

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna chapter 21-30

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

"What?" I blinked at him, unsure I'd heard right.

We were idling at a red light when he turned toward me, his sharp profile cast in shadows, but his expression was steady, tired, but serious. The kind of serious that pulled every ounce of focus out of me.

"You said you had questions," he said quietly, his voice lacking the usual cold bite. "Now's your chance."

I thought he'd brushed me off earlier. Guess not. That meant I had to make this count.

"Okay," I hesitated, gathering my thoughts before blurting out, "Why do the wolves in your pack have silver eyes when they shift? I've never seen that before, not in any pack."

I gestured toward my own eyes as if that would help explain. Then I turned fully to face him, watching every twitch in his face. Every clue. His jaw tensed before he schooled his features into that impassive, frosty look he wore like armor.

"No other pack is led by a god," he said simply. "My wolves channel my strength during combat, on missions, or even just to show reverence."

I blinked. "They channel you? Wouldn't that weaken you, especially if a lot of them are doing it at the same time? Is that why no one's seen you in years? Are you drained or something?"

His lips twitched faintly, not into a smile, but something close to it. "No. If anything, it strengthens me. They borrow, but I retain. I actually feed off—"

He stopped abruptly, pressing his lips into a hard line.

I tilted my head at him, trying to coax the rest out without saying a word. Feed off what? His pack? Their devotion? Something else entirely? The sentence just sat there between us, unfinished, and I had a feeling whatever he'd been about to say was something he'd decided I wasn't ready for yet. Or something he hadn't planned on admitting at all.

I filed it away. I'd circle back to that later, when he was in a more giving mood.

"Alright," I said instead. "What about those Latin commands you use? How do they even work? And why can I understand them?"

His eyes flicked to me briefly, then back to the road. He answered in Latin first. The words slid off his tongue with effortless authority, unhurried and precise. Even though I didn't know the literal meaning, I knew what he meant. My wolf perked up instantly, like she'd been called to attention without her permission.

That, right there, was the part that unsettled me.

"It's a direct command," he said in English again. "Stronger than an alpha's sacred binding. When I give an order in Latin, it bypasses everything, goes straight to the wolf. And the wolf obeys. No hesitation. No room for interpretation."

I sat with that for a moment.

I knew what alpha command felt like. It was like having your body and soul yanked in a direction you didn't choose, your own instincts overridden by someone else's will. But what he was describing was something deeper. More invasive. More absolute. It didn't just override the person, it bypassed them entirely, went straight to the animal underneath like the human part didn't even factor in.

Every time he'd commanded me in Latin and I'd obeyed before I'd even decided to, that was what had been happening. Not my wolf responding to an alpha. My wolf responding to a god, directly, with nothing in between.

"Direct command," I murmured quietly, more to myself than to him.

"How it works," he muttered, gripping the wheel tighter, his knuckles turning stark white, "that's a longer story. As for how you understand it..."

His voice trailed off. He looked torn, his frustration sharp and unhidden. "I'm not completely sure," he finally admitted.

So even he didn't know. That was oddly reassuring. And even more terrifying.

I let a beat of silence pass before speaking again. "What about that thing you did to me? In my head. Still not okay, by the way," I added sharply, folding my arms.

He chuckled, not the least bit apologetic. "I said I'm sorry, didn't I? That should count for something."

I gave him a dry look.

"It was necessary," he continued, glancing sideways at me. "I had to know what you knew. Had to see if I could trust you."

I pounced on that. "Know what?"

"Next question," he said, finality laced in those two words.

Figures.

I chewed on my bottom lip, debating how far I could push before he shut down entirely. Zaliver wasn't going to spill all his secrets, at least not yet. Maybe not ever. But I had a feeling he wasn't lying either. Just editing.

Still, this was only our second full day together. We were hardly the fairy tale version of mates. If anything, we were stuck in the prologue of a very complicated story.

Time to dial it down a notch.

"Back where I'm from, you're more of a legend than a real person," I said quietly. "We've only heard of places your wolves have attacked, raided in your name. No one's actually seen you in years. Why is that?"

He frowned, not in offense, more like confusion, so I clarified. "I mean, why stay hidden?"

Realization settled into his features, and his mouth curved slightly, more sardonic than amused.

"I don't bother with minor problems when my pack can handle them for me," he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I used to go out there, walk among them. But when I lived in the human territories, I got tired of arrogant wolves showing up just to try and challenge me."

I raised a brow. "Seriously?"

"Every few decades, without fail," he said, his tone somewhere between bored and irritated, like he was recalling a particularly tedious pattern. "Some young alpha hears the name *Lupus Deus* and decides that taking me down is how he proves himself. They never last long. But after a few centuries of it," he paused, jaw ticking, "it got old. So I stopped making myself available."

I stared at him. "You withdrew from the entire world because wolves kept picking fights with you?"

"I withdrew," he said evenly, "because killing them was starting to feel like maintenance."

The car went quiet after that. I turned back to face the road, processing the casual, devastating weight of what he'd just said. Six hundred years of being the most powerful thing in the room, and the solution he'd landed on was simply to stop showing up.

I wasn't sure if that made him sad or terrifying. Probably both.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

He nodded, lips curling with amusement. "They'd hear stories, think I was some ancient relic, and come looking to prove something. Like they thought they could take down an old man." He scoffed under his breath. "Their faces when they realized the truth? Not worth my time anymore."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing. The image was too good: towering men yelling curses, expecting to meet some shriveled elder with a cane, only to find a tall, broad-shouldered god staring back at them with all the patience of someone who had done this exact thing a hundred times and was profoundly bored by it. Zaliver probably didn't even raise his voice. That almost made it funnier.

But underneath the amusement, I could feel the cracks. The things he wasn't saying. The parts he was holding back.

And I knew I'd keep asking until I found them.

"So, this island, how do you manage to bring things in and out without attracting human attention?" I asked, genuine curiosity bubbling up. I wasn't trying to escape anymore. Maybe it was the restful sleep I'd had last night, or maybe I was finally starting to accept that I was here for a while. Either way, the question came from real curiosity, not strategy.

Zaliver arched a brow and looked me over, probably wondering if I was fishing for a way to sneak out. But after a beat, he either decided I wasn't a threat, or he just didn't think I stood a chance.

"I've been alive a long time, long enough to know the right people, or creatures, I guess. When I found this island, I knew it would be home, even before I realized I'd have a pack here. I didn't want humans ruining it with their pollution or greed, so I had a witch cast a barrier around it. Now no human or supernatural being without my permission can get in."

