

## 10. Northern Blood

Kai had seconds to collect himself as his sister reminded him of his place, letting go of the girl in front of him.

He was the King, and he had a role to play. Especially with all the cameras pointed in his direction.

He would be thinking about Savannah Stormhold later.

Savannah. F\*cking. Stormhold.

It was unbelievable that out of all the people here, he was drawn to her. His guilty pleasure, his little maid, turned out to be the woman he tried to avoid marrying in the rst place. Moreover, she was the little sister of the guy whose guts he hated the most.

His head was buzzing with a million questions, so he just waved for the event to start, ignoring Elene's displeased gaze at him and his earlier promise to deliver a short speech. She would have to gure all of this out on her own since she was the one who started this mess in the rst place. Which she did just perfectly.

Of course, her bestie Penelope was the rst, and he didn't even listen to how she solved an old northern riddle for ve-year-olds. Elene could have at least given her something a bit more challenging, so as not to make it too obvious that she was helping her. Penelope wasn't an idi.ot.

Neither was Princess Savannah. His eyes were searching for her at every opportunity, and each time she averted his gaze. Apparently, everyone and everything in this room was more interesting to her than he was – the lamps, the walls, the oor, the people...

He gritted his teeth, focusing on the women before him. A witch just passed the test.

A witch...

Elene must have been crazy to invite her. Witches should have been avoided at all costs.

"Salome Gray from the White Tree Coven", she introduced herself and gave him a seductive glance with her onyx eyes, which he did not return as he was staring at Savannah again. Her delicate shoulders were poking out of her feathery dress, bringing sinful thoughts into his mind.

She looked nothing like the last pictures of her that he had seen. Then again, the last time he was interested to see her was years ago, when she was just a cute teen with freckles. Interested wasn't even the right word. He wanted to make sure she was nowhere near ready to get married to piss off Gideon with his offer after he humiliated his sister.

That was stupid, and he knew that now. But back then, it seemed like a good idea after he saw Elene crying for hours. Both he and Gideon were young Alphas back then and it was a given that his elders would try to persuade him to accept such a marriage.

Now the joke was on him. Because Savannah grew up. And the woman she had become was... really something.

It all made sense now. Her destroying the bushes, her looking guilty for kissing him back... She was no maid indeed.

The next girl was another werecat, Mikaela something. That meant that now there were two werocats in the game. Two too many. This kind was free and not cut for a traditional marriage.

It was almost Savannah's turn, and he couldn't wait. As soon as this farce was done, he would drag her away, and they would talk about... everything.

He didn't know what that 'everything' meant precisely, but they had to clear the air. Judging by her reaction, she thought that he had been purposefully messing with her all this time on purpose. And although he was initially guilty of creating this whole situation in the rst place, he wanted her to know that he wasn't playing with her when he kissed her. It was an honest mistake that he would never repeat again.

That thought felt sour to him, but he had to push it deeper into his mind.

This had to be the end of them. He would never allow himself anything with her.

After all, they weren't mates, and they were too different. This could never work...

Some girl he didn't know got her riddle that, for some reason, seemed to be harder than what the other contenders got. She managed to solve it, and when she introduced herself as Astrid, a daughter of some eastern Alpha, it became clear to him that Elene was playing a game of her own, trying to eliminate the ones she disliked the most rst. He wanted her to nd a way to stop the Trials, but she also had to understand that they had to keep their face in all of this. Showing favouritism was against everything the North believed in.

He grunted at the thought that they would have to have a conversation about all this again. And although he loved his sibling with all his heart, he had had enough of her for the past two days already.

It was Savannah's turn now, and she stepped forward. The deance and determination on her face was admirable. But then the props arrived and he realised that she wasn't getting a riddle like everyone else. He felt anger rising at the bottom of his chest.

"There are nine coins on the table," Elene smirked, "but one of them is fake. The fake coin is slightly lighter than the rest. Our contender can weigh the coins two times and no more. Then, she has to tell us which coin is fake. Good luck!"

His sister turned and walked to his throne, their eyes meeting for the rst time during this whole mess.

"What the hell, Elene?" he demanded via the mind-link. "Everyone got a children's riddle, and she gets this?"

"So what?" she shrugged it off and stood next to him. "You wanted her out. Here is your chance. She fails miserably and leaves. The end."

"And then we wouldn't hear the end of this. The Northern King was so afraid of the little western princess that he made her lose by rigging the contest!"

