

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 111: Saved Their Lives

Everything happened so quickly.

One moment, the dragon's roar reverberated through the restroom. The next, Rhydian's entire body shuddered violently, his breathing turning ragged as if the dragon inside him was desperately trying to claw its way free.

"Rhydian!"

Aria tried to go to him, but Maverick caught her wrist.

"We have to go," he said urgently, tightening his grip.

"I have to help him."

"It's too late." Maverick's voice was grim as he tilted his chin toward Rhydian, silently urging her to look.

Aria did, and her breath caught.

Rhydian's body convulsed again, harder this time. Every muscle beneath his clothes seemed to tighten at once, straining against the fabric. His shoulders broadened with frightening speed, stretching the seams of his uniform until the material groaned in protest.

Aria's eyes widened as crimson scales began pushing through the skin along his neck, catching the light with a metallic sheen. They spread rapidly beneath his jaw and disappeared beneath the collar of his shirt while others crept over the backs of his hands.

His fingers flexed, and the nails lengthened before her eyes, darkening into black talons that gouged deep grooves into the tiled wall when he instinctively reached out to steady himself.

His pupils narrowed into razor-thin slits as his brilliant blue eyes burned with an intensity that made Aria's pulse stumble. The restroom itself seemed to shrink around him, and every breath he drew felt larger than the room could contain.

"Maverick..." Aria whispered fearfully, unable to tear her eyes away.

"He's shifting," Maverick answered, his expression hardening. "And it doesn't look like he's controlling it."

Almost as if to prove his words, Rhydian's back arched violently. Something enormous struggled beneath his skin, forcing muscle and bone to distort beneath the surface before snapping violently back into place.

Another roar tore from Rhydian, and only then did Aria truly grasp the danger. This restroom had never been built to contain a full-grown dragon. If Rhydian completed the transformation in here, there wouldn't be a restroom left.

"Oh my God..." the realization hit her.

Maverick wasted no more time. He pulled Aria firmly behind him and headed for the ruined doorway. This time, she didn't resist. Fear had finally caught up with her.

The moment they burst out of the restroom, they were met by Variant, Valerie, and the two guards who had only just regained their footing.

"What's going on?" Variant demanded, having noticed the tension in the air.

"Rhydian's shifting!" Maverick barked. "Get the fuck out of here!"

"What?!" Variant and Valerie shouted in unison, genuine panic flashing across their faces.

Before anyone could ask another question, the entire corridor lurched beneath their feet as a deafening boom erupted from inside the restroom.

The walls shuddered violently as though something enormous had slammed into them from within. Fine cracks raced across the plaster, and dust rained from the ceiling in pale clouds.

For one frozen heartbeat, everyone simply stared before common sense took over. None of them needed to be told twice. They broke into a sprint just as another tremendous impact shook the building.

Unfortunately, they had barely covered a few meters when an earth-shattering explosion tore through the corridor and the restroom walls burst apart. Bricks, shattered tiles, and chunks of concrete blasted outward in every direction like deadly shrapnel.

From the corner of her eye, Aria caught sight of something colossal crashing through the collapsing ceiling. Crimson scales flashed between clouds of dust before an enormous wing burst free, tearing through the stone as though it were paper, and the dragon soared into the open sky.

But the damage had already been done.

"Look out!"

Aria threw both arms over her head, squeezing her eyes shut as she braced for the crushing impact of the falling debris.

Except when several seconds passed and nothing happened, she slowly lowered her arms in confusion.

That was when she saw it.

A wall of crystal-blue ice stood between them and the collapsing building. Massive chunks of stone hammered against it one after another, each impact sending spiderwebs of frost racing across its surface, yet none of them managed to break through.

Maverick.

Aria turned sharply toward him. He stood directly in front of them with both arms outstretched, his gray eyes fixed on the barrier. Frost crawled over his forearms and spread across the floor beneath his boots as he held the shield in place.

Only then did she notice his posture. One knee had sunk toward the ground while the other leg trembled beneath him. The sheer weight of the fallen masonry pressing against the barrier was forcing him lower inch by inch.

"Maverick..." Concern gripped Aria's chest.

A strained breath escaped him, but he never looked away from the barrier.

"Come on," he muttered, as though urging himself on.

The ice groaned, and for a terrifying moment, Aria thought it would shatter. Instead, Maverick drew a deep breath and let out a roar of his own. The frost coating the barrier thickened instantly, and with a violent thrust of both arms, he drove the shield outward.

A thunderous crack split the air as the wall of ice surged forward like an avalanche, hurling the heap of broken stone away from them. The bricks exploded across the way, clearing a path as dust billowed through the hall.

Silence followed, broken only by the distant beat of enormous wings overhead, reminding them that somewhere above the academy, a dragon was now flying free.

Everyone stood frozen for a heartbeat before the dust slowly began to settle. Cautiously, Aria looked around and realized an entire section of the dining hall had collapsed inward, leaving a gaping hole where the restroom wall and part of the ceiling had once stood.

Before she could fully take in the devastation, strong arms suddenly wrapped around her. Maverick pulled her tightly against his chest, holding her as though reassuring himself she was truly alive.

Only then did Aria realize how violently he was shaking. She had no choice but to hug him back. He had just saved their fucking lives.

Chapter 112: A Trapped Serpent

"A patient hunter still bleeds when he underestimates his prey."

~ Rebel Beast

Maverick Nightshade either had no secrets worth stealing, or he was far more intelligent than most people gave him credit for.

Left alone in the office, Venus Crotalus calmly surveyed the room, his sharp black eyes taking in the shelves, drawers, and neatly stacked reports resting upon the desk. Nothing appeared out of place, yet somehow that only made him more suspicious.

His Highness Caelis certainly wouldn't leave anything important lying around for strangers to stumble upon. Venus preferred to believe Maverick Nightshade possessed enough intelligence to follow the same principle.

Still, the professor's abrupt departure lingered in his thoughts. The urgency in Maverick's eyes had not been feigned. Whatever had happened was significant enough for him to abandon their legal agreement without a second thought.

For a moment, Venus had considered following him. Information had value, after all. But then he changed his mind. This was the perfect opportunity to find out more about Aria Aspen.

Compared to apex predators like Maverick, Rhydian, and Caelis, ordinary humans had one fatal weakness. They hid things emotionally instead of strategically.

The clever concealed their secrets where no one could reach them. But the poor, helpless human probably tucked hers beneath her mattress, inside her drawers, between the pages of books, or behind photographs she believed no one else would think to inspect. She assumed locks were protection and privacy were enough to keep curious eyes away.

It rarely was.

Venus adjusted the cuffs of his academy uniform before allowing himself the faintest smile. His Highness had asked him to find out what was so special about Aria Aspen.

Which meant there was only one place worth visiting.

Her room.

And fate couldn't have handed him a better opportunity than this.

Thus, Venus left the office.

From the information he had gathered, Maverick had assigned the human girls rooms on the second floor. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the button, watching the doors slide shut in silence.

At this hour, every student from House Therion should have been in class. That didn't mean the house was completely deserted, and Venus had no desire to stumble across anyone wandering the corridors.

If he was caught, he could always claim he had gotten lost.

It wasn't the worst excuse. He had only been inside House Therion a handful of times. Besides, while Maverick Nightshade insisted on keeping the academy under control, he was intelligent enough to know there were boundaries he couldn't enforce. It was an uneasy arrangement between him and the beast students. Maverick overlooked certain things, and in return, they refrained from giving him reasons to interfere more than necessary.

The elevator doors slid open on the second floor. Venus stepped out and paused. It was empty.

Good.

Without wasting another second, he made his way down the corridor, his eyes quickly reading the room numbers as he passed them. His source had been very specific. The girls' shared suite was the last room on the floor.

His pace quickened, yet his footsteps remained almost inaudible. As a serpent, being swift and silent came as naturally to him as breathing. He reached the door and lowered himself onto one knee.

From an inner pocket, Venus withdrew a slim leather case no larger than his palm. Inside lay several lock picks arranged with almost obsessive precision. After a brief inspection of the lock, he selected a tension wrench and the thinnest pick.

The tension wrench slid into the keyway first, and then came the pick. Venus closed his eyes and concentrated. To an ordinary person, the lock was silent, but to a serpent, it spoke.

His hearing sharpened until the faintest metallic scrape echoed through his mind. He could distinguish each individual pin as the pick nudged it upward, listening for the tiny clicks hidden beneath the pressure of the lock's springs.

One. Two. The third resisted. All it took was a slight adjustment and another gentle lift.

Click.

The fourth pin fell into place almost immediately. Then the fifth. A soft, satisfying snap followed as the cylinder finally turned beneath his fingers.

Venus smiled to himself. He hadn't grown rusty after all.

Years ago, back in the Serpenthood, he and Caelis had developed an unfortunate hobby.

Robbing dragons.

Most dragons were so insufferably arrogant they never imagined anyone would dare steal from their hoards. Venus and Caelis had considered it a public service to relieve them of a fraction of their excessive wealth.

It had worked remarkably well.

Until Njord found out.

The memory alone was enough to make Venus shudder. Njord had never laid a hand on Caelis. The Basilisk Prince was far too valuable to him. Instead, he punished everyone around his son. Friends. Servants. Guards. Anyone unfortunate enough to have encouraged Caelis's recklessness became the lesson.

Venus had spent weeks recovering and had never attempted another robbery after that. At least not with Caelis involved.

The lock clicked completely open. Venus eased the door inward and slipped inside before quietly shutting it behind him.

His gaze swept across the suite, and a low whistle escaped him.

Maverick Nightshade certainly hadn't spared any expense. The common area was spacious, comfortably furnished, and stocked far better than the average student quarters. It was a stark contrast to the accommodations reserved for the human students in Ophidian.

Then again, Karen Donovan and the others weren't in their house because anyone particularly cared about them. They were temporary political pieces. Once they served their purpose, she and her goons would be sent back where they belonged —

If they survived that long.

Venus slowly surveyed the room. Four bedroom doors stood before him.

Which one belonged to Aria Aspen?

Left alone, he would have searched every inch of the suite, but he wasn't sure how long Maverick would be away and had no intention of being caught. So he relied on instinct instead.

It had never failed him.

Venus chose the bedroom closest to the balcony, specifically the one on the left. He tested the doorknob and, to his relief, found it unlocked.

The moment he stepped inside, a feminine scent drifted into his nose. Orange and peppercorn.

His brows lifted slightly. Damn. That smelled surprisingly good.

He walked farther into the room when something brushed against his feet. Venus frowned and looked down to see a thin wire stretched across the doorway.

Wait a minute... wasn't that—

His head snapped up. Too late.

A small projectile shot across the room and buried itself in the side of his neck before he had time to dodge.

"What the—"

He yanked it free and stared at the tiny dart between his fingers. It was a tranquilizer.

His pupils narrowed.

Who the hell rigged their own bedroom with traps?

Perhaps Aria Aspen wasn't nearly as harmless as she looked.

The drug worked fast. His vision blurred almost immediately, and the room tilted beneath him. Gritting his teeth, Venus staggered toward the door, reaching for the nearby shelf to steady himself.

The instant his weight shifted onto it—

Snap. Pain exploded through his fingers.

Venus jerked his hand back with a strangled yell. A rat trap clamped tightly around two of his fingers.

"What kind of psychopath..."

Acting purely on instinct, he stumbled blindly while trying to pry the trap loose.

It was a mistake.

Venus had no idea what had been spilled across the floor—oil or something else—but the world suddenly vanished beneath him. His legs shot forward, and he crashed flat onto his back with enough force to drive every bit of air from his lungs.

For several seconds, all he could do was gasp. Finally, he managed to wrench his fingers free from the trap. Unfortunately, the tranquilizer had already spread too far through his body.

His eyelids grew impossibly heavy. The ceiling spun lazily above him, becoming more blurred with every passing second.

It turns out Aria Aspen was far more dangerous than anyone had given her credit for.

Darkness swallowed him whole.

Chapter 113: [Bonus -] Alive And Well

"True friendship is measured by the distance someone is willing to run toward danger, not away from it."

~ Rebel Beast

What Brittney had mistaken for an explosion turned out to be something far worse.

A dragon burst through the roof of the restroom, its enormous crimson body tearing through stone and steel as though they were nothing more than paper. A heartbeat later, the entire section surrounding the restroom collapsed behind it with a deafening crash.

The ground lurched beneath everyone's feet, shaking hard enough to send several students stumbling. Rhydian's roar rolled across the academy, primal and powerful, adding to the chaos until it almost felt as though the earth itself had split apart.

Except this wasn't an earthquake. Rhydian Drakhar had transformed inside the cramped restroom, and the building had paid the price.

Dust swallowed the area, turning the air thick and gray. Every breath scraped against Brittney's throat while grit stung her eyes until tears blurred her vision.

How had things spiraled this badly?

It had all begun when Aria excused herself to use the restroom. At first, Brittney hadn't thought much of it. But as the minutes dragged on, unease steadily crept into her mind.

Her first suspicion had been Karen.

After the stunt she'd pulled earlier, Brittney had been convinced Karen and her pathetic little group had cornered Aria inside the restroom. Except Karen had stormed out of the dining hall shortly after her failed attempt to provoke another fight, leaving only Charlotte and the girls from House Ophidian behind.

And none of them had left their seats.

Brittney had almost convinced herself she was overthinking things until Variant and Valerie exchanged the same uneasy look.

"Is it only me, or is Aria taking too long?" Variant had asked.

That had been all the confirmation Brittney needed. The six of them hurried toward the restroom, only to find the two Therion guards sprawled unconscious outside the entrance.

Before any of them could process what they were seeing, Professor Maverick and Dimitri came charging down the corridor as though hell itself were chasing them.

Unlike Maverick, who went straight for the restroom door without slowing, Dimitri intercepted the girls.

"You all need to leave. Now."

"What?" Brittney stared at him in disbelief.

"But Aria's still in there!"

"So is Rhydian Drakhar."

Alek's eyes widened. "That's impossible. We watched him leave earlier."

Dimitri answered her. "You don't know this academy better than the beasts who live here. There are more ways in and out of this place than you realize."

There was concern in his eyes now.

"We don't know how this ends, but I do know one thing. You girls shouldn't be anywhere near it."

"But—"

Trisha barely managed the word before Variant stepped forward.

"We'll stay."

Dimitri turned to her.

"Excuse me?"

"We know Rhydian," Variant replied. "If anyone can help if things get out of hand, it's us."

For a brief second, Dimitri looked like he wanted to argue. Instead, he exhaled and turned back to the human girls.

"Fine. Then move."

He ushered them down the corridor with surprising firmness, placing himself behind them so no one could double back.

By pure coincidence, Alek ended up at the rear of the group beside him, and Dimitri rested a steadying hand against the small of her back.

Alek felt it and said nothing. This wasn't the time to question the attraction between them.

They reached the dining hall to find Charlotte and the others sitting exactly where they had been before. Or at least pretending to.

The slight flush on their faces and the hurried way they settled into their seats told a different story.

They had been watching.

"Everyone out!" Dimitri's voice boomed across the hall. "Leave the dining hall immediately!"

Confused murmurs broke out around the room.

"Why?" Chelsea asked, though the curiosity in her eyes looked suspiciously close to excitement.

No one answered. Instead, a deep, primal roar shook the building, and every conversation died.

The kitchen staff were the first to react. Pots clattered onto countertops as the cooks abandoned everything, shouting for everyone else to get out. Only then did the seriousness of the situation seem to register with the remaining human students.

Panic broke out. Everyone surged toward the exits, shoving and stumbling over one another in their desperation to escape.

Dimitri planted himself firmly behind Brittney, Trisha, and Alek, shielding them from the crushing crowd until they finally stumbled out into the courtyard.

They had barely stepped outside when the building exploded. Or so Brittney had believed until she finally understood the truth.

Brittney had watched enough documentaries growing up to know the destruction dragons were capable of. Bristol Province had been reduced to rubble during the first years after the barrier collapsed. Yet from those ashes, the beasts had rebuilt it into Bestial City.

