Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 182: The Change In Him[1,623 words]

For a moment, Maverick stood motionless in the middle of his room. The call with his mother had left his head reeling. Father Roman was coming to the academy?

Maverick was positive he wasn't prepared for the chaos that was sure to follow in Roman's wake. If even his mother was sending him away because she couldn't handle him right now, what made her think he stood a chance?

Then Dimitri's absurdly chaotic thoughts began spilling into his head before the man himself even appeared in the doorway.

"Hello, Marvy," Dimitri greeted in the same sickeningly sweet voice Violet had used moments ago, leaning against the doorframe with a smile that was probably meant to be charming, but instead turned out downright creepy.

Maverick simply stared at him. "Don't start."

He should have known better.

"I'm having another baby, Ricky." Dimitri rubbed his stomach in an exaggeratedly maternal fashion, mimicking something he'd probably seen pregnant women do countless times before. "You're going to be the oldest big brother." He finished the performance in such a nauseatingly sweet voice that Maverick's patience finally snapped.

Maverick flicked his hand, and Dimitri suddenly discovered he could no longer speak. A thin sheet of ice had sealed his lips firmly together.

"Mmm! Mmm!" Dimitri protested through his frozen mouth, undoubtedly demanding to know why Maverick had to do him like this.

But Maverick merely smirked and turned toward his wardrobe to find a change of clothes, foolishly believing he had won.

You do know your papa and I worked very hard to fertilize this baby, right? Dimitri's thought suddenly filled Maverick's head, loud and perfectly clear.

Except the Beta hadn't projected it in his own mental voice. Somehow, the bastard had managed to think the entire sentence in a disturbingly accurate imitation of Violet Purple, making it sound exactly as if his mother had whispered those horrifying words directly into his head.

That did it.

"For fuck's sake!" Maverick exploded, slamming the wardrobe door he'd just opened with enough force to rattle everything inside. Turned out freezing Dimitri's mouth had been a terrible miscalculation.

At the same time, the ice sealing Dimitri's mouth melted away, and the bastard immediately burst into laughter. He guffawed so hard he had to brace one hand against the wall, which only made the entire thing feel like a personal mockery of Maverick, who watched with the blank expression of a man seriously reconsidering why he hadn't frozen his uncle's entire head instead.

"Okay, fine..." Dimitri managed between bouts of laughter, raising a hand in surrender. "I'm going to be serious now."

But then the thought of Maverick having to attend yet another baby party crossed his mind, and whatever control Dimitri had managed to regain disappeared. He doubled over, laughing all over again.

"I'm so sorry..." Dimitri wheezed, wiping the tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. "I just can't help it. All I can imagine is you going home and being forced to attend another tea party organized by one of your sisters."

Unfortunately, Maverick didn't even have the energy to be angry anymore because he could see that exact future unfolding with horrifying clarity. Another baby meant another sibling to spoil, another tiny person following him around whenever he visited home, and several more years of being dragged into whatever ridiculous games his younger sisters decided their eldest brother had no choice but to participate in.

At this point, Dimitri wasn't even mocking him. The bastard was practically predicting his future.

"Control yourself," Maverick ordered.

As though someone had pressed a remote and switched him off, Dimitri's laughter stopped. His shoulders straightened, the amusement disappeared from his face, and within seconds, Maverick's ridiculous uncle was gone and his Beta stood in his place.

"If my mother's made up her mind, then there's no stopping her," Maverick said, deciding Father Roman was a problem for another time. "I'll worry about that later. For now, let's focus on tonight."

Dimitri nodded before studying him more carefully. "How do you feel?"

Maverick knew exactly what he was asking. Dimitri had warned him about taking the suppressor last night, and after witnessing Feral's reaction to being forcibly silenced, there was no mistaking the concern behind the question.

"I feel perfect."

Dimitri lifted a brow, clearly not believing him. Not after the way Feral had reacted before eventually forcing his way back to the surface.

"He was pissed at first," Maverick added, keeping his voice casual, "but I guess spending time with Aria calmed him down."

"Oh, that’s good." Dimitri breathed out in relief.

And yes, Maverick was lying his ass off. Since waking up that morning, Feral had remained silent. Completely silent. Maverick hadn’t felt so much as a growl, an irritated thought or the faintest push against his consciousness, and considering how difficult it usually was to get the bastard to shut up, the absence was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t tell Dimitri that. His uncle would panic, and knowing him, he might even go as far as trying to cancel the match.

Maverick believed he still had hours to get his wolf back on his side. Besides, no matter how furious Feral was with him, there was no fucking way he would sit quietly by and allow Rhydian Drakhar to beat their ass.

Feral’s pride was every bit as vicious as his own. When the time came, Maverick was counting on that shared hatred of losing to drag the stubborn bastard out of whatever hole he’d crawled into.

"Any update on Rhydian Drakhar?" he asked at last, pulling off his shirt as he prepared for the shower.

"He’s back on campus."

Maverick stopped, one brow lifting. "Since when?"

"Came back early this morning while most of the beasts were still asleep."

"So he snuck back in like some coward after trying to steal my mate?" Maverick snarked.

Dimitri said nothing to that.

"Tell Selene to take over my classes today. I’m not sure what I’ll do to that bastard if I see him before the fight."

"As you wish. Anything else?" Dimitri asked.

"Send Variant and Valerie to Aria and the girls. If they need any feminine help preparing for tonight, those are the only female beasts I trust around them."

Dimitri nodded before turning and leaving to carry out his Alpha's orders, leaving him alone in the room.

Maverick stepped into the bathroom and twisted the shower knob, steam curling upward almost instantly as scalding water pounded down onto his shoulders.

He braced one forearm against the tile, letting the heat work into his muscles, and allowed his mind to wander. Except instead of dwelling on his father's impending visit, his thoughts drifted, unbidden, straight back to his mate.

He recalled what they had done earlier. Her beautiful body. The way her breasts filled his hands, nipples tight and flushed dark under his mouth. The slick heat of her wrapped around his fingers, impossibly tight, clenching down every time he'd curled them just right.

The way she'd bitten her own lip raw trying to stay quiet, even though her hips rolled shamelessly against his hand anyway, chasing exactly what he'd been giving her.

His cock was already hard by the time his hand slid down his stomach, and he wrapped his fist around the base with a low grunt, the water sluicing over his knuckles as he gave himself one slow, testing stroke.

Fuck.

Maverick let his eyes fall shut, chasing the memory further. He imagined her mouth instead of his hand, Aria on her knees in front of him right now, water running down her bare skin as she looked up at him with those same blue eyes, half-lidded and glassy the way they'd been that morning, right before she came apart on his fingers.

His strokes picked up speed, rough and unhurried at first, then faster, his fist twisting on every upward pull the way he imagined her tongue would. Her lips would wrap tight around the head of him, sucking hard the same way he'd sucked her nipple into his mouth. He pictured her hollowing her cheeks, taking him deeper, that same twinkle of amusement in her eyes even with him buried in her throat, teasing him even now.

