Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 201: Can’t Wait For Long[1,077 words]

Aria’s entire body went still.

She braced herself instinctively for the bite, but the pain never came. Maverick remained there for another torturous second, his fang resting against her skin while his breathing grew heavier. Then he dragged himself away from her neck, lifting his head just enough to speak.

"I don’t know how much longer I can hold myself back, Aria." His voice sounded rough, the words hard on him. "And Feral..." He exhaled sharply. "Feral isn’t making it any easier."

Aria swallowed, her heart stuttering beneath her ribs. She knew exactly what he meant. The mating. The marking.

That instinct inside both Maverick and Feral demanding the bond far more permanent than the kisses they’d allowed themselves so far.

She simply didn’t know what she was supposed to say when part of her was frightened by the enormity of it while another part couldn’t stop wondering what it would feel like to surrender.

Maverick finally lifted his face completely and looked into her eyes. The gray had narrowed into predatory slits, but beneath all that hunger was restraint. He was struggling, Aria realized. Actually struggling, with her trapped between him and a tree, her neck exposed and his mate close enough to bite, and still he was waiting for her.

Guilt twisted painfully inside her.

"I’m sorry," Aria whispered, and she meant it.

Maverick’s brows drew together. "You have nothing to apologize for, Aria. I’ll wait for as long as I can."

They both knew what he meant. The mating fever. Once it came, he would have to give in. Until then, however, the decision remained hers, and that only made Aria feel worse knowing how much holding himself back was already costing him.

"But you look so damn good tonight." His eyes dropped briefly to her mouth before returning to hers. "And if I don’t get another taste of you, I think I’m going to lose my fucking mind."

Aria’s lips parted, but no words came. She could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears, could still feel the phantom pressure of his fang against her neck. So she did the only thing her suddenly useless voice would allow.

She nodded.

That was all the permission Maverick needed.

His mouth descended on hers in a ravenous kiss, stealing what little breath she’d managed to gather as his body pressed hers firmly against the rough bark of the tree.

Aria slid her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. Maverick groaned into her mouth at the invitation. His hand settled at her waist beneath the open fur coat, his palm warm even through the thin fabric of her top as he slowly followed the curve of her side.

His tongue brushed the seam of her lips, and Aria opened for him willingly. There was none of the frantic recklessness from before. Maverick had all the privacy he’d wanted now, and he intended to take his time with it. His tongue stroked against hers with maddening patience, retreating only to draw her after him before meeting her again, until Aria found herself rising onto the toes of her boots just to keep his mouth exactly where she wanted it.

Maverick seemed to like that. A rough sound vibrated through his chest as he pulled her firmly against him. Aria gasped into his mouth at the sudden contact, and he took shameless advantage of it, deepening the kiss until her fingers tightened around the back of his neck and she forgot entirely about the tree holding her upright. By the time he finally released her mouth, her lips were swollen and tingling.

He then kissed his way slowly along her jaw, his mouth settling against the same sensitive spot where she’d felt his fang moments ago, except this time there were no teeth. Just the slow press of his lips followed by the warm sweep of his tongue that sent a shiver racing down her spine.

"Maverick," Aria moaned his name, having no idea what she intended to say afterward.

He hummed against her skin, and that was worse.

Aria’s head tipped back against the tree before she could stop herself, giving him more room, and the answering growl against her throat told her Maverick noticed exactly what she’d done. Her eyes fluttered open to the crescent moon hanging between the branches overhead, and some distant, still-functioning part of her brain could only hope the Moon Goddess had better things to do tonight than watch this.

His mouth traveled lower, lingering at the base of her neck before returning to that sensitive spot again, deciding it belonged to him.

"Soon..." Maverick murmured against her skin, his voice so rough that the word seemed to scrape over her nerves. "I'm going to be balls deep inside you, and I'll fuck you so hard you'll cry tears of gratitude."

Aria's entire body reacted before her mind could.

Those words should have frightened her. Coming from anyone else, they probably would have sounded like a threat. But from Maverick, with his mouth still warm against her throat, they sent a hot pulse of desire straight through her.

God help her, she was turned on.

Maverick caught the change immediately. His nostrils flared as he breathed her in, and when he lifted his head, the desire already burning in his eyes had darkened into something so hungry that Aria's stomach tightened.

"Do you trust me?" Maverick breathed, pressing a kiss now to her chest.

That was probably the stupidest question he could have asked when they were already teetering at the edge, one reckless decision away from plunging straight over it.

Yet Aria answered on a trembling breath. "Yes."

His eyes almost seemed to glow at her response. Then, without looking away from her, Maverick slowly lowered himself.

His lips trailed downward in a torturously slow path, beginning at her cleavage before continuing lower. All the while, his eyes remained fixed on hers, watching every flicker of realization cross her face as he descended.

Aria's breathing grew shallower the farther he went, her fingers tightening helplessly at her sides as Maverick sank lower and lower in front of her.

Until he reached her skirt. And Aria stopped breathing.

Maverick's hands settled against her hips as he moved closer, his face now dangerously near the short hem. Then he inhaled deeply through his nose. Loudly.

Aria swallowed.

Dear Lord. She knew exactly what he was about to do.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 202: [Bonus -] A Little Lesson[1,057 words]

Aria braced herself, already certain this was about to be the most mind-blowing intimacy they'd shared yet. They were outside, for God's sake, hidden among the trees but nowhere near far enough that someone couldn't stumble upon them.

She had never considered herself the kind of woman who would find the possibility of getting caught exciting. Yet Maverick was introducing her to all sorts of things about herself tonight.

He didn't make the move Aria expected. Instead, Maverick lifted his head and began murmuring beneath his breath in a language she didn't understand.

"What are you—"

Her question was cut short by a sudden creak behind her.

Aria barely had time to look before the tree came alive. The bark shifted against her back as two slender vines emerged from either side of the trunk, curling around her wrists before she could react. With one swift tug, they lifted her arms above her head and wound securely around them, binding her against the tree.

"Maverick!" Aria exclaimed, instinctively pulling against them. The vines didn't budge. If anything, they tightened.

"Fae magic," he explained, looking far too pleased with himself. "I'm nowhere near perfect at it, but I did pick up a trick or two."

"A trick or two specifically for tying your mate to a tree in the middle of the woods?" Aria tried to sound scandalized, but the breathlessness in her voice ruined the effect entirely.

Maverick chuckled. "Can't help that I'm creative, Aria. How do you think I became a professor at my age?"

"Oh, yeah?" She lifted a brow despite the increasingly dangerous flutter in her stomach. "And how many other women have you tied up like this, Professor?"

The question had been meant as a tease. Unfortunately, Maverick's amusement disappeared. Aria realized how stupid it had been. If he couldn't stand women touching him, then of course there had been no one.

She had accidentally brushed against the part of his past he still refused to share with her. Guilt washed over her. Aria was already opening her mouth to apologize when Maverick spoke.

"No one, Aria." His voice was quiet now. "Only you. My mate, for as long as I live."

Just like that, Aria wasn't sure she was breathing anymore. Something in her chest cracked open at the simplicity of it, and she understood, with sudden, terrifying clarity, that she had fallen for this man completely. There was no walking this back now.

Maverick's mouth slowly curved, turning the tenderness between them dangerous once more.

"But now..." He rose to his feet, his body pressing against hers as his eyes traveled deliberately over the position he'd put her in. "I think it's time for a little lesson, dearest mate."

Somehow, she found the audacity to lift her chin and whisper, "Teach me, Mr. Professor."

