

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 31: Aria Freak

Curiosity was a terrible survival instinct.

~ Rebel Beast

Karen was a real bitch.

Just as she had planned with her newly appointed lieutenant, Charlotte, and the rest of her team of troublemakers, Karen had managed to claim the best room in the entire house.

Their room occupied the front corner of the loft level and was noticeably larger than the others. More importantly, it possessed the largest private balcony in the house. As if that wasn't enough, it came with a view overlooking the front gardens and the winding stone pathway leading toward the residence.

On the bright side, the room itself wasn't dramatically bigger. But the thought of Karen spending the next several weeks, assuming she lived long enough, bragging about it filled Aria with a great deal of irritation.

Fortunately, Brittney had fought like a banshee and managed to secure the second-best room. Not that it had come easily. Liv and her team had wanted it too. It had taken all four of them to drag the girls out and throw them into the hallway.

It wasn't Aria's finest moment, but at least they won.

Their room wasn't bad. Four queen-sized beds occupied the room, one in each corner, allowing enough privacy that they wouldn't constantly be breathing down each other's necks.

Soft cream walls made the space feel larger than it actually was. Matching wardrobes stood against one side while study desks had been positioned beneath the windows.

A thick rug covered most of the wooden floor. The room even had its own sitting area consisting of two armchairs and a small coffee table. The place was comfortable enough.

The best feature, however, was the balcony.

Unlike Karen's balcony overlooking the front of the residence, theirs sat along the side of the house.

Aria slid open the glass door and stepped outside.

The forest greeted her immediately. Towering trees stretched endlessly into the distance. Their dark silhouettes swayed gently beneath the night breeze while insects chirped somewhere beyond the tree line.

Now that she thought about it, while Karen got the front-facing balcony and could see visitors coming, theirs faced the woods and provided the best cover for sneaking out.

Not bad at all.

The woods felt close enough to touch, and the thought of a beast climbing through the trees and into their room should have unsettled her. Instead, Aria found herself relaxing.

There was something calming about being out in the open like this, listening to the wind rustling through the trees. She had always liked quiet places.

Unfortunately, she could never enjoy those moments for long.

At first, it was one firefly. It drifted over and settled directly onto Aria's palm resting on the balustrade. She lifted her hand, staring at the tiny luminescent creature.

"Well, hello there."

Aria smiled down at the insect with the fascination of a child. She was still studying it when a second one landed on her palm.

She chuckled.

"Guess that's your mate come to get you, huh?"

Then a third landed.

"Oh." She said. "That's your daughter?" Her brows furrowed. "Or son?"

Something suddenly settled on her cheek and even without looking, Aria could tell it was another firefly.

Slowly, she lifted her face and froze. A swarm of fireflies was floating toward her from the woods.

"Oh shit."

Aria suddenly realized just how screwed she was. She had thought she left her weirdness back home, but apparently it had followed her all the way to Bestiaris Academy.

Fantastic.

The last thing she needed was her new roommates discovering she was some sort of freak.

Although something told her the girls wouldn't react that way, the thought of them looking at her differently was still uncomfortable. She would no longer just be Aria. She would become Aria Freak.

So Aria began swatting at them.

"Please go away," she whispered urgently, waving her hands.

Except that seemed to make things worse. The more she tried to chase them away, the more they gathered around her. It didn't help that it was exactly that moment Brittney's voice called out from inside.

"Aria? Are you outside?"

"Oh God."

Aria was officially panicking.

"Just go already!"

She shook her body as if that would somehow discourage them. The fireflies remained completely unimpressed.

Brittney stepped onto the balcony.

"Aria, have you seen... whoa." She stopped mid-sentence and did a double take.

Having resigned herself to her fate, Aria slowly turned around to face her.

There was a very good reason for Brittney's reaction.

Aria was covered from head to toe in fireflies. They rested in her hair, perched on her shoulders, clung to her sleeves and dotted the fabric of her clothes. Hundreds of tiny lights blinked around her like living fairy lights.

She expected Brittney to scream, or stare at her with the wary look people often reserved for her whenever they stumbled onto scenes like this.

Instead Brittney, who had gone completely speechless, simply pulled out her phone and took a picture.

Click.

Aria stared, speechless. Brittney stared back. Then the girl turned and hollered toward the room.

"Yo, you guys should come see this!"

Aria's dread increased immediately as she heard the pitter-patter of hurried feet.

Trisha arrived first.

"This better be good, Brittney, otherwise..."

She trailed off. Her jaw nearly dropped.

"Holy Christmas lights."

The words came out as a stunned mutter.

"Whoa." Was all Alek managed. Her eyes widened in fascination rather than alarm.

Then Alek, ever the curious one, walked directly toward her. "How are you doing this?"

Aria groaned.

Alek pointed at the fireflies. "Insects don't normally gather around people like this. And definitely not in these numbers. Most species avoid larger creatures altogether."

Aria lifted both hands helplessly. "Guess who's a firefly magnet then?"

She gave them just enough of the truth.

Brittney grinned. "Well, I'm not complaining. You could always light my path whenever the electricity goes out."

Aria genuinely didn't know what to say at that point. She had expected them to stare at her like she was some kind of freak. Instead they had somehow turned the entire situation into a bonding moment.

It was very suspicious. So she scrutinized each of them carefully to see if they were faking it. But there was nothing. No fear, discomfort, or judgment.

Aria wondered if it was because they were from Nova City. Maybe strange things didn't faze them the way they did back home where she had been ostracized for far less.

Then, as if the fireflies had finally finished embarrassing her, they dispersed all at once. The tiny insects floated away into the darkness, their lights vanishing amongst the trees.

Aria caught the look of fascination on the girls' faces as they watched the rare display.

When the last firefly disappeared, she finally asked, "You guys aren't freaked out?"

Brittney frowned. "Freaked out over what?"

She raised a brow. "That hundreds of fireflies decided you're their favorite resting place?"

"Pretty much."

"Girl, we're attending Bestiaris Academy. Nothing can freak me out more than that.. Although..." Brittney added, a rogue smile appearing on her lips. "You seriously have to teach me how you did that. It was cool."

Aria blinked. That was cool.

This was the first time someone had ever called her freaky ability cool. Although it was obvious the girls believed it had simply been a coincidence and didn't realize this sort of thing happened around her all the time.

"Come on, let's go inside. We have things to discuss," Alek told her. "Unless, of course, you want something to come out of those woods and eat you. Just don't expect me to help."

Aria rolled her eyes, knowing it was a pathetic attempt to scare her. Yet her heart warmed at the thought of Alek actually being concerned about her.

So she followed them inside and Brittney immediately threw an arm over her shoulder.

Aria didn't exactly like being touched, but at that moment she welcomed it.

For the first time in a long while, she felt like she belonged somewhere. Like she had finally found her people. She could only hope it stayed that way forever.

If only wishes were horses.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 32: The Investment

Nothing changes a person faster than having someone who depends on them.

~ Rebel Beast

It was nearly midnight by the time the girls finally went to bed.

At least they had come up with a plan. Since there was only one kitchen in the house, they would wake up by five and prepare breakfast before everyone else. The others could fight over space and ingredients afterwards.

Except while Brittney, Alek, and Trisha slept, Aria remained awake. Not because the new bed was uncomfortable, but because she still needed to go through the contract Eniola had sent her.

