Chapter 239: Don’t Lose Your Teeth

"What?" Maverick was more surprised than shocked. He couldn’t say he hadn’t seen this coming, knowing the nature of the fight, but the sudden declaration still caught him off guard.

Sensing something was wrong, he immediately closed the space between them. His gaze swept over her, scrutinizing her intently. "What happened?"

"I don’t want you getting hurt," Aria said, glancing back at the fight. Somehow, the serpent had gotten back on his feet, and in retaliation for being subdued, he seized the Aetheris fighter’s arm and snapped it. The man’s scream reverberated through the arena. Aria winced, but the crowd broke out in cheers as if the violence was worth celebrating.

It wasn’t that Aria was particularly softhearted. Had it been anyone else, they could beat each other bloody for all she cared and she probably wouldn’t bat an eye. But this was Maverick. Her Maverick. The thought of Rhydian grabbing his arm and breaking it like that made something vicious twist inside her. If that bastard hurt Maverick, she would never forgive him.

She was genuinely worried about him.

Maverick’s heart warmed all over again. Goddess, what had he done to deserve an angel like her?

Except before he could answer, Felicity’s voice cut into the moment.

"That is the most cowardly thing I’ve ever heard."

Aria turned.

Felicity had risen from her seat and was staring at her with open disdain. Several Therion members nearby had gone noticeably quiet, their attention shifting from the fight to the confrontation brewing among them.

"Excuse me?" Aria asked.

"You heard me." Felicity folded her arms. "This is exactly why beasts shouldn’t mix with humans. You come into our world without understanding anything about us, then expect us to change because our ways make you uncomfortable."

Aria’s brows pulled together.

Felicity gestured toward the cage. "Contrary to whatever you’re thinking right now, we’re not as fragile as humans. Our bodies heal quickly. Yes, getting your arm snapped hurts like hell, but the pain is temporary but the pride of your House lasts much longer."

Aria opened her mouth, but Felicity wasn’t finished.

"And frankly, I’m disappointed in you, Professor."

That did it.

Maverick’s expression went completely still. Felicity either didn’t notice the warning or was too angry to care.

"I expected better from you. You’re the leader of Therion. Everyone in this House looks to you. Even if you were going to date a human, the least you could have done was choose one who respected our House enough not to ask you to run from a fight because she’s scared you might get hurt."

"Shut the fuck up."

His words weren’t just loud, it came with an authority that made Felicity’s mouth snap closed. Maverick stared at her, all the warmth he’d shown Aria moments earlier gone.

But either Felicity dared death or she was too dumb.

"Professor, I’m only saying what everyone in this House is thinking right now."

"Really?"

Maverick glanced around at the surrounding Therion members before returning his attention to her.

"Aria and I had barely gone public for a few hours and you suddenly know what my entire House thinks about my relationship?"

Felicity’s lips parted but nothing came out.

Her arms dropped to her sides, indignation flashing across her face.

Maverick said, "Defending Therion’s honor is my responsibility. I accepted this fight, and I’ll be the one stepping into that cage. Aria being worried about me doesn’t dishonor this House."

His gaze hardened. "But you talking down to my girlfriend is something I won't tolerate at all."

Felicity looked away, visibly aggrieved, but wisely kept her mouth shut this time.

Maverick swept his gaze across the Therion section.

"And that goes for everyone."

The few students who had been openly watching suddenly found other things to occupy themselves with.

"I'll deal with my girlfriend. The rest of you mind your business."

A strange silence settled over their section. Except it didn't extend very far. The other students from the neighboring House sections had clearly been listening too. Hence the instant Maverick turned his head and caught several of them staring, they simultaneously whipped back toward the cage.

One male even started cheering much too enthusiastically for the ongoing fight as if he'd been invested in it the entire time.

Then Maverick turned back to Aria, and the annoyance on his face disappeared almost immediately.

He placed both hands on her shoulders and gently guided her several feet away from the others. Not that the distance offered much privacy when they were surrounded by beasts with sensitive hearing, but Aria appreciated the effort nonetheless.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said gently. "But I can't back out now."