Maverick's chest nearly burst with satisfaction. His mate was actually playing along.

"So here's how it goes," he said, his voice slipping effortlessly into the calm authority he used in class. "I'm going to teach you what happens when extreme cold meets heated skin."

Aria swallowed hard as her stomach tightened.

Maverick lifted one hand between them, and frost spread across his fingers before gathering in his palm, thickening into a small block of ice.

She stared at it, fascinated and nervous as hell.

Maverick lowered his hand. "Lesson one. Cold causes the blood vessels near the surface of the skin to constrict." He pressed the ice lightly against the inside of her knee.

Aria gasped.

"And that," he continued as if she hadn't made a sound, "is your body's first reaction. Shock."

The ice began traveling upward, and Aria sucked in another breath. The cold was almost painful at first, a sharp contrast against her already overheated skin. But as Maverick drew it along the inside of her thigh, the initial sting transformed into something else entirely.

Her fingers curled against the vines.

"Lesson two," Maverick continued in that insufferably calm voice of his. "Your nerves become considerably more sensitive to every change in temperature."

He traced the ice farther up her thigh, drawing a helpless mewl from her. As it climbed higher, Aria's legs instinctively pressed together.

"Ah." Maverick sounded intrigued. "And now we have an involuntary response."

"Maverick—" His name came out strangled as he circled the ice teasingly close to the apex of her thigh, never quite touching where she wanted him most.

"I'm teaching, my love," he said with infuriating innocence.

Fucking bastard. He was enjoying this. Unfortunately, Aria had asked for the lesson.

Instead of giving her what she wanted, Maverick changed course, trailing the ice over her hip and across the bare skin of her stomach. Aria whimpered, squirming against the vines as goosebumps followed in its wake.

"Patience," he murmured, amused by her frustration, as he finally brought the ice back down. He dragged it past her waistband, until the ice hovered directly over her clit through the fabric of her panties.

"Another lesson," Maverick continued, pressing the ice firmly against the sensitive bud.

Aria's whole body jolted violently, a broken cry tearing from her throat as the shock of cold hit her exactly where she'd been aching for him. Her hips rolled forward on instinct, grinding against the sensation, chasing it even as her thighs tried to clamp shut around his hand.

Maverick held the ice steady, circling it in slow, deliberate motions right over her clit. Aria's moans came faster now, unrestrained, her head falling back against the tree as she tugged hard against the vines, not to escape, but because her body needed somewhere to put the overwhelming sensation building low in her belly.

"Final lesson here," Maverick rasped, watching her fall apart with open fascination, grinding the rapidly melting ice harder against her, "is watching you decide whether you want to get away from this, or closer to it."

"Closer..." Aria cried out.

"I didn't quite hear you." Maverick was punishing her now.

Aria glared at him. "Fucking closer!"

A pleased rumble rolled through Maverick’s chest at how easily he’d broken through his mate’s shy defenses.

It only frustrated Aria more.

What the hell had ever made her think Maverick would be shy and innocent? The man had no experience, yet he handled her like he’d spent years studying her body instead of teaching classes.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 203: [Bonus -] Voyeur[1,002 words]

The remaining ice melted in Maverick’s palm, water trailing down his fingers as he hooked them into the waistband of her panties and dragged them down her legs in one smooth motion. Aria stepped out of them obediently, her breath shaky.

He knelt before her, his hands gliding up the backs of her thighs to push her skirt out of the way, holding her exactly where he wanted her.

For one torturous second, nothing happened. Aria felt his breath fan hot against her as he simply breathed her in, and the anticipation nearly undid her before he’d even touched her.

Then his mouth finally closed over her clit, and Aria’s entire body seized.

A sharp, broken cry tore out of her, her hips jerking forward as if she’d been struck by something electric, her knees buckling instantly. The vines caught her, supporting her weight, and Maverick hummed low in his throat at the taste of her, the deep, satisfied sound vibrating against her clit.

He started slow, dragging his tongue in long, flat strokes from bottom to top, pausing to circle her clit lazily before retreating again. Every pass pulled a fresh gasp from her throat, her fingers tugging uselessly against their restraints.

"Maverick," Aria breathed, his name catching somewhere between a plea and a warning.

He answered with a low groan, sinking his tongue lower, pressing it just inside her, testing, unhurried enough that she felt every inch of the slide. Aria’s thighs quivered around his head, and a broken moan slipped free before she could stop it.

"Fuck," Aria gasped, startling herself with how filthy and unfamiliar the word sounded coming from her own mouth. "Don’t stop, please, don’t you dare stop."

Maverick growled his approval against her, the rough vibration making her cry out again. He pulled back only to drag his tongue upward once more, circling her clit with renewed purpose, flicking it rapidly now, building a relentless rhythm that had her hips rolling helplessly against his mouth.

The vines around her wrists, sensing the frantic pull of her body, loosened just enough for one hand to slip free. Aria didn't hesitate. Her fingers dove straight into his hair, fisting tight and dragging him harder against her.

Maverick groaned at that, the sound muffled against her as he sucked her clit fully into his mouth, alternating firm pulls with quick flicks of his tongue that had Aria shaking.

"Oh God," she sobbed, her voice cracking. "Right there, Maverick, please, right there—"

Maverick didn't relent. If anything, her begging only spurred him on, his tongue working her with a precision that bordered on cruel, switching patterns the moment she grew used to one, keeping her teetering on some impossible edge.

Aria's thighs quivered around his head, her throat growing raw from the sounds escaping her, somewhere between sobs and moans she couldn't separate anymore.

"You taste so fucking good," Maverick rasped, barely pulling away long enough to speak before diving right back in, as if even that brief separation was too much.

That filthy admission did something to Aria she wasn't prepared for. Heat coiled tight and fast in her belly, turning her next moan strangled and desperate.

"I'm close," she gasped, her hips grinding shamelessly against his mouth now, chasing it. "I'm so close, don't stop—"

Maverick obeyed. He doubled down, sucking her clit into his mouth with firm pressure while his tongue flicked relentlessly against it, and Aria's entire body locked up.

"Maverick—" His name broke apart into a sob halfway through, her back arching hard against the tree as the coil inside her finally snapped.

Aria came with a raw, unrestrained scream as pleasure crashed through her in uncontrollable waves. Her fist tightened in his hair, pulling hard, though Maverick only groaned at the sting, the sound vibrating against her oversensitive flesh.

He didn't let up.

Even as her body shook through the aftershocks, Maverick kept his mouth on her, licking slowly, drawing out every last pulse of her release instead of letting her come down. Aria's legs buckled entirely, her moans turning breathless, somewhere between laughter and sobs from the overstimulation.

"Maverick, I just—" she gasped, fingers still tangled in his hair. "I can't, I just came—"

"I know," he murmured against her, voice wrecked, before his tongue dipped lower again, building her right back up. "Doesn't mean I'm done."

Aria's head fell back against the bark with a broken moan, her hips already rocking weakly into his mouth despite how sensitive she felt, caught between begging him to stop and pleading for more.

It was through that haze that she somehow managed to lift her head, and her heart jolted at the sight. There, half-shadowed beneath the trees, stood a figure she recognized instantly.

Silver hair. Silver eyes.

Caelis.

"Maverick—" She tried to warn him, but her voice fractured into a moan instead, and Maverick, utterly lost between her thighs, didn't hear her.

Aria was already too far gone to care properly. Caelis made no move to leave, standing perfectly still beneath the trees, watching silently.

