

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 131: Keep Him Away From Aria

The moment Maverick walked into the office, he knew Principal Warrick was going to have it out for him. He had barely closed the door behind him when Warrick shoved himself out of his chair.

"What the hell, Maverick?!"

The man's voice thundered through the office, his eyes burning with fury as he planted both hands against his desk.

"You fought with Rhydian in a restroom? You're supposed to contain those kids, not stoop to their level!"

To anyone else, the sight would have been shocking.

Everyone at Bestiaris knew that while Warrick officially bore the title of principal, it was Maverick who truly kept the academy running. He commanded the respect of the students, handled problems most members of the staff wouldn't dare approach, and possessed enough power that very few beasts could challenge him without thinking twice.

But that was simply Maverick Nightshade.

He had never needed to throw his power around merely because he possessed it. Warrick was still the principal of Bestiaris Academy and, more importantly, an elder. Maverick might disagree with him, argue with him, and occasionally make the man's job considerably harder, but he would never disrespect him simply because he could.

So instead of rising to the anger thrown at him, Maverick inclined his head.

"You're right."

Warrick blinked in surprise, clearly having prepared himself for an argument.

Maverick continued before he could speak. "I apologize. Things got out of hand before I realized how far they'd gone. I should have handled the situation differently."

Some of the fury drained from Warrick's face. He simply stared at Maverick for several seconds before releasing a heavy sigh and sinking back into his chair. His hand came up to rub tiredly across his forehead.

The truth was, he wasn't particularly angry, just disappointed.

Warrick had placed an enormous amount of faith in Maverick over the years. Whenever tensions between the houses threatened to erupt, Maverick was usually the person he trusted to restore order.

When younger beasts lost control of their animals, Maverick was the one expected to put them into place. Even the decision to place the humans inside House Therion had come partly from his confidence that Maverick could protect them without allowing personal feelings to interfere.

"What happened?" Warrick finally asked.

Maverick lifted his gaze.

"I've heard enough rumors already, and every version somehow gets worse than the last," Warrick said. "According to one student, Rhydian attacked a human. According to another, he tried to eat her. Someone else swears the entire restroom collapsed because the two of you shifted and tried to kill each other."

Maverick's brow furrowed. "Rhydian was the only one who shifted, and he succeeded in bringing the place down on us."

"So he intended to kill you?" Warrick asked, a little worried now. Should anything happen to the wolf prince, he wasn't ready to answer to his parents.

"Perhaps," Maverick said, thinking it over. "Who knows what was going on in that reptilian head of his?"

Warrick sighed. "Listen," he said carefully. "I know dragons are a headache, Rhydian more than most. But for all his faults, it's unlike him to personally attack a human without provocation. He has an entire house full of idiots willing to cause trouble on his behalf." His expression became serious again. "So tell me what actually happened."

For a moment, Maverick said nothing. All he could think about was Aria standing in that restroom with Rhydian far too close to her and his jewelry adorning her.

Maverick's jaw clenched before he could stop it.

That bastard wanted to claim what wasn't his. The fury that had ripped through him at the time returned once more.

Aria was his and his alone.

The ignorant human simply didn't know what she had done. To think he'd planned not to rush things, intending to court her the human way before the bond completely overwhelmed him. But that wasn't happening anymore.

A dragon was after his mate. That wasn't a competition Maverick had any intention of entertaining. Most of all, how Rhydian had become interested enough in Aria to offer her jewelry was beyond him.

Maverick knew enough about dragon history to understand how unusual that was. Dragons, especially those of royal blood, rarely looked twice at humans. Granted, there had been very few recorded interactions between the two species since humans and beasts had lived apart, but everything known about dragons pointed to one undeniable fact: they were fiercely protective of their bloodlines.

Their population was dwindling, slowly pushing their species toward extinction. Because of that, preserving their bloodline wasn't merely important to them; it was practically an obligation.

Which made Rhydian's interest in Aria all the more strange. Dragons wanted strong females. Aria was human. She was not meant for him.

"Rhydian didn't attack her," Maverick confessed at last.

Warrick's eyebrows drew together in confusion.

"The rumors are wrong about that much. He didn't intentionally hurt Aria."

"But?"

Maverick worked his jaw. "He cornered and harassed her. I found them together in the restroom." He gave him a tiny piece of the truth. "Aria was frightened and confused, and Rhydian wasn't exactly making the situation easier. So I intervened."

"And by intervened, you mean you punched him."

Maverick paused. He hadn't exactly punched him, but there was no way he was telling the man he'd tossed away the ring Rhydian had given Aria. It would only lead to more questions.

He couldn't let anyone suspect.

"Yes," he lied.

Warrick closed his eyes. "And then things got worse from there," he muttered.

"I should have handled it better," Maverick admitted instead. "I lost my temper as much as he did, and things got out of hand. For that, I'm sorry."

Warrick stared at him. That was the part he couldn't quite understand.

He had seen Maverick angry before. Everyone had. The wolf possessed a temper like any other apex beast, but Maverick's greatest strength had always been his ability to control it. He could stand in the middle of a commotion and remain perfectly rational while everyone else tore one another apart.

Yet apparently, all Rhydian had needed to do was corner one human girl in a restroom, and that legendary control had disappeared.

Interesting.

Warrick decided not to voice the observation. Yet.

"And the damage?" he asked.

"I'll take care of it," Maverick clarified. "All of it. The repairs, replacements, labor. I'll cover everything."

The expense didn't bother Maverick in the slightest. Thanks to his mother and the many fathers who had spent most of his life ensuring he would never lack for anything, Maverick possessed more money than he could reasonably spend in one lifetime. Paying for a destroyed restroom would barely affect him.

Rhydian Drakhar was the problem. More specifically, the fact that Maverick had a feeling this wasn't over. Good thing they would settle it properly in the arena tomorrow.

Whatever twisted game Rhydian was playing, Maverick had to ensure that dragon never came close to his mate again—even if he incurred the wrath of Maximus Drakhar and the entire dragon clan.

"Fine," Warrick said. "Until the dining hall is repaired, the students can have their meals in their respective houses. We'll communicate with the kitchen staff and make sure everything is prepared and delivered on schedule, just as it was before."

Maverick nodded.

"The last thing I need is hundreds of students wandering around looking for somewhere to eat." Warrick sighed again. "Having dangerous beasts in this academy is enough. I'll not have them hungry too."

"I'll see to the arrangements," Maverick assured him. "And I'm sorry once again."

Warrick waved him off. He had the weary expression of a man who had accepted long ago that running Bestiaris Academy would probably take several years off his life.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Maverick. Even you, apparently." His gaze sharpened. "Let's just make sure this particular mistake doesn't happen a second time."

Maverick understood the meaning behind those words perfectly. Warrick expected him to regain the control he was known for and keep it, regardless of what Rhydian or anyone else did to provoke him.

"You have my word," Maverick said.

Warrick nodded, apparently satisfied.

Maverick continued. "I'll go oversee the repairs. We'll have the dining hall functional again in no time."

"Go." Warrick waved him toward the door. "Before someone destroys another part of my academy."

Maverick turned and walked out of the office.

The door had barely closed behind him when he spotted Dimitri waiting against the opposite wall. His beta straightened immediately at Maverick's appearance, studying his face, obviously trying to determine exactly how badly the meeting had gone.

"How did it go?" Dimitri asked.

Maverick gave him a flat look. "How did you expect it to go?"

Dimitri's mouth twitched. Maverick started down the corridor, and Dimitri fell into step beside him. He knew Warrick wouldn't do anything serious to Maverick.

"Oh well," Dimitri muttered. "Can't exactly say I didn't see that coming."

Maverick barely heard him. His thoughts had already moved elsewhere.

"What about Rhydian Drakhar?"

Dimitri's expression sobered immediately. "He left the academy shortly after the incident. The guards confirmed it. No one's seen him on campus since."

"Good for him," Maverick said as they continued walking. "There's no guarantee I won't freeze his ass off if I see him in this academy today."

They reached the end of the corridor before Maverick abruptly stopped. Dimitri took another step before realizing his alpha was no longer beside him and turned back.

"Make sure I'm informed the instant Rhydian returns to campus."

Dimitri's brows rose slightly. "Then what?"

Maverick looked at him. For all the composure he'd shown inside Warrick's office, there was no mistaking the cold warning that entered his eyes now.

"Make sure he doesn't go anywhere near Aria."

Chapter 132: Plumage And Mimic

A crowd had gathered in House Aetheris.

One would have thought something important had happened, judging by the number of students gathered around the common room. But there was no emergency, no fight, and certainly no dragon involved.

There was only Charlotte.

The human sat comfortably in the middle of the room, surrounded by a collection of Aetheris beasts who had gathered to hear what had happened in the dining hall. Questions came from every direction, and Charlotte answered each one with far more enthusiasm than the situation deserved.

"So after Prince Rhydian fed her, he attacked her?" a raven shifter asked.

"Well..." Charlotte drew out the word, enjoying the attention before finally nodding. "I wouldn't exactly call it feeding her."

Most of the students gathered around her were birds. The dragon shifters had kept their distance, pretending they couldn't care less about the gossip. However, Charlotte had caught more than one of them listening from across the room, their attention suspiciously fixed in her direction whenever she spoke.

She didn't call them out on it. Dragons were proud creatures and would rather pretend they weren't interested than admit they wanted to hear what everyone else already knew.

That was fine by her. They could pretend all they wanted. Charlotte already had the attention of the lesser beasts.

It wasn't the kind of influence she wanted yet, but it was a beginning. First, she needed to make herself loved. Once enough creatures knew her name, they would start talking about her and carry her reputation throughout the academy. The more powerful beasts would eventually have no choice but to notice her.

"I suppose Aria Aspen must have felt special for a moment there," Charlotte continued, her lips curling into a smile. "Our dragon prince personally feeding her? How romantic."

A few birds snickered.

"But Rhydian knew exactly what he was doing. He wasn't trying to make her feel special. He was simply fattening her up for the kill."

Charlotte burst into laughter, and almost immediately, the birds around her laughed with her. For a moment, the entire gathering looked less like a group of students gathered around the academy's latest gossip and more like a circle of friends enjoying themselves.

Charlotte smiled. To think earlier that morning, these same creatures had laughed when she fell from the balcony. Now they were hanging on her every word. It was almost satisfying.

Well, almost.

Her gaze eventually drifted across the common room and landed on a particular table.

Lord Plumage and Lady Mimic.

The two famous parrot shifters sat together, completely absorbed in their conversation. Neither had looked in Charlotte's direction once, and that irritated her more than she cared to admit.

They were siblings, and despite being among the most recognizable birds in Aetheris, they seemed entirely uninterested in whatever spectacle was happening around them.

Plumage was impossible to miss. His hair was styled into a mohawk, the dark strands rising boldly from his head while the tips shifted through vivid shades of blue, violet, green, and pink. The colors blended together so beautifully they resembled the stunning lights of the northern sky.

Black eyeliner framed his eyes, sharpening his already striking features and adding to the aloof, almost rebellious aura he carried so effortlessly.

Charlotte had expected him to look like the stereotypical bookish parrot. Quiet, needy, and perhaps the sort who spent his evenings buried beneath piles of books.

She couldn't have been more wrong. Plumage looked like the sort of bird who would rather start trouble than read about it.

His sister wasn't any less striking.

Mimic shared the same unmistakable attitude, though her appearance was slightly different. One side of her hair was completely black, while the other exploded into the same dazzling blend of blue, violet, green, and pink, creating the appearance of a living aurora running through her hair.

Black eyeliner emphasized her eyes, while silver rings pierced her nose and lower lip, giving her an effortlessly rebellious appearance.

She looked cool, detached, and completely uninterested in impressing anyone. And that was precisely what made Charlotte want their attention.

Parrots were considered one of the less prestigious bird species in Aetheris. They weren't higher birds like eagles or falcons, nor were they regarded with the same reverence as dragons.

Yet Plumage and Mimic were different.

They held power. Real power.

From what Charlotte had heard, the two siblings effectively led the parrot shifters in the academy. Even other beasts answered to them, and they had quite an influence within the academy.

They answered to no one except Rhydian. The dragon prince had given them complete freedom to run their own affairs. Hence, the siblings owned and operated The Rooster Report, Bestiaris Academy's most popular gossip column.

But even with the autonomy Rhydian had given them, they weren't afraid to write something unfavorable about the dragon prince. No one could understand why Rhydian allowed it or what fueled the birds' audacity.

Charlotte had heard they had published more than one article criticizing the dragon prince. Apparently, even royalty couldn't buy their silence.

That was why students trusted them. If you wanted rumors, you went to the students. But if you wanted the truth?

You went to The Rooster Report.

Charlotte's eyes remained fixed on the siblings. They were exactly the kind of beasts she needed to notice her. Powerful, influential, and connected. Unfortunately, neither of them had even bothered to look her way.

Charlotte's smile slowly faded.

Perhaps if they wouldn't make the first move, she would. After all, powerful people didn't go after small chops. It was the other way around.

Charlotte suddenly pushed herself to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Zainab asked.

Charlotte's gaze shifted toward the side of the common room, where Plumage and Mimic were seated at their table, completely absorbed in their own conversation.

"I'm going to build real power with real people."

Indigo and Meredith followed her gaze and immediately understood who she meant.

Neither of them said a word.

Since the beasts had approached them to hear what had gone down in the dining hall, Charlotte had taken over the conversation. She kept the attention on herself, and it didn't take long for the two girls to realize Charlotte wasn't interested in sharing the spotlight.

As long as they stayed beside her, they would always remain beneath her. So neither bothered trying to advise her anymore. If Charlotte wanted to embarrass herself, that was her business.

Charlotte straightened her clothes and began walking. The birds surrounding her noticed immediately. Their storyteller was leaving?

Several heads turned, conversations quieting as they watched her cross the common room.

Charlotte didn't slow down. She walked straight toward Plumage and Mimic's table, aware of every pair of eyes following her.

When she reached them, she stopped.

"Hello." She waved at them. "My name is Charlotte Greenwood."

Plumage and Mimic merely lifted their heads. Their eyes moved over her once before returning to their conversation as if she hadn't spoken at all.

Charlotte stood there in silence. She should have taken the hint, walked away, and pretended she had never approached them in the first place. But there were too many eyes on her, and she couldn't leave like some loser.

They were birds. Fucking parrots. She had approached them respectfully, and they had dared to treat her as though she didn't exist.

Charlotte's smile tightened.

"Perhaps it's because you're beasts," she said, her voice carrying across the table, "but where I'm from, when someone greets you, the least you can do is reciprocate."

The conversation between the siblings stopped. Slowly, almost simultaneously, Plumage and Mimic lifted their heads.

They looked at Charlotte. There was something unsettling about the way they stared at her now.

Mimic was the first to speak.

"Charlotte Greenwood. Eighteen years old."

Charlotte's expression changed.

"Daughter of Rick and Eva Greenwood. Your father owns Greenwood Holdings, while your mother sits on the board of three charitable foundations."

Charlotte's eyes widened.

Mimic continued as though she were reading from a file.

"You've been friends with Karen Donovan since childhood. You spend most of your time around her despite the fact that she rarely considers you an equal. You follow her because of the connections she provides and the things you hope to gain from being associated with her."

Charlotte's lips parted. The color began draining from her face.

"How..."

Mimic ignored the interruption.

"You have an unhealthy fascination with dragons. Your bedroom at home contains an entire collection of dragon memorabilia, including books, figurines, paintings, jewelry, and several commissioned portraits. You even have a small shrine dedicated to dragons."

A few birds nearby exchanged uncomfortable looks.

Charlotte couldn't move.

"You begged your parents to register you for the Concordia Program after they refused. When they still wouldn't agree, you threatened to kill yourself."

Charlotte's heart dropped. No. That wasn't supposed to be known. It was private. That was something only her family knew.

Mimic's expression remained completely calm. "You eventually got your way and were accepted into the program."

The common room had gone completely silent. Not one bird laughed or whispered.

Charlotte stood frozen before the two siblings, every carefully constructed piece of herself suddenly exposed beneath their gaze.

Mimic tilted her head arrogantly.

"Do I need to mention more?"

Chapter 133: Charlotte Was Dead

If there was one talent Charlotte Greenwood excelled at more than anything else, it was causing trouble.

~ Rebel Beast

Charlotte went silent, unable to utter another word. Her mind raced as she stared at Mimic, trying to understand how the hell the girl knew any of that. Then it hit her.

Someone must have told them.

Yes. That was the only explanation. Someone who knew her, someone who had the power to dig into her private life and hand everything over to these two.

