

Chapter 1 — Fade (Archived)

The scent of Caelum's cooking had followed me for the last mile, a thick trail of saliva marking my path home. Inside the apartment were my best friends. Caelum Nero's graceful dance with the kitchen knives. His older brother, Korben, lounged with a book and a wineglass in hand, letting his wit dangle on the edge of his tongue. Finally, the oldest and founder of our group, Liam Reed, engrossed in a new video game, his new ZetaWave 3 humming softly in the background.

"Food's almost ready!" Caelum called out, flashing a grin as he caught sight of me. "Oh! Hey, Fox! You're just in time."

Caelum was the youngest and most mature—fresh out of high school, though you'd never guess it from his constant motion and quiet confidence. His dark red hair had a vibrant blue streak through the center, his reaver's mark.

"For dinner, I hope! I've been starving all day." I licked my lips in anticipation of tonight's meal. The redheaded boy had been cooking since the previous night, determined to keep scavengers away from his promised feast. We would try to steal a bite when he wasn't looking. His trusty *thwapping* spatula, never out of arm's reach and lightning-fast reflexes to match.

"Ah, nope! I said, *almost* ready. Dinner will be ready within the hour at most," he snickered, buzzing between the different cooking appliances.

I frowned, protesting the speed at which the food would finish, as if it would hurry it along somehow. "Tell me how an hour falls under 'almost'."

He stopped everything to shake his spatula in my face. "Listen, you. I have been cooking since yesterday. An hour *is* almost."

Liam grabbed a cigarette from his pack and popped it into his mouth. He brushed his hand against my hand as he passed me, and my tail flicked excitedly in response. He got a kick out of doing that often. "Hey, Fox. Where you been?"

"Wanted to feel important today." I nonchalantly held up a shopping bag containing a tank top, garden seeds, a fancy blade from the pawnshop, and a retractable bug catcher's net—my spoils of the last few hours. "Strangest thing happened while I was walking back, though."

"Yeah? What's that?" Liam hovered closely over me, genuinely interested in hearing my story.

I set my bags down next to me—another way of saying I lost them, and I recounted my story from earlier. "I had this eerie feeling I was being watched near the Hydra's Den. You know that little patch of woods right behind the tavern?"

He leaned in as he listened, holding onto every word. With a playful grin slapped across his mug, he was hooked already. "Yeah, okay, so *were you* being watched?"

My tail swished playfully as I continued my story. "I noticed the bushes nearby rustling, and I saw big yellow eyes looking directly at me." I paused, intentionally adding a dramatic flair. In hindsight, it would have been more impactful a sentence later. "You'll never guess. It was a blue-furred fox." It didn't take my honed senses to see the disbelief that washed over him as he nodded, still grinning sheepishly.

"Pfft, you had me going for a second, man," he chuckled quietly, patting me on the shoulder as he went to enjoy his cigarette.

"It's true!" I exclaimed, but he had already closed the door.

Liam, at twenty-four, was the oldest, carrying the weight of responsibility alongside the burdens of his past. Behind hazel eyes, Liam was keen and observant, with brown hair always slicked back and tucked behind his ears. His glory days earned him the title of unsung hero, putting Orion in a calm for the monstrous beasts of the Wilds. The Serenity. Unfortunately, he was the only surviving member of his group and to add salt to the wound, this also put him out of work.

"Do you have any idea just how rare it is to see one of those?" Caelum didn't sound like he believed me either, but at least he was a bit more convincing.

"Hey, it's mating season right now. I imagine for Crit it'd be more common than you'd think." Korben cackled from across the room, using a nickname that he'd given me the day we met. Crit—short for Critter. Korben was the only one allowed to use it.

My eyes narrowed at him out of the feeling that it was the right reaction, but if I was being honest, I wasn't exactly sure what it meant.

"Shit! I completely spaced that the fire nexeon went *kaput*. No wonder this burner won't get hot." The young chef groaned, yet his momentum remained. Watching him was entertaining. He moved so gracefully in the kitchen, stirring here, shaking there. His process was nothing short of chaotic, yet the result, *always* perfect.

