

Chapter 1 — Fade



Status

In progress

The back-alley stench of rotten trash and spent nexeon crystals. Moonlight barely touched the damp bricks, leaving the shadows thick and restless. My claws flexed instinctively, scraping softly against the steel pipe in my hand. The noise of distant machinery filled the air—dull and steady, masking anything nearby.

It's close. Can you feel it? The thought wasn't mine. It threaded through my mind, coiled and certain. *I can smell it. Can't you?*

I ignored the words—or tried to—but my ears twitched, straining for the faint scrape I'd already heard once. A claw against stone.

There—a glint of green. The glow came next, faint but unmistakable, slicing through the shadows like a blade. The creature followed soon after, its narrow head tilting unnaturally as its glowing eyes locked onto me.

"Wraithhound," I said, the word heavy on my tongue. My grip tightened on the pipe, its metal biting into my palm.

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

Look at you, pretending you're ready for this. The thought pushed itself forward, laced with amusement. *Should I count the seconds 'til you screw this up?*

The wraithhound 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.

It yelped, the sound guttural and wrong, as its smoky body coiled into a mangled nightmare. For a moment, it stayed down, its green eyes dimming. Then the smoke gathered again, reforming as the hound rose.

"Great," I muttered, my claws itching to be free.

You're holding yourself back with that pipe. The thought hissed, cutting through my focus. *Are you trying to make it a fair fight or do you enjoy screwing up?*

"Try saying something useful." I spoke quickly as the beast prepared its attack.

Try behaving like a monster instead of pretending to be human. The voice responded without missing a beat.

The wraithhound's next attack was faster, its limbs elongating grotesquely as it leapt again. I spun, swinging the pipe in a tight arc. The metal met empty air. Too fast.

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 unnaturally as if mocking the laws of physics.

The pipe fell from my hand. Enough of this.

My claws extended with a sharp click, the sound breaking through the alley like a challenge. The wraithhound snarled, smoke billowing from its maw as it lunged again. This time, I met it head-on.

I ducked low, driving my claws into its chest in a single, fluid motion. The smoke around it burned cold, biting at my skin as I ripped upward. The creature let out a shriek, its body convulsing as its form splintered .

"Not so tough now, are you?" My breath came in quick bursts as I watched it dissolve into smoke and mist.

The acrid smoke clung to me as I stepped back. My claws retracted slowly as my hand brushed the discarded pipe and a faint scent of ash curled around me like a warning.

It's never just one, the thought surfaced, quieter this time but no less intrusive. *You should know that by now.*

A second growl reverberated through the alley, low and menacing. Then another.

I froze, the back of my neck prickling as two more green glows cut through the darkness ahead. The shapes emerged slowly, their bodies forming like smoke caught in a windstorm. More wraithhounds.

"Oh, come on!"

Didn't I just say—

"Don't start."

The hounds didn't hesitate this time. They lunged in unison, tearing into the stone with each stride. I leapt sideways, vaulting off a wall to avoid them. Their momentum carried them into the narrow corridor, claws scraping in frustration as they spun towards me.

Two now? Good game.

Cadmea's commentary made my blood burn hot, but I didn't have time to respond. I dashed toward the nearest hound as it swiped at me, its sharp claws glinting like razors. I grabbed a discarded crate and slammed it into the beast's face. The wood splintered on impact, and the hound staggered back, snarling.

The second hound darted in from the side. It grazed my arm as I twisted, blood staining the sleeve of my jacket. I kept moving, pushing down the pain. I kicked off the wall to gain height, and my claws extended with a familiar click as I raked them across the beast's back. Blue smoke hissed and curled where the strike landed, and the hound shrieked. But it didn't stop.

They're getting smarter, Cadmea noted. Why don't you have that feature?

"Shut up."

