Chapter 241: The Dragon And The Wolf

The Serpent was making a move. The humans simply hadn’t realized they were the pieces.

~ Rebel Beast

Aria’s eyes had not been wrong. Karen, Liv, Olivia and Fatima were indeed heading toward their section. Karen was the first to notice her watching and smiled knowingly before changing course toward her.

"That bitch really is a troublemaker," Brittney muttered.

"Exactly the point," Alek said. "So we don’t give her the satisfaction."

"She can try," Variant objected. "I’ll teach her a lesson."

"Maverick’s fight with Rhydian is about to happen. I cannot be responsible for any incident that disrupts it," Aria told her. "Your beastkind already don’t like me. I’m not giving them another reason."

Variant sighed.

Aria was too peaceful sometimes. If she was going to establish herself as Maverick’s girlfriend, Variant personally thought she needed to ruffle a few feathers every now and then. Or perhaps that was simply the beast in her, always ready for a fight. Either way, she respected Aria’s decision and reluctantly settled back into her seat.

By then, Karen had reached the aisle beside Aria’s row with an expression that promised trouble.

"Congratulations," she said. "I didn’t get the chance to say it after the race. There was just too much noise afterward."

"You mean celebration?" Trisha countered.

Karen’s pleasant expression nearly cracked. Of course the bitch had to remind her that Therion had celebrated while her own team lost.

Still, Karen forced herself to remain composed. Caelis had ordered her to cause trouble with Aria during the match, and she intended to keep her end of their arrangement, especially after he'd already kept his. Karen wasn't stupid enough to find out what the serpent would do if she failed him.

Besides, she wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to deal with the hypocritical little whore.

"Thank you for the compliment," Aria replied as politely as she could. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to enjoy the match in peace."

She could sense it. Karen had come looking for trouble, and Aria refused to give her an easy opportunity to find it.

"Oh, no. What's the rush?" Karen placed a hand theatrically against her chest. "Your boyfriend is about to have a very important fight. I'm sure you'd appreciate our support." She smiled. "I even brought snacks."

Without bothering to look, she held out her hand, and Olivia promptly placed the popcorn into it.

Brittney stepped forward. "We don't need your damn support. Get the fuck out of here."

"Sorry, but that's where you're wrong." Karen plucked a piece of popcorn from the bag. "There's no rule prohibiting me from sitting wherever I want in the arena."

Stunned, Brittney immediately looked toward Valerie and Variant for confirmation.

Valerie sighed. "She's right. There isn't an official rule. Everyone just sits with their own House because that's how it's always been done. At this point, nobody even thinks about it."

Karen's smile turned smug. She deliberately popped a piece of popcorn into her mouth.

"Well, then. I guess we're about to have a very entertaining match."

With that, she moved along the row and settled into an empty seat three places away from Aria.

Unlike Karen, whose brazenness knew no bounds, Liv, Olivia and Fatima were considerably more aware of the fact that they had just planted themselves in the middle of House Therion. They followed quickly and sat close together, casting wary glances at the beasts surrounding them.

At this rate, Karen was going to lead them to their deaths one day.

"We should really—"

"Let her be," Aria interrupted Brittney. "As long as she stays in her place, there's no reason to get worked up over her shenanigans."

Brittney didn't look convinced, and neither did Alek. But eventually, they returned their attention to the arena. Aria did the same.

Karen, however, wasn't watching the cage.

She was watching Aria. It was only a matter of time now.

Thanks to Karen's distraction, Aria had missed whatever happened afterward. By the time she turned back, Rhydian was already in the ring, waiting for Maverick's arrival. He rolled his shoulders and stretched his arms, causing the muscles along his back to bunch with the motion. Aria's throat worked as her eyes followed the flex of his shoulder blades down the strong line of his spine before she caught herself staring again.

Good Lord. Even his back was indecent.

Although Rhydian wasn't purposefully showing off, Aetheris had gone insane. They were chanting his name from their section, stomping their feet hard enough that Aria could feel the vibration beneath hers.

Several dragons were already standing, while one particularly enthusiastic avian had climbed onto his seat and was screaming something about tearing the Wolf Prince apart.