"It's Karen, isn't it?" Charlotte raised her voice at Mimic, pointing an accusing finger at her. "She paid you guys to do this? How dare you behave so arrogantly when you're nothing but another gossip column making a living out of people's pockets?"

Behind her, whispers immediately began to spread, the atmosphere in the common room shifting with alarming speed.

"Has the human lost her mind? How dare she speak to Mimic and Plumage like that?"

"Who does she think she is to raise her voice at one of our own?" another Aetheris beast snarled.

"Oh shit," Zainab muttered when she noticed the way public opinion had suddenly turned against them. Or more precisely, at Charlotte.

What in the world had Charlotte been thinking? Did she seriously believe these beasts would choose a human they'd known for barely two days over two of their own?

To think they had followed Charlotte out of pure survival instinct, hoping she would become the leading figure among them and, together, they would somehow survive this place. But the reverse seemed to be happening. Charlotte wasn't increasing their chances of survival. If anything, remaining beside her was quickly becoming a threat to it.

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith exchanged a look. Not a single word needed to be spoken between them.

While every beast in the room had their attention fixed on Charlotte, the three girls carefully slipped out of their seats and began moving toward the entrance. Charlotte had done this to herself. They weren't going to die with her.

"Uh-oh..." Charlotte muttered when she finally noticed the same beasts who had been laughing with her only minutes ago were now closing in around her.

She laughed nervously and lifted her hands. "No, you don't understand. I was only joking."

Nobody laughed.

Charlotte hastily turned toward Mimic, silently pleading with the girl to say something that might calm everyone down. Surely Mimic could tell them it wasn't that serious. One word from her and they would probably back away.

"Right?" Charlotte asked, forcing another laugh.

Mimic stared at her with the most spectacular resting bitch face Charlotte had ever seen. Then the parrot shifter calmly rose to her feet.

"I suppose your parents will be receiving news of your unfortunate demise today," Mimic said haughtily, smoothing down her clothes. "Don't worry. I'll make sure to put in a good word for you in our next article."

Charlotte's face dropped.

Mimic turned toward her brother. "Let's go, Plumage."

Plumage pushed himself to his feet, a sadistic little smirk pulling at his lips. He didn't spare Charlotte so much as a sympathetic glance.

Even for parrot shifters, neither sibling seemed particularly concerned that the human might actually be torn apart the moment they walked away. Then again, Charlotte should have remembered where she was.

Beasts were beasts.

"No, wait! Please—!"

Charlotte tried to go after them, but she didn't make it two steps. The surrounding beasts moved in.

Someone shoved her hard enough to send her stumbling backward. She crashed onto the seat Plumage and Mimic had just abandoned, her hip slamming painfully against its edge before the rest of her body followed.

"Fuck!"

Sharp pain shot through several parts of her body as she tried to push herself upright, only to freeze when she realized just how many beasts were surrounding her now.

These were the birds she'd been laughing with minutes ago. Who had smiled at her, asked her questions, and practically begged for every juicy detail she could give them.

Now their faces weren't friendly at all.

Fuck.

Charlotte's heart slammed violently against her ribs. She was about to be publicly lynched. This was definitely not how she had planned to die.

Her gaze darted frantically through the crowd, desperately searching for Zainab, Indigo, or Meredith. She couldn't find a single one of them.

Charlotte's stomach dropped. Those bitches had abandoned her. She was completely on her own.

"Make her kneel," someone said, and before Charlotte could even process the command, several hands were already on her body, dragging her up from the seat.

"No, don't touch me!" Charlotte struggled against them, twisting and shoving at whatever hands she could reach, but there wasn't much she could do against several beasts at once. They forced her down, and her knees struck the hard floor with enough force to make her wince.

Charlotte stopped struggling.

Her chest rose and fell heavily as she looked around at the beasts surrounding her. Fighting them would only make things worse, and despite the panic threatening to consume her, she wasn't stupid enough to believe she could overpower an entire room of beast shifters.

"What do we do with her now?" one of the birds asked, sounding less certain than the others. "Remember Maverick's rules. We're not supposed to harm the humans. Are you sure Prince Rhydian would be fine with this?"

"Fuck Maverick's rules."

The voice boomed across the common room with enough authority to silence everyone.

Heads turned. Charlotte followed their gazes and felt whatever little hope she'd had disappear when she saw a dragon shifter approaching the gathering.

Quest.

Aetheris beasts immediately created a path for him, moving aside without needing to be told. Quest walked through the opening at an unhurried pace, and Charlotte remained on her knees as he came to a stop directly in front of her.

She had to tilt her head back to look at him and the sadistic glint in his eyes made her stomach twist.

Charlotte swallowed. Her heart began pounding so violently she could hear it in her ears. She swore to the heavens that if she somehow survived this, she would never run her mouth recklessly again.

At least not around beasts.

Quest looked around at the gathered students. "I don't care what rules Maverick Nightshade put in place. The human insulted one of our own, and we cannot simply let that go."

Several beasts murmured their agreement.

"If we allow one human to disrespect us without consequence, the others will eventually think they can do the same," Quest continued. "They sleep beneath our roof. They eat our food. They enjoy the protection of our house, and yet she thinks she can stand in the middle of Aetheris and say whatever she wants?"

Charlotte's anger immediately overpowered some of her fear.

"That wasn't an insult. I was—"

The slap came so quickly Charlotte never saw it except her head snapped violently to the side. For several seconds, she heard nothing but a faint ringing in her ears. Heat exploded across her cheek, followed almost immediately by a sharp sting that brought tears rushing into her eyes.

She slowly turned her face back. Quest lowered the hand he'd struck her with, a sneer twisting his features.

"You don't get to speak unless I order you to, human."

Charlotte pressed a trembling hand against her burning cheek. Tears blurred her vision, but she refused to let them fall. Her lips trembled as humiliation settled alongside the pain.

She hated him. She hated every single beast standing around watching this. Most of all, she hated herself for being stupid enough to end up here.

Then Charlotte's gaze suddenly shifted past Quest and her eyes widened dramatically.

"Prince Rhydian?"

The effect was instantaneous. Quest spun around, and so did nearly everyone else.

For one glorious second, every pair of eyes left Charlotte.

Except there was no Rhydian.

By the time Quest realized he'd been tricked, Charlotte was already moving. Her hand shot toward the chair Mimic had abandoned moments earlier. She grabbed it with both hands, surged to her feet, and swung with every ounce of strength the panic and adrenaline could give her.

The chair slammed straight into Quest's face and a sickening crack echoed through the common room. Quest stumbled backward with a furious grunt, crashing into the beasts behind him and sending several of them staggering.

Charlotte didn't wait to see the damage.

She simply dropped the chair and ran for her life.

She was so dead. So, so dead.

Behind her, commotion broke out.

"Quest!"

"Are you alright?"

Several beasts rushed toward the dragon, helping him regain his balance. Quest shoved the first pair of hands away from him, his face burning with humiliation as much as pain.

A human had just struck him in front of his entire house?

His eyes snapped toward the doors Charlotte had disappeared through and pure fury filled them.

Quest seized the nearest beast by the front of his shirt and dragged him close enough that their faces nearly collided.

"Get that human," he snarled. "Right fucking now!"

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 134: An Unfortunate Accident

Those beasts were fucking hunting her!

Charlotte screamed when she looked behind her and saw the horde of Aetheris beasts chasing after her, their footsteps thundering through the corridor as more students joined the pursuit. Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest.

What the hell was she going to do?

For one desperate second, Charlotte contemplated running back to her room and locking herself inside, but common sense immediately told her how stupid that would be.

She would only trap herself. That door wouldn't hold against an entire crowd of angry beasts, especially when some of them could probably tear through the solid wood without breaking a sweat.

Not that she could reach her room anyway.

Somehow, the commotion had drawn even more Aetheris students into the chase. Word must have spread that a human had struck a dragon because some of the beasts who hadn't even been in the common room in the first place were joining in now.

Several had already moved ahead and blocked the way leading toward the humans' quarters, clearly assuming Charlotte would make a desperate run for the safety of her room.

Charlotte, in question, skidded to a stop before she could reach the blocked corridor, nearly slipping on the floor as she spun around and bolted in the opposite direction toward the main entrance.

She had to get out. It would be easier to call for help outside than to remain stuck in here with these barbaric creatures.

Unfortunately, Charlotte hadn't made it two steps before she realized they had already blocked the entrance as well. There was no getting out. She was stuck here.

"Shit!"

Charlotte changed direction so abruptly that pain shot through her ankle. There was nowhere else to go except the staircase, so she threw herself toward it and grabbed the railing as she began taking the steps two at a time.

"Catch her!"

"Don't let her escape!"

The commands echoed behind her.

"Where do you want me to fucking go?!" Charlotte screamed desperately over her shoulder. "You've blocked every fucking exit!"

But no one cared. If anything, the pounding behind her only grew louder.

Charlotte ran with everything she had. Her lungs were already burning, each breath she took tearing painfully through her chest as she forced herself higher. Her legs weren't doing much better. The muscles in her thighs screamed, and her knees still hurt from being forced onto the floor earlier.

Why didn't this fucking place have an elevator?!

The answer occurred to her almost immediately. Because the bastards could fly.

Charlotte looked upward and nearly lost all hope. The staircase wound around the open center in an elegant spiral that suddenly seemed specifically designed to kill humans.

She wasn't going to make it.

Worse, she didn't even know where she was going. The higher she went, the greater her chances of getting trapped. She couldn't fly either.

"Get her!"

That command was all it took for Charlotte to keep heading toward her inevitable death. She had no choice. Unlike earlier, she began taking the stairs three steps at a time, not caring about the pain shooting through her ankles.

She could hear the twisted laughter behind her. They must be enjoying chasing her like this was some sick survival game. And then came the sound of flapping wings.

Charlotte's stomach dropped. No. She knew that sound. She slowly looked over her shoulder, and several ravens were flying toward her.

"Oh, come on! Why is it always the ravens?" She didn't know whether to weep or laugh.

The black birds swept through the open space, their wings beating powerfully as they gained altitude.

"Help me! Somebody! Prince Rhydian!" Charlotte screamed, hoping that by some stroke of luck, he'd appear and save her.

But there was no such luck.

Charlotte practically dragged herself around the bend using the railing. Her hair had come loose around her face, sweat gathered along her forehead, and her breathing came out in desperate gasps.

A shadow passed over her, and she looked up. One of the ravens flew directly above her before diving straight at her.

Charlotte screamed and ducked just as its talons swept through the space where her head had been. She nearly lost her footing, caught herself against the railing, then continued running before the others could gain much ground.

But she couldn't outrun the birds. They soon overtook her.

Instead of attacking her as Charlotte had expected, the ravens swept past her. She flinched anyway, throwing an arm over her head as several sets of wings beat through the air above her. But no claws sank into her scalp, nor did they tear at her skin. The birds simply flew ahead.

Charlotte should have been relieved, but she wasn't. Something was wrong.

Sure enough, Charlotte rounded the next bend and nearly crashed straight into a wall of black feathers. She came to a startled stop.

The ravens had landed across the passage ahead, some in their human forms while others remained shifted, their dark bodies packed together so tightly there wasn't even enough space for Charlotte to squeeze through.

Charlotte stared at them in disbelief. Behind her, the rest of the beasts were still coming. Her breath caught.

Immediately, she started backing away from the ravens, moving along the third-floor gallery. Unfortunately, this section opened onto an unprotected balcony with no railing.

Charlotte swallowed. She was now caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. It dawned on her that they weren't trying to catch her anymore. They were herding her.

She tried to move sideways, but another group of birds descended in front of her. Ravens, falcons, hawks, pigeons, and species Charlotte couldn't even name joined the growing mass until everywhere she looked, there was nothing but feathers.

"Please, stop." Charlotte retreated, but they kept coming.

"I'm serious. Stop!"

Charlotte took another step backward, her foot coming dangerously close to the open edge. She froze. Her stomach dropped so violently she almost felt sick.

She wouldn't survive if she fell from this floor.

The birds stopped goading her backward, but they continued beating their wings close enough to her face that Charlotte had to shield her eyes.

The sound was overwhelming. Hundreds of wings seemed to be moving at once, creating an incessant rush of air and feathers that whipped her hair across her face and left her dizzy and disoriented.

She had never hated birds more in her entire life.

For what felt like forever, Charlotte remained trapped at the edge, barely able to see through the shifting wall of feathers. Then, one after another, the birds parted down the center.

Charlotte felt her soul leave her body as Quest stepped through.

He walked toward her slowly, without the slightest urgency, and the fiendish delight in his ice-blue eyes frightened Charlotte more than the entire flock surrounding her.

"Finally," Quest said when he stopped several feet away. "You're exactly where you belong."

Charlotte instinctively stumbled backward, and her foot landed on nothing. A startled scream escaped her as her arms shot out for balance and she lurched forward again, barely stopping herself from toppling over the edge.

Fuck! She really didn't want to die!

"If you lay a hand on me, Rhydian isn't going to forgive you for this," Charlotte warned him, hoping the psychopath wouldn't risk his prince's wrath over one stupid argument.

Instead, Quest laughed. "Who said I'm going to lay a hand on you?"

Charlotte frowned. "What?"

For a moment, she genuinely didn't understand. Then her eyes slowly moved toward the open drop behind her before returning to the birds surrounding her.

Cold realization washed through her. "No."

Quest smiled while Charlotte shook her head.

"Please." She hated how frightened she sounded now, but pride had become the least of her concerns. "Don't. Please."

Her plea seemed to delight Quest even more.

"We were only playing around," he said casually. "Unfortunately, the human became frightened. She ran upstairs, got a little too close to the edge..."

Quest clicked his tongue. "And fell."

Charlotte stared at him in horror.

"Such an unfortunate accident."

"You're insane."

"Perhaps. But you'll serve as an example to the others."

"Rhydian will know what you did."

"Will he?" Quest asked. "There are dozens of witnesses here who saw you running around like a madwoman. Perhaps you slipped. Perhaps you got too close to the edge yourself. Humans are terribly fragile creatures, after all."

Charlotte looked around desperately, but not one beast spoke or stepped forward to protect her.

Quest's smirk turned devilish. "I suppose even Maverick Nightshade will have difficulty finding someone to punish when there isn't a culprit."

Charlotte's blood ran cold. Then the birds began to move, and her head snapped toward them.

"No, wait—!"

But the flock broke into motion, and the birds that had formed a living wall around her launched themselves into the air at once. Dozens of wings beat furiously, and the sudden gust slammed into her from one direction.

"No!"

Charlotte pitched backward, her arms flailing wildly as she desperately tried to throw her weight forward.

She failed.

Charlotte screamed as she fell three floors down.

Chapter 135: Save Me

"Some meals fate cooked could only end in disaster."

~ Rebel Beast

"We're here, sir."

The taxi driver's voice pulled Thamas Draco from his thoughts.

The dragon lifted his gaze toward the towering structure ahead, taking in the familiar sight of House Aetheris.

One would think that with his absence, the house would be a little subdued. Perhaps the students would feel the loss of one of their own, especially after the humiliation Rhydan had put him through.

Apparently, Thamas had expected a little too much.

Even from inside the vehicle, his enhanced hearing picked up the commotion coming from the house. There were voices everywhere, along with the unmistakable beating of wings and bursts of laughter that carried farther than they should have.

They were having quite the fun in there—without him.

A muscle ticked in Thamas's cheek.

It shouldn't have bothered him. He'd been gone a day, and he certainly hadn't expected the entire house to go into mourning simply because he wasn't there. Still, hearing everyone carrying on as if nothing happened irritated him more than he cared to admit.

"S-sir?"

Thamas finally turned his head. The driver immediately regretted calling him a second time.

The dog shifter gripped the steering wheel tighter, his throat bobbing nervously beneath Thamas's stare. Cold sweat had already begun gathering along his forehead.

Picking up a dragon shifter was both a blessing and a curse. Dragons paid well. Extremely well when they were in the mood to do so. A driver could make more from transporting one wealthy dragon across Bestial city than he might earn from several ordinary fares combined.

The problem came when they weren't in the mood to pay.

Dragon violence against lesser beasts was hardly unheard of. Some of them would simply leave without paying, and anyone foolish enough to challenge them risked discovering exactly how little a dragon cared about fairness when his pride was questioned.

This particular dragon looked as if he'd already had a terrible day. One of his arms was injured, his expression was murderous, and the driver had enough survival instinct not to ask what had happened to him.

Thamas glanced at the meter, then back at the driver. Using his good arm, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of gold coins he'd taken from his hoard before leaving his lair. Without bothering to count them, he dropped the entire handful onto the driver's lap.

The driver stared down, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head. Those weren't ordinary coins.

