



# The Arrival of the Dragons (Dragon's Reign #4)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** As the other Dragon Kings and Queens arrive to court Caden, tempers flare and other hijinks ensue! From the Green Dragon King Illarion buzzing Reach to the Red Dragon Queen Mei bringing an army of robots with her as a gift, nothing is easy for Valerius or Caden.

But while the Dragons are distracted by their internal strife, their enemies are still moving swiftly against them.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

## DOWN TO SIZE

“That bastard!” Valerius hissed as he jumped to his feet, eyes locked on Illarion, as the Green Dragon circled High Reach.

Caden’s haze of pleasure fell away as he watched the titanic Green Dragon cut through the sky as if he owned it. If there was one thing he knew, such arrogance would not be tolerated by either Valerius or Raziel. Cold memories of him and Valerius battling over the skies of Reach filtered through his brain. He remembered the dead and the dying by the Gash. That would be nothing if Valerius and Illarion attacked one another.

“He knows you’re not in the castle, right? I mean, it almost looks like he wants you to come out and play,” Caden said after watching Illarion for a few moments more.

Scowling, Valerius growled, “He will find out that I do not play.” He focused on Caden who had gotten to his feet as well then. “You will stay here. I will handle this.”

Caden though grabbed his arm. “By handle this what exactly do you mean?”

“I will knock that son of a bitch out of the air and then roast him with fire!” Valerius roared, his temper rising up like a volcano.

Caden could hear Raziel in Valerius’ voice. The Spirit and the man were speaking as one. A quiver of fear and awe ran through him. Red light flared in the Black Dragon King’s eyes.

There will be violence. There will be death , Iolaire whispered. This cannot be.

“Wait, wait, wait, Illarion is right over Reach! You take him out and he takes down a part of the city,” Caden reminded him. “Just us tusseling a little bit killed over a dozen people. Two titanic Dragons fighting over a population center? What do you think that will do?”

That last part had a guilty flash going through Valerius’ eyes. The red glow reduced slightly.

“Shifting in my territory and flying around my capital city without my permission is the height of disrespect! I cannot let it stand, Caden! You give Illarion an inch and he will take miles!”

Caden’s mind tumbled. He understood that territory was all important to Dragons. He was certain Valerius was right that if he didn’t go after Illarion, the Green Dragon would consider it a victory and increase his tactics. But he also felt that any contest between the Black and the Green Dragons would lead to greater tragedy. Iolaire was rigid inside of him. He felt warnings coming off of the White Dragon.

No violence. Must not allow violence, Iolaire said. It was speaking far more than ever before, anxious to get its point across. Arrogant Green Dragon. Poisonous and foul. Must not fight though. Not now.

Yeah, okay so Illarion is an asshole, how do I make Valerius realize he’s not worth turning into a charcoal briquet? Caden asked.

Illarion is not worthy of notice, Iolaire said and the image of a fly circling a mountain. Insignificant.

Oh, right! Got it!

“Illarion is doing this to get a rise out of you, Valerius,” Caden said. “He wants you to fly up there and challenge him. Because that makes him important and worthy of your time. So that’s the last thing you should do.”

“The last thing? I cannot just ignore this!” Valerius pointed to the sky with emphasis.

“No, you’re right. But it’s how you respond that’s important. Let’s not play his game. Let’s not attack him,” Caden said as Iolaire presented him with an image of the White and Black Dragons flying together towards the Green Dragon. “Iolaire thinks we should make a united front.”

“What? You are not going up there! You are staying here!”

“Iolaire disagrees. As do I. We go up and meet Illarion together. We don’t attack. We look like--ah, parents disapproving of a teenagers’ antics,” Caden raced out as Iolaire sent him more images. “It’ll be clear that he’s being an asshole, not being a good guest, and that we don’t approve. But most importantly, it’ll make his posturing seem what it is! Pathetic. And weak.”

Valerius blinked. “Iolaire is a strategist.”

Iolaire was still rigid, not sure if Valerius and Raziel would agree with them.

“I think Iolaire isn’t fond of fighting, but I think it’s right, too. I mean, Illarion is just edging for a fight. We shouldn’t give him what he wants. Not giving him what he wants should be our main goal at all times,” Caden said.

“That will frustrate him no end.” Valerius gave a grim smile.

“Exactly. We should just treat him as if he’s a badly behaving guest, and not a challenge to you.” Caden put a hand on Valerius’ chest. “You’re the king of kings .

He's not even a pretender to the throne."

A full body shudder went through Valerius, but then he gave a nod. He caught both of Caden's biceps. "If he attacks, you will retreat. Do you understand? I do not need your help in fighting him."

"Yeah, I don't want to fight. And I know you got that part of the equation," Caden assured him. His shoulders twitched just thinking about going up against the mammoth Black Dragon. "But you don't fight unless people's lives are at stake, right?"

Another tight nod. Caden could see his jaw muscles working. Valerius was not liking this, but he was going to do it. Caden felt like dancing, but then he remembered they had to shift and face Illarion. His mouth went dry.

"Let us go then," Valerius said, before turning and running out from under the canopy of trees. In a blurred moment, he turned from man to Dragon.

The Black Dragon flapped its mighty wings and was up into the air. Caden was stunned at the beauty and magnificence that was Valerius and Raziel. His breath caught and he stood there frozen. Valerius turned his head around and looked back at him.

Oh, right, time to shift. Caden closed his eyes. Iolaire, please help me do this without messing up.

Iolaire chirruped and flapped its wings. Caden opened his eyes and ran. He picked up speed and leaped...

Please, please, please shift!

He fell flat on his face. The air left his lungs and he let out an oomph. Dazed and cheeks burning with shame, he gazed up at the Black Dragon looking down at him.

A thought came from Valerius, Stay there, Caden. I will handle this.

No! I can do this! Caden reached for him.

I will keep to the plan. You remain here, Valerius said.

But I--

Valerius though was already flying towards Reach. Caden slammed his hand against the ground.

Damnit, they're going to fight unless we're there, Iolaire! I just know it!

The White Dragon Spirit flapped its wings in agreement. Caden got up to his feet, dusted himself off, and looked at where the titanic Black and Green Dragons were about to meet.

Just above the city. Oh, man, Valerius! Keep your temper!

But if his words reached Valerius or Raziel neither of them responded to him. Feeling panicky, Caden looked around for a place to launch himself off. That had worked in the field. The only real hill was over the pool. The water would be a good deterrent for him to fly. It would also be better than landing in the dirt again if he didn't.

Butterflies were filling Caden's chest as he glanced back over his shoulder at Valerius and Illarion. The Green Dragon had become aware of the Black Dragon's presence and had cut a close corner around High Reach. They were going directly at one another. The Black Dragon wasn't hurrying, but there was a tenseness about it

that told Caden neither Valerius nor Raziel was happy.

Okay, we gotta get up there, Iolaire. Not messing up this time, okay?

Iolaire bobbed its head. Caden took a breath and jogged over to the base of the slight rise overlooking the pool. He had a momentary regret that the Green Dragon had shown up like this. He and Valerius could have been cleaning up in the pool. Before getting very dirty again, with Caden paying Valerius back for the “favor” he had given him earlier.

But no. We’re here and Valerius is going to get into a fight.

Caden shook his head, took a breath and then raced up the incline. It wasn’t all that far, and it wasn’t all that high. It was maybe ten feet above the water’s surface, if that. Caden’s right foot hit the very edge of the hill and he leaped ...

And he fell.

He belly flopped into the pool. Once more all the air was thrust out of his lungs. His front stung like a son of a bitch. He sank several feet down below the water’s surface before he opened his eyes. Below him looked to be a forest of trees. It was some kind of weed that grew from the bottom and waved lazily in the current. The pool was a blue-green color because of the plants and the light. It was so beautiful that the pain retreated for a moment, but then he realized that he needed to breathe.

Caden scrambled for the surface and took in a great gasping breath. He treaded water, too annoyed with himself to do anything for a moment. What was his problem? Why couldn’t he shift? He needed to do it! Why was he failing at it so spectacularly? He swam around to look back towards Reach. The Black Dragon was hovering while the Green Dragon circled it. Caden gritted his teeth.

Valerius is keeping it together. For now.

Grimacing as his body still hurt from impacting the water, Caden slowly swam to shore. Iolaire mimicked the swimming motion with its arms.

Why is this happening? Why can't we just shift? You want to shift! I want to shift! But we cannot shift! Now is not the time to have performance anxiety! Caden raged.

Iolaire let out a hoot of sadness. It didn't know what the problem was either.

We need to be calm. We need to work as one.

Iolaire let out a second hoot in agreement. Caden was sure that this wasn't Iolaire's fault. It must be his. Once he got on shore, water sluicing down his body, he looked over again at Valerius and Illarion. The Green Dragon was snapping at Valerius, who remained flapping his wings. It reminded Caden of a cat swiping at a bigger cat to try and start a fight. Eventually, the paw would come down. Caden shook himself.

We need to get up there, Iolaire.

Humans cannot fly, Iolaire said and fluttered its wings.

Yeah, I know. I--

Humans cannot fly, Iolaire repeated, and there was clearly a greater meaning there.

Okay, what do you mean? Humans can't fly. That's why we have to shift and--

Humans cannot fly, Iolaire said with more insistence.

Caden stopped talking and thought about what that meant. I just... oh, I'm not giving



up control. I'm thinking like I'm going to literally be flapping my own wings up there.

Iolaire flapped in response. Yes, but humans cannot fly.

Right. I need to let go. You need to take over.

Caden closed his eyes and reached for Iolaire in his mind's eye. They could and would never touch in real life. He would never know what it was like to brush his hands over Iolaire's scales or skim them along its wings. But he would never want them to be apart so that this could happen. It meant far more to have them together like this than to simply wish to touch Iolaire. In fact, the moment that his fingers were about to touch Iolaire just in his mind a spark formed in the short distance between them. It grew in intensity until it blinded Caden.

And then it consumed him.

When he blinked he was looking out through a Dragon's eyes. Caden smiled and the White Dragon did too.

Iolaire, you're in charge. Do what we need to do here. I trust your judgment more than mine, Caden told his Spirit.

The White Dragon tipped back its head and let out a pleased hoot. Then its wings began to flap and they were airborne. Caden's stomach dropped into his feet at the suddenness of it, almost as if he were on a rollercoaster. Iolaire took them up and up and up until the sunlight seemed to suffuse the air around them and there was nothing else, but light. Then they were skimming through the air, being held aloft by unseen currents.

His gaze focused on Illarion and Valerius. The Green Dragon was still circling and

snapping at the Black Dragon, but he did it a little too close one time and nipped Valerius' left wing. The Black Dragon let out a roar that seemed to shake the very skies. Through Iolaire's enhanced hearing, Caden could hear people far below crying out in fear. The Black Dragon's eyes were a sulfurous red and they were glowering at the Green Dragon, tracking the titanic beast, waiting for its moment to get revenge.

Iolaire, get us over there! Like now!

Caden could almost feel the Green Dragon's glee at his unexpected "victory". He'd gotten a reaction from Valerius. His teeth were strong and sharp. He had bloodied the king. Or that was what Caden thought. Thankfully, he could not hear Illarion's thoughts. But the arrogant way the Green Dragon flew through the air made Caden pretty certain that his thoughts were likely close to that.

At least, he was all arrogance, until Valerius bit back. Once more the Green Dragon came too close again, perhaps for a second nip. But this time Valerius snapped at Illarion's right wing and sliced it. The Green Dragon let out a howl and green gushes of smoke exited from its mouth. That cloud of what Caden thought might be toxic gas started to drift down towards Reach. Panic filled him, but Valerius saw what was happening as well and acted.

The Black Dragon opened its mouth and let out a gust of wind, not fire. Caden knew that Valerius had other powers, but this was the first time he'd seen what looked like Superman's powerful breath. It dissipated the foul green gas.

Illarion was still making angry, pained almost barking noises as his wing gushed black blood that dripped down the webbing. His eyes were a poisonous green-yellow, too. They narrowed and Caden knew he was about to bodily slam into the Black Dragon.

They're escalating, Iolaire! What do we do? Ice them? Will that do anything but piss

them off?

Caden was also worried that if they did use their ice breath that some of the ice might drop down onto the city below and injure someone. He reached out for Valerius' mind, but it was shut off to him. All he heard was an angry hum.

This is really not good!

They can do too much harm. Too much! Must stop them! Iolaire's response was strange.

How are we going to do that? Get between them and--oh! What the Hell?

Iolaire opened its mouth and let out a sound. It was a mournful sound. Beautiful, actually, like the beginning of a song. But the effect it had was instantaneous and shocking. The Black Dragon grimaced and shook its head as if the sound was unpleasant while the Green Dragon immediately transformed into his human form.

And then Illarion started falling to Earth.

But Iolaire darted in and Illarion in one of its claws. Iolaire then hovered there as it brought the angry and shocked Dragon Shifter up to eye level. Valerius came close as well so that Illarion was between them.

Illarion was handsome in a hard way. He had chiseled features and short dark hair. A scowl seemed to be permanently etched on his face. His thick brows were drawn together as he bellowed at them.

“What have you done?” Illarion shouted in a Russian accented voice. “Release me! If you do not release me, I will make you pay , little Dragon!”

Make us pay, will he? Doesn't he see the situation he's in? Caden laughed.

Iolaire brought Illarion nearer to their face and allowed some ice breath to trickle out from between their teeth. The mist curled around Illarion. He glared, but stopped swearing at them.

"Release me," Illarion hissed again.

But Iolaire shook its head. This caused Illarion to struggle in Iolaire's claws, which was stupid. He would fall unless he could transform back into his Dragon shape in time before he hit the ground.

Cannot shift until I let him, Iolaire told Caden.

Holy... really? You can do that?

We can do this. Yes, Iolaire answered simply.

Even though Valerius hadn't been affected by the call in the same way, he wasn't looking much happier. His eyes were still a sulfurous red. Caden reached for his mind, and this time, he could actually talk to him.

What is the meaning of this, Caden? Valerius asked. He could hear Raziel in his tone.

Are you okay? How's your wing? Caden asked, deflecting the answer, because he wasn't sure what the answer was, and he was worried about that wing, though it looked completely healed.

My wing... My wing is fine. Valerius sounded calmer as he heard the concern in Caden's voice. But there are things of greater import. How... How did you do this?

I don't know. I have no idea. Iolaire just did it!

Caden looked down at the struggling Illarion. He was trying to break out of the White Dragon's grasp and shift. He could accomplish neither.

This is quite the trick. The Black Dragon's eyes narrowed. A useful and dangerous trick. How long can you keep Illarion like this?

Let me ask. Caden turned his attention to Iolaire. How long can you keep him in human form?

Iolaire sent him the image of day turning to night. But then Iolaire showed him that it could make that time less if it wanted.

It looks like this can last a whole day, but Iolaire can release him anytime before that, Caden told Valerius.

Could he do that to any Dragon? Valerius asked speculatively.

All but Black Dragon. Black Dragon too strong to make shift. Besides, Iolaire did not want to hurt, Iolaire suddenly said.

Did you hear that, Valerius? Caden asked.

I did. I felt the power of Iolaire's call, but resisted it, Valerius said.

Raziel spoke then, Iolaire is not as defenseless as we thought. Brave little Dragon.

The White Dragon tipped its head back, and Caden laughed. Iolaire was preening under Raziel's appreciative gaze.

Are you okay with what we did, Valerius? Caden asked tentatively. He expected Valerius and Raziel to be furious. I know that you can handle him, but things were getting sort of heated.

At first, Valerius did not answer. Caden could almost feel Raziel waiting for the Dragon King to speak first.

I was not pleased... at first, Valerius admitted. The shock of it was something but I am glad you did this. I was losing my temper. Once he struck me--

You had to respond in kind. And he's big enough that you had to really take him down, Caden agreed. So this was good?

The Black Dragon seemed to smile. Yes, Caden, you and Iolaire did very well. It makes me curious what else you can do.

Me, too! Caden admitted.

Iolaire was still preening and showing off for Raziel, who was giving many admiring glances.

Come, let us take Illarion down to High Reach, Valerius said. I would speak to this fool.

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### CIVILITY

Valerius flew down to the courtyard outside of his throne room. As tempting as it was to land in Dragon Strike Square to excoriate and humiliate Illarion in front of his people, he resisted, and landed only to an audience of Chione, Simi and Ngoye.

Valerius shifted and landed in what some people called the Superhero pose before gracefully rising to his feet. Immediately, Captain Ngoye was offering him his favorite silk robe embroidered with silver dragons to slip on. He drew the cool silk over his body and tied the belt.

“Thank you, Ngoye,” he said to her.

“My king.” Her eyes went up to the White Dragon. “Did Iolaire just... Well, did I see what I thought I saw?”

“That Iolaire made Illarion transform into his human form? Yes, Ngoye, you did,” Valerius could not hide the satisfaction in his tone.

While ice breath could be useful in a fight, this ability was a true game changer. Caden was so much safer now than he had been before.

“The other Dragons will think twice now before attacking him,” Ngoye said with a nod.

“There will be no more attacks in my skies,” Valerius told her.

Illarion's actions had been beyond the pale, if predictable. But his just desserts were incredibly satisfying. Ngoye bowed and moved back to her post by the doors to his throne room. Valerius turned to watch the White Dragon slow its descent and then, like a helicopter landing, drop all the way down to the stone flagged courtyard. The wind from the White Dragon's powerful wings blew Valerius' hair back and he sheltered his eyes from the dust and leaves that were stirred by the air currents.

Chione stepped over to Valerius. "Are you all right, my king?"

"You cannot possibly believe that I am harmed. I think you are referring to my temper. And my temper is... in check. Besides, how could I not be amused by that?" Valerius pointed to Illarion who was still caught in one of Iolaire's large clawed hands.

Illarion roared, "Put me down! Put me down now!"

"He reminds me of Fay Wray trapped by King Kong," Chione giggled.

"You will pay for this, White Dragon!" Illarion howled as he kicked his bare legs.

Both Valerius and Chione were laughing now though there was some hysteria to it. Chione brought up a tablet to show him what the local news were reporting. There were helicopters hovering at a safe distance recording everything, and he could see what they were seeing.

"Illarion will never live this down," Valerius said, a smile curling the edges of his mouth. "This is almost better than me sending him slamming towards the ground and roasting him."

Chione agreed as she turned up the volume so that they could hear the anchor breathlessly saying, "... and after the Green Dragon King Illarion's unexpected--and



clearly unauthorized--flight over Reach, the White Dragon emitted a call that appears to have shifted Illarion back into human form! Have you ever heard of a Dragon Shifter having that power, Tom?"

She was asking the anchor that was in the studio while she was filming from Dragon Strike Square.

"No, Carol, this is completely unexpected. But let's hear from our Dragon Shifter expert, Dr. William Tanaka." Tom, whose hair looked lacquered, turned to a distinguished looking man in his fifties.

Valerius had spoken to Tanaka once. He gave him no answers to his questions, but the professor of Shifter studies at Harvard, had known more than he'd thought he would about Shifters despite Valerius' reticence.

Dr. Tanaka answered in his pleasant voice, "As we all are aware, each Dragon Shifter has a main breath ability. In the case of our own Black Dragon King Valerius, fire is his main ability, but as he demonstrated today, he has a powerful air breath ability that dissipated the Green Dragon King Illarion's main breath ability, which is poison. It is rumored that the Black Dragon King Valerius, for certain, has many more elemental powers than we have ever seen. But as to the White Dragon's ability to actually force the shift, well this is beyond anything we've seen from the Dragons so far."

Carol broke in, "But, Dr. Tanaka, are we certain that Iolaire truly caused Illarion to shift? Perhaps he simply had an accident and Iolaire caught him."

Dr. Tanaka gave her a slightly repressive smile. "Dragon Shifters like Illarion are simply too old to have an accident like that. And, I think, it is pretty clear from his current reaction that Illarion is none too pleased with the actions of the newest addition to that Shifter group."

They showed Illarion's current behavior of hissing and spitting at Iolaire. Chione turned off the tablet.

"How are you going to deal with this, my king? Illarion has broken so many of the rules, and he attacked you," Chione said.

"Let him dig his hole deeper. Violence is not the answer for now," Valerius told her.

She looked surprised and one of her eyebrows rose. "I thought you would be eager to do something physical to him."

"Oh, I am finding his humiliation far more satisfying. Besides, Iolaire should have its moment of triumph."

"You will release me!" Illarion screamed.

Caden looked at Valerius for an okay to let the Green Dragon Shifter down. Valerius gave a brief nod. This caused Illarion to squawk even louder about how he would not be treated this way and how dare Valerius and this runt White Dragon do this to him and he'd see them drown in a sea of poison and on and on it went.

Despite his threats and calumnies, Caden set Illarion down gently on the courtyard. The Green Dragon Shifter stumbled back. Valerius rather thought he was stumbling away on purpose so as to get distance between himself and the White Dragon without making it obvious he was running away. Better to be thought clumsy than afraid in Illarion's mind. Valerius often thought the same thing.

"Illarion does not take well to fear," Chione murmured. "I do not think he will forgive Iolaire for this."

"No, likely not, but now at least he knows that Iolaire, though small, is mighty,"

Valerius said.

Iolaire made Green Dragon afraid! Raziel laughed. Little White Dragon caused him to crash from the sky!

Valerius was glad to just hear amusement in his Spirit's voice rather than anger. Raziel was in the best of moods. It was proud of the little White Dragon that could.

But neither Caden nor Iolaire should have had to intervene at all. Illarion should have respected me, but he did not. I will have to fix that.

At that moment, part of Valerius wanted to go over and grab Illarion by the scruff of the neck before threatening him within an inch of his life. But like Caden had said, that would be giving Illarion attention. And any attention--good or bad--would be treated as a victory by the Green Dragon Shifter. So he stood there, arms crossed, looking at Illarion as one might an uninteresting bug. For his part, Illarion was not looking at Valerius.

"Our fears about Iolaire being all but defenseless are seemingly unwarranted," Chione murmured.

"We do not know the limits of this gift yet," Valerius murmured.

"What do we know about it?" she asked quietly.

"It lasts a minimum of 24 hours unless Iolaire releases the Shifter and allows them to transform."

Chione's eyebrows rose. "Twenty-four hours? Illarion will be a madman before that if he is not allowed to shift."

“True.” Valerius smiled. It was not a nice smile. “But he did break the rules of civility so I am not inclined to ask Iolaire to release him early.”

The two of them watched as the Green Dragon Shifter stared daggers at Iolaire, his threats having dried up for some reason. Maybe simply being released had stopped the flow of words. Iolaire merely cleaned its wings and moved the tip of its tail up and down, rather cat-like, with seeming no concern at all for Illarion’s ill temper. Illarion scowled harder.

Your nonchalance is annoying Illarion, Caden , Valerius chuckled.

I know. He’s really mad. Did you see him hopping up and down before? That was funny, Caden answered.

Yes, well, you have made an enemy of him, I think. You must be very careful, Valerius cautioned. He didn’t want Caden to get cocky.

I guess I have. Though really it’s bullshit for him to be mad at me considering everything. He was the one to go on television and say I was his mate! Not to mention he was endangering people! Caden sounded affronted to have gained an enemy for “unfair” reasons.

Valerius shook his head. Illarion is not logical. He is a bully. He is used to being the strongest. My existence is nearly intolerable to him because I am stronger than him. Yours now... he did not expect you to be able to best him.

Guess he doesn’t want me as a mate anymore! Thank God! Caden sounded relieved.

Valerius knew that contrary to Caden’s belief, Illarion would likely want Caden more than before. He would want to possess and lord over Iolaire. That was likely the only way he saw getting his face back.

“Why don’t you shift?” Illarion suddenly shouted at Iolaire. “Let us see you in the flesh! Let us see how tough you are in your human form!”

“He did not just say that!” Chione let out a disbelieving laugh. “What does he think he’s going to do? Have a fistfight with the White Dragon Shifter?”

Valerius’ hands curled into fists. “He will never touch Caden.”

Iolaire continued with its cleaning, ignoring Illarion entirely.

“We’re not going to see Iolaire in its human flesh, dear Illarion! Iolaire’s human side is going to remain a mystery!” Esme’s voice drifted out of the double doors. The Claw came to attention as she strode out wearing an icy blue dress that flowed around her like mist.

“Esme!” Chione called gaily and the woman greeted each other with air kisses.

“It is so good to see you, Chione! It’s been too long!” Esme smiled genuinely at the Sphinx Shifter.

“It has. You’ve come at the perfect time though.” Chione looked over at Iolaire.

“I had to stick my head out of the sun roof in the vehicle taking me here from the airport to get in on the action.” Esme’s eyes slid to Illarion. He had taken the short cut by shifting. “But I did see the battle. You were magnificent as always, Valerius. Raziel is so gorgeous. Those midnight black scales against the peerless blue sky.” Esme kissed Valerius’ cheek.

I am magnificent , Raziel agreed. His Spirit had always liked Esme, which was rare, as Raziel normally hated most people.

“Raziel extends its greetings to you and Scylla,” Valerius told her.

“Scylla so wanted to fly up there and get involved in things!” Esme’s eyes narrowed at Illarion.

He had violated all of their rules, not just Valerius’. To treat one Dragon with a lack of respect was to treat them all that way. The delicate balance was kept by each Dragon Shifter acting carefully around the other. Illarion had violated all of that.

“It was good that you convinced Scylla not to,” Chione said. “Iolaire had things well in hand all on its own.”

“Oh, yes, I saw that! Everyone saw that,” Esme tittered.

Esme gave Illarion a similar hard smile as Valerius had. The Green Dragon Shifter ignored her. It was really impressive that Illarion could pretend to be alone on this courtyard with Iolaire. Other than Esme’s opening line, none of them had actually directly spoken to him. So there was that.

Esme turned fully to Iolaire, who had stopped cleaning to observe her almost shyly. She took a few steps towards the White Dragon. Her expression was surprisingly tender. “Aren’t you beautiful! Oh, my such a lovely one. I am Esme, the Blue Dragon. My Spirit’s name is Scylla.”

Esme is a friend, Valerius assured Caden. Though she looks like a stylish grandmother, she has the most strategic mind of all of us.

She seems nice! Caden exclaimed, and Valerius got an impression of long lost grandparents from Caden’s past that he missed dearly.

He wanted to warn Caden that Esme was more like Marban than she was like those

fuzzy memories of white-haired older people who brought presents and smiles. But Iolaire was already slowly lowering its head so that its eyes were even with hers. Iolaire then slowly blinked, cat-like once more. Esme reached out to touch Iolaire.

“May I, dear Iolaire?” she asked.

Iolaire pushed its nose into her hand. She let out a delighted laugh and was soon scratching and embracing the massive head. She pulled back to gaze at Iolaire with affection. A huff of frost exited Iolaire’s mouth. The White Dragon looked apologetic, but Esme tsked.

“I control water, dear one. We are aligned. You see?”

She moved her hand through the last tendrils of drifting fog. They curled around her fingers and then transformed into water droplets that formed a small pool in her hand. Iolaire licked the water up experimentally, which had her laughing delightedly again. She patted Iolaire’s nose.

“Valerius, Iolaire is quite the charmer!” Esme’s pale cheeks were pink with pleasure. Her sea blue eyes looked quite brilliantly happy.

At that moment, Valerius realized that she was glad for this new addition to their kind. He had thought she would be more concerned about the politics of it, and the potential disruption of the power balance. It was she who had suggested the splitting of the planet into territories. But, at this time, she seemed simply happy to embrace a new Spirit in the realm.

“Iolaire is at that.” Valerius strode towards them, and immediately, Iolaire pressed its snout against Valerius’ chest. Hot breath gusted over him, nearly blowing his robe off.

Chione came over as well. She got a lick from Iolaire in greeting. That left just Simi and Ngoye standing at attention by the doors of the throne room--where they were supposed to be--and Illarion, standing awkwardly a dozen feet away. The Green Dragon Shifter was no longer scowling, well, no more than he naturally did. He looked thoughtful, which had Valerius feeling uneasy. Illarion had definitely not given up on getting Iolaire. Seeing Valerius observing him, Illarion met his gaze evenly. He gave a small smile to Valerius.

“Well, this visit has not been boring yet,” Illarion said as he approached.

Iolaire’s head rose abruptly as it turned to regard Illarion out of cool, blue eyes.

Illarion hesitated in mid-step. He finally held up his hands. “I have no ill will towards you.”

“That is hardly what you were saying earlier,” Chione remarked dryly.

Illarion let out a few chuckles that didn’t sound authentic. “I was... startled. I am not used to being manhandled.”

This coincided with Valerius’ own beliefs. Illarion was off his game. He had revealed too much in that temper tantrum of his.

But he expected to come here and what? Valerius wondered and narrowed his eyes. He has gone too long unchecked. No one can challenge him in his own territory, but here, he has had a small Dragon take him down to nothing.

“It was quite a bit more than that, Illarion.” Esme’s expression was mild, but there was a sharpness to her tone.

Illarion’s expression grew dark for a moment, but then with a visible effort, he



smoothed it into a smile with another chuckle and shrug. “I had no idea of our newest addition’s powers.” His gaze hardened for a moment. “But next time I won’t be caught off guard.”

Iolaire regarded him with a speculative look. The White Dragon Spirit was new, but clearly it wasn’t a fool.

“But, I would say let us put this in the past. I am willing to forgive, if you are,” Illarion said to Iolaire.

What the Hell? He’s willing to forgive?! He’s the one in the wrong! Caden cried, clearly furious over Illarion’s behavior. Not to mention he needs to apologize to YOU! Not me!

Iolaire turned its head away from Illarion and pointedly looked at Valerius. Illarion grimaced, that darkness returning to his expression, but again, he made an effort to be apologetic. He spread his arms wide and lowered his head.

“I see that I am to ask for your forgiveness, Valerius.” Illarion waited for him to say something in return. Valerius was silent for long moments, which caused the Green Dragon Shifter to glance up. “I could not resist flying around your beautiful city.”

He bit you! Caden grumbled. That had nothing to do with sightseeing!

I know, Caden. His lies are transparent and pathetic, Valerius answered.

Green Dragon pathetic, Raziel growled. His Spirit was watchful. It wanted to make sure that Illarion made no move towards Iolaire. Raziel was feeling just as protective as he was. We should crush him.

For once, Valerius wasn’t quick to disagree. These actions were tantamount to

spitting in his face. He thought, too, of the abuses that the President of the United States and Prime Minister of Canada had brought to his attention. Illarion was flaunting all the rules. If he did nothing it might be worse than acting.

“I wonder, Illarion, what your reaction would have been if Valerius had come to Moscow and buzzed those minarets of yours without your permission?” Esme asked almost sweetly.

Illarion’s jaw worked, but then he shrugged. “I think it would give my people quite the show! They normally only get to see other Dragons on television or the net.”

“I am surprised that they know there are other Dragons out there. After all, you do limit your people’s access to the internet and every television station is state run,” Chione said in the same tone as Esme.

