

## Dark Wolf Chapter 6 - Tips

Damian stared deep into Venus's beautiful, chocolate-colored eyes. It was like he had died and gone to heaven.

A wave of pain and torment racked his body and mind. He growled and gripped his temples, doubling over in his seat. Venus gasped and stood to her feet, hurrying around the table to try to comfort him.

His whole body tensed as he did everything in his power not to push her away. He pulled the vial from his pocket, unscrewed the lid and dropped a dropperful into his mouth.

As the potion swept into his bloodstream, the pain and torment slowly subsided. Venus knelt beside him, looking up into his eyes with an expression of absolute compassion on her face.

"Damian," she said with quivering lips. "Are you all right?"

He covered her hand with his own. "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

She moved back to her seat and stared at him. He shook his head, feeling so ashamed he could taste it over the lingering taste of chocolate and the bitter taste of potion.

"Now you know what you're getting into."

"It doesn't change anything. I've agreed to let you court me," she said with a choked laugh.

He breathed deeply and let it out, trying to relax as the last waves of pain subsided.

"I would understand if you changed your mind after seeing that."

"I'm not changing my mind."

The waiter returned with the bill, and Damian quickly paid it. "Maybe we could get some air," he said.

They gathered their jackets and walked outside. He was wearing a winter parka and she a full-length fur coat that he could smell didn't come from any living animal.

It was comical to him that she would wear fake fur in a place like Alaska. He and his brothers had no qualms about ripping animals apart and feasting on their flesh and bones, but he wouldn't share such thoughts with this woman who lived a very different life.

He held the door for her as they made their way out of the restaurant and started a slow walk along the harbor. The waxing moon was high overhead. It would be full in another week, giving him and his brothers the one night of the month where they could forgo the potion and live without pain.

“How often do you have to take it?” she asked, wrapping her arm around his and huddling close to him for warmth. The early spring air was far more temperate on Fate Island than it would have been on their property in central Alaska. But there was still a chill.

“Every three hours,” he said. He covered her hands with his, offering her his warmth. He had lived naked and cold in the deepest frozen wilderness most of his life. Venus knew nothing of such things. She lived in luxury and beauty, and that was what she deserved. Damian feared that he could never give her what she needed, and part of him knew that he should let her go right now. He would bring nothing but darkness into her life. Venus should only have light.

“Thinking of you being cursed for so long breaks my heart, Damian,” she said as they walked slowly down the street. The heels of her boots clicked on the pavement.

“If I hadn’t been cursed, I never would have met you,” he said. It was an optimistic statement so uncharacteristic of him that he stopped short and was unable to think or speak for several beats.

She turned to him under the lamplight and smiled. “That’s true. You would be a very old man or already passed on.”

Despite the evil of the Snow Queen’s curse and all the torment it had caused him and his brothers, without that act of cruelty, there was no way that he and Venus ever would have met. There was no way that she could have ever been his mate. He was a hundred years old, and she was twenty-four.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been happy that it happened,” he said with a bitter laugh.

She lifted her naked hand to cup his cheek. Her palm was warm despite the cold. Damian felt such tenderness in her touch that he was overcome with emotion.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her toward him. She gasped and leaned into him. Their lips met in a hot rush as the water sloshed against the hulls of the boats on the harbor. She moaned softly as their lips parted and their tongues slipped into each other’s mouths.

He pulled her more tightly against him, growing hot and hard with desire.

“Venus. Oh, Venus,” he said, kissing her cheeks and forehead. “You are a miracle.”

“You are a miracle to me, Damian. I just hope that I won’t wake up from this dream.”

“You deserve so much better than me.”

“You don’t know my life.”

He took a step back and looked at her. They’d spent the entire evening talking about his curse and all his years as a beast in the forest. They had spoken very little about her.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked you more about yourself. I just wanted to get this all off my chest, so you knew what you were getting into.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I’m glad you told me.” She chuckled.

“How does a woman as accomplished, beautiful, and as intelligent as you, feel like being with a cursed wolf like me is a dream?”

“Have you ever heard the term ‘stage mother’?” she asked, winding her fingers through his. They started back down the street, walking slowly hand-in-hand as tourists walked along the sidewalk and in and out of shops that were still open.

“I’ve never heard the term.”

“I’ve been trained from the time I was three years old to perform. I’ve been a professional model since I was thirteen. I don’t know any other life.”

“And it was your mother that pushed you into those things,” he said, catching on.

“Yes. That’s the long and short of it.”

He stopped and turned to her, pain tightening in his chest. But it wasn’t the pain of his curse, it was the pain of knowing that Venus—his beautiful, perfect mate—had experienced anything but absolute love and support as a child and as a woman.

“I’m so sorry. I have no words.”

“I suppose there are benefits. I’ve seen so much. And so many people would love to have what I have. I have a beautiful apartment in New York City. I have a closet full of designer clothes. Travel, expensive meals, and the attentions of the most successful men in the world.”

Damian gritted his teeth and growled, feeling a surge of jealousy that he could barely contain.

“But I don’t know if I care about any of that,” she said. “I think I just want a simple life. Something I can count on; something real. I met a mountain lion shifter at my last photoshoot. She told me about her mate and their life together.