My eyes narrowed slightly. "But I've seen maps. This place doesn't show up. There's nothing but water and a few scattered land masses on the edge. How does something this huge stay hidden?"

He smirked. "Because that's what I want people to see. The barrier makes the island nearly invisible, or appear submerged. The land is a lot bigger than you think, probably as big as Texas. If planes or boats try to get close, they run into a storm, lightning, whirlpools, you name it. The border keeps them away."

I blinked, genuinely impressed. "No wonder this is the one area even the most stubborn explorers and governments won't go near. Still, that doesn't explain how you get stuff in and out."

"That," he said with a teasing glint in his eyes, "is for me to know and for you to dot, dot, dot."

I pressed my lips together and looked at him. He looked back. Neither of us moved.

"You're not going to tell me," I said flatly.

"No," he agreed pleasantly.

I turned back to face the road, making a mental note to ask again later when he was either in a better mood or I had better leverage. Probably the latter.

The drive had taken us into a much busier part of the island. Tall, clean buildings rose on either side, almost sterile in their design. The place had the quiet hum of order and purpose.

That reminded me why we were even in this car.

"So, why are we going to the doctor? I'm perfectly fine, in case you hadn't noticed," I said, a bit defensively.

"You'll find out in a few minutes," he said casually as he pulled up in front of a sleek white building with four stories and large glass windows. A sign in front read: Laboratory of Experimental Research.

My stomach dropped at the word experimental.

He turned off the car and reached for the door handle. I stared at the building.

"Wait, hold on. I thought you said we were going to a doctor. That place does not look like a hospital," I said, suspicion creeping into my voice.

Zaliver rolled his piercing blue eyes, then stepped out, slamming the door shut behind him. A moment later, he came around to my side and opened my door, waiting silently.

I stayed seated.

He raised a brow.

"I mean it," I warned, unbuckling my seatbelt slowly. "If I get jabbed with anything, anything at all, I'm out. I'll swim off this island and vanish so fast you'll think I never existed. You'll be stuck searching like some deranged version of Finding Nemo, only this time, Daddy never shows up."

I stepped out before he could respond and marched toward the entrance without waiting for his reply.

Behind me came a low, rumbling growl, then a loud crash and the sound of something shattering against stone.

I didn't look back. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what he'd just destroyed, and honestly, given the morning I'd had, I felt it was deserved.

But when I reached the door, Zaliver was already there, holding it open for me like nothing had happened. I shot him a sideways glance. His expression was perfectly composed. Not a scratch on him.

I decided not to ask.

"Thanks," I muttered, brushing past him.

He walked ahead like he owned the place, which, knowing him, he probably did. The receptionist behind the front desk gawked at him like she couldn't believe her eyes. I had to resist the urge to wave and say, Yeah, I know. He's something else.

We passed her without a word. Zaliver punched in codes and moved through restricted doors with ease. I followed closely, a knot forming in my stomach with every staircase we descended.

After one final flight of stairs, we stopped in front of a glossy blue door. A man stood there waiting, dark-skinned, wearing a crisp white lab coat. His face was lined with age, but his wide smile was warm and unhurried, the kind that had clearly put a lot of frightened people at ease over a long career.

He looked at me first, not at Zaliver, and something in his eyes said he already knew exactly who I was and had been waiting for this introduction for some time.

My nerves didn't disappear. But they settled, just a little.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

The moment we stepped inside the room, a wave of relief washed over me, it actually looked like a proper medical office. Clean, clinical, and thankfully normal. There was only one chair, though, which felt oddly deliberate. Zaliver motioned for me to sit, then exchanged greetings with the man in the room. They shook hands, Zaliver even gave him

a pat on the shoulder before leaning against the wall beside me, arms crossed and unreadable as always.

"Hello, Vivian. I'm Doctor Mickelson, but you can just call me Dr. Mick," he said with a friendly smile. "I'm not sure if you've been told why you're here."

I noticed Zaliver subtly shake his head at him.

Dr. Mick nodded in understanding. "Alright then. When Zaliver contacted me, he said he wanted to run a few tests to study the bond between the two of you. Specifically, why he hasn't marked you yet."

The mention of that struck a nerve. I shot the doctor a sharp glare. He visibly flinched and glanced at Zaliver, whose expression must have been terrifying, because Dr. Mick instantly apologized.

"Sorry! That came out wrong. What I meant was, this is the first case we've ever seen of a mating bond between a wolf and a wolf god," he rushed to explain, eyes lighting up with scientific wonder.

I took a deep breath, trying to process that. So that was what all this distance had been about. That was the answer I'd been silently begging for, the reason he never marked me. All the time I'd spent wondering if it was because he didn't care, or worse, didn't want me. I turned to face Zaliver. His eyes were locked on the doctor in a steely glare, but then he looked at me.

"Why didn't you just tell me that?" I asked, the words coming out sharper than I intended. "Instead of dodging me?"

He only shrugged, then looked away. Typical. I wasn't sure if I was annoyed or just tired of being left in the dark.

I turned back to Dr. Mick. "Alright, so what exactly are these tests? What do you need from me?"

He walked over to his desk and returned with a clipboard in hand. "Does that mean you're agreeing to participate?" he asked, hopeful.

"At this point, do I really have another option?" I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm curious too."

"Great. We'll start with the basics, temperature, height, weight, allergy profile, and go from there."

"Are both of us doing this? Or just me?" I asked, half hoping Zaliver would be dragged into it too.

"Just you," Zaliver answered before the doctor could. "They ran these on me ages ago, but my body is—" He cut himself off. "It's just you."

I frowned at him. There was something in the way he paused that made my instincts twitch, but he avoided my eyes. Whatever.

"Alright. Let's get it over with."

He checked my eyes, ears, and did all the standard breath-in-breath-out stuff. But as soon as he asked me to stand by the wall to measure my height, dread crept up my spine. I knew what was coming next. The scale.

And Zaliver was still standing right there.

If you've never had your weight called out in front of someone, especially someone who looks like a carved god, it's not an experience I'd recommend. The last time I felt this level of exposure was back in middle school gym class, when some kids would snicker when the numbers climbed too high for their liking.

What people don't realize is that being a werewolf doesn't mean being effortlessly fit. Our wolf traits don't always carry over unless we call on them. Some of us get the lucky fast metabolism. I didn't. My body processes food at a human pace unless I shift or summon my wolf's strength. So no, I wasn't fat. But I still carried a little softness from my younger years, something I was never really comfortable with.

"Step onto the scale," Dr. Mick said.

