

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 11: Spy On The Beast

Aria was nervous at first, a lot of unpleasant scenarios running through her head.

What if they were taking her somewhere private to finish her off? Then again, wouldn't she have needed to do something wrong first?

That thought was quickly replaced by another.

What if they had finally realized she was some sort of defective candidate and wanted one of those blue-blooded girls instead? No offense to Brittney, Alek, and Trisha.

Well. Maybe a little offense.

Aria comforted herself with the fact that it was already too late to find a replacement. Deployment was tomorrow morning. Surely they only wanted to ask her a few questions.

The problem was, questions about what?

Aria simply settled for putting on a brave face while her thoughts ran wild.

Eventually, Abigail stopped in front of a door.

"You may enter."

Aria was suspicious. "That's it?"

"That's it." The woman reached for the handle. "She's waiting for you."

Aria's eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. She?

Before she could ask another question, Abigail opened the door and gently shoved her inside. The door clicked shut behind her.

Aria blinked in surprise at what she saw. This was not what she had been expecting.

The room looked more like a luxurious office suite than an interrogation chamber. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Nova City while bookshelves lined one wall and expensive artwork decorated another. The scent of coffee lingered in the air. Everything about the room screamed wealth.

Then a soft voice spoke.

"Hello, Aria."

The sound startled her. She turned.

A beautiful dark-haired woman sat behind an enormous desk. She looked to be in her late thirties, dressed in an elegant navy suit that probably cost more than Aria's entire house. Despite that, there was something warm about her smile. Dangerously warm.

Rich people always smiled before asking for something.

The woman rose gracefully to her feet, extending a hand.

"My name is Dr. Eniola Moore," she introduced herself. "Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Moore Biotech Industries, and Senior Scientific Advisor to the Novara Regional Council."

Aria stared at her. That was an absurd number of titles for one person. Her gaze shifted to the offered hand. She ignored it. Aria didn't know the woman's intentions yet and wasn't about to get cozy with her.

To Eniola's credit, she didn't seem offended by the rejection. If anything, her smile deepened a little as she withdrew her hand.

"You may sit."

Aria did. The chair was so comfortable it annoyed her. For a moment neither spoke.

Then Eniola folded her hands neatly atop her desk. "I watched your interview."

Aria groaned internally.

"My condolences."

To her surprise, the woman laughed.

"I liked you."

Aria instantly grew more suspicious. People like Eniola Moore didn't notice people like her unless they wanted something.

"So," Aria said cautiously, "Why am I here?"

Eniola leaned back in her chair.

"I simply wanted to meet you."

That was all? Nah, she wasn't falling for that bullshit.

So Aria waited.

The woman continued studying her.

Aria waited some more. Eventually she sighed. "What do you want?" she went straight to the point.

Eniola seemed amused. "What makes you think that?"

Aria retorted. "Because people in your position don't invite disposable girls into fancy offices just to admire the scenery."

Interest flashed across Eniola's face.

"There it is."

"There what is?"

"The reason I chose you."

Aria immediately stilled. She knew she shouldn't have let her guard down.

Eniola must have noticed the girl looked seconds away from bolting because she quickly added, "I'm interested in the beasts."

"Most people are," Aria pointed out.

"Not in the same way, Aria. I'm a renowned xenobiologist, and I've been interested in the beast shifters ever since they stumbled into our world. The wolves are already documented. We understand them better than any other non-human species. But the dragons, the serpent clans, and the dozens of other creatures in Bestial City..." She paused. "There is still so much we don't know."

Understanding dawned on Aria.

She said bluntly, "You need someone to spy for you."

"Straight to the point," Eniola breathed. "I prefer calling it information gathering."

"Whatever makes you sleep at night, lady," Aria retorted.

Eniola sighed as though she had dealt with stubborn teenagers her entire life.

"Fine. Spying."

At least she was honest.

Aria crossed her arms. "And why exactly would I help you?"

The answer came immediately.

"Davina."

Just like that, every trace of humor left Aria's face.

Eniola offered immediately. "I can help her."

"I already helped her."

"Did you?"

The question immediately irritated Aria.

"I made sure she'll be taken care of."

Eniola nodded.

"You mean with money?"

"That's generally how being taken care of works," Aria snapped.

The moment Eniola brought Davina into the conversation, that was where her manners ended.

"What if you die?"

The words landed harder than Aria expected.

The woman continued gently.

"What if you die tomorrow, Aria? Or next week? Or a month from now? Do you think that money will last forever?"

Aria said nothing. She didn't want to give Eniola the illusion that she held all the cards here.

Eniola leaned forward.

"I'm talking about a future here. A real future. My company funds educational programs throughout Nova City. Your sister would receive the best education available. Housing. Healthcare. Career opportunities. Connections. Just think about it."

She paused. "Your mother too."

Aria's voice was taut. "My mother?"

"I know about your mother's tendency to choose the wrong men." Eniola spoke carefully, aware she was stepping into sensitive territory. "Environment shapes people, Aria."

Aria remained silent.

"Nova City provides opportunities that many provinces simply cannot. She'd meet different people. Other women who could influence her for the better. Better jobs. Better support systems. Better opportunities."

Aria hated how convincing she sounded.

Unfortunately, this kind of speech always had a catch to it.

Eniola noticed her expression.

"You're skeptical."

"I'm not stupid."

"Good," the woman said. "Because I don't have much use for stupid people."

"And what if I die early?" Aria held her gaze. "That doesn't exactly profit you, does it? All these promises disappear the moment I'm gone."

Unexpectedly, Eniola beamed at her.

"Then I suppose you'll have to keep yourself alive." She tilted her head slightly. "And I have a feeling you know exactly how to do that, Aria Aspen."

Silence settled between them as Aria was left speechless. She scrutinized the woman carefully.

Aria didn't owe the beasts anything. Unlike some of the girls downstairs, she wasn't chasing a romantic fantasy of catching the eye of some deranged beast shifter.

Survival and her family were all that mattered. And if helping Eniola Moore achieved both goals, then she was in.

Besides, if she turned the offer down, the woman would simply recruit someone else.

Aria wasn't about to throw away a golden opportunity.

"Fine. I'll consider it."

Eniola didn't look surprised by her answer. If anything, she seemed to have expected it all along.

"Good. Now—"

"But before that, I need something from you." Aria cut her off.

Now Eniola looked interested.

"What is it?"

Aria didn't hesitate.

"I need a map of Bestiaris Academy."

For the first time, Eniola looked genuinely impressed. A proud smile curved her lips.

"I knew I made the right choice."

That reaction unsettled Aria. It was the same look corporations got whenever they stumbled upon valuable talent. It felt like she had just passed some invisible test.

Eniola folded her hands.

"As you wish. I'll provide a map of the main campus and all documented surrounding zones. You do not want to wander beyond those boundaries."

"Why?"

"Because many who ventured beyond them never returned."

A shudder crawled down Aria's spine. She ignored it.

"One more thing."

"What is it?"

Surprisingly, Eniola didn't seem bothered by the growing list of demands.

"I want information on the previous candidates."

That made the woman pause.

Aria clarified. "Especially the girl who lasted the longest."

For a brief moment, approval flashed through Eniola's eyes.

Aria immediately wondered if she had made a mistake. Perhaps she had shown too much of her hand too soon.

"I'll provide that too. However, you should know that this arrangement remains confidential," Eniola reminded her.

"I figured."

"Like every candidate, you'll receive a device before deployment tomorrow. My contact information will already be added. I'll also send over the agreement."

Aria immediately raised a finger.

"Add one clause."

Eniola arched a brow.

"What is it now?"

"I reserve the right to back out of this deal whenever I want."

This time, the woman looked genuinely taken aback.

"And don't try slipping some clever legal nonsense into the contract either," Aria added. "I'll read every line before signing."

Eniola's smile became all teeth.

"Smart ass."

She rose and extended her hand.

"So, do we have a deal?"

Aria looked at the offered hand. Unlike before, she reached out and shook it.

"I guess."

Eniola's grip tightened briefly before releasing hers.

"I can't wait for tomorrow," she said. "I have a feeling things are about to become very interesting."

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 12: Deployment Day

"Up! Up! Up!"

The command ripped through the dormitory moments before a shrill alarm blared overhead, jolting every contestant awake.

Apparently, the government couldn't afford to give all twenty girls they were about to send into danger a room of their own. Guess that was where their generosity ended.

Thankfully, the room was spacious. Though it was lined with bunk beds, two girls to a unit, there was still enough room to breathe.

Several groans echoed through the dorm.

Some of the girls didn't react well to the sudden wake-up call. More than two candidates tumbled from the top bunks, hitting the floor with painful thuds and a chorus of curses.

Aria's gaze snapped toward the clock mounted on the wall.

4:00 a.m.

Seriously? Did they really have to leave this early?

"I don't care if you've broken a bone. Get into the showers. Now!" Abigail barked.

The intensity of her voice, combined with the female soldiers standing behind her, had the girls moving immediately.

"Whoever designed this program definitely hated women," Brittney yawned loudly as she shuffled toward the communal showers.

Aria couldn't even argue. She had barely slept.

Every time she closed her eyes, her brain reminded her they were about to walk straight into enemy territory. While her body desperately needed rest, her mind refused to cooperate.

The communal shower area wasn't anything Aria hadn't seen before. Rows of showerheads lined opposite walls, steam already gathering beneath the bright ceiling lights. Water pounded against the tiles while sleepy girls stumbled around trying to wake themselves up.

Unlike Aria, who preferred keeping to herself, some of the candidates moved around naked without a shred of embarrassment. For someone used to avoiding crowded spaces, she had never seen so many different body types packed into one room before.

Turning, she found Brittney looking her over with an expression that immediately set off alarm bells.

"What?" Aria demanded.

Brittney grinned. "Nice boobs."

