

Chapter 21 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I wish I could spend forever like this dancing with Marco. But all too soon, the song ends, and the crowd turns to the ballroom's main door as the Lycan King and Queen arrive. Everyone except for the royal family bows at their arrival. My gown swirls around me as I curtsy alongside the others, but I catch a glimpse of the Queen. She stands tall beside her dignified husband, but I'm surprised to see her eyes fixed on Marco. Her gaze is so filled with hatred and envy that it sends a chill down my spine as the King motions for everyone to rise.

He stands at the edge of the balcony, officially welcoming his guest to the palace to celebrate the Autumn Equinox. Then, he gives a short but eloquent speech about the changing of the seasons throughout the kingdom and the fall harvest.

Once the King is finished speaking, everyone disperses, and Marco is called by the Lycan King to have a talk. The ballroom feels far too large and crowded without Marco by my side, so I quietly slip out one of the small corridors. The palace is enormous, each corridor grander and more ornate than the last, and I wander around and take in the sights. I don't head in any particular direction, simply enjoying a bit of peace and quiet away from everyone in the main hall.

I find a pleasant little window nook and sit by the edge, admiring the night sky outside through the glass panes. The curtains hanging by the window make the space feel cozy and intimate, and I think I'll sit here for a while before exploring some more. However, my absent-minded little tour of the palace is interrupted by the sound of voices approaching.

"I cannot approve of your marriage to that girl," the voice says.

My heart races as I realize it's the King talking. He and Marco walk casually down the corridor, oblivious of my presence on the little ledge behind the curtains.

"She is a surrogate's daughter with no legitimate bloodline. I had one of my men dig into her past, and not only is she an omega, she never manifested a wolf!" the King goes on.

Marco's answering laughter is hollow and sarcastic.

“It’s a bit late for you to disapprove, seeing as I’m already married to Tanya. Besides, what exactly are you dissatisfied with? The fact that she’s an omega and an outcast? Or that she’s a surrogate’s child just like me? Because from where I’m standing, it seems to me like we’re a perfect match.”

The King’s furious growl chills me to the bone.

“Watch your mouth, boy! You know full well that you are not just a surrogate’s child. You are the son of my fated mate. Even if everyone thinks Eric must be the next Lycan King, you should know that the day your curse is cured, I will declare you as my heir. I will definitely find a cure for your curse, let that weak girl leave you in a hurry!”

“You mean I’m the son of your rejected fated mate,” Marco spits back at his father. “My mother loved you. She may have only been the humble princess of a small kingdom, but she left everything behind to be with you. You took her innocence and had a child with her, but you refused to marry her.”

The pain and rage in Marco’s voice make my heart ache, even as my mind reels with the information he’s revealed. Everyone believed Marco’s mother was just a random surrogate. The King must have kept the truth secret!

“Even when her kingdom was destroyed, and her family was killed, my mother stayed by your side, and you did nothing to help.”

“I was just a prince at the time. I had to think of my own kingdom. Marrying an alpha’s noble daughter as my queen was the best way to protect Mador.”

“You chose strength and power over the love of a fair and gentle woman who adored you. You declared that I was a mere surrogate’s son instead of admitting I was the illegitimate child of your fated mate because you valued your throne more than your family. My mother was beautiful, inside and out. She was loving and kind, and you let her die alone, thinking she didn’t deserve you when the truth is you’re the one who wasn’t worthy of her.”

I have to raise my hands to my lips to stifle a shocked gasp. The two of them walk right past the window nook without noticing me, too caught up in their argument to realize I was there. The last thing I hear as their footsteps fade is Marco’s voice, distant but determined.

“You are my King and my father, but I am nothing like you. Even if I weren’t cursed and you gave me the throne, I would never be like you. I can get that place by myself, and I will never sacrifice my wife.”

“Tanya, there you are.”

Lily's voice startles me so much I nearly jump out of my skin. After Marco and the King left, I started to make my way back towards the ballroom.

"Sorry, I was just exploring the palace. Is everything okay?" I ask, still shaken by everything I just heard.

"Actually, that's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. This is your first time in the palace, right? I thought I'd give you a little tour," she says with a sweet smile.

"Thank you, that's very kind. But I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"Not at all, I insist," she says, taking my hand before I can protest. "Besides, I can show you Marco's room here in the palace. Surely you must be curious about your husband's old living quarters."

Now that she mentions it, I am curious to see the place where Marco lived before he moved to the townhouse. But going there without him feels invasive.

"Are you sure it's okay for us to go? I shouldn't intrude," I mumble.

"Nonsense. I'm sure he wouldn't mind. I wouldn't have the key to his room if I wasn't allowed to use it."

Lily leads me through the palace until we reach a large set of double doors. We pause at the entrance, and she presses a heavy iron key into my hand before nodding towards the door.

"Go on, make yourself at home. I'm going to rejoin the party and attend to some guests, so feel free to have a look around. Take as much time as you want," she says with an encouraging nod before walking away.

Hesitantly, I slide the key into the lock and push open the heavy doors.

The bedroom is larger than the entire apartment I used to live in, in my small town outside the capital. It's not as cozy as the townhouse, with its elegant architecture and antique furniture, but it's undeniably beautiful. I walk into the room, slowly taking in the sights. Next to the expensive-looking double bed, there's a wooden nightstand with several picture frames. Each photo shows Lily and Marco together, smiling happily at each other.

On the other side of the bed, there's a matching nightstand with more pictures, and I realize there are two of everything. Two matching cups are on the table by the window and two sets of towels in the bathroom with Lily and Marco's initials embroidered. Across the room, there's a counter with a ceramic vase containing a bouquet of lilies that have since died and dried out, but between the crisp old petals, there's a note from Marco addressed to Lily.

I find a pink scarf lazily tossed on the lounge chair that Lily must have left behind from her last visit and an earmarked fashion magazine on the counter. I can tell that this is a place where she

felt comfortable and at home, and Marco clearly made the space for her. Lily's presence is all over the room. I feel impossibly small compared to this monument to their relationship.

The space is filled with memories they must have shared, evidence of years they spent together. The more I look around, the more apparent it becomes that this room is a testament to Lily and Marco's relationship. There's a small layer of dust covering multiple surfaces as if no one- not even Marco- had dared to disturb the treasured memories that littered every corner of the room.

I walk towards a grand piano on the other side of the room. On the music stand, there's some unfinished sheet music and scribbled notes in Marco's handwriting. At the top of the paper is the handwritten title Lily's Lullaby in D Minor. He'd composed entire sonatas for her, and I didn't even know he played the piano.

There is so much history here I could never compete with. Every intimate detail of the room feels like a knife in my heart. The iron key Lily gave me is heavy in my hand. I feel like I could shrink into myself until I disappeared completely, leaving no trace behind.

I walk out of the room, gently closing the doors behind me as I'm crushed by the sensation of loss and defeat. I can't go back to the ballroom and face the crowd of cold faces that would be waiting for me, so I head outside, desperate for fresh air and a change of scenery.

But even as I walk away, my mind is filled with echoes of what I heard and flashes of what I saw. The memory of that room plays over and over in my head, even when I close my eyes. I'm flooded with the image of the dead flowers, those lilies looking painfully beautiful even when dried out and forgotten. I can't shake away the thought of Marco's words on the tender little note;

'For my fated love, Lily

Forever yours, Marco.'

She's his fated mate, I'm not.

Chapter 23 Fall Into The Pond

Chapter 22 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I stumble out of the palace and into the gardens, feeling tired and mildly nauseous. I make my way to the edge of a large pond, focusing on the sight of starlight glistening on the surface of the dark water. Someone approaches me, and I wince when I realize Ayana and Lily join by the pond, ruining any chance at peace and quiet.

Not here. Not now. It's been a long night, and I'm in no mood to be tormented further. The King's voice still rings in my ears; the secret of Marco's sitting heavy in my heart. Not to mention the crushing sorrow of everything I saw in Marco's old room. The way Lily smiles at me so innocently makes my skin crawl.

"My dear Tanya, is everything all right?" Lily asks. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

I did, and she knows it. She's the one who showed me the ghost of her past relationship with Marco.

"I just needed a moment alone and some fresh air," I say softly. I don't have the energy for any more drama. I just want to hide from all of this and rest for a while.

"Well, I'm amazed you're still in the palace at all," Ayana says, with none of Lily's forced politeness. "It's not like anyone wants you here."

I don't answer. The last thing I want is to get involved in some kind of confrontation with her.

"It's a pity that you even showed up tonight," she goes on. "Everyone knows you don't belong. Prince Marco is the Second Prince of Mador, and you? You're just a charity case at best, a horrible mistake at worst. He can dress you up and dance with you, but we all know the truth. You are nothing."

