

Chapter 11 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I glance at the contract in my shaky hands unable to believe my eyes. Ever since I was a little girl, I've always dreamed of the day I'm going to get married. Unlike other girls who dream of the beautiful gown and beautiful necklace they will wear, I dream of the handsome man I will marry. I often daydream about how handsome my husband will be and how much I will love him; most importantly, he is going to love me back, just as fiercely as I love him.

The paper in my hand has invalidated those dreams. This is no marriage based on love, it is based on interest. I cannot deny that Marco is royalty and is very handsome, but the fact that he doesn't love me dampens my spirit. I remember my mom and how she died before I got a chance to know her. I remember Brandon and how he betrayed me. I remember how Marco saved me only to marry me out of a sense of responsibility. I love these people, but never get loved back in return. It is as though I am not destined for love.

The door swings open again and Marco walks back inside.

"It's a three-year marriage contract," seeing me hold the file, Marco explains. "That means we'll be married for three years and live together within this period. During this marriage, we'd have to be seen together in public and act like a real couple in order to make people believe, but when we're alone..."

"...we're just two normal persons with no attachments sharing a roof," I force a smile, pretending to accept the contract well.

"...there would be no attraction," he pauses at my words, but then continues. "I'll pay you three million dollars when we finish this contract."

I know I should be happy with such a huge amount of money, but I'm not. I want to marry for love and not for money. It is weird though. Many girls would kill for this opportunity, especially girls like me who come from poverty, yet I'm not keen on it. I just stare at the paper, sad and struggling to hold back my tears. Marco must sense my discomfort, because he says in a comforting voice.

"If you want to think about it, I can give you a few days to..."

“It’s fine,” I hastily say and sign on it before pushing the paper back into his hands.

“I should appreciate you,” I say, gulping furiously as I try to hold back my tears. “For saving me from Rick and protecting me. I cannot thank you enough for all you’ve done for and all you’re doing for me.”

Though I am forcing a smile, I can feel the tears simmering beneath my eyes. I am a few seconds away from bursting into tears and it will be really embarrassing to cry in front of a man who has done so much for me.

“I would like to walk around the capital,” I hastily say and wobble out of the room, just in time for the tears to fall off my face.

Manuel’s POV

“Do you really have to be so cold to her, bro?” I complain as soon as the poor girl leaves the room. “I can literally feel the room drop a couple of degrees because of the coldness in your heart,” I continue scoffing at Manuel. “In fact, I think your heart’s made of ice.”

“Are you done with the cold reference?” Marco rolls his eyes.

“Not yet, I’ve got one more,” I tease. “Who left you too long in the freezer and frosted your heart?”

“Really funny,” Marco sneers.

“But really bro,” I continue, desperate to press my point. “The girl seemed as though she was about to cry.”

“I don’t love her,” Marco replies. “It’s better I tell her upfront than cheat her on.”

“But you could have done it in a smarter way,” I taunt. “Besides why can’t you love that beauty? You see how that dress hugs her curves, god! If I were a man, I’d be worshiping her perfect body.”

“Good thing you’re a wolf then,” Marco replies with the same coldness with which he’s talked to the girl.

“I think she was about to cry,” I press on. “Why not go after her and check up on her?”

Marco merely grunts without saying anything, seemingly not agreeing with my proposal. Yet, he actually steps toward the door.

I can’t help but snort with laughter.

Tanya's POV

I hastily clean my tears as I step out of the empty wall and into the streets. My excuse of seeing the capital is not completely an excuse, I actually do want to see the capital as well. Even though I've been in the capital for a couple of days, I've been indoors all through. The capital is really busy and is sprawling with so many activities that it is impossible to focus on one. Despite the numerous activities around me and desire to see them, I can't focus my attention on them.

I am sad about my predicament, worse still, I am upset that I am sad. Marco has saved me from Rick, protected me from my family and made sure I am comfortable. It will be perfect if he loves me, but I don't think I have any right to demand love from him. I feel really sad that I am beginning to like him while he shows no affection for me.

I am walking unconsciously through the city, and nothing catches my fancy, until I come upon a big building. It looks ancient, yet, it looks very new. It is built with white bricks and has two tall towers flanking it. Instead of normal windows, it has stained glasses of different colors.

On each window is a different painting of the Moon Goddess, the most powerful deity in Wolf history. I used to hear stories about the beautiful ambience of the Temple of the Moon Goodness, and I am not disappointed.

I clear my mind of my troubles and walk into the temple. The sun reflects into the building through the colored stained glasses and lights up the temple. It is just like I've been told. A huge, beautiful statue of the Moon Goddess stands at the altar and overlooks the neatly arranged temple. The temple is almost empty save from some acolytes taking care of the altar.

I sit for a few minutes pondering my situation while praying to the Moon Goddess for strength and clarity. I am just about to leave the temple when I catch sight of a very small structure at the far end corner of the temple and I instantly recognize what it is. I used to hear stories of how the Moon Goddess gives advice to confused Wolves through the Priestess, who are the Messengers of the Moon Goddess.

Grateful for the opportunity, I walk towards the structure, lean on the cushioned railing and turn towards a small veiled window. I can slightly make out a figure beneath the dark veil and it is impossible to tell who or what it is.

"Hello," I say, unsure of what to do as it is my first time.

"Greetings," a thick gruff voice replies.

Almost immediately, the voice coughs and morphs into the voice of a young boy, "sorry," the smooth voice wheezes and coughs again before turning into the voice of an old woman. "That's not right," the voice rasps and coughs once again, morphing into a young woman's voice. "That would do."

“Are...you alright?” I ask, uncertain of what just happened.

“I’m fine,” the flowery, soft voice of a young woman replies behind the veil. “Now tell the Moon Goddess what’s wrong.”

“I met a man...” I start.

I tell her about my desire to marry someone I love and the person who loves me back too. I tell her how Marco and I have unintentionally had sex. How he has saved me from my cruel family and their wicked plan to sell me to Rick, a sexual pervert. How it is a marriage of contract and not a real one.

“...I wish I haven’t stumbled in the wrong room,” I murmur as sadness overwhelms me.

“If you haven’t stumbled in the wrong room,” the voice says. “You would never have met. The Moon Goddess does what’s best for us and she has led you in the hands of Marco. You will be a happier woman if you accept it as the work of the goddess.”

“But he doesn’t love me.”

“Because he said so?” the voice chuckles. “I know Marco very well. On the outside, he’s as cold as a fish, but on the inside, he’s like a warm, fuzzy embodiment of light and love. All you need to do is just break through his cold exterior and reach into his warm heart. I believe you will be a good fit for him.”

“You seem to know a lot about him,” I observe. “Are you related?”

“Me? I...um...I...ouch.”

I hear a soft thump against the window and a male voice grunting. I am tempted to pull the veil apart and see what is going on but I don’t.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Your voice...”

“Of course, I’m okay. I... I just have a cold,” the voice says. “So my voice is a bit hoarse.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about me. We’re here to talk about you. Tell me something about yourself, apart from your marriage to Marco. Something personal, something you wish to happen.”

I think long and hard and only one thing comes to mind.

“I create perfumes in my home pack,” I say. “And I would really want to learn from the various famous perfume designers that are in the capital. I usually make perfumes based on how I feel,

but I do hope that I can work in a perfume shop where I can learn more about perfumes. Hope I can also find a similar job here.”

“Go, my child, may the Moon Goddess bless you and grant your wish.”

Lily’s POV

The stupid smile I’ve planted on my face all day is beginning to wear me out.

Seeing Tanya in the capital really unsettles me because I’ve already devised a plan to make sure that it never happens. I am worried about how my plan has failed and I need to get answers.

“Thank you for the tea, Lily,” the last of the guests hugs me. “It is wonderful.”

“Thank you noble man,” I smile. “I’m honored by your presence.”

As the last guest in the hall leaves, I walk through the hallway to the second lounge and pull it open.

Immediately I get into the lounge and step inside, I drop my smile, and then I see him. He is sitting there, smiling as though he’s won the lottery, but I’m not in the mood.

“Tell me,” I snap at him. “What is Tanya doing in the capital, huh, Brandon?”

Chapter 13 He Picks Me Up From Work

Chapter 12 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Lily’s POV

“Well, that was an unexpected twist,” Brandon says, sitting back into the leather armchair.

I walk around the lounge room at the back of the auction house like a lion pacing in a cage.

“I’m sorry, is this supposed to be amusing? We had a deal!” I hiss at him. The whole point of paying Brandon was for him to get close to Tanya. How did that scrawny little nobody end up arm in arm with Marco?

Brandon examines his hands, absently picking at the dirt under his fingernails.

“The situation changed,” he mumbles. “It’s not personal, Lily; it’s just business. You know how auctions work, right? The prize goes to the highest bidder. You paid me well, but Alina paid me better.”

“If you betray me-” I start, but he cuts me off and moves swiftly towards me before I can muster a threat.

“Careful, little lady. I wouldn’t want you to break a nail. Nobility is such a delicate thing,” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear and making angry heat rise to my cheeks. “If I betray you, there’s nothing you can do about it. Or have you forgotten, Lily? I know your dirty little secret.”

He gives me a lazy smirk and turns away. As Brandon leaves, I reach for a teacup on the counter. I fling it in his direction, and it smashes against the door seconds after he closes it behind him. Porcelain shards litter the floor as I take a few steadying breaths. I straighten my back and brush off my gown, plastering a polite smile on my lips.

I walk out of the lounge, looking elegant and unbothered. There’s work to be done, and I still have a part to play.

