

DEFY THE ALPHA(S) 2: REBEL BEAST

Chapter 1: The Concordia Ceremony

"Tonight, the results of the Concordia Selection will be released. This is a priceless opportunity; if you're chosen, I'd expect you to behave accordingly. No breakdowns, no screaming on camera. You will only show your best selves on TV. Do you understand me?" Mrs Helen, Aria's history teacher, looked over each female student carefully.

"Yes Mrs Helen," Her classmates chorused, but Aria scoffed, clenching her fists. She knew that being selected wasn't the prestigious honor the government packaged it to be.

It was a death sentence.

The Concordia Selection was nothing more than the government's desperate attempt to send human females to mingle with feral beastmen, in the hopes of carving out some peace and dignity for the human race.

Twenty years ago, a surge of energy tore through every barrier that once shielded humans from beast shifters. Now, every creature one could imagine from a fantasy world now lived alongside humans, and most of them could rip apart a grown human on a whim.

She would never be foolish enough to put her own name into the pool. Unfortunately, her classmates didn't share her opinion.

"I certainly hope I'm chosen," Lisa enthused. She was one of the cheerleaders, a typical airhead.

"I mean, have you seen those beast shifters?" Lisa continued excitedly. "My sister said one of the licensed ones came into her bank. He was so tall, like, over six feet, and hot as hell."

The girl beside her squealed, her imagination clearly running wild. "Imagine being their mate! I'll be treated like a queen!"

More like a piece of meat. Aria scowled.

What the hell was wrong with them? What made them believe those apex predators wanted anything to do with girls like them? Didn't they read the reports of human girls being suspiciously injured or killed?

"Girls, I'm glad you're excited, but you'll have to be chosen first," Mrs Helen said.

There were only twenty girls chosen each time. Lisa obediently quietened down, but then she caught Aria's disdainful expression.

"What are you staring at, freak?" Lisa snapped, catching her gaze.

"Wondering how fast it'll take for you to end up dead if you did get chosen," Aria said banally. "I'm betting at most five minutes."

"Ooooooh..." Her classmates jeered at her words. Lisa's face turned red with anger, and she moved, ready to beat Aria up. Aria tilted her chin up, daring her to make a move.

"Enough!" Mrs Helen roared, "Aria, you'll stay for detention -"

The bell rang, interrupting her words. Aria didn't waste any time, she grabbed her things and left the classroom before Mrs Helen could stop her.

The one silver lining to the Concordia Selection was that all schools had been mandated to close early so students could prepare themselves and watch the live broadcast of the ceremony.

Not just that, stores across the country had either shut down or were operating limited hours to honor the occasion.

Unfortunately, that also meant her mother and her asshole of a boyfriend were home. Talk about a living nightmare.

"Hey freak!" Benjamin Neem called out, waving at her as he stood in front of his brother's waiting truck. Ever since she had refused to sleep with him, he had made it his job to torment her.

"Why the rush? Are you going to the animal shelter to see your relatives? Telling the birds to come after me? Or maybe you'll summon a seaslug this time!"

"Go away, " Aria scowled at him, flipping him off. One of these days, she would wipe that confident smile off his face.

There was a reason Benjamin called her a freak.

Animals had always been drawn to her.

Dogs. Cats. Birds. They followed her about whenever they could. One time, during an altercation with a classmate, a flock of birds flooded into the classroom and the girl ended up being injured.

That incident earned her mother a trip to the principal's office, and Aria a new mocking last name.

Aria Freak.

Since then, most people have avoided her. Her own mother Quinn would have sworn Aria wasn't hers—if only she hadn't been the one who gave birth to her.

That was why she spent time volunteering at the animal shelter - she felt more at home there than she felt in her own home.

Aria walked faster, quickly climbing onto the school bus. Everyone gave her a wide berth, even the student that was seated beside her shifted slightly, putting space between them as if whatever was wrong with Aria might be contagious.

That was nothing new.

When Aria arrived home, the sound of her mother arguing with her latest boyfriend assaulted her ears.

That was nothing new either.

"Home sweet home," Aria muttered dryly, not expecting any acknowledgement. She headed straight for the couch to check on her younger sister.

Davina was asleep. She was fine and judging from the half-eaten plate on the floor, had at least been fed. Most times, Quinn forgot she had a young child to feed, too wrapped up in whatever mess she had going on with her current boyfriend.

Aria and Davina had different fathers, similar only in their toxicity. Their mother had always loved red flags in men, and her latest, Jack, was no exception.

Aria had learned long ago not to interfere in their lovers' fights. Once she graduated, she'd get a job, save enough money, and take Davina far away from this place before their mother ruined her too.

Quinn would always choose a man over her own child.

Aria was used to it.

Night fell, and at exactly nine, the ceremony began. Aria didn't need to see it to know. The volume of the television was turned up loud enough that the broadcast echoed through the house—even into her room.

Aria had an earphone in, mostly to block out her mother, who kept insisting that she come out so they could watch the event together. She ignored her in favour of studying.

However, after some time, her stomach began to gurgle. So she made her way downstairs, hoping to fix herself a small snack.

Aria passed by the living room, where Quinn and Jack sat glued to the television, Davina between them, watching the broadcast with a level of attention that immediately put Aria on edge.

"Sister!" Davina called out, waving to her. "Come watch it with us! We're halfway through!"

Reluctantly, she made her way to the living room. Ten girls have already been called.

The eleventh was next. Aria watched, bored, wondering if she could sneak away once Davina wasn't paying attention.

"—And the eleventh lucky candidate is... Aria Aspen!"

Aria froze. No. That wasn't possible. She must have heard wrong.

But the shout of celebration from her mother and boyfriend shattered that fragile hope.

Her stomach dropped. No way.

Slowly, Aria turned, her gaze landing on Quinn, their gazes connecting. Her mother's smile fell and then she was staring at her with guilt written all over her expression.

"T-tell me you didn't—"

"I'm so sorry," Quinn shook her head. "I had no choice. Jack and I needed the money—"

Aria didn't hear the rest, she just kept shaking her head. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be real.

Aria knew the government paid families to sign up—an obscene amount just for applying, and even more if their daughters were selected. It was the only reason most of them did. After all, Bestial City, the capital of the beasts, was not a place for humans.

She just hadn't expected her own mother to be the one to sell her off to die.

A knock sounded at the door.

With anger rushing through her veins, Aria moved before she could think, striding over and yanking it open, anxious to know whoever that was. Except whatever retort she had died on her lips.

A woman stood there with a microphone and beside her, a man held a large camera, already aimed straight at Aria's face.

National television.

Aria's stomach dropped. How were they here so quickly!

"Congratulations, Aria Aspen! You are one of the selected candidates for the Concordia Program. How do you feel right now? Excited? Overwhelmed?" The reporter shoved the mic closer, her smile bright and expectant.

Aria couldn't breathe. Her world tilted.

"No, no, no," she shook her head, panic rising. "I didn't sign up for this."

The reporter's smile faltered. She turned quickly to her partner with the camera, scrambling to regain control of the situation.

"This isn't an opportunity!" Aria's voice cut through her. "It's a death sentence."

For one second, there was silence.

"Out of my way!"

She shoved the microphone aside and rushed down the front porch. Her foot missed a step, and her body pitched forward.

Aria hit the ground hard, her shoulder taking the impact before her head snapped against the pavement. Pain exploded through her body. Her ears rang, the world spinning violently around her.

Darkness crept in at the edges of her vision. This time, she didn't fight it.

Chapter 2: Reserve Her For Last

"Humans," Rhydian Drakhar muttered, his nose flaring as a thin trail of smoke curled from it. "They never learn, do they?"

His gaze remained fixed on the screen, the Concordia Selection ceremony playing out before him.

One would think that after the last failed program, they would have learned their lesson. Instead, their persistence was as pathetic as their fragile lives.

"What do we do, Rhydian?" Tamara asked, looking up at him, her eyes gleaming with the same ferocious hunger to wipe the humans from their territory.

Tamara was his subordinate and closest companion. They had been together since birth, and even now, within the draconic court, most assumed she would become the future lady of the Drakhar Family. But to Rhydian, Tamara was a trusted ally, nothing more.

For a moment, Rhydian remained silent, his attention fixed on the video feed. It had shifted to behind-the-scenes footage of the selected contestants. Reporters had gone to the homes of the chosen girls, capturing their reactions for public entertainment.

So far, it had been nothing but the shrill excitement of girls screaming, tearing up and gushing tears of gratitude.

Pathetic. Rhydian rolled his eyes.

Humans were predictable and boring. All of them didn't know what it truly meant to be chosen. He was just about to turn off the TV when the newest interview caught his attention.

The girl was striking with clear blue eyes, her brunette hair knotted into a messy bun. Initially, she looked stunned, but just as Rhydian was about to look away, the shock in her eyes twisted into anger.

Then her voice rang through his speakers.

"This isn't an opportunity! It's a death sentence!"

His brows lifted. So some humans weren't completely brainless after all?

He watched as she shoved the reporters aside and bolted. In the background, someone shouted,

"Aria!"

That was her name.

Right at that moment, she slipped and fell hard, knocking herself out on the concrete. The interviewer panicked as she quickly ordered the cameraman to cut the feed, but not before the camera zoomed in on her unconscious, bleeding head.

A laugh escaped him before he could stop it.

"Rhydian? What is it?" Tamara asked, surprised.

"It's nothing," he said, though the faint amusement in his eyes betrayed him. "Aria..." he repeated quietly, testing the way her name sounded in his mouth.

Maybe she was pretending for the cameras, but Rhydian found himself entertained by her.

The humans had finally chosen someone interesting to enter the academy, instead of the half-wits that were intent on seducing his fellow beastmen. One thing was certain, this girl was either very stupid that she signed herself up for what she knew was a death trap,

or very brave to use the limited opportunity she had to let everyone else know the truth about the Concordia Selection.

Suddenly, Rhydian was curious to know how long she could last.

If she ran at the mere thought of attending Bestiaris, how fast would she run at the sight of him? At his dragon? Would she curse him before knocking herself out again?

