

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 21: House Ophidian

The first day had taught them an important lesson. Death did not wait for orientation.

~ Rebel Beast

Caelis Cobryn watched the last of the humans being herded back into the bus before finally turning away from his hiding place. Nothing more to see. The show was over.

The goody-two-shoes Maverick and his people were trying so hard to restore some semblance of order.

Except chaos, pain, and fear were exactly what they should have expected when preys wandered into a predator's territory.

Caelis would have extended a hand to him out of pity if he hadn't been the one responsible for the whole commotion in the first place. He was certain Maverick had already figured that out too and probably wouldn't be in the mood to accept his hand either.

The professor had always been strange with his attachment to humans. Pretty much every wolf shifter Caelis had met since arriving in this region was.

Perhaps because he was a snake and cold-blooded, Caelis simply couldn't understand it. What was the appeal of protecting creatures so fragile and easy to kill?

Sure, they were good at certain things, building cities, advancing technology, and creating civilizations. But in the end, strength ruled, and humans sat firmly at the bottom of the hierarchy. Beasts should be masters over them.

Unfortunately, creatures like Maverick Nightshade and his annoying pack made that dream far more difficult to achieve.

But for the first time since the attack, Caelis Cobryn found himself thinking about a brown-haired human.

Aria Aspen.

Something was off about her.

Sure, it sounded ridiculous, but he had seen her stop that bull. The creature had been furious and should have trampled her without hesitation. Instead, it stopped. Only for a split second, but it had happened.

Caelis knew what he saw.

Perhaps the humans had brought a hidden weapon this time. Perhaps the second Concordia Selection wasn't a complete waste of time after all. Had they underestimated the threat simply because she looked human?

Speaking of "they," did Rhydian know? Was that why he wanted the girl last?

That fucking bastard.

His hands balled into fists. He should have known better than to trust him.

"That was a brilliant one, My Prince. That move is going down in the records." Venus' voice cut through his thoughts.

The python shifter practically vibrated with excitement as he walked beside him.

Venus was more than an assistant. He was Caelis Cobryn's First Fang, a position granted only to the most trusted members of the Serpent Court.

Without waiting for Caelis to speak, he continued. "I honestly thought the herd would scatter before reaching the academy. It went exactly as planned in the end." He smirked.

The plan itself had not been particularly difficult. All it had taken was a little patience and timing.

Caelis had known for months that a herd grazed along the hillside behind the academy every afternoon.

All he had done was time the humans' arrival, locate the largest bull, and make it angry. By making it angry, Caelis had shifted into his serpent form and injected the creature with just enough venom to agitate its nervous system but not enough to kill it.

The effect had been immediate. The animal became irritable and aggressive. Every movement from the surrounding herd became a challenge. By the time the creature attacked one of its own, the rest of the herd had already begun responding to its agitation.

As confusion swept through the herd, the other members of House Ophidian chosen for the task emerged from the trees and guided the animals as planned. And like flowing water, the terrified herd rushed toward the path of least resistance. Straight toward Bestiaris Academy.

The rest was history.

Venus continued talking and only realized at that moment that the prince had not replied to any of his comments.

"My Prince?"

There was no answer.

Venus glanced sideways. Caelis was walking beside him, but his thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

"My Prince?"

This time Caelis blinked and looked at him.

"What?"

Venus immediately knew something was wrong. The basilisk prince was many things, cold and quiet, but distracted was not one of them.

"Is there a problem, my prince?" Venus asked cautiously.

Caelis was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I want you to look into someone."

Venus immediately perked up.

"Who?"

"Aria Aspen."

For a moment, Venus simply stared at him.

"The human?"

Caelis nodded.

Venus' eyes suddenly widened as if a revelation had struck him.

"Oh."

Caelis already disliked that look.

"Oh?" he repeated.

Venus leaned closer and lowered his voice.

"Do you want the human for a special dinner?"

Caelis stopped walking. Unfortunately, Venus mistook his silence for encouragement.

"We could lure her out tonight. Although it might be difficult today after what happened. Maverick will definitely be cautious after the stunt we pulled, and we don't want to accidentally run into the wolf prince. Still, if you have any special requests, we could prepare the girl exactly how you like—"

Venus never got the chance to finish. One second he was speaking and the next, his feet left the ground. Caelis had grabbed him by the collar and dragged him forward until their faces were inches apart.

Venus froze. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead when he saw the prince's eyes glow faintly.

Oh no. Not the eyes. Anything but the eyes.

Venus had seen what happened when a basilisk became annoyed. Most victims ended up as a very expensive lawn decorations.

"My Prince..." he squeaked.

The glow dimmed. Instead, a threatening hiss escaped Caelis' lips.

"You will not touch Aria Aspen."

Venus swallowed. Hard.

"All I asked," Caelis said through clenched teeth, "was for information."

Realization immediately dawned on the python's face.

"Oh. So that was what you meant. I thought...."

He didn't get to finish thanks to the glare from the prince.

Caelis finally released him.

The python shifter immediately stumbled backward and began straightening his clothes.

"That makes much more sense." Venus cleared his throat. "There is one small problem, though."

Caelis immediately felt a headache forming.

"What?"

Venus rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not really good with the whole computer thing."

Caelis stared at him speechless. Three years and he still did not know how to use a computer.

Venus smiled nervously. "The others usually handle that."

Caelis stared harder.

"Then find someone who can. I need all you can find out about her." The words came out as a bark.

"Yes, My Prince."

Honestly, how had he ended up with this idiot?

Then again, loyalty was difficult to find these days. Most of the other members of his court spent their time spying on him and reporting every little detail back to his father. Venus, for all his shortcomings, had never done that. Which was precisely why he remained his First Fang.

"Don't fail me this time," He warned.

"I won't, My Prince." Venus immediately saluted with a nervous smile.

Caelis ignored him. Then he turned and made his way toward House Ophidian, alone.

As the apex predators of the beast world, dragons had laid claim to vast portions of territory over the years, including the land upon which Bestiaris Academy was built.

There was no universe in which dragons and serpents could have coexisted within the same dormitory. In the end, House Ophidian had purchased its portion of land from the dragons at an outrageous price.

If further proof of their mutual hatred was needed, one only had to look at House Therion. The dragons had charged the serpents a fortune. Then turned around and gifted an equally large section of land to House Therion for free.

Petty bastards.

Nonetheless, the serpents had built their home there.

House Ophidian rose four stories into the air, its dark stone exterior gleaming beneath the afternoon sun. Unlike the grand towers of House Aetheris or the fortress-like appearance

of House Therion, there was something unsettlingly elegant about the structure. Curved balconies wrapped around portions of the building while green-tinted windows reflected the surrounding landscape like the eyes of a serpent waiting patiently in the grass.

The entrance path leading toward the dormitory was lined with statues. Dozens of them. Wolves. Boars. Bears. Even a dragon.

Each sculpture had been carved with such remarkable detail. Their expressions captured terror, rage, or defiance so perfectly that they almost appeared alive.

Fortunately, they weren't. The statues had been deliberately crafted to resemble the stone victims left behind by basilisk petrification.

That particular idea had belonged to his father. The serpent king never missed an opportunity to remind others of the Serpent Court's power.

While it was a decoration for the serpents, it was a message to the dragons. They had Caelis now. Their messiah. The one destined to lead the Serpent Court into a future where serpents stood above every other beast.

Unfortunately, the burden of that belief followed the poor prince everywhere. Which was why Caelis couldn't always be himself.

He couldn't joke too much or laugh too freely. Worse, show emotions. Emotions was a bullet to the head and weakness was luxury princes were rarely afforded.

By the time Caelis reached the entrance, the familiar cold mask had already settled over his features.

With that, he stepped into House Ophidian.

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Chapter 22: The Ones Who Survived

The most dangerous predators weren't always the strongest. Sometimes they were simply the ones who planned ahead.

~ Rebel Beast

Dusk had fallen by the time one of the beast shifters stepped into the bus and drove them toward their residence. However, there was still enough light left to admire the breathtaking structures scattered across Bestiaris Academy.

Just like that, some of the excitement began to return, although it was far more restrained than before. At least they would have a comfortable place to stay, even if everything in this cursed academy seemed designed to kill them.

Or so they thought.

The bus eventually slowed and came to a stop in front of a bungalow.

"Huh?" Brittney perked up and looked out the window. "Are we stopping for a bathroom break or something?"

Except Aria already knew deep down this wasn't a bathroom break. They have been fooled.

The beast shifter driving the bus rose from his seat and looked at them as though they were all idiots.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Another attack? Get your asses out of the bus and into the safety of your dorm immediately!"

At once, murmurs filled the bus as confusion spread through the girls.

