

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 71: Invitation To Aetheris

"No student leaves Bestiaris carrying only books."

~ Rebel Beast

While Charlotte found Karen's humiliation immensely satisfying, the feeling didn't last.

The moment Karen disappeared through the door, reality settled over the room like a heavy fog.

They were alone. The only humans left in a residence deliberately built on the outskirts of the academy, with nothing but the woods separating it from the other Houses.

"What are we going to do now?" Zainab asked, unable to hide the fear in her voice.

Professor Maverick had taken the others to House Therion. Prince Caelis had just walked away with Karen and her followers.

They had been left behind.

If another flock of ravens descended upon the residence tonight, there was no guarantee anyone would come for them this time.

The silence that followed grew unbearably heavy, but Charlotte refused to let it stay that way.

"What do you mean, what are we going to do?" she said, forcing far more enthusiasm into her voice than she actually felt. "We've got this entire place to ourselves. I say we celebrate!"

"Celebrate?" Zainab repeated skeptically.

"Yes, celebrate!" Charlotte insisted, throwing both hands into the air despite the sharp pain that flared through her bruised side.

"Karen the devil is finally gone. Professor Maverick isn't here breathing down our necks with his countless rules and regulations. For the first time since arriving at this academy, nobody's telling us what we can or can't do."

"So I say we throw ourselves a party!" she finished, punching the air triumphantly.

Silence answered her.

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith exchanged uncertain glances before slowly looking back at Charlotte. None of them looked convinced.

Charlotte stared at them for a long moment before her shoulders slumped.

"Tough crowd," she muttered.

With a defeated sigh, she bent down to pick up one of the overturned chairs.

"Fine. Let's just clean this place up. It's ours now, after all."

She had barely taken a step when a smooth voice drifted through the common room.

"A party doesn't sound like such a terrible idea."

Charlotte froze.

"I happen to have one coming up."

All four girls turned toward the entrance at once, their eyes widening in unison.

Standing in the doorway, framed by the fading evening light, was a young man whose red hair caught the last rays of the setting sun like living fire.

"Rhydian... Drakhar," Charlotte breathed, her voice trembling as her eyes lit up with unmistakable wonder.

"The one and only," Rhydian replied with an effortless grin that had undoubtedly broken more than a few hearts over the years.

Ordinarily, that smile might have put people at ease. Instead, Meredith, Indigo, and Zainab shrank back instinctively. Charlotte, however, could only stare, her excitement outweighing every reason she had to be afraid.

"H-have you come to kill us?" Meredith asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Kill you?" Rhydian echoed, genuine confusion crossing his face.

"Ravens belong to House Aetheris," Indigo said, struggling to keep her voice steady. "You sent your ravens after us earlier today. Have you come to finish what you started?"

Rhydian let out a small sigh.

"About that..." he said. "That particular attack was never sanctioned by me. Unfortunately, those responsible are still members of House Aetheris, and as their leader, the responsibility is ultimately mine."

He paused deliberately, a mischievous smile slowly spreading across his face as though he were about to offer them something impossible to refuse.

"Which is precisely why I've come bearing compensation."

"Compensation?" Zainab repeated, unable to hide the suspicion in her voice.

"Yes," Rhydian said. "I've just heard my esteemed colleagues finally abandoned centuries of tradition and welcomed humans into their Houses."

His gaze swept over the four girls before a teasing smile tugged at his lips. "Granted... you aren't exactly the human I was hoping to recruit, but what can I say? Rhydian Drakhar possesses an exceptionally generous heart."

He spread his hands. "So, how would you ladies feel about joining House Aetheris?"

"What?!"

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith blurted out at the same time.

"Yes! Yes! I'll come!"

Charlotte's answer was so immediate that the other three girls turned to stare at her as though she'd finally lost her mind.

Had she forgotten what had happened to Karen? For all they knew, House Aetheris could prove even worse than House Ophidian.

Rhydian noticed the disagreement almost immediately.

"Of course," he said, "there's no need to decide tonight. Take your—"

"Yes!"

Charlotte cut him off before he could finish. She spun toward the others.

"This is exactly the opportunity we've been waiting for. Why are you all acting like this?"

"We're talking about dragons," Zainab whispered fiercely, conscious of Rhydian's presence. "What makes you think he'll protect us? How do we know this isn't another trap? Have you already forgotten what happened this morning?"

"He already told us it wasn't his doing," Charlotte argued. "Besides, what's the alternative? Staying here until the next attack finishes the job?"

"But—" Meredith began.

"There is no 'but.'" Charlotte folded her arms. "Either you come with me, or you stay here and hope you're luckier next time."

The three girls exchanged uncertain looks. None of them had an answer.

Charlotte threw her hands into the air.

"Fine!" she huffed. "Stay behind then. You can be the only humans left hiding in this gloomy house while everyone else is off making history with the beasts."

She turned dramatically toward Rhydian.

"Wait!"

Charlotte bit back the smile threatening to spread across her face.

Easy peasy.

She composed herself before glancing over her shoulder.

"Yes?"

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith looked at one another one last time, silently searching each other's faces for reassurance.

At last, Meredith nodded.

"We're coming too."

Charlotte's face lit up.

"Excellent decision."

Inwardly, however, an entirely different thought crossed her mind.

Now the numbers were finally evening out.

Karen thought she'd won, but she hadn't seen anything yet.

With renewed confidence, Charlotte walked toward Rhydian. The Dragon Prince regarded her with amused curiosity, as though he could already tell there was far more going on inside her head than she was letting on.

Charlotte stopped before him, dipped into a respectful bow, then lifted her head, her eyes shining so brightly they almost rivaled his grin.

"You're not going to regret this, Your Highness."

Chapter 72: One Has To Die

"The first lesson taught at Bestiaris is survival. Everything else is an elective."

~ Rebel Beast

After Maverick's speech, the atmosphere inside House Therion shifted noticeably.

Dimitri wasted no time ushering them toward the elevator, leaving Aria little chance to gauge the full extent of the change.

Even so, she caught the difference. The hostility in the beasts' eyes had faded, replaced by a reluctant acceptance. They still weren't happy about the humans' presence, but Maverick had spoken, and in House Therion, that was the end of the discussion.

Aria's heart swelled with gratitude.

Professor Maverick didn't have to do any of this, but he had. She wasn't naïve enough to believe a decision like this wouldn't come with repercussions behind closed doors, especially considering how hostile the beasts were toward humans.

Perhaps, the next time she saw him, she'd thank him.

Whenever that happened.

"House Therion occupies the land between House Aetheris and House Ophidian," Dimitri explained as the elevator began its ascent.

"When Bestial City was first established, the dragons were the first to claim territory. That made House Aetheris the first residence to be built." He chuckled. "Unfortunately for them, Bestiaris was meant to be an academy, not a dragon kingdom, so they had little choice but to allow the serpents to construct House Ophidian."

He shook his head in amusement.

"The dragons insisted it be built as far away from them as possible. The serpents were equally happy with that arrangement. Which is how House Therion ended up right in the middle. Apparently, neither side minded having wolves as neighbors."

The elevator chimed softly as the doors slid open. Dimitri stepped out first, and the girls followed after him.

"I don't understand," Brittney said. "Why do dragons and serpents hate each other so much? I mean, the dragons are already on top. No matter what happens, their position isn't exactly threatened."

"That's exactly the problem," Dimitri replied as he led them farther down the corridor, passing identical doors on either side. "The dragons have held absolute power for years. Then Caelis came along."

He glanced over his shoulder.

"To the dragons, he's a threat that should never have existed. To the serpents, he's their greatest hope of seeing one of their own become King of the Beasts."

"Whoa." Even Aria couldn't hide her surprise. "The Basilisk Prince is the future King of the Beasts?"

"That doesn't make sense," Alek pointed out. "King Darius is a hydra. Doesn't he have children? How does Caelis suddenly become the next king?"

"There is," Dimitri said, "a reason most beasts insist on marrying within their own kind and keeping their bloodlines as pure as possible."

The girls exchanged curious looks.

"You'll learn about it properly once lectures begin, but among beasts, there are what we call the Mystical Beasts."

He listed them. "Hydras. Dragons. Phoenixes. Basilisks. Leviathans. Thunderbirds. Creatures born with features so overwhelming that a single one could alter the balance of an entire kingdom."

He shrugged.

"For whatever reason, nature seems determined to keep that kind of power from becoming too common. Most Mystical Beast bloodlines have either dwindled to the brink of extinction or disappeared altogether."

"The hydras are one of them?"

Dimitri nodded.

"King Darius is believed to be the last pure hydra alive."

Alek frowned.

"So why not simply have children?"

"He tried." Dimitri's expression grew more solemn. "There are no female hydras left, so he married a dragoness instead. She's actually Rhydian's cousin."

"What happened?" Brittney asked.

"They had one surviving son."

"And?"

"He inherited his mother's blood. He's a griffin," Dimitri finished. "Powerful by ordinary standards, but nowhere near powerful enough to inherit the throne."

"They kept trying," he continued. "Pregnancy after pregnancy ended in tragedy. None of the children survived, and after years of failure there were no more heirs."

"So the throne simply..." Aria hesitated. "Moves to someone else?"

"It moves," Dimitri corrected, "to the strongest." He spoke the words as though they were the most obvious thing in the world.

"The beasts have never cared about birthright as much as they care about power. The one capable of protecting us becomes king."

"That leaves Rhydian and Caelis," Alek murmured.

"Exactly."

"But there can't be two kings," Dimitri said. "Only one can inherit the throne. And neither Rhydian Drakhar nor Caelis Cobryn is the sort to kneel before the other. For one of them to become king..."

He allowed the words hang in the air for a moment before delivering the inevitable conclusion.

"The other will have to die."

Aria, Brittney, Alek, and Trisha exchanged stunned looks. None of them realized they had come to a complete stop until Dimitri glanced back at them.

"Oh." He pointed farther down the corridor. "We're right over there."

The girls quietly followed after him, though their minds reeled from the whole revelation.

Dimitri eventually stopped before the last room at the end of the corridor, a pleased look on his face.

"This is the best room on the entire female floor. Professor Maverick insisted you stay here. Left to him, he would've preferred you on his—" He caught himself abruptly.

Dimitri cleared his throat.

"Never mind."

Before anyone could question the strange remark, he pressed the doorbell. The door flew open so quickly it nearly collided with his face.

Four girls emerged one after another, each carrying boxes filled to the brim with their belongings. The first shot Aria and the others a venomous glare.

"It's all yours," she snapped bitterly before brushing past them without another word.

Aria watched her leave, a knot tightening in her chest. As relieved as she was to have somewhere safer to stay, she couldn't ignore the fact that someone else had been forced out to make room for them.

The second and third girls were far less hostile. They merely looked the newcomers over with open curiosity before continuing down the hallway.

The last girl lingered, laughing when she noticed Aria's uneasy expression.

"Don't mind Felicity. She's always been a little dramatic." She shifted the box in her arms with surprising ease. "Besides, I'm not complaining. Now I get to move in with my boyfriend."

She gave them an enthusiastic wave. "See you around!"

Then she hurried after the others. Aria and the girls stared after her, momentarily speechless.

Dimitri spread a hand toward the open doorway. "Well..." he said. "Shall we?"

Chapter 73: Gave Her A Cardiac Arrest

"Every House has its own heartbeat. Sooner or later, everyone living inside begins to hear it."

~ Rebel Beast

The moment Aria stepped into the suite, she understood why Felicity had glared at her earlier.

She would've hated anyone who took her away from a place like this too.

The shared living room occupied the heart of the suite, with four identical bedroom doors arranged evenly around it, one in each corner, giving every occupant the same amount of space and privacy.

This wasn't a dormitory at all, but a five-star hotel.

The walls were painted a rich blue-green that gave the room a welcoming warmth beneath the soft glow of the wall sconces. White molding framed the walls, while dark walnut floors disappeared beneath a large woven rug patterned in muted shades of ivory, slate blue, and terracotta.

At the center of the room sat a spacious caramel-colored leather sectional, accompanied by matching armchairs arranged around a handcrafted walnut coffee table. A neat stack of books rested on its surface beside a ceramic bowl filled with pinecones and dried branches, simple decorations that somehow made the room feel lived in rather than staged.

Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched along one side of the suite, their cream curtains left partially open to reveal a spacious balcony overlooking the academy grounds. The evening breeze drifted inside through the slightly opened glass doors, carrying with it the cool scent of trees and the distant sounds of students still wandering the campus before night finally settled.

One wall was occupied by built-in bookshelves filled with novels, textbooks, and board games. Opposite them stood a refreshment counter fitted with a coffee machine, an electric kettle, a refrigerator, and neatly arranged cupboards, making it easy to forget this was student accommodation at all.

Mounted above the modern stone fireplace was a magnificent wooden carving depicting wolves running alongside bears, stags, lions, and other great land beasts beneath a full moon. Unlike the imposing sculpture in the foyer, this one carried an unexpected sense of unity, every creature moving together, none considering itself greater than another.

For a long moment, none of the girls spoke.

Aria slowly turned in a circle, taking everything in. If this was how the ordinary students of House Therion lived, she couldn't begin to imagine what Professor Maverick's quarters looked like.

Wait a minute. Why was she thinking about Professor Maverick's room?

Aria mentally shook herself.

Get a grip.

"I know I was born into wealth," Brittney said with an appreciative whistle as she looked around, "but this is still ridiculously luxurious for student accommodation. I love it."

"It certainly beats that doomed human residence," Trisha agreed without hesitation.

"And we all get our own rooms," Alek added, visibly relieved. "No offense, girls, but I like having my own space every now and then."

Aria couldn't have agreed more.

More importantly, she would finally be able to use her phone without worrying about curious eyes wandering onto the messages she'd exchanged with Doctor Eniola.

A sudden realization seemed to strike all of them at the exact same time because all four pairs of eyes met.

Then all four girls bolted.

Dimitri barely had time to blink before they shot off in different directions, their excited squeals ringing through the suite and nearly bursting his eardrums.

"Goddess above..." he muttered under his breath. "What did I just get myself into?"

Aria sprinted for the bedroom closest to the balcony. Unfortunately, Trisha had the exact same idea. The two of them reached the door almost together, but Aria's fingers wrapped around the handle a split second first.

"I touched it first," she declared triumphantly. "It's mine."

Trisha came to such an abrupt stop she nearly crashed into her. Seeing the room was already claimed, she whipped around and made a desperate dash for the one directly opposite.

Too late.

Brittney was already standing in front of it with one hand resting possessively on the doorknob. She wore a grin so smug it was almost offensive.

"Try being a little less greedy next time," she teased.

"Oh, come on!"

Trisha threw both hands into the air before trudging dramatically toward the only remaining room, directly opposite the one Alek had already claimed.

"Well," she grumbled, reaching for the handle, "I suppose this one will have to love me instead."

Brittney clapped her hands together excitedly.

"Alright, nobody opens their door until the count of three."

The other girls straightened up, eager to see what their rooms looked like.

"One..." Brittney began.

"Two..."

"Three!"

All four girls threw their bedroom doors open at the same time, and for one glorious second, silence greeted them.

Then the suite erupted. It wasn't the sound of joy.

"Rats!"

"Oh my God! There are rats in here!"

"What the hell?!"

The screams echoed from every direction at once.

Dimitri had expected gasps of admiration, perhaps even tears of gratitude after seeing the rooms. Instead, his sensitive ears were assaulted by pure, unfiltered panic. He barely had time to react before Trisha came sprinting toward him.

"Save me!" She launched herself straight at him.

Dimitri caught her on instinct, lifting her effortlessly as her arms wrapped around his neck while her legs locked around his waist. The force of the impact nearly knocked them both off balance, but he steadied himself before either of them could fall.

"It ran over my leg!" Trisha shrieked, frantically shaking one foot. "Oh my God! I think I've caught something!"

Dimitri stared at her.

"You caught what?"

"I don't know!" Trisha cried. "Rat disease!"

Before he could reassure her, Brittney stumbled out of her room looking rattled as well, though slightly more composed.

"There were two of them!" she exclaimed, pointing accusingly toward her bedroom. "Two whole rats!"

Almost as if offended by the accusation, one of the tiny rodents darted out through the doorway.

Brittney saw it and screamed.

"I hate rats!"

She jumped sideways without looking where she was going.

The little creature skidded to a stop. Then, before everyone's eyes, its body stretched, bones shifted beneath its fur, and within seconds, a young naked woman stood where the rat had been.

Brittney froze. Her mouth slowly fell open.

"T-That's..."

She pointed with a trembling finger.

"That's a human?"

No one answered because, at that exact moment, Aria burst out of her room.

"Get back here, you filthy pest!"

She came charging after another fleeing rat with a mop handle gripped in both hands. The terrified rodent zigzagged across the floor.

Aria raised the stick.

"I'm ending you!"

"Aria, don't!"

Three voices shouted at once.

"What?" Aria snapped, still glaring at the little menace that had nearly sent her into cardiac arrest the moment she'd opened her door.

"It's a human!" Brittney cried.

Aria frowned.

"A what?"

The rat suddenly stopped running and shifted in the blink of an eye. A heartbeat later, a young man was crouched on the floor, completely naked and shivering with fear.

Aria's grip loosened, and the mop slipped from her fingers, clattering onto the floor.

Her eyes widened. She had very nearly beaten a human to death. Worse still, he wasn't wearing a single stitch of clothing.

Right at that moment, Alek stepped out of her room, and unlike the others, she wasn't screaming. Instead, both shifters in their human forms were bent over as she dragged them along by their ears.

"I caught them," she announced proudly.

Then she stopped, her eyes landing on Dimitri. Or more specifically, on the fact that Trisha was in his arms.

Dimitri froze.

In all the chaos, he'd completely forgotten he was carrying her. The moment his eyes met Alek's, realization hit him like a freight train.

His arms instinctively relaxed.

Thud!

"Ow!"

Trisha landed squarely on her backside, wincing as she reached behind herself.

"I think I just broke my tailbone!"

Brittney hurried to her side.

"Are you alright?"

"I'll survive," Trisha groaned as Brittney pulled her upright. "But if I start walking funny tomorrow, I'm suing you, asshole." She glared at Dimitri.

Unfortunately, Dimitri stood rooted to the spot. For reasons he couldn't explain, he faced Alek wearing the unmistakably guilty expression of a man who'd just been caught doing something he shouldn't.

"I can explain."

Alek blinked.

"Explain what?" she asked, looking genuinely confused.

Dimitri stared at her. Then it dawned on him.

What exactly was he trying to explain? More importantly, why did he feel the need to explain himself to her in the first place?

Something had to be wrong with him. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Mercifully, Alek spared him any further embarrassment.

"Well..." She lifted both hands slightly. "Look what I found."

Only then did he notice the two miserable rat shifters in her grasp. She marched them toward the others by their ears while the pair stumbled after her, both wearing identical expressions of suffering.

The rat shifters had all reverted to their human forms now.

There were eight of them altogether, huddled shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the living room with their heads lowered, while Aria, Brittney, Alek, Trisha, and Dimitri stood over them.

The playful beta from moments ago was gone.

Dimitri's face had hardened, and though he never raised his voice, the authority in his expression was enough to make every rat shifter shrink where they stood.

"What," he asked, his voice dropping into a low growl, "is the meaning of this?"

It was the same girl who had shifted earlier who finally found the courage to speak.

"It... it was Felicity," she admitted. "She told us some human girls were moving in today and ordered us to hide in their rooms."

Chapter 74: Are You Single?

Chapter 74: Are You Single?

"Every House tests its newcomers. Some with traditions. Others with teeth."

~ Rebel Beast

"So Felicity told all of you to hide in these rooms and scare the girls?" Dimitri asked, disbelief evident in his voice. "And you agreed?"

The rat shifters exchanged uneasy glances.

"Well..." the first girl answered timidly. "It's not like we could refuse her." She swallowed. "You know what she is."

Her voice grew so small toward the end that she lowered her head without daring to meet Dimitri's eyes.

Aria caught the implication immediately.

"What is she?" she asked.

Dimitri turned to her. "What?"

"What kind of beast is Felicity?" Aria repeated more firmly.

It was the rat girl who answered.

"A tigress."

"What?" Aria and Trisha blurted out together.

"Oh... crap," Alek muttered beneath her breath.

Brittney frowned.

"What? Why are you all looking like someone just announced the end of the world?"

Unlike the others, she hadn't spent years reading about animals simply because she found them fascinating.

Alek sighed.

"If beast shifters inherit even part of their animal instincts, then that's bad news."

"How bad?"

"Tigers," Alek explained, "are notoriously territorial."

Realization slowly spread across Brittney's face.

"Wait." She looked from Alek to the rat girl. "Are you telling me she's going to want to murder me in my sleep because I took over her territory?"

She looked around.

"Which room was hers?"

One could never be too careful.

Before the rat girl could answer, Dimitri cut in.

"Nobody is murdering anyone."

His tone left little room for argument.

"Yes, Felicity has a temper, but she's not about to lay a finger on any of you." He folded his arms. "She knows exactly where that would land her with Maverick."

The reassurance should have helped, but it didn't.

The four girls exchanged silent glances. While Dimitri sounded convincing, he also wasn't a woman.

Felicity might not attempt murder, but after today's welcome, none of them doubted she'd find far more creative ways to make their lives miserable. The rat incident alone had proven that.

Dimitri either missed the exchange entirely or chose not to acknowledge it.

"Besides," he continued, "our beast instincts influence us, but they don't control us. Felicity and the others have already been moved somewhere they'll be comfortable. They may resent it now, but eventually they'll settle in."

Brittney opened her mouth, but Dimitri raised a finger.

"I already know what you're going to say."

She closed it again.

"If you're still uncomfortable, I'll arrange for trusted members of the patrol team to keep watch outside your suite every night. Will that put your minds at ease?"

"Better," Brittney admitted.

Only then did Dimitri turn back toward the rat shifters, and the poor creatures shrank almost immediately. His expression remained calm, but there was nothing friendly about it anymore.

"If I so much as catch the scent of any of you anywhere near this suite without official authorization," he said evenly, "I'll hunt you in my wolf form and swallow you whole."

Perverse delight glinted in his eyes at the thought.

One of the rat boys went visibly pale.

"I swear!" he squeaked. "I'm never coming back!"

Another nodded so frantically Aria wondered if his head might fall off.

"Neither am I!"

Dimitri regarded them for another moment before giving a single nod.

"You may leave."

The response was instantaneous.

The eight rat shifters vanished so quickly they became little more than blurs rushing past the girls. Within seconds, the suite was empty.

Well, almost.

One rat boy suddenly darted back inside, reached for the front door, pulled it shut with remarkable politeness, then disappeared again before anyone could say a word.

Silence fell.

"That..." Brittney said slowly, "was impressive."

Dimitri placed a hand over his chest and dipped into an exaggerated bow.

"You're most welcome, my ladies."

Brittney's opinion of Dimitri rose several levels on the spot. He was handsome, reliable, and funny. And if the look she'd caught between him and Alek earlier meant anything... she might have just found her friend a boyfriend.

"Not to pry into your personal life," Brittney began sweetly, "but are you single, Dimitri?"

The beta lifted a brow. He hadn't seen that coming.

"No," he answered.

Brittney stared at him unwaveringly.

"Are you serious, or are you teasing me?"

"The former, I'm afraid."

"Well..." Brittney clasped her hands together. "You wouldn't mind if I asked you a few more questions then?"

Meanwhile, Aria, Trisha, and Alek watched the exchange from the sidelines, each silently wondering what on earth had gotten into their friend.

"Well..." Dimitri scratched the back of his head. "Sure. Why not?"

"Excellent!"

Brittney clapped her hands once, as though the matter had already been settled.

Before Dimitri could reconsider, she had her phone out, opened the Notes app, and assumed the air of an experienced interviewer.

"Now then," she began, "have you ever been in a relationship? If yes, how many? Please start from the day you escaped your mother's womb. Childhood sweethearts count too. How long did each relationship last? Did any of your ex-girlfriends think you were the problem? Are you still friends with any of them? Better yet, are there any unresolved situationships I should know about?"

