



# Chapter 1 — fade.



Status

Done For Now

Moonlight kissed the damp bricks of the surrounding buildings, leaving the shadows thick and restless. My claws flexed, scraping against the steel pipe in my hand. The noise of distant machinery filled the air—dull and steady, masking anything nearby. The back alley reeked of decaying refuse, overlaid by a faint aetheric scent.

In this scenario, I was the hunted.

As I exhaled, a cloud obscured my vision in the frosty air. My ears twitched, straining for the subtle scrape I'd already heard once. A claw against stone.

There—a glint of green eyes. The glow of dark blue smoke came next, slicing through the shadows like a blade. The creature followed soon after, its narrow head resting at an unnatural tilt as its vibrant eyes locked onto me.

“Wraithhound,” The word felt heavy on my tongue. My grip tightened on the pipe, its metal biting into my palm. As if it had a mind of its own, my tail flicked with confidence, betraying how I felt inside. Nervous, anxious.

I had some tricks up my sleeve, and had been in enough fights to know how to win them. None of that mattered.

Fighting was just gambling, only the stakes were higher. Every swing, every dodge, every feint—all a roll of the dice. Some people thought fights were about skill or power, or who had the sharpest sword or the fastest reflexes. But at its core? Just chance.

Sure, you could stack the odds. You could train, sharpen your instincts, read your opponent like a dealer flipping cards. But even the best gamblers lost big. Even the best fighters took a hit they didn't see coming. You bet your body instead of your coins, wagered your life on split-second decisions.

And me? I liked the thrill. The weight of risk pressing against my ribs, the sharp inhale before a move that could make or break me. Fighting was just another way to feel alive—the same rush as doubling down on a bad hand, the same quiet certainty that even if the odds were against me, I could make them bend.

I just had to play the game.



The creature moved closer, its claws clicking against the stone. Smoke curled from its body, faded wisps of blue that twisted as it stopped just short of the moonlight. It waited with an unrelenting gaze.

A waiting game. A silent bet.

It lunged, its claws tearing through the wall as it propelled itself toward me. I ducked low, the rush of air brushing past my fur as the pipe cracked against its

ribs. The sound reverberated through my arms—a satisfying crack—before the creature hit the ground.

That should have been enough. But the house always had tricks too.

The hound shuddered, its smoky body curling into itself. Its green eyes flared to life as it reformed, standing as though nothing had happened.

I clicked my tongue. "Should've figured."

The wraithhound's attack was faster, blue smoke trailing as its limbs elongated, lunging at me like a flipped card coming down on the table. I spun, swinging the pipe in a tight arc.

We missed each other.

The air was the only thing I hit, my bet placed on a hand that didn't pay out. Its claws tore into my shoulder, the impact driving me to my knees. Pain bloomed, sharp and immediate, as I twisted away, baring my teeth.

The hound landed a few feet away, its body rippling as if mocking the laws of physics.

My grip on the pipe loosened. I needed a new strategy.

*Enough of this.* The pipe fell from my hand.

My claws extended with a sharp click. The wraithhound snarled, smoke billowing from its maw as it lunged again.

I phased, going all-in.

Everything blurred in a flicker of motion, my body shifting through space faster than the mind could track. One second, I was in its path. The next, I was behind it, claws already sinking deep into its side. The sensation was like cutting through silk soaked in ice water. Aetheric smoke curled around my hands as I tore upward. The smoke twisted, lost to the air as the creature's body collapsed inward, nothing but a burned-out wisp of what it once was.

*Sure, I play... but I never said I play by the rules.*

The acrid scent of the beast's essence clung to me, combing through my silver fur like a warning. I exhaled, rolling my shoulders to shake the numbness out of them. "Too bad," I muttered, voice low. "Better luck next time."

The thing about gambling... the odds were always against you. Even if the game was fair—which it never was—you were always one hand away from losing it all. Fighting wasn't any different.

I stretched, rolling my shoulder to test the damage. A sharp sting bloomed beneath my fur. But at least I was standing. I took a step, feeling confident.

"You see that, Cadmea? Too easy." I said, but my mind felt empty.

As if on cue, a growl reverberated through the alley, low and menacing. Then another.

Four more green orbs cut through the darkness ahead. Smoke thickened in the air, like ink in water as the creatures took form—bodies twisting. The laws of physics were more of a suggestion than a rule for wraiths.

"Oh, come on." I said, a frown tugging at my mouth. My claws flexed, extending with a click. "You don't know when to quit, do you?"

The first lunged.

I moved before it even reached me, shifting my weight forward and slipping to the side. It shot past, momentum carrying it too far. Too eager. Too predictable. I vaulted off the wall, twisted midair, and landed behind it.

It snarled, correcting course. I was already swinging.

My claws raked across its ribs, splitting through the swirling aether that made up its body. Aetheric flesh tore cold against my skin. The hound shrieked, staggering from the blow—not dead, just pissed.

The second was faster. I twisted just in time. Claws shredded through my sleeve, pain blooming in my arm as warmth seeped through the fabric. I didn't react. Pain was just another number—an expense you factored in.

I kicked off a nearby crate, flipping over its head as it lunged again. Midair, I twisted and drove my claws down. They sank deep into its back, and I ripped upward as I landed. Smoke hissed, curling from the wound as the hound crumpled.

Not enough.

The first hound recovered, darting low. I spun, missing the swipe of its claws. My jacket didn't.

*Shit. Caelum's going to kill me.*

I dropped low and slashed at its legs, knocking it off balance.

A blur of movement—a second one closing in fast. I phased.

The world flickered—sound snapping to an eerie silence as I phased through the void, space bending like a shuffled deck of cards.

I reappeared behind them, already moving. My claws flashed in a tight arc, slicing deep into the second hound's throat.

