Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 221: Healthy Dose Of Drama[1,561 words]

Caelis unsettled Aria. Truly. He reminded her of those movies where stunningly beautiful vampire males lured innocent and naive human females off their feet, only to turn them into dinner once night fell.

The serpent knew exactly what he was doing, and that made him dangerous. He was using her own independence against Maverick. If Maverick answered for her, Caelis would get to imply that he was controlling her. If she, on the other hand, refused, the good-looking giant earthworm would get the satisfaction of making it seem as though she was afraid of whatever harmless game he was proposing.

However, it was better to be safe than sorry. Hence, Aria's answer should have been no, but what came out of her mouth was, "What type of game are we talking about here?"

As soon as she said that, a satisfied glint entered Caelis's eyes, as if the prey had willingly stepped into his trap. But Aria was no prey, and she was determined to prove him wrong.

Her answer also had Maverick's head turning sharply toward her.

"He's manipulating you, Aria." He glared at Caelis.

"I know that," Aria answered, much to his surprise.

"And you're still going to do it?" It made absolutely no sense to Maverick. His job was to keep his mate safe and away from trouble, yet here she was willingly walking into whatever game the sly basilisk was playing.

"Yes," Aria said. "When dealing with a bully, you don't show them even the slightest sign of weakness."

Caelis's brows drew together slightly at the comment. She called him a bully? Just how many nicknames and insults had she given him already?

Nonetheless, he clasped his hands behind his back. "Excellent. Although I think Professor Maverick misunderstood my suggestion. I wasn't proposing a game between the handful of us."

Aria's suspicion returned immediately.

"Then what are you proposing?"

Caelis turned his attention toward the party around them. "A competition."

That single word certainly didn’t make him sound any less dangerous. Still, Aria wasn’t the only one who perked up at the mention of a competition. Everyone else did too.

Brittney folded her arms. "What kind of competition are we talking about here, mister?"

Caelis regarded Brittney, studying her with newfound curiosity. So this was the human who had seduced his First Fang? Interesting. He couldn’t decide whether to be curious or impressed. It took considerable nerve for a human to willingly climb into bed with a serpent, and this one appeared to have confidence in abundance.

So he answered her. "Nothing that should frighten you."

"Who said I was frightened?"

"Then we’re making progress already, human."

Brittney’s mouth fell open before her eyes narrowed. She decided immediately that she didn’t like Venus’s boss. He was far too mouthy, and Brittney preferred being the one who got the last word.

Caelis continued like none of them had spoken. "It would be a competition between the three Houses. Three human representatives from each, participating in three rounds."

The Basilisk Prince had spoken loudly enough to catch the attention of several people standing nearby. Conversations began dying as word travelled through the surrounding crowd.

Caelis continued, his voice carrying effortlessly as he announced, "Aetheris against Ophidian against Therion."

That did it.

A cheer rose somewhere among the Ophidian students. Within seconds, students who hadn’t known what Caelis was talking about were pushing closer to find out.

Aria stared at him, speechless. He’d known exactly what would happen.

Beasts were territorial enough without attaching their House names to anything. The moment Caelis turned his little game into a House competition, refusing stopped being quite so simple.

"What are they competing in?" Maverick asked, shifting slightly in front of Aria in case Caelis suddenly suggested something dangerous.

"Chibun Dash."

As soon as those words left Caelis's mouth, a burst of celebration erupted from the students. The main highlight of the night—the fight between Maverick and Rhydian—hadn't even started yet, and the party was already becoming far more interesting than anyone had expected.

"I don't understand. What's all the excitement about?" Aria asked no one in particular, but Valerie and Variant were quick to answer.

"It's Chibun racing!"

"You've never seen a Chibun?"

"Should I have?"

"Oh, you're going to love them," Valerie said. "Chibuns are these adorable little creatures used for racing competitions."

"And it's one of the most popular sports for gambling," Maverick added. "The races themselves are harmless, but I still don't trust Caelis." He made no effort to lower his voice despite the serpent standing only a few feet away.

"Professor," Caelis said, "you should work on those trust issues now that you have a girlfriend. I hear lack of trust is responsible for the demise of many relationships. You wouldn't want your newly formed one to end so soon, would you?"

"Why don't you say that again?" Maverick growled, immediately provoked. How dare the bastard suggest that he and Aria would break up?

"Maverick." Aria placed a hand against his stomach, stopping him before he could move.

"He's provoking you on purpose. Don't let him win." She began rubbing slow circles through his clothes, and gradually, the tension beneath her palm eased.

Maverick was annoyed with himself. He wasn't usually this easy to rile, but ever since the mate bond had kicked in, anything involving Aria seemed capable of stripping away years of practiced control.

As expected, Caelis observed the interaction closely, giving nothing away about whatever was going through his mind.

Instead, he turned to Venus, who had remained quiet throughout the exchange. "Go bring the Chibuns."

Venus bowed his head and left, but not without stealing a subtle glance at Brittney.

Caelis began explaining while they waited.

"Chibun racing is simple. Each House selects three humans. Every competitor is assigned a Chibun at random. Once the race begins, you may call to your animal, gesture, whistle, bargain with it if you're particularly desperate, or stand there and pray to whichever deity you believe might take pity on you."

A few students close by laughed.

"You may not touch the Chibun after the race begins. You may not cross the boundary, interfere with another competitor's animal, or touch the bait at the finish line. Doing any of those things results in immediate disqualification."

Aria frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it," Caelis confirmed.

"That sounds suspiciously harmless, Mr. Caelis."

"And I'm wounded by your distrust, Miss Aria." He arched a brow, returning her attitude without missing a beat.

Aria shook her head. "No, you're not."

"No," Caelis agreed. "I'm really not."

Aria stared at him, dumbfounded by the blatant admission. Did anything actually bother this beast, or had he been born without the part responsible for normal emotions?

At the same time, Maverick watched their exchange with growing unease. Caelis wasn't the type to banter with anyone, especially not a female. His reputation was morbid enough that most females avoided him altogether, and only the daring ones ever willingly visited his bed.

Maverick loved Aria's fearless nature, but he didn't like seeing that fearlessness directed at Caelis. The serpent was already far too interested in her for Maverick's liking, and the last thing he needed was Caelis developing any more ideas about his mate.

"Come here." He pulled Aria to his side.

Caelis saw it and said nothing. Maverick should have been smarter than this, but this was what happened when you let emotions take over. He had no idea what Caelis was really after when it came to his beloved "girlfriend."

At that moment, there was movement nearby, and they turned to see Dimitri and Alek finally returning. However, something was wrong, and even a blind person could sense the tension wafting off Alek.

"Alek—"

"What's she doing here?" Although Alek didn't call anyone by name, the way her gaze was pinned on Brittney made it obvious who she was talking about.

Brittney chuckled in confusion. "I think I'm a bit lost here."

"Alek..." Dimitri tried to reach for her, but one fierce look from Alek was enough to silence him. Everyone, including Brittney, was stunned. They had never seen Alek this angry.

Alek faced Brittney. "They said you were missing and we needed to find you."

For once, Brittney couldn't say a word.

"Well, tell me then, were you missing?" she asked.

"Not really..." Brittney answered nervously for the first time. "I was just strolling in the woods. Although I did tell Trisha I needed to get some air." She felt guilty for reasons she couldn't even understand.

"Unbelievable." Alek shook her head in disappointment.

Then she stormed away.

"Alek—!" Dimitri went after her.

Brittney wanted to follow them, intending to find out where the anger was coming from, but Maverick stopped her.

"Don't. Let them be."

Brittney stayed where she was, watching them leave with a confused expression. What had she done wrong?

"Such a healthy dose of drama," Caelis remarked, having stood there and watched the entire exchange play out.

Aria would have given him a piece of her mind, except another kind of drama erupted right at that moment.

It was Charlotte.

Except that wasn't what had everyone gasping in shock.

Charlotte wasn’t alone. The dragon named Thamas was with her, and worse, he held the end of a chain wrapped around Charlotte’s neck as they made their entrance together.

What the fuck...?

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 222: Spat Between Women[1,556 words]

Red.

That was the color Charlotte was known for. Scratch that, everyone knew she was obsessed with it and practically wore red everywhere. But not tonight.

Tonight, Charlotte was in green.

A short, metallic-green dress that clung to her body and shimmered whenever the light caught it. It was sleeveless, with a plunging neckline that pushed her cleavage up and left little to the imagination. Smoky makeup darkened her eyes, giving her an appearance far bolder than the Charlotte they were accustomed to seeing.

But the most shocking part of her outfit was around her neck.

The chain Thamas held wasn’t attached to some ordinary collar. A thick black leather band circled Charlotte’s throat, decorated with short metal spikes and a silver ring at the front where the chain was fastened. It looked suspiciously like the sort of thing meant for a bedroom rather than a party, and judging by the way several people were staring, Aria wasn’t the only one who had reached that conclusion.

It was clear to everyone who Charlotte had worn the green for.

Thamas Draco.

The dragon proudly held the chain in his grip, not giving a fuck about the wide-eyed stares and open mouths as they made their way deeper into the party. Since when did dragons willingly parade around with humans at their sides? At this rate, the impossible was quickly becoming a pattern.

