

## Dark Wolf Chapter 4 - Tips

Damian looked in wonder at the vision of beauty on the screen before him. Big, dark eyes centered in a perfect oval face with high, aristocratic cheekbones. Her warm brown skin looked as soft as silk and begged for his fingertips to touch and caress.

He had never seen a woman so beautiful and perfect, even after weeks of watching TV shows and looking at endless images online. His inner wolf howled with need and the torment wracked his insides. He took another draft of potion and tried to remain calm.

“Venus,” he whispered.

The goddess of love and beauty. It was a perfect name for her. He’d spoken with her over the app and arranged a date that night. She had been the one to ask, and he wished he had asked her first, but he had been so dumbstruck. So shocked that not only had his mate arrived in his life so soon after coming to Selkie, but that she was here in this miraculous place.

“What are you looking at?” Thorne asked, walking to where Damian sat on the computer in the guest room.

“I found my mate,” he said with a raspy voice.

“No,” Thorne growled. “You? The young wolf who wants nothing more than to die?”

“The curse—” Damian started. But he couldn’t finish his thought.

All his darkness and all his moods seem to dissipate and lift away in the light of her beauty.

“That’s her. We’ve made a date for tonight. I need to make a reservation at the Captain’s Grotto.”

“Why you?” Thorne said with a growl as he turned away.

His older brother Thorne had a biting temper that his oldest brother and alpha never seemed to question, though Rex was always chiding Damian for simply speaking the truth. They should have all died long ago. Or at least be very, very old men.

He shook his head and buried his face in his hands. How could he bring all of this to Venus’s doorstep? It felt so wrong. This beautiful human woman didn’t deserve to have someone like him in her life, but there was no way that he could resist the draw he felt toward her.

He picked up the Doolittles’ landline and quickly called to make a reservation at the Captain’s Grotto that night. He was lucky to get a seat after dropping Rebecca

Doolittle's name. After he had completed the task, he stood from the chair in the upstairs guest room and walked down to the kitchen where he found Rebecca and Patrick tidying up.

"We hear you have big news about your mate," Rebecca said with a smile.

"She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said, his voice low and full of anxiety. "I have no idea how..."

"She's your mate, son," Patrick said, squeezing his shoulder. Damian appreciated the bear's reassurance. Damian looked like a much younger man, but the truth was that he was decades older than the middle-aged grizzly trying to impart his comfort and wisdom.

"You're going to do well tonight," Rebecca said, patting his arm gently. "Do you have an outfit picked out?"

"Yes, the one you helped me buy."

"You're taking her to the Captain's Grotto?" Patrick asked.

"I've made a reservation, just like you showed me."

"You're going to do well tonight, Damian. Don't be nervous," Rebecca said.

"Thank you. Both of you. You have been so kind to all of us. You saved our lives by allowing us to stay here."

"Don't mention it. Who would we be if we didn't offer a helping hand to other shifters?"

Damian nodded once and turned to go. It was hard to look into the kind, gentle eyes of Rebecca and Patrick Doolittle when all he felt was darkness and fear. But he also felt something new stirring inside him as he hurried up the stairs to find his date night outfit. Hope. It was a feeling he hadn't experienced in so long he wasn't sure what it was.

"Venus," he said in a low voice as he closed the door of the guestroom and began to look through the closet.

Her name was like a poem on his lips and tasted as sweet as honey. His inner wolf growled for his mate and a tinge of pain shot through his belly. He took a deep breath and let it out, knowing he had just taken a dose of potion and shouldn't need more for several hours.

How could he tell her about all of this? How could he expect her to accept him?

When he was a young man, shifters had kept their identities secret from the human world. It was considered dangerous to reveal yourself to anyone but your fated mate until you knew for a fact that they loved and accepted you. Even then, some shifters were hunted down and murdered by their mates' families.

It was hard to forget the fears and taboos of the past. But Venus had signed up to a shifter dating site. That much at least he knew she would accept from him. The rest? He had no idea.

It was only an hour and a half until the reservation, so he showered in the guest bathroom and changed into his clothes. He slapped on some of the expensive cologne that Patrick had lent him and brushed his hair as he looked in the mirror.

