

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 151: As Discreet As Possible

"My prince..." Venus stuttered, his heart immediately falling out of rhythm. He should have been able to control something as simple as his heartbeat, but Caelis had caught him completely off guard. Now Venus had to force himself to calm down before his body exposed exactly how nervous he was.

It should have occurred to him that Caelis would be informed the moment he crossed back into serpent territory. Under normal circumstances, Venus would have anticipated something like this. Unfortunately, his head had been so thoroughly occupied by Brittney that common sense had failed him, and now he was about to pay the price.

Caelis's nose suddenly twitched, his face wrinkling with distaste before his tongue darted briefly from his mouth to taste the air, an instinct so natural to serpent shifters that most of them barely noticed when they did it.

He frowned. "Why do you stink of some strange perfume concoction?"

Venus gulped. He should have known better. How the hell had he convinced himself that a few bottles of body wash and half a bottle of perfume would be enough to deceive Caelis?

Caelis continued, "Where is my document with Maverick's signature?"

Venus's heart nearly stopped. He had completely forgotten why he'd gone to House Therion in the first place. What kind of fucking charm did Brittney have over him that he'd forgotten the one task his prince had entrusted him with?

Venus knew at that moment that it was over for him. He could invent a story, but there wasn't enough truth available to cover all the inconsistencies. Caelis was too intelligent to fool with some hastily constructed lie, and his network of informants throughout Bestiaris would eventually expose any deception Venus attempted anyway.

Above all, Venus was Caelis's First Fang. He could fail his prince, however shameful that might be, but deliberately deceiving him was another matter entirely. Caelis trusted him, and Venus wasn't about to repay that trust with lies simply because he was too embarrassed to admit what he'd done.

At once, Venus dropped to the floor and bowed until his forehead touched the ground. "Forgive me, Caelis, for I have failed you."

Caelis's face tightened slightly. He couldn't say he hadn't seen something like this coming. When Venus hadn't returned at the expected time, Caelis had initially assumed Maverick was deliberately holding him back.

But when news reached him that Maverick and Rhydian had fought in the restroom and Venus still hadn't returned, Caelis knew something was wrong. He'd called Venus several times, but none of the calls had been answered before the phone eventually went off. Caelis had the device tracked afterward, only to discover that its last location was still somewhere within House Therion.

Had it been Rhydian, that hot-tempered, childish, fire-breathing lizard, perhaps he would have had reason to fear for Venus's safety. But this was Maverick. The wolf was honorable, weakened as he was by those mundane morals of his, and wouldn't harm the First Fang of House Ophidian without first considering the consequences it would bring upon House Therion. Caelis respected him enough to know that much.

So what the hell had been keeping Venus?

Caelis had decided to wait until midnight. If Venus hadn't returned by then, he would have marched into House Therion himself and demanded answers, and depending on the answers he received, things could have gotten bloody.

Hence, seeing Venus finally return unharmed only to drop at his feet and confess that he had failed him intrigued Caelis far more than he cared to admit.

"What did you do, Venus?"

"I strayed from the mission and ended up doing something you wouldn't approve of," Venus admitted, keeping his forehead pressed firmly against the floor.

"Look at me," Caelis ordered.

Venus had no choice but to lift his head, forcing himself to stare directly into the prince's cold, unreadable silver eyes.

"Now..." Caelis said slowly. "Tell me exactly what happened. Do not leave a single detail out."

And just like that, Venus had no choice but to confess. He told Caelis how he'd snuck into the girls' quarters after Maverick left in a hurry, intending to gather information about Aria. Unfortunately, he'd ended up in Brittney's room instead, where the little demoness had tranquilized him and left him unconscious for hours.

By the time he came around, he was tied up, and with House Therion surrounded, escaping without drawing attention to himself had been impossible. He'd been forced to remain with her, and somewhere along the way, Brittney had turned out to be far more

accepting than he'd expected. They'd talked, he'd gotten carried away, and eventually, they'd ended up having sex.

At least, that was the version Venus gave him. He deliberately omitted the fact that he'd knotted Brittney and might have left his mark on her too, just as she had on him.

He knew Caelis had explicitly ordered him not to leave anything out, yet the moment Venus considered revealing those particular details, something inside him resisted. It wasn't merely embarrassment, but an instinct deeper than that, almost possessive, urging him to keep what had happened between him and Brittney to himself.

When Caelis didn't reply immediately, seemingly lost in thought, Venus became even more anxious. "I have failed you, which is why I'll gladly accept any punishment you give me. But please, let me continue serving you. I know I'm unworthy after sully myself with a human, and I swear it will never happen again—"

"Oh, please, stop with the theatrics, Venus," Caelis interrupted, rolling his eyes. "You certainly don't think you're the first serpent to lie with a human?"

Venus's brows lifted in surprise. He wasn't? Suspicion immediately entered his eyes as he stared at Caelis. "Have you—?"

The look Caelis gave him was so deadly that it was a miracle Venus didn't turn to stone right there.

"Father's nefarious activities are not exactly unknown," Caelis admitted. "Humans are a different species, which makes them exotic enough to appeal to creatures like Njord Cobryn. My father is simply discreet enough to avoid the scrutiny and judgment of his people, or worse, give anyone reason to believe that serpents and humans can... fraternize." He deliberately chose the more subtle word.

Venus was stunned. No wonder he'd never known about it. Caelis must have gone to extraordinary lengths to uncover something the serpent King had taken such care to conceal.

Caelis looked at him. "You said the human tranquilized you?"

Venus nodded. "Yes. She set up an entire trap in her room."

"So she anticipated the possibility of a beast intruding and had the proper weapons prepared." Caelis's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "This year's candidates are becoming far more suspicious than I thought."

"I won't go near her ever again," Venus promised him.

"No," Caelis said. "I want you to go back to her."

"What?" Venus wasn't sure he'd heard him correctly.

But Caelis continued, undeterred. "I want you to deliberately get close to Brittney Thorne. She already trusts you enough to let her guard down, so use that to your advantage. Find out what she knows, especially anything concerning Aria Aspen. If continuing to fuck her makes her more willing to talk, then by all means, continue fucking her."

A hint of amusement entered Caelis's otherwise cold eyes. "Judging by how spectacularly you abandoned your mission tonight, I doubt you'll consider that particular assignment much of a hardship."

Venus's face went red with embarrassment.

"But don't make the mistake of falling for her," Caelis warned him. "And make sure no one finds out about this arrangement. Be as discreet as possible."

## Chapter 152: [Bonus - ] Vampire Mark On Her Neck

"Brittney...!"

The sleeping girl heard her name, but it sounded distant, like someone was calling her from underwater, and her sleep-addled mind dismissed it as part of a dream.

Then it came a second time, louder and accompanied by another violent pounding.

"Brittney! Open up!"

Brittney's eyes finally snapped open, her ears registering the pounding on her bedroom door.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, stumbling out of bed with sleep still clouding her eyes and leaving her unsteady on her feet. Then the events of the day came rushing back to her all at once, and her eyes widened.

"Venus?!" Her brain finally remembered.

Except when she turned toward the bed, the spot where Venus was supposed to be lying was empty. Brittney stared at it for a second before quickly looking around the room in case he'd shifted back into his snake form without waking her.

"Venus?" she whispered, even crouching to peer beneath the bed. "Are you there?"

Common sense finally caught up with Brittney and told her that he was gone. If Venus were still around, he certainly wouldn't be hiding beneath her bed. More importantly, with the way those lunatics were pounding on her door, he would have been the first to wake her and warn her that her roommates were outside.

Just like that, Brittney felt her stomach drop with disappointment. Sure, she'd known Venus wasn't going to stay with her forever, but it would have been nice if he'd at least woken her to say goodbye before leaving.

She was about to straighten when something caught her attention. This wasn't the same bedsheet she'd had on the bed earlier. Speaking of which, for someone who'd been deliciously fucked, Brittney suddenly realized she couldn't find a single piece of evidence on her body that anything had happened at all. What time was it, anyway?

Understanding dawned on her. Venus had cleaned her up. He'd even changed the damn sheets before leaving. Just like that, a stupid grin spread across Brittney's face. That snake just kept getting cuter and cuter.

Except the thought was ripped away when another bang landed against her door.

"Brittney fucking Thorne, are you sleeping to death in there?! Answer the door right now!"

It was Trisha's voice, and she sounded pretty pissed.

Oh, fuck.

"Give me a minute!" Brittney finally shouted back. Hearing her voice must have reassured them that she was, in fact, still alive because they stopped trying to break down her door.

She rushed to her wardrobe and pulled out a shirt and shorts. She was in the middle of dragging the shirt over her head when her hand brushed against the side of her neck and she winced.

Huh?

Curious, Brittney headed over to her vanity and turned her neck toward the mirror. Her mouth fell open.

"That fucking bastard...!"

Two bold fang marks stood out against her skin. They looked almost identical to the puncture wounds a vampire would leave behind on an unfortunate bloodless victim. What the hell had Venus been thinking? Did this look like a fucking vampire movie? How the hell was she supposed to explain this?

As if that wasn't enough, another impatient knock sounded at the door.

"What's taking you so long to open the door, Brittney? Are you okay? Just open up."

It was Aria's voice this time.

Damn it! She couldn't let them see the mark. Brittney could already imagine the judgment on their faces when they discovered she'd slept with a snake shifter. Worse, if they saw two fang marks on her neck, they would naturally assume Venus had attacked or hurt her, and after everything that had happened between them, she couldn't let that happen.

"I slept naked! Give me time to get decent!" she shouted back, the anxiety and urgency of the situation making her voice sharper than intended.

Brittney immediately began rummaging through her wardrobe, tossing clothes aside one after another as she desperately searched for a turtleneck and prayed to God she'd actually packed one.

She finally stumbled upon one, and no piece of clothing had ever made Brittney happier. She immediately pulled it on and breathed a sigh of relief when the fabric completely covered the mark on her neck. Then she put on her shorts.

Leaving nothing to chance, Brittney looked around the room for anything else that could betray her. She quickly gathered the rest of Venus's belongings and buried them beneath her clothes inside the luggage in her wardrobe. Satisfied that everything was finally in place, she walked over and opened the door.

The girls must have been impatiently leaning against it because the moment the door opened, they stumbled inside.

"Whoa," Brittney exclaimed, stepping back in surprise as Trisha, Alek, and Aria recovered themselves. All three of them were staring at her as though she'd committed some terrible crime while locked away in her bedroom.

It was Aria who made the first move, stepping farther into the room and inspecting the place as if expecting to find someone hiding behind the curtains or beneath the furniture.

"Okay, what's going on?" Brittney asked, her tone turning serious. A nervous part of her wondered whether Aria intended to go as far as searching the wardrobe, but thankfully, she gave up halfway through her inspection and returned to the others.

"Can someone talk now?" Brittney demanded.

Alek, Trisha, and Aria exchanged glances before Trisha turned to Alek. "Well, you were the one who called for this. Explain."

Alek turned to Brittney. "Well, Aria is having a relationship crisis—"

"I don't have a relationship, not to mention a crisis," Aria cut in stubbornly.

Alek waved her off. "Anyway," she continued, "I thought it would be best if we all sat down and talked things through, considering she's been behaving like some child..." She deliberately emphasized the last part, earning an irritated eye roll from Aria.

"So I came to your room to get you, and we've spent the past fifteen minutes trying to reach you."

"We thought something had happened to you," Aria added.

"And we nearly called Maverick, but Aria wouldn't let us because she's too shy to face her mate," Trisha taunted.

At the mention of the word "mate," Brittney's interest was immediately piqued.

"All right, color me interested. Now we definitely need to have that conversation." Brittney ushered them out, deliberately moving everyone as far away from her bedroom as possible before closing the door firmly behind her.

That was so close.

## **Chapter 153: [Bonus - ] Have Sexy Father-in-laws**

"So let me get this straight..." Brittney began. "Aria..." She gestured toward Aria, who was seated on the other couch with a defensive look on her face. "...is Maverick fucking Nightshade's fated mate?!"

"I literally told you that minutes ago," Alek answered.

"Oh my God." Brittney looked completely blown away. "I knew it! I fucking called it! All those secret touches from someone who supposedly doesn't like being touched, I knew there was something between them."

"Except Aria turned him down," Trisha added, prematurely killing Brittney's excitement.

"Excuse me?" Brittney practically hurled the words at Aria. "You did what?!"

Aria rubbed her forehead with a sigh. She couldn't say she hadn't seen that reaction coming. It was times like this that she almost wished she hadn't formed such a close bond with these girls, because apparently friendship also meant everyone felt entitled to stick their noses into her business.

Everyone knew how persuasive Brittney could be, which was probably why no one interrupted when she began grilling Aria.

"Are you crazy? This is Maverick Nightshade we're talking about. The man practically every woman on this planet wants to fuck!"

"Well, I would too, except it comes with forever," Aria blurted out, only realizing what she'd admitted when the words were already out of her mouth. Embarrassment immediately flooded her face.

"No, no, no," Alek told her. "Don't you dare retreat now. Keep that same energy. We need you angry and truthful, not careful and afraid to admit what you actually want."

Anger rushed through Aria's veins. "I am not afraid! Excuse me if I'm not comfortable with someone telling me I'm bound to him forever. Someone I don't even know!"

"Then get to know him!" Trisha cut in. "This is supposed to be a mate bond, and from everything I know, it's something special. Do you even realize how lucky you are to stumble upon your forever person? Someone whose soul was literally made to yearn for yours? Most people go their entire lives without finding something like that, and plenty of them would kill for the chance you've been given."

"That's the problem," Aria said, her frustration giving way to something far more vulnerable. "Without the bond, would he have fallen for me? Or am I supposed to just play along with some script fate has already written for me? What assurance do I have that I'll even like what I find at the end of the road?"

At that, all three girls went silent. For once, none of them had an immediate argument to throw back at her. When Aria put it that way, they could understand her hesitation. It wasn't Maverick she was rejecting as much as the terrifying idea that something beyond her control had already decided what the rest of her life was supposed to look like.

Alek's expression softened. "I don't think any of us can answer that for you, Aria. The only person who can tell you whether he would have fallen for you without the bond is Maverick himself. But if there's one thing I've learned about the Matebond since coming here, it's that no one really fights fate and wins. Maybe you don't have to accept everything the bond promises right now. You can simply give yourself the chance to know him and decide what you want from there."

"Moreover," Alek added, a little humor returning to her voice, "if fate gives you something this good, I'm not sure you want to find out what's waiting on the other side. With our luck, it could be really ugly."

"I know I'm a terrible judge of character when it comes to men," Brittney said this time, "but even I can acknowledge a genuine man when I see one. Maverick has protected all of us since we arrived at this school. If he were an asshole who only cared about getting into your pants because you're his mate, he could have protected only you and left the rest of us to our fate."

"Or he could be doing all of this to buy my affection," Aria argued.

Alek gave her a look. "Now you're deliberately painting the poor guy black."

"I don't know!" Aria threw her hands into the air. "I didn't come to this school to date anyone. All I've been thinking about since I got here is survival, getting through this program and eventually going home. Now, out of nowhere, I'm supposed to become someone's forever person. I don't even know what I'm supposed to do with that."

"You're scared. We get it," Trisha told her, surprisingly gentle this time. "But life itself is unpredictable, Aria. Before all of this happened, could you ever have imagined that your own mother would submit your name to the Concordia Program for money? You had plans for your life, and everything changed in one night without asking your permission."