Korben's laughter echoed through the room, but his eyes never left his brother. "I'm telling you, little bro, if you wanted to torch the place, at least wait till I'm outside," he joked, but there was a flicker of concern in his eyes. He played it off smoothly, turning his worry into another joke. "You know I'd have to come rescue your sorry ass otherwise."

He shot a wink at Caelum, and for a split second, the playful mask slipped, showing the instinct to look out for his younger brother. Even in his teasing, there was that thread of protectiveness that only surfaced when he thought no one was paying attention.

Caelum shrugged off the incident with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I know, I know. At least nothing bad happened. I need to pay better attention," he said, his voice carrying that signature tone of self-deprecation he always used to minimize his own problems. His hands moved deftly around the kitchen, preparing everyone's plates. I realized how pale he was, a sign that he'd pushed himself harder than he could handle.

"What happened? Would you let me do that while you sit for a minute?" My voice was rife with concern as I rose to take over.

He glanced up with an unconvincing grin, a hint of surprise masking the exhaustion in his eyes. "I'm fine, Fox. Seriously. You guys don't have to worry about me. The nexeon crystal died, is all. I promised you guys a feast, and I won't rest until you're all full." He insisted, redirecting the focus back to us, the way he always did when he didn't want to talk about himself. There was no use arguing when he got this way.

Korben filled in the details. "The magic in it misfired, nearly incinerating him. Honestly, I'm shocked he has eyebrows still."

"That's really not funny to joke about." Maybe I worried too much, but it felt like death lurked around every corner within the walls of Velskiryn.

The playful tone died down quickly, and Caelum gestured to a stack of envelopes on the table. "Oh, you got a letter."

Curious, my tail swished excitedly as I spotted an official-looking letter with my name on it amid the usual pile of junk. "Mail? I never get mail!" The faint scent of smoke drifted in from outside, effortlessly distracting me from my excitement, and I noticed Liam's *zweihänder* casually propped against the wall. "Did Liam score a mercenary gig?"

"Doubtful. He was polishing it when I woke up. Hardly any work nowadays since Orion's serenity started." Korben picked up Liam's controller and resumed playing, quickly discovering the Game Over screen. "What the hell kind of game is this?"

Korben had a magnetic air around him that drew attention everywhere we went. He was a couple of years younger than Liam, a little taller, had golden blonde hair. He took pride in his looks—always perfect, a testament to his luck in the genetic lottery. His reaver mark presented itself a bit more subtly than his younger brother's, the vibrant blue streak running along his forearm.

"Thanks! Any minute now and it'll be ready!" Cael promised, moving a pot of something tasty to the kitchen table. I chuckled under my breath, wondering how many times he'd said that so far. For as bright as the kid was, time was foreign to him. Not that I was any better with it, but it was different.

I grabbed the letter and plopped down on the sectional couch next to Liam's imprint from where he sat. He smelled like an ashtray, smiling as he reclaimed his spot beside me, but his focus was on the game. "Bro, how many times are you going to try the same thing?" He asked sharply, but Korben had his concentrate face on. Brow furrowed, tongue hanging out to the side.

"What's this game?" I gestured towards the screen.

Liam's eyes remained fixated in front of him. "New strategy game. Hard as hell." With a languid lunge, he snatched his controller back, becoming completely immersed in the pixel realm once again.

"Looks like you could use my help tonight. Count me in after I take a shower!" My superior nose kept me hyper-vigilant about my hygiene. When people had body odor around me, it made me feel like I smelled.

Korben swirled his wineglass, the red liquid spinning around the curvature of the crystal as he returned to his book. "Good luck! He's hooked," he said, not even looking up. "He won't even let me jump in. That was the most I've played all day."

"That's 'cause I want to win, bro," Liam retorted with a grin, glancing over at me to see if I enjoyed his response. Admittedly, I wasn't really paying attention at this point.

"Shots fired," Caelum chuckled as he set the table.

Korben laughed, taking the jibe gracefully, "I'll remember you said that Liam, you watch yourself. You might beat me in strategy games, but you know I dominate your ass in first-person shooters." Liam grinned again, his focus locked into the game, barely registering further conversation.