Aria stared at her. Then immediately took a step sideways. Unfortunately, she stepped straight into another girl.

"Watch it," the girl hissed.

"Sorry."

Aria quickly moved away before facing Brittney again.

The brunette still hadn't stopped grinning.

"Relax," Brittney said. "I'm into guys. I just appreciate quality workmanship when I see it."

Aria shook her head, unsure. She still couldn't decide whether having Brittney around was a blessing or a curse.

Probably both.

"You know," Brittney continued while lathering soap across her arms, "you still haven't told me what happened last night after you vanished in the middle of dinner."

"Yeah, about that..."

The lie came naturally.

"It turned out my sister ran away from home. Since I don't have a phone, my mother had to contact them directly."

Brittney's expression immediately softened.

"Oh no."

The guilt hit Aria almost instantly.

"No wonder you looked so distracted after you came back. Has there been any news?"

"I'll have to check after this." Aria forced a shrug. "Hopefully Davina hasn't done anything stupid."

"Good. I hope everything turns out okay."

Aria forced a smile.

"Me too."

At that exact moment Abigail stormed into the shower room.

"Enough talking!" Her voice boomed off the tiles. "You are not washing away the sins of your ancestors. Move your asses!"

Several girls jumped, while one nearly dropped her soap.

Aria scrubbed herself one final time before shutting off the water. She wrung the excess moisture from her hair, grabbed a towel, and wrapped it around herself.

Today was deployment day. There was no turning back now.

If Aria thought the shower had been some sort of parade, then she got the shock of her life when she stepped back into the dormitory and found the girls getting dressed.

What the hell?

Having spent part of yesterday observing the other candidates, Aria had figured out that roughly eleven of the girls came from influential families, three from middle-class homes, and the rest from backgrounds similar to hers.

Yet looking around now, it was difficult to tell.

Designer labels appeared everywhere she looked. Expensive handbags sat on beds, while Jewelry sparkled beneath the lights. Even some of the girls from less fortunate backgrounds seemed determined to keep up appearances, squeezing themselves into imitation designer outfits that probably cost more than they should have.

Apparently, survival wasn't the only competition happening here.

The one that left Aria completely speechless was Charlotte. The girl had somehow squeezed herself into a dramatic red ballgown.

Aria could only assume the outfit was intended to attract the attention of the dragon prince. Charlotte had spent most of yesterday talking about dragons and her dream of riding one. The obsession was honestly becoming concerning.

What Aria couldn't understand was how the girl intended to run in that thing if the situation demanded it. Had they forgotten where they were going? Or had the government's constant promises of safety completely destroyed their sense of self-preservation?

Then again, to each their own.

Aria walked over to her bunk and opened the small bag containing the entirety of her possessions. Her options were limited.

In the end, she pulled out a black T-shirt and a pair of black leggings. It was practical and comfortable. Also if everything went horribly wrong, black blended into darkness better than bright red.

She was halfway through pulling on her shirt when someone suddenly appeared beside her.

"What is this?"

Aria looked up. It was Chelsea.

The brunette was dressed like she was heading to a fashion show rather than enemy territory. A fitted white crop top exposed her toned stomach while a pair of designer trousers hugged her figure perfectly. Gold jewelry decorated her wrists and neck, and she managed to put on makeup despite the limited time.

Chelsea pinched the hem of Aria's shirt between two fingers as if it personally offended her.

"What about it?" Aria's tone was cold.

Chelsea scoffed. "Oh right, I forgot. You're poor."

Several nearby girls looked over, unable to resist the drama.

Chelsea smiled sweetly. "Is that why you're dressed like you're attending a funeral?"

A few snickers erupted around the room.

"But then again, it could be your own burial in a few hours. After all, you have a thing for graves, don't you?" she taunted her.

The laughter grew louder. Except Aria wasn't amused, at all.

Before Chelsea realized what was happening, Aria grabbed the hand holding onto her shirt and twisted it, hard.

"Ow!" Chelsea yelped and immediately dropped Aria's shirt.

"You're hurting me, bitch!"

The scream echoed through the room, and several heads snapped toward them.

"What is going on here?" Abigail's voice cut through the commotion.

The woman pushed through the crowd and immediately separated them.

Her gaze landed on Aria first.

"Didn't you hear the strict warning about fighting?"

Aria opened her mouth, the same time opened hers too, but neither of them got the chance to speak.

"You're lucky we're about to depart," Abigail snapped. "Otherwise there would be consequences for this." The warning was clear.

Abigail looked around the room.

"Get your belongings together. We leave in five minutes."

Just like that, everyone dispersed while Abigail moved on to terrorize another corner of the room.

Aria glanced toward Chelsea. The girl was now sitting on a bed looking personally victimized while her friends crowded around her.

Aria scoffed, she hadn't even twisted that hard.

Alek appeared beside her, the both of them watching the scene.

She said to Aria, "Chelsea is petty, and you've officially made yourself an enemy."

Except that part wasn't surprising.

"I suggest you watch your back during this journey." She told her, and walked away.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before they were finally leaving the tower. Another highlight of Aria's morning came from watching most of the girls struggle with their luggage.

Karen alone had somehow managed to pack three large suitcases.

Aria stared at the mountain of luggage in disbelief. Was the girl heading to a dangerous beast city or a luxury vacation resort?

Apparently, Karen wasn't the only offender.

Several girls had brought enough belongings to survive a small apocalypse. As a result, nearly thirty minutes was wasted trying to load everything into the large coach bus waiting outside.

Abigail looked one inconvenience away from committing murder.

"Move! Move! Move!" she thundered. "Get on the bus. Now."

The girls quickly obeyed.

Aria stepped aboard and immediately headed for a window seat. As expected, Brittney followed. The brunette dropped into the seat beside her before anyone else could claim it.

"Nervous?" she asked.

"No." Aria answered honestly.

Whatever was going to happen would happen. There was no point worrying about it now. If anything, she just wanted to get it over with.

The bus doors opened again, and conversations died instantly as Gideon stepped inside. He walked down the center aisle before stopping near the front.

"Ladies."

Twenty pairs of eyes turned toward him.

"Today marks the beginning of the most important journey of your lives."

As Gideon continued speaking, several staff members entered the bus carrying sealed packages. They began distributing them to each candidate.

Aria lifted a brow as Eniola's words from yesterday resurfaced in her mind.

"Like every candidate, you'll receive a device before deployment tomorrow. My contact information will already be added."

The woman certainly hadn't been bluffing.

Aria accepted the package and immediately opened it. Inside was a phone, a smartwatch, a charger, and a small pamphlet.

Gideon gestured toward the items.

"The phone and health watch have both been synchronized with our monitoring systems. They contain tracking functions that will allow us to locate you should you become separated from your group. Additional information can be found in the brochure included in your package."

Aria made a mental note to read it later.

"Our journey to Bestial City will take approximately eight hours."

A collective groan swept through the bus.

Gideon ignored them.

"I suggest you use that time wisely. Get some rest. You have no idea what awaits you beyond the border, and you will need both your minds and bodies functioning at their best."

Aria finally understood why they had been dragged out of bed at four in the morning.

That was a ridiculous amount of travel time.

Gideon continued. "A military escort vehicle will travel ahead of us and another will follow behind. Additionally, a few certified beastmen have been assigned to ensure your safety during the journey through Bestial City and all the way to Bestiaris Academy."

The moment Gideon mentioned beastmen, the girls practically exploded. Excited squeals filled the bus and most of the girls

rushed toward the windows, nearly climbing over one another as they searched the convoy outside.

"I see one!"

A finger pointed excitedly toward a vehicle several cars ahead. Though the man was dressed in a uniform and wore a mask that concealed most of his features, it wasn't difficult to identify him.

The sheer size alone gave him away.

Even from a distance, he stood well over six feet tall. The aura surrounding him felt different too. Dangerous, and predatory.

There was no way he was human.

More squeals erupted.

"He's huge!"

"Oh my God."

"Can he ride with us instead?"

"Yes! Let him come ride with us!"

Aria stared. Were these girls serious?

Beside her, Brittney muttered, "Why? So you can all jump him?"

Unfortunately, nobody heard her, not over the chaos. Even Gideon seemed to realize he had lost control of the girls.

He stood there for several seconds watching the spectacle unfold, then let out a long suffering sigh.

"You know what?" Gideon said to the distracted girls, "Goodluck to you all."

Without another word, he turned around and left.

Aria watched him go. Not that she could blame him.

If they hadn't even reached Bestial City yet and the girls were already behaving like this, she didn't dare imagine what awaited them at Bestiaris Academy.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 13: Finding Caelis

Maverick Nightshade leaned against the wall, his arms folded across his chest as he watched the hallway.

The first lesson was over and students poured out of the classroom one after another, the buzz of conversation filling the corridor.

"Isn't that Professor Maverick? What's he doing out here?"

The whisper came from a group of girls walking past him. From the deep crimson of their uniforms, they belonged to Aetheris House, home of the aerial beasts.

"Maybe he's waiting for someone," the second girl guessed.

The third smirked. "You mean me?"

The three girls burst into laughter.

To his annoyance, Maverick found himself smiling. And yes, they weren't entirely wrong. He was waiting for someone.

Not long after, his target finally appeared. Unfortunately, he wasn't alone.

Rhydian Drakhar strolled down the hallway with a girl hanging off each arm as though he were leading some sort of parade.

Typical.

The dragon prince looked exactly how one would expect a dragon prince to look. Handsome, dangerous and just intelligent enough to make his arrogance unbearable.

His crimson hair was impossible to miss, falling around his sharp features in unruly waves that somehow suited him. Like most dragon shifters, he was broad-shouldered and powerfully built, carrying himself with the effortless confidence of someone who had never been told no in his life.

Blue eyes gleamed with far more cleverness than his reckless reputation suggested. While the girls found him attractive, the boys found him irritating. Both groups were correct.

