

7. The Map

They were walking in silence and Kai wanted to do more for her. He didn't even know why. He couldn't explain it to himself. But she looked worried and it made him unsettled too.

"So, look here," he showed her the back door that even servants used from time to time. He remembered it well for the sole reason that it was a weakness in his castle and he made his guards do regular checks there. "You go left when entering and then you go up the stairs to your oor. You will probably nd yourself in some storage room, so..."

He stopped, thinking of how to explain things to her more clearly while she looked at him with unhidden curiosity in her eyes. He shouldn't have been doing this, but, sighing, he took his phone out of his pocket and within seconds he entered the password for his security app, scrolling through the options until he found the map of his house. The real one. The one that wasn't shared with anyone other than his security people. He would just show her this tower and that was it. There was no way that she would remember the outline of the secret passage. It would be too short to do even when it came to simply understanding what she saw.

He started explaining to her the turns and the doors she needed to use.

"And thanks to that, you'll be in the darkest corner of your oor. There, everything will depend on your luck," he smiled at her.

Savannah felt lucky indeed. That gardener did not know what he was doing, showing her this precious map. But she was looking at the lines greedily, even if just for a few seconds. It was enough for that image to forever indent into her memory. She wouldn't be able to forget it. Ever.

"Uhm, got it," she chewed on her lip, trying not to grin wickedly. This was the best thing he could do for her. "Thanks," she glanced at him again and noticed his eyes lingering on her mouth.

"You are welcome," he shrugged, and she opened the door. A part of her wanted to ask his name but she knew that she was better not to. She'd better just leave and forget about what happened.

But as she took another step, he gripped her hand and spun her to face him again, crashing his lips into hers for that last taste...

It took them both longer than they realised. Savvy only managed to push him away when Kyle tried to mind link her again.

"I need to go!" she said more to herself than to him, her breathing still ragged.

The maid ran away and Kai stared at the door in front of him. It was a while since he felt this... lost. Lost in his own feelings.

He had to snap out of it and get back to what he was supposed to be doing. But before he left too, he mind linked his head guard and his sister.

"I want both of you to leave the contenders alone. No one should be on their oors now. No one should be in the tower as well." He shut the connection, knowing that no one would dare to disobey his direct order. A little smile tugged at his lips. At least he could do something for the little maid. Even if this had to be the end of their story.

Savannah reached the corridor that led to her room and listened, before sneaking back into her bedroom. Kyle and Zara were already gone and she let them know that she had succeeded, before taking a quick shower and going to bed.

And for the rst time in a while, her mate wasn't the one she was thinking about when she drifted off to the land of dreams.

"Are you sure about this?" Zara was helping with the clasp of a blue sapphire and diamond necklace while Kyle was working on the mask. "I still think we should have gone with the golden one."

"Something tells me that most girls will be wearing golden outts since they all want to send the message that they are worthy of being queens," Savvy smirked, looking at herself in the mirror. They had already done her hair, and now she had it up in a relaxed braided crown with a low messy bun with a few loose curls here and there. The braid was a traditional northern one, and for a very good reason. Her every step here would have to be meaningful, and she couldn't afford anything random.

"Shouldn't you do the same?" Kyle gave her a reproachful look.

"Why?" she scoffed. "I don't have to prove that I can be a queen. I am probably the only one of pure royal blood here. I need to prove something else – that I can belong here even despite being a westerner."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Zara sprayed something over her hair and added the last sapphire hairpin.

"This is why my dress is dusky blue," Savvy chuckled. "In the olden days, it used to be the traditional bridal dress colour in the North. They wore it with fur, but fur would be too much nowadays. So, that's why I asked my seamstress to add a few feathers to nish the look instead, to create a similar effect and shape. Who knew that these would be the circumstances of me wearing that dress?! But I am happy that I thought about that before arriving here."

"Good thing that you got their trick with the dress code," Kyle snorted. "That was so low of them, to be honest."

"What did you expect after they arranged all that just to get rid of me?" Savvy giggled. Somehow it was easier for her now. She had a mission, and she didn't have to get married.