My grip tightens on my purse at the sting of her words.

"It will be such a shame when your marriage falls apart. It was scandalous when Lily and Marco broke up, but he inevitably gets fed up with you and tosses you aside; it will be downright pathetic."

"And I'm sure you would be delighted if we broke up," I say, my voice soft but firm. "Just like you were happy when Marco and Lily broke up. After all, it can't be easy seeing the guy you like with another girl."

I'm surprised by the strength of my own words; not aggressive but just defensive enough that Ayana gawks at me. Too much has happened tonight; my heart feels sore and raw from everything I've learned. I don't want to fight, but I've been pushed too far this time. This time, I won't stand by as she attacks my marriage. She's not just insulting me; she's insulting Marco, and that cuts too deep for me to stay quiet.

"What are you talking about?" Ayana snaps, her wide eyes darting from me to Lily. She sneers at me, looking ready to claw my face off, but I don't recoil. I stand my ground, finding courage

within me that I did not know I possessed at the thought of everything Marco has endured. His father betrayed Marco's mother, rejecting his fated mate just like Lily betrayed Marco when she chose to be with Eric. Marco endured heartache and injustice, but he was still kind enough to marry me and rescue me. How dare Ayana call that marriage pathetic?

"You've always liked Marco, haven't you? Even when he was dating your friend, Lily. Is that why you hate me so much? Because I'm married to the man you're obsessed with?"

Ayana steps towards me, baring her teeth.

"Shut up, crazy bitch. You're talking nonsense!"

"I saw you on Valentine's Day, you know. I saw you at the restaurant in the rain, watching us. That was you, wasn't it? I never wanted to cause any trouble. I never wanted to bother anyone, but you sent those roses and the note as a prank to hurt me. It was all you, wasn't it?"

"Shut up!" she says again.

"Your crush has made you bitter, Ayana, but that doesn't give you the right to hurt others. Making other people unhappy won't make you feel better."

"I said, shut up!" she shrieks, shoving me back so hard that my purse falls out of my hands. I reach down to pick it up. Before I can get it, Ayana swoops in and grabs it, spitefully throwing it into the pond.

No!

What have I done? I stare in horror as the golden little clutch plops into the water and starts sinking. Ayana stares at me with a wicked smirk, haughty and triumphant. How can she be so cruel?

There's something precious in that bag, something more valuable than any accessory. It's the same purse I wore to the auction, and a sickening realization twists my stomach into a knot. The jewels named after Marco's mother, the Marie Gorriete Earrings, are still inside that bag.

"Please help me! I have to find it," I say as I rush to the edge of the water.

Neither Lily nor Ayana moves an inch, clearly uninterested in assisting me. My eyes scan the pond as my heart pounds furiously in my chest. Those earrings were a family heirloom left to Marco by his mother before she died. If I don't do something, that treasure will be lost to the depths of the enormous pond and lost forever.

But I can't swim.

I'm equally mortified and terrified as I watch the purse disappear under the surface. I've already hesitated too long. It's now or never.

I hike up the hem of my gown and kick off my heels before stepping into the murky waters.

"What are you doing?!"

"I have to get it back," I call out, ignoring their scoffs and Ayana's malicious laughter.

I trudge deeper into the cold pond; the floor is slippery with seaweed and mud under my bare feet. I move further away from the edge; my eyes fixed on the last spot where I saw the purse before it sank. Marco's mother was a gentle and beautiful woman. Those earrings are the last thing she left behind for her son. I have to find them.

The water is up to my neck now, and I frantically rummage through the dark water in search of the purse. Marco gave those earrings to Lily as a token of his love and trust, and she tossed them aside, auctioning them off. But I could never do that to him. I cough as the water gets into my eyes, but I keep going deeper and deeper.

When my hand finally grasps the familiar material of the little handbag, I could cry with relief. Somewhere in the distance, I hear the commotion of a crowd gathering by the edge of the pond, but I barely register it. I kick at the darkness, my dress heavy with water. My slippery fingers unclasp the little latch on the purse, and I rummage blindly through its contents until I feel the ornate, solid shape of the earrings in my hand.

I clutch them tightly, but I've gone too far into the pond, and my feet can't touch the bottom anymore. I flail, kicking at the emptiness around my legs and gasping as I try to keep my chin above the surface.

Several people have gathered outside. In the distance, I see Lily looking around frantically and then throwing herself into the pond. Figures rush toward the pond. With a loud scream and a tremendous splash, Lily deliberately jumps in, and all I can do is keep struggling against the weight threatening to drag me down.

Not for the first time, I wish with all my might that I had a wolf to shift into and give me strength, but all I can do is gasp for air as my limbs grow cold and sore with effort. My muscles scream against the strain, my head growing light as my body becomes heavier.

I can't swim. I can't even float as water seeps into the fabric of my gown and drags me down. Everything is becoming blurry as I fight to stay on the surface, coughing and gasping. But there, in the distance, I see him.

Marco and Eric run towards the pond, and I cling to hope like a life raft as the princes rush towards me. No, not towards me. I realize in a daze that the gathered crowd is pointing at a spot closer to the edge, where Lily threw herself in. Lily flails and screams, splashing about as everyone's attention is drawn to her.

Help me! Please! I want to cry out, but my lungs burn with the cold, and my chest is tight and icy.

Marco beats his brother to the edge of the water and jumps in gracefully. But his focus is centered on Lily's thrashing form, and I realize that he's not coming to rescue me. He doesn't see me.

I can't hold on any longer. The darkness wraps itself around me like a shroud, and the water pulls me under. A distant, childish part of my mind wonders if Marco will miss me. The last thing I see is his handsome frame reaching for Lily before the cold consumes me, and everything fades to black.

Chapter 24 You Are More Important!

Chapter 23 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Marco's POV

Lily's screams ring in my ears, and she thrashes wildly in the pond, sending water in every direction. I race to her side, jumping in before Eric even reaches the edge of the pond. Lily wraps her arms around me with a gasp, her nails digging into my skin. I grimace as she splashes me, hauling her out of the water.

"Lily, calm down. Stop it. I got you," I growl at her, and she wiggles a bit less at my command.

I carry her out, setting her down gently on the ground. Eric quickly joins us, his expression wrought with worry.

"You shouldn't have done that," my brother says quietly to me. "I would have gone in to rescue her."

I know Lily is not mine to rescue. She's with Eric now, and he's the one that should be rushing to her aid. But I'm faster and stronger, and I would have done it for anyone. Even though Lily and I aren't together anymore, I wasn't going to stand by and watch as she drowned.

"You're welcome," I growl at him sarcastically before nodding towards Lily. "Take care of this."

Eric only glares resentfully at my biting tone before kneeling beside his fiancé. I step back, giving them some space.

“Lily, are you okay? What happened?” he asks.

“It was an accident; Ayana knocked her purse in the pond,” Lily coughs, her voice overly breathy. “Oh, Eric, I was so scared. I feel so faint.”

I roll my eyes, not wanting to get involved in whatever drama Ayana stirred up. Lily is safe, so I get up to head back into the ballroom and look for Tanya. But before I take a single step, Lily sputters.

“I told her not to go in... I tried to go in after her to help... I’m sorry I didn’t stop her in time.”

I whirl around to face Lily again, my brow furrowing.

“Her? Who else went in?” I ask, and it’s more of a demand than a question.

Lily takes an exaggeratedly slow breath.

“Tanya... Tanya went into the pond. I think she was trying to get her purse back. I...”

Her words fade, and I don’t register much of what she says after my wife’s name. My eyes widen, scanning the dark waters. Something tightens in my chest as panic, unlike any I’ve ever known, fills me.

I jump back in.

Tanya’s POV

Dying happens very slowly and then all at once. At first, everything hurts, cold and tight and dark around me as my lungs scream for air. Then, I lose sight of which way is up and which way is down, and the pain quiets. It becomes a distant whisper as I feel myself fading, like falling asleep.

The strength seeps out of me, and my eyes slip shut, my limbs becoming loose. For a moment, I swear I can feel my heartbeat slowing, softer and softer with each beat.

Then, a kiss brings me back from the edge of death.

Cutting through the darkness underwater, someone’s lips press fiercely against my own. Air is pushed past my cold lips, my tired lungs heaving as a breath is blown into me. Life shocks back through me as if waking me up from an awful nightmare, sensation slowly returning to me.

Strong arms wrap around me, pulling me out of the blackness. I’m still cold and dizzy; everything feels so far away, but I’m not afraid. I feel safe in this desperate embrace. If I died, perhaps these are the arms of my angel, coming to carry me away to a place of warmth and rest.

But then we break through the surface of the water, and the world rushes back at me. I gasp, welcoming oxygen into my aching chest. Marco holds me as I struggle to steady my breathing, and the realization hits me like a crashing wave.

