1. Northern Hospitality

2250 Words

Skin to skin, hot tongue tracing her every curve, creating burst after burst of tingles. Savannah arched her back, giving her mate better access, and grasped his hair as he teased her sensitive spot over and over.

“You are mine, Savvy, only mine!” Zack growled as he entered her in one powerful thrust, locking their eyes and growling from the pleasure.

The car jumped on an uneven northern road, and Savannah woke up, realising this was just a dream. She sighed in relief, looking around and seeing her best friend Kyle and new assistant Zara by her side.

Savannah yawned as she looked outside of her car window. The views of the North did not impress her much. She sighed again, remembering that this would be her home from now on. It was unlikely that her future husband, the Northern Lycan King, would let her live in the West with her brother and his family. After all, he had been asking for her hand in marriage for so many years. Kai was a known cold-hearted brute, and she was surprised he was interested in her at all. Not to mention that she was still a minor the first time he dared to suggest the marriage. Fast forward to her being twenty now, and he still did not leave this idea.

She, however, did not care about his motivation. She did not care about her future husband at all. This was a sacrifice that she was willing to make for her people. Because after her mate’s betrayal, she couldn’t feel anything anymore anyway.

Just a few months ago, she was the happiest girl alive when, during a terrible war, she met the perfect man among her brother’s allies. Zack Morgan was an Alpha who earned his reputation as a great warrior and ruler. And everything in her life made sense the moment they laid their eyes on each other, and he called her his.

He took her back to his pack and announced her his Luna before his packmates, proving the seriousness of his intentions. And then they had a night of passionate lovemaking. It was pure bliss, heaven on Earth, all her dreams came true… Up until the moment she woke up and accidentally heard about his plans to kill her brother and make her nothing more than a breeding machine for him.

“Savannah will be busy the next few years mourning her brother and friends as well as giving birth to my pups… ” His cruel words would be imprinted in her memory forever. A scar that would never heal.

Her heart broke into a million little pieces, and she ran away from him. Zack tried to get her back, but she made it very hard for him. And when they were finally able to face each other again, she rejected him. Only that he did not accept her rejection… which complicated everything for her.

The car stopped, and she blinked a few times, trying to get out of her daze. She promised herself not to go into that darkness anymore. None of that mattered. She would never see him again.

She was here, she was alive, and she was about to fulfil her princess duties and marry the man she did not love, need or even know. All for an alliance that her brother, the Western Lycan King needed, for she knew that if the two kingdoms were not working together now, they might both got destroyed by their enemies very soon. Her brother knew that, but King Kai did not. And they were lucky he agreed to all that in the first place.

The driver opened the window and handed the papers to one of the northern guards.

“Princess Savannah Stormhold,” he announced. “The bride of King Kai Fionnlagh.”

The guard took his time to check the papers that were handed to him, and another one joined him, looking over his shoulder.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, just one of the king’s brides arriving for the Trials,” the first one replied and handed the papers back.

“What did he just say?” Kyle brushed his hand over his red hair. He had this little habit since their childhood.

“There must be some kind of mistake,” Zara said reassuringly, checking her iPad. She always kept herself busy.

“Of course,” Savannah chuckled. “Relax, Kyle. What else could it be?”

They drove into the territory, and she was finally able to see what the high stone walls were hiding.

It was a castle. A real castle! Huge, dark, ancient, and gloomy. Just like in history books.

Savannah couldn’t believe her own eyes. She was a princess, yes, but she used to live in modern-style mansions. This was… so not what she expected. Even though her brother told her not to expect much from the North.

And she didn’t. But she didn’t expect to get into the Middle Ages either.

“Not important,” she breathed out. None of this was important. She just had to find Kai. Get married to him fast and be done with it. Then maybe they could work on some kind of agreement as to how their life together would be. Surely, they could agree on monthly visits. Hopefully, yearly, after she produced him an heir. Then maybe she could find her mate, kill him and just concentrate on her child. This was a good enough plan.

She and her entourage got out of their cars. And Savvy noticed a woman in a dress too luxurious and open for the ugly and cold weather they had today, walking leisurely in their direction with a much younger girl by her side. The latter had some kind of folder in her hands.

But it was the first one that bothered Savannah because she knew exactly who that was.

“My name is Elene,” the woman smiled, playing with her heavy golden locks. “I am the Northern Princess and the sister of King Kai.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Savvy managed to curl her lips in a smile. “I am…”

“I know who you are,” Elene sneered, and Savannah swallowed. Of course, she did. Elene probably knew everything about her family. After all, all this started with her. Years ago, Kai proposed her hand in marriage to her brother. Gideon declined the generous offer. The first time Kai asked for Savvy as his wife was probably just out of spite. It was no secret that Elene was in love with her brother. And now that he found his mate and was happily married, all her dreams about becoming the Luna of the Western Kingdom were gone.

She probably hated her. Not that the situation was Savvy’s fault. But she could see that in the woman’s eyes now.

“Follow me,” Elene waved to her and started walking. Sighing, Savannah did as she was told.

“Your castle is magnificent,” she decided to start small talk just as etiquette required of her.