Maverick pushed away from the wall and stepped directly into his path.

"I need to talk to you."

It wasn't a request.

From the way Rhydian looked him over, he seemed to realize that too. The dragon prince turned to the two girls hanging onto his arms and flashed them that rakish smile of his.

"Now why don't you ladies go have fun without me?"

The girls immediately brightened. Neither seemed interested in arguing. After throwing one last lingering glance his way, they walked off together.

Maverick watched them leave, noting the golden wolf-head insignias stitched onto their navy-blue uniforms.

House Therion. His house.

Technically, relationships between students from different houses weren't forbidden, but most beasts preferred sticking to their own.

Well, most. Rhydian Drakhar didn't seem to have a preference. With one exception.

House Ophidian.

Dragons and serpents had been at each other's throats for generations, and the feud had naturally followed them into the academy.

At least, it usually did.

For the past two days, there hadn't been a single report of a dead student or even a fight breaking out. That was highly unusual.

House Aetheris and House Ophidian normally made sure to leave each other a fresh casualty every other day.

Under normal circumstances, Maverick would have considered it a miracle. But the human girls were scheduled to arrive today. And suddenly everyone was on their best behavior?

Yeah. He could smell the bullshit from a mile away. Rhydian and Caelis were definitely up to something.

Worst-case scenario, the two houses had called a temporary truce for the purpose of hunting the humans.

He could not let that happen.

Rhydian started, "I'm all yours, Prof. Although..." His gaze deliberately raked Maverick from head to toe. "You should know my services are quite expensive."

Maverick glared at him. Just because he didn't like women touching him didn't mean he was interested in men either.

"Come." He jerked his head toward an open-air balcony overlooking the academy grounds. "We'll talk there."

Students occupied the space, chatting amongst themselves while enjoying the fresh air. That ended the moment Maverick and Rhydian stepped onto the balcony.

They didn't need to be told twice. Conversations died instantly as they hurried away, leaving the balcony entirely to them.

Neither men seemed bothered by their reaction. It was instinct for smaller creatures to submit to the larger ones.

Silence settled between them.

Maverick and Rhydian stood facing each other. Although Rhydian towered over him by a few inches, Maverick still stared the dragon dead in the eyes, the air between them crackling with dominance and challenge.

Despite wearing the academy uniform, Rhydian was well over ninety-nine years old, though dragons still considered him a child.

Whether the dragon prince was older than him or not was irrelevant. While Rhydian remained a student at Bestiaris Academy, he would obey the faculty. And that included him, Maverick.

Rhydian smirked. "Since I'm not here to help scratch your itch...."

Maverick released a warning growl.

His reputation for not associating with females was well known and he was endlessly teased for it. Rumors about his sexuality had spread through the academy. Not that he particularly cared what a bunch of bored students thought of him.

"Let's cut the crap." Maverick's voice was cold. "I know you know why I called you out here."

However, Rhydian merely cocked his head, pretending to be oblivious.

"I don't know—"

"The humans will be here in a few hours," Maverick informed him.

"Oh, right." Rhydian muttered. "The fresh meat."

"Excuse me?" Maverick's eyes narrowed.

Rhydian shrugged. "Isn't that what they are? Otherwise, why would those ridiculous pests come here if not to serve as entertainment?"

"Those are precious lives, not entertainment!" Maverick snapped, stepping into his space.

Except Rhydian didn't appreciate the move. A low growl rumbled from his throat in warning.

"Then you should tell them to stay away from us. They don't belong here."

In retaliation, Maverick's eyes seemed to glow, the air around them rippling with power.

"This place once belonged to them," he shot back.

"Then they should come take it back." Rhydian's blue eyes gleamed with challenge. "I'd love to see them try."

Maverick said. "Whether you like it or not, the humans are coming, and I want to be assured that neither you nor Caelis are planning something stupid."

"Caelis?" Rhydian laughed. "Since when did the two of us become friends?"

"So you don't know where he is then?" Maverick asked, listening for his heartbeat. He could tell if the dragon lied.

Rhydian lifted a brow. "Do I?"

Maverick tilted his head, watching him. He was evading his question.

Then he let his power slip free, silently.

His consciousness pushed forward, searching for a crack in the dragon's mind. A memory, or thought. Anything that would lead him toward whatever plan he and Caelis were hiding.

Instead, he slammed into a mental wall that felt like solid steel and pain exploded through his skull.

A sharp hiss of outrage escaped Rhydian's throat when he realized what he did.

He roared. "If you think it's that easy to get inside a dragon's head, then you're in for a huge disappointment!"

Smoke curled from his nostrils as fury burned in his eyes. He took a threatening step forward but ice immediately burst from the ground, jagged spikes erupting towards him.

One shot upward so quickly that the tip sliced across his throat, forcing the dragon prince to halt. The cut was shallow but the warning wasn't.

Cold mist drifted through the balcony as Maverick held the ice in place. His breathing had grown heavier from the failed intrusion, but his voice remained steady.

"You dragons might be powerful, but your numbers are limited. Humans outnumber every beast species combined. If enough of them decide your kind are a threat, how long do you think it will take before they try to wipe you out?"

He continued. "Human and beast integration isn't some idealistic dream. It's necessary for the survival of both sides."

Rhydian barked out a laugh.

"And you're basing that on the wolves?"

Maverick's jaw tightened.

Rhydian spread his arms.

"Look around you, wolf prince. It's more than wolves now. Beasts fight amongst themselves for territory, resources, and dominance. We always have. Because we have the power to. But look at the humans. They are weak. Fragile. Short-lived."

Each word landed like a hammer.

"They couldn't survive in our world if we stopped protecting them. So try all you want. Push your integration programs. The ending never changes anyway."

Maverick's throat worked, but he said nothing.

Rhydian stepped away from the ice, completely composed now.

"I take it this conversation is over."

He took several steps before pausing at the corner of the balcony. Then glanced over his shoulder.

"Oh, and good luck finding Caelis." The knowing wink that followed was all Maverick needed to see.

Rhydian knew exactly where the serpent prince was. The bastard simply wasn't talking.

"Shit," Maverick cursed.

The ice instantly melted into water, pooling across the balcony floor before evaporating into nothing.

Maverick immediately pulled out his phone and dialed his beta. The call barely rang once before the other end answered.

"Alpha."

"Put every wolf in House Therion on search duty." Maverick barked the order without preamble. "I want eyes on every corner of this academy. Find out where that snake

slithered off to. Those girls have been handed into my care, and I refuse to have their deaths on my hands before they've even survived their first day."

His beta on the other end immediately understood the severity of the situation.

"Yes, Alpha."

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 14: Welcome To Bestial City

"So, now that we all have each other's numbers, I created a group for the four of us to stay in touch and coordinate our plans," Brittney chirped happily as they continued their journey to Bestial City.

The initial excitement from earlier had long faded. Some of the girls lucky enough to have window seats still stared outside with curiosity, but eight hours was a very long time. Eventually, even the novelty of trying to spot the beastmen in the convoy lost its appeal.

Aria pulled out the phone they had been given and opened the messaging app. Her mouth immediately twitched.

#### **Girls Trying To Stay Alive (GTTSA).**

Aria wasn't entirely sure how to react to that name. One thing was certain though. She was never giving Brittney naming privileges again.

Not surprisingly, Trisha was the first to comment.

**Trisha:** What kind of weird-ass group name is that?

Since Brittney was seated beside her while Alek and Trisha occupied seats two rows away, Aria watched the girl furiously type out a response.

**Brittney:** It's called creativity. Something you don't seem to appreciate.

A moment later, another message popped in.

**Trisha:** If that's creativity, then humanity is doomed.

The snort that escaped Aria caught her completely off guard. She immediately composed herself. This was no time to encourage their antics. They were headed to Bestiaris Academy, for crying out loud.

Unsurprisingly, a minute later, Trisha changed the group name.

### **Operation Stay Alive (OSA).**

Almost immediately, a certain person fired back.

**Brittney:** And this is the best you could come up with? What are we? A military unit?

**Trisha:** Better than sounding like a support group for people with poor survival instincts.

Before the argument could continue, a new message appeared.

**Alek:** Essential things to grab before leaving the bus.

Just like that, the group chat quieted down.

**Alek:** Take as many bottles of water as you can carry. We don't know the quality of the water supply at Bestiaris Academy. For all we know, the local beasts might find it amusing to poison us.

A small smile tugged at Aria's lips.

Finally, there it was. Someone useful with enough common sense to think ahead. She knew she had made the right choice with Alek.

The message seemed to remind Brittney and Trisha why the group existed in the first place. So the argument died. Though not before Brittney quickly changed the group name again.

### **Friends On A Mission (FOAM).**

Brittney looked up from her phone and grinned. "See? At least this acronym is pronounceable."

The girl looked like she wanted to be applauded. Aria ignored her.

For all her jokes and reckless behavior, Brittney didn't seem remotely afraid of what waited ahead. Maybe it was because she didn't have someone depending on her the way she had Davina.

And she intended to make it home to her sister no matter what it took.

Another message appeared.

**Alek:** Stock up on food whenever possible. Food shortages and food poisoning are both miserable ways to die.

That was the point Aria froze.

Aside from the packaged snacks they had been given earlier, she had almost nothing. At best, her supply would last a day or two if she rationed carefully.

Her stomach sank.

She glanced toward the front of the bus where Abigail sat. Maybe by the end of the trip she could convince the woman to spare some leftovers if any remained.

A new message appeared before the thought could settle.

**Trisha:** Don't worry. I packed enough snacks to feed us for a week.

**Brittney:** Same. One of my bags is literally nothing but snacks. I refuse to spend weeks away from home without chocolate.

Relief immediately washed through Aria. At least starvation was no longer an immediate concern.

Still, the exchange left an unpleasant feeling in her chest. Everyone else seemed to be contributing something useful, while she was relying on their supplies.