Gold wasn't the currency used in Bestial City for payment, but that didn't make the metal worthless. If anything, it was more valuable. A reputable dealer or collector would probably pay him far more for them than this entire journey was worth.

By the time the driver looked up again, Thamas had already opened the door.

"Sir, this is—"

Thamas slammed the door shut.

The driver wisely decided not to bother him. Just in case the dragon realized how much he'd handed over and decided he wanted some of it back, the dog shifter shifted the car into gear, slammed his foot on the accelerator, and disappeared down the road with enough speed to make his tires squeal.

Thamas didn't even look back. He stood before House Aetheris, his injured arm strapped securely against his body. Beneath the bandages, pain throbbed relentlessly through the damaged limb.

As commanded by Rhydian, he had spent the past day actively fighting his body's attempts to heal itself.

There was no greater torture than that.

Dragons possessed superior healing abilities. His body knew exactly what it was supposed to do with the damage, and every instinct inside him demanded that he surrender to the shift, allow his dragon closer to the surface, and let his natural healing take over.

Instead, he had been forced to suppress it every fucking second.

The experience was almost akin to deliberately making himself human. Weak, injured, dependent on time and medicine to repair what his own body could have fixed far more quickly.

He climbed the steps toward the entrance, already wondering what sort of reception awaited him inside. Perhaps the idiots would finally stop whatever nonsense they were doing once they saw him.

Thamas had almost reached the doors when the noise from above suddenly intensified. He stopped and lifted his head.

Something weird was going on. There was shouting, accompanied by a tremendous rush of wings.

His eyes narrowed at the sight of birds converging along the open third floor in alarming numbers. Ravens, hawks, falcons, and several other winged shifters crowded the opening, some hovering in the air while others appeared to be surrounding something he couldn't see from below.

What the hell were they doing?

Then the entire flock erupted outward and someone fell. Thamas barely had enough time to register a flash of hair and flailing limbs before a body came hurtling over the edge.

It was a girl, and for the briefest second, he simply stared.

There was something almost absurd about the sight. House Aetheris was built for aerial creatures, and falling from one of its open floors wasn't particularly concerning when nearly everyone living there could sprout wings before reaching the ground.

Except this girl wasn't shifting. She was falling to her death.

Perhaps it was the shock of everything happening so quickly, but when Thamas saw her plummeting toward the ground, his instinct took over before his mind could catch up enough to ask the most obvious question.

Why the fuck was there a wingless creature in House Aetheris?

Thamas launched forward just as the girl dropped within reach. He had only one functioning arm, but that realization came approximately one second too late.

"Fuck."

He threw himself beneath her anyway. The girl slammed into him with enough force to drive the air violently from his lungs.

Thamas staggered backward, his shoes scraping against the ground as her momentum nearly sent them both crashing down.

His good arm locked around her waist while pure agony exploded through his injured shoulder when her weight knocked against it. Thamas gritted his teeth and somehow remained standing.

Chapter 136: Save me - 2

The human girl clutched him as if he were her lifeline, her entire body trembling violently against his. Her face was buried against his chest, and Thamas could feel her heart pounding almost as hard as his own.

Then his brain finally caught up with what he had done. Thamas looked down, and his expression went completely blank. He had just risked his injured arm to catch a human.

A fucking human?!

Revulsion filled him. Of all the creatures that could have fallen from the damn building, it had to be one of them.

His good arm was still wrapped firmly around her waist, supporting most of her weight while her legs hung limply over his arm. Pain continued throbbing through his injured shoulder from the impact, making his ire burn even hotter.

He should drop her. She wasn't his responsibility. If anything, he'd already done far more than he should have by catching her in the first place. Whatever happened after he put her down was none of his concern.

Thamas loosened his hold, but the human stirred. Her eyelids fluttered weakly before slowly peeling open. For a moment, her unfocused gaze wandered as if she had no idea where she was. Then her eyes found his.

Thamas stilled. He could see the fear in them. Her fingers weakly clutched the front of his shirt.

"Save me."

That was all she whispered before her eyes closed. Her head fell against his chest as she fainted completely in his arms.

Thamas stared down at her. What the fuck?

For several seconds, he didn't move. Everything in him rejected the creature he was holding. He hated humans. He hated their weakness, their arrogance, and most especially the fact that their arrival at Bestiaris had caused him his pride.

He had no reason to care what happened to this one. He should put her down and walk away. Instead, his arm tightened around her. The realization irritated him enough that he almost changed his mind out of spite.

Before Thamas could decide what the hell was wrong with him, the sound of approaching footsteps drew his attention, and several students spilled outside.

Most of the birds had already shifted back into their human forms, and judging by the excitement on their faces, they had clearly rushed downstairs expecting to find the human's broken remains.

Their excitement didn't last.

The first few students stopped so abruptly that those behind nearly crashed into them. Silence spread through the gathering.

Thamas Draco stood at the bottom of House Aetheris with the human in his arms.

It was a sight none of them knew how to process.

Just like that, the whispers began.

"Isn't that Thamas? He's back?"

"Why did he catch her? Doesn't he hate humans?"

"Why the hell is he holding her like that?"

Thamas's jaw tightened. He wasn't holding her like anything. He had simply caught her because she'd been falling. That was all. Any creature with decent reflexes would have done the same thing.

Probably.

Students began moving aside, creating a path through the middle, and Thamas didn't need to wonder for long who they were making way for as Quest stepped through.

Quest, the dragon wore the satisfaction of someone coming downstairs to inspect the results of his handiwork, but the expression disappeared the instant he saw Thamas.

He stopped short, his gaze moving over the bandaged arm first before dropping toward the unconscious girl in Thamas's hold. Surprise flashed across his face, followed quickly by annoyance. He recovered just as fast, adopting a polite expression.

"Here you are, Thamas." He sounded almost genuinely pleased to see him. "I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

Thamas said nothing to him. Then Quest's attention returned to Charlotte.

"Although, I have to say, your timing was impeccable. Or perhaps not." Quest gave a disappointed sigh and gestured toward the unconscious human.

"You just ruined our little game."

There was something about Quest's words that didn't sit right with Thamas.

"What game?" he demanded, his voice low.

"Obviously," Quest said, motioning toward the human in his arms. "Her. She was supposed to go..." He made a crude splattering sound with his mouth, mimicking a body hitting the ground. "But I suppose that isn't happening anymore."

"Although," he added, "if you don't mind, you can hand her over to me. Just because this didn't work out doesn't mean there aren't plenty of other ways to have fun."

Quest tilted his head toward two bird shifters, silently ordering them to take Charlotte from him.

They barely moved before Thamas spoke.

"She's going nowhere with you."

Quest frowned. "Excuse me?"

Thamas didn't bother repeating himself. Quest studied him for a moment before his expression suddenly cleared, arriving at the only explanation that made sense.

"Oh." He clapped his hands together. "You want to join in on the fun? Sure, I don't mind. What are brothers for?"

Thamas's expression didn't change, and Quest's expression slowly fell.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" Thamas turned his attention toward the birds surrounding them.

"All of you, back off. Now."

The birds exchanged confused looks, but none dared move closer. What the hell was going on here?

"Since when did you start caring about humans?" Quest demanded.

"I don't care about humans." Thamas adjusted the unconscious girl in his arm. "But this one? You're not getting your hands on her."

Quest stared at him in disbelief.

"Do you even know what she did?" His voice rose. "She insulted one of our own." He pointed furiously at his face. "Then she hit me in the fucking face with a chair. How exactly do you expect me to let that go?"

Thamas nearly did a double take. She did what?

His gaze dropped to the unconscious human in his arm, one brow lifting despite himself. This little thing had hit Quest in the face with a chair?

Perhaps she wasn't as fragile as she looked.

"What would you have me do, brother?" Quest continued. "Let a human humiliate me in front of the entire house and walk away without consequence?" His expression hardened. "Would you have me swallow that shame, or let me have my revenge?"

Chapter 137: It Belongs To Me

At the same time....

"Hey—you!"

The shout rang across the ruins of the collapsed dining hall but Tamara didn't stop.

Workers were at the site clearing away the wreckage left behind by Rhydian's shift. Twisted metal, and chunks of concrete had already been separated into piles while others worked carefully around the portions of the structure that remained dangerously unstable.

The staff member who had called out frowned when the student in House Aetheris uniform continued walking straight toward the restricted area like she hadn't heard him.

"Hey! Students aren't permitted beyond this point!"

She kept on walking.

Annoyance flashed across his face, leaving him no choice but to abandon what he was doing and hurry after her.

"I said you can't—"

Tamara turned, and the rest of his warning died immediately. Recognition crossed his face, followed almost instantly by unease.

"Tamara Ironwing?"

Of all the students he could have confronted, it had to be the dragon prince's second-in-command.

Tamara regarded him with an unreadable expression, neither confirming nor denying her identity. She didn't need to. Everyone at Bestiaris knew who she was.

The staff member recovered quickly enough to straighten himself. "What are you doing here, Miss Tamara? This entire section is not safe ."

Tamara glanced beyond him toward the ruins. "Then I suggest you continue with your work and pretend you never saw me."

He hesitated. "But—"

She walked past him.

The staff member turned after her, clearly debating whether stopping Tamara Ironwing was worth whatever consequences might follow.

Apparently, it wasn't. He returned to work.

If anything happened to her, everyone here had seen him try to stop her. He certainly wasn't taking the blame when Maverick Nightshade came looking for answers.

Tamara came to a sudden halt, her gaze sweeping over the destruction around her. She had been in class when news reached her that Rhydian Drakhar had attacked a human in the dining hall restroom.

Honestly, there were so many versions of the story circulating around the academy that Tamara no longer knew which one was true.

Some claimed Rhydian had deliberately cornered the human. Others swore he'd lost control of his dragon and nearly killed her. She'd even heard one particularly ridiculous version where Maverick had wrestled Rhydian to the ground and dragged Aria Aspen from his claws.

But one fact remained absolute in every version. Rhydian had destroyed the dining hall, and Aria Aspen had been with him when it happened.

Seeing the damage for herself only confirmed that much, and for once, she didn't know what to feel.

She had tried contacting Rhydian several times, but he wouldn't answer. Tamara knew exactly where he would be. His lair. Unfortunately, tracking him down there would be a death sentence.

Just because Thamas tolerated her presence around his lair on occasion, didn't mean Rhydian would do the same. Prince or not, friend or not, he would snap her neck before allowing her to trespass on a ground his dragon considered sacred.

So here she was, trying to figure out what the hell had happened on her own.

No matter how much Tamara thought about it, the story simply didn't make sense. It was beneath Rhydian to attack some defenseless human female, especially one he'd been showing such unusual interest in since the moment she arrived at Bestiaris. Sure, he could be reckless, destructive, and downright impossible when his temper got the better of him, but this was different.

Something wasn't right.

Tamara was still lost in thought when her sensitive hearing picked up an excited voice somewhere among the workers.

"Whoa, dude, come check this out."

Her attention shifted.

One of the workers was crouched among the debris, beckoning frantically to another man a few feet away. He brushed the dust from something he'd just uncovered before holding it up toward the sunlight.

"Isn't this real gold?"

His partner leaned closer, inspecting the ring between his fingers. The moment sunlight caught the metal and the gemstone embedded within it, his mouth fell open.

"Shit. That's real gold. Where the hell did you find that?"

"Right here." The first worker laughed in disbelief, gesturing toward the rubble at his feet. "I was clearing out the debris and stumbled across it."

Apparently unwilling to let his partner have all the luck, the second man immediately crouched and began shifting smaller pieces of rubble from the same area, digging eagerly through the dust.

It didn't take two minutes.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

His hand disappeared beneath the bricks and emerged clutching a tangled string of jewelry. Several delicate chains hung between his fingers, accompanied by bracelets that glittered brilliantly beneath the afternoon sun.

"Dude." The first worker stared. "What kind of luck is this? Who the hell leaves something like that lying around?"

Their discovery didn't remain private for long because the commotion quickly drew the attention of the surrounding workers.

The moment they realized what had been found, clearing the debris suddenly became considerably more enthusiastic.

Men who had been moving carefully moments ago began searching through the rubble with renewed interest, each hoping the wreckage might surrender another piece of forgotten treasure.

Tamara didn't move. Her gaze had locked onto the jewelry, watching as the second worker untangled one of the smaller bracelets and lifted it toward the sunlight, admiration and satisfaction gleaming in his eyes as he examined his discovery.

Unfortunately, his satisfaction lasted all of three seconds and the bracelet disappeared from his fingers.

"What the—" A growl had already started in his throat when he spun around, only to find Tamara standing directly behind him.

As an outsider who had only been hired to work on the reconstruction, he had no idea who Tamara was, but whatever furious demand had been forming on his tongue died the moment he met her gaze. He might not know her name, but he knew a dragon when he saw one.

"M-Miss..." he stammered, taking a hesitant step back.

But Tamara was no longer looking at him. All of her attention had settled on the bracelet in her hand. She turned it slowly between her fingers, examining the unmistakable gleam of precious metal beneath the dust. There was no doubt about it. This was real gold, and only one dragon had been anywhere near this place before the entire dining hall came crashing down.

It didn't take long for Tamara to put two and two together. Rhydian hadn't... had he?

Her stomach twisted.

He had to have lost his fucking mind. A human?

Tamara wanted to dismiss the possibility immediately, but the evidence was sitting right there in her palm.

Her expression slowly turned cold as her fingers closed around the bracelet.

The worker took another nervous step back when her attention finally returned to him, clearly expecting the dragon female to turn her anger on him. Tamara barely seemed to notice. Instead, she swept her gaze across the ruins, taking in the workers who had begun searching eagerly through the debris.

"Stop."

The single command carried loudly enough to halt everyone within earshot. Heads turned in her direction, and Tamara raised the bracelet for them to see.

"Every piece of gold, jewelry, or gemstone you find in these ruins belongs to me. I don't care how small it is or how deeply it's buried. Search every inch of this place and bring everything you find directly to me."

The workers exchanged uncertain glances.

Tamara's eyes narrowed.

"Am I understood?"

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

"Hi, Tamara."

"Hey, Tamara."

Students greeted the dragoness as they passed, but Tamara didn't answer. She barely even noticed them, too lost in the thoughts that had been tormenting her since she left the dining hall.

No matter how much she thought about it, it was simply too difficult to believe. Yet the weight of the jewelry tucked inside her pocket was enough evidence to keep her from dismissing the possibility entirely.

Rhydian had given that human pieces of his hoard? Wasn't he aware of the implications? What exactly was his plan here? Did he honestly think the dragon clan would accept some pathetic human as his chosen female? What the fuck was he doing?

Tamara felt like she was going insane with all the thoughts running through her head.

Maybe she was mistaken. Perhaps Rhydian had taken the jewelry from his hoard for some other reason, and whatever happened in the restroom had caused him to lose it before the building collapsed.

That was far more believable. She was the one jumping to conclusions. Rhydian wasn't stupid. He was their prince, the future of the Drakhar bloodline. Whatever fascination he had with Aria Aspen could only ever amount to some stupid fun before he eventually grew bored of her.

Yes, that was it. She was simply overthinking everything, and when Rhydian returned, he would clear up this entire misunderstanding himself. Until then, she would keep the jewelry safe for him.

With that settled in her mind, Tamara continued toward House Aetheris. Except the last thing she expected to find when she arrived was Thamas Draco carrying an unmistakably unconscious Charlotte in his arms.

What the fuck?

Perhaps it was the lingering anger from discovering Rhydian's hoard scattered throughout the dining hall, but rage immediately surged through Tamara so violently that her entire body trembled.

What the hell was this sudden obsession dragon males had developed with human females? Were they all trying to drive her insane? Did she need to start knocking their heads together until their brains began working properly again?

And then there was Quest standing in the middle of the commotion, surrounded by a multitude of Aetheris students who looked as if they couldn't wait for a fight to break out.

"What would you have me do, brother?" Quest's voice rang across the courtyard. "Let a human humiliate me in front of the entire house and walk away without consequence?" His expression hardened. "Would you have me swallow that shame, or let me have my revenge?"

None of them had noticed Tamara yet, too engrossed in whatever madness was unfolding before them.

"You already threw her off a building. That should be punishment enough. I'm sure the human will think twice about laying a hand on you next time," Thamas told him.

Wait a minute—who threw who off a building?

Tamara lifted a hand to her temple. Mother of dragons, these people were after her life. Why couldn't she have one moment of peace? It had been one disaster after another since morning, and apparently, House Aetheris had decided she hadn't suffered enough.

