

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna chapter 31-40

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian's POV

"I mean it, Vivian. I expect you to buy thirty of everything, shirts, pants, skirts, earrings..." His voice dipped lower, tone suddenly rougher. "Bras. Underwear. Lingerie."

My eyes practically bulged from my face. "Wait, thirty? Are you kidding me? That's excessive! And why would I need lingerie? I already told you, I'm not trying to live off of you."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. No. And for me."

I blinked. "What?"

"You clearly won't accept a simple 'just because I said so,' so let me break it down for you." He tucked his hands in his pockets and leaned in slightly, eyes locked on mine. "If you spent five million dollars today and another five tomorrow, the only dent you'd make in my bank accounts would be equivalent to losing ten pennies from the first account. Out of many."

I opened my mouth to respond but forgot how to breathe for a second.

"So think of it this way: you're doing me a favor. I don't mind letting that money sit there, untouched for centuries if needed. But if you spend it, not only do you ease your own discomfort, but you'll make a bunch of shop owners incredibly happy to see their Luna shopping at their stores."

He said it so casually, like five million was pocket change. I bit my lip, trying to wrap my head around just how rich he was. Or how powerful. The thought alone made my skin tingle.

I couldn't lie, the way he framed it made sense. Technically, I'd be helping people, right?

I smirked a little. "You're a smooth talker, you know that?"

"I've been told," he said with a sly grin.

"Fine. You win. But don't come crying to me when you wake up bankrupt," I teased, half-joking as I reached for the card.

Before my fingers could close around it, his hand snaked out and tugged me against his chest. I let out a soft gasp.

"Stick close to your guards," he murmured. "If you need anything, just ask Luke."

Then, without another word, he leaned in and kissed me. Just a small brush of lips, but warm and lingering. My heart tripped over itself in my chest. Then he pulled away, slipped the card into my hand, and vanished, same as last time. Kiss and disappear. No warning, no explanation, just gone.

I stood there for a second, card in hand, wondering if he even knew what he did to me when he did that. Probably. He probably knew exactly what he was doing.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and rubbed my face, needing a moment to just feel. Zaliver was intense. Unpredictable. But he was also showing me a version of care I didn't expect from someone like him. Quiet care, the kind that didn't announce itself. I was going to have to be more careful not to push it away out of habit.

He'd said I could eventually call my parents. Maybe even visit, if I behaved. That was something worth holding onto.

As I made my way toward the living room, I passed the guards' lounge and barely registered the sound of footsteps until four familiar figures fell into stride beside me like shadows. Mila, Courtney, Johnson, and Luke. All quiet as ghosts. I wouldn't have noticed at all if Johnson hadn't smacked Mila's butt, earning a sharp gasp from her.

I turned around just in time to see her fist cocking back, only for Luke to catch it midair with a sigh.

"Why is it you people can never act right in front of the Luna?" he muttered with a glare.

I smiled, warmed by the familiar chaos. They were all in sleek black uniforms, more official than usual, and this time, each of them had earpieces tucked discreetly behind their ears.

"Hey, guys. How are you?" I asked, genuinely happy to see them as we headed into the main living area.

"We're great, Luna," Courtney replied, her voice polite. "Anywhere you'd like to go today?"

I pulled out the black card from the waistband of my shorts and held it up like a trophy.

Luke's green eyes narrowed, clearly remembering my attempted boat purchase last time. I snorted and held up my hands.

"Don't worry. I'm not planning to escape today. No boats involved. Promise."

His posture didn't ease. He stayed stiff, eyes still scanning me like I might grow gills and dive off the nearest dock at any second.

I sighed. Fine. No use trying to convince him with words. I'd just have to show him.

"That's great! You'll love the shopping here," Mila said excitedly, tugging her hand out of Luke's grip and sliding up next to me. "Our malls are way better than anything humans have."

"Yeah?" I asked, curious. "How so?"

"Well, for one," she began, flipping her hair over her shoulder, "you don't have to worry about someone accidentally shifting mid-shop and exposing the big secret, because everyone here's a wolf. Or at least most of us are."

My brows shot up. "Wait, humans live here?"

Mila nodded, but Luke cut in to clarify.

"Only those mated to wolves. Other than that, it's just us."

I let out a breath, equal parts relieved and intrigued. It made sense. If a wolf claimed a human mate, of course they'd bring them into the fold. The island was basically its own world, with its own rules, and the more I learned about it, the more I realized I'd barely scratched the surface. Six days ago I was fleeing my home pack in the middle of the night. Now I was standing on a hidden island in the Bermuda Triangle, about to go shopping with four supernatural bodyguards on a card with no apparent limit. My life had taken a very specific kind of turn.

"So," I asked after a pause, tucking the card back into my waistband, "any malls in mind?"

Mila's face lit up like I'd just said the magic words.

And just like that, the energy around us shifted. Less bodyguard, more chaos. Which, honestly, felt exactly right. I was starting to think chaos might just be my love language. And maybe that was fine, because chaos, it turned out, was the only thing about this place that felt completely familiar.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian's POV

I couldn't help it, I was irritated. Not raging, not devastated, just tired of the awkward stares and the thick tension that clung to me like a second skin. I'd expected some friction, sure. I just didn't think I'd feel this invisible and feared at the same time.

After being escorted to the island's largest shopping mall, I quickly realized just how fast word traveled in a pack. Especially when it involved the Alpha snapping someone's neck for me. That news had apparently reached every corner of the territory.

The weird part? The wolves were polite. Too polite. The kind of respectful that was less about admiration and more about fear. Every store I entered came with trembling hands, stammering apologies for things that didn't even happen, and eyes that darted away the second I met them. It was like I was some cursed object no one wanted to touch. People either avoided me like I carried the plague or treated me like a ticking time bomb.

All I wanted was to meet pack members, talk to them, observe them, feel like I belonged to something here. But the way things were going, I had a better shot at wrangling information out of Zaliver himself. And we all knew how chatty he was. Spoiler: not at all.

"It's fine, Luna. They're just not sure how to approach you yet," Courtney said gently, standing beside me while I sifted through a rack of shirts. I must've looked like I'd just been told my puppy ran away. "The pack's never had a female Alpha before. It's just going to take some time."

I nodded, but the knot in my chest tightened. Courtney had a point, but it didn't make it hurt any less. I mean, I wouldn't want to hang around the girl who got someone in the pack killed either. No matter what her title was.

