

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna chapter 71-80

### The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

I reached out and gently pulled his hand away from his face. I brought it to my lips and kissed his knuckles, then held his hand against my cheek before lacing our fingers together. I gave him a soft, encouraging smile.

He looked at me from beneath thick black lashes, blue eyes filled with something I'd never seen in them before. Vulnerability. A few strands of his hair had fallen forward, shadowing his expression, but nothing could hide what was simmering there. He didn't look like a predator right now. He looked like someone about to hand me a piece of his soul and bracing for me to drop it.

"I had it built," he said quietly, slowly, like the words weighed a thousand pounds, "as soon as I heard."

"Heard what?" I asked gently, sensing how much this was costing him.

"That they, that they were giving me a mate."

My breath hitched. I stared at him, confused. That would've been a long time ago. But when we first met, he hadn't trusted me at all, he'd gone through my head without asking. Why build a house for someone you were convinced might be a weapon aimed at you? My expression must have given me away because he kept going, trying to fill in the gaps.

"As time passed, I started to think maybe it was just a rumor. Or maybe, even if I found you, it wouldn't work out. So I moved into the pack house and just... forgot about this place." He glanced toward the house, then back at me. "But it's finished. Furnished. It's been waiting."

I blinked at him. "But why? Why build it at all?"

He smiled at me then, soft and sad, and lifted a hand to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers trailed lightly along my cheek before dropping away.

"Because I guess," he said quietly, "even monsters want a family to love."

He gave my hand one last squeeze, then slipped out of the car, leaving me sitting there with a thundering heart and tears threatening to spill down my face.

I sat with that for a moment before I could move.

It wasn't the word monster that got me, or even the vulnerability of him admitting he'd built this house in secret on a hope he'd almost given up on. It was the simplicity of it. He

hadn't dressed it up or tried to make it sound like less than what it was. He'd just said it plainly, without armor, and somehow that landed harder than anything else he'd ever said to me. Six hundred years old, and the thing that broke through was this: even monsters want a family to love.

He circled the car to open my door, and by the time he appeared, I had myself mostly together. That realization, though, had settled deep. Zaliver might move through the world on dominance and instinct, but underneath all of that was still someone capable of wanting things, ordinary things, that no amount of power or centuries of living had ever managed to give him. Marking me hadn't just been territorial. It had come from somewhere he probably didn't even have a full name for yet, and neither did I.

When he extended his hand, I didn't hesitate. I placed mine in his, and together we stood facing the house.

Our house.

"Do you like it?" he asked, voice unusually quiet as he pulled a key from his pocket.

I turned to look at him, letting a soft smile spread across my face. "I love it. It's perfect."

The tension drained from his shoulders visibly. His whole face lit up with a grin so wide and unguarded, so completely unlike him, that I almost didn't recognize it as his. Then, without any warning, he swept me off my feet.

"Zaliver!" I shrieked, laughing as he spun me in circles, the night air rushing past us, laughter coming from both of us at once.

He stopped, still holding me, and started walking up the steps to the front door.

"What are you doing?" I giggled.

"Carrying you over the threshold," he said, like that was completely obvious.

I arched a brow. "That only works if we're married."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," he muttered, a cheeky smirk tugging at his mouth.

I shook my head, still smiling, as he somehow managed to unlock the front door one-handed without putting me down.

"So," he said, glancing down at me, "how's my wooing going so far?"

I tried to hold a straight face. I failed completely. The corner of my mouth twitched upward before I could stop it.

He took that as an absolute victory. "I'll take that as a very good sign."

Just before he stepped inside, his expression shifted. Something darker, more deliberate, moved through his eyes.

"I have to warn you, Vivian," he said, all traces of playfulness gone from his voice.

My heart skipped. "What?"

He leaned in, lowering his voice like he was sharing something scandalous. "Most of my wooing will take place here. And so will other things."

A slow smirk pulled at his lips, his blue eyes gleaming with wicked satisfaction. "The living room. The floor. The bedrooms. The walls—"

"Zaliver!" I gasped, half-laughing and absolutely mortified.

"The shower and tub. The stairs. The gym. The pool—"

"Wait." I blinked. "We have a pool?"

His smirk widened. "Yeah. Wanna go see it now? Or maybe the trampoline first, we could really—"

"Zaliver!" My face was on fire, but laughter was already bubbling up through it and there was nothing I could do about it.

His laugh echoed through the entryway as he kicked the door shut behind us, warm and full and real.

And just like that, something shifted. A large piece of the anger and confusion and hurt I'd been carrying toward him began, quietly, to loosen. Not disappear entirely, not yet, but loosen and soften at the edges. In its place, something warmer started to take up room. Something that scared me a little, if I was being honest.

But somehow, it felt like exactly the right kind of scared. The kind that meant something real was on the other side of it.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

Two days slipped by quicker than I expected, especially with how much time I spent learning every corner of our new home. And I say "our" even though it still felt surreal to put that word on it. Zaliver made sure to pop in every few hours with flowers in hand, small thoughtful gifts tucked under his arm, and that dangerously charming grin that never failed to leave my pulse slightly off-balance. Those eyes of his, icy blue and always more intense than warranted, had a way of unnerving and calming me at the same time.

While he was off managing whatever the island demanded of him, I busied myself decorating. Most of the additions came from shopping sprees with Hannah, who seemed to be living her actual dream through my house. She bounced around flinging throw pillows and scented candles with the energy of someone who had been waiting her whole pregnancy for an excuse to do exactly this, while I followed behind her in a state of equal awe and mild panic. Honestly, she had more fun dressing my house than I did.

Still, I kept finding things to tidy or fluff or realign even after everything looked picture-perfect, because the nerves wouldn't stop moving under my skin. My parents were due in just a few hours, and despite every logical part of me knowing I had nothing to prove, I felt exactly like a teenager about to introduce her boyfriend to her parents for the first time. Except this wasn't some boy. This was Zaliver. The Lupus Deus. My mate.

I checked my outfit for the fifth time in front of the mirror. The soft peach dress hugged my frame just enough to be elegant without trying too hard. I'd curled my hair loosely and left it down, and I was wearing the diamond drop earrings Zaliver had surprised me with yesterday. Looking at my reflection, I could see what the outfit was saying even if I hadn't planned it that way: look how well I'm being taken care of.

The funny part was that I hadn't seen him since this morning. He'd kissed my forehead, told me he'd be around the island making sure everything was ready, and that he wanted things to be perfect. Which was, in itself, unexpected. Sweet, but unexpected. Because even if my parents hated him, there wasn't a thing they could do about our bond. He didn't have to impress anyone, and yet here he was, apparently trying to anyway.

Which was why, two nights ago, I'd dragged him into what I could only call a planning session.

I'd been pacing in front of the bed like a woman on the edge of snapping. Hair in a lazy bun, pajamas wrinkled from tossing and turning for an hour before giving up on sleep entirely. Zaliver, by contrast, looked like he'd never experienced stress in his six hundred years of existence, lounging across the bed with his ankles crossed and his arms folded like he was waiting for a movie to start.