Instead of taking offense, Illarion acted like the two women were simply silly as he said, “I think information is overrated. Most people cannot understand their own limited existences let alone a whole world of them. I make things simpler for my people in this time of information overload. They don’t need to unplug and disconnect , because their lives are much more in the moment.”

“Very little information comes out of your territory as well, Illarion,” Chione pointed out. “It seems like you do not want anyone to know what you are doing there.”

Illarion’s smile was hard. “Both I and my people want our privacy. Not all of us want our actions splashed over the news! That first battle between you and Iolaire was quite the sensation, Valerius! Those poor citizens of yours that got in the way. They made such a fuss about peasants dying. That is all what the free press is good for!”

Valerius gritted his jaw. “Every one of my people is precious to me.”

“Then it must have pained you greatly to have crushed so many of them.” Illarion grinned.

Valerius did not answer. His temper was starting to fray dangerously again.

Don’t listen to him! Caden sounded disgusted. He’s not worth the time! He hasn’t even noticed that you didn’t accept his apology!

He will, Valerius said. He had a plan. He would put it in place.

“I do not understand why you will not shift,” Illarion was saying to Iolaire. “Are you vain? Worried that your human form is not as pretty?”

Oh, please! This guy is a jackass! Caden grouched.

“The White Dragon Shifter--like you and your people, Illarion--values their privacy. None of you will be meeting them in their human form,” Valerius remarked dryly.

Iolaire’s tail swished happily at his words. He felt Caden’s relief at them as well. Illarion looked like he was sucking on a lemon.

“But this is nonsense! How are we to court them if they are unable to speak?” Illarion cried. He then thrust a finger in Valerius’ face. “How do we know this isn’t your doing? That you haven’t threatened Iolaire to remain in Dragon form so that you have the advantage over us?”

The urge to simply bite that finger off was huge in Valerius’ mind, but he stayed quite still, not even blinking. “I assure you that this is Iolaire’s decision. And I am surprised that you worry about Iolaire speaking to you. Considering you just like making pronouncements about it being your mate without a word from it.”

Illarion put his hands on his hips and grinned. “One needs to be aggressive. Stand back and someone might take your place.”

Or you just come off as some creepy, controlling asshat, Caden remarked.

Valerius smiled. Again, it wasn't a nice smile. “I assure you, Illarion, that based upon what I know of Iolaire, you could crow every moment of every day and it wouldn't make much of a difference.”

That should be my line, but thanks, since I can't say it! Caden told him.

“We shall see.” Illarion appeared completely unrepentant.

Esme was back to patting Iolaire's snout, and Illarion moved closer to get in on that action. Iolaire let out an angry snort of frost. Esme turned it into a thin glass wall between Illarion and Iolaire.

“Do not press your luck, Illarion,” Esme said dryly. “Iolaire does not want you near.”

“Does this mean you intend to throw your hat into the ring, Esme, and not just be an observer as you usually are? That you are here to court the White Dragon, too?” The Russian accent made the words even more biting.

Esme narrowed her eyes at him. “Dear boy, rushing in where angels fear to tread with an arrogant smile on your face might be your way of interacting with the world, but it has never been mine. And my way has served me well throughout the millennia.”

As if to prove her point that her way was better, she scratched under Iolaire's chin. Iolaire's eyelids shut in pleasure.

“I just thought that your friendship here with Valerius would preclude such actions by

you,” Illarion said.

Esme continued to scratch Iolaire. “You see things as always in a binary way, Illarion. Mine or yours. Yes or no. Enemy or ally. All or nothing. It’s so... interesting.”

Illarion’s smile faded a watt. He knew she was insulting him, but couldn’t quite figure out how, because, like she had said, he thought of things in those terms and couldn’t see what was wrong with it.

“My way has served me well, too,” Illarion told her stiffly.

“Hmmm,” she answered noncommittally as she continued to scratch Iolaire’s chin. “If you say so. You have not asked about your ability to shift, Illarion. I, for one, would be most curious about when you’ll be able to do that again.”

Illarion’s jaw worked for a moment. “I imagine... that it will wear off soon.”

Chione let out a soft huff of breath that almost sounded like a laugh. Illarion’s head jerked towards her.

“If you have something to say then say it!” Illarion snapped at her.

“Do not speak to Chione in that manner,” Valerius’ voice was cold. “Apologize.”

“She...” Illarion stopped himself. He rolled his lips together. “I... I apologize for my tone.”

“Your apology is accepted, Illarion. I want you to have a pleasant stay in Valerius’ territory,” Chione said gracefully. “Despite how things have started out. Perhaps not having the ability to shift for some period of time would be a good thing.”

Alarm flared in Illarion's eyes. They darted all around. He was realizing that his time stuck in his human form was going to be longer than he'd thought. That was good to see.

"Are you letting all the Dragons come here, Valerius?" Illarion asked as he watched the scratching.

"I let you come here, didn't I?" Valerius pointed out.

Illarion's eyes narrowed. "I would have come regardless."

There was such tension for a moment that the air seemed to solidify with it. Iolaire let out a low hoot to remind him that violence was not the answer. Simi and Ngoye were alert at the doors, ready to come charging in. Chione's hands flexed together in front of her chest as her gaze skipped between Valerius and Illarion. Esme concentrated on Iolaire, but he felt her waiting for his reaction. He was going to give it.

We need to crush him, Raziel repeated from earlier.

Yes, I think we do.

At that moment, there was a commotion at the doors to the throne room. Simi and Ngoye were holding back three large men, who from their clothing and grim-faced demeanor, were a part of Illarion's entourage.

"You remain here until allowed forward," Simi growled at a bear of a man that stood two heads taller than him. Not that the Snake Shifter was intimidated. He looked about ready to strike.

"I am here to serve my master," the bear-man snarled in a Russian accented voice. He was holding a robe for Illarion.

“My king has not said you can come out here,” Simi hissed back.

So everybody that serves Illarion is a bastard, Caden said. Good to know.

Valerius gave a mirthless smile then he strode over to the bear-man. He pulled the robe out of his hands. The bear-man was so startled by his sudden appearance that all he did was open his mouth, but nothing came out.

“I will take this. Wait here. I would have words with your master before he retires to his quarters,” Valerius told him. He then went over and took Illarion’s arm firmly by one hand and dragged the Green Dragon Shifter over away from everyone. “Come, Illarion, I would speak with you.”

Illarion’s eyes went a sulfurous yellow at being manhandled yet again, but in their human forms, Valerius was stronger too.

What are you doing, Valerius? Caden sounded uneasy.

Setting the ground rules, he answered simply.

When they were apart from the others with a semblance of privacy, Valerius released Illarion’s arm and held up his robe for him to put on. Illarion’s brow furrowed. He was clearly wondering why Valerius was offering to help him into his robe. It was also clear he suspected a trap.

Valerius tilted his head to the side and cocked an eyebrow. Slowly, Illarion turned and allowed Valerius to help him on with the robe. Just as Illarion had slipped it over both shoulders, Valerius’ hands bore down on those same shoulders. Illarion let out a soft gasp at the pain as Valerius squeezed .

Valerius’ voice was low, “Illarion, let me make two things clear. Your insults and

disrespect towards me are not forgiven, and you will pay for them in due time.”

“I--”

“Silence!” He squeezed harder on those shoulders. He heard Illarion’s teeth grinding together to keep back the pained sounds that wanted to escape him. “But here is the most important part for that little pea brain of yours to understand. Are you listening?”

“You are getting dangerously close to--”

“Are you listening ?” Valerius could have truly crushed some of Illarion’s bones if he squeezed any harder.

Illarion grunted and nodded.

Valerius continued, “If you do anything--if you even attempt to do anything--to harm Iolaire, I promise that I will rip your wings off and feed them to you. Is that understood?”

There was a half second of hesitation, but then Illarion nodded sharply again as Valerius started to squeeze even harder. He let Illarion go. The Green Dragon Shifter let out an involuntary gasp, and reached up to touch his shoulders, but stopped himself.

Valerius met Illarion’s shadowed gaze, and with another of those not-nice smiles said, “Now, let’s get you settled somewhere out of the way.”



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### GO PLAY

Caden wondered exactly how and where he was going to go in order to shift back to his human form in privacy. Despite his and Iolaire's seeming nonchalance around Illarion, neither of them was keen on staying any longer in the same space as the Green Dragon Shifter than absolutely necessary.

Illarion's eyes were hard. His expressions were hard. He was a hard, unyielding person who had no interest in Caden or Iolaire for any good reason. Truthfully, he made the skin between their shoulder blades crawl.

Esme cooed at him, and he smiled down at her. They liked the Blue Dragon and wasn't that ultra cool that she could actually control water when she was human?!

Can we do that, Iolaire? Can we make ice when we're in our human form?

Iolaire hooted that it didn't know. It had never seen that before. While Esme would be the most logical person to ask, they couldn't, because she couldn't hear their thoughts. Relaying them through Valerius would not be wise, because both of them were pretty sure Valerius wanted that ability kept secret. But perhaps Valerius or Raziel would know if they could use their gifts in human form.

Speaking of gifts, what else do you have up your sleeve, Iolaire? That thing of changing people from Shifter to human was pretty surprising! Caden asked his mysterious Spirit.

Iolaire hooted and pretended--or so it seemed to Caden--that it didn't understand his

question.

Why won't you tell me all we can do? Caden pushed.

Iolaire blinked slowly at him, doing that cat-like loving thing. Caden sighed. Iolaire was being coy, though he didn't know why. Of all the people that should know what they could do, shouldn't Caden be one of them? But maybe Iolaire didn't know itself. The sense he had when Iolaire acted up in the air was that it was going by instinct.

Right now, Iolaire was staring at Illarion, who was staring back. It shifted their stance, lifting their wings and settling them back down lightly to make them appear bigger. It was the equivalent of a cat puffing up its tail and fur on its body. Illarion cocked his head to the side and smiled. Iolaire went quite still. Valerius looked between them and saw what was happening. He stepped between Illarion and Iolaire.

Ignore him. He will be handled, Valerius assured Caden and Iolaire.

Right. He's... he's leaning over so that I can see him behind you, Caden remarked dryly.

Valerius pinched the top of his nose at this information. Just focus on me then. It seems he cannot help himself.

Even after you nearly crushed his shoulders, he's still pushing this, Caden realized.

Illarion is the type who does not stop until he hits a wall that will not break for him. He will bash himself against it for a time before he realizes he cannot get through, Valerius explained.

So you're comparing yourself to a wall? Caden grinned.

Among other things, Valerius answered with a small smile.

I think Iolaire and I should take off if you're settling everyone in for tonight, Caden told him reluctantly.

Chione was already urging Esme towards the doors. He was sure that Illarion would stay just where he was for all time if Iolaire was there. So the only option was for them to go.

Caden couldn't quite hide the disappointment that their time together had come to an end. For today, at least. But now, anytime he saw Valerius he would have to be in his Dragon form and that wasn't as fun. And it wouldn't be just the two of them either. Iolaire hung their head.

Yes, Valerius sounded just as disappointed as he did. That would be wise. You should return to the pond and take the car back to Reach .

Caden nodded his head. Or rather Iolaire nodded.

Esme, who had been watching the exchanges between them, opened her eyes hugely wide. "Are you communicating telepathically with one another, Valerius?"

Valerius did not answer her. Instead, he put an arm around her shoulders. "We have much to discuss, Esme."

"Oh, you're going to be coy, aren't you? I suppose that just means that I have to wrangle it out of you," she laughed, seeming happy with it being a mystery.

Valerius smiled at her. He wasn't going to give away anything. He then called to Caden, Fly well. I will be in contact with you as to when you need to appear next for this circus.

Caden felt a sudden sense of panic. But what about seeing you? Are we going to fly together? I can't do this without you! He hadn't meant to let that out, especially so plaintively. I mean, of course, I can. Just--

Caden, I know. We are in this together. As to whether we can meet alone... Valerius considered this. He bit his lower lip. It was clear he wanted to fly with Caden, but didn't think it was safe to do so. I will be under surveillance constantly by the other Dragon Shifters. They will all want to discover your human identity. But I will find a way to get to you. Right now, I am very grateful that Iolaire is agreeable to remaining in your human form for as long as needed.

Right. Yeah. Caden still felt uneasy and at sea. I just... you know, we just... we just started this thing between us and--and the Dragon thing and--

Caden, all is well. I wish to be with you. More than anything. But we must be careful right now, Valerius' tone was gentle. Please know that this stricture on seeing you is not something I wish to do. It is what I MUST do to keep you safe.

Okay, okay, I'm just panicking a little bit, Caden admitted, frisking happily at the clear desire on Valerius' part to be together. And I miss you already.

Valerius' expression softened even further. As do I. Be careful, Caden. Do not do anything foolish. Go directly to the pond.

What about the press? Iolaire lifted their head towards the helicopter--actually helicopters --that were hovering all around High Reach, filming them.

Valerius frowned. But Chione was already on it.

"I have contacted the media, the helicopters will be moving away," Chione called to them.

And within a few seconds, the helicopters were flying off in all directions, and soon the skies above Reach were empty but for clouds.

“Oh, how clever you are, dear,” Esme said. “After some naughtiness with the press in London, I’ve had to impose no fly rules while I am in residence.”

“While Valerius has offered to buzz them, I have assured him that a quid pro quo with the media is far more beneficial,” Chione told her.

Illarion let out a cold laugh. “Negotiating with those jackals?!” He shook his head. “Why? Take out a few of their helicopters and see how close they get after that.” Everyone just stared at him coldly. He crossed his arms and muttered, “My way is better.”

Valerius pinched the top of his nose again. He then reached over and caressed Iolaire’s big head. Iolaire cooed at him, which had Illarion jerking towards them. His brows furrowed as he stared at the evident affection between them. A scowl started to form on Illarion’s handsome yet hard face.

“Iolaire, I regret taking my leave of you,” Valerius said as he stroked Iolaire’s head. It felt so good and Iolaire rustled their wings in pleasure. “But we shall see each other soon.”

The Black Dragon King then stepped back. He urged his guests and Chione over to the doors so that Caden could easily lift off from the courtyard.

“The White Dragon is leaving?” Illarion gestured towards him. “But we are only here to see it! And it’s leaving?”

“You have seen Iolaire,” Valerius pointed out. “If that is all you were here for, you may leave now, too.”

“You know what I am here for, Valerius!” Illarion scowled at the Black Dragon King. “And I will not leave without it.”

The Green Dragon Shifter then spun on his heel and joined the jack-booted thugs he had brought with him. The four of them stormed inside. Valerius’ lips flattened.

Remember that we’re ignoring him, Caden reminded Valerius. He’s not worth your breath. And he’s getting nothing he wants out of this visitation with me.

Valerius gave a slight nod. He is dangerous, Caden. Remember that.

Oh, I will.

“Goodbye, dear Iolaire!” Esme called to him with a wave. “I look forward to seeing you soon. Perhaps we can go flying together and see how water and ice can be used to create unique effects.”

Iolaire was eagerly nodding their head to that. It sensed that they could learn much from the Blue Dragon Shifter. If they trusted her.

She seems really willing to teach, Caden agreed. I think... Well, I think she might be trustworthy too.

That surprised him a little. He’d seen Esme on television and the net before. She’d always seemed charming and warm. She seemed that now though there was a slightly harder edge about her that hadn’t been present for the cameras. But Valerius had told him that the other Dragon Shifters hadn’t gotten their Spirits through necessarily noble acts. He wondered how she got hers.

But beyond all of that, he wondered if she wanted to teach him things. He had thought that all the other Dragon Shifters would want to make sure that he didn’t

become powerful and threaten them. Not that he could threaten them really. Even with this new gift, he was pretty sure it had limits. He wasn't sure if it would work all the time, or on how many Dragons it would work on, or for how long if there was more than one that was affected.

Chione waved to him as well. "See you soon, Iolaire!"

Stay safe, Caden , Valerius sent once more. Remember, right back to the pond.

They nodded. It was time to go. Iolaire had just started to flap their wings when Caden suddenly worried they wouldn't be able to gracefully get up into the air again. He pictured them going up a few feet then falling over or soaring into the side of High Reach or falling into one of the mansions below. But Iolaire had it covered and they were up and safely away from the castle within moments. Valerius' form became smaller and smaller. Caden felt a wave of depression go through him.

I can't believe we won't get to see Valerius and Raziel alone for like... ever, Caden sighed.

Iolaire hooted sadly as well. Though he hadn't really thought about it, Iolaire must have experienced what he and Valerius had done sexually. Iolaire knew how he felt about Valerius, too. But the Spirit had not been intrusive at all, giving him total privacy. But still, Iolaire was impacted too by this relationship, and he had never asked the Spirit what it thought.

Iolaire, you are okay with me and Valerius... uhm, being together, right?

Iolaire appeared startled. Not startled because he had asked, but startled, because it was completely on board. He got the sense from it that it would never tell him "no" as to what lovers or friends he picked, that Iolaire was utterly pleased. There was some hooting and a little bit of hiding its head beneath a wing in Caden's mind's eye--not

in real life as they were flying--as it expressed admiration for Raziel.

You like Raziel, huh? That's awesome! It's like dating brothers or something. Huh, I'm glad that this is working out.

Iolaire softly hooted again, and made clear that it wondered if he thought that Raziel liked Iolaire back.

I think Raziel is pretty chuffed about you, to be honest. Let there be a Dragon romance!

Iolaire let out a hoot of delight, sending their head back and allowing a puff of frost to be released as they flew over Reach. The White Dragon was taking the long way back to the pond, and Caden didn't mind that at all. In fact, despite what he'd told Valerius, he didn't want to go back there just yet. This was the first time he had a chance to just be with Iolaire. Couldn't he do what he liked for once? Why wasn't he free to simply fly around like Valerius did and then go back to the pond when he had a mind to? Maybe they should take this opportunity to do something on their own.

Hey, Iolaire, Tilly is at Spirit Park today with her friends. Maybe she's still there. We could drop down and give her that ride we promised, Caden suggested. No one will know that we aren't just meeting up randomly with some kids. Tilly won't give us away.

Caden could almost feel Valerius' disapproval even though the Black Dragon King did not know what he was doing.

What could possibly go wrong with this? We're just going to go down for a few minutes!

Iolaire was eager to meet his sister and readily agreed. Nothing would go wrong!



Let those not be famous last words!

They curved to the left and headed towards the large park on the south side of the Mid. Spirit Park was dedicated to the Spirits that transformed humans into Shifters. There was plenty of lawn space where people could play games, picnic or just hang out. There were also large swathes of forest with running-walking paths threading through their leafy vastnesses. Finally, there was a large pond where people swam and fished called Little Lost Lake. Tilly liked to hang out near the swimming pond. He directed Iolaire in that direction.

Let's see if we can catch sight of her. I hope she's still there .

And they were in luck. As Iolaire flew them lower to the ground, they caught sight of his sister and her two best friends, Tobey Caudle and Macauley Smythe. His sister was in the center of the group, and immediately clapped her hands together when she saw Iolaire.

Tobey, a gangly 13-year-old with thick Coke-bottle glasses and too long legs, jumped up and down in excitement. Macauley, who was scared of just about everything, froze and curled down rabbit-like. Tilly patted Macauley's back in encouragement. Iolaire landed about fifty feet from the group. Caden had been so excited to see his sister, that he hadn't worried about the landing.

Humans can't fly, but Dragons can. So long as I leave the flying to you, I think we're safe, right, Iolaire? Caden asked.

Iolaire hooted. Caden would learn, but for now, it was better that Iolaire was in control of this Dragon business.

I wish we could talk to Tilly, though it seems she knows what's up! Here they come, Caden laughed.

Tilly and Tobey linked their arms through Macauley's and practically dragged her to him and Iolaire.

"Iolaire!" Tilly called breathlessly as they skidded to a halt about ten feet away.

Good job at not calling me Caden, Tills! Caden thought happily.

Iolaire let out a soft hoot and, immediately, lowered its head so that the teens wouldn't feel loomed over. And they might get scratches as well. Tilly had absolutely no fear, of course, but she seemed a little awed as she carefully walked towards them.

C'mon, Tilly, it's just us! Caden thought.

Tilly slowly lifted up a hand to touch Iolaire's snout. She lightly placed it between Iolaire's two nostrils. Iolaire let out a heavy frosty breath that had her laughing.

"Iolaire seems to know you, Tilly," Tobey said as he pushed his glasses up. They constantly slid down his nose.

Macauley--who had both hands up, covering her face, peered out between her fingers--and asked in a shaky voice, "I-i-is i-i-i-t a n-n-nice, D-D-Dragon?"

"The nicest!" Tilly assured them then quickly realizing that this confirmed that she had some kind of special relationship with the White Dragon, she added, "I mean, I think so! You all saw it on TV last night."

Tobey took a few steps forward. Iolaire settled down in its "round-cat" pose as Caden thought of it, and curled its tail around its body and front claws hidden beneath its body so that it looked more approachable.

"Wow!" Tobey murmured as he carefully stroked Iolaire's left upper arm. "It's so

warm! I thought it would be cold, but it isn't."

Macauley darted forward, touched or more like patted Iolaire once, and ran away again. At least, she had taken her hands from her face.

I wonder if she would be so afraid if she knew it was me, Caden wondered.

"This is so cool!" Tobey remarked as he circled Iolaire and looked at every part of the dragon. "Why do you suppose it landed here though? There's only the three of us."

"Because it wanted to meet people, but not be overwhelmed," Tilly said, though her gaze went out to the wide expanse of lawn. "Though I'm betting it won't be just us for very long."

Macauley had approached the tip of Iolaire's tail. Immediately, the White Dragon started to tease her with it. Macauley watched with an open mouth as the tail behaved like its own creature and tried to tickle her. She squeaked and jumped up and down. She then slowly reached out to pat the tail's "head" or rather, its tip. It darted up and touched her cheek as if to give her a kiss. She giggled.

Tobey, having finished his inspection, stood with hands on hips and said with evident satisfaction, "This is the best thing ever!"

Tilly laughed and nodded in agreement. She was leaning against Iolaire's shoulder. Iolaire sent a few puffs of frost into the air so that snowflakes floated down onto her hair and shoulders. She looked like a little fairy princess.

"Can you imagine Valerius coming down and hanging out with us in the park like this?" Tobey asked as he clambered on top of Iolaire's left forearm and sat on it. Iolaire moved it up and down so it was like a ride. Tobey let out shouts of glee.

“No way!” Tilly shook her head.

Macauley, who now was happily being held up by the tail, looked alarmed again, “Oh, it would be so scary if the Black Dragon came down to us!”

“I think it would be awesome,” Tobey contradicted her.

I wonder if I could convince him to land where people can actually see and touch him, Caden murmured.

Iolaire thought that this was a brilliant idea. He and Raziel could ferry kids on their backs across the lake. They could make fire and ice shows that people would ooh and ahh at. Caden wasn’t so sure that Valerius would be up for that, even if Raziel could be convinced to do so. He didn’t think that even Iolaire’s charms could convince Raziel to do it.

“You just say that now because the Black Dragon isn’t here!” Macauley gulped. “But you’d be scared too if the Black Dragon came down!”

“Well, yeah, a little bit, but it’s not like he couldn’t just as easily kill me from the sky as from the ground,” Tobey pointed out.

That didn’t soothe Macauley predictably. “Kill you? Why would he want to kill you? What have you done?”

“Nothing! I was just kidding!” Tobey rolled his eyes.

Tilly was near Iolaire’s left ear and whispered, “Do I get my chance to fly today?”

Iolaire nodded eagerly even as Caden felt a little trepidation.

How are we going to stop her from falling off? Or suffocating or something? I mean maybe--oh, man! You've gotta be kidding me, Caden murmured.

There were people coming up the rise of the grass field. They were people clearly interested in seeing Iolaire. But even if Caden hadn't seen the angry scowls on their faces, or the bricks or bats and pieces of glass they held, he would have heard the angry calls of "Host" and "Parasite".

Humans First had found the White Dragon Shifter.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### RESTRAINT

“A re you seeing this, dear?” Esme’s voice rose up to a twitter as she spoke to Chione.

There was a momentary silence as Valerius imagined Esme showing Chione something on the web or television, and then his Councillor murmured, “Oh, my, how did that happen? I thought... they should not be there!”

“It looks like they went to play with the children and... well, Human’s First are everywhere . Sort of like cockroaches, you know,” Esme answered her.

Valerius, who was changing on one of his eyrie perches in his tower, frowned. Esme and Chione were seated on the ground floor of the tower by the fire, sipping glasses of wine. He hadn’t invited Illarion. According to his servants, Illarion had collapsed on his bed, though the Green Dragon King had pretended not to be tired after his fast, long flight, he clearly had been.

So who could the two women be talking about? He expected them to be discussing strategy about how to deal with an awake Illarion, not to mention the other Dragon Shifters that were to start arriving the next day. But no, they appeared to be looking at the news and seeing something involving Humans First. What were the Human’s First doing now? Didn’t he have enough trouble with Illarion here and Mei to follow close on his heels in the morrow to deal with those idiots?

“I don’t think we should tell him. He’s already so wound up with Illarion being here,” Esme murmured, casting her voice so low that he almost didn’t hear it, but he was

quite tuned into them. “And it’s not like they could really do anything after all.”

Chione didn’t answer. He glanced over the side of his perch quickly enough to see his Councillor nod her head instead. He flattened his lips. They were supposed to be plotting on his behalf, not against him. For he was sure who the “he” in that sentence was.

Iolaire and Caden have done something, Raziel grumbled. It was already curled in a ball, half asleep after the wonderful afternoon with Caden and the straining not to kill Illarion. That last bit had definitely exhausted his Spirit.

No, surely not. I told them to go home. They would not disobey such a rational command, Valerius retorted. But a seed of unease was planted. What else would Esme and Chione be adverse to telling him if it was not about Caden and Iolaire? It must be something else. Because even if they did not go straight home, the likelihood of them running into Human’s First is--

They have done something, Raziel stated. They are young and invite trouble.

Unnerved, Valerius launched himself off of the platform to the next to the next and next before landing in what Chione called his “hero’s pose” with one knee bent and one leg stretched out behind him. The two women clapped, though both of them were just as limber. He weighed being annoyed or amused and decided to bow.

Let them make of that what they will.

“Valerius, you look refreshed. Would you like some wine?” Chione asked, quickly hiding an iPad behind her back.

“What were the two of you watching?” Valerius asked evenly as he stood there, unmoving.

“Oh, nothing!” Chione lied airily.

He lifted an eyebrow. “Really?”

Esme quickly poured him a glass of wine and, smiling winningly, thrust it towards him. “Please join us, Valerius. There is nothing worse than drinking alone.”

“You are drinking with Chione,” he pointed out. “That is hardly alone.”

Esme blinked innocently. “Yes, but it feels ever so much better the more people there are joining in.”

He, however, avoided the glass of wine and went to grab his own iPad off the side table. He heard a slight groan from Chione as he tapped on his browser. It did not take long for him to find what they had been looking at. Every channel was showing it.

“They are all right, Valerius,” Chione said weakly.

“It’s not like they can be hurt by those idiots,” Esme offered.

She began drinking her wine and his own. He wasn’t sure if the drinking belied her words or if she was just thirsty after her long flight across the Atlantic. Valerius ignored both of them as he watched the screen. He went rigid.

“...not fifteen minutes ago, the White Dragon Shifter alighted in the park and began to cavort with the children there, but their time of peace was soon over as they were approached by a group of Humans First protestors armed with bats, knives and who knows what else!” the female newscaster said breathlessly. Her eyes shone with excitement as she added with baited breath, “One wonders if there will be violence!”



One did not have to wonder if the newscaster hoped there would be. It was clear she did. He dropped the iPad and was pivoting towards the balcony, ready to shift and take off to the park to rescue his foolish— beloved —young man. But Chione caught his arm. He shot a look at her that would have probably killed another in her place.

“Chione,” he growled.

“You can’t go. No matter how much you want to. You must not go,” Chione told him, her eyes full of pleading.

“She’s right, you know. The Black Dragon King cannot fly into that park and torch those odious Humans First people,” Esme agreed, her hands tightening on the glasses of wine. “Even if warranted.”

“Why not?” he barked, even though he already knew on some level why not.

“They cannot hurt Iolaire,” Chione repeated a statement from earlier. “I’ve sent Simi and the Claw down there to observe and act if it is necessary. The police are also present. The biggest Werewolves they have are already infiltrating the park. Again, not that Iolaire needs their help. They cannot harm the White Dragon Shifter.”

“Not their body, no. But their soul...” Valerius’ lips flattened.

Shouldn’t he want Caden and Iolaire to learn the lesson that not everyone was good? That not everyone should be trusted? That humans, especially, were a group of reactionary monkeys still on many levels?

“If you go down there to save the day, Valerius, you not only risk more violence against Shifters, you raise Humans First profile,” Chione explained carefully. “That will only give the group more influence, not less.”

“But they are threatening Iolaire!” he roared.

“They are insects thinking that their buzzing is going to threaten a mountain,” Esme laughed. “Iolaire’s hide is as thick as ours. They proved that by resisting your attack, Valerius, the day they arrived.”

That was true. If anyone could have truly hurt Caden and Iolaire, it would have been him and Raziel.

What do you think? Valerius asked Raziel as his gaze dipped to the iPad.

The scene now showed the White Dragon Shifter completely surrounded by the howling mob of Humans First. With a start, he recognized Tilly seated on Iolaire’s back. Beside her were two other children. The other two looked scared, but Tilly appeared furious. She was staring at the mob with her hands clenched over her thighs and her eyes practically sparking fire.

Now she would make a great Dragon Shifter, Raziel rumbled in amusement.

She would. But she’s human, Raziel. She can easily break. All the more reason for us to go there and assert our dominance, Valerius argued.

No, Raziel said after a long moment.

No? Valerius couldn’t hide his shock. He had fully expected his red-blooded Spirit to want to fly down there and bring order. But ? —

Iolaire can protect them. We would undermine them if we went there. They must learn to assert their own dominance in their own way. We would crush their spirit if we constantly interfered, Raziel explained.

And as soon as Raziel said it, Valerius understood that his Spirit was right. But they are so young and inexperienced!

Yes, as we once were.

I do not recall us ever being so innocent, Valerius muttered.

Perhaps not. But we had to begin somewhere. This is their beginning, Raziel answered.

“I see that you are not going to fly down and attempt to save the day. What happened? Did our words reach you or oh my! Not Raziel! I believe the world must be ending if Raziel is advising restraint.” Esme offered him yet a third glass of wine. Evidently, she was intent on drinking both of the other glasses herself.

“You are correct. Raziel believes that Iolaire must handle this by themselves,” Valerius growled. He grabbed the glass of wine and took it over on the couch before settling down with the iPad. He would watch every moment of this. If things went south, he would go down there.

“Here, let me put it on the big screen,” Chione said and turned on the large screen that was almost invisible against the far wall.

She had on a different channel. This one had a handsome African-American reporter dressed in a smart suit with horn-rimmed glasses. His voice was low and melodic. It was the kind of voice that calmed everyone down.

