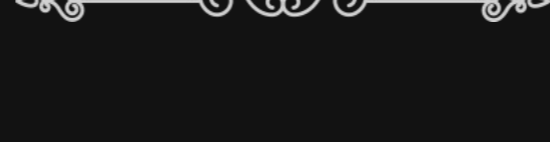


Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder

Chapter 226



Chapter 6: Double the Breeders, Double the Fun

Rowan

Mist was rolling over the muddy gray water of the inlet, the waves crashing into the rocky, seaweed-covered beach as I pulled on my socks and boots. The air was heavy with salt and an earthy smell of minerals and fish. The mountains beyond the inlet were cast in a soft pink glow as the sun began to rise, the soft violet-blue sky giving way to streaks of fuchsia and gold.

My feet were sore as I walked up the beach toward the village. Running on the sharp, rock-laden sand always cut into my paws, but the snow was still too thick and rotten to run my wolf in the nearby mountain valleys.

I reached the rock where I had left my backpack and shifted back to my human form, then pulled my sweatshirt over my head, the thick fabric a welcome warmth against my chilled skin. I finished getting dressed and, slinging the backpack over my shoulder, I climbed up the embankment and across the long field of brush, the village twinkling in the sunrise in the distance.

"Morning, Rowan!"

"Good Morning, Rowan. Out for a run?"

"Can you bring this up to the house for me, darling? It's for your mother."

The village was bursting into life as I made my way through the narrow streets, passing countless villagers. Everyone always said hello, or waved, as I passed by. I passed a woman hanging laundry and another tending to a smoker, the smell of honeyed smoked salmon blanketing the stretch of street as I walked.

The house was beckoning to me as I approached, a large A-frame fortress tucked into an enclave of thick spruce trees that towered over the three-story building with ease. The village continued on into the woods, small cabins dappled here and there, their chimneys puffing smoke into the cloudless, violet sky.

I could remember a time when the village was hidden amongst the spruce. Only recently had it spread to the coast, new gravel covered streets leading toward the dock my father had designed, the breakwater towering over the boats rocking in the low tide.

The breakwater had made it possible for boats to reach the shore, as well as small seaplanes when the water was calm. Ethan may not have been the leader of the pack, but his tedious improvements to the village and his relentless pursuit of allies and trade had secured Winter Forest's status as a powerful pack, and the village soon became the capital of the Northeast territory.

"Hey!" I said as I entered the house, pulling my boots off and setting them on the mat next to the door. "I'm home. Mom! Someone gave me a package for you."

"Is it mail?" I could hear her footsteps on the floor above, and she nearly lost her balance as she thundered down the stairs. Her white hair was pulled back into a braid, but several long strands came loose as she slid to a stop in front of me.

"What's with all the racket?" my dad said as he stepped out of his office, which was situated off the entryway. I shrugged, turning my attention to Mom as she ripped open the package, her face falling as she pulled out a jar of blueberry jam.

"Don't worry about it, Rosalie—"

"This isn't like her, Ethan! We haven't received any letters from her in four weeks. Before that we had dozens of them every time the postal plane came in—"

Dad turned on his heel and disappeared into his office. He returned holding a piece of paper above his head, handing it to her and pointing to a paragraph handwritten in neat scrawl. "Aaron made it to Mirage, see? His father says all is well there. There is nothing to worry about."

Mom looked defeated as she tucked the jam back into the box, giving me a sober, yet genuine smile. Please tell Mrs. Kratt thank you for this, Rowan," she said softly, turning away from us as she walked toward the kitchen.

Dad sighed, looking down at the letter before folding it up, giving me a knowing glance. "This is harder on her than I thought it would be."

"I thought she'd appreciate the quiet around here, with Maeve away," I replied, pulling my arms out of my jacket and hanging it on the hook near the door. I frowned at the empty hook that should have held my favorite flannel jacket. I'd been looking for it

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everywhere, with no luck.

Dad scratched his beard, nodding in agreement. "I think it's too quiet. That's the problem."

It was damn near silent in the house without Maeve here to cause her usual chaos. Dad wasn't constantly pleading with her to get out of his office, and Mom wasn't scolding her endlessly in her soft-spoken, gentle way.

Even Gemma was gone. I hadn't thought much about her absence at first. She was Maeve's best friend, but Gemma also meant a great deal to me. We'd grown up together, though she was several years older than me. There was never really a time in my life that she hadn't been around.

I missed them, truthfully. Winter Forest felt very small without them both.

"Got a minute?" Dad motioned for me to follow him into his office. I sat in one of the wide leather chairs next to his desk. He kept his small office space meticulously clean and orderly, not a single paperclip out of place.

"What's up?" I asked, leaning forward in my chair.

"I'm sending you to Red Lakes," he said, settling into his chair and testing out a pen on a scrap piece of paper.

"Why?" I stammered, excitement rushing through my veins. "When?"

"Three weeks from now, if the weather holds. By ship."

I stared at him, the blood draining from my face. "Ship?"

"Yes. It'll take about two weeks to cross the Gilahanda Sea, and once in Red Lakes you'll stay for roughly a month, give or take. I will meet you there toward the end of your stay."

"Why by ship?" Adrenaline rippled over my skin as I thought of the stories I'd heard about the Gilahanda Sea. We were protected from its rough waters in our inlet, but once outside of the inlet's protection...

"Solar panels," Dad said, matter-of-factly.

I tilted my head, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't reply I said, "What about solar panels?"

