

Dark Wolf Chapter 5 - Tips

Venus tapped her foot nervously and took another sip of Chardonnay. She couldn't believe she was on a date with a shifter. She couldn't believe she was on a date at all. It had been almost a year since she'd gone out with anyone, and before that she couldn't remember the last time she'd had any romantic relationship with the opposite sex.

According to her mother, no one was good enough for her. She had her sights set on a multimillionaire, at the very least, for her daughter. From what she understood about Damian, he wasn't wealthy. But he was her mate. Not that that would matter to her mother.

Her mother didn't have an opinion about shifters one way or another, but she did have an opinion about what she wanted for her daughter—and that was status and wealth. Nothing else would do.

That was what she'd been preparing Venus for, for her entire life. All the dance recitals and beauty pageants. All the acting lessons and fashion shows. Moving to New York and getting representation from the biggest modeling agency in the country, it hadn't been for Venus's personal success—it had been to land a rich husband in the end.

It wasn't as if her mother kept her intentions secret. She told her every single day what she wanted for her. Venus had learned long ago to keep her mouth closed. Her mother thought love was an illusion, and all that truly mattered was money.

Venus didn't know. She had no idea what love really was. She wanted to believe that deep down her mother loved her, but she just wasn't sure. Her father had left and had never come back.

Even after years of therapy, where her therapist tried to help her work through her relationships with her parents and to see that they were wounded people coming from a wounded place, she still hadn't had a true experience of love.

She had watched as her agent got married to the love of her life and had two beautiful children. She seemed happy. At least, her photos on Instagram seemed to show a perfect life. But if there was one thing Venus understood about images, it was that often they were superficial and completely fake.

She remembered the mountain lion shifter and how she talked about her mate and her family. Venus had a sense that maybe that was what love was supposed to look like. Something sweet and pure and true. She could only hope and pray that that was available to her too.

She took another sip of wine and then looked up at the front of the restaurant. There he stood, tall and broad shouldered with gleaming blue eyes that penetrated her soul. She

set down her wine glass as her heart leapt in her throat, and she stood nervously to her full height.

Damian strode across the room, cutting in front of the host. He approached her and she could see that even at her five-foot-eleven height, he was several inches taller than her, even in her heels. Her heart fluttered in her chest and her mouth went dry. He reached her and they stood staring at each other, several feet apart as the host tried to regain control of the situation.

“Can I get you a glass of wine?” the man asked.

Damian shot him a look as if he’d forgotten the man was there and then nodded sharply before turning his attention back to Venus. The host spread his arms, indicating that the two should sit. She felt lightheaded and weak in the knees so followed the suggestion. She slid into her seat and Damian mirrored her actions.

“Very good. I’ll be right back with a glass.”

“Hi,” he said in a gruff voice. “I’m Damian Winter. I’m pleased to meet you, Venus.”

They reached across the table to shake hands in a gesture that felt far too formal for the emotion she was experiencing. As soon as they touched, a fire lit in her belly, sparking from her fingertips, up her arm, down her shoulders and through every fiber of her being.

Her mouth dropped with a gasp, and she blinked several times, her eyes watering. She withdrew her hand, needing to regain control of herself. The emotions raging through her were too powerful to bear and she wasn’t sure how to process it.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said in a croaking voice.

Venus had been trained on her presentation her entire life. Her mother would scold her for her awkward behavior. But somehow, right now, it didn’t matter. Damian’s eyes were fixed on her like two lasers homing in on a target. She felt the heat of that intensity burning into her heart and mind and deep into her soul.

“You’re more beautiful in person,” he said. “If that’s even possible.”

The host returned with a bottle of Chardonnay and filled Damian’s glass. The man recited the specials and handed them both menus. But she didn’t hear a word that he said. When the host left them again in silence, she took another sip of wine, hoping that the alcohol would calm the raging inferno in her chest.

“So, you are in Selkie for a fashion shoot?” he asked, sipping his own wine.

“Yes. I’ll be here for a few days. It’s mind-blowing that I found you.”

"It's fate," he said, his eyes never leaving her for a second.

She gulped, watching every nuance and expression on his face. He was so handsome, so perfect, as if chiseled out of marble, if some marble statue could also be rugged and hot-blooded at the same time. She felt the heat rush between her legs and dampness rise on her brow.

"Fate," she said in a soft voice. "It was fate that I joined mate dot com. I did a shoot with some shifters out at the grizzly reserve, and one of the women told me about her family. It all just sounded so sweet. I had to know for myself."

"Sweet," he said in a low growl. "I don't know if that's the word I would use to describe me." He let out a dark, low laugh.

"Why did you call yourself Dark Wolf?" she asked.

He clenched his jaw and looked away from her for the first time since he'd spotted her across the room. He clasped his hands on the table in front of him and his gaze returned to her. She could see so much desperation and pain in his expression that her heart wept with compassion for whatever had caused it.

