

Dark Wolf Chapter 11 - Tips

Venus jumped when she heard her phone's notification and sat up from the bed. She picked up the phone and saw that the text message was from Damian. She let out a sigh and swiped her screen, opening up the app.

"I am so sorry," the text read. She scrunched her eyebrows together and dialed his number.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," she said when he answered.

"I never wanted you to see me like that."

"Your wolf is part of who you are," she said.

He was quiet for several long moments, and she checked the phone, thinking the call had dropped.

"It is. That's the problem. My wolf is cursed and that's what you saw."

"I know who you are."

"I can't ask you to accept me. I am no good for you."

"That's up to me to decide."

"I don't want to hurt you or scare you. It's the worst thing I could imagine."

"I admit I was scared."

"I can't ever let that happen again."

"It won't," she said, but she didn't know how that was possible unless she let him claim her to break the curse.

Seeing him shift into a wolf, seeing the crazed violence in his eyes, it had made her think twice about what a relationship with him would be like.

If he were a human man, there's no way that she would consider a lifelong commitment after two dates. But Damian was a shifter and shifter commitments were something completely different than what was found in the human world.

"I want to see you," she said. "I want to know that you're okay."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "Don't you have any potion?"

"I do, but I am still ashamed that you saw an uncontrolled shift."

"You don't have anything to be ashamed of. Can you get a ride over to my hotel room?" she asked.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and he sighed. "Yes. I'll come over."

"Good. Then we can talk this through. There are things that I need to understand."

"I'll be there in half an hour, if that's okay."

"I'll be here."

She hung up the phone and bit her lip before standing up to pace the room. Venus had no idea what she was doing. She'd never been in a real relationship with a man. She was still under the thumb of her mother. She didn't even have control of her own life.

Everything felt so fraught and impossible, but she wasn't going to let go of this chance to be loved and the promise that she saw in Damian's eyes. She had to know if it was worth it. She had to know if it was the real thing.

Half an hour later, there was a gentle tapping at her door, and she slowly swung it open. Damian stood sheepishly on the other side holding a bouquet of daffodils. The yellow blooms smelled exquisite, and she inhaled them as he offered them to her.

"These are lovely, thank you so much," she said, stepping back to invite him inside.

"I wasn't sure what you would like. I thought maybe I should get something more stately or exotic, but for some reason these simple spring flowers are what called to me."

"They're perfect. I love them," she said, putting them in the hotel room ice bucket. She filled it with water and set it on the small table near the window. They sat across from each other, staring into each other's eyes.

"I don't really know how this is supposed to go," she said, looking at her clasped hands.

"That makes two of us."

She laughed, looking up at him. "I can't imagine you did a lot of dating seventy-five years ago out in the rural wilds of central Alaska."

"No. Not at all."

"How much experience do you have?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

He let out a sigh and sat back on his chair, looking out the window.

"Not much," he said, finally looking back at her. "What about you?"

"I haven't had much experience either." She laughed nervously. "Have you ever... You know...?"

"Have I ever made love to a woman?" he asked, filling in the blank for her. She slowly nodded, her eyes never leaving his. He gritted his teeth and frowned.

"No," he finally said. "Have you ever? I'm sure you have."

"I haven't."

"Not even once?"

"Not even once. My mother never approved of me dating. No one was ever good enough. Mostly no one was ever rich enough. She didn't want me to be with anyone who had less than a hundred million dollars' net worth."

"That takes me off the table then," he said darkly.

"My mother doesn't run my life," she snapped with more vehemence than she'd meant to.

"That's good. I'm glad."

"It's time for me to stand up for her," she said. "I'm not going to be her tool for wealth and fame anymore."

"You never should have been. No one should ever have treated you that way. You are a special human being with feelings and desires and talents of your own. You should always get to decide who and what you want to be."

"I want to be with you, Damian," she said, reaching out to take his hand. They had their hands clasped across the table and he stared at them, his lips trembling.

"I want you more than anything else in the world. I want to care for you and protect you and keep you safe from harm. But I'm afraid that harm might be me."

"But once we're mated, the curse will be broken," she said.

"So it would seem," he said. "But the curse is deeper than seventy-five years in animal form. I don't know if I will ever fully heal from what has been done and who I've become."

"You are a good man. Despite everything."

"I just wish there was more time. I don't want you to rush into anything. I want you to be sure."

"I want to be sure too. And I feel surer with every passing moment."

She gripped his hand more tightly and stood from her chair, pulling him up to his feet. She fell into his arms, and he embraced her against his chest, gently stroking the back of her neck and caressing her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

"You are a sweet, gentle man. I've been around a lot of bad people in my life—selfish, toxic people. You're not one of them." She looked up at him and could see tears forming in his eyes. His emotions were so raw and close to the surface it made her heart break. She cupped his cheek and gently pressed her lips against his.

