

NO FRIENDS IN THE ARENA

by Rob Farquhar



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"Remember: there are no friends in the arena."

Briony nodded once at Seal's last, pre-Battle advice. There was only one thing she was after - the one hundred thousand dollar prize at the end of the show and the recording contract. That was the goal. That was the win.

Next to her, Daniel took in a deep breath through his nose, then nodded as well. He was an okay kid. Good voice on him, though she hadn't really heard it come out as much during rehearsals as much as when he'd sung for the four coaches in the blind audition. Briony had seen the recording of Daniel's performance and had to admit that she was impressed. He had good technique, solid control and an endearing manner with the crowds.

Maybe that was his weakness. If it was, she'd been subtle about trying to get him worried about his actual performance based on the trouble he'd had during rehearsal. Even Ricki-Lee had pointed it out.

Briony wondered if he'd actually been playing cagey - but dismissed the thought. Daniel was too honest, too raw for his own good.

For her own part, Briony had worked on ensuring her performance was right on the money. She'd decided how to differ the song Seal had chosen from the version everyone knew (aside from the change in pitch due to her and Daniel's voices) and had worked the kinks out over the last couple of days, both with Daniel and on her own.

Still, while Seal and Ricki-Lee had praised her progress, they made a comment about her ability to connect with the audience. She'd turned all four chairs around with her audition,

though. And connection was beside the point. All the audience had to do was like how she sang, and sing Briony Leeson could do.

As soon as she'd started singing along to FM radio, her mother had been enlisting her in music classes and getting her to practice regularly.

Though Briony had protested, Mother hadn't heeded her want of free time. "The world won't wait on you while you slack off," was Mother's most often-used comment. "You're either working to win right now or you're losing for the rest of your life."

Mother was also keen to remind them that they'd come from little, that it was only through consistent hard work and discipline that he had been able to raise not just Briony but her siblings without her father around.

Mother had done her work well, Briony mused. That focus had got her the audition, had won it, had set her up for this two-singers-enter-one-singer-leaves Battle Round.

But now, something was wrong; a nagging unease as Seal stepped out of their way and she and Daniel walked toward the the tunnels that would take them separately into the battle arena. Something was bothering her. Not about her performance, or the rehearsals, or even Daniel - she had the sudden sense that there was something she needed to do, something she'd forgotten or neglected.

She hadn't had this trouble at the blind audition, yet at the mouth of the tunnel, she stood sweating, hands twitching. Lights blazed at the other end, beams of spots probing across the tunnel's far mouth like the fingers of some great beast feeling for her.

This was nothing. This was nothing. She was in control.

"Our first contestant," Darren McMullen's voice boomed, "Hailing from St. Ives, New South Wales, it's Briony Leeson!"

Yet it didn't sound like McMullen, not from here. It was the voice of an ogre, calling her out. The roar of the crowd was the howling of some great dragon, baying for blood.

Years of training and stage discipline had her putting one foot in front of the other without thought, carrying her down the tunnel and out into the stage. It was a cauldron of hell, all blazing red light and faces, so many faces in the darkness. They were all seeing this, her sudden loss of control, and no doubt Mother was watching; she'd see the signs.

Damn it. How was she going to win now? She was going to fail and everyone would see it...

"And from the chill of the Mornington Peninsula, please welcome David Turlington!"

She looked off to her left. There, coming out of the tunnel, was David. The man she needed to beat.

Her last hope - that Daniel would be as nervous as she was - faded as the spotlights caught him. He looked up, waved at the screaming crowds, smile beaming from his face as brightly as the spots that shone on it. Maybe more so.

McMullen said something else, leading them into the song. Battle was commencing and she wasn't ready.

Tapping from behind her. Mother, advancing on her, face a cold mask of disapproval?

She fought the urge to turn and look. Just the drummer, tapping his sticks to bring the rest of the band in.

More time, more time, just a few seconds more so she could get herself under control and get into the song. The song! How the hell did it start again?

Eidetic memory, that at least Briony had going for her. The words to the song appeared before her mind's eye, crystal clear, and right on queue the intro finished and she came in.

The crowd applauded, and there were cheers, but... something was wrong. She was wrestling with the dragon. Normally, she had it under control. The music was always paced, measured, precise. She knew what would happen and when, so that she could bring herself to bear precisely when she needed to.

Nothing had changed - and yet, somehow, everything had changed. She could feel a vibration in the air, in her bones. The heartbeat of the dragon that she had to kill.

