

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 101: Dragons Do Not Nuture....

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"Scholars often mistake a dragon's generosity for kindness. They are wrong. Dragons do not nurture what they do not intend to keep." — Professor Sébastien Elias.

"You're talking rubbish." Aria brushed Brittney off. "Let's just grab our food and get the hell out of here before things get even more complicated."

No matter how much Rhydian Drakhar smiled, she couldn't bring herself to trust him. The birds that had attacked them that day belonged to House Aetheris, which meant he had been the one to give the order.

Then why was he suddenly being nice to her? What game was he playing? Or had he simply changed his mind?

The thought barely lasted a second before Aria dismissed it.

Changing his mind didn't erase what he had done. Neither he nor the Serpent Prince could wash the blood from their hands so easily. They had treated the girls from the previous Concordia Program like pieces on a game board, eliminating them one after another without remorse.

There was no forgiving that, and there certainly wasn't any reason to lower her guard.

Variant was the one who approached her, lowering her voice enough that only Aria could hear.

"No matter what happens next time, don't touch a dragon shifter so carelessly. Do you understand?"

Aria met her eyes. "Don't worry. There won't be a next time."

She turned to Brittney. "Let's go."

But she had barely taken a step before her attention drifted toward the food station.

Rhydian stood there with surprising concentration, inspecting every tray before serving himself generous portions like choosing the wrong dish would somehow ruin his entire day.

"You know what?" Aria stopped walking. "I think I'll sit this one out. Just get me whatever you're having."

"Wait, what?" Brittney frowned before following Aria's gaze.

"Oh."

Understanding immediately crossed her face.

Aria didn't wait for another word. She walked over to one of the empty tables, pulled out a chair, and sat down. When she looked up, Charlotte was already staring at her.

More like glowering at her.

Aria looked away without a second thought. The girl was lucky enough that the Dragon Prince hadn't killed her on the spot.

Her gaze shifted again, and this time she found Karen.

Unlike Charlotte, Karen wasn't glaring openly, but the contempt in her eyes was just as unmistakable. Fortunately, they had chosen tables in different rows, leaving enough distance between them that neither group had any reason to interact.

Alek, Trisha, Brittney, Variant, and Valerie had reached the food stations by then. Even from where Aria sat, she noticed how the girls gave Rhydian a respectful distance.

Only Variant and Valerie stepped close enough to stand beside him, yet even they left him to his own devices. Rhydian Drakhar appeared to treat breakfast like one of life's greatest pleasures.

A large serving tray rested in one hand, supporting several ceramic plates piled high with food. One plate was loaded with thick cuts of roasted meat, another with rice and vegetables, while a smaller dessert plate held an assortment of sweet treats. A bottle of water occupied the remaining space on the tray.

Aria stared, stunned. How much food did one dragon need?

Little did she know, that was nowhere near enough to satisfy the appetite of a full-grown dragon.

Apparently finished choosing his breakfast, Rhydian picked up the tray and turned away from the serving station.

Aria expected him to head back to Charlotte and the others. But he didn't. At first, she assumed he was avoiding Charlotte after what had just happened, which was pretty reasonable.

Even she avoided Charlotte after that. There was something disturbing about that girl.

Then she noticed something that made her stomach tighten. Rhydian wasn't walking away from her. No, he was coming toward her.

Wait a minute. This can't be real.

Except it wasn't a dream, and within a few steps, he stopped right beside her table.

Rhydian towered over her, and Aria fought the urge to push her chair back. The Dragon Prince was intimidating enough from a distance. Standing this close, he felt larger than life.

Neither of them spoke. The silence stretched long enough to make Aria wonder if she was expected to say something first.

Then, without a word, Rhydian lowered the tray onto the table in front of her.

"Eat."

Aria blinked.

"...Excuse me?"

She couldn't have heard him correctly. Judging by the stunned faces around the dining hall, neither had anyone else. The small whispers from Karen's side of the table died one after another until the entire hall seemed to be watching them. Even the kitchen staff had stopped what they were doing.

Ignoring every pair of eyes fixed on him, Rhydian picked up the spoon, scooped up a mouthful of rice, and ate it. He swallowed.

"It's not poisoned," he said. "Now eat."

Aria stared at him.

"This is ridiculous!"

Nothing about this made sense. One minute, the Dragon Prince wanted humans dead. The next, he was standing over her, insisting she eat his breakfast.

Across the hall, Charlotte looked equally horrified. What had Aria Aspen done to her Dragon Prince?

Rhydian remained unmoved.

"If you keep looking at it instead of eating it, it'll get cold. Humans should eat to survive."

"I can't finish all this!" Aria blurted out instead.

His gaze swept over her before returning to her face. "You're too thin. You should eat more."

That did it.

"Who do you think you are?" Aria shot back. "We're not friends. We barely know each other. Why are you doing this?"

The question landed harder than either of them expected, and for the first time, uncertainty crossed Rhydian's face.

His brow drew together, and he looked down at the tray. Then at Aria. Only now did he seem to realize how bizarre his own behavior looked.

Rhydian closed his eyes briefly and drew a slow breath. When he opened them again, the fierce possessiveness in them had settled, though it hadn't disappeared completely.

"Just..." he muttered, his voice rougher than before. "Eat."

Aria's heart pounded. Why was he so determined to feed her? Had he poisoned it?

No. He had eaten from it himself.

Her thoughts immediately argued back.

If Rhydian Drakhar truly wanted her dead, poisoning her breakfast in public was beneath someone like him.

Her eyes searched for Variant and Valerie.

The two women stood by the serving station, watching everything unfold. Silently, Aria pleaded for help.

Valerie met her gaze. Then she mouthed two simple words.

Just eat.

That was enough. Aria slowly picked up the spoon, scooped up a small bite of rice, and brought it to her mouth. The moment she swallowed, the tension in Rhydian's shoulders eased almost imperceptibly.

A deep, satisfied warmth settled over his dragon.

They had fed their Treasure.

Aria waited after the first bite, expecting that to be the end of it.

She was wrong.

"The meat," Rhydian instructed. "Eat it. You need to put some flesh on those bones."

His tone left little room for argument. Aria had the unsettling feeling that if she refused, he would personally feed it to her.

She decided not to find out. Silently, Aria picked up another piece of meat and ate it.

"I'm done," Aria announced, a note of defiance creeping into her voice.

"Eat more."

She was about to argue when Rhydian abruptly turned and strode out of the dining hall, his shoulders rigid. Aria watched him leave, her gaze following him until the doors swung shut behind him.

Barely a heartbeat later, a deafening roar rolled across the academy, shaking the windows and rattling the dishes on the tables. A massive shadow swept past the tall windows, and no one needed to look twice to know the Dragon Prince had shifted into his beast form.

For several long seconds, the dining hall fell completely silent. Aria could feel countless eyes fixed on her, but she pretended not to notice them. Instead, she calmly finished the food on her plate.

God knew what that crazy dragon would do if he came back and discovered she'd left any behind.

Trisha was the first to break the silence. Tray in hand, she stared at Aria in disbelief.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"We have no idea," Variant admitted, her eyes never leaving Aria.

"This is the first time we've ever seen Rhydian behave like this," Valerie said. "We know he loves food, but he's never fussed over whether someone was eating, let alone a human."

"On the bright side," Brittney squealed, clasping her hands together, "that was the hottest possessive-beast moment I've ever seen!"

Alek and Trisha exchanged a look before quietly moving farther away from Brittney, unwilling to catch whatever delusion she seemed to be suffering from.

Meanwhile, at Charlotte's table, the girls looked at one another uncertainly before turning to her.

It was Zainab who spoke up. "Did you just see what happened?"

"You seriously think I'm blind?" Charlotte snapped.

She nervously bit at her fingernail, her thoughts racing.

She was certain of it. Aria Aspen had done something to Rhydian, just like she had done something to Maverick. There had to be something she was using on those men.

"Such a whore," Karen muttered. "At least she won't be able to seduce you, Your Highness." She was speaking to Caelis.

But the Basilisk Prince didn't answer. His attention was elsewhere.

No. Surely it couldn't be what he was thinking. More likely, that idiot dragon had simply decided to chase humans now.

Because if his suspicion turned out to be true...

Rhydian Drakhar was completely fucked.

Chapter 102: Karen's Plan

"Jealousy has always been the easiest disguise for fear. It allows the heart to hate what it secretly believes it can never become."

~ Rebel Beast

"So I'm just telling you to be careful around her," Karen continued when Caelis said nothing. She knew he could hear her, and his silence only encouraged her.

"She hides behind that innocent face, and men can't seem to help falling for it. I'm sure Maverick keeping her in his house is nothing more than a convenient excuse to make her his private whore." Karen finished speaking and carefully watched Caelis, waiting for a reaction.

His brows furrowed slightly.

Caelis might not have been close to Maverick Nightshade, but he knew enough about the Wolf Prince to recognize him as an honorable man. That alone made Karen's accusations sound like nothing more than malicious gossip.