I'm alive.

And I'm not alone.

Marco carries me out of the pond, our drenched clothes clinging to our bodies. The crowd has started to disperse, less concerned with my safety, while Lily is the center of attention. Several people register Marco and me as he emerges from the pond and lays me on the grass. I'm shivering slightly, and both of us are panting. But as soon as Marco's breathing steadies enough for him to get a word out, he growls at me.

“What were you thinking?”

I'm too shaky to answer right away, so I just look down, unfurling my frozen fingers to reveal his mother's earrings in the palm of my hand. Marco's eyes widen at the sight of them and then narrow in disapproval at the relief on my face.

“You could have died,” he says, his voice low and angry. “You nearly drowned because of a pair of earrings?”

I frown up at him, confused by the frustration on his face. I'm still dizzy and lightheaded, but I manage to reply.

“They were your mother's.”

He only stares at me in disbelief.

“Your mother left them for you, and you gave them to Lily. They're important,” I say simply.

A palace guard approaches us, discretely handing Marco a towel to dry himself off. He takes it and dismisses the guard, looking down.

“How did you know they were a gift? How did you know I gave them to Lily?”

I rub my eyes with the back of my hand, brushing off little droplets.

“There was a note from you in the box: ‘For my love.’ These earrings are a token of love, first from your mother and then from you to Lily.” I mumble, trying to explain. “A token of love is a treasure. Something so precious is worth the risk.”

He shakes his head, but I can't tell if he's still mad at me. His expression becomes quiet and unreadable. I'd never seen him so... protective.

He looks at me, and for a second, I get the feeling like he's seeing me for the first time. There's still frustration and disapproval in his blue eyes, but also a hint of something else I can't quite identify. A strong emotion hovers in his deep eyes, as if he is trying hard to suppress it, yet it's still about to erupt.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to cause a scene, really. I just..." I hold out the earrings to him. "They're important to you. I had to protect that."

He doesn't say anything, and he doesn't take the earrings from me. Instead, he tosses the towel at my face. I sigh somewhat ungracefully into the fabric, rubbing it against the back of my head to try and dry out my hair a little. With the towel over my eyes, I don't see him moving closer to me, but the next thing I know, his arms are wrapped around me.

"Wha- Marco, I can't see," I grumble, squirming slightly, but he pulls me against him, holding me even tighter. I go still, holding back my protests as I hear his muffled voice through the fabric.

"My wife is more valuable than any object- foolish little flower. A token of love is precious, but a life is priceless. You are far more important to me."

Chapter 25 Fever

Chapter 24 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I'm hot and cold all at once, the fever wracking through my body. The chill of the pond from that night seems to have seeped into my bones, making me shiver even a sweat clings to my skin. My hand rests on my stomach as guilt courses through me, stronger and sharper than any discomfort from the fever.

If I were the only one sick, I wouldn't mind. But at that moment, when I jumped in after the earrings, I forgot that I'm not just making choices for myself anymore. There's a child growing in me that will suffer the consequences of my mistakes. I berate myself for not having thought of that when I recklessly threw myself into the water. If this baby suffers because I made myself ill, I'll never forgive myself.

What kind of mother will I be?

Something shifts on the bed beside me, and I wince at the stiffness in my joints. My eyelids are heavy with fatigue, and everything seems blurry and far away like I can't tell whether I'm awake or dreaming.

Suddenly someone's lying beside me, gently adjusting me to rest against his embrace. His arms wrap around me, and in spite of the burning fever, I welcome the warmth. Wrapped up in him, everything is less painful. A hand rests on top of mine, fingers delicately entwining with my own.

"It's going to be okay," says a deep but caring voice.

Marco.

I must be dreaming after all, or perhaps the fever is making me imagine things. I'm so groggy, I can barely tell.

"The baby..." I mutter, and my thoughts are jumbled and incoherent. The baby deserves a better mother than me. Someone competent enough to care for them.

"Shhhh," the voice shushes me gently.

Fingers tentatively stroke the skin on my abdomen, guiding my own hand and rubbing my belly tenderly.

"Don't worry, little flower. The baby is going to be just fine. I promise."

His words lull me into a comfortable daze, and I feel myself relax against him. After a while, the voice cuts through the fog in my brain once again.

"You have to eat something."

I grimace, feeling too nauseous. There's a soft chuckle in response to my childish expression.

"Come on, little flower. You need to eat. What's your favorite food?"

I groan slightly, too tired and feverish to think straight.

"When I was little..." I mumble. "When I was little, my aunt would make grilled cheese sandwiches with homemade tomato soup."

I sigh at the memory. It had been years since she'd prepared for me. I stopped being worthy of my family's time and affection when they realized I didn't manifest a wolf. They realized I was defective, broken. But the memory of those sunny afternoons with my aunt still fills me with joy. She would let me help with the sandwiches while she made the soup from scratch. Once it was

all done, we'd dip the bread and cheese into the softly-spiced soup. Everything would be warm and cozy, and the house would smell like fresh herbs and toasted bread.

"It tasted like... It tasted like comfort," I whisper before dozing off.

I don't know for how long I'm asleep before the sound of clanging in the distance wakes me up. I stretch slightly, trying to focus. The bed is empty, but there's a variety of loud noises coming from the kitchen. There's metal clashing, sizzling, and the sound of Marco cursing under his breath. I frown slightly, but I'm too weak to get out of bed.

I'm not sure how much time passes while I lay there, drifting in and out of sleep. At some point, the sound of footsteps tugs me back into consciousness.

I blink a few times in an attempt to clear my vision at the sight of Marco entering the room with a wooden tray full of food. His blonde curls are a shaggy mess like he's been running his hands through his hair in frustration, and sweat coats his handsome brow.

He walks to the edge of the bed and sets the tray gently on my lap. I stare at the food in surprise. There's a cup of tea in the corner and a small plate with a burnt grilled cheese sandwich. Besides it, there's a bowl full of what appears to be homemade tomato soup. Under the bowl, itself is a crumpled and stained piece of paper, and it takes a few seconds for my mind to make sense of the scribbled words. The recipe is written in my aunt's handwriting.

"Go on. Eat," Marco commands, as if I were a child.

I silently obey. He watches me curiously as I dip the corner of the sandwich into the soup and take a bite. It tastes... not quite like my aunt's. The grilled cheese is slightly burnt, and the soup is somewhat over-seasoned, but it's still tasty.

I pick up the frayed piece of paper, holding back a smile when I see drops of food that were spilled onto the recipe.

"Where did you get this?" I ask.

Marco quickly snatches the sheet from me, and I frown at the little burn marks on his fingers as he quickly shoves the recipe into his back pocket.

"Your aunt is a very busy lady. She was rather stunned to see a Lycan prince show up at her home, but she insisted that she didn't have time to cook for you."

He must have shifted into his wolf form and run all the way to our village outside of the capital, where my old pack lives.

"So she gave you the recipe, and... you made it yourself?" I ask.

He nods somewhat dismissively, and I realize I don't have the words to thank him. The comfort food is not exactly the same as my aunt's. But the fact that Marco went through all that trouble to make it for me is quite possibly the sweetest thing anyone's done for me in my entire life.

I gratefully eat every last drop, and all in all, it's the best meal I've ever had.

Hours trickle by, and I fall into a somewhat uncomfortable and restless slumber as my body finishes fighting off the fever. In the middle of the night, I wake up feeling dry and aching, and I drink some water from the glass on my nightstand.

When I turn back, I realize Marco is sleeping beside me. I blush at the sight of him in my bed. He must have fallen asleep looking after me. I shuffle slightly to look at him, careful not to wake him. He looks different than he did when he fell asleep holding me during the full moon. He's lying on his side, facing me. His breathing is uneven, and his brow is furrowed tightly.

Outside, the waning moon casts a soft light through the window, illuminating his elegant features with a silvery glow. He told me that even on regular nights, the blood moon curse still hurts him, making it difficult to sleep. My soul aches at his suffering, and I hate the thought of him plagued by pain or nightmares.

Hesitantly, I reach out towards him, my hand hovering a few inches away from his face. I brush my fingertips gently across his forehead, smoothing out the pained frown. His expression changes under my soft touch. When I start to pull back, his hand moved towards my own, fingers wrapping around my wrist.

My eyes widen in surprise as he holds me in his sleep. His grip is not tight enough to hurt but firm enough that I can't pull away. His breathing has steadied somewhat, but when I try to squirm away, he just draws me closer.