Fine. If he wanted to stand there like some pervert and watch, that was his problem.

Aria held his gaze instead, lips parted and breath ragged, letting him see exactly what Maverick was doing to her, some reckless, delirious part of her refusing to look away first.

Then Maverick curled his tongue in a way that made her vision white out, and Aria screamed, her head snapping back against the tree as she shattered again, harder than before.

He continued through the shuddering aftershocks until her legs went completely weak beneath her, her body trembling from two back-to-back climaxes.

Finally, Maverick lifted his head, chin and half his face glistening with her release, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

"Interesting lesson, right?" He grinned up at her, breathless but smug.

Aria only sighed, letting her head fall back against the tree, utterly spent. Then she remembered Caelis.

But when she looked toward the trees again, he was already gone.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 204: If She Left Him[1,159 words]

"Did I hurt you?" Maverick asked once he'd released her from the vines, his hands moving over her arms as he checked the places they'd restrained her.

"No." Aria was still trying to catch her breath when his attention suddenly fixed on her wrist.

The skin had turned red from how hard she'd been tugging against the vines, and the satisfaction on Maverick's face disappeared.

Aria caught the guilt immediately.

"Not in any way I didn't enjoy," she assured him, trying to pull her hand away, but Maverick wouldn't let her.

Instead, he cradled her wrist between his hands and gently massaged it with his thumb. "I wish I had healing abilities like my sister Sage. She's practically a prodigy at it."

Aria lifted a brow. "So there's no Fae word for healing?"

He knew exactly what to say when he wanted vines to tie his mate to a tree, but healing the bruises afterward was beyond him.

Maverick caught the jab and grinned. "It doesn't work like that. Fae magic isn't abracadabra. You can't just say a word and make whatever you want happen."

"Convenient."

He snorted in amusement. "My earth magic is actually pretty weak. Water manipulation is where I'm strongest. That's where the ice comes from, and somehow I inherited that from my Fae grandmother's bloodline."

"Somehow?"

"It's complicated." His thumb continued rubbing gently over her wrist. "I could tell you which side it came from, but we'd be standing in these woods until morning trying to untangle my family history."

Aria considered that. Knowing what she already did about Maverick's family, she couldn't exactly argue.

"Fine. No healing spell."

"Unfortunately."

"But plenty of bondage vines."

Maverick's mouth twitched. "Like I said, sweetheart. I'm creative."

"So..." Aria's voice turned sultry. "Is there a creative way to solve this problem?"

Her hand drifted lower, intending to tease him, but the instant her palm settled over the hardness beneath his pants, Maverick recoiled so quickly that Aria froze.

The playfulness vanished from her face.

"Oh my God." She snatched her hand back. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I thought you'd like—" Her voice caught. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No, no. You didn't hurt me." Maverick shook his head, guilt replacing the alarm on his face. "You startled me, that's all."

Aria stared at him. She wanted to believe him, but Maverick could clearly see that she didn't.

"Aria, I..." He stopped, struggling with whatever he wanted to tell her.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Maverick swallowed. "It still catches me off guard sometimes. But I'm in control most of the time."

Aria's chest tightened.

"What catches you off guard, Marvy?" she asked gently.

Something in his face changed. Not enough to give her an answer, but enough for Aria to know she was finally getting close to whatever he had spent so long refusing to tell her.

She chose her next words carefully.

"Were you abused, Maverick?"

Maverick flinched.

That was all the answer Aria needed.

Suddenly, everything began to make sense. His aversion to a woman's touch. The fact that he had never been with one despite having no problem with other men touching him.

Even Dimitri’s refusal to answer her questions, insisting that whatever happened was Maverick’s to share.

She had suspected it before. Now she knew. And she wouldn’t force the rest out of him.

"You know what?" She quickly changed the subject. "I think we’ve been out here long enough. We should probably get back to the party."

Aria turned to leave, but she’d barely taken a step when Maverick caught her arm and pulled her back.

She gasped as she came against him.

For several seconds, neither of them moved. His arm remained around her while his eyes held hers, their faces close enough that Aria could feel the warmth of his breath against her lips. The desire from moments ago was still there, but a heavier tension had settled between them now, and despite how close they were, Aria knew Maverick hadn’t pulled her back to kiss her.

"Promise me..." he began.

Aria stilled.

Maverick drew her closer. "Promise me that if I tell you the truth..." He drew in a shaky breath, and for once, the man who always seemed to know exactly what to say couldn’t seem to find the words. "If I bare myself to you, you’ll still look at me the same way."

Her heart squeezed.

"Promise you won’t look at me and see someone dirty. Someone ruined." His grip on her arm trembled. "That you won’t decide I’m not worthy of your love... or worthy of being your mate."

Aria’s lips parted, but Maverick wasn’t finished. His next words were barely above a whisper.

"And don’t think of me as a murderer."

Aria went completely still. Of all the things she’d expected him to say, that wasn’t one of them. She nodded before she could find her voice.

Maverick shook his head immediately. "Say it, Aria. Please."

The plea nearly broke her heart.

"I promise." This time, her voice came without hesitation. "Whatever you tell me isn't going to change the man I see standing in front of me. You're still Maverick. You're still my mate. And nothing that happened to you before I came into your life could ever make you dirty or unworthy of being loved."

Maverick's face softened, but the fear didn't disappear completely. He wanted to believe her. Goddess, he wanted to.

But Aria was human. She didn't feel the bond with the same instinctive certainty he did, and they hadn't completed it either. Nothing bound her to him except her own choice. Which meant she could still choose to leave. And that terrified him more than telling her the truth.

So he kissed her.

Maverick cupped her face in both hands and lowered his mouth to hers with none of the hunger from before. There was no teasing this time, no Feral pushing beneath his skin, no desperate need to claim. He simply kissed her, slow and deep, memorizing the softness of her lips against his.

Aria leaned into him. Her hands settled against his chest before sliding around his neck, and that easy acceptance nearly broke him.

She didn't know yet.

Right now, she was still touching him without fear. Still calling him her mate. Still holding him as if there was nowhere else in the world she would rather be.

So he kissed her because this might be the last time Aria ever let him hold her this close.

And when her fingers slipped into his hair and she kissed him back with all the tenderness he didn't deserve, Maverick closed his eyes and held on to every second.

Her warmth. Her taste. The way she held him.

He committed it all to memory.

Because if Aria walked away from him after tonight, at least he would have one last kiss to keep forever.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 205: Maverick's Story - 1[975 words]

Maverick was scared shitless. Aria could sense it in his body language. Even when they sat at the foot of the tree, he wouldn't let her sit beside him. Instead, he had her settle in front of him with her back against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist like he couldn't bear to let her go.

From there, Aria couldn't see his face or read whatever was going through his head. All she had was the warmth of his body pressed against hers and his legs stretched along either side of her, cocooning her between them.

"Okay..." He sounded nervous. "I-I don't know where to begin."

Aria was already turning toward him. "Maverick, you don't have to—"

He stopped her before she could finish turning, keeping her back against his chest.

"I can do this." There was such determination in his voice that Aria's heart ached for him. He was pushing himself to do this for her when she'd already made it clear that he didn't have to.

She didn't try to turn around again. Maverick was quiet for a moment before he finally spoke.

"I'm sure you already know who my parents are..." He gave a small shrug behind her. "I mean, who doesn't know Violet Purple, the Goddess's daughter, and her multiple Alpha mates?"