Tanya’s POV

For as long as I can remember, my life has been dull, dreary, and difficult. But ever since I met Marco, my world turned upside down. In all my life, I’ve never had someone waiting for me to come home.

But when I step inside the townhouse, my husband stands in a doorway observing me. He’s casually leaning against the frame, those blue eyes scanning me with an unreadable expression.

“It’s getting late,” he says plainly. “Go to your room and try to get some rest. There’s somewhere I want to take you tomorrow.”

“Where are we going?” I ask timidly.

“Eau de Lune Perfume Company. Lily’s family owns it, so I was able to pull some strings and get you a job there.”

My heart skips a beat. Eau de Lune Parfumerie is the most reputable perfume company in the kingdom. It’s been a dream of mine to go, but I’ve always been an omega, the weak and unworthy surrogate daughter of a minor Alpha. I’ve never been important or wealthy enough to go near that place.

“Really? They would be willing to let me work there?”

“They wouldn’t be willing to refuse me. You start tomorrow.”

The next day, I arrive at the parfumerie wearing a black, satin blouse and caramel-colored trousers that accentuate my slender figure and make me look long and graceful. The maid who works at the townhouse laid out the professional-looking outfit for me the night before. Somehow, I actually look like I belong in this elegant, extraordinary place.

Well, almost.

It’s hard to feel like I fit in when I can’t escape the whispers about the second prince and his new wife. All the employees are buzzing with the gossip of Marco’s scandalous marriage with a strange she-wolf so shortly after breaking up with Lily.

Luckily for me, no one seems to know what the mysterious new wife looks like or even what her name is. It’s an effort not to blush while some of my co-workers swoon over the prince and mourn his lack of availability. I can’t imagine what they would say if they knew I’m the reason he’s off the marriage market.

The tall, brown-haired girl showing me around the building leads me through a set of glass double doors. She seems outrageously offended that she’s been degraded as my tour guide.

“Miss Lily will see you now,” she snaps at me, not hiding her resentment at having to babysit the new girl.

Marco warned me that I’d be reporting to Lily. Her family owns the company, so she basically runs the parfumerie. It’s a little unnerving to know I’ll work for my new husband’s ex-girlfriend and future sister-in-law. But this is an amazing opportunity, and I’m determined to make the best of it.

Lily surveys me from behind her enormous desk, and my skin prickles uncomfortably under her scrutiny. Behind her, Lily’s friend, Ayana, makes no effort to conceal her contempt towards me. Finally, Lily crosses her arms over her chest and offers me a sweet smile.

“Well? How is your first day going so far? Is everything to your liking? You’re very lucky, you know. Pauline is one of our low-level managers,” Lilly says, nodding towards a snobbish, brown-haired girl. “She has to take time out of her extremely busy day to show you around.”

Pauline nods and bares her teeth at me in a smile that’s more feline than friendly. I muster a polite nod.

“In fact, now that you two know each other, why don’t you spend the rest of the day training her? We wouldn’t want Tanya getting lost or confused on her first day on the job, right Pauline?”

Lily, Pauline, and Ayana exchange an amused smirk between the three of them, and I struggle to ignore the feeling of foreboding that fills me.

As Pauline leads me to a warehouse, she prattles on about the company's success and status, boasting that all employees graduated from prestigious universities.

"Of course," she says. "As our newest employee, I'm sure you know all about our rigorous and selective hiring process. Tell me, where did you study? Ivy league? International?"

I bite my lip and lower my gaze slightly. The truth is, I'd gotten a scholarship to a local college. It was nothing fancy, but it was the best I could do with the resources available.

"Not exactly," I mumble. "I was in a small pack outside the capital, so I went to school there."

The disdain is so plain on her face that it makes me want to turn away and hide.

"Well then, you must be very special if they hired you, right?" Pauline says sarcastically.

She takes a vial off the shelf with a smug little pout.

"Here. We're developing a new scent using raw materials. This is a sample of the distillate we're using, and we need more. There's another bottle of it here, but it's an old formula, and there was some confusion with the labels, so it's not clearly marked. You'll have to look for it very carefully and bring it to my office once you're done."

Pauline drops the vial into my hands and turns on her heel, walking away swiftly before I can protest.

The warehouse is massive. There are rows and rows of shelves full of flasks and droppers, wooden crates, copper pots, and glass canisters. My heartbeat quickens as panic starts to rise. It would take me over three days working without sleep or rest to go through all the boxes and find the right bottle.

Focus. I can do this.

I open the little vial and take a deep, slow breath. The scent is light and floral, with accords of hibiscus and honeysuckle.

If I try to read through every mismatched label and faded formula to find the right sample, I'll never find it. The sight of the cluttered warehouse is too overwhelming; I need to focus my senses. I close my eyes and run my hands along the nearest shelf, letting instinct take over. I'm hit with over a dozen different smells, an array of citrus, herbs, spices, resins, woods, and sweets.

Every scent tells a story. This is what I do. Working here is my dream. Marco got me through the door, and now it's up to me to prove I belong here. I won't let him down.

I make my way through the different containers, inhaling deeply until I'm lightheaded and dizzy. The raw sample in my hand has hints of apple blossom and wild berries mixed with something warm and earthy. Sandalwood and amber are hidden beneath the more pungent floral notes.

There.

The black bottle in my hands matches the scent perfectly. This is the one. I'm sure of it.

I know that it shouldn't, but a small part of me enjoys the look of disbelief on Pauline's face when I appear in her office with the distillate.

Maybe I do belong here, after all.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. I work at the parfumerie for several hours, sniffing, boiling, and bottling until my head hurts slightly. But I'm proud of what I accomplished today, and I actually enjoyed every exhausting minute of it.

The sound of a woman screaming wipes the content smile off my lips.

Several female employees gather at one of the large windows. Many are gasping and whispering among themselves.

"What's going on?" I mumble, approaching them with uncertainty.

"It's the second prince! Prince Marco is here!"

My breath catches in my throat as I manage to peek out the window at what everyone is staring at.

Marco is parked outside the main entrance, standing with his hands in his pockets, leaning lazily against the car door. He looks unimpressed, but even with his sunglasses on, I can feel his gaze scanning the crowd gawking at him through the window.

His eyes land on me.

Chapter 15 He Doesn't Come To The Restaurant

Chapter 14 Valentine's Day

Chapter 13 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

“Do you think he's here to see Lily?” one of the workers asks.

“There's no way. Prince Marco and Lily are a thing of the past. She's engaged to Prince Eric.”

Outside, Marco walks away towards the entrance of the building. He's coming this way, my heart pounding harder and harder with every footstep.

“Even if Marco married some she-wolf, Lily was supposed to be his fated mate. Why else would he be here?”

The sound of heels clicking against the marble floor makes me want to disappear as the crowd moves away from the window and shifts towards the main entrance. Lily appears with Ayana close behind her.

“Do you think Marco's new wife is here? I haven't seen her,” another employee says.

They've seen me, they just haven't realized who I am, but they will soon. There are too many people around, but the focus is evenly divided between Lily and Marco. The last thing I want is to draw attention to myself, and I dig my nails into my palm to stop my hands from shaking.

Maybe I can slip away unnoticed while everyone is distracted. I lower my head, letting my sleek black hair form a curtain over my face. Everyone is watching Marco as he makes his way toward Lily, gasping at the scene about to unfold, but Lily only smiles presumptuously. Even she expects that he's here for her. I take a few unsteady steps backward, hoping to sneak off without causing a fuss.

But then Marco walks right past Lily without so much as a glance in her direction, as if he hardly noticed her standing there. Lily barely flinches, but her lips press together tightly as her former lover ignores her existence. She is unaccustomed to being ignored, just as I am unaccustomed to being noticed.

Before I can register what's going on, Marco appears in front of me, blocking off my quiet escape route.

“Where are you running off to?” he asks, his low voice making the question sound more like a demand.

“Nowhere, I... I was just...” I stammer as everyone’s eyes turn to me.

Marco slides his hands out of his pockets, taking off his sunglasses in a swift motion. Those messy blond locks and electric blue eyes make him look like a roguish prince charming, and he crosses his arms over his broad chest, surveying me expectantly.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble sheepishly. “I was just leaving. Why are you here?”

“What do you think? I’m here to pick up my wife from work.”

My wife. I’m still not used to those words and hearing him call me that makes rosy heat rise in my cheeks. The corner of his lip curls slightly at the sight of my blushing as if he finds my modesty amusing.

But around us, whispers and shock ripple across the gathered crowd. My co-workers, who’ve barely noticed the arrival of the new employee, seem to see me for the first time. Their eyes feel like dozens of little needles, prickling my skin with jealousy and judgment. But Marco is watching me, too; his gaze seems to shield me from the rest.

“Thank you,” I whisper to him, wishing no one else could see or hear us.

He simply nods in response, and we walk out of the building together, the crowd parting around us. I tell myself that this is just protocol. Marco is the second prince, and it’s his responsibility to play the part of the dutiful husband. It’s an act, a role he has to play to maintain appearances.

I know that, but I still can’t push the butterflies in my stomach down completely. I’m so caught up with the feeling of him beside me, head held high and proud as he walks arm in arm with me, that I don’t even notice the glaring look of resentment that crept onto Lily’s and Ayana’s faces.

Since Marco showed up at work that day, everyone at the Eau de Lune Parfumerie treats me differently. Some approach me with curiosity and forced politeness, while others glare with unabashed envy and spite.

Today, however, the atmosphere in the perfumery is decidedly different. Many employees are eating chocolates and boasting roses or heart-shaped cards. Even Pauline seems to be in a good mood. It takes me a few minutes to understand the cause of such celebratory commotion.