The glow from her device illuminated her face as she sat cross-legged on her bed, carefully reading through every clause. She wasn't about to let some billionaire scientist outsmart her with legal nonsense.

Although Davina still hadn't responded to any of her messages, which worried her more than she cared to admit, it didn't mean she had given up on moving her sister out of Westmoor Province.

Eniola was right, after what happened during their arrival, life was not guaranteed here. While she would do everything in her power to survive, it still wasn't enough anymore. She needed insurance.

Insurance that if something happened to her, Davina would still have a real future. Not the kind where their mother kept setting them back every few years with another terrible choice of man, nor the kind people in Westmoor spent their entire lives dreaming about and never reached.

Aria could not afford a lawyer, so she had to go through the contract painstakingly, one clause at a time. Good thing her new phone came with all sorts of fancy upgrades and didn't lag. At least it saved her time switching between the contract, the internet, and the dictionary.

The first few pages were exactly what she expected. Legal jargon. Corporate jargon. And more legal jargon. Aria was convinced lawyers deliberately made contracts difficult to read so ordinary people would give up halfway through.

Then she reached the section that mattered.

ARTICLE 2: PARTICIPANT RESPONSIBILITIES

2.1 The Participant agrees to provide periodic observations regarding social, political, cultural, and academic developments occurring within Bestiaris Academy.

2.2 Such observations may include, but are not limited to, student interactions, institutional practices, inter-species relations, cultural customs, and unusual incidents.

2.3 The Participant shall make reasonable efforts to ensure information provided is accurate to the best of their knowledge.

"Information gathering my ass," Aria scoffed.

This was spying. But leave it to Eniola to turn spying into a respectable profession.

Aria continued reading.

ARTICLE 3: CONFIDENTIALITY

3.1 The existence of this agreement shall remain confidential.

3.2 The Participant shall not disclose the existence of this agreement to academy officials, beast citizens, government representatives, or other candidates.

The next section finally caught her attention.

ARTICLE 4: EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

4.1 Upon successful completion of the program, the Sponsor agrees to provide educational assistance to Davina Aspen.

4.2 Said assistance may include full academic tuition, housing, healthcare coverage, professional mentorship, and career placement opportunities.

4.3 Educational tuition and housing assistance shall become permanent upon execution of this agreement and shall not be revoked except in cases of fraud or deliberate misrepresentation by the Participant.

Aria slowed down and reread the section a second time. Good thing tuition and housing were permanent. She had worried that if she somehow quit, then the new life her sister and mother would enjoy could suddenly be taken away from them.

Just like that, some of the tension Aria had been carrying all day eased from her shoulders. If Davina could get an education and a roof over her head in Nova City, then she should be able to figure out the rest herself.

At least that was what Aria hoped.

4.4 PERFORMANCE CONTINGENCY

Should the Participant voluntarily terminate this agreement before completion of seventy percent (70%) of assigned objectives, the Sponsor reserves the right to suspend professional mentorship, internship placements, career sponsorships, and other supplementary advancement opportunities.

And there it was.

Aria knew Eniola Moore had not built an empire by handing out free favors. Still, she couldn't exactly call the clause unfair. The essentials remained protected while the extras had to be earned. That was business.

The next section made her sit up straighter.

ARTICLE 6: TASK ASSIGNMENTS

6.1 The Participant shall periodically receive assignments relevant to the objectives of this agreement.

6.2 Assignments may include observational reports, information gathering, cultural documentation, social assessments, and other tasks deemed appropriate by the Sponsor.

6.3 Certain assignments may contain completion deadlines.

6.4 Failure to complete assignments shall not affect educational assistance guaranteed under Article 4.3 but may impact performance evaluations and supplemental benefits.

Aria frowned. Assignments?

That sounded like a very corporate way of saying Eniola would be giving her potentially dangerous homework. The woman had conveniently forgotten to mention that part during their meeting.

But it wasn't like Aria hadn't seen it coming.

Her eyes continued moving down the page.

ARTICLE 7: PERFORMANCE TRACKING

7.1 Progress under this agreement shall be measured through objective completion and contribution assessments.

7.2 The Participant shall be informed periodically of their current completion percentage.

7.3 The Participant reserves the right to terminate this agreement at any time and for any reason without penalty to benefits guaranteed under Article 4.3.

A small smile tugged at Aria's lips. On the bright side, she wasn't signing away her life completely.

But on the other hand, Aria could see how tempting this arrangement was. While she technically had the freedom to leave, she could easily become consumed by the desire to give Davina everything and never walk away.

That was probably the entire point. Eniola Moore wasn't forcing her to stay, she was making her want to.

Aria took a deep breath. She just had to not get carried away.

If Eniola Moore wanted a spy, very well, she'd be that well-paid spy. After all, if the beasts were keeping secrets, she wanted to know them too.

So, Aria put down her signature in the signing section.

It was done.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 33: Breakfast Gone Wrong

Aria had spent her entire life trying not to stand out. Fate seemed determined to ignore her wishes.

~ Rebel Beast

The heat of the morning sun was the first thing that hit Aria's face and warned her that what she had feared had actually happened.

"Oh shit!"

Aria jerked upright immediately, like someone waking from a terrible nightmare.

For one blissful second, she hoped she was wrong, until she looked toward the window. The sun was already blazing in all its glory. Her heart sank.

Slowly, Aria picked up her phone and checked the time.

8:03 a.m.

"No!"

What happened to five in the morning?

What happened to their genius plan of waking up early and taking over the kitchen before everyone else?

Aria whipped her head toward her roommates' beds, desperately hoping that by some miracle they had decided to cook without her. But she should have known better than to place her faith in a bunch of aristocratic teenagers.

Brittney was still asleep. Her mouth hung open while a thin trail of drool had escaped onto her pillow at some point during the night. One of her arms dangled off the side of the bed while her blanket was twisted around her legs like she had spent the entire night fighting an invisible enemy.

In that split second, Aria made a mental note never to touch that pillow. Ever. Then her gaze drifted toward Aleksandra and Trisha's side of the room.

Alek had somehow managed to sleep diagonally across her bed. One leg hung halfway off the mattress while her blanket was bunched beneath her skin.

Meanwhile, Trisha still had her sleeping mask firmly in place despite the fact that they had gone to bed with the lights off.

"Guys!!!!!" Aria screamed at the top of her lungs.

Brittney was the first to wake.

"What..." she mumbled groggily. Her eyes slowly drifted toward the sunlight pouring through the windows.

"Huh?"

Then she looked at Aria as though trying to determine whether this was reality or some particularly cruel dream.

"What's the time?" she asked.

Aria was not in the mood. She simply glared at the girl.

Brittney immediately sat up. "Oh no."

"What's with the ruckus this early in the morning?" Trisha complained, pulling the sleep mask from her face.

At almost the exact same moment, Aleksandra stretched lazily on the bed. Then her eyes landed on the sunlight and the sleep vanished from her face instantly.

"Shit!" She grabbed her phone and checked the time.

"Oh yeah," Aria thought darkly. She knew that feeling.

"What happened?" Brittney looked genuinely baffled. "I did turn on the alarm."

She immediately grabbed her phone and shoved it toward them. Aria looked down and true to Brittney's words, there wasn't just one alarm. There were eight.

One had been set for five in the morning. Another for fifteen minutes later. Then twenty past five. Half past five. Twenty to six. Quarter to six. Ten to six, and finally, one last desperate alarm for six o'clock.

