Chapter 237: Maverick Stole His Mate

What the fuck was he doing?

Rhydian exhaled heavily as he stood before the door to Caelis's office.

He should go in. Instead, he remained there, staring at the damned door like the wood had personally offended him.

What Rhydian really wanted was to turn around, leave this entire place and retreat to his lair. At least there he could lick his wounds in peace. He would be far away from Aria, with only Sargon's demands to contend with.

He wouldn't have to watch his mate holding another man's hand. Wouldn't have to watch her kissing someone who wasn't him.

Rhydian clenched his jaw. Yes, he'd turned back.

While he had walked past them like he couldn't give less of a fuck about Aria, he hadn't made it very far before curiosity—or perhaps sheer stupidity—got the better of him. So he'd gone back to catch another glimpse of her, and there she was, kissing Maverick.

The rumors weren't wrong after all. Rhydian had suspected as much, of course. Maverick's behavior in the restroom had already told him there was something more going on. The wolf had nearly lost control when he'd found him alone with Aria. That couldn't have just been territorial bullshit from an overprotective professor.

Maverick was in love with her. Rhydian had seen it in his eyes.

It was a fucking miracle he had managed to leave them alone because the alternative had been turning around, dragging Maverick away from Aria and murdering him.

How dare he put his hands on his mate?

How dare he kiss her?

How dare he—

Rhydian closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe. Killing Maverick would hurt Aria. That was the only reason the wolf was still alive—aside from the fact that he was a strong bastard from an equally powerful family.

She liked him. Rhydian couldn't deny that anymore. He'd seen the way Aria looked at Maverick, the ease with which she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Whatever existed between them was real. And he couldn't deliberately do something that would cause her pain.

Perhaps they could share—What the fuck?

Rhydian's eyes snapped open. He dragged a hand through his damp hair, staring at the wall in disbelief. Had he completely lost his mind?

Share?

He was a fucking dragon. Dragons didn't share their hoards and certainly didn't share their mates either. Yet the thought had entered Rhydian's head so easily that it disturbed him far more than he cared to admit. For one insane moment, some part of him had genuinely considered tolerating another male around Aria if that was what it took to have her.

Fuck. His obsession was getting worse. Rhydian dragged a hand down his face. He needed to do something about this.

Right now, Sargon was still suppressed enough for him to think clearly. But when the effects of the Peridexion root wore off and Sargon stirred again...? Rhydian wasn't entirely sure what he would be capable of.

At that moment, the door opened, revealing the piece of snake himself. Caelis stood on the other side, staring at him with that insufferably blank face of his.

"No offense," he said, "but I was beginning to wonder how long you intended to stand outside my door."

Rhydian was already in a foul mood, and seeing his nemesis running that smart mouth of his was enough to irritate him further.

"I was gathering enough self-control to remember that it's Maverick's face I'm supposed to hit tonight, not yours."

The corner of Caelis's mouth lifted. "I hope you've gathered enough, then. Do come in."

He turned and walked back toward his desk, casually presenting his back to Rhydian as if there wasn't the slightest possibility of an attack.

A tick formed in Rhydian’s jaw.

It was a deliberate move between predators. Turning your back on someone you considered dangerous was either incredibly stupid or a calculated way of showing that you didn’t fear them.

Caelis was many things. Stupid wasn’t one of them.

Rhydian stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He pulled out one of the chairs and dropped into it with deliberate nonchalance.

"You called for me. Why?"

"You weren’t at the party." Caelis settled into his chair. "I thought it prudent to send a reminder that you had a fight tonight, just in case you’d forgotten."

A crease formed between Rhydian’s brows.

Caelis had risked the head of one of his serpents by sending him all the way to House Aetheris to knock on his door and announce that the Basilisk Prince needed to see him. For a reminder?

Bullshit. Something was up.

Caelis must have caught the suspicion on his face because he added, "A considerable number of people are betting on you tonight. I would rather not deal with the financial consequences should you suddenly decide you no longer wish to fight."