He was saying, “... Humans First have surrounded the White Dragon Shifter and the three children it was playing with. Though Humans First have demanded the children be released, the children themselves have something very different to say about it.”

The camera then cut to Tilly shouting at the chanting Humans First members, “You’re all just a bunch of racist (BLEEP)! Go away! We don’t want to go with you! We’re staying with Iolaire! So get bent!”

Chione let out a burbling laugh. “Now she’s got some spunk, doesn’t she? Though her parents are probably going to say something to her about her choice of words.”

“Quite feisty.” Esme nodded. “Do you know her, dear?”

“No, not at all,” Chione lied, this time much more convincingly than she had to him. “I just imagined what her parents would think.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Esme murmured.

Valerius agreed with Chione that Tilly’s parents would not be amused hearing their daughter swear on television. But, then again, they might be more concerned that both of their children were staring down an angry mob and he wasn’t doing anything about it.

The camera cut back to the soothing anchor and framed High Reach behind him. “One wonders what Dragon King Valerius is going to do. I have to say that I expected him out here before now. But, so far, no sign of the Black Dragon Shifter.”

Valerius’ hands clenched into fists. The iPad shattered in his hands. He tossed the remnants on the floor with a clatter, prepared to get up again and go to Caden.

“I need to go?—”

“Valerius!” Chione cried. “Give Iolaire a chance to handle this. If they don’t, then you can go down.”

“What if something happens before then?” But he stopped himself.

“It won’t. Don’t you see how Iolaire is shielding the children with their wings? Nothing can hurt them,” Chione said.

He took in Iolaire’s behavior. It was true. The children were very safe where they were. And Iolaire could simply fly away if necessary. But still, he said, “If something happens, I will root out every member of Humans First and roast them alive.”

Esme blinked and said to her wine, “I would pay to see that.”

“They are causing you some pain, too, Esme?” Chione asked. “I thought that they were more of an American issue.”

“It is actually worse across the pond than here in some ways,” Esme admitted after a moment with an airy wave that was belied by the large swallow of wine. “They try to paint their rancid hatred towards Shifters as concern for jobs and culture , but it's speciesism pure and simple. It’s easier to talk about Shifter versus human than it is to discuss the change of the world overall. There are inequities, but many are ones that existed even before we revealed ourselves to the world. Though we speak of businesses as people, they are sociopaths. They simply do not care for the havoc they cause when they pay too little, lay people off, or simply work them to death. Other problems... are simply the changes that Shifters being out has wrought.”

“You mean how people will hire a Raven Shifter as their lawyer instead of a human one?” Chione asked.

“Now that we no longer have to hide our immortality, we can prosper even more greatly than before,” Esme explained. “More and more wealth is retained by Shifters. Positions of rank and authority are held by a majority of Shifters. Setting aside roles just for humans has been called the worst sort of affirmative action, which instead of

helping humanity, many claim undermines humans' rights to lead in any industry or politics. It makes them seem lesser ." Esme threw up her arms, nearly making it rain wine. "But if we don't set those places aside, less and less humans are represented in important roles, and people think that's because they can't be there."

"Studies clearly show that when Shifters and humans work together businesses are more vibrant, communities are better run, and many, many other positive effects," Chione offered. "Humanity has much to offer."

"Sometimes I agree with you and those studies, dear. But then I see this ." Esme pointed towards the screen, which now showed the Humans First members chanting some anti-Shifter screed. It had the words "parasites" and "hosts" often thrown in.

"They have strengths where we are weak. For example, they think quickly and in the moment, whereas we often are thinking too many steps ahead and are paralyzed with indecision, or even think that there is plenty of time to come to one even when there is not," Chione argued.

"I'll give you that. The humans in my cabinet are always eager to be doing something ," Esme muttered. "I don't see you praising humanity today, Valerius. What do you think?"

"Sometimes I would like to live on the top of a mountain where no one could bother me," Valerius growled. "But that is not an option any longer for me as the two people in this very room convinced me that the only way to make peace in the world is if I ruled it."

That had them quieting down and looking, what he thought anyway, was a little guilty into their glasses of wine.

The news anchor was back. "Despite threats and cajoling, the children still remain

firmly with Iolaire. The White Dragon Shifter has made no threatening moves towards anyone, though the crowd appears to be growing more uneasy every moment. Where is Black Dragon King Valerius?"

Valerius' hands clenched again. Luckily, there were no more iPads within reach to crush into splinters. "You see! They all want me to come! They expect me to come!"

"Yes, they do, but why do they?" Chione challenged, hands on her hips.

"Because Iolaire?—"

"Needs help against board-wielding idiots? No, that is not why. It is because it is Humans First. Jasper Hawes has tried to make everything between you and him, when he doesn't represent humanity! He represents this ugly sliver of it," Chione argued. "If Iolaire was in danger, I would go there myself and do something. But they are not. So I must counsel you to stay, Valerius. I know that this is not what you want to do, but--"

"Since I have come to rule, there has been little of what I like to do open to me!" he shouted at her.

He regretted it slightly the moment he did. She was not responsible for what was happening with Iolaire and Caden now. He could leave and go there no matter what she said. He was staying here because he agreed with her.

But this is agony.

Yet at that moment, Iolaire appeared serene. Their blue eyes searched the crowd for something. What did they see in the Humans First faces other than hate? Caden would recognize the fury for what it was, but would the Spirit? Iolaire seemed so terribly innocent, more innocent than Caden even. Would seeing this ugliness hurt it?

Raziel snorted. Iolaire is strong. Do not think it is a delicate flower!

The newscaster went on, “It is unclear what Humans First wants. All the children are now shouting at them to go away and other... ah, colorful epithets. They clearly do not need saving.”

They cut to Tilly and her friends on Iolaire’s back who were all now shouting at the protesters, shaking their fists in the air, blowing them raspberries and making other rude gestures. Valerius was certain he would be hearing all about this from Caden and Tilly’s parents.

The newscaster continued, “As the newest of the Dragon Shifters with a more delicate touch than the others such as the Green Dragon King Illarion or the Red Dragon Queen Mei—with her notorious fiery temper—not to mention our very own Black Dragon King Valerius, perhaps Humans First thinks it can push Iolaire around!”

“They think they can push a Dragon around? They must have all taken a few hits to the head,” Esme muttered. “But it does show how delusional these Humans First people are to believe that they could go up against one of us. Even the newest, smallest of us.”

“Iolaire is not violent. Not to say they can’t defend themselves, obviously, but violence is not their way.” Chione was rubbing her hands together in front of her.

But both of them went stiff as one of the protestors decided that they had waited long enough for the children to be “returned” from the back of the hated Shifter. He rushed forward with a two-by-four raised above his head. The camera zoomed in on the end of the piece of wood and there were rusted nails sticking out. They would do nothing against Dragon hide, yet still, Valerius’ heart was in his throat that board neared Iolaire. He saw the police surging forward at the edge of the crowd, but they couldn’t



get to the man who was about to attack the White Dragon Shifter in time.

Caden, Iolaire, be careful!

That will not even tickle, Raziel muttered, head on its massive crossed arms.

They are not fighters!

Iolaire is a mighty Dragon and those are foolish humans. All will be well. Raziel seemed to be channeling Chione at that moment.

Esme gave out a hoot of delight as Iolaire grasped the edge of that upraised board in their teeth and neatly yanked it out of the man's hands. The man, startled, was raised up a few feet in the air until he wisely let go and tumbled onto his ass, stunned. Iolaire tossed the board over onto the grass away from anyone. They then turned back to the man whose mouth was open in an "O" of terror as Iolaire leaned down and nudged him gently to his feet. He stumbled backwards, letting out yells of fear until he realized that he wasn't being harmed. Well, except for the layer of frost over his clothes. Tilly and the other children laughed and pointed at him, rolling about. Soon, some of the crowd—those not in Humans' First, or at least those without weapons—laughed, too. The protestor's cheeks flared red. Iolaire preened which had people taking pictures and crowding through the rowdy protestors to get nearer to the White Dragon.

Chione hit his arm. Her face was wreathed in smiles. "See! See, Valerius! Iolaire is doing just fine."

"You sound as if you do not quite believe it yourself, Chione," he pointed out.

"Well, I am protective of them too," she admitted sheepishly.

Caden and Iolaire had handled this well. In fact, they gently cleared a way for the Werewolf police to get to the man who had attacked them. The Humans First protestor was none too gently handcuffed and read his rights before being hauled away. Another massive Werewolf, though retaining his human form, stepped between the front of the crowd and Iolaire.

This Shifter stood well over six feet. He was over half as wide with muscles that were barely contained by his uniform. Valerius recognized him. It was Police Chief Thorin Winterloss. Not only did he run the police, but was the Alpha of one of the most powerful Werewolf packs in America, the Blood Moon Pack. He was an imposing figure, exuding authority, and menace, when he had a mind to. Now, he was showing both.

“You will all disperse ! The park is now closed! Every person who remains in this park after the next five minutes will be arrested!” Thorin barked, his voice booming even over the cries of the crowd. His hard blue eyes crested over the reporters, too. “That goes for the press as well. Now go!”

The ones that had come simply to see the White Dragon Shifter immediately turned to go, though there were plenty of “noooooooooos” and “c’mon, let us stay, we didn’t do anything!” But Thorin looped his thumbs into his gun belt and stared at anyone who dared oppose his orders. None survived that stare for long. Even the Humans First people left, with plenty of mutterings under their breath. The press, of course, were the last to start leaving.

“Why are you not having the Humans First protestors arrested?” Esme asked curiously.

“Because we can learn more about Humans First if we simply tag them, log them and have them followed,” Valerius grunted.

“Oh, good show, dear boy,” Esme said with an appreciative nod. “Though back in the old days, I would have employed some good hangings. Not all of them obviously. But some.”

Valerius snorted. “Yes, Esme, you had many heads on pikes as I remember.”

“One must keep order,” she answered lightly.

Soon, there were only Iolaire, Tilly, her friends and the Werewolves in the park. A news crew that had been retreating slowed their movements as the newscaster urged them to zoom in on Iolaire and Thorin.

“Quick! Quick! Get this shot! The police chief and Iolaire are speaking!” the newscaster hissed.

The police chief was indeed talking to Iolaire and the camera picked up the sound.

“While I recognize that all people have the right to be in public places in Reach, Iolaire,” Thorin was saying, “You might want to consider limiting your appearances to planned events. At least, give us notice of where you intend to go so that we can prepare the area. You cause quite the stir.”

Iolaire hooted sadly.

Thorin’s expression surprisingly softened. “Yes, I can imagine this is hard when all you want to do is be with people. But things are tense right now and?—”

Thorin did not get another word out as there was the unmistakable thunderous flap of wings. Another Dragon Shifter had arrived in Reach. And they were alone with Caden and Iolaire. Valerius ran to the balcony and shifted. Raziel did not object. Instead, his Spirit had billowing fire leaving their mouth as they took off into the air.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### THE GOLD DRAGON

Caden looked up into the sky from where the sound of massive wings was coming from. The sun was much lower causing the sky to be painted with purple, blue and crimson. It was a magnificent background for the giant Gold Dragon with spikes on its powerful tail that hung suspended fifty feet above him.

“Oh, wow! It’s the Gold Dragon King Tezcacoatl!” Tilly cried.

“His Spirit’s name is Eldoron!” Tobey informed them all proudly of his Dragon knowledge.

“He’s so big!” Macauley said faintly. “Like four times Iolaire’s size!”

“He’s classified as a Titanic-sized Dragon. In terms of size, Raziel is the biggest then Mephous and then Eldoron,” Tobey supplied helpfully. “Iolaire is the smallest!”

“Eldoron could crush us.” Macauley scrunched down low on Caden’s back.

“Being crushed is the least of our worries really if Eldoron attacked us.” Tobey pushed his glasses up onto his nose. “It breathes liquid metal! We’d be burned alive and dissolved in huge pools of mercury!”

“That’s not helping, Tobey!” Maccauley cried.

“Oh, we’d be dead like instantaneously,” Tobey continued, completely unrepentant. “So it’s not like we’d feel our bodies being dissolved and--”

“TOBEY!” Maccauley hit her friend’s back.

Tilly patted Caden’s neck and said loyally, “Iolaire held its own against Raziel. So though it’s small, it’s mighty! We’re perfectly fine, Macauley. Iolaire handled the crowd of crazies easily. It can handle Eldoron!”

Iolaire hooted with happiness in response and lifted its head proudly. Caden though was focused on remembering what he could about Tezcacoatl from his Shifter classes in high school. The Gold Dragon King’s seat of power was Mexico City and he ruled over much of South America and the Caribbean so that explained why he had gotten here relatively quickly.

He’s not a bully like Illarion. More like a showboat. So I don’t think we’re in danger from Tezcacoatl or Eldoron, for that matter .

In fact, he’d heard that Eldoron was rumored to be incredibly vain. Though from Caden’s perspective maybe it had a right to be. The golden color of its scales shimmered in the day’s dying light as the Titanic Dragon flew in glorious circles overhead, doing loops and gliding, giving Caden and Iolaire plenty of opportunities to see just how magnificent it was. He realized that Eldoron was not completely gold, but had some silver scales across its belly and tail.

I think Eldoron is flirting with us, Iolaire , Caden realized after the Gold Dragon had done the fourth loop.

Iolaire hooted softly, watching the other Dragon’s moves as if to copy them later.

It’s not as awesome as Raziel though! Caden said.

Iolaire gave a very positive hoot at that as if to say, “But of course not! No one compares to Raziel!” But it was enjoying Eldoron’s flying maneuvers.

“Do you know that Tezcacoatl was a--”

“Tobey, if this is more about how he can easily kill us and in what ways, don’t say it!” Maccauley begged.

“No, no, I was just going to tell the story about how he became a Dragon Shifter,” Tobey assured her with a wave of his hand.

“Okay, I guess you can tell it,” Maccauley murmured. She was still clutching onto Iolaire’s back as if her life depended upon it.

“You’re our scaredy cat, Maccauley,” Tilly teased gently. “But we love you for it! And we’ll keep you safe!”

“Funny you should say that! Because helping other people get through their fear in a terrible situation was how Tezcacoatl bonded with Eldoron!” Tobey went on enthusiastically, “Tezcacoatl was a miner. The mine he worked in was very unsafe, but he needed the money to help his mother and sister so he took on the work regardless. Well, the inevitable happened. The mine collapsed with him and a lot of other workers inside. Tezcacoatl got all the surviving miners together and kept their spirits up as they waited for rescue. But as the hours turned to days and then to over a week, even he realized that no one was coming to save them. The mine owners had abandoned them. It was then he prayed for the Spirits to give him strength to not only get the miners out of this terrible situation, but also take revenge on the greedy mine owners.”

Caden thought about what Valerius had said about how Dragon Shifters did not get their Spirits from simple bravery or even honor. He knew the ending to the story that Tobey was telling, and while it did have some aspect of both bravery and honor, there was also violence to it as well.

“And then Eldoron came to him?” Tilly asked.

Tobey nodded and his glasses slid down his nose in response. “Because they joined underground in a mine, that’s why people think he has metal breath.”

“And he got the miners out?” Maccauley peeked up then.

“Oh, yeah, and then he went in dragon form and killed the mine owners! Totally slagged them!” Tobey answered with enthusiasm.

Maccauley groaned and hid her head again.

“He’s made safety and fair wages and good working conditions for workers the focus of his territory. And any employer that doesn’t act responsibly towards their workers gets--”

“Slagged?” Tilly guessed.

“Yep! Needless to say some of the investment in his territory has been down, but he says that the people who would have come in if he didn’t have such rules would just cause more harm than good,” Tobey added.

“The Black Dragon King Valerius doesn’t, uhm, slag people, right? I’ve never heard of him interfering with business or anything,” Maccauley asked softly.

“No, he’s pretty much left the economy alone so it’s stayed like it was before,” Tobey answered. “But he has established far larger areas of undeveloped woods and fields. Plus, there used to be all these really ugly strip malls according to my mom that were abandoned after people mostly started to shop online, and he’s had those torn down and turned into parks.”

Tilly shuddered. “Strip malls even sound wrong. And all the parks are awesome.”

“Reach wasn’t here before the war, Tilly. Valerius created this mountain. It used to be completely flat here. He can control the earth, and supposedly loads of other things,” Tobey informed her a little archly.

Tilly colored. “Yeah, well, I just meant that parks are awesome in general and that it’s cool Valerius did that.”

And as if talking about Raziel and Valerius caused them to appear, the massive Black Dragon was suddenly just there . Raziel had flown in silently and was blocking Eldoron’s path. There would not be another playful loop. Raziel’s red eyes were glowing hotly and there was no mistaking the anger in them, not to mention a hint of that volcanic rage that Valerius tried hard to control.

Raziel’s sudden appearance in its path had Eldoron awkwardly cutting to the left and losing altitude. The television crews that had been retreating due to the police chief’s threat had stopped after Eldoron’s appearance and had been filming the whole thing with breathless commentary. They had all been in awe of Eldoron’s beauty and flying ability, but the moment that Raziel came and threw Eldoron off its game they really got excited.

Caden heard one nearby reporter say into his mic, “Looks like Eldoron can’t compete with our Raziel though! Raziel came in so suddenly and unexpectedly that no one realized it was there, including Eldoron, until it was too late! Raziel moved as if part of the night itself!”

Eldoron seemed all too aware that Raziel had taken some of the shine off of its victory with the press, and Caden supposed, with Iolaire. Eldoron’s eyes narrowed as it righted itself. With a mighty flap of wings, it shot towards Raziel only veering away at the very last second, leaving only a few inches between their nearest wings.



But Raziel did not flinch, and the wake of Eldoron's nearby flight did not affect the Black Dragon in the least.

Go, Raziel! Go, Valerius! Caden cried.

Iolaire hooted its support.

While Caden felt the brush of Valerius and Raziel's minds against his and Iolaire's, no words were sent. Despite their seeming nonchalance with Eldoron's antics, clearly, they had to give the Gold Dragon all their attention. While not as large or aggressive as Illarion and Mephous were, Eldoron was clearly not to be underestimated.

"It looks like there will be quite a few Dragons posturing over the city to get your attention, Iolaire," the police chief said with a sigh. "Not that I can't appreciate shows of dominance, but Dragons are not known for being careful."

Caden flashed back on what happened at the Gash. No, they were not when they were angry or scared. But, though it was clear that Valerius was not happy with Tezcacoatl, it was also very clear to Caden that both he and Raziel were being as careful and controlled as they could be.

"If Eldoron is trying to impress Iolaire, I do not think it's working," Tilly said to the police chief. "Raziel is so much cooler."

"Our Dragon King Valerius is the greatest of them all," the police chief said in approval. "And I think Raziel is going to end Eldoron's preening. Oh, yes, here we go."

What he was referring to was Raziel, who had been simply hovering while Eldoron was swooping in the air around it, moved impossibly quickly for something so big.

Raziel shot upwards and flew directly above Eldoron. The Black Dragon then flapped its huge wings. The unexpected, powerful downdraft sent Eldoron falling towards the earth. It only managed to gain control ten feet from the ground and landed heavily, digging large furrows in the grass.

“Whoa!” Tobey cried and pumped a fist in the air. “Go, Raziel!”

“You showed Eldoron who is the boss, Raziel!” Tilly shouted into the air.

“Oh, my God, Raziel is even bigger than I thought!” Maccauley squeaked and buried her face against Iolaire’s back.

The police chief snorted. “Eldoron looks like a cat that’s fallen down and is trying to pretend it meant to do that all along.”

Indeed that was the perfect way to describe Eldoron as it quickly sat down, lifting its magnificent head and doing its very best to ignore Raziel doing a victory lap up above them. Caden felt a touch of awe--and a little fear--as Raziel tossed its huge head back and let out a gout of red and gold flames. He swore he could almost feel the heat from here.

One of the reporters who had come quite a bit closer now was saying breathlessly into his mic, “Such a magnificent display of dominance by our Black Dragon King Valerius! One wonders if we will get to see yet more aerial acrobatics in the upcoming days as the rest of the Dragon Shifters arrive!”

Let’s hope not! Caden mentally shook his head at the reporter.

The reporters were acting as if this was a game! Hadn’t what happened at the Gash shown them that Dragons fighting over the city was dangerous at best , and likely to be deadly too? He could almost hear Rose’s voice in his head saying, “It happened to

people in the Below, and you know that no one cares about the people who live there.” And, it seemed that was true. Memories were short, or so it seemed.

All of the reporters had returned to the park, despite threat of arrest--though it didn't appear that the police chief was going to arrest them quite at that minute--and were filming avidly. Many had approached Eldoron and the Gold Dragon was posing for the cameras.

But soon all cameras were focused on the Black Dragon as Raziel landed with a boom about fifty feet away. More grass was torn up, and Caden winced. If he and Iolaire hadn't come to the park none of this would have happened. The reporters scuttled backwards as Raziel approached Eldoron, tail swinging and eyes narrowed menacingly. Iolaire hooted softly, indicating that it would not have wanted to have such a look given to it. Caden agreed.

The Black Dragon circled the Gold Dragon with slow, powerful, deliberate strides. Raziel never took those sulfurous red eyes off of Eldoron. For its part, Eldoron fussed with its wings and cleaned a pristine part of its scales with its tongue, trying for all the world to seem unconcerned. But one thing that Caden noticed was that Eldoron did not look into Raziel's eyes. In fact, it lowered its head when Raziel stopped directly in front of it and stared. This show of submission defused the situation.

“Tensions have abruptly abated as Eldoron showed proper respect to Raziel,” one of the reporters said into the camera. “Oh, look, they're shifting!”

Both Raziel and Eldoron disappeared in a moment and two men were standing there on the ripped up grass. Tezcacoatl was a handsome man with dark copper skin and long black hair that hung in a sheet to his mid-back. He had golden brown eyes that were alight with intelligence and humor. He was beaming at the cameras, at Valerius and, most especially, at Iolaire. Iolaire shuffled their feet and drew their tail, rather cat-like, around their feet.

The whole park was now lit up by the camera lights as reporters swarmed around Valerius and Tezcacoatl. It was still amusing to Caden to watch Valerius be on camera nude and yet seem as comfortable and kingly as if he were dressed in silk and leather. Tezcacoatl was making poses so that his magnificent physique was shown off to its best. Reporters began to shout questions at them both.

“Dragon King Valerius, you’ve had two other Dragons fly over your capital city, how do you feel about that?” a female reporter with red hair asked.

Valerius stared at her so long without answering that the microphone she’d thrust towards him started to wobble a little bit. Tezcacoatl saved her as he threw one arm around Valerius’ shoulders, beaming. He was over a head shorter than Valerius and built more stockily, but he managed to yank Valerius towards him in this one-armed hug.

His sunny, Mexican accent made him seem even more charming as he said, “I am certain that Valerius is quite annoyed with me! But how could I help myself from flying over his magnificent city? Especially when the newest member of our tribe has arrived!”

Tezcacoatl pointed at Iolaire and all the cameras swung over to the White Dragon. Iolaire blinked as the lights blasted into its eyes and drew hid its head in one wing, which made it, evidently, appear shy. There were audible “awwwwwws” that had Iolaire hiding even more.

The police chief chuckled. “You’re a little too big to hide, Iolaire.”

“Iolaire doesn’t like media attention. It likes people’s attention,” Tilly said loyally and kissed Iolaire’s neck.

Iolaire chirped at her words and the kiss.

“This is your first time in Reach in many years, Dragon King Tezcacoatl. How does it feel to be back?” a male reporter with a quivering mustache asked.

“Most excellent!” Tezcacoatl put a large hand against his chest. “Though I always miss my magnificent Mexico City!”

“This will be the first time that all of the Dragon Shifters will be in one place since the war,” a dark-haired female reporter with cheeks as pale as milk stated. “Will you be speaking of the threats to this world from expansionist policies like Dragon Queen Mei’s?”

Valerius stated simply, “Nothing is off the table.”

“And what of the growing unrest with Humans First all over the world? Why haven’t you met before now to discuss that?” the reporter pressed.

“Merely because we are not physically in the same place, dear lady,” Tezcacoatl said, “does not mean we do not speak regularly.”

“Will all the Dragon Shifters be on the Shifter Council that you’ve started, King Valerius?” another reporter shouted.

“That is still in its planning stages,” Valerius answered.

“Did you have any fears in coming here, King Tezcacoatl, considering the bombings that have taken place in Reach?” another reporter shouted from the back. “Not for yourself, obviously, but for your human attendants.”

Caden remembered that, unlike many Dragon Shifters, all of Tezcacoatl’s attendants were human. They also all came from poor families. He paid for everything for them and their relatives including schooling, room and board and anything one could

imagine.

Tezcacoatl, who had not let go of Valerius, despite Valerius just standing there like a piece of stone, squeezed him again and said, “Absolutely not! I have great faith in Valerius and his very brave Claw and the police!” His expression hardened somewhat as he added, “To those of you who are choosing violent methods to support your cause, know that you are doing more damage to the people you claim to care for than those who do not share your position! And for those of you who feel disenfranchised and left out, know that you are not alone! But violence where innocents are maimed, injured or even killed is not the answer!”

Caden felt a tiny bit of liking Tezcacoatl for those words. Though they were a little ironic considering what he did to those mine owners. But then again the mine owners had not been innocent like the people in the square or even those at the Humans First meeting.

Based upon the questions so far, Caden was beginning to relax. There was nothing about him or mating or anything crazy like that in the questions or answers. In fact, he felt quite ignored, which was good. But then he heard the next question and realized he’d let his guard down too soon.

“So are you here to court Iolaire as well, Dragon King Tezcacoatl? After all, Dragon King Illarion has made his typical bold statements that Iolaire is his mate,” another female reporter--this one with a bob of blonde hair--asked the visiting Gold Dragon King.

Caden saw the tension spread through Valerius as this question was asked. Caden tried to touch his mind, but it was locked very tight.

Oh, boy, he’s so mad at us, Iolaire!

Iolaire gave a sad hoot in agreement.

There was a sparkle in Tezcacoatl's eyes as he leaned towards the reporter almost conspiratorially and said, "I think we all know that Illarion says many things that are just wishes. I believe that Iolaire is its own, and will choose which one of us as its special someone. I most definitely am putting my hat in the ring!"

What?! No! That is not what's happening here! Caden felt the frustration of not being able to speak right now. He looked at Valerius, who met his eyes. Tell them that's not what's going on, Valerius!

He was half afraid that Valerius would allow this idea to stand just as punishment for them not going home. But he was wrong.

"Black Dragon King Valerius, are you putting your hat in the ring as well?" another reporter asked.

"Illarion is not the only one who speaks wishes ," Valerius said curtly with a repressive look at Tezcacoatl who did not shrink at all. "As said previously, Iolaire wishes no mate at this time. My fellow Dragon Shifters have come here on a fool's errand if they think that Iolaire will be going home with them."

"Yes, but some are saying that the real reason that Iolaire has no interest in revealing themselves and meeting with the other Dragons is that it has already chosen someone. Namely... you ," the red-haired reporter said.

Everyone went still and silent at this. Caden could only hear his heart thumping like a jackhammer in his chest. What did he want Valerius to say? That yes, they were together and the other Dragon Shifters needed to get stuffed? But if he did that, then he and Caden could never openly date because they'd know he was the White Dragon! But if Valerius completely denied that they were together then... then

Caden's heart might break. Even if it wasn't true!

And it wasn't true, right?

No, it wasn't.

Valerius met the reporter's gaze steadily. "My personal life has always been off limits to the press." His gaze swept the entire crowd. "As you all are well aware."

The reporters looked a little chastened, which for reporters was probably pretty amazing. Tezcacoatl was looking at Valerius speculatively though. It was clear that he wouldn't be put off by some stern words and an even sterner glare.

"Thorin," Valerius called to the police chief who stepped up with considerable alacrity.

"Yes, my king?" Thorin bowed low.

"He's bowing!" Maccauley let out an excited whisper. "That's so cool!"

"Of course he's bowing. Everybody bows to Valerius. Well, not the reporters, but everyone else. Besides he's a Werewolf," Tilly whispered back. "They're big on rank."

"Oh, yeah, right," Maccauley answered.

"Please have your people escort the press from the park," Valerius said firmly. "I believe you did tell them it was closed some time ago."

"It shall be done, my king." Thorin bowed again.



With a few terse words, his people were herding the reporters away from them. There were more shouted questions and cameras were still being turned towards Valerius and Tezcacoatl, but the police were making headway. Soon, the lights from the cameras were gone and only the soft twilight illuminated the park. The churr of night insects replaced the reporters' calls and the three Dragon Shifters and three children all stared at one another.

Tezcacoatl turned to Valerius and said, "You are not too angry at me, Valerius!"

Valerius' lips flattened. "After seeing what I did to Illarion, why would you risk my temper, Tezcacoatl?"

The Gold Dragon Shifter released Valerius from the hug and spread his arms wide. "I was coming to High Reach when I saw that Iolaire was in the park." He shrugged. "I had to come."

"And show off," Valerius muttered.

Tezcacoatl laughed. "Of course! One must be the peacock with one's potential mate! Oh, and look at those eyes flashing! I cannot believe the reporters did not press the question about you and Iolaire!"

"If you suspect that I am in love with Iolaire, it further begs the question why you would risk my wrath in coming here like this," Valerius growled.

Tezcacoatl's eyes widened. "Love?"

Valerius scowled, but said nothing. Had he admitted to more than he wanted to?

Tezcacoatl rubbed his chin. "Valerius and Raziel in love?!" He shook himself. "My friend, I did not think you were, but if you are to tell me now that Iolaire is off limits,

I will respect that. But I cannot help being flirtatious still. It is my nature!”

Caden and Iolaire were rigid. Tilly had even stopped breathing. They were both waiting for Valerius’ answer.

“I cannot tell you that, because it is not my place to say. Iolaire is its own. It makes the decisions,” Valerius finally got out. His voice taut with emotion.

Tezcacoatl nodded after long moments. “By the gods, Valerius, it must be serious! You are respecting Iolaire’s autonomy. So what would you say for yourself though. Should I back down?”

Valerius’ head lifted. His eyes burned with fire. “If I were in your place, I would most definitely back down.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### FIGHT ALL THE WAY

So how mad are you on a scale of one to ten? Caden's voice came clearly over their bond. The worry in it almost made Valerius assure him that all was well. Almost.

Eleven, Valerius answered. Wait, no, fifteen.

Fifteen?! Why fifteen?! Caden cried as Iolaire's eyes went as round as saucers. This is not a fifteen situation!

And how do you come to that exactly?

No, I asked first! You have to tell me why--why you're so mad. Exactly, and then consider... uhm, consider not being mad, Caden said.

Another desire to soothe Caden nearly overcame him at those plaintive words. But Caden had to understand how this ill-thought-out desire to go to the park and play with the children was when there were Dragon Shifters other than them in the city.