She paused only long enough to take a breath.

"Oh, and don't skip any details."

Dimitri's mouth actually fell open.

Aria almost felt sorry for him.

"You don't have to answer any of that," she quickly cut in before Brittney could produce another list. "Our friend can be a little..." She searched for a diplomatic word. "Intense."

She offered Dimitri an apologetic smile.

"Besides, I'm sure you have far more important things to do. You're probably busy."

Trisha had already slipped behind Brittney, subtly trying to steer her away before she managed to offend the only ally they currently had inside House Therion.

For a brief moment, Dimitri considered accepting Aria's invitation to escape.

Then his gaze drifted to Alek. She wasn't saying anything. She was simply watching him.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Dimitri suddenly found himself wanting there to be no misunderstanding where he was concerned.

"Yes," he said at last. "I've been in a relationship before."

Chapter 75: Be The Second Choice

"Sometimes the safest place in the world is the one you swore never to enter."

~ Rebel Beast

Brittney smiled like an addict whose fix had finally arrived. Even Trisha released her arm. There was no stopping her now.

"I did have childhood crushes," Dimitri admitted proudly. "Or rather, they had crushes on me."

He said, "Growing up attached to Maverick's hip and being practically part of his family was bound to attract attention."

The smile lingered only briefly before turning wistful.

"Unfortunately, that turned out to be both a blessing and a curse."

He looked up. "I've only been in one relationship." Dimitri paused. "It lasted a month."

"A month?!" the girls exclaimed in unison.

They all looked at him differently now. A month? That was suspicious.

Dimitri had the easygoing charm people often associated with heartbreakers. He was handsome, approachable, and knew exactly how to make people feel comfortable.

Nothing like Professor Maverick. For some reason, Aria's mind supplied the comparison on its own.

And yes, Maverick Nightshade wasn't cute.

He was all sharp edges, intense, and the sort of presence that made people think twice before speaking.

Dimitri noticed the skepticism written across their faces and couldn't help but chuckle.

"I know what you're thinking. Yes, I was the one who ended the relationship."

The girls exchanged another look. In the end, they had been right.

Then Dimitri said, "Turns out she wasn't interested in me after all." His smile became self-deprecating. "She was in love with Maverick. Dating me was simply the closest she could get to him."

A heavy silence settled over the room.

Trisha let out a long, low whistle.

"Ouch."

"That..." Brittney said, shaking her head. "That was genuinely horrible."

"Are you alright?" Alek asked.

Everyone turned toward her. There was no curiosity in her voice, only concern.

"That must've hurt."

For reasons Dimitri couldn't explain, those simple words settled somewhere deep inside him. He met her eyes and smiled.

"It did." He shrugged lightly. "But it happened two years ago. Thankfully, it only lasted a month. Had it gone on any longer, I might not have walked away with my sanity intact."

"Can I ask you something?" Aria said.

"Sure."

"How do you deal with it?"

Dimitri asked confused. "Deal with what?"

She hesitated, searching for the right words. "Living under Professor Maverick's shadow."

"I mean..." Aria continued, "doesn't it bother you that you'll always be everybody's second choice? That no matter how hard you try, you'll always be the alternative?"

"You're overthinking it," Dimitri told her.

"I am?"

"I don't get jealous of Maverick." His answer came so naturally that the girls found themselves surprised.

"Maverick isn't my biological brother," Dimitri explained, "but we've grown up together for so long that we've never really seen the difference. We were practically raised side by side. If you ask my mother, she'd probably tell you she raised twins."

He laughed softly at the thought before his expression turned thoughtful.

"Besides, we're completely different people. Maverick commands attention as easily as breathing. That's just who he is. Maverick Nightshade."

Dimitri pointed to his chest. "Me? I actually have to make an effort. He's naturally intimidating. I'm naturally approachable. He'd rather avoid people. I enjoy being around them. He's patient enough to sit in silence for hours. I would've gone insane after the first ten minutes."

"That is true," Trisha admitted. "I honestly can't imagine Professor Maverick making jokes."

"So there was never any point in comparing myself to him. We're too different."

He added more hesitantly, his eyes resting on Aria. Almost as if this secret wasn't his to divulge.

"And contrary to what most people believe, Maverick didn't have it easy. A lot of people look at him now and assume life has always favored him because he's strong, respected, and talented."

He shook his head. "They couldn't be more wrong. If people actually knew what Maverick has lived through, they wouldn't envy him."

The room fell silent.

Aria found herself staring at Dimitri.

Professor Maverick was pitiful? That was impossible. The man seemed almost untouchable. Everything about him spoke of control, confidence, and power.

So what could have happened to someone like him? Was that why he always kept everyone at arm's length and rarely smiled?

The questions came one after another until Aria almost groaned inwardly.

What was wrong with her? Why was she suddenly so interested in Professor Maverick Nightshade?

She barely knew the man.

Dimitri noticed the curiosity flickering across her face but chose not to elaborate. Instead, he turned back to Brittney. "As for your original interrogation..."

Brittney immediately straightened, ready to resume taking notes. "I won't beat around the bush, I do have... noncommittal lovers."

Brittney's eyes widened, he was surprising honesty.

"You mean friends with benefits?"

Dimitri nodded without the slightest embarrassment.

"They take care of my needs, and everyone involved understands exactly what it is. After my first relationship, I realized I wasn't ready to trust someone with my heart again. At least, not yet."

"But," Dimitri continued, "if fate ever decides to smile on me and sends me a genuinely good woman, then I'd like to believe I'd still have the courage to fall in love again."

As he said it, his eyes drifted toward Alek. It wasn't obvious, yet Alek caught it, and heat immediately rushed into her cheeks.

She quickly looked away, pretending to study the bookshelf as if it had suddenly become the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

Dimitri cleared his throat. "Well, I'd better leave you ladies to settle in. It'll be dark soon."

His easygoing smile returned.

"Unpack your things, get some rest, and make yourselves comfortable. I'll have someone bring dinner up shortly."

He walked toward the entrance before stopping. "As for your classes, don't worry about them tonight. Tomorrow we'll sort everything out."

"Thank you," Aria said sincerely.

The others echoed her gratitude.

Dimitri gave them a small salute before stepping out of the suite, quietly closing the door behind him.

Silence lingered for several seconds.

Then Brittney said, "I've decided."

Trisha sighed.

"Here we go."

"I like him."

Alek nearly choked. "Brittney!"

"What?" Brittney grinned innocently. "Not for me."

Her eyes slowly shifted toward Alek. "For somebody else."

Alek's face turned even redder. "Get lost."

"Someone's in love with the beta." She teased her.

Trisha laughed.

"I'm out of here," Alek couldn't wait to be rid of them. Brittney especially.

"Good idea," Aria said, "We should unpack before our resident matchmaker starts planning a wedding."

"Whatever," Brittney said, making a face. "You guys can't run from love forever."

Just like that, the girls drifted toward their rooms, still exchanging playful remarks as they disappeared one after another.

Aria closed her bedroom door behind her and finally had a chance to take everything in properly.

The room was spacious without feeling overwhelming. A queen-sized bed occupied the center, dressed in crisp white linens with a deep forest-green throw folded neatly across the foot.

Matching walnut bedside tables stood on either side, each holding a warm reading lamp. Opposite the bed sat a study desk positioned beneath a broad window, while a tall wardrobe occupied one wall beside a bookshelf with empty shelves waiting to be filled.

The room carried the same blue-green walls as the suite outside, making it feel calm and unexpectedly peaceful. For the first time since arriving at Bestiaris, Aria felt safe.

She walked toward the window, letting the cool evening breeze brush against her face. Then her phone suddenly vibrated inside her pocket.

She pulled it out eagerly, thinking it was Davina. Her face fell just as quickly. It was an email from Doctor Eniola.

Aria's heartbeat quickened as she unlocked the screen and opened it.

Report everything that's happened so far.

Chapter 76: House Aetheris

"The loudest rebellion is rarely against an enemy. It's against one's own."

~ Rebel Beast

House Aetheris had rarely felt this crowded. The common room had been designed to accommodate the largest creatures in the academy, yet with nearly every dragon and avian beast gathered under one roof, the spacious hall suddenly felt far too small.

Most of the dragons remained in their human forms, knowing their shifted forms would take up too much space. The smaller avian beasts, however, saw no such need.

Parrots perched comfortably along the backs of sofas, ravens occupied the railings overlooking the lower floor, while sparrows, finches, hawks, and owls rested on chandeliers, shelves, and window frames. Their constant chirping blended into a restless murmur that filled the hall.

Tamara had been the one to call the meeting. After her conversation with Rhydian, it dawned on her that her position might not be as secure as she had once believed. Things had changed, and the rules were no longer so simple. She had to get the House in order before Rhydian decided to put her in order instead.

That was why she stood at the front of the room, patiently waiting until enough eyes settled on her.

"I know the arrival of the human girls has unsettled many of you," she had barely begun when her words ignited the room.

"Unsettled?" one dragon scoffed. "It's disgusting!"

"How can we continue pretending everything is normal while humans are still walking around this academy?"

Several dragons voiced their agreement.

"They should've been sent home the moment they arrived!"

"And after what happened this morning?" another dragon snapped. "His Highness publicly humiliated Thamas over a human."

His fists clenched.

"That was an insult to every dragon in House Aetheris."

The accusation immediately found support. Voices rose from every corner of the room until they overlapped into a single wall of outrage.

Even the smaller birds began chirping loudly, echoing the dragons' sentiments with surprising enthusiasm.

Another dragon said, "Prince Rhydian has forgotten who he's supposed to protect."

"Yes!"

"He's lost his way!"

"The interests of House Aetheris should come first!"

Tamara allowed them to vent for a few moments before attempting to regain control.

"Everyone—"

She got no further because a broad-shouldered dragon stepped forward from the crowd.

Quest was his name, and he looked directly at Tamara, making no attempt to hide the contempt in his eyes.

"That," he said coldly, "is what you should be dealing with."

The room gradually quieted.

"Instead of nodding your head every time the prince speaks, perhaps you should remind him where his loyalties belong."

A few dragons exchanged uneasy glances while the others openly nodded. The House was divided now.

Quest wasn't finished.

"If someone competent held this position instead of..." His eyes swept over Tamara. "...a woman, perhaps Prince Rhydian would've listened to reason by now."

A handful of dragons agreed with him while the others were unsure which side to choose.

It wasn't exactly a secret that Quest had coveted Tamara's position for years.

Ever since Tamara had been appointed instead, he had challenged nearly every decision she made, convinced the role had been stolen from someone far more deserving.

Namely, himself.

Anger flashed through Tamara's eyes. Questioning her decisions was one thing, but humiliating her before the entire House was another.

She took a deliberate step toward him.

"Perhaps you'd like to repeat that—"

The grand doors swung open, and every head turned.

"Since you're looking for a Quest..." Rhydian's amused voice echoed through the hall before he even stepped inside.

"I'm here now."

The Dragon Prince walked into the common room wearing his usual carefree smile.

"Why don't you now try making me listen to reason, Quest?" Rhydian deliberately emphasized the dragon's name, turning it into the punchline of his own joke.

Quest's face paled immediately. He hadn't known the prince would be attending.

Yet Rhydian's presence surprisingly wasn't what stunned the room into silence. Rather, it was the four young women walking in behind him.

The dragons froze, and the birds stopped chirping. For one long heartbeat, nobody spoke. Then whispers spread through the room like wildfire.

"Aren't those the humans?"

"What are they doing here?"

"Why did His Highness bring them into House Aetheris?"

A parrot perched overhead tilted his head before flying down and shifting into his human form.

He leaned toward another parrot and whispered,

"I heard from one of the hawks stationed near House Therion that both Therion and Ophidian have already taken humans into their Houses."

The other parrot nodded.

"In that case, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Our prince has never liked being left out of anything."

Rhydian started toward Quest. No one told the others to move, but they did, stepping aside until a clear path stretched between the prince and the dragon.

The hall fell eerily quiet. Quest stood rooted to the spot as Rhydian closed the distance between them.

The Dragon Prince stopped directly in front of him.

"Well?" Rhydian said, his tone almost conversational. "I'm listening. Convince me. Change my mind."

Quest swallowed.

Only hours earlier, Rhydian had broken Thamas' shoulder before the entire House. The memory remained painfully fresh. Becoming the prince's next example was the last thing he wanted.

Then Rhydian rested a hand on his shoulder, and his soul nearly left his body.

To everyone else, it looked almost friendly until his fingers tightened. Not enough to hurt, but enough to remind Quest that if Rhydian wished to crush his bones, he could.

"Well?" Rhydian prompted again.

"Talk."

Quest cleared his throat.

"I... I only meant..." His confidence from moments ago had vanished. "We're dragons, apex creatures. We shouldn't be lowering ourselves to the same level as humans."

He forced himself to continue despite his dry throat.

"They're meant to serve us... not stand beside us."

His eyes briefly swept toward the four girls.

"And our families won't approve either. They'll see this as degrading ourselves. Associating with humans diminishes what it means to be a dragon."

When he finished, he found himself breathing harder than before.

Rhydian regarded him for a long moment.

"Is that all?"

Quest nodded cautiously.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Rhydian sighed.

"And you wonder why you aren't my second-in-command when you're this stupid."

Gasps rippled through the hall.

Several of the smaller birds instinctively covered their beaks to hide the laughter threatening to escape. The last thing any of them wanted was for Quest to discover they'd found the exchange amusing.

Rhydian's grip tightened ever so slightly, and Quest stiffened until his heartbeat thundered in his ears.

The smile disappeared from Rhydian's face, his voice now cold enough to silence the entire room.

"I encourage disagreement."

His fingers tightened another fraction.

"I encourage ambition."

Another pause.

"I even encourage competition within my House."

His blue eyes settled squarely on Quest's.

"But if you ever undermine Tamara's authority again..."

The words came out almost as a whisper.

"I'll make Thamas' punishment look like a childhood memory."

No one doubted him. Not even Quest.

Rhydian released his shoulder as abruptly as he'd seized it. Quest inhaled sharply, only then realizing he'd forgotten to breathe.

From where she stood, Tamara watched Rhydian in silence, affection softening her eyes before she could stop it.

Perhaps Thamas would call her foolish again for loving someone who would probably never return those feelings. Yet moments like these made it impossible not to.

Rhydian hadn't merely defended her position, he had defended her dignity. Most dragons in positions of power wouldn't care about a dragoness' honor unless their own pride was on the line.

Rhydian walked past Quest and took his place at the front of the hall. The amusement was gone from his face, and every member of House Aetheris instinctively straightened.

"Nothing blinds a dragon faster than believing the sky belongs to him alone. It doesn't."

His voice carried easily across the room.

"Humans command the skies now as well. They built machines that fly without wings. We breathe fire. They build bombs capable of reducing cities to ash."

His gaze swept across the gathering.

"So tell me, in what way are they truly beneath us?"

No one answered.

"Yes, their lives are fragile." He nodded. "But they compensate for that fragility with something we've consistently underestimated."

His expression hardened.

"Numbers. Every year, fewer dragons are born. Meanwhile, humans multiply without pause, spreading across the world like weeds."

Several dragons lowered their eyes, mourning that reality.

"We spent years trying to halt the assimilation, but Fate appears to have rejected that decision. While we cling to old prejudices, our enemies have adapted. They've begun building alliances with humans, and by the time we finish arguing over pride, they'll have finished preparing for war."

"Fortunately..." A confident smile slowly returned to Rhydian's face. "You have me."

A few dragons exchanged uncertain glances.

"I saw the board changing long before the rest of you realized we were playing a different game."

He turned toward the four young women standing quietly behind him.

"So allow me to introduce the newest members of House Aetheris."

He extended a welcoming hand toward them.

"Charlotte."

"Zainab."

"Indigo."

"Meredith."

"Welcome to House Aetheris."

Chapter 77: Living Amongst Dragons

"Every House has a language. Outsiders survive by learning it before speaking their own."

~ Rebel Beast

No dragon clapped or cheered their arrival. But of course, it didn't matter to Charlotte. She was finally inside the House of her dreams.

She was living with dragons. Actual dragons.

If someone had told her a few days ago that she'd be sharing the same roof as the creatures she'd spent years obsessing over, she would've laughed in their face. Yet here she was, following behind Tamara as the dragonness led the four of them deeper into House Aetheris.

"This is unbelievable," Zainab murmured, nearly tripping over her own feet as she craned her neck upward.

The ceilings stretched impossibly high above them, supported by enormous stone pillars carved with dragons soaring through clouds. The corridors were so wide they made the girls feel like dwarfs with every step they took.

Charlotte caught her staring and couldn't help smiling.

"I read about this," she said, unable to hide her excitement. "Dragons build with their true forms in mind. If they ever shift, they need enough room to move around comfortably without bringing the building down."

Zainab looked around again in amazement.

"Even then..." she muttered, "this place is every claustrophobic person's dream."

"I bet our rooms are incredible," Indigo said, practically bouncing as she walked.

"And hopefully," Meredith added, eyeing the open walkways lining the corridor, "they remembered humans can't fly."

She tilted her head toward one of the balconies.

"There aren't any railings."

Charlotte followed her gaze, and sure enough, the broad balconies extended outward with nothing separating them from the open air. For dragons, it made perfect sense. Railings would only get in the way whenever they landed or took flight.

For humans, one wrong step was all it would take to be sent to glory.

"What matters," Charlotte said, lowering her voice, "is that we're here."

A smug expression crept onto her face.

"And between us..." she leaned closer. "I think we got the better deal."

The girls understood what she meant. They had gotten dragons while Karen and her clique ended up with snakes.

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith struggled to keep straight faces. After seeing Prince Caelis in action, the thought of spending every day surrounded by serpents made all four of them shudder.

No doubt Karen was going to have a wonderful time there.

Charlotte couldn't wait. The moment she got permission, she was taking pictures of everything. The halls, the architecture, the dragons... everything!

Back home, no one would believe her otherwise. She'd be the envy of every girl she knew.

Her attention gradually shifted to Tamara.

The dragoness hadn't spoken a single word to any of them since they'd left the common room. She simply walked ahead with long, measured strides, never once slowing down despite the considerable distance they'd already covered.

Charlotte glanced around once more. Just how enormous was this place? How many acres of land had the dragons claimed to build something this massive?

Curiosity finally got the better of her, and she hurried until she was walking beside Tamara.

"Um... Tamara—"

The dragoness slowed just enough to turn her head, and the look she gave Charlotte could've cut glass.

Charlotte immediately swallowed.

"It's Miss Tamara to you."

She spat the words like poison.

Would you look at that? She's quite the delight, Charlotte sassed mentally.

She recovered almost instantly.

"Sorry, Miss Tamara," Charlotte said with an apologetic smile.

She wasn't foolish enough to miss the obvious. If Rhydian ruled House Aetheris, then Tamara ruled everything beneath him.

Making an enemy of the dragonness on her very first day sounded like an exceptionally terrible idea.

Tamara acknowledged neither the apology nor the effort behind it. She simply faced forward again and continued walking without breaking stride.

Charlotte had no choice but to jog after her.

"Why aren't we taking the stairs?" she asked, quickening her pace. "I'd love a room on one of the upper floors. Imagine the view of the academy from up there. I bet it's breathtaking." Her eyes practically sparkled at the thought.

Tamara didn't answer.

The only response Charlotte received was the faintest scoff, so subtle she never noticed it, too caught up in the excitement of finally living among dragons.

The nerve.

Tamara's fingers curled into fists before she slowly relaxed them again.

If not for Rhydian, what made this human believe she had the right to walk these halls? To breathe the same air as dragons?

Whatever fantasy Rhydian was trying to build, it wouldn't change the truth. Dragons stood at the top of the food chain. Humans did not.

She would play along for now because her prince had ordered it. Nothing more.

This foolish dream of his wouldn't last anyway. It was only a matter of time before it blew up in Rhydian's face, and when that happened, she wouldn't be held responsible for what followed. She had warned him.

When Tamara still refused to answer, Charlotte finally got the message.

She wasn't welcome.

Unfortunately for the dragonness, Charlotte had no intention of giving up so easily. She wasn't naïve.

They were prey living in the home of predators, and Prince Rhydian wouldn't always be there to protect them. If they wanted to survive House Aetheris, they needed someone else willing to tolerate their existence.

Winning Tamara over was not a choice but a necessity.

Finally, Tamara came to a stop.

"We're here."

The girls immediately hurried forward until they were standing behind her.

Before them stood an enormous wooden door carved from golden oak, its surface covered in intricate engravings of dragons soaring through clouds and mountains.

Charlotte's heart pounded.

If the door looked this magnificent, what did the room behind it look like?

Tamara reached into her pocket, produced a ring of keys, selected one without hesitation, and slid it into the lock.

Charlotte grabbed Meredith's hand so tightly the other girl winced.

"This is it," she whispered excitedly. "This is really it."

The lock clicked, and the heavy door creaked open.

Darkness greeted them.

Not just that, the room had been left untouched for so long that the moment the door moved, a thick cloud of dust billowed outward, swallowing the entrance.

All four girls immediately burst into coughing fits.

"Good grief!" Indigo coughed, waving both hands in front of her face. "Did we just walk into an abandoned tomb?"

Nobody answered.

Tamara simply stepped inside.

Unlike the humans, the darkness posed no obstacle. Her dragon eyes adjusted effortlessly as she crossed the room with ease. She reached the wall, found the switch, and pressed it.

Light flooded the room, making the girls squint against the sudden brightness before their vision gradually cleared.

Charlotte's excitement vanished. The color slowly drained from her face.

"What the hell?" she whispered, her eyes wide with shock.

She took one hesitant step forward.

"Isn't this...?"

Chapter 78: Even Dragons Have Weak Spots

"The strongest sisterhood is born from surviving the same nightmare."

~ Rebel Beast

"Isn't this...?"

"A storage room," Zainab finished for her, sounding every bit as heartbroken as Charlotte felt.

Technically, it wasn't.

The large windows, high ceiling, and generous floor space made it obvious the room had originally been intended as living quarters. Somewhere along the way, however, it had become nothing more than a dumping ground.

Furniture was stacked wherever there was space. Bed frames leaned against one wall beside rolled-up mattresses wrapped in yellowing sheets. Wooden crates were piled on top of one another, some overflowing with old books, brass lanterns, chipped vases, and framed paintings draped beneath dusty cloth.

Broken chairs, folded tables, rugs rolled into thick bundles, empty trunks, and shelves waiting to be assembled occupied nearly every corner. Dust blanketed everything so heavily it looked as though no one had stepped inside for years.

Tamara turned to face them.

"Dragons are hoarders by nature," she said matter-of-factly. "Everything you'll need to furnish your rooms is already here."

She gestured around them.

"Take whatever you want to keep. The rest can be moved to the storage room I'll show you afterward. Is that clear?"

Her tone remained perfectly calm.

Meredith stared at the mountain of furniture in disbelief.

"This is ridiculous!" She threw her hands toward the room. "It'll take hours just to clear enough space to walk, let alone clean everything."

"And who do you expect to clean it up?" Tamara retorted, no warmth in her voice.

"The dragons?"

Her lips curled with open disdain.

"Should we clean up after your mess?"

She took a slow step closer, her eyes sweeping over the four girls.

"Or have you already forgotten what you are? You're outcasts."

Meredith's mouth parted, then closed again. There was nothing she could say. The humiliation settled heavily in her chest, leaving her to endure it in silence.

Charlotte couldn't.

"This doesn't make any sense!" she burst out. "We're guests here!"

Her chest rose and fell with indignation.

"I want to speak to Rhydian—"

She never finished.

The instant the Dragon Prince's name left her lips, Charlotte blinked. When her eyes opened again, Tamara was standing directly in front of her, one hand clamped around her throat.

The next second, Charlotte's back slammed against the wall hard enough to rattle the framed pictures hanging nearby.

"Charlotte!"

Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith cried out together. Instinct took over, and they rushed forward.

"Don't."

Tamara's voice cracked through the room like a whip.

She didn't even look at them. The mere glow in her eyes was warning enough for the three girls to stop dead in their tracks as reality came crashing back.

