

Friend of Foe?

2823 Words

Savannah couldn't believe her own eyes. After she heard about the Luna Trials, she was sure that she would see a few familiar faces here, but this was one face that she did not expect to see at all.

"Brigit?" she tried not to sound too surprised at the sight of the werewolf shifter. She used to be one of the "red girls" from the harem that her brother Gideon and sister-in-law helped to set free. She was also a friend of Riannon. Or at least that was what Savvy thought. When Brigit left, she claimed that she looked forward to her freedom and finding her true mate. Yet now here she was – at the Luna Trials. A place where none of that mattered. And it looked like she was one of the contenders.

"Princess Savannah," the girl greeted her unemotionally. As if they barely knew each other and had never fought side by side in the bloodiest battle just months ago.

Then again, Brigit wasn't exactly Savannah's friend. She had a complicated relationship with Riannon too. So, could they really expect any kind of loyalty from her? After all, when a person does something good sincerely, they shouldn't expect to be paid back. Good deeds only remain good when there is no ulterior motive.

This was why Savannah breathed out and forced a polite smile on her face, "I didn't expect to see you here. That's a... lovely surprise."

"There is no need for that," Brigit stopped her with a gesture of her well-trained hand. She was the daughter of a white werewolf Alpha, and her kind was known for being tall and muscular. From the olden days, both men and women were trained to be warriors. And Brigit was no exception. She was the epitome of a female warrior with her strong, athletic build. Her hair used to be longer than what Savannah remembered, and now it was cut short so that it barely reached her shoulders. It was straightened to perfection to give her a more polished look. Yet she remained true to herself, as her dress was metallic grey, resembling armour, with a few thin silver chains forming intricate patterns on her shoulders.

Brigit came prepared, and she didn't think of warning them about The Luna Trials.

"Look," she sighed, "I know very well that you did not expect any of this in the first place. But I am not going to apologise. I am doing this for my people. I need to win this thing, whatever it costs me."

"Be my guest," Savvy shrugged her shoulders, demonstrating her indifference. "All I need is an alliance. I never wanted to marry that prick in the first place. You can have him if you like him."

"Sav!" Kyle squeezed her arm as a warning. Words like this could have all kinds of consequences here and he was afraid that even walls had ears.

"Then we have no problem. Right?" Brigit raised her brow and walked past the two of them. "Don't worry. When I become the Luna of the North, you will have your alliance. I can promise you this much."

"That's – very generous of you." Savvy and Kyle exchanged glances. They were both relatively young but not new to political games. When someone promised something so important so bluntly, it was usually not what they intended to do. Words meant nothing in their world.

"Go home, Savannah. There is nothing for you here," the werewolf advised before she disappeared in the darkness of the passage that led to the staircase. They heard her receding footsteps, and Kyle opened his mouth to say something, but Savvy placed her finger to her lips quickly to let him know they weren't alone.

"Oh, excuse me. I did not mean to eavesdrop." They heard a sweet voice coming from the opposite direction and saw a young woman walking out of one of the rooms. She had light blonde hair braided to one side and was wearing a chiffon midi dress with puffy off-shoulder sleeves, which was simple and elegant, and made her look fragile at the same time. Savannah realised she was far behind in the game with everything.

"It can hardly be called eavesdropping, considering how tiny this corridor is and how close our rooms are to each other," Savvy giggled innocently while trying to remember if she knew this girl but nothing came up in her mind on her. "I am Savannah –"

"Stormhold. I know. You are the princess from the Western Lycan Kingdom, right?" The girl was smiling in a friendly manner, and Savvy felt like she had to respond to all that positivity. "It's nice to meet you, and it looks like we are going to be neighbours for the Trials. Exciting!"

"Yeah – Very," Savvy stretched a painful smile onto her lips. Exciting wasn't the word that she wanted to use. But as a princess, she was trained for these kinds of things. She knew how to fake it when it was necessary. "And you are..."

"Astrid Erling," the girl reacted quickly, playing with her braid. "I am one of the daughters of Alpha Eric from the Black Mountain pack. We are one of the smallest packs from the South, and as you can imagine..."