"Did he say dorm?" Karen frowned. "He can't be serious, right?"

She even laughed as if the entire thing was some elaborate joke.

At the back, Trisha looked physically ill.

"This just keeps getting better and better."

The sarcasm in her voice was impossible to miss.

Unable to tolerate their hesitation any longer, the beast shifter barked,

"Out. Now."

That was all it took. The girls immediately began scrambling out of the bus like frightened mice fleeing a sinking ship.

But while everyone else hurried toward the exit, Aria deliberately lingered behind. Once Brittney walked out, she headed for the storage compartment. Thankfully, it wasn't locked.

Rows of bottled drinks and individually packaged snacks were stacked neatly inside. She found energy bars, crackers, and small bags of nuts. The kind of food designed to survive months without spoiling. Exactly the sort of thing she would want during an emergency.

No one seemed to notice she was still inside. Without hesitation, Aria grabbed several packaged snacks and stuffed them into her pockets before reaching for three cans of water.

Water was more important. People could survive longer without food than without water.

Just as she was about to close the compartment, a voice startled her.

"Smart."

Aria looked up.

The beastman driver was leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed.

Great. He caught her.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then the beastman nodded toward the cans in her hands.

"Perhaps there's hope for you yet."

Aria wasn't sure whether that was a compliment or an insult. Either way, she wasn't interested in a conversation.

She closed the compartment.

"Thanks."

The word came out flat. Then she brushed past him and stepped off the bus.

Brittney was waiting just around the corner.

"You'd make a terrible accomplice in a bank heist."

Aria was referring to the fact that Brittney had failed to distract the beastman long enough for her to finish looting the supplies unnoticed.

"I did try," Brittney said, her face turning red. "He picked me up and moved me out of the way like a child."

"Oh." Aria's lips twitched.

She fought the urge to laugh and instead handed two of the water cans to Brittney.

"Let's go."

Keeping a straight face, she headed toward the crowd of girls gathered in front of the bungalow.

At that moment, if the girls' disappointment had been obvious upon arrival, it had become significantly worse now that they were standing directly in front of their so-called dormitory.

The bungalow itself wasn't terrible. At least not objectively.

The building stretched wider than an ordinary family home, with a long wraparound porch, large windows, and a dark sloped roof. Small balconies projected from either end of the upper loft level, their railings painted white against the dark wood.

Warm lights glowed from inside while neatly maintained flowerbeds lined portions of the exterior. A stone pathway led to the entrance, but beyond that, there was nothing but woods. It was as if the academy had deliberately tucked them away where they would be forgotten. Out of sight, out of mind.

For most people, it would have looked perfectly respectable. Unfortunately, most people weren't daughters of wealthy aristocrats. To girls like Karen, this place probably looked like a shack.

"This is ridiculous!"

Right on cue, Karen exploded.

"What happened to all those beautiful dormitories we saw on the way here? How do you expect us to sleep in this... in this..."

She gestured wildly toward the bungalow.

"...rat nest!"

Several girls immediately voiced their agreement. Charlotte, apparently filling the void left behind by Chelsea's absence, folded her arms.

"That isn't even big enough for my closet."

The beastman didn't even bother responding to them. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the bus, watching the girls complain as if their misery was the greatest entertainment he had experienced all day.

"This is totally unacceptable! We are not slaves!"

"We're risking our lives just by being here! The least you beasts could do is give us somewhere decent to live!"

The complaints grew louder until a voice cut through the commotion.

"Those beautiful dormitories you saw on your way here belong to the dragons, serpents, wolves, and every other beast on this campus. Which, in case you haven't noticed, you are not."

The complaints died instantly. All heads turned.

Maverick Nightshade was making his way toward them with Abigail walking a few steps behind him.

Aria narrowed her eyes at the woman

Interesting. So she was still alive.

She had probably fled for her life during the stampede and abandoned them to fend for themselves.

Maverick stopped in front of the girls. The wolf prince looked exhausted, not that anyone else seemed to notice.

"The dragons didn't want humans on their land in the first place," he said bluntly. "This residence was the compromise your government negotiated."

Several girls immediately looked offended.

Maverick didn't care.

"You can either stay here and make the best of it, or you can find alternative accommodation." His slitted gray eyes swept across the group. "So by all means, try your luck."

The implication settled over the girls immediately. The woods surrounding them suddenly felt far less welcoming.

Karen's mouth opened, then closed.

Satisfied, Maverick glanced toward the bungalow.

"Now that we've established where you'll be living, get inside. Now." The hardness in his voice brooked no words.

Despite their complaints, the girls eventually filed into the bungalow one after the other.

The moment Aria stepped inside, she paused.

Okay. This wasn't what she had been expecting.

The living room was spacious and would obviously serve as the common area. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, while several oversized couches had been arranged in a circular formation around a low wooden coffee table. The couches themselves were cream-colored, decorated with soft throw pillows in shades of blush pink, lavender, and pale blue.

Large windows lined one side of the room while bookshelves and decorative plants filled the corners. A stone fireplace occupied the far wall, though it wasn't currently lit.

Whoever designed the place clearly had the young women in mind. There was an almost cozy atmosphere to it.

"This doesn't look bad." She was impressed.

Her eyes wandered toward the hallway branching deeper into the house. There were far too many of them for private rooms. Immediately, a disturbing thought crossed her mind.

"Let's just hope I won't be sharing a room with Karen."

Brittney instantly hooked an arm around hers possessively.

"No one's taking you away from me."

Aria looked at her. Brittney looked deadly serious.

"We're sticking together until death do us part."

Aria rolled her eyes. The dramatic idiot. Yet she had to admit Brittney was beginning to grow on her.

Before she could dwell on the thought any further, Trisha and Alek made their way toward them. The two girls looked significantly better than they had earlier.

"How are you guys holding up?" Aria asked.

Trisha shrugged. "We knew this was expected. No point stressing over it now."

Apparently she had reached the acceptance stage faster than most people.

Alek nodded. Then her expression became serious.

"This is going to be a shared space. I want to make sure we're sticking together."

Brittney reminded her, "We formed our team from the very beginning." She cocked her head. "Unless you're backing out now."

Trisha snorted.

"We're not going anywhere. If there's one thing today's attack taught us, it's that surviving this place with the wrong people is a terrible idea."

Alek nodded in agreement.

"No one can tell me otherwise, we are the best out there. Nothing is getting between us."

The four girls looked at one another. Guess this was it then. No going back.

Right at that moment, Maverick arrived.

Without hesitation, he announced, "Congratulations, doomed humans. You survived your first few hours at Bestiaris Academy."

No one celebrated. The joke hit a little too close to home.

Maverick continued anyway.

"You're down to sixteen students and four rooms. So save me the headache by forming your teams and choosing your room."

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Chapter 23: I Am Not Your Superhero

The first mistake most prey made was believing the predator was joking.

~ Rebel Beast

"What happened to the four?" Aria asked just as the girls were about to break into their respective teams, their excitement abruptly halted.

Maverick's brows lifted slightly in surprise.

It seemed not all of them were idiots.

He answered, "Two died. According to your chaperone here..." He gestured toward Abigail standing by the door. "I believe their names were Eloise and Sadie."

The moment the names left his mouth, a wail broke out from among the girls.

"Not Eloise!"

Aria recognized the speaker. Debra, or Debbie, whatever name she answered. It was almost strange watching her cry now when it had been obvious for hours that four girls were missing.

Then again, perhaps she had been holding on to hope that somehow her friend had survived.

"And Chelsea?" Aria asked.

"The one with the broken leg?" Maverick replied.

Aria nodded.

"Our healers did everything they could. They saved her life, but she'll never fully recover. The same goes for the other candidate, Gloria. Both girls are being airlifted back to Nova City as we speak."

His gaze swept across the room.

"So yes. You are the lucky sixteen. For now."

The way he said those two words sent a chill through the room. The danger wasn't over. Not even close.

As if she were speaking to an acquaintance rather than a professor she had met only hours ago, Aria continued.

"We were informed that you're responsible for our safety here, sir."

Maverick folded his arms across his chest. Even with the long sleeves, the movement still drew attention to the thick muscle beneath.

Unfortunately, Aria's traitorous eyes noticed.

Quick. Focus.

Now was hardly the time to be admiring a professor.

"Obviously," she breathed, forcing her attention back to the conversation, "I don't blame you for what happened today. Coming here was our choice. But what measures are in place to ensure our safety moving forward?"

Then, after a brief pause, she added,

"Please, sir?"

Maverick was caught off guard by the practical question Aria Aspen asked, unlike the other girls who had spent most of their time whining and demanding special treatment.