They weren't confronting another human, but a dragoness. If Tamara chose to breathe fire, there wouldn't be enough left of them to identify.

Fear rooted them where they stood.

Charlotte was left alone.

Tamara tightened her grip just enough to force a strangled gasp from her.

"I think I need to set something straight," she said quietly, her dark eyes burning with contempt. "You've mistaken Prince Rhydian's kindness for an acknowledgment that you're important."

She leaned closer until only Charlotte could hear her next words.

"You're nothing but servants here, brought in to serve us. Don't ever make that mistake again. Otherwise, you'll discover just how easily humans burn. Do not test my patience. Ever."

Charlotte didn't need to be told twice. She nodded frantically, desperate for air.

The fear in her eyes pleased Tamara.

She released her grip, and Charlotte crumpled to the floor like a sack of potatoes. She immediately broke into a fit of coughs, clutching her aching throat as she struggled to draw a proper breath.

Tamara looked down at her with undisguised disdain. So fragile. To think creatures this pathetic dared compare themselves to dragons.

Just as Charlotte looked up, Tamara remembered something.

"Oh, and one more thing." The amber glow in her dark eyes flared brighter. She lowered herself into a crouch until they were eye level.

"Should I ever find you hovering around Rhydian..." Her voice softened into something far more dangerous.

"Or worse..."

She held Charlotte's gaze captive.

"Should you ever entertain the delusion of finding your way into Rhydian's bed..."

Charlotte's eyes widened. It felt as though Tamara had reached inside her head and exposed the one fantasy she'd never dared speak aloud.

"I promise I'll kill you myself."

There wasn't the slightest hint of exaggeration in her voice.

"It will be slow, and brutal."

For one reckless moment, Charlotte glared back in defiance only to lower her eyes.

Tamara's lips curved into a satisfied smirk.

Nothing more than a spineless little wretch.

She rose gracefully to her feet and brushed the dust from her sleeve. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the key and tossed it onto the floor in front of the remaining girls.

"You'll find the storage room six doors down the corridor," she said indifferently. "Move everything there once you've decided what you're keeping."

Without another word, she turned and walked away, leaving the door hanging open behind her.

It wasn't until the sound of her footsteps had completely faded that Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith finally found the courage to move.

"Charlotte..."

They hurried toward her, stopping only a short distance away, guilt and concern written plainly across their faces.

Without warning, Charlotte screamed. The sound echoed through the room, startling the girls backward.

She stormed toward the nearest wooden crate and shoved it with all her strength. It crashed onto its side, spilling books and brass ornaments across the dusty floor.

"Who does she think she is?" Charlotte shouted, her chest heaving.

Who was that bitch to tell her to stay away from Rhydian?

He was the dragon of her dreams.

From the moment she'd first read about dragons as a little girl, she'd imagined standing beside one.

No one was taking that dream away from her.

"No." Charlotte shook her head furiously as she paced the room like an agitated animal.

"We have to deal with her."

"Deal with who?" Indigo asked, alarm creeping into her voice. "You don't mean Miss Tamara, do you?"

"Charlotte," Meredith said carefully, "she's a dragon."

She hoped that simple reminder would be enough to extinguish whatever reckless thoughts were forming inside Charlotte's head.

It wasn't.

Charlotte stopped pacing. A dangerous ambition settled into her eyes as a slow smile spread across her face.

"Even dragons," she said, "have a weak spot beneath their thick scales."

Chapter 79: Humans At House Ophidian

"The most dangerous thing about humans isn't what they are. It's what they're willing to become."

~ Rebel Beast

"Ow!" Karen cried out as the healer pressed the damp cloth against the swelling on her cheek.

She jerked her head away with a glare.

"Would you go easy on it?" she snapped. "For fuck's sake, do you even know what you're doing?"

The spiny mouse beast looked at her without the slightest sympathy. A low hiss escaped the nurse before she dropped the bloodstained cloth onto the bedside table and turned on her heel.

Karen stared after her in disbelief.

"Excuse me?"

The nurse didn't even acknowledge her. She simply pulled back the curtain separating the treatment bay from the rest of the infirmary and disappeared.

No sooner had the nurse left than the curtain was pushed aside once again. This time, Venus stepped into the treatment bay, his eyes immediately falling on the abandoned cloth before shifting to Karen's bruised face.

He raised an eyebrow. "Did you piss off the nurse?"

Karen looked at him as though he'd insulted her.

"Piss her off?" she scoffed. "If I pissed her off, trust me, she'd know."

Venus regarded her for a long moment. Then he let out a long, weary sigh.

"Good for you."

Karen frowned.

He picked up the abandoned cloth from the bedside table and casually dropped it onto her lap.

"Now you can clean your face yourself."

He turned and walked away.

Karen stared after him, completely stunned.

"What do you mean by that?"

She scrambled off the examination bed.

"Come back here!"

Venus didn't stop.

"You people are supposed to do something about this!" Karen shouted, pointing furiously at her face. "Look what that bitch did to me!"

Her nose throbbed, while her cheeks were swollen from Charlotte's relentless slaps. Angry scratches crisscrossed her skin where Charlotte's fingernails had torn through it, and a dark bruise had already begun forming along her jaw.

Karen Donovan looked nothing like herself.

Venus continued walking without so much as glancing over his shoulder. Frankly, he couldn't care less.

Caelis had dumped Karen on him before returning to House Ophidian to inform the serpents about their new residents, as though Venus couldn't have handled that simple task himself.

Venus clicked his tongue.

Then again, it was obvious the prince simply wanted to escape Karen's company as quickly as possible.

He couldn't blame him. After less than an hour with Karen Donovan, both he and Caelis had independently arrived at the exact same conclusion.

She was a bitch. A terrible one.

He really should've known better. Njord Cobryn had never once given them an assignment that didn't come with a headache attached to it.

Venus returned to the private ward where Liv had been admitted. The girl lay asleep on the hospital bed, one eye covered with a protective dressing while an intravenous drip fed steadily into her arm.

Olivia sat beside her, gently holding Liv's hand, while Fatima occupied the chair on the opposite side, both girls looking exhausted after the day's events.

The moment they noticed Venus entering, they immediately stiffened.

Venus noticed.

"You don't need to be afraid of me," he said calmly.

Neither girl looked convinced.

Even though Venus hadn't been the one to spit venom into Liv's eye, he was still a serpent. As far as they were concerned, he possessed the same terrifying ability as Prince Caelis.

When neither of them relaxed, Venus gave up trying to reassure them. Fear was only natural. Humans had always feared predators.

Perhaps that fear would lessen if they survived long enough to call House Ophidian home.

What he couldn't understand was why they remained so fiercely loyal to Karen Donovan.

She was the one who had dragged them into this mess. Yet despite everything, they followed her like loyal sheep.

Humans truly were peculiar creatures.

Fortunately, the arrival of the physician interrupted his thoughts. The door opened, revealing a tall, slender man whose snow-white hair contrasted sharply with his surprisingly youthful face. Wire-framed spectacles rested neatly on the bridge of his nose, lending him an air of quiet intelligence.

"Ah, you're here," the doctor said, acknowledging Venus with a polite nod before approaching the bed.

"How is she?" Venus asked.

The doctor smiled reassuringly.

"She was fortunate." He adjusted the chart hanging from the foot of the bed before continuing.

"The venom reached her eye, but she was brought in quickly enough that we were able to flush it out before it caused any permanent damage."

Olivia and Fatima visibly relaxed.

"We also administered an antivenom specifically formulated for basilisk venom," the doctor continued. "The burning sensation has subsided considerably, and there'll be no lasting damage to her vision."

He leaned over Liv, carefully lifting her eyelid before shining a small examination light into her eye. The pupil contracted immediately.

"Good."

He repeated the examination on the other eye before asking Liv to follow the beam of light, despite knowing she was half asleep from the medication. Her eyes responded exactly as expected.

The doctor glanced toward the monitor beside the bed.

"Heart rate is normal. Blood pressure is stable. Oxygen saturation is excellent."

Satisfied, he stepped back.

"She'll be sore for another day or two, and bright lights may bother her temporarily, but she'll recover completely."

Olivia let out a shaky breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"So... she'll be alright?" Fatima asked in a low voice.

"She will."

The doctor's reassuring smile returned.

"I'd like to keep her here overnight for observation, just to be safe. Assuming nothing changes, she'll be discharged tomorrow morning."

Venus gave a single nod.

"Very well."

He turned toward the two girls.

"I'll return for her tomorrow."

Then, without the slightest hesitation, he added,

"You two. Come."

Olivia and Fatima looked at him blankly.

"It's time to leave."

"What?"

The word escaped both of them at the same time.

They exchanged frightened looks before slowly turning back to Venus, their expressions mirroring the same dreadful realization.

They had to leave for House Ophidian.

Meanwhile, at the serpent's residence...

Every member of House Ophidian had gathered in the common room. The meetings were becoming a daily occurrence.

Caelis stood at the front, his silver gaze sweeping across the sea of serpents before him.

"I apologize for summoning all of you again so soon," he began.

The response came almost immediately.

"You never need apologize, Your Highness."

"The prince calls, we answer."

"It is our honor."

Several serpents bowed their heads while others thumped a fist lightly against their chests in salute. Not a single complaint reached his ears.

For once, Caelis found himself satisfied. If there was one quality House Ophidian possessed in abundance, it was loyalty.

Serpents were raised from the moment they hatched to understand that the crown came before the individual. Obedience wasn't viewed as weakness but as the foundation upon which their House had survived for centuries.

It was something dragons would never understand.

Dragons spent their entire lives being reminded they were superior. Every hatchling was taught it was destined to soar above every other creature. When pride became the first lesson a child learned, kneeling before another dragon became far more difficult.

Perhaps that was why House Aetheris produced so many challengers, while House Ophidian produced servants of the throne.

Caelis drew a slow breath.

"There is something you all need to know."

The room quieted immediately.

"Four human girls will be residing in House Ophidian."

The silence lasted only a heartbeat before the common room erupted.

"Humans?" a viper hissed. "In our House? Impossible!"

A black mamba stepped forward, open disgust written across his face.

"Humans and serpents cannot coexist." His slit pupils narrowed. "From the beginning of time, we've struck at their heels while they've sought to crush our heads."

A chorus of hisses spread throughout the room.

"We don't trust them!"

"This is madness."

The protests overlapped until they became impossible to distinguish from one another.

Caelis waited, and only when every complaint had been voiced did he speak again.

"It is the Cobra King's order."

The effect was immediate. The hall fell silent, several serpents exchanging uncertain glances.

"The Cobra King ordered this?" someone asked uncertainly.

Technically, he hadn't. But if his father intended to burden him with Karen Donovan, then the least he could do was carry the blame for the three extra girls.

Caelis felt no guilt whatsoever.

"That can't be," Nadia said, disbelief clear on her face. "His Majesty Njord would never agree to humans living among us."

Caelis met her gaze without flinching.

"Then you're welcome to question the king yourself."

Nadia's lips parted, but nothing came out.

Neither she nor anyone else seemed eager to challenge the Cobra King directly.

Caelis knew they wouldn't. At most, they'd send word to their families seeking confirmation. That problem belonged to his father now.

He could deal with it.

Seeing the resistance beginning to fade, Caelis continued.

"The girls will live under House Ophidian."

His tone left no room for debate.

"That means they fall under our protection

His silver eyes swept slowly across every serpent present, taking in their reactions.

"No one outside this House is to lay a hand on them." He paused deliberately, a faint smile touching his lips.

"As for the other humans... they remain fair game."

That earned several approving hisses.

"Am I understood?"

There was hesitation, but one serpent lowered his head.

"Yes, my prince."

Another followed.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Soon the answer spread throughout the hall until every member of House Ophidian had spoken with one voice.

"Yes, my prince."

Chapter 80: Sheeps To The Slaughter

"The oldest law of nature is simple: something always eats something else."

~ Rebel Beast

The ride to House Ophidian would've been painfully awkward had Karen not filled every passing minute with the sound of her own voice.

She'd refused to let both girls sit in the back with her, complaining there wasn't enough room and that she wasn't about to suffocate because they insisted on squeezing into her space. Olivia had reluctantly remained beside her, leaving Fatima to occupy the front passenger seat.

The arrangement did little to ease Fatima's nerves. If anything, it made them worse. She sat stiffly with both hands clenched in her lap, scarcely daring to breathe too loudly. Every now and then, her eyes drifted toward Venus before darting away again.

Meanwhile, Karen remained blissfully unconcerned.

"I expect to have a room all to myself," she declared as if she were issuing instructions to her hired staff. "You can put the girls wherever you want, but they'll need to stay close enough that I won't have to waste time looking for them whenever I need something."

She adjusted the angle of her head carefully, mindful of her bruised face.

"I refuse to walk halfway across the House just to have someone run an errand."

Olivia's fingers tightened around the hem of her pants. She met Fatima's eyes through the rearview mirror, and neither of them needed to say a word.

They finally understood.

Karen hadn't brought them along because she valued their friendship. She had brought them because she wanted servants.

Strangely enough, the discovery brought more relief than disappointment.

If Karen got her wish and received a room of her own, they wouldn't have to endure her constant complaints or spend every waking moment walking on eggshells around her.

Neither girl responded. The truth had finally sunk in. Following Karen Donovan had been the worst decision they'd made since arriving at Bestiaris.

Unfortunately, regret changed nothing.

"Are you even listening to me?" Karen demanded after several minutes of being ignored.

Venus finally looked at her through the rearview mirror.

"One more word," he said pleasantly, "and I'll drive this car straight into the nearest tree. The unfortunate part for you is that you're human while I'm a beast. I'll probably climb out with a few bruises."

His hazel eyes met hers in the mirror.

"You, however..." He gave a careless shrug.

"Let's see if your father's money can buy your life."

Karen stared at him in disbelief.

"You wouldn't dare!"

Before the final word had fully left her mouth, Venus slammed his foot onto the accelerator, and the vehicle surged forward so violently that all three girls cried out.

Then, just as suddenly, he hit the brakes. Karen, who hadn't bothered fastening her seatbelt, shot forward. Her face struck the back of the front passenger seat with a sickening thud.

"Ow!" She clutched her nose as fresh pain exploded across her face. When she pulled her hand away, bright red blood stained her fingers.

"My nose!"

She tilted her head back in panic.

"Why is everybody doing this to me?"

Venus acted as though she hadn't spoken. The vehicle rolled to a smooth stop before the towering entrance of House Ophidian.

He switched off the engine, climbed out, and shut the door behind him.

Apparently, Caelis had already sent word ahead because three serpent girls were waiting outside. Standing at their center was Nadia.

She stepped forward the moment she saw him.

"Nadia," Venus greeted.

Her honey-colored eyes drifted toward the vehicle.

"You left the humans behind?"

Venus nodded toward the car.

"They're your responsibility now."

He paused before adding dryly,

"A word of advice. The blonde one is venomous."

Almost on cue, Karen stumbled out of the car. She was still clutching her bleeding nose, her head tilted backward as she complained loudly while Olivia and Fatima hurried around the vehicle to help steady her.

Nadia's eyes settled on Karen. Rather than concern, they gleamed with unmistakable delight.

"How fortunate," she murmured.

Her forked tongue slipped briefly between her lips before disappearing again.

"Venom happens to be our specialty."

Venus had nothing to say. His task ended the moment he'd delivered them. If Nadia killed them, then good riddance.

"Come," Nadia said to the two serpent girls standing behind her in a thick serpentine accent. "Let's welcome our guests."

The pair smiled knowingly. There wasn't a trace of warmth in either expression.

Without another word, the three serpent girls walked toward the newcomers in perfect step, moving with the effortless grace of predators who had already decided how the evening was going to end.

Fatima was the first to notice them.

"They're coming," she whispered, her voice tightening with dread.

"Who's coming?" Karen asked, unable to lower her head because of her injured nose. She had a blood-soaked handkerchief pressed firmly against it.

Olivia turned, and the moment her eyes landed on the approaching girls, every muscle in her body went rigid. An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

She didn't like this place. She wanted to leave.

The three serpent girls advanced without haste, their movements almost hypnotic. There was no urgency in their steps, only confidence.

Like all serpents, they could taste the fear saturating the air. It clung to the two human girls like perfume. Their racing hearts, the subtle rise in body temperature, and the scent of cold sweat gathering beneath their skin escaped none of the serpent shifters' heightened senses.

Delicious.

For the briefest moment, Nadia's imagination betrayed her. She pictured herself in her true form, her body coiling around one of the trembling girls, tightening little by little until the frantic heartbeat beneath her scales finally stopped. Then came the slow, patient meal that every serpent instinctively understood.

Warm, fresh, and satisfying.

The image lingered just long enough for her features to begin changing. Without realizing it, fine dark bronze scales spread across the sides of Nadia's neck, while her pupils narrowed into thin vertical slits. When her forked tongue flicked briefly between her lips, the change became impossible to miss.

Fatima's breath caught, and Olivia instinctively took half a step backward. For a terrifying second, both girls were convinced they had just watched the serpent before them become something else entirely.

Karen, however, noticed none of it. With her head still tilted back to stop the bleeding, she merely frowned in annoyance.

Why was this girl staring at her like that? It wasn't as though she could actually do anything to her. Her father would never allow it.

Fortunately, Nadia regained control before her instincts carried her any further. She inhaled slowly, and the scales receded beneath her skin. Her pupils rounded once more, and the serpent's tongue disappeared from sight.

By the time she spoke, a courteous smile rested on her face, though it never quite reached her eyes.

"Welcome to House Ophidian, humans," she said, her thick accent wrapping around each word with unsettling elegance.

Karen finally looked at Nadia, taking her in properly.

The serpent girl was quite tall, her dark wavy hair falling over her shoulders while a pair of striking amber eyes regarded her with quiet amusement. There was something unnervingly composed about her.

Unfortunately for Nadia, Karen Donovan didn't care. Moreover, Prince Caelis must have already made it clear that no one was to lay a hand on her.

"My name is Karen Donovan," she corrected haughtily. "Not some 'human.' Show a little respect."

One of Nadia's brows arched ever so slightly.

So this was the venomous one Venus had warned her about.

Oddly enough, she wasn't offended. If there was one thing serpents excelled at besides striking, it was patience.

"My apologies," Nadia replied with effortless politeness. "I wasn't aware of your name."

She gestured first to the blonde girl standing on her left.

"This is Nagin."

Nagin offered a pleasant little wave.

"Hello."

Nadia then indicated the curly-haired redhead on her right.

"And this is Linda."

Linda smiled, though there was something unsettling about it.

"I can't wait for us to have fun together."

The words were innocent enough, but Fatima felt a chill creep down her spine.

Nadia's attention shifted back to the humans.

"And the rest of you?"

Only then did Fatima and Olivia realize the serpent girls were waiting for their introductions.

Fatima swallowed before finding her voice.

"Fatima Brown."

A satisfied smile touched Nadia's lips before she turned to the last girl.

"Olivia Martinez," Olivia answered, doing her best to sound steadier than she felt.

"Wonderful," Nadia said warmly, every bit the gracious hostess. She stepped aside and extended a hand toward the entrance.

"Come with us. Your quarters have already been prepared."

Her smile remained flawlessly courteous.

"You've had a long day. I'm certain you'd appreciate some rest."

"Finally," Karen said with a sigh of satisfaction as she tossed the bloodstained handkerchief aside. "Someone around here understands what I need."

Without waiting for anyone else, she started toward the entrance as though she owned the place.

Fatima and Olivia remained where they were. Neither of them moved.

"And you two?" Nagin asked gently.

The girls exchanged a hesitant glance.

Neither wanted to go. Neither had much of a choice.

Drawing silent courage from one another, they stepped forward together and followed Karen into House Ophidian.

Almost instinctively, both looked back over their shoulders, watching the three serpent girls fall in behind them. Something about the formation made Fatima's stomach tighten.

She couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't guests walking into a home. They were sheep being quietly herded toward the slaughter.

None of the human girls noticed the brief glance Nadia, Nagin, and Linda exchanged before the three serpent girls continued after them.

Chapter 81: Earn Her Place

"The gods gave humans fragile bodies and dangerous imaginations."

~ Rebel Beast

The moment they stepped inside House Ophidian, the first thing the girls noticed were the stares.

Serpents lingered in the corridors and lounged against pillars, their slitted eyes following them wherever they went. Some watched with open curiosity, others with barely concealed disdain. This was the first time many of them would be living this close to humans, and the idea clearly didn't sit well with them.

The intensity made Olivia and Fatima's skin crawl. Honestly, they would've preferred insults to being glared at like that. Karen, however, seemed to have been cut from a different cloth because her reaction was entirely different.

She ignored every stare as though it didn't exist and continued marching forward as if she owned the place. That confidence lasted until she suddenly came to an awkward stop after realizing she had absolutely no idea where she was going and had to wait for everyone else to catch up.

"What are you two lingering behind for?" she snapped at Olivia and Fatima the moment they drew closer. "Unlike you, I actually need to shower, eat, and sleep this disastrous day off."

Olivia exchanged a glance with Fatima. Neither of them pointed out that Karen had been the one who'd stormed ahead without waiting for the people leading them.

Besides, if she wanted to yell at someone for slowing her down, it should've been the serpent girls. Naturally, Karen chose the easiest targets instead.

Nadia noticed the exchange and deliberately made no effort to increase her pace. She, Nagin, and Linda continued strolling forward with unhurried grace until they reached the humans.

"What are you waiting for?" Nadia asked nonchalantly. "Come."

Karen rolled her eyes and resumed walking. This time, she knew to let Nadia lead the way.

House Ophidian possessed a strange stillness. The corridors curved gently instead of running in straight lines, their smoky olive walls broken only by sconces casting pools of warm amber light. Every archway flowed into the next without the sharp corners, giving the impression the entire building had been designed to guide one's movement rather than interrupt it.

The farther they walked, the more students they encountered. Each time, the serpents slowed or stopped altogether. Then they simply watched until it felt less like people observing the newcomers and more like predators studying unfamiliar prey that had wandered into their territory.

Karen frowned.

"This place doesn't even have an elevator?"

"Elevators?" Nadia made a face. "We don't build boxes to carry us upward. We simply follow the path."

Linda added, "What Nadia is trying to say is that House Ophidian was never built with elevators in mind. While snakes like confined spaces, sudden vertical movement feels unnatural, so we opted for gradual ascents instead."

She gestured ahead where the corridor gently curved upward.

"The upper levels are connected by broad winding ramps. Whether walking or shifting, they're far more practical for our kind."

"Fortunately, you won't have to concern yourself with any of that," Nadia told her. "Your quarters are on the ground floor."

"You should've asked, though. I live in a high-rise building back in Nova City. I like viewing the world from my place at the top," Karen announced.

Olivia rolled her eyes inwardly. She hoped Karen choked on her arrogance one day.

Nadia ignored the comment entirely, and after another minute of walking, she finally stopped before an elegant wooden door.

"We're here."

Karen didn't wait for permission. Certain the room beyond had been prepared exclusively for her, she reached the door first and stepped inside.

She stopped.

The room was undeniably spacious, stretching far wider than the one she'd occupied in the human residence.

Good, she thought, only for her excitement to die just as quickly.

Instead of the private suite she'd demanded, four beds occupied the room, one positioned neatly in each corner.

"What the hell...?"

Her face fell. She slowly turned toward Nadia, outrage blazing across her features.

"What is the meaning of this nonsense?" she demanded. "I specifically asked for a private room!"

Olivia and Fatima stepped inside a moment later, but unlike Karen, they were too distracted by the room itself to answer.

The walls were painted a muted sage green, accented with shiny molding that traced intricate patterns beneath the ceiling.

Unlike the bright, welcoming atmosphere of their previous residence, the colors here were subdued, cool, and strangely soothing. Warm amber lamps glowed from recessed alcoves in the walls, filling the room with gentle light that softened every surface without ever becoming bright.

Each of the four beds was identical, generously sized, and dressed in crisp cream linens layered with deep green throws and matching pillows embroidered with patterns resembling overlapping scales.

Beside every bed stood an ebony nightstand, while a tall wardrobe occupied the space beyond, its silver handles shaped like serpents coiled around the doors.