"Unfortunately, there will be a next time," Quest said with annoyance. "The entire point of punishment is to make certain there isn't one. So hand her over, brother. Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

"I wish I could," Thamas said. "But handing her over already makes me an accomplice to whatever insane revenge you're planning." He shifted Charlotte carefully in his arms before glancing pointedly at the cast around his broken one. "I'm still serving out my own

punishment, and I'm not particularly interested in losing the other arm. Unlike you and that bird brain of yours, I actually possess some sense of self-preservation."

Quest's expression darkened. "What did you just call me?!"

He took a threatening step toward Thamas, but before he could get any farther, Tamara finally interfered.

"What the hell is going on here?!"

Her voice cut straight through the commotion.

Quest stopped at once.

The students who had gathered eagerly around the dragons immediately began backing away, their earlier excitement disappearing now that House Aetheris's second-in-command had arrived. Whispers spread quickly through the crowd.

"Shit, Tamara's here."

"I don't want to get implicated."

"Thank the Mother of Dragons I wasn't the one who pushed the human off the building."

Tamara ignored the whispers and took a good look at Thamas. He looked considerably better than the last time she'd seen him in his lair, when his injuries had left him weak and barely capable of standing without assistance. Then her gaze dropped to Charlotte lying unconscious in his arms, and hot rage mixed with another emotion she couldn't quite identify twisted inside her.

He had obviously only just returned, so how the hell was he already involved with that pest Charlotte? More importantly, Thamas hated humans. He'd made that perfectly clear from the beginning. So why was he suddenly sticking his neck out for this one?

First Rhydian and Aria Aspen, and now Thamas carrying Charlotte around like she'd become his personal responsibility. Were these humans using some sort of charm on the dragon males? Was there something Tamara was missing here?

Perhaps her gaze lingered on Charlotte for a second too long because Thamas caught the ugly look that crossed her face, and just like that, a wicked idea occurred to him. Without breaking eye contact with Tamara, he deliberately adjusted Charlotte in his arms and pulled the unconscious woman closer against his chest.

Tamara lifted a brow at the gesture. Thamas merely held her gaze, the faintest hint of amusement dancing in his eyes.

"You're finally here," he said.

"And you're here too." Tamara tried to keep her tone neutral, but the slight rise in her voice betrayed her irritation. "Never thought I'd see the day when you'd protect the same human you once wanted dead."

Thamas smirked. "I suppose I had plenty of time for self-reflection while I was locked away. Besides, what better way to earn some brownie points with Rhydian than by saving one of his precious humans?"

The words precious humans immediately dragged Tamara's thoughts back to Rhydian and Aria Aspen. Her fingers curled into fists at her sides before she could stop them.

Rhydian Drakhar was not interested in humans.

Simple as that.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 139: Hide Your Nature

"Pain could humble a dragon, or it could teach the beast how to become crueler."

~Rebel Beast

Thamas was riling her up on purpose. Tamara could see that much. He must still harbor some resentment over her rejecting him, and now he was trying to make her jealous by using Charlotte of all people.

Tamara scoffed. He really needed to grow up.

Determined to show him that his pathetic little act wasn't affecting her, she turned away and focused her attention on Quest.

"What is this I hear about you trying to hurt the human?" she demanded, the anger returning to her voice.

"Hurt is putting it mildly," Thamas cut in. "Try murder. He threw her off the third floor."

"She brought it upon herself when she laid a hand on me," Quest growled. "She should have known her actions would come with consequences."

"So you decided to take matters into your own hands?" Tamara snapped. "Or have you forgotten Rhydian's instructions? No more drama. No more attacks against the humans until the party tomorrow."

Quest's expression hardened. "Then perhaps Rhydian shouldn't have broken his own rule by attempting to harm a human in the restroom earlier today. Isn't a leader supposed to lead by example?"

For once, Tamara was left dumbfounded.

She couldn't refute that without revealing more than she wanted to, especially when she herself didn't know exactly what had happened between Rhydian and Aria Aspen. The jewelry weighing heavily in her pockets only made the entire situation more complicated.

So instead, Tamara allowed command to bleed into her voice.

"When I tell you to back down..." Her tone dropped dangerously low, her aura swelling with enough authority that several of the lower-ranking dragons immediately retreated. "You back down."

Quest tried to hold her gaze, his jaw clenched and defiance burning openly in his eyes. But in the end, even he knew when he'd reached his limit. He lowered his head in reluctant submission, though the grinding of his teeth made it obvious how little he liked doing so.

When Quest finally lifted his face, resignation and suppressed anger had settled over his features. His attention shifted toward Thamas.

"A dragon can only hide its true nature for so long."

Thamas's eyes narrowed at the insinuation behind those words. Was Quest implying that protecting Charlotte was nothing more than an act? Perhaps he needed to work on his performance if even that bird-brained bastard could see through him.

Quest turned back to Tamara. "You'd better keep the humans away from my dragon. Otherwise, you might discover they make quite a sumptuous meal."

He held Tamara's gaze for another tense second before turning and striding away.

Tamara watched him leave, releasing a heavy breath. What the hell was happening to this house? Aetheris had never been this divided. They fought, certainly. Dragons were far too temperamental not to. But this was different. Ever since the humans arrived, one problem seemed to follow another.

Surely Rhydian had to see that too.

With Quest gone, the crowd quickly began to disperse. Apparently, without the promise of violence, everyone suddenly remembered they had somewhere else to be.

That included Thamas.

"Stop right there!"

Thamas halted with Charlotte still in his arms. Slowly, he turned around.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tamara demanded.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Thamas shifted Charlotte slightly in his arms, drawing Tamara's attention to the unconscious human. "She asked me to keep her safe before she passed out. I'm doing exactly that."

Tamara burst into a short, disbelieving laugh. She crossed the distance between them until she stood directly before him.

"I might believe Quest if he suddenly developed a soft spot for humans, but you?" She looked him dead in the eyes. "Never. I know you too well, Thamas. Your hatred for humans runs bone-deep. One little human girl isn't going to change that overnight."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Green eyes bored into black ones as the noise surrounding them faded beneath the tension stretching between them.

Tamara leaned closer, deliberately invading his space until barely an inch separated their faces. They were close enough that all Thamas had to do was tilt his head forward and their lips would meet.

"You're doing this to spite me," she told him quietly. "You're parading her around because you think it'll make me jealous after I refused to be your woman."

"And is it working?" Thamas asked.

Tamara scoffed before lowering her gaze toward the unconscious Charlotte, undisguised distaste crossing her features. "With a pathetic human?" She looked back at him. "You could do better, Thamas."

Thamas pursed his lips as though seriously considering her words.

"Is that so? Fine, then." He turned abruptly and started walking away.

"Don't harm the human!" Tamara called after him.

Thamas stopped.

"I cannot guarantee what Rhydian will do to you this time if you deliberately go against his orders," she warned him.

For several seconds, Thamas remained with his back to her. Then he glanced over his shoulder.

"Then I guess you never knew me as well as you thought." His gaze held hers. "I'll do anything to survive."

With that, Thamas turned away and continued walking.

Tamara remained where she was, watching him disappear with Charlotte still cradled in his arms. Her hands slowly curled into fists at her sides.

Aria Aspen was already complicated. Whatever was happening between her and Rhydian meant she couldn't simply get rid of her without risking the prince's wrath.

Charlotte, however, was a much simpler problem. One human was already getting inside the head of a royal dragon. Tamara wasn't about to stand by and watch another do the same.

Charlotte Greenwood had to go. Permanently.

Despite the pain shooting through his injured arm with every step, Thamas continued carrying Charlotte with his head held high. He could feel the stares following him as he went inside, and as expected, the whispers weren't far behind.

"Dragons above, have the stars fallen, or is that really Thamas Draco carrying a human?"

"Wasn't he the one who ordered the ravens to attack them? I thought he hated humans. Is this some kind of restitution?"

"Strange things are indeed happening these days. I bet the human must feel lucky. Imagine getting carried in a dragon's arms after nearly being killed by one. Dreams really do come true."

Thamas kept his expression perfectly straight, coming to an abrupt stop at the sight of the outrageously large winding staircase stretching toward the upper floors.

He looked up. His flat was on the fifth floor.

Fucking perfect.

Under normal circumstances, Thamas could have shifted, flown straight to his balcony, and been inside his flat within seconds. But with Rhydian's punishment preventing his arm from healing properly, he couldn't do that.

Inside him, his dragon stirred restlessly, rearing its head against the restraint he'd forced upon it. The beast wanted to heal. It pushed against Thamas's control and permission to repair what had been damaged.

Thamas forced it back down.

No. He would see this punishment through to the end.

Rhydian had wanted to humiliate him. To teach him a lesson. Perhaps he'd expected him to break beneath the pain and come crawling back with his head lowered.

He wouldn't.

Rhydian thought he'd broken him. He'd merely awakened something better.

Aware that several students had followed him inside simply to see what he would do next, Thamas tightened his hold on Charlotte and placed one foot on the first stair. Then another.

His injured arm protested immediately but

Thamas didn't so much as flinch. He continued upward with his back ramrod straight, carrying Charlotte as though she weighed nothing and his arm wasn't screaming at him.

"Fuck," one of the students whispered from below. "He's actually going to walk all the way to the fifth floor with an injured arm and the dead weight of a human?"

A female bird beside him released an almost dreamy sigh. "That is the hottest thing I've seen all day."

Her friend couldn't agree more.

"I think I'm starting to like this new side of Thamas."

Thamas heard every word and kept climbing. As expected, he made it all the way to the fifth floor without giving the spectators below the satisfaction of seeing him struggle. He entered his flat and walked into the living room, waiting until the door had closed firmly behind him before finally releasing the shaky breath he'd been holding.

Fuck, that hurt.

For a moment, he simply stood there, allowing the pain shooting through his injured arm to settle. Then his gaze dropped to the human still lying suspiciously limp against his chest.

"You can open your eyes now," Thamas said. "It's just you and me."

Charlotte didn't move, remaining perfectly unconscious. Or at least, that was what it looked like.

Thamas stared at her for another second before the last trace of concern disappeared from his face. Without warning, he dropped his arms and Charlotte hit the floor with a heavy thud.

"Ow!" she cried out instantly, curling in on herself as pain shot through her body.

But Thamas looked down at her without an ounce of sympathy in his eyes. His expression was perfectly calm as he said, "Now, we can talk, human."

Chapter 140: Let Me Serve You

"Charlotte was like an annoying cockroach. Somehow, she always survived."

— Rebel Beast

Charlotte didn't need to be told twice. She scrambled to her feet, nearly losing her balance when pain shot through her battered body.

The truth was, she had genuinely fainted after the fall, but somewhere along the way, she'd regained consciousness in Thamas's arms. She simply hadn't seen any reason to give up the act, especially when it became obvious that pretending to be unconscious was somehow keeping her alive.

Well, apparently that protection had expired the moment they were alone.

Her entire body hurt, and blood still trickled from several cuts across her skin, but none of that stopped Charlotte from taking in her surroundings. She was inside a dragon's home. A freaking dragon's private flat!

Considering everything she'd heard about dragons and their obsession with wealth, Charlotte had expected the place to be outrageously extravagant, with gold dripping from every available surface and gemstones carelessly lying around.

Instead, she found herself staring at a surprisingly sophisticated living room. Deep olive and black dominated the space, giving the room a dark, masculine elegance, while warm lighting softened the otherwise imposing interior.

At first, Charlotte thought the touches of gold were surprisingly restrained, appearing along the edges of the furniture, fixtures, and decorative pieces in a way that complemented the darker colors beautifully. Then she looked properly, and her mouth fell open.

Good Lord.

The coffee table had gold legs. The enormous chandelier hanging overhead was pure gold. Gold threaded through the dark curtains, framed several paintings, edged the shelves, and gleamed from ornaments positioned around the room. Even the bloody fireplace had golden detailing carved around it.

Sure, it wasn't enough to make the room gaudy, but it was certainly enough to announce that whoever lived here had money and wanted everyone entering his home to know it.

Charlotte's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. For a moment there, she'd actually feared Thamas Draco possessed some humility. But not even good taste could completely defeat a dragon's arrogance.

He was a dragon through and through, exactly as she'd hoped.

"How much did you hear?" Thamas's low, raspy voice broke through her thoughts.

"W-what?" Charlotte stuttered, blinking at him with as much innocence as she could muster. However, the blank look Thamas gave her made it immediately clear he wasn't buying it.

"Nothing," Charlotte said quickly. "Nothing at all."

She barely saw him move. One second, Thamas stood a few feet away, and the next, his hand was wrapped around her throat.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he snarled, tightening his grip until Charlotte's breath caught painfully in her chest. "I can hear your pathetic little heart beating out of rhythm. You think you can stand in my home and lie to me?"

"Fine!" Charlotte beat against his arm, desperate for air. "I heard everything!"

Thamas released her with a shove, and Charlotte stumbled backward, coughing as she dragged air into her burning lungs. Her throat already ached from the force of his grip, and she wouldn't be surprised if she now had the imprint of his fingers around her neck.

There wasn't an ounce of remorse in those beautiful but cruel green eyes of his. Charlotte straightened despite the lingering pain. She feared him, for sure. She wasn't stupid enough not to. Unfortunately, even fear had never possessed the remarkable ability to keep her mouth shut.

"You're in love with Tamara."

Thamas didn't react.

Charlotte studied him carefully before adding, "But she doesn't love you."

That did it.

Emotion flashed through Thamas's eyes so violently that Charlotte immediately realized she'd found the wound beneath all that dragon arrogance. His green eyes seemed to burn brighter, and the threat in them was unmistakable. One wrong word and she had no doubt he'd forget he'd just saved her life and toss her off the building himself.

"But she might be in love with you," Charlotte added quickly. "She could simply be hiding her feelings."

The violence in his gaze didn't disappear, but Charlotte noticed she had his attention now.

"You suspect it too," she continued, choosing each word carefully. "That's why you used me back there. You pulled me closer the moment you noticed her looking, and you made damn sure she saw you carrying me away."

Charlotte swallowed before delivering the dangerous conclusion.

"You were trying to make her jealous."

When Thamas said nothing, Charlotte found enough courage in his silence to continue.

"I can help you," she said. "If Tamara really is in love with you, I can help you win her over in no time."

Thamas burst into incredulous laughter causing Charlotte's confidence to immediately waver.

The laughter died just as quickly as it had come, and then he was striding toward her. Charlotte instinctively retreated with every step he took, her earlier courage disappearing beneath the sheer force of his presence. His aura had become so thick and volatile that her heart began hammering with fear, warning her that perhaps she'd pushed this dragon a little too far.

Her back struck the wall.

Thamas stopped directly in front of her, towering over her with enough fury burning in his eyes to remind Charlotte exactly what kind of creature she'd decided to bargain with.

"What makes you think I have any need for a weak, pathetic human like you?" he snarled. "If I wanted to make Tamara jealous, there are enough highborn dragonesses at Bestiaris who would gladly serve that purpose." His voice rose, the authority behind it making Charlotte flinch. "What makes you think you're worthy of working with me? What makes you think you're so fucking special?"

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut beneath the force of his voice.

"Because that's exactly what I am," she said. "A weak, pathetic human."

Silence followed. Charlotte waited several seconds before cautiously opening her eyes.

Thamas was still staring down at her. The anger hadn't disappeared, but it had settled into something more controlled, as though he was restraining his temper long enough to discover whether she actually had a point or had simply lost whatever remained of her mind.

Charlotte took that as permission to continue.

"I might not know Tamara very well, but I've seen and heard enough to know she's proud and possessive. Very possessive." Charlotte swallowed, then forced herself to hold his gaze. "If you parade some beautiful highborn dragoness around, what does that prove? Nothing. Tamara can tell herself she's your equal. She can dismiss her as another female trying to win your attention."

Thamas's expression remained unreadable.

"But me?" Charlotte gestured toward herself. "I'm human. Weak, and beneath you. Everything she believes you should despise."

A strange emotion flickered in his eyes, and Charlotte knew she had him.

"Watching you chase me wouldn't just make her jealous. It would drive her insane because she wouldn't understand it." Her confidence grew with every word. "What does he see in that miserable human? Why does he want her? Why is he choosing her when he could have any dragoness he wants? Those questions would eat at her every single time she saw us together."

Charlotte allowed a small smile to appear.

"She'd doubt it at first, of course. Which means we'd have to make it convincing. But Tamara doesn't strike me as the kind of female who would stand quietly by while someone she considers beneath her takes something she secretly believes belongs to her."

She tilted her head. "Eventually, that dragon pride of hers would win..." Charlotte smirked. "And she'd come to take back what's hers."

For a moment, it looked like Charlotte might have finally convinced him. Thamas's expression turned thoughtful as he considered her words. Then his eyes flared with rage, and his large hand closed around her throat once more.