I let out a small gasp as he tugs on my wrist, and I lose my balance slightly, collapsing against him. I stay completely still for a moment, worried that I've woken him by falling into his arms, but he remains unconscious. Instead of waking, he shifts slightly around me, accommodating me into his embrace. The way he wraps his arms around me is both possessive and soothing. He's so warm and solid against mine, his body sending sparks everywhere it touches my own.

I allow myself to stare at him for a minute, relieved to see the discomfort drained from his expression. The usual harshness of his features has melted away. He looks peaceful now, almost content in his slumber. He's sound asleep, completely unaware of the way he's pulled me close, his fingers lazily stroking in absent-minded little patterns and sending goosebumps along my skin.

"Marco?" I whisper, unsure of what to do.

He doesn't answer.

Instead, at the sound of my voice, he pulls me in even closer and tilts his chin down, so his lips graze my own. The kiss is tauntingly soft, his lips feather-light against my own, which part slightly in surprise. Shock and delight flow through me like a deep breath. I feel alive and awake but relaxed and comfortable at the same time. I lie still against him, letting my eyes fall shut of their own accord as I melt into his kiss.

Chapter 26 Marco's Birthday Is Coming

Chapter 25 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

Once I'm fully recovered, I visit Lady Vivian's home in the palace every few days to learn her craft. The days I get to work as her apprentice quickly become the highlight of my week.

Her wing of the palace is not as grand as the ballroom or the main hall, but I can tell from the moment I step through the doorway that Lady Vivian's home is filled with love. She has a delicate woman's touch and carries herself with admirable grace and dignity. She looks young for her age, but there are a few tiny wrinkles around her eyes when she smiles that make her look friendly and enchanting.

"Careful when diluting the oils, dear," she says, watching as I pour the contents of a dropper into a larger bottle. "Remember that the concentration of the extract will affect the intensity and duration of the fragrance."

I follow her advice, carefully mixing the solutions. There's something incredibly soothing about being around Vivian, and I can't help but feel the need to make her proud.

"Well done, my dear," she says brightly. She leans forward to smell the perfume I've just finished bottling with an approving glint in her eyes. "Absolutely perfect. Your talent does not cease to amaze me."

I beam at her praise before jumping slightly at the sound of footsteps approaching.

Two handsome young men enter the room, both of them sharing a resemblance with Lady Viviane.

"Your latest creation smells divine, mother," says one of them.

Viviane stands beside me, placing her hands on my shoulders as she greets the two men.

“Actually, what you’re currently smelling is a creation by my new apprentice. Isn’t she wonderful? Tanya, I’d like for you to meet my sons. This is Philip,” she says, nodding towards the elder of the two.

Philip steps forward with a pleasant smile and shakes my hand.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I can see why our mother speaks so highly of you.”

I thank him with a curtsy before Vivian motions for the younger fellow.

“And this is Thomas.”

Thomas skips the formalities and goes right in for a hug. His friendly enthusiasm takes me by surprise, but I can’t help the laughter that escapes my lips at his charismatic energy.

“Lovely to meet you,” he says, stepping back with a grin. “Please, call me Tommy.”

As he pulls away to look at me, a curious expression passes over his eyes. He glances at his mother and then back at me with amusement.

“It is said that my mother was the loveliest lady of the court back in her day. I think perhaps that title has now been passed to you, Tanya the apprentice.”

My eyes widen slightly at his flattery. Thomas, or rather, Tommy, pinches my cheek playfully.

“You even look kind of like her, you know,” he adds, and his mother laughs lightly at his lively sincerity.

They’re all so open and jovial, even Philip’s calm and grounding presence. They’re so welcoming to me, and they seem so at ease with each other. This... this is what a happy, loving family must be like.

Lily’s POV

I make a point of going on a promenade around the palace on one of the days that Tanya is working at my mother’s estate. I choose a route that allows me to walk right past her home and stop under the shadow of one of the trees near the window.

When I peer inside, I feel my blood boil at the sight of my mother’s hands on Tanya’s shoulders. They both smile and laugh, working together as if they’d known each other their entire lives. When my brothers arrive, my jealousy only doubles.

Philip, who’s always so stern and thoughtful, actually smiles at her! Thomas shamelessly hugs her with all the excitement of a puppy dog making a new friend, even pinching her cheek

affectionately. It bothers me to see them act so familiar and merry without me... to see them act that way with her.

With every passing second, my envy intensifies, and I can't help but get flustered. I'm caught up in the sight of them together, my hand unconsciously curling into a fist by my side until my nails dig into my palms.

Tanya's POV

By now, I should be used to Ayana's angry staring, but the glare she shoots at me the next day at work is so incredibly vicious it chills me to my bones. The ruthless resentment in her eyes startles me so much I lose my footing slightly and drop some of the paperwork I was carrying.

One of my co-workers, a red-haired girl with freckles and a friendly smile called Ella, snickers. She kneels beside me to help pick up the papers.

"Don't pay too much attention to Ayana," Ella says to me with a giggle. "She's just bitter because she got stuck doing community service for two months!"

I thank Ella for her help as we finish gathering the documents I dropped.

"Really? Why?"

"Prince Marco assigned it to her as punishment for nearly causing you to drown."

I blink at Ella in surprise before making the mistake of glancing back at Ayana.

"What are you staring at?" Ayana snaps at me.

"Nothing, I just-"

"Oh shut up," she cuts me off before I can even explain or apologize. "I wouldn't be so content if I were you. You think you can be all happy and comfortable because you're married to the second prince. But the truth is you barely know Marco. You don't know anything about him, so it's only a matter of time before the relationship falls apart."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Ayana," I say with a soft frown. "But I don't believe that."

"Oh yeah?" she asks mockingly. "Then tell me something about Marco. Do you even know when his birthday is?"

Her question shocks me silent, and I bite my lower lip with embarrassment as she laughs.

“How sad! The prince’s birthday is in five days, and his own wife doesn’t even know. That’s pathetic.”

Five days. Is his birthday really coming up so soon? I can’t believe I had no idea. But Ayana has lied to me in the past and set me up. Everything she’s said and done has been to hurt and humiliate me. What if this is just another cruel prank?

I wait until my shift is over and leave work to talk to Oliver on the way home. I must hurry so I can be back in the townhouse before the evening. I need enough time to prepare tonight’s dinner and light the doorway for Marco before he gets home, and if it really is his birthday in five days, there’s much to be done.

I wave at him from across a narrow street, and he smiles politely when he sees me.

“Hey, Tanya,” he calls out.

“Hi, Oliver! Sorry to bother you, but I’m in a bit of a rush, and I need to ask you something really quick. Is it true that Marco’s birthday is in five days?”

“Yeah. Marco’s birthday is coming up, but....”

A clock chimes from somewhere down the street, and between the ringing and my own excitement, I barely register his unfinished words. I wave at him again gratefully before continuing on my way, rushing home.

Two days later, Marco sits in the dining room while I finish clearing away the table. He’s told me that he has servants to clean, but I don’t mind it. I like feeling useful.

Marco clears his throat awkwardly.

“Tanya... is everything okay?” he asks, surprising me.

“What? Yes. Why?”

“You’ve just been acting kind of strange lately. You seem a bit stressed, and I wanted to make sure nothing was wrong.”

“Oh. Thank you for checking on me, but everything is fine. Really,” I answer, perhaps a bit too quickly.

Once I’ve finished cleaning up, an idea pops into the back of my mind.

“I’m going to head out for a bit,” I say, reaching for my coat.

“Where are you going?” Marco asks before taking a long sip of water from his glass.

“I’m going to the Moon Temple to speak with the Messenger Mage,” I answer, and he chokes, spitting out his drink in surprise before coughing quickly.

I hand him a napkin and a new glass of water, quickly explaining myself.

“When I lived in the small village outside of the capital with the Blackhide Pack, I always heard stories about the powerful wolf spirits of the Mages who served as messengers to the Goddess and how they would provide council to those in need. I visited the Temple a while ago, and it really helped me, so I’d like to go tonight.”

Marco only nods at me dismissively, although some color has drained from his handsome face.

When I arrive at the Moon Temple, I make my way to the small room off to the side. I climb into the cushioned seat of the little chamber, smiling slightly at the sight of the veiled silhouette on the other side of the sheer curtain.

“Hello,” I say softly, surprised by the sound of panting as if the Mage were breathing heavily after a run. “Are you okay?”

There’s some vague grumbling and then a bit of coughing before the Mage answers.

“Yes, all good. Proceed, my child. What can I help you with today?”

“Well, I was wondering... Could I ask you what kind of gift you like? Hypothetically, if your birthday was coming up, what would you like to receive?”

“Meat!” the voice answers excitedly, a bit gruffer than before.

I sit there in stunned silence, unsure of what to say to that. There’s a faint shuffling noise on the other side of the curtain and then a bit more coughing before the voice becomes gentle and feminine again.