It’s Valentine’s Day.

I’ve never really celebrated it before, even when I was with Brandon. The whole holiday seems luxurious and foreign to me, so I stay out of everyone’s way and try to go about my work unnoticed. As the hours pass, couriers keep stopping by the building, delivering flowers and other gifts to the girls in the shop. Each new arrival is accompanied by excited gasps and

cheerful giggles. Their unabashed girly joy is contagious, and I can't help but smile at how happy everyone seems.

Until the questions start.

As the day's novelty starts to wear off, many girls start to remember that I exist, and it doesn't take long for them to notice my auspicious lack of gifts. Their attention turns on me gradually, and I feel myself shrink further into myself with every inquisitive glance.

To make matters worse, several girls come up and show off their flowers or jewelry to me, wondering at the sort of gift Prince Marco got for his new wife.

I haven't even thought of that. I've never received a gift on Valentine's day. Honestly, I'm lucky to have a husband, and Marco has already done so much for me. How could I possibly ask for anything more? I don't need a fancy gift to show off.

But I can only imagine the judgment I would face if I voiced those sentiments, so I do my best to change the subject. Whenever someone approaches me to inquire about our plans for Valentine's Day, I stumble and mutter whatever I can think of, avoiding any clear answers.

It looks like I might just get away without any drama, but then Pauline walks over to the counter where I've been working, and she looms over me with a malicious grin.

"Aw, don't tell me Marco forgot about his wife on Valentine's Day. He didn't even get you anything, did he?" she taunts.

The look on my face is the only answer she needs. Everyone stares at me, their expressions a mix of disdainful pity and haughty triumph.

"How sad," says one of the clerks with an exaggerated pout. "It's such a pity that married couples get bored of each other. When the relationship is new, everything is exciting and great, but men lose interest the moment they put a ring on a woman's finger. Don't feel bad, Tanya. Guys forget about Valentine's Day after they get what they want from a girl."

That's the kindest thing anyone says to me. Everyone else just muses over the doomed state of my relationship and whines about what a shame it is that Marco is stuck with a wife he doesn't care about. Their words claw at my mind like nails on a chalkboard, and just when I think things can't get any worse...

"Well, it's hardly a surprise."

Everyone whirls to face whoever just spoke, and I flinch at the sight of Marco's sister walking into the shop.

“My brother has better things to do than throw gifts at a gold digger,” Cathy says, her eyes bearing into me disapprovingly. She strolls to one of the workers and hands them a piece of paper.

“There’s a banquet coming up soon at the palace. I’m here to pick up the requested fragrances.”

Two clerks hurry to the back, rushing to get the perfumes ready. Cathy returns her attention to me, glaring down at me over her nose even though I’m taller than her. A frightened, childish part of me wants to hide behind the counter to escape her mocking, but I force myself to hold my ground.

“It’s amazing my brother manages to remember he has a wife at all, considering she’s so unworthy of him. The Ironclaw Pack is the greatest pack in the kingdom, and Marco is the most powerful shifter among us. He’s the second prince of Mador, and his wolf is skilled and strong, even capable of manifesting through Marco and changing his voice. Yet you expect him to get a Valentine’s Day gift for his little whore?”

Cathy’s words are a slap across my face. I should be used to being tormented, but it hurts to be reminded of what I am to them. Only Marco sees me as more than a despicable she-wolf whore.

Just when I think I’m going to combust from shame, Lily walks in. Ayana trails behind her like a faithful dog. I brace myself for Cathy to embrace her, for the two of them to team up and tear me apart. But Cathy merely glares at Lily with unrelenting disapproval.

“Oh, look. If it isn’t Marco’s former tramp. I told you I would get the perfumes, Lily. You can go back to playing with my brothers’ feelings or whatever it is you do for fun,” she growls.

To her credit, Lily maintains her composure, smiling politely. It never occurred to me that Cathy would also be unfriendly to Lily, but I suppose it makes sense. Lily was Marco’s fated mate, and now she’s engaged to his brother.

They’re each dignified and elegant, but from the look in their eyes, I suspect they’d both be happy to rip each other’s throats out. Nervous sweat trickles down my pale skin. I’m a mouse caught between two lionesses.

“Cathy, darling,” Lily purrs. “I’m glad to see you have everything under control. Please let me know if there’s anything I can assist you with. And if you see Eric today, please thank him for me. Even though he’s busy with royal matters, he sent me a dozen white roses for Valentine’s Day. I’m so lucky to be engaged with such a thoughtful prince.”

She doesn’t say it to me, but I know what everyone is thinking. I can see it in their eyes as they glance from Lily to me. Even Cathy shoots me a smug little scoff.

I may be married to the second prince, but I’m not important. I’m not deserving. I’m not even worth a single flower...

Then there's a knock at the entrance.

Silence falls over the perfumery shop as a currier enters, carrying the largest bouquet I've ever seen. The roses are not white or pink like the others, but rather a rich and sensual shade of scarlet.

"Tanya?" the currier asks.

All eyes fall on me as I take a hesitant step forward.

"Yes?"

He hands me the bouquet, and my fingers find a small, folded note between the flowers. I open it, my heart skipping as I read over the printed message.

HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY

I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU AT THE RESTAURANT DUMONET TONIGHT

-MARCO

Cathy gasps in horror at this note, "Tonight is the full moon, how can my brother..."

Perhaps if I wasn't so consumed with excitement, I would have noticed the strange smirk creeping onto Ayana's lips.

Chapter 14 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

I can't move fast enough as I race to get ready after work. Excitement courses through me, and I can't wait to see Marco. The note said to meet him at the Dumonet, which is one of the fanciest restaurants in the capital. I stop by Marco's townhouse and rummage through the new wardrobe. I'm still not used to having so many expensive clothes to choose from, and it takes me a few minutes to pick out an outfit I think my husband will like.

I chose a red a-line gown, the same shade as the bouquet he sent for me. It has drooping sleeves of scarlet chiffon, a delicately fitted waistline that swoops into flowing ruffles, and pleats that resemble petals. The red fabric contrasts my snow-white skin, and I tie my sleek black hair into a graceful half-updo, pinning one of the roses from the bouquet into my hair. I try not to think of

Marco's lips as I quickly apply a soft, rosy shade tint over my nervous smile. I can only hope to look as lovely as a flower for him.

When I arrive at the beautiful restaurant, the waiter leads me to a candlelight table.

"Would you like to order, miss?" he asks.

I'm hit by the smell of sweet spices and freshly cooked delights, but I shake my head gently.

"Not yet, thank you. I'm waiting for someone."

The waiter walks away, attending to the various guests in the restaurant. Most of them are couples, and I try not to stare at how they swoon and celebrate together. Soft music is playing in the background as lovers drink and dine all around me.

After an hour goes by, the waiter returns for the fourth time.

"Miss... can I at least get you a drink while you wait? Or maybe an appetizer?"

I turn him down politely. Marco didn't specify what time he would be arriving tonight, but I'll wait for him as long as it takes. A few of the other patrons notice that I'm still sitting alone. I lower my gaze to avoid their curious glances, ignoring their whispers. I fiddle with the napkin on my lap, running my fingers through the fabric in an attempt to distract myself.

Another hour goes by, and my eyes keep staring at the front door whenever someone walks through it, but there's still no sign of Marco. I tell myself he's a royal, so it's only natural that he's busy. After all, I wasn't even expecting to celebrate Valentine's Day with him, so I shouldn't mind waiting.

So I wait some more.

My back goes stiff from sitting in the same position for so long, and my thoughts start to wander to the dark and lonely corners of my mind. After yet another hour passes, I begin to doubt myself. Maybe I'm at the wrong restaurant. Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe Marco got held up somehow.

Or maybe I'm just not worth it.

I wrap my arms around myself as if I could shield myself from the thought. My gaze subconsciously falls onto the elegant golden ring on my finger. The round diamond sparkles in the candlelight, making me think of the glint in Marco's eyes. I never would have dreamt of marrying a prince, never expected to be so lucky. But here I am.

When Marco came into my life, he changed everything. He gave me hope, and now I can't seem to stifle it. I hope to make him happy, even if it's just for a while. I hope to make him proud and

ease his troubles, even if it's just an arrangement. I hope for him to walk through that door, even if it takes all night.

Hours keep trickling by, and one by one, the guests begin to leave. Waiters start clearing the tables as they wrap up for the night. I don't even know what time it is. I can feel the people in the restaurant staring at me with pity and embarrassment. With every passing minute, I feel another crack in my heart, but I stay firmly planted in my seat.

He could walk in any minute.

"We're closing soon, miss," the waiter says, his patience having run out a long time ago.

"I'll just wait a little longer if that's okay."

Clouds are gathering outside the Dumonet by the time the restaurant manager comes by to tell me they're done operating for the day, and I need to get out so they can close up. Rain starts to pour as I'm forced to leave the restaurant. Anyone left on the streets either pulls out an umbrella and hurries away or shifts into a wolf to run off and avoid the downpour.

But I have neither umbrella nor wolf, so all I can do is curl up on the sidewalk as the rain drenches me. I sit in the rain, waiting and hoping.

Marco's POV

I don't know at what point I got used to having Tanya around. She's such a quiet and constant presence that in a short period of time, I became accustomed to having her in my life, as if she'd always been there.