The first hound lunged again, its body distorting unnaturally as it stretched in mid-air. I rolled forward, narrowly avoiding its strike, and grabbed a loose length of chain from the ground. Whipping around, I lashed the chain at its legs, tangling them long enough to slam the broken pipe into its side. The impact creaked through the alley, and the hound dissolved into a fine blue mist.

"That's one."

Counting now? You're adorable. Use your fingers if you need to, I won't judge.

The remaining hound snarled, circling me. Its eyes glowed brighter, and smoke billowed thicker from its form. A shift in the air sent a shiver down my spine—something was wrong.

The hound didn't attack alone this time. Another shape materialized behind it, the green glow of its eyes piercing the dark.

"Three, seriously?"

Try four, Cadmea said.

I spun as another growl erupted from the opposite direction. A fourth hound appeared, cutting off my escape route.

"Perfect. Just perfect."

Relax. Phase if you need to. Cadmea sighed, exasperated. Even pushing aside his sarcastic remarks.

"And risk bringing more back with me? No way."

It wouldn't make a difference.

"...Good point."

The hounds lunged together, their coordination unnerving. I darted into the street, narrowly avoiding the claws aimed at my legs. They followed, their glowing eyes locked on me as if nothing else in the world existed.

The crowded square came into view, its lights bright and artificial. The city didn't sleep, but it had its quiet moments. This wasn't one of them. Even in the backstreets, the faint murmur of life in Riar carried over—voices from the taverns on the main roads, the soft clatter of boots against stone, the occasional burst of laughter breaking through the haze. All of it blurred together, distant and unimportant. Civilians milled about, oblivious to the danger barreling toward them.

"Great timing, Fox," I muttered.

I bolted into the crowd, weaving through clusters of people. The hounds pursued, their smoke-filled forms twisting and bounding over carts and stalls. People screamed as the creatures leapt past them, but the hounds never deviated from their path. They didn't attack anyone else. Just me.

You've got their undivided attention, Cadmea said. You should feel flattered.

"Flattered or hunted?"

Now you're getting it.

My tail flicked in irritation, but I couldn't shake the truth in the words. Wraithhounds didn't wander into Riar on their own. They couldn't. They weren't from this realm. Someone had sent them from the Aether Silva—Cadmea's realm. Sent them to hunt me.

I ducked into a narrow alley, the tight space forcing the hounds to follow single file. The first one lunged, its claws grazing the wall as it reached for me. I leapt

upward, grabbing a rusted fire escape and swinging myself over its head. The hound slammed into the wall, disoriented for a moment, but the others surged forward, snapping at my heels.

Spotting a pile of crates stacked precariously against a wall, I kicked the bottom one as I ran past. The containers toppled, crashing down onto the second hound. Its shriek cut through the night as the contents pierced its smoky form, dissolving it into a faint mist.

"Two," I muttered, sprinting forward.

The remaining hounds were relentless, scraping closer with each stride. My lungs burned, and the wounds on my arm and shoulder throbbed, but I couldn't stop moving.

The Hydra's Den came into view, its nexeon-lit sign flickering faintly. I veered toward it, leaping over a toppled fruit stand as the hounds closed in. One slashed through my jacket as I hit the ground and rolled.

Smooth. Cadmea couldn't mask his sneer—not that he tried. *Now we get to listen to Caelum lecture us on maintaining pristine clothing.*

"I'm more than happy to leave you here." I said as I scrambled to my feet, throwing myself toward the Den's entrance. Dashing across the street, I leapt onto the hood of a parked car, vaulting off of it, putting some distance between me and my assailants... for a moment.

You dare threaten me with my deepest desire?

He chuckled in my head as I rolled my eyes.

A group of drunks loitered near the entrance of the bar, their laughter spilling into the street like the stench of stale ale.

One of them turned, his glazed eyes studying me for a moment. "What in Eikan's name are—?" he asked, his speech slurring from inebriation. "Hey, Benny. Get a load of the freak in the fox costume!"