The thought lingered, dark and quietly appealing. His dragon stirred inside of him, awake and ready for the taste of fresh meat. Rhydian straightened, the air around him rippling with authority.

"Send a message to that worm, Caelis," he said coldly. "Tell him I'm willing to stay my hand, for now. We need to talk."

Tamara inclined her head. "As you wish, my lord."

Then she was gone.

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Caelis was the leader of the snakes—Or worms, as Rhydian preferred to call them. Normally, he would never lower himself to allying with them, but if the humans were returning to Bestiaris Academy, then he would need his help.

It wasn't difficult to admit the basilisk was effective. Cold-blooded and ruthless, the creature had no heart.

Rhydian stepped into the shower, turning the knob until the water blasted against his back. Heat spread instantly through his muscles. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to relax. This felt like heaven.

Humans were annoying, but their inventions were useful. Back beyond the barrier, their kind had relied on natural sources, rivers, lakes for baths. Primitive, yes, unlike here where water obeyed at the turn of a dial, convenient and efficient.

When the dragon shifter was done, he stepped out and moved into his closet, dressing with ease. Rhydian wore the Bestiaris uniform like it had been made for him.

A fitted blazer of deep crimson—almost black at the seams—lined with gold stitching and fastened with dark metallic buttons. Beneath it, a crisp white shirt sat neatly against his throat, paired with a narrow black tie pulled tight. His black trousers fit close to his frame, tucked into polished leather boots.

While most beasts wore their uniforms loosely, resenting the constraint of clothing, Rhydian wore his with pride.

He was the leader of dragons and he would not look anything less.

He fastened the winged gold insignia onto his jacket, completing the look. Every beast bore an insignia to identify their house.

The three ruling houses of Bestiaris were:

Aetheris—house of dragons and all winged creatures. It was led by Rhydian.

Ophidian—house of serpents and all that crept. It was ruled by his nemesis, Caelis.

Therion—house of the land beasts, with wolves reigning at the top. It was currently under the command of the outsider, Maverick Nightshade, the wolf prince.

There was no place for humans. There never had been, and there never would be.

But humans refused to accept it, knowing that Bestiaris was created to help beastmen interact with human society.

The school was a mandatory four-year institution designed for beasts—a place where they were forced to study and learn how to exist within human society. Only those who graduated and earned certification were permitted entry into human cities - yet no self-respecting beastmen would have willingly entered human cities, if humans had not forced them out of hiding and invaded their territories.

But of course, these conniving humans weren't content with that. Now they dared enter a school meant for beastmen alone in the name of "assimilation."

Rhydian scowled. Humans were greedy detestable creatures who dared to reach beyond their status. That was why he was even allying with Caelis in the first place.

By the time Rhydian entered the breakfast hall, Caelis was already seated, waiting and glaring.

This was neutral ground. No fights were permitted in the dining hall, which made it the only place they could form a temporary alliance.

The bastard Caelis was in his uniform as well. House Ophidian wore green, marked by their coiled serpent insignia.

"You would think," Caelis drawled, his forked tongue flicking briefly as he spoke, "since you called for a meeting, you'll actually arrive on time."

While they looked human, moments like this reminded everyone what they truly were.

"Sorry," Rhydian said, making a show of yawning. "Dragons tend to take their time."

Caelis's expression darkened, and Rhydian took absolute satisfaction in it except it vanished just as quickly.

"Forgive me," Caelis's voice was laced with mockery. "I forgot dragons were such lazy creatures."

A low growl rumbled in Rhydian's throat, a clear warning, but Caelis's eyes slightly glowed ominously, serving as a reminder of exactly what he was capable of. The air between them tightened, thick with threat and resentment.

If not for the ceasefire, both of them would be bleeding. Caelis was dangerously annoying, and annoyingly dangerous.

When the barrier first fell and beasts fought for territory, the snake clan was at the bottom of the hierarchy. Dragons ruled as apex predators until Caelis was born.

An heir who could turn flesh to stone with a single look was too powerful. The dragons tried to eliminate him, but the snakes hid and protected Caelis until he was of age to wreck destruction.

Now, the balance had shifted. With Caelis as their clan head, the Serpent clan's standing was equal to the Dragons, which Rhydian took as a great insult.

Sadly, he had to set aside that feud for now.

"The humans have restarted the Concordia program," Rhydian said, getting down to business. "

"I saw," Caelis replied curtly. "We didn't kill enough to send a clear enough message the previous time. They're trying to turn this place into Lunaris Academy."

Rhydian stared the serpent in the eye, reminding him, "You know we cannot let that happen."

Before the beasts came out of the barrier, the werewolves were the only creatures known to humans. They established Lunaris Academy, a matchmaking place masquerading as a school. Alphas took human mates, tainting and diluting their lineage.

"I know that," Caelis replied, his voice edged with irritation. "However, the rules have changed. We overdid it that year. Now, Maverick Nightshade is here to play protector."

Maverick Nightshade was the powerful prince of the wolves. His mother, half Fae and half werewolf, was the one who tore down the barrier and caused this mess. Now the bastard was here, trying to teach beasts how to co-exist with humans.

As if that was ever going to happen.

"Maverick will be too busy and distracted when they arrive. Or are you not up for the challenge?" Rhydian taunted deliberately. "Are humans too much for you now?"

"I can handle pesky humans," Caelis hissed at the insult.

"Good. I say we have a deal, then." Rhydian stood, stretching out his hand for a handshake.

Caelis stared at his hand as if it were a trap, half expecting Rhydian to burn him with his dragon fire the moment they made contact.

But he was no coward. He stood and clasped it.

Rhydian smiled. Mission accomplished.

But Caelis's grip suddenly tightened as he said through gritted teeth, "Don't go thinking this means we're friends. Once the humans are eliminated, you are my enemy."

He had not forgotten or forgiven the number of attempts the dragons made on his life. Among the countless grudges and blood-soaked conflicts, one truth remained undeniable: the dragon clan and the snake clan would never coexist. The only way the blood feud between them would end was with one party's death.

"Of course," Rhydian answered with that knowing light in his eyes. "I would never dream of it."

Caelis turned to leave, as if he couldn't bear to remain in his presence any longer.

But Rhydian spoke again, "One more request."

Caelis halted and glanced at him over his shoulder. "What is it?"

Rhydian said, "Among the humans, I want you to reserve one for last. Exclusively for me."

Caelis's brows lifted in immediate suspicion. That was new.

"Who?" he asked.

Rhydian's lips curved to the side.

"Aria."

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Chapter 3: Selected

"Welcome back to the land of the living, little bitch."

A familiar voice cut through the darkness before Aria could even open her eyes. Her stomach twisted in recognition. Her eyes snapped open to reveal Jack, her mother's useless boyfriend, leering down at her.

Damn it.

"That's enough, Jack."

Her mother's voice came from somewhere behind him, laced with warning.

"I leave you alone for one minute and this is how you treat my daughter?"

Jack scoffed. "Your daughter needs to understand she can't go around trying to kill herself, not after the investment we've made on her."

"Oh, you mean the money we got for signing her up without her permission?" Quinn shot back. "Or the one we're still waiting for?"

She stepped closer, her voice dropping. "If that's the case, you can at least try showing her some respect."

What the hell was going on?

Aria groaned, her head throbbing as she tried to move. Big mistake. Pain exploded behind her eyes. Everything was too bright. Too loud.

She squeezed her eyes shut, her breath hitching as she tried to steady herself.

Where was she? What happened?

"Darling..." Her mother's tone softened instantly as she moved closer, her face coming into view. "How are you feeling?"

Aria ignored the question.

"Where the hell am I?" she rasped.

"In the hospital," Quinn replied. "Don't you remember?"

The scent of antiseptic hit her then, along with the light hum of machines in the background. And just like that, it all came rushing back.

The ceremony. Her name. Her mother. The camera. The fall.

Aria's expression twisted. "You signed me up?" Her voice cracked, then hardened. "You actually signed me up for the selection?"

Quinn flinched. "Honey, listen, I can explain—"

"Explain what exactly?" Aria snapped. "That you sold your daughter's life for some quick cash?"

"Cash we needed to take care of this family," Jack shot back.

Both Aria and Quinn turned to glare at him, but it was her mother who spoke first.

"You shut it right there, Jack. Don't interrupt my time with my daughter."

The way Jack's eyes flashed, he clearly didn't like being spoken to like that. And if Aria wasn't feeling so furious and betrayed, she might have actually applauded her mother for once.

Quinn sucked in a breath. "The shop wasn't doing well, and we needed money to—"

"So you decided selling me to the government was better than finding another option?" Aria cut in. "Whatever happened to taking out a bank loan or working a part time job? Or how about dumping Jack, since all he does is waste your money?"

Quinn winced, her face flushing. "It's not exactly selling you—"

Jack's face was thunderous. "How dare you disrespect me—"

"Isn't our favorite candidate awake?" A too-sweet voice broke through the room, drawing all attention and interrupting the tense atmosphere.

Aria frowned as she turned. It was the reporter from last night. She bristled instantly.

Jack's tone shifted at once, his anger vanishing in a flash. His tone was eager, almost respectful. "Aria just woke up."

The woman ignored him completely. She walked over to the bed with ease. "We didn't get the chance to properly meet. My name is Hailey Ann. It's a pleasure."

She extended her hand, but Aria didn't take it. She just stared at Hailey's nail extensions as though they were poison.

Hailey didn't seem offended. If anything, her smile sharpened.

"I see why the public is so taken with you," she said smoothly. "There's something captivating about your attitude. Though I imagine that bump on your forehead might be less appealing."

Aria stiffened.

"What—"

She reached up, fingers brushing her forehead, only to wince in pain.

"How big is it?" she muttered.

"Big enough," Hailey replied casually. Then, as if discussing the weather, she added, "I take it she's ready to go."

Aria looked up. "Go where?"

Her gaze flicked to her mother.

Quinn hesitated, then gestured helplessly. "She just woke up. We haven't told her yet."

"Tell me what exactly?" Aria asked, an unsettling feeling twisting in her stomach.