"Thank you," the northerner smirked and turned to have a look at her. "The other contenders said the same. You will be able to enjoy northern architecture more if you advance in…"

"Excuse me?" Savannah was never slow, and she stopped right there and then. She knew a scheme when she saw one. "Other contenders? Maybe the princess will be so kind as to explain to me what that means?"

"Other contenders for the title of The Luna of the North, of course," Elene gave her the most innocent smile. "What else could it mean?"

"But I am king Kai's future wife," Savvy lifted her chin up to meet the woman's delighted gaze.

"Oh, no, dear. You got something wrong. You are a contender for the position of his wife. Con-ten-der." Elene spelt the word for her, enjoying the moment to the core.

"There must be some kind of a mistake," Savannah insisted.

"There is no mistake, dear," the princess of the North said, "You are a contender in The Luna Trials. Take it or leave it."

"The Luna Trials?" Savannah clenched her fists, "You must be kidding! King Kai is of a very high opinion of himself if he thinks that his future wife should humiliate herself by fighting with other women over the honour of becoming his Luna!"

"This is the North," Elene suddenly became sharp, and all her smiles were gone. "The Northerners will never take a Luna who is not worthy! If you want this place, you need to prove that you are the best among all possible options. You need to be of excellent health and lineage, you need to know how to behave, you have to be smart, but most importantly, you need to prove your strength!"

They were serious. Savannah realised that it was not a joke. They were absolutely serious. This was happening. The Luna Trials or whatever they called it… It was real.

"And by the way," the princess looked at her with some kind of superiority, "That was minus five points. You will be the only contender to start with a negative point balance."

"There are points?!" now Savvy was pissed. How dared they? She was a princess, for the Moon Goddess's sake! The whole situation was an insult like none other.

"Of course," Elene giggled as they entered a huge inner garden, "how else would we find out who is the best?"

Savannah wanted to say something. She actually wanted to say a lot of things but shut her mouth before she lost more points. She needed to think first before doing anything else. And preferably alone.

"Now, wait here," the princess told her, "Your maid will come for you when your room is ready. But we didn't expect you until Sunday, so they just started to prepare it. It will be a while."

"That's quite all right," Savannah smiled charmingly, switching her fake politeness mode too. She knew how this game was played. "The northerners are famous for their hospitality, are they not?"

That was a jab, and Elene's smile faded. No one praised the northerners for, well, anything. And even if they did, hospitality would be at the end of the list.

The princess left without saying anything else, and Savvy knew that it would be hours before she was able to relax in that room they 'forgot' to prepare.

She motioned for Kyle and everyone else to not come close to her. They were her friends, and she did not want them to see the ugly side of her. She needed that ugly to come out of her somewhere else, so she went deep into the garden to avoid any witnesses to her fury. She found the ugliest rose bush she had ever seen, with strange metallic-looking flowers and growing out her claws, she shredded every single one of them to pieces.

It was not fair! It wasn't supposed to be like that! All she wanted was to sacrifice herself for the sake of her people, ensuring their safety. Because the alliance could give them that. That thought was bringing her at least a little bit of peace.

But she wasn't prepared to fight for the man she did not even want! What was that? Hell?

And most importantly, was the alliance even still an option? Considering that her so-called arranged marriage turned out to be a scam.

She had to find this out. And she had to do it as soon as possible.

But even thinking of the Northern King made her blood boil. He must have been atrocious if he did that. What can one expect from the man who called himself the Northern Star? Ugh.

"That lying, cheating, self-absorbed, manipulative, conniving, treacherous piece of a b*stard!" she yelled as she destroyed the last flower. She was panting, and no, it did not help her to feel better in any way. Not at all.

It only became worse when she heard a chuckle behind her back.

"What did that bush ever do to you?" a husky voice inquired, and she turned to see the witness of her despair...

NOTE: Hello to the old readers and the new! This is book 2 in The Moonrise Kingdom series, but this story will be written as a standalone book. Most of Savvy's history is already explained in this chapter, but you can find out more about her backstory if you like in the first book - The Perfect Luna.

You can find me and news on updates and some visuals for my book in my FB group Marissa Gilbert's Reading Circle. Not to mention that there will be a giveaway for my readers soon. Join us if you aren't already there. It's fun ;) And let me know what you think of this chapter. As always, I am waiting for your suggestions for the title. And also, we will be voting for the best cover for this book in the group (there are three options to choose from). Don't miss it!

2. The Gardener

2011 Words

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

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

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

“Just… trimming,” Savvy stretched her lips into a charming smile and avoided looking at the destroyed bush. She just hoped that the guy wasn’t the gardener who was responsible for taking care of those things. But he probably was exactly that – the gardener. Otherwise, why would he have that earthy forest scent with a hint of pine in it and be sitting on the ground of all the places? Now that she had a better look at him, he was very handsome and had all those muscles that probably came from physical labour. The gardens of the northern castle were vast, he probably had a lot of work here, and she felt guilt washing over her. She wasn't the kind of princess who terrorized her servants and omegas. That being said, the guy wasn't an omega, but his aura was hidden and it was hard to tell his rank. He was probably somewhere in the middle because there was no way an Alpha or a Beta would hide who they were. It was in their nature to demonstrate these things.

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

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

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

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

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

“Voluntary?” she chuckled loudly, throwing her head back.

This was ridiculous. Were all northerners like that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

***

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

“Elene, what the hell is all this?”