**Brittney:** Though I'm going to miss actual cooked food. Why can't one of you volunteer as the food tester? Imagine dying for your friends. We'd build a statue in your honor and everything.

**Trisha:** Then volunteer yourself. I'll worship your statue and leave flowers until the day I die. That's the least I can do.

The sarcasm dripping from her words was impossible to miss.

Before their argument could spiral into another commotion, Aria typed four simple words.

**Aria:** I have the map.

Immediately, three typing indicators appeared. Aria didn't wait for any of them to finish and uploaded the file.

The moment she had switched on the phone earlier, the first message waiting for her had come from Eniola.

"An early gift to commemorate our business."

Attached beneath it were the files she had requested: the academy map and the records of previous Concordia participants.

The ease with which the information had found its way onto the device rubbed Aria the wrong way.

She made a mental note to acquire another phone as soon as possible. The thought of someone monitoring her messages made her skin crawl.

She needed privacy.

**Alek:** How did you get hold of the Bestiaris map?

Aria knew the question was coming and had already prepared her answer.

**Aria:** I have my sources.

"Ooh," Brittney said. "Mysterious." She winked before opening the file on her device.

Aria rolled her eyes at the girl's theatrics. Thankfully, none of them pressed for more details, respecting her privacy. While they had formed an alliance, Aria wasn't naive enough to believe they weren't keeping secrets of their own.

These were the children of aristocrats.

There was no way their parents had simply sent them off and hoped for the best.

If Maverick had been assigned to protect them, what was the likelihood their families hadn't arranged additional layers of protection as well?

That had to explain why the likes of Charlotte seemed completely unbothered by the danger ahead. Then again, Aria couldn't pretend to understand how aristocrats thought.

Just look at Brittney. The girl had been shipped off here with seemingly no concern for whether she lived or died.

Perhaps their parents had gambled with them too. They just didn't know it yet.

The map was enough to keep the girls occupied, and Aria used the opportunity to send a message to her sister.

'Hello Davi, it's me, Aria. I know you're mad at me for leaving, but unfortunately, this is the way it has to be. However, I'm coming back for you. I promise. Please reply once you get this.'

Aria sent the message and took a shaky breath. In. Out.

Then she turned toward the window, watching the scenery race by while her thoughts drifted far beyond the glass.

They only made two stops throughout the journey, both for bathroom breaks and a brief meal before continuing on the road.

Although one had to give Karen some credit. The blonde had outright refused to use the gas station toilets.

In her words:

"You have no idea what kind of infections are breeding in those poor-people bathrooms."

So she endured the entire journey instead, limiting how much water she drank whenever possible.

They moved on.

Aria had to thank Brittney for keeping her awake through most of it with her endless stream of conversation. Because the moment the girl finally ran out of things to say, exhaustion, stress, and lack of proper sleep came crashing down on her all at once.

A sudden blaring sound jolted Aria awake.

Looking around, she discovered she wasn't the only one. At some point, nearly every girl on the bus had fallen asleep. The long journey had finally caught up with them.

Abigail was standing in the aisle now, watching them with her usual austere expression.

She addressed them. "Buckle up. We're at the border."

"What?!"

The girls practically shrieked the word.

Aria immediately sat up straighter. If they were at the border, that meant they had reached Blackwater Province.

Blackwater Province had earned its name from the river that separated it from Bestial City. Even now, the water flowing beneath the bridge appeared almost black, swallowing the sunlight instead of reflecting it.

The dark river stretched endlessly in both directions, forming a natural barrier between human territory and the lands beyond.

Aria stared through the glass as the border came into view.

Blackwater Province's side of the bridge looked less like a border crossing and more like a military fortress. Concrete barriers lined the roads while armed soldiers patrolled every few meters with rifles strapped across their chests.

Watchtowers overlooked the crossing, and powerful searchlights swept across the black waters below even in broad daylight. Every inch of the area screamed vigilance.

For the first time since leaving Nova City, Aria truly understood how seriously the government viewed the beasts.

The convoy ahead slowed briefly. Soldiers approached the lead vehicles, checked identification, exchanged a few words, then waved them through. Apparently everything had already been arranged because their bus continued forward toward the opposite shore.

The atmosphere inside the vehicle was different now. The excitement that had filled the bus hours ago was gone. No one was talking about beast princes anymore.

Even Brittney had fallen silent, leaning across Aria to stare through the window.

Reality was finally setting in.

Then they saw it.

Unlike the human side, Bestial City had no walls, gates, and army waiting to inspect travelers. Instead, rising ahead of them was an enormous stone arch spanning the entire roadway.

The structure was colossal, towering high above the bridge like a monument built by giants. Age had weathered parts of the stone, yet it remained imposing enough to dominate the entire landscape.

A collective gasp swept through the bus because carved into the top of the arch was a hydra with seven heads.

Each head faced a different direction with its jaws parted and fangs exposed. Their eyes had been carved so deeply into the stone that they seemed almost alive, watching every traveler who crossed beneath them.

Beneath the monument, words had been etched into the stone in massive letters.

**ENTER WITH HONOR OR LEAVE AS PREY.**

Aria swallowed.

"Welcome to Bestial City."

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 15: Arrival At The Academy

Twenty years ago, Bestial City had been known as Bristol Province, one of the largest human metropolitan centers in Novara.

Then came the territorial conflicts. The beasts claimed the region, renamed it, and transformed it into the capital of their society.

"It's the statue of King Darius, the King of the Beasts!" Charlotte exclaimed as they passed beneath the arch and ventured deeper into beast territory.

Just as humans had their leader, President Callum, the beasts had King Darius. Unlike humans, however, beast society was built upon hierarchy. The strongest ruled. Somehow, despite the dragons' overwhelming power, it was the hydra that had emerged as their king.

"Damn, seven heads," Brittney breathed. Then she looked around at the girls with a knowing expression. "Any of you into that?"

If looks could kill, Brittney would have died several times over. Unfortunately, the girl didn't seem to know when to stop.

"Why the faces?" she asked. "Isn't that... wait a minute. Not racism. What's the word for it?"

"Speciesism," Alek supplied casually from behind.

"Bingo!" Brittney turned around and pointed at her. "That's the one."

"That is enough," Aria told her under her breath. "We're in beast territory now, concentrate."

She made a point of glancing in Karen's direction. The blonde's brows were furrowed together. Apparently, even Karen was finally realizing that things were getting real.

"Why is there no security?" Chelsea suddenly asked, referring to the complete lack of visible guards on the beast side of the border. Blackwater had been crawling with soldiers, watchtowers, and weapons. Here, there was nothing.

"Because they don't need any."

The answer came from Abigail. Immediately, every head turned toward her.

"The beasts don't fear invasion from humans," she explained. "If anything, some of them would welcome it. Moreover," Abigail added, "who says there are no guards?"

She glanced out the nearest window. "Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they're not there."

A shudder crawled down Aria's spine. She looked outside.

Dense forests stretched along both sides of the road. Thick trees, tangled undergrowth, and shadows filled the landscape. With the speed the bus was moving, it was impossible to focus on any one spot for long.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something might be watching them from within the woods.

"Beast shifters excel at stealth," Abigail informed them. "There's a saying around here. Entering Bestial City is easy. Leaving is impossible."

The temperature inside the bus seemed to drop several degrees as a heavy sense of foreboding settled over the girls.

Then Abigail's grave expression suddenly cracked.

"I'm joking."

"What?!"

A collective groan swept through the bus. Several girls looked ready to throw something at her. She had scared the absolute life out of them.

Still, Aria couldn't shake the feeling that there had been at least a grain of truth hidden beneath the joke. The woman seemed less interested in reassuring them and more interested in easing the tension before panic could take root.

Abigail raised her voice. "Bestiaris Academy is located on the outskirts of the city. That means we still have another hour of travel ahead of us."

"Nooo!"

A wave of groans swept through the bus. Their butts were sore already from hours of sitting down. So much for the government caring about them when they could have easily shoved them onto a plane instead.

Fortunately, the collective misery didn't last long. The forests gradually gave way to civilization, and their jaws nearly hit the floor.

Aria had no idea what she had been expecting from Bestial City. But it certainly wasn't this.

Growing up, she had heard the stories on how the beasts invaded Bristol Province, conquered it, and claimed it as their own.

Yet nothing she was seeing suggested a ruined city. If anything, it looked as though the beasts had taken what once existed and improved upon it.

"Impossible," Brittney breathed, her eyes wide.

Outside the windows stretched a city unlike anything Aria had ever seen.

Towering structures rose into the sky, some built from glass and steel, while others were carved directly from stone. Massive spires dominated parts of the skyline while bridges connected buildings high above the streets below. Wide roads cut through the city, flawlessly maintained and crowded with vehicles.

The city was bustling. People, or rather beast shifters filled the sidewalks in their hundreds. Some of them appeared almost human until a second glance revealed slit pupils, horns, scales, tails, or patches of fur. The rest made no effort to hide what they were.

Aria spotted a man with antlers walking out of a café, a woman with golden scales running along her neck, and what looked suspiciously like a seven-foot lizard carrying groceries beneath one arm.

Aria let out a disbelieving scoff. All this time, humans had imagined the beasts living in caves somewhere beyond civilization. The reality couldn't have been further from the truth.

The beasts hadn't merely inherited Bristol Province, they had made it theirs.

Everything felt familiar enough to recognize yet foreign enough to remind her she wasn't home anymore. No wonder they didn't want humans here.

"This is unbelievable," Charlotte whispered.

The girl practically bounced from window to window, desperate to absorb everything at once. There were beastmen everywhere.

At one point, she caught sight of two beastmen breaking into a fight on a crowded street corner. Their fists moved so quickly her eyes struggled to follow. The fight lasted less than ten seconds before they separated and continued walking as though nothing had happened.

It truly was another world.