Compared to that, this destruction was small. Yet it still left her frozen. An entire section of the dining hall had caved in where Rhydian's transformation had shattered one of the main support pillars.

"Oh my God..."

The words slipped from Alek's mouth, though Brittney wasn't sure whether she or Trisha had whispered them first.

"Aria's still in there," Trisha breathed, horror spreading across her face.

Variant and Valerie were inside as well.

Without thinking, Brittney rushed forward, but Dimitri stepped into her path.

"You can't."

"My best friend is trapped in there!" Brittney shoved against him. "She needs me!"

"And if you go in now, she'll have two people to rescue instead of one." His voice remained steady despite the commotion around them.

"The structure is unstable. If anyone can get her out, it's Maverick."

"Then I'm sorry," Brittney shot back, tears burning her eyes. "Because I'm not standing here waiting for someone else to save her."

She pushed past him only to stop.

The dust parted, and from beneath a roof of crystal-blue ice, Maverick emerged, leading the others through the wreckage while the frozen barrier overhead caught every loose brick and splinter that threatened to fall.

And right beside him was Aria.

She was alive and unharmed.

Chapter 114: Be The Female Lead

"Crises Confirms Character"

~ Rebel Beast

"Aria!"

Brittney's voice cracked as she broke into a run.

"Brittney!"

The moment Aria saw her, she instinctively pulled away from Maverick and hurried forward, meeting her best friend halfway. Brittney threw her arms around her with enough force to nearly knock the breath from her lungs, holding on as if letting go meant risking losing her all over again.

Only then did it hit Aria. In the chaos, she had been so consumed by everything happening inside the restroom that she'd completely forgotten about her friends.

Relief washed through her as she realized they were all standing here, alive and safe.

Brittney pulled back just enough to look at her, her eyes suspiciously bright.

"Don't you ever do that again," she said, her voice trembling despite her attempt to sound stern. "I thought my heart was going to rip in two. You're the first real best friend I've ever had, Aria. I can't lose you."

Emotion caught Aria completely off guard.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, squeezing Brittney's hands. "I promise, I'm not going anywhere."

Before either of them could say another word, Alek and Trisha reached them.

Neither asked permission and simply folded Aria into another embrace until all four girls stood huddled together in the middle of the courtyard.

For a little while, none of them spoke. After everything that had happened, words felt unnecessary.

A short distance away, Charlotte watched the scene unfold and an unpleasant feeling twisted inside her chest.

Her gaze drifted toward Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith. If she'd been the one trapped beneath that collapsed space, would any of them have reacted this way?

She already knew the answer.

The four of them weren't really friends.

They were survivors forced into the same corner, united more by circumstance than affection. If Charlotte died tomorrow, one less competitor would remain. Someone else would simply move one step closer to the top.

"Okay..." Aria laughed weakly from somewhere in the middle of the group. "I think that's enough hugging." She could barely breathe anymore.

It was almost ironic. Not long ago, she'd been convinced she wasn't the sort of person who enjoyed hugs. Yet somehow these three girls kept finding new ways to squeeze every ounce of air from her lungs.

And strangely, she didn't mind it.

Before coming to Bestiaris, Aria had been convinced girls were superficial, petty, and constantly competing with one another.

Brittney, Alek, and Trisha had been proving her wrong every single day. For the first time in her life, she understood what genuine friendship felt like.

She couldn't wait for the day they met Davina.

"I couldn't agree more," Alek said, reluctantly stepping back. Brittney released her next, followed by Trisha.

Trisha looked Aria up and down before folding her arms. She said, "You do know if this were a movie, you'd definitely be the female lead."

"What?" Aria stared at her. "Why?"

"Because disasters keep following you around," Trisha replied matter-of-factly. "It's always the female lead the author keeps throwing one obstacle after another at. The poor girl barely gets a chance to breathe."

Despite everything, a laugh escaped Aria.

"I certainly hope not," she shook her head. "Because if that's true, then I'd be the one getting fought over by all the male leads, thereby creating the famous dramatic love triangles."

"Or a reverse harem," Brittney chimed in.

When the others turned to look at her, she shrugged.

"Reverse harems are all the rage these days."

The girls exchanged thoughtful glances.

She wasn't wrong.

"Well, whether it's a love triangle or a reverse harem, I don't envy the female lead one bit," Alek opined. "Handling one man already sounds like enough work. Imagine having two, or even three."

"Exactly. Which is precisely why I can't be the female lead. Just thinking about it is enough to make me lose my mind." Aria laughed it off, trying very hard not to think about what had happened with Rhydian. Or Professor Maverick.

No. That definitely wasn't some bizarre reverse harem situation.

She was growing up. It was perfectly normal for people her age to become curious, to experience confusing emotions, and to make sense of feelings they had never encountered before.

That was all this had been.

Exploration.

And there would be no more of it.

If this incident had taught her anything, it was that she was dealing with dangerous beasts. Had it not been for Maverick, she would have been buried beneath the collapsing building — even if, technically speaking, the entire disaster was his fault.

"It's good to see you girls chatting," Variant said as she and her cousin made their way over. "That means you're all okay."

Brittney lifted her chin. "It's good to know you two are okay as well. Honestly, I like you both more than most of the beasts I've met so far."

Variant and Valerie exchanged a quick glance before smiling, clearly touched by her sincerity.

"That is sweet," Valerie said warmly. "Thank you, Brittney."

At that moment, Maverick walked over. He didn't raise his voice or make any dramatic entrance, yet everyone instinctively straightened the moment he approached.

Aria, in particular, became painfully aware of his presence. She was still angry with him. How could he have thrown away the ring Rhyddian had given her? It hadn't been his decision to make.

"I need you both to take the girls back to their apartment while I deal with things here," Maverick instructed Variant and Valerie.

"Of course, Alpha," Valerie answered for both of them. "You can count on us."

"And make sure you thoroughly check their apartment before they go inside," Maverick continued. "I wouldn't put it past some of the beast students to sneak in while everyone is distracted. We can't afford to take chances."

"We'll make sure it's secure," Valerie promised.

Maverick gave a slight nod before his gaze drifted toward Aria. She refused to meet his eyes. The deliberate avoidance brought a small tick to his jaw.

She was angry with him. He could scent it in the air. He didn't need the mate bond to tell him that.

Maverick wanted to explain himself, to tell her why he'd thrown the ring away, but now wasn't the time. There was far too much damage waiting for him inside the building.

"Take the car and leave now," he ordered.

"What about us?" The voice came from behind.

Unsurprisingly, it was Charlotte.

Maverick turned toward her, one eyebrow lifting ever so slightly.

Charlotte said. "We just survived an attack too. What if we're not safe either?"

Every eye shifted back to Maverick.

He regarded her for a long moment before answering in a voice completely devoid of emotion.

"How unfortunate." He clicked his tongue in exaggerated sympathy. "You're none of my concern."

"Ouch," Brittney muttered loudly enough for Charlotte to hear.

Without another glance, Maverick turned and headed back toward the damaged dining hall, Dimitri following close behind.

Charlotte looked as though someone had slapped her across the face.

"Don't worry," Valerie said with a pleasant smile. "I'll walk you back to House Aetheris. I wouldn't want you getting lost... or frightened on the way."

Not even Aria managed to hold back a snort of laughter. God, that was wicked. But Charlotte had walked right into it.

It was obvious she had only been trying to get Maverick's attention. Besides, House Aetheris sat directly along the main path. It was practically impossible to miss.

Charlotte's face darkened.

"Thank you, beast." she said, every syllable dripping with sarcasm.

Valerie didn't react.

Charlotte spun on her heel. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith lingered for only a second before hurrying after her like obedient little ducklings.

"Come on," Variant said, leading the others toward her parked car, its paint now coated in a thin layer of dust from the collapse.

With a collective sigh, the girls squeezed themselves back into the rear seat once again.

As the girls settled back into the cramped seat, Brittney's eyes drifted to Aria. Her brows slowly knitted together as she finally noticed the ruby necklace and gold waist chain around her belly. Those definitely hadn't been there before.

She opened her mouth to ask about them, then thought better of it. Whatever had happened inside that restroom clearly hadn't been something Aria was ready to talk about in the middle of a car ride.

Besides, once they got back to the apartment, she intended to interrogate her properly.

Every.

Single.

Detail.

Variant started the engine, and the familiar rumble of the vehicle filled the air as they pulled away from the damaged dining hall.

The drive back to House Therion was mostly quiet. Unsurprisingly, they came across Charlotte and the other girls making their way toward House Aetheris on foot.

A mischievous grin spread across Variant's face.

"Watch this."

Before anyone could ask what she meant, she deliberately accelerated through a patch of loose dust and tiny pebbles scattered across the cobbled road. The rear tires kicked up a cloud that swept straight toward Charlotte's group.

"Ah!"

"What the hell?"

Charlotte, Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith threw up their arms, coughing and stumbling back as dust swirled around them.

Variant burst into laughter.

"Oops!" she called through the open window with absolutely no remorse. "Road conditions."

Then she drove off, still laughing while Valerie shook her head beside her, looking thoroughly accustomed to her antics.

Chapter 115: Who Said We Wouldn't Attend?

"There are rules between the houses. Break them, and someone answers for it."

~ *Rebel Beast*

By the time they arrived at House Therion, there was a new set of guards that hadn't been there before. Aria noticed them and frowned. It was undoubtedly Maverick's doing.

What was he trying to protect her from? Rhydian's dragon? What was so bad about accepting a jewelry gift from a dragon? The more she thought about it, the more questions she was left with.

"Whoa, that looks serious," Brittney commented as she stepped out of the car after the others, taking in the security as well.

"Why do I feel Professor Maverick is taking precautions after the attack in the dining hall?" Trisha wondered.

Alek looked at Aria as though she had the answer.

"You don't think Rhydian would return and try to attack us again?"

"No, he won't," Aria said immediately, a fierce protectiveness rising inside her. "He's not like that."

The moment those words left her mouth, all eyes turned to her.

Realizing what she had said, Aria cleared her throat.

"I mean, what happened in the dining hall was a complete accident. Rhydian hadn't meant to shift there. It wasn't intentional. So he has no reason to come after us," she blurted.

For a moment, they simply stared at her. Aria couldn't help but notice the way Brittney, Alek, and Trisha looked at one another, their eyes communicating without words. They knew she wasn't being entirely honest with them.

"Anyway, Aria's right," Variant said, breaking the awkward silence. "Rhydian isn't some wild dragon that goes around destroying buildings because he's pissed. However, it's in Alpha Maverick's nature to be thorough. Trust me, you girls haven't seen half of his protective side."

"Oh, I'm sure Aria would be delighted to know that," Brittney teased shamelessly.

"Fuck you, Brittney," Aria shot back, thoroughly annoyed.

"Oh, I'm a good fuck, darling," Brittney replied without the slightest bit of shame.

Aria let out a long breath of exasperation. The girl was simply impossible.

Variant shook her head. "Come on already. You girls need to settle in."

Just like that, they returned to House Therion.

Classes must have changed because the corridors were now filled with Therion students making their way to the next lecture while others lingered outside in small groups, talking among themselves.

The moment they spotted Aria and the others, conversations faltered. Then the whispers began.

"Isn't she the human Rhydian cornered in the restroom?"

"I heard Alpha Maverick had to save her. Otherwise she'd be dead by now."

"I knew bringing humans into House Therion would only cause trouble."

"I bet she keeps getting into danger just to catch Alpha Maverick's attention."

Aria's brows knitted together. What the hell?

Didn't these beasts realize she could hear every word they were saying? More importantly, how had news traveled through the academy this quickly?

"Just ignore them," Valerie said, noticing the look on Aria's face. "Most of the beasts around here have far too much free time. Gossip is practically a competitive sport."

Variant laughed. "They'll find someone else to talk about when the next big story comes along. Though I should warn you, today's incident is the hottest topic on campus. The gossip won't be dying down anytime soon."

Aria couldn't help but sigh. Pretending not to care about their gossip proved much easier in theory than in practice.

They eventually reached their suite and stepped inside.

"Routine inspection," Valerie announced. "Alpha Maverick's orders."

"Be my guest," Trisha replied. "I'll be damned if another one of those oversized rats sneaks into my room. I'm still traumatized from the last one."

Variant and Valerie exchanged amused looks before splitting up.

"I'll take this one."

"I'll check this."

Variant entered Alek's room while Valerie pushed open Trisha's door. Neither room had been locked, making the inspection quick. A few moments later, both women stepped back into the living room.

"Clear," Variant reported.

"Nothing unusual here either," Valerie added. "The rooms are safe."

"Let's finish the last two," Variant said, already turning toward the remaining bedrooms.

Aria's and Brittney's rooms stood opposite each other. Valerie had barely reached for Brittney's doorknob when—

"Wait!"

Brittney rushed over, nearly throwing herself between Valerie and the door, spreading both arms protectively across it.

Everyone stared at her, surprised by her reaction.

"I..." Brittney's eyes darted around wildly as she searched for an explanation. "I made a mess in there," she blurted out.

The room wasn't messy. The problem, however, was what she'd left inside it.

Between the trip wires, rat traps, tranquilizer launcher, and every other precaution she'd rigged against unwanted visitors, her room looked less like a bedroom and more like a military obstacle course.

If Aria and the others saw all that, they'd probably think she was one bad day away from murdering them in their sleep. Yeah, she definitely didn't want to make that impression.

It wasn't her fault she'd arrived at the Concordia Program... thoroughly prepared.

But Valerie said to her, "We're all girls here, Brittney. Our rooms end up looking like that sometimes, don't they?" She glanced over her shoulder, looking to the others for support.

"She's right," Variant agreed with a nod. "Mine certainly isn't spotless at the moment."

"My room isn't exactly perfect either," Aria admitted with an awkward shrug.

All eyes shifted to Alek.

"Sorry," she said unapologetically. "I have an unhealthy obsession with cleanliness."

"Exactly," Trisha chimed in. "Not everyone is a pig."

Normally, Brittney would have rolled her eyes or fired back at her cousin's jab. But today, Trisha's insult was accidentally working in her favor.

"See?" Brittney said quickly, seizing the opportunity. "I'm just a little sensitive about the state of my room right now. Besides..." She gestured toward the rooms Variant and Valerie had already searched. "If every other room is clear, then mine should be too, right?"

Variant and Valerie exchanged a thoughtful look, thinking it through.

Finally, Valerie breathed. "Fair enough."

She stepped away from Brittney's door and turned toward Aria's room instead.

"Let's check the last one."

Variant nodded and reached for Aria's doorknob.

The moment their attention shifted elsewhere, the breath Brittney had been holding escaped her lungs in a slow, silent sigh.

That had been close.

Variant disappeared into Aria's room, and unlike Brittney's supposedly messy room, Aria's was neat and orderly.

Variant took her time searching it. It was obvious Alpha Maverick was fiercely protective of Aria, which meant she had to make absolutely certain the oblivious "Lady boss" wasn't in any danger.

She checked beneath the bed in case a snake was hiding there, inside the wardrobe, behind the curtains covering the balcony doors, and even inside the adjoining bathroom. Satisfied that nothing seemed out of place, she stepped back into the living room.

"Aria's room is safe," she announced.

Brittney clapped her hands dramatically. "That's what I like to hear. We're officially in the clear then."

"I believe we're finally done here," Valerie said with satisfaction. "We should probably leave you all to rest for a while. It's been quite the day."

None of them argued with that.

"You already have our contact information," Variant said. "If you need anything, call or send us a message. And whatever you do, don't open the door for anyone unless it's one of us, Alpha Maverick, or Beta Dimitri."

"We'll remember," Aria assured them. "And thank you. Really. For everything today. For looking out for us."

Valerie's face softened instantly. "Aww, don't mention it. You girls are adorable." She grinned. "We'll have breakfast together again tomorrow..."

She paused midway through the sentence.

"...Actually, we don't exactly have a dining hall anymore."

