Chapter 234: Maverick Knew

For a moment, Maverick said nothing, his hand still intertwined with Aria's, however, his entire posture changed. His shoulders squared as he regarded Venus with a look that made the serpent immediately realize how his words must have sounded.

"What did you just say? You're telling me I can't enter the arena?"

"Because you haven't signed the waiver," Venus quickly clarified.

Maverick's expression eased by a fraction.

"The waiver?"

"The combat agreement my prince Caelis gave you earlier," Venus reminded him. "You never signed it. If you still intend to participate tonight, you need to do so before you're permitted into the arena."

Maverick exhaled through his nose. Right. That damned document.

"Where is it?"

Venus gestured toward another passage branching away from the main staircase. "This way."

Before following, Maverick looked down at Aria. "Are you comfortable coming with me? Dimitri is already inside. I can have him come get you so you can stay with the girls."

Aria didn't even think twice about her answer. "Until that fight starts, wherever you go, I go."

Maverick stared at her. Then, to Aria's absolute delight, colour crept across his cheeks. Her eyes widened. Was he blushing?

Professor Maverick Nightshade, the most famous werewolf prince, was actually blushing because she wanted to stay with him.

Aria's smile slowly grew. She felt giddy with excitement and at the prospect of flirting with him the more.

"Don’t do it," Maverick warned.

"What?" Aria gave an innocent shrug of her shoulder. "I didn’t say anything."

"I don’t need to read your thoughts, my love. It’s written all over your face."

That made Aria laugh out loud.

Venus nearly rolled his eyes at the exchange before turning away to lead them down the adjoining passage.

Werewolves. They really didn’t need to suffocate him with all this lovey-dovey nonsense.

Still, Venus had to admit there was something admirable about how openly they loved. Wolves claimed their partners loudly and without shame, as if affection itself were something worth flaunting. Serpents tended to be far more conservative.

There were exceptions, of course. His own parents had never been particularly interested in following tradition, but generally, Serpent couples weren’t nearly this... mushy. Especially not in public.

Venus led them farther underground.

Aria glanced around as they walked. The passage was carved almost entirely from stone, with torches set at regular intervals along the walls. Yet what surprised her most was the temperature. For somewhere buried beneath the ground, it wasn’t suffocating or stale. Warm air moved continuously through the corridor, fresh enough that she could occasionally feel it brushing her skin.

How had Caelis managed that? She was beginning to suspect the serpent had put an absurd amount of thought into rebuilding this place. It made her wonder just how much money he was making from all this to justify the effort.

Venus eventually stopped before a dark wooden door and pushed it open. Caelis was already inside.

Aria followed Maverick into what appeared to be a temporary office. There was a broad desk, several chairs, shelves and enough space to receive visitors, but nothing about the room felt particularly personal. No photographs. No keepsakes. Not even some ridiculous childhood trophy shoved onto a shelf. Nothing at all suggested Caelis Cobryn existed outside whatever work he conducted here.

Did he not have a family or something?

Aria immediately caught herself. Why did she care?

Truth was, she didn’t. Still, if classes were starting Monday and she was going to be attending the same Academy as the serpent prince, knowing more about him wasn’t exactly unreasonable.

That was what Aria told herself, anyway.

"Have a seat," Caelis said.

Two chairs stood before his desk. Maverick pulled one out for Aria first, waiting until she was settled before taking the other.

Caelis watched the gesture without comment.

Aria noticed he’d discarded the long midnight-blue overcoat he’d worn earlier. The fitted navy turtleneck remained, paired with charcoal trousers, and without the coat or sunglasses, he looked considerably less formal. His silver hair still hung loose around his face.

His silver eyes, however, were considerably harder to ignore without the dark lenses concealing them.

Fuck. They were stunning.

"Where’s the document?" Maverick asked.

Caelis opened one of his desk drawers and removed several sheets of paper. He placed them in front of Maverick, followed by a pen.

"Apologies, but it’s standard procedure. Every participant entering the ring is required to acknowledge the risks involved and consent to—"

"So there isn’t some cleverly hidden clause on page six stating that if I die, you inherit House Therion?"

Caelis stared at him, momentarily speechless.

"No."

"Or that Ophidian gets possession of my body?"

