Chapter 235: Ogling Another Man

What followed was an intense stare-off between Maverick and Caelis.

For a moment, Aria could have sworn they were communicating telepathically. Except that was impossible. Caelis was a serpent, not a member of Maverick's pack, so there was no way they could mindlink.

Which meant this was exactly what it looked like. Two dangerous men having some ridiculous silent battle with their eyes.

The temperature in the room began to drop.

Aria felt it first along her exposed skin, the gradual chill spreading through the office as Maverick's power stirred. Across the desk, something equally threatening seemed to awaken in Caelis. His silver eyes took on an unnatural gleam while Maverick's grey irises began bleeding purple.

Oh, hell no.

The last thing Aria needed was Caelis accidentally turning her boyfriend into a decorative statue.

"I don't think you're done going through the contract, Marvy." She placed a hand on Maverick's arm while pointing toward the document with the other.

His attention immediately shifted to her. Whatever had been building inside him receded almost as quickly as it had surfaced. The purple faded from his eyes, the unnatural chill lifted, and Maverick returned to the contract.

Aria released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Seriously, what was it with these men and being dangerous? Couldn't they settle anything without looking two seconds away from trying to kill each other?

Relieved, she lifted her head and glared at Caelis. He was the perpetrator of this entire mess. Ever since the night began, he'd been finding one way or another to provoke her man.

As if he'd been waiting for exactly that reaction, Caelis arched a brow at her.

Why are you blaming me?

At least, that was what his expression seemed to say.

Aria shook her head. Forget it.

Why did she even bother trying to understand him? Caelis Cobryn was a troublemaker, and worse, he seemed to genuinely enjoy getting on people's nerves.

Beside her, Maverick stopped turning the pages. His attention had settled on one particular section.

"This says neither of us can use our powers."

"Yes."

Maverick looked up. "Why?"

"Because I don't want either of you destroying my arena."

Aria couldn't help herself. "You're already charging an exorbitant amount for this fight. Shouldn't structural repairs be covered by that?"

Caelis looked at her.

Valerie and Variant had told her earlier exactly how much Caelis was charging to host the fight. They knew because Rhydian himself had apparently told them. Aria had initially accused the girls of exaggerating, but they'd insisted there was no reason for him to lie about it. Dragons might be boastful creatures, but pride made them strangely particular about certain things, and Rhydian had more money than he knew what to do with anyway.

The amount still bothered her. Money like that could change lives where she came from. Here, it was being thrown at an underground fight because two powerful beasts had wounded pride and something to prove.

Then again, it wasn't her money. Humans had their own problems to solve, and Rhydian had every right to spend his wealth however he pleased.

Didn't mean she had to like it.

Aria expected Caelis to take offence at her question. Instead, he answered calmly.

"Yes, the fee would cover structural damage. But depending on the extent of it, repairs could take days, perhaps longer. I don't particularly enjoy having my business interrupted."

He paused. "More importantly, there’s the matter of everyone else."

Aria frowned.

Caelis told her, "Imagine Maverick throwing ice across the arena while Rhydian answers with dragonfire. Eventually, someone misses."

He went on.

"One stray attack reaches the spectators. Perhaps it hits a beast. Perhaps it hits one of your fragile human friends. Suddenly I have injuries, possible deaths, an investigation, outraged families, Academy officials asking questions and the government demanding to know why humans were allowed anywhere near an unrestricted beast fight."

He gave the smallest shrug. "That would be an administrative nightmare and terrible for business."

Aria challenged him. "So you expect them to fight with their bare hands?"

Something changed in Caelis’s expression as he leaned forward, resting his forearms against the desk.

"I prefer it that way." His silver eyes held an unsettling glint. "There’s something rather honest about two powerful beasts stripped of everything except what nature gave them. No fire. No ice. No convenient little trick to end things from a distance."

His voice dropped lower. "Just bone against bone. Fist against flesh. Strength against strength."

Aria stopped breathing.

Caelis held her gaze.

"Not to mention, you learn considerably more about a man when victory requires him to get close enough to feel the damage he’s causing."

The blood slowly drained from Aria’s face. For one unsettling moment, she saw something behind those beautiful silver eyes that she hadn’t noticed before.