"Fuck, Aria." His voice came out wrecked, barely recognizable, hips snapping forward into his own grip.

Maverick thought about the sounds she'd made, muffled against her own palm, and imagined instead her moaning openly around his cock, the vibrations traveling straight up his spine. That image alone had his balls drawing tight, his rhythm turning erratic and sloppy as he chased the edge hard now.

He came with a broken, guttural groan, his hips jerking forward as thick ropes of release splattered against the shower wall, his whole body shuddering violently through it. His knees nearly buckled from the force of it, but he kept stroking through the aftershocks, milking every last pulse, until the oversensitivity finally made him release himself entirely.

For a long moment, Maverick just stood there, his chest heaving, forehead resting against the cool tile, water running down his face and dripping off his jaw.

He could see it. Something had changed in him completely. He hated sex — even though he needed it. He once couldn't endure even the mere thought of being touched by another woman.

Now all he could think about was getting inside Aria properly, feeling her walls clench around his cock instead of just his fingers, feeling her come apart around him instead of just his hand.

Maverick looked down only to find himself still hard.

He sighed.

How the hell was he supposed to make it through the rest of the day like this?

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 183: Karen's Rules[1,591 words]

"What do you think about this outfit?" Karen Donovan asked, standing in front of the full-length mirror with a skirt held in each hand.

One was a soft blush-pink mini skirt made from textured designer tweed, with pearl buttons running down one side and a thin gold chain resting along the waistband. It was pretty, and feminine.

The other however was completely different, a fitted black leather skirt with a high waist and an asymmetrical hem that stopped dangerously high on one thigh, finished with a slim silver buckle at the hip.

Olivia looked up from her bed and considered both properly.

"The pink one makes you look sweeter, especially with that white top you picked out. And it'll look good with your heels." She tilted her head before pointing toward the other one.

"But I'd choose the black. It shows off your waist better, and with your legs, you can actually pull off that length without looking like you're trying too hard. Besides, we're going to a party full of beasts. Sweet probably isn't what you're going for tonight."

A pleased smile immediately spread across Karen's face. "That's the problem with having a body like mine. Everything looks good on me."

She turned slightly toward the mirror, admiring her reflection from another angle. "Sometimes I wonder how other girls even shop without getting depressed."

Olivia was sorely tempted to roll her eyes, but she resisted. Karen tossed the pink skirt carelessly onto her bed and held the black one against her waist instead, turning from side to side as she imagined the completed outfit.

"The beasts have no idea what's waiting for them tonight. I'm going to make sure every head turns the moment I walk in." A smug little smile curved her lips at the thought.

Then Karen suddenly paused. "Where did you say Fatima went again?"

At the question, Olivia's heart missed a beat. Her fingers tightened instinctively against her thigh, and she couldn't quite bring herself to meet Karen's eyes.

"S-she stepped out. She'll be back soon."

It wasn't a particularly satisfying answer, and for one terrifying second, she thought Karen might question her further. But Olivia should have know, Karen didn't give a shit.

Karen had more important things on her mind than worrying about some loser. She turned back toward the mirror, holding the black skirt against herself again as she considered which top would complement it best. Before she could make up her mind, however, the door clicked open.

Olivia swallowed as Fatima came into view. But Fatima wasn't alone, and that was what had Karen pausing the moment she saw who stood beside her.

Liv stood right beside Fatima at the doorway, one hand curled around the strap of her bag as she stared into the room.

It had been two days since the incident, and Karen hadn't visited Liv once since leaving the hospital that day. What neither Fatima nor Olivia knew was that Karen had practically forgotten about her. Even the empty bed hadn't been enough to remind her. Fatima and Olivia hadn't dared bring Liv up either, knowing how volatile Karen's moods could be.

Now all four girls stood in silence. Fatima in particular was nervous as hell. She had been the one to bring Liv back to the hostel, and she remembered perfectly well the tantrum Karen had thrown when she'd discovered she would be sharing a room with she and

Olivia in the first place. Adding the roommate Karen had conveniently forgotten existed seemed like the perfect recipe for another explosion.

For a moment, Karen's face froze as several emotions passed across it too quickly to hide, but there was no mistaking the anger that flashed in her eyes. Then she noticed the way the other girls were looking at her.

Olivia had gone tense, while Fatima looked like she was preparing herself for the worst. Even Liv remained cautiously by the doorway instead of stepping fully into what was supposed to be her room. For perhaps the first time, Karen wondered if she had taken things too far for all three of them to look this frightened of her.

So almost immediately, a smile spread across her face. It was bright, sweet and so sudden that the other girls knew better than to believe a second of it.

"Liv! You're back!" Her voice was full of excitement, as though she had been eagerly awaiting her return all along.

Yet it did nothing to ease the tension in the room. None of the girls moved, their attention fixed on Karen as they waited to see how long that cheerful mask would last.

Karen dropped the skirt without another thought and hurried over to Liv, grabbing her by the arm. "What are you standing there for? Come on in."

Like a robot, Liv allowed herself to be pulled farther into the room, although she threw a lingering look back at Fatima as the girl closed the door behind them. Fatima had been the one keeping her updated throughout her stay at the hospital, telling her about Karen's attitude and everything that had been happening around campus in her absence.

But even without Fatima telling her a thing, the fact that Karen hadn't visited her once throughout her entire stay spoke volumes.

She had nearly lost her eye because of Karen. If she hadn't run her mouth at the Basilisk Prince for her sake, she would never have been struck with venom in the first place. She had defended Karen without hesitation and nearly paid for that loyalty with her sight. The realization that it apparently meant so little to Karen hurt more than Liv wanted to admit.

It was at that moment that Karen finally seemed to register the empty bed. She guided Liv toward it and made her sit before reaching down to take her chin, tilting her face gently from side to side as she examined her.

"Poor thing," she murmured. "You've slimmed down quite a lot."

Nausea churned in Liv's stomach at the sudden display of concern. Karen touching her and pretending to care now felt almost insulting. She immediately knocked Karen's hand away, causing one of Karen's brows to rise.

"Don’t worry, I’m good," Liv said instead.

Typically, Karen would have reacted badly to anyone swatting her hand away, but perhaps even she realized she was the one at fault here because, after a brief pause, she let it slide.

Karen clapped her hands together instead. "Good. Now that you’re here, you should know we have a party—"

"I’m not going," Liv said before she could even finish.

Karen tilted her head, as though she wasn’t entirely sure she’d heard correctly. "Excuse me?"

"I’m not going. I need to rest." It was the only explanation Liv could bring herself to give.

What Karen didn’t know was that Liv was still deeply traumatized by what had happened. Her injuries might have healed enough for her to leave the hospital, but the thought of being surrounded by beasts again filled her with anxiety. Right now, a party was the last place she wanted to be.