Hailey blinked at her, then let out a short, incredulous laugh. "Were you not paying attention? All selected candidates are to be transported to the capital immediately. And we're already behind schedule thanks to the little stunt you pulled."

Aria would have known that if she had been listening in class, but she hadn't since she didn't think it was any of her business. How was she supposed to know her parents would sign her up behind her back?

"I wasn't aware of that," she said, her voice sharpening. "And I didn't consent to any of this. This can't be legal!"

"Aware or not, Aria Aspen, your name has already been selected," Hailey said coldly. "Unless, of course, your parents are willing to pay the penalty fee five times the participation amount they received on your behalf."

Protests broke out instantly. Jack swore the loudest.

He turned on Aria with a glare. "Fuck it. You're going whether you like it or not, you ungrateful brat."

"Ungrateful?" Aria laughed in disbelief. "You sold me and took the money behind my back. How exactly does that make me ungrateful, you selfish prick? If you want money that badly, sell your own organs instead!"

Jack's expression darkened. "Watch your mouth, girl. Last I checked, you don't need it to be eligible for the program."

"Don't threaten my daughter!" Quinn snapped.

"Alright, that's enough!"

Hailey's command echoed through the room, silencing everyone instantly.

"I've already said we are behind schedule," she continued, her gaze sweeping over them. "So what will it be? Are you coming willingly, or are your parents paying the penalty?"

A small whimper slipped from Quinn's throat, and it hit Aria harder than she expected. As much as she loathed the woman, she was still her mother. They couldn't afford that kind of penalty.

Not to mention, if it came down to it, Quinn would carry the burden alone while Jack would disappear like the others before him. In the end, Davina would be the one who suffered the most.

"I'm sorry, Aria," Quinn said, her voice breaking. "Please, help your mother. Just this once."

Aria closed her eyes briefly. Then, she opened them with determination.

"Fine," she said. "I'll go."

Relief washed over the room. Quinn sagged while Jack exhaled. Even Hailey's expression changed just slightly.

"On two conditions," Aria added.

Hailey muttered under her breath, "You've got to be kidding me."

Jack scoffed. "Why can't you just let this go for once, drama queen?"

Aria ignored him. She already knew exactly what she was doing.

Quinn looked at her hopefully. "Alright, what do you want?"

"I want to see Davina before I leave."

Hailey frowned. "Your younger sister? She's not here. And like I said, we don't have the time—"

"Then make the time," Aria said flatly.

Silence fell. Hailey's jaw tightened, and for a moment, it looked like she might refuse. Then she sighed, giving in.

"Fine. What's your second condition?"

Aria's gaze flicked briefly to her mother, then to Jack, before settling back on Hailey.

"I want the remaining payment transferred directly to my account."

"What?!" Jack exploded.

But Aria didn't stop.

"And I want you to make sure neither my mother nor her boyfriend has access to it," she continued calmly. "Instead, a monthly stipend should be sent to my sister, Davina. And I want it monitored to make sure it's actually used for her. That shouldn't be too difficult, since you knew where to find me the moment my name was announced."

She held Hailey's gaze. "Agree to that, and you can do whatever you want with me."

For a beat, the two of them simply stared at each other. Then something shifted. For once, the reporter looked at her with a hint of respect.

"Consider it done," Hailey said, a small smirk tugging at her lips.

Jack lost it. His face was apoplectic with rage, his eyes almost bursting from their sockets. "You scheming bitch! How dare you!"

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Chapter 4: No One Survives Bestiaris

"You can't do this to me! Who the hell do you think you are?" Jack snarled, striding towards Aria with his hands outstretched.

"Get off my daughter!" Quinn tried to pull him back, but Jack shoved her aside, causing her to fall.

"Mom!"

For the first time, fear flickered through Aria. Jack didn't look like he was going to stop his violence. She raised her arms, preparing to defend herself.

But she didn't need to. One second, he lunged at her, and the next, Hailey moved. She caught his arm, twisted, and flipped him clean over her shoulder. Jack hit the ground hard, a groan tearing from his throat.

Like it was nothing, Hailey straightened, completely unbothered, and pulled out her phone.

"Security."

Within minutes, Jack was dragged out of the room.

And just like that, another one of her mother's relationships was over.

Aria's mind was still reeling from the surprise rescue when Hailey instructed, "Get into that shower. Wash up and get dressed. By the time you're done, your sister should be here to say goodbye."

She paused at the door, her gaze hard.

"Don't test me, Aria Aspen."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Aria muttered.

As she left to make the arrangements, Quinn tried to take advantage of the moment. "Aria—"

"Get me my sister," Aria cut in coldly. "I have nothing else to say to you."

Quinn flinched as if Aria had hit her. But she took the hint and left her alone.

While waiting, Aria did as instructed. She stepped into the shower, washed quickly, and changed into the pair of jeans and blouse Hailey had left for her. It didn't take long for her to hear the sound of rapid footsteps. Quick, like everything else in her life lately.

The hospital door burst open.

"Aria!"

Davina came running toward her, her hair messy, eyes wide and brimming with tears.

Aria's chest tightened.

"Davina—"

The girl crashed into her, wrapping her arms tightly around Aria's waist, as if holding on hard enough could stop the world from taking her.

"You're not going," Davina said, her voice shaking. "You can't go. I heard Mother. They said you're leaving because we have no money. You're not leaving me! I can pay for you! I saved up some! Just use it!"

Aria swallowed hard, forcing her hands not to tremble as she crouched down in front of her.

"Hey... hey..." she murmured, brushing the girl's hair back. "Look at me."

Davina shook her head violently, clutching her tighter.

"No! I won't! If I look at you, you'll go and leave me behind!"

That hit harder than anything else. For a moment, Aria couldn't speak, choked by emotion. Then she forced it aside.

"I'm coming back," she said, her voice steady despite the storm building inside her. "Do you hear me? This isn't forever."

Davina finally looked at her, tears streaming down her face.

"You promise?"

Aria held her gaze and lied without blinking.

"I promise."

Behind them, Hailey cleared her throat.

"Our time is ticking."

Aria ignored her. She reached up, wiping Davina's tears with her thumb. "You're going to be strong for me, okay?"

Davina shook her head again. "No! I don't want to be strong! I want you to stay!" Her voice cracked, raw and desperate.

Aria pulled her into a tight hug, pressing her face into the girl's hair.

God. This was the part that hurt. Not even her mother's betrayal came close to this.

"Listen to me," Aria whispered, her voice low, and urgent. "You're going to take care of yourself. And that money, it's yours now, okay? Don't let anyone touch it. Not Mom, not Jack, not anyone."

Davina sniffled. "I don't care about the money!"

"I know," Aria said softly. "But I do. And you'll need it to live."

Footsteps approached them, and before Aria could react, Davina was suddenly pulled away.

"No!" the girl screamed, struggling. "Let me go! Aria!"

One of the security guards held her firmly, unfazed by the kicking and crying.

"That's enough," Hailey chided her. "Your sister should be honored to have been chosen."

"I don't care!" Davina cried, twisting in his grip. "Give her back! I want my sister!"

Aria shot to her feet, anger flaring.

"Don't touch her like that—"

"She's interfering with an official process," Hailey interrupted, her tone flat. "And we're already behind schedule."

Thankfully, their mother had the sense to step in, pulling Davina back.

"Let's go," Aria said, forcing her voice steady.

Her sister's cries tore through her, but Aria hardened her heart. If she didn't, she wouldn't leave. She clenched her jaw and turned away.

"Take care of her," she said to Quinn, not looking back. "Or I'll make you pay."

Then she walked off with Hailey, her sister's screams echoing behind her.

"Don't worry," Hailey said, as if offering comfort. "She'll understand eventually. Children always do."

Aria didn't respond. They made it outside the hospital, where their ride was already waiting, and Aria's jaw nearly dropped.

A limousine.

A fucking limousine!

A uniformed driver stood by, another man already opening the door for her like she was some kind of VIP.

"Get in already, Aspen. We don't have time for your pointless gawking," Hailey said, slipping inside.

"It's Aria," she muttered, irritation in her voice. Her surname only reminded her of the fact she didn't even know who her father was.

Once inside the sleek, luxurious interior, Aria glanced around before asking, "So what happens next?"

Hailey barely looked up from her tablet. "You'll be transported to Nova City. That's where processing takes place. You'll meet the other selected girls, integrate, and—if you're lucky—avoid getting bullied before you're sent to Bestial City."

Aria frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Hailey lifted a brow. "Haven't you seen your video circulating online?"

A cold feeling settled in Aria's stomach.

"What video?"

Hailey didn't answer. She tapped a few times, then turned the tablet toward her.

"See for yourself."

Aria took it and froze. It was her from last night. The moment she opened the door for Hailey and her colleague, and her epic fall.

Everything. Nothing was cut. Nothing was hidden.

"You were live on TV," Hailey said. "Everyone saw it. You've already earned a new nickname: Trip."

Aria's grip tightened on the tablet as she exhaled slowly, her jaw clenched. First Freak, and now Trip. Derogatory nicknames seemed to follow her wherever she went. The humiliation burned beneath her skin, hot and suffocating. But her anger burned hotter.

"I'll survive," Aria said coolly, handing the tablet back. "I've endured worse."

She had survived bullying before. What could possibly be different about this?

"Really?" Hailey said, clearly amused. "Is that what you actually believe, or just something you told your younger sister so she wouldn't break down further?"

A sharp pain settled deep in her chest at the mention of Davina.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded.

Hailey tutted, her lips curving with a little patronizing pity.

"Aria Aspen, have you forgotten? Not a single human student has ever survived to graduate from Bestiaris Academy. The quickest recorded death was ten minutes."

She didn't stop.

"The beasts are creative when it comes to killing humans. In the last program, eight students died on the first day from poisoned water. Two others went exploring and lost their way, ending straight into a snake shifter's nest. They were bitten to death. One provoked a dragon and was burned to ash."

The woman watched Aria closely, expecting fear but it didn't come. Instead, Aria narrowed her eyes.

