

The Luna Trials by Marissa Gilbert

Chapter 20 - 30

1. 20. Breaking Balls

Savvy tensed as her head snapped in the direction of an enormous lycan walking out of the door in front of them. Tall, with longish ginger hair and a short beard, he was a beast of a man. Bigger than Kai and Lachlan put together. So big that Savvy wondered in her mind where he purchased clothes his size because his jeans and red black flannel shirt were fitting him perfectly. It must have been a special order.

“Aspen, old mutt!” Kai chuckled at the stranger, and Savvy relaxed instantly. So, it wasn’t a dangerous situation of any kind. “Still can’t get over your loss last time? Mind your mouth today, though. I brought a lady to this gods’ forsaken place.”

“Fenrir with you,” the giant let out a chesty laugh. “And I thought you were a king who could afford to take women to a decent restaurant! How cheap are you to bring the lady here?!”

“Maybe I am just not that special to him,” Savvy offered, cockily deciding to rub salt in the wound. Immediately Kai’s hand wrapped around her waist possessively.

“We’ll see about that one,” Aspen’s eyes traced his movement, and a discerning smile appeared on his face. “Well, don’t just stand there! Come inside!”

The three of them walked into the spacious but cosy pub. It was decorated according to the best northern traditions, and a white bear’s head on the wall did not escape Savvy’s eyes. No wonder they never liked each other with the lycans.

The entrance hall to the pub was painted with white and blue traditional northern patterns, while the fireplace welcomed them with a crackling fire and the comforting light of the flame. There were a few private cabins on the left with soft leather seats, a bar with light-coloured wooden tables, and high stools with windows running along one wall for their customers to enjoy

a picturesque view of the forest. Although, at the moment, they could only see the darkness of the night.

The chatter and laughter of the customers created a lovely atmosphere, and an old song was playing from the speakers.

At the very back of the establishment, Savannah noticed a pool table, but Aspen guided them the opposite way.

"I guess today you are taking the cabin," he stated as he winked at the northern king.

"Yes, please." Kai nodded in agreement and nudged Savvy slightly to follow the big man. He led them to a cabin hidden from everyone else and handed them their menus.

"No need for those." The king shook his head. "We'll have two rabbit liver pies."

He winked at her as she stared at him in shock before quickly regaining her composure and looking at Aspen with a grin.

"Those are for him. And I'll have your Special Burger!"

"Burned!" Aspen whispered so loudly that probably everyone in the building heard him. "I must warn you that it's a huge burger, though."

"Good!" Savvy nodded. "I am starving! Add a coke with some fries to that."

"I'll have the same then," Kai chuckled.

"What, no rabbit liver today?" his companion questioned, arching her brow playfully, as he admitted defeat by lifting his hands in the air. The pie wasn't his favourite either.

"I was just trying to introduce you to a taste of northern food." He pretended not to care, crossing his hands on his chest and looking away.

"Hey, Aspen," Savvy looked up at the lycan, who was watching the two of them with amusement and asked. "Are you a northerner?"

"Born and bred." He hit himself on the chest with pride. "Who will be cooking these burgers?" she asked innocently.

"For him, some intern in my kitchen. For you, I will do everything myself!" The giant snorted, and they heard Kai growl a warning.

"See?" Savannah rolled her eyes, "I still have northern food made by the best the North has to offer!"

Aspen disappeared into the kitchen, and for the first time, they found themselves alone... Neither of them knew what to say

"This is probably not what you imagined?" He tapped his fingers over the wooden surface of the table.

"I never imagined us having a date at all," she admitted softly. "Here or anywhere else."

"I imagined it since the moment I met you, but it was today that I knew I'd be taking you here."

"Is this a special place to you?" Savvy decided not to beat around the bush.

"Look here," he took her tiny palm in his and moved it to the corner of the table, letting her feel the carvings on the edge. With her delicate fingers, the girl slid closer and traced the pattern engraved with what she surmised was probably a claw.

Harold + Ronja – Kai

She stared at the carving for a while with her lips parted before bringing herself to look at him again.

"You came here with your parents?" Savannah guessed correctly.

"Sometimes." The king found, for some odd reason, that he wanted to share this memory with her. "We would come here to ... to feel normal, I guess. It worked each time. Here, my mother and father weren't the King and the Queen. They were just a husband and wife. This is why! thought it would be a perfect place for"

"For the gardener and the maid," Savvy chuckled. "Is it not?" Kai raised his brow questioningly. "I think it is," she agreed, a little smile dancing on her lips. "Tell me more."

And he did, not sparing the smallest detail, even some of the most embarrassing stories of his childhood. He made Savannah laugh, and to him, it was priceless.

"No way!" She giggled as he told her the story of him running away from his house when he was little but not quite making it past the bridge before his father's Beta caught him. He delivered him here to his parents, who probably were trying to have a normal date for once, to no avail. The previous king was so pissed.

"You should have seen the look on his face!" He tried to mimic his father's expression, "This little brat again! Aspen and Celia were here too, watching the whole scene from the backroom, Their Dad was one of the strongest warriors and"

"Wait!" Savvy choked. "Is Aspen Celia's brother?!" "Yeah," Kai replied matter-of-factly, unaware of the problem. "Celia's brother is making me food?" The girl's eyes grew wide.

"Is my sister creating trouble for you?" Aspen reappeared, wearing an apron, and carrying two plates in his large hands, placing them on the table.

"Well..." Savvy cleared her throat uncomfortably, hoping that he hadn't tried to poison her food and forced a smile.

"Of course she does!" the giant sighed. "Ever since she became friends with Penelope, she has been like that!"

"She is not that bad," the princess lied, and Aspen towered over her.

"If she does something again, tell her this," he leaned all the way to her ear and whispered something that Kai couldn't hear.'

The Northern King didn't like the two being so close to each other. He did not like it at all. "Thanks for your help, Buddy!" he snarled at his friend. "I think we can take it from here." "Thank you, Aspen," Savannah grinned, "you are the best northerner I have ever met!" "And you are." The big guy began to say something, but this time Kai growled loudly. "Bye, Aspen!"

"Northern gardeners sure are temperamental!" Savvy let out a little laugh and took her burger in her hands.

They ate, and they talked, teasing each other as usual. However, it felt so natural and so comforting for both of them. As if this was how it was supposed to be.

"Shall we play pool?" Kai suggested, and Savannah pierced him with her gaze. "I am not sure how" She bit her lip and looked at him through her long lashes.

"I'll teach you!" He promised eagerly and took her hand, pulling her toward the game table. "It's not as easy as it looks, but, luckily for you, I am a great teacher."

"Be careful with that one!" Aspen grunted as they passed the bar area. "He cheats!"

"Not true!" Kai sounded offended, but it was clear that all this was just a joke to him. "It's just that you are a sore loser looking for excuses!"

He started explaining the game's rules to her, clearly excited while placing all the balls into a wooden triangle. The "little maid" watched him and nodded as he explained every single detail, her fingers brushing over the wooden cue in her hand, drawing his attention each time.

"I think I've got it!" She smiled when he was done.

"Come on then," he stepped behind her, pressing his hard body into hers. "I'll help you to break the balls."

"That's so sweet of you," she chirped and leaned forward, taking position and aiming at the cue ball.

"Like that," Kai gently bent over her, his breath tickling her ear, hands over hers. He showed

her how to move the cue and then pointed at the shiny white ball. "Hit that one, and if you manage to legally pocket one of your balls, it will be your turn again."

"Uhm," Savvy licked her lips, and even though he did not see it, the sound alone made him gulp. "I'll try. Do I do it like that?"

She hit the cue ball with precise strength and aiming, doing a clean breaking and pocketing one of her balls along the way.

He walked around her and noticed the sly look on her face, a smirk curling her lips. "You know how to play," he stated, feeling dumb.

"Only a little," Savannah paid him no attention, aiming to pocket the next ball and doing so brilliantly. "We call it billiard."

She was crushing all his hopes one by one, pocketing ball, after ball, after ball. When she finally missed, he managed to pocket a couple as well. When he was about to repeat his shot, she appeared at his side, leaning closely just like he had done earlier to her.

"Don't worry," she whispered, "I am only trying to teach you."

Her fingers brushed gently over the bare skin on his hands, and he instantly missed, making her chuckle.

"That was cheating!" He grunted.

"Or maybe you are a sore loser looking for excuses!" Aspen burst out laughing, all while Savannah pocketed her last ball.

"I won!" she announced and jumped onto the table, shaking her shoulders in a little impromptu victory dance.

"She is a keeper!" Aspen snorted and went back to the kitchen. Kai watched her, so happy and daring, knowing he wouldn't want it any other way.

Savannah didn't even notice how he trapped her between the table and himself. She froze, not knowing what he was about to do. His lips curved cunningly like a predator toying with a prey.

He leaned forward, their foreheads touching and noses brushing over each other.

"You are magnificent, Little Maid." The smile on his face was catching, and soon the girl found herself grinning back.

“And you don’t read people too well,” she snorted, trying to break the romantic mood that suddenly overwhelmed and scared her.

“Since you won, you deserve a little treat.” He grasped her by her waist and took her off the table, gently placing her back on the floor as if she was made out of the finest porcelain, “Let’s

go!”

Savannah chose not to argue. She also remained quiet when he laced his fingers with hers.

It was terrifying to start trusting a man again, but with him. With him, it was different

They sat back on the motorbike, and Kai drove off while Savvy hugged him, much tighter this time, placing her head on his back.

He loved feeling her body so close to his. It was undeniable that he was falling for Savannah Stormhold. Falling for her badly ...

The king brought her to the top of one of the highest hills, parking his bike there. Savvy tried to get off as quickly as possible, twisting her foot in her high-heeled shoes during the attempt, but luckily he caught her just in time.

“Careful!” He smiled, holding her with one arm while removing his helmet with the other. Then he helped her stabilise herself and took off her helmet as well, watching how her shiny hair tumbled over her shoulders. She looked so tiny in his huge leather jacket, but he knew not to let this fool him. This girl was a force to be reckoned with.

“Come,” he took her hand, and she obeyed, following his lead. “I think you are going to like this view.”

They stepped close to the edge of the hill, and Savvy gasped in awe, seeing the entire capital city beneath them, the lights glittering in the dark night. She saw the castle they came from and the mountains with the woods that surrounded it.

“It’s so beautiful,” she breathed out.

“I know,” he said, and she turned to look at him, catching him staring at her and not at their surroundings.

He took her in his arms, but to her surprise, he just pulled her down and onto his lap, sitting himself comfortably on the grass and helping her lean against his chest for comfort.

"You know, this is another one of my secret places," Kai admitted. "Somehow, you make me want to show them all to you."

"Well, you will not hear me complaining. I love it here."

Finally. Kai was so close to her that he could place his nose into her hair and inhale deeply. The scent of bluebells haunted him from the first day he smelled it.

"I come here when I am on a run." He wanted to share more with her. "I also like to come here for the First Snow."

Savannah knew about this tradition thanks to the History contest. The First Snow was very important in the North. It was a special holiday that took its roots in the old days. When the Harvest was done, and Winter was starting, the northerners celebrated the end of the working season. Sacrifices were made to Fenrir to ask him for mercy during the following harsh months when hunting was more difficult. However, the most important association was that it often was the beginning of their wedding season. Couples were proclaiming their love for each other and getting married. It was considered good luck for a couple in love to greet the first snow together.

Since then, a lot has changed, of course. Nevertheless, the importance of the First Snow stayed

For a second there, Savvy got caught up with the romance of it all and found herself trying to see if any snowflakes were falling from the sky. How stupid was that?

She shivered, and the handsome man embracing her immediately turned her to face him.

"Are you cold?" He asked, and she nodded without saying a word. "Maybe it will be best to get back?" Their eyes locked, and for a few seconds, they just looked at each other, only stars

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illuminating them in the darkest hour of the night. Kai's eyes glowed blue as Asgard tried to fight for control. Savannah sucked in a breath, her eyes shining with golden light as Athena attempted to do the same.

"Wolves," Kai muttered sarcastically, bringing himself closer to her. "Stupid wolves," she agreed, her lips gently touching his.

"It's unhealthy to fight them," he slid his hand into her hair, pulling her towards himself so that there wasn't an inch between them.

“Agreed,” she let herself be enveloped in his warmth and passion. He tried to be gentle at first, holding himself back as his lips covered hers. But with each stroke of their tongues against each other, his grip on her was getting tighter. Savvy found herself breathing heavily as she grasped his hair in the heat of the moment. She tugged it, making him growl, and he started to devour her possessively, greedily, as if she was the last drop of water and he had been wandering

through a desert for years.

“We need to stop,” she mumbled, her breathing ragged, her eyes held no conviction in following through her words. :

“Yeah,” Kai agreed, kissing her neck and removing his jacket off her shoulders for more access.

They were both mad, and neither of them was going to fight it.

“Savannah,” he snarled into her mouth and claimed it again, getting a much-desired moan from her this time.

She wanted to claw his t-shirt off him, and he did not seem to mind. But the nearby sound of a loud howl stopped them.

Savvy wanted to continue, but Kai got tense, pressing her closer and covering her mouth with his finger for a moment.’

“Sh*t,” he swore under his breath. “Savvy, we need to go.” She wasn’t an j***t and knew that if he told her that, then it was serious. “It’s not one of your men, is it?” She asked him bluntly as they rushed to the bike.

“I don’t think so,” Kai admitted. “I don’t want to push my luck while you are with me. We’d better get back.”

“I can fight,” she told him dryly, putting the helmet back on. “I know,” he smiled, doing the same. “But I don’t want you to have to fight.”

They drove off quickly and were speeding over the road they used to come here. The howls were getting closer and closer, and Savannah could swear she heard a couple of roars too. This wasn’t good.

At least they were together.

Right about the time that thought crossed her mind, a huge brown wolf jumped out of the bushes, knocking them both off the motorbike.

Savvy rolled over her head and found herself falling down a steep hill. Down, down, down ... Until darkness stole everything from her.

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Savannah was preparing for sleep. There was no way she was going to that ... 'date'. She took a long bath, so lengthy that she was going to miss that dinner, after which she was not going out of her room. Then she brushed her hair and curled it slightly with her straightener because she was still not going anywhere and had all the time in the world. She did very light make-up. Just because she wanted a little practice. Her eye was constantly on the clock.

"Let's go!" Athena urged her, but, of course, she ignored her. She was the decision-maker. Not that wolf.

No one, absolutely no one, was going to force her to make a wrong decision.

She had already made one of those with Zack and now faced the music each time he had fun with someone else.

She did not need this. She did not want this ...

"Ridiculous!" Savvy told herself and went to look for outfits. She sent Kyle and Zara away early today and had all the time in the world.

Savannah found her favourite pair of ripped jeans and added a beige satin chiffon top to it with two layers. She found herself buckling the straps of her white sandals very soon after that.

Why? Because she was just going to check if the Lycan King of The North had bothered to show up himself. That was why. The only reason.

It was already well past dinnertime, and Savannah didn't expect to see him there. He wouldn't be waiting for her for an hour.

Although ... he never told her the exact time. So, technically, she wasn't even late.

Her heart was beating so fast that it felt as if it was going to jump out of her chest any moment now. It only got worse with every step she took toward the pond.

Kai called it their spot. Wasn't it ridiculous? It was. Despite the fact that this was the place her mind went to when he mentioned it, it wasn't their spot. They didn't have a spot. They were nothing to each other and would never be anything. They would never have "a spot".

They were not even ...

"You came!" his voice emerged from the darkness, and she had to adjust her vision to see him sitting under a tree. One hand on his knee and the other brushing his hair that looked ... as if he was nervously fiddling them for hours... He did not trim his stubble and looked more like the gardener she knew again, especially in his white t-shirt and jeans paired up with a black leather jacket.

"I was just ... passing by," Savvy mumbled, turning on her heels, but Kai was next to her in a blink of an eye.

"Of course you were," he chuckled, towering over her, his eyes exploring every inch of her. "Better late than never, Savannah."

"How long were you going to sit here?" She found herself asking, even though it didn't matter.

"Long." His voice became deeper and raspier. Her lips curled into a little smile because she could sense that he was genuine.

"Well, I just came to tell you not to bother and go to sleep." The girl lifted her chin defiantly and saw a smirk forming on his lips. He was enjoying their game.