Karen laughed in disbelief. "I don’t think you understand. It’s not a choice. We have to be there to—"

"If I hadn’t come back to the dorm today, would it still not be a choice?" Liv cut in, the frustration she’d been holding back finally creeping into her voice. "Or is that just another one of your rules, Karen?"

For a moment, Karen looked genuinely taken aback by her boldness. The instinct to retaliate was there, Liv could see it in the sudden tightening of her face, but Karen caught herself before she could react. She was the one who needed something from Liv this time, and apparently, even Karen understood that throwing another tantrum wasn’t going to get it for her.

"Fine, I admit it," she finally said. "I should have visited you, but you’re here now. I gave you a roof over your head in Ophidian, and the least you can do is show up tonight and not fail me. The other girls are going to be there, and I’m not going to let them outnumber us." There was such determination in her voice that it was obvious she genuinely believed she had made a reasonable argument.

"Wow," Liv breathed, finally seeing Karen for exactly what she was. "You are a fucking bitch."

"What?" Karen shouted, her features twisting instantly.

There she was. Liv almost wanted to laugh. She pushed herself off the bed at once and stood face-to-face with her, no longer willing to shrink beneath the temper that had intimidated her for so long.

"If this is about the roof you supposedly gave me, then I'll gladly leave," Liv told her. "I had a better time in the infirmary than I've had living here with you. This place already makes me sick."

Before Karen could react to that, or Liv could make good on her threat to leave, the doorbell rang. Just like that, the confrontation came to an abrupt halt, their anger giving way to a shared tension as every pair of eyes turned toward the door.

Perhaps determined to prove she wasn't some coward who could be frightened inside her own House, Karen was the first to move. She crossed the room, grabbed the handle and pulled the door open.

Venus stood on the other side. His face gave nothing away as he looked directly at Karen and announced without preamble, "Caelis wishes to see you."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 184: Into Her Or Not[1,017 words]

"The last time, Caelis looked like he couldn't care less about me, so what does he want this time? Why does he suddenly want to see me? I've been careful not to provoke him." Karen badgered Venus with questions as they made their way down the hallway leading toward Caelis' quarters.

There was something unsettling about House Ophidian. Even when the halls were quiet, they never truly felt silent. There was always the faint sound of scales dragging against stone or the occasional hiss coming from somewhere Karen couldn't see, enough to make the hairs on her arms stand on end. Serpents were simply unsettling.

However, Caelis Cobryn wasn't exactly hard on the eyes. The basilick prince was certainly a good catch, but Nightshade was the real prize.

Not only was Maverick potentially the next Alpha King of the Asterion region, but he had four powerful fathers and the most powerful supernatural in the world as his mother. The kind of influence surrounding that family was something people spent their entire lives trying to acquire.

Her father might have sent her to Bestiaris expecting her to establish roots in Bestial City, but Karen had always believed in aiming higher when a better opportunity presented itself. Maverick Nightshade was a much bigger fish, and Daddy couldn't possibly be that

angry about a change of plans if she came home with something better than what he'd originally wanted.

"If I knew why he wanted to see you, there wouldn't have been much point in sending me to bring you to him, would there?" Venus finally replied without even bothering to look at her.

Karen's lips pressed together at the response, but she didn't ask another question, quietly following after him instead.

They finally reached the Basilisk Prince's quarters, and Venus opened the door without knocking before leading Karen inside. Her eyes naturally wandered as she followed him, taking in the place as they made their way toward Caelis' office.

The first thing she noticed was how ridiculously neat everything was; she bet Caelis would notice if someone moved a chair an inch from where he'd left it. Dark furniture and black marble dominated the space, with touches of Ophidian's signature green and silver worked into the decor.

There were no family portraits on the walls, no photographs sitting around, not even some useless little collection that might have given away what the beast enjoyed doing with his time. Nothing seemed personal.

Karen couldn't say she was surprised. Caelis was unnervingly composed, always so controlled that she sometimes wondered if anything ever got under his skin. Apparently, even his quarters reflected that.

To be honest, Karen had no idea what to expect when she entered that office, but it certainly wasn't the scene she stumbled into.

Karen halted in her steps at once.

Caelis Cobryn was seated on the edge of his desk, his attention fixed on the paper in his hand and his side profile exposed to her. Karen had always assumed Cobryn simply wore his silver hair long, but for the first time, she noticed the faded cut along the sides now that he'd pulled the rest into a high bun.

It exposed more of his face, sharpening features she'd never really paid much attention to before. Just behind his ear was a small tattoo she hadn't noticed either.

R ♥ L.

Karen's eyes lingered on it for a second, wondering what the letters meant, before the sunlight streaming through the open blinds drew her attention elsewhere.

It fell directly across Caelis, catching against the paleness of his skin and making his silver hair appear almost white beneath it. Even his lashes looked silver from where she stood.

Karen found herself staring far longer than she should have, her eyes shamelessly tracing his profile before moving lower to the relaxed way he'd positioned himself against the desk.

Damn.

She had always known Caelis Cobryn was attractive, but when the hell had he become this hot?

Venus cleared his throat beside her, and Karen immediately snapped out of it. She straightened, embarrassed to realize she'd just spent several seconds gawking at the Basilisk Prince.

At the same time, Caelis lifted his head, seemingly only now acknowledging her presence.

"Oh, you're here." He lowered the paper he'd been reading and placed it beside him.

"Oh, yeah." Karen hated the slight shake in her voice, especially when she felt heat creeping into her face.

What the hell was going on? She was not into the snake. *Get a grip on yourself!* Karen mentally scolded herself.

Caelis looked at Venus. "Excuse us."

Venus didn't even hesitate. He turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Suddenly, it was just the two of them in the room, and for the first time, Karen found herself nervous around Caelis for a reason that had nothing to do with the possibility of him hurting her.

"How was your night?" Caelis asked, straightening from the desk.

"It was fine," Karen answered, increasingly uncomfortable with the way his silver eyes remained fixed on her.

She tried to regain some control of the situation by taking charge of the conversation.

"Venus told me you wanted to..." Karen trailed off when Caelis suddenly began walking toward her. There was no hurry in his steps, which only made it worse. He didn't stop until he was directly in front of her, so close enough that Karen had to tilt her head to meet his eyes.

She shifted her weight on her heels, unsettled by the sudden turn of events. Caelis had never shown the slightest interest in her, even when she'd practically thrown herself at him, so whatever this was now left her completely off balance. She couldn't tell if he was deliberately trying to make her nervous or if she was making something out of nothing, and she hated that she couldn't read him.

"I take it you're going to the party tonight?" he suddenly asked.

"Y-yeah."

"Good." Caelis seemed pleased by the answer, which somehow pleased Karen in return.