Smoke burst from the wound like a broken dam. It shrieked, its form collapsing into a pile of thick, curling mist.

"One down." I exhaled.

The remaining hounds circled, their green eyes burning brighter. Their movements changed. More deliberate. Less frantic. They weren't just reacting anymore.

A third shape emerged behind them. Then a fourth.

I inhaled, calculating the odds. "You've got to be kidding me." Two injured. Two fresh. Four against one.

I'd pushed my luck too far. All I could do was run.

I darted toward the closest one, feinting left. It lunged—predictable. I sidestepped and raked my claws across its throat, the impact sending it reeling. That was all I needed.

Sprinting as fast as my feet would carry me, the street came into view. The city lights stretched ahead, too bright, too loud, a mess of bodies moving in patterns I'd memorized a thousand times over. Riar was known as the city of dreams. Even during snowfall in the middle of the night, Riar never slept. Nightlife spilled from the taverns into the bustling market streets.

*Perfect.* I bolted into the crowd.

People scattered as the hounds followed, leaping over carts, knocking over tables. Glass shattered across the stone. Some people screamed. Some tripped over themselves as they tried to get away. But the hounds never deviated. They were only after me.

I veered, cutting through an alley too narrow for them to run side by side. Tactical choke point—and a dead end. The first hound vaulted towards me. I grabbed the

fire escape, swung over its head, and landed behind it.

It crashed into the wall behind me.

A stack of crates loomed ahead. I kicked the bottom one hard enough to send the pile toppling. The second hound shrieked as debris shattered through its smoky form.

I phased behind the last one, sprinting out of the death trap. My lungs burned. My shoulder throbbed. I didn't slow.

My destination, the Hydra's Den, flickered into view, its nexeon-lit sign buzzing against the night sky.

I vaulted over a trader's stand. Two wraiths chased me, and one was close. Too fast.

I phased.

The world blurred—time folding in on itself for a heartbeat.

I reappeared a few paces behind myself—behind it, claws already swinging.

Aetheric flesh split beneath my nails. The hound howled, dissolving into mist before it even hit the ground.

Landing hard, I skidded before pushing myself upright.

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders as I turned back to the last remaining hound. It growled low, hesitation flickering behind its glowing green eyes. I tilted my head. "Go on," I said, voice even. "Place your bet."

It went all in,

I watched it vanish, melting into the darkness the same way it had arrived.

Cracking my knuckles, I retracted my claws. The beasts' aetheric blood dripped from the tips, dissipating into the air before it ever reached the ground.

Outside the bar, The Hydra's Den, a group of drunks stood out front, smoking cigarettes. Oblivious to the events that led up to this point, one of them turned. His glazed eyes studied me for a moment. "What in Nohr's name are you?" He broke out in laughter and his speech slurred from inebriation. "Hey, Benny. Get a load of the freak in the animal costume!"

"Excuse me," I muttered, ignoring the snide laughter from his friends as I slipped past. The man shouted after me, but his words fell flat as I entered the bar.

I huffed, my lungs feeling like dried up fruit. The warmth of the tavern nestled itself beneath my fur.

"You're late," the bartender said, barely glancing up from his work.

"Had company." I pulled my hood lower as I approached him.

The bartender's gaze flicked toward the door. His lips curled in a half-smirk as he set down the glass he'd been wiping. "Company, huh? You're lucky I don't charge extra for bringing trouble into the Den."

I ignored the remark, weaving through the haze of smoke and mismatched tables. My tail flicked once before I tucked it close.

Reaching the counter, I drummed my claws on the worn surface. "Is it ready or not?"

The bartender cocked his head, raising an eyebrow. "It's been ready. Get this thing gone, would ya?" He crouched behind the counter, retrieving a small package wrapped in dark cloth, shaking it next to his ear before handing it over.

"Just some gifts," I said with growing excitement.

"Sure," he said, eyeing me as if I planned to rob him. "You can let your roommate know I'm no moron. This is the last time."

Leaning against the counter, he crossed his arms. His piercing blue eyes flicked toward the door where the wraithhounds were relentless. "You think I don't recognize when I'm being played? That little brother of yours—what's his name? Caelum? He's lucky I'm not charging double. You tell him this is the last time."

I blinked, trying to mask the twitch in my ears. "Caelum? He's not my—" My sentence ended short as I shook my head, keeping myself focused. His relation to me wasn't the important part. "What does Caelum have to do with this?"

The bartender shook his head as he wiped down the counter. His hair, classic short back, and sides cut, had a hint of silver at the temple that wasn't noticeable until under a light. "Oh, please. Do I look like a nexeon miner fresh off the line? I know how this game works." As he straightened, his eyes locked onto mine. "He sends you because you're good at looking harmless. Guess he figured you'd have better luck than he did."

"Wait, but—" My claws scratched lightly against the wood as I tried to find the words. "I think you've got this all wrong. I came here for me. Nobody sent me."

His laugh was dry, cutting. "Sure, sure. If you want to play dumb, then get out."

"I'm not lying," I kept my voice firm, seeking control of the conversation. My tail flicked against my legs, betraying the calm front I was trying to hold. "Your accusations are baseless. I have what I need, so I'll take my leave now."

The bartender leaned closer, lowering his voice so only I could hear. "Let me give you a little advice, kid. If you're going to run errands for him, make sure you're getting paid in something better than sob stories. He's not half as smart as he thinks he is."

I forced a breath through my teeth, clinging to what remained of my composure. "Caelum doesn't owe you anything. He doesn't owe me anything. And this isn't for him. I mean, it is, but he doesn't know about it."

"Right." His smirk widened as he straightened. "And I'm a priest of Nohr. Next time, he cleans up his mess before sending a lackey. This is a warning."

Leaning forward, I growled through my teeth, extending my claws. "I'm really the last person you want to be threatening."