Large windows dressed in heavy moss-green curtains overlooked the academy grounds, while a circular woven rug covered the center of the floor, its design depicting two serpents intertwined in an endless knot.

Large snake plants occupied the corners of the room, and narrow shelves carved directly into the walls displayed neatly arranged books alongside glass terrariums where moss and woodland plants flourished beneath carefully controlled humidity.

There were no unnecessary decorations or clutter. Everything had been arranged with purpose. The room was elegant, comfortable, and immaculately clean.

It was also, unmistakably, a shared room.

"There isn't a single room available for you," Nadia said without the slightest hint of apology. "No serpent is willing to surrender more than what has already been offered."

"Fucking bullshit!"

Karen closed the distance between them in a few quick strides until they were nearly face to face.

"I don't care how you do it," she snapped. "My father is paying your prince for my stay here, and I expect the most comfortable accommodation available."

She jabbed a finger toward Fatima and Olivia.

"So I couldn't care less whether those two stay with you or sleep in the hallway. I'm having this room all to myself."

For a moment, silence settled over the room.

Then Fatima let out a mirthless laugh.

"So that's really how you see us? You don't care what happens to us." Her voice shook, though whether from anger or disappointment, even she wasn't sure. "As long as you get what you want, we're expected to follow behind you like servants."

"Fatima," Olivia warned.

"No." Fatima shook her head. "Not this time. What's the worst she can do? Threaten me?" Her eyes never left Karen's. "Shut down my father's business?"

A bitter laugh escaped her.

"There's only so much even her father can do."

Karen's expression darkened.

"You've got a lot of nerve talking to me like that."

"And you've got a lot of nerve expecting us to sacrifice everything just because you're Karen Donovan."

"Ladies."

Nadia's calm voice slipped effortlessly between them before either girl could say another word.

"While I would genuinely enjoy watching the three of you settle your differences, there are a few House rules we should establish first."

"Rules?" Karen's head snapped toward her, the word catching her off guard.

Nobody had mentioned rules.

The confusion quickly gave way to irritation.

What exactly was going on here? Her father was paying for her stay. She was supposed to be served, not managed.

"There are rules every member of House Ophidian follows," Nadia began. "This House didn't become what it is by chance. Everything you see here exists because every serpent contributes something to it. We don't have servants waiting on us. No one is too important to work."

"Every resident of House Ophidian earns their place and sacrifices for the House. Of course, you'll be attending classes alongside everyone else. But outside your lectures, you'll be assigned duties around the residence."

Karen frowned.

"What kind of duties?"

"Cleaning," Nadia began listing. "The lawns. The corridors. Laundry whenever necessary. Whatever task the House requires."

Karen stared at her in disbelief, then laughed.

"You're joking."

No one laughed with her.

Karen looked from Nadia to Nagin, then to Linda. Not one of them smiled, and the laughter slowly died on her lips.

"You're serious."

"We are."

Karen shook her head.

"No. That's not happening."

Nadia remained silent.

"My father isn't paying your prince so I can become some glorified cleaner." Karen lifted her chin proudly. "If labor is the problem, I'll simply pay someone else to do it."

This time, Nagin spoke, her tone colder now.

"There is no buying your way through House Ophidian. Every Ophidian gives something of themselves."

She took a step forward.

"For you, it will be your comfort."

Karen scoffed.

"And if I refuse?"

Nadia looked toward Nagin, then toward Linda. Without exchanging a single word, the three serpent girls nodded almost imperceptibly.

The transformation happened so quickly the humans barely registered it. One moment the girls were standing there. The next, empty clothes collapsed onto the floor, and three enormous serpents occupied the space where they had been only a moment earlier.

A massive cobra rose from the floor, its hood spreading wide as molten amber eyes fixed upon Karen.

Beside it, an enormous python slowly coiled over itself, its thick body moving with terrifying strength.

On the opposite side, a broad-headed viper remained perfectly still, its unblinking gaze somehow the most unsettling of all.

The girls broke into screams.

Karen, Olivia, and Fatima scrambled backward in blind panic before climbing onto the nearest beds, their hearts hammering violently as they instinctively lifted their feet off the floor.

The three serpents watched them patiently.

If not amused. Then, just as suddenly, their bodies shifted once more.

Within seconds, Nadia, Nagin, and Linda stood in their human forms once again, completely naked and utterly unconcerned by it. This time, there was no trace of hospitality left on Nadia's face, only satisfaction.

"Well?" Her amber eyes held Karen's trembling gaze. "Am I understood now, Karen Donovan?"

For the first time since arriving at Bestiaris, Karen's pride deserted her. She nodded so quickly it almost hurt.

"Understood."

A small smile curved Nadia's lips.

"Good," she said. "I think the two of us will get along just fine."

Chapter 82: Tell Your Father

"The moon never argues with the tide. It simply pulls."

~ Rebel Beast

Maverick Nightshade wiped away the layer of steam clouding the vanity mirror and studied his reflection. The man staring back at him no longer resembled the one from earlier.

The madness had retreated from his eyes. His breathing was steady, his shoulders relaxed, and every trace of the turmoil that had threatened to consume him after Feral's move had been carefully buried beneath expert restraint.

At least, that was what anyone looking at him would think.

Today had tested him in ways he hadn't believed possible. Even now, whenever he closed his eyes, Aria's face surfaced uninvited. Worse still, every breath reminded him of her. Lavender and mint. Such an innocent scent, yet somehow it had become the most dangerous thing he'd ever encountered.

The realization settled heavily inside his chest. It had only been two days, and he was already obsessed with his mate. Not intrigued or merely attracted, but obsessed. That frightened him more than any enemy ever could.

If merely standing beside Aria had pushed him this close to losing control, then allowing Feral any freedom around her would be nothing short of catastrophic.

His wolf wouldn't simply chase her. He would claim, devour, and consume every part of her until there was nothing left for the rest of the world.

Maverick shut his eyes briefly.

No. That could never happen.

After ensuring Aria had safely settled into House Therion, he'd run for hours through the forest surrounding Bestiaris until every muscle in his body screamed in protest. Only then had Feral finally quieted. The wolf still lingered beneath the surface, restless and alert, but no longer clawing relentlessly at the walls of his mind.

Unfortunately, another thought crept into his mind before he could stop it. She was only downstairs, close enough that if anything happened, he could reach her in minutes.

The thought brought an unexpected sense of relief.

And fear.

He could reach her whenever he wanted.

Maverick stepped away from the mirror with a sharp jerk, as though putting distance between himself and his reflection might somehow drive the thought from his mind as well.

He drew a slow breath, roughly drying his damp hair with the towel before tossing it carelessly onto the rack, then stepped out of the bathroom and into the quiet of his quarters.

He hadn't even reached the living room before another familiar presence brushed against his senses.

Dimitri.

Maverick didn't need to see him to know he was there. Nor did he need telepathy to guess exactly what his uncle was doing.

Dimitri's mind had always been impossibly loud, a constant stream of thoughts that never seemed to pause for breath. After growing up together from infancy, Maverick had become so accustomed to that relentless mental noise that he could practically sense it before they were even in the same room.

If the average mind was a gentle murmur, Dimitri's was a marketplace at midday.

"You're quite a difficult man to keep track of," Dimitri remarked, sniffing the air the moment Maverick stepped into the room. "Where have you been?"

"I went for a run," Maverick said, walking over to the wardrobe. He pulled out a black polo shirt and a pair of shorts before beginning to dress.

Dimitri waited until he'd finished before speaking again.

"So."

Maverick looked at him.

"So... what?"

"Don't play innocent with me." Dimitri folded his arms. "You know exactly what I'm asking."

Maverick released a tired sigh, tilting his head back for a brief moment before answering.

"I'll apologize to Aria for what happened earlier. Then I'll stay away from her until I'm certain Feral won't lose control again."

"Maverick—"

"I don't want to hear it."

He turned away, searching the room for where he'd left his phone.

Dimitri ignored the interruption.

"Feral isn't going to hurt her. He knows she's his mate just as much as yours. Our wolves may be animals, but they're still driven to protect what's theirs."

Maverick finally looked back at him.

"No," he muttered. "You're right. He probably won't hurt her physically. But Feral is still ruled by instinct."

Maverick's jaw tightened.

"All he understands right now is possession. If he surfaces again, he won't stop to think whether Aria is ready or not. He'll simply take what he believes belongs to him."

The thought alone made something twist violently inside his chest.

"I refuse to let that happen."

Seeing how resolute he was, Dimitri changed tactics.

"Then tell your father."

Maverick didn't answer.

"At least tell Asher. Out of everyone, he's the one most capable of keeping this quiet. He's gone through the same difficult mating situation before. If anyone can help you navigate this, it's him."

Maverick stopped searching. For several seconds, the room remained completely silent. Then he slowly raised his head.

"No."

His voice was calm but left little room for argument.

"My father has never gone through this."

He met Dimitri's gaze.

"He didn't have his wolf violently forced into manifestation years before it was supposed to happen."

He added, "And I'm no longer a child. If I'm expected to lead the wolves one day, then I need to learn how to solve my own problems instead of running to my father every time something goes wrong. After all, Father Asher became Alpha while he was still young."

"Through my father's help," Dimitri cut in immediately. His patience was beginning to wear thin.

"Need I remind you that Ezra practically stood beside him every step of the way? And he still does."

Maverick regarded him without flinching.

"Then I'll do better."

There wasn't even the slightest arrogance in his voice, only absolute certainty.

"I'm Maverick Nightshade, after all."

He bent down, finally retrieving his phone from where it had become tangled in the bedsheets.

Dimitri shut his eyes briefly.

Goddess save him from this one.

The stubborn fool sounded exactly like Asher whenever someone offered him help. Apparently, hardheadedness ran in the bloodline.

Chapter 83: [Golden Ticket Bonus -] Stalker

"The night belongs to whoever isn't afraid to claim it."

~ Rebel Beast

"Where are you going now?" Dimitri asked as Maverick reached for his boots.

"Patrolling the academy."

Maverick slipped them on.

"We'll finish this conversation later."

"Or do you mean you're going to stalk your mate?" Dimitri asked with a knowing look.

Maverick slowed as he headed toward the door.

"For someone determined to avoid her," Dimitri continued, "you certainly seem intent on remaining within walking distance."

Maverick looked back over his shoulder.

"I'm making sure the academy remains secure. I wouldn't be stupid enough to think Rhydian and Caelis don't have a trick up their sleeves."

But the look on Dimitri's face made it abundantly clear he didn't believe a word Maverick had just said.

Maverick held his gaze for another second before opening the door. Whether Dimitri believed him or not no longer mattered.

At least, that was what he told himself.

Because regardless of the excuse he chose to hide behind, there was only one place his feet intended to take him.

Aria was downstairs, and until he convinced himself she was truly safe, sleep wasn't an option here.

Maverick closed the door behind him and stepped into the corridor outside his suite.

His quarters occupied the fifth floor of House Therion, reserved for alphas and beasts at the top of the House's hierarchy.

He walked toward the elevator without hurry, and moments later, the doors slid open on the second floor.

The corridors remained surprisingly lively despite the late hour. Groups of students wandered between rooms, some returning from runs and training while others chatted outside their doors before curfew finally drove them indoors.

No one paid Maverick much attention. The Alpha professor's presence at odd hours had long stopped surprising anyone. His footsteps slowed as he approached the suite assigned to Aria and the others.

Two members of House Therion's patrol stood outside, quietly conversing until they noticed him.

Both immediately straightened.

"Alpha Maverick."

He acknowledged them with a nod, his gaze briefly lingering on the door behind them.

Dimitri.

Of course he'd actually assigned guards.

The realization should have eased the lingering knot inside Maverick's chest. Instead, it only loosened it slightly.

"Everything good?" he asked.

"One attempted prank from a few rat shifters earlier," one of them answered, his brows arching when he saw the way Maverick's expression suddenly darkened.

He quickly added, "Beta Dimitri handled it personally. Nothing since."

"Good."

Maverick barely kept his composure. Without another word, he turned and walked away before he summoned every rat shifter involved and dealt them a punishment of his own.

He took the stairs this time, descending to the ground floor before stepping outside into the cool night air.

Bestiaris never truly slept. Patrol teams crossed the courtyards at regular intervals, exchanging greetings whenever they passed one another.

"Alpha."

"Alpha Maverick."

He returned each greeting with little more than a nod. Just as before, no one questioned why he was there. He had always patrolled the academy from time to time, especially during the first weeks of a new term.

Tonight appeared no different. At least to everyone else.

If only they knew.

Maverick slowly circled the perimeter surrounding House Therion, his sharp eyes sweeping across every rooftop, pathway, and shadow.

There were no dragons, no serpents, and nothing remotely suspicious. The grounds were exactly as they should be.

Maverick should have been comforted.

Instead, his thoughts drifted back upstairs.

To the second floor.

Aria.

He stopped walking.

The balcony connected directly to her room, and it wouldn't be difficult to scale it.

His hand unconsciously slipped into his pocket where the master key rested against his palm.

He had the key to every room in House Therion.

Maverick closed his fingers around the cool metal.

No. Absolutely not. That crossed every line.

Aria deserved privacy, trust, and respect.

Slowly, he released the key.

Then another thought quietly found its way into his mind.

He wasn't going there because he wanted to see her. He only wanted to make sure she was comfortable and confirm she truly felt safe. That was all.

The justification sounded reasonable enough that even Feral fell suspiciously silent.

Maverick looked around the courtyard.

Left.

Right.

Then above.

No one appeared to be watching.

The next moment, his knees bent, and he disappeared from the ground in a single powerful leap.

The first-floor balcony came into reach.

Maverick caught the edge of the balcony floor instead of the railing, his fingers locking around the concrete lip. With a single pull, he lifted himself onto the balcony before immediately setting his sights on the level above.

A second leap carried him high enough to seize the underside of the next balcony. His body moved with the ease of someone whose strength far exceeded that of an ordinary man, and moments later, he pulled himself onto the second-floor balcony in complete silence.

Finally.

Maverick glanced down into the courtyard below, making certain none of the patrol teams had witnessed his ascent. Not that he owed anyone an explanation. Still, if rumors started spreading that Professor Maverick Nightshade had been sneaking into a female student's quarters in the middle of the night, the damage would fall far more heavily on Aria than on him.

Satisfied that the courtyard remained empty, he turned his attention to the room beyond the glass doors. His hearing stretched through the suite, picking apart every sound within.

There was nothing. No footsteps, whispered conversation, or restless movement beneath the sheets. Only the slow, steady rhythm of four sleeping hearts.

His gaze settled on the balcony door. It was locked. A faint sense of satisfaction stirred within him. She'd remembered to secure it before going to bed.

Good girl.

The possessive approval that immediately rumbled through Feral made Maverick's jaw tighten.

No.

He forced the wolf deeper into the recesses of his mind. If he was doing this, it would be on his terms, not Feral's.

His hand slipped into his pocket and closed around the master key. Then he stopped.

Dimitri had been right.

He'd insisted he wasn't going to stalk Aria, yet somehow he'd ended up standing outside her balcony in the dead of night with a key in his hand.

Maverick stared at the lock for a long moment. He should leave, but unfortunately, he had already crossed too many lines to pretend this was still a good idea.

Slowly, he slid the key into the lock, and the mechanism turned with a soft click. Maverick went completely still.

What if Aria opened her eyes and found her professor standing inside her room in the middle of the night? How exactly was he supposed to explain that?

He waited. The rhythm of breathing inside the room never changed. Only then did Maverick carefully press down the handle and ease the balcony door open, wincing inwardly at the faint creak of the hinges.

When no one stirred, he slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind him.

Chapter 84: What if.....?

Chapter 84: What if.....?

"The road to truth often begins where comfort ends."

~ Rebel Beast

Something was wrong.

Aria felt it before she understood it. Her eyes flew open only to find a shadow looming over her bed.

A scream surged toward her throat, but before it could escape, a large hand covered her mouth while the weight of a body settled over hers, pinning her gently but completely against the mattress.

"Don't scream."

What did he mean, don't scream?

Someone had broken into her room in the middle of the night. She should've been terrified. She should've been fighting. Instead, Aria found herself nodding.

The response shocked her almost as much as the intruder himself. Somewhere beneath the confusion, an impossible sense of familiarity settled over her. Her racing heart gradually slowed instead of speeding up, and rather than panic, an inexplicable feeling of safety wrapped itself around her.

She had officially lost her mind.

"I need to turn on the bedside lamp," the husky voice murmured. "Nod if you're alright with that."

Once again, she nodded.

The hand slowly lifted from her mouth. A quiet click followed, and warm golden light spilled across the room.

Aria blinked several times, then her eyes widened.

"You..." she gasped.

It was Maverick Nightshade—no, Professor Maverick Nightshade.

Her mind immediately descended into chaos.

What on earth was he doing inside her bedroom?

A thousand questions collided inside her head, yet strangely, fear wasn't among them. If anything, the strange tension that always surrounded him seemed even stronger now that they were alone.

He was so close.

His head tilted slightly as he looked down at her, strands of his purple hair falling across his forehead. The amber light softened the hard lines of his face without diminishing the intensity in his eyes. Up close, he looked almost unreal, like one of the ancient gods she'd read about in storybooks who wandered into the beds of mortal women under the cover of night.

Aria suddenly became very aware of how difficult it was to breathe. Thankfully, common sense hadn't abandoned her completely.

"What are you doing here, Professor?" she whispered, her voice still unsteady.

Maverick blinked as though only just remembering where he was.

"I came to apologize."

Aria stared at him.

"In my bed?" One corner of her mouth lifted despite herself. "In the middle of the night?"

For the first time, Maverick seemed to register their position. He was leaning over her, one arm braced beside her head, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

Any reasonable person would've moved immediately.

He didn't.

"I also wanted to make sure you were alright."

The answer sounded strangely sincere, yet it was also the poorest excuse she'd ever heard.

Aria knew it.

Judging by the faint tightening of his jaw, Maverick probably knew it too. Still, neither of them acknowledged it.

Silence settled between them.

It should have been uncomfortable. Instead, it felt strangely peaceful. Aria became aware of the reassuring weight pressing lightly against her and hated herself for realizing she didn't mind it.

To be honest, she liked it.

The realization was so absurd that Aria immediately blamed it on waking up too suddenly. That had to be it.

Then another scent drifted toward her. Something uniquely... him.

"What perfume do you use, Professor?" she asked before she could stop herself.

Maverick looked genuinely puzzled.

"Perfume?"

Understanding slowly crossed his face, and a smile ghosted across his lips.

"I don't wear any."

His gaze lingered on her for another heartbeat.

"I was about to ask you the same question."

His voice dropped almost unconsciously.

"You smell..." He drew a slow breath. "...incredible, Aria."

The words settled over her like sunlight.

Without thinking, Maverick leaned closer. It was not enough to touch, but enough to breathe her in. The cool scent of lavender and mint surrounded him once more, and for a dangerous moment, the rest of the world simply disappeared.

A shiver raced down Aria's spine. Every instinct told her this had gone far beyond anything that should ever happen between a professor and his student.

She should tell him to leave. Instead, she remained exactly where she was, looking into his eyes as though the rest of the academy no longer existed.

Perhaps this was only a dream. That had to be it. Because if it wasn't, then neither of them had any idea how they were ever going to walk back from this.

Maverick seemed to regain a measure of control because he jerked away with a pained groan, as though he were fighting a battle within himself.

"I'm sorry for kissing you earlier." His voice was rough.

"Oh."

The single word left Aria before she could stop it. To her own surprise, disappointment settled inside her chest.

"I kissed you against your will. Well... not me exactly," Maverick tried to clarify, forcing each word out as if it cost him something. "But my wolf is still a part of me, and whatever he does is still my responsibility."

He took a deep breath.

"The point is, I'm truly sorry. It won't happen again."

Aria stared at him, trying to make sense of what she was feeling. Her head was reeling.

A strained breath escaped him.

"Goddess help me..."

He finally forced himself off the bed, taking his warmth with him. Only then did Aria realize how comforting his presence had felt.

Maverick turned away, dragging a hand through his hair in frustration.

"I shouldn't have come here."

He laughed once under his breath, though there wasn't an ounce of humor in it.

"This was a mistake."

How desperately he wished he could read her mind and know what she was thinking.

Surely, she thought he was some kind of pervert for breaking into her room and standing over her while she slept.

"I'll leave," Maverick said.

Just as he turned to go, a hand closed gently around his wrist. Maverick stopped and looked back.

Aria was sitting upright now, still holding onto him. For several long seconds, neither of them spoke.

"What if..." She found her voice, only to lose it again halfway through.

Maverick waited.

"What if I wasn't upset?"

His brows drew together.

"Aria."

"What if I wasn't angry that you kissed me?"

Chapter 85: The Pull Of The Matebond

Sometimes the first thing that crumbles isn't the enemy's wall. It's your own certainty."

~ Rebel Beast

The question lingered between them, and Maverick's expression became unreadable.

"You don't understand."

"Then help me understand!" Aria snapped, tension crackling between the two of them.

"You say you don't like people touching you, and then I touch you, yet you don't freeze me with your ice the way you do everyone else. Why are you confusing me? Do you like me or something?" Aria finally confronted him.

Maverick's chest was heaving now, his eyes clouded with emotions Aria couldn't quite grasp.

"Talk to me," she whispered, suddenly conscious of her friends sleeping in the next room. She had no idea how she would explain this if they woke up, and selfishly, she wanted this moment to remain theirs alone.

Maverick closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he said, "My wolf is dangerous."

"So?"

"It could hurt you, and I'm supposed to protect you."

"I don't need protection from you. I've been doing a pretty good job of protecting myself," Aria retorted.

His jaw tightened.

"You say that now, until you're standing face-to-face with Feral."

"Feral, is it?" Aria said. "That's actually a cute name."

Maverick let out a frustrated growl.

"I mean it."

Aria did not say anything else but she could feel him trying to pull away without actually moving. More than anything else, she could sense there was something he wasn't telling her.

Aria slowly pushed herself to her feet until she was standing in front of him.

"You apologized," she began, "but that doesn't mean I accepted it. An eye for an eye."

Maverick looked at her in confusion.

"A kiss for a kiss."

Before the sudden courage abandoned her completely, Aria leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss against his lips.

Maverick was so startled that he pulled back almost immediately.

"What?" Aria asked, her voice carrying both frustration and the painful awareness of what she'd done.

She just kissed her professor. She just kissed her professor!

Heat flooded her cheeks.

"I don't know." She laughed nervously. "I really don't know what's gotten into me."

But Maverick did.

It was the pull of the Matebond, and his heart pounded beneath the severity of that realization. His instinct urged him to close the distance between them and surrender to the fire she'd just ignited within him. Yet every lesson he'd lived by demanded that he step away.

"This isn't right." His voice sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than her. "I didn't come here to take advantage of you."

He needed her to understand that. That had never been his intention.

Although, at that moment, he wasn't entirely sure what his intention had been in coming there at all.

"I don't care," Aria whispered before capturing his lips again. This time, he didn't pull away.

Maverick leaned into the kiss, his body settling naturally against hers as though drawn there by an invisible force.

Aria was dressed in a sleeveless tank top and a pair of comfortable lounge bottoms, and she suddenly became acutely aware of how little distance separated them.

She moaned, rocking against him while Maverick answered with a guttural groan, pressing deeper into the kiss with lusty swipes of his tongue.

Thought became impossible. Aria slipped her arms around his neck, her fingers threading through his purple hair as she'd secretly wanted to ever since she'd first seen it.

Gods, it was impossibly soft.

She yanked lightly at his hair, and Maverick let out a low sound against her lips. Before she knew what was happening, her vision blurred, and Aria found herself back on the bed.

Maverick was completely in control now, his body caging her in so she had nowhere else to go. He kissed her with a hunger that seemed impossible to satisfy, as if every taste of her only made him want more. When his hand drifted lower, Aria instinctively arched toward him.

Fucking hell. He felt so good.

At that moment, none of it seemed to matter anymore. It didn't matter that he was her professor, or that he was a beast, or that they had no business doing any of this. Aria simply couldn't get enough of him.

