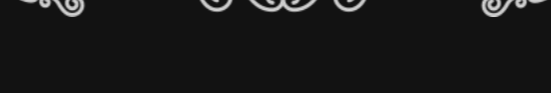


Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder

Chapter 224



Chapter 4: Familiarity Breeds an Heir

It couldn't be

Aaron bobbed his head at me, his curls falling over his face. "Maeve," he said, his voice serious, nothing like the man! had met hours earlier. "You're looking... well."

I could see the smile hiding in the corner of his mouth. I glared, which surprised him, one of his dark brows arching.

Ernest was standing between us, looking from one to other expectantly, a wide, almost deranged smile plastered on his face.

"This is just great!"

"Fantastic," i murmured, not breaking eye contact with Aaron. "You're quite changed, Aaron."

Something passed over his face at that, a look of concern? I couldn't quite make it out.

"It's been ten years, if I remember correctly." He took a step forward, looking down at me through a fan of dark lashes. "I would hope I look different than I did at what, fourteen?"

Oh yes, he looked different. The Aaron I once knew had been short, blond, and lanky, slightly behind in physical development compared to Rowan and his friends. Aaron had, in fact, gravitated toward me during his family's visit to Winter Forest, shortly after his father had formed the Red Lakes pack in what was once the uninhabited forests in the Western Territory. Aaron hadn't wanted to play warrior with Rowan and his friends. He mistook my gender for weakness, however. There would be no dolls or tea parties for Maeve that day.

i lifted my chin, squaring up to him. I didn't know why I was suddenly so angry. I felt deceived, perhaps. I obviously didn't recognize him in the market. He must not have recognized me. Not until he heard my name, that is.

Something in his eyes told me not to mention that we had met earlier. I could see it written on his face. He was watching me closely, like prey, taking me all in.

No, this wasn't the Aaron I remembered. Not at all.

"How is your father?" I asked formally, Ernest was beaming,

"Fine, as always," Aaron said shortly, glancing over at Ernest. "He sends his regards, Alpha,"

Ernest looked as though he might burst into happy tears. I rolled my eyes.

"And to your father, of course. I look forward to meeting him in the future. Your family is doing a great service to Drogomor, a service that will see us see us bound together in peace for years to come."

Aaron nodded shortly, his mouth twitching into a forced smile.

"And how nice it is that the two of you are friends."

I thought for a moment that Ernest was about to reach out and take us both by the hands. I flinched as he turned to me, forcing a smile onto my own face. "Ernest," I said lightly, not sure what else to say.

"I have an early meeting in the morning, so I must retire. But please, sit down, get to know each other again." He smiled eagerly, always the gracious hostess. I made my smile wider, knowing full well I looked delirious.

"Thank you, Ernest. Goodnight," I said through gritted teeth. Ernest nodded a farewell to Aaron, then practically skipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"You!" I said, rounding on Aaron.

"...Me?"

"You ran off the second you found out my name was Maeve: Why didn't you say anything? Did you not recognize me?"

He laughed, once.

What would you like me to say, Maeve? I didn't I didn't recognize you, alright? And then it felt weird because you

Because we have to have sex."

He raised his eyebrows, his eyes twinkling with mirth I could see the cutting, playful remark on his lips as he opened his mouth to reply, but I held my hand up to stop him,

"I'm being serious right now," I said curtly, giving him a cold look

"Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about earlier today, too." He took a step back then leaned against Ernest's desk, crossing his arms over his chest.

We stared at each other, like we had done so many times before. I felt as though a silent conversation was passing between us, something I couldn't yet decipher.

And his eyes.

How had I not noticed Aaron's eyes when we were children? Surely I would've remembered something as rare as that

You have something on your face," he said, matter-of-factly.

I reached up and touched my cheek, which was still oily from the thick salve. I glared at him, tucking my hand back in the pocket of my robe.

"You look like you're feeling better," he said in a casual tone.

"I am."

"That's great."

"Sure."

He exhaled deeply, shifting his weight as he looked away from me and around the room. "Hmm..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

I rocked on my heels, glancing longingly at the door.

"You can go, if you want," he said, tilting his head toward the door. "I'm not holding you captive."

"Ernest is probably standing in the hallway," I breathed, glancing back at Aaron. "I don't want to get stuck in a conversation with him right now. I'll be up all night."

"What's his deal, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"How'd you get caught up in all of this?"

"He's my cousin. His mother is my father's sister. This is... this is my duty to my family."

Aaron looked slightly taken aback at this. He looked away, focusing his gaze on the window. Why you?"

"I don't understand -"

"He's the Alpha, shouldn't he have a mate?"

"He doesn't. Don't ask me why, I really don't know."

He shifted, looking uncomfortable. "I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"That he was your cousin. I thought."

There it was again, that strange expression. The same look of shock and despair I had seen in the market He looked almostlerlon, luis brow knitted into a concerned frown.

"It doesn't matter,said firmly "We have a job to do. Ernest needs an heir."

What do you get out of all of this?

I paused, unsure how to answer

"Is there some incentive?" he continued, standing up and taking a few steps toward me. I stiffened, scrunching the fabric of my robe in the palms of my hands as he neared, Something about him intimidated me, only slightly, but enough to make me fight the urge to cower as he straightened to his full height only a foot away from where I stood

"I told you, this is a duty to my family. A service, like Ernest said. The same goes for you."

"Ah, yes. A great service to my family indeed." There was something dark in his voice, and I looked up at him, seeing the darkness wash over his face.