The tavern fell quiet. Each patron focused on us, ready to jump at the first sign of movement. I looked around at all the faces, slinking back.

"Wrong." The bartender's grin never faltered as he flexed his biceps, leaning over the counter. His stance oozed in confidence. "That would be me."

Before I could retort, a chair scraped against the floor. The sound cut through the silence in the room like a cry in the night. A towering patron, built like he was part minotaur, stumbled over. He adjusted his jacket with exaggerated slowness, his uncomfortable gaze settling on me.

"Everything good here, Radek?" The man's voice was gravelly, like stone grinding against stone. He cracked his knuckles, the sound loud in the sudden stillness.

The bartender, whose name I'd never figured out—Radek, apparently—gave him a casual nod, his eyes remaining in place. "Just a misunderstanding, Dren. No need to get involved."

I straightened up with a slight huff, realizing I should have folded a while ago. My eyes drifted to meet the hulking man's glare for a split second before I stepped back, retracting my claws.



"It's not for Caelum," I said, keeping my voice level. Sure, it would have been easier to agree and be on my way, but backing down from the truth didn't feel like an option. "I was just trying to... clarify. No trouble here."

Radek snorted, unimpressed, but he gestured for Dren to sit back down. The man hesitated, his gaze still locked on me, before slinking back to his chair with a grunt.

"Next time, don't bring your drama into my bar," Radek said, his voice low but pointed. "I don't care who sent you. This is *your* one warning."

I bit my tongue, nodding once, tight-lipped, and turned toward the exit. My heart was still pounding, but at least I had the package.

Halfway to the door the door, I stopped as the most inconvenient thought hit me. I winced. "One more thing," I said, spinning back around.

Radek raised an eyebrow, annoyed. "What now?"

I swallowed crow—no chewing, no eating. Just swallowed it. "Can I grab, uh, something specific? Liquor." My ears twitched. "It's called Basilisk's Teeth?"

He didn't respond, only stared before correcting me. "Basilisk's Breath." Any shred of credibility I had left vanished. His gaze persisted, as he decided whether I was worth the trouble.

"It's a gift, Radek. I came here on my own." I said, hoping to win him over. He didn't look convinced. "I promise."

His gaze persisted as he mulled over whether I was worth the trouble. "Wait here," he finally said, disappearing into the back room.

Tapping my claws on the counter, my eyes scanned the room. That's when I noticed someone watching me.

A figure lingered a few feet away, his tattered clothes too pristine for the grime-streaked bar. Loose threads dangled from his shirt, but the fabric was spotless, catching the dim light like it didn't belong here. He didn't belong here.

As he stepped closer, a foreign scent trailed him—crisp and clean, out of place in a room soaked with sweat and stale ale. His calculated movements were as if he was used to eyes always following him.

"Trouble with the bartender?" His voice had a clipped tone, like he was rehearsing a line.

"No, no. We're good here," I said, keeping my voice neutral.

He tilted his head, a gleam from the edges of his hair betraying his disheveled visage. His vibrant blue eyes caught the light with a sparkle. "Might I say, you've got the most interesting way of handling it."

Something about the stranger's smile unsettled me, like he knew more about me than he let on. "Sorry, do we know each other?"

He smiled, his expression both amused and guarded as he shook his head. "Not yet."

The stranger paused as he studied my expression. Then he nodded, shifting as he stepped closer. His gaze held an undeniable curiosity. "You're clearly not from around here," I said, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

"Neither are you," he countered, his smile widening just enough to show a hint of teeth, perfectly straight and unstained. "But I imagine you blend in better than I do."

I couldn't help but grin like I'd found the end of a rainbow as I pondered the absurdity of his statement. As far as I knew, I was the only hybrid in existence. An enigma of humanity. A beast and a human stuck together to create me.

"You... realize what you just said... right?" I asked with an amused grin, bewildered by the irony of him believing I blend in. He stood out from the crowd, but he didn't have a tail, moveable ears, fur, or paws.

His smile didn't falter, but a moment of realization flashed through his expression. "Right. Let's say we're neck and neck."

My tail responded with a swish, absent-mindedly brushing against his arm. The brief contact was electric, my nerve endings sparking like a shattered nexeon crystal. I jerked it back before the rush could settle. My fur stood on edge as I eyed him. *What did he just do to me?*

"A little skittish, are you—or perhaps it's something else? Something... unexpected?" His sharp eyes held an intensity you'd expect from someone accustomed to giving orders, not following them. They flicked down to where my tail had been before meeting mine again, his path precise—unwavering.

Before I could respond, Radek returned. He carried a dark glass bottle in hand. "You've got a name?" he asked, looking directly at the stranger, his tone casual but edged with suspicion.

The blonde's smile didn't waver as he responded, confidence pouring out of him. He was so sure of his own name that I wondered if he picked it himself. "Asher."

Radek glanced at me. "Friend of yours?"

I shook my head. "We just met."

"Right." The bartender's expression hardened as he set the bottle down with a heavy *thud*. His eyes narrowed, flicking between us before settling on Asher.

"Well, Asher, this isn't a place for loitering. You've got five seconds to decide if you're staying or making yourself scarce."

Asher tilted his head, an almost regal gesture adding to his appearance. "Fret not. I was just leaving."

Radek's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing as Asher turned back to me. "It was... interesting meeting you," the blonde said, taking in my appearance once more. My face felt hot again. Being in the spectacle that way was... discomfoting.

Unsure what to make of him, I nodded. "Yeah... you too" I said. His gaze lingered before he went out the front door.

Radek shook his head, gesturing towards the bottle to remind me. "Watch yourself, kid. Some people don't belong here, no matter how good they are at pretending."