I studied the envelope like it was a winning Powerball ticket. It smelled of lemon Pine-Sol and the seal was wearing off. It almost seemed like someone tried to open it, but that wouldn't make sense since it had my name on the front.

As I tore open and unfolded the letter, my name in bold confirmed it was mine.

▼ **Fox Varant — (Click to open the envelope)**

7th Starfall of Veilrune, yr. 208

Re: Notification of Unclaimed Inheritance

Dear Mr. Varant,

We are writing to inform you of a significant unclaimed inheritance that has come to our attention. Our firm, Astor & Jenkins Law, has been entrusted with managing this matter on behalf of the estate. Due to the nature and magnitude of the inheritance, it is imperative that you contact us at your earliest convenience to arrange a meeting.

Details:

1. Nature of the Inheritance:

- While specific details of the inheritance cannot be disclosed at this time, it involves substantial assets and property, necessitating your presence for further discussion and necessary legal proceedings.

2. Verification of Identity:

- To proceed, we require verification of your identity, including government-issued identification and any documentation of your relationship to the deceased, **Brenda Miles**. Please be prepared to

present these at the initial meeting. Insufficient identification will require a DNA analysis at Genesic Labs Inc.

3. Meeting Arrangement:

- We invite you to visit our office at 1121 Upper Annabel St, Paxton - Sector C, at your earliest convenience. Due to the high priority status of this case, an appointment is not necessary. However, if you can not be present within 7 days of receiving this letter, please call XXΩ-AJL-1121 to arrange an alternate date.

4. Confidentiality Notice:

- Due to the sensitive nature of this matter, we request that you refrain from discussing the details of this communication with third parties until further instructed.

Your prompt response to this matter is crucial to facilitate the legal processes involved in the transfer of the estate. Please be assured that our team is dedicated to ensuring a smooth and confidential handling of all proceedings.

We look forward to your response and to assisting you in this important matter.

Sincerely,

Miranda Jenkins - Senior Partner

Astor & Jenkins Law

1121 Upper Annabel St, Paxton - Sector C
Riar, Velskiryn

XXΩ-AJL-1121

My mind began its usual dissection as I turned the letter over in my hand. *An unclaimed inheritance? From Brenda Miles?* The name drew a blank, and I'd mentally cataloged every person I'd ever met, coming up empty. *Why would they use a gene testing lab to verify identity? If this were legitimate, wouldn't a government-issued ID suffice? What angle are they playing here?* My instincts screamed trap, but another part of me, the part that didn't quite understand the strange quirks of humanity, wondered if maybe they were just following procedure.

I couldn't help but think back to every interaction where my naivety got the better of me. Like when I confidently told Caelum that women had bigger chests than men because they keep extra supplies inside there. I'd never seen Caelum laugh so hard in my life. This letter felt like another setup, but the complexity of the scam was beyond my grasp. *Why go to so much trouble to con me?* It didn't add up, and my mind wrestled with the idea that I had anything worth scamming.

Korben wobbled as he stood with an empty glass in hand. He slogged his way to his bottle of merlot. Wyvern's Blood, with a picture of a small dragon on the label. He claimed it was delicious and would offer me some each time he bought it. I would always decline. The idea of alcohol changing a person made me nervous that I may never change back.

"Are you drunk, K?" His younger brother teased, effortlessly snatching the freshly poured glass and guzzling as much as he could get away with.

"Give me that. You're far too young." Korben's speech slurred slightly as he reclaimed his night's entertainment. "And... maybe. I think so. But this's *good* stuff." Drawing out the word 'good', he topped off his glass before returning to his spot on the taupe sectional that framed the living area.

I took a deep breath in, catching a strong whiff of Liam's comforting scent in the air. It had been a familiar constant in my life since he found me, a subtle blend of steel, cigarettes, and something indefinably 'Liam'.

Everyone has a unique chemistry to their smell. Cael told me it was impolite to label people this way after I said he smelled like a baby chimera doused with kerosene and a hint of pink peppercorn... For the record, both of the Nero boys smelled fine. Liam just smelled... better.