Reluctantly, I obeyed, trying not to think about Zaliver's eyes boring into my back.

Please don't say it out loud. Just write it. Write it and keep your mouth shut.

Dr. Mick scribbled on his clipboard. So far so good.

"You're slightly above average for your height. Is that typical for you?"

I felt my cheeks burn. "Yes," I muttered, resisting the urge to punch him.

"What about your metabolism? Wolf or human range?"

"Human," I said quickly, barely above a whisper.

I didn't dare glance at Zaliver. I felt like I was being dissected.

"Does this run in your family? Or just you?"

"Just me," I answered through gritted teeth. I decided then and there I officially disliked Dr. Mick.

I bit my lip and stared at the floor, wishing the whole thing would just end. I was already planning a mental diet. Less carbs. More runs. Maybe a juice cleanse.

"Are you considering dieting?" he asked.

Before I could answer, a low, dangerous growl rumbled behind me.

Dr. Mick froze. His clipboard slipped from his hands as he dropped to his knees in front of me, neck bared in immediate submission.

"She is perfect the way she is," Zaliver growled. The raw power behind his voice sent chills down my spine and apparently through the doctor too. "You will not shame her. Do not forget your place, pup. End this. Now."

Something swelled in my chest, warm and bright and completely unexpected.

I turned to look at him without meaning to. He wasn't looking at me, his eyes were still fixed on Dr. Mick with the kind of cold authority that made grown wolves drop to their knees. But his jaw was set tight, and there was something in the rigid line of his shoulders that told me this hadn't been easy for him to say. Not because he didn't mean it. Because he did.

I hadn't even realized how heavy that shame had been sitting on me until he ripped it away. Years of it. Gym class. Quiet comments. The mirror on mornings I didn't want to face. And he'd flattened all of it with eight words, without being asked, without hesitating.

I looked away before he could catch me staring.

"I-I'm truly sorry, Vi, Luna, Vivian," Dr. Mick stammered, his voice trembling. "I meant no disrespect. Please forgive me."

I sighed. My wolf wanted to tell him no, just to watch Zaliver lose it again. But I just wanted to be done.

"Sure," I said flatly. Even I could hear the stiffness in my voice.

He drew a blood sample, mumbling another apology, and we finally left.

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Vivian Grey's POV

Back in the car, the silence between us was thick, but not cold. I turned to him, gratitude bubbling in my chest.

"Thanks," I murmured.

He looked over at me, blue eyes intense and steady. "That will never happen again," he said, voice low and full of promise.

I believed him.

But even as warmth lingered in his words, a small part of me shivered, because that look in his eyes? That wasn't just protective. It was dangerous.

We pulled into a wide clearing surrounded by thick forest. The moment the tires left the road and rolled over the grassy field, I realized this wasn't just some casual drive. It was a training ground. Wolves, men and women alike, both in human and shifted form, were scattered everywhere, sparring, grappling, and pushing through punishing workouts. Everyone wore workout clothes, drenched in sweat and intensity.

Though the windows of the car were tinted, I could feel their eyes on us. Some stared with curiosity, others with suspicion. And then I spotted him. Albericus. He moved toward us with that easy confidence of his, dressed in black sweatpants and a snug white tee that made it hard not to notice the hours he'd clearly spent training. His sunlit brown hair was tousled, and those green eyes of his were locked onto the car.

Zaliver turned to me with a half-smile, eyes glinting with mischief.

"You're safe here, Vivian. I'll show you just how secure this island is," he said, killing the engine and stepping out before circling around to open the door for me.

The second I stepped out, the weight of every gaze hit me like a wall. Dozens of strong, trained wolves stared, but none of them made me feel as exposed as Zaliver did when his eyes met mine.

Albericus whistled low when he got a better look at the vehicle. Typical.

"I haven't seen you drive anything other than that Black Beauty in years. Is this new?" he asked as they bumped fists and knocked shoulders like brothers.

Zaliver only nodded, not giving much away.

Then Albericus's attention snapped to me, and a slow, teasing smile crept onto his face. There was a twinkle in his eye, one that told me he knew something I didn't.

"Good morning, Luna Vivian. How's the day treating you?" he asked with too much glee.

I tilted my head slightly. I'd been calling him Algebra in my head since the moment I heard his name, and honestly, I was done being polite about it. I played along with a cheerful smile. "Morning, Algebra. I'm doing well. You?"

His grin instantly dropped, the corners of his lips flattening. His green eyes turned sharp and unamused.

"Just peachy," he muttered.

Zaliver cleared his throat, pulling our attention to the crowd that had somehow drifted closer. They all bowed their heads in respect to him but kept watching me with open curiosity.

"Back to training," Zaliver commanded with a simple wave. "Your Luna is observing. Try not to make fools of yourselves."

Like magic, they returned to their drills, only now more fired up.

Zaliver turned to me again, his hand settling gently on my shoulder. His expression was unreadable, a mix of frustration, tension, maybe worry. I couldn't quite place it, and that made my stomach tighten.

"Watch how they move. Focus on technique. Let me know if you spot any slackers," he said with a wry smile. But even in jest, his tone was layered.

Then he nodded toward a long bench nearby. "Go sit there. I'll be back in a bit, I need to speak with Albericus."

I watched him walk away with Algebra, both of them deep in a silent conversation that I figured was a mind-link, judging by the occasional twitch of a brow or frown.

To get to the bench, I had to pass by several sparring pairs. I told myself I'd be quick. Stay sharp. Avoid getting in anyone's way. Even as a werewolf, getting hit mid-spar wasn't something I was eager to experience.

I was maybe five steps from the bench when it happened. Out of nowhere, a blur of movement swept my feet from under me. My body hit the ground hard, hands scraping against sharp rocks, cheek stinging, lungs emptying in a harsh gasp.

I lay there for a second, blinking at the sky, pain registering in slow waves. My palms burned. My pride burned worse.

Everything stopped. Every grunt. Every punch. The entire field went quiet.

A shadow loomed over me.

I lifted my head, trying to ignore the sting in my palms. A girl stood above me, young, pretty, with long black hair and pale brown eyes that held no real concern. There was a mocking smile tugging at her lips.

"Oh no, did that hurt?" she asked in a fake-sweet voice that was quiet, but loud enough for any wolf to hear.

I narrowed my eyes. My wolf stirred, growling under my skin.

"Well, it wouldn't have hurt if you were actually our alpha's mate, you little lyi—"

She didn't get to finish.

Zaliver appeared behind her like a shadow ripped from the earth. His aura hit like a storm, deadly, suffocating. His eyes were pitch black, a void that promised violence. The way his hair fell over half his face only made it more terrifying.