"That's so sweet of you." He nodded, and she did the same. "How can I thank you for doing this? Otherwise, I'd be here until morning."

"Don't mention it!" Savvy tried to walk away, but he caught up with her instantly.

"That would be rude!" he chuckled. "I may be just a gardener, little maid, but I am not some brute."

"Good for you," she raised her brow, trying to walk around him to no avail. "Will you excuse me?"

"Let me at least feed you," he offered, adding, "I know you skipped dinner."

"And how would a gardener know that?" Savannah couldn't help the grin that was forcing itself on her face.

"Gardeners know things!" Kai cleared his throat, and the next time she tried to walk away, he caught her in his arms, pressing her tiny body against his broad chest. It felt nice, and he didn't want to stop. The excited glint in her eyes told him she was also enjoying the game. The King was happy to oblige.

"And I thought you are not a brute," she taunted him, but did not struggle against him.

"I am just a concerned gardener. Maids have a hard enough life to skip meals." His hands locked on her waist. She seemed so fragile that he felt he could snap her in two if he was not careful. However, he knew it was a wrong impression because the woman in front of him radiated confidence and power. ‘

"True," she agreed with ease. "There is so much work now with the Luna Trials. That king is such a jerk for making twelve women compete for him, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Kai shrugged, taking her hands into his large palm and pulling her after him. "I only heard great things about him."

He was taking her away from the castle and deeper into the garden, using the passages in the vast green maze of his home.

"I also heard he is insanely handsome," Kai chuckled. "Maybe that's the secret to why they chose to compete?"

"Yeah!" Savannah snorted loudly. "That's unlikely. If I were him, I would sleep with my eyes open if he ends up marrying one of these women after all. There is absolutely no way in hell for any of them to ever forget the humiliation of this stupid contest. Being given tasks and then graded based on the performance ... Like puppies in a dog show. None of these strong, fierce females will ever forgive him."

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"Luckily, for him," Kai unexpectedly pushed her against a tree, "he only needs one of them to forgive him. And to love him ... To stay by his side and"

His lips were already brushing over hers, their hot breaths entangled. "And what?" Savvy whispered into his mouth.

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"And he will spend all his life begging for forgiveness if he has to," Kai gently bit her bottom lip, tugging it softly to part her lips. "That one woman he has his eyes on seems to be worth

"Oh?" She tried to keep her composure, ignoring Athena's howling inside. "It's Petra, isn't

it?"

A growl escaped him right before he crashed his lips into hers, greedily devouring the little maid in his arms. His tongue tried to conquer dominance as his fingers laced into her hair at the back of her head as if he was afraid she would pull away any moment. Yet she wasn't.

However, she wasn't giving him the dominance either, and for the hundredth time with her, Kai realised that he loved the challenge. And also the change.

She wasn't some daughter of an Alpha, who was taught how to be a Luna her whole life. Savannah was the Alpha. His equal. Not only by blood but also by spirit. And the more he got to know her, the more he felt that nothing less would ever be enough for him now.

Kai broke the kiss because he knew that if he didn't do it now, he wouldn't be able to stop. But Savvy deserved better, and he already had big plans for tonight.

"Let's go," he grasped her delicate fingers and urged her to follow him. This time she didn't object in any way, which gave him the confidence to go on with his reckless idea.

He took her to the main wall, and Savannah saw a secret gate she remembered from the wonderful map he had once shared with her. However, it wasn't the part that surprised her the most.

"Is that a..." She pointed at the huge shining monster of a motorbike in front of her. "Our ride," the King smirked at her and took off his jacket. "What..." Savvy didn't even get to finish her sentence as he wrapped the firm leather around

her.

"You'll get cold in this." Kai pointed at her flimsy top and before she could reply, handed her a helmet as well. "Safety first, little maid."

"How thoughtful," She chuckled, putting it on. "Won't you get cold like that?"

"With your hands around my torso and thighs pressed against mine?" the King smirked at her, adjusting his own helmet. "Unlikely."

Savvy was happy that her face was already covered by now, so he couldn't see how her cheeks flushed at his suggestion.

He started the bike and she sat behind him, hugging him from behind. The heels weren't the best choice of footwear for a motorbike ride, but it was the least of her problems because ... now she could feel every freaking perfect muscle of his abdomen with her own fingers. Kai was definitely exercising daily for most of his life, and Savannah unknowingly traced her fingers over the relief of his muscles.

"There will be time for that, little maid," he growled and drove off. "Now, just hold on to me."

It was easier said than done because when her fingers dug into his flesh, she couldn't stop imagining how she could explore his toned muscles not only with her fingertips ...

Nevertheless, she managed to forget about this when they drove across a massive ancient

bridge built between two dangerous cliffs. The hair that stuck out of her helmet was blown by the wind, and the cold northern air tickled her nostrils, seducing her with the scents of fresh pine and cedar.

She loved it. More than she imagined. The night, the starry sky above their heads and, mostly, that feeling of freedom.

For one night only ... they were the gardener and the maid. Two people free to do whatever they wanted. And Savvy knew she was going to enjoy that.

Kai took her away from the city, and to the little town close to the woods. It was a test, but he didn't tell her of course. What would be the fun in that?

So, when he parked next to a pub with the vibrant name "The Whitehound", he watched her closely, not willing to miss her reaction.

A pub wasn't a place fit for a princess. In fact, the one and only time he took Elene and Penelope here, they both scrunched their noses in this establishment. However, Kai had loved this place ever since his now-deceased father and mother brought him here when he was little for a private family dinner. They frequented the best restaurants in the North, and an experienced chef was working at their castle, yet this was the dinner that he remembered the most. His first time here. Because here, they weren't a king, a queen and a prince – they simply *were* a family of three. Since then, it had grown from a secret place to dine to a place where he felt comfortable as if he was at home.

Savannah took off the helmet, her hair cascading down her shoulder in soft waves. She looked around and studied the sign at the front of the building as he watched her silently.

"They'd better have burgers in here," she informed him with a grin. "I am starving!"

"I was actually planning to feed you with that rabbit liver pie we talked about earlier today," he teased her, and she rolled her eyes, handing him back the helmet.

"No, thanks. I don't think I've been in the North long enough to be ready to experience this... delicacy."

"Your loss," Kai chuckled, taking her hand into his and realising that it felt so normal and natural to him now.

"can't believe you dare to show your face in here!" they both heard an ominous snar..

A splitting headache turned every movement into pure torture as Savannah desperately struggled to open her heavy eyelids. She couldn't figure out what was going on for a while until the recollection of the accident formed in her mind.

She fell down, rolling, slipping, and hitting rocks, dry, sharp twigs and other debris on her way down. She tried her best to grasp onto something, but the hill was too steep, and everything was happening too fast. The Princess couldn't see much thanks to the helmet, but if she was honest, this was probably what helped her stay alive.

One thing was for sure. The fall was over, and she was now half-sitting, goddess knew where.

Every bone and muscle in her body ached, bringing temporary agony. Her lycan accelerated healing was already kicking in, but it would still take her a few good minutes to simply come to her senses. The worst thing was that one of her feet felt as if it was broken, and this one injury would probably take a while to heal and get back to normal.

She saw two large palms moving in front of her and felt someone removing her helmet. Savvy instantly hoped it was Kai, thanking the Moon Goddess for keeping him safe. However, she

tensed when she met the gaze of just one blue eye and noticed white hair sparkling in the moonlight. This time at least, he was adequately dressed-black pants, boots and an aviator jacket made of rough leather and black fur. A modern pirate, no less.

The familiar stranger carefully took the helmet off, supporting her head, and scanning her with his eye. The other was covered with a black eye patch with some kind of northern pattern.

"You!" Savvy breathed out, and a vague smile curved his lips.

"Me," the werebear shifter confirmed and stretched his hand to her neck, making her shudder uncomfortably. "You are bleeding," he stated calmly as if it wasn't an extraordinary situation.

"Yeah, it happens sometimes when you fall down a cliff!" Savvy lifted her chin up defiantly. "And you are just passing by, of course."

"No," he chuckled and still touched her skin, causing stinging sensations. "I arranged all this."

His bluntness made her part her lips, and he liked the effect he made on her. At least she respected him for not pretending he had nothing to do with it.

“So, this is an assassination attempt then?” she clenched her lips tightly and looked around in search of Kai, sadly realising she was the only one to fall down the slope. Nonetheless, it was probably for the best, meaning that the King of The North must be in a much better state than she was.

“No,” the bear started to unzip her jacket, and despite her protests, he overpowered her with ease and pulled it off her shoulders as carefully as he could, shocking her even more with his gentleness. “I just wanted to create a distraction so we could talk. Who knows when the next time will be that you can get out of the castle, Savannah?”

She gulped involuntarily. He knew who she was! This couldn't mean anything good.

“Relax, Princess,” he coaxed, his healthy eye glowing red. “If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead, and I wouldn't be tending to your wounds either.”

“Is that what you are doing?” she shot him a wary glance.

“Of course. Though if Fionlagh dies, I wouldn't mind. But that's unlikely. Someone like him will never die in a battle!”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Savvy narrowed her eyes suspiciously. That didn't sound like just a random set of words.

“Maybe one day you will find out,” he retorted as he sneered and brushed his palm over her bare arm, checking for injuries and leaning in closely so that his hot breath was now burning her skin.

“I think I am fine! Thanks!” she exclaimed, trying to distance herself, despite the lack of space she had to move. Images of their last encounter, where he quickly overpowered her flashed before her eyes. The white werebear was very strong. So strong that to have a chance against him, she would have to let out what was inside of her. No matter the situation, her inner beast had to be her last resort.

“Does this look fine to you?” he asked, raising one of her legs so she could see her foot turned out at an unnatural angle. It also hurt like hell.

“I will heal,” Savvy insisted, pressing her lips. She did not like being vulnerable at all.

“You will be in agony for quite some time,” he explained patiently, undoing the straps of her sandals. “Terrible choice of shoes for the North by the way.”

“Where is Kai?” She was slightly fed up with the small talk. He had just admitted that he arranged this attack, causing her to fall. There was no way he was getting away with acting like her saviour right now.

His eye glinted dangerously, and in the next moment, he tore the fabric of her jeans to gain better access to her foot, yet the predatory look he gave her made her squirm.

“Stay in place,” he advised, sliding his palm up her calf and gripping her tightly.
“Ready?”

“I asked you a question!” Savannah was getting angrier by the second, and more frustrated, but the werebear twisted her broken foot to set her bones back in place. Excruciating pain overtook her as she simultaneously released an ear-splitting shriek. He held her in place, watching her chest heaving up and down.

“Easy!” He pressed her against the ground, maintaining a firm hold of her leg.

Savvy could feel her healing speed up and knew that, thanks to the corrected position of the bones, it would be mere minutes until she was properly healed.

“Where. Is. Kai?” she repeated her question, still panting slightly, and saw a displeased expression on the bear’s face.

“Does it matter?” He raised his brow while one of his hands drew soothing circles on her flesh.

“It matters to me,” the girl insisted, trying not to move.

“Don’t tell me you like,” the man gritted his teeth, “that prick,” he spat out, not even trying to hide his irritation.

ay “It’s not about that.” She shook her head and tried to remove his hands from her. As if to prove a point, he didn’t move an inch.

“The lucky bastard is busy. Although I wish he was the one to fall and not you. This,” he offered as he gestured his arms about him, “wasn’t planned.”

I am flattered,” Savannah snorted in an attempt to hide her agitation. “But to what do I owe the honour of you not wanting me to break my neck?”

“When I met you first, I didn’t know who you were,” he started, only to be interrupted immediately

“This makes two of us. Why don’t you introduce yourself then? You already know who I am.”

“I do,” the man in front of her admitted readily. “I watched the show after all. Rewound it a few times to get a better look at you too.”

"I was there for like two seconds." Savvy averted his eyes, his gaze endeavouring to pierce hers, but she looked up the slope to see if Kai was all right. She could hear faint sounds of a fight, which meant that he was alive at least. He was also too far from her at the moment. She regretted that they couldn't stay and faced the battle together. Now he was on his own up there, and she was alone down here with this dangerous bear.

"That's why I didn't watch the twins. I liked that other one better" He smirked slightly when her attention was entirely back on him. "The Truthteller, was it?"

"How would I know?" Savvy shrugged, starting to fear where all this would lead them. "My leg is fine now. Would you let go of it?"

"It doesn't look fine to me yet." He caressed her again, and now she knew he was simply playing with her. For him, she was nothing more than prey.

It did not help when she heard movements in the dark behind them and saw a few pairs of eyes dangerously glinting in the depth of the woods. He wasn't alone, although even if he was, it would be more than enough to cause trouble.

"I have to say I was surprised to see you go out with him." The bear decided to change the subject. "I would assume you would be the one to hate him the most because of what he has done."

"Who says I don't hate him?" Savannah tried to seem unconcerned.

"Don't play with me, princess!" He snapped and finally took his hands off her. "I have eyes everywhere. You were watched today, and the two of you looked like you had the time of your life."

"So?" Savvy tried to stand up, but the healing wasn't complete yet, and she stumbled. However, the bear did not let her fall, catching her in time. Catching a glimpse of his facial expression, Savvy quickly realised the situation.

"He humiliated you and made you compete with other women for what was supposed to be yours in the first place, and this is your reaction? A date?" She knew he was testing her, so she managed to stay calm, simultaneously controlling herself and her wolf. Savannah knew too little to make any conclusions or decisions at this moment. Luckily, she was brought up as a royal and knew how to play the game of wills quite well.

"Trust me," she challenged, meeting his watchful gaze, "there is hardly one girl in the Trials fighting for Kai Fionlagh. Each contender has her own reasons to be there. I am no exception."

"And what is your reason, Savannah?" He tried to take her chin into his hand, but she managed to escape his attempt.

“Now that is a rude question, considering you still haven’t introduced yourself, yet you have already managed to injure me.”

“I am ready to apologise for that. My name is Darius Bjorn, and I am at your full service, Princess.” He bowed and took her hand into his, brushing his lips over her delicate fingers, as if he was a gentleman and not one of the white bear rebels endangering all the lycans. Savannah was surprised he really had not tried to kill her or at least kidnap her to terrorise Gideon. That would undoubtedly be an easy way out

However, all these thoughts left her when a wave of a slightly familiar scent coated the two of them, tickling her nostrils and unsettling Athena in her mind. She searched for its source, only to realise that it was the werebear himself.

“What’s wrong, Princess?” he taunted, an innocent smirk curling his lips.

Kai snarled Toudly as two bears and another two wolves approached him after he killed the first five who dared to attack him. How many more were hiding nearby, biding their time? The metallic taste of the werewolves’ blood was still on his tongue. Werewolves, not lycans. From their scent, they weren’t local. Considering who he was dealing with, he knew scents weren’t something he could rely on anymore.

However, at this moment, none of this bothered him ...

For the first time in his life, Kai was afraid. Tenacious primal fear cordoned off his body and soul. He thought he had forgotten what fear felt like years ago, but here it was, ever-present and stronger than ever before. He was worried sick for the girl he stupidly took on a date, purely out of his selfish desires. He shouldn’t have done it. If he hadn’t, Savannah would now be in the safety of her bedroom, sleeping peacefully, but he got greedy. He wanted her to see the real him. He wanted to have her all to himself for once. He wanted her to stop seeing the cold northern king and start seeing the man he knew she could fall in love with one day. If he tried hard and proved himself to her, maybe they could ...

He had miscalculated. It was his mistake, and Savannah was left paying for it.

He saw her fall off the hill in the last few seconds before he was attacked. Kai didn’t even get to shift or see what happened to the western princess because someone’s canines were already buried in his flesh.

Asgard had different feelings. Somehow his wolf was sure that Savannah was alive, and that knowledge gave him the strength not to lose it here and now. However, his wolf was enraged. Raw fury filled him to the brim, and his wolf instincts overtook him. He had to let it all out.

Both bears charged at him at once, massive and ferocious, but he lunged at the bigger one, easily escaping his smaller companion’s claws and sharp teeth. Without wasting

time, Asgard went for the main artery in its neck, tearing it off and spitting it out on the ground with the rest of his flesh. At the same time, he managed to S***h an eye with his talons. Just to ensure that this bear would be distracted while he was dealing with the rest of its crew.