"All I want is to take care of you," he said. "To love you and cherish you for the rest of my life."

"I know. I can feel it. I don't care that I've only known you for a short time. Everything in me tells me that this is it. We are meant to be. That you are the man who will give me everything I've ever wanted."

"I am just a refugee living in someone else's house. I have very little to offer."

"You have yourself. And that's all that matters."

He held her close and kissed her deeply, both of them tasting and feeling deeper into each other's souls. He inhaled sharply through his nose and his tongue slid between her lips.

A flood of desire washed through her, and she moaned at the taste of him. His hands slid down her back and cupped her ass, pulling her more tightly against him. She could feel his body respond to the feeling of her softness. She groaned and wrapped her arms around him.

"I want you. I want to feel you," he said with a low growl.

"I want you too. I want you to be my first, my everything."

"I can't claim you today. Not yet," he said, leaning his forehead against hers.

"I understand, but let's have this moment. Let's explore each other and learn what it means to make love."

Damian growled and lifted her off her feet, pulling her legs up around his waist as he carried her across the room and laid her on the bed. She felt his erection hard against the softness of her sex.

It was a completely foreign experience, but it filled her with such longing and desire that she could barely breathe from the excitement. He kissed her mouth and her face, his hands roaming her body and caressing her curves. She ran her fingers through his long hair and whispered his name over and over.

"I love you, Venus. I love you more than I've ever loved anything."

Her mouth dropped open, speechless as his kisses trailed down her body. He lifted her shirt and kissed her stomach and then over her chest. He pulled down the cup of her bra and flicked his tongue over her breast.

Her entire body shuddered with arousal as he sucked the dark brown nipple into his mouth. She gripped his hair and gasped, her sex flooded with heat, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Are you okay?" he asked, whispering in her ear.

"Yes. Don't stop."

He slipped her out of her shirt and bra and planted kisses over her breasts, gently squeezing one while he sucked on the other.

"You are so beautiful. So perfect."

Venus had heard the words a million times before, but coming from Damian it meant something completely different. He loved her and she believed him. She was beginning to feel that she loved him too.

It shook her to her very foundation. She wanted to see him, to touch him, feel him closer—as close as any two people could be. She gripped the hem of his shirt and pulled it up over his head. She gazed at his beautiful, perfect body and ran her hands over his chest.

She leaned up on her elbows and licked his chest, flicking his nipple with her tongue. He growled and kissed her. She slid her hands into his waistband. She wanted him. She wanted him inside her.

As if reading her mind, Damian stripped them both down to their underwear, slowly pulling the last silky bit of fabric down her legs. He spread her thighs and inhaled her sex, looking up into her eyes.

"Are you sure this is okay?" he asked with a growl as he licked the inside of her thigh. She dripped with longing and quivered. She needed him to touch her more than she'd ever needed anything in her life.

"Yes. I want you to kiss me. Down there."

"Oh, God, yes," he said in a reverent breath as his tongue slid up the inside of her leg. He placed his lips gently on her outer folds and her entire body spasmed with the contact. She mewled and pulled him closer against her. His tongue slid between her lips and made contact with her clit.

"Oh my God, Damian."

"I want to give you pleasure," he said. "I want you to feel how much I love you."

She was dumbstruck and unable to respond as his tongue licked her clit with just the right amount of pressure. Her nipples were tight as bullets as his tongue wagged on her sex.

"Don't stop, don't stop," she ground out.

Dark Wolf Chapter 12 - Tips

Electricity shot through her, igniting her entire body. She arched her back and groaned as her pussy clenched. She'd never felt so much pleasure. Even when she'd been alone with her vibrator in moments of solitude in the darkness of night.

This was better than any of her fantasies had ever come close to simulating. Her love for Damian exploded from the center of her chest and all she wanted was him. She pulled him toward her and kissed his lips, tasting her on his tongue. She felt his hardness against the wet throbbing of her sex.

He caressed her cheek and kissed her forehead.

"You're so beautiful when you climax," he said. "It's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

She wanted him inside her more than she had ever wanted anything. She wanted to feel the power of his hips thrusting and his cock sliding deep. She wanted the two of them to become one. She tilted her hips, angling his cock against her entrance.

The phone rang and she gr0aned, reaching for her cell phone to turn it off, but then she noticed the caller ID.

"It's my mother," she said.

"Leave it," he said, k!ssing her gently on her face.

"I need to know what she wants," she said, fear suddenly gripping her ch3st.

"Okay. But don't let her upset you," he said, rolling away and lying beside her. She sat up and grabbed the phone and fl!cked the b.utton to answer.

"Hello?" she asked, holding the phone to her ear.

"What took you so long?"

"I was busy," she said, standing from the bed and slipping a bathrobe around her shoulders. "I was in the gym."

"You're supposed to work out in the morning. Not the afternoon."