The alarms stretched down the screen like the schedule of a particularly paranoid person.

Aria's jaw nearly dropped to the floor. To think all those alarms had gone off one after another and not a single one of them had heard a thing.

That wasn't oversleeping anymore, it was a group talent.

But Aria knew deep down that if she hadn't stayed up late reading the contract, she would have been awake long before the others. Unlike her pampered roommates, she was used to waking up early.

"It must have been the stress of the trip. I'm so sorry," Alek said, looking genuinely guilty as though it had somehow been her responsibility to wake all of them.

"Why are you sorry?" Aria asked. "This is all our fault. Unfortunately, we can't dwell on it forever. What matters now is getting downstairs and hoping to God there's something left for us."

Without wasting another second, Aria rushed into the bathroom. She rinsed her mouth, splashed cold water across her face, and ran wet fingers through her hair. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

She didn't even wait for the others. Aria practically flew out of the room and down the staircase. Perhaps by some twist of fate, the others had overslept too.

Except that wasn't the case.

The moment she stepped into the living room, her hopes died.

Liv's group was already there. They occupied the couches and looked half asleep. The tired, resigned look on their faces was all the warning Aria needed.

She immediately headed for the kitchen.

The smell hit her before she even reached the doorway.

Burnt.

It was not the pleasant smell of slightly overcooked toast. No, this was the thick, bitter stench of food that had been left too long on the fire.

Aria's brows furrowed as she quickened her pace. Please tell her nobody was wasting food.

Getting to the kitchen area, there was no sign of Karen. However, Charlotte, Philippa, and Debbie had completely taken over the space. All three girls wore aprons tied neatly around their waists like professional chefs running a high-end restaurant.

If only their cooking matched the image.

Charlotte stood by the stove, frowning in concentration as she tried to scrape a blackened egg off a frying pan. Beside her, Philippa and Debbie stared at the egg with the strained expressions of people watching a disaster unfold in slow motion.

"Hey!" Charlotte spotted her immediately and pointed the spatula at Aria as though it were a weapon. "We are the ones in charge of the kitchen for now!"

Aria barely acknowledged her.

Her attention remained fixed on the egg Charlotte dumped onto a growing pile of barely edible fried eggs. Some were burnt around the edges while the others looked half raw in the middle.

Then her nose twitched, the smell was far too strong for a few ruined eggs. That was when her gaze shifted to the trash bin.

Aria walked over and froze. The bin was overflowing with burnt eggs.

She saw the blackened shells, half-cooked yolks, and entire eggs that looked as if someone had cracked them into a pan only to immediately destroy them. Mixed among the mess were clumps of scorched rice, slices of bread burnt so badly they resembled charcoal, and what looked suspiciously like an entire pot of porridge scraped directly into the garbage.

Aria's eyes widened. How did anyone fail this many times?

"Hey, Trip! I'm still talking to you!"

Charlotte had apparently decided to switch to insults after realizing she wasn't getting Aria's attention.

Aria ignored her. Instead, she marched to the refrigerator and yanked the door open.

Her stomach dropped.

The crate of eggs that should have fed all sixteen girls was almost empty. There were only ten eggs left. The loaf of bread had been reduced to a few lonely slices. Even the carton of milk, fruits and vegetables were nearly gone.

Aria gripped the refrigerator door. At this rate there wouldn't be enough food left for her group to make breakfast, let alone the other poor girls.

Her jaw clenched. This had to be deliberate. Nobody could be this incompetent. The only reasonable explanation was that Karen's group were wasting supplies on purpose so everyone else would suffer.

The refrigerator door suddenly slammed shut. The loud bang nearly caught her fingers. Aria jerked back and when she lifted her head, Karen was standing in front of her.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 34: Teach The Rich

The academy wanted them to fear the beasts. Nobody warned them about the humans.

~ Rebel Beast

"What do you think you're doing?" Karen glared intently at Aria.

Aria lifted a brow. "What do you mean?" Her lips twitched. "Or rather, shouldn't I be the one asking that?"

Karen's expression darkened. "Excuse me?"

Aria's eyes flicked toward the bin overflowing with ruined food.

"What's the meaning of all this?"

Karen followed her gaze, yet she showed no remorse whatsoever.

"So?" Karen demanded, lifting a brow.

"So?" Aria huffed in disbelief.

She knew an altercation between her and Karen had been inevitable. She simply hadn't expected it to happen this soon. Or over breakfast.

"You let your group waste food and all you can say is 'so'?"

"Ah." Karen nodded slowly, realization finally dawning on her. "So that's your problem. I should have known."

It wasn't just the wasted food, but Karen's complete indifference that made the anger bubble inside Aria. But she held herself still.

She would not lose control in front of Karen. Not when that was clearly what the girl wanted.

"The ingredients in that fridge weren't for you alone," Aria told her. "Nor were they for your team to experiment with. If you had no idea how to cook, the least you could have done was approach one of the groups that could and make a deal. Everyone wins."

She gestured around. "Now look at the mess you've made."

But Aria might as well have been lecturing a brick wall because the girl barely reacted.

"You expect me to beg people for food?" Karen actually laughed as though the idea was absurd.

"Yes." Aria didn't back down. "If you can't cook, which is a basic survival skill by the way, then yes. Swallow your pride and ask for help instead of making everyone starve because of your team's stupidity."

The kitchen suddenly went quiet. Even some of the girls in the living area had come to see the drama.

"Or..." Karen drawled. "Since you're apparently so good at it, maybe you should have woken up early and cooked breakfast for all of us. Don't you think so, girls?" she looked at her teammates around her who stifled their laughter behind their hands.

All except Phillipa. The girl looked increasingly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

Aria felt her jaw tighten. Right now, she was marble and stone, Karen wouldn't get a reaction out of her.

"However, I understand." Karen placed a hand on Aria's shoulder and offered her a patronizing smile.

Aria resisted the urge to throw it off.

"Where I come from, food like that gets fed to the dogs." She emphasized the last word intentionally. "Which means the girls can experiment all they want if that's what it takes for them to learn how to make me breakfast. I'm sure the academy has more supplies somewhere."

Karen's expression hardened. "And if not, you can always feed everyone once the fridge gets restocked."

Her face suddenly shifted into a look of mock sympathy. "Oh, but if you're really that hungry, you can always eat it out of the bin." She gestured toward the trash can. "I heard that's how people like you avoid wasting food anyway."

She added, "You could even send some home to your family. I'm sure they'd appreciate it."

It was one thing insulting Aria, but it was another getting her family involved.

"Is that so?" Aria's lips curved to the side. "Why don't I show you how we poor people do it then?"

Before any of them could predict Aria's move, she lunged forward and grabbed Karen by the hair. Hard.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Karen screamed as pain shot through her scalp.

But Aria's face was hard, her mind made up.

She yanked Karen forward and shoved her face straight into the bin.

A gasp rent through the space.

"Karen!" Charlotte screamed hysterically.

Her eyes were wide, unable to believe what she was seeing.

How dare this scum do this to Karen? Did she have any idea who Karen was?

But Aria certainly didn't care. Not even a little. She tightened her grip and smeared Karen's face through the mess inside the bin.

"We poor people hardly pick food from the bin because there's barely enough to waste!" she snarled. "But since rich people love wasting it so much, it's up to the poor to teach them not to!"