His eyes sharpened with interest. The human girls irritated him more often than not, but this one...

Perhaps there was one worth saving after all.

It wasn't just Maverick. Several of the other girls looked surprised by how naturally Aria communicated with him.

Karen especially didn't like the attention Aria was receiving. She should have known the little opportunist was trying to get Maverick's attention. The thought immediately soured her mood.

So she cut in.

"Yes, Maverick," Karen demanded with a smug expression. "Tell us exactly how you intend to protect us?"

One moment Maverick was standing before them. The next, he was right in front of Karen.

The movement happened so fast that none of them actually saw him cross the distance until he was towering over her. Sadly, Karen noticed at the last second.

"Ah!"

With a startled yelp, she stumbled backward over her own feet and landed hard on her ass.

Several girls gasped while others fought not to laugh.

Maverick loomed over her, his expression dark and unreadable.

"It's Sir. Professor. Or Professor Maverick."

Each title was delivered with deliberate emphasis.

"Not Maverick." His gray eyes narrowed. "Am I clear?"

His voice boomed through the room with such force that Karen immediately found herself nodding.

"Speak it out."

The command cracked like a whip.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Karen practically shouted the words, her face burning red with humiliation.

At the side, Brittney snickered and Aria nudged her.

"Behave."

That only made Brittney bite her lip harder.

Then, as if nothing had happened, Maverick turned around and calmly walked back to the front.

"Here, let me help you." Charlotte offered Karen a hand.

Karen slapped it away with a glare sharp enough to draw blood.

"I don't need your help."

She climbed back to her feet on her own. Then her gaze landed on Aria, the hostility in her eyes impossible to miss.

Aria lifted a brow in return.

She knew exactly how girls like Karen operated. The moment something went wrong, they immediately went hunting for a scapegoat.

Fine by her. But Karen had better think twice before trying anything stupid. She wasn't some helpless damsel waiting to be bullied. If Karen wanted a fight, she would quickly discover that Aria gave back exactly what she received and then some.

"Now listen up."

Maverick's voice drew her attention back to him.

The room quieted as expected in the face of authority.

"I need to make a few things clear if we're going to have an amicable stay here. For starters, I am not your superhero. Nor am I your babysitter." He paused deliberately. "And especially not your errand boy."

"Such a disappointment." Brittney clicked her tongue.

Her eyes openly wandered over Maverick's body. "He'd look devastating in one of those skin-tight superhero suits."

"Concentrate, Brittney."

Aria spoke through gritted teeth, not because Brittney was being ridiculous, but because the idiot had just planted a very dangerous image inside her head.

One that absolutely did not need to be there.

He informed them, "For the record, I didn't volunteer for this assignment and babysitting a bunch of spoiled human brats ranks very high on my personal horror list."

That wasn't supposed to be funny, however, Aria's lips twitched anyway.

He had a horror list? Now she was curious.

What exactly occupied the number one spot?

Unfortunately, Maverick caught that tiny slip. His gray eyes found hers immediately and Aria stiffened.

Quickly, she cleared her throat and schooled her expression back into something respectable.

Nothing to see here.

Brittney caught the entire exchange and pinched her on the arm with a knowing look.

Aria shot her a warning glare. Don't.

Brittney's grin only widened.

"But most of all," Maverick continued, his voice hard as steel, "never lay a hand on me, not even by accident. Otherwise, you're as good as dead. Am I clear?"

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 24: Rules And Warnings

The most dangerous place wasn't the battlefield. It was the place everyone insisted was safe.

~ Rebel Beast

Professor Maverick Nightshade had his own definition of safety.

Unfortunately for them, it involved enough rules to make Aria wonder whether they had joined an academy or accidentally enrolled in a maximum-security prison.

The first rule was simple.

"Do not leave the house after dark."

That honestly shouldn't have needed to be a rule. Common sense alone should have kept everyone indoors after what happened earlier. Unfortunately, common sense wasn't nearly as common as people claimed. Apparently, some of them still entertained the idea of wandering outside.

The girl named Liv raised her hand.

"What if it's important?"

Maverick looked at her with exasperation.

"Is it more important than your life?" The sarcasm in his tone was unmistakable.

Laughter broke amongst the students making Liv realize how stupid she sounded.

Maverick continued nonetheless.

"Second, nobody goes anywhere alone. I don't care if you're going to class, the cafeteria, the library, or even the bathroom. You move in groups of three at least."

Bestiaris Academy was so massive that if the beast got to them, it would be difficult to rescue them on time.

"Third, stay out of territories that don't belong to you." Maverick gestured toward the window. "House Aetheris. House Ophidian. House Therion. Every House governs its own territory and entering without permission is a good way to sign your own death."

He added, "Although House Therion is generally more tolerant toward humans than the others. But the wolves are not the only land beast there and you would be stupid to mistake their tolerance for friendship."

Holding their gaze, Maverick said, "Trust no one."

The room fell silent for a moment before he echoed, "Fourthly."

Everyone groaned. There were still more rules.

"If you see a snake where a snake shouldn't be, leave. In fact, run."

"What? " The question came from Karen.

"You heard me. Serpent shifters are very good at sneaking into places they aren't supposed to be."

His words were supposed to be serious, yet somehow they sounded incredibly ambiguous. The snickers from the girls confirmed it.

Maverick groaned inwardly. Goddess save him from this nightmare.

But the laughter died quickly when he added, "Serpent bites were the leading cause of death among the last Concordia candidates, so laugh all you want while it lasts."

And just like that, no one was smiling anymore.

"Check your beds before sleeping. Check your closets. Check your bathrooms before sitting down. If something feels off, assume it is."

There were some images Aria didn't need in her head, and one of them involved a snake biting her in the ass while she was trying to use the toilet.

Even if she survived Bestiaris Academy, she was going to be traumatized for life.

"Fifth." Maverick pointed toward the hallway. "Keep your rooms clean. Not because cleanliness is next to godliness, but because a messy room makes it easier for unwanted things to hide and increases your chances of death."

"And the sixth." His expression hardened.

"If you hear strange noises after dark, ignore them."

"What kind of noises?" Alek asked.

"Scratching? Tapping? Whispering?"

Several girls exchanged nervous looks.

"What if someone is calling for help?"

Maverick's eyes narrowed.

"What if they're not? If you want to help, contact the patrol team. You're human and useless in this academy. If I were you, I'd worry less about playing hero and more about staying alive. Dead people don't save anyone."

Aria frowned. That was harsh. But alright.

Anything you say, Professor.

"Seventh. If you're bitten, scratched, stung, poisoned, or suspect you've been poisoned, report it immediately. We have antivenoms capable of handling most incidents." Then his voice dropped. "Most."

That single word managed to make the room colder.

"Eighth. A bus would arrive every morning to transport you to class and return you to the residence afterward. If you miss it, you're on your own."

"Ninth." Maverick pointed toward the kitchen area. "The refrigerators have been stocked with groceries."

Aria was relieved by that. At least she didn't have to worry about the beasts poisoning their food in the cafeteria.

That relief lasted all of three seconds.

"You'll be preparing your own meals."

And just like that, horror spread across several faces. Apparently, cooking was a survival skill not everyone possessed.

"Call it a forewarning, but this is going to be a disaster," Brittney said.

And she wasn't wrong.

Them cooking their own meals? They would be lucky if Karen and her lackeys didn't burn the entire house down before the end of the day.

"Tenth. For the time being, there will be no classes."

That got everyone's attention.

"No classes?" They echoed one after the other.

"Not until the academy decides it's safe enough."

Considering they had nearly been trampled to death within an hour of arrival, that was reasonable. There wasn't much to be argued about that aside from Charlotte who sulked.

Guess someone wouldn't be seeing her dragon prince anytime soon.

"And finally, while I don't control your feelings, if you think you're going to come here, fall in love with a beast, and live happily ever after, you're an idiot."

The room froze.

"Uh-oh," Aria muttered. The professor just shattered a lot of dreams.

"You are prey. They are predators. If you want to survive Bestiaris Academy, take romance completely out of the equation."

The room remained silent for several seconds after that.

Whether it was because they were processing his words or mourning their future love lives, Aria couldn't tell.

But as much as Maverick had spoken, he wasn't the one to tell the girls what to do.

"That will be all for now. Get some sleep. The patrol team will ensure no other unfortunate incidents occur tonight."

With that, Maverick took his leave without turning back.

The professor strode out of the bungalow as if he had successfully completed his mission and wanted nothing more to do with any of them.

Abigail immediately took that as her cue to step forward.

"Alright girls, as Professor Maverick instructed, each team—"

"Let's see which team gets the best room!"

Charlotte's scream cut through the living room like a battle cry.

