

## 2. The Gardener

2011 Words

The voice startled her. Savannah wondered for a second how on Earth she did not notice that she had a spectator. The man who was chuckling at her was sitting under a huge oak tree, hidden behind the rose bushes when she arrived. This was the sole reason she did not see him in the rest place.

Anyway, it was her mistake. And from what it looked like, she couldn't afford any mistakes at the moment. She had to think about everything first, to decide on her course of action.

She heard the sounds of the man standing up and turned on her heels to see who it was. A sigh of relief escaped her. Before her stood a tall man dressed in not the cleanest set of clothes she had seen. His jeans were filthy with dirt, and his grey henley shirt had probably seen better days. He had dark hair and a beard, which gave him a bit of a dangerous woodcutter vibe, but she could tell that he was one of the northerners who belonged to the castle. Probably just one of the workers, which was a good thing for her. He would hardly know who she was, and she could get away with it.

"Just... trimming," Savvy stretched her lips into a charming smile and avoided looking at the destroyed bush. She just hoped that the guy wasn't the gardener who was responsible for taking care of those things. But he probably was exactly that – the gardener.

Otherwise, why would he have that earthy forest scent with a hint of pine in it and be sitting on the ground of all the places? Now that she had a better look at him, he was very handsome and had all those muscles that probably came from physical labour. The gardens of the northern castle were vast, he probably had a lot of work here, and she felt guilt washing over her. She wasn't the kind of princess who terrorized her servants and omegas. That being said, the guy wasn't an omega, but his aura was hidden and it was hard to tell his rank. He was probably somewhere in the middle because there was no way an Alpha or a Beta would hide who they were. It was in their nature to demonstrate these things.

"Sorry," Savvy mumbled apologetically and felt obliged to explain herself. "It's just that I am having a very bad day."

"You are not from here," the guy looked her up and down with some kind of interest evident in his eyes. "Although there are a lot of new people here today," he muttered under his breath. He probably wasn't happy that all those people were walking around in his garden now, ruining it as she did right now.

"Are you surprised?" the girl raised her brow questioningly, remembering why she was here in the rest place. Anger raised at the pit of her stomach. "It looks like your king wants a show."

His head snapped in her direction, and he sucked in a deep breath.

"As far as I heard, it's voluntary. No one is forced to take part." The man shrugged, and that little gesture annoyed her more than anything else today.

"Voluntary?" she chuckled loudly, throwing her head back.

This was ridiculous. Were all northerners like that?

"Because it's every woman's desire to run after a man like a little circus dog, performing tasks and tricks along with many others just like her in the pathetic hope that maybe... MAYBE he would be kind enough to choose her! Yeah, THAT'S every woman's desire! We CHOOSE that!"

She huffed an angry laugh with her tirade and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You can leave if you don't like it this much!" the man retorted, visibly annoyed with her little speech.

"You don't know what you are talking about!" she sighed, realising that he would never understand her.

"Who are you again?" the gardener asked. "Did you come with one of the contenders?"

"Contenders!" she snorted and rolled her eyes. She hated that word already. "I came with one of the political victims." There. She said it. Enjoy the truth, gardener! "Honestly, I don't even understand how king Kai will be able to look into his future wife's face, knowing that he made her go through all this. That his future queen was used as a puppet in his games just because he did not want to marry a certain princess."

"Ah, I see," a smirk stretched over his bearded face. "You came with Princess Savannah of the Western Lycan Kingdom."

"No!" she blushed, and technically, it wasn't even a lie. She didn't come with the princess. She was the princess.

"I bet she is angry," the stranger went on with some kind of amusement on his face. "The western princess who is used to getting everything she wants just by clicking her finger. I am sure the concept that she actually has to fight for something is hard for her to grasp."

"Is that what you think?" she let out a laugh this time. "That a girl who grew up without parents, with herself and her brother under constant attacks, just magically gets everything? Let me tell you, if she decides to stay and take part in that nonsense of competition, she will wipe the floor with anyone who'd be stupid enough to compete against her. The question is whether she would still like to get married to a man - although a man is not even the right word here - as your King. Because as far as I see it, he is the one who already failed his first test! Marrying someone like that was already a sacrifice on her part! And knowing that he isn't even capable of keeping his own word is just sad! That's really below her standards for any man, let alone a royal."

