Chapter 240: Piece Of Temptation

With Maverick gone, Aria returned to her friends, who were eager to receive her. Felicity also went back to her seat, though not without throwing another glare in Aria's direction. With the main fight about to begin, no one wanted to miss the action.

Alek immediately made room for Aria while Trisha touched her arm reassuringly. Valerie and Variant offered matching smiles, and Brittney leaned closer.

"You know, you don't actually have to watch."

Aria glanced at her questioningly.

Brittney nodded solemnly. "Just close your eyes. I'll watch for you and tell you who wins."

Aria burst into laughter despite herself. Except doing that would probably make things worse. Felicity had just called her a coward because she was scared for Maverick. If she refused to watch the match altogether, God knew what they would call her next.

Felicity was into Maverick. It wasn't exactly difficult to figure out with the jealousy practically oozing from her. Not that Aria was surprised. With a man like Maverick, females were bound to flock to him, drawn by the allure of power, status and, well, the fact that he was ridiculously handsome.

Even now, it was sometimes difficult to believe she was actually mated to him. Just what had the Moon Goddess been thinking?

What qualifications had she possessed that made the goddess look at millions of other women and decide she was perfect for Maverick Nightshade?

Aria liked to think she was a good person, but there were plenty of good women in the world. Why her?

Not that she was complaining. God, no. She just couldn't help wondering sometimes. Questions like these made her wish she could sit down with the Moon Goddess one-on-one and demand an explanation for whatever divine matchmaking process was going on inside her head.

"How incredibly helpful." Aria replied to Brittney.

Brittney shrugged. "Hey, that’s what friends are for."

Aria shook her head, but some of the tension finally loosened inside her. She was still worried. Terrified, if she was being truthful. But at least she wasn’t alone.

The lights around the cage suddenly dimmed, and conversation faltered throughout the arena. Then the torches surrounding the central floor flared higher all at once. A roar swept through the chamber, causing Aria to look up.

Caelis Cobryn had entered the arena. And the reaction was immediate.

Ophidian was the first to rise for their prince, but the excitement quickly spread through the other sections as Caelis walked toward the cage with the cold, unhurried confidence of someone who knew every person in the room was watching him.

His overcoat was back on, falling almost to his ankles as he crossed the floor. And yes, the dark sunglasses had returned as well, concealing those unsettling silver eyes.

Aria watched with rapt attention as he stopped before the cage and the arena gradually fell silent.

Caelis waited patiently. He didn’t need to demand anyone’s attention, and simply stood there until the last scattered conversations died away and the entire crowd was waiting for him to speak.

The reaction clearly pleased him.

"Humans..." he began, deliberately allowing his attention to wander across their sections. "Ladies, gentlebeasts of every unfortunate variety... welcome."

A few laughs broke through the crowd, and Aria glanced around. As annoying as the serpent was, even she had to admit he knew how to work an audience. His dry humor only seemed to make them like him more.

Caelis spread his arms.

"We have gambled, celebrated, and some of you have lost enough money tonight that I strongly recommend avoiding your bank accounts until morning."

Laughter broke out, but Aria folded her arms across her chest and fixed him with a serious look, refusing to admit that he was funny at all.

"And judging by the amount of blood already decorating my floor, you’ve been sufficiently entertained."

The cheering grew louder. Caelis waited for it to settle before continuing.

"But I know perfectly well that none of you came underground for what you've already seen."

The atmosphere changed instantly, and Aria felt it. Anticipation swept through the arena as bodies leaned forward and conversations ceased.

Like a puppet master working the strings of his creation, Caelis seemed to relish their impatience.

"No. You came for the fight everyone has been talking about since the challenge was issued."

The first chants began somewhere in Aetheris before Therion answered with their own. Caelis lifted one hand, and remarkably, the noise began to die again.

"Tonight, there will be no dragonfire or ice."

Groans immediately sounded from several sections, but they did little to diminish the excitement.