After picking out, okay, hoarding, around thirty shirts, Courtney helped me carry them while Mila and the others rotated around me like clockwork. They took turns walking beside me, trying to make conversation and keep things light. I appreciated it, even if my smile barely reached my eyes.

As we made our way to the register, I spotted the cashier, and the poor thing looked like she was about to pass out. Her eyes widened like I'd walked in covered in blood, and her pale skin went ghost-white.

I forced a friendly smile and approached with calm steps. "Hello!" I greeted, laying the stack of shirts down gently in front of her. Courtney stood quietly at my side, a silent wall of support.

"H-Hello. I-I hope you're pleased with our store, L-Luna," she stammered, hands shaking as she scanned each tag with trembling fingers. She didn't even look up.

"The store is lovely. You're doing a good job," I said, smile still in place though it was beginning to feel like a mask.

She finally glanced up at me, just for a second, and I saw it clearly in that brief moment, not disrespect, not coldness, just fear. Pure, animal fear. Of me. Of what I represented, or maybe of what had happened to the last person who'd crossed me, even accidentally.

Her reaction wasn't her fault. None of this was her fault. But it still settled in my chest like a stone dropped in still water. Deep in my chest, my wolf let out a low, unhappy sound. This was our pack. Weren't we supposed to feel connected to them? Wasn't the bond supposed to go both ways?

I kept smiling until we were outside, and then I let it drop.

Once the bags were packed, we left the store. I was mildly surprised when I learned everything I bought would be sent straight to the pack house. I didn't even need to carry anything other than my credit chip. Efficient, and strange.

Mila, Johnson, and Luke were waiting just outside when we rejoined them. We'd only been out for a couple of hours, but no one seemed hungry or rushed. So we just kept walking, wandering really, from shop to shop, the others occasionally pointing something out that caught their eye, trying to keep things light.

Then Johnson's phone rang, and that's when the real day began.

"Sorry," he muttered, sheepishly pulling it out of his pocket. I gave him a small shrug. I wasn't in a talking mood anyway.

He answered it with a tone that made Mila snort beside me. "Warning: if I get fired because of this call, I'm setting you on fire. What do you want?"

The voice on the other end was female, teasing, and familiar in that sibling sort of way. "Oh come on, bro! You love me. Besides, if you get fired, I'll hire you myself. And Mark said if you even think of lighting a match near me, he'll kill you. Thanks, babe! Anyway, I just need you for like two minutes—"

"Nope. Not happening." Johnson cut her off, clearly already fed up. "You pulled me out the other day. I'm lucky no one caught me ditching work on my first damn day."

"I know," she said, tone softening. "But this is important. Just one last favor. Please?"

"Why can't Mark help you? Isn't that what mates are for?"

"He's busy." Her voice dropped lower, a mix of frustration and something sadder. "I'm sorry I'm bothering you. I just thought my big brother would still be around when I needed him, even for the little things."

Johnson's shoulders relaxed a little. I could tell the guilt was sinking in.

"Like when I couldn't reach Mom's cookies because she always put them on the top shelf. You'd get them for me and split them, remember? I always knew you'd have my back. But I guess we're grown now. I get it. You don't care anymore. It's fine. I'll just do it myself."

Her words were soft but sharp, and Johnson looked at me, torn.

I gave him a small nod.

He sighed, dragging a hand through his loose blond curls. "Fine. I'll be there in a few," he said, voice gentler now.

A squeal of delight erupted through the phone, making Mila flinch beside me. I laughed under my breath.

Maybe things weren't so hopeless after all. The pack might be afraid of me right now, and that was going to take time to fix. But I had four people walking beside me who weren't, and that was a start. That was enough to keep moving forward on.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

"Good. Your spot's already open. I knew you'd fall for that," a teasing voice chirped through the phone. The smirk behind the words practically echoed in the air.

Johnson's eyes narrowed.

"You manipulative little witch!" he barked into the phone, loud enough to catch the attention of a few nearby shoppers.

I couldn't help it, I laughed. A quiet, surprised giggle slipped out before I could stop it.

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Love you, bro. See you in a few."

The call ended before he had the chance to fire back, and Johnson let out a low groan as he shoved his phone into his pocket. His hand flew up to tug harshly on his thick curls in frustration.

"I can't believe I fell for that again," he muttered to himself.

That did it. The girls and I exchanged glances, then burst into a round of unrestrained laughter. The sight of this towering, muscled werewolf pouting like a scolded pup because his baby sister had outplayed him was just too good.

Luke chuckled as he clapped Johnson on the shoulder.

"You're laughing because you've never had a little sister who memorized all your weaknesses and later turned them into weapons," he said with a kind of exaggerated weariness. "It's like living with a walking curse."

Johnson let out another exasperated sigh. "Ahhh man! Sorry, Luna. I'll be back in a few." He turned to leave.

Something inside me moved before I'd made a conscious decision about it. Maybe it was the way the mall noise had gone quiet around us again, the distant awareness of eyes tracking me from store windows. Maybe it was just that Johnson's sister sounded like

someone who didn't know to be afraid of me yet, and that felt like the most appealing thing in the world right now.

"Do you mind if I come?" I asked.

Johnson looked surprised, brows lifting in that puppyish way of his, but then a bright grin broke out across his face.

"No problem, Luna. I'm sure my sister will be thrilled to meet you." His voice held genuine warmth.

Hope bloomed inside my chest, small but real. Maybe his sister would give me a real chance, someone to talk to who didn't already have an opinion about me shaped by fear or the ghost of a broken neck.

We followed Johnson outside and slid into the black BMW we'd come in. Once we were on the road, I glanced his way, curiosity tugging at me.

"So, do you know what she wants you to do?"

He gave a shrug, nonchalant. "Not really. She always gives me weird little tasks at the store. Could be anything."

"What kind of store does she own?"

That's when his face changed. A deep blush crept into his cheeks, and even his ears turned bright red. My thoughts jumped immediately to all the wrong conclusions.

"Oh no," I said slowly. "What kind of weird store are we talking about here?"

After an awkward pause, he muttered, "Victoria's Secret."

Oh.

I stared at him, eyes wide. That wasn't too bad. Until I remembered exactly what kinds of things they sold in Victoria's Secret.

"Wait, what kind of odd jobs does she make you do in a lingerie store?"

Johnson groaned, loud and defeated, before tucking his massive frame into itself like a sulking bear. He hid his face under his arms.

Mila and Luke erupted into laughter.