"We need a plan," I muttered for the third time. "We really, really do."

He said nothing. He just raised a brow and let me keep going.

"I mean, they're my parents. This is a big deal, Zaliver."

His eyes twinkled. "What sort of plan are we talking about?"

I stopped pacing to glare at him. "Don't play dumb. I know you've already figured this out. You wouldn't have invited them if you hadn't."

He didn't deny it. Typical.

"Fine," he said, shifting slightly. "I'll give you the outline. When they arrive, they'll be escorted to the house. You'll greet them first, without me."

My brows pulled together. "Why not?"

His expression turned serious, though a grin lurked just underneath. "Two reasons. First, I want to give you those initial moments alone with them."

"And the second?"

"Because it's not ideal for their first impression of me to be," he paused, seeming to search for the word, "overwhelming."

I frowned. "What does that mean exactly?"

"You've felt what it's like to be close to me. My presence runs heavier than a typical Alpha's. The wolves here have adjusted to it over time. Your parents haven't had that adjustment. If I open the front door, they might drop to their knees from pure instinct before either of us can say hello. Would make dinner a bit awkward."

Despite myself, I started laughing, even though the mental image of my father on his knees in the entryway did very uncomfortable things to my stomach.

"You're ridiculous," I said.

He only shrugged. "You chose me."

And I had. Goddess help me.

It was true, though. The power he held was something I could feel through our bond, this quiet, volatile pressure caged just beneath the surface of him. Like a bottle of soda shaken and sealed. Every now and then he'd release a faint ripple of it, barely noticeable, but I felt it in my bones. It made some primal part of me sit up straighter whenever it happened. If this was how he felt when calm, I genuinely didn't want to know what enraged looked like.

"And," he added, drawing it out with a mischievous edge, "I'd like you to put in a few good words for me before I walk in. Warm them up a little."

I groaned. "So I'm the warm-up act."

"Something like that."

I chewed my lip, turning it over. Was there even a right way to do this? Introduce your parents to your immortal, dangerous, occasionally terrifying mate on an island hidden inside the Bermuda Triangle? Someone should have written that guide. Would have been genuinely helpful.

"Do not stress," he said, standing and crossing to me, both hands settling on my shoulders. His touch grounded me the way it always did, even when everything else was a mess. "Whatever happens, we'll get through it. Together."

The bond carried the rest of what he meant, quiet and certain.

Whatever happens, I'm not going anywhere. Neither are you.

I'd held onto that promise when I finally fell asleep that night.

Now, standing in front of the mirror in my peach dress with two hours left to go, I was trying to hold onto it again.

Please, Moon Goddess. Let this go smoothly.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

I stood in front of the mirror, adjusting the soft peach dress one final time, wondering if it was too much or not enough. This would be the first time Zaliver saw me in something truly feminine, something chosen not out of necessity but with him in mind. That thought alone sent a flutter through my stomach that had nothing to do with nerves and everything to do with the bond humming between us.

The dress was a blend of silk and cotton, light and smooth against my skin. The flowing skirt swished softly around my thighs, and the fabric hugged my waist through a delicate belt with a large bow tied in the back. Long sleeves draped from my wrists, giving the whole thing a romantic, almost ethereal quality. Hannah had found it during our shopping trip and insisted I get it, said it suited the occasion and that she fully intended to borrow it once her baby arrived. I couldn't deny it made my legs look longer, and for once I didn't feel awkward in something pretty.

Instead of heels, I slipped into simple brown warrior sandals. They grounded the outfit in a way I liked. Comfortable, but still put-together. As I looked at my reflection, my wolf stirred with a low, pleased rumble. She approved, and that was more comforting than I'd realized I needed. Since the marking, she'd been more present, more vibrant, as if something that had been sleeping inside us had finally woken up.

What I couldn't quite make sense of were the random flashes of heat that had been hitting me lately. They came without warning, like when I was brushing my teeth and the brush snapped clean in half from my grip. My muscles would seize, like lightning moving through me from the inside out, wrapped in heat and then suddenly gone. Like nothing happened at all.

I pushed the memory aside and padded downstairs, trailing my hand along the banister. The house was as beautiful on the inside as it was out, all warm woods and soft browns and textures that felt lived-in even though no one had ever lived here. I hadn't explored beyond the front rooms yet, too caught up in everything else, but I had a feeling Zaliver's grand tour for my parents would end up doubling as one for me.

I made my way to the kitchen. I needed something cold. Water, just water, but of course I had no idea where anything was. I opened cabinet after cabinet until I found a glass, filled it, and stood at the counter letting the chill travel down my throat and do what it could for my nerves.

After that I wandered into the living room and sat down, letting the quiet settle around me. Lately, silence had become something I sought out. It was the only time I could think clearly, sort through everything that had accumulated.

That was when I realized I hadn't reached out to Zaliver through the mating bond. Not truly. He'd connected to me once, but through the Alpha link, not the bond itself. I'd always waited for him to initiate. I wondered what it would feel like to try it myself.

I closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and focused inward. I brought up his face, the sharp lines of it, the weight of those eyes, the particular way he looked at me like I was something both precious and unpredictable. The moment his image came clear, something warm and pulsing stirred inside me. A thread. Not fragile, not tentative, just alive. I reached for it, mentally wrapped myself around it, and let the bond open between us.

It was golden-red and deep, full of something old and intimate. It didn't just hum. It sang.

I went very still.

The emotions coming through were muffled at first, like sounds through a closed door. But as I held on and focused, they sharpened. He was irritated, not the mild kind you feel when your keys go missing, but something with more weight to it, more edge. And underneath that irritation sat something hollow and cold. Not sadness, not rage, just an absence. A grey, flat void that made me frown instinctively.

Without thinking about it, I reached across the bond and brushed against his mind. A gentle knock, nothing more.

The shift in him was immediate. The cold just vanished. In its place came warmth, the kind that moves through you when you step into sunlight after being inside too long, and it radiated through me so strongly I exhaled. The bond deepened between us, more present than it had been a second ago. I felt him clearly enough that the distance stopped making sense.

"Zaliver?" I reached out gently, still catching my breath from the shift.

"Vivian? Is everything alright?" His voice came through the link into my head, laced with concern. A thread of blue moved through the bond's gold.

"Yeah," I answered, still trying to sort through what I'd just felt. "I just wanted to talk."

Of course. Even in a mind-link, I managed to sound like a complete dork.

"Are you sure? I could be there in a few—"

"No, no. I'm okay. You don't need to rush back," I said quickly.

"You're sure?"

I smiled. "Yup. Totally. Ummm, what are you doing right now?"

"Going over some reports from Hogan, my third-in-command. Why?"

I hesitated. "You seemed annoyed. I was just wondering why."

