Chapter 238: I Don’t Want You To Fight

If anyone had asked Aria what the main arena would look like, she would never have been able to guess because nothing could have prepared her for a sight like this.

The moment they stepped inside, the rowdy noise assaulted her ears. Loud voices bounced off the walls, accompanied by laughter and the occasional roar from the crowd. And yes, there were already two beasts in the fighting area beating the crap out of each other.

The fighting cage dominated the center of the arena. It was enormous and constructed in the shape of an enclosed dome, almost like an egg, except the spiraling ironwork surrounding it had been forged into intertwined serpents.

Their metal bodies twisted around one another from the base to the curved ceiling, their heads appearing at intervals between the bars with open jaws and exposed fangs. Under the glow of the surrounding torches, the dark metal gleamed beautifully. The craftsmanship was so intricate that Aria almost forgot what the structure was meant for. It was, quite simply, a beautiful cage.

Surrounding it were several tiers of seating, divided into sections for each House and separated from the central floor by low barriers. Right now, however, those boundaries appeared to be little more than decoration because half the beasts had abandoned their seats.

They crowded as close to the cage as they could get, shouting encouragement and insults at the fighters inside. Some were pounding their fists against the barriers while others slammed their feet against the floor in approval whenever a particularly brutal hit landed. The entire place was charged with aggression, the air thick with sweat, excitement and the metallic tang of blood. Aria had never been surrounded by so much testosterone in her life.

Maverick must have sensed her discomfort because he pulled her closer, practically guiding her through the crowd. However, with the place so congested, there was still plenty of pushing and shoving. After the third person nearly knocked into her, Maverick decided he’d had enough. He lifted one hand, and ice began creeping across the ground.

The first beast it reached yelped and jumped back, stumbling into the people behind him. Curses immediately broke out, but the frost kept spreading. Another beast recoiled, then another, and within seconds, alarm rippled through the crowd as everyone hurried away from the advancing ice.

What had begun as panic inevitably created a path straight through the congestion. Then people finally noticed who stood at the other end of it, and all eyes turned toward them. At first, Aria caught anger on several faces, probably from being startled, but the moment they realized Professor Maverick was responsible, that anger disappeared remarkably fast.

Maverick simply stood there with his head tilted slightly to the side, watching and waiting to see if anyone stood up to him, Aria realized.

No one did.

Only then did Maverick hold out his hand. Aria glanced down at it before placing hers in his. His fingers closed around hers, and he began leading her through the path he'd cleared as if she were some queen being escorted through her court.

With every step they took, the ice melted beneath their feet, leaving bare stone in their path so they could walk without slipping. The spectacle was enough to interrupt the fight itself. Even the two opponents inside the cage had stopped beating each other long enough to watch Maverick Nightshade escort his human girlfriend through the arena.

Just because Aria didn't like public scenes didn't mean she didn't know how to play along when she found herself in one. So she walked hand in hand with Maverick, chin raised and shoulders straight, wearing the same confidence she would have carried down a runway.

There had to be designated seating for each House because when Maverick finally stopped, Aria found herself surrounded almost entirely by members of House Therion.

And among the familiar faces, she quickly spotted Felicity. The tigeress who had orchestrated the rat prank on her first day was staring straight at her. Judging by the look on her face, jealousy was practically choking her.

Aria wasn't usually one to provoke someone for the sake of it, but at that moment, she couldn't resist letting a small smirk curve the corner of her lips.

How did it feel knowing that the insignificant little human she'd looked down on was now dating the leader of her House?

Imagine that.

Although it lasted only seconds, it might as well have been hours with the way the two of them glared at each other. Eventually, Aria's attention was drawn away when Maverick led her past the low barrier and into Therion's seating section, where her friends were already waiting.

"Finally, you're here."

Alek and Dimitri were the first familiar faces she saw before Brittney, Trisha and the "V" twins, as Aria now preferred to call them, popped into view.

"Finally, you're talking too," Aria shot back, giving Alek a pointed look for that stunt she'd pulled earlier, storming off and refusing to talk after they'd all been worried about Brittney.

"We'll talk about that later. Right now, we're talking about you," Alek said.

"Me?" Aria frowned in confusion.

From the way Alek glanced at him, Maverick apparently got the hint that the girls wanted some time alone because he released Aria's hand.

"You have a good time. I need to have a quick word with Dimitri."

Dimitri seemed to have been expecting it because the moment Maverick moved toward him, he was already getting to his feet. The two men stepped into the aisle a few meters away and promptly began having what appeared to be an entirely silent conversation through their mindlink.

Which was pretty weird as fuck. But oh well. Another thing she would eventually have to get used to.

With Maverick gone, the girls immediately closed in. Brittney shifted into the empty space beside Aria, effectively sandwiching her between herself and Alek, while Trisha, Valerie and Variant leaned closer.

"Girl," Brittney was the first to speak. "How are you holding up about this fight?"

"What?" Aria stared at her, baffled by the question. "I'm fine. Really fine," she added when her friends continued looking at her with concern.

"I don't think she understands yet," Trisha said, regarding her with something disturbingly close to pity.

Aria frowned. "What don't I understand?"

"Just watch the fight for a while." Brittney tilted her head toward the cage ahead.

Aria followed her gaze. Thanks to Maverick's earlier display, no one had returned to crowd the space directly in front of their section yet, leaving them with an unobstructed view of the fight.

Right at that moment, Aria got an unadulterated view of one of the beasts holding the other in a brutal submission hold.

"Yes, the fights can get pretty vicious," Valerie explained. "Not always, though. But that's Ophidian versus Aetheris, and those two Houses are always out for blood whenever they meet like this."

Aria watched for a moment, and for once, she began to understand what was happening. The beast with the advantage was Aetheris. She wasn't entirely sure he was a dragon judging by his leaner frame. Dragons were usually much broader, so perhaps he was some kind of bird shifter. Whatever he was, the arrogance on his face was unmistakable. Then again, arrogance seemed to be one trait nearly every Aetheris possessed, as though ruling the skies somehow made them superior to everyone beneath them.

The fighter trapped beneath him was obviously a serpent, judging by the fangs bared through his grimace of pain. The Aetheris beast had one arm locked around him, forcing his body into an awkward angle, and there was such dark satisfaction on his face that Aria knew he wasn't simply trying to win. He was enjoying his opponent's suffering while members of his House cheered him on.

Aria frowned.

Was this what Maverick would be subjected to? Or possibly even Rhydian?

No, Maverick was not that kind of person. But she still didn't like it. There was something humiliating about watching someone being overpowered like this while the crowd screamed their approval. How could anyone enjoy something like this?

Then the serpent moved. His free hand searched blindly until his fingers found his opponent's face. Without hesitation, he drove them toward the Aetheris fighter's eyes. The scream that followed cut through the arena.

Aria flinched.

The Aetheris beast released him instantly, staggering backward with both hands flying to his face. Blood was already slipping between his fingers and running down his cheeks. Freed from the hold, the serpent dropped forward, coughing and dragging in several desperate breaths before lifting his head again.

The crowd went fucking wild and Aria's stomach churned.

Oh God. She was going to be sick. She couldn't handle this. More importantly, she couldn't let Maverick do this.

Aria was on her feet before she'd fully made the decision. She hurried toward Maverick, who was still standing with Dimitri in their soundless conversation, and stopped directly in front of him.

"I don't want you to fight anymore!"