“I’m afraid I’ve given you a strange answer to a strange question. Why are you asking me this?” the Mage asks.

“My husband’s birthday is coming up, and with all my heart, I want to give him the perfect gift. But what can I give to the man who already has everything? I’ve been wracking my mind and can’t figure out what to get him. I just want to make him happy, but I don’t know how.”

There’s a long silence as the Mage seems to consider my words. Finally, after what feels like forever, comes the reply:

“Have you asked your husband if he even wants to celebrate his birthday?”

Chapter 26 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

"I just don't know what to do," I mutter in defeat. "I don't know how he would want to celebrate exactly, but I want to make it perfect for him."

There's a hesitant silence on the other side of the sheer curtain, and I stare at my hands, fiddling anxiously with my wedding ring as I proceed. Perhaps I've missed something?

"My husband... He's very special, and everyone knows it. But I see more to him than high society and status. He's the child of a surrogate, and his biological mother died when he was very young, just like me. My relationship with my stepmother was always strained, and my father never allowed me to celebrate my birthday."

My father resented that I was born on a blessed harvest moon but didn't manifest a wolf, so he considered my birthday a waste. Unlike me, Marco is very strong and powerful. I don't think the king hurt Marco like my father hurt me. But there are many to damage a child.

"I believe my husband has a complicated relationship with his own stepmother as well, and I don't think his father cared enough about him," I explain. "They don't appreciate him enough. My husband deserves to be loved not just for what he is but for who he is. That's why this celebration is so important. I want to show my husband that I truly see him for who he really is, and I want to prove to him that he is cared for. After all, everyone deserves to feel loved. And everyone deserves to be celebrated on their birthday, right?"

A brief silence again as the Mage reflects on my words.

"You have very sweet intentions, young lady. Your gift should reflect such earnest affection, but I'm afraid I don't know what to suggest. It is not my place to know what men desire. The best advice I can give you is to think of your husband's needs. You probably know him better than most. What do you think is something missing in his life that you could give him?"

I pause for a moment, reflecting. What does the most powerful Lycan in the kingdom need?

A good night's rest.

“Oh, I know! My husband suffers from nightmares and discomfort during the night. Actually, he even kissed me a few nights ago in his sleep.”

“What?!” the Mage asks, the voice suddenly deeper than it was a second ago.

On the other side of the curtain, I hear the sound of shuffling and thumping, as if there were some kind of battle happening beneath the Mage’s dark veil.

“Is everything okay?” I ask with concern. “Is there someone else over there?”

“Sorry? No! I mean, everything is fine,” the voice replies, the figure straightening up. “It’s just that it takes complicated magic with our wolf spirits for a Messenger Mage to... um... commune with the Moon Goddess. Yes. That’s it. It can seem a bit odd when we’re, uh, giving council.”

“Oh,” I say softly, not sure of what else I should say.

“You were saying that your husband doesn’t sleep well?”

“Right, yes,” I say with a short sigh. “My husband has strange nightmares, and I think he’s not fully in control when he sleeps. He doesn’t even remember that he kissed me the other night. Of course, I didn’t mind it, but I don’t want to bring it up and make him feel uncomfortable. So, I think the best thing I could give him is a gift to help him sleep better.”

It was perfect. Marco did so much for so many people, so for his birthday, I would give him the gift of rest.

I stay up late that night, working into the early hours of the morning in my little laboratory in the attic of the townhouse. I work quickly and carefully, brewing up the little potion that would help my husband sleep.

My conversation with the Mage at the Temple of the Moon Goddess was a bit odd, but it left me feeling determined and uplifted. The concoction bubbles as I add the fresh chamomile and sandalwood extracts to the lavender mixture in the beaker.

Before transferring the concoction to the bottle, I cast my mind back to my last attempt at a healing potion. For some incomprehensible reason, the ingredient that managed to magically stabilize the mixture was my blood. I’m determined to ensure this extraordinary perfume helps Marco, so I take a long needle and prick my finger. As I let my finger hover over the solution, a few droplets of blood trickle down and fizz as they come in contact with the potion.

Just like the first time, the perfume stabilizes, becoming clear and silky. The bubbles sizzle, and the steam clears away, replaced by a warm and soothing fragrance that’s just what I was hoping for. The scent is light and calming, and I actually yawn after inhaling it.

I hurry up and transfer the liquid into the special bottle I've selected for Marco's gift. The vial is made of blown glass, and the color is a lovely, deep shade of midnight blue that reminds me of a peaceful night sky. I attach the silvery little stopper and tie a single, shimmery black ribbon around the neck of the bottle. It looks lovely, and my heart swells with hope at the thought of how it might help Marco.

On the day of Marco's birthday, I take extra time decorating the townhouse. I dim the lights on the overhead chandelier, opting for elegant candlelight around the main hall. The flames flicker and illuminate the golden balloons I've hung up everywhere. Gold like the crest of the royal family. Gold like the wedding ring on my finger. Gold like the sun that chases away the full moon that brings him so much trouble.

I've even managed to bake an elegant little cake with dark chocolate and orange zest. The rich, citrusy-sweet aroma of fresh baked goods fills the house, making it feel more like a home. The bottle of extraordinary perfume I made for him is in a little blue box decorated with black and gold ribbons. I smile as I imagine the look on his face when he arrives and sees it all, but I'm pulled away from my thoughts by a knock on the door.

I open it with curious cation. It's a bit early for Marco to be back from work already, and he wouldn't need to knock to enter his own home; he has the keys.

Lily and Eric stand on the doorstep, dressed in casual but elegant attire and holding a champagne bottle out to me as an offering.

"Tanya, hello. I hope we aren't too early. Is he home yet?" Lily says, handing me the champagne bottle before I even have the chance to ask her what it's for.

"Home yet? You mean Marco?" I ask, still shocked to see them.

"Yes, we received your invitation to his birthday party. The card you sent us said we'd be celebrating in his townhouse tonight."

What card?

I'd actually hoped to celebrate privately with Marco tonight, and I certainly hadn't sent out any invitations. Was I supposed to?

It's too late to figure that out now. Eric and Lily are already here, and I can hardly send them away, so I stand aside and let them come in. Lily dons her usual polite smile, but there's something else lurking in her eyes that I don't understand. Even Eric looks somewhat uncomfortable as I lead them into the dining hall and set the bottle down on the counter next to the cake and the gift box.

It's not too long before there's another knock at the door, and I blink in surprise as Oliver and Ayana arrive. Like Lily and Eric, they both insist that they received an invitation to tonight's birthday party addressed from me. Oliver hovers in the corridor, looking particularly strange and uncomfortable. I barely have enough time to figure out what any of this means before there's a third knock on the door.

Marco's sister arrives, and all I can do is usher her in with stunned silence. What is everyone doing here?

"Well, this is bloody awkward," Cathy says, and by the looks on everyone's faces, I can tell she's not the only one who feels that way. "Why the hell are we having a party?"

Frankly, I'm not sure what any of them are doing here, but I smile at her politely, trying to be a gracious host.

"It's Marco's birthday, right?"

"Yeah, it is. But my brother doesn't celebrate it. He never celebrates it. His birthday is on the anniversary of his mother's death. Who wants to have a party on the day their mom died?"

My heart drops at the same time as a satisfied smirk appears on Ayana's face.

No! She set me up. That's why she told me about Marco's birthday in the first place. She must have sent out all the invitations in my name!

I'm sick to my stomach at the thought of Ayana using the anniversary of someone's death as a twisted prank. How could she do this? Not only to me but to Marco?

At that precise moment, I hear my husband's voice outside, and the sound of a key jingling in the lock at the front door makes me panic.

"Hello? Tanya? I'm home."

Chapter 28 The Cake Is As Sweet As You

Chapter 27 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

He's here. Goddess saves me, Marco is here, and I don't know what I'm going to do. There's no way I have enough time to take down all the ribbons, balloons, and ornaments that I've used to decorate the interior of the townhouse.

There's no time. The best I can hope to do is hide the birthday cake, so I pick up the tray where I'd set the cake and gift down and whirl around to try and stash it away. But it's too late.

I turn around and freeze at the sight of Marco hovering in the doorway. He stands there staring at me, his face unreadable as his eyes scan the gathered crowd. Nobody dares cheer or yell 'surprise!' Everyone just stands there in deathly silence, and I wish I could disappear. I'm so ashamed I could crumple into the ground.

Marco takes a step towards me. Then another. Each step echoes in the quiet hall and feels like a blow to my heart until he's standing right in front of me. I stare at the floor, feeling like an utter fool. He doesn't say anything for a while, so I finally force myself to tear my eyes away from the ground and slowly lift my gaze to look at him. His face is cold and unfeeling, and I have no idea what he's thinking.

