

REMINGTON WÜLF

A Hymn For The Hollow



For my amazing husband—your unwavering belief in me is the light I hold onto when doubt creeps in. Thank you for every word of encouragement, every late-night pep talk, and for always reminding me why I started. I couldn't have done this without you.

“He who fights with monsters should
be careful lest he thereby become a
monster. And if you gaze long into
an abyss, the abyss also gazes into
you.”

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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Foreword

Some stories are about love. Some are about survival. This one is about both.

When I first wrote *No Kingdom for a Fang*, it was a story about two people clawing their way through a world that never made space for them. Kriia and Rexar weren't meant to fit neatly into each other's lives—they were both too jagged, too stubborn, too unwilling to surrender. But they chose each other anyway. Not because it was easy, but because it was worth it.

A Hymn for the Hollow is what comes after.

This is a story about what it means to love someone when the whole world is against you. About fighting for yourself, even when it would be easier to disappear. About the ghosts that never stop hunting, the wounds that never fully heal, and the way people find their way back to each other through the wreckage.

It's a story about Kriia refusing to be owned. About Rexar realizing that love is not possession, but choice. About the weight of legacy, the hunger for power, and the blood spilled in the name of revenge.

But at its core, this is still a story about two people trying—*desperately*—to hold on.

So if you like your romance a little sharp, your monsters a little too human, and your heroes just reckless enough to

burn the world down for each other—
Then this book is for **you**.

— Remington Wülf

Preface

Six months ago, Kriia Thomas stood in the wreckage of her old life and chose a new one. Not an easy one. Not a safe one. But one she could call her own.

She thought she knew what it meant to fight for her freedom. She thought she had escaped the shadows that had once tried to claim her. She thought she understood what it meant to stand at someone's side without losing herself in the process.

She was wrong.

Because the past has claws. And the Fangs are not the only monsters lurking in the dark.

There are whispers in Scrila. A name no one dares to speak. A family thought to be long dead.

But the *Hollow* are not dead.

They've been waiting.

And Kriia?

She's exactly what they need.

Acknowledgments

To the incredible internet community—you've given these characters a life beyond the page, breathing energy into them with every discussion, theory, and piece of art. Your passion means more than I can ever say.

To my husband—thank you for listening to me ramble for days on end about these characters, their choices, their heartbreaks. Your patience, encouragement, and unwavering belief in me kept me grounded when doubt tried to creep in.

To Kezzi—your support has been invaluable, and your creativity has inspired me in more ways than I can count. Your characters, your insight, and your friendship have made this journey all the more meaningful.

And to you, the reader—thank you for stepping into this world with me. For every late-night page turn, for every moment spent lost in these shadows. This story exists because of you.

Map Of Hiraeth



I

A Dirge for the Damned

*“Somewhere between the first chord and the last
scream, we stopped being a band
and became a funeral procession. The problem is,
none of us wanted to admit we
were already carrying the casket.”*

Tacenda



TACENDA

(n.) things better left unsaid;
matters to be passed over in silence.

Kriia was *drowning* in chaos.

The green room was a mess of tangled cables, half-empty beer bottles, and the unmistakable scent of cigarette smoke curling through the air like a ghost that refused to leave. Voices clashed over the muffled thump of the opening band bleeding through the walls—someone was arguing with the venue manager, someone else was trying (*and failing*) to tune a bass, and Kriia was seconds away from snapping as she tried to juggle inventory, merch sales, and a frantic text from the sound tech.

And in the middle of it all, Vee was sprawled across the couch like he had no concept of urgency, one arm draped over the backrest, the other lazily strumming his guitar, plucking out notes that did nothing to help her growing headache.

Vee's new distraction was a girl he met at a meet and greet. Kalypso was draped across his lap, her small frame curled against him like a satisfied predator at rest. She was sharp angles and calculated chaos, an intoxicating mix of punk rebellion and high fashion, with emerald-green streaks cutting through her jet-black hair and an intricate web of piercings adorning her nose and ears. The bold blackout tattoo that wrapped around her throat made her already striking features even more severe, a permanent reminder that she wasn't someone to be ignored.