"I want you to do something for me tonight."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 185: Broken His Word[1,020 words]

"What?" Karen blurted out, shocked by the request. The Basilisk Prince wanted her help.

"Can I trust you?" Caelis suddenly asked while Karen was still struggling to recover from the first surprise.

Karen's mouth fell open, and then she found herself nodding like some idiot.

"Yes, you can trust me. What do you want me to do?" Karen was more than eager now.

To think she had been looking for a way to get into Caelis' good graces, and the opportunity had practically landed in her lap. Yes, the universe was really on her side tonight.

At that response, Caelis suddenly reached a hand toward her, and Karen flinched. But he didn't stop. His hand continued forward until his fingers settled against the side of her face.

Karen gasped at the contact. Just as she'd imagined, his hand was cold to the touch, although the chill seemed to adjust to her temperature surprisingly fast. Karen, however, had stopped breathing altogether when Caelis began rubbing his thumb across her cheek almost affectionately.

"You do know Aria Aspen, right?" Caelis asked, still caressing her cheek, and Karen could only nod like some compelled human.

"I want you to start some trouble with her at the fight tonight," Caelis told her.

It was safe to say Karen was sold the moment he mentioned Aria and trouble in the same sentence. Finally, Caelis was beginning to see why that bitch needed to be taught a lesson.

But no matter how enthralled Karen was by Caelis' sudden charm, she could never pass up a golden opportunity.

"It's not going to be easy," Karen told him.

"If it were easy, I wouldn't have sought you out."

As if testing how far Caelis was willing to go for this, Karen stepped closer until their bodies briefly touched. She expected him to move away from her or even threaten her like he usually did. But Caelis remained exactly where he was, and for once, Karen could see something almost challenging in his eyes.

"It's going to cost you." She smirked.

"And what would it cost?" Caelis lifted a brow, his thumb still caressing her cheek.

Karen was becoming increasingly lightheaded from all the attention he was giving her, but she didn't let it show. This was exactly what she'd wanted from him since arriving at Bestiaris, and she wasn't about to lose her nerve now that she finally had it.

"You," Karen said.

For a moment, something changed. The softness disappeared from Caelis' silver eyes, replaced by a look so cold and dangerous that Karen was suddenly reminded of exactly who stood before her. His hand might still have been resting against her face, but the Basilisk Prince was back, and there was nothing charming about him now.

Her heart leapt, and Karen quickly clarified. "I want you as my plus one."

And just like that, the danger disappeared as though it had never been there in the first place.

"Deal," Caelis said.

A small, victorious smile made its way across Karen's face. She could have demanded a separate room, but then it would be much more difficult to get the other girls to run her errands.

Or Karen could have made him excuse her from the mandatory duties every member of House Ophidian was expected to perform to contribute to the House's strength, especially when she considered most of those duties beneath her.

But no, tonight Karen was going to make every head turn. All the other human girls would envy her and wish they were in her shoes. She had come to this academy with a mission, and tonight, she'd demonstrate to the other girls just how bright her future here could be.

Caelis wasn't finished. "You will only hang on my arm tonight. Nothing else. And under no circumstances will you expose our deal to anyone. Otherwise, you can rest assured I'll have your head myself. Most importantly, you will fulfill your part of the deal regardless of how difficult it becomes."

For the first time, Karen found herself staring directly into Caelis' silver eyes. They were beautiful as hell, but there was no mistaking the threat behind them now. He would make good on every word he'd just said, and Karen could see it.

Karen swallowed.

"Deal."

Suddenly, as though everything that had happened between them had been nothing more than a performance, Caelis withdrew his hand and stepped away from her. Karen blinked, her senses finally returning as it dawned on her that she'd just been played. But perhaps because she was no stranger to putting on a performance herself, Karen kept the cheerful smile on her face.

What mattered was what everyone else would see and envy tonight. She could work on winning over Caelis Cobryn afterward.

"Be ready at eight on the dot. Not a minute later."

Of course, he was keeping his side of the deal too. Karen couldn't wait.

"As you wish, Prince Caelis. You won't be disappointed." She curtsied to him as though that was supposed to impress him.

Caelis barely spared her another glance before Karen turned on her heel and left the office, barely able to contain her excitement. She found Venus waiting near the entrance and, for the first time since meeting him, actually smiled at him before walking past.

The moment Karen was gone, Venus returned to Caelis' office.

"You agreed that no human would come to harm during the party. You gave your word, Your Highness!" he protested.

But Caelis merely looked at him. "The letter specified during the gathering. Rhydian invited them to the party, not the fight. Moreover, this is human against human."

For the first time, Venus truly understood just how strategic Caelis could be. He hadn't broken his word. He had simply found the space between the words where his promise no longer applied.

"Damn," he breathed, unable to hide how impressed he was. "Still, Maverick and Rhydian won't let you get away with this."

"I know that," Caelis said calmly. "But by the time they come for me, I'll already have what I want. It'll be worth it."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 186: Charlotte Gone[1,011 words]

While House Ophidian was busy making its own plans, House Aetheris certainly wasn't being left behind when it came to its own antics. Or at least, a certain someone wasn't.

Zainab, Indigo and Meredith had been dragged into a dark room against their will. They had been in their room when someone rang the doorbell, and thinking it was Charlotte, who still hadn't returned since the incident yesterday, Zainab had hurried to open the door. Instead, she'd found three female dragons standing on the other side.

And that was how they ended up in what appeared to be some basement beneath the dorm. Apparently, it was yet another room the dragons had turned into storage, which was absolutely insane. Just how much did these beasts hoard? At this point, it wasn't an instinct but an addiction that needed professional help.

Except none of them could dwell on that right now, not when they were scared out of their minds. The room itself wasn't helping either. It was cold and windowless, with stone walls that carried the faint smell of damp and a single naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. Crates, covered furniture and other abandoned objects crowded the edges, leaving the middle strangely bare. And standing directly beneath that lonely bulb was Tamara Ironwing.

The female dragons forced them forward until they stood in the middle of the room, close enough that none of them could avoid looking Tamara in the face.

"Thank you, girls," Tamara said to the dragons who had brought them down here without so much as giving them a choice.

One of the females, obviously the leader of the three, smiled. "Anything you want, Tamara."

With a proud expression and a slight lift of her chin, she turned and headed for the door, the other two following behind her.

The moment the door slammed shut, Zainab, Indigo and Meredith jumped at the sound. Then came the unmistakable click of the lock, and whatever little hope they'd been holding onto disappeared with it. They were trapped underground with Tamara Ironwing, with no one knowing where they were. At this point, all three of them were convinced they were going to die.

Tamara didn't need to see their faces to know they were terrified. The scent of fear pouring from the humans had already saturated the air, thick enough to make her nose wrinkle in distaste.

Such fragile, miserable things. And yet, Rhydian's beast had chosen one of them for a mate. The thought alone made her stomach churn with disgust and anger.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I called you here," Tamara finally said.