The softness in his voice made Felicity's blood boil from where she stood.

Professor Maverick was never like this with any of the females in Therion. She had watched girls flirt with him, even she threw herself at him and practically begged for his attention, only for him to brush her aside coldly. Yet this weak little human only had to look worried and suddenly his entire demeanor changed.

What had Aria done to deserve that? Nothing. She didn't deserve him.

Felicity hated her.

Aria, completely unaware of the murderous thoughts being directed at her, released a breath and nodded.

"It’s fine. Felicity’s right." The admission tasted bitter, especially knowing the tigeress could probably hear every word. "It was selfish of me to ask you not to participate just because I’m scared you’ll get hurt."

Felicity scoffed under her breath. See? Even the bitch knew she was right. Yet Maverick still wouldn’t leave her.

"Hey." Maverick’s hands slid down from Aria’s shoulders to her arms, rubbing them reassuringly. "It’s all right. I actually think it’s cute."

Aria gave him an incredulous look. "Cute?"

"Yes." A smile tugged at his mouth. "I can already imagine you chastising me while cleaning up my wounds afterward."

Oh God.

Aria’s stomach churned as her imagination immediately supplied an image of Maverick covered in blood while she tried to put him back together.

"Please don’t say things like that."

Maverick chuckled and bent to kiss the top of her head.

"I’ll make it quick," he promised. "That way you won’t have to watch for long."

Aria sighed and finally allowed herself to relax against him. There was nothing she could do to stop the fight now, and panicking wasn’t going to help either of them.

"Fine. Just don’t come back here with permanently crooked teeth. I won’t accept it."

Maverick burst out laughing. "So that’s where you draw the line?"

"Absolutely."

"Broken bones are negotiable, but crooked teeth aren’t?"

"I have standards."

He laughed again before he leaned down and kissed her forehead.

A deafening roar suddenly exploded from the cage startling Aria startled. She turned only to see the fight was over.

The serpent stood victorious while his Aetheris opponent remained on the ground, one arm hanging uselessly at his side and blood streaking his face. Ophidian erupted in

celebration. Students surged toward the barrier, shouting and pounding their fists against it while the serpent lifted his arms in triumph.

Aetheris reacted very differently. Instead, boos rained down from their section. Some even threw something toward the cage while the others shouted insults at the defeated fighter as he struggled back onto his feet, their anger almost worse than anything his opponent had directed at him during the match.

Aria stared speechless. Felicity hadn't been exaggerating. Losing really was considered a disgrace.

The bird shifter kept his head lowered as he made his way out of the cage, blood still dripping down his face while members of his own House continued jeering at him.

Aria's unease returned.

Before she could dwell on it, Venus approached Dimitri, leaned close and murmured something into his ear before disappearing again almost as quickly as he'd arrived.

Dimitri's expression changed. He walked over to them.

"Alpha....."

That was all he needed to say but Maverick understood, and his smile faded. Aria's heart sank.

"It's time, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

For a moment, neither of them moved.

It was ridiculous. Maverick wasn't going off to war or walking toward certain death. He was going to beat the hell out of Rhydian for however long it took one of them to win. Yet standing there, surrounded by the crowd of beasts, it felt much more serious than that.

Maverick cupped her face.

"I'll be fine."

"You better be."

"I will."

Aria searched his eyes before wrapping her arms around him. Maverick immediately pulled her against him, holding her tightly enough that she could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek.

"Be careful," she whispered.

"I promise."

"And remember the teeth."

A low laugh rumbled through his chest.

"Goddess forbid I disappoint you."

Aria reluctantly pulled away. Maverick kissed her briefly but firmly, before resting his forehead against hers.

"I'll see you in a few minutes, sweetheart."

"You'd better."

His thumb brushed across her cheek. Then he stepped away.

Aria hated how difficult it was to release his hand. Their fingers remained linked until the distance between them forced them apart, and even then, Maverick looked back at her once before following Dimitri toward the fighters' entrance.

Aria watched until he disappeared from sight.