"It's my second workout," she said. "I ate a piece of pizza, and I wanted to work it off."

She bit her l!p, hating the sound of her own lies.

"I am sitting on the plane. We are about to taxi out onto the runway. I'm going to be in Selkie by tomorrow afternoon."

"Mother, you don't need to do that," she said with deep alarm.

"It was you who decided to stay in Alaska when you should have been leaving tomorrow. Now I have to go out of my way to make sure that you're safe and staying on track. Who knows what kind of trouble you could get into on your own up there."

"I'm absolutely fine. I'm an adult. I can take care of myself."

"Clearly, that's not true," her mother said.

Venus cringed. She hated how her mother made her feel. Like a small, vulnerable child who had no choice and no options. She looked back at Damian. He had a deep frown on his face.

"What is it?" he mouthed. She shook her head, too ashamed to respond.

"I'm going to bring you back to New York with me. If you insist on staying in Alaska, I will just have to come out there to take care of you while you are on your vacation."

"I wish you had spoken to me before you made this decision."

"You left me no choice, Venus. I have to go now. We are about ready to take off."

Her mother hung up the phone and the line went silent.

Venus collapsed on the bed and buried her face in her hands with a deep groan.

"What happened?" Damian asked, rubbing her back.

"My mother is coming to Selkie. She insists on staying with me during my vacation."

"That's crazy. You don't need a babysitter."

"She doesn't like letting me out of her sight if I'm not working. I should've known something like this would happen. I'm never going to escape her."

"It's okay," he said, massaging her shoulders. "I'll be here with you. I'll help you with whatever you need."

"It's probably better if she doesn't know about you," she said without thinking.

"Oh," Damian said, pulling away.

Venus suddenly realized what she'd said. She reached out to him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm here for you no matter what. That will never change. I will offer you whatever support I'm capable of giving. I wish I could do more."

"You've done more for me than anyone else ever has. Now I know what it feels like to be loved. I understand what real loyalty feels like."

"If I were a better man, there would be no question."

"I don't think you understand what a good man you truly are, Damian Winter. I've never had anyone love me for who I am. They always want my beauty or my fame or my status. No one has ever really wanted my heart. Not until you."

"You have the kindest, purest heart," he said, kissing the back of her hand. "Anyone who doesn't see that and cherish it is a fool. Not just a fool, a complete monster." He looked down at the blankets slung over his lap. "A greater monster than even me."

"There's nothing monstrous about you, Damian. You're kind and noble and good."

"Perhaps. I want to do the right thing, but I don't know what that is. Right now, I'm afraid the right thing is stepping back and letting you work things out with your family. I don't want to put my own needs in the middle of the situation with your mom."

"That may be wise for now," she said with a lump in her throat. She couldn't even imagine what her mother would think of Damian.

She could see the sadness welling in his eyes like tears. He nodded once and stood from the bed before he pulled on his pants and shoes.

"I am here for you, for anything you need. Just call me and I will come running. I promise you. You're all that matters to me. I will go to the ends of the Earth to make you happy. Right now, I will leave to give you space."

The last thing she wanted was for Damian to leave. They had been about to make love. The change of events was giving her whiplash. She wanted him to stay, but she also knew that she didn't want him in the middle of the wrath that would come from her mom. It was time for her to stand up for herself and to make a real choice, and until she did, Damian was better off as far away as he could get.

"I want you to know," she said, walking towards him and wrapping her arms around his shoulders, "that I am in love with you. And nothing she says or does is going to change that."

"I feel exactly the same way."

He kissed her forehead and then her lips and then slowly turned away and walked out the door. As it clicked behind him, Venus collapsed on the bed and burst into tears. She had never felt so trapped and so conflicted. She didn't want to think about what her mother would do if she found out about Damian and all the twisted, manipulative, unkind words that would follow.

She curled up in the bed and stared at the wall. Tomorrow would bring inevitable conflict. There was no way to prevent it if she ever wanted to break free.

She should have asked Damian to stay—to make love to her, claim her—but she knew the moment wasn't right. They needed to clear the air. They needed the space that would come once she had made a real decision. A decision she didn't know if she was strong enough to make.

She lay in the bed in her bathrobe, staring at the glow behind the curtains until the sun finally set. She was left in a dim, lonely room all by herself. Finally, she stood up and got herself dressed.

She had sent Damian away for his own protection, but she needed to fill the gaping hole inside of her. She needed to practice standing up for herself and following her own path; her own desires.

She pulled on a warm jacket and boots and headed downstairs. She remembered a River's Bakery was beside the bookstore where Damian's brother worked.

She was going to eat pastries until she was full, and she wasn't going to have one single guilty feeling about it. Maybe if she did, it would give her the courage to break free when her mother arrived tomorrow.

It was several blocks to the bakery and when she slipped through the door and inhaled the scents of butter, chocolate, frosting and sugar, she went weak in the knees and instantly salivated.