Ah let us start then. Valerius' left eyebrow rose. Humans First. Your sister trash-talking them. Then Tezcacoatl--

That was not my fault! Nor was the Tilly thing! She has a mind of her own! And really the Humans First pitchfork wielding mob was not my fault either! Caden sounded indignant as if these arguments were very valid. And Tezcacoatl? He seems pretty unstoppable unless you're Raziel so... not my fault. None of it is my fault.

If you had gone home like I instructed and you agreed to NONE of this would have happened , Valerius reminded him, demolishing these ridiculous statements.

I... Well, it was just... Tilly wanted a ride and I thought... How much harm could it possibly do? Caden wailed. Things just got out of hand! But I have to be able to go places without you!

Valerius pinched the top of his nose. I know this, Caden, but your adventures need to be kept to a minimum while the other Dragon Shifters are here. Dealing with Humans First is one thing, but the Dragon Shifters... His eyes slid to Tezcacoatl who was looking between them with avid interest just as Esme had. They were silent for too long. Are too curious for their own good.

Actually, I sort of like Tezcacoatl. He seems nice, Caden said. Iolaire looked almost shyly at the Gold Dragon Shifter. Not sure of him, but not rejecting him.

You like him?! Valerius had not meant to sound so outraged. Or rather jealous.

Suddenly, a Dragon nose was pressed against Valerius' naked chest. I like you best! You know that, right? I'm just saying the others aren't all bad. Esme is cool. Tezcacoatl is funny. Illarion... Well, forget Illarion. But they're nothing compared to you. I swear it, Valerius.

More nosing. Cold gushes of air against his skin, blowing his hair back, frosting him. And yet, Valerius was smiling . He couldn't help himself. Anger flowed away like water. The warmth that bloomed in his chest so suddenly was a little frightening. He swallowed, and used his powerful will to hide it from Caden. This was too soon. Too much. The young man would flee from it and Valerius wouldn't blame him. Instead, he scratched Iolaire under the chin and between the ears. Tezcacoatl made a delighted sound and came nearer, hand outstretched.

“So cute!” Tezcacoatl laughed. “Oh, Iolaire is--”

Valerius caught his wrist in a none too gentle grip before he could reach the white scales. Iolaire reared a little back, looking at Tezcacoatl out of narrowed eyes. Its back was arched with alarm.

“What? What? Can I not pet Iolaire too? I am a very good petter, I assure you,” Tezcacoatl stated with true earnestness.

That caused Iolaire to look at Tezcacoatl with more curiosity than alarm. Petting was evidently Iolaire’s kryptonite.

“You do not get to pet anyone,” Valerius growled.

“Ah, you are doing that thing again. It is so strange to see you act this way about a person and not territory --”

“Tez!” Valerius barked.

“What about if Iolaire gives me permission?” Tezcacoatl wheedled, raising and lowering his eyebrows.

“Iolaire hasn’t!” Tilly, who had been quiet, piped up. She looked down on them from up high.

Valerius repressed a smile. She looked like a queen on her white throne. Her White Dragon throne.

We should not be encouraging Dragon riding, Raziel growled.

And yet, you were just imagining carrying her yourself, so I am confused, Valerius

said as he caught an image from Raziel's mind showing just that.

His Spirit looked affronted and its wings shifted. But Valerius was not fooled by Raziel's grumpiness. He wasn't sure how he felt about someone riding on their back as if they were a beast of burden, but Tilly and the children looked to be having a marvelous time on Iolaire and he couldn't help but be affected by that in a positive way.

Tezcacoatl looked up at Tilly and the other two, before giving them a sweeping bow. "Forgive me, my lady. You are quite right. Iolaire has said nothing to me. Yet."

Valerius narrowed his eyes. And he never will.

"I'm not a lady," Tilly said in a very lady-like, noble voice.

"Maybe I am," the other girl giggled by her side.

"Maccauley!" Tilly rolled her eyes, but her voice was scandalized.

The boy rocked back and forth, laughing at them both. He wiped his eyes of laughing tears.

"And who might you be, noble sir?" Tezcacoatl asked.

"I'm Tobey! This is Tilly and that's Maccauley, if you didn't guess already," Tobey answered eagerly, charmed by Tezcacoatl already.

Valerius tried not to sigh. That was the problem with Tezcacoatl. Everyone liked him. Even if he was slightly light in his thought processes.

Power to the people, indeed! Does he not know how stupid people are? Valerius

growled.

“King Valerius knows who I am,” Tilly said archly.

Valerius stiffened. For a moment, he thought she would give away everything, but then he remembered the dinner! That had been on the news. If they pretended not to know one another entirely, that would seem strange.

“Oh, yeah, dinner.” Tobey though looked slightly disbelieving. “You talked about that all day. Are you going to tell King Valerius the same thing so he can confirm it?”

“It did occur, young man,” Valerius said with a smile at Tilly. “We had quite a good dinner and a wonderful talk.”

“Mom is a good cook. So is Dad. Next time you come, Dad will have to cook,” she said brightly.

“You think that he’s coming to dinner again? Oh, God!” Tobey let his head fall back and groaned.

“You are taking meals with your people, Valerius? That is a good sign!” Tezcacoatl punched his shoulder.

“It took a bomb threat to do it,” Tobey said helpfully.

“A--a bomb ?” Tezcacoatl frowned.

“It is a long story,” Valerius told him. “I look forward to a second dinner, Tilly. Without the bomb scare.”

“Yeah, me too!” She nodded eagerly.

“I can’t believe he really came to dinner. And he seems to... like you,” Tobey said weakly.

“Why did you think she was lying? It was on the news,” Maccauley pointed out.

“Yeah, but...” Tobey said and frowned. “Should we be bowing to him?”

“Not in the least.” Valerius waved an arm through the air. “You stay where you are. Iolaire will be taking you all home. Tilly, you must tell Iolaire where you and your friends live.” He said that with extra intensity. Caden, undoubtedly, knew where her friends lived, but he must not seem to.

“You are going to have Iolaire leave so soon?” Tezcacoatl cried. “But we have barely begun to know one another and--”

“Tezcacoatl--”

“Tez! We do not have to be so formal here now that the press and your enforcers are gone,” Tezcacoatl sniffed.

Enforcers? Does he mean the police chief and the Werewolves? Caden’s confusion was obvious.

He does. He has little love for authoritarian figures such as police, politicians or even the wealthy. He believes they are the root of all evil , Valerius said.

So he doesn’t rule? He’s not one of those authoritarian figures? Caden’s skepticism almost had Valerius laughing.

There’s a fair amount of self-blindness in Tezcacoatl--



Tez! Caden corrected with a laugh.

Valerius rolled his eyes. Yes, well, Tez is charming and quite vain. He believes he is the friend to the common man and woman.

And is he? I mean I hear in the papers about him helping workers and stuff,

Valerius shrugged. Each will have their own view on this. It is not how I rule my territory.

“You are talking! You are talking to one another somehow!” Tezcacoatl exclaimed as he looked between Valerius and Iolaire.

“Do you see lips moving?” Valerius was back to scratching Iolaire’s chin.

“No, which is even more intriguing,” Tezcacoatl said, which had Valerius internally groaning.

“Iolaire, you need to take the children home, and then you are to go home.” Valerius said the last bit looking into Iolaire’s eyes to make his point.

But not directly, Valerius cautioned. He was now thinking he had to be quite literal with Caden and Iolaire. He wouldn’t put it past them to go buzz sheep or something. Go back to the pool and use the vehicle to get home. Leave the vehicle near the corner of Lester and Donovan.

We’ll do that. I swear! Caden said even as Iolaire nodded.

Even as the two of them were talking internally, Tilly rattled off both Tobey and Maccauley’s addresses, which Caden already knew so he didn’t have to listen.

Seriously, how mad are you? Caden pressed.

Caden...

I didn't mean for this to happen. Iolaire and I thought that--

I know. You meant no harm and you did no harm. In fact... Valerius grimaced. You handled Humans First well. You did not panic and did not hurt anyone accidentally.

Yeah, that guy was freaked, but all he did was pee himself, Caden chuckled.

Iolaire let out a chuff of amusement too.

But... Valerius touched Iolaire's nose. No more excitement for today.

Iolaire's head lowered.

We promise. No more. Though we'll miss you , Caden told him.

You have no idea how much I will miss you, Valerius' mind voice caught. He cleared his throat though that would do little.

Talk later? Call me? Tell me all the crazy stuff happening at the castle? Caden begged.

Yes, I promise. Believe me when I say that thoughts of you--and your amusement--will help me keep my temper, Valerius replied dryly. He would try to "enjoy" what happened with the other Dragon Shifters just to report it to Caden and Iolaire.

All right! He felt Caden's joy.

Now take the children home, Valerius instructed.

I'll talk to you later, Caden said quietly.

"Now, you should probably take Maccauley home first and then head to Tobey's and--whoa!" Tilly cried in joy as Iolaire lifted off of the ground.

She and the other two children grabbed on as Iolaire rose up higher and higher. There were then whoops and cries of delights as Iolaire started flying towards neighborhoods in the Mid to drop off its charges. Valerius and Tezcacoatl watched them all go in silence.

Tezcacoatl put an arm around Valerius' shoulders. "Do not be sad, Valerius. You'll see Iolaire soon. I will insist upon it."

Valerius rolled his eyes and shrugged off that arm. But gently. "Let us go to High Reach. You, too, have caused enough excitement this evening."

Tezcacoatl made a mock salute. "Yes, my king!"

Valerius shook his head and took two huge steps before letting the Shift overcome him. Raziel let out a roar of delight and victory. They had sorted a disaster out without any loss of life or respect. He heard Tezcacoatl shift behind them and soon Eldoron was flying practically wingtip to wingtip beside Raziel. In the none too distant past, this would have annoyed them both, but they had gotten used to flying tandem with Iolaire recently.

Speaking of Iolaire...

Raziel turned its head to catch sight of the White Dragon flying over the west part of the Mid. Iolaire turned its head and let out a cry of greeting and then a gout of snow.

Raziel returned the greeting by lighting the sky with fire. Eldoron, thankfully, did not spurt hot metal, but did make a laughing cry.

The two of them spiraled upwards until they reached the landing area right outside of his throne room. Raziel tilted its head down to indicate that Eldoron should land there first. Eldoron flapped its golden wings. The torches that framed the doors to the throne room caused those wings to look like they were on fire. Then Eldoron slowly lowered to twenty feet down before it Shifted and Tezcacoatl dropped to the ground. Raziel and Valerius followed after.

The doors to the throne room were open. As Valerius stood up, cool dew soaked grass under his feet, he saw Esme, still in her flowy blue dress, and Chione, now clothed in a bronze silk and leather dress that covered less than it revealed. Beyond them was Illarion, glowering. His green eyes glowed poisonously.

Clearly, someone is jealous.

Tezcacoatl raced to Esme, grabbing her in his arms, and spinning her around so that her blue dress floated around her.

“Oh, you bad, bad man, Tez,” Esme twittered as he set her down on her feet.

“I cannot help it! You are a vision, Esme! Everytime I see you, you are more beautiful,” Tezcacoatl said, completely unrepentant about being a bad, bad man. Then again, Esme didn’t seem to mean it either.

“Bad man? Bad man? You are scum , Tezcacoatl! You think to put some claim on Iolaire?” Illarion finished a drink and threw the cup on the ground. It clattered and bounced across the marble floor. One of his staff ran to follow it. Valerius’ jaw clenched.

Tezcacoatl though seemed completely unphased by Illarion's sloppy anger. Instead, he spread his arms wide as one of his retainers strode up to him and put a gold and blue robe over him. Then he took a glass of wine off of the tray offered to him by one of Valerius' servants.

"You have as much claim to Iolaire as I do to the sky," Tezcacoatl laughed.

"Then what are you doing here?" Illarion snarled as he grabbed some wine himself and guzzled it down.

Chione came to Valerius to offer him a robe. He took it from her and clothed himself as the others bickered. Well, Tezcacoatl and Illarion bickered while Esme watched on.

"Is Iolaire all right?" Chione murmured.

"In fine fettle. Sorry, but I am certain that it would do it all over again." Valerius smiled dryly at her.

"... you think to prance and preen into Iolaire's heart." Illarion's face was inches from Tezcacoatl who smirked at him, only causing Illarion to grow angrier. "What do you really have to offer? Peasants and poverty?"

Illarion let out an ugly laugh. Tezcacoatl's usually smiling face went dark, cheeks flaming, and eyes narrowing.

"You speak of poverty and peasants, but what of your territory, Illarion? You have only prisoners," Tezcacoatl snarled.

They were now nose to nose. Valerius took a cup of wine and sipped it as he watched them.

“You should step in,” Chione stated softly.

“Why?” Valerius asked. “A little blood spilled might be a good idea.”

Chione looked at him with dismay. “They’ll destroy the throne room!”

“It’s stone.” He shrugged.

“Valerius! You are the host! Having your guests brawl is not hospitable,” she protested.

He could hardly hide his smile. “On the contrary, Chione, this is only your second time with more than two of us in a room. Brawling is the least of what is expected.”

Chione sighed. “You just want to see their noses bloodied for flying above Reach.”

“You think that's unwarranted?” He lifted an eyebrow at her.

Chione’s arms were crossed over her chest. “No, no, of course not. But there has been so much violence in the past few days. More of it feels... wrong.”

Valerius sighed. He thought how this would look through Caden’s eyes. The young man would likely be unnerved, especially as they were ostensibly fighting over him . But the truth was that these were old arguments between the Green and Gold Dragons.

“Do you really think if I interfere between them that this will lower the aggression in that room?” He gestured with his wine cup towards the throne room.

Chione pursed her lips, but then she lowered her head. “You are correct. It won’t.”

“You are distressed.” He put an arm around her shoulders. “What is it?”

She shook herself. “I do not know. I just have feelings of foreboding.”

Whether it was one of her true visions of the future or just all the unrest was unclear to him. He did not like to see his normally feisty and lively Councillor look so dour and dire. That was his role.

“I will tell you what, you can... give them plushies,” Valerius said.

Chione immediately whirled towards him, eyes wide, and lips parted. “You mean... I can give each of them a plushie of their own color?”

“Yes.”

And maybe Caden can come with Wally to High Reach. I need to see him in person.

“You look like you’re sucking on a lemon!” she laughed. But then leaned in and kissed his cheek. “But you are so sweet for worrying about me.”

“We have to keep our spirits up, Chione. We are going to need every last ounce of patience,” he warned her.

She smiled at him even as she was pulling out her phone, undoubtedly to speak to Wally about the plushies. He sighed and moved off just as he heard her say, “Wally? It is Chione! I--oh, Marban? You’ve been having a day, have you? I see. Well, no, you mustn’t kill him. I realize--oh, he did that ? My, that would be distressing.”

Her voice trailed off as he strode over to Esme. She was tapping the edge of her cup against her lower lip as she regarded the two other Dragon Shifters. Her blue eyes sparkled speculatively. She welcomed him with a smile, but her eyes flickered back

to Illarion and Tezcacoatl as they shouted in each other's faces, circling the room, noses practically pressed together, looking as if they were about to grapple with one another and start rolling around on the floor.

"Did you ever see the old gladiator games?" Esme asked.

"I did. I would love to see a deathmatch between them," Valerius said.

"You like Tez. He annoys you, but you like him. Illarion..." She let her voice drift off. Looking at the Green Dragon she let out a sigh. "He's always been a bully and had more cunning than actual intelligence, but he seems more out of control than usual."

Valerius looked at how Illarion's face was practically purple with rage. His hands were clenched at his sides at Tezcacoatl's taunting.

"They haven't been in each other's presence for thirty years," he reminded her.

"Yes, yes, that's true. But there's more to it than that. I think Illarion is on edge," Esme murmured.

He turned to look down at her face. "About what?"

"Mei has been pressing against his flank," she said. "He doesn't trust anyone else to fight with him while she is working with whatever she has."

"Or they are allies as they have been in the past and this is a ruse... though for what reason I cannot think. And Illarion is hardly an actor," Valerius pointed out.

"Things feel off-balance, Valerius," she said and shook her head, clearly not pleased with her own words.



“Because of Iolaire?” She had seemed nothing but charmed with Iolaire, but she, unlike Illarion, was a consummate actor.

She smiled up at him. “No, no, I am very fond of your little White Dragon.”

“ My ?” His throat felt tight again

“Oh, yes, Valerius, yours .” She looked back at Tezcacoatl and Illarion. “But I think you’re going to have to do more than just gain Iolaire’s affections to keep him. You will have to fight everyone and everything.”

Valerius gritted his teeth. He had a sense that she was right.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### ROSE UNFILTERED

“Y ou’re in so much trouble, Caden,” Tilly told him the moment he walked in the door of their house.

“Don’t hold back, Till,” he teased her then said, “C’mon, I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.”

After all though Valerius claimed to be at a level 15 mad, it was still okay. What can Mom and Dad be at? An eight at the highest?

Tilly crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “No, it’s probably worse , because my punishment is less than yours, and woo boy, mine is bad.”

“How bad?” Caden frowned.

“Uhm, how about I’m to stay in this house forever and I’m not even to be trusted with my phone or computer for the next century?” She glared at him. Her expression clearly said that this wouldn’t have happened if he and Iolaire hadn’t shown up at the park.

“Yikes! That does sound major.” He leaned down and asked conspiratorially, “So a ride on Iolaire’s back wasn’t worth it?”

She brightened immediately. Her eyes shone. “Oh, that was worth almost anything, but that’s not what I was punished for.”

Iolaire tipped its head back and let out a stream of happy snow in his chest.

“Iolaire is in agreement that it was wonderful, and it wants to be your steed again,” Caden assured her.

Tilly clapped her hands together in glee and let out a whispered squeal. “Definitely! Tobey and Maccauley are definitely trying to text me about when we can do it again. I would know for sure when that would be if I had a phone! I’ve got to work at Wally’s more so I can have a secret second phone like you do.”

“The encrypted phone is so I can talk to Valerius and the other people at the castle without anyone tracing it back to me,” he reminded her.

He had left that phone, thankfully, tucked into his clothes at the pond. He wondered if Valerius went through endless amounts of clothes and phones and wallets—did the Black Dragon King even have a wallet?—when he had to shift in a hurry.

“Do you think that Valerius will give me an encrypted phone?” She looked so hopeful and clasped her hands together as if in prayer. “I mean, you never know when he might need me in order to get a hold of you!”

“I’ll ask.”

Caden bit down on his inner cheek to suppress a smile. He could almost imagine the disbelieving look on Valerius’ face about having the speed dial for a thirteen-year-old girl. But as he thought about it more, giving Tilly an encrypted phone might be a good idea just in case he was in a bad spot and couldn’t call himself. So he actually would ask.

“Thank you!” Tilly jumped up and down.

“So if it wasn’t the flying on Iolaire that got you in trouble, I’m guessing it was egging on the Humans First pitchfork wielding mob?” he guessed with a sympathetic smile.

She nodded and sighed. “I was perfectly safe! You and Iolaire were right there!”

“That’s true. But when Mom and Dad are scared, they aren’t exactly reasonable,” he agreed with her.

“I know! They?—”

Tilly didn’t get to say more as suddenly both of their parents appeared out of nowhere. Tilly’s mouth shut with an audible click. Their mother gestured to the stairs, and Tilly scurried upstairs without a squeak.

That’s bad. Way bad.

His mother’s eyes were red as if from crying. His father’s face was pale as milk, which was how he looked whether he was angry or afraid.

“Hey, guys, I take it that you saw the news,” he said weakly.

“Kitchen. Now.” His father did not wait to see if Caden would come as he turned on his heel and stalked there.

His mother hesitated a moment. She reached out and touched his cheek. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine . There was never any danger and?—”

But his mother shook her head sadly and she, too, turned and went back to the

kitchen. Caden tipped his head back and let out a long sigh. While he had been worried about Valerius' reaction to his detour to the park, he clearly should have been more worried about his parents' reaction.

After deep breathing to center himself, Caden followed after them. No matter how old he was or how responsibly he acted, they could still make him feel like a child that was throwing a tantrum, and he couldn't let that happen with this. It was too important that they understand he had to be out and about as Iolaire. Not just for himself and the Spirit, but for the people that they seemed to matter for.

His father and mother stood at the opposite side of the kitchen island from him. The enticing aroma of his father's spicy, three-alarm chili filled his nostrils and his stomach growled audibly. He'd devoured everything in the picnic basket they'd brought to the pond, but it wasn't enough. He was still famished and he adored his father's chili in any event.

He craned to look past his parents at the bowls of toppings set out on the counter. There were cooked noodles, tons of cheese, sour cream and chopped green onions. Another growl exited his stomach. His father pointedly stepped in front of the Le Creuset ceramic dish.

So that's how it is! They won't feed me until they have their say!

Valerius, at least, would have let him eat and yelled at him in between bites. But his parents were playing for keeps. He crossed his arms over his chest and ignored his stomach. Iolaire was making pathetic eyes that if his parents could have seen them might have softened them, but they couldn't see Iolaire and it wasn't as if he could shift in the house!

"Do you even need me to tell you how irresponsible you were today?" his father asked.

Immediately, Caden's back was up. What did his father know about shifting? And what did he expect? For Caden to never show himself except at pre-screened times?

"You evidently feel you need to tell me. So go ahead." Caden crossed his arms over his chest and thrust his chin out truculently.

"Caden!" His mother sounded scandalized at his petulant tone.

Don't act like a child. Keep it together.

Caden gritted his teeth together. "I'm sorry, Mom, but I already know what he's going to say, and he's wrong!"

"If you can read minds then read mine!" His father snapped.

They were like two bulls facing off. Iolaire was making nervous twitters, not liking this anger between him and his parents. But this had been coming for a while, he realized. His father thought he knew better about what being a Shifter was, let alone what being a Dragon Shifter was.

"You think I shouldn't have gone to the park where Tilly and her friends were, because my very appearance there put her in danger! I should have arranged a private time with her. Right?" Caden ground out.

"That's part of it," his father answered tightly.

His father was too good a lawyer to concede that was all of it. He'd think up another argument in moments. His mother tried to soften his father's anger, but both of them were raring for a fight it seemed.

"Except that's crazy!" The frustration just burst out of Caden. He was yelling, and his

parents didn't deserve all of this, but they were there and criticizing him. "Can I never go to a park? Can I never interact with people out in the open? Can I never be like every other Shifter? Or every other Dragon Shifter?"

"You're not like the others," his mother breathed.

"Yes, I am! Those Humans First people couldn't have even scratched me." He shook his head with disgust. "And if I live my life in fear of them then they've won!"

"Your sister and her friends could have gotten injured," his father pointed out.

"Unlikely! I can protect her. Iolaire can protect her and other people too! And I can't meet Tilly secretly if I want to continue to be incognito!" He thumped his chest. "Don't you get it that I have to live? That Iolaire has to live? We can't be cooped up in the house! The people out there need and want Iolaire!"

"Are you done?" His father's tone was cold. "Whatever you say now, what you did was for selfish reasons, and it wasn't well thought out. Things are on a knife's edge right now, Caden. It's not a normal time where you can just do these things. Humans First tried to bomb our house. Landry is in jail. All the Dragons are coming here to meet you and you're supposed to be trying to keep your identity a secret! But there you go flying into a public park, nearly starting a riot, and getting it all on the evening news!"

Caden swallowed. There was a lot of truth in this. But he still felt the unfairness of everything so keenly so he struck out, "You're so willing to put me in charge of my own territory, but not go to the park by myself because I want to go? Oh, wait, that's because you think that you'll be running the territory, right?"

His father flinched. "Caden, that's not at all the same. And I wouldn't be?—"

“The world is fucked up because humans and Shifters believe that one or the other has to be on top! You want to make sure that I’m on top so that you can be on top, for once, too!” Caden roared.

“That’s not true,” his father whispered.

“Caden, apologize now!” His mother’s eyes were red with more unshed tears.

His father was whiter than before but for different reasons. Regret immediately slammed into Caden, but anger was still like this hot poker prodding him.

“But he’s said it often enough! How many times has he come home from the office and complained about how the best work, and the bigger bonuses always go to the Raven Shifters? How many times has he said he’s a token and that they don’t see his value? I can’t count the times, because there are so many of them!” Caden retorted.

Every word he spoke, even if in some way true, was incredibly cruel. He knew his father was expressing simple—and likely well-earned—frustration. But now Caden was throwing back at him what he likely had considered private.

“I’m trying to make sure that you are protected,” his father’s voice was hoarse. “You trust people so easily. I can already see that you are half in love with Valerius.”

Tears sprang into Caden’s eyes. His face felt hot and tight. He would not cry. He would not howl. Though he wanted to do both all of a sudden.

“You don’t know Valerius at all! You just assume he wouldn’t do what’s in my best interests even though he’s only king because he put himself last, and everyone else first!” Tears were blurring his vision.

“You make him sound very noble, Caden, but remember what he did when he



thought another Dragon was in his territory?—”

“That was a mistake! He would never hurt me now! Never! And he listens to me about what I want. You don’t!” Caden snapped.

“That’s not true.” His father was patting the air between them as if that would calm things. “You might not want a territory now, or even be able to rule it yet, but in the future you very well may.”

“Then I’ll get one then!”

“The longer you allow things to stay at the status quo, the harder it will be to change things later,” his father explained.

“You don’t know that! Valerius would have my back if I wanted my own territory. You see what you want and what you think is best. You’ve never asked me what I want!” The tears spilled over and they felt like they should sizzle from the heat on his cheeks. “But when I act on what I want, you say it’s selfish! It’s bad! Well, bringing joy to people isn’t bad! It isn’t selfish!”

“No, of course, not, honey. It’s just... now isn’t the best time for you to be out in the open like that,” his mother soothed.

“Now is the best time! What I did to those Humans First guys did more to set back that group than all of the damned proclamations that have been issued against them!” Caden felt his throat tightening, making it harder to speak, but he pushed on. “Because it showed what they are: racist assholes! And Tilly and her friends by speaking out showed people that they don’t have to be afraid of them either! They took away more power from Humans First than anyone! But, go ahead, ground her! Tell her that speaking out against those who are cruel and awful is something to be punished for. Go ahead! Make her hide the things she wants from you!”

Iolaire hooted sadly and softly. It was that sound alone that had Caden seeing his parents through the rain of angry tears. They both were pale and shell shocked. He'd never spoken to them like this before. It was awful, but it also felt right on some level. Maybe the things he had to say were right. But doing it this way likely hadn't been. He was certain it wasn't. He had hurt them. He wasn't even sure they had heard what he said other than the ugly anger in his voice. He shook himself.

"I have to... I just have to go..."

Caden turned and fled from the house. He heard them calling his name, but he didn't stop. He slammed out of the front door and was halfway down the street before he realized that he had no idea where he was going. Except he did know. He wanted to go to High Reach. But he couldn't. Maybe it was good that the other Dragon Shifters were there, because he had a feeling that sobbing to Valerius about how mean and unfair his parents were probably wouldn't have elicited much sympathy. In fact, Valerius might have seen it as proof of just how young he was. Too young to have a relationship with.

"Caden? Caden, is that you?" Rose's voice came from in front of him.

He lifted his head and focused in on the Swarm Shifter who was standing just a dozen feet ahead of him under a street light. She was wearing one of her yellow and black bee dresses.

"Rose! Hey, I'm so glad to see you." He tried to surreptitiously swipe the tears away, but his voice was a watery mess and his nose was full of snot so she knew he'd been crying.

She was suddenly right there, touching his left elbow, her face a mask of concern. "What's wrong, Caden? What happened?"

He realized then that he should have contacted her and Wally the moment he'd gotten to the pond to tell them he was safe. They would have been worried about him. Maybe that's why she was walking to his house. Or maybe she had plans with his mom for that night.

"Do you have plans with Mom?" he asked her.

She shook her head, a little sheepishly. She was carrying a wrapped pie dish, he realized at the last moment. "No, I just thought I'd stop by after all the craziness you experienced tonight. And I brought cherry pie. Don't worry! I didn't make it. My neighbor did to thank me for taking care of her garden."

Caden sniffed, smelling sweet, tart cherries and the buttery baked aroma of the crust. His stomach growled audibly.

"C'mon, let's go back to your house and eat it there," she suggested with a smile.

"Can't. You can go, but I... I can't..." He couldn't get any more words out.

She grasped his forearms as he had brought his hands to scrub the tears away. "Did they... no, they wouldn't kick you out. So something's happened. You need to talk and eat pie. C'mon, I'll take you to one of my favorite spots."

He was simply able to nod miserably as words were beyond him completely now. She led him expertly back through the night-shrouded streets of the Mid. They entered one of the semi-secret passages nearby where he'd parked the car he and Valerius had taken to the pond. He found himself looking for it. Longing for what seemed like an age ago now. For a time when he hadn't said such ugly things to people he loved.

They threaded their way through the back pathways of Reach, until they exited a

wooden door that led out onto a little balcony overlooking the drop. There was a bench flanked by two flowering boxes of flowers. Their sweet scent perfumed the air. She sat down and placed the pie beside her, gesturing to Caden to sit on the pie's other side. She then pulled off the tinfoil cover and revealed the sugar-laced lattice top.

"Dig in," she said, her mouth parting slightly with desire for the pie, as she simply pulled out a hunk of it with her right hand. No utensils required.

Gooey filling and a dusting of sugar ran down her fingers, but she just bit into the main piece, making groans of delight. Even though he normally couldn't eat when he was upset, he couldn't resist this pie, not when it had Rose making those grunts of satisfaction. Besides, if he waited, she might eat it all! So he dug in too.

He soon was joining her in the wordless sounds of appreciation. The filling was just the right amount of sweet and tart to cut the fat from the crust that must have been mostly butter and sugar. The coarse sugar crystals that were sprinkled on top of the pie added a wonderful crunch to the pie's soft interior and moist crust.

They didn't talk until half the pie was eaten. Then as they licked their fingers clean of sugar and butter and cherries, he told her everything. Rose was a good listener, he realized. Probably one of the best. She asked a question here or there, but only to draw him out more or clarify a point. But other than that, she didn't speak until he was done. He let out an exhausted sigh when he brought her up to the point of meeting her in the street.

"So... I'm pretty much a shit person, right?" He tucked his head down.

"No, but you were pretty mean to your folks when you knew they were just scared for you, which for you, fluffy bunny," she poked his stomach, which had him letting out a squeak and telling her to cut it out, "is pretty intense."

He rested his head in his hands. “I don’t know. It just all came out. I know it’s not fair. But it’s...”

“Not altogether untrue? Yeah, that’s why you regret it so much. The truth hurts the most. To be fair, I don’t believe your father was consciously thinking that he was finally going to get what he feels he’s owed by his son being the next Dragon Shifter.”

He smiled at her dry tone. “That’s probably an understatement.”

“They were scared. You were frustrated. After everything that’s happened, the fact that you didn’t snap worse than this before is amazing in my view.” She looked down mournfully at the pie, but then shook herself and covered it with the foil again. “We’ll get totally sick if we eat more now. Besides, we’ll get to think about having it later, which is a pleasure in itself.”

He smiled. “I’m so glad I met you, Rose. I feel like we’ve known one another forever.”