"What's the slowest death then, if the quickest was ten minutes?" Aria asked.

"How long did that girl live for?"

"Six weeks. Just a little longer and she would have made it through the term."

"Six weeks..." Aria repeated under her breath, thinking hard.

"Why do you ask?" Hailey's eyes narrowed.

For the first time since the journey began, Aria's eyes lit up with fierce determination.

"If a human girl made it through six weeks," she said, "then survival isn't impossible."

Aria clenched her fist, staring Hailey in the eye.

"Bestiaris won't kill me. I'll outlive it and return home to my sister."

Chapter 5: Save One

"Aren't you looking good as always, Professor?" purred a student, her words anything but innocent.

Maverick Nightshade did a double take, slowing as he glanced toward the girl eyefucking him from the corner of her locker.

From the flick of her forked tongue and the gleam in her eyes as she took him in, he didn't need the insignia on her uniform to know she was from House Ophidian, the court of serpents.

Sneaky little things.

Maverick grunted when her thoughts slammed into his head.

'I could do so many things to you.'

That was promptly followed by a very graphic image of her snake form wrapped around his—

"What the hell?"

Maverick's eyes flashed with annoyance as he shoved the image out of his head with a curse under his breath. He stared at the girl, who smiled knowingly, clearly aware he had caught the thought.

It was moments like this that Maverick Nightshade truly hated his powers. And the students in this damn institution.

Still, he had a reputation to uphold and couldn't let some reckless kid get away with messing with him.

He approached her slowly, his expression unreadable.

"What is your name?"

Her face looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't place it exactly. Then again, he rarely paid attention to the females here. His role at Bestiaris was to educate the beasts and prepare them for integration into human society.

As well as stop the school from tearing itself apart. Whatever else the students got up to was none of his concern.

Student-teacher relationships weren't exactly forbidden here. But discipline had been drilled into Maverick since childhood, and he wasn't about to throw away years of self-control for a few minutes of pleasure and the stupid games these kids liked to play.

The girl perked up instantly, hope lighting her features.

"Nadia," she said quickly.

"Nadia," Maverick repeated, mentally classifying her under students to avoid.

Unfortunately, Nadia mistook that for interest. She stepped closer, trying to close the distance between them despite the crowded hallway and the dozens of eyes now fixed on the scene.

Then again, this was Bestiaris. Everything went here. Her expression changed when she encountered the invisible barrier around him, stopping her from touching him.

If Nadia truly knew him, she would know one thing: Maverick Nightshade did not like being touched. Not by females. Not after what happened years ago.

At this point, Maverick had already made peace with the fact he would never love—or be loved—properly. Which made Nadia's persistence all the more irritating. Still, he couldn't entirely blame her.

Most of these creatures had only recently left the barrier behind. Civilization was still something they were learning, their instinct ruled them far more than logic ever would.

"Nadia," he said, drawing her attention again.

Her brown eyes lifted toward him with fascination.

"I think I have a solution for both of us."

"You do?"

All Maverick did was flick his fingers and Nadia gasped as freezing water materialized out of nowhere, drenching her from head to toe.

"That should help you cool down," he said with cold satisfaction as jeers and laughter erupted around them. Hopefully, that would discourage anyone else thinking of trying the same thing.

Then his expression darkened.

"Detention after class."

Nadia threw her hands up dramatically. "Oh, come on, Professor! That was nothing! I was only trying to help. Especially when you're this tight-knit." Her voice lowered teasingly. "You should loosen up sometimes."

Yeah. Not happening.

"Two hours," Maverick added, already walking away briskly.

As much as he would have liked to stay and crack down on the rest of the students openly flaunting the rules, there were more pressing matters right now.

The students parted instinctively for him as he passed, one of the perks of being at the top of the food chain. Here at Bestiaris Academy, all that mattered was your beast and the amount of power you possessed.

As Maverick approached Principal Warrick's office, it wasn't hard to see the reason for the tension thickening the air.

Human security lined the path leading to the office and the moment he approached, they visibly stiffened, hands shifting closer to their weapons as one of them stepped forward.

"Maverick Nightshade?" the man said, more confirmation than question.

It wasn't difficult to recognize him. Not with the signature purple hair and slitted gray eyes. Perks of having notoriously famous parents.

"The one and only," Maverick replied in a bored tone.

The security leader stopped in front of him and despite the stacks of muscle on the man, Maverick still towered over him with his height and the dangerous power rolling off him in waves.

"Routine check," the man said carefully.

With a sigh, Maverick stretched out his arms as he was patted down from top to bottom.

"Clear," the man spoke into his device.

Maverick would have thought that was the end of it until another guard stepped forward carrying a metal briefcase.

The moment it opened and revealed a suppressor collar, a dangerous snarl escaped Maverick's throat.

"I'm not wearing that."

"It's only for the duration of the meeting," the guard explained cautiously. "The advisor wants to feel safe."

"Then he shouldn't have stepped into Bestiaris City!" Maverick almost said it aloud, but held himself back.

Still, he was having none of it. He would not be chained like some rabid animal because a human politician was nervous.

"Tell your advisor this," Maverick snapped. "Either I walk into that room without a damn collar or he can forget this meeting entirely."

Conflict flashed across the guard's face, but he relayed the message anyway. After a brief exchange through his earpiece, the man finally stepped aside.

"You may enter."

Maverick gave him one long, intimidating look before walking toward the office. The doors opened swiftly.

Principal Warrick sat at the center of the room alongside Morgan, the president's advisor. Several guards stood motionless in the corners, weapons strapped to their sides.

Maverick's nose twitched instantly, overwhelmed by the concentration of human scent packed into one room. It made the air feel suffocating.

"You're here," Warrick said, gesturing toward the empty seat beside him.

All the while, Maverick felt Morgan staring, studying him. The moment Maverick sat down, their eyes met.

"Good lord," Morgan murmured in disbelief. "The resemblance is uncanny."

Maverick didn't react, already used to it. The comparisons had followed him his entire life.

"Are we here to admire my face," he asked dryly, "or start the meeting?"

There were far better things he could have been doing with his time.

Morgan cleared his throat quickly, professionalism snapping back into place.

"Thank you for honoring this meeting. President Callum sends his regards and appreciates your efforts in helping the Novara region through this crisis."

United Dorminia wasn't a single country. It was a federal union formed after the Great War forced human nations together. Every region still operated independently with its own ruler, laws, and now, its own monsters.

"Thank you," Maverick replied politely, though his blank expression revealed nothing.

Morgan continued. "I'm sure you're aware the Concordia program has officially resumed."

Of course Maverick knew. It was impossible not to. Every news channel, every social platform, every conversation somehow circled back to it. Even his algorithm had become flooded with reactions, debates, and outrage.

And already, he could feel the effect it was having on the beasts. The restlessness, excitement and predatory anticipation.

"I am," he answered simply.

Morgan's expression suggested he wanted more than a two-word response.

"Well?" he prompted.

Maverick pinned him with a dark stare.

"History should be enough to remind you what happens when humans play dangerous games like this."

"You're right," Morgan agreed smoothly. "History also taught us to take better precautions this time. We're properly educating the girls beforehand. Anti-venoms will be provided in case of fatal bites and they'll carry defensive devices capable of alerting school authorities if attacked. Their survival chances are significantly higher now."

Maverick almost laughed.

"Do your survival devices protect them from dragon fire?" he challenged coldly. "Do you tell those girls there are creatures here capable of incinerating them before they can even scream?"

Morgan remained silent.

Maverick continued.

"Or snakes powerful enough to suffocate them before help arrives?" His expression darkened even further. "Better yet, do you mention the existence of a basilisk capable of turning them to stone with a single careless glance?"

Morgan finally spoke. "The girls are aware of the dangers."

"Are they?"

Maverick thought about the video of the terrified girl who had thrown herself down a porch trying to escape selection. Already, protests had begun erupting across several human districts. Families were calling the program legalized sacrifice while activists accused the government of disguising exploitation as coexistence.

And yet the program continued.

Morgan adjusted the lapels of his suit. "The girls understand their sacrifice is necessary for this country and for the future of human-beast integration."

Then he looked directly at Maverick.

"Or what would you have us do instead?"

"Shut it down."

"Excuse me?" Morgan said sharply.

"Maverick," Warrick warned quietly, but Maverick ignored him.

"You're sending those girls to die."

"No great achievement has ever been made without sacrifice," Morgan countered immediately. "Look at Lunaris Academy. Look at the Asterion region and the progress humans have made with wolves."

Maverick cut him off.

"We've had over two hundred years to adapt to the wolves and even now conflicts still happen."

His gaze hardened.

"But these aren't wolves. They're beasts from uncivilized realms. Some of them are feral and still view humans as prey." His voice lowered dangerously. "Trust me when I say those girls will become nothing more than entertainment for creatures far stronger than them."

"And whose fault is that?" Morgan snapped.

Maverick stilled, the words hitting harder than they should have. So they were doing this again. The blame.

The same endless argument thrown back and forth for years. The same reminder that his mother had been the one to destroy the barrier and change the world forever.

It was the entire reason he was here in the first place, trying to clean up the mess.

Maverick's voice turned cold.

"It seems you've already made your decision, Advisor Morgan. So why bother asking for my opinion?"

Morgan exhaled slowly.

"Because we need this to work. This is our only chance to prove humans and beasts can coexist peacefully. Otherwise..." He hesitated. "We may be heading toward another war."

Silence settled briefly before he continued.

"Several factions are already demanding that all beasts be removed from human territories entirely, but the United Dorminia Concord Laws prevent any forced expulsion."

Maverick tilted his head slightly.

"So what exactly do you want from me?"

Morgan held his gaze.

"Two years ago, you weren't here, but now you are. Protect the humans from the beasts. Save them...."

His voice lowered.

"Even if it's only one."

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 6: Processing

Reader Warning:

This Chapter contains disturbing themes including forced medical examinations, physical restraint, loss of bodily autonomy, institutional abuse, emotional distress, and dehumanization. Reader discretion is advised.