"I'm sure Alpha Maverick will figure something out. He always does," Variant said confidently. "And if not, we can always meet downstairs in the common room and gossip about absolutely everything."

"Speaking of everything..." Valerie suddenly snapped her fingers. "The party!"

Variant blinked. "Oh! That's right." She turned back to the girls. "You are all coming, aren't you? Rhydian invited all the humans."

"What party?" Alek and Trisha asked in unison.

Brittney's eyes lit up with excitement. "Wait... did you just say party?"

Three pairs of bewildered eyes turned toward the two beast girls. Only Aria remained relatively unsurprised.

If she remembered correctly, Rhydian had mentioned a party back in the restroom. At the time, she'd been too overwhelmed by everything else to ask what he meant.

Now, judging from the stunned expressions around her, she realized this wasn't an ordinary party.

"Yes, a party!" Valerie announced excitedly. "It's tomorrow night. And after that comes the fight between Rhydian and Alpha Maverick."

"Wait." Aria's head snapped up. "Did you just say a fight between Rhydian and Maverick?"

Valerie paused. "Um... yeah?"

A curse slipped beneath Aria's breath before she could stop it.

"Is this because of me?" she asked, her voice tightening with alarm. "Because of what happened today? If that's the case, then I don't agree to this fight."

"I think you need to slow down a little, Aria," Variant said gently.

"But you just told me Maverick and Rhydian are going to fight."

"They are."

"Then how is that not because of me?"

Variant and Valerie exchanged a look.

"It's sort of complicated," Variant admitted.

Valerie scratched the back of her neck, trying to explain. "Technically, there are rules between the houses. When Rhydian attacked the human quarters, a few boundaries were crossed, and now the challenge has to be settled properly." She waved her hand dismissively. "It's a whole beast thing."

"Besides," Variant added, "this sort of challenge isn't exactly unusual here."

Valerie nodded. "Exactly. The reasons go beyond just you."

Relief loosened the knot in Aria's chest, though only slightly.

"So no one is fighting over me?"

Both beast girls stared at her. Then Valerie burst into laughter.

"Oh, trust me," she said between laughs. "If two apex predators were actually fighting over a girl, the academy would've shut down by now."

She breathed. "Fortunately for everyone, that's not what's happening. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. You girls won't be coming to watch it."

"Who said we wouldn't?" Brittney demanded, folding her arms.

Valerie looked surprised. "You want to attend?"

"Of course we do," Brittney replied without hesitation. "You announce a party, then casually mention a fight between two apex predators like it's part of the entertainment schedule, and expect us to stay home?"

Even Alek admitted. "I have to admit, I'm curious too."

"So am I," Trisha agreed. "You can't tell people something like that and expect them not to ask questions."

Everyone turned to Aria, waiting for her response.

"If everyone is going," she said after a moment, "then I don't want to be left behind either."

Watching two fully grown beastmen beat each other senseless wasn't Aria's idea of entertainment. If anything, she wanted nothing to do with it.

But after everything that had happened today, she knew she wouldn't be able to sit peacefully in her room wondering if either of them had gotten seriously hurt.

She needed to see that fight with her own eyes.

"If that's the case," Variant told them, "I'll let Alpha Maverick know you've all decided to attend. Something tells me he's going to be pleasantly surprised."

Chapter 116: The Dragon's Rhyme

"Take not the gold a dragon gives...."

~ Rebel Beast

"See you guys later!" Variant and Valerie waved from outside the door, and Trisha waved back before shutting it behind them.

For a moment, she simply stood there with her hand on the knob. Then she drew in a deep breath, turned around, and walked toward the middle of the room.

"So..." she began, looking between the three of them. "Are we going to talk about the fact that we just made one crazy decision?"

Brittney looked up from where she had dropped into one of the seats. "What's crazy about it?"

"We're going to a beast fighting den," Trisha reminded her. "An underground beast fighting den where anything could go wrong."

"Actually," Alek said thoughtfully, "I didn't think any of us would have a taste for violence."

Aria shrugged. "We're in a program where we've watched fellow humans get killed in gory ways. I believe we've developed a palate for violence at this point."

"Moreover..." Brittney chimed in, and the devious smile spreading across her face immediately made Aria suspicious. "It's Maverick and Rhydian we're talking about. I sure hope they're fighting shirtless."

Aria swore she did not know when her head snapped toward Brittney.

One second, she had been standing there completely unbothered. The next, a hot, irrational spike of anger tore through her so quickly that she was glaring at Brittney before she even realized what she was doing.

The look must have been worse than she thought because Brittney slowly lifted both hands in surrender.

"Joking," she said with a laugh.

Aria looked away immediately.

What the hell was that?

The anger receded almost as quickly as it had come, leaving behind an uncomfortable tightness in her chest. This was Brittney, her friend. She knew Brittney was joking, so there was absolutely no reason for the thought of her looking at Rhydian shirtless to have irritated her that much.

Across the room, Alek and Trisha exchanged a look. Aria caught it.

"What?"

"Nothing," Trisha said far too quickly.

Brittney, however, had never possessed Trisha's sense of self-preservation.

"Come on, it was just a joke, Aria." She laughed. "If eyes were bullets, I have no doubt I'd be dead by now. But don't worry. I ain't stealing your men."

"My what?" Aria stared at her.

Brittney leaned forward, elbows settling on her knees as amusement gave way to open curiosity. "You and Rhydian. What is going on between the two of you?"

"What?!" Aria exclaimed. "That is an absurd declaration. Nothing is going on between the two of us." She looked at Brittney as if she had lost her mind. "How can you even ask such a question?"

"Then what happened in the restroom?" Trisha's gaze dropped pointedly. "The necklace and the belly chain." Her eyes swept over Aria once before returning to her face. "You weren't wearing either of those when we left the house."

Silence fell as everyone stared at Aria, waiting for her answer, or more specifically, staring at the ruby around her neck. It was simply breathtaking.

"Fine." Aria released a long breath after realizing there was no getting out of this. "Rhydian gave them to me."

"He did what?!"

All three voices collided so loudly that Aria flinched.

"Would you all calm down?"

"Wait." Trisha held up a hand, looking genuinely bewildered now. "You mean the dragon who sent those murderous ravens after us gave you those?"

"It wasn't exactly like that."

"And you accepted them?"

"Well, what did you want me to do?!" Aria threw her hands up in exasperation. "I didn't exactly have a choice."

She turned toward Alek. "You remember that theory you had about his dragon perhaps being in control?"

Alek nodded slowly.

"Well, it turns out you were right. Because he walked into the restroom with his pockets full of some of the finest jewelry I've ever seen and asked me to take my pick."

Alek's expression changed. "Whoa. Wait a minute."

Aria frowned. "What?"

"Did you just say pockets full of jewelry?"

"Um..." Aria hesitated. "Yeah?"

Alek stared at her, speechless.

"What about it?" Aria asked, already getting the uncomfortable feeling that she had somehow missed something important.

"A dragon's hoard."

The words came out so abruptly that everyone stared at Alek.

"A what?" Brittney asked.

"A dragon's hoard," Alek repeated, standing now. "It's one of the oldest recorded draconic instincts. Dragons have always had an innate need to collect wealth. Gold, silver, gemstones, artifacts, anything they consider precious or valuable. The stories weren't entirely made up."

She was becoming more animated with every word, gesturing as she spoke.

"They gather everything in one place. Traditionally, it was a cave, usually somewhere inside a mountain or another location that was almost impossible for others to reach. That place was called their lair, but the collection itself was their hoard. And it was extremely private. Dragons are notoriously territorial about their hoards, hence most wouldn't allow anyone near one, much less take something from it."

Aria stared at her as a strange memory surfaced.

Treasure.

Rhyddian had used that word. Except he had not been talking about the jewelry when he said it.

Her stomach tightened.

"He did mention treasure," Aria mumbled.

Alek's attention sharpened. "He did?"

"Yes." Aria immediately regretted speaking. "But forget it."

She certainly was not telling them that Rhydian had called her "Treasure." This conversation was already spiraling into absurdity without adding that particular detail.

"Yes, dragons love treasure," Alek continued. "Or, more accurately, they become possessive of whatever they consider treasure."

"So Rhydian probably has some massive warehouse somewhere filled with jewelry?" Brittney asked. "Cool."

Alek opened her mouth only to stop. Her gaze had fallen back to Aria, or more specifically, to the ruby necklace resting against her skin. Just like that, the excitement slowly disappeared from her face.

"Oh, shit."

Aria's stomach dropped. "What?"

Alek said nothing.

"What's wrong, Alek?"

"Nah." Alek shook her head, but she did not look convinced by her own dismissal. "I'm probably overthinking it."

Trisha narrowed her eyes at her. "Alek."

"It could be nothing."

"That is exactly what people say before telling you something is definitely not nothing," Brittney pointed out.

Alek grimaced.

Trisha looked from her to Aria's jewelry, and realization seemed to dawn on her from an entirely different direction.

"Oh."

Aria turned toward her. "Why did you say it like that?"

Trisha's eyebrows rose. "Don't tell me you've forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

"That old children's rhyme."

Aria stared blankly at her. What was she talking about?

Trisha gave an incredulous laugh. "Come on. Most parents used to sing it to scare children away from beast territories."

She cleared her throat dramatically before singing in the eerie, childish melody Aria had not heard in years.

"Take not the gold a dragon gives,

Nor jewels from where his treasure lives.

For once his treasure leaves his keep,

The dragon knows the heart to reap.

Wear his gold and heed the warning—

His castle gates may close by morning."

Chapter 117: Accepted His Courtship

The room went silent.

Brittney's mouth twitched. "Well, that suddenly sounds a lot less cute than it did when we were children."

Aria rubbed the side of her temple, where a headache was beginning to form.

"I still don't get it," she said. "I didn't steal this from him. He gave it to me. There's no way he's coming to attack me for something he clearly gifted me."

It simply didn't make sense.

Alek scratched the back of her head, visibly uncomfortable now. "I mean, you're human, so perhaps it doesn't apply to you."

"Alek."

"I'm serious. These are draconic customs. Some are very old and might not even be practiced anymore."

"Just say it already!" Aria finally lost her patience.

"Fine!" Alek sighed. "Dragons sometimes give pieces from their hoard to a female they've chosen."

Aria became very still. "Chosen for what?"

Alek looked at Trisha, who suddenly found the ceiling fascinating. Left with no other choice, she returned her attention to Aria.

"A mate."

Aria blinked in confusion.

"A what?"

"A mate," Alek repeated cautiously. "In draconic traditions, giving a female something from the dragon's personal hoard was part of courtship. Dragons are extremely possessive of their treasure, so offering something from the hoard was supposed to demonstrate that the female was more valuable to him than the treasure itself."

Aria slowly looked down at the ruby resting against her chest. Suddenly, it felt much heavier than it had minutes ago.

"And when the female accepts it?" she asked nervously.

Alek visibly swallowed. "Well... she accepts the courtship."

Aria's head shot up. "I accepted what?"

"Technically," Alek rushed to explain, "there are other stages involved. It isn't simply jewelry and suddenly you're mated for life. But accepting treasure from a courting dragon is considered a very significant step. Especially if the pieces came directly from his personal hoard."

Aria stared at her in horror. Her hand had gone unconsciously to the necklace.

When Rhydian had stood before her with his pockets overflowing with jewelry, she had thought the entire situation ridiculous. A dragon behaving like some overgrown child, shoving jewelry at her until she picked something just to make him stop.

Now another memory returned.

The way he had watched her choose. How his attention had fixed on the ruby the moment she put it on. She could never forget the satisfaction in his eyes.

Her stomach did a double flip.

"What happens after his mate accepts?" Aria couldn't help but ask.

Alek hesitated.

Aria's eyes narrowed. "What happens, Alek?"

"Well, historically, the dragon would take his chosen mate back to his lair."

Aria felt something cold crawl down her spine.

"And?"

Alek looked deeply apologetic. "And they would complete the mating process."

"What do you mean by complete the mating process?" Aria asked, even though she already knew what it meant. Her brain simply didn't want to acknowledge it.

Trisha answered with brutal dryness. "They fuck and have children."

"Oh, shit," Brittney muttered.

Aria stopped breathing. For several seconds, she simply stood there, staring at nothing. The room suddenly felt too warm.

It was at that moment that another horrifying thought struck her. What if Maverick hadn't come in when he did? Would Rhydian have taken her and flown her to wherever his lair was? Probably somewhere she could never escape even if she tried.

She had accepted the jewelry out of ignorance. She probably wouldn't have understood what was happening until it was too late. And if she refused to mate with him once they got there, what then? Would Rhydian have forced himself on her? She hadn't come to this academy to mate with anyone, much less a dragon. And she certainly hadn't come here to give birth to one's children—if that was even possible.

"Oh my God." Aria began to panic.

"Aria?" Brittney sat forward.

"Oh my God."

"Don't panic," Alek said quickly.

Aria looked at her as though she had lost her mind. "You just told me I accidentally accepted some dragon mating ritual. How exactly am I supposed to not panic?"

"No, no, no. That isn't what I said."

"That is exactly what you said!"

"I said it could have been part of a courtship ritual."

"That is not better!"

Aria suddenly felt dizzy. She took one step backward, but her legs betrayed her. Brittney shot out of her seat and caught her by the arm before she could stumble.

"Whoa. Sit down before you crack your head open and die before marrying your dragon prince."

"Brittney," Aria growled, her voice low and dangerous. This was not the time for jokes.

"Fine. Mouth shut." Brittney pursed her lips together.

Alek hurried over as Brittney guided Aria into the nearest seat.

"But don't be afraid, Aria," Alek said quickly. "You're here while Rhydian is gone. He gave you the jewelry and left. He didn't take you anywhere."

Only because Maverick provoked him.

Aria wanted to say it aloud, but she didn't have the strength. She simply closed her eyes and took a moment to breathe.

Perhaps Alek was right and it was simply a gift. A strange gift from an even stranger dragon, but still a gift.

But deep down, there was still a voice telling her she was living in her own little world of delusion.

Aria suddenly stood, startling the girls who had gathered closely around her.

"Alright," she said. "This is what we're going to do. I'll take off these goddamned pieces of jewelry and send them back to him. That should be the perfect rejection message, right?" she asked Alek.

"Well..." Alek started. "It's up to the dragon to—"

"Case closed." Aria didn't want to hear the rest of her words.

She took a deep breath. Then she said, "Now, I'm going to walk to my room, take a bath and wash all this bad luck and misfortune off my skin, have a good sleep so I can think better, and then I'll figure out a way to send these gifts back to their owner. Right?"

She looked between the three girls, waiting for confirmation.

"Right," all three of them said, although none of them sounded remotely convinced.

Nonetheless, Aria ignored their uncertainty and forced a smile. "See you guys."

She walked over to her room and, without looking back, stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

For a moment, Alek, Brittney, and Trisha remained in silence.

Then Brittney muttered, "She's living in delusion, right?"

"One hundred percent," Alek and Trisha said in chorus.

Chapter 118: A Serpent In Her Room - 1

"Never enter a woman's room uninvited. You may not like the arrangements she makes for your stay."

~ Rebel Beast

"If she's right about one thing, though," Alek said, "we need the rest too. You two..." She pointed between Trisha and Brittney. "Especially need it. We've already experienced enough madness for one day."

"Ahh, you're so right," Trisha said, rising to her feet and stretching her arms above her head. "See you guys later." She was already heading toward her room before Alek could say anything else.

"Later, everyone." Brittney pushed herself to her feet and headed toward her own room. Without a second thought, she swung the door open, took one step inside, and froze.

There was a body sprawled across her floor.

"What the fuck?"

The words slipped out before she could stop them. Brittney stood at the entrance, shocked beyond words as she stared at the motionless figure lying several feet away from her.

"Is something the matter?" Alek, who had already reached her bedroom, peeked back out with concern.

Brittney reacted immediately, forcing brightness into her voice. "Oh, everything is alright. I just nearly slipped, but I'm good now."