Her single emerald eye—*the only one she had left*—watched Kriia with a quiet, simmering kind of disdain, unreadable except for the barely-there smirk at the corner of her mouth.

Kriia didn't know Kalypso well, but she knew the type. Girls who liked to play games with people's minds, who wielded their beauty and sharp words like knives, who thrived on control. And Vee? Vee was exactly the kind of idiot who

thought he could handle her.

The tension between them crackled as Kriia scrolled furiously through the inventory list, realizing—again—that the venue had misplaced an entire box of shirts. **Perfect.**

“Vee, I swear to the gods, if you don’t get off your ass and help me count inventory, I’m gonna hack into your pedal board and make it play bubblegum pop every time you step on it,” Kriia snapped, barely looking up from her clipboard.

Vee didn’t even blink. Just plucked another note, the deep hum of his guitar vibrating through the couch. “Relax, *band mom*. You’re gonna give yourself an aneurysm.”

Kriia grabbed the nearest roll of tape and hurled it at his head.

Vee ducked—barely. The roll smacked against the couch beside him, knocking over an empty beer can. Kalypso exhaled sharply, amused or irritated, Kriia couldn’t tell.

“You throw shit at me, and *I’m* the bad guy?” Vee said, grinning like a bastard.

“You’ve *been* the bad guy,” she muttered, skimming the merch table for the missing box. “Just because I haven’t stabbed you yet doesn’t mean you’re safe.”

Kalypso shifted in his lap, her long black nails tapping against her thigh. “You two always flirt like this, or is this a special occasion?” Her voice was smooth, disinterested—but the way her fingers tensed slightly against Vee’s leg didn’t go unnoticed.

Vee snickered. “She *wishes*.”

Kriia shot him a glare. “*You* wish I wished.”

Kalypso’s eye narrowed just enough to make her point, but Kriia was already tuning her out. She had a job to do, and wasting energy on whatever weird mind games Vee’s new girl

wanted to play wasn't on her list of priorities.

The venue manager was still yelling at someone over the stage's blown-out monitors. The bass tech was still murdering an attempt at tuning. Kriia's head was pounding.

And then—

The air shifted.

Heat licked at her skin, thick and smoldering. The scent of smoke—not the stale bite of cigarettes, but something deeper, richer, something *alive*—coiled through the space, curling low and lazy like the warm breath of a fire waiting to spread.

She knew before she even turned.

Rexar.

And gods, he looked alive.

He stepped inside like he owned the place, rolling his shoulders like he was shaking off the last remnants of a fight he'd already won. There was something sharper about him tonight, something brighter, the deep red streak in his white curls burning vivid under the fluorescent lights.

Kriia's breath hitched despite herself. She knew this feeling. Knew the raw energy that radiated off him after feeding, the way his presence felt bigger, heavier, like every ember inside him had been stoked at once. It made the air feel thicker, pressing against her skin, and she hated how something inside her trembled at the sheer power of it.

It had been two days since he came back from the Culling.

Two days since he kissed her like he was starving for something only she could give him.

Two days, and he still hadn't told her everything.

Rexar caught her staring, and his smirk deepened, one brow arching. "What?"

Kriia shook her head, exhaling slowly. "Nothing."

But it wasn't nothing.
And they both knew it.
She needed air.

Slipping her phone into her jacket pocket, she muttered something about taking a break and stepped outside. The cold Scrila night wrapped around her instantly, a sharp contrast to the feverish heat that still clung to her skin.

A moment later, Rexar followed.

For a long beat, neither of them spoke.

The city stretched out before them, neon signs flickering, the distant pulse of music and traffic filling the silence.

But between them—

Between them was everything left unsaid.