"Man, I still have the pictures from when she made you model that new set of lin—"

Johnson's low, growling snarl cut her off. The sheer mortification on his face was priceless.

"You said you deleted those!" he snapped at her.

Mila turned in her seat, still laughing but now narrowing her eyes like she'd just remembered something important.

"And you said you deleted my red bikini photos from freshman year. But guess who saw them on Facebook?"

His face twisted from angry to wide-eyed innocence. He blinked up at her with exaggerated disbelief.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Must've been some other Johnson. It's a pretty common name, you know."

But his fingers twitched on his lap like he desperately wanted to yank his curls again.

"Liar!" she hissed. "Your FB name is Johnson WiggleWiggleWiggle."

Wait.

What.

I turned to Courtney beside me, mouthing, WiggleWiggleWiggle?

She mouthed back with a grin, Jason Derulo.

I pressed my lips together so hard it hurt. My whole body was shaking with the effort of not losing it completely. I stared very hard at the headrest in front of me and thought about taxes. It didn't help.

Mila crossed her arms. "One, it's stupid. Two, delete the bikini picture. And three, the last time I checked, you don't even have anything to wiggle."

I gave up. A sound came out of me that could generously be described as a laugh and less generously as a seal being stepped on. I clapped a hand over my mouth.

Johnson, completely unfazed, smirked and leaned forward, his bulk taking up more space than seemed physically possible.

"Baby, the last time you checked, we were both drunk. But if you wanna check my wiggle again, let me see yours first."

Mila's eyes went wide. Her entire face flushed a deep, telltale red.

Smooth.

Okay. That escalated fast.

"Johnson! Chill out, man. Mila, you too, behave," Luke scolded, but his tone was full of suppressed amusement. I got the sense he was very used to playing peacekeeper between these two. He was absolutely the mom-friend of this group, and he wore it with the quiet exhaustion of someone who had accepted his role long ago.

When we finally pulled into the parking lot, the guys hopped out to check that everything was clear before opening the door for me.

The building was sleek, modern, and absolutely fashionable.

It looked exactly like the Victoria's Secret store from the mainland, window displays and all.

And that's when Zaliver's voice echoed in my head, calm and certain as it always was.

Bras. Underwear. Lingerie.

Oh goddess.

I stood there for a moment, staring up at the sign, putting the pieces together one by one.

He knew. He'd known exactly where Johnson's sister worked. He'd probably planned this down to the parking space.

Six hundred years old and he was out here playing shopping matchmaker.

Incredible.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian's POV

My cheeks were practically on fire. I hadn't had a chance to buy any essentials since arriving, thanks to everyone acting so oddly around me, but now I had to. Not for Zaliver's sake, but for my own dignity. There was no way I was walking around feeling like Captain Commando. Absolutely not.

As soon as we stepped inside the store, Johnson excused himself. He disappeared into a back room for barely a second before returning with a petite blonde woman, her soft blue eyes reminding me so much of his. She looked a few years older than me and wore a flowing lavender dress that hugged a very prominent baby bump. I blinked, surprised but not in a bad way.

Her eyes found mine instantly. I braced myself, expecting the usual flash of fear or suspicion. Instead, she smiled warmly, genuinely, as if I were just another woman, not the Luna, not Zaliver's mate, not the rumored monster.

She stepped forward and offered her hand. "Hi! I'm Hannah, Johnson's sister. You must be Luna Vivian. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Her sincerity softened something tight in my chest. She wasn't posturing or playing games. Even my wolf, usually alert and on edge around strangers, felt at ease. There was no challenge in her gaze, just quiet respect.

"Please just call me Vivian," I said, shaking her hand. "It's nice to meet someone who's not guarding me."

"Vivian it is," she said brightly. "Let me know if you need help with anything."

Then her friendly smile turned devilish as she glanced at her brother. "As for you, dear brother, I have a job for you."

Before he could protest, she dragged him to the other side of the store.

"I'll be outside," Luke said, his voice a little too eager. "Patrolling. You know, patrolling."

He didn't wait for a reply before escaping the store like it was on fire. I rolled my eyes. What was it with men and lingerie shops? They'd eagerly remove these things but freak out the second you mentioned buying them.

"Well," Courtney said with a teasing glint in her eye, "looks like you've got the floor, Luna."

"I'm sure you don't want us watching while you pick out your seduction gear," Mila added, not bothering to hide her grin.

I turned away, cheeks burning again. "You can leave now."

Courtney snatched a red thong from a nearby display and waved it in the air. "I wonder what the Alpha would think about this lacy little number?"

Mortified, I lunged and grabbed it from her hands, stuffing it back in the box like it had burned me.

"I'm not here to seduce him. I'm just shopping," I said as calmly as I could, before striding off with as much dignity as I could gather, knowing full well that no matter what I said, everyone would assume my choices were to catch Zaliver's attention.

But they are, my wolf chimed smugly.

No, they're not.

Then get the red thong.

Shut up.

Okay, fine, the black one, then.

I blocked her out after that, pretending she didn't exist. I was halfway through selecting everything I needed when something passed by me that almost made me choke.

Johnson. In a woman's lingerie costume.

I swear I snorted, and I wasn't the only one. The entire store erupted into laughter, soft chuckles and outright cackles filling the air. I knew I shouldn't laugh, but spirits above, it was just too much.

His broad, clearly masculine frame was stuffed into a too-small outfit that wasn't even the right measurements. His curls were pulled forward, his expression a mixture of rage and deep regret. And goddess help me, he had side-boob.

Outside the window, he stood with his arms stiff at his sides, jaw tight, staring straight ahead like a soldier at attention. Two older women had stopped to look. One of them said something and pointed. Johnson's eye twitched.

A child tugged on her mother's sleeve and pointed too.

Johnson looked directly at me through the glass, caught my eye, and mouthed, very slowly and deliberately, I hate her.

Hannah strolled over and stood next to me, watching her brother stand stiffly outside the store window.

"You are the best brother ever," she called through the glass, a wicked grin on her face.

People were already talking to him, gesturing at the costume, probably thinking it was part of some bizarre advertising campaign. They wouldn't be entirely wrong.

"He volunteered?" I asked, still trying not to wheeze from laughter.

"Oh yes," Hannah said, arms folded smugly. "I told him sales were dropping and we needed someone to attract attention. I might've said I would have to dress up and stand outside, but being the sweet big brother he is, and seeing I'm pregnant, he insisted on doing it for me."

