



# Seven Curses for Seven Dwarves (Cursed Kingdoms #5)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Seven cursed men. One hunted woman. A dark, forbidden love that was never meant to be.

I ran into the cursed forest to escape death... and stumbled into something far worse.

The townspeople whispered of dwarves who only worked at night, but they were wrong. Seven monstrous beasts—a bear, a wolf, a panther, a hawk, a stag, a fox, and a serpent—roamed the land by day, cursed to shift into towering, untamed men only after sundown.

They told me I was their salvation, the only one who could break their curse. But doing so meant giving them my heart, not just my love, but my life.

They swore they wouldn't claim me, but as the nights stretched on, their restraint crumbled. And the terrifying part? I didn't want them to resist.

Seven Curses for Seven Dwarves is a steamy, why-choose shifter romance full of forbidden desire, supernatural curses, and feral, possessive men who refuse to let go. Read now to enter the enchanted forest... before the beasts claim you next.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## CHAPTER 1

My lungs seized with each ragged breath, acid burning through my chest as I fled deeper into the cursed forest. The darkness swallowed me, branches tearing at my cloak, my hair, my skin... anything they could grab to slow me down. Behind me, the crimson glow of my stepmother's tracking spell pulsed through the trees, her magic searching, hunting, stretching toward me like bloody fingers intent on dragging me back to the altar she'd prepared for tomorrow's sacrifice.

I stumbled over an exposed root, caught myself against a rough bark trunk. My palms scraped raw, blood warming my frozen fingers for a cruel instant before the night air stole that heat too. The wind sliced through my clothes, howling between the ancient pines like the voices of those who'd entered these woods before and never returned.

"Keep moving," I hissed to myself, the words burning my throat. "She's going to kill me if I don't."

Tomorrow I turned twenty-five, the age when my bloodline's magic fully matured, when my heart would reach its perfect potency. The precise moment my stepmother had been cultivating me for since she murdered my father. I'd overheard her speaking to her coven sister last night, describing exactly how she would carve my still-beating heart from my chest and consume it to gain my family's power and immortality.

The Winterbourne legacy. My curse.

I clutched the worn strap of my satchel tighter, feeling the outline of my knife press against my ribs. A pathetic defense compared to her sorcery, but I hadn't fled without

a plan. I didn't need to win... I just needed to disappear. The legends about these woods kept even the most desperate villagers from entering. Dark trees. Darker beasts. And the "dwarves" who only emerged at night.

Dwarves. The whispered euphemism made me want to laugh, hysteria bubbling in my throat. Village mothers scared their children with tales of stunted, twisted creatures who stole misbehaving children. But the older stories, the ones hidden in my father's forbidden books, spoke different... men cursed to become beasts, of ancient magic older than my stepmother's coven.

Even if they were dangerous man-killers, I'd rather they kill me than my step-mother. Though with how dark it was in the forest, I probably wouldn't see my killer.

I forced my legs to keep moving, though each step sent fire shooting up my calves. The underbrush grew thicker, thorns catching on my leggings, tearing the fabric and the skin beneath. Each breath came shorter now, black spots dancing at the edges of my vision. How far had I run? Miles, surely, but the forest stretched endlessly.

My boot caught on something—another root, a stone—and this time I couldn't catch myself. I tumbled forward, the world spinning in a blur of darkness and pain. My shoulder slammed into hard ground, and I skidded down a slight incline, pine needles and mud filling my mouth, my nose. The copper taste of blood coated my tongue.

I lay there, face pressed into the damp earth, pain throbbing through every inch of me. Get up. Get up now.

When I forced my head up, I saw it... a structure, half-hidden by the trees ahead. An enormous cabin, built from logs thicker than my body, its roof sagging under the weight of moss and time. The forest was actively reclaiming it, vines crawling up the walls, windows clouded with grime and cobwebs.

Hope and dread tangled in my chest. Shelter meant rest, but occupants meant danger. The ache that had been slowly forming in the back of my skull was now raging.

I dragged myself toward it, fingernails filling with dirt as I clawed my way up the small rise. My vision blurred, exhaustion dragging at me like physical weights. I hadn't slept in two days, planning my escape, gathering supplies.

The cabin's porch steps groaned beneath my weight. I pressed my ear against the weathered door, listening for movement inside. Nothing. Just the wind and my own frantic heartbeat. With trembling hands, I pushed against the wood. The hinges shrieked in protest, metal grinding against metal like they hadn't moved in decades.

Air rushed out to meet me, carrying the scent of... a well lived-in home. I'd expected stale air with dust, but that wasn't what I smelled at all. I slipped inside, easing the door closed behind me. Darkness. Complete, suffocating darkness. I blinked rapidly, willing my eyes to adjust.

Slowly, the interior revealed itself: massive furnishings built for bodies larger than mine. An oversized table with four chairs. A stone hearth big enough to roast a deer whole. Dust-covered shelves lined the walls, filled with basic amenities and tools... and lots of cobwebs. Somehow, this place both seemed lived in and abandoned at the same time.

My legs finally surrendered. I collapsed onto the warped floorboards, my cheek pressed against wood that smelled of pine sap and time. The knife in my satchel dug into my side, but I couldn't summon the strength to move. Exhaustion dragged me under like quicksand.

The silence wrapped around me, thick and oppressive. Not the silence of emptiness—the silence of waiting. My heartbeat slowed, but each pulse echoed louder in my ears. Something felt wrong. Too still. As if the forest itself had stopped

breathing.

A snapping branch outside jerked me back from the edge of unconsciousness. My muscles tensed, but I couldn't move, pinned by fatigue and terror.

Then I heard it, a growl. Not the yip of a fox or the distant howl of a wolf, but something deeper, something that vibrated through the floorboards and into my bones. Primal. Ancient. Hungry.

Another growl answered from a different direction. Then a third.

I was surrounded.

My fingers twitched toward my knife, but the movement felt impossibly slow, like moving through honey. What good would steel do against whatever waited outside? The village stories painted these creatures as something beyond natural... something magic had twisted.

A shadow passed one grimy window, massive and hulking. Not human-shaped, too large, too fluid in its movements. A second shadow joined it, then a third. They circled the cabin with deliberate, predatory grace.

The wind died completely. The forest held its breath. My heart hammered so violently I thought it might burst through my ribs of its own accord... save my stepmother the trouble.

The porch creaked beneath a heavy weight. Something sniffed at the door's edge... a deep, ragged inhale that seemed to pull at the very air in my lungs. I closed my eyes, terror transforming into an icy calm. So this was how I died. Not on my stepmother's altar, but in the belly of forest monsters. At least she couldn't claim my heart... or my legacy.

The door hinges protested again, a long, drawn-out wail of metal. Cold air rushed in, carrying scents of pine, earth, blood, and something wild... musk, fur, and power. Hot breath huffed just beyond the threshold, close enough that I could feel its warmth against my exposed neck.

I forced my eyes open.

Three massive shadows blocked the doorway. Too large for men, too deliberately still for animals. Their eyes caught what little light filtered through the trees... amber, silver, and obsidian, all fixed on me with terrible intelligence. The amber-eyed one stepped forward, paws—no, feet—no, something in between... crossing onto the wooden floor.

Its growl filled the cabin, a sound I felt more than heard. Not anger. Assessment. Curiosity.

The silver-eyed one snarled something that sounded impossibly like words, though my terror-addled brain couldn't decipher them. The black-eyed one remained silent, but its stare burned into me with unnerving intensity.

I should have screamed. Should have fought. Should have at least died with dignity. Instead, a broken laugh escaped my lips.

"Dwarves," I whispered, the irony of the village tales hitting me as darkness swallowed my consciousness whole. "They said you were dwarves."

The last thing I felt was powerful arms lifting me from the floor, cradling me against a chest that burned like a furnace. The last thing I heard was a voice, rough with disuse but unmistakably human, rumbling above me.

"She knows what we are."

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### CHAPTER 2

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a pair of glowing amber irises—too high off the ground, too wide, too wrong. My muscles seized. Not dream-terror, but something ancient and instinctual that screamed danger through every nerve ending. The cabin darkness pressed against my skin as I counted them slowly, seven pairs of eyes surrounding the place I'd foolishly thought safe, all gleaming with hunger that felt impossibly human.

Something moved to my left, slow and hulking. The floorboards vibrated with each step. Too massive for any normal forest predator. Too deliberate for a mindless beast. My throat closed, air struggling against the tightness as my vision adjusted to reveal massive shadows shifting against the night.

My body screamed run, but my legs refused to obey. Pain throbbed through my head. The blood that had kept me racing through the forest all night now felt frozen in my veins. I moved to sit up, realizing I was on a soft mattress instead of the rough wooden floor where I'd collapsed. I didn't remember climbing into a bed. Movement caught my attention.

They didn't break down the door. They didn't roar or charge. They just... circled. Watching. Waiting. The silence terrified me more than any growl.

I forced my fingers to move, reaching for the knife strapped to my thigh, the only possession I'd grabbed when fleeing my stepmother's blade. My fingertips brushed the hilt, but a deep, rumbling growl stopped me cold. A warning. Unmistakable.

Another form stalked past the window: shaggy fur, impossibly wide shoulders, claws that scraped against wood as it passed. The sound crawled up my spine and nested at the base of my skull. Primal. Ancient. Hungry.

The cabin creaked, but not from wind. The sound came from weight... steady, deliberate weight pacing across the porch. I curled into myself, heart slamming against my ribs so violently I feared they might crack. Death had found me, after all. Just not the one I'd been running from. Why hadn't they eaten me while I'd been unconscious? That would have been a better way to die.

When the door pushed open, it did so without a touch... hinges sighing in protest against some invisible force. I bit down on my lip until I tasted blood, desperately swallowing a scream.

A bear padded in first. Not a normal bear... this one stood taller than any I'd ever seen, muscles rippling beneath brown fur that absorbed the faint moonlight streaming through the windows. Its eyes gleamed like gold coins in the dark, fixed directly on me with terrifying intelligence.

Behind it came a wolf, its fur so black it devoured the shadows around it. Silver eyes tracked my every twitch. Then a sleek panther, low to the ground and utterly silent, moving like liquid night.

A stag followed, antlers jagged and sharp as blades, scraping the ceiling as it entered. After came a hawk that swooped through the door to land on the rafter above, talons curling into the wood as it tilted its head to examine me.

A fox with glowing green eyes slipped in next, its movements playful despite the tension. And last... a serpent. Long and thick as my thigh, its scales iridescent like spilled oil in moonlight. It slid across the threshold with unnatural grace.



I pressed myself against the headboard, my spine grinding painfully against the wood. My voice remained trapped in my throat, cold sweat sliding down between my shoulder blades. The beasts formed a perfect circle around me... predators surrounding prey.

Yet they didn't attack. They didn't move closer. Were they guarding me? Trapping me? I couldn't tell. My instincts shrieked at me to run, but something held me in place. Curiosity burned through my fear. Or something deeper... some strange pull in my blood I couldn't name.

Time stretched in agonizing silence. The only sounds were my ragged breaths and the occasional shift of weight on the wooden floor. Then, slowly, impossibly, the beasts began to change.

The panther moved first. Its body contorted violently, muscles spasming beneath sleek fur. Bones cracked—loud, sharp sounds that echoed in the small cabin. The creature snarled, pain evident as limbs lengthened, fur receded into olive-toned skin that steamed in the cold air. Where the beast had crouched, a man now knelt, head bowed, chest heaving.

The bear's transformation was even more violent—massive frame twisting as shoulders narrowed and spine straightened. Thick muscle rearranged itself beneath bronze skin. Dark hair remained, but now only on his head and jaw. His huge hands splayed against the floor, fingers curling as the last claws retracted.

The wolf thrashed, its transformation more painful than the others. Bones broke and reformed with sickening cracks. Its muzzle shortened, teeth receding into human gums even as the creature's mouth twisted in agony. Sandy hair replaced black fur, and piercing gray eyes remained fixed on mine even through the change.

The stag curled in on himself, antlers dissolving like mist as his human form

emerged. Tall, solemn, with russet hair falling past his shoulders. The hawk's feathers drifted through the air like snow as wings became arms, beak softened to lips, and a handsome man with sharp, unblinking eyes took the stag's place.

The fox grinned even mid-shift, body lengthening, auburn hair replacing rust-colored fur, green eyes maintaining their mischievous glint as if the whole process amused him.

And the serpent... the last to change, didn't make a sound. Its transformation was eerily beautiful, scales melting into pale skin so translucent I could track blue veins beneath. White-blond hair emerged from nothing, eyes remaining wrong... slitted pupils in icy blue-green irises that examined me without blinking.

They all stood before me... seven men. Beautiful, terrifying, primal. All naked but utterly unbothered by their nudity. I scrambled backward, bouncing off the headboard again as my cheeks blazed with heat that had nothing to do with fear.

The bear—no, the man—didn't move. His deep brown eyes studied me with unsettling intensity. "You shouldn't be here." His voice rumbled low, words vibrating through the wood headboard behind me.

Not threatening, but not welcoming either. It left me feeling something... but not fear. I refused to think about it in depth right now.

Another one of the men, the wolf, cocked his head with a smirk. "More importantly, how can you see us?" His gray eyes narrowed with suspicion, lips curved in an expression caught between amusement and anger.

I opened my mouth to ask what the hell they meant, but the fox-man stepped forward, green eyes dancing with curiosity. "You shouldn't see us like this." He gestured to his transformed body, utterly shameless at his nakedness. "No one ever has."

The serpent-man said nothing, only tilted his head, white-blond hair shifting across impossibly pale shoulders. His gaze dissected me as if I were something to be studied rather than feared.

My pulse stuttered wildly beneath my skin. All seven of them were standing there, imposing and unabashedly naked. I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew two things with absolute certainty: they weren't normal... and I was very, very fucked.

### CHAPTER 3

My skin prickled under the bear-man's stare, his massive shadow stretching across the small cabin space. They were all huge men, larger than I'd seen before from my kingdom. I couldn't quite understand how they all fit in the cabin. The cabin smelled of pine, ash, and something else... something wild and male that made my heart pound for reasons beyond just fear.