After the most boring three-hour ride of her life, they finally arrived at Nova City, the human capital.

Hailey was still on the phone, barking orders left and right, probably deciding Aria's fate as they spoke.

But Aria understood it now. The Concordia Selection was rigged.

If it took Hailey three hours just to get to her province, then how had the woman known exactly where to be before her name was announced?

The government couldn't possibly have sent reporters to all seven provinces to wait outside the homes of every girl who applied. That would have been ridiculous. No way would they waste that kind of money on ordinary girls.

Unless they already knew who the winners were.

The reporters had been stationed outside their homes ahead of time, waiting for the exact moment the names were called so they could capture the "raw reactions" live.

Yeah. That made far more sense.

But even if the public figured it out, would they care?

Probably not. As long as it entertained them, people would happily swallow whatever lie the government fed them.

Nova City was the epitome of what every modern city aspired to be. Towering skyscrapers stretched toward the clouds while sleek glass buildings reflected the afternoon light.

The roads were wide, clean, and lined with digital billboards, their advertisements glowing across the highways crowded with streams of expensive vehicles. Even the air was different here, less dusty, and less heavy, nothing like her humble Westmoor Province.

"Finally," Hailey breathed, lowering her phone.

Or so Aria thought. A second later, the woman was already typing furiously again. She raised a brow, wondering if Hailey ever took a break from that damn device.

Speaking of phones...

She had left hers behind for Davina so they could still communicate somehow. She could only hope her sister had the patience to deal with the poor thing without throwing it into a wall.

The phone had been secondhand to begin with since electronics were ridiculously expensive after the Great War. The screen was cracked beyond repair and it was so damaged that she usually had to shove a pin into the tiny port just to force it to restart whenever it died. Which happened constantly.

Hopefully, there would be some way to contact Davina from Bestiaris Academy.

"We'll arrive at the tower in five minutes," Hailey said suddenly, pulling Aria from her thoughts.

"What?" Aria croaked.

But Hailey was still typing away, barely acknowledging her.

"News of your arrival somehow leaked. There are already fans waiting outside the building."

Finally, she lifted her head and looked Aria over critically.

"I know you're going for the whole tough-girl, don't-mess-with-me image," she said, "but winning the crowd over would be smart. Investors eat that kind of shit up and since you're trying to survive Bestiaris, it would increase your odds."

"Investors," Aria repeated slowly, hating how stupid she sounded.

She rubbed her forehead. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"You don't honestly think the government is the only group involved in this program, do you?" Hailey asked. "Why would they waste national resources on something with such terrible odds of success?"

"So basically," Aria said flatly, "there are rich humans with a morbid fascination for watching how long girls survive in enemy territory before getting ripped apart."

She nodded grimly. "Nice."

For once, Hailey actually looked caught off guard by her response.

"I don't know what happened to you, child," she muttered, "but you seriously need some sunshine in your life."

Aria looked away, staring out the window again. What happened was simple. She finally saw the world for the bullshit it truly was.

"The point is," Hailey began, "if the crowd loves you enough, they'll find ways to keep you alive for as long as possible. Not to mention, your little stunt is already causing a stir in the capital."

Before Aria could ask what exactly Hailey meant by "stir," noise reached her ears and her gaze snapped toward the entrance of the tower.

A crowd had gathered outside. Their limousine slowed as security struggled to push people back, bodies packed tightly behind barricades while cameras flashed nonstop.

Aria felt both flustered and terrified. She had gone from being the freak of her province to somehow becoming popular in the capital overnight. That was not something a person adjusted to in the blink of an eye.

"Remember to smile," Hailey reminded her.

Aria scowled.

What was she? A damn circus attraction?

Hailey visibly winced before throwing her hands up. "You know what? Just be yourself."

Then the woman rose to her feet, muttering something under her breath about being grateful Aria would soon be someone else's problem.

Aria wasn't exactly offended. It wasn't like the two of them had bonded.

A few minutes later, the door finally opened and Aria was introduced to a world she never imagined herself becoming part of.

Camera flashes exploded in her face almost instantly, bright enough to blind her.

Seriously, how exactly was she supposed to smile and wave when she could barely see?

Then came the screaming.

"That's Trip! She's finally here!"

"We love you, Trip!"

"Fall again for us, Trip!" someone shouted mockingly from the crowd.

Aria froze.

The cameras captured every second of her deer-in-headlights expression.

She swallowed hard. This was a living nightmare.

It wasn't until Hailey nudged her sharply and muttered, "Move," that Aria realized she had completely stopped walking.

She stumbled forward awkwardly, her body moving before her brain caught up. Security surrounded her on all sides, blocking off the crowd as fans shoved against the barricades, trying to get closer.

"We support you, Trip!"

"Show those beasts what you've got!"

The voices echoed around her from every direction.

Before Aria could process any of it, she was ushered through the revolving doors and into the tower lobby.

The inside looked even more expensive than the outside. Polished marble floors gleamed beneath massive crystal chandeliers while towering glass walls overlooked the glittering

skyline of Nova City. Employees dressed moved briskly across the lobby, barely sparing the commotion outside a glance.

As they walked in, a group of four people approached them, led by a woman dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit. Her expression was cold and unreadable, her movements rigid enough to make Aria instinctively straighten. They stopped directly in front of them.

"You're late," the woman said flatly.

"Stuff happened," Hailey answered with equal indifference.

Then Aria felt the woman's gaze settle fully on her. The scrutiny was intense. The woman looked her over from head to toe like she was assessing a product rather than a person.

Still, Aria refused to back down. She met the woman's stare head-on, holding her ground stubbornly. For a brief second, something flickered across the woman's face. Interest? Approval? Or perhaps irritation. Aria couldn't tell, and that somehow bothered her more.

"We'll take it from here," the woman said finally.

Hailey turned toward Aria. "Alright, kid. This is where we part ways. Try to stay alive and keep your promise to your sister."

Then she saluted casually and walked away without another glance.

"Move," the suited woman ordered immediately. "We don't have much time."

For the first time since meeting her, Aria actually wanted Hailey back. At least the reporter had been honest about who she was and gave her necessary information.

This woman, though? Aria couldn't read her at all. Still, she followed after her while the others fell into step behind them.

Curious about where they were headed and who she was, Aria finally asked, "What's your name?"

Judging from the cold stare she gave her, Aria expected silence in return. But a few seconds later, answered in a clipped tone,

"Abigail McLean."

Aria's brows furrowed slightly. No title. No explanation. Nothing else. Great.

"Where are we headed?" she asked again.

"Processing," Abigail answered bluntly.

Processing. That was the same word Hailey had used earlier. Except Aria still had no idea what exactly they were processing.

For the first time, she regretted refusing to learn more about the Concordia Program. At least then she would know what nightmare she was walking into.

They reached an elevator and Abigail pressed a button.

"Get in."

Aria obeyed reluctantly, noting the floor number.

Ten.

The five of them entered the elevator together, yet somehow the small space felt overcrowded, heavy and suffocating.

None of them spoke, the silence alone making Aria uneasy. The elevator doors finally slid open and she was led into what looked like some kind of administrative office. Phone lines rang nonstop while workers rushed from desk to desk carrying files and tablets. The entire floor buzzed with activity.

A man approached them immediately.

"Is she the one?" he asked.

"Yes," Abigail answered curtly.

From there, everything moved quite quickly. Aria was questioned within an inch of her life. They asked about her mother. Her father—though if she knew who he was, wouldn't she have mentioned him already?

They asked about Davina too, except Aria only gave the bare minimum. The thought of these people ever dragging her little sister into something like this made her blood boil.

The questions kept coming. Boyfriend?

Friends? Had she ever visited Bestial City?

Gone near the border? Had any affiliation with a beastman? What were her thoughts on beasts?

Every answer was typed down meticulously like she was being entered into some database instead of being spoken to like a person. By the time it ended, Aria was mentally exhausted.

Unfortunately, they still weren't done. They took records of her height, weight, eye color, skin and blood type. Every physical detail was documented carefully before a worker handed her an identification badge with her photograph attached.

Candidate Twenty.

Sweet.

"Let's go," Abigail ordered again.

Aria stared at her in disbelief. "We're still not done?"

"Health assessment."

The answer unsettled her immediately.

The elevator opened onto another floor and Aria's stomach dropped the moment she spotted two men in white coats already waiting. Something about this felt horribly wrong.

"What's going on here, Abigail?" she asked cautiously.

"We need a complete medical evaluation," Abigail answered without emotion.

"Underlying conditions. Fertility health. Hormonal cycles. Physical compatibility. Bone structure. Reproductive capability."

It dawned on Aria, this wasn't about her health, they were evaluating breeding stock.

"No," Aria said instantly, taking a step back. "I'm not doing this."

One of the doctors calmly held out a hospital gown. "You'll need to change immediately."

Fear crawled down Aria's spine.

"No."

It was then she finally understood why Abigail had brought three guards with them.

The moment Aria turned to run, they moved. She barely made it a few steps before they grabbed her. Aria fought violently, kicking and thrashing as panic took over her body.

"Should've marked her as a flight risk," one of them muttered while trying to pin her down.

"Let me go!" Aria screamed. "You can't do this to me!"

One of the guards laughed coldly.

"The moment those documents were signed, you became government property."

Aria was hauled to her feet and dragged toward a cold metal table where they forcefully strapped her down. No matter how much she screamed, no one came to help her.

Not when they forcefully stripped her bare and examined every inch of her body like she wasn't even human. Not when cold instruments invaded the most intimate parts of her, tearing cries of pain from her throat while strangers stood around watching like this was normal.

No. Nobody stopped them. Nobody cared.

They handled her body however they pleased, reducing her to nothing more than another candidate to be inspected, documented, and prepared for slaughter.

At that moment, dying at the hands of the beasts almost sounded kinder than surviving another day in this place.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 7: You Need An Ally

Chapter 7: You Need An Ally

Aria glared at Abigail so intensely that if looks could kill, the woman would have been dead already.

The medical assessment was finally over.