And then he moved.

His hand shot out and gripped her head, and before I could even blink, there was a sickening snap. Her expression froze mid-word, eyes still glaring at me. Zaliver tossed her body like she was nothing, her corpse landing yards away in silence.

I was frozen. My body wouldn't respond. I didn't know if it was fear or shock or both. Around me, no one spoke. No one moved.

Then Zaliver crouched beside me. With the same hands that had just ended that girl's life, he scooped me into his arms like I weighed nothing. Held me close against his chest. Cradled me.

I didn't resist. My limbs felt numb. My eyes glazed. I stared at him, not quite seeing, but feeling everything.

We locked eyes. For a long moment, we just stared at each other, like the world had stopped moving. His expression shifted, less rage, more sorrow.

And then he whispered, voice low, full of something I didn't know how to name.

"Close your eyes and sleep, Vivian. Dream sweet things. Because when you wake, I'll be the nightmare you can't escape."

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

When I opened my eyes, it felt like I had slept for years, though it couldn't have been more than a few hours. I didn't need to look around to know where I was or to remember what had happened. That girl's neck snapping right in front of me, the sound had etched itself into my memory, looping every time I blinked. And Zaliver, gods, the way he looked, cloaked in darkness with those inky black eyes and that expression, pure, wild fury. He didn't just act like a predator. He was one.

I squeezed my eyes shut again, hard enough to see little white spots dance behind my lids. A long, shaky breath pushed from my chest.

I didn't know what to feel. Toward him. Toward myself. My emotions were caught in a storm, and I stood at the eye of it, torn between human logic and my wolf's primal understanding. The human in me wanted to scream, to ask how he could kill someone like that, so suddenly, so violently. But my wolf? She didn't flinch. She understood. She approved, even. To her, his reaction was justified. A mate threatened is a mate defended, no matter the cost.

I wanted to label him a monster. I should have. But that part of me, the side bound to him, understood too well. It frightened me that some piece of me accepted it so easily.

What frightened me more was the calm. Not the calm that comes from being in shock, but something quieter than that. Something that sat in my chest like it had always been there,

waiting. I'd watched a girl die, watched the life go out of her face between one word and the next, and some part of me had simply filed it away. Not ignored it. Filed it. Like my wolf had already categorized this under things that happen in the world Zaliver inhabits, and I was going to have to get used to it.

Was I really in danger when she tripped me? I wasn't sure. Maybe it had been an accident. But deep down, I didn't think she planned to walk away peacefully, not with the look she gave me. Still, she didn't deserve that. Why couldn't he have just warned her? Removed her from the pack? Anything but that.

It was disturbing how calm I felt while watching her die, my mate's hands ending her life like it meant nothing. I should have screamed, cried, run. But I didn't. It was as if some part of me had been expecting this. After all, I'd heard the stories. Whispers of what Zaliver was capable of. That he could kill without flinching. I just thought I'd have more time before witnessing it for myself.

I cracked my eyes open again, blinking into the darkness. Heavy curtains kept the room sealed in shadows, but I could tell it was night. I must've slept the whole day away. This island was draining me. Or maybe it was everything on the island. The testing. The constant pressure. The endless flood of information I didn't ask for. At least I was unconscious and not, well, pregnant. A dark chuckle slipped out before I could stop it.

I pushed myself upright and immediately felt the chill on my wrists. A metallic tug followed. My stomach sank.

"No way," I muttered under my breath.

"I did," came Zaliver's voice, smooth and deadpan.

I turned my head toward him. He sat on the couch across from the bed, legs spread, arms crossed, expression unreadable. His dark hair fell into his eyes, casting shadows over his face. He looked like part of the darkness itself. I couldn't read what he felt, if he felt anything at all.

And me? I didn't even know what I was feeling. Resentment? Confusion? Hurt?

I stared at him for a long second, unsure where to even begin. How do you start a conversation after someone murders a girl in front of you?

"So, about that girl you killed today?" Yeah, no.

Instead, I drew in a deep breath and lifted my arm, letting the chains clink softly. My eyes met his, sharp and cold.

"Why?" I asked.

He didn't even flinch. "Do I need a reason?"

My jaw clenched. "Yes! Yes, you actually do."

He tilted his head, unfazed. "Can't you guess? I killed someone right in front of you. Do you really think I could trust that you wouldn't run the second I turned away?"

His gaze shifted to the curtains, and I hated that a small part of me understood. Damn it, he had a point. But that didn't mean I accepted it.

I stood up, testing the weight of the chains as they followed me. I tugged and, to my surprise, they stretched. I walked farther, past the bed, then toward the bathroom. Still more slack. I stopped at the shower door and turned back to him with narrowed eyes.

"Why are these chains so long?"

"I had them made for you," he said like it was nothing.

I stared at him for a long moment. He'd had chains custom-made for me. Not grabbed whatever was lying around, not improvised. Actually commissioned them, probably before today, which meant some part of him had been planning for the possibility of chaining me up long before that girl hit the ground. The thought should have made me angrier. Instead it just made me feel like a piece on a board he'd been moving for a very long time.

"I don't know what's worse," I said flatly, "how long they are, or the fact that you custom-made them for me."

The metal bit into my wrists as I tugged again, harder this time. They didn't budge. Even calling on my wolf's strength didn't loosen them.

Of course they didn't.

I turned and walked back toward him slowly, hands clasped, the chains dragging softly behind me. He looked tense. Coiled, like he expected me to explode. And the strangest thing? My wolf, despite everything, still leaned toward him. She pushed a gentle nudge through the bond, whispering that he was ours, that he was protecting us the only way he knew how.

But I wasn't so easily swayed.

I stopped a few feet from him and looked down at the chain looped around my wrists, then back up at him. Six hundred years old, a god, the most powerful being in any room he'd ever walked into, and he'd put me in chains because he was afraid I'd run.

I wasn't sure if that made me feel sorry for him or more determined than ever to prove him right.

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Vivian Grey's POV

I stopped just in front of him, close enough to feel his heat.

"I'm not your prisoner, Zaliver," I said quietly, but my voice was steady.

He didn't respond. Not right away. And in that heavy silence, something inside me twisted, torn between the mate bond pulling us together and everything he'd just done tearing us apart.

"Okay, look," I started, arms crossed tight over my chest to keep myself from trembling. "I'm not gonna lie. Watching you kill that girl freaked me out, but honestly, I kinda saw it coming."

