

"Get over yourself, Hydra."

The curtains made him sick. Some mornings, you wake up and know the day is destined to be a shitty one. The milk's expired, your coffee's bland, and PR shoves speeches up your tail, booking you for a Saturday night interview with a pompous asshole.

"Hydra? Look at me. Snap out of it."

"Won't you shut up?" The Lucario jerked his shoulder. "Your voice is grating."

"Get a fucking grip." The Braixen grabbed his arm, twisting him around. "You go out there, suck his dick, and stick to the script. We need this. You're down five points in Lotus Falls, and this is your way back in."

"Kiss my ass."

The fox ignored him, rattling on about podcasts and late-night talk shows next week. Her voice really was piercing. When the lights dimmed, a makeup team powdered his snout, smearing foundation and colored dragons over his cheeks.

He slipped into that empty, wide grin as the curtains pulled back.

"Remember the script, Hydra."

"Don't fuck this up. Or else."

An audience full of paid pokémon and programmed applause welcomed him onto the stage. Front and center, an Inteleon smirked into a microphone, decked out with a black suit and bowtie one size too small.

"Lord Hydra, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the show."

"Thanks for having me, Delta."

One paw tidied his scarf while the other waved at the cameras, flashing his set of fangs. At least five Rotom orbited the desk, switching between live feeds as he took a seat.

"Earlier on the program," Delta said, "we played a song from a new band making waves in your district: *The Hell Cats*. Are you familiar with any of their music?"

"Unfortunately, I am." The Lucario crossed his arms. "Hard to avoid them these days. Every time I open Yapdos, they're dressed like prostitutes and scratching up another storm. It's deplorable."

Delta grinned and flicked his slimy tail. "Not only that," he rattled. "Their latest music video features Giratina, with lead singer Scarlet twerking, dancing, and performing in his lap. Do you worry that kind of evil messaging could influence young pokémon in your district?"

Hydra tightened his scarf and bit back a growl. *No, you snobby fucking lizard.* "I worry about a lot of things influencing young people these days..."

A camera floated in front of him, and he gripped it with both paws.

"Look. Parents can decide what their kids listen to. But when celebrities build their careers mocking Arceus, celebrating Giratina, and treating faith like a joke, I don't think that's doing our communities any favors."

"So, you're not a fan?"

Hydra barked out a laugh. "Delta, if I had it my way, The Hell Cats would spend less time making porn in the Distortion World and more time finding actual jobs."

Right on cue, the crowd erupted with applause. Hydra slid a paw over the armrest and slumped into his chair.

The Inteleon tidied one edge of his collar, a thin beam of water sprouting from his finger. "Different times, I suppose." He shrugged. "Back when I was younger, pokémon

that praised Giratina learned pretty quickly what the consequences were. I'd be careful if I were them."

"Right..."

They moved into softball questions after that. Hydra had rehearsed most of them, with the occasional 'What's your favorite restaurant to visit in the Elpi?' appetizer to keep things fresh.

He almost got comfortable.

Delta flicked the remote and displayed a screenshot he'd never seen before. "Apollo and you were close once," the lizard said. "But last week, he made a statement criticizing your stance on the drug crisis. Do you still stand by what you said, despite his concerns?"

Hydra flicked his tail. Right. His statement. The one he never wrote, and PR shoved to the press like slabs of gold. "Absolutely, I do. Without a doubt."

He swallowed hard.

"I have a lot of respect for Apollo," he went on. "Galena Collis is the cornerstone of our region, and he's been their leader for over a decade now. But he's soft. We have drugs pouring into our region, and he's letting those *thugs* walk free. Free to terrorize more of your neighborhoods, more of your homes."

One of his arms lowered. His muzzle curved into a stage-ready frown. Off to the side, a Braixen flashed him a thumbs-up, but he pretended not to notice.

"We don't need rehabilitation," Hydra continued. "We need to put those criminals behind bars. Permanently. It's the only way we can restore order."

"So, to clear the air," Delta said, leaning on both of his elbows, "you think Chief Apollo is too soft on crime? Is that right?"

"Yes. Without a doubt." Hydra nodded. "If I were in charge of the Collis, their streets would be safer. Not only is he running his own district into the ground, but he's bringing all of Sylva Skies with him. It's shameful."

Those cheers thundered across the room again. Something bitter filled Hydra's maw as he ducked his head, pumping his fist for the lens. The pose, management said, generated the big bucks.

