Chapter 233: Watch Him Get Mauled By A Dragon

At first, no one seemed to notice what had happened until Zainab and Indigo screamed, drawing everyone's attention. Before anyone else could even move, Thamas had already rushed toward Charlotte and scooped her into his arms like a child.

Tamara looked up at the scene, her brows pulling together. What was going on?

The poison shouldn't have taken effect until much later, when Charlotte probably went to sleep and simply never woke up. Her collapsing here, in front of everyone, complicated things considerably.

Thamas looked down at Charlotte with a deep frown. She was still breathing, but her breath was disturbingly shallow. Cold sweat coated her forehead, and when he hurriedly adjusted her in his arms, his gaze caught on her hands.

The tips of her fingernails had darkened.

His expression changed instantly.

Poison.

"What the hell happened?"

Maverick was already striding toward them, brows drawn into a scowl as students instinctively moved out of his path.

He hadn't been joking when he'd warned the Houses about the humans' safety. Whatever rivalries existed between them, every human inside Bestiaris was not to be touched tonight, and Charlotte, collapsing unconscious during a supposedly harmless competition was not something he intended to overlook.

But before Maverick could reach Charlotte, Tamara stepped directly into his path.

"She must have exhausted herself during the competition," she said. "Humans are such fragile things."

Maverick stopped, his brows narrowing.

"Humans aren't as weak as you think they are. That doesn't look like mere exhaustion."

Before he could push past her, a low, resonant horn blared through the Outer Ring. The sound rolled through the structure, cutting through conversations and bringing the remaining celebration to an abrupt end.

Every beast knew what it meant.

"It is time," Caelis announced, anticipation threading through the otherwise measured words.

The fight.

Maverick's jaw clenched and his gaze returned to Charlotte. For the first time that night, he found himself caught between two responsibilities. Something was clearly wrong with Charlotte, but the fight waiting below involved more than his own pride. Therion's reputation was riding on him as well.

"I'm taking her to the healers," Thamas said firmly. "You can come check on her when you're done."

Maverick looked at him but Thamas didn't wait for permission. Whatever had happened to Charlotte, every second could matter. He turned and hurried away with her in his arms.

Tamara followed with equal urgency, but before leaving the Outer Ring, her gaze flicked toward Zainab and Indigo. The two girls stood frozen together, visibly shaken.

Tamara held their eyes for barely a second but that was enough. Neither girl needed to be told what the look meant. If either of them opened her mouth, they were as good as dead.

Tamara continued after Thamas, confident that the rest would be handled.

The fact that a human had just collapsed should have unsettled everyone, but instead, the Outer Ring began to thrum with a different kind of energy.

The beasts were exhilarated. Cheers rose from the surroundings as students began chanting for the fight, some of the males even beating their chests in a wild display of dominance.

There was something almost feral about the atmosphere now, a hunger that hadn't been there during the Chibun races. Charlotte had just been carried away unconscious, yet the prospect of Maverick and Rhydian beating each other bloody seemed to have already swallowed everyone's attention.

Bloodshed. Of course. Typical beasts.

Aria found it more disturbing than she wanted to admit. For a little while tonight, especially during the competition, she'd thought perhaps something had changed. After all, humans and beasts had gambled together, argued over the Chibuns and celebrated the same victories. For once, the divide between them hadn't seemed quite so enormous.

Apparently, she'd allowed herself to get carried away.

"Is she going to be okay?" Aria asked, holding onto Maverick's arm as she stared in the direction Thamas and Tamara had disappeared.

"She better be," Maverick said, a subtle threat entering his eyes.

A second later, those eyes went distant. Aria recognized it immediately. Just like earlier, Maverick was standing beside her physically, but his mind had gone somewhere she couldn't follow.

When his attention finally returned, she studied him carefully. "Where did you go? What's going on?"

Maverick drew her closer, rubbing her arm reassuringly. "Nothing much, love. I mindlinked Dimitri. I'm having one of his men look into what happened to Charlotte, just in case the dragons are up to something."

What he didn't tell Aria was that he'd been rather cautious about mindlinking Dimitri this time. After what he'd accidentally interrupted earlier, Maverick had no desire to make the same mistake twice.