A beat of silence. Then a soft, almost caught-out, "Annoyed. Oh."

His emotional temperature shifted, suddenly guarded, like someone scrambling to close a drawer they hadn't meant to leave open.

"Oh?" I echoed, raising an eyebrow even though he couldn't see it.

"It's nothing. Your parents will be here soon."

Deflection. Classic. I didn't push, though. Knowing him, he was probably planning something and didn't want me to know. He was full of surprises, some terrifying, some the kind that made your chest ache in the best way.

"So how much longer?" I asked, settling back into the cushions.

"About an hour. Are you nervous?"

I let out a slow breath. "Yeah. You?"

His amusement trickled through, warm and easy. "Not really. After all, I still get to have you to myself at the end of the day."

My cheeks warmed. "You make it sound like you're the one meeting my parents."

I could practically feel the smirk in his silence.

"When will you come by?" I asked softly.

"Give me forty-five minutes."

"Okay," I said, a smile in my voice. "See you soon."

Neither of us reached to sever the connection. We stayed there, quiet, both present in the bond's warmth, neither quite ready to let go of the thread between us.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivians POV*

I picked up my phone from where I'd left it earlier that morning and started tapping away at random games. Anything to keep my mind occupied. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop my thoughts from circling back. I shoved the looming anxiety about my parents' arrival as far back as I could, trying to bury it under everything else.

Instead, my focus shifted to the gnawing discomfort in my chest, the feeling of being utterly useless. While I'd spent the day lounging with Hannah and strolling through boutiques, part of me felt like I should be doing something meaningful. I didn't want to just drift around in Zaliver's world. I wanted to contribute, to stand beside him, not trail behind.

That thought planted a seed. Maybe I could talk to him, convince him to let me help somehow. There had to be something I could do. Then I started wondering about his role in all of this. Being the Lupus Deus wasn't just leading a pack. It was leading alphas, managing territories, balancing politics and power and gods only knew what else. How did he even find the time to be with me?

I didn't get to go much further down that train of thought.

I felt him before I heard him.

The tether between us grew shorter, tighter. The bond shifted from a distant pull to something more immediate, wrapping around me like a hand closing gently. He was close. Very close.

Then I heard it, barely there, the soft patter of his footsteps, too light and fast for a normal wolf. And before I could fully get to my feet, he was already inside, standing behind me.

"You know," I said with a half-laugh as I turned around, "you're freakishly fast. Remind me never to race you."

I stepped around the couch to face him, but the way his gaze dropped from my face and slid slowly down my body made me stop mid-step. His eyes darkened, his wolf coming to the surface in a way I could feel like static on my skin.

"You," he murmured.

Just the one word, just that, and it sent a shiver the full length of my spine.

I stayed where I was, unable to take that last step toward him. The way he was looking at me had a weight to it, something between hunger and reverence, and it pinned me there as effectively as anything else he'd ever done. My heart thudded in my chest, heat moving up my neck to my cheeks.

His chest rose and fell slowly. I'd be lying if I said my eyes didn't drop for half a second to the lean cut of him through that black shirt. Well. If he was going to look at me like that, I figured the score was even.

"You look beyond beautiful," he said, voice low and unhurried, like he was thinking through every word. "The sun is the dullest star in the sky compared to you."

My lips parted.

"I wish I had the words to describe you, but you've outdone all of them. I'm speechless."

He stepped closer, and he was looking at me the way people look at things they can't quite believe are real. Something in my chest tightened in a way that had nothing to do with the bond.

I didn't know what to say. He wasn't throwing out hot or cute. He'd called me beautiful and meant it, and I could feel how much he meant it in the way his voice had gone quiet, in the warmth that moved through the bond like something settling. It shouldn't have mattered as much as it did. But it did.

He reached out, took my hand gently, and raised it to his lips. Kissed my knuckles, eyes still on mine. The whole thing felt slightly unreal.

"Have you been secretly writing poetry on the side?" I teased, trying to let some air back into the moment.

He chuckled, that rare, boyish smirk pulling at his mouth. "Maybe a little," he said, before slipping past me and heading upstairs.

Still a little stunned and hopelessly flustered, I followed him.

He walked straight into the shared closet without a word. I sat on the edge of the bed, the ghost of his compliment still echoing somewhere in my chest.

"Are you going to shower?" I asked, tugging my skirt down as I shifted on the mattress. Goddess, I loved the look of dresses, but my body still moved like I was in jeans. Sitting with my knees together was starting to feel like a full-body workout.

"Yeah," Zaliver replied from inside the closet.

"Ooh," I called back, unable to help myself. "Are you going to change into one of your signature looks? You know, the legendary black shirt, dark jeans, and scary boots combination?" I blinked at him all innocently as he stuck his head out with a perfectly deadpan expression.

He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe. But with the variety of black shirts I own, the possibilities are endless."

I snorted, laughing, as he rolled his eyes and disappeared back in. A moment later he strolled out barefoot and headed for the bathroom without closing the door, already pulling his shirt over his head. His belt came next, the metallic clink landing in the quiet room.

I looked away quickly, frowning very hard at the wall. The smirk he shot me before stepping behind the tiled wall did not help. My wolf was practically vibrating with interest but I kept my eyes exactly where they were and thought very firmly about other things.

When I finally heard the water running, I let out a breath and glanced over my shoulder. The shower was, thankfully, not visible from where I was sitting. Not that I'd been planning to look. Obviously not.

But there was something unexpectedly comfortable about the moment. Domestic in a way that caught me off guard, the ease of it, the quiet ordinariness of sharing space with someone.

"Hey, Zaliver?" I called over the sound of the water.

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking, while my parents are staying here, maybe I should sleep in a different room—"

His growl cut through the steam and the wall between us.

"No. Absolutely not. Don't even think about it. You're staying with me," he snapped. Something banged, probably the shower wall, probably his fist.

I rolled my eyes. Of course.

"I'm just saying it's temporary. They don't know you. They're already going to be overwhelmed, and finding out their daughter is sharing a bed with a powerful stranger under the same roof isn't going to ease them into anything," I said patiently. "Even if nothing's happened between us, they'll assume it has. It's about making them comfortable."

The temperature of the room seemed to drop a degree.

"They'll be appreciating me if I even allow them to sleep in the same house," he growled. "Because if you're moving to a separate room, so are they."

"That's completely unreasonable!" I called toward the bathroom, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You can't be serious. Actually, no, you probably are."

"Unreasonable? You want to see unreasonable? I'll come out right now and show you unreasonable. But I'm telling you now, Vivian, you're not sleeping anywhere else."

I froze, eyes going wide in the direction of the bathroom as the water shut off.

My imagination helpfully filled in several visuals my poor, entirely unprepared brain was not asking for.

"Oh my goddess," I muttered, face absolutely on fire. My wolf let out a deeply disappointed huff.

