

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 51: Read Aria's Mind

A dragon guards its treasure. A serpent guards its truth. A wolf guards its mate.

~ Rebel Beast

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"How are you still alive?"

Karen looked genuinely stunned to find Aria standing there.

Aria stared at her, speechless. This bitch actually sounded disappointed.

Sure, Aria couldn't stand the sight of Karen Donovan and wished she never had to wake up to that smug face again, but never once had she wished the girl dead.

She recovered enough to answer.

"Guess fate likes me a little more than it likes you." Her eyes hardened. "Unlike someone who survived by throwing her own friend in front of a crow."

Karen's face drained of color. For a split second, pure panic flashed across her features before she hurriedly glanced around the common room. More students were filtering downstairs now, drawn by the summon. Conversations slowed as curious eyes drifted toward the two girls.

Aria became aware of her roommates, Alek, Brittney and Trisha stopping behind her as well. None of them interrupted and simply watched.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Karen denied a little too quickly.

"Really?" A dangerous glint settled into Aria's blue eyes. "Then why don't we ask everyone who was there whether they saw you dragging Philippa in front of you to shield yourself from the crows?"

She made to step around Karen but she moved sideways, blocking her path. Her voice rose just enough for nearby students to hear.

"What is your problem with me?" she demanded, sounding equal parts confused and wounded. "First you picked a fight with me, and now you're accusing me of sacrificing Philippa? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Aria almost laughed because she knew

Karen wasn't defending herself. This was all a performance and from the way nearby students exchanged uncertain glances, it was working.

"I don't have anything against you," Aria said, refusing to match Karen's volume. "But I can't ignore the fact that you're a bully." Her gaze swept past Karen's shoulder. "And considering Philippa isn't standing here with the rest of us, I'm willing to bet the worst happened."

She looked Karen dead in the eye, saying with an ice cold voice, "So no, I'm not staying quiet while you pretend you didn't shove that girl into the path of death just to save yourself."

The murmurs went up a notch, and from the sideways glances being thrown Karen's way, it was obvious doubt had begun to creep into their minds. Karen noticed it too and panicked for a moment.

"Karen didn't do anything to Philippa."

Charlotte stepped into the conversation, drawing everyone's attention. She came to stand beside Karen, folding her arms across her chest before glaring at Aria.

"I saw it," she declared. "Philippa was the one who stumbled into Karen's path. Karen simply used that moment to escape. Surely you can't blame her for trying to survive when everyone else was doing the exact same thing."

"What kind of fucking bullshit explanation is that?" Brittney snapped, coming to stand beside Aria. Alek and Trisha immediately joined them, making it four against two.

The fact that neither Philippa nor Debbie stepped forward from the crowd confirmed the suspicion Aria had from the very beginning.

They were the casualties of the beasts' attack.

For a brief moment, it became a silent game of intimidation, and Aria's side appeared to be winning.

Until Liv walked over and stopped beside Karen. "How is that bullshit when Charlotte just told you what she saw?"

Aria narrowed her eyes at Liv. No wonder Karen's behavior went unchecked. The moment one girl disappeared from her circle, someone else seemed eager to take her place.

Before Aria could respond, Shannon stepped forward too.

"In that case," she said, "shouldn't Aria be the one taking responsibility? She's the one who started the fight this morning. If we hadn't all been distracted by her, maybe we would've noticed the crows sooner."

Aria's jaw nearly hit the floor.

What the hell was going on here? She had come to call Karen out for sacrificing another girl. Instead, she was the one standing trial.

As though that wasn't enough, one by one, the remaining girls crossed over to Karen's side. Olivia, Meredith, Indigo, Zainab and Fatima, Aria watched each of them move.

By the time they were done, Karen stood with eight girls behind her while she had only three.

Aria worked her jaw. So much for trying to do the right thing. This was what she got in return. Then again, what exactly had she expected? That they would suddenly hold Karen accountable? Punish her?

The thought was almost laughable.

Holding Karen responsible would've broken her influence over the others. Maybe then another girl wouldn't end up paying the price for her selfishness. Now she was a fool.

This was exactly why she preferred minding her own business.

For a moment, there was nothing but tension between the two groups. They stood facing one another, neither side willing to back down. It felt less like an argument now and more like two rival gangs standing on the verge of a brawl. One wrong word was all it would take.

That was the scene Maverick and Dimitri walked into when they returned to the residence.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Maverick didn't bark the words, yet they rolled across the room like distant thunder. Every head snapped toward him and, just like that, the girls froze like deer caught in headlights.

No.

There was absolutely no way he was about to witness a catfight on top of everything else that had happened today.

He'd had enough.

Aria startled at the sound of his voice. She turned only to meet those furious gray eyes, their vertical pupils narrowed into dangerous slits.

Her heart performed that strange little pitter-patter dance it had developed recently.

She immediately looked away, suddenly unable to bear the weight of his gaze, even though it had lasted only a few seconds.

The confrontation dissolved almost instantly. The girls broke eye contact with one another, suddenly finding the floor, the walls, and the ceiling infinitely more interesting than their professor. No one wanted to be the first to explain what had just happened.

Aria was highly tempted to speak. Something told her he'd listen. But what was the point? The girls had already proven themselves to be absolute morons, and she wasn't wasting another breath trying to save people who clearly didn't want saving.

If Karen ever held a knife to their throats, she'd simply mind her own business. Besides, she didn't want the professor involved in hers.

It was clear to Maverick that whatever was going on, the girls wanted to keep him out of it. Normally, he would've respected that, but then he caught the faint crease between Aria's brows and the stubborn set of her lips. Something about it refused to let him walk away.

"I'll ask one more time." His voice dropped lower, colder. "What the hell is going on here?"

The temperature in the room seemed to fall with every word, and a shiver rippled through the girls. Charlotte unconsciously rubbed her arms as goosebumps spread across her skin.

Then Brittney broke.

"Karen Donovan stands accused of contributing to Philippa Davids' death."

"What?!" Karen's head snapped toward Brittney, fury blazing in her eyes.

"Brittney!" Aria hissed. She shouldn't have blurted that out.

But Brittney had never been one to keep quiet. She confessed it all to Professor Maverick, "Aria saw Karen use Philippa as a human shield during the crow attack. We believe that contributed to her death."

Maverick's brows shot up.

Even Dimitri looked taken aback. After spending so much time dealing with beast politics, he'd almost forgotten humans were capable of the same kind of cruelty.

"That is not true!" Karen shouted. "She's lying!"

As expected, her loyal lackey rushed to her defense.

"I saw it happen," Charlotte insisted. "Aria's the one lying."

This time, Maverick turned his attention to Aria. "You do realize that's a very serious accusation, don't you?"

For a moment, it seemed as though Aria wouldn't answer. Then she lifted her chin.

"I'm telling the truth." Her voice was steady despite the nervousness knotting in her stomach. "Otherwise, I would've never confronted her about it in the first place."

To be honest, Aria had doubted herself for a moment. What if she hadn't seen things correctly? But the more she replayed the scene in her head, the more certain she became.

She had seen it. Karen had used Philippa as a shield.

Maverick slowly swept his gaze across the girls. "Do any of you know what I'm capable of?"

Alek answered without hesitation.

"You can read minds, Professor."

"Correct," Maverick concurred. "Except that answer is a little vague. Most people think reading minds means hearing someone's thoughts as though they're speaking inside my head. That's only part of it."

His gaze swept across the room.

"Thoughts leave impressions. Every memory you consciously recall leaves behind traces, almost like footprints in a fresh snow. When I touch those traces, I don't simply hear what happened, I can see fragments of it if I want to."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"Not the entire memory though, just flashes. But it's enough to piece together what someone was thinking at that particular moment."

His gray eyes moved from one girl to the next. "You know where I'm going with this, don't you?"

Karen remained silent. The color had already drained from her face.

Alek was the one who answered, again.

"You're going to investigate this matter yourself."

"Exactly." Maverick nodded approvingly. "Smart girl."

A blush crept onto Alek's cheeks.

Then Maverick's gaze settled on Aria.

"And we'll start with the accuser." His eyes locked onto hers. "Aria Aspen."

"What?!" Aria eyes widened in disbelief.

There was only one problem with Professor Maverick Nightshade's little plan. He couldn't read Aria Aspen's mind.

And he knew it.

## Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 52: Sweet Silence

"Every creature fears the hand that can reach its heart, because not every touch bruises the skin. Some unravel the soul."

~ Rebel Beast

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"I'm going to step closer now," Maverick warned quietly, giving her one final opportunity to object.

"Huh?" Aria mumbled incoherently.

Then he closed the distance between them.

One step. That was all it took. Then he was standing right in front of her, towering over her until he blotted out everything else. The girls, the common room, the murmurs around them, they all disappeared behind the broad frame of Professor Maverick Nightshade.

He was all she could see, and every instinct inside Aria screamed at her to move.

Run.

Step back.

Do something.

Anything.

Yet her feet remained rooted to the floor as though they'd betrayed her. Or perhaps, she was the one betraying herself. Aria hadn't realized she'd been staring until his deep voice pulled her back.

"I'm going to touch you now."

The words should have sounded professional. A simple warning before he used his ability. Instead, they landed like a death sentence.

Run.

The warning echoed louder inside her head.

Something deep within her soul recognized this moment for what it was. Not dangerous because he intended to hurt her, but dangerous because she had the strange feeling nothing between them would remain the same afterward.

Every sensible part of her begged her to pull away. Yet another part, one she hadn't known existed until Maverick Nightshade walked into her life, wanted to know what his touch felt like.

The realization terrified her.

Around them, the strange tension hadn't gone unnoticed either. The common room had fallen unusually quiet, every pair of eyes fixed on the two of them.

"Wasn't he averse to touch or something?" Liv whispered, her brows knitting together in confusion.

Brittney immediately hissed for silence while Alek and Trisha shot Liv matching death glares. None of them were about to let anyone ruin this moment.

The three girls stood completely captivated, watching the invisible thread stretching between Aria and Maverick as though they had been waiting for this moment all along.

As if she were something delicate meant to be treasured, Maverick gently cupped her face with both hands. His palms were warm against her skin, rough enough to remind her they belonged to a warrior, yet impossibly gentle in the way they held her.

It was only a touch. It shouldn't have affected her this much. Yet a million chills raced through her body, and Aria stiffened on the spot.

He must have felt the tension seize her because his next words were little more than a whisper.

"Relax."

The single word brushed over her like a lover's caress. She did relax, especially when his scent drifted into her nose.

Dear Father lord in heaven, the man smelled insanely good.

Aria's eyes fluttered shut as she caught his scent again. With her sense of sight gone, it became even more distinct. Deep, dark and smoky, like freshly roasted dark coffee over an open fire.

It should have smelled harsh and intimidating, matching the severe man standing before her. Instead, hidden beneath all that darkness was the faintest trace of vanilla. So subtle she almost convinced herself she'd imagined it.

Thus, Aria found herself breathing in again just to be sure. It was still there. Warm, smooth and dangerously comforting. It didn't suit him. Or perhaps, it suited Professor Maverick Nightshade far too well.

Everyone saw the sharp edges. Right now, however, she could almost sense the softness hidden beneath all that rigid self-control.

Maverick closed his eyes and reached for her mind. As expected, nothing happened. There were no scattered thoughts or emotions brushing against the edge of his consciousness waiting to be pieced together.

It was as though the moment his ability reached Aria Aspen, it stepped into an endless field of untouched snow where not a single footprint existed. It should have bothered him, but instead, Maverick found himself savoring it.

For as long as he could remember, the world had never truly been silent. Every person he encountered carried thoughts, memories and emotions loud enough to leave impressions behind. Even when he wasn't trying to read them, they were always there, scratching at the edge of his mind like an endless chorus he could never quite escape.

Standing before Aria, however, there was only silence. Beautiful, uninterrupted silence.

The quiet settled over him like cool rain after years beneath an unforgiving sun, easing a weariness he hadn't even realized he carried. It was strangely addictive, making him wonder if this was what ordinary people experienced every single day.

His thumb drifted across her cheek almost absentmindedly. The movement had nothing to do with searching her mind anymore. He simply wanted to know what she felt like.

Maverick Nightshade had spent years avoiding unnecessary touch. Aside from his mother and sisters, physical contact had always been something to endure rather than enjoy. It was invasive and unpleasant.

Yet Aria's skin beneath his fingertips was impossibly soft, the warmth of her face settling against his palms as though she'd been made to fit there. Instead of the familiar discomfort, an unfamiliar calm spread quietly through his chest.

It made no sense. Almost as though his body had decided Aria Aspen wasn't someone to push away. Without thinking, he drew a slow breath.

Lavender and fresh mint.

The fragrance was clean and delicate, wrapping around him with effortless grace. It wasn't loud enough to demand attention, yet somehow he couldn't stop himself from breathing it in again.

For the first time, Maverick understood why people sought the comfort of another person's touch because he found himself reluctant to let go.

Unfortunately, Maverick couldn't afford to let that show. If he suddenly admitted he couldn't read Aria Aspen's mind, every ounce of authority he'd built over the last few minutes would crumble before the girls.

So he continued the performance.

His brows drew together in concentration while his thumb traced slowly along her cheek. A thoughtful hum vibrated low in the back of his throat, the sort of sound someone made when piecing together fragments only they could see.

To everyone watching, Professor Maverick Nightshade was reading Aria Aspen's mind. To Maverick, he was simply buying himself time.

To Aria, it was an entirely different kind of torture. Each slow stroke of his thumb burned against her skin as though his touch carried a warmth of its own.

The sensation spread from her face down the length of her neck before settling somewhere beneath her ribs, leaving her strangely breathless.

He hummed again, and the deep vibration rolled over her, slipping beneath her skin until a slow warmth unfurled low inside her.

Dear Lord, did the man have any idea what his voice was doing to her?

"I'm close now," Maverick murmured, never breaking the illusion.

The words struck her harder than they should have. A shiver traveled through her body, followed by another wave of unbearable warmth that left her clutching desperately to what little composure she had left.

Meanwhile, Maverick remained completely absorbed in his performance until his nose twitched. Without thinking, he drew a slow breath, and every muscle in his body suddenly locked.

His wolf stirred. No, it surged. A low growl rumbled deep within his chest before he could stop it.

Aria's lashes fluttered open, and she looked directly into his eyes. Whatever she saw there sent fear crashing through her.

The calm was gone. Something wild, predatory, hungry and untamed stared back at her. Her breath caught, and she jerked backward, breaking the contact between them.

"I..." Aria's voice came out smaller than she'd intended. "I think that's enough."

The warmth vanished with the distance.

Maverick blinked as awareness slowly returned. He took one careful step back, putting the space between them that should've been there from the beginning.

"You're right."

His voice had turned rough, the words dragged over gravel.

"I've seen enough."

For once, Professor Maverick Nightshade wasn't talking about memories.

## Chapter 53: Abandon One Of Her Own

"The strongest wolves don't win by force alone. They win because no one realizes they're hunting until it's too late."

~ Rebel Beast

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For a long moment, an awkward silence descended between them. Aria hurried back to Brittney's side without daring to look behind her.

"Are you okay?" Brittney asked as soon as Aria moved to stand beside them.

"I'm fine," Aria answered a little too quickly, rubbing her hands up and down her arms in a futile attempt to chase away the lingering warmth clinging to her skin.

Brittney, Alek and Trisha exchanged puzzled glances. That wasn't the reaction they'd expected.