Alek shook her head sympathetically. "Be careful, Brittney. This is definitely not the time to get injured. Anyway, see you later."

She disappeared into her room and shut the door.

The sound seemed strangely final to Brittney. She was alone now, with whatever the hell she had just discovered lying unconscious in the middle of her bedroom. For several seconds, she remained frozen at the entrance until the possibility of Aria suddenly coming out of her room occurred to her.

Brittney quickly stepped inside and locked the door behind her.

She leaned against it for a moment, trying to collect herself. Okay. There was no reason to panic. The entire purpose of setting those traps had been to catch any rat shifter stupid enough to sneak into her room again.

And there was absolutely no reason to fear a rat. They were just tiny, disgusting, annoyingly pesky creatures with four horrible little legs and an irritating habit of climbing over things they had absolutely no business touching.

A shiver ran through her.

Of all the beasts in this academy, why did rats have to be the ones that revolted her the most?

Gathering her courage, Brittney pushed away from the door and cautiously approached the unconscious intruder, carefully stepping around the traps that had already been triggered.

Then she noticed the uniform. Green.

Brittney stopped. "What the fuck?"

Her eyes widened as she finally took in the deep green jacket covering the intruder's body.

Therion wore navy. Ophidian wore green.

She had been expecting a rat shifter, what the hell was a serpent doing inside her room?

Her earlier disgust disappeared, replaced by something much colder.

The rat shifter from before had only wanted to prank them. This was different. A student from House Ophidian had deliberately broken into her bedroom while she was away.

Why? Had he come to kill her? Or worse, all of them?

Brittney's stomach tightened. From everything she had heard about the previous Concordia Programs, snake bites had been responsible for more than a few human deaths. Some victims had died before anyone even realized they had been poisoned. For all she knew, this serpent had intended to deal with her first before moving on to Aria, Alek, and Trisha.

Her first instinct was to scream for the others. Brittney almost did only to stop herself. The girls had only just gone into their rooms after one of the most chaotic days of their lives. They needed a moment to breathe, and the intruder was unconscious for now. She could raise the alarm later.

First, she needed to make sure the bastard stayed exactly where he was because tranquilizers wore off eventually. And when this serpent woke up, she had every intention of making sure he regretted choosing her room to break into.

Brittney carefully dismantled the tranquilizer trap she had rigged near the entrance. The last thing she needed was to accidentally drug herself while trying to deal with an unconscious intruder.

She moved slowly, releasing the tension from the trip wire before removing the launcher from where she had concealed it, taking extra care not to make enough noise to alert the girls in the other rooms.

Once she was finished, Brittney placed the entire setup carefully on the bed. She really needed to be more conservative with her supplies from now on. She had no idea how easy it would be to replace any of this stuff in Bestial City, especially when every delivery entering the academy was probably inspected.

Back home, she could order whatever she wanted without anyone asking too many questions. Her family's influence had also made sneaking her stuff into the Concordia Program considerably easier than it should have been.

Here, however, nobody gave a damn who her family was. She was human, and worse, a participant in a government program where their movements were probably monitored more closely than she realized.

If someone decided to inspect a suspicious package addressed to her, Brittney had absolutely no intention of explaining why an eighteen-year-old girl needed tranquilizer darts, trip wires, restraints, and enough trapping equipment to concern the average police officer.

She crouched beside her bed and reached beneath, pulling out a compact black case she had deliberately hidden underneath it. Brittney entered the four-digit combination into the locks, one after another. Two quiet clicks followed before she pressed both releases with her thumbs.

The lid sprang open.

Everything inside had its own compartment. Several lengths of thin trapping cord were wound into perfect coils along one side, secured beneath the narrow elastic straps.

Four remaining tranquilizer darts rested inside individual padded slots, while beside them lay the compact tranquilizer pistol they belonged to. A few smaller tools occupied the remaining compartments, everything arranged with the kind of meticulousness that would probably make anyone who saw it question what kind of childhood Brittney had experienced.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 119: A Serpent In Her Room - 2

"He had broken into her room searching for answers. She intended to make sure he woke up with questions."

~ Rebel Beast

Brittney surprisingly had a fun childhood, once upon a time. Before everything went to hell, she had been a daddy's girl.

Her father had never particularly cared that his first child was a daughter. If anything, he'd dragged her into every hobby he probably would have shared with a son.

He had taken her fishing before she was old enough to bait her own hook, taught her how to camp and build a proper fire, and showed her how to tie knots that wouldn't loosen under pressure.

They had gone hiking through forests, spent weekends practicing archery, learned how to follow animal tracks, and once spent an entire summer competing over who could build the better snare without actually catching anything in it.

Those had been some of the happiest years of her life. Before he divorced her mother, and married her best friend. Before the daughter he'd once proudly called his little partner somehow became an embarrassment he preferred not to acknowledge.

Brittney's expression hardened as she picked up the thin trapping cords.

"Asshole," she muttered.

She pushed the memory aside and examined what she had. Unfortunately, these weren't designed for restraining people. They were meant for traps, and while they could probably work in an emergency, she wasn't stupid enough to trust them against a beast shifter.

Brittney ran a frustrated hand through her hair. She knew she'd brought a proper rope.

Turning toward the wardrobe, she pulled out one of her luggage bags and unzipped it. The clothes immediately became casualties of her search as she tossed them aside without a care.

"Come on..." she muttered, only for her finger to finally brush against something rough beneath the remaining clothes.

Brittney's eyes brightened.

"There you are."

She pulled out three lengths of sturdy rope bundled together in a tight coil, each one looped neatly around the others and secured by a single binding knot to keep them from unraveling inside her luggage.

Now that was something she could work with. Brittney slowly turned toward the unconscious serpent and a devious smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"Alright, snake boy," she murmured. "Let's make sure you don't wake up in a bad mood."

Brittney dragged a chair across the room and positioned it directly behind him before squatting beside his unconscious body. Before anything else, she needed to make sure snake boy wasn't carrying any unpleasant surprises.

She began patting him down, carefully checking the pockets of his uniform. The first yielded a phone, which she immediately confiscated and placed on the bed. The next contained some cash and a few other personal items. Then her fingers brushed against something slim and rectangular tucked inside an inner pocket of his jacket.

Brittney pulled it out and it turned out to be a narrow leather case. Curious, she flipped it open and found several lock picks arranged neatly inside, each tool held securely in its own little slot.

Her eyebrows shot up. So that was how he'd gotten inside.

He hadn't slipped beneath the door in snake form or crawled through some ridiculously tiny opening as she'd initially assumed. The bastard had simply picked the lock.

Brittney had to admit she was mildly impressed.

"Naughty serpent," she murmured with a grin.

She tossed the case onto her bed beside his phone. That belonged to her now.

Then the real work began.

Brittney tucked her hands beneath his arms and attempted to haul him upright.

Nothing happened.

Her brows furrowed. "Oh, come on."

She adjusted her grip and tried again, putting considerably more strength into it this time. His upper body lifted several inches before the full weight of him nearly dragged her straight back down.

"Heavens above, what the fuck do they feed you people?"

Brittney released him and stood there for a second, breathing hard as she reconsidered her approach. He didn't look that heavy. Tall, certainly, with the lean build most serpent shifters seemed to possess, but apparently all that muscle beneath his uniform weighed considerably more than she'd expected.

Taking a deep breath, Brittney planted her feet firmly on the floor, crouched behind him and hooked both arms beneath his. This time, she used her legs rather than her back and heaved with everything she had.

The effort nearly killed her.

"Come on, you oversized worm!"

Somehow, she managed to drag him backward until his body reached the chair. With one final burst of strength, Brittney hauled him upward and practically dumped him onto the seat like an extremely expensive sack of rice.

She immediately dropped to her knees in front of him, breathing as though she'd just completed an entire marathon.

"Good God."

For several seconds, Brittney remained there recovering. Then she happened to look up.

And paused.

With his eyes closed and that calculating expression gone from his face, the serpent looked unexpectedly peaceful. He was handsome too, which was extremely inconvenient. His lashes were ridiculously thick for a man, casting faint shadows beneath his eyes, and his lips were full enough to—

Brittney blinked. What the fuck was she doing?

She shook her head with a shudder.

Absolutely not.

This was not the time to start lusting after cute serpents who broke into people's bedrooms. Especially ones who might have entered with every intention of murdering her.

Brittney pushed herself to her feet and grabbed the rope.

"Back to business."

She stepped behind the chair and began winding the rope around his torso, securing his arms tightly against the backrest before looping it several times around both him and the chair. Years of knot-tying returned almost automatically as her fingers worked, tightening each restraint before finishing with a knot she knew wouldn't loosen simply because someone struggled against it.

She stepped around him afterward, inspecting her work with satisfaction.

Yeah. Brittney took back what she'd said earlier.

Snake boy was definitely going to wake up in a bad mood.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 120: Who Are you?

Chapter 120: Who Are you?

"Serpents are patient creatures. They watch, they wait, they strike. But even serpents occasionally slither into the wrong nest."

~ Rebel Beast

"Urgh..."

Venus groaned as consciousness slowly returned, bringing with it the unpleasant sensation that someone had replaced his brain with mush. His head felt unbearably heavy, his thoughts sluggish and disconnected as he struggled to remember what the hell had happened.

He tried to move and immediately discovered another problem. His muscles were weak. He wasn't talking about mere tiredness here, but a strange lethargy, as if his body had forgotten how to obey him. That was definitely not normal.

Venus forced his eyes open and everything was blurry at first. Shapes bled into one another beneath the light, and through the haze, he made out the blurry outline of a woman.

Venus frowned. What the hell was going on?

For one ridiculous moment, his drugged mind supplied the only explanation it could manage.

Had he died?

Perhaps this was the palace of the Serpent God and she was some divine maiden sent to welcome him into the afterlife. Venus considered that possibility with surprising seriousness.

It made sense. He had lived an exceptionally honorable life, after all. Well... perhaps honorable was stretching it. But surely years of loyal service to his prince counted for something.

The robberies had been Caelis's idea most of the time, and the occasional blackmail, spying, trespassing, and other questionable activities had always been committed for perfectly reasonable purposes.

Mostly.

Venus shook his head, hoping to clear some of the fog clouding his vision, before forcing his eyes open again. This time, the room came into better focus, and so did the dark brown-haired woman standing beside the wardrobe. She was changing.

He swallowed.

She had already pulled on a tank top, but from the waist down, she wore nothing except a red thong. Her back was turned to him, which meant she obviously hadn't realized he was awake yet. Otherwise, she probably wouldn't have chosen that exact moment to bend over and reach for the trousers pooled near her feet.

Venus swore to the Serpent God he wasn't a pervert. But heavens above, he was still a man. Technically, half-man.

His gaze dropped before good sense could intervene, and he caught the generous curve of her ass as she stepped into her trousers. The girl lifted one leg, then the other, the movement making her hips sway as she tugged the material upward.

Venus stared.

All the blood in his body seemed to rush in two very unfortunate directions. The first was straight to his brain, which had apparently recovered from the tranquilizer quickly enough to appreciate the view. The second traveled considerably lower, and judging by the sudden tightening in his trousers, that part of him had recovered even faster.

A strained groan escaped him. Venus clenched his hands, intending to adjust himself somehow, only for his arms to refuse to move.

What the fuck?

His gaze snapped downward, and he finally saw his present condition. Ropes were wound around his chest, waist, and arms, securing him firmly to a chair. Even his wrists had been bound behind the backrest, leaving him with almost no room to maneuver.

The groan must have alerted her because Brittney spun around so violently she nearly lost her balance. Her eyes widened.

"Shit!"

She abandoned her trousers halfway up her hips and rushed toward the bed. Within seconds, she had grabbed the tranquilizer pistol and aimed it directly at him.

Venus's eyes narrowed on the weapon. So that was what had taken him down.

Brittney's chest rose and fell quickly beneath her tank top, partly from the sudden dash across the room and partly from the realization that the beast she'd captured was finally awake. Her grip tightened around the pistol.

"So not only do you break into women's rooms," she accused, "you spy on them while they're changing too?"

Venus lifted his gaze to her face. "Not my fault you were giving me a good show." The words left his mouth before his common sense returned.

Venus almost cursed himself. A good show? Really?

He was tied to a fucking chair with a pistol pointed at him, and apparently his first instinct was to antagonize the woman responsible.

It all made sense to him now. The room he had broken into hadn't been Aria Aspen's. This must be one of her roommates. Not that he'd taken the time to learn their names. His entire attention had been focused on Aria Aspen.

A tick formed in his jaw. Well, fuck. How was he going to handle this? Or rather, how was she going to handle him?

Venus pulled against the ropes, testing just how securely she had tied him. There was barely any give. Whoever this girl was, she knew her knots. He twisted his wrists next, searching for some weakness he could exploit, but Brittney was already watching him too closely to give him the chance.

"Don't even think about it," she warned, immediately raising the pistol higher. For all she knew, he could be preparing to shift, and Brittney had absolutely no intention of discovering what a pissed-off serpent looked like in its beast form while trapped inside her bedroom.

Brittney narrowed her eyes at him. "This tranquilizer might not look like much, but what's in it is potent enough to put down a fully grown lion within seconds and keep it unconscious for hours." Her gaze deliberately traveled over him before returning to his face. "You're just a serpent. Something tells me you don't want to find out what a second dose would do to you."

Venus stopped moving. His brows slowly furrowed.

There was something deeply unsettling about this girl. The traps had been the first warning. Now she casually spoke about sedating large predators as if this wasn't her first time handling one.

Venus studied her more carefully. Just like that, Caelis's conspiracy theory didn't seem quite as ridiculous as it had before.

Was it really a coincidence that Aria Aspen, the human Caelis had already found suspicious, had been assigned to live with a girl who kept elaborate traps inside her bedroom?

Perhaps His Highness had been right to be cautious after all. Something about this year's Concordia Program felt different, and Venus was beginning to suspect the humans sent to Bestiaris Academy weren't as innocent as he thought they were.

"Who are you?" Venus finally asked.

Brittney's eyebrows rose. Of all the questions she had expected from the intruder tied to her chair, that certainly wasn't one of them.

Slowly, she lifted her chin, refusing to let the uncertainty show on her face.

"I think the better question is..." Her finger remained close to the trigger as her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Who are you, serpent?"

Chapter 121: The Truce

She wasn't joking. Venus could tell from the determined look in her eyes and the steadiness of the weapon pointed directly at him. Whatever uncertainty she might have felt about holding a beast captive had disappeared. If he gave her a reason to pull that trigger, she would.

"Venus Crotalus," he answered.

"Crotalus?" Brittney's face twisted. "What kind of weird-ass name is that?"

Venus scowled at her, genuinely offended. The Crotalus name had commanded respect in the Serpent line for generations. They might not possess royal blood, but his family had influence, and enough political power that very few serpents were foolish enough to insult them openly. Apparently, nobody had bothered to teach this human the significance of the name she had just mocked.

His pride demanded that he correct her immediately. The weapon aimed at his chest suggested otherwise.

Venus wisely chose survival.

"And what, pray tell, is your beloved name?" he asked instead, his voice dripping with obvious sarcasm.

Brittney stared at him. Then her eyebrows slowly climbed.

"Wait." Genuine disbelief crossed her face. "You don't know the name of the human you came here to kill?"

Venus blinked in confusion. "What?"

Brittney scoffed, looking almost offended on his behalf. "The audacity of you beasts really needs to be studied. You break into my room to murder me, and you couldn't even bother learning my name first?"

For several seconds, Venus could only stare at her. Then it dawned on him. She thought he'd come here to kill her.

Well, shit.

Venus couldn't exactly blame her for reaching that conclusion. Their kind hadn't given the humans much reason to assume otherwise. Several contestants from previous Concordia Programs had died under suspicious circumstances, and serpents in particular hadn't exactly earned themselves a reputation for mercy.

Still, being accused of an assassination he hadn't even planned offended him on a professional level.

"If I had come here to kill you," Venus said dryly, "I assure you, I would have at least learned your name first."