The three girls lifted their heads almost at once, only to quickly lower them again. None of them knew what might be considered disrespectful to a dragon, and after everything they'd witnessed since coming to Bestiaris, they weren't particularly interested in finding out the hard way. Especially when the dragon standing before them could burn them alive before they had the chance to scream.

The gesture only seemed to irritate Tamara. "You don't have to worry. I'm not going to kill you, so you might as well look at me while I'm talking."

That got all three girls to raise their heads. There was still some hesitation, but none of them dared disobey now that she'd given a direct order.

"You have good reason to be afraid, though," Tamara continued. "Deep down, you know humans don't belong here. But your government didn't give you much of a choice, did they? They threw you into this academy because of whatever..."

She paused, searching for the appropriate word before settling on one.

"Deluded dream of unity they're trying to achieve. I understand that too." She even pressed a hand to her chest as if she genuinely sympathized with their situation.

Zainab, Indigo and Meredith exchanged confused looks, none of them having the slightest idea where this conversation was going. They'd come down here convinced they were about to be punished for Charlotte's actions, yet somehow the dragoness was sympathizing with them?

Or so they thought.

"However..." Tamara's expression hardened. "It's one thing to know your place and stick to it. Unfortunately, one of you clearly doesn't."

The girls gulped almost in unison. They knew it!

Charlotte had finally landed them in trouble. After everything she'd done yesterday, it had only been a matter of time before someone came looking for the rest of them.

Indigo was the first to drop to her knees. "I swear to God, we had no idea Charlotte would pull that stunt!"

Zainab and Meredith immediately followed, sinking beside her.

"It's the truth," Zainab quickly supported. "We would never have supported what Charlotte did. She acted on her own."

"Whatever you want us to do to make up for it, we will," Meredith pleaded, pressing her palms together. "Just please spare us."

It was as though Meredith had just given Tamara exactly the opening she'd been waiting for, because the slow, satisfied smile that spread across her lips was enough to make goosebumps rise across their skin.

"Now, you've finally said something worth my attention."

Meredith gulped before glancing toward the other two, only to find the same uneasiness written across their faces. Somehow, all three of them had the sinking feeling that they'd just walked willingly into a trap, and whatever Tamara was about to ask of them, it was already too late to take back their offer.

Tamara didn't bother beating around the bush. "I want Charlotte gone."

The girls stared at her in shock. It was Indigo who finally managed to speak. "You mean gone, as in out of the academy and sent back home, right?" she asked with a nervous laugh, desperately trying to make the situation sound less sinister.

Tamara didn't seem amused. "I want Charlotte dead tonight."

The air seemed to leave their lungs all at once. Charlotte dead? Surely she couldn't mean that. There was no way Tamara had dragged them all the way down here because she expected them to kill Charlotte themselves... right?

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 187: Your Life Or Charlotte's[1,062 words]

Tamara continued like she hadn’t just asked three humans to murder one of their own.

"Of course, I would have done it myself, but thanks to the stupid rule Maverick put in place and my position as Rhydian’s second-in-command, I cannot do anything that compromises the safety of the dragons."

Her eyes moved slowly between the girls. "But you’re human. Those restrictions don’t apply to you, which makes the three of you perfect."

Meredith stared at her in horror. "Miss Tamara, I’ve never hurt a fly in my entire life."

Seeing Meredith attempt to reason with her, Zainab and Indigo quickly joined in.

"I wouldn’t even know how to kill a person," Zainab admitted, her voice shaking. "I don’t have it in me."

"Me neither!" Indigo rubbed her palms together as she pleaded. "I know Charlotte can be a lot, but I don’t think it has gotten to this point. We can speak to her."

"Yes!" Meredith quickly supported. "I promise we’ll make sure Charlotte never crosses the line again. In fact, she won’t even leave our room if that’s what it takes, much less get in another dragon’s face."

Perhaps that assurance should have been enough, but the memory of Thamas carrying Charlotte in his arms flashed through Tamara’s mind.

No. This weed had to be pulled out by the root before it had the chance to spread. Otherwise, it wouldn’t just be Rhydian. The next thing she knew, that idiot Thamas would come running to announce that he’d found his mate in Charlotte. Whatever madness had begun infecting the males of her kind needed to end before human mates became some ridiculous trend among dragons.

"Is that so...?" Tamara asked, but there was nothing reassuring about her tone, and the hairs on the backs of their necks rose.

"Since you all love Charlotte so much, let’s do it this way, then. Charlotte or your lives?"

"What?" all three chorused before exchanging uneasy looks, each of them hoping the others had somehow understood Tamara differently.

Tamara showed them no mercy. "Either the three of you end Charlotte tonight, or I end you."

"And don’t think I’ll let some rule stop me. I can easily have someone else finish the three of you, or perhaps an unfortunate accident happens down here in this basement." Tamara glanced around the room like she was considering the possibilities. "Of course, your

deaths would raise suspicion, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take. The question is, are you?"

Her eyes gleamed as she looked between them, almost daring one of the girls to challenge her.

"Do you love Charlotte enough to risk your lives for her, or will you choose yourselves?"

Of course, the answer was obvious. None of them were exactly loyal to Charlotte, even if it might have appeared that way after she’d stood up against Karen’s mistreatment of them. But when it came down to Charlotte’s life or their own, everyone was on their own. Besides, they wouldn’t even be in this mess if it weren’t for that bitch in the first place.

"Miss Tamara..." Zainab began carefully, her eyes flickering toward the others before returning to the dragoness. "It’s not that I’m saying I wouldn’t do it, but I don’t know how to do something so... gory."

"It need not be gory," Tamara replied. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small red plastic bottle before tossing it toward her.

Zainab caught it on instinct, but the moment the bottle landed in her palm, her hand began trembling so badly that she nearly dropped it. She stared down at the tiny container as though whatever was inside could somehow eat through the plastic and burn straight through her skin.

"That’s a special poison," Tamara explained. "You won’t need much. Get it into Charlotte’s drink at the party tonight, and by the time anyone realizes something is wrong, it’ll already be too late."

Zainab, Indigo and Meredith looked at one another, their stomachs tightening at the thought of what they were being forced to do. This wasn’t some stupid academy rivalry anymore. They were holding the means to end another person’s life, and Tamara was speaking about it as casually as though she’d asked them to pour Charlotte a glass of wine.

"Only one of you needs to handle the poison, but the other two will make sure Charlotte drinks from the right glass. Distract her, convince her, do whatever you have to do. There is no room for mistakes." Tamara had thought the plan through carefully. More importantly, involving all three ensured that none of them could later claim innocence without condemning the others. "And with all three of you involved, I don’t have to worry about one suddenly developing a conscience and betraying the rest."

"So..." Tamara looked each of them directly in the eye. "Are you in or out?"

Indigo swallowed. "What happens if we get caught? Wouldn’t we be punished or something?"