"Funny you say that." I said, securing my hood as the bartender returned to his work. "You didn't kick me out." I held my wrist over the scanner, clutched the package and the bottle, turning towards the back exit.

He looked up, letting out a low chuckle. "You're not pretending, kid. You're a snake like the rest of us, you just haven't realized it."

His words lingered with me as I pushed the front door open. The icy air nipped at my face, as I checked each direction for wraiths. I stepped into the shadows, my mind replaying the events over again. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd be seeing Asher again soon.

The streets were far too quiet for a city like Riar. I knew better than to trust the silence. My ears twitched, straining for a sound that wasn't there. A growl, a scrape—anything to tell me where they were.

Nothing.

My claws flexed, indecision biting at me. "It's fine." I told myself. "They're gone—"

A few steps in, I heard a rustling from the surrounding darkness. *No way. They found me already?*

I stood frozen in place, as if not moving meant they'd sniff me and leave me alone. My diamond-shaped pupils enhanced the low lighting as I scanned the darkness ahead for the movement.

The rustling came again, sharper this time. My ears twitched, and I fought the urge to jump. Never let them call you on your bluff.

I gripped the package tucked beneath my jacket tighter. My claws flexed against the glass bottle in my other hand. If they showed themselves, I'd have to fight—and with my hands full, it wouldn't end well.

I couldn't fight like this.

A low groan escaped my throat. "Time to pay Cadmea a visit." My claws retracted as I slowed my breathing and focused. The surrounding air thickened, buzzing with energy. The edges of the world blurred, the shadows of Riar dissolving into something colder, stranger.

The Aether Silva rippled into view, immediate and effortless, like stepping into a thought.

Cobblestones vanished, replaced by ash that clung to my paws like static snow. Twisted, skeletal trees stretched toward the pale sky. Wisps of pastel blues, greens, purples, danced in the distance, adding splashes of life to the desaturated landscape.

Each breath tasted like cold despair.

"You're being tracked, you know." Cadmea warned, appearing just out of reach. A ghostly blue smoke danced around a figure that looked identical to me. An anthropomorphic fox, loaded. Bushy tail, moveable pointed ears, claws, paws, and all. The only difference being my human face, while his was fox-like. "Why have you come?"

I held out the gift and the bottle. "Keep these safe for me."

Cadmea's tone harshened, the smoky distortion surrounding him hiding his frown. "You're not serious, Andrew." He had called me Andrew my whole life. I never knew why, but I never thought to question it either. "The Silva isn't—"

"My personal storage unit, I know. You've told me a thousand times." I rolled my eyes.

"This wouldn't happen to be the time it sticks, would it?" His eyes followed mine as I scanned the forested wasteland.

Blackened shadows of people drifted through the ash, their edges blurred, like they couldn't decide whether to stay or disappear.

A man's silhouette knelt at the base of a tree, his head in his hands. The surrounding air burned with flickers of red light, like a dying ember. I felt the tug of his anguish, sharp, and hollow, and forced my eyes away. I kept my distance from the shades that lingered. Getting too close meant losing more than just my nerve.

"No, it wouldn't," I muttered, my voice sounding small in the oppressive groans of the shades that lingered here.

My claws worked, scraping at the ash beneath one of the twisted trees. The more I dug, the more that fell into place. My hands faltered, twitching as Cadmea's wispy outline surged into me like a gust of wind.

"Cadmea," I growled, trying to resist.

"Relax," he said, his tone as smooth as it was maddening. "Let me help."

My jaw clenched, but I didn't fight him as he took over my body. I watched as my claws moved with precision, Cadmea's influence over me palpable as he placed the items into the hollow. He covered them with ash, his movements quick and deliberate, as though he'd done this a thousand times before.

"Done," Cadmea said, satisfaction oozing from his tone. The Silva seemed to shift around us, its ominous silence somehow growing more silent. "Now, leave before they catch your scent."

I wrested control back, the transition jarring but familiar. My claws retracted as I stepped back, my breathing shallow. The aether felt heavier now, pressing against my chest like a weight. My thoughts turned dark; I couldn't stay here much longer.

The world blurred again, the Silva fading like smoke caught in the wind. The cold ash and haunting light gave way to the damp shadows of Riar, the sharp stench of stone and grime rushing back to meet me. My paws clicked against the cobblestones, and I exhaled a long breath, the weight of the Silva releasing from my chest.

But I wasn't alone.

A rustle came from behind, something lurking in an alley. Then, the snarling, guttural sounds of wraithhounds closing in behind me.

"Dammit, already?" My feet were already in motion.

*I warned you against coming here, Andrew.* Cadmea's presence invaded my mind, his thoughts bleeding into mine. A soul's pact with a vagrant. It's what made me a reaver—the price I had to pay for the Aether Silva to accept me. *The wraiths can track your aether signature.*

The threat grew louder as they tore across the stone, giving way to the chase. I didn't dare look back, amplifying the fear building inside my chest. I could almost feel them ripping through my flesh with every step—like the next one would be a step too slow.

"They would have found me anyway." I said, pushing out the words in a heavy breath. My lungs burned as the shadows closed in like a suffocating shroud. My focus narrowed as I pressed on, but they were catching up.

*You're right. You've never cared much for subtlety.* His words stung like a wasp, as if they meant anything. Cadmea had a way of turning everything I lacked into something superior over me.

"You're ridiculous sometimes." I said with a growl as the apartment came into view. But I could feel them on top of me. I'd never make it.

*Why? Because I'm the only one concerned with keeping us alive?* Cadmea chimed in, mocking me. *You think you'd have survived this long without me?*

I'd reached my tipping point. "That's it!" I yelled between ragged breaths, my paws skidding to a halt on the uneven cobblestones.

In one fell swoop, I extended my claws and swung a fist backwards, catching an eager hound in the jaw. Its head snapped to the side and the body twisted into smoke.