"You didn't come here to murder me?" Brittney asked, genuine surprise crossing her face. For a moment, she actually seemed willing to consider the possibility. Then suspicion returned just as quickly. "You're lying."

"I am not lying."

"If you're not lying, then why are you here?" Brittney demanded. "Why did you sneak into my room?"

"I came here to—" Venus stopped himself immediately.

He had nearly said too much.

There was no way in hell he could tell her he'd broken into the suite looking for information about Aria Aspen. That would only lead to more questions. Why Aria? What did they want with her? Who had sent him? Eventually, everything would lead back to Caelis, and Venus would sooner let this irritating human shoot him with every tranquilizer dart she possessed than betray His Highness.

"You came here to do what?" Brittney pressed when he didn't continue.

Venus swallowed, his mind racing for an explanation convincing enough to satisfy her.

The problem was that the girl was sharp. Far sharper than he'd initially given her credit for. He couldn't simply throw together some pathetic excuse about getting lost. She had already found the lock picks he'd used to enter the suite, and considering he was currently tied to a chair in her bedroom, claiming he'd wandered inside by accident would only make him sound like an idiot.

Brittney watched his expression carefully. He was stalling. She could tell.

"You see!" she accused, lifting the tranquilizer pistol again. "You can't even explain why you're here because you know damn well—"

"Karen sent me!" The lie escaped Venus before he could reconsider it.

Brittney froze.

"What?" The pistol lowered several inches as surprise replaced the suspicion on her face.

Venus almost sighed with relief. Well, almost.

"What does Karen want?" Brittney asked suddenly.

If that bitch had sent him here to harm them, Karen could rest assured she would be ending her pathetic life today.

Now came the dilemma. What excuse could Venus possibly make about Karen that would sound believable? Fortunately, it didn't take long for an idea to form. Being Caelis's assistant meant he had learned to think quickly and resolve crises, notwithstanding how unusual his current predicament happened to be.

The thing about a perfect lie was knowing how much truth to sprinkle into it.

He answered. "Karen overheard that I was coming here to deliver a confidential agreement for Maverick to sign—"

"What confidential agreement?" Brittney interrupted.

"It's essentially a consent and liability agreement," Venus explained. "Maverick has to sign it before he's permitted to participate in tomorrow's fight. The arena belongs to Caelis, and we have to ensure neither His Highness nor the arena can be held legally or financially responsible in the event of serious injury or casualties. As his second-in-command, handling matters like that falls under my responsibilities."

"Whoa, wait a minute..." Brittney clearly hadn't seen that coming. "You're Caelis Cobryn's second-in-command?"

There was unmistakable awe in her voice.

"Yes, my lady," Venus replied, unable to keep a trace of pride from entering his tone. Hopefully, that little revelation had finally made some impression on her.

"I have Caelis Cobryn, the Basilisk Prince's second-in-command, tied to a chair in my bedroom," Brittney muttered to herself, now pacing the room while Venus waited patiently to learn his fate.

"Actually," he corrected, because apparently his pride wouldn't allow him to leave it there, "First Fang is the official title. There is also a Second Fang and Third Fang, but His Highness prefers to keep me closest."

"Whoa." Brittney stopped pacing. "This is mind-blowing. I wish I had popcorn for this."

"Popcorn?" Venus repeated incredulously.

Did she think this was some sort of documentary?

"Alright." Brittney suddenly turned toward him. "Let's make a deal."

Venus's interest sharpened. "What deal?"

Brittney finally lowered the tranquilizer pistol. "I don't shoot you again, and in return, you don't shift into some giant serpent and try to kill me."

Venus stared at her.

"Also," she continued before he could respond, "you should know there are Therion guards all over the house now. Unless you want to explain why you broke into the human girls' apartment and deal with Maverick's wrath afterward, I suggest you cooperate. Behave yourself, answer my questions, and who knows?" A sly smile appeared on her face. "I might even help you get out of here without anyone discovering you were ever here."

Venus considered her offer carefully.

He shouldn't trust her. Humans and serpents naturally distrusted each other, and this particular human had already tranquilized him, tied him to a chair, confiscated his belongings, and threatened to tranquilize him again.

Yet there was something about her that made him want to trust her.

A little.

"Fine," Venus finally said. "Deal. Now, if you don't mind, would you loosen these restraints, please?"

"Oh, no." Brittney shook her head immediately. "You're still a serpent. I'm keeping you exactly where you are in case you decide to go back on your word."

Venus's expression flattened. Apparently, her trust only traveled in one direction.

Brittney walked over to her bed, climbed onto it, and made herself comfortable. She stretched out on her side and propped her head against one hand as though she hadn't just negotiated a temporary truce with a beast she'd captured in her bedroom.

"Now..." Her eyes gleamed with curiosity. "Tell me what Karen wanted from you. And then you can explain this First Fang, Second Fang, Third Fang thing. I'm interested in serpent culture."

Venus sighed.

Apparently, he didn't have much of a choice here. To think the great Viper would one day find himself tied to a chair, narrating the customs and hierarchy of his people to a human girl.

Strange things were indeed happening.

"So..." he began.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 122: This Snake Won't Bite

"You can trust a snake, but never forget what its fangs were made for."

~ Rebel Beast

"Ooh, sorry about this," Brittney said, finally remembering her trousers were still sitting halfway down her hips.

How ridiculous she must have looked all this while. Oh well. She tugged them the rest of the way up and fastened them around her waist without a hint of embarrassment.

Heavens forbid her stepmother had been there to witness such a thing. She would have called her improper, unchaste, indecent, shameless, immodest, vulgar, ill-bred, and probably a dozen other antiquated insults reserved for women who dared behave too

loudly or freely for her liking. All because the girl had accidentally been caught half-dressed in her own bedroom.

Unknown to Brittney, that single action brought the image of her beautifully shaped ass straight back into Venus's mind, and he gulped. Hard.

Weren't human females supposed to be reserved? Delicate? Easily embarrassed? This one was almost vulgar by everything he'd heard about humans. Venus found himself liking her. She was a breath of fresh air.

"Yes." Brittney relaxed now that she was properly dressed. "And since we're apparently exchanging introductions, my name is Brittney Thorne."

"Thorne?" Venus repeated thoughtfully. "Like the thorn of a rose. A flower beautiful enough to tempt the hand closer, only to draw blood from anyone careless enough to forget that beauty sometimes comes armed."

Brittney lifted a brow, visibly impressed despite herself. "Okay, that was lovely, serpent boy. Except I'm Thorne with an 'e.'"

"Serpent boy?" Venus repeated, finding himself amused rather than offended.

"Well, aren't you one?" Brittney challenged.

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "I suppose I am."

"Alright, no more distractions. Let's get into the story." Brittney shifted eagerly on the bed, clearly unable to contain her curiosity.

Venus sighed. "Where do I begin?"

"Karen Donovan. What does she want?"

"Of course," Venus replied dryly.

Naturally, she wanted to begin with the one part of his story that was completely fabricated. The one part that could earn him another tranquilizer dart to the chest if he made a single mistake.

Venus settled against the chair as much as the ropes allowed and studied Brittney for a moment. He would have to be very careful with this one.

"Karen Donovan wanted me to spy on your room."

Brittney immediately sat up. "Spy on our room? Why? What does she want? Did she ask you to plant something incriminating in here? To kill us? Poison us?" The questions came one after another before Venus could answer a single one.

Venus sighed. "Like I said before, I'm not here to hurt you."

"Then what does Karen Donovan want?" Brittney demanded, her temper rising.

"Would you lower your voice?" Venus hissed, glancing toward the door.

She had promised to help him escape, but at this rate, she was going to draw every one of her roommates into the room. Dealing with one human female who could plant traps was already more than enough. Venus wasn't interested in discovering what the other three were capable of.

"Fine." Brittney lowered her voice, although none of the authority disappeared from it. "What does Karen want?"

"She wasn't satisfied with the room we gave her. She wanted me to find out whether you girls had been given better accommodations than she was."

Venus knew he was taking a risk with that lie, but from the little he had already witnessed of Karen Donovan, she was absolutely capable of something this petty. She had barely spent a day in House Ophidian before complaining about everything she could find, and from what he'd gathered, she and Aria Aspen already despised each other. If Brittney knew Karen well enough, she would hopefully fill in the rest herself.

"Of course." Brittney rolled her eyes, looking completely unsurprised. "That bitch wouldn't be satisfied even in her own house."

Her reaction gave Venus the confidence to continue. "You don't say. We serpents already know we have a mad dog in our den."

"Mad dog?" Brittney couldn't stop the laugh that escaped her, quickly bringing a hand to her mouth.

Venus shrugged. "I couldn't think of a better animal to describe her."

"More like a dragon. The way she opens that mouth of hers, it's a miracle fire doesn't come out."

"Or a peacock," Venus suggested. "I swear, even His Highness Caelis doesn't possess half the pride Karen Donovan does. You should have seen the way she barged into his office earlier today demanding to be fed."

"Oh, that's Karen alright." Brittney chuckled. "I don't envy your job at all."

"Karen can try but I work for Caelis, not her," Venus corrected her, smirking.

"And yet you still did her bidding." Brittney arched a brow. "You snuck into our room."

"A terrible case of curiosity, I suppose." Venus glanced pointedly at the ropes securing him to the chair. "And we can both see how wonderfully that worked out for me."

"Yeah, here you are." Brittney nodded, oddly pleased with herself.

Technically, she had captured a serpent.

Not just any serpent either, but the First Fang of Caelis Cobryn, the Basilisk Prince himself. Brittney couldn't help the ridiculous spark of pride that came with the realization. Who the hell else could boast about something like that?

"Are you hungry?" she suddenly asked.

Strange as it might sound, Brittney was actually enjoying her time with the serpent. He was unexpectedly entertaining company, and since he was technically her guest now—albeit a trespassing guest she tied to a chair—she supposed the least she could do was make his stay memorable.

And perhaps feed him while she was at it.

Venus said. "Huh?"

"Hungry." Brittney studied him as though the answer should have been obvious. "By my calculations, if you came to Maverick's office before sneaking in here, then you probably missed breakfast. It's already noon. You must be starving by now."

Venus almost corrected her.

Serpents weren't humans. They didn't need to eat every few hours unless they simply wanted to. Their slower metabolism allowed them to conserve energy far more efficiently, and one substantial meal could sustain him for days before hunger gnawed at him. And yes, he had eaten recently enough that food was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Yes," Venus heard himself say instead.

He went still. What the hell was he doing?

Brittney didn't seem to notice his confusion. She was already climbing off the bed, apparently satisfied with his answer.

Venus watched her, equally bewildered by himself. There was absolutely no reason to lie about something so insignificant, especially when he was already juggling one considerably more dangerous lie concerning Karen Donovan.

Yet he had.

Curiosity, Venus decided. That was all it was. Everything about this strange human female had managed to surprise him since he'd stumbled into her room, and apparently some reckless part of him wanted to see what she would do next.

Brittney went over to her wardrobe and pulled out a small container she'd tucked away with some of her things. When she returned, she was smiling, choosing this time to sit on the edge of the bed across from him.

"These are some of my favorite cookies," she declared happily, opening the container. "And this is my last batch, so you can consider it an honor that I'm willing to share them with my intruder."

Venus chuckled. "Anything my lady says."

"Wait." Brittney paused just as she was about to take one out. A thought had suddenly occurred to her. "Snakes eat cookies, right? I mean, you're part human. You should be able to—"

"I'm physically capable of eating ordinary human food because I'm a shifter," Venus explained. "My serpent side simply prefers meat, eggs, fish, anything rich in protein." His gaze dropped briefly to the container in her lap before returning to her face. "So yes, I'll eat your cookie."

Brittney froze. Heat rushed straight into her face before she could stop it.

That fucking serpent.

Did he seriously not know how that sounded?

Her suspicious gaze snapped toward him, searching his expression for the slightest hint that he'd done it on purpose. There was nothing.

Venus sat there with such an innocent expression that Brittney genuinely couldn't tell whether he had just made the most shameless innuendo imaginable or whether she was the filthy-minded one for interpreting it that way.

Fine. Calm down. It was just a cookie. Why the hell was she making it weird?

"Okay..." Brittney reached into the container and pulled out a cookie. She was about to stretch it toward him when she remembered one small problem.

His hands were still tied behind his back.

Venus must have reached the same conclusion because he gave the ropes a small tug before looking pointedly at her, silently reminding her that she had made him completely incapable of feeding himself.

Brittney sighed.

"Fine," she said reluctantly. "I'll feed you, but only if you promise not to bite me. Is that understood?"

The ridiculousness of that statement occurred to her almost immediately.

She was asking a serpent not to bite her.

Perhaps she really had lost her mind. Less than an hour ago, she'd found this man unconscious on her bedroom floor and tied him to a chair because she'd been convinced he intended to murder her. Now she was preparing to hand-feed him cookies.

A wide smile slowly spread across Venus's face, revealing just enough teeth to make Brittney reconsider the wisdom of getting her fingers anywhere near his mouth.

"Don't worry," he assured her, amusement dancing in his dark eyes. "This snake won't bite."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 123: A Trick With His Tongue

"Peace Was The Experiment. Desire Was The Complication."

~ Rebel Beast

"You promise?" Brittney asked, still not entirely convinced. Come on, this was a snake she was talking about. There was no way she was putting her fingers anywhere near that dangerous mouth of his based on his word alone.

"I promise," Venus replied with enough confidence to convince a less suspicious woman.

Unfortunately for him, Brittney was not that woman.

"Swear on your god."

"Really?" Venus looked genuinely amused by her tactics. "What if I'm not religious?"

"I'll take my chances with my instincts, then, and they're telling me you serpents respect your god."

Venus studied her for a moment before conceding. "Fine. I'll give you your oath."

He would have raised a hand solemnly if she hadn't tied both of them behind his back.

"I swear before the Serpent God that should I bite dearest Brittney while she feeds me her delicious cookie..." His expression remained perfectly serious. "May he take away my family jewel."

Brittney's jaw dropped. For several seconds, she simply stared at him, too stunned to process what had just come out of his mouth.

Then everything clicked into place. That bastard had known exactly what he was saying!

Brittney slowly narrowed her eyes. "Nicely played, serpent boy. Nicely fucking played."

To think she'd spent the past few minutes wondering whether she was the filthy-minded one. Meanwhile, the bastard had been sitting there pretending he didn't understand the double meaning.

The smirk that finally appeared on Venus's face confirmed everything. He had been stringing her along the entire time.

Venus couldn't help himself. Watching the realization spread across her face had been far too entertaining. It wasn't his fault human slang was remarkably easy to pick up, especially when certain words came with such interesting alternative meanings.

Besides, after the way she treated him, surely he was entitled to have a little fun.

"Now that we've established the safety of my family jewel," Venus said pleasantly, opening his mouth, "I believe you owe me a cookie."

Brittney gaped at him. Perhaps she should have tranquilized him twice.

However, Brittney Thorne was not one to accept defeat. He had started this little game, and she was going to finish it.

Just like that, a ridiculous idea entered her head. One so outrageous that none of her roommates would ever believe her if she told them later.

"Game on," Brittney told him.

Something gleamed in Venus's eyes, his interest immediately piqued. He had no idea what the human was planning, but judging from the sudden confidence on her face, he was certainly interested in finding out.

Brittney rose from the bed with the cookie container in one hand and walked toward him. Venus watched her approach, expecting her to stop in front of the chair. Instead, she rested her free hand on his shoulder for balance and, before he could begin to guess her intentions, swung one leg over his thighs and settled astride his lap.

Dearest Serpent god.

Venus's mind nearly emptied. The human was sitting on his fucking lap.

Her thighs rested on either side of his, her body close enough that only a few inches separated them. Worse, the position placed her dangerously close to his crotch, and after the little performance he'd accidentally witnessed earlier, Venus did not need that particular part of his body receiving any more encouragement.

Slowly, he lifted his gaze to her face. "You do realize you're seated on a serpent, don't you?"