She smiled and pinked, responding, “Yeah, it’s so weird. I remember having a few friends like this before the joining where I just... clicked .” She snapped her sticky fingers. “Eweh.” She wiped them on her dress. “But I have to admit that I’d given up on having a friend like that. Until you.”

They both smiled shyly and bumped shoulders.

“You’re the only one who understands,” Caden said as he leaned back against the cold stone of Reach’s outer wall.

She let out a laugh. “I understand what it means to be one of the most powerful people in the world? Uhm, no. Definitely not.”

“I’m not?—”

“Yes, Caden, you are . You’re one of nine beings that has the ability to destroy all of us.” She sighed. “I know from how you told me about it that you felt arrogant for saying how important Iolaire was to everyone. But that’s not being arrogant. That was true .” She crossed her legs at the ankles as she, too, leaned back against the cold stone. “When I was down in the Below, getting the pie?—”

“We have to do something more for your neighbor to get more pie,” he begged.

She grinned. “She has plenty of weeding to do.”

“I’m there!”

“Then we shall be inundated with pie!”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

She shook her head. “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted about pie?—”

“There is nothing rude about pie,” he scoffed.

“Well, you may have a point there. But anyways . When I was down in the Below, people were all buzzing about Iolaire,” she said with a faint smile. “There was hope , and we don’t get a lot of that down there.”

Caden blinked. “Should—should Iolaire go there? Go back there? After what we did? The hurt we caused?”

He couldn’t quite believe that the people in the Below would look at him and Iolaire

with anything other than rage after the deaths that their coming there had caused.

“People know that was an accident. And they blame Valerius, if they blame anyone,” she assured him. “So if you... you wanted to go to the Below... I don’t see why not. Especially with Marban making sure that things are all kept in order.”

“Marban.” Caden’s lips couldn’t help but flatten.

“He’s not all that bad. You should have seen him and Wally today in the shop. They were like a couple of old hens clucking at one another the entire time!” Rose laughed so hard that she was gulping for air. He thumped her back.

“It was that funny?”

She wiped her eyes. “Only because I know Marban, and I’ve never seen him so... real .”

“Real?”

“He was having a good time. Wally was able to call him on his shit and he didn’t get offended by it. Wally, evidently, has that right,” she explained. “He seemed... I don’t know. So different.”

“He’s complicated.”

“He is.”

They sat in companionable silence for long moments. Caden felt like he’d been scrapped clean of all the toxic anger. It was a relief. And Rose made him feel himself again. She was such a good friend.

And what about your other good friend? Landry? She's in jail .

Caden felt his stomach tightening. He had to go see her if he could. He knew that people did stupid things. Hadn't he just proved that tonight? He had to make sure she knew that he still loved her and would do whatever he could to help her.

"I think... I think Iolaire should go to the Below, and we should have the press find out about it," Caden said suddenly. "And then we should have a plan to show people everywhere that those in the Below are just like them, and should be treated just like them."

"That's a pretty tall order." But though her words were slightly negative, her tone wasn't and her expression was thoughtful. She turned towards him. "What's with the 'we' business? Are you going all royal we on me and will no longer speak in the singular?"

He snorted. "Truthfully, since it is me and Iolaire together, it is we . But I was thinking of we as in you and me figuring this out."

"Ah," she said simply and nothing more, but he could tell from her expression that she was both gratified and a little nervous.

He didn't blame her for the latter. He was way nervous. He had no idea what he was doing. Or more like, he only had the slightest idea that was full of earnest hope.

"I should go home and apologize to my parents," he finally said. "Come with me? Tilly's grounded so she'd love to have you sleepover. We can walk together to Wally's tomorrow for work."

She blinked, still clearly stunned at being welcome in his home. "Uhm, yeah, sure, that sounds good to me."



“Great.”

He got up and offered her a hand. She took it. They were both still sticky. He grabbed the pie and it wasn't because he was fearful that she would eat it all on the way back. Well, mostly not because of that.

“Caden, when you apologize to your folks,” she paused and bit her lip.

“It's okay. I want to hear your advice. Unfiltered Rose.”

She waved a hand through the air even as she smiled before becoming very serious, “Be certain about what you're sorry about. Don't apologize for what you really think. Apologize for the way you said it, but not what you said. Not if you believe it. Because it'll just bubble up and explode again. You and your folks can be honest with one another and still love one another.”

He nodded. “Told you. Unfiltered Rose is the best Rose.”

She tossed back her head and laughed. “Oh, I have far better things to show you. Just you wait!”

### SHEEP'S CLOTHING

V alerius sat upon his throne and brooded. Chione, who stood beside him, one delicate hand on the back of his throne, would have been the only one in that room to know he was in a fouler mood than normal. Tez, Illarion and even Esme knew him as a dour king in general. They had not truly seen how different he was around Caden and Iolaire. But, then again, waiting on the Red Dragon Queen Mei was enough to annoy anyone, especially when she was making a procession through Reach with her droids.

A screen had been set up so all could watch as she paraded through Reach with her wondrous creations. The streets were lined with his people. Close ups of the faces of the children showed only wonder for the droids similar to those they saw in movies like Iron Man , except there were no human beings riding within them. They were completely mechanical and all under Mei's sole control. There were lines upon lines of them walking in lockstep all along the parade route while Mei smiled demurely, giggled behind one hand, and waved the other at the star-struck crowd.

She was a beautiful woman with long black hair and delicate features. She pretended in public to still be the school girl that she had been when she joined with her Spirit. She completely hid her masterful mind and her lightning quick temper. It was said that she had executed so many Councillors that none dare take the job any longer. Failure was not tolerated by Mei. Disagreeing with her was not tolerated. Disobedience of any form was not tolerated. She might not have camps like Illarion did, but her people were under as much of an iron hand as his were. But the public outside of her territory did not see this.

“Doesn’t Dragon Queen Mei look just stunning in that Chinese style dress?” one reporter gushed. “That lovely dark blue tunic with white piping at the sleeves and an aqua skirt was handmade by these little old ladies in a small village just for her. They were tribute! And she’s got the cutest shoes to match her top!”

“Not to say the dress isn’t beautiful and well-made but it is so nice to see one of the Dragon Shifters dress so... down to earth?” another reporter suggested.

The first bobbed her head rather like a marionette. “Indeed it is!”

Tez, who was wearing a sleeveless tunic in pale green with tan fringe, dark blue leggings and tan boots along with enough topaz around his neck to sink a small boat, stood a few feet from the screen, shook his head in disgust. “Are they so blind not to know that Mei demands those little old ladies make her dresses for no pay? It is tribute! But not of the voluntary kind! Woman of the people, please!”

“Some reporters are shallow creatures, dear. They often just want to look at the outside of something and present it in a nice light, depending on how ugly it truly is,” Esme replied airily from her stance by the open doors to the terrace. She was in one of her chic pants suits from Paris. “If they were honest, they would realize that Valerius probably wears the most down to earth clothes out there. Leather straps? All the same every day?”

“I do not care how I look,” Valerius growled as he rested his chin on his hand. He was, indeed, in his leather pants, boots and off-the-shoulder leather armor. He found these outfits useful and comfortable.

“You look like a reject from a renaissance faire,” Illarion muttered.

In contrast to Valerius, Illarion was dressed in a finely-tailored dark blue suit with white button down shirt open at the collar. His more traditional Russian style dress

was for the evenings. During the day, he looked like a wealthy industrialist. Knowing that he kept most of his population in camps made those “civilized” clothes seem more of a stretch than Mei’s “modest” garments. Both of them were hiding what they were beneath sheep’s clothing.

“Have you been able to shift yet, Illarion?” Valerius asked mildly even though he knew that Illarion had not and it would annoy the Green Dragon shifter hugely to be asked.

Illarion flinched and looked up at him with a poisonous gaze. Tez laughed delightedly.

“So the little White Dragon has defanged the mighty Green Dragon?” Tez’s dark brown eyes were filled with glee.

Illarion looked like was chewing glass. “Iolaire will never turn that power upon me again!”

“Really?” Esme drawled. “And why is that? Because it is your mate?” Her voice dripped with disdain.

Illarion’s head whipped around towards her. “And why are you here, old woman? Do you think that the White Dragon would want your wrinkled form? Bah!”

“Dragon King Illarion!” Chione’s voice rose up sharp and powerful. “Such rudeness will not be tolerated.”

But Esme waved a hand in the air. “Do not worry, Chione. His words draw no more blood than a fly’s would. The day I worry about my desirability based upon Illarion’s judgment would be a sad day indeed. But you are truly foolish to think that the only thing one could offer Iolaire to join them would be a romantic attachment. Indeed, if

one was very clever, they would be offering a partnership . Romance often dies. But partnership can shift with the tides of time.”

“Partnership? Partnership? You would share power? No! A mate is not an equal! They are a companion! To please!” Illarion scowled.

Valerius could not imagine a sentiment less designed to attract Caden than that one.

“I am certain with that very interesting view of how lovers interact that you will just bowl Iolaire over,” Esme replied faintly even as her expression was one of looking at an ugly bug that had crawled out from under the bed.

“Even if Iolaire had such low self-esteem that it should consider you, Illarion, if you were the only option on Earth, you are not! I am here to offer love and companionship!” Tez laughed, unapologetically even as Valerius had to hide the tensivity that entered his form. “I am quite a bit more handsome than you, Illarion. And my Eldoron eclipses any other Dragon’s beauty. Plus my personality is quite a bit more pleasant than yours. I would make an ideal mate!”

“Only if the White Dragon wishes to waste its time with the dregs of society!” Illarion scoffed.

Seeing yet another fight about to take place, Esme said, “Eldoron is a majestic Dragon.”

Tez made a bow. “Thank you. And Scylla is a vision!”

Esme merely smiled, clearly not bothered by Tez’s compliments or by Illarion’s insults. Raziel regarded them all with disgust. It wasn’t that the Black Dragon Spirit did not enjoy Esme and Scylla, but it wanted Caden and Iolaire.

We will see them this afternoon, Valerius tried to soothe his Spirit.

We will not be alone! Mei will be showing off to them her mechanical men. I think we should melt them into slag! Raziel shouted. Iolaire will find that impressive.

Oh, Caden would too. Valerius imagined them doing just that and a smile reached his lips.

“Why do you let Mei parade through your village--”

“City, Illarion, Reach is a city,” Chione remarked brusely.

Illarion grunted his assent and continued on, “Why are we punished for simply flying into Reach while she gets to bring an army?”

Valerius actually wasn't pleased with this display, but unlike flying in his territory in Dragon form, these mechanical men were not a threat. Not a traditional one in any case. Mei did not mean them to be threatening. She was, after all, having them come in like highly expensive, elaborate toys that would thrill the people. And the people were thrilled from the look of the crowd. If he treated them like they were a real army then he would look weak. So in they came. They would all be placed in the dungeon the moment they arrived and guarded by the Claw.

“Because these tin soldiers are a party trick,” Valerius answered him.

“How can you be sure?” Illarion asked a rather cautious question from him.

Valerius' eyes glowed as he slowly leaned forward in his throne and said softly, “Because there is no substance on this Earth, or off of it, that Raziel and I cannot turn to molten slag in moments.”

Illarion actually twitched. Tez let out a nervous bark of laughter. Even Esme twisted her strand of black pearls tight enough that if they hadn't been fine quality the strand would have snapped. They had not been in the same room until this visit since the war but they remembered his and Raziel's abilities well. Perhaps it had been wrong for him not to call a meeting earlier just so he could remind them who was king of Dragons here.

He leaned back on his throne. "So let the crowd enjoy the display, just as Mei knows that by allowing it that I am not impressed."

Captains Simi and Ngoye, who were both guarding the front doors to the throne room, ready to open them once Mei made her insufferable entrance, were grinning at his show of strength. He did not even have to glance up at Chione to know that her expression was cool and serene, showing her approval too.

"Illarion, is there a metal out there that your poison breath will not corrode?" Esme asked, seeming genuinely curious.

"No." Illarion shrugged. "It was just a question."

Tez looked at the television screen with his upper lip raised in disgust. "She should not have soldiers like this at all! Especially when they are made to look like toys! What does she need such an army for?"

"An army is for show or for war," Esme murmured as she gazed out at the cerulean blue sky.

Valerius could tell she desperately wanted to fly. He would give her a dispensation to do so after Mei's grand entrance.

"She has a right to rule her territory the way she wants," Illarion immediately went

prickly, clearly anticipating that if they criticized Mei's army, they might get to his camps.

"Nothing is going to be verboten at this meeting," Valerius found himself saying. "We will be discussing everything that is of concern to anyone."

All three Dragon Shifters' heads snapped towards him. Even Chione looked shocked for a moment, but she quickly covered it with her Sphinx-like calm. After the initial shock had passed, Esme nodded with a small smile on her lips. Tez looked excited as if he had a million criticisms to make. Illarion stared at him without blinking.

"Concerns have been raised," Valerius said simply. "And as much as we would all like to think that each of our territories is a world unto itself, that is not true. We are all connected. What happens in one territory affects all of the others."

"My goodness, Valerius, you almost sound like you're going to exercise your first among equals status for once," Esme said mildly.

She was right. He had not though intended to say any of this, or do any of it, but as he stared at each of the three dragons here with more to come, he realized that he could not ignore this opportunity. Bringing Marban in had already taught him that disparate voices, perhaps voices one would not think to listen to, often had things to say one needed to hear.

"We made our pact 30 years ago. The world has changed. We should discuss those changes," Valerius answered her simply.

Though he could see they had questions, his gaze went to the screen where Mei was taking a bunch of flowers from a little girl and kissing the girl's blushing cheeks. He would speak only when all of them were there, or in private with those he sought to win to his side. He would not repeat himself. Talking exhausted him.



His bad mood was partially caused by that exhaustion Watching Mei pretend to be a down to earth queen when he knew her to be a vicious empress was taxing enough. Having Illarion scowl and strut about the castle while trying to bark orders at Valerius' staff was another rub. Tez constantly ribbing him about having a romantic attachment to Iolaire was like being pricked constantly by a needle in one's shoe. But, if he were honest with himself, it was not being able to see Caden that was truly making him edgy.

Their phone call last night had been necessarily brief. Though the phones were encrypted, careful Dragon ears could hear most anything. The longing in Caden's voice for them to picnic again--though really he doubted it was the picnicking and not the lovemaking that Caden really wanted as did he--and to fly once more was quite apparent. But there had been a sadness and exhaustion in Caden's voice as well that had alerted Valerius to something being wrong. His normally indeflatable young man was deflated.

"What is it? What's happened?" he had demanded finally when Caden seemed to not intend to tell him voluntarily.

"What--how did you know?" Caden asked, not being able to lie to him or not willing to. Probably a mixture of both. He'd likely made a deal with himself that he wouldn't say anything unless Valerius asked him full out.

"Caden, tell me," he simply demanded.

Caden let out a sigh. "I didn't want to mention it because... because it's going to sound stupid. And it is stupid. But it's not, either."

"You are speaking in riddles," Valerius said with just a huff of impatience in his voice.

“I got into a fight with my parents about the incident in the park,” Caden told him.

“And?”

That couldn't be all of it. Caden's tone told him that something momentous had happened and fighting about the park didn't seem sufficient to warrant this type of despair.

“I said some—some things that maybe needed saying but I was really mean in how I said them. Dad is in his study. He doesn't want to talk to me. Mom is furiously canning stuff, and talking in single word answers when she does talk at all. If it weren't for Rose and Tilly, I would feel invisible!” Caden wailed. Then he swallowed and said, “I suppose I shouldn't expect anything less. I really hurt my parents and they need time to stop being angry with me.”

“What did you say exactly?” he prodded. He really wasn't good at waiting to hear what the point was.

“Like that my dad is using the fact that I'm a Dragon Shifter to settle some old scores in his own life. Like they want me to have a territory but not go to the park, because they think they'll be able to control the territory themselves while I... I grow up, I guess. Like not considering what I want or what it really means being the White Dragon,” Caden said, his voice rising with every word.

“Those are things that you must settle with them,” Valerius simply agreed.

There was a surprised silence. “You--you guessed these were problems?”

“From the moment your father hired lawyers and made plans on your behalf without talking to you... yes. You took it well enough because you are good-natured, but even you have a breaking point,” Valerius answered as he stretched out on his bed.

He looked over at the empty side of it and realized he was acting as if Caden was lying there. He forced himself to stretch across the whole bed like usual.

Another silence. “Do you--do you think I’m naive? That’s what Mom and Dad think. They don’t believe I can really understand the power I have, let alone use it appropriately.”

Valerius pinched the top of his nose. This was a difficult question to answer, because Caden’s unjaded outlook was both a strength and a weakness. “I think you are... idealistic. That can fall into the naive category at times, but other times it can inspire. Inspiration is the greatest of powers, Caden. It can move things that force cannot, that fear cannot.”

Caden let out a low chuckle, evidently not offended at all. “You know that’s one of the nicest things you could say about me.”

“The thing is that people like your father--and even, like me --see the world quite differently. Where you see light, we see dark. On the one hand, we want to protect you so that you can keep seeing the world in that idealistic light. On the other hand, we find it frustrating that you do not see what we do and court danger for yourself and those that follow you,” Valerius said, and almost felt exhausted by it. He talked more with Caden than with anyone. And he knew that this talk they were having was crucial to help Caden.

“When you describe it that way it makes sense. You want to do everything you can to keep me as I am, but as I am, I get myself into messes because you’re protecting me?”

“Yes.”

“I do need Dad’s help,” Caden said quietly. “He knows so much more than me.

You... you know eons more than me. But I have to try some things on my own, even if they are mistakes. Maybe especially if they are. If he doesn't let me play a role in my own life..." Caden broke off with a sigh.

"There is a balance. Raziel understands it far better than I do," Valerius admitted. "I wished to swoop in the moment that you were in the park, but..."

"I did okay. It was a bad situation. But I won't hide from Humans First! And like I told my parents last night, Tilly and her friends fearlessly taunting the protestors took their power away," Caden said. "On the news, they keep showing how dumb the Humans First people look for claiming to be worried that the kids were in danger. It was clear that they just hate Shifters."

Valerius had seen that himself. In fact, Chione had been twittering to him about it excitedly. On his call with Marban, to check in on the status of the Shifter Council, the wily old criminal had thought it genius.

"But Caden might have been..." Valerius had broken off, realizing he was revealing too much of himself to the king of the underworld.

"I know it is hard to see the younglings take action on their own," Marban had responded with actual sympathy. "They see only how far they can fly , while we see how far they can fall . But they can only learn one with the other. So we must learn to sit back and watch only."

In that moment, Valerius had realized with a start that he liked and appreciated the Swarm Shifter on some level. Marban had something good to offer. It had been a rather stunning revelation. Even he, evidently, could learn something new.

Interpreting his silence as the end of the call, Marban had said, "Wally says hello."

“Ah, that is right that you took Caden’s spot today at the shop, which I appreciate. But are you still there?” Valerius had frowned. It had been very late.

“No, no, Wally and I are having drinks at his place... with his cat,” Marban had said the last as if there was a sour taste in his mouth.

Valerius had let out a burble of laughter. “A Rat Shifter has a cat for a pet?”

“He adores them. Get off my lap!” Marban had hissed at the cat evidently. There had been hissing of the feline variety that had followed.

“I will let you go then. Enjoy your evening.” Valerius had hung up laughing.

But his call with Caden had not ended in laughter but rather simple longing.

“You will be coming as Iolaire to meet Mei today,” Valerius said.

“Oh, right, yeah,” Caden didn’t sound intrigued.

“She’s going to bring her toy soldiers.”

“Toy... oh, the droids?! That’s cool,” Caden warmed a little. “But what if she intends to use them for nefarious purposes? Marban thinks that the people behind the bombings and even Humans First might be from outside. What if Mei is behind it?”

“I have considered this, and this is partly why I am allowing her to bring the soldiers,” he stated.

“But... oh! You think she’ll use them, but you’ll have people like following them and checking them out!” Caden got it.

“Indeed.” Valerius smiled at Caden’s evident enthusiasm for spycraft.

“It will be interesting to meet her, I guess,” Caden said with a deep sigh and Valerius reached over to the empty part of the bed again as if he could touch Caden’s arm and link their hands together. “But I miss you. I can’t wait until they’re gone and it’s just the two of us again.”

Valerius smiled softly. “Neither can I.”

Simi’s voice drew him back to the present as he boomed, “Dragon King Valerius, do I have your permission to allow the Red Dragon Queen Mei to enter the throne room?”

Valerius let out another sigh before answering, “Let her in.”

### STORIES

Earlier...

Caden stood by the windows of Wally's shop watching the crowds mill about the square after the Red Dragon Queen Mei's procession had passed. He hadn't been able to see her and had only glimpsed the mechanical soldiers. The Claw had arranged for there to be a clear area through the square's center while the crowd had pressed all around it, including against the shop's windows. Yet Caden had felt her.

He'd been folding t-shirts with Valerius' precious face upon them as there were no customers in the store during the parade—a calm before the storm in a way—and manfully resisting rubbing his cheek against the face when the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He dropped the t-shirt and turned towards the shop windows as if in a trance. All he could see were the butts and backs of the viewers. But he slowly stepped towards the glass until his nose was practically pressed against it.

“Caden?” Rose was suddenly beside him. “What are you doing? Don't attract those people here. I'm just catching my breath.”

“It's Mei,” Caden said softly.

Rose looked outside, clearly saw only the press of butts, and turned back to him with a frown. “How do you know?”

“The television will give you a better view!” Wally called.

Their boss was sitting in Landry's usual stool. He had the television above the cash register on. It usually showed specials but now aired on one of the cable news networks. It showed the parade. It actually showed the outside of the shop. And right now, Mei was standing in the middle of the square.

A dozen of the Faithful were approaching her in their white robes. Each of them were carrying peonies. His mother was out there. His mother had explained that peonies in Chinese culture represented nobility, wealth, honor, feminine beauty, innocence and charm. On the television, the head of the Faith was bowing as he offered the armful of delicate flowers to Mei, who was all smiles and graciousness. She accepted the flowers and held them to her breast for a moment, drawing in their deep scent, before she handed them to one of her soldiers. The soldier tossed each of the blooms into the air so that when they came down, they were easily caught by children in the crowd. There were cries of joy and claps of amazement.

"She certainly knows how to work a crowd," Wally admitted reluctantly.

Caden turned back towards the window. Iolaire's ears were flickering. The Spirit wasn't afraid of Mei, but Iolaire wasn't as excited as it had been meeting Tez or Esme. Iolaire's reaction to Illarion had been less intense .

"What's wrong, Caden?" Rose put her hand on his right forearm.

"Iolaire is reacting to Mei," Caden admitted.

"How?" Rose frowned. "Freaked out?"

"No, just wary. Iolaire is sitting sort of back, tail curled around its feet and--" He saw Rose staring at him like he was insane. "What?"

"You see your Spirit. That's still so weird to me," Rose said with a shake of her head.



“That’s weird?” He was a little hurt.

She thumped his back. “Yes, but cool. I guess it’s just another Dragon Shifter thing.”

“Mei does not seem to be aware of you, Caden. Thankfully,” Wally said as he gestured to Mei’s procession moving on. Though, at the last moment, she turned her head and seemed to look directly into the camera and at him, but then she was smiling and continuing on.

“What do you know about Mei, Wally?” Caden asked as he turned away from the milling crowd. The people would be in the shop any second and then talking about anything—let alone Mei—would be off the table.

They were short-handed with Landry behind bars so it was sure to be a scrum. His parents hadn’t agreed to let Tilly come and work in the shop because of her punishment even when both he and his sister had pleaded. They couldn’t ask Marban to continue to work at the shop. He was a little more important than that. Plus with the Dragons coming to the city—not to mention Iolaire’s reveal—business was brisker than ever.

Despite all of these hardships, Caden rather thought that his pleas for Tilly to work had actually made his parents less agreeable. Neither of his parents were really speaking to him at the moment. His father was shut up in his study, and his mother had answered him with one word responses as she made breakfast for everyone except him.

They can’t stay mad forever. He grimaced. But they are likely expecting an apology from me, which I can give as to how I spoke to them, but not about what I said. So things are going to be a little frosty for a while.

“You think I know secrets about the great Red Dragon Queen Mei?” Wally chuckled,

turning around on the stool, and pulling Caden from his gloomy thoughts.

“Something tells me from that chuckle that you do,” Rose pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

He reached for the Black Dragon balloon hat, and both Caden and Rose exchanged a look. Wally plonked it on his head with much squeaking.

“What’s with the hat, Wally?” Rose’s eyebrow rose higher.

“It is the wisdom hat,” Wally harrumphed, clearly aware that she was about to attack his dignity in some way.

“It’s a balloon--”

“Wisdom hat!” Wally interrupted with a monumental clearing of his throat. “In any case, do you want to hear what I know or don’t you?”

“We want to know, Wally. And quickly, as the crowd is getting restless out there. There aren’t many more mechanical soldiers to watch pass by.” Caden pointed over his shoulder at the door.

“Fair enough! Well, I know what makes Mei tick,” Wally told them.

“Really?” Rose’s arms crossed over her chest. She looked as much amused as dubious. “Do you know her personally?”

“No, but I know how she got her Spirit,” Wally said, a superior smile on his face as he tipped his head back. The balloon hat fell off and he nearly toppled from the stool trying to catch it.

Both Caden and Rose grinned at each other. But they quickly hid those grins when Wally scowled at them as he put the hat on again.

“Go on, Wally,” Caden urged.

“Now, how a person gets their Spirit says a lot about them,” Wally explained.

“Really?” Rose sounded wry. “Because it seems the type of Shifter you are means more to most people.”

Wally waved a hand through the air. “That’s prejudice, pure and simple. I’m betting how you got your Spirit was heroic.”

Rose’s eyes widened. She blushed and ducked her head. Caden smiled knowingly.

“It was,” Caden said.

Wally nodded. “Not surprised.”

“But... okay, so it was a little heroic, but I’m a Swarm Shifter!” she cried as if betrayed by the act.

“Being a Swarm Shifter doesn’t make you bad, Rose. It is how you use your gift,” Wally said gently. “You know this.”

“Yeah, but...” She shook herself. “Go on with Mei’s story.”

“She was the daughter of the equivalent of a mayor in her village. Her father was wise and kind. He took care of his people, and was known as someone who would give second chances,” Wally explained.

“Sounds like a great guy,” Caden said.

“Yes, and Mei loved him more than life.” Wally looked as if he were seeing this past.

“So he died? Terribly? Someone betrayed him?” Rose guessed.

“Rose!” Caden waved at her.

But Wally smiled sadly. “Yes, of course, they did.”

“Bandits? A rival for the leader of the village?” Rose guessed some more.

“Can you let him tell the story, Rose?” Caden asked.

She sniffed. “Fine, but I bet I can guess--”

“It was Mei’s fiancée,” Wally interrupted.

Rose’s mouth opened and shut a few times. “That’s... that’s awful! Was she as trusting as her father then?”

Wally shook his head. “In fact, she was suspicious and constantly looking out for her father, not wanting his kindness to be taken advantage of. But, in this case, she was the one to trust while her father was not so sure.”

Rose’s eyes narrowed. “Why does this sound like the typical story of a woman who falls for a bad man and ignores all common sense and--”

“He saved Mei’s life in the woods that surrounded their village. She was a skilled warrior in her own right. Her ability with the bow and sword was nearly unparalleled,” Wally said. “But she was only human and a dozen bandits are

formidable. Just as she was about to fall, her future-fiance killed her final attackers.”

“Sounds useful.” Rose shrugged.

“I’m going to make a guess here,” Caden said. “Those were the fiancée’s men, weren’t they?”

Wally touched the side of his nose. “Right you are, kid. He saw her and maybe it was love or lust at first sight, but he recognized in Mei someone far more worthy to align himself with than the bandits.”

“Why would she trust someone who kills his own men?” Rose scoffed.

“He hadn’t been with his men when they attacked. He came in after, and pretended, I suppose, to be a wandering traveler,” Wally explained, mirroring her earlier shrug. “Whatever his story, she believed him. And I imagine he was convincing and earned her love and respect, which could not have been an easy thing to do. She brought him back to the village and convinced her father to put him in charge of security with her.”

“And her father sensed something off about him?” Rose asked, clearly getting involved in the story more than she wanted to let on.

Wally nodded. “He did not believe in coincidences. But he might have believed in treating people well will, more often than not, make them respond in kind.”

Rose glanced at Caden then. When he smiled at her, not sure what she was thinking, she quickly turned away.

“But that this young man would appear at just the right moment to save his daughter? That made him suspicious.” Wally looked grim. “But he offered his hospitality, and

kept his suspicions to himself, because he saw that Mei already was smitten.”

“Smitten?” Rose squawked. When Wally looked at her curiously, she explained, “If Mei was a man would you say ‘smitten’? That woman.” She pointed to the television screen where Mei glided up to High Reach. “Has never been smitten a day in her life! She would have to be a totally different person, and if there’s one thing that you and I know, Wally, is that Shifters don’t really change. Their personalities don’t alter!”

Wally actually smiled and nodded. “Just let me finish my story and then... Well, let me finish.”

She let out a breath that had her bangs flying up. “Go on then. Dumb girl is smitten with charming sly bandit who is eyeing her village for his own.”

“The bandit thought that the moment he and Mei married that the father would cede control of the village over to him, but the old man guessed this and called the bandit to his rooms one night,” Wally continued. “At this meeting, he told the bandit in no uncertain terms that he was not giving control of the village to him. Not now. Not ever.”

“Yeah, but if control of it was going to go to Mei, I’m betting this bandit guy thought he would have control through her.” Caden frowned deeply.

“Oh, yes, if the father had said only that then I’m sure the bandit would have assumed just that.” Wally adjusted the “wisdom hat”. It squeaked loudly.

“So he wasn’t going to pass the leadership onto Mei? Because she was a girl? He must not have intended to give it to her at all!” Rose was scowling.

“Maybe so, maybe not, but he told the bandit that his daughter would not take his place either. So if he was there for anything other than love of a wonderful, skilled

woman then he should leave .”

The skin between Caden’s shoulder blades bunched. He could almost feel the blade that was undoubtedly going to be thrust into Mei’s father either figuratively or metaphorically.

“So what did he do?” Caden asked, sounding a little breathless with anticipation and dread.

“The bandit assured Mei’s father that love was all that motivated him. He bowed and left. Everything seemed quite normal and happy. He was more attentive to Mei than ever, and treated the father with respect.” Wally chewed his inner cheek. “The wedding took place with great splendor. People from all over came with gifts for the young couple. It was during the wedding feast when the tragedy occurred.”

“What happened?” Caden asked.

“Bandits,” Rose hissed, eyes narrowing.

Wally gave one sharp nod. “Husband and wife fought valiantly. They saved so many people. But one.”

“Mei’s father? Oh, no, she must have been beside herself with grief!” Caden’s heart ached. He tried to imagine his parents being killed and it was enough to make his heart clench. To find out that it was the person he had loved and trusted behind it... well, it would be too much!