"Fox?" I was in my head, unaware of the physical world around me. My eyes refocused and I discovered my mouth attached to Liam's knee that was propped up on the couch. It concerned him enough that he paused his game. "There might be better questions to ask, but what are you doing?"

For three years, these guys had been my all-day, every-day squad. Liam rescued me from the Wilds while I was a pup, but I reached adulthood by the end of the year. I usually told people I was twenty-two. My birthday was on the 14th Tideflow of Zephyris. Each year, on that day, the guys would treat me like a king. I didn't understand the concept, but I wasn't about to ask questions.

With a sheepish grin, I played it off cool. "Just making sure you still *need* me."

"Ha. That joke's one for the leg-ends." Korben raised his glass to me. I could always count on him to indulge me when shitty puns were involved. We could easily go back and forth for hours, coming up with the worst puns to drive Liam insane.

The brunette knew if he said any more, that we'd never stop. The room went silent as everyone focused on what was in front of them. My eyelids grew heavy and the inheritance letter soon became nothing more than a mere afterthought. The pixelated sounds of Liam's game blended into background noise as I drifted away from the evening.

My senses shut down one after the other. I enjoyed feeling the cool breeze from the air conditioning unit run through my tail, making the individual hairs stand up. It *was* a little odd, the more I thought about it. It was far too chilly outside for air conditioning, and I didn't remember hearing the nexeon inside it humming when I walked inside.

My limbs grew heavy next, and my thoughts became mere fragments of recognition from the events of the outside world. My skin cells danced with anxiety for every rain drop that landed on me.

Wait... Rain? That's not good.

"Liam? Did you pay the roof bill this month?" I vaguely recalled asking before succumbing to my fatigue.

A chilling voice cut through the crisp air like a wet knife in response.

"Caaaaaaddddmmeeeeaaaaa."

What was—wait a second. Oh, shit. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK! Not again. Wake up Fox. Wake up! My mind, instantly alert, screamed in desperation at my body, but I still felt entirely paralyzed.

Caelum's voice rang through my reverie next, stirring me enough that I blinked a few times, but wasn't fully in control yet. "FOX! Wake up! WAKE UP!"

His brother hunched over me, shaking me, the urgency in his voice calm and comforting as he took charge of the situation. "He's coming to. We'll phase back. Get back to safety." Caelum didn't budge, hesitant to leave us in danger. "Caelum. Go!"

My eyelids fluttered open as I made a bit more sense of the situation. I was sitting up. Behind Kor was a desaturated landscape, with beautiful pastel flames dancing above an electric-blue river. The whole scenery appeared so thin, so fragile, as if the ground never had to support weight before and I might fall through it at any moment.

The voice demanded my attention, firing through the air like a whistling arrow destined to hit the bullseye. It was breathy, yet so loud. Haunting, able to rattle the bones of even the largest of minotaurs.

"Caaaaaddmmeeeeaaaa," the voice drawled, flooding me with apathetic despair. It was the driving force behind my novel depression. The feeling was so demotivating—so crippling. I relished the notion of how easy it would be to just give in. To never return home and let the vagrants decide my fate. To release myself from the never-ending burdens and heartaches that we inevitably all face the longer we live. I yearned to be free from the Hell that life would become.

It penetrated the core essence of my existence. My body and mind felt completely devoid of all warmth. My skin separated from my frame. A parasite had poisoned my thoughts and in an undistilled, raw, hopeless flash of despair, I was *one-hundred-fucking-fifty percent* certain that *I was the reason* for everything wrong with the world.

Riar became nothing more than an insignificant, distant memory. A subtle reminder of the life I would never return to. I was the reason for suffering. For pain. Whatever the vagrants had planned for me, *I deserved it*.

It roared this time, *"CADMEA!"* close enough that I could feel the vibrations in the voice.

"Dammit! Fox! Wake. Up!" Korben's voice failed to overpower the vagrant audibly, but a slap across my face did what he needed it to.