"Strange things are indeed happening," Variant commented, sounding thoroughly scandalized.

"No, they aren’t," Caelis said, much to her surprise.

"Excuse me?"

"This is merely the consequence of a pattern started by one..." Caelis replied meaningfully, his gaze settling boldly on Maverick and Aria. "Isn't this what you wanted, Professor?"

A tick appeared in Maverick's jaw, but he said nothing.

Caelis continued, "The problem with change is that once you set it in motion, you don't get to decide what form it takes." There was something almost knowing in his expression, as if he could already see where all of this was headed. "You wanted humans and beasts to come together. I simply wonder whether you'll still be pleased when you see exactly what that creates."

While Caelis was trying to provoke Maverick, Karen's eyes were glued to Charlotte, her expression filled with disbelief and an undercurrent of jealousy. She was together with a dragon? How could that be? How had Charlotte managed that feat when she was stuck with a serpent instead?!

But the curiosity soon gave way to acrid bitterness.

Of course, she was fucking the dragon! Just look at what she was wearing and the way she'd presented herself. Back in Nova City, she was the weirdo who wouldn't stop talking about dragons. Her room had been filled with images of them. She'd even had a fucking shrine.

But even as Karen regarded her with disgust, there was still a part of her that couldn't accept that Charlotte had actually gotten exactly what she'd always wanted. So rather than acknowledge that the former weirdo had somehow made her ridiculous obsession a reality, Karen chose to focus on everything she could find wrong with it. The revealing dress. The collar. The shameless way she allowed Thamas to parade her around like some kind of animal.

Because criticizing Charlotte was much easier than admitting she was jealous of her.

At that moment, Charlotte's eyes connected with Karen's through the crowd. She stopped and tilted her head, saying something to Thamas, who also paused as his green eyes travelled in Karen's direction.

Karen straightened at once, suddenly self-conscious beneath their attention. And just as she'd predicted, Charlotte smirked darkly before making her way toward her, with Thamas following beside her.

"Fuck..." Karen muttered under her breath when she spotted them approaching. She was outmatched and vulnerable right now.

She cleared her throat not so subtly and, left with no other choice, slipped her arm around Caelis's.

Caelis was startled, his expression taking on that familiar look of annoyance when his eyes found Karen's. Except, for the first time, he saw something almost pleading in them. His brows furrowed, and he turned to see the new couple heading toward them.

Figures.

The basilick prince knew Karen and Charlotte didn't see eye to eye. Karen was far too proud to be outdone.

Hence, for once, he played along, placing his hand over Karen's in an affectionate gesture. Aria saw the move and frowned. Her gaze lifted to meet Caelis's, and he raised a brow as if to ask whether she had a problem with that. Aria answered with a resting bitch face.

Maverick caught the entire wordless exchange between them, and he didn't like it. Yet he said nothing. He trusted Aria. It was Caelis he didn't trust one bit.

As expected, Charlotte and Thamas walked over to them—or more specifically, Caelis and Karen.

Karen immediately lifted her chin, refusing to let Charlotte see how much their approach had unsettled her. Her arm remained firmly linked through Caelis's, and when she noticed Charlotte's gaze drop briefly to it, she almost smiled.

Not that Charlotte looked remotely impressed. Her eyes travelled from Karen's hand on Caelis's arm to Caelis himself before returning to Karen. Then the corner of her mouth curved.

"Well," Charlotte said. "This is unexpected."

Karen's eyes narrowed. "What is, Charlotte?"

"You." Charlotte glanced deliberately at Caelis. "I always thought you had higher standards and would likely go after the likes of Professor Maverick—"

Charlotte didn't even get to finish before a warning hiss rose from deep in Aria's throat. Aria hadn't even realized she'd made the sound until it was already out, white-hot anger momentarily blinding her.

Nonetheless, the effect was immediate.

"Apologies, Aria," Charlotte said with amusement. "But I'd suggest you hold on tightly to your man. Karen does have a habit of going after whoever everyone else considers top-tier."

At the same time, Trisha leaned toward Aria and whispered, "Chill, girl. No one's taking what's yours."

Aria immediately calmed down, her face turning red. She swore to God she hadn't even realized she'd made that sound. It helped when Maverick kissed the top of her head and said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Don't worry. I'm yours forever. Anyone else can only dream."

And that was all the confirmation Caelis needed.

The instinctive hiss. The possessiveness Aria herself hadn't seemed aware of. Maverick's complete lack of surprise at either of them. Like other werewolves before him, it seemed Maverick had found his mate.

That was a complication he hadn't seen coming.

Meanwhile, the smile vanished from Karen's face. Then she gave a short laugh. "You do know that's funny coming from someone wearing a collar and being walked around on a leash like some dog."

Charlotte's fingers rose to the leather around her throat. Except rather than looking embarrassed, she slowly traced the ring at the front before glancing back at Thamas.

"Thamas, darling," Charlotte asked sweetly. "Am I a dog?"

Thamas's green eyes settled on Karen before returning to Charlotte, something suspiciously close to affection entering them.

"No," he said simply, curling his fingers around the chain. "You're just my lovely pet."

Charlotte chuckled while Karen stiffened, her grip on Caelis's arm tightening.

Thamas's gaze dropped pointedly to Karen's arm around Caelis's. "I suppose your serpent is as cold as everyone claims and doesn't satisfy you enough. Otherwise, you'd understand that some people are simply a lot more experimental."

His fingers trailed slowly down Charlotte's throat, the gesture so blatantly sexual that there was no mistaking what he meant.

"Damn," Brittney whispered. "If I were Karen, I'd never recover from this." A grin spread across her face. "And yes, I'm enjoying every minute of this drama."

Karen's face burned with humiliation, and in an attempt to soften the blow Charlotte had dealt her, she burst out, "Trust me, I couldn't care less what the two of you do."

Her gaze swept pointedly over Charlotte's dress. "Although I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You've been obsessed with dragon dick since Nova City. Congratulations on finally getting one to fit inside you, though I'd advise your date to be careful of diseases. Gutter whores like you tend to be full of them."

Her laughter had taken on a hysterical edge as she turned her attention to Thamas. "And I thought dragons were meant to care about the purity of their bloodlines. Is that really the kind of human you'd risk tainting yours with?"

That did it.

A growl rumbled from Thamas's chest as he took a threatening step toward Karen, but Caelis intervened before he could get any closer.

"Calm yourself, Thamas. It's supposed to be a small spat between women." Caelis's voice remained composed. "Your date's been insulting me, and you don't see me threatening to turn her to stone. Surely your pride can withstand a little harmless teasing."

Caelis and Thamas glared at each other, the tension between them so thick one could practically taste it. Things were about to get out of hand at this rate.

From the corner of his eye, Maverick noticed Venus returning with the Chibuns and decided he'd had enough.

"Instead of standing here trading insults like children, why don't you settle whatever this is through the competition?" His gaze moved between them. "Then we'll see who still has something to say when there's an actual loser."

Chapter 223: Stop Flirting With My Boyfriend, Caelis!

"What game?" Thamas asked, his voice gravelly.

"Chibun racing," Maverick answered. "Caelis wants three humans from each House competing over three consecutive rounds."

Caelis smirked. "We'll see if your human is as good at racing Chibuns as she is at running her mouth."

At that, Thamas had nothing to say. Chibun racing appeared almost childish on the surface, but much of it came down to luck. The creatures were notoriously unpredictable, which was precisely what made the races entertaining—and one of the more popular sports for gambling among beasts. No amount of strength or intimidation could guarantee

a Chibun would cooperate, which meant even Thamas couldn’t be certain Charlotte would win.

"I’m in," Charlotte said without even understanding the nature of the game.

Then she looked at Karen, smirking. "Is she in too, or will she find some convenient excuse now that she knows she’s bound to lose?"

"I was already in before you even arrived, loser," Karen hissed, stepping right into her face. Neither of them backed down.

Charlotte scoffed. "We’ll see who’s the loser at the end."

Venus hadn’t returned alone. Several other students from House Ophidian accompanied him, each carrying a wooden crate. A scratching noise came from the first one, and Charlotte immediately took a step back.

"What the hell is in there?"

Valerie was practically bouncing with excitement. "Wait for it."

Amused by Valerie’s enthusiasm, one of the handlers crouched and opened the little wooden door. Something silver-grey poked its head out, and Aria’s suspicion vanished.

"Oh my God."

The creature cautiously hopped onto the stone, and Aria wanted to melt on the spot.

It resembled a rabbit at first glance, but its body was smaller and rounder, covered in such thick, velvety fur that Aria immediately wanted to bury both hands in it. Its ears were also shorter and slightly rounded at the tips, while an enormous fluffy tail curled behind it like a plume. Huge black eyes regarded the surrounding crowd with absolutely no concern for the fact that dozens of predators were staring back.

Another crate opened and a cream-colored one hopped out. Then came chestnut, black, mottled grey and white. By the time all nine crates had been opened, there were enough Chibuns gathered together to make Aria and Brittney briefly forget they were supposed to be competing with them.