For once, the talkative Brittney resisted the temptation to tease her. Whatever had just happened between Aria and Professor Nightshade had clearly shaken her far more than any of them had anticipated.

So none of them pressed her, choosing instead to give her a moment to gather herself.

Aria welcomed the silence. She needed it.

Her breathing had steadied, yet she could still feel the phantom weight of Maverick's hands against her face. Worse still, every now and then the scent of dark roast coffee and vanilla seemed to drift through her memory all over again, making her stomach twist into unfamiliar knots.

A deep frown settled between Aria's brows as her gaze drifted back to Professor Maverick Nightshade. Something about that man wasn't normal. He unsettled her in ways she couldn't begin to explain.

Maverick's expression had returned to its usual unreadable mask, but the slight tightening of his jaw suggested his thoughts were elsewhere. He flexed his fingers, almost as though trying to rid himself of the memory of her soft skin lingering against his palms.

Then he looked up and found his next target with unnerving precision.

"Next on the list, Karen Donovan," he said, his voice once again calm and professional.

Karen nearly jumped out of her skin as the color drained from her face.

"What about Aria, Professor?" Charlotte asked urgently. "What did you see in her memories? Was she right or was she mistaken?"

Maverick slowly turned his head toward her.

"Why?" His voice remained deceptively calm. "So you can all adjust your thoughts before it's your turn?"

Charlotte's eyes widened.

"N-No, that's not what I meant."

Around her, the confidence she'd borrowed from the other girls began to crack. One by one, uncertain glances were exchanged.

Maverick ignored her and shifted his attention to Karen Donovan. Unlike Aria Aspen, Karen's mind was complete chaos.

Fear had stripped away every barrier she'd unknowingly built, allowing fragments of her thoughts to brush loudly against his consciousness without him making the slightest effort to reach for them.

Can people really control what they think?

No think about something else. Anything else.

What if he already saw it?

Stay calm, Karen. Stay calm.

A low chuckle escaped Maverick. The sound alone made Karen's blood run cold.

"Go ahead," he said, folding his arms across his chest. "Manipulate your thoughts."

Karen's breathing hitched.

"Yes, I know exactly what you're trying to do."

Cold sweat gathered across her forehead. How had things escalated this far?

Charlotte made a desperate move.

"Professor—"

Maverick didn't even spare her a glance.

"You've spoken enough."

He lazily flicked two fingers, and a thin ribbon of ice wrapped itself around Charlotte's mouth, sealing it shut. Her eyes widened in horror as muffled protests became the only sounds she could make.

The room fell deathly silent. Only then did Maverick continue the interrogation, his eyes fixed on Karen with terrifying patience.

"Now, answer my question."

He took one deliberate step toward her.

"Did you..."

Another step.

"...or did you not..."

He stopped directly in front of her.

"...use Philippa as your shield?"

Karen tried to hold her ground, but the pressure finally became too much. Her composure cracked.

"What was I supposed to do?" she cried, her voice rising into near hysteria. "There was chaos everywhere! We were all trying to survive! Philippa stumbled in front of me and... and I just reacted!"

She shook her head frantically, tears spilling freely now.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen! The both of us could've died, but I survived. Shouldn't that count for something?"

As though sensing the room slipping away from her, she hurried to defend herself again.

"It only lasted a second! I didn't kill Philippa! The claws did! You're all making it sound like I murdered her!"

"That selfish bitch! This time I'm actually knocking her teeth out!"

Brittney lunged forward without another thought, but Alek and Trisha caught her by both arms before she could reach Karen.

"Let me go!"

"No!"

"She deserves it!"

Karen continued crying, but the tears had long since lost whatever sympathy they might've earned.

Maverick remained completely unmoved.

He'd seen enough minds to recognize the difference between remorse and self-preservation. Karen wasn't mourning Philippa. She was mourning herself.

His voice was cold. "Even beasts know better than to abandon one of their own on the battlefield."

The words echoed heavily through the room. Disgust flickered openly across his face. As a wolf shifter, protecting their pack wasn't what they were taught, they were born with it.

"You're all frightened girls trapped in a place determined to kill you, yet instead of standing together, you chose to sacrifice one of your own for another heartbeat of survival." Maverick just couldn't understand it.

Karen collapsed to her knees.

"I'm sorry!" she sobbed. "I didn't mean to! Everything happened so fast! I panicked!"

Unlike several of the girls, whose expressions had begun to soften beneath the tears, Aria wasn't moved in the slightest. She saw the performance for exactly what it was.

"Whether I like it or not, every one of you remains my responsibility while you stay at this academy." Maverick announced to them, holding their gazes.

"That responsibility includes protecting you from beasts and from each other. That is why...." His expression hardened. "I will not tolerate this again."

Maverick paused just long enough to leave the girls in tension.

"Karen Donovan will be punished!"

## Chapter 54: A Little Psycho

"The dead cannot speak. That is why the living must decide whether to honor them, or betray them."

~ Rebel Beast

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The girls let out collective gasps, unable to believe the professor would actually go that far.

"What?!"

"No way!"

"That's impossible!"

Even Aria's brows lifted in genuine surprise. She had expected Professor Nightshade to give Karen a harsh scolding, perhaps assign her extra duties around the residence. Punishment? That was unexpectedly satisfying.

"You all heard me," Maverick said, completely unmoved. His gaze briefly drifted toward Aria. Whatever he saw on her face only reinforced the decision he'd already made.

Liv scoffed. "With all due respect, Professor, do you even know who Karen's parents are?"

Judging by the confidence in her voice, she clearly expected that revelation alone to make him reconsider.

Maverick looked at her with complete indifference.

"So?"

Liv's face fell. That single word completely derailed her.

Charlotte's muffled protests grew louder behind the sheet of ice sealing her mouth. Had she been able to speak, she would've undoubtedly joined Liv in reminding everyone just how influential Karen's family was.

Since she couldn't, Liv decided to continue on her behalf.

"What Karen did was wrong, but she's already apologized. If her parents find out you punished their daughter after everything she's been through today, you'll be creating unnecessary trouble for yourself."

She folded her arms afterward, clearly pleased with herself. Surely the professor would think twice now.

"Oh, she's dead," Alek commented under her breath. Honestly, she had no idea what gave these girls the confidence. Just because they had money?

Well, good luck to her.

She hadn't known Professor Maverick long enough, but from their few interactions, he struck her as the kind of unorthodox, cutthroat teacher who couldn't care less about things like status.

And as expected, it was exactly as Alek predicted.

"You do realize you're threatening the wrong person, don't you?"

Maverick regarded Liv with a look that bordered on pity.

"My family isn't exactly known for being reasonable people."

But Liv wasn't backing down.

"My first father has the ability to compel people to do just about anything. If he truly wanted to, Karen's parents could spend the rest of their lives eating their own shit while thanking him for the privilege."

A collective wave of disgust swept through the room.

"Eww!" Trisha gagged. "I don't think I'll ever recover from that mental image."

Karen wished the ground would simply swallow her whole. This was embarrassing.

"My second father prefers handling problems in his dragon form," Maverick continued as though the first threat wasn't enough. "If Karen's parents become too troublesome, I'm sure he'd consider them a decent afternoon snack."

"Ooh," Brittney grinned. "Two to nothing."

And yes, Aria and her girls were having fun here.

"My third father commands lightning. I doubt there'd be enough left afterward to identify the bodies."

By now, Liv's confidence had all but disappeared. She'd only wanted to protect Karen. Instead, she'd unknowingly invited Professor Nightshade to compare family pedigrees.

She suddenly remembered exactly who his mother was.

Violet Purple.

The woman every child in Novara had grown up hearing stories about for the past twenty years.

Everyone knew Violet Purple had multiple husbands. Very few people ever bothered looking into what those husbands were capable of.

Liv was beginning to regret that oversight.

"My fourth father," Maverick resumed, "is known simply as the Beast. He has an unfortunate habit of solving problems with his fists."

He shrugged casually.

"Then there's my grandmother, the Queen of the Free Fae, whose army would make Karen's parents' private security look adorable. As for my mother..." A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Well, if Violet Purple truly wanted to conquer the world, she'd probably have it done before dinner. Then there are my siblings, who are somehow even more troublesome."

"So tell me something, Liv." Maverick rolled his broad shoulders, a gesture Aria seemed to notice.

"If you were standing where I am, would you give a single fuck about Karen Donovan's parents?"

Liv's throat worked soundlessly.

"Answer me."

His voice cracked through the room with enough authority that nearly every girl flinched.

"N-No!" Liv blurted immediately, unable to look Karen in the eye.

She had only wanted to defend Karen and gain her favor in the process. Instead, she'd embarrassed her beyond repair.

"Good." Maverick rubbed a tired hand through his purple hair before letting out a weary sigh. "I'm done entertaining this conversation."

He looked directly at Karen.

"Karen Donovan will remain in this residence."

Confused murmurs immediately spread through the room. The girls looked at one another, unable to understand how remaining in the residence counted as punishment.

Maverick anticipated the confusion.

"The rest of you," he announced, "will be coming with me to House Therion."

For several long seconds, nobody reacted. It was as though the announcement had been so absurd their minds refused to process it.

Then the room exploded with screams.

"Oh my God!"

"No way!"

"We're going to live with the beasts?"

"That's impossible!"

"Is this really happening?"

"I think I'm dreaming!"

"This is insane!" Fatima exclaimed.

"Yes," Maverick agreed dryly. "I've finally lost my mind."

Threatening beast students with failing grades had been one thing. Bringing twelve human girls into House Therion was something else entirely. It wouldn't be long before the entire academy accused him of trying to turn Bestiaris into another Lunaris.

Frankly, he couldn't blame them. He only hoped he hadn't just moved the girls from one danger into another.

"Wait..." Meredith spoke up, the realization finally settling in. "If Karen isn't coming with us, does that mean she'll stay here alone?"

Her expression slowly shifted to horror as the true weight of the punishment dawned on her.

Just like that, thirteen pairs of eyes settled on Maverick, waiting for his answer.

"What do you think?" he replied without a trace of sympathy. "She sacrificed Philippa because she happened to be standing in her way. Now she gets the opportunity to survive with nobody left to stand in hers."

"Oh shit," Brittney muttered before slowly turning toward Aria. She didn't say a word, but the look on her face said enough.

Your man of interest might actually be a little psycho.

## Chapter 55: Frozen Company

"A leader who fears making enemies will never protect those who need him most."

~ Rebel Beast

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"You can't do this to me!" Karen said hysterically, close to losing her mind. "I dare you!"

She wasn't so daft as to miss what was happening. They were leaving her to her death. She would be all alone in the house, left at the mercy of whatever beast came for her. He was practically signing her death sentence.

How could he do that? Wasn't he supposed to be a teacher? How could a teacher behave this way?

But her protest might as well have been music to Maverick's ears. He told the other girls, "What exactly are you waiting for? Go pack your things!"

That was all the permission they needed. The girls immediately sprang into action, excitement replacing the earlier tension as they hurried toward the staircase.

Even Charlotte made to leave, completely forgetting the thin sheet of ice still sealing her mouth. After all, there was no way she was passing up an opportunity to live alongside the beasts.

Granted, House Therion wasn't exactly her first choice. If she had it her way, she'd be sharing a roof with the dragons, preferably one particular dragon.

Still, a girl had to start somewhere. Who knew? Perhaps getting close to the land beasts would eventually bring her closer to Prince Rhydian Drakhar.

Aim for the sky. Literally.

Before Charlotte could take more than two steps, Karen snapped.

"You wretch!"

She lunged forward and grabbed a fistful of Charlotte's hair before violently yanking her backward. Charlotte cried out in pain, stumbling off balance as Karen continued pulling.

"You're really turning your back on me now?" Karen shrieked, tears streaming down her face. "After everything I did for you back in the Capital? After agreeing to stick to my side?"

Charlotte struggled against her grip.

"Mmph! Mmph!"

The ice around her mouth reduced every protest to muffled noises. She clawed desperately at Karen's wrist, trying to pry the girl's fingers from her hair, but Karen held on with surprising strength.

Seeing Charlotte's obvious distress, Maverick and Dimitri exchanged a brief glance. Maverick tilted his head toward the girls, and his Beta understood immediately.

Dimitri strode between the two girls, caught Karen by the wrist and Charlotte by the shoulder, effortlessly pulling them apart as though he were separating two quarrelling children.

Karen struggled against his grip, but he was like a boulder she couldn't shake. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Charlotte scrambled behind Dimitri, rubbing her aching scalp while glaring daggers at Karen.

Karen, meanwhile, had completely abandoned whatever dignity she had left.

"I should've known you'd be unreliable, you whore!" she screamed.

Charlotte's eyes blazed with fury. Had her mouth not still been sealed shut, she would've undoubtedly returned the favor tenfold.

Unknown to her, Maverick caught that thought and the corners of his lips curled into a fiendish smile. He lazily flicked a finger, and the layer of ice cracked before melting away from her mouth.

Charlotte sucked in a deep breath.

"Oh, thank God!"

Maverick said almost delightfully, "You seemed rather eager to speak."

It dawned on Charlotte that Maverick had done it on purpose and certainly not out of the goodness of his heart. Unfortunately, she couldn't pass up the opportunity.

She was fucking furious.

"Oh, shut up already!" Charlotte lost it. She jabbed an accusing finger at Karen. "What exactly did you do for me that was so great besides paying for the mini vacation you invited me on and the meager hand me downs?"

Charlotte's eyes flashed with anger.

"So don't stand there acting betrayed after you're the one who messed everything up this time." She added, "And for the record, everything Aria said was true!"

Although Maverick had instructed the girls to pack their things, they had all lingered on the staircase to watch the drama unfold.

While the mind reading professor had practically revealed the truth already, hearing it confirmed by Charlotte still sent shockwaves through them.

Charlotte looked Karen dead in the eye.

"You did use Philippa as a shield. Yes, I saw it happen with my own eyes," she spat.

The two girls glared at one another. Karen's glare, however, lacked the fury it had moments ago. In its place was something far more exhausting.

Defeat.

For the first time, it truly dawned on her. She had been alone all along.

"So..." Maverick chimed in. "You did lie after all."

Fresh panic spread across Charlotte's face. She'd only wanted to hurt Karen by exposing her for the horrible person she was. Except she realized lying to protect Karen made her an accomplice.

Maverick really shouldn't have been enjoying this. Yet he had to admit this was surprisingly entertaining.

"Well then," Maverick announced. "Since you were kind enough to participate in the cover-up, you'll be participating in the punishment as well."

Charlotte's face turned ghostly white.

"You'll be staying behind with Karen Donovan."

"Nooooo!"

Charlotte's scream was so high-pitched several girls instinctively covered their ears.

"Damn," Brittney breathed. "You sure she's not a banshee in disguise?"

Aria let out an unexpected snort before quickly covering her mouth.

Charlotte looked absolutely devastated.

Why wouldn't she? The girl had been convinced fate had finally smiled upon her. Living under the same roof as the beasts meant endless opportunities to run into Prince Rhydian Drakhar.

Perhaps she'd even get lucky enough for him to notice her.

Now that dream had been ripped away before it had even begun. The injustice of it all completely shattered whatever pride she had left. Charlotte collapsed onto her knees and rubbed her palms together frantically.

"Professor, please!" she cried. "Don't leave me here! I'll do anything! Please let me come with everyone else!"