Maverick seemed just as consumed by her. It felt like a battle neither of them wanted to win, his mouth moving fervently against hers, carrying the familiar dark, smoky scent of coffee that always seemed to cling to him.

Neither of them was in control anymore.

Aria gasped against his lips, acutely aware of his hard erection pressed so close to her. Every instinct warned her they were venturing into dangerous territory, yet she couldn't bring herself to stop.

Maybe Brittney had been right after all. Maybe she could allow herself to live a little. One night with her impossibly handsome professor and then life would simply go on.

What was the worst that could happen?

At that exact moment, Maverick's phone rang and he froze. The shrill vibration of his phone cut through the silence like a blade, shattering whatever had possessed them both.

He stared at the screen for a heartbeat before dragging an shaky breath into his lungs.

It was Dimitri.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

The fog clouding his thoughts lifted all at once, replaced by the horrifying awareness of where he was and what had almost happened.

He immediately put space between himself and Aria, running a trembling hand through his hair before pulling the device out. The phone continued vibrating in his hand, but he couldn't bring himself to answer it just yet.

Aria remained where she was, equally speechless. She didn't know whether to speak, or pretend the last few minutes had never happened.

Neither of them knew what to say.

Maverick looked at her, guilt written plainly across his face.

"We'll... we'll talk later," he said instead.

Without waiting for a response, Maverick turned, crossed the room, and disappeared through the balcony doors.

Aria remained seated on the bed long after he'd gone, listening to the sound of the door closing behind him. Only then did the full weight of everything crash over her.

She slowly lifted a hand to her swollen lips.

What in the world has she done?

Chapter 86: The Point Of A Quickie

"The hardest doors to open are rarely locked. They're simply the ones we're afraid to walk through."

~ Rebel Beast

Maverick didn't bother climbing down this time, he simply jumped.

The drop from the second-floor balcony lasted only a heartbeat before he landed lightly on the ground, his knees bending to absorb the impact. He straightened—

"Goddess!" Maverick nearly stumbled backward, one hand flying to his chest.

Dimitri stood directly in front of him, arms folded, wearing the unmistakable expression of someone who had just caught another red-handed.

"Why are you so startled, Maverick Nightshade?" he asked with infuriating calm.

Then, without a word, Dimitri slowly lifted his gaze toward the second-floor balcony before lowering it back to Maverick. He gave his nephew a long, deliberate look.

Maverick already knew that expression.

"It's not what you're thinking."

"Really?"

Dimitri's face scrunched in exaggerated disbelief. "You practically reek of her."

He muttered under his breath, "So much for courting the poor girl the human way."

Maverick rubbed a hand over his face.

"We didn't have sex, if that's what you're implying."

Dimitri merely raised an eyebrow.

"We didn't even have time to do anything," Maverick added, sounding far less convincing than he intended. Mainly because Dimitri's phone call had interrupted everything.

"You don't need much time, Maverick Nightshade. That's the entire point of a quickie." A wicked grin spread across his face. "You, of all people, should know that. Or have you forgotten how your sister Sage came into existence?"

And yes, how could he possibly forget? That story had become legendary within the family. His other father, Roman Draven, had never been allowed to live it down.

Shortly after Maverick's birth, Roman had returned to the South Pack following his coronation. Between reorganizing the South Pack and dealing with the unrest in the Novara Region, he'd barely seen his wife Violet for weeks.

By pure coincidence, both of his parents had official meetings with the president around the same time.

Though the more explicit details had been kept from him when he was younger, he eventually learned the truth from the mouths of his relatives.

Apparently, neither of his parents had intended to waste the rare opportunity, and they ended up doing it in one of the empty offices.

Just like that, one impulsive decision and one remarkably ill-timed quickie later, Sage Draven happened.

It was a good thing Sage hadn't been born until late January of the following year. Had she arrived a little earlier, Maverick would've spent the rest of his life explaining how he and his little sister had somehow been born in the same calendar year.

The thought alone was enough to give him a headache. Not that Sage needed any additional reasons to torment him. She already managed that perfectly well.

Still, it was probably safe to say his mother, Violet, had learned her lesson. Father Roman, on the other hand, had simply gained another story to add to his ever-growing collection.

"That's not going to happen. I'll be more careful from now on," Maverick grumbled, already moving on.

If Dimitri could smell Aria on him, then others could too. He couldn't risk drawing attention to her yet. He needed to get back to his room as soon as possible and definitely not because he wanted her scent clinging to his room instead of fading into the night air.

Feral growled inside his head.

If the wolf had his way, he'd probably seal the shirt inside an airtight bag just to preserve her scent for as long as possible.

Dimitri, however, wasn't finished.

"So, in the end, my prediction came true and you ended up stalking the girl in her room. Since there was no screaming, I assume the two of you were busy..." His gaze drifted to Maverick's swollen lips. "Kissing and whatever else hopelessly smitten mates do."

Maverick let out a low growl.

"You're beginning to annoy me, Uncle."

"Well," Dimitri said, completely undeterred, "I have to know whether sneaking into her room in the middle of the night instead of proudly announcing she's your mate is going to become a daily habit. That way, I can make the necessary arrangements."

"It won't be a daily thing," Maverick said. "Tonight... just happened."

"Hmmm." Dimitri hummed thoughtfully. "That's exactly what you said a few moments ago before you ended up stalking the poor girl in her room. Still, I'll take your word for it. Just don't get the girl pregnant before telling her the truth."

"Dimitri!"

He merely shrugged.

"I'm just saying, your mother has four husbands and doesn't seem remotely interested in being done having children. Explaining our family tree is already difficult enough. Let's not make it any more confusing than it already is."

Maverick finally stopped walking. He was officially done with Dimitri.

With all the resignation of a man accepting his fate, he asked, "Is this why you called me?"

"Of course not." Dimitri looked almost offended. "I'm not such a sadist that I'd interrupt my cousin just to leave him with blue balls."

The smug look on his face completely contradicted his words.

Maverick answered him with a blank stare.

Taking the hint, Dimitri cleared his throat, the amusement slowly fading from his expression.

"Principal Warrick wants to know how the human students will be identified now that you and the other princes have decided to split them among your Houses."

Maverick immediately understood what he meant.

Each House had always been recognized by its own colors and insignia.

Therion bore navy blue with the beast insignia.

Aetheris claimed crimson alongside the winged insignia.

Ophidian wore green with the serpent insignia.

According to the academy records, the human students from two years ago had worn brown with a human-shaped insignia.

Unfortunately, the humans were no longer housed together and had been divided among the three Houses.

There was absolutely no way Maverick intended to make his mate wear that dreadful shade of brown.

Then inspiration struck him.

"I think I have the perfect idea," he said, the corners of his mouth lifting. "One not even Caelis or Rhydian can refuse."

Chapter 87: THE ROOST REPORT

Penned by Lord Plumage & Lady Mimic

"We don't spread rumors. We simply give them wings."

Lord Plumage: Good morning, Bestiaris! Or should I say... good mourning? Depending on whose class schedule, reputation, or life expectancy you're talking about. Nonetheless, welcome back.

Lady Mimic: Oh, don't be dramatic, Plummy. We've only lost a handful of humans already.

Lord Plumage: My point, exactly.

Lady Mimic: Survival rates are dropping, readership is rising, and our sponsors are smiling. What a glorious semester.

So sharpen those claws, straighten those feathers, and hold onto your dignity while you still have it.

Let's begin!

THE CONCORDIA EFFECT

Two years ago, the Concordia Selection welcomed humans into Bestiaris Academy for the very first time. They wore brown uniforms, carried a human insignia, and endured the ridicule that followed them through every corridor. Most beasts barely noticed they existed. Those who did were probably responsible for ending their lives.

That arrangement seemed unacceptable to everyone.

Until this year.

For reasons known only to the heavens, three Beast Princes looked at a group of humans and collectively decided they were suddenly worth claiming.

Prince Maverick Nightshade made the first move. Prince Caelis Cobryn refused to be left behind. Then Prince Rhydian Drakhar joined moments later.

Three heirs. One decision. An entire academy left wondering what exactly had changed.

Did the humans suddenly become more valuable overnight? Or did three princes see something everyone else failed to notice?

Our recommendation is simple.

If royalty suddenly begins paying attention to something the rest of society discarded, watch carefully.

Royal instincts have a troubling habit of seeing tomorrow before everyone else.

Or perhaps one prince simply moved first, and the others merely refused to lose.

THERION'S CROWN PRINCE

House Therion has never been accused of lacking confidence. Neither has its Alpha. Yet Alpha Maverick Nightshade surprised even his own House when he reached for the humans before anyone else had the chance.

An act of compassion? A calculated political statement? An attempt to embarrass the other heirs? Or is there another explanation entirely?

Our sources have noticed something rather curious. The prince's interest appears... unusually consistent.

No names yet. Even we know how to exercise restraint.

Occasionally.

Still, wolves are creatures ruled by instinct, and instinct rarely wastes its time.

Neither do we.

THE COBRYN CONUNDRUM

The prince who never smiles has everyone else doing it for him. Prince Caelis Cobryn remains as impossible to read as ever.

His expression has never changed. His voice has never risen. Nor has his patience ever shortened.

Which somehow makes him even more unnerving.

House Ophidian welcomed its human students with flawless discipline, impeccable organization, and enough polite threats to remind everyone that serpents prefer courtesy right before they strike.

One particularly unfortunate student reportedly discovered this after questioning House rules.

Several witnesses insist three senior students transformed into their beast forms before calmly asking whether she wished to continue arguing.

She did not. Neither would we.

Rumor insists Prince Caelis has taken a personal interest in ensuring the humans adapt quickly.

Whether that concern stems from responsibility, strategy, or something considerably deeper remains impossible to determine.

Unfortunately, Prince Cobryn has yet to provide facial expressions for analysis.

DRAGONS DON'T WHISPER

Some leaders inspire through speeches. Others inspire through fear. Prince Rhydian appears determined to perfect both.

Just a day ago, Prince Rhydian publicly broke Thamas's shoulder and made it abundantly clear that anyone questioning Tamara's authority would answer directly to him.

Then he accepted human students into House Aetheris. Traditionalists nearly fainted while progressives celebrated. Everyone else wisely stayed out of his way.

Bestiaris truly has entered a strange era.

There is something oddly entertaining about watching our favorite dragon prince drag House Aetheris into the future, whether dragons like it or not.

Considering dragons rarely agree on anything except their own superiority...

We wish him luck.

He's going to need it.

THE HUMAN SURVIVAL GUIDE

Blink Twice If You Need Help.

Current academy statistics suggest humans are now experiencing one of three conditions.

Confusion. Terror. Or accidental celebrity status.

Congratulations. You've gone from invisible to everyone's favorite conversation piece overnight.

Unfortunately, popularity has a nasty habit of attracting predators.

Both literal and otherwise.

WHILE WE'RE AT IT, A MOMENT OF SILENCE

For the color brown.

After two unforgettable years, the infamous brown human uniforms have officially disappeared.

Fashion has prevailed.

Human students now wear the colors of the Houses that claimed them.

Blue for Therion. Crimson for Aetheris. Green for Ophidian.

At last, humanity has been liberated from what several students described as "an act of visual violence."

We have yet to identify whoever originally approved brown as an academy uniform.

When we do, questions will be asked.

FRIDAY NIGHT FEVER

Party... or Prey?

Now for the question perched on every beak in Bestiaris Academy. Friday night marks the first grand party of the semester.

For the first time since the Concordia Selection began, humans will attend after being claimed by the three ruling Houses rather than standing apart from them.

Some students believe inviting humans is proof that Bestiaris is finally changing.

Others believe bringing prey into a gathering full of apex predators sounds less like a celebration and more like the opening Chapter of a tragedy.

Then there is Prince Rhydian Drakhar, the dragon who never seems capable of doing anything quietly. Word around campus says he intends to make this party unforgettable.

Knowing Rhydian, he probably will.

The only uncertainty is whether everyone will remember it for the dancing...

Or the disaster.

As for Prince Maverick Nightshade, all eyes will be watching to see whether he remains beside House Therion's humans for the entire evening.

Prince Caelis Cobryn has been suspiciously silent throughout all of this. Anyone familiar with snakes knows silence is rarely the absence of movement.

It's merely the moment before the strike.

One thing is certain.

By the time the music stops, reputations will be shattered, alliances will have formed, someone will almost certainly start a fight, someone else will almost certainly lose one, and we will be there to report every delicious second of it.

Lady Mimic: Before we leave, a friendly reminder to our dear readers: walls have ears, windows have eyes, and parrots have exceptional memories.

Lord Plumage: Especially when someone is foolish enough to gossip within flying distance.

Together:

"Until next edition, keep your feathers clean, your claws sharper than your friends', and remember... history belongs to heroes. Headlines belong to us."

Chapter 88: Feral Bond

"His knuckles bled. His control bled faster."

~ Rebel Beast

"Did you miss me?"

That single voice had Aria's eyes fluttering open. For one disorienting moment, she could only stare.

What the hell?

Maverick Nightshade was above her, one knee resting on the mattress as he leaned over, caging her in without quite touching her. The lazy smile tugging at the corner of his mouth made it painfully obvious he was enjoying every second of her speechless reaction.

Aria's pulse lurched.

"What are you doing here?"

Her thoughts had scattered in every direction, leaving her struggling to remember how to breathe, let alone speak.

"You don't look quite happy to see me, Aria." Maverick lowered himself just enough for his face to hover close to hers, his gaze never leaving her own.

"I'm just saying..." she began, only for the words to falter.

Maverick's wolfish smile deepened, as though he knew exactly what effect he was having on her.

Aria swallowed, forcing herself to hold his gaze despite the frantic pounding of her heart.

"You left me hanging last night." A crease formed between her brows as she gathered what little resolve she had left. "I believe your exact words were that we'd talk about it later."

"Well," she added, a spark of defiance slipping into her voice, "it's later."

"And that," Maverick murmured, "is exactly why I'm here."

He lowered himself against her until the warmth of his broad body surrounded her. There was nothing hurried about the way he looked at her, as if he had come with only one purpose in mind.

"To make it up to you," he finished, never once breaking her gaze.

It wasn't the fact that Aria was pinned on her back, completely trapped, that had her breath stuttering, but the fact that he was only in his briefs. Maverick's hard, nearly naked body pressed down on hers while his strong thighs spread her wide open.

Just like his gorgeous face, the rest of him was just as flawless, her gaze wandering over the broad planes of his shoulders before tracing the taut sinew beneath his skin. Maverick wasn't bulky, but there was no mistaking the strength in his frame, every line of his body honed with purpose.

"Or..." Maverick continued, his eyes hooded as he stared down at her, "do you want to talk?"

He added, "I like the other type of talking better." He punctuated his words by deliberately rolling his hips against hers.

Aria moaned the moment his undeniable evidence of desire made contact with her center. Fire swept beneath her skin while something warm coiled low in the pit of her belly.

She couldn't hold it in anymore.

"No more talking," Aria said with a note of annoyance in her voice, pulling him down and fusing her lips with his.

Maverick smiled against her lips, looking every bit like the big bad wolf who had finally caught his prey. Aria sensed it and growled against his lips in warning. As punishment, she bit down hard on his lower lip, but the sting only seemed to spur him on.

In retaliation, Maverick caught her lower lip between his teeth and gave it a teasing tug until Aria had no choice but to relent.

As soon as she let him in, the kiss deepened naturally, unhurried and consuming, until everything beyond Maverick faded from Aria's mind. Every part of her body felt as though it had been set on fire. She couldn't get enough of him. She wanted more.

Aria ground her hips against his, needing to feel his body move above hers, while his tongue claimed hers, slow and relentless. It wasn't until her vision began to swim that they finally broke away, panting heavily.

Maverick pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth, then trailed lower to her chin, his lips warm and unhurried against her skin. When he reached her throat, he lingered there, nibbling and tasting until a shiver worked its way through her body.

He kissed his way back up until his mouth found hers again, though this time the kiss was brief, before he broke away. Then he rested his forehead against hers, his eyes locked on her own.

"Do you trust me?" Maverick asked, his voice husky.

Aria nodded, unable to find her voice.

Something shifted in his gaze, pride and desire tangled together as he lowered his mouth to her chest, pressing kisses along her skin.

This time Aria felt his hands begin to travel, sliding slowly down the length of her body, and her heart kicked into a frantic rhythm. Everywhere he touched left a trail of fire behind, and she writhed beneath him, soft moans slipping from her throat before she could stop them.

Aria's breath caught the moment Maverick's hand slipped beneath the waistband of her bottoms. For a second, neither of them moved, his palm simply resting low on her stomach as if giving her a chance to stop him.

She didn't.

When his fingers finally slipped through her wetness, a moan tore from Aria's throat, muffled instantly by his mouth covering hers.

Aria hadn't realized just how aroused she'd become until that moment, the truth of it slick against his touch, impossible to hide.

Maverick took his time. His fingers moved slowly at first, tracing small circles against her clit that had her hips twitching beneath him, her nails digging into his shoulders.

He seemed to memorize every reaction, every hitch of her breath, adjusting his rhythm to whatever made her gasp hardest against his lips. Even so, he swallowed every sound she made, refusing to let her look away even as her eyes fluttered shut.

The pace built gradually, his fingers growing bolder as her hips began to move with him, chasing the feeling he was drawing out of her.

Aria's moans grew louder, unrestrained now, her body arching into his hand as pleasure coiled tighter and tighter low in her belly.

She was mewling against his mouth, her fingers fisting in his hair, and still he didn't rush her, drawing it out until she was trembling, right on the edge.

"Maverick," she gasped, barely recognizing her own voice, "please."

That was all it took. He picked up his pace, his fingers moving fast and relentless, and Aria's body finally gave in.

Her back arched off the bed, her muscles drawing taut, and then she shattered beneath him, her cry swallowed by his kiss as pleasure crashed through her in waves, leaving her trembling long after it passed.

Aria stared at the ceiling for a moment, her mouth agape in wonder. So this was how it felt. It was so beautiful. If Maverick could make her feel so good with a finger, she could only imagine what it would feel like if he was inside of her.

As if her body couldn't agree more, her core throbbed. She wanted him. But Gods, it was morning, and it was by sheer grace she had not woken her roommates up by now.

"Now that we've talked...." Maverick said, drawing her attention back to him. "I believe it's time you should wake up."

"Excuse me?" Aria was confused as hell.

Then, like someone shoved her roughly down a pit, Aria's eyes flew open, and she sat up with a startled gasp, the interior of her own room before her.

"What the hell?" Aria looked around, still rattled. Did she just have a sex dream about her professor?

She wiped her hand down her face. She swore to God it had felt so real. Her core tingled with need, and she was unbelievably wet.

Heaven help her.

Just to be sure, Aria looked around, and her room was locked tight, not that it had stopped the professor before. But still, she had been alone. At least for the duration of the night.

It had been a dream. A sex dream about Maverick Nightshade.

Meanwhile....

Maverick Nightshade jerked upright in bed, not because he was late for class, but because something had happened.

He stalked into the bathroom, and there, right in front of the mirror, his eyes were practically glowing.

Feral.

The wolf had connected with Aria. Early that morning, while she slept, some part of him had reached her, and he could still feel the echo of it thrumming beneath his skin, as real as if it had actually happened. His raging arousal stood as proof.

Those blazing eyes stared back at him from the glass, feral and knowing, mocking him with every flicker of gold.

He hadn't meant for this to happen. He hadn't meant for any of it.

With a snarl, Maverick slammed his fist into the mirror. The glass shattered, spider-webbing outward before shards clattered into the sink, but he barely registered the sting across his knuckles.

All he could think about was Aria, the taste of her still phantom on his tongue, the sound of her moans still ringing in his ears. Maverick gripped the edge of the sink, his knuckles bleeding, breath ragged.

This couldn't happen again. But some primal part of him already knew it would.

His wolf, Feral, wanted his mate, and he would go to any length to ensure it.

Chapter 89: The First Person He Sees

"Every home changes the people who enter it."

~ Rebel Beast

"Morning," Brittney greeted cheerfully the moment Aria stepped out of the room.

"Morning," Aria mumbled, making her way toward the refreshment station where Brittney stood with a steaming mug cradled between her hands.

A fresh pot of coffee still sat warming on the machine. Grateful for the sight, Aria reached for a clean mug, poured herself a cup, and lifted it beneath her nose. The rich aroma curled around her senses, drawing out a quiet sigh before she took her first sip.

"I have to admit," Brittney said with a grin, "I'm completely in awe of this place. Even the coffee is amazing."

"Mmm." Aria nodded over the rim of her mug. "It really is."

Brittney studied her for a moment before tilting her head. "Are you okay? You look a little out of it. Didn't you sleep well? I know some people have trouble sleeping in a new place, but I slept like a baby. Honestly, these beds are ridiculously comfortable."

There was a dreamy look on her face, as though she was still reliving the experience.

Before Aria could think of a response, the bedroom door swung open and Trisha shuffled out.

"Ugh." She stretched so dramatically that her shoulders popped. "That was one hell of a night's sleep."

Judging by the state of her locs, she hadn't moved with even the slightest bit of dignity. They fanned out in every direction, looking more like a bird's nest than a hairstyle.

She suddenly paused and sniffed the air.

"Is that coffee I smell?"

With a knowing smile, Brittney lifted her mug in answer.

Trisha's eyes lit up.

"Please tell me there's some left. I can't function without coffee."

"Help yourself," Aria said, stepping aside to make room.

Trisha didn't need to be told twice. She practically stumbled to the coffee maker, already reaching for a mug before she'd even stopped walking.

Aria took advantage of Trisha's arrival to retreat to one of the armchairs, grateful for the interruption. At least it spared her from Brittney's relentless questioning. If Brittney ever found out Maverick had sneaked into her room the previous night, she would never let her hear the end of it. Whatever had happened between her and the professor was a secret Aria intended to carry to her grave.

Unfortunately, Brittney was as persistent as a bee drawn to honey. She followed Aria over and settled into the armchair opposite her, clearly not ready to let the conversation go.

"I can't help wondering about the other girls," Brittney said with delight. "They'd probably kill to be living here right now."

"You mean Karen, specifically," Trisha chimed in.

Now armed with her own mug of coffee, she dropped into the chair beside Aria.

"I bet she'd have a heart attack if she found out we're staying somewhere this nice."

Aria told them, "What matters is that we gave them a chance. They chose their bed, now they can lie in it. We have no business feeling guilty." She took another sip of her coffee.

And speaking of choices, it was Aria's decision not to tell Eniola that she, Brittney, Alek, and Trisha were close friends. Yes, she had deliberately left that out of her report. She still didn't fully trust the woman and would rather continue maintaining the image of being a loner in this place.

Moreover, the report she had given was almost clinical in its delivery. Aria had only shared what she considered necessary: the attacks so far, the student deaths, the growing division among the humans, and the fact that they had been assigned to House Therion while the other girls had been left behind to die.

Unless Eniola had another spy among them, Aria saw no reason to hand over personal information that could one day be used against her.

"Feeling guilty?" Trisha scoffed. "Girl, everyone's out here for themselves. It's a dog-eat-dog world. I don't give a damn about anyone."

The moment she caught the looks Brittney and Aria exchanged, Trisha realized what she had just said.

"I mean... except you guys, of course."

Brittney rolled her eyes before turning her attention back to Aria.

"Do you think they're still alive?"

Aria knew exactly who she meant. Around this time yesterday, the birds had attacked them, changing their lives forever. Then again, their lives had already been turned upside down the moment they were forced into the Concordia Selection. The attack had simply become another turning point, albeit one that had unexpectedly worked in their favor.

"I don't know," Aria admitted with a shrug. "I guess we'll find out before the end of the day... or when Dimitri shows up."

Except it was Alek who stepped out of her room at that exact moment.

Three heads turned toward her in unison.

Alek was wearing a sleeveless sunflower-yellow sundress that fell just above her knees. The fitted bodice and softly flowing skirt gave her an effortless, younger look.

Alek frowned as all three women continued staring at her.

"What?"

Aria lifted a brow. "You're ready for the day already?"