A nervous laugh escaped him, but there wasn't much humor in it. Aria didn't say a word, letting him find his way through the story at his own pace.

"I had what many people would call a unique and exciting childhood. As the first Alpha Queen, my mother had a lot of responsibilities on her shoulders and a lot of reforms she wanted to make. My fathers did everything they could to make things easier for her, but there were some duties only the Queen could perform."

His arms shifted around Aria's waist, settling more comfortably as he continued.

"Thanks to my multiple fathers, I grew up surrounded by so many people and so much love that sometimes I didn't know what to do with all of it. But my mother was stubborn. She grew up with an absent father, and she was determined not to repeat that pattern by becoming an absent mother herself. So when my sisters and I were little, she took us with her whenever she could, even when she traveled for work."

"It was quite crazy, actually. I remember this one time..." Aria could hear the smile creeping into his voice as the memory came back to him. "She'd recently had my sister Cecily, and apparently Cecily decided she wasn't going to stop screaming for anyone.

Father Griffin tried everything, but she wouldn't calm down in his arms, so eventually he took her to my mother."

"Where was she?"

"In a meeting." Maverick paused, already sounding amused. "A very important meeting. The room was filled with Sub-Alphas, their Betas, elders, and other important figures in the werewolf community."

Aria was already beginning to see where this was going.

"Turns out my sister was hungry and wanted her milk directly from the source. So right there, in front of all those men, my mother brought out her boob—"

"Oh my God..." Aria slapped a hand over her mouth, failing miserably to stifle her laughter. "She did not."

"Oh, she did." Maverick was laughing now too, the sound vibrating through his chest against Aria's back. "She fed her daughter right in front of all those traumatized men. And then she had the audacity to look at them and say, 'Why are you all looking at me like I flashed you? If you lot can fuck your women and put a babe in them, then act normal when she feeds your pup.'"

"No..." Aria shook her head in disbelief. "Tell me she didn't."

By then she was laughing so hard that tears had gathered in the corners of her eyes. She wiped them away, imagining an entire room of powerful werewolves suddenly finding anywhere else to look while their Queen calmly breastfed her daughter in the middle of a meeting.

The heaviness that had clung to Maverick when he first began talking had gradually eased without Aria even noticing.

Maverick chuckled as he continued. "My mother is strong. I mean, if she can handle four grown Alphas under one roof, everyone else is pretty much a piece of cake."

Aria found herself smiling in admiration. She had never met Violet Purple, but everything she had heard about her made the woman seem almost larger than life.

"Yeah. She's really amazing."

Maverick leaned closer until his lips were near her ear. "Don't worry. You'll meet her soon."

Aria's smile faltered.

If Maverick had meant to reassure her, he'd achieved the exact opposite. Meeting his mother was terrifying enough. Meeting Violet Purple was something else entirely. She was the Alpha Queen, the Goddess's daughter, and one of the most powerful supernatural beings alive. Compared to someone like that, Aria was merely a human girl who had somehow ended up dating her son.

Aria was a hundred percent certain Violet was going to be disappointed.

So she only nodded with a small smile, grateful that Maverick couldn't see the sudden panic on her face.

He continued.

"My mother was a philanthropist too, and she made sure we accompanied her to some of her events. She knew what growing up surrounded by wealth, power, and privilege could do to children if no one kept them grounded. She didn't want us becoming spoiled simply because of the family we'd been born into. She wanted her kids to be humble and respectful. She wanted us to understand how fortunate we were and how quickly pride could bring someone down."

Aria felt the change before she fully registered it. The amusement disappeared from Maverick's voice. His body went rigid behind her, and the arms around her waist no longer felt relaxed.

When he spoke again, the warmth of the childhood memory was gone.

"And it was at one of those events that everything went wrong."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 206: Maverick's Story - 2[1,522 words]

"I can remember it all like it was yesterday..."

Aria swallowed, saying nothing. She could feel they had finally reached the part of the story Maverick had been dreading, and whatever came next was going to be difficult for him to say.

"The, uh... event..." Maverick cleared his throat. "It was for displaced and vulnerable half-breed kids. Most humans think there's something exciting about marrying a werewolf and having werewolf children, but sometimes reality doesn't turn out the way they imagined."

"Not every half-breed inherits a wolf. Some are born without one at all, while others inherit one so weak they might never be able to shift properly. And unfortunately, there are parents who don't take that well."

His fingers found the small strip of bare skin at her stomach, tracing idle circles there as if he needed something to occupy them.

"Most of the time, it's the fathers. Werewolves who can't stand the thought of their offspring being a runt because they consider it a disgrace to their bloodline. Sometimes, though it's rarer, the abuse comes from the human mother. Women who wanted the pride and status that came with having a werewolf child, only to end up with the exact opposite of what they expected."

Aria didn't say a word, but anger burned through her for those children. They hadn't asked to be born that way. They hadn't chosen whether a wolf would come to them or how powerful it would be if it did. How the hell could a parent look at their own child and punish them for something completely beyond their control?

"Werewolves usually come into their wolves at eighteen. Some come into them earlier at seventeen, and sixteen is even rarer, but there are almost always signs before then. The strength. The speed. Faster healing. Sharper senses. Little things that become more obvious as they get older."

Maverick paused. "With those kids, the signs are either barely there or missing completely. A few are sickly. Others are simply much weaker than they should be. Their families usually know long before the child is old enough to shift."

Aria's jaw clenched as Maverick said, "Some of them get thrown out. Others endure the abuse until they eventually run away on their own. Werewolves live by a strict hierarchy, and forcing parents like that to take their children back doesn't solve anything. You might as well send the kid straight back to their death."

There was no humor left in Maverick's voice now.

"So my mother stopped trying to reunite every family. She focused on giving the children somewhere safe to go instead. The younger ones could be placed with families who would love them for who they were rather than what they could do."

"And the older ones?"

"A lot of them don't want another family." Maverick's voice softened. "Some have spent so long being controlled or hurt by adults that the last thing they want is another person claiming to be their parent. Mother understood that too. So there are homes where they can stay while they finish school, and programs where they can learn a trade or whatever skills they need to support themselves. They help them find work when they're old enough, teach them how to manage money, and find them somewhere to live. Basically, everything they need to build a life that doesn't depend on the people who abandoned them."

"There are therapists too," Maverick added. "For the ones carrying wounds that don't disappear just because they're finally somewhere safe."

He sighed. "She just wanted to make the world a better place, you know. But I think sometimes she forgot she had enemies too. Not that I blame her, I mean, who would be stupid to go against my mother unless they were courting death. My fathers alone was willing to die for her. But she took advantage of that.

There was a sudden pause, and for over a minute, neither of them spoke. Had it not been for his finger still caressing her stomach, Aria might have thought he'd fallen asleep or something. Eventually, curiosity got the better of her, and she turned. Or tried to.

"There was an explosion..." Maverick finally said, and Aria immediately stopped trying to turn.

"I was with a bunch of the kids when it happened. My parents were the real targets. The culprit had given a gift to one of the children and told her to take it to my mother. Violet, ever trusting of a child, accepted it from her with a smile. It was my father Asher who heard the ticking inside, but by then it was too late. The blast happened almost immediately."

Aria felt Maverick's breathing deepen as he went further into the memory.

"It rocked the entire building. Good thing my mom could manipulate fire because she took the brunt of it. Otherwise, my fathers might have died." His next words came slower. "The child who delivered the gift wasn't as lucky."

Aria's stomach dropped.