“All I could think was how lucky she was, and how jealous I felt. I have walked the streets of Paris, eaten at the most fabulous restaurants in Italy, Tokyo and London, but when I came to Selkie, part of me felt like I’d finally come home. There’s just something magical about this place. Something made me feel like I could sink into its warmth, like stepping into a hot tub. And then I met you, Damian.”

A tear slid down his cheek as he wrapped her in his embrace and breathed in the soft scent of her skin. It enraptured him and surrounded him with absolute bliss. He knew deep down inside that he would do anything to protect this woman, to give her everything that she wanted and needed. He would work every moment for the rest of his life just to see her smile.

“My brothers and I are trying to sell our land. After the property is sold, we will split the money and will each be able to buy our own homes.”

“And do you plan to stay here in Alaska?”

“My brothers and I have our differences, but I wouldn’t want to leave my pack. Unless it was to be with my mate. I would go anywhere and do anything to be with you.”

Venus giggled and bit her lip, shaking her head. “I can’t believe that we just met,” she said. “It feels like we’ve known each other a million years.”

“That’s what it’s like with your mate. Part of me didn’t believe that it would be possible for me after all these years. But here you are and here I am. The fates have brought us together. I am beginning to believe again that there’s hope for me, for my brothers, for this life.”

“You’ve given me hope too, Damian,” she said, caressing his cheek.

He leaned in again and kissed her. Deep and desperate and hungry. She groaned and melted in his arms and his inner wolf growled for him to claim her. But he knew it was too soon.

He couldn’t be reckless and rush headlong into a mating. He was an old-fashioned man. He needed to know she was ready, that she loved him, and that she understood what it meant to be a shifter’s mate.

“Can I give you a lift back to your hotel?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

They walked back to the truck, and he held the door for her as she climbed inside. They chatted about how cute Selkie was and how different things were now from when he was young. He pulled up in front of one of the higher-end tourist hotels in town and walked her through the lobby and up to her door.

“This is me,” she said, pulling a thick card out of her pocket.

“When can we see each other again?”

“I have a shoot tomorrow morning. But I’m free in the afternoon.”

“I would be honored if I could court you again tomorrow afternoon.”

“Of course.”

He leaned in and softly kissed her sweet lips, the bliss and the beauty and the pleasure of it washing over him like warm liquid love. He was bathed in the golden beauty of her embrace, but still he slowly and painfully pulled himself away. He lifted her hands to his lips and kissed the backs of her knuckles.

“Until then, beautiful goddess. I bid you good night.”

“Good night, Damian,” she said in a breathy voice. He turned away and walked down the hall. Behind him, he heard the door click open and then closed. He looked back and she was gone.

As he rode the elevator, he clasped his hands in front of himself and then bit his knuckles. His wolf growled and grunted, screaming for him to claim her, but the man was in control now.

Despite the very few days he had spent in this form over the last seventy-five years, he had grown older and wiser. He was not going to risk the love of his mate. She was his life, his everything, and he would do anything in his power to win her heart and to give her the home and the love that she deserved.

## **Dark Wolf Chapter 7 - Tips**

Venus closed the door behind her and let out a long sigh. Being with Damian fulfilled a deep yearning that she hadn’t even realized was there. He looked at her with such understanding and commitment.

After a lifetime of being used for one purpose or another, Damian’s care and selflessness towards her nearly broke her heart. Silent tears slid down her cheeks and she wiped them away. She looked at the dampness on her hands with shock and wonder, not understanding the roiling emotions raging through her body.

She slid out of her jacket and dropped it on a chair before collapsing on the bed. She stared at the ceiling and wondered what in the world she was going to do. Was she falling in love already? It didn't seem possible. Was she not seeing the red flags or the warning signs?

Damian had warned her about himself and everything that he considered a problem. But Venus didn't see any of that. She just saw a kind, sensitive man who'd been through so much hardship and trauma that it had colored his life, similarly to her own.

Venus had been existing for her mother, for her agent, and for everyone else for so long that she didn't even know what it felt like to be seen the way Damian seemed to see her.

She rolled over on the bed and groaned into the pillow. Then she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She had no idea what to do next. She had no idea how to be cared for and not obsess over what she could do for others. She knew she was falling for him. If he came back right now and asked if he could claim her, she might just say yes.

But maybe it was because she was so starved for the kind of love and attention that being a shifter's mate promised her. He was right, she had to know for sure that she really loved him. She laughed darkly and wiped the rest of the tears from her damp cheeks. She had no idea what love really felt like, and that was difficult to accept.

Selkie was the last stop on the trip before the crew would be returning home, but she wanted to stay longer than the few days planned for the shoot.

She stood up and started her nightly routine of skin care and hair care. After wrapping her hair in a silk scarf, she slid under the covers and tried to sleep. She had a very strict health and beauty routine that required her to get eight hours of sleep.

But she lay in bed, unable to think about anything but Damian. She picked up her phone from the bedside table and flicked over to the mate dot com app. She looked at all his photographs again, swooning like a teenage girl. She sighed and placed the phone over her heart, thinking about his embrace and his kiss. In the few times that Venus had been kissed in her life, it had never felt like that.