Aria's mouth tightened. "Charming," she muttered.

"They're certainly confident," Alek said.

"Overconfident," Variant corrected immediately.

"They have reason to be," Valerie admitted. "Rhydian is powerful and older. Maverick is good, but I wouldn't expect an easy win."

That did very little for the knot steadily tightening in Aria's stomach. Looking at Rhydian alone, she understood why Aetheris was confident.

He was huge.

Maverick was a large man himself, so Aria had never really considered the difference between them before, but with Rhydian standing beneath the arena lights, there was no hiding the sheer amount of muscle packed onto him. She was grateful there would be no dragonfire tonight, but that hardly made her feel better when his fists looked capable of inflicting plenty of damage on their own.

Her earlier fear returned.

Maverick was going to survive this. Of course he was. She had to trust him.

Aria drew in a deep breath and slowly released it, willing the anxiety to loosen its grip.

The chanting finally stopped when Caelis raised one hand. Inside the cage, Rhydian straightened and turned toward the opposite entrance.

Caelis waited until the last voices faded before extending his arm toward the other side of the arena.

"And representing House Therion, their leader, professor, and Wolf Prince—"

He didn’t even get to finish because Maverick stepped out.

A startled laugh almost escaped Aria. Of course Maverick couldn’t even allow Caelis the satisfaction of finishing his dramatic introduction. The basilisk prince slowly turned his head toward him, and although his sunglasses concealed his eyes, Aria could practically feel the irritation radiating from him.

She would have found it hilarious if Maverick hadn’t also decided to walk into the arena wearing nothing but his fighting pants.

Wonderful.

Aria’s amusement disappeared.

Unlike Rhydian, there was no ridiculous sheen of oil drawing attention to Maverick’s body. He didn’t need it. Not when dark markings had been painted across his skin instead, beginning in sharp strokes along his cheekbones before continuing down his neck and spreading across his chest. More curved around his upper arms and sides, the patterns resembling claws in some places and the jagged suggestion of fangs in others.

Aria didn’t know what they meant, but they looked distinctly wolfish—and incredibly fucking sexy.

Maverick wasn’t built like Rhydian. The dragon prince possessed the heavier frame, broad and thick with the kind of muscle that made his brute strength immediately obvious. Maverick was leaner by comparison, though there was nothing slight about him.

His shoulders were wide, his waist narrow, and his stomach was divided into hard, defined ridges that contracted as he walked. The muscles along his arms were compact and pronounced, the kind of definition earned through years of actual use rather than display.

One thing was clear to Aria. Maverick looked fast, while Rhydian looked like he could break a man in half. She only hoped Maverick never gave him the chance to get his hands around him.

And then there was everything else. The purple hair falling carelessly around his face. The markings cutting across his skin. The predatory slant of his eyes as he surveyed the arena without the slightest hint of nervousness.

There was something almost exotic about him tonight. And no, Aria wasn't the only one who noticed.

A piercing whistle came from somewhere behind her, followed by another.

"Fuck me, Professor!"

Aria froze.

Laughter came from several sections, followed almost immediately by more whistles and catcalls.

"You look quite edible tonight, Professor!"

Aria's fingers balled into a fist.

Maverick rarely exposed this much skin in public. He wasn't the sort of man who walked around half-naked simply because he had a body worth showing off, which apparently made tonight a special occasion for every shameless female in the academy who had been waiting for an opportunity to see what his clothes had been hiding.

A scowl made it's way across Aria's face.

She was going to murder them. Every last one. How dare they—

Aria caught herself.

Calm down. They were only looking. Looking was harmless. Sort of.

Her eyes narrowed at the female who had just whistled again.

Actually, no. She didn't particularly like the looking either.

God.

Since when had she become the jealous girlfriend who wanted to claw another woman's eyes out because she dared appreciate her boyfriend's abs?

Aria forced her hands open.

Fine. They could look. That was all they were getting, anyway. Maverick was hers.

Aria watched as Maverick stepped into the ring. And just like that, there they stood—the dragon and the wolf, finally facing each other.