"Pandemonium broke out. There were screams everywhere. People shouting. Smoke so thick I couldn't see where I was going. And their thoughts..." He paused. "Goddess, their thoughts were so loud they nearly drove me mad. Everyone was terrified, and I could hear all of it. All I wanted was to get to my family, but every time I tried to reach them, someone shoved me back or the crowd carried me farther away. Then I stumbled into someone..."

He hesitated.

"That's the last thing I remember. Everything went black."

Aria's heart began to race. She had already suspected where his story was headed, but hearing how it had begun made the dread crawling through her much worse. The finger tracing circles over her stomach had gone still. Maverick's hand remained there instead, his palm pressed flat against her skin as his breathing grew heavier behind her.

"When I woke up, I was somewhere I'd never seen before. There were no windows, just a door. But that wasn't even the strangest part."

Maverick drew in another breath. "There were pictures of my family everywhere. I mean everywhere, Aria. They covered almost every inch of the walls. That bitch had been following us. Photographing us. Collecting moments from our lives without any of us knowing."

Aria felt cold despite the warmth of him behind her.

"But most of them were of my father Asher. There were photos of him from his days at Lunaris Academy. Ones even I had never seen before. Some had hearts drawn around him or little love notes written across them." His voice hardened. "And then there were the ones of my mother. She'd painted her like the devil."

When Maverick fell silent again, Aria didn't move. She could barely breathe anymore, and she wasn't sure she could bear to hear the rest of this story.

"Her name was Elsie Lancaster."

White-hot anger tore through Aria. Now she had a name. One she could put to the piece of shit who had done this to him, and God help that woman if Aria ever found out what prison she was rotting in.

Maybe having his mate there with him gave Maverick the strength to keep going.

"While I was in captivity, she told me she'd gone to school with my parents. She said my mother had stolen everything from her, especially the love of her life, my father, Asher Nightshade."

Aria felt sick.

"She looked me in the eye and said, 'Violet thought she'd won, but that's where she's wrong. Aside from that miserable purple hair, you look just like your father. If I can't have Asher, then I'll have you instead.'"

Goosebumps broke out across Aria's arms as her heart began to break for the boy Maverick had been. No. God, no. She didn't want the story to go there. She already knew that it had, but knowing didn't make hearing it any easier.

"And then she..." Maverick stopped. "She..."

The words wouldn't come this time. Aria could feel his chest rising and falling against her back, each breath deeper than the last, but eventually, he forced them out.

"She made me do things to her body." His voice had gone frighteningly even. "And she did things to mine too."

Aria turned around so quickly that his arms fell away from her.

Her heart shattered.

Tears were running silently down Maverick's face. He wasn't sobbing. His voice hadn't even broken. He was simply sitting there with them slipping down his cheeks as though his body was grieving while his mind remained trapped somewhere far away.

"Maverick..."

Aria reached for him and cupped both hands over his ears, her own tears spilling as she shook her head.

"You don't have to tell me anymore. I understand, Maverick. Don't say it anymore. Please."

But Maverick didn't seem to hear her. Or perhaps he couldn't stop now that he'd finally started. His gaze remained fixed somewhere beyond her, no longer seeming to see the woods around them, and when he spoke again, his voice carried that same terrible calm.

"She said I would be hers forever..."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 207: Maverick's Story - 3[1,814 words]

"She said I would be hers forever..." he breathed. "At first, I tried to fight her off, but I was only thirteen. She beat me with this special whip made of silver. I had the marks all over my body..."

Maverick's hands moved instinctively, one brushing his neck before reaching toward his back. Then he paused.

"Oh, right..." He seemed to remember. "They're gone."

"Gone?" Aria frowned. She didn't know everything about werewolves, but even humans knew what silver could do to them.

"My mother took me to the Fae realm to have the scars erased. She said my fathers' scars were enough for one family and she wasn't going to let that bitch leave her mark on my body too."

A laugh escaped Maverick then, so completely out of place with everything he'd just told her that Aria stared at him.

But there was something almost morbidly funny about the memory to him. His mother had been furious about those scars, as if Elsie leaving even a single permanent mark on her son was a personal insult Violet Purple refused to tolerate.

Then whatever little humor had entered his voice disappeared again.

"While the scars aren't physically there anymore, I can still feel them sometimes. Like a phantom limb. Therapy helped, but it can't erase the memories. Some nights I sleep and I see her." Maverick swallowed. "I relive everything. I'm that small boy, helpless to stop her. Helpless while she does whatever she wants to me."

"But you're not helpless anymore, Maverick," Aria told him, her voice almost a whisper. "You're grown now. You're the all-powerful Alpha Prince Maverick Nightshade. Even if, by some impossible stroke of luck, that bitch ever made it out of prison, she would never lay a hand on you again."

Maverick's face changed suddenly.

"Who told you she made it to prison?"

Aria paused. A small furrow appeared between her brows.

"If she didn't make it to prison, then what happened to—" The question died on her lips.

She stared at him as the answer came to her before Maverick ever had to say it. Her mouth opened, but for once, Aria had absolutely no idea how to put what she was thinking into words.

Maverick didn't leave her wondering for long.

"I killed her."

There was such cold finality in the words that Aria froze. She said nothing. Maverick didn't either.

For several seconds, they simply stared at each other, his expression unreadable as though he were waiting for something from her.

Revulsion, perhaps.

Fear.

Whatever it was, when Aria gave him neither, Maverick finally spoke.

"I think this is the part where you're supposed to look at me like I'm some kind of monster. Or maybe get disgusted."

Aria raised her chin and looked him dead in the eye. "And why would I do that?"

"Perhaps because I was the anomaly whose wolf manifested under extreme trauma at thirteen." Maverick's words were disturbingly matter-of-fact. "And the first thing I did with him was rip a grown woman apart so brutally there wasn't a single part of her body left intact. The police who arrived after my parents found me couldn't even keep their breakfast down."

Aria studied him. The detached, methodical way he described it wasn't accidental. Maverick was trying to scare her. He was laying the ugliest parts of himself at her feet and waiting to see if this would finally be enough to make her run.

Aria understood why.

He had carried what Elsie did to him for years. The nightmares. The phantom scars. The instinctive recoil whenever a woman touched him. And along the way, Maverick had convinced himself that surviving it—and what he'd done to escape it—had made him unworthy of being loved.

A dull ache settled in Aria's chest.

It made her feel stupid for every assumption she'd once made about him. Back in her province, so many times Maverick had appeared on her television and all she'd noticed was the privileged son of Violet Purple, surrounded by wealth, power, famous parents and everything a person could possibly want. She'd thought his life had probably been easy because she'd only known what the cameras showed her.

She had been so fucking wrong.

Aria wasn't even sure she could have walked out of that experience with her mind intact, yet Maverick had grown into the man sitting before her. A professor. An Alpha. A man who loved her dearly.

And he genuinely believed this was the part of his story that would make her stop loving him? Was he kidding her?

Maverick did not see her next move coming. Instead of answering, Aria moved, straddling him and locking her legs around him until she was comfortable. Then, with one arm around his neck, she ran her other hand through his hair almost affectionately.

"Good work, Maverick," Aria said, much to his shock. "Give Feral a big thank-you for me as well."

Maverick stared at her, dumbfounded. This was not the reaction he had expected.

"I have a sister named Davina..." Aria said, immediately drawing his attention. "And for her, I'd do anything. If she'd been in your place..."

She didn't finish.