She picked up the phone and typed out a text message.

"I can't wait to see you tomorrow." She set the phone back down again, knowing that Damian didn't have a computer or phone of his own.

Falling asleep that night was a challenge, but she finally drifted off and woke again the next morning to her alarm. She went through her morning routine before a quick yoga session in the hotel room. After her stretch, she hit the gym on the first floor of the hotel.

She ran a mile on the treadmill and worked her arms and legs before returning to her room for a shower. By then it was 7 o'clock and she needed to start preparing for the shoot.

She checked her phone and found a message from Damian.

"I can't stop thinking about you."

"That makes two of us," she said, adding a winking emoji.

After her shower she moisturized and dressed without applying any makeup. The makeup artists at the shoot would take it off anyway. An hour later in the lobby, she waited with the other models for the van to pull up out front.

"I signed up for mate dot com last night," said Sarah Lynnwood, a model she'd worked with a handful of times before the Alaska trip. She scrolled through the matches with a frown. "I didn't get a 100% match though." Sarah bit her lip and scrunched her eyebrows.

"I did," Venus said with a whisper.

"You did what?" Sarah asked, looking up at her with surprise.

"I got a 100% match."

"You did not," she gasped with jealousy and disbelief.

"I did." Venus picked up her phone and tabbed over to mate dot com to show her the picture of Damian with the 100% match beside his profile.

"You bltch," Sarah said, laughing.

Venus knew that Sarah didn't actually believe Venus was a bltch. But being matched with a shifter came with a whole host of advantages compared to the human dating scene.

"He's from here," Venus said.

"He's in Selkie?"

"We met last night. It was the best date of my life."

"How many dates have you even been on, Venus?" Sarah asked, knowing Venus's strict lifestyle from their previous work together.

“At least two or three,” Venus said, shoving her phone back in her purse.

The other model rolled her eyes. “I guess congratulations is in order.”

“You could say that.”

“What’s your mother going to say?” Sarah mocked.

It was a running joke among some of the models in the agency, considering Venus’s mother traveled with her everywhere. In some ways it had helped insulate Venus from some of the more toxic aspects of being a young model on the international stage, but on the other hand, she had to deal with this kind of sniping.

Venus bit her lip as the van pulled up outside the hotel. She pretended like Sarah had never asked the question. Then the jealous model sat next to her in the van and asked about her mother again.

“I’m twenty-four years old. I don’t need my mother’s permission to date.”

“Are you sure about that?” Sarah taunted.

“I haven’t told her yet, to be honest. Damian and I were just matched. It’s not like we’re getting married or anything.”

“I thought that fated mates were it for a shifter. Are you telling me that he’s not for you?”

Venus let out a long-suffering sigh and looked out the window. Damian certainly felt like it for her. But she had very little experience with men. Even at the ripe old age of twenty-four with thousands of miles clocked on jets around the world, with all the people she’d met at every fancy party she’d attended, her actual experience with romantic relationships was almost zero.

“He is handsome and kind and we had a wonderful date,” she said, trying to be objective. She was getting sick of this conversation. She wasn’t catty with other models as a rule, but Sarah was testing her patience.

“Well, good for you,” Sarah said, standing up in the van and moving to the back with some of the other models. They giggled and laughed behind her, and Venus rolled her eyes. She was tired of always being the girl everyone else snickered at because of her mother’s overprotectiveness and stage mom behavior.

Venus realized, not for the first time, that she needed to get out from under her mother’s thumb. If that meant taking Damian as her mate and staying in Selkie to start a new life, or simply getting a new manager, something had to be done. She couldn’t live like this anymore.



When they made it to the shoot location, Venus focused on doing her best and posing for the camera. She tried to push Damian and her mother from her mind, but after the shoot was over, and the driver took the models back to the hotel, anxiety rose in her chest, and it was all she could think about. She called the shoot organizer to let her know that she'd be staying on after today and wouldn't be traveling back with the rest of the crew.

"Okay. Does your mom, I mean, manager know about this?" she asked Venus.

"Yes of course. We're both fully in agreement. I'm just going to take a little time off to rest and unwind. Selkie is such a charming place. Perfect for a little vacation."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," said the shoot organizer. "I just don't want to get any flak from your mom."

"Of course not. Thank you so much."

Venus got off the phone and sighed, scrubbing her face with her hands. Her mother was notorious in the industry for being difficult and domineering. Despite all that, Venus still booked high-end work, which really came down to her own talent and abilities. The last person she wanted to talk to right now was her mom, though if she didn't show up in New York on the return flight, there would be hell to pay.

But Venus didn't want to think about that right now. She had a date with Damian and that was all she cared about.

After she changed into some comfortable clothing, she met Damian down in the lobby of the hotel. He was even more beautiful in the light of day. Their eyes met across the lobby, and she walked toward him as if in a dream. She dressed in jeans and hiking boots and her all-weather parka. He had promised to take her for a hike up into the mountains, and she couldn't wait to experience the outdoors and fresh air with her rugged wolf shifter.

"You look prepared," he said, reaching out to take her hand.

