

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 41: The Promise

"Our parents saw an opportunity. We saw the monsters waiting on the other side."

~ Rebel Beast

It must have only been a few minutes, but for Aria and the girls huddled together inside the bathroom, it felt like an eternity.

None of them dared say a word.

The silence hung heavily between them as they remained pressed against the tiled walls, listening for any sign that the crows were around.

They didn't dare cry either.

Perhaps it was the shock. This was the second time in less than two days they had stared death in the face and somehow survived.

Or maybe they had simply run out of tears. Whatever the reason, none of them cried.

For the first time since arriving at Bestiaris Academy, Aria found herself wondering if this place had already decided their fate. What if she was deluded and there was no escaping this.

Their parents had accepted the money, never realizing it had been purchased with their blood. Now the consequences belonged to them.

Aria sat with that thought for a while, sinking deeper into the miserable numbness threatening to swallow her whole. Then her phone beeped.

The sound was so sudden that she nearly jumped. Slowly, she pulled the device from her pocket and glanced down at the screen.

At first she blinked, certain her eyes were playing tricks on her. But the message remained.

'You would come back, right? You promise?'

Aria shot upright so fast she nearly hit her head on the bathroom sink. The movement startled everyone, rousing them from their reverie.

"What?" Alek whispered. "What happened?"

Aria stared at the screen, her vision blurry.

"Davina," she whispered back.

Then her voice became louder as she repeated. "Davina."

The words caught in her throat while tears gathered in her eyes.

"She finally replied."

The bathroom fell silent.

"Oh." Brittney let out a bittersweet smile.

"Good for you."

None of them noticed the way Brittney's gaze lowered afterward. Unlike the others, nobody had sent her a message. Her parents really sentenced her here, it dawned on her.

Even though Brittney pretended it didn't matter, it still hurt somehow.

Aria quickly wiped at her eyes before typing back.

'I promise you. I'll come back.'

The moment she hit send, something inside her loosened. The crushing weight that had been sitting on her chest since yesterday suddenly felt lighter.

Davina was waiting for her, which meant dying wasn't an option. She had to survive, somehow. Putting her phone away, Aria released a long breath and looked toward the others.

"I don't hear the birds anymore. Let's get out of here."

She pushed herself to her feet, intending to leave but someone tugged at her sleeve. Aria looked down. It was Trisha.

"What?"

"What if it's a trap?" Trisha demanded.

Her expression was horrified.

"What if the moment we step outside they all come rushing back?" She shuddered at the thought of it. "I don't want my eyes plucked out."

"Then stay behind," Aria replied.

Before Trisha could protest further, she reached for the bathroom door and pulled it open.

The girls collectively held their breath, expecting a murder of claws to come bursting in. But nothing happened. Just silence.

To be honest, Aria was terrified too. But common sense told her this had to be over.

Slowly, they stepped out. The room looked exactly as they had left it. None of the birds had managed to get inside which was surprising. Seems they respected their bedroom.

"I'm going downstairs," Aria informed them.

"Wait." Brittney's voice stopped her.

Before anyone could ask what the problem was, Brittney marched over to her wardrobe and ruffled through it. A moment later she emerged carrying a baseball bat.

"What the hell?" Aria couldn't believe her eyes.

Trisha's eyes were the size of saucers. "Wait a minute. I've been sleeping in the same room as you while you had a baseball bat within reach?"

"Where did you even get that?" Alek asked.

"They didn't search our bags," Brittney replied matter-of-factly.

"Because they probably didn't think one of the contestants would be crazy enough to bring a baseball bat," Trisha muttered.

"But it's about to become useful, isn't it?" Brittney shot back. She demonstrated by swinging it through the air. The bat cut through the room with an alarming whoosh.

"The birds caught me off guard the first time. But next time?" She swung again to make her point. "I'll give those little fuckers a piece of my mind."

Aria, Alek, and Trisha exchanged a look.

Yep. The moment this crisis was over, they were absolutely searching Brittney's wardrobe. God only knew what else she had hidden in there.

Then Brittney suddenly turned toward Aria.

"You know what? I think you should have this."

Before Aria could object, she shoved the bat into her hands.

"I think I'm good." Aria rejected it.

"No, I insist." Brittney closed Aria's fingers firmly around the handle. "What if Trisha is right and there are still some hiding out there? You have to protect yourself. She pointed at all of them. "And us."

Aria's lips twitched. Since when had she become Aria Aspen, the protector?

Sadly, judging by the way the girls were looking at her now, she already knew the answer.

The girls descended the staircase painfully slowly. Aria led the way with Brittney's baseball bat gripped tightly in both hands while Alek, Trisha, and Brittney followed close behind.

Nobody spoke, and every creak of the wooden stairs made them tense. Aria's heart hammered against her ribs as her gaze took in her surrounding attentively. They were approaching the common room.

"Do you hear anything?" Trisha whispered.

"No," Alek whispered back.

Their ears remained alert for the slightest sound of flapping wings. Then suddenly a shadow moved around the corner and someone screamed, "Bird!"

Without looking, Aria reacted instantly, swinging the bat with everything she had except the strike never landed.

A hand shot out and caught the bat mid-swing and the impact echoed through the room.

Aria froze. The others froze.

Standing before them was Maverick Nightshade and his fingers were wrapped around the bat as though it weighed nothing.

For several seconds neither of them moved.

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Chapter 42: Aria And The Professor

The living carry burdens the dead no longer have to bear.

~ Rebel Beast

Whoever said the eyes were the mirror to the soul must have been standing exactly where Aria was when they made that observation.

Maverick Nightshade had the most unsettling eyes she had ever seen. Up close, they were impossible to ignore. His irises weren't simply gray, there were flecks of violet buried within them, surrounding those rare vertical pupils. The more she stared, the more alive they seemed, as though every emotion passed through them before he could hide it.

Right now, they looked relieved.

Aria's breath caught. Relieved? Was he worried about them?

The thought sent an unexpected thrill through her. Maverick Nightshade did not strike her as the kind of man who worried about anyone. Yet here he was staring at her as though checking she was still standing, still breathing, and definitely still alive.

Something strange twisted low in her stomach. The realization should have annoyed her. Instead, it did the exact opposite.

The both of them were still holding the baseball bat and Aria suddenly became painfully aware of it. More specifically, she became painfully aware of him. Of how close he was standing. Of the heat radiating from his body. Of the fact that if she stretched her fingers just a little further, she would touch his hand.

He wore no gloves today, just his bare skin. There was no barrier. Nothing.

Yesterday, he had made it very clear that he disliked physical contact. Yet during the attack, he had touched her more than once. His hand had wrapped around her wrist. His fingers had brushed against her skin. The memories arrived uninvited and far more vividly than they had any right to.

Aria gulped. What would happen if she touched him first?

Would he recoil?

Would he glare at her with those unnerving eyes?

Or would those large hands wrap around her throat and toss her across the room for daring to try?

The image appeared in her mind so intensely that her pulse skipped. Unfortunately, the thought did absolutely nothing to discourage her curiosity.

Good God. What was wrong with her?

The worst part was that Maverick wasn't looking away either. His gaze remained locked on hers, steady, intent, and unwavering.

For a strange moment, it felt as though he too had forgotten about the destroyed dormitory around them. Even the terrified girls standing behind her. Everything seemed to fade until there was only the two of them standing there with a baseball bat caught between them.

