

14. Brunch

"Is it good or bad?" Savvy furrowed her eyebrows. She did her best, and she knew it, but it wasn't like they were in a friendly country. Besides, Elene had plans of her own for the contest, which was obvious to everyone present.

"Just take a look at it yourself." Zara handed her a laptop and placed a cup of coffee on the bedside table. She never wasted time, an aspect Savannah especially valued in her. She was always punctual and neat, even though her sense of fashion was on the edgier side and could easily suggest otherwise. Her usual put-together and neat appearance was quite out of place, and Savannah was surprised to see a huge distinct stain on her white dress.

"What's this?" she asked without hesitation, shing for her friend's reaction.

"Nothing." Zara shook her short dark hair. "Just a clumsy accident at breakfast."

"Are you sure it was an accident?" The princess arched her brow. It was hard to read Zara, but not impossible. Something seemed off.

"Yeah. Sure. I'll change it when we are done here. It's nothing for you to concern yourself with." The werewolf shrugged her shoulders and gave her a brief smile. She was projecting condescence, so Savvy was about to let it go when Kyle snorted.

"Accident my as*," He glanced at her from the chair he was sitting in with his own laptop on his knees. "That bird shifter contestant did it. And the whole room heard what she said to Zee."

This immediately aroused Savvy's interest. Were other contenders mean to her people?

"Oh, really? What did she say?" Savvy chirped and took a sip of her coffee, apping her eyelashes innocently. She wasn't fooling anyone, though, as her eyes glowed golden with Athena's anger as her desire rose to rip off the head of her friend's tormenter. She could put up with a lot if it was required from her by the situation, but in no universe was the bird going to get away with it.

"Nothing." Zara pronounced the words cautiously and shot a death stare at Kyle.

"She said it made sense that Zee joined a lycan pack since she was now a stray and her ock didn't want her and then suggested a stain on her dress would make her look the part." Kyle ignored Zara's warning because he knew too well that none of them would tolerate the bullying of their team members.

"How lovely!" Savvy put the cup down with a clatter. Then tapped her ngers anxiously over the wooden surface. "And what did you do when you saw it, K?"

"I wanted to bathe that b*tch in coffee," he sneered at her but then heard Zara clearing her throat and noticed her kicking his chair gently. "But Zee stopped me, and we just walked away. It was—nice."

"The hell it was!" Savvy rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Guys, you don't have to—"

"Because everything we do will be reected on you, Savannah." The assistant said rmly, pursing her lips. "And no one here will be doing you favours and looking away. We are here to help you and not create problems, remember?" She glared at Kyle, and he groaned, getting back to whatever it was that he was doing on his laptop.

"I'll deal with it myself then," Savvy promised him via their mind link, and he secretly smirked at her, knowing that she would take care of Mavis discreetly. Years of being a princess gave her quite the experience in the eld of acting when no one was looking.

"Let's get back to that news release," Zara had lost her patience and sat on the bed next to her, clicking on the trackpad.

A northern channel's logo appeared with a beautiful scenic mountain view as a background, and then she saw the hosts, the famous twin brother and sister, Chloe and Claude Larsen. She read a few articles about them in the past, and, of course, they were imprinted in her memory forever as everything else. They won all kinds of prizes for their tv and online programs and were one of those people who were shaping the minds of the Northern Lycan Kingdom. People loved them, and, more importantly, people believed them. Those two were denitely the one to pay attention to here.

"And now to the part we have all been waiting for!" Chloe stretched her smile to the maximum, showing off her pearly whites. She was in her late forties but didn't look a day older than twenty-ve. Her blonde hair was done in an intricate but stylish hairdo, and she was wearing a white suit, matching her brother's but with slightly more feminine features.

"The Luna Trials are really happening!" Claude picked up where his sibling had left off. He also looked the part and knew how to handle himself respectfully in front of the camera. "Moreover, King Kai has already met the contenders, and the rst elimination took place."

"Shame we didn't get to nd out who failed the simplest test!" Chloe looked straight into the cameras. A little hint of a smirk was playing on her lips. "But of course, we have saved the best highlights to show you. And, trust me, you want to watch them all!"

One by one, they started to introduce each contender. Praising some of them, like Inga and Celina. Then they mentioned some others brie, like the witch and the wercats, until nally condemning all the others in one way or another.

"I don't know what this werewolf was thinking!" Chloe shook her head with a disappointed impression on her face. That was far from what she really felt, judging by the glint in her eyes. Something told Savannah the TV-presenter was happy that something juicy happened and not with one of her

"You know how those are – crashing things all the time, coming uninvited to the territories that are not theirs. Brigit is just true to her nature," Claude smirked. "Having said all that, she wasn't by far the main surprise of the day! Can you imagine?!"