"So do you," she said with a laugh. He was wearing outdoor clothes that suited him perfectly. His long blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail and his chin sported a day of stubble.

He smiled. "I packed a picnic lunch. I hope you're hungry."

"I'm famished," she said.

She was supposed to fast for most of the day and then eat a low-fat, low-calorie meal for dinner, but with Damian she wanted to consume the whole world and feel full.

Completely full for the first time in her life. Something about being with him gave her permission to really live, and it was a feeling that she didn't want to give away.

## Dark Wolf Chapter 8 - Tips

Damian marked Patrick's truck in the parking lot near the trailhead and grabbed the backpack from the backseat. Venus hopped out of the car and took a deep breath of the crisp afternoon air.

The sky was clear, and the sun was bright overhead. He felt so much happiness and fulfillment being with her that it almost scared him. She was everything to him. A chance at a new life; a chance to be reborn as a new man.

He had taken his dose of potion before picking her up and wouldn't need another for quite some time, but he always kept a vial in his pocket.

He slung the backpack over his shoulders, and he took Venus's hand as they headed up the mountain path.

"It is so peaceful here," she said with a soft sigh.

Songbirds were singing in the brush and the branches of the trees above. As they rose in elevation they came to a clearing where they could see down into the valley and all the way to the ocean.

There was a little bench off the trail where they sat together, and he unpacked their picnic lunch. He poured her a cup of hot chocolate from the thermos and handed her a sandwich wrapped in butcher paper.

"I got this from River's Bakery next door to my brother's mate's bookshop."

"She's the witch who made your potion?" Venus asked.

"The very same," Damian said.

Venus sipped her hot chocolate and unwrapped her sandwich and he followed suit. The food was delicious, and the company was even more so.

"I told the shoot manager that I'm not going back with the rest of the crew tomorrow," she said. "I want to spend more time here in Selkie, with you."

The wolf inside him screamed for him to claim her. He rubbed his temples, fighting the pain. His wolf's instinctive howling for his mate was nothing compared to the inner torment of the curse.

It was something he never wanted her to witness again, but Damian knew that claiming his mate so soon was not the right thing to do. They needed time for the courtship—she needed to know that she truly loved him. Otherwise, how could they possibly build their relationship on a foundation of lust?

He wanted her to be happy and he wanted to do everything he could to ensure that happiness. It meant more to him than almost anything else. She was his saving grace. His angel. He wanted to be that for her more than anything else.

Finding Venus had been like finding a purpose, a reason to live after nearly a century of death.

He would serve her with every ounce of his strength as long as fate would allow, but he wanted her to be sure that she really and truly wanted him forever and always before he claimed her.

Claiming her would save him. It would bring him back to life and he would begin to live again like a true man. But he had to be careful. He had to make sure that it was right for her. It was the only thing that made any sense.

“These sandwiches are so good,” Venus said. “It’s too bad that I’m cheating on my diet right now.”

“Diet?” he asked, looking at the slender woman sitting beside him.

“To maintain my figure for the runway I have to keep to a very strict regimen,” she said with a sigh, folding up half of the sandwich and putting it away.

“And how do you feel about that?” he asked.

Damian already got the sense that Venus would be happy leaving all of that behind and living a simple life with him here in Selkie. But if she wanted to return to New York to continue her work in the fashion industry, he would follow her to the ends of the Earth if she let him.

“I don’t know anything else,” she said. “It’s been a part of my life as long as I can remember. I’m not sure if I’ve ever really been full.”

“That sounds terrible,” he said. As wolves, he and his brothers hunted relentlessly; they gorged and devoured their prey. It was the most satisfying experience they could have.

His inner beast taunted him, sending him images of a wolf wildly writhing with his mate on the forest floor. It aroused him immediately, but he would never take Venus so

barbarically. She deserved gentle loving kindness and tenderness, and he wouldn't give her anything else unless she asked for it.

"You deserve to be happy, Venus," he said. "It's all that I want for you."

"You make me happy, Damian," she said softly, looking down at her hands.

"Making you happy makes me happy," he said. "I don't know if I ever felt like I had a purpose in life until now. But now I do. It's to make you smile."

"I have never had anyone say things like that to me before," she said. "Sure, I've had men promise me things, give me gifts and flatter me. But it all rang a little false."

"I could keep myself closed off from it and just tell myself that they were trying to buy my affections, which is what my mother always told me—not that she minded my affections being bought. She just didn't want me to settle for anything but the highest bidder."

"All I have is some sandwiches and a borrowed truck," Damian said.

She laughed and threaded her arm through his.

"That's not all you have, Damian," she said softly, looking into his eyes. "You have your heart. And that's worth more than all the money in the world."

Damian had been so consumed by darkness for so long, it was hard for him to think of himself as having much of a heart at all.

"You are a very kind, sensitive man. I think the darkness you see in yourself is just an expression of that."

"Maybe you're right," he said, looking out into the distance.

A thin strip of cloud hung on the horizon out at sea. He felt his heart widening to encompass the entire scene. Venus gave him that. She gave him the sense that he could open himself up again. He could feel again and allow life into his heart when he had been so closed off to it before.