To that, Aria couldn't answer, not when the answer was painfully obvious.

"So why don't you go with the flow this time?" Trisha continued. "Not because fate told you to. Not because Maverick wants you to. Do it because you want to find out for yourself whether there's something between you worth exploring. You don't have to promise him forever tomorrow."

"What's that saying again?" Brittney struggled to remember for a second before snapping her fingers. "Ah, yes. When life gives you lemons, you fucking make the best lemonade you can. And baby girl, this particular lemon happens to be Violet Purple's son. You get to become part of that family. Do you have any idea how fucking gorgeous your potential fathers-in-law are? And you get four of them! Four!"

Aria didn't know when the laughter escaped her. It burst through the heaviness in her chest so unexpectedly that she couldn't stop it. Here she was questioning her fate, free will, and whether she could ever surrender herself to some magical bond, while Brittney was already planning her entry into the Nightshade family and apparently admiring her four potential fathers-in-law.

Except the laughter broke apart almost as quickly as it came. One moment Aria was laughing, and the next her face crumpled as tears spilled down her cheeks. She tried to stop them, embarrassed by how suddenly she'd lost control, but once the first sob escaped, everything she'd been holding inside since leaving Maverick's quarters seemed to come pouring out with it.

"What if he leaves me?" Aria cried. "What if one day he decides the bond doesn't mean what he thought it did? What if I believe all of this, give him everything, and he uses me and leaves anyway? Everyone keeps telling me it's forever, but people promise forever all the time before they walk away. What makes this any different?"

"Oh, Aria..." Alek's heart broke as the real source of Aria's fear finally came to the surface. This had never been about whether Maverick was handsome enough, kind enough, or whether Aria wanted him. She was terrified of trusting something permanent when

nearly everything she'd learned about love had taught her that permanence could disappear without warning.

Just like that, Alek moved first, wrapping her arms around Aria. Trisha joined them almost immediately, followed by Brittney, until Aria was surrounded by all three girls while she wept. No one tried to argue with her anymore or convince her that she was being ridiculous. They simply held her because that was what friends were for.

It felt like forever before Aria finally stopped crying. By then, she was trapped beneath three pairs of arms, their combined body heat quickly becoming unbearable. "Gosh, move away. I feel like I'm inside an oven."

The girls all chuckled but released her, giving Aria the space she desperately needed. She wiped the remaining tears from her face and groaned. "That was so embarrassing. Trust me when I say I did not plan on having an emotional breakdown in front of all of you."

"But you feel healed now, right? That's my power you're feeling right there," Brittney joked, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

"Oh, fuck off," Trisha said, rolling her eyes.

Aria chuckled at their banter, wondering if the two girls would ever go a full day without getting on each other's nerves. Sometimes it was difficult to believe they were related, although perhaps that explained why they irritated each other so effortlessly.

"Wait," Brittney suddenly said, her amusement fading as another thought occurred to her. "If Maverick is your mate, what about the dragon? I thought there was something going on between you two?"

## Chapter 154: Reconcile The Both Of Them

That loudmouth!

Trisha glared at Brittney with enough intensity to burn a hole through her. What the hell was she doing? Aria had nearly suffered a breakdown over the thought of having one mate, and now Brittney wanted to stress her further by bringing Dragon Prince Man-Whore into the conversation?

"Rhydian is probably fooling around," Trisha said sternly, shooting Brittney a pointed look that clearly warned her not to say anything stupid.

But she should have known better. Brittney listened to no one.

"And what if he's serious?"

"Well, Aria has a mate now, so no, we're not letting some dragon come between them."

"Or Aria could date him too. Isn't Maverick's family big on multiple partners? What if fate already has something like that arranged for Aria too?" Brittney argued.

"Thank you, universe, but that is so not happening." Aria's mind was already made up. "I've barely agreed to give Maverick a chance. I'm not adding some naturally occurring arsonist nuthead to the collection. I'm not that kind of person."

Brittney shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, I'm not the one accepting expensive jewelry from him either."

Just like that, Aria was rendered speechless.

"Okay—" Alek started, but Trisha cut her off before she could continue.

"This is how it's going to be. Aria will speak with Maverick tomorrow, and hopefully, the two of them can spend some time getting to know each other without any dragon interference. Rhydian Drakhar nearly got us killed, which already makes him a terrible idea. So no, Aria is not entertaining anything with him. Simple as that."

At that statement, Brittney's brows furrowed. She didn't appreciate being brushed off by her relative, especially when Trisha was speaking as if she had any authority to decide what Aria did with her life.

"Aww, look at you making decisions for Aria already. Why don't you spend some of that energy finding your own partner?"

Trisha froze, unable to believe the words that had just come out of Brittney's mouth.

"Brittney!" Alek and Aria shouted at the same time.

"That was honestly uncalled for," Aria rebuked her openly.

But the damage had already been done, and from the look on Trisha's face, she wasn't about to let Brittney get away with it.

"No, let her be," Trisha said. "She thinks everyone is like her, with terrible taste in men and willing to sacrifice even her own family for the idiot she fell in love with." She knew exactly where Brittney's deepest wound was, and this time, she deliberately struck it.

Aria had no idea what the hell Trisha was talking about, but whatever it was, the effect on Brittney was immediate. The humor disappeared from her face, and for someone who was almost always loud and cheerful, the coldness that settled over her features was unsettling.

"Seriously, Trisha," Alek said, clearly disappointed. "You didn't have to go that far."

"No, no, no. Don't look at me like I'm the bad guy here," Trisha snapped. "Brittney has to learn that she can't be the first person to run her mouth and then act like the victim when someone gives her exactly what she asked for."

"I don't know what the hell is going on between you two, but this ends here. You're not tearing into each other under my watch. I won't allow it," Aria said firmly.

"There won't be a fight." Brittney's voice was unusually low when she finally spoke, but there was enough bitterness behind it to make Aria uneasy. "She's already won."

She turned to Trisha then, and the look on her face made Trisha's anger falter. There was no sarcasm, playful comeback, or the usual fire Brittney carried around so easily.

"Congratulations, Trisha. I'm sure the same family your grandfather wanted nothing to do with must be incredibly proud of you right now."

And with that, Brittney turned her back on them and walked away before anyone could respond, slamming her bedroom door with enough force to rattle the walls.

Alek and Aria exchanged a look before sighing. To think Alek had called everyone together to help Aria sort through her problems, and somehow, they had ended up with an entirely new problem on their hands. Now the two of them would have to figure out how to reconcile Brittney and Trisha before this ridiculous fight became something neither girl could take back.

"She started it first," Trisha said defensively when she caught Alek and Aria staring at her.

"Just because she started it doesn't mean you had to stoop to her level. Two wrongs don't make a right," Alek lectured her.

"This is Bestiaris Academy, Trisha," Aria reminded her. "We don't have the luxury of fighting among ourselves, especially when we never know where the next attack from the beasts will come from. Sticking together is probably the biggest reason we've managed to survive this long compared to some of the other girls, and we can't afford to lose that because you two keep trying to hurt each other whenever you're angry."

She added, "And I understand why you're upset. Brittney crossed a line, and hopefully, she'll learn to think before opening that mouth of hers next time. But sometimes you have to be the bigger person, especially when the other person clearly has a lot of growing up to do. You two are practically family. Do you realize how lucky you are to have that in this shithole of a program? Out of everyone here, you already have someone connected to you by blood. You should be protecting one another, not using what you know about each other as weapons whenever you fight."

From the look on Trisha's face, Aria knew her words had struck home. The anger that had fueled her only moments ago was gone, leaving behind the unmistakable discomfort of someone who knew she'd crossed a line.

"You're right," Trisha admitted reluctantly. "What I said was childish, and I'll apologize to her. But I know Brittney. The last person she'll want to talk to right now is me."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to her," Aria assured her, giving her hand a comforting squeeze.

With that, Aria got up from the couch and headed toward Brittney's bedroom while Alek and Trisha remained behind, watching her approach the closed door.

"Brittney Thorne," she called, rapping her knuckles firmly against the door. "Open up right now."

## Chapter 155: Brittney's Story - 1

Almost immediately, the door swung open, and Aria found herself standing before a Brittney whose face practically screamed that she knew exactly why Aria was there and couldn't care less.

Aria didn't say a word. She simply walked past her and entered the room. Her eyes wandered toward the bed, where an already opened bag of chips sat beside a few crumbs scattered across the sheets. Apparently, someone had decided to eat her feelings.

"Want a bite?" Brittney asked, closing the door behind her.

"Sure," Aria answered. If there was one thing she knew about Brittney, it was that forcing her into a serious conversation immediately would only make her defensive. Sitting down and eating with her first might make whatever came next a little easier.

Brittney walked over to her luggage and crouched beside it. "All right, let's see. I've got barbecue chips, sour cream and onion, cheese puffs, chocolate cookies, salted crackers, gummy bears, and..." She dug deeper before triumphantly pulling out another packet. "Spicy nachos. Pick your poison."

Although Aria already knew Brittney had brought snacks with her, the sheer number of options still caught her by surprise.

"Jeez, Brittney. Did you pack clothes in there at all, or did you use your entire luggage allowance to smuggle in a convenience store?"

"Priorities, babe." Brittney didn't sound remotely ashamed. "Now choose before I change my mind."

"Spicy nachos."

Brittney's brows rose in approval. "Excellent choice. I knew there was a reason I liked you."

She pulled out the packet and walked over to the bed before plopping down on it, scooting backward until her back rested against the wall.

Aria joined her, settling beside her before Brittney handed over the packet. She tore it open and shoved the first mouthful into her mouth, the loud crunch filling the room as Brittney reached for the other chip she picked for herself.

"I'm sure you're curious about the story," Brittney said suddenly.

"Ah, no." Aria reached for another nacho. "I came here to reconcile you and Trisha. You two are practically cat and dog at this point."

"Just say it, Aria. You want the story." Brittney rolled her eyes as she tossed another chip into her mouth. "You've probably been dying to ask since Trisha made that comment."

Aria chewed slowly, determined not to give her the satisfaction, but Brittney continued staring at her with that irritatingly knowing look.

"Fine," Aria finally gave in. "I want the story."

Brittney was quiet for a while, absently digging through the bag of chips before finally speaking. "Well, it's basically the same storyline as every other broken home. My father divorced my mother and married her best friend."

Aria stopped chewing. Of all the things she had expected, that hadn't been one of them.

"He claimed my mother chose her career over him," Brittney continued, staring down at the chip between her fingers. "And the annoying part is that he wasn't exactly wrong. All that matters to my mother is her work. Sometimes I can't help but wonder if giving birth to me was another experiment for her. Something she wanted to experience once just to see how she'd look as a mother before going back to the life she actually cared about." She gave a humorless laugh. "Of course, none of that justified my father fucking her best friend while they were still married."

"I don't think I've ever witnessed an easier divorce," Brittney went on. "My mother couldn't have cared less that the marriage was over. There were no tears, no begging, no fighting to save anything. She signed whatever needed to be signed and went back to work like she'd canceled a subscription she no longer needed. My father, on the other hand, was more than delighted because he could finally be with the woman he'd apparently wanted all along."

Aria's heart broke for her. It was strange to think that only minutes ago she had been crying over her own fear of being abandoned, yet Brittney had been carrying a different

version of the same wound beneath all that humor. At this point, not knowing the identity of her own deadbeat father almost felt like a blessing. At least she didn't have memories of watching him choose another woman and another life over her.

"My father became a completely different person the instant he married his second wife," Brittney continued. "If the whole mate thing existed for humans, I'd almost believe she was his. That's how enamored he was with her. He worshipped the ground she walked on, and whatever she wanted, she got." Brittney finally ate the chip she'd been holding. "Unfortunately for me, the one thing she wanted most was for me not to be around."

Aria's brows pulled together, but she remained silent and let her continue.

"To her, I was a reminder of my mother. Worse, I was something that would always tether my father to his first wife, no matter how completely she'd replaced her everywhere else. She wanted him all to herself, and apparently, having his daughter around ruined the perfect little life she'd imagined for them."

"That's horrible," Aria couldn't stop herself from saying.

Brittney shrugged, although there was nothing careless about the gesture. "Sadly for my father, getting rid of me wasn't exactly an option either. The Thorne family wouldn't permit it. I'm the only heir, remember? Whatever problems my parents had with each other, I still carried the family name, and that made me important enough that he couldn't simply ship me off somewhere and pretend I didn't exist."

"So he was stuck with you," Aria said quietly.

"Exactly." Brittney reached into the bag again. "He was stuck with the daughter his new wife didn't want, while I was stuck in a house where everyone made it perfectly clear I was the extra workload nobody had asked for." Her lips curved into the smallest smile, but Aria could see now that humor was simply the easiest way Brittney knew how to talk about things that still hurt. "And I think you can already guess how I turned out."

Aria looked at her for a long moment. "Loud, inappropriate, incapable of keeping your mouth shut, and apparently carrying enough snacks to survive an apocalypse?"

Brittney smiled at that, but the amusement vanished almost as quickly as it appeared.

"Vengeful, cruel, and rebellious. I just wanted to hurt them all. To make them feel even a fraction of what they'd made me feel."

## Chapter 156: Brittney's Story - 2

"I ran with the wrong crowd and intentionally became the kind of daughter they already seemed convinced I was going to be. I broke the rules because I knew it embarrassed my

father, and caused trouble knowing his wife hated it. Sometimes I did things for no other reason than knowing they wouldn't approve."

Aria watched Brittney as she narrated the story. She could tell the girl wasn't entirely in that bedroom anymore, and that some part of her had gone back to those years and was reliving those awful memories.

"Unfortunately for me, my father covered up every mess I made with his money and connections, so eventually, it started feeling like I was throwing a tantrum and he was cleaning up after me." Brittney grimaced. "Which, now that I think about it, was exactly what I was doing. At some point, he got tired of my bullshit and assigned security to me to 'restrain my frivolity,' as he liked to put it. And that's when I met him."

Aria's interest immediately piqued. She had been waiting to find out who this mysterious idiot Trisha accused Brittney of sacrificing her family for, and something told her they had finally reached the juicy part.

"His name was Hycent, although everyone called him Hype. He was one of the two security guards assigned to me. Hype was fresh out of college and only took the job because the pay was ridiculously good—"

"Whoa..." Aria stopped her right there. "When you say fresh out of college, how old are we talking?"

Brittney pressed her lips together. "Five years older?" she answered with a wince, already anticipating the judgment.

"Brittney!"

Brittney defended herself immediately.

"I'd already clocked eighteen before anything got to the you-know what-I'm-talking-about stage."

"Ugh." Aria grimaced. "Don't put that image in my head."

"Oh, right. I forgot you're the Virgin Mary." Brittney's amusement returned almost instantly. "But don't worry. I'm sure Maverick will do justice to that."

That response brought back the very inappropriate memory of Maverick creeping into her bed the previous night, and Aria's face immediately went beet red.

"Can we go back to the story?"

Brittney smirked, clearly enjoying how ridiculously easy it was to tease Aria.

"Nobody knew about us at first because we both knew my father would fire him if he found out, and Hype needed the job. So it was all secret touches, holding hands whenever nobody was looking, and making out in dark corners whenever we went somewhere together."

A small smile appeared on Brittney's face at the memory. "And I have to tell you, there's nothing quite as exciting as secretly dating someone you're not supposed to be with. Every time we nearly got caught, my heart would be pounding for the next ten minutes. The secrecy, the risk, knowing one wrong move could expose everything... it was an adrenaline rush, and considering the kind of person I was back then, I fucking loved it."