A second hound followed up behind the first, snapping with powerful jaws. I phased, reappearing just above it, using my body weight to crush it to the ground with my elbow.

Two more pounced at me from either side, but I phased again. My claw impaled a fifth hound through the neck as I reappeared. A fiery rage overtook my yellow eyes, each beat of my heart filling a void reserved for fury.

The wraith disintegrated. My ears turned to a low growl behind me. I spun around, kicking the hound in the jaw with enough force to snap its neck.

One remained.

It seethed, smoke dripping and its stance low, but I was beyond its existence at that point. It dove towards me and I side-stepped, catching its tail. I swung it in an arc, using my free hand to slice the tail off. Its body crashed into the ground. As it scrambled to its feet, it whimpered, cowering away from me with fear in its eyes.

I screamed as I neared, pummeling its face in beats. *"Why. Do you. Torment. Me. Every. Chance. You. Get?"* It dusted into smoke as I took its life.

I remained in the middle of the road like a crazed maniac, huffing to catch my breath.

Silence.

The realization of what I'd just done to my aggressors sank in with the euphoric feeling of isolation.

I wasn't in a mood to celebrate my victory. I'd been dealing with Cadmea's sly remarks for three years.

"Do you want me to die?" I said, gritting my teeth. "Do you hate me that much?"

Silence.

"What did I ever do to you?"

Silence again.

"Answer me!" I roared, the intensity scaring even myself as it echoed off the nearby buildings.

*Who do you think keeps you alive when you pull stunts like this?* His response was quick, carrying an icy poison.

"You think that gives you some sort of pass to make every waking moment of my life an absolute nightmare?" I shouted out. If I didn't look insane before, I did now.. but I didn't care.

*If you didn't make yourself such an easy target, maybe you wouldn't always be the victim!*

I retracted my claws, spitting on the ground before I spun towards the apartment to make the rest of the trek home. His remark meant nothing to me, yet his tone infuriated me.

*Whatever! I'm tired of it, Cadmea,* I responded in thought, a scowl upon my face as I trudged along. *I didn't ask for you. I didn't want you. You've been nothing but hell and I'm over it. I'm done! Get the hell out of my head!*

Silence.

I fumed the rest of the way home. He did too. A stray fragment of thought occasionally slipped to the other like an intercepted note in a classroom. I had just started on the stairs when he finally spoke again.

*Without me, you'd be dead, you know. You're hopeless, Andrew. It's a surprise you even survived the last three years, and we both know how much luck was involved.*

*Call me Andrew one more time, Cadmea.* I stopped mid-step up the stairs, biting my tongue to keep from telling him what a piece of shit I thought he was—but it didn't stop my thoughts. *I swear on Eikan's hands, I will spend the rest of the night listening to The Harpy Sisters until you leave my head.*

His silence carried a hint of smugness, but at least my threat held enough weight to shut him up. I stomped up the rest of the way, my frustration reverberating through every step. I leaned against the door, taking a deep breath before stepping inside.

I walked in to the smell of Caelum's cooking and laughter. The sound of the Nero brothers' conversation ended from the other room as I shut and locked the door behind me.

"Fox?" Caelum's voice called out, curious. His head appeared from around the corner, his dark red hair catching the light. He appeared stupefied as he examined me. "Where on Nohr's breast have you been?"



"Out," I said, sliding my hands into the pockets of my shredded jacket. My tone was sharper than he deserved, but I was still seething.

Korben's laughter echoed from the couch. "That's specific. Let me guess—he's been in one of his moods again."

"What did you do? We just got you that jacket!" Caelum said with a groan, picking at the shredded cloth.

"Save it, Cael. I'm *not* in the mood." I said, growling through my teeth.

"Called it." Korben said, antagonizing me on purpose.

I shot him a glare as I made my way to the couch, and his smug grin soured.

Caelum was stubborn, but he picked up on the intensity in my voice and returned his attention to his task.

Korben tossed a pillow at me as I sat, but I caught it without looking, extending a claw to protect myself. I punctured it, spurting out a small burst of stuffing.

"You look like crap," he said. "Rough night?"

I dropped the pillow and glanced toward Caelum in the kitchen. He was listening in, stirring something in a large pot he was holding.

"What of it?" I said, sharp enough that Korben took the hint and returned to his whatever he'd been doing prior.

Caelum stopped stirring, setting the pot down before approaching me. His nose wrinkled as he let out a sigh. His emotional maturity outrivaled everyone's, despite him being the youngest. As if he bypassed typical emotional triggers, always seeing a situation for what it was. "Are you hurt?" He asked, kneeling beside the couch as he examined me again.

My temper eased as I realized the pain from my wounds radiated through my body. "I wasn't until you reminded me." I said, wincing as I leaned back.

Korben raised an eyebrow. "Wraithhounds again?"

I nodded, and the room fell silent.

"You're supposed to tell us when you're doing this stuff," Korben said, his tone serious now. "You can't just—"

"I didn't go looking for it," I said sharply, cutting him off. "It just happened."

"Were they here again?" Caelum asked, clarifying his question while retrieving a first aid kit from nearby. "In Riar, I mean."

"Yeah." I nodded, wincing slightly as he dabbed something on my shoulder wound. "I still don't know how they're getting here though."

It was true. Wraiths weren't in my realm. They were unresolved shades, long after the owner had passed away.

Caelum didn't respond. His brother sighed and leaned back, rubbing a hand through his blonde hair, the locks falling back into place. "You're going to give us all a damn heart attack one of these days."

"Well, try being me."

Korben snorted and turned his attention to a stack of magazines.

Caelum finished treating my shoulder, and I didn't tell him about the other wound. I was tired of being prodded at. My wounds healed fast—far faster than a typical human's.

