

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder

Chapter 223



Chapter 3: That's Why He Ran Away

Gemma placed the salve down on the vanity in front of me, wiping the greasy sheen off her fingers on the fabric of her skirt. This stuff is so messy"

"I don't think I need it."

Gemma grabbed my shoulders and turned me toward the mirror of my vanity, her face hovering above mine in the reflection. She was a normal color, her cheeks rosy from the heat still seeping from the open windows.

Me, well, I was more than a little pink. I reached up to touch the tip of my nose, the skin burnt to a vibrant red that envied the color of the evening gown I had worn to my usual dinner with Ernest only an hour ago.

"Thank Goddess that man got you into the shade!" she said, shaking her head as she reached for the greasy can of salve again, struggling to pry it open. "What were you thinking wearing that jacket out on a day like this? It's still almost ninety degrees outside, and the sun is setting!"

"It's spring! How was supposed to know it was going to get this hot?"

"How many times do I have to remind you that we're not in Winter Forest anymore? There are real seasons in Valoria, Maeve. Not just Winter and Break-up."

grunted, pulling away from her as she reached for my face with a glob of yellowish salve on her fingers. Gemma was right, though. Our springs and summers back home were brief and often chilly, Break-up signified the breaking up of the ice over our rivers and lakes, basically another word for spring. But the snow still hung on the mountains even in late summer, most of it never melting at all.

"I just wanted to wear Rowan's jacket, that's all. It's not even that thick, you know. It's a flannel."

"How many people do you see wearing any type of flannel here?" Gemma attempted to smother my face in the salve a second time, but I dodged her touch. She leaned back, giving me a steely look. "Stop moving!"

I surrendered, grimacing at the smell. "What the hell is that?"

She shrugged. "One of the kitchen maids gave it to me. The servants have been talking about your sunburn all evening. You looked a right mess at dinner, from what I heard."

"It smells awful!"

"Well, you wouldn't have needed it if you used your brain and stayed out of the sun."

"I was a little busy"

"Hanging out with your lunatic, I almost forgot!" she laughed, shaking her head as she screwed the lid back on the salve and tossed it unceremoniously into the top drawer of the vanity. "Put it on in the morning, too."

Gemma turned around, disappearing through the bathroom door. I heard water running, then her voice as she murmured curses while she tried to scrub the thick salve off of her hands.

She was my closest and dearest friend. Gemma and I had been thick as thieves when I was a kid, even though she was ten years older than me. She was often tasked with looking after me and Rowan, but eventually our relationship grew into something more than that. She was family, truthfully.

Gemma was the daughter of Seraphine, who had been a close friend of my mother, Rosalie. Gemma had also seen much of the world in her short life, which had given her an air of worldliness that I had found intoxicating as a child. During the war, she'd lived on the island where our mothers had first met. Our games of make-believe went beyond the scope of my limited imagination if she was in control, and when it was decided that I would relocate to Valoria, well, there was no way I was going without her.

I was to be Luna, after all. Maybe one day the White Queen of the north. I would eventually require my own staff. There was no one I trusted more than Gemma, and no one who would even come close to being experienced enough to be my advisor. Her position put her in the upper echelons of Pack Drogomor, granting her unlimited access to the castle and antations to the ten parties and gatherings Ernest held within the castle's walls

Unfortunately, it also meant she had to work closely with Horace, the decrepit old man who served as Emosi's advisor

Hes the absolute worst Gemma said as she sat down on the edge of my bed, crossing one leg over the other and vipina bet damp hands on her skirt "He has me running about all day right now, readying things for your breeder's

i blanched I hadn't thought about Aaron all day, not after meeting the man in the market.

Oh Gemma, did he tell you who it is?" I asked, turning in my stool to face her. I leaned forward when she shook her head, her eyes flashing with playful anticipation.

Hopefully someone handsome

"It's Aaron Cressner!"

'Not Aaron of Red Lakes

"Yes!"

"No!" she cried as I buried my face in my hands. We were both resisting the urge to laugh, and I knew that the second we made eye contact we would dissolve into uncontrollable girlish giggles. "I thought he hated you!"

"Oh, he loathes me." I laughed into my hands. "How could he not?"

"I mean, you only maimed him a little."

A little? He fell ten feet out of a tree and had a branch coming through his shoulder!"

In my defense, he had agreed to climb the tree. I had only called him a baby, twice, when he protested the activity. I did warn him not to go too high, but did he listen?

Gemma snorted with laughter, her face reddening as she rocked back and forth on the bed. "Oh Goddess, what are you going to do?"

What can I do? This obviously wasn't my decision. I doubt it was his, either." I had the sudden flashback of the day his family departed, Aaron and his parents stuffed into a seaplane as it began to move away from the dock.

Thad been standing on the rocky beach, watching the plane move gracefully through the surf, when I saw Aaron looking at me through the plane's window, his blonde hair standing straight on end as he slowly raised his hand into view, giving me the middle finger.

"His mother must be dead," Gemma said, smoothing her hair away from her face as her laughter subsided. I nodded, knowing that must be the truth. Aaron's mother had blamed me for the fall, calling me a little devil. She even had the audacity to call my mother a witch as she pleaded with the woman to let her heal Aaron as the boy lay sprawled out on the ground, the meat of his right shoulder skewered by a fallen branch.

"Curse you, girl!" his mother had said, pointing a boney white finger a mere inch from my face. "Curse you and your mother. You'll never find your mate. You'll never know your wolf."