Aria's grip tightened, then loosened. Slowly, almost against her own will, one finger began sliding toward his hand. The movement was small and barely noticeable, yet, it felt louder than every sound in the room.

His gaze immediately dropped to it. He noticed. Of course he noticed. Maverick Nightshade noticed everything.

Aria froze, but he didn't move or try to stop her. He didn't pull away either. For one reckless second, it almost felt like he was giving her permission. Then his eyes lifted back to hers and held. The challenge in them stole the air from her lungs.

It felt like standing at the edge of a cliff. One step. That was all. One step and there would be no pretending this was nothing. One step and neither of them could take it back.

Still neither moved or looked away. Aria's fingertip drifted closer, close enough that she could almost feel the warmth coming from his skin. Then—

"Professor?"

And just like that, the spell shattered.

Maverick jerked away as though suddenly remembering where he was, taking the bat with him. For a brief moment, neither of them spoke.

His gaze swept over Aria once more, taking in her flushed face and the way her chest rose and fell. Not that his own condition seemed much better.

His breathing appeared slightly uneven, his jaw tighter than usual. If Aria didn't know any better, she would have thought he was trying to regain control of himself. The realization sent another strange thrill through her.

"Watch where you swing that thing next time," Maverick said, his voice rougher than usual.

Then he placed the bat back into her hands.

It lasted only a second but there was a brush of fingers. Nothing more.

Yet the moment their skin touched, the air seemed to vanish from Aria's lungs. She sucked in a sharp breath while her eyes widened slightly.

What the hell did he do to her?

Heat immediately rushed to her cheeks and her heart began pounding all over again.

Unfortunately, Maverick chose that exact moment to turn away as though nothing had happened.

Or perhaps fortunately.

Because otherwise Aria had no idea how she was supposed to explain whatever nonsense was currently happening inside her head.

"Professor!"

Charlotte called again, her voice cutting through the room.

Her hair was disheveled with tears streaming down her face, clearly shaken by the attack. Unfortunately, Charlotte appeared to have forgotten one very important warning.

She rushed toward Maverick with her arms spread, intending to throw herself into a comforting embrace. Except she never made it.

A translucent barrier flashed into existence between them and Charlotte slammed face-first into it.

The impact was loud enough that several students winced. She bounced backwards and landed hard on the floor. For a second, she simply stared ahead in shock before blood began pouring from her nose.

"Mummy!" Charlotte cried.

Her eyes widened in horror when she lifted a trembling hand and found it covered in blood.

"I told you, didn't I?" Maverick said, his expression completely unmoved. "No one touches me without permission."

His voice carried across the room, loud enough for the students who were cautiously emerging from their bedrooms to hear.

Except that sounded like complete nonsense to Aria. Just moments ago, she had been close enough to touch him and he had done absolutely nothing.

Actually, scratch that. He had touched her.

Unless she had imagined the entire thing, there had definitely been finger contact involved.

Which meant one of two things.

Either Maverick Nightshade had very selective standards. Or he simply preferred being the one in control.

"I understand you all just went through a traumatic experience," Maverick continued, addressing the students. "But I think it would be best if you remained in your rooms while we clear out the bodies."

"Bodies?" Aria echoed. The word lodged itself somewhere in her throat.

"Bodies". Plural. Not "body". Bodies.

A chill ran down her spine as the implication settled over all of them. They had lost more people.

The realization had barely settled in when movement from the kitchen caught everyone's attention.

Mike stepped out first with Dimitri following behind him. The two shifters carried a body between them, Mike holding the arms while Dimitri carried the legs.

For a moment, Aria's mind refused to register what she was seeing. Then she recognized the clothes. It was Abigail.

Their chaperone was dead.

Except it wasn't Abigail's death that shocked the students into silence. It was the state she was in.

Both of Abigail's eyes had been plucked out.

The empty sockets stared at nothing while dried blood coated most of her face. The sight was so grotesque that Aria felt her stomach twist violently.

A wet retching sound suddenly broke the silence as Shannon doubled over and vomited onto the floor. The sound seemed to trigger everyone else because Liv was next and was swiftly followed by Charlotte.

One after another, the girls bent over, emptying the contents of their stomachs onto the floor while the smell saturated the area almost immediately.

Several students screamed and scrambled away from them, terrified the vomit would splash onto them. Others covered their mouths and turned pale while a few looked moments away from joining them. It was complete chaos all over again.

"Get inside. Now!" Maverick's voice thundered through the residence.

The students scattered at once. Bedroom doors flew open and slammed shut one after another as everyone hurried back into whatever room they had emerged from.

Within seconds, the common room was nearly empty again.

Maverick groaned and rubbed a hand across his forehead. What the fuck was he supposed to do with this situation?

Back inside the room, silence settled over the girls. Aria sat on the edge of her bed staring at nothing.

Usually she would have demanded to see the other bodies. But after seeing Abigail, she had no desire whatsoever to find out what the others looked like.

That image alone was enough nightmare fuel for a lifetime. She would hear about the deaths anyway. There was no need to increase her chances of insomnia.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Alek, Brittney, and Trisha came to stand in front of her.

Aria lifted her gaze to stare at them, her brows furrowing in confusion.

"What is it?"

The three girls exchanged looks. Apparently, they had already decided who would be speaking on behalf of the group.

"So..." Trisha started.

Aria didn't like where this was going.

"Care to tell us what exactly is going on between you and the professor?"

Aria swallowed. Hard.

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Chapter 43: Put Your Trust In Him

Some people walk into your life like a storm. Others become the reason you survive one.

~ Rebel Beast

Aria didn't like the look in their eyes. She felt like a rabbit that had just realized three foxes were blocking every possible escape route.

"What are you talking about?" She laughed awkwardly. "Why would anything be happening between the professor and me? I literally met the man yesterday!"

Her gaze darted between the girls, hoping that answer was enough to kill whatever ridiculous theory they had cooked up.

It wasn't. The looks on their faces only became more knowing.

"So you're trying to tell me those longing gazes were for nothing?" Trisha pressed.

"Longing gazes?" Aria let out a disbelieving laugh. "Trisha, do you even hear yourself?" She threw both hands into the air. "That sounds ridiculous."

Brittney butted in.

"I think the phrase Trisha is looking for is sexual tension."

She gave Aria a flat look.

"Girl, both of you were practically eye-fucking each other."

Aria opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Before she could recover, Alek joined in.

"And I saw the way your hand drifted toward him."

Aria's face heated immediately.

"You saw that?"

Damn, she was doomed. Had she become so undisciplined that she was behaving like some she-wolf in heat?

"I think everyone noticed that," Alek informed her. "The man literally announced no touching to the entire residence and you still looked ready to test the theory. It seems you do enjoy courting death."

Aria groaned. This was slowly becoming her worst nightmare.

Sadly, Brittney wasn't done.

"I was so tempted to grab the bat and swing it at both of you."

"What?!" Aria's eyes widened at the confession.

"I was watching like, just kiss already and get it over with!" Brittney groaned, her fingers clawing the air to show her frustration.

"BRITTNEY!" Aria's face turned bright red. "He's a professor at this institution, for crying out loud!"

"So?"

"So?"

Aria stared at her in disbelief. How was she missing the point this badly?

"He's a professor," Aria repeated slowly, as if speaking to a child.

Brittney merely shrugged. "Last time I checked, there wasn't a rule saying we couldn't date the professors."

"Brittney!" Aria called out through gritted teeth this time.