"I'll make sure House Aetheris doesn't touch you," Tamara assured her before a cruel smile curved her lips. "Haven't you learned anything since coming here? This isn't the human world. Beast laws were never written with humans in mind, and one human turning against another isn't going to inspire the same outrage you seem to expect."

She let that sink in before adding, "There will be questions, certainly. Perhaps even an investigation. But I can assure you I'll shield you."

It was clear they didn't have much of a choice, and judging by the looks they exchanged, all three of them had reached the same conclusion.

"We'll do it," Meredith finally said, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

It was a dog-eat-dog world, and when it came down to Charlotte's life or theirs, they would choose themselves. Charlotte should have known better than to keep provoking beasts who could crush them without a second thought. They weren't going to die for her foolishness.

A victorious grin spread across Tamara's face.

"Good," she said, visibly pleased.

Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Of course, it goes without saying that under no circumstances, even if the plan goes awry, will my involvement be exposed."

Tamara stepped closer, and the girls immediately went rigid, their feet seemingly rooted to the floor as she stopped directly in front of them.

"Otherwise, I'll burn you alive."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 188: Imagine A Fairytale[1,071 words]

"Please tell me that, for once, you actually have an outfit you can pull off for this party, Aria," Trisha said.

They were still in the living room, trying to plan for tonight's rendezvous. At least this way, they could keep each other company instead of slowly dying of boredom.

"I don't," Aria told them straightforwardly.

Trisha and Brittney groaned at the same time.

"Can you blame me?" Aria immediately defended herself. "I thought the beasts would be inviting us to funerals, not parties!"

Even if she hadn't expected Bestiaris to be one long fight for survival, Aria still wouldn't have packed much in the way of party clothes. She had been the ostracized freak back in Westmoor Province. Nobody had exactly been lining up to send her party invitations.

"So you're trying to tell me that somewhere deep inside you, there wasn't even a tiny part that wondered if this whole thing might turn into some ridiculous fairytale?" Brittney asked. "You know, come to Bestiaris, discover the beasts aren't as terrible as everyone says, fall madly in love with one, attend glamorous parties and live happily ever after?"

Aria's brows drew together as she actually considered the question. To be honest, she had never consciously thought about it, but perhaps there had been a tiny part of her that hoped things would somehow turn out that way. That one might fall in love with her, protect her, take her to parties, marry her, and give her many, many children. They would live happily ever after, and she would never have to worry about anything again.

But Aria was far too practical to entertain fantasies like that, which was probably why the thought had never fully formed in the first place. Happily ever after belonged in fairytales, not in a school filled with creatures capable of killing her with their bare hands.

She had survived this long because she'd never allowed herself to forget what the beasts were capable of. Who knows? She might have been one of the dead humans if she had let the fantasy convince her otherwise.

"I'm sorry, but no," Aria confessed. "My only goal was—"

"Survive Bestiaris Academy and get back to my sister," Brittney interrupted, doing a surprisingly convincing imitation of Aria's serious voice. "I'm not here to party or have fun because humans and beasts cannot possibly coexist, and unlike the rest of you fools, I have priorities." Her grin widened. "I swear, I can read you like an open book now."

Aria could only shake her head. There really was no point arguing with Brittney when she got like this.

"We understand," Alek assured her. "I don't even know what came over me, to be honest. I only packed one or two party outfits myself."

She shrugged. "I think somewhere in my mind, I figured that if I was eventually going to die here, I might as well look good at least once before it happened."

"That's the spirit," Brittney said approvingly.

"That's a terrible spirit," Aria corrected.

"Don’t worry," Trisha told her. "I’m sure Brittney has enough clothes to dress you, or..." A grin slowly appeared on her face. "We could always add an outfit to the list. I’m sure Maverick wouldn’t mind spending money on his woman’s clothes."

"Ooh, that’s a good one." Brittney’s eyes lit up. "Now I’m actually curious to see what he’d pick for you. The beasts have shopping malls downtown, right?"

"No, no, no." Aria shook her head. "Don’t do that. I’m not having a guy buy my clothes for our first party together."

"I’m sure he wouldn’t mind," Trisha reasoned. "You’re his mate, and in the circles I’m used to, it’s perfectly normal for a man to provide an outfit for the woman accompanying him."

"Unfortunately, I didn’t run in your circles, and in mine, pride matters. If I could leave the academy right now, I’d rather go shopping for the outfit myself. But I don’t want to start depending on a guy to the point where he’s already buying my clothes when we barely just began whatever this is between us. I’m sorry, but that’s not me."

Brittney opened her mouth to argue, but Aria continued before she could.

"I’d rather borrow something from one of you because I know I can return it afterward, and I trust none of you would ever shame me for needing it. I might not be as rich as you guys, but I’m genuinely content with what I have."

For a moment, an awkward silence settled over the room before Trisha nodded. "Okay. No buying you an outfit, then. We’ll just badger Dimitri with everything else we need instead."

Aria relaxed, grateful that they had respected her decision. Perhaps there would come a time when she’d be comfortable letting Maverick spoil her that way. She couldn’t deny that the idea was appealing, especially after seeing how freely he seemed to give. But definitely not for their first party.

"Speaking of which..." Trisha reached for her phone. "We should probably make that list before Dimitri comes to his senses and realizes agreeing to buy whatever we need was a terrible mistake."

Alek immediately frowned. "Can we please remember that the person you’re planning to torture is my mate?"

"Precisely," Brittney said. "That means we have an inside connection."

"That is not what I meant, Brittney." She groaned.

Aria laughed as Trisha opened a blank note on her phone. "Okay, what do we actually need?"

"Hair spray," Brittney said immediately.

"Setting spray," Trisha added.

"Bobby pins," Alek contributed.

"Hair ties," Aria said.

"Lash glue."

"Nail glue."

"Fashion tape."

"Safety pins."

"Wait." Alek held up a hand. "Why do we need nail glue? Don't we already have some?"

Brittney stared at her. "And what happens if we run out?"

"How much glue are you planning to use?"

"That's irrelevant. Put it on the list."

Trisha dutifully added it.

"Your loyalty to my mate is truly inspiring," Alek muttered.

"Cotton pads," Trisha continued, ignoring her. "Makeup remover, body lotion, deodorant..."

"Perfume," Brittney added.

"You have perfume," Aria pointed out. "A truckload of it, actually."

"We have perfume for regular life. Tonight requires party perfume."

Aria stared at her, stunned. "What's the difference?"

Brittney looked genuinely offended by the question. "Everything. Tonight's special. Not to mention, we're using this once-in-a-while opportunity to stockpile. I would not be living my numbered days without smelling nice."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 189: A List For The Beta[1,127 words]

And just like that, Aria lost the argument.

She turned to Trisha in defeat. "Add perfume."

"Already done."

"Hand warmers," Alek suggested. "The party is possibly outdoors, and God knows how many hours we are going to be there."