For one second, nobody moved. Then all hell broke loose.

The girls spun toward the hallway almost simultaneously.

"What?"

"Hey!"

"Move!"

"That room is mine!"

Charlotte and her teammates immediately rushed forward and formed a human barricade across the entrance.

Several girls protested while others tried squeezing past.

Meanwhile, Karen had already marched ahead as if the best room already belonged to her by divine right.

Aria watched the scene unfold with growing disbelief.

Guess the war had started after all.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 25: You Started This

Every rule in a dangerous place was written in someone's blood.

~ Rebel Beast

It was midnight and while the humans were probably asleep in their little shack, all three Houses had gathered in the courtyard. Behind them, the massive silhouette of the school building loomed over the academy grounds.

There was no moonlight, but rows of lights illuminated the hundreds of students filling the space. The dragons occupied one corner of the courtyard, the serpents clustered together near the pillars, and the members of House Therion claimed their own section. Even from a distance, the tension between the groups was palpable.

Professor Maverick Nightshade had called for a meeting and while most shifters would have preferred to ignore the summons, they knew better than to provoke the wolf prince.

Maverick was powerful and he had a habit of making examples out of those who wasted his time. Not even Principal Warrick could command obedience the way he did. Bestiaris operated on a simple principle: Strength earned respect and weakness invited challenges.

As an Alpha wolf and a half-Fae, Maverick sat uncomfortably high on the food chain.

Very few students were interested in discovering exactly what his powers could do when he was genuinely angry.

It was even rumored that President Callum had once proposed making Maverick the principal of Bestiaris Academy in an effort to restore order. But the Beast Council had immediately rejected the suggestion.

While Maverick was strong, he was still from the Asterion Region, hence an outsider. The council preferred one of their own overseeing the academy.

As expected, the dragons had eagerly offered themselves for the position, only for the serpents to object.

Bestiaris Academy already reflected dragon influence in almost every corner. The institution itself had originally been established through an agreement between the human government and the dragon clans. It served as the primary academy where young beasts received an education before entering broader society and interacting with humans.

Giving the dragons complete control of the academy on top of that would have tilted the balance of power too heavily in their favor. To solve that, the serpents offered their own people. Naturally, the dragons disagreed.

Neither side was willing to accept leadership from the other. In the end, a compromise had been reached. They choose a land beast. Someone neutral to handle their heirs.

Principal Warrick, a bear shifter, accepted the position. Unfortunately, neutrality and authority were not the same thing.

Compared to dragons and basilisks, a bear shifter ranked significantly lower on the power scale. Which meant Warrick often felt less like the principal of Bestiaris Academy and more like a paper tiger trying to keep apex predators from tearing each other apart.

When the main doors finally opened, the courtyard immediately stirred. Principal Warrick emerged first with Professor Maverick Nightshade following several steps behind him.

As expected, the students' reaction was far from welcoming. Many openly expressed their displeasure at Principal Warrick for needing Maverick's presence to control them.

The serpents hissed collectively, their voices blending into one expression of dissatisfaction. Caelis, however, remained silent throughout it all, his silver eyes observing the scene without revealing a single thought.

Several dragons snorted openly. Rhydian Drakhar stood amongst them looking completely relaxed, his arms folded across his chest. If anything, the dragon prince appeared entertained by the situation. The members of House Therion were less openly hostile, though that did not stop the snickers.

"He's such a coward,"

"I almost feel bad for him."

Everyone knew without Maverick, gathering all three Houses together would have been nearly impossible. Especially if Rhydian and Caelis decided to be stubborn.

Principal Warrick heard every word and ignored all of it. He was already used to it. The lower-ranked beasts were manageable. Even most of the felines listened. He could handle the serpents too unless Caelis decided to get involved.

The young prince was the backbone of the serpents and, unfortunately, the reason many of them misbehaved. One word from Caelis could undo hours of discipline.

If there were any creatures who consistently gave him headaches, it was the dragons. Even their youngest members carried themselves with enough arrogance to challenge his authority.

The only leverage Warrick truly possessed over them was their grades and Maverick Nightshade. Without those two things, the academy would have descended into chaos long ago.

Stepping forward, Warrick addressed the crowd. "I gathered everyone here tonight because there is something important we need to discuss."

His gaze swept across the gathering before continuing.

"I believe all of you are aware that the human candidates have officially arrived."

The reaction was immediate.

Boos erupted throughout the courtyard. Students shouted over one another, with a few openly cursing while others laughed. The hostility was impossible to miss.

Then something strange happened.

One after the other, students began to freeze mid-sentence till they were completely encased in ice. Within seconds, dozens of students stood completely frozen.

The courtyard fell silent.

Confused murmurs immediately followed as students looked around in alarm. All eyes slowly turned toward Maverick Nightshade.

The wolf prince stood exactly where he had been moments ago. His expression was neutral, yet the message was clear.

Behave.

Several serpents turned toward Caelis, clearly expecting him to do something. Caelis ignored them completely. What exactly did they expect? For him to challenge Maverick in the middle of a disciplinary meeting? That would be idiotic.

As expected, the noise gradually died down and everyone was forced to focus on Principal Warrick once more.

"I have been informed about today's attack," Warrick said, his voice hardening. "And before anyone wastes my time, yes, I am fully aware that it was orchestrated."

A ripple spread through the crowd. Nobody looked particularly guilty. If anything, some students appeared proud of themselves.

Warrick sighed. That was exactly the response he expected.

"Twenty years have passed since beasts arrived in this region, yet some of you still behave as if you're wild animals."

That earned a few offended looks.

Warrick ignored them.

"Whether you like it or not, coexistence with humans is inevitable. That is one of the reasons Bestiaris Academy exists in the first place. So what exactly is the problem if humans have finally come close enough for you to gain first-hand experience?"

What answered his question were protests from every direction.

"We don't want them here! Send them back!"

"Let the humans stay on their side of the city!"

"We know what this is!" A dragon shouted from the crowd. "You're trying to breed us with those pathetic creatures!"

Another one said, "This isn't Lunar Academy! Humans have no place here!"

The courtyard descended into chaos once more. This time Maverick didn't react. He allowed them to protest to their heart's content and expose every ugly thought rattling around inside their heads.

Eventually the noise began to die on its own. Only then did Maverick step forward while Principal Warrick stepped aside.

The difference in authority was obvious. The courtyard quieted almost instantly.

Maverick said, "We anticipated this reaction, which is why we've decided on a solution."

Several students frowned immediately.

"From this point forward, if a human is killed, the responsible party will be punished."

Nobody seemed particularly concerned. They could handle whatever punishment that came their way.

Then Maverick finished.

"Their grades will be deducted."

The courtyard remained silent for exactly three seconds. Then all hell broke loose.

"What?!"

"That's insane!"

"You can't do that!"

"How can you stand with those humans? You're supposed to be on our sides!"

The outrage was understandable. Every student at Bestiaris needed to maintain a specific grade threshold in order to graduate. Failing meant repeating an entire academic year. For most students that would be annoying. For final-year students, it was a nightmare. Nobody wanted another year trapped inside this academy.

Maverick's expression did not shift one bit, completely unimpressed by the uproar surrounding him.

He announced, "And that is not all."

Hundreds of eyes filled with hostility fixed themselves on the wolf prince.

"Any creature found around the human residence with the intention of harming the candidates will face the exact same punishment."

For the first time that night, Rhydian Drakharr was provoked. The dragon prince stepped out, smoke curling from his nostrils as his eyes narrowed.

"You would dare punish your own kind over those pathetic humans?" His voice boomed across the courtyard.

Several dragons immediately voiced their agreement, their protests rising above the other students.

"All lives have value," countered Maverick.

But the answer only seemed to anger Rhydian further.

Maverick continued anyway. "He who kills by the sword ends by the sword too."

Rhydian let out a humorless laugh. More smoke escaped from his nose, the temperature around him rising noticeably.

"You've gone way over your head this time, Nightshade. Better be prepared for what you started."

The dragon prince turned sharply and strode away from the gathering. Several dragons immediately followed after him, their expressions dark with displeasure.

Caelis watched the scene unfold before finally speaking.

"The Beast Council won't stand for this."

Unlike Rhydian's outrage, his tone was calm. Dangerously calm.

Maverick met the basilisk's silver gaze without hesitation.

"Sure," he said confidently. "Go ahead and inform them."

For a brief moment, the tension between the two predators became almost tangible. Students watched the exchange closely, half expecting one of them to make a move.

Instead, Maverick simply turned his back on Caelis.

The ultimate dismissal.

Principal Warrick quickly followed after him, looking relieved that the meeting was finally over.