He tilted his head, studying me, but I rushed on before he could interrupt. "No offense or anything, but you've been alive for centuries as the Lupus Deus. Kinda hard to believe you haven't killed someone before. And let's not act like wolves don't tear rogues apart the second they get the chance. I just didn't expect it to happen so fast, so close. And honestly? That felt completely unjustified."

His face, unreadable at first, began to shift, surprise, then something like relief, and finally fury.

He stood abruptly, towering over me, and I instinctively stepped back. I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze. His dark blue eyes burned, and black veins pulsed under the skin beneath them, shifting and crawling like shadows alive. My breath caught in my throat.

And just when I thought it couldn't get more terrifying, he opened his mouth and flashed those sharp, gleaming canines.

"Unjustified?" His voice cracked like thunder. "You think what she did wasn't reason enough?"

His chest heaved, his body coiled tight like he was barely holding back a storm. I spoke softer now, nervous. I really needed to learn when to shut my damn mouth.

"She tripped over me," I said, glancing at his chest because I couldn't hold his eyes anymore. "I don't think that warranted death."

"You're right."

I looked up fast, blinking. Wait, what?

"Really?" I asked, almost hopeful. Was that guilt I heard in his voice? Maybe he regretted it. Maybe that girl had a name. Maybe I could remember her, honor her—

"I should've tortured her first," he finished, voice tight with bitterness. "Then I'd be calmer."

And just like that, my faint hope shriveled. My shoulders sagged.

"Of course," I muttered to myself. Should've known. I turned and made my way back toward the bed, stepping clumsily over the chains that clinked and tugged at my wrists.

"Can you get this crap off me?" I snapped, yanking my arms up with a clatter of metal. "If I didn't feel like a prisoner before, I sure as hell do now."

He didn't move. Just stood there with his arms folded across his chest. I glanced away before my eyes could linger too long. The black veins had faded. He looked like himself again, infuriatingly gorgeous.

I sat on the edge of the bed, refusing to give him the satisfaction of begging.

He watched me, silent, his stare digging into me. I stared back, flat and unimpressed.

"I thought you'd be unstable," he said finally. "Terrified. I thought you'd hate me."

His voice was tight, like he was holding back something more. Something raw. And for a second, the armor slipped just enough that I caught the thing underneath it, not cruelty, not calculation, but something closer to dread. Like he'd genuinely braced himself for me to fall apart. Like he wasn't entirely sure what he'd do if I had.

I sat with that for a moment longer than I let on. Six hundred years old, and he'd stood there bracing for my reaction like a man waiting to hear a verdict. That wasn't the behavior of someone who didn't care what I thought. I didn't know what to do with that. So I tucked it away for later, the way I always did with things too complicated to deal with right now. Then I just shrugged and looked back down at the chains, tugging lightly. "Warning: it'll catch up to me eventually," I mumbled. It was true. I was the type to go with the flow until the tide pulled me under. I didn't always face things right away, but they always circled back to bite me.

"So you're not going to do anything crazy?" he asked. "Try to escape?"

I snorted. "Nope. No dramatic escape attempt from me." I gestured vaguely at the walls around us. "Besides, it's more like swimming than running here. And I am not a strong swimmer. I've seen what lives in open water."

He almost smiled. Almost.

"Right," I said, tilting my head, "now that we're starting to understand each other, maybe you can go ahead and unchain me?" I lifted my wrists with a confident smile.

"No."

My head snapped up. "What?! Why the hell not?"

He arched a brow, calm and maddeningly smug. "I appreciate your honesty, but I don't take chances. You will crack eventually, and when you do, I'd rather not be the one cleaning up the blood. You're staying in here. If you need anything, ask."

I growled before I could stop myself. A wet, guttural sound ripped from my throat, low and threatening. For once, he actually looked taken aback, but only for a second. Then he straightened and stared me down, his eyes darkening again.

I knew I wasn't a real threat to him. But I didn't care. The fury burned too hot. I hadn't shifted in three days. My skin felt too tight, stretched over something that needed to get out. My wolf clawed at the surface, snarling alongside me.

"You can't do this to me!" I hissed. "I need to shift. If you don't want me going full-on violent-crazy and tearing your face off while you sleep, then remove these chains."

He bared his teeth in response, a deep growl vibrating from his chest. It rolled through the room, shaking the walls and rattling the chains on my wrists. My wolf whimpered and pressed low inside me, ears flattened in warning.

But I gritted my teeth and held my ground.

The chains clinked as I straightened my spine, shoulders back, chin up. I wouldn't submit. Not this time.

Not when I was the one in chains.

The growl still vibrated between us, low and unresolved. Neither of us moved. And in the silence that followed, I realized this was what it was going to be like, two people who belonged together, standing on opposite sides of a line neither of us had drawn.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

If I gave in now, I knew how things would go from here on out, him throwing his dominance around whenever I dared to have a different opinion. No. If I wanted any kind of equal footing with Zaliver, I had to dig my heels in and push back.

"You reckless little thing!" he snapped, his eyes glowing with fury. "Do you even realize how dangerous it is for someone like you to hold back a shift? You could've seriously hurt yourself. Spirits, Vivian! This is exactly why you need me to look after you!"

Wait, what?

I just stood there, mouth hanging open like a complete idiot. Of all the things I'd said, all he heard was that?

He somehow twisted this whole thing into me needing him? What kind of mind gymnastics?

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered. "Let's rewind here. It's not like I chose to avoid shifting. In the past three days, I've been knocked out more times than I can count. I got yanked off a plane, drugged, kidnapped twice! And let's not forget the blackout part. So if anyone's to blame here, it's you, Zaliver."

I jabbed my finger toward his chest for emphasis.

"I was literally heading out to run when Algebra, or whatever-his-name-is, swooped in and sedated me. I'd like just one freaking day where no one is putting me to sleep!"

My chest heaved with frustration, but he just crossed his arms and gave me a pointed look.

"Fine," he said calmly. "You're going for a run. Then straight to bed."

He stepped closer, pulling a key from his pocket. Finally.

I held out my wrists, eager to be free of the chains, but instead of immediately unlocking them, he paused in front of me. His gaze locked with mine, intense, unreadable.

"Behave," he warned, his voice a low rumble.

I rolled my eyes so hard I was surprised they didn't get stuck.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered under my breath. My wolf was practically bouncing inside me, excited and impatient to be free. She was itching to stretch her legs, to feel the earth beneath our paws again.

Behave, mutt, I teased her silently.

Shut up, you love me, she shot back with a smug huff.