Life was getting better. And in no way was it because of her kisses with the gardener.

Nope, that denitely didn't have anything to do with that. She did not think of his soft lips and of how his ngers were laced into her hair. She had better things on her mind. Like avenging her honor and making the northern royal siblings regret their sneaky tactics.

Zara helped her to attach the mask, and Savannah gave her friends the last twirl. The pale blue fabric was heavy, but the feathers were making it look like it was oating in the air.

The glimmering silver sequins and beads were like little sprinkles of night stars. But what she loved the most about this off-shoulder dress was the split front that allowed her freedom of movement and gave a good view of her legs.

It was very... Savvy. In a dress like that, she would be as comfortable as a sh in the sea.

Someone knocked on her door, and Zara rushed to open it. She was wearing an elegant black dress with a large golden bird clasp on her left shoulder.

"Princess Elene asks you not to be late," a maid handed them a golden envelope and disappeared even before any of them had a chance to respond.

"She is in such a rush!" Kyle rolled his eyes.

Zara handed Savvy the letter, and she opened it without delay.

Her lips curled into a smirk when she read the contents of the message.

"What is it?" Kyle was impatient.

"Nothing much," Savannah opened the secret compartment of her make-up box and hid the letter there. "Elene really wants us to get to the ball on time. She was even kind enough to give me strict directions on where to go."

"That's– unexpectedly nice of her," Zara checked the time and looked at Savvy reassuringly.

"If only her instructions didn't lead me to an inventory room at the back of the castle," the lycan princess snorted. She couldn't believe that this woman hated her enough to go into this much trouble. This was so... childish. Although, maybe not. The consequences could have been a disaster.

Little did the people here knew that her photographic memory would never let her get lost in this place. All thanks to one very handsome gardener...

"B**ch," Zara swore under her breath but quickly regained her composure. "Anyway, shall we? Now we just have to come early!"

"I like the way you think," Kyle winked, offering them both his hands, which they gladly accepted.

In less than a few minutes, they were already standing at the grand doors leading to the main ballroom. Elene was greeting the guests, wearing a sparkling golden dress. She was in the middle of ridiculing a girl who had the misfortune to arrive in a purple dress.

Unfortunately for her, the purple ink wasn't used in the invitation. Hence, the colour was considered inappropriate today.

"The North always respected wits before everything," Elene frowned and waved the girls off. "We cannot have a queen who doesn't know the simplest of rules."

She clearly wanted to say something else, but that was when her eyes locked with Savannah's. Elene recognised her at once and gasped. However, she clenched her lips not to give away her displeasure. But it was obvious, nevertheless.

The girl in purple had already left, using her chance to escape. And Savvy left her companions to enter separately, as the contenders were obliged to.

"Savannah Stormhold?" Elene pretended that she did not care much. "I am not mistaken, right?"

"Not this time," Savvy gave her the most charming smile despite not being able to restrain herself from a little jab.

"What do you mean? I'd never..." she started talking but cut herself off in the middle of it, realising what the westerner meant. She was talking about the instructions she sent to her room to try and get rid of her quickly. The plan that obviously failed.

"Don't worry about it," Savannah leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I appreciate the gesture, and I will return it when I can."

Their eyes locked just for a brief moment as Savvy's lips curled into a smirk. That was a promise and now Elene would have to live with it.

Not waiting for a reply, the Wester Princess entered the ballroom.

The space was lled with guests in masks, and she tried to observe them discreetly. The ball was only supposed to start when the King arrived, and the contenders were introduced. So she still had time to do whatever she needed to do.

Masks were covering the faces but no one here was able to hide their scents. Savvy tried to remember them now, since that would be valuable information for later.

She was sipping champagne in the corner when the doors on the opposite side of the grand hall opened, a familiar scent hitting her nostrils...

NOTE: If you are new to my books, join Marissa Gilbert's Reading Circle group on FB for the full experience. It's 13k of like-minded people discussing chapters, characters, and visuals. Trust me, it's fun!

And as always, help me with the title, please.