His sister's face paled. "Well, it's too late for that anyway! Just wait and see... Besides, it's not that hard. They would be talking badly about us whatever we do! You know how they are!"

But he wasn't listening to her anymore. His eyes were glued to Savannah who was slowly counting the coins in her palm with her delicate ngers. The same ngers that he loved having entangled in his hair.

"Wait!" He heard himself saying and standing up. He would give her any other riddle and make up something about his sister pranking the other only other princess present. Elene asked for it anyway. Kai knew that he didn't want to see Savannah humiliated.

However, the moment she turned to him on her heels, it wasn't an expression of gratitude that she wore on her face. Her brows were knitted on her forehead, and there was a dangerous glint in her eyes warning him that if he took one more step, he was going to regret it.

Although in just a second, it changed to a fake smile, and she turned back to the cameras.

"I am honoured by the fact that His Majesty wants to see me answering this up close. I am humbled by the attention." She placed all nine coins in a row on the table, and one of the cameramen came closer to avoid missing anything. "I love this test, and these ancient northern coins are exquisite. I have never held one in my hand before, and however a lot ends, this was already worth it. To touch the history of the North... It really means a lot to me. You see, a long time ago, a member of my family married a northern noble lycaness. It's a long and beautiful story, but to cut it short, I have northern blood in me too. And this is the rst time I get to experience the culture, and this is... simply incredible."

Kai would have gaped if he didn't know any better. The way she just introduced herself and showed respect for his culture was unbelievable. She even mentioned having northern blood, which he wasn't aware of. He gave his Beta a quick order to check this information and concentrated on Savannah, who bent slightly in front of him to have a better look at the coins.

"My task is to nd a fake coin by weighing them." The woman smirked at the audience and took one of the coins into her ngers. "If I had to choose by just looking at them, I'd pick this one. It's scratched just like the others, but the scratches seem... shinier. I'd even say newer." She made a half turn to glance at Elene, who was turning as white as a sheet of paper and returned her sneer from earlier. "Regardless, I have to weigh the coins, so here goes nothing."

The princess quickly separated coins into three groups and then demonstrated to everyone the one she already considered fake, placing it a bit further away from the other two in its group.

Then she took the rst two groups in each hand and carefully put them on the scales, waiting just a few seconds for them to get even.

"As you can see, these two groups have the same weight," she announced with the tone of a teacher. "If the fake coin was in any of the two groups, the scales wouldn't be even. So, we can forget about these six coins. Now we have only three left."

She cleaned the scales and took another two coins from the third group.

"Now," Savannah smiled charmingly, "if I am correct, then these two coins will have the same weight, meaning that the remaining coin is the lighter one. Also known as the fake one."

She placed the coins on the golden cups, and smirked when the scales got even again.

"Ah," she took the last coin, the one she bet was the fake one from the very beginning. "And here is the one we've been looking for!"

It was quiet at rst, but soon someone started clapping. Then another person joined them, followed by many others.

Savannah bowed gracefully before the crowd.

"Congratulations!" Elene almost growled, trying to end this fast and hurried to their side. "You were lucky and solved your riddle."

"It wasn't a riddle, Princess," Savannah commented calmly so that others couldn't hear them, "And I wasn't lucky, I just have a talent for seeing fakes easily."

Their eyes met, and it was nothing less than a war announcement between the two of them.

"Introduce yourself!" Elene walked back to the throne, not even bothering to pretend to be polite anymore.

Savvy tried to remove her mask but had a slight problem locating the ties in her complicated braid hairdo.

"Here," Kai tried to help her, covering her ngers with his. The simple motion made them both freeze, and he felt his breathing getting ragged. Absent-mindedly, he brushed his thumb over hers, making her shiver.

But remembering where they were, he pulled one of the ties and helped her to get rid of the mask, announcing her himself. "Princess Savannah Stormhold of the Western Kingdom. Our honouring guest and the twelfth contender of The Luna Trials."

Whispers and gasps erupted through the crowd while Savannah walked to the centre of the line of the contenders. This was where he was supposed to stand for their group shot, and something told him that she was aware.

Penelope shot him a concerned glance which he ignored as he stood right next to the Western Princess, trying not to inhale her intoxicating scent of bluebells.

"I am honoured to have such wonderful, strong and beautiful women come to our palace to honour our traditions by ghting for the title of The Luna of The North. I hope to be worthy of their efforts." The words came out dry, and he could swear he heard a little snort.