Zaliver kept watching me like he expected me to bolt or do something dramatic. When he didn't spot any sign of rebellion, he sighed heavily and slipped the key into the lock. The chains fell with a satisfying clatter. I lifted my arms, relishing the sudden freedom.

"Come on," he said with a jerk of his chin.

He led me deep into the forest behind the house, guiding us away from the more open parts of the island. The further we walked, the wilder it felt. The scent of damp moss, bark, and soil filled my lungs and for the first time in days, I felt alive.

I hadn't realized how much I missed this, the trees crowding close like ancient guardians, the hush of nature ready to welcome me back into its arms.

Despite living on an island that was mostly forested, this was my first real moment in the woods since arriving. And it felt like coming home.

When we finally stopped, Zaliver stepped back, giving me space.

Now, most people had this dramatic image in their heads about shifting, clothes ripping, bones cracking loud enough to echo, blood maybe. But for us, it wasn't like that anymore.

The first shift was always a mess, bones shattering and reassembling, clothes torn to pieces, screams caught between human and wolf. But once we made it through that first painful transformation, our bodies adapted. Shifting became as natural as breathing or stretching after waking up.

Now it felt almost pleasant. Like a deep yawn after a long nap.

And the clothes? That had changed too. Somewhere down the centuries, we figured out how to keep them intact. Some ancient instinct or magic protected what we wore.

Probably because getting caught naked in the woods repeatedly was a surefire way to blow our cover with humans.

So when I felt the tingle in my spine and the pull of fur beneath skin, I didn't brace for pain or scream. I welcomed it.

I gave in to the wild within me.

I tried to ignore the weight of Zaliver's gaze as I stood still, drawing in a long breath. My eyelids slipped shut, and I focused on the pull inside me, on the raw, primal part of myself waiting just beneath the surface.

Shifting wasn't about brute force or speed. Not really. It wasn't a frantic scramble to morph into something deadly, it was surrender. Trust. Letting go of control so my wolf could take over when it mattered most.

I let her rise.

The moment she accepted me, a warmth bloomed in my chest and rippled outward. My bones stretched and cracked, reshaping with familiar ease. When I opened my eyes, the world was different. Sharper. Brighter. Alive.

Zaliver stood still ahead of me, his eyes locked on mine, well, on hers now. I could feel his gaze drinking in every inch of my form. I knew what he saw. A she-wolf with a coat that

started a soft caramel at my shoulders and darkened as it reached my tail, which was nearly black. A single patch of ebony fur marked the tip of my left ear.

We were bigger than wild wolves but not the towering beasts from fairy tales. I was tall for a female, and I carried myself with pride as I padded over to Zaliver. He didn't hesitate, his hand reached out slowly and brushed the top of my head.

My wolf pressed our snout gently to his leg.

"So soft," he murmured, his fingers combing through our fur. He paused at my left ear and tugged it.

No! I shouted inside, too late.

A loud purr escaped me.

Zaliver's eyes widened in shock at the sound.

Mortified, I could only watch as my wolf took that as an invitation and began rubbing our body along his legs.

Seriously? Stop it! I scolded. You're not a damn cat!

I want him to wear our scent, she replied smugly.

He already smells like us. We've been glued to him for days!

Zaliver tilted his head down, amusement twinkling in those deep eyes.

"You're quite the flirt, aren't you?" he said, his voice rich and rough with laughter.

And then she winked at him.

I groaned inwardly. Perfect. Just perfect. Go ahead and flirt with our fated mate. It's not like I have to deal with the awkward aftermath or anything.

As if to make matters worse, she darted away suddenly, paws pounding against soft earth. I felt the wind rush through our fur as we ran. Behind us, Zaliver didn't hesitate, he followed, still in human form but easily keeping pace at my side.

We ran together, the forest blurring past in streaks of green and gold. My wolf exhaled with contentment, her instincts satisfied by the nearness of our mate.

But she wasn't done.

Without warning, she dropped into a slide mid-stride, our body twisting through the dirt. I barely had time to panic before Zaliver appeared above me, wrapping his arms around my body. With an effortless twist, he flipped us in the air, his back hit the ground with a thud, and I landed on top of him.

Thank the moon for magic. Our clothes had already reformed.

You're ridiculous, I muttered.

He liked it, my wolf said smugly.

You're trying to seduce him!

Helpful bitch, she corrected with a satisfied growl.

I wanted to be mad, but I was too busy catching my breath on top of a man who made my heart pound even faster than a full sprint.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

I froze, still straddling Zaliver, his arms locked tightly around my waist like iron bands. For a moment, I didn't dare move. His gaze was already on me, intense and unreadable. I tilted my head up, caught in the stormy shift of his eyes, deep blue, growing darker by the second.

It had never been me on top before. Always him. Always dominant. But here I was, flushed and trembling, with his heartbeat thundering beneath my palm, steady, powerful, and way too fast for me to pretend this meant nothing. The scent of him filled my lungs, heady and addictive. I felt heat coil through me, slow and wicked.

"Are you alright, Vivian?" he asked, voice low and rough, the kind that made your name sound like a promise wrapped in sin.

My brain short-circuited.

No. No, I was not okay. My sinfully hot mate was beneath me, holding me close like I was the only thing tethering him to the earth, and we hadn't even kissed yet. I felt like I was going to melt into him or combust. Possibly both.

"Uh, y-yeah," I stammered. "Sorry. I don't know what got into my wolf."

"She's got quite the playful streak." He didn't let go. Instead, with a sudden, smooth motion, he rolled us until he hovered above me, forearms braced on either side of my head. His face was only inches from mine now.

His voice dropped into a murmur. "Makes me wonder if you'll be like this in bed."

My breath caught. My body went rigid, then trembled. The way he said it, gods. I didn't know whether to slap him or pull him closer. I choked on a noise I didn't even recognize.

Yep. I was definitely dead. Goodbye, world. Death by mate-induced hormonal overload.

But then something in me sparked, my sass crawling its way back to the surface like a defense mechanism.

"Why do you say that like you actually stand a chance?" I said, tossing the words out half-joking, trying to cool the heat simmering between us. I was not about to lose my virginity to the Lupus Deus two days into this weird forest-bound mate thing.

His eyes narrowed at me, the faintest growl rising from deep in his chest. I felt it rumble through him and through me. His lips curled slightly, a warning. His body pressed tighter to mine, hips pinning me in place. And before I could blink, he had my wrists secured above my head.

I blinked up at him, wide-eyed. Crap. Did I go too far?

"Why must you always push me?" he growled softly. "I suggest you watch that tongue of yours. I've already tolerated far more than I usually do. No more talk about other males. I won't allow it."