Unfortunately, the feeling was mutual. As much as the girls stared at the city, the city stared back. Heads turned as they passed and conversations paused as pedestrians stopped to watch.

It was unsettling how quickly the beasts seemed to identify them as outsiders. Not merely because of the convoy, but because they somehow knew. The predatory intensity in some of those gazes made Aria very grateful for the reinforced glass separating them.

Judging by the silence inside the bus, the other girls felt the same way. Just like that, nobody seemed interested in beast men anymore.

The journey continued.

Eventually, the scenery outside began to change again. At first, the shift was subtle enough that Aria almost missed it.

The roads widened as four lanes became six. The median separating traffic grew broader, filled with carefully maintained hedges, flowering trees, and decorative stonework.

Massive pillars appeared every few hundred yards along the roadside, each bearing the same crest she had seen countless times on television broadcasts.

Bestiaris Academy.

"We're here," Aria whispered.

"Huh?" Brittney leaned toward the window. "We're here? But there's nothing."

The academy itself was still nowhere in sight. Yet somehow Aria could already feel its presence. Perhaps it was simply the growing knot in her stomach.

Then Abigail spoke. "Buckle up, girls. We're here."

A gasp came from somewhere near the front of the bus. Then another.

Aria followed their gaze and for a moment, she thought she was looking at part of the city's skyline. Until she realized it was a single building.

Her breath caught because Bestiaris Academy dominated the horizon.

The Central Hall stretched across so much land that Aria couldn't immediately judge where it began and ended. Dark stone walls gleamed beneath the afternoon sun while massive windows reflected the sky above.

Steel supports framed sections of the structure, blending modern engineering with the sort of grand, oversized craftsmanship that only made sense once you remembered some of its students could turn into dragons.

Their bus rounded a curve and the entrance finally came into view.

Their surfaces were carved with intricate reliefs depicting beasts of every kind. Dragons seemed to emerge from both pillars with their wings spread wide. Suspended between them hung a massive metal crest.

## **BESTIARIS ACADEMY**

Beyond the pillars stood a wrought-iron gate nearly thirty feet tall. A security checkpoint occupied the area just beyond the entrance. Apparently, the officers had already been informed of their arrival because they simply waved them through.

Aria's heart lurched because crossing this gate felt final. There was no turning back now.

The bus continued down a broad avenue lined with trees, fountains, and carefully maintained gardens before entering the central grounds.

If one had to describe Bestiaris Academy, it looked like someone had combined an airport, a university campus, a government capitol, and a dragon palace into one impossible structure.

The main courtyard alone was larger than Aria's entire high school. Water flowed through narrow stone channels built directly into the pathways while benches curved around fountains carved into the shapes of winged beasts she couldn't identify.

At the center of the courtyard stood a massive dragon statue with its wings spread wide and its head lowered as if preparing to unleash fire.

Curiously, there wasn't a single student in sight. It almost felt as though the academy had hidden them away before the girls arrived.

Up close, Aria noticed that the Central Hall dominated everything around it because the rest of the academy had been built around the structure. Even the open terraces extending from the upper floors suddenly made sense.

They weren't observation decks but landing platforms for dragons. It dawned on Aria then that everything about this place had been designed with the dragon shifters in mind.

Finally, the bus slowed to a halt and the engine shut off. No one moved. It was as if the girls were still trying to adjust to the reality that this place would be their home from now on.

Then Abigail broke the silence.

"As you step out of this bus, I want you to stay together. I don't think I need to explain why."

For once, nobody had a clever response. Not even Brittney.

"Let's go."

Abigail stepped off first, and just like that, the spell broke. The girls immediately began filing out after her, excitement returning almost as quickly as it had disappeared.

Aria could understand why. The beastmen from the convoy had stepped out of their vehicles.

But that wasn't all.

The academy had clearly prepared for their arrival because a line of personnel stood waiting nearby. Security, Aria assumed. Yet that didn't explain the sudden commotion spreading through the girls.

Curious, Aria pushed her way toward the front until she finally saw the source of the disturbance.

Or rather, him.

The dark purple hair was the first thing that caught her attention.

Though he walked alongside two other broad-shouldered men, they may as well not have existed.

The pictures hadn't done Maverick Nightshade justice. Not even close.

Sharp cheekbones and a strong jaw gave his face an almost unfair symmetry. He looked less like a professor and more like someone who belonged on the cover of a magazine.

The girls lost whatever composure they had left. Their whispers swelled into a deafening wall of noise.

"Oh my God! That's Maverick Nightshade!" Chelsea shrieked.

"Someone hold me. I think I'm going to faint."

In the past, Aria would have rolled her eyes at such theatrics. Except she found herself staring too. For reasons she couldn't explain, she just couldn't seem to look away.

Then Maverick's gray, slit-pupiled gaze landed directly on her. And for the first time in her life, Aria Aspen forgot how to breathe.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 16: While The Beast Play

Most people said he was perfect to a fault, but Maverick Nightshade hardly found that surprising when he had a perfectionist for a father. Scratch that. One of his fathers.

Unfortunately, he had inherited a variant version of the man's powers as well, powers that demanded absolute control.

He simply couldn't help it. No one did things better than he did. That was confirmed when he asked his cousin and beta for what felt like the hundredth time.

"You still haven't gotten Caelis' location?"

Dimitri let out an exasperated sigh.

"That would be a no. Again." He shook his head. "You need to relax, Maverick."

"I need to be thorough. Nothing can go wrong." Maverick said, impatiently tapping his foot against the ground.

"I have all the wolves in House Therion on the lookout for the basilisk. I even asked the other beasts to keep an eye on the dragon asshole should he make a move. For all we know, Caelis has slithered off to one of his nests and is shedding skin somewhere while you're standing here worrying over nothing." Dimitri tried to assure him.

That could very well be the case. But if there was one thing Maverick had learned from his father, it was to trust his instincts.

"It's too quiet," he muttered. "Something doesn't add up."

"That is why we have backup." Dimitri gestured toward the security personnel stationed nearby. "Even as powerful as Caelis is, he can't take on all of us."

Perhaps Dimitri was right and he needed to take a chill pill.

Maverick glanced at the sky before checking his watch. "What's taking them so long? They should have arrived by now."

It was safer for them during the day than at night. He needed them settled down, then he could assign beasts to patrol the residences and keep the girls away from the creatures that would gladly make a meal out of them.

No sooner had he finished speaking than his sharp hearing picked up the sound of approaching engines.

"They're here," he said more to himself than anyone else.

He stood on the steps leading to the Central Hall and as soon as he witnessed the buses rounding into the grounds, he stepped down with Dimitri right behind him.

The girls were already climbing out by the time he approached them, and he saw the exact moment they recognized him.

Screams and shrieks assaulted his sensitive hearing, making him wince internally. One would think he would have gotten used to the attention his presence garnered, but that wasn't the case.

Maverick Nightshade stood awkwardly with his hands behind his back, waiting for the commotion to die down.

He was dressed in a tailored black coat worn over a charcoal shirt. Dark trousers and polished boots completed the look while black gloves covered his hands completely. At least with the gloves on, he wouldn't have to worry about an overeager student touching him without permission and nearly freaking out.

As usual, his brain went to work instantly, analyzing and filing away every detail he could gather about the girls. Then his gaze collided with hers and his world tilted.

As the eldest son of the most powerful hybrid in the United Dorminia, Maverick had fame attached to his name long before he learned to walk. That meant women were naturally drawn to him and threw themselves at him whenever given the chance.

He had seen them all. Human females. Beast females. Some of the most beautiful women in the country. None of them had ever intrigued him, especially not after the accident.

Until now.

Until her.

He remembered the girl. She was the one who had caused a scene during the selection and sent shockwaves across the Novara region. Physically, there was nothing extraordinary about her. Sure, she was pretty. Her brown hair fell around her shoulders in loose waves, slightly disheveled from the journey, while bright blue eyes stared back at him.

But he had seen better.

Weirdly enough, there was surprise in those eyes. Unlike the excitement and desire he usually inspired, she almost looked puzzled.

Why?

Was there something about him she didn't like?

Whoa.

Maverick was caught off guard by the thought.

He was used to reading people quickly without even relying on his powers, but for once, he found himself stumbling.

So Maverick reached out with his gift, oddly curious to know what she was thinking. The thoughts of the other girls were far too loud in his head as they gushed over him. One of them was already planning their future together and deciding how many children they would have.

Disgust stirred inside him and Maverick immediately cleared the noise away, pushing the thoughts into the deepest part of his mind as his father had taught him.

Then he focused on one person. Except when he brushed against her mind, there was nothing. Just silence.

Huh? Maverick frowned.

At first he thought he wasn't trying hard enough and tried again. Yet no matter how much he pushed or attempted to slip into her thoughts, he couldn't.

Except there was no mental barrier. He could tell that much.

Mental barriers always felt like something. Depending on the individual, they could resemble concrete walls, or steel doors. For her, there was simply nothing.

Maverick's eyes widened. No way.

She couldn't be immune to his mind-reading ability. This was a first.

If Maverick's initial interest had been ten percent, it was safe to say it had just jumped beyond a thousand.

He didn't even realize he had been staring until Dimitri awkwardly cleared his throat beside him.

Maverick snapped out of it immediately. He straightened, his back ramrod straight, control returning to him.

His voice boomed across the courtyard.

"My name is Maverick Nightshade, and welcome to Bestiaris Academy."

The applause and cheers that followed cut off whatever he had intended to say next, forcing him to wait until the celebration died down.

He continued.

"While I would have given you a tour of the school, I'm afraid there isn't enough time. The sun is going down, and trust me, you do not want to be outside while the beasts are playing."

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 17: Something Was Coming

"Is it just me or is Maverick staring at her?"

Karen's words were enough to snap Aria out of whatever madness had overtaken her moments ago.

Unfortunately, breaking eye contact didn't seem to stop him.