One of the werewolves tried to bite his side, but Asgard was too fast for him. Turning around, he snarled and leapt at the second werebear, who was also much slower. He had to take them out first. He dug his claws in the enemy's fur while his canines closed in a death grip around the bear's throat, ripping off his head. He had to put a lot of force into that, but the final result was worth it in the end.

A few seconds later, he had disposed of the other werewolf with one sharp bite, sending him to meet Fenrir's justice. The last one came at him, desperate for a win yet unable to get to anything vital in Asgard's body. With a mighty twist, the lycan grasped his smaller opponent with his teeth, pulled him off his feet and slammed the bastard to the ground, crushing the life out of him.

With a loud roar, the dying giant charged at him, blood still gushing down its neck where the first werebear had a piece missing from their first encounter. Asgard quickly stepped aside and

brought his claws down in one huge strike. The bear fell to the ground, twitching and gasping for breath.

The lycan didn't even spare him a last glance, knowing that he was as good as dead. considering how much blood he was losing. No regeneration could help that,

He saw more glowing eyes in the darkness and knew he had just seconds before the next batch would charge at him.

Kai wasn't going to wait for them this time. They weren't of interest to him. Considering they were attacking him in small groups, it was obvious they had only one purpose today. To stall for time.

He had mind-linked Lachlan and Aspen, to let them know what happened and knew help would be here soon. However, he was not going to wait for it. There was only one thing on his mind now, only one person-Savannah

It was absolutely impossible, and Savvy knew that. The smirk on Bjorn's face indicated he understood the level of the effect his scent was producing on her.

Cedarwood with a hint of mint Zack's scent was hard to forget as it haunted her day and night. She loathed it to the point she stopped drinking her favourite mint tea and

changed her toothpaste to a berry-flavoured one. Each time it reminded her of her mate, who betrayed her and was ready to kill her if he had to.

Nonetheless, a part of her still responded to that damn scent. The scent that was now slowly coating her. There was something else in it, something different, and she couldn't tell at once, but slowly, a note of chestnut was added to it. It was hard to notice at first, but it slowly replaced the cedar. Bjorn took it as a sign and bent down to reach, to touch her lips with his. Savannah flinched away, startled even more than before.

"What are you," she hesitated, "doing?" she asked, her brows knitted together. "Pardon me," the werewolf chuckled softly but didn't move away. "I thought you were ready ...

His gaze told her what he thought. Wishful to the point of being hungry, but also playful. As if he was toying with her.

"Ready?" she arched her brow and tried to push him away, but he remained in his place. "May I ask, ready for what?"

"You'll know when you feel it," he teased, his light silver hair shining in the moonlight. Athena was on high alert when he was around.

"Is this the important conversation you almost killed me for?" She decided to go back to the point.

"You came here to marry the King of The North, and I am ready to assist you with that."

She first thought that he was joking, but their eyes met, and not a muscle twitched on his face.

"Hmm. That's one interesting offer considering that you have to attack Kai to simply speak to me." Savannah decided to play dumb. She knew too well what he meant, or at least she thought she knew. But this was getting ridiculous.

sa "I think you know I am not talking about him " Bjorn smirked and pressed her tighter against

himself. "Trust me, Princess, his days on the throne are numbered."

"Is that so?" She tried to distance herself from him, but it was proving to be complicated without applying force. Remembering how easily he overpowered her the last time, she didn't want to take any chances until she knew more.

"You don't believe me yet," he interjected, his eye glowed red as she tensed. However, the bear lowered himself to her ear and whispered, "That's fine. I wasn't counting on it during my first attempt. You will watch him lose one thing after another before your very eyes, and you then will believe me."

Savvy gulped. That werebear sounded confident. Too confident to ignore.

“In the meantime, I will court you,” he announced, and she felt slightly uncomfortable. Just what did that mean?

“Sounds ... promising,” she mumbled, and he moved a strand of hair off her forehead.

“Understand that we need to get to know each other better before you can say yes to me, but I am a patient man.” His straightforwardness was scaring her. Just why was he so confident?

“I am making no promises,” she said bluntly, Darius Bjorn was giving her bad vibes, and she was unaware of what to do with this turn of events.

“I am not asking you to. I am making my move and letting you know about it, Savannah.” He cupped her chin and tilted it slightly toward him. “I will be sending you gifts. You will know when they arrive. You can stop bothering with the Trials. Trust me, you don’t need them.”

“Forgive me for not dropping my own agenda because a man I have only met twice says so.” She rolled her eyes, unclear on how else she should react. It was yet another male who thought he knew better than she did on what she needed. She wasn’t interested in those. Not to mention his whole attitude and background were questionable, to say the least.

“Savannah, I understand,” he told her. “I know that you’ve been hurt before and ...”

He made a pause to enjoy her wide eyes. Many people in the West knew about her story, but it was unlikely for it to spread in the North, yet what Bjorn was implying couldn’t be read any differently. He obviously knew about her and Zack, which partially explained the scent he emitted.

“I will learn how to deal with you over time, and you will learn to trust me.” A promise which strangely seemed like a threat to her. “Just wait for my gifts, and you’ll see...”

Suddenly, he abruptly looked to his right and then back at her, sighing. “I am afraid I have to go now, Savannah. I am not saying goodbye. Remember, I am the one who can give you what you came to the North for. Not him.”

“Listen,” she interrupted him, but he placed a finger to her lips.

“No time now,” Bjorn shook his head. “If you want to speak to me, place a lantern on your window when you go to sleep.”

She wanted to tell him that it was extremely unlikely she’d be calling him when she was going to sleep, but they got distracted. They both heard the sounds of four large paws

landing nearby. Savannah knew it was Kai before she smelled his scent and a feeling of relief made her

exhale happily. She turned to look at Bjorn, but the white werebear was already gone.

*Savvy!" The lycan king was running in her direction, absolutely naked and covered in blood. It didn't bother him, but her cheeks flushed before he could reach her.

"Kai!" She tried to warn him about his nudity with her sharp tone, but he ignored her completely, locking her in his arms and giving her the tightest of hugs. It felt divine. Even she had to admit to that. His head was buried in the crook of her neck, and he inhaled sharply.

Suddenly, his whole body stiffened. "Who did this to you?" Kai growled.

"I am not asking you to. I am making my move and letting you know about it, Savannah." He cupped her chin and tilted it slightly toward him. "I will be sending you gifts. You will know when they arrive. You can stop bothering with the Trials. Trust me, you don't need them."

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1. 23. A Royal Ride

"Who did this to you?!" Kai repeated his question as Savannah furrowed her brows, not understanding what he meant. Although, if she was being honest with herself, she was mostly trying really hard not to look at his beautiful muscular body, exposed fully before her eyes. There was something about him that always tempted her mind to go to sinfully delicious places, and it was hard to have him this close with no clothes to boot.

"I'm," she attempted to say something, but he placed his palm on her cheek and rubbed it gently with his thumb, "fine ... I'm fine."

"The hell you are," he grunted while his eyes glowed blue. "You have blood here."

She tried to touch the same place he did and ended up placing her fingers on top of his, causing him to suck in a deep and painful breath.

"I had the helmet on," Savvy tried to explain while her cheeks were heating up from the tension. "I didn't scratch my face. I probably got it when I wiped my hand or something."

Kai caught her arm and started checking it, eyes grazing over every exposed inch of her skin. It did not escape him that she didn't have his jacket on anymore, and he noticed it on the ground nearby. Meaning that for some reason, it was taken off her.

The blood pulsed in his veins at the thought of why that would have been necessary circling in his mind.

However, he quickly cooled down, concentrating on something more important. Savannah was healing rapidly, but he could see a few deep cuts and bruises on her.

Her jeans were soaking with blood in some places, and she had one shoe on, making it hard for her to keep her balance.

“Savvy...” Kai wanted to say something but couldn’t find the right words, realising that no matter how he looked at it, he was the one at fault.

One thing that selfishly bothered him even more than her being hurt thanks to him was that Savannah reeked of another male. It was impossible to tell the species, which could only mean one thing-his assumptions about who attacked them were correct.

Yet, once again, the Western Princess stood before him alive and in one piece.

“Please, don’t throw me in the lake again.” the girl knitted her brows, reading his facial expression correctly. He felt a prick of guilt deep inside. How low was her opinion of him?

Instead, he grasped her and pulled her into a hug, tucking his head into her hair. Kai inhaled her scent so deeply that his whole lungs were filled with it now. For some reason, it helped to calm him down, although he wasn’t in any rush to let her go. He almost lost her, and the feeling was horrific.

Her delicate fingers glided over his bare skin as she awkwardly wrapped her arms around him instead of pushing him away.

“I am so sorry,” he muttered, but she heard his *every* word. “I don’t see how any of this is your fault,” Savvy whispered, and he exhaled heavily,

distancing himself from her.

“I was supposed to keep you safe on my territory.” The Northern King averted her gaze, shame flowing through his *mind* and soul.

“Yeeeah” She stretched the word. “Your territory is roamed by your enemies. Are you sure you don’t want that alliance my brother is offering?”

Her smile faded when he didn’t bite the joke. Although this was understandable to some degree, considering their circumstances. Maybe this wasn’t the time for jokes.

“Who was with you here?” Kai looked her straight in the eye.

Savannah disliked that this was suddenly becoming an interrogation. Nevertheless, she could also understand where he was coming from. In his place, she would do the same thing.

“I have a feeling you know who it was.” She stepped away from him and crossed her hands on her chest. While she was understanding, she wasn’t appreciating.

“Do you?” The King lifted his brow at her.

“Darius Bjorn, the white bear shifter with one eye who claims that he will be the King of The North soon,” she said bluntly, trying not to miss his reaction as this was important. She noticed how he clenched his fists and how his eyes glowed again, meaning that his wolf was angry and trying to get out.

“Did you meet him before you came here?” Kai was unsure if he really wanted to hear her answer.

“No,” she said calmly, and he experienced temporary relief. However, temporary was the keyword.

“Did you have any contact with him prior to arriving in the North?”. “No.” “Did you know about him at all?” “No.”

She was starting to get furious. “Did you ...” He started asking the next question, but she lost it.

“Kai Fion....lugh,” she almost swore because this last name always caused her to stumble, “what is it exactly you want to know?!”

“I want to know why the man who kills anyone he meets, who has never left a single witness alive, left you in one piece twice!” the Lycan growled, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Maybe because I am so adorable, he can’t resist me?” Her lips curled into a sly grin, making this the last straw for him. In one swift move, Kai lifted her up in his arms and started walking.

“What do you think you are doing?!” Savannah snarled at him. Athena was joining in the game as well. They were Alphas and were not going to be manhandled like that again. Enough was enough, and the Northern King had already gotten away with it once.

“There is a lake nearby!” The man smirked, and she hissed at him.

“I swear, if you do this again, I will shift and leave the North and those stupid Trials for good!” she announced, not expecting any kind of reaction.

However, this made the King stop. After a few seconds of hesitation, he even placed her

back onto her feet, startling her.

Savvy didn't know how to react and what to say. She just watched Kai return to where she initially fell and picked up the leather jacket. He then turned back to face her and threw the garment at her.

"Put it on!" he commanded, and Savannah rolled her eyes, shoving it back at him.

"You put it on! You need it more!" The princess let her eyes slide down just once, which caused her breath to hitch. He was one gorgeous lycan specimen, after all. Too good to forget. Ever.

However, she returned to her senses when the jacket flew back to her face. "Put. It. On." A roar, not even a growl this time.

Kai didn't know why it was so crucial for him now, but he wanted his scent all over her. His. Not anyone else's.

"Seriously!" she grunted but decided to accept the questionable gift anyway. "I am not joking! You need to cover yourself!"

Slowly and menacingly, he stalked toward her with a smirk on his lips. His eyes had a dangerous glint in them that resulted in Savvy's instant silence. Towering over her, he placed his large palms onto her delicate shoulders and turned her away so she couldn't see him anymore.

His hot breath tickled the skin next to her ear, and she heard his raspy whisper, "All you had to do was stop staring."

She blushed, unable to control it, and was disappointed when his heat was gone, leaving her feeling alone, cold and, well ... unsatisfied.

"I am sorry" Kai suddenly hugged her from the back, and although she should have pushed him away, she didn't. She leaned her head back, welcoming his unexpected embrace and his grip on her became tighter. His lips pressed against her neck, right where a mate's mark should go, and Savannah felt goosebumps run all over her body.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "Just the thought that he was next to you ... That he touched you ... It's more than I can handle. He never leaves anyone alive and"

"Would you prefer him to kill me?" she snorted, and he sighed. "Of course not...."

"Then what are you so worked up about? You know I came here for the alliance. I am not working for the bears. They tried to destroy us just a few months ago, and you should have seen how bloody that battle was!"

"I am worried for you, Savvy." His hand went up to her neck, cupping her chin while his thumb caressed her lower lip softly. "I am sorry. It's my fault, and I hate that you were

exposed to this psycho twice because of my negligence. The fact that he didn't do anything to you only scares me more. If *you* were mated to someone like him ..."

She flinched hearing that and stepped away, wrapping the leather jacket tighter around herself as if it was going to help her hide from the truth. The truth she wanted to share with him.

"He is not my mate," Savannah said quietly but firmly.

"Thanks to Fenrir!" Kai breathed out in relief, realising for the first time that this was what he wanted to hear more than anything.

already had a mate." Her following confession made his excitement disappear.

Savannah. "He was lost for words, not knowing what to feel and how to react. She was already mated to someone. He knew that they weren't mates, but thinking of her mated to someone else wasn't easy for him.

"He wasn't a good man," she clarified quickly without giving him as much as a glance. "It didn't work out."

Kai decided to not hold back and hugged her from the back again, squeezing her so tight that she would know how he felt.

"His loss," he whispered, and Savvy felt one single tear rolling down her cheek. "And my gain," the lycan king added, turning the woman around and lowering himself so that his lips could trace hers, parting them. Their eyes locked. A pause which had him silently asking for permission. When she blinked, he crashed his lips back into hers for a deep and passionate kiss. He felt the salt from her single tear, and it made him angry that someone made her cry. Even if just a little bit.

He wanted more of this, more of her, but so many people were knocking into his mind right now that he had to stop, painfully tearing his lips off of the woman he knew he wanted. Badly.

"I'll shift and take you to the castle on my back." A grin formed on his handsome face, and he placed his hands on both sides of her, right above the perfect V that led right to ... where Savannah was desperately trying not to look. Especially after their shared kiss.

"Excuse me?" She arched her brow defiantly.

"Or would you rather walk in one shoe?" The man chuckled softly. "Come on, Savannah. I'll shift and take you back home. It's going to be the fastest route. When else are you going to ride the King of the North?"

“Something tells me there are going to be quite a few opportunities,” she taunted him unexpectedly, and he lost his breath for a second. He considered telling Lachlan, who hadn’t stopped trying to reach him, to piss off.

A few howls emerged in the distance, and they both knew their moment was almost gone.

“Quick.” Kai smirked. “Before they find us!”

He shifted into a giant wolf right before her eyes, and she had to bite her lip to hide her excitement. She knew they only had a few seconds before his warriors would be able to locate them, but she allowed herself to admire his black and smoky grey fur. This colour was so rare that she couldn’t stop admiring it, mindlessly running her hand through his coat and enjoying how soft and silky it was.

He turned his head to look at her, and his eyes gleamed with blue light in the darkness of the night

“Hi, Asgard,” Savannah greeted the wolf with respect. “It’s nice to meet you again.”

He growled softly and tucked his head into her chest while she leaned forward and rested her chin on his head.

The moment was sweet, but the howls emerged again, and they both knew it was time to go, so she hopped on top of him.

There was absolutely no need for this. Savannah could have shifted herself, and they could have run back together. However, the King wished to take her on his back instead, and she decided to go with it, remembering a small extract from the history book she read for the Trials. In the North, this was considered to be a special kind of closeness as no wolf usually allowed any riders on their back. Unless, of course, it was someone special. Moreover, it was a part of an ancient bridal ritual when a male brought his future wife to his home on his back.

Savvy knew, of course, that Kai probably didn’t even know that. That tradition was long gone now. He couldn’t possibly be thinking about it. Needless to say, a little smile encroached on her lips.

The rustling of leaves distracted them both, and they saw two dark figures stepping out of the nearby bushes.

“You must be f*cking kidding me!” they heard a familiar voice.

NOTE: Please, remember, that most of my announcements take place in Marissa Gilbert’s Reading Circle on FB.