She paused, then added dryly, "What I didn't mention is that sales are just fine. And that there's no universe where I'd ever wear that thing in public."

I stared at her, a slow grin stretching across my face. I was starting to understand what Luke meant about little sisters. Dangerous.

Hannah must have caught my look because she grinned and said, "He called me fat in my second month. Fat. No one calls a pregnant woman fat and gets away with it."

We looked at each other and burst into helpless laughter. Full, genuine, stomach-hurting laughter, the kind I hadn't managed since before the night my mother woke me up and told me to run. It felt good. It felt like something I hadn't known I was missing.

"You might be my new best friend," I admitted, wiping actual tears from my eyes.

She slung a short arm over my shoulder like we'd known each other for years. "I had a feeling I'd like you. Anyone who makes my brother look that mortified is a friend for life."

But then she spotted the neat pile of undergarments in my basket, and that evil glint was back in her eye. The same look she'd given Johnson just before sending him into costume purgatory.

Uh-oh.

"So," she drawled slowly, lips curving into something that looked suspiciously like her brother's mischief face. "How do you feel about see-through lingerie?"

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

It was official. I'd somehow become best friends with a certifiably insane, pregnant woman who took genuine joy in pushing my comfort levels to their absolute limit. Hannah practically held me hostage in her boutique, refusing to let me leave until I tried on every scandalous outfit she could find. Some of them had me seriously considering kneeling down and praying for my soul. I mean, come on. See-through lace? Who was that even for?

I drew a firm line there. "Nope," I had said, holding up one of those sheer, practically nonexistent pieces. "I'm not wearing something that looks like it came from a spider's web and a bad decision."

Hannah had just smirked. "Wimp."

Once she'd tortured me enough, she left the store in the care of one of her assistants and dragged me around the territory for what she dubbed "a proper tour." And honestly, it was something I didn't know I needed. Johnson had his boyish charm and silly antics, but Hannah? She was sharp-tongued, blunt to the point of painful honesty, and completely unbothered by social niceties.

While we were out, she noticed the way people instinctively gave me space, too much space, like they were afraid of breathing the same air. It was subtle, but she caught it. When a waiter spilled a drink before even making it to our table and practically collapsed into a spiral of apologies, Hannah called him out loud and clear.

"Okay, okay, we got it the first fifty times. Chill, man. No blood, no foul," she snapped.

The entire restaurant froze. Even though Hannah had spoken, every single gaze zeroed in on me, like they expected me to erupt or, I don't know, transform into a monster on the spot.

"I-I'm..." The poor waiter looked like he might faint. His hands clutched his apron, twisting it as if it could hold him together. His brown eyes shimmered with panic.

I couldn't take it. Something about his trembling form and desperate stammer made my heart squeeze. On instinct, I stood and walked over to him. I ignored the way people sucked in breaths around us. Luke and the others were nearby, watchful and ready, but they didn't interfere.

I rested my hand gently on the waiter's shoulder, and he flinched under my touch.

"Hey," I said softly, voice low and coaxing, "can you look at me? Because I feel like I'm giving this heartfelt monologue to a ghost."

He lifted his gaze slowly, hesitantly. Light brown hair framed a face that couldn't have been much older than mine. His eyes matched the color of fresh earth, warm, but currently clouded with fear.

"What's your name?" I asked gently.

"J-Jedadiah," he whispered, like he was confessing something awful.

"Well, Jedadiah, it's okay. Honestly. Accidents happen." I gave him a smile, hoping it didn't look as awkward as it felt. "Like my friend said, no blood, no foul. And believe me, if there was blood, you'd know. I've gone longer without food than I'd like to admit, and biting my own lip might have been a possibility."

His face twitched into a small, surprised grin. The tension around him seemed to unravel.

"There it is," I said, grinning back. "See? You're gonna be fine."

He nodded, the stiffness in his posture easing slightly.

"What can I get you?" he asked, his voice still a little shaky, but more steady this time.

Before I could answer, Hannah chimed in with a list that had me staring.

"Lemonade. Cheeseburger, extra bacon. No mayo. No mustard. Fries. Onion rings. Garlic bread. A slice of pizza. Salad. And if I'm still breathing after that, maybe a banana split. Or chocolate cake. Or both."

Jedadiah and I exchanged looks.

"What?" she said, noticing our twin expressions of disbelief. Her right eye twitched in annoyance.

We both replied at the same time, "Nothing."

"Thought so," she huffed. "You may be Luna, but I've got zero problems locking you outside my shop in a banana suit. Same goes for you, puppy."

"Uh, noted," I replied, fighting back laughter. "I'll just take two grilled cheese sandwiches, tomato sauce, garlic bread, and a Sprite. Oh, and let's try not to drop it this time, yeah?"

I added a playful wink. His mouth dropped open in surprise, and his cheeks flushed pink. Nodding enthusiastically, he scurried off.

Just like that, the atmosphere in the room shifted. The tension dissolved like sugar in warm tea.

Later that evening, we dropped Hannah back at her place. The drive back to the pack house was quiet, peaceful even. I wanted to call it home, but the word still caught in my throat. Something inside me wouldn't let it settle just yet.

By the time we pulled in, most of the house was dark. Faint snores echoed down the halls.

I said my goodnights and slipped away to the room Zaliver and I shared. A small smile tugged at my lips. We'd gone the entire day without any drama, no cold stares, no cryptic growling, no awkward tension. Maybe, just maybe, we were turning a corner.

Yeah. I really needed to stop jinxing myself.

I pushed the door open, expecting an empty room. But instead of finding it vacant, I was met with total darkness. Not a flicker of light.

I stepped in, shutting the door behind me and letting my hand trail along the wall for the switch until I touched something warm. Someone warm.

My breath caught.

My fingers had landed on Zaliver's shoulder. He was rigid under my touch, like a statue carved from tension and shadow.

"Zaliver?" I whispered into the dark, heart thudding so hard I was sure he could hear it. Why was he just standing there?

Suddenly, he moved, too fast, too sudden. His hand clamped over mine, rough and unyielding. Without a word, he started dragging me toward the bed.

"Zaliver?" I said again, my voice cracking under a mix of nerves, confusion, and something else I didn't want to name. Not yet.

He didn't answer. Instead, he stopped abruptly and shoved me forward. I stumbled, crashing face-first onto the mattress with a muffled yelp.

Before I could catch my breath, he flipped me over, hovering above me in the dark like a phantom. My wolf stirred uneasily.