"What?" The girl looked completely unrepentant. "They do it at Lunar Academy. Not to mention, we're basically inmates on death row in this place. The least the academy could do is provide some fun."

She clicked her tongue. "At least one of us is winning."

"Winning?"

"Yes." Brittney pointed at her. "You have a sexy professor who's into you, and I fully intend to live vicariously through you."

"Okay," Aria said, getting to her feet this time because it felt like she needed to get something straight into their heads.

"Fine," she confessed. "I admit Professor Maverick is a bit hot."

"A bit hot?" Trisha scoffed in disbelief. "Girl, that man isn't Maverick. He's Mave-wreck. I bet if he asked half the girls in this academy to jump off a cliff, there'd be a traffic jam at the edge."

At this point, Aria knew there was no changing her roommates' minds. All she could do was explain herself and hope they stopped looking at her as though she was one accidental glance away from becoming Mrs. Nightshade.

She took a deep breath.

"What I'm trying to say is that I did not come to this academy to date or fall head over heels in love with some professor. Whatever happened out there was probably a momentary lapse in judgment and it won't happen again."

"Mmm-hmm." Brittney's tone made it painfully obvious she didn't believe a single word.

Aria sighed. This was getting her nowhere.

This time, her voice softened.

"I get that we've all been surrounded by tragedy and that you guys are trying to squeeze whatever entertainment you can out of this situation, but that's all this is. We're trying to survive here. I made a promise to my sister and I intend to keep it. I know Professor Maverick falls nowhere in my future—"

"Don't be so sure of that," Alek cut in.

Aria turned toward her. Alek shrugged.

"He could protect you, you know. I think having someone like him on your side would be a pretty powerful advantage in this place."

"Well, I don't intend to put my trust in him."

The answer came immediately.

Perhaps a little too quickly.

"I've seen enough men around my mother to last a lifetime. The only thing I've learned so far is that relying on men is usually a mistake. So no, I'd rather figure out my own survival than give some guy the opportunity to turn my life upside down."

The room grew quiet.

Maybe it was the force behind her words, or the grave look in her eyes. Whatever it was, Alek, Brittney, and Trisha could all tell there was a story there. For once, none of them pushed.

"Fine. It's your choice," Trisha said.

Brittney raised both hands in surrender.

"Just saying, if you decide to have a little fun along the way, he's not a bad choice. I mean, this is only day two. We don't even know if we're making it to day three."

She paused before adding, "It wouldn't kill you to enjoy yourself a little."

"Unfortunately, that fun could potentially ruin my life. So no, I'd rather focus on why I'm here." Aria folded her arms. "And we're not dying. We're getting out of this place alive."

There was enough fear in this place already. She refused to contribute to it.

"Umm... guys." Alek's voice interrupted the moment. She was standing by the window now, staring outside.

"If you're all done arguing, I think you might want to see this."

"What is it?" Aria asked urgently, heading toward the window at the same time as Trisha and Brittney.

The four girls crowded around it immediately, jostling for space as they peered outside.

At first, Aria had no idea what Alek wanted them to see. Then she spotted the red-haired beast approaching the residence.

Even from their position on the upper floor, they could feel the shift in atmosphere. The patrol team straightened instantly and every pair of eyes turned toward him.

"Why does he look oddly familiar?" Brittney muttered, her brows furrowing just like everyone else's.

"Oh shit..." Aria breathed as recognition struck her like lightning.

The four girls spoke at the same time.

"Rhydian Drakhar."

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Chapter 44: Therion Would Revenge

There is no such thing as a small choice during dangerous times.

~ Rebel Beast

They had lost two more students while the healer battled to save another. Then there was the issue of their chaperone being dead too.

Yeah. This just kept getting better and better.

"We cannot keep the girls here anymore," Dimitri commented, looking around the residence and taking note of just how easy it had been to breach the building.

Maverick's head snapped toward him.

"What do you mean by that?"

Dimitri lifted a brow. "Don't tell me you haven't been thinking about it too, Maverick."

Maverick let out a growl of annoyance. Just because he had thought about it didn't mean he was going to act on it. The government had been the ones foolish enough to bring the humans here. It was their responsibility to keep them alive. No one was dumping that burden on him.

At least that was what Maverick stubbornly kept telling himself. Inwardly, however, his conscience warred with him.

The girls wouldn't survive the week. That much was obvious. Including Aria.

Fuck off.

Maverick smothered that particular thought until it became nothing more than background noise.

"And what exactly do you suggest I do?" His voice came out hard and gritty.

Dimitri gave him a knowing look.

"You know exactly what I'm suggesting."

"Oh hell no," Maverick cursed immediately. "That's not happening."

But Dimitri pressed on. "Therion House is the safest place for them right now."

"They are still beasts!" Maverick argued.

"Beasts who listen to your command," Dimitri shot back. "They may not all be wolves, but they still look to you for leadership. Whether they like it or not, they acknowledge you as their Alpha."

"This is not my business!" Maverick roared, frustration finally boiling over. "I shouldn't care!"

"Yes, you shouldn't care, yet somehow you do because that's who you are, Maverick Nightshade!" Dimitri fired back with equal intensity.

For a second, the two men simply stared at each other. The tension between them cracked.

Then Dimitri sighed and calmed down a little.

"You're the firstborn son," he continued. "You should be learning how to rule your father's pack and preparing for the responsibilities waiting for you. Instead, you're here as a teacher in some academy."

Maverick's jaw tightened, fighting back the emotions that threatened to show.

Dimitri did not stop.

"You didn't come because you lacked better opportunities. You came because you wanted to ease the burden on your mother. Because every time someone blames Violet Purple for tearing down the barrier, you take it personally."

Maverick Nightshade's eyes flashed at that.

Dimitri was right. There wasn't a day that went by in Novara without someone blaming his mother Violet Purple for what happened. She brought the beasts into human lands. At least that was what people liked to say.

It had broken his mother's heart when he volunteered to come to Bestiaris. It wasn't his responsibility, she had told him. But how could he stand aside when he could actually do something?

Being an Alpha didn't necessarily mean leading a pack. He was leading one here too. Sure, this place sucked, but it had its moments. Dare he admit it, he had even begun enjoying the job a little.

Well. Until the humans arrived.

Maverick opened his mouth to speak when he felt a subtle shift in the air and his gaze snapped toward the open door.

Dimitri noticed. "What is it?"

"Someone wants to court death," Maverick growled.

He stepped outside the residence and, just as he had sensed, found Rhydian Drakhar standing in the middle of the front lawn.

The bastard. What was he doing here? After what had happened, how dare he show his face at the residence?

Maverick wasn't the only one thinking it.

Every member of the patrol team had gotten to their feet. Low growls rumbled through the air as hostile gazes locked onto the dragon prince.

Rhydian knew he was taking a stupid risk by coming here. One that could very well end with him being torn apart by a group of angry Therion beasts. Yet he had come anyway. He just needed to know. But know what precisely?

His gaze swept over the injured patrol members. The crows had gotten them good. Blood stained their uniforms and several bore fresh wounds. Under normal circumstances, Rhydian would have been impressed by the effectiveness of the attack.

Except this mission had never been approved by him. Therion needed to know that.....She needed to know that too.

"I did not come here to fight," Rhydian announced, noticing the way the wolves, bears, and badger shifters had begun circling him like predators searching for the perfect place to sink their teeth.

"You should've thought of that before drawing first blood," Mike snarled, exposing razor sharp teeth.

While House Therion remained neutral in the conflict between Aetheris and Ophidian, that neutrality only lasted as long as nobody provoked them.