Maverick's expression remained as indifferent as ever.

Unfortunately, his lack of sympathy only made Charlotte more desperate. Without thinking, she lunged forward and grabbed hold of his leg.

Every girl in the room froze.

Aria's heart nearly stopped.

Even Dimitri slowly closed his eyes. That stupid girl had just made the worst mistake imaginable.

Disgust flashed across Maverick's face. He stepped backward almost immediately, but the damage had already been done. His features darkened with fury.

Cold mist gathered around Charlotte's knees. Then the ice spread rapidly over her legs before climbing higher and higher with frightening speed.

Charlotte tried to move but couldn't. Panic flooded her face as the frost crawled over her waist, her chest and finally toward her neck. Her breathing became ragged. The ice had already reached her jaw when another voice shattered the moment.

"Don't!"

Maverick stopped instantly and the frost ceased spreading as though time itself had been interrupted. He slowly lifted his head towards Aria with questioning fury.

"Please," she whispered, her eyes locked onto his.

For one long, tense moment, nobody breathed. The girls looked from Aria to Maverick and back again, silently wondering whether the Professor would indulge her.

His gray eyes lingered on hers for several seconds, then the killing intent quietly disappeared. Maverick withdrew his hand.

Aria finally released the breath she'd unknowingly been holding.

Ironically, she hadn't spoken because of Charlotte, but him. Something told her that if he allowed his anger to go any further, Professor Maverick Nightshade would regret it afterward.

Charlotte remained frozen from the neck down, trembling violently, but at least her head remained free. Once the ice melted, she'd recover.

Eventually.

"Get your things," Maverick said quietly.

For a second, none of the girls knew whether he was speaking to Aria or to the rest of them. In the end, nobody questioned him and simply obeyed.

Across the room, Karen quietly lowered herself onto one of the sofas. A slow smile spread across her face. Perhaps this punishment wasn't so terrible after all. At least, she wasn't going to be suffering alone.

Guess who had a frozen roommate for company?

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 56: She's Into You

**"The wolf didn't fear touching her. It feared never wanting to let go."**

~ Rebel Beast

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Maverick stationed himself in the hallway instead of waiting inside the common room. It was the closest point to the staircase leading to the girls' rooms while still keeping a comfortable distance from Charlotte.

While Karen retreated to her room to continue her tantrum, the other girl remained frozen where he'd left her. Maverick wasn't in the mood to look her.

The last thing he needed was another reminder of how close he'd come to losing control. Better to stand out here than look at Charlotte again and feel the temptation to finish what he'd started.

Unfortunately, there was one small detail he'd overlooked in his grand plan to relocate fourteen human girls. Girls took forever to pack.

Not that he minded waiting.

He certainly wasn't staring toward Aria Aspen's closed bedroom door every few seconds. Nor was he paying attention to the muffled voices drifting through the hallway. It was not his fault wolves had excellent hearing.

And yes, they were talking about him.

That wasn't exactly unusual. People had been talking about him for years. Students and professors gossiped. Even strangers who'd never met him somehow found things to say.

So why, in the name of the Goddess, was he suddenly interested in listening to a bunch of human girls doing the exact same thing?

"Okay, are we all just going to pretend nothing happened downstairs?" Brittney's unmistakable voice rang out from behind the door. "Because Maverick Nightshade is ridiculously hot, and I'm not even talking about his face this time. Girl, if a man defended me like that, I'd happily dedicate my life to him."

Maverick rubbed the back of his neck. Well, that was unexpectedly flattering. Nonetheless, his attention lingered, and it wasn't because of Brittney. He was waiting for another voice.

One in particular.

"I admire his morals," another girl said thoughtfully. "But don't you think he's a little intense?"

Maverick immediately recognized Alek, the smart one. His brows furrowed. Intense? How exactly was he intense? Compared to the rest of the beasts, he considered himself remarkably restrained.

As though sensing his silent objection, Alek continued.

"I don't know. It's just a feeling. The way he looks at Aria..." She hesitated. "I swear half the time he seems like he wants to protect her, and the other half he looks like he wants to eat her alive."

Maverick slowly dragged a hand down his face before letting out a quiet groan.

Wonderful. This was entirely Feral's fault.

Had his wolf not chosen the worst possible moment to rear its head, none of this would've happened in the first place.

His gaze drifted back toward Aria's bedroom door and found himself waiting for her voice. To hear what she thought of him. Did she agree with Alek? Did she think he frightened her?

The answers shouldn't have mattered, yet somehow, they did.

Maverick let out another quiet groan.

Goddess above. How was it possible to become this fascinated by a girl he'd only met yesterday?

"I'd say he's giving intentional man!" Brittney squealed with the excitement girls had whenever they thought they'd uncovered something scandalous.

"He knows exactly what he wants and isn't afraid to go after it. Geez, Alek, the man has a smoldering gaze hot enough to melt a girl's panties. Maybe that's what confused you."

Against his better judgment, the corner of Maverick's mouth twitched. Brittney Thorne had just earned herself a place in his good books.

Unfortunately, her words weren't the ones he was waiting for. There was still one voice he hadn't heard.

"I think we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves," Trisha said this time. "The last thing we should do is pressure Aria, especially when she might not even feel whatever this strange tension between her and the professor is."

Interesting.

Maverick's expression remained unchanged, but inwardly, that single sentence caught his attention.

So she felt it too, that pull between them. Then why hadn't Aria said anything?

For the first time since leaving the common room, an uncomfortable feeling settled in his chest. What if she'd hated the entire encounter? What if Feral had frightened her more than he'd realized?

That would be... rather unfortunate.

At last, Aria spoke.

"Let's just pack our things. I'm sure we've already wasted enough of the professor's time."

Silence followed. Maverick's ears perked up even further. That wasn't what he'd been waiting to hear.

Oddly enough, he didn't mind them wasting his time, even though he had a bazillion things waiting for him. Only the Goddess knew whether those uncultured beasts had torn the academy apart in his absence. Yet, right now, he'd rather stand in that hallway for another hour if it meant hearing what Aria Aspen truly thought of him.

Instead, she'd neatly avoided the subject altogether. It was only then Maverick realized that being unable to read Aria's mind was both the most frustrating and strangely exhilarating challenge he'd ever encountered.

"Having fun eavesdropping on the girls?"

Maverick's eyes opened immediately. He didn't startle like a man who'd just been caught doing something embarrassing. Instead, he calmly turned his head toward his uncle before pushing himself off the wall he'd been leaning against.

"It wasn't intentional," he said.

"Mmm-hmm." Dimitri's expression made it abundantly clear he didn't believe a single word of that.

"It was simply an interesting conversation." He claimed.

"I never took you for a narcissist." Dimitri told him. "Standing outside listening to people gossip about you. Should I be worried?"

Maverick let out a wary smile. "This really isn't the time, Uncle."

Apparently, Dimitri disagreed. He wandered over until he was leaning against the same wall beside Maverick, perfectly invading his nephew's personal space without the slightest hint of shame.

"If you're trying to figure out whether the girl likes you," Dimitri said casually, "the answer is yes."

Maverick frowned.

"I may have accidentally overheard the conversation myself."

"Accidentally?"

"I have wolf ears too."

That was actually fair?

"Aria Aspen is very attracted to you," Dimitri continued. "Frankly, I don't know what you're so worried about."

Maverick's concern wasn't that Dimitri had overheard the girls. It was the fact his uncle somehow knew exactly which girl he cared about.

Dimitri caught the realization almost immediately and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, please. You honestly think you're subtle with the way you've been looking at that girl like a dog salivating over a bone?" He gave Maverick a sideways glance. "It's completely unlike you."

Maverick leaned back against the wall once more.

"...Yeah."

The word left him almost absentmindedly.

"It is unlike me."

Silence settled comfortably between them as Maverick allowed himself to think about his wolf, instincts and the overwhelming urge to keep Aria close. None of it made sense.

After several moments, he finally spoke.

"Uncle..."

Dimitri looked at him.

"Do you still remember how my parents knew they were mates?"

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 57: Congratulation Maverick

**"A wolf can lie with its mouth. Never with its instincts."**

~ Rebel Beast

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"Are you actually serious right now?" The sheer disbelief on Dimitri's face was almost insulting.

"Maverick," he said slowly, "your father Roman has practically turned your mother's love story into a required family reading. The man documented every ridiculous detail of how Violet ended up with your four fathers. Then, as if writing the books wasn't enough, he insists on rereading his favorite Chapters at nearly every family gathering."

Dimitri pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I've heard that story so many times I could probably recite it word for word in my sleep, and you're asking whether I remember how your parents discovered their mate bonds?"

Maverick rubbed the back of his neck, looking genuinely embarrassed.

"Right." He cleared his throat. "It's just..."

His hand made a vague gesture in the air as if he could somehow organize the thoughts refusing to cooperate inside his head.

"My memory just..."

"You're wondering whether Aria Aspen is actually your mate," Dimitri finished.

Maverick tilted his head ever so slightly.

"Pretty much."

Dimitri let out a slow sigh before looking at him properly.

Maverick misunderstood the look.

"No," he said quickly. "It's not because she's human. I don't care about that."

Maverick took a deep breath. "I just want to be certain I'm not trying so hard to recreate my parents' love story that I'm convincing myself of something that isn't real." The confession finally left him.

Then, after another moment, he admitted something else. "Although I wasn't exactly expecting my mate to be human."

His gaze drifted toward the staircase leading upstairs.

"A human participating in one of the ugliest programs ever created." His jaw tightened. The realization still sat poorly with him.

"Well," Dimitri replied with a shrug, "your parents didn't exactly have an easy romance either. Apparently the Moon Goddess looked at your family tree and decided suffering was a hereditary trait."

Maverick deadpanned.

Dimitri continued, "I suppose that's her sense of humor. Violet Purple's eldest son, one of the most eligible bachelors in United Dorminia, and the potential Alpha King. And his mate turns out to be an ordinary human thrown into a government-sponsored death game."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. That sounds exactly like something the moon goddess would do."

Maverick scowled at him. "You're not helping."

"I know." Dimitri grinned, obviously enjoying himself. "But I can help answer your question."

His expression gradually became more serious.

"According to your father, Roman's endless collection of love stories disguised as memoirs, mate bonds leave signs. They never look exactly the same, but there are certain things that almost always happen."

He raised a finger.

"First, there's the pull. The kind that keeps dragging your attention back to one person no matter how hard you try to focus on something else."

Maverick silently ticked that one off.

Dimitri raised a second finger.

"Then there's the awareness. You begin noticing them before everyone else. Their voice, scent, mood. Somehow, they always stand out in a crowded room."

There goes another silent check.

A third finger joined the others.

"Touch becomes complicated." Dimitri smirked knowingly. "You either can't stop thinking about touching them or once you do, you suddenly realize you've been missing something your entire life."

Maverick's ears turned ever so slightly red.

Dimitri noticed. "Well." He said, "I think we can safely tick that one off too."

He lifted a fourth finger.

"And finally, there's the tension. Not just the awkward kind, but the one that makes every conversation feel heavier than it should. You glance at her a little too long, and every moment apart feels strangely noticeable, even when you've only known each other for a day."

Dimitri looked sideways at his nephew.

"So...? How many boxes have you ticked so far?"

Maverick swallowed. "All of them."

"Well..." Dimitri clapped Maverick on the shoulder with a proud look. "Congratulations, nephew. You've found your mate."

The words settled heavily between them. He found his mate? That was hard to believe.

"Your family is going to lose their minds." Dimitri laughed at the thought.

Maverick's eyes widened. "Oh, hell no!"

He pointed a warning finger at Dimitri. "Don't you dare tell them. At least not yet. I'll tell them myself when the time is right."

"You know exactly what they're capable of. The moment they hear I've found my mate, they'll travel all the way to Bestial City just to meet her. I can't let that happen. Not when I don't even know if she feels the same way."

Dimitri looked genuinely puzzled.

"Don't be ridiculous. She'll feel it too. My mother fell for my father at first sight."

"Mating bonds don't always happen the same way," Maverick reminded him. "Besides, Aria's human and won't feel the bond as intense as I do. If I suddenly tell her she's my mate, I'd be placing an enormous responsibility on someone who barely knows me."

Maverick decided, "I have to do this the human way."

Dimitri raised an eyebrow. "The human way?"

He replied. "I make her fall in love with me first."

Only then did Maverick allow himself the faintest smile. "And after that, I'll tell her the truth."

Dimitri regarded him for several long seconds. "Good luck with that."

Maverick drew in a deep breath. Why was he so nervous? He could do this. Really.

How difficult could courting a human possibly be? He was Maverick Nightshade after all.

Just then, his wolf ears twitched and his expression changed instantly.

"Shit."

Dimitri straightened as he too heard it.

"They're coming."

The two wolves exchanged one panicked look before moving at the exact same time.

They hurried out of the hallway and into the common room just as the bedroom door upstairs swung open.

Maverick Nightshade and Dimitri King were already seated like they'd been waiting there the entire time. But one person had caught their undignified entrance.

Charlotte.

Even in her frozen state, her narrowed eyes bounced between the two men with suspicion.

Maverick met her stare but his eyes, however, carried a very different message.

Say one word and you're staying frozen forever

## Chapter 58: Not Going To House Therion

**"The moment a beast's instinct speaks louder than reason, destiny is already at work."**

*~ Rebel Beast*

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It was déjà vu all over again, except this time they were leaving the house they'd moved into barely a day ago.

Honestly, it was becoming irritating.

Did these people have any idea how exhausting it was to pack, unpack, then pack everything all over again? Her body had only just begun accepting this place as her temporary home until she found a way out of this shithole.

Still, as annoyed as Aria was, she couldn't deny she was grateful Professor Maverick had their safety in mind. Unlike everyone else in this institution, he'd actually done something. Then again, hadn't he warned them that the beasts of House Therion weren't to be trusted?

Even so, Aria would rather sleep under the same roof as a house full of beasts than spend another night with Karen Donovan.

The girl didn't need claws or fangs to be considered a dangerous beast. Karen Donovan was living proof of that.

Brittney and the others struggled downstairs beneath what looked like enough luggage for an overseas relocation. In comparison, Aria's belongings fit neatly inside a single duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

That made her the first to reach the common room. Or rather, the first to see him. Maverick — no, Professor Maverick. Somehow, dropping the title made his name feel far more intimate than it should.

He and his Beta sat comfortably on one of the sofas with their backs partially turned toward her. Dimitri lazily scrolled through something on his phone while Professor Nightshade stared silently ahead, seemingly lost in thought.

Sadly, that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that Aria suddenly couldn't remember how to breathe whenever he was nearby.

This wasn't even her first crush. So why was something as simple as drawing air into her lungs becoming such a challenge?

It had to be his eyes.

Those unsettling gray eyes with their narrow pupils looked as though they'd crawled straight out of every dangerous fantasy she'd ever refused to admit having.

Then again, she wasn't even looking at them right now.

Or, as Brittney would put it, the man wasn't Maverick but Mave-wreck. And he was doing a fantastic job wrecking not only her thoughts but apparently her lungs as well.

Perhaps Professor Maverick sensed her presence because he turned around almost immediately.

"Oh, you're here."

He rose to his feet in one smooth motion.

The brief sweep of his eyes over her made warmth creep into her cheeks.

"Yeah."

Aria deliberately looked everywhere except at him. The floor, sofa. Literally anything that wasn't Professor Nightshade.

