Chapter 232: Bittersweet Victory

The tension surrounding the final round was almost palpable. Several of the humans noticed Aria talking to Lucifer, and although they found it strange, some begun imitating her method instead of simply yelling commands at their Chibuns.

"I’m pretty sure Aria is going to win this round anyway, so just be a good boy and get us some extra points to humble the other Houses." Brittney spoke earnestly to the Chibun in her arms.

"One more race. Just one more," Charlotte murmured to hers.

She was sweating profusely now, despite the cool night air. Her skin felt strangely clammy, and her heart hadn’t stopped pounding since the previous round, but those concerns had been pushed to the back of her mind. Her gaze remained fixed determinedly on the finish line.

"Ready..."

Venus’s voice carried across the track.

The contestants lowered their Chibuns to the ground, keeping their hands on them until the signal. Around the course, conversations faded as students leaned forward in anticipation.

Then the gun went off.

Perhaps the Chibuns had finally grown accustomed to the race because almost every one of them took off at once —Well, almost every one.

Karios remained exactly where he was.

Unfortunately, Zainab had ended up with him this time. But nobody paid much attention to Karios because one Chibun immediately stood out from the rest.

Lucifer.

The black-furred Chibun was hopping down the track with such fierce determination that several people could only stare.

Was this not the same creature who had spent the previous two rounds relentlessly chasing Bunbun? The same Chibun everyone had dismissed as a horny little nuisance who couldn't stay focused long enough to finish a race?

Now Lucifer wasn't even looking at the other Chibuns. He had one destination.

The finish line.

Heads began turning toward Aria, expressions ranging from bewilderment to outright awe. What kind of witchcraft had she performed on him?

Aria, meanwhile, wasn't even bothering to motivate Lucifer like the other contestants were doing. She simply stood behind the boundary with her arms folded, watching him race with growing amusement.

It seems Lucifer really valued his balls.

A laugh threatened to escape her.

And for the first time that night, Aria allowed herself to feel a little proud of whatever strange influence she seemed to have over animals. Maybe being different wasn't always such a terrible thing.

The moment Lucifer crossed the finish line,

House Therion went wild, their celebration loud enough to shake the Outer Ring.

They had won. House Therion had won the competition.

Students surged to their feet, shouting, embracing and celebrating their victory while those who had bet on Therion screamed even louder over their winnings.

Even Alek, who had been in a foul mood earlier, couldn't resist being swept up in the excitement. A smile broke across her face as she cheered with everyone else.

She was so damn proud of her girl, Aria.

For the first time that night, Caelis removed his sunglasses. His silver eyes remained fixed on Aria as one word slipped from his lips.

"Gotcha."

Three Chibuns. Three different temperaments. And yet, every single one of them had responded to Aria in a way they hadn't responded to anyone else.

His suspicion was right. Aria Aspen possessed some kind of influence over animals. And no ordinary human could do that. So what exactly was she?

Caelis intended to find out tonight, by whatever means necessary. Maverick would probably hunt him down once he realized what he intended to do. Perhaps even try to kill him. That was a problem he would deal with when the time came.

If Aria Aspen posed a threat to beastkind, he couldn't afford to look the other way simply because she happened to be a werewolf's mate.

Whatever the consequences, he needed the truth.

The roar from Therion overwhelmed the Outer Ring so completely that when Olivia's Chibun crossed the finish line in second place, hardly anyone seemed to notice. Or perhaps they simply didn't care. They had a winner already.

Instead, several Therion students rushed toward Aria.

"We're lifting her!"

"Hell yes!"

Two males reached her first, already bending like they intended to hoist her onto their shoulders. They never got the chance.

Maverick looked at them and that was all it took. Both males stopped immediately, taking careful steps backward.

"Actually..."

"Yeah."

Neither of them bothered finishing.

Aria burst out laughing. "Seriously? It's just a game, Maverick."

Maverick appeared completely unapologetic. Fortunately, Variant had no such concerns.

"Oh, move!" she shouted, pushing between them with two other Therion females. "If His Royal Possessiveness won't let you touch her, we will."

Before Aria could protest, the girls grabbed her.

"Wait—"

And Up she went.

Aria shrieked as they lifted her into the air, her hands flying out instinctively for balance.

"VICTORY TO THERION!" The House answered with a deafening roar.

"Put me down!" Aria yelled through her laughter but nobody listened.

The displaced males did not stop there. With Aria clearly unavailable, they looked around for another person to celebrate with and their attention landed on Brittney.

"Oh, hell no," Brittney said, already laughing nervously as they started toward her.

A sharp hiss stopped them and the males froze. So did Brittney.

Venus stood several feet away, his expression perfectly composed despite the unmistakable warning that had just left his throat.

The Therion males stared at him.

"What?"

Venus recovered without missing a beat.

"Her Chibun is still racing." He gestured toward the track. "Don’t distract her until the competition is actually over."

There was a brief silence before one of the males shrugged. "Fair enough."

Venus turned away as if the matter meant absolutely nothing to him but Brittney’s lips curled into a knowing smirk.

Sure. Seems somebody was jealous.

Venus caught the expression from the corner of his eye and rolled his eyes.

The Therion males, meanwhile, needed another target for their excitement. Sadly for Lucifer, they found one.

"There he is!"

"Our champion!"

Lucifer had barely finished chewing his reward when several hands scooped him up. The poor Chibun suddenly found himself sailing into the air.

"LU-CI-FER! LU-CI-FER! LU-CI-FER!"

His legs kicked wildly with every toss, ears flattened and probably deeply regretting winning anything.

At that very moment, another cheer rose from the track. Charlotte’s Chibun had crossed the finish line. She was third, again.

Charlotte released a breathless laugh. "Yes!" She had secured Aetheris another point, nonetheless.

But her joy was short-lived.

Her knees suddenly buckled and before anyone could reach her, Charlotte Greenwood collapsed onto the floor.