Maverick continued staring at her in a way that made her deeply uncomfortable. It was as if he could see something nobody else could. As if, given enough time, he would peel back every layer of her and figure out exactly what made her tick.

"She must have flirted with him first. There is no way he'd be interested in her," Chelsea's voice came next. "I knew the bitch was up to no good from the start."

Aria sighed. What had she done to them this time?

In the end, it was women who tore other women apart.

Thankfully, Maverick seemed to recover from whatever had possessed him. He finally looked away, and Aria discovered she could breathe again.

Although strangely enough, she also felt a tiny sense of disappointment now that he wasn't looking.

Yep. Something was definitely wrong with her. Or perhaps there was something strange in the air. It was Bestaris after all.

"Hello," he introduced himself. "My name is Maverick Nightshade, and welcome to Bestiaris Academy."

The girls immediately lost their minds.

Cheers and screams erupted around her for reasons that had very little to do with his actual speech.

Sure, Maverick Nightshade was attractive.

But that shouldn't justify this level of insanity.

He continued.

"While I would have given you a tour of the school, I'm afraid there isn't enough time. The sun is going down, and trust me, you do not want to be outside while the beasts are playing."

Aria would have paid more attention except a conversation had started behind her.

"Why is he wearing gloves?" one of the girls whispered.

"I'm not sure if it's true," another girl replied, lowering her voice even further, "but I heard he was involved in some incident when he was younger. Ever since then, he doesn't like women touching him."

"Seriously?"

"That's what I heard. Apparently, he wears gloves all the time because of it."

Aria's ears perked up and her brows furrowed. He was abducted?

Aria didn't know why, but suddenly she was curious about Maverick.

Shit.

He wasn't her business. What was going on with her?

If Maverick heard the conversation, he didn't show it. Currently, he was making small talk with Abigail, who had introduced herself to him. Even with his gloves on, he didn't bother extending a handshake.

"Alright, girls, time to settle," Abigail announced. "Remember to stay in groups and don't wander off. Your luggage will be handled and brought over by the staff, so you don't need to worry about that. Let's go!"

Maverick Nightshade took the lead, supposedly guiding them to their residence. The security personnel immediately spread out around the group, effectively surrounding them and making it impossible for anyone to wander off unnoticed.

Since Aria had pushed toward the front earlier, it meant she ended up directly behind him. Just like the girls around her, she followed after Maverick carefully, taking in everything she could.

They walked along a cobbled pathway that branched outward in several directions. Courtyards, gardens, and entire districts of buildings stretched across the landscape.

Although Maverick claimed he wasn't giving them a tour, he apparently had no problem giving them a history lesson instead.

"You should know that Bestiaris was built on dragon territory after the dragons laid claim to the land."

Except it all made perfect sense to Aria now. For a school built for beasts, it almost felt as though the architects had designed everything with dragons in mind and only remembered everyone else afterward.

"There are currently three houses in power here," Maverick continued. "The first is House Aetheris, ruled by the Drakhar heir. House Ophidian is—"

"You must feel on top of the world, don't you?"

Aria didn't need to turn around. She recognized Chelsea's voice immediately.

"What do you want?" Aria asked irritably. "You're distracting me."

"Really, Trip?"

Aria's eyes flashed. But she quickly got herself under control. Chelsea was trying to provoke her. She won't succeed.

"Grow up."

Aria moved forward, closing the small gap that had formed when she slowed down.

Unfortunately, those words only seemed to anger Chelsea further. Who does that poor rat think she is?

It happened that Maverick stopped walking at that exact moment to answer a question from one of the girls.

"Then what about the humans?" the girl asked. "What's our house?"

Maverick looked directly at her.

"You don't have one."

The answer landed like a brick.

"You are simply... human." He added bluntly, "No one expects you to survive long enough to form a house."

An awkward silence followed.

For the first time, the girls were forced to confront exactly how insignificant their existence appeared to be in beast society.

Aria should have been paying more attention. Because with a devilish smile, Chelsea suddenly kicked out her foot and caught her behind the knee just as she took a step.

Everything happened at once.

Aria lurched forward and nobody saw it coming. Not even her.

She stumbled directly into Maverick and instinctively grabbed the nearest thing she could reach to stop herself from face-planting into the ground.

Unfortunately, that happened to be his pants. A horrified sound nearly escaped her throat. If not for the belt keeping everything in place, she probably would have dragged them halfway down his legs.

Instead, she ended up sprawled at Maverick's feet.

The laughter came immediately.

"Would you look at that?" Chelsea mocked. "She really does deserve the nickname Trip."

Another round of laughter erupted from several girls.

Aria wanted the ground to swallow her whole. Maverick probably would have stepped back immediately. Instead, he froze.

The moment she touched him, his entire body tensed.

For years, physical contact had always produced the same result. Disgust, overload and the urge to pull away. But this time, none of that happened. Instead, warmth spread through him.

Maverick stared down at her, confused. What manner of witchcraft was this?

Beside him, Dimitri's eyes widened. He knew exactly how Maverick reacted to physical contact from a woman. He waited patiently for him to freak out. It didn't happen.

Huh? His eyes narrowed. This wasn't normal at all.

Before either of them could process what had just happened, the ground suddenly trembled beneath their feet. The laughter died instantly as confusion spread through the courtyard.

What was that?

Maverick's head snapped toward the distant tree line. His enhanced hearing caught the pounding first. The thunder of hooves.

His expression changed immediately.

"Something's coming," he said quietly at first, only for his eyes to widen when he figured it out.

"MOVE!" The shout cracked across the courtyard.

Right at that moment, a herd of furious-looking bulls burst from the trees.

Pandemonium broke out.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 18: The First Deaths

**Warning:** The Concordia Program officially begins. This Chapter contains graphic violence, blood, injuries, death, and scenes of distress.

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**Panic was the brain's way of informing the body that something had gone terribly wrong, and that survival had become the only priority.**

**The problem was that when twenty people panicked at the same time, survival became a competition.**

**And competitions always produced losers.**

"MOVE!" Maverick Nightshade had boomed, not, "Run!"

Perhaps in the future, the wolf prince should be more specific about which direction people were supposed to move.

Aria barely had time to think before she felt her arm nearly dislocate from her shoulder. Maverick had grabbed her and hauled her to her feet with enough force to make her stumble before pulling her behind him protectively.

"Stay behind me and don't leave my side!" he barked, his eyes wide with urgency.

Aria looked around. There was nothing but screams and chaos everywhere as the herd slammed into the courtyard like a living avalanche.

"Stop running! Stay behind the shifters!" Maverick roared, sounding more like a battlefield commander than a professor.

Aria didn't even realize he was still holding onto her until she found herself being dragged from place to place as he shouted orders to the others.

Unfortunately, Maverick might as well have been singing a lullaby. Most of the girls weren't listening. Panic had taken hold of their reasoning, and they were making the very mistakes that got people killed.

It wasn't until the first bull crashed into one of the shifters that Aria finally understood the strategy.

The beastman planted his feet and met the charge head-on. Muscles bulged beneath his clothes as he fought to hold the creature back, his boots carving trenches into the ground while the bull tried to force its way past him.

If only the humans stayed in the center, the shifters could protect them. Unfortunately, try explaining that to a crowd that had already lost its mind.

Several girls had broken formation entirely. Others were running in random directions. Charlotte was among the worst of them, screaming at the top of her lungs while sprinting across the courtyard, her red gown billowing behind her like a giant warning flag.

The bull noticed her immediately.

"Go away! Leave me alone!" Charlotte shrieked as the creature thundered after her.

The distance between them vanished frighteningly fast.

"Somebody save me!" she cried right before her heel caught the hem of her dress.

Aria winced.

Oh great. The girl was dead.

Or so she thought.

The next second, Maverick exploded into motion.

One moment he was beside her and the next he was a blur. Aria nearly lost her footing as he dragged her along behind him.

"Dude! Let go!" she shouted.

There was no way she could keep up with that speed. Maverick either didn't hear her or didn't care.

Charlotte was on the ground now, desperately crawling away while the bull closed the remaining distance. With a terrified scream, she squeezed her eyes shut and threw her arms over her head, waiting for the impact.

Except death never came.

She slowly opened her eyes only to see the bull mere seconds away from her. Except it was frozen solid.

Beside her stood the most beautiful beast she had ever laid eyes on.

"Daddy!" Charlotte cried.

Then before Aria and Maverick could process how much the girl had completely lost her mind, Charlotte launched herself at the wolf prince and clung to him like her life depended on it.

Maverick froze instantly.

Charlotte didn't even seem aware of the effect she was having on him. Right now, the only thing that mattered was holding onto her savior.

Aria was the only one who noticed because it was wildly inappropriate.

"Let go of him right now!" she ordered.

Instead, Charlotte tightened her grip. She didn't seem to notice the way the blood had drained from Maverick's face or how every muscle in his body had gone rigid with tension.

Unknown to them all, a certain red-haired dragon stood on a balcony overlooking the courtyard, watching the entire scene unfold. To him, it was pure entertainment.

"That bastard Caelis really does know how to put on a good show," Rhydian chuckled, his eyes dancing with amusement.

Tamara stood beside him, observing the chaos with the same morbid fascination.

Neither of them cared much about the fate of the humans. They could die for all they cared.

Well, Rhydian was mildly interested in one human.

Aria.

And so far, she was falling short of his expectations. How long was she going to hide behind Maverick like a frightened rabbit?

Although, the fact Maverick was holding onto her was interesting. The bastard barely tolerated handshakes. He certainly didn't let people touch him. Yet he had dragged Aria around the courtyard himself.

Interesting.

What was so special about the girl? Rhydian wanted to know. That is, assuming she survived the herd.

Back in the courtyard, it didn't take long for another bull to mark them as a target.

The creature pawed at the ground repeatedly, lowering its head as it prepared to charge.