"I feel like I'm thawing out after a long cold winter," he said. "Because I'm sitting beside your fire."

"I feel the same," she said, looking up into his eyes. They gazed at each other and then their lips touched softly. He caressed her face and held her close as she laid her head on his shoulder.

"I want to stay like this forever," she said with a sigh.

“I do too.”

As they started back down the mountain, Damian felt the pain slice through him. He pulled the potion out of his pocket, and it slipped from his fingers, crashing onto the rocky ground. It shattered into a million pieces and the potion he needed so desperately in order to maintain himself leaked out into the soil. He fell to his knees and gasped, clutching his heart.

“No, no, no.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Was that your potion?”

“Yes,” he said through clenched teeth.

He was in desperate need of another dose. He shouldn’t have waited so long. He should have brought a backup vial with him. His inner wolf howled in torment as the pain worsened. He groaned and tried to push himself back to his feet.

“Are you okay?” she asked, grasping his shoulders and trying to meet his gaze. He gritted his teeth and patted her hand.

“Let’s get you back down the mountain,” he said. “I think I will make it that far.”

“It’s going to be okay, Damian. I’m with you. I’m here. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Her reassurances were so comforting, but he knew there was nothing she could do short of giving herself to him right then and there on the forest floor.

There was no way he would take her now like this. He had to get her home. It was his only choice. He only prayed that he would make it that far.

They hurried down the hill, each step more painful than the last. By the time the trailhead came into view, he was panting and barely able to keep himself in human form.

When he saw the truck, he fell to his knees, growling in pain. His inner beast was thrashing and biting at the backs of his eyes. The wild rage that ran through him was desperate and uncontrollable as the pain sliced through his belly. He pulled the keys from his pocket and shoved them into her hands.

“Please get yourself back to the hotel,” he said, his jaw tensed, and his fangs descended in his mouth. He looked up at her as the wolf inside him began to break through the surface.

“Damian. I can’t leave you like this.”

“You need to go now, Venus,” he roared. She stood back, her eyes wide with shock. Shame ripped through him. He crumbled to the ground into the fetal position as his entire body burned, his mind awash with the blackest shame.

“Please, Venus, go,” he begged her. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

She took the keys, ran to the truck, and unlocked the door. Her terrified eyes were the last thing he saw before the beast tore from inside him, shredding his clothes to tatters.

The angry, dark wolf emerged from the man she had believed so kind and sensitive. All he could see was darkness, and all he could feel was death. He howled into the air. Venus turned on the truck, rolled down the window, and shouted to him.

“I’m going to get you help,” she said before turning around and driving off in a cloud of dust.

Damian howled his torment and ran frantically into the forest. He had lost her. He was cursed and there was no one and nothing that could save him.

## **Dark Wolf Chapter 9 - Tips**

Venus sped down the mountain in a daze—she couldn’t get the image of Damian’s frantic eyes out of her mind. The pain she’d seen in his face was enough to bring her to her knees. He was her mate. The man she was meant to live her life with. She was it for him and he was it for her. She never wanted to see him in that much pain again. But what had just happened had frightened her.

A tear slid down her face. He had shifted right in front of her into a giant white wolf, howling at the sky and disappearing into the forest. The rational parts of her knew that being with a man like that was bad news.

She shook her head and wiped the tears from her cheeks as she drove. She wasn’t sure where to go or what to do. She had never met his benefactors personally, and her frantic mind was searching for something that made sense.

She got lost for at least half an hour in the backcountry roads before finding her way back to Selkie. With immense relief, she was able to find New Moon Books, where she knew Damian’s brother worked with his mate.

She parked the truck outside the little shop and tried to regain her composure. She looked at herself in the mirror, seeing bloodshot eyes and smeared mascara. Damian shifting was one of the most terrifying experiences of her life, and she hated that the man with the sensitive eyes and the delicate touch had turned into such a monster right in front of her. She sat outside the shop for several long moments, not sure of what to do.

She was staring at the wheel of the truck, her mind blank, when she heard knuckles rap on the passenger side window. She looked up to see a man she instantly knew must be Damian's brother.

He had the same blonde hair and blue eyes, and the unmistakable look of a shifter. There was such concern in his face that it made her want to start crying all over again. She climbed out of the car and walked around to the sidewalk to meet him.

"You must be Venus," he said in a low voice.

"I am," she said, her words barely audible.

"Where's Damian? What's going on?"

She shook her head, unable to speak. A curvy blonde woman walked through the doors of the shop and took her hand. "Come inside and sit down. You look like you had a fright."

She followed the kind woman into the bookshop, and they all settled into the seating area at the back of the store.

"We were hiking," she said, trying to get her words to come out straight. "He dropped his potion and it broke."

"He was forced to shift in front of you?" Rex asked her.

"Yes," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh dear," Luna said, taking her hand and patting it. "That must have been quite a scare for you,"

"I wanted to help him."

"There was nothing you could have done," Rex said in a low growl.

A shiver went down her spine. Luna tried to comfort her, but she still couldn't help but feel guilt for leaving him.