"So this is your plan, huh?" he hissed, forcing her back against the wall. "You expect me to parade around Bestiaris with a lowly human like you on my arm?" His fingers tightened. "Is that your real mission here? To seduce me under the guise of helping me win Tamara?"

Charlotte grabbed his wrist, coughing as she struggled to force the words through her constricted throat. "I wouldn't dare! It's only a suggestion, my lord. You can choose to do whatever you want with it."

Thamas's grip tightened until Charlotte's breath disappeared completely.

Her eyes widened.

Darkness crept into the edges of her vision, little sparks bursting behind her eyes as panic finally overwhelmed every stubborn instinct that had kept her standing up to him. Was this really how she was going to die? After surviving being thrown from the third floor, she was going to get herself strangled to death because she couldn't keep her fucking mouth shut?

Just when Charlotte became certain he'd gone too far, Thamas released her. She crumpled against the wall, coughing violently as air rushed painfully back into her lungs. Her hands flew to her throat while she hacked and gasped, barely noticing when Thamas turned his back on her and walked several steps away.

"Let's say I agree to this madness," he said after a long silence. "You obviously want something in return."

Charlotte slowly lifted her head, a glint in her eyes.

Of course she wanted something.

Quest wasn't finished with her. Charlotte knew that with absolute certainty. Tamara might have stopped him today, and Thamas might have carried her away, but neither changed the fact that she'd humiliated a dragon in front of his entire house. Quest would come for her again eventually, and next time, he might make certain there was no Thamas nearby to catch her.

But if she had Thamas Draco's protection? That changed everything.

Charlotte pushed herself upright despite the ache in her throat and looked directly at his back.

"Let me serve you," she said.

Thamas slowly turned around and Charlotte held his gaze.

"That is all I ask, my lord."

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 141: Guilty Little Fantasy

Aria felt unbearably hot and strangely suffocated. At first, she blamed the warmth of her room, but when she tried to shift and failed, she realized there was another reason entirely. A pair of strong arms were wrapped securely around her waist.

What the fuck?

She tried to move, only for whoever had her trapped in that position to tighten his hold almost instinctively. His entire body was cocooned around hers, his chest pressed firmly against her back, unwilling to let go. And yes, she could definitely feel the hard muscles pressed against her—

Wait a minute.

Aria immediately began struggling to free herself. Her movements finally disturbed whoever was holding her, and he stirred with a low sound, loosening his arms just enough for her to turn around.

Aria froze.

She was staring directly into the irresistible sleeping face of Rhydian Drakhar.

Dear Lord in heaven. What was happening right now?

He was fast asleep, and somehow that only made him more handsome. Without those blue eyes glaring at someone or that arrogant smirk constantly threatening his lips, Aria could properly appreciate just how unfairly beautiful the dragon prince was.

Everything about his face seemed carved, from the sharp line of his jaw to the high cheekbones, straight nose, and heavy brows that gave his features their distinctly masculine edge. Even asleep, there was something naturally severe about his face, softened only by the wild strands of red hair that had fallen messily across his forehead.

If a woman had a weakness for dangerous, powerful men who looked like they could either ruin her life or give her the best night of it, Rhydian Drakhar was practically designed to become her wet dream.

Aria's gaze drifted toward his lips, and she swallowed.

That was a mistake.

They were slightly parted in sleep, and suddenly she couldn't stop staring at them. Like a vampire presented with a tantalizing vein, some ridiculous part of her wondered what they would taste like, how they would feel against hers. She stared far longer than any sane human should stare at the mouth of a dragon who could wake at any moment and catch her doing exactly that.

"I can feel your pretty heart racing, my treasure."

Aria nearly jumped out of her skin. Her gaze snapped upward.

Rhydian was awake.

His piercing blue eyes were staring directly into hers, heavy with sleep yet far too aware for her liking. Their intensity left her momentarily spellbound, especially when the corner of his mouth lifted as if he'd known exactly what she'd been thinking. Her pulse raced even faster.

"I thought I satisfied you earlier," he murmured, his voice rough from sleep, "but that doesn't seem to be the case here, little one."

Aria blinked in confusion. What the hell was he talking about?

She didn't have enough time to make sense of the question. Rhydian moved suddenly, rolling her beneath him with such effortless strength that Aria found herself flat on her back before she could even protest.

That was when she discovered something considerably more alarming. They were both naked. What the—?!

Aria's eyes widened as she stared up at him. What exactly was going on here? Why was she naked? Why was Rhydian naked? Why had she been sleeping wrapped in his arms like it was a normal thing? None of it made any fucking sense.

But coherent thought became considerably harder when Rhydian lowered his head and pressed his lips against her neck. Tingles immediately raced across her skin.

Aria's eyes fluttered shut before she could stop them. Her body relaxed beneath him, surrendering to the warmth of his mouth while the questions she'd been desperate to answer moments ago began slipping beyond her reach. Her thoughts muddled.

Something about this wasn't right. Aria knew that, but she just couldn't seem to remember why. It didn't help that Rhydian showered her throat with kisses at such perfectly wicked intervals that whenever her senses began to return, his mouth chased them away again.

"Rhydian..." Aria tried to sound stern, but her voice came out as a breathless rasp that did absolutely nothing to communicate whatever protest she'd intended.

Rhydian paused, burying his face against the curve of her neck before inhaling deeply.

"Fuck," he rasped. "You smell like heaven, my treasure."

The guttural groan that followed vibrated through her, sending another rush of heat curling low in her belly. It certainly didn't help that their bodies were pressed together so closely she could feel exactly how affected he was, the unmistakable hardness of him pressing against her stomach.

Oh shit. Aria knew she was in trouble.

How the hell had things escalated to this point? The last thing she remembered was going to bed. Yes, she'd climbed into bed after the eventful disaster at the dining hall and fallen asleep. Nothing else had happened after that.

Wait a minute... was this a dream?

Of course! This had to be another one of those saucy dreams she'd been having lately. It explained everything. Why Rhydian was suddenly in her bed. Why they were both naked. Why none of this seemed to make any logical sense.

Now all she had to do was wake herself up.

Then Rhydian's mouth returned to her neck, his lips closing over a particularly sensitive spot, and whatever determination Aria had gathered disappeared immediately.

Her lips parted on a gasp as her back arched from the mattress. The sensation was simply out of this world, pleasure rippling through her with enough intensity to make waking up seem like a terrible idea.

Fine. It was a dream. Nothing more than a harmless fantasy conjured by her own traitorous mind, which meant none of this was real and there would be no consequences waiting for her when she eventually opened her eyes.

So why exactly was she fighting it?

Aria abandoned every thought of waking up. If her mind had decided to give her Rhydian Drakhar naked in her bed, then she might as well enjoy her guilty little fantasy while it lasted.

Rhydian suckled harder on her skin, playfully catching the sensitive flesh between his teeth while his hand traveled down her body to cup her breast. Aria's breathing grew labored beneath him, her body heating with each touch until a deep ache settled between her thighs.

She began to writhe restlessly, pressing closer to him without even realizing it, her mind consumed by a need that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Rhydian noticed and sank his teeth a little deeper into her neck at the same moment his fingers found her sensitive nipple and pinched.

The sharp mixture of pain and pleasure tore a cry from Aria's lips before she could contain it. Her back arched against him, every nerve in her body seeming to flare at once as Rhydian released her skin and soothed the tender spot with his tongue.

Such a wicked dragon prince. Even in her dreams, the bastard apparently had no intention of playing fair.

Right at that moment, a door Aria hadn't even realized was there opened.

Her head turned toward the sound, and whatever pleasure-induced haze she'd been floating in disappeared at the sight of Maverick standing in the doorway, completely bare from the waist up with nothing but an apron tied around his torso.

Aria's head spun.

What in the heavens was going on here?

And for the first time since she'd convinced herself this was nothing more than another one of her saucy dreams, Aria began to wonder whether she was actually in control of it. Because if she was, her imagination had apparently lost its fucking mind.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 142: Bon Appétit

"Never fall asleep holding a dragon's treasure. You might discover exactly what your heart considers precious."

~Rebel Beast

"P-professor Maverick?" Aria stuttered, having absolutely no idea what to make of the situation. What was he doing in her dream with Rhydian? And why in heaven's name was he shirtless with nothing but an apron tied around his waist?

Speaking of Rhydian.

Remembering that the dragon prince was still very much on top of her, Aria planted both hands against his chest and tried to push him away. She might as well have tried moving a boulder. Rhydian didn't budge an inch, seemingly content to remain exactly where he was.

To make matters worse, he didn't seem remotely bothered by Maverick's presence. Had he forgotten that the two of them had nearly torn each other apart earlier today?

"What are you doing?" Maverick asked sternly.

Aria swallowed, her heart beginning to race for an entirely different reason. They weren't going to fight again, were they? Surely not. After all, this was her dream. Her own mind wouldn't be cruel enough to make her witness another fight between these two, right?

Reluctantly, Rhydian lifted his face from her neck with an irritated sigh.

"You're here?" he asked, sounding less like he was addressing the wolf prince he'd nearly fought earlier and more like Maverick was an annoying friend who had interrupted him at the worst possible moment.

Aria's head reeled. What?

"I told you to send her down for dinner as soon as she woke," Maverick reprimanded him.

Whoa. Hold up. What dinner?

Aria's gaze darted between them, more confused than ever. What the hell was really going on here?

Rhydian and Maverick were speaking to each other like this was perfectly normal. Maverick was apparently making dinner while Rhydian was in bed with her. And yet, neither male seemed to find anything remotely strange about it.

Nothing made sense anymore. Absolutely nothing!

"Oh, that..." Rhydian began. "I actually thought about it, but then Aria woke up ogling me, and that was when I realized she wanted another kind of food." The smirk that followed was all wicked desire.

That arrogant bastard! If she'd known how she'd gotten into this situation in the first place, she wouldn't have made the mistake of "ogling" him at all.

Rhydian must have sensed the protest coming because he leaned down and kissed her right on the lips. And yes, Aria was an absolute goner.

Rhydian kissed like a beast who knew exactly what he could do to a woman and shamelessly basked in that knowledge. He deepened the kiss almost immediately, his mouth moving over hers with enough confidence to scatter whatever fears she had left.

Just like that, Aria forgot Maverick was standing right there as Rhydian's tongue swept into her mouth and tangled with hers. A helpless moan left her as her fingers curled against his chest. Instead of pushing him away as she'd originally intended, her hands slid upward and found their way into his wild red hair, pulling him closer.

Rhydian groaned his approval against her lips. The sound sent another rush of heat through her, and Aria kissed him back with equal hunger, completely forgetting for several blissful seconds that they had an audience.

Then Rhydian pulled away suddenly, lifting his head to look at Maverick.

"See?" he said smugly. "Told you she wanted a different kind of food."

Annoyance flared inside Aria at the realization that he'd just used her to prove a point.

Oh, so that was how he wanted to play?

Before Rhydian could turn back to her, Aria grabbed him by the hair and yanked him down, slamming her lips against his. This time, she kissed him.

Rhydian made a startled sound against her mouth, but his surprise lasted barely a second before he kissed her back just as fiercely. Their mouths moved together with shameless

hunger, Aria's fingers tightening in his red hair while her other hand traveled down the hard planes of his back, pulling his body closer against hers.

If Rhydian wanted to prove she was hungry, then fine. She would show him just how hungry she could be.

Aria poured every bit of her frustration into the kiss, biting at his bottom lip before soothing it with her tongue. Rhydian answered with a low growl that vibrated between them, and the sound only encouraged her. She wanted more of his mouth, more of his weight against her, more of whatever delicious madness her dream had decided to offer.

She wasn't interested in making sense of any of it anymore. She simply wanted him.

They pulled apart at the same time, both desperate for air, their chests heaving from the intensity of the kiss. When their eyes met again, a dark, unmistakable hunger burned in them.

Rhydian slowly turned his head toward Maverick. "Watch, wolf prince," he said, his voice dropping into a low, provocative growl. "Since you're so concerned about feeding our beautiful treasure, let me show you exactly what she's hungry for."

Maverick did watch. Those slitted gray eyes remained fixed on her with such intensity that Aria's breath caught in her throat.

Father, help her. She was about to become dinner, and she wasn't entirely certain she was going to survive this dream.

Rhydian turned his attention back to her, and Aria's heart leaped with a dangerous mixture of anticipation and desire. Without warning, his hands closed around her waist and dragged her toward him, positioning her directly beneath him.

Before she could even guess what he intended, he caught her legs and lifted them, leaving Aria staring up at him in absolute shock.

Rhydian announced, "Bon appétit, little one."

Then he drove into her.

Aria woke with a startled gasp, shooting upright in bed. Her heart pounded so violently she could hear the rush of blood in her ears, her breathing coming fast as she struggled to separate the dream from reality.

Then she felt something clenched tightly in her hand. Aria slowly looked down, and her stomach dropped. It was the necklace Rhydian had given her. She had been clutching it in her sleep.

Immediately, she tossed the necklace away as if it were poison.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Aria climbed out of bed and hurried over to her vanity. She stopped in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection like it might somehow explain what the hell was wrong with her.

Her cheeks were flushed, her skin coated with a thin sheen of sweat, and through the oversized shirt she wore, she could clearly see her nipples pebbled against the material. But none of that compared to the most embarrassing evidence of all—the unmistakable wetness between her legs.

She was horny as hell.

"Ugh!" Aria let out a frustrated cry, dragging a hand through her hair.

What was going on with her? Couldn't she rest like every other normal teenager out there without images of these damn beasts invading her dreams and making her desire... things?

Aria released a long sigh. What was she supposed to do about it? She couldn't stop sleeping simply because she didn't want to dream about Professor Maverick or Rhydian. That would be insane. She needed sleep if she wanted to keep a sound mind and survive whatever else this place had waiting for her.

Just because Maverick had offered them sanctuary didn't mean they were suddenly safe. If anything, this felt like the calm before the storm. Aria could feel it in her bones. Something was going to happen sooner or later. The beasts weren't simply going to give up, not when so many of them still wanted the humans out of the academy.

Her phone suddenly beeped, and Aria nearly jumped out of her skin. She turned toward the bed, wondering who could possibly be messaging her now, then hurried over and picked up the phone.

There was a new message.

[Can we talk?]

~Maverick Nightshade.

Aria's heart skyrocketed. He wanted to talk?

But talking meant they would have to meet, and meeting Maverick meant looking him in the face after she'd just had the kinkiest dream about him and—oh shit.

No. Absolutely not.

There were only so many things one person could handle in a single day, and Aria had no idea how she was supposed to stand in front of the professor and behave normally when the image of him standing shirtless in an apron was still painfully fresh in her mind.

Aria was already typing out a response when an annoying little voice in her head reminded her of one very important detail.

He could sneak into her room.

Aria's fingers stopped over the screen.

Fuck.

What if she refused to meet him and Maverick decided to come here instead? He'd done it before. The last thing she needed was to have him appear inside her bedroom while she was still worked up from that ridiculous dream.

At least if they met somewhere else, there would be space between them and, hopefully, enough people around to prevent her brain from betraying her again.

Fine. Aria made up her mind. She couldn't avoid him forever. Then her gaze landed on the necklace she'd tossed away earlier, its ruby glinting innocently from the bed. Her embarrassment faded a little.

She hadn't forgotten what Maverick had done. Whatever his reasons had been, he'd provoked Rhydian until the dragon lost control and nearly killed them. She wasn't going to let him off that easily.

[Alright. Where do we meet?]

Aria sent the message and dropped the phone onto the bed, assuming it would take him a while to respond.

She had barely turned away when the phone beeped again. Aria stopped, then slowly looked back at it.

Was he sitting somewhere staring at his phone, waiting that intensely for her response?

She picked it up again.

[Dimitri is coming to pick you up.]

"Fuck." Aria stared down at the message in horror. She wasn't ready!

She'd literally just woken up. Her hair was a mess, she was sweaty, and she desperately needed a shower. How fast was Dimitri coming?

Immediately, she typed,

[Give me five.]

This time, Aria didn't wait around to see if he replied. She stripped off her clothes and rushed straight into the bathroom.

Aria wasn't the type to spend forever in the shower, but even she had to admit she'd broken a personal record this time. By the time she stepped out and checked her phone, she'd barely spent three minutes in there.

And Maverick had replied.

[I'll give you twenty.]

Aria's heart melted before she could stop it. He had no idea why she'd asked for more time, yet he'd given her plenty without question.

Such a gentleman.

The thought came so naturally that Aria didn't even realize she was smiling until she caught sight of herself.