She went to the counter and ordered one of everything that looked good, along with a large pot of tea. She took a seat by the window and waited for the cashier to bring her order to her table.

When she bit into the first pastry, delectable chocolatey sweetness melted over her tongue, and she groaned with satisfaction.

She looked up and saw Luna wave at her from the other side of the window. Venus smiled and waved back. The woman walked through the door of the bakery and sat beside her with a giant smile.

"What a lovely assortment of pastries," Luna said with a grin.

"I don't think I've ever tasted anything so good. Even in France."

The truth was she hadn't ever been allowed to eat pastries while in France. Or baguettes, or anything else besides salad and water and lean chicken breast.

"I saw you sitting here in the window and thought I'd come to see how you were after yesterday."

"Better and then worse," she said, taking a sip of sweet tea.

"How's that?" Luna asked with true compassion in her eyes.

"Damian and I seem to be working things out, but truth be told, he is the least of my concerns."

"Oh?" Luna asked as she accepted a cup of tea from the cashier and took a sip.

"My mother," Venus said with a sigh. She shoved another bite of chocolate croissant in her mouth. "She's the definition of a stage mother."

"I see. Is she here?"

"She's in New York. Or she was. She just told me she was getting on a plane and would be here tomorrow."

"But you're an adult. At least you should be if you signed up for mate dot com."

"I'm twenty-four."

"You're so beautiful it's hard to tell," Luna said, taking a sip of tea. Venus offered her a pastry and Luna readily accepted it.

"She's been my manager all my life. I've been a professional model since I was thirteen. Before that, I was in all kinds of beauty pageants from the time I was three. She tries to run my life. Today was the last day of my shoot here, and I told her I was going to stay. But of course, she couldn't allow me to have even a few days of freedom without watching over me."

Luna scrunched her eyebrows together and clenched her teeth. She slowly shook her head and then took another bite of pastry.

"What does Damian think about all of that?"

"We've agreed to stay apart until after I've spoken with her."

Luna slowly nodded and tapped the crumbs off her flaky Danish.

"He should be beside you. Defending you."

"It's for me to do. I have to stand up to her once and for all."

"She's your mother. She's had all this power over you all your life. You're going to need help."

"Maybe, but I think this is something I have to deal with on my own."

"We are all here for you, Venus. Me, the Winters, even the Doolittles. We have your back. Don't let yourself get sucked back into her vortex. I understand what it's like to be the child of a manipulator. My dad was the same. I had no idea what it felt like to be truly loved and supported until I met Rex.

"It took a massive betrayal for me to finally break out of the slumber I was in. I understand exactly what it's like to be raised by a person like that. You spend your

whole life trying to please them and nothing ever works. But you need to know you have the right to be happy. You're strong and beautiful and talented and kind. A world of love and community is waiting for you. Just don't forget that we're here for you."

Luna reached out and squeezed Venus's hand. She felt a tear welling in the corner of her eye at such kindness. Venus couldn't remember the last time anyone had been so genuinely understanding and helpful.

Now she had Damian and a friend in Luna. She wiped the tear from her eye with a napkin and squeezed Luna's hand back. She felt as if she had found a true kindred spirit. Someone who understood what she was going through, and what it was like to be treated so badly by someone who was supposed to love her.

"I won't forget. I'll stay strong. I promise."

Dark Wolf Chapter 13 - Tips

Tearing himself away from Venus was the hardest thing he'd ever done. As he walked down the stairs and into the cool afternoon light, he couldn't believe that he'd done it. He wanted to go back upstairs, throw his arms around her and hold her tight, but she didn't want him to see her at her weakest.

He had to respect her need to deal with her mother on her own. It was her own mountain to climb. Damian couldn't climb it for her, despite how much he wanted to.

He growled at himself for not knowing how to protect her and hurried down the street to where he'd parked Patrick's truck. He jumped inside and hit the steering wheel with his fist. What kind of man leaves his mate in her hour of need?

But he had to go. He had to step back and give her the space she needed to make her own choices and fight her own battles.

He thought about his own mother and father on the way home. They'd been such kind, supportive people that he couldn't even comprehend the controlling bltch that Venus's mother appeared to be. It made him think of the Snow Queen and the seventy-five-year curse he and his brothers had suffered.

They'd made a mistake. They had tried to steal from a witch. Stealing was wrong, and the snow flower was invaluable, but even if they'd robbed a bank or stolen a priceless jewel, they would have been out of jail long ago for the crime.

The Snow Queen's cruelty had lingered for years and years, making it almost impossible for them to escape. Finally, the brothers had made the choice to run hundreds of miles through the snow and ice of the Alaskan winter to make their way to Fate Island.

It had been a struggle that they had shared, but they'd finally made it, and now two of the six of them had found their mates here. Rex's curse had been broken through claiming his beloved Luna.