"No," Caelis answered, this time with a small sigh.

Maverick was annoying him on purpose.

"My girlfriend?"

Caelis’s gaze flicked briefly toward Aria.

"Regrettably, Professor, human beings cannot be transferred through combat waivers."

Aria pressed her lips together to keep from laughing, but Maverick didn’t look amused.

"You may read it yourself," Caelis continued. "No one is asking you to sign anything blindly."

Maverick picked up the document and it was seven bloody pages. Sadly, he began reading.

For the first minute or so, Aria watched him, mildly entertained by how seriously he studied each section. No kidding, Maverick Nightshade was exactly the sort of person who actually read terms and conditions.

Soon, she got bored and her attention wandered and landed directly on Caelis. Her heart gave that annoying little jump again because he was already watching her.

There it was, that blank expression of his.

Aria was beginning to despise it. Just what in the world went through this man’s head when he looked at people like that?

"Congratulations on your victory, Aria Aspen."

She blinked, taking a second to realize Caelis had actually spoken to her. At the same time, Maverick’s eyes lifted briefly from the document. He returned to reading almost immediately, trusting her to handle the serpent herself.

"Thank you," Aria replied politely.

She expected that to be the end of it. If only she knew.

"You seem remarkably talented with animals."

Something in Aria immediately went on alert. Her eyes narrowed slightly, but Caelis didn’t appear fazed.

"I guess you could say that. I used to work after school at an animal shelter."

"Hm." Caelis leaned back in his chair. "I see."

Aria waited.

"That explains why you were able to handle all three Chibuns so effectively."

Her mouth twitched.

"I suppose so." A small, nervous laugh escaped her.

Caelis continued watching her.

Across from them, Maverick turned another page. His eyes moved over the words, but very little of what he was reading actually registered anymore.

He was listening.

Until now, Maverick had assumed Caelis's unusual interest in Aria was precisely that—interest. Perhaps the serpent enjoyed irritating him. Perhaps Aria fascinated him because she was his girlfriend and Caelis knew how territorial werewolves could become.

But this was different. Caelis wasn't flirting with her. He was questioning her. And Maverick was beginning to understand why.

His mind returned to the Chibun races and how effortlessly Aria had won. Lucifer especially. The horny little bastard had been a complete pain in the ass for two rounds until Aria got her hands on him. Then suddenly, after one conversation with her, he'd forgotten every female around him and raced straight for the finish line.

Yeah. Maverick wasn't stupid.

He'd noticed those things. He simply hadn't thought to connect them. Even now, he wasn't prepared to jump to conclusions. Maybe Aria simply had a way with animals. Maybe working at the shelter had taught her more than either of them realized.

Whatever the explanation was, it didn't change a damn thing about how he felt about her.

Caelis, however, was another matter.

If the serpent had taken an interest in his mate because he suspected there was something unusual about her, Maverick wanted to know exactly what he intended to do with that suspicion.

Because depending on the answer, Caelis might discover just how literal the phrase all hell breaking loose could become. Thank the Goddess he had an uncle for that.

"But I can't help but wonder," Caelis pressed. "Those Chibuns were raised here in beast territory, and their temperaments differ considerably from the average rabbit. It speaks to just how talented you must be to handle them so easily."

"Where exactly are you going with this conversation?" Maverick cut in.

Caelis turned to him. "Excuse me?"

"If you're trying to find an excuse not to give Aria the Chibun you promised her for winning, then say so."

"What?"

For once, Caelis looked genuinely thrown.

That didn't even make sense.

"Why would I do that?" he asked. "Of course Miss Aspen's Chibun will be delivered to her room first thing tomorrow morning. I don't go back on my word."

"And Brittney's and Trisha's," Aria added quickly. "They participated too, so I think they deserve their prizes."

Caelis looked at her.

"Of course. Anything you say, Miss Aspen."

"Thank you."

Caelis appeared perfectly unbothered, but inwardly, he was anything but.

Somehow, a conversation he had been carefully steering had veered completely off course in a matter of seconds.

Then his gaze met Maverick's and the wolf was already looking at him. Neither man spoke. Except they didn't need to. Caelis understood immediately.

Maverick knew, and he'd derailed the conversation on purpose.