In fact, both sides treated Therion with extreme caution. One change of allegiance from Therion could shift the entire balance of power overnight.

If Therion sided with Aetheris, Ophidian would find itself severely outmatched. If Therion sided with Ophidian, then Aetheris would have a problem on its hands. Neither side could afford to make an enemy of them.

Right now, however, things were not looking good for Aetheris.

Rhydian Drakhar was powerful, but he was still one dragon standing against six very angry predators. Even if he somehow won, he would be leaving with enough injuries to keep the healer busy for days. That was assuming Maverick Nightshade chose not to get involved.

"I did not know about this attack," Rhydian said firmly. "I did not approve it. The crows acted on their own."

He hoped that would be enough. It wasn't.

Maverick strode toward him.

"Your orders or not, you're still responsible," he said coldly. "You're the leader of House Aetheris. When your house draws blood, the consequences belong to you." The words settled heavily between them.

Maverick's gaze swept over the patrol team. The beasts were beginning to close in. Apparently they had mistaken his approach as permission to attack.

"Back off." He ordered.

Nobody moved. If anything, they looked ready to lunge.

Maverick's face darkened. "I won't say it twice." The Alpha command in his voice rolled across the lawn like thunder.

"Back. Off. Now."

Just like that, every beast slowly retreated because they had no choice. The hisses and murderous glares directed at Rhydian made it very clear this conversation was far from over.

Rhydian remained where he was. If anything, a strange sense of awareness suddenly washed over him. His gaze lifted toward one of the upper windows of the residence where several figures were pressed against the glass watching the confrontation unfold.

There he saw her. Even with three other faces crowding the window beside her, he picked her out immediately. Strangely, the tight feeling in his chest loosened.

She was alive. Thank the goddess.

Actually, wait a minute. Why did it matter whether she was alive?

Oh right.

So she could die by his hand when the time was right.

Maverick followed the direction of his gaze, and his eyes narrowed the moment he realized exactly who Rhydian was looking at. A strange sound rumbled in his throat before he could stop it. Then he stepped directly in front of the dragon prince, blocking his view.

Rhydian's brows furrowed. What exactly was his problem?

"What do you want, Rhydian Drakhar?" Maverick demanded.

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Chapter 45: Regret It One Day

Rhydian and Caelis agreed on very little. Unfortunately, the future wasn't one of them.

~ Rebel Beast

Rhydian Drakhar had never found Maverick more annoying than he did at this moment.

Sure, he still had a few inches over the wolf, but somehow Maverick had managed to plant himself directly in his line of sight. Rhydian even suspected the wolf was standing a little straighter on purpose, though he didn't call him out on it.

What was wrong with him?

More importantly, Rhydian couldn't exactly crane his neck around Maverick without looking suspicious.

The girl was alive. That was all he needed to know. Which meant the fun wasn't over yet. However, he now had to figure out how to make it up to Therion somehow.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?!"

At first, Rhydian thought Maverick's irritation was directed at him. Then he followed the wolf's line of sight and his brows rose.

Another guest of honor had arrived.

Caelis Cobryn.

"Really?" Maverick threw his hands into the air. "You two picked a crime scene as the perfect place for a reunion?"

The poker-faced bastard continued walking as though he hadn't heard the sarcasm.

"I heard there was an attack," Caelis said with an air of nonchalance. "I had to make sure none of my people were about to be implicated."

Of course, he was lying through his teeth.

Neither Rhydian nor Maverick believed him for a second.

What they didn't know was that Caelis was here for a completely different reason.

He needed to confirm Karen Donovan was alive. Preferably before his father discovered she was dead and without that busybody, Maverick, poking his nose into his affairs.

"Congratulations," Maverick drawled. "The serpents don't appear to be implicated this time. Now get your ass out of here, Cobryn."

The order fell on deaf ears.

Caelis approached anyway, his sharp gaze sweeping across the damaged residence, the tense patrol team, and finally settling on his nemesis, Rhydian. He stopped a few paces away and clicked his tongue.

"Someone seems to be having a wonderful morning."

His gaze lingered on Rhydian before shifting to Maverick. Judging by the way the wolf was glaring, half of that hostility seemed directed at the dragon prince while the other half seemed directed at him. It wasn't anything new.

Rhydian cocked his head and something gave a satisfying crack in his neck.

"You do not want to provoke me this morning."

"Why?" Caelis taunted. "You'll send the crows after me too?"

A warning growl rumbled from Maverick's throat, but the serpent prince was completely unmoved by the attempt at intimidation. Then movement caught his attention and his gaze shifted upward. One eyebrow lifted.

There, pressed against one of the upper windows, a familiar pair of blue eyes stared back at him.

Aria Aspen.

So she was alive.

Strangely enough, he had expected that.

Whatever Aria Aspen was hiding, it wasn't something ordinary. She didn't strike him as the type to die so easily.

Good. He intended to find out exactly what she was hiding. And after that...?

His eyes narrowed slightly.

He'd kill her, of course. Human or not, she had to go. Karen Donovan would have to wait until last.

A crease formed between Maverick's brows as he caught Caelis staring toward the window with unusual focus. Warning bells immediately began ringing in his head.

First Rhydian. Now Caelis.

What was it with both of them being interested in that particular section of the residence where Aria and the other girls stayed?

He didn't like it. His expression darkened.

Maverick boomed. "Get away from that window right now!"

The girls scrambled instantly, nearly tripping over one another in their rush to obey. Seconds later, the curtains were yanked shut.

Maverick watched until the window was completely covered. Only then did he look back at the two princes.

Caelis was staring at him now. A thoughtful look had settled onto the basilisk's face.

Did Maverick know something?

The wolf had grown up around humans, had human relatives, and sympathies. Could that be why he was being so protective of them? Or was there something else he wasn't seeing?

Whatever it was, Caelis was like a bloodhound once he caught a scent. Now that his nose was buried in this matter, he wasn't about to let it go anytime soon.

"If you two are done wasting my time, then kindly move on to your classes while I clean up the mess both of you seem so fond of making." Maverick gestured toward the exit.

Rhydian opened his mouth to speak, but Caelis beat him to it.

"How many of the girls died?"

Maverick, who had been about to turn his back on them, halted. He slowly looked over his shoulder, his eyes twitching.

"Why? So you can finish where he started?"

He nodded toward Rhydian, who sighed. Apparently, he wasn't getting out of this anytime soon.

Of course, which girls died was the question Caelis had actually wanted to ask.

Unfortunately, he couldn't phrase it that way without drawing attention to himself. If he got a number, however, he could at least estimate the chances of Karen Donovan still being alive.

Or he could simply wait until later. The parrots were probably already digging through the story. Soon, the entire academy would know what happened. Caelis simply wanted answers now.

He didn't respond. Maverick began walking toward him until the two men stood face-to-face.

They were the same height, but Maverick's broader build gave him a heavier, more imposing presence, while Caelis carried himself with the lean, predatory grace of a serpent.

"One day, and I hope it isn't too far from now..." Maverick began, his voice carrying a dark seriousness that made the air feel heavier.

"You'll look back at everything you've done and regret every single decision."

His eyes never left Caelis.

"You'll regret every human life you've taken. Every family you've destroyed. Every person you've convinced yourself didn't matter. And when that day comes, you'll wish there was a way to undo it all. But there won't be."

Silence settled over the lawn.

"Because the dead don't come back."