Then, without another word, he yanked us both upright and grabbed my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. We started walking through the woods, my steps stumbling clumsily after his sure ones.

My heart was still trying to return to a normal rhythm. Being around Zaliver was like constantly standing too close to lightning, dangerous, thrilling, impossible to ignore.

I glanced down at our joined hands. His hand dwarfed mine, rough and calloused in places, but still warm. It made me wonder about the strength he held back every single day, and what it cost him to do it.

"What was her name?" I asked softly.

His fingers tightened around mine. Just enough to answer.

"Martha," he said, voice clipped. "And I don't want to talk about her. Whatever issue she had with you is over."

That was blunt. But I didn't push. Not when his shoulders were pulled back like he was preparing for war.

Rest in peace, Martha. I hope you're not holding a grudge in the afterlife for whatever part I played in your death.

"Why didn't you shift?" I asked instead, hoping for something less loaded.

He looked at me briefly and offered a tight, worn-out smile. So much for that.

"Next question?" I asked, not bothering to hide my irritation.

He nodded, amused.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Black."

Called it.

"Song?"

"None."

I raised a brow.

"Movie?"

"None."

"TV show?"

"Still none."

"Sport?"

"Pointless."

At least he changed it up.

"Book?"

"None."

I let out an exaggerated sigh. "What is wrong with you?"

His lips quirked, clearly enjoying my frustration. "What?"

"You're messing with me," I muttered.

"I'm not," he said, but the sparkle in his eye told me otherwise.

Silence stretched between us as the glow of the pack house porch came into view. Then I asked, "So, are you not going to ask me?"

"I don't need to. I already know," he said confidently.

I blinked, and he smirked down at me.

"Your favorite color is violet. You're currently obsessed with that song Often by The Weeknd. Your favorite show is The Vampire Diaries. You don't have a favorite sport, but you do have a favorite book." He paused, letting the anticipation hang between us. "Fifty Shades of Grey." He let the last one roll off his tongue with mock seriousness.

I wanted to die. Right there. Of embarrassment.

He wasn't done.

"You also like that Christian guy," he added, his expression souring as he looked away. "The one from the book."

I bit my lip, trying not to laugh. He was jealous. Of a fictional character.

Hashtag Team Grey. Sorry, Zaliver.

Why did this always happen to me? One minute I was teasing, the next I was mentally writing my will.

"I'll make you something to eat, then bed," he said, pushing open the front door and guiding us to the kitchen. He pulled out a chair, settled me in, and began gathering ingredients like it was routine. I glanced at the clock, 11:57. Not as late as I thought.

He acted like he didn't care. Like he wasn't opening up. But this? This had to be his way of showing he did, in his own cryptic, emotionally stunted, supernatural god-wolf way. I wanted to know more. I needed to. But the walls around him felt permanent.

Maybe it was about those other gods he mentioned. Maybe they were the reason he wouldn't mark me yet. Why he'd dragged me to that lab to see if something was wrong with me, wrong for him.

I watched him move around the kitchen and decided that, for now, I'd take what he was willing to give.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

I watched him as he worked, quiet and beautiful and powerful. And I wondered if I'd ever be close enough to understand what kept him caged.

Could that really be it? The possibility twisted like ice in my stomach. The idea that I might somehow hurt Zaliver, gods, I couldn't bear it. I shoved the thought into the farthest corner of my mind, locking it away. I wasn't ready to face something like that. Not yet.

Later that evening, Zaliver surprised me by making soup for the both of us. Honestly, I expected something bland or underwhelming, but it was the opposite. Whatever he'd added to it filled me up completely. I couldn't have eaten another bite if I tried.

"Now, bed," he said simply.

"But I'm not even tired," I whined with a half-hearted pout, following him down the hall.

He gave me an eye-roll over his shoulder. The casual way we moved into the bedroom startled me. Our room. I'd already started calling it that in my head, like I belonged here. But I didn't know where I stood. Without the mating mark, what was I really? Not his Luna. Not officially. I felt like some uninvited guest the Alpha refused to kick out.

"Give me your hands," he said, lifting the chains from the nightstand.

I backed away and shook my head firmly. "Nope. I'm not putting those things on. They're unnecessary."

Relief washed over me when he sighed and let them fall to the floor with a clink.

"Fine. But you will wear them tomorrow when I leave," he warned.

That caught my attention. My ears twitched.

"We'll see," I said vaguely, eyeing him as he turned toward the dresser. "What are you doing?"

He pulled out some bottoms and pajamas and handed them to me. "Business," was all he offered before disappearing into the bathroom and flicking on the light.

Business. That probably meant time alone, finally. I hadn't realized how much I craved a moment to just be, without his looming presence filling every corner of the room.

As soon as he shut the door, I changed quickly on the couch and ran my fingers through my tangled hair. I needed normalcy. Something to do. Something mine.

"If I'm going to live here, I should start looking for a job tomorrow," I muttered to myself. "Not that I have any of my paperwork." Maybe Zaliver could use his influence to help with that.

"You don't need them," his voice came from behind me, sharper than I expected. "Because you won't be working. If you want something, just tell me."

He walked over and sat next to me, arm draped along the back of the couch, his body heat curling around me like smoke. His nearness was unsettling and comforting all at once.

I tried to stay calm. "I need a job, Zaliver."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I can't keep living in your clothes forever?" I gestured at my borrowed shirt. "I have other needs too. Personal things. Long-term things."

He clicked his tongue. "If you want something—"

"I'm not going to just ask you every time I need something. That makes me feel like a gold digger," I cut in, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of it. Still, I held his gaze.

He rolled his eyes. "You're using that word wrong. I was around when it first started popping up in conversation. But this isn't gold digging. I'm your mate. I want to give you everything."

I crossed my arms. "I don't care. I'm not living off you."

That struck a nerve. The air around him shifted, darker, heavier. His expression hardened.

"Why do you sound like you're planning to pay me rent or something?" he snapped.

My eyes widened. "What?"

"That's what it sounds like to me."

I shook my head, trying to make sense of his leap in logic. "That's not it—"

"Then what is it?" he pressed, voice rough with irritation.

I took a breath, unsure how to explain the chaos in my chest. "I don't really know what kind of relationship this is, if we can even call it one. Everything's happened so fast. I

didn't ask for a mate, and then you came, well, took me, and now you're some ancient god on top of it all. A job would give me something solid. Something that's mine. Something normal."