"And you're not?" Alek shot back, glancing between the three of them. "None of you even look like you've started getting ready."

Brittney's eyes narrowed. "Since when do you wear dresses?"

"Excuse me?" Alek placed a hand against her chest, sounding thoroughly offended. "What do you mean, since when do I wear dresses? I've always had them."

"But you never wore them until today," Brittney pointed out.

Trisha narrowed her eyes. "More like the question should be, since when were you into cute, feminine clothes? You always preferred oversized shirts and pants."

"Oh, I see..." Brittney muttered, her eyes lighting up like someone who had just stumbled upon a juicy secret. "This is for him, isn't it?"

"What? For who? What are you talking about?" Alek's voice rose an octave as she feigned innocence.

"Don't think we're stupid, Alek. You're not exactly subtle when it comes to your crush."

Perhaps it was the knowing look Trisha fixed on her, or the certainty in her voice, but Alek finally crumbled.

"Okay." Alek let out a defeated sigh. "Fine. I like him a little."

"Ooh," Brittney cooed teasingly.

"Oh, come on. Stop it." Alek blushed furiously. Her confidence faltered as she glanced down at her dress. "Do you think this is stupid, though?"

"No, it's actually cute," Aria said. "However, if you're trying to change yourself for him, then I suggest you think twice about it. You're special the way you are, and if Dimitri feels the same way about you, he already saw that girl in those baggy jeans you wore yesterday."

"Although..." she added with a small smile, "there's nothing wrong with wanting to look beautiful for someone you like."

"Spoken like a love expert," Brittney teased.

Aria had a feeling she knew exactly where this conversation was headed the moment Brittney spoke again.

"Which makes it even funnier that you can't see the love story unfolding right under your nose."

"You mean the forbidden love story with my professor?"

"Oh, please." Brittney scoffed. "We all know the professor part isn't what's stopping either of you."

Aria sighed. "Can we concentrate on one love story instead of two?"

And just like that, the spotlight shifted back to Alek.

"Okay," Trisha spoke up, "I can't be the only one who thinks this is moving a little too fast. We only arrived at this academy two days ago, even if it feels like we've been here much longer, and we're already talking about crushes. Survival was the only thing on our minds."

"But we can't lose ourselves while trying to survive this nightmare," Brittney argued. "If my girls happen to find themselves swept up in a whirlwind romance, then I'm all for it. Besides, Aria and Alek can't die virgins."

At those words, both Aria and Alek whipped their heads toward Brittney, staring at her in utter disbelief, as though they couldn't believe she had just announced something so personal without a shred of shame.

Feeling the full weight of their stares, Brittney remained completely unfazed.

"Ain't that the truth, though?"

"I hate you," Alek muttered, her face burning crimson with embarrassment.

Thank the Lord Brittney had no idea how close she had come to losing said virginity last night, Aria thought. She still didn't know what had come over her, but she intended to keep a much tighter rein on herself from now on.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door, and three pairs of eyes immediately turned toward Alek.

"It can't be who I think it is," Brittney said in a sing-song voice.

Alek quickly shook her head, though the sudden nervousness on her face betrayed her. "It could be someone else," she insisted.

"Nice try," Trisha said with a snort. "Who else would it be?"

The truth was, they all knew it could only be Dimitri. He had been the one handling them since they arrived at Therion. It was only natural that he would come back for them.

Even Aria found herself siding with the others.

"You should be the first person he sees."

"What? No." Alek looked between them in alarm. "Why me? One of you can answer it."

"Absolutely not," Brittney said, already climbing to her feet. "This is your moment."

"I don't have a moment."

"Yes, you do," Trisha replied, making a shooing motion with both hands. "Now go."

Alek continued protesting, but none of the girls were listening anymore. Between Brittney and Trisha, she was gently but firmly ushered across the room until she found herself standing in front of the door.

Left with no choice, Alek reached for the handle and pulled it open.

Chapter 90: My Wolf Is A Murderer

"The hardest part of loving someone is believing they'll still choose you after they know the truth."

~ Rebel Beast

Maverick Nightshade stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking House Therion, his hands clasped behind his back as he stared into the distance, lost in thought.

"You are unfashionably late again, Alpha Maverick. I don't suppose this is going to become a habit?" Dimitri remarked as he stepped into the room. A knowing smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Then again, I imagine sneaking off to visit your mate in the middle of the night must have quite the relaxing effect on—"

He stopped short because Maverick had turned to face him.

A scowl darkened his features, and as his fingers flexed at his sides, the fading bruises across his knuckles suggested they had recently borne the brunt of his temper.

"You don't look relaxed at all," Dimitri finished, studying him more carefully. "What happened this time?"

Maverick's expression hardened even further.

"Feral is taking advantage of the mate bond," he said flatly. "He invaded Aria's dream."

Dimitri stiffened at once.

Expecting the worst, he asked, "What did he do to her? Did he hurt her?"

"He didn't hurt her," Maverick answered through gritted teeth. "At least... not in a way she didn't want."

Dimitri's brows drew together.

His mind immediately leaped to an unpleasant conclusion, but he wisely kept it to himself. The last thing he needed was to provoke his hot-headed nephew any further.

"So," he said cautiously, "what did he do?"

Maverick held his gaze.

"It was an erotic dream, Uncle."

"Oh."

Dimitri slipped a hand into his pocket, doing his best to sound surprised. Truthfully, who was he kidding? He had suspected something like this the moment Maverick mentioned the dream.

Maverick continued, his voice rough with mounting frustration.

"By the time I woke up, that damned animal was still in my head." He jabbed a finger against his temple. "He's taunting me. Playing games with me. He enjoys every second of this. He wants me to lose control. He wants me to stop fighting him and hand him the reins."

"Maybe... handing him the reins wouldn't be the worst idea," Dimitri ventured carefully. Even as the words left his mouth, the uncertainty in his expression betrayed how dangerous he knew that suggestion was.

Sure enough, Maverick's face darkened like an approaching storm.

"Are you kidding me?" Maverick stared at him in disbelief. "If I let Feral take the reins, he'll have me balls-deep inside Aria before the night's over!"

"Then tell her the truth, Maverick, or I swear to the Goddess, I'll do it myself and let this whole mess be over. Consequences be damned!"

"Sure, go ahead. Tell her my wolf is a murderer!" Maverick snapped, his eyes blazing as the veins in his forehead stood out with the force of his outburst.

Just like that, a heavy silence settled between the two men.

Dimitri let out a weary sigh, pity flickering across his face.

"Maverick, you know that wasn't your fault. You were only a child. That bitch got exactly what she deserved."

"And I ended up transitioning with a powerful wolf I can't control because of it," Maverick shot back bitterly. "A wolf I can't even trust around my own mate."

"We don't know that," Dimitri countered. "So far, Feral's reaction to Aria hasn't been violent. If anything, it seems to be the possessive instinct every wolf has toward their mate and the overwhelming need to claim their other half."

He met Maverick's gaze, his expression turning solemn.

"You can't keep fighting this forever, Maverick. That's not a battle you're going to win."

"I just need time!" Maverick's voice rose once more. "Why can't he understand that? She's human. I'm a beast. She doesn't understand our world. Aria needs time to understand the bond... to accept it. Otherwise, she might reject me before we've even had a chance."

"Then tell Feral," Dimitri suggested. "Talk to him. One on one. Like Asher always says, there has to be balance. You and Feral need to come to an understanding."

"Easier said than done," Maverick scoffed, dragging a hand through his hair. "The next time he tries to take over, you'll be the one trying to stop me."

"In that case, I've done everything I can for you, Maverick. The rest of this battle is yours." Dimitri's voice softened. "But if push comes to shove, I'll do whatever it takes to save you even if that means telling Aria the truth or calling your father for help."

The two men held each other's gaze for a long moment before Maverick was the first to look away.

"It won't come to that," he said quietly.

Dimitri nodded, though the worry never left his eyes.

"Let's hope not."

An uneasy silence settled over the room once more until Dimitri finally broke it.

"Well, now that we've gotten that out of the way, what do we do with the girls? You can't rescue them from their little human dormitory prison only to lock them away in a gilded cage. Which is where my brilliant idea comes in."

Just like that, Dimitri was back to his usual cheerful self.

"I was thinking the girls could eat at the dining hall—"

At the mention of the dining hall, Maverick's eyes narrowed. Before he could object, however, Dimitri was already one step ahead.

"I know exactly what you're going to say. They could be attacked. But most of the students are already in class by now."

"Most students," Maverick corrected.

"The girls need to be introduced to the academy. They need to become familiar with their surroundings before classes begin... whenever you've decided that's going to be."

"Monday," Maverick replied. "I want them to officially resume on Monday. The same goes for the other houses the remaining human girls ended up in. Let the beasts play the rest of their games until then, but come Monday, all of that ends."

He continued, "And you won't be the one showing them around. I need you here, Dimitri. There are mountains of paperwork and emails waiting because of this damned program, not to mention everything that's come in from back home."

"Is that so?" Dimitri replied, though there was something oddly deflated about his tone.

Maverick didn't seem to notice.

"Have Valerie and Variant do it. They're both sociable enough to make the girls feel welcome. Just make sure they have adequate security. I don't know what game Rhydian is playing, but it's Caelis who concerns me the most. Make sure they don't take their eyes off Aria."

"Of course," Dimitri agreed. "In that case, I think I should meet with Valerie and Variant first to explain just how important this assignment is. At the same time, I should be the one to introduce them to the girls. They already trust me, and they'll be far more willing to open up to Valerie and Variant if I'm the one making the introduction."

Maverick regarded him thoughtfully.

"Hmm... okay." A slight frown tugged at his brow. He couldn't quite explain it, but something about his uncle's sudden enthusiasm felt suspicious.

"Good." Dimitri grinned, looking far too pleased with himself. "Then I'd better get going. I'll be back."

He had barely taken a few steps toward the door when Maverick called after him.

"Dimitri!"

Dimitri stopped and turned back with a raised brow.

"Something wrong?"

Maverick didn't answer immediately. His eyes slowly traveled from Dimitri's shoes to his face before settling on his hair.

"Did you jerry curl your hair?"

Dimitri instinctively reached up, his fingers brushing through the loose curls that now fell over his forehead.

"Oh, this?" He smiled as though it were the most natural thing in the world. "I thought I'd change things up a little. The humans already saw me yesterday with one hairstyle. I can't have them thinking I'm the beta who only knows one look." He nodded toward Maverick. "That title already belongs to you." He ended with an awkward laugh.

Maverick only stared at him.

The silence stretched just long enough for Dimitri to realize his explanation had done absolutely nothing to clear the confusion written all over Maverick's face.

"Well..." Dimitri pointed a thumb toward the door. "I'd better get going."

Before Maverick could stop him, Dimitri slipped out of the room and shut the door behind him. Left alone, Maverick continued staring at the door for several long seconds.

What in the Goddess's name had just happened?

Then Dimitri's words echoed back to him.

The one hairstyle...

His gaze slowly drifted toward the mirror across the room.

Maverick walked over to it and studied his reflection. His hair had always been swept neatly to one side like his father's. He had never given it much thought before.

Almost absently, he slid a hand through it, pushing it back from his forehead.

Would a slick back suit him better?

No...

Maybe a messy pompadour.

Or perhaps a fade...

His brows drew together as he tilted his head from one angle to another.

What would Aria like?

The thought hit him like a bucket of cold water.

Maverick Nightshade froze. Then he shut his eyes and let out a slow, defeated sigh.

He was finished. Completely and utterly finished.

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 91: Mine

"She thought she was admiring a handsome man. She didn't realize she was already memorizing the scent of home."

~Rebel Beast

While Alek had been expecting Dimitri, it didn't mean she was prepared for the sight that greeted her.

If Dimitri King had been charming yesterday, that charm had somehow multiplied today, and Alek found herself gawking at him.

Dimitri was wearing an olive-green henley with the sleeves rolled carelessly to his forearms. The open V-neck left the strong column of his throat exposed, revealing just enough sun-kissed skin to be distracting without trying to be.

The loose fabric skimmed over his broad shoulders and solid chest before falling effortlessly over his frame, somehow making a man built like a beast look dangerously approachable. It suited him far too well.

Alek found herself staring at the hollow at the base of his throat for a second longer than was appropriate before her eyes snapped upward.

Seriously? Since when did collars become attractive?

Looking up, however, proved to be an even bigger mistake.

Her gaze landed on the glossy, soft curls that framed his face. Alek had never understood the appeal of jerry curls, but on Dimitri, they looked ridiculously attractive. Her fingers itched with the absurd urge to run a hand through them. And maybe...

Maybe sink her teeth into him a little.

Christ, Lord above.

What in the world was wrong with her?

It didn't help that she was no longer breathing properly because his scent drifted toward her.

Dimitri smelled of black currants, crisp cedarwood, and clean musk. The sweetness reached her first, bright and inviting, before the richness of cedar settled beneath it. It was the sort of scent that would linger in her memory long after he'd walked away, making it impossible to forget the man who wore it.

But while Alek found herself captivated by Dimitri, the same could be said for him.

Yesterday, when he had caught her, he could have sworn he'd felt those curves beneath his hands. He hadn't been mistaken.

Yellow.

That was going to be his favorite color from now on.

Alek looked devastating in the yellow sundress that hugged her figure, drawing his attention first to the soft swell of her breasts before following the graceful curve of her hips.

Hips that would one day bear his pups.

His heirs.

Dimitri didn't even realize he'd crossed the room. One moment he had been standing by the doorway. The next, he was right in front of her, his gaze burning with an intensity that stole the breath from her lungs.

Almost instinctively, he lowered his head toward the crook of her neck. Without realizing it, Alek tilted her head back, giving him room.

Meanwhile, Aria, Trisha, and Brittney watched the scene in utter bewilderment.

"Is that supposed to happen?" Trisha asked, her brows knitting together. "I mean, he's supposed to appreciate the dress, not... whatever this is." She gestured helplessly toward the pair.

"Well, he's doing just fine." Brittney shrugged. "If a man appreciated me like that, rest assured my panties are coming off."

"Eww." Aria pulled a face, though the mention of panties instantly reminded her of her dream—and exactly whose fingers had been down there.

A miserable groan escaped her. This was getting out of hand.

Meanwhile, with his face buried against Alek's neck, Dimitri drew in a slow, deep breath. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

Alek smelled of creamy vanilla, fresh lime, and crushed basil. There was nothing overly sweet about it. The lime reached him first with a lively brightness, while the basil lent it a clean, green edge. The vanilla lingered just enough to soften it all. Dimitri had met women who wore expensive perfumes. None of them had ever made him want to stand this close.

His gums throbbed, and his canines instinctively lengthened as an overwhelming urge to sink them into the smooth skin of her neck swept over him.

The tips of his teeth grazed Alek's skin, drawing a shiver from her. His tongue swept over the spot in a slow, possessive stroke. Completely oblivious to what he was doing, Dimitri leaned in again, his mouth parting as instinct took over.

"Beta Dimitri?"

The voice behind him shattered the moment.

Dimitri froze.

As though waking from a trance, he looked down to find Alek still in his arms, her eyes glazed, lips slightly parted, and her head tilted toward him in complete surrender.

His blood ran cold. He had almost marked her.

Oh shit.

Before he could recover, Hummer's triumphant roar exploded through his head.

Mine.

Double shit.

Dimitri sprang away from Alek as though he'd been burned.

The sudden distance seemed to snap Alek out of whatever spell had settled over her. Her eyes widened, and as awareness flooded back, crimson spread across her cheeks.

What the hell had just happened?

"I'm so sorry." The apology tumbled out before Dimitri could stop it. He looked thoroughly shaken. "You just looked so beautiful..."

His eyes squeezed shut.

Brilliant.

Apologizing while complimenting her in the same breath probably wasn't helping.

Inside his head, his wolf, Hummer, was practically beside himself, pacing in restless circles, entirely too pleased with what had nearly happened.

Dimitri, on the other hand, wanted the ground to split open and swallow him whole because he had just remembered he hadn't come alone.

He slowly turned toward the doorway, and the expressions staring back at him confirmed everything he had been dreading.

Valerie and Variant had seen it. Maybe they hadn't understood he had nearly marked Alek, but they had definitely seen him try to bite her.

His.

The word settled into his chest with startling ease. It should have felt foreign. Instead, it felt right.

"Uh..." Dimitri cleared his throat. "This is Valerie and Variant."

Valerie and Variant stepped forward, greeting the girls with bright smiles.

The girls returned the greeting, though Alek's voice came out noticeably quieter. She couldn't even bring herself to look at Dimitri.

He noticed but pretended he hadn't.

"They'll be taking care of whatever you need for the rest of today," Dimitri said, forcing himself to sound composed. "If anything comes up, you can always get my number from them."

An awkward silence followed.

"I'll... see you all later."

He turned and started toward the door.

One... Two... Three... Four steps.

He stopped.

Before anyone could question it, Dimitri turned on his heel and strode straight back to Alek. He cupped her face with one hand and pressed a quick, gentle kiss to her lips.

"I wish I had time to explain," he murmured against them. "But I really have to go."

Alek could only stare at him, her mind completely blank. She managed the smallest nod.

"See you."

He stole one last kiss before finally forcing himself to walk away. This time, he didn't look back as the door clicked shut behind him.

For exactly three seconds, absolute silence filled the room. Just like that, every pair of eyes slowly turned toward Alek, including Valerie's and Variant's.

Then the silence shattered as the girls erupted into excited screams.

Chapter 92: It Has Begun

"To Variant and Valerie, fashion was a matter of life and death."

~ Rebel Beast

Alek had to clap her hands over her ears as excited screams rang through the room. The next thing she knew, Brittney had swept her clean off her feet.

Alek let out a startled scream and instinctively grabbed hold of Brittney's shoulders. "Put me down!"

"Alek! What the hell, girl?" Brittney laughed as she lowered her back to the floor. "That was hot as hell!"

Alek couldn't even respond. The barrage of praise left her completely overwhelmed. This was the first time she'd ever had friends celebrating her love life as though she'd struck gold.

Although she, Trisha, and Brittney had known each other before all of this, their relationship had always been casual. They talked and spent time around one another at events, but they had never shared anything personal. Somehow, over the past few days, that had changed.

"Stop it. That was nothing," Alek said, trying to downplay it.

"That was definitely not nothing," Variant spoke up.

Her comment drew the girls' attention, and for the first time, they took a proper look at the two members of House Therion who had been assigned to look after them.

Both had chestnut-brown wavy hair and stood at nearly the same height, with Variant about three inches taller than Valerie.

Their fitted navy blazers hugged their waists perfectly over crisp white shirts and slim silver-striped ties. Their high-waisted navy pleated skirts fell just above the knee, paired with sheer charcoal tights and knee-high leather boots. Matching wolf insignias gleamed against their lapels, completing the uniforms that somehow looked both impeccably proper and effortlessly fashionable.

Brittney tilted her head from one girl to the other.

"Are you two twins?"

Trisha shook her head before either of them could answer.

"No. Look closely." She pointed between them. "Variant's eyes are slightly rounder, and Valerie's nose is a little sharper. Variant also has a slightly fuller face. The makeup just makes them look more alike than they actually are."

"Well..." Variant admitted with an impressed smile. "You're right. We're not twins."

She hooked her thumb toward herself before pointing at Valerie.

"I'm a chipmunk, and she's a squirrel. We're distant cousins. Different species, but close enough that most people mix us up. It doesn't help that we enjoy dressing alike."

"Aww." Aria said. "That's actually really sweet."

Brittney's eyes lit up with curiosity.

"So... when you shift, do you talk with those really tiny, squeaky voices?" She lifted her hands animatedly. "You know, like those little singing chipmunks from those old movies."

Variant's smile vanished.

"I don't know what your entertainment industry has been teaching humans," she said with surprising seriousness, "but no, we do not burst into song or suddenly develop ridiculously high-pitched voices just because we shift."

Brittney blinked.

"And for the record," Variant continued, folding her arms, "that's an incredibly disrespectful stereotype."

Even with the tiny frown on her face, she somehow looked so adorably offended that Brittney immediately raised both hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry."

Variant held her stern expression for another second before letting out a small huff.

"Accepted."

The tension evaporated instantly, and Brittney grinned, relieved she'd survived the lecture.

Valerie looked at Alek curiously.

"So, since when have you and Beta Dimitri been in a relationship?"

Alek stared at her.

"A relationship?" she repeated before letting out a disbelieving laugh. "We're not in a relationship. We literally only spoke for the first time yesterday."

"Oh!" Brittney clapped her hands together excitedly. "Let me tell you about their divine moment!"

She didn't wait for permission and started,

"We were all heading to House Therion for the first time when Alek tripped on the stairs. Before she could even hit the ground, Dimitri caught her as quick as lightning." Brittney clasped both hands dramatically over her chest. "Then they just stared at each other. You know those ridiculously mushy moments in romantic movies where the whole world disappears?"

She pointed triumphantly at Alek.

"I don't know about everyone else, but I knew right then I was witnessing an 'and that's how I met your mother' moment." She was far too caught up in her own excitement to notice the meaningful glance Valerie and Variant exchanged.

Aria spoke before anyone could comment further. "Where is Professor Maverick?"

The question immediately earned her three identical looks from her roommates.

"What?" Aria said defensively. "He was the one who brought us here. The least he could do is tell us what his plans are for us. It almost feels like he's avoiding us."

Or, more specifically...

Avoiding her.

She wisely kept that part to herself.

"Alpha Maverick is an incredibly busy man," Valerie explained. "If it weren't for President Callum, he probably wouldn't have gotten personally involved with the human program in the first place. But don't worry, you've got us now." She said proudly. "Aside from those insufferable parrots, there's hardly a piece of gossip on this campus we don't know."

Variant gave Aria a once-over.

"For someone so interested in Alpha Maverick's whereabouts, you don't look particularly eager to leave."

Her gaze shifted to Trisha and Brittney, taking in their sleepwear. "In fact, none of you are." She paused when her gaze settled on Alek.

"Except you."

"Yep. Just me," Alek replied casually.

"Yep," Variant said knowingly. "We know why."

A snort escaped Brittney before she could stop it. Alek shot her a warning glare.

Clapping her hands once, Variant immediately took charge.

"Alright, everyone. Into your rooms. Shower, get dressed, and make yourselves presentable. You're officially members of House Therion now, and word is the girls from the other houses are heading to the dining hall too."

At the mention of the other girls, Aria, Trisha, and Alek exchanged a look. So their previous roommates were coming too. This was going to be fun.

The chipmunk's eyes narrowed with fierce determination.

"We are absolutely not letting those girls outdress us."

She jabbed a finger toward the door.

"Ladies... the war has officially begun."

Chapter 93: Safer In The Human Dorm

"Nothing is more terrifying than discovering the rules have changed and no one will tell you why."

~ Rebel Beast

Aria was the first to step out of her room, having never been the type to spend an hour getting ready. She barely made it three steps into the living room before Variant gasped dramatically.

"Oh, no, no, no. That is absolutely not happening."

"Oh, God, no," Valerie agreed, looking personally offended.

Aria stopped in her tracks and looked down at herself.

"What?"

She was wearing a pair of oversized gray sweatpants, an equally oversized black T-shirt, and plain white sneakers. Her dark hair hung loosely around her shoulders, having brushed it after showering.

"What's wrong with this?"

Valerie stared at her in disbelief.

"On any other day, if you're staying in your room, binge-watching documentaries, or planning to spend the entire day avoiding civilization, by all means, dress like that." She motioned toward Aria from head to toe. "But you cannot walk out with us looking like... this."

Variant folded her arms with a solemn nod.

"People always think women dress up for men." She scoffed. "They're wrong. We dress up because it makes us feel good. And because crushing the confidence of other women is an added bonus."

She smiled sweetly.

"Mostly the first one."

Aria wasn't sure whether she was joking.

Before she could ask, the two girls began circling her like stylists assessing a client.

"The sweatpants can stay," Valerie decided after a thoughtful hum. "They're fitted enough to work." She pinched the hem of Aria's oversized shirt. "But this has to go."

"What?" Aria frowned. "It's comfortable."