Chapter 46: The Arena

The burden of inheritance was that someone else's war became your responsibility.

~ Rebel Beast

It seemed Maverick's words got to Caelis because, for a moment, the basilisk prince didn't speak.

Or so they thought.

Caelis leaned in slightly and replied in the same arrogant tone.

"Unfortunately, there's no future where that's going to happen, so save the speech."

His silver eyes narrowed.

"And be careful these days. This isn't the Asterion Region. The beasts might start wondering where your loyalties truly lie."

"Is that a threat?" Maverick flexed his shoulders. There was something almost eager in his expression now. "Because you should be careful who you threaten. Especially when that person happens to control whether you pass this semester or spend another year repeating it."

A scowl immediately appeared on Caelis' face. His serpent tongue flicked out.

"Just because you have Warrick in your pocket doesn't mean you can abuse your authority."

"Really?" Maverick sounded delighted now. "I suppose nobody taught you that threatening your professor comes with consequences."

He gestured dismissively. "So why don't you run back to your father and complain? I'd love to see Njord Cobryn form an investigation committee over your hurt feelings."

That hit a nerve. Threatening his grades was one thing, but insinuating he was his father's lapdog was another entirely.

It wasn't easy to read Caelis' thoughts. The basilisk prince had built formidable walls around his mind over the years. Perhaps because he was angry, Maverick caught a glimpse through the cracks.

Turn him to stone.

The thought flashed through his head so clearly that Maverick braced himself when Caelis' pupils narrowed into slits and a faint glow appeared in his eyes.

"Do it," Maverick challenged him. "I dare you."

The glow intensified.

"Petrify me if you can stomach the consequences."

For a moment, neither of them moved. The tension became so thick even the patrol team seemed reluctant to breathe. They all stood on edge, waiting for the slightest excuse to move.

Caelis' eyes flickered. They brightened, then dimmed, before brightening again like a dying light struggling to stay alive. The internal battle was written plainly across his face.

Then, with a frustrated hiss, his pupils rounded once more and the glow vanished completely. He had lost the argument with himself.

From the side, Rhydian chuckled.

"Your frustration is almost a sexy sight. Sadly, I've never had a thing for snakes."

It was a good thing Caelis had calmed down a little, otherwise Rhydian might have become a statue from the sheer intensity of that glare.

Rhydian rolled his eyes. Did the worm think glaring at people made him more intimidating? All he needed to do was gouge out those fancy eyes and the problem would solve itself.

Probably.

Caelis finally tore his attention away from Rhydian and focused on Maverick instead.

His gaze burned with enough intensity to set something on fire.

"We'll see who wins in the end."

That was all he said before turning away.

Though not before casting one lingering glance toward the residence. The bodies were probably still inside. He hadn't seen anyone move them yet. If he could just get one look, his curiosity would finally be satisfied.

Unfortunately, Maverick Nightshade was watching him like a hawk and would probably freeze him in place before he made it three steps.

Which meant he would have to do this the serpent way, wait, watch and let the information come to him.

Caelis left.

Satisfied that the serpent wasn't going to cause any more trouble for now, Maverick turned to return to the residence when he noticed Rhydian was still standing there.

"What are you still doing here?" he barked. "Waiting for your turn to threaten me too?"

"Quite the contrary," Rhydian said. "I'm here to inform you that whoever is responsible for this will be punished by my own hands."

He said it a little too loudly, his eyes flickering toward the residence window for the briefest second.

"Good for you. That's House Aetheris' business, not Therion's," Maverick replied, thoroughly unimpressed.

"Fine," Rhydian said with a shrug. "Then let's settle it in the Arena."

At the mention of the Arena, Maverick's eyes sharpened. So did the attention of the patrol team.

Dimitri immediately stepped forward.

"You are a teacher, Maverick," he warned cautiously. "Don't do it."

But Rhydian had already caught the scent of blood and like a fisherman reeling in a hooked catch, he pressed his advantage.

"Teacher or not, everyone is welcome in the Arena."

He looked toward the patrol team, smiling with the confidence of a salesman pitching a dream.

"You want revenge for what happened today, don't you? What healthier way to settle things than in the Arena? Or are you afraid I'll beat the ass of your revered leader?"

Murmurs immediately spread through the patrol team.

Maverick heard them. More importantly, he understood exactly what Rhydian was doing.

The Arena was an underground fighting ground operated by the students. Officially, it didn't exist. Unofficially, everyone knew about it.

It was where grudges were settled, where rivalries ended, and sometimes where lives did too. Most matches stopped before reaching that point, but when House Aetheris and House Ophidian were involved, things had a habit of escalating.

Since the participants were usually beasts, the academy often looked the other way. Now Rhydian was trying to drag a professor into it.

Of course the answer should have been no.

Except after today's attack, Maverick could see it in the eyes of the patrol team. They wanted him to accept.

"Let's be honest, Professor Sexy Pants," Rhydian began, causing Maverick's jaw to tighten.

"You've been looking for an excuse to beat the shit out of me all morning. Why not take the opportunity while it lasts?"

His grin became downright insufferable.

"Or are you scared?"

The murmurs grew louder.

"Maybe all that talk about Violet Purple's heir being powerful is just that. Talk."

Rhydian spread his hands.

"Or perhaps you've spent so much time relying on your powers that you've forgotten how real beasts settle their disputes."

Rhydian was goading him. That much was obvious. The problem was that it was working.

Maverick considered the alternatives. This was no longer just about him. If he turned down the challenge, Therion would find another way to seek revenge and he might not be able to control what happened next.

Secondly, his family's legacy had been dragged into the conversation. Perhaps it was time to remind these children how to respect their elders. No—scratch that, teachers.

Maverick's lips tilted into a dangerous smile.

"I'm in."

Rhydian lifted his chin in satisfaction.

It was settled.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 47: Spare A Fair Maiden

A wise person avoids unnecessary fights. A fool starts them. A beast enjoys them.

~ Rebel Beast.

After rage-baiting Maverick Nightshade into agreeing to the fight, it was safe to say the Drakhar heir was back to his usual sunshine personality.

This was going to be the biggest fight the Arena had seen so far. Well, aside from the future one between him and Caelis. He could already see that match happening during graduation. Only one of them would be leaving this academy to go live their best life afterwards.

That one fight would finally put an end to the centuries-old feud between dragons and serpents because, naturally, Rhydian saw himself winning. There was simply no version of reality where a worm defeated a dragon.

Anyway, back to his current masterpiece.

The more Rhydian thought about the fight, the more excited he became. He could already picture the Arena packed to the brim with students. The stands would be overflowing. The dragons would be screaming his name. The wolves would be howling for Maverick. The serpents would likely join the wolves just to demoralize him.

Good thing he never needed people to validate him. His confidence came naturally and flowed endlessly.

Money would change hands faster than a cheetah on caffeine. For once, there would be dragons, serpents, and land beasts sitting together in the same place without trying to kill one another.

A thought suddenly struck him. What about the humans?

Rhydian's eyes widened. They absolutely needed to be invited. How else would they discover who the superior predator truly was?

Maverick Nightshade had been getting away with mesmerizing half the female population with his whole sexy professor routine, but Rhydian doubted that advantage would survive the Arena. Not when they would finally witness real competition and powerful men testing themselves against one another.

There was something primitive about combat. The tightening of muscles beneath the skin, the flex of broad shoulders, and controlled violence. The speed, confidence, and raw certainty that came from knowing exactly what your body was capable of.