Savvy turned to see who the intruder was and noticed Lachlan walking out of the bushes, quickly wrapping something around his torso. She was extremely thankful for this because it would have been incredibly challenging to handle another naked Northman tonight.

The Beta watched the sight before him with a puzzled expression, and when Elene appeared right behind him, he didn't even react to her presence.

Savannah, however, felt her cheeks getting red from the look the northern princess gave her.

"Kai Fionlagh!" she gritted her teeth. "Are you serious?!"

Savannah was sure Kai would shift back to his human form now and talk to his sister and Beta. She had started imagining how Elene would probably accuse her of everything that had gone wrong, starting with the attack and conspiring with the white bears. However, to her surprise, the giant wolf huffed at his sibling and then simply sprinted away. She barely managed to dig her fingers into his fur to stay in place. Not to mention, she had to lean forward so that her chest was pressed against his back since keeping balance was next to impossible otherwise.

After just a few moments of their midnight run, her shock dispersed without a trace. She never rode on someone's back before, and it was, to say the least, really something!

The shrubs and trees surrounding them swayed, their leaves rustled by the wind. The scenery around them was changing rapidly, and she squealed with excitement, breathing in the earthy scent of grass.

To see the speed of a Lycan wolf with human eyes was improbable. Yet here they were ...

Kai ran through the woods he owned, and it was obvious he knew every inch of his land, letting her enjoy it and taking her through the most picturesque locations now that they didn't have to use the road anymore.

She would never admit it out loud, but this quickly turned into the best date of her life. Even despite falling off a cliff.

Savvy tried to contain her emotions but gave herself away when a heartfelt laugh escaped against her wishes. She got bold and leaned herself forward all the way to his large furry ear, shouting, "Faster!"

Kai was happy to oblige her request. He was ready to do anything to hear the sound of her laughter again. He was ashamed to admit it, but he would do circus tricks if she demanded them right now. Luckily for him, she just hugged him tighter, letting him envelop in that lovely bluebell scent of hers.

The guards at the gates gaped at the sight of their king bringing the western princess to the castle on his back, but neither commented on what they saw. After all, they all wanted to live.

Kai brought her to the pond, carefully lowering himself to let her hop off easily.

Savvy realised they would have to talk if she lingered any longer. That conversation could ruin everything.

So, she did the most'adult thing she could think of and, without further ado, tried to run away

She didn't get far since she only had one shoe on, significantly slowing her down. She hadn't reached the backdoor when two strong hands wrapped around her waist and stopped her lousy escape attempt.

"Wait," Kai whispered into her hair, her heart fluttering in her chest at the sounds of his husky voice. She could feel that by some miracle, the king already had some kind of pants on. He probably had a secret stash of clothes somewhere here, which was a relief to her.

"It was a really long day," Savannah offered, and they both knew it was the truth. "I am aware," he admitted. "But I don't want it to end like this."

"Like what?" The girl turned to face him, and a corner of her soft lips curled slightly. "Like the day the Northern King gave me the ride of my life?"

He couldn't help a low growl that escaped his chest. She was teasing him knowingly when he could barely control himself around her as it was.

"Savvy," Kai pulled her so close that he could hear her hastened heartbeat, "sometimes you are playing with fire."

"What can I say," she shrugged, "I always liked dangerous games."

"Savannah," he exhaled reproachfully as he pulled her closer and took her chin into his warm, rough palm.

"What?" She tried to avert his gaze, but it stopped being important when he leaned forward to capture her lips, stealing her breath away. His hand glided to the back of her neck, fingers lacing with silky strands of her hair to tug it softly so that she would arch her back for him.

Kai deepened the kiss, still holding her tight against himself. However, this time he managed to stop first, panting and wanting more, neither moving away nor continuing

what he started. He gently pressed his forehead over hers, savouring their moment as their noses brushed over each other.

“Good night, Savannah,” he whispered and then took a step back, startling her.

“Really?” she raised her brow questioningly.

“Really,” Kai took her hand and bowed to kiss it, his warm lips touching her skin briefly to send a wave of ... tingles.

“What a gentleman,” Savvy giggled, trying to not let him know that this little gesture was driving her crazy with lust for him.

“You said it was a long day yourself,” he reminded her.

“I did, didn’t I?” The princess tilted her head to watch him intently, and then a sly grin spread over her face. “Your sister and Beta are trying to reach you, aren’t they?” She covered her mouth so

as not to laugh too disrespectfully.

“It’s going to be a long night, too,” he chuckled, admitting the truth and stretching his hand to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. “Dream of me, all right?”

“No way!” she shoved his hand away playfully and limped in the direction of the backdoor. She stopped before she got too far, turning back to glance at him. “Think of what could have been while they nag you.”

The king’s lips parted, and the princess was finally able to escape.

Savvy was walking up the stairs for some time when she finally decided to give up and sat down to remove the shoe, rightfully deciding that it would be faster to walk with bare feet than like this.

“Savannah?” She heard a familiar voice call her and turned to see Astrid with a girl she didn’t know walking out of the corridor that contenders usually used. Savvy noticed a small suitcase in the stranger’s hands. The girl wore a wine-red dress that hugged her generous curves perfectly and played with her ebony-black curls right next to her revealing cleavage.

Yes, Savvy would remember someone like that. She was new. “Hi,” the princess greeted the fellow contender. “I just had some air outside.” “And lost your shoe?” the newcomer scoffed.

“Emma!” Astrid scolded her. “Sorry, Savannah. Emma just arrived. I finally managed to get them to let one of my friends stay with me. Everyone here has a support team, and I felt lonely.”

"Understandable," Savvy nodded. She was ready to agree to anything as long as the focus was off her.

"So, what happened to the shoe?" Astrid giggled. "You didn't think you were getting away with it, did you?"

Of course, she didn't. Getting some air was a lame excuse, and she knew it. "Well," Savvy sighed, "I went for a run, but when I came back, my shoe was missing."

"Really?" Astrid rolled her eyes and gave her a hand, helping her stand up. "It must be Celia or Inga. Those two have no boundaries!"

"Yeah, probably." Savannah just went with it. It was better than the truth. Although, of course, she knew that Astrid didn't buy the little lie. She was too smart for that.

"By the way," the girl changed her voice to a whisper. "Emma just found out what tomorrow's task will be."

"Oh really?" Savvy looked at her in surprise. Was she really going to tell her?
"Obviously, it's a big secret," Astrid added, even quieter than before.

"Then maybe you shouldn't share it with another contender!" Emma hissed, narrowing her eyes.

"Savannah is a friend," Astrid looked slightly annoyed. "I need someone in the competition who won't stab me in the back. Trust me, Em, she is the only one here who wouldn't!"

"No promises!" Savvy snorted, and her new self-proclaimed friend giggled as well.

"Seriously," the blonde sighed, "I tried talking to everyone here and other than you, Petra is the least blood-thirsty one. Can we agree to be on the same side at least until the final trial?"

"Are you sure we are going to stay here that long?" a chuckle escaped the princess. "Do you even remember that we are the least desirable contenders here?"

"We are the most underestimated ones!" Astrid corrected her with a smirk. "Something tells me, you are getting far in this contest. And I am not a quitter either!"

"Feisty little southerner!" Savvy giggled. "Fine! I like the idea. Now, spill. What is the next challenge?"

"Interviews," Astrid replied, looking around cautiously. "Emma just arrived and saw that the twin's filming crew came right before her."

"Maybe they are just going to film everything as usual," Savannah suggested.

"Unlikely." Astrid shook her head as the three of them climbed up the stairs. "She saw folders with our names, and they discussed questions as they waited for the security check. We don't know any specifics."

"Too bad!" Savvy chuckled.

"And what information do you have to thank Astrid's kindness?" Emma grunted behind them.

"Em, please!" her friend begged and looked at Savvy apologetically. "I know who will be the twin's main target," the princess winked at her two companions. "Something we don't know!" The brunette did not seem impressed by her humour.

"Doesn't matter," Astrid intervened. "If Savvy happened to know something, she would tell me too."

"You are too kind!" Emma mumbled, but both of them heard that. "Don't worry," Savannah smiled, "if I have a chance, I will repay everything."

They said their goodbyes, and Savvy got into her bedroom. She considered getting a shower, but Kai's jacket was still on her, and she liked its scent. Besides, she was so exhausted she simply didn't have the strength for anything anymore. So, she quickly slid out of the clothes, casually throwing the jacket right next to the bed and then wrapped herself in sheets.

The forest scent gently surrounded her, making Athena purr in her mind as the two of them drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

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Savvy woke up and stretched in her bed with a smile on her face. She decided to take a bath and soak in it a bit since she didn't get to it after the events of the previous day. What happened yesterday left her perplexed and puzzled. It was difficult figuring everything out in this strange place. She was used to political games; however, back in her kingdom, at least she knew who she could trust. She had her brother Gideon, who always had her best interest in mind. She had Reid, his Beta, who was also like an older brother to her and was always spoiling her more than anyone else. She also had her warrior friends. She knew that each of them was ready to die for their princess.

She didn't have any of that here, and sometimes it felt like she was walking in a minefield.

Kyle had been her best friend ever since she could remember, and she was happy that he volunteered to come here with her. But he couldn't help her much in the North. They already figured this much out.

Closing her eyes and slowly slipping underwater, Savannah had to admit to herself that she enjoyed her date with Kai. She liked talking to him, kissing him, okay, probably more than just liked it. The way they parted yesterday was so promising. She was excited for the first time in a long while.

That Bjorn bear was intimidating. It bothered her that he was physically stronger. Not many

Lycan males could boast that. She was a royal, after all. A simple bear wasn't supposed to be able to tackle her this easily. Which could only mean one thing... Bjorn wasn't that simple.

It was kind of obvious considering Kai's reaction after each of their encounters. Savvy saw a dark figure hanging over her and got out to the surface immediately.

"Morning, Sunshine!" Kyle flashed his pearly whites at her, and she threw a sponge at him.

"Eww, Kyle! Boundaries!" she shouted as he escaped to the bedroom.

"It's your fault!" her friend replied from behind the door this time. "You were gone last night, and we couldn't find you in the morning! Do you know that it's the middle of the day already?!"

"Really?" A wave of guilt washed over Savannah. But it wasn't too big of a wave.

"Yeah," Zara confirmed. "We had to wake you up. They just announced what you are going to be doing tonight."

"The interviews?" Savvy asked, quickly finishing washing off. "Yeah," her assistant sounded startled. "How did you know?"

"I had a friend share that valuable info with me yesterday," the princess giggled, wrapping a towel around herself and walking back to her two partners in crime.

"Is that why we couldn't find you yesterday?" Kyle looked at her suspiciously, and she averted his gaze.

“So, what else do we have here? Any peculiar news?” Savvy tried to change the subject while Zara was busy arranging her breakfast on the table.

“Not much,” she shrugged her shoulders. “I bribed a few people and now get regular reports about the other contenders. No fairy princesses among them. They are here to win. Even Petra.”

“Shocking!” Savannah giggled, taking her seat at the table and winking at her assistant. “Thanks, Zee. I don’t know what I would do without you!”

“She is a star!” Kyle confirmed, looking at his laptop. “Thanks to her little spies, the Truthteller now has more info to share. And thanks to that, he doesn’t look biased toward a certain princess. Kai’s date with Salome today was just golden!”

A piece of toast stuck in Savvy’s throat, and she tried to desperately cough it out. “Are you okay?” Zara rushed to her side, but she motioned for her to stop. “Yeah, I am great,” she muttered. “What are you talking about, Kyle? What date?”

“An improvised one,” the guy sneered. “He found her early in the morning and invited her to have breakfast with him. The drones are all over them. That breakfast is still not done! And it’s been hours!”

“I have to say,” Zara chimed in, “I didn’t think much of the witch in this kind of a competition, but judging from the photos I am getting, the King is smitten with her.”

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1. 25. Gilded Armour

Savvy clenched her lips so tight that they formed a thin white line.

“Can you imagine how great it would be if Kai ended up marrying a witch?” Kyle snorted loudly while typing something on his laptop. “We will be able to mock the North for the rest of our lives for having a Witch Queen! This is just precious!”

“You Lycans and your love for the same species!” Zara gave him a mocking eye roll.

“If you want me to help him end up with Mavis, just tell me!” Kyle winked at her, and the bird shifter’s face changed at once.

“Anyone but that botch!” The girl crossed her hands on her chest. “With her on the throne, you will have a war at your doorstep in no time!”

“Yeah, she doesn’t seem particularly charming!” Kyle agreed and looked at his childhood friend. “Savannah, what do you think? Mavis or Salome?”

His smile dropped when he saw her pale face. He knew her too well to not understand that something was going on.

“What is it?” “Is it that piece of sh-t Zack screwing someone again?” He asked her bluntly without beating around the bush.

“Show me the pictures,” Savannah ignored the question. “Sav, you look a bit pale,” Zara walked towards her with a concerned look. “Are you sure...

“Show me the pictures!” the princess demanded, and her assistant got out her phone, swiping her fingers across the glossy screen a few times. Then she handed her the device, and Savannah saw Kai walking in the garden with Salome attached to his hand. The two of them were

glancing at each other and grinning like two happy children, and Savvy felt nauseous from seeing them like this.

She started scrolling. Picture after picture of what looked like a proper date. Then, a new notification came, and she clicked on it without thinking twice, opening the most recent photo. Kai pressed Salome’s hand to his lips while giving her a playful gaze. The gaze she knew too well. The gaze she thought he only gifted her with.

Savannah’s heart clenched painfully. She had already done this. She had already been through this. Betrayal was not new to her, but why did it hurt so much again?

“What the hell, Sav?” She didn’t even notice that Kyle was already standing next to her. She knew that her eyes were getting watery. The tears she would never let fall were burning her eyes, and she blinked them away quickly. She was crying for her fated mate for one day! The Northern King would not be getting such honour. They were no one to each other after all.

“I am fine!” She forced a smile, but her friends didn’t buy it. Kyle was watching her intently with his brows furrowed. Nevertheless, it was Zara who said the words loud and clear, “You like the King.” The silence in the room was heavy.

“What?” Kyle let out a nervous laugh, but then his eyes locked with Savannah’s for a few seconds before she turned away.

“Oh, no!” He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “No, no, no! Savvy, you can’t!”

“And I will not!” She practically yelled at him, and the trio got silent. Until Kyle interrupted again.

“How?” He looked at his childhood friend questioningly. “When?!” “It’s a long story!” Savannah sighed, bitterness lacing her words.

“We have time,” Zara moved a chair for the princess to sit on and settled on the next one. Kyle returned to where he left his laptop, but it was the last thing on his mind now.

Savvy contemplated just telling them everything and being done with it. “Forget it” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not a big deal.”

"I've spent years in the Red Harem, Savvy," Zara tilted her head slightly. "I know the look on your face far too well. I saw it in the mirror and on every other girl's face. But the thing is that you brought us here for a reason, and I hope that it means you can trust us. If you can't share this with me, I will understand. But at least let Kyle know everything. It's essential now."

Zara prepared to leave, but Savvy took her hand and squeezed it slightly. "No, stay," she smiled. "I trust you both."

She saw their concerned glances and, taking a deep breath, told them everything, not withholding even the most minor details.

The room got quiet again when she was done. "Before you say anything," the princess warned them, "I know I am pathetic. First Zack, now

this..."

"There is nothing pathetic about you," Zara assured her. "Zack was your mate, and Kai, well, he is charming."

"Asthole," Kyle interjected, tapping his fingers on the cover of his laptop. "He is an asshole who arranged all this to avoid marrying you, Sav. That's..."

"I know." She had to agree with him. "Consider it all forgotten. We are back to plan one. I am winning and leaving."

"Good," Kyle nodded eagerly and opened his laptop back. "In the meantime, the Truthteller has something to say about this date!"

"No," Savvy rushed to stop him. "Please, don't."

"Fine!" he grunted and shut his laptop. "But only because you asked! And don't start me on that other guy and his gifts! What the hell is that supposed to mean?!"

Zara watched the two of them thoughtfully and raised her brow when Savvy went to the wardrobe and got a luxurious gown out.

"I think I'll wear this one for the interviews," she chewed on her lip, throwing a quick glance at her assistant, who had a hard time holding back a little smirk that desperately tried to escape her.