“When did she figure out it was her husband’s bandits and her husband’s order that took her father’s life?” Rose asked, looking a little pale herself.

“Right away. She saw him speaking to one of the bandits just before they managed to

get away. You see, this time he wasn't going to kill all of his men, just enough," Wally said the words as if they tasted bitter. "But Mei had started to get suspicious, and she went after that bandit, and made him tell her the truth about the man she had thought she loved."

"Again, I just don't see Mei valuing goodness and wisdom!" Rose's hands flew up into the air like startled birds.

Wally patted the air with one pudgy hand and the "wisdom hat" with the other. "Regardless of what she valued, she returned to the village to find her father dead and with the knowledge that her husband was the one responsible for it," Wally's voice deepened. "They say that she let out a scream that cracked open the sky. Red lightning that rained down and destroyed the roof of the wedding hall where she cradled her dead father's head in her hands."

"The joining?" Caden's eyes grew wide.

Wally nodded. "She is said to have transformed into the Red Dragon right there and then. She roasted her deceitful husband alive, and then she is said to have flown up and gone after the rest of his men, burning them to ashes in her magma-like breath. When she returned to the village, after scouring the area of all evil doers, she took over running the village. She was their protector and savior for many, many centuries."

The moment that Wally finished his story, silence fell as both Caden and Rose absorbed it. The story, in Caden's mind, made Mei seem... likable. She had been betrayed by the person she loved most, so maybe that explained her need to build mechanical armies to protect her and her people. She likely didn't trust any people after that. Caden felt sympathy for her and he looked curiously at Iolaire.

Why don't you like her? Caden asked his Spirit.



But Iolaire didn't get a chance to answer as Rose shouted, "Bullshit! I call bullshit, Wally!"

Instead of acting offended, Wally's round face split with a huge grin. His mustache was quivering with affection and pride. Caden frowned. What had he missed here?

"Wally, that story... it's true, right? I mean it sounds true," Caden said almost meekly as Rose was shaking her head.

"It sounds like a story, Caden. Too neat and clean, and I'm betting your little heart was thumping in sympathy for her." Rose lifted her eyebrows at him.

He actually blushed and lowered his head. "Well, yeah." His head shot up again. "But who wouldn't?! You'd have to be cold-hearted not to understand what something like that could do to a person and--"

"Do you really think that woman that freaks Iolaire out is this feel-good village daughter who avenged her father and was a wise and just ruler ever after?" She shook her head as if he was simply too naive.

"I--I don't know. She could be!" Caden looked back at Wally for support. "Wally, you told us this to explain Mei and--"

"The story I told you is the one that Mei wishes to be known," Wally interrupted.

"Mei wants..."

"She doesn't speak of it herself, obviously, but the story just slipped out to the press," Wally explained.

Caden scowled. "You said you had secret knowledge. Something in the paper--"

“Considering it was made of dead trees at the time and now is likely on microfiche, that is the equivalent of secret knowledge to you youngsters,” Wally corrected him, waving a chubby sausage finger through the air.

“So is that whole story a--a story? A lie?” Caden cried, feeling betrayed somehow. Iolaire was licking its claws and cleaning its head with them cat-like.

Don’t you be acting like I’m naive too, Iolaire! Caden cried.

All he got was slow blinks of love before Iolaire went back to cleaning itself.

But Wally shook his head. “Oh, yes, but there are some definite changes to it.”

“Like what?” Caden’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t sure he trusted Wally not to lead him astray again.

“The village mayor had only one child,” Wally said.

“Yes, it was Mei. We know--”

But Wally shook his head, cutting Caden off. “No, he had a son .”

“Oh, my God.” Rose put a hand up to her lips. “Mei was the bandit !”

Wally grinned and pointed at her. “You win a prize of knowledge, Rose. Perhaps you would like to wear the wisdom hat?”

Rose was immediately backing away and was waving a hand as if to ward the balloon Dragon hat off.

“So did her husband find out who she was and what she had done?” Caden was

stunned.

“I do not know that she ever actually married him, but he did supposedly love her. I just know that she slaughtered everyone that stood in her way,” Wally remarked dryly.

Caden put a shaky hand up to his forehead. “Does Valerius know the true story?”

The Black Dragon King had told him that Dragon Shifters did not get their Spirits by doing good and noble acts. So he, undoubtedly, knew that Mei wasn’t some orphaned girl who had taken her revenge. But still.

“I imagine he is not blind to her nature,” Wally said. “He’s a wise, if gruff, person, our King Valerius.”

“But those soldiers.” Caden shook his head in dissatisfaction. “Mei gets her way through subterfuge! Those soldiers are like that wooden horse story.”

“Valerius isn’t foolish. If he’s let her bring them in, he’s done it for a purpose, Caden,” Rose assured him.

“Indeed, Caden, do not worry,” Wally told him.

But Caden couldn’t help but worry. He pulled out the phone to call Valerius, but people flooded into the store. He had only a moment to text a “CALL ME” to Valerius before the store was overwhelmed with people clamoring for Red Dragon plushies.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### LIKE THE MOON

Just as the doors to the throne room were being thrown open to Mei, Valerius felt the cell phone that was just for communications with Caden buzz in his pocket. He immediately pulled it out and saw that the young man had texted him in all caps.

### CALL ME.

So Valerius' head was down, staring at his phone, like a teenager when Mei swept into the room. He was texting back as she was announced.

What's wrong? Valerius texted.

His heart was thudding heavily in his chest. What was wrong with Caden? Had Humans First done something?

He probably has argued with his birth humans again, Raziel muttered, its massive head resting on its front claws.

But that was not the case as Caden texted back, It's Mei! Wally told me the truth about how she got her Spirit! The soldiers have got to be Trojan Horses!

Valerius frowned. What was Caden on about? Did he think the mechanical soldiers held human soldiers? No, that couldn't be. As the thumping of the metallic feet of Mei's honor guard of mechanical soldiers as well as Mei's voice, musical and lovely, rose up to greet him, Valerius continued texting with Caden and didn't acknowledge her at all.

What do you mean? Trojan Horses? Valerius texted.

She's bad! She tricks people! I can't text everything. Can we talk? Please? Caden responded.

Chione cleared her throat noisily. Otherwise silence had fallen in the throne room. He glanced up. Mei was bowing before him, holding herself very still, her arms prettily spread at her sides, her long black hair falling forward like a waterfall of black silk. About two dozen of her mechanical soldiers flanked her in a V-shape. They, too, were bowing.

Esme's mouth was twitching suspiciously. Tez was openly staring at the phone in Valerius' hands with shock. Illarion scowled, but because he always did that there was no saying it was due to the current situation. Valerius shifted on his throne for a moment.

"Please excuse me. I just need to... finish this important communication," Valerius told them, feeling rather like a teenager caught out by his parents texting at the table, he quickly tapped back to Caden, Be at ease. I am aware of Mei's character. I will call you soon.

Then he quickly slipped the phone in his pocket and faced Mei, who was still bowing.

"Queen Mei, I welcome you to High Reach. I apologize for that--that distraction. It was a very important communication," Valerius said smoothly. "Please rise."

She gracefully rose up with a smile that, surprisingly, didn't look at all plastered on her face. Her arms were still spread to her sides as she regarded him with seemingly nothing but pleasure even though he knew that his behavior with the phone must have been galling. He had not meant to insult her, but Caden was his number one priority.

“King Valerius, it has been so long since we have been in one another’s presence. I am greatly honored to be here,” Mei said sweetly and disingenuously.

“Yes,” was all Valerius responded. “I see you have come with quite the entourage.”

She put one hand up to her perfectly painted mouth. “Yes! My soldiers! I have brought one as a gift for you.”

She turned around and gestured for the largest of the mechanical men to step forward. It stood around seven feet tall and had a mixture of black and silver metal armor on the outside. The visor for where the eyes were showed two glowing red beams. The armored skeleton showed multiple moving parts that opened and closed, flexed and tightened as the creature moved. It walked up a few steps closer to him than Mei and then got down on one knee before bowing its head.

Valerius stared at it silently for long moments. Why had Mei given him this creature? Surely, it could not be built like the rest of her tin pot army! She would not want him to have a chance to reverse engineer it, even though he was certain that Raziel could turn them all into slag no matter what they were made of or how they worked. But he also had no doubt that she would have anticipated this and created some kind of backup for this defense. Perhaps they would explode when exposed to great heat and release toxic gasses or nuclear material that would poison the land and its people.

He had spoken blithely to Illarion about the danger posed by Mei’s mechanical men, but he wasn’t as calm about it as he appeared. In fact, the more he thought about Caden’s nonsensical message--Trojan Horses--the more uneasy he became. It would be like Mei to create something that seemed to pose a threat when, in reality, the real threat was hidden.

“He is quite impressive, Queen Mei,” Chione was the one to speak as Valerius’ silence had undoubtedly stretched too long. “And shows your cleverness.”

Mei seemed completely unphased by Valerius' continued rude behavior. She giggled delightedly again. "Thank you, dearest Chione! To be given such a compliment from one as clever as you is so flattering!" She put a hand on her creation's right shoulder. "Do you like the coloring, King Valerius? It was done especially for you and Raziel."

He found himself smiling and it was not a nice smile. "Raziel looks forward to turning it into slag, Mei."

Mei's smile dipped for just a fraction then. "Oh, but you haven't seen what it can do! You shouldn't destroy it... not just yet." She tried flashing a bright smile then as if destroying her "gift" was great fun.

Valerius stood up from his throne and walked down the steps until he was a foot from her. He knew he was invading her personal space. It was intended. She was over a foot shorter than him and was probably a third his size, not that Mei had ever let an opponent's greater physicality impress her. But he knew how to loom, and even if he did not scare her, he made her angry, which was often more useful.

"Why did you bring them with you, Mei?" he asked softly.

The others in the room shifted uncomfortably. Simi and Ngoye tightened their hands on their weapons.

Mei looked up at him, still appearing serene, even if there was a splash of heightened color on both of her cheeks. "I thought this gift would please you, Valerius. A toy--"

"You do nothing unless it pleases yourself," he interrupted her crisply, something that no one did in her territory. Her eyes narrowed for a moment before springing back to those large, wide, girlish orbs full of innocence and light. "I do not want you here, let alone this metal monstrosity, not to mention the hundreds that you had traipse through my territory."

A cruel smile appeared on Mei's lips, one that was far more her own than any of the others she had shown so far. "Your people seemed to appreciate them. Or do you think it foolish to enjoy the beauty of my creations?"

"They do not know you, Mei, but I do. They don't know it was you who slaughtered that village after seducing the simple mayor's son," he said quietly. "If they did, they would never trust you or find pleasure in the gifts you bring."

Her expression darkened. "That is a scandalous lie! I was the one attacked--"

"No, you were not, my dear," Esme said with a sour press of lips. "Please, do not believe your own lies, let alone waste our time with them. Behave like your true self. There are no cameras here or rubes to be taken in."

Mei's dark eyes flashed, but then she let out a sharp laugh. "I suppose you are one to know that the best, Esme! Everyone sees you as their favorite, fashionable nai nai." She used the Chinese word for paternal grandmother with a shake of her head. "When you have caused more deaths than perhaps all of us combined!"

"Well, I did not spend my life as a common bandit . I advised the greatest kings and queens of this world," Esme sniffed. "And with that kind of power comes death. Inevitably."

"I see some merit in your robots, Mei," Tez said, tapping his chin with one finger. "At least you would send soulless things to fight instead of using your people as canon fodder."

"I protect my people," Mei answered stiffly.

"Except that war inevitably leads to death, and having such soldiers seems to me like you want war," Tez continued as if she had not spoken.



“Yes, what are you doing with these soldiers, Mei? What are you preparing for?” Esme’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I share a border with Illarion. Wouldn’t you want a deterrent, too?” Mei asked as she gestured towards the Green Dragon King who had not spoken.

Illarion showed a mouthful of teeth. “If I act it is only because I am provoked, or need... room.”

“That is what the Germans said before the World Wars!” Esme scoffed. “Need room! With all that space in Russia alone, you need no more room.”

Illarion extended his arms. “My wings are large, Esme, I must spread them wide.”

Mephous’ wings are stubby for its size, Raziel said with a puff of dismissive smoke.

“You cannot spread them at all since Iolaire has blocked your ability to shift,” Tez mocked.

Illarion swung towards Tez with raptor-like rage. His head was lowered as if he was about to ram Tez in the stomach. For his part, Tez looked eager to take part in a brawl. He was going to have to let them go at it or something was going to get broken, likely a wall or two in the castle and Valerius had no time for that.

They are loud and annoying, Raziel grumped. Make them stop.

Valerius agreed with his Spirit.

“Enough!” Valerius’ voice rose above the fray.

Everyone’s gazes turned towards him. He met Mei’s gaze again.

“Let me put this bluntly,” he told her. “You knew that bringing these mechanical tin pots here would annoy me.”

Mei’s smile widened a fraction. She put a delicate, long fingered hand to her chest, the nails of which were perfectly lacquered in red. “I assure you it was not my desire to distress you--”

“You did not distress me, Mei. You have irritated me,” he corrected. “So the consequences are yours if these creations do anything . At all. You will pay for it.”

“And what will you do if there is some accident?” Mei practically fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“I will rip you apart and burn your body atop the pyre of your precious robots in front of your former people.” He leaned further in so that their noses were inches apart. “And I am betting that your people... will cheer .”

Can we do that now? Raziel had lifted its head and was looking eagerly forward.

Not now, Raziel. She must break the rules first.

You know she will! I would love to rip Xipil’s horns off! Raziel enthused about Mei’s Spirit.

Wouldn’t we all, but not now.

For the first time, Mei looked uneasy. She was used to the clever barbs and backstabs that Esme threw her way. Or Illarion’s chest pounding. Or Tez’s shaming. He wasn’t boasting or shaming or cleverly speaking to her, he found that he was incredibly angry and meant every word. She realized he did, too.

Mei's eyes dropped from his. "As your people determined, my soldiers are not armed and--"

"They would not have to be! They could simply crush a human being with their bare hands or metal hands, or whatever!" Esme shook her head in disgust. "You should have not brought them here, Mei. Perhaps you have been too much in your own territory where no one tells you the truth, but that is it!"

Mei cast her an angry look and her upper lip writhed back, but then she lowered her head again and looked repentant. "I assure you my thought process was only to show them off. They are wonderful. Not as a show of force, but of advanced technology! What harm could they do to any of us in any case?"

Valerius did not know. But he would find out. He looked at Chione and she gave him a barely perceptible nod. He knew that the best scientists in the territory would be here to study Mei's mechanical men. But would they be missing the forest through the trees? He wasn't sure.

"All of your... wondrous machines will be placed in the dungeon here at High Reach," Valerius informed her. His eyes narrowed at the "gift". "Especially that one."

Mei curtsied. "Of course, whatever you think best, King Valerius. I am a guest of your territory. I will acquiesce to whatever you wish."

Valerius put his hands on his hips and surveyed the group before him. "I did not ask you here. I did not want you here. But you have come. So let me make this perfectly clear, you will respect my rules and if anyone harms my people there will be hell to pay. Is that understood?"

There were bobs of heads all around.

Chione stepped forward and said kindly, “We do wish you to have a pleasant stay in Reach, but as King Valerius has said there are rules and his people are his prime focus.” She gestured to Simi and he spoke on his radio, which had a servant coming in. “Lassiter will take you to your rooms, Queen Mei. After your... your soldiers have deposited your things there, they will be taken down to the dungeon.”

Mei bowed low before she and her soldiers followed after the whip-thin Lassiter from the room.

Esme swished over to him. “King Valerius, I am so in need of a flight! And Scylla is just desperate to see your beautiful fields. May we have your permission to fly?”

Valerius gave the first genuine smile he had so far that morning. “Of course, Esme. You have my permission to fly my skies at any time.”

She curtsied effortlessly.

Tez scurried over. “Wait, wait! May I accompany you, dear Esme? Eldoron longs for Scylla’s lovely company!” He turned pleading eyes on Valerius. “Please say that I may fly too!”

“So long as you fly away from me right now, I give you eager permission,” Valerius responded dryly.

“I haven’t flown with another Dragon in so long, Tez! This will be wonderful!” Esme gushed, not completely immune to the Gold Dragon’s charm.

“Indeed!”

“Please... go .” Valerius made a whisking motion with his hands as if he was a broom and they were dust.

Tez took Esme's nearest hand in his and the two of them practically skipped onto the terrace before shifting and taking off into the peerless blue skies of Reach. That left Illarion. The Green Dragon King was looking at the still kneeling gift soldier from Mei, who hadn't accompanied the others to her rooms. Obviously, because it was Valerius', though he did not want it.

He thought of picking it up and taking it to a field and using it for target practice. But that would be unwise. For though he doubted this gift would have the same machinations as the others, it would still be good to know how it worked. Mei was probably counting on that, which meant it might be dangerous to disassemble it.

"I am going to take a stroll through your little village," Illarion said suddenly.

Once again he miscategorized a city as a village then, of course, he insulted it more by calling it little. But Valerius did not care. He would just be happy to get Illarion out of his hair. And he had no fear that Illarion would accidentally walk into Wally's shop and somehow suss out who the White Dragon truly was either. Illarion would not be caught dead in a souvenir shop. He and Chione watched as Illarion stalked out of the throne room. His shoulders relaxed, but then he looked at the soldier. It likely had a listening device at least in it.

"Captain Simi, take this down to the dungeon," Valerius ordered.

But before the captain had a chance to take a step, the mechanical man stood up and addressed Valerius in a stilted voice, "My name is Adama. Command me, King Valerius, and I will obey."

"Maybe we should ask it some questions?" Chione asked as she stepped down to his side from the throne.

"It will only tell us what Mei wishes us to know," Valerius remarked dryly. "I would

not even satisfy her curiosity with our most basic questions.” He addressed Adama. “You will accompany Captain Simi down to the dungeon. You will then power off until ordered otherwise by me.”

Adama smartly saluted and turned towards Captain Simi. It had already determined who Simi was, which was interesting and a little unnerving. It was indeed listening and learning. He did not wait to see them leave, but instead gestured for Chione to join him on the terrace. The two of them walked out into a nice cool breeze. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back to let the sun fall full on his face.

“Was that Caden on the phone? I've never seen you so fascinated by your phone before.” Chione did not sound annoyed at his earlier distraction, but amused.

He snorted and opened his eyes. “Yes, now you are making me feel more like a teenager than ever.”

“A teenager with a crush?” Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

He rolled his own at her and had them go to the railing. “He was actually worried about Mei. Wally had told him some story about how she got her Spirit and he was alarmed.”

Chione’s eyebrows rose. “I wonder what story Wally knows.”

“Probably the true one,” Valerius said with a sigh. “He spoke of Trojan Horses.”

“The robots?” She looked impressed. “He didn’t just see them as a danger from their surface, but a deeper danger?”

“Yes. I must call him back and find out his thoughts.” Valerius pulled out his phone and texted, Can you speak now?

“I wonder what Iolaire knows. The other Dragon Spirits knew one another in the other world, didn’t they?” she asked. It was a rare question from her.

“Does your Spirit not know others?” he asked back.

“It does not speak to me as yours does to you. It only sings.” She smiled softly, but then shook herself. “I should tell you the schedule of arrivals for the other Dragons so you can call Caden.”

His hand tightened on the phone. “Yes.”

I wish he were here, Valerius thought and it was completely unbidden. Look at me, Raziel, I am mooning over the boy.

Iolaire is the moon , Raziel murmured. It is the color of the finest moon and stars.

Valerius looked at his Spirit in surprise. Raziel had its head again on its front claws and was gazing dreamily down at the Mid.

You are even a bigger romantic than me, Raziel! Valerius laughed.

The Black Dragon’s eyes closed and it proceeded to snore.

“Valerius?” Chione asked, eyebrows raising again.

“I am here. I was just... speaking to Raziel.”

“And blushing!” Her voice thrilled with laughter. “Well, I am so glad to see you in a better mood than before.”

“I am surprised that you are not giving me gentle critique about how I treated Mei,”

he said, looking at her curiously.

Chione's eyes widened and she quickly shook her head. "After she brought those soldiers here? I was so glad you took her to task!"

"Really? Hmm, I shall have to continue to be more forceful." He stroked his beard.

She playfully hit his arm. "No! Mei and Illarion are the only two that truly need a show of temper!" She brought up a tablet and ticked off, "Queen Kaila shall arrive tomorrow around noon."

"Ah," he said with a faint flattening of his lips.

"You like her. I realize that she is flighty at times and--"

"She hates being away from water. We are practically land-locked here, which will trigger her boredom . And when Kaila is bored, she gets into trouble," he explained.

"She will liven things up." Chione smiled softly.

"Do we need to liven up?" His eyebrows rose this time. Then he said, "Have you reconnected since--"

"No, no, we are just friends now. So! Let's get on," she quickly said, her cheeks flaming hotter than his from earlier. "Queen Jahara will arrive later that evening."

Jahara was more reserved than Kaila by a yard. She was a planner by nature. He wondered how she would view Iolaire. She was steady and thoughtful. She would not come to a conclusion until she had seen and experienced everything.

"And King Anwar? When should we expect him?"



“The following morning. Though he will not like being last, he is a small Dragon and it takes longer for him to come so far.” She ticked something off on the tablet before tucking it beneath her arm. “He and Tez will undoubtedly start a war of words with Illarion that the Green Dragon King cannot win and there will be blood.”

“Perhaps it will stop him from criticizing High Reach, my clothes, the furniture--”

“He loves beautiful things and has very good taste. Perhaps you could ask him for some advice with--”

“I like how things are.” He glared at her.

She just smiled. “Well, we shall have all the Dragons here for the first time in two days from now. Momentous.”

“Yes, and all the more reason for our unknown bombers to strike,” he reminded her.

“I have an idea on this to try to get more information on Humans First that I’ve started in motion,” she said as she tapped her chin.

“Will you tell me what this plan is?”

Surprisingly, she shook her head. “No, I think plausible deniability is best in this. I’ll let you know if it goes anywhere, and then you can thank me or I can brush it under the carpet as a terrible idea.”

He snorted. “You don’t often have bad ideas, Chione.”

“That’s because I only tell you the good ones.” She patted his arm and headed in. “Enjoy your call!”

He smiled at her retreating figure just as he felt the buzz of his phone and Caden's message, Yes! Call me!

Valerius did and the phone was answered upon the first ring.

"Hey," Caden's voice was low and a little breathy. "I missed you."

A smile was on Valerius' lips immediately. All his annoyance at the other dragons and their shenanigans fell away. "I missed you as well. I think Raziel is even more heart broken."

"Really? Iolaire has been pining a little bit, too," Caden admitted.

"Oh, yes, I do not know if I should reveal how it referred to Iolaire." He leaned his hip against the warm stone railing.

"Now you have to tell me!" Caden laughed, utterly delighted.

"Something about how Iolaire is the moon." He paused to hear Caden and Iolaire's reaction to this. He was not disappointed.

"Iolaire is blushing! And preening! And giving me a nasty look for telling you!" Caden's laughter grew. "Oh, c'mon, Iolaire, it's not as embarrassing as I was with one of Valerius shirts!"

"What were you doing with that shirt?"

"Uhm."

"Caden."

“Uhm.”

“Caden!”

Caden burst out laughing again. “I can feel your hard stare all the way here in the warehouse!”

“It is my masterful stare,” Valerius corrected him, a sensual smile wreathing his lips.

“Masterful?” Caden held the laughter back.

“If you truly could see it, you would tell me immediately what you were doing with that shirt. Do you feel my stare, Caden? Are you going to deny me... or submit?” his voice dropped to a low growl.

He knew Caden was frisking then. He felt it as much as heard the young man walking about. “God! Do you know that I have a hard on and I’m supposed to go back out and help people buy red plushies?!”

Valerius grinned triumphantly. “How many red plushies?”

“Don’t worry, your majesty, not as many as the black plushies. And certainly not as many as the white plushies,” Caden added under his breath.

“What? Is the White Dragon selling more than me?” Valerius pretended mock outrage. Caden made a humming sound. “It is only because it is new .” Caden hummed again with a note of laughter. “Millions have already gotten my plushie!”

“Let’s not go that far! Though Wally would love it if it was true,” Caden told him. “I miss you.”

“So you said.”

“Well, I would say it a million times. I really miss you,” Caden’s voice dropped low.

Valerius lowered his head. “I know that you feel very alone right now, but I am... I am right here. I am with you. We must just get through this and then... then it will be just us again.”

“I can’t wait. Oh, speaking of those other Dragons, Wally told me a story about Mei,” Caden began.

“Tell me.”

And Caden did. He told Valerius both stories.

“So which is true, do you think? Rose is positive that Mei was the bandit, but I sort of hoped maybe not?” Caden’s voice rose slightly at the end.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, but she was the bandit,” Valerius told him gently.

“Oh, man, Rose was right!”

“Rose is a good judge of character, or rather, I should say that she has been disappointed by people enough that it is easier for her to believe something bad about someone instead of something good,” Valerius explained.

“Yeah, I guess.” There was a pause and then Caden added, “So those soldiers--”

“Undoubtedly, hide some secret or are to distract us from what she is really doing,” Valerius finished for him. “I threatened her within an inch of her life. She may have actually believed me, but I do not know if that will stop her if she has planned

something.”

“Do I have to meet her?” Caden’s outrage cracked his voice.

“No, you do not.”

There was a long sigh. “Yes, I do. Because she won’t leave if I don’t. So I have to.”

Valerius smiled. Caden understood that there were some things one might be duty bound to do. “The last three Dragons will be here within two days.”

“Two days?!” Caden squawked. “Why couldn’t they have just taken planes?”

That had Valerius laughing until he was holding his sides. Wiping tears from his eyes, he said, “Oh, Caden, what did I ever do without you?”

There was a shocked silence then Caden said, “I was here all along. You just needed to come to Wally’s.”

“Maybe I should have.”

Silence fell between them. Not an uncomfortable silence, just a happy one.

“You should be here around 7,” Valerius said softly.

“Before dinner, right?” Caden sounded so sad.

Valerius frowned. “Your mother is an excellent cook so I do not think you will be missing much.”

“I’ll be lucky if she even lets me have leftovers,” Caden sighed.

“They are still angry?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Your parents are sensible people. They will come around,” Valerius assured him. “But just in case they do not, I will have a picnic basket packed for you by the pool.”

“My stomach will thank you forever.”

Valerius chuckled. “We are ruled by our stomachs. Now, I should let you go, shouldn’t I?”

Caden was quiet. “I don’t want you to let me go.”

“I did not mean--”

“You meant to get back to work. I just...” Caden let out a self-conscious laugh. “It’s nothing. Just I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yes, tonight.”

He tightened his hand on the phone. Neither of them hung up. Valerius stared down at the Mid. He could see Dragon Strike Square from here and the roof of the Emporium.

“One of us should probably hang up now,” Caden said, but he didn’t sound like he was going to do it.

“We should.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I do not wish to either.”

“Well, this is a conundrum. I guess we’ll just have to wait until the batteries run out,” Caden chuckled.

“I suppose we will.”

But then, Wally’s voice came over the line, “Caden! We’re dying out here! I think there really will be blood if we don’t get more plushies out pronto!”

“All right, Wally!” Caden called then sighed as he said to Valerius, “I guess Wally crying or the batteries dying ends our call.”

“Yes, go help him and Rose.” Valerius smiled even as he ached a little bit letting Caden go.

“Tonight. We’ll see each other tonight,” Caden repeated as if assuring himself.

Valerius closed his eyes, imagining it was night already with the moon like Iolaire glowing. “Tonight.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

BETRAYER?

“Caden, when do you have to be at the--the thing tonight?” Wally asked as he, Caden and Rose headed out of the Emporium’s front doors.

Caden knew that the thing Wally was referring to was his meeting with the Red Dragon Queen Mei that evening at High Reach. Maybe after he dutifully met with her then he could somehow sneak around, shift and make his way to Valerius’ quarters so they could have some alone time. Valerius would likely think that was a bad idea. A very bad idea. He’d reminded Caden earlier that afternoon that it would only be a few days until the other Dragon Shifters were gone and that they would be alone again. But Caden still thought he might do it anyway.

“Caden? Earth to Caden?” Rose laughed. When his head jerked towards her, she tipped hers towards Wally. “He asked you a question.”

“Oh, right, seven. So I’ve got time.”

It was just a little after five. He had plenty of time. And he wasn’t sure what he was going to do or where he was going to spend it. He wasn’t going home that was for sure, unless Rose came with him. She would be the only reason his parents would actually speak with him.

“Would you like to come with me to see Landry?” Wally asked.

Caden blinked. “I thought she was in some kind of lockup where she couldn’t have visitors.”



Wally tipped his head up a little pridefully. “I may not still be in the underworld, kid, but I’ve got some connections.”

“Those must be some connections, Wally!” Rose looked impressed. “I don’t even think Marban could get into the Oubliette to see a prisoner like Landry. Not officially anyways, and certainly not to bring a guest!”

The Oubliette was the maximum security prison located in Low Reach. It was a thick, squat building that had high, sheer stone walls and narrow arrow-slit windows. The security was solely made up of the biggest Werewolves. Caden had only ever heard about it on the news and maybe passed by it once or twice in his life. He had never thought to know anyone inside. He certainly wouldn’t have expected Landry to ever be in there.

Unless it was to be visiting her brothers to be honest. But Landry herself? Never. I just can’t believe this is real.

Caden’s forehead furrowed at Rose’s words while Wally rocked back and forth, a huge grin on his face, loving the mystery. But then a thought came to Caden.

“Chione has something to do with this access, doesn’t she?” he asked.

Wally looked so crestfallen that Caden knew it was true.

“I don’t name sources, Caden! First thing about being your Councillor is that I got to keep our sources anonymous, even from you!” Wally sniffed.

“Even from me, huh?” Caden chuckled.

“Especially from you! Loose lips sink ships!” Wally wagged a finger in the air before he went to lock the Emporium behind them.

Truthfully, there was little reason to lock it as they had been cleaned out by the customers that day. Wally had called his suppliers and had jumped up and down like a piece of popcorn in a hot skillet as he demanded they work double, triple, quadruple overtime to get him all of his merch. All the Dragon Shifters coming into Reach was bigger than even the 30th Anniversary had been and he wouldn't miss out monetarily.

“I keep secrets, Wally! I can't believe you think I'd blab!” Caden shook his head.

“It's better not to know. So you won't have to worry about blabbing accidentally,” Rose told him. “And Wally is now your Councillor?”

“Yeah, Valerius has Chione so I needed someone, too. Who better than Wally? And you, of course! I think I have two of the best Councillors, honestly!” Caden smiled.

“I have a feeling your father's partners might be a little miffed about you taking advice from us and not them,” Rose said with a shake of her head.

“If I believed that they had my best interests at heart, I might listen to them, but they don't. They want power so they assume everybody else does, too, and for no other reason than to lord it over others,” Caden admitted with a shrug. “Besides, they haven't even asked to meet with me, yet I'm sure they are formulating plans and all that to talk to Justice St. John about my situation! Think about it! How can you represent somebody you've never spoken to?”