Maverick had his brooding professor appeal, Rhydian had no intention of denying him that. But under the Arena lights, stripped down to only pants with sweat glistening over corded muscles and adrenaline pumping through their veins, it would be a completely different game.

Strength would become visible. Power would become tangible. Every dodge, strike, and display of dominance? Yeah, the females would eat it up.

Except another problem occurred to him.

Most human women supposedly weren't fans of violence.

Well. That was rather inconvenient.

Maverick certainly wouldn't help matters either. The man was practically hovering around the humans like some overprotective mother hen.

Rhydian would have to ease them into the experience. Perhaps market it as something educational. Or something cooler. Humans loved parties, didn't they?

Either way, there was no chance he was letting those penny creatures miss the opportunity to witness Rhydian Drakhar in action.

And while they were at it, he would kindly remind them that placing their trust in Maverick Nightshade was a terrible long-term survival strategy. Maverick Nightshade might be annoyingly strong, but he had years on him.

While the Arena technically belonged to Caelis and served as one of the basilisk's favorite sources of income, Rhydian remained one of its most valuable customers. The worm charged him outrageous participation fees every single time, which was admittedly impressive business.

Yeah, their relationship was complicated.

A bizarre mixture of hatred, competition, mutual respect, and an overwhelming desire to throw one another off a cliff. Almost like one of those enemies-to-lovers stories human females seemed obsessed with writing.

Not that he was judging them.

Not when he was a huge fan of the genre himself. What better way to get into a woman's head than to know what made them tick?

Anyway, giving the serpents an opportunity to believe they might actually defeat him was one of life's greatest pleasures. Watching hope blossom in their little snake hearts only for reality to crush them moments later.

Delicious.

Though, to be fair, some had come close — only when they cheated.

Tamara believed House Aetheris should create its own Arena. But that was a terrible idea. Where was the fun in segregation? Where was the entertainment? Besides, why would he willingly deprive Caelis of his biggest source of income?

The worm returned the favor by allowing dragons access to the Arena despite the chaos they inevitably caused. It was business after all. So the arrangement worked.

For now.

The two houses would continue this strange dance of rivalry, competition, and mutual irritation until graduation finally arrived. Then the final show would begin.

"That was a reckless move out there."

"Ugh!" Rhydian made a show of being startled when Caelis Cobryn emerged from the woods, interrupting his train of thought.

Rhydian looked him over.

"I know you, Silver Eyes, are practically obsessed with me to the point of stalking, but I was in the middle of thinking up a very important plan." He pointed dramatically at his head. "Genius requires concentration, you know."

Caelis hissed in a deeply disrespectful manner, making it abundantly clear what he thought of that complaint.

Rhydian made a face.

"Gods, is that the expression you make to your females in bed? Dude, you seriously need sex education. Good thing I'm a master at—"

Caelis cut him off with another warning hiss, sounding dangerously close to reaching the end of his patience.

Then he got straight to the point.

"For someone who didn't want Aria Aspen dead yet, you certainly didn't seem concerned about her well-being this morning."

Rhydian sighed and ran a hand through his already disheveled red hair.

"I didn't know about the attack. How many times do I have to sing that song?"

"Enough times to remind you to get a better grip on your people before they ruin everything," Caelis told him seriously.

Rhydian would have assumed Caelis was simply concerned about the fallout, except the basilisk's black little heart had never shown much concern for humans before.

Immediately, his dragon senses started tingling.

"Is that why you cornered me out here?" Rhydian asked suspiciously. "To lecture me about properly managing my human extermination schedule?"

Something smelled fishy — and for once it wasn't the serpents.

Caelis straightened.

"You asked me to spare Aria Aspen and keep her for last. I need you to do something similar for me."

At once, Rhydian perked up. "Well, would you look at that?"

His grin turned downright wicked.

"Tell me, what fair maiden has managed to wrap her pretty little fingers around your cute little snake heart?"

Chapter 48: Handle His House

An enemy is dangerous. An entertained enemy is worse.

~ Rebel Beast

At first glance, most people saw Rhydian Drakhar as the carefree Casanova heir of the Drakhar family.

They weren't entirely wrong. That was simply who Rhydian was. Except they made the mistake of assuming carefree meant foolish.

The dragon prince was larger than life and determined to enjoy every second of it. He laughed loudly, fought recklessly, flirted shamelessly, and rarely took anything seriously.

As a result, most people underestimated him. Rhydian didn't mind. It made life easier. Because beneath all the charm and chaos was a mind far sharper than people gave him credit for. He was simply recklessly intelligent and unapologetically Rhydian Drakhar.

Caelis knew better than to underestimate him. Perhaps it was a dragon thing. Dragons were naturally knowledgeable creatures. Wise, however, was an entirely different matter. Otherwise, they wouldn't have orchestrated that attack.

Their stunt had only strengthened Maverick Nightshade's resolve. The wolf's greatest weakness had always been his sense of responsibility. Now the humans were even further under his protection.

"That is not funny. Stop it," Caelis snapped.

Rhydian stopped, but the smirk remained.

"Who is it?" he inquired.

Caelis told him, "She goes by the name Karen Donovan. I want her alive for now."

"Why?" Rhydian asked.

"Why?" Caelis repeated, pretending not to understand the question.

Rhydian stared at him patiently. "Yes. Why do you want me to keep her alive?"

Caelis folded his arms. "Did I question why you wanted Aria Aspen alive? So why bother questioning mine?"

"Because you never bothered asking," Rhydian retorted. "And since we're being honest, I wanted Aria Aspen alive because she seemed fun during her interview. It would've been a terrible waste to kill that much potential so quickly."

For the first time, Caelis looked genuinely surprised. He hadn't expected Rhydian to answer the question himself. The dragon prince was many things. Honesty was not one of the qualities he usually associated with him.

Having answered, Rhydian looked at him expectantly.

"Well?" His blue eyes gleamed with curiosity. "What do you want with Karen Donovan? You certainly haven't fallen in love with a human, have you?"

He barked out a laugh. "Nah. Serpents don't have beating hearts. So tell me, Caelis Cobryn. What exactly are you planning?"

The problem was that Rhydian was watching him too closely. Those bright blue eyes suddenly seemed capable of seeing far more than they should.

For the first time since arriving, Caelis felt a flicker of genuine unease. He couldn't tell Rhydian his father was making deals with humans. The two of them weren't allies, they were enemies. For all he knew, the dragons were conducting schemes of their own.

Maybe the nonsense about Aria Aspen being "fun" was exactly that. Maybe Rhydian already knew what Aria was, and the gods only knew what the dragons were truly after.

Caelis immediately went on the defensive.

"You expect me to believe you have no idea what Aria Aspen is?" His silver eyes narrowed. "And that you just happened to choose her by coincidence?"

The amusement immediately faded from Rhydian's face. The light in his eyes dimmed.

As proud creatures, dragons could tolerate many insults, and being called a liar was not one of them, especially when they were telling the truth.

For a moment, Rhydian simply stared at him. Then he exhaled heavily through his nose.

"Fine." His voice lost all traces of humor. "Aria for Karen. We have a deal. Now fuck off."

Caelis' expression shifted slightly. For a moment there, he had forgotten they were supposed to be enemies.

The ceasefire was making things messy, and the lines were beginning to blur. He didn't like it one bit. The sooner this truce ended, the sooner things could go back to the way they were supposed to be.

Unable to let him have the final word, Caelis called out as he began to walk away.