"Fine, whatever," I said loudly, waving the white flag. "But on a completely unrelated note," I added, trying to shift the conversation onto safer ground, "I wanted to ask if

there's anything useful I can do around here. I don't want to just lounge around all day. I want something to actually do."

Silence.

Then muffled grumbling from the bathroom, mostly unintelligible, definitely disgruntled.

I smiled to myself. Asking for responsibility seemed to be the one reliable way to disarm the territorial grump that was my mate.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

The sound of the shower stopped, the water ceasing its steady rhythm behind the door. My breath caught as Zaliver stepped out of the bathroom, steam curling around his tall frame like it didn't want to let him go. A white towel hung low on his hips, clinging to him, leaving very little to the imagination. Beads of water trailed down his golden, sun-kissed skin, over his chest, his abs, vanishing into the edge of the towel.

I didn't mean to stare, but my eyes drank him in like I was starving. Each powerful step he took toward me made my pulse race. There was a flicker of annoyance on his face at first, but it softened the closer he came. And Goddess help me, the way that towel clung to him... it was a miracle I remembered how to breathe.

My lower belly tightened, heat curling in me as I bit down on my lip, caught up in the sheer presence of him. He was so confident in his body, his strength. My fingers ached to follow the trail of droplets as they journeyed down the ridges of his stomach.

"Vivian?"

His voice broke through my haze, but it took me a beat too long to answer. "Hmm?"

I was too busy tracing the light trail of hair below his navel with my eyes, mesmerized by where it disappeared.

*I bet it keeps going...* my wolf purred, her voice dripping with mischief, sending a delicious shiver through me.

"Vivian." He said my name again, slower this time. The way it rolled off his tongue had my heart skipping a beat. I met his gaze and was startled by the mix of surprise and something playful dancing in his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like you're about to "

I didn't let him finish. I didn't even think. My body moved before my brain could catch up. One second I was sitting there, the next I was launching myself at him, driven by a raw, aching need that I couldn't hold back anymore. It was like this realization hit me all at once that this man, this impossibly powerful creature, was mine, and I needed to touch him, to taste him, before I lost my chance.

He caught me with ease, his strength grounding us. I threw my arms around his neck, angled his head with determination, and kissed him like my life depended on it.

Instead of being caught off guard, Zaliver groaned deep in his chest a sound that reverberated through me and pulled me tightly against him. His arms slid down my back, firm hands cupping my ass before gripping the backs of my thighs and lifting me clean off the ground. I gasped, my legs wrapping around his waist instinctively.

My dress clung to his damp skin, but I couldn't care less. He started moving, slow and sure, walking us toward the bed. Our mouths never parted. It was wild, frantic, the kind of kiss that felt like it could unravel the world. Like if we stopped, the earth might just tip off its axis.

His hair was still wet, and my fingers tangled in it, tugging him closer every time I felt him pull away. Every time I did, he answered with a teasing nip to my lips that made me moan softly, made my toes curl.

By the time we reached the bed, I was practically trembling. Zaliver laid me down carefully, his body following mine. He was hovering above me, mouth hot and demanding, hands strong and possessive, when suddenly... he paused.

Everything slowed.

He pulled back just slightly, eyes locked on mine. Then another kiss. And another. Gentle, soft like he was trying to calm something in both of us.

And then he pulled away completely, sitting back with a sudden, jerky motion like he had to physically remove himself from me.

I stared up at him, breathless and confused, lips tingling and body on fire.

He was breathing hard, chest rising and falling, like he was holding something back. Something fierce.

And I could still feel the ghost of his lips on mine.

He looked down at me, jaw clenched, eyes heavy with want. The tension between us was palpable, thick enough to wrap around my shoulders like another blanket. It was obvious he didn't want to stop so why had he?

Propping myself up on my elbows, I stared up at him, a goofy, content smile tugging at my lips. I felt... still. Warm. Like I'd just surfaced from a dream soaked in heat and yearning. The fire between us hadn't gone out it simply smoldered now, soft and satisfied for the moment.

"I'd love to continue this," Zaliver said, voice low and rough, "but your parents are about to walk through the front gate."

That snapped me out of my haze like a splash of ice water.

"What?" I squeaked, heart jumping into a full sprint.

I bolted upright, my hands flying to smooth down my rumpled dress. My hair was probably a mess, my lips swollen, and my entire being still buzzing from the intensity of our kiss. Meanwhile, Zaliver stood there, completely unbothered, towel barely hanging on and smirk playing at the edge of his mouth.

Heat rushed to my face as I remembered the way I'd launched myself at him like a feral thing. Goddess, I'd attacked him and judging by the very prominent situation under his towel, he hadn't minded one bit.

I tried my best not to stare, but he wasn't making it easy. He didn't even attempt to hide his arousal. The man had absolutely no shame.

I adjusted the bottom hem of my dress with shaky fingers, smoothing it down with fast little pats. When I pulled my hand back, it was damp. Confused, I looked down and realized my dress had little droplets on it.

"You got me all wet!" I groaned, glaring at him like it was somehow his fault, even though I'd been the one who attacked him like a starved animal.

Zaliver choked. Literally choked.

"What?" I asked, startled, taking a step toward him.

He shook his head, laughter spilling from his lips in deep, rolling waves. I blinked at him, confused, until he finally managed to speak between chuckles.

"Well, I'm glad," he said, smug as hell.

My brows knitted together in confusion. "Why would you be gla "

And then it hit me.

Oh. My. Goddess.

My words. I replayed them in my head and my face went nuclear. My eyes went wide with horror. "Wait! No! No! That's not what I meant!"

His grin widened, so unbearably pleased with himself.

"Sure, it's not." He winked, then turned and sauntered toward the closet, whistling like he hadn't just crushed my dignity underfoot.

I stared at his back, half mortified, half tempted to throw a pillow at him.

But before I could do anything, the doorbell rang.

I froze, my breath catching. My parents.

Part of me wanted to sprint down the stairs and wrap myself in the safety of their arms. The other part? It wanted to turn around and climb right back into Zaliver's.

With a frustrated huff, I spun toward the bedroom door. "Don't take too long," I tossed over my shoulder.

"I won't," he called out, amusement thick in his voice.

Mortification clung to me like static.

Why? Why did my brain have to pick that exact moment to blurt something completely innocent in the least innocent way? Why couldn't I just once sound like a normal person and not a walking innuendo?

Goddess help me I was never living this down.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

I paused on the last step, took a deep breath, and prayed the heat in my cheeks would be brushed off as nothing more than, well, heat. With my heart thudding nervously, I hurried to the front door, excitement bubbling in my chest. I was finally about to see them my parents. It felt like ages since I'd last been in their arms.

Before I could even open the door all the way, I was engulfed in warmth. My mother's arms wrapped around me, her sobs shaking both of us, and then my father pulled us into his embrace too, his presence grounding me instantly. I melted into them, clutching them tightly one arm around Mom, the other around Dad as tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

When Mom finally pulled back, her face was flushed and her eyes rimmed with red. I gave her a soft, watery smile, and she just let out another choked sob and hugged me all over again. My chest clenched. I'd missed her voice, even her tears.