I stared at the floor, fingers twisting in my lap. Saying it out loud lifted something off me, like peeling away a layer of confusion. Silence followed. I hesitated before finally looking up.

He was watching me, expression unreadable, blue eyes flat.

I bit my lip, unsure if I'd said too much. Maybe I'd ruined the fragile peace between us.

Then, to my surprise, he chuckled softly, running a hand through his midnight hair.

"What?" I asked, nervous.

He shook his head with a low exhale. "At first, I assumed they sent you to manipulate the bond. That you'd act sweet and tempting, draw me into some trap. But now I realize..." He smirked. "It's the opposite."

I blinked. "Come again?"

What the hell does that even mean? my wolf grumbled.

Zaliver suddenly let out a full, unrestrained laugh, deep and loud, clutching his stomach as if I'd told the best joke of his six hundred years. It startled me. I'd never heard him laugh like that before, and something about it warmed me. It was real. Alive. It made him look almost human.

But just as quickly as it came, it vanished.

Before I could process it, he was above me, his body braced over mine, eyes glowing with something intense and unfamiliar. Mischief, maybe. Reverence, even.

He reached out and traced his fingertip from the corner of my eye, down to the edge of my lip, and slowly across it. My breath caught. I couldn't stop my eyes from drifting to his mouth.

"You," he murmured, voice like velvet. "You haven't been corrupted by this world yet. You're just you. And now that I see that clearly, I intend to savor every second."

His smile was soft and full of something that made my heart stutter.

"What are you talking about?" I whispered.

"Hush," he whispered back, and kissed me.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

It didn't hit me right away what he'd done, what we were doing.

My eyes fluttered shut a beat too late, but when they did, everything sharpened. Every sense turned raw and alive. I felt everything, him. The heat of his body seeped into mine, his chest pressed against me, and his heartbeat thundered like a war drum inside my ears.

His lips, soft and firm all at once, were locked to mine, careful but certain. A shiver rolled through me as his mouth teased my bottom lip, a subtle tug that made my nerves dance and my breath catch. I froze, completely out of my depth. This was my first kiss. What the hell was I supposed to do?

Like he sensed I might retreat, one of his hands cupped my cheek, steadying me, anchoring me to the moment. His other arm supported his weight above me, careful not to crush me, though honestly, I wouldn't have minded. Not right now.

I stopped thinking and let instinct take over. My lips began to move with his, fumbling at first but slowly finding rhythm. I reached up, my hands grazing his back. He stiffened

briefly, then relaxed into my touch. His kiss deepened, lips moving with more intent, and I trailed my fingers down his spine until I gripped his waist. That's when everything changed.

He growled softly, his teeth catching my bottom lip before I parted it, surrendering. The rush of blood in my veins became thunderous. Every inch of skin burned beneath the weight of my clothes, and still, I felt consumed by something hotter, him.

The bond, our bond, something we'd let grow faint through distance and hesitation, suddenly ignited. It burst between us, wild and electric, golden threads reconnecting like fire meeting oil. I felt it in my chest first, a warmth that spread outward in every direction at once, filling spaces I hadn't realized were empty. Like something that had been waiting for permission finally got it. The sensation punched the air from my lungs and drew a helpless sound from my throat. His groan mirrored mine, low and unguarded, and that sound alone nearly undid me.

Then came his tongue, sweeping across my lip, and I lost myself. Just that taste of him wrecked me. I wanted more. I needed more. I met him with a hunger that startled even me. I pulled at his hips, urging him closer as our tongues tangled and fought for control.

He pulled back slightly, panting, a low growl escaping him. For once, his eyes were their true shade, a vivid, glowing blue, not clouded with shadow or fury. They locked with mine, and for a long second, we just breathed together, heavy and uneven, our chests brushing.

I blinked up at him, dazed but smiling. Joy shimmered behind my confusion. I could feel my wolf curled up in my mind, completely overwhelmed and probably unconscious from the sheer force of the connection we'd just reignited.

When I finally found my breath, my voice came out low and ragged. "Not that I'm complaining, but where the hell did that come from?"

Zaliver hovered above me, hair falling across his forehead, those hypnotic eyes still simmering with need. His lips were redder than before, slightly swollen from kissing me.

A wave of fierce pride rose inside me. I had done that to him. A possessive instinct followed quickly after. I wanted to be the only one who ever saw him like this, who ever made him fall apart.

Without even realizing it, my hands slid around his waist and tugged him closer, tightening the space between us. He smirked knowingly, like he could read every damn thought I had, which, let's be honest, he probably could.

"What?" he said with mock innocence. "Can't a guy kiss his adorable little mate?"

I snorted, rolling my eyes. "You dragged me to the doctor to figure out if you could keep your so-called adorable mate."

He pushed himself up and stood, stretching his arms over his head. My eyes betrayed me, wandering to where his shirt rode up, exposing that perfect hint of a V.

"I was going to keep you either way," he said, voice losing its teasing edge. "I just needed to know what to expect. You never really know with the mating bond. It's meant to make

us stronger together, to balance us, but it also makes us vulnerable. It gives us something to lose. And people who have something to lose," he paused, gaze darkening, "they can be manipulated. They can be blinded by what they think is happiness."

His words hit me like cold water. My breath caught, and for a second, my joy slipped away.

He wasn't just talking in theory. There was weight in his voice, something worn and specific, the kind that only comes from experience. I turned the words over in my mind, trying to find the shape of what he wasn't saying. Someone had used that vulnerability against him before. Someone had gotten close enough to reach the thing behind the armor and had done damage there. I didn't know who, or when, or how long he'd been carrying it. But I felt the echo of it in every wall he'd put up since the moment I met him.

Of course there was someone before me.

I hated how my chest tightened at that. But I held onto the truth of what we were now. We were bonded. Fated. That had to mean more than anything that came before.

Before I could say anything, he changed the subject. "Now come on and get some sleep," he said, tone shifting to something more mischievous. His lips twitched. "Unless you've got other ideas?"

I bolted off the couch and flung myself onto the bed, cocooning in the blanket like a terrified but highly amused burrito. "Good night!"

His laugh followed, low and full of amusement, and the sound settled something in me.

Whatever came before, whatever pain or hesitation lingered, for now, we were here. Together. And that was enough.

In the morning, he pressed his card into my hand before I'd even finished waking up.

"I'm giving you this again. This time, actually use it," he said, tone calm but firm.

I looked down at the sleek black card, then back up at him. The first time he'd given it to me, I'd treated it like a weapon I didn't know how to hold. Now it felt different. Not like a leash. More like a door left open.

I closed my fingers around it and nodded.