There was an eerie calmness to Caelis, as though the violence he described wasn’t horrifying at all. Almost as if somewhere beneath his controlled voice and impeccable manners lived something far darker than she’d given him credit for.

A shiver travelled over her skin. Caelis Cobryn wasn’t simply strange. There was something seriously wrong with this man.

"That is enough."

Maverick’s voice sliced through the moment.

Caelis looked away from her, and whatever had kept Aria frozen broke so abruptly that she sucked in a lungful of air.

What the fuck had just happened?

She swallowed, forcing herself to look elsewhere. Goddammit. Caelis Cobryn was crazy.

"Don’t scare my girlfriend like that," Maverick added. "Ever again."

The warning settled heavily over the room.

But to Aria’s surprise, Caelis didn’t seem particularly intimidated. His attention drifted toward her once more before returning to Maverick.

"Your girlfriend is considerably stronger than you seem to think, Alpha Maverick."

Anger flashed in Maverick’s eyes.

All night, he’d been brushing off Caelis’s interest in Aria. The lingering looks. The questions. The little comments carefully designed to provoke him. Maverick had tolerated most of it because reacting every time another male looked at his mate would make him exactly the kind of possessive bastard Aria had warned him not to become.

But Caelis was beginning to get on his fucking nerves.

"She’s my girlfriend," Maverick said, his voice dangerously low. "Not yours."

Aria felt the threat behind those words from where she sat. There was no flare of power, or sudden drop in temperature, but that made Maverick seem even more dangerous. He wasn’t posturing anymore.

Caelis must have recognized it too. For once, the serpent seemed to realize he’d reached the limit of how far he could push before Maverick stopped trading words with him.

"Duly noted."

Caelis leaned back, effectively withdrawing.

Maverick watched him for another few seconds before lowering his attention to the waiver. Whatever patience he’d possessed for the remaining page was gone. He skimmed the last few paragraphs, picked up the pen and signed his name across the designated line.

At this point, he needed to get into that ring before he decided to use Caelis as the punching bag instead. Good thing Rhydian would do just fine.

Maverick set the pen down harder than necessary. He simply didn't understand what the hell it was about Aria that had suddenly drawn everyone's attention. First Rhydian. Now Caelis.

Were they doing this because of him?

Maverick had spent enough time teaching, challenging and putting them in their places whenever their egos became too large for the classroom. He'd gotten the better of both princes more times than either would probably care to admit. Perhaps now that he had someone he openly cared about, they'd finally discovered an easier way to get under his skin.

If that was the intention, then congratulations. It was fucking working.

Maverick got to his feet, taking Aria with him. He didn't bother saying goodbye before heading for the door, and Aria wasn't particularly inclined toward pleasantries either.

Except the moment Maverick opened it, they found Rhydian coming down the passage toward the office. Both men stopped.

And just like that, all the air seemed to leave Aria's lungs.

For most of the night, she'd told herself she would be perfectly fine if Rhydian eventually showed up. She was with Maverick. She knew what she wanted. Whatever ridiculous attraction she felt toward the dragon prince didn't mean anything.

Unfortunately, her body hadn't received that particular speech.

Because seeing Rhydian again reminded her, rather inconveniently, of just how fucking attractive the royal dragon was.

His red hair was damp, suggesting he'd showered before coming down here, and the torchlight caught against the wet strands, deepening them to a rich, almost blood-red shade. He wore nothing elaborate tonight, just a white singlet and red trousers. He looked ready to fight already.

Unfortunately for Aria, the singlet left his arms completely bare. That was where she made her mistake.

Her gaze travelled over the broad muscles of his shoulders and down his arms, watching them flex subtly as his hands curled at his sides.

Then her traitorous imagination supplied an image she absolutely did not need. It was of those arms wrapping around her waist and easily lifting her from the ground. Of him holding her against him as though she weighed nothing.

Her heart began doing an embarrassing little dance inside her chest.

"Aria."

She didn’t hear it.

"Aria!"

The sharper call snapped her out of whatever madness had temporarily possessed her.

Aria blinked as reality crashed down around her.

Maverick was standing right beside her. And she’d just spent several painfully obvious seconds ogling another man in front of her boyfriend.

Oh my God.