As I calmed down, I felt awkward, imagining the fun and laughter that I ruined. A pang of guilt coursed through me. I didn't mean to come in acting like a monster.

The silence stretched on, each second piling on top of my insecurity before I couldn't take anymore. "Sorry. I just needed a moment to collect my thoughts. I didn't mean to snap at everyone." My voice was firm and loud, so Caelum could hear it from the kitchen. The apology felt out of place, and nobody responded, only adding to my anxiety.

"So, either wraithhounds have figured out phasing," Korben said, his tone low, "or there's another reaver out there somewhere."

"But... that still wouldn't explain the wraiths—not really." I said, relaxing as I lounged back on the couch. The fabric felt coarse against the pads of my fingers as I clenched them. "You might be right though. I feel kind of silly thinking I was the only one."

"Well, it's not like there are other hybrids out there." Caelum turned off the water with a deliberate motion, wiping his hands on a dishrag as he stepped into view.

I scoffed. "So we think."

He frowned, setting the rag down. "I'm just saying, it's not asinine to assume you'd be unique in other ways. I'd never heard of a wraithhound until I met you—or the Aether Silva."

"Yeah... well... clearly not as unique as we thought." The fire inside dimmed to a dull glint as the conversation started feeling more natural. I glanced toward the window, the city lights beyond a dull backdrop. "I mean, how else could a wraith get here? It's not like Orion and the Silva are across the street from each other. They're different realms."

Korben shrugged. "Unless you're leaving the door open." His grin returned but weaker, like armor that didn't quite fit. "Is that a thing?"

I shook my head. "I don't believe so. At least, if it is, I don't know how," I said. "But... they weren't wandering. They had orders. Ignore everything else and focus on me." Another tense silence in the room as we contemplated the possibilities.

Caelum's voice broke the silence. "So, what's your next move?"

I blinked at him, surprised by the question. "Next move?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "If someone's hunting you, we can't just wait for them to strike again"

For a moment, the weight of his words pressed against me. He wasn't wrong. The wraiths, the possibility of another reaver—at least, something was out there that wanted me dead. This was only the start.

"I don't know," I admitted, my voice low. "I need to figure out who—or what—is behind this."

Korben leaned back, his grin gone. "Whatever it is, you're not doing it alone."

I glanced at him, his usual carefree demeanor replaced by something harder, more resolute. Caelum nodded in agreement, his sharp eyes meeting mine.

"You're stuck with us, Crit," the older continued, his tone lighter but no less serious. "You don't get a choice."

Korben had always called me 'Crit.' It used to be 'Crittter,' but it shortened over the years. At first, it embarrassed me, but the way he said it grew on me.

I didn't answer right away, but the weight in my chest finally lightened at the thought of not carrying this alone. Yet, even as they said it, I felt more alone than

ever. Someone—or something—was hunting me. Not them. And we didn't know what.

A voice ran through my mind again. I'd felt his presence the whole time, but he'd come and go so often, it didn't register anymore. Thinking back, he hadn't left after our fight. *Fox... Go lay down and rest for a little while. I'll check back before the night ends.*

"What do you care?" I snapped, earning a quizzical eyebrow from the older brother.

Caelum recognized it. "Cadmea," he said, returning to the kitchen to finish dinner. Korben rolled his eyes and refocused on whatever he had been doing prior. He'd never liked Cadmea or the Aether Silva.

*You're right. What do I care? I couldn't be nice to you if I wanted to. You'd never allow it.*

I opened my mouth to argue back, but nothing came out. The more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right—at least in that instance, he was right.

"You never were before. Why start now?" I said, my tone softening. Korben raised an eyebrow, but didn't investigate further.

"I figured he was out working," I gestured to the massive two-handed sword. Korben didn't respond. "Liam, I mean. I thought he had a job today."

He finally looked up. "Oh. Nope, he's in his room. Said he wasn't feeling great earlier." Korben said, returning his attention to his magazine as he flipped the page.

*You still have something buried here, you know.* Cadmea seemed annoyed, but his tone had a hint of something else in it. Something... unnerving.

"Oh! I forgot!" A surge of excitement coursed through me as I phased into the Aether Silva. The ash-drenched landscape sprawled out before me—barren and heavy, the air thick with silence. Twisted, dead trees clawed at the pale sky above glowing rivers of aether. Every nerve in my body was on edge, the oppressive atmosphere clawing at my mind.

The shades lingered, their tormented souls crying out like a twisted choir of agony. I always steered far away from them. Getting too close meant rescuing

someone from their anguish—by taking it as my own.

Cadmea stood waiting, his smoky silhouette dancing behind his usual form. A mirror image of me, only darker, with his presence like a heavy chain wrapped around my chest.

Our tether separated him from other vagrants, and me from other humans—tail aside. Vagrants and wraiths were native to the Aether Silva, a spiritual realm where anguished souls went as the seed of despair crested in their hearts.

"How nice of you to join me." Cadmea said, his voice dripping with sarcasm that made my fur bristle.

"Stay out of my way," I said, not meeting his eyes as I started digging into the ash near a tree. The cold bit at my claws, but I worked quickly.

"You're welcome, by the way," Cadmea sneered, leaning against one of the skeletal trees. "You know... for reminding you, and all."

He was in a mood. He'd get this way after being awake too long. Said vagrants don't sleep. Yet, sometimes he'd disappear for a day or two. By morning, he'd be back to his usual sarcasm. He called it 'offloading,' but it sounded like sleeping to me.

I didn't respond to him. Instead, I focused on uncovering the package and bottle I had buried earlier. The oppressive weight of the Silva pressed harder on my thoughts with every passing second. Despair curled at the edges of my mind, insidious and relentless.

"Andrew," Cadmea said, his tone full of disdain as I ignored him. "What's the point of all this running? You don't even know what you're fighting for."