She reached back to rehearsal, pulling forth the memory of her performance. She'd done it then, she could do it now.

Only two lines of the song had gone by. Two more and the first verse would be done, then the chorus when Daniel would join her in harmony. No problem.

And yet, that vibration hadn't gone away. The dragon's heart was still beating, nagging at her control.

Still no problem, Briony reassured herself, casting her gaze out over the crowd, trying to connect with them like Seal and Ricki-Lee had said during rehearsal. She brought the verse to an end. Just get through this and you'll be okay.

Then Daniel came in with the harmony in the chorus.

The nagging went away, all right - but in its place was a full-blown itch, a raging discontent. She knew why. She could hear it. Though he was only singing harmony, Daniel's voice... brought something more to the performance. He wasn't wrestling with the dragon. It was carrying him. He rode it and it took him somewhere... somewhere she didn't recognise, somewhere she didn't have a name for.

She chanced a look across at Daniel - and nearly lost the next word of the chorus. Even singing harmony under her... he was happy. Joy was pouring out of him. He wasn't concentrating on getting it right, doing it well, he was doing something else... he was just singing.

The first chorus ended. Briony dropped back as Daniel took a couple of steps forward and addressed the audience with the second verse. Again, it continued - she'd got to know him over the last few days of rehearsals of their battle song, and she could tell that he was still nervous, still battling the same problems that she kept firmly under wraps when she stepped out to perform, but somehow Daniel wasn't fettering them, he was letting them be... and just getting out and having fun with the song.

She noticed him play with his phrasing and pitch a little, do things a little differently than he had during the rehearsals. Yet it all seemed natural. Right.

With a sick certainty, she realised: He was going to win. After all the work she'd done, he was going to win.

She could almost feel Mother standing behind her, even though

she new Mother was up in the stands, watching with the rest of her family.

Then Daniel turned back to her in the bridge to the second chorus, and for a second, their eyes met. And there was a quick flash, Briony saw it - concern. Worry. Maybe even disappointment.

Time stopped utterly. Why should he be worried for her? Why should he be disappointed? He had the win. He knew it. He knew Briony knew it. This should be his moment of triumph.

Utterly lost, Briony tried to figure out what to do next. She could stop singing, right there and then. Concede the battle. She could keep on with what she was doing, and wrestle with the dragon for the rest of the song. And lose anyway.

Something Briony had held tightly within her loosened. If this was it, if she was going to lose, she was going to have some fun.

When the second chorus started, Briony let go the control of her voice, matched Daniel's pitch for the first two lines, let the differences in their voices make the harmony -

And a massive weight that she hadn't known was there suddenly disappeared, and she was flying too. The dragon was carrying her, just like it was Dan.

She saw it in Dan's eyes; the win wasn't a certainty for him any more, but that slight disappointment evaporated and he threw himself into the chorus with her.

The battle was now a real battle, which, in a way, was what Dan had been hoping for. Yet Briony couldn't imagine anything more fun, and neither could he.

Dan gave Briony an almost imperceptible nod, and Briony knew he meant for her to take the next line of the bridge; something they'd rehearsed him doing. She knew why, though. He was asking her what she had, what she could do with it.

Briony's tactical sense spotted a danger; it gave him the opportunity to see her and respond.

Yet still, she no longer cared. She knew she had talent, and she was eager to see just how Dan would return fire. She smiled as she sang the line to him, and noticed the way his eyes widened at what she gave him.

She'd pushed him, given Dan something to better, and he wasn't sure if he could do it - but Dan still threw himself into the next line with gusto, giving it all the heart he had. And he was still just as happy.

They traded the next couple of lines again, Briony finding out something new about how to sing a pop ballad each time, and then they came back in together for the chorus. The band brought them back down after the last line, and the auditorium exploded with applause.

Briony could see them all, standing, clapping, cheering, and oddly enough, it didn't feel like a congratulation or a thanks. It was almost an acknowledgement that even though the audience hadn't been the ones performing on stage, they'd still felt just what Briony and Dan had been feeling there, riding the dragon. The applause was their way of singing it.

Maybe the two of them were still in sync, but the next thing Briony knew, she'd taken two steps to get to the halfway point between herself and Dan, and he'd stepped forward too. His arms

were about her, hands pounding her back (she could feel the hard surface of the microphone still clasped in his right hand) as she hugged him as tightly as she could.

She took a breath to say something, feeling her mouth curve upward as she did, but the same smile was on Dan's face. He knew.