His shoulder-length blonde hair framed his face, and he rubbed his square freshly shaven jaw. Venus was perfect. A goddess like her namesake. He hoped that a cursed backcountry wolf wouldn't be a disappointment to her.

From her profile, he understood that she was a fashion model who traveled the world and lived in New York City. Part of him felt like it was doomed before it even started. But Luna and Rex were living happily together above New Moon Books in town. Perhaps the curse could be broken for him as well.

He headed downstairs where he heard his brother Tate playing video games with the Doolittles' teenage sons. Minnie was in the kitchen making cookies with her father. Blake sat alone in the living room reading an old book. Felix studied something on the computer.

He had no idea where Thorne had gone, and he was the last person Damian wanted to speak to right now. Getting through tonight would be challenging enough without Thorne's biting anger and proclivity for provoking him.

He walked into the kitchen where Patrick was scooping peanut butter cookies onto a cooling tray while his thirteen-year-old daughter prepared the next batch.

"You're looking dapper this evening," Patrick said with a toothy smile.

"She's going to love dad's cologne," Minnie said with a giggle as she scooped cookies on to another tray.

"Here are the keys to the truck. I trust that you will stay safe."

"You have my word as a Winter," he said. Something he did not give lightly.

His bond with his brothers was deep in his blood. They had lived their previous life as close as brothers could be, and the last seventy-five years as cursed wolves had only

deepened the bonds. They were a pack, a family. Despite their disagreements and scuffles, his word as a Winter was his bond.

“I trust you,” Patrick said, slapping the truck keys into Damian’s hand.

“Thank you again, Patrick.”

“Go get your mate, son.”

Damian nodded and Patrick handed him a cookie before he turned and walked to the door. He munched on the gooey, warm treat and it brought a smile to his face. He slipped out the door before his brothers could see where he was going. He was sure that word had already traveled through the ranks of the Winter wolves around the Doolittle house.

Soon they would need to leave. The Doolittles may have still welcomed the family, but Damian and his brothers were all beginning to feel an undercurrent of guilt for having stayed too long. No matter how many times the Doolittles assured them they were welcome, he knew that it was time for them to stop taking advantage of their hosts’ continuing hospitality.

He climbed behind the wheel of Patrick’s truck and thought about having his own truck, his own home. Somewhere for him and Venus to live and love. He shook his head at himself and gritted his teeth, knowing he was jumping the gun on that presumption.

The woman had not accepted him yet; she didn’t even know about the curse. Imagining them happy together in a cute little log cabin with baby wolves on his knee was getting ahead of himself. First, he had to court her—win her heart and her love. Something Damian was unsure he was capable of doing.

He’d had very little experience with women before the curse and even less after it. There had been a few stray kisses with women at the tavern in the closest town, but nothing after or since.

In a way, he was happy that he hadn’t spread himself thin, but at the same time he had no idea what he was doing. He understood that modern women were very different and typically far more experienced than he.

He wouldn’t hold it against Venus if she was like the majority of others. He was assured that it was quite normal for someone in their twenties to have had several romantic partners, even though the idea of it caused a jealous knot to twist in his gut.

She deserved so much more than his jealousy. She deserved more than a cursed wolf. But if he could do anything for her, if he could give her even the slightest glimmer of what she deserved, then he would gladly do it and would count it as serving his higher purpose before he died.

He listened to the local college radio on his way into town. Guitars and mandolins played folk music as the lilting female voice sang a sad lullaby about love and loss at sea. Damian took a deep breath and let it out. Dusk was falling over the land and the night sky spread out overhead between the line of trees along the road.

When he made it into the lights of town and pulled on to the shop-lined streets, butterflies burst in his belly and fluttered in his chest. He bit his lip in anticipation and when he parked his car and climbed out, he had to stop and catch his breath in order to keep himself from throwing up.

She was supposed to meet him here at eight, and he hoped that she was already comfortably seated at their table. He took several deep breaths and scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to steady his nerves.

When he stepped through the door of the Captain's Grotto, the smell of seafood pasta and crusty French bread filled the air, but over the strong scents of delicious food, he could smell the spicy scent of his mate.