The possibility that Damian's curse could also be broken loomed large before him, but he wanted something more than to break his curse. He wanted her to be happy and free. They were both trapped by an evil witch but in their own ways.

Just thinking about what her mother had done to her, how she used and manipulated her all these years made him so angry that he had to pull over on the side of the road to catch his breath.

He thought about how Blake wanted to kill the Snow Queen. Despite their failed attempts and his own near death, he understood his older brother's point of view. Evil should be punished. The victims of their crimes deserved justice.

The Winters deserved justice for their pain and torment, but they were not completely innocent. Venus, on the other hand, was. She'd been cursed with a terrible, selfish parent, and no child deserved to be treated like a pawn in someone's game.

He slowly pulled back out on the road, trying to get his rage under control. He wouldn't be any good to her if he got into an accident and went up in flames. And it certainly wouldn't be a way to pay back the Doolittles for everything they'd done to help him and his brothers.

When he made it home, his other brothers were nowhere to be seen. The Doolittles were setting the table for dinner when Damian walked through the door. Rebecca smiled, Minnie gave him a little wave, and the teenage boys Roger and Frederick nodded.

"What's up?" Frederick asked.

"You look like death warmed over," said Roger.

"Are you okay?" Rebecca asked, grabbing his shoulder compassionately.

"I'm fine."

"Did something go wrong with Venus?" Patrick asked, setting the roast chicken down at the table.

"Her mother's coming to Selkie."

"Is that a problem?" Rebecca asked, not understanding. She was a wonderful loving mother; she would assume that Venus's mom was the same.

"Venus's mother is the quintessential stage mom," Damian said. He had just learned what the term meant. It tasted like poison on his tongue.

"Oh," Rebecca said, looking over at Patrick.

"What are you doing back here?" Patrick said.

"Venus didn't want me to get in the middle of the drama. I should've stayed. I feel like such an impotent fool."

"If she wants to deal with it herself, you have to respect her wishes," Rebecca said.

"I know," Damian said, lowering his head and staring at the ground.

"Why don't you join us for dinner?" Rebecca asked as Patrick returned with a bowl of salad.

"Where are the others?" Damian asked, sliding into a chair beside Minnie.

"Your brothers have been fighting," said Patrick. "They've decided to go to separate quarters."

"Fighting about what?" Damian asked as Rebecca sliced into the chicken and served him a piece.

"Your parents' property sold for \$1.5 million today. Escrow papers were sent over to be signed."

"And Blake is refusing to sign?" Damian asked, scooping salad onto his plate.

"Exactly," Rebecca said, dishing up chicken onto her own plate.

"He just won't let it go," Damian said, shaking his head. "We need that money to move on with our lives. And to get out of your hair."

"Ain't that the truth," Patrick said with a smile and a wink.

"You and your brothers are welcome here as long as you need," Rebecca said.

"You've been so kind to us," Damian said, staring down at his food. The juicy chicken and gravy and crispy salad looked delicious, but his stomach was tied in knots. "\$1.5 million divided six ways... That would give Venus and I a good start in life."

"It certainly would," Rebecca said, slicing into her chicken and popping a bite in her mouth.

"It's time for us Winters to move on. I wish that Blake understood that."

"He's attached to the land in your parents' legacy. He wants to go back."

"Let him, then. He can live his life as a wolf on the land. The new buyers will never notice."

"Unless he gets shot," Patrick said.

Damian cringed, imagining his brother wandering the Arctic tundra alone. "I wish he could see what the rest of us sees."

"He is intent on killing her," Patrick said.

"Patrick," Rebecca said, shaking her head.

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I've heard them talking about it before," Minnie said.

Rebecca sighed and took a bite of salad.

"I talked to Rex about getting Blake some counseling. Perhaps all of you could go to family counseling together."

Damian gave her a sideways glance and then forced himself to take a bite of chicken. The idea of going to therapy with his brothers sounded ridiculous. They were mountain survivalists. Men who had lived as beasts for almost a hundred years. How could some human therapist help them?

"I know a shifter psychologist who specializes in shifter family issues," she went on. "It may be exactly what all of you need." She looked at Damian meaningfully.

He still had plenty of his own darkness to work through. It hadn't been easy. All he had been able to think about had been death for so long that the possibility of having a happy life hadn't even occurred to him until he met Venus. The fact that she accepted him, warts and all, was too beautiful to even believe could be true.

Kissing her, loving her, seeing her quiver with pleasure at his touch, it had made all the pain and torment worth it. He could weather any storm just to see her smile. If Blake found his mate, Damian knew that he would be able to let the land go; let go of his need for revenge against the Snow Queen. And finally move on.

"Love is the greatest healer of all," Damian said in a soft voice.

"That's true, Damian," Rebecca said sympathetically. "When does Venus's mother arrive?"