"Yes," Caelis continued, thoroughly unsympathetic. "No powers. No weapons. No interference from either House. Tonight, we strip away every advantage nature was generous enough to give them and answer a much simpler question."

He paused, drawing out the silence.

"Which one is still dangerous when all he has left are his own two hands?"

The arena exploded.

Brittney leaned closer to Aria's ear. "He's a good showman."

Aria scowled, her heart slamming against her ribs. What exactly did Caelis gain from encouraging this kind of violence?

Whatever it was, he appeared perfectly at home in the center of it all, letting the noise crash around him before raising one hand toward the Aetheris section.

"House Aetheris!"

The dragons and avian beasts surged to their feet.

Caelis's voice carried above the roar.

"Behold your heir... Rhydian Drakhar!"

Right at that moment, Rhydian stepped into the arena, and Aria forgot how to breathe.

The dragon prince had abandoned his singlet somewhere along the way and now wore nothing but his red trousers. But that wasn't what had the jaws of nearly every female in the arena threatening to hit the floor—Aria included.

Rhydian Drakhar was... oiled. And no, that wasn't an exaggeration. The dragon prince was thoroughly oiled.

Whatever lunatic had prepared him for the fight had apparently decided that simply sending Rhydian out half-naked wasn't enough. Oil gleamed across his broad shoulders and chest, catching the torchlight each time he moved.

It traced the hard definition of his torso, sharpening every dip and plane until the six distinct muscles of his abdomen looked almost indecently sculpted. Even the deep lines disappearing beneath the waistband of his trousers had been given entirely too much assistance.

Aria gaped. There was simply no dignified way around it. The man looked edible.

Oh shit.

That thought snapped Aria back to her senses. She wasn't supposed to be lusting after Rhydian when she was actively trying to get over this ridiculous attraction to him.

But fate must have been messing with her because Brittney chose that exact moment to whistle.

"Damn, girl. I feel you. Even with Maverick keeping you occupied, Rhydian Drakhar is a fucking piece of temptation."

Heat flooded Aria's cheeks.

God help her. Had she been staring at Rhydian so shamelessly that even Brittney noticed? This was not good. Not good at all.

Aria immediately cleared her throat and attempted to recover some semblance of composure. "Maverick's better."

Brittney smirked. "Tomato, tomahto. Enjoy the view anyway. A girl has needs."

Aria's gaze drifted back to Rhydian despite herself, and she tried very hard not to stare at his pecs for longer than was socially acceptable. It didn't help that the oil made every shift of his muscle ridiculously noticeable.

But something else caught her attention.

Rhydian looked serious. Not his usual arrogant, perpetually irritated kind of serious either. There was a grimness about him Aria hadn't seen before, his jaw set as he approached the cage without acknowledging the deafening cheers coming from Aetheris.

Then, as though he sensed her watching him, Rhydian looked up and their eyes met.

A thousand butterflies burst in Aria's stomach with such force that a shuddering breath slipped from her lips. It lasted only a moment but it might as well have been forever.

Rhydian didn't smile, but he didn't look away either. He simply stared at her with an intensity that made everything around them seem strangely unimportant. There was too much in those eyes for Aria to make sense of, and perhaps that frightened her more than if she'd understood exactly what he was thinking.

Because she understood herself. She wanted him.

Fuck.

Aria tore her gaze away.

That settled it. She could never, under any circumstances, allow herself to be alone with Rhydian Drakhar. Whatever self-control she possessed around other men seemed to abandon her whenever he got too close, and she didn't trust herself enough to find out how far that attraction could go.

She had to complete the bond with Maverick tonight. Once she mated with him and everything between them was finally sealed, this ridiculous attraction to Rhydian would disappear.

It had to.

Thankfully, Rhydian broke eye contact, his face revealing nothing. Aria schooled her own features as she watched him continue toward the ring.

"What are they doing?" Trisha's voice echoed from the side.

Aria turned and looked to see Karen and her group heading towards their section

What the....?