"Oh no..." Aria felt the breath leave her lungs.

The bull exploded forward.

"Incoming!" Aria screamed in warning.

At the very last second, Maverick snapped out of whatever frozen state he had been trapped in. He tore Charlotte off him and shoved both girls aside. Then he turned and met the charge head-on.

The impact was brutal. A horn ripped across his side and sent him skidding several feet across the courtyard.

"Maverick!" Aria screamed.

Blood immediately stained his shirt.

But she barely had time to react because another bull thundered past so close she felt the rush of air against her body. Aria threw herself aside before its hooves could crush her.

"And now the little mouse is trapped between monsters," Rhydian murmured.

Below, Aria had been completely separated from the wolf prince and dragged into the heart of the commotion.

This had to be a nightmare.

Aria desperately tried to locate Maverick, but everywhere she looked there was screaming, running, and blood.

So much blood.

Not all of it belonged to the humans and beasts. Some of it belonged to the bulls as well. With the situation completely out of control, some of the beastmen had resorted to killing the animals.

She watched as one of them ripped a horn straight from a bull's head. The creature bellowed in pain and outrage. Then the beastman drove the jagged horn upward beneath its jaw. The broken point burst through the top of its skull before he punched his hand straight through its chest. The bull collapsed instantly.

The sight was horrifying.

However, if there was one image that would remain with Aria forever, it was the sight of a bull lifting one of the girls into the air with its horns.

The girl screamed.

Then the animal tossed her aside like discarded trash. Her body struck the ground and rolled several times before coming to a stop.

Aria's heart twisted. She knew without a doubt that the girl was dead.

It shattered something inside her.

Even though Aria knew this was a possibility, she hadn't been prepared for the reality of it.

All of this for what?

To integrate with the beasts?

Was it worth their lives?

How dare they use them like this?

While she was having her internal crisis, Aria spotted Brittney.

The girl was hiding behind one of the beastmen, using him as a shield without realizing another bull was charging toward her from behind.

"Brittney!" Aria screamed her name, but the girl didn't react.

Her voice was drowned out by the chaos so Brittney couldn't hear her, and she was seconds away from being killed.

Aria couldn't let that happen.

She could make it. That was the lie she told herself.

Aria ran like she had never run in her entire life, her heart pounding violently against her ribs.

"What the hell is she doing? Has she lost her mind?" Rhydian's brow furrowed into a deep frown. Even he knew that was a suicidal move.

Tamara frowned as well, but not because of Aria's actions.

Rather, because of the sudden interest the dragon prince seemed to have developed in the girl. She had been watching him this entire time, and out of all the humans below, Aria was the only one who had managed to hold his attention.

That was concerning.

Good thing the girl was about to get herself killed. Tamara smirked.

Rhydian wasn't the only one who had noticed. Maverick had as well, and he was already moving, trying to catch up with her.

But Aria got there first. Her wide eyes locked onto Brittney, who had finally noticed her.

Without hesitation, Aria shoved the clueless girl out of the way. Then she turned to face the bull.

The creature was only moments away from impaling her. There was no time to run or think. Aria didn't know what came over her.

"STOP!"

The command ripped from her throat and the bull skidded to a halt.

It was not a gradual stop, nor hesitation. It simply stopped.

Its massive horns hung inches away from Aria's body while dirt and stone sprayed across the courtyard from the force of its halted charge.

Silence seemed to descend for a fraction of a second. Aria stared at it. The bull stared back.

Her heart hammered so hard she thought it might burst from her chest.

"What the hell?" Rhydian lost his composure.

Except the dragon prince wasn't the only one watching.

Maverick Nightshade saw it too.

And somewhere else within the academy grounds, a certain basilisk saw it all play out.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 19: A Greedy Dragon

**"Sometimes the truth wasn't hidden. It was simply standing next to a lie that made more sense."**

**— Rebel Beast**

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Wait a minute.

Did she do that?

For one impossible second, Aria genuinely thought she had commanded the furious-looking beast to a halt. Had she somehow graduated from being harassed by birds and squirrels to giving land mammals instructions now?

But that thought only lasted until the bull snorted, a cloud of hot breath exploding from its nostrils.

Oh shit.

Aria saw the exact moment the animal made up its mind to end her.

She saw it in its eyes.

The creature moved and Aria's eyes widened. Call it survival instinct, but she reared back only to stumble into someone. She quickly turned around and Aria had never been so relieved to see another person in her entire life.

It was him. Maverick Nightshade.

Their eyes connected. His impossibly striking slitted eyes held her bright blue ones hostage. Then the world went quiet and it might as well have been only the two of them standing there at that moment.

Ba-dum.

Ba-dum.

Her heart pounded violently inside her chest.

She had to be dreaming. Except she wasn't. Maverick Nightshade was someone she had only ever seen on television screens and posters, not standing right in front of her with barely any space between them.

Aria could suddenly understand the appeal, why girls lost their minds over him. Because up close, she wasn't entirely sure she could survive him either. She was about to melt into an emotionally compromised puddle.

How could someone look so perfect? And that hair? She was almost tempted to reach out and run her fingers through it. Purple hair was rare enough, but naturally purple hair? That was practically unheard of. Would it feel any different from everyone else's?

Not that she had much experience touching men's hair. When you were the local freak, boys generally avoided you like the plague.

Aria had told herself she hadn't come to this place to fall in love, yet here she was dangling precariously at the edge.

But those stupid thoughts vanished the instant Aria remembered one thing: Maverick Nightshade was supposed to be a professor in this academy. In one word, her soon-to-be teacher.

Fuck!

The realization hit her like a bucket of cold water and she stumbled backward, only for Maverick to catch her.

"Watch out!" Maverick grabbed her by the waist and Aria immediately stiffened. Wasn't the guy supposed to hate physical contact or something? Sure, he wore gloves, but he was being weirdly touchy with her.

Maverick seemed to have come to the same conclusion because he released her just as quickly. Truth be told though, he didn't feel uncomfortable around the girl. Which was something he would investigate once this madness was over.

Aria carefully looked around this time and the next sight stole the breath from her lungs.

The bull was frozen solid. Frost coated every inch of its body while ice crawled across its hide like crystal veins.

Except its final position remained poised as if it still intended to strike her with its horn. Hence the ice encasing the horn had formed a long jagged icicle that Aria would have walked straight into had Maverick not grabbed her.

She nearly killed herself. Aria gulped.

Slowly, she turned to Maverick.

"You saved my life. Thank you," Aria breathed.

He barely reacted. His jaw was locked so tightly she thought his teeth might crack. For a moment, Aria wondered if she had somehow offended him.

But Maverick's icy gaze remained fixed on the bull. Then he slowly clenched his fist and the frozen animal exploded. Ice and flesh shattered apart in a violent spray.

"Ahh!" Aria screamed and threw her hands over her face. She expected chunks of frozen bull to rain down on her. They never did.

Instead, when Aria lowered her arms, she discovered a wall of ice standing between her and the debris, shielding her. By the time she blinked, it was gone.

She stared at Maverick Nightshade with wide eyes, feeling relieved and annoyed at the same time. He didn't have to explode the bull. That was just mean.

"You're welcome," Maverick replied arrogantly before walking away.

"Show-off!" Aria muttered as she watched him leave.

Nice ass though.

Her traitorous mind supplied and Aria groaned internally. What the hell was wrong with her?

Thankfully, the herd attack was over.

Unfortunately, the aftermath was just beginning.

Meanwhile, on the balcony.....

Rhydian wore a deep frown as he tried to process what he had just witnessed.

"Did you just see that?" Rhydian asked breathlessly.

"See what?" Tamara asked, nowhere near as stunned as he was.

Rhydian looked at her. "Is it just me or did Aria just command that bull?"

"Aria?" Tamara frowned. He was already calling the girl by her first name before they had even met. That alone was alarming.

"Did you see her stop the bull or not?" Rhydian demanded, impatience creeping into his voice.

"It wasn't her," Tamara said.

"What?"

"It was obviously Maverick's doing. He was standing right there. How would you expect a mere human to stop a charging bull with a single word? How is that even possible?"

Rhydian's face became a storm of conflicting emotions as he considered her words.

"You're right," he murmured. "How could a human possibly do that?"

The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous it sounded.

He looked back toward the courtyard.

"Besides, it happened in a split second. I must have seen it wrong." That had to be the answer. Because nothing else made sense.

Rhydian didn't notice Tamara watching him until he turned and their eyes connected.

"What?" he asked, sensing she had something to say.

"Rhydian," Tamara turned to him, reaching out to straighten the tie that had become crooked during the commotion. "I understand the appeal of a new toy. We dragons are greedy after all."

Tamara wasn't kidding. Dragons were notorious hoarders of wealth, treasures, and anything they deemed valuable. Which was why the dragon shifters at Bestiaris maintained secret lairs overflowing with riches collected over decades.

She continued, "But it's better we stick to our kind this time."

The meaning was clear to Rhydian. She had noticed his interest in Aria.

But Rhydian caught the hand fixing his tie and stopped it. For a moment, they stared at each other, Tamara waiting anxiously for his response.

"Don't overstep your boundaries," he told her, then walked away from the balcony.

Rhydian tugged at his tie, loosened it, and tossed it aside. For someone known for impeccable neatness and impossible standards, the act was strangely careless.

Rhydian was annoyed, and he didn't even know why.

His dragon was simply restless. Perhaps it was because Aria didn't die. Or whatever he thought he had seen. Or— The interest he had caught in Maverick's eyes.

That thought irritated him the most.

Aria Aspen was interesting.

And dragons had never been particularly good at sharing things they found interesting.

Rhydian didn't stop walking, if anything his pace quickened.

Students instinctively stepped aside as the dragon prince moved through the academy halls. Some lowered their heads while others hurried out of his path entirely. None of them were foolish enough to block him when he wore that expression.