"You gonna keep pretending nothing's wrong?"

Rexar's voice was low, rough around the edges like a match waiting to be struck. A slow stream of smoke curled from his nose, warm and sweet like burning maple, wrapping around them both in the cold night air.

Kriia folded her arms, leaning against the venue's brick wall, letting the chill sink into her skin. "I don't know," she said, eyes flicking toward him. "You gonna keep pretending you're fine?"

Rexar huffed a laugh, tilting his head back to look at the sky, where the city lights swallowed the stars. He looked *alive*—more than he had in weeks. The week after the Cullings always seemed to do this to him, ignited something raw and electric in his bones. His skin held a restless energy, like a current just beneath the surface, his movements sharp and fluid in a way that made something inside her tremble.

"Define 'fine,'" he said finally.

She didn't answer. They both knew it was bullshit.

Two days ago, he had come back from the Culling looking stronger. Sharper. Not just the usual high that came after feeding—this was deeper, more potent. The kind of power that didn't just settle into him, but radiated outward, filling every inch of space he stepped into.

And he still hadn't told her what happened.

Kriia dug into her jacket pocket, pulling out her lighter just to have something to do with her hands. She rolled it over her fingers, the metal cool against her skin. A flicker of flame would've been comforting, but tonight, with him standing beside her, she didn't dare light it.

"What was it like this time?" she asked finally.

Rexar went quiet. The air between them felt heavier, the warmth of him pressing against the night like a slow-burning fire.

Kriia wasn't sure he was going to answer until he did.

He ran a hand through his hair, fingers threading through the white curls streaked with crimson, exhaling a slow breath through his nose. The stream of smoke that always drifted from him curled lazily into the air, making the space between them feel warmer, heavier. Kriia had been around him long enough to ignore its effect, but still—it made her body relax even as her mind braced for whatever he was about to say.

"Feels different now," he admitted finally, voice low. "Not in a bad way. Not physically, anyway." He lifted a hand, and with just a flick of his fingers, the tip of his cigarette caught flame. He took a drag, the ember glowing as he held the smoke in his lungs before exhaling another slow plume. "I feel *stronger* after. More... *alive*."

Kriia didn't flinch, but something in her expression shifted. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

Rexar's smile was sharp, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Should be."

The way he said it made something tighten in her chest.

"Then what's wrong?" she asked, crossing her arms, watching the way his jaw tensed.

He flicked his cigarette, embers scattering as he stared out over the city. "I used to be able to push it down. Make it *just about* what we are. Survival, instinct, family tradition. I could tell myself it was clean, justified. They were criminals. They deserved it." His lips pressed together for a beat before he exhaled another soft breath, smoke curling around them both. "But lately... I can't stop thinking about it after. Can't stop *feeling* it."

Kriia frowned. "Feeling what?"

He turned to look at her then, and something about the intensity of his gaze made her stomach flip.

"Their fear."

The words sat heavy between them.

Kriia swallowed, watching the way his fingers twitched, like he wanted to light something just to *burn* off the weight of the conversation. The streetlight overhead flickered, and he barely moved his hand before the flame in the bulb steadied, bending to him like it was instinct.

Rexar exhaled, the scent of his sweet smoke curling in the air between them. "I don't know how to quiet it."

She didn't have an answer.

And he didn't expect her to.

Before she could press him further, the door behind them creaked open.

"I *knew* you two were out here being weird."

Vee's voice shattered the moment, his silhouette framed by

the neon glow of the alley lights. He looked like he had just rolled out of someone else's bed, hair a mess, Kalypso's dark lipstick still smudged at the corner of his mouth.

Kriia narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you want, Vaelyn?"

He grinned, unfazed. "To remind you that you have a job to do, and if I have to carry *one more* box of overpriced t-shirts, I'm gonna start making people pay me in weed instead of money."

"Yeah?" Rexar drawled, eyebrow raising. "And if I set your *guitar* on fire?"