My mother had been beside herself. I had never seen her so upset. No one except for Aaron's mother blamed me, of course. I was only ten years old, and Aaron had been nearing fourteen, old enough to know better than to take his chances against a twenty-foot-tall birch tree.

They told me not to heed the words of Aaron's mother. There was no curse, they said. But something in my mother's eyes as she tried to reassure me made me think otherwise.

"Well, the good news is he'll be sent home whenever you reach your second trimester, as long as everything goes... swimmingly

"Stop it," I said, burying my face in my hands a second time. My sunburnt skin burned from my touch. "I'm supposed to see the doctor soon, aren't I? To find out when my chances of conceiving are best?"

"Yeah, probably soon. That old quack... I doubt he knows what the word ovulation means. I'll know more when i meet with Horace next week."

"And so, it begins," I said soberly, looking through my fingers at her. She nodded, tilting her head to the side.

"So, tell me more about this man from the market."

perked up at this, although I had already filled her in on most of what had happened. Myla wanted to look for him after he disappeared in the crowd, but I refused, feeling hot, overwhelmed, and like I had done something to scare her away

"He wasn't really a lunatic, you know. He was just... funny. I understood his humor. I liked it and he picked up on that immediately, almost like he knew me already."

"Oh... you should go to the ball tomorrow -"

"No, absolutely not."

*Why Maeve? You haven't gone to a single ball since we've been here, and I've gone to five!" She paused, her face drawn with lines of concern. "This isn't about the curse, is it? You know that's not-"

"I'm not twenty-one for another two months, I wouldn't be able to sense my mate before then. It would be a waste of time--"

"What if he's there? Come on--"

"And what if I am cursed? Or worse, what if he already has a mate and is just a ridiculous, playboy flirt?"

Gemma gave me one of her famous half smiles, her green eyes creasing with mirth. "You like him..."

"I don't like him. Not like, like him. Okay? I met him once and only for the course of an hour, tops. I couldn't do anything about it if I did, anyway. I'm about to be... to be pregnant. By Aaron. To give my own cousin an heir." I paused, looking up at her. "Wow, that sounds horrible when you say it aloud--"

"It's a mess, truly," she laughed, standing up and coming to my side, gripping my shoulder in reassurance. "But It's our mess. I'll stand by you."

"You kind of have to," I murmured, grimacing as she looked over my face and noticed a spot that had been spared by the salve. "Don't do it!"

"Okay!" she said, her hands up in a gesture of surrender. "It's your crispy skin, not mine."

I rolled my eyes, standing up from the stool and falling face-first into the bed. "Why couldn't they've just sent Rowan here? Would that have been so bad?"

"Well, it might have started a war, so yes. It would have been very, very bad, actually," she sighed, patting my back. "I do miss Rowan, though." Her voice was dreamy as she said it, and I rolled over, glowering up at her. "What? Don't act like everyone doesn't just adore him."

**I don't know why--"

"Well, he is rather handsome. Everyone says so."

"Who, exactly?"

"Um, your mom has said so a time or two."

I snorted with laughter, Gemma smiled, her eyes creasing at the corners.

"I miss him too," I said as I exhaled.

I could always count on Gemma to distract me enough to make me feel better. I didn't see her as often as I wanted, but when I did, I didn't feel so alone.

Trolled over onto my back and we spent a few moments staring up into the floral lace canopy of the massive four poster bed, our laughter waning.

A sharp knock on the door startled us both, and Gemma sat up, her light brown hair fluffed with static. "What?" she called out, looking over at the clock. It was just after nine.

A maid poked her head around the door, her face flushed and eyes wide. "Miss Gemma?"

"...Yes?"

"Horace is looking for you. He sent me."

Chapter

That's why Heliant Away

"Tell him i'm going to bed," Gemma said as she stood from the bed, giving the young maid a stern look. "And stop letting liimi order you out of bed to run his errands"

"The Alpha needs to see Miss Maeve, too. Right now," she nervously interrupted.

"Now?" I asked, confused. She nodded, and Gemma and I exchanged glances.

"Are we under attack?" Gemma asked, her voice low and serious.

*Oh no! No, nothing like that." The maid shook her head frantically. "The breeder is here. The Alpha said there was no reason to wait until tomorrow for introductions."

I stood, touching my reflection in the vanity as I reached for my robe.

Well, here goes nothing.

I pulled my silken, cream-colored robe tight around my waist as I walked down the empty hallway toward Ernest's study, murmuring complaints. I was barefoot, tired, and fried to a crisp. Why Ernest couldn't have waited until morning was beyond me, but I did know he was unusually excited about this entire process. He obviously wanted an heir, badly.

I didn't know why Ernest had never found his mate. I didn't know why he couldn't have children, either. He had never stopped talking long enough for me to ask.

I reached his study and found the door ajar, muffled male voices spilling out into the darkened hallway. I didn't knock as I entered, instead pushing the door open with enough force that it swung wide and knocked against one of the ceiling height bookshelves.

Ernest's head snapped around, startled, but his face brightened as he saw me. "Ah, Maeve! So good of you to join us!" he said, coming toward me with his arms wide, as though he were about to wrap me in his arms.

"As if I had a choice--"

But then I saw him standing near the window, his back to me, his wide shoulders and brown curls so familiar. My breath caught in my throat as he turned around, a knowing, almost smug smile on his face.

"Aaron has been so looking forward to seeing you again--"

I opened my mouth to speak but was at a loss for words. It didn't make sense. Aaron looked at me, his eyes shining in the faint glow of a single lamp on Ernest's desk.

One blue, and one gray.