I glanced between the two of them both sniffing now and whispered, "Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

They both eased back slightly, but my father kept one arm protectively looped around her shoulders. Seeing them again like this, safe and alive and here, opened a floodgate of memories. It reminded me of home, of laughter echoing through our tiny kitchen, of bedtime stories and early morning hugs before school. It reminded me of how deeply I loved them.

I had features from both of them. My hair and eyes matched theirs deep brown like wet soil after rain. Dad always took on a reddish hue when he spent too much time in the sun, and Mom's tiny frame, all delicate angles and soft lines, had passed me her upturned nose. Dad wasn't enormous, but he was still a big man, especially compared to her, and it was clear I inherited his height even if just by a few inches. Every inch counted, I liked to think. I had his temper too, though it rarely flared up in front of him. We were alike enough to understand one another without speaking.

After lots of kisses, hushed reassurances, and clinging hugs, I finally managed to guide them inside and have them sit.

"We missed you so much, Vivian. We nearly lost our minds looking for you," Dad said hoarsely. His voice was rough with emotion, but steady classic him. He and Mom settled on the loveseat, still clinging to one another, while I curled up in a nearby chair.

"I missed you both, too," I said softly. "And to think I was supposed to be moving out for college. Guess that didn't go as planned, huh?" I tried to lighten the mood with a laugh. To my relief, Mom actually cracked a smile, even with her eyes still glistening.

The conversation started out light lots of concerned questions and me trying to reassure them that I was okay, that I was safe but the shift came fast. I felt it the moment Dad's posture tightened. His eyes, sharp and dark, began to scan the room. He didn't say a word yet, but I could see him noticing things: the air, the silence, the subtle energy that never quite left this house. He was a man who paid attention.

Unlike Mom, who tended to be expressive and talkative, Dad was quieter always watching, always analyzing. But when he did speak, especially when angry or defensive, he could be terrifying.

I held my breath when he finally spoke.

"So... your mother told me you've been with your mate this whole time. Is that true?" His tone was calm, but there was something buried beneath it. Disapproval? Worry? Protective anger?

I tensed, fingers clenching slightly in my lap. Here it was the part I'd been dreading. Zaliver wasn't here with me, and that made this harder. There was no buffer. Just me and the truth. And Dad.

"Yeah," I said simply.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, watching me with a look that saw too much, a look that had always seen right through me. I kept still, trying not to give anything away, even though inside I felt like I was balancing on a knife's edge.

My father's gaze stayed on mine, unwavering. Testing. Judging. Maybe even afraid.

And somehow, that made this reunion feel even more real.

"Why didn't you call us the moment you could?" my dad snapped, his voice sharp and loaded with frustration. "Young lady, I'm relieved you're safe don't get me wrong but that doesn't excuse you leaving Lily's pack during an attack with your so-called mate who I already don't like, by the way and then going completely silent. Your mother and I have been worried sick. We got on a damn plane to who-knows-where, blindfolded, just to find out if you're okay. So tell me, why shouldn't we drag you back home and lock you away until you're fifty? Mate or not."

Mom flinched at his outburst, glancing at him with wide eyes, but I could see the undercurrent of understanding in her expression. She didn't entirely disagree.

I hadn't realized until that moment how closely I was tuned into Zaliver through our bond. I could feel him on the other end fuming. His fury pulsed like a drumbeat beneath my skin. Hoping to calm him before he did something reckless, I focused and sent a wash of calm through the bond. It helped... a little. His anger dulled, but it was still simmering just beneath the surface.

But my own emotions were harder to suppress. It wasn't just irritation it was something deeper, rawer. I was angry, and yet... it didn't feel like *my* anger alone. There was something primal inside me rising in protest. Something that growled at the condescension in my father's tone, the challenge in his stare.

I took a deep breath, squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin. Something shifted in me. The room felt colder. Heavier.

That feeling I'd only felt it once before. Back when I had to put Luke and Johnson in their place for questioning me. It was the Luna in me rising to the surface. Zaliver's mark hadn't just bonded us it had awakened something within me.

Mom noticed it first. Her gaze faltered, instinctively turning away, even though her face twisted in confusion. Dad, though... he stared, dazed. His head dipped slightly as if some primal part of him wanted to show submission.

I opened my mouth, then quickly cleared my throat when I heard how ice-cold my voice sounded. That wasn't what I wanted. This wasn't about dominance.

I breathed in again, willing myself to relax. They were my parents. They had every right to be scared. But still, my inner wolf didn't like being challenged not after everything.

"I know you're upset," I began softly, trying to level with them. "But this whole situation... it's bigger than anything we've ever dealt with. I'm not trying to be reckless or keep secrets, but I can't control everything. I *wanted* to call I tried but I couldn't. These past few days haven't exactly been easy for me either."

As soon as I spoke, it was like the trance lifted. My parents blinked, glancing at each other before focusing on me again.

Mom stepped forward this time, her voice gentler. "Sweetheart, you can't just vanish especially after an attack. When no one remembered seeing you, not even Lily, it raised red flags. The Alpha was questioned because we'd informed the Luna of your visit, just like we always do. Then you disappear? It looked... suspicious. And then the way you reached out you had us picked up by some luxury car and flown out here. We had to give up our phones, weren't allowed to tell *anyone* where we were going. They even blindfolded us, Vivian."

Her voice cracked slightly, not with anger but with worry.

"If something's going on... if there's something you need to tell us, just say it. Please."

I stared at her, stunned.

"W-what?" The words tumbled from my lips, shaky and small.

I hadn't known it was *that* serious

# The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

Did they seriously believe I had something to do with the attack on Lily's pack?

The moment the thought crossed my mind, my stomach twisted. I guess their security wasn't as sloppy as I'd assumed, picking up on the fact that some random girl showed up, stayed briefly, then vanished the same day their alpha was murdered. Perfect. Now I was probably considered a fugitive.

Did Zaliver know about this?

I shifted uncomfortably under their stares, but my mom turned to my dad instead.

"So, you didn't know?" she asked him softly.

I was too stunned to speak, let alone lie. I just shook my head slowly, eyes fixed on some random spot on the wall. My mind was racing, and I felt pale, sick even, like someone had scooped out my insides and replaced them with ice.

"Oh, but how did you get past the other patrols? Not everyone's been told to look for you. You're somewhat a suspect, but someone high up made sure you're not actively pursued." Her words carried both concern and suspicion. "Still, there are plenty of wolves out searching, enough to notice if you crossed any borders."

My father leaned forward, voice edged with frustration.

So Zaliver did know. That manipulative Alpha. Of course he'd pulled strings behind the scenes, made sure I wasn't hunted, and still hadn't told me. My jaw clenched.

My mom's eyes darted around the room. I could feel her unease, like her instincts were warning her of something she couldn't name. But I was too caught up in the storm inside me to focus on it.