"I couldn't agree more," Delta cut in, offering a webbed hand. "Somebody had to say it. Perhaps it's time Apollo steps down, lest the problem never ends."

Hydra shook paws, but his smile failed to reach his eyes. The next question came in a blur. His brain lingered on autopilot, reciting Tauros shit spoonfed by a team that thought they knew best.

"Your advice on the current climate disasters... Any comments regarding the other leaders... Your views on recent fashion trends in the Elpi..."

Ten minutes. Five. The Lucario counted down the time until commercial break. When one camera lowered, he thought it was over, but his tail quickly glued itself as Delta leaned over the desk.

"Your district boasts about its academics," Delta said. "Eighty percent of all scientists live in the Amethyst Elpi, and you hold the highest share of universities across the region. Yet, you're not a scientist yourself, Hydra? Does that bother you at all?"

The Lucario shuffled his paws under the table. This hadn't been part of the script. A glance at his manager backstage spelled confusion, and he paused long enough to clear his throat.

"Giving me a tough one, eh?" Hydra finally chuckled. "Early on, I'd say it did. I have nothing but respect for our scientists: they've made remarkable discoveries throughout history, and under my leadership, those breakthroughs have only improved."

He glanced at the Inteleon, disguising his frown with a nod. His eyes drifted off into the crowd seconds later.

"The Elpi will always have its scientists," Hydra continued. "But for the first time ever, we have more than that. Since I took office, we've increased our district's defender count by over fifteen percent. That's on par with the Creedite Woodlands and Lotus Falls, and only five points behind the Galena Collis."

Delta hummed, twisting his skinny arms together. "That so? What you're saying is, you're steering the Amethyst Elpi into a new direction?"

"More or less." Hydra rubbed his neck. Sure. That sounded good enough. "With an uptick in magic and crime these last few months, safety has become a top concern. Before me, our district was vulnerable. Weak. Now, we're prepared for any threat, inside or out."

"Speaking of prepared." Delta flicked a remote without warning. Before Hydra could probe, a picture flashed onto the screen. "There's been a rumor circulating on social media. You and your second-in-command, Aeru, supposedly spotted holding paws at a coffee shop. Have you seen it?"

"I..." The Lucario's heart dropped. His team promised they'd scrape that. Sue the perpetrator and ensure it never comes up tonight. "I've seen glimpses of it. I try to avoid giving merit to fake, ridiculous rumors online, though."

"So it's not true, then? You were never at that coffee shop, and this picture is a deepfake?"

"Not—no, not necessarily. It's just..." His manager cleared her throat backstage. He didn't budge, biting his tongue hard enough to draw blood. "Aeru is my right-hand general. He works hard for all four districts, not just ours. We are friends, he and I, and I'm sure, once or twice, we've grabbed coffee together, if that's what you're asking."

"Just coffee?" Delta hummed, smiling wide enough to break his jaw. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing else..."

The audience only half-laughed this time. Not nearly enough to mask the unsteady flicks of his tail, or the bleeding makeup striping down his chin.

Delta waved an arm, clicked his pen, and gripped one of the Rotom cameras once it got close. "That's all for tonight, folks. Thanks for tuning in. Stick around after this commercial break for a sneak peek of tomorrow's guest."

He strolled to Hydra's side of the table and placed an arm over his shoulder. They each mouthed a goodbye. Hydra tried to keep his chin high, but the spotlight burned his eyes as the broadcast flickered to red.

He never remembered leaving the studio after that. Only the sweet splash of rain, coating his fur like the cocoon around his leader's satchel.

Thud

"F-fuck, Hydra..."

A half-drunk wine bottle toppled over. Hydra clutched the Gallade in his arms, wrestling him onto his back. Their weight tented the mattress as the Lucario stripped off his cloak.

"Yeah," Hydra breathed. "I'd love to. Missed you all damn day."

Aeru hummed, drifting a paw to wander up the jackal's suit before plopping it free. His eyes glazed over. "You did? Prove it."

"Prove what?"

"How much you missed me." Aeru snickered, his voice honey-sweet and dangerous.
"Not sure that I believe you."

Hydra let out a warm growl. His tip already peeked through his sheath, heated and red, sparking a slow grind of his hips as he brushed against the knight. "How's this for proof?"

"You're just pent up," Aeru murmured. "Could have been anyone's fault. Not mine."

"I assure you. It is entirely your fault."

The candle burned on the nightstand. Aeru licked his lips. He tickled a paw down that blue fur, slow and feathery, and grazed over that pouch. Hydra curled every digit and moaned.