Karen had never suffered a humiliation like this in her entire life. The smell alone was enough to make her gag. Ruined eggs clung to her cheek while something sticky tangled up in her hair. She struggled with everything she had to break free, but Aria was stronger than she was.

"Charlotte!" she managed to scream, and that seemed to snap Charlotte out of it.

With a furious shriek, she rushed toward Aria intent on tearing her away from Karen.

But right at that moment, Brittney burst through the crowd of students gathered around the kitchen.

"Oh no, you don't!"

She launched herself into the fight without a second thought and grabbed Charlotte by the hair seconds before she could reach Aria.

Thus their own fight began.

Unfortunately, Debbie immediately rushed in to help Charlotte, turning it into a two-against-one fight.

Philippa stood off to the side, conflicted.

Aria had helped her on the bus. But if she didn't help Karen, the girl would make her life miserable afterwards.

At that same moment, Alek and Trisha arrived too, their jaws dropping at the sight before them.

The kitchen looked like a war zone. Karen was halfway inside a trash bin and Aria looked seconds away from committing a felony.

Charlotte and Debbie were trying to rip Brittney's hair out.

Trisha groaned mentally. She should have known. Brittney had a knack for finding trouble.

She looked at Alek as if asking what to do.

But the girl saw through the look and merely shrugged.

"Do we have a choice?" she asked. "It's a team, remember?"

Thus the both of them joined in the fight.

Chapter 35: Murder Her

The difference between a leader and a bully was usually who held the power.

~ Rebel Beast

The kitchen was in utter chaos.

Karen had managed to break loose from Aria's grip, except she looked absolutely ridiculous. Egg yolks dripped down her cheeks while bits of burnt rice clung to her hair. Something green that might have once been a vegetable was also stuck near her temple.

Right now, Karen's eyes were livid and she looked like she might murder Aria. Except instead she plunged a hand into the bin, grabbed a handful of ruined food, and hurled it at her.

"You fucking bitch!" she screeched. "You don't know who you messed with! I'm going to kill you!" She genuinely looked insane at this point.

Aria, on her own part, focused on avoiding the food being launched at her like projectiles.

"News flash, this is Bestiaris Academy!" she retorted. "We're all dead anyway!"

On the other hand, Brittney and Charlotte were locked in a stalemate, both girls gripping fistfuls of each other's hair.

"Let go of my hair right now, whore!" Charlotte shrieked.

"Why don't you let go first, dragon ass-kisser?" Brittney shot back.

She meant that literally.

Charlotte laughed in disbelief. "No wonder your family is so ashamed of you. You should whore around a little more. It suits you anyway."

She spoke through gritted teeth, her scalp undoubtedly protesting the treatment.

Just as Alek always said, "rich people circle". Charlotte knew everything about Brittney's background and was using it against her.

Unfortunately, she forgot that Brittney was the type of person who bit back twice as hard.

"Is that so?" she chuckled mirthlessly. "I wonder if the Larson family knows their daughter has a thing for dragons. I mean, if they searched your room thoroughly enough, they might even find your little dragon shrine."

Forget the fact that Aria had started this fight. At this point, Brittney seemed determined to make sure everyone left with emotional damage.

As for the other group, Debbie seemed to realize she had gotten herself into a bit of a situation when Trisha locked her in a headlock from behind.

"What the fuck!" Debbie shouted, smacking repeatedly at Trisha's arm. "You didn't tell me you knew martial arts! Let me go right now!"

Trisha barely seemed bothered. In fact, she looked far too comfortable in that position, having hooked one arm around Debbie's neck while keeping her body positioned behind her. At the same time, she used her weight to keep Debbie pinned in place.

No matter how much Debbie twisted, kicked, or flailed, she couldn't break free. It was honestly impressive and slightly terrifying.

"Martial arts?" Trisha scoffed. "You people really do underestimate yoga."

"Yoga?" Debbie was unable to believe her ears.

"Yes."

"Yoga doesn't teach people how to do this!"

Debbie let out an incoherent noise of frustration as she attempted another escape.

"It teaches flexibility," Trisha corrected, unfazed by her struggling. "And flexibility teaches you how to put people in very unfortunate positions." She punctuated her point by tightening her hold further.

At that point, Debbie resigned herself to her fate, knowing she was never getting out of this unless Trisha decided to let her go.

As for Alek and Philippa, the both girls were playing a game of chase. Philippa wanted to interfere in the fight and help Karen, but Alek wouldn't let her cross over.

Every time Philippa tried moving left, Alek stepped left. When she tried the right, Alek moved right too. At some point, they had gone around the kitchen island twice.

"Would you get out of my way already?" Philippa snapped.

"No."

"Karen needs help!"

Alek shrugged. "Aria needs help too."

Philippa glared at her. Aria obviously had the upper hand. Alek glared right back. As long as her team was winning, nobody was interfering in that fight. Absolutely nobody.

"What in the hell is going on here?!"

A voice suddenly thundered through the room, causing all the girls to halt as if someone had pressed pause on them. They knew that voice.

The remaining crowd of students that had been cheering them on suddenly went silent. Then they quickly parted, forming a path through the middle of the room.

A familiar figure came into view. A furious-looking Abigail stood in the middle of the opening, glaring at them. Her chest rose and fell with each heavy breath.

Her gaze swept across the room, taking in the food scattered across the floor, Karen covered in garbage, Charlotte and Brittney still gripping handfuls of each other's hair, and Debbie trapped in Trisha's hold.

The more she looked, the darker her expression became. Then her gaze finally settled on Aria and the storm brewing in those eyes darkened even more.

"You!" Abigail growled, immediately coming to a conclusion. "You did this, didn't you?"

"Excuse me?" Rage flared inside Aria.

Abigail stormed over to her.

The woman only had a few inches on Aria in height, but she was broader and built like someone who could throw a grown man through a wall. Standing over her now, she looked genuinely threatening.

"I warned you the last time, didn't I?" she glared down at Aria. "I knew you were trouble the first time I laid eyes on you!"

To make matters worse, Karen chose that exact moment to air her complaints.

"She shoved my face into the bin!" she cried.

To demonstrate, Karen grabbed her own head and mimicked the motion of being forced downward.

"She kept pushing my face into it!"

Then, as if that wasn't enough, she added, "I swear she wanted to kill me!" Already emotional, it didn't take much effort for Karen to add a little extra drama to her theatrics.

Hearing that, Abigail's head snapped toward Aria. From the way she was glaring at her, Aria swore the woman looked seconds away from murder.

Aria's heart began to thunder inside her chest, causing her to take an involuntary step backward.

Then something happened.

Right at that moment, a loud crash shattered through the kitchen windows as glass exploded inward. At the same time, a chorus of harsh cawing filled the air as a murder of crows burst through the broken openings.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 36: "Fear" For Their Lives

The beasts feared human ambition. The humans feared beast power. Neither side realized fear was the true enemy.

~ Rebel Beast

Like a living black cloud, the birds flooded the kitchen. For a brief moment, everyone simply stared until one of the crows slammed directly into Abigail's face.

The woman screamed, except a second bird followed immediately after and blood flowed from her left eye. Abigail staggered backwards, clutching her face.

The girls screamed in terror. The sight was horrifying. Just seconds ago, Abigail had been the most dangerous person in the room. Now she was just another victim.