"Fashion is not comfortable," Variant replied, walking behind Aria and gathering her long dark hair into her hands.

Aria immediately stiffened.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't answer. Instead, Variant tilted her head thoughtfully while lifting Aria's hair into a loose, messy bun, allowing a few soft strands to fall around her face.

"There." Valerie stepped closer, studying her critically. "Definitely better."

"No..." Variant murmured, adjusting another strand. "Leave these pieces out. They soften her face."

"You're right," Valerie agreed. "They also bring out her eyes."

Aria looked between the two of them.

"Um... hello? Does my opinion count?"

Neither answered.

Valerie reached out and pressed a hand against Aria's waist. Aria immediately slapped it away.

"Hey!"

"I was measuring."

"With your hand?"

"Yes."

Valerie sounded completely unapologetic.

"I think a cropped T-shirt would do her justice." She looked Aria over again. "She's got a nice waist, and that little bit of midriff deserves to see daylight."

"I am not showing my stomach."

"You're showing, like..." Variant pinched her fingers together. "This much." She demonstrated a gap barely wider than two fingers.

"I'm not comfortable showing off my body," Aria protested.

"Don't worry. I respect that," Variant said.

Aria thought she'd won, only for the chipmunk to add,

"So just do it for today."

Aria groaned. To think she was no longer in charge of her own body.

Variant said, "Think of it as your initiation into House Therion. Once we've completely humiliated the other houses and their human intakes, you can go back to dressing however you want."

Aria paused. She must have heard wrong.

"What are you talking about?"

Valerie looked equally confused.

"The other houses?"

"No." Aria shook her head. "You said their human intakes."

"Yeah." Variant frowned. "The other contestants have already been distributed between House Aetheris and House Ophidian."

"Exactly. How?"

Variant and Valerie exchanged puzzled looks.

"Wait..." Variant said slowly. "You didn't know that?"

"No," Aria answered immediately. "We were all brought to House Therion, and that was it. Nobody told us where the others went. I just assumed they'd all been taken back to the human dormitory."

"Oh, shit. Dimitri." Realization dawned on Valerie. "The beta never actually introduced you girls to how the academy works."

She rubbed her forehead before muttering under her breath, "Leave it to a man to forget the most important part of the explanation."

Right at that moment, the door to Brittney's room swung open, and Aria found herself doing a double take.

Guess someone had taken breakfast a little too seriously.

Gone was Brittney's long brunette hair. In its place sat a sleek jet-black bob that framed her face perfectly, the blunt bangs grazing just above her eyebrows and making her look effortlessly chic.

She had traded her sleepwear for a pair of high-waisted beige wide-leg trousers that hugged her waist before flowing elegantly to the floor. A cropped black graphic T-shirt left just a sliver of her midriff on display, while a pair of black-rimmed glasses completed the look, giving her the perfect balance of playful and sophisticated.

Brittney Thorne looked like she'd walked straight out of a fashion campaign.

Variant's eyes immediately lit up.

"Now that," she declared proudly, "is what I'm talking about."

As if Trisha couldn't let Brittney have the spotlight for too long, her bedroom door swung open as well.

And she stepped out.

Just like Brittney, Trisha Thorne had dressed with every intention of turning heads.

Her long brown locs had been pulled back beneath a silky navy-blue bandana, leaving the soft curls at the ends to spill over her shoulders and down her back.

Layered silver necklaces rested against the denim corset-style top that hugged her figure, its asymmetrical hem revealing just enough skin to tease the eye without giving everything away.

The faded wide-leg jeans sat low on her hips, decorated with stitched navy stars and distressed patches that somehow made the outfit look effortlessly cool instead of messy. White platform sneakers completed the look, while oversized black sunglasses rested atop her head like the finishing touch.

Brittney folded her arms.

"Oh, so we're competing now?"

Trisha rolled her eyes.

"As if you're worth my opponent," she jabbed.

While Brittney and Trisha were busy quibbling, as they were so fond of doing, Variant turned to Aria.

"How are you friends with these two, yet none of their fashion sense has rubbed off on you?"

"Well, technically, we only met a few days ago," Aria replied dryly. "And definitely not because we'd have naturally become friends in real life, but because we were all sentenced to the same death game."

Variant got the point.

"That mouth of yours is going to get you into trouble around here," she said.

"You asked," Aria said with a shrug. "I simply answered."

"I think that's the least of our problems right now," Alek cut in. She looked directly at Brittney and Trisha. "Aria and I just found out that, just like us, the other girls have been assigned to House Aetheris and House Ophidian."

"What?!" Brittney and Trisha exclaimed in unison.

Trisha asked Aria. "Is this true?"

Aria nodded.

"Unfortunately, it's true."

"That cannot be!" Brittney wailed dramatically. "I was planning to rub the fact that I now live in House Therion all over Karen Donovan's face. It won't have the same effect now." She stuck out her bottom lip in disappointment.

Aria turned back to Valerie and Variant.

"How do you know all this? Did Professor Maverick intentionally keep it from us?"

The two girls exchanged a glance.

"Whether Alpha Maverick deliberately kept it from you or simply forgot, we have no idea," Valerie admitted. "But everyone in Bestiaris already knows."

"How?"

"We have an academy social app," Variant explained. "Think of it as the heartbeat of campus life. Every event, every scandal, every fight, every rumor, every relationship—it all ends up there sooner or later."

Valerie picked up where she left off.

"The biggest account on the app belongs to two very loud parrots who call themselves Lord Plumage and Lady Mimic. They're practically celebrities around here."

"They've got spies everywhere," Variant added. "Students. Probably staff too."

Valerie continued. "They somehow find out everything that happens inside Bestiaris before everyone else does. If you sneeze in one corner of the academy, don't be surprised if it's headline news by lunchtime."

"So when today's article went live," Variant finished, "they revealed that the surviving human contestants had been divided equally between House Aetheris, House Ophidian, and House Therion."

"I don't get this." Alek's mind was still reeling. "Didn't beasts hate humans? They even went as far as killing some of us to send that message loud and clear. So what's all this?"

"That," Variant replied, "is the same question everyone is asking. But I guess, in a way, House Therion saw this coming. Alpha Maverick has been protective of humans from the very beginning. If there was anyone who would've done everything possible to keep you girls safe, it would've been him."

"But Rhyidian and Caelis?" Valerie frowned. "We have no idea what their endgame is. Dragons hate humans. They genuinely believe your kind is the weakest species to ever

walk this earth. Humans are fragile, and weakness goes against everything dragons stand for."

"And the serpents?" Aria asked.

"Humans and serpents have never gotten along," Variant answered. "That said, I'd argue it's easier for humans and snakes to coexist than humans and dragons. Even so, serpents aren't exactly known for being trustworthy."

"So maybe you still have a reason to smile when it comes to Karen Donovan," Variant said, her expression brightening. "Out of the three houses, none respects humans more than House Therion. If I'm being honest, I think your contestant friends would've been safer back in the human dormitory than wherever they are right now."

Chapter 94: You Haven't Fed Me

"He didn't fear betrayal. He prepared for it."

~ Rebel Beast

It was said that Caelis Cobryn never had fun. The rumor wasn't entirely wrong.

While most students were making their way to class, the Basilisk Prince was still in his office, reviewing the reports that required his approval with his usual unreadable expression.

Without looking up, he signed the last page and slid the folder across the desk.

"I need you to send this Liability and Indemnity Agreement to Maverick Nightshade," he instructed his First Fang.

Venus accepted the neatly bound folder without question.

The document was straightforward.

Should anything happen to Maverick during the fight in the arena, neither Caelis Cobryn nor his business could be held legally or financially responsible. By signing it, Maverick acknowledged that he had agreed to the fight of his own accord and accepted full responsibility for whatever followed.

Although Caelis doubted anything would happen to the Wolf Prince, none of them was stupid enough to incur the wrath of his mother, Violet Purple, anything could still happen,

and he wasn't willing to take that chance. Rhydian had been the one to arrange the fight, and should he have any ulterior motive, Caelis refused to be caught unprepared.

"The fight will not proceed until he signs it," Caelis said. "Make sure he does. That will ensure the validity of tomorrow's match. We need to be certain, especially with all the buzz it's already generating. I cannot afford to lose that amount of money."

"Yes, Your Highness," Venus replied. "I take it Rhydian has already signed his."

"Yes," Caelis answered in his thick accent. "Alongside his generous payment."

He shamelessly admitted it had been a good one.

A knowing grin spread across Venus' face.

At this point, it was almost laughable. Every time Rhydian wanted to use the arena, Caelis charged him an outrageous participation fee. In fact, he did the same to practically every dragon. They always complained, yet they always paid.

As far as Caelis was concerned, dragons had money. They could afford it.

"Send my response to Rhydian in writing as well," Caelis said, not yet finished. "Tell him I stake my future on it. The humans will remain unharmed for the duration of the fight."

"Are we really doing this?" Venus frowned. "This could've been the perfect opportunity to get Rhydian out of this academy."

"Getting Rhydian out of this academy isn't the goal," Caelis corrected calmly. "Getting rid of him is."

Venus fell silent.

"Besides," Caelis continued, "Aria Aspen will be there."

One of Venus' brows arched.

"You want to see her?"

"More than that." Caelis' eyes narrowed slightly. "I want a conversation with her. She's hiding the truth about who she is, and I intend to find out exactly what."

"Would that even be possible?" Venus asked genuinely. "Maverick guards those girls like a mother hen. Getting close to her won't be easy."

"Don't concern yourself with that." A faint smile tugged at the corner of Caelis' lips. "I already have a plan."

Venus wasn't the least bit surprised.

As long as he had served as Caelis' First Fang, the Basilisk Prince had always been several steps ahead of everyone else. Every obstacle became an opportunity, and every situation somehow ended in his favor.

Just then, a loud commotion erupted outside the office.

Both men went on alert immediately.

Caelis and Venus exchanged a brief look before rising from their seats to find out what had caused the disturbance.

They stepped out of the office and into the spacious living room of Caelis' private suite.

Except the scene that greeted them was anything but ordinary.

Two serpent shifters had a furious Karen Donovan restrained between them as she struggled against their grips with all the dignity she could still salvage.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, jerking her arms in a failed attempt to free herself. "Let go of me right now! You have no right to do this to me. I only requested to see Caelis. Let me go this instant!"

"What is going on here?"

Caelis' deep voice echoed through the room.

Everything came to an abrupt halt.

Karen immediately yanked her arms free as the two guards released her. She quickly straightened her blouse, smoothed down her skirt, and lifted her chin as though she hadn't been dragged out of the room moments ago.

"Finally," she said, relief washing over her features. She pointed accusingly at the two serpent shifters. "I only wanted to see you, and these two idiots refused to let me through. You should teach them some respect."

"You're the one who needs to learn some," one of the serpents hissed, his slit pupils narrowing dangerously. Every muscle in his body tensed as though he was one insult away from striking.

"Simion." Caelis spoke only his name but the serpent immediately fell silent. His murderous glare, however, never left Karen.

"You may leave now," Caelis ordered.

Simion inclined his head.

"Yes, Your Highness."

He and his partner turned to leave, but not before Simion deliberately drove his shoulder into Karen's as they passed.

She stumbled a step to the side.

"How dare you!" she gasped in outrage.

Neither serpent spared her so much as a glance. Within seconds, they were gone, leaving an uncomfortable silence hanging in the room.

Caelis regarded Karen with the same unreadable expression.

"What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Karen repeated, staring at him in disbelief. "Yesterday, the three girls you assigned to escort me to my room threatened me. Can you believe that? They shifted into their snake forms and tried to attack me!"

Caelis and Venus exchanged a brief glance.

It seemed Nadia had decided to give the new arrival the traditional Ophidian welcome after all.

"I'd hardly call it an attack," Venus said, unable to hide the amusement in his voice. "More like an introduction to the house."

"That was not an introduction," Karen snapped. "It was a threat!"

"Did you get hurt?" Venus asked.

"No," Karen admitted through gritted teeth. "But she intended to hurt me."

Caelis had heard enough.

"If that's all you came here to complain about, then I wish you a pleasant day, Karen."

Karen stared at him.

"You haven't fed me!"

Her voice echoed through the room.

"You just dumped me in a room I'm forced to share with those two pathetic girls, then forgot I even existed." Her eyes shimmered with tears. "I've been surviving on snacks since last night, and I'm sick of them. I want actual food." She wiped angrily at the tears threatening to spill over.

Caelis remained silent.

For all his ruthlessness, there was one principle he refused to compromise on.

No one deserved to be denied food.

Not even someone he found insufferable.

"I'll—" Venus began.

"Gather the other girls and follow me," Caelis interrupted. "We'll have breakfast in the dining hall."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 95: Human Fatality

"Dragons weren't made to impress the world. The world simply couldn't help but stare."

~ Rebel Beast

The brief shadow that swept across her face was enough to jolt Charlotte awake.

Her eyes flew open.

She shot upright in bed so quickly she nearly made herself dizzy. Instinctively, her gaze snapped toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, and just as she expected, a lone figure soared through the distance.

A dragon.

Charlotte threw off the covers, snatched her phone from the bedside table, and hurried out of the room before either of her roommates had the chance to wake.

She couldn't blame them for sleeping in.

The four of them had spent most of the previous night cleaning, and even then, there were still piles of dusty sheets waiting to be washed before the day was over. But that wasn't on her mind at the moment.

Charlotte's heartbeat quickened as she stepped into the hallway, her eyes eagerly taking in everything around her.

House Aetheris was already awake.

Students moved through the corridors in every direction, preparing for the day's classes. Some hurried past with bags slung over their shoulders while others stood in small groups, chatting as they walked. The towering halls reverberated with footsteps, laughter, distant conversations, and the occasional flutter of wings from the smaller avians in their beast forms.

Charlotte felt like a child stepping into an amusement park for the very first time.

No matter where she looked, there was something new demanding her attention. The ravens, the eagles, the dragons... everything!

It was overwhelming. It was magnificent.

Unfortunately, her excitement didn't go unnoticed.

Several dragons glanced in her direction before openly scowling. One female dragon wrinkled her nose as though Charlotte's mere presence offended her. Another deliberately bumped shoulders with her while walking past, never bothering to apologize.

Charlotte barely noticed. How could she?

There was simply too much to see.

Almost absentmindedly, her feet carried her farther down the corridor until the familiar open-air walkway came into view.

The moment she stepped onto it, she froze.

"Oh..." The word escaped as nothing more than a breath.

Spread out before her was the morning sky, painted in soft shades of gold and pale blue as the first rays of sunlight bathed the academy grounds below. But it wasn't the scenery that stole her breath.

It was the dragons.

Students stepped onto the broad stone platform one after another before shifting seamlessly into their dragon forms.

Charlotte's mouth slowly fell open.

There had to be at least five of them.

The first dragon gleamed a deep crimson, his scales catching the sunlight until they resembled molten rubies. Great ivory horns curved backward from his head while smoke lazily escaped his nostrils.

Beside him stood a dragon cloaked in shimmering sapphire scales that reflected the morning light like gemstones. Elegant silver horns framed her head, and every movement she made possessed an almost regal grace.

The third was unlike anything Charlotte had ever seen.

Emerald scales covered his body from snout to tail, broken only by streaks of gleaming gold running along his spine. His folded wings were so enormous they cast shadows over the platform beneath him.

The fourth dragon was midnight black. His scales were so dark that the sunlight seemed to disappear against them. His eyes burned a vivid amber, glowing like twin embers beneath heavy ridges.

The last dragon was a brilliant pearl white, her scales almost luminous beneath the morning sun. Even standing still, the dragonness looked impossibly elegant.

Charlotte's eyes shone with unshed tears.

She couldn't breathe. For years, she had watched documentaries, collected books, and memorized every piece of information she could find about dragons. None of it came close to seeing them with her own eyes.

One of the dragons lifted his head, and a low rumble vibrated through his chest before it grew into a powerful roar that rolled across House Aetheris like thunder.

Its fellow answered with a roar of his own, followed by another and another, until their voices overlapped, echoing through the towering halls until the very walls seemed to hum beneath the sheer force of it.

The sound was primal, and powerful enough to make several of the smaller avian beasts instinctively scatter into the air. Some of those in human form even flinched.

But that wasn't the case for Charlotte. To her, it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

Those magnificent roars, they were the sweetest thing she had ever heard.

A laugh escaped her lips before she even realized she'd made a sound.

"I'm really here..." Charlotte whispered to herself. "I'm actually here."

The dragons then exchanged playful growls as though challenging one another.

It seemed they were racing.

One dragon scraped his claws against the stone while another spread her wings to their full, breathtaking span. The others followed suit.

Then, almost as if responding to an invisible signal, all five dragons launched themselves into the air at once. Their enormous wings came down with explosive force.

WHOOOOSH!

A violent gust tore across the open balcony, and Charlotte's smile disappeared.

The wind struck her before she even realized what was happening, and her feet left the ground.

Her eyes widened.

"No—!"

There was nothing to grab onto or steady herself with. For one horrifying second, Charlotte's body hung weightless above the open balcony before gravity claimed her.

Charlotte's scream echoed through House Aetheris as she plunged over the edge of the building.

Luckily for Charlotte, they had been assigned to the ground floor. Hence the fall only knocked every bit of air from her lungs.

She landed hard on the grass below, lying flat on her back as she stared up at the cloudless blue sky, struggling to understand how everything had gone so wrong in the span of a few seconds. Then the laughter reached her.

It came from every direction.

Charlotte turned her head just enough to see students lining the balconies overhead while others had gathered in the courtyard below. Some of them pointed openly at her, while the others made no effort to hide their laughter.

Heat flooded her cheeks. Then a shadow suddenly fell across her face and

Charlotte looked up.

Rhydian stood over her, his arms folded across his chest, his expression caught somewhere between annoyance and disbelief.

Her heartbeat immediately quickened.

"Good thing I had Tamara put you fragile little things on the ground floor," Rhydian said, his deep voice carrying easily across the courtyard. "Otherwise, I'd be explaining a human fatality before breakfast."

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 96: Don't Forget Who We Are

"A king who cannot sit beside the weak will never be worthy of leading the strong."

~ Rebel Beast

No matter how furious Rhydian was, it didn't seem to have any effect on Charlotte. Instead, she stared up at him from where she lay sprawled on the ground, her eyes practically sparkling.

"Rhydian Drakhar," Charlotte breathed, awe filling her voice. If she died right then, she would have no regrets.

Charlotte hadn't expected to ever see him again, especially after that annoying dragoness had threatened her. Yet here he was, standing right in front of her, and her poor heart simply couldn't settle.

"Human," Rhydian called, confusion evident in his voice. "Are you okay?"

She just kept staring at him with that strange look in her eyes.

Rhydian glanced up toward the walkway above. It wasn't an especially high fall, but it was enough to leave someone seriously injured if they landed at the wrong angle or hit a hard surface.

Fortunately, neither appeared to be the case.

"If you're fine, then get on your feet. There are eyes all over this academy, and I don't need Maverick Nightshade giving me grief over how I treat the humans," Rhydian said, genuine concern creeping into his voice.

Uh-oh. She definitely didn't want him getting into trouble because of her. So Charlotte immediately sprang to her feet.

"I'm good," she said hurriedly. "I'm good."

Now she was standing face to face with Rhydian. They were so close she could actually reach out and touch him.

Touch Rhydian Drakhar?

Ahhh!

She'd die! No, she'd never wash that hand again!

...Wait. Maybe she'd cut it off and treasure it forever.

No! That wouldn't work. It would rot.

Ahhh!

Then she'd simply have to find another way to preserve the memory of his touch forever—if it ever happened.

Oh, wait. She could make it happen.

Except Charlotte knew it had to happen naturally. She didn't want Rhydian getting angry or, worse, thinking she was some kind of creep.

Rhydian gave her one last look over. "Since you're fine, I'll be on my way."

"Wait!"

Charlotte's voice rang out before she could stop herself, making Rhydian pause. She quickly cleared her throat and straightened her posture.

"I mean Prince Rhydian." Her chin lifted ever so slightly. She had learned that was how the dragons addressed him and fully intended to make a good impression.

One of Rhydian's brows rose. He hadn't expected that.

"What is it you want, Charlotte?"

Charlotte brightened instantly. Just hearing her name leave his lips was enough to send her heart into a frenzy.

"I was wondering..." she began. "What are your plans for us? I mean, you brought us out of the human dormitory for a reason, didn't you? When do we start classes? What exactly are we supposed to do around here? How can I make the dragons like me a little more? How do I—"

Whatever question she intended to ask next was interrupted by the unmistakable growl of her stomach. Charlotte froze as heat rushed to her cheeks. There was no pretending he hadn't heard that.

"Why haven't you eaten?" Rhydian asked, a frown settling on his face.

Charlotte answered carefully. "Because... there wasn't anything to eat."

A tiny, devilish thought slipped into her mind.

"Miss Tamara had us staying in a room that used to be a storage room. We spent most of last night cleaning because there was so much dust and clutter. We survived on the little snacks we had with us." She gave an embarrassed smile. "To be honest, we still don't know where our next meal is coming from."

As if determined to support her story, her stomach growled again.

Although Charlotte sounded completely innocent, every word she had uttered subtly painted Tamara in an unfavorable light.

Whether Rhydian noticed or not, she could not tell, not when he rested a finger against his chin.

"Hmm, that's true," he murmured. "Humans need regular meals."

A spark suddenly lit his blue eyes. One, Charlotte mistook for concern. Was he actually that happy to take care of them?

"Would you escort us to the dining hall yourself, Prince Rhydian?"

The question seemed to pull Rhydian back to the present. He looked at Charlotte, his expression unreadable.

Charlotte's confidence immediately crumbled.

"Or... not," she said awkwardly. "It was a silly suggestion. You're royalty. I shouldn't expect someone like you to escort a mere human to the dining—"

"Go and gather the others."

Charlotte blinked. "Huh?"

Rhydian's blue eyes curved with unmistakable amusement.

"The humans of House Aetheris," he declared, "are about to receive the rare honor of having breakfast with their prince."

Charlotte nearly threw herself at him. She somehow managed to stop herself at the very last second.

"You won't regret this, Your Highness!" Charlotte blurted excitedly. "We'll be ready so fast, you'll think we teleported!"

Teleported? Rhydian almost laughed. The human was unexpectedly amusing.

Charlotte spun on her heel, only to nearly collide with Tamara. She instinctively recoiled, fear flashing across her face. Then she remembered who was standing behind her.

Rhydian.

Her spine straightened immediately. Charlotte offered Tamara a smile that was sweet enough to fool no one.

"Good morning, Miss Tamara."

Tamara's brows drew together. She heard the mockery hidden beneath those innocent words. The human, Charlotte, was really asking for death.

Unfortunately for Tamara, Rhydian was standing right there. So she watched in silence as Charlotte skipped away, barely containing her excitement.

"Really?" Tamara sneered, turning to Rhydian. "You're having breakfast with the humans now? Is that how low you've chosen to stoop, Your Highness?"

Rhydian took a moment before speaking.

"I wasn't aware sharing a meal with a human stripped me of my title." His lips curved into the smallest smile. "Perhaps I should mention that to Father. He's had breakfast with the human president on more than one occasion."

"You know that's different, Your Highness. The president is—"

"Human," Rhydian finished for her. "Just like the girls you're looking down on."

Tamara opened her mouth, but Rhydian continued before she could interrupt.

"Several of those girls come from influential families. Had humans not become so consumed by politics and power, they wouldn't be here at all. We'd be the ones requesting audiences and waiting for permission to meet them in the human territories."

Yet Tamara shook her head, she wished she could make him understand.

"You've been drifting farther and farther from our traditions, Rhydian," she said. "Our people are beginning to notice. They're uncomfortable. We are dragons. There are values we've upheld for generations. Don't forget who we are."

"Then perhaps we've placed too much value on a tradition that fears change." Rhydian said, no hint of hesitation in his voice. "If holding on to old beliefs means refusing to become better, then they're no longer worth preserving."

Tamara became speechless.

Rhydian took a deep breath.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm already late for breakfast."