Vee pressed a hand to his chest, mock-offended. "You wouldn't."

Rexar flicked his lighter open with a sharp snap. "Try me."

Kriia sighed, pushing off the wall. "You're both idiots."

"Yeah, yeah," Vee said, stepping aside to let her pass. "Don't think this conversation's over, though. Whatever dark, brooding *shit* you two have going on, I'm invested now."

Kriia rolled her eyes but didn't argue.

As she walked back inside, she felt it again—the weight of *something* pressing down on her, something bigger than just a band on the edge of implosion, bigger than just a boyfriend who wouldn't tell her everything.

Rexar was *different*.

And she had a feeling whatever had changed in him—

It wasn't done yet.

Quondam



QUONDAM

(adj.) belonging to some time long
passed; once but no longer

Rexar waited until the door shut behind her before speaking.

“You ever get tired of running your mouth, Vee?”

Vaelyn snorted, leaning against the alley wall with that same lazy arrogance, the ghost of Kalypso’s lipstick still smeared at the corner of his mouth. “Not when it’s this much fun.”

Rexar turned his palm upward, and with a thought, fire bloomed to life in his hand. The flame curled lazily, licking at his skin without ever burning, casting flickering shadows across the alley walls. The heat pulsed in time with his heartbeat, a restless thing barely contained.

He could burn it off—*literally*—but it wouldn’t make a difference. The fire was inside him, and it wasn’t going anywhere.

Vee watched him, sharp eyes narrowing just slightly. **He noticed.** Maybe not what had changed, but enough to know *something* was off. “So,” he said, tone too casual. “What’s up with you?”

Rexar let the flame stretch higher, just enough to illuminate the space between them, before curling his fingers inward, snuffing it out. “Nothing.”

Vee made a face. “Bullshit. You came back looking like you swallowed a goddamn sun, and now Kriia’s staring at you like you might set yourself on fire at any second.”

Rexar exhaled through his nose, warm smoke curling into the cold air. It drifted toward Vee, wrapping around him like an invisible hand, just enough to slow him down. His shoulders relaxed, his stance went looser, his breathing evened out like he’d had one drink too many—but not enough to stop him entirely. Just enough to lower his guard.

Vee blinked, like he wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt lighter.

Then, realization flickered across his face.

He grinned. “Gods, I *forgot* how weird that shit feels.” He rolled his shoulders experimentally, testing it. “Fucking tranquilizer breath.”

Rexar just smirked. “Works, though.”

Vee let his head fall back against the brick, looking up at the sky like he could see past the glare of neon lights. “So, you’re *not* gonna tell me what’s up.”

“Nope.”

“You *do* realize that makes me wanna dig even more, right?”

Rexar flexed his fingers, conjuring another flicker of flame before extinguishing it just as quickly. “I do.”

Vee grinned again, but it was smaller this time. *More knowing.*

There was a time, years ago, when Rexar might’ve told him everything. When he and Vee had been inseparable, two halves of the same reckless storm, tearing through life without a second thought. Vee had been the only person who understood the weight of their bloodlines, the expectations, the need to carve out something of their own before it swallowed them whole. They built Toad Biscuit from nothing, running on adrenaline, late-night dares, and the unshakable belief that it was *them against the world.*

But that was before.

Before Kriia.

Before the shift that neither of them acknowledged, but both felt. Before Vee started watching her like she was a threat instead of just another person in Rexar’s orbit. Before the casual jabs turned into something sharper, something meaner, before the laughter between songs became weighted with something unspoken.

Before Vee had to share him.

Now?

Now, they didn't talk about the things that mattered.

Rexar pushed off the railing. "Go inside, Vaelyn."

Vee huffed but didn't argue. "Aw, *full name*? Cold blooded, Rex." Still, he turned toward the door, but before he went inside, he shot Rexar one last look.