"The others are coming."

She pointed upstairs as though the squeaking wheels scraping across the wooden floorboards and the girls' occasional grunts weren't loud enough for a wolf to hear from miles away.

Maverick's gaze settled on the lone duffel bag hanging from her shoulder.

"Is that all you brought?"

Aria looked down at the bag before looking back at him. A small frown settled on her face.

"We were sent here to survive the beasts, not build a new life. I didn't see the point of packing an entire boutique." There was just enough sass at the end of the sentence to make Dimitri hide a smile.

Aria assumed Professor Nightshade was judging how little she owned. The truth was quite the opposite. Even he owned more belongings than she had.

"That doesn't mean you should stop living simply because your circumstances have changed."

"Sorry," Aria replied without missing a beat. "I don't enjoy living in delusion."

Dimitri's chuckle drifted across the room.

The sound carried a very clear message:

*Good luck with this one.*

Maverick shot his uncle a brief glare before walking toward Aria.

"Fine." He extended a hand. "Give me the bag."

Aria blinked. "No, thank you."

The idea alone sounded absurd. What professor carried a student's luggage?

Maverick remained perfectly patient.

"You don't even know the way to House Therion."

*I have a map.* The words almost escaped before she caught herself.

"This isn't heavy."

Unfortunately for her, Maverick had already reached for the strap.

"Don't be stubborn." His fingers closed around it. "Leave it."

"Sir, I don't think it's appropriate for—"

A low growl vibrated through his chest and

Aria released the strap immediately as if it had suddenly become red-hot. She instinctively took a step backward.

Fuck.

Maverick cursed himself. He hadn't meant for that to happen. He'd only wanted to help.

Every instinct inside him screamed that carrying her things was his responsibility.

How was he supposed to watch his mate walk all the way to House Therion carrying that luggage while he stood there doing nothing?

Instead, he'd frightened her. Again.

*Smooth going, Maverick.*

*Real smooth.*

An awkward silence settled between them.

Aria kept her eyes lowered, unsure what she was even supposed to say anymore.

"I'm sorry."

His quiet voice finally broke the silence. Aria looked up and the regret in his expression caught her completely off guard.

"It's not your fault," he said. "Sometimes I forget I'm dealing with humans."

She nodded slowly. "I understand."

Maverick wasn't convinced. His eyes lingered on the way she unconsciously rubbed her arms before folding them around herself as though protecting her own body. He really was making a mess of this.

Fortunately, the others finally arrived.

His attention shifted to Brittney, who was stubbornly dragging two suitcases side by side, each with a duffel bag hooked onto its extended handle as she somehow attempted to haul all four pieces of luggage in a single trip.

Without another word, Maverick walked over.

"I'll take one."

Brittney looked at him in surprise. Then her entire face lit up. "Seriously?"

She handed him one of the suitcases almost before he'd finished speaking.

"Thank you!"

If the girl had heart-shaped pupils, now would've been the time.

Aria quietly watched the exchange and didn't notice the small smile that formed at the corners of her lips. It seems she'd been making too much of it after all. Perhaps he'd only wanted to help.

Maverick noticed Trisha and Alek struggling with their own luggage.

"Dimitri." He called.

The Beta looked at him, and if looks alone could kill, Maverick would've died where he stood. Since when did he become a servant for the humans?

Nevertheless, Dimitri pushed himself off the sofa and wandered over with exaggerated resignation.

"Anything for the ladies."

He accepted the bags while projecting his thoughts towards Maverick.

*You're laying it on a little thick, don't you think?*

Maverick ignored him. He said instead,

"Let's go."

"What about the others?" Aria asked, noticing several girls were still upstairs packing.

"I'm a busy man," Maverick answered without missing a beat. "The patrol team can bring them over at their leisure."

"Oh." Aria accepted the explanation without another thought.

Beside Maverick, however, Dimitri slowly turned his head to stare at him. The look said exactly what he was thinking.

*Liar.*

He knew Maverick could've waited another hour if Aria Aspen hadn't arrived.

Just as they made to leave, one of the bedroom doors opened. Every head turned to find Liv stepping into the hallway. But something immediately stood out.

She wasn't carrying any luggage.

"Why are you down here without your bags?" Maverick asked, his voice stripped of the softness it had carried moments ago when speaking to Aria.

Liv looked nervous as hell, but she somehow managed to get the words out.

"I'm not going to House Therion."

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 59: Ready To Kill

**A ruler who cannot control their own people eventually becomes ruled by them.**

~ Rebel Beast

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"Excuse me?"

Maverick didn't even realize the question had left his mouth. He struggled to believe what he was hearing.

The same confusion rippled through everyone else. Aria looked from Liv to the other girls, only to find them just as bewildered. None of it made any sense.

As though that wasn't enough, the remaining bedroom doors opened one after another. The rest of the girls descended the staircase in eerie silence, almost as though the entire thing had been rehearsed beforehand.

Just like Liv, none of them were carrying their luggage.

Trisha leaned toward Aria and whispered, "Is it only me, or does this smell like someone's been pulling strings?"

"Karen," Aria whispered back without hesitation.

It could only be her.

There was no logical explanation for this. Just moments ago, these girls had been screaming with excitement at the thought of living alongside the beasts. There was no way seven of them had suddenly changed their minds at exactly the same time.

No. Karen had done something.

The six girls quietly took their places beside Liv. Maverick's eyes swept over each of them.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his voice carrying a gravity that made the room feel colder.

Meredith was the one who answered.

"I'm not going to House Therion."

"Me too," Indigo added.

One after another, the same answer echoed through the common room.

"Me too."

"I'm staying."

"So am I."

By the time the last voice faded away, all seven girls had made their choice.

Aria stood there completely dumbfounded. If she'd only suspected Karen before, this confirmed it. Now she had no idea how Professor Nightshade intended to deal with this.

Which was why his response caught everyone completely off guard.

"Okay then."

That was all he said. Then he turned toward Aria, Brittney, Alek and Trisha.

"Let's go."

"Huh?" The four girls stared at him in disbelief.

What they didn't know was that Maverick Nightshade wasn't interested in convincing anyone to save themselves. He had already offered them a way out. If they chose to stay behind, that was their decision.

The only reason he'd involved himself in this mess in the first place was because of his blissfully ignorant mate. His responsibility began and ended with Aria Aspen. Everyone else could go to hell for all he cared.

Maverick had already turned his back on them, his silence making one thing painfully clear.

He had made his decision.

Only one person made him stop.

"Wait!"

Aria's voice rang out behind him.

Maverick closed his eyes briefly before letting out a quiet sigh. When exactly was his softhearted mate going to learn that she couldn't save everyone?

Still, he stopped walking.

Aria turned away from him to face the girls.

"I don't know what's happened or what Karen told you," she began, giving each of them a disappointed look. "But trust me when I say this. Whatever she's holding over your heads isn't worth your lives. This place isn't safe anymore."

"And House Therion is?" Shannon shot back, her tone so sharp that Aria was taken aback.

Shannon continued, "Professor Nightshade was the one who told us beasts aren't to be trusted. Now, all of a sudden, he wants us living under the same roof as them?"

She scoffed. "Or is that part of the plan between the two of you?"

"What?" Aria stared at her in complete disbelief.

Shannon's features twisted with jealousy and suspicion.

"You think we haven't noticed the way the professor looks at you?"

Oh... fuck.

Aria felt the blood drain from her face.

This was exactly what she'd been trying to avoid. She'd never wanted anyone thinking there was something going on between her and Professor Nightshade.

Seeing Aria's expression only strengthened Shannon's confidence.

"For all we know," she went on, "this whole thing was your idea. You lure us over there, the beasts get rid of the rest of us, and then you get your happy ending with the professor."

The weight of the accusation settled over everyone present, and none of the girls noticed the way Maverick stiffened. They were too busy watching Shannon, who had mistaken Aria's silence for guilt and was growing bolder with every passing second.

"Except you've forgotten one thing," Shannon sneered. "You're just some poor, pathetic nobody, and once he's done playing with you..." Her expression was openly cruel. "He'll dump you just like every other beast dumps a human."

It happened so fast no one had time to react. All they heard was Dimitri's voice cutting through the room.

"Maverick, don't!"

But he was already too late.

Maverick barely moved his hand, and a razor-sharp spear of ice shot through the air with terrifying accuracy before burying itself in Shannon's side.

Her scream ripped through the residence.

Startled gasps broke out from every corner of the common room as the girls stared in horror, their eyes darting from the blood rapidly staining Shannon's clothes to Professor Nightshade.

Or rather, the predator standing where their professor had been only seconds ago.

"Come on," Maverick said, his voice so low it barely sounded human anymore. He took one slow step toward Shannon, whose knees buckled beneath her as she clutched desperately at her wounded side.

"Say it again."

"Maverick!" Dimitri reached for him. "It's not worth it!"

He caught hold of Maverick's arm, hoping to snap him out of whatever had taken hold of him.

Instead, Maverick shrugged him off with frightening ease. Dimitri stumbled backward several steps, looking at his nephew with an expression that bordered on alarm.

That single movement shattered whatever composure the girls still possessed. Panic took over as several girls screamed outright while the others scrambled backward in blind terror. Half of them bolted for the staircase without even thinking, desperate to put as much distance between themselves and the furious Alpha as possible.

Until this moment, Professor Maverick Nightshade had always protected them, defended them, and spoken to them with remarkable patience.

Now they were finally seeing what lay beneath all that restraint was not just a professor, but a beast too.

And one that looked ready to kill.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 60: Little Prey

**"Every predator has a breaking point. The wise ones pray they never become the reason it breaks."**

~ Rebel Beast

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"How dare you disrespect what's mine?!"

Maverick's voice carried an otherworldly boom, his vertical pupils constricting into razor-thin slits, the gray in his eyes spreading with an intensity that no longer looked human.

A suffocating aura rolled off him in waves, so oppressive that everyone present could tell Professor Maverick Nightshade was no longer the one standing before them.

Well, not everyone.

Most of the girls had already fled to their rooms, no doubt trembling behind locked doors and leaving Shannon to her fate.

Aria, Brittney, Alek and Trisha remained trapped in the corner of the common room, having lost their chance to escape earlier. Their backs were pressed firmly against the wall, fear written plainly across every one of their faces.

Maverick towered over Shannon, his broad shoulders slightly hunched as a low growl continuously rumbled from deep within his chest. The sound alone was enough to freeze one's blood.

Shannon had long stopped worrying about the blood pouring from the wound in her side. She was staring at his face instead, and whatever she saw there drained every last drop of color from her own.

"Maverick!" Dimitri tried again, but the moment he lunged forward, his body abruptly halted. He frowned and looked down only to discover both of his feet had been sealed to the floor by thick ice.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Dimitri exclaimed, glaring at the ice in disbelief. "You froze me?"

The only response he received was another low, unapologetic growl.

"Killing the girl isn't the answer, Feral," Dimitri said, deciding to address the wolf instead. "Maverick protects these girls. If you kill her, he'll never forgive himself for it. You'll have broken the very rule he forced the beast students to follow. He won't like that."

Feral slowly turned his head toward Dimitri, his narrowed eyes carrying not the slightest hint of remorse.

"Maverick," he growled, "doesn't like her disrespecting what's his either."

Then he turned back to Shannon with such finality that Dimitri's stomach lurched.

Fuck.

He knew exactly what that look meant.

His gaze darted across the room until it landed on Aria. She looked frightened, confused and completely overwhelmed. Then it hit him.

"Aria!"

Her attention immediately snapped toward the Beta. Dimitri's eyes were filled with desperate expectation.

"Do something!"

"Huh?" Aria stared at him as though he'd finally lost his mind. What did he mean, do something? If he couldn't stop Professor Nightshade, what made him think she could? She was only human.

Slowly, she shook her head. She couldn't.

But Dimitri refused to accept that.

"Trust your instincts!"

Aria's heart lurched.

The frightening part was that her instincts had been screaming at her from the very beginning. They wanted her to go to him, and stop him.

Common sense, however, screamed even louder. Stay where you are. Stay alive.

After all, this entire disaster had started because she refused to mind her own business. Why should she risk her life for Shannon after everything the girl had just accused her of?

Dimitri saw the hesitation written all over her face.

"If you don't stop him," he shouted, "he's going to kill the girl, and the Maverick I know would beat himself over it."

"Stop him how?" Trisha cried, panic plain in her voice. "Girl, that's his beast! What could you possibly do?"

What could she possibly do? Aria honestly didn't know.

Then, as though someone had whispered directly into her soul, one answer surfaced with startling clarity.

**Touch him.**

The thought struck with such certainty that it stole her breath. But doubt followed.

Didn't Professor Nightshade hate being touched? What if she only made things worse?

Yet even as she questioned herself, another truth surfaced. He had touched her, not once but twice.

During the bull attack, he'd held her without the slightest hesitation. Then earlier, he'd briefly touched her.

Aria had done everything possible to convince herself she wasn't special. But what if she was wrong? What if he only welcomed her touch?

The idea sounded completely absurd, yet she could no longer ignore the strange pull between them.

She swallowed hard. God, please let her be right.

Because if she wasn't, she would've broken the promise she'd made to Davina.

"Oh, hell no," Brittney blurted the moment she saw the resolve settle across Aria's face. She had spent the whole time teasing Aria about Professor Nightshade, but that didn't mean she was about to watch her best friend run straight toward a monster.

"I'm sorry," Aria whispered apologetically.

Before anyone could stop her, she ran.

At that exact moment, a slow, terrifying smile spread across Maverick's face as he raised one hand toward Shannon.

"No!"

Aria threw herself between them and, without giving herself another chance to think, reached up and cupped both of Maverick's cheeks with trembling hands.

Her heart was racing so violently now it pounded against her ribs like a war drum. Aria swallowed hard.

"Please don't kill her," she pleaded softly.

And me too. She added the last part silently in her head.

Aria was terrified. Her hands trembled where they rested against his cheeks, yet somehow she found the courage to keep them there.

Maverick slowly lowered the hand he'd raised toward Shannon, and the suffocating pressure filling the room disappeared almost instantly.

That should have solved all their problems, except a slow, fiendish smile spread across his lips. He looked at her with unmistakable satisfaction.

"I knew you'd come, little prey."

"Excuse me?"

Aria wasn't sure which part alarmed her more. The ridiculous nickname. Or the unsettling feeling that she'd just walked straight into a trap she hadn't even realized was being laid.

A shiver crawled up her spine as she caught the dangerous amusement dancing inside those gray eyes. Instinctively, she pulled her hands away as though she'd touched something that burned.

Then she tried to step back. She never got the chance.

Maverick—or rather, the wolf wearing Maverick's face—slid an arm around her waist and effortlessly pulled her back against him.

"What are you doing?" Aria demanded, panic creeping into her voice as her heart began racing all over again. "Let go!"

Ignoring the traitorous tingles spreading beneath his touch was becoming increasingly impossible.

Feral merely smiled.

"I've grown rather tired of Maverick pretending he can resist you."

His thumb lazily brushed against her side through the fabric of her clothes.

"So...I've decided to help him along."

Before Aria could even begin to understand what he meant, he lowered his head.

And kissed her.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 61: I'm Sorry

**"You're safe,' the wolf promised."**

**"He never said from whom."**

~ Rebel Beast

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Aria had kissed a boy once before. Back then, she'd thought it was sweet and romantic, even. Then she learned the next day it had all been a bet to see who could kiss "Aria Freak."

