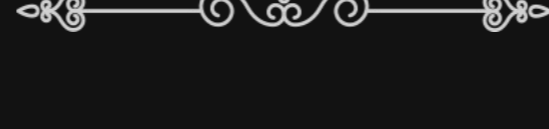


## Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder

Chapter 228



### Chapter 8: Don't You Dare Touch That

Maeve – One week later

It had been a week since the storm that marked Aaron's arrival at the castle. His presence was like the storm itself, electric, undoing the carefully crafted routines of everyone who called the stone fortress their home.

I noticed the change in Ernest first. His usually dry monologues during dinner became lively and animated with Aaron in attendance, the two men talking gaily with their heads bent toward each other, laughing and whispering like a couple of old friends while I played with my fork on the other end of the table, not included in their conversation.

Gemma too was changed. She had spent most of her time marching around the castle, ordering the staff around with an iron fist and managing the daily schedule I could never seem to follow. With Aaron around, however, Gemma seemed to cling to my side, her face always drawn with lines of suspicion as she watched Aaron through the corner of her eye.

But when I asked her about it, she only shrugged, her mouth pursed in a tight line. I could only assume it was out of concern for me. Gemma had always been fiercely protective of me, our relationship mimicking that of an older and younger sister.

On the seventh night of Aaron's stay, I walked into the dining hall to find it changed, the long table taken apart and replaced by a smaller round table, four chairs fitting snugly around a modest assortment of food and wine.

And there they were all three of them, Gemma beckoning me to come sit beside her as she took a seat next to Ernest, whose cheeks pinkened as he glanced shyly at Gemma.

Seriously? I thought as I watched Gemma give him a knowing, almost secretive glance, her mouth wide in a beaming smile.

Oh, Goddess, you've got to be kidding me.

Aaron sat to my left, smiling at me as he sat down. I watched as they conversed over steaming plates of prime rib and mashed potatoes, my mouth feeling dry with a mingled sense of shock and excitement.

I had been avoiding Aaron like the plague all week, angered by our fight in the field outside the castle and embarrassed by the fact I had broken down and crawled into his bed the day after the storm. I hated people seeing me hurt. I had always been able to play it off, straining my mouth in a fake smile and moving on like nothing had happened.

But Aaron made that impossible. Something about him forced people to let their guard down. I found the wall I had built around my heart falling away piece by piece, finally allowing myself to accept my fate. I watched as Ernest and Gemma fell under his spell, his unexplainable gravitational pull.

I hated him. I wanted him.

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It was early afternoon, the sun beating down on the garden as I walked through the rows of yellow poppies and gardenias, the smell of lilac and honeysuckle thick in the humid air. I settled into a lounge chair in the upper garden, a wide white umbrella shading me from the sun.

Gemma had ordered new clothes for me from town, several linen sets of wide leg pants with matching shirts and a few airy dresses. I ran my hands over the fabric of the linen pants and top I was wearing, thankful for how cool the fabric kept my skin.

No more sunburns for me this summer, I thought as I put on a wide-brim hat, settling down against the lounge chair and opening up a book.

But then I heard Aaron's voice carried on the soft breeze, his voice cracking with laughter and effort. I looked down at the lower garden, scanning the long beds of flowers until I spotted two men standing near a pile of blackened tree branches.

There he was, shirtless, his bronzed skin gleaming in the unforgiving sunlight.

He was kneeling with his back toward me, his hands gripping a chain that he and the gardener had wrapped around the stump of the felled tree, one of the large ornamental mountain ash that had been split in two and charred by the lightning during the storm.

He rose to his feet, yanking on the chain to check its integrity. The muscles in his arms and shoulders flexed as he raised his hand and motioned to the gardener, who was fastening the other end of the chain to a small tractor.

He had one of those bodies built by necessary force and years of careful practice, not the lean, chiseled look that was so popular with the warriors of the pack. Aaron was built. Powerful. A real beefcake.

He turned, noticing me standing with my mouth half open as I watched him from my perch on the lawn. I quickly closed my mouth; thankful he was too far away to see the vibrant blush that had risen on my chest and neck. He arched his brow at me, and I scowled, looking away and pretending to be invested in the book on my lap.

The tractor started up with a low, choking rumble and I watched as the gardener steered it forward, the chain whipping into a tight line and ripping the tree stump out of the ground. Aaron was striking the roots with a hatchet as they erupted from the earth, every muscle in his arms and back rigid with effort. I swallowed hard, struggling to keep my attention fixated on my book.

A great snapping sound echoed through the garden as the stump came loose. Aaron raised his arms in triumph, hooting with glee as the gardener glanced round and gave him a wide smile.

I bit my lip, sinking a lower in my lounge chair and resting the book on my lap.

"Maeve!"

I didn't answer as I dramatically turned a page.

"MAEVE!"

"What, Aaron?" I looked up over the edge of my book to see him motioning toward the tree stump, his mouth stretched in an almost delirious smile.

"Did you see that!?"

"Yes!" I chuckled slightly to myself. Men.

He said something inaudible to the gardener, whose enthusiasm at their success was just as pronounced. Aaron's head was thrown back in laughter at whatever the man said in response. He turned then, walking toward me with one of the biggest smiles I had ever seen, his eyes dancing with mischief.

Oh, here we go.

"Don't!" I said as he neared, his skin glistening with charcoal and sweat. He plopped down on the end of the lounge, the entire chair shaking and creaking painfully under his weight. He wiped his brow, then reached out to pat my ankle, leaving a smear of charcoal on my skin.

I scowled, reaching down to wipe the black muck from my ankle.