"I'll go get him," Rex said. Venus handed him the keys to the truck and the alpha wolf left the store.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," Luna said, sitting in the armchair beside her. "I just can't make enough potion fast enough."

"It's just so unfair," Venus said.

"It's a terrible thing, that's for sure," Luna said. "I'm doing absolutely everything I can."

"Of course you are," Venus said. "I wish that I could do more."

"You love him," Luna said. "I can see it in your eyes. That's the most that anyone could ever hope for."

Venus let out a long sigh, knowing the truth of Luna's words. She did love Damian, and she wanted to be his mate. But after seeing his wolf like that, part of her was unsure. She was definitely shaken up.

All the terrible things her mother had told her about men played through her mind. What if Damian was dangerous and unkind? What if he was the wild beast she'd seen in the forest and not the loving man she believed him to be?

"How did you decide?" she asked, looking up at Luna and dabbing her eyes with the tissues the blonde woman offered.

"I knew from the moment we met. But Rex had these old-fashioned ideas about courtship."

"Don't you think that it's the right thing to do? To know someone before you commit to them for the rest of your life?"

"Yes. I do. And I understand why he wanted to wait. The mate bond can be overwhelming for human women, and it's unwise to build a lifelong relationship on lust. But, if you love each other, you can overcome anything," Luna said. "When a shifter claims his mate, the bond is so complete and intense that you can feel each other even when you're miles apart."

"Then what's the problem?"

"If the match is wrong, then it can be the worst thing imaginable for everyone. It's rare among shifters, but it's not unheard of. There are shifter mates who are worse than anything you've ever imagined."

"I was afraid of that," Venus said. "You've given me a lot to think about." She rose from her chair and headed to the front door of the shop.

"Damian is a good man," Luna said. "I hope that you can forgive him for losing control. He had no choice in the matter."

"I do. Believe me, I do. It's just a lot to take in."



“I’ve been exactly where you are. Just a few weeks ago. Take your time, Venus. You’re making the biggest decision of your life, and it shouldn’t be taken lightly.”

Venus slid out the door of the bookshop and headed out onto the street. Her hotel was only a few blocks away.

When she walked through the door of her hotel room, she sank straight into the bed with a groan. She definitely had a lot to think about. As much as she adored Damian, Luna’s words rang true.

The mistake of a bad mating couldn’t be taken back, and the Winter wolves’ reluctance to claim their mates before they knew for sure that it was true love was protecting both of them.

She ran a bath and slipped into the warm water, letting the bubbles envelope her lithe body. She rested her head on the porcelain and breathed in the soft fragrance of the bubble bath, trying to put what had happened behind her.

She wanted to give Damian the benefit of the doubt. He was a good man, from what she knew about him, but the truth was she barely knew him. Seeing the wolf side of him was a wake-up call. A wake-up call she had desperately needed.

If he had asked her back in the forest if she would be his mate and submit to his claiming, she would have said yes. But now she realized that was wrong.

She needed to protect herself and her heart. Despite his handsome face and his tender words, Damian was a stranger. A cursed stranger, no less. Anything but absolute caution would be a recipe for disaster.

She climbed out of the bath, overcome with sadness. As she wrapped herself in a big fluffy bathrobe, she heard her cell phone ping with a notification. Her heart leapt and she went towards the phone, hoping it was Damian telling her everything was all right—that Rex had found him and brought him home, but it wasn’t Damian.

“So you aren’t coming straight back home?” the text message from her mother read.

Venus groaned and rolled her eyes. She was a grown woman who should be able to make her own choices. She didn’t have any other jobs booked for weeks and could spend another few days in Selkie with a clear conscience, but her mother would see things quite differently.

“Is there a reason you didn’t tell me?” the next text message read.

Venus growled with irritation, resisting the urge to throw the phone across the room. She told herself she wasn’t going to let her mother get to her, but that wasn’t working

out. Anger rose in her chest, and she wanted to lash out. She knew trying to reason with her mother or argue with her was a recipe for disaster.

“I just needed a little R&R,” Venus typed out as she unwrapped her hair.

“You should have cleared it with me first, Venus. We’ve talked about this.”

Venus gritted her teeth. She was a grown woman. She didn’t need to ask her mother’s permission to take vacation for three days. Venus wanted to inform her that she was overstepping, but it was futile. She’d been down this road before—since she was seventeen and had started to attempt to gain some independence. It had never gone well for her.

“I’ll be back in New York in less than a week. You don’t need to worry about me. I am going to stay in exactly the same hotel I’ve been in. I just want to spend a little more time in Alaska. I’ve been burnt out and need recreation and rest.”

“You can do that in New York.”

Venus rolled her eyes and was about to turn off her phone when another message from her mother came through.

“Unless there’s another reason you’re not telling me about.”

Venus sighed and this time she turned off the phone. There *was* another reason. Damian. She needed to know if accepting his mating bite was right for her. She could never leave Selkie until she did. It would be a betrayal of herself. When she knew for sure and had made her choice, then she would inform her mother. But, until then, she needed to keep things quiet.

Venus lay back on her bed and covered her face with her hands. She was overcome with emotion, feeling that she would be trapped in this toxic relationship for the rest of her life.