The room was pitch-black, and despite being a werewolf, I could barely make out his form. He was draped in black, cloaked in an eerie, bone-deep silence that screamed of something darker. His presence was ice wrapped in heat, still and stormy all at once.

"What are you doing?" I started to ask, but his growl, low and threatening, cut me off.

He crawled over me slowly, planting one hand on either side of my head, caging me beneath him. His face dipped close, so close I could feel the soft brush of his breath against my skin. His eyes glowed faintly, icy blue burning in the dark like twin flames.

And in them, I saw it all.

Anger. Betrayal. Longing. Confusion. Hunger.

And something deeper, something so dark and ancient it made my bones want to curl inward.

I didn't move. I didn't breathe.

Whatever this was, whatever storm was brewing inside him, I had a feeling it wasn't finished yet.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Vivian Grey's POV

Why did he feel everything so deeply? Why did I always end up like this, pinned beneath him, overwhelmed, trapped beneath the weight of emotions I didn't ask for?

"What's the matter, my sweet little mate?" His voice brushed across my skin like silk, soft and laced with affection. But beneath the warmth, I heard it, something sharp, something cold. His tone may have sounded gentle to the untrained ear, but I knew better. I could feel the undercurrent of fury threading through each word. "The problem is, you touched another male. You flirted with him. And then you had the nerve to wink at him."

His hand slid slowly down my arm, around my waist, and curved beneath my back. Fingers spread wide, pulling me into him. My body betrayed me by pressing closer. His scent clouded everything, warm cedar, dark musk, and something wild that made my pulse stutter. His other hand tangled gently into my hair, holding me in place as he leaned on one elbow, caging me in.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I whispered, trying to breathe through the storm gathering inside me.

He laughed, low and without a shred of amusement.

"Don't lie to me," he growled. "That pup at the restaurant. Jedadiah." He spat the name out like poison. My eyes widened. That's what this was about? He was furious over the kid who'd waited our table?

I shook my head, heat prickling across my skin. "No. I wasn't flirting. He was just—"

Zaliver's face hardened. He pulled back just far enough to snarl at me, his lips curled and his eyes wild, causing me to shrink instinctively beneath him.

"I don't care!" he snapped. "You touched him. You flirted. You winked at him. Have you already forgotten what I told you?" His voice was soft again, maddeningly soft. He spoke like he was reciting a love poem, but his words struck like cold steel. My bones trembled. Even my wolf was unsure, fascinated by this primal side of him, while I was afraid.

"Don't hurt him! Please!" I gasped, sensing a dangerous shift in him.

His eyes narrowed. "What? You care about him now? Tell me, do you have feelings for the boy?"

His voice was rough and tight, yet I caught something underneath it, something raw and real. Panic.

"Zaliver, you're overreacting! I don't even know the kid!" I tried reasoning with him, searching his stormy gaze for some sanity. "He's just a boy."

"And I'm a man," he hissed. "A man who can give you everything you need. He could never take care of you. But me?" His face lowered, his nose brushing down mine, then across my cheek. "I can do things for you no one else can."

And suddenly, I understood.

Jealousy.

Zaliver, my possessive, lethal, six-hundred-year-old mate, was jealous. Of Jedadiah. A teenager who'd spilled a drink and gone pink when I winked at him. I had approximately two seconds to sit with how absurd that was before his lips crashed onto mine and the thought dissolved entirely.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't careful. It was wildfire, fast, consuming, and dangerous. And my body responded in kind, as if it had been waiting, aching for this exact chaos.

He kissed me like he wanted to erase any memory of anyone who came before him. His lips moved against mine with a fervor I'd never felt before, like a dam had broken inside him and every suppressed emotion was pouring into me. I arched into him, trying to get closer, to anchor myself as the heat flared low and deep in my belly.

But he pulled back just enough to torture me. His hand still in my hair, holding me in place, kept our lips a breath apart. I tried to meet him halfway, desperate to feel him again, but he wouldn't let me. My moan escaped before I could stop it.

What was happening to me?

He sucked on my bottom lip before biting it, not enough to break skin, but enough to sting. And then his tongue swept over it, soothing the pain, undoing me all over again.

Thoughts were a blur. The argument, Jedadiah, his fury, none of it mattered anymore. Just when I thought he'd kiss me again, he stopped. His eyes were unreadable as he stared down at me.

"I'll get the results tomorrow," he said, voice suddenly steady. "To see if our bodies are truly compatible. I don't know what they'll say, but one thing's certain."

I blinked up at him, breathless, my mind still reeling. "What?"

He leaned in, his voice like a vow. "By tomorrow night, there will be a mark on you. Something to show you're mine."

Clank.

My breath caught.

"You didn't—" I looked down.

Chains. Again.

"You chained me? Again?" I barked, fury boiling in me as I sat up, the weight of the metal biting into my wrists. "I can't believe you actually— What the hell, Zaliver?! I'm not some dog you can just lock up!"

He stood at the foot of the bed, infuriatingly smug, hands in his pockets. His eyes gleamed with wicked amusement.

"You're insane!" I shouted, yanking at the chains.

He shrugged and walked toward the door.

"If you sleep anywhere near me tonight, I swear I'll kill you!" I hurled a pillow at him with all the strength I had.

It hit him square in the back. He turned slightly and raised a brow at me.

"And by then, you'll already be marked as mine," he said smoothly, like he hadn't just declared war.

"Son of a—" I shouted, not caring how childish I sounded.

He opened the door, unfazed. "Never said I wasn't. Sleep well, sweetheart." And with that, he slipped out and shut the door behind him.

I stared at the door long after it clicked closed, teeth grinding, fury sizzling through me.

He really did it. He actually chained me again, after everything, after the kiss, after the vow, after all of it.

And yet, something about what he said before he left twisted inside me. What kind of mark did he mean?

That night, sleep never came. My mind spiraled through every terrifying, thrilling, and impossible possibility.

And none of them brought me peace.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Zaliver's POV

I closed the door with finality and stood just behind it, the echo of the lock clicking into place grounding me in this madness. From inside, I could hear her shifting on the bed, followed by the sharp sting of my name spat out in pure fury. Her anger hit me like a wave, but instead of flinching, I found myself staring blankly at the wall, thoughts rushing through me at impossible speeds.

Who would've thought that a stubborn, sharp-tongued little brunette could unravel me so completely?