I'm used to taking care of myself, never relying on others. I don't need a wife to wait for me every night with a warm meal and a soft light. But somehow, the fact that she does it because she wants to, not because she has to, makes it that more special. Ever since she became a part of my household, Tanya has left a single light on by the entrance of the townhouse. Every evening, she prepares dinner and waits for me, leaving that light on like a beacon in a lighthouse to guide and welcome me home.

Home.

I can't remember the last time I felt that way. No one told Tanya to do it; I certainly didn't ask for it, but she does it anyway. When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed, but Tanya does things simply because she wants to help. She cares, and she makes a house feel like a home.

But tonight, there is no light.

It's pretty late for her to be out, but maybe she needed to buy some last-minute ingredients for dinner, or perhaps she stayed working late. Either way, I try not to let the darkness of the townhouse bother me as I make my way home.

"Marco!"

Cathy's voice pulls me out of my thoughts as my sister runs into me.

"Thank the Goddess, I'm glad you're home. I knew you wouldn't be foolish enough to take that little tramp out for dinner tonight."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, frowning at her words.

"I think someone is playing a prank on your new wife, brother," she says with a chuckle, but I don't share her amusement. I clench my hands into fists at the way she says the word 'wife' like it's an insult. "Someone sent roses to Tanya at work today with a note to meet her for Valentine's Day dinner at the Dumonet. I figured someone else must have sent them since you'd never go for a romantic dinner on a full moon, but I just wanted to make sure."

Rain continues to fall around us, soaking through the night. The image of Tanya waiting at home with a light on and a homecooked meal is replaced with the idea of her sitting in a restaurant, cold and alone, waiting for me. Concern stirs within my wolf. It takes me less than a heartbeat to decide what to do, and I let out a frustrated growl as I push past my sister and start rushing toward the restaurant.

"Marco, what are you doing?!" Cathy calls after me, but I ignore her. "Brother, tonight is a full moon! Have you lost your mind? If you go find her..."

The sound of the rain drowns out her words, and I don't slow down. Fear is not in my nature, not even tonight. I have a responsibility to my wife, and I won't abandon her, even as the magic of my wolf ripples through me. Every step is faster than the last, sending water splashing across the pavement. How long has Tanya been waiting for me? What must she think?

I grit my teeth, trying to suppress my rage as claws appear on my fingertips. I feel the lycan transformation threatening to take over, making me faster and swifter as I run through the street. When I reach the Dumonet, the restaurant is closed, and there is no sight of Tanya. I curse under my breath, scanning my surroundings. Where is she? Where could she have gone? Rage and worry brew within me. What if something happened to her? It's pouring rain, and Tanya is pregnant. There's a hollowness in my chest that I don't recognize at the thought of Tanya, all alone in the cold and damp darkness. I need to make sure she's safe. Not just because I have a responsibility to protect her as a husband, but because of... something else I don't quite understand. All I know is that I need to find her.

I turn on my heel, ready to head back down the street, and continue searching for her, but then I catch a glimpse of red over by the sidewalk. Tanya doesn't run from the rain or seek shelter

herself from the cold. She just sits there, crouched on the curb outside the restaurant, soaking and shivering.

My wife is waiting for me.

Chapter 16 He Finally Comes

Chapter 15 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Marco's POV

She looks so small sitting on the sidewalk. At first, all I can feel is relief that she's safe, and the wolf within me calms at the sight of her. Her black hair, which she's pinned into an ornate style, drips onto her glistening pale skin. The red dress is slick and clings to her figure, accentuating every soft curve. She shivers against the cold where she's huddled under a tree, and I can't help but wonder if she would have stayed there all night, waiting for me.

I can't help the curiosity that fills me when I think of her. We came into each other's life by pure accident, but I've never quite met anyone like her. No one has ever waited for me like that, with such loyalty and patience. It's foolish and reckless but... sweet, and I'm annoyed by the odd sense of affection that fills me as I walk toward her.

Tanya's POV

I brace myself from the cold to be best of my ability, but water trickles between the leaves of the tree I'm crouched under, soaking my gown in spite of my best efforts. But suddenly, the water stops, and I look up in surprise to see Marco holding a black umbrella over my head.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of him, and he wordlessly takes off his jacket, draping it over my shoulders and shielding me from the rain. He examines my shivering form with displeasure before speaking.

"You shouldn't be out in this weather. How long have you been out here, foolishly waiting for me? You look like a sad little wet flower."

Honestly? I'm not sure how long it's been. I lost track of time a while ago, and right now, all I can think about is the fact that he's actually here.

“I don’t know... but I couldn’t leave. I was afraid you’d show up, and I’d be gone. I couldn’t do that to you.”

He shakes his head with disapproval, and perhaps I have behaved like a petulant child. But he came, and he found me.

“And look,” I say softly. “Here you are now.”

He’s silent for a moment, considering my words as I look up at him, little droplets clinging to my lashes. Finally, he sighs, running a hand through his soaking hair.

“Tanya, I didn’t invite you to this restaurant tonight. Someone else sent the flowers. I don’t really celebrate Valentine’s Day.”

My shoulders sag slightly in defeat as his words sink in. The roses, the restaurant... he really didn’t want to celebrate with me.

“Oh... that’s okay.”

Marco sighs, unconvinced. He kneels in front of me so he can look into my eyes.

“I had no idea it was so important to you. I’ve just never cared about the holiday that much, but if I’d known that you did, I would have spent it with you.”

Despite the cold, warmth starts to spread within me as he reaches for something, and my eyes go wide as he pulls out a small bouquet of wildflowers. The stems are slightly crushed, but the dainty petals are intact, and the droplets on them look like little diamonds, glittering in the night.

“It’s late, so all the shops are closed now, but I came across these a short while ago,” he says, his voice softening. “They made me think of you, little flower. I’ll get you a formal Valentine’s Day gift later, but for now, this will have to do.”

Little flower. I blush at the pet name. When I first came here, I wanted to look like an elegant rose for him, but these wild, colorful delicate flowers are so much more beautiful. I would much rather be Marco’s little flower than a luxurious rose. I take the small bouquet from his hands, touched by the gesture.

“They’re perfect,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

Something makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and the strange sensation of being watched makes me tear my gaze away from Marco. Between the rain and the shadows, I swear I saw Ayana’s eyes watching us from across the street, full of contempt and indignation. But when I blink and look again, there’s nothing there. Maybe I imagined it.

“Come on, let’s get you home,” Marco says, standing up.

I turn my attention back to him, happy to obey, but when I try to get up, my legs are shaky. I've been curled up and trembling in the cold for so long that my feet have gone completely numb, and I get dizzy when I try to move. I stumble into Marco's arms, his large hands catching me before I stagger to the ground.

For a moment, I'm frozen in his arms, my heart racing in my chest as my head spins. Marco's arms are strong around me, but I quickly struggle to regain my footing. Whether he calls me a little flower or not, I know he doesn't love me. Our marriage is an arrangement, and he probably doesn't want this kind of closeness between us.

Marco frowns after I pull away, appraising my movements. To my surprise, he kneels in front of me, gesturing for me to climb onto his back.

"I'll carry you," he says, his tone commanding.

I almost protest, saying that I don't want to inconvenience him, but I can barely stand, let alone walk home through the rain.

Hesitantly, I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders. His muscles are hard and taugth against my skin, and I pray he can't feel my racing heart as I gently take the umbrella from him, holding it to free his hands.

He stands up, his hands grasping my thighs. His touch is hot and firm, even through the damp fabric of my dress. Even though we're both drenched, I hold the umbrella to shield our heads as he starts walking back toward the townhouse. The street lamps are reflected on the rain-covered pavement. Against the glittering lights of the night, I can make out our silhouette between the shadows. I smile at the image.

There, reflected in the rain, we look almost like a painting or a postcard. We look like a real couple. If anyone looked, they'd see a husband and wife sharing an intimate moment in the rain. It's so sweet and simple that it fills me with a cozy sort of courage. I hesitate for a while, but then slowly, I gently rest my head on his shoulder, soaking in the comfort of our proximity.

Marco notices my gesture, and he tugs slightly over his shoulder, pulling the coat that's draped around me tightly. I bite my lower lip softly, failing to hold back a little smile. He must think I'm only leaning against him because of the cold, but that's okay. He doesn't mind; he doesn't push me away. I know he's not in love with me, and we're not a real couple, but for now, he holds me closely, making me feel safe and warm. I know I will treasure the memory of tonight long after it ends, and in this moment where it's just the two of us and the rain, that is enough.

When we get to the townhouse, Marco sets me down gently. Arriving here with him really makes it feel like coming home. Once I've found my footing, Marco steps back to examine me, ensuring that I'm okay and I can stand on my own. However, it's not my own well-being that worries me but his.

There's a strange expression on his face, and he's gritting his teeth together as if trying to suppress it. But it's not just the look on his face; there's something else I can't really describe that makes me shiver anxiously. There's a sort of feral aura around him like some otherworldly beast is taking hold of him, and Marco is struggling to hold it back.

"Marco... are you okay?"

"I'm fine!" he growls.

He takes a few shaky breaths, fighting to calm himself as fear courses through my veins. What's happening to him?

"Go to your room, Tanya."

I can tell it's an order, not a request, but I'm hesitant to leave his side when he's in such a state. Concern urges me towards him, and I take a small step towards him in hopes of comforting him, but he pulls away sharply as if trying to maintain a safe distance between the two of us.

"I don't want to leave you like this. What's wrong?"

"I said I'm fine!" he barks at me, his tone fierce and commanding.

I shrink back slightly, startled by the aggression. I can see him fighting to remain calm.

"Just go to your room," he grunts as if it's difficult to get the words out. "I won't ask again. Lock the door, and don't come out until the sun rises, no matter what."