“You've got to pinch that in the bud, Caden. People speaking for you is bad business, especially if they don't represent your interests.” Wally was frowning as he pulled the key out of the lock and tested to make sure the door was securely locked.

“Yeah, I sort of did that with Mom and Dad last night.” Caden rubbed the back of his neck.

“It didn’t go well,” Rose succinctly told Wally.

“They want to do what’s best. But since they are your parents they want to act instead of you, instead of for you,” Wally guessed. “You’re the White Dragon Shifter and no one can do that job but you.”

“Yeah, I know.” He rubbed the back of his neck some more. It seemed the more they talked about his parents the tighter his muscles became there. “Even if they are mistakes.”

Wally shoved the massive keyring in his pocket. “They are your mistakes. They should be yours. It’s the only way to really learn.”

“Yeah, but now I’m thinking my mistakes have a lot more impact.” Caden’s lips flattened. He knew he was not smart enough to do this all on his own, but he had to be somewhat in control of his own message.

“You were chosen for a reason, Caden,” Wally assured him. “Things will work out. You’ll see.”

“Right. I’ve got to believe that.” Caden then realized Rose was about to take off. “Can Rose come with us to see Landry, too?”

But Rose was already shaking her head and putting up a hand as if to block the invitation physically. “No, I can’t go. Even if Landry would have wanted to see me for some unknown reason--”

“Because you’re cool, smart, kind--”

“Kind?” Rose laughed. “Okay, okay, but seriously, I have to spend time with some of my brothers and sisters in the Below.”

“When you say brothers and sisters, you don’t mean blood obviously?” Caden guessed. She’d mentioned that he’d saved one of her sisters from the original bomb attack.

She nodded. “No, just more of Marban’s followers. Anyway, they’ve started saying that I think I’m too good for them with all the time I’m spending in the Mid with you guys. So I need to patch up some of my friendships there.”

Caden felt a little stab of jealousy. He had worked hard to get Rose to trust him. He imagined her being free and easy with other people, freer than with him and Wally and it made him ridiculously envious of those unknown brothers and sisters.

Rose must have seen something on his face, because she put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Caden, I’m going to be talking to them about our plan for Iolaire to visit the Below.”

“I wasn’t worried! I mean you should spend time with your other friends. Not just me, Wally and Tilly. You have a life--”

“Yeah, I do, but that doesn’t mean that you guys aren’t my number ones,” she interrupted him and blushed as if revealing this much was embarrassing to her.

“You’re my number one too,” he quickly confessed.

“After Valerius,” she said with a laugh, but still looked pleased all the same. She patted his arm. “Go see Landry. If you think it will cheer her up at all, let her know that I’m thinking about her.”

“Will do,” Caden promised.

“My car is this way, Caden,” Wally said with a wave and started leading them around

to the side of the Emporium.

“We’re going in the Bug?” Caden grimaced.

“I do not see you with any vehicle, so yes , we are going in the Bug,” Wally informed him tartly.

The Bug was an ancient Volkswagen Beetle painted a dung brown with only two seats that semi-held their occupants in place while they were bouncing up and down like jumping beans due to the Bug’s lack of shock absorbers.

“Actually, Valerius has cars--”

“You should only be using those in an emergency and certainly not to go see Landry in the Oubliette! Make that the next bit of Councillor advice I give you!” Wally informed him as the Bug came into view.

Wally was right, of course. But Caden often couldn’t feel his butt after riding in the Bug, not to mention he’d bashed the top of his head more than once. Iolaire who had been napping--likely dreaming of Razielle--stirred a little bit in reaction to his anxiety, but he soothed his Spirit. The Bug was not an enemy. Just an annoyance.

While Wally climbed into the driver’s seat--which had a thick cushion so that he could see over the dash--Caden slipped into the passenger seat. He tried to click the seat belt but it wouldn’t hook. He looked over at Wally with disbelieving eyes.

“Oh, yeah, that broke. Just tie it around that handle there,” Wally suggested.

“Wally, I can only hope that all these plushie sales will lead to a new ride for you,” Caden said as he looped the seatbelt around the handle and prayed it would hold.

“What? And get rid of Bug? NEVER!”

With that Wally turned the key and the Beetle burst into life with a puff of black smoke coming from the exhaust pipe. The motor rattled and clanged as he pushed on the gas. They took off at about 5 miles per hour. The Bug took a while to gain any speed. It's top speed was something like 40 miles per hour. Caden rolled down the window and held onto the frame of the car as Wally drove them into the curving road that would lead to Low Reach.

By the time they got to the Oubliette, Caden's brain felt like it had broken loose of its moorings and had sloshed from one side of his skull to the other dozens of times. He leaned forward, breathing hard and trying to center himself, once Wally pulled the Bug into a parking space for prison visitors.

Wally patted him on the back. “You okay there?”

“Ah...”

“Caden, it wasn't that bad!”

“You have a cushion! I want the cushion next time,” Caden protested as he straightened. “I can't feel my spine!”

“You big baby. C'mon, Landry is waiting for us,” Wally said as he got out of the car.

Caden got out far slower as he had to unscrunch his spine and somehow get feeling back into his ass and legs. He hobbled after Wally as the little man impatiently waved to him to get a move on.

Wally didn't take them to the main entrance of the prison, but rather an employee entrance, which further had Caden thinking that Chione was behind this somehow.

They still had to go through a metal detector and a pat down, but it was brief, almost perfunctory, though Caden was still a bit in awe of the Werewolves whose hands were bigger than his head.

Soon, he and Wally were being escorted down a hallway that looked to be carved out of living rock, much like the Steps were, but there was nothing beautiful about this space. There was almost a brutalism to the way the stone was cut. Caden felt the prison's very being pressing down on him, almost choking him with the lack of sky and space. It wasn't airy either. Their Werewolf companion's head was just a few inches shy of the ceiling. And when they reached an actual visitor's room, that was barely large enough to hold the table and four chairs. Caden and Wally took the chairs on one side of the table and waited.

In a few moments, Landry was brought in. She wore a bright orange jumpsuit. Her dark hair was lank and hid her face entirely. The few flashes of her face he did get showed that her skin was oily and broken out. It held a pasty cast as well. Her wrists and ankles were shackled and she had to shuffle to move.

"Landry!" Caden jumped up to embrace her, but Wally caught his arm.

"No touching, kid. Those are the rules. Sit down," Wally instructed.

Caden reluctantly seated himself again. The large female Werewolf brought Landry around to the other side of the table. The top of the table was metal and there was a section that was raised up with a loop cut out through the center. The Werewolf slid the third handcuff on Landry's chained wrists around the loop and clicked it shut.

"What do you think she's going to do? Lunge at us?" Caden asked the Werewolf, anger tinting his words.

The Werewolf merely stared back at him impassively. In a low voice she said, "These

are the rules.”

Wally patted Caden’s hands. “It’s all right, Caden. She has to follow the rules. All of us are going to follow the rules.”

Wally said the last especially to the guard as if to assure her that they were not rule breakers and could be trusted. The Werewolf narrowed her dark blue eyes at Wally as if his words had the exact opposite effect.

“You have 30 minutes. No more. If you wish to leave the room before then, knock on the door and I’ll open it,” she said finally.

And then she moved off in that rangy stride that Werewolves had and left the room. There was a heavy clunk, thump as the lock was engaged. Caden suddenly felt like he had even less air to breathe than before. He glanced up for vents. The room smelled of rock and mildew. But then realizing that this was foolish to concentrate on when he only had to be there 30 minutes while Landry couldn’t leave, and maybe would never leave, Caden focused.

“Landry, are you okay? I mean, I know you’re not okay. But is there anything--anything we can do?” Caden asked.

Landry had been sitting there silently, head down, hands pressed close to her chest. She wasn’t even trying to touch them even though the guard was outside and wouldn’t be able to see. There was a camera, but would the guards spring into action for just a brush of fingers? Maybe they would. So Caden kept his hands in his lap even though he saw no red light on that would indicate the camera was recording.

His right leg started bouncing. Iolaire was waking up and did not like this space where it could not see the sky or feel the breeze.



“You shouldn’t have come,” Landry finally said softly.

Caden blinked. That was not what he had expected to hear. He had thought Landry would be glad to see familiar, friendly faces. But instead, it seemed as if she wished they hadn’t come at all.

Wally, however, did not seem surprised. “Worried about what people on the block will say if they know you’ve seen us?”

There was a sharp intake of breath that caused some of Landry’s lank hair to pull against her lips. She fumbled it away.

“No one will know, Landry,” Wally assured her.

“The guards talk,” she mumbled.

“This one won’t,” Wally said.

She bit her lower lip. The skin blanched. “Humans First know who you are, Wally. They know who--who Caden is--is, too. Because of me .”

“Don’t worry about that, Landry!” Caden assured her. “They already knew. I’m sure the surveillance videos already made the rounds far before Jasper talked to you.”

If Caden was truly honest with himself, the revelation of who he was might already be known to the Dragon Shifters, and all this subterfuge with Valerius might not be necessary. But still, the general public didn’t know and they were the ones whose knowledge could really change his life.

“He confused me. He made me think... I had no choice. Or... I did have a choice, but I made the one where I gave you up, Caden,” she whispered. “That’s why you

shouldn't be here."

"You're stuck between a rock and a hard place. You had to make a decision to save your brothers. I get that," Caden assured her. "That's not important right now. What's important is figuring out how to get you out of here."

She seemed to fold in on herself even more. "There's no getting out of here, Caden. I'm a terrorist."

"You were an unwitting accessory," Wally contradicted, tapping a stubby finger on the table. "While the law doesn't differentiate at times, prosecutors do. Offer up what you know. Everything you know."

She was shaking her head. "But my brothers--"

"Landry, your brothers have made their beds," Wally said flatly. "You are the only one that could potentially get out of this. They won't."

She cringed again and Caden felt a welling of anger towards her brothers. How could they get their little sister involved in something like this? He tried to imagine him coercing Tilly into a plot to plant a bomb and just couldn't! No matter how good the cause, he wouldn't drag her into this. But Landry's brothers had.

"Landry," Caden said softly, "your brothers wanted to hurt people. In fact... They still want to hurt people. You never have."

"I didn't know," she said weakly. "Not about the bomb, but I did about you, Caden."

"Landry," Wally continued. "I've always been straight with you. I think you know that I don't give advice that I wouldn't take."

She nodded miserably.

Wally leaned forward. “The best thing you can do is to help stop Humans First and Jasper Hawes.”

Another sharp intake of breath. “They’ll hurt my family, Wally!”

“I’m not saying there aren’t risks, but I’m betting people can help you and your family disappear,” Wally said quietly.

Caden’s head jerked towards him. Had Chione asked Wally to offer this? Was this some kind of witness protection thing?

He felt Landry frowning. “But my brothers--”

“Again, there’s no saving them, sweetheart. But your mom and dad... yourself... These are the people you can save. And more. You can stop these bombings, Landry, and all the other bad things that Humans First are doing,” Wally told her. His mustache quivered with his intensity. “You did a wrong thing, Landry, by telling your brothers about the plans for the square and ratting out Caden, but you can more than make up for that by helping to stop Humans First.”

She was shaking her head, or maybe her whole body was just shaking. “I don’t know if I can do it, Wally. You don’t know what it’s like in here. You have to pick a side and I--I am not a Shifter so I--I need--”

“I know exactly what it’s like in here, Landry, and other, worse prisons too,” Wally interrupted softly. “I know that you need protection and that the only real choice you’ve got is Humans First in there.”

She nodded after a moment. “I don’t hate Shifters, but... but if you don’t choose a

side in here... I had to do it.”

Caden’s heart fell. He could well imagine that Landry needed protection in this place. The Shifters would want to kill her. If she didn’t choose Humans First then she would be on her own. But by choosing Humans First it made her seem all the more guilty.

“It’s actually good that you are with Humans First in here. You should amp up their belief in you,” Wally told her. “You should make them think that you’re solidly a part of them so that they will tell you things.”

“Things? Like what... oh.” Landry sat there, stunned.

“And then you can tell us those things and you’ll tell a judge and jury those same things. Do you see, Landry? You’ll have a chance to keep yourself safe, but also to keep others safe,” Wally said.

“I--I don’t know... maybe... if I could help, I’d want to help, but I’m--I’m scared, Wally!” she wailed.

Caden’s heart clenched again and all he wanted to do was break Landry out of here. Hearing Wally’s words had given him hope. Landry spying on Humans First seemed a tall order, but maybe not. She was one of the people who had tried to blow up the Shifters at the square. She was the sister of some of the ring leaders. She knew Jasper Hawes.

“I know it’s scary, sweetheart. But, trust me, you need to find your way out,” Wally said. His pudgy hands were clenched together on top of the table.

“I’m not sure,” she mumbled as she lowered her head.

“But you’ll think about it?” Caden asked.

She nodded silently.

Wally let out a breath he'd evidently been holding in. "That's all we can ask for."

Caden's gaze went up to the camera. He was pretty sure that Wally was wily enough not to have let this conversation be recorded. Chione certainly was wily enough.

"We'll come and see you again," Caden began.

But Landry was shaking her head. "You shouldn't come, Caden. You shouldn't be anywhere near here. Humans First are always watching. And they are always watching you."

Caden's jaw gritted. "I can take care of them."

"That's just what they want," she said. "For you to lose your temper and--"

"They tried that," Caden said, remembering clearly the park incident. "I can handle myself."

"They'll push and push and push..." Landry sighed. "They'll find your weak moment."

"They will try, but they won't succeed." Caden's brows drew together in determination.

She lifted her head. "But also you shouldn't come because, whether I do this thing for Wally or not, I can't be seen talking to you."

Caden's eyes widened for a moment. But then it was clear. Humans First would hardly trust Landry, let alone confide secrets to her, if they thought she was meeting

with the White Dragon Shifter. Even if only the upper levels of Humans First knew who he was, they would report that he was coming to see her.

“I get it,” Caden said stiffly. “I put you in danger.”

She nodded. “You shouldn’t want to be around me, Caden, because I figured out something about myself.” Her skin flushed. “When it comes down to it, I’m a coward and will sell you out to save myself.”

Before he had time to react, she was calling for the guard. The clunk-thump of the lock disengaging happened faster than it had before. The female Werewolf was back, releasing Landry from the table. And then they were leaving the room.

Landry didn’t even look back.

### REVEAL

Valerius waited on the plaza outside his throne room for Caden--or rather, Iolaire--to arrive. He wore his customary black, but this time his shirt was silk and his pants and boots were leather. He wore a single ruby on a gold chain on his neck. The ruby was huge and plainly cut. He normally did not have any interest in such baubles, but this one was simple, beautiful and expressed what it needed to. He was king of kings and queens.

His hair stirred in the breeze, but he resisted the urge to shut his eyes. Caden would be there soon. Raziel was intent on seeing Iolaire the moment it appeared on the horizon. But both were running late.

“Wally and I went to see Landry,” Caden had explained over the phone earlier.

Valerius had heard the roar of the motor of one of the SUVs that Caden had been driving to the pond in, to quickly stuff food into his mouth from the picnic basket that Valerius had left for him there, before shifting and flying fast back to High Reach.

“I do not know if that was...” Valerius stopped. What word should he use here? What word would get across his feelings on the matter without hurting Caden’s? He grimaced. There was no word. “Wise? Was that wise for you or for her?”

Caden let out a brittle laugh. “You’ll be happy to know that Landry agrees with you that it wasn’t.”

Valerius grimaced again. He had hurt Caden. “It is not that I do not understand your

affection for her, but--”

“She betrayed me. She did some foolish, bad things. She could have gotten people killed, including my family if Jasper had really gone ahead with his threat to bomb my house.” Caden went silent. “But I just can’t see her as anyone other than Landry, my friend, the person who was willing to go to jail for me to protect my secret from you.”

“Yes, but in her pantheon of needs, there are things in there above you. That is not a criticism of her.” Though Valerius truly thought it was. From what he could tell Landry’s brothers had earned their fates, whatever grim ones awaited them, and her parents had supported the speciest ideology that had permeated their home, poisoning everything. “But it is simply a fact. She has recognized her limits and is warning you off.”

There was a long silence on the line, and Valerius suddenly imagined Caden’s face trailed with tears and eyes bleak, and he tightened his hold on the phone.

“I can’t save everybody, right? I can’t fix everything? Just saying it makes me realize how arrogant it sounds and not... good at all,” Caden’s voice was hoarse .

Not arrogant. Naive. Innocent. Idealistic. Earnest.

“It is hard when one is given so much power, only to find it is not enough,” Valerius remarked softly.

It was a lesson he’d had to learn often enough. It was the feeling he had even now as the other Dragon Shifters moved about within his own castle. He had so much power, but would it be enough to keep Caden safe?

The boy is strong. Iolaire is wise. All will be well, Raziel remarked.



I am surprised you did not put something in there about us assuring that by ripping every other Dragon's wings off. Valerius couldn't help the grin that crossed his lips.

Raziel, who was standing up, and watching keenly through his eyes stated simply, That goes without saying.

"Our new brother or sister is late," Mei said from behind him.

Her step was light. He turned around to see her. Like him, she was dressed far more finely than the afternoon where she had played "queen of the people". Now she looked like an empress in a silk kimono-esque dress of reds, oranges and golds with her hair drawn up in an elaborate bun where two long sharp pins were stuck.

"Iolaire will be here." He turned back to look at the horizon.

There was a faint rustle of silk and waft of jasmine perfume as she joined him at the railing. This meant she had tried to hide her approach before. Valerius gritted his teeth as his annoyance at her games flowed through him again.

"Why are you here, Mei?" Valerius asked her.

He did not turn to look down at her. He kept his eyes on the darkening sky. But he saw her look at him.

"To meet Iolaire, of course," she answered.

"But why ? To seek out a--a mate as Illarion does, or an ally as Esme does, or someone to showboat to like Tez does?"

"Showboat?" Mei giggled, raising one delicate hand to hide her mouth as she did so.

"I suppose Tez does do that. He enjoys the compliments and attention. He is a very

vain creature, but he tries to do good as well.”

“You are not vain, Mei. Not about your looks. You use them as a weapon and a shield, but that is as much as you care about them,” Valerius remarked. “No, you want respect. And if someone does not respect you, they learn to regret it, no matter if you appear to be a sweet, innocent girl.”

Her eyelashes fluttered across her expertly made up cheeks. Her skin was as perfect as a doll’s. Chione was beautiful, but in a wild, natural way. She did dress up and act like an adult. But she never cared if she got a spot on her clothes or ice cream on her chin. She was beautiful no matter what. Mei’s beauty was one carefully crafted. He could never imagine her allowing a stray hair to be out of place unless she intended it to be.

“That is quite the compliment from you,” she answered him.

He grunted. “I am a blunt instrument, Mei.” He turned towards her. His greater height and breadth were just part of what set them apart. “I say only what I mean.”

Her dark-eyed gaze was upon him, studying him minutely, but then she was shaking her head. “You expect people not to believe you. Even when you are being very blunt.”

“So I ask again, Mei. Why are you here?”

“I need to know what Iolaire intends. We have been eight for so long. Now we are nine,” she answered.

“And you do not believe that Iolaire does not want their slice of the pie? Even though they have been clear that they wish to remain in my territory and simply be left alone?” His right eyebrow lifted. She gave a shrug as if to say, who wouldn’t? These

had been his thoughts as well. “If they were you or I or any of our other brethren, I would agree with you, but Iolaire has no such designs.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are telling the truth of what you believe. But how can you be so sure?”

“By knowing them.”

She shook her head. “This may be what they want now , but later?” She let out a sharp laugh and crossed her arms over her chest. “You think things will not change when they realize that you will never give them even an inch to breathe let alone rule anything?”

He scowled. “Have you not heard of my Shifter Council?”

Her eyebrows rose and she let out a laugh. “A ruse! It will have no real power!”

“Marban is not one to be snowed for long,” Valerius pointed out.

“Marban, Marban, Marban.” Her voice thrilled with laughter and disdain. “His grasp exceeds his reach.”

Valerius felt a touch of unease. What experience did Mei have with Marban? It sounded as if she had a secret. He would find out what it was.

“All right, let us say that Iolaire chaffs under my leadership, what can you offer? Part of your territory?” His dismissive tone showed just how likely it would be that she offered that.

“No, but what I propose will definitely lead to all of us retaining our territory intact,” she said, touching her carefully plaited hair.

“What?”

Her smile, which had been small, but there the whole time they spoke, grew, bloomed. “A true partnership. Something that you would never give. That none of the others would either.”

Whenever she speaks, she lies, Raziel stated with a disgusted puff of smoke. What partnership has she ever given that has not ended in death? Caden and Iolaire will see right through her as we do.

But still, even with his own and Raziel’s certainty that Caden could not be won over by this woman, his skin suddenly felt hot and tight and he wanted to rip through it and her. He loomed over her. His shadow, the Black Dragon’s shadow, grew out from his own.

His voice was soft, almost like a lover’s murmur as he said, “Like the one you offered the mayor’s son all that time ago?” She was too much in control of herself at all times to react to that fully, but she did freeze and her eyes widened just for a moment. “Iolaire knows all about that. Your reputation precedes you.”

At that moment, his eyes caught sight of Iolaire’s graceful form flying towards them. He pulled away from her and turned his back. Iolaire and Caden were all that mattered. She did not.

The other Dragon Shifters flowed out of the throne room in their finery, too. Esme was in a deep royal blue sleeveless dress with a light blue sparkly wrap. Tez was in one of his handmade ensembles that combined modern clothing with native flair. Feathers stuck up from his hair and there was a beaded fringe coming from his shirt and boots. Illarion was dressed in blood red with a long militaristic coat with a fur collar.

Iolaire circled High Reach twice. It was a magnificent display of the white, pearlescent scales against the dark blue sky. But Valerius knew the flying was because Caden was unsure of how to land.

Could you tell the others to go back inside or something? Caden begged. I might smush them! The plaza is too small!

Valerius couldn't help the chuckle he let out. Caden, Raziel is four times Iolaire's size and we land here quite easily.

Don't lord your perfect flying skills over me! Caden cried. You won't think the plaza is big enough when Iolaire's butt lands on Mei's head!

I actually think it is the perfect size if you do that. Valerius' lips twitched.

Caden actually laughed, too. Yeah, true, but our goal is for me to make a good impression, right?

I am not so sure of that. Considering both Mei and Illarion seem intent on partnering with you, Valerius replied dryly as he watched Caden make yet a third gliding loop around High Reach. I think you should show them just how much trouble you really are so they won't be so eager.

Mei wants to be my mate?! Caden's wings drooped and he nearly crashed into one of the towers.

Valerius winced. Esme murmured something encouraging and lifted her hands into the air as if to keep Iolaire aloft.

She wants a partnership, Valerius growled.

A partnership?! Maybe she means like we'd be even partners ruling her territory--

Caden! Do not be foolish! Even as Valerius' heart did a foolish flip-flop at the fact that Caden would even see anything positive about Mei's proposal.

Valerius, I would never choose her over you and Raziel, Caden told him sounding absurdly fond. Remember? I want to stay here... with you.

Suddenly, Iolaire's movements were much more graceful as if Caden had finally found his groove with this flying thing.

Let Iolaire land, Raziel urged, speaking for the first time. You are still a youngling with your first wings .

Oh, I would! But Iolaire wants ME to do it! Caden protested. Iolaire, listen to Raziel! Raziel has got the right idea here. There was silence and then Caden said, Damn! Iolaire still wants me to try!

Valerius knew then that he had to give Caden confidence to do this. That is all right. You can do this, Caden. Why don't you come around again and... and hover.

Okay, right, I can do that.

Esme came to his side. "Is Iolaire allowing its human counterpart to, ah, land?"

Valerius nodded. "I think it best we stay at the edges of the plaza. All of you, move here!"

The last barked order had everyone quickly moving out of the way.

"What is wrong with Iolaire?" Illarion scowled.

“Nothing. Our dear little baby Dragon is making one of their first landings.” Esme pressed her hands together in front of her chest, eyes fixed on Iolaire.

Illarion let out a nasty laugh. “What is this? Kiddie school?”

Tez looked at him as if he were an ugly insect. “They just got their Spirit, Illarion. I am certain at this same stage you were tripping over your own claws.”

Illarion’s face purpled. “You--”

“Hush! They need quiet!” Mei held up a hand and both Illarion and Tez surprisingly quieted.

Caden had made his way around and was hovering awkwardly about 100-feet above the plaza.

The ground looks really far down, Valerius! Caden mumbled.

You are safe. You are fine, Valerius soothed. Now, I want you to slowly start decreasing the number of flaps you’re making. You will lower slowly.

Caden stopped flapping and he nearly dropped like a stone, but quickly started flapping double-time again.

I don’t think I can do this! I really can’t! Caden gasped.

You can, Valerius put all of his will behind those words. Then he stepped out in the middle of the plaza right before where Caden would land if he landed perfectly.

What are you doing? Are you insane? Caden demanded.

Raziel snorted. It was completely amused and entranced by all of this.

I trust you, Valerius told him .

You shouldn't! Caden squawked. Valerius, I'm new to this and--

I trust you in this, because you would do anything not to hurt me, Valerius answered simply and stood there.

Valerius then lifted his hands into the air, and feeling rather like an aircraft controller, started to guide Caden down. There were sharper dips in Caden's altitude than were ideal, but slowly, but surely Caden landed. When his clawed feet touched the ground, Caden let out a huge sigh and immediately pressed his head against Valerius' front. Valerius petted him gently. Esme started clapping. Tez gave a chant of appreciation. Illarion crossed his arms over his chest and looked unimpressed. Mei just had a small smile on her lips.

Phew! I made it! Caden gasped.

You did! I knew you could, Caden, Valerius assured him.

You were right that I didn't want to crush you so that's why it worked.

Caden let out great gusts of icy breath from his nostrils in relief, which coated Valerius' clothes with a sparkling layer of frost. Raziel allowed their fires to build and the frost dissipated faster than it had come. His Spirit wanted them to shift and curl their neck around Iolaire as they breathed fire and ice.

"What are you saying to one another?" Tez asked as he came over, eager to pet Iolaire once more.



“What do you mean? They are saying nothing!” But Illarion looked interested in spite of himself.

“Can you hear Iolaire’s thoughts, Valerius?” Esme asked as she, too, drifted nearer to Iolaire.

“Yes, and they can hear mine.” Valerius continued to pet Caden’s head.

“That is a rare gift. It must be Iolaire’s gift,” Mei said quietly as she approached Caden. “You would have shown the ability with the rest of us if it was yours, Valerius.”

Or maybe we’re just meant to be together! Caden lifted his head and gave her a narrow-eyed look.

Mei stopped in mid-stride as she read right that Iolaire was unhappy with what she had suggested. She lifted her hands as if to show that she was the helpless girl that she had portrayed herself to be to the mayor’s son so long ago.

“What else can you do, Iolaire?” Mei asked softly as she took one step closer then another. “I know about your ice breath. We all saw that in technicolor.”

Her smile grew slightly larger as she put in that dig against Valerius. He couldn’t quite blame her, considering the ones he’d had at her expense. And yet, she had come here and annoyed him first. He had the right to be testy. She was just being rude.

“Iolaire can make it so we cannot shift,” Tez offered with a sort of acidic helpfulness. He wasn’t fond of Mei, believing that she enslaved her people. “Ask Illarion here. He can tell you exactly what that power is like. Instead of erectile dysfunction, it’s Shifter dysfunction.”

Mei stopped walking. Her eyes slid towards Tez and Illarion to see if he was telling the truth. Clearly, she worried about that power being used on her. Valerius thought it might drive her far crazier than Illarion to not be in control of the Shift.

Iolaire says the power should wear off naturally in 24 hours or so, Caden admitted.

A whole day? He was certainly taught his lesson, Valerius assured him.

He looks like he wants to give Tez a lesson, Caden remarked.

Valerius glanced over at the Green Dragon Shifter. Illarion's poisonous gaze was locked on Tez. "You'd best lock your door tonight, peasant, not that it will save you from me--"

"Enough! There will be no violence unless I am the one committing it against your thick skulls!" Valerius shouted.

Caden was beetling in on himself. It was amazing a Dragon could look so small. Even Iolaire. Valerius petted him some more.

It is all right, Caden. Do not pay attention to them. Pay attention to me, Valerius urged.

Caden's bright blue eyes focused on him and Caden gently lowered his head so once again his nose was pressed against Valerius' front. Caden still regarded the other Dragon Shifters suspiciously, even Esme. Caden seemed like a kitten hiding behind his father's arms. Valerius leaned down and kissed Caden's head. He had not thought how this action would be perceived until Caden's slightly hysterical laughter filled his mind

Uhm, Valerius, you just kissed me , Caden stated.

I... hmmm, yes, I did. Valerius slowly straightened.

Both he and Caden glanced over at the others. Luckily, Chione was not there. She would have laughed out loud. As it was, Esme hummed to herself and swished the skirt of her dress in an effort to stop from guffawing. Tez was beaming as if a proud papa. Illarion's expression was stony. Mei was impossible to read. Valerius turned away from all of them.

I think the cat is sort of out of the bag that we like one another now unless you do this with all of them too. Nose kisses, Caden snorted.

Valerius' lips twitched. Didn't you know that nose kisses are common between Dragon Shifters?

Really? Okay then. Give Illarion a nose kiss, Caden challenged.

I would rather not. Valerius patted Caden's head some more.

"I would request time alone with Iolaire," Mei stated suddenly.

"If she gets time alone with Iolaire, then I want to as well!" Tez cried. "It would be completely unfair otherwise!"

"It is clear from your behavior, Valerius, that you have been stacking the deck in your favor." Illarion glowered. "We must all be allowed to make our case and have our time with Iolaire."

The only one that didn't ask for this "alone time" was Esme, but she gave Valerius a look that screamed, "You did this to yourself, young man!"

You do not have to do anything you do not want to, Caden, Valerius assured him,

realizing that he had indeed made a mistake. But it had to come out sooner or later. He did not believe that the others would not have pushed this issue to be with Iolaire even if he had remained apparently neutral.

“I will not leave until my request is granted!” Illarion almost stamped his foot at this.

I think I’ll do it. Just to get them to go, Caden sighed. His wings slumped slightly.

This is my fault. You do not--

That’s not true! Okay... it’s sort of true, but they weren’t going to settle for these meet and greets anyways. We both know that, Caden assured him.

But before Valerius could say anything further, either to Caden, or to the assembled Dragon Shifters, Caden’s head was suddenly up and he resembled more a pointer dog than a Dragon as he was staring at something intently through the throne room’s open doors. Everyone looked, though all Valerius saw was the heel of someone who had evidently passed through the doorway.

Caden? What is--

It’s her! Caden cried.

Who? Valerius asked.

Caden quivered, about to lunge through the too small doorway. The girl who set the bomb!