Get a grip, Aria. He was only being thoughtful.

She quickly typed,

[Thank you.]

Aria took a deep breath, trying to settle the nervous anticipation fluttering through her.

Her phone beeped again.

[You're welcome. Can't wait to see you.]

And just like that, her heart began racing for an entirely different reason. Perhaps agreeing to this meeting had been a terrible idea after all. Unfortunately, there was no going back now.

With a sigh, Aria turned to face the next problem at hand. One that had probably plagued women since the beginning of time.

What was she going to wear?

For the first time, Aria regretted not coming with more clothes. Not that she'd had much to choose from in the first place. Most of what she owned consisted of dark, oversized shirts, comfortable tops, and jeans. She'd always been the kind of girl who dressed for practicality rather than appearance. Except now, Aria found herself wishing she owned some of Alek's pretty sundresses or even the kind of sexy clothes Brittney seemed to wear so effortlessly.

"Don't think like that," Aria scolded herself.

She was only going to meet Maverick, not impress him. Aria was Aria, and she had her own style. There was absolutely nothing wrong with that, even if some unfamiliar part of her suddenly wished she could look a little more feminine.

Hell, black wasn't even her favorite color. Actually, Aria didn't think she had a favorite color.

The realization made her pause.

She'd grown up too fast. Between taking care of Davina and assuming responsibilities that should never have belonged to her in the first place, Aria had spent most of her life

worrying about what someone else needed. There hadn't been much time or money left for discovering what she liked, what suited her, or even what kind of woman she wanted to become.

And since she'd never had much of a love life either, none of that had ever seemed particularly important.

Until now.

"It's just to talk," Aria muttered to herself as she walked over to the wardrobe. She hadn't unpacked yet, which meant her clothes were still stuffed inside the luggage she'd shoved into the enormous space when they first arrived.

She crouched and began rummaging through her things, pulling out one shirt after another. Then her hand landed on a pair of distressed denim shorts.

Aria paused.

She could pair those with her oversized black hoodie. It wasn't exactly feminine, but the shorts were cute enough to make the outfit look like she'd put some effort into it without seeming like she'd tried too hard.

Except her legs would be completely bare.

Aria frowned down at the shorts. After the incident with Rhydian and his ridiculous obsession with her stomach, the last thing she needed was to discover that Maverick had a similar fascination with legs.

Surely Maverick wasn't into legs, right?

Whatever. She was overthinking this.

Aria had already wasted enough time debating an outfit for a meeting that was supposedly just a conversation. She pulled on the shorts and hoodie, then returned to the vanity to finish getting ready. She was in the middle of gathering her hair into a high ponytail when a knock sounded at her door.

Aria walked over and opened it. Alek stood on the other side. Her gaze immediately traveled over Aria's outfit before returning to her face.

"Dimitri is here."

"Oh. Okay." Aria returned to the bed and picked up her phone. One glance at the screen told her it was exactly one minute past the twenty minutes Maverick had given her.

Damn. Someone was an accurate timekeeper.

Aria slipped the phone into her pocket and followed Alek out of the bedroom. Dimitri was seated comfortably in the living room, sipping a cup of hot coffee.

Aria stopped. How did he—

Alek must have seen the question forming on her face because she quickly explained, "Dimitri has been here for a while."

Aria's brows lifted. "But I didn't hear the door—"

"He didn't ring the bell," Alek said. "He was keeping to the time Maverick gave you."

Aria slowly turned her head and gave her roommate a scrutinizing look. "And how do you know all this?"

Alek's cheeks immediately colored as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"We've been talking."

Okay... Aria decided right then that she wasn't going to ask any more questions. Whatever attraction was developing between her roommate and Dimitri was apparently moving much faster than she'd realized.

"Miss Aria." Dimitri rose when he noticed her, addressing her with that strange formality again.

Aria frowned. Wasn't he older than her or something?

"It's Aria," she corrected him.

Dimitri smiled. "Fine. If you say so, Aria."

"Thank you," Aria breathed.

"We should go," Dimitri said. "Alpha Maverick is waiting."

Aria nodded and headed toward the door, but Dimitri lingered behind. She heard him speak to Alek in a voice low enough that he probably hadn't intended for her to hear.

"I'll come back for you when I'm done."

And that was Aria's cue to leave.

She walked straight out the door without looking back. Whatever was developing between those two was none of her business. She had enough confusing beast-related problems of her own without adding Alek's budding romance to the list.

Less than a minute later, Dimitri joined her in the hallway with a suspiciously pleased smile on his face.

Aria looked at him, then deliberately looked away. Nope. She wasn't going to ask at all. Some things were better left unknown. Instead, she focused on the reason he was here in the first place.

"Where exactly is this meeting?"

"In his living room."

Aria stopped walking.

"Excuse me?"

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 144: Face Your Fate

Dimitri stopped as well, taking in the baffled look on her face.

"Oh." Realization slowly dawned on him. She was uncomfortable with the idea of being alone with Maverick in his private space.

"The conversation..." he began carefully, "is a little private, and at Bestiaris, walls have a lot of ears."

Aria didn't answer, her hesitation written plainly across her face.

"Trust me when I say Alpha Maverick is an honorable man..." Dimitri trailed off halfway through the sentence, seemingly remembering that said "honorable" man had sneaked into her room just last night.

He cleared his throat. "The point is, I'm only a phone call away, and you can leave whenever you want."

Aria was suddenly at a loss for words.

How was she supposed to explain that she wasn't afraid Maverick would do something to her? The problem was being alone with him.

After that dream, Aria barely trusted her own thoughts around the man, much less herself inside his private living quarters with no one else around. She was already flustered just thinking about seeing him again. What would happen when they were standing face-to-face with no one around and no convenient distractions between them?

God help her.

"Fine. Let's go," Aria said, lifting her head with far more confidence than she actually felt.

Dimitri said nothing and took the lead this time. They headed toward the elevator, and once they were inside, he pressed the button for the fifth floor.

An awkward silence descended between them. Perhaps sensing her tension, Dimitri glanced at her and decided to strike up a conversation.

"As Alek's friend, what kind of date do you think she'd like?"

"What?" Aria turned to him, completely caught off guard by the question.

"I'm sure you've noticed, but I like Alek," Dimitri said.

Aria tried to keep the judgment off her face, but apparently she didn't do a very good job because Dimitri caught it immediately.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "I'd probably think the same thing if the tables were turned. Just yesterday, it didn't exactly look like I was searching for anything serious. But then..." Dimitri paused, a smile slowly appearing on his face as his thoughts wandered back to Alek.

"I've never felt like this before. Ever." His expression grew thoughtful even as he spoke. "It's like I've been missing something my entire life without even knowing it, and suddenly, there she is. Like I've finally found what my soul has been searching for all along and—oh shit."

Aria frowned. "Shit?"

"No, no, not her." Dimitri's entire expression changed as something seemed to click into place. "I think I just figured something out."

"Figured out what?"

Dimitri didn't answer. Whatever realization had struck him seemed to have completely stolen his attention.

"And yes," he added distractedly, "Alek is about to become the best thing that's ever happened to me."

The more he talked, the more confused Aria became. Then, without warning, Dimitri reached for the panel and pressed the button for the second floor.

Aria stared at his hand. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, but you're going to have to see Maverick alone."

"What?!" Aria felt her head reel. "What is going on?!"

Dimitri looked at her. "I'm sorry, Miss Aria, but this is something Alek and I need to discuss first. I'm sure the Alpha would tell you the same."

"Eh?"

Right at that moment, the elevator doors slid open.

"You have to go now. He's waiting for you." Dimitri pointed toward the hallway. "It's the first door over there."

"But wait—!"

"I'm about to face my fate, Aria," Dimitri said with a sudden seriousness that was nothing like his usual playful self.

That gave her pause.

His gaze held hers as he added, "It's time you faced yours too."

Aria swallowed. She had no idea what he was talking about, but some instinctive part of her recognized the weight behind those words. Something was happening, something bigger than she understood, and the strange certainty in Dimitri's voice left her with the unsettling feeling that she was standing at the edge of it.

Without another word, Aria stepped out of the elevator.

She turned around just as the doors began sliding shut, watching Dimitri disappear behind them with a finality that made her stomach tighten.

Just like that, she was alone. And like Dimitri had said, it was time to face her fate.

All it took was a few steps through the empty hallway before Aria found herself standing directly in front of the door. Maverick's flat.

Aria lifted her hand to knock, but before her knuckles could touch the wood, the door shifted with the movement of air and creaked open slightly.

She froze. The door had been left unlocked.

Fuck. He really was waiting for her.

Taking a deep breath, Aria pushed the door open and stepped inside. To be honest, she had no idea what she'd expected Maverick's home to look like, but it certainly wasn't winter.

And no, she wasn't exaggerating.

It was snowing inside Maverick Nightshade's living room.

Aria stood just inside the doorway for several seconds, staring as delicate flakes drifted lazily from somewhere above and settled across the furniture, the floor, and even her shoulders. Yet when she brushed one from the sleeve of her hoodie, there was no damp spot left behind.

The temperature inside his home was perfectly comfortable, and warm enough that she didn't even feel the need to rub her hands down her arms. It was almost as if the snow existed purely for decoration.

Of course Professor Maverick would have decorative indoor snow. What else couldn't he do?

Aria finally stepped farther inside, and once she'd gotten over the bizarre weather situation, she properly took in his living room.

Holy shit.

Their suite downstairs was luxurious, but Maverick's quarters made it look modest by comparison. His living room alone appeared nearly twice the size of theirs, although Aria supposed that made sense. Four separate bedrooms took up most of the space in their suite, while Maverick apparently had this entire place to himself.

The room was beautiful in a way she hadn't expected from him. Ice blue dominated the space, appearing across the walls and enormous rug beneath the sitting area, while deeper shades of purple softened the coolness and gave the room an almost regal quality. Dark furniture grounded the lighter colors, and somehow, the combination worked.

A massive sectional occupied the center of the living room, arranged around a low glass coffee table that looked so spotless Aria wondered whether anyone had ever actually used it. Not a single item sat out of place.

The cushions were perfectly arranged, the curtains fell in precise folds beside the tall windows, and even the few decorative pieces scattered around the room looked like someone had measured exactly where they ought to sit. Professor Maverick was definitely a neat freak.

Aria wasn't surprised.

One entire wall had been converted into a library, with shelves stretching almost all the way to the ceiling. They were packed with textbooks, leather-bound volumes, folders, and what appeared to be years' worth of academic material.

Aria wandered farther into the room, still looking around as the strange snow continued drifting harmlessly around her. Then something on one of the shelves caught her attention.

A photograph.

Aria walked toward it. There were six people in the picture, and she recognized Maverick immediately. He stood near the center, looking considerably younger, with one arm thrown around the woman beside him while four men surrounded them.

Aria's eyes widened. Wait. She knew that woman. That was his mother, Violet Purple.

If Aria hadn't seen her on television before, she would've assumed she was Maverick's older sister rather than his mother. The woman barely seemed to have aged at all. Her blackish-purple hair was unmistakable, falling beautifully around her face as she smiled at the camera, while Maverick leaned against her with the comfortable familiarity of a son who had probably done it a thousand times before.

The four men surrounding them could only be his fathers.

Good Lord.

Aria knew the story, of course. Almost everyone did. Violet Purple and the four men she'd married had become practically legendary long before Aria was old enough to understand why everyone found their relationship so fascinating. But seeing them together somehow made it more real.

Four husbands.

Aria stared at Violet with newfound respect. How in heaven's name did one woman handle four men?

Her gaze moved across the photograph again, and despite there being four possibilities, figuring out Maverick's biological father wasn't difficult at all.

Asher Nightshade.

The eyes gave him away immediately. Maverick had inherited those unmistakable slitted eyes from him, along with enough of his facial structure that Aria could see the resemblance once she knew to look for it.

The strong jaw, the shape of his eyes, even something about the intensity in his expression seemed to have come straight from his father. The purple hair, however, was entirely Violet.

Maverick looked like someone had taken the most striking parts of both his parents and decided it would be unfair not to combine them. No wonder the man was gorgeous as sin. He had two sets of ridiculously good genes to thank for it.

But it wasn't their appearance that held Aria's attention for long. It was the way they stood together. This wasn't one of those stiff family portraits where everyone dressed nicely and smiled because someone behind a camera told them to.

Violet had one arm wrapped around Maverick while Asher stood close on his other side, his hand resting firmly on his son's shoulder. One of the other men with green hair had apparently been saying something when the picture was taken because Maverick was

caught halfway through laughing, while another had an arm draped casually around Violet. Everyone seemed crowded together without caring about personal space, their attention divided between the camera and one another.

Maverick looked ridiculously, unquestionably loved.

For some reason, that realization softened something inside Aria. She'd only ever known him as Professor Maverick Nightshade, the wolf prince who carried enough authority to silence a room of beasts. It was strange seeing proof that somewhere beyond Bestiaris, he was simply someone's son.

"I see you've met my parents."

Chapter 145: A god

Maverick's voice suddenly boomed through the quiet room, and Aria startled so badly she nearly knocked the photograph from the shelf.

She spun around, then swallowed. Oh, for fuck's sake.

After the dream she'd just had, the least the universe could've done was make Maverick look slightly unattractive today. Apparently, that was asking too much.

He was dressed casually in a fitted black long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, managing to look indecently good in something so simple. The shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and chest, outlining the strength in his arms before tapering neatly over his narrow waist. It certainly didn't help that the black made his purple hair more striking and drew even more attention to those slitted gray eyes.

She must have been ogling him far too obviously because her wandering gaze eventually lifted and collided directly with his.

Aria's soul nearly left her body.

Fuck!

Maverick thankfully didn't comment, although something about the way he looked at her made Aria suspect he had noticed every embarrassing second of it. She cleared her throat and forced herself to look away, desperately trying to regain some semblance of control.

"Ahh, yes." Aria gestured toward the photograph. "I just met them. Not physically, though..."

Perhaps it was the slight raise of Maverick's brow, or perhaps her brain had finally caught up with her mouth, but Aria immediately realized how that sounded.

"Not that I'm planning to meet your parents," she quickly added. "Because that's totally not normal. That's the kind of thing people in relationships do, and we're obviously not in a relationship yet." Her eyes widened. "No! I don't mean yet like I'm expecting us to be in a relationship eventually. I mean, yes, you snuck into my room and kissed me, but that doesn't mean—"

Aria stopped herself, painfully aware of the awkward expression on her face as she stared at Maverick, whose expression remained so unreadable that it only made everything worse.

"Okay, I'm rambling now." She pressed her lips together and gave him a small, embarrassed nod. "I think I'll just shut up."

While it looked like Maverick wasn't capable of much expression, the truth was that he was dying with laughter inside and barely holding it together.

"You can meet my parents anytime you want. Although I should probably warn you that they're more than a little invasive, and they'll definitely have questions about us," Maverick told her.

"Oh, us..." Aria muttered, refusing to think too deeply about that particular word. This conversation was becoming more awkward by the second, so she looked around for something, anything, to steer it in a safer direction.

"How is this possible?" she asked, gesturing toward the snow.

"Ice magic. Water manipulation. I am—"

"Half-Fae," Aria finished for him. "Yeah, literally everyone who lives in the United Dorminia Federation knows your roots, Professor."

"You don't need to be formal around me, Aria. Just call me Maverick."

Aria pursed her lips, having absolutely no idea how to tell him that being formal with him was currently one of the few defenses she had left.

"Professor" put a respectable distance between them, while "Maverick" was the man who somehow found his way into her dream wearing nothing but an apron. She needed that distance for the sake of whatever remained of her dignity and sanity.

"But you're still my professor—"

"I insist," Maverick said firmly.

For a moment, the two of them simply stared at each other, until that familiar stubborn glint appeared in Aria's eyes. If he wanted to make a point out of his name, then she could make one too.

"Fine, Maverick." She deliberately emphasized his name. "And if you don't mind, Maverick, I'm curious. Why aren't your ears pointed? I thought even half-Fae inherited that."

Maverick immediately caught the challenge in her tone. The corner of his mouth curved as he realized exactly what she was doing. "Because I hide them, Aria." His smirk deepened. "Would you like to see my Fae ears, Aria?"

There was something about the way he said her name that made the question sound far less innocent than it should be.

Aria was confused. How the hell had they gone from arguing over what to call each other to sounding like they were flirting?

That had definitely not been her intention.

"No." That was the answer Aria had in mind, but what left her lips was, "Yes."

A quiet breath escaped Maverick's lungs. He had wanted Aria to become comfortable enough with him to ask for something like this, but now that she actually had, the reality of what she was asking quickly caught up with him.