"I want one," Brittney declared immediately, her eyes shining with delight.

"Nope." Trisha shook her head. "We’re not taking random animals back to the dorm."

"They’re not random animals," Variant corrected. "Chibuns are a crossbreed between rabbits and chinchillas. They got the powerful hind legs and speed from rabbits, but most of that ridiculously soft fur comes from the chinchilla side."

Brittney stared at the nearest Chibun as if Variant had just strengthened her argument.

"So what you're telling me is that it's a rabbit with upgraded fluff?"

Variant considered that. "That's a horribly inaccurate description."

"But not entirely wrong," Valerie added.

"Perfect." Brittney nodded decisively. "I want two now."

"I'm not waking up with that thing chewing my hair." Trisha glared at her.

"It wouldn't chew your hair."

Except right at that moment, one of the Chibuns began chewing on the end of its handler's sleeve.

Trisha gave her a pointed look.

Brittney covered it up with a grin. "We'd raise ours with good manners."

Aria couldn't help herself. They were so adorable. But she'd spent enough time volunteering at the shelter to know that an animal being adorable meant absolutely nothing where temperament was concerned. Still, she desperately wanted to touch one.

She turned to Maverick. "Can I have one after this is over?"

Except before Maverick could answer, Caelis said, "If you win the competition, I'll let you keep one."

Silence fell.

Aria stared at Caelis, and judging by the expressions around her, she wasn't the only one caught off guard.

What the fuck was going on with him tonight?

Caelis Cobryn barely spoke unless he had something worth saying. Yet, since Aria had returned to the party, he'd been inserting himself into conversations, provoking her, bantering with her, and now offering her a Chibun before her own boyfriend could even answer.

Beside her, Maverick went very still.

Okay. This was getting weird.

Everyone expected Maverick to put Caelis in his place, but he simply glanced past the basilisk to his girlfriend. He cupped her cheek and said, "Don’t worry. I’ll get you another one. We don’t know where he got these, and for all we know, they could be wild or diseased. I’ll find you a well-mannered one."

"They aren’t wild, and they’re fully vaccinated," Caelis said aloud. "Moreover, I’m sure Aria would appreciate a Chibun she earned through her own efforts far more than one simply handed to her. Isn’t that right, Miss Aria?"

The whispers started again, only louder this time. Just like Valerie and Variant, Brittney and Trisha exchanged a look. Why the hell was Caelis so invested in Aria and Maverick’s business?

Maverick was about to interfere, but Aria touched his arm and told him gently, "Let me handle this."

She could see in his eyes how badly he wanted to knock the teeth out of Caelis’s mouth, and that was exactly what she didn’t want. That snake was sneaky, and she still didn’t understand why he seemed so determined to provoke them.

"Mr. Cobryn—"

"Caelis," he corrected. "I referred to you by your first name. Perhaps you could extend me the same courtesy."

Aria kept a polite expression on her face, although deep down, she wanted to strangle him. He was so fucking infuriating. Nonetheless, she put on a faux smile.

"Mr. Caelis," she said pointedly. "You are awfully interested in my business tonight."

"Yes, I am."

That wasn’t the answer Aria had expected.

"Excuse me?"

Caelis appeared unfazed. "Your boyfriend has spent a considerable amount of time drilling into our heads that the humans are to receive special treatment. What better way to earn his approval than by treating his very own girlfriend even better than he expects?"

Aria stared at him for a moment before a slow smile touched her lips.

"Oh, I see." She nodded as though his explanation had suddenly made perfect sense. "So all of this is about impressing my boyfriend?"

A few snickers sounded around them while Caelis’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

"How thoughtful of you, Mr. Caelis," Aria continued sweetly. "Although if you're trying this hard to earn Maverick's approval, perhaps you should offer him the Chibun instead."

Brittney choked on a laugh. So did Valerie and Variant.

Aria wasn't finished.

"As for me, I'll gladly earn mine." Her attention shifted toward the Chibuns before returning to Caelis. "But let's make one thing clear. If I win, I'm keeping it because I won it. Not because you decided to give me something."

"Naturally," Caelis answered with a smirk.

"Good." Aria smiled back just as pleasantly. "Then stop flirting with my boyfriend through me and start the damn competition."

Caelis seemed satisfied with that and finally got down to business.

"Fine then. Each House, provide your three humans."

Naturally, House Therion was already set with Aria, Brittney, and Trisha. Still, Aria glanced in the direction Alek had disappeared with Dimitri.

"Do you think Alek would be interested in playing?"

"With that mood and whatever drama she has going on?" Trisha shook her head. "I highly doubt it. She can cheer us on from the sidelines if she comes back. We'll go to her once we're done here."

Aria and Brittney nodded in agreement.

At the same time, Karen turned eagerly to Caelis. "There are four of us. Do you have any of the girls in mind to join me?"

She waited expectantly for his answer, but Caelis barely spared her a glance.

"Do whatever you want. I don't give a fuck whether you win or lose." Then, as if it were an afterthought, he added, "This isn't about you anyway."

And with that, he walked away.

For a moment, Karen simply stood there, stunned.

What did he mean it wasn't about her?

Her eyes followed Caelis before drifting toward Aria and her friends, who were laughing about something amongst themselves.

No. It couldn’t be what she was thinking.

But once the thought entered her head, she couldn’t get rid of it. Caelis had barely tolerated Karen hanging on his arm all night, yet he’d spent an unusual amount of time talking to Aria. Provoking her. Bantering with her. He’d even offered her a Chibun and admitted outright that he was interested in her business.

Karen’s hands slowly balled into fists. Surely Caelis wasn’t interested in Aria.

Not him too.

The bitterness simmering inside her sharpened into something uglier. Aria Aspen was becoming a thorn in her side.

Caelis’s attention shifted to Thamas.

"Neither Rhydian nor Tamara is here, which makes you the highest-ranking Aetheris dragon available. Where are the remaining humans from your House?"

"We’ll get them," Charlotte answered before Thamas could.

She slipped her arm through his and steered him away. Thamas allowed himself to be led, but the moment they were far enough that the others could no longer hear them, his expression hardened.

"Tamara still isn’t here." There was an accusing edge to his voice. "You said this would work."

"And it will." Charlotte appeared entirely unconcerned. "Patience. There’s still time. Word will reach her."

Thamas regarded her for a moment, clearly less convinced than she was.

"I need to get the other girls," Charlotte added. "I’ll be back."

She released his arm and headed off in search of her roommates, leaving Thamas watching after her.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 224: Thanks For The Wine[1,611 words]

This party had to be a big deal because there were so many beasts gathered that Charlotte didn’t even know where to begin looking for her roommates.

Just as she was about to pull out her phone and call one of them, someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and found Zainab standing behind her.

"Hey..." Zainab greeted with a nervous smile.

"Hey." Charlotte didn’t think much of her strange mood. "Where are the others?"

"They’re over there." Zainab pointed toward the edge of the party, where Indigo and Meredith stood apart from everyone else like they were trying their best not to be noticed.

"Come on, then. We have a competition to win."

Charlotte headed in their direction with Zainab beside her, spotting the others exactly where she’d pointed. But they weren’t alone. Another dragoness stood with them.

"And there comes the lucky human," Evelina said as soon as Charlotte came into view. "Your roommates have been quite worried about you."

At the mention of her roommates, Charlotte looked from Indigo to Meredith. Both of them looked nervous as hell, and Charlotte wasn’t stupid. Whatever this dragoness had been doing before she arrived, neither girl appeared to be enjoying her company. This was exactly why Charlotte had sought protection in Thamas in the first place.

Charlotte turned her attention back to the dragoness. "You look familiar, so I’m guessing I’ve seen you around before. What I don’t understand is why you’re hovering around the humans. I thought dragons had better things to do than intimidate people half their size."

The dragoness’s lips thinned. "I’m Evelina. And I was merely looking out for your roommates while you were off enjoying yourself." Her gaze swept dismissively over Charlotte. "Although it seems my good intentions aren’t appreciated."

"Well, we don’t need them," Charlotte retorted. "Nobody is allowed to harm us at this party."

What she didn’t see was the guilty look that passed between Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith.

Evelina’s expression hardened. She strode toward Charlotte, but Charlotte didn’t move a muscle.

The dragoness stopped directly in front of her. Most humans would have backed away from a pissed-off dragon, even if only by instinct. Charlotte stared her dead in the face.

Evelina scoffed. "You must think you're special now that Thamas has shown you a little favor."

Charlotte didn't blink. She refused to give her even the satisfaction of a reaction, and that only seemed to irritate Evelina more.

"This..." Evelina caught the chain attached to the collar around Charlotte's neck and gave it a small tug, forcing Charlotte a fraction closer. "This doesn't make you important. A collar is still a collar, sweetheart. Don't mistake the bondage for devotion."

Charlotte's jaw clenched and Evelina smiled.

"But by all means, enjoy yourself tonight. Parade around with your dragon. Wear his colors. Pretend you've suddenly become untouchable."

She leaned closer until her mouth was beside Charlotte's ear.

"Just remember that the party eventually ends."