I knew what I had done was questionable. Forcing her to stay, keeping her confined, it crossed every line I swore I wouldn't. But the thing that unsettled me the most wasn't the guilt. It was the calm that settled over me once I knew she couldn't leave. That she was mine. I hated myself for it, but gods, it felt so damn right.

It didn't help that she made it worse, her eyes lingering on me when she thought I wasn't paying attention, her hands brushing me in her sleep. I never called her out for it. I loved the way she touched me in her dreams, the way her scent clung to my skin. Pretending to ignore it was easier than watching her retreat into herself if she realized I noticed.

With a frustrated growl, I blurred down the hallway toward my office. I slammed the door behind me, hard enough to rattle the shelves. The heavy sound echoed off the walls, sharp and final. I dragged my hands through my hair and dropped into my chair, turning it to face the tall window behind my desk.

The moon hung there, brilliant, silent, judging. It bathed the dark room in silver light, casting long shadows that only seemed to emphasize the growing hunger inside me.

My beast stirred just beneath the surface. It wanted her. Now.

I shifted in my seat, jaw clenching as my imagination didn't do me any favors. A slow, wicked smile curled my lips despite myself. I wanted to mark every inch of her skin, claim her completely until the world knew she belonged to me. Not just in name, not just by bond, but by every raw, primal instinct within us.

She was my mate.

That still felt like a dream I never dared to have. I'd existed longer than most bonds themselves, older than most wolves could imagine. I watched generations find their fated ones, watched them glow with joy and sink into their bond like it was salvation. Saw how it softened them, steadied them, gave them something worth fighting for beyond pride and territory. All the while, I stood outside that warmth. Centuries passed and I stood in the same cold place, watching others be chosen while the universe stayed silent on my behalf. Eventually, I stopped expecting it. I convinced myself I was never meant to have a mate. That the universe had simply skipped me, moved on, decided I was too far gone for something that tender.

Then the rumors started.

Whispers. A mate made just for me. The Moon Goddess herself crafting someone to match my darkness. I didn't believe it, not at first. I knew better than to trust kindness from those gods. They never gave without taking twice as much. But a sliver of curiosity took root in my chest regardless, quiet and stubborn.

What would she be like? Could she calm the storm inside me?

I didn't go searching right away. I wasn't that desperate. Not yet. But over time, the loneliness dug deeper than I wanted to admit. The endless string of meaningless nights, the emptiness at the other side of the bed, the way I could feel centuries still stretching before me like a road with no end and no warmth along it. Eventually, I started sending scouts. Quietly. Discreetly. Told them to look for anomalies, she-wolves who stood out in strength, speed, presence. Something different. Something made to match what I was.

Every time, they returned with nothing.

Each empty report landed in me like a small, practiced blow. I'd learned not to react, but I felt them all the same, the same way you feel a wound that's healed badly and aches in cold weather. I knew what it meant to be disappointed by the gods. I'd had centuries of practice. But this particular disappointment was different, quieter, more personal. Like being told over and over that you weren't worth the effort of being loved. After enough of them I began to wonder if it was a lie, something concocted by the gods to distract me, or worse, that some lesser male had found her first and buried her beneath his scent to keep her hidden from me.

Still, I never stopped wondering. Even now, with her so close, I didn't trust what this bond meant. Part of me still expected betrayal. Some twist. Some cruel trick designed to make me lower my guard and pay for it. But another part, smaller and more dangerous, just wanted to know her. All of her. Her pain, her past, her secrets. Her desire.

Even in the short time we'd shared a room, I could feel how wild she was. How unpredictable. How dangerous, just not in the way most people feared. She wasn't my enemy. But she could be the only person in six hundred years capable of bringing me to my knees.

The Moon Goddess, that tricky creature, I didn't hate her. Not like the others. But I didn't trust her either. If she made Vivian for me, there had to be a reason. A deeper purpose I hadn't uncovered yet.

And maybe, just maybe, I'd been made for her too.

But that didn't mean I would stop being careful. I'd play the game. I'd protect what was mine. And I'd burn the world to ash before letting anyone else take her from me.

Even if that meant keeping her in chains a little longer.

Even if some part of me, buried deep beneath the centuries of armor, hoped she'd eventually stop fighting it and choose to stay.

That was the part I didn't let myself examine too closely. Not yet. Some doors were safer left shut, at least until I knew she wouldn't use what was behind them against me.

Chapter 38: My Little Scary Luna

Zaliver's POV

I've seen enough terrified faces to last me lifetimes. Young women, eyes wide with fear, trembling from the unknown. Each time, I'd search for something, anything, that might

stir recognition in my soul, the kind that only a mate could bring. But nothing. Not a flicker of warmth. Not even a whisper of connection. I looked into their eyes one after another and felt the same hollow silence every time. So I did what needed to be done. Wiped their memories clean, made sure they were returned safely to their packs, none the wiser. And each time, I felt the loneliness settle back in a little heavier than before.

And then came the mission. The one that changed everything.

It was Albericus's assignment, the Blue Moon raid, when I noticed something strange in him. His wolf looked off. Not dangerous, not disobedient, just different. I've always had a sixth sense with wolves, especially the ones we trained, so I picked up on it immediately. But I brushed it off. A flicker in the wind, maybe.

That was my mistake.

I let my guard drop. One heartbeat of distraction, and Albericus lunged at me. He'd never dared use his gifted strength before, not in combat, not against me. He'd always been more brawn than mind, thriving on destruction. But this time, it wasn't rage that drove him, it was something else. Something magnetic.

I moved through the chaos of the raid myself, pulling my attention back just in time to see what he'd found. Small and delicate, brown eyes wide with confusion, yet calm, too calm for someone in the middle of a pack attack. She didn't flinch. And when my gaze landed on hers, I felt it before my mind could process it. The shift. The pull. Something ancient and unmistakable cracking open in my chest after centuries of silence.

Shock. Wonder. Then, unmistakably, a deep, primal certainty that settled into my bones like something coming home.

That's when I knew.

She was mine.

Vivian.

Shaking my head, I pulled myself out of the memory and stared out at the night sky. The moon was high, a soft glow veiled behind drifting clouds. I tapped my fingers rhythmically against my thigh, trying to stay grounded. The silver edge of the cloud still let the moon's light peek through, casting eerie shadows across the room.

Watching it, I felt an odd sense of recognition. Maybe I was the moon, distant, cold, and untouchable. And Vivian was the cloud, hovering close enough to dim me, but never truly hiding me. Persistent. Soft. Utterly unaware of how much she was already changing the quality of my light, and how strange it felt to notice that I didn't mind. I was tethering her to me, terrified she might drift out of reach, which was an irony I wasn't entirely ready to sit with. Me. Afraid of losing something.