By the time they finally released her, every muscle in her body ached. Her wrists were raw from struggling against the restraints, while a dull pain lingered throughout her lower body.

She gritted her teeth as she followed Abigail out of the room. They stepped into the elevator once more and rode up to another floor.

This one was different. It was quieter, and more private. Abigail led her down a corridor where muffled voices drifted through the walls.

The woman stopped outside a door and said, "Time to meet your peers."

She pulled it open and waited expectantly. Aria eyed her cautiously before stepping inside. A short passageway stretched ahead of her before opening into a small but luxurious conference hall.

Rows of elevated seats faced a stage at the front of the room where a man stood beside a massive electronic screen displaying what appeared to be presentation slides.

The moment Aria entered, every head turned toward her. She felt like a fish tossed onto dry land.

"You must be Aria Aspen." The man smiled politely. "I'm Professor Cletus."

Aria took in the square-framed glasses perched on his nose, the salt-and-pepper hair combed neatly back, and the practiced smile that seemed designed to put people at ease.

Only a fool would feel at ease in this place.

"What now?" Aria croaked.

"Hm?" The professor tilted his head in confusion before understanding dawned on him.

"Oh. Right." He adjusted his glasses. "I know the medical evaluation process can feel rather uncomfortable for some of you—"

"Uncomfortable is an understatement," Aria cut in coldly. "Why don't we put you on your back and let some stranger poke your ass with weird instruments? Then you can tell me how comfortable it feels."

Snickers erupted throughout the room and a few girls outright laughed. Conversations immediately broke out around her.

"She's the one, isn't she? The girl who made a scene on national television."

Another voice answered, "Turns out she's just as troublesome as she looked."

Aria's brows rose.

Someone else said with obvious amusement, "This is going to be fun."

Professor Cletus cleared his throat loudly.

"You might as well take a seat," he said. "We were almost finished here anyway."

Having scowled at the man long enough to make her feelings perfectly clear, Aria turned to face the true battle of her life.

A room full of girls.

Perhaps because she had spent most of her life being bullied by them, Aria had never felt comfortable around her own gender.

Today was no different. All nineteen girls were staring at her. Judging her. Sizing her up like rivals. The program wasn't even a competition. It was supposed to be a fight for their lives. But apparently, some people could turn anything into a contest.

Some wore their dislike openly, glaring at her as though she had personally offended them simply by existing. Most looked curious. A few seemed bored. One, however, looked intrigued.

Aria frowned and deliberately ignored her. Thankfully, there were plenty of empty seats available. She chose one far away from the clusters of girls already gathered together.

The move was intentional. A clear message that she didn't need their friendship.

Apparently, someone took offense to that. One of the girls openly scoffed, unable to hide her annoyance. Aria ignored her too. Instead, she focused on the giant screen at the front of the room.

Three men stared back at her. Maverick Nightshade. Rhydian Drakhar. Caelis Corbyn.

Their names were displayed beneath their photographs.

Professor Cletus resumed speaking.

"As I was saying, Maverick Nightshade is one of our people on the inside and will help you adjust once you arrive tomorrow."

Aria already knew who Maverick was. His parents were practically legends throughout the Aster region. The man himself was a celebrity and half the girls in her class practically worshipped him.

Honestly though? Who wouldn't fall for the purple hair and those strange gray eyes with their slit pupils? He was sexy as hell.

As for the other two, she knew very little.

Only that the red-haired one was apparently a dragon while the silver-haired one was a basilisk.

Fantastic. She was being shipped off to live amongst dragons and a basilisk. This program somehow managed to become more ridiculous every hour.

Professor Cletus said. "Compared to previous years, we've ensured there is sufficient anti-venom stocked throughout the academy. Snake attacks accounted for a significant number of casualties during earlier programs. You will also receive smart watches capable of monitoring your health and alerting school authority should you find yourselves in danger. All of this is intended to ensure—"

"Hello."

The voice suddenly sounded beside her ear and Aria nearly launched herself out of her seat. Every head in the room turned toward her.

"Is something wrong, Aria?" Professor Cletus questioned.

"Nothing," Aria muttered, embarrassed.

Some blonde girl snorted. "Attention seeker."

Aria slowly turned toward her. Their eyes met. Right then and there, she decided she disliked the girl.

"Sorry," the newcomer whispered. "Didn't mean to scare you."

A grin spread across her face. "Actually, that's a lie. It was pretty funny. You should've seen your expression."

Aria frowned. It was the girl who had been staring at her earlier. The one who looked interested. Apparently she had abandoned her own seat and crossed the room just to bother her.

Aria recognized trouble when she saw one.

"Brittney." The girl stretched out a hand in introduction.

Aria stared at it without taking it. Brittney merely shrugged, unaffected.

"Well, I already know your name," she said cheerfully. "I'd say we're properly introduced."

"What do you want?" Aria asked, refusing to lower her guard.

Brittney's lips curved mischievously.

"Would you believe me if I told you that the moment you walked into this room, I had a feeling we were destined to be best friends? Your name starts with an A, mine starts with a B. A and B. The alphabet itself is practically shipping us together."

Aria nearly lost her composure. She simply blinked.

"I know. Sounds crazy, right?" Brittney sighed dramatically. "Trust me, people tell me that all the time. Otherwise, why would my parents sign me up for the Concordia Program other than to get rid of me in the most legal way possible?" She laughed at her own joke.

Aria immediately went on alert. This was exactly how emotional attachments started, and she wasn't falling for it.

"I don't need friends," Aria grumbled, making herself perfectly clear.

But Brittney laughed as if Aria had just told the funniest joke imaginable.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, leaning closer. "You think the beasts are the only monsters here?" She subtly gestured toward the cluster of girls seated off to the side. "There's a pack of cheetahs sitting right over there and trust me, they'd tear you apart themselves if given the chance."

Some of the playfulness faded from her expression. "If you actually intend to survive this place, then you're going to need an ally."

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 8: Prepare Our Graves

"Survive".

That single word echoed through Aria's mind. For a brief moment, she considered Brittney's offer. Still, she couldn't fully trust her yet. Girls could become enemies over the smallest things.

Right then, Professor Cletus clapped his hands together. "That will be all for now," he announced. "If there's any part of the orientation you still don't understand, I'm willing to answer a few questions."

Almost every hand in the room shot into the air. Except Aria's and Brittney's.

Professor Cletus looked stunned at the overwhelming response. "Well," he said with an awkward chuckle, "that's certainly more enthusiasm than I expected."

A few girls giggled.

"Alright," he continued, adjusting his glasses. "I'll take four questions and no more than that. As for anything else you may still be confused about..." He lifted a thin booklet from the table beside him. "Our orientation guide should cover most of it."

He held it up briefly before adding, "And if you still need assistance afterward, you may contact the support team directly. They'll be available throughout your stay... however short it may be."

Brittney whispered conspiratorially, "Let's see them ask the dumbest questions possible."

"Let's see..." Professor Cletus scanned the room before finally pointing at someone. "You. Go ahead. What's your question?"

The girl, a pretty brunette, stood excitedly. "Hello," she said brightly. "My name is Chelsea. So... hypothetically speaking..." she began, trying and failing to sound casual, "if one of the beast heirs likes us, are relationships actually allowed?"

Aria rolled her eyes. She had seen that question coming from a mile away.

That was the entire appeal of Bestiaris Academy to girls like these. Date a beast man. The beast shifters were considered superior species compared to humans and the idea of being chosen by one carried a certain twisted prestige to it.

Cletus sighed the kind of tired sigh that suggested he had answered this exact question far too many times already.

"Relationships between participants and beasts are not prohibited," he answered carefully. "However, your primary focus should be survival and integration."

Brittney scoffed beside her. "Their shamelessness is honestly impressive."

Aria understood exactly what she meant.

The government's entire goal was obviously to encourage relationships between humans and beasts, yet they kept hiding behind the polished word integration instead of admitting it outright.

Another hand shot up immediately, taking advantage of the distraction.

"Yes?" Professor Cletus said.

"Are dragon students actually capable of flying while carrying someone?" The girl asked. "And if so, would they allow humans to be their rider?"

"Someone watched way too many fantasy movies growing up," Brittney muttered with a laugh.

The man scratched his head awkwardly. "With the proper positioning and equipment, that is theoretically possible. However, dragon shifters are extremely temperamental and dangerous. I strongly advise against approaching them in their shifted forms."

Judging from the girl's disappointed expression afterward, Aria doubted that warning had been received the way he intended. Perhaps this would be fun after all.

"Professor Cletus," the blonde girl from earlier, spoke up suddenly without waiting to be acknowledged. The same girl who had mocked Aria.

"Is it biologically possible for a human to conceive a child with a beast?" she asked boldly. "Specifically a snake shifter. How exactly would the anatomy even work?"

This time, murmurs spread across the room. Even Aria was mildly interested despite knowing the girl's intentions were anything but scientific.

"Regarding Karen's question," another girl chimed in thoughtfully, "if humans can reproduce with wolves, then I don't see why it would be impossible with other species."

So there were intelligent people here after all, Aria mused. Though the fact the blonde girl's name was actually Karen somehow felt incredibly fitting.

Professor Cletus took over. "Thank you, Aleksandra, for that. And just like she said, cross-species reproduction has already been proven possible between humans and wolves. As for serpent shifters, however, the answer becomes a bit more complicated."

He adjusted his glasses before continuing.

"Many serpent species are ovoviviparous, meaning the eggs develop and hatch internally before live birth occurs. Others are fully oviparous and lay eggs entirely. Because of those biological differences, we honestly don't know how compatible reproduction with humans truly is across every serpent species."

"We also lack sufficient scientific data to fully answer that question. Human-serpent pairings remain extremely uncommon and controlled studies on the subject are practically nonexistent."

Aria shuddered. The thought of them trying to gather "scientific data" for something like that was horrifying enough on its own.

Professor Cletus continued, thankfully oblivious to her thoughts.

"However, nature has always been unpredictable and the human body itself is remarkably adaptable. It would not surprise me if such cases became possible under the right circumstances."

Then Brittney spoke loudly from beside her.

