

*Note: This is the prologue of a much longer story.*

*Prologue...*

Trees zoomed past, roots were leapt over, and quick footsteps echoed behind him. He didn't know how long he had been running for anymore, all he knew was that he had to *keep* running, or else it was going to get him. So long he had been running that the only things he *wanted* to hear were the sounds of the dead leaves as they crumbled beneath his feet, the sound of his heart beating in his ears, and the voice in his head echoing, '*Don't stop.*'

And not the sound of the heavy feet as they crushed those dead leaves he had left behind.

By now, his dark skin was littered in scratches, some bleeding and others only red from the irritation. As much as it was annoying to feel the warmth of the blood roll down his arms, he had to remind himself that *now was not the time to be picky about such things*. Of course, it had to be bleeding all over the new outfit that he had finally gotten the week before, but things happen! Right now his main concern was trying to figure out when he was going to reach civilization. How far away *did* he end up wandering from the village? How long until that damned thing was going to stop *chasing* him? He'd curse himself for the rest of eternity if it was only chasing him because he was *running*, and not because it wanted to eat him. Actually, he probably should have considered that earlier, when the stupid thing told him he couldn't run forever. The thing was probably toying with him!

'*See, Vio! This is why you shouldn't go poking your head into things that scream 'DO NOT APPROACH,'*' his own voice echoed in his head as he leapt over a fallen log in his path. The short male slowed down for a moment to glance behind him, but quickly picked up his pace again when he caught sight of glowing white eyes through the thicket. '*When is it going to give up?!*' he sighed to himself, swerving to get out of the way of a rather thick tree. He had traveled through these forests *thousands* of times before, so why was it that everything looked so different?! The trees were all in the wrong place, there were too many fallen leaves all over the place despite it only being the middle of *summer*, and, '*For the love of the Gods, I could have sworn I left at dawn!*' The sun was nowhere to be seen and the sky was an eerie orange-red. Was he running in the opposite direction of the village? No, that wasn't possible. Perhaps he was careless and jumped too quickly into danger, but he wouldn't get himself *lost*.

His pale brown eyes widened when he finally noticed tags hanging off the ropes that were tied from tree to tree beside him. '*FUCK!*' Of *all* things, he had to get himself stuck in a *Realm*. Now how was he supposed to get out of this mess?! Literally?! The path seemed endless, and he was *definitely* certain that his own energy wasn't going to last forever. Sadly, he couldn't say the same of the *thing* that was following closely behind. Judging by its size when he first approached it—it could probably run for *days*. He was no match for it, and by now his muscles were screaming at him to stop—no more, *no more*.

Their prayer was miraculously answered when he finally noticed a clearing in the trees. The light grew brighter and brighter as he got closer to the clearing, and finally the large wave of light hit him when he stepped outside, forcing him to shield his eyes with an arm.

The only problem was that, unfortunately, the ground seemed to have completely *vanished* underneath him. His mind was only able to process a single appropriate response for such a thing before gravity decided to finally do its job. Luckily for him, the fall wasn't straight down, or he feared that this would have been the last time he'd be able commit such a stupid mistake. Not-as-luckily, the trip down included much tumbling and various apparently vengeful twigs that stuck out would catch themselves

onto some part of his clothing or his *skin*. The latter was definitely more painful, but he had to admit that the various *stones* that were poking out of the cliff-side were much angrier, and hurt all the more.

When his body finally came to a stop, he simply lay limp on his side, allowing his chest to rise and fall slowly to calm his racing heart. It was dark and incredibly quiet—there didn't even seem to be any insects around. He had to say that in such a darkness at least a *cricket* would seem welcomed, even when he would usually curse them when trying to get a good night's rest.

Once Vio felt like his heart was no longer going to burst through his chest, he sat up as slowly as he could to figure out just how much damage that fall seemed to have done. His arms were stinging from all the scratches, but he thanked that it was his *arms* that took the brunt of the damage as opposed to his *face*. Many of those branches and rocks could have easily taken out an eye. Blood seemed to be splattered all over his clothing, and he signed internally. There was no more complaining about the state of his new clothes. It as might as well be used as a campfire at this point, considering its incredibly shredded state. At least it provided some warmth. Judging by the fact that very little light was actually reaching down here, it was going to get *very* cold. In the end, it wasn't as though he had spent his entire *savings* on new clothes so that he could begin traveling and get out of that blasted crowded village. How many hours had he slaved away at all those annoying shops when he could have spent them reading or wandering through the forest and figuring out where all the *Realms* were so he wouldn't have gotten in this mess in the first place?! A few moments of thinking, he sighed again.