Even so, there was no denying the amount of attention Aria Aspen had begun attracting. Karen Donovan, however, was foolish if she thought he couldn't see exactly what she was trying to do. He had no intention of becoming another piece on her board.

Caelis set his utensils down.

"I've lost my appetite."

He stated it so matter-of-factly that it almost sounded like he was blaming Karen for it.

Karen stared in disbelief as Caelis pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

Before walking away, he looked her straight in the eye. "Apparently, jealousy is the color of your soul."

Then he left.

That bastard.

Karen's hands curled into fists as she watched the Basilisk Prince walk away without another glance in her direction.

This was all Aria's fault. Her life would have been so much better if Maverick had chosen her instead, rather than the cold-hearted Serpent Prince.

Her eyes drifted toward Aria and they were filled with hatred. One way or another, Aria Aspen had to go. She couldn't stand the sight of her anymore.

The bitch deserved none of this.

Meanwhile, Aria noticed the moment Caelis rose from his seat. She had been halfway through another bite of meat when his cold, detached gaze settled on her.

It lasted only a moment, yet it carried enough weight to make her pause. She frowned right back at him before deliberately taking another bite of meat, chewing without the slightest concern.

Caelis looked away first and strode out of the dining hall.

Right then, the others reached the table carrying their trays.

"Since your lovely Dragon Prince already brought you a feast, I figured I'd just bring mine," Brittney said, flashing Aria a knowing smile as she took the seat beside her.

"Don't start," Aria warned.

"Start what?" Brittney asked, feigning innocence.

"In any other situation," Trisha began, dropping into the seat beside Aria, "I'd probably laugh along with her. But this is a dragon we're talking about. I think we should discuss what just happened."

"Trisha's absolutely right," Alek agreed, taking the seat opposite Aria. "Maverick is kind and all, but Rhydian is dangerous."

"Well..." Variant began as she settled into the chair beside Alek. "I wouldn't exactly call him dangerous all the time."

She considered her words. "He has good days and bad days. The problem is, his bad days can be catastrophic."

"But what happened just now was still strange," Valerie said, turning to Aria. "I've known Rhydian for years, and I've never seen him behave like that. What exactly did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Aria answered defensively. "Touching him was just plain stupid. I couldn't stop myself. It just happened. I..." She searched for the right words before throwing up her hands. "I honestly don't know!" she burst out. "And before anyone says it, no, I don't have magical fingers."

Brittney slowly raised one hand, her lips pressed together.

"I wasn't about to ask that again."

Aria didn't believe her.

"So..." Brittney continued, refusing to be discouraged. "Could Rhydian suddenly be interested in women? Maybe feeding Aria is some dragon version of flirting. Is that how dragons court someone?"

"Oh..." Alek leaned back thoughtfully. "That's actually an interesting theory."

Everyone looked at her.

"In animal behavior, food sharing is a recognized form of courtship in several species. Some birds present food to females before mating. Wolves have been observed sharing fresh kills with potential mates. Even among certain reptiles, males offer food as a display

that they can provide resources. It's less about the food itself and more about demonstrating fitness, reliability, and the willingness to invest in another."

Brittney said to Alek, excitedly. "See? I knew breakfast could be romantic."

Variant shook her head. "The comparison doesn't quite work."

Alek lifted an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Because dragons aren't driven by breeding seasons the way ordinary animals are," Variant explained. "A dragon doesn't start offering food simply because it's looking for a mate. If that were true, Rhydian would have done this years ago."

Valerie nodded in agreement.

"Dragons choose very carefully. Some never choose anyone at all. Others spend decades ignoring every person interested in them."

"And Rhydian has never shown the slightest interest in a human," Variant added. "If anything, he preferred treating them as prey. If you know what I'm talking about."

Oh, they knew exactly what she meant. Rhydian Drakhar had taken far too much pleasure in eliminating the girls from the previous Concordia Program.

Trisha spoke slowly.

"So you're saying whatever happened today wasn't normal."

"Not exactly," Alek replied.

Variant lifted a brow, waiting for her to continue.

"Instinct doesn't always follow logic," Alek explained. "Biology is filled with examples of innate behaviors appearing before the individual consciously understands them. What I'm saying is that sometimes the nervous system responds first, and the mind spends the next several minutes trying to make sense of what just happened."

Valerie frowned.

"You're saying his dragon acted before Rhydian did?"

Alek gave a small shrug.

"I don't know. Dragons aren't exactly my field of study. I'm only saying it's possible. Whether that's what actually happened... is another question entirely."

The table fell silent. That was so weird.

Except Aria broke the silence.

"Oh, I'll tell you what happened." Her smile was all teeth. "Rhydian Drakhar is a psychopathic asshole, and whatever happened just now is probably one of the hundred twisted games running through his head."

Her eyes hardened.

"It's not going to work. His games have no effect on me," she said pointedly, her eyes pinned on Variant and Valerie, silently questioning how either of them had fallen for him.

Variant and Valerie exchanged a glance and simply shrugged, clearly unbothered and unoffended. The girl would never understand.

Valerie replied, "Well, if by chance his intentions turn out to be genuine, I'd suggest you take him up on whatever he's offering."

"Excuse me?"

Valerie said shamelessly. "Rhydian Drakhar is a taste every woman deserves at least once in her life. Trust me, as a human, he'd ruin you in the best way possible." She giggled, clearly lost in a memory of her own.

Aria hadn't expected anything that crude to come out of Valerie's mouth. Otherwise, she might have braced herself better.

That was when the vision struck her, sudden and vivid. She saw herself on her knees on the bed, wrists bound, with Rhydian kneeling behind her. Then he thrust into her hard enough to tear a scream from her throat, the bed rocking beneath the force of it.

The rice in her mouth went down the wrong way, and Aria choked, coughing violently as her eyes watered. She fumbled for the bottle of water, gasping between coughs.

"Fuck!"

"Aria, are you okay?"

The girls' concern was immediate.

Although Aria gulped down the water, the coughing refused to stop. She pressed a fist against her chest, hoping it would settle on its own.

Then a voice cut in. "Here, let me help you."

Aria barely had time to lift her head before a splash of ice-cold water struck her square in the face. She gasped, more from surprise than the water itself.

The entire table lurched to its feet.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Alek demanded, rounding on Karen.

Karen blinked innocently before covering her mouth with one hand.

"Oops. I'm so sorry," she said sweetly. "I was only trying to help. My hand slipped."

Not a single person at the table believed her. She had walked all the way over from her own table with a glass of water in her hand. There had never been any intention of helping. She had come looking for trouble.

Brittney immediately started forward, but Alek caught her by the arm before she could reach Karen. At the same time, Variant took a step toward Karen, fury already flashing across her face.

Karen tilted her head.

"Little Aria is all wet." Her gaze swept over the damp front of Aria's clothe before returning to her face. "Don't wipe it off. Aren't you trying to look all wet and sexy for the beast men?"

"How dare—"

"Variant."

Aria's voice stopped her before she could take another step.

Variant turned back and watched as Aria calmly pulled a handful of tissues from the dispenser and began dabbing the water from her face and clothes. Only after she had finished did she lift her head to look at Karen.

"Leave the fool alone," she said evenly. "She's looking for attention, and I have no interest in giving it to her."

With regal dignity, Aria folded the damp tissues together, set them aside, and sat back down.

Seeing Aria seated, the others slowly did the same. One after another, they resumed their meal as if Karen no longer existed.

Karen remained standing where she was, staring at the six girls in disbelief. That wasn't the reaction she wanted.

Instead, they had dismissed her so completely that her little performance suddenly felt ridiculous.

Neither was she able to carry out the plan she had in mind.

Chapter 103: Get Close To The Princes

"This Mission Was Impossible"

~Rebel Beast

Karen subtly tightened her grip on the small table knife concealed in her palm. The plan had been simple. The moment Aria attacked her, she would strike back. There was no doubt that little street rat would overpower her in a straight fight. Just like Charlotte, she probably fought like a feral dog.

But all Karen needed was a single opening.

Then she would rake the blade across Aria's face and leave behind a scar so grotesque that no one would ever look at her the same way again.

Not even her precious Maverick.

Of course, people would blame her. But it would have happened during a fight, and there was only so much anyone could prove. Fights were messy, and people got hurt. She would simply claim she had been defending herself.

Now, that opportunity was gone.

Karen couldn't attack Aria outright. Aria would see it coming, and there would be no disguising it as self-defense. No excuse would be convincing enough. Not that excuses mattered much in the Concordia Program.

The beasts had made it painfully clear that their lives meant nothing, and no one seemed capable of stopping it. Compared to that, one human slashing another hardly seemed enough to shake the academy.

Karen had been glaring at Aria for so long that Valerie finally lost her patience.

"You should get going, bitch," she said flatly. "I don't have the same patience Aria does." She lazily flexed her short claws, their sharpened tips catching the light.