Then she drew back with the sweetest smile Charlotte had ever wanted to slap off someone's face.

"Enjoy it while you can, Charlotte."

Evelina released the chain and walked away, looking entirely pleased with herself. As soon as she was gone, Charlotte's roommates hurried toward her.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Charlotte answered, although her voice came out taut. She would be lying if she said the encounter hadn't rattled her. But she was Charlotte Greenwood, and if Evelina thought one threat was enough to make her tuck her tail between her legs and run, then the bitch clearly didn't know her.

"Who the hell is that?" she demanded, already adding another name to her growing list of enemies.

"She's one of Tamara's friends," Indigo answered.

Charlotte's attention snapped back to them.

"And since when did the three of you become friendly with a dragoness?"

"We are not friends!" Meredith snapped.

The force of the response made Charlotte's brows rise.

Meredith seemed to realize it too because she quickly reined herself in. "What about you? Since when did you start dating a dragon? Is that where you've been all this time?"

Of course, that was exactly the story Charlotte and Thamas wanted everyone to believe.

The truth was far less exciting. Charlotte had been terrified Quest might come back for her, so she'd hidden in Thamas's room for the rest of the night. Thamas himself had left and hadn't returned to the dorm until earlier today, which was when they'd come up with their plan for tonight's party.

Charlotte was using him, and that was the part she desperately hoped the dragon hadn't figured out yet. She needed Tamara here, and if by some stroke of luck the dragoness really did have feelings for Thamas, then flaunting herself on his arm all night should eventually produce some kind of reaction. Otherwise, she was taking one hell of a risk for nothing. Worse, if Thamas ever realized she'd been using him for her own purposes, Tamara might become the least of her problems.

So she intentionally allowed a blush to creep across her cheeks. Let them think whatever they wanted. In fact, the more people who believed something had happened between her and Thamas, the better. Rumors traveled faster when there were witnesses willing to repeat them, and her roommates were as good a place to start as any.

"Enough of the chit-chat. Which of you is good with animals? I need two people to join me for this race."

"Race?" all three girls asked, confused.

"There's no time to explain. I need two of you. Are you in or out?"

The three girls exchanged glances, but before Meredith could answer, Zainab and Indigo spoke almost simultaneously.

"I am."

"Me too."

"Good." Charlotte smiled in satisfaction. "Now all that's left is to beat that bitch Karen."

She beckoned to Zainab and Indigo. "Let's go, then."

"Wait!"

Meredith's sudden shout stopped all three of them. Charlotte turned and noticed the glass of wine in her hand.

"You should have this," Meredith said, holding it out to her. "It'll steady your nerves for the competition, and it's quite good wine."

Indigo and Zainab went pale, recognizing the wine immediately. Charlotte noticed none of it. Instead, her eyes lit up at the sight of the glass.

"God, I haven't had a decent wine since I got to this party."

She took it from Meredith and downed the entire thing.

Indigo and Zainab pressed their lips together, while tears threatened to gather in Meredith's eyes. Her hands had begun to shake, so she quickly clasped them behind her back before Charlotte could notice.

She had no choice. It was Charlotte or them, and she had chosen them.

"Thank you." Charlotte handed the empty glass back to her before looking at the others. "Let's go."

Nobody moved. Zainab and Indigo stared at her. Meredith stared hardest of all. For several seconds, all three waited for something to happen.

Charlotte frowned. "Why are you guys staring at me like that? Let's go."

She turned and walked off, snapping them out of their shock.

Zainab and Indigo hurried after her, but both glanced back at Meredith with the same bewilderment written across their faces.

Wasn't Charlotte supposed to be dead already?

Meredith looked just as confused.

Tamara hadn't told them how quickly the poison would work. She hadn't told them much of anything beyond what they needed to do. Perhaps it wasn't supposed to kill Charlotte immediately and would take several minutes. An hour. Maybe even until after the party.

They could only hope.

Because if the poison hadn't worked at all, sooner or later Tamara was going to find out. And that possibility frightened them almost as much as what they'd just done.

By the time Charlotte returned to the party, they were unsurprisingly the last group to arrive.But that wasn't what caught her attention. Someone else had finally shown up.

Tamara Ironwing.

Never would Charlotte have thought she'd be so happy to see that dragoness. Her plan had worked. Whatever news she'd hoped would reach Tamara clearly had, because there she was.

And she was standing with Thamas.

Both of them noticed Charlotte the moment she returned. Thamas tried his best to give her the kind of smile expected from a man happy to see his lover, and Charlotte almost would have believed it herself if she hadn't known better.

Tamara saw it too and Charlotte waited for the reaction. But Instead, Tamara smirked and gave her a little wave with her fingers.

Charlotte's steps faltered. That was... strange.

She'd expected anger. A glare and even some territorial display or an attempt to pull Thamas's attention back to herself. Anything that suggested seeing Charlotte with him bothered her.

But Tamara looked amused. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

"You sure know how to waste everyone's time."

Karen Donovan's voice pulled Charlotte from her thoughts.

"Shut up, Karen," Charlotte snapped.

Then she noticed that only Olivia and Fatima were standing beside her.

"Where's your mouthpiece, Liv? I was expecting her."

Karen's expression soured. "Mind your business, Charlotte."

Charlotte chuckled. "That's rich coming from you."

Before Karen could retort, one of the serpents approached and handed her a Chibun, effectively cutting their argument short.

Charlotte rolled her eyes and stepped forward when it was her turn. The moment the Chibun was placed in her hands, however, something felt wrong.

A strange weakness ran through her fingers.

Charlotte frowned and tried to adjust her grip, but her hands suddenly trembled. Before she could tighten them around the little creature, it slipped straight through her fingers and dropped onto the stone.

Her breath caught. What the hell?

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 225: Defend Their House Honor[1,653 words]

Zainab and Indigo saw it happen and knew without a doubt what was going on.

Across the gathering, a secretive smirk touched Tamara’s lips. The humans had done well. Before the night was over, Charlotte would be dead, and she wouldn’t even know what had killed her.

Guilt gnawed at Indigo until she couldn’t take it anymore.

"Why don’t you go to the infirmary?" she suggested. "They might have something for the trembling."

It wasn’t much, but it was the only way she could think of to help without openly betraying Tamara. If Charlotte went to the infirmary, perhaps one of the healers would realize something was wrong before it was too late.

Charlotte stared at her as though she’d lost her mind.

"Go to the infirmary because of a little hand tremor? Are you serious?" She gave her a dirty look. "I’m fine."

Indigo opened her mouth to insist, but Zainab subtly jerked her chin toward Tamara.

She followed the gesture, and the moment her gaze collided with the dragoness’s, her heart nearly leapt out of her chest.

Tamara was watching them.

"Never mind," Indigo muttered, quickly retreating into herself.

Charlotte snorted. This time, she took a breath and concentrated on keeping her hands steady before reaching for the Chibun again. Her fingers still felt strangely weak, but she managed to secure the little creature against her chest without dropping it.

"There you are." Charlotte grinned victoriously and stroked the thick fur of the silver-grey Chibun. "Much better."

At the same time, Aria and her friends were having the time of their lives. She'd been given a mottled grey-and-white Chibun, and despite everything she'd heard about how unpredictable they could be, this one seemed perfectly content in her arms. It had settled against her without the slightest struggle, its enormous fluffy tail curled comfortably over her wrist.

Brittney received a black one and stared directly into its face.

"You look evil. I'm calling you Lucifer."

"Brittney!" Trisha chastised. "That's racist!"

Brittney gasped, realizing how that had sounded.

"It's not because he's black!" she defended herself. "He just has this cunning look in his eyes. Actually, he reminds me of someone."

"Who?" Trisha asked.

"Just someone." Brittney grinned, subtly scanning the crowd for her snake boy.

Trisha shook her head before glancing down at the sandy-brown Chibun she held cautiously in her arms. The creature seemed perfectly harmless, but after watching one chew through a handler's sleeve earlier, she wasn't taking any chances.

"You and I are going to have an understanding," she told it. "I don't trust you, and you don't give me a reason not to."

Aside from the faint twitch of its nose, her Chibun all but ignored her.

Then Brittney asked, "Is Lucifer a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," Aria answered without looking.

Brittney regarded her strangely. "How would you know that?"

"I used to work at an animal shelter, remember? You get pretty good at spotting these things after a while." Aria glanced between the two Chibuns. "Look at Trisha's. She's female. Her head is a little narrower, and her body is slightly rounder through the middle. Lucifer's head is broader, and he's a little leaner. Males also tend to have a slightly wider gap between the openings underneath the tail."

Brittney blinked. "You got all that from looking at his face?"

"Mostly experience. But if you want proof..." Aria held out her hands. "Give him to me."

Brittney passed Lucifer over, and Aria carefully supported him before turning him just enough to check beneath his tail. He remained surprisingly cooperative as she parted the thick fur.

"See?" Aria pointed out the difference. "Definitely a boy."

Brittney leaned closer. At that exact moment, Lucifer turned his head and met her gaze with those enormous black eyes.

She froze. For some ridiculous reason, Brittney suddenly felt like a pervert.