"Well, fuck off, giant lizard. And perhaps for once try to rein in the dragons. Otherwise, people might begin wondering whether the Drakhar heir has any control over his own house anymore."

But Rhydian simply threw his head back and laughed.

He turned around. "Oh, don't worry about me, little worm. I'm already handling it."

His grin widened. "Just try reducing your obsession with me a little. One of these days all this sexual tension is going to boil over."

Caelis hissed at him with enough venom to kill a small animal.

Rhydian merely chuckled, turned, and continued toward the academy with a noticeable spring in his step.

Phone in hand, he scrolled through the messages on the screen. A few minutes ago, he had sent a request to his dearest fang, asking for the location of one particularly troublesome dragon.

The response had arrived almost immediately.

Thamas, the little asshole was bold enough to go to class as if nothing had happened.

Well then, this was going to be fun.

Class was still in session when Rhydian Drakhar arrived. Without slowing down, he grabbed the door handle and ripped the classroom door open so hard it slammed against the wall with a loud bang.

Every head immediately snapped toward him, and even the professor paused mid-sentence. The sudden interruption shattered the lesson entirely.

"Rhydian Drakhar," the teacher, Selene, called out disapprovingly, placing both hands on her small waist. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Sorry about this," Rhydian said as he stepped into the room. His eyes immediately found Thamas.

The dragon in question went pale. So he knew fear after all.

"But we might be having an impromptu practical lesson today."

He paused beside Selene and gave her a quick once-over. "Also, nice skirt, Selene. You look lovely."

Just like that, the professor's prepared reprimand died in her throat as a faint flush crept up her neck.

Meanwhile, Rhydian continued forward as though nothing had happened while Thamas looked ready to leap out the nearest window. Unfortunately for him, there wasn't one close enough.

Instead, he slowly sank lower into his seat as Rhydian approached.

"Your Highness..." He began weakly.

"Hello, Thamas." Rhydian smiled.

The smile somehow made things worse.

Around them, students had completely abandoned any pretense of paying attention to class and watched the scene with intrigue.

Without warning, Rhydian grabbed the front of Thamas' uniform and yanked him clean out of his seat.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 49: Lesson's Over

No one fears an honest enemy. It's the smiling one that keeps the students awake at night.

~ Rebel Beast

Thamas let out a very undignified yelp as Rhydian roughly hauled him out of his seat, the desk screeching loudly across the classroom floor.

All the students, excluding the dragons, broke into excited chatter, the Therion and Ophidian beasts eager to see the scene about to unfold. Today's lesson had never been so exciting.

All members of House Aetheris wore nervous expressions, knowing shit was about to hit the roof. Unfortunately, Tamara wasn't part of this class, which meant there was no one close enough to talk Rhydian out of whatever he was about to do.

"What do you think you're doing, Rhydian?" Selene recovered, attempting to restore order to her classroom.

"Attempt" being the key word.

"Don't worry, Selene," Rhydian said as he dragged Thamas toward the front of the classroom. "It'll all be over before you know it. Just a little lesson on..." His eyes drifted toward the large digital screen mounted behind her.

He paused, right before a grin slowly spread across his face.

"Talk about coincidences."

Displayed across the screen in bold letters was today's topic:

Royal Hierarchy: Authority, Duty and Obedience.

Underneath were bullet points discussing the chain of command within the different beast clans, the responsibilities of leaders, and the consequences of insubordination.

Rhydian barked out a laugh, pointing a finger at Thamas, who had suddenly lost every ounce of confidence.

"This fool right here apparently skipped this Chapter."

The students burst into laughter. As much as the serpents hated Rhydian's ass, it didn't mean they couldn't laugh at his joke. Besides, the dragon prince was about to tear one of his own apart. What better spectacle was there than that?

"So here's what we're going to do," Rhydian enthused. "Professor Selene will handle the theory while I'll demonstrate the practical."

He flashed Selene one of his trademark smiles. "Perfect teamwork, don't you think?"

Selene simply stared at him, speechless. The Drakhar heir had always been insane, yet somehow, he found a new way to redefine the word.

After a long moment, the llama shifter quietly stepped aside. She knew when a situation was beyond her. There were some battles that simply weren't worth fighting.

Selene might have been the professor, but she was still a llama standing in front of a dragon prince.

The academy had strict rules forbidding students from laying a hand on their teachers. Unfortunately, those rules only mattered when the person breaking them respected the consequences. She knew exactly how far she could push before the dragon in him reared its head.

If there was anyone in this academy bold enough to stand toe-to-toe with Rhydian Drakhar, it was Professor Maverick Nightshade. She wasn't Maverick and had absolutely no intention of discovering where her own limits ended.

"So..." Rhydian began, forcing Thamas onto his knees in front of the entire class.

While fear lingered beneath the surface, Thamas' expression remained hardened with rage. Being made to kneel as a dragon was humiliating enough. But being made to kneel before the serpents was worse. His pride was never going to recover from this.

"I'm sure some of you have already heard about the crow attack this morning..." Rhydian's gaze swept across the classroom, taking note of the conveniently empty seats where some of the crow shifters should have been.

"At least the crows were smart enough to crawl back into whatever little nest they're hiding in right now. But apparently, Thamas here believes being a dragon gives him the right to disobey my orders."

Thamas lifted his head with a sneer.

"I was simply doing what you should've done. After what happened last night, every last human had every reason to be wiped out of this academy." His lips curled. "But I guess you've suddenly gone soft."

The words had barely left his mouth before Rhydian's fist crashed into his face, the crack echoing through the classroom.

But instead of gasps, the room erupted into cheers and whistles. Violence was simply another language to beasts. Only Selene remained frozen in the corner, two fingers pressed against her temple as though she could massage away the headache forming behind her eyes.

"Don't start that bullshit with me," Rhydian growled, seeing straight through Thamas' attempt to twist the narrative. "I don't care what you think should've happened."

His voice turned colder. "As long as you wear House Aetheris' colors, my orders are absolute. And when I say the humans are not to be touched..." He leaned down until they were eye level. "...you do not touch them."

Thamas slowly recovered from the punch, a dark bruise already blooming across the side of his face. Although he remained on his knees, there was no remorse in his expression. If anything, his hatred had only deepened.

Rhydian suddenly grabbed a fistful of his hair, and Thamas hissed as pain shot across his scalp, his head forced upward until he was staring directly into the dragon prince's eyes.

"I told beautiful Selene I'd keep this practical lesson brief, and I intend to keep my word."

Even from her corner of the classroom, Selene felt heat rush into her cheeks. Rhydian Drakhar was going to be the death of her.

Though, now that she thought about it...

Was the skirt really that nice?

Her eyes subtly dropped to the black A-line skirt that stopped just above her knees, the modest slit at the back allowing for easier movement.

Maybe... she should wear it again next week.

Rhydian resumed, "Tell me, Thamas, just how much does flying mean to you?"

A confused furrow crossed Thamas' features because that was a stupid question. Flying was life to dragons.

"I love it—" The words had barely left his mouth before realization struck him. It wasn't a question but a sentence.

A sinister glint flashed in Rhydian's blue eyes. "Thought so. I'm a dragon after all."

His smirk turned downright fiendish, so much so that chills raced across Thamas' skin. Before he could even blink, Rhydian's hand shot out and grabbed his shoulder.

Crack!

The sickening sound reverberated through the classroom.