"Isn't this too much?" Kyle rubbed the back of his neck. He always supported all her crazy actions, but when it came to her outfits, he always sided with Gideon and Reid, wishing for her to

dress like a good little nun.

“No, no,” Zara intervened this time, not letting him ruin the fun. “It’s just perfect.”

Kai was happy because he knew that soon he would see the woman who had been on his mind since the moment he let her go the night before. He managed to sort out quite a few problems today, and now they could finally talk with the Western Princess.

He waited for her in the dark passage of the castle, already knowing that she would use the secret backdoor he had shown her when he thought she was a maid in trouble. The sweet memory made his chest tighten.

When the door creaked, his lips curved into a half-smile since he wasn’t mistaken. However, the Northern King lost his breath at the sight of the woman who walked out into the light. To him, she was a vision of utter perfection.

Savannah had a beautiful lustrous gown on. A golden corset adorned with sequins and beads in intricate patterns hugged her curves perfectly, while the soft organza and tulle skirt cascaded to the floor like a cloud of iridescent pale pink mist. Kai couldn’t take his eyes off the slit at the front where her slender tanned leg that definitely belonged to a well-trained warrior was appearing and disappearing in the layers of the flowing skirt with every step she took.

His thoughts, however, concentrated on her delicate collarbones exposed to his gaze. Her neck was free to mark, and he was itching to do just that, watching her wearing the sleeveless dress with such confidence as if it was golden armour. The embellishments gleamed as they caught the light from the tiny lamps installed on the walls. She looked like a fragile fairy who arrived into this world by mistake. Beautiful and ethereal. Gilded leaves in her extravagant updo in the latest northern fashion helped her look the part, and Kai couldn’t stop admiring her beauty

Her looks weren’t what attracted him the most. There were many beautiful women in the world. He had eleven others waiting for him just a few feet away, but there was just one Savannah Stormhold. Now he knew without a doubt that she was the only woman or him.

He stayed in the darkness, enjoying her bluebell scent that had already reached his nose. The king inhaled it deeply, waiting for her to stop in front of him. She was supposed to have already realised he was standing there.

However, Savannah just strode past him, her heels clicking on the cold northern stone floor.

He cleared his throat, but she didn’t stop

“Go get her!” Asgard growled inside of him, ready for the game of chase. If she was ready to hide, he was prepared to seek.

Nonetheless, the princess sped up as if she was in a hurry. He saw how tense her shoulders were, and it made him worried. This did not resemble the playful chase he was hoping for at all.

She was actively avoiding him!

“Savvy,” the king called, walking behind her, not quite believing that this was happening after what they had experienced the previous day.

Yet Savannah chose to continue ignoring him because whatever it was between them, it had to stop. This was the best thing she could do because, technically, she could win without even as much as having to talk to him. The North wanted a strong Luna, not the one their king would be smitten with. So, there was no point in wasting her time on what could never work anyway.

He had a date with another woman after what they shared the night before, and she sadly realised today that he would be having many more dates with all the Luna Trials contenders. To him, she was just one of them.

And she, quite frankly, couldn't handle it.

Well, actually, she could. But that would only be possible if she came back to treating all this as a political affair and forgot about all the romance attached to it. Out of all the people in the world, Kai was the one she could never end up with. The least possible options were only her mate and that white bear that kept pestering her.

It was the sad truth. She had to forget that the gardener even existed. There was only King Kai, the cold and calculating monarch who did not keep his word and who had plenty of women to choose from.

“Savvy!” he growled behind her, as she picked up speed again. If she could just make it to the hall with all the guests and the girls, she would be safe. He wouldn't do or say anything there. Then, after her interview was done, she could sneak out while he was busy with someone else. She was sure he would be with someone else.

Then she would allow herself one single night of tears. Just like she did with Zack.

When they had won the battle, and everyone was celebrating their victory, Riannon's return, and saving the red girls, Savannah escaped the impromptu party and locked herself in her bedroom where she cried in the shower for hours, trying to wash off her mate's scent along with the short memories of them being together. She managed to do the first one, but the second one turned out to be a real struggle.

So, she learned to live with that instead. The tears dried up, and neither Savannah nor Athena let themselves think of him again.

Until the pains arrived, that was. Her mate had a way of reminding her about himself, which only prompted her to hate him more.

However, none of this was important now. What was important—Savvy knew very well how to deal with betrayal since this wasn't her first one.

“Savannah!” The Northern King sounded impatient as he finally managed to catch hold of her arm right before she was about to enter the passage leading to the main hall.

“Oh,” she chirped while her face was expressionless, which startled him a bit, “Your Majesty. I really did not see you there. Pardon me for my rudeness. Shall we?”

She intended to keep walking, and he had to yank her away from the door. She looked him in the eyes for the first time since they parted ways the previous day, and he instantly knew that something was off. It did not make him change his mind or back away. Savannah didn't know it yet, but he had already made a crucial decision.

“Let go of me!” she warned him, her eyes glowing the royal gold of the West. “Not before you talk to me!” he demanded, letting Asgard show off his blue northern

bloodline glow. She wasn't the only one who could do that. Two could play this game!

“Aren't you tired of talking?” The princess rolled her eyes to demonstrate how unbothered she was by his advances. “You talked to the witch the whole morning!”

Well, this was awkward. She didn't plan to comment on that. Yet it ended up being one of the first things she mentioned to him.

Great job, Savvy.

She absolutely hated how the corner of his mouth curved slightly after hearing her words.

“Savannah,” his voice sounded deep and rumbled as he leaned towards her and almost brushed his nose over her cheek. “By any chance, are you jealous?”

Her eyes widened instinctively. That audacity of his was unbearable. “Of what?” she scoffed. “You and Maleficent?”

The grin on his face became wider as he pressed her against a wall with his unbearably massive hot chest that seared her skin even through her firm corset.

“So jealous,” he repeated, provoking her. “Savvy, do you by any chance like me?”

Seventy Three Letters

“In your dreams!” Savannah hissed, trying to push him away. “Womanisers are not my cup of tea. So, go back to Sabrina, the teenage witch and..”

He crushed his lips into hers, his warm tongue sliding into her mouth, trying to gain submission with t, greedy, devouring, dominant strokes. She relished this more than she cared to admit, but, her desires battled her will, she couldn't lose. So, while Kai was enjoying himself, Savannah did the only thing that came to her mind and bit his lip, drawing blood from it. Kai growled into her mouth, but to her surprise, it wasn't the angry growl she expected.

He caught both her arms and pinned them above her head, staring at her with a smug smile and licking his lip, the metallic taste only exciting him more for some reason.

“Do that again, and I'll choke you!” Savvy promised and saw the lycan leaning toward her lips.

“I have to warn you, Savannah,” he whispered in a manner that created goosebumps all over her body. “It's quite possible that I will enjoy that as well. So, do as you must.”

He was about to claim her lips when she turned away, forgetting that this only gave him access to her neck.

“Don't tempt me, Savvy,” he snarled into her ear and started to trail a series of wet torturous kisses all over her neckline. “You have no idea how many times I have thought of marking you. But when I do it, I will do it right.”

She froze in his arms, not believing her own ears. Was he really saying that? A mark? He can't be serious!

“Stop it, Kai!” she ordered, and to her surprise, he obeyed her at once, locking his blue eyes with hers. “Enough of these games! Let's just go to the main hall. You can play with one of your other brides if you are in the mood for it! Just leave me alone.”

She tried to walk away, but he caught her again.

“Savvy, what's wrong?” Now he was serious. He could tell that she was hurting, and his heart was aching for some reason,

“Nothing!” She lied, to which of course he didn't buy.

“Savvy...” Kai caught her in his arms again and took her chin into his hands. “Savvy, you aren't seriously thinking I was on a date with Salome, are you?”

“What am I supposed to think?!” she snapped at him.

"That I am crazy about you," he interrupted. That you are all I can think of since the moment I saw you destroying that bush."

She paused, fingers digging into the fabric of his expensive black suit.

"That I am ready to send to hell all the traditions of my country for a chance to marry you." He smiled. "If you will have me, that is."

She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding when he pulled her closer. "But Salome..."

"Salome will be leaving the Trials today." Ka smirked. "You are not the only one who came here for an alliance, Savannah."

Her lips parted at the news. She couldn't believe this was really happening and that the million scenarios of Kai marrying the witch she fabricated in her mind were not going to come true.

"Why are you telling me all this?" she asked, arching her brow in sudden curiosity. "Isn't this confidential information?"

"It is," he affirmed and nodded, tracing her lower lip with his thumb. "But, how else am I ever going to gain your trust?"

She clenched her lips, knowing she would probably always have trust issues. How could anyone trust other people in this cruel world?

"I've made so many mistakes already," Kai confessed. "I am ready to do everything I can to prove to you I am worthy of your love. I want to earn your trust, I will do whatever it takes ..."

"I don't think it's possible given our circumstances," she chuckled sadly. If he was venturing to be honest with her, she could at least meet him where he was at.

"I agree," Kai took her chin into his large palm and with a slight lift brought her face up to look at him. "This is why the Luna Trials are over the minute you say so. Become my real fiancée, Savvy. We don't have to marry immediately, however, I do want everyone to know that you are the only one for me."

"No," she shook her head in denial. "This is crazy. That's impossible! Let's just forget the whole thing. You and I ... it was never going to work. You will find your mate, and this would become a disaster! Besides, we barely know each other ... All this is just ... I don't know what this is."

She blubbered all that nonsense, and he watched her with a half-smile.

"I don't want a mate if she is not you," he told her, placing his forehead on hers. "She can't feel better than this."

"You have no idea what a mate bond is like." Savannah sighed, and now he was the one struck with a fit of jealousy. "It will consume you within minutes, overwhelm you. You will forget about everyone else and only want that one person."

"Is this ... how you feel about your mate?" His grip on her became tighter, and he wasn't sure if he really wanted to know the answer. What if her feelings for him were nothing in comparison? Was that why she kept pushing him away?

"Not any more," she breathed out, and he felt the heavy constriction gripping his heart lift off his chest.

"Then my mate wouldn't be a problem either," he said, gently nibbling her lips. "Just say yes to me, Savvy."

"No," she responded at once, and he let out a chuckle. Kai gave her a challenging look, unbuttoning his blazer and throwing it to the ground. She stared at him with her brows furrowed. Next, she watched him roll up his sleeves and lower himself to the ground in front of her.

"I knew you would require more persuasion, the king's hand glided over her hip, moving the fabric of her skirt aside and sending pleasant shivers all over her body.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she stuttered hesitantly. Yet she did not push him away.

"Kneeling before my future Queen." he sneered and hooked her thigh, gaining a gasp out of

her.

"Kai!" she belatedly attempted to scold him, but he was already peppering her skin with small sizzling kisses. "We can't! Not here!"

"I love how you went from 'we can't' to 'not here' in less than a second." He wickedly winked in approval. "That's my girl."

"Someone could see us!" She squeaked as his fingers reached for her silk underwear. This wasn't how she expected to spend this evening.

"Isn't this the best part?" He smirked and placed her thigh on his broad shoulder, dipping his head between her thighs.

She could feel his hot tongue making its first stroke against her core, only a mere piece of fabric separating them now. To her surprise, he immediately withdrew from her, his eyes intensely shining gold.

“Now, Savannah, this is the part where I need you to tell me you want this,” he looked at her with such vivid passion that she felt utterly devoured by him. Her breath hitched.

“No way.” She swallowed and shook her head. One of them had to be the sane one. “Let’s just go to the hall and ...”

“Yeah, no!” Kai refused with a laugh. “Not interested in that option. Not without tasting you first.”

“Blackmail is not a way to ask for consent!” she hissed as he drew his fingers in circles over her inner thigh.

“I am not blackmailing you!” He placed his hand on his heart as if she had stabbed it and his voice sounded offended. “I am’ begging on my knees. There is a difference!”

She had difficulty breathing at a steady pace. His closeness caused her mind to willingly wander to sinful places. She knew quite well he could already scent her response to his question, he could glimpse it on her ruined underwear. He was too close to not notice. Yet, he needed to hear it.

“We could stay like this all night,” he added and grazed his canines over her sensitive skin. “I really don’t mind. In fact, if your legs are wrapped around my shoulders, I could stay like that my whole life.”

Another electric touch, and she closed her eyes in willing defeat.

“Yes! Okay?!” Her voice emitting anger and desperation simultaneously. “Yes! To hell with you, Kai Fion...”

She didn’t get to finish as he ripped the lacy piece of fabric off her faster than she could utter his last name, opening her thighs wider for him.

Kai drew his hot tongue from the very bottom of her core to the delicate bud at the top of her pink glistening folds in one luxurious glide, finally tasting her for the first time.

Savvy threw her head back, thankful there was a wall behind her. He held her tight. Cupping her bottom to help her balance and enjoying how it couldn’t fit in his large palm, he flickered his tongue over and over, swearing under his breath a few times because he didn’t know if he could

control himself.

“Goddess!” Savannah screamed, immediately covering her own mouth. The last thing she wanted now was witnesses. Although, the thought that they might get caught excited her more than she was willing to admit.

Fenrir would be jealous of me,” Kai chuckled before he plunged his tongue inside, probing her, teasing. Her core clenched around him, and he swore again. She knew that he was cursing, but the words were unfamiliar.

“What... you.. saying,” she tried to ask the question, but her mind was clouded with every sensation he was now giving her. She moaned that last word, and he stopped everything, tearing away from her pulsating core to look at her.

Her cheeks were flushed, causing a smug smile to stretch across his handsome face.

“The ancient northern language,” he responded without taking his eyes off her, his fingers making circular motions around her sensitive bundle of nerves. “You know, we had a beautiful alphabet system. Seventy-three letters of intricate squiggles.”

“Impressive,” she panted and flinched when she saw a feral smirk forming on his lips. He had something on his mind, and she knew it

“Why don’t I show you?” The lycan returned his gaze to her centre and this time added a finger to his divine torture of her core, thrusting it in and out, driving her crazy as he traced the ancient letters, making her moan.

The pressure was building up quickly inside her, and she tugged on his hair to help him catch the right rhythm.

“Kai, please!” she began to beg, not knowing what she really needed from him. She lost it as he snarled into her, creating extra vibrations and adding two more fingers.

His body was quivering with restraint as he let out a painful moan when he tipped her over the edge. It took all of his willpower not to claim her fully here and now, but Savannah deserved more than a hasty encounter in a dark passage. He knew that this would be it for today, and when she screamed as her release ripped through her body, Kai helped her ride her pleasure, catching a glimpse of their future together.

He distanced himself away from her core after showering her inner thighs with a trail of kisses when she ceased shaking from her intense climax. He knew it was too early to let go of her, as she could barely stand straight.

He stood up slowly, locking her in his arms and letting her lean over his chest. She tried to move away from him, but he held her in place.

“Not now,” he said, burying his face in her hair. “What are you ...” She wanted to question him but he shushed her.

"Give me a minute, Savannah. I am looking at the portrait of my one-hundred-year-old grandfather to calm myself down."

She giggled, realising that she was the only one to receive a release tonight.

"We can fix that," she whispered into his ear, and a low, pained sound emerged from his chest.

"I am afraid we have no time," he informed her as his lips found her skin again. "We need to

go to that hall, after all." |

"We can't go in there now!" Savvy whispered, afraid to look at him for some reason. "Why?" he snorted as he caressed her bare back. "Because now we smell like each other. It's too obvious what we've been doing!"

"How terrible!" he let out a chuckle. "But isn't that the whole point? We are going to finish the Trials now. For good."

"How are you going to do this without offending everyone?" She raised her chin to look at him and really hoped he had a solution.

"By offering them what they really want instead," he planted a small kiss on her nose. "It's okay, Savvy. We are going to figure everything out eventually. Let's go. I don't want to wait a moment longer!"

They ran together, holding hands and laughing at the craziness of what they were about to do. – Savannah couldn't believe it was happening, but Athena howled inside in approval and in the

heat of the moment, all this felt so right. Kai felt right. She felt as if he was hers

The doors were opened before them, and the intense light of the main hall hit the happy couple in the face. It took them some time to adjust, but to their surprise, they mostly saw the backs of all the guests. No one was paying them much attention.

Naya walked toward them in a beautiful azure gown with a tense face. Something was off.

"Turn away and leave, Savannah," she whispered as she passed the couple, and Savvy froze on the spot.