"Excuse me," I muttered, ignoring the snide laughter from his friends as I swiftly slipped past. The man shouted after me, but his words fell flat as I entered the bar. I heard their yells when they noticed my aggressors, and they scrambled to get inside from behind me.

The last of the bunch made it in the nick of time, slamming the heavy door shut behind him, cutting off the sounds of the beasts thudding and scraping to get inside.

Inside, the bar's chaotic noise was a welcome reprieve. Nobody seemed to notice the chaos outside. I leaned against a pillar, breathing heavily as my lungs cooled down from all the activity. Sweat dripped down my temple, and the faint scent of ash still clung to my clothes.

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

"Had company," I muttered, pulling my hood lower as I made my way toward the back.

The bartender's gaze flicked toward the door, where thuds and scrapes still echoed from outside. 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. The fewer stares, the better.

You're a vision of subtlety, Cadmea sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. I'm sure no one noticed the sweaty fox slinking in like he's being chased by demons. Oh wait—

"You are insufferable today. Did I piss you off somehow?" I said under my breath, earning a curious glance from a patron nursing his drink. I glared back until he looked away. The last thing I needed was for people to think I was talking to myself.

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

The bartender cocked his head, raising an eyebrow. "It's been ready. What's in here that's so important, anyway?" He crouched behind the counter, retrieving a small package wrapped in dark cloth, shaking it gently next to his ear before handing it over.

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

"Sure," he said, eyeing me quizzically. "Oh. And 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 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. And the hounds outside? They were what, drawn to your winning personality? If you want to play dumb, then get out."

Oh, but he's not playing, Cadmea's voice interjected, honeyed with sarcasm. Thankfully, it was in my head. *He's just that naturally clueless.*

"I'm not lying," I said firmly, desperately seeking control of the conversation. My tail flicked anxiously against my legs, betraying the calm front I was trying to hold. "I just needed to grab this. It has nothing to do with Caelum."

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. 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 Eikan. Next time, tell him to handle his own mess. This is a warning."

Are you just going to take that? Burn the place down! Cadmea said, a pang of mania seeping through his tone.

Leaning forward, I growled through my teeth, extending my claws. *"I'm really the last person you want to be threatening."* I said, my voice low and menacing.

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

"Wrong." The bartender's grin never faltered as he leaned over the counter, flexing his biceps with his arms crossed. His stance oozing in confidence. *"That would be me."*

Before I could retort, a chair scraped harshly against the floor. The sound silenced the room like a blade slicing through tension. A towering patron, built like he was part ox, pushed himself to his feet. He adjusted his jacket with exaggerated slowness, his stony 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—Radek, apparently—gave him a casual nod, his eyes remaining in place. *"Just a misunderstanding, Dren. No need to get involved."*

Oh, let him get involved. Cadmea's excitement swirled through my thoughts. *What's life without a challenge? Listen. We'll knock over some tables and there's a vat of acid—"*

I talked over his asinine idea, straightening up. My eyes slowly drifted to meet the hulking man's glare for a split second before stepping back and retracting my claws. *"It's not for Caelum,"* I said, my tone as calm as I could manage, although I was fuming. Intimidation was ineffective, but backing down from the truth wasn't an option. *"I was just trying to... clarify. No threats here."*

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

Cadmea pouted dramatically in my mind. *Coward. I had three brilliant plans, and you ruined them all.*

"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.

Just as I reached the door, I stopped. A thought hit me, sharp and inconvenient. I winced. "One more thing," I said, spinning back around.

Radek raised an eyebrow, clearly 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?"

Radek stared at me for a long moment before sighing heavily. "Basilisk's Breath." Any shred of credibility I had left instantly vanished. He stared at me incredulously. "Wait here," he said, disappearing into the back room.

You are incredible, Andrew! Cadmea couldn't contain his laughter. His cackling consumed my thoughts. *You can never show your face around here again! How humiliating.*

I grimaced, but didn't feed into it. Tapping my claws idly 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 came out smoothly, but with a clipped tone, like he was holding back a more polished accent.