Chaos broke out as the crows descended upon everyone else.

Aria's heart nearly stopped at the scene. At first, fear engulfed her, having thought it was her doing. But that thought lasted only a second.

This wasn't her. And that made it far worse.

Breakfast was completely forgotten as the girls began running in every direction. Some tried hiding beneath the kitchen island while others covered their heads and curled into balls on the floor. The crows didn't care and swooped down anyway.

A terrified scream made Aria turn only to see that it was Philippa. As expected from the selfish Karen, she had abandoned all dignity and was trying to force her way through the commotion toward the exit.

Except she was using Philippa as a human shield, keeping the girl in front of her, having decided her own life mattered more than anyone else's.

Not surprising, the crows attacked Philippa while the girl raised her arms over her face, screaming as she tried to protect herself.

"That horrible bitch!" Aria shouted in anger.

Even now Karen was using people.

"Get down!" Alek yelled from somewhere nearby.

Aria turned to see Trisha pressed so tightly against the wall she was practically one with it. However, it wasn't enough. All it would take was for one of the crows to notice her and it would be over.

Alek was already on her stomach, using one arm to shield her head while the other protected her face.

"Don't stand!" she shouted. "Crawl! Protect your face!"

Trisha listened immediately. She dropped lower and covered her head. Even then she was screaming. Everyone was screaming. The kitchen area had become a nightmare.

Feathers filled the air while broken glass crunched beneath frantic feet. The cawing had reached a deafening level. Aria lowered herself too, but almost immediately realized something.

This wasn't going to work. The birds were everywhere and didn't look like they'd be leaving anytime soon. If anything, they seemed determined to keep attacking.

And if these were beast shifters, then they definitely weren't safe if they stayed here.

"THIS ISN'T GOING TO WORK!" Aria shouted.

The others looked toward her.

"We need to get to the safety of our room!"

For a moment, nobody moved. Then all four of them looked at each other and made up their minds.

"At the count of... one..." Aria breathed hard, studying the area for the perfect opening.

"Two..."

Her heart was pounding. Then she saw the moment most of the birds focused on Debbie, who had made a straight run for it.

"Now!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

That was all it took. All four of them broke into motion.

They ran, colliding with some of the other students who were also making a run for it. Someone fell, but there was no time to check who it was, and another student stepped over the victim. The entire residence had descended into madness.

Right now, it was survival of the fittest.

"Move!" Aria screamed at her roommates, who knew their lives were on the line. She remained at the back and could only move when they did.

Together, they bolted successfully from the kitchen and made it to the staircase packed with panicked students. The girls pushed themselves through whatever little space they could find, shoving past anyone who wasn't fast enough. Alek reached the top first, followed by Trisha and Brittney.

Aria wanted to follow, but someone grabbed her ankle, tripping her.

"Aria!" the girls shouted.

"Just go! I'm right behind you!" she shouted, scrambling back to her feet and prompting the girls to move on.

At that moment, a crow swooped low and Aria ducked, causing the bird to slam into the wall beside her.

Son of a biscuit!

But the creature immediately launched itself back into the air. Not just that. More were coming.

The girls finally reached their hallway, their room only a short distance away. Aria was the only one still far behind.

"Open it!" Aria shouted from her position.

Brittney reached the door first and threw it open. She went inside, followed by Trisha and Alek. They waited urgently for Aria.

Unfortunately, the birds noticed and were smart enough to realize their prey was about to escape.

"ARIA!" Brittney screamed when she saw how close the birds were.

The first crow was almost on top of her. Aria felt it as though she had a second pair of eyes at the back of her head. She would make it, but that meant the birds would enter with her too.

She couldn't let that happen.

Instead of entering, Aria grabbed the door and slammed it shut, dropping low at the same time. Thanks to the momentum, the first bird smashed into the wood with a loud thud.

Unfortunately, a second crow was already diving straight toward her. Without thinking, she slipped off her left flip-flop and swung so hard her arm vibrated from the force. The crow spun sideways and crashed into the wall.

A third bird spotted her and dove straight at her. Except the door opened right at that moment and hands reached through the opening, grabbing her.

Brittney, Trisha, and Alek yanked Aria into the room before the third crow could reach her, slamming the door shut behind them. A second later, something heavy struck the door while the girls collapsed onto the floor.

That had been close.

Except they were not truly safe.

This was still an open space, and any crow determined enough could still find a way in.

"To the bathroom!" Aria hollered.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 37: The Aftermath

When the crows descend, even old enemies forget why they were fighting.

~ Rebel Beast.

"Wonderful morning, Uncle Dimitri," Maverick said over his cup of steaming coffee, his back turned to him. He didn't need to look to recognize who usually entered his room without knocking.

"Ahh," Dimitri breathed. "Finally, someone decided to respect me." There was a hint of amusement in his tone.

Maverick smiled into his coffee before taking another sip.

While Dimitri was technically his uncle, he was also younger than him by an entire month. Their family tree was, err... complicated.

His mother, Violet Purple, had been raised by Nancy, her legal human mother. The details involving her biological Fae mother were a story for another day.

Years later, Nancy married Ezra King, who had once served as his father, Asher Nightshade's sub-alpha. Which was where the complication began.

Violet married Asher Nightshade while Nancy married Ezra King. Then both women had children, except Violet gave birth first. The result was that Dimitri became his uncle despite being younger than him.

Family gatherings tended to be very confusing to outsiders. At least Nancy and Ezra were happy together. The same could be said for Violet and Asher.

Unfortunately, this meant Maverick was stuck with Dimitri reminding him at every available opportunity that he should respect his elders.

"You are fashionably late to class today," Dimitri pointed out, coming to stand a few meters away from him. He wrapped his arms around his chest, muscles bulging from the action.

"After the terror I suffered at the hands of the humans yesterday, a little rest was needed." Maverick grimaced as he recalled the events.

He added, "Besides, I believe I've earned enough goodwill around this academy to disappear for a morning without being questioned."

"Hmm," Dimitri said. "So the workaholic Maverick Nightshade does know when to catch his breath?"

Maverick gave him a look but ignored him, knowing Dimitri was just trying to get a reaction out of him. He placed his empty mug on the counter before leaving the area.

Logically, he should have been living with the other staff in the staff quarters, but Maverick stayed in House Therion.

Part of it was to keep the beasts in line. Left to themselves, the dormitory would have returned to the same disastrous state it had been in before he arrived at the academy. Not that he could have stayed away even if he wanted to.

House Therion recognized him as the strongest land beast on campus. It was his responsibility to rule over them. Otherwise, chaos would eventually descend.

His Alpha suite occupied the highest floor and was easily the largest living space in the entire dormitory. Dimitri stayed in the suite next door as his Beta.

Maverick returned to the living area where floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked House Therion's grounds. Dimitri followed after him and plopped down onto one of the couches.

"So, are you ready to talk?" Dimitri demanded.

Maverick made a face, already knowing this was either a conversation about the humans or the beasts. Around here, there was rarely any other topic other than that.

"What do you want to say, Uncle?"

Maverick chose to remain standing. A fitted charcoal shirt hugged his broad frame while the sleeves had been neatly rolled just below his forearms. Over it sat a dark tailored vest embroidered with bronze detailing. His black trousers were perfectly pressed while polished black loafers completed the look.

There wasn't a single crease on him, nor stains from the coffee either. Everything about Maverick Nightshade was perfect.