She'd hated herself for believing it had meant something. But this? There was nothing innocent about this kiss.

The instant Maverick's lips claimed hers, every nerve ending in her body sprang to life. She knew she should push him away. She knew she should protest. Instead, something inside her surrendered before her mind ever had the chance.

Like someone who had wandered through a desert only to stumble upon water, Aria found herself drinking from him with a desperation that startled even her. Her eyes drifted shut as she lost herself in the warmth of his lips, the slow coaxing of his mouth against hers making every coherent thought slip further and further away.

Without realizing it, the hands she'd withdrawn moments ago found their way back to his face. Her fingers cradled his jaw almost reverently as countless tingles burst beneath her fingertips before racing through the rest of her body like wildfire.

Everything about him felt impossibly right.

The firmness of his lips, the warmth of his breath, and the unhurried way he kissed her as though he already knew she belonged there.

A soft, helpless sound escaped the back of her throat, only to be stolen away as another wave of pleasure washed over her, leaving her knees threatening to give out beneath her.

Aria completely lost track of time and never saw the utterly flabbergasted expressions on Brittney, Alek and Trisha's faces. Even the frozen Charlotte.

Only moments ago, they'd been terrified Professor Nightshade was about to kill someone. Now, they were watching him kiss Aria with enough intensity to leave all four girls questioning whether they'd somehow stumbled into an entirely different scene.

Yet even their shock paled in comparison to Shannon's. Still clutching the wound in her side, she stared at the pair in complete disbelief. She was bleeding out while the very man responsible held Aria as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Her chest tightened with something far uglier than pain. It wasn't fair. She had accused Aria of seducing the professor moments ago, and now the two of them were kissing right in front of her as if proving every bitter word she'd spoken.

Yet none of that mattered anymore. Shannon didn't want to be right anymore, she wanted to live. The terror finally eclipsed her pride and tears spilled freely down her face as she whispered through trembling lips,

"Please... I don't want to die."

She could already feel the strength leaving her body. No. This couldn't be how her story ended.

Shannon imagined her parents receiving the news, only to be told their daughter had died because she'd let her mouth carry her too far. The thought was almost as unbearable as the pain.

Somehow, Shannon's plea reached Aria through the haze clouding her mind and the sound shattered whatever spell she'd fallen under.

With a startled gasp, she pushed against Maverick's chest and stumbled backward, breaking the kiss. Awareness crashed over her all at once.

Her breathing turned ragged as she looked around the common room, only to meet the stunned expressions staring back at her. Everyone looked utterly speechless, except Dimitri.

The Beta merely watched the pair with the resigned expression of someone who had expected this outcome all along.

Horror slowly spread across Aria's face.

What had she just done?

Unbothered by the storm raging inside her, the wolf wearing Maverick's face gently caught her chin and turned her back toward him. Dark satisfaction danced inside those gray eyes.

"Well?" Feral murmured, a wicked smile tugging at his lips. "Tell me, little prey, do you still think you can resist me after—" He never finished.

Aria drove the crown of her head straight into his face with enough force to make a sickening crack echo through the room.

Maverick staggered backward with a pained groan.

"You son of a biscuit!" Aria snapped, glaring at him with enough fury to set the room ablaze. Who in their right mind just kissed someone like that?

Even if...

Her traitorous heart had shamelessly enjoyed every second of it.

Get out of my head. She practically screamed the words at herself.

However, that headbutt had done more than bloody Maverick's nose. It had broken Feral's hold over him.

"Fuck."

Maverick instinctively reached for his nose, only for his fingertips to come away stained with blood.

He barely noticed, his eyes found Aria instead. She was glaring at him, her cheeks still flushed, her lips pressed into a thin line while anger and embarrassment battled openly across her face.

Then everything came back. Feral, Shannon, the attack, and finally, the kiss.

Every second replayed inside his mind with horrifying clarity.

"Goddess... no." The color drained from his face.

He took a hesitant step toward Aria.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

Aria instinctively stepped back. The movement was small but almost imperceptible. Yet it struck Maverick harder than any blow ever could.

Something inside him quietly broke. This wasn't how he'd wanted their first kiss to happen. It wasn't supposed to happen at all.

Once again, Feral had ruined everything.

At the same time, Dimitri finally managed to shatter the ice imprisoning his legs through sheer brute strength.

"Maverick." There was understanding in his voice.

Maverick turned toward him, and Dimitri immediately recognized the familiar look in his nephew's eyes. He'd already begun blaming himself.

"He didn't hurt her," Dimitri said gently, hoping to reach him before the guilt buried him completely.

But Maverick's expression had already become strangely distant as if he'd accepted a punishment no one else had given him.

"Maverick—" Dimitri tried again but his nephew had already turned away.

Facing Aria once more, Maverick swallowed painfully before forcing the words out. "I'm so sorry, it will never happen again."

His voice was barely above a whisper but the sheer self-loathing in his eyes made her chest ache.

For one impossible moment, Aria wanted nothing more than to walk over and wrap her arms around him. To tell him it wasn't entirely his fault.

But none of that made any sense.

She remained rooted to the spot as Maverick turned on his heels and walked away without another word.

"Maverick!" Dimitri called after him. "It wasn't your fault!"

He never looked back.

Meanwhile, Brittney, Alek and Trisha hurried over to Aria, concern written plainly across their faces.

"Are you okay?"

"Did he hurt you anywhere?"

"Do you need anything?"

Questions came at her from every direction.

"I'm fine," Aria replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She was still trying to process everything that had happened.

Unfortunately, her body seemed determined to remember the kiss far more vividly than her mind wanted to because the lingering warmth refused to disappear.

God, what had he done to her?

"So..." Brittney began cautiously. "Are we still going to Therion?"

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

**"A dragon can survive without treasure. Never without pride."**

~ *Rebel Beast*

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"Thamas!" Tamara called out, her voice echoing through the mouth of the cave.

After hearing what had happened between him and Prince Rhydian at the academy, she'd known exactly where to find him.

This had always been Thamas' sanctuary.

His lair.

Most dragons despised other dragons trespassing inside their lairs. It wasn't merely possessiveness but instinct. Their treasures were an extension of themselves, and inviting another dragon into that space was almost as intimate as baring one's soul.

Normally, Tamara would've respected that boundary, but not today.

The afternoon sun spilled through the entrance, bathing the first stretch of the cavern in warm golden light. Yet the farther Tamara ventured inside, the more daylight surrendered to the darkness until the cave was illuminated only by scattered rays slipping through cracks in the stone high above.

One would think dragons would've abandoned such primitive habits after arriving in Novara region, but they hadn't.

Treasure hoarding wasn't just a tradition, but their nature.

Gold coins lay scattered across the stone floor, some stacked into uneven mounds while others had spilled into glittering rivers beneath her boots.

An ancient crown rested beside jeweled goblets whose owners had long since turned to dust. Ornate swords with gem-encrusted hilts leaned against the cave walls beside weathered shields while nestled among them were more modern trophies—a luxury wristwatch crafted from platinum, a limited-edition sports car key displayed atop a velvet cushion, rare gemstones sealed inside crystal cases, and paintings whose signatures alone were worth fortunes.

To another person, it would've looked like unimaginable wealth, but to a dragon, it looked like home.

The cavern widened until it resembled an enormous chamber rather than a cave, the ceiling soaring high enough that Thamas in his dragon form could comfortably stretch his wings.

That was when she found him.

Thamas lay motionless atop a sprawling mound of gold, countless coins shifting beneath his weight. And like many dragons seeking the comfort of their lairs, he hadn't bothered with clothes.

His broad back faced her, bronze skin catching the faint shafts of light filtering down from above while the treasure beneath him gleamed around his body like liquid sunlight.

"Thamas!" Tamara called again, hurrying toward him.

He slowly turned his head and Tamara stopped dead in her tracks.

His irises had become molten green, split by narrow vertical pupils that radiated the unmistakable warning of a dragon balanced dangerously close to losing himself.

But that wasn't all.

Thamas' entire body glistened with sweat, every breath leaving him in a ragged hiss,

pain etched across his features.

"What are you doing here?" His voice came out rough, carrying the unsettling blend of dragon and human.

"I heard what happened," Tamara replied gently as she knelt beside him. Supporting him carefully, she helped him sit upright before her eyes immediately settled on his shoulder.

The bruising had darkened into an angry shade of purple, and the joint sat at an unnatural angle beneath his skin.

"It's healing incorrectly," she said with a frown. "I can help you."

She reached for him but Thamas slapped her hand away.

"You think that bastard Rhydian wouldn't know someone healed me?" he snarled, his green eyes flashing dangerously. "The punishment loses its meaning the moment you interfere."

Tamara stared at him in disbelief. "So you're going to keep shifting until your body fixes itself?"

"If that's what it takes." His jaw tightened.

"I need the pain."

He breathed through the agony. "I need something to remind me of the day I finally saw Rhydian Drakhar for the bastard he truly is."

Tamara studied him for a long moment before sighing.

"He gave you an order, didn't he?"

"An order not to harm the humans?" Thamas laughed bitterly. "Tell me, Tamara... since when did dragons start bowing to those fragile little creatures?"

"Since we entered their world," she answered without hesitation. "In case you've forgotten, peace didn't come easily. It took years before humans and beasts stopped trying to slaughter one another on sight. If Rhydian gave that order, then he had a reason for it."

She held his gaze. "He's our prince and leader. We follow him."

"Not forever."

The words came quietly, yet they carried enough certainty to make Tamara's stomach tighten. Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

Thamas' expression hardened. "The Drakhar family isn't invincible."

He leaned forward despite the obvious pain it caused him. "They're powerful, but there aren't many of them. The Draco Clan, however..."

His lips slowly curved into a humorless smile, eyes gleaming with dangerous conviction. "We have more numbers and Ilif enough dragons stood together—"

"Thamas." There was unmistakable warning in Tamara's voice.

He ignored it, saying, "We could overthrow them."

"Thamas, what you're talking about is treason."

"Then look at me!"

The force behind his voice silenced her.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

When Thamas was certain he had her complete attention, the anger gradually faded from his face, replaced by a gentler emotion.

"I see the way you look at him. You're in love with him."

Tamara remained perfectly still.

"You think I don't notice?" Thamas continued with a sad smile. "I know exactly how your eyes follow Rhydian whenever he walks into a room."

His uninjured hand slowly rose to cup her face. Unlike his words moments ago, the gesture was impossibly tender.

"You're beautiful, Tamara." His thumb brushed softly against her cheek. "You're beautiful, strong, and loyal. You're everything a dragon queen should be."

Pain flickered across his face as he said,

"And you're wasting all of it on a man who'll never look at you the way you deserve."

His eyes searched hers.

"I would. I'd spend the rest of my life proving your worth. You'd be my queen."

For a brief moment, the cave fell completely silent, their eyes locked.

Anyone witnessing the moment from afar would've thought Tamara had been won over by his confession.

She hadn't.

Gently, she removed his hand from her face before taking a step back.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear any of that." Her voice had become cold

"But hear me carefully, Thamas." She looked him dead in the eye. "If I catch even the faintest whisper of rebellion against Prince Rhydian or the Drakhar family..."

A flicker of scarlet fire danced briefly across her dark pupils. "I'll be the first dragon to tear your heart from your chest."

She straightened her uniform.

"Recover. Then return to the academy."

Without waiting for a reply, Tamara turned and walked toward the mouth of the cave while Thamas' unwavering gaze followed her every step.

The moment she reached the entrance, she

expanded into the magnificent form of a dragon. Brilliant crimson scales shimmered beneath the afternoon sun, each edged with the faintest trace of molten orange.

With one powerful beat of her wings, Tamara launched herself into the sky and disappeared beyond the mountains.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 63: Withdraw From Bestaris

**"A crown forged by fire burns the head that wears it."**

~ Rebel Beast

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Tamara landed gracefully on the landing platform of House Aetheris in her dragon form. Evening had begun settling over the academy, painting the sky in streaks of gold and crimson.

The instant her claws touched the floor, her wings folded into her back, scales melted into smooth skin. A heartbeat later, Tamara stood where the dragon had been, still dressed in her academy uniform.

To this day, no one truly understood what ancient magic allowed dragons to retain their clothing whenever they shifted.

It simply worked.

Naturally, dragons considered it further proof that the Moon Goddess had favored their race above all others.

While wolves, serpents and nearly every other shifting species had to worry about replacing their shredded clothes after every transformation, dragons emerged with every thread perfectly intact.

If there was one thing dragons loved almost as much as treasure, it was reminding everyone else of that fact.

Tamara followed Rhydian's scent through the familiar corridors of House Aetheris until it stopped outside his private quarters. She didn't bother knocking because the door was ajar which was weird.

So she pushed it open and stepped inside and immediately halted. The last thing she'd expected to find was a room full of ravens.

Nearly a dozen of them occupied Rhydian's living room, their familiar jet-black hair making them almost indistinguishable from one another at first glance.

Their sharp, beady eyes snapped toward her the instant she entered, instinctively assessing the newcomer.

Just as quickly, recognition dawned on them, and whatever wariness had flashed across their faces dissolved into relief. Some of them even looked one mild inconvenience away from bursting into tears.

Tamara frowned. "What is going on here?"

Her gaze swept across the room, taking in the organized chaos. Four long desks had somehow found their way into Rhydian's living room. She was almost certain they hadn't been there this morning.

Two of them were occupied by raven shifters furiously copying the contents of a single handwritten page onto fresh sheets of parchment, their quills scratching nonstop as they raced to keep up.

At the remaining tables, another group folded each completed letter before slipping them into expensive cream-colored envelopes. The others pressed House Aetheris' crimson wax seal onto each one before stacking the finished invitations neatly inside waiting crates for delivery across the academy.

It looked less like the dragon prince's residence, and more like the headquarters of an overworked postal service.

Tamara reached across one of the tables without asking permission and plucked a freshly sealed invitation from a raven's hand.

The poor bird looked moments away from protesting before deciding against arguing with an irritated dragon.

She broke the wax seal and unfolded the letter :

**To House Therion, House Ophidian, and our Honored Human Guests,**

**House Aetheris cordially invites you to an evening gathering this Friday at The Grand Arena.**

**Recent events have placed unnecessary distance between our Houses. While I cannot undo what has already happened, I believe we can at least prevent ourselves from creating more reasons to distrust one another.**

**There will be food, music, games, and, if the Moon Goddess is feeling particularly generous, no attempted murders.**

**The purpose of this gathering is simple: to remind ourselves that we are classmates before we become each other's headaches.**

I understand many of our human guests may be hesitant to attend after the unfortunate incidents of the past days. That hesitation is both reasonable and expected.

Trust is not earned through invitations alone.

Therefore, I offer my own future as collateral.

Should any human guest come to harm anywhere within House Aetheris or during the duration of this gathering, regardless of the cause, I shall immediately withdraw from Bestiaris Academy.

Since trust is a burden best shared equally, I respectfully invite House Ophidian to provide same collateral of their own upon accepting this invitation, so our human guests may enjoy the evening with a little less anxiety.

I eagerly await Prince Caelis Cobryn's undoubtedly generous response.

As for House Therion, please ensure your wolves arrive well-fed. I'd rather they focus on the refreshments than the guests.

Until Friday, I kindly ask everyone to refrain from creating additional diplomatic incidents.

Sincerely,

Prince Rhydian Drakhar.