"Okay, we're done here." She promptly took Lucifer back from Aria and settled him against her chest. "Thank you very much for the demonstration."

Aria laughed. "You were the one who asked."

"I asked whether he was a boy. I didn't ask for a guided tour of the man's private property."

Trisha snorted.

Brittney stroked Lucifer's fur as though nothing had happened. Then, once Aria and Trisha were distracted, she lowered her head toward him.

"Sorry about that," she whispered.

Lucifer's nose twitched before he made a strange little sound that Brittney interpreted as judgment.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't judge me. You could've just told me you were a boy."

Ridiculous as it was to argue with an animal, Brittney felt they'd understood each other perfectly.

Around them, the mood of the party changed completely.

Students dragged benches and tables away from one stretch of the inner court while others marked a broad starting line across the stone and another farther down for the finish. Shallow dishes were placed beyond it, filled with whatever Chibuns considered irresistible enough to justify the public humiliation they were about to endure.

"Humans!"

Caelis's voice boomed across the court, and the surrounding chatter gradually died down as attention shifted toward the nine competitors.

"You are about to represent your respective Houses, so do try your best." His mouth curved into a smirk. "House pride is apparently a terribly fragile thing, and I'd hate for any of you to be responsible for permanently damaging it."

The response was immediate.

Cheers came from all three sides of the court, students shouting for their Houses as the competition suddenly became far more real.

For once, the humans weren't being hunted, protected, or treated like fragile guests. They were representing the Houses themselves, and judging by the noise around them, the beasts had every intention of taking that very seriously.

Venus eventually took over, stepping toward the marked course and clapping his hands once to get everyone's attention.

"All participants, take your Chibuns to the starting line. The first round is about to begin."

All nine of them began moving into position, but Aria lingered for a moment. She looked down at the mottled grey-and-white bundle nestled comfortably in her arms before turning toward Maverick.

"So, wish me luck."

Maverick raised an eyebrow. "Good luck."

"No." Aria held the Chibun toward him. "Give him a name."

That clearly wasn't what Maverick had been expecting.

For a second, he simply stared at her. Then a broad smile spread across his face, one so genuinely pleased that Aria wondered why something as simple as asking him to name an animal had made him that happy.

Maverick studied the Chibun seriously. His mate had just entrusted him with a responsibility of tremendous importance.

"Karios," he decided.

Aria glanced down at the Chibun. "Karios?"

Instead of answering immediately, Maverick bent and planted a kiss right on top of the Chibun's fluffy head.

Aria's heart practically melted.

It was such a ridiculous sight. This powerful wolf prince, who could freeze someone where they stood, solemnly kissing a ball of grey-and-white fluff for good luck.

Maverick lifted his head. "Good fortune. That's what it means." His thumb brushed over the Chibun's soft head. "Now he has a name and my blessing. You can't possibly lose."

Aria smiled. God, she loved this man. So she leaned forward and kissed him.

Maverick responded immediately, one hand settling at her waist as his lips moved against hers. Somehow, he kept finding new ways to prove she'd made the right decision by giving them a chance. Every time she thought she'd gotten used to him, he did something unexpectedly sweet and made her fall a little harder.

She might have kissed him considerably longer if an irritating voice hadn't come from behind her.

"Being Professor Maverick's girlfriend doesn't mean the rest of us have to stand around waiting while you finish making out with him."

Aria broke the kiss with a sigh.

Of course. Karen.

She turned and found her already standing near the starting line with her Chibun in her arms and impatience written all over her face.

Aria really didn't have the energy for her tonight.

"Then don't wait," she said simply before turning back to Maverick. Aria gave him one last quick kiss before adjusting Karios securely against her chest.

"Come on, Karios. Let's go protect your new father's fragile House pride."

Maverick laughed behind her as she headed toward the starting line.

Aria took her place beside Brittney and Trisha, lowering Karios carefully onto the stone behind the starting line. The moment his paws touched the ground, she expected him to dart off, but he merely sat there and looked up at her, waiting to see what she intended to do next.

Not all the Chibuns were quite so cooperative. Some sniffed the ground, turned in circles or attempted to wander away before their handlers quickly redirected them.

Lucifer was one of them.

"Excuse me." Brittney caught him before he made it two steps and placed him back where he'd started. "We haven't even begun yet. Save that enthusiasm."

Venus announced. "There will be three rounds, and all nine of you will compete in each one. You'll receive a different Chibun every round."

He gestured toward the starting line.

"Place your Chibun behind the line. Once the signal is given, you cannot touch it again until it crosses the finish. You may call, whistle, gesture or do whatever else you think will convince it to run, but you cannot cross the boundary or interfere with another Chibun. Either will get you disqualified."

Venus pointed toward the dishes of bait beyond the finish line.

"First Chibun across earns three points for its House, second earns two, and third earns one. The points from all three rounds will be added together, and the House with the highest total wins."

The noise around the court rose to a deafening level as Venus finally stepped away from the starting line.

Then the countdown began.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 226: I Will Adopt You[1,077 words]

The moment the starting gun went off, one would have expected the Chibuns to dash toward the finish like animals in any normal race.

The exact opposite happened.

The gunshot startled humans and Chibuns alike, and for the first few seconds, the course descended into complete chaos. Some of the Chibuns bolted forward while others scattered sideways. One flattened itself against the floor, refusing to move at all, while another spun around and raced straight back toward the person who had released it.

Unfortunately, that one belonged to Karen.

"Are you kidding me?!" Karen shouted as the Chibun bounded happily toward her. "Get the fuck back in the race!"

She pointed frantically toward the finish line, but the more she gestured for it to go away, the closer it came until it was practically sitting at her feet.

Laughter broke out among the Aetheris students.

"Excellent choice, Caelis!" one of the dragons called across the court. "Ophidian really sent us their finest!"

Another voice followed immediately. "Don’t blame the human. Even the Chibun wants to escape your House!"

That earned an even louder roar of laughter from Aetheris, followed by angry shouts and curses from the Ophidian side.

Caelis didn’t react.

While everyone else laughed at Karen’s misfortune, he stood with his arms folded, one hand resting against his chin. Behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, his attention remained fixed on the race.

Or rather, on one particular competitor.

And that didn’t go unnoticed.

Maverick Nightshade came to stand beside the Basilisk Prince, following his line of sight until it landed exactly where he’d expected.

Aria.

Her Chibun still hadn’t moved from the starting line. Karios simply sat there staring up at her while Aria crouched behind the boundary, pointing toward the opposite end of the course and apparently trying to explain to the animal what he was supposed to do.

It didn’t help that one of the other Chibuns was already bounding determinedly toward the finish, drawn by the treats waiting in the shallow dishes.

Unfortunately for everyone else, it belonged to Charlotte.

"Yes, Tom! Keep going! Make Momma proud!" Charlotte screamed, bouncing where she stood and clapping wildly as the grey Chibun raced ahead.

"You can fool everyone else, but not me."

Maverick’s voice broke Caelis’s concentration.

"What are you talking about, Professor?" Caelis asked casually, without bothering to look at him.

Around them, the court had descended into noisy chaos. Humans shouted instructions their Chibuns had no obligation to obey while students screamed encouragement from the sidelines. Bets were being called from every direction, coins and notes changing hands as quickly as odds were shouted.

A particularly loud group of Aetheris dragons had apparently placed a considerable amount on Charlotte's Chibun and were now roaring Tom's name as if the creature were charging into battle.

Caelis heard every bit of it.

The turnout alone had already exceeded his expectations, and judging by the amount of money currently exchanging hands, the night's profits would be massive.

That pleased him immensely.

"Stay away from Aria." Maverick went straight to the point, his voice low enough that the warning remained between them. "There won't be a second warning."

"Even I know better than to lay a hand on a werewolf's mate."

Caelis finally turned toward him.

Maverick didn't so much as blink at the revelation. After his behavior tonight, even an observant fool could have connected the dots, much less someone as calculating as Caelis.

"I have no desire to be disintegrated by your mother's death touch," Caelis continued.

"It's not my mother you should be worried about."

One of Caelis's brows rose.

Maverick met his gaze, and for a brief moment, his irises burned gold, offering the Basilisk Prince a glimpse of the beast staring back at him.

"It's me."

Caelis regarded him for another second before inclining his head.

"Fair point, Alpha Maverick. Now, if you don't mind, I'd rather concentrate on the race."

Having delivered his warning, Maverick walked away to join the Therion students cheering for his girlfriend.

Caelis watched him leave before giving a quiet scoff.

Maverick had misunderstood him. He had no intention of harming Aria Aspen—as long as she was not a threat to beastkind. There were far more effective ways of drawing the truth out of someone.

Then his attention returned to the game.

"Come on, Karios." Aria pinched the space between her brows. "You've got to make your father and me proud. Or would you rather let someone else win and have Daddy get chewed out by the other Houses?"

Karios's ears twitched. But that was it.

"All you have to do is run really quickly to the finish line. There are yummy treats waiting for you there." Aria pointed toward the dishes, certain that food would finally convince him.

Nothing happened.

"Fine." She sighed. "Whether you win or not, I'll adopt you."