Karen understood she had lost this round.

But the war wasn't over.

"You'd better watch your back," she snarled before turning on her heel and walking away.

"I should just—"

Brittney shot to her feet, but Aria caught her wrist and pulled her back into her seat.

"Let her go," Aria said calmly. "Karen isn't worth the drama."

The beasts were already doing enough to destroy them. She refused to help by giving humans another reason to tear each other apart.

"You do know you can take her, right?" Brittney muttered. "Karen's all talk. The only thing she's good at is getting other people to do her dirty work."

"There's already enough violence in this academy," Aria replied. "Let's try going one day without adding to it."

"No wonder she ended up with the snakes," Trisha snorted. "She really found her people."

Alek tried to hold it in but failed, the laughter escaping before she could stop it. A small smile tugged at Aria's lips, only to disappear the moment her eyes met Charlotte's from across the dining hall.

Charlotte was still staring intensely at her and the hatred in her gaze was impossible to miss.

Aria looked away first.

"You guys should finish eating," she said. "I just want to get the hell out of here. I'm not comfortable anymore."

If she had known breakfast would turn into this, she would have skipped the dining hall altogether and had breakfast delivered to her room.

Variant frowned as she watched Karen disappear into the crowd.

"I don't like that girl," she muttered. "I'll report this to Maverick."

Aria shook her head almost immediately.

"Don't bother him with something this petty. He's already dealing with enough, don't add to his problems."

"Actually..." Valerie spoke up, her expression turning serious. "I think Variant's right."

Everyone looked at her.

"When we first heard humans would be living among us, this was one of the things we worried about. Now that the humans have been divided across the different houses..." She paused before finishing, "...what if each house decides to eliminate the humans assigned to the others?"

A heavy silence settled over the table.

"Oh, shit," Brittney breathed. "That is one dark thought."

She frowned, thinking it over. "But I see your point."

Almost instinctively, her gaze drifted toward Charlotte's table. Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith were already looking in their direction. The moment they realized Brittney had caught them staring, all three quickly looked away.

"...And now that you've mentioned it," Brittney continued, "I can actually see that happening."

Alek agreed. "Variant's right. There isn't a single rule here protecting any of you. As far as the outside world knows, there's a good chance we're already considered dead. If one human kills another inside this academy..." She let the thought hang before adding, "Who's going to punish them?"

Nobody answered. Because nobody had one.

"We'll just have to be more careful," Aria said at last.

Variant rested an elbow on the table.

"Or..." she began, "we sign you four up for training."

"Training?" Aria, Brittney, Alek and Trisha echoed in unison.

"Combat training," Valerie clarified. "Most students here know how to throw a punch. Some have trained since they were children, and with Caelis running an underground fighting arena, fighting is practically a sport around here."

Variant said. "We'll start with the basics, and little by little, turn you girls into warriors." She kept the rest to herself.

If you survive long enough.

Although this year's Concordia Program appeared different from the last, none of them were naïve enough to believe the danger had disappeared. The rules might have changed but the beasts hadn't.

Aria gave a small shrug.

"I'm in."

"Oh, absolutely," Brittney agreed without hesitation. "Although, can I ask who's doing the training? More importantly..." She leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Do we get to choose our instructor? Because I'd personally relish one who fights with his shirt off. Preferably with an unfair amount of muscles."

"Brittney!" Alek exclaimed, turning crimson as she stared at her in disbelief.

"What?" Brittney asked, looking genuinely confused. "If I'm about to get punched every day, I deserve something nice to look at while it happens."

Aria burst into laughter, the warm and genuine sound escaping before she could stop it. Somehow, she had grown used to Brittney's shameless comments. At this point, she had begun expecting them. Even Variant and Valerie struggled to keep straight faces.

Then her phone vibrated inside her pocket and she slipped the phone out and glanced at the screen. The instant she saw the sender, every trace of amusement disappeared from her face.

It was Eniola.

Without another word, she unlocked the screen and opened the email. Except before Aria had the chance to open the email, Brittney leaned in, trying to peek at her screen.

"What is it?"

Aria jerked the phone back against her chest so quickly that even Brittney blinked in surprise.

"Whoa." Brittney frowned. "What's wrong?"

Aria forced her shoulders to relax, but the sudden movement had already drawn everyone's attention. Before she could think of an answer, a grin spread across Brittney's face.

"Wait..." she said, drawing out the word. "Is that a secret message from Professor Maverick?"

"Shut up," Aria snapped, her eyes widening.

Brittney gasped dramatically before breaking into a fit of giggles.

"Oh, it absolutely is."

Aria rolled her eyes and refused to dignify that with a response. Instead, she turned toward Variant.

"Where's the restroom?"

Variant pointed toward the far end of the dining hall.

"Go through that corridor, take the first left, and keep walking until you reach the end. The ladies' restroom is the last door on your right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." Aria rose to her feet, slipping her phone into her hand.

"I'll be back." She offered the group a small smile, but it never reached her eyes. None of them noticed.

Aria walked out of the dining hall at an unhurried pace, only allowing herself to breathe once she had turned the corner and disappeared from everyone's sight.

A few moments later, she pushed open the restroom door. The room was empty.

She walked past the row of sinks and mirrors before stepping into the last stall. After sliding the bolt into place, she lowered herself onto the closed toilet seat and finally unlocked her phone.

For several seconds, Aria simply stared at the unopened email. Then, with a slow breath, she tapped it open.

Dr. Eniola Moore

Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Moore Biotech Industries.

Her eyes immediately dropped to the message.

Subject: *Operational Update & Revised Assignment*

Dear Aria,

First of all, thank you for your recent reports.

The level of detail you've provided regarding the Concordia Program, the academy's internal structure, and the behavior of both the students and the beast factions has proven exceptionally valuable to our research. Your observations continue to confirm several of our working theories while shedding light on matters we previously had no means of verifying.

I also want to acknowledge the emotional weight of what you have been forced to witness.

Reading your reports about the young women who lost their lives at the hands of the beasts was deeply distressing. My heart goes out to every family that will never receive the answers they deserve. I understand how difficult it must be for you to watch it unfold from within but do remember that your work matters.

Now, regarding your family.

As promised, our contacts have completed the relocation process.

Your mother and sister have safely arrived in Nova City and are currently being accommodated under one of our facilities. They will remain under our supervision while preparations for the next phase are finalized. You no longer need to concern yourself with their well-being.

Our team will continue handling every logistical requirement on your behalf.

Now to the reason for this message.

Your performance over the past days has demonstrated resourcefulness, discretion, and an ability to adapt under extraordinary circumstances. You have proven yourself to be a valuable asset.

Because of that, we are assigning you a new objective. We need you to establish close contact with two individuals.

Rhydian Drakhar and Caelis Cobryn.

At this stage, we are not requesting direct intelligence gathering alone. We need access. So observe and gain their trust.

Learn their routines, habits, personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and, most importantly, the dynamics between the ruling beast factions.

Employ every resource at your disposal.

Every conversation, opportunity and advantage. Whether through friendship, cooperation, manipulation, or any other means available to you, your objective remains the same.

Get close to them.

Do not underestimate the difficulty of this assignment. Both men occupy positions of considerable influence within their respective houses, and each presents unique risks. So Proceed with caution.

Good luck, Aria.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 104: No Escape

The easiest way to control someone's future is to become the reason they still have one.

~ Rebel Beast

"You have got to be kidding me."

Those were the words Aria muttered by the time she finished reading the email.

For several long moments, she remained seated on the toilet, staring blankly at the screen as her brain struggled to process what she had just read.

Eniola wanted her to get close to Rhydian Drakhar and Caelis Cobryn. Had the woman completely lost her mind? That wasn't an assignment but a death sentence.

She might as well save everyone the trouble, slit her own throat, and be done with it.

How exactly was she supposed to pull something like that off when even Eniola herself had described the mission as carrying "unique risks"?

Aria let out a groan and dragged a hand through her hair. She should have known there would be a catch.

Why else would someone as powerful as Eniola Moore relocate her family from Westmoor Province to Nova City out of the goodness of her heart? No. Nothing that valuable came without a price attached.

She had simply been too distracted by everything happening around her to ask just how expensive that price would eventually become.

Or maybe she hadn't been distracted at all. Maybe she had seen the warning signs from the very beginning and chosen to look the other way because the alternative had been leaving Davina behind.

For one reckless moment, Aria opened the reply box, her fingers hovering over the keyboard as she considered ending the arrangement before it had truly begun.

Then she stopped.

What about Davina?

...And, as much as she hated to admit it, her mother too.

According to the contract, Davina's education and housing were guaranteed the moment she signed. Even if she walked away tomorrow, those benefits were supposed to remain untouched.

Provided Eniola never had grounds to invoke the fraud clause.

Aria frowned. The more she thought about that single sentence, the less comfort it brought.

Who decided what qualified as fraud? Would it be an independent court? Or would it simply be Eniola Moore?