He meant to remind her that despite the ropes and their ridiculous conversation, he was still a predator. Apparently, Brittney heard something entirely different.

"Really?" She glanced down at him with exaggerated surprise. "Because all I see is a serpent who cannot bite."

She emphasized the last two words with such delight that Venus felt a chuckle rumble through his chest.

"I see."

Her audacity was becoming increasingly entertaining. Very well. If Brittney wanted to play, he would see how long that confidence lasted.

"Now open up, serpent boy," she ordered him.

Venus was beginning to like that nickname far more than he should.

"As my lady wishes."

He obediently opened his mouth. Brittney reached into the container and picked out one. She brought the cookie toward his mouth, holding one end between her fingers so he could bite off the other half.

Except Venus didn't bite off half. He took the entire thing instead.

Brittney barely had time to release it before something flicked across the tips of her fingers. She gasped and jerked her hand back.

"What was that?"

The sensation had been strange. Cool, wet, and incredibly light. It had happened so quickly that if she hadn't felt the lingering dampness against her fingertips, she might have convinced herself she'd imagined it.

Venus chewed innocently. "What was what?"

Brittney narrowed her eyes at him.

"Nothing."

She wasn't falling for that expression. Something had definitely touched her, and judging from the suspicious amusement hiding behind his eyes, the bastard knew exactly what it was.

Venus swallowed before humming appreciatively. "Hmm. What a sweet and creamy cookie."

For once, Brittney genuinely didn't know how to respond. There was no doubt, he wasn't talking about the cookie filling.

"Another one," Venus requested.

Fine.

Brittney reached into the container again, except this time she was prepared. She deliberately held the cookie by its very edge and brought it toward his mouth, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

Venus accepted it just as obediently as before. Then she saw his tongue flicked out.

Brittney's eyes widened.

For the briefest second, his tongue looked almost human as it passed his lips. Then it suddenly changed, the tip separating into two slender points, dark and unmistakably serpentine, before flicking deliberately across her fingertips.

The movement was so fast that Brittney would have missed it entirely if she hadn't been watching for it.

She froze, while Venus calmly chewed his cookie.

"Is something the matter?" he asked with such convincing concern that she might have believed him if not for his eyes.

There it was. A challenge.

He wanted a reaction. The sneaky bastard was waiting to see whether she would recoil now that she'd discovered exactly what had been touching her.

Brittney slowly released the breath caught in her lungs and forced every trace of surprise from her expression. Two could play that game.

"Nothing," she replied casually.

Then she reached into the container again.

"Want another one?"

Venus's gaze lingered on her face for a moment, and a dark excitement shone across his expression when he realized she wasn't backing down.

"Certainly," Venus replied. He could play this game for as long as he wanted.

Brittney didn't hold the cookie delicately by the edge this time. She had grown bolder, her fingers curled around almost half of it as she brought it toward his mouth, no longer caring whether Venus tried that little trick with his tongue again.

Venus, the Serpent, did not disappoint.

He took the snack from her fingers, and the moment the last piece disappeared between his lips, his tongue slipped out again. Except this time, there was nothing quick or accidental about it.

Brittney's breath caught.

She finally got a proper look at it. His tongue was longer than she'd originally thought, dark and slender, with the tip splitting neatly into two. Venus deliberately curled it around her ring finger.

Brittney went completely still.

The sensation was unlike anything she'd expected. His tongue was slick and strangely smooth as it wound around her finger, the forked ends dragging slowly along either side of it. A shiver swept through her before she could stop it, raising goosebumps along her arms as her heartbeat picked up.

That fucking serpent.

Venus's eyes remained fixed on hers as his tongue slid along her other finger once more, almost tauntingly, before finally retreating into his mouth.

Brittney pulled her hand away slowly, her gaze dropping to his lips as he began chewing the cookie, watching the slow movement of his jaw with far more fascination than anyone had any business giving to a man eating a biscuit.

Venus noticed and his chewing gradually slowed before stopping altogether. Brittney lifted her eyes and their gazes met.

Something changed between them.

The amusement that had been lingering in Venus's eyes was gone.

Brittney didn't know exactly when their ridiculous little game had stopped being funny, but suddenly she was painfully aware of everything.

The weight of herself on his lap, the warmth of his body beneath hers, and her thighs resting on either side of his. And the fact that his face was only inches away from hers.

Venus wasn't smiling anymore. Neither was she. Brittney's gaze dropped to his mouth again, and this time Venus caught the movement. Her heart slammed harder against her chest.

She should move. Instead, Brittney leaned closer.

It was barely noticeable at first, a small tilt forward that she could have easily pretended meant nothing. Except Venus moved too, closing some of the distance she had created.

Neither of them said a word.

Their faces drew closer until Brittney could feel the warmth of his breath against her lips. Her eyes began to close, and Venus tilted his head slightly, their mouths barely a breath apart when common sense finally came crashing back into her head.

What the hell was she doing? She was about to kiss a serpent. Not just any serpent either, but Caelis fucking Cobryn's second-in-command.

Brittney jerked backward so quickly that Venus blinked. She scrambled off his lap, nearly stumbling in her haste before catching herself.

"I should..." Brittney cleared her throat, suddenly finding it difficult to look directly at him. "I should check if there's an opening for you to leave."

Venus said nothing.

Good.

She didn't want to know what expression was currently on his face.

Brittney hurried toward the window and pulled it open, allowing the cooler air outside to hit her overheated skin. She leaned forward and peered down, immediately spotting several Therion guards stationed around the building.

Damn it.

Relief and disappointment hit her at the same time, and Brittney wasn't particularly pleased about the second one. As much as she had unexpectedly enjoyed Venus's company, there were certain lines one simply did not cross.

And sitting on the lap of an intruder she'd tranquilized and tied to a chair before nearly making out with him definitely qualified. She needed to get this serpent out of her room before she did something even crazier.

"There are still guards outside, so we're going to have to—" Brittney turned, the rest of the sentence dying in her throat.

The chair was empty and the ropes she'd wrapped securely around Venus lay in a loose heap on the floor.

There was no Venus.

"Oh God..." She gulped.

Then something cold and smooth brushed against her ankle.

Chapter 124: Playing House With A Serpent

She should have known better.

What the hell had she been thinking, sitting on his lap and feeding him cookies as though they were playing house? Venus might have been funny, charming, and surprisingly easy to talk to, but none of that changed what he was. In the end, serpents were beasts, and beasts were dangerous.

It dawned on Brittney then that she'd never truly had the upper hand. If Venus had wanted to escape, he could have easily shifted at any point and slipped free before she could blink. He had stayed because he'd chosen to.

Strangely enough, that realization comforted her almost as much as it frightened her. Brittney wanted to believe their ridiculous deal still meant something to him. That beneath whatever terrifying creature was currently moving somewhere around her feet was the same serpent who had teased her about cookies and swearing upon his family jewels that he wouldn't bite her.

That was the only reason Brittney remained as still as possible when he brushed against her ankle again. She knew enough about snakes not to make any sudden movements around one, and she certainly wasn't going to start screaming before she knew what Venus intended to do.

Snakes had never made her particularly squeamish anyway. Years ago, while traveling with her father, they'd visited a market where one of the handlers had draped a harmless boa around her shoulders. She remembered being fascinated by the weight, the strange smoothness of its scales, and the way its muscles had continuously curled against her skin.

This was nothing like that. Venus began climbing her.

"Holy shit," Brittney breathed. He was heavy as fuck.

She instinctively braced one hand against the windowsill as his body wound around her lower leg and continued upward. His scales sliding over her clothes with a faint rasp, muscles contracting beneath them as he used her body for support. Another thick coil passed around her waist, forcing Brittney to adjust her footing beneath his ever increasing weight.

He was treating her like a damn tree.

Brittney's heart hammered harder as more of him climbed upward. Venus wasn't some little garden snake she could simply shake from her clothes. His viper form was considerably larger than any natural specimen had a right to be, his body was thick and powerfully muscled. Yet for all that strength, his coils never tightened enough to hurt her. He could have constricted her until she couldn't breathe if he'd wanted to. But he didn't.

That mattered. At least, Brittney desperately hoped it did.

She felt another section of his body slide across her ribs before his head finally reached her shoulder. Venus curled partly around the back of her neck, and then his head rose beside her face.

Brittney stopped breathing.

Fuck.

Seeing a serpent from several feet away was one thing. Having the face of a giant viper inches from your own was a stuff of nightmare.

Venus was black. He was not a flat, lifeless black either. His scales were glossy and richly patterned, overlapping one another in perfect rows that caught the afternoon light from the window. Beneath certain angles, there were subtle traces of deep emerald that shone through the darkness before disappearing again.

His head was broad and distinctly triangular, narrowing sharply where it met his neck, while the scales above his eyes gave his face a naturally severe expression.

And those eyes...

Brittney couldn't stop staring at them.

They were a beautiful brown, with vertical pupils cutting through their centers like narrow blades. There was something unnervingly intelligent about them too, and not the vacant stare of an ordinary reptile. Brittney could tell, Venus was in there. He was watching, and studying every tiny reaction she made.

He looked lethal. But God help her, he was beautiful too.

Brittney had never imagined using that word for a snake before, yet there was no other way to describe him. His scales were flawless, his markings elegant, and there was

something almost regal about the way he held his head. Even the slow flick of that familiar forked tongue fascinated her now that she could see where it truly belonged.

Understanding dawned on Brittney.

This was Venus. The bastard was trying to scare her. After everything that had happened between them, he wanted to see whether one glimpse of his real form would send her screaming toward the door.

Brittney's fear immediately became a matter of principle. She lifted her chin.

"You don't scare me."

Venus stared at her. She stared right back at him. For several seconds, neither of them moved, until the viper's head suddenly drew backward. His mouth flew open, and Brittney nearly jumped out of her fucking skin.

A vicious hiss tore from him, so forceful and startling at such close range that every survival instinct Brittney possessed screamed at her to run.

His jaws opened impossibly wide, revealing the pale interior of his mouth and two long fangs unfolding from the roof of it. They were far larger than Brittney had expected, curved slightly backward and sharp enough that she suddenly understood why vipers had such a terrifying reputation.

His forked tongue flickered between them.

Brittney gulped. Okay. Maybe he scared her a little.

Her entire body had gone rigid, and she was reasonably certain her soul had briefly abandoned it. If she discovered later that she'd peed herself a little, that information was going with her to the grave.

Still, Brittney refused to move. It was no longer courage keeping her there, but pure, unreasonable stubbornness.

Eventually, Venus closed his mouth and the hiss faded.

Brittney narrowed her eyes. "Asshole."

His tongue flicked out once more and somehow, she knew he was pleased with himself.

Once her heart stopped trying to break through her rib cage, Brittney slowly lifted one hand. She made sure Venus could see it coming, giving him every opportunity to move away. When he remained where he was, she cautiously brought her fingers toward the side of his head.

Her fingertips touched his scales. His scales were dry and remarkably smooth beneath her fingers, with a subtle texture where each one overlapped the next. Her nervousness slowly gave way to curiosity.

Brittney stroked her fingers over the top of his head, following the pattern of his scales before cautiously tracing farther down his neck.

When Venus didn't move, she did it again. His posture seemed to relax beneath her touch, the tension leaving some of the muscles wrapped around her as his head settled more comfortably against her shoulder.

Brittney's lips curved into a slow smile. Oh, this was priceless. The terrifying viper was enjoying being petted.

"What a cute little serpent." She gave the top of his head a playful pat.

Venus's head whipped toward her hand with an offended hiss.

Brittney snatched her fingers back.

"Heavens!"

He hadn't actually bitten her, but those fangs had come close enough to remind her that their agreement had limitations.

"Fine, you've made your point." Brittney held up both hands in surrender. "You're terrifying, and ferocious. The most frightening serpent I've ever encountered. Happy?"

Venus's tongue flicked lazily in her direction and Brittney rolled her eyes.

"Now could you please get off me? Because, man, you weigh a fucking ton."

To her surprise, Venus listened.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 125: Dangerous Things

The Viper's head lowered from her shoulder, and slowly, his coils began loosening around her body. Brittney remained still while he unwound himself, feeling the powerful ripple of muscle beneath his scales as he traveled downward.

His body slipped across her waist, hips, and thighs in the same controlled manner he'd climbed her, each heavy coil releasing her one after another. The moment the last of his weight left her body and settled onto the floor, Brittney sucked in a deep breath.

Freedom.

She rolled her shoulders and stretched her back, suddenly appreciating what it felt like not to have an enormous viper using her as his personal climbing post.

Before Brittney could finish stretching the ache from her shoulders, Venus shifted.

It happened so quickly that she barely had time to register the change. One second, the enormous black viper was coiled at her feet, and the next, his body blurred and expanded before human Venus stood directly in front of her.

Completely naked.

"Holy beautiful creation," Brittney breathed.

Her brain stopped functioning.

Her gaze traveled shamelessly over his body before she thought of it. Venus was lean but powerfully built, with broad shoulders and a toned chest that tapered into a hard, defined stomach. There wasn't an ounce of unnecessary flesh on him. Every muscle looked like it had been carved into place, and the spiral tattoo etched at his side made the entire sight even more unfair.

Don't look lower.

Brittney swallowed.

Don't you fucking look lower!

For once, the sensible voice in her head was loud and clear. Unfortunately, curiosity had always been one of Brittney Thorne's greatest weaknesses.

Her eyes dropped. She let out a sharp breath.

Well. Apparently, there were some aspects of serpent anatomy that did not survive the transition into human form.

Brittney had no idea what she'd expected. Perhaps something unusual enough to remind her that Venus wasn't entirely human. Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, everything down there was unmistakably male.

Very unmistakably male.

And much larger than she had been prepared for.

Her inner slut approved wholeheartedly.

Brittney immediately dragged her gaze upward, only to discover Venus watching her with unmistakable mirth in his eyes.

He'd caught her staring.

She cleared her throat and attempted to gather some semblance of dignity, which was difficult considering she'd just inspected the naked man from head to toe.

"So now, not only do I have a serpent in my apartment, but a naked one as well."

"Oops." There wasn't an ounce of remorse in Venus's voice. "What are you going to do about it, my lady?" he asked.

Brittney narrowed her eyes. His voice had lowered, and for some reason, the accent beneath his words seemed more pronounced now. Brittney hated how much she liked the sound of it.

"I currently have two ideas fighting inside my head," she admitted.

Venus's brow lifted.

"One is telling me to kick you out of my window."

"And the other?"

Brittney released a shaky breath. Her gaze betrayed her again, traveling briefly over his chest and stomach, though this time she possessed enough self-control to stop there.

"The other," she said slowly, "is whispering some really, really dangerous things to me right now."

Something shifted in Venus's face. The amusement remained, but there it was replaced with something dark that made the atmosphere between them feel suddenly heavier.

"And which one are you going to listen to?" he asked.

Brittney stopped. She looked at him properly then.

If Venus had any common sense, he should have been helping her make the responsible decision. He should have grabbed some clothes — any clothes. Then find his way out, or at the very least reminded her that this was a terrible idea. The worst idea, even.

Instead, he stood there waiting. The bastard wasn't going to save her from herself.

Brittney sighed. "I tried."

Venus's lips twitched.

"I really did," she added. "But apparently, I have a weakness for bad decisions."

One step was all it took to close the distance between them before she could change her mind. Brittney slipped an arm around his neck, and kissed him.

Venus didn't hesitate.

The moment Brittney's lips met his, he kissed her back with enough hunger to steal the breath from her lungs, tilting his head and deepening the kiss before she had the chance to reconsider the terrible decision she'd just made.

Brittney moaned against his mouth, and

Venus swallowed the sound greedily.

His hands found her waist, sliding around her as he pulled her closer until there was barely any space left between them. Brittney felt the warmth of his bare body through the thin material of her clothes. This was going quite quickly but she didn't care anymore.

Then his tongue slipped between her lips.