Pointed ears were nothing remarkable in the Fae lands, but they weren't in the human realm. They were in the human realm, where anything visibly different had a way of becoming a spectacle.

His Fae features weren't something Maverick revealed for people's curiosity. Allowing someone to see them required a degree of trust he rarely gave, and although Aria didn't know it yet, she was his mate. Her opinion mattered far more than he wanted it to. This was part of him, something he could hide but never change, and the possibility that she might look at him differently afterward made the moment unexpectedly vulnerable.

Aria must have sensed some of his hesitation because she immediately began, "You don't have to do it if you—"

"I'll do it."

"Okay." Aria straightened slightly, bracing herself.

Maverick took a deep breath, then focused entirely on her, never once looking away.

Aria became increasingly uncomfortable beneath his scrutiny. It felt as though he were peering straight into her soul, stripping away every defense she had until she was standing before him with nothing to hide behind. Just when she decided she couldn't endure another second of that unnerving attention, he began to change.

Almost in slow motion, Aria watched in disbelief as his ears lengthened, their rounded tips gradually sharpening into elegant points. But that wasn't all. The transformation subtly altered the rest of his features, making his face more angular and his jaw almost unnaturally sharp.

Purple slowly bled into his slitted gray eyes until the color became luminous, giving them an otherworldly glow beneath his dark lashes. Even his skin seemed different, impossibly smooth and clear, without a single blemish to disturb its perfection.

Aria's mouth fell open.

At that moment, it became painfully clear why Maverick never walked around looking like this. If girls already went completely gaga over him in his mortal form, there was only one way they would treat him if they ever saw him like this.

A god.

Chapter 146: Not The Entire Truth

Aria had never been so intimidated and enamored at the same time. Maverick Nightshade was beautiful in a way that almost hurt to look at. Ethereal was the only word she could think of, because anything less didn't seem enough. There was something so otherworldly about him that some ridiculous part of her almost wanted to drop to her knees and worship at his feet.

It was as though Maverick had lowered an invisible barrier along with whatever magic concealed his Fae features, because for the first time, she could actually feel the power inside him. It reminded her of standing beneath a high-voltage power line and feeling that strange electrical hum in the air, except there was nothing threatening about this. The energy surrounding Maverick didn't warn her to stay away. If anything, it seemed to lure her in.

Every hair on Aria's body stood on end as the invisible current reached her. The first contact made her tense, but then the sensation changed, brushing over her skin with the softness of a lover's caress. It traveled from her arms to the back of her neck and down her spine before disappearing as quickly as it had come, leaving her breathless and painfully aware of how fast her heart was beating.

"What was that?" she asked, baffled yet curious.

"My magic is trying to recognize you," Maverick answered.

"Is that normal?" Aria asked curiously.

Because you're my mate, Maverick was tempted to answer, but even he knew that wasn't the kind of revelation he could simply drop on her without warning. Not when those few words carried a responsibility she didn't understand yet.

Instead, he said, "It's identifying whether you're friend or foe."

"That's cool." Aria muttered, feeling oddly proud of herself. "So your powers trust me? Is that why you can touch me?"

"Kind of," Maverick offered, his attention fixed on her as though her fascination with this side of him was equally fascinating to him.

"Kind of?" Aria lifted a brow. "So that's not the entire truth?"

"Why?" Maverick asked, a hint of excitement entering his voice. "Do you want the entire truth, Aria?"

Aria gulped. She was tempted to say yes. Very tempted. But some instinct warned her that whatever truth Maverick was holding back wasn't something small, and allowing him to share something that personal would only deepen whatever was already happening between them.

She said instead, "I think we should get back to the reason you called me here in the first place."

And just like that, some of the light in Maverick's luminous eyes dimmed. It was ridiculous, but Aria felt a sudden ache in her chest at the sight of it.

Shit, why was she feeling guilty?

She hadn't done anything wrong. All she'd done was draw a necessary boundary between them. She was his student, he was her professor, and on top of everything else, he was a shifter.

So why did she suddenly have the ridiculous urge to close the distance between them, wrap her arms around him, and maybe run her fingers over one of those strange but beautiful pointed ears—

Fuck. What was she thinking now?

Maverick recovered quickly, whatever disappointment he'd felt disappearing behind his usual composure.

"Fine. But we should eat first. I'm sure you haven't had dinner yet."

At the mention of dinner, a very vivid image from her dream of Maverick bare-chested and wearing an apron flashed through Aria's mind. Just like that, her throat went painfully dry.

Flustered, she blurted, "So you're going to cook and all with an apron tied around your waist?"

Maverick looked genuinely confused. "Urm... yes? You don't like aprons?"

"No, it's not that. It's just..." Aria didn't know whether she wanted to laugh, cry, or find the nearest window and throw herself through it.

"It's nothing. You can cook with an apron or not. I don't care." She was so done at this point. Those dreams were determined to ruin her life, and to think they were beginning to manifest in real life was scarier.

Maverick studied her with obvious concern, having absolutely no idea why the prospect of him wearing an apron had caused her so much distress.

"You look stressed, but all I can promise is that after one bite, you'll forget all your sorrows."

"Oh, you've cooked already." The realization hit Aria with enough force to make her want to slap a hand over her face.

She had been panicking over nothing?! Great. Now Maverick was probably going to think she was a weirdo.

"This way." Maverick gestured toward an adjoining doorway leading.

Aria followed the direction he indicated while Maverick fell into step behind her. His kitchen wasn't as enormous as the living room, but it was still spacious enough to make her envious.

The design continued the ice-blue and purple theme in a subtler way, with pale cabinetry, dark countertops, and soft lighting beneath the cupboards. A large island occupied the center with several stools tucked neatly beneath it, while one wall held a refrigerator, oven, and other appliances fitted seamlessly into the cabinetry.

The cooking utensils surprised Aria the most. There were actual pots and pans of different sizes, knives arranged according to its type, wooden spoons, spatulas, mixing bowls, chopping boards, measuring cups, and enough equipment to convince her none of it was there for decoration. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a man own this much kitchen equipment, much less have everything arranged with such ridiculous precision.

"Wow," she muttered, looking around with renewed interest. "I didn't know you loved cooking."

"My father Griffin loves cooking," Maverick explained. "He gave up his position in the pack to his sister so he could take care of us. We had maids for most of the housework, but the kitchen was completely off-limits to them. Papa Griffin cooked everything we ate himself." A fondness entered his voice that Aria hadn't heard before. "I spent enough time following him around the kitchen that it was inevitable I'd pick up his love for it."

"That is quite sweet," Aria said softly, finding herself increasingly fascinated by these little pieces of Maverick's life that had nothing to do with being an Alpha, a prince, or her professor.

Then her eyes fell on the island, and she became speechless.

Chapter 147: You're My Mate

Maverick Nightshade should have been a chef instead of a professor. More importantly, was he trying to fatten her up?

Aria stared at the feast spread across the island in complete disbelief. There was enough food to feed several people, and the dishes looked like something that would be served in a five-star restaurant.

Except where the portions should have been tiny, the plates ridiculously expensive, and reservations made months in advance, Maverick apparently hadn't gotten the memo about tiny portions.

He had made tender cuts of glazed meat arranged over roasted vegetables, creamy potatoes garnished with herbs, grilled fish resting beneath a delicate sauce, freshly baked bread still warm enough to release steam, and several smaller dishes Aria couldn't immediately identify but desperately wanted to taste. Even the salad looked too beautiful to be called a salad.

"You made all of this by yourself?" Aria asked in disbelief, turning toward him.

"Yeah," Maverick answered so casually, as though this was something the average person could do.

Aria stared at him for several seconds. First the snowy welcome, then his Fae form, and now the food? The entire situation was beginning to feel suspiciously calculated.

"Why do I feel like you're trying to bribe me, Maverick?"

Maverick stopped. "What are you talking about?"

Aria gave him a look. "You know exactly what I'm talking about here, Maverick."

And yes, Maverick knew, because the lightness disappeared from his expression. There was no point pretending anymore. He had provoked Rhydian until the dragon lost control, except what he hadn't anticipated was just how badly everything would spiral afterward.

Aria folded her arms across her chest. "You invited me here because you wanted to talk. Then I walk in and you're treating me like I'm someone important even though I'm human." Her eyes narrowed. "So either you treat everyone who comes into your home like royalty, or you're trying to soften me up before we get to the part where I ask why the hell you deliberately provoked Rhydian into turning into a dragon and nearly got us killed."

Maverick couldn't deny it because, when she put it that way, the food did look suspiciously like a bribe.

"You're right," Maverick admitted. "I am doing all of this to please you because I'm genuinely sorry for my actions earlier. I don't know what came over me, and I know I put you in danger. But I also knew you'd be hungry, and this isn't the kind of conversation I wanted to have while you were sitting here on an empty stomach."

Aria hadn't expected his honesty to affect her as much as it did. Warmth spread through her chest despite her best efforts to resist it, and for the first time since entering his home, she wondered if perhaps she'd been a little too hard on him. He wasn't trying to manipulate his way out of what he'd done. If anything, he seemed to be trying very hard to make amends.

"Well, I can't wait to try the food, then." Aria pulled out a chair and settled into it before Maverick could do it for her.

Maverick didn't seem bothered. Instead, he reached for the pitcher of freshly made juice and poured her a glass before placing another glass of water beside it.

Aria watched him move around the island, becoming increasingly nervous as she took in the beautiful food, the private setting, and the handsome man personally serving her dinner. This was really beginning to feel suspiciously like a date. Her mother would probably give her an award if she knew Aria had somehow gotten herself invited into the private home of a man this wealthy and influential.

Except Aria wasn't going down that path. Whatever this was, it wasn't a date.

Maverick eventually took the seat opposite her, looking considerably more comfortable with the situation than Aria felt. He picked up his fork but didn't touch his own food. Instead, he nodded toward one of the dishes on her plate. "Try the potatoes first."

Aria looked down at the perfectly roasted potatoes, their golden edges crisp and lightly coated in herbs. "What's so special about the potatoes?"

"You'll see."

That answer immediately made her curious, so Aria stabbed one with her fork and took a bite. At first, all she noticed was the texture. The outside had been roasted until perfectly crisp, while the inside was so soft and creamy it practically melted against her tongue.

Then the flavor hit her. Butter, garlic, and herbs blended together with a subtle sweetness so perfectly that Aria's eyes widened, and her palm came down against the island before she could stop herself.

"Oh my God!" she moaned. "What witchcraft is this?"

Maverick chuckled, clearly pleased with himself. "Told you."

Aria immediately took another bite and made another embarrassing sound of happiness. At this point, she didn't even care. If Maverick had somehow enchanted these potatoes, she would gladly suffer the consequences.

"They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," she said without thinking. "I think I understand that now."

"You do?" Maverick's attention settled entirely on her. "So I'm touching your heart right now?"

Aria stilled with her fork halfway to her plate. Her eyes slowly lifted to his, and whatever playful response she'd been about to make disappeared beneath the intensity of his stare. She swallowed before forcing out a nervous laugh. "You know that was a joke, right?"

"Nothing about you is a joke to me, Aria," Maverick said, and there wasn't the slightest trace of humor in his voice.

The smile on Aria's face vanished.

An awkward silence settled between them, made worse by the fact that Maverick didn't look away. The delicious bite she'd been chewing suddenly became considerably harder to swallow because Aria knew exactly what he'd just done.

She slowly lowered her fork and placed it on the plate before leaning back in her chair. There was no point dragging this out any longer. Aria had come here for answers, and if she allowed Maverick to keep distracting her with delicious food, she might leave knowing even less than when she'd arrived.

"What is going on between us, Maverick?" She went straight to the point. "The other night, you snuck into my bed, and then we did things that were completely inappropriate and shouldn't have happened in the first place."

Aria took a deep breath, forcing herself to continue despite how uncomfortable the conversation was becoming. "I don't know what your intentions are, but you should know I'm not that kind of person. If this is some kind of game to you, or you're only interested because I'm human and you think that makes me something new and exciting—"

"This is no game, Aria. It's fate," Maverick told her severely.

Aria stared at him with raised brows, unsure whether she'd heard him correctly.

Maverick remained silent for a moment before speaking again. "I honestly didn't want to spring this on you like this. I wanted to give us time to get closer first, enough for you to naturally lean into the bond. I thought that when I eventually told you the truth, you would already feel enough of it yourself that it wouldn't overwhelm you."

"What are you talking about, Maverick?" Aria asked, no longer comfortable with the direction this conversation was taking.

Maverick looked directly into her eyes. There was no teasing in his expression now, no attempt to flirt his way around the subject or soften what he was about to say. "You're my mate, Aria."

"Excuse me?"

Maverick released a slow breath. "You're my fated mate. The other half of my soul. The woman my heart would recognize in any lifetime and long for in this one."

For several seconds, Aria didn't move. She simply stared at him across the island with such complete stillness that Maverick briefly wondered whether he'd actually broken her.

Then she burst into laughter.

It was not a nervous chuckle or an embarrassed little laugh, but full, uncontrollable laughter that had her pressing a hand against her stomach. Maverick watched in silence as she laughed harder, tears beginning to gather at the corners of her eyes.

Of all the reactions he'd prepared himself for, this hadn't been one of them.

"I didn't know you could joke around like this, Maverick."

Maverick's face hardened. "This is not a joking matter, Aria. I'm serious."

The laughter gradually died in Aria's throat. She searched his face, waiting for anything that would tell her he was messing with her. But Maverick wasn't smiling. Those slitted eyes remained fixed on her with a seriousness that erased the last traces of humor from her face.

Oh God.

Her stomach turned as the truth finally sank in. He wasn't joking. Maverick Nightshade genuinely believed she was the other half of his soul.

Suddenly, everything that had happened between them took on a meaning Aria wasn't prepared to deal with. Him sneaking into her room. The kiss. His strange possessiveness. The way he'd reacted to Rhydian. Even Dimitri's cryptic words about facing her fate now made horrible sense.

Aria pushed away from the island and stood so hastily that her chair scraped loudly against the floor. "I need to go."

Maverick immediately rose from his seat. "Aria—"

"No." She lifted a hand before he could come any closer. Her thoughts were moving too quickly for her to make sense of any of them, and the room suddenly felt far smaller than it had a few minutes ago. "I can't do this right now. I need to leave."

Chapter 148: Fear Of Commitment

"There was a difference between choosing someone every day and being told you were destined to choose them forever."

~ Rebel Beast

Fear unlike anything Aria had ever felt gripped her, and she stumbled backward in her haste to put some distance between them. She moved too quickly, however, catching her foot against the chair behind her. Her balance gave way, and she would have hit the floor if Maverick hadn't moved in a flash and caught her.

A sharp current rushed through her the instant his hand closed around her arm, so sudden and intense that a startled gasp escaped her lips. Aria went completely still. Her pulse quickened beneath her skin, and despite every breath she dragged into her lungs, she couldn't seem to get enough air.

"You feel it, don't you?" Maverick asked, his voice dropping into a low, husky tone that sent a shiver through her. "This crazy bond between us..." His words trailed off as his

thumb moved over the spot where he held her, caressing her skin in a slow, sensual stroke that only intensified the strange current flowing between them.

Aria swallowed as heat rushed to her face. One part of her was screaming at her to run because she wasn't ready for this kind of commitment. Yet another part of her wanted the exact opposite.

It wanted to stop fighting the attraction that had been tormenting her since Maverick first kissed her and surrender to whatever was pulling them together. Would it really be so terrible to live in the moment for once and forget about the consequences?

Held spellbound by the conflicting emotions raging inside her, Aria barely moved as Maverick leaned closer and whispered into her ear, "You can deny the bond for as long as you want, but you cannot run from it. The bond is final."

Those words fell on Aria with the finality of a death sentence. The attraction that had nearly persuaded her to surrender was immediately drowned beneath the terrifying realization that Maverick wasn't offering her something she could simply enjoy tonight and reconsider tomorrow.

In his world, fate had already made the decision for them, and Aria had spent far too much of her life having other people decide what her future should be.

Aria lifted her face and looked him directly in the eyes. "Let me go, please."

Maverick stilled. He studied her for only a second before his hand fell away from her arm. He didn't argue or try to convince her to stay. He simply stepped back and gave her the distance she'd asked for.

Aria didn't waste it. She turned and practically fled from the room, leaving Maverick standing alone in the kitchen as he watched her go.

Everything was practically a blur as Aria ran into the elevator, pressed the button for the second floor, and endured the short ride down that somehow felt like it took forever. The moment the doors opened, she hurried along the walkway and practically shoved open the door to their suite, startling Alek and Dimitri, who had obviously been in the middle of an intense makeout session.