Aria's brows furrowed. "You seriously think the dragons might have something to do with this? But Rhydian promised—"

"Rhydian doesn't have absolute control over the dragons," Maverick interrupted.

Aria stared at him, speechless. That didn't make sense. He was their leader!

"Not the way Caelis controls the serpents," he continued. "Ophidian respects hierarchy. Most serpents would sooner cut off their own tails than openly defy Caelis. Dragons are different."

"How different?"

Maverick glanced toward the section populated by Aetheris beasts. "Dragons don't respect authority simply because someone holds a title. They respect strength, and even then, only for as long as that strength can keep them in line. Rhydian can command them, but that doesn't mean every dragon will obey him when his back is turned."

Aria’s grip tightened slightly around his arm, and Maverick looked down at her.

"Aetheris has always been a powder keg, sweetheart. Rhydian is simply the one standing on top of it. One wrong move and the whole thing explodes in his face. So no, I don’t trust them. I’d sooner trust an Ophidian than an Aetheris. At least with serpents, you know to expect subtlety and trickery. A dragon will swear he’s on your side, then burn you with dragonfire the moment you turn your back."

Aria wasn’t sure how she was supposed to react to that, but strangely enough, she found herself feeling sorry for Rhydian Drakhar.

After what Maverick had just told her, his position suddenly seemed rather lonely. Being the leader of creatures too proud to submit easily meant constantly having to prove he deserved to remain above them. One display of weakness and apparently, even his own people might turn on him.

But as quickly as the sympathy came, Aria pushed it aside. It wasn’t her problem if the dragons couldn’t respect their own leader. Aetheris had made its bed. They could lie in it.

At that moment, she noticed something strange. The beasts were now streaming toward the far end of the Outer Ring in growing numbers.

"Where are they all going?" Aria asked.

"Down to the arena."

Aria turned to Maverick. "Down?"

"The actual fighting arena is underground."

"Underground?"

She looked again, this time paying closer attention. At the far end of the arena, beyond two enormous broken columns, part of the floor had opened. What Aria had assumed earlier was simply another section of the structure now revealed a broad staircase descending beneath the Outer Ring.

Beasts poured through the entrance in excited groups, disappearing one after another down the wide steps. Torches burned along both walls below, their flames casting an amber glow over the descending crowd before darkness swallowed them farther down.

Aria was speechless. All this time, she’d thought the ruins around them were the arena. To think they’d only been standing on top of it. Just how brilliant was Caelis to come up with something like this?

Before she could dwell on it, Maverick slipped his hand into hers, intertwining their fingers.

"I won't be available to protect you once the fight begins," he said, his expression turning serious. "So I want you to stay close to Dimitri."

Aria looked up at him. Of course that was what he was thinking about when he was the one about to enter an underground arena and fight a dragon.

"You worry too much." She leaned into him, squeezing his hand. "Nothing's going to happen to me."

Maverick didn't look convinced.

Aria sighed. "Fine. I'll stay close to Dimitri."

"Thank you."

"But I also want you to know that I don't approve of this violence."

One of Maverick's brows lifted.

Aria held his gaze solemnly for another second before adding, "However, do kick Rhydian's ass."

A broad smile spread across Maverick's face.

"There she is."

He caught her around the waist and pulled her against him before lowering his mouth to hers. Aria smiled into the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck as he kissed her deeply enough to make her briefly forget that nearly all the beasts had disappeared underground to watch him potentially get mauled by a dragon.

When Maverick finally pulled away, he brushed his thumb across her cheek.

"Let's go."

Still holding hands, they followed the stream of students toward the entrance. The closer they came, the more Aria could hear from below. Voices echoed through the passageway, distorted by the stone until the cheers seemed to rise from beneath their feet.

Maverick stepped toward the first stair, only for Venus to move directly into his path. Aria hadn't even noticed him standing beside the entrance until then. The serpent looked unusually official with his hands clasped behind his back, stationed there while everyone else filed past him.

"I’m sorry, Professor," Venus said. "But you can’t go in there."