I didn't need to see the others moving restlessly around the room to know I'd stumbled into something ancient and dangerous. My instincts screamed to run, but my body refused to move. My heart demanded I stay and stand my ground, but I wasn't sure why. Not that running had done me any good when the forest closed in around me last night.

"You shouldn't be here, little one," the bear-man said again, his voice a low rumble that sank into my bones.

I stayed on the bed, heart still slamming against my ribs, but I lifted my chin. "Too late," I said, surprised my voice didn't tremble. They surrounded the bed in a crescent shape, so I didn't really have a way to get past them anyway.

His jaw tightened, muscles working beneath his bronze skin. The others exchanged unreadable glances, a silent conversation passing between them. One of them... lean, golden-haired, with a sharp grin and sharper eyes, stepped forward.

"The forest let her in," he said with a shrug. "That counts for something."

"Or it's a trap," the wolf-man muttered from the corner, arms crossed, gaze sharp and cold. "It's always a trap."

I looked at him, at his narrowed eyes and clenched jaw, and something about him pricked at me... familiar, like the scent of a coming storm. Pain shot through my eye like a blacksmith's iron. A memory fluttered, just out of reach. Had I seen him before? My back ached where it pressed against the rough wooden headboard, but I didn't dare move.

The fox-man flopped into the nearest chair and gestured lazily. "Might as well tell her. She already saw the worst of us." His mouth curved into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Well, almost the worst."

The stag-man, tall and quiet with gentle brown eyes, shook his head. His russet hair caught the firelight, glowing like autumn leaves. "We don't know what she is yet."

That chilled me more than the air. My fingers curled against the blanket, nails digging into the fabric. "I'm not anything," I whispered. "Just someone trying not to die."

The panther, dark-eyed and silent, watched me from the shadows while radiating danger like heat. He hadn't moved, hadn't spoken, but I felt his gaze on me like a physical touch. He knew. Somehow, he knew I wasn't telling them everything.

Another man, smaller than the others, perched on a windowsill with restless energy cocked his head. Feathers still clung to his hair, brown and gold. The hawk. "You saw us," he said softly. "In our true forms. That shouldn't be possible."

I swallowed hard, remembering something from my childhood. I'd forgotten, but now there was a tickle of a memory. The massive bear crashing through the undergrowth. The wolf circling. The panther's eyes glowing in the darkness. The stag's antlers silhouetted against the moon. The forest had been alive with them. My step-mother's

soldiers had dragged me back to the kingdom where I'd been thoroughly punished.

"You're human," the fox said, staring straight at me with eyes so green they burned.

"But not entirely."

My mouth went dry. The truth crawled up my throat desperate to escape. I shouldn't trust them... I couldn't trust anyone. But my step-mother's soldiers would drag me back to my death. These men... these creatures... they weren't ordinary. Maybe they'd understand what made me different, what made my stepmother lock me away, study me, prepare me for my sacrifice.

"My heart," I murmured, and seven sets of eyes locked on me like I'd just set fire to the room. "My stepmother wants it. Says it'll make her live forever."

Something passed through them then... recognition, fury, pain. Their bodies tensed as one, a ripple of tension so strong I could almost taste it. The bear-man looked like he might shift again from sheer rage. His fingers lengthened slightly, nails darkening into claws before he forced them back.

"Winterbourne," he growled. "You're a Winterbourne."

I nodded, and the temperature in the cabin dropped ten degrees. The wolf cursed under his breath, pushing off the wall he'd been leaning against. "Of course she is." His laugh cut like glass.

"That name cursed us," the hawk-man spat, suddenly on his feet. He moved too fast, inhumanly fast. Hawk talons erupted from his human hands, the tips reaching for my throat. "That bloodline damned us."

I stared at them, my voice hoarse. "What does that mean?" I struggled to sit up, arms trembling beneath me. I wasn't sure I wanted the answer.

One of the men smiled, but it was sad. His earlier playfulness vanished like smoke. "Your ancestor, hundreds of years ago, she bound us with a spell. We were men. Warriors. Brothers." He gestured around the room. "Now we're beasts."

"By day, we lose ourselves," Another said quietly, the stag-man's voice gentle despite the horror of his words. "By night, we remember what we were... and what we lost. Worse, when we do find people to interact with, they see dwarves instead of the men we are. They're terrified of us."

"And now," the bear-man said, stepping closer, looming over me, "the curse has brought you back to us."

Finally, I managed to sit up, drawing my knees to my chest. The cabin spun around me. My stepmother's cold smiles made sense now. The ancient books in her study. The way she'd muttered about bloodlines while drawing my blood. She hadn't just wanted immortality... There had to be more to the spell, and she'd wanted to finish what my ancestor had started.

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream. But I couldn't move. At this point the headache had evolved into a migraine which made it impossible to think clearly.

"How do you break it?" I asked, barely breathing.

They looked at each other, then at me. The silence stretched, broken only by the pop of embers in the fireplace. It was the fox-man who answered, voice unusually serious.

"You have to give us your heart. Willingly. Fully."

I swallowed hard. "Like... love?"

His smirk faded, eyes darkening to forest shadows. "Like... death."

The silence that followed was thick enough to drown in. My heart hammered against my ribs, desperate to escape the cage of my chest. The irony wasn't lost on me... that's exactly what they needed.

"If I break the curse," I whispered, "I die."

"Yes," the bear-man said, no gentleness in his voice.

My mouth tasted of copper and fear. "And if I don't?"

"We stay monsters," One of the others finally spoke up, voice low and rasping from disuse. His dark eyes burned into mine. "Forever."

I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering despite the fire they'd built. The choice they presented wasn't a choice at all. My life, or their humanity. Either way, blood would be spilled. Either way, I would die so someone else could live.

"So what now?" I asked, surprised at the steadiness in my voice.

The wolf-man's mouth curled in a bitter smile. "Now? You stay." The words hung between us, both promise and threat.

"Until when?" I demanded.

Panther-man's eyes darkened, pupils elongating slightly... a reminder of the beast within. "Until we figure out what the hell we're going to do with you."

I straightened my spine, refusing to cower. I'd spent my life being caged, studied, prepared for sacrifice. I wouldn't make it easy for them. "And if I try to leave?"

The panther-man stepped forward then, his movement liquid grace. "The forest won't



let you." He crouched beside me, close enough that I felt his heat. "It brought you here for a reason."

His proximity stole my breath. Up close, I saw the flecks of gold in his dark eyes, the scar that bisected his lower lip. His gaze dropped to my throat, where my pulse hammered wildly.

"Your heart," he whispered, so low I could barely hear. "Is already pounding like prey."

I didn't flinch. Didn't look away. If I was to die here, in this cabin of monsters, I wouldn't do it cowering. "I'm not prey," I breathed back.

Something flickered in his eyes... surprise, maybe even respect. He stood in one fluid motion and backed away. The others watched, a new tension crackling in the air.

"Dawn comes in three hours," one of them said, breaking the silence. "We should prepare."

My blood went cold. "Prepare for what?"

Fox-man's smile returned, brittle and sharp. "For the change, little Winterbourne. When the sun rises, we lose our minds." He gestured to the walls, to the scratches and gouges in the wood. "And it would be a shame if we accidentally ate you in our madness."

The bear-man nodded once, decision made. "Kade, take her to the cellar. Lock it."

Before I could protest, Kade hauled me to my feet. His grip was firm but not cruel, his body heat burning through my tattered clothes. I stumbled against him, legs still weak from hours of running through the forest whenever that was...

"What happens in the cellar?" I asked, dreading the answer.

He looked down at me, something like regret darkening his features. "Like Garret said. You hide. We hunt."

As he led me away, I caught Garrett watching us, his expression unreadable. But behind his eyes, something burned... something just as dangerous as the beast he became by day.

And in that moment, I wondered which was more terrifying: being hunted by the monsters these men became, or facing the hunger I'd glimpsed in their human eyes.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:28 pm*

### CHAPTER 4

I didn't sleep, not really. I lay curled on the too-large cot they gave me, surrounded by musty dirt and stone walls under a ceiling that groaned with every step of something far too heavy. Every time I drifted, I'd wake to another sound... a footfall, a growl, the flap of wings, or the low hiss of something slithering just beyond the trapdoor.

The blanket scratched against my skin. I pulled it tighter anyway, needing the warmth more than I feared what lingered in its ancient fibers.

Morning came with no sunlight, only the cold realization that I was trapped in a house with seven cursed men who wanted my blood, and maybe something more. Their curse was my inheritance, a twisted birthright I never asked for. My fingertips tingled with it, that strange power that had drawn me here, the same power that now kept me alive among predators.

Hours passed in the darkness. How would I know when it was night again? I crept to the door at the end of the stairs. It didn't budge. Not locked, just... heavy. Too heavy for someone like me. The second I pushed, I heard a growl on the other side.

The door lifted effortlessly. Garrett stood on the other side, naked, shoulders tense, and arms crossed over his chest. Did these guys even own clothing? Wait, did townspeople who saw them as dwarves see them naked too? Or did the clothing magically appear too? Scars raked across his bronze skin... claw marks, too large to be human. His dark eyes burned gold in the dim light, animal and watchful.

"Where are you going?" he asked, not harshly, but firm enough to make me pause.

"Out," I said. "I don't like cages."

"It's not a cage," he replied. "It's protection."

"That's what she said," I muttered, and something dark flickered across his face.

He didn't stop me when I opened the door to the outside, but I felt him watching every step I took into the fog-thick night air. His gaze burned between my shoulder blades like a brand. Actually, I was surprised when my boots hit the detritus as I stepped off the porch.

The forest looked different in the dead of night... colder, hungrier. Trees stretched too tall, branches reaching like gnarled fingers. The ground felt spongy beneath my boots, rich with decay. I half-expected to hear the sounds of forest animals, but there was nothing. No sound. No life. Just quiet... and the distant snap of a twig that didn't come from me.

I turned, scanning the trees. Something was out there, watching. The hair on my arms stood on end. My breath puffed white in the cold air, and I backed toward the cabin slowly. Whatever watched me was hunting me. I felt it in my bones, in the ancient blood that cursed me to this place, to these men.

But it wasn't one of them. Somehow, I knew I was safer with the beast-men than I was outside their cabin.

When I returned to the cabin, the wolf-man was leaning in the doorway, smirking like he'd been waiting for me to come crawling back. His gray eyes cut through me, amused and bitter all at once. Sandy hair fell across his forehead, giving him a boyish look that his sharp smile instantly destroyed.

"Feel better now, forest princess?" His voice dripped with mockery.

"You're a jackass," I snapped.

"Actually, I'm a wolf, remember? Name's Ronan. Glad we're establishing roles," he said, pushing off the frame and stalking past me with the confidence of someone who knew exactly how much he unsettled people. His shoulder brushed mine, accidentally or not, and he flinched away like I'd burned him.

Inside, Kade was sharpening a knife. Not looking at me. Not speaking. But the tension in his body told me everything... He'd been listening. Black hair fell across eyes so dark they swallowed light. His movements were precise, economical, and deadly. The blade caught firelight as it swept across the whetstone. Scrape. Scrape. Scrape. The rhythm of it reminded me of a heartbeat.

"He doesn't like you leaving," The annoying fox-man called from the rafters, lounging like a fox in a sunbeam. Auburn hair glinted copper as he grinned down at me, green eyes dancing with mischief and something darker. "None of us do."

"Why?" I asked, spinning to face him. "Because I might die?"

"Because you might break us," he answered, voice laced with something I didn't want to name. His fingers drummed against his thigh, restless, as if he longed to touch what he couldn't have.

I couldn't figure these guys out. They needed me, needed my heart to break the curse, but they hadn't killed me. Oh, they easily could. Any one of them could overpower me and in a matter of seconds I'd be the sacrifice they needed. And yet, they protected me from themselves and from the hunters.

The stag-man appeared beside me, silent and calm, and handed me a mug of something hot. Taller than the others, he moved with careful grace, like someone constantly aware of his strength. Deep russet hair fell past his shoulders, and his eyes

held knowledge that seemed ancient.

"It helps," he said softly. "With the headaches. The curse causes them. I'm Evander. He's Cassian."

I hadn't mentioned my headache to anyone. The throb behind my temples had started the moment I crossed the property line yesterday. I took the mug warily.

"You mean the part where I'm apparently bait for your collective doom?" I sipped anyway. It tasted like pine needles and smoke, but it warmed me. The pain eased almost instantly, and I hated being grateful to any of them.

"We don't want to hurt you," Evander added, eyes so sincere they made my throat tighten. "But you're not safe. And we're forever doomed and tortured by the curse. It gets to you after a century or two."

"I figured that out the moment one of you growled at me for breathing too loud." I took another sip, watching him over the rim of the mug. His fingers trembled slightly when he pushed his hair back. Control. They were all clinging to it even though they all seemed on the verge of being feral.

Garrett returned, arms tense, jaw tighter than before. His gaze swept the room, cataloging each man's position before settling back on me. It seemed the bear in him was never far from the surface... territorial, protective, dangerous.

"You're not a prisoner. But if you run, they'll find you."

"Them?" I asked. "The hunters?"

"Or worse," The hawk-man said from the stairs, rubbing the back of his neck, golden hair wild. Tattoos snaked up his arms and over his shoulders. His nakedness affected

me just like the others. Did none of them own clothing? "The forest listens when she speaks."

"Leif." Garret warned on a growl.

Leif didn't seem to care as he came closer, eyes bright with challenge. "But you're not scared of us, are you?"

I didn't answer, and he grinned.

"Didn't think so." He stepped in close, too close, body heat pressing against mine as his palm slid along the edge of the wall beside my head. The others watched, suddenly still, hungry.

"You don't get it yet, do you?" Leif whispered, lips brushing my ear. "We can't touch you. But that doesn't mean we don't want to."

My breath hitched. His amber eyes dropped to my lips. Heat flooded through me, pooling low in my belly. Not fear... something else, something dangerous and wanting. Then he stepped back with a wink, like he hadn't just lit me on fire.