"Nothing I can't handle," I said shortly, 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. "You've got an interesting way of handling it."

Something about the stranger's smile unsettled me, like he knew more about me than he let on. "Do I know you?"

He smiled faintly, his expression both amused and guarded. "Not yet."

Is... is he... cruising you? Cadmea could hardly contain his laughter. He was having the time of his life.

Heat rushed to my ears. *"What the hell does that even mean?"* The words escaped louder than I intended, drawing a quizzical look from the guy.

Another cackle. *This just keeps getting better. No shovel needed!* His sarcasm dripped like venom, but I didn't understand what he was talking about. *Ask him if he's lost, or better yet, if he's royalty slumming it with the commoners. That'll go over well.*

"Sorry," I said, a tinge of guilt creeping up on me. *"Reflexive response."* My voice was low as I gestured to the room with my eyes.

The stranger briefly paused as he studied my expression. Then he nodded, shifting slightly as he stepped closer. His gaze held an undeniable curiosity.

"You're 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 fox and a human put together. And then... there was Cadmea... because being the only hybrid wasn't enough.

My tail responded with a swish, absent-mindedly brushing against his arm. The brief contact was electric, nerve endings sparking like a shattered nexeon crystal. I jerked back before the rush could settle, my tail twitching as if it had a mind of its own.

"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.

He's just as braindead as you are. Cadmea said, his excitement fading out to accommodate his typical superiority complex.

"You... realize what you just said... right?" I asked, bewildered, my ears twitching and tail swishing to convey the irony. It was true, he stuck out. 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."

I rolled my eyes, my sheepish smile fading, but before I could respond, Radek returned. He carried a dark glass bottle in hand. "You've got a name?" Radek 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. I'd never seen anyone so sure of their own name. "Asher."

Cadmea broke into a fit of laughter again in my head, without explanation. I almost asked, but thought better of it.

"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 slightly, an almost regal gesture despite the roughness of 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, clearly taking in the view. My face felt hot again. Being in the spectacle that way was... discomfoting.

Unsure what to make of him, I nodded. Asher lingered for a moment longer before approaching the door. The wraithhounds had given up their assault, although I couldn't recall when the noise stopped. With a final glance back, he pushed the heavy door open and slipped out.

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

"That's funny." I said, securing my hood as the bartender returned to his work, "I'm just pretending, but you never kicked me out."

I clutched the package and the bottle, turning towards the back exit. He hardly looked up as he let out a low chuckle. "You're not pretending, kid. You just haven't realized it."

Pushing the door open, the night air felt icy against my face. I contemplated his words for a moment before starting my trek home. As I stepped into the shadows, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd be seeing Asher again soon.

He's right, you know. Cadmea broke through my reverie. *You're no better than any of them.*

I frowned, tucking the package deeper into my jacket and clutching onto the bottle of liquor. "Think what you want," I said, my voice sharp. "I've got what I came for."

Got what you came for, but still leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for the hounds, Cadmea muttered, his tone dripping with disdain. *Brilliant. Really. You should teach classes with recklessness.*

The street behind me was too quiet for a city like Riar. The wraithhounds had fallen back for now, but that didn't mean they were gone. 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 muttered under my breath. "We'll make it back before—"

They're still hunting you, you know, Cadmea cut in, his tone casual but biting. *Just because you can't hear them doesn't mean they've stopped. You're not as good at covering your tracks as you think.*

I gritted my teeth. "And you think hanging around here is safer?"

I think standing here is stupid. His words curled through my thoughts, heavy with sarcasm. *But what do I know?*

Hardly a few steps in, I heard a rustling from the surrounding darkness. *No way. They found me already?* I wondered, cursing under my breath.

Get out of here. This is my area, Cadmea snapped at me, earning a tired eye roll.