Consciousness rushed into me and I immediately recognized the situation for what it was. "I'm up. Let's go." And just like that, the ethereal realm of dancing flames and electric-blue rivers dissolved. The self-loathing cleansed from my mind, leaving just the remaining pulses of death's temptation fading, abandoned and no longer able to feed. I had never been more thankful to be in the safety of home.

Breathing heavily and suddenly drenched in as much sweat as my partially fur-covered body allowed, I gathered my bearings. I looked over at Korben who

appeared even worse for wear.

"Thank you," I offered sheepishly. "That... that was bad, wasn't it?" I struggled to maintain my eyes on my saviors, as if announcing the severity of the situation made it a shameful truth. My tail tucked itself between my legs and my ears drooped.

"We were almost dinner on a platter that time... That is, hands down, the absolute worst way I can imagine going out." Korben chuckled, the tension in his voice unmistakable, and I acknowledged his immediate sobriety. He migrated back to the kitchen and poured a third glass of wine, downing it in one, and cradled his head in his hands.

"It got that bad?" Cael's concern formed as guilt over leaving early and abruptly transformed into anger. "For fuck's sake! What if we're not there to help you next time? Why is this fucking happening?" Caelum mentioned this as if I had any control. As if I didn't *already* know. His temper was out of character for him, especially towards me. I couldn't be upset with him... I truly scared him this time.

Liam hadn't said a word, but he was listening. His game controller was on the ground, his character was dying on screen, and he didn't seem to care. That told me a lot about what he was thinking. My ears drooped. I felt ashamed of myself.

"I'm so sorry. Truly, I didn't mean to worry everyone. I only fell asleep for a sec—"

"A second too long," Liam snorted, cutting me off before I finished my sentence, his concerned tone sharper than he seemed to realize.

My tail curled itself around me, acting as my only defense against the inevitable truth. My voice involuntarily limited itself to a murmur. "I know. I didn't—"

"Do you know? Dude, this is how many times that they've risked their asses to save yours?" Liam flung his hand at the two brothers as he referenced them.

Shame weighed down my gaze as they unsteadily averted their eyes from mine. I opened my mouth to speak, but Liam hadn't finished. "Just... save it. Have you done *anything* to figure this out? You're putting everyone at risk, and it doesn't seem like you give a shit." Liam's words sliced through me as he ran a hand through his hair, tucking it behind his ear. His jaw tightened and I could see the tension in his shoulders. A younger Liam would have broken something by now. This Liam kept his clenched fists at his sides and wore his fear in his eyes.

Kor spoke up from across the room, splitting the tension. "We'd hate for something to happen to ya, Crit." As my gaze moved between speakers, it finally settled on Caelum, although I wasn't sure how much more I could take.

"You've got to get this under control. We care about you," Cael averted his gaze to Liam, "And... we've been lucky so far. We can't run on luck forever."

The brunette's temper had already settled into guilt. "I'm not a reaver. If something happens to you guys in... that *place*. I can't get there to save you," His voice wrought with concern as he pleaded, embellishing them with a hint of hatred. "I know you can't control it... But you *need* to figure out how to."

"Liam, that makes you the lucky one. Those things truly are a nightmare." Kor's voice held onto its carefree tone. I was always so envious of how he could control a room so effortlessly, bringing everyone's mood to his level.

"Uh, idea! You ought to check out that sleep specialist down the road from here. You know, the one with that sign in the front yard that we used to pass by on the way to Nomina's Grill. 'Sleep your way to a better you.'" Korben threw a finger up and his hand forward, imitating the woman on the sign right down to her goofy smile. "What the hell was her name?"

His younger brother chuckled. "Rachel Studdard? How could you forget? The sign was a full body cutout of the woman while she held a banner with her name and number. There's no way that sign was cheap to make."

I could only nod, a lump in my throat preventing me from speaking. I knew the boys were trying to lighten the mood, but it was hopeless.

"Thank you, buddy." Liam replied meekly, ready to wrap it up. Caelum cleared his throat, signaling to Liam that there was more to say. "And... I'm sorry for snapping. You didn't deserve to have this whole thing pinned on you." Liam was never great at expressing his feelings, yet somehow sounded so sincere when he finally did. While I wanted to be pissed at him for yelling at me over something out of my control, I couldn't... If something happened, it *would* be *my* fault. It was a hard pill to swallow.