"Whatever's crawling under your skin?" His voice was quieter now, almost serious. **Almost.** "Better figure out if it's something you can live with before it eats you alive."

The door swung shut behind him, leaving Rexar alone in the cold.

He let out a slow breath, but the fire inside him didn't fade. It never did.

Rexar stayed outside long after Vee had gone back in.

The cold bit at his skin, sharp and insistent, but it never touched the fire simmering beneath his ribs. It never had. No matter how cold it got, no matter how hard the wind cut through Scrila's neon-lit streets, Rexar ran too hot to feel it.

The hunger hadn't faded yet.

It should have. Two days was usually enough for the edges to dull, for the raw energy to settle into something manageable. But this time, it clung to him, too much, too fast, coiling in his veins like a second pulse. He exhaled, another slow stream of smoke curling into the air, maple-sweet and heavy, a warmth that softened the space around him even as his mind refused to quiet.

He rolled his lighter between his fingers, flicking it open just to watch the flame dance. Focus on the fire. Control it. Keep everything else buried.

He didn't know how to explain it to Kriia.

Didn't know how to tell her that it wasn't the kill that unsettled him—it was how **alive** it made him feel. How the weight he carried every other second of his life disappeared the moment he fed. How the world went quiet. How the heat in his chest became something steady, something right.

And then it was over.

And the silence that followed was worse.

Something was wrong with him.

He snapped the lighter shut.

Not here. Not now.

Rexar pushed off the railing and stepped back inside.

* * *

The green room was even louder than before. Someone had turned the music up, bass rattling through the floorboards, and the air was thick with the smell of alcohol, sweat, and cigarette smoke.

Kriia was at the merch table, checking inventory again, her sharply pointed ears twitching as she argued with one of the venue staff. She always looked like this when she was about to snap—shoulders tight, jaw locked, like she was holding everything together through sheer force of will.

She didn't look up when he walked in, but he felt the way she **noticed**. The way her breathing shifted, the way her fingers hesitated for half a second before continuing their frantic tally.

She still felt him.

That was enough.

For now.

Vee, on the other hand, had made himself comfortable again,

sprawled across the couch like he owned the place, one boot propped up on the table, beer bottle dangling from his fingers. He looked too pleased with himself about something, the kind of smugness that usually meant he was either up to something or had just gotten away with it.

Kalypso was curled beside him, her single emerald eye flicking toward Rexar—sharp, calculating. Watching. Like she was waiting to see if he'd react, if he'd take the bait Vee was inevitably laying out.

Rexar ignored them both.

Instead, he turned to Kriia, watching the way she moved—focused, restless, like she needed something to keep her hands busy. Like she was thinking too hard.

"Where's Remi?" he asked.

She didn't look up. "Where do you think?"

Rexar exhaled through his nose. **Of course.**

Remi didn't do crowds. He *barely* did people. If he wasn't helping with setup, he was either outside, chain-smoking through his third pack of the night, or sprawled out in the truck, boots kicked up on the dashboard, waiting for Kriia to finish.

But that wasn't what Rexar was asking.

Remi being *here* was what mattered. He didn't just show up to venues unless Kriia needed him for something. And Kriia never needed help with shit like this.

So why had she brought him? Remi had been around a lot this past week.

Rexar had never given much thought to him. Too closed off. Too quick to snap. He carried himself like a man waiting for the next fight, shoulders tense, jaw always set, like he expected the world to swing first.

And maybe it was personal—hell, Rexar had never been the kind of guy people like Remi took well to. Too loud, too cocky, too sure of himself in a way that pissed off men who were more used to taking hits than throwing them. And Remi? He was all sharp edges and silent resentments. Rexar felt it every time the guy looked at him, the weight of something unspoken but not subtle.

But jealousy?

Not a fucking chance.

Whatever history he and Kriia had was exactly that—history. Rexar didn't do insecurities. He had nothing to prove, least of all to a guy still trying to crawl out of the hole he kept throwing himself into.