House Aetheris.

Tamara's eyes widened.

"What the hell?"

She reread the paragraph where Rhydian had pledged to withdraw from Bestiaris Academy should a single human come to harm during the gathering.

Surely she was imagining things.

Except she wasn't. It was just as insane the second time.

"Has he completely lost his mind?" she shouted, her pupils narrowing dangerously as several ravens nearby jumped in alarm.

She crumpled the letter in her grip before sweeping a furious glance around the bustling room.

"Where is he?!" she boomed.

The ravens exchanged uneasy glances before one of them quietly pointed toward the closed bedroom door.

Tamara didn't wait another second and stormed across the living room with such purpose that one unfortunate raven, who had been crouched near the doorway polishing the wooden floor, barely managed to look up before she nearly stepped on him.

"Eep!" The tiny shifter squeaked and hurriedly threw himself out of the way.

Tamara never even acknowledged his existence. She reached the bedroom door, grabbed the handle, and flung it open with enough force for it to slam violently against the wall.

"Rhydian Drakhar!" The entire residence seemed to shake with the force of her entrance.

Sure enough, Rhydian Drakhar was inside. Just not in the way she'd expected.

The dragon prince lounged comfortably against the headboard, dressed in nothing but a pristine white bathrobe. Thin cucumber slices rested over his closed eyes while some sort of green herbal paste covered the better part of his face.

As though that wasn't ridiculous enough, two raven shifters sat at the foot of the bed, dutifully massaging each of his feet. Another sat beside him holding an elaborate fruit cocktail, patiently adjusting the straw every time Rhydian took a sip, while a fourth raven worked on the tension in his shoulders. The entire room smelled of mint and expensive oils.

Tamara stood frozen in the doorway. Her eye twitched. Apparently the prince she was worried about was having a wellness retreat.

Her blood pressure had never climbed so high in her entire life.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

### Chapter 64: You're Replaceable

**"Fire is easy to summon. Restraint is the true dragon's gift."**

~ Rebel Beast

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The force with which Tamara slammed the door interrupted whatever luxurious wellness routine had been taking place inside. The ravens nearly jumped out of their skin.

Rhydian didn't.

"What is all this noise?" he murmured, lazily lifting the cucumber slices from his eyes before setting them aside.

His blue gaze settled on Tamara.

"Oh." He sounded almost pleased. "You're finally here." Rhydian said as if he hadn't caught her scent the moment she'd stormed into his chambers.

"Everyone out," Tamara ordered, her voice low and dangerously restrained.

The raven shifters hesitated. None of them moved.

Technically, this entire ordeal was part of their punishment, with Rhydian drilling lessons into them.

When he gave an order, everyone else came second.

"Out!" Tamara barked.

Several ravens flinched, right before Rhydian gave a lazy flick of his fingers.

"You can go."

That was all the permission they needed.

The ravens abandoned everything where it was, and disappeared through the doorway so quickly it was almost impressive.

The door had barely clicked shut behind the last one when Tamara lifted the crumpled invitation.

"What is this?" she demanded. "No, better yet, what the hell are you thinking?"

Rhydian regarded her calmly. "Why ask a question you already know the answer to?"

Tamara marched toward the bed until she stood over him, her features twisted with disbelief.

"You're willing to gamble your future for the humans?"

Unlike the furious dragon before him, Rhydian simply folded his hands behind his head and settled farther against the pillows as though this were nothing more than an afternoon conversation.

"If you'd read the entire letter," he replied evenly, "you'd notice I also placed Prince Caelis in a rather uncomfortable position."

Tamara shot back immediately, "That is assuming he accepts your invitation."

Her voice rose. "You've just handed that snake the perfect opportunity to get rid of you. All he'd have to do is arrange for one human to get hurt during the party, and you're gone."

Her eyes blazed. "What exactly do you intend to tell your father, Huh? The Drakhar family? That you abandoned Bestiaris because you decided making impossible promises to humans was somehow a brilliant idea?"

Tamara rarely questioned Rhydian's judgment, but today, she was questioning his sanity. Nothing about this resembled the dragon prince she'd served for years.

Yes, Rhydian had always possessed a reckless streak, but it had always been calculated. This was something else entirely.

Her thoughts drifted, against her better judgment, to a certain human girl.

It had to be her.

Nothing else explained why Rhydian had suddenly become so invested in winning the humans' trust, let alone organizing a gathering in their honor.

The words rose to the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them.

The last time she'd voiced that particular suspicion, Rhydian's response had not been pleasant. Tamara had learned her lesson that some thoughts were safer left unspoken.

"Do you have such little faith in me?" Rhydian asked, the question catching Tamara so completely off guard that she blinked.

She swallowed before lifting her chin.

"I'm simply being logical."

"Is that so?"

Rhydian reached for the cocktail abandoned on the bedside table and absently stirred it with the straw before taking a leisurely sip.

His blue eyes remained on her the entire time.

"Is that the same logic you used when you allowed Thamas to carry out the attack on the humans?"

The words landed with such frightening precision that Tamara froze. For the briefest of moments, surprise shone across her face before it was replaced by indignation.

"I did no such thing!" she shot back, her dark eyes flashing with a mixture of outrage and disbelief.

Whatever humor vanished from Rhydian's eyes as he lifted his gaze and looked Tamara dead in the eye.

"Would you stand there and tell me you didn't have the slightest suspicion that Thamas would order the attack?"

Just like that, Tamara found herself at a loss for words.

Thamas was hot-tempered, stubborn, and impossible to reason with once he'd set his mind on something. She hadn't been certain he'd openly defy Rhydian's command, but neither had she done anything to stop him.

Silence settled between them. It was answer enough.

Finally, Tamara drew in a slow breath.

"The dragons aren't comfortable with the humans being here," she admitted. "I assumed you simply didn't want human blood staining your own hands. If Thamas acted on his own, the blame would fall entirely on him for disobeying your orders while your own conscience remained clean."

She met Rhydian's eyes without looking away. "The humans would've been gone and you wouldn't have had to dirty your hands to make it happen."

Rhydian let out a humorless chuckle.

"So this is what I've become in your eyes? A coward?"

"No, that's not what I meant—" Tamara answered immediately, but the look in Rhydian's eyes stole the rest of the words from her mouth.

There was no anger in them, only disappointment.

"Tell me something, Tamara, how long have you served me?"

"Three years," she answered without hesitation. "Precisely since we arrived at Bestiaris."

She added with a small smile, "Although we've been friends for as long as I can remember."

For some reason, that only made her feel more uneasy.

Rhydian's gaze drifted somewhere beyond her. "I still remember the day I told Father I wanted you as my second-in-command. I thought he was going to breathe fire on the entire palace."

Even within the Drakhar Court, dragonesses were still expected to remain in the background. Their greatest duty, according to tradition, was producing heirs to restore the ever-declining dragon population.

Appointing a woman as his second-in-command had bordered on blasphemy.

"You were strong," Rhydian continued.

"Disciplined. Hardworking. When everyone else questioned themselves, you never did."

His eyes returned to hers. "But above all,

you were loyal. And together, we made a great team."

Rhydian drew a slow breath before speaking again. "I want that Tamara back. But if I cannot trust my own second-in-command..."

The words lingered heavily between them.

"...then you may discover you're far more replaceable than either of us ever imagined."

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 65: House Therion

**Trust is strange. It grows slowly, yet dies in a single decision.**

~ Rebel Beast

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If there was ever an opportunity to convince the others to come to House Therion, Professor Maverick had all but destroyed it.

After witnessing what happened to Shannon, no amount of persuasion would convince the remaining girls that living among beasts was the safer option.

Except that didn't stop Aria and her clique from leaving the residence. At this point, they had no choice.

Professor Maverick's violent outburst had only reinforced Shannon's twisted theory that Aria and the professor had conspired to lure everyone into House Therion.

As absurd as that sounded, Aria couldn't ignore the reality of the situation either. Staying behind meant sharing a house with Karen, and after everything that had happened, she wouldn't put it past the girl to convince one of the students, desperate enough to slit her throat in the middle of the night, thinking it would solve their problems.

So yes, she would take her chances with the beasts. Even if their leader made her heart pound for all the wrong reasons. Still, one thing had become abundantly clear.

Professor Maverick wasn't going to hurt her.

At least, not physically. His wolf had already proven that. That didn't mean she trusted him. Far from it. Something was going on, and Professor Nightshade was hiding it from her.

Truthfully, Aria didn't want to know.

There was an instinct buried deep inside her that whispered that if she ever uncovered whatever secret he was keeping, her life would never be the same again.

Aria wasn't sure she was ready for that.

"We're almost there," Dimitri announced, briefly meeting Aria's eyes through the rearview mirror before returning his attention to the road.

With Maverick nowhere to be seen after his abrupt departure, Dimitri had been left with the responsibility of escorting the girls to House Therion.

"Would Shannon survive?" Brittney suddenly asked, voicing the question that had been lingering in everyone's mind.

She was seated beside Dimitri in the front passenger seat of the jeep, and he glanced at her before answering.

"If they get her to the infirmary in time, then yes." He sounded confident. "Our healers should be able to save her."

"Healers?" Brittney repeated. "As in those blessed werewolves with magical healing powers?"

"Not quite," Dimitri replied with an amused smile. "Healer wolves are incredibly rare, and most of them have long since been recruited by Asterion Region."

He continued, "Beasts have another group that's just as valuable. The spiny mouse clans."

"The tiny rodents?" Trisha blurted out in disbelief.

"The very same."

Dimitri chuckled at their expressions.

"Don't let their size fool you. They're arguably the finest healers in the beast territories. Their understanding of herbs borders on frightening, and their concoctions are often more potent than some of the medicines used in your human hospitals."

He added, "And when herbs aren't enough, they use themselves."

Silence filled the jeep.

"Excuse me?" Brittney asked cautiously. "Did you just say they use themselves?"

"Their bodies possess an extraordinary regenerative ability," Dimitri explained. "They can safely donate tiny pieces of their own tissue without suffering permanent harm. Those tissues are then processed into specialized grafts capable of repairing complex wounds that ordinary medicine can't."

"Oh my God." Brittney visibly shuddered.

Trisha gagged. "I was having such a good day before you said that."

Even Aria felt her stomach turn slightly.

Only Alek leaned forward with genuine fascination. "That's actually incredible."

Her eyes practically sparkled. "Can I meet one?"

Dimitri laughed. "If you're really that interested, visit the infirmary sometime. You'll probably find at least one of them yelling at a beast for refusing to drink one of their bitter concoctions."

Alek grinned. "I'd love that."

Trisha snorted. "Such a nerd."

Alek rolled her eyes without the slightest hint of offense.

"Something doesn't add up," Aria said suddenly, disrupting the moment.

"What doesn't add up, Miss Aria?" Dimitri asked.

"Miss?" Aria frowned at the sudden formality.

Dimitri coughed into his fist. "I mean Lady Aria?" Catching the look she shot him through the rearview mirror, he quickly corrected himself. "You don't like that? Would you prefer another title?"

"Why would I want a title in the first place?" Aria asked, completely baffled.

Low key, Dimitri. Low key, he reminded himself. She doesn't know yet.

"What I meant was," he corrected smoothly, "what's bothering you, Aria?"

Even then, it still felt strange addressing her so casually, knowing she would one day become the Luna of the pack.

Aria continued watching him for another moment before answering.

"There were thirteen of us at the residence instead of fourteen. We've already confirmed Abigail is dead, and we assumed Philippa and Debbie were gone as well. So who's the other one?"

Since none of the girls, aside from her clique, wanted anything to do with them, Aria hadn't exactly gotten around to learning everyone's names.

"Oh, about that," Dimitri replied. "The girl Debbie survived. Her injuries were severe, but the healers managed to stabilize her. The two students officially confirmed dead are Philippa Davids and Enika James alongside your chaperone, Abigail, of course."

"Oh..." Alek murmured. "I know about Enika. She was a lot like you."

Aria immediately understood what she meant. Enika had been poor. Just like her.

That explained why almost no one had mentioned her name. The girls had cried for the others, yet Enika had faded into the background, unnoticed even in death.

Aria slowly clenched her fists.

Somewhere tonight, a family would hear the news that every parent dreaded.

Aria caught herself. Why should she waste her anger on their behalf?

Those parents had known there were risks before allowing their daughters to come here. They had accepted them the same way every other family had.

If there was anyone deserving of her anger, perhaps it was the government that continued sending innocent girls into this nightmare under the guise of coexistence.

Silence settled over the jeep after that. No one seemed interested in speaking anymore. It remained that way until Dimitri finally slowed the vehicle and said.

"We're here."

Aria turned toward the window, and the first thing she noticed was how different House Therion looked from their human residence.

Gone was the isolation of the forest. Instead, the building occupied one of the academy's most prominent locations, where neatly manicured hedges and carefully landscaped grounds gave the entire estate an air of prestige.

Dimitri climbed out first. The girls followed one after another until all four of them stood outside the jeep, their eyes slowly traveling upward.

House Therion towered before them.

The five-story residence stretched so wide it looked more like a luxury hotel than a student dormitory. Built from elegant slate-blue stone, the structure was complemented by towering glass windows, spacious balconies, and black steel accents that gave it a bold, contemporary appearance.

Wide stone walkways led to the grand entrance, where an enormous relief had been carved directly into the façade. Wolves, bears, lions, tigers, and other great land beasts were sculpted in stunning detail, their fierce gazes seeming to watch over everyone who approached.

The immaculate landscaping softened what would otherwise have been an overwhelmingly imposing structure. Everything about the residence spoke of wealth and refinement, making it difficult to believe this was home to the very beasts humans had always dismissed as mindless animals.

For several long seconds, none of the girls spoke. Then, almost at the same time, they breathed,

"Wow."

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 66: Beasts Against Humans

**"It is difficult to hate someone once you've been welcomed into their home."**

~ Rebel Beast

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No wonder the beasts looked down on humans. If you lived in a place like this, it was easy to believe you were untouchable.

Wasn't that exactly how Karen and the others treated people they believed were beneath them? Only this time, it wasn't the rich against the poor.

It was the beasts against the humans.

Since it was already evening, classes had ended, and the grounds of House Therion were alive with activity. Beasts occupied the walkways in small groups, some talking, others returning from training, or simply enjoying the cool evening air.

But the moment they spotted the girls, the conversations gradually died away. Curious eyes followed them, some openly puzzled, others wearing unmistakable frowns.

"They don't look very happy to see us," Aria pointed out, suddenly wondering if coming here had been a terrible mistake.

"They're surprised," Dimitri corrected. "You're the first humans to ever step foot inside House Therion. Naturally, you're attracting attention."

There wasn't the slightest concern in his demeanor.

"As for the ones glaring, don't pay them any mind. You don't have to worry about them. No Therion beast is foolish enough to challenge Maverick's decision."

Aria shivered at the mention of his name.

Dimitri continued, "They may not like having humans here, but House Therion has always operated on one simple rule. When Maverick speaks, we listen."

Aria merely nodded and looked away, though she remained painfully aware of every pair of eyes boring into her from behind.

"Come on," Dimitri said, motioning for Alek, Brittney, and Trisha to stay close.

"What about our bags?" Brittney asked.

"They'll be taken to your rooms," Dimitri assured her. "You girls don't have to worry about that. Until then, let's properly welcome you to House Therion."

Aria had no idea what Dimitri meant by "properly welcome," yet she followed after him. There was no turning back now.