He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be around me. I felt a pang of grief for my girlish feelings about him, knowing he would never just be the playful, goofy man from the market again. No, that man was gone.

"I know you don't like me," I said softly. "I know you don't want to be here."

He stepped forward, closing the distance between us, His hand hovered near my forearm, as though he were about to touch me, but then he closed his hand into a fist and let it fall to his side. "I don't want to be in this situation. You're right. But that doesn't mean I don't like you."

"Even after what happened when we were kids?"

He looked confused for a moment. "Sure."

"Oh, okay..."

I felt the anger lifting. The tension in my shoulders released as my body relaxed. Why had I been so mad at him before?

Because he ran away from me? Because he turned out to be Aaron?

I wanted him to be something different, I realized. I liked him immediately. I felt an unexplainable rush the second he touched me for the first time, preventing my fall into the street. He was handsome, hilarious, and downright annoying but... I had wanted him. I had wanted him for myself

But now he was my breeder, and there could be no relationship between us outside of our task. We could be civil, sure, but nothing else.

I could feel his gaze and looked up, noticing the twinkle of understanding in his eyes. Maybe, just maybe, he felt the same way

"You didn't recognize me, either," he said, one corner of his mouth lifting in a soft smile.

"I really didn't," I said, a gentle laugh escaping my lips. "You look nothing like you did when I saw you last."

"Oh, really?" That look again, as though he were nervous about something

A ripple of suspicion washed over my body. I didn't know why, or how to explain it, but Aaron was acting as though he didn't remember me at all from our youth. How could he not remember me, after everything that happened?

"Yeah, you uh.. are a lot taller. I didn't think you'd get this tall, actually. You were blond, too. I guess... I don't remember your eyes. I feel like I would've remembered -"

"They became a lot more pronounced as I got older," he said quickly, lifting away.

"Oh, that-that makes sense." It didn't, but I wasn't going to argue with him.

"It's late." He turned back around, motioning toward the door. "We should go to bed." He blushed, shaking his head." didn't mean-"

"I know what you meant." I gave him a generous smile, even though my heart felt like it would burst through my chest "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"I thought you were supposed to arrive at the end of the week? Why are you here so early?"

de stand eine fermament, biting the inside of his cheek. There it was again, the feeling like we were silently

nunk at somehow

"Are you disappointed" he asked, tucking his hands into his pockets.

Why

"I thought maybe you'd want to see me again. You know, after meeting in the market."

Oh, the look he gave me was intense, I felt the electricity pass between us, the tension so thick you could cut it with a Knife

"We can be friends," I breathed, looking at him through my golden lashes.

He shook his head, taking a single step forward, "No, No we can't."

I opened my mouth to speak, but I heard my name called from off in the distance,

"Maeve?!"

It was Gemma, All the electricity and tension evaporated as I suddenly snapped back to reality.

"I'm coming.* i hollered back. Then, I turned to Aaron and said, "I have to go." As I walked away I said, "I-I'll see you tomorrow, probably."

But he was at my side as I left Ernest's study, walking in step with me as I headed toward the grand staircase leading up to the upper floors.

"Why are you following me?" I hissed, my words a whisper as to not alert anyone to our presence. It was late, and the castle's inhabitants were sleeping. I knew a few servants who used their nights to shift, often coming back to the castle grounds in the dead of night. The servants were gossips, according to Gemma. The last thing I wanted was word to spread that I had been running around the castle with Aaron, even though we had the Alpha's blessing, technically.

"I'm going back to my room," he said, shrugging.

When we reached the third floor landing rounded on him, my hands on my hips. "This floor is mine. The guest quarters are on the fourth floor," I said, pointing to the stairs.

"I'm on this floor, actually," he said, walking past me and down the darkened hallway that led to my wing of the castle.

"Where the hell do you think you're-"

"Maeve? Maeve, I've been looking all over for you-" Gemma came bounding down the hallway, silently, her feet not making a sound. She skidded to a stop only feet from Aaron.

"Who is-" She noticed his eyes. She blinked several times, then looked around Aaron's form to where I was standing, her eyes wide. "Please tell me you didn't invite him-"

"Gemma, this is Aaron," I said through gritted teeth, She turned slowly back to him, arching her brow as she looked him up and down

"Uh, hey?" Aaron said, obviously uncomfortable by Gemma's thorough examination,

"Are you sure?" she said to me, looking up at Aaron with an air of suspicion. "He looks nothing like-"

"He's looking for his room and is lost!" I hissed, looking around to make sure we weren't overheard. "Which room is he in on the fourth floor?"

"Um, Maeve? That's why I was looking for you. He's not on the fourth floor."

"What? Where is he staying then?"

Aaron looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes twinkling with menace. He took a step forward, side-stepping around Gemma and then walking down the hallway, stopping at the door only a few yards away from my own

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"You've got to be kidding me!" i cried, looking at Gemma for assistance. She shrugged,

Aaron smiled, nodding his head in farewell. "Goodnight, ladies. Thank you for the...splendid accommodations, Gemma."

He slipped into the room, closing the door behind him. "Maeve, listen-"

"He's staying in my quarters? Who decided this?"

"Horace. I didn't know until tonight."

The two bedrooms in my wing of the castle were separated by a single door. He could come into my bedroom without having to step foot in the hallway.

"I'll just have to keep that door locked."

"Maeve, that's the thing." Gemma said nervously, wringing her hands. "Horace removed the lock."

"He WHAT?"