And the worst part? I didn't want the flames to go out.

I clutched the mug tighter as Leif sauntered away. The room felt charged, electric with unspoken things. Seven cursed men. Seven beasts trapped in human skin. And me, somehow both their salvation and their destruction.

The curse thrummed between us, ancient and hungry. It wanted blood. It wanted touch. It wanted everything I shouldn't give.

"You should eat," Evander said gently, breaking the tension. "The forest takes

strength."

I nodded, not trusting my voice. But as I followed him toward what passed for a kitchen, I felt their eyes on me. Garrett's protective glare. Ronan's bitter amusement. Kade's silent intensity. Cassian's playful hunger. And Leif... Leif's blatant want. I'd figure them all out eventually... maybe.

Seven men. Seven monsters. And me, already falling into their trap.



### CHAPTER 5

Two days trapped in this forsaken cabin felt like two centuries. The walls closed tighter each time the sun sank, and they returned from their animal forms, naked and hungry. Not for food. For me. I pretended not to notice their stares that burned through my clothes, but my body betrayed me with every flush that crept up my neck, every quickened breath when one of them passed too close.

The silence had teeth. The walls whispered things I wasn't ready to hear. Seven men, seven beasts, seven pairs of eyes that followed my every movement. I paced restlessly during the day when they prowled the forest in their animal forms. I sat at the windows trying desperately not to look when they returned human at sunset. I failed constantly.

My eyes always found someone. Garrett's broad shoulders tense as he built the fire. Ronan's smirk from a shadowed corner. Kade's silent, unblinking stare that somehow touched me without contact. I couldn't decide what was worse, the way they looked at me or the terrifying hunger I felt looking back.

At least today I had convinced Garrett to let me stay in the more comfortable bed in the main cabin during daylight hours instead of the cold, musty cellar where I'd spent the previous nights. Progress, if one could call it that.

None of them had touched me. Not really. But the air between us crackled every time we shared space. They kept their distance, barely. I saw the effort it cost them in white knuckles and tight jaws. And I started to wish, dangerously, stupidly, that one of them would stop pretending they didn't want to cross that invisible line.

In all reality, it was a stupid wish. They wanted my heart cut from my chest just like my step-mother. But there was something else there... something calling us together and I didn't understand it. I felt it, but it was beyond all reason to give in.

Sleep avoided me that night. The bed felt too soft, too empty, too safe. My skin tingled with awareness of seven men breathing beyond my door, seven heartbeats pulsing in rhythm with the forest magic that saturated the walls. Past midnight, I abandoned the pretense of rest.

The wooden floor was cool against my bare feet as I wandered into the main room. Garrett sat before the fire, completely naked, his massive body silhouetted by flames. His muscles looked carved from stone, tension evident in every line of his back. He didn't turn when I entered.

"Can't sleep?" His voice rumbled through the room, striking something deep in my belly. I ignored the heat that pooled deep between my thighs.

"Not with the seven of you breathing like you're one deep sigh away from devouring me," I answered truthfully.

A soft laugh came from the shadows, not from Garrett. Ronan materialized from the darkness, his lean body moving with predatory grace. That sharp smirk I was learning to both loathe and crave played on his lips.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," he murmured, eyes glittering dangerously.

I felt another presence before I saw him. Kade, tucked into the darkest corner, watching. Always watching with those obsidian eyes that seemed to see straight through my nightdress. Where they'd found a nightdress for me, I didn't know. And I refused to ask. Kade never spoke unless absolutely necessary, but his silence communicated volumes.

I sat down between them before I could reconsider. The air felt heavier here, thicker. Magic seeped through the cabin walls like fog, settling on our skin, making every breath an effort.

"Tell me the truth," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady despite the rapid beating of my heart. "What happens if one of you touches me?"

Footsteps approached from the hallway. Cassian slinked into the room, his hair wild, his green eyes dancing with mischief that couldn't quite hide something darker beneath.

"We lose control," he said with a wink, but there was no humor in it. His usual playfulness was stretched thin over barely contained hunger.

"You shift?" I guessed, though somehow I knew there was more to it.

"No." Evander's voice came from the stairs as he descended like a ghost, his movements impossibly graceful for a man his size. "We claim."

The silence that followed was deafening. I looked from face to face, finding the same raw desire in each expression, though differently masked. Garrett's jaw clenched tight. Ronan's smirk twisted with something almost painful. Kade's eyes narrowed to slits. Cassian's perpetual grin faltered. Evander looked away completely.

"And that would kill me?" I asked when no one volunteered more information.

The question hung in the air. Glances exchanged between them carried entire conversations I couldn't decipher. The tension pulled tighter. Their hunger became a physical presence in the room, pushing against my skin.

I stood suddenly, desperately needing space to breathe. The moment I turned toward

the door, Kade materialized before me. Not touching, but close enough that his body heat radiated against mine. His pitch-black eyes held me immobile. His jaw clenched, every muscle in his powerful body visibly straining against some invisible force.

"Don't run," he rasped, the words clearly painful to form.

"Why not?" I whispered, my breath shallow, heart pounding wildly.

"Because I might follow," he said, and it sounded more like a threat than a promise.

Another presence pressed close behind me. Leif. I recognized his wild energy before I felt his breath stir my hair.

"Or I might not stop him," Leif added, his voice tight with restraint.

My skin buzzed with awareness. My legs trembled. My heart hammered a frantic rhythm I couldn't control. I stood frozen between them, prey caught between predators, yet something inside me thrilled at the danger.

"Enough." Garrett's voice cut through the tension like a blade, authority resonating in that single word. "No one touches her. We can't risk it."

They backed away. Barely. Just enough that I could breathe again, but not enough to feel safe. Never enough for that.

Panic surged through me. My body reacted before my mind decided. I bolted. The door flew open with a bang as I slammed into it, the freezing night air hitting my flushed skin like a physical blow. I tore across the clearing, barefoot, my borrowed nightdress whipping against my thighs. The moss felt slick beneath my feet as I fled toward the treeline.

Behind me came sounds that weren't footsteps. Growls. The beating of wings. Movement that belonged to creatures, not men. All seven of them gave chase. The curse must have wavered with their control, allowing partial shifts even in moonlight.

The forest blurred around me. Branches clawed at my arms. My lungs burned. My heart screamed in my chest with each desperate stride. Something slithered ahead of me, faster than anything natural should move. Then a pale blur struck from the trees.

I slipped on wet moss. Fell forward. But instead of hitting the ground, I landed against something solid. Cold. Scaled.

Nikolai caught me before I could fall, his serpent form coiled beneath me like a living net of muscle and magic. Not fully beast, not fully man. His torso was human, pale and bare in the moonlight, but his lower half rippled with serpentine coils that gleamed like oiled silver. Like a Naga creature from forbidden fairytales whispered about in my childhood.

His arms wrapped around me, cradling me against him as his coils shifted, pulling me tighter against his chest in a possessive, almost reverent hold. His breath ghosted against my neck, cool compared to my overheated skin. I couldn't stop the shiver that ran through my body.

"You run... and I find you," he murmured, his voice a whisper dipped in venom and silk. "You tremble... and I feel it."

My breath caught as he tilted my chin up, forcing me to look into eyes that glowed with an unnatural light. Pupils slitted like a snake's.

"You awaken things... things that slither through shadow and dream, little flame," he continued, his thumb tracing my lower lip with impossible gentleness.

"You're hurting her," Garrett barked, suddenly there at the edge of the small clearing. He stood furious, naked, wild-eyed, clearly restraining himself from charging forward. "Let her go."

Nikolai didn't even glance at him. His attention remained fixed entirely on me, his gaze studying my face with unsettling intensity.

"You would cage her," he whispered, still watching me. "I would worship."

"She's not yours," Garrett growled, stepping forward, leaves crunching beneath his feet.

"She will be," Nikolai said softly. "I plan to make her. All of ours the stars say."

I gasped, my body going stiff in his arms. His gaze didn't waver. It burned with something darker than mere desire, something ancient, patient, and terrifying.

"You belong to the curse," he murmured against my cheek, his lips barely brushing my skin, "but I... I belong to you."

Garrett stormed toward us, his voice rough with command. "Let her go, Nikolai."

Nikolai didn't flinch. "No."

That one word was soft. Quiet. But it cracked through the clearing like thunder, shocking everyone to stillness.

"You're scaring her," Garrett snarled, visibly struggling to keep himself calm though his fists clenched tight at his sides.

"She's already scared," Nikolai whispered, curling another length of his silvery tail

around my thigh in a possessive caress. I couldn't stop myself as I finally moved, my hands going to his bare chest. "Not of me... of what she wants."

Cassian emerged from the trees, leaves stuck in his tousled hair, no trace of his usual playful grin. "Niko, come on. Don't do this."

"I already have," Nikolai replied. "She ran. I followed. She fell. I caught. This is what fate does when it's finished playing polite. Hesitant I am not."

"Stop talking in riddles," Leif snapped from a low branch, perched there with eyes sharp and glowing in the dark, something birdlike in his movements despite his human form.

"She's the thread in the tangle. The center of the snare," Nikolai whispered, his lips brushing my temple with terrifying tenderness. "I am the fangs in the dark... and I will not uncoil."

Garrett growled, taking another step forward. "You're crossing a line."

Nikolai smiled then, slow and glacial as he pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes again. "I was born on the other side of it."

Evander stepped forward cautiously, hands raised in a placating gesture. "We all want to protect her, Nikolai. But this isn't the way."

"She doesn't need protection," Nikolai said, his grip tightening almost imperceptibly. "She needs possession."

A shiver tore through me, not from fear, though there was certainly that, but from the terrible truth inside his words. They didn't just want me. They were already unraveling because of me. The realization was both horrifying and intoxicating. My

thumb stroked his chest as I watched his reaction. It was barely perceptual as his eyelids closed a fraction, like he was reveling in the sensation.

Kade's voice cut through the night, cold as steel. "Release her. Or I will make you."

Nikolai tilted his head, and for a moment I glimpsed it, the briefest flicker of serpentine glee in his inhuman eyes.

"You cannot unmake what has already begun."

Then he looked down at me again, eyes glowing with that unnatural light, voice so soft it barely stirred the air between us.

"You'll see. Soon. The bond is hungry. And I... am patient."

His coils shifted beneath me, muscles rippling like silk over stone as he adjusted his grip and pulled me tighter into his chest. He didn't release me. Didn't ask permission. Simply turned toward the cabin, carrying me with him, ignoring the growls and shouted warnings from the others as though they were merely the wind.

"They don't understand," he whispered, his lips brushing my ear with unsettling reverence. "They see flesh and fear. But I see the thread inside your soul... coiling, coiling, coiling toward mine."

His voice was almost tender, but every word slithered through me.

"The forest chose you. The curse called you. But I... I claimed you first."

As he carried me across the clearing, silent and undisturbed by the chaos around us, I couldn't tell what chilled me more... His words or the terrifying part of me that wanted to believe them. That wanted to surrender to whatever dark fate bound these



seven men to me, and me to them. The curse whispered through the night air, and somewhere deep inside, something inside me broke. They couldn't resist me, and I could no longer resist them. It was fate.

### CHAPTER 6

Garrett towered over me, his massive frame blocking out the flickering firelight. His eyes burned gold in the shadows, wild and primal. "You're not meant for just one of us," he growled, his voice rumbling through my chest and settling low in my belly. "You're meant for all of us." The words hung in the air between us, heavy with promise and threat all at once.

Something in the air cracked then, like lightning splintering the sky. Tension became need. Silence turned to fire. I couldn't breathe with the weight of their eyes on me, all of them standing in a circle like predators surrounding prey they didn't know whether to worship or devour.

And I wanted them to do both.

I sat on the edge of the low bed, my heart hammering against my ribs. Seven men. Seven shifters. Seven pieces of my soul I hadn't known were missing until they found me. The curse that bound them pulsed in the air, thick and ancient. Maybe this was madness, but it felt like destiny.

Nikolai stepped forward first, his body gliding more than walking, hair loose and pale against his bare chest. The serpent shifter moved with hypnotic grace, muscles rippling beneath skin so pale it almost glowed in the dim light. His icy blue-green eyes fixed on mine, pupils slitted like a snake's despite his body appearing fully human.

"Say it," he whispered, his voice cold velvet, his hand gently tilting my chin until his

gaze caught mine. "Say yes."

"Yes," I breathed. "I want you."

He didn't pounce. He unwrapped me, sliding my nightdress off in a fluid motion. One slow kiss at a time, one stroke of his fingertips, one brush of his lips along my throat as his forked tongue flicked across my skin like heat and silk. The strange, inhuman sensation made me gasp, my back arching off the bed.

His fingers traced the curve of my breast, teasing my nipple into a tight peak before his mouth captured it. I moaned, fingers twisting in his white-blond hair. The others watched, their breathing heavy, their eyes hungry. I should be scandalized by the audience, but it felt right that they were here.

"Beautiful," Nikolai murmured against my skin. "So warm. So alive."

His body coiled around me as he laid me to the bed, his hips pressing against mine, tail tightening possessively around my ankle. I hadn't even realized he'd partially shifted, but the smooth scales against my skin sent shivers up my spine.

"You were always mine," he murmured. "Even before you were real."

Nikolai's fingers ran along my sides until he spread my thighs open. His cock stood proud against his abdomen, thick and flushed with need. When he positioned himself between my thighs, I whimpered with anticipation. Instead of a thick intrusion pushing into me, I felt his fingers slide through my wetness. He played, sliding them into me, finger fucking me gently as he spread it everywhere. Then his thumb circled my clit, driving me to the edge before he suddenly stopped. I had to hold back a curse.

His hand drifted down, curling around his thick cock, stroking from base to tip as he

watched me. The sight alone made me tremble... his pale fist wrapped around that long, thick length, his body coiled with restraint that looked ready to snap. When he pressed the blunt head against my slick entrance, I gasped, hips twitching in helpless need. He didn't thrust. Not yet. He simply pushed, slow and deliberate, parting me inch by devastating inch, and I felt every ridge, every swollen vein as he sank deeper into me. The stretch burned in the most delicious way, a slow invasion that made my back arch and my mouth fall open. His eyes never left mine, not even when I cried out, nails digging into the marble-hard planes of his shoulders as he bottomed out, balls pressed flush against me.