Brittney nearly forgot how to breathe. She had already discovered there was nothing ordinary about a serpent's tongue, but experiencing it like this was something else entirely. The forked tip brushed against hers before curling around it with a dexterity that sent a shiver racing down her spine. Brittney responded without thinking, her fingers tightening against the back of his neck as their tongues tangled in a heated, unfamiliar dance.

Damn him. Even his kisses had to remind her that he wasn't human.

Brittney kissed him harder. This was insane.

Only a short while ago, she'd had this same man unconscious on her bedroom floor. Then she'd tied him to a chair, interrogated him, fed him cookies, nearly kissed him, watched him turn into a giant viper, and somehow all of that had led here.

She was making out with the intruder, and enjoying every fucking second of it.

That realization finally made Brittney break the kiss. She pushed against Venus's chest, forcing a few inches between them. Neither spoke as their breathing filled the silence instead.

Venus stared down at her, his lips slightly parted from their kiss, while Brittney struggled to gather enough sense to decide what happened next. His hands remained at her waist, but he didn't pull her back. He simply waited.

For one suspended moment, Brittney wondered whether this was where they stopped.

It probably should have been. She could tell him they'd gotten carried away. Or better, handed him something to cover himself, find a way past the guards, and send him back to House Ophidian before one of her roommates discovered that she'd somehow turned capturing an intruder into whatever the hell this was.

That would be the sensible thing to do.

Instead, Brittney's hands moved to the hem of her tank top and pulled it over her head.

Chapter 126: Leave No Bones

Warning: Snusnu ahead. The serpent has officially escaped containment.

~ Rebel Beast

Brittney might as well have placed a spell on him with the way Venus's eyes were trained on her. She wore no bra, so the moment the top was free, her breasts bounced loose, unrestrained.

Hell.

Venus felt his manhood tighten at the sight, arousal coiling low and immediate. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. They hadn't even started, and he was already this hard. How was he going to last at this rate?

This was the first time he was going to be with a human, and it should have concerned him. It didn't. Perhaps there was truth to what they said about men losing all sense at the thought of sex, because he certainly wasn't thinking straight right now.

Whatever this was between him and Brittney was bound to end badly. Even if it was possible for other beasts to cross that line, serpents and humans didn't mix, not really, not in any way that lasted. Perhaps it was the thrill of the forbidden pushing him forward, the pull of something he had no business wanting. He craved a taste of it anyway.

Venus wasn't sure he had ever seen a more beautiful woman. Brittney was all feminine curves, her dark hair tumbling over her shoulders like a waterfall caught mid-fall. She was, without question, a snake charmer, and he was already ensnared.

His gaze dropped to the swell of her chest, catching on the rosy, dusky peaks of her nipples, already pebbled from the air, or perhaps from the weight of his stare. His mind conjured a dozen visuals of what he wanted to do to them, each more distracting than the last.

It didn't help that Brittney caught him staring. She trailed a finger down to her chest and circled it slowly around one nipple, teasing. Venus swallowed hard, his throat working like a man dying of thirst in the middle of a desert. He was thirsty for her, and she knew it.

"So you're a boob man, serpent boy." Brittney's voice dropped low, seductive, her finger still moving in slow circles, her breath catching with every pass.

Venus watched, hypnotized, as she brought her other hand up to squeeze her breast, a soft gasp slipping past her lips, followed by a low, needy moan. He couldn't wait to have her. He wanted her the way a man wanted air after being held underwater too long.

His tongue flicked out, tasting the air between them, serpentine instinct rising to the surface. He could feel her arousal on it, sharp and sweet, with an undercurrent of her scent threaded through it, orange and peppercorn, and it nearly undid what little restraint he had left.

"Keep looking at me like that," Brittney murmured, "and I might just finish myself before you get the chance."

That did it. A dark and hungry glint shone in Venus's eyes.

"I dare you." Venus said.

Brittney smirked. She was crossing every fucking boundary here. There was no way in hell she was telling her roommates Venus had been in her room, not when it would lead to questions she had no intention of answering, questions that would eventually lead right back to what had happened between them.

She knew her friends weren't judgmental, but even with the fascination the Concordia girls seemed to have developed for beast men lately, serpent shifters ranked dead last on that list.

Brittney didn't share that prejudice. Not when the serpent in question had just given her one of the most memorable afternoons she'd had since arriving. So if she wanted to experiment with a little forbidden sex, that was entirely her business.

After all, it was just sex. Nothing more. When this was over, she and Venus would part ways, and life would move on. The next time they crossed paths, they'd probably fall right back into pretending to be enemies.

Venus's gaze darkened, desire simmering hot behind his eyes. He crossed to her bed and sat on the edge of it, then tapped his thigh, his voice low and commanding.

"Come here."

Brittney walked toward him slowly, putting a dramatic sway into her hips with every step. When she reached him, she lowered herself onto his lap, dragging her hips deliberately against his straining erection before finally settling.

A hiss tore from Venus's throat, and his hands shot to her hips to steady himself, his grip bordering on bruising. Brittney didn't complain. Not when it was proof of exactly how much she affected him.

Venus lifted one hand and caught her jaw, tilting her face toward his. "You are no innocent human," he said with a rough voice, "but a little demoness sent straight from hell to destroy me."

Brittney only smirked, intentionally rocking her hips forward against him in a slow roll. "How exactly do you intend to punish me, then?"

His eyes glinted with wicked promise. "Quite slowly, my lady."

He released her jaw, trailing his hand down the column of her throat, over her collarbone, until he reached the curve of her breast. He lifted both hands, palming her fully, kneading and squeezing leisurely. Brittney sighed, the sound low and satisfied. It felt unbearably good.

Then his mouth closed around her nipple, and Brittney let out a sharp cry before clamping her hand over her own mouth, remembering at the last second that her roommate slept just beyond the wall. Thank God for thick walls.

Hell.

Brittney threw her head back in bliss, one arm wound tight around his neck to keep from toppling backward. Venus sucked greedily, taking almost her entire areola into his mouth, his tongue working in slow, torturous circles.

"Fuck," she breathed, unable to hold back any longer, rolling her hips harder against the length of him.

Venus pulled back just enough to let her nipple slip free, the cool air rushing over the slick skin, before diving right back in, sucking nipples deep into his mouth again as if she were something sweet he couldn't get enough of.

His free hand slid to her waist, guiding her movements, helping her ride him in a rhythm that had her biting down on her lip every time the pleasure struck exactly right.

Brittney's heart pounded so loud she could hear it in her ears, the blood rushing hot through her veins as she moved faster, chasing the friction. Chasing him. She was close, achingly close, such that her thighs trembled with the effort of holding back.

Then Venus bit down, the sharp graze of his teeth against her nipple sending her over the edge. Brittney came with a cry that he swallowed instantly, his mouth crashing against hers, drinking down every desperate sound she made while her body shook apart around him.

She clung to him like he was her lifeline, kissing him messy and deep as the aftershocks rolled through her in slow, lingering waves, her hips still moving in small, helpless circles against his.

With the first rush of pleasure behind them, their kisses became slower and more indulgent, lips lingering as they tasted and savored each other, no longer driven by the same desperate urgency as before.

Brittney pulled back for air, resting her head against his chest, catching her breath. Then she glanced down and smirked at what she found.

She lifted her head, grinning up at him. "Guess you spill like a man too."

Venus knew exactly what she meant. He'd come right alongside her, unable to hold himself back, his release soaking through the front of her trousers. She didn't look disgusted in the slightest. If anything, she looked pleased with herself.

"Now that you've seen it," Venus said, "it's my time."

Before Brittney could brace herself, he lifted her effortlessly and laid her flat against the bed.

"Oh," was all she managed before he reached for the waistband of her trousers and began tugging them down. Brittney lifted her foot to help ease them free, and he pulled them the rest of the way off, tossing them carelessly aside.

Then his gaze landed on the sight of her in nothing but a red thong, the same sight that had greeted him earlier, and his erection throbbed even harder at the memory. He was going to enjoy every second of this.

"While I love you in this sexy piece..." Venus murmured, hooking his fingers into the fabric and easing it down her legs with far more care than he'd shown the trousers, "I like you even better bare."

He slid it free and, unlike the trousers, set it carefully aside within reach. That one he intended to keep as a little souvenir of the very good time they'd shared.

Then he finally had her laid bare before him, and the sight nearly undid him. She was flushed and glistening, her arousal from earlier still slick between her thighs, evidence of exactly how ready she was for him.

Venus lowered his head and drew in a slow, deep breath, savoring her scent.

"Deliciousss," he breathed, the word drawing out on a serpent's hiss, his forked tongue flicking against the air.

For the first time since this began, fear suddenly gripped Brittney, because from where she lay, it looked very much like Venus intended to make a meal of her, and he had no plans of leaving not even the bones behind.

Chapter 127: Ruined Her For Other Men

"Damn. Those two beat us to it."

~ Rebel Beast

Venus lifted both of Brittney's legs, hooking them over his shoulders with an ease that made her breath catch, positioning her exactly where he wanted her.

Brittney braced herself, or tried to, because the moment his mouth closed over her clit, a sharp cry ripped free. Her hands flew to her mouth immediately, clamping down hard to muffle the sound. She couldn't wake Aria from her sleep because there was no way in hell she could explain this.

Venus lapped at her clit with unhurried leisure, clearly enjoying himself, savoring her as though she were the only thing he'd ever wanted to taste.

The pleasure built fast, overwhelming Brittney in a way that left her caught between two conflicting instincts: the urge to push him away because it was almost too much, and the desperate need to pull him closer because she couldn't survive him stopping.

Her hips rocked instinctively against his mouth, chasing the feeling, and soon enough, her hand wasn't enough to contain the sounds spilling out of her.

Venus reached up without breaking his pace, grabbed the panties he'd set aside, and stuffed them into her mouth. Brittney let out a muffled protest, but if that was what it took to make sure he didn't stop, then she would take it.

The damn serpent must be an expert at this because he changed his pattern at intervals, testing and adjusting, circling slowly before flicking faster until he found the exact rhythm that made her thighs clamp involuntarily around his head.

Brittney tightened her grip on him, her hips grinding shamelessly against his face now, chasing her own release with a desperation she barely recognized in herself. She came hard, her whole body seizing around him, a broken cry muffled against the material in her mouth.

Venus still wasn't done with her.

He kept his mouth right where it was, sucking gently on her now-sensitive clit while she twitched and mewled beneath him, the pleasure edging dangerously close to too much.

Brittney's hands flew to his hair, yanking without any real intention, with no idea how else to channel the storm of sensation crashing through her.

She wasn't a stranger to sex. She'd had men before, plenty of them, actually. But Venus wasn't a man, not really, and he was systematically destroying every expectation she'd ever had of what a human male could do to her body. This was different. This was on another level entirely.

Just like that, Brittney hit her peak once again. Father Lord, she swore she was at heaven's gate right now.

Then, before she could catch her breath, she felt something new.

Wait a minute... was that...?

His tongue, somehow, impossibly, was inside her.

How did he—don't ask. Don't question it. Just feel it.

Fuck her life.

It was strange, the forked tip moving in ways nothing human ever could, curling and flicking with a dexterity that had her vision blurring at the edges.

Brittney's fingers tightened in his hair again, pulling without direction, her mind completely blank except for the singular, overwhelming truth that she was never, ever going to experience sex the same way again.

Venus had ruined her. Thoroughly, completely ruined her for anyone else. No human man would ever compare to this. None of them ever could.

Brittney had no idea what exactly he was doing with that tongue of his, only that it was working some kind of devastating magic, and before she could brace herself, she was coming again, harder than before, gushing against his mouth in slick, trembling waves as her entire body shook apart.

Her back arched off the mattress, her thighs locking around his head as a strangled sound tore free from behind the material in her mouth. Then her body sagged into the sheets, spent and boneless, utterly wrecked in the best possible way.

But Venus still wouldn't let her up.

He continued lapping at her gently, thoroughly, making sure not a single drop of her release went to waste, his tongue moving in slow, indulgent strokes until Brittney was practically whimpering from the overstimulation.

Only then did he finally lift his head, a wicked, satisfied grin curling at the corner of his mouth, his face glistening with evidence of exactly how thoroughly he'd just devoured her.

Brittney didn't even have the energy left to scold him for it. Not when he'd just given her the best orgasms of her entire life, three times over, and she couldn't have wished for anything better.

Venus climbed slowly up her body, every inch of contact deliberate, until he hovered fully over her. He reached up and eased the panties from between her lips, tossing them aside before capturing her mouth in a deep, searching kiss, sharing her own taste with her. Brittney moaned against him, the mingled flavor addictive and dizzying.

He pulled back just enough to murmur against her lips, "Told you. Moist and creamy."

Brittney was breathless. "Now I'm curious how you taste."

"Why don't you find out, my lady?" Venus smirked, that familiar wicked glint returning to his eyes.

The grin that curved Brittney's lips turned downright sinful. Venus rolled onto his back, giving her room to position herself between his legs. She leaned forward intentionally, letting her bottom lift and arch behind her. Venus groaned low at the sight, his gaze fixed on the beautiful curve of her.

"I haven't even started yet," Brittney teased. "Better keep quiet unless you want to wake my roommate."

Venus didn't need to be told twice. He wanted her badly enough that he would have throttled anyone who dared walk through that door right now.

Holding his gaze, mischief burning bright in her blue eyes, Brittney wrapped her fingers around his length. He jerked hard at the contact, a sharp hiss slipping past his teeth.

"Easy now, serpent boy," she murmured, stroking him slowly. "Wouldn't want to startle the snake."

Filthy mouth.

Venus thought, equal parts amused and undone. The same mouth that was about to close around him.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 128: If Only He Was Human

Brittney took a moment to study him properly. He was long and thick, flushed dark with arousal, thick veins tracing along his length, a bead of precum already gathering at the flushed head. He looked so achingly human like this, it was easy to forget what he truly was underneath all that skin.

She lowered her head and swirled her tongue slowly around the head, gathering the taste of him.

Fuck. Venus's breath fractured instantly, his hips twitching beneath her.

The taste of him carried something underneath the salt she couldn't quite place, something that pulled at her rather than satisfied her. She wanted more the second she'd had a taste.

Brittney took him deeper into her mouth, sucking gently at the head while her hand worked the base of his shaft. He was thick, gorgeously so, and she could already feel exactly how well he'd stretch her once he was where she really wanted him. God, she couldn't wait.

She picked up her pace, hand and mouth moving together now, sucking and licking with unhurried devotion, savoring every reaction she pulled from him.

"Oh yes, my lady," Venus groaned, low and guttural, his fingers fisting into her hair without ever trying to control her rhythm.

The sharp sting from her scalp shot straight down to her core, and she throbbed with sudden, urgent need. She wanted him inside her so badly it was almost unbearable.

Driven by that ache, Brittney took him deeper still, until he brushed the back of her throat, her eyes watering as she fought the reflex and pushed through it anyway. She sucked him down further, the wet, filthy sound of her mouth working him filling the otherwise quiet room, proof of how far gone she was.

Venus never once tried to control her pace. He let her take exactly what she wanted, completely at her mercy, and something about that surrender only made her hungrier.

She dragged her teeth lightly along his length, then pulled back and bit down firmly at the head, and that was all it took to shatter what little control he had left.

Venus trembled violently beneath her, a low, animalistic growl rumbling deep in his chest as he spilled hard into her mouth.

Brittney didn't let a drop go to waste, swallowing every pulse of him down, before licking him clean the same way he'd done for her, until there was nothing left behind.

Lifting her head, she wiped the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, smacking her lips together.

"Tasty."

Venus smiled at her, a warm feeling rising in his chest beneath the hunger. She had no idea how much that wicked fire in her did to him.

Brittney crawled back up his body and kissed him deeply, sharing the taste of him with him. Both of them moaned into it, kissing lasciviously, without a single care for anything beyond this room. They both knew exactly what they wanted now, and neither had any intention of holding back from it.