"Good," Aeru finally whispered, a free hand slipping his own helmet away. "It'd better be my fault. 'Cause I wanna take responsibility for it."

That savory smell of desire filled the room. Aeru needed this more than he did. Or maybe equally bad. Hydra probed his muzzle lower, stealing a kiss, twisting their tongues together.

The knight melted like wax.

His stomach rubbed up and down Hydra's hard-on until the canine whimpered against his lips. Hydra couldn't help it. They crafted a steady rhythm, trumpeted by heavy pants and sweaty grinds.

Aeru broke the kiss and smiled, almost purring. "Poor pup," he said. "Let me lend you a paw." He wiggled himself free and slithered between his legs.

The Lucario made a noise with his throat, somewhere between a grunt and a plea. He could feel the stickiness inside his sheath as those small paws tugged his fur aside, leaking like a constant stream.

Aeru didn't hesitate.

He trailed his soft pads down the entire length, brushing his claws over that knot. Hydra rolled his eyes back. Those digits kneaded his hips like velvet. He thudded one foot against the bed, his sensors perked against his ears.

When he forced out another moan, Aeru licked his lips and dipped his nose closer. "You're so big, Hydra," he said in that husky voice, replacing his paws with a sniff. "And warm."

Hydra thrashed his tail against the sheets.

He watched that slender maw move forward, the small pink tongue meeting his thick red shaft, lapping every drip from his tip with a cushioned suckle. The rush was electric. Hydra resisted the urge to thrust. To sink himself deeper.

He gripped the knight's shoulders and scratched under his chin. "Christ, you're good..."

His brain felt foggy. Maybe he was pent-up. Aeru responded with a giggle, sliding up and down and adding some suction, keeping his eyes glued onto the canine's. If the Gallade told him to jump off a cliff at that moment, he might have done it.

"Fuck..." Hydra brought his legs up, throating a howl of passion. The bliss hit like a Revavroom. Before he could voice it, he spurt once, hard and long, his whole body shuddering with an orgasm he'd been milking all week.

Aeru squeezed his erection and swallowed every drop.

When the haze settled, Hydra wasn't sure if he'd passed out. His chest pounded, palms numb, and Aeru stepped away with a satisfied swipe of his lips, letting the Lucario admire him.

And that's exactly what Hydra did.

Under the candlelight, the knight glowed. Those slender hips revealed a cute, bubblegum pink shaft that bobbed into the air, craving attention. His stomach puffed out with fluff, not muscle, small enough that Hydra could circle it with both paws.

Aeru was maybe half his weight. Probably less. Definitely less.

How can one guy be so gorgeous? Hydra pondered it over as he patted the mattress, offering to return the favor. One round of kissing later, and the Gallade's heated member bounced in front of his nose, sweet musk and judgment swirling into a fine wine.

Hydra cupped that length with his tongue, watched the small knight squirm, and let their playlist die down as the night bloomed into a cozy afterglow.

His ear twitched once the shower drizzled off. Aeru emerged from the bathroom and draped a towel over his neck, tussling with a robe. Hydra's robe. Two sizes too big, but his favorite to steal.

"You don't mind, right?" Aeru said, strolling over.

Hydra patted the mattress. "Maybe if you actually stretched any of my clothes, I would."

Aeru barked out a laugh and crawled beneath the covers. They shared a quick, polite smooch, tamer after a warm bath and salted pretzels. The Gallade smelled of jasmine, lavender, and a hint of Lucario. Or maybe several hints.

Hydra blamed it on the robe.

"So," Aeru said, settling against his shoulder, "I never asked. How'd the interview go? Was he boring, shitty, and an asshole like you thought?"

"Even worse." Hydra groaned and flicked his tail. "Guy spent twenty minutes asking questions and another forty trying to answer them himself. Media team regrets sending me on."

"They do?"

"First time for everything, I guess." Hydra huffed. He grabbed the remote and browsed to their favorite show. "Not like it matters. Next week is another pompous, rich snob, and I'm sure he'll be worse."

"You need a break," Aeru said, gripping his arm tighter. "When's the last time you had a day off? A real day off?"

Hydra opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Aeru knew the answer already.

"I'm serious, Hydra. You can't keep doing this to yourself."

"You know it's not that simple, Aeru." The Lucario stared at the television. "They got my tail locked down until September."

"A whole month? For what?"

"Meetings. Training. Podcasts. Charity appearances. Strategy sessions. More meetings. You name it."