At the same moment, the students Maverick had frozen earlier were suddenly released from their icy prison.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 26: Set The Roof On Fire

An enemy was easier to hate when you never had to look them in the eye.

~ Rebel Beast

"Maverick Nightshade is beginning to chew more than he can handle and it's high time we taught him a lesson," growled Thamas, one of the dragon shifters.

While dragons were often seen as noble creatures, there was still hierarchy even amongst themselves and the Drakhar household were considered royalty. Hence it was natural that all dragons deferred to Rhydian even within the academy.

Rhydian's features were grim. He halted suddenly, causing the cluster of dragons to stop with him.

Rhydian turned to Thamas and asked, "And what exactly do you have in mind?" His face was hard to read.

Thamas puffed out his chest, saying, "I believe if our families come together and protest, we'd be able to force him out of the academy."

Rhydian snorted.

"Maverick Nightshade is the powerhouse keeping this academy in line. The fact he's already protecting the humans probably means President Callum put him to work. Even I can see his value, not to mention my father."

Thamas wasn't deterred. "You mean when your father hears that Maverick is messing with our grades?"

While the beasts loved playing gods within the academy walls, it was still a gilded cage. Most of them couldn't wait to graduate and return to their people. For students like Rhydian, there were responsibilities waiting beyond these walls. One day he would inherit the Drakhar name and everything that came with it.

Rhydian looked at him as though he had suddenly grown another head.

"That only tells me you don't know Maximus Drakhar well enough. My father would roast you alive for complaining about a teacher. He'd tell you to take control of the situation

and handle it yourself." His eyes glowed faintly at the end, authority rolling off him in waves.

Thamas squared his shoulders.

"In that case, I'll get rid of him."

"Excuse me?" Rhydian was genuinely taken aback.

"You said I should take authority, didn't you? Then I choose to get rid of the man once and for all."

Rhydian was in his face the next second.

His hand shot out, grabbing Thamas by the collar and lifting him slightly off the ground.

"You would doom us?"

Thamas spat back, "Look around you. We're already doomed with the humans in the academy and now Maverick protecting them. Before long, they'll expect us to put our sticks into their honeypots like the wolves and produce halfings. How doomed will we be then?"

Unfortunately for him, those words only seemed to infuriate Rhydian further. The dragon prince yanked him even closer.

"Do you think we'd live long enough to crossbreed when Violet Purple learns that something happened to her son?"

At the mention of that name, the dragons became tense.

Violet Purple was Maverick Nightshade's mother. The woman who had torn open the barrier between worlds and brought their kind into this region.

More importantly, she possessed the power to erase people from existence itself. In that case, there would be no body to bury, not to mention, a grave to visit. No proof they had ever existed at all.

If they dared harm her firstborn son, that would be their fate. Violet Purple had brought them here, and she could just as easily make them disappear.

"Rhydian," Tamara said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder to calm him.

But Rhydian snapped at her and she immediately let go, startled. Everyone looked at the dragon prince in surprise. This was the first time he had reacted that way toward Tamara.

Even Rhydian himself couldn't understand why he was so irritable. He released Thamas, who glared at him while straightening his shirt.

A low rumble escaped Rhydian's chest and as much as Thamas hated it, he lowered his head. Unless he was prepared to challenge Rhydian for leadership right then and there, it was wiser to back down. Dragons had foul tempers and Thamas wasn't deluded enough to think he could defeat the Drakhar heir.

Tamara cleared her throat.

"I understand that most of us are agitated right now, but Maverick's rule actually has no direct effect on us."

That immediately caught everyone's attention. Rhydian frowned.

"What do you mean?" one of the dragons asked.

Tamara was emboldened. "Maverick thinks he can control us through our grades but that's where he's wrong. We don't have to dirty our own hands."

"Oh."

Understanding immediately dawned on Rhydian.

The House of Aetheris was not limited to dragons alone. It included every avian creature capable of flight. Eagles, hawks, falcons, ravens, crows and dozens of others. Most of them held no real influence within the House and certainly didn't enjoy the privileges dragons did.

More importantly, nobody cared if they repeated a year, and very few of them would dare refuse a dragon's order.

Just like Rhydian, the others figured it out too, knowing smiles appearing across their faces.

Thamas grinned. "Then let's have them attack the human residence tonight. It would be fun seeing the look on Maverick's face afterward."

"Yes," Kelab, another dragon, agreed eagerly. "We could have the little birds set the roof on fire and enjoy their screams."

The excitement spread quickly as more dragons bought into the idea. Except an image suddenly flashed through Rhydian's mind.

Bright blue eyes. Brown hair. Aria Aspen.

If the dragons went ahead with this plan, there was no guarantee the human girl would survive.

The realization irritated him far more than it should have. Before he knew it, he boomed, "Enough!"

The sudden roar shocked the dragons into silence. Every head turned toward him, confusion written on their faces. Shouldn't he be supporting the plan?

Rhydian could see the suspicion beginning to form in their eyes but he didn't care. He was their leader and they would obey.

"There will be no secret attack tonight."

"What?" Thamas shouted.

"Then tomorrow?" Kelab asked hopefully.

"Nobody makes a move without my approval. Am I understood?"

Silence answered him. The dragons exchanged uncertain looks.

"Am I understood?!" Rhydian thundered.

"Yes, my prince!" they chorused immediately.

Rhydian's hard gaze swept across the group before settling on Tamara.

"Keep an eye on them. You know what to do if anyone gets out of line."

Then he turned and walked away. Halfway down the path, Rhydian pulled his phone from his pocket. He needed to see that bastard Caelis.

Because for the first time in a very long time, Rhydian Drakhar had absolutely no idea what he was doing, anymore.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 27: Come Home

Loyalty was beautiful until it became a chain.

~ Rebel Beast

Just like in Rhydian's case, Maverick's announcement had sent shockwaves through House Ophidian. Unlike the dragons, however, the serpents had the decency to wait until they reached their House before cornering their prince for answers.

The common room was packed to capacity as the creeping creatures gathered to hear from Caelis. Totally different from the open, grand spaces favored by the dragons, the Ophidian common room was dimly lit and designed for comfort rather than spectacle.

Dark green couches curved around low tables while tall pillars carved with intertwined serpents stretched toward the ceiling. Decorative vines crawled along the stone walls, giving the space an almost jungle-like feel.

Snakes occupied most of the room, but they weren't alone. Lizard shifters lounged against the walls, chameleon shifters perched lazily on furniture, and several gecko shifters occupied the higher ledges near the ceiling.

At the center of it all was Caelis Cobryn.

Unlike Rhydian whose dragons wanted blood, the mood here was strangely optimistic.

Venus spoke for them.

"My prince, you should not trouble yourself with Maverick Nightshade's threats." He puffed out his chest proudly. "The serpents will ensure that nothing affects your grades and that you graduate from this school without issue."

The students nodded in agreement. This was an agreement they had made before arriving at the dormitory.

"Yesss," Nadia said, her golden eyes sparkling. "Use us, my prince. Let us handle the humans. We are your instruments to use." Her words ended with a distinct hiss.

Whether it was their forked tongues or simply serpent nature, many snake shifters possessed a faint hissing quality to their speech. The more emotional they became, the stronger it appeared.

A chorus of approving hisses filled the room, the sound echoing from every corner.

If only Caelis was as impressed by their devotion as they expected him to be. Instead, he felt the pressure on his shoulders increase.

Yes, the serpents were painfully loyal. But that loyalty came with expectations. Everything they did, every scheme they crafted, every victory they celebrated ultimately led back to one goal.

Defeating the dragons and elevating the Serpent Court.

Caelis was the symbol of their rise. They weren't offering to protect his grades out of kindness. They were protecting their future, and that future sat on his shoulders.

Caelis opened his mouth to speak and everyone stopped talking.

"Maverick thinks he has us shackled." His calm voice carried throughout the common room. "But that's where he's wrong. We are serpents."

His silver eyes swept across the room. "We are known for finding holes in places where there are none."

A collective hiss followed immediately to show their support.

"Maverick thinks he's clever." Caelis' lips curved in a cold smirk. "But we are serpents, and serpents have survived far worse than a wolf with authority issues."

This time laughter mixed with the hissing, the tension in the room easing.

Caelis continued. "We will allow Maverick to think he has won. We will obey and let him lower his guard."

The anticipation in the room became almost tangible.

Then his eyes narrowed. "And when the time is right, we will strike where he least expects it."

The common room broke out in cheers, laughter, and triumphant hisses.

Caelis watched them with an unreadable expression. Yet despite himself, one corner of his mouth tilted upward. At least his people were happy. The pressure of carrying their expectations hadn't disappeared, but seeing them like this made it a little easier to bear.