Maybe she hadn't been nearly as clever as she'd thought when she agreed to the contract.

Aria slowly lowered the phone onto her lap.

For the first time since signing her name, she couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that she hadn't entered a partnership but had stepped onto a chessboard. The pieces had already been arranged, and she had simply mistaken choosing a side for choosing the game.

Suddenly, Aria found herself considering the assignment from a different angle.

Perhaps getting on Rhydian's good side wouldn't be impossible after all. He had already shown an unusual interest in her. He was a dragon. Maybe all she had to do was stroke his ego a little, play along, earn his trust, and—

Aria froze.

"...What the hell am I thinking?"

Her eyes widened in horror. Surely she wasn't entertaining the idea of seducing Rhydian Drakhar just to complete this mission.

A groan escaped her.

Aria Aspen, what is wrong with you?

That wasn't who she was, and she refused to become the sort of person who climbed into another person's bed simply to get what she wanted.

Even then, say she somehow managed to earn Rhydian's trust without crossing that line, there was still Caelis.

That beast man was an entirely different problem.

Unlike Rhydian, Caelis didn't even pretend to tolerate her existence. If anything, he looked at her as though she were an inconvenience that had somehow wandered into his territory. Aria had little doubt that if the opportunity ever presented itself, he wouldn't hesitate to turn her into stone.

And that was the person Eniola expected her to befriend?

No. The woman had completely lost her mind. She couldn't do this.

Resolute, Aria was prepared to tell Eniola exactly what she thought of her impossible assignment when a dull thud echoed from somewhere beyond the restroom. Immediately, her fingers stopped moving.

Her brows furrowed slightly.

Then a second sound followed, except this time it was quieter. It was almost as if something was being dragged across the floor.

Every muscle in Aria's body tensed as she remained perfectly still, straining to listen.

Silence.

Slowly, Aria locked her screen and slipped the phone back into her pocket. Carefully, she unbolted the stall door and eased it open.

The restroom was empty.

She stepped into the aisle, her gaze sweeping across the sinks, mirrors, and entrance.

Nothing.

The sounds had disappeared as suddenly as they had come. Maybe she had imagined them. Or maybe the academy was finally getting into her head. Either way, there was no point lingering here.

She would respond to Eniola later, back in the safety of her room. Besides, if she stayed away much longer, Brittney would undoubtedly come searching for her. And Brittney's curiosity had a way of bulldozing through boundaries Aria preferred to keep firmly in place.

Aria walked over to the sink, washed her hands, and dried them on the towel dispenser beside the mirror. Then she reached for the door.

The moment it swung open, she stopped dead.

Two bodies lay sprawled on the floor directly outside. Both young men wore the navy uniform of House Therion and looked unconscious.

A chill crawled down Aria's spine. Her gaze lifted from the motionless figures to the man standing a few feet away.

Rhydian Drakhar.

Her breath caught so violently it almost hurt. Instinct took over, and Aria opened her mouth to scream.

"Don't make a sound."

The command settled over her like invisible chains, and the cry died in her throat before it could escape, almost as though an unseen hand had wrapped itself around her voice and refused to let it pass.

Rhydian stepped over the unconscious Therion students without sparing them a glance and walked toward her.

Aria instinctively retreated, taking one careful step, then another, never taking her eyes off him.

She watched cautiously as Rhydian Drakhar stepped into the restroom and shut the door behind him.

Aria swallowed.

There was no escape for her now.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 105: A Dragon's Possession

Beware the dragon who begins offering treasures, for possession often begins long before either heart understands it.

~Rebel Beast

Aria's heart pounded against her ribs like the hooves of galloping horses. There was no mistaking her predicament. She was trapped inside a restroom with an apex predator.

Instinctively, she continued backing away, only now realizing just how enormous Rhydian truly was. Aria had always considered herself tall for a woman, yet standing before him now, she felt almost small. The Dragon Prince towered over her with broad shoulders and a solid build that made the room seem even smaller than it already was.

He didn't need dragon fire to kill her. With the strength in that body alone, he could probably tear her apart with his bare hands.

Her back struck the tiled wall, causing her to stumble slightly. There was nowhere left to run.

Rhydian continued advancing without haste. There was something unnervingly calm about the way he watched her. Those piercing blue eyes never left her face, carrying the certainty of a predator that knew its prey had nowhere left to run.

"D-Don't do this, Your Highness," Aria blurted out, struggling to keep the panic out of her voice.

"Call me Rhydian," he replied.

His voice was deep and husky, rich enough to send an involuntary shiver crawling down her spine.

"...Rhydian?" His name left her lips more as a question than an acknowledgment.

Confusion replaced some of the fear clouding her thoughts.

Wasn't he supposed to kill her?

Why, of all things, was he asking her to call him by his name?

"Good, little one. Good," Rhydian said, a note of unmistakable pride creeping into his voice.

The reaction only deepened Aria's confusion. Something was seriously wrong here.

"Stay back!" Aria cried the moment he took another step toward her. "Please... don't hurt me. I'm more useful to you alive than dead."

"Hurt you?"

Rhydian frowned, looking genuinely puzzled by the suggestion.

"Why would I hurt Treasure?"

"Huh?"

Aria stared at him, her confusion only growing.

Without saying another word, Rhydian slipped a hand into the pocket of his trousers, and when he pulled it back out, Aria's eyes widened.

Gold necklaces draped over his fingers in tangled loops, intertwined with bracelets, rings, and gemstones that glittered brilliantly beneath the restroom lights. The handful looked as though he had reached into a pile of valuables and simply grabbed whatever came up first.

A few rings and bracelets slipped through his fingers, striking the tiled floor with a series of soft metallic clinks before skidding toward Aria's feet.

Her jaw slowly fell open.

Those weren't cheap imitations. Even with her limited knowledge of jewelry, Aria could tell they were genuine. The gold possessed a rich, unmistakable sheen, while the gemstones reflected the light with a brilliance no fake could hope to imitate.

Her first thought was absurd.

Where in the world did he get all this? Did he rob a jewelry store?

Then it hit her. Dragons hoarded wealth.

Gold, jewels, anything that sparkled and caught the eye. It had always been one of the defining traits woven through every story ever told about them.

Although, considering the beasts had arrived in the human world with nothing after the barrier collapsed, there was a very good chance every single piece of jewelry Rhydian was offering her had once belonged to someone else. Which, when she really thought about it, was still stealing.

Rhydian extended the handful of jewelry toward her and Aria stared at it before slowly looking back up at him, completely baffled.

What exactly was he expecting her to do with all that?

"Wear them," Rhydian commanded.

Aria was speechless.

"...Excuse me?"

For a moment, she was convinced she hadn't heard him correctly. But Rhydian didn't appear interested in explaining himself.

"Pick the finest," he said. "Wear it around your neck..."

His voice faded as his eyes traveled the length of her body until they settled on her waist. Then lower.

Aria's breath caught.

Heat rushed into her cheeks as his gaze lingered on the bare strip of skin exposed between her cropped shirt and the waistband of her trousers.

His stare wasn't crude or mocking. If anything, he looked utterly captivated, which somehow felt even worse.

"And around your stomach," Rhydian finished, his voice low with satisfaction.

Aria's first instinct was to demand an explanation until Alek's words from breakfast resurfaced in her mind.

"Instinct doesn't always follow logic. Biology is filled with examples of innate behaviors appearing before the individual consciously understands them. What I'm saying is that sometimes the nervous system responds first, and the mind spends the next several minutes trying to make sense of what just happened."

The memory made Aria pause.

Could this be one of those instincts?

Did this mean Rhydian wasn't consciously choosing any of this? That it was the dragon inside him that wanted to drape her in gold?

The thought should have reassured her. Instead, it tightened every muscle in her body. Because if Alek was right, then Rhydian wasn't pretending. He genuinely had no control over whatever was driving him.

Aria hesitated. She looked from the jewelry in Rhydian's outstretched hand to the Dragon Prince himself before cautiously reaching forward.

The moment her fingers brushed the tangled collection, another ring and two bracelets slipped free, falling to the ground.

Instinctively, Aria bent to pick them up.

"No."

The single word halted her, and she looked up.

"Leave them," Rhydian said. "Wear it."

Swallowing, Aria carefully sifted through the glittering collection until one necklace caught her eye.

Unlike the others, it wasn't overly extravagant. The chain was crafted from slender strands of woven gold, each link so finely made it resembled lace more than metal. Resting at its center was an ornate oval pendant framed by tiny pearls and intricate gold filigree that curled around a deep ruby. It looked like something a noblewoman from centuries ago would have worn to a royal ball.

Beautiful.

And undoubtedly expensive.

She carefully lifted it free from the tangled mass while Rhydian watched without blinking.

Aria could feel his gaze following every movement of her hands. Trying her best to ignore it, she turned the necklace around and reached behind her neck to fasten the clasp.

Her fingers fumbled, and the tiny hook refused to catch.