"She'll be here soon." Rebecca nodded. "I am worried about her. The woman has control of Venus's life. I feel like I need to be there for her to help her stay strong."

"Just knowing that you're on her side will give her strength," Rebecca said.

Damian knew that Rebecca had been born human and had been turned by Patrick on their wedding night. She understood what it meant to be loved by a shifter and brought into the shifters' world after living a life as a human.

But Rebecca had a lovely family with supportive parents who'd paid her way through law school and had always stood by her side. They'd supported her relationship with Patrick and there were pictures of them smiling at their wedding. Damian didn't think that Venus's mother would be the same.

"I can't lose her," he said through the lump in his throat.

"You won't. Fate works in mysterious ways. You just have to keep the faith," Patrick said.

It was strange being at the dining room table with the Doolittles without the rest of his brothers around. He wasn't sure he even wanted to know where the rest of them were, but finally decided to ask.

"Felix is upstairs learning about computer programming," Patrick said, counting off on his fingers. "Blake ran off into the woods in wolf form. Tate and Thorne went into town to blow off steam. They said they probably wouldn't be back until morning."

"Good for them," Damian said, almost wishing he'd known his brothers were in town so that he could have hung out with them during this challenging night.

He finished his meal, listening to the Doolittle children talking about their day at school and their hobbies.

He helped Patrick clean up after dinner and then went upstairs to talk to Felix. He found his brother in the upstairs office, typing away on the keyboard.

"What are you up to?" Damian asked. Felix looked up at him as if snapping out of a dream. "You missed dinner."

"That's fine. I needed some time alone."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No. I need to take a break now," Felix said, rubbing his eyes. "Computer technology is absolutely fascinating. I've been learning a computer programming language and there is just so much it can do."

Damian sat on the futon across from his brother. He had always been the most intellectual of the six of them, studying medicine and law back before the curse. He had gone to college for a few years before returning home when their father died. Damian had always felt sad that Felix couldn't complete his education. It didn't surprise him that his older brother was finding a new passion in life.

"The world has changed so much. But I still enjoy reading the same books I enjoyed before the curse," Damian said.

"Now it's so easy to get them. You can download them instantly," Felix said, shaking his head.

"It is amazing," Damian said.

He had read almost every paperback in the Doolittles' house since the potion had allowed them to stay human for more than one day a month, but he hadn't had the concentration to read anything since he'd met Venus.

Knowing Venus was the most important thing that had ever happened to him. He imagined sitting on the couch on a lazy Sunday with a book and a cup of tea as it rained outside the window in their cozy little home. The idea of it was so vivid in his mind that it made him take a shuddering breath.

"What happened with your mate?" Felix asked.

"Her mother's coming to town. She is a horrible person. Venus is going to stand up to her once and for all."

Dark Wolf Chapter 14 - Tips

Venus barely slept, tossing and turning in the hotel bed. When the dawn light finally crept over the mountains and through her window, she felt foggy and exhausted.

She climbed out of bed and stretched, her mind confused and anxious about what the day would bring. She wished that she'd woken up with Damian by her side, but she had sent him away. It was the right choice. She knew she had to face this on her own, but that didn't make it any easier.

Damian had become a strength for her, and she couldn't deny that she already depended on that strength and love to carry her through. Her mother's plane had arrived in Juneau late the night before and she would be getting on the first ferry to Fate Island in just a few hours.

Venus's skin crawled as she thought about the upcoming confrontation. Would she be able to withstand the force of her mother and all the years of conditioning that came with

it? She didn't know anything else. She was her mother's pawn and that was all she'd ever been.

Despite all the travel, experiences, and accolades, she was still a prisoner. But she didn't have to be. She could be free. She could be loved and cared for and live a quiet peaceful life with Damian here on Fate Island.

The thought of going back to New York and giving in to her mother's demands twisted her stomach with agony. It was unimaginable.

She wanted to call him or text him and ask him to come stand by her while she waited but knew this was a trial she had to get through on her own.

Then she would know she was ready to accept his claiming bite and become his mate. After that, they would stand together against whatever came.

Damian wasn't the only one who was cursed—she had a curse of her own. While their love had brought them together through the mysterious workings of fate, they both still had to work through their own darkness by themselves. If she couldn't face her mother, then how could she ever help Damian face his own darkness?

The same went for him. They needed to be strong on their own so that they could be strong for each other. It all made so much sense to her now, but that didn't mean she didn't wish he was with her, holding her and kissing her.

The evening before, so close to making love, had been so right. It was a preview of what was to come when they were able to spend their lives together. She wanted it so badly she could taste it. It was all she'd ever wanted, after all those years of loneliness, of following her mother's orders, of being molded into somebody her mother wanted her to be.

Damian saw the true Venus. Beyond all the glamor and the training that her mother had thrust upon her. Damian saw directly into her heart, and she saw into his. There was no denying they were meant to be together. She would do whatever it took to ensure their future.