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 97: Meeting Of The Houses

"One dining hall. Three Houses. Countless invisible lines waiting to be crossed."

~ Rebel Beast

Rhydian Drakhar was a remarkably tall, broad-shouldered man, so much so that Charlotte felt as though she were walking beside a giant.

She didn't mind in the slightest.

Instead, she walked beside him with barely restrained excitement, constantly fighting the urge to slip her arm through his. She held herself back.

Even Charlotte knew it was too soon. Rhydian wasn't interested in her — yet.

Charlotte had chosen a fitted red corset top and paired it with charcoal-gray wide-leg cargo trousers that sat low on her hips. The color hadn't been an accident. Red was the

color of Rhydian's dragon, and if she had any say in it, it would soon become the color he associated with her as well.

The corset hugged her a little too tightly, pushing her breasts together until they looked ready to spill free at the slightest wrong movement. Charlotte considered that perfectly acceptable.

She hadn't missed the brief moment Rhydian's eyes had fallen on her earlier.

It might have lasted only a second, but it had happened. And that was enough.

Everyone knew Rhydian Drakhar loved women. Female beasts practically threw themselves at him, and from what Charlotte had heard, the Dragon Prince had never been particularly good at saying no.

She was human. That was the only obstacle. And Charlotte had every intention of becoming the first human to make him forget every beast woman who had come before her.

The other girls didn't know it yet.

But by the time the Concordia Program was over, she'd be the one walking away with a dragon prince.

"Breakfast usually ends by eight, and everyone is expected to head to class afterward," Rhydian informed them as they walked along the cobbled path leading to the dining hall.

"But it's already nine, Your Highness," Charlotte pointed out in an unusually sweet voice. "Does that mean we won't get anything to eat?"

The sugary tone caught everyone's attention. Zainab, Indigo, and Meredith all turned to look at her.

Since when did Charlotte sound like that?

It was painfully obvious she was trying to look cute for Rhydian. None of them had the heart to tell her it was a little embarrassing.

Rhydian replied haughtily, "You're walking with the dragon prince. That should answer your question already."

In one word, those rules didn't apply to him. He could have his meal anytime and whenever he wanted.

House Aetheris was the closest to the dining hall, the sprawling building sitting only a stone's throw away from the academy itself.

The moment they stepped inside, the human girls slowed to a stop, a collective gasp escaping their lips. The canteen was far grander than any of them had imagined.

Warm morning light streamed through towering windows, illuminating polished stone floors and neat rows of wooden tables spread across the vast space.

The ceiling stretched high overhead, its elegant lighting making the already enormous hall feel even more open. What caught the girls' attention most, however, was the seating arrangement.

The dining hall had been divided into three distinct sections that stretched the length of the room. Wide walkways separated each section, making the division impossible to miss.

An open balcony overlooked the entire hall, and from what they could see, the upper floor followed the same layout.

"Why is it arranged this way?" Meredith asked, noticing that the serving stations had already closed for breakfast. Even so, fresh food had been set aside, as though someone had expected late arrivals.

"Each House prefers keeping to itself," Rhydian answered. "It avoids unnecessary disputes."

"So Aetheris eats with Aetheris, Therion with Therion, and Ophidian with Ophidian?" Indigo asked.

"Problem solved," Rhydian replied with a grin.

Considering how much the three Houses—or more precisely, Aetheris and Ophidian—seemed to dislike one another, the arrangement actually made sense.

"What about upstairs?" Meredith asked, glancing toward the balcony.

"That's usually reserved for beasts at the top of the hierarchy. Predators above, prey on the ground floor."

He was about to continue when his gaze drifted across the dining hall.

The corner of his mouth lifted.

"Well, well..." he murmured. "Isn't this a surprise? Looks like one predator is breaking the rules."

The girls instinctively followed his line of sight.

Their eyes landed on Caelis Cobryn.

The Basilisk Prince occupied an entire table by himself, eating breakfast with the same cold elegance he seemed to carry everywhere.

Well, not entirely by himself.

Karen, Olivia, and Fatima sat at the same table, quietly eating their meals. Even so, it was impossible to miss the distance between them and Caelis. An invisible boundary seemed to surround the prince, keeping everyone just far enough away to avoid intruding on his space.

The four of them ate in silence. At least, until Rhydian and the others arrived.

Immediately, Rhydian strolled toward the Basilisk Prince with the confidence not many people possessed. He stopped beside the table.

"Well, isn't this a blast?" Rhydian grinned. "Looks like we're both giving our humans the royal treatment."

Caelis didn't respond immediately. Instead, he calmly cut another piece of his meat, took a measured bite, and only after swallowing did he lift his gaze to Rhydian.

"Morning, Rhydian," he greeted with no warmth. "To what do I owe the pleasure today?"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic." Rhydian waved a dismissive hand. "I'm trying to convince my humans that I can actually be fun. Hard to do that if I can't even chat with my nemesis."

Only then did Caelis's attention shift beyond Rhydian. His silver eyes settled on the group of human girls standing a few paces behind him.

Charlotte stood with her chin raised defiantly, glaring at Karen. If looks could kill, Karen would already have a murder case on her hands. To think that little rat was still alive and well.

It wasn't just Charlotte and Karen. Both groups of humans seemed to be glaring at one another.

But the silent standoff didn't last long. Another group of humans entered the dining hall at the same time.

Just like that, the spotlight shifted.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 98: She Saw Him

"There are moments so small they last only seconds, yet divide a life into before and after."

~ Rebel Beast

"That is House Aetheris," Variant said, pointing ahead while Valerie drove, prompting Aria and the others to look through the window.

"Whoa."

"Damn."

"Impressive."

"Impossible."

The first time they had arrived at the academy, there had been no opportunity to appreciate the House properly. Their attention had been fixed on Maverick, the academy, and their survival.

Now, there was nothing to distract them.

House Aetheris rose proudly from the landscape, its red-brick exterior practically glowing beneath the morning sun. Broad balconies stretched from every level, most without railings, while towering stone columns and sweeping archways gave the structure an almost fortress-like presence.

It was obvious the entire House had been designed with dragons in mind rather than humans. The building was as magnificent as it was intimidating.

"So..." Brittney began, still staring out the window. "You're telling me Charlotte and her gang of mini devils live here?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "Damn, that's so enviable."

The words had barely left her mouth before she caught the looks Variant and Valerie exchanged through the rearview mirror.

"I mean no offense, of course. I love Therion. It's beautiful in its own way. But this place feels..."

"...like something humans were never supposed to see," Aria finished, her eyes lingering on the towering structure even as they drove pass.

"Exactly!" Brittney exclaimed. "Dragons are practically mythical creatures, and here I am looking at the place they actually call home. It almost feels sacred." She sighed dramatically. "I'd totally live here."

"Well, I wouldn't," Alek said.

Her roommates looked at her.

"As impressive as the architecture is, look at those balconies. Most of them don't even have railings. That's practically an invitation to fall to your death, especially for humans who can't fly. One shove and Charlotte and her goons become pavement decorations."

"R.I.P.," Trisha supplied solemnly.

Variant said. "Well, no offense taken. Not when we're friends with Rhydian Drakhar."

"Sort of," Valerie corrected with a knowing smile.

Variant shot her a look. "They didn't need to know that."

Valerie shrugged. "The whole academy already does. They'll find out sooner or later. Better they hear it from us than through some ridiculous rumor."

It hit Trisha.

"Wait a minute..." Her eyes darted between the two women. "You're sleeping with the dragon?"

A beat passed.

"Which one of you?"

Variant and Valerie exchanged another look. Then Valerie shrugged.

"Both of us."

"What?!"

"No way!"

Aria, Alek and Trisha stared at them in open disbelief.

Brittney merely said. "That's actually kind of cool."

The girls gave Brittney a long look. She had always been weird.

It was Aria who finally spoke. "I don't understand how this works."

She hesitated, gesturing helplessly with both hands instead of finishing the sentence aloud.

Trisha rolled her eyes. "Just say it, Aria. None of us are kids."

Aria swallowed.

"So... do you two take turns or something?" she asked, the words tumbling out faster now. "Like... some sort of timetable so you don't clash?" She immediately regretted saying it, but there was no taking it back now. "Or do you all..." She felt her face grow warmer. "...share the same bed?"

Variant and Valerie burst into laughter.

"You're kind of adorable, Aria," Variant managed between laughs. "You couldn't even bring yourself to say 'sleep with him.'"

Valerie wiped at the corner of her eye.

"'Share the same bed,'" she repeated, trying and failing to keep a straight face. "That was genuinely precious."

Aria wished the seat would open up and swallow her whole.

She knew beasts often had more than one partner. Maverick's own mother was in a plural marriage with four men. Yet hearing about it and asking people who actually lived that life were two entirely different things.

When their laughter finally died down, Valerie told her. "You humans always think of relationships as though there's only one right way to build them."

Aria frowned. "What do you mean?"

"We're beasts," Valerie said simply. "Every one of us has two natures living inside us. There's the person and then there's the animal. Most of us spend our entire lives learning how to balance both."

Variant nodded.

"Animals don't all bond the same way. Some choose one mate for life. Others naturally gather several partners. Some live alone unless it's breeding season. The instinct isn't identical across species, so neither are our customs."

"And then there's status too," Valerie added. "Power changes things. Strong Alphas have always attracted attention. The same goes for powerful Alpha females. Some beasts are naturally drawn toward strength, protection, or bloodlines. Sometimes those relationships become plural marriages. Sometimes they don't."

Variant shrugged.

"Some people choose one partner because that's all they want. Others choose more because everyone involved wants the same thing. There's no rule saying one way is more respectable than the other."

"The important part," Valerie finished, "is that everyone chooses it."

Silence settled over the vehicle.

"So..." Brittney said at last, looking between the two women with unmistakable curiosity. "You two actually chose to share Rhydian?"

"Yes. Sort of."

"Oh my God, you two are confusing me." Brittney groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "Just when I think I understand, I don't."

Variant chuckled. "It's more of a friends-with-benefits arrangement. Rhydian isn't exclusive to anyone. Valerie and I just happen to be his favorites."

"So..." Aria hesitated before settling on the closest conclusion her human mind could reach. "So he's a man-slut."

"Pretty much," Valerie admitted.

"I see." Aria nodded in understanding. "Thank God he's into beast females and not human females."

"Yeah, thank God," Variant agreed seriously. "Because I don't think any human woman would survive that man."

Variant finally pulled into the parking lot before bringing the car to a smooth stop. The moment the engine died, the girls piled out.

"Thank God," Trisha groaned, stretching both arms above her head until her back gave a satisfying crack. "That was crampy."

She wasn't exaggerating.

With Trisha, Brittney, Alek, and Aria all squeezed into the back seat, the ride hadn't exactly been comfortable. By the time Aria climbed out, her legs were already begging to be stretched.

Variant and Valerie stepped out moments later. The girl checked the time on her phone before slipping it back into her pocket.

"Breakfast is already over, but Dimitri would've taken care of everything." She looked at each of them in turn. "Most of the students should be in class by now, so it'll probably just be your fellow humans and whichever beasts are chaperoning them."

Her expression grew noticeably more serious. "So act cool. No matter what happens, no fighting. You got that?"

"Got it," the girls answered almost in unison.

While everyone else started gathering themselves, Aria found herself tugging self-consciously at the hem of her cropped T-shirt.

This wasn't her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd willingly shown this much skin.

Just a few more minutes, she reassured herself. Then it'll all be over.

Variant glanced toward Valerie. "Lead the way, girl."

Valerie flashed a proud smile. "With pleasure. Follow me, ladies."

Brittney pumped a fist into the air. "Let's do this!"

Without waiting for anyone else, she strode after Valerie, with Trisha and Alek close behind. Aria naturally drifted to the back of the group, while Variant remained a few steps behind them all, her watchful gaze sweeping the surroundings as though making certain nothing could reach them unnoticed.

Together, they headed inside.

The moment they stepped into the dining hall, every one of them came to an abrupt stop.

The hall stretched so far ahead that Aria couldn't immediately tell where it ended.

Seriously, did Bestiaris Academy have too much land on its hands?

Everywhere she looked, there was space,

wide walkways, tables that could seat dozens at a time. Even after everything she had seen since entering beast territory, the academy still found new ways to remind her just how different this world was from her own.

Valerie gestured toward the far side of the hall. "The food stations are over there. Dimitri must have already—" Her words stopped abruptly.

"...Wait."

Variant had to step forward.

"What?"

Valerie frowned toward the center of the dining hall. "Isn't that Rhydian?"

Everyone instinctively followed her gaze.

"What is he doing here?" Valerie muttered. "He should've been in class by now."

Before Aria's mind could even process the question, her eyes had already begun searching and she found him almost instantly.

Rhydian stood among Charlotte and her goons. But even from a distance, there was no mistaking the broad shoulders, and striking crimson hair that caught the morning light.

He turned at that same time and their gaze collided.

Aria drew in a sharp breath.

Fuck. He was handsome as hell.

The same way Aria stared at him, Rhydian looked back, except his gaze drifted lower, settling on the strip of bare skin exposed between her crop top and pants.

Heat rushed through Aria's body and she

could have sworn she felt his eyes trace the curve of her waist, lingering just long enough to leave her suddenly aware of every inch of exposed skin.

It wasn't even a touch, yet it felt dangerously close to one. Instinctively, Aria tugged at the hem of her crop top, trying to cover herself, only to remember there wasn't enough fabric to pull any lower.

Defy The Alpha(s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 99: One Big Unhappy Family

"The ancient dragons wrote that every treasure is first claimed by mind before it is ever claimed by touch."

~Rebel Beast

It was almost magnetic the way Rhydian Drakhar's gaze found Aria Aspen.

She was exactly as he remembered. And somehow, even worse.

There was an innocence about her that should have made her fragile. Instead, it only made the unassuming boldness in her stand out even more. She looked at the world with every intention of questioning it, even when she knew she shouldn't.

His dragon stirred.

She didn't belong in a place like this. Which only made him want her here even more.

Could she survive if he pulled her into the darkness of his world?

His gaze drifted lower.

The cropped shirt she wore exposed a narrow strip of toned skin above the waistband of her sweatpants.

The dragon inside him lifted its head.

Treasure.

The single word reverberated through every part of him, and Rhydian's jaw tightened.

Dragons coveted gold, jewels, ancient relics—objects worthy of guarding with their lives. Not people. And certainly not a human girl.

Yet his beast refused to acknowledge the difference.

His eyes lingered on the smooth curve of her waist. Without warning, his dragon thrust an image into his mind.

A slender gold chain encircled her waist, resting against her bare skin as if it had always belonged there. Tiny gemstones caught the light with every breath she took. His hands were at the small of her back, fastening the clasp before his fingertips slowly followed the

chain where it embraced her body, lingering just long enough to admire how perfectly it suited her.

The image vanished as quickly as it had come, but it left behind a hunger that tightened every muscle in his body.

His dragon wanted to adorn her. To drape her in pieces from his hoard until every beast who looked at her understood she belonged to the Dragon Prince.

The possessive impulse was so sudden, so consuming, that it took every ounce of discipline Rhyddian possessed not to cross the hall and discover whether her skin was truly as soft as his dragon imagined.

Instead, he remained where he was, watching her while trying very hard not to wonder what other treasures would look just as perfect against her body.

"Aria."

Someone nudged her.

"H-huh?" Aria blinked, turning to find Trisha watching her with concern.

"Are you okay? You were out of it for a moment."

"Y-yeah." Aria cleared her throat, unconsciously wrapping an arm around her waist as though shielding herself. "I'm fine."

She wasn't.

Aria had no idea where her mind had gone just now. It was as though she'd lost a few seconds without realizing it, only to return with the lingering feeling that something had happened while she wasn't fully present.

"Well, thank God for that," Trisha muttered. "Because we have another problem."

"What?"

"Caelis Cobryn is here."

Aria instinctively searched the hall, but she shouldn't have bothered. He found her first.

Those silver eyes settled on her with frightening precision, as if he had known exactly where she would be standing all along.

A chill crawled down Aria's spine.

Caelis Cobryn was beautiful in a way that was unsettling. His skin was so pale he could have stepped onto the set of a vampire drama without a trace of makeup.

His features were carved with impossible sharpness, from the clean line of his jaw to the aristocratic bridge of his nose. Like every serpent beast she had seen, his build was lean, almost deceptively so, yet his frame carried the restrained strength of something capable of striking without warning.

It was his eyes that unsettled her most. There wasn't an ounce of warmth in them.

They were beautiful, cold, and ancient. And at this very moment, they were fixed entirely on her.

"You shouldn't be looking at him," Trisha whisper-yelled. "He's a basilisk, for crying out loud."

Right. He was the prince whose gaze could turn living creatures to stone.

Aria almost laughed at the absurdity of the thought because, if anyone had already been petrified, it was her.

She simply couldn't look away.

"I'm not the one doing the looking," she murmured, her brows drawing together as she continued meeting his gaze. For several long seconds, neither of them moved.

Caelis regarded her with cold disdain, as if questioning why a human had the audacity to return his stare.

Aria answered with one of her own. She refused to lower her eyes.

Who did he think he was?

Unfortunately, the silent standoff was finally broken when someone stepped between them.

"Haven't you heard it's a little disrespectful to ogle a woman, Caelis?" Rhydian said, his expression as bright as ever. "Show some manners."

Rhydian's broad frame blocked Caelis' view of Aria completely.

A muscle ticked in Caelis' jaw. That annoying idiot.

However, the interruption also reminded Caelis that he had allowed himself to lose control for a moment. His attention shifted away from the human girl he wanted so desperately to question and back to his meal.

If everything went according to plan, there would be plenty of opportunities to uncover the truth. She could hide. Just not forever. If there was one thing he possessed in abundance, it was patience.

Unfortunately, Caelis and Rhydian were not the only ones caught off guard by the group's arrival.

Charlotte, Karen, and their respective little entourages stared openly at Aria's group, their expressions twisting with barely concealed jealousy and resentment.

Karen and Charlotte could hardly stand each other, yet Aria Aspen, Brittney Thorne, Trisha Thorne, and Aleksandra Bellville had become the one thing they could agree on.

Neither of them understood how those four always seemed to land on their feet while they were left picking up the pieces.

To make matters worse, Rhydian—the very dragon Charlotte had entered the dining hall with—ignored them and instead, headed straight for Aria's group.

"Isn't this lovely?" Rhydian said, a grin spreading across his face as he approached them. "Humans and beasts finally becoming one big unhappy family."

"My angels."

He slipped effortlessly between Variant and Valerie, bending just enough for each woman to press a playful kiss against one of his cheeks amid soft laughter.

"Rhydian." The two Therion beast greeted him warmly, clearly pleased to see him.

Aria watched the exchange without a word.

The dragon really was a man-slut. Nothing new there.

Rhydian finally straightened, and out of everyone standing before him, his attention settled on her.

He extended his hand.

"Rhydian Drakhar," he introduced himself smoothly. "It's nice to see you again, Aria Aspen."

Defy The Alpha (s) 2: Rebel Beast

Chapter 100: Enchanted Hands

"It is written in the oldest draconic records that the wrong touch could ignite a dragon's rage, while the right one could silence it."

~ Rebel Beast

Aria had no idea which unsettled her more.

The fact that he knew her name. Or the fact that he had said again as if they had already met.

"Excuse me?" Aria asked. "Have we met before?"

"Oh, not officially." Rhydian's smile widened a little. "But I caught you peeking at me through the window the other day."

Fuck her life.

Heat rushed into Aria's face.

He had seen her. Well, all of them. Her roommates had been standing right beside her, yet somehow he had singled her out as though she had been the only one there.

"Well..." Rhydian inclined his head toward his outstretched hand. Only then did Aria realize he had been waiting for her all this time.

Don't do it.

Every instinct she possessed urged her to leave his hand hanging. Unfortunately, Aria Aspen had never been particularly gifted at listening to good advice.

She slipped her hand into his.

Warmth spread through her palm the instant their skin touched. It was not ordinary warmth. It was richer than that. Deeper.

It flowed through her fingers, across her wrist, and up her arm with a slow, intoxicating pull until it settled somewhere beneath her ribs. For one reckless moment, Aria understood why dragons were associated with fire.

She drew in a quiet breath. He was far warmer than any human had a right to be. Yet the sensation was strangely inviting, making her want to lean into it just to see if the rest of him carried that same impossible heat.

Then reality caught up with her.

This was probably how he charmed every other girl who crossed his path. She refused to become another one of them.

Aria began to withdraw her hand. Or at least she tried to.

Rhydian's fingers tightened just enough to stop her before giving the gentlest tug. The movement caught her completely off guard, and she stumbled a step toward him, stopping herself only inches before colliding with his chest.

Aria shot him a glare. It lasted all of a second because Rhydian calmly lifted her hand between them.

Her pulse skipped.

Before Aria could understand what he intended, his lips brushed across her knuckles. The kiss was featherlight, yet the warmth of it lingered against her skin as though it had no intention of fading.

A shiver rippled through Aria's body, escaping as the smallest intake of breath.

When she looked up, she found him watching her. There was amusement in those sapphire-blue eyes. Just a knowing glint, like someone who had expected that exact reaction from the very beginning.

Aria immediately pulled her hand free.

Rhydian offered no resistance. If anything, the corner of his mouth curved into the faintest smirk.

He straightened to his full height.

"Now, it's nice to meet you officially, Aria Aspen."

Aria forced herself to hold his gaze.

"Likewise."

The lie tasted awful.

Caelis should have ignored the entire exchange. Instead, against his better judgment, his eyes drifted back to them.

Just like that, a scoff escaped him. Typical humans.

To be so thoroughly unsettled by one of a dragon's oldest tricks was almost embarrassing. If Aria Aspen thought that little display had been anything special, she was even more naïve than he had first assumed.

Caelis was not the only one struggling to keep his emotions in check. Charlotte felt as though the ground had just disappeared beneath her feet.

Did Rhydian really just kiss Aria's hand?

Her hand.

No.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

She was supposed to be the first human to receive every one of those moments. The first hand he held. The first hand he kissed. The first human woman he willingly acknowledged before everyone else.

Instead he had given it all to Aria Aspen.

The realization burned hotter than jealousy ever should. Unable to endure another second of it, Charlotte hurried toward them.

"Your Highness," she called sweetly, stopping beside him. "We haven't had breakfast yet."

With fake familiarity, Charlotte slipped her arm through Rhydian's, smiling like she belonged there.

She had barely touched him but Rhydian stiffened. His dragon erupted inside him.

A violent snarl tore through his mind, so powerful it nearly drowned out every rational thought he possessed.

Wrong.

His pupils narrowed into slits while molten gold bled into the blue of his irises. Every muscle in his body locked so tightly that a tremor ran through his arms.

He ripped himself free from Charlotte's grasp as though her touch had burned him, an anguished growl escaping his throat.

For one terrifying moment, it looked as if he wanted to shift right there and then.

"Rhydian, no!"

Aria didn't remember but she reached for him, her hands closing around his forearm.

She wasn't even sure what she hoped to accomplish, whether to stop or ground him. She had moved before thinking.

The effect was immediate because Rhydian Drakhar froze. The violent trembling ceased almost as quickly as it had begun, and the molten glow faded from his eyes until only his familiar brilliant sapphire remained.

Silence settled over the hall. Only then did Aria realize what she had done. She immediately released him, taking a step back.

What was wrong with her? Why did she keep touching these men without thinking?

Rhydian slowly exhaled. When he finally spoke, his voice was so calm it was almost unsettling.

"We should get our food," he said. "It'll get cold otherwise."

Without another word, he turned and headed toward the food stations.

Nobody moved. Not that anyone seemed capable of moving.

Even Caelis watched Rhydian's retreating back with narrowed eyes. Something wasn't right. Something had just happened. He could sense it.

"What the fuck was that?" Brittney asked, breaking the silence.

Her eyes slowly shifted toward Aria.

"...What did you do this time?"

"Me?" Aria stared at her in disbelief.

"Well, I'm not the one going around touching dangerously attractive beast men." Brittney said in a whisper. "First Maverick. Now the Dragon Prince. At this point, I'm starting to think your hands are enchanted."