And for the first time, Maverick saw a ruthlessness in his mate's eyes that he hadn't known she was capable of.

Aria's voice was deadly when she said, "I'm sorry to say this, but you gave that bitch Elsie a quick death."

Maverick blinked. His mate might as well have been possessed.

"If she were still alive, I'd probably hunt her down myself. I once read that having your fingernails ripped off is one of the most excruciating kinds of pain." Her fingers continued moving gently through Maverick's hair, completely at odds with the words leaving her mouth.

"I'd make sure she understood exactly what helpless felt like. And when she screamed, I'd record it for you so whenever she showed up in your nightmares again, you could play it and remind yourself that she can't hurt you anymore."

She added with a wink, "For therapy, obviously."

Fuck his life. No one had ever said anything remotely like that to him.

Feral was practically howling inside his head, absolutely delighted by this vicious side of their mate, and Maverick wasn't doing much better. Somehow, while Aria sat in his lap describing what she would have done to the woman who had abused him, his cock had gotten hard.

It wasn't the violence. It was her.

His mate who could barely hurt a fly was calmly telling him she would hunt someone down for what they'd done to him. There wasn't an ounce of fear, disgust, or pity in her eyes. Just fury on his behalf and the absolute certainty that Elsie's death had been far more merciful than Aria believed she deserved.

Goddess help him, that was apparently a fucking turn-on. And unfortunately for him, she wasn't done.

"Since she loved hurting children so much, I'd have something special made just for her. Something covered in barbs sharp enough to tear her every time it moved. And once she'd

suffered enough from that, I'd have her whipped with silver too. Let her find out what it feels like to have that shit tearing through her skin over and over again."

A mirthless laugh slipped from Aria. "God, there are so many ideas dancing through my head right now."

Any average person probably would have been running for the hills by now. Maverick sat there staring at her with nothing but adoration in his eyes.

"I'd keep her alive through all of it," Aria continued, completely serious now. "Every time her body tried to give out, I'd make sure she survived long enough for the next one. And when there was finally nothing left I wanted to do to her..."

Her eyes hardened. "I'd put her in acid and watch every last trace of her disappear. Flesh. Bones. Everything. Because after what she did to you, I wouldn't want a single piece of that bitch left to contaminate the earth."

Silence descended between them. Then Aria tilted her head.

"And now that you've seen how wicked I can be, I think this is the part where you're supposed to look at me like I'm some kind of monster." Her brow lifted. "Or maybe get disgusted."

Maverick recognized his own words immediately. Slowly, something dark and heated entered his gaze. His arm curved around her waist, drawing her closer as his voice dropped to a husky murmur.

"Perhaps we fit each other after all."

"Is that so?"

Aria arched a brow before gripping his jaw and holding his face firmly between her fingers.

"Then how dare you think you belong to that woman?"

Maverick went completely still.

The way Aria held his face, the possessiveness burning in those blue eyes and the fact that she was still straddling him after hearing the worst thing he'd ever done, made every instinct inside him surrender willingly.

He had wronged his mate.

"I'm sorry, my love," Maverick said with all the humility he could manage.

Aria’s eyes narrowed.

"You belong to me, Maverick."

A shiver of pleasure went through him at the words.

"I belong to you, Aria."

"These lips..." Aria leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his mouth.

Maverick didn’t move. He let her take it.

"This body..." Her lips left his and traveled along his jaw before finding his neck. "All of you..."

The words warmed his skin. Aria drew back just enough to meet his eyes again, her hand still holding his jaw.

"Mine. Do you understand?"

Maverick’s gaze never left hers.

"Yes, my Queen."

Aria stilled.

"I’m yours," he continued. "Body, soul and mind. Not Elsie’s. Never Elsie’s." There was absolute certainty behind every word. "Yours, Aria. Only yours."

For a moment, Aria could only stare at him.

She had meant to reassure him. To make him understand that nothing he’d confessed tonight could make her afraid of him. But Maverick had turned it around on her, offering himself with such complete devotion that her heart didn’t seem to know what to do with it.

His eyes dropped briefly to her mouth before returning to hers.

"So..." The faintest hint of his usual Maverick returned. "Can I kiss you now?"

Aria’s lips twitched.

"Yes, you—"

She never got to finish. Maverick’s mouth came down on hers.

The kiss was hard, immediate, and filled with everything he'd been holding back since he'd begun telling her the truth. Aria wrapped her arms around his neck as he pulled her against him.

There was no fear sitting in the back of his mind waiting for Aria to pull away. She knew the ugliest parts now, and she was still here. Still in his arms. Still kissing him. Still his mate. The party could continue without them.

Maverick had everything he needed right here.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 208: Get Information About Aria[1,213 words]

Something had changed.

Caelis could feel it deep in his bones. There was a piece on the board he hadn't accounted for, something that had shifted without his knowledge, and the uncertainty was beginning to drive him insane.

He had spent days preparing for tonight. Every detail had been considered, every possible outcome weighed. He wasn't about to allow the unexpected to disrupt any of it now. Yet his mind kept returning to what he'd seen in the woods.

The human and the Alpha Prince. When the hell had they become that close?

If anything, he had expected it to be Aria and Rhydian. That would have made far more sense and, quite frankly, would have made his plans much more worthwhile.

Unless this was some sort of game the human was playing. Seduce the dragon and the wolf?

Caelis frowned. But how?

Rhydian was a fool where a beautiful female was concerned, that much was guaranteed. Maverick Nightshade was another matter entirely. Since the Alpha Prince arrived at Bestiaris, Caelis had never seen him willingly entertain a woman's advances. More importantly, he'd never heard so much as a whisper of Maverick taking one to bed. Not one rumor. Not one drunken encounter. Nothing.

Yet he had walked into those woods and found the same man on his knees between Aria Aspen's thighs.

That wasn’t a minor discrepancy.

Maverick was averse to women. Simple as that. Caelis didn’t know what had happened to him, nor had he ever cared enough to pry, but he recognized trauma when he saw it. There were certain reactions the body learned that even the most disciplined person couldn’t completely hide. Whatever had happened to Maverick was his business, and Caelis had never intended to make it his own.

Until Aria Aspen somehow became the exception.

Had it all been an act?

Perhaps Maverick’s reputation was nothing more than an elaborate ruse concealing whatever true purpose had brought him to Bestiaris.

No. Caelis dismissed the thought almost immediately.

Maverick wasn’t cunning enough for that kind of deception. The man was intelligent, certainly, but he was painfully straightforward. If Maverick wanted to destroy somebody, he would probably have the courtesy to inform the person beforehand.

Which left the human. Aria Aspen.

The image returned before Caelis could stop it. Her before the Alpha Prince. Her cheeks flushed, blue eyes hazy with pleasure. The sounds she’d been making before she’d finally noticed him standing beneath the trees.

And then she’d looked directly at him.

That was the part Caelis couldn’t seem to shake. Most humans would have panicked, covered themselves, or even looked away in humiliation. Aria had done none of those things.

Instead she had stared straight back at him with those lust-heavy eyes while Maverick continued what he was doing, like she had decided that if he wanted to stand there and watch, then he could damn well watch.

She hadn’t given him embarrassment. She’d given him defiance. And for reasons Caelis didn’t particularly care to examine, it had felt very much like a challenge.

His jaw hardened.

What exactly was Aria Aspen doing to these men? First Rhydian. Now Maverick.

There was something here he didn’t understand, and he hated nothing more than an unanswered question standing anywhere near one of his plans.

He needed Venus. Now.