"You are right, brother!" Chloe agreed with him quickly. "I couldn't believe my own eyes when I saw her taking off her mask!"

They showed a video of Savvy removing her blue and golden mask. Kai was cut entirely out of the shot, and it looked like she was completely alone when it happened. Then it was revealed that she was saying something, but one could only hear the twins explaining what happened. Of course, they missed everything worth mentioning and Savvy gritted her teeth.

"Savannah Stormhold, Ladies and Gentlemen!" Claude announced.

"The Western Princess in the esh!" Chloe giggled. "And let me tell you, I have always known those rumours about King Kai asking for her hand in marriage were not true. Now it's obvious who is chasing whom!"

"I have to agree," Her co-host snorted. "It must be dicult for a princess to show the world that she is the one clinging to our King. Yet here she is! Smiling and waving her hand as she tries to compete with the real deal!"

"Speaking of which—" The picture changed to showcase Penelope. It was a gorgeous image in which she looked much better than in real life. "If I were to make a bet today, I would be placing all my money in the hands of Miss Summerstern! She was a true picture of grace and beauty in her unique red gown. Just look at how wonderful she looks right next to King Kai. A match made in heaven!"

They went on and on about how amazing Penelope was, and Savvy could feel Elene's touch in all of this.

She shut the laptop when she had nally had enough.

"Unbe-freaking-livable!" The lycaness let out an exasperated sigh. "My carefully selected dress, my performance, my speech! They showed none of that!"

Her perfect plan had a crack now, and she had no idea how to x it. If this was how the media was working, then

"No worries," Kyle chuckled from his seat as she tried not to grow her claws out and go to the garden to chop some more roses. "I am on it."

"What do you mean?" Savannah looked at him with interest.

"I mean that I just created accounts on every known social media platform with the nickname Truthteller." He winked at her. "I had everything recorded and had footage from every angle as well. I spent the whole night editing them together. And now, I am planning to spend the whole day sharing them as far and as wide as the internet and social media will allow. I am also adding comments on my personal point of view as well regarding your bravery, the unfair treatment, all of it."

"Show me!" she tiptoed to him barefoot on the cold stone oor and sat on the armrest.

"Don't read the existing comments, though," he warned her. "It's a work in progress."

However, of course, she went to the comments section rst.

"They showed her that they didn't want her, but she still tries to cling to the king!"

"She is just embarrassing herself."

"I don't like her, but the dress is great."

"She can come to my town, and I will show her the northern hospitality! She will forget about the King!"

"I think it was brave of her to do that for love."

"Show off!"

Savannah walked away, and for a few seconds, her friends were quiet. She could feel anger rising in every cell of her body.

"Are you okay?" Kyle asked with a concerned voice.

"Peachy." The princess gave them a wide grin, but for some reason, they both looked scared when they saw it. "Zara, help me to nd that pink dress. Since this is the reality of our current situation, make sure you lm everything happening today. And every day after that while you're at it. Remember, we are on our own here."

"Isn't this dress too much for today? It's just a break," Zara pointed out, getting the shimmering fabric out of the wardrobe.

"There aren't breaks here," Savvy took it from her and inspected it one more time, just in case. She didn't need any more surprises. The North was giving them to her one after another anyway. "Every minute, we'll be lmed, and we need to beat them at their own deceptive game."

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Savannah strolled through the garden in her long pale pink dress. The ne brunch spread was another opportunity where the contenders were supposed to meet Kai to get better acquainted with the Northern King. She had already spotted four cameras on her way in, subtly giving them her best angles as she passed them by.

There was a reason she liked this dress so much. The sheer owing fabric covered with intricate shimmering lace hugged her body perfectly while her chest and arms were covered, creating the innocent and modest look she was going for. At the same time, the gown was backless and see-through from mid-thigh down, letting her stay playful and true to herself without being over the top.

This wasn't what she would normally wear for brunch, but she wasn't wrong in her choice. Savvy noticed and quietly applauded herself for her foresight the moment she saw all the other contestants in their sparkly and bedazzling outfits.

Some brunch it was!

And there, right in the centre, she saw none other than the Northern King himself talking to Penelope.

Savvy had to clench her sts in her skirt and force a charming smile when someone greeted her. She didn't like them being together one bit.

Truth be told, she hated it.

What she hated even more was that they appeared to be a beautiful couple. Penelope was indeed a stunning woman t to be a queen.

