

## Cursed Wolf Chapter 1

"We can't stay here," Thorne Winter growled as he laced his faded leather boots.

"We can't leave Mother and Father's land," Blake Winter said. "This place is our birthright." He pulled his dusty fur pelt more tightly around his shoulders.

"There's nothing left for us here," Damian said, looking off into the dark corner of the cabin. He was swaddled in a wool blanket, his long blond hair covering half his face.

"It may be time for us to leave," Rex, the eldest Winter brother, sighed. He poked at a burning log in the decrepit fireplace. Sparks flew and swirled in the hearth. "There's not enough time for us to maintain the cabin and search for mates one night a month."

"We should have left decades ago," Thorne barked.

"Quiet," Rex said, holding up his hand. "We need to make a unanimous decision. Blake is right, this place is our responsibility. Four generations of Winters lived, worked and died on this land."

"Our generation should have died already."

"Damian, please stop being morbid." Rex side-eyed his youngest brother.

"We can sell the land," Felix said. "With inflation, it should fetch us a handsome price."

"How can we sell it? We can't communicate with humans more than one day a month." Blake batted at the dusty fur covering his shoulders and a cloud puffed around him.

"We should at least try something! Aren't you bored of living like this?" Tate stood from the rickety chair and paced the small living area in the family's ancient cabin.

"Bored isn't the word I'd use for it," Damian said.

"There has to be something better than this," Tate said. "We haven't found our mates. We haven't broken the Snow Queen's curse. It's time to move on."

"I had a dream," Rex said with a sigh. "At dusk, before we changed."

"What kind of dream?" Blake asked.

"I could sense where my mate is. She's in a town called Selkie, in a place called Fate Island."

"That's where the shifters are supposed to be," Felix said. "I heard a human talking about it when I was in town last month."

"We should have gone already," Thorne said. "Our mates are not in the nearest town. We've gone there every month for seventy-five years. I can't even remember the last time I sensed another shifter, let alone my fated mate."

"I can't even talk to human women anymore," Blake said.

"You can barely talk to anyone anymore," Tate snickered.

"We've all suffered from the lack of our humanity," Rex said. The weight of the family curse and the decision in front of him pressed down on his shoulders. "Sometimes, I'm not sure if I'm a man or a wolf, even in this body."

"We're the walking dead," Damian said.

"Stop saying that!" Tate said. "We've barely lived!"

"We should kill her," Blake said.

Rex rubbed his hand down his face. "The Snow Queen cannot be killed. Not by us. Besides, we don't even know if it would break the curse."

"There must be others who understand the witch's magic," Felix said.

"Perhaps we will find them on Fate Island," Rex said. "And if my dream was correct, that is where I will find my mate and break my curse."

"What about the rest of us?" Thorne growled.

"If I am released from the curse, I can better protect us all. Same goes for the rest of you."

"I don't care if we use a dream as an excuse," Thorne said. "It's time to leave this place."

"All in favor of leaving the land, say aye," Rex said, holding up his hand. "Aye."

The other brothers followed suit, one by one, until only Blake was left with this hand down. He sat in silence, covered in his dusty furs. The firelight danced on his face and in his hazel eyes. "I don't want to leave the land."

"We won't leave you, brother," Rex said. "We stick together. We're a pack."

"You'll never find your mate here," Tate said.

"You'll never grow and change. You'll never have a family. You'll be stuck in time forever," Damian said.

"We should just force him to go," Thorne said.

"No." Rex shook his head at his middle brother.

"We need to remain rational, or we really have lost our humanity," Felix said.

Blake crossed his arms and stared at the floor. Rex understood how his brother felt. They were all deeply bound to the land. Not only had they grown up here, they'd spent the last seventy-five years hunting the backcountry property for anything their wolves could eat.

They'd made their home for twenty-seven days of the month in a cave that overlooked a meadow and a thick pine forest. That cave had been their true home all those years while their small hunting cabin had slowly fallen into disrepair.

No matter how much he regretted leaving, part of him hoped to never come back. Over the last ten years, a numbness had settled into his chest. As much as he admonished Damian for his morbid talk about death, Rex couldn't help but feel like he'd overstayed his welcome in this world.

Rex had been thirty-two when the witch had cursed them. He'd only aged a few years in the many decades since. It was unnatural. But so was only shifting out of wolf form on the night of the full moon. Felix had estimated that they'd only aged while in human form, and Rex thought that was a good explanation.

He only hoped that when he did claim his mate, he'd get to have a normal life with her, and time wouldn't suddenly catch up with him. He wouldn't put it past the Snow Queen to curse them twice and steal all their happiness in the end.

Thinking of the witch sent a shiver down his spine, and he forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. Getting away from her mountain was reason enough to finally leave this place.

"Aye," Blake said in a small voice, holding up his hand. "I won't stand against all of you, brothers. It's time to go."