Pain exploded through Thamas' body as Rhydian intentionally shattered the shoulder joint where a dragon's wings anchored in their shifted form. It was a precise strike, one only another dragon would know how to inflict.

Thamas' scream was so full of anguish that this time, no one found amusement in it. The classroom fell deathly silent as every beast stared at Rhydian.

In that moment, they remembered exactly what the carefree Drakhar heir was after all. An apex predator.

Rhydian only released Thamas after making absolutely certain the damage had been done.

The wing joint had been completely shattered. Even if Thamas shifted right then, his wings wouldn't respond properly. Healing magic could have repaired the injury within

hours, but without a healer, the bone would have to mend naturally. Until then, the skies were closed to him.

Thamas collapsed onto the floor, clutching his ruined shoulder as his body writhed in agony. Rhydian straightened his uniform as calmly as though he had merely finished adjusting his cuffs.

Then he looked around the classroom.

"Thamas Draco is not permitted to see a healer. He will recover naturally, no matter how long it takes."

His gaze swept across every dragon, serpent, and Therion beast in the room.

"Anyone who goes against my order or assists in his recovery will have me to contend with."

The threat settled over the classroom like a heavy fog, and not a single student dared utter a word.

Satisfied, Rhydian gave a single nod.

"Lesson's over."

Chapter 50: A Discovered Crush

Every academy teaches lessons. Some just happen to be life and death.

~ Rebel Beast

Have you ever had that feeling deep in your gut that told you something was about to change?

That quiet shift in the air where you just knew you were standing on the edge of a life-altering moment.

You could never explain it to anyone else. No one would understand. They'd probably think you were crazy. Yet you could feel it deep in your soul.

Something was coming.

The only question was whether it would be good or bad.

Yes.

That was exactly how Aria felt.

An hour had gone by since Rhydian Drakhar and Caelis Cobryn made their appearance in front of their lawn yet she was unsettled.

Rhydian and Caelis were not your typical beasts, and she'd do well to avoid them like the plague. It had been a mistake on her part to stare at them the way she had earlier. Even with the distance separating them, their eyes had locked onto hers as though they had felt her watching.

Aria could only hope she hadn't unknowingly challenged or marked herself in some beastly way. The last thing she needed was some unhinged predator deciding she had become an entertaining hunt simply because she'd dared hold eye contact.

Although, now that she thought about it, what were the dragon prince and the famed basilisk even doing at the residence? Were they here to gloat over the attack? Or were they simply counting how many humans were left alive before deciding who to finish off next?

Aria shivered.

Thankfully, Professor Maverick Nightshade had not let them pass through.

But Aria was not deluded to think the both men couldn't finish them if they wanted to. After Maverick left them alone eventually, they would be nothing but sitting ducks waiting to be killed. This place wasn't safe anymore.

"I know the beasts are dangerous but one has to admit," Brittney started, "Rhydian Drakhar is smoking hot."

Aria's head jerked in the direction of the foolish girl.

"Smoking hot as in when he roasts you alive with dragon fire, right?"

Brittney rolled her eyes.

"I'm just saying, if they weren't dangerous psychopaths and all, which one would be your type? Oh right..." A sly smile spread across her face. "I forgot. You already belong to Professor Nightshade." She punctuated the statement with a dramatic wink.

"Brittney!"

Aria shot her a reprimanding look, but Brittney simply stared back with an innocent expression that screamed, I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about.

If anything, she turned toward the other girls. "What about you two? Which one would you pick?"

Alek said. "I'll go with Caelis. I like the quiet, mysterious type."

"Boring!" Trisha jeered. "Rhydian seems fun. Plus, with a body that sinful? Yeah..." She sighed dreamily, already looking like she was picturing something she probably shouldn't. "I'd climb that dragon like a tree."

Aria made a face.

"You mean a body riddled with STDs? Do beasts even get infections?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"You are such a killjoy, Aria," Brittney groaned.

Aria shrugged unapologetically.

"Just being realistic, that's all."

"How about being realistic about your..." Brittney made exaggerated air quotes. "...forbidden attraction to your professor?"

"We are so not doing this again, Brittney."

Right then, a knock sounded on the door and just like that, the room fell silent. The girls looked at one another, each silently hoping someone else would answer it.

Trisha suddenly looked terrified.

"The crows aren't back... are they?"

"Unless crows in bird form have suddenly learned how to knock on doors, I'd say no," Aria replied, climbing to her feet. She couldn't help wondering if Trisha was beginning to develop post-traumatic stress disorder after everything that had happened.

Taking a steadying breath, Aria opened the door. Then promptly swallowed.

Standing outside was the werewolf who always seemed glued to Professor Nightshade's side like they had been attached at the hip since birth. If she remembered correctly, wolves called someone like him a Beta.

The Beta looked unusually stiff, and warning bells immediately started ringing inside Aria's head.

Surely... he hadn't overheard everything they'd just been saying, right?

Unfortunately, werewolves were famous for their ridiculously sharp hearing.

Oh, fuck her life.

Dimitri cleared his throat, maintaining a perfectly neutral expression as though he hadn't heard a thing.

"You should all come downstairs. Professor Maverick Nightshade has something he'd like to discuss with everyone."

It was the way he emphasized Professor that made Aria's soul leave her body.

He knew. He absolutely knew.

How Aria managed to keep the straight look on her face, she would never know.

"Thank you," she said politely before gently closing the door.

The instant it clicked shut, her expression dissolved into one of pure, unfiltered horror.

"He heard us!" Aria cried, dragging both hands through her hair. "He fucking heard us! How am I supposed to face the professor now?" She rounded on Brittney, accusingly pointing a finger at her. "This is all your fault! If you hadn't encouraged all those stupid thoughts, none of this would've happened!"

She was pacing now.

"Whoa, calm down." Brittney held both hands up in surrender, looking far too amused for Aria's liking. "What's the big deal? You're hardly the first girl to confess she finds him attractive."

Aria froze mid-step.

"...Excuse me?"

Brittney and Trisha exchanged a knowing look before bursting into laughter as though they were sharing a joke only the two of them understood.

"Oh, dearest Aria," Trisha sighed dramatically, "your dating portfolio seriously needs updating. Unfortunately, we're all one bad day away from becoming beast food, so there probably won't be enough time to fix that."

"I don't understand." Aria looked between them, completely lost.

"Professor Maverick Nightshade is ridiculously attractive. What makes you think you're the first girl to notice?" Brittney gestured as though the answer should have been

painfully obvious. "I'm pretty sure that man receives at least one love confession every other day. If not every day."

Trisha nodded enthusiastically.

"If breathing were a crime, Professor Nightshade would've been sentenced already."

"So yeah," Brittney concluded with a shrug. "You finding him attractive is probably the least surprising thing he's heard this semester."

That explanation should have made Aria feel better, instead, her stomach sank.

She wasn't special.

She was simply another girl with an embarrassing crush on Professor Maverick Nightshade.

...Wait. Why did that even bother her? She wasn't here to date or fall in love. She certainly wasn't here to join some imaginary queue of girls throwing themselves at a professor.

Yet that strange, irritating feeling refused to disappear. It lingered beneath her skin like an itch she couldn't scratch.

Aria let out an annoyed sigh.

"Well, we're needed downstairs. Let's go see what this is all about." She walked toward the door. "Hopefully this madness will be over soon."

Before the others could respond, she stepped out into the hallway. However, Aria hadn't needed to worry about how she was going to face Professor Nightshade.

Because the very first person she ran into in the common room was the witch.

Karen Donovan.