"My little cloud," I muttered under my breath, lips twitching at the absurdity.

Who would've thought that the feared Lupus Deus, leader of all, harbinger of wrath, would turn into a hopeless sap over a five-foot-four, brown-eyed she-wolf currently chained to my bed, probably plotting my gruesome death?

She could plan all she wanted. There wasn't a force on this earth that could take her from me. And she most certainly couldn't kill me.

But that stray thought, kill, erased my momentary warmth. The humor faded, replaced by something darker. Something colder. Like a switch flipping inside me, the air in the room dropped, frost creeping in from the corners, as the ever-present shadow within stirred. I didn't need to look in a mirror to know my eyes were glowing.

The thought of Jedadiah laying so much as a finger on her sent my wolf into a frenzy. I knew rationally that nothing happened. A touch. That's all it was. Harmless. Innocent. But I couldn't stomach the idea of her giving anything, even a glance, to another male.

Jealousy? No. Jealousy was a tame word for what I felt.

It was volcanic.

My jaw tightened, canines slipping past my lips. My chest rose and fell rapidly as images flashed in my mind, bones snapping, flesh tearing, blood painting the ground. My wolf fed me those images like a balm to soothe the roaring in my head. Anyone who touched her would pay. With blood. With breath. With life.

I let out a laugh, but there was no amusement in it. Just disbelief. How the hell did a sweet, delicate creature like Vivian end up being the perfect counterpart to this? To me.

She was my opposite in every way, and yet she fit so seamlessly into my chaos. It baffled me. She should be terrified. Maybe she was, I could catch her fear now and then, faint but sharp, like a pinch of citrus on the wind. Whenever I acted out, whenever the beast surfaced, her scent would shift, spike, then vanish like it never happened. She didn't run from it. She absorbed it, steadied herself, and came back with that chin lifted.

And instead of that scaring me, it did something else.

It excited me.

Did I like her fear?

Did I feed off it?

No. No, that wasn't it. It wasn't fear I wanted from her. It was everything. Her anger. Her defiance. Her fire. Even her silence. I craved it all. I wanted to drown in her, to drag her down into the abyss I lived in and see if she could survive there with me.

Maybe she could.

Maybe she already was.

And that, more than anything, terrified me.

Because I had lived for six centuries without anything worth losing. And now, chained to my bed and furious at me and still somehow burrowing her way beneath every wall I had ever built, she was becoming exactly that.

Something worth losing.

Something I would not survive losing. Something I had not had in six hundred long years and had long ago stopped believing I deserved.

I turned back to the window and let the cold, brilliant, completely indifferent moon look at me, and thought that perhaps the cloud had more power than it knew. Enough to change absolutely everything, if it chose to stay long enough to try. She was mine.

I just had to make sure she knew it too.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Zaliver's POV

There was a tightness in my chest that didn't belong. Unease clawed at me, sharp and subtle, a strange blend of dread and quiet. My skin prickled even as a chilling calm blanketed me, and deep down, I knew something was wrong.

Then came the shift.

The beast stirred. No, more than stirred, he roared.

A violent surge of instinct and fury crashed through my mind as he lashed against the walls I'd spent centuries fortifying. He didn't just push, he tore through them, snarling, snapping, sending pain ricocheting through my skull.

I grit my teeth, spun the chair toward the desk, and yanked the drawer open with shaking fingers. Even in the dim light, I found what I was looking for, the syringe. The liquid inside was thick and deep purple, almost black in the darkness. My salvation. My curse.

As soon as I gripped it, the beast went berserk. He tore at me from the inside, claws digging into the flesh of my chest until I gasped out loud. Fire lanced through me, and I felt my shirt rip. Warm blood trickled down my torso before the wounds closed over with unnatural speed.

Still, I didn't stop.

I jabbed the needle into my arm. The sting was fleeting, a whisper of pain compared to the storm raging inside. The second the sedative hit my bloodstream, he faltered. His fury dulled, his howls faded to growls, then fell silent.

Peace, bitter and fleeting, settled over me like ash after a fire.

He was never fully gone. Just buried. Waiting.

It hadn't always been like this. Once, the beast was manageable. But when that bone-deep unease crept in, when my instincts sensed danger or something unfamiliar, he rose. Wild. Brutal. Blood-hungry. I'd grown sick of the destruction, the needless death. So I made something stronger than him.

But it came with a cost.

I left the cold office and walked into the forest. The clouds shifted, moonlight spilling through the canopy. I looked up, wondering just for a breath what Vivian would think if she knew the truth about what I was. What I really was, beneath the flesh.

I swallowed hard, trying to drown the thought.

Even if she feared me, I'd still keep her.

I felt him before I heard him. A familiar flicker of presence, like a spark against dry grass.

Albericus.

He padded silently toward me through the trees, his aged frame still regal, still strong. He shouldn't have lived this long, but he had. Because I made it so. If I was destined to walk this world alone, unclaimed and undying, then the least I could do was let my oldest companion remain beside me.

His shadow crept up behind me, thick with concern and silent judgment. When I finally turned, I caught the sharp gleam of his narrowed green eyes fixed on the small tear across my shirt, right where blood had soaked in.

He sniffed the air, catching the coppery tang.

I didn't flinch.

The curse of a best friend who'd known me far too long was that he didn't always listen to warnings. He'd seen me at my worst and thought that gave him the right to poke at the line. He believed he was helping. He always did.

Albericus had been urging me to step back from Vivian, to give her space. His logic made sense in theory. But he didn't understand that the moment I decided to claim her, she became a target. That truth didn't change no matter how carefully I tread. Pulling back wouldn't protect her. It would just waste precious time.

"You've taken your shot," he said quietly.

I gave a small nod.

"That's the fourth one since she arrived."

My jaw locked. I stared up at the moon.

"You've never needed this much before. She's alrea—"

The snarl escaped before I could stop it. Low, guttural, filled with warning.

"She hasn't changed anything," I snapped. "I'm not dying. I'm not weakening. I haven't forgotten our plans."

But that wasn't all of it.

"The beast just wants to mark her," I said after a beat, softer. "He's panicking that if I wait too long, they'll decide I shouldn't have her at all."

Saying it aloud made my throat tighten.

I didn't want to lose her. Not before I even knew what we could be.