The spacious ballroom was overcrowded, and there was this unpleasant atmosphere of distress looming over. The space was filled with the buzzing noises of conversations and gasps.

Some servant girl slipped a small envelope into Savvy's hand, startling her, and left quickly before the Lycan Princess could ask her anything.

"What is going on?" Kai growled, and Elene was the first one to react, squeezing herself out from the main crowd.

"Oh, good that you are here! One of the Alphas in the guest delegation is not feeling well!" she said with a concerned face and then went stiff, eyes travelling over her brother and Savannah, lingering on their fingers laced together. "Come," Elene took her brother's arm and started pulling him away. "We can't let him die on our watch! It's going to be a scandal!"

"Go," Savvy whispered to him as he shot a worried glance at her. This was clearly not the right time for any kind of announcement.

"Sorry," he mouthed to her and rushed into the heart of the crowd, leaving her alone. She could feel that something ominous was looming over her.

Exhaling heavily, Savannah opened the envelope and gasped when she read the words on the little note as she smelled a strong scent of mint.

Thope you like my present.

1. 27. Mint

Savannah crumpled the note in her hand, turning to search for the maid who had given it to her in the first place. To her disappointment, the maid was already nowhere to be seen. It wasn't a big deal; her face was forever imprinted in Savvy's memory, and she could find her later. For the millionth time, she was happy her parents had chosen not to disclose her little talent. It had proven to be useful in her adulthood so far.

She wondered what the present from Bjorn could be and instinctively knew that she had to go to the centre of the crowd to find out. However, this was when she realised that everything around her smelled like mint.

She swallowed the lump in her throat and hoped this was another one of the white bear's tricks. In her presence he had already tricked her once, somehow imitating her mate's scent. She was not going to fall for it.

However, Athena was unsettled inside, whimpering from pain, and Savannah knew events around her were taking a turn for the worse.

"I am fine!" She heard a familiar husky chuckle and felt a pang in her heart. "Really, I am sorry I scared you all! It was nothing!"

“Nothing?” Elene’s voice was unusually high-pitched. “Are you sure? *Maybe* we need a healer here?”

“No, I feel much better. Thank you, princess” Zack assured her. “It’s just an old trauma. I was poisoned with aconite, and sometimes it reminds of itself. But it’s temporary.”

She hadn’t seen him in months and really believed that the next time their paths would cross would be when she hunted him down to kill him. On her terms. When she was ready and prepared.

Not like this...

Nevertheless, the Moon Goddess had other plans. People in front of her stepped away, and she finally saw none other than her mate standing and talking to Kai and Elene. Another wolf was by his side, and she immediately recognised Zack’s Beta, Viktor. He was one of the few people she met in his pack. He was also one of the wolves who tried to catch her and kill her when she was trying to escape.

He hadn’t changed much, although something about him was definitely different. He had a crazy glint in his eyes that wasn’t there before. She could feel his wolf howling for their mate, yet Zack didn’t even look at her. What kind of game was he playing?

The worst thing of all this;- she had just been so happy a moment ago. The first time in a while. Zack’s presence had to ruin it for her once again.

She wondered how he could stand there and pretend nothing was going on. However, she quickly remembered that he was an excellent actor.

“You should have left when I told you,” Naya appeared next to her and handed her a glass of champagne that smelled suspiciously like vodka

“I am surprised you warned me at all,” Savvy admitted, and took a sip of the drink, setting her

sight on the king and his unexpected guest at all times. Alcohol did not affect her too much anyway, but it could calm her nerves just a bit.

“Why?” The werecat curled her lips playfully and shrugged her shoulders. “After all, I am not your enemy here.”

“Are you a friend, though?” the princess sniggered. “That is the question.”

“What are you going to do now?” Naya “masterfully” changed the subject, playing with her high silvery-white ponytail. She looked stunning in her azure sparkling dress with cut-out sides that emanated a gentle glow. It did not escape Savannah’s eye that the cat’s long nails were painted with the same pattern as the beads and sequins of her

gown. But she knew that those were actually deadly claws ready to defend their owner any time. Or attack her opponent Brigit strolled past, ignoring them completely, but as she ended up standing behind them while choosing something to eat from the abundance of refreshments offered to the guests, they heard her quiet voice.

“Am I seeing things, or is that the infamous Alpha who is” She abruptly stopped talking, but they all knew what she meant. Savvy was happy that she didn’t call Zack her mate in a grand hall full of shifters with excellent hearing.

“How did you know?” Naya sneered, not looking at the werebear. In fact, neither was looking at the other. “He ran away with his tail between his legs before we rescued you.”

“I rescued myself,” Brigit declared firmly, popping a little chocolate heart into her mouth with her back to the other contenders and the drama in their midst.

“Questionable,” the cat scoffed, lifting her white brow up. Her gaze wandered through the room as if she was more interested in practically anything else, and the three didn’t share this conversation right now.

“What’s questionable is how your kind claimed the victory when you were the last ones to arrive at the battle scene.” Brigit fixed the cape of her dress. It was made entirely out of glimmering purple beads, the colour of queens. It reminded Savvy of chain armour and a part of her respected Brigit for remaining true to herself,

“Wasn’t that you?” Naya mimicked her tone, and the two growled quietly at each other.

Savannah ignored them and their quiet contention. It had been minutes since they were all here, and Zack didn’t look at her once. Neither did Kai. They were talking, and the more time passed by, the more worried the western princess felt.

“Don’t buy the act,” Athena snarled in her mind. “His wolf is roaring that we belong to them. They would have claimed us and marked us if they could.”

This realization didn’t bring Savvy relief like it probably should for mates, yet satisfaction grew in the knowledge of how much it would hurt him when she rejected him.

Zack glanced at her for the first time as if knowing what she was thinking about. Their eyes locked for a few seconds, and his lips curled into a vaguely menacing sneer.

His slight reaction to her alerted Savvy that his being here wasn’t a coincidence. He had known she was in the North. He had come here with a purpose. He had a plan he intended to follow through

She felt slivers of his emotions seep into her conscience. There was so much raw anger, disappointment, regret, desire ... It made her slightly nauseous. She neither wanted nor needed to

feel this anymore. Unfortunately, the mate pull was ever present, and she was thankful that Athena was a royal Alpha lycan, which meant she contained the pride and strength required to still want to reject him. This went against everything, but they both knew they would never be able to trust their mate.

Savannah regretted one thing the most, her stupid decision to mate with Zack on their first day together. This one simple mistake had caused her so much pain. Literally

She watched her mate place a hand on Kai's shoulder and laugh about something as if they were old friends. Right after which, he looked at her again. There was no smirk this time.

She felt a wave of anger, wishing she could somehow protect herself from his feelings. It was not fair that he was forcing them on her.

"Uh-oh," Naya whispered, polishing her nails. "I bet he has connected the dots."

"What dots?" Savvy tried to remain calm. She needed to think in peace and not have to deal with what was being insinuated..

"That the king reeks of you," Brigit snorted, walking away from them, and Savannah felt blood rushing to her cheeks.

"What?" the werecat next to her chuckled. "It's not like you two tried to hide it. Is that why Morgan was writhing on the floor in pain?"

Savvy met her gaze, and a little smile involuntarily crept up the corners of her lips. "Did it hurt him that much?" she queried, drawing her tongue across her teeth. "He almost cried," Naya snickered, barely holding back laughter. "Good," the Western Princess nodded, suddenly feeling much better.

Scanning the room, she searched for Kai with her eyes. Fear crept in when she saw him walking away in Zack's company. She wanted to talk to Kai, to tell him about her stupid mate. She

needed him to know who he was dealing with.

As if hearing her thoughts, Kai turned, his eyes meeting hers in the crowd. His warm gaze calmed her a bit as he mouthed sorry, probably referring to the announcement they had planned to make.

Well, that momentum had been gone now. Savannah was afraid to imagine what a spectacle Zack would have made if Kai had announced his choice.

She itched to gesture for him to speak to her first. She desperately needed to tell him everything, but Elene started clinking a fork to an empty champagne flute thus getting her attention as well as everybody else's in the room.

"Relax," Kyle mind linked her, appearing next to her out of nowhere and quickly squeezing her hand in a supportive gesture. "If he wanted to announce ... who he is, he would have done it

already."

"That only worries me more," Savannah confessed with a sigh. "I could have handled that. This means he is here for something else."

"Tonight, we will get him." Her friend announced dryly and looked her in the eye. For the first time, he was so serious that she doubted for a second if he was the same light-hearted and carefree person she had known her whole life. "If he doesn't do the right thing and accept your rejection, I will kill him for you. Tonight ... Actually, we should probably kill him anyway, since he is

a traitor."

"Stop," Savvy hissed. "We can't kill anyone here. We are guests in the North. Apparently, so is he. This could be taken the wrong way."

"Say I don't care, and neither should you." Kyle furrowed his brows, placing his hands in his pockets. "This is why I should be the one to do it and not you. They will not kill me since I am Reid's brother. They will extradite me at best, leaving you to continue whatever it is you are doing

here..."

A sly smile curved on his lips. "I am getting an alliance!" Savannah rolled her eyes, trying not to blush too much.

"Yeah... Sure," Kyle snorted. "Anyway, good luck at the interview. I think they are ready to start"

Elene gave the contenders their number, though it appeared Petra seemed to be missing, which automatically placed her last.

Savannah looked at her mentor, who was already present wearing a beautifully draped black silk dress with her short hair curled and styled to perfection. She looked satisfied, and the princess wondered if it was part of her carefully crafted plan. After all, appearing

last was an advantage. Especially since a contender from the North wouldn't get into much trouble.

However, if someone had devised a plan like that, as brilliant as it was, that person wouldn't be Petra.

Mavis was up first. Savannah noticed how Zara watched her fellow werebird with her lips clenched tight. She knew that there was no love lost between the two of them. Werebirds weren't the strongest shifters, but sometimes it seemed they were the cruellest.

Of course, the twins were the ones handling the interview. Both wore sparkling white outfits to host the event and were in perfect sync as always.

A small stage was constructed for the show in the corner of the hall, an oversized purple and gold chair placed in the middle looked suspiciously like a throne. There were numerous vases with white roses in the background, and Savvy frowned at the sight. She would literally choose any other flower.

They started with simple small talk, warming the werebird up for the main event.

"Mavis," Chloe smiled politely, and Savvy instantly knew that the question would be provocative, to say the least. "Birds never live outside their flock. How do you imagine yourself being a Queen here? You know that your flock wouldn't be allowed to join you."

Mavis was wearing a sparkling black dress with feathers that lacked originality. Considering birds were known for being flashy. However today, only Mavis's red ombre hair reminded them of who she truly was. Was she trying to tone herself down to appease the northerners? It wasn't working

"Well" She angled her head slightly. "Birds don't usually leave their flocks because we don't tend to survive on our own. I don't think I will have that problem next to King Kai."

"So, what you are saying is that you are here to get our king's protection?" Claude also seemed nice. "Seemed" being the key word.

"Of course, not!" Mavis giggled, but the giggle came out awkward. She then started to list her many wonderful qualities, which, Savvy knew, wouldn't make much difference. They already outed her and everyone now knew she had nothing to bring to the northern table.

Inga got away pretty quickly, but there were no surprises there.

"Penelope, you are next," Elene called her friend's name after the twins stopped torturing the contenders. Savvy shot her a surprised look. She was sure the best

candidate would be saved for last. The Northern Princess noticed her reaction, rolling her eyes in response.

In the meantime, Penelope walked onto the stage. The guests were quiet each time the contenders spoke. All attention was on them constantly.

As always, Penelope radiated perfection. She was wearing a white silk dress with a chiffon cape which was very simple in design, pairing it with an intricate diamond necklace.

“Penelope, it’s so nice to see you!” Chloe beamed at her. This time it was genuine, and Savannah wanted to make an annoyed sound but stopped herself in time. Today she had bigger problems than these girls. Her two main problems left the room together and hadn’t returned still.

Goddess knew what they were discussing. Maybe Zack had already told Kai he was her mate, and they were arranging her ride home. Or worse ... She didn’t even want to go there.

“Tell us, how did you find the competition? Did you get to spend a lot of time with the king?”

Claude leaned slightly forward. He was excited too.

“Kai and I have always spent a lot of time together ever since we were young.” Penelope smiled and tucked a lock of her dark hair shiny hair behind her ear, a subtle blush tinting her cheeks. “We know each other so well, we finish each other’s sentences! We are actually very much alike!”

“Liar!” Athena snorted as they kept listening to what the brunette was saying, “They have nothing in common.”

“Agreed,” Savvy sneered as she crossed her hands on her chest. “Wishful thinking!” The wolf added.

“I call that delusional.” The princess almost chuckled but was able to stop herself in time.

Inga followed Penelope and nothing out of the ordinary happened.

“Princess Savannah Stormhold,” Elene called her name, and Savvy exhaled discreetly, forcing a charming smile on her lips. She hated these kinds of things, but luckily, she knew how to handle them well.

“Your Highness,” Chloe greeted her according to the rules, and at least there was that. The host gave her a sharp once over.

“Please,” Savvy splashed her hands. “There is no need for formalities. I am a guest here just like everyone else, and I’d rather not use my title. Just call me Savannah.”

“That’s very sweet of you. Savannah, are you trying a lot of new things while you are in the North?” Claude joined the conversation.

“I have definitely tried a few, and I can’t wait to experience more,” she responded, slightly in

her chair

“Does that mean you are confident you will stay here, Savannah?” Chloe smirked, waiting for her reaction.

Savvy was about to reply when she saw Kai walking out with Zack from the back room they had previously disappeared into. Both men went in the direction of the TV crew, both looked tense, and both had their eyes on her.

1. 28. Hit & Miss

Savannah didn’t know what to expect now. She grazed her sight over her smirking mate, although it was Kai’s reaction she was mainly interested in observing. He seemed tense to her, lips pursed and hands in his trousers pockets. Nonetheless, when their eyes locked, a small reassuring smile reached the corners of his lips, and she instinctively knew nothing had changed between them as of yet.

“So?” Claude urged her to respond, shaking his shiny blonde hair as if he was starring in a shampoo commercial. “Are you confident that you are staying, Savannah?”

“I can’t be confident, can I?” Savvy replied, lifting her chin slightly. She glanced at the Northern King again. His sinile faded, but now she was the one who wanted to raise his spirits. “I am the least wanted contender here. I know too well, and so does everyone else. I am the least likely to win, but...” She looked Kai straight in the eye, “But I feel like I am starting to fall in love with the North. The people are nice, the traditions are beautiful... there are so many wonderful things here!”

“But what about the king?” Chloe interrupted her little speech.

“He is ... intriguing,” Savvy chuckled, desperately wishing to change the subject. She wasn’t going to confess anything on TV with so many witnesses. Not like that.

She could feel her cheeks heated involuntarily.

“But let’s imagine you can win,” Claude suggested with an insincere grin. He definitely wasn’t imagining that. “Do you think you can be the perfect Luna for the North?”

“Perfection is subjective,” Savannah felt herself relaxing. She was ready to talk about anything other than how she felt about Kai. Or her mate, who was now trying to pierce her with his glare. He hadn’t looked at her previously, but now that all the attention was on her, thanks to the interview, he was devouring her with his hungry eyes, as if she was all he wanted for the months they had been apart. “It would be premature of me to promise to be perfect. Perfection comes in all shapes, sizes, colours, and forms, and more importantly, it comes from experience.”

“And do you feel like you have the required experience?” Chloe leaned forward as if they were good old friends, but there was a menacing glint in her eyes that Savvy couldn’t ignore. She knew that glint too well. This was how a predator would eye its prey.

Savannah Stormhold was no prey though, and it was time she clarified this.

“I definitely have more experience than anyone else in the Luna Trials.” She shot the TV presenter a graceful smile. “You see, my parents died early, and, since then, it was only my brother and me. Gideon didn’t have a Luna, and naturally, I had to take most of the responsibilities

upon myself.”

“Yes, we have heard that you are one of the best at throwing amazing western parties!” The twins exchanged smirks. “But the North is a bit different from the West.”

“It is undoubtedly different,” Savvy nodded, “but politics is the same everywhere. You either have the skills for it, or you don’t. I do. However, I am surprised that you only mentioned parties. I

thought you had done sufficient research on me. Right now, it’s a bit embarrassing that I know more about you two than you know of me. When this is supposed to be in your job description.”