All that was left was to turn and face the judges.

"Wow," Keith said. "Look, I dunno exactly what happened out there, but what you gave us, that was something else. Congratulations, you two. That was a fantastic battle round."

Darren McMullen was about to let Seal give his judgment when Delta leapt in. "You know, something changed out there at around the second verse with you, Briony. I was a bit worried that Dan was going to walk it, but you... you've had this problem with engagement in the audition, but I was finally connecting with you. Seal's got a real tough one now."

Briony just smiled and nodded. Did she have the words to even frame some kind of response to that?

"Dan - great work out there too," Delta continued. "You keep proving that you're worthy of being here."

"Thanks," Dan replied.

"Look, uh, I think we're going to need to get straight to the coach's decision here," McMullen said. "Seal? What do you reckon?"

"Firstly," Seal said, "Dan, Briony, you were both incredible out there. Let me just say that no matter what happens in the next minute or two, you both have careers. Congratulations."

"So, Briony," Seal said, and Briony couldn't help laugh at the mock severity in his voice. "Darling, I remember having a right old struggle with you during the rehearsals. Like Delta said, I thought it was Dan's battle when you started off. What happened to you up there?"

Briony gave up fighting the blush that she felt burning her cheeks. "I realised that you were wrong," she answered.

The gasps and laughter from the crowd and the other three judges were almost overwhelming, as was the look on Seal's face. "Whoa!" Joel exclaimed. "That's something really new! Seal being wrong?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," Seal said, "but how so?"

"Before we came out, you told us that there were no friends out here."

"So I did," Seal replied. "The arena doesn't have room for friends."

Briony took a breath. "Well, I know what that's like. I've been doing that most of my life. Making sure friendship didn't get in the way of winning.

"But if you've got no friends, then what you've got are enemies. People who you have to do your best to make sure they're not a threat, get them out of the way."

She looked over at Dan. "But that means you're so busy spending your time doing things that aren't what you want to be doing. The rehearsals and everything else, that was what Dan was showing me. I spent so much time watching him for flaws and making sure my performance was perfect that I forgot to just..."

do what I wanted to do."

"Still means you had a competitor out here tonight, though."

"Yeah, but that's what makes him a friend," Briony said. "Enemies try to undercut you, want to stop you from being your best so... so that they don't have to be the best themselves, because it's about winning."

"But while I was trying to win, Dan came out and was his best... and when he did that, he kind of asked me to show what my best was."

There was silence in the auditorium.

Joel, naturally, was the first one to notice. "Damn, girl. This is the quietest it's ever been in here."

Delta looked over at Dan. "Dan, what do you make of all this?"

Dan nodded. "Briony's right. It's like, we can come out here and do this competition and keep trying to sabotage each other and come out wondering whether we were really good enough if we win it, or you know, we can just... do our thing and it doesn't matter what happens in the end, 'cos we know it was us that came out here."

"And, um... when you do your best, and someone else does better -" He looked over at Briony again - "there's, like, no better way of making me lift my game to try and, like, be worthy of who I'm competing with."

"If that isn't best friends... I dunno what is."

Briony was surprised by the explosion that went off in her

chest. She was beaming like a silly girl, she knew it, but she suddenly didn't care. She turned back to Dan and gave him the tightest hug she'd ever given anyone, and he returned the favour.

"Oh, boy," Seal said. "Well. That doesn't make my job any harder, let me tell you. Um... Okay. No matter what, I've got to go on performance tonight, the singer that I can take all the way to final night, and... look, quite frankly, I wish I could take the two of you through, because you're both such strong, positive people that you'd be a joy to work with."

Briony couldn't help smile again, and shoot a look at Dan. He'd nailed it. You can only find out what your best is by going up against the best at their best.

Even with all the butterflies whirling around in her stomach, she was happy to have made it this far, standing on this stage.

"In a way, though, that makes my job a little easier, 'cos it's like I said just now - no matter what happens next, you both have got what it takes, kids. Seriously; that confidence, no matter how long you've had it, is going to take each of you through your performing careers like nothing else can. It's a hard road, but if you've got that you're already most of the way down it."

Briony shot one last look up into the audience. She knew Mother wasn't going to be happy... but now it didn't matter. She was happy for the first time in ages. Win or lose in the next few seconds, she'd keep going.

She mightn't become The Voice, but she'd found her voice.

"So tonight," Seal said, "the singer who I'm taking into the next round is..."



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