I felt the others watching. Felt their hunger like hands on my skin... hot, possessive, reverent. Their breaths came ragged. Restless energy filled the room as some of them paced and others gripped their aching cocks as they watched Nikolai take me. My body wasn't just on display... it was offered, stretched and filled by one of them as the others waited their turn, worshipping me with their gaze.

Nikolai began to move then, slow, serpentine rolls of his hips that dragged his cock along every swollen nerve inside me. I whimpered, pleasure tightening with every glide, every grinding thrust that stoked the fire deeper. He leaned down, mouth brushing mine as he whispered words in a language I didn't recognize—syllables that pulsed with dark power when he kissed them into my mouth. His fingers found my clit again, skilled and relentless, circling and flicking until my thighs trembled and my breath came in shallow gasps. "Let go," he murmured, voice low and lethal, every word sharpened with command. "Give yourself to me."

And I did.

I shattered beneath him, a cry ripped from my lungs as my pussy clenched around his cock, spasming in frantic waves while my vision went white. Pleasure consumed me, not a climax but a detonation... the kind that rewrote the boundaries of my own body.

Nikolai didn't stop. He fucked me through it, chasing his own release with a deep, guttural growl, his control finally snapping as his thrusts turned sharp, punishing, perfect. His body went taut above mine, eyes blazing as he drove deep one final time and came... hot, thick pulses spilling into me as his breath stuttered in my ear. "I mark you," he whispered, voice shaking, sacred and unholy all at once. "Mine." He lingered inside me, possessive even in the aftershock, before slowly pulling out, my swollen pussy slick and dripping with the proof of his claim. Then he rose, fluid and graceful, leaving a trail of wet heat behind as I lay trembling, open, aching, and desperate for the next.

Cassian came next, fox-bright eyes dancing with mischief, but the faint tremble in his hands betrayed something deeper... urgency, reverence, hunger held barely in check. He knelt between my legs like a worshipper at the altar, auburn hair falling over his brow, green eyes locked on mine from beneath thick lashes. His hands slid up my thighs, fingers splayed wide like he needed to feel everything. "You still want this?" he asked softly, his voice lower than usual, not a tease but a plea. His lips brushed my knee, soft and reverent, as though that kiss alone might be enough to undo me.

"Every second of it," I breathed, threading my fingers into his hair, tugging gently, urging him closer.

He growled low, the sound more primal than playful, and began trailing slow, maddening kisses up my thighs. His mouth was heat and promise, tongue flicking patterns that set my nerves alight without ever touching where I needed him most. I squirmed, hips rolling, trying to guide him. He chuckled against my skin, breath hot and wicked between my legs. "Patience," he murmured. "Good things come to those who wait."

"Cassian," I groaned, tugging harder. "Please."

His grin was wicked and full of sin. "Since you asked so nicely."

And then he devoured me. His mouth claimed me like he'd been waiting centuries for this exact moment, tongue sweeping between all along my pussy with a confident stroke that made me cry out. He moaned into me, the vibration deep and decadent, sending sparks down my spine. "That's it, sweet thief," he purred, lips parting me wider, tongue lapping slow and deliberate. "Steal your pleasure from me."

He buried his face between my thighs, tongue working in tight, rhythmic circles around my clit, switching between maddening flicks and firm pressure that made my legs shake. When he slid two fingers inside me, they curled instantly to find that devastating spot, and stars detonated behind my eyelids. I writhed beneath him, panting, back arching off the bed. "Fuck, Cassian?—"

But he didn't stop. Didn't slow. He just held me open with one hand, fucking me with his fingers, licking me like he meant to break me apart. I came hard, screaming his name, thighs locking around his head as my body convulsed around his hand, soaking his wrist.

Only when I went limp and trembling did he pull back, mouth glistening, eyes dark with lust. He stood smoothly, his cock he flushed red and thick with need. He stroked it once, slow and teasing, watching me with a hungry smirk. "Ready for more?"

I nodded, breathless, and he climbed onto the bed, bracing himself over me. When he pushed inside, it was with a deep, rolling grind that filled every inch of me. I moaned long and low, clenching around him as he set a slow, punishing rhythm, each thrust dragging along the slick, tender nerves still pulsing from orgasm.

"You taste like the end of the world," he groaned, hips slamming into mine. "And I'd still choose it."

He fucked me with playful intensity, each stroke deep, precise, making the bed rock beneath us. One of his hands slid under my ass to tilt my hips, the other cradled my

throat... not choking, just claiming. His eyes never left mine, watching every tremble, every cry, like he was cataloging the entire symphony of my pleasure. I reached for his back, digging my nails in, and he hissed, thrusting harder. "That's it," he whispered. "Let me wreck you."

I came again, raw and aching, clutching his body to mine as my orgasm tore through me, wringing every last moan from my throat. He followed with a strangled groan, burying himself to the hilt as he came, cock pulsing deep inside me, his whole body trembling.

He leaned down, biting my shoulder. Not enough to bleed, but enough to brand. "Mine," he whispered, the word both a promise and a threat. He kissed the spot, lips gentle, possessive.

Cassian rolled us to the side, both of us breathing hard, one hand still on my hip like he couldn't bear to stop touching me. I lay sprawled across the bed, body flushed, pussy soaked and throbbing, surrounded by the heat of his claim.

Five more pairs of eyes stared at me from the shadows. Still waiting. Still hard. Still burning with the same hunger that had just consumed him.

Leif shifted his weight at the edge of the bed, his impatience radiating off him in sharp, electric waves. His hair fell messily across his brow, sweat-dampened and wild. Those amber eyes blazed like twin suns, locked on me with the kind of hunger that made my core clench in anticipation.

Behind him, Evander waited, composed but watchful, while Ronan lounged against the wall, trying to look bored despite the raging erection. Kade was silent, unreadable in the shadows, and Garrett stood like a sentinel, his body tense, his gaze dark and possessive.

But it was Leif who moved. Leif who couldn't wait. The hawk shifter surged forward without asking, crashing his mouth against mine in a kiss so desperate it knocked the air from my lungs. His hands clutched at my thighs, rough and shaking, fingers digging into my skin like he needed to anchor himself or fall apart completely.

“I need this,” he breathed into my mouth, voice cracking and trembling. “Need you.”

That was all it took. I gave him a single nod, and the last of his control disintegrated.

He flipped me onto my back with a strength that bordered on frantic, spread my legs wide, and gripped his cock, thick, flushed, already weeping. Without hesitation, he lined himself up and pushed inside in one swift, brutal thrust that made me cry out. The stretch was instant, sharp, and exquisite. My back arched off the bed, fingers digging into the inked skin of his forearms as he set a pace that was nothing short of feral.

“Fuck, Lunara,” he groaned, hips slamming into mine, the slap of skin against skin echoing off the cabin walls. “So fucking wet for us.”

His mouth was everywhere... my neck, my breasts, the curve of my jaw, leaving open-mouthed kisses and stinging bites in his wake. Each mark felt like a vow, a brand. His hands gripped my hips with bruising force, dragging me up into each thrust, forcing me to take all of him, every inch, again and again. I wrapped my legs around his waist, gasping as he sank even deeper, the angle perfect and devastating.

“You feel so good,” I moaned, my voice breaking as the pleasure built, fast and unstoppable.

Tears shimmered in his eyes, but he never slowed. Never faltered. His forehead pressed to mine, breath panting against my lips as his rhythm turned punishing, relentless, each thrust a confession, each moan a plea. The cocky, smirking Leif I'd



known was gone, burned away by the man unraveling above me. This was the real Leif. Raw. Desperate. Worshipful.

He fucked me like he needed me to stay whole. Like every thrust was the only thing keeping him from shattering. “I’ve waited too long,” he whispered, voice thick with emotion, eyes locked on mine like he couldn’t bear to blink. “And it still wasn’t long enough.” His strokes grew erratic, deeper, sloppier. He pulled out with a growl just before the edge, pumping himself with one hand until his hot release spilled across my belly in thick, wet streaks. He collapsed over me, pressing his lips to my forehead in a kiss that was more than affection—it was an apology, a promise, and a brand all at once. His chest heaved, his arms caged around me, but he didn’t let go.

Not right away.

And when he finally did, his hand lingered on my thigh, thumb brushing circles into my skin, eyes still wide, still wrecked. And I lay there, open and dripping, my body used and worshipped in equal measure, already aching for the next.

Evander was next. Silent. Steady. He stepped forward, his russet hair catching the firelight, eyes soft but dark with need. Unlike Leif’s desperate hunger, Evander moved like the earth itself, patient, purposeful, immovable. Every step toward me was measured, deliberate, as if he were crossing a sacred threshold.

He didn’t ask with words at first... just with his gaze, those warm brown eyes searching mine with a vulnerability that made my heart ache. I gave a small nod, lips parted, body aching for more. He scooped me into his arms like I weighed nothing, cradling me against his chest as if I were something precious and breakable. He carried me to the center of the room where more blankets had been rearranged into a soft, moon-drenched nest. He knelt and placed me there with care, positioning every limb like I was his goddess waiting to be worshipped.

“Are you sure?” he asked at last, voice like velvet against my skin, thick with reverence and barely caged desire.

“Yes,” I whispered, breathless. Needy. Undone and still unraveling. "I need you."

### CHAPTER 7

Evander began with my feet, lifting one gently in his large hand and pressing a kiss to my arch. Then each toe, reverent and slow. His mouth was soft, warm, grounding. He worked the soreness from each muscle with long, kneading strokes, until a low moan escaped my lips from the simple beauty of his touch. His hands traveled higher, coaxing tension from my calves, my thighs, his thumbs pressing into muscle with patient care. When he kissed the inside of my knees, and then moved closer to the place that ached for him most, I squirmed. My hips rolled instinctively, but Evander didn't rush. He moved like time belonged to him, like he had all the hours in the world to worship me.

When his tongue finally parted my folds, I gasped. Each stroke was slow, unhurried, but thorough, a deep claiming disguised as tenderness. He didn't lick like a man desperate to finish... he tasted me like I was sacred. My hands fisted in his hair as pleasure tightened deep inside me, my hips lifting to meet each flick of his tongue. When he pushed two fingers into my slick heat, thick and perfectly curved, my body tightened around him in reflex. His voice came like a kiss against my cunt, low and commanding. "Not yet. I want to feel you when you come."

He rose above me, his cock flushed, already slick, his eyes full of something raw and open. "I want to make love to you, Lunara," he said, resting his forehead against mine. "Not just fuck you. Love you."

And gods, I wanted that too.

He slid inside me in a long, slow thrust, stretching me wide, filling me until there was

no space left between us. I cried out, arms wrapping around his shoulders, body opening to him without hesitation. His pace was steady, unhurried but deep. Each movement rocked me to the core, hitting something tender and devastating inside me. His lips brushed my shoulder, then my jaw, then my mouth between every thrust. I felt him in every inch of me, not just his body but his soul, and the way he moved told me exactly how much he felt in return.

“You are magnificent,” he whispered, voice cracked and breathless. “A miracle.”

Tears blurred my vision. I cupped his face, letting him see all of me, letting him have it. This wasn’t just sex. It was something deeper. Evander held me like I was precious, like he was remaking the pieces of me with every kiss, every movement.

But even his control had a limit. His rhythm broke, faster now, need sharpening each stroke. His body shuddered as he buried his face in my neck, whispering my name like he could anchor himself to it. His arm curled behind my back, lifting me, angling my hips just right. His cock struck a spot that sent fire rushing through me, and I came—hard. My muscles clenched, my body arched, and I cried out as ecstasy washed over me like a tide I couldn’t stop.

He groaned, deep and ragged, his cock pulsing as he spilled inside me. For a moment, he stayed perfectly still, his breath against my throat, his arms wrapped around me like the world would end if he let go.

Eventually, he eased back and kissed my palm. A soft, intimate gesture. Then he tucked a blanket over my waist with quiet care.

Four down. Three more.

I should’ve felt finished, but instead I burned hotter than ever. My pussy still throbbed. Still clenched around nothing. Still begged to be filled again. I was greedy

now, high on power, love, magic... and the seven men who had made me theirs.

The others watched me with hungry eyes.

Ronan was next. He didn't wait for an invitation.

He stalked forward, gray eyes lit with something dark—resentment, challenge, desire that pulsed like lightning beneath his skin. He didn't look at me like a man about to worship. He looked at me like a man ready to ruin. “You sure you want the villain now?” he asked, the crooked smirk on his face failing to hide the crack in his armor.

I reached for him and kissed him hard, pouring every bit of my answer into the connection. “Yes,” I whispered. “Even the villain.”

Something shifted in his expression. Vulnerability flickered and vanished, slammed behind the wall he always wore. He grabbed me, spun me around, and forced me onto my hands and knees. His cock pressed at my entrance—thick, hot, already pulsing with need.

“I'm going to fuck you until you forget everyone who came before me,” he growled. He dragged two fingers through my slick folds and shoved them into my mouth. I sucked on them, tasting myself and the others, moaning around him. “Until all you remember is my name.”

He slammed into me with a brutal thrust that made me cry out. My arms shook. My back arched. His hands gripped my hips like they were his and always had been. His thrusts were deep, fast, and punishing, each one knocking the breath from my lungs. He leaned over me, chest against my back, hand tangled in my hair, his breath hot against my ear.

“You're fucking soaked,” he snarled. “Little sorceress can't get enough.”

I whimpered, my cunt tightening around him in response. His pace grew savage. He pulled me up, spun me around, and slammed me against the wall. My legs wrapped around his waist, and he lifted me like I weighed nothing. Then he was fucking up into me, hips pistoning with raw, violent need.

“I hate how much I want you,” he growled against my throat. “I want to ruin you.”

“You already have,” I gasped, my nails scoring down his back.