That one earned immediate agreement from everyone.

"Blister plasters too," Trisha said. "Someone is going to regret her shoes before the night is over."

All three women looked at Brittney.

Brittney’s eyes narrowed. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

No one answered, but it was added to the list anyway.

Suddenly, Brittney’s countenance brightened. "Oh! And those little rhinestones people stick around their eyes."

Alek frowned at her. "Why do we need rhinestones?"

"We don’t need them."

"Then why are we asking Dimitri to buy them?"

"Because I want them."

Alek closed her eyes for a moment. "That poor man."

"Your poor man is a Beta wolf who threatened to rip out another man’s throat this morning," Aria reminded her. "I think he can survive a little shopping list."

"That was a joke," Alek said.

Nobody answered.

Alek looked around the room. "He said it was a joke."

"Of course he did, sweetheart," Brittney replied sympathetically.

Alek threw a cushion at her, but Brittney caught it against her chest with a laugh.

"Snacks," Aria said, dragging them back to the matter at hand. "If we're really staying inside until tonight, we're going to need food."

That opened an entirely new disaster.

"Chocolate."

"Chips."

"Cookies."

"Can't we just get something with actual nutritional value?" Trisha interrupted.

"Chocolate has nutritional value," Brittney argued.

"No, it doesn't."

"It provides happiness. Happiness is essential to human survival."

"Put chocolate on the list." Aria knew Brittney had won. Again.

Trisha added it.

Alek leaned over to look at the phone, and her eyes widened. "How many things are on there already?"

"Not that many. Twenty-three."

Alek's mouth fell open. "Twenty-three?"

"We're shopping for four women," Brittney defended. "That's barely six things each."

Aria snorted with laughter. "Dimitri is going to hate us."

"No," Alek corrected her. "Dimitri is going to hate the three of you. I'm his mate."

Brittney scoffed. "If anything, that makes this your responsibility. Tell your man to shop faster."

"I am not telling my mate to shop faster!"

"Then I'll tell him."

"You absolutely will not."

While Brittney and Alek argued, Trisha quietly continued typing, and Aria leaned closer to see what else she'd added. "Do we really need a mini sewing kit?"

"Yes."

"Two different kinds of hair spray?"

"One is holding spray and the other is finishing spray."

Aria regretted asking. How had she gone this long without realizing girls needed this much stuff?

Eventually, Alek managed to wrestle the phone away long enough to inspect the completed list, and the horror on her face grew with every swipe of her thumb.

"This is ridiculous."

Alek looked toward Aria for help, but Aria merely raised both hands. This was beyond her.

With a defeated sigh, Alek handed the phone back. "Fine. Send it. But when Dimitri sees this and decides he no longer wants a mate, I'm blaming all of you."

"Oh, please." Brittney settled comfortably against the couch. "That man is so enamored with you he'd rather slit his throat than let you go."

Alek tried to look annoyed, but the smile threatening the corner of her mouth ruined the effect.

Trisha gave the list one final inspection before pressing send. For several seconds, nothing happened. Then her phone chimed.

All three girls immediately leaned toward it as Trisha opened Dimitri's reply.

Is this a shopping list or a cry for help?

Brittney burst out laughing. A second message appeared before any of them could respond.

And why the fuck do four women need this much glue?

That finished the girls. They laughed so hard they fell on one another. Alek covered her face, already regretting every decision that had led to her mate becoming the designated errand boy for the afternoon.

Trisha, completely unrepentant, began typing her response.

We'll need everything before the day is over. Thank you.

Alek peeked through her fingers. "At least tell him I had nothing to do with this."

Trisha paused. Then she added:

Alek says thank you too.

"TRISHA!"

Alek reached for the phone, successfully snatching it from her, intent on extricating herself from the situation when another message from Dimitri came through.

Tell her anything for my baby girl.

Alek froze. She clearly hadn't been expecting that, judging by how quickly the tips of her ears turned red.

Unfortunately for her, the other girls had already peeked at the screen.

"Oh my God," Brittney gushed. "You two are so disgustingly sweet, I'm going to need insulin before the party."

"Get off!" Alek immediately tried to hide the phone against her chest, which only made Brittney laugh harder.

Right at that moment, the doorbell rang, immediately bringing the conversation to a halt. The girls exchanged confused looks. They weren't expecting anyone.

Aria got up and headed for the door, peeking through the peephole first. The moment she recognized the two women standing outside, however, a smile spread across her lips.

She opened the door.

Valerie and Variant stood at the entrance with a trolley piled with steaming food.

Variant winked at her. "Anyone call for room service?"

"Well, look who decided to save us from starvation." Aria chuckled, stepping aside to let them in.

"Variant! Valerie!" Brittney cried, rushing over to hug them. Alek and Trisha weren't far behind, happily welcoming their new friends.

"You two are lifesavers!" Alek exclaimed at the sight of the food.

"With the dining hall destroyed, food is being sent directly to each House," Valerie explained as they wheeled the trolley inside. "With a little bit of Maverick's influence, we managed to get enough for everyone. I hope you don't mind us inviting ourselves to breakfast."

"You absolutely do not need to apologize for showing up at our door with food," Aria assured her. "If anything, you've just guaranteed yourselves a permanent invitation."

"The more the merrier," Trisha agreed.

Seeing how readily they'd been welcomed, Valerie smiled. "Well, on that note, please tell me you guys are already preparing for the party tonight!"

The excited look she exchanged with Variant told Aria everything she needed to know.

Apparently, what had started as four girls trying to prepare for one party had just gained two more participants, and judging by the personalities involved, their relatively peaceful day was about to become a whole lot more chaotic.

Meanwhile, a certain Beta was currently texting his boss.

Your mate and her friends have sent me on a quest.

Maverick's response came almost immediately.

You'll survive.

There are thirty-seven items.

Good luck, Uncle.

Dimitri stared at the message for several seconds before typing his reply.

Fuck you.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 190: Maverick Would Punch Some Faces[1,606 words]

Breakfast with Variant and Valerie was filled with laughter, teasing and enough jokes to make them forget, if only for a while, everything that had happened since they arrived at Bestiaris.

As Aria watched the women interact, she found herself wondering if perhaps she had been a little too hard on the beasts. Humans were capable of both good and bad, so why had she never truly considered that the beasts could be the same? Perhaps some of her distrust was simply years of conditioning at work.

After all, the beasts had once lived in a world without humans, where strength determined almost everything. Survival of the fittest wasn't merely some saying to them. It had been their way of life for a long time.

Then suddenly, they found themselves sharing a world with creatures physically weaker than them, only to be told they had to coexist under laws created by those same creatures. Aria couldn't imagine how strange that must have been. A beast could kill a human with a squeeze of its fingers. The only reason humanity could stand against them at all was because humans had weapons and technological advancement on their side.

Nothing else.