She was so nervous that after drinking her coffee, she walked out into the dim dawn light and watched the boats on the harbor.

Fate Island was a beautiful place. A place where all her dreams could come true. She watched the seagulls flying on the airstreams and she almost felt as if she could fly with them. Someday soon, this world would be hers.

She would be safe from worries. She would be home. After her walk, she went back to her hotel room and finally succumbed to sleep. By the time she woke up, her mother's ferry was due to arrive any minute.

She quickly showered and changed and put on fresh makeup. The last thing she needed was her mom criticizing her unkempt appearance. Part of her wanted to arrive with bags under her eyes and wearing a sweatsuit, but she had a much more important purpose today than irritating her mother.

She looked at herself in the mirror and let out a deep breath. She knew she looked tired but there was no changing that now. She had to face what was in front of her.

Her phone buzzed with a text, and she picked it up, thinking it would be from her mom, but it was from Damian telling her he was there for her no matter what. She squeezed her eyes closed and let out a ragged breath before replying.

"I know you are. I can feel you in my heart."

It was true. She felt him all around her. It was the best feeling in the world, and she could only imagine what it would be like once they were finally bonded together as mates.

That would have to wait until this was done. There was no going back now—she had to face her own curse and put it to rest. She had to be a hero and slay her own dragon, like a knight in a fairytale.

Sleeping Beauty was awake, and she would sleep no more.

She grabbed her purse, slung on her jacket, and headed out the door. As she watched the ferry draw closer to the harbor, her heart pounded in her chest, and she tried to calm down.

When the ferry docked and the passengers began to disembark, she bit her lip watching each one, expecting to see her mother. When her mom's figure finally emerged from the ferry, she gritted her teeth and forced herself to smile. Her mother immediately saw her. She headed right toward her, wearing a thick fur coat and pulling a suitcase behind her. She did not look happy.

"I see you had the decency to meet me on arrival," her mother said. "I've arranged for a car to take us to this hotel you're staying in. I hope the accommodations are sufficient."

Venus wasn't staying in the most luxurious hotel on the island. It was the same place all the other models and crew had booked. It was sufficient for business travelers, but not at all the kind of luxury her mother would expect.

"Maybe you'd like to stay somewhere else."

"It's where you wanted to have your vacation. If it's good enough for you, then it should be good enough for me."

A taxi arrived and the driver put her mother's suitcase in the trunk. They both climbed inside. Venus gritted her teeth, not knowing what to say or do. She felt dumbstruck and overwhelmed by her mother's presence. She felt herself sinking in on herself like she always did—as if she was still a little girl and her mother was the whole world.

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe through the panic. She was a grown woman, and she made her own choices. She reminded herself of that repeatedly. It didn't matter that her mother was her manager and that she took a percentage of every contract that Venus obtained. Venus had her own money, her own bank account, and she had found the love of her life.

She could easily start over right here and now. She could cut ties with her mother completely and she would be free. Her mom might try to sue her for breach of contract, but she knew that she couldn't win.

She believed that she had control and probably never imagined that Venus wouldn't continue to be the dutiful daughter she'd always been. She expected her to marry some billionaire and give her billionaire grandchildren.

They arrived at the hotel and her mother scoffed at the accommodations the minute the driver parked. Venus cringed, wishing she could just escape without having to face the inevitable conversation.

She should have just told her back on the docks. Then the woman could've gotten back on the ferry and left. There was still time—the afternoon ferry left three hours after it arrived—but Venus felt caught up in her mother's whirlwind. Just like she always was.

She clenched her fists, trying to remind herself to be strong. She had Damian's heart and his strength and his courage behind her. They had to stay strong for each other. She had to face her own curse. Her own monster. Her own wicked witch.

Her mother checked into the hotel and booked a room right next door to Venus. Once she was settled in, and she informed her that she was going to rest before their reservation at the Captain's Grotto.

It was the same restaurant that Damian had taken her to on their first date. She did not want to taint that memory with this conversation with her mother. She stood outside her mother's hotel room, staring at the door.

She had to get this out now. She had to tell her the truth.

She was staying on the island, she was going to be with Damian, and she was never going back to New York. She wouldn't let her mother control her ever again. She may

even quit modeling for good and spend her life following her own passions. Passions she had yet to fully discover.

With Damian by her side, though, she knew she would. But she was stuck in place like a statue, unable to move or speak. Finally, she simply turned back to her own room and closed the door behind her, feeling like a fool.

"Why can't I do it? Why can't I tell her?"

She dropped her jacket on a chair and pulled her phone out of her purse. There were several missed texts from Damian, asking her how things were going.

"I don't know if I can do it," she typed out.

"Yes you can. You're a strong, independent woman, Venus. You need to stand up for yourself. Don't allow her to control you any longer."

"I just don't know how to do it."