"Yeah, well, let's just hope none of you end up laying eggs from your vaginas."

The girls burst into laughter while Karen shot Brittney a murderous glare. Not that the girl looked remotely bothered.

Aria's brows lifted slightly as she studied the girl beside her. Brittney really wasn't like the others. Maybe giving her a chance wouldn't be the worst idea in the world after all.

"Now for our final question." The Professor said, his gaze sweeping across the room, searching through the sea of eager girls.

Then his eyes landed on Aria. She stiffened immediately.

Please don't. She had already had enough attention for one day.

"Aria Aspen," he called, much to her chagrin, "as the last candidate to arrive, I imagine you must have quite a few questions yourself."

"I don't—" The denial stopped at the tip of her tongue. Maybe she did have a question after all.

Someone in this room clearly needed to remind these idiots what they were actually walking into.

"You're right," Aria said slowly as she rose to her feet. "I do have a question."

Professor Cletus gestured toward her encouragingly. "Go ahead."

Aria glanced around the room, catching the girls' curious expressions before looking back at him.

She asked calmly, "Since the government is so determined to send us to our deaths, I assume they've already prepared graves for us too?"

Silence instantly swallowed the room.

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Chapter 9: Build An Alliance

For a moment, there was nothing but silence, which genuinely confused Aria.

The program was designed to send them to an early grave, so why did they all seem so shocked by the question?

Professor Cletus broke the silence with an awkward chuckle.

"That is quite a sensitive thing to say, Aria Aspen."

Was he kidding her right now?

Anger reared its head inside Aria like a waking volcano. But before she could explode, someone beat her to it.

"Really?" a stunning dark-skinned girl scoffed. "How sensitive exactly? The program is already a death trap and history has proven that. The previous candidates are evidence enough, so remind me again how much more sensitive the question can get?"

"Don't bother, Trisha," Brittney called out. "I'm sure the graves are way outside their budget. Not that I believe they'd bother retrieving my remains from the academy anyway."

Trisha's eyes met Brittney's. From the way the girl scowled, Aria immediately got the feeling the two didn't get along.

Uneasy murmurs spread through the room.

Fear shone across several faces as though their carefully constructed fantasy had finally burst, forcing reality upon them.

Karen abruptly rose to her feet.

"I will not stand for this!"

"Then sit down," Brittney said with a roll of her eyes.

The glare Karen sent Brittney's way deserved to be framed and hung on a wall.

Aria found herself thinking that perhaps Brittney wasn't particularly popular around here. The girl was loud, blunt, and completely incapable of keeping her thoughts to herself.

Karen continued, her gaze shifting toward Aria accusingly.

"That bitch is intentionally trying to spread panic and hysteria among us."

"Language, please," Aleksandra interjected, clearly uncomfortable with Karen's hostility.

Karen ignored her completely. Instead, determination blazed in her eyes as she rallied the people foolish enough to buy into her argument.

"The previous generation suffered because there weren't enough protections in place," Karen declared. "They were the first trial group. Their sacrifices gave us a chance to do better."

Aria had never wanted to punch someone quite as badly as she wanted to punch Karen right then. How dare she call them a trial group? Those girls weren't volunteers, but sacrifices. Just like they were.

"But things are different now," Karen continued, her voice growing stronger. "The government has implemented better safeguards. Yes, danger exists, but our chances of survival are significantly higher."

She looked around the room boldly.

"Besides, how can humanity ever move forward if everyone stays inside their comfort zones? Someone has to take the first step. We are the generation that can create a future where humans and beasts live side by side."

"Yes, preach on!" one of the girls shouted.

"You're right, sis!"

Aria's jaw nearly hit the floor. No wonder the government got away with everything.

Some people practically volunteered to be manipulated.

"Furthermore," Karen continued, "I would be honored to die for my country."

"Not me and you, dumbass," Brittney muttered under her breath. This time her voice was low enough that only Aria heard it.

"Don't bother," Aria told her.

The girls had already chosen its side. Anything Brittney said now would only make her look bitter.

Karen's voice rose another notch.

"People die every single day and their deaths mean nothing to society. So why should we fear death if ours can help change the future?"

Karen turned fully toward Aria.

"Oh no," Aria thought.

She began walking toward her and didn't stop until she stood directly in front of Aria's seat, staring down at her.

The gesture was anything but subtle. Karen was establishing dominance. There was a hierarchy forming, and just like a wolf pack, the ones at the top would dominate those beneath them.

Except Aria refused to be at the bottom. Bullies rarely targeted people willing to fight back. If she could convince that self-righteous pick-me she wasn't an easy target, perhaps the girl would find someone else to bother.

Aria already had enough problems waiting for her at Bestiaris Academy. She didn't need Karen becoming one of them.

Karen's gaze never left Aria.

"While some choose to cower in fear and others run their mouths without contributing anything useful, I will proudly serve the United Dorminia and the Novara Region." She raised her voice. "Who's with me?"

"Yes!"

Several girls rose to their feet.

"We're not afraid of death!"

"We'll proudly serve our country!"

A satisfied smile curved Karen's expression, the smugness practically wafting off her.

She stood a little straighter beneath the cheers, looking down at Aria as though she'd proven some grand point.

The look in her eyes practically screamed, *you see that? What exactly are you going to do about it?*

But Aria smirked instead. She leaned forward slightly and spoke low enough that only Karen could hear.

"I hope you still have that courage when you're staring death in the face."

The effect was immediate.

For the briefest moment, the confidence cracked. A small frown tugged at Karen's lips before she quickly regained control.

Professor Cletus cleared his throat.

"Thank you, Karen. That was a very inspiring speech."

Yet Karen remained where she stood, the stare-off between her and Aria growing increasingly intense. At least until approaching footsteps echoed through the room.

Both girls turned. Several men in tactical gear had entered the conference hall.

"You should be careful around here," Karen warned her. "Otherwise, you might become the first unfortunate casualty."

She returned to her seat.

Almost immediately, Brittney's face appeared in Aria's field of vision.

"See?" she grinned. "Told you that you needed allies."

Aria scowled.

In the end, it seemed the beasts weren't the only threat she had to worry about.

This was already becoming far more complicated than she had imagined.

The effect was immediate. The moment the men stepped into the hall, the atmosphere changed. Conversations died and the girls straightened in their seats.

These weren't ordinary security guards.

Their black uniforms were immaculate, fitted to perfection with armored vests covering their torsos. Each of them carried a sidearm on their waist while a strange insignia was embroidered onto their sleeves.

From the way they moved, Aria could tell they were disciplined and dangerous.

The group made their way onto the stage and one man stood out immediately. Perhaps it was the authoritative aura rolling off him in waves. Or maybe it was the way the others naturally deferred to him. Whatever it was, she knew he was the leader.

Professor Cletus hurried over and shook the man's hand. The relief on the professor's face was almost comical, as if he had successfully handed over a group of ticking bombs to someone else's care.

Then Cletus practically fled the stage.

Coward.

Aria's attention shifted back to the man as he stepped forward. When he spoke, his voice boomed through the hall without the aid of a microphone.

"My name is Gideon."

His introduction was simple and direct, suggesting he didn't care whether they remembered it or not.

"Welcome to the second Concordia Program." His sharp eyes swept across the room. "You should consider yourselves fortunate. Out of thousands of applicants across the Novara Region, each of you was selected to represent humanity."

Aria fought the urge to roll her eyes.

Fortunate?

Sure. That was definitely one word for it.

"We understand the risks associated with this program," Gideon continued. "And despite those risks, you chose to step forward. For that, the government is proud of you."

The speech sounded rehearsed. But who was going to call him out on it? None.

"However," his voice hardened, "while your journey officially begins tomorrow, your conduct begins now."

The room went still.

"Fighting will not be tolerated." His gaze lingered briefly on Karen and Aria.

Apparently, word traveled fast. Or perhaps not.

Cameras. How had she not thought of that sooner?

Now that Aria looked closely, she spotted them mounted at strategic points throughout the hall, quietly watching their every move.

Great. So they had been observed the entire time.

"Any attempt to escape this facility will result in immediate pursuit and every available measure will be deployed to locate you. The consequences will be severe." The warning hung heavily in the air.

No one laughed. At least they weren't completely stupid.

"There will be no wandering around the facility. Once you return to your suites, remain there. Get all the rest you can. You have a long journey ahead tomorrow."

Then he barked, "Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," the girls answered.

However, it was weak and pathetic. Gideon thought so too.

His eyes narrowed.

"I said, am I understood?"

"YES, SIR!"

The sound reverberated through the room.

Much better.

"Good."

His gaze traveled across the room one final time. He said, "You may now proceed to lunch."

The moment the words left his mouth, the girls immediately rose and headed toward the exit.

Aria followed with the others. Unfortunately, Brittney followed her too. The girl remained glued to her side like a persistent fly.

"Lunch is perfect," Brittney announced. "This is where we build our alliance."

Aria frowned. She hadn't even officially agreed to be friends with the girl and somehow Brittney was already expanding the group.

Brittney must have seen the look on her face.

"We need more people," she explained. "There is no way we're surviving Karen and her followers by ourselves."

Speak of the devil.

As if summoned by the conversation, Karen shoved hard past Aria's shoulder while walking by. Apparently, Gideon's warning about fighting had obviously gone in one ear and out the other.

Brittney gave Aria a knowing look for the second time.

"See? I told you."

Aria groaned internally. This was becoming ridiculous.

She had spent most of her life avoiding other girls. Now she somehow had one attached to her side and was apparently recruiting more.

Sensing her distress, Brittney patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll handle everything. Trust me," she added confidently. "I'll build us the best team."

Aria stared at her. That wasn't reassuring. At all.

Thankfully, they didn't have to take another elevator. The crowd moved through a wide hallway before turning through a set of double doors.

The moment Aria stepped inside, she froze.

The room was enormous.

Crystal chandeliers hung overhead, casting warm light across the reflective marble floor. Round tables were arranged neatly throughout the hall while waiters dressed in crisp uniforms welcomed them. Everything looked painfully expensive.