She tried again and yet still nothing. The silence stretching between them somehow made the simple task feel impossibly difficult.

Finally, the clasp clicked into place.

Thank God.

The ruby pendant settled gently against the hollow of her throat, and Aria lowered her hands.

She hadn't expected putting on a necklace to feel so... awkward.

Or perhaps it wasn't the necklace at all but the way Rhydian was looking at her.

His blue eyes never wandered from her, drinking in the sight with unwavering fascination.

A slow, almost imperceptible smile softened his features.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

The single word made warmth creep into Aria's face. She didn't know whether to hide behind the nearest wall, or demand to know why he was looking at her as though she had just become the most precious thing in the room.

Then he commanded, "Put on the others."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 106: Treasure's treasure

"When a dragon begins calling something treasure, pray it is gold. Gold can be stolen back. Hearts cannot."

~ Rebel Beast

Perhaps realizing she was dealing with a dragon who seemed strangely fascinated with dressing her in his jewelry, Aria found a sliver of courage returning.

At the very least, he wasn't trying to kill her—yet.

Tentatively, she reached into the glittering collection once more until she found a heavy gold ring crowned with a deep emerald gemstone. It was bold and unmistakably masculine, the sort of ring some lord would have worn while signing away estates and ruining lesser men.

Aria slipped it onto her finger, and it hung so loosely she was certain it would fall off if she shook her hand. She held up her hand for Rhydian to inspect, forcing what she hoped looked like an innocent smile.

"See? Wrong size," she said lightly. "Guess that means I can go now?"

A dissatisfied rumble vibrated from Rhydian's chest.

"No."

Without another word, Rhydian walked over to the marble countertop beside the sinks and opened his hand, spilling the tangled mass of gold onto the surface with a chorus of metallic clinks.

Then, just when she thought the madness had reached its limit, Rhydian reached into his other pocket, and another handful emerged.

Aria's eyes grew so wide they almost hurt.

What the—

A few necklaces escaped Rhydian's grip before he could add them to the pile, dropping to the floor. He didn't even spare them a glance before emptying what was left onto the growing heap of jewelry.

Aria swore before God Rhydian Drakhar had to be possessed. Surely no sane person carried this much jewelry around in their pockets.

At this rate, she'd walk out of the restroom looking like a noblewoman wearing the contents of an entire royal treasury. Seriously, what was so important about putting gold on her?

For the first time in her life, Aria regretted not paying more attention whenever documentaries discussed dragon customs.

There had to be a reason for this. But whatever it was, she needed to escape before Rhydian decided she still wasn't decorated enough.

Completely absorbed in his task, Rhydian began sorting through the collection with remarkable concentration. Rings were pushed into one line, necklaces into another, bracelets into a third, while everything else was arranged into neat little piles.

His expression remained intensely thoughtful, as though selecting the perfect piece was a matter of life and death.

That was when Aria decided to seize the opportunity. Carefully, she took one step backward, nothing happened. Rhydian remained engrossed in his jewelry.

She took another. Still nothing.

When a third step earned no reaction either, Aria almost couldn't believe it. This wasn't ordinary distraction, it bordered on obsession.

Suppressing the urge to sigh with relief, Aria began tiptoeing toward the door, moving one careful step at a time until she had successfully slipped around him.

Freedom was only a few feet away when—

"Ha."

The triumphant sound echoed through the restroom.

"Found Treasure's treasure."

Rhydian lifted the gold ring into the air, satisfaction lighting up his face as though he had uncovered a priceless relic hidden in plain sight.

"This one." His smile widened.

Then he looked toward the spot where Aria had been standing, and the smile disappeared. A slight frown settled between his brows.

"...Treasure?"

With her hand on the doorknob, Aria's plan was simple: open the door, run, and scream loudly enough for the entire academy to hear.

Except before she could turn the handle, those piercing blue eyes found her with startling precision.

She froze.

The restroom fell into complete silence, and neither of them moved. Aria stood rooted to the spot with one hand resting on the doorknob while Rhydian simply watched her.

One heartbeat passed. Then another. Aria finally decided to surrender.

With all the dignity of prey realizing it had been caught sneaking away from its hunter, she slowly removed her hand from the doorknob, turned around, walked back toward Rhydian, and silently held out her hand.

"Just get it over with," she said with an awkward laugh.

To be honest, Aria had expected Rhydian to be angry, or at least curt with her, but that wasn't what happened. Instead his eyes carried a gleam at the sight of her outstretched hand, possessive and pleased all at once.

Aria hadn't prepared herself for the moment his fingers closed around hers. Tingles shot through her body from that single point of contact, sharp and electric, racing up her arm before spreading through the rest of her body. Out of instinct, she tried to pull back, but his grip held firm, unyielding in a way that made her breath catch.

His thumb moved first, tracing slow circles over the top of her palm, deliberate and unhurried, as if he had all the time in the world to memorize the shape of her hand. Aria's heart rate shot to the rooftop, her pulse fluttering visibly at her wrist. When he finally slid the ring onto her finger, it settled with surprising ease. It was a perfect fit.

How did he —?

Aria was speechless, staring at the delicate band crowned with diamonds that caught the light and scattered it in tiny fractured rainbows across the marble counter.

But Rhydian was not done. He lifted her palm to his mouth and pressed a kiss there, slow enough that she felt the warmth of his breath before the touch of his lips, his gaze locked on hers. The air between them thickened, charged and heavy, until the room felt smaller, hotter, and dangerous.

Aria wasn't sure she was breathing anymore.

Rhydian pulled her closer, and she stumbled straight into him, one hand landing against the solid warmth of his chest. She couldn't look away from his eyes, blue and endless, as though an invisible thread held her fixed in place. He reached past her toward the sink,

retrieving a dainty waist chain from where it lay tangled among the rest of his hoard, and the movement brought him even closer, until all she could breathe in was him.

His scent wrapped around her, charcoal dust and cedarwood, threaded with incense, carrying a richness she imagined old gold might hold after centuries locked away in a dragon's vault. It was intoxicating in a way that made her head spin.

Rhydian was seducing her. That much was certain. And yet she didn't fight it. Her mind had gone quiet the moment his warmth closed over her, every rational thought dissolving beneath the pull of him. She thought of Variant and Valerie and the way she'd judged them only minutes ago, and for the first time she understood.

She wasn't sure she could resist Rhydian Drakhar either.

He leaned into her, lowering the chain to fasten it around her waist, his knuckles brushing her bare skin as he worked the clasp shut. Then his fingers lingered, tracing slow, idle patterns against her stomach, and Aria gasped, her knees threatening to give out beneath her.

Her heart pounded so hard she could feel it in her throat, her blood running hot beneath her skin, and still all she could smell was him. So when Rhydian tilted her chin up, guiding her face toward his, she didn't resist.

Don't fall for this. It's one of his tricks.

But Aria couldn't help herself. She wanted this. She wanted him.

Rhydian cupped her face between his palms, and despite their size, his hold was achingly gentle.

"My treasure," he murmured, the words low and reverent, his eyes half-lidded, heavy with a devotion that seemed far too genuine for a man playing games.

Aria nearly moaned at the sound of it, melting helplessly on the inside. Her lips parted on their own, an invitation she hadn't meant to offer.

He leaned in, dragging his jaw slowly along her cheek instead of claiming her mouth outright, and shivers cascaded down her spine, while heat gathered low and insistent between her thighs.

Rhydian took his time, tracing his face against hers with maddening patience, deliberately avoiding the one place she wanted him most.

Then, finally, his lips ghosted over hers, barely a whisper of contact. Aria gasped and pressed closer, chasing the feeling, craving him the way a parched throat craved water after days in the desert.

Just as Rhydian closed the last inch of distance between them, the door exploded inward, kicked open with such force it nearly tore free of its hinges.

The sound cracked through the restroom like a gunshot, and both of them broke apart instantly, Rhydian's arm sweeping around her, pulling her behind him as though shielding her from whatever had arrived.

Together, they turned toward the doorway.

Maverick Nightshade stood there, filling the frame, his broad shoulders rigid with barely restrained fury.

If Aria had thought Rhydian Drakhar frightening in his intensity, Maverick Nightshade was terrifying in an entirely different way, a presence that seemed to suck the air from the room and leave her chest tight.

His eyes slowly moved from her to Rhydian, before dropping to where Rhydian's arm still curved protectively around her waist. Fury shone hard across his face, a muscle ticking in his jaw, his hands curling into fists at his sides.

And for the first time since she'd met him, Aria saw murder in Professor Maverick's eyes.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 107: Maverick's Mission

"There are two ways to conquer a kingdom: break its walls, or raise its children."

~Rebel Beast

An hour before the fight.....

"The line is connecting in three... two... one..." Standing beside the desk, Dimitri counted down with his fingers.

The screen expanded until it filled almost the entire monitor as President Callum appeared.

"Good morning, Mr. President," Maverick greeted, his posture straight as a spear.