Then his phone vibrated and the small smile vanished instantly. Slowly, he pulled the device from his pocket and looked at the screen. His blood ran cold.

The message contained only three words.

'Come home. Now.'

There was no greeting nor warmth whatsoever, just a simple command from the Serpent Lord.

His father.

Just like that, the sounds of celebration around him suddenly felt distant, dread tightening around his chest.

If his father was summoning him home in the middle of the night, then something must have happened or gone terribly wrong.

Caelis didn't need to waste time. He knew his father hated lateness above all else. If he wasn't wrong, he had about an hour to get to the Palace of the Serpent King.

Venus saw the look on his face and immediately knew something was wrong. He made his way over.

"What is it?"

Caelis pulled him aside. Most of the beasts were too engulfed in their excitement to notice that something had changed. But to be safe, he lowered his voice.

"Father summoned me."

The grimace that replaced the once-bright look on Venus' face was one for the record.

It was funny how quickly Venus became serious whenever the Serpent Lord was mentioned. Then again, his First Fang knew exactly what his father was capable of.

"Do you want me to come along?" he asked carefully.

"No," Caelis said. "You should stay here, handle the others, and make sure none of them does anything stupid before I return."

Venus nodded.

Then he said in a lower tone, "I'll prepare the ride."

Caelis patted him on the shoulder before making his way toward his room. On the way, several students reached out to touch his arm or pat him on the shoulder, none of them aware of the turmoil brewing inside him.

He didn't even react to their devotion, but none of them seemed bothered by it. That was exactly how they preferred him. Their stoic, untouchable prince.

Caelis stepped into his room and locked the door behind him. He had just pulled off his shirt when his phone beeped with another message.

His heart leaped, thinking the serpent king was about to attach some impossible condition to the visit. His father was fond of such games after all.

But to his relief, the message was from Rhydian, the "fire-breathing lizard" as he had saved the contact.

'We need to meet. Now.'

Caelis' face settled into a deep frown. Why was everyone ordering him around tonight?

Who did Rhydian think he was?

Deciding to transfer his frustration to the dragon, Caelis typed a reply.

'Fuck off.'

Then he pressed send.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 28: Handle Matters Himself

Some fathers never needed to raise their voices. Their children had already learned to fear the silence.

~ Rebel Beast

Caelis could have easily left through the front door, but when you had dragons as enemies who would do everything possible to get rid of you, you learned to always keep your guard up.

Naked as the day he was born, he finally transformed.

Caelis' room was one of the largest in House Ophidian, yet it still felt too small whenever he assumed his true form.

The basilisk occupied nearly the entire space.

His enormous body stretched from one end of the room to the other, coils piled upon coils. Over fifty feet of silver-blue scales gleamed beneath the room's lighting, each scale catching the light differently and creating the illusion of liquid metal flowing across his body.

The room itself was designed to accommodate transformations, otherwise there was no way a creature of his size would fit inside.

At the center of the coils rested his head. Crown-like horns swept backward from his skull, giving him the appearance of royalty rather than a mere beast. His silver eyes

remained open, reflecting the space around him with unsettling clarity. They were ancient, intelligent eyes.

A normal snake of that size should have been making noise. The shifting of scales alone should have echoed through the room. But Caelis made none, there was not a scrape of a rustle. Only the occasional flick of a forked tongue betrayed the fact that he was alive. That was perhaps the most disturbing thing about him.

His basilisk had terrified many creatures the first time they witnessed him. It was not enough that he was large enough to swallow them whole, he still moved like a shadow. There was something deeply unsettling about a predator that massive making no sound at all.

Except that was not the only thing Caelis was capable of doing. Just as he could make himself larger, he could make himself smaller.

His massive body began to shrink. The coils occupying the room receded one after another as if the basilisk was folding in on itself. Fifty feet became forty. Forty became twenty. Then ten. Until eventually, a snake no longer than eighteen inches rested on the floor.

His silver-blue scales still gleamed, though they were far less intimidating now. If anything, he looked harmless. Except that illusion had ended many lives.

Caelis flicked out his tongue and turned toward the open window, slipping through it. The drop would have killed a human but for him, it was merely an inconvenience.

His small body wrapped around the stone ledge outside before he continued downward. One coil after another found purchase against the wall. The four-story descent took only a few minutes.

Not once did anyone notice him and Caelis found out why. Halfway down, music drifted through the night air. The students were having a party in the common room.

Thank you, Venus.

Caelis resumed his descent and moments later, reached the ground. The small woods behind the dormitory provided ample cover. He glided through patches of grass and beneath low shrubs, moving silently between roots and fallen leaves.

The academy grounds stretched before him. Serpents had a knack for discovering weaknesses in the academy's perimeter wall. Time and time again, they dug out secret spots, ensuring the dragons never found out.

Or so he thought.

Caelis was already halfway across the academy when he heard a powerful flap followed by a low rumbling sound akin to a dragon's. His body immediately froze.

Was this bastard seriously kidding him right now?!

At first, he intended to ignore it. Unfortunately, the noise was far too close for comfort. Abandoning caution, he accelerated, the rest of the journey taking only minutes.

He slipped through the hidden opening in the academy wall and emerged beyond the perimeter, only to stop.

A dragon was waiting for him, large wings folded neatly against its body. Its golden eyes watched him with infuriating patience as though it had known exactly where he would emerge and waited for him.

Caelis stared in disbelief. The dragon stared back at him.

It was not just because of the color of the dragon. There was only one creature in the academy arrogant enough to pull something like this.

Rhydian Drakhar.

For a moment, a dangerous thought crossed Caelis' mind. What if he turned Rhydian into stone?

The petrification was permanent. At least, as far as he knew. One look infused with his power was all it would take and the dragon would be stone forever.

Once Rhydian was gone, the war would be over. Or so Caelis liked to believe.

Logically speaking, that was a lie.

While Rhydian was the only surviving heir of the Drakhar family, his death wouldn't end the conflict between dragons and serpents. It would only intensify it. Maximus Drakhar would personally ensure that not only Caelis, but every serpent connected to him was wiped from existence.

Rhydian seemed to know that as well because the way he held Caelis' gaze radiated absolute confidence. The dragon looked entirely unbothered by the possibility of death.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he shifted into his human form. Naked, Rhydian strode toward him.

"I thought I told you we needed to meet!"

Caelis shifted as well, anger licking at the edges of his mask as he retorted, "Do I look like your fucking servant? Don't think for one second that I can't take you on, Rhydian Drakhar." The threat in his voice was unmistakable.

Rhydian stopped roughly five feet away. Any closer and the encounter might escalate into something neither of them could easily walk away from.

Caelis narrowed his eyes.

"Were you spying on me? How did you even know about this spot?"

Rhydian laughed as though that was the dumbest question he had ever heard.

"You snakes pride yourselves on being sneaky," he said. "But you keep forgetting Dragons are masters of knowledge. We know more than you think."

Caelis frowned. Just how many of their secret routes had been discovered? Clearly, this one was compromised. He would have to find new escape routes. The last thing he trusted was a dragon.

Especially dragons who had spent years dreaming of eliminating him.

Caelis was already irritated enough by his father's summons. The last thing he needed was Rhydian Drakhar wasting what little time he had left.

"Don't waste my time," he demanded impatiently. "What do you want?"

Rhydian didn't seem bothered by his tone.

"Maverick thinks his new rule is going to protect the humans," he said. "It's the worst mistake he's made all year. What are we going to do about the humans?"

Caelis scoffed.

"Or do you mean Aria Aspen?" he measured with a hiss at the end. He narrowed his eyes. "You knew about the girl, didn't you?"

This time Rhydian looked genuinely confused.

"Knew about what?"

"Don't take me for a fool." Caelis stepped closer. "We all saw what happened earlier. She stopped the bull. That cannot be normal. The humans are up to something."

"You believe Aria stopped the bull?"

Rhydian stared at him for a moment before laughing in disbelief.

"That was obviously Maverick. He was right behind her and must have done something with his powers. We don't know the full extent of his abilities, anyway."

But Caelis hissed.

"Don't try to confuse me. I know what I saw."

Rhydian crossed his arms.

"Fine. Let's say you know what you saw then. How did she do it?" He spread his hands. "For her to do whatever you're claiming she did, she'd have to be supernatural. She obviously isn't."

For a moment, Caelis didn't respond. His silver eyes narrowed further, the wheels in his head clearly turning as he replayed the scene again and again.

Nothing about Aria Aspen suggested she was anything other than human. Yet the image of the bull stopping before her refused to leave his mind.

Rhydian seemed to notice his hesitation.

"But if you truly believe she's something more," he continued, taking advantage of the silence, "then we have to keep her alive by all means possible."