Aria suddenly understood where some of the government's funding was going. It was almost funny. They were feeding them like prized livestock before shipping them off to die.

Beside her, Brittney looked equally impressed. Then her eyes landed on one of the tables.

Immediately, she pointed. "Four seats. That's enough for our team."

Before Aria could object, Brittney grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward the table.

"Go claim it."

"What?"

"I'll get our teammates."

"Wait—"

But it was too late.

Brittney had already disappeared into the crowd.

Aria stared after her, then slowly rubbed her forehead.

"Father Lord in Heaven," she muttered under her breath. "Help me with this one."

Chapter 10: The Worst Team

"Can I sit here?"

Aria lifted her gaze and immediately recognized the girl.

"You..." She pointed vaguely at her. "I know you."

The girl smiled knowingly.

"Aleksandra," she supplied. "Though you can call me Alek." She paused, frowning slightly. "Or Sandra, I suppose. Either works."

Aria considered that. "Which one do you prefer?"

Aleksandra thought about it for a moment.

"Alek sounds cooler." She shrugged.

Aria grinned. "Alek then."

One Alek's brows lifted. "So can I join your table?"

"About that..." Aria hesitated.

Brittney had declared she was assembling them a team. However, if Aria was finally making an effort with other girls, then surely she should have some say in who joined it.

She looked Alek over.

The girl was honestly pretty, with ginger hair, freckles sprinkled across her nose, and wide brown eyes that gave her an almost harmless appearance. Back in the conference hall, she sounded intelligent.

If Aria intended to survive this madness, she needed information. And Information usually came attached to smart people.

Aria cleared her throat.

"Sure. Go ahead."

Alek smiled and took the seat opposite her. As she settled down, Aria glanced around the hall. For once, it seemed she hadn't completely messed things up.

Everywhere she looked, girls were grouping together, forming little alliances of their own. Perhaps she should thank Brittney for the idea. Otherwise, she probably would have ended up sitting here alone.

Not that she would ever admit that out loud.

Although she was still wary of girls in general, Alek must have seen something worthwhile in approaching her because most of the candidates still looking for a group were actively avoiding their table.

Aria didn't particularly care. She wasn't trying to collect followers. Unlike Karen.

The blonde had claimed one of the long rectangular tables and was seated right in the middle while the other girls filled the surrounding seats. The scene reminded Aria of the famous painting of the Last Supper. Only with more blondes and significantly fewer miracles.

"Karen thrives on attention." Alek's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

Aria looked back at her, curiosity flickering across her face.

Alek continued. "Her father is one of the most influential politicians in Nova City and her mother's family comes from old money."

That explained a lot.

"She's powerful," Alek said. "Or at least people think she is. That's why they're flocking to her." Her lips curved in a smile.

"If it's any consolation, I've never seen her intimidated by anyone before, until you."

Aria scoffed. "Intimidated?" she repeated. "Karen looks like she wants to bury me alive."

"Exactly." Alek looked entirely too amused by that.

Aria narrowed her eyes. "You seem to know her pretty well."

Alek picked up the menu, pretending to study it. "Rich people circles."

That somehow explained absolutely nothing.

Aria brows furrowed. "I don't get it."

Alek glanced up.

"What don't you get?"

"I thought the Concordia Program mainly targeted poor families desperate for money." She gestured vaguely around the room. "Why would rich people send their daughters here knowing how dangerous this place is?"

Alek let out a small laugh. "What have rich people always wanted?"

Aria said. "More money?"

"Power," Alek corrected. "Money is just how they buy it."

She set the menu down. "Humans have almost no influence inside Bestial City. We trade with them. Even negotiate with them. But we don't actually have any real power there."

Aria listened carefully.

"Now imagine one of their daughters catches the attention of a dragon heir. Or a basilisk prince."

Realization slowly dawned on Aria. "Oh."

"Exactly." Alek nodded. "One marriage. One relationship. One child. That's all it takes to secure influence that money alone can't buy."

Her expression hardened now. "And throughout history, whenever powerful people wanted to gain something, who usually paid the price?"

Aria already knew the answer.

Alek answered anyway.

"Women."

The word landed heavily.

"They get dressed up differently depending on the century, but the game stays the same. Different era. Different strategy." She smiled humorlessly. "Same sacrifice."

For the first time since arriving in Nova City, Aria felt like she was finally talking to someone who understood exactly how messed up this entire situation was.

Right at that moment, Brittney stumbled back into her life and ruined the serious mood. She was dragging Trisha along with her. Well, dragging might have been a strong word.

The caramel-skinned girl was walking under her own power, but from the way she kept trying to pull her arm free, it was obvious she didn't actually want to be here.

Brittney's gaze landed on Alek and her eyes widened.

"Oh my God." Pride immediately filled her face as her attention moved to Aria.

"I knew it," she declared dramatically. "The two of us really do think alike. Fate clearly destined us to be together."

Aria stared at her. She genuinely wondered whether Brittney cared if people misunderstood the things that came out of her mouth.

Apparently not.

Just as Aria expected, Trisha shot Brittney a look.

"What kind of fetish cult are you starting this time?"

Brittney grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Not a fetish cult," she corrected. "Just a clique of smart girls trying to keep each other alive in this twisted game."

Before Trisha could object, Brittney shoved her into the remaining empty seat and claimed the last one for herself.

Aria watched the interaction unfold.

"You two know each other?"

"I don't—"

"Very well," Brittney answered over Trisha.

Then she pointed at Alek.

"The three of us actually."

Alek sighed. "Rich people circles."

There it was again. That vague answer.

Aria immediately felt her defenses rise. She didn't like this.

She was the outsider at this table. The others shared a history she knew nothing about, while she sat there trying to piece together conversations that apparently everyone else understood.

And if there was one thing Aria hated, it was feeling out of the loop. Worse, if things ever turned ugly, where would their loyalties lie? Certainly not with her.

Perhaps this whole team idea had been a mistake.

"Trisha is technically my relative." Brittney explained.

"Technically," Trisha emphasized. "The connection is so watered down it's practically nonexistent."

"And yet," Brittney countered sweetly, "you still carry the Thorne surname."

Trisha released a long suffering sigh. Arguing with Brittney was physically exhausting.

Now that she was closer, Aria could properly study her. Long brown locs framed Trisha's face before giving way to soft curls at the ends. With her striking hazel eyes, she possessed the sort of exotic beauty that made other girls jealous.

The contrast between her and Brittney was almost ridiculous. While Trisha looked elegant and intimidating, the brunette looked like trouble wrapped in a pretty package.

Baby-blue eyes sparkled with mischief as though she woke up every morning searching for new ways to create problems.

"She's normally not this grumpy," Brittney informed Aria.

Trisha immediately narrowed her eyes.

"Don't."

"She's only mad because I kissed her crush during a game of Truth or Dare."

"BRITTNEY!"

Trisha looked absolutely horrified.

Brittney said. "What? I'm just giving Aria context. If we're going to be a team, it's important we get everything out in the open. Secrets create trust issues."

"In that case," Trisha snapped, "why don't you tell Aria how you're considered a disgrace to the Thorne family?"

Just like that, silence fell over the table.

Brittney stopped smiling.

Alek immediately took a sip of her drink, thanking the waiter who served her right on time.

Aria stared at the scene, then pinched the bridge of her nose.

So much for building a survival team. At this rate, they were going to kill each other long before the beasts got the chance.

Before Aria could say anything, Brittney beat her to it.

"Yeah, you're right," she admitted with a smile that was anything but amused. "I am a disgrace. That's exactly why I'm here."

The joke landed flat. Yet Brittney continued anyway.

"But unlike your parents, I'm not trying to use you as a pawn in some power game." She nodded toward Karen's table. "You're smart enough to make your own choices, Trisha. If you want to join Karen's group, go ahead. I'm sure they'll take you."

For once, Trisha opened her mouth and had absolutely nothing to say.

A strange silence settled over the table.

After what looked like a brief internal battle, she finally sighed.

"Fine. Let's get this over with."

Brittney immediately brightened.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Thank you!" She practically launched herself across the table.

Trisha held up a hand instantly.

"Don't."

The warning in her eyes was clear. Brittney wisely stopped where she was.

"Alright, that's enough." Aria's patience had finally reached its limit.

Just like that, all eyes shifted toward her.

Aria licked her lips before speaking.

"I don't do teams."

That earned her several raised brows.

"I'm usually better on my own." She confessed. "But I have enough self-awareness to admit I can't do this alone."

The girls exchanged glances. At least she was being honest.

Aria continued. "I don't know much about Bestiaris Academy. But every game follows the same rules. The people with the most information and the strongest support usually win."

Her gaze moved between them. "So do we agree to have each other's backs?"

Alek, Brittney, and Trisha looked at one another.

Brittney answered first.

"I'm in."

"Me too," Alek said.

Trisha hesitated for only a second.

"Well," she muttered, "you people seem like you know what you're doing. Fine. I'm in."

Brittney looked far too pleased with herself. She did it! The team was complete. There was no backing out now.

"Good," Aria said.

For the first time since arriving in Nova City, she felt like she might actually have a chance.

"Now the next step is combining whatever information we know about Bestiaris Academy—"

"Aria Aspen." Her name cut through the conversation.

Immediately, Aria looked up to see

Abigail standing a few feet away.

Her hackles rose instantly. What did they want now?

Abigail approached the table.

"You need to come with me."

The atmosphere shifted. All three girls stood at once, their sudden movement drawing attention from nearby tables.

"Where are you taking her?" Brittney demanded. From the look on her face, she seemed fully prepared to throw hands if necessary.

Abigail remained completely unfazed.

"Aria is needed for some questioning."

"Questioning about what?" Trisha asked.

"She'll be back shortly."

The vague answer did absolutely nothing to calm anyone.

Across the room, Karen let out a laugh.

"Who knows what trouble she managed to cause this time."

Aria ignored her.

Even though her heart had started pounding, she forced herself to stand.

"Don't worry," she told the others. "I'll be back."

Hopefully.

She turned toward Abigail.

"Let's go."