I don't dare refuse him, so I quickly rush to my room and do as he says. I try to get ready for bed, but I can't stop worrying about Marco. I pat my hair dry with a towel and slip onto a nightgown, leaving on my wedding ring and ruby necklace like I always do.

I'm starting to wonder how I will be able to sleep when I'm so concerned about Marco when a horrible howl tears through the night. I whirl around in a panic at the sound, my gaze landing on the bedroom window as the roar echoes around me. Outside amidst the blackness, the full moon shines in the sky.

Chapter 17 Full Moon – The Curse

Chapter 16 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

The howling continues, each guttural roar more pained than the last. I know Marco told me to stay in my room no matter what, but his tortured cries pierce my soul and reverberate deep within me until I can't take it anymore.

I open the door of my room, hesitating in the hallway for a moment as my concern for Marco wars against fear and uncertainty. Finally, I reach his room, but when I knock on the door, there's no answer. Every few minutes, there's another pained howl, and the silence in between is just as alarming.

His room is locked from the inside, and the door won't budge when I struggle with the knob. Desperation intensifies my need to reach him, to help him. I look around until my eyes land on a decorative candelabra on the hallway counter. Another anguished howl snaps me into action, and I instinctively grab the candlestick and slam it onto the doorknob. It takes me a few tries until I manage to knock the metal hard enough that the lock gives in, and I'm able to swing the door open.

Inside, the room is dark, but I can make out Marco's silhouette a few feet away from me. Only it's not Marco, at least not the Marco I know. He's shifted into his Lycan form, his usually broad shoulders and defined muscles becoming even larger and sharper. His fur is black as night, and the moonlight glints on the curved claws. In this form, he's as terrifying as he is beautiful. But what shocks me isn't the fangs or fierce aura around him, but rather his eyes. His beautiful blue eyes have turned a shade of red, like a crimson fire burning beneath the surface of cyan ice.

"Marco?" I ask softly.

His wolveren ears twitch at the sound of my voice, and his gaze dives into me. My heart pounds in my chest, my breathing ragged as I take in the sight of him.

His clothes have been reduced to torn rags, his shirt is utterly destroyed, and his pants are shredded. But the strangest thing is the silver line across the base of his palm. I've never seen anything like it before. The silver vein glows as if moonlight and steel flowed through it instead of blood, flickering and pulsing softly like a heartbeat. I watch in horror as the silver begins to spread slowly, rising past his wrist and slithering up to his forearm.

I barely have time to worry about it because Marco starts moving toward me. I take a few shaky steps across his room as he circles me with a wild, menacing gaze. He stalks me with the skill and elegance of a predator, herding me deeper into his room until I'm cornered against the back. He comes closer, pinning me against the wall. His arms are on either side of me, and my breathing turns ragged with fear.

All I can do is close my eyes as tears stream down my cheeks. He's not in control, I tell myself. A chill runs down my spine as I feel something cold and sharp trailing softly along my collarbone. I brace myself for the pain of his imminent strike, but it never comes. Instead, I open my eyes in time to see Marco tear my mother's ruby necklace off my neck.

I wince as the necklace clatters on the ground, and the moment it leaves my skin, I feel something indescribable burst within me. An unspeakable force ripples through my body as I feel myself caught in a vortex of energy I can neither see nor understand. Something changes deep within me, like some kind of chain around my soul has been snapped beyond repair. I gasp in a trance-like state as I even feel the sound of a wolf's howl echoes in my mind.

But then, just as quickly as it appeared, the energy around me dissipates, and the haunting howl also goes quiet. Everything in the room is exactly as it was only a moment ago, and I start to wonder if I imagined all of it.

Before I can think about it further, Marco roars again, and his pained howl is so overwhelming that I quickly forget about the wolf's howl I heard in my mind.

“What... what's happening to you?” I whisper.

Marco breathes heavily, and something flickers in his eyes like there's still a part of him fighting against the force taking hold of his body. Slowly, I raise my hand and press my palm against his heaving chest, trying to soothe him in any way I can. Something softens about him, seemingly calmed by my touch, and I watch in awe as he shifts back into human form.

But those red embers of maddens still glow in his eyes. The bloodlust of his Lycan form has faded, but whatever dark and feral power courses through him is still affecting him.

Suddenly, he wraps his arms around me and picks me up in one swift motion, and I can't help the small cry that escapes me. He carries me to the windowsill until I'm sitting on the edge.

“Marco...” I mumble in surprise. The sound of his name on my lips makes him growl softly, but not with anger. Desire radiates off him like an aura, primitive and raw. He trails one hand over the back of my palm, drawing little patterns up my forearm and dragging over my shoulder. Then his hand is around the back of my neck, his fingers tangled in my hair as he pulls me closer, resting his forehead against mine. My lips part involuntarily at the warmth of his breath against my skin.

“My mate,” he says, and before I can process the words, his lips are on mine.

He kisses me hungrily, and I forget about everything for a moment. All I can think about is the sensation of his lips against me, dangerous and demanding. His other hand slides down the curve of my lower back and along my hip. I gasp slightly as he pushes insistently on my thigh, spreading my legs so he can stand between them, closer to me. His teeth graze my lower lip playfully, and I feel heat coursing building inside me.

He must be confused, the madness clouding his senses. He probably thinks I'm Lily again. The realization makes my heart shrink with sadness, but then he's kissing my neck, and I let my head tilt to the side, exposing myself to him.

“Wait,” I tell him, pressing my hand against his chest to push him back. He stops kissing me but stays close, his muscles taut under my palm. “Marco, do you... do you recognize me? Do you even know who you’re with right now?”

His hands are still on my body, making it hard to focus, but he holds my gaze and his words are unmistakable when he replies.

“You’re Tanya... my mate,” he says, and then he kisses me again.

I don’t understand what he means. Does he actually know he’s with me? He said my name, but does he think he’s with Lily somehow? I know I should probably stop him, but the feeling of his skin against mine is intoxicating. Marco kisses me deeply and passionately. I finally give in, wrapping my legs around him, and he presses himself closer to me. He wraps his arms around me and carries me to the bed.

Marco looms over me, his breath ragged with desire, his lips come crashing down against mine again. His calloused hands roam over me, exploring my curves and sending goosebumps along my skin. He smells like the earth after it rains, mixed with cinnamon and smoke, and everywhere our bodies touch sends sparks flying with me. He looks like he wants to rip the nightgown right off my body.

That silver vein continues to pulse on his arm, and every now and then, I see his muscles tense, like the curse is still sending shocks of dark power through him. But I silence his pained growls with a kiss, and the beastly aura recedes slightly. I caress and comfort him, and the roaring becomes less frequent as if my presence soothed him. Eventually, he stops convulsing entirely as he gives himself over to the pleasure of our embrace.

The desperation in his kisses becomes tender and soft, and he rolls onto his side, resting his head on my chest. I run my fingers through his golden brown curls, letting him find peace and calm. His breathing slows, and my own racing heart steadies as he drifts off. Once I’m certain he’s sleeping soundly, I try to slip out of his arms to go back to my room, but he’s so large and heavy against me. When I move, he wraps his arms tighter around me, holding me against him.

He keeps his head on my chest as if my heartbeat was the lullaby that carried him peacefully into sleep. I’m so relieved to see him resting that I don’t have the heart to wake him, so I let myself relax under his weight and warmth. Before I can make sense of anything that happened tonight, my eyelids grow heavy, and my thoughts are drowsy.

I fall asleep wrapped up in him.

Chapter 18 Special Perfume

Chapter 17 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

Sunlight pours into the room, bathing me in a warm light. I blink a few times to shake away the drowsiness that clings to me as I look around. I need to sneak back to my room, but when I move, Marco's eyes meet mine. They're a bit groggy with sleep, but they've returned to their usual shade of blue, with no trace of the crimson that burned in them during the night. I take in a sharp breath, startled by the intensity of his gorgeous gaze. Then, he takes in the sight of our entwined bodies, his brow furrowing.

"What happened last night?" he asks defensively, pulling away slightly to survey our surroundings.

Something tightens in my chest as I realize he doesn't remember anything that happened. My mind races to explain.

"You were howling in pain. I know you told me to stay in my room, but I was worried. I came to check on you... but nothing happened. I mean, you kissed me, and we ended up sleeping in the same bed, but you didn't... we didn't have sex. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude, but when I tried to leave, you held me so tight."

I know I disobeyed his orders last night by coming into his room, but before I can apologize further, Marco pulls away from me completely, sitting up on the edge of the bed. I try not to let my eyes wander over his exposed torso as he rubs the back of his neck, coughing a few times awkwardly. His golden curls are tussled, and his skin almost seems to glisten in the morning sunlight.

"You probably heard the rumors about the second prince having a curse..." he says, seeming more embarrassed than I've ever seen him. "I call it the curse of the blood moon because I'm trapped in my lycan form on every full moon and fall into a frenzy of bloodlust. I lose control completely, reduced to a primal state of madness. Even on nights when the moon isn't full, I'm plagued by pain and nightmares. We got lucky last night. It's dangerous to be around me during a full moon since I can't hold back under the effects of the curse."

He sounds almost apologetic as he explains, and my heart aches for him. Something he says catches my attention, and I sit up slightly as well.

"You said you're trapped as a lycan, but last night you were able to gradually shift back into your human form."

His eyes widen slightly with disbelief at my words.

“That... that’s impossible. Nothing can alleviate the symptoms of the curse while the full moon is out.”