Today she was wearing a deep purple dress, the colour of the royals. And the golden hairband in her rich wavy dark hair looked suspiciously regal.

Kai said something, and she laughed, placing her palm on his chest as if it belonged there, as if she had done it many times before. What was worse was that it made the King chuckle as well.

They indeed looked like this perfect couple, and Savvy wanted to wipe their smiles off both their faces.

"Savannah! Savannah!" Someone called her name, and she was surprised to see a cloud of pink moving toward her. "There you are! Come with us!"

A small hand grabbed her and pulled her away. In this pink chaos, she noticed pink curly hair done in two pretty buns and decorated with owers.

"Petra?" Savvy tried to stay polite as the other girl giggled. She let herself throw one last glance in Kai's direction, realising that he was watching her intently now.

"Yes, come on!" Even though it was hard to see her in layers of tulle, Petra insisted. "I like your dress, by the way! Do you also like pink? I love pink!"

She already regretted that she was wearing that colour today. However, when Petra stopped, she saw that some other contenders were already there.

"So, we are sharing information!" Petra announced proudly. "Penelope told us some things that no one else did! Did you know that there are cameras here everywhere lming everything that we do?"

"Really?" Savvy tried to sound surprised and caught Astrid's approving gaze.

"Yes!" Petra nodded. "And also Penelope said that everything we do is judged all the time. We have to be really careful not to lose points. And did you know that we were lucky to come in the right dress colours yesterday?!"

"Penelope is so kind!" Brigit was staring at her ute with what looked like a mimosa.

So kind to share the information they had already gured out on their own. Which was exactly what Brigit hinted at, and everyone other than Petra understood her hidden meaning.

"She is," Petra beamed. "I decided to follow her example and tell all of you as well."

"That's so nice of you," Naya purred, ipping her straight snow-white hair to the back. She looked gorgeous in a silver dress without any extra detailing because with a body and features like that no extra decorating was necessary.

"So, I thought—" Petra was dgeting with the hem of her dress. "Maybe we could all share useful information? I know we are rivals, but we are also together in this. We don't have to become enemies."

"Sure, kiddo! Count on it!" Mikaela, another werewolf, snorted loudly, not hiding her resentment. It was clear that she wasn't going to share anything even if her life depended on it. "Nice dress, Naya," she said before leaving in a tone that meant she hated the garment.

"I take it you know each other?" Savvy asked the werewolf and only received an eye roll in response.

"We went to school together, and she was a b*tch back then too," the cat replied.

"So, what do you think?" Petra attempted to bring them back to the subject.

"I'll share some useful information with you," Brigit gulped her drink and placed the empty glass on the nearby table. "Beware of what Penelope says, and don't trust the information you get from her."

With that, the werewolf turned on her heels and left their small company.

"What does she mean?" the pink-haired girl gaped, just as her babysitter arrived.

"Petra, I think you should mingle some more!" The elegant woman, who had helped her at the rst challenge, took her hand leading her away. She was undeniably beautiful, and, unlike her ward, she knew how to play the game. Obviously, she didn't want the girl to be seen with the most popular of all the candidates. Chloe and Claude spared Petra in their piece about the Trials, and there was no need to give them a reason to tear her apart next time.

"Okay, Evelyn," Petra looked slightly startled but obeyed her mentor, waving her hand at the others as she was dragged away toward the "more popular kids".

"I have to say I like that child!" Astrid let out a little laugh, and even Naya almost reacted to that but managed to keep her calm. She wanted to say something, probably something snarky, but her face changed suddenly, and her gaze shifted slightly behind Savannah's shoulder.

Savvy turned to see what startled the cat and saw Kai walking in their direction. He was beside them in no time with a polite smile, looking very handsome in a black shirt and trousers while the wind was rustling his hair.

"Ladies, it's nice to see you all again," he greeted them.

Astrid stood up, smiling nervously, and Naya nodded slightly, holding her glass with a cat's grace.

"We are honoured by your presence!" Savannah didn't look at him the second time. "Excuse me, I see someone I need to talk to."

She was about to leave when he caught her arm.

"Actually," Kai lowered his head and locked his eyes with hers. "I wanted to talk to you for a moment."

Everyone around them went silent. It seemed like the whole garden stopped moving and breathing. For the two of them, it was as if they were utterly alone here.

"Some other time, perhaps," she answered, angling her head at him and then sharply removing her hand from his grasp, making him growl in response.

NOTE: I will be posting a pic of Savvy's dress in Marissa Gilbert's Reading Circle group tonight.