That did it. He slammed into me again and again, then came with a hoarse cry, cock pulsing deep inside me as his rhythm faltered. I came again with him, a softer orgasm that melted through my limbs like silk.

He stayed there for a long, breathless moment, head resting on my shoulder, breath ragged. His teeth pressed to my skin. He didn’t speak, but he didn’t need to.

Ronan didn’t say mine like the others. But it was in the way he touched me. In the way his thumbs traced circles on my waist. In the kiss he pressed to the bite mark blooming on my neck.

He set me gently back into the nest Evander made and stepped away, his back to me.

But he left part of himself behind, still curled in my chest like a secret only I could keep.

Kade came last before Garrett. Silent. Shadowed. The panther shifter had watched everything unfold from the edge of the firelight, his expression unreadable, his eyes never once leaving mine. While the others moaned, whispered, growled their need, Kade remained still, coiled like a predator waiting for the perfect moment to strike. And when he moved, it was with the quiet grace of something dangerous. Each step deliberate. Each breath measured. The fire caught along the cut of his muscles and the

gleam of precum trailing from the thick length between his thighs. He didn't ask. He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

He cupped my cheek, his palm rough and warm, the pad of one knuckle brushing down my jaw in a touch that made my breath hitch. That was his question. That was his permission. "You don't have to say anything," I whispered. "Just come here, my mate."

And he did.

One smooth motion brought him inside me, deep and thick, his cock forcing me open in a stretch that made my toes curl. My gasp caught in my throat, but his hand was already there, fingers curling gently, his thumb resting over my pulse like he needed to feel my heartbeat beneath his palm. He laid me back with care, his body settling over mine. Our mouths crashed together in a bruising kiss that tasted like worship and desperation. He didn't ease into me. He took me. His rhythm was sharp, relentless, just shy of brutal, but never careless. Every thrust sent sparks across my skin, each one precise, devastating. I arched into him, nerves lit and raw, my body a live wire.

My legs wrapped around his waist, locking him inside as he drove deeper, his cock dragging over every oversensitive place until I could hardly breathe. I clawed at his back, nails raking down his skin, but he didn't flinch. He welcomed it. Growled into my mouth. Bit my lower lip until I whimpered. He shifted his angle, and suddenly I couldn't stay quiet. I cried out, writhing beneath him as heat turned to fire, the burn of friction tangled with the rush of surrender. Then it hit... my orgasm sharp and brutal, no buildup, just explosion. I came hard, body convulsing as white-hot waves ripped through me. Messy. Loud. Completely consuming.

His mouth left my lips, trailing down my throat. He bit the swell of my breast, then soothed the sting with his tongue. His hips moved faster. Rougher. Controlled precision beginning to crumble. And for the first time, I saw him break. His jaw

clenched. His eyes glassed over. His movements grew frantic. One last thrust, deep and savage, and he came with a groan that shook his whole body. His cock pulsed inside me, filling me with heat as he collapsed over me, forehead resting on my shoulder. His breath came heavy, fast, almost wild.

Then he reached for my wrist, lifting it between us, and pressed a kiss to the softest part of my skin. “Mine.” Just one word. But it wrapped around my heart and never let go.

He didn’t linger. He pulled away slowly, rising with that same silent grace. I lay there, gasping, slick and spent and trembling, my body marked and stretched, but still aching for more.

Garrett waited at the edge of the room.

He hadn’t touched me all night, but he’d seen everything. The way he watched me now—tense, reverent, starving—told me this was never just sex for him. This was something else entirely. A ritual. The final bond.

The bear. The leader. The one who had carried centuries of pain on his shoulders. Now he approached, and something in his eyes cracked me wide open.

He knelt between my thighs, hands planted on either side of my waist. His chest gleamed with sweat, muscles flexing with each breath, old scars catching the firelight like pale lightning. “Tell me it’s still what you want,” he said, voice hoarse, rough with something deeper than need.

“I’ve never wanted anything more,” I whispered, my voice shaking with exhaustion and love.

He didn’t move right away. Just looked at me like he needed to memorize this... me,



before everything changed again. Then he pulled me toward him. His cock pressed against my entrance, already thick, already leaking. The moment he pushed inside, I gasped. My head fell back. My legs locked around his waist. He filled me completely, perfectly, like he was made for me. His rhythm was slow. Deep. Measured. Each thrust carved into me like a vow.

His hand tangled in my hair. He kissed me... soft, possessive, endless. His lips traced down to my heart, where he whispered, "Lunara... my light. Our salvation."

Every stroke of his cock sent pleasure flaring through me, a current of heat and magic and something more. The others gathered around us, their eyes glowing, their bond pulsing like a second heartbeat through my body. Garrett's pace stayed steady, but the world shifted around us. The air thickened. The energy changed. Magic built. Pleasure climbed.

I came first... shuddering, gasping, legs pulling him closer as I clenched around him. Garrett followed with a roar that rattled the windows. His body surged against mine as he came, cock twitching, spilling deep inside me.

And then he didn't move.

We stayed locked together, my arms wrapped around his shoulders, his forehead pressed to mine. The others closed the circle around us, their bond surging between us like lightning.

For a moment... I felt it. The magic. The air shimmered. Something inside the curse trembled. The seven looked at each other, hope dawning in eyes that hadn't seen it in centuries.

Then the sun rose.

The light crept through the cabin window. And the snarls returned.

Garrett lurched away from me with a roar, falling to his hands as the curse slammed into him. Bones cracked. Skin split. Fur spilled across his back like a wave. I scrambled back, sobbing as one by one, they changed.

Nikolai's skin shimmered, turning to scales. Cassian's body twisted, shrinking as fox fur overtook him. Leif screamed as wings tore through his shoulders. Evander dropped to his knees, antlers erupting from his skull. Ronan howled as fur spread across his chest. Kade melted into sleek shadow, becoming a panther before my eyes.

And Garrett. My Garrett. He swelled, his roar turning into a growl, his human eyes the last thing to vanish as the bear took over.

"No..." I whispered. "No, no, no."

We'd bonded. I'd given myself to all of them. It should have worked.

Garrett's voice broke through the change, barely human. "We took her. We bonded. We have her heart."

He collapsed to all fours. Fur overtook the last of his form.

"Why," he growled, the word shattering in his mouth, "are we still cursed?"

Seven beasts stood before me. Seven pairs of eyes stared into mine, still them... and not.

I reached for Garrett, my fingers trembling as they sank into thick fur. "I'm sorry," I sobbed. "I thought I could save you."

The bear leaned into my touch. A low, mournful rumble echoed from his chest. The curse had not lifted.

But something inside me hardened.

I wasn't going to give up.

Not now.

Not ever.

### CHAPTER 8

I woke up drowning in their scent, my body humming with remembered pleasure. The sheets twisted around my naked limbs still held their warmth, but the spaces beside me lay empty. My skin tingled with the memory of their hands, their mouths, the overwhelming sensation of belonging to them all at once. I stretched, wincing at the delicious ache between my thighs and the marks from their bites, proof that last night hadn't been a dream.

Light filtered through the curtains, casting the cabin in a hazy glow that didn't match my mood. Where were they? After what we'd shared, I hadn't expected to wake alone. After the awful realization that the bond hadn't worked, I'd been too exhausted to do more than move to the bed and pass out.

I sat up slowly, pulling the blanket to cover my breasts even though there was no one to see. The fire in the hearth had dwindled to glowing embers. The silence pressed in around me, heavy and wrong after a night filled with growls, moans, and whispered promises.

"Garrett?" My voice sounded small against the emptiness.

No answer.

"Ronan? Cassian?"

Nothing.

The floorboards creaked beneath my feet as I stood, wrapping the sheet around me like armor. My discarded nightdress lay abandoned on the floor. I still didn't know where they'd gotten it from, and I didn't plan on asking.

They'd been here. All seven of them tangled with me, and we'd claimed each other. We'd been desperate, all of us. The curse that bound them to their animal forms for most daylight hours had been weakening over the weeks since I'd found them. Last night, with the moon high and their human forms stable longer than ever before, we'd surrendered to the pull between us.

They'd told me the legends. A woman would come who could break their curse. A woman bound to all seven of them, her soul split seven ways.

Me.

I thought we'd succeeded. The way the cabin had practically vibrated with power as we'd come together, the way the bond between us had flared like wildfire... I'd fallen asleep too exhausted to think more about it. I'd hoped that morning would bring their final freedom.

I moved to the window, the sheet trailing behind me. Where were they? Had they gone hunting? What did they even do in their animal forms? Since I'd arrived here, I'd only ever seen them guard me.

A movement caught my eye. A massive shadow shifting near the tree line. Garrett. Even in bear form, I recognized him instantly, his dark eyes finding mine through the glass. His massive head lowered in what looked like shame.

My heart dropped. The curse hadn't broken. Maybe I could hope it would tonight when they turned back into humans.

I pressed my hand against the window, watching as he paced back and forth. The powerful bear moved with the same controlled strength as the man, but he couldn't speak to me. Afraid to hold me.

A flash of orange fur drew my attention to the hearth. Cassian's fox form lay curled in the shadows by the hearth, his sharp eyes regarding me with a mixture of sorrow and mischief that was uniquely his. When he saw me looking, his bushy tail twitched once in acknowledgment.

Movement from above made me glance up. Leif perched on the rafters, his hawk wings half-spread as if caught between landing and taking flight. Even as a bird, there was something defiant in the way he held himself, something restless and wild.

I turned slowly, suddenly aware that I wasn't as alone as I'd thought.

Kade crouched in the darkest corner of the room, his panther form nearly invisible until he blinked. Those impossibly dark eyes tracked my every movement, protective and wary.

Near the bed, Nikolai's serpent body coiled in a tight spiral, his scales gleaming in the dim light. Unlike the others, he seemed perfectly still, waiting with inhuman patience. The only sign of life was the occasional flicker of his forked tongue.

A low growl drew my attention to Ronan, who paced into the room in his wolf form. His gray fur bristled each time I moved toward the door, as if warning me not to leave his sight. The fierce protectiveness I'd felt from him last night hadn't faded with the change.

And finally, I spotted Evander by the window. The stag stood tall and proud, his antlers nearly brushing the ceiling beams. There was something regal in his stance, even as his soft brown eyes reflected a deep sadness. How could I have missed them

before?

Seven beasts. Seven men trapped between forms.

"It didn't work," I whispered, more to myself than to them.

Ronan growled again, softer this time. Almost apologetic.

I sank onto the edge of the bed, clutching the sheet tighter around me. Last night they'd worshipped every inch of my body with human hands and mouths. This morning, they couldn't even speak to me.

We'd thought physical joining would complete the bond. That somehow my body would be the key to breaking their curse. It had felt right, vital, necessary. The way they'd touched me, claimed me, filled me... it had felt like salvation. Like destiny. I'd given each of them my heart and soul.

But here we were, the morning after, and nothing had changed. Except now I knew exactly what I was missing. Now I'd felt them, all of them, branded myself with their touch. Now the loss cut deeper.

I stood again, letting the sheet fall away. None of them had been shy about looking at my naked body last night, and I refused to be shy now. Their animal eyes tracked me with unmistakable hunger as I moved across the room to retrieve my nightdress from where Kade had tossed it.

The thin cotton slid over my skin, offering little protection from their heated stares. I felt the weight of their attention, the same as when they were men, but now tinged with frustration. With regret.

It would be a long day. Might as well start it with some tea. I poured some water into

a kettle and slid it into the hearth over the fire.

Garrett pawed at the window from outside, leaving muddy streaks on the glass. Even in bear form, his authority was clear. He was telling me something, but I couldn't understand.

"I'm not going anywhere," I told him, pressing my palm to the glass opposite his massive paw. "We'll figure something out tonight."

Cassian made a small yipping sound that might have been agreement. Leif ruffled his feathers restlessly.

I moved to throw another log on the fire, conscious of seven sets of eyes following my every move. My body still hummed with the memory of their touch, the places they'd kissed and claimed still sensitive. The bond we'd forged pulsed between us like a living thing, stronger now despite the curse remaining intact.

I didn't regret giving myself to them. How could I? From the moment I'd stumbled into their forest, lost and afraid, they'd protected me. Revealed themselves to me. Shown me a world of magic and curses and destiny I'd never dreamed existed.

"We'll figure this out," I promised, looking around at my strange, beautiful beasts. "The curse didn't break, but something changed. I can feel it."

Kade moved silently to my side, his massive head butting gently against my hip. Though he couldn't speak, his intent was clear. Support. Solidarity.

Evander dipped his antlered head in agreement.

Ronan continued his agitated pacing, but his eyes never left mine.



Leif swooped down to perch closer on the back of a chair.

Nikolai slithered toward the bed, as if indicating we should return there.

And outside, Garrett watched through the window with fierce determination.

Only Cassian seemed relaxed, stretching lazily by the fire as if to say we had all the time in the world.

But we didn't. With each day, the huntsmen my step-mother had sent to drag me back to my death came closer to finding me. Then there would be no salvation for my beasts.

I refused to let that happen. Somehow, I would break this curse. I would free the men who had claimed me so completely last night. The men who, even now, watched over me in their beast forms.

The voice in my head wasn't my own. It rumbled, deep and commanding, unmistakably Garrett's even without the physical vibration in his chest. "Careful, little mate."

I froze, the kettle half-lifted from the fire, my eyes darting to the bear still stationed outside the window. His dark eyes met mine, intent and unmistakably human despite his animal form. I wasn't imagining it. Somehow, I could hear him in my mind.

"She can hear us." This voice was different. Sharper, edged with sarcasm. Ronan. The wolf paused in his pacing, ears perked forward as he stared at me.

"Of course she can. The thread is woven, even if the knot has not yet unraveled." Nikolai's voice was a whisper through my thoughts, cool and measured as it had been against my ear while he'd taken me from behind last night.

I set the kettle down with a clatter, turning to face the room full of beasts. "I can hear all of you."

"That's new." Cassian's voice was light with forced cheer. "Now you get the pleasure of my wit even in daylight hours."

"Is this normal?" I asked, addressing the room at large. "Part of the curse?"