She had a right to this if he was honest with himself.

However, she completely shocked him when she slid her arm around his elbow and stepped closer.

"Your Majesty," Savannah beamed at the cameras. "I think it's time for us to announce the main part."

Kai looked at the princess in confusion. What was she doing? That dangerous glint was back in her green eyes.

He was about to laugh it off and lead her out of the ceremony hall. But she turned back to the cameras.

"I guess the honour is all mine." She chuckled. "When I was invited to participate, I only agreed since it was such a wonderful and ancient tradition. As I have already told you, I love history, and I am especially fascinated with the history of the North. One of the ancient rules of The Luna Trials was that it wasn't just the King making his choice. The people of the North were choosing their Luna as well!"

His lips parted, and her lips curled into another smirk as she continued, "During each test, when contenders are eliminated, the people of the North can save one person by giving her the vote of their hearts. You are all a part of this! Up until the nal trial!"

The guests started buzzing again.

"That would be all news for tonight," Kai announced before she threw something else at him with a curt smile and then gestured for the musicians to start playing. "Enjoy the night."

Now all that he wanted was to take Savannah, drag her out of here to his own room and... have a proper conversation. Nothing else. Nothing... funny.

The bedroom wasn't probably the place for it.

"Well, this was fun," the princess chirped, and before he managed to do anything, slipped away from him and dissolved somewhere in the dancing crowd. Kai had the rm intention to follow her, but Penelope stood in his way along with several other contenders.

"You already danced with one of us." The girl teased him. "How about giving the same honour to all of us? We've been waiting for this all night."

"Sure," Elene appeared at his side and jabbed him with her elbow. "Kai will pay equal attention to each contender. We don't have favourites here."

He glared at his sister. Now she was talking about having no favourites? Really?

The Lycan King quickly looked around, but the Western princess was nowhere to be found.

No matter what she was thinking, she wasn't getting away with this so easily.

He danced with each contender, trying to be polite to his girl with pink hair. Some of them were chattering the whole time, especially that Petra who tried to call her who seemed way too young for all of this. So young that he asked for her birth date just to make sure Elene didn't make a mistake. The last thing he needed was an under aged contender.

She just turned eighteen and he signed hearing that. It would take her years before she was mature enough to become a Luna.

The white werewolf was silent, although she was probably the only one to whom he was at least remotely interested in speaking. Not many bears visited his pack. But he didn't want to push it. Especially since tonight he wanted to wrap this up quickly and go nd... her.

He was done in an hour and a half. Much longer than he expected. And, of course, Savannah was nowhere around, leaving him no choice to go look for her.

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Savvy was so angry that she couldn't stay in her room. She left as soon as she could. For that one night, she had done enough and just remembering the show made her lips curve slightly again.

In the end, it didn't turn out that bad. Not to mention that she was only starting. Zara and Kyle wanted to talk to her, but she lied that she was too tired tonight and that they would discuss everything rst thing in the morning.

In reality, she needed to be alone. Moreover, she needed a good run.

It was risky with the curfew hours here. Then again, all other contenders were still at the ball. So that meant that they weren't in their rooms either. The opportunity presented itself and she wasn't going to deny herself the pleasure.

The gates were opened tonight because the guests were coming in and out all the time.

Savannah used the less guarded entrance to sneak out. The garden in that gloomy bastion was enormous, but nothing could compare to the real forest. And after that evening, she needed this connection to nature.

Athena was fast, they would just run a little bit and return safely.

She pulled her dress off behind one of the trees and stepped out of it, shifting almost instantly. Stretching her paws rst, she charged deep into the northern woods.

The trees were different here, the scents were delicious, and she was truly enjoying herself, so it was also a good idea to learn the local landscape in case of emergencies in the future, if, instead of a turning back, she decided to get deeper into the unknown.

However, after a while, she felt someone else's presence. At rst, it felt like someone was watching her from one of the small bushy hills. Yet soon she heard branches breaking nearby and decided that it was time to quickly get back to the castle.

She started running but that... something was only getting closer.

He was alone, and she knew it. A male... big. Massive even. Judging by the footsteps.

Savvy kept running when all the sounds disappeared, and she stopped. Was it this easy? He simply decided to leave her alone after following her for a while?

She wanted to continue her way when the sombre shadows before her suddenly felt thicker. All her senses were heightened now, but nothing was going on.

Until she saw one red eye gleaming in the darkness...