I flinch as he moves slowly, but he simply lowers his attention to the tray in my hands and blows out the little candle I'd lit on the center of the cake. I hold my breath in nervous anticipation as he raises a hand and slides a finger across the frosting before raising it to his lips.

His brows arch almost imperceptibly as he sucks the buttercream off his finger. "It's sweet." He's so calm- so unexpectedly calm.

"Marco," I say finally, unable to bear the silence any longer. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea. I didn't know your birthday fell on the same day as your mother's...."

Before I can finish the sentence, he nimbly dips his finger into the frosting again. Only this time, instead of licking it off, he taps his finger on my face, leaving a smudge of chocolate on the tip of my nose. It's the most child-like thing I've ever seen him do, and for a moment, I swear I see the corner of his lip curl ever so slightly in a hint of a smile.

I'm completely frozen and perplexed, blinking up at him. No one else says anything as he lowers his gaze once again to the tray in my hands and picks up the decorated little gift box.

He examines the packaging for a moment before looking back at me expectantly.

"Is this supposed to be for me?"

His words snap me out of my daze, and I hurriedly set the tray down before turning back to face him. I try to reach for the little box to take it back, intending to hide it or dispose of it, but he swiftly moves it away, raising it up to eye level as if examining the ribbons.

"It looks like a birthday gift. Were you planning on giving it to me?" he asks smoothly.

Is he... teasing me?

“Y-yes,” I stutter, still dazzled by the uncharacteristic trace of playfulness. “It’s a special potion like the extraordinary perfumes. I made it to help you sleep better at night.”

But I was set up. I didn’t know why no one celebrated his birthday. If I’d known, I would have never...

“What’s gotten into you, brother?” Cathy asks loudly. Marco looks over at his sister as if suddenly remembering we aren’t alone in the townhouse dining hall. “You’ve never celebrated your birthday before. Why does it this year? What changed? What’s different a-”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Marco cuts in, interrupting her. “But I’m afraid it’s time for everyone to leave. Tanya and I going to have a quiet dinner and celebrate privately.”

I genuinely don’t know who is more surprised, Cathy or me.

He really wants to celebrate alone with me? He’s not even mad at me?

As if to prove his point, he drapes his arm over my shoulders, pulling me in close. I feel like I’m in some kind of strange, wonderful dream. All I wanted was to make him happy. Is it possible that I succeeded in spite of Ayana’s manipulation? My heart races in my chest as he holds me tightly.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” he addresses our gathered guests. “I appreciate the gesture. But you should all go home now. I would like to spend my birthday alone with my wife.”

Lily’s POV

By the time Eric and I return to our chambers in the palace, I’m still fuming internally with jealousy. Ayana must have been really desperate to set up Tanya like that and pull off that kind of prank. But...

He’d protected her. Even on the anniversary of his mother’s death, he’d stood by Tanya’s side and protected her from all of our judgment and potential humiliation. Seeing him wrap his arm around her and stand alongside her like that had been a slap across the face.

I thought I knew exactly what I was giving up when I walked away from my relationship with Marco, but nothing prepared me for the way he’s moved on. I left him. I’m the one in control, the one with the power. He should be heartbroken and lovesick with longing for me.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming,” Eric says with a chuckle.

Eric sits on the living room couch with an amused smile on his face, and I make sure to maintain my composure.

“My brother and his new wife certainly seem to be getting along quite well, wouldn’t you say? They seem... happy.”

I don’t answer, schooling my expression in pleasant neutrality.

“A relationship like that looks quite good,” Eric goes on, seemingly oblivious to the raging storm brewing within me. “I wonder if you miss it. Tell me, Lily, do you regret walking away from a life of love with my brother for a life of power with me?”

His words take me by surprise, and I’m so unprepared for them that I almost gasp. Instead, I quick my head to the side slightly, looking at him with a perfectly innocent expression of hurt and confusion.

Perhaps he was not so oblivious after all.

Eric has always been the perfect gentleman. Respectable. Gullible. Predictable. The perfect mark.

But as I turn to face him now, I can’t decipher the look on his face. He looks so casual and disinterested, but his words suggest he’s anything but. For the first time, I can’t read him, and I can’t make sense of it.

“What are you talking about, my darling?” I say, keeping the usual pretense. “I didn’t choose to marry you for power. I love you.”

Eric chuckles at my lies as if he could see through them. He leans back in his seat, propping his feet up on the coffee counter. He seems somewhat amused by my statement.

“Come on, Lily. Why don’t you relax a bit?” he says with a laugh. “After all, we’re the same, you and I. We have more in common than you think.”

I maintain my look of confused neutrality, still trying to decipher this new version of Eric that I’m discovering.

“In fact, neither one of us saw this coming. I’m talking about Tanya, of course. No one expected my brother to marry so soon after you broke his heart. But that girl is amazing. Don’t you think Tanya is amazing?” he asks with a feline smile, folding his hands behind his head as he leans back comfortably. “I mean, no one in your family has been able to make the extraordinary perfumes with their unique effects and healing powers. None of the Montenero’s inherited that special skill, right? And yet— Tanya did it. Twice now. First, she made the elixir that cured Cathy’s allergies, and now she’s done it again with a new perfume to help my brother sleep. That can’t be an accident or a coincidence, right?”

I say nothing, biting my lower lip as he goes on.

“You know, now that I think about it, Tanya actually looks resembles Lady Vivian quite a bit. Are you sure you don’t have some long-lost sister, my darling?”

His question is posed as a joke, and when I step closer to him to examine his expression, he still looks like a gentleman. Charming. Casual. Classic.

I clasp my hands behind my back and lean against a nearby pillar, so he doesn’t see the way my fingers tremble.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” I reply, echoing his amused smile. “Unfortunately, my mother only gave birth to one daughter, and you’re looking at her.”

He hums softly to himself like the whole conversation is some kind of curious joke, but even as he looks away from me, I can’t shake off the feeling that he’s seeing right through me.

Chapter 29 The Blue Moon Tree

Chapter 28 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya’s POV

After an early dinner, Marco invites me to go on a drive with him. He takes me out of the capital, driving for miles until we reach a glen on the outskirts of the kingdom. He tells me that we’re in the Blue Moon Pack.

It’s impressive to see how expansive the Kingdom of Mador truly is, and I’m reminded of how much power his family holds to rule over all of this, even the territories inhabited by other packs.

“I want to show you something.”

Marco parks the car, and we walk for a short while, reaching a beautiful clearing in the glen. At the heart of the small valley is an enormous tree with hundreds of little beautiful flowers. I’d never seen it before, but I immediately recognize where we are. Even I’ve heard the wondrous stories of the Blue Moon Tree. Legend says the ancient tree was blessed by the Moon Goddess herself many centuries ago, and those beautiful flowers around the tree must be the Blue Moon Flowers.

People are gathered in the open space, some walking around peacefully while others sit or kneel by the tree in prayer or meditation. Many of them are couples.

“This is where my parents met many years ago. They crossed paths right under the tree, and it was love at first sight.”

I gasp softly at Marco’s words.

According to folklore, the tree is not only considered a sacred space but a holy relic for lovers. As we walk closer, I can see dozens and dozens of multicolored ribbons tied around the branches of the tree. It is said that if you visit the tree with your lover and tie a ribbon around one of its branches, the Blue Moon Tree will grant your wish and bless your love, so you can be together forever.

Marco says none of this, but there’s something new in his expression that makes my heart flutter.

“Did you ever come here with Lily? To make a wish together?” I ask, trying to keep my tone impartial. I barely manage to bite back the smile on my lips when he says:

“No.”

I know I shouldn’t get my hopes up. But maybe bringing me here is a sign that Marco has started to truly care for me, even if it’s just a little. My tentative speculation and blissful hopes are interrupted by the sound of a man yelling.

“How can they give such an order?!”

The screaming man is young and handsome, quite like a fox. He’s probably in his twenties or early thirties. He’s tall and lean, with an elegant and remarkably muscular build. He has an unshaven beard on his chin as well as kind eyes. He holds his head high while another flustered fellow trips over himself to hold him back.

“The Blue Moon Tree is sacred to our pack and -ow!” he cries out as the shorter, anxious man steps on him by accident, but the tall, handsome man ignores him. “No, no, no, my friend, I will NOT calm down! I want to go to the capital and fight this -get off me, good sir!” he bats away the flustered fellow.

The two men struggle somewhat comically and mutter intangibly before scurrying off, looking rather agitated. Once they’ve wandered off, Marco and I continue our stroll, walking up to the Blue Moon Tree.

The sun is beginning to set over the horizon, casting a gentle fading glow over the peaceful landscape.