"I have no doubt you did," Aria muttered.

"Eventually, my father found out, and to say he was furious would be an understatement. It wasn't even the age difference that bothered him. It was Hype's status. What would people think if they discovered that the only heir to the Thorne family was dating one of her bodyguards?"

Brittney's smile disappeared again.

"So my father decided to use Hype to teach me a lesson. He fired him, then used his connections to make sure no reputable security company would hire him. He wanted me to understand exactly what he was capable of doing to anyone I dragged into my rebellion, and he was perfectly willing to destroy Hype's life to make his point."

Brittney looked directly into Aria's eyes as she said, "I hated him. I hated my father so fucking much. He didn't stop with the security companies. He made sure Hype couldn't get even the most ordinary job without someone suddenly deciding they didn't need him anymore."

"He sabotaged him at every turn, and I don't think my father ever realized that in trying to punish Hype, he was hurting me too. I was already hopelessly in love with him, and watching someone I loved become so helpless because of me broke something inside me. That's when I came up with the suggestion." Brittney swallowed, and for the first time since she'd started telling the story, she seemed reluctant to continue.

The anticipation became almost unbearable, and Aria found herself asking carefully, "What did you do, Britt?"

"I suggested he rob my family."

"Oh, shit." The words fell out of Aria's mouth before she could stop them.

"I wanted to hurt my father the same way he'd hurt me. Money was his weapon. He could ruin people's lives because he had enough of it to make one phone call and close every

door in their faces. So I started wondering what would happen if he didn't have that power anymore."

Brittney looked down at the bag of chips in her lap. "I honestly didn't care if it meant I became poor too. What the hell had all that money ever done for me anyway? It hadn't made my mother love me more. It hadn't stopped my father from choosing someone else over me. If anything, it was the reason he believed he could control everyone around him."

Aria could barely comprehend what she was hearing. How badly did a parent have to hurt their own child before that child stopped caring if she brought the entire family down with her? Then again, hadn't Aria experienced a smaller taste of that hatred herself after discovering what her mother had done?

Perhaps the only difference was that she had Davina to think about. No matter how furious she became with Quinn, there would always be her little sister standing between her and any decision reckless enough to destroy them all.

"The plan was that once we got the money, we'd leave the country and start over somewhere outside the United Dorminia Federation entirely. Somewhere far enough away that my father couldn't reach us with his money or his connections."

Brittney's voice was almost a whisper. "I didn't care where we went. As long as Hype was there and my father couldn't find us, I thought we'd be fine."

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

### Chapter 157: Brittney's Story - 3

Brittney had been willing to throw away everything she had for this man. The realization made Aria stop eating, the bag of nachos resting on her lap.

"The problem was that robbing my father wasn't as simple as I thought it would be," Brittney continued. "I was angry and eighteen, so in my head, taking his money meant taking away his power. Except rich people don't keep their entire fortunes sitting in one bank account waiting for their rebellious daughters to steal it. A lot of my father's wealth was tied up in companies, investments, stocks, properties, trusts, and Goddess knows what else. Even if I'd emptied every account I knew about, I couldn't have made him poor."

"But you could hurt him," Aria said.

"Oh, definitely." Brittney's lips curved bitterly. "The Thorne family had several private accounts containing liquid funds for investments, acquisitions, emergencies, and whatever rich-people nonsense required millions to be moved quickly. Because I was the

heir, I knew more about those accounts than my father probably realized. I had access to authentication codes, account information, and enough family credentials to get us through security if we knew what we were doing."

Aria frowned. "We?"

"Hype knew a hacker. I didn't ask too many questions about him because, at the time, I thought the less I knew, the better." Brittney gave a humorless laugh. "Which should tell you how incredibly intelligent I was. We couldn't touch anywhere close to my father's entire wealth, but we could take enough money that even someone as wealthy as my father would notice it missing."

"Damn," Aria breathed, her head reeling.

"Yeah," Brittney admitted. "The clever part was protecting Hype. We knew that if my father discovered one of his former employees had stolen from him, he'd make sure Hype spent the rest of his life in prison. So everything was arranged to point back to me. My credentials authorized the transfers, and the receiving account was opened under my identity. We deliberately left behind a trail to make it look like I had stolen from my own family."

Aria stared at her. "You deliberately made yourself look guilty?"

"That was the point. I knew my father." Brittney looked at her. "He might not have loved me the way I wanted him to, but I was still his only child. More importantly, imagine the scandal if people discovered his own daughter had robbed him. He would never hand me over to the authorities and allow our family name to be dragged through the mud. I thought he'd cover it up, which meant Hype would be safe."

The more Brittney spoke, the more Aria realized how far she had actually gone. Brittney had risked her freedom, her inheritance, and whatever relationship she still had with her family, then deliberately placed evidence against herself to protect Hype from the consequences. It was simply crazy.

"And it worked," Brittney said. "We pulled it off. By the time anyone realized what had happened, the money was already gone from the family accounts and sitting somewhere my father couldn't immediately reach. Hype and I had new identities, fake passports, everything. We were supposed to leave United Dorminia together."

Aria didn't like the way she'd said 'supposed to'.

"What happened?"

"Hype betrayed me."

The answer came without hesitation, but Brittney's face had gone strangely blank.

"Hours before we were supposed to leave, we celebrated. Nothing extravagant because we couldn't risk drawing attention to ourselves. We simply ate together, talked about where we'd go first, what kind of house we'd get eventually, all that stupid shit people talk about when they think they're about to start a new life together."

Brittney's fingers tightened around the chip she was holding until it broke. "At some point, I started feeling tired. I thought it was everything finally catching up with me, so when Hype told me to sleep, I did."

"No, he didn't..." Aria shook her head, already knowing where this was going.

"He drugged me."

"Britt..."

"When I woke up, he was gone. His clothes were gone, along with both of our fake passports." Brittney let out a laugh devoid of amusement. "And when I checked the account, every fucking cent was gone too. He'd transferred everything somewhere else before leaving the country."

Aria felt sick on her behalf. "So he left nothing."

Brittney snorted. "Oh, he did leave a letter."

Of course he fucking did. Aria could already feel anger coursing through her veins. She would kill the bastard right now if she could.

"It's been two months, so I don't remember all the words anymore, but I remember the parts that mattered. He told me not to hate him for choosing himself. He claimed my father would forgive me because I'm his daughter, while he would be treated like a criminal."

Her mouth twisted. "Then he said the money was compensation for everything my family had cost him. His career, his reputation, his future. Since I was the reason my father destroyed his life in the first place, I owed him another one."

"That son of a biscuit," Aria hissed, her hands curling into fists. Ugh! How she wished she could get her hands on him.

"The funny thing is, I wasn't even angry about the money," Brittney said, the pain in her eyes making Aria's chest tighten. "I would have given it to him, Aria. Every cent. If he'd told me he wanted the entire amount for himself, I probably would have fucking agreed because that was how stupidly in love with him I was. It was waking up and realizing that while I had been planning our life together, he'd been planning how to leave me behind. That was what destroyed me."

Aria couldn't think of anything to say.

"And the worst part?" Brittney continued. "Hype was right about one thing. My father didn't send me to prison."

Somehow, the way she said it made Aria certain that wasn't the mercy it sounded like.

"Everything led back to me. According to the evidence, I had robbed my own family and then somehow lost the money. My father knew Hype had been involved, of course, but by then, he was outside United Dorminia and the money had disappeared with him. Father could have reported everything and let the authorities tear the whole thing apart, but that would mean admitting publicly that the Thorne heir had helped rob her own family." Brittney shook her head. "He couldn't tolerate that kind of humiliation, so he buried as much of it as he could."

"But people found out," Aria guessed.

"You know how socialites are. You can hide something from the newspapers much easier than you can hide it from people whose favorite hobby is knowing everyone else's business. By the time my father contained the situation, whispers were already spreading through our circle."

Brittney set the chip aside, having lost her appetite. "I became a social pariah. Parents who used to invite me into their homes suddenly didn't want me anywhere near their daughters because I might corrupt them too. People whispered whenever I walked into a room, and some of my old friends weren't even allowed to speak to me anymore. In my family's eyes, I had gone from being an embarrassment they could manage to someone they couldn't trust with anything."

Aria finally understood. "That's why you're here."

Brittney gave her a sad smile. "When the Concordia Program came along, my father must have rejoiced. The universe had personally delivered him a solution. Send his troublesome daughter away in the name of strengthening human-beast relations, let everyone praise the Thorne family for contributing their precious heir to the cause, and get me out of his life at the same time. He did everything he could to make sure my name ended up on that list. That—"

Brittney never got to finish because Aria suddenly pulled her into a hug.

"Don't," Aria murmured when Brittney stiffened against her. "You don't have to make a joke out of this one."

For a moment, Brittney didn't move. Then something in her finally gave way, and she embraced Aria. The first tear slipped down her cheek, followed by another, and finally, she began to sob.

## Chapter 158: Not A Scary Forever

"Just let it all out," Aria said, gently patting her shoulder.

Brittney did.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had the luxury of crying on someone's shoulder like this. There had been a time when Hype was the person she ran to whenever things with her father became unbearable.

She would complain to him about everything, and he would listen, comfort, and hold her until she felt like she could face life again. Yet the one person she'd trusted with all the ugly parts of her life had ended up giving her the worst betrayal of them all.

For a while after Hype left, Brittney had considered ending it all. She had simply lain there one night and wondered what the point of continuing was when nobody seemed to want her.

Her mother had always chosen her career. Her father had chosen another woman and eventually his reputation. Even Hype, the one person she'd believed had chosen her above everything else, had taken what he wanted and abandoned her too. It wasn't difficult to begin wondering whether the problem had always been her.

Perhaps there was simply something wrong with her. Some defect she couldn't see that everyone else eventually discovered. Something that made Brittney Thorne entertaining enough to have around for a while but impossible to love.

Her arms tightened around Aria. Right now, another human was holding her as if she mattered, and Brittney selfishly wanted to enjoy it for as long as she could. Even if some bitter part of her wondered how long it would take before she ruined this too.

Aria didn't complain when Brittney practically crushed herself against her until there was barely any space between them. She only adjusted her hold and began running her fingers gently through her friend's hair.

Whenever Davina cried as a child, Aria would hold her like this and sing her a lullaby. So she began to sing to Brittney too.

It was ridiculous considering Brittney was a grown woman, but it was the only comfort Aria knew how to give without filling the room with meaningless words. Brittney didn't laugh at her or make one of her usual inappropriate comments. She simply buried her face deeper against Aria and listened.

They remained that way for what felt like forever. Eventually, Brittney's sobs quieted, and she simply held on to Aria while the last of her tears dried against her shoulder.

Brittney finally whispered, "I think something's wrong with me. That must be the problem."

Anger licked through Aria's veins at that comment. "Nothing is wrong with you."

When Brittney said nothing, Aria pulled back enough to look at her. Brittney's eyes were swollen, her cheeks wet, and her nose had turned red from crying.

"I mean it, Britt. There's nothing wrong with you. Your parents were supposed to love you before you ever had to do anything to earn it. Your mother choosing her career over being there for you was her decision. Your father cheating on her, marrying her best friend, and then treating you like some inconvenience in his new life was his decision. Those things say something about them. They don't say anything about what you're worth."

Brittney bit down on her lip, still unsure.

Aria continued, determined to change her mind. "Sure, you made mistakes. Big ones. Goddess knows helping someone rob your family isn't exactly something I'd recommend."

A wet, unexpected laugh escaped Brittney, but Aria wasn't trying to be funny.

"But you were still a teen, angry, hurt, and desperate to hurt the people who had spent years hurting you. That doesn't make what you did right, but it doesn't make you some horrible person who deserves everything that happened afterward either. You're allowed to regret what you did without deciding you're worthless because of it."

Brittney wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. "You don't understand."

"Then make me understand."

"Hype was right."

Aria's expression hardened.

"I destroyed his life." Brittney's voice shook a little. "If he'd never gotten involved with me, my father wouldn't have gone after him. He would have found another job, probably built a career, maybe had a normal life. Instead, he lost everything because he dated me. I was so busy being angry that he left me that I didn't want to admit that part." She stared down at her hands. "Maybe I deserved what I got."

"No!" Aria practically shouted. It was hard to see Brittney, who wouldn't let anyone treat her like shit, allowing some guy from her past to reduce her to a ghost of herself.

"No," Aria repeated firmly, hoping it got into her head. "We're not doing that. Hype was your bodyguard, Brittney. His entire job was to know you. He knew exactly whose daughter you were. He knew what your father was capable of, and I'm guessing he knew

your father wouldn't exactly throw him a celebration if he discovered the two of you together."

Brittney frowned. "That doesn't mean—"

"It means he made a choice too. You didn't drag him into a relationship at gunpoint. He chose to date and sneak around with you. He took that risk knowing there could be consequences. Your father destroying his career afterward was cruel, but that's on your father. Not you."

Brittney opened her mouth, but Aria wasn't finished.

"And even if Hype blamed you for what happened to him, he had options. He could have broken up with you or told you he resented you. He could have taken the money you were willing to give him and said he wanted to start over alone. Hell, he could have told you to fuck off and never spoken to you again."

Aria's anger grew the more she spoke. "Instead, he let you believe you were leaving together. The asshole sat there talking about your future while secretly planning to drug you, steal the money, take your passport so you couldn't follow him, and disappear."

Brittney's eyes lowered in shame as it dawned on her how far she had lost herself trying to please a man.

"That isn't compensation," Aria said. "That's fucking revenge."

The words settled heavily between them.

"Hype knew you loved him enough to betray your own family for him, and instead of being honest with you, he used that love to make sure his plan worked. Then he left you a letter blaming you for what he chose to do. That's not you getting what you deserved, Britt. That's him making you responsible for his choices because it was easier than admitting he betrayed someone who trusted him."

Brittney's eyes filled again.

"So as far as I'm concerned, Hype is a cowardly, selfish, manipulative, gaslighting piece of shit."

A startled laugh burst through Brittney's tears. For once, Aria was properly cussing.

Aria breathed in relief. "There. I said it."

"You forgot 'bastard.'"

"Sure. He's a cowardly, selfish, manipulative, gaslighting bastard piece of shit."

Brittney laughed again, this time hard enough that she had to wipe fresh tears from beneath her eyes.

Aria let her laugh before reaching over and squeezing her hand.

"And maybe one day you'll realize him leaving was the best thing he ever did for you," she said. "Because now you know exactly who he becomes when things get difficult. Imagine actually leaving everything behind, building an entire life with him, and discovering that years later when you had nowhere else to go."

"The money can be replaced, and your reputation can recover. However, your relationship with your family..." Aria grimaced. "Well, judging from everything you've told me, I'm not sure there was much worth saving there to begin with."

"You're right," Brittney murmured as the realization dawned on her. "I don't have a family."

Except what followed Brittney's sentence was a slap to the back of her head.

"Ow!" Brittney cried out, rubbing the spot. "What was that for?"

"Really?" Aria scoffed. "You have no family? Then what are we?"

"Oh..." She finally understood. "About that—"

"We are sisters, Brittney. And sisters always stand up for one another. In fact, one of them wants to apologize sincerely." Aria said, getting off the bed. She headed to the door and opened it.

As expected, Trisha and Alek were standing outside. Except Trisha remained at the entrance with guilt written all over her face.