Caelis looked up sharply and Rhydian smirked.

"We could watch and investigate her. Find out whatever she's hiding."

The dragon prince looked smug as if he had just pitched a million-dollar idea. That only made Caelis want to punch him in the face.

"You must take me for a fool," Caelis said coldly.

"What?"

"You want me to do all the dirty work while you sit back doing what? Commanding your flight of egotistical dragons?" Caelis scoffed. "Well, guess what?"

He was in Rhydian's face now.

"I don't give a fuck about the girl and she could die for all I care. In fact, dying seems like the perfect solution to end all this mystery."

He stepped back.

"But if you don't like that scenario, then you'd better do something about it yourself. Though I suppose you'd rather be dead than be caught showing interest in a human, right?"

The smile on Caelis' face was smug and downright diabolical.

"Don't bother me again. Just because we're at a standstill doesn't mean I can't lose it."

The threat lingered in the air between them. Then Caelis turned and walked away without another word.

Rhydian watched his retreating figure with a blank expression. The silence stretched for a second, then, unexpectedly, a smile crossed his lips.

Caelis thought he had won that argument. The idiot had no idea he had just handed Rhydian the perfect solution.

It was time to handle matters himself.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 29: Serpent Lord Njord

A prince could afford many mistakes. Trust was rarely one of them.

~ Rebel Beast

"Your Highness?"

The driver Venus had arranged for Caelis was already waiting at the designated spot.

Giving him a once-over, Caelis scrutinized the serpent intensely. He trusted his people, but trust and caution were two different things. The dragons had spent years looking for a way to get rid of him. It wasn't impossible that one of them had finally found someone weak enough to exploit.

"What is a serpent's greatest weapon?" Caelis asked the secret question.

Only those personally vetted by Venus would be able to answer correctly without guesswork.

"Patience," the driver answered confidently.

Good for him. Even a moment of hesitation would have cost him his life.

A satisfied look crossed Caelis' face as he pulled the passenger door open and stepped inside. Moments later, the driver entered as well, started the engine, and guided the vehicle onto the road.

The drive was a silent one. Caelis had no interest in conversation, and the driver knew better than to initiate one. This would likely be the first and last time they ever met. Venus rotated the drivers frequently, the same way he changed passwords.

Most of the other beasts considered him paranoid, but when you spent your life being hunted, trust became a luxury you could never afford.

Caelis' heart began to race, knowing that every kilometer covered brought him closer to his father. Yet years of serpent instincts allowed him to lower his heart rate at will. Within seconds, his pulse slowed until it was barely noticeable.

Just like that, he buried his emotions as well. It was only a visit. Whatever happened would happen.

Turning his attention to the window, he watched the scenery blur past in streaks of light and shadow. Humans were not entirely useless after all. They were surprisingly good at inventing things.

Take the car for instance. It would have taken him hours to crawl all the way to his father's estate serpent form. Instead, the vehicle devoured the distance with ease.

Unfortunately, that was where most of his appreciation for humans ended. Give them an inch and they always wanted more. More power. More control. They stepped into a place and immediately sought dominion over it, reshaping everything around them to suit their needs.

That was precisely why they would never be allowed to rule. The beasts would not bow to creatures they considered beneath them.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the city's metropolis. Unlike human cities that gradually wound down after dark, the beast districts were only just coming alive.

The streets remained crowded despite the late hour. Neon signs illuminated towering buildings with streams of vehicles flowing through the roads. Winged beasts crossed the skies overhead, some returning home from work while others were only beginning their shifts. The nightlife belonged to predators after all.

Restaurants remained open with customers occupying outdoor seating areas. Delivery riders darted between lanes carrying orders. Clubs pulsed with music behind brightly lit entrances. A group of young wolf shifters laughed loudly as they exited a gaming center

while several eagle shifters perched on the balconies of nearby buildings, engaged in heated conversations.

Life.

That was the easiest way to describe it. The city breathed with it. To an outsider, it would have appeared as though every species lived together in perfect harmony.

Except the reality was far more complicated. Their old grudges did not disappear simply because they shared the same streets.

With dragons claiming much of Bestiaris City, it meant serpent shifters were rarely welcome in districts controlled by dragon households. Most dragons wouldn't even deny it publicly.

The prejudice was real.

Dragon-owned businesses would have happily refused to hire serpents altogether if not for one inconvenient problem. They needed workers.

Unfortunately, discrimination still existed.

Serpents were often paid less than their counterparts despite performing the same jobs. Promotions mysteriously found their way to other winged creatures first. Then there was the bullying. The insults, exclusion and constant reminder that they were unwanted in dragon owned enterprises.

As a result, most serpents preferred supporting their own. Serpent-owned businesses hired serpent workers. Serpent families shopped at serpent establishments. Their money circulated through their own communities whenever possible.

Still, every now and then there was always a serpent or two willing to work for dragon enterprises. Usually because the pay was better and survival came before their pride.

King Darius had spent years trying to build bridges between the species and promote unity throughout the city. Sadly, the unity was easier to preach than enforce.

There was only so much a king could do, and no matter how fair his policies appeared, many serpents believed his loyalties would always lean toward the dragons who support him the most.

Trust was difficult to earn and even harder to keep.

The vehicle continued through the city before eventually crossing an invisible boundary. The difference was immediate.

Dragon banners disappeared from buildings and serpent insignias replaced them. The architecture changed as well as the roads were quieter, the buildings lower and wider. They had entered the serpent-controlled residential district, the noise of the city fading behind them.

The roads curved gently through the neighborhood, winding between rows of elegant houses. The buildings were long and graceful, their architecture emphasizing flowing lines instead of sharp edges with balconies curving around the corners. Silver and emerald colors dominated the district.

Eventually, the residence of the Serpent King came into view, and even after all these years, the sight still made people stare.

The estate sat atop a gentle rise overlooking much of the district, the structure stretching across an enormous portion of land, rivaling some of the smaller dragon compounds.

His father never spared any expense. Half the reason for the residence's existence was to remind the dragons that the Serpent Court could afford their own luxury too.

The road leading toward the estate seemed endless. Tall trees lined both sides of the path, their branches arching overhead to form a natural tunnel. Decorative lanterns illuminated the route while perfectly trimmed hedges stretched as far as the eye could see.

Eventually, they arrived before the wrought-iron gates. The gates themselves stood nearly two stories tall and at their center was the crest of House Cobryn. Two silver Cobras intertwined around a crown.

The guards immediately recognized them and the heavy gate swung open. The car rolled forward.

Fountains greeted visitors on either side of the entrance. The water cascaded down the stone sculptures while carefully maintained gardens surrounded the circular driveway. Several luxury vehicles were already parked nearby, suggesting his father had entertained guests earlier.

The driver brought the car to a stop and Caelis stepped out.

The estate looked even larger from up close.

Marble columns supported the entrance while white-veined stone stretched across the exterior walls. Servants moved quietly through the grounds, maintaining the appearance of perfection expected from the residence of the Serpent Lord. Nothing was ever allowed to look imperfect here.

Nothing.

Caelis entered through the grand doors, and as expected, the interior was every bit as excessive as the exterior. Crystal chandeliers hung from impossibly high ceilings. Expensive paintings lined the walls while the marble floors reflected the lights above like mirrors.

Then his eyes landed on the centerpiece of the main hall.

A massive statue.

The sculpture depicted a colossal basilisk coiled around a dragon. The serpent's body constricted tighter and tighter around the dragon's frame while the creature struggled beneath it. One fang hovered inches from the dragon's throat as though victory was only moments away.

It was impossible to miss the symbolism which was the serpent conquering the dragon. The future his father dreamed of.

Caelis grimaced.

"You are ten minutes late."

The voice echoed through the hall.

Caelis looked up. His father was descending the grand staircase, and he took a good look at the man who birthed him.

Njord Cobryn possessed a cruel sort of beauty.

Everything about him was sharp.

Sharp cheekbones. Sharp jawline. Sharp green eyes that seemed capable of cutting through a person's thoughts before they even spoke. Age had touched him lightly despite the decades behind him.

He looked far younger than he had any right to, carrying himself with the same dangerous elegance that had made him infamous throughout the beast territories.

The resemblance between father and son was unmistakable.

They shared the same aristocratic features, the same predatory stillness, and the same unnerving habit of staring at people until they became uncomfortable.

But that was where the similarities ended.

While Caelis possessed silver hair and silver eyes, Njord's hair was a striking shade of gold, falling neatly around a face that seemed carved from stone. Where Caelis often concealed his emotions behind a mask, Njord appeared to have discarded his entirely.

If there was one thing they truly shared, it was the coldness. The difference was that Caelis still had moments where the ice cracked.

