Chapter 242: Who Would Bow To The Other?

"The problem with putting two kings in one cage is that neither remembers how to kneel."

~ Rebel Beast

This was a night unlike any other, and everyone in that arena knew it.

They had seen Professor Maverick discipline students whenever they stepped too far out of line and learned very quickly why challenging an Alpha like him was a bad decision. But those encounters had never been fights. No one had ever watched Maverick Nightshade willingly step into a cage and trade blows with another beast, much less Rhydian Drakhar.

That alone was enough to send the arena into absolute mayhem.

For the males, this was the sort of confrontation they would boast about witnessing for years. A dragon prince against a Wolf Prince. Two of the academy's most formidable predators locked inside the same cage to fight it out with nothing but their fists and prowess to determine who walked out the victor. There was something primal about the prospect that had beasts roaring themselves hoarse before the match had even started.

The females, however, had another reason to be grateful for their seats. Maverick and Rhydian stood several feet apart in all their half-naked glory, and judging by the whistles, shameless propositions and increasingly creative obscenities being shouted from the stands, several women had already forgotten there was supposed to be a fight.

This wasn't entertainment but a wet dream with an admission fee. And if either man chose to lose his pants before the night was over, half the females in the arena would probably consider their lives complete.

Maverick and Rhydian regarded each other. Their eyes traveled over one another with calculation, assessing stance, and whatever weakness might prove useful once the fight began. If either discovered one, his face gave nothing away.

Then Caelis stepped between them.

"The moment I leave this cage, it will be sealed," he announced. "Neither fighter will be permitted to leave until a winner has been determined."

Everyone already knew the general terms of the match, yet murmurs still traveled through the stands.

Aria understood why. One of them would have to concede. Maverick Nightshade or Rhydian Drakhar.

Which one of those two ridiculously proud men was actually going to bow to the other?

Caelis continued. "Any use of supernatural abilities, including but not limited to mental influence, will result in immediate disqualification." His head turned pointedly toward Maverick at the last part.

"The opposing fighter will automatically be declared the winner."

Maverick said nothing.

He could already hear the low murmur of thoughts pressing at the edges of his consciousness, over a hundred minds packed into one arena creating a constant din he had learned to shove into the background. Usually, ignoring them came naturally enough. Right now, he couldn’t afford a single lapse.

"The fight begins at the sound of the horn," Caelis finished.

Outside the cage, an Ophidian stood ready with a large war horn clasped in both hands.

Of course there was a war horn, simply punching each other wasn’t dramatic enough.

Aria would have rolled her eyes if she weren’t so nervous. The entire affair bordered on ceremonial, but she couldn’t deny there was something captivating about it.

Caelis gave both men a graceful bow.

"May the strongest beast win." Then he stepped out.

Aria held her breath.

At a signal from one of the Ophidian attendants, the two sections of the domed cage began moving toward each other. Metal groaned across hidden tracks as the intertwined serpents drew closer, their curved bodies gradually enclosing the opening through which Caelis had just passed.

The halves met with a tremendous clang. An Ophidian immediately approached the joining point. He took hold of a thick iron lever built into the frame and dragged it downward with both hands.

Something heavy shifted inside the structure with a clunk. Several bolts shot through the adjoining sections at once, locking them together. There was no doorway anymore. Just Maverick and Rhydian inside the cage.

The horn didn't sound immediately. Whoever had been given the responsibility was deliberately drawing out the suspense, allowing the anticipation to build while Maverick and Rhydian faced each other in complete silence.

Neither looked away. Then Maverick's attention shifted to Aria. Rhydian noticed because his gaze followed Maverick's across the arena until it landed on her too.

The change didn't go unnoticed. Heads began turning in the same direction, first a few and then dozens more as curious beasts tried to see what had managed to steal the attention of both men before their fight.

Just like that, Aria found herself at the center of attention. But she barely noticed. Her eyes remained on Maverick for a moment before straying toward Rhydian.

He was already staring at her. And there it was again. That same inscrutable look she could never quite understand, except this time there was something almost demanding about it.

What did he want from her? Whatever it was, she couldn't give it to him. Whatever Rhydian thought he wanted from her could only end in disaster.

So Aria lowered her eyes and turned them back to Maverick.

A muscle ticked in Rhydian's jaw and his expression hardened. As if the Ophidian holding the horn had been waiting for precisely that moment, he lifted it to his lips.

The blast rent through the arena. It was deep and thunderous, reverberating off the walls with an ominous finality that raised every hair along Aria's arms.

Maverick and Rhydian moved, and her breath caught.

Aria knew beasts were faster than humans. She had seen enough since arriving at Bestiaris to understand that much. But knowing it was one thing. Watching two of them launch themselves at each other with the intent to fight was another.

They collided in the center of the cage, with Maverick striking first, driving a fist toward Rhydian's face. But the dragon twisted at the last second and answered with one of his own.

Neither managed to evade the other completely. The blows landed almost simultaneously, and Aria flinched at the sickening thud of knuckles meeting flesh.

Both men staggered apart, and for a moment, neither advanced. Maverick straightened first. He lifted a hand to his nose and dragged his thumb beneath it. When he pulled it away, blood streaked the pad of his finger. His eyes dropped to it.

Across from him, Rhydian worked his jaw slowly from side to side before touching the corner of his mouth. His fingers came away red too.

The arena broke into an uproar, but neither man seemed to hear it.

Maverick looked from the blood on his thumb to Rhydian. Rhydian did the same, and something passed between them that Aria couldn't begin to call friendly.

There was no anger. If anything, they looked almost satisfied. Neither had come away untouched.

Good. It was time to get serious.

Rhydian wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he tipped his head to one side, a sharp crack coming from his neck.

Maverick's response was to curl his hands into fists. He had promised his mate he would make this quick, and he intended to keep that promise.

Rhydian lowered his stance. Maverick followed suit. Then the dragon and the wolf charged each other again.