"I'm so sorry," Trisha apologized. "I didn't mean any of those words. I was just angry and—"

Trisha didn't even get to finish because Brittney rushed over and pulled her into an embrace.

"I'm sorry too," Brittney apologized. "I promise I'll watch my mouth from now on."

The two cousins hugged, holding each other tightly with tears in their eyes.

Alek came to stand beside Aria. "Good work you did there."

Aria couldn't help but smile. She felt so proud of herself.

Yet as she watched Brittney and Trisha hold on to each other, her thoughts drifted back to everything Brittney had told her. Human relationships ended all the time. People married, promised each other forever, and still walked away when they no longer wanted it.

Perhaps having someone who was truly meant to stay forever wasn't such a terrible thing after all.

The thought surprised her. Until now, Aria had looked at the mate bond as something that threatened her freedom. Something permanent she had never chosen and couldn't escape.

She had been so focused on the possibility of being trapped that she hadn't considered the other side of permanence. Maverick couldn't simply wake up one morning and decide he didn't want her anymore — she hoped so.

For the first time since discovering she was his mate, Aria found herself looking at the bond in a different light.

Forever didn't sound quite as terrifying anymore.

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

Chapter 159: The Will Of A Dragon

Rhydian Drakhar woke with a groan.

Pain throbbed behind his eyes, spreading across his skull while his heart pounded in his chest. He remained still for a while, a hand pressed against his forehead as he waited for the pounding to ease.

What the hell happened?

It felt like he'd slept for days, even though his body carried the strange exhaustion of someone who had been very active without remembering any of it.

Rhydian slowly opened his eyes only to see the stone ceiling stretched above him. His brows furrowed. He knew that ceiling. Rhydian pushed himself upright and looked around.

Gold moved beneath him with a familiar metallic clatter, several of the coins sliding down the enormous mound upon which he'd apparently been sleeping.

His lair.

How the hell had he gotten here? The last thing he remembered clearly was the dining hall.

His dragon, Sargon, had become increasingly obsessed with what Aria should eat. Eventually, his incessant complaining had become unbearable enough that Rhydian had taken matters into his own hands and fed her himself.

After that, it felt like he had been evicted from his own body while someone else took over.

Sargon.

Rhydian could feel the fog clouding his memories beneath the headache. What had his dragon done? He needed to know. So he closed his eyes and forced himself to think.

The first memory struck him so suddenly that Rhydian's eyes snapped open. He saw himself flying toward Dragonspire.

No, not himself, but Sargon. The memories came rushing back before Rhydian could properly process the first.

Sargon had entered their lair with an intention that made Rhydian's stomach turn. The bastard had gone straight to the hoard, grabbed a handful of jewels in his large clawed hands, and flown off.

Another memory surfaced of the bastard stalking Aria and finding the perfect opportunity in the restroom. He remembered Aria's confusion when he'd appeared and watched through the memory as Sargon took out the jewelry he'd stolen from their own hoard and put it on her as if it belonged there.

Rhydian watched with growing horror as his dragon willingly gave his treasures to a human female.

How was this happening?

Then Maverick appeared and tossed the jewelry aside as if it were worthless.

Rhydian remembered the rage and the dining hall collapsing around them as Sargon's fury consumed every rational thought Rhydian possessed.

Yet none of that was what horrified him now. Rhydian sat completely still as the meaning behind Sargon's actions finally settled over him.

A dragon did not take treasure from his hoard and place it upon a female without reason. His dragon had chosen a mate.

Aria.

"No..." Rhydian whispered, his face set in disbelief. "No fucking way."

He surged to his feet so quickly that the gold scattered beneath him. His legs were unsteady, forcing him to catch himself against a nearby rock formation.

"It can't be."

Aria was human.

Had Sargon completely lost his fucking mind?

Rhydian dragged both hands through his hair and began pacing through the cavern, trying desperately to find another explanation.

Dragons did not mate with humans. They couldn't. Humans were an entirely different species and weren't part of draconic mating traditions, bloodlines, or anything else that had governed dragon society for thousands of years.

A dragon choosing a human made absolutely no sense, especially his dragon. Sargon wasn't some ordinary beast; he was the strongest.

Rhydian was the Drakhar heir. One day, the responsibility of continuing one of the strongest draconic bloodlines would fall upon him. Dragons were apex predators, and their females were built accordingly, with strong bodies and powerful beasts. Females capable of surviving pregnancies with offspring carrying ancient draconic blood and eventually producing heirs strong enough to continue their clans.

To think Sargon had looked at Aria Aspen, a tiny, beastless human who could probably be blown halfway across a room by one careless beat of his wings, and decided she was his mate.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Rhydian demanded.

Of course, silence answered him. Now the bastard wanted to be quiet.

Rhydian pressed his fingers against his temples. How was he supposed to explain this to the dragons at Bestiaris? To the Drakhar Clan? To his father?

The thought alone made him grimace.

No. They wouldn't accept it. Why would they? Rhydian himself could barely accept it.

Yes, he'd been fascinated by Aria from the beginning. He wasn't going to lie to himself about that. There was something about the human that called to him. He'd even entertained the idea of getting her into his bed eventually, if only to satisfy the curiosity she'd created.

That was supposed to be it. Nothing serious. Not a female Sargon intended to keep, and certainly not someone Rhydian would be bound to for the rest of his life.

Rhydian exhaled harshly and finally stopped pacing, properly taking in his surroundings. He had claimed and fashioned his lair within Dragonspire, a mountain humans had called by that name for generations before they'd known dragons were real.

As expected, the name had stayed after the dragons came.

Human legends claimed the mountain had been made for dragons because of how impossible it was for ordinary people to traverse. Its cliffs rose too steeply in places for climbing, and enormous sections of volcanic rock could only be reached from the air.

The legends had become considerably less amusing once the actual dragons arrived.

Rhydian had ensured the entrance to his lair was hidden away so that it wasn't easily found. But the interior was even more impressive.

Old volcanic passages twisted through the mountain before opening into enormous caverns, some wide enough for Sargon to move through without lowering his wings. Black volcanic stone covered the walls, broken occasionally by veins of strange crystal that had formed within the mountain long before Rhydian arrived.

Some of them glowed. The light was faint, scattered patches of pale blue and violet shimmering along the walls and casting enough illumination across the cavern to reveal his hoard.

Gold was spread everywhere. Coins gathered in enormous mounds alongside jeweled crowns, weapons, gemstones, sculptures, and artifacts collected—stolen—by Rhydian over the years. Modern treasures had gradually joined them too, because Rhydian saw absolutely no reason a dragon's hoard needed to remain trapped in antiquity.

But this was merely the outer portion of his lair. The passages descended farther into the mountain until they reached a cavern unlike any other within Dragonspire. There, thousands of luminous formations hung from the ceiling, crystalline stalactites glowing softly in the darkness while smaller formations rose from the ground beneath them.

And at the center rested a small, impossibly dark lake.

Blackwater.

The beginning of the river humans believed swallowed sunlight.

Water escaped from that lake through fissures beneath Dragonspire, traveling through underground channels before eventually emerging and feeding the great Blackwater River separating human territory from Bestial City.

Yet the water behaved differently inside the mountain.

While sunlight seemed to disappear into Blackwater without reflection, the strange light produced by Dragonspire's crystals danced perfectly across its surface. Beneath that cavern ceiling, every glowing stone was mirrored in the black lake until it looked as if thousands of stars existed above and below at once.

His lair was the only place where Rhydian could disappear from the responsibilities attached to his name.

Until Sargon betrayed him.

At that thought, a deep rumble finally stirred inside him.

There you are.

Sargon's presence unfolded lazily within his mind, utterly unbothered by the crisis he'd created.

Rhydian clenched his jaw.

"You chose a human."

The response came without hesitation.

Mate.

Rhydian closed his eyes. "Fuck you," he cursed.

He would not accept this choice. Aria was human.

As if reading his mind, Sargon replied.

"Treasure. Ours."

"You do not understand!" Rhydian snapped.

Even if there was the slightest chance he dared accept Aria as his mate, it would only lead to her doom. Aria Aspen couldn't survive the life of a dragon. Their customs, their way of life, everything about them demanded strength. Even fucking required a level of endurance he doubted her fragile human body could withstand.

She wouldn't be able to keep up with his vigor. Not to mention, as far as anyone knew, humans and dragons couldn't procreate. Rhydian was the dragon prince. One day, he would need an heir capable of succeeding him and continuing the Drakhar bloodline.

Everything practically screamed that they couldn't be together.

And then there were his enemies. Caelis Cobryn and the serpent clan would come for her the moment they discovered what she meant to him. Aria wouldn't simply be his mate anymore. She would become his greatest weakness, and anyone who wanted to hurt him would know exactly where to strike.

Sargon heard every thought and rumbled, "We protect Treasure. Together."

"No, no, no." Rhydian shook his head. "This is not happening."

The dragons would never accept Aria. Worse, her existence as his mate could threaten the very order their society had upheld for centuries. Dragons stood above humans in strength, power and status. Humans were not their equal, much less beside their future king.

A dragon's female was considered an extension of himself, and if Rhydian chose a woman his kind considered weak, they would see that weakness as his own.

He couldn't let that happen.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not taking the human as my mate," Rhydian told Sargon.

At once, his dragon's roar exploded through his head, so furious that Rhydian staggered. Sargon's rage tore through him with enough force to make his bones ache, the beast violently rejecting the very idea of abandoning the female he had already claimed as theirs.

It was said that no one could fight against the will of their dragon and win, but this was something Rhydian had to do. Not only for his own safety, but for Aria's too.

Because if he accepted her as his mate and dragged her into the brutal world that came with being Rhydian Drakhar's female, she wouldn't simply have to prove herself worthy of standing beside him.

She would have to survive everyone who believed she wasn't. Otherwise, Aria Aspen was as good as dead.

## Chapter 160: How To Handle Feral

"Maverick understood rejection. Feral only understood one thing: Mate."

~ Rebel Beast

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"I still don't think you should go ahead with this. You have a fight against Rhydian tomorrow. What if it affects you?" Dimitri couldn't help voicing his concern as he stared at the suppressor in his hand.

Maverick was lying on his bed, his left wrist secured to the metal frame with a restraint made from the same suppressive material. Even if Feral managed to surface, he shouldn't be able to break free. Maverick considered it an extra precaution, one he hoped they wouldn't actually need.

"Just do it before he gets an inkling of what I'm up to," Maverick said urgently.

"Fine, if you say so." Dimitri sighed before filling the syringe and pressing the needle into Maverick's free upper arm.

Maverick grimaced as the suppressor entered his system. The effect came quickly, spreading through him until an unnatural emptiness settled where Feral's presence had always been. The suppressor was both a blessing and a curse. The drug existed for beasts like Feral, wolves capable of overpowering their human halves and becoming dangerously uncontrollable, but Maverick had always believed something this powerful had no business being freely available.

Even his other father, Alaric Storm, whose Storm Enterprises was one of United Dorminia's leading defense and biotechnology conglomerates, dealing in everything from weapons development and pharmaceuticals to genetics and advanced biological research, kept suppressors under strict control. The drug was useful when necessary, but prolonged use could become toxic, and in the wrong hands, it could easily become a weapon against shifters.

Had it not been for Maverick's history with Feral and his family's connections, getting his hands on a suppressor this quickly would have been considerably harder.

Eventually, the drug settled completely, and Maverick felt... fine. Yet there was an uncomfortable absence inside him that reminded him strangely of a phantom limb. Feral had been part of him for as long as he could remember, a constant presence somewhere in the back of his mind, and now Maverick could feel the space where his wolf should have been without being able to reach him.

"How do you feel?" Dimitri asked cautiously, peering down at him with narrowed eyes.

"It's working—" Maverick was still speaking when something slammed against the barrier inside his mind with such force that his entire body tensed. A violent surge followed, and suddenly Feral was there, forcing his way forward with a vengeance that made the first dose feel almost useless.

Maverick looked at Dimitri, his gray eyes widening. "Give me a second dose. Now!"

"What?" Dimitri stared at him in disbelief. "No, I can't—"

Maverick grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him closer. "He's here!"

One look into Maverick's slitted gray eyes told Dimitri he wasn't exaggerating. Whatever argument had been forming on his tongue vanished immediately as he reached for another syringe and filled it. He caught Maverick's free arm and drove the needle toward his skin, only for the tip to strike the surface and refuse to penetrate.

Dimitri frowned, then noticed the faint shimmer spreading across Maverick's skin beneath the light. His stomach dropped as realization hit him. A thin layer of ice had formed over Maverick's arm, hardening his skin before Dimitri could inject the second dose.

Slowly, Dimitri lifted his head and froze.

The eyes staring back at him were still Maverick's slitted gray, but whatever warmth and restraint had existed in them was gone. Cold amusement had taken its place enough to make Dimitri immediately understand that the man looking at him was no longer Maverick.

It was Feral.

"Bad Beta."

Those were the only words that left Maverick's mouth before Feral struck.

One moment Dimitri was sitting on the edge of the bed, and the next he was hurled across the room with such force that his back crashed against the wall and the breath was knocked clean out of his lungs.

Dimitri groaned as pain spread through his body, but he forced himself back to his feet, intent on restraining Feral exactly as Maverick had asked him to.

Except when he straightened, his eyes immediately went to the bed. The metal frame where Maverick had secured his left wrist was broken, the restraint hanging uselessly from the twisted remains. Worse, there was no sign of Feral anywhere in the room.

"Damn it."

Dimitri rushed toward the balcony, searching the grounds below for any glimpse of him. But there was no movement, trail of ice, nor even a shadow disappearing into the distance. Feral had gotten out, and Dimitri didn't need to waste time wondering where he'd gone.

There was only one person Maverick's wolf was obsessed with.

His mate, Aria.

He had gone to her. There was no doubt about it.

Dimitri rushed back into the room, intending to call for support and have Feral restrained before things got out of hand. He had already lifted his phone when he suddenly stopped.

What was the point?

No matter how much Maverick worried about Aria, Feral would never intentionally hurt her. Protecting their mate was instinctive to wolves, even when the beast itself didn't fully understand human emotions, boundaries, or the complicated social rules that came with courtship. Feral understood that Aria was his mate and that she belonged with him. What he didn't understand was why she could feel the bond and still refuse him.

Moreover, sending people after Feral would only provoke him, and things could quickly get out of hand. It would also draw unnecessary attention to the bond between Aria and Maverick. Until Aria decided what she wanted and accepted Maverick of her own free will, the last thing either of them needed was the entire academy interfering in something that should remain between them.

So Dimitri slowly lowered the phone. It was all in Aria's hands now. Hopefully, just as she'd managed to stand her ground against Maverick, she would know how to handle his wolf without pushing Feral to the breaking point too.

## Chapter 161: Someone Save Her

Like sisters who could fight over the smallest thing and still remain inseparable, Trisha and Brittney were back to being buddies. They chattered away that evening until dinner was delivered.

Turns out until the dining hall was repaired, food would be supplied to all the students in their respective Houses. So they ate between jokes and conversations, and before Aria knew it, it was time for bed.

Ready for the night, Aria walked over to the balcony door and lingered there. She was supposed to lock it as she had every night since arriving at Bestiaris, determined to keep any "sneaky" beasts from finding their way into her room.

But tonight, she found herself wondering what the point was. She was safe in House Therion, after all — and certainly wasn't because she was anticipating a certain professor visiting her in the middle of the night.