The gardener's mouth parted and Savvy decided that she had done and said enough and it was best to retreat before everything backed.

It actually made her feel a bit better about the whole thing, and now she knew she had to go back to her companions and start strategizing. She had to make a decision whether to meet the king, slap his face and leave. Or to stay and make him regret that he ever dared to start all this, considering that marrying him was already a sacrifice of her life.

She took a few steps when she heard a loud growl. Uh-oh. She offended the gardener, after all.

"Listen, little... maid," he gritted his teeth, and his eyes shone blue. "The Luna Trials are the ancient tradition of the North. This is something sacred to us, and the future Luna of the North will be respectful of that. If your princess cannot respect our traditions, then she indeed came to the wrong place."

"Oh, please, big... garden boy," she lled her words with as much venom as she only could. "I studied the history of the North and know for a fact that even if there was such a tradition years ago, it hasn't been done once in the past two centuries. If you did not respect your own tradition for so long, why should we?"

She decided not to continue this and just stormed off in the direction where she had left her friends. The faster they could talk, the better.

"Are you okay?" Kyle seemed worried about her. He was her childhood friend and one of the very few people she could trust in this world.

"Never better," Savvy nodded reassuringly. "We have a decision to make. And we need to make it quick. I need to know where the library here is."

"I already got the map from one of the servants," Zara produced a sheet from her red leather folder and handed it to her. She was always efficient like that, and Savannah was thankful for the best team next to her.

"Good," she said, studying the map quickly. "I need to get everything they have on The Luna Trials. I read about it a long time ago in one of our books about the North. But it was barely a few paragraphs. I need to learn everything that was ever written about the Luna Trials. Every bit of information is priceless at this point."

"Let's go then," Kyle smirked when Savannah gave the sheet back to Zara, knowing that his best friend had already memorised everything. This was one of the things they were always quiet about – Savannah had a photographic memory. It was enough for her to see something once, and she wasn't able to forget it afterwards. The castle's plan was now imprinted in her mind forever.

"I think I will go alone," Savvy stopped them. "We don't want to miss the time when our rooms will be ready. I feel like there are going to be a few more surprises. Or better say, traps. Let's call it for what it is!"

"But are you going to do it? It sounds so... humiliating," Zara shot her a concerned glance. She knew about humiliation first-hand. Just a few months ago she was a part of the harem of the former fox king. Her brother and sister-in-law managed to free all the girls and gave them the freedom of choice. Zara was a bird shifter and, unfortunately, she couldn't return to her former pack because she had denounced them when she was in love with fox. He took her to his pack and only there did she find out that she wasn't the only one for him. But love made her stay. And after just a few nights and a few experiments in his lab, his interest in her was gone. She spent years locked up in the harem, which was called Eden and where every woman was supposed to only wear red revealing clothes, watching the man she loved screwing every other girl around, only staying because she had nowhere else to go.

Until Savannah's sister-in-law, the Western Lycan Queen gave them a choice. Zara chose to stay with them, and they quickly became friends since Savvy was volunteering to find every former red girl a new job and place to live. Since they became close, Savvy chose Zara to become her assistant when it was time to leave for the North. But Zara was quickly proving that this was the right role for her.

"I still haven't made up my mind," Savannah confessed. "I need a way out that will still get my brother the coalition he needs. If I just leave then that will be in danger. But the king clearly does not want to marry me and that makes two of us."

"Your brain is already working," Kyle's lips curled into a little smile as they strolled in a little circle, trying not to attract attention. "I am sure you'll figure out the best solution."

"I wish I was as sure as you are," Savvy squeezed his hand and left for the library.

She wished she could talk to someone now about the predicament she was in. But at some level, the gardener was right. This was the first time she had to make big decisions on her own. And so many packs and lives depended on it.

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Kai opened the door to his office and growled when he saw his sister inside.

"Elene, what the hell is all this?"