I stood frozen in place, as if not moving meant they'd sniff me and leave me alone. My eyes scanned the darkness ahead for the slightest movement.

The rustling came again, sharper this time, causing my ears to twitch.

If you're waiting for an invitation to die, you're doing great, Cadmea said, his tone teetering between mockery and irritation. *Move, Andrew!*

"Fine," I said through clenched teeth, gripping 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.

"You win," I hissed under my breath, letting the tension ease from my shoulders. My claws retracted as I slowed my breathing and focused. The surrounding air thickened, buzzing faintly with energy. The edges of the world blurred, the shadows of Riar dissolving into something colder, stranger.

The Aether Silva rippled into view.

The transition was seamless, like stepping into a thought. As the cobblestones beneath my feet vanished, ash replaced them, clinging to my paws like static snow. The air grew still, heavy, and unnervingly silent. Twisted, skeletal trees stretched toward the pale sky, their bark bleached of life. Wisps of pastel light-blues, greens, purples—danced in the distance like embers carried on an individual breeze.

The aether curled through the air in streaks of vivid blue smoke. The rivers carved glowing paths through the ash-laden plains, their electric glow sharp against the muted world.

Don't get comfortable, Cadmea warned, his voice sharper here, louder, as though the Silva amplified his presence. *You're wasting time, and time here is not your friend.*

"Right," I muttered, my voice sounding too small in the oppressive silence. My claws worked quickly, scraping at the ash beneath one of the twisted trees. The cold bit at my fingers, but I didn't stop until I'd hollowed out enough space for the bottle and package.

I reached for the items, but my hand faltered. My claws twitched, suddenly no longer under my control.

"Cadmea," I growled, trying to resist.

Relax, he said, his tone as smooth as it was maddening. *You're terrible at this, anyway. Let me help.*

I gritted my teeth but didn't fight him. My claws moved with precision, Cadmea's influence 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.

The Silva seemed to shift around us, its ominous hum growing faintly louder.

Done, Cadmea said, satisfaction oozing from his tone. *Now, if you're finished playing delivery boy, let's get out of here before something bigger than you decide to take notice.*

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. 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 boots hit the cobblestones, and I staggered slightly, the lingering weight of the Silva clinging to my limbs.

But I wasn't alone.

A faint rustle came from the shadows, sharper and closer than before. My claws flexed instinctively as I scanned the alley.

The glint of sapphire fur caught my eye, and my breath hitched. The blue fox stood motionless, its sleek coat shimmering faintly in the moonlight.

It didn't belong here.

Kill it, Cadmea said dryly.

"Kill yourself," I muttered, bracing myself as the creature's ears twitched toward me. The fox cocked its head, as if it understood, its bright, cautious eyes locking with mine.

The tension snapped taut as it growled softly, its tail flicking low and deliberate.

Better get moving, Cadmea said, his voice curling through my thoughts like a warning.

The blue fox bolted into the darkness, leaving me staring after it. And then I heard it—the snarling, guttural sounds of wraithhounds closing in behind me.

"Dammit," I said, already in motion, kicking myself for wasting so much time.

The snarling sounds of wraithhounds were approaching quickly from behind.

The threat grew louder as they tore across the stone, giving way to the chase. I didn't dare look back. My lungs burned as I dashed towards the apartment, the shadows closing in like a suffocating shroud.

This is just great, Cadmea chimed in, his tone mockingly harsh. You really think you can outrun them, Andrew? Fine. Try not to embarrass us both for once.

"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 from my fingertips and swung a fist backwards, catching a wraithhound mid lunge in the jaw. Its head snapped to the side and the body following suit as it twisted into smoke.

A second hound had followed up closely behind the first, snapping at the empty spot where I stood with its powerful jaws. I instantly appeared beside 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 a pace behind me, letting the fifth hound impale its neck on my claws.