President Callum looked to be in his late fifties. His blond hair had been carefully combed back, every strand disciplined into place with enough product that not a single one dared

rebel. The dye concealed most of the years, though faint streaks of silver still peeked through near his temples.

Behind the square-rimmed glasses, sharp black eyes regarded Maverick with the easy confidence of a man who had spent decades negotiating with people. Even dressed in a simple button-up shirt, there was an unmistakable authority about him, refined by years of leadership and sharpened by the instincts of a seasoned statesman.

"Maverick, my boy." Callum smiled easily.

A muscle ticked in Maverick's jaw. Had they been friends, perhaps he would have accepted the familiarity. But President Callum had never once allowed him to forget the nature of their relationship.

This was politics and mutual usefulness, nothing more. Being called my boy sounded less like affection and more like ownership.

"It's Maverick Nightshade," he corrected evenly. "Not your boy."

Silence lingered for only a second while

Callum's eyebrows lifted almost imperceptibly.

Message received.

"Of course." His expression never faltered. "Maverick Nightshade."

Without wasting another moment, the president leaned forward. "I trust Bestiaris Academy hasn't become too much for you."

Maverick heard the question for what it truly was.

Can you still control the situation?

"The situation remains under control," Maverick answered. "Control and safety, however, are two very different things."

Callum nodded his head. "I see."

He reached for a digital file and skimmed its contents. "It has come to my attention that this year's Concordia Program has recorded the lowest mortality rate since its establishment."

His finger continued scrolling.

"Historically, nearly two-thirds of participants failed to survive their first day. Compared to the previous year, these figures represent significant progress. I believe the anti-venom initiative has contributed considerably to—"

"With respect, Mr. President." Maverick interrupted him. "The anti-venoms have achieved almost nothing."

Callum stopped scrolling.

Maverick continued before the president could respond. "On their first day, the students were subjected to a coordinated bull attack."

His voice remained level.

"Eloise and Saddle died before medical intervention could reach them. Gloria and Chelsea survived, but only after losing limbs. They'll spend the rest of their lives paying the price for an experiment they volunteered for."

The office became very still and that gave Maverick the space to continue.

"On the second day, Erika and Phillipa were killed during the claw incident. Even Abigail, the specialist your administration personally selected for this operation also died."

Maverick looked directly into the camera.

"If a trained military operative couldn't survive these attacks, what chance do frightened eighteen-year-old girls have?"

Callum folded his hands together. "The casualties are regrettable."

"They are preventable." Maverick countered.

"They are inevitable." The correction came without hesitation. "You continue making the same mistake, Maverick."

"And what mistake is that?"

"You still view this as a school." Callum's expression hardened. "I view it as a strategic operation. The Concordia Program has never been about education. It is about access, influence, and ensuring the next generation of beast leaders grows accustomed to human presence before the older generation succeeds in convincing them we're the enemy."

Maverick's expression darkened. "They already think humans are the enemy."

"And whose fault is that?" Callum asked.

"Their parents are the extremists here."

"No, that is not —"

"Maverick..." Callum leaned back, his tone carried the patience of a man explaining policy for the hundredth time.

"We have apex predators living within our borders. They possess capabilities beyond our own and answer to their own authority.

They enforce their own laws and occupy territory inside our nation."

He spread his hands. "Tell me, what sovereign government would simply accept that?"

"The beasts shifters aren't asking to govern humanity."

"They don't need to." Callum answered immediately. "They already possess the power."

He tapped the desk. "My responsibility isn't today's peace, it's tomorrow's security. If I wait until they decide to march on Nova Region, then I've already failed the people who elected me."

Maverick told him. "They aren't preparing for war, they only want to be left alone, which is the opposite of what we're doing now."

Callum gave a humorless smile. "History is filled with leaders who ignored growing threats because they preferred such optimism over preparation. I won't become one of them."

He picked up a folder. "Every week reports land on my desk of border attacks, livestock massacres, and civilian deaths. There are entire communities demanding that I remove every beast from United Dorminia."

He dropped the folder back onto the desk.

"My citizens expect answers. They expect protection, and they expect leadership. The Concordia Program is our opportunity to reshape relations before another generation inherits such a pattern of hatred."

"It still isn't diplomacy, this is a psychological warfare." Maverick replied.

Callum didn't deny it.

"Of course it is. The younger generation hasn't fully inherited the prejudices of their elders. If they learn together, work together, and perhaps form relationships...? Then one day the old political order disappears."

Maverick's eyes narrowed. "And how many children must die before that future arrives?"

Neither man spoke.

Finally Callum sighed.

"So tell me, Maverick, what would you have me do?"

Before Maverick could answer, Callum raised a hand.

"And don't tell me to leave the beasts alone. I cannot. Not while I occupy this office."

Maverick held his gaze. "Then stop sending children to fight a conflict they never started."

Callum didn't blink. "I have a nation to protect."

"And I," Maverick answered, "have their names."

He held the president's gaze without flinching.

"I remember every girl who walked through those academy gates believing she had a future."

"Eloise."

"Saddie."

"Enika."

"Phillipa."

"They aren't statistics to me, Mr. President. They're graves."

The silence that followed was heavier than anything either of them had said. Callum regarded Maverick for a long moment before releasing a weary sigh.

For the first time since the conversation began, the president looked less like the most powerful man in Nova Region and more like someone carrying the weight of an entire nation on his shoulders.

"I understand your heart, Maverick."

His voice had softened. "I truly do."

He folded his hands on the desk.

"But understanding your heart doesn't change my reality. I have exhausted diplomacy. I've listened to military advisors, economists, sociologists, and security experts. Every one of them reaches the same conclusion."

He paused. "It is either this, or a full-scale war with the beasts."

Maverick's jaw tightened.

"No nation has ever moved forward without sacrifice," Callum continued. "History has never been kind enough to offer such peace without demanding something in return."

But Maverick wouldn't listen. "Those sacrifices—"

"Maverick." The president cut him off before he could finish. "I didn't call to debate the morality of the Concordia Program."

His expression returned to that familiar political composure. "I called because my advisory council has approved another initiative."

Curiosity flashed across Maverick's face.

"What initiative?"

"A school excursion." Callum said. "Except this time, the destination will be Nova City."

A curse slipped under Maverick's breath before he could stop it.

Callum pretended not to hear.

"I had much the same reaction," he admitted. "But the proposal isn't without merit."

He reached for another report.

"Our behavioral specialists believe prolonged exposure is the key. Bestiaris allows humans to experience beast society. The problem is that the exchange has only flowed in one direction."

He tapped the folder. "They believe the beasts should see humanity at its best."

Maverick's expression remained unmoved.

"The proposal recommends carefully managed exposure. Public landmarks, cultural centers, community events, human families and positive media coverage."

Callum looked up.

"With enough favorable experiences and the right public relations campaign, we may begin reshaping how the younger generation perceives this coexistence."

Maverick let out a humorless laugh. "So your solution is propaganda."

"I prefer strategic communication."

Maverick shook his head. "It doesn't change the objective. Do you have any idea how many beast students attend Bestiaris Academy? Hundreds. And you intend to bring them into Nova City?"

"Not all of them." Callum answered calmly.

"We're considering twenty. The selection will consist of students with exemplary academic records, stable behavioral assessments, and a demonstrated willingness to cooperate."

He paused deliberately. "And naturally... we'd like the princes included."

Maverick already knew the names before Callum spoke them.

"Rhydian Drakhar and Caelis Cobryn."

Maverick exhaled slowly. "They're not fools."

"I know."

"They'll recognize this for exactly what it is. They won't allow themselves to become political mascots."

Callum told him. "Which is precisely why I need you."

Maverick's eyes narrowed.

"They tolerate you, and unlike every government representative we've ever sent near that academy, they'll actually listen when you speak."

Callum folded his hands once more.

"Convince them while I'll handle the Parliament and of course demonstrations from the public that would be sure to follow."

He breathed, "You just convince two princes that humanity is worth visiting."

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 108: Take Responsibility

"Love had turned a careful strategist into a man willing to gamble away kingdoms."

~ Rebel Beast

"I'm sorry, but I cannot make such promises, President Callum," Maverick told him honestly.

Callum sighed. "Maverick—"

"There is only so much the beasts will tolerate from me. I can only push them so far before they snap. Unless, of course, you're prepared to lose the only human the beasts are willing to tolerate."

Maverick deliberately threw the president's own words back at him.

"But," he continued after a brief pause, "I'll do everything within my power."

The relief that crossed Callum's face was almost too subtle to notice, but Maverick caught it anyway. For all the authority the president projected, it was becoming increasingly obvious who this operation truly depended on.

"However," Maverick added, "I assume the human students will also be accompanying the excursion. It would give them an opportunity to see their families."

Callum shifted in his seat.

"I don't think that's wise. What if some of the girls refuse to return afterwards? Or worse, what if their parents refuse to let them? There are already activist groups gaining traction and demanding the Concordia Program be shut down. The last thing we need is to hand them more ammunition."