And that did it. Karios moved.

Aria's eyes lit up as the Chibun hopped forward, slowly at first before picking up speed.

"Yes! Come on, boy! You can do this! Beat all their asses!"

Charlotte's Tom was still ahead, although he had long since abandoned his assigned lane and was bounding diagonally across the course—not that it mattered. Karios, on the other hand, stayed remarkably straight, his little legs carrying him faster with every leap.

It didn't take long for people to notice.

"Oh my God, he's moving! Therion is catching up!"

The Therion crowd, which had all but given up moments ago, came alive at once.

Beasts who had been groaning over their wagers seconds ago surged to their feet, shouting Karios's name as he bounded across the course. Even those who hadn't bet on him joined in, House pride suddenly far more important than whatever coins they stood to lose.

Seeing that happen, Charlotte's earlier confidence evaporated, replaced by a flicker of anxiety. Aria's Chibun was rapidly catching up with hers, and at the speed Karios was going, he might actually overtake Tom. There were only a few meters left. She couldn't let that happen.

"Hurry up, Tom!"

Her encouragement did little to make him move any faster, and Charlotte's frustration mounted.

"Just hurry the fuck up!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

The force of it must have taken more out of her than she'd realized because her heart suddenly began pounding harder than it should. A wave of dizziness followed, making her sway slightly before she caught herself.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 227: Aria Wanted Him[1,041 words]

"Now I see why you chose her," Tamara said, watching Charlotte revel in her Chibun's lead with all the excitement of a child.

Thamas followed her gaze. Charlotte was certainly an interesting human, but that wasn't the answer he'd been hoping for. This entire charade was supposed to make Tamara jealous, after all.

"What do you see?" he asked, feigning indifference.

"She's a breath of fresh air. Audacious and exotic." Tamara turned to meet his gaze. "A rare flower you're not accustomed to."

"I suppose so." Thamas hummed.

"Have you fucked her yet?"

The question was so abrupt that it caught him completely off guard.

That put him in quite a predicament. If he said yes, Tamara might think less of him for sleeping with a human. But saying no hardly helped his attempt to make her jealous.

"Not yet," he blurted out.

"Then fuck her and get her out of your system."

"Excuse me?"

Tamara stared him dead in the eyes. "I have enough problems on my hands keeping the dragons in line. You're the last person I expected to start encouraging this foolish idea of humans and dragons getting together."

"Or maybe you’re just jealous."

"What?"

Thamas smirked arrogantly. "Jealousy doesn’t suit you, Tamara."

For a moment, she simply stared at him. Then understanding dawned, and a short laugh escaped her.

"I see."

His smirk faltered. "You see what?"

Tamara stepped closer until they stood face-to-face, seemingly unconcerned with the crowd around them. "You’re doing this because I turned you down, aren’t you?" Her voice lowered cruelly. "You thought parading another woman in front of me would make me jealous."

Thamas said nothing.

"And of all the females you could have chosen for this childish little game, you chose a human." Tamara’s lip curled. "How low could you possibly sink, Thamas?"

The words struck exactly where she’d intended them to. Humiliation crawled beneath his skin as the truth of his failed plan settled over him. He should have known this wouldn’t work.

His gaze shifted toward Charlotte. The charade had to end.

Except Charlotte suddenly swayed and Thamas moved instinctively, but before he could take another step, fingers closed around his arm.

He looked down.

Tamara.

"I’m sorry," she said, and the unexpected softness in her eyes stopped him. "I shouldn’t have said that. I just want you to be done with the human."

Thamas’s brows drew together. Tamara was giving him whiplash, but his foolish heart seized upon the one thing it desperately wanted to see.

Hope.

He placed his hand over hers and Tamara didn’t pull away. Perhaps he hadn’t failed completely. Tamara had never been an easy dragoness to win over. Maybe he simply needed to try harder.

By the time he looked toward Charlotte again, she appeared fine.

Meanwhile....

Something was wrong with her. Charlotte could feel it now.

But she couldn’t give up. Not when Tom was still ahead and victory was only a few meters away. She needed this win, if only for the pleasure of rubbing it in Karen’s face.

More importantly, winning the first round for Aetheris would give everyone something else to remember her for. With or without Lord Plumage and Lady Mimic turning it into tomorrow’s gossip, Charlotte Greenwood would have carved her name into House Aetheris herself.

Except Charlotte’s hope shattered when Karios suddenly drew level with Tom.

"No, no, no! Tom, move!"

Too late.

With only a few meters remaining, Karios surged ahead, his little legs carrying him past the grey Chibun before he bounded across the finish line.

For half a second, there was stunned silence before the Therion section erupted into a deafening roar.

Beasts shot to their feet, wagers were thrown triumphantly into the air, and voices collided as Karios’s name rang through the Outer Ring. The sudden eruption startled several Chibuns still attempting to finish the race, sending one darting sideways while another stopped altogether and flattened its ears.

Karios, however, couldn’t have cared less about the commotion. Having accomplished what was required of him, he hopped straight toward the nearest dish and buried his face in the treats like winning the race had merely been an inconvenient obstacle standing between him and dinner.

Aria laughed, overwhelmed by the rush of victory. Then she turned, spotted Maverick and ran. He barely had time to brace himself before she launched herself at him, arms circling his neck with complete faith that he would catch her.

Maverick sure did, his hands closing securely around her as her legs wrapped around his waist.

"We won!"

"I saw."

Aria kissed him before he could say anything else.

The adrenaline still racing through her made the kiss harder than she'd intended, but Maverick answered with equal hunger, holding her firmly against him while the celebration continued around them. For several seconds, the noise of the arena seemed to disappear beneath the pounding of her heart and the familiar heat of his mouth.

When they finally broke apart, both were breathing harder. Aria remained in his arms, staring into his beautiful slitted gray eyes. The desire there was unmistakable, and her pulse skipped as she bit lightly into her swollen lower lip.

There would be no more waiting after tonight. She was certain now. She wanted this man.

Maverick must have seen the decision in her eyes because a deep growl rolled through his chest.

Aria leaned closer until her lips brushed his ear. "Later."

"Fuck." Maverick released an unsteady breath and tightened his hold on her. "Later suddenly seems very far away."

Aria burst out laughing.

Eventually, he lowered her back onto her feet, and she turned toward the course—only for her heart to nearly jump out of her chest when her gaze collided with Caelis's.

God help her. He had to stop doing that.

The Basilisk Prince stood some distance away, still watching her from behind those sunglasses. Then, to her surprise, he lifted two fingers to his temple and gave her a small salute.

Aria made a face at him. That weirdo.

Right at that moment, another cheer broke out, albeit with less intensity than the one that had followed Karios's victory.

Charlotte's Tom had crossed the finish line, securing second place in the first round.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 228: Lucifer And Bunbun[1,212 words]

With Aria taking first place and Charlotte securing second, only third remained up for grabs. Every human still in the race desperately wanted that final point for their House.

Their Chibuns, however, couldn't have cared less.

Karen's was practically a lost cause. The creature hopped everywhere except toward the finish line, wandering from one side of the course to the other. Sadly for Karen, the rules prevented her from crossing the starting boundary or touching it, leaving her with no choice but to call and gesture furiously from where she stood.

"Go that way!" Karen snapped, pointing toward the finish. "That way!"

The Chibun stopped, and for one hopeful second, Karen thought it had finally understood her. Then it turned around and started hopping in the opposite direction.

Karen looked ready to commit murder.

If any Chibun currently stood a chance of claiming third, it was Trisha's. She had named the sandy-brown female Bunbun, and although Bunbun wasn't tearing down the course the way Karios had, at least she was making steady progress toward the finish.

There was only one problem. Lucifer was harassing her.

"Goddammit, Lucifer! What the fuck are you doing?" Brittney shouted, gesturing wildly toward the finish line.

Lucifer ignored her completely. He had lost all interest in racing and was far more fascinated by Bunbun, following closely behind her and repeatedly sniffing at her. Bunbun tried to move away, but Lucifer followed.

Then he attempted to climb onto her and

Brittney's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"LUCIFER!"

Several heads turned at the scream.

"GET THE FUCK OFF HER, YOU RABBIT WHORE!"

The outburst earned another wave of laughter from the crowd, but Brittney was beyond caring at that point. Where the hell had that Chibun picked up such behavior?

"Bunbun, don't let him distract you!" Trisha called, desperately trying to coax her Chibun forward. "Keep moving, baby girl. Don't let a male ruin your chances this early in life."

Unfortunately, the advice fell on deaf ears because Bunbun had other ideas. The sandy-brown Chibun stopped and turned around.

"Oh, no." Trisha covered her face with one hand. Even among animals, females were willing to throw away a promising future for a male.

Lucifer sniffed at Bunbun again. Then Bunbun struck him squarely in the face with one of her hind legs. Lucifer stumbled sideways, visibly stunned by the rejection, while Bunbun bounded several feet away from him.

"Yes!" Trisha pumped her fist into the air. "That's my girl! Mummy is so proud of you, Bunbun. Serves him right!"

"Excuse you." Brittney pointed indignantly at Bunbun. "Your daughter just assaulted my son."

