Chapter 246: Rhydian Had Lost His Mind

Music Recommendation : Battle Cry by The Family Crest

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There were too many bodies. Beasts were spilling between rows, grappling over seats and knocking chairs aside, with more joining the fray by the second. No one was in uniform tonight, which only made it harder to distinguish Therion from Ophidian in the tangled mass. From inside the cage, individual faces were nearly impossible to pick out.

But Rhydian knew where Aria had been sitting.

"Where is she?" His voice came out wrong, carrying a deeper resonance beneath his own.

But Maverick was already moving. He strode straight past Rhydian without another glance at him and reached the bars.

"ARIA!" His shout carried over the commotion.

There was no answer.

Rhydian reached the edge of the cage a second later, his hands closing around the ironwork as his gaze swept through the stands.

"TREASURE!"

There was no response, only the mounting bedlam beyond the bars.

"Open the cage!" Maverick bellowed.

No one listened. Half the arena was fighting, and those who weren’t seemed occupied with trying to separate those who were.

"OPEN THE FUCKING CAGE!"

Maverick seized two bars and hauled against them. The iron groaned. He pulled harder, his muscles bunching along his arms and shoulders, but the internal bolts held firm. The bastard Caelis had constructed the cage with the expectation that no beast would be able to do exactly what he was attempting.

Maverick released the bars with a vicious curse. Then he heard a crack behind him, and his head whipped around only to see that Rhydian was changing.

You have got to be kidding me.

Maverick could only stare for one stunned second. Did the idiot not realize the cage could not contain his shift?

But another sickening crack split the air as Rhydian's body expanded.

"Oh, you fucking bastard."

Maverick ran, barely making it to the opposite side before the transformation overtook Rhydian completely.

Sargon filled the cage. There was no other way to describe it.

The enclosure had been built to withstand beasts. It had not been built to comfortably accommodate a fully grown dragon prince.

Sargon's back slammed into the curved ceiling before he could straighten completely. His wings were trapped half-folded against his sides, one sweeping dangerously close to Maverick and forcing him to flatten himself against the bars. His tail curled awkwardly around the limited floor space while enormous claws scraped against the surface.

The ironwork shrieked under the sudden strain. Sargon roared and drove his back against the ceiling. The entire dome shuddered. Several serpent-shaped bars warped outward, but they didn't give.

Sargon struck the ceiling again, harder this time, making the metal buckle. Pain clearly meant very little to him at that point.

"Stop!"

Maverick ducked as one enormous wing shifted above him. Sargon growled.

"You're going to crush me before we get out of here, you idiot! Give me some fucking space!"

The dragon's massive head swung toward him, and Maverick found himself staring into an eye almost level with his entire body. For a moment, Sargon simply regarded him with unmistakable impatience.

"Yes, I'm talking to you. Move."

A low growl vibrated through the cage.

"Fucking growl later."

Sargon shifted his wing. Barely. But it was enough. Maverick stepped forward and stretched out one hand, frost crawling from beneath his palm. It spread across the nearest bar in branching veins before leaping to the next, then the next.

Sargon watched intently.

The frost thickened rapidly, swallowing the dark iron beneath layer after layer of ice. It climbed the spiraling serpents, coated their open jaws and swept across the curved ceiling until the gleaming structure began turning white.

Maverick's hand started to tremble, but he didn't stop. Cold mist escaped his mouth with every breath, and purple bled steadily into his grey eyes as he drew deeper on his Fae blood, the temperature inside the cage plummeting.

The frost escaped the enclosure next, racing across the surrounding floor and sending nearby beasts scrambling away as ice spread beneath their feet.

Sargon remained unmoved. Heat rolled beneath his red scales, his body maintaining a temperature the cold couldn't easily penetrate.

Maverick gritted his teeth. "Come on." He needed more.

The ice thickened, and the groaning of strained metal gradually changed into a brittle creaking sound.

Finally, Maverick lowered his hand, his fingers shaking violently. He looked at Sargon. The dragon looked back. Maverick gave him a single nod.

That was all he needed. Sargon struck.

The sound was deafening as the frozen dome shattered. Great sections of ironwork burst outward in a glittering hail, but Maverick was already moving. He threw both hands forward, and a wall of ice surged upward between the exploding cage and the stands. Frozen metal slammed into it, and the shield shuddered violently.

Maverick staggered as piece after piece struck. Cracks raced through the ice, but it held long enough for the last fragments to clatter harmlessly to the floor. For several seconds, an uncanny silence descended over the arena.

Students stared, speechless. The magnificent serpent cage that had dominated the center of the chamber was gone, reduced to twisted sections of frozen iron scattered across the floor. And standing amid its remains was a dragon.

Sargon unfurled his wings, and this time, there was nothing above him to stop them. They opened to their full breadth. Someone screamed, and that was all it took.

Pandemonium followed.

Whatever remained of the original brawl was forgotten as students scrambled to get away. Shrieks rang through the chamber while bodies rushed toward the exits, some climbing over seats rather than waiting for the aisles to clear.

Maverick didn’t care.

"Aria!" He shoved through the frantic students heading in the opposite direction.

Sargon had no such problem. The dragon crossed the distance with frightening speed, crushing abandoned chairs beneath his feet as he headed straight for the section where Aria had been sitting.

Maverick reached it moments later, his gaze sweeping frantically across the wreckage. There were only overturned seats and her discarded coat, but no Aria.

"Aria!"

A weak sound came from beneath one of the seats. Maverick lunged toward it and heaved the chair aside.

Karen Donovan stared up at him.

Her hair was a disaster. Angry scratches marred her face, her cheek was already beginning to swell, and there was blood beneath her nose.

"Professor," she sobbed. "Help me."

Maverick’s stomach dropped.

"Where is Aria?"

Karen blinked.

"Where is she?!"

"I—I don’t know."

Maverick grabbed her arm and pulled her upright.

Karen winced. "She did this to me! She attacked me and—"

A growl rolled through the stands, and Karen stopped. Maverick slowly looked over his shoulder. Sargon was staring at her. The dragon had heard every word.

"Oh, fuck." Karen’s face drained of color.

Sargon’s jaws opened.

"GET DOWN!"

Maverick threw Karen to the floor and dropped over her as dragonfire came roaring toward them. Ice surged from his outstretched hand, a shield forming barely in time.

Fire engulfed it.

Maverick clenched his jaw as heat blasted through the barrier, so intense that steam immediately billowed around them. Water ran from the melting edges while he forced more ice into place faster than Sargon’s flames could devour it.

"RHYDIAN!"

The fire finally ceased, and Maverick lifted his head. Sargon stood several yards away, smoke curling from between his teeth.

Maverick stared at him in disbelief. Had the bastard finally lost his fucking mind?