer understood.

And that was why I needed help.

Not to hide out of shame.

But to survive the people who would come hunting for the power that hummed beneath my skin like a distant storm.

Like Jonas would.

The sacred clearing appeared gradually, like the forest had been folding it in on itself until now. A ring of standing stones surrounded it—tall, smooth, covered in faint white runes that tickered like breath on glass. No wind. No birdsong. Just space. Space that existed for something older than wolves and witches and the wars between them.

In the middle of the clearing stood a structure that barely looked like a house. More tree than building. More grown than built. It pulsed with energy—not threatening, not inviting. Just... aware.

I stepped into the clearing, and the weight of the outside world slipped from my shoulders.

This place didn't care about my name.

Or my mistakes.

Or the blood on my veins.

Before I could knock, the door creaked open.

Naeva stood there, taller than I expected, wrapped in layers of deep green and brown fabrics that moved like leaves in a breeze I couldn't feel. Her skin was like coffee before the cream, and her eyes—gods, her eyes—they looked like they'd been carved from wet earth and filled with stars. She was younger than I expected. Mid-thirties, maybe. High cheekbones, dark curls piled into a messy braid, She wore layers—shawls, scarves, rings—but not in a showy way. More like armor. Her presence was... heavy. But not cruel.

She looked at me like she already knew the shape of my soul.

"Come in, Katherine," she said, stepping aside. "It's been a long walk."

Not Kat. Not Kathleen.

Just my real name. Laid bare like an offering.

Nonetheless I nodded, and crossed the threshold.

Inside, the air was warm and rich with scent—dried herbs, widowers, something deeper. Memory, maybe. Glass jars lined the walls, packed with roots, feathers, bones, petals, stones. No clutter—everything had purpose. A hearth crackled to the left, and in its light, runes shimmered across the floor like shifting ink.

I didn't speak. I didn't need to.

She gestured to the wooden stool near her worktable and I sat.

"Your aunt sent word. I know why you're here," she said, moving back toward a low table covered in dried plants and bowls.

"You came for concealment," she added then, pulling down a carved box from a high shelf.

Not a question. A knowing.

Still, I found my voice, dry as it was. "You can really mask it?"

She didn't look up. "Masking is one thing. Changing is another. I can't erase what you are, Katherine. But I can help you pass."

"Pass is good enough," I said. "I'm not looking to lie. Just... not get hunted."

Naeva finally looked at me, eyes narrowing slightly. "What you carry—it doesn't want to be hidden. It wants to be known. Felt. Tasted."

"Yeah, well. It'll just tear everything down."

Her lips twitched, almost a smile. "Fair point."

She set the box on the table and opened it slowly. Inside, nestled on a strip of black velvet, was a pendant unlike any I'd seen. A dark stone—obsidian, maybe—shaped like a fang, set in a claw of twisted silver, the chain simple but strong.

"This will mask your aura," she said. "As long as it touches your skin."

I leaned forward, watching as she lifted it gently. "Does it change my scent too?"

"Yes," she answered. "Couldn't have it any other way. Aura goes with scent. To mask one, you must alter both."

My stomach clenched—not with doubt, but with memory.

She paused, eyes flicking up to mine. "You understand what that means? Your mate won't find you."

I swallowed hard.

Naeva tilted her head. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I already had a mate," I said, voice rough. "I rejected him."

Her hands stilled. She didn't interrupt.

"He tore me apart for it. Literally. Left me bleeding in the snow. It would have been the end of me if Hator hadn't been there."

Hator didn't like it. She hissed, low and resentful, before curling back into the dark. Her hatred for Jonas hadn't dulled—if anything, it had sharpened over time, simmering like coals under wet ash. She wanted to give him what he deserved. But I didn't. I didn't want to see him ever again.

"I know," Naeva said, and there it was—that look. Pity. I hated it. "but..."

"If the Goddess is fair," I halted her, "she won't give me another one. And even if she does... I don't want him."

Something passed through Naeva's expression. Not pity anymore. Respect, maybe. The quiet kind.

"I see," she murmured. Then, more to herself, "It could be challenging to find the right choice in that way..."

She looped the pendant over my head, cold silver brushing my collarbone.

The moment it touched my skin, something shifted.

A snap, like a rubber band.

A ripple, subtle but definite.

I felt Hator stretch inside me, curl tighter around my spine, as if retreating beneath layers of silk.

My scent changed. I knew it. Still her, still me—but muted. Sharper in some places, softer in others. Different enough that even someone who knew me might pause before recognizing it.

"There," Naeva said, stepping back. "You're veiled. To most, you'll seem... unremarkable. Still powerful, but in a quiet way."

"Good," I said. "That's all I want."

She studied me for a moment longer, then turned away to clean her tools. "It won't hold forever. Come back before the summer solstice and I'll renew it. If you take it off for more than a few minutes, it will need resetting."

"Understood."

"And if someone sees through it..."

I met her eyes. "Then they deserve to."

A smile ghosted across her lips. "You're not afraid of being seen."

"I'm afraid of being used."

She nodded, satisfied. "Then you've come to the right place."

Naeva's fingers brushed the edge of the table before she turned to the door. "Good luck, Katherine," she said. No softness in it. Just truth. Like a blade wrapped in silk.

I didn't get a chance to reply.

A knock—sharp and sure—cut through the room like a warning shot.

Naeva's head tilted. Her eyes narrowed, calculating. "Go," she murmured, already moving. "Back door."

I didn't argue. I knew when something wasn't for me.

I crossed the room, boots silent on the worn wood. But before I slipped through the back, I glanced over my shoulder—because instincts like mine didn't like being ignored.

Two figures stood in the doorway.

The first was a girl, maybe a bit younger than me. Dirty blond eyes—too bright, too cold, too detached. She stared straight at me, like she could hear the gears in my head.

And behind her—a woman dressed in deep green. Her eyes glowed white. Not pale. Not cloudy. White. Blind and seeing more than anyone should.

A seer.

Something inside me tightened.

Naeva didn't inch. She smiled, all edge. "Ah. You're early," she said, stepping aside.

Then she looked at me, chin tipping toward the woods. "Go."

No please. No goodbye.

Just a silent warning: whatever's coming isn't for you.

So I left.

Fast. Quiet. Without a sound.

Without looking back.