"No one knows what's normal." Kade's deep voice startled me, rare even when he was in human form. "You're the first mate we've found in three centuries."

The word 'mate' sent a flash of heat through me.

"We thought it would break the curse." Evander's gentle voice filled my mind. "The legends said when we found our mate, our souls would be made whole again."

"But it didn't work." I wasn't asking a question. The evidence stood before me, seven beasts instead of seven men.

"Not entirely." Leif's voice was restless even in my head. "But something changed. This connection... we've never had this before."

I nodded slowly, trying to process what this meant. The bond hummed between us, a tangle of connections that pulsed with their emotions as much as their thoughts. I could feel Garrett's frustration. Ronan's bitter disappointment. Kade's quiet resolve. Each distinct, yet somehow harmonized into a chord that resonated through my body.

"What do we do now?" I asked, moving toward the hearth. My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since before... well, before they'd taken me to bed last night.

"We wait for sunset." Garrett's mental voice carried the same authority as when he'd ordered his brothers to take turns with me, each claiming a different part of my body while I writhed between them. "Then we try again. The alternative is not an option."

My cheeks flushed at the memory, and I felt their collective response through the bond, a surge of heat and possessiveness that made my knees weak. Then his second sentence hit me. Because they needed my heart. I'd hoped like they had it was figurative, but Garrett had his doubts.

"Focus, little mate." Ronan's sarcastic voice cut through the haze. "Feed yourself first. We can't exactly help you in these forms."

Right. I needed to take care of basic needs. Food. Water. Warmth. I moved to the kettle again, determined to make tea at least. It has helped with the headaches I'd had constantly since I'd arrived in the forest.

"Left side of the handle." Evander's gentle warning came too late. I grabbed the hot metal, pain searing through my palm.

"Fuck!" I yanked my hand back, cradling it against my chest.

The mental space exploded with reaction. Garrett roared, the sound echoing in my head while the bear outside pawed frantically at the window. Ronan cursed vividly. Cassian whimpered in sympathy. Kade's presence darkened dangerously, as if searching for something to attack. Leif's energy flared like lightning. Nikolai hissed, a cold fury flowing through the bond.

Evander's calm voice cut through the chaos. "Cold water, Lunara. Then the blue jar on the shelf."

I nodded, moving to the basin of water I'd collected yesterday. The cool liquid

soothed the angry red skin of my palm, but tears still stung my eyes. Not just from the pain, but from the overwhelming wave of their concern flooding through me.

"We should be able to help her." Garrett's frustration pounded in my temples.

"If the fucking curse had broken, we could." Ronan's anger lashed through the bond like a whip.

"Enough." Evander's voice silenced them both. "Lunara, the blue jar. It contains a salve for burns."

I found the jar where he'd indicated, awkwardly opening it one-handed. The salve smelled of mint and something earthier. As I applied it to my burn, instant relief spread through my palm.

"Thank you," I said softly, looking toward the stag by the window.

Evander dipped his majestic head. "It would be better if I could apply it myself, but..."

I understood the unspoken. If he were human, he'd be tending my wound with the same gentle thoroughness he'd shown my body last night. If the curse were broken, none of them would let me suffer a moment's discomfort alone.

"I'm okay." I straightened my shoulders, looking around at my worried beasts. "Really. I've had worse."

That was the wrong thing to say. The bond vibrated with their collective displeasure, memories of my confessions from the time we'd been together surfacing. How I'd told them about my lonely childhood, the series of women my father had paraded through my life before my evil step-mother, and the accidents that came from neglect rather

than malice.

"No one will ever hurt you again." Garrett's voice was a solemn vow in my mind.

"Not while shadows cling to our bones. She is ours, and death must take us first." Nikolai's addition carried a deadly promise. I was almost used to his cryptic way of talking.

The intensity of their protection should have frightened me. Seven predators, each powerful in their own way, all fixated on me. Instead, it felt like coming home after a lifetime of wandering.

### CHAPTER 9

"The fire's dying," I observed, breaking the silence I'd fallen into. "I should get more wood."

"I'll come with you." Seven voices spoke as one in my mind, making me laugh despite myself.

"All of you?" I raised an eyebrow, looking around the cabin filled with creatures. "Quite the escort for a trip to the woodpile."

"We're not taking chances." Garrett's tone brooked no argument. "Not with you."

I hadn't expected to feel so exposed, stepping outside in just my nightdress. The forest around the cabin was dense, private, miles from the nearest town or road. But seven pairs of eyes tracked my every move, alert for danger in a way that made me acutely aware of my vulnerability.

Garrett led the way, his massive frame clearing a path through the underbrush with purposeful strides. Ronan flanked my right side, his presence sharp and tense, always watching. Kade moved silently along my left, more shadow than beast, his steps so quiet I could barely hear him. Cassian darted ahead, quick and light, scanning the path with a grin that didn't quite mask his focus. Leif kept to higher ground, his gaze sweeping the surroundings, eyes narrowed with sharp intensity. Evander brought up the rear, calm and steady, his awareness like a second shield at my back. Only Nikolai remained at the cabin, his serpent body unsuited to the cold, but his attention lingered in my mind, coiled and constant through the bond.

"The woodpile's right there," I pointed out, barely twenty paces from the door. "I think I can manage."

"Humor us." Ronan's dry voice filled my mind. "After centuries of solitude, we're a bit overprotective of our mate."

Our mate. The possessive plural sent a shiver through me that had nothing to do with the cool autumn air.

I gathered the firewood quickly, aware of their vigilance. Their protectiveness was palpable through the bond, a steady pulse of watchfulness that wrapped around me like armor.

When I returned to the cabin with my arms full of logs, I noticed the sun beginning its descent toward the horizon. Soon it would be night. Soon they would change back.

Soon I would be in their arms again, trying once more to break a curse that had held them for centuries.

I stacked the wood near the hearth, added a few logs to the dying fire, and turned to find... an empty cabin.

"Hello?" I called out, both aloud and through the bond.

Their presence in my mind had dimmed, not gone but muted, as if they were deliberately pulling away.

I moved to the window. No sign of Garrett's massive bear form. The stag was gone from the tree line. The wolf had vanished. The hawk no longer circled overhead.

"Where did you go?" I pushed the question through the bond, feeling their reluctance

to answer.

"It's almost sunset." Garrett's voice finally came, distant and strained. "The change is... not something you should witness."

"But I've already seen it. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but you don't have to hide yourself from me."

"We'll return when it's done." Evander's gentle explanation followed. "When we're men again."

I stood alone in the cabin, arms wrapped around myself. The fire crackled, throwing shadows across the empty room. Their absence felt wrong after a day of constant watchfulness.

"But I could comfort you," I offered to the empty air, knowing they could hear me through the bond.

"No." Seven voices responded as one, firm and unyielding.

I sank down by the fire, staring into the flames. Outside, the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in deepening shades of purple and blue. Somewhere in the forest, seven beasts were transforming back into the men who had claimed me so thoroughly last night.

Men who would return to me soon, their eyes hungry and their bodies human, at least for a few precious hours.

Men who would try again to break a curse that had bound them for centuries.

The bond pulsed quietly between us, a living thread that connected my heart to theirs



even when they were physically absent. Through it, I felt flashes of their pain as bones shifted and fur receded. I felt their determination. Their hope. Their fear that even this, what we'd found together, might not be enough.

I stared into the fire, arms wrapped around my knees. The warmth of their touch still lingered on my skin... but none of them had returned yet. It was like they couldn't stand to be near me during the transformation back to human. I understood, in a way. They probably wanted me to remember them as either fully beast or fully man, not caught in the agonizing between.

"I can still feel you," I whispered to the empty room, knowing they could hear me through the bond. "All of you. Inside me, around me, part of me. The curse didn't break... but something changed."

Something had changed. I could feel them in my mind now, their thoughts and emotions tangled with my own. The bond remained, stronger than before, humming with potential.

Before it got too dark, I decided to retrieve more water from the well. Yeah, my beasts would probably hate that I'd gone alone, but it wasn't far from the cabin. No further than the woodpile, which could be seen from the porch of the cabin.

When I got to the well, I sat on the edge for a moment, listening to the nightlife of the forest. There was an essence of peace that came from sitting there in the chilly air. It was probably stupid to stay out here longer than necessary in just a nightdress, but the way the crisp air nipped at my skin refreshed me.

Time passed faster than I realized. My fingers felt like ice before I left my thoughts and retrieved the water. I headed back to the cabin to warm up and make tea.

The cabin was quiet when I pushed through the door, the main room empty. I moved

to the hearth, needing warmth and to put water on to boil. That's when I felt him. A prickle along my spine, a coolness in the air that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Nikolai materialized from the shadows beside the fireplace, as if woven from darkness itself. Naked as always, his white-blond hair loose and wild around his shoulders. His eyes found mine, glowing softly like moonlit ice, pupils slitted in a way that wasn't quite human.

"You ache," he whispered, the words caressing my skin like a touch.

I blinked at him, startled by his sudden appearance, by the raw understanding in his gaze. "What?" Just when I thought I understood his cryptic nature, he started on something I couldn't quite figure out.

"You ache because they left you empty." He moved toward me with fluid grace, his bare feet silent on the wooden floor.

My breath caught as he drew closer. Unlike the others, he didn't seem afraid to approach me tonight. His eyes devoured me, taking in the nightdress and my bare legs. A flush spread across my cheeks, leaving me feeling suddenly hot.

"They think claiming you would fix the curse," he murmured, circling me slowly, like a predator. "But it was never about claiming. It was about offering."

I stepped back, unnerved by the intensity of his gaze, by the weight of meaning in his words. "What does that mean?"

His lips curved, slow and dangerous, revealing the edge of teeth that seemed too sharp. "You gave your body. Your pleasure. But you didn't take what was offered in return."

"They didn't offer anything," I said, confused. "I mean, I guess they offered the bond. I accepted that."

He made a soft sound, almost like laughter, but too sad. "They offered everything, little flame. Their pain. Their curse. Their centuries of suffering. Did you reach for it? Did you pull it into yourself?"

I didn't know how to respond, didn't know what terrified me more... his words or the soft longing in them. Last night had been about pleasure, about connection, about belonging. I had wanted to bond with them, believing that giving myself to them in body would be enough.

It should have fixed the curse. I hadn't realized there was more... hadn't thought about taking their pain, their burden, their suffering into myself as willingly as I had given them my body.

"The offering goes both ways," he continued, stopping just inches from me. I felt the chill radiating from his skin, so different from the burning heat of the others. "They must give, but you must also take. Willingly. Knowingly."

"Garrett didn't say anything," I whispered. "None of them did."

"They don't know." His fingers brushed my cheek, light as a snowflake, making me shiver. "They've forgotten the old ways. They think brute force and desire are enough."

"And you remember?"

"I remember everything." His eyes were ancient, endless, filled with secrets no one else had dared to carry. "I will follow you into the hollow places," he said. "Even if they hide in shame. Even if they run from what we are."

"I don't know what we are," I admitted, my voice small against the breadth of the night around us.

"Soon, little flame," he whispered, his breath cool against my lips. "You will."

He didn't move for a long moment, his pale eyes boring into mine, ancient and unknowable. I reached for him without thinking, fingers trembling, but he only shook his head once—slow, deliberate. "Not yet," he whispered, voice like mist curling around my ears. "You are not ready to take what must be given."

"I don't know how," I confessed, my throat tight. "Tell me what to do."

"You already know," he said, sadness and certainty woven together. "You are afraid to become what they need."

"I don't want to lose myself," I whispered. It was a raw truth, ugly and selfish.

"You won't," he promised. His cold fingers brushed my lips, featherlight. "You will become more."

Then he faded before I could reach him, dissolving into shadow like he had never been there at all. Only the lingering heat on my skin told me he was real. Only the thrum of the bond, steady and aching, reminded me that I was not truly alone.

The rest of the night passed in slow, aching silence. The men orbited me without speaking, moving around the cabin and the surrounding woods like ghosts. Kade sharpened his blades until the metal sang, the sound grating and mournful in the heavy air. Leif remained perched in his tree, refusing to climb down, arms tight against his chest like he could hold himself together through sheer will. Evander disappeared into the forest, returning hours later with herbs and roots, his face tight and closed off, offering no explanation. Ronan paced the perimeter of the clearing

like a restless shadow, his gray eyes constantly scanning the trees, as if trying to find something he could fight, something he could blame. Cassian tried once, only once, to break the tension, tossing out a joke with a crooked grin. But it fell flat between us like a stone and he retreated without another word.

They avoided each other as much as they avoided me, as if something fragile had cracked between all of us. As if they blamed each other. As if they blamed themselves. Maybe they did. Maybe I did too.

But none of them came inside. None of them reached out to me mentally. None of them touched me.

"I feel you," I whispered into the bond, voice trembling even though I didn't speak aloud. "I know you're there."

A pulse of acknowledgment answered me... seven distinct threads of emotion tightening around my heart. Garrett's grief. Kade's silent rage. Leif's restless yearning. Ronan's despair. Cassian's bitter regret. Evander's steady sorrow. Nikolai's cold, unyielding devotion.

They heard me. They felt me. But they could not come to me.

I stared into the fire, feeling the bond thrum against my ribs like a second heartbeat. The curse hadn't broken. And I didn't know if it ever would.

Seven threads, stretching taut from my soul to theirs, gossamer-thin but unbreakable. And hungry. So hungry.

Nikolai's words echoed again, louder now in the emptiness. It was never about claiming. It was about offering.

I closed my eyes, feeling the threads pulse against my skin. They had given themselves to me... their bodies, their pleasure, their desperate hope. But I had not given everything in return. Not my heart. Not the part of me that could shoulder their centuries of agony, their brokenness, their grief, and still call it love.

Could I bear it? Could I open myself wide enough to take it all in... and not shatter?

I didn't know.

I couldn't trust anyone... Not my father who kept bringing evil women in the house... and not the woman who finally poisoned him to steal my heart and the Winterborne bloodline.

But as I sat there, surrounded by the scent of them, my body still marked by their hands and mouths, I knew one thing with bone-deep certainty.