Marco watches me with patient curiosity as I trail my fingers along the leaves of the drooping branches. The Blue Moon Flower petals give off a lovely floral scent, and I can suddenly

understand why this place is considered so special. On the branches, there's a whimsical assortment of bows, ribbons, string, and scraps of fabric, each colorful little knot representing a wish fluttering in the wind.

The Blue Moon Tree is beyond beautiful; it's magical.

I can feel Marco's eyes burning on my skin, watching my every move as I reach for the rosy pink ribbon I'd used earlier to tie up my hair in a half-up-do. Soft black waves fall over my shoulders as I untie the bow from my hair and extend the ribbon toward him.

"Will you make a wish with me? I'd like to pray for our unborn child's happiness," I ask him shyly.

Something glimmers in his eyes, and it makes my soul sing. After a long moment, he gives a small nod. Together, we reach for the nearest low-hanging branch, and he takes one end of the ribbon while I take the other. Our fingers brush against each other as soft as a breeze. We tie the ribbon around the drooping branch, making our holy wish, as pure as a promise.

I close my eyes, and we stay there for a while, our hands just barely touching. When I open my eyes again, the sun has finished setting, but I find that the world has not gone dark. Instead, the Blue Moon Flowers are glowing around me with a soft blue light that twinkles like starlight at my fingertips.

My lips part at the sheer beauty of it, but when I turn to face Marco, I find that he's only looking at me.

"How is this possible?"

He tears his eyes away from mine to take in the shining petals.

"Bioluminescent flowers. They only grow on the Blue Moon Tree. No other land in the world has them."

Extraordinary.

I stand there surrounded by the hopes and wishes made by generation after generation of lovers, fluttering in the breeze with flowers that twinkle like stars, and I know without a doubt that I will treasure this moment for the rest of my life.

The next day, Marco and I have returned to the capital and are back to everyday life.

I spend the morning working with Lady Vivian's home for my apprenticeship. As we wrap up the latest batch of fragrances we've been working on, Vivian pulls me aside and excitedly hands me a piece of paper.

“What’s this?” I ask, scanning the writing on the sheet.

“It’s an application for this year’s national perfume contest. It’s a very prestigious competition that’s well-known throughout the kingdom. This year is particularly special because they’ve changed the prize. In the past, winners simply got praise and acclaim for winning the contest, but starting this year, the best perfumer will be awarded the opportunity of a lifetime. The first-place winner gets their perfume advertised across the kingdom, as well as the offer to partner with several retailers that would allow you to sell your work at an unprecedented scale. It’s an amazing business opportunity.”

I take the application form gratefully.

“This competition would be perfect for you. It’s a wonderful chance for your work to get the exposure it deserves and build your brand. This kind of recognition could skyrocket your career.”

Anxious butterflies flutter in my stomach with equal measures of nerves and excitement.

“Do you really think I should enter? Would I even stand a chance at winning?”

Vivian offers me her signature warm and nurturing smile.

“Of course you do, young lady. I wouldn’t suggest it otherwise. You are my apprentice, after all, and there hasn’t been a gift like yours in a while. Not even my talented daughter possesses your natural skill.”

I survey the application, reading over some of the questionnaires.

“But it says I need a referral to apply for the competition,” I muse.

Vivian pinches my chin tenderly.

“And if you decide to enter, I would be more than happy to sponsor you. Just say the word, and I’ll write the referral letter myself. Promise me you’ll think about it?”

At the very least, it wouldn’t hurt to consider it.

“Okay. I promise.”

Chapter 30 Marco Kisses Lily

Chapter 29 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I am walking back home with excitement clearly written all over my face. I have a bright smile on my face while I cling the application form closely to my heart.

When I consider how my life has drastically changed, I am very surprised. My life has gotten much better, and I have a number of people to be grateful for. One of those people is Lady Viviane, Lily's mother.

We've only known each other for a couple of months, and it feels as though we've known each other since forever. She is slowly becoming the mother I never had.

I finished early with Lady Viviane, and I want to enjoy an evening stroll before I reach home.

My stroll takes me by the main gate of the palace. The main gate is truly a majestic work of art. It is adorned with gold and shines brightly under the evening sun. The gate was also peaceful. I expect to feel the same peace as I walk by but a loud noise startles me. I look towards the gate and am surprised to see the guards forcefully toss a man out of the palace.

He lands very rough and awkward on the floor and I am worried that they've hurt him. I am about to go check on him but he is already on his feet in a flash. He doesn't bother to dust the sand off his body before he starts yelling at the guards.

I am quite surprised that he hit the ground so hard and doesn't even have a bruise on his body. I think he might be a powerful werewolf, maybe even an alpha of a pack.

He is obviously angry but his exaggerated gesticulations almost make him look like a court jester. He is gesticulating so hard that it is hard not to laugh at him. I am amused by the way he gestures wildly with his hands, and I wait to watch the drama.

"How dare you?" he is yelling towards the palace. "How dare you give such orders? Even if you're the Lycans, you can't give such horrendous orders without consorting the concerned pack."

The guards just stare at him as though he is invisible. Their silence must have infuriated him further because he begins to yell louder and curse the Royal family. After a few minutes of causing a scene, he realizes that it is yielding no results.

"I am the alpha of my pack, and I will be back for you," he threatens and turns to walk away.

It is when he turns that I am able to see his face clearly. My amusement turns to surprise when I see his face clearly. He is the exact same man I saw arguing with another man under the Blue Moon Tree. I am surprised as to what he is doing in the palace. I hastily clear the thought off my mind. Marco will soon be back and I need to get his dinner ready.

The Next Day

Making breakfast for Marco always makes me happy, and today is no different. I carefully serve his toasted pancake on the table after giving him a generous amount of syrup by the side. The morning sun is already shining brightly and I wonder why Marco is not yet awake. He usually wakes up very early in the morning because of the nightmares he has in his sleep, but recently, he seems to be waking up late.

I walk to his door and knock gently. When I get no response, I knock slightly harder, still no response. I slowly push the door open and am relieved when I see him sleeping peacefully on his bed.

There is something peaceful and alluring about the way Marco sleeps. His usual cold, troubled expression has disappeared. He now has a soft, almost childish expression on his face as he sleeps. His face is filled with peace, innocence, and comfort. I smile softly as I gaze at his face. Marco is so handsome that I get butterflies in my stomach just by looking at him.

Marco turns on the bed and I see him clutching tightly the perfume I made for him. Joy fills me up when I realize that my perfume might be the reason he is sleeping peacefully. I am proud of myself because I can also help Marco with something he really needs. He has helped me a lot and I feel very happy that I can help him in return, no matter how small.

His lips slightly curl into a lazy, sleepy smile. They are so soft, pink...and kissable.

I am intrigued by his beautiful lips and I unconsciously stretch my hand to feel them. My finger is just a few inches from his lips when I feel his eyes on me. I look at his face and am startled to see that his blue eyes are wide open and staring at me.

Shocked, I hastily jump back away from him. He has an amused look on his sleepy face. He doesn't say anything but keeps staring at me. I am embarrassed and I hastily explain myself.

"I wanted to wake you for breakfast," I murmur. My heart is beating very fast and I am too shy to look at his face.

"I'll join you soon," Marco replies and I detect a small chuckle in his voice.

I am flustered while I hastily walk away from his room to the dining. I blush as I remember the awkward but sweet moment in his bedroom.

Marco joins me for breakfast a few minutes later and we eat in silence.

"I will come home late today," I tell Marco, breaking the silence.

"Why?" he raises an inquiring eyebrow.

“I want to visit the Messenger Mage this evening to thank her for giving me really good advice,” I smile shyly.

“It seems like I’ll change my schedule too,” a mysterious smile plays on the corner of Marco’s lips.

I cast a puzzled glance at him but he doesn’t give an explanation.

My day at work is smooth and filled with happiness. The Messenger Mage has helped me so much and I am excited to talk to her again. I glance at the wall clock and realize that it is closing hours. I quickly clear my table and prepare to close.

I am just stepping out of my office when Ella stops me.

“Tanya,” she smiles. “You’re just the person I’m looking for.”

“Me?” I ask, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Lily just sent me to find you,” she replies and walks away. “See you tomorrow.”

“Lily?” I mutter. “Me?”

I can’t help the bad feeling that slowly creeps up on me, but I can do nothing else than slowly pick my way to her office. I am just about to knock on her door when I hear Lily’s voice. It seems like she is talking to someone. I am about to leave and come back later when I hear her call a name that is dear to me.

“Marco,” Lily’s voice drifts from her office.

Although I know it’s wrong, I just can’t help it. I am too curious to leave so I eavesdrop at the door. I think I misheard but I hear it again, clearly this time.

“Marco, look at me,” she says.