At least, that was what she told herself.

So Aria merely closed the balcony door without locking it and went to her bed, tucking herself beneath the covers.

"Goodnight, Aria," she murmured to herself. "Not today either." It had become something of a mantra, a quiet reminder that she had survived yet another day in this damned academy.

With that, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

It felt as if she had barely been asleep when something pulled her awake. Aria's eyes opened slowly at first, but the strange feeling that something was wrong sharpened so quickly that she sat upright at once, her gaze sweeping across the dark room.

Two purple eyes were glowing in the darkness.

A scream nearly rent from her throat, but the familiar shade of purple stopped her just long enough to make her hesitate. Aria reached blindly for the bedside lamp and switched it on.

There he was.

Maverick Nightshade.

He stood in the middle of her room like some creep from a horror movie, completely still, while the purple glow in his eyes vanished beneath the light so quickly that Aria almost wondered if she had imagined it.

"Are you kidding me?" Aria cursed under her breath. It was beginning to seem like this guy somehow got off on sneaking into her bedroom in the middle of the night and scaring the life out of her.

Suddenly, her phone beeped with a message. Aria picked it up from the bedside table and frowned when she saw Dimitri's name. She opened it.

[Be careful with Maverick tonight.]

Aria didn't know which was more concerning: the fact that Dimitri somehow knew Maverick was in her room right now, or that he was warning her to be careful around him. A blush crept up her cheeks for reasons she refused to examine, but caution quickly won out as she narrowed her eyes.

She was just about to type, Did the two of you plan this? when a gravelly voice spoke from across the room.

"You didn't lock your door this time, little prey."

The words little prey had Aria lifting her head at once.

Seriously? After everything that had happened earlier, after he'd practically handed her an eternal sentence by announcing she was his mate, he was going back to calling her prey? Moreover, the last time he'd dared call her that, she'd driven her crown straight into his head. Surely, he hadn't forgotten how that felt.

"You wanted me to come to you, didn't you?" he continued in that deep, gravelly voice of his that might have melted Aria into the mattress had his attitude right now not been getting on her nerves.

Aria gestured toward him with her fingers. "Is this some sort of payback for earlier? You're trying to prove that my rejection didn't bother you, so now you're going to stand there acting like an arrogant asshole?"

Maverick didn't answer, and before Aria could demand one, her phone beeped again. Another message from Dimitri appeared on the screen.

[Maverick isn't himself tonight. Don't take anything he says or does to heart. Don't worry, he won't hurt you.]

What the fuck?

Aria's heart missed a beat as every bit of irritation disappeared beneath a sudden rush of caution. She read the message again, slower this time, before lifting her eyes toward the man standing in the middle of her bedroom. Something was definitely wrong here.

Aria studied Maverick more carefully, and now that she knew to look, the differences were impossible to miss. Maverick had always possessed an almost infuriating amount of restraint. Even when angry, there was control beneath it. The man standing before her had none of that. He carried Maverick's confidence without his discipline, and there was something almost reckless about the way he stood there, like he wasn't scared of the consequences.

"I'm guessing the chirping of a Beta is trying to fill you in," he said with a confident smirk.

And that was all it took for Aria to know with absolute certainty that this wasn't the Maverick Nightshade she knew. Or rather, Maverick wasn't the one currently in control of his body. The real Maverick respected Dimitri far too much to speak about him with such casual contempt.

Aria slowly lowered her phone. Looking him dead in the eye, she asked, "Who are you?"

Some sort of delight spread across Feral's face, pleased she had finally asked the right question. He had waited long enough for her to recognize him as someone separate from Maverick instead of treating them as if they were one and the same.

"You know who I am, Aria." He spoke her name in a way that sent goosebumps spreading across her skin despite the distance between them.

Aria managed to find enough of her voice to say, "Stop playing games with me."

Feral sighed. "You're suddenly so chatty, little prey. I liked you better this morning when you didn't want to talk."

And just like that, Aria was reminded of the very, very vivid dream she'd had about Maverick that morning.

Perhaps it was the shock of realizing he knew about the dream, or the sheer embarrassment of it, but Aria threw off the covers, jumped from the bed and made straight for the door.

Someone save her. This was absolutely not what she'd bargained for!

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

For the first time, Aria truly understood just how unfair the difference in speed between a wolf and a human was.

She had barely thrown herself off the bed and made a dash for the door when the room seemed to blur around her. One second, freedom was only a few steps away. The next, her back was pressed against the wall with Feral standing directly in front of her, blocking every possible escape.

Aria stared at him, her mind struggling to catch up with what had happened. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, yet Feral hadn't even broken a sweat. If anything, he looked amused by her pathetic attempt at escape, those gray eyes carrying that strange purple glow as he leaned closer.

"Are you trying to run from me, little prey?"

Aria gulped. What in the world had she gotten herself into?

Feral reached out and tapped the tip of her nose with one finger, almost playfully. "Such a bad mate."

It was safe to say that Aria was utterly and completely flabbergasted. She hadn't even recovered enough to think of another escape plan before Feral caught her around the waist and lifted her effortlessly off the floor. Aria instinctively wrapped her legs around him, grabbing his shoulders to keep herself steady as he carried her back toward the exact same bed she'd tried so desperately to escape from.

He lowered her gently onto the mattress, a tenderness completely at odds with the way he'd just chased her across the room. Before Aria could catch her breath, Feral leaned over her and pressed his lips against her neck, trailing slow kisses along her skin like he had all the time in the world.

"Wait..." Aria told him, but the word came out embarrassingly weak. It didn't help that his lips found a sensitive spot on her neck that sent a shiver down her spine, making her fingers tighten against him before she could stop herself.

Her traitorous body wanted nothing more than to melt beneath his touch, but the reminder lingered at the back of her mind that, however much he looked, sounded and felt like Maverick, the man touching her right now wasn't entirely himself.

"Stop!" Aria said with more force this time, bringing both hands up to push Feral away from her.

Feral actually froze. The disbelief on his face was almost comical, like it had never once occurred to him that his own mate might actually push him away.

"Why?" he asked, and damn it, he actually looked hurt.

"That's no way to treat your mate," Aria blurted out, only to feel her face heat the second the words left her mouth.

"What other way should I treat Mate?" Feral frowned, genuinely confused. "Why doesn't Mate want to mate with me?"

Father Lord above. Aria could feel her face getting hotter by the second. Was sex all he could think about?

"Of course I want you," Aria confessed, biting the inside of her lip.

It was taking everything in her to navigate this very, very tricky situation without making things worse. After her failed attempt at a relationship back home, if anyone had told her

she would one day be lying in bed confessing her feelings to not only her professor, but Violet Purple's son, she would have laughed in their face.

The instant she said she wanted him, Feral's eyes lit up. And that was all the permission he needed because he immediately leaned toward her, clearly intending to continue exactly where he'd left off, but Aria quickly said, "But..." while inching away from him.

"But?" Feral repeated, his patience clearly beginning to wear thin.

"We can get to know each other," Aria added quickly. "I can get to know you." She hoped to God she had made the right decision, because she was beginning to suspect reasoning with him required an entirely different set of survival skills.

Immediately, like a child on Christmas morning, his entire face brightened.

"Mate wants to know me?"

"Yes, I want to know you." Aria gave him a smile she hoped was convincing enough. "For starters, if you're not Maverick, who are you? What's your name?"

"Feral," he answered almost immediately.

"Oh." The word slipped from Aria's mouth as everything finally clicked into place.

Maverick's wolf.

"Feral," she repeated, remembering the way Maverick had panicked over him that night, warning her that his wolf was dangerous.

"How is this even possible?" she muttered, reaching out almost hesitantly to touch his face.

Her fingers traced his cheek, expecting to find something different there, some small feature that belonged only to Feral and would make it easier to separate him from Maverick. But there was nothing. It was still Maverick's face beneath her hand, his skin, his voice, his body, and yet the person looking back at her felt completely different.

Feral leaned into her touch. "I am he, and he is me."

Aria could barely wrap her mind around it. She knew werewolves possessed both a human and a wolf side, but she'd always assumed the wolf was exactly that—a wolf, an instinctive part of the person that emerged when they shifted.

She had never imagined the wolf could think for itself, speak for itself, want things Maverick might not want, and then take over his body as if two different people had been living behind the same eyes all along.

A strange pang of sympathy struck Aria.

"How did this happen?" she asked, still stroking his cheek.

Aria didn't know enough about the human mind to understand exactly what had happened to Maverick, much less how the mind of a werewolf worked, but she knew that sometimes, when someone endured more than they could handle, the mind found its own way of protecting them. Perhaps Feral had been Maverick's.

"He called me when he needed someone to protect him," Feral answered, rubbing his cheek against her palm with an almost feline affection that seemed completely at odds with the dangerous wolf Maverick made him to be.

"Protect him from who?" Aria asked, her curiosity immediately getting the better of her.

But Feral merely shook his head. "He wouldn't like it if I told you. It would bother you." He paused before adding, almost grudgingly, "I agree with him for once."

Aria groaned in annoyance. She had never wanted to hear a story so badly in her life. Nonetheless, if there was one thing she understood, it was having parts of your past you weren't ready to share, so she decided to respect his decision.

"Did he hurt that much?" she asked instead. Guilt suddenly twisted inside Aria for all the times she'd assumed Maverick had lived some ridiculously perfect life and couldn't possibly understand real hardship.

He had four fathers who adored him, after all, and the most powerful woman on the planet for a mother. He was powerful in his own right, wealthy beyond anything Aria could imagine, and had probably never wanted for anything material in his life. Yet none of those things meant he couldn't have suffered. Who knew Maverick Nightshade had been fighting demons of his own long before she ever met him?

"I protected him," Feral answered casually, as though protecting Maverick from whatever had hurt him had been the simplest thing in the world.

"And what about you? Who protected you?"

Feral went still, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made Aria's chest tighten. "That is what I do. I protect." He pressed his cheek more firmly into her palm. "The same way I'll protect Mate."

Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

Aria's heart suddenly began to race, warmth spreading through her chest at the simple declaration. There were no conditions attached to it, no hesitation or uncertainty. Feral spoke of protecting her like it was something she didn't need to earn or ask for, but something he had already decided she deserved. Aria couldn't remember the last time anyone had made her feel so completely cared for.

Feral suddenly clicked his tongue in distaste. "Too much talking. I want my mate."

"Oh no, you don't." Aria pressed her fingers against Feral's lips the moment he tried to move closer. Unfortunately, that did nothing to discourage the wolf. He simply caught one of her fingers between his lips, his eyes fixed mischievously on hers as he gave it a playful suck.

A sharp breath escaped Aria. This damn wolf was going to be the death of her.

At once, Aria pulled her hand back with a gasp and, gathering every bit of strength she possessed, caught him off guard long enough to flip their positions so that Feral was beneath her while she sat astride him.

Feral grinned up at her with immediate expectation. Finally, some action. As far as he was concerned, there was no way he was leaving this bed without at least a little affection from his mate. Sucked to be Maverick.

Aria, however, fixed him with the sternest look she could manage.

"Now listen up. It's late, and unlike you, I actually need some sleep. So this is how it's going to be. If you're going to stay in this bed, then you'd better behave yourself. We can cuddle and go to sleep, and that is all. Otherwise, you can leave through the balcony door. Am I clear?"

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 163: Little Prey's Prey

Aria expected Feral to argue, so it caught her completely off guard when he simply said, "Okay."

"Okay?" She eyed him suspiciously. That had been far too easy, considering the wolf had been trying to get into her pants practically from the moment he'd appeared.

"Let's sleep, little prey," Feral said. "Can't wait to have you all wrapped up in my arms."

Aria made a face. "Is there no other name you can call me besides prey? That title feels so awkward."

"It fits you perfectly," Feral countered. "Every time you try to run, I'll be there to catch you."

"I'm not running anymore." The admission came easier than Aria expected. She was finally beginning to accept that whatever existed between them wasn't something she needed to spend every second fighting. "As long as you don't hurt me."

"Never." There was no teasing in Feral's voice this time. The word came with such absolute conviction that Aria felt it settle somewhere deep inside her chest, almost like a vow. She believed him, and that realization brought a smile to her lips.

"Let's sleep then." Aria lay back on the bed, expecting him to follow after her. Instead, Feral stood.

"What are you—?" Aria trailed off the moment he pulled his shirt over his head, and suddenly she was staring at Feral's—no, Maverick's—God, both of their body. This whole sharing-one-body situation was going to give her a headache.

Unfortunately, the body in question was distracting enough to make her forget all about that headache. Smooth, unblemished light olive skin stretched over a broad, defined chest before giving way to the hard ridges of his abdomen.

Aria's eyes traveled lower, unable to help it, following the faint trail of dark hair disappearing toward the deep V that vanished beneath his waistband. For one dangerous second, she found herself wondering exactly what it would feel like to trace the same path with her fingers.

When she finally dragged her attention back to his face, Feral was already watching her. The smug satisfaction in his eyes told her he'd noticed every single second of her shameless inspection.

"Perfect, aren't I?" he asked.

His confidence seriously needed to be studied.

"What do you think you're doing?" Aria demanded, her voice coming out louder than she'd intended in her embarrassment.

"You said we'd cuddle in bed." Feral looked genuinely confused by her outrage. "I don't sleep with clothes on."

"Excuse me?" Aria stared at him, wondering if perhaps she'd misunderstood.

Feral winked. "I run hot."

Before Aria could decide how to respond to that, Feral unfastened his pants and pushed them down, stepping out of them without the slightest hint of shame. He was left standing there in nothing but black boxer briefs, and Aria's jaw nearly dropped.

The fitted fabric did absolutely nothing to preserve her innocence, especially when her eyes betrayed her by dipping downward long enough to notice the rather generous outline beneath them.

Oh, dear God.

Feral caught her staring and hooked his fingers beneath the waistband of his briefs. "Want a preview?"

And yes, the wolf had been born without a single ounce of shame or self-preservation, because he actually started tugging the waistband downward. Aria flew off the bed and grabbed his fingers before he could get any further.

"Are you fucking out of your mind?!" Aria whisper-yelled, painfully aware that there were three other women sleeping only a few walls away.

Feral smirked. "Saving it for when we mate properly, eh?"

This insufferable pervert of a wolf! How could he possibly share a body with the honorable, poised Maverick she knew?

"How are you so shameless?" Aria demanded, still thoroughly flustered and completely unable to understand how his mind worked.

"Anything for my mate," Feral declared.

Aria's breath caught in her throat. He said the word mate with such pride and affection that it sounded less like a claim and more like something precious to him. Feral made the

bond she'd spent so much time fearing feel warm and strangely safe. It was almost ridiculous that she'd been so terrified of what it meant to belong to him.

"Also..." Feral continued, a wicked glint entering his eyes. "Just because you don't want to see it yet doesn't mean you can't feel it."

Aria understood exactly what he meant when the fingers she had wrapped around his waistband shifted beneath hers, drawing her attention dangerously lower. She swallowed, caught between the sensible voice telling her she had already established the rules for tonight and the far less sensible part of her that was suddenly very curious about how far she was willing to bend them.

Before Aria could decide which side was winning, Feral's hand moved over hers. Instead of continuing on his own, he slowly guided her hand lower, his eyes never leaving her face. He watched her carefully, giving Aria every opportunity to pull away. For all his shameless teasing and insistence on having his mate, Feral wasn't forcing the choice from her. He wanted her to make it.