"That is your concern, not mine, Mr. President."

Maverick's voice remained calm.

"You asked me to convince the princes and their subordinates to enter Nova City. I'm willing to do exactly that. The beast shifters may dislike the humans, but at least they're familiar with the Concordia students. If they suspect the government has hidden motives, those students become the only leverage they trust."

He held Callum's gaze. "Didn't your behavioral analysts tell you that?"

President Callum fell silent. Maverick knew he had cornered him.

After a long heartbeat, the president finally spoke.

"Fine. I'll raise the matter with Parliament and see what can be arranged—"

"No, Mr. President."

Maverick interrupted him.

"That is where you're mistaken. This isn't something to be discussed later. This is the agreement we're making."

His gray, slit-like eyes never wavered.

"I'll convince the beast shifters to enter human territory. I'll negotiate their cooperation and oversee every aspect of the excursion right down to the itinerary."

He paused. "In return, the surviving human students accompany the trip and are permitted to visit their families."

Callum slowly worked his jaw. For the first time since the call began, Maverick felt the balance of power shift in his favor.

Or so he thought.

"Maverick Nightshade." A calculating smile spread across Callum's face, the sort worn by businessmen moments before closing an exceptionally profitable deal.

"Are you telling me you're willing to take responsibility for this entire excursion?"

Oh, shit.

Maverick recognized the trap the instant it snapped shut around him.

"So you're assuring me," Callum continued, "that you'll keep the beast shifters under control and that no human lives will be lost during the visit to Nova City?"

The office fell silent.

This was dangerous. His father, Asher, would've probably advised him against making promises he couldn't guarantee.

But Aria was involved.

There was no way in hell Maverick would leave his mate behind while escorting the beasts through Nova City like honored guests, uncertain whether she'd still be alive when he returned.

He had also looked into Aria's background.

Why wouldn't he?

It turned out her mother had signed her into the Concordia Program without her knowledge or consent, which explained why her story had spread across the country so quickly.

That woman would have hell to answer for the day they met. Then again, had she not forced Aria into Bestiaris Academy, Maverick might never have found his mate.

He could have spent years searching. Or never found her at all. Everyone knew not every destined pair was fortunate enough to meet within a lifetime.

The point was, Aria loved her sister. Maverick intended to do everything within his power to reunite them while keeping Aria somewhere his protection—and his influence—could still reach her.

Pulling himself back to the conversation, Maverick answered, "Yes. I'll ensure it."

"Good." Callum released a slow breath, looking as though an enormous burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders. "Then we have a deal. The surviving human students will accompany the excursion."

He was fucked. Maverick knew it. Thoroughly fucked.

Not only did he have to convince Rhydian Drakhar and Caelis Cobryn to enter Nova City, he also had to keep two apex predators under control while they were there. His other papa, Roman, would laugh himself senseless if he ever found out.

Callum shook his head with an amused smile. "You're every bit as stubborn as your father, Maverick."

"I don't hold a candle to that man, Mr. President," Maverick muttered under his breath.

His father was everything people claimed him to be. He certainly wouldn't have walked into a political trap this easily.

Whether Callum heard him or not, he gave no indication.

"I'll have my team prepare the agreements. They'll be in contact shortly and assist you with whatever resources you need to make this mission successful. Enjoy your time at Bestiaris Academy, Maverick Nightshade."

The screen went black.

For several long moments, Maverick simply stared at the monitor before dragging a tired hand down his face.

"Congratulations," Dimitri said. "You're toasted."

Maverick groaned and leaned back in his chair. "You really don't have to remind me."

"Of course not." Dimitri smiled with exaggerated innocence. "I'm merely admiring the extraordinary lengths a man in love will go for his lovely mate... who still has absolutely no idea she's his."

"Uncle Dimitri, please." There was genuine exhaustion in Maverick's voice. He already had more than enough on his plate.

Dimitri sighed. Everything would've been much easier if Maverick simply accepted help.

Before either of them could continue, the doorbell rang. The two men exchanged a glance.

"Were we expecting anyone?" Maverick asked.

"Not that I'm aware of." Dimitri rose from his chair. "I'll see who it is."

Maverick nodded before reaching for another report on his desk. It contained the latest records of students leaving and returning to the academy.

He already knew the report wasn't entirely accurate.

Students from Houses Ophidian and Aetheris had long mastered the art of slipping beyond the academy grounds unnoticed. More importantly, most security personnel were far too intimidated to report the movements of Caelis Cobryn and Rhydian Drakhar.

Maverick usually let them.

Giving those two princes a reasonable amount of freedom was far wiser than provoking them into reminding everyone why apex predators were feared.

He was still reviewing the report when footsteps echoed back into the office. Looking up, he saw Dimitri returning and he wasn't alone.

Maverick immediately recognized the young man standing beside him.

Venus.

Caelis Cobryn's viper.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 109: Rhydian Did What?

Chapter 109: Rhydian Did What?

Every shifter carried a beast within them, that much was understood. But there was something fundamentally unsettling about the serpents.

Dragons inspired fear by their very presence, wolves overwhelmed with sheer dominance, but snakes waited. They watched until the perfect moment arrived, then struck before anyone realized they had been in danger at all.

Perhaps that was simply written into their blood.

"To what do I owe this visit, Venus?" Maverick asked, deliberately studying the young man standing before his desk.

Venus looked immaculate in the deep green academy uniform of House Ophidian. Not a wrinkle marked the expensive fabric, and even his silver tie pin sat perfectly centered beneath his collar. Like every serpent Maverick had met so far, the young man carried himself with unnerving precision.

"You're supposed to be in class," Maverick remarked, unable to ignore it.

"I will be," Venus replied. "Just as soon as you sign this."

He crossed the office and laid a thick, leather-bound document on the desk before sliding it toward Maverick.

"What is this?"

"The liability and indemnity agreement concerning tomorrow's match."

Venus folded his hands neatly behind his back.

"It ensures that His Highness, Prince Caelis Cobryn, House Ophidian, its affiliates, and the arena management bear no legal, financial, or civil responsibility should you sustain injury, permanent disability, or death during tomorrow's bout."

"No shit," Dimitri muttered under his breath.

Maverick ignored him. He had almost forgotten he was scheduled to fight Rhydian tomorrow.

Pulling the document closer, he opened the cover. The title alone stretched across the first page.

VOLUNTARY COMBAT PARTICIPATION, LIABILITY WAIVER, ASSUMPTION OF RISK,
MEDICAL CONSENT, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT

His eyebrow lit up with intrigue. Beneath it sat several paragraphs of meticulously drafted legal language.

The Undersigned Participant acknowledges that participation in the combat event conducted within the Arena Network is entirely voluntary and undertaken without coercion.

The Participant understands that combat between beast shifters carries inherent risks, including but not limited to fractures, internal injuries, paralysis, permanent disability, psychological trauma, loss of limb, or death.

The Participant voluntarily assumes all foreseeable and unforeseeable risks associated with participation.

Maverick slowly turned the page, then another and another. His expression gradually shifted from curiosity to genuine admiration.

There were sections covering medical authorization, emergency treatment consent, arena conduct, confidentiality clauses, and independent witness certification.

He stopped halfway through the document.

"How many pages is this?"

"Thirty-two," Venus answered.

Maverick was stunned. "Thirty-two pages just for me to beat Rhydian unconscious?"

"Twenty-nine," Venus corrected. "The remaining three are signature pages and medical disclosures."

Maverick sighed. "I don't approve of you students participating in underground fighting..." He flipped another page. "But I have to admit, this is exceptionally well drafted."

His gray eyes lifted to Venus. "Caelis wrote this?"

"He supervised it," Venus answered without pride or modesty. "His lawyer handled the technical language, while His Highness personally reviewed every clause."

Maverick looked back down at the agreement.

There were provisions protecting spectators from liability, compensation policies for accidental property damage, clauses governing disputes, and even a section requiring fighters to disclose any performance-enhancing substances before entering the arena.

It was absurdly comprehensive.

"There seems to be no loopholes," Maverick murmured.

"Very few," Venus corrected. "For obvious reasons, His Highness dislikes expensive lawsuits."

"So what does Caelis do with all the money?" he asked casually. "I've heard he charges Rhydian a ridiculous amount every time he fights in the arena. Speaking of which, shouldn't I be paying some sort of participation fee myself?"

"What His Highness does with his finances is not my place to discuss, Professor Maverick," Venus replied with unfaltering politeness. "As for your participation, there is no fee."

"There isn't?"

"Prince Rhydian has already covered it."

Maverick's eyebrow climbed. "How generous."

Or perhaps that was simply what happened when one belonged to a species infamous for collecting wealth faster than they spent it. Dragons had arrived in this world with nothing, yet somehow they always seemed to possess fortunes that rivaled old families.

The irony wasn't lost on him.