Rhydian scrutinized him. "You know by now that I’m too proud to back out like some coward."

"You never know." Caelis shrugged.

Rhydian stared at him for another moment before exhaling through his nose. This was a waste of his fucking time. Then again, he’d rather sit here and deal with Caelis than go anywhere near Aria right now. The snake was a good distraction.

An incredibly annoying one, but a distraction nonetheless.

"Also," Caelis went on, "I thought you should know that Maverick has signed the waiver. Which means the fight is officially happening."

"And why exactly do I need to know that?"

None of this warranted dragging him all the way here.

"Because you paid his participation fee," Caelis replied. "That makes you both his sponsor and opponent. I assumed you might appreciate being kept informed."

Rhydian rubbed his temple. Caelis Cobryn was indeed the bane of his existence.

Then Caelis added casually, "He was just here with his mate, Aria Aspen."

Rhydian went rigid.

"What did you just say?"

Caelis regarded him with an innocent expression, as if he hadn't just dropped that particular piece of information with the precision of a blade.

"You haven't heard yet?" He actually managed to look surprised.

If only Rhydian didn't know the bastard.

"Oh, right." Caelis leaned back in his chair like he'd only just remembered. "You weren't at the party. They haven't announced anything officially, but the two of them shared quite the kiss earlier. Half the academy saw it. I wouldn't be surprised if someone recorded it."

Rhydian said nothing.

Caelis continued just as casually, pretending not to notice the dragon's stunned expression. "At first, I wasn't entirely sure myself. Then they disappeared into the woods together for a while and returned looking rather... disheveled. I eventually had one of my people confirm it through one of Aria's friends."

His lips curved a little.

"Apparently, they're a match made in heaven. Sounds like perfect mates, eh?"

Rhydian felt as if the ground had shifted beneath him. No. That couldn't be right. Aria was his mate. Except he couldn't say that. And suddenly, Rhydian understood.

His gaze focused immediately. This was what Caelis wanted. The serpent hadn't dragged him down here because of a fucking waiver. He was testing him.

Rhydian had no idea exactly when he'd slipped, but Caelis must have noticed his sudden interest in Aria.

The restroom. Fuck.

It had to be. That confrontation hadn’t exactly been subtle, and Rhydian had done nothing afterward to cover his tracks. Caelis was a calculating bastard. Give him enough pieces and eventually he would put them together.

Rhydian forced every trace of emotion from his face. "Where exactly are you going with this?"

Caelis met his stare. He knew. Or at the very least, he knew he’d struck something.

"I simply thought you had a thing for the girl," Caelis said. "Perhaps wanted to get her into your bed. Quite unfortunate that Maverick beat you to it."

Rhydian leaned forward.

"And just as you said, she’s Maverick’s mate." His voice was low and firm.

The warning underneath it was clear. Whatever Caelis thought he’d discovered, Aria had nothing to do with him. And if Caelis was considering using her against him, he would supposedly have Maverick to answer to.

Caelis held his gaze.

"Let’s hope it stays that way."

Just like that, the air between them changed. Neither man moved. Neither needed to. The truce between their Houses had never made them friends. It had merely forced the two enemies to temporarily stop reaching for each other’s throats.

"Don’t ever forget," Caelis said, his voice dangerously calm, "every suffering your people inflicted on me, I’ll return sevenfold."

Rhydian’s expression hardened.

"And don’t you forget either. Enjoy the life you have now, Caelis. You won’t have it forever."

Silence followed as there was nothing left to pretend after that. They both knew exactly where they stood.

Enemies.

Rhydian shoved himself to his feet, the legs of the chair scraping harshly against the stone floor. This was enough. He needed to hit something. Fortunately, there was an entire arena waiting for him.

And for once, Rhydian was glad the man he was about to beat bloody happened to be the same bastard who had dared to steal his mate.