And yet something did. All I can do is shrug in reply. I have no explanation for what I saw last night. Honestly, I’m just grateful. I was able to help in any way.

Marco turns away from me, his gaze becoming distant as he’s lost in contemplation. I take the opportunity to slip quietly off the bed, and the floor is cold against my bare feet. Marco is lost in thought, barely registering my movement. I should go and let him rest. We both had an intense night.

Before exiting the room, I stop to pick up my ruby necklace from the floor.

A part of me expects to feel something as I clasp my mother’s necklace around my neck, but nothing happens. I’m filled with strange suspicion that whatever changed last night when I took the ruby off isn’t going to revert back even if it’s back on.

The ruby necklace... Marco’s curse... The howling... The way he called me ‘mate’...

I don’t understand what happened last night, but I can’t shake the feeling that somehow, we crossed some kind of line. Maybe it’s all in my head, or perhaps something changed deep within me.

And now, things will never be the same.

The next day at work, my mind is clouded by the memories of everything that happened last night. In spite of this, I do everything I can to stay focused since today is an important day at the Eau de Lune Parfumerie. I can’t afford to be distracted.

One of the perfumery’s senior managers is hosting a tour for the newer employees. Oscar, the guide for the day, will be showing us some of the company’s most famous fragrances. He leads us through the winding halls of the perfume factory to a showroom at the back. I’ve never seen this part of the company before.

My colleagues and I explore the display as Oscar explains that these perfumes here are the pride and joy of the perfumery, custom created by Lily’s family; the Monteneros. The Montenero family owns the Eau de Lune Parfumerie. Their unique fragrances and formulas date back generations of apothecaries, chemists, and perfumers.

“The Montenero’s custom line of perfumes is unique for several reasons. They were created by Ms. Lily Montenero’s ancestors; their craftsmanship and skill with scents are still unrivaled. Besides, many of them also have special functions. The substances in this room are also

medicinal. These perfumes go above and beyond the practice of aromatherapy and have been used to treat various ailments. Some are potent enough to be used as sedatives and anesthesia, while others have powerful effects similar to opiates that can induce hypnotic or even hallucinogenic states,” he says before pointing to one vial on the display. “This solution has been used to relieve symptoms of respiratory diseases, and this other one can effectively treat insomnia and improve sleep disorders.”

Some of these seem more like magic potions than simple perfumes! I look through the various flacons and bottles. The labels indicate that many of the extracts and solutions were created by one of Lily’s ancestors, a woman called Margaret Montenero.

The other co-workers gawk and gasp in amazement as Oscar shows us some of the books left by Lily’s forefathers, which include various studies and formulas for the extraordinary perfumes. But the scents are so vivid and alluring that I struggle to focus on Oscar’s words. Somehow, I feel like my senses have sharpened, and I’m surprised by the intensity of the smells and the ease with which I recognize them.

“We still have documents on the Montenero’s process for creating fragrances, but only the Montenero family possessed the ability to create the extraordinary effects of their perfumes. Unfortunately, the skill required to craft them has been lost by this generation.”

But even as Oscar speaks, I close my eyes and imagine how the different aromas come together in each vial. I frown, filled with an uneasy sense of shock. If the Montenero’s unique skill has been lost, how can I instinctively distinguish the ingredients that fill the air?

My attention glides across the display, caught by a particular scent. I let my intuition guide me, following the strangely familiar fragrance across the room. I recognize those floral notes and earthy accords, and I find myself drawn to them.

“Tanya,” Oscar says suddenly, appearing in front of me. The manager cuts me off, blocking a path I was subconsciously following. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I snap out of my daze and stare at the ground self-consciously.

“I’m sorry, I thought I smelled something....”

“That area of the display is not open to the public. We keep Ms. Lily’s custom creations there. Her perfumes have won contents and are a testament to her unique craftsmanship. But those are not for sale, and they are not part of today’s tour, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. My apologies,” I mumble sheepishly before rejoining the group.

I stay with the other employees for the rest of the tour, haunted by the familiarity of Lily’s collection and the intuitive sense of Margaret Montenero’s extraordinary creations.

When I arrive home, I'm surprised to find Marco waiting for me in the townhouse. He leans against a nearby window with his arms crossed in that commanding, unbothered posture of his. When he sees me, he nods towards an iron key resting on the nearby glass counter. An elegant black ribbon is tied around the ornate key's handle.

"What's this?" I ask, picking it up gently.

"A belated Valentine's Day gift. I said I would get you, something official. This is it."

I examine the key in my hands, filled with curious excitement.

"Marco, thank you. You didn't have to...."

"You don't even know what it is yet," he interjects, the corner of his lip curling almost imperceptibly in an amused smirk. "The key opens a small attic on the top floor of the townhouse. Your gift is there."

I glance down the corridor, wondering what it could be.

"But before you go look, I need to tell you something," Marco says, "The autumn equinox is coming, and the royal family will be holding a celebratory banquet at the palace. You'll be expected to attend with me."

It's not exactly a casual invitation, and I can't help the anxious butterflies in my stomach at the thought of going to the palace with him. I remember Cathy stopped with a list of perfumes for an upcoming banquet the other day. She must have been referring to the celebration of the autumn equinox.

"Well? Don't just stand there," he says, and I can't figure out if his tone is impatient or playful. "I told you what I needed to say. Go enjoy your Valentine's Day gift, little flower."

I blush at the nickname before nodding and heading towards the attic. I hesitate in the doorway, looking at the beautiful little key before sliding it into the lock. The door swings open with a soft 'click.'

Chapter 19 Making Perfume

Chapter 18 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya's POV

The moment the door swings open, I'm struck by a variety of delectable scents. My eyes widen as I step inside and take in the sight of the quaint space in the attic. The room has been refurbished with a large desk and several shelves full of equipment and ingredients.

There are several copper and glass distillation stills, as well as various tubes, beakers, and droppers. The shelves are lined with jars of dried herbs, barks, and resins. There are also vials with a variety of solvents and oils.

The equipment and materials here are brand new and sophisticated, only of the highest quality. The smells that fill the air are so delectable that my heart skips a beat. Marco has even provided a few blank journals for me to record different formulas and take notes.

It's not just a hobby room; this is a fully stocked laboratory for me to create perfumes and potions. The little apothecary shop he's made for me right in his townhouse is a dream come true. This space is perfect for me, cozy and well equipped, so I can comfortably spend hours in here doing what I love. The thoughtfulness behind Marco's gift fills me with warmth and joy.

He promised me a Valentine's Day gift, but I never expected this. I had no idea he knew how much my work meant to me, and the possibilities of what I could do with these supplies seem endless. There's so much I can experiment with, not just commercial perfumes but tinctures, lotions, balms, and all kinds of fragrances.

I try to remind myself that this is just a formal gesture. Marco has made it clear that what he feels for me is not love but rather a sense of marital duty and responsibility. I know I should be reasonable and logical in response to his gift. But I believe that to create this room for me, at least in some way, Marco must truly care for me, and I can't help the joy and gratitude that fills my heart.

Third POV

Madame Carlotta is not only the owner of the capital's successful dress store, but she is also the most prolific and respected fashion designer in the kingdom. She does not often make house calls, but on this occasion, she will make an exception for an old friend.

In preparation for the Autumn Equinox banquet, she visits Lily's mother, Vivian Montenero, in her home. Vivian welcomes Madame Carlotta with friendliness and enthusiasm, and the designer quickly gets to work taking her measurements for the gown Vivian will wear to the banquet.

While Madame Carlotta gets to work, the two women chatter away happily.

"Honestly, Vivian, you should have seen it!" Madame Carlotta says with an excited smile. "I thought I would never find someone who could wear the Treasure of the Store gown. But that girl prince Marco brought back wore my masterpiece so perfectly, I gave her the dress!"

Vivian Montenero arches a brow with interest at the news. She knows that even her daughter Lily and the other noble ladies of the court were never able to pull off the famous gown.

“She must be very special indeed if you let her keep your Treasure. Is she really so beautiful?”

Madame Carlotta nods eagerly.

“Yes! Her figure is slim but elegantly curved, with fair skin that looks like porcelain and the most stunning turquoise eyes that seem to match and compliment her husband’s. It’s like Marco’s eyes are the fair blue of a clear sky, and his wife’s are the exotic blue-green of the sea. Honestly, they look like a perfect couple.”

“She sounds lovely! If I ever get the chance, I would quite like to meet her,” Vivian exclaims.

“You should! She truly is lovely,” Madam Carlotta agrees. “And she’s not arrogant and spoiled like some of the noble ladies. When I saw her in my store, she was actually very sweet and polite. But enough about that. Tell me about you! How have you been? How are your sons?”

Vivian smiles as the seamstress finishes her measure, telling her about her two sons. Lily’s elder brothers are very different from each other but equally wonderful in their mother’s eyes. The eldest is calm and steady, while the younger son is lively and outgoing. The two women continue talking for a while, passing the time with pleasant conversation and catching up on the latest gossip.

Tanya’s POV

Ever since I discovered the collection of extraordinary fragrant potions created by the Monteneros, I’ve fantasized about recreating them. There is one in particular that is said to fight allergies, quickly relieving the symptoms of a reaction.

Using the equipment in the laboratory that Marco got me, I try to recreate the special perfume from memory. Unfortunately, I think the formula calls for an extract of butterbur flower, which is rare in these parts of the kingdom. I don’t have any of it in stock in the little perfumery in the attic, so instead, I use a combination of ginger root and apple blossom to replicate the scent.