She knew that her mother had never truly loved her—that she was just a pawn in her game of fame. It had become more and more evident to her as the years went by, and she had finally admitted it to herself.

Now was the time for her to gain her independence. With everything happening with Damian, she couldn’t deal with her mom. She needed to sort out her own feelings. If that meant ignoring her mom’s demands for a few days, then so be it. She would deal with the aftermath once she knew what she wanted to do.

The thought of that was far scarier than the sight of her sweetheart turning into a vicious wolf.

## Dark Wolf Chapter 10 - Tips

Damian tore through the forest, his human mind in torment. He couldn't believe he had let Venus see him like that. The curse had taken over him, returned him to the darkness of his feral state.

This was the truth of who he was. He couldn't deny it or pretend that she could save him. He was meant for death and destruction and nothing else. He howled out his torments, gnashing his teeth and ripping through the woods. If he found the scent of prey, he knew he would rip it to shreds.

But the angry, hulking predator sent a wave of fear through the forest, warning any creature in his path. He ran for miles and miles, not knowing where he was going and not caring. This was the end of him. A fitting end indeed. He could never face her again—not after what she had seen.

He ran and ran until he came to a steep cliff that dropped off into nothingness. He looked at the hole in the world, and all the sorrow and sadness in him told him to jump. End it. Release the woman he wanted so desperately to love.

Then he heard footfalls behind him, the sound of another predator rushing through the forest toward him. He turned on the approaching creature with a snarl and found his brother Rex standing before him. He growled and snapped at his alpha, but Rex stood strong and firm before sending a wave of dominance over his younger brother.

Damian snarled and cowered under the pressure of his brother's alpha strength. Then he did something Damian could not do himself. He shifted into a man and stood naked in the forest before his brother.

From a pouch at his waist, he retrieved a small vial of potion and approached his younger brother. Damian turned and looked down into the void below. He imagined flinging his body over the edge and falling hundreds of feet to the rocks below him, his body crashing and crushing and breaking, releasing him from his curse.

"Venus is waiting for you. Don't do this to her. Don't do it to yourself. It's so close to an end, Damian. You have to see this through."

Damian threw his head back and howled out his pain. It echoed through the forest and across the canyon. He heard his brother approaching behind him and he spun again. This time, instead of greeting his alpha with aggression, he collapsed in sadness. Rex stepped forward, the dropper in his hand.

He dropped the potion into Damian's mouth, and it slid into his bloodstream immediately. His pain and torment slid away, and he knew that he could shift back into his human form. But he didn't want to be a man. He didn't deserve his human form. He didn't deserve her. Rex knelt beside him, stroking Damian's fur.

“Come back to me, brother,” Rex said softly. “It’s always darkest before the dawn.”

Damian shifted with a cry and found himself on his knees in front of his older brother.

“I am such a fool. I scared her away. She deserves so much more than this.”

“You have to let her decide for herself Damian,” Rex said as both men stood.

I know,” Damian said. “Venus is a strong, beautiful, intelligent woman. I won’t take the choice away from her, even though I know what choice she should make.”

“And what is that?”

“She should run away from me as fast as she can.”

“You are selling yourself short. I can tell the girl cares for you. She might even love you if you let her.”

Damian shook his head and scrubbed his hands over his face. He covered his mouth as he took a shuddering breath.

“How could she love a man like me? I have nothing to give her. Only darkness and pain.”

“You have much more than that. You have your heart and your love, and that’s worth more than anything in this world.”

“How can I love her like this?”

“The curse can be broken. I am proof enough of that.”

“Even if the curse is broken, I will have still lived with this for seventy-five years. I am a man who was once the walking dead. Nothing can change that, Rex. Nothing.”

“Damian. It is time for you to grow up. Leave this foolishness behind you and claim what is yours.”

“I don’t need to hear your placating words, Rex. I know what I lived. What we all lived.”

“The curse has torn you apart. Are you going to let the Snow Queen win?”

Damian turned back to his brother, growling and clenching his sharp teeth. He wanted to lash out and fight him, but he knew that he wouldn’t win.

“She’s already won,” Damian said. “Pretending otherwise is a fantasy.”

“You are living in a fantasy, brother. A dark, depraved fantasy where there’s no hope. In reality, hope and light and love are all standing right in front of you. You would deny it so that you could stay in your own dark little world.”

“Don’t lecture me, Rex. Maybe you can get over this; maybe you can put it behind you, but I can’t. She saw what I truly am. All the potion in the world won’t change that.”

“If you claim her, the curse will be lifted. I don’t need the potion anymore. My mind is clear. My heart is beating. I am in love with the woman of my dreams and we’re going to have a child. How can you turn your back on that possibility?”

Damian sank to his knees and covered his eyes as he sobbed, naked and cold in the early spring forest. The chill nipped at his skin, but he didn’t feel it. All he felt was pain and confusion.

“I love her too much to give her this,” he said. “I am a broken man. Little more than a beast. I don’t even know who Damian is anymore. I am a cursed wolf, a monster. How could I curse her with this?”

“And have I cursed my beloved Luna?” Rex asked, standing above him.

“It’s different for you.”