Albericus exhaled through his nose and shook his head.

"So either they figured you'd be too paranoid to complete the bond, meaning no mating and no marking, or," he gave a sarcastic shrug, "they're planning to drug you into submission."

I shot him a glare and turned to walk off. He followed.

"I'm not wrong," he muttered. "And even if she's not a threat now, it doesn't mean she won't be later."

That made me stop cold.

I pivoted slowly to face him, and even he took a step back when he saw my eyes, now black with my wolf pushing forward.

Albericus didn't hate Vivian. He just feared what she might become. What she might be turned into.

I understood that. I did.

But the weight of his doubt, after everything, was heavier than I expected.

"You think I haven't thought of that?" I asked, voice low and dangerous. "You think I haven't imagined every way they could use her, corrupt her, turn her into something that destroys me from the inside? You think I'm blind?"

A sharp edge in my voice, one I'd never used on him before. He felt it.

Albericus bowed his head and bared his neck in submission. I didn't acknowledge it. I just turned toward the nearest tree, letting the fury burning under my skin have somewhere else to go.

My claws extended, and I raked them down the bark. Chunks flew. The tree groaned beneath my blows, again and again, until it finally cracked and collapsed with a deep, splintering moan.

I stared at it, breathing hard, chest heaving.

He was just trying to look out for me. Pointing out things I already knew. But even when he was right, even when I understood, some instinctive part of me couldn't stand to hear anything said against her.

Vivian. The only good thing I'd had in longer than I could remember.

How strange, I thought.

How dangerous.

The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

Zaliver's POV

I exhaled slowly, trying to push out the frustration clawing at my chest. My gaze locked onto the distant pack house. It was buried deep in the forest, miles away, but that didn't matter. Not for someone like me. Through branches, trees, and thick night, I saw it as clearly as if I stood at its doorstep.

I tuned everything else out. The rustling wind, the low howls in the distance, even the steady heartbeat of the earth below us, gone. All I could hear now was the pack house. It was like slipping into another form entirely. Disembodied. Invisible. Like a ghost.

My senses cut through walls and floors with ease, moving past thumping TVs, muffled music, hushed arguments, flirtatious whispers, the soft breathing of wolves lost in sleep. A couple arguing in hushed, heated tones on the second floor, the kind of argument that had been had before and would be had again. Three pups long since unconscious in the east wing, their breathing the slow, even rhythm of the truly untroubled. Johnson, still awake somewhere on the fourth floor, muttering what sounded like a list of grievances under his breath, and a voice that was probably Mila telling him to go to sleep.

I slid past them all, until I reached her. My room. Vivian.

She was already in bed.

Her heartbeat pulsed gently in my ears, rhythmic and soft, soothing in a way I hated to admit. She shifted beneath the covers, metal dragging faintly against silk. Then she lay still for a minute, only to toss again like her body couldn't settle. The chain, though not meant to comfort, tethered her in more ways than one. And the knowledge that she couldn't rest without me nearby? That twisted sense of control satisfied something dark inside me.

Satisfied, I slowly pulled my senses back and turned my attention to the silent figure standing beside me, my beta, my oldest friend.

"You know what the worst part of this mate thing is?" My voice was quiet, but it carried the weight of a truth I rarely allowed myself to speak aloud.

He didn't answer.

"They sent her to me," I said, turning to face him. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes locked onto mine with sharp focus.

"I figured you'd be pleased. You always looked at mated pairs like you wanted what they had. So why does having her bother you so much, aside from the obvious?" he asked, words careful, cautious.

I clenched my jaw.

"Because they can take her away."

My voice was flat, but the ache behind those words was sharp and buried deep. I didn't let it show on my face. I never did. But for a second I felt it, that specific hollow place where certainty should be, the space that had grown in me over centuries of watching others hold onto things I couldn't. I'd lived long enough to know that anything given could be taken. Anything wanted could be used against you.

And I wanted her.

That was the problem.

I swallowed that vulnerability and straightened. I pushed away the man haunted by what-ifs and pulled on the skin of the commander, the one who didn't flinch, who made the hard calls.

"How are the preparations going?" My voice snapped back to the cold sharpness I was known for. "Anything I need to get involved in?"

He didn't hesitate.

"All proceeding according to plan. Nothing in this division that requires your direct intervention." He mirrored my tone, clean and professional.

"Tell Hogan to check in with me first thing in the morning. I'll be heading to New Orleans and New York next week. Make sure he, Luke, and Sawyer all know their roles while I'm gone. Also have the lab results from the blood tests delivered directly to my desk. No one else reads them. Understood?"

As I started walking toward the pack house, my beta moved beside me.

"Understood. Anything else?"

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "How's the search for Aurora?"

His face darkened, tension crawling across his features. His hands curled into fists.

I needed Aurora for my own reasons, reasons tied to what was coming. But Albericus had his own vendetta. Whatever happened once I got what I needed from the witch, even I wasn't sure how that story would end. The past ran deep between them.

"She's slippery," he muttered. "But I'm close. Her banishment from the covens limits her. She's losing options. Just need to crack her defenses."

I nodded once.

"Two weeks. No more. Time is not a luxury when war is on the horizon."

I didn't wait for a reply. I kept walking.

As I neared the pack house, wolves crossed my path. Some dipped their heads in silent respect; others paused to exchange brief words. I offered only nods in return. My mind was already ahead of my body, racing up the stairs before my feet even touched them.

When I reached the top floor, I moved at a speed that blurred the world around me. The door to the room didn't make a sound as I slipped inside, silent as breath.

Vivian lay curled on the bed, those new pajamas hugging her curves. She smelled intoxicating tonight. Rich and warm and wholly herself. The part of me that had grown used to seeing her in my clothes, sleeping wrapped in my scent, felt a faint twinge of something at the sight of her in her own things. She was making a space for herself. Creating her own comfort. A sign of independence.

And still, she'd threaded the chain through the sleeves like it belonged there.

My lips twitched at the sight. Damn. She was right. I was a jackass.

I stood over her for a long moment, quietly studying the way her chest rose and fell, the way her fingers had curled around the chain in her sleep like she'd made peace with it, or maybe just made peace with me.

I wasn't sure which one unsettled me more.

I reached down and unclipped it from her wrists, careful not to wake her.

She didn't need the chains tonight. She wasn't going anywhere.

Neither was I.

Tomorrow there would be lab results, and a mark to place, and a war beginning to take shape somewhere on the horizon. Tonight, there was only this.