Who was he kidding. It was his own fault that he had provoked that *thing*. *'But I've never seen it before!... No Vio, that's not a valid excuse... Oh, but there is so much to learn from new things!... That doesn't mean that you should just go ahead and chase after the damned thing!... Aaaagh, but so what! You can't learn without risking something or another!'* His hands were up at his head and was clenching his jaw at his annoyance for arguing with himself. He winced when he clenched his skull too hard.

At least he was alive. That's what mattered. Although, the more he thought about it, the more that he figured that *it* would sooner or later catch up with him. His legs were screaming at him for being so incredibly rude to them, and essentially refused to move. It seemed as though his entire *body* was against him, right now, but even he couldn't blame it.

When the short male finally let his hands rest at his sides and raised his head, he noticed a faint glowing only a few paces away. To make things stranger, it seemed to have been coming from a *rock*. Furrowing his eyebrows—and wincing at the movement—he squinted to see if he could get a better look at it, but finally gave into his curiosity as he began crawling towards the source of light without realizing it. Once he was right next to it, the male took it into his hand and examined it closely.

It wasn't like any stone he had ever seen in his entire life. It was a beautiful translucent blueish-black color that seemed to be *glowing* from within, and it was what was essentially creating the light. He turned it over in his hand to get a closer look at it, but instead of the same, smooth surface, he was met face-to-face with a pair of eyes that were looking directly at him. Both Vio and the eyes stared at each other for a good few moments, before the rock... *Uncurled* and made a strange squeaking noise. It wasn't so much the uncurling that triggered a reaction, but the squeak that caused Vio's body to finally allow him to move again, and he sent the rock(?) flying into the air as he scrambled back to where he had originally fallen.

*'A rock... That makes noise. There is no such thing, Vio. No such thing! You're just—you're just imagining things!'* he tried to reason with himself, trying to calm his breathing as his heart began to beat faster once again. When the rock(?) finally fell back down with a soft *thump* only a few paces away, Vio

stared at the object as it uncurled once more and shook its... Head. His brown eyes only widened when it proceeded to stare back at him, and only then did it hit him.

It was a phantasm. There was no way a real creature like this existed in the human world. It *had* to be a phantasm, but the question was—*what* type of phantasm was it? He'd never seen anything like it before! Nothing in the books, nothing from passing seers!

He opened his mouth, but closed it immediately. What if it was a bad spirit?

No, that wasn't the point here. The point here was to learn more! How could one learn if nothing was risked?!

"... C-Can you... Can you speak?" he asked in a low voice. The... Rock-snake, thing only continued to stare, before making the strange squeak sound again. "... I'm going to take that as a *no*," he reasoned, sighing out loud and finally relaxing his stance. "What *are* you...? Though I suppose you can't answer that..." The young male reached back towards the rock-snake and picked it up in his hands. "... You're like... A snake that swallowed a rock, but *not*," he gently tapped at the strange lump that appeared to be its body—the side he had seen first—and smiled a bit at the pleasing *clink* noise it made. "I'm going to assume that you're one of the weaker phantasms... You don't seem like you can do much, can you? What are you doing down here, anyways?" he asked, tilting his head and staring back into the eyes of the rock-snake.

It squeaked.

"You're probably lonely down here all by yourself, aren't you! What do you say we travel together, huh?! You can work as a very nice light for night-time!" he exclaimed, smiling at the creature.

It squeaked again.

"... I should probably figure out how to get out of here, first, huh?" he said, glancing back up from where he fell. He regretted doing the action instantly.

The same glowing white eyes from before were staring back at him, causing the grin he had on his lips from earlier to flip upside down.

He sighed.

*'Violante Liberia Constantinus. You really should have eaten that bread you had been saving this morning.'*