"Aria—!" Alek immediately pulled away from Dimitri, looking both flustered and embarrassed at being caught.

Had it been any other time, Aria probably would have joked that they needed to get a room. But right now, she simply stood there staring at them like a deer caught in headlights, her mind still trapped upstairs with Maverick and everything he'd just told her.

Alek's embarrassment disappeared the moment she noticed the terrified look on her roommate's face.

"Aria?" Her voice became cautious. "Are you okay?"

Aria didn't answer. She hurried past them and disappeared into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Alek immediately went after her, but by the time she reached it, Aria had already turned the lock.

"What is going on, Aria?" She knocked several times but received no response.

Dimitri, who had watched the entire exchange from the living room, frowned. "That doesn't look like it went well."

Alek turned toward him. "What didn't go well?"

Dimitri glanced at Aria's bedroom. "Just like us, Maverick and Aria are fated mates too."

"Oh, wow." Alek stared at him as the information sank in. "I guess that explains the tension between her and the professor. I've noticed it since we came here. There's always been something unusually intense about the way they react to each other."

"Apparently, Maverick finally told her," Dimitri said.

"Oh..." Alek glanced back at Aria's door as understanding slowly settled in. "That's quite a lot to dump on someone. I mean, I know about the concept of fated mates, and finding out that the two of us..." She gestured between them. "...are actually mates is still kind of crazy to me. I'm open to exploring it because I like you, but Aria is different. She comes from a broken home, and anything involving relationships or permanent commitment is complicated for her."

"Maverick..." Dimitri breathed, suddenly realizing there was another person upstairs who probably wasn't handling this particularly well either. "I need to go to him."

"Okay," Alek said without hesitation. "I need to check on Aria too. So go do your job while I do mine."

"God, I love you right now." Dimitri couldn't help the words that slipped out as pride filled him.

The goddess had given him a mate who understood exactly what needed to be done without him having to explain it. To think he hadn't recognized the signs from the beginning was almost embarrassing.

Alek went red in the face immediately. She knew he didn't love her like that yet. They had only just started getting to know each other, and whatever existed between them was still

too new to be called love. But hearing the words from him still sent a delicious tingling sensation through her that made it impossible to stop the smile on her lips.

"I should go..." Dimitri said, yet he made absolutely no move to leave.

Mate.

The little bastard of a wolf finally howled inside his head, making his presence known after being suspiciously quiet while Dimitri figured everything out on his own. Now the damn creature was practically wagging his tail in excitement, as if he deserved any credit for the discovery. They were going to have a very long talk after this was over.

Dimitri knew he needed to leave, but knowing something and actually doing it were two entirely different things, especially when Alek looked up at him with those flushed cheeks and slightly swollen lips from what they'd been doing before Aria interrupted them.

He reached for her face and kissed her, intending only to steal one quick kiss before forcing himself out the door. Except the moment their lips touched, something inside him flared to life.

The bond surged between them with such force that Dimitri's fingers tightened against her cheeks, and the gentle kiss deepened before he even realized what he was doing. Alek made a soft sound against his mouth and kissed him back just as eagerly, her hands sliding up his chest and around his neck as his tongue met hers.

Whatever little sense Dimitri had managed to hold onto vanished with that response. His hands dropped from her face to her waist, and he lifted her effortlessly. Alek wrapped her legs around him without breaking the kiss, pressing herself against him as Dimitri carried her backward until her back met the wall.

Their mouths separated only long enough to drag in a breath before finding each other again, the kiss turning hotter and far less controlled. Alek threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled him closer while Dimitri held her firmly against him, one hand supporting her beneath her thigh as the other tightened around her waist.

Alek ground against him, and the friction drew a rough groan from Dimitri that disappeared against her mouth. She answered with a breathless moan of her own, tightening her legs around his waist as he kissed her harder.

The bond seemed to magnify everything between them, making every touch feel more intense than it should have. Dimitri could feel how badly she wanted him closer, and judging by the way his body responded whenever she moved against him, he wasn't doing much better.

His mouth left hers and traveled along her jaw before finding the sensitive skin beneath her ear, and Alek tipped her head aside to give him more room.

"Dimitri..." She breathed his name as his lips moved against her neck.

Things probably would have escalated much further if Alek hadn't managed to remember that they both had something far more important to deal with. She reluctantly pulled his face away from her neck, breathing hard as she stared at him.

"Maverick."

Dimitri froze before closing his eyes in frustration. "Fuck."

He pressed his forehead against hers, neither of them making any immediate effort to untangle themselves as they struggled to catch their breath.

His voice still rough from the kiss, Dimitri said, "We seriously need to get those two together, because I'm going to lose my damn mind very soon."

Chapter 149: Going After His Mate

By the time Dimitri returned to Maverick's quarters, he found him drinking. Except instead of drowning himself in alcohol like any reasonable person would after having a love confession go that spectacularly wrong, Maverick was sitting in the living room, drinking tea.

That was one thing about the Nightshade Dimitri had never been able to understand. He knew why Maverick didn't drink. Alcohol muddled the senses, weakened control, and made people do things they would never consider under normal circumstances.

But sometimes Dimitri wondered if that wasn't exactly the point. Maverick had inherited his father's obsession with discipline and carried it into nearly every aspect of his life, always composed, always controlled, always determined to remain several steps ahead of everyone around him.

Dimitri wondered if Maverick realized how stifling that had to be. If your heart got broken, you were supposed to drink too much, curse fate, make a few terrible decisions, and wake up the next morning regretting at least half of them. There was practically an unspoken rule about these things.

But Maverick Nightshade, apparently, hadn't gotten the memo.

"What happened?" Dimitri asked, even though he already had a pretty good idea of how spectacularly downhill everything had gone.

"Disastrous," Maverick answered in a voice as calm as still water. "She probably hates my ass and never wants to see my face again."

"She's only scared," Dimitri corrected him.

"My mate doesn't want to be with me, Uncle." Maverick's voice rose just enough to betray the frustration beneath all that carefully maintained poise. His eyes met Dimitri's, and he paused, visibly reining himself in before his emotions could get the better of him.

Dimitri studied him for a second before walking over to the sofa and sitting adjacent to him. There was little point telling Maverick not to take Aria's reaction personally when the entire concept of a mate made rejection about as personal as it could possibly get.

"So what's your next plan?"

"I had the brilliant idea of kidnapping her somewhere private and letting the mating fever hit us both until she couldn't deny the bond anymore," Maverick told him.

"Taking a Chapter out of your father's notebook, eh?" Dimitri teased.

Everyone who knew Asher Nightshade knew the stories. The man had fallen for Violet at first sight and proceeded to do everything within his power, including several things no sane person would recommend, to make her his. If Maverick intended to follow his biological father's example, Aria was in for one hell of a courtship.

"Except that would be stupid." Maverick took another sip of his tea, apparently recognizing the rather significant flaw in his brilliant plan. "If she panicked because she felt trapped, kidnapping her would only prove every fear she has about this bond."

"Exactly. Aria isn't your mother, Violet. She comes from a broken home—"

"And isn't receptive to anything that threatens her independence," Maverick finished for him. There was a trace of sarcasm in his voice when he added, "You don't think I looked into my own mate?"

Dimitri lifted both hands in surrender. He might have taken it upon himself to help these two idiots get together, but he had no intention of becoming collateral damage in their love war.

"Okay. In that case, you've got it all handled, then."

"I'll seduce her."

Dimitri's eyes shot up. "Eh?"

"She's not afraid of intimacy," Maverick explained, setting his cup aside. "She's afraid of what comes after it. She can kiss me, want me, even allow herself to enjoy being with me, as long as she believes she can walk away afterward. The moment I told her the bond was forever, she panicked."

There was a tic in his jaw. "My mate grew up watching the people who were supposed to love her fail her. She doesn't know the identity of her father, and her mother dates deadbeat men, further traumatizing her. Now I'm promising her forever as if the word is supposed to comfort her. She doesn't understand what forever means to a mate because she's never had any reason to trust it."

A determined glint entered Maverick's eyes. "I wanted to court her the human way because I thought giving her time would make this easier, but that's where I went wrong because the mate bond isn't mundane. So I'm done hiding it from her. I'll give her all the freedom she needs to choose me, but I'm going to make damn sure she understands exactly what she's choosing between."

A slow confidence settled over his features. "I'll tear down those walls one by one, and by the time I'm done, forever won't be the thing she's running from. It'll be the thing she wants."

While Maverick was speaking, Dimitri had somehow become distracted imagining inspirational music swelling dramatically in the background. Maverick certainly had the expression for it, sitting there delivering his grand declaration with the conviction of some legendary hero preparing to ride into battle.

Dimitri became so entertained by the image that he completely missed the moment Maverick stopped talking and continued staring at him like a moron.

"What do you think of it?" Maverick asked.

"Huh?" Dimitri blinked.

Realizing he'd been caught not listening, he grabbed the first relevant thought that came to mind. "And what about the dragon?"

Just like that, Maverick's eyes darkened.

"Rhydian Drakhar is probably fooling around. There isn't a single documented case of a dragon mating with a human."

"Well..." Dimitri began carefully. "It's technically only been twenty years since the barriers fell, and considering how little interaction there has been between dragons and humans, it's not surprising there isn't enough research to know whether—" He trailed off when he noticed the murderous look steadily forming in Maverick's eyes.

Dimitri immediately changed course. "But of course, it could also be another tactic by Rhydian to mess around with Aria. With those damn parrots in his service, he must have sensed that you feel something for Aria, so this could be his way of getting back at you."

From the way Maverick's eyes narrowed, it was obvious he was actually considering that angle. Dimitri caught the reaction and immediately became impressed with his own deduction. "Goddess, I'm brilliant." He clapped for himself.

"Good thing I'll be teaching the bastard a lesson tomorrow night," Maverick said, rising to his feet.

Without another word, he carried his cup into the kitchen, washed it, and returned to the living room while Dimitri waited. Whatever amusement had been on Maverick's face earlier was gone by the time he came back.

"I need suppressor shots."

Dimitri stiffened immediately. He looked Maverick dead in the eye. "What for?"

"Feral will go after Aria tonight," Maverick said. "I can't let that happen. She needs time and space for today, and Feral isn't going to understand that."

"Only tonight, right?" Dimitri asked, his tone becoming serious because they both knew the consequences of using that stuff.

Suppressor shots restricted wolves from surfacing or taking control of their human counterparts. They were primarily used on rabid or dangerously unstable wolves that couldn't be controlled through ordinary means, but prolonged use was toxic to the wolf itself, which was why access to them was strictly monitored.

Maverick had already been given more than enough doses as a child when his family struggled to control Feral, and Dimitri wasn't about to stand by and watch him start self-medicating again.

"Just tonight," Maverick assured him, his expression hardening with determination. "Come tomorrow, I'm going after my mate."

Chapter 150: I Thought You Were Dead

A blackish viper with the smallest hint of deep emerald slithered through the foyer of House Ophidian alongside the other students, yet no one seemed particularly bothered by the sight of it.

This was the home of serpents, after all. A snake moving freely through the halls was hardly worth a second glance, and this particular viper was none other than Venus Crotalus.

The First Fang had successfully made it out of House Therion without getting caught, which was already one problem taken care of. Keeping close to the edges of the corridor,

Venus began making his way up the broad, winding ramps that connected the different levels of the House. He continued like that until he finally reached his floor.

Caelis was undoubtedly waiting for him, and while Venus already had about a million questions to answer, there was no way in hell he was going to face his prince reeking of Brittney. Even now, he had no idea what he was supposed to tell Caelis.

The prince would undoubtedly be disappointed in him. What the hell had he been thinking, sleeping with a human when he was one of the loudest voices against getting attached to them in the first place?

But even as he beat himself up over it, Venus couldn't lie to himself about one thing. That had been the best sex of his life. Nothing he'd experienced before came remotely close, and that only made the situation worse. Why the hell did Brittney have to be human? If she had been a serpent, there would have been nothing stopping this from continuing between them.

The instant Venus reached his door, he shifted back into his human form, completely naked. The few serpents passing through the corridor barely spared him a glance. Nudity wasn't considered particularly scandalous among shifters who regularly lost whatever they were wearing whenever they transformed. Everyone had seen everything at some point, and eventually, there was nothing interesting about it anymore.

Venus unlocked his door and stepped inside. His apartment was exactly the way he'd left it, not that anyone would have been stupid enough to break into the First Fang's quarters. Venus might have looked harmless enough when he wanted to, but he was still a viper, and the venom in his fangs wasn't there for decoration.

Venus didn't bother inspecting anything further and headed straight for his bedroom. Once inside, he went directly into the bathroom and turned on the shower. For the first time in his life, Venus found himself wishing he had Caelis's ridiculous collection of bathing products.

Most beasts might not know it, but Caelis didn't joke about his hygiene. The prince had separate products for practically every part of his body. There were shampoos and conditioners for his hair, cleansers and moisturizers for his face, body washes, exfoliating scrubs, oils, and Goddess knew what else Venus had never bothered learning the names of.

He used to joke that Caelis could put half the women in Bestiaris to shame with the amount of products lined up in his bathroom. Now Venus desperately wished he'd taken a page out of the prince's book because Brittney's scent was all over him.

He could smell her on his skin, in his hair, and every time he breathed deeply enough, that damn orange and peppercorn scent filled his senses and made his head reel. Goddess, she

smelled divine. Even standing beneath the running water, some traitorous part of him wanted to close his eyes and breathe her in rather than wash every trace of her away.

"This is bad," Venus muttered as he grabbed the two bottles of body wash he thankfully owned, one sandalwood and the other bergamot.

If he'd had ten different scents available, he probably would have poured all ten over himself. Better to come out smelling like a chaotic mixture of every fragrance known to mankind than walk into Caelis's quarters wearing Brittney's scent like a fucking beacon.

In the end, Venus became desperate enough to use his shampoo on practically everything, scrubbing himself thoroughly until his skin nearly protested and Brittney's scent was no longer overwhelming his senses.

It was still there, though. Venus could detect the faintest trace of orange and peppercorn beneath everything he'd used, but surely that was only because he knew exactly what he was looking for.

Someone would have to get ridiculously close to him to notice it now, and Venus chose to believe he was simply overthinking the whole thing. Besides, no one was going to lean in and smell him—he hoped.

Venus stepped out of the shower stall and began drying himself. He was in the middle of rubbing the towel through his damp hair when something in the bathroom mirror caught his attention and made him pause.

There was a bite mark on the area between his neck and shoulder.

"What the fuck?" The words slipped out of Venus's mouth before he could stop them.

He leaned closer to the mirror, angling his body until he could see the mark properly. Venus remembered exactly how it had gotten there. Brittney had bitten him hard in the heat of passion, her teeth sinking into his skin while she'd clung to him.

But it should have healed by now. Serpent shifters had a much faster metabolism than humans, and minor injuries rarely remained visible for long. Yet the imprint of Brittney's teeth was still there, standing out clearly against his skin as though his body had no intention of getting rid of it anytime soon.

"Fuck!" Venus muttered as he rubbed his fingers over the mark.

Had this been a different world where Brittney was a serpent shifter, Venus might have worn her mark proudly. But serpents didn't mark their partners like this. They certainly didn't sink all thirty-two teeth into someone like an overenthusiastic human trying to take a bite out of them. Their marks were made with their fangs instead.

How the hell was he supposed to explain this? His situation kept getting worse by the minute.

Yet even as Venus stared at the evidence of what they'd done, an inappropriate thrill ran through him. Goddess, he really enjoyed his time with her.

There was no other choice. He needed to cover the damn thing until it completely faded.

Venus headed into his bedroom and immediately got to work. He applied deodorant generously beneath his arms, adding another layer of fragrance to whatever remained of Brittney's scent, then went through his wardrobe until he found a black turtleneck with long sleeves and paired it with casual jeans.

Good thing serpents were cold-blooded. No one was going to question why a snake shifter had suddenly decided to wear a turtleneck this late at night.

Once he was dressed, Venus grabbed his perfume and practically doused himself in it. One spray became three, three became six, and by the time he finally stopped, the cloud of fragrance surrounding him was so thick that he inhaled at the wrong moment and broke into a violent coughing fit.

Fuck. He smelled like he'd robbed an entire perfume store and then detonated the evidence on himself. Not even Brittney's scent could have survived the chemical warfare he'd just unleashed.

Only then did Venus feel confident enough to leave his bedroom. Except the moment he walked into his living room, he discovered Caelis already seated casually on his sofa, waiting for him.

Venus halted midstep.

"There you are..." Caelis said casually, lifting his eyes to him. "I was beginning to think Maverick had killed you, but apparently, I was wrong."