From the way his purple hair had been styled to the expensive watch resting around his wrist, he looked less like someone preparing to teach a class and more like the heir of one of the most powerful families in the United Dorminia.

Unfortunately, he was painfully aware of the effect he had on people, especially the

students. There was a reason his classes were always filled to the brim, and it certainly wasn't because the teenage girls were suddenly fascinated by beast history.

"How long do you intend to keep the human girls locked up before they start attending classes?" Dimitri asked him.

Maverick stared out the windows. Students crossed the grounds heading to class while others lingered in small groups near the courtyard.

"As long as it takes," Maverick answered. "I won't release them until I can prove it's safe for them to attend classes."

Dimitri sighed. "You do realize what's scarier than a beast?"

Maverick didn't respond.

"A bunch of teenage girls trapped in the same house with nothing to do."

A muscle twitched in Maverick's jaw.

"I'm doing everything in my power to keep them alive. The least they can do is behave."

"You're right," Dimitri concurred, "Sorry about that. You're obviously under a lot of stress already. However, I just think that after practically delaying a war between the beasts last night, keeping the girls confined to the same house all day might provide the perfect opportunity for some idiot kid to eliminate them all at once."

That finally got Maverick's attention because he wasn't wrong.

He did think about that. Maverick had simply assumed his authority would be enough. Moreover, it was a mind game.

The dragons and serpents were practically at each other's throats. If one faction was seen eliminating too many humans and repeatedly getting punished for it, eventually they would realize they were paying the price while their rivals were gaining ground.

Maverick had been hoping both sides would reach a stalemate and leave the girls alone.

Any humans who survived long enough for that to happen? Well. Good luck to them.

Now, he could only hope he hadn't given them too much credit.

Suddenly, Maverick's phone rang. At the exact same moment, Dimitri's phone rang as well. The both of them looked at each other and said nothing. They didn't need to. Not when they could sense something was wrong.

Maverick frowned before pulling his phone out.

It was Mike, the captain of the patrol team assigned to the human residence. A bad feeling settled in his stomach.

He answered immediately.

"Mike?"

The response that greeted him was chaos. There was shouting in the background. Most of all, the harsh cawing of birds.

For a moment, Maverick couldn't make sense of any of it. Then Mike's voice finally broke through.

"Alpha!" The man sounded breathless.

"What is going on?" Maverick demanded with a growl.

"A murder of crows!" Mike shouted over the noise. "Someone sent a murder of them!"

Another scream echoed in the background.

Maverick's expression darkened.

"We're trying to contain them but they're everywhere!"

A loud crash sounded through the phone.

"I'm trying my best!" Mike yelled. "But I can't say the same for the humans! They're too much to handle!"

The line suddenly dissolved into static before going dead. Silence settled between both men.

Dimitri slowly lowered his own phone too.

"Guess the dragons aren't afraid of their grades after all."

It wasn't difficult to guess who had orchestrated the attack. The lower beasts rarely moved without the approval of an apex beast.

And crows were an Aetheris specialty.

Maverick's jaw clenched hard. Without another word, he stormed out of the suite.

Dimitri immediately followed behind him.

The doors slid open and Maverick stepped into the corridor with such force that several students jumped.

One unfortunate boy failed to move fast enough and Maverick shoved him aside. The student stumbled into the wall.

The others learned quickly. By the time he reached the staircase, students were already getting out of his way before he arrived.

Whispers followed behind him.

"What happened?"

"Why is Professor Nightshade in such a hurry?"

"Was there an attack?"

"I bet it's the humans."

"Well, it was only a matter of time. Did anyone really think the dragons or serpents would happily accept those rules from last night?"

Maverick ignored every word. Moments later, he reached the parking area and entered his vehicle. Dimitri climbed in from the other side.

The engine roared to life, and they were gone. The journey should have taken five minutes but Maverick made it in three.

His hands tightened around the steering wheel, his eyes set on the road. There was a strange dread sitting in his chest, which made absolutely no sense.

Since when had he started caring this much about the humans? They were here because of their own stupidity. They were not his responsibility. At least, not beyond a certain point.

That was what he kept telling himself. Unfortunately, one particular human kept surfacing in his mind.

The one human whose thoughts he couldn't read.

The one who had somehow managed to catch his attention despite all his efforts not to care.

The vehicle screeched to a stop outside the human residence. Before it had fully settled, Maverick was already stepping out.

His gaze immediately lifted toward the sky. In the distance, dark shapes were flying away from the residence.

The crows were leaving, their mission complete, leaving him to stare at the aftermath of their destruction.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 38: The Look In His Eyes

A beast's claws are easy to see. A human's ambition hides beneath a smile.

~ Rebel Beast

"Good morning, ladies," Rhydian said, smoothly sliding his arms around the waists of two female beasts.

"Rhydian!"

Both females cooed, one of them even playfully slapping a hand against his chest for the way he had snuck up on them.

Valerie and Variant were two of his favorite girls from House Therion, if you knew what he meant.

The girls weren't twins, but two best friends who liked pretending they were. Probably because they were distant cousins. Valerie was a squirrel while Variant was a chipmunk. Neither ranked particularly high on the power scale.

Tamara had often looked down on him for "schmoozing" with the lower beasts. In her language, if he was going to fool around, then he should do it with beasts of his own standing.

Except Tamara didn't understand that the lower beasts were far more fun to be around than the stuck-up powerful females.

One conversation with a dragoness and they were already imagining wedding ceremonies and dreaming of becoming the next Lady Drakhar.

It wouldn't even be beneath some of them to try trapping him with a pregnancy if they thought it would improve their chances. So no. That was not happening.

He would rather dirty himself in the mud with the lower beasts. At least Valerie and Variant had no expectations whatsoever. They knew exactly what this was. Fun. Nothing more.

Dragons were proud, majestic creatures who almost exclusively intermarried within their own kind in order to preserve their bloodline. They were fiercely traditional when it came to mating and family lines.

A dragon prince could never marry a chipmunk or a squirrel. The thought alone was laughable. He knew it. They knew it.

Which was why they enjoyed themselves without unnecessary complications, knowing every day together could easily be the last. Not that Rhydian was exclusive anyway.

Rhydian Drakhar had proudly carried the title of dragon-whore for years.

He guffawed at their reaction.

"Well then, we'd better get breakfast. This dragon, for one, is quite famished."

It was an innocent comment. However, it came from Rhydian and the dragon prince somehow managed to say it in a way that immediately brought color to both girls' cheeks.

"Oh, come on, stop already, Rhydian!" Valerie, the more reserved of the two, rolled her eyes while trying—and failing—not to smile.

Rhydian smirked. The quiet ones were usually the most dangerous in bed. J

Just like that, they fell into step and headed toward the breakfast hall. As usual, students stared. It had been years, yet none of them had ever gotten used to seeing the dragon prince surrounded by lower beasts.

Rhydian simply didn't discriminate. Except House Ophidian. He'd rather die than have anything to do with those worms.

They made it to the hall where he headed straight for his table. The moment he sat down, several members of his house stepped forward and began serving him. It had been that way for years. Rhydian rarely had to lift a finger unless he wanted to.

Within minutes, the table was filled with steaming platters of food. Roasted venison, fried chicken, stacks of warm bread, bowls of thick stew, and vegetables. Dragons required enormous amounts of energy to sustain their size and power. As a result, they ate accordingly.