"I'm going to come be with you. We can face her together."

"No. I have to do this by myself."

"I don't want to leave you to face this on your own. I feel like I should be there for you."

"You are here for me."

She set the phone down on the bed and stood. Squaring her shoulders, she went back to her mother's door and knocked. Her mother finally answered, snapping at her as she opened the door, assuming that it was housekeeping.

"Venus? What are you doing? I told you I was napping."

"I need to speak with you, Mother," she said, brushing past her into the hotel room. Her mother closed the door and turned her head angrily.

"Can't this wait until dinner?"

"I don't want to go to the Captain's Grotto with you tonight."

"Why ever not? It's the best restaurant in town. Even a hick town like this has one good restaurant."

"Fate Island is a lovely place. It's a place I intend to stay."

"Stay? Have you lost your mind?"

"No. I've finally found it. After all these years, I didn't think that I could, but here I am saying the words. Mother, I'm not going back to New York with you."

"What's gotten into you, Venus? Did you eat bad clams or something? Has this cold air rotted your brain?"

"I'm no longer going to allow you to control me. I'm a grown woman and I make my own decisions."

"Is this about that shifter you were matched with on mate dot com?"

Venus gasped, her eyes widening. "How do you know about that?"

"You didn't think that I would allow you to go gallivanting off to Alaska without tracking your phone?" her mother said with a wicked laugh.

"You're insane."

"Someone has to look after you. You've never been able to manage yourself. You have some talent and some beauty, I'll give you that, but you are the most irresponsible girl on the planet. You need someone to tell you what to do, otherwise your life would be a complete disaster."

"The only complete disaster in my life is you. You've used me like a puppet on a string. But it ends now. No more."

"That shifter really has gotten into your brain. Have you let him touch you? Have you let him take your virtue? I should have known that the second I let you out of my sight you would let a dirty shifter take your greatest asset."

Venus stood stunned silent. Her mother's words cut like a knife. For the first time she was truly realizing the depths of her mother's insanity.

"Damian is a good man. And he's my mate. He loves me like no one ever has. I didn't even know what love was until I met him, thanks to being raised by a woman like you. But now I do, and I will be his mate, his wife, and the mother of his children here on Fate Island, where I can finally have a home."

"You have no idea what you're doing, throwing your life away like this. You could've had everything. I taught you everything, I trained you, and this is how you repay me? You ungrateful little b!tch."

Her mother raised her hand and slapped her across the face. Venus gasped, clutching her cheek in absolute shock. Her mother had always controlled her with her words, but she'd never struck her before.

"It's over, Mother. You lost. Take the money that you got out of me and go live the rest of your miserable life. You will never ever get anything more from me as long as I live."

"This isn't over, Venus," her mother growled.

"Yes, it is. I suggest you get on the next ferry out of town, because I'm calling my mate and he is a dark, wild wolf. He's a dangerous man, and I don't know what he'd do if he learned that you struck me."

"Are you threatening me?" her mother asked, shock written across her face.

Venus stepped forward menacingly.

"And what if I am? What would you do about it?"

Her mother gasped, her mouth hanging open comically. The woman was at a loss for words for the first time in Venus's life. Venus smirked, turned on her heel, and slid out the door.

Venus covered her mouth as she laughed, making her way back to her own room. She picked up her cellphone and tapped out a message to Damian. "I did it!!!"

"I knew you could."

"We need to get her on the ferry out of town. I don't want her on Fate Island for a minute more."

"I'm gathering my posse. We are here for you, Venus."

Half an hour later, six wolves, two bears and a witch were at Venus's door. All of Damian's brothers, Luna, and the Doolittles had come to support her. She knocked on her mother's door and the woman answered.

"I knew you'd come to your senses," she said smugly. Her face fell when she saw the assembled group on the other side.

"It's time for you to leave, ma'am," Rex said, a wave of his alpha power washing over everyone and slamming Venus's mother in the chest.

"What is the meaning of this?" she snapped.

"We're going to escort you to the next ferry out of town, and you're never coming back. You will never ever bother Venus again," Damian said.

"You. You're the one who twisted my daughter's mind against me."

"No one needed to convince Venus that you were an evil witch," Damian said. "You did that on your own."

The group slid through the door and grabbed Venus's mother's things, throwing the few items she'd unpacked back into her bags. She grumbled all the way back to the docks, but the power of the group was too much for her to stand against. She threatened to call the police, but the Doolittles just laughed at her.

"Every cop on the force is a shifter. No one's going to do anything to defend you. We all know the truth. You are going to get off our island right now," said Rebecca.

Venus's mother grabbed her rolling suitcase and grumbled angrily as she charged up the ramp onto the ferry. Venus fell into Damian's arms, and he held her tight.

The group watched the ferry disappear into the sunset. She looked up into her mate's eyes in the fading light of day, knowing that these wonderful people had her back.