Njord never did.

The Serpent Lord moved with such measured grace, his dark robes flowing behind him until he came to stand before his son. The two of them faced each other in silence, though Caelis stood a head taller.

"I'm sorry."

Those were the words a normal son would have said. Unfortunately, Njord Cobryn had spent years teaching him that apologies were little more than admissions of failure.

So Caelis buried the words before they could leave his mouth.

"I was tied up at the academy."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 30: Sell Them The Fantasy

Patience was a serpent's weapon. Pride was a dragon's. Both could kill.

~ Rebel Beast

Njord Cobryn did not ask what had gone wrong at the academy, which was strange. The man involved himself in Caelis' life to an almost obsessive degree.

Instead, he simply said, "Come, let's have dinner. It's been a while."

Caelis stiffened.

There were three dining rooms in the Serpent King's residence.

The first was the main dining hall downstairs. It was where Njord, his wives, and children gathered to eat as a family. At least, that was the official purpose. Most meals there felt more like court meetings disguised as family dinners.

The second dining room was located within Njord's private quarters. It was where he invited his children for what he referred to as quality time. In reality, those dinners often ended with a lesson, a warning, or a reminder of what was expected from them.

The third was the Grand Hall.

The room was so enormous that additional tables could be brought in whenever the Serpent Court hosted guests. Banquets, celebrations, political meetings, all of them took place there.

The point was togetherness, according to Njord. A united court was the strongest weapon against dragon tyranny.

Caelis had already assumed the conversation would take place in his father's private quarters. Which was why surprise flashed across his face when Njord headed toward the main dining hall instead.

He followed after him.

The room was easily capable of seating dozens of members of the Cobryn family at once. A long mahogany table stretched through the center while chandeliers hung overhead, their reflections dancing across the glossy floor. Tall windows overlooked the estate grounds and thick emerald curtains framed either side of the glass.

Yet despite all the empty seats surrounding the table, there was no one there. Not his father's wives, his brothers or sisters. It was just him and his father, and that alone was enough to put him on edge.

Njord walked toward his usual position at the head of the table. After taking his place, he gestured toward the chair immediately to his right, the first seat after the head. The position traditionally reserved for the heir.

Caelis sat. Neither of them spoke.

Moments later, servants entered the room in a perfectly ordered line. Their movements were so silent they might as well have been ghosts. With their heads bowed and eyes lowered, they moved around the table, placing dishes one after another.

The smell quickly filled the room. There was roasted venison glazed in herbs, smoked pheasant, and braised wild boar. Various cuts of grilled meat were arranged upon silver platters.

There were vegetables too, though they occupied significantly less space than the meat. Serpents were carnivores after all.

One dish in particular caught his attention.

It contained roasted snake meat prepared in a rich sauce.

A human would probably find the sight disturbing, and Caelis never understood why.

Humans consumed cows, chickens, fish, goats, and countless other animals despite being mammals themselves. Yet somehow they expected beasts to follow a different standard.

The logic made little sense. Those animals were simply animals. They were not beastfolk. A snake and a serpent shifter were not the same thing any more than a wolf and a wolf shifter were. One possessed intelligence, culture, and a beast soul. The other was food.

Simple.

At least to the beasts.

The servants finished arranging the final dishes before retreating from the room as quietly as they had arrived.

Soon only father and son remained.

The dining room suddenly felt far larger than before and significantly more uncomfortable. Caelis was on guard here, careful not to make a single mistake.

Across from him, Njord calmly picked up his knife before Caelis reached for his own fork. It was their custom. No one ate before the Serpent King.

As a basilisk, Caelis had no reason to fear his father, who was merely a cobra shifter. All it would take was one power-filled look and the man would be frozen forever.

But how could he do that to the father who had raised him? The man who had spent years shielding him from dragon plots and assassination attempts?

No. That would make him the worst kind of son.

Sure, Njord could be hard. Sometimes unbearably harsh. But everything the Serpent King did, he did for the future of their people.

Or at least, that was what Caelis believed.

Every lesson, punishment and impossible expectation, were all meant to shape him into a worthy heir. An heir strong enough to lead the Serpent Court — and soon, become Beast King.

Njord and Caelis ate in silence for a while until the Serpent King finally decided it was time to break it.

"I'm sure you're wondering the reason for this sudden summon."

Caelis lowered his utensil as well. He answered curtly, "I'm sure it's something important."

Njord said, "If I'm correct, the humans arrived at the academy earlier today, didn't they?"

"Yes, they did."

Assuming his father wanted to hear more, Caelis added, "I handled them. They're down to sixteen. For now. It might take a little longer with Maverick Nightshade getting in the way, but I assure you, Father, the humans will be out of our land in no time."

Caelis braced himself for the disappointment. Four survivors was hardly an impressive result. In his father's eyes, four humans dying during an orchestrated attack was probably closer to failure than success.

Which was why his next words caught him completely off guard.

"Don't bother the humans for now."

"Excuse me?"

For the first time that evening, Caelis' mask slipped. His head snapped up so quickly that even he felt it.

"What did you just say?"

But Njord was steady.

"Karen Donovan," he said. "You'll find she's among the humans. I want you to keep her safe."

Cold realization washed over Caelis and he sank back into his seat.

"Since when did we start working with humans?" he asked. "What did they promise you?" The accusation in his voice was deep and cutting.

It simply didn't make sense. All his life, the man had taught him that humans were prey. Creatures to keep beneath their heel. So how could he suddenly go back on his own words?

"If we're to defeat the dragons, then we need every bit of help we can get," Njord told him.

"And it had to be the humans?" Caelis' voice went up a notch. "You told me humans were like parasites. Give them an inch and they only spread further. So how could you lower your pride like that and associate with the likes of them?"

Njord suddenly hissed. The sound cracked through the room like a whip, sharp and dangerous.

Under normal circumstances, that would have been enough to end the discussion. Instead, Caelis hissed back.

For a brief moment, his own presence surged forward. The pressure in the room shifted as son and father stared at one another across the table. Then reality caught up to him.

Caelis remembered who he was speaking to. Slowly, he lowered his head. The silence that followed was heavier than the confrontation itself.

Something flashed across Njord's eyes.

Surprise? Pride? Annoyance? It vanished so quickly Caelis couldn't be certain he had seen it at all.

But one thing was clear to the Serpent King. As much as he tried to keep the boy in line, Caelis was becoming bolder and there would come a time when lowering his head would no longer be his first instinct.

Holding his gaze, Njord told him, "A good heir knows there are no permanent friends or enemies. Not even when it comes to prey."

Caelis replied with meaning layered beneath his words.

"You know what humans want, Father."

Of course he did. Njord's slow smirk said it all.

"Then sell them the fantasy," he said.

Caelis' eyes widened. Of all beasts, the Serpent King couldn't possibly be suggesting that he...

He swallowed, not daring to finish the thought.

"As weak as they can be, you'd also learn that humans are..." Njord paused, searching for the right word. "Fascinating creatures."

He smiled.

Caelis frowned. Nothing about this made sense.

"Kill as many humans as you want, but Karen must be spared. Perhaps even have a little fun with the girl. That should earn me bonus points with her father." Njord paused. "As long as you remember where your loyalty lies. Humans can be crafty as well. Don't get carried away."

The warning was clear. Beasts belonged with beasts. Humans belonged with humans.

Yet it still didn't make sense to the basilisk prince. His head was spinning from all the revelations thrown at him tonight. How could they go from hating the spineless species to selling them a fantasy? It went against everything Caelis had ever been taught.

For once, he thought the Serpent King might be wrong.

"What if I don't want to?" Caelis challenged.

Someone had to make his father see reason.

Njord didn't react. There was no anger on his face. No disappointment. No emotion at all.

The Serpent King simply rose from his seat.

Caelis stiffened, though he refused to let it show.

Njord came to stand before him and placed both hands on his shoulders. Then he leaned in and asked, "Have I ever led you astray, Caelis?"

"No," he answered after a moments hesitation.

"Then trust your father on this."

Caelis swallowed.

Njord continued, "I have lived longer than you and know more than you ever will. Everything I do is for you and for the progress of the Serpent Court."

And for yourself, Caelis thought.

He might have been obedient to a fault, but that didn't mean he was blind to see when he was being used.

Fine. If this was what his father wanted, then he would do it. But on his own terms. When it inevitably failed, the Serpent King would finally see how disastrous this decision truly was.

"I'll do it, Father," he said.

Njord smiled proudly.

"Good son." He ran a hand through Caelis' hair.

"Now go see your mother and sister before you return to the academy. I'm sure they'll be delighted to see you."

And there it was. The reward after the lesson.