Aeru clenched the sheets. He nudged Hydra's chin with his maw, waiting until the Lucario finally looked at him. "You have a voice too, you know. You don't have to say yes to everything."

"Cute."

"I'm serious."

The remote settled between them. Aeru glared up, his cheeks steamy, wet, and puffed out like an Eevee, devoid of his native helmet and the rest of his armor.

He glowed under the nightlight. Delicate and vulnerable. The opposite of a general, for damn sure. Hydra tugged him closer, pressing the Gallade against his chest.

"So am I."

"But they work for you," Aeru whispered. "Not the other way around."

"No. They work for Hydra."

The words slipped out before he could stop them. He drifted a paw to hit play on the remote, sinking lower into the mattress.

Aeru didn't respond right away. Not until the intro music blared, and the candle burned out from the window ledge. "What if you quit? Right now."

"I'm not allowed to quit. They'd never let me."

"But how can they stop you?" Aeru pressed. "What if you got up, walked away, and never came back?"

"Trust me. They'll drag my ass back here, one way or another." His eyes lingered on that amulet, perched on his dresser like the eyes of a dragon. It flickered once.

"Hydra..." The Gallade cupped his cheek and touched their noses. "They can find another leader. Make someone else their puppet. I love—prefer..." He swallowed. "All I want is for you to be happy. Forget everything else."

"Who said I wasn't happy?"

"Don't lie to me." Aeru shook his head. "You're not happy. I know you're not. Every day, you go out there and read speeches written by greedy, homophobic assholes who tell you who to be, who to love, and what to say."

Hydra bit his lip. He tried to look away, but two paws reeled him back.

"I don't care about that version of you, Hydra," Aeru went on, his breath shaky and warm. "I care about this one. You. We can quit together. They can't stop us."

He held his tongue and peered into the Lucario. Their eyes, lighter and deeper shades of ruby, clashed in a silent duel.

The real him? Hydra scrunched his nose. So that's how Aeru saw him? Fake and like another puppet? Out of all the pokémon in his camp, hearing those words from the Gallade stung the most.

"I can take care of myself, thank you." He turned his shoulder and made space between them. "You don't know shit about how this works. Don't pretend like you do."

"Hydra, that's not—" Aeru recoiled. "I wasn't trying to call you weak. I promise."

Hydra scoffed, saying nothing.

"I wasn't." Aeru's ears dipped. "That's the opposite of what I'm saying. I know how hard you work. How much shit you carry. I can't imagine what that's like."

"Aeru. Just drop it."

"But I hate seeing you like this," the Gallade continued. "They take so much from you, and you keep giving it to them. Over and over. You deserve better."

"Aeru—"

"I'm just trying to help you, not insult you. That's all I've been trying to do—"

Dammit, Aeru. Just drop it. Hydra clenched the sheets and added a growl to his voice. "For the love of Arceus, you've made your point. You're irritating."

For better or worse, that did the trick. Aeru shut up after that. The program blared in the background, sappy and bland, but Hydra barely heard it.

Something in his chest twisted.

After several minutes of silence, he tried rolling over and snaking a paw out. Aeru pulled away almost instantly. He offered his shoulder as a pillow, muttering an apology, but the Gallade pretended not to hear it, staring ahead at the bright screen.

By the time the episode finished, they'd made no progress.

The clock struck long past midnight. Aeru rose to his feet and stripped Hydra's robe free, hanging it against the dresser. "Tomorrow night?" he mumbled, facing away.

"Sure. Tomorrow." Hydra sighed. They gathered up Aeru's helmet, armor, and satchel at the door, never looking at each other.

It always ended this way. Not usually in a fight, but having to wave goodbye. The maids would check in early-morning, and if they spotted the general and leader of Amethyst Elpi sleeping together, there'd be more than a slimy reporter to worry about.

Aeru faded into the night with his bag tucked close.

Great job, Hydra. You asshole. He slammed the door and dragged himself back inside. The bottle of wine brushed his paws, cold and acrid, and he poured a splash down his throat.

The bitter cherry burned his lungs.

Alcohol has a wicked sense of humor. Doesn't matter if you're fucked up, sober, high, or happy. It numbs everything. He topped the first bottle and fished for a second, sliding it down his muzzle with a satisfied groan.

"You piece of shit," he muttered, licking his lips, cracking open the third. "You puppet."

The television blared in the background. His phone buzzed on repeat. When his back hit the mattress, Hydra closed his eyes, fighting with the sheets until his pillow smacked against the floor.

One paw rose to the mirror, growling with his entire chest, "I'll kill you, asshole. One of these days."