Then came the food tasters, Jaxon and Ajax. The two vulture-shifter brothers approached the table and sampled each dish individually. It had been standard procedure since Rhydian's first year at the academy.

As long as the food hadn't been prepared by dragons, there was always the possibility of serpent interference. The Ophidians were masters of poison.

Paranoid? Perhaps. Alive? Also yes.

Good thing vulture shifters possessed an uncanny ability to detect toxins. Their species could survive poisons that would kill most creatures outright, making them ideal food tasters.

After several moments, the brothers exchanged a look. Then they nodded.

"It's safe, my prince," Ajax announced.

"Well then, let's dive in, girls." Rhydian rubbed his hands together, genuine excitement lighting up his face at the sight of the food.

Everyone knew that aside from women, food was the second greatest love of the dragon prince.

They ate in relative silence, though the girls couldn't help noticing that Rhydian was in an exceptionally good mood.

"Something good must have happened, Your Highness," Variant pointed out. "You seem unusually happy today."

"Ahh, yes." Rhydian answered through a mouthful of food. He swallowed before looking at the girls.

"Technically, I've been in a dark place for an entire day." His eyes gleamed. "Then a certain big-headed worm gave me the best advice imaginable."

His grin widened. "I intend to follow through with it."

Valerie and Variant slowly turned to look at each other. Neither had the faintest idea what he was talking about, but dealing with Rhydian had taught them one important lesson. Sometimes it was better not to ask.

The girls simply nodded and continued eating. A few moments later, Variant spoke again.

"Well, good thing you're happy. We can't have our two most favorite people on campus in foul moods."

Rhydian lifted a brow. His mouth was already moving again as he attacked another plate. Honestly, it was a miracle his uniform remained spotless.

"Who's in a bad mood?" he asked curiously.

"Professor Maverick," Variant answered immediately.

Valerie chimed in. "On our way here, he looked like he was about to kill someone."

Rhydian paused briefly before continuing to eat.

Valerie leaned forward conspiratorially.

"There are rumors going around that the humans were attacked."

The fork froze halfway to Rhydian's mouth.

The movement was so abrupt it would have been funny under different circumstances.

The girls immediately noticed. Variant frowned.

"Shouldn't you know about that?" she asked. "I heard it had something to do with the birds or something."

A sharp breath left Rhydian. For the first time that morning, the amusement vanished from his face.

"Thamas." The name came out as a growl.

Heat rolled off him and a thin stream of smoke escaped his nostrils. His hand tightened around the fork until the metal bent.

"Rhydian?" Variant called cautiously.

The playful dragon prince was gone, and when Rhydian finally turned toward her, the girls felt a chill crawl down their spines.

Because it was the exact same look they had seen in Professor Maverick's eyes earlier.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 39: Stay Alive

Every parent wants their child to be special. They rarely consider the consequences when it actually happens.

~ Rebel Beast

Father had allowed him to stay the night. Not that Caelis had done much with the opportunity aside from scrutinizing how much worse things had gotten within his family.

Then morning came, and it was time to leave.

Right now, he stood with his mother, who looked just as radiant as the last time he had seen her. Lady Lina Cobryn was obviously the most favored of Njord's wives from the love and attention he showered upon her.

She had given him Caelis. A basilisk.

It wasn't every day a basilisk was born into the serpent clans, which was why he was considered such a rare and mythical creature.

A surprisingly large faction of the serpent population was deeply religious because of it. They believed Lina had been specially favored by the Serpent God himself, which was why she had been able to birth Caelis.

Or to be more precise, the less polite version of it. They believed the Serpent God had personally planted his seed inside her womb and gifted Njord Caelis.

For a beast who was notoriously possessive of his wives, Njord seemed remarkably unbothered by the idea of a deity bedding his favorite woman. Then again, the man tried for a second child.

Caelis wasn't stupid. He knew exactly what his father had been hoping for. Njord had been trying to squeeze another basilisk out of his mother.

Unfortunately, the Serpent God must have gone on holiday afterward. Or perhaps he had simply stopped favoring Lina because the second attempt had produced the complete opposite.

Then came his sister. Rosie Cobryn. Except she had perhaps drawn the worst fate possible.

Rosie was a rosy boa shifter born into a family of cobras.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been a problem. There were hundreds of serpent species in existence and it wasn't uncommon for serpent shifters to produce children whose beast forms differed from their parents.

A cobra could have a viper child. A python could produce a rattlesnake. Nobody thought much of it, except the Cobryns weren't just any family. They were obsessed with bloodlines. Njord's wives were all cobras, and his children had always been cobras.

Generation after generation, the family had somehow maintained the pattern to the point many considered it a blessing from the Serpent God himself. Then Rosie arrived and shattered it.

A rosy boa was small and harmless. Worst of all, his sister was completely non-venomous. The nobles rarely said it to lady Lina's face, but Caelis had heard the whispers growing up.

The Serpent God had blessed his mother Lina with a basilisk. Then immediately punished her with Rosie.

If Caelis was not mistaken, then the rumors and backtalk had all been instigated by his father's wives whose animosity was not exactly hidden. Back behind the barrier, all five of Njord's wives had come from powerful and respected clans.

Then there was Lina. A nobody who had somehow charmed her way into the Serpent King's bed and never left. Unfortunately, there was very little the other wives could do to his mother. Not while Njord continued holding her in such high regard. That didn't stop them from trying, though.

Most times, however, their attention shifted toward Rosie. Which was why Caelis did everything in his power to protect her.

The problem was that protecting someone became significantly harder when you spent most of the year at the academy. It became even worse when the person in question possessed absolutely no sense of danger.

Rosie had a bad habit of assuming the best in everyone. In the Cobryn household, that was practically a death wish. It was honestly a miracle she had survived this long in a family as cutthroat as theirs. Although that might have had something to do with her charm.

Rosie was the most beautiful serpent in the entire clan.

Caelis wasn't even exaggerating.

She possessed long rosy hair that flowed all the way to her waist like liquid silk. The signature silver eyes of the Cobryn bloodline stood out brilliantly against her fair skin, giving her an almost ethereal appearance.

Her features were soft and delicate, lacking the sharp predatory beauty most serpent women possessed. She had large innocent eyes, long lashes, full pink lips, and a heart-shaped face that somehow made her look perpetually curious about the world around her.

Even her smile was dangerous, not because it was seductive but due to its genuineness.

Rosie smiled at people as though she expected kindness in return, and the fools usually fell in love before realizing what had happened.

Barely fourteen and there were already suitors seeking her hand in marriage. Thankfully, Caelis had broken enough bones over the years to make it clear that his sister was off-limits.

He would already have enrolled her in Bestiaris Academy if it weren't for the fact that the beasts there were even worse predators. Rosie was too innocent. They would tear her apart and eat her alive.

Or worse, use her against him.

In one word, he would never allow her to study in Bestiaris. Granted, it meant she would never receive the certification required to freely travel the human territories. But as long as she remained safe, he could live with that.

He would take care of her, and perhaps one day, find another way for her to see the human world. The future was long, and full of possibilities. If his father was truly beginning to work alongside humans, then perhaps things were finally starting to change.

Njord Cobryn was not there to send him off to the academy. The Serpent King had already said what he wanted to say and disappeared to attend whatever important matters occupied him these days.