“Tell us. Savannah, what did we miss?” Claude pursed his lips, breathing sharply through his nostrils. He did not like being challenged on air when he had no problem throwing other people under the bus regularly.

“Pretty much everything!” The princess shrugged her shoulders innocently as she let out a little giggle. “My charity work, curating our schools and managing to achieve better results, thanks to a few changes in the education system than we have had prior. My personal art program, paid for by the money I inherited from my parents. My aid to Beta Reid with the budget and managing to increase our profits. Not to mention the many battles I took part in over the years because, frankly, I didn’t have all that extensive battle training for nothing. I have had a busy

life that was already filled with Luna duties. I am sure it will be somewhat different here, but luckily, I am a very quick learner.”

“And how about a rumour that you have ...” Chloe went for the kill, judging by her fierce look, and Savannah gulped, preparing for an attack.

“Oh, is that Petra?!” she heard a voice that definitely belonged to Kyle. “What is she wearing?!”

Naturally, all heads turned to the main entrance, and everybody present gasped, seeing Petra walk in wearing a sparkling bodysuit, consisting mainly of rhinestones. It was barely covering anything, her long slender legs were on full display. She had an enormous fluffy cape in addition that consisted of layers and layers of white tulle. It was definitely made by the same designer for the previous gown. Her pink hair was done up in two pyramid buns with loose curls falling down her beautiful and happy face.

She was clearly enjoying the attention, right until the moment her mentor Evelyn ran up to her, trying to close the cape on her.

“Petra!” the woman hissed at her giggling protégé. “What?” The girl flapped her lashes. “You told me to s*x it up a bit!” “This wasn’t what I meant!” Evelyn gritted her teeth, trying to fix the situation.

“Well,” Kyle appeared right next to them, “and I believe that Petra looks stunning tonight!”

The rascal bowed and kissed Petra’s hand, making her grin even wider. All while Evelyn drilled his skull with her angry glare.

Savvy knew that this was the perfect distraction and decided to use that moment for her exit while the twins made the cameras turn and film Petra.

“It was such a pleasure to talk to you!” She stood up from her seat, shook startled Chloe’s hand, and then did the same to Claude. The two of them realised she had escaped when it was already too late.

“Wait, we are not done,” the hostess mumbled.

“Speed things up.” Kai grunted. “It’s time for the next contender. Princess Savannah, can I speak to you for a moment?”

“Of course,” she nodded, hoping that it was for the best and not because Zack told him something awful about her. Which could simply be the truth ... She shuddered at the thought

alone.

But Kai was looking at her with the same warmth and desire, so she knew that her mate hadn't managed to ruin anything yet. There was still hope.

She tried to walk past Zack, who was blocking her way, but he made sure their hands touched. Even if just for a moment, it felt like a bolt of lightning went through Savannah's body, reaching every little corner of her soul. The mate bond was still there, ever present as the first day she met him. Athena howled from the pain, knowing that this bond had no future. The tingles followed ... Torturously pleasant, they made her heart ache ... It was definitely easier to look at him from the side than have any kind of physical contact.

She felt Kai's fingers lacing with hers and in the very same moment, the bond and its effects were forgotten. Zack's spell was lifted. Kai was being so bold, considering they hadn't made any announcements yet, but she was happy that he did this.

Kai took her to the room where he had talked to Zack just a few minutes ago, and the moment he closed the door, he pressed her against it, crashing his lips into hers.

Tongues entangled, she dug her fingers into his body as he stole a moan from her.

"Savvy," the king placed his forehead onto hers, taking a breath, "we'll announce everything right after the interviews are done. I am sorry for the distraction. That Alpha ..."

"I know him, Kai," she interjected, gathering the strength to tell him who Zack really was.

"I know," he confessed, tightening his grip on her as she gasped from the surprise.

"You do?" Savvy searched for any kind of reaction in his eyes and only saw guilt there. That bothered her more than she could imagine.

"He is a traitor in the West. Your brother announced an award for his head." Kai nodded, and she realised that he was talking about something else. He still wasn't aware that Zack was her *mate*. "I am sorry for receiving him here. That must be unpleasant for you."

"Oh, you have no idea," she started to explain, but the king covered her lips with his again. He couldn't help himself. It was getting harder and harder to control Asgard.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I need to get information from him, and he will stay here for some time. Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"Kai," she shook her head. "He is the worst ..."

Once again, she was about to tell him everything when the back door opened, and Lachlan appeared with a very tense face.

“Lan, are you kidding me?” Kai stepped in front of Savvy, covering her from his friend defensively. This was an instinct of some sort, and even the king himself was surprised by it.

His Beta stared at them for a few seconds with his brows furrowed but snapped out of it quickly

“Apologies, my King,” he said in a respectful official tone he had never used before, although he wasn’t quite sure how to behave in front of the Western Princess. They hadn’t had a chance to discuss protocol yet. However, right now, protocol was the least of his problems. “Our northern

border is under attack.”

Savannah held back a gasp that threatened to escape her. Now wasn’t the time for drama.

“Who?” Kai asked grimly, and his Beta didn’t say a word out loud, clearly using their mental

connection instead.

“You can speak in front of Savvy,” Kai insisted, and they both flinched hearing these words.

Savannah loved the idea of the two of them being together. However, it was something like a dream to her, a fantasy which she allowed herself to believe. They didn’t make the announcement, and she somehow knew that it wouldn’t be happening when they entered the hall together. It would have been too good to be true. She may have been a princess, but her life wasn’t a fairytale

Yet now, he was ready to share vital intel with her. His Beta was either the best actor of the year or absolutely stunned by the sudden changes.

“Are you sure?” Lachlan cleared his throat.

“Savannah is mine,” Kai said the three words that prompted his second-in-command to bow his head respectfully.

“The white bears have attacked three towns on the borders. We haven’t experienced a massive attack like this for months.”

“Is it Bjorn?” Savvy asked, and the Beta’s brows went up. Once again, he looked at his Alpha questioningly.

“White bears only serve Bjorn,” Kai explained patiently and turned to her. “Savvy, I need to go there. I am so sorry, but we will have to make our announcement another day...”

“That’s not a problem for me.” She smiled at the realisation that this was what he was thinking about now. Them.

His expression changed upon hearing her words, and he traced her lips with his fingers. “Will you wait for me, Little Maid?”

“Always, my Gardener.” She stood on the tips of her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck to give him a quick kiss on the cheek, but at the last moment, he turned to capture her lips again.

“Don’t worry, Savvy,” he whispered, a smirk forming on his handsome face, “I’ll be back so soon you will not have time to miss me. Now that I have someone to return to ...”

Her heart clenched, and warmth spread over her chest. He was almost gone when she came back to her senses. Before she managed to say anything out loud, the door closed behind him.

“Shoot!” Savannah bit her lip in disappointment. She would have felt better if she could lift that weight off her shoulders.

“And agitate him right before he goes to a battle?” Athena snorted in her mind. “Not the best idea. Besides, it gives us a perfect opportunity to deal with Zack on our own. Don’t you, think?”

“Huh.” Savvy looked at the situation from a different perspective. “Let’s do this then. He

VIIVVVVILUIMV LUOI VILLISUU

either accepts my rejection and leaves, or he is ...”

“Dead meat,” Athena sneered.

1. 29. No Second Chances

Savannah came back to the main hall and found Celia giving her interview. The girl seemed cheerful and giggled a lot, but at the same time, her knee was twitching, signalling how nervous she was. Celia wasn’t handling the pressure well Too bad for a Luna of The North candidate. Although she wasn’t a real contender, was she?

Elene sat on a high golden chair behind the cameras and made some notes in a little notebook from time to time. Chloe and Claude were doing the same. Sadly, Savvy realised that they would be the ones giving them points for their performance today. What was worse, with Kai gone, no one would be here to help her out

Then again, was it really a problem? Considering they had already chosen each other.

It was probably stupid, but Savvy believed him. She believed everything he said, and only when she felt a heavy gaze on her, she lifted her eyes and shivered, seeing Zack. Bad memories flooded her mind at once.

She already believed a man blindly once.

The princess turned on her heels and walked away without sparing him an extra glance. She couldn't deal with him now, so it was best that they did not meet each other.

She came back to the table with snacks and beverages and saw Evelyn still working on wrapping Petra's tulle cape around her to imitate a skirt. Kyle was right next to them, having the time of his life, judging by the cheesy grin plastered across his face.

"Give it to me!" Evelyn pointed at his black tie, and he started to untie it with a curious expression. She yanked it out of his hands and wrapped it around Petra's waist.

"Do I look bad?" The pink-haired girl was on the verge of crying. "Trust me," Kyle smirked, "not a single man in the room thinks that."

"Thanks!" Petra beamed at him, suddenly happy and cheerful again. "And thanks for your help!"

"Some help that was!" Evelyn gritted her teeth, and her eyes flashed purple when she glanced at Kyle angrily.

"Always at your service!" he saluted them and was about to leave when Evelyn stood in his way. With hands crossed on her chest, she lifted her chin to give the guy a look of disdain.

"Mess with my girl one more time, and you will regret it!" She warned him, and now Kyle looked truly interested.

"Me?" he gasped, grasping his heart. "Mess with Petra? Never! You can rest assured..."

The next moment the graceful woman gripped the lapels of his blazer, pulling him closer by force. However, it looked like she was simply fixing the jacket. Savvy was impressed with her. Not many would dare do this to a lycan. Then again, the North was different. And lycans here were different too.

"I don't like to repeat myself," she whispered on the verge of hissing, luckily everyone was watching Celia's interview. "Do it again, and your little secret will come out! You love the truth,

don't you?

Kyle's smirk faded at once, and Savvy herself almost gasped, hearing these words. Did Evelyn manage to find out that Kyle was the Truthteller? That was fast! Not to mention that this could cause potential problems for them.

"Who doesn't like the truth?" The lycan ran his hand through his hair, still playing his role of the careless young man. "Especially when the truth can be so useful. Don't you think so?" He winked at the she-wolf in front of him, and Evelyn pursed her lips together and nodded curtly. After which, she waved him off, dismissing him as if he was a nobody, and then returned to check on Petra as it was almost her turn to go.

Kyle stood there for a while with his mouth open, hands in his pockets until he met Savvy's glance and gave her a can you believe this look. But a mischievous glint in his eyes did not escape his friend. He was having fun!

Happy that at least someone was enjoying himself during all this, Savvy looked around and met the gaze of her mate again. She couldn't wait for the official part to be over so she could leave.

"Salome, it's your turn," Elene gestures for the witch to take the seat in front of the sibling hosts. The woman looked stunning tonight in sparkling black, and Savannah remembered the videos from this morning. Familiar unpleasant darkness spread over her chest. Ugly, sticky and painful, it was a horrible feeling and she didn't like it one bit. However, Kai's words about Salome wanting only an alliance were giving her hope that she would indeed leave tonight.

In the meantime, the hosts and the guest had already exchanged pleasantries.

"So the first question I want to ask," Chloe tilted her head just the way she did before an attack, but the witch raised her hand, gesturing for her to stop.

"I have to apologise," Salome flashed a sincere smile. "only came here today not to be rude, but I am not going to give an interview."

"Are you sure?" Claude chuckled. "This would mean you don't get any points for this, and after a very successful date with the King, you would be back to square one."

"Yes, I am aware," the woman admitted and played with the shimmering sequins of her gown. "But that's the thing, after getting to know Kai better, we both realised that there aren't any sparks. What kind of union would it be without any attraction between the two of us? So, I have made a choice to leave the Luna Trials immediately."

"And throw a chance like that away?" Chloe arched her brow and pursed her lips. She was clearly disappointed not to be able to go on with her initial plan, but there wasn't anything she could do

"I am not throwing away anything," the corners of Salome's lips curved. "We are parting as friends. How many people can call the Northern Lycan King a friend? Can you?"

Savvy had to give it to the witch. She had the best way out. There was no chance in hell of her winning, and she was leaving without the humiliation of being eliminated by someone. It was her own decision.

She stood in the crowd along with everyone and felt the strong scent of mint coating her. Athena was uncomfortable because the mate bond forced her to feel attracted to the man standing right behind them. It was almost unbearable.

However, it got worse and escalated quickly when his hand brushed up and down hers, waves and waves of tingles rippling through her.

At this rate, she'd start hating tingles soon, loathing the sensation

Zack was using the fact that she couldn't leave without making a fuss about it, his fingers were drawing small circles on her skin. For a moment there, Savannah had to close her eyes not to let the mate bond cloud her judgement. She remembered their one and only night together, but then she recalled how he chased her through the woods with his warriors. And she was pretty sure he would have killed her if he had a chance. She was just lucky to escape.

Yes, that memory helped her a lot, and Savannah came back to her senses, choosing to move forward, closer to the stage. Anything to escape him!

Autumn, the fox from the South was getting properly red for some reason. Savvy didn't know what the twins asked her, and she didn't care. Instead, she pivoted and strode to the main door to try and get some air. The Western Princess walked out and decided to hide in the corridor where she and Kai had so much fun just recently, hoping no one would follow her. Sighing, the princess touched the wall she was leaning on just under two hours ago as if she could get more strength by doing so.

She heard the steps first, the minty scent followed soon, making her growl in anger. How dared he be so brazen? After hiding from her for months, her annoying mate couldn't leave her alone.

"How long are you going to keep ignoring me?!" Zack demanded as if he had a right to do so and she felt that this audacity of his had no limits.

"Ignore you?" A cruel laugh rocked her chest as she turned to face him. "Oh, Zack, I am not planning to ignore you at all."

"I know you are trying to scare me now, Savvy," her mate placed his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall, dangerously close to her. He was so close that if

she simply stretched her hand, she could ... probably strangle him in a minute or so. Maybe even break his neck if the angle was right.

“Oh, Zack, I am not even trying,” she scoffed, her laughter echoing through the passages. “But I bet you are scared nonetheless. Is that why you were hiding for so long?”

They were staring at each other as if it was a real battle.

“I wasn’t hiding,” the man said after a while, still not taking his eyes off her. It seemed like he couldn’t get enough of this closeness. Even if it was just an illusion. Right now, they couldn’t have been further apart. “I was thinking of how to fix everything!”

“You are a traitor, Zack!” she took a huffish stance. “I am afraid everything is beyond fixing for you!”

“Savvy, don’t say that!” he tried to take a step towards her, but she flashed her canines at him and growled a warning. “Whatever happened in the past, however foolish I have been, nothing will change the fact that we are mates!”

She let out another laugh. This was too good!

“Wow, Zack,” she pushed herself off the wall and stalked towards him slowly, noticing how he gulped at the sight of her, “I always knew that you were a sick bastard who can’t keep his word and has no heart, but I had no idea that you are also delusional!”

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“No heart?” He looked at her sheepishly and chuckled bitterly. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Uh-huh,” she confirmed his suspicions with a nod and a sneer.

“Savvy, what happened between us was what broke my heart. I love you so much. my beautiful mate! I couldn’t...”

“Stop!” she gritted her teeth, angry that he was throwing big words like that into play. “Don’t you dare go there!”

“Why not?” His hazel eyes glowed. “Because for someone who claims to love me, you did everything to hurt me the most!”

He clenched his lips, looking for words. This definitely wasn’t going according to his plan, especially since he knew what was at stake here

“And you had your revenge.” His voice sounded dry and full of pain. “It happened here in this hallway, right? This place still smells of the two of you! Did you let the King touch you to get back at me?”

“You must be thinking too highly of yourself,” Savvy couldn’t help but snort. “Nothing I do has anything to do with you! You were dead to me the moment I heard you plotting to kill my brother and using me as a breeder for your perfect heirs.”

“So, you heard my conversation with Castiel?” He looked away just for a moment but quickly returned his gaze to her face. “And what if I tell you that you misunderstood me? Have you ever thought of that?”

“I have,” she chuckled, even enjoying this conversation a bit. At least it wasn’t boring. “But then I came to the conclusion that nope, you weren’t misunderstood. You are just an as*hole who thinks of himself only.”

“I wanted to gain Castiel’s trust to help your brother. I had to tell him what he wanted to hear,” he started speaking, and she rolled her eyes.

“Was that why your people tried to catch me whatever it cost them? I saw it in their eyes. They were ready to kill me in their wolf forms.”

