

## Cursed Wolf Chapter 3 - Tips

They'd run for hundreds of miles through the snow and ice. They'd crossed through the territory of other wolf packs and grizzlies. They'd barely avoided a confrontation with an enraged mother polar bear, defending her cub. After months of exhausting travel, with only his inner shifter senses to guide him, Rex led his brothers to the southern coast. They waited near a port, outside of town, until the full moon allowed them to shift.

The brothers had carried clothing, money, and important documents with them, strapped to their wolf bodies, across the entire journey. The packs weighed them down, snagged on trees, and were handy leverage points to opponents in a fight. It hadn't made the journey any easier. But they couldn't travel without their human things.

They'd shifted in the forest near town and changed. They booked a hotel and slept till dawn, when they caught a ferry to take the long journey across the water to Fate Island.

They arrived on Fate Island just before dusk, and hurried off the boat as quickly as they could get past the other travelers. They made it into a dense city park and waited for the darkness to take them back into animal form.

For weeks, they traveled near the town. Rex prayed every day that he'd scent his mate. But with each passing day without her, he had to keep himself from losing heart. On the morning of the third week, they'd been on Fate Island, they heard the sound of a chainsaw in the pine forest they'd been hunting in, in the steep hills high above the town.

Rex could smell the scent of shifter on the wind. He'd thought he'd scented shifters in town, but they'd been in such a rush to hide themselves from humans, that they hadn't stopped to look.

He peered through the trees at the lumberjack in the forest. He wore a pair of tan coveralls under his thick parka and a pair of steel-toed waterproof boots.

The animal mind was thick around the rational part of him. But he couldn't help but feel a sense of envy that the man could shift on command. That he had such warm, new clothing; that he had a life in the world.

Rex stepped forward, despite the warning growls of his brothers. The man looked up, his eyes widening as he removed his safety goggles. The man sniffed the air, seeming to realize Rex was no ordinary wolf.

He had to try to make contact. None of the brothers had seen or heard of another shifter in decades. The old fear of being found out by humans hadn't diminished in all that time.

The man raised a hand as if to warn Rex's wolf. Rex bowed his head, showing uncharacteristic submission. He began to paw the snow, the inner man praying he could still remember how to spell and that his animal limbs could scratch out the words.

When he finished writing in the snow, he stepped back, allowing the man to read what he'd left behind.

"Help us. Can't shift." The man muttered and scratched his chin, looking back up at Rex. His brothers stepped out of the forest, revealing themselves.

"What happened to you?" the man muttered, squatting down to eye level with the wolves.

Rex shook his head, unable to answer.

"I can take you home with me. Give you a warm place to sleep. Food. Not sure what else I can do."

Rex felt a wave of relief as the man showed them to the back of his pickup. There was half a load of firewood in the truck bed, but the brothers jumped up and squeezed in together as best they could.

Rex learned the man's name was Patrick Doolittle. A bear shifter and the head of a kind family. Patrick was as good as his word. He gave the brothers the run of his large, insulated shop and the forest beyond. Gave them blankets to sleep on, cooked meat, and best of all, the company of other shifters.

As the night of the full moon drew closer, Rex felt as if something was coming. Something big. After all this time, all the years of being cursed to live as wolves, he sensed that the brothers' turmoil would soon end.

He had communicated to Patrick and his wife Rebecca that they were only able to shift on the full moon. Conveying anything more complicated than that proved impossible. The Doolittles provided new clothing for the brothers in anticipation of the coming event.

When they shifted at dusk, Rex knew that everything would be different now. Patrick was right outside the door of the shop, waiting for them to come out. There were hugs all around. From both Patrick and his wife and their three growing children.

Inside, Rebecca invited them to join the family for dinner. The brothers walked into the dining room of the family's home. The smell of the meal was good enough to make a grown man cry.

Luckily, the Doolittles had a table large enough for all of them to sit together. After they said a prayer of thanks to Fate, they dug into the feast.

"I can't remember the last time I tasted so many delicious flavors," Tate said, scooping forkfuls of garlic mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"We've been planning it all week," Minnie, the youngest Doolittle, said.

"I wanted you boys to have something special when you came out of your shift," Rebecca said. She eyed them expectantly.

"You are probably wondering how we got this way," Rex said.

"Just a little bit," Minnie giggled, her bright blue eyes flashing. The girl had just turned thirteen, but still had a childlike quality in her smile.

"It happened so long ago," Damian drawled.

Rex gave his youngest brother a warning glance. He did not want Damian to scare Minnie or her older brothers with talk of death.

"It was seventy-five years ago, last month, if I've calculated correctly," Felix said.

"Seventy-five years." Patrick's shocked voice carried over the crowded dinner table. He dropped his drumstick in his mashed potatoes. Flecks of white flew from the plate and landed in his red beard. "What happened? Who did this to you?"

"A witch," Thorne growled.

"We should have killed her," Blake said. "We could have kept the land."

"Blake, remember our company." Rex showed his teeth.

The undercurrent of alpha wolf dominance ripped through the air, and Rex needed to remind himself of their company. The Doolittles were shifters, but they were civilized shifters who lived in a nice house and drove trucks. They weren't cursed wolves like he and his brothers, forever wandering the snow drifts in search of prey.

"What witch? Do we know her?" Rebecca asked. "Patty, do you think it could have been one of the Ravens?"

"No, Reba. The Ravens are mischievous and cunning, but I doubt they'd do something like this. Even if they had the power."

"It was the Snow Queen," Blake said. "She lives in an ice palace in the high mountains above our family's land. If we'd killed her, we would have broken the curse."

"We don't know that," Felix said.

“Blake, we put this issue to rest fifty years ago. Or don’t you remember the injuries we all suffered? We almost lost Damian.”

“Who is the Snow Queen? I’ve never heard of this witch,” Rebecca said.

“We don’t know where she came from. According to our grandfather, she’d always been there. She is immortal,” Rex started.

“Mostly immortal,” Felix corrected.

“She grows a magical flower in her snow garden. The flower of youth. The humans in the area told the old legends like they were fairytales. But our family knew the truth. The Snow Queen is very real,” Blake said.

Rex continued, “Our father was crushed in an avalanche. That same winter, our mother caught the fever. We were scared she was going to die with no way to get to the doctor.”

“We knew from the legends that the snow flower granted youth. We hypothesized that it would also cure our mother’s illness,” Felix interjected.

“We stole it, she cursed us, and our mother died anyway,” Thorne spat out.

“The only way to break the curse is to claim our fated mates,” Rex explained. “We haven’t had much luck with that. Only having one day a month to be human makes it hard to court anyone.”

“There’s been a lot of changes in the world in the last seventy-five years,” Rebecca started.

“Humans know about shifters now, for one thing,” Patrick interjected.

Rex’s mouth dropped and he looked around at his brothers’ stunned faces.

“There is also a shifter dating website where shifters find their mates all the time,” Rebecca said. “More female shifters have been born than ever in the last thirty years. And human women sign up to date shifter men in droves. It’s kind of a thing.”

“I never thought I’d live to see this day.” Rex leaned back in his chair, taking in all the new information. “What’s a ‘website’?”