It hurt more than I expected, the idea that people assumed I was part of the slaughter. And maybe, in some twisted way, I was. Not with my hands, but I'd been part of the chain of events that led there.

"Vivian," my dad started, voice firm but quieter than before. "We don't believe that garbage anymore. But we need answers. What's really going on? Is this your mate's doing? Did he orchestrate that attack? Why were you missing? Are you even sure he's really your mate?"

That last question hit like a slap.

My head snapped up. "No, what? No. He is my mate," I said, voice cracking on the last word. "Don't say that. He's mine."

That possessive edge that surfaced whenever Zaliver talked about the bond, I finally understood it. Just having my own father question it made something primal rise up inside me, defensive and fierce, vibrating just under my skin.

My dad stood, towering over me, expression carved from stone. My mother rose too, more slowly, more cautiously. The tension in the room had pulled itself taut.

"I haven't even met him," Dad bit out, "and I can already tell he's a bad influence. Look at this mess. People think you're involved in a massacre. Is this what happens when we're not around? We sent you to Lily's pack to keep you safe, not to send you running headfirst into danger."

His voice was rising, frustration sharpening into anger, and my cheeks burned.

"Chace," my mother said softly, fingers finding the hem of his sweater.

Neither of us paid her any attention. The tension had locked us into our own standoff.

"You've never even given him a chance," I shouted. "How can you judge him when you haven't even met him?"

Dad's expression darkened. He reached out and grabbed my arm.

"Chace," Mom said again, more urgently this time. There was something in her eyes now, fear, and the air in the room had shifted without either of us noticing, turning colder, heavier, like everything was bracing.

"Because he hasn't earned one!" Dad's voice boomed off the walls. "I'm relieved you're alive, but you're coming home with us. Tonight. You've been missing for weeks, and we didn't know where to even start looking. We weren't told where you were, even now, and that's his doing, isn't it?"

I could feel it before I heard anything.

The bond pulled tight. Zaliver was coming. And judging by what was moving through it, he had heard everything.

"Let go!" I yanked my arm back but Dad's grip held. "You can't drag me anywhere I don't want to go. I'm a legal adult, and you haven't even given me a chance to explain!"

A brief, irrational panic surged through me, some vivid fear that he might somehow pull me off this island, erase everything that had happened here.

Thud.

"And where is this so-called mate of yours?" Dad growled, eyes blazing.

"Behind you," said a voice. Cool. Cutting. Lethal.

The air went still.

My dad's hand dropped from my arm as he turned. His reaction was immediate, a sharp, audible gasp that wasn't just surprise. It was the full-body recognition of something greater standing in the room. The same thing I'd felt the first time I saw Zaliver. He didn't just look powerful. He radiated it.

I looked at him instinctively. The combat boots were gone, replaced by gleaming black dress shoes that clicked softly against the floor. Black slacks, tailored precisely, fitted in a way that left very little to the imagination, and I already knew the front view was a problem for my focus. His shirt was buttoned, deep black to match his hair, fitted close enough to show everything I was already too familiar with, with a white shirt visible underneath, three buttons undone at the chest.

And those eyes. Ice-blue, sharper than usual, brighter against the slicked-back black of his hair. He wasn't just the man I'd kissed under moonlight anymore. Right now, he looked every inch the dark legend. The Lupus Deus.

His smile wasn't safe either. It curled at the corner in that particular way that wasn't amusement at all, just a quiet, mocking acknowledgment that my father had stepped into something he didn't understand.

Both hands in his pockets. Feet apart. Completely still. And the fury rolling off him was impossible to ignore.

I hadn't noticed him arrive. I should have, I knew better, but Dad and I had been too deep in our argument. He'd been watching through the bond, absorbing every word, and I could feel what he'd made of it.

My mom looked like she didn't know whether to run or cry. She backed away instinctively, eyes fixed on Zaliver, both hands stretched out as if she could somehow stand between us and what stood before her.

My dad hadn't spoken, but his posture said enough. Shoulders rising, spine drawing back slightly. The confidence from two minutes ago was gone.

Zaliver didn't glance at me. He simply moved, circling my father, and came to stand at my side. The moment he did, Dad stepped back, sliding in front of my mother on reflex.

I looked at my father's face and felt something sink in my chest.

He wasn't just surprised.

He was horrified.

Because he knew. Whatever he'd felt the moment Zaliver walked in, he understood now that this wasn't just some alpha his daughter had attached herself to. This was something else entirely. Something far, far more.

## Chapter 78: fight to the death

*Vivian's POV*

Zaliver pulled his hands from his pockets and reached for mine, the same hand my father had just grabbed. His touch was careful, almost reverent, as he took it and examined it closely. No marks, nothing bruised or red, but the intensity in his gaze made the gesture feel like a declaration.

I looked up at him just as his eyes flickered black. His upper lip curled, not quite a snarl, but the warning was there, simmering just under the surface. Then, without a word, he turned to face my parents with a grin sharp enough to cut the tension clean in half.

I couldn't move. I just stood there, heart hammering, trying to catch up with what was happening.

"Hello," Zaliver began, tone cool and laced with something dangerous. "I'm Vivian's mate. Zaliver Azrala. But I suppose that doesn't mean much to you, does it, Mr. Gray? You've made your feelings pretty clear. You don't approve."

His voice was calm, conversational even, but every word landed with the weight of a warning. He walked toward them slowly, hands clasped behind his back like he was taking a stroll rather than facing down my parents in their own daughter's living room.

My mom and dad began backing toward the front door, eyes moving between him and me. Mom glanced at me, urgency all over her face, pleading silently. My mind felt scrambled. I couldn't sort out what she needed from me. My legs were barely holding me up.

"Who the hell are you?" my father demanded, though his voice wavered. He looked straight at Zaliver but flinched doing it, like the eye contact cost him something. He and my mother were circling slowly toward the exit, moving the way prey moves when it doesn't want the predator to notice.

Zaliver's expression twisted into something that looked almost amused, in the way a cat looks amused watching something smaller run.

"What? I'm the bad influence, remember?"

Both my parents flinched. I knew that tone. It meant he was past reasoning.

My father looked at me then, panic written into every line of his face, eyes asking the question I dreaded: Is this really your mate?

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't speak. The bond had gone cold, like Zaliver had drawn every spark of warmth back into himself just to prove what it felt like without it.

"You know," Zaliver continued, voice laced with something sweet and corrosive, "that might be the nicest thing I've been called lately. I've had worse. Monster. Murderer. Abomination. But I have to admit, bad influence has a certain ring to it."

He smiled, wide and full of teeth, and it made every word worse.

"Zal—" I tried, finally finding something like a voice.

But the moment his eyes turned toward me, the words vanished. His smile dropped. We stared at each other, and something shifted in the bond, just briefly, the dark fog thinning.

Then my parents moved.