For a few seconds, there was only silence between the two of them. “They didn’t get my order right....”

“Of course, they didn’t! This is probably why you ran away afterwards with them and all the useful intel you got from that fox. To be honest, I am surprised you honoured the Northern King with your presence!”

“Savvy, I’ve made many mistakes,” he interrupted her, probably realising they were not going anywhere like this. “But I am ready to forget the past and to move on to the future. With you.”

“Cause that’s happening!” Each word was laced with sarcasm. This was way less dramatic than she imagined their next meeting to be. The stupid mate bond! She would never have fallen for a guy like him if not for it.

“We are mates, Savannah.” Zack insisted, and she had to give it to him – he had some balls. “Fated mates chosen by the Moon Goddess. We were made for each other, and we can make each

other happy. If you only gave me another chance”

“You know what, maybe I would have done it,” she lied to make a new blow. “But

unfortunately, since you managed to have lovers left and right while you were away, knowing what kind of physical pain it would cause me, there is nothing to talk about anymore. You are simply not worthy of my time, Zack."

"Do you think it was easy for me?" He snapped as if everything was her fault, so much pain in his eyes she almost bought it. Almost. "My wolf was dying from the pain of separation from you, and I had to act. I was thinking about you while I was doing this, imagining you, pretending it was my beautiful perfect mate."

"Zackie!" she tilted her head and pouted her lips. "Poor you! How did you get through all this? It must have been so hard for you?!"

Her brows furrowed as she looked at him, and at least he wasn't that stupid because the Alpha before her knew at once she was mocking him.

"Savvy."

"Cut the cr*p!" The princess demanded, changing her tone and demeanour at once. "I was thinking about you too when you did this, you know. I was writhing in pain each time, trying to claw my own skin and heart out while you were screwing someone and imagining me. I was imagining things too! My favourite fantasy was ripping your head off and being done with it quickly. It's still the best for me!"

"Savannah ..." He repeated her name again, trying to reach her as if it could make any difference. It couldn't.

"But I am willing to go with my second favourite," the girl sneered, letting her claws grow long and tracing the one on her index finger over her lower lip. "You'd better take that chance while I still give it to you."

"If you are talking about rejection, then forget about it!" Zack grunted. "I will never agree to lose you!"

"To lose me, you have to have me!" she exhaled heavily. "And you don't." "Savvy, I love you! All I ask is a new chance!"

Something inside of her was calling her to agree to this. She could still feel the pull even though she was a royal lycaness.

Savannah breathed in deeply and smelled Kai's scent. It was still strong in this place where he held her just a few hours ago. The thought alone of him made her anger ease off a bit.

There was no chance of her forgiving Zack. Not now, not ever. "I, Savannah Stormhold," she started the standard rejection line.

"No!" Zack growled loudly and balled his fists, heaving. "Don't even try this. I would never agree!"

"... reject you, Alpha Zack Morgan of The Emerald Mountain pack as my true mate!" She lifted her chin high and let Athena give her eyes the royal golden glow. "Accept it, and I will spare your life today! Until we meet on a battlefield, you'll be safe."

"Never!" he snarled, and in one sharp moment, she was next to him, grasping his neck in her palm and shoving him against the wall, denting it by the impact.

"Say the words!" She bared her teeth. "Mark me, Savannah!" He completely misunderstood her reaction. "You know you want

"In your dreams!" she hissed, tightening her grip and lifting him on the wall. Just a bit more pressure – and she could crack the bones. Zack would be dead, and everything would be over

mWhat is going on here?!" She heard Elene's voice behind her back, knowing that this was the worst thing that could happen now...

1. 30. Missed Chances

!

Elene had an aghast look on her face, and Savannah knew she was really in trouble now. So, the only thing she was considering now was how to proceed with all this. Should she just break that neck and be done with it? Kai would understand if she explained it to him later. Or so she thought... Would he really understand? After all, although the attraction was undeniable, they still didn't know each other too well. They planned to learn everything, but they weren't there now. Would it truly be okay to dispose of her mate? And here of all the places...

"Savvy!" Zack gurgled, and she wanted to slam him into the wall.

"Say..." She at least wanted to get the rejection accepted, while Zack's face was already crimson red. He owed her that much.

"Put him down!" Elene growled, and for the first time since she came here, she felt a wave of power coming from the Northern Princess, which surprised her more than it should have. After all, Elene was a royal Lycan as well, and that came with some perks.

However, she was still undecided about what to do. Knowing Zack, he could run away fast, and she would spend months again trying to hunt him. Without their stupid bond, she would be free. She could be free now, and then maybe Kai and she could ...

"If you kill him, you will hurt Kai and the Northern Lycan Kingdom," Elene crossed her hands on her chest and watched the scene unfolding before her. This was something new, and Savannah felt like it was some kind of a test.

"Or I will do them a service," Savvy slowly moved her eyes from Zack to the Northern Princess

"He is here on a diplomatic mission. If he ends up dead, all Kai's efforts will go in vain."

Her mate desperately tried to release himself from her grasp, and, rolling her eyes, Savvy released her grip on his neck. Morgan collapsed to the floor and gulped for air a few times in some sort of panic until he was able to steady his breathing.

Savannah looked down on him. Every physical attraction for him was blurred out now. She just wanted him gone from her life. Out for good. She contemplated whether to tell the King's sister who that pathetic man was to her. Zack would definitely mention it somewhere. In all honesty, he could do that now to try and ruin things for her. So, it was best to get it off her chest. She would prefer to tell Kai first. Herself. But the situation called for action.

"He is my..." She started speaking, but Elene waved her off.

"I know very well that he is the traitor of the West," the Princess snapped. "It's not an excuse. You want to be the Queen here. You should know better. We have to deal with people we don't like all the time."

"And you are setting just a great example there," Savannah scoffed, and Elene wanted to reply something, but at the last moment, the door that led to the main hall opened, and Astrid's head poked in

"Oh, I am sorry to disturb you," she giggled innocently. "Princess Elene, everything is ready, and everyone is looking for you."

"Very well," the youngest Fionnlagh responded lightly as if nothing happened here.

"Let's go, ladies. Alpha Morgan, you can join us or retreat to the room we provided for you."

"I wouldn't miss an event like this for the world!" Zack chuckled, adjusting his suit jacket. And Savvy thought that she should have killed him after all. The smug smile on his face told her everything went just the way he wanted...

All the twelve Luna Trial contenders were standing in two rows on the stairs in their beautiful sparkling gowns. Each looked like a queen already.

And also there was Petra.

Elene was checking her notes with Chloe and Claude, who were nodding in unison each time she spoke. Savannah tried to listen to them, but the buzz of the rest of the guests was making it impossible to decipher words.

“And I thought everything was ready!” she snorted and shot a quick look at Astrid, who stood behind her. A little smirk formed on the Southerner’s face.

“I just thought you needed a little help there,” she whispered, and Savvy nodded. This was nice of her, considering she was very close to getting rid of a contender.

“Can you believe she is wearing this?” Inga snickered, glancing quickly at Petra in ruffles and with Kyle’s tie as a belt. For some reason, the other Northerners didn’t like the pink-haired she-wolf much, and Savannah noticed how Petra lowered her head as if she was already defeated

“Don’t!” she took her hand at once and gave it a light, reassuring squeeze. “Someone like you would look amazing wearing anything. You came here to fight for the position of a Luna. A true Luna always holds her head high and owns her choices. Just consider it another test.”

“Penelope said it would be a great outfit for the interviews,” Petra said quietly, and Savvy gave her palm an extra squeeze.

“And now *you* know who not to listen to,” Naya snorted as she stood on the other side of Petra.

“Just turn it to your advantage now,” Brigit said without looking at them. “It is a gorgeous outfit, whatever everyone else thinks. Things like this will make you stand out among other women. It’s a trick we always used at...”

She stopped talking, realising she had already shared too much, but Savvy knew she meant the harem where Brigit spent years fighting for the attention of the Fox King Castiel Armstrong. Now that she was thinking about it, Brigit was his favourite for a long time, and only his obsession with Savvy’s sister-in-law put an end to this. However, the white bear knew very well how to stand out among many beautiful girls. She did that during the Riddle challenge when she went ahead of her turn. But later, she was quiet, which wasn’t how Riannon spoke of her at all. According to her, Brigit was a leader in nature.

“Where?” Petra wanted more of Brigit’s story, but the woman in question only pressed her Tips tighter together.

“In her old pack,” Savannah smiled and let go of Petra’s hand as Elene was already walking in their direction.

The music died down, and so did the chatter of the guests. All the attention was now on the Northern Princess. She had a tablet in her hands and a gracious smile was curling her lips. Someone's eyes gleamed in the crowd, and Savvy knew without looking it was Zack. He was watching her even now when his best course of action should be to run as fast as he could.

"We use several aspects to judge the interviews," Elene announced with a smile. "The content of answers matters the most, but we also look at the body language and tone, confidence and attitude, consistency of a contender and last, but not least, appearance. After all, we are choosing the Luna of the North, and our land deserves the best."

She took a significant pause, looking around the hall and pretending to ignore the cameras.

"Without any doubt, our main winner tonight is none other than the daughter of the North Penelope Summerstern! She received thirty points for her interview and her final score at the moment is forty points." A round of applause emerged as Penelope stepped forward, bowed and then moved to the higher level of the stairs. The contenders moving forward had to stand above the ones who didn't.

"The next contender had a slightly less impressive score, but her overall score is now the same as Penelope's," Elene said calmly. "Savannah Stormhold receives twenty points and has forty points overall."

Savvy gasped uncontrollably. She was astonished by the fact that she scored this high. She was sure that Elene and the twins would give her the lowest possible points.

"Go!" Astrid whispered to her, and Naya nudged her gently. Savannah placed her hand to her heart with a smile on her lips as if she wanted to thank everyone present and then joined Penelope at the top.

"Congratulations, Savvy!" The girl greeted her as if they had been best friends for many years. Which they weren't.

"Thanks, Pen!" she reciprocated with a grin. "Congratulations to you too."

"I have to say this was easy," the brunette giggled, and Savvy thought that maybe Elene had given her friend the list of questions beforehand. However, something was strange. Why didn't they sabotage her again? She loved their tactics. It was easy to deal with, and who knew what they changed it to now.

"The next contender also received twenty points for the interview and is currently ranking third with thirty-five points. Astrid Erling!"

Astrid was probably even more surprised than Savannah, and they exchanged warm smiles when she reached the top. Soon Inga and Celia followed, receiving twenty points each but scoring slightly below Astrid. Then Naya and Mikaela earned fifteen points each, bringing them to thirty points. The two cats were happy with the results but not happy about having to stand not far from each other. If cats didn't like someone, this was for life.

"Ugly dress," Mikaela traced Naya's curves with her eyes and smirked. "1. 'Don't be so hard on yourself, dear,'" the silver-haired contender replied, "Yes, your outfit today could have been better, but ugly is not the word. Mediocre is." They both hissed at each other and turned away.

Five girls were left standing at the bottom.

"Sadly, the next contender received zero points as she decided to leave on her own terms and did not give an interview." Elene was smiling, but her tone was ice cold. "Salome Gray, you are the first to leave the Luna Trials. It was an honour to have you here."

"Thank you. Princess Elene," the witch curtsied slightly mockingly and stepped down to join the quests. Waves of whispers rippled through the room, but it looked like Salome wasn't bothered about all that.

"The next contender received the lowest points during the interview and overall performance. Autumn Bern, please step down. It was an honour to have you here ..."
Elene clearly wanted to say something else, but the little fox with red hair rushed away quickly, covering her eyes as if she was about to cry.

"Why so low?" Savvy whispered to Astrid, and she tilted her head slightly. "She said she didn't believe in Fenrir," the girl replied. "For the North it's..."

"Preposterous," Celia said firmly. "You can say whatever you like, but Fenrir and the royal family are untouchable."

"Stop sharing!" Inga jabbed her friend with her elbow. Now only three girls were standing at the bottom, and Savvy felt perplexed about this.

"Brigit Borg, Petra Biernat, Mavis Redfeather," Elene turned to them. "Your scores are low, and one of you will leave as well. Unless the King or the people of the North save you. We will see if that happens tomorrow."

She then motioned for Chloe and Claude to take it from there. The blonde siblings turned to the cameras and started explaining how people could cast a vote. And apparently, they could do that once from a registered mobile phone number in the system. Which, in Savannah's opinion, was ridiculous.

Then again, it was probably her fault since she cornered them into following that tradition in the first place.

The main event was over soon, and Savvy wasn't surprised to see Zack gone. She gritted her teeth, hoping he didn't run too far. She was going to force that acceptance of rejection out of him. Her life literally depended on that.

Kyle was already gone too, and Savvy just hoped he wasn't looking for her mate. That wasn't his battle to fight. Although, technically, if he caught him and held him for her, she wouldn't mind

Lost in thought, Savannah didn't notice how she ended up walking down the corridor leading to their tower with Zara, Brigit, Astrid and her friend Emma, who seemed displeased with something again, judging by the looks she was giving her.

"Good luck tomorrow," Astrid tried to start some kind of conversation and glanced at Brigit timidly.

"I don't need luck," the werebear cut her off. "I'll still get where I want to be."

"Without a doubt," Savannah smiled and at the same time felt piercing pain going through her body. She knew far too well what was happening and couldn't believe the audacity of her mate.

For some reason, this time, everything felt so much stronger that she could barely stand on her feet. Not at all the pain level she was used to by now.

Zara was the first to notice she turned pale and quickly draped her hand around Savannah's to give her something to lean on.

"Is something wrong?" They heard Emma's voice. She sure had a tough attitude for a newcomer who had no role to play here.

"I am just tired," Savvy tried to brush her off, not willing to explain the drama of her life to anyone.

"Are you sure?" Astrid looked genuinely concerned. "You look pale." "Yeah, I'll be fine," the Princess assured them. "See you tomorrow, and congratulations."

"Congrats to you too, Savannah," the Southerner beamed while Emma was already opening her door without even looking at them.

"Thanks," Savvy muttered, wishing for nothing more than to hide in her chambers.

Brigit watched her in silence, and when the two other women were gone, she leaned into Savannah's ear and whispered, "If you don't kill him, then I will."

With that, she turned on her heels and rushed to her own room.

Zara helped her to get inside and unzipped her dress. Unfortunately, they had done this many times before, so she knew the drill perfectly. Biting her lip to distract herself with a different kind of pain, Savvy grabbed the first thing she saw in the wardrobe – which was a simple, delicate blue dress with traditional northern embroidery on the front. Pulling it on, falling to the bed. Zara covered her with a throw the way she always did.

Savvy closed her eyes, withering in pain, counting the minutes for it to stop. But today, Zack was punishing her for real. For the past few months, all his encounters were short, but today, he decided to indulge himself in lust, pleasure and revenge right next to her. The worst thing was that she couldn't kill him until she got approval from Kai.

Her heart was ripping apart, piece by piece. She didn't love Zack. She simply couldn't. Not after everything She didn't even want him on a physical level. But the realisation that this was the one man who was supposed to protect and cherish her made all this even more painful.

She thought of Kai and his promises. Was he really going to keep his word and choose her? She wanted to be chosen. That mate thing wasn't what she expected, but could they be happy together as chosen mates? She knew one story with a sad ending.... If she tried it with Kai, but he rejected her when he found his true mate ... this would break her irrevocably. She didn't realise it before, but little by little, he filled that void left by Zack. She was afraid to admit it out loud, but she needed him more than he could imagine. She didn't even notice how the darkness took away her pain, and she finally managed to fall asleep.

Firm fingers brushed over her cheek and neck. She breathed out, feeling much better all of a sudden. Then soft lips planted a little kiss on her bare shoulder, and Savannah opened her eyes to see Kai.

"Kai?" she sat up higher at once and then immediately wrapped her arms around him. The King only pressed her tighter and kissed the top of her head, lacing his fingers into her hair and inhaling deeply as if he needed that desperately. He smelled of forest and pine as always, but today there were other notes there as well. Smoke and blood were more robust than other scents,

and Savvy distanced herself from him, checking his face. Luckily, he looked unharmed. Just less polished and neat. Just like her gardener

"Are you fine?" Savannah cupped his cheek, and he leaned into it just for a moment. "Is the battle over?"

“I want to show you something, Savvy,” he told her with a little excited glint in his eyes.
“Come with me now.”