"What are you reading?" he asked, reaching for my iced tea.

"Don't you dare touch that," I said as he gripped the glass, bringing it to his lips with a devilish smile.

"I've never heard of that one. Sounds scandalous."

I glared at him, snapping the book closed and snatching the drink out of his hand, setting it gently on the small wrought iron table on the other side of the lounge chair. "I really thought you'd get less annoying the more I got to know you."

"I get that a lot," he said with one of his half-cocked smiles, the corners of his mouth twitching with some unsaid remark.

I stared at him, watching his inner thoughts dance across his face. He was so magnetic, with something about him constantly pulling me in, no matter how much his teasing behavior infuriated me. I glanced over at the glass of iced tea, the frosted glass now blackened from his touch.

"There's a party tomorrow night," he said, almost shyly. At the festival grounds on campus. I guess they extended the festival because of the storm."

"Did Gemma tell you about it?" I sighed, pulling my knees into my chest and wrapping my arms around them.

He nodded, giving me a quizzical look. "She did. She said you won't go."

"... I never go to the socials."

"Why? I bet they're fun. There's a lot of people here." He paused, his face falling in sudden understanding. "Oh, right."

"Right." I breathed. "What's the point when

you know."

People went to socials to find their mates. The end of a festival was like the championship game of matchmaking. It was unattainable for me, given my situation.

"Would you go if I went with you?" he asked earnestly, reaching over as though he were about to touch my arm then thought better of it, instead looking down at his blackened hands for a second before folding them in his lap.

"I wouldn't do that to you," I said soberly, resting my chin on one knee. "Part of you being here is to find your mate, right?"

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, one dark brow arched in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"That's why you agreed to all of this, isn't it?" I said, thinking of what Gemma had told me earlier. "Aside from duty to family and making alliances,"

he didn't agree to this to find a mate, Maeve." His voice was serious, the change from his usual teasing demeanor slightly shocking.

"I didn't mean that you're not taking this seriously,"

"I know. I know that's not what you meant."

"I only meant-"

He reached out, touching my cheek. His touch was hot against my skin, almost electrifying. I felt tears welling in the corners of my eyes and I blinked, looking away from him. This is exactly why I had been avoiding him. He always brought my deeply rooted emotions to the surface against my will.

"I'm sorry," he said briskly, pulling his hand away.

"We can't-"

"No, I—" he reached out again, rubbing my cheek with force. "Ouch! What,"

"Oh, I made it worse"

"Stop-"

He was leaning over me, staring down at me with a concerned expression creasing his eyes. He brought his thumb to his mouth, pressing the tip of it on his tongue. A hot blush rose in my cheeks at the sight.

But then reached down and continued scrubbing my face, as though I were an infant.

"Aaron! Quit it!" I brought my hands to face, letting my legs stretch straight out, my foot brushing against his upper thigh.

"It's just soot."

"I know! You're covered in it!" I exclaimed, trying not to laugh as I rubbed at my cheek, my fingers covered in black grime when I finally pulled my hand away.

"So, you'll come tomorrow?"

"When did I agree

Aaron rose to his feet, reaching for the towel brought with me and began wiping the charcoal from his shoulders and chest. He bent, tossing the towel to the side as he ran his hands down his thighs, brushing the soot from his jeans.

That's when I noticed it. His skin. His smooth, flawless skin that stretched tight across his back and shoulders. I watched as he straightened up, looking at the spot where the curve of his chest muscles met his shoulder and edge of his collarbone.

The scar. It wasn't there.

"Aaron?"

"Yeah?"

"What-what happened to the... I thought you'd have a scar on your shoulder from when you fell? From the branch? You didn't... at least I don't remember my mom-" I felt hot all over, a wave of confusion washing over me, drowning me, as the memory of our first encounter clawed its way to the surface.

I could hear his mother's words in my ear. Her curse. The curse she ground out through clenched teeth as Aaron wailed on the ground between us, blood pouring from his chest as his mother begged to let her suffer. Aaron's mother had refused. She pulled the thin, knotted branch from his shoulder right in front of me...

"What are you talking about, Maeve?" Aaron looked flushed. Was that fear I saw cross over his face?

I stood, taking a slow, cautious step toward him with my hand outstretched. I reached up, touching the place where the scar would have been. Should have been.

"I don't understand-"

it-it wasn't that bad?" he said, his voice lifted in uncertainty. He took a step away from me, reaching up and holding his hand over the spot where I had just touched him. "I don't remember."

"How can you not remember that Aaron?"

"Remember what?" He took another step back.

"Did my mom offer you her blood?" I asked, my stomach tightening. Something was wrong here.

"Her blood? What are you talking about? Are you alright, Maeve?"

"She cursed me, Aaron!" I exploded, the words bursting from my lips. "You fell from that tree and she cursed me for it!" My hands balled into fists at sides, fury rippling up my spine.

"Oh, that? That wasn't that bad at all. It looked worse than it-than it was," he stammered. "I was fine. I was fine, really. Not everything leaves a scar-"

I reached up, feeling along my chest until my finger found the raised, half-moon scar over my breast. Rowan had caused the injury that gave me the scar. It had been an accident, his slingshot missing his target and the rock ricocheting off the newly constructed breakwater and hitting me in the chest with enough force to break the skin open.

It was a small, superficial wound. Nothing that needed my mother's powers to heal. But Aaron's injury had been much, much worse. The village doctor has been sent for. Aaron had left in a sling, his skin stitched back together with thick, black thread.

"How-"

He turned away from me, walking away with great speed. I stood gaping after him, struggling against the onslaught of confusion that kept me immobile, my mind racing.