Caelis scanned the crowd of students, searching for his First Fang.

"There you are..."

A feminine voice purred beside him just as an arm slipped through his. Every hair along Caelis's arm stood on end.

Karen Donovan.

"Where have you been, Caelis?" she demanded like he owed her an explanation.

His gaze dropped slowly to the arm she had looped through his. He didn't like that. More specifically, he didn't like the possessiveness in her tone.

Their arrangement had been very clear. Karen was allowed to hang on his arm tonight because it served both their purposes. That privilege did not grant her any claim over him.

He belonged to no one. And he certainly would never belong to Karen Donovan.

"You'll find I'm certainly not in the mood for one of your games, Karen Donovan. Don't make me take off these glasses. My gaze won't be friendly."

Caelis said it so matter-of-factly that the false smile Karen had been wearing for the benefit of anyone watching disappeared instantly.

She carefully slipped her hand from his arm, but not before speaking loudly enough for those nearby to hear.

"Men are all the same. Fine. Go have fun with your boys."

She turned to leave, only to lean close enough to whisper, "Fuck you."

Then she whirled around and sauntered away.

Caelis didn't give her a second glance. He had far more pressing matters on his mind.

His forked tongue flicked briefly between his lips, tasting the air. Hundreds of scents surrounded him—smoke from the braziers, alcohol, sweat, perfume, humans and beasts packed together—but it took him only a moment to isolate the familiar scent he was searching for.

Venus.

Caelis followed it through the crowd and found his First Fang standing with several members of Ophidian. There was a drink in his hand, and to anyone passing by, he appeared to be doing nothing more than enjoying a conversation with his Housemates.

But Caelis noticed something else.

From where Venus had positioned himself, he had a clear view of the Therion humans.

Or, more precisely, the human girl he had taken to bed.

A small furrow appeared between Caelis's brows.

No. Venus was probably keeping an eye on her because of the mission. Nothing more.

Sensing his Prince nearby, Venus turned. Their eyes met across the crowd, and Caelis gave a slight tilt of his head, gesturing for him to follow.

He didn't wait to see whether Venus obeyed.

Caelis made his way out of the Outer Ring and into the surrounding woods, continuing until the music had dulled behind them and he was certain no one was close enough to overhear. Venus followed without question.

Apparently, his agitation wasn't as well concealed as Caelis had thought.

"What's the problem, Your Highness?" Venus asked.

Caelis went straight to the point.

"You saw Maverick with the human girl, didn't you?"

"Everyone saw Professor Maverick kiss Aria Aspen, Your Highness." Venus paused. "However, it changes nothing about tonight's plan."

"No, it doesn't." Caelis turned to face him. "But I would like to know whether I'll be dealing with the wrath of a dragon, a wolf, or both when this is over."

Venus frowned. "You think Aria and Maverick are together? It could have been a one-time thing."

"With Rhydian, perhaps." Caelis's expression hardened. "But Maverick is a wolf, and wolves don't behave like that without reason. They're territorial bastards. Even I know better than to dismiss one once he's taken an interest in something."

Venus considered that. "So what would you have me do?"

"Find your secret human lover."

Venus went still.

Caelis noticed.

Of course he did.

"Get whatever information you can from her about Aria Aspen and Maverick Nightshade before the fight begins." Caelis held his gaze. "I don't care how you manage it. I want to know what I'm walking into tonight."

For a brief moment, Venus said nothing. Then he inclined his head.

"As you wish, Your Highness."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 209: The Serpent She Had Been Looking For[1,120 words]

After that spectacular performance and insanely hot kiss courtesy of Aria and Maverick, it was safe to say the rest of them had become the unofficial source of answers to questions every beast suddenly wanted answered.

Unfortunately for everyone else, those answers weren't theirs to give.

Everywhere they turned, someone was staring at them as if being Aria's roommates meant they should explain what the hell was going on between the human and their Alpha Prince.

However, while most of the reactions ranged from shock to outright disbelief, there were also the furious ones, even within House Therion.

Take the tigress Felicity, for example.

"Bitch won't stop staring at us," Trisha commented when her eyes connected with the tigress's yet again.

"Or talking either," Brittney said.

It was obvious Felicity was trying to provoke them into reacting. So far, they'd heard her call Aria a rather colorful collection of names, including *human slut* and *ghetto whore*. And as if those weren't enough, she'd spent the last several minutes loudly insisting to anyone willing to listen that Aria had worn the fur deliberately to seduce their Alpha.

Brittney's mouth twitched. If only Felicity knew.

"Don't bother with the tigress," Valerie told Trisha and Brittney. "Her pride is bruised, and with Maverick's protection over all of you, there's nothing she can actually do about it. Right now, she's just trying to provoke you into reacting."

"Unfortunately for her, that's where she's failed woefully." Brittney scoffed. "If that bitch thinks she has a mouth on her, she'd better not provoke me. I'll insult her so badly she'll wish she'd crawled back into her mother's womb."

Valerie lifted a brow, clearly unconvinced that Brittney wasn't bluffing.

"She's not kidding," Trisha assured her. "If name-calling were a sport, Brittney would win the world championship. I'd probably settle for state champion."

She considered it for a moment. "I think it runs in the family."

"In that case..." Variant cut in. "You both might want to watch that mouth around your classmates when lessons begin on Monday. We beasts have notoriously short tempers."

Brittney grinned. "Noted."

Variant stared at her. "You don't look like someone who intends to take that advice."

"Oh, absolutely not."

Variant and Valerie sighed. They certainly had their work cut out for them.

Then a burst of laughter from nearby caught their attention.

It came from Dimitri and Alek, who were seated a short distance away. They had purposely given them some space tonight, allowing the new mates to explore their bond without four dateless women hovering around them like unwanted third wheels.

Whatever Dimitri had just said had Alek laughing so hard that she leaned into him. Dimitri watched her with obvious amusement, but then his gaze dropped to her mouth, and just like that, the laughter between them faded into something else.

Brittney immediately noticed.

"And here we go..." she said, already anticipating what was coming as she twirled the drink in her glass. "In three... two... one..."

Right on cue, Dimitri pulled Alek into a kiss.

And not a small one either.

Within seconds, the two were practically eating each other's faces, completely oblivious to everyone around them. Much like Aria and Maverick earlier, however, their little display did not go unnoticed.

"Unbelievable..."

"I cannot believe this."

"What the hell is going on tonight?"

Shock rippled through the surrounding beasts as more heads turned toward the couple.

"First the Alpha, now the Beta," one of the Therion males said. "Is there something about these humans the rest of us haven't been told?" His mouth curved into a grin. "Perhaps I should taste one and find out."

His attention shifted toward Brittney and Trisha. He barely had time to take a step in their direction when Valerie and Variant hissed.

The sound that came from both females at once was vicious enough to wipe the grin straight off his face. Valerie bared her teeth while Variant moved closer to the humans, and despite neither female ranking particularly high on the beast power scale, the warning was unmistakable.

Try it.

The male apparently decided neither woman was worth finding out what would happen next. He raised his hands and backed away.

Brittney watched him go.

"And here I was thinking squirrels and chipmunks were supposed to be cute."

"We are cute," Valerie replied sweetly.

Variant finished in a stern voice. "Until we're not."

"Cool." Trisha was impressed.

Dimitri and Alek, meanwhile, were still kissing, and from the way things were going, neither seemed particularly concerned about oxygen deprivation.

Valerie’s amusement faded as she glanced around them.