"I made a deal with Eugene. We're going to start a trade route directly across the sea, bypassing the need to ship goods by plane. We will still ship goods out of Mirage by train, like usual. Gene finally has an access road built from Red Lakes to the outskirts of the Finaldi but it'll be some time before it's built all the way down to Breles. He'll eventually be able to funnel goods from the west through Red Lakes and send the goods across the sea, here."

"You're joking, right?"

Dad blinked, his eyes narrowing. "Is there something funny about this?"

"No, no I just... you've heard the stories..."

"Fantasy," he said, rolling his pen over his fingers. "The ships we have now are much faster, safer, very different from the wooden ships still used around Avondale and Breles. Plus, if we are successful, we can convince the Alpha of Breles to contribute to—"

Mom might be the ruler of Winter Forest, but Dad was the reason why the pack's strong economy was what it is today. He talked on, explaining how more efficient trade would speed up communication between the packs. He held up his hand, tracing a circle on his palm as he showed me how it would work. We'd ship oil and timber down to Valoria, and Valoria would use it to strengthen their cities and power their homes to make up for their depleted wind turbine farms. Valoria, the most populous of the territories, traded back and forth with Avondale and Breles since the tropical, warm-water sea between the cities less dangerous and more predictable.

Trade used to stop at Breles, but not anymore. Not if Dad could open up a route over Gilahanda.

*Red Lakes has minimal power as it stands. Unless the access road to Finaldi is finalized, they will continue to live in the stone age. Their timber is priceless, and the landscape there is level. Solar farms are more than doable around their village for now, but wind turbines are the future. We just need a way to get parts and engineers from Valoria there without spending months traveling through the Isles and up the western coast. That's where the northern sea route comes in."

He brought out a map, smoothing it onto his desk. I stood, peering over his shoulder as he traced the route he had in mind.

"So I'm taking the solar panels to Red Lakes?"

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"Yes, and overseeing the construction and implementation of the solar farm in my absence."

"What about cellular communication?"

"What about it? That technology hasn't been used in over two decades, Rowan. I think we need reliable power restored before worrying about fixing or replacing all those old towers."

I looked down at the map, my eyes settling on Finaldi. It was a large territory, twice as large as Valoria but with a quarter of the population. Finaldi had radio towers, several of them, and I knew the designs well.

"If we can ship solar panels across the sea, we can certainly ship the parts for radio towers as well. Two or three towers surrounding Red lakes would allow for cellular communication between Finaldi and Red Lakes," I rattled on, my voice bubbling with excitement. And, if we built a few towers here, and convinced Ernest to invest in a dozen or so towers in Valoria—, well, we would have cellular communication. We'd be able to use those old phones again. No more letters. No more getting news weeks after something happens."

Dad was looking up at me, watching my face. I looked down at him, meeting his eye. His expression was blank but I could see the gears turning. "I wish I understood your mind, Rowan," he said, a smile twitching onto his wide mouth.

"I'm just saying, well, if you're right about the sea route... we could do more than get electricity to these smaller packs. We could do much more than increase trade."

"I know," he said, turning back to the map. "I'll consider it, if you're successful in bringing reliable power to Red Lakes."

I wanted to jump up and down, but maintained my composure. I had always gravitated toward engineering. I had even begged to be sent to Valoria, to attend the university outside of Mirage.

But I was the son of an Alpha. I was meant to lead, to conquer, not pour over blueprints and build radios. Taking a long respite from my duties and training under my parent's supervision was out of the question.

At least, I thought it was.

Being sent to Red Lakes to complete this project was something I could have only dreamed about. I knew that if I proved myself, Dad would be more willing to allow me the freedom to journey further from home and do even more.

"Did you hear me?" he asked, and I blinked, straightening up and clearing my throat.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I said," he turned around in his chair to face me, his blue eyes piercing my own. "Red Lakes is a test, Rowan. Eugene's pack is still new. He's a friend now, of course, but the relationship between our packs needs to be more than that."

"Well, giving him a solar farm should do the trick,"

"His daughter, Kacidra." He paused, searching my face for understanding. I inhaled, fighting the nervous flush that was prickling across my cheeks.

Don't say it, please, I silently pleaded.

"Kacidra is unwed." "No,"

"I want you to at least try, Rowan. It's time to find your mate and settle down. A match with kacidra would ensure an unbreakable bond between our packs,"

"But Aaron is already fathering Maeve's—"

"That situation is vastly different from what I'm asking you to do, Rowan. Aaron and his family will have no claim over that child or the title it will one day inherit. You, on the other hand,"

"Me? Maeve is one who will take over Winter Forest! I have no title to inherit—"

"That's not true, Rowan," he said firmly, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his chair.

"How? How is that not true? The women rule here, not the men."

"You know that we have other territories where you can rule. Our lands have grown exponentially over the years. But if you want to

stay here, you'll have to have a daughter," he said bluntly. "Your mother's blood runs through your veins, does it not?"

I swallowed hard, sinking into my chair.

"Maeve won't return to rule until after your mother's death, and we are far from that. Find your mate and produce a female heir. She'll take over Winter Forest if Maeve decides to stay in Valoria, which I believe she will."

"So, this wasn't really about infrastructure was it."

"I told you it was a test, Rowan. If you're successful in Red Lakes—" He paused, giving me a serious look. "If you're successful in both aspects of this mission, well, you can have all of the radio towers you want."

I tucked my hands between my knees to prevent them from trembling. I wanted my radio towers. I wanted them badly. I also didn't want to be forced into a relationship because it helped further my father's hold on the territories.

But the pros outweighed the cons.

"I'll do it."

I rested my head against the chair, closing my eyes. A mate wouldn't be so bad. Right?