Aria held his gaze, having no idea where the sudden confidence came from. She could have pulled her hand away, and something in his eyes told her he would have let her. Instead, she allowed him to guide her, answering the unspoken question between them with one of her own. She might not be ready to give him everything he wanted tonight, but she wasn't afraid of wanting him either.

Aria gasped the moment her hand made contact, her fingers meeting something warm, steel-hard, yet undeniably flesh. Everything about him felt tightly packed together, overwhelming in a way that left her slightly dizzy and disoriented by just how much of him there was to take in without being able to see.

Still holding her hand in his, Feral guided her blindly toward his straining length, letting her map him entirely through touch since she couldn't see him. That was exactly what he wanted anyway, her fingers learning every inch of him without the distraction of sight. He helped her begin to stroke him, slow and clumsy at first, her breathing already ragged.

Aria was flustered during those first few strokes, unsure of herself, but the way Feral reacted beneath her hand—the hitch in his breath, the low sound rumbling in his chest—emboldened her quickly. She grew bolder with every pass, oddly delighted by the way he felt in her palm, hot and pulsing and entirely at her mercy for once.

"Look at you," Feral rasped, his voice thick with want. "Sitting on top of the world with the predator caught in your little trap, eh, little prey?"

That word again. Prey.

It struck a nerve, and Aria decided right then to remind him exactly what prey could do when cornered.

She reached lower, blindly seeking out the sensitive weight of him through his briefs, and squeezed, firm and unforgiving. That single act of retaliation, paired with the relentless drag of her hand along his length, was more than enough to shatter him completely.

Feral came apart beneath her touch, and Aria saw every second of it: the way his muscles seized, the veins straining beneath his heated skin, his mouth falling open on a broken groan, his whole body trembling as release rippled through him in violent waves.

Watching Maverick's body respond that way, even knowing it was Feral in control, left her feeling strange, caught between fascination and unease at what she'd just done to the body of her mate and professor.

Aria finally pulled her hand free, slick with his release, staring at it with wide-eyed curiosity as the reality of what she'd just witnessed slowly sank in.

Feral recovered enough to speak, his voice rough and satisfied. "Next time, little prey, my seed will be deep inside you."

It sounded like both a promise and a warning, and something about the way he said it made her stomach flip.

Aria deliberately reached out then, wiping her slick fingers slowly across his boxers, uncaring when the movement brushed against his already oversensitive length through the fabric. She felt him twitch beneath her touch, a sharp hiss slipping past his teeth, but Aria didn't apologize. Instead, she savored the small taste of power she'd found in undoing him.

"Until next time," Aria said, pulling her hand back completely, satisfaction lacing her voice. "Now go clean up, Feral Wolf."

## Chapter 164: Sleep Impossible

Feral's eyes brightened. He liked what she did with his name. It separated him from Maverick Nightshade, and made him more than simply the beast lurking somewhere inside the man. Aria, his mate, knew him well enough now.

"I will, Mate," he answered. "Except I'll be naked."

"What?" Aria asked, only to glance down and notice the damp patch on his boxers.

"Then wear your pants," she insisted.

"I can't." Feral looked at her as though the answer should have been obvious. "Told you I run hot."

And annoyingly enough, Aria knew he wasn't kidding. When she had... er... touched him down there, God, he'd been outrageously warm. It had to be a werewolf thing or something because no normal human being should feel like a walking furnace. Even so, she wasn't fooled. Feral was clearly trying to find his way into her bed completely naked, and that was absolutely not happening.

Suddenly, an idea struck her, and Aria turned toward her wardrobe. She rummaged through her things until she found a pair of loose sleep shorts, then returned to him.

"Here." She handed them over. They were one of her more oversized pairs, so there was at least a chance they would fit him.

Feral took the shorts with an amused look on his face, stretching the waistband between his hands as he inspected them. "Now we're sharing panties. Feral approves."

"They're shorts, not panties," Aria corrected him.

"Hmmm." That was all he said before bringing the shorts to his nose and inhaling deeply.

Mistaking his intentions entirely, Aria frowned. "They're clean." A hint of offense entered her voice because she couldn't believe he actually thought she'd hand him something dirty to wear.

"What a disappointment." Feral inhaled again, completely unashamed of himself. "I was looking for your scent."

Aria's eyes widened as the real reason for his sniffing finally dawned on her, and heat immediately rushed into her cheeks. This was more than she could handle. There was shameless, and then there was whatever level of corruption this wolf had managed to achieve.

She immediately pointed toward the bathroom. "Get in there. Now!"

Any more of this and she really was going to end up as a puddle on the floor.

Feral's grin was downright sinful as he obeyed, keeping his eyes on her until he disappeared into the bathroom. The infuriating wolf didn't even bother closing the door behind him.

The moment Feral was out of sight, Aria's legs nearly gave out beneath her. She was standing there in nothing but a tank top and shorts, yet she felt unbearably hot.

She began fanning her burning cheeks, blaming every degree of it on that perverted wolf currently occupying her bathroom. God, how was she supposed to survive the rest of the night with him when her self-control was already hanging by a thread?

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Feral stood before the mirror with Aria's shorts stretched between his hands, thinking about how many times his mate's ass had been tucked inside them. Now he was going to wear them too.

The thought pleased him, and he hurried through cleaning himself up, already impatient with the few minutes he'd been forced to spend away from her.

Back in the bedroom, Aria had no idea what to do with herself knowing the shameless wolf would be back any second. At first, she paced around the room, then decided she needed something to occupy her hands and began fixing the bed, straightening the sheets.

She was almost done when Feral stepped out of the bathroom, and Aria stopped dead. Her gaze traveled over him once before she simply stared, dumbfounded. Suddenly, she understood exactly why Feral had called her shorts panties, because on him, that was precisely what they looked like.

The fabric clung to his much larger body, stretched tight across his hips and thighs. On Aria, the shorts usually fell comfortably down her thighs, but Feral's height and broader build had stolen nearly half their length, leaving them sitting dangerously high on his powerful legs. They weren't much longer than the boxer briefs he'd just ruined, and the feminine cut only made the sight even more ridiculous.

Perhaps she could have controlled herself if Feral had looked even remotely embarrassed. Instead, the moment he noticed her staring, he planted one hand on his hip and struck the kind of exaggerated pose Aria had seen female models use when showing off clothes. The laugh escaped her before she could stop it.

"Please, don't!" Aria slapped a hand over her mouth, fighting desperately not to laugh too loudly, but that only encouraged him because Feral immediately changed into another pose, turning slightly and looking over his shoulder like someone were photographing him.

"Sexy, right?" He turned back and jutted his hips forward with absolutely no shame.

Aria's laughter died a very unfortunate death. The pose should have remained funny, except the shorts were tight enough to emphasize far more than she wanted to notice, while his powerful thighs made the tiny piece of clothing look even more indecent. She swallowed and quickly dragged her eyes back to his face before the perverted wolf caught her staring again.

"I think that's enough of the fashion show for one night, Feral wolf. Let's sleep."

Feral brightened instantly. If he'd had an actual tail at that moment, it would have been wagging. He crossed the room toward the bed with enthusiasm and immediately pulled back the bedsheet.

"You won't need this while I'm here," he told her. "Get into bed, little prey. Let my arms be your solace tonight."

Aria swallowed. Father in heaven, help her.

Like a sheep willingly walking toward the slaughter, Aria climbed into bed and settled near the middle, turning her back to him because facing Feral while trying to sleep seemed unnecessarily dangerous.

A second later, the mattress dipped beneath his weight as he joined her. Just as he'd promised, his arm slid around her waist and pulled her back against him before he carefully lifted her head, slipping his other arm beneath it for her to rest on.

There was barely any space left between them. Aria's back was pressed firmly against his chest, her hips tucked against the warmth of his body while his arm remained securely around her waist. Then Feral buried his face against the curve of her neck, his warm breath brushing her skin with every exhale and sending an involuntary shiver down her spine.

They were cuddled so tightly there wasn't even room for air between them, and damn him, Feral hadn't exaggerated his body temperature. Heat surrounded Aria from behind until it felt as though she'd been tucked against her own personal furnace.

The strange thing was that beneath all the embarrassment and awareness of having him pressed so intimately against her, she felt safe. His arm around her wasn't restrictive or demanding. It simply held her, like this was exactly where he believed she belonged.

"Sleep tight, Mate," Feral murmured against her neck, his voice quieter now, stripped of the usual teasing.

Aria couldn't bring herself to answer. She stared into the darkness instead, painfully aware of his warmth, his breathing and every place their bodies touched. If Feral genuinely expected her to fall peacefully asleep while wrapped around him like this, then perhaps the wolf wasn't nearly as clever as she'd given him credit for.

It was impossible.

## Chapter 165: Reject Aria

Rhydian Drakhar intentionally returned early that morning, choosing an hour when most of House Aetheris would still be asleep. There was no doubt the patrol had spotted him somewhere along the way, but information moved through the House in stages. By the time anyone important heard that the dragon prince had returned, Rhydian intended to have his thoughts in order and, more importantly, his temper under control.

He entered through the balcony, landing silently before stepping into his room. The moment he crossed the threshold, however, he stopped. Someone was here. Rhydian sensed the presence before his eyes found her, his awareness heightening as Sargon stirred faintly beneath his skin.

Tamara.

"You're back," Tamara said, rising from the chair near the far side of the room.

Rhydian could see her perfectly well without the lights. Dragon eyes were made for darkness, and every movement she made was clear to him, from the way she straightened to the tension gathered across her shoulders. Tamara crossed toward the wall anyway and switched on the light.

Brightness flooded the room, and Rhydian blinked as his eyes adjusted before turning fully toward her.

"What are you doing here?"

Tamara studied him instead of answering immediately. It was obvious she had been sitting there for quite some time, waiting with the sort of patience that usually meant trouble. She folded her arms over her chest, and Rhydian already knew from the set of her mouth exactly what had brought her into his room before sunrise and that he wasn't going to enjoy the conversation.

"I could ask you the same thing," she replied. "You disappeared yesterday without telling anyone where you were going."

"I wasn't aware I needed permission to leave."

"You don't."

"Good. Then we're done here."

Rhydian started farther into the room, intending to walk straight past her, but Tamara stepped directly into his path.

"No, we're not."

His eyes dropped briefly to where she stood between him and the rest of his room before slowly lifting back to her face. Most dragons knew better than to deliberately block Rhydian Drakhar's path. Tamara had known him long enough to understand the warning in his silence, but apparently she was too angry to care.

"What happened in that dining hall yesterday?"

The question immediately dragged back the scattered memories of Sargon taking control. Gold clutched in massive claws and Aria standing beneath him while his dragon adorned her with pieces of their hoard.

Mate.

Rhydian's jaw tightened, and Tamara noticed.

Her eyes narrowed. "What is going on with you, Rhydian?"

"It is nothing," he said stubbornly.

"This is about that human, isn't it? Aria Aspen?"

The instant Aria's name left Tamara's mouth, Rhydian's body went rigid. Something dangerous flashed through his eyes before he could suppress it, accompanied by one instinctive thought that disturbed him almost as much as everything Sargon had done yesterday. If Tamara dared touch a single hair on Aria's head, Rhydian wasn't entirely sure what he would do to her.

That realization gave him pause.

Had Sargon become so consumed by Aria that he would genuinely turn against Tamara for her? He had known Tamara for years. She had stood beside him through battles, disputes and every responsibility that came with being the Drakhar heir. Aria had been in his life for what amounted to mere moments by comparison, yet the idea of anyone threatening her stirred something vicious inside him that reason couldn't seem to control.

Unaware of the war taking place inside his head, Tamara continued, her voice rising. "Perhaps you'd like to explain why you lost control yesterday, which is unlike you, or why I found pieces of your hoard buried beneath the rubble."

Tamara lifted a small leather satchel in one hand, and for the first time since entering the room, Rhydian's attention snapped entirely toward it. His eyes narrowed with such intensity that Tamara instinctively tightened her grip.

"Treasure."

The word came from Rhydian's mouth, but the voice belonged to Sargon. Deep, possessive and unmistakably hostile.

Rhydian moved toward the satchel, but Tamara immediately pulled it out of his reach.

Big mistake.

Sargon surged forward so violently that Rhydian barely had time to fight him. One moment Tamara was standing before him, clutching the satchel against her chest, and the next Rhydian's hand was wrapped around her throat.

Tamara's eyes widened, not from fear

fear, but disbelief.

Sargon stared at her through Rhydian's eyes, his grip firm enough to warn without crushing. "Belongs to Mate. Not you."

Then he tore the satchel from Tamara's grasp and shoved her away.

Tamara stumbled several steps before catching herself, one hand immediately rising to her throat. For several seconds, she simply stared at him. She couldn't decide which revelation hurt more: that Rhydian, who had always respected her strength and trusted her more than nearly anyone else, had just put his hands on her over another female, or that the female in question was Aria Aspen.

His mate.

At the same moment, Rhydian violently wrestled control back from Sargon. He blinked, disoriented by the sudden shift, before his eyes dropped to the satchel clutched in his hand. Then he looked at Tamara.

The devastation on her face told him everything.

"No..." Tamara whispered.

Rhydian said nothing.

"No, that cannot be." Her voice cracked as tears filled her eyes. "She cannot be your mate."

"Tamara—"

"You cannot accept that, Rhydian!" she shouted, the first tear spilling down her cheek.

"You cannot seriously stand there and tell me that a human is going to become the mate of the Drakhar heir."

Rhydian's temper snapped.

"You think I have any control over it?" he demanded. "You think that of every female I could possibly choose, I would deliberately choose a human? Am I that fucking stupid?"

Tamara flinched, but Rhydian was too angry to stop.

"You think I wanted to wake up and discover that my dragon had selected the one female our kind would reject before she ever had the opportunity to prove herself?"

His fingers tightened around the satchel. "You think I wanted Sargon losing his mind over her, giving away pieces of my hoard and attacking anyone who comes too close to what he now considers his?"

Tamara's tears continued to fall, though her expression hardened beneath them. "Then reject her."

Rhydian went still. Inside him, Sargon roared. The sound existed only in Rhydian's mind, but the force of it was so violent that pain lanced through his skull.

Tamara took his silence as hesitation and stepped closer. "If you don't want this, reject the bond. Refuse her. Whatever Sargon thinks she is, you are still the one in control."

Rhydian looked at her for a long moment, saying nothing.

"You just said it yourself. Dragonkind would never accept her." Tamara's voice softened. "Rhydian..." She rarely called him by his name like that when they were discussing matters concerning the clans. "Bringing Aria into our world would be suicide. They would tear her apart. Look at the way some of our kind already treat humans, then imagine what they would do to one expected to stand beside the future head of the Drakhar Clan. Do you really want that fate for your mate?"

And Rhydian did imagine it. No matter how confidently Sargon insisted they would protect Aria, Rhydian couldn't possibly be around her every second of the day. There were too many ways someone could get to her, too many enemies who would see her as an opportunity the moment they discovered what she meant to him.

Even Maximus Drakhar concerned him. His father wasn't unnecessarily cruel, but when something threatened the future of his heir or the continuation of their bloodline, Rhydian couldn't predict how far the man would be willing to go.

Aria was human. Fragile. Breakable in ways dragon females simply weren't. There were so many ways she could die in his world that Rhydian could probably spend the entire morning listing them, and the thought made Sargon restless beneath his skin.