Savannah could imagine. The South did not have a kingdom. They had a Republic with its own Council, members of which were selected and then changed yearly to avoid someone becoming too powerful. They also did not have lycans since the Crimson Revolution when they killed the royal family, and the remaining lycans chose to flee to save their lives. The situation was so unprecedented that it was hard to believe. After all, the lycans were much stronger than werewolves. In reality, most still didn't know what happened there. The survivors weren't sharing their stories.

Now the Southern Republic proclaimed itself as the centre of the civilised world because it didn't have a monarchy, which wasn't enough of a reason, in Savannah's opinion. Just because a bunch of very random people could get to the steering wheel for a year, didn't make them better or more advanced. Her brother King Gideon was trained for this role since he was little. The royal blood in his veins made him stronger than regular lycans. Werewolves had nothing on him. So, how could some Council compare itself to him?

The joke was on them, though. There was absolutely no benefit in having a wife from the South. She couldn't bring any influence to her husband, so unless she was the king's mate, such a match was out of the question. Which explained why Astrid was placed in the Outcast Tower. Elene deemed her useless for her brother.

However, these were the Luna Trials. And things were different here. The Luna of the North was supposed to be chosen based on merits, not looks or connections.

But that was in the olden days. They lived in the now. And something told the western princess that the Luna Trials wouldn't be fair game.

"That explains why you got into the neglected corner," Savannah chuckled, trying to be nice. It would be hard to make friends here, but as long as she didn't make more enemies than necessary, it would be great too.

"Yeah, I figured when I found out that I live right next to a white bear shifter and –" Astrid bit her tongue, but it was already late for that.

"Me," Savvy let out a little laugh, not embarrassed in the slightest. "Yes, my brother and the Northern Lycan King aren't on the best terms with each other. So, I would hardly be a favourite here."

"Really? I am surprised that he didn't just marry you," Astrid said and immediately covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, sorry... It's just... Everyone heard that King Kai asked for your hand in marriage several times in the past."

"I guess he changed his mind," Savannah was getting slightly tired from all this. The werewolf girl seemed nice, but she had things to do and decisions to make. "Anyway, I need to go. It was nice meeting you, Astrid."

"Of course!" Luckily the southerner knew how to take a hint. "I will see you at the dinner tonight."

"Probably not," the princess confessed. "It was a long road, and I just want to have some rest and privacy."

"Got you. Then tomorrow's Welcoming Party?" Astrid suggested.

"Yes, I will definitely be going to that one." Because it was obligatory.

The two young women waved each other goodbye and went in opposite directions. Astrid seemed sweet enough and slightly young, but Savvy wasn't too naive to make conclusions based on her first impression. She knew better than that.

Zara was already sorting Savvy's things in her room, and the western princess whistled when she saw how small and modest her accommodation was. Minimalistic wasn't even the word for it. Just a bed, a desk, a wardrobe and a little bathroom. This wasn't how a royal was supposed to be greeted.

"I am going to file an official complaint," her assistant pursed her lips. Zara looked calm, but Savannah saw the little vein pulsing on her forehead and knew that, in reality, the werewolf was furious. "This is outrageous! Your room is just like mine and Kyle's! It's so disrespectful!"

"You will do no such thing!" Savvy carefully sniffed around, ensuring that there were no other surprises in the room. Fortunately, it seemed clean. Her lycan senses did not find anything suspicious, and she trusted her intuition.

"But –" Kyle wanted to say something when she motioned for him to stop and switched on the mind link.

"From now on, everything we need to say about this place can only be said via the link," she informed her friends. "Everyone will be looking at us, watching our every step. And I have already made a few mistakes."

"Yet it sounds like you have a plan," Kyle smirked and sat on the fluffy rug on the floor, letting the girls have the bed and the only available chair.

"I think I do," Savannah sighed. "It's obvious that marrying the prick is out of the question after everything they have done. Not to mention that he isn't a fan of the idea himself."

"As...ole," Zara made a rumbling sound.