And if Remi had a problem with him?

That was a Remi problem.

The heat in his chest flared again, restless and demanding. Loud. He clenched his jaw, shoving the feeling down as deep as it would go.

He just had to make it through the night.

Then he could figure out what the hell was wrong with him.

Rexar ran a hand through his hair, white curls falling messily over his forehead as he forced himself to refocus. One night. He just had to make it through one more goddamn night of this tour without letting whatever was crawling under his skin get the better of him.

The heat inside him still pulsed, slow and insistent, like embers being stoked. It wasn't just the aftermath of the Culling. **This was different.** More potent. **More.**

He rolled his shoulders, trying to shake it off, but the restless energy didn't go anywhere. He needed an outlet. Something

to burn, something to fight—hell, even a distraction would do.

And as if summoned by his frustration, the door to the green room slammed open.

A frazzled-looking stagehand stood in the doorway, panting, his headset hanging lopsided around his neck. “Uh—Rexar? We got a problem.”

Rexar sighed, already regretting whatever he was about to hear. “What kind of problem?”

“The kind where your walking neon sign of a friend is about to put some asshole through a wall.”

Of course.

Without another word, Rexar pushed past the stagehand and stalked down the hall. He could already hear the commotion—a mix of shouting, cursing, and something heavy crashing against metal.

By the time he stepped into the loading bay behind the venue, the fight was already in full swing.

Remi had some guy pinned against a stack of crates, one hand clenched into a tight fist in his shirt, the other cocked back and ready to break something. His sharp neon-green eyes glowed like a goddamn warning, and even from a few feet away, Rexar could see his muscles tensed with barely restrained aggression.

The guy in his grip—some roadie, judging by the lanyard still swinging around his neck—was trying to shove him off, but it wasn’t happening. Remi was too strong, too pissed, and judging by the way his nostrils flared, probably too high on adrenaline to be reasoned with.

Rexar didn’t move. Didn’t step in.

Didn’t have to.

Kriia was already there.

She didn't grab Remi, didn't shove between them—just placed a hand on his wrist, fingers curling lightly over the veins thrumming beneath his skin. Not forceful. Not demanding. Just there.

"Rem," she murmured, voice low. Meant only for him.

Remi didn't move. Didn't let go of the guy. His breathing was ragged, his muscles coiled too damn tight, like one wrong word might set him off all over again.

Kriia didn't flinch. Didn't snap. Just held on. "It's done."

For a long, stretched-out second, Rexar thought it wouldn't work.

Then—slowly, like it physically hurt—Remi uncurled his fingers, shoving the guy backward. The roadie hit the ground, scrambled to his feet, and bolted, muttering curses that Rexar barely heard.

He wasn't the problem.

The problem was Remi.

He exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down his face—and Rexar saw it.

Blood, smeared at the corner of his mouth. Not the other guy's. His own.

Rexar didn't react, but Kriia did. Not in shock. Not in alarm. Just... knowing.

She dug into her jacket pocket, pulled out a crumpled napkin, and shoved it into Remi's hand without a word.

Remi didn't say anything either. Just wiped his mouth, staring at the red staining the fabric.

Rexar knew what it meant. *They all did.*

The *Crimson Surge* had been clawing at the edges of Remi's control, pressing against the breaking point, waiting for the

smallest excuse to snap free. He'd barely kept it down. **One more second. One more push.** And it wouldn't have been a fight—it would've been an execution.

Remi exhaled, rolling his shoulders like he was shaking something off. Then, voice rough, he muttered, "I need a fucking smoke," and turned toward the alley.

No one stopped him.

Rexar watched him go, exhaling slowly through his nose, smoke curling warm and sweet in the space between them.

Vee let out a low whistle. "Damn, *he's* got issues."

Kriia shot him a look. "Don't start."

Vee only smirked, but the amusement didn't quite reach his eyes.