Hours begin to pass as I extract and distill the oils of various plants, and I add licorice root and stinging nettle to try and match the aroma in my memory. Much to my dismay, I can’t get the final step right. I try to mix the solution, adding the ethanol to the oils and extracts, but the liquids don’t blend right. Each attempt ends in a pungent, oily black mess as the substance boils and burns in all the wrong ways. Every failure is more discouraging than the last.

At one point, the bubbling beaker overheats as I try to distill the mixture yet again, causing it to break. A startled yelp escapes me as the glass bursts, sending small shards flying. I struggle to clean up, feeling utterly defeated.

Perhaps I made was wrong. I was convinced that I could replicate the perfume from the special collection or at least create something similar, but no matter how hard I try, I can't get it right.

One of the glass shards from the explosion cut my palm, and I wince at the stinging pain. With a sigh, I start to clean up a bit, pushing past the crushing disappointment. I'm determined to try just one more time.

Once again, I extract the oils from the selected plants and add the solvent. When I carefully bring the fluids to a boil, I can't help but panic slightly at the sight of little black bubbles appearing. I rush to stir the elixir, desperate to prevent the chemicals from reacting badly again.

In my haste, a drop of blood slips from the wound on my hand, spilling into the boiling liquid. Frustrated, I remove the beaker from the flame, ready to give up. But then, much to my surprise, the black bubbles dissipate, and the mixture settles, revealing a golden honey-colored elixir. I gasp in delight as the scent of sweet spices fills the air.

Due to the missing ingredient I had to replace, the effects might be slightly weaker, and the smell is somewhat different from the one in the showroom. But I did it! I created an extraordinary perfume! I stare in amazement at the wonderful little healing potion, quickly pouring it into a tiny bottle and savoring the elegant and earthy smell.

I can't help but wonder what finally stabilized the fluids, and my eyes widen in shock as I look at my hand, my gaze fixed on the small, scarlet trickle of blood.

Marco and I enter the banquet hall arm in arm for the Autumn Equinox Banquet. The gown he's gotten me for the occasion is not yellow or orange like the leaves of the season, but rather a rich metallic gold the color of sunlight. The silky fabric is so magnificent that it needs no gaudy ruffles, no bows, or frilly accessories to accentuate its beauty. Its simplicity is elegant and regal, with short, swooping sleeves that droop off my shoulders. The silky fabric hangs around my curves to accentuate my figure, flowing with my movements as we walk through the banquet hall. It matches the delicate chain of my ruby necklace and the golden wedding ring I've become so accustomed to wearing.

Marco's eyes trail over my silhouette approvingly, and I feel my cheeks flush under his brazen gaze. Before I can thank him for the dress, he excuses himself with a polite nod, explaining that he needs to go speak to some of the other guests.

A few minutes pass before Marco's sister spots me, and she approaches me like a vulture descending on its prey. Her own dress is short and black, and I flinch at the rage in her eyes as she realizes that it pales in comparison to mine.

"Well, look who it is," she says mockingly. "How ironic is this? The gold dragger is dressed in gold!"

I bow my head slightly, remembering my place, and Cathy takes a long sip from the cocktail in her hand before speaking again.

“I suppose it makes sense that my brother’s little trophy wife would look like a shiny statue. He never should have married you; we all know you don’t deserve him.”

She coughs slightly, taking another gulp from her drink.

“Ahem,” she clears her throat. “I don’t know why he even brought you here tonight, nobody wants-”

She stops mid-sentence, unable to finish. Whatever insult she was going to throw at me fades from her lips as her expression contorts in pain. I gasp in horror as the princess staggers backward and collapses on the ground, unconscious at my feet.

Chapter 20 The Fallen Princess

Chapter 19 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya’s POV

I feel everyone’s eyes turn on me as I stumble back slightly in surprise. I barely have time to process what’s happening before Ayana appears at the edge of the crowd. She shoves her way past me, almost knocking me off my feet as she rushes to Cathy.

“Cathy? Cathy, wake up!” she cries, shaking the princess violently by the shoulders in an attempt to rise her, her voice drawing even more attention to the scene.

“Somebody gets help!” Ayana shrieks at the top of her lungs, but despite all her yelling, Cathy remains unconscious.

Suddenly, I see Ayana’s expression twist from melodramatic exaggeration to genuine fear as she holds her hand by Cathy’s face. I’m filled with horror as I realize she’s trying to feel Cathy’s breath, and a sickening sort of understanding washes over me as I see that Cathy isn’t moving at all.

“What- what happened? Is she... is she okay?” I ask, my voice shaky with concern.

Ayana’s attention whirls furiously towards me.

“No! She is NOT okay!” she yells as if it were somehow my fault. “Cathy is not breathing! Tanya has killed the princess!”

What? No! How can she say that? I would never! My mouth drops open in shock as the crowd gathers around me.

“Arrest her!”

Someone grabs me by the elbow, yanking me back. I’m seized by panic as a man tries to drag me away, ready to throw me to the palace guards.

A kind-faced young man emerges, and I recognize him from the auction. He’s a friend of Marco’s.

“Let her go; Tanya is married to the second prince. She would never harm Cathy.”

Everything is happening so quickly, and I can barely understand what’s going on. The hand grabbing my arm stiffens as another voice cuts through the commotion, cold and commanding.

“Who dares lay a hand on my wife?”

The crowd parts as Marco storms towards me, and the angry guests that were trying to throw me out release me immediately, backing away from Marco with fear. I’m filled with relief at the sight of him, his presence giving me a much-needed sense of security.

“If anyone wants to take away Tanya, they’re going to have to go through me,” he says, power radiating off him like an aura. He surveys the scene, daring anyone to defy him and try to hurt me. No one dares to challenge him, too fearful of his strength and rage.

But Ayana is relentless, and her expression softens into fake submissive sadness as she speaks to Marco.

“My prince, Tanya has killed your beloved sister,” she says, pointing to Cathy’s still figure.

Everyone watches in silent anticipation as Marco walks past me and kneels by his sister, examining her with a frown. Cathy is still not breathing, but when Marco checks her pulse, relief smooths over his handsome features.

“She’s still alive, but her heartbeat is very weak,” he says before turning to me, ignoring Ayana. “Tanya, I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

I shake my head softly, still trembling. Marco needs my help, and I try to remember every detail. What could have caused something so terrible?

“I- I don’t know. We were just standing here. I’m not sure what happened. She was talking to me, and she had a few sips of her drink. Then she just started choking and passed out of nowhere.”

“Her drink...” he repeats the words to himself, an idea suddenly forming in his mind.

He looks at his unconscious sister once again, and I can see the gears turning in his head.

Cathy’s drink is splashed on the floor next to her. Marco lifts her sleeve to reveal a red rash on her hand where she spilled the liquid when she fainted.

“My sister has a severe allergy to lemons,” he mumbles, leaning over Cathy’s figure to examine her spilled cocktail. His powerful sense of smell confirms his suspicions. “It’s faint, but there’s a scent of lemon juice in this drink.”

She must have had an allergic reaction to the cocktail! That’s why her skin turned red where she spilled the beverage on herself, and she choked while drinking it. The crowd murmurs with concern, and their eyes once again fall on me.

“So what? That doesn’t change anything,” Ayana insists, determined to blame me for all this. “Cathy and Tanya were the only ones here. Tanya must have put the lemon juice in Cathy’s drink to poison her! Marco, everyone knows that the princess and your wife don’t get along...”

I can’t believe she would accuse me of something so awful. As much as she mocked me, I would never hurt Cathy. Thankfully, Marco’s friend steps forward again to silence her.

“That’s ridiculous. Tanya is new to the capital. How could she know about Cathy’s allergy?”

“Why are you defending her, Oliver? That bitch tried to kill Princess Cathy!” Ayana snaps back.

Ayana and Oliver argue, their voices growing louder as tension rises. The crowd begins to panic as Cathy remains unmoving. Only Marco’s furious roar cuts through the noise, quieting everyone down.

“Everyone remains calm. My sister doesn’t have a lot of time. Right now, the only thing that matters is finding a way to save her. Once she’s awake, she can tell us what happened herself. For now, we need to focus on helping the princess.”

He scans his surrounding, ordering one of the guards to send for the royal physician. But he said it himself, Cathy doesn’t have much time left. If the doctor takes too long to arrive, they might not be able to save her. She hasn’t been breathing for a few minutes, and if her heart stops beating, no medicine will be able to bring her back.

Prince Eric appears behind me, the fear evident on his face. I’ve never seen the royal family looking so concerned.

“I’ll send a maid to look for Cathy’s medication, but her room is huge, and it’s a mess,” Eric says. “Besides, our sister has not had an allergic reaction for a long time, and I doubt even Cathy remembers where she left the medicine. It will take far too long to find it.”

Longer than Cathy has left. The princess’s life hangs in the balance, and with every passing second, she’s in more and more danger.

Just when it seems all hope is lost, I remember the small bottle of extraordinary perfume I slipped into my purse before coming to the banquet. It’s the special concoction I made to heal allergies! I make my way through the crowd as fast as I can, getting my dainty clutch purse. Several people stare at me in open judgment and disbelief as I pull out the little vial and hurry to Marco’s side.

“I can help her,” I say quickly. This is too urgent for me to be shy about my creations. If I don’t do something, Cathy could die.

Marco looks at me, surprised by my words. He glances down at the bottle in my hands with a questioning expression.

“This isn’t a regular perfume; it’s also a healing potion. The fragrance could alleviate your sister’s allergic reaction, allowing her to breathe again. If I apply it to her, it could save her life.”