Tamara continued, sensing that she was finally getting through to him. "Thamas is already vying for your position. Imagine what happens if he discovers you're mated to a human. He'll use it against you. The Draco Clan will use it against you. You'd become a laughingstock." She stepped closer until there was barely any distance left between them. "Rhydian... you need a strong female who can fight beside you. Someone the dragon clans would respect. Someone they wouldn't dare question."

She swallowed before continuing, and this time, her voice carried an emotion she could no longer completely hide.

"Dragon births are difficult enough, and our population is already declining. The next Lady Drakhar will be expected to give you strong heirs capable of continuing your bloodline." Tamara murmured the words as she slowly reached for him, her fingers moving toward his chest.

She almost succeeded in touching him before Rhydian caught her wrist at the last second.

"I didn't realize you were suddenly so maternal, Tamara." His eyes dropped pointedly to her hand before returning to her face. "What happened to dedicating your life to making a name for yourself instead of staying home and popping out hatchlings?"

Tamara's face fell instantly.

Rhydian knew exactly what he'd done. Those were the same expectations Tamara had spent years fighting against. Her parents had repeatedly tried to convince her to step down as his second-in-command, settle with a suitable dragon and embrace what they considered her proper role as a female.

Rhydian had always been one of the few people who respected her refusal to do so. He had supported her ambition, trusted her abilities and never once treated her as though her greatest contribution to dragonkind would be the children she could produce.

Hearing him throw that same expectation back at her now felt like a betrayal on an entirely different level.

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

Chapter 166: Men Will Be Men

Music Recommendation : Bioluminescence by Brianna Tam

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"How can you say that to me, Rhydian?" Tamara stared at him with unmistakable hurt, his accusation having struck a deeper part of her than she was willing to admit. "I was only trying to help."

"Were you?" Rhydian asked, his voice turning colder. "Were you genuinely concerned about my well-being, or are you simply aggrieved by the thought of a human being my mate?"

"Of course I was worried about your well-being—"

"What a liar."

"I'm not lying!" Tamara snapped, frustration breaking through her composure. Of all the people in the world, Rhydian was the last person she had ever expected to question her devotion to him.

"If you were truly that concerned about me, then you wouldn't have suggested that I reject Aria when you know exactly what that would do to Sargon and me. He has already accepted her. If I spend the rest of my life fighting him over his own mate, Sargon and I would be in perpetual conflict. Do you have any idea what that could do to me? To my control? To the bond between a dragon and his beast?"

"Of course I've thought about that, but Sargon is still under your control. He should be capable of understanding the situation and making the right choice." Tamara shook her head impatiently. "Surely even he doesn't want to see her dead."

The words landed badly.

Rhydian's eyes flashed, his expression darkening at the casual certainty with which Tamara spoke about Aria's death. It didn't matter that the possibility had already crossed his own mind countless times. Hearing someone else say it aloud awakened a viciousness inside him that had his fingers curling around the satchel.

"Get out," he said, his voice low with restrained anger.

Tamara hesitated.

Rhydian's restraint shattered. "I said get out!"

The force of his roar shook through the room.

For all Tamara's fearlessness, she knew Rhydian well enough to recognize when she had reached the limit of what he would tolerate. Her eyes burned with unshed tears as she turned toward the door, her dignity barely holding together beneath the humiliation of being dismissed by the man she had served faithfully for years.

Before she could leave, Rhydian's voice stopped her.

"And Tamara."

Her hand tightened around the doorframe.

"If a single word of this conversation leaves this room and something happens to Aria because of it, you can rest assured that you'll follow her to the grave."

Tamara's fingers curled around the frame so tightly that her knuckles turned white. For several seconds, she couldn't move.

Years. She had given him years of loyalty, service and devotion. She had stood beside him, defended his authority when dragons questioned his decisions and carried out his orders even when she disagreed with them. Yet now he was standing behind her, threatening to kill her over a human woman he had barely known.

The worst part was that Tamara knew he meant it.

Her throat tightened painfully. How foolish she had been to believe Rhydian was different.

Tamara had spent most of her life proving she deserved more than the expectations placed upon dragon females. She had rejected suitors, disappointed her parents and fought for every ounce of authority she possessed because she refused to become another female whose entire worth was measured by the male she married and the heirs she produced for him.

She had wanted more for herself. She had wanted strength, authority and a place among dragons that no one could take from her simply because she was female. And somewhere along the way, she had believed those same qualities made her worthy of standing beside Rhydian, not as another dragonness throwing herself at the Drakhar heir, but as someone who had earned the right to be his equal.

She had thought Rhydian would admire what she had made of herself. More foolishly, perhaps, she had believed Sargon would too. Dragons respected strength, and strength was naturally drawn to strength. Sargon was one of the most powerful dragons ever born to their kind. What could a beast like him possibly desire more than a dragonness powerful enough to stand at his side?

Perhaps that was why this hurt so much.

After everything she had done to become that female, Sargon had chosen a fragile human instead. A woman without scales, fire or even the strength to survive against most beasts without protection. It made every sacrifice Tamara had made over the years feel like some cruel joke. She had gained the strength, the authority and the reputation she had fought for, yet somehow, when it came to the one male she had allowed herself to want, none of it had mattered.

In the end, even Rhydian Drakhar could cast aside years of loyalty for a female who had done nothing to deserve his devotion. Apparently, males were all the same. Give them enough beauty, bat a few eyelashes in their direction, and suddenly all the strength and loyalty they claimed to value became meaningless.

Tamara swallowed against the ache in her throat before turning around.

"You cannot hide a mate bond, Rhydian. Sooner or later, everyone will see it for themselves." Her wet eyes met his without wavering. "So if you're going to kill me when that happens, you might as well do it now."

They stared at each other in the tense silence that followed. Tamara waited, almost daring him to answer, but Rhydian said nothing. She took his silence for what it was and turned away, stepping through the doorway and closing it behind her before the tears finally slipped down her cheeks.

Everything was painfully clear now. Men would always be men. Even Rhydian.

The door closed with a hollow thud that lingered long after Tamara was gone. Inside him, Sargon was practically preening with satisfaction, pleased that Rhydian had defended their mate, but Rhydian felt none of his dragon's triumph. All he felt was the bitter weight of guilt settling in his chest.

He and Tamara had been together for years. She had stood beside him through more than he could count, and threatening her life after everything they had been through left a sour taste in his mouth. Perhaps he had gone too far. But she was also his second-in-command. If there was anyone he should have been able to trust to stand behind his decisions, even the ones she didn't agree with, it should have been her.

Rhydian groaned and dragged a hand over his face, his head reeling. Everything was happening too fast. Then his gaze dropped to the satchel still clutched in his hand and something inside him eased.

His grip loosened as he stared at it, remembering the gold Sargon had draped over her, the possessive satisfaction his dragon had felt while doing it. For the first time since Tamara walked out of the room, Rhydian felt as though he could breathe again.

"Aria..."

## Chapter 167: The Reality He Wished

"Morning, Rhydian."

A strangely sweet, familiar voice drifted into his ear.

Rhydian's eyes slowly opened, and there she was. Aria Aspen was in his bed. Naked.

For several seconds, Rhydian simply stared at her, too disoriented to understand what he was seeing. The last thing he remembered was the altercation with Tamara and standing alone in his room afterward with the satchel in his hand. He must have fallen asleep at some point, although he couldn't remember climbing into bed. More importantly, he certainly couldn't remember Aria climbing into it with him.

A dream.

That had to be it. There was no other explanation for why Aria Aspen, a human scared of him, would willingly crawl naked into his bed.

But even for a dream, Rhydian had to admit it felt absurdly real. He could feel the warmth of her body beneath the sheets and smell that maddening scent that had been tormenting Sargon since the first moment they encountered her. Aria smiled down at him without the slightest trace of embarrassment, unconcerned by the fact that she was completely naked beside him.

"What's wrong, Rhydian?" she murmured, leaning closer until the softness of her bare breast brushed against his chest. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Rhydian didn't know how to tell her that it wasn't because he had seen a ghost, but because he was staring at a reality he hadn't even dared imagine outside the confines of a dream.

He took her in slowly. Aria was all softness and beauty above him, her body illuminated by the pale morning light spilling through the window. His gaze lingered on the gentle swell of her breasts, watching them rise and fall with every breath, her nipples already hardened and brushing lightly against his chest, sending a hot rush of blood straight to his groin.

Rhydian let his hands wander, tracing slow paths along the dip of her waist and following every curve down toward the small of her back. She was slim and toned, and he found himself wishing there was more of her to hold, more dips and curves for his hands to memorize.

It wasn't a complaint, though. If anything, the thought of fattening her up, of keeping her well-fed and cared for until there was even more of her for him to hold like this, sent possessiveness curling low in his chest.

His fingers continued their exploration, tracing the delicate line of her spine with such devotion that it felt less like touching skin and more like reading scripture, every inch of her worthy of worship beneath his hands.

When his hands finally reached the curve of her bottom, he squeezed without shame, kneading the soft flesh beneath his palms with unrestrained hunger.

Aria gasped, startled.

Rhydian smiled against her collarbone, then pulled one hand back and brought it down in a sharp, resounding slap. The sound cracked through the room, followed immediately by Aria's stunned gasp.

"Rhydian—" she started, but he cut her protest short with another slap, firmer this time, before soothing the sting with slow, deliberate kneading, his fingers sinking into her soft flesh.

Her breathing changed instantly, coming faster now, shallower, need bleeding into every exhale.

He struck a third time, and this time Aria moaned outright, the sound low and unguarded as her body arched involuntarily into his touch and the faint red imprint of his hand bloomed across her skin.

Rhydian's nostrils flared. He could smell the unmistakable evidence of her arousal, and the realization sent another wave of heat through him. His eyes darkened, pupils widening with a hunger that was becoming increasingly difficult to restrain.

"I want to be inside you now, Aria."

Rhydian didn't wait for her to answer. He didn't need one, not with her scent thick in the air and driving him mad. He gripped her thighs and spread them wide, settling himself between them with the kind of confidence that came from knowing exactly what he wanted and refusing to deny himself any longer.

Aria barely had time to catch her breath before he pushed into her, drawing a sharp cry from her throat as her back arched from the mattress.

"Rhydian—" she gasped, her fingers scrambling for purchase against his shoulders.

He didn't slow down. If anything, her cry only spurred him further, some deep, primal part of him refusing to be gentle now that he finally had her. His movements became faster and more demanding, the headboard knocking rhythmically against the wall as Aria clung to him.

"Mine," he growled against her throat, his teeth grazing her pulse point. "You're mine, Aria. Say it."

"Yours," Aria gasped, the word escaping without hesitation as she wrapped herself tighter around him.

The answer sent another surge of possessiveness through Rhydian. He held her closer, losing himself in the warmth of her body and the way she responded to him, every sound she made stripping away another piece of the restraint he had spent so long trying to maintain.

Her nails raked down his back, her legs locking tightly around his waist as the pleasure continued to build between them, leaving her breathless and trembling beneath him.

"That's it," Rhydian rasped, his voice rough as he watched her lose herself beneath him. "Let me hear you."

Aria couldn't have held back if she tried. The pleasure finally overwhelmed her, her entire body tightening around him as his name tore from her lips and echoed through the empty room, past caring who might hear.

Rhydian followed moments later, a guttural sound escaping him as he buried his face against her neck and held her tightly through the intensity of his own release, every possessive instinct inside him roaring with satisfaction at finally having his mate in his arms.

For a moment, neither of them moved, their chests heaving as they remained tangled together, the last traces of pleasure leaving them both trembling and breathless.

But Rhydian wasn't ready for this dream to be over. He barely gave her a moment to recover before flipping her onto her stomach with effortless strength, pulling her hips back against his own without giving her time to catch her breath.

The needy whine that followed was music he knew he would never forget. Not anytime soon.

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

### Chapter 168: Caelis Revenge

"Dragons don't stop at one," Rhydian growled against Aria's ear, his chest pressed flush to her back, his hips already setting a punishing new rhythm. "This is what happens when you fall for one, Aria. You get claimed until you can't remember your own name."

"Rhydian—" His name came out broken, half protest, half plea, though her hips pushed back into his thrusts, betraying exactly how much she wanted this.

"That's it," he rasped, one hand fisting in her hair, tilting her head back so his mouth could find the curve of her throat. "Take it. Take all of me, little mate. You wanted a dragon. Now you'll learn what that really means."

Every filthy word sent a fresh wave of heat crashing through her, and Aria found herself mewling helplessly into the sheets, overstimulated and utterly wrecked, yet unable to stop chasing the way he made her feel. His pace only quickened, driving into her deep and relentless, the slap of skin against skin filling the room alongside her broken moans and his low, possessive growls.

"You feel this?" he demanded, angling his hips to hit somewhere devastatingly deep. "This is mine. Every part of you belongs to me now."

"Yours," Aria gasped again, the word barely coherent, her body shaking as another climax built impossibly fast, stacked right on top of the last.

Rhydian felt her tighten around him and lost what little restraint remained, chasing his own release with brutal, driving thrusts, his grip on her hip bruising as he held her exactly where he wanted her.

"Come for me again," he ordered, voice broken and guttural. "I want to feel you fall apart, Aria. Now."

She shattered on command, a scream tearing from her throat as pleasure crashed through her in violent, uncontrollable waves, and Rhydian followed instantly, a savage growl ripping out of him as he spilled deep inside her once more, hips stuttering through every last shudder of his release.

Rhydian collapsed over her, careful even in his exhaustion not to crush her beneath his weight, rolling them both onto their sides so she remained tucked against his chest. Neither of them spoke immediately, the sound of their ragged, uneven breathing filling the room instead.

Rhydian pressed a slow kiss to the top of her head, his hand trailing idle patterns along her spine, tracing the same path he'd worshipped earlier, though gentler now, almost reverent.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?" he asked, voice low and rougher than usual, though the concern in it was obvious.

"You hurt me in the best way possible, Rhydian," Aria replied with a small, contented smile. She burrowed closer, adding, "Wake me like this every morning, and I might actually start liking you."

Rhydian chuckled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. "I'm up to the task, Treasure." His arm tightened around her, pleased by the sight of her curled so trustingly against him, claimed and entirely his, at least for now.

After a while, Rhydian reluctantly pulled away from her. "I need to clean you up."

Aria only hummed in response, already drifting toward sleep as exhaustion finally claimed her.

Rhydian slipped out of bed and went into his bathroom. He filled the golden basin he had never bothered using for anyone else with warm water and grabbed a clean towel before returning to the bedroom. Except the sight that greeted him made him freeze.

Caelis was standing beside the bed with Aria trapped against him. One clawed arm was wrapped around her neck, holding her effortlessly in place, while a sinister glint shone in

his silver eyes. The basin slipped from Rhydian's hands and struck the floor with a loud clatter, water spilling around his feet, but he barely noticed.

"Don't you dare touch her, Caelis!" Rhydian roared so deeply that the force of his aura seemed to shake the entire building. Caelis didn't so much as flinch.

"I told you, didn't I?" Caelis said coldly. "One day, I would come for the one thing you loved most."

"Rhydian..." Aria called his name, real fear filling her eyes.

"Aria..." Rhydian reached for her instinctively, but Caelis tightened his hold and dragged her closer against him, making her whimper.

"Fine, you win!" Rhydian said desperately. "You can take my life, but please, spare her."

"No!" Aria cried. "Don't do this, Rhydian. Don't you dare!"