I would try.

For them.

For us.

For whatever we were becoming.

### CHAPTER 10

I should have known the stillness was a warning. The forest had grown too quiet, the air thick with pressure, not peace. Even the wind had gone still. I sat near the dying fire, curled in the blanket nest Evander had made, trying not to tense at every sound. The nightdress clung to my skin, thin and useless against the cold creeping under the door. Seven pulses hummed at the edge of my mind... present but distant. Watching. Waiting.

The bond between us was muted, like something holding its breath. They hadn't spoken through it since the sun had gone down. No reassurances. No thoughts. Only tension. I pulled the blanket tighter around my shoulders and stared at the fire. The danger wasn't inside the cabin, but I felt it press against the walls. Something waited just beyond the trees.

I'd forgotten to get more wood from the woodpile. On my last trip, I'd only grabbed a few small logs to get through the day thinking my mates would return tonight. They had not.

A branch snapped. Sharp. Intentional.

I turned toward the door a second too late.

It exploded inward with a deafening crack. Splinters flew across the floor. Cold air surged in.

They came in fast. Five. Maybe six. Hunters dressed in leathers etched with dark

sigils, their faces painted in ash, weapons gleaming with silver and bone. The air reeked of magic... old, dirty, violent. One of them smiled. "Found you, witch-bitch."

I dove for the fireplace, reaching for the iron poker. My fingers grazed it. Hands grabbed my hair and yanked me back. I screamed, twisted, kicked. Nails raked skin. I tasted blood. The hunter cursed and slammed me against the floor.

"She fights like a feral beast," one muttered.

"Chain her. Quickly," another snapped.

A silver muzzle clamped over my mouth. My scream choked off. The taste was metallic and final. Chains wrapped around my wrists... cold, glowing, hissing against my skin. Suppression magic. I bucked and twisted. It didn't matter.

"She doesn't need to be unharmed for the ritual," came a woman's voice from the doorway. Calm. Cruel. "She just needs to be breathing."

They dragged me through the cabin, my feet catching on the rough wood. The fire sputtered behind me. The open door let in the dark.

And then I saw them.

All seven.

Naked. Tense. Magically Restrained. Furious.

They looked ready to murder.

But not to the hunters.



To them, the curse made my mates look small. Laughable. Gnome-sized creatures in mismatched clothes, unarmed and ridiculous.

“Dwarves?” one hunter snorted. “These are what she’s been hiding with?”

“They look like someone’s garden ornaments.”

The men didn’t speak. Couldn’t speak. The curse twisted perception and took their voices with it. Garrett stepped forward, muscles flexing, rage burning in his eyes. The hunter closest to him gave a mocking laugh and shoved him back with one hand.

“Careful. This one might bite.”

Evander reached for me. The magic yanked him back like a leash. Cassian growled low, fists clenched. Leif’s jaw worked in frustration as he paced the clearing’s edge. Kade looked ready to strike, but the hunters didn’t see danger. They saw nothing worth fearing.

Ronan lunged. The hunter closest to him stepped aside casually and slammed a boot into his side. Ronan went down hard. No one noticed the pain in his eyes. They only laughed.

“Pathetic.”

And Nikolai... he stood behind them all, still and silent, his gaze locked on me. The bond vibrated with his fury. With all of theirs.

"Lunara," Garrett’s voice pushed through the bond like a scream. " We’re here. We will save you."

But they couldn’t move. Couldn’t fight. Couldn’t save me.

And the hunters never even noticed.

They yanked the chain, dragging me across the frozen ground. My head snapped back. The muzzle scraped my lips.

The men roared inside the bond.

And I couldn't answer.

"They'll come for her," one of the hunters muttered, bored.

"Won't matter," another replied. "By then, it'll be done."

They couldn't follow. Not yet. Not until the sun dropped below the horizon. Until then, they were tethered, trapped outside the ritual's reach. And I would already be on the altar, my blood feeding her magic.

They dragged me through the trees with mechanical efficiency, boots crunching over frost-hardened earth. Half a mile from the cabin, the clearing opened before us... too perfect to be natural. The stone altar waited at the center, carved with runes that pulsed faintly, hungry for blood. They threw me down, chains clanking, skin slapping cold stone. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs.

She was already there.

Cloaked in crimson, surrounded by robed figures who moved like shadows. Her gloved fingers glistened with old magic. When she smiled, it was hollow. Too smooth. Too sure.

"You ran," she said. "And still, here you are."

I glared. The muzzle silenced the words burning behind my teeth.

She traced my cheek. The gesture meant nothing. The command came instead. “You’ll bite before the moon reaches its highest point. And I will never die.”

Behind us, a howl pierced the woods. The hunters stiffened.

She didn’t flinch. “Let them come,” she said. “It’s already too late.”

The sun inched lower. Her acolytes began carving blood into the dirt. Seven cuts. Seven drops. One for each bond I wore like a second heartbeat. They didn’t know what they were drawing from... but I did. They sliced my skin like parchment. I bled. They caught it in a silver bowl and called it power.

The chains grew heavier. My limbs sagged. Not from pain, but because they drained me. Piece by piece.

One of them pressed a blade against the inside of my thigh. “Don’t move,” he said.

I moved anyway. The cut went deeper. The bowl caught more blood.

The muzzle bit into my face. I bit my cheek to keep from screaming.

She circled me slowly. Red cloak sweeping the ground, untouched by the filth. She lifted a black apple in her palm. It didn’t shine. It absorbed light. Absorbed everything .

“Do you know what this is?” she asked.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t need to. Everyone in our world knew the Apple of Ashes.

“It took me twenty years,” she said, eyes gleaming. “Three husbands. Seven witches. Your father. And now, you.”

The apple hovered just inches from my mouth.

“Bite,” she ordered. “And in return, I’ll live forever.”

I didn’t move. Couldn’t. Well, physically I could. The muzzle would only allow for me to follow my step-mother's commands, but nothing else. But I didn’t break.

She reached for the muzzle’s clasp. “Such spirit,” she muttered. “Your mother had it too. Until she drowned.”

That snapped something inside me.

The sky darkened. Shadows stretched. The sun was nearly gone. And I felt them.

The bond surged. Seven lines of heat and fury racing toward the clearing. Garrett. Ronan. Kade. Evander. Cassian. Leif. Nikolai. Human again. Powerful again. But held back. Still caught behind the ritual’s barrier.

“They can’t save you,” she said, voice brittle now. She felt them too. Her fingers trembled.

The chanting swelled. Acolytes lit the blood symbols with their own power. The circle burned sickly green.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t pray for rescue.

I prayed for vengeance.

The clasp fell open. The muzzle dropped from my mouth.

She lifted the apple. Triumphant.

“Bite,” she whispered.

I opened my mouth.

And I spoke.

The words weren’t mine, not entirely. They came from somewhere deeper. Older. The language of sacrifice. Of reversal. Of blood claimed instead of given. Winterbourne.

Her eyes widened. She tried to pull the apple back.

Too late.

The runes flared... not hers anymore. Mine.

The ritual turned on itself.

Seven bonds surged forward, no longer silenced by chains or spellwork. The forest heard me now.

The altar pulsed.

The apple shook in her hands.

And then?—

Everything broke.

### CHAPTER 11

The altar cracked beneath my body, a deep groan ripping through the clearing as the ritual circle ruptured outward, shattering the symbols carved into the earth. Magic flared wild and uncontrolled, surging through the ground, the trees, the stones. The acolytes staggered back, their chants breaking into panicked shouts.

The apple slipped from her trembling hand, but I caught it before it hit the ground, my fingers closing around the gnarled, pulsing fruit.

The sickly green glow of the ritual circle flickered... then ceased entirely.

The bonds connecting me to my mates roared to life. No longer a whisper. No longer distant. They flooded me, seven distinct threads weaving tighter, closer, stronger. Garrett's rage. Ronan's defiance. Kade's relentless focus. Evander's sorrow-turned-fury. Cassian's wild glee. Leif's sharp, cutting urgency. Nikolai's cold, unwavering devotion.

They were here. They were mine.

My stepmother stumbled backward, face blanching as she watched the ritual she had crafted for two decades crumble before her eyes.

"You don't know what you're doing," she gasped, voice breaking. "You're going to destroy yourself."

"Good," I said, voice low, raw, burning from someplace far deeper than my throat.

Without hesitation, I lifted the apple to my lips. I bit deep.

The taste hit instantly... fire and rot, ash and sugar. It spread through my mouth, down my throat, into my bones. The world tilted around me as magic flooded every vein, not siphoning away my power, but multiplying it. Twisting it. Strengthening it.

I heard her scream.

The bond flared first... sharp, urgent, a crack of lightning across my nerves.

From the treeline, they burst into the clearing together, seven forces of nature cutting through the smoke and wreckage. Garrett led, massive paws slamming into the ground, his bear form barreling toward the altar. Ronan was a blur of gray fur and bared teeth, low growls vibrating in his chest. Kade slipped between the broken runes like a living shadow, the sleek, black ripple of his panther form nearly invisible against the shattered darkness.

Above them, Leif shrieked, a golden hawk slicing through the smoke. Cassian's fox form darted between fallen acolytes, sharp and precise. Evander's stag body crashed through the outer edge of the clearing, antlers lowered like a battering ram. Nikolai slithered low and silent along the altar stones, a pale serpent glinting in the moonlight.

All of them surged toward me. Toward the altar.

Ready to fight.

Ready to bleed for me.

And then they saw what was happening.



They froze.

The bond between us spasmed, confusion and fear slamming into me all at once.

I wasn't helpless. I wasn't chained.

I stood upright on the cracked altar, blood streaming from my wrists, the black apple in my hands... partially eaten, pulsing with magic so dense it made the air vibrate.

I wasn't the girl they'd raced to save.

I was something else.

Their forms shifted mid-stride, half-shifting in flashes of muscle and magic... Garrett's paws slamming into bare earth, Ronan snarling as he staggered into human shape. Cassian dropped into a crouch, half-shifted, fox ears flickering before vanishing.

"What—" Garrett's voice cracked across the bond, raw and bewildered.

I raised my head, meeting their eyes one by one.

And then I took another bite of the apple.

Magic flared so violently it flattened the broken ritual circle, shoving the acolytes' bodies aside like dry leaves.

The force of it staggered them backward, scattering them around the edges of the clearing as they struggled to keep their footing, fighting the sheer weight of the power now pouring out of me.

They didn't move toward me again.

They couldn't.

Not when every instinct inside them screamed that whatever I had become was no longer something to be protected.

I was the storm now.

I was the end.

I bit again, devouring the dark magic she had hoarded for herself. Every bite tore another shred of stolen life from her body.

Her skin blistered. Her hair whitened. The glamour she had woven over herself for years peeled away in strips, revealing the shriveled, blackened husk beneath. She stumbled, sagged to her knees, clawing at the air as if she could pull the magic back.

"You wanted to steal my life," I said, my voice rising with the magic surging through me. "You wanted my blood. My soul. Now you can have it... every poisoned drop."

I took a final bite.

The remains of the apple disintegrated into ash in my hand, the last of its power rushing into me like a drowning wave. I screamed, the sound ripped from my chest, too full of rage, of magic, of vengeance to contain.

My stepmother collapsed to the stones, robes puddling around her like empty skin. Her body crumbled into nothing... ash and mist carried away on the rising wind.

The forest itself seemed to sigh.

The chains binding me to the altar disintegrated, falling away in curling wisps of smoke. The runes carved around the clearing cracked and shattered, bleeding old magic into the soil. The weight that had smothered the clearing lifted, replaced by something raw and electric.

And then the curse broke.

The bonds between me and my mates snapped taut, surging with blinding force. I felt them all at once... every breath, every heartbeat, every emotion crashing into me like a second storm.

The cursed chains that had imprisoned them for centuries tore free like thread stretched too tight.

"Lunara," Ronan gasped, falling to his knees. His body convulsed, but not with the agony I had seen every time the curse forced their shifts. This was different. Smoother. Quieter. A shedding of chains instead of a tearing of flesh. "What did you do?"

Bones shifted. But not with pain this time. With freedom.

Garrett shifted, massive hands curling into fists, his mouth open in a silent roar of triumph. Leif stumbled, golden feathers rippling along his arms before cleanly fading away. Kade emerged from the shadows, sleek and human and whole, his dark eyes burning. Ronan shifted his stance, wolfish grin curling his mouth as claws slid back into human hands. Cassian whooped, fox ears and tail flashing into existence before vanishing again. Evander straightened, antlers rising from his brow in a slow, regal arc, then fading as he breathed deep. Nikolai lifted his hand, scaled skin smoothing back into pale flesh with deliberate control.

They were free. All of them. No more forced shifts. No more cursed chains. No more

stolen forms.

Leif laughed, wild and disbelieving. "I can control it," he breathed, shifting his fingers to talons and back. "Gods, I can actually control it."

Kade said nothing, but the shadows bleeding from his fingertips told their own story... his wonder as he flexed control he'd never been allowed to have.

Cassian spun in place, his grin wide and reckless. "Fuck yes! Do you know how long I've wanted to do this? Centuries of pain, gone in an instant!"

Evander exhaled slowly, reverence shaping every line of his face. "The land feels different," he murmured. "The connection is... purified."

Nikolai watched me, scales flickering along his jaw before fading back into smooth skin. His voice was soft but full of terrible certainty. "You've rewritten the magic itself."

I staggered forward, the magic inside me pressing against every inch of my skin, desperate for more space than my body could give. My limbs shook, my vision blurring.

Garrett caught me before I could fall, arms closing around me with a choked sound, something broken and sacred all at once.

"It's done," he whispered, voice thick with disbelief. "You broke it."

I tried to smile. Tried to answer. Tried to tell them... something.

But the magic inside me wasn't done.

It twisted. It clawed. It fought for space within a body not meant to hold so much.

"Something's wrong," I heard myself say, the words torn from my lips.

The apple's magic, the blood ritual, the shattered curse... it wasn't just inside me.

It was becoming me.

The apple core in my hand had crumbled to dust, its magic fully absorbed into my bones, my blood, my soul.