Rexar didn't say anything. Just flexed his fingers at his sides, the heat still thrumming in his blood, restless and demanding.

Whatever had crawled under his skin, whatever had changed in him since the Culling—it wasn't leaving.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Rexar pushed the green room door open with more force than necessary, the metal creaking as he stepped inside. The warmth hit him instantly—stale beer, cigarette smoke, the ever-present thrum of bass bleeding through the walls. It should've felt normal. Routine.

It didn't.

Behind him, Kriia hesitated. Just for a second. Then she sighed and turned back toward the alley, vanishing down the hall.

Going to check on Remi.

Rexar exhaled through his nose, rolling his shoulders. Not his business.

What *was* his business was Vee—who had flung himself onto the couch with an exaggerated groan, arms draped over the backrest, legs kicked up on the table like he had **zero** concept of personal space. Kalypso was curled next to him, as unreadable as ever, one hand resting idly on his thigh, her nails tapping a slow, methodical rhythm against the fabric of his jeans.

She watched Rexar like she knew something he didn't.

Rexar ignored it.

He grabbed a half-empty beer off the table, taking a long swig before Vee spoke.

"Good to know Special K's out there keeping the streets safe." He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You think he's giving some heartfelt speech about the consequences of violence, or just chain-smoking 'til the rage dies out?"

Rexar didn't answer. Just looked at him.

Vee's grin faltered. Just barely. But Rexar caught it.

There.

That slip—that fraction of hesitation—was new.

Vee had always been too much. Too confident, too reckless, too damn sure of himself even when he had no reason to be. But something about him lately—the way he carried himself, the way his jokes hit just a second off-beat—felt *wrong*.

It wasn't just the usual bullshit. It was something else.

Something that had been creeping in for a while now.

"You good?" Rexar asked, watching him too closely.

Vee huffed, shoving himself upright. "What, are *you* worried about *me* now?"

Rexar didn't blink. "Should I be?"

Vee rolled his eyes, grabbing his beer. "You sound like my goddamn grandmother."

Rexar leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. “Your grandmother **knows** what your bloodline does to people.”

Something flickered behind Vee’s eyes—something dark, something quick—before he covered it with a sharp laugh.

“You mean *Oblivion’s Grasp*?” He stretched his arms behind his head, smirking. “Please. That shit’s just Hawthorne propaganda to keep the weak ones in line.”

Rexar’s jaw ticked.

Vee noticed, because of course he did. And he doubled down.

“The whole ‘overuse leads to madness’ thing? Scare tactics, man. They don’t want us getting too good at it.” He lifted his hand, fingers splaying. For half a second, the air around him shifted—not visibly, not physically, but in a way that made the back of Rexar’s neck prickle.

Like something had *glitched*.

Then, just as fast, it was gone.

Vee grinned. “I use it all the time, and I’m fine.”

Rexar didn’t call him on the lie.

Didn’t remind him that he’d seen the moments where Vee seemed to zone out mid-conversation, only to snap back with a too-easy joke. That he’d noticed the way Vee’s reactions were sometimes half a second off—like he had to *catch up* to the moment.

Didn’t tell him he was using it more and more.

And that eventually—it was going to catch up to him.

Instead, Rexar just took another slow sip of his beer and said, “Yeah? Then why the hell do you look so paranoid all the time?”

Vee’s smirk froze.

Kalypso, silent until now, tilted her head. Watching.

Waiting.

Then—Vee laughed. Loud. Too loud. “Man, you really need to get laid if you’re paying *that* much attention to my face.”

It was a deflection. And a bad one.

But Rexar let him have it.

For now.

Instead, he just smirked, letting his smoke curl lazily through the air, watching as Vee subtly rubbed his temple with the heel of his hand. Like his head hurt.

Like he was trying to ground himself.

Like maybe—for just a second—he wasn’t sure if this moment was real.

Rexar didn’t push.

He just waited.

Because sooner or later—

Vee was gonna crack.