The girls climbed the broad staircase. However, the beasts' stares only grew more intense. More Therion beasts emerged from inside the residence as though news of the humans' arrival had spread throughout the entire house.

They lined the balconies, leaned against the railings, while others stopped along the staircase simply to watch. Perhaps it was those unwavering gazes that made Alek lose her footing, her foot catching the edge of a step.

"Oh!"

She pitched forward.

Before anyone else could react, Dimitri reached out on instinct. One arm circled her waist while the other caught her wrist, steadying her before she could hit the ground.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

Alek found herself staring into his face from far closer than she'd expected. Strands of his wavy hair had fallen carelessly across his forehead. For the first time, she noticed how handsome he was.

"Are you alright?" Dimitri asked, noticing she'd gone completely still.

"Y-Yeah." Alek blinked as if waking from a trance.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she quickly stepped out of his hold, though Dimitri kept his hand beneath her elbow until he was certain she had regained her balance.

"Thank you," Alek said, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from her clothes to hide her embarrassment. "That would've been really disastrous."

"Yeah, it would've," Dimitri answered almost absentmindedly, his gaze lingering on her a second longer than necessary.

Behind them, Aria lifted a brow while Brittney and Trisha exchanged identical looks. None of them missed the strange tension that had suddenly settled between the pair.

"I think we should keep moving," Aria said, mercifully breaking the silence.

"Right." Dimitri cleared his throat before gesturing toward the door. "This way."

The moment they stepped through the enormous entrance doors, their jaws nearly dropped to the floor.

The foyer was unlike anything they had expected. White marble, threaded with blue-gray veins, stretched beneath their feet, reflecting the golden glow cast by elegant pendant lights suspended from the soaring ceiling.

A sweeping staircase curved toward the upper floors, while twin glass elevators glided effortlessly between each level. Murals of the land beasts adorned the walls, each one rendered with breathtaking detail.

At the center of the foyer stood a magnificent sculpture that immediately drew their attention. A wolf, lion, bull, stag, and bear spiraled around one another in perfect harmony, each figure flowing seamlessly into the next until it was impossible to tell where one beast ended and another began.

Resting atop the wolf's head was a tiny rat. Though dwarfed by the giants beneath it, the little creature occupied the highest point of the sculpture, reminding everyone that greatness was never measured by size alone.

"I think we've been deceived all our lives," Brittney muttered, unable to tear her eyes away. "This looks nothing like the den of savage beasts I've spent my entire life imagining."

Dimitri replied, "That is because it's far easier to convince people the beasts are monsters than admit they're simply different."

Beyond the foyer, an expansive common room opened before them. Plush sofas and armchairs were arranged in inviting circles around low wooden tables, while bookshelves lined one side of the room beside a crackling stone fireplace. Students occupied nearly every corner.

Perhaps because they were within the comfort of their own residence, many of the Therion students had allowed parts of their beast forms to surface. Some had glowing eyes, others absentmindedly flexed elongated claws against the arms of their chairs, while a few tails swayed lazily behind them as conversations carried on like nothing were unusual.

Then everything changed.

The moment the beasts noticed the human girls, claws receded, tails disappeared, and their unnatural eyes returned to ordinary human ones with effortless ease.

Murmurs broke out.

"Why are they here?"

"What are the humans doing in House Therion?"

"What's Beta Dimitri doing with them?"

Dimitri seemed to have expected the reaction. He climbed several steps of the grand staircase overlooking both the foyer and the common room before turning to face the students.

"Everyone," he called, his voice carrying effortlessly across the residence. "May I have your attention? I have an important announcement."

Aria drew in a sharp breath.

Here we go.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 67: What The Humans Want

**"Loyalty isn't proven when you agree with your leader. It's proven when you don't."**

~ Rebel Beast

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At that moment, Aria, Brittney, Alek, and Trisha felt like exhibits on display, standing behind Dimitri on the staircase while the entire House Therion stared at them.

Dimitri began, "I'm sure some of you are wondering what's going on, while others have already heard bits and pieces of what happened today."

The statement immediately stirred fresh murmurs throughout the residence. Students exchanged puzzled glances and whispered questions to those beside them, trying to determine who actually knew what he was talking about.

Dimitri waited until the noise eased before continuing.

"With me are the human students Aria Aspen, Brittney and Trisha Thorne, and Aleksandra Bellville. Effective today, they will be residing in House Therion."

The words had barely left his mouth before the residence exploded.

"What?!"

"That's impossible!"

"Humans living here? Since when was House Therion turned into a charity?"

"This has never happened before!"

A donkey shifter let out a contemptuous snort. "Caelis and Rhydian were right," he said loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Maverick Nightshade is turning Bestiaris into another Lunaris. He's destroying everything that makes beasts different from humans."

His accusation only poured fuel onto the fire.

Unlike the wolves, who had lived alongside humans long before the academy was founded, many of the other land beasts reacted with open hostility.

Bulls stamped their feet in frustration. Mule and donkey shifters argued loudly with anyone willing to listen, while several goat shifters voiced their objections just as passionately.

Within seconds, the hall had dissolved into a wall of overlapping protests.

"Enough!" Dimitri's voice rang across the house, and a handful of students immediately fell silent.

The rest did not.

If anything, the more stubborn beasts raised their voices, refusing to be drowned out. Their defiance emboldened others, and before long, the uproar swelled louder than before, threatening to drown Dimitri out entirely.

Trisha swallowed hard. "Should we be concerned at this point?"

Although none of the beasts had become violent, their protests were growing increasingly heated. The hostility in the room was impossible to ignore.

Aria was about to assure her that nothing would happen when an unfamiliar tug pulled at her chest. A shiver raced over her skin, raising goosebumps along her arms.

She didn't have to turn around. Somehow, Aria already knew who had just arrived.

One moment, the Therion beasts were arguing among themselves.

The next, a wave of icy air swept through the residence, sending a chill across the room despite the warmth of the evening.

Every head turned toward the entrance, and the effect was immediate. Their voices died away one after another until complete silence swallowed the foyer.

No one dared utter another word. Some of the beasts didn't even seem to be breathing anymore. All that remained was the measured sound of approaching footsteps echoing across the marble floor.

Maverick hadn't even reached the staircase before his voice echoed through the residence.

"I hear some of you disagree with my decision."

There was no shouting or threats, yet every word settled over the room with undeniable authority.

Aria had met confident people before. Even charismatic ones. But whatever surrounded Maverick Nightshade went beyond charisma. Authority clung to him as naturally as breathing. He didn't have to demand attention. Everyone surrendered it willingly.

Her heart gave an infuriating little flutter.

Seriously? After everything that had happened today?

She inwardly scolded herself and forced her attention back to the matter at hand.

By then, Maverick had reached the staircase, and their eyes met.

There was only one question in hers.

Where did you go?

For the briefest moment, something shone in his gray eyes, and then it vanished. Maverick looked away without a word, his expression revealing nothing.

It shouldn't have mattered. Yet for reasons Aria couldn't explain, her chest ached with disappointment.

"How long do you think you can avoid humans?" Maverick began, standing before them with the effortless confidence of one who had never doubted his authority.

"Forever!" one of the beasts shouted.

Despite the gravity of the situation, a portion of the beasts laughed in agreement.

Maverick wasn't the least bit fazed.

"The humans will continue sending girls."

"And we'll continue killing them," a bull shifter growled, his crimson eyes flashing as they drifted toward the human girls. Had Maverick not been standing there, he looked ready to charge.

Maverick met the challenge without so much as blinking.

"Until the day the tables turn," he replied evenly. "Until the humans stop seeing frightened beasts hiding behind walls and begin seeing enemies worthy of extermination. Tell me, how long do you think they'll tolerate burying their daughters before they decide to bury us instead?"

The laughter vanished, replaced by low murmurs as several beasts shifted uneasily.

Maverick continued.

"You call yourselves predators, yet your solution is to hide from the very world you claim to dominate. How long do you honestly believe that's sustainable?"

Silence spread through the room.

"You ask why we're expected to coexist with humans. I'll ask you something in return. What happens when they stop asking?"

A handsome lion shifter with a full mane of honey-blond hair spoke out.

"You know why they're really here, Alpha Maverick. They call it coexistence, but we know what they truly want."

His lip curled in disgust.

"They want a union. Our offspring. Human greed has never known restraint."

"Yes!"

Several lion shifters voiced their agreement, their support echoing throughout the house.

"And if that's true?" Maverick challenged. "The lion population continues to decline with every passing generation. You speak of preserving pure blood, but bloodlines mean very little once they're extinct."

The lion shifter's jaw tightened.

"So tell me, what matters more? Your pride? Or your legacy?"

This time, neither he nor the other lions answered.

Maverick let the silence linger before speaking again. "Fortunately for all of you, none of these girls are here for that purpose."

His expression hardened.

"And let me make something equally clear. If I catch anyone making advances toward any of them, you'll discover very quickly that dying at human hands would've been the kinder fate."

An uncomfortable tension settled over them.

Aria's brows lifted. Since when did Professor Nightshade start deciding who they could or couldn't date?

Maverick looked across the room one final time. "Whether you approve of this decision or not is irrelevant. These girls now reside in House Therion. And every member of this House lives by the same principle. We protect our own. Not from each other, but from anyone foolish enough to threaten them."

He paused.

"Am I understood?"

A few reluctant murmurs answered him.

Maverick's expression remained unchanged. When he spoke again, Alpha authority rolled through the room with invisible force.

"Am I understood?"

The command struck everyone like a physical weight. Even Aria felt it. The feeling swept over her, pressing against every instinct she possessed. It was terrifying—and yet intoxicating.

"Yes, Alpha!"

The reply thundered through the residence in perfect unison.

Only then did Maverick turn toward the girls, and his gaze found Aria almost immediately.

Heat rushed through her body so suddenly she had to curl her fingers into her palms just to steady herself.

He looked away first.

"Dimitri."

"Yes, Alpha."

"Get the girls settled. They've had a long day."

Without another word, Maverick turned to leave.

"Wait!" Aria's voice escaped before she had time to think.

Maverick stopped. Slowly, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Don't you think this is becoming a habit, Aria Aspen?"

There was the faintest trace of dry amusement beneath the words. This made it the third time.

Aria immediately regretted opening her mouth. She hadn't thought that far ahead, and now every pair of eyes in the residence was fixed on her.

Taking a steadying breath, she finally managed,

"Thank you, Alpha Maverick."

Maverick looked at her in surprise. So that was the title she'd settled on this time.

Nonetheless, he gave the slightest inclination of his head, a low, almost inaudible sound rumbling at the back of his throat.

Then he turned and walked away.

It wasn't much, yet the crushing weight he'd been carrying since the incident with Shannon eased a little. At least he had managed to do one thing right.

No sooner had Maverick stepped outside than he noticed papers raining from the sky. One drifted toward him, and he caught it with ease.

It was an envelope.

His brows drew together as he broke the seal and unfolded the letter. Except the further he read, the darker his expression became.

He cursed.

"Rhydian, that old, shrewd bastard...."

# Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 68: Divided House

**"The first crack is never what breaks the glass. It's simply the one we notice."**

~ Rebel Beast

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"Karen Donovan is alive," Venus announced.

Caelis looked up from the papers he was buried in. The arena had been generating impressive profits so far, but the upcoming match between Maverick Nightshade and Rhydian Drakhar was guaranteed to send the numbers soaring. He would likely make three times his usual earnings.

For once, the dragon had done something useful with his life.

"Is that so?" Caelis murmured thoughtfully.

"I can't decide whether that's fortunate or unfortunate. While I am expected to honor my father's agreement, only the gods know what sort of bargain he struck with that human. Had Karen died, the burden would've died with her. Instead, I'm now expected to babysit a human." He clicked his tongue in distaste. "That is rather offensive to my nature."

"That isn't all," Venus said.

Caelis lifted a brow.

"According to the reports reaching me, Maverick took four of the human girls to reside in House Therion."

"What?" Shock flashed across Caelis' face.

It lasted only a heartbeat before a slow, amused laugh escaped him.

"So it begins..." he murmured, a knowing glint entering his silver eyes. "I always knew Maverick was destined to become Bestiaris' undoing. It appears fate has finally decided to cooperate."

"What are your orders?" Venus asked. "Karen is still with the remaining girls, and word is there was some sort of confrontation involving Maverick. The details are sketchy, but I'm certain we could learn everything if we questioned the girls."

He added with a faint grin, "Politely, of course."

Caelis ignored the joke.

"The girls Maverick took, was Aria Aspen among them?"

Venus looked genuinely surprised.

"How did you know?"

"Hm." Caelis leaned back in his chair, thoughtfully stroking his chin. "This continues to get more interesting."

He looked at Venus.

"Tell me. What have you discovered about the girl so far?"

Venus scratched the side of his brow.

"Honestly, Your Highness, nothing extraordinary. She lived a fairly ordinary life. However..."

Caelis leaned forward.

"However...?"

"I don't know whether it's important, but she wasn't particularly well received in her community."

Caelis frowned.

"Explain."

"She was something of an outcast. Her classmates even nicknamed her 'Aria Freak.' There was also a rumor that she trained birds to attack another student during an argument."

"And what made them believe such a thing?"

"The girl worked at an animal shelter and preferred the company of animals over people." Venus shrugged. "Apparently, that was enough to make the humans uncomfortable."

"So she has an affinity with animals," Caelis murmured.

"I wouldn't necessarily put it that way, but—"

"And now she has conveniently been admitted into an academy populated entirely by beast shifters." Caelis' eyes narrowed. "Surely I can't be the only one who sees the conspiracy unfolding."

"What conspiracy, Your Highness?" Venus asked in confusion. "Just because Aria relates well with animals doesn't make her special. The girl is still human."

"And how do you explain her stopping the bull?"

"Well..." Venus hesitated. "Just as Rhydian suggested, perhaps it really was Maverick—"

"Don't finish that sentence."

The edge in Caelis' voice was enough to silence him.

Venus wisely obeyed.

A deep crease formed between Caelis' brows. He was growing tired of everyone insisting that what he'd witnessed was impossible. Something about Aria Aspen refused to make sense, and he intended to uncover the truth, even if it required methods he would ordinarily never consider.

"If Maverick personally selected those four girls, then he's already written the others off," Caelis spoke more to himself than to Venus.

"Although Rhydian and I reached an agreement, he has far less control over the dragons than he likes to believe. That leaves Karen Donovan sitting alone in the human residence, waiting for whichever creature decides to end her short, pathetic existence."

"So what do you intend to do?" Venus asked.

Caelis rose from his chair, straightening the sleeves of his shirt.

"The exact opposite of what everyone expects. Or rather, what Maverick Nightshade wanted from the very beginning."

Venus waited.

A calculating gleam entered Caelis' silver eyes. "We're going to protect the humans. Who knows? Karen Donovan may prove useful to me yet."

He announced to the dumbfounded Venus,

"We're going to the human residence."

**At the human residence...**

"Eww!"

Olivia and the other girls currently scrubbing the floor gagged almost in unison at the sight of the dried vomit still caked across the tiles.

Had anyone told them that the moment Professor Maverick left with Aria and her clique they'd be reduced to cleaning duties, they would've swallowed every ounce of fear and followed him instead. Anything was preferable to scraping another person's vomit off the floor.

Unfortunately, not everyone had been assigned manual labor. If anything, the residence had quietly split into two opposing camps.