"Too much... I can't..."

My knees buckled. Darkness clawed at the edges of my mind.

Strong arms caught me before I hit the ground... Garrett, Ronan, Evander... all of them moving at once, frantic hands anchoring me as I sagged against them.

"Her pulse is wrong," Evander said sharply, already pressing his hand against my throat.

"She's burning up," Leif shouted, horror tightening his voice.

"Back!" Garrett barked, holding me tighter. "Give her space!"

Panic screamed through the bond... wild, uncontrolled.

But then another voice. Calm. Certain.

"No," Nikolai said, his words slicing through the chaos like a blade.

He knelt beside me, his touch cool against my searing skin, his eyes glowing with the same power that seethed in my blood. His voice dropped low, almost reverent.

"She's not dying."

He pressed his palm against my forehead, his power flaring softly around his fingertips, recognizing the magic boiling inside me not as a death sentence.

But as evolution.

"She's ascending," he said.

The last thing I saw before the darkness swallowed me whole was the seven of them leaning over me... bloodied, wild-eyed, illuminated by the light bleeding out from under my skin.

Then the world unraveled.

And the forest devoured me.

### CHAPTER 12

I woke in a tangle of limbs and heat, my body humming with power I didn't recognize. Seven heartbeats pulsed against my skin, each one matching the rhythm of my own. The cabin's wooden walls seemed to breathe with us, the forest beyond stirring with something ancient and alive. My shifters surrounded me, no longer cursed, no longer afraid. And I was no longer just Lunara Winterbourne. I was something more.

They had returned me to the bed in the cabin, the same one where everything first unraveled. I remembered wondering who had slept in it before, since there were too many of them and only two beds in the cabin, plus the cot in the cellar where they had first kept me. Now it felt like the center of the world, the focal point of our twisted fate turned glorious destiny.

Their touch felt different now. Electric but safe. Scorching but soothing. Our bond hummed like a chorus behind my heartbeat, insistent and unbreakable. I could feel each of them inside me. Not just their physical presence, but their emotions. Their hunger. Their love.

"You're awake." Garrett's voice rumbled through me, vibrating along nerve endings that recognized him as mine. He knelt beside the bed, his massive frame somehow graceful as he leaned toward me. The others shifted around us, seven pairs of eyes glowing in the dim light. "The forest's heart beats again."

His calloused fingers traced my jaw as if I might shatter. The others moved closer, forming a protective circle. Ronan's sardonic smile couldn't hide the relief in his eyes.

Kade watched with that silent intensity that spoke volumes. Cassian winked, though his usual playfulness was tempered with reverence. Leif couldn't stop touching my arm, my shoulder, my hair, as if ensuring I was real. Evander's gentle eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Then there was Nikolai, pale and beautiful as death, who slid next to me on the bed and whispered, "Reborn in shadow and silk, little flame. Just as I foresaw."

Evander laid his palm over mine, his touch carrying the scent of pine and earth. "You are not broken. You are the storm that made us whole."

I gasped as their words echoed not just in my ears, but in my mind. I could hear their thoughts. Feel the echo of their longing even when they said nothing. Garrett's fierce pride. Ronan's reluctant devotion. Kade's consuming possession. Cassian's delighted awe. Leif's wild joy. Evander's tender relief. Nikolai's dark obsession.

The bond wasn't symbolic anymore. It wasn't just love or lust or fate. It was alive, primal, unshakable.

"What happened?" I whispered, though fragments of memory flashed behind my eyes even though they weren't mine. The witch's cabin in the heart of the forest. Her curse that bound these men. My choice to sacrifice. The magic that flowed between us, breaking chains centuries old.

"You know what happened," Nikolai murmured, his ice-blue eyes peering into my soul. "You took her magic and bent it to your will."

Yes. I remembered now. The ancient witch who had cursed them, trapping them between man and beast, forcing them to guard her forest for centuries. I had offered myself in exchange for their freedom, but instead of becoming her prisoner, I had somehow absorbed her power.



"The forest whispers your name," Garrett said, his deep brown eyes flecked with gold. "It belongs to you now. To us."

A shiver ran through me, not of fear but of recognition. Beyond the cabin walls, beyond the circle of my men, I felt the trees stir. The earth pulse. And deep within it, something darker stirred... as if awakened by what I had become.

"I can feel you all," I said, reaching for them. Seven pairs of hands reached back, touching whatever part of me they could reach. "Inside me. Like you've always been there."

"We have," Cassian said with a wicked grin. "But not like we're about to be."

Garrett growled, not in warning but in hunger. He moved first, as was his right as the eldest, the leader. His mouth found mine, slow and deep, pressing me back into the bed with a growl that vibrated through my spine. His hands were everywhere, spreading my thighs, gripping my breasts, pinning me in place with the kind of dominance that had me dripping before I could beg.

"I need to taste you," he rasped against my throat. "Need to know you're real."

"Yes," I gasped as he moved down my body, nipping and sucking marks into my skin.

The others watched, their desire a physical force against my newly awakened senses. I felt Ronan's pulse spike when Garrett pushed my thighs wide. Kade's breath caught as my back arched. Leif couldn't contain a groan as Garrett's tongue made that first long swipe along my pussy.

I moaned as Garrett settled between my legs, devouring me like a starving man. His thick beard scratched against my sensitive skin, the slight pain only heightening my pleasure. His tongue circled my clit before flattening against it, pressure perfect and

maddening.

"Fuck," I groaned, my hips bucking against his face.

Strong hands pinned my thighs wider, and I realized Kade had moved to help, his dark eyes watching my face as Garrett's tongue slid inside me, then returned to my clit, relentless and hungry.

I couldn't look away from them. Couldn't close my eyes against the sight of these powerful men watching their leader claim me with his mouth. My fingers tangled in Garrett's short hair, pulling him closer as pressure built low in my belly.

"She's close," Nikolai whispered, though I hadn't said a word. He knew. They all knew, could feel it through our bond just as I could feel their arousal, their need.

Garrett growled against my pussy, the vibration pushing me closer to the edge. Two thick fingers pushed inside me, curling forward to find that spot that made stars explode behind my eyes. My thighs shook as the pressure built, as Garrett sucked my clit between his lips and flicked his tongue against it.

I came with a scream that shattered into a sob, my back bowing off the bed, held in place only by Garrett's strength and Kade's steady hands. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed through me, each one echoing through the bond to my men, who groaned and shuddered as if they felt it too.

Before I could catch my breath, Nikolai replaced Garrett, his face a mask of cool hunger. His tongue, slightly forked at the tip from his serpent nature, licked me clean with precise, wicked strokes.

"Taste the power you took, little flame," he whispered, his eyes glowing with lust and hunger. "It burns so sweetly in your blood."

His fingers slid inside me, long and precise, stroking places I hadn't known existed. Where Garrett had been all heat and instinct, Nikolai was calculation and control. He watched my every reaction, adjusting his touch to draw out my pleasure, building me toward another peak with merciless efficiency.

"You see now, don't you?" he murmured, his cool breath fanning across my overheated skin. "What you've become. What we are together."

I couldn't answer. Could only gasp and writhe as his clever fingers worked inside me, his thumb circling my clit with just enough pressure to drive me mad. The others moved closer, their hands stroking my hair, my face, my breasts, as if they couldn't bear not to touch me.

Nikolai's forked tongue flicked against my clit, and I came again, harder than before, my eyes rolling back as my body clenched around his fingers. The power inside me surged with my release, and for a moment, the walls of the cabin groaned, the air thickened, and the forest beyond seemed to sigh in response.

"Ours," they breathed in unison, seven voices becoming one in my mind.

And I was. Body, soul, and this new, wild magic coursing through my

Evander moved forward as Nikolai slid away, his gentle eyes at odds with the hard length waving around. Unlike the others, there was no aggression in his approach, just unrelenting purpose as he settled between my thighs. "Let us worship you," he murmured against my throat as he freed himself and eased into me, my still-pulsing body welcoming his thick cock with a greedy clench.

I gasped at the sensation of being filled, my oversensitive flesh stretching around him. Evander was thick, thicker than I remembered, and he pushed into me with patient determination until he was seated fully.

"Feel us," he whispered, beginning to thrust with slow, deep strokes that hit places inside me that made my toes curl. "Feel how we need you."

The bed dipped on either side of me as Cassian and Leif joined us, their hands and mouths hungry on my skin. Cassian claimed my left breast, his tongue swirling around my nipple before sucking it into his mouth with a groan that vibrated through my chest.

"Fucking gorgeous," he murmured, green eyes dancing with mischief and heat. "The things I'm going to do to you when it's my turn."

Leif took my other breast, less patient, nipping and sucking with the wild enthusiasm that characterized everything he did. His hands trailed over my ribs, my hips, dipping between my thighs to where Evander thrust into me.

"So wet," Leif groaned, his fingers collecting my slickness and bringing it to his mouth. "Taste so fucking good."

I arched between them, overwhelmed by sensation. Evander's cock sliding in and out with deliberate precision. Cassian and Leif's mouths hot on my nipples, their hands trailing everywhere, their whispered filth and praise in my ears. And through our bond, I felt their need, their hunger, their love, multiplied and reflected back at me until I couldn't tell where I ended and they began.

"Please," I gasped, not even sure what I was begging for. More. All of them. Forever.

Evander's rhythm never faltered, his strokes deep and thorough, each one pushing me higher. When I came around him, it was with a surprised cry, my back arching off the bed, my inner walls clamping down on his thick length. He groaned, his control slipping just enough to speed his thrusts before he pulled out, his cock glistening with my release.

"Kade," he said, his voice strained. "She's ready for you."

Kade didn't speak. He rarely did. But his eyes said everything as he moved behind me, strong hands flipping me onto my hands and knees with effortless strength. One hand tangled in my hair, the other repositioning me and then pressing to my lower back, angling me exactly how he wanted me.

I felt the blunt head of his cock against my entrance, then the delicious stretch as he pushed in with a single thrust. Kade wasn't gentle. He wasn't slow. He fucked me hard and silent, his breath ragged against my neck, his grip firm enough to leave marks.

"Yes," I moaned, pushing back against him, meeting his thrusts with my own desperate movements. "Harder."

He complied, hips slamming against my ass, the sound of skin on skin filling the cabin along with my cries. Through half-lidded eyes, I saw the others watching, stroking themselves, their cocks hard and leaking as they waited their turn.

Ronan apparently couldn't wait any longer. He moved in front of me, his cock level with my face, his gray eyes burning with challenge.

"Open," he demanded, no please, no preamble. Just pure Ronan, raw and unfiltered.

I let my mouth fall open, and he pushed inside without hesitation, groaning when I sucked him down eagerly. His hands gripped my hair alongside Kade's, controlling my movements as I took him deeper.

"Fuck, your mouth," he hissed, his hips jerking forward. "Knew you'd be perfect."

I moaned around him, the vibration making him curse. Kade's thrusts from behind pushed me forward onto Ronan's cock, creating a rhythm that had me filled from both

ends, used and wanted and desperately, achingly satisfied.

They took turns after that, each claiming me in every way possible. Mouths, hands, cocks, until my body forgot how to separate pleasure from pain. Until I was limp, shaking, and begging for more.

Cassian fucked me with a playful intensity, his cock hitting spots that made me see stars while he whispered filthy praise in my ear. Leif was wild and relentless, flipping me into positions I didn't know my body could achieve, his enthusiasm contagious and overwhelming.

I came again and again, hoarse from screaming, skin slick with sweat and come, every part of me filled, stretched, marked. They passed me between them like a precious thing, each taking their pleasure but always, always watching for my reactions, feeling my pleasure through our bond, adjusting to maximize it.

When it seemed I couldn't take anymore, when my limbs were liquid and my mind floating somewhere above my body, Garrett returned. The others moved back, forming a circle around the bed, their hands stroking their cocks as they watched their leader claim me one final time.

"Mine," Garrett growled, positioning himself between my spread thighs. "Ours."

His cock slid into my soaked cunt with ease, my body welcoming him like he belonged there. My legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, pulling him deeper, needing him closer.

"Yes," I gasped, my hands clutching his broad shoulders, nails digging into his skin. "Yours. All of you."

Garrett's hips slammed into mine with bruising force, each thrust pushing me further up the bed until my head pressed against the headboard. He didn't slow, didn't gentle.

He took me with all the pent-up need of centuries, and I met him with equal ferocity.

The others stroked themselves faster, their breath coming in harsh pants as they watched, still hungry despite having already taken their pleasure. Their desire fed mine through our bond, building it higher and hotter until I was trembling on the edge of something monumental.

"Come for us," Garrett commanded, his voice thick with power and need. "Let us feel you."

When I came that last time, I shattered. Wrecked, overwhelmed, transcendent. I screamed all their names in a litany of devotion, my body convulsing around Garrett's cock as waves of pleasure crashed through me.

The forest answered with a pulse of energy that made the walls tremble. The air thickened with magic, wild and ancient, responding to our union as if it had been waiting for this moment. Garrett roared as he found his release, his seed spilling hot inside me as the others followed, their come painting my skin in primal claiming.

We didn't just bond. We didn't just fuck. We fused.

The magic that had broken their curse, that I had stolen and made my own, now bound us together in ways that defied explanation. I could feel them in my blood, my bones, my breath. Seven heartbeats synced with mine, seven souls entwined with my own.

When it was done, we lay tangled in a pile of limbs and breathless groans, every inch of me sore, every hole used, every heartbeat echoing with theirs. Garrett pulled me against his chest, the others finding places to touch, to hold, unwilling to break contact even in exhaustion. Someone moved the other bed against the one I was on as more of them joined in on the cuddle puddle.

"We are one," Nikolai whispered, his fingers tracing patterns on my sweat-slick skin.  
"And nothing, not fate, not magic, not time, can undo it now."

The forest hummed in agreement, the darkness within it retreating for now, respectful of what we had become together. Whatever challenges awaited us beyond this cabin, beyond this moment, we would face them united by something stronger than any curse.

I was theirs, and they were mine, and we were something new.