"I don't want to tell you," he said, smiling. "But I believe I must."

"It can't be that bad," she said with a laugh.

"You would be surprised," he said with a dark smile.

"Are you afraid that it will scare me away?" she asked.

At that exact moment, their server appeared and asked them if they were ready to order. Neither had looked at the menu yet, so they both ordered the special. The server took their menus and hurried away, leaving them in a heavy silence.

"I am one hundred years old," he told her.

"You don't look a day over ninety-nine," she said with a giggle, picking up her wine and taking a sip. She'd had half a glass which was usually about her limit, but she enjoyed the warm relaxation that swept over her and decided that today she would make an exception.

"It's not a joke," he said.

She looked back up at him with confusion building in her chest.

"Seventy-five years ago, my brothers and I were cursed by a witch called the Snow Queen."

Venus stifled a laugh and shook her head, thinking he was pulling her leg, but the expression on Damian's face told her that it was no joke.

"A witch?" she said, taking a bite of buttered French bread.

"She lived high in the mountains in a palace above our family's land."

Venus gobbled down the bread, unable to stop herself. It was so delicious. At the back of her mind, she heard her mother's voice telling her not to overeat, but her mate was sitting in front of her telling her that he was cursed by a witch. If this wasn't the moment where she should break her diet, then she didn't know what was.

The server appeared with their first course, and she took a bite of the delicious clam chowder, trying to reconcile what he had just said.

"I'm not sure what to think."

"I shouldn't have told you. I can see that now." He crossed his arms and stared at his soup. "I'm sorry."

She bit her lip and searched his eyes. He was telling the truth—she could see it. After all the places she'd been and all the people she'd interacted with, Venus had developed a keen sense of character.

Not to mention that the many years of placating her mother had taught her when people were lying, when they were manipulating, and when they were telling the truth. Damian was telling the truth.

"So, this witch, why did she curse you?"

He let out a long, ragged sigh and took a bite of soup. After he swallowed and wiped his mouth, he looked back up at her.

"We stole the snow flower of youth. It was wrong, but we wanted to save our mother. She was dying of the fever the same year our father was crushed in an avalanche. It was too much loss and we all decided unanimously to take the flower. It grew each year. We learned the stories from our father and grandfather before him. They had seen it themselves. They saw how she grew old each year and was renewed in the spring by the single icy flower that grew in her garden."

"That sounds like something out of a fairytale," she said.

"Being with you is like something out of a fairytale," he said. "You have the name of a goddess. And you clearly are one as well."

Venus felt her face heat in spite of herself. She was used to being complimented, and the line wasn't even particularly original, but coming from Damian, it was sincere and passionate, and she felt it in her gut.

As they ate their main course, he told her about the decades they'd spent trapped as wolves. Unable to shift except on the night of the full moon. It was devastating and painful to listen to his story. Her heart bled for him, and she wanted more than anything else to make all the pain go away.

"How are you a man tonight? It's not the full moon."

"My brother's mate, Luna. She is a witch as well."

Venus shook her head. The idea of magic and witches was completely foreign to her, and she wasn't sure what to make of all of it. If it had been coming from anyone else, she wouldn't have believed it, but coming from Damian, she could sense that it was all true.

"She had a potion that her grandmother had started before she passed away. It worked well enough to allow us to be men, though there are side effects. She's trying to make it stronger and more permanent, but the only way to break the curse permanently is to claim our fated mates."

"To claim me..." she said with a dry voice. Their eyes locked and her mouth watered thinking about kissing his full, beautiful lips.

Venus had traveled the world, had walked the most glamorous runways in the most luxurious cities in the world, but she had never been with a man. And even the few men she had dated could not compare to the towering masculinity of Damian Winter's presence.

She knew what it meant to be claimed by a shifter. There was enough information on their culture that most humans understood. It was a mating bite. Like a marriage, but far stronger and more permanent.

"Maybe I can help you," she said in a breathy voice.

"Venus," he said, reaching out to take her hand.

The server set chocolate mousse in front of them and then scurried away.

"I could never ask you to sacrifice yourself for me."

"It wouldn't be a sacrifice, would it?" she said. She gulped, just thinking about what it would be like with this man, with his big, strong body over hers, kissing her, loving her, holding her. Heat flooded into her core, and she bit her lip.

“I am not asking you to give yourself to me until you know that you want me as a man. Until you know that you love me.”

“I understand,” she said.

She had been attracted to him on sight, and everything about him was magnetic to her, but hearing him say that he wanted her to love him before she agreed to be his mate sent a wave of relief through her body.

It made her even more attracted to him that he cared more about her happiness than his own. Without claiming his mate, he would remain cursed. From what he'd said about his life, his years as a wolf, she could tell that it had taken a toll on his psyche.

“So, Damian Winter, you want to court me?”

“More than I've ever wanted anything else in my life.”