Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast - Chapter 231: Do We Have An Understanding?[1,281 words]

Finally, the last race.

Caelis was quietly exhilarated, even though nothing on the outside betrayed it. His expression remained carved from stone, his posture relaxed as he watched the handlers prepare the Chibuns for the final round.

If even Karen, that stupid human, had noticed something unusual, then surely he was on the right track. The difference was that her accusation had been emotional, poorly presented and motivated almost entirely by humiliation.

He was none of those things.

Caelis was patient. Methodical. Almost impossible to rattle. He didn't allow excitement, anger or personal feelings to dictate his conclusions, and he certainly didn't make accusations without evidence to support them. Suspicion was useful, but only when one possessed enough discipline to test it before mistaking it for fact.

And that was precisely what he had been doing all night. The first Chibun could have been a coincidence. But the second had made that considerably harder to believe. Now there would be a third.

Caelis's gaze settled on Lucifer, and a dark glint shone in his eyes. Karen had unknowingly handed him the perfect final test. For once, her stupidity had worked in his favor.

As everyone dispersed for the final race, Maverick reached for his mate.

"Come here."

He pulled Aria into his arms, holding her against him for a moment before drawing back and cupping her cheeks between his palms.

"Listen to me," he said, his eyes fixed on hers. "I am so, so proud of you. And I don't care what that girl or anyone else says. You deserved every win because you worked for it."

It wasn't until Maverick said those words that Aria realized how much Karen's accusation had depleted her morale. She'd told herself she was fine, that her words didn't bother her, without realizing that a little doubt had managed to creep in anyway.

But as she stared into those stunning slitted grey eyes, her confidence slowly returned. Maverick looked at her as though she could commit the worst crime imaginable and he would still see the same woman standing before him.

"Thank you," Aria said, meaning it from the bottom of her heart.

Instead of saying you're welcome, Maverick stroked his thumbs across her cheeks.

"I'll always believe in you, Aria Aspen, no matter what everyone else says."

Aria couldn't answer this time. Emotion clogged her throat, and she could only nod as tears gathered in her eyes.

"Oh my God," Karen's voice rang out. "How dramatic can you be? Do we seriously have to wait for you every single—"

She never finished because Maverick lifted one hand and a sheet of ice formed over Karen's mouth.

Her eyes widened. Did he just...?

Aria pressed her lips together, fighting a laugh as she slipped from Maverick's arms and headed toward the starting line with a smirk.

Karen's disbelief quickly turned to panic when she realized Maverick had absolutely no intention of melting the ice, and the final race was about to begin.

"Mmmm! Mmm!"

Her muffled protests followed her as she took one furious step toward Maverick, intending to demand that he remove it. Then she caught the look in his eyes.

Karen stopped.

Something told her that approaching him right now might result in considerably more than a frozen mouth.

She changed direction towards Venus. Karen hurried toward the serpent, gesturing wildly at the ice covering her mouth before pointing at herself and making frantic motions for him to remove it.

Venus watched the performance with remarkable patience.

"Any injury or inconvenience incurred as a direct consequence of provoking Professor Nightshade is entirely your responsibility," he informed her.

Karen stared at him, speechless. Literally.

Venus glanced toward the starting line. "Moreover, your hands remain functional. You may still direct your Chibun."

Karen nearly saw red. This wasn't in the damn rules! They were doing this to her on purpose.

She whirled around in search of Caelis, only to discover that he was already looking at her. Even with his sunglasses concealing his eyes, the message was unmistakable.

Come over here and make this my problem. I dare you.

Karen immediately reconsidered, looking around desperately, but there was no time left and apparently no one was willing to help her. Every contestant had already received a Chibun, while hers had been left near the starting line for her to collect.

It was Fatima's cream-colored Chibun. The only creature that had managed to earn Ophidian their miserable single point. At this point, Karen was tempted to abandon the race entirely. They couldn't humiliate her like this and still expect her to participate.

Unfortunately, the moment she imagined walking away, Charlotte's face appeared in her mind. The bitch would never let her hear the end of it. Worse, she'd call her a coward.

As Karen remained rooted to the spot, the Ophidian students began losing patience. They booed her, and soon enough, several voices from the other Houses joined in.

"Get back in the fucking race, you coward!"

A crumpled paper betting slip sailed through the air and bounced harmlessly off Karen's shoulder.

Her eyes widened. But almost immediately,

someone else tossed a balled-up napkin.

"All she's done is throw accusations around all night! She hasn't even won the House a single point!"

"Stop embarrassing Ophidian!"

"Get to the line!"

Another crumpled betting slip struck the side of her head.

Karen’s face burned. It wasn’t until that moment that she finally understood what Caelis had meant when he’d warned her about House pride.

Ophidian didn’t care that Maverick had frozen her mouth shut or that she thought Aria was cheating. They cared that she was representing their House, and right now, she was embarrassing them.

The boos grew so loud that Karen didn’t even remember making the decision to move. One moment she was standing there beneath the weight of their ridicule, and the next she was hurrying toward the starting line, blinking rapidly against the tears blurring her vision.

She crouched and picked up the cream-colored Chibun. The little creature settled comfortably against her arms, blissfully unaware that its handler was experiencing the worst humiliation of her life.

Karen swallowed hard behind the ice. She had never been treated like this before, with no one rushing in to fix the problem for her. She wanted the ground to open and swallow her whole.

More than anything, she wanted her daddy.

At the same time, Aria picked up Lucifer with both hands. The black Chibun’s hind legs kicked furiously for a moment as he searched for purchase before finally settling in her hold.

Aria raised him until they were eye to eye.

"Listen up, Lucifer. I used to work around animals, so let me tell you something you might find interesting." Her expression turned deadly serious. "Do you know what happens to males who can’t stop chasing females and trying to mount everything that moves?"

Lucifer’s nose twitched.

"They get neutered."

The Chibun went completely still. Oh yeah. He could hear her just fine.

Aria narrowed her eyes. "And do you know what that means?"

Lucifer stared at her.

"Those two little balls you’re so proud of?" She lowered her voice. "Gone."

A tiny shiver ran through the Chibun.

Aria brought him closer.

"So here’s what we’re going to do. When this race starts, you’re going to forget Bunbun exists. No chasing after her or any other female. You’re going to run straight to that finish line, get your treat and keep your balls. Do we have an understanding?"

Lucifer’s ears slowly flattened against his head. Then, almost protectively, he tucked his hindquarters closer against her palm.

Aria bit back a smile.

"I’ll take that as a yes."