“No, it’s not. It’s time to be strong—to be a man and to leave this childish behavior behind you.”

“I can’t. I can’t. I can’t bring her into this cursed world.”

“Don’t you understand, Damian?” Rex said, kneeling beside him and gripping his shoulder. “Her light will break the curse. Your love will chase away the darkness. You can have the life you deserve. Fate is on your side.”

Damian felt himself crack and shatter into pieces. He wanted to weep but he had already shed all his tears.

“I want to love her. I want to give her everything. I just don’t know what I have to give.”

“Yourself, Damian. Your heart. Your love. It’s enough. I promise you.”

The brothers stood and quickly embraced. He felt his brother’s strength and resolve, and it bled into him.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ve been a child all this time. Maybe it’s time to stand up and be a man.”

“That is the Winter wolf I know,” Rex said with a smile.

The two of them shifted and ran through the forest back to the trailhead where warm clothes and shoes were waiting. They changed and Rex drove him down the mountain towards Selkie.

“Do you want to see her?” Rex asked. “Or should I take you back to the Doolittles’ ranch?”

“I can’t face her right now. I need time to think, to get my head clear.”

Rex silently turned towards the road that would take them to the Doolittles and drove along the winding road up to the bear shifters’ property.

They parked outside and Rex cut the engine before following Damian back into the house. The brothers were gathered in the kitchen, the Doolittles nowhere to be seen. Thorne was pacing by the sink, angry as ever, while Blake moped, and Felix was reading something from a printout.

“What’s going on?” Rex asked.

“We have an offer on the property,” Felix informed them.

“We will finally be free of that place,” Tate said, rubbing his hands together. “Think of all the fun things we can do now. It’s the best news we can hope for.”

“We can’t sell it. We can’t,” Blake moaned.

“We’ve already agreed to. I’m sorry but majority rules,” Rex said.

“All those years we stayed because you wanted a unanimous decision. Why have you changed your mind now?” Blake asked.

“Because I know now for sure that leaving was the right choice. It makes it clear to me that selling is also the right choice. I’m sorry, Blake, but it’s five to one. You’re overruled.”

“This is bullsh!t,” Blake said. “It’s our land. I don’t want to sell it.”

“Why would you want to go back there?” Thorne said. “So the witch can k!!! you once and for all?”

“I will k!!! her,” Blake said with a growl.

Thorne threw his head back and laughed. "I'd like to see you try. The witch is more powerful than a thousand shifters. You are a fool and you always have been. You haven't grown a day in seventy-five years."

"Stop it now," Rex said. "Blake, I'm sorry, but we're selling. Thorne, don't antagonize him. We will each get our share and then we can move on with our lives. Two of us now have found our mates. My beloved Luna is carrying our child. The next generation of Winter wolves. Would you deny fate, Blake? Would you deny my happiness and the happiness of my mate for your own selfish need to maintain the dead land of our ancestors?"

"It's where mother died. It's where we buried our father. How could you give that away?"

"We aren't forgetting. They are still with us in our hearts and minds. That's what matters. Not a gravestone. They've been gone a long time, little brother. You need to let it go."

"I will never let it go," Blake said, growling before he left the room and slammed the door behind him.

"Idiot," Tate said. "We're each going to get hundreds of thousands of dollars. We can do anything we want. The world is amazing now. I want to go to Hawaii."

"That's nice, Tate, but let's cool down on that for a moment. Blake has a point. We buried our parents on that land. We have to respect his feelings."

"I can't believe you're letting him get away with that," Thorne spit out.

Damian didn't want to listen to his brothers argue. He didn't care. He was done with the land, and he was done with that place. His parents were dead and so were the rest of them.

He had to decide if he wanted to go on living. The only thing that kept him here was the possibility that Venus could love him. That they could have a good life together. That he could make her happy.

"What about you, Damian?" Felix asked.

"I don't care. I want rid of it, like the rest of you."

"He found his mate. She's a beautiful fashion model," Tate said, making faces at him. "Why haven't you claimed her yet?"

"Don't talk about her," Damian said threateningly. Tate took a few steps back, putting his hands in the air in the universal sign of surrender.

"I'm just asking. You don't need to bite my head off."

Rex cut in. "Damian, go take a shower and relax. Luna is going to come pick me up from town. She'll be here in a few minutes. And after you have a chance to cool off, you should contact Venus. She is a strong woman, and she cares about you. There's no question in my mind. Don't screw it up."

Rex left the Doolittles' house several moments later. Damian watched him from the upstairs office. He kissed Luna's forehead as she climbed out of the car. The two of them seem so happy. So perfect.

Damian rubbed his temples. Maybe he could have that with Venus. If there was even the smallest chance in the world that they could have what Rex and Luna had, then it was worth a try. The worst that could happen would be her rejecting him. And he would accept that.

Part of him believed he deserved to be rejected. But the other part of him knew that he had to give Venus the option. His love for her was so deep that it hurt. It was like a long asleep limb finally coming back to life.

The tingle of the blood circulating hurt at first, but it was the only way to wake back up. That's how he felt right now. Maybe soon, he would be able to walk again and forget that it had ever happened.