"We're a team. If you go down, we save you or we all go down together." Caelum put so much enthusiasm in his words that it sounded great to all of us... and then it didn't.

"That's not the most encouraging motto, bro."

His voice grew small. "I'll work on it."

My mind drifted back to the harsh conversation from earlier, replaying each line one after the other, as I tuned out their banter

I need to be better for them. I can't keep endangering everyone. They've done so much for me, and what have I done for them? Nothing but nearly kill them time after time.

The shame sunk its claws into me, deciding that Liam raising his voice was hardly a fitting punishment.

I can't believe I haven't done a single damn thing to figure out why this keeps happening—why I'm phasing when I fall asleep... Dammit, Fox, get your shit together.

I deserved much worse than just yelling. My eyes started welling up with tears as I tore myself apart.

I'm a shitty friend...

Suddenly, Korben's lanky arms wrapped around me, forcing my face into his stinky pit. Followed by Caelum's, and then even Liam's. Despite my self-loathing, I couldn't help but laugh as they all confessed their deepest feelings of love for me, while squishing me between their manly, muscular chests. For a moment, my woes vanished, if only for good.

"Let's eat guys," the younger Nero brother suggested with precise timing as the stove chirped. He was the first to slip away so he could set the last of the prepared food on the table before standing back to admire his accomplishment. "About time!" The older brother approached the table muttering a curse in praise, "Eikan be damned, Cael. This s-smells good! Looks good! Let me ask you something. Do you outdo yourself day after day... but I mean, how?" He earned a genuine grin from his younger brother, as he topped off his wineglass.

"Thanks, Korben!" His eyes beamed with delight before a wave of confusion dawned on them. "Wait... that was a compliment... right?"

Korben took his seat with a plop. "Right. Exactly!"

Liam and I took our seats, the tension from the argument still lingering in the room... or maybe just in my head.

"This looks excellent, Cael. Thank you for going through all the trouble, man." Liam

offered a warm grin towards the talented chef, who beamed back, before nudging me in the side. "What do you think, Fox?"

I didn't understand how Liam wasn't upset over our argument still. He always had a knack for putting everything to the side when food was involved. I always dwelled on everything.

I nodded, agreeing with the others, and forced out a mumble—something of gratitude to Caelum—not sure exactly of what it was. Everyone was too busy filling their plates to notice, anyway.

"Fair warning. I wanted to try out some new recipes, so let me know how you like it!" The redhead's eyes conveyed his excitement, a refreshing change from his insufferable mood swings over the past few weeks. He truly was the oil that kept the machine running, so I relished seeing him this way.

The room realized a brief silence as we focused on our food, all lost in our own heads. Finally, Korben was the first to speak up, a subtle drawl to his words as the wine set in again, "You know... I've been wondering what the vagrants are saying in the Silva when Crit sleep phases. I think it's the same thing every time, but I can't decipher it while my heartbeat is in my ears."

"I didn't even know they could speak until a couple weeks ago, for real. It's fucking terrifying." Cael shuddered, still able to hear the voice in his head, "It sounds like he's just going, 'Ahhhmeeahhhh.'"

"You know, brother man, I think you're exactly correct. But you're missing the deathly jingle."

"C-Cadmea." I weakly mustered into the conversation before clearing my throat to try again. "Ahem. It's saying Cadmea."

"Cadmea? What is that?" Liam asked. Since Liam wasn't a reaver, he didn't have access to the Silva and struggled to keep up with these talks.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Truthfully, the meaning eluded me, yet deep down, I felt I should have known what it meant. "It has this familiarity. Like I know what it means, but I just can't remember." I could feel my tension easing as I immersed myself in the conversation.

"Could just be a language native to the vagrants. There's still so much we don't know about them." Cael made a good point. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that it might have something to do with me.

Korben was full of envy and praise as he turned to me, "Dude, you realize in the three years you've been phasing, you've uncovered more about the Silva than we have for our whole lives?"