I froze, my claws scraping against the ash, before shaking off his words. "I'm not running."

Cadmea drifted closer, his presence suffocating. "Aren't you? Running from your past, from failure... from yourself?" His voice twisted, colder now. "Where do you belong?"

As aether crept into my lungs, dread washed over me. The whispers of the vagrants, or maybe the spirits of people, crept into my head that didn't belong. The stagnant silence of the Silva seemed to scream, voices surging inside my head like a storm.

"What the hell is your problem?" I said, my voice shaking. Keeping my thoughts on track was a struggle. "I have people—friends—who care."

*But do they actually care? Maybe I'm just a nuisance.*

My thoughts turned dark and my digging slowed. The gifts weren't there, anyway. I slumped back, sitting on my tail as it curled itself around me.

"Maybe now." Cadmea appeared behind me, wrapping his hands around my shoulders as he whispered into my ear. "But what about when they find out what you truly are? What we are."

I clenched my fists, the package and bottle forgotten. The despair gnawed deeper, filling my thoughts with doubts I couldn't escape.

*They'll hate me. I've been lying to them. I'm shit.*

"I'm all you have. I'm all you need." His voice softened, but I wasn't listening anymore. Instead, I wallowed in my own anguish. Cadmea watched, his gaze full of deserved pity. "You've overstayed your welcome, Andrew. It's time to go now."

The despair crested. I trembled as my mind threatened to destroy me. Orion's essence had protected me until now. I could feel as the wraiths honed their senses towards me. The cacophony of the Silva grew louder, the gnarling sounds of evil closing in as they detected my presence. They left a pressure on my soul, an icy hand dragging me further into the void.

*Good. Let them have me. I don't deserve life. I don't deserve to be alive. Let them kill me.*

"Trust me," Cadmea's voice was sharp now, cutting through the storm of my thoughts. "You're not ready for that."

I struggled to focus, my vision blurring as the despair threatened to consume me. Cadmea's silhouette loomed closer, reaching out and placing a bottle of alcohol and a small package in my hands.

"What are these?" I blinked, gazing up at him.

"Aeyer, save us," he said, a genuine smile starting in the corner of his mouth. Then, his tone grew demanding, sending a chill down my spine. "Phase back. Now."

I could only stare. First at the gifts, then up at him.

*Why the hell is he talking to me like I'm worth **anything**? I wish he'd leave me the hell alone.*

Cadmea growled, kneeling to my level. Thin strands of blue smoke wisped around his silhouette.

"Phase, now!" His voice filled the air like a nightmare.

I nodded with a dry gulp, forcing myself to return. Instantly, Cadmea and the Aether Silva melted away. The self-loathing I clung to moments prior disappeared. Everything was as I left it—except for me. My lungs wretched for oxygen and sweat dripped down my face. I felt faint.

"Crit?" Korben scooted next to me. I felt dazed as I recalibrated with the realm's essence. "Crit, what's wrong? Talk to me, buddy."

Caelum poked his head from the kitchen and was next to me faster than possible, wiping a cold, wet rag against my face.

"Gah!" I yelped out at the unexpected wet attack. "What are you doing?"

Caelum pressed the cold rag against my forehead, ignoring my protest. "You look like you just wrestled a behemoth," he said, his tone sharp but layered with concern. "Sweating like that isn't normal, Fox. What happened?"

Korben sat back on the couch beside me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his usual smirk gone. "You were fine a second ago."

"I *am* fine," My voice sounded hoarse and my claws flexed, betraying my nerves. "I was in the Silva longer than I meant to be."

"You phased?" Korben raised an eyebrow, his voice rising. He paused, scrutinizing my face. "This isn't okay, Crit. Look at you—you're pale, shaking, soaked in sweat. This other realm, or whatever—" He gestured #####, his frustration bubbling over. "It's gonna get you killed."

"Enough," Caelum said, cutting Korben off with a glance. He crouched beside me, his sharp blue eyes studying my face. "Fox, what really happened? The truth."

For a moment, I considered brushing them off, but the weight of their stares made me hesitate. I sighed, trying to piece my thoughts together before I remembered the gifts in my hands. "I got you guys something."

The boys both blinked, thrown off guard by my change in topic. "Fox..." Caelum gave me a look of pity. I hated it.

"I'm fine." My voice wavered between annoyed and unsteady, despite my best effort to stay composed. "Just a little distracted, I guess. Cadmea—" I stopped, shaking my head.

Korben's hand shot to the back of his neck, rubbing it as he stood and began pacing. "We've been saying it for years. That thing is poison. You can't keep listening to it."

"Like I have a choice," I shot back, my irritation flaring. "He's part of me. He always has been and always will be."

"Yeah, well. He's going to be the death of you!" Korben snapped, his voice echoing through the room.

"Korben," Caelum said, his tone a warning.

*I love being talked about like I'm not here.* Cadmea's snide remark echoed in my head.

The tension in the room was suffocating, but I forced myself to break it. I held up the bottle of Basilisk's Breath, shoving it into Korben's hands. "Here." I said, not wanting to sound too eager. "Save me a drink."

"Wait." He blinked, staring at the dark glass. "You... actually got it?" He ran his finger over the label as if it would wipe off and turn out to be a prank.

"Of course I got it." I grinned, pleased with myself. "What do you think I was doing out there?"

Korben's expression softened for a moment as he swaddled his precious alcohol. "Despite everything, you did good today, Crit."

I turned to Caelum and produced the other item—a nexeon crystal, its weak glow lighting up the room. I held it out to him. "This is for you."

"Magic?" Caelum frowned, taking the crystal with a gentle touch, as if it would disintegrate at the slightest amount of pressure. "What's this for?"