My heart suddenly picks up pace as myriads of questions flitter through my mind.

What is Marco doing in Lily’s office?

Why didn’t he tell me?

Is that why he changed his schedule?

What is going on?

I can barely breathe as Lily continues to speak.

“I know you still love me, Marco,” Lily continues. “I know I’m still in your heart. That is why you married that omega. She’s supposed to replace me, right? Because she’s born on the same day as I am does not mean she can replace me. No one can replace me in your heart, Marco, no one.”

I wheeze when I hear her. I just can’t believe that Marco would stand there and let her say those words. It must be a prank. There is no other explanation. It has to be a set-up. I take the risk to look through the frosted window in Lily’s office. Frosted glasses are only clear from the inside-out. From the outside-in, I can only see silhouettes.

My heart plummets when I see Lily and Marco’s silhouette through the window.

This is not a prank.

This is real.

Marco is really in Lily’s office and he’s standing really close to her.

“I’m very sorry for breaking your heart and going after Eric,” Lily continues in a soft, apologetic tone. “I know you chose that girl to make me jealous and angry. I always recall our past memories and I want to be with you. I love you, Marco.”

I hold my breath as silence reigns in the office. My face is still glued to the window, looking at the silhouette of Marco and Lily. I feel a small flicker of hope that Marco would turn her down. That flicker of hope is like a lone candle saving me from drowning in darkness and misery.

“I love you, Lily.”

That is certainly Marco’s voice. I would recognize it anywhere, even when I’m asleep. I am certain I didn’t hear wrongly. Marco just declared his love for Lily.

That is not the worst part. The worst part is what comes next.

Lily’s silhouette leans forward to Marco’s silhouette.

They are kissing! I gasp, unable to believe my eyes.

At that moment, that flicker of hope inside me goes off, and I plummet into a despair, wallowing darkness.

Chapter 30 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I can't bring myself to watch anymore.

Each second I spend by the window feels like a shard of glass is constantly digging into my heart.

I can't bear it anymore.

The moment Lily's silhouette intersected with Marco's I turn my head away in pain. I don't have the courage to continue watching. How can I stand there watching my dearly beloved husband kiss another woman? I can't. I hastily turn away from Lily's office and run back the way I came. The pain in my heart is almost unbearable. I've never felt this much pain in my entire life, and it feels like I am breaking apart with each step I take.

The tears that pool in my face make my vision blurry as I run back to my office. I clasp my mouth tightly with my hands as I try to fight back the tears. Although I don't want to believe it, it doesn't change what happened.

Lily and Marco kissed.

I am struggling not to cry but it is becoming increasingly difficult. I quickly scoop my bag from the table and dash out of the office. I do not want to draw attention to myself on the road so I try to compose myself as I walk on the streets.

The only question on my mind is WHY?

Why will Marco do this?

Has he not been very nice to me lately?

Why did he hug me by the pond if has no iota of affection for me?

Why did he celebrate his birthday with me when he never celebrated it before?

I am just beginning to think that Marco is developing feelings for me, but that turns out to be just my imagination.

Maybe I am too eager to believe that he loves me and misjudge his actions. Maybe he only wants to use me to make Lily angry and jealous. Or maybe he only cares about the baby growing inside of me and that is why he's being nice to me.

Whatever the reason is, thinking about it only makes me feel sadder. I can no longer hold back the feeling of sadness that swirls in my raging heart and I just want to let it out.

Sadness overwhelms me and I collapse to the sign on the road. I shrink to a ball and begin to cry my out.

A few minutes later of crying my heart out, I suddenly feel someone pointing a clean, new handkerchief with a beautiful embroidery towards me. I look up and I'm absolutely surprised that Prince Eric is the one offering me a handkerchief.

I wonder what Prince Eric is doing in this area. Did he come to visit Lily? Or he is just taking a walk in the neighborhood?

"Take this," he says in a gentle tone, completely different from his brother.

My heart sinks deeper when the thought of Marco crosses my mind and more tears spill from my eyes. I collect the handkerchief from Prince Eric, bowing my head slightly to say thank you. The handkerchief is soft, clean, and clearly expensive.

Prince Eric just stands there, looking princely and charming in his dark suit and dark sunglasses. He looks every bit like a gentleman and patiently waits for me to finish cleaning my face with his handkerchief before he asks for it back.

"Why are you crying?" Prince Eric asks.

"I...I..." I stutter.

I don't know what to say. Although I am hurt and sad, I don't want to say anything that might hurt Marco's image.

"I...this..." I keep stuttering.

"Just a bit of mild unpleasantness with Lily," I reply and force a smile. "It's not a big deal."

"It's not a big deal, yet you are crying your heart out over here?" Prince Eric asks, chuckling in a cynical manner as though he sees right through my lies.

"It's Lily and Marco, isn't it?" he smiles softly. His knowing expression dares me to deny the truth.

How did he know that? I think to myself. His guess is so accurate that I can't hide the shock from my face.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Prince Eric says.

“It’s not difficult to guess what’s making you cry,” he continues.

“I also faced the same thing when I started dating Lily. She has such a deep connection with Marco that I could never understand. Lily and I are never able to form that kind of connection.” Prince Eric explains.

I am surprised by his words, but shocked with the way he says it. He tells me that his fiancée is deeply in love with his brother, and he has an amusing smile on his face. He isn’t sad or worried or scared. It’s as though he doesn’t love Lily or he doesn’t care about her at all.

I wonder why he’s dating her in the first place if he doesn’t love her. Just like his father, Eric does not seem to care about love, only power.

“You don’t seem sad that Lily and Marco are still seeing each other?” I ask, surprised that he doesn’t seem to care.

“Not really,” he chuckles. “I engaged Lily because I thought she is special, but recently, I realized I might have made a mistake.

He takes off his sunglasses and gazes at me intently with his brown eyes. He steps closer to me and whispers, “I think maybe you’re the special one.”

He then moves his face closer to mine and I subconsciously jerk back.

“See you later, Tanya,” Prince Eric grins and walks away.

I do not understand what he means by his words, but what I do understand is that I cannot come in the way of Lily and Marco’s fated love. Even Prince Eric seems to have given up. It’s time for me to face the truth. There’s no way Marco can love me, since he’s already in love with Lily. The sooner I realize that, the better.

“You inspired me to pick out the perfect gift for my husband,” I say to the Moon Mage behind the veil. “He really loved it. Thank you very much.”

“I could only inspire you because you’re very smart and thoughtful.”

I smile at the compliment. After such a sad day, that I’ve had, I can really use a compliment or two.

“Thank you for always listening to me,” I continue. “No matter how heavy my heart is or trivial my words are, you always listen. Thank you very much.”

“Really, dear. I should be the one saying thank you for allowing me to peek into that beautiful mind of yours. It is always rare to see such kind-hearted and innocent persons like you. I wish to talk to you more and more,” the Moon Mage replies, making me smile shyly.

Talking to the Moon Goddess Mage always makes me feel better. I’ve had a pretty sad day, but, after a few minutes of talking to her, I feel happy already. She always seems to understand me, and she always seems to know what to say.

“Sometimes I even think if you were a boy, I would definitely fall in love with you,” I chuckle and joke with her. “You always know how to make me feel better.”

“You really wish that?” the Moon Mage asks and I can clearly detect excitement in her voice, which only makes me laugh harder.

“Yes.”

“If I were a boy, would you rather choose me or your husband?” the Moon Mage asks.

My first instinct is to say Marco. But the image of what happened earlier in Lily’s office flash through my mind.

“You,” I reply to the Moon Mage, and she seems to go into another one of her trances.

I hear a thump and laughter behind the veil. I am used to it by now that it no longer bothers me. The Moon Mage, still in a trance, is mumbling under her breath. I do not hear her very clearly but I think she is saying something along the line of, “You’re jealous! But it’s useless for you to be angry. You are so cold and I am so cheerful, I am just more popular and likable than you, hahahaha!”

I no longer pay attention to her but mumble under my breath, “I don’t deserve Marco’s love. I should not be loved by him.”

“I have to go now,” I speak aloud for the Moon Mage to hear. “It’s night already.”

“Okay, my daughter. Be safe,” the Moon Mage replies and I walk out of the temple to go home.

Werewolves have excellent night vision, so I’m not surprised when most of the street lights are not working and nobody is saying anything about it. If I had my Wolf, I probably will not notice that the street lights are faulty.

I try to navigate my way in the darkness but I hit my leg on a large stone and lose my balance. I stagger and try to regain my balance, but it’s too late. I know I am going to fall and I cannot do anything about it.

Just as I’m about to hit the ground, I feel a pair of strong hands catch me. I hastily look at who it is and find that it is no other person than...

“...Marco?” I whisper.