"Yes, but that's a good thing," the princess grinned and plopped onto the bed, stretching her body for the first time today. "That means that when I am done here, I am free. And this is much better than I hoped for on our way to the North. However, before I can leave, there are two problems to tackle. The first one is obvious; we still need that alliance. Even after everything. The threat is too big, and it will be much easier with the North on our side. But at the same time, I need to save my kingdom's face. It shouldn't look like he gave us the alliance as an apology for not marrying me. And I absolutely cannot lose the Trials and leave without the alliance confirmed in writing."

"So, where does that leave us?" Kyle furrowed his brows, rubbing the back of his neck.

"That leaves us with the one and only option. I need to win this thing," she announced, and both of her friends' mouths parted.

"But..." Zara mumbled.

"Yeah, I know," Savvy giggled and rolled her eyes. "Complicated, huh? But that's the thing. According to their own rules, the winner of the Trials can ask for three things from the King."

"And you are planning to ask for –" Kyle really wasn't getting it.

"The alliance as the first wish," Savvy smirked. "And then, I will ask him to let me go as the second wish, saying that we are not right for each other. But the third wish would be for us to stay best friends forever. You see, the northerners take pride in keeping their word and being honourable. We will have to exploit that."

"Do they?" Zara snorted. "They literally just screwed us over."

"That's the thing," Savannah pointed out, "wording requests matter. Gideon and Kai agreed that I would be Kai's bride. And technically, I am. It's just that I am not the only one. His promise is kept nonetheless."

"As...ole," Zara repeated, folding her hands over her chest. Kai wouldn't be getting any fan mail from her any time soon.

"Yes, sure," Savvy laughed and now spoke out loud. "But two can play this game. Now I know how to play, and it will be different."

"They don't know what's coming for them," Kyle scoffed. "But why aren't you going to dinner? I am starving!"

"Too early to meet everyone and let them see me. I want to surprise them," the princess stood up and took an invitation lying on top of the desk. "Besides, the Welcoming Party is not that welcoming. It's the first elimination event. And we need to prepare."

"Elimination? Really?" Zara was getting angrier and angrier by the minute.

"Yes," Savvy shrugged. "You are cordially invited... blah-blah-blah... Masquerade with the contenders revealed..."

"Damn, that guy has some balls," Kyle growled. "He is making a show out of it."

"It is meant to be a show. And this is the best part because, boy, I am going to use it!" Savannah announced and her lips curled into a sly smile. "The Luna Trials is a complicated event, and everything here has a meaning. Here, look at this invitation."

They all gathered around her, and she pointed with her perfectly manicured finger.

"Do you see the ink used for the writing? This is the dress code," she informed them. "My name is written in red, the body of the message is in golden ink, and the signature at the bottom is in blue. That means that contenders can wear gowns only in these colours and their shades. If someone arrives in green, she will be eliminated for insulting the Northern traditions."

"For real?" Kyle whistled. "Was this guy? Five?"

"He didn't make these rules," Savannah explained. "They have them for centuries. Anyway, we need to get everything ready for tomorrow. I won't be colour coding my dresses like you were packing them. And I don't have a mask. You need to be dressed appropriately too. Kyle, men can wear black."

"What a shame, so that golden tuxedo of mine is a no-go?" the young lycan snickered.

"There is always next time," Zara retorted. "Let's see what we can use for a mask. I can try and get one if we can't come up with anything."

They started working and only took a break for food that Zara had to request straight to Savvy's room.

When it got dark, they finally called it a day and agreed to start early the next morning to finish the preparations.

Savannah wanted to shower and relax, but Athena whimpered inside of her, calling for some fresh air. The princess knew better than not to give her what she wanted. Especially when she needed her wolf on her best behaviour.

So, she gave up quickly and went into the castle's garden, wearing just her silk robe, since all she needed now was a little run. She passed the guards and the warriors, thanking the Moon Goddess that the space around the castle was huge.

Then finally, she got to a little inner pond and decided that it was a good place to shift. She had already untied her robe when she smelled the familiar scent and covered herself quickly, turning to see the intruder.

"Oh, don't mind me," the gardener chuckled, walking from behind a large tree with a smug smile and his hands in his pockets...

NOTE: And as usual - title suggestions?