"Your son tried to mount my daughter in the middle of a race."

"He's young! It's normal for him to explore!" Brittney cleared her throat, realizing how ridiculous she sounded even to herself.

"Brittney."

"What?"

Another cheer suddenly rose from the Ophidian side, and both women whipped around.

While they had been arguing over the questionable upbringing of their Chibuns, Fatima's cream-colored one had quietly made its way down the course. It crossed the finish line without any of the drama surrounding the others and immediately lowered its head to the treats waiting beyond it.

For a second, Trisha stared. Then her mouth fell open. "No, Bunbun!" she wailed. "We were so close!"

The Ophidian section celebrated their single point as though it were three. It wasn't much, but with two rounds remaining, the competition was far from decided.

Unfortunately, their excitement didn't sit well with Karen. That praise should have been hers!

She marched straight toward Venus, pointing furiously at her chestnut Chibun, which had wandered even farther from the finish.

"There’s something wrong with my Chibun. This game is rigged."

Already well acquainted with Karen’s temperament, Venus kept his response formal. "If the competition were rigged, I imagine you’d hardly be the only one complaining. You’ll receive a different Chibun in the second round, so keep your composure."

Unfortunately for Karen, Venus had spoken loudly enough for everyone nearby to hear.

And, as expected, Charlotte couldn’t resist.

"Only when things don’t go her way does she suddenly decide the game is rigged."

"Shut up, Charlotte!"

"And if I don’t?" Charlotte raised a brow. "What are you going to do? Daddy isn’t here to save you."

Humiliation burned through Karen, and she opened her mouth to retaliate, but Caelis’s voice carried across the court before she could.

"The first round is officially over. Therion takes three points."

The Therion section broke into cheers so loud one would have thought the fate of Bestiaris itself depended upon the outcome.

Maverick glanced down at Aria, unmistakable pride in his eyes.

"Aetheris takes two. Ophidian, one."

Despite coming last, Ophidian answered with the loudest roar, while Aetheris received their two points with considerably less enthusiasm.

Charlotte’s smile faded. An uncomfortable pressure settled over her. Second place wasn’t enough. She needed to do better in the next round.

"The second round begins immediately," Caelis announced before turning the proceedings back over to Venus.

Handlers moved onto the course to collect the Chibuns. Some went willingly. Others required considerably more persuasion.

Lucifer was among the latter.

He darted around the first handler who reached for him and made another determined attempt to follow Bunbun.

"Oh, for God's sake," Brittney groaned. "Somebody get my horny son."

Aria burst into laughter while Trisha covered her face. Across the court, the corner of Venus's mouth lifted. Like mother, like son.

From the corner of her eye, Aria noticed a handler approaching Karios.

The mottled grey-and-white Chibun had finished eating and now sat beside the empty dish, calmly running one paw over his face, blissfully unaware of the honor he'd just won for Therion.

As the handler bent down and scooped him up, an unexpected tenderness tugged at Aria's chest.

She waved. "Bye, Karios. I'll come back to claim you. That's a promise."

Karios's ears lifted.

The handler turned away, but the Chibun twisted in his arms, stretching his neck around the man's elbow. His dark eyes searched through the crowd until they found Aria.

Maverick noticed. "He really likes you."

Aria smiled. There was nothing particularly strange about that. She had handled enough animals at the shelter to know that sometimes they simply took to certain people faster than others.

Several feet away, however, Caelis had noticed too. He said nothing. One round proved very little. That was why there were three.

"Switch them," he ordered.

The handlers obeyed, redistributing the Chibuns among the nine competitors as another wave of excitement swept through the crowd.

Aria gave Maverick one last chaste kiss on the cheek before stepping away.

"Three points down," she said. "Six more to go."

Maverick smiled. "Go win, my Luna."

Aria beamed before returning to the starting area. A chestnut Chibun was immediately placed into her arms.

Karen’s Chibun.

The same troublesome little creature that had spent most of the previous round hopping everywhere except toward the finish.

Yet Aria looked down at him and smiled. "Welcome to the winning side, little one."

Across from her, Karen received Karios and her irritation disappeared almost instantly.

She stared down at the mottled Chibun in her arms, and a slow, satisfied smile spread across her face.

Now she had the winner.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 229: Celebrate With A Stranger[1,086 words]

"I can’t promise to adopt you too," Aria was already telling her newly assigned Chibun before the second round began. "But you should know there’s a delicious treat waiting at the end. You missed out the first time, and I’m sure you don’t want that happening again."

The chestnut Chibun stared up at her, its little nose twitching.

People said animals couldn’t understand human language, and perhaps that was true. But after spending so much time working with them at the shelter, Aria had learned that words weren’t always necessary. Animals responded to patience, tone and intention. Sometimes, getting through to them was simply a matter of making them trust you.

"Well, that’s the best argument I’ve got." She scratched gently between its ears. "The rest is up to you."

At Venus’s instruction, Aria lowered the Chibun onto the course and stepped back behind the starting boundary with the other competitors.

The gun went off, and much like the first round, chaos followed.

Several Chibuns scattered in different directions. One remained stubbornly planted where it had been released, while Lucifer had apparently learned nothing from his earlier rejection because he was once again interested in Bunbun than the race.

Unfortunately, Bunbun belonged to Charlotte this time.

"Get your Chibun under control!" Charlotte yelled.

Olivia, who had drawn the short straw of becoming Lucifer's temporary caretaker, threw her an exasperated look.

"What exactly do you expect me to do?"

Sweat already coated Olivia's forehead as she called and gestured uselessly from behind the starting boundary. Even Brittney hadn't managed to tame Lucifer during the first round. What terrible luck had landed her with the horny little menace?

But amid the familiar chaos, one thing was very different. Aria's chestnut Chibun took off as if his life depended on it.

A ripple of confusion spread among the contestants. But the spectators had a very different reaction.

Cheers rose from the students who had gambled on Aria securing another win, which was practically everyone from Therion and quite a few from the other Houses. After her first victory, plenty had backed her to win again, while others had dismissed it as beginner's luck.

Those people were beginning to regret their decision.

"Oh my God," Zainab said, staring at the chestnut Chibun racing down the course. "Isn't that the same one Karen said was rigged?"

Karen heard her. Her face burned.

Karios, the supposed champion she'd been so pleased to receive, hadn't moved an inch.

"What are you waiting for?!" Karen screamed, pointing toward the finish. "Move!"

Karios didn't so much as twitch. He sat comfortably where she'd released him, staring ahead like the entire competition had absolutely nothing to do with him.

"Come on!" Karen shrieked. "You did it before!"

Nothing.

For one furious second, Karen actually imagined giving him a kick just to get him moving. The thought disappeared almost as quickly as it came. There were too many people watching, and hurting one of the Chibuns would only turn the entire crowd against her.

Fuck! What kind of bad luck was this?

She hated this stupid game. She hated this school. She hated everyone currently laughing at her. Most of all, she hated Aria.

Her gaze snapped toward the other human.

That bitch had to be doing something. There was no other explanation.

Aria's Chibun had been useless with her, yet now it was racing like its fluffy little ass was on fire. Meanwhile, the Chibun that had won for Aria was suddenly useless the moment Karen got him.

Somehow, Aria was cheating. She had to be.

And as expected, the chestnut Chibun crossed the finish line and a deafening celebration swept through the arena.

Two straight wins?! That was crazy!

Aria barely had time to celebrate before Maverick reached her, swept her clean off her feet and spun her around.

"We won again!" she laughed, clutching his shoulders.

"You won again," he corrected, pride shining in his eyes.

Aria was still smiling when a small, unwelcome thought crept into the back of her mind.

Twice now, she had come first.

Her smile faltered.

Back at the province, being different had never earned her admiration. It had earned her whispers, cruel looks and one word she'd spent years pretending didn't hurt.

Freak.

What if people started wondering why the animals behaved differently with her?

Then Maverick grinned at her as if she'd accomplished something extraordinary, and the fear loosened its grip.

Maybe she was overthinking it. This was a Chibun race, for goodness' sake. She had simply gotten lucky. Twice.

Aria pushed the thought aside and allowed herself to enjoy the moment. Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one who had noticed the pattern.

Several feet away, Caelis stood perfectly still.

His attention wasn't on the cheering Therion students or the beasts celebrating their successful wagers. It was on the chestnut Chibun happily eating from the dish beyond the finish line. The same creature that had refused to cooperate with Karen. Then his gaze shifted toward Karios, still sitting exactly where Karen had released him.

Interesting.

One Chibun could be coincidence. Two made coincidence considerably harder to believe.

Caelis slowly returned his attention to Aria Aspen. There was something unusual about that human. He was almost certain of it now. He simply needed one final test.

Meanwhile, Brittney's new Chibun, the cream-colored one that had belonged to Fatima in the previous round, raced across the finish line and secured another point for Therion.

Brittney lost her mind.

"Yes!" she screamed, jumping into the air.

Perhaps it was the excitement, because for one reckless moment, Brittney completely forgot herself. She rushed toward Venus and began smacking both hands against his chest in celebration.

"I won! I won!"

Venus stared down at her. Then he cleared his throat.