But one look at Rhydian's face told her there was nothing she could say to change his mind.

Caelis's cold chuckle filled the room. "The great Rhydian Drakhar reduced to begging. I never thought I would see the day."

"Rhydian, please..." Aria was crying now, struggling to reach him, but Caelis's grip held her as firmly as death itself.

"You can have me. You win. Let this war end with my death. Just spare her." Rhydian lowered his head, surrendering himself without another thought.

Aria's cries grew louder as she fought uselessly against Caelis Cobryn. Rhydian kept his head bowed, every instinct inside him raging against the submission, but there was nothing the basilisk could demand from him that mattered more than keeping her alive.

Then Caelis said, "I can't say this isn't satisfying, but I've changed my mind."

"What?" Rhydian's head lifted sharply.

Even Aria's struggles stilled, a flicker of desperate hope breaking through her tears.

"Killing you like this would be too easy." Caelis smiled. "I'd rather break you first and kill you afterward. I think I'll enjoy that much more."

Rhydian understood his intention a second too late.

"No! Don't touch her—!" he roared, already lunging toward them.

But Caelis had turned Aria's face toward his own. Her terrified blue eyes met the beautiful, glowing silver of his, and in that instant, she was lost.

"ARIA!"

Rhydian's scream rent through the room as he watched the color drain from her skin. Stone crept across her body with horrifying speed, swallowing every trace of warmth beneath cold gray until even the terror in her eyes was frozen forever.

## Chapter 169: Desperate Measures

"Aria—!"

The scream was already on Rhydian's lips when he jerked upright in bed. He was on his feet almost immediately, his frantic gaze sweeping the room for Aria's petrified form, only to find nothing.

There was no Caelis, stone or Aria. Just an empty bedroom with morning sunlight filtering through the windows as if nothing had happened.

"It was a dream..." Rhydian muttered to himself, pressing a hand against his chest as he tried to calm his heart, which was pounding like the hooves of galloping horses.

But no matter how many times he reminded himself that none of it had been real, the horror refused to leave him. If anything, the nightmare had forced him to confront a possibility he had been too distracted by the mate bond itself to properly consider. If Caelis ever discovered what Aria meant to him, there was no telling what he would do with that knowledge.

"Caelis..." Rhydian muttered the name with an intensity of hatred he had never felt before.

For the first time, he realized just how dangerous the snake prince could become to him. Of course Rhydian loved his parents, but they were powerful, heavily protected and far beyond Caelis's easy reach. He had never gone to sleep wondering whether either of them would still be alive when he woke.

Aria was different. She was human, surrounded by beasts, living within the same academy as Caelis, and there were far too many ways the bastard could get to her if he ever decided she was the easiest way to hurt him.

Rhydian shouldn't have allowed the thought to form because Sargon surged violently to the surface.

"Protect Treasure."

He wanted to go to Aria.

"That cannot happen," Rhydian protested immediately.

Going to Aria now would only draw attention to the very thing they needed to conceal. If anyone saw the Dragon Heir rushing across the academy at this hour simply to assure himself that one particular human was safe, questions would follow, and that would accomplish the exact opposite of protecting his mate.

But Sargon was beyond reason. The dragon didn't care about the politics, secrecy or what anyone might suspect. He wanted his mate where he could see her, smell her and hold her safely within his arms.

That was when Tamara's words from the night before returned to Rhydian with uncomfortable clarity. He couldn't hide a mate bond forever. Not when Sargon could barely tolerate being separated from Aria without fighting him for control. Sooner or later, his dragon's reckless devotion would expose exactly how important she was to them.

Rhydian couldn't allow that to happen yet. He needed time to understand what this bond meant and, more importantly, how to keep Aria from becoming a weapon his enemies could use against him. Tamara had been right about one thing, though. Sargon was his beast, and no matter how powerful the dragon was, he would answer to him.

Rhydian crossed the room toward the wardrobe and pressed his thumb against one of the carvings worked into the stone beside it. There was a click before a narrow section of the wall shifted outward, revealing the concealed compartment behind it. He reached inside and pulled out a small glass vial containing pieces of a strange dried, twisted root.

Peridexion root.

Never in his life had Rhydian imagined he would willingly use it on himself. He had only kept a small supply because one could never be too prepared when surrounded by other dragons, especially ones who might someday become his enemies. Unfortunately, desperate times called for desperate measures.

Back in their world, dragons had possessed very few weaknesses. Their soft underbellies were the only vulnerable part of their otherwise impenetrable bodies, and even reaching one during battle was nearly impossible.

Then the barriers fell and they entered the human world, where they discovered Peridexion. No one understood exactly why the plant affected dragons the way it did, but exposure to a concentrated amount suppressed the beast within. Thankfully, the effects weren't permanent. Depending on the dosage, they could last anywhere from several hours to several days.

Rhydian could already feel Sargon's outrage building inside his head as he carried the vial toward the table, but there would be no changing his mind. His dragon needed to learn some restraint, and since reasoning with him had accomplished nothing, Rhydian was going to enforce it himself.

"Need Treasure!"

Rhydian ignored him and carefully measured the crushed root into a cup, calculating precisely how much he would need. Too little and Sargon could break through its effects before Rhydian was ready. Too much and he could still be weakened when the fight began tonight.

By evening, he needed the Peridexion out of his system and his dragon at full strength again. Once satisfied with the amount, Rhydian poured water over the root and watched the liquid cloud as he stirred it.

"NO!"

Sargon's roar exploded through his head with enough force to make Rhydian stagger. His dragon surged toward the surface, fighting for control before Rhydian could bring the cup anywhere near his mouth. Heat rushed beneath his skin as his veins bulged against his temples, his fingers tightening around the cup until he heard the faint protest of glass beneath his grip.

"I said enough!" Rhydian snarled, forcing Sargon back through sheer will. "This is your own doing. If you had listened to me, it wouldn't have come to this."

"TREASURE!"

"I am trying to protect her!"

Sargon fought him harder at that, but Rhydian refused to surrender control. He raised the cup and drank the entire concoction before his dragon could stop him, swallowing against its bitter taste until there wasn't a drop left.

For one terrible moment, Sargon nearly overwhelmed him. Rage unlike anything Rhydian had ever experienced rippled through their connection, accompanied by a roar so violent that he grabbed the edge of the table to keep himself upright. His vision blurred. Heat scorched the back of his throat, and Sargon's presence seemed to swell until there was no room left inside Rhydian's head for anything else.

Then there was absolute silence.

Rhydian remained hunched over the table, breathing heavily as he waited for the next furious demand for their mate. Nothing came. For the first time in longer than he could remember, there was no second presence moving alongside his consciousness.

The silence should have pleased him. It was exactly what he had wanted, yet an unsettling emptiness opened inside him where Sargon had always been, so profound that Rhydian found himself reaching instinctively for his dragon before catching himself.

This was necessary. Sargon would understand that eventually, even if he hated him for it now. By tonight, the effects of the Peridexion would have worn off, and Rhydian could only hope his dragon had forgiven him by the time they stepped into that fight together.

Otherwise he was doomed.

## Chapter 170: Roost Report 2

Penned by Lord Plumage & Lady Mimic

"We don't spread rumors. We simply give them wings."

Lord Plumage: Good morning, Bestiaris! We have survived yet another day.

Lord Plumage: Must you?

Lady Mimic: Accuracy is the backbone of journalism, Plummy.

Lord Plumage: You write anonymous gossip for an academy newspaper.

Lady Mimic: And yet we profit from their curiosity.

Lord Plumage: Oh well, moving swiftly along.

Lady Mimic: Very swiftly. Preferably before another building collapses.

Lord Plumage: Yes, well. What began as an unusual semester has officially become quite a show. Humans are being fed, dragons are defending them, and somewhere in all of this, Bestiaris Academy has misplaced an entire dining hall.

Lady Mimic: Sharpen those claws, straighten those feathers, and if you happen to be standing inside a school building...

Lord Plumage: Locate the nearest exit.

Let's begin!

### BREAKFAST WITH THE PREDATORS

When the three ruling Houses accepted humans into their ranks, we assumed the gesture was largely ceremonial. A show of unity, maybe.

A convenient opportunity for the two princes to prove that they were more progressive than everyone else while the unfortunate humans attempted to survive the semester.

Then they brought them to breakfast, and the arrangement became serious.

Humans were seated among beasts, fed alongside House members and, most surprisingly, watched over by the very creatures who barely acknowledged their existence two years ago.

Even Prince Caelis Cobryn appears to have developed opinions regarding human nutrition.

Yes, that Prince Caelis.

The same serpent who usually looks as if the rest of us are inconveniencing him simply by breathing within the same space. Witnesses claim the Ophidian Prince personally ensured his humans were eating properly.

It is often said that beasts are territorial creatures. Apparently, that territorial instinct now extends to humans. Bestiaris Houses now claim, feed and protect them.

We eagerly await the collars.

Even Prince Rhydian Drakhar couldn't escape the trend. Although, in his case, he may have taken hospitality a little further than necessary.

BREAKFAST FOR TWO?

While Prince Caelis concerned himself with the nutritional well-being of his humans, Prince Rhydian was witnessed doing something considerably more interesting.

He served one human.

Aria Aspen. A Therion human.

Which raises several questions, beginning with the most obvious: Where was Prince Maverick Nightshade?

The wolf prince was noticeably absent from our unlikely royal reunion, and while we're certain House Therion is perfectly capable of keeping its humans alive without him hovering over their plates, perhaps Prince Maverick should pay closer attention to where his humans are wandering.

Dragons are notorious hoarders. We would hate for Therion to misplace one. As for Rhydian, we remain undecided.

Was this an innocent act of generosity?

A calculated attempt to tempt another human toward House Aetheris?

Or has our favorite dragon prince rediscovered an old habit and developed a taste for humans?

Before anyone begins sharpening pitchforks, we mean that figuratively.

We hope.

Either way, Prince Maverick may want to count his humans before bedtime.

Or, more precisely, one of them.

REST IN PIECES

We would now like everyone to observe a respectful moment of silence for the Bestiaris dining hall.

...

Thank you. Once, it had tables, chairs, and years of history. Now it has excellent ventilation. Anyone who hasn't heard about the collapse of our dearly departed dining hall must have spent yesterday living beneath a rock.

Which, coincidentally, is now one of the few structures on campus we trust.

Unfortunately, no one appears capable of providing an accurate account of what happened. Not even the humans present during the incident seem to know how an ordinary meal ended with half the dining hall becoming an architectural memory.

Rumors, however, have been multiplying faster than rabbits during mating season.

The facts we can confirm are these:

Prince Rhydian Drakhar did corner Aria Aspen in the restroom. Professor Maverick was indeed nearby. Shortly afterward, things went terribly wrong. Dragons are possessive creatures and Wolves aren't exactly famous for sharing either.

Perhaps Professor Maverick objected to a dragon making advances toward one of Therion's humans.

Perhaps Rhydian objected to the objection.

Perhaps someone simply insulted someone's mother. At Bestiaris, all three are equally plausible.

Whatever happened, the aftermath involved a furious dragon, several terrified students and the premature retirement of one dining hall.

To think we once worried the arrival of this year's humans might be uneventful.

How embarrassing of us.

Until Professor Maverick, Prince Rhydian or the human unfortunate enough to find herself at the center of this increasingly suspicious drama decides to speak, we may never know exactly what happened.

Aria Aspen, if you're reading this, our office accepts anonymous statements.

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AETHERIS HAS GONE SOFT

We never expected to write that headline.

Frankly, our feathers resisted. Yet of all three Houses, Aetheris appears to be suffering the most dramatic effects from prolonged human exposure.

Only hours after the dining hall incident, another disturbance broke out inside dragon territory. This time, there was a human hunt. The human in question?

Charlotte Greenwood.

The reason?

We would explain what she did, but our readers have suffered enough academically this semester. What matters is what happened afterward.

Thamas Draco was witnessed carrying Charlotte Greenwood in his arms while actively protecting her from his own dragon brother, Quest.

We repeat: A dragon defended a human against another dragon.

Has everyone recovered?

Good.

Never has House Aetheris been particularly famous for placing human welfare above draconic loyalty, yet here we are.

First, Rhydian accepts humans into Aetheris. Then he feeds one belonging to another House. Now Thamas Draco is apparently willing to stand against his own kind for one. At this rate, dragons may discover empathy before graduation.

Still, strange things are happening inside House Aetheris, and the humans appear to be at the center of every one of them. The question is whether this change will last.

Are humans genuinely becoming part of the Houses that claimed them?

Should they finally relax? Unpack their bags? Begin believing that perhaps Bestiaris isn't quite as determined to kill them as previous years suggested?

Or is this merely the calm before everyone remembers exactly what they are?

Humans, our recommendation remains unchanged.

Enjoy the hospitality. But keep your running shoes nearby.

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TONIGHT, WE BLEED

Now onto the event everyone has been pretending not to obsess over.

Tonight's fights.

And unless half the academy suddenly develops morality before sunset, the arena is going to be packed. All eyes, naturally, are on one particular match.

Maverick Nightshade versus Rhydian Drakhar. Wolf against dragon. Professor against Prince.

Following yesterday's dining hall disaster, this fight may have become considerably more personal.

Whatever tension existed between the two before has undoubtedly grown teeth. The question now is what exactly they intend to settle inside that arena.

Their pride? A grudge? Or perhaps a certain blue-eyed human who has developed an alarming habit of appearing whenever powerful males begin behaving irrationally.

Aria Aspen, we hope you're prepared. There is every possibility someone bets you before the night is over.

Either way, Maverick and Rhydian's match is shaping up to be the biggest fight Bestiaris has seen this semester.

One of them will walk away victorious, while the other will walk away with considerably less dignity.

Assuming they walk away at all.

AND THEN THERE'S THE SNAKE

Prince Caelis Cobryn has been suspiciously quiet. Which, admittedly, is much like saying water has been suspiciously wet.

Still, while wolves growl and dragons destroy perfectly serviceable architecture, the Basilisk Prince has remained comfortably removed from the chaos.

Perhaps he is simply anticipating tonight's fight. After all, an arena packed with students means bets, and bets mean money.

Considering the attention surrounding Maverick and Rhydian, tonight may prove exceptionally profitable for his serpentine pockets.

Or perhaps Caelis is planning something else entirely.

That is the unfortunate thing about snakes.

By the time you notice them moving, they've usually already decided where to bite.

For now, Prince Cobryn appears content to watch.

So will we.

Tonight, Maverick Nightshade and Rhydian Drakhar enter the arena with an entire academy waiting to see which predator comes out on top.

Caelis Cobryn watches from the sidelines.

Somewhere between all three of them stands one human who probably wishes everyone would stop saying her name.

We would apologize, Aria. But that would require remorse.

Quite unfortunate.

Lady Mimic: And that concludes today's report. One dining hall dead, one human hunted, several dragons experiencing suspicious moral development, and two powerful males preparing to beat each other senseless tonight.

Lord Plumage: When you summarize it that way, this academy sounds deeply concerning.

Lady Mimic: And yet enrollment remains open.

Lord Plumage: Before we leave, remember: if you see something suspicious, tell a professor.

Lady Mimic: And then tell us what the professor does about it.

Lord Plumage: Preferably us first.

Lady Mimic: Now you're learning, Plummy.

Together:

"Until next edition, keep your feathers above the wreckage, your claws out of the evidence, and remember, secrets may survive the night, but by morning, they always find a perch."