"I've been wondering," Liam said in between bites, "How did you guys even learn that you could... you know... Phase?"

I blinked. It wasn't every day that he asked a personal question. Or every week... or month. It was rare. Korben's eyes rolled up and to the side as he tried to remember. The redhead didn't give it any thought, and instead shrugged, "Korben taught me when I was really little. It's always been a part of my life, I guess."

With a chuckle, Korben explained, all eyes intently focused on him. "I learned from my folks. And then," He grinned as his thoughts caught up to his mouth and he realized we were clinging onto every word, "and then I taught Cael when he was six, the same age I was when we first arrived in Orion." He took a long gulp of his wine before continuing, clearly not savoring the flavor in his mouth. Wasn't that the point of wine?

The blonde continued, slurring his words as he digressed a bit. "The first time I'd seen the Aether Silva was when Mom phased us through it to this realm. Dad taught me everything he knew about the Silva. Almost as if he knew his time would be short—that their lives would be stolen from them." A flicker appeared in his eyes—sadness, at first, then replaced with wonder. A quiet, lingering thought of what life could have been, if only his parents were still alive. "As for taking me there, he refused."

"Why wouldn't he?" the brunette asked, his curiosity unsatiated and piquing mine even more.

"Too dangerous. He said it over, and over, and over." Korben swirled his wine glass slowly, lost in his past. His typical carefree grin instead replaced with a wistful nostalgia. After spacing out for a moment, he seemed to snap back into reality.

"So, anyway, I was terrified when I finally learned how to phase on my own—I even rejected it for a while. Once Cael started asking questions about our past, I decided I needed to be brave enough to explore my powers further."

My brow furrowed as I imagined how difficult it was, being so young and alone. Velskiryn kingdom without guidance. Liam was truly interested in the Silva tonight for some odd reason. I eyed him curiously as he asked another question, "So how... do you phase without fear of a vagrant waiting there for you to arrive?"

"Our realm's... essence protects us while aether integrates us into its realm's life force. It's the only thing that's proven effective at keeping the vagrants at bay—and luckily, Orion's essence keeps them from following us here." Caelum stated, sneaking in the last drink of his older brother's wine as soon as he finished speaking.

The older brother was deep in thought when he had an epiphany. "That's what they meant when they were talking about 'the rot,' the other day." He held his glass up to his lips and took a healthy gulp of air before noticing it was empty. He turned it upside down to make sure he wasn't imagining the emptiness and spilled a few leftover drops onto his lap.

I shook my head, disgruntled with myself for not piecing it together sooner, scoffing, "That makes absolute sense." Cael nodded in agreement. "I can't believe I didn't connect those dots sooner."

Kor dialed us back a little, pouring himself another glass. "I don't remember Dad ever doing anything that didn't involve phasing, since he was always patrolling the woodlands. He could stay in the Silva for way longer than we can." He scrunched his face as he reached for a hypothesis. "*Maybe* the more attuned you are to your home realm's essence, the harder the rot fights the aether?"

"That actually is a possibility." Caelum chuckled, "though, how one does it is beyond me."

"Well, I still can't say I approve of the whole 'being a reaver' thing, but you guys make it look so flashy in combat. I'm envious of that part," Liam admitted, wrapping up the conversation.

The rest of the meal was uneventful, save for being delicious. There was a rich scent of garlic, and herbs, various meats from rare creatures of the Wilds, perfectly seared with an expertise that some people spend their lives learning.

We all knew how much time Cael poured into this meal, the hours spent simmering, seasoning, and perfecting each bite. None of us dared ask how much these ingredients cost—it was the unspoken question hanging over the table—but we all exchanged glances, silently wondering.

Just when I thought I couldn't eat another bite, Caelum suddenly had a tray full of Harpy Honey Baklava and Ambrosia Apple Tarts. Despite our protesting stomachs, they didn't last long.

Korben and Liam started an argument over a trading card game that also gained popularity as a video game. It escalated into a mindless debate over which generation Qualico debuted in. Cael and I exchanged knowing glances and said nothing—they were both wrong.