"This isn’t going to end here."

Brittney noticed the direction of her stare and followed it. Not everyone watching Dimitri and Alek looked shocked or curious. Several beasts, especially House Ophidian and Aetheris were openly scowling now, their displeasure becoming harder to miss.

"They know how easily something like this can start to look like a pattern," Valerie continued. "First Maverick publicly kisses a human. Now his Beta is doing the same thing with another one. Humans and beasts getting this close to each other..." She shook her head. "There are beasts who aren’t going to like where they think this is heading."

"Dimitri will protect Alek," Trisha said, finally understanding her concern.

"And who will protect you?"

Variant’s question was directed at Trisha, but her eyes moved briefly to Brittney as well.

Neither girl answered immediately.

Alek had Dimitri. Aria had Maverick. Whether they needed protection or not, two of their friends now had some of the most powerful beasts in Therion standing between them and anyone who might wish them harm.

Brittney and Trisha had no one.

"We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it," Brittney answered at last.

Then, deciding she’d had enough of the sudden seriousness, she reached for Variant’s hand.

"Besides, isn’t this supposed to be a party? What’s with the depressing mood?" She tugged her toward the crowd. "Come on. Let’s dance."

Variant barely had time to protest before Brittney dragged her away.

Trisha and Valerie exchanged a look and shrugged before following after them.

On the dance floor, Brittney couldn’t care less about the beasts casting dirty looks her way as though she had no right to be there. She ignored every last one of them and danced with the girls instead, laughing and moving with the music until, for a little while, she almost forgot they were trapped in an academy that seemed determined to kill them.

Then, somewhere in the middle of the dancing, she saw him.

An all-too-familiar face in the crowd. One belonging to a certain serpent who had once snuck into her room.

Venus—God help that surname—Crotalus.The serpent she'd been looking for all night.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 210: Just One Dance[1,099 words]

Brittney's dance moves faltered at the sight of her serpent boy.

Venus looked quite dashing, as always, in a suspiciously fitted sage-green turtleneck beneath a charcoal-grey jacket, paired with black joggers. There really should have been a rule against serpents looking that good. It felt like false advertising for a species everyone kept warning her about.

His eyes found hers across the crowd. Venus mouthed something to her, but between the music and the bodies moving between them, Brittney couldn't make out most of it. She only caught one word.

Come.

"What are you looking at?"

Trisha turned to see what—or rather, who—had Brittney so fixated. Unfortunately, by then Venus was partially obscured by the crowd, and all Trisha saw were two beast couples kissing and grinding shamelessly against each other on the dance floor.

"Seriously?" She smacked Brittney's arm and gave her a reprimanding look. "Can you stop that? Quit staring at people making out like some creep."

Brittney had never felt so wrongly accused in her life.

She was not staring at them. Unfortunately, defending herself would mean explaining exactly who she had been staring at, and when Brittney glanced past Trisha again, Venus had already disappeared into the crowd like the creeping serpent he was.

So she covered with a smile instead.

"It's public. I can't help where my eyes go."

She went right back to dancing, doing her best to appear casual enough not to arouse Trisha's suspicion.

Somewhere along the way, Valerie and Variant had found a couple of males to dance with, and their attention was no longer entirely focused on the humans.

Perfect.

"You know what?" Brittney said after another minute. "I think I need some air."

"What?" Trisha stared at her.

"I just want to look around, Trisha. Calm your tits."

"Then I'm coming with you," Trisha insisted. "You heard what Variant and Valerie said. We can't separate. We need to stay somewhere they can see us. This place is dangerous."

"Oh, come on." Brittney deliberately waved off her concern. "It's a party, and I'm going to have fun without being babysat. You should too."

"Of course I know it's a party, but—"

"Then have fun."

At the same time she spoke, Brittney reached blindly for the nearest male and grabbed him without bothering to check who he was or even which House he belonged to.

"Keep my friend company."

That was all the warning either of them received before Brittney shoved him toward Trisha. They stumbled into each other, Trisha catching herself against his chest while the stranger steadied her by the arms.

"Excuse me!" Trisha snapped, immediately sidestepping her newly assigned date to go after Brittney.

Except Brittney was already gone.

"Ugh, that little bitch—" She could strangle her.

"Excuse me?"

The male voice came from behind her.

"What?!" Trisha snapped as she turned, only to stop short.

She hadn't bothered looking at the man when Brittney practically threw him into her arms. Now that she did, she found herself momentarily speechless.

His face was painted, obscuring enough of his features that she couldn’t decide exactly what he looked like beneath it, but there was no hiding those striking amber eyes. Red curls fell loosely over his forehead, and unlike most of the males around them, he was wearing a sweatshirt. It did little to conceal the definition of the body underneath, but it made him stand out among a crowd where apparently half the male population had collectively decided shirts were unnecessary.

Trisha had seen enough bare chests tonight to last her a lifetime. Everywhere she looked, some beast was flexing his pecs while equally shameless females ogled him. At this point, she was beginning to wonder whether she’d accidentally walked into a mating party.

The stranger, however, felt oddly out of place. And as much as the more adventurous part of her was suddenly tempted to come out and play, safety came first.

Trisha narrowed her eyes. "Who are you?"

"Luther."

The answer came without hesitation.

There was something strangely polished about him. Trisha couldn’t put her finger on what exactly gave her that impression, and perhaps she was reading too much into a man she’d known for all of thirty seconds.

"What House are you from?" she asked.

Luther’s amber eyes gleamed with amusement.

"You haven’t even offered me your name yet, pretty human."

"Your House?" Trisha insisted.

Even she was mildly surprised by her own audacity. More surprising was the fact that a beast was actually allowing a human he’d just met to interrogate him instead of telling her to mind her business.

Which only made her more curious. If she could figure out which House he belonged to, perhaps she’d have somewhere to start with him.

Luther studied her for a moment before answering.

"I’m an outsider."

"Excuse me?" Trisha wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly.

"I don’t belong here." A slight pause. "Yet."

That explained it.

"You’re not a student here."

He shook his head.

Trisha regarded him for another second before it clicked. "So, in other words... you’re a party crasher?"

Luther narrowed his eyes slightly. "And what are you going to do about it? Expose me?"

"That depends on your intentions. Did you sneak in here to cause mayhem, or did you just want to have a good time without an invitation?"

"I came to have fun and forget how messed up this world is for a little while."

There was something about the way he said it that made Trisha believe him.

"In that case, your secret is safe with me."

They both laughed.

"So," Luther said, "do I finally get to know your name, pretty human?"

"Trisha." She hesitated before giving him the rest. "Trisha Thorne."

"That’s quite a remarkable name." His gaze lingered on her. "So, Trisha Thorne, would you honor me with a dance?"

Trisha stared at him before a disbelieving laugh escaped her. "That’s ridiculous."

"What’s ridiculous, Trisha?"

"I need to go after that knuckleheaded Brittney, not dance with some beast shifter I don’t know."

"But Brittney specifically told me to keep you company." Luther’s lips curved slightly. "I’m only doing my job. Can you blame me?"

Trisha’s mouth opened, then closed again.

The audacity.

She glanced toward the crowd, wondering what the fuck was going through Brittney’s head right now. Then again, Brittney was the one who had grabbed a complete stranger and shoved him at her before disappearing. Whatever happened next was entirely on her.

"Fine," Trisha reluctantly agreed. "Just one dance. Nothing else."

Luther’s lips curved to the side.

"Anything you say, Trisha Thorne."