Karen's and Charlotte's.

The two groups occupied opposite ends of the common room like rival kingdoms preparing for war.

Karen stood with Liv while Olivia and Fatima did the cleaning, both girls stealing annoyed glances toward the mess they had been forced to deal with.

Across from them stood Charlotte alongside Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith.

Shannon had already been taken to the infirmary, leaving no one certain whose side she would eventually choose. After nearly losing her life because of Karen's recklessness, however, it was difficult to imagine she'd remain particularly loyal.

"It's refreshing," Karen drawled, "to finally know which of the snakes I called friends have been waiting to betray me."

Charlotte didn't so much as flinch.

"That's an interesting accusation coming from someone who shoved one of her own friends into danger." She gestured toward Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith. "At least they know I won't sacrifice them just to save myself."

Her gaze shifted toward Liv. "If I were you, I'd sleep with one eye open. The next time the beasts attack, Karen might decide you're the most convenient shield."

Liv folded her arms.

"Karen already admitted it happened in the heat of the moment." She sniffed dismissively. "Besides, Phillipa wasn't exactly the brightest in the room. No wonder she died."

She lifted her chin. "Karen also told us her father already has plans to keep her safe. Naturally, those loyal to her will benefit as well." A smug smile touched her lips. "I actually feel sorry for the rest of you."

Charlotte laughed. "You're putting an awful lot of faith in someone who has never done anything unless it benefited her."

Karen's eyes narrowed. "Is that so?" She looked toward the girls cleaning. "Olivia. Fatima..."

The two immediately straightened.

"Stop cleaning."

The girls exchanged confused looks. Karen had been the one insisting she couldn't bear looking at the mess. Now she wanted it left exactly as it was.

Not that either of them intended to question her.

Both hurried over and took their places behind her. Karen stood taller now, her chin lifted high.

"Since we're apparently going to be sharing this residence from now on, I think it's time everyone understood how things are going to work."

Her gaze settled squarely on Charlotte.

"You and your little followers will be responsible for cleaning this residence."

Charlotte stared at her in disbelief. For a long moment, she genuinely wondered how she'd ever mistaken Karen Donovan for someone worth following.

"And why," she asked evenly, "would I do that?"

Karen let out a scoff.

"Because despite this adorable little rebellion you've put together, we both know who actually holds power."

She lazily gestured toward Charlotte's friends. "I'll tolerate your little club. What I won't tolerate is you mistaking this temporary freedom for equality."

"Also," she added, "you seem to have forgotten something. Bestiaris may be beyond my father's reach..." A cold smile spread across her face. "But your family isn't. All it takes is one phone call, and everything your parents have spent their lives building disappears."

Karen looked thoroughly pleased with herself. "So be sensible. You're free to have your little group, but you'll answer to me. So what will it be? A yes or a no?"

Silence settled over the common room, the tension hanging between both groups so heavily it seemed capable of snapping.

Charlotte lowered her head. "You're right," she said in a small voice. "I can't fight someone like you."

A satisfied smile slowly spread across Karen's face. There it was. The surrender she'd been waiting for.

"Karen..." Charlotte said softly as she approached her.

There was something almost apologetic about the way she carried herself that even Liv, Olivia, and Fatima relaxed.

Charlotte stopped directly in front of Karen.

"I'm sorry..."

Karen smiled triumphantly.

"...that I didn't do this sooner."

Before anyone realized what was happening, Charlotte drove her forehead straight into Karen's face.

Crack!

The sickening sound echoed through the common room, and Karen screamed, stumbling backward with both hands flying to her face. Blood poured freely between her fingers.

"You fucking bitch!" Murder blazed in her eyes.

"How dare you!" Olivia lunged first, but she never reached Charlotte because Zainab intercepted her halfway, grabbing a fistful of her hair before the two crashed to the floor together.

Within seconds, the entire room became a war zone. The girls screamed, grabbed one another's hair, and threw clumsy punches. Furniture scraped violently across the floor.

And that was exactly the scene Prince Caelis Cobryn and Venus walked into.

## Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

## Chapter 69: Never Belong In Ophidian

"It is a strange thing to survive monsters, only to be devoured by your own."

~ Rebel Beast

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"What in the name..." Venus exclaimed the moment he stepped into the residence.

The girls were so consumed by the fight that none of them noticed the newcomers standing in the doorway, which should have been locked.

Fearing the prince might find the scene beneath him, Venus instinctively stepped forward, intending to separate them.

"Leave them."

Venus paused.

Caelis watched the spectacle with intrigue, his hands clasped neatly behind his back.

"Don't interrupt the entertainment."

Venus abandoned the idea and returned to Caelis' side. "If you insist, Your Highness."

The two then watched in silence as the common room descended further into madness.

Meredith and Liv wrestled each other across the floor, screaming as each clung stubbornly to the other's hair.

Indigo and Fatima were engaged in an equally undignified struggle, neither willing to surrender as they shoved and pulled at one another with flushed faces.

Nearby, Zainab tried to pry Olivia's fingers from her curls while Olivia retaliated by pinching her arm hard enough to earn a sharp yelp.

Caelis' silver eyes drifted from one fight to another without the slightest trace of concern.

"That must be Karen Donovan," he remarked at last, his thick serpentine accent curling around each word as he watched the blonde girl losing rather spectacularly.

"What a letdown."

Karen lay flat on her back while Charlotte straddled her waist, both girls gripping fistfuls of the other's hair with enough force to bring tears to their eyes. Charlotte suddenly

ripped her own dark hair free from Karen's grasp, ignoring the strands she'd sacrificed in the process.

Then her palm came down hard across Karen's face.

Smack!

"You."

Another slap.

Smack!

"Bitch!"

Another.

Smack!

"Who do you think you are?" Charlotte's voice cracked with years of bottled resentment.

"If it wasn't for your parents, you'd have absolutely nothing!"

Karen could barely answer. Her cheeks had turned an angry shade of red beneath the relentless assault.

Charlotte seized another handful of Karen's blonde hair and yanked hard enough to force a cry from her.

"Look at me!" she screamed. "Where's your father now? Isn't he supposed to be so powerful?"

Karen swiped wildly at her face, but Charlotte leaned away each time with surprising agility. She'd dreamed about this moment too many times to waste it.

"Liv!" Karen shrieked desperately. "Help me!"

Liv shoved Meredith aside with both hands, sending the girl sprawling onto the floor before charging across the room.

She crashed into Charlotte with enough force to throw both girls apart.

Charlotte slammed shoulder-first into the wall with a painful grunt before sliding to one knee.

"Karen!" Liv hurried toward her. "Are you alright?"

Karen ignored the question, humiliation burning hotter than the throbbing pain in her face. She climbed unsteadily to her feet, glaring at Charlotte with naked fury.

"You piece of shit!"

She stormed over and drove her foot into Charlotte's stomach. The girl doubled over with a cry, one arm instinctively wrapping around her abdomen.

"How dare you put your filthy hands on me!"

Karen landed another kick.

Charlotte gasped, curling tighter against the floor as the air fled her lungs.

Around them, the room gradually fell silent. One by one, the girls noticed the two figures standing at the entrance, and the color drained from their faces.

They recognized him. He was the Basilisk Prince. No one dared move.

Karen, however, was too consumed by rage to notice. She continued beating Charlotte as though nothing else in the room mattered.

"Get up!" she shouted, drawing back her foot. "Stand up and face me!"

"Karen..." Liv reached for her arm. "The fight's over."

Karen shrugged her off without looking. This couldn't be the end. She was only getting started.

"Karen!" There was genuine terror in Liv's voice now.

"What?!" Karen snapped, spinning around in irritation.

The words died the instant she found herself staring directly into a pair of gleaming silver eyes.

Prince Caelis Cobryn stood only a few feet away, his expression unreadable as he regarded the destruction before him.

The color drained from Karen's face. She instinctively stumbled backward, her heel catching against the leg of an overturned chair. With an undignified yelp, she landed hard on the floor.

The room fell so silent that the only sound left was Karen's uneven breathing.

She knew who stood before her now.

Prince Caelis Cobryn.

Caelis remained silent as he lowered himself into a crouch until they were eye level. His silver eyes drifted to Charlotte, curled on the floor clutching her stomach as she struggled to catch her breath, before returning to Karen.

"You fight like a coward."

Karen's eyes widened.

Had those words come from anyone else, she would've fired back without a second thought.

But this was the Basilisk Prince.

One wrong word, and she feared she would be turned to stone before she even managed to finish her sentence.

Caelis regarded her with detached curiosity.

"Dragons pride themselves on honorable combat," he said. "Serpents, on the other hand, were never meant to fight that way. We are cunning, patient, and strike only when the moment favors us." The final words rolled off his tongue with the faintest hiss.

Karen could only stare at him. She couldn't tell whether he was praising her or condemning her. His expression revealed nothing.

"However..." Caelis continued, his gaze briefly settling on Charlotte once more. "Even serpents know better than to derive pleasure from the suffering of their own."

His eyes returned to Karen.

"You don't belong in House Ophidian. You never will. You will always remain an outsider."

He let those words settle before adding,

"But my father's orders leave me with very little choice."

Realization struck Karen like a bolt of lightning. Her mouth slowly fell open.

"It... it's you?" she breathed. "You're the one Father said would protect me?"

A laugh escaped her, an awkward mixture of relief and disbelief.

Caelis rose smoothly to his feet.

"Follow me."

He simply turned and walked toward the door.

Karen hurried after him before suddenly stopping.

"Wait." She frowned. "Where are you taking me?"

Caelis didn't bother looking over his shoulder.

"Where do you think?"

Karen's eyes lit up.

House Ophidian? Of course! Everything suddenly made perfect sense.

First, Maverick had taken Aria Aspen and her pathetic little clique into House Therion. Now Prince Caelis himself had come for her.

A slow smile spread across Karen's face.

She couldn't wait to see the expression on Aria's face when she discovered she hadn't been abandoned after all. Fate wasn't finished favoring her yet.

"Karen?"

Someone called, and she turned.

Liv stood a few steps away, uncertainty written plainly across her face.

Karen had promised they would be protected too.

## Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 70: Game On

**"Some serpents wear a savior's face."**

~ Rebel Beast

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At first it was Liv. Then Olivia and Fatima joined in.

"Karen, don't."

"Please... don't do this to us."

Their voices were filled with desperation. They couldn't imagine being left behind. Not after everything they had done for her.

They had turned against their own friends without hesitation, choosing Karen over everyone else. If she walked out that door now, Charlotte would undoubtedly make them pay for it.

Karen let out a weary sigh. Desperate people were exhausting.

Still, she couldn't deny they had their uses. A house full of serpents was hardly somewhere she intended to fend for herself. Someone would have to attend to her needs.

"Wait," she called after Caelis.

Caelis stopped. Slowly, he turned to face her, a scowl settling across his features.

"What is it?"

"I won't be going alone." Karen gestured toward the three girls behind her. "They're coming with me."

As though fearing there might be some misunderstanding, Liv, Olivia, and Fatima immediately stepped forward, separating themselves from the rest of the girls.

The sight did nothing to improve Caelis' mood. Instead, his brow furrowed even deeper.

"What did you just say?" he asked with dangerous calm.

Confident that her father had already arranged everything, Karen lifted her chin.

"I'm not going anywhere without them. You're taking me to a house full of serpents. Naturally, I need people I can trust."

"Yes," Liv quickly agreed. "Karen can't stay there by herself. Someone has to look after her."

Karen's lips curved with satisfaction. If only Liv realized how accurate that statement truly was.

Caelis slowly rubbed the back of his neck.

For the first time in a very long while, he found himself wondering exactly what kind of trouble his father had saddled him with.

For a moment, Caelis looked as though he might actually consider it until Karen spoke again.

"Besides," she said with unconcealed arrogance, "I'm sure my father is paying you an exorbitant amount to make sure all my needs are met."

The air changed, and a dangerous gleam flashed through Caelis' silver eyes. He had tolerated her arrogance because his father had ordered him to. But treating him like a servant?

That crossed a line.

Before Caelis could act, Venus stepped smoothly into his path.

"Your Highness," he said carefully. "Remember your father's orders."

Caelis said nothing.

Venus lowered his voice another fraction.

"Besides, if she must die, let it be by dragon hands rather than yours."

For a long moment, Caelis remained perfectly still. His expression softened just enough for Venus to believe the crisis had passed.

He stepped aside.

The instant he did, Caelis made a low, guttural reptilian sound from the back of his throat. His jaw unhinged wider than any human's should have, revealing a pair of gleaming ivory fangs. Thick strands of translucent venom gathered at their tips before spilling free.

Without the slightest warning, he spat, and the venom struck Liv squarely in the eye.

"Ahhh!"

Liv's scream ripped through the room. She clutched at her face, stumbling blindly across the floor.

"It burns!" she shrieked. "Oh my God... it burns! I can't see! I can't see!"

Panic seized the room.

Karen recoiled instinctively, dragging herself backward across the floor while Olivia and Fatima did the same, horror written plainly across their faces.

Only moments ago they had believed Prince Caelis represented safety. Now it dawned on them that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

"You... you hurt her!" Karen cried, staring at him in disbelief.

Caelis regarded her without the slightest hint of remorse. If anything, the cruelty only sharpened the elegance of his features.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear," he said, his voice as cold as polished steel. "I am not your servant, nor will I ever become one."

He took an unhurried step toward her.

"My patience does not resemble Professor Maverick's, and I don't play games like your resident dragon, Rhydian Drakhar."

He stopped.

"The only reason you continue to draw breath is because I have chosen to allow it."

His silver eyes settled on hers with chilling finality.

"So do not mistake my compliance for foolishness. Your safety exists only for as long as I decide it does."

The room fell silent. Or at least, as silent as it could with Liv's agonized screams echoing through the common room.

She was on the floor now, clutching her eye and writhing in pain as tears streamed uncontrollably down her face.

Without sparing her another glance, Caelis turned to Venus.

"The girls wish to reside in House Ophidian." His tone was perfectly composed. "See that all four of them are given comfortable accommodations."

Then his attention shifted to Karen.

"And you were right." His lips curved into a smile devoid of warmth. "I should charge your father an exorbitant fee for these additional services. I'm certain he'll be delighted to pay it."

Karen could only stare at him, speechless. For someone who thrived on having the upper hand, Caelis had dismantled every illusion of control she thought she had.

She wanted to scream. To break something. Anything.

Humiliation and fury churned together until she could scarcely tell them apart.

A laugh suddenly broke out from Charlotte.

Still lying on the floor, the chuckle began as a weak, breathless sound. Then it grew louder and louder until she was laughing hysterically, openly mocking Karen.

And, as expected, the laughter provoked Karen. She let out a shrill scream and charged at Charlotte.

"I'll kill you!"

Venus intercepted her with ease, catching her around the waist before she could take another step.

Karen kicked, struggled, and hurled every curse she could think of, but Venus held her effortlessly, as though restraining an unruly child.

Caelis paid the commotion no further attention. He walked out of the residence and into the evening air.

Something brushed against his shoulder, and he looked up to find the sky filled with drifting envelopes, carried across the academy by birds.

Caelis plucked one from the air, broke the seal, and unfolded the letter. His expression shifted as his eyes moved down the page. First came curiosity, then amusement, and finally, a scoff escaped him.

"Game on, Rhydian..." he murmured, folding the letter neatly between his fingers. "This should be entertaining."