Like a Gastly in the night, his reflection purred back. "That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

...

Hydra froze.

Every fur along his spine prickled. He must be drunk. That voice, sharp and smooth, mocked his own, and the mirror trembled as his reflection crossed its arms again.

"Aeru was right about you," it went on. "You are a puppet. Doing everything they tell you to do, like a good little pup."

The Lucario shuffled to his feet. He crept to the glass and peered through slitted eyes, heart hammering against his chest.

"I'm losing it," he finally whispered. "Fuck me."

He jerked a paw right. The other canine followed. He craned his neck sideways, then up, then down again. His reflection mimed him to a tee.

"Sweet Arceus." Hydra gripped his temple. "Hearing shit in my head. Just what I needed."

"But you know I'm right, don't you?" The mirror grinned at him. Those white fangs brandished like rows of knives, stepping closer despite Hydra standing still. "You still can't control yourself. You never have."

A chill swept the air. When Hydra met those eyes, he stumbled over his feet and thudded against the mattress. There was *no* denying that. "W-what the fuck?"

"Aren't you embarrassed? You're better than them. Stronger than them. And they treat you like their toy."

His back hit the covers. Cherry wine still stained his claws as he gripped an empty bottle, thrashing it out like a dagger.

The reflection hummed. "Are you not exhausted?"

"Get out of my head," Hydra choked out. "You're not real. Just another... another..."

Imagination? Dream? Drunk-craved fantasy? His lips went cold, and the mirrored Lucario laughed.

"Let me help you," it said. "Together. What do you say?"

Hydra bit his lips. His phone. If he was fast enough, he could call the guards, have this entire damn mansion flooded with defenders. He snatched a paw for it, but that voice iced his ears.

"I'm the only one who can help you, Hydra."

"You don't even know me, dammit," he barked, tossing a bottle aside. "Nobody does. Not you. Not those reporters. Not—"

"Not even Aeru?"

The glass pulsed.

His reflection, tall and dark, silhouetted into a blurry sphere. Blue tufts paled out. That spike on its chest vanished, drawn over by a flowery patch of white fur. When Hydra pinched his face again, no longer did a Lucario stare back at him.

A Gallade did.

"Have some faith, my love," the voice said, softer now. "In due time, we can show the world who you really are. The real Hydra."

That breeze, lonely and thin, sliced under the windowsill. It brushed over Hydra's fur. Ran down his back. Guided him closer...

Closer. Another step. He stalled inches from the mirror, unmindful of his amulet buzzing a frantic warning, and shook his head.

"I'm not special," Hydra muttered. "I never have been. You're wasting your time."

"Maybe. But there's only one way to find out."

The Gallade pressed its paw to the glass. Those eyes peered into him with that familiar, comforting glow. A smile he'd grown to crave. For a moment, all he could do was stare...

The lights. Cameras. Microphones wielded by patronizing talk-show hosts. They blurred into a cozy abyss. Far too long had he been crushed by the pressure: the leader of Amethyst Elpi, but cursed under its misery.

Hydra rattled, almost whispering, "Maybe you're right..."

No more makeup smeared over every inch of his fur. No more scripts shoved up his ass. He could escape. Total, absolute freedom.

His arm tugged against his thigh.

Forget what happened next. The world would be better off without him. Aeru was right; they could always find a new puppet. Someone else to pull on their leash.

Tap

Their paws connected. The mirror roared, cracked, and swallowed the room with a mystic haze.

"The first step, Hydra..."

That voice sounded so distant now, fading from his ears like the floor at his feet. His limbs went numb. He fought to keep his eyes open, to keep his legs from buckling over.

"Is to let go. Of all your fears, your doubts. Listen to that quiet echo in your head and submit to it."

Colors washed the ceiling in a bright, celestial flame. Gravity pulled him tighter. His lungs wheezed, bones clenched, and with a mighty roar, a weight shoved him forward, straight into the veil of nothingness.

"One day, Hydra..."

His paws lost balance, twisting into a void of stars. An underground portal. That voice pierced his brain, numbing every sensor and every thought.

"Through Faith, may all souls be free."

His amulet toppled to the floor, rolling under his desk. The television rattled on. Movement from the hallway passed his doors, but nobody had entered yet.

When the haze settled, his room was empty. A single notification buzzed his phone, flashing on the home screen for half a second.

Aeru: I'm sorry about earlier...

And then, seconds later, a final buzz.

Aeru: i love you



AFXNHUS