I noticed the ease with which Korben got Liam to talk. It was something I admired and envied all at once. While I fumbled through a hundred topics, trying to get a reaction out of Liam, Korben just knew what to say. They were like two sides of the same coin, able to get under each other's skin with a single word, laughing about it two seconds later.

Caelum watched them with that gentle smile of his, ready to step in if things got too heated but content to let them have their fun. He always seemed to know the perfect time to chime in. When the conversation was about to die, he'd know exactly how to keep it going. "They made the pre-evolution in the next generation!"

His eyes flicked over to me, silently checking in to make sure I was okay. He always did that—always trying to read the room, always putting us first.

Nonsensical conversations weren't my thing—not really. I struggled to keep up. Sometimes, I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I couldn't connect with people the way Korben and Liam connected, or the way Caelum could smooth over any tension with a look. I wondered if they knew that sometimes I felt like a stranger in the group I called home. The feeling never lasted longer than a minute before I'd find myself wrapped back in the conversation. Maybe—just maybe—I was being a little dramatic.

Liam settled the debate by launching the game from his phone, and the distinguishable music filled the room. As he navigated the in-game menus, his matter-of-fact expression suddenly twisted into a frown. I tried to stifle my laughter at the melodrama, but Caelum couldn't hold back.

Korben chuckled too when Liam showed him the screen, "Liam, look at them! They knew the whole time and didn't say a word. The guilt on both their faces right now!" he pointed accusingly, gawking at us.

Liam sneered playfully, "A couple of little goblin gropers snickering over there."

I tried on my best innocent face and absent-mindedly pawed at a moth that had found its way inside, acting as if I had missed the entire ordeal. Cael had a

different approach. "No, I couldn't remember either." His gaze towards me turned devious. "But Fox knew."

He just did that. "Traitor! I take back anything nice I've ever said about you!"

"Too late, all sales are final." Caelum retorted, keeping my nice things and leaving me powerless to do anything about it.

Before I could react, an idea popped into Liam's mind with such an exciting force, he nearly toppled over. "Wait!" His outburst startled all of us, especially Korben, who had just finished another glass. "So, what's everyone's plan for the evening? You boys down for some fun tonight?" He leaned back in his chair, his eyebrows high and confidence etched into his face. We all blinked dramatically, unsure of what he meant by that.

It was Cael who broke the silence. "Liam, are you hitting on us?" Korben tried to stifle his laughter. Liam threw a slab of meat across the table at the redhead as he continued his mocking impression, "I cannot believe that Liam Reed, the hottest guy in school, wants to have *fun* with me..." He ran his hands through his sleek hair, giving it a wild look and he shook his head, his expression full of desire, "Let's just let loose and have fun tonight."

Korben looked like he was going to melt from embarrassment and laughter, hiding his face in his hands. "Bro, what? What are you even doing? I can't handle you right now."

Liam continued to fling food across the table, having forgotten whatever fun idea he had.

I cocked my head, and my ears twitched uncomfortably. "Okay, now I really don't understand." I admitted, my voice drowned out by their cringeworthy antics.

Scrambling to my feet, I silently excused myself, counting down the seconds before I'd feel the hot water of a shower running through my fur.

Dashing upstairs and into the bathroom, I went straight for the dial, adjusting the temperature to hot and then a little further. As I undressed, the steam filled the room, threatening to drown me if I didn't leave the door open. Caelum assured me that wouldn't happen during the countless arguments about how nudity made people uncomfortable.

How did that make

any sense? Supposedly, floating water in the air can't actually drown anyone, yet

we test it anyway, standing in thick, wet clouds, hiding behind towels. All because we'd rather pretend everyone's got some mysterious secret between their legs. Meanwhile, every person and their mother has basically the same setup down there. The whole thing just seemed needlessly dangerous.

The door stayed open.

The scent of men's body wash filled the air as I stepped into the hot spray. The water ran through my fur, cleansing it of all my worries and insecurities. I relaxed, allowing the jets to massage my muscles with a contented sigh. Slumping back against the shower wall, I closed my eyes, and the world around me faded away.