In those seconds they'd reached the front door, thrown it open, and each grabbed one of my arms. My mother's hand closed around my wrist and she pulled.

Zaliver's eyes went pitch black.

A growl ripped through the house like a fault line cracking.

"Stop, you're just going to make him—" I tried to shout, heels digging into the floor, but my dad cut across me.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I should've known. You'd never just leave, not even for a mate. I knew you were taken. I knew it." His eyes swept the driveway. Looking for a car, I realized. Some kind of escape.

But there was no escaping this. Not with the storm building behind Zaliver's eyes.

I wrenched my hand free from my mother's grip and shouted over the chaos. "Stop! Please, just stop!" My voice broke. "You don't understand, if we go any further this spirals into something we can't undo. Just let me talk to him—"

A snarl from behind me cut through everything.

Zaliver emerged from the tree line like something made of shadow and fury, shoulders taut, each step measured and deliberate. We hadn't gotten far from the house, maybe fifty feet, but it felt like a battlefield now.

My dad stepped in front of me immediately. My mom moved to his side, dropping into a crouch, already preparing for an attack.

Zaliver stopped a few feet away, pulled off his blazer, and let it fall. He rolled up his sleeves without breaking eye contact with my father.

"I was trying to give you space," he said, each word slow and precise. "I was going to respect your need to take this in. But then you had to yell at her. Hurt her." His voice dropped into something that wasn't quite human. "That is something I will not forgive. Father or not."

My dad squared up, jaw tight, fists clenched. "I won't let you keep my daughter here any longer. If it costs me my life, so be it."

The corner of Zaliver's mouth lifted. Not playful. Lethal.

"A fight to the death, then."

My father didn't understand what he'd just agreed to. But his body did, I could see it in the subtle shift of his stance. He'd been a warrior in his youth, trained and disciplined.

But Zaliver wasn't a warrior. He was the Lupus Deus. A living weapon, made by gods for the sole purpose of ending things.

They began circling.

My mother's hand found my shoulder. I couldn't move.

"Shit," I breathed.

Then my father shifted.

Bones cracked and reformed, his body reshaping into the powerful, muscled form of his wolf. My mom gasped. Before I could scream, he lunged.

Zaliver didn't shift.

He caught my father midair, one arm sweeping around him, and slammed him into the ground with a force that made the earth shudder. My father scrambled back to his paws immediately, but Zaliver barely looked like he'd tried.

That mercy wouldn't last.

I saw the claws extend.

He crouched low, prepared to strike. My dad was already circling again, preparing for another charge. And I knew with cold certainty that if this continued, Zaliver would kill him. Not out of malice. Instinct would take over, the way it always did with him, and my father would be gone before either of them understood what happened.

This wasn't a fight. It was a misunderstanding that had caught fire, and two people who both loved me were about to tear each other apart over it.

I shoved my mother's hands off, dodged her reaching arms, and ran.

My heart pounded louder than my footsteps. My lungs burned.

Zaliver's arm swung forward just as my dad lunged again.

I threw myself between them.

The world slowed to a crawl in that half-second, claws and teeth and sheer force all converging on the space I'd just moved into, and I closed my eyes and prayed I'd been fast enough.

# The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivian's POV*

I made it just in time.

Adrenaline tore through me and sharpened everything, every movement, every sound. I ducked beneath Zaliver's incoming claws, barely, and without thinking I drove my foot straight up into his groin.

His expression went from rage to something very different. I didn't wait to see how long that lasted. I spun around and dropped to my knees in front of my father's wolf form. He was snarling, breath hot and wild against my face, but I locked my arms around him and shoved with everything in me. Somehow I managed to push him a few feet back from Zaliver.

I got to my feet and stood between them, chest heaving, claws out, heart pounding so hard I could hear it. My gaze moved from one to the other. The fury running through me was my own but it was also something older and deeper, something that lived in the part of me that had been waking up piece by piece since the marking. My wolf was furious. So was I.

How dare Zaliver take this to the death? Over what, some misplaced idea of protection? I was exhausted by being caught in his storm, dragged around like something fragile he had to keep locked away.

And my father. I understood his fear, I did, but he hadn't let me speak a single word. His first instinct had been to fight, to offer his life if necessary. I didn't want that. Not like this.

Behind me, Zaliver was still on the ground, hands cupped over himself, face twisted between pain and disbelief. His eyes found mine, furious and betrayed at once. I didn't flinch. I didn't feel guilty. If anything, he'd had it coming.

And then my father was up again. Growling, charging, still bound by the death order Zaliver had spoken. His wolf barreled forward, and Zaliver just watched from the ground, not even bracing, like he already knew I was going to do something.

Maybe he did.

In that moment something clarified. Whether my father still had a choice didn't matter. I had one. I was Zaliver's mate, his equal, and I'd spent too long acting like that was a title that came with conditions instead of a position that had its own power.

The power inside me surged. I didn't fight it.

"Sit. Stay."

I turned to my father and let the command come from somewhere low and certain, not a shout, not a plea. My eyes carried the authority behind it, and to my own stunned surprise, it landed.

Mid-sprint, my father skidded to a halt and froze. He shifted back to human form in the dirt, blinking like he wasn't sure what had just happened. My command had overridden Zaliver's.

My mother rushed to his side, checking him over quickly. Bruised ribs, mostly, nothing a few hours wouldn't fix.

I let out a shaky breath and turned back to the man who had caused all of this.

Zaliver was on his feet now, hands at his sides, jaw tight. He took one step toward me.

I raised a finger. "Stop."

He stopped.

"I'm done," I said, voice still unsteady with rage. "I'm done with the violence and the overbearing displays. This is not how this works. I won't keep tolerating it."

His expression shifted, wounded and frustrated. "Vivian—"

"Don't." I cut him off. "You don't get to say my name like that and then treat me like something you own. Every time you've done something like this, I've made excuses. I've tried to understand you. But this?" I gestured at the mess behind me. "This isn't love. This is madness."

My voice cracked, but I held his gaze.

"Why do you keep doing this?" I asked, quieter now. "What is it?"

"You don't understand—"

"Of course I don't!" My voice broke back into something raw. "How could I? You never let me in. You keep everything locked away and expect me to just guess, just follow, just trust blindly. This bond won't survive if you won't talk to me, Zaliver. It won't."

My breath came unevenly. He was staring at me with that cold, controlled face that hid everything, and his wolf was right at the surface, and mine was answering, bristling, refusing to back down.

His gaze moved briefly to my parents. I stepped sideways, putting myself between them.

His mouth tightened. "So you're choosing them over your own mate."

"No one is choosing anyone," I said flatly. "They're my parents, and you're my mate. Why does everything have to be one or the other with you? Why can't all of you just exist in my life at the same time?"

The wounded pride was visible now, underneath the cold.

"You issued a death sentence against my father because you assumed he was going to take me from you." My voice cracked on the word. "Do you hear how that sounds? What did you think would happen? That you'd kill him and I'd just stay? That's your idea of love?"