Something was irritating him, and everyone could sense it.

His long strides carried him toward the upper levels of the academy. The higher he climbed, the stronger the restless feeling beneath his skin became.

His dragon wanted out. Now.

By the time he stepped onto the rooftop landing platform, his patience had completely evaporated.

The platform stretched across a vast section of the academy roof, built specifically for dragon shifters. Reinforced stone covered the ground, designed to withstand their weight.

Rhydian stepped into the center and stopped. His jaw clenched and fists tightened.

"Fuck."

The transformation hit him instantly. His bones cracked and shifted beneath his skin. Muscles expanded while crimson scales spread across his body. His frame grew larger and larger until the Rhydian's human form disappeared entirely.

In his place stood a massive crimson dragon.

The beast's scales gleamed beneath the afternoon sun like polished rubies. Golden horns curved backward from its head while enormous wings folded tightly against its sides. Every inch of the creature radiated power.

The dragon lifted its head and released a roar that echoed across Bestiaris Academy.

Windows rattled while birds fled from nearby trees. Every beast within hearing distance understood the message immediately. The dragon prince was in a terrible mood.

Rhydian spread his wings, the movement alone generating a powerful gust that sent loose leaves and papers spiraling across the rooftop. Then he jumped.

A single powerful flap launched him into the air. Within seconds he climbed above the towers, above the walls, and above Bestiaris itself.

Below, he could see the human students and the aftermath of the herd attack. Dragons had always remained an awe-inspiring sight and not even the disaster was able to stop people from pointing and gawking at him.

Annoyingly, his gaze drifted toward the humans below, searching for a girl he had no business thinking about.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 20: I Want To Go Home

**It was easy to hate an enemy, but much harder when you were forced to watch them bleed.**

**~ Rebel Beast**

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Everything should have settled down after the herd attack was over, but it was only the beginning. Everywhere Aria looked, there was nothing but screams, pain, and sorrow.

Then someone screamed her name.

"Aria!"

Aria knew that voice. The moment she turned, she saw Brittney rushing toward her. Before she could brace herself for the impact, Brittney had already tackled her into a hug, knocking the breath from her lungs.

"You idiot!" Brittney wept in joy. "Why did you put yourself in danger like that for me?"

Except Aria hadn't figured that out yet. Mostly because she hadn't been thinking at the time. She was usually a sensible person.

"Don't worry, it won't happen a second time," Aria meant it.

Surviving Bestiaris was the goal. She couldn't afford to let emotions get in the way. So from now on, there would be no more reckless charges toward angry bulls for Brittney. While they worked together as a team, survival was ultimately an individual responsibility.

Brittney rolled her eyes. "You're so cold-blooded."

Except Aria thought that if being cold-blooded kept her alive, then so be it.

However, Brittney was Brittney because the next second she was already back to her cheerful self. The girl got to her feet and pulled Aria up with her.

Aria was dusting off her black pants when she heard Charlotte's hysterical voice.

"I don't think she's breathing!"

Aria recognized the body immediately.

It was the girl she had seen tossed through the air by the bull.

Maverick Nightshade and another man rushed over and examined her. Then the two of them exchanged a look.

Aria knew that look. The girl was gone.

"Damn," Brittney breathed. "That's so sad."

A sharp pain crossed Aria's chest. Tonight, some family would receive the news that their daughter was dead. Just like that. A precious life gone.

She couldn't help thinking about Davina in that position. The thought alone made her stomach twist. Aria's hands clenched into fists. She had to survive no matter what.

Suddenly, a mighty roar echoed across the academy grounds, startling most of the human students. The beasts barely reacted, clearly accustomed to it. Then came the thunderous beat of wings and everyone lifted their heads toward the sky.

A dragon.

"Oh my," Charlotte gasped, completely forgetting about the dead girl lying at her feet.

Her eyes practically sparkled. This was a dream come true.

Finally, her dragon!

So close yet so far. Charlotte could already picture herself riding on its back through the clouds.

The dragon soared overhead, its massive body casting a shadow across the courtyard.

"It's beautiful," one of the girls whispered in awe.

Unlike the others, Aria glared at the giant lizard.

She wasn't stupid. What were the chances a herd of bulls just happened to attack the moment they arrived?

It was obviously orchestrated.

Her hands curled into fists.

What gave these creatures the right to decide who lived and who died simply because humans had crossed into their territory? A territory that hadn't even belonged to them originally.

If the beasts were angry, they should take it up with the governments responsible, not ordinary people who had no say in the matter.

But that was how it always worked. When powerful groups went to war, it was the innocent who paid the price.

"How are we supposed to go up against a creature like that?" Brittney asked. "They're even bigger than I imagined."

"You don't," Aria replied. "If you want to kill a dragon, do it while it's in human form."

"Whoa."

Brittney looked genuinely shocked. She immediately glanced around, remembering most beast shifters possessed enhanced hearing.

Lowering her voice, she whispered, "Let's be careful with statements like that. What do you think these creatures would do if they even suspected we had an atom of ill intent toward them?"

Before Aria could answer, a shout of alarm rang out across the courtyard.

"Help me already! It hurts so much!"

The girls had gathered around a particular area.

Aria and Brittney exchanged a look before making their way over. They practically had to force themselves through the crowd.

Except Aria wasn't prepared for the sight waiting for her on the other side.

It was Chelsea.

Karen was cradling her on the ground because the girl couldn't stand. One of her legs had been mangled so badly that Aria's stomach immediately turned.

Bone protruded through the torn flesh and blood soaked Chelsea's expensive clothes, pooling beneath her on the stone pavement.

The sight was horrifying.

One of Chelsea's friends burst into tears on the spot, unable to hold herself together any longer.

Aria didn't know how to feel.

A small, ugly part of her couldn't help thinking about how Chelsea had used those same legs to trip her earlier. Now they were shattered.

It felt like some twisted form of poetic justice. Then guilt followed immediately afterward. Nobody deserved this.

"Clear the way!"

Maverick Nightshade appeared beside Chelsea the next second.

Aria couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

The man had been dealing with one disaster after another since their arrival.

"Please help me," Chelsea sobbed. "It hurts. It hurts so much."

For the first time since meeting her, Chelsea sounded genuinely terrified.

Maverick crouched beside her, his expression unreadable as he examined the injury.

"Dimitri," he called his beta.

The wolf shifter immediately appeared at his side.

"Take her to the healer. Now."

"Yes, Alpha."

Dimitri didn't waste a second. He carefully lifted Chelsea into his arms despite her cries of pain.

The girls around her began crying harder as she was carried away. Aria watched as another beast shifter joined Dimitri, and they disappeared into one of the academy buildings.

Then Maverick commanded.

"Everyone return to the bus."

Perhaps it was shock or fear, but nobody moved.

Then Maverick's eyes flashed yellow.

"Now!"

The growl in his voice rolled across the courtyard. Immediately, everyone scrambled into motion, hurrying toward the bus without another word.

Brittney fell into step beside Aria.

"Wait," she said suddenly. "Where's Abigail?"

Aria blinked.

Now that Brittney mentioned it, the woman hadn't barked an order at them since the whole thing started.

"Oh no," her stomach sank. It couldn't be what she was thinking.

Unfortunately, there wasn't time to think about it. The remaining shifters were already herding them toward the bus with growing urgency.

The moment they entered the bus, the atmosphere changed completely.

Nobody said a word. There were no more teasing remarks about the beast princes or academy life anymore. Instead they sat quietly in their seats, fear written all over their faces.

Seated beside Brittney again, Aria looked around the bus and relief washed through her when she spotted Alek and Trisha toward the back. The two girls looked traumatized, but they were alive. At this point, that alone felt like a blessing.

Her gaze drifted toward the front. The doors had been shut and locked. Outside, one of the beast shifters stood guard. Then a shaky sound suddenly drew her attention.

"No," Philippa whispered.

Aria turned toward the blonde girl from Chelsea's clique and frowned. Her hands were trembling so badly she could barely keep them still.

"No, no, no..." The girl's breathing quickened. "I can't do this."

Several girls exchanged nervous glances.

"I can't do this anymore." Tears streamed down Philippa's face. "We're all going to die."

"Philippa..." one of the girls tried cautiously.

"No!" she snapped.

The outburst startled everyone.

"We just got here and someone already died!" Her voice cracked as fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "Did you see what happened to Chelsea? Did you see her leg? I don't want to die. I don't want to be here. I want to go home."

Her breathing became faster and faster.

Aria recognized what was happening, Philippa was having a panic attack

"I'M GOING TO DIE!"

"Would you shut the fuck up already?" Karen suddenly shouted, close to losing it too.

The entire bus fell silent.

Philippa looked as though she had just been slapped.

Aria sighed. Were these girls really incapable of compassion?

She swiftly rose from her seat.

"Aria?" Brittney called after her. The look she gave her clearly asked what she thought she was doing.

Aria ignored her and made her way down the aisle until she reached Philippa. Just because she didn't like the girl's behavior didn't mean she would pass up the chance to show a little kindness to a fellow human.

The girl was shaking so violently now that it looked painful.

"Hey," Aria said softly.

Philippa didn't respond.

"Phillpa, is it?" This time, Aria crouched in front of her. The girl finally looked up, her eyes red and swollen.

"I can't do this," Philippa whispered.

"I know," Aria smiled sadly, then pulled the girl into a hug.

Philippa froze for a moment before she finally fell apart.

The sob that escaped her sounded almost painful as she buried her face against Aria's shoulder.

"It's okay," Aria said quietly.

The words felt strange coming from her.

"It's going to be okay."

That was a huge lie. But for now, it would serve.

"I don't want to die." Philipa said over and over like some chant to ground herself.

"You won't."

Aria didn't believe that herself, but she kept speaking anyway.

"We're still here..."

For now.

Aria didn't let that part be known.