My yellow eyes burned with a red fiery rage. Each beat of my heart adding to the void reserved for my fury. As the wraithhound disintegrated, I spun around, just in time to kick one in the jaw, snapping its neck instantly.

The final hound growled at me, its stance low, but I was beyond its existence at that point. I strutted towards it as it dove for me, easily ducking around the jump and catching its tail, slicing it off with my free hand. It whimpered, scrambling to its feet, but not quickly enough.

"Why do you torment me—," I screamed in a rage, pummeling its face with a fist for every syllable, "Every. Chance. You. Get?" It dusted, and I stood there in the middle of the road like a crazed maniac, huffing to catch my breath.

Silence.

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

I didn't care what anyone thought anymore. I'd been dealing with Cadmea's sly remarks for three years. "Answer me!" I demanded, the intensity in my voice scaring even myself.

Silence.

"Do you want me to die?" I roared, turning in different directions with each sentence. "Do you hate me that much? What did I ever do to you?"

Silence.

I retracted my claws, spitting on the ground before I spun towards the apartment to make the rest of the trek home.

Useless piece of shit, I thought. The phrase kept repeating itself in my head. Finally, Cadmea snapped back.

Useless? Who do you think keeps you alive when you pull stunts like this? His voice dripped with venom. Without me, you'd be dead.

You think that gives you some sort of pass to make every waking moment of my life an absolute nightmare? I wasn't sure what my thoughts sounded like, but if yelling a thought was possible, I was doing it.

If you didn't make yourself such an easy target, maybe you wouldn't always be the victim! He screeched, as if that meant anything to me. *Face it! You're hopeless, Andrew. It's a surprise you made it to three, and we both know how much luck was involved.*

I bit my tongue, but it didn't stop my thoughts. *Call me Andrew one more time. I dare you.*

I argued with Cadmea the entire rest of the way, never uttering a syllable. My face made all the correct facial expressions as we talked in my head, and in hindsight, I would have loved to see what that looked like.

Finally, I made it to the apartment steps. I stomped my way up the stairs, leaning against the apartment door as I leveled my emotions. After a few deep breaths, I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The smell of Caelum's cooking drifted through the air, something savory and rich. The sound of muffled voices carried from the living room.

"Fox?" Caelum's voice called out, sharper than usual. His head appeared from around the corner, his red hair catching the light. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Out," I said, sliding my hands into the pockets of my torn jacket.

Korben's laughter echoed from the couch before I could take another step. "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, ready to lie into me.

"Save it, Cael. I'm *not* in the mood." I said, growling through my teeth. My eyes still burned from the fire inside them as I stomped my way through the apartment, heading straight for the couch.

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, puncturing it accidentally, spurting out a small burst of stuffing.

"You look like crap," he said, leaning back with an affable grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Rough night?"

I dropped the pillow beside me and glanced toward Caelum. He was still watching me, stirring something in a large pot, and his gaze much sharper than I liked.

"What?" I said.

Instead of snapping back at me, Cael's expression softened. His nose wrinkled slightly as he let out a sigh. Caelum's emotional maturity outrivaled everyone's, despite him being the youngest. It was as if he bypassed typical emotional triggers, always seeing a situation for what it truly was. "Are you hurt?"

Suddenly, 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, his grin fading into something more serious.

"Wraithhound?"

I nodded, and the room fell silent except for the faint clatter of Caelum's utensils as he moved back to the kitchen. He said nothing, but I could feel the tension in his movements.

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

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

"And you didn't think to phase back?" Caelum asked from the kitchen.

I shook my head. "I didn't want to provoke more of them to join the fray, but eventually I phased to kill them all."

Caelum didn't respond. Korben sighed and leaned back, rubbing a hand through his hair. "You're going to give us all a damn heart attack one of these days."

I didn't answer. The weight in my chest hadn't gone away. There was something out there... something hunting me. Fear clung to my nerve endings like an electric balloon. Cadmea was still quiet, likely seething over our fight earlier, like I still had been.