Various nobles scoff and mumble their disapproval, ridiculing my words. But we’re running out of time, and I don’t care if they make fun of me. The only one that needs to believe me is Marco. If he lets me, I will do whatever I can to save his sister.

“Please, Marco. Let me help. I need you to trust me.”

He peers into my eyes, staring straight into my soul.

“I believe you. Do it.”

A few onlookers gasp and protest, but a glare from Marco is enough to stop anyone from interfering as I crouch next to the princess. Carefully, I spray the perfume over her and then unscrew the lid and hold the bottle under her nose for good measure, letting the aroma waft up to her.

The room is as silent as the grave as they all wait to see what happens, and after a moment, Cathy gasps.

Relief spreads across the room as Cathy’s brothers come to her side and help her steady herself as she wakes up. The princess takes several shaky breaths, eager to get air back in her lungs. Ayana leans in close as well, shoving me out of the way, but I don’t mind. I’m just happy to see Cathy breathing again.

“Cathy! Thank the Goddess you’re okay! I was so worried! Tell us, what happened? Did Tanya give you that drink?” Ayana asks, and from the corner of my eye, I swear I could have seen her wink at Cathy, encouraging her to blame this whole thing on me.

Cathy just looks at me and then at her spilled drink on the floor, her face slowly starting to regain color.

“No... I got it for myself from somewhere else. This was all a terrible mistake; it has nothing to do with Tanya.”

I can’t help but smile at her softly. I’m happy to know that Marco’s sister is okay and that, in spite of our differences, she’s an honest person. It seems we’ll be able to put this whole nightmare behind us. But then Lily’s voice cuts through the air, unusually cold. I feel her eyes burning on me as she points at the perfume bottle in my hand, her tone sharp as steel.

“Where did you get that?”

Chapter 21 The Montenero’s New Apprentice

Chapter 20 - Pregnant After One Night With The Lycan

Tanya’s POV

I turn towards Lily, surprised by the chill in her tone. I’ve never seen her be openly hostile before, but when I look into her eyes, it’s not just anger that fills them; it’s fear. What could she possibly be afraid of? I can’t figure out what’s going through her mind, but I don’t get the chance to ask her. Ayana leaps at the opportunity to accuse me once again, yelling in my face.

“So, she’s not a murderer, but she’s a thief!” she cries.

Eric and Marco help Cathy to her feet as the princess slowly begins to recover. Still, Ayana is relentless in her efforts to make me seem like the villain.

“That extraordinary perfume, you took it from Lily’s family! They recently showed Montenero’s custom perfume collection at the perfumery. Tanya must have stolen it from there.”

“I would never do that,” I try to explain. “It’s true that I visited the perfume display, but I didn’t steal anything. I made this fragrant potion myself, recreating the formula from what I smelled in the special collection.”

Everyone's eyes dart between Ayana and me, unsure of whom to believe.

"Lair!" she persists. "The Montenero's extraordinary perfumes are unique. No one else can create their special effects. How dare you say that you made it? You obviously stole it!"

Even Marco's friend, Oliver, seems like he doesn't know what to say. I start to panic again, fearing they'll try to arrest me once more.

"I'm telling the truth, I swear," I say pleadingly. "I recreated it from memory."

I'm hit with an idea, and I hold up the little vial, showing it to everyone.

"I made this perfume, but I didn't have all the right materials, so I had to replace an ingredient. I couldn't find any butterbur flowers, so I used apple blossom and ginger root instead. So my perfume even smells different from the ones made by the Monteneros."

It's true, but silence hangs in the hall. The crowd remains divided and unconvinced, our argument reaching an apparent stalemate. My formula is unique, but unless I can prove it's actually different from the Montenero's perfume, no one will believe that I made it.

Ayana will insist that I stole the bottle from the perfume display. She is an established member of the court and a friend of Lily's. If it's just her word against mine, they will believe Ayana over me.

But then suddenly, a beautiful woman with dazzling green eyes steps forward. She smiles at me kindly, and I'm touched and surprised by her friendliness.

"That's Lady Vivian Montenero," someone whispers, and a shocked silence falls over the crowd. I bow my head at the noblewoman, feeling nervous and self-conscious.

"I've heard some rather lovely things about you, young lady," Vivian says quietly enough that I'm the only one who can hear her. She's stunning, but her presence is calm and commanding. I can only imagine how extremely well-respected she must be among the court.

"I can recognize my family's extraordinary perfumes anywhere," she says, raising her voice to address the crowd this time. "With their highness's permission, I can identify the potion that healed the princess."

Prince Eric looks at his sister, who nods at him slightly.

"Very well," Eric says. "Let Lady Vivian settle this matter once and for all."

I hand the small bottle to Vivian. If what I've heard about her family's gifted sense of smell is true, she will be able to identify the perfume as my original creation.

Vivian holds the ornate little bottle up to her nose, inhaling deeply. She closes her eyes, pondering the scent.

“There are notes of... licorice root... hints of stinging nettle, and... yes, apple blossom and ginger. None of my family’s perfumes have these exact ingredients. The effects are similar, but the scent is slightly different. I believe this young lady is telling the truth. Tanya must have created this perfume herself.”

Despite my relief, my heart is still pounding in my chest, and there are several amazed gasps around me.

“That’s incredible!” Someone says.

“How did she do that?!”

Vivian glances back at me, returning the small vial to my hands.

“You have a phenomenal talent, my dear girl. The craftsmanship required to not only recreate but modify this kind of formula is truly magnificent. If it wasn’t for your unique skill, I fear Princess Cathy might not have recovered in time. You saved her life.”

I curtsy slightly in response to her words, dazed by her praise. I glance at Marco, who gives me a grateful and encouraging nod.

“Thank you, my Lady. It was nothing.”

“It most certainly was not ‘nothing,’ and please, call me Vivian. I think you and I will be spending plenty of time together. A talent like yours is not meant to be wasted. I normally would never work with someone outside of my family, and I have not taken on an apprentice in a very long time. But with a gift like yours... I will gladly make an exception. What do you say, Tanya? Would you like to be my apprentice?”

I stare at her in awe.

“I would be honored.”

To be Lady Vivian’s apprentice is an unparalleled privilege. Everyone around me seems surprised and impressed. Well, everyone except for Lily, whose expression turns oddly pale at her mother’s words.

After all the commotion, I’m relieved when everyone files into the ballroom, ready for the celebration to commence. Candlelight glows around me, and the guests gather around the edge of the main floor as the orchestra prepares to play the first song.

Prince Eric steps out into the center of the crowd, Lily standing beside him. But much to my surprise, instead of turning to her, the two of them walk in my direction. I'm stunned as Eric stands before me and bows politely, offering me his hand.

"May I have the pleasure of the first dance?" he asks.

At the sight of Eric inviting me onto the floor, Lily quickly rushes to Marco, all too eager to dance with him in my place. All eyes are on me as the prince waits for my reply.

"Me?" I ask meekly, struggling to believe that this is actually happening.

"Yes, you. It would be an honor to dance with the girl that saved my sister's life, as a thank you."

I feel safe by Marco's side, and the idea of stepping away from him and into the middle of the crowd to dance with the prince is somewhat mortifying. I'm flustered by all the attention, but with so many nobles watching, I cannot afford to disrespect the prince by refusing him.

Hesitantly, I give Eric my hand, trying not to trip on my unsteady feet as he guides me onto the center of the dancefloor. The warm glow of the ballroom glistens on my golden dress, which flutters around me with ethereal elegance. Everyone watches as the music starts to play, and we begin to dance. But amidst the twinkling lights and the swell of the violins, all I can think about is Marco's gaze from across the room, burning into my skin.

Lily's POV

Although I can't help but resent the way everyone watches Tanya and Eric, I rejoice at the opportunity to reconnect with Marco. He cuts quite the dashing figure in his formal attire; his usually shaggy blond curls are neatly brushed, making him look younger and softer.

He guides me through the first half of the dance, but even as his strong hand rests on my waist, there is no trace of the old desire that used to fill his handsome blue eyes when he looks at me. In fact, on more than one occasion, his gaze grows distant and absent-minded, and I catch him looking past me. Subconsciously, his attention keeps getting pulled toward Tanya and Eric. Jealousy courses through my veins, and I bat my eyes at Marco.

"We don't dance like we used to anymore," I say with a shy smile, my tone soft and flirty.

He clenches his jaw at my words, stiffening.

"There is no 'we.' Not anymore," he says gruffly. "You and I are a thing of the past. Tanya is my present."

Envy turns to indignation, and I have to make an effort to keep my expression pleasant. My engagement with Eric has brought me closer to power and riches, but Marco was always the handsome one. The strong one.

After I broke things off with him, I honestly expected him to wait for me. Even now, there's still a part of me that believed he would always love me. The way he looks right through me as though he could only see Tanya is infuriating.

There's a change of rhythm in the song, and the gentlemen on the dancefloor twirl their dance partners. I manage not to gasp as Marco takes advantage of the moment and spins me away, leading me right into Eric's arms. Quickly, I compose myself and continue dancing with Eric, trying to pretend that the switch was intentional. I can't believe Marco had the audacity to swap me right out of his arms to dance with Tanya.

Tanya all but stumbles into Marco's waiting embrace before falling into step across from him. The two of them look like such a beautiful couple. His golden hair matches her gown, and the shades of green in her eyes compliment the deep blue in his as they gaze at each other. The sight of them makes me furious beyond words. He holds her so tenderly, and she moves with him so gracefully, gliding along to the music.

She looks like a fairytale princess that fell into his arms, and I hate her for it. I think I should do something.