Brittney froze. Her hands were still planted against his chest.

"Oh!"

She sprang away from him with a shriek like she'd just discovered she'd been touching something poisonous.

Fortunately, Therion was too busy celebrating another successful round for the interaction to draw much attention. Those who did notice seemed to think nothing of it. Brittney was hardly known for containing her excitement.

Trisha noticed, though.

Her brows pulled together as she watched Brittney hurriedly put several feet between herself and the serpent.

That was strange.

Brittney could be loud, dramatic and shameless when she wanted to be, but running to celebrate with a complete stranger wasn't like her. Especially an Ophidian.

Trisha frowned. Something was going on.

And Brittney wasn't telling her.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 230: Aria Is A Cheat[1,568 words]

No sooner had Brittney's Chibun crossed the finish line than Bunbun, who was still being relentlessly pursued by Lucifer, finally decided she'd had enough.

The sandy-brown Chibun bolted.

Unfortunately for Lucifer, she bolted in exactly the right direction. Bunbun shot down the remaining stretch of the course with Lucifer bounding eagerly after her, but she reached the finish line first, securing third place for Aetheris.

Charlotte threw a fist into the air.

"Yes!"

It wasn't the placement she'd wanted, but one point was better than nothing. She still kicked herself for losing first place to Aria again, although the sight of Karen standing at the starting line with absolutely nothing to show for the round made the defeat considerably easier to swallow.

For once, karma was giving that bitch exactly what she deserved.

But the loudest celebration belonged to House Therion.

Eight points.

They had dominated both rounds so completely that victory already seemed inevitable. Even if Aria failed to take first place in the final race, Therion had three competitors and only needed to secure another placement to put the competition firmly beyond everyone else's reach.

The Therion students were convinced it was already over. Their cheers filled the Outer Ring, with the students embracing, shouting and arguing excitedly over their winnings while several beasts were already boasting about Therion's victory as if the third round were merely a formality.

Karen could barely stand listening to it. Every cheer grated against her nerves. She looked at Karios, who had suddenly found the motivation to hop around now that the race was over, then toward the finish line where her former chestnut Chibun was happily eating after winning for Aria.

Something inside her snapped.

"Aria is cheating!"

The accusation cut straight through the celebration. Aria's laughter faltered as she turned away from Maverick.

"What?" For a moment, she genuinely wondered whether she'd heard correctly. "Excuse me?"

Nearby conversations began dying out as students turned toward the commotion. It didn't take long before the drama had captured the attention of practically everyone around them.

Karen marched forward. "You heard me. You're cheating."

Aria stared at her as though she'd lost her mind. "And how exactly am I doing that?"

"That!" Karen pointed furiously toward the chestnut Chibun. "I had him in the first round. He wouldn't listen to anything I said. Then you get him and suddenly he races straight to the finish line?"

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

"And Karios won the first round for you. Now I get him and he doesn't move at all until the race is over." She gestured toward the mottled Chibun. "How does that make any sense?"

The accusation planted a seed. Murmurs began spreading through the crowd as students glanced between Aria and the two Chibuns. Even some who hadn't thought much of her consecutive victories seemed to reconsider.

Aria's stomach sank. She didn't like where this was going.

"Maybe Karios just doesn't like you," Charlotte offered.

Laughter broke out.

Karen whipped toward her. "Nobody asked you, slut!"

Charlotte's expression darkened. "I'm only saying what everyone else is thinking, idiot."

"Enough," Aria cut in before the two could launch into another argument. "I don't know why they behaved differently with me. Maybe I got lucky."

"Twice?" Karen scoffed. "With two different Chibuns?"

"That's generally how luck works, Karen. Sometimes you get it more than once."

"You're doing something to them."

The amusement disappeared from Aria's face. She lifted her chin, refusing to give Karen the reaction she wanted.

"What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then perhaps you should figure that out before opening your mouth."

Several Therion students loudly agreed.

Karen's cheeks reddened, but she refused to back down. "You think nobody finds this suspicious? You win with Karios, then he becomes completely useless for me. The Chibun that was useless for me suddenly wins the second you touch him. That's not normal."

Not normal.

The words struck harder than they should have. Aria kept her expression composed, but coldness settled in her stomach. She knew those words. Or at least different versions of them.

Why do birds always gather around you? What's wrong with you? Freak.

Maverick moved closer, his hand settling against the small of her back. Aria knew immediately that he'd noticed the change in her.

Karen hadn't. She said to the audience, "There has to be something wrong with her, or she's using some kind of trick. She's definitely not innocent!"

A growl rolled through the air and Karen fell silent.

Maverick's eyes glowed gold.

"Choose your next words very carefully."His voice was low enough to make the warning worse.

"Maverick." Aria caught his arm.

His gaze shifted to her, and she gave a small shake of her head. She could handle this.

This wasn’t home. She wasn’t that girl anymore, and she didn’t need someone fighting every battle for her.

Aria faced Karen again.

"You want to know how I’m cheating? Fine. Tell me."

Karen faltered. "What?"

"Tell everyone what I’m supposedly doing." Aria spread her hands. "I’m standing behind the same line as you. I’m not touching my Chibun after the race starts. I’m not crossing the boundary. I’m not interfering with anyone else’s animal or touching the bait. So explain exactly how I’m cheating."

Karen’s mouth opened but nothing came out.

Aria’s lips curved wickedly. "That’s what I thought."

"The fact that I don’t know how you’re doing it doesn’t mean you’re not!"

"Perhaps," Caelis interrupted, "we should allow the person overseeing the competition to decide whether it has been compromised."

Heads turned towards the serpent prince.

Caelis remained where he’d been standing, one hand casually tucked into the pocket of his overcoat.

Karen’s eyes immediately brightened. Caelis was the Prince of her House, and if there was one thing she knew about him, it was that he had little patience for dishonesty.

"Yes, Prince Caelis." Hope crept into her voice. "You saw what happened. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you don’t find any of this suspicious."

"You’re right. I did see what happened."

Karen’s confidence soared while Caelis’s gaze drifted toward Aria. For the briefest moment, she had the uncomfortable sensation that he could see straight through her.

"And I find many things suspicious."

Aria’s heart skipped before picking up speed.

"Then disqualify her!" Karen demanded.

"No."

Her face fell.

"What?"

"Miss Aspen has broken none of the rules."

"But—"

"You were all informed before the competition began that Chibuns are notoriously unpredictable. One refusing to cooperate with you does not constitute evidence that another contestant cheated."

"Ha! Take that, sucker!" Brittney laughed from nearby.

Karen shot her a glare.

Caelis continued before she could respond. "Unless you can provide evidence that Miss Aspen violated an actual rule, the results stand. Being unusually successful is not grounds for disqualification."

Karen’s jaw clenched. She glared at Aria, but anger wasn’t going to prove anything. She needed evidence. Something that would expose whatever trick Aria was using and finally wipe that smug look off her face.

Then an idea struck her.

"Fine." Karen pointed toward Lucifer. "Give her my black Chibun in the final round. Let’s see if she maintains that successful streak with him."

Brittney’s head snapped around. "Excuse me?"

Karen barely glanced at her. "Everyone has seen how useless that ugly thing is—"

"Don’t you dare call my baby ugly, you overbleached, bargain-bin Barbie with the personality of a wet sock!"

Karen gasped. Even a few Therion students went quiet before laughter broke out around them.

Brittney folded her arms. "Yeah. I said it."

Karen looked ready to explode, but Caelis spoke before she could retaliate.

"Fine."

The laughter subsided.

"Miss Aspen will receive the black Chibun for the final round." Caelis turned toward Aria. "Provided you have no objection."

Aria stared at him.

She didn't particularly appreciate him entertaining Karen's ridiculous accusation, especially after he'd just admitted there was no evidence she'd cheated. But backing down now would only give Karen exactly what she wanted.

Besides, there was something deeply satisfying about the thought of winning with the Chibun everyone had already written off.

"It's fine." Aria looked directly at Karen. "I'll take Lucifer."

A satisfied smile spread across Karen's face.

Perfect.

Everyone had seen what Lucifer was like. He'd spent most of the competition chasing Bunbun instead of the finish line, and practically every contestant dreaded ending up with him.

She'd see Aria Aspen maintain her perfect record now.

"Good."

House Therion was considerably less pleased.

Boos and jeers immediately rose from their section, several students accusing Caelis of deliberately handicapping their best competitor. Even around the betting tables, uncertainty spread. Some who had been ready to put their money on Aria began reconsidering after watching Lucifer's performance in the first two rounds.

Caelis couldn't have cared less.

"The final round will proceed as planned." With that, he turned away.

Handlers moved onto the course, gathering the Chibuns and preparing them for the last race.

Karen lingered.

"This isn't over."

Aria sighed. "It never is with you."

The bitch scoffed and walked away. Aria watched her go before glancing toward Lucifer.

The black Chibun was sitting innocently in a handler’s arms as though he hadn’t spent the better part of two races sexually harassing Bunbun.

Aria narrowed her eyes at him. Lucifer stared back.

"Well," she murmured, "I suppose it’s you and me now."