The silence stretched longer than I liked. Korben busied himself flipping through a stack of magazines on the coffee table, the lighthearted smirk he'd tried to wear now fully replaced by furrowed brows. Caelum, ever methodical, had turned his attention back to the sink, the sound of running water punctuating the otherwise still room. I felt their unspoken questions hanging between us.

"You sure it was just the hound?" Korben finally asked, his tone low.

"I'm not sure of anything right now," I said, leaning back on the couch. The fabric felt coarse against the pads of my fingers as I clenched them. "But it wasn't normal."

"That much is obvious," Caelum turned off the water with a deliberate motion, wiping his hands on a dishrag as he stepped into view. "But you don't just run into wraithhounds. Especially not here."

"It wasn't just the wraithhound," My voice was quiet but steady. I glanced toward the window, the city lights beyond a dull backdrop. "Someone's clearly targeting me. I mean, how else could a wraithhound even be in Orion?"

Korben shrugged. "You've gotta be right. I don't see another explanation. Unless you're leaving the door open. Is that a thing?" His grin returned but weaker, like armor that didn't quite fit.

I shook my head. "I don't believe so. It didn't feel random," I said carefully. "The hounds... they weren't wandering. They had orders. Ignore everything else and focus on me. And then a blue fox—" I stopped myself, unsure how to explain the inexplicable.

Korben perked up at that, rolling his eyes. "Damn, Crit. You're getting good. I actually believed you."

The redhead smirked, feeling foolish. "Yeah. You had us going until you threw the in the blue fox." he said, his gaze moving towards the kitchen. "Good try though."

"No, I'm not lying. It was there. I got close. Then it growled and took off into the woods behind the Hydra's Den. It knew something was wrong."

Caelum leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "Blue foxes are wild creatures. Rare, yes, but wild. Are you saying it helped you?"

"I'm not *saying anything!*" My words came out sharper than intended. "It was there. It looked at me like... like it knew something. Then it bolted. That's it."

"You didn't follow it?" Korben asked, incredulous.

"No," I said, my voice flat. "I didn't. Cadmea told me to run and then gave me shit for not following the fox."

He whistled low, shaking his head. ""Why do you even bother with him? He's a deadbeat vagrant, and he knows it." His cheerful disposition always faded at the mention of Cadmea. "That beauty could've been worth a fortune. Not to mention, it might've led you to whatever—"

"This wasn't about money!" I cut him off. My claws flexed involuntarily, digging into the couch cushions before I forced them to retract. "It wasn't just an animal. It felt... it was almost like it knew me."

Korben raised his hands in mock surrender, though his grin didn't fully fade. "Hey, I'm just saying. If some mysterious creature showed up in the middle of a wraithhound attack, I'd want to know why."

"Me too! I want to know." The tension coiled tighter in my chest.

Cadmea's voice rang through my head. *Let it go, Fox. They can't understand the feeling the same as you.*

I frowned, shooting him a warning glance... despite him not seeing it. There wasn't much to say to him.

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 hounds, the stalker—someone with access to the Aether Silva. The blue fox—

none of it made sense, but I couldn't ignore the pattern forming. 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 now fully 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," he continued, his tone lighter but no less serious. "You don't get a choice."

I didn't answer right away. The weight in my chest finally lightened—just barely—at the thought of not carrying this alone. But even as they said it, I felt more alone than ever. Someone—or something—was hunting me. And it would only stop once it got what it wanted.

A voice ran through my mind again. *Fox... Go lay down and rest for a little while. I'll wake you up.*

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

Caelum recognized it immediately. "Cadmea," he said, returning to the kitchen to finish dinner. Korben nodded in understanding, his attention refocused on whatever he had been doing prior.

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. He was right—at least in that instance, completely right. My vision was blurring from exhaustion as I stood, slogging my way to my room. Once inside, I closed the door and flopped onto my bed.