"Your garden," I said simply, leaning back into the couch and letting out a long breath. "It's nearly spent, but it should give the plants the boost they need to stay alive."



"I'm not going to ask how you found one." A subtle smile played across his lips, and his sharp gaze softened.

"About that. You aren't very popular at the Hydra's Den."

He winced. "You went through Radek?"

"What's the story there, anyway?" I asked, leaning in like he had a secret nobody else could know.

"It's a long story." His grin told me it was a story I'd have to get out of him later.

"Thanks, Fox. By the way, food's ready," he said after a beat, straightening and stepping toward the kitchen.

I stood, my legs feeling like jelly, and followed him.

"Thanks for cooking. I'll bring some to Liam." I said as I piled two plates of food. Caelum nodded, dishing up plates for his brother and himself.

First, I grabbed a dagger I'd hidden in my room. The blade caught the dim light, its golden hilt gleaming. Albeit a bit worn, it seemed of high quality. I hesitated for a moment, tucked it under my arm, and headed to Liam's room.

The soft creak of my knock broke the silence. His voice came through the door, low and tired. "Come in."

I stepped inside, balancing the food and the gift. His room was spartan, as always—bare walls, a made bed, and an empty spot in the corner where his zweihänder normally sat. A soft glow emanated from a nexeon lamp in the corner.

The room carried the familiar stench of man and steel, one that I'd recognize anywhere as Liam. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his shoulders slouched as he ran a hand through his hair. He looked up as I entered, his piercing green eyes sharp even through the shadows of the room.

I set the plates down, ceramic on a wooden desk breaking the silence with its clatter. "Brought you something."

Liam didn't budge, his gaze lingering on the plates of food, studying the concoction Caelum whipped up. "Thanks, Fox, but I'm not feeling food right now."

"Okay." I held up his gift, its golden hilt standing out in the faint light. "Are you feeling sharp weaponry?"

"A dagger?" Liam raised an eyebrow, leaning forward to examine the weapon. His movements were slow, deliberate, as though every motion had weight behind it.

"How did you—"

"Yeah." I stepped closer, holding it out to him. "I know you've got the zweihänder, but sometimes, smaller is better."

He took it from me, his fingers brushing mine in a way that made me aware of how close we were. His hands were rough, the calluses of someone who had seen more battles than he cared to count.

Studying the dagger, he looked almost panicked, but his expression softened as he exhaled. He turned the dagger over, inspecting it with precision. "It's well made," he said finally, his voice low. "Where'd you get it?"

I shrugged, trying to sound casual. "Picked it up from Herdy's last week."

His eyes snapped to mine, cold, but with embers stoking in them. "Dammit, Fox, what did I tell you about going to that pawn shop by yourself? Sector B is—"

"Relax, Cael and Kor went with me." Even though he was upset, something made a fluttering feeling in my chest.

He perused my face for sincerity, wearing a tight scowl. Once satisfied, he glanced back down at the dagger. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips, one that always caught me off guard. Genuine, softening his sharp features in a way that made the fluttering feeling worse. "Thanks, Fox," he said, setting the dagger to the side. "This means a lot to me."

"Don't mention it," I sat on the edge of his bed. My tail swished against the sheets, elated that he liked the gift. I grabbed my plate and started eating, the silence stretching between us.

He didn't dig in, instead leaning back on his hands and watching me with an intensity that made me feel like he saw more than I wanted to show. "Alright, what's on your mind?"

I sighed, setting my plate down and leaning back against the wall. "Long night."

"Clearly." He tilted his head slightly, his green eyes glinting with something I couldn't quite place. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not really." I glanced away, my ears flicking in irritation at myself more than at him. "I just... had to deal with some stuff."

Liam could never let it go that easily. "Stuff like the Silva?" he asked, his voice carefully neutral.

"Yeah," I admitted, running a hand through my hair. "I stayed longer than I should have."

He expressed his disdain with more grace than Korben. "You're playing with fire. You know that, right?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Every move is a calculated risk."

His face fell to his palm, and he shook his head. "Kor's been watching celebrity poker games on TV again, hasn't he?"

I shot him an icy stare. "I'm going to be a whale one day."

"You've never even been a fish."

I scoffed, picking up my plate again. "Because you never let me leave my bowl. You never walk your fish, Liam."

He glanced at me through his fingers, dragging his hand down his face. "You're a bit of a mess, you know that?"

I paused mid-bite, raising an eyebrow. "And you're just now noticing?"

A soft chuckle escaped him, low and warm. "Noticed a long time ago," he said, his tone teasing. "But tonight? It's written all over your face."

"Always am," I said with a half-hearted shrug. "What's new?"

He didn't laugh, his tone turning serious. "You're not invincible. You can't keep throwing yourself into the Silva and hoping you'll come back unscathed."

Our eyes met, my tail flicking behind me. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Stay in this realm from now on," he said, his voice firm. "There's no reason for you to phase."

I snorted, shaking my head. "Why is everyone telling me to give up the things that make me unique? Nobody else in the world can do what I can do." As the words came out, I realized how true they were, and I almost felt a sense of pride bubbling within me.

"And what do you do?" His tone was sharper than I was used to. My mouth opened to answer him, but nothing came out. I didn't want to argue about this

anymore.

I looked away, exasperated. "I don't know."

The room fell into a silence that carried more weight than words. Liam picked up his plate, his movements slow and deliberate as he started eating. I followed his lead, the tension between us easing into something more comfortable.

"Thanks for the food," he said after a while, his tone lighter. "You didn't have to bring it in here."

"Figured you might not come out," I smirked. "Didn't want it to go to waste."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "You really are a mess."

"Takes one to know one," I shot back, earning another laugh.

The weight of the night lifted, replaced by something quieter, steadier. Sitting there with Liam, the world didn't feel as heavy. And for the first time all day, I let myself relax.

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