While they kissed, Brittney reached between them, wrapping her fingers around his erection once more. She positioned him right at her entrance, then broke the kiss just long enough to look him dead in the eye as she began to sink down, taking him slowly, inch by devastating inch.

He stretched her instantly, a slow burn that had her breath catching in her throat, her body adjusting to his size with every inch she took.

Once Brittney was fully seated, she went still for a moment, letting her body adjust around him, breath shallow and unsteady. Venus's hands found her hips, gripping tight, though he let her set the pace, watching her with hooded intensity.

She rolled her hips experimentally, testing the fit, and a shudder ran through both of them at once.

"Fuck," Brittney breathed, dropping her forehead against his.

Venus's grip tightened. "Move, my lady. Don't torment me for too long. There's only so much patience a serpent can have."

Brittney chuckled. He was so freaking cute. For the first time, she couldn't help wondering whether, under different circumstances, Venus might have actually made a good boyfriend. If he were human, the two of them would probably have one hell of a time together.

Except if Venus were human, he wouldn't be Venus. He wouldn't be the serpent boy who had somehow turned breaking into her room into the most fun she'd had in a long time. Perhaps that was exactly what made this so thrilling. They were completely wrong for each other, and somehow, that only made being together feel even better.

So she moved then. Slowly at first, rising and sinking in shallow, testing waves, her nails digging crescents into his chest as she found her rhythm. Every drag of him against her walls sent sparks up her spine, and by the third slow roll of her hips, the testing had given way to a ravenous hunger.

Venus's hips began meeting hers, matching her pace, then pushed past it, one of his hands sliding up to fist in her hair while the other gripped her waist, guiding her faster. Brittney's breath came in short, broken gasps, her pace growing less controlled, more desperate now, chasing the building pressure coiling tight low in her belly.

"There," she gasped, when he angled up just right. "Right there... don't stop now."

Venus didn't. He held that angle, thrusting up to meet her with such focused control, watching her fall apart above him with unmistakable satisfaction.

The pace built faster, Venus's hips driving up to meet her every drop, the sound of skin against skin filling the room alongside her ragged breathing. Brittney's cadence faltered, control slipping as that tight coil wound tighter with every stroke.

"I'm so... so close," she gasped, nails biting into his chest.

"I know." Venus's voice was strained, his own control fraying at the edges. His grip on her hip tightened to a bruising degree, angling her, driving deeper, harder, chasing the same edge she was racing toward.

"Let go for me, little demoness. I've got you."

That was all it took.

Brittney shattered around him, a broken cry tearing free before she could catch it, muffled against her own hand as her body clenched tight around his, pulsing through wave after wave of release.

Venus followed seconds behind her, a low, guttural growl ripping from his throat as he spilled deep inside her, his hips stuttering as he rode out every last shudder with her.

She collapsed against his chest, the both of them trembling, breath ragged and uneven in the aftermath. Neither of them moved for a long moment, tangled together, their hearts hammering in matching rhythm.

She was so beautiful.

Venus rolled her over before she could catch her breath, and Brittney found herself flat on her back beneath him, blinking up at him in dazed surprise.

What —? She'd assumed he was finished and that they'd simply sink into a soft, sated moment together.

That assumption lasted all of two seconds before Brittney registered Venus still hard inside her, with him already hooking her legs around his waist.

She understood how wrong she was. It wasn't over yet.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 129: Knotted.

Chapter 129: Knotted.

It shouldn't have been possible. That was the part that terrified him.

~ Rebel Beast

Venus thrust deeply into her, and Brittney bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep the sound building in her throat from breaking free.

God, how she wished they were somewhere private enough for her to be loud. To let him hear exactly what he was doing to her. But for now, this would have to do.

Venus dropped his forehead against hers. One of his hands was braced against the mattress while the other gripped her waist as his pace built, driving into her with an intensity that had tears gathering at the corners of her eyes, the pleasure edging past what she thought her body could take. Brittney was close again, that familiar feeling coiling low in her belly, winding faster and tighter than it had the first time.

Then something shifted.

Brittney felt it before she saw it, a change in the air between them, his movements taking on a distinctly predatory edge.

When she forced her eyes open, his pupils had narrowed into thin vertical slits, and his breathing had turned ragged, each exhale carrying the faintest hint of a hiss. Before she could ask what was happening, his mouth found the curve of her throat.

Fangs.

Long and terrifyingly sharp, pressed against her pulse point.

"What the—"

A sudden cold fear seized Brittney, cutting straight through the haze of pleasure. But before she could react or even finish the thought, he sank his fangs into her neck.

The world went white.

Pain and pleasure crashed through her body at once, blinding and almost indistinguishable from each other, and she couldn't hold back the sound building in her throat.

With nowhere else to put it, she turned her head and bit down hard on his shoulder instead, muffling her own scream against his skin. She'd come before, plenty of times, but

nothing had ever felt like this. Nothing had ever ripped through her body with this kind of intensity.

Brittney clung to him, her fingers digging into his back, holding on because she genuinely wasn't sure she'd survive letting go.

Deep inside her, she felt it, a strange pressure swelling and locking them together, and Venus groaned against her throat as he kept spilling into her, wave after wave, his hips barely moving now because they couldn't.

She couldn't move either. Not that she wanted to.

They stayed like that, locked together, trembling, their ragged breaths mingling in the small space between them. Neither of them spoke. There was nothing to say, only the slow rise and fall of their breathing and the occasional helpless shudder that ran through one or both of them as the sensation refused to fade.

It felt like an eternity, though it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. The entire time, all Brittney could feel was overwhelming, indescribable pleasure and a fullness she never wanted to end, her body pulsing in time with his, caught in some strange feedback loop neither of them seemed capable of controlling.

Eventually, whatever held them fused together finally released its grip, and Brittney sucked in a full breath, air rushing back into her lungs as if she'd forgotten how to breathe on her own.

Venus eased out of her carefully, and they both collapsed against the mattress in a tangled, exhausted heap, chests heaving and skin damp with sweat.

"What the hell was that?" Brittney finally managed, her voice thick and slow, the words dragging out of her as though she were drunk.

Her whole body felt heavy and loose, almost drugged, except this felt less like a crash and more like happiness poured directly into her bloodstream.

Beside her, Venus's brow furrowed, a deep line of worry carving into his expression. "I don't know," he admitted quietly. "But I think... I think I just knotted you."

"What the fuck is that?" Brittney mumbled, her eyelids already growing unbearably heavy, sleep tugging at the edges of her mind.

"It shouldn't even be possible," Venus said, more to himself than to her, staring at the ceiling like it held the answers.

At the same moment, Brittney's hand drifted toward her neck, her fingertips brushing over the tender, throbbing mark he'd left there. She frowned. "You bit me."

"Fuck. I'm sorry." His voice cracked, guilt etched plainly across his face as he propped himself up to examine the damage.

Brittney let out a long, loud yawn, waving off his concern with a lazy hand. "At least it was a good fuck."

Sleep pulled at her harder now, impossible to fight, and the last thing she registered before darkness took her under completely was the worried crease still lingering between Venus's brows.

As soon as Brittney fell asleep, Venus knew he couldn't stay in her bed any longer. They'd had their fun, and it was time for him to leave, especially after all the lines he'd already crossed today.

Careful not to wake her, Venus slipped out of bed and crossed the room to the window. Evening was already beginning to settle over House Therion, the afternoon light fading into a dull gold beyond the glass.

True to Brittney's warning, Therion guards were still stationed outside, with another pair occasionally passing beneath her window. That complicated things, but it didn't make escape impossible.

Guards were guards regardless of the house they served. When nothing happened for long enough, their vigilance inevitably grew lax. And if Venus waited long enough, the changing of the guard would give him the opening he needed.

Caelis was probably wondering where the hell he was by now.

Venus rubbed a hand over his face. He didn't even have a decent excuse this time. What the hell had been going through his mind?

Brittney.

His mind supplied the answer, almost as if mocking him for it. He turned toward the bed against his better judgment.

Brittney remained deeply asleep, sprawled comfortably across the sheets with her dark hair scattered around her. At least he'd accomplished one useful thing today. The little demoness would probably sleep through an earthquake after everything they'd done.

Then his gaze caught the already-drying traces of his release across her skin and the bedsheet beneath her.

He couldn't leave her like this.

His gaze moved around the room until he spotted her discarded top on the floor. Venus picked it up and carried it into the bathroom, running the material beneath the tap before wringing out the excess water.

It wasn't exactly ideal, and Brittney would probably curse him for using her clothes as a washcloth when she woke, but he'd already committed enough crimes in this room that ruining one top hardly seemed significant.

When Venus returned, he began carefully wiping her skin clean, working slowly and gently so as not to wake her. When he lifted her legs to clean between them, his seed spilled free from her in a slow, unmistakable rush.

Fuck. He really had knotted her.

At least she couldn't get pregnant. Human and serpent reproductive cells were genetically incompatible despite the humanoid physiology of serpent shifters. Whatever had passed between them here could never result in conception.

It was a small mercy because if Brittney had somehow gotten pregnant, he would have ruined her life completely. The serpents would never allow a child like that to live.

So yes, he had that much to be grateful for.

Still, the sight of his release slick against her skin, filling her, was such an unexpectedly beautiful thing to witness that Venus didn't register what he was doing until his fingers had already begun pushing it back inside her. Some deep, instinctive part of his serpent nature rebelled against seeing any evidence of their coupling wasted.

Suddenly, he froze.

What the hell was he doing?

Chapter 130: Choose Between Caelis And Brittney

Venus dragged both hands down his face. There was definitely something wrong with him.

Almost immediately, he resumed cleaning Brittney, this time with more force than he intended, as if he could scrub away the strange thoughts along with the evidence of what they'd done.

Except Brittney whimpered in her sleep and Venus stopped at once. He hadn't meant to hurt her.

"Sorry," he whispered, his expression softening as he leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss against her inner thigh. Her scent still lingered strongly around him, mixed with his own, and Venus swallowed hard when another wave of hunger stirred inside him.

He wanted her again.

For one reckless second, he was tempted to forget everything and crawl straight back between her legs. But Venus knew exactly where that would lead. He wouldn't stop at one taste, and Brittney was human. Unlike him, her body needed time to recover from everything he'd already put it through. More importantly, he needed to exercise some fucking self-control.

That was all the motivation Venus needed to finish cleaning her.

Once he was done, he looked at the thoroughly ruined bedsheet beneath her and sighed. There had to be another set somewhere. Every student at Bestiaris had been provided with spare bedding in their wardrobe, which meant Brittney should have one as well.

Venus slipped one arm beneath Brittney and lifted her easily from the mattress, holding her sleeping body against his chest while his free hand stripped the soiled bedding from beneath her. She barely stirred, merely resting her cheek against him as though being carried naked through her bedroom by a serpent she'd met only hours ago was the most natural thing in the world.

The thought amused him more than it should have.

He gently lowered Brittney onto the bare mattress before crossing to the wardrobe. The overhead compartment was the most obvious place to check, and when Venus opened it, he found a neatly folded set of fresh bedding exactly where he'd expected.

He pulled it down and was about to close the compartment when the larger wardrobe door beneath it creaked open slightly.

Venus paused.

Don't.

His gaze remained fixed on the narrow opening. It was absolutely none of his business.

He lasted perhaps three seconds.

"Fuck it."

Venus pulled the wardrobe door open.

Brittney clearly hadn't finished unpacking. The remaining luggage had simply been stacked inside the enormous wardrobe, probably because she intended to arrange everything properly once she had enough time.

However, one suitcase had been left partially open, and Venus's curiosity immediately got the better of him.

He crouched and carefully pulled the zipper farther apart.

The first thing he discovered was hair. Lots of it.

Venus stared in surprise before pulling out one wig, then another. By the time he'd counted six of them in completely different colors, lengths, and styles, he couldn't hold back the laughter anymore.

He should have known.

Brittney struck him as the kind of woman who could wake up with black hair, then decide she was bored by lunchtime, and become a redhead before dinner simply because she could. There was something endlessly playful about her, something loud and unapologetic that seemed to bleed into everything she owned.

Yet the more Venus discovered about her, the more he realized there was another side to Brittney Thorne he couldn't quite understand. How had she learned to set traps like the one that had caught him?

His amusement faded slightly.

That knot she'd tied around him hadn't been some amateur attempt either. If Venus hadn't been able to shift, there was no way in hell he would have escaped those restraints so easily.

Perhaps it was nothing. After all, he had spent years developing a rather impressive talent for stealing from dragon hoards, and that certainly wasn't written into serpent biology.

People had hobbies. Strange ones, sometimes. But was this merely Brittney's hobby, or was there something else she was hiding?

His gaze caught a long black object tucked into the corner of the wardrobe.

Venus reached inside and pulled it free. It was a baseball bat.

He stared at it suspiciously. Considering the woman it belonged to, Venus wasn't stupid enough to assume it was harmless. He turned it over in his hands, inspecting the handle and running his fingers carefully along its surface in case she'd somehow modified the damn thing to release another tranquilizer dart.

Thankfully, nothing happened. It appeared to be an ordinary bat.

Venus gave it an experimental swing and nodded appreciatively. Good weight and excellent quality too. In fact, everything he'd seen so far suggested Brittney came from money.

That shouldn't have surprised him. It was common knowledge that several of the human women selected for the Concordia Program came from wealthy or influential families.

Some had supposedly entered their daughters into the program hoping they might form connections with powerful beasts and give their families a foothold in Bestial City. It was remarkably easy to forget that when the same girls arrived at Bestiaris Academy and were treated as nothing.

Venus glanced toward the sleeping human on the bed, and a wicked smile slowly appeared. He wondered which wealthy, respectable man he'd just thoroughly corrupted the daughter of.

Although, considering everything he'd learned about Brittney in just a short while, calling her innocent was an insult to both of their intelligence. Still, the thought entertained him.

Venus returned the bat exactly where he'd found it before his attention dropped to the remaining luggage. There were three large suitcases altogether. What the hell had she packed in all of them?

He wanted to find out.

Venus actually reached toward another suitcase before stopping himself. No.

He'd already snooped enough. Besides, Brittney had trusted him, however recklessly, and he had no desire to abuse what little trust existed between them.

More importantly, this was Brittney. For all he knew, opening the wrong suitcase would launch a tranquilizer dart directly into his forehead, and the humiliation of waking up on her floor for the second time today might actually kill him.

Venus closed the wardrobe.

He returned to the bed with the clean sheet and shifted Brittney carefully toward one side of the mattress. He fitted the fresh sheet over the exposed half first, smoothing it into place before lifting her again and settling her onto the newly covered section. Then he pulled the remaining half beneath her and finished making the bed around her without waking her.

Once everything was done, Venus pulled the blanket over Brittney's naked body, covering her properly so the evening chill wouldn't reach her. Brittney immediately burrowed deeper beneath it, releasing a small, contented sound in her sleep.

Venus smiled before he could stop himself. He sat on the edge of the mattress for a moment, simply watching her. A strand of dark hair had fallen across her face, and he reached out almost unconsciously, brushing it away before tucking it behind her ear.

If he didn't have to leave, he could have shifted into his serpent form and coiled himself around her while she slept. He wouldn't exactly keep her warm. Serpents were cold-blooded, after all, and if anything, he'd probably end up stealing some of her warmth for himself.

But that should count for something, shouldn't it?

Venus's smile slowly disappeared. What the hell was he doing? He couldn't become attached to Brittney. No matter how much fun they'd had today, she was still human.

More importantly, he served Caelis. If tomorrow his prince decided Brittney Thorne was a threat and ordered him to kill her, where would that leave him?

His jaw tightened. He didn't want to think about the answer, but he already knew it. At the end of the day, it would always be Caelis over her. He couldn't betray his prince over a human he'd known for a single afternoon.

Whatever this had been between them, however unexpectedly good it had felt, needed to remain exactly that.

An afternoon. A reckless mistake. A memory he could enjoy without allowing himself to want anything more.

"Goodbye, Brittney," Venus whispered. He leaned down and pressed one final kiss against her cheek.