For the first time, Aria could actually understand the reasoning behind the Concordia Program. If humans and beasts were ever going to coexist without constantly fearing or trying to overpower each other, then someone had to make the first move. If only the government had been one hundred percent honest about what they were doing.

She couldn't help but snort at that last thought.

The beasts weren't stupid. They knew the human government wanted something from them, and disguising that intention beneath pretty speeches about unity probably wasn't helping. Perhaps if the humans had offered genuine friendship first instead of trying to force cooperation, the beasts might have eventually learned to trust them. And from friendship, who knew what could happen?

"Aria—?"

She startled, realizing she'd been lost in thought for longer than she intended.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I was asking what you're wearing for the party tonight."

"Oh, about that..." Aria scratched the back of her head. "I'm simply picking out a few good pieces from Brittney's wardrobe."

Aria expected to see at least a little judgment in Valerie and Variant's eyes, but the exact opposite happened.

"Thank the goddess." Variant pressed a hand to her chest in relief. "For a second there, I thought we were going to have another sweatpants dilemma. But Brittney's wardrobe? We can work with that."

And just like that, Aria was dumbfounded. Was her fashion sense really that horrible? She just liked being comfortable. What was wrong with it?

"And I, for one, am more than excited to get started!" Brittney announced in a singsong voice, already rising to her feet.

That was Aria's cue to get up as well. Everyone followed, far too excited by the prospect of dressing her up. Aria couldn't exactly blame them. There was something oddly therapeutic about forgetting all their problems for a while and fussing over clothes instead — she was just the unfortunate model.

Before they could even make it to Brittney's room, she had already rushed ahead and started pulling clothes from her wardrobe. By the time Aria and the others walked in, several outfits still on their hangers had been laid across the bed. Brittney wasn't done either. She dragged out a heavy suitcase from the bottom of the wardrobe and dropped it onto the other side of the mattress with a thud.

Aria's eyes drifted toward the two other suitcases still tucked inside the wardrobe, but Brittney closed the doors before she could dwell on them for too long. At this point, Aria wasn't sure whether Brittney had packed for Bestiaris Academy or permanently relocated her entire closet.

The girls immediately descended on the clothes, picking through them with far more enthusiasm than Aria thought the situation required.

Valerie held up a black halter top, only for Trisha to dismiss it with a shake of her head. Variant found another with thin straps and held it against Aria from a distance, tilting her head as she considered it, while Alek rummaged through the pile in search of something that could go with it.

Then Brittney finally pushed her way into the middle of them. "Actually, there's something I've had in mind for Aria."

That immediately caught everyone's attention. Brittney crouched beside the open suitcase and began digging through it, tossing aside one piece after another until she finally made a triumphant sound and pulled out a fitted black top with a structured, corset-like shape.

Valerie took it from her and held it up for a better look, examining the cut and structure before glancing toward Aria.

"Mmm," Variant hummed in approval. "This is exquisite."

"Yeah," Valerie agreed. "It'll define her waist, no doubt."

Aria stared at the top. Even she had to admit it was beautiful, but it was certainly not something she would have picked for herself, especially considering how much cleavage it would show. Then again, this was a party. If there was ever a time to crawl a little way out of her comfort zone, perhaps tonight was it.

"And then..." Brittney said, already rummaging through another pile. A moment later, she pulled something free and held it up proudly. "This is for the skirt."

Aria stared at the tiny piece of black fabric dangling from Brittney's fingers, and the first words out of her mouth were, "Hell, no."

"Hell, yes!" Trisha countered, taking the textured black mini skirt from Brittney and inspecting it herself. Paired with the structured top, it would look incredible, and judging by the approving looks passing between the others, Aria was horribly outnumbered.

"If tonight goes to hell—and knowing Bestiaris, it probably will—I am going to end up flashing half the academy while running," Aria protested.

"No, you won't," Trisha assured her. "That's why there are shorts underneath." She turned the skirt around, showing Aria the fitted shorts hidden beneath the outer layer. "See? You can run, jump, fight for your life or do whatever else Bestiaris decides to throw at us without giving anyone a free show."

Aria wanted to cry a little on the inside. She wasn't a skirt person to begin with, much less one that barely seemed to qualify as a skirt. She might as well walk outside in her bedroom shorts. These girls weren't simply trying to coax her out of her shell anymore. At this rate, they were going to smash the damn shell to pieces and make sure she could never crawl back inside.

"Come on, no wussing out now," Variant told her. "Just try it on already." She pushed the top into Aria's hands while Trisha tossed her the skirt, which Aria caught against her chest before it could fall.

Aria undressed in front of them, taking off one cloth after another. She pulled her tank top over her head first, freeing her breasts in the process. It felt a little strange changing under the attention of five other women, but when her eyes met Brittney's and the girl wriggled her brows at her in that insinuating way, Aria simply rolled her eyes. That weirdo.

Aria had no doubt the look had something to do with her breasts again. Her B-cups were perfectly normal compared to Alek's C-cups—which Brittney had affectionately dubbed bazookas—but the girl had made it her personal mission to appreciate every body type in

the room. Aria supposed it was body positivity, even if Brittney had the strangest possible way of spreading it.

She ignored her and pulled on the structured top instead, adjusting it until it sat properly against her body. The snug fit immediately drew in her waist while lifting her breasts higher than Aria was accustomed to seeing them, leaving just enough cleavage above the neckline to make her stare at herself for a second. Goodness. Brittney hadn't been joking when she'd said the top would work.

Even before Aria had finished pulling on the skirt, she could already hear the low murmurs of approval coming from around her. By the time she straightened and turned around, the room had gone suspiciously quiet as everyone took in the complete outfit.

"Sweet Mother," Variant muttered, giving her a slow once-over. "Alpha Maverick is going to be punching a lot of wandering eyes before the night is over."

Valerie shook her head. "We'll be lucky if he doesn't send her straight back here and lock himself inside with her instead."

Aria blushed hard beneath the sudden outburst of compliments.

"I knew this would work!" Brittney squealed, looking ridiculously delighted, like a mother whose child had just done her proud. "All we need now to complete the outfit is a pair of black leather boots."

"Oh, I have just the pair for her," Trisha said. "I'll be back." With that, she hurried out to retrieve them.

Alek studied Aria for another moment before a practical thought seemed to occur to her. "Since the party is outdoors, won't she get cold dressed like this?"

"You're right." Valerie rubbed her jaw thoughtfully as she looked Aria over again. Then her eyes brightened. "Actually, I think I have the perfect solution for that."

"You do?" Variant asked, clearly surprised.

Valerie turned to Variant, and for several seconds, neither of them said a word. Aria watched their eyes meet, some silent understanding passing between them that she couldn't decipher. Whatever it was, Variant's lips slowly curved into a knowing smile.

"Oh, I see..." she murmured, a strange sort of mischief entering her eyes.