Maverick tapped the cover of the agreement with two fingers. "I'll still need to go through this carefully. I'd rather make sure there isn't anything hidden in here that comes back to haunt me later."

"You won't find anything of that nature," Venus assured him. "The agreement exists to protect the arena. Our reputation has taken years to build and his Highness has no interest in compromising it through questionable contracts." He spoke without defensiveness.

Maverick nodded slowly. "It still deserves a proper reading. I'll look through it later. You can return later."

"I'm afraid I can't." Venus remained perfectly composed. "His Highness instructed me not to leave without your signature."

Maverick looked up. "He specifically said that?"

"Yes."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll wait."

The answer came so quickly it almost amused him.

"We have a match to prepare tomorrow. There isn't time for unnecessary delays."

For several seconds Maverick simply stared at the young serpent before letting out a weary sigh.

His father had drilled one lesson into him from childhood. Never sign a document you haven't read yourself. And absolutely never if it came from a serpent.

He pulled the agreement back toward himself. "Fine."

Venus inclined his head once. "I appreciate your cooperation."

Maverick resumed reading, turning another page while Dimitri wandered toward the window, absentmindedly scrolling through messages on his phone.

The office settled into silence that lasted less than a minute.

Dimitri's phone rang. He answered without much thought.

"Yes?"

He paused just as his entire posture stiffened.

"...What did you just say?"

There was another pause right before his voice rose.

"Hello? Hello!" The line had already gone dead.

Maverick immediately looked up.

"What is it?"

Dimitri slowly lowered the phone, his face drained of color.

"We have a problem."

A knot formed in Maverick's stomach.

"What happened?"

Dimitri swallowed.

"Rhydian..." He hesitated for the briefest moment.

"...Rhydian apparently cornered Aria inside the women's restroom."

The document hit the desk with a loud slap and Maverick was already on his feet before the sentence had fully registered. His chair scraped violently across the floor as he crossed the office in long, purposeful strides, every muscle in his body drawn tight.

The air itself seemed to grow colder.

"Professor—" Venus called after him.

"What about the agreement?"

But Maverick didn't answer. Not when the office door flew open, striking the wall with enough force to make the frame shudder before he disappeared into the corridor without a backward glance.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 110: [Bonus -] Mine, Not His

A dragon can lose his gold and gather more. The treasure he chooses cannot be replaced.

~ Rebel Beast

If Maverick thought he had known fear before, then he had been mistaken.

This was fear.

It wrapped around his throat like a vice, squeezing until breathing became an effort. Blood thundered through his ears so violently that it drowned out everything else, and the corridor blurred as he tore through it.

At that moment, there was no separating man from beast. The wolf and the man wanted the same thing.

Find their mate.

His chest tightened with every step. No.

It couldn't be what he was imagining. If Rhydian Drakhar had laid so much as a finger on Aria...

A darkness settled over Maverick that even he recognized as monstrous. He would kill him. Except death would be far too merciful. He would make the dragon beg for it first.

He would carve him apart one piece at a time until the arrogant prince wished for the mercy of death and found none. Then he would hunt every dragon Rhydian had ever called family, every ally, every friend—every person whose existence mattered to him.

One after another.

Only when Rhydian had nothing left to lose would Maverick grant him the release of death.

Maverick knew those thoughts were monstrous, but he embraced every one of them. Because if anything had happened to Aria, there would be no line he refused to cross.

When he arrived at the dining hall, he barely noticed Variant and Valerie racing toward him. He didn't see Brittney and the others with the concern written across their faces. He didn't even spare a glance at the two Therion guards slowly regaining consciousness on the floor.

None of them mattered. Only Aria did.

The restroom door stood shut before him, locked, but it didn't matter. Maverick drove his foot into it with enough force to rip the entire frame apart. Wood splintered, and the door crashed inward.

His heart stopped.

During those frantic time racing across the academy, Maverick had imagined countless horrors waiting for him beyond that door.

Aria burned beyond recognition by dragon fire. Aria lying in a pool of her own blood. Aria's neck twisted at an impossible angle, her lifeless eyes staring back at him.

Hence nothing had prepared him to see

Aria alive and completely unharmed. More shocking still, she was tucked securely against Rhydian Drakhar's side. The dragon prince's arm rested possessively around her waist, holding her close enough that there wasn't even room for daylight between them.

For one impossible moment, Maverick simply stared, his mind refusing to accept what his eyes were showing him.

What the hell?

His relief lasted less than a heartbeat before it gave way to something far more dangerous.

Possessive fury.

It swept through him so completely that every muscle in his body drew tight, barely containing the violence clawing its way to the surface.

His gray eyes locked onto Rhydian.

"LET. HER. GO." The words came out low, controlled, and completely devoid of emotion.

A deep rumble rolled from Rhydian's chest. The dragon had heard the challenge, and rejected it.

His Treasure wasn't leaving.

Caught between them, Aria finally found enough courage to move. She barely managed half a step before Rhydian drew her right back against him.

"Treasure is mine."

His voice rolled over her in that rich, gravelly timbre that somehow managed to be both commanding and intimate. Heat rushed across Aria's face while her core throbbed with need and she hated that her body reacted. The dragon was dismantling every ounce of self-control she had left, one heartbeat at a time.

This time, Maverick didn't command Rhydian. Instead, his eyes found Aria's. Those gray eyes were still every bit as intense as he said, "Come here, Aria."

Aria swallowed. She no longer understood what was happening, but she understood enough. This wasn't about her. Not entirely.

Two apex males stood facing one another, and somewhere between them, pride, instinct, and possession had become hopelessly tangled.

If either one surrendered to his temper now, the restroom would become a battlefield, and she wasn't convinced she'd survive being caught in the middle. She had to make a choice. More importantly, she had to make the right one.

Slowly, Aria turned back to Rhydian. Against every sensible thought screaming inside her head, she lifted a trembling hand and cupped his face.

The effect was immediate. A deep, contented rumble rolled through the dragon's chest as he leaned into her palm without hesitation. His eyes drifted shut, every line of tension melting from his body beneath her touch as though the simple caress had soothed something ancient inside him.

Across the room, Maverick watched in silence. His expression became unreadable. Why was Rhydian acting like this? More importantly, why was Aria touching him that way? A possessiveness so fierce it bordered on pain twisted through his chest. She was supposed to be looking at him like that, not the dragon.

Mine. Not his.

"I have to go," Aria whispered gently.

Another rumble escaped Rhydian, this one almost mournful. Treasure wasn't supposed to leave. He still had so much to do. Treasure deserved more gold, more jewels, the finest gifts from his hoard. He would hunt for Treasure. Protect Treasure. And most of all, fill Treasure with his seed. She would carry his heirs. Strong dragon heirs.

"The fight tomorrow," Rhydian said. "Come."

Aria blinked in confusion.

"What fight?"

"Aria." Maverick's voice sliced through the room with unmistakable urgency.

Driven more by instinct than thought, Aria rose onto her toes and pressed the quickest kiss against Rhydian's cheek.

It was only the briefest touch, yet the transformation was instantaneous. Rhydian's entire face lit up. Not like a prince. Not even like a dragon. But like a boy receiving his first kiss.

Aria's heart nearly stopped. What on earth had she just done?

Without waiting to find out, she hurried toward Maverick. His face might as well have been carved from granite. She couldn't read a single emotion behind those gray eyes.

"We should go," she whispered. "Before he changes his mind."

Maverick didn't answer.

His gaze had settled on the ruby pendant resting against her throat. Then it drifted lower to the gold chain circling her waist. Something dark flashed across his face.

"Who gave you those?" The question came out as a growl so harsh it made Aria flinch.

She instinctively wrapped her fingers around the ruby pendant and his eyes as well notice the expensive ring around her finger.

"Does it matter?" Aria said carelessly.

It mattered.

Maverick was a professor of history, and every credible account ever written about dragons agreed on one thing. A dragon guarded its hoard more fiercely than its own life. Kingdoms had burned trying to steal dragon's gold. Entire bloodlines had vanished for touching what belonged to one. Yet history recorded one exception.

Their mates.

The oldest texts described dragons adorning the one they had chosen with treasures from their own hoard. The gold was never decoration, but a declaration. A dragon who willingly placed his treasure upon another had already claimed her in the oldest language his kind possessed.

Maverick's blood ran cold.

His hand shot out, gripping Aria's wrist as his eyes swept over every piece Rhydian had placed upon her—the necklace, the ring, the waist chain. Then his gaze lifted and locked onto Rhydian.

"You have no claim over her."

Before Aria understood what he intended to do, Maverick yanked the ring from her finger.

"Maverick, no—!"

She was too late. The ring struck the tiled floor with a sharp metallic clink.

Silence settled over the restroom. For one terrifying heartbeat, nothing happened. Then the restroom echoed with the fury of a dragon's roar. The sound crashed into the walls with enough force to shake the mirrors and rattle every hidden pipe within them.

Aria's blood turned to ice. They were in trouble now.