That left only his mother and sister. Which, somehow, was worse.

"Look at you," Lina sighed.

Before Caelis could react, both her hands were already cupping his face. He resisted the urge to groan but his mother tilted his head left, then right, searching for an injury that wasn't there.

"You've lost weight."

"I haven't."

"You have."

Caelis sighed. There was absolutely no winning against his mother.

Lina clicked her tongue before smoothing an imaginary crease from his collar.

"Be careful at that academy." Her fingers lingered on his cheek. "If it wasn't for that damned certification, I wouldn't let my baby anywhere near those monsters."

Caelis already knew exactly which monsters she was referring to. The Dragons.

His mother had disliked dragons long before he was born. The fact that the feeling was mutual only strengthened her opinion.

"I'll be fine, Mother."

Lina looked entirely unconvinced. Caelis wisely decided not to argue further. Instead, his attention shifted toward Rosie.

His sister was staring at him quietly. Caelis pointed a finger at her.

"If any boy starts bothering you, tell me."

Rosie immediately rolled her eyes.

"What are you going to do?" She folded her arms. "Beat them up again?"

"Again?" Caelis scoffed. "You forgot your brother is a basilisk." A dangerous smile spread across his face. "They'd make excellent decorations for the front yard."

Rosie groaned. "Oh my God. You are insane."

"Better get used to it." Caelis said cockily.

Then before he could escape, his mother pulled him into another hug. Lina squeezed him as though she intended to make up for every minute he would spend away from home.

"Stay safe."

"I will."

"Eat properly."

"I do."

"Sleep properly."

"I do."

"Don't fight dragons."

Caelis wisely remained silent. Lina immediately narrowed her eyes.

"Caelis."

"I'll try."

"Caelis."

"Love you too, Mother."

That seemed to distract her. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Caelis gently untangled himself from the hug and stepped back. It was time to return to the academy.

And hopefully, Karen Donovan was still alive.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 40: It Wasn't Her

Schools were such strange places. Lifelong friendships and lifelong grudges often started in the same room.

~ Rebel Beast

Venus was waiting for Caelis right at the academy entrance, which wasn't surprising considering he had sent him a message minutes ago that he was on his way back.

The driver barely had enough time to slow down before Venus opened the passenger door and climbed into the seat beside him.

"My prince," Venus greeted.

The vehicle began moving again.

"How did it go?" Venus inquired, his gaze subtly raking Caelis up and down, checking him for injuries.

While the Serpent King rarely laid a hand on his son, some of his punishments might as well have accomplished the same thing.

Though Caelis had assured him over the phone that he was fine, it hadn't stopped Venus from imagining increasingly horrific scenarios throughout the night.

"Father is working with the humans."

"What?" Venus' jaw nearly dropped to the floor. He shook his head. "No way."

It didn't make sense. During the last Concordia Program, the Serpent King had practically encouraged them to wipe the human vermin from their lands. So what could have changed?

"What deal did he make with the humans?"

"I have no idea," Caelis answered. "But he wants us to protect a human named Karen Donovan."

"Is that so...?" Venus trailed off, looking away with an expression that immediately caught Caelis' attention.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" he asked with a frown.

"About that..." Venus winced, looking at Caelis with a sympathetic expression. "The humans were attacked a little while ago. There are talks that some of them died. We don't know if Karen is among th—"

"Stop!" Caelis' voice boomed through the vehicle.

The driver reacted instinctively. The brakes screeched while the vehicle lurched violently before coming to an abrupt halt.

The door flew open and Caelis stepped out urgently.

"My prince, wait up!" Venus scrambled out after him, but Caelis wasn't listening. He was already marching toward the human residence.

Students scattered from his path the moment they saw his expression. A few recognized him and immediately lowered their heads. Others simply got out of the way.

He had been told humans were resilient, like cockroaches. In that case, Karen Donovan had better survive. Otherwise, he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to tell his father.

Caelis rarely failed his assignments, and he had no intention of starting now.

Back at the human dormitory...

Maverick and Dimitri took in the entrance.

Feathers littered the front lawn like black snow. Blood stained the steps leading into the residence. Several windows had been shattered, leaving jagged teeth of glass around the frames, which had undoubtedly served as the birds' point of entry.

The damage was worse than he expected.

If he remembered correctly, he had left eight members of House Therion to guard the residence. Two on each side of the house with rotational shifts in between so they could rest.

The arrangement had been intentional.

Four wolf shifters since wolves could communicate through their pack link and relay information almost instantly.

Two bear shifters for their size, endurance, and ability to physically hold a position when things became chaotic.

The remaining two had been badger shifters. They were stubborn creatures with powerful senses and a reputation for refusing to back down once they dug their heels in. Together, they should have been more than enough to handle a normal threat.

Except the dragons had been smarter this time. This wasn't a fight but an ambush. One that his patrol team had obviously been unable to handle.

Speaking of his patrol team, most of them were clutching one eye or both with blood pouring down their faces. It would be a miracle if none of them went blind from this.

But the most common injuries were the deep cuts and multiple puncture wounds.

One wolf shifter had a strip of flesh missing from his cheek, while a bear shifter was covered in so many cuts that parts of his uniform had turned red. Despite that, he was still helping one of his injured teammates to his feet.

The sight made Maverick's jaw tighten.

"They are so dead," Dimitri said through gritted teeth.

House Aetheris would be in for a surprise if they thought Therion would not retaliate after this attack. They had drawn blood first.

"Go," Dimitri told him. "I'll help them get treatment."

Maverick nodded. The only relief he had was that these were shifters and that they would heal from this.

Unlike the humans.

That thought got him moving into the house faster. Except the inside was worse than the outside. It looked as though a tornado had ripped through the residence.

Furniture lay overturned across the common room. Cushions had been torn apart and several light bulbs were shattered. Like the outside, black feathers were everywhere. Some were even stuck in streaks of blood smeared across the wooden floor.

The air reeked of blood, fear, bird droppings, and burnt food. The combination made the entire place feel suffocating.

Anger coursed through him. How was any of this supposed to work?

The beasts hated the humans. The humans feared the beasts. Somehow the adults running this program expected eighteen-year-olds to fix what generations had failed to solve.

Why didn't they just end this damn experiment and let everyone be?

"Professor?"

His train of thought was cut off when someone called his name. He turned to find the team captain, Mike.

Just like the others, the young man bore his own injuries. Several scratches ran across his face while dried blood stained his hands and uniform. One sleeve of his shirt had been torn nearly to the shoulder.

"Where are they?" Maverick asked, referring to the humans.

Although now that he listened closely, he could hear the pounding of hearts and muffled whimpers coming from behind the bedroom doors.

"The surviving humans are probably huddled up in their rooms," Mike answered. "They're too terrified to come out."

"Surviving?"

Maverick's heart faltered because that could only mean one thing.

Someone had died.

Mike swallowed. His voice was unusually quiet.

"You should come see the bodies. They're in the kitchen."

Maverick wasn't sure he was breathing anymore. It felt as though an invisible noose had tightened around his throat.

His legs began moving before his mind could catch up, carrying him toward the kitchen while a thousand thoughts raced through his head.

Then they stepped inside, and he saw them.

The breath he had been holding escaped immediately as relief hit him so hard it was almost painful.

To Maverick's horror, he realized exactly what his first thought had been.

It wasn't her.