Each word cost something, but I didn't stop.

"You call yourself the Lupus Deus. You talk about your power, your strength. But have you ever once stood in the aftermath of something you destroyed and actually looked at what you left behind?"

I stepped closer, voice dropping. "After every conquest. Every battle. Have you ever stayed long enough to see the ashes?"

He didn't speak. He just looked at me.

I moved right in front of him and reached up, taking his jaw in my hand, tilting his face until his eyes had nowhere to go but mine.

"Look at what you've done. Not just today. All of it. Every time. Because you believe destruction is the only way to hold onto something."

His jaw tightened under my grip. He didn't pull away.

I wasn't talking about one afternoon. I was talking about his whole life, every path paved in scorched earth, every war fought when what he wanted was never actually in danger. Why did he always need to conquer things that weren't fighting him?

Something was moving through his expression that I couldn't quite read. We were both standing still in the middle of the wreckage, and the air between us was sharp and waiting.

Then, quietly, he said, "Yes."

One word. And I felt it through the bond, honest and stark and the most he'd given me in a long time.

I softened my grip and moved my hand to cup his cheek. My thumb brushed across his skin.

"Then why?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "If you knew you'd win. If you knew I'd still be here. Why did you let the darkness lead?"

His eyes closed. He leaned into my touch, just slightly.

The silence that settled between us was heavy with everything he hadn't said yet.

But I could feel it, through the bond, through the press of his cheek against my palm.

Something was shifting.

I just hoped it would be enough.

## The Wolf God's Unwanted Luna

*Vivians POV*

I felt the storm raging inside him through our bond, conflicting and chaotic and barely contained. For the briefest moment, I caught something unexpected, anxiousness, maybe even remorse, and then just as quickly it vanished. Like a door slammed shut, the emotions disappeared as if they'd never been there at all.

When he opened his eyes, they were frozen and unreadable.

My breath caught.

"Because I don't care what I have to do or who I have to crush, as long as I end up with what I want," he said coldly.

He stepped back, slipping from my hands. I stood there staring up at him, and I felt something inside me fracture. My hands dropped to my sides.

"My mistake," he said, voice flat, "was thinking I needed to be someone you'd want to spend forever with. I've been pretending, pretending to be gentle, pretending to be safe, while fighting chaos behind the curtain. I let you believe in a side of me that never truly existed."

His eyes locked onto mine. "But the truth is, I was born a monster, and a monster I remain. A weapon built to destroy. I'm no savior, Vivian."

His voice never wavered. Each word landed like something thrown with intention.

"I'm a creature of the night. Vile. Cold-blooded. Created to stalk, seduce, and kill. And you know that. You've always known." He leaned closer, his breath brushing my neck as he tucked my hair behind my ear. "Even our bond can't hide that truth from you. You've felt it too, the darkness clinging to me like a second skin."

I stood rigid, fists clenched so tightly my nails bit into my palms. I needed the pain. I welcomed the distraction from the weight of what he was saying. He wasn't lying, every word rang with raw truth and I knew it.

I had felt that darkness, of course I had. But when I was with him it always faded, like mist retreating from sunlight. I'd been choosing blindness, painting him into the shape of

what I thought a mate should be, someone gentle and devoted and capable of being saved. I'd let myself believe that once he claimed me, everything fundamental about him changed.

But now I had to wonder: had he simply learned to wear the role I needed him to play?

My voice came out unsteady. "But were your feelings for me a lie?"

He let out a long breath and moved to stand in front of me again. His expression shifted, just slightly, into something more careful.

"No," he said, and for the first time in this whole gut-wrenching exchange, his voice held something fragile. "That, Vivian, is the one thing that's never been false. You're real. A blessing I never expected. I never imagined having a mate, let alone one like you. And I think," he paused, "fate hoped you would be enough to make me stop."

He said it quietly, with a reverence that made it sound like something he'd carried for a long time before saying it out loud. He didn't look dangerous in that moment. Just tired. Ancient. Worn down by years I'd never lived through, by things I couldn't fully imagine.

And still, the words cut deeper than I was ready for.

Zaliver stood before me looking like a stranger. The sharp-cut suit, the polished shoes, the air of someone who had made a thousand calculated decisions before walking into this

room. My Zaliver wore dark jeans and worn boots, black shirts that fit without trying. But this version, I didn't know this one. Or maybe it was the real one, and I had only ever been shown what I could handle.

A cold truth settled in my chest. People had layers. The face they showed the world, the one they kept for family, the one that only came out with someone they loved, and underneath all of it, the version even they tried not to look at directly. I had only ever known his third face. The lover. And I had let the bond convince me that loving someone deeply enough could rewrite what they were. That the monster the rest of the world feared had simply dissolved because he held me gently.

I'd forgotten what he actually was.

"Stop what?" I asked, my voice thin.

His eyes dropped from mine. "War for the skies," he said, low and distant.

My heart skipped. "You're going to start a war?" My voice rose. "Is this why I was bonded to you? To stop you from going through with your revenge?" I stepped back, breath catching. "This is about your brother's death?"

His silence confirmed everything.

"There's more to this than I ever saw," I whispered. "I was blind. Completely blind."

Zaliver turned his head slightly. "Don't act so surprised, Vivian. I've ended lives for far less."

His tone was flat, casual, disturbingly so. The girl from the clearing surfaced in my mind. Martha. Her face behind my eyes like a ghost.

He shrugged. "It's not like I lack an army or the means to take down a fellow god. You of all people should know that."

His back was to me. I opened my mouth to respond, and then I heard footsteps, fast and purposeful, from more than one direction.

Then came a sound I knew would stay with me.

My parents' cries.

I whipped around. A circle of people had closed around us. My parents were in the grasp of two large figures. I saw the glint of needles. My mother's eyes widened. My father growled, low and furious, and then both of them went limp.

"What the hell are you doing?" I screamed, the sound cracking as it left my throat.

I spun, looking for anyone, and what I found made my blood go cold.

Luke. Johnson. Mila. Courtney. Standing among the strangers. Silent, stiff, expressions grim. There was sorrow in their eyes, not guilt, which somehow made it worse.

Betrayal moved through me like something physical.

"I have urgent matters to attend to," Zaliver said, turning back to face me. "This conversation will have to end here." He paused. "Vivian." The sadness in his eyes when he said my name was the most unsettling thing I'd seen all day. "It's been a pleasure."

Something in my chest came apart.

This wasn't him. Not the man who whispered my name like it mattered. This was the Lupus Deus, standing in full view without the softness I'd mistaken for permanence.

His gaze returned to me, and for a fraction of a second, I saw it. Pain. Like he didn't want this. Like some part of him hated it.

"What—" I started, taking a step back, stomach twisting.

"Sleep," he murmured. "Grieve. Forget."

And then everything fell away.

The last thing I saw before the darkness took me was Zaliver's face. And the smile on it was the most broken thing I'd ever seen.