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Caden lunged past Valerius. Or rather he sort of barreled the Black Dragon King over. Valerius let out a startled cry as he was dashed to the ground. Caden stuck his head and part of his long neck into the throne room. He saw the fox-faced girl at the far corner of the room. Her mouth was opened, forming an “O” of surprise and alarm. Then she was moving again. Her feet amusingly flew out on either side of her as she scrambled to run deeper into the castle and away from him, where he could not go.

Freeze her! Iolaire suggested.

Now you want to be part of the action! Caden laughed.

Ice! Iolaire hooted in happiness.

You better take over then because I don’t want to hurt her! Caden said.

As the fox-faced girl headed towards the far doorway. Iolaire sent a wave of ice breath towards her. She yelped. The world went white. Caden’s heart was in his throat until it cleared. The fox-faced girl was stuck to the wall with a curved “bar” of ice that held her a foot off of the ground. She struggled wildly in her icy prison, but she was unharmed. Caden grinned.

Perfect! He told Iolaire.

Iolaire hooted again.

“Well, aren’t you a pretty young man,” Mei said as she slid underneath their chin and entered the room.

What? How does she know-- Caden’s thoughts came to an abrupt halt as he saw the mirrored wall that was opposite them.

In it, there should have been Iolaire’s massive dragon’s head and Mei’s slender form sheathed in fiery red. But there wasn’t. He saw himself in the mirror. His human body. Naked and blinking back at himself stupidly.

“You’d best pull back, young man,” Mei whispered conspiratorially. “Before the others see. I’ll keep your secret. This will let us meet alone in person, will it not? Then we can truly talk.”

She winked knowingly even as Caden reared back as if struck by lightning. His heart was thumping so hard that he thought it would beat out of his chest. Adrenaline coursed through his system.

Mei knows! She saw me! Caden cried as he cast about wildly as if to physically hide himself in some way.

The mirror! I should have warned you, Valerius thought grimly.

I didn’t give you a chance! Caden answered.

He hadn’t. He had just acted so the fox-faced girl didn’t get away. Valerius had just gotten upright now, having recovered from Caden’s lunge. The panic melted away at the realization that he had bowled Valerius over. Caden quickly nosed him.

Are you all right? Did I hurt you? Caden asked.

I am more than fine. Valerius gave him a smile and patted his cheeks. But who is our friend in there? The one you risked so much for?

She was the fox-faced girl I saw in the square who set the bomb, Caden quickly explained. But what about Mei? I...

Valerius grimaced. One thing at a time. What is done is done. We will deal with it. But this girl is more important.

Y-yeah, you're right, of course. But Caden still felt exposed and fragile despite being in their dragon-form.

"What is the cause of all of this excitement?" Esme asked as she glanced through the open doors. She let out a gasp. "What--why... Serai! Why has Iolaire attacked her?"

"You know this girl, Esme?" Valerius turned towards the Blue Dragon Queen.

Caden's heart was hammering again. Could Esme be behind the bombing? No, she couldn't be! She was Valerius' friend! Besides, she had a look of genuine shock on her face.

"This young woman." Valerius pointed at the still struggling Serai. "Is the one who set the bomb in Dragon Strike Square."

Esme blinked. "W-what?" She put a hand on her chest. "That's impossible!"

Again, she seemed genuinely shocked. Caden got no sense of acting from her at all. But he didn't know her well. And she was supposed to be one of the most cunning of the Dragon Shifters.

Valerius, could Esme... Caden's thoughts dropped.

No, at least... Valerius looked grimmer. I do not believe that Esme would be so foolish as to bring the same girl to High Reach after she had her set a bomb knowing that you would be here. It would be too risky and Esme is not a risk-taker.

Unless Serai didn't tell her that I had seen her, Caden suggested softly.

Even so, she wouldn't risk it. She has backup plans for backup plans. She trusts in nothing and no one, Valerius answered. If she wished to go against me, she would not be sloppy like this.

I'm glad. I--I like her, Caden admitted.

She had petted him and been kind about his icy breath. He genuinely believed she wanted to show him how to be a Dragon Shifter. But he mostly didn't want it to be true because she seemed the one friend Valerius had among the Shifters that he had met so far. Tez was one, too, but lesser because Valerius and his personalities clashed.

As do I. Going up against Esme would be far more dangerous than Mei or Illarion in any case so I have more selfish reasons for hoping it is not so, Valerius told him.

You mean because she's smarter than them? Caden knew that Illarion was the physically strongest of the three, and likely second only to Valerius. Mei had magma to Esme's water breath so they would be evenly matched in that.

Mei is clever. But Esme is careful. She did not get where she is by being foolish or acting without thinking things out eleven steps ahead of her, Valerius explained.

Speaking of Mei, she was over by Serai, pacing in front of the struggling girl, with one finger tapping her delicate chin and regarding her curiously. She, too, seemed to not know who the girl was. But, then again, Mei must have been a good actress as she



was able to convince the mayor's son that she loved him and wanted only the best for him until she stabbed him in the heart.

What about Mei? Could Serai be working for her? Though neither of them are acting like they know the other, Caden said.

He risked a quick head duck to see what was happening in there. After glimpsing his human face again, he determined not to do that again. Luckily, no one had been looking into the mirror at the time.

“Could Iolaire be mistaken?” Tez asked. “I hardly remember the circumstances of my joining.”

“You did not forget the faces or names of the people responsible for you and the others being in that mine, now did you?” Esme asked dryly. “So I highly doubt that Iolaire or its human counterpart has forgotten the face of the person who set the bomb that would have killed him or her otherwise.”

“No.” Tez frowned. “I suppose that face would be burned into my memory.”

“Your people have either betrayed you or you have betrayed Valerius, Esme. Either way, you are deep in it!” Illarion remarked with a snort.

Esme tossed him an icy glance. “That is likely what someone intends , but it shall not be so. For I have not betrayed Valerius, and I will find out from Serai who put her up to this!”

Esme stalked into the throne room. Tez reluctantly followed after her as if he were compelled to learn this young woman's story. Illarion went over to the railing and leaned against it, arms crossed over his chest as he watched Iolaire with hooded eyes.

You should go in there, Valerius. I'm fine out here, Caden urged the Black Dragon King.

I do not wish to leave you alone with Illarion, Valerius answered simply.

The very fact that Valerius was hesitating in leaving him warmed Caden. But Valerius needed to discover if Serai's betrayal extended beyond her to one or more of the other Dragon Shifters.

I'll be fine. He tries anything and he doesn't get to shift for another day. Caden gave Illarion a narrow-eyed look.

Indeed. Raziel would like to see you do that again, Valerius laughed.

I bet. Caden nosed the Black Dragon King's stomach, loving the smell of him, and wanting to have that in his nose even as he thought it best that Valerius go inside while he remained outside.

Valerius frowned. You must not repeat this to Chione but...

What? Caden felt a little agog about whatever the Black Dragon King didn't want his Councillor to know.

But I could use her guidance in this. Valerius sighed.

Caden chuckled.

Do not laugh! But soon Valerius was grinning himself, though he soon sobered.

I'm betting you know what she would say in this situation, Caden guessed.

Serai is Esme's citizen, not mine , Valerius explained slowly . But Serai committed an act of terror against my people. So there is a line I must walk not to interfere in Esme's business, but to protect my own as well .

Valerius scratched Caden between the ears as he spoke. His gaze was distant and Caden realized how hard this must be for Valerius. He knew there were enemies on all sides and yet he couldn't just crush everyone to end the threat. Well, maybe Valerius could , but he was trying to find another solution.

You should still be in there, Caden told him. Chione would likely tell you to let Esme take the lead, and to only interject if you must.

Valerius' eyebrows rose. You already know her so well despite just having met.

Caden shrugged and their wings rustled. I've just seen her do it a bunch of times in the sticky situations that have cropped up. I figure she would advise you to do the same!

You are right. Valerius nodded and smiled. You are completely right.

Where is Chione by the way? I can't believe she wouldn't be in the thick of things.

She is dealing with a matter with President Goodfellow. She will join everyone at dinner.

Dinner, Caden sighed. He would not be having any and the picnic basket of food he'd snarfed down before coming here seemed a long time ago.

I wish I could cook for you upstairs. I would make you beef--

Don't talk about beef! I want that beef! But Caden shook himself. Go on. Get in

there. Do your kingly duty and then come back out to me.

You just do not wish me to speak of beef.

Damned straight.

Valerius gave him another nose-kiss, which was just awesome. Somehow he could feel that kiss on his scales as much as he could feel it on his human skin. Caden then soon lost sight of Valerius as the Black Dragon King strode inside. Caden could not risk even lowering his head to look into the throne room again to follow Valerius' beloved body, or he really risked someone seeing his human form in the mirror so he could only listen now to what happened. Their ears twitched.

"Serai," Esme's voice rose up. "A very serious charge has been laid against you. Namely, that you are the one who placed the bomb in Dragon Strike Square."

"Mistress! What?" Serai's voice was soft and breathy like an innocent girl's.

But what innocent girl sets a bomb that would kill people? Caden asked himself as much as Iolaire. She looks the same age as Tilly though!

Iolaire agreed and dug their claws into the plaza's stone and earth floor.

"Should we perhaps let her down from that ring of ice?" Tez asked, sounding as if he was incredibly uncomfortable seeing a child constrained in that way.

Caden was surprised it was Esme who answered sharply, "No. I will have my answers now."

I don't think Esme is the type to accept any reason for betrayal, Iolaire.

Another soft hoot from his Dragon Spirit confirmed they were in agreement on this as well.

Is her coldness to Serai more proof that Esme isn't a part of this? Or just a desire for others not to be able to interrogate Serai without her?

Iolaire found this all disturbing. It did not understand why the girl would want to harm innocents in the square. Why had her Spirit not intervened and stopped her?

Lots of Spirits help their humans kill , Caden pointed out gently. Even Valerius and Raziel have killed in their day. And would have hurt us if we hadn't gotten away from them before they knew us, remember?

Another soft hoot and Iolaire's head lowering acknowledged that truth though he felt Iolaire's desire to explain away Raziel's reaction. Territory. Protection. Not malice.

Yeah, you're right about that, Caden said.

There was certainly a difference between the cowardly act of someone setting a bomb that would hurt people who were not attacking versus believing one had been attacked viciously and defending oneself.

"Iolaire says you are the girl it saw that placed the backpack with the bomb," Valerius' voice was surprisingly gentle. "Was it you?"

"N-no! How could I? I was in England when the bomb went off!" Serai cried. "Mistress, you saw me that day! How could I be in two places at once?"

Could I be wrong, Iolaire? Caden asked. Maybe she just looks like the girl. You were not with me when--

I was there. I watched. It is her, Iolaire responded.

You were there? Did you know it was going to happen? Caden asked.

The White Dragon Spirit did not answer him exactly, only saying, Watching you.

You were watching me? For how long? And why? I--

Listen now, Iolaire interrupted gently.

Caden realized that Iolaire would not answer more, perhaps it wouldn't have even if there hadn't been important information that they needed to listen to. So he sighed and accepted this. But he would come back to it. Not to mention, he noted that Iolaire was expressing itself in more complex sentences. It was learning.

"You were with me in the morning , Serai. You could have gotten here by the time the bomb was to be set," Esme answered her, and there was a chill in her tone.

"But you'll see I was on no planes! I--"

"Even if I could check every single plane that flies between England and the United States for you, which would be a herculean task and most likely a fruitless one if you came by private jet, there are plenty of other ways to make your way here in time," Esme responded tartly. "I would hope whoever is trying to harm Valerius--and evidently, myself, too--would have the wherewithal and the respect to not send you via coach and under your own name without a disguise."

"Mistress! Why would you think I would do this?" Serai wailed.

Caden's heart clenched. Iolaire hid their head in a wing. She sounded so young.

But she isn't. Once a person bonds with their Spirit they are that age forever so she could be as old as Chione!

Caden suddenly desperately wished that Chione was here just like Valerius had.

"You did not want to come here, Serai," Esme said quietly. "When I asked you, you tried to beg off, even though traveling into Valerius' territory is a great honor."

"I--I did not feel well! I--"

"You hid in our rooms immediately. You only came down here because I asked Molly to have you bring Iolaire its gift," Esme said, her voice suddenly cutting. "Molly!"

"Yes, Mistress," said another young woman.

"I see you have the gift. How did you come by it?" Esme demanded.

"Serai brought it to me," the young woman paused and Caden knew there was more that she wasn't saying.

"But?" Evidently, Esme heard the missing words, too.

"I don't want to add... I don't want to be responsible for you thinking this is anything--"

"Molly, just tell the truth. The facts are the facts," Esme interrupted, and there was exasperation as much as anger in her tone.

"She didn't want to come down," Molly admitted, her voice getting small. "She asked me to come up to get the gift. But I couldn't because you might need me and then she

ran off.”

“Yes, thank you, Molly. I do understand your concerns,” Esme suddenly sounded so tired. “I do appreciate your honesty, and I want you to remember that simply by speaking the truth you have done nothing to hurt Serai.”

But everyone knew that these words simply added to Serai’s appearance of guilt.

Iolaire suddenly reared and swung their head around towards Illarion. The Green Dragon King was no longer leaning against the wall, observing them out of hooded eyes, but instead had padded silently to their side and had been about to touch them.

Rage flickered in Caden’s chest. He turned their massive body and pushed their head towards Illarion’s chest. White frosty air wreathed around their jaws. Illarion put up his hands and backed away. Caden though continued to come after him, jaws agape, until Illarion’s back hit the wall.

“I am sorry, Iolaire. I just...” Illarion let out a helpless laugh. “I have never touched a Dragon before. I am fascinated.”

Really? Nothing to do with the mates thing? Caden expressively raised one of their eyebrows.

“You are so pretty! Such a pretty Dragon!” Illarion then admitted.

Caden’s eyes narrowed and he let out another huff of frost that coated Illarion’s front. The Green Dragon Shifter grimaced and there was a spark of anger in his eyes, but he did not attack.

Just try it. Try shifting and we’ll stop you in your tracks, Caden thought.



Iolaire twittered something about it being wrong and odd that the other Dragon Shifters had never touched one another.

They aren't a pack, Iolaire. They don't see themselves as the same. But just as predators they have to be wary of, Caden explained.

He was understanding Valerius' reasoning all the more now that he was seeing all of these people up close. Other than Esme and, potentially Tez, he didn't like the Dragon Shifters at all. Maybe the others would be nicer. But he somehow doubted it.

"I apologize, Iolaire." Illarion tipped his head. He couldn't bow because Caden really had him pressed up to the wall and their jaws.

Are you? I wonder. Would a man who puts people in concentration camps care about our personal space, Iolaire? I doubt it.

Iolaire was regarding the Green Dragon Shifter with a bit of the cat "don't touch me" expression. It was not angry like Caden was, but more perplexed by such rudeness. Touching another Dragon was right and natural in Iolaire's view, but not without asking permission first!

Not to mention that Valerius and Raziel don't like this guy, Caden reminded Iolaire.

Raziel wise! Iolaire hooted.

Yeah, Valerius is as well.

"I wish we could talk," Illarion said, drawing their attention back to him. A small smile played across his lips. He was handsome in a severe way and the smile softened him a little, but it could not erase what they knew about him. "I have often thought that listening to others is boring, at best, but you... I would like to hear from you."

Why? I swear, Iolaire, that I think he believes we are some kind of pretty princess in here. Imagine his surprise if he were to find out the truth!

Iolaire snorted frost.

“You do not believe me. But I do not blame you for having dark thoughts about me.” Illarion shrugged his fur covered shoulders. “Valerius and I are rivals in everything. I am certain that he has not painted me in good terms.”

And you’ve proven yourself to be even more of an asshole by your actions. But hey! You must think I am blind, deaf and dumb.

“Valerius is a bully. Surely, you have noticed this, yes? He tried to bully you, but despite your small size, you were fierce!” Illarion chuckled. He sobered though as he said, “One must push back against him. You are young. Not just in Shifter terms, but human ones. I sense this.”

Caden blinked. Did Illarion know who he was? Or was the Green Dragon Shifter just guessing? Maybe everyone already knew who he was, mirror or no mirror, and all this hiding was for nothing!

“And you have lived here in his territory all your life so you are bound to be a little...” Illarion wagged his fingers in the air. “In awe of Valerius, yes? And prejudiced against the other Dragon Shifters, I am sure! Of course, this is natural.” Illarion leaned in a little. “But you must fight against these things when you make your decision about who you will join with. Because, I assure you, that Valerius is the worst choice for you to make. He is set in his ways. He thinks he is first among equals. And he will never let an equal rule with him here.”

And Illarion would be a much better choice? Even if everything he said was true, Iolaire, it doesn’t sell him! Caden thought with disgust.

There was a cracking sound, which had both Illarion and them looking towards the throne room. The others were marching out with Valerius and Esme in the lead. Serai was between them. Their ice breath that had pinned Serai to the wall had evidently been transformed into water by Esme. That change from ice to water was the cause of the sound. But the water bound Serai just as firmly as the ice had. An almost living “tentacle” of water wrapped around her middle, pinning her slender arms to her sides. She was just a slip of a girl, but as she neared them, whatever doubts Caden had that she wasn’t the one he’d seen went away. It was her. Like Tez had said, her face was burned into his memory.

Why did she do it? Caden wondered.

He hadn’t realized that he’d shared that with Valerius until the Black Dragon King responded, She will not say. She still claims to be innocent. She is lying, of course. But Esme wanted to make sure.

I am sure. It is her, Caden said and felt like he was signing this girl’s death warrant.

“Iolaire confirms--”

“Yes, Valerius, I can tell what Iolaire’s answer is,” Esme said.

She stood there in her dark blue wrap. Her beautiful, lined face was shadowed now as the sun was setting. It seemed engraved with the burden of this betrayal in the dimming light. Caden lowered his head until he was almost eye to eye with the girl.

Why? Why would you do that evil thing? He asked, even though he knew she wouldn’t hear him.

She struggled to get away from him, misinterpreting his gaze as one of aggression. But Esme’s water “tentacle” held her in place. The frost from his breath caused the

“tentacle’s” surface to ice over. She suddenly stopped struggling and hung there almost limp for a moment.

In a voice that was soft, but not girlish or frightened, Serai said, “What would you sacrifice to change the world?”

“Is that why you did it?” Esme frowned. “To change the world? By killing a bunch of tourists eating ice cream and buying souvenirs? Do you really think that would change the world in any good way?”

Serai’s head lifted. “Good is in the eye of the beholder.”

And then, before anyone could do anything, she bit down on her own teeth. There was a click and a hiss and then white foam was flowing out of her mouth, over her lips and down her chin. Her young body jerked and spasmed before going still.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

### NO MORE HIDING

Valerius looked down at the dead girl. His jaw set. He felt a mental quivering over his bond with Caden. The young man had never seen a dead person before. Not like this. He turned and grasped Iolaire's head.

Fly up to my quarters and Shift. I will be with you momentarily, Valerius said.

But Serai...

You can do nothing for her, Caden. I will handle this, Valerius assured him.

Why did she do it? Caden's question was a rhetorical one. Both of them could speculate, but neither of them was a fanatic.

Go upstairs, Caden. It will be all right, Valerius coaxed.

Will it?

One of Iolaire's huge blue eyes met his and he knew both human and Spirit were suffering. Neither was meant for death. How strange in some ways that a Dragon Shifter was the opposite of death. Valerius reluctantly moved away from Iolaire, and with a warning wave of his hand, the others did as well. After a few tentative flaps, Iolaire rose up into the sky. They took one rather sad bank around the city and then disappeared behind his tower. They did not make a reappearance. Caden had shifted successfully. Valerius noted that Caden had not feared someone seeing him in his human form. The opening to his balcony was on the opposite side of the plaza so

none would, but still Caden seemed to not be so focused on that.

“Iolaire is up in your chambers! Shifted!” Illarion stated the obvious, pointing to the tower. “Will we finally get to see them in their human form? Or will we continue this farce of meeting them?”

“You got your time alone with them out here, Illarion. Your five minutes are up,” Esme said sharply from where she was kneeling down by Serai. The water tentacle was gone, a splash of liquid on the plaza ground was the only sign of it.

“That did not count!” Illarion’s cheeks reddened.

“Always claiming the world is unfair, Illarion?” Mei arched an eyebrow at the Green Dragon Shifter.

“Better than thinking the whole world is out to get me, eh, Mei?” Illarion snapped back. “Iolaire will enjoy their time with me far more than you.”

Tez, who was unapologetically crying, cried, “How can you think about that now? A girl is dead! Her body is not even cold!”

Illarion’s eyes narrowed. “Because she is a terrorist . She planted a bomb that would have killed innocent people. Why would I waste a single thought on her other than how I will kill those who assisted her? Valerius, am I not right in this? Or have you gone as soft as this idiot here?”

“She was young and foolish! Idealistic!” Tez cried.

Esme met Valerius’ gaze even as her right hand was in the girl’s hair and the other cradled her head. Her blue eyes crackled with grief and anger. “I am inclined to agree with Illarion on this. Serai was no child though she looked like one. And there was

nothing in her life that should have made these choices of hers understandable.”

At that moment, Chione came into the throne room. She was smiling and her voice reflected it as she said, “What have I missed?”

She came to an abrupt halt as she saw Serai’s still form.

“You’ve missed some fireworks. A true James Bond villain death!” Illarion snorted. “A poisoned tooth!”

“By the gods,” Chione whispered and rushed to Esme’s side. She curled one arm around the Blue Dragon Shifter’s back. “Serai! How did this happen? Esme, I am so sorry!”

“No, it is me who is sorry. She was the bomber, Chione. And she deserves no more tears.” Esme quickly rose even as she gave into Chione’s embrace.

“What do you wish to do with her, my king?” Chione asked.

“An autopsy. See if there’s anything about that poisoned tooth that will lead us to the people she’s working with,” Valerius said finally.

“Of course. It will be done,” Chione said and immediately contacted the Claw.

“You have been very quiet, Valerius. What are your thoughts on this? Are you going to announce that you caught the bomber?” Mei asked.

She drifted over and looked at the dead girl by her feet with all the emotion she would have at looking at a dead leaf. His own emotions were mixed. He was holding them at bay, because nothing good could come from letting them rule him at this moment.

“No one will speak of this.” Valerius gave each of them a hard stare. “I will find out who is behind her and all the rest of it. Mark my words.”

“Is it not clear that Esme is? It was her woman!” Illarion waved negligently at Esme.

Esme’s eyes narrowed. “Sometimes I forget how very stupid you are, Illarion, but then you remind me with your next sentence!”

“What? You--”

“If I was the culprit, I can assure you that I would not have her with me now so Iolaire could easily identify her! Then give her a poison tooth to activate upon that inevitable disclosure!” Esme snarled at him. She was shaking. Chione stroked her back. “Whoever did this, whoever turned her from me and sanity, will pay for it!”

Valerius reached for Esme. She turned towards him, her head held high. Valerius took her hands in his. Only then did he feel the slightest trembling.

“I am so sorry, Esme,” he said.

She gave him a nod that held only the slightest stiffness to it. “Not as sorry as I am for not catching this treachery.”

“But they will be caught,” he said, certain it was true.

“Oh, yes, they most certainly will be.” She let out a breath. “Would it not be too rude if I called off dinner this evening? I need to start my investigation into this.”

“Not at all. Dinner will be served for whoever likes it in the main dining hall or can be brought to your quarters. I will also not be joining in on the main festivities,” Valerius said.



“Because you will be trying to seduce Iolaire to stay by your side?” Illarion scowled at him.

Valerius found a smile crossing his own lips. “I assure you, Illarion, that the more time Iolaire spends with all of you--you, especially--the happier Iolaire is exactly where they are.”

Valerius let go of Esme’s hands after a gentle squeeze and gestured for Chione to join him in the throne room. Already, the Claw, with their equivalent of crime scene investigation, was swooping in to take Serai’s body away. She joined him by the throne itself. She was dressed in a long sand colored dress with diamonds sewn into the fabric. She looked like a desert at night.

“You look lovely,” he told her.

She smiled. “I feel I am in the wrong outfit. I should have dressed for a funeral.”

He grimaced. “Find out all about Serai, Chione.”

“Do you want me to be circumspect with Esme?” She tilted her head towards where the Blue Dragon Shifter was already leaving the room with Molly in tow.

“I doubt she will come to you for anything. Her pride, if nothing else, has been wounded by failing to see a traitor in her own house,” he said as he tracked Esme’s movements.

“You don’t think she is behind it?”

“I suppose she could have brought Serai with her as some kind of ruse, as she knows I would never believe her so stupid,” he surmised. “But that is an unnecessary risk and might do the exact opposite. So no, I do not. Besides, while she has killed many

civilians in her time, blowing up tourists hardly seems her style.”

“Indeed, not.” Chione shook her head. “And she would have no reason to cause such chaos. Of all the Dragon Shifters, she’s the most inclined to want there to be a seeming balance between humans and Shifters.”

“Seeming?” His eyebrows lifted.

Chione crossed her arms. “I think we have to be honest that Shifters have advantages that humans cannot always meet. Our immortality allows us to hone our minds and increase our wealth.”

“Yes, but it also makes us lazy and take too long to make decisions. We think we have all the time in the world when we do not. Humans feel time in a way we no longer can,” he cautioned her. “While I see some of the long term planning here of a Shifter mind in these attacks, there is also the in the moment feel of a human mind.”

Chione looked down thoughtfully. “Yes, I think you are right. So it could be a new Shifter.”

“Or a Shifter and human working together,” he replied dryly.

Her head lifted in surprise. “But what would coincide between the two? Both species want to be on top.”

“Maybe it’s what part of those species gets to be on top,” Valerius said with a frown.

“You mean someone like Marban might want the system to change? Not him, specifically, but someone like him?” she asked.

“Marban merely wants to be included at the top of any system. He has no desire for

equality,” Valerius stated. “If it was Marban as a part of this, being on the Council neutralized him to some extent. He won’t want to shake the pillars of Heaven when he is in Heaven.”

“Indeed.”

“The other Dragon Shifters have yet to arrive. I am curious to see how thirty years of rule has impacted them,” Valerius said.

“Understood. Are you going to Iolaire?” she asked.

He nodded. “I have taken too long already to get to them. Seeing Serai die...”

“Have they ever experienced that?”

“I do not think so. Will you handle matters here? If you need me, of course, contact me,” he told her.

“I can get things settled. Go to them.” She bowed her head before he went to the stairs.

He could have shifted and flown to his room, but he’d seen Caden admiring these clothes and he didn’t want to ruin them. So he took the stairs two or three at a time to get to his tower rooms.

When Valerius opened the doors to his tower, he found Caden wearing one of his silk shirts that was long on him so that it came down to mid-thigh. The young man curled on the couch, staring at the fire. Immediately, Caden looked up when he came in. The sadness that shadowed Caden’s features cleared for a moment as the young man hopped up from the couch to come to him.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Caden murmured.

Valerius took Caden into his arms and kissed the top of his head. “I am sorry that I could not have shielded you from that.”

Caden clung to him, face pressed against his shoulder, body shaking a little. Valerius ran a hand up and down Caden’s back. They stayed that way for some time before Valerius urged the young man back down onto the couch. Caden drew his knees up to his chest and looked a mixture of bewilderment and grimness.

“I see you found something to wear,” Valerius said, trying to lighten the mood.

Caden lifted up his arms which had the long sleeves of the silk shirt flowing back to his elbows. “This was all I could find that semi-fit. Do you own anything that isn’t black and silk or leather?”

“No.”

“You don’t have any underwear either. Or shorts or jeans or sweatpants or--”

“Underwear is a pain and unnecessary. Could you imagine me in shorts?”

Caden looked at him skeptically. “Noooo, so I guess I see your point. I’m going to have to bring a change of clothes to the castle.”

Valerius allowed this idea to sit with him for a minute. Should Caden have clothes here? It would be more convenient. Perhaps one of the guest rooms could be turned over for his use. Or Caden’s things could be here . In his rooms. Alongside his things. Caden was suddenly watching his face and nibbling his lower lip nervously.

“Uhm, maybe that was a little forward so I--”

“No, I think that is wise. You should have some things here,” Valerius finally answered after what he knew had been too long a silence.

“Only if you want me to--”

“I do. I do, Caden. It is just new for me.”

Caden gave him a ghost of a smile. “Yeah, I get that. But I’m really starting to figure out that change is inevitable.”

Caden went back to staring into the fire. For his part, Valerius called for raw beef and chicken along with vegetables to be brought up. He would cook for Caden. The young man needed to eat. Then Valerius opened a bottle of wine. He poured large glasses for both of them. Caden thanked him silently and cradled the goblet against his chest. Valerius sat down beside him, allowing one arm to curl around Caden’s shoulders. Caden naturally drew against him, resting the side of his head against Valerius’ chest. Caden let out a sudden snort.

“What?” Valerius asked.

“I imagined doing this with you the first day we met, which wasn’t that long ago. But I thought it was impossible,” Caden admitted.

“Because you never wanted to be this close to me?”

“Are you kidding? Of course, I did! You’re really hot. You were an asshole, too. But a really sexy one,” Caden laughed. “Now that I know you better, it’s hard to imagine not wanting to be like this for so many other reasons. I’m sure you didn’t imagine me here.”

Valerius, who had been nuzzling Caden’s hair, was saved from answering this by the

knock on the doors. “Ah, our food. Stay where you are, Caden. Though I trust my staff implicitly, we shouldn’t have them seeing you here now.”

Caden let him get up, but there was a reluctance there as if Caden wanted to say something, but didn’t. Valerius set his wine glass down and went for the doors. It was Mariya with a huge platter of steaks, spatchcocked chicken, and vegetables already salted, peppered, marinated, and ready for the grill. He smiled at her and thanked her before swiftly closing the door on her after taking the tray from her hands.

“Oh man, that looks so good already,” Caden moaned.

“It will taste better cooked. Even Raziel thinks so,” Valerius said as he started laying the thick slabs of steak, the spatchcocked chickens, the large white knob onions, the red peppers, and then the zucchini and onion slices on the grill over the fire. Immediately, the meat and vegetables began to sizzle.

After everything was set out, he got back on the couch with Caden tucked against him. He had a set of long tongs in his hands so that he could turn almost everything from where he was sitting. Besides, the key was not to touch anything until one absolutely had to in order to get that caramelized char.

“The girl, or I guess, the Shifter, Serai, why do you think she did it? I mean she said for change, but what change?” Caden finally asked. “She’s a Shifter. She’s more likely to be on top than a human.”

“Depending on what kind of Shifter she was,” Valerius said.

“Somehow I don’t think Esme would have Rat, Snake or Swarm Shifters in her entourage,” Caden said almost bitterly.

“Actually, she would. Esme has her ear to the ground at all times. She wouldn’t

ignore a population of Shifters based on prejudice. That would leave a hole in her spying,” Valerius answered.

“Oh, I guess I was wrong again,” Caden sighed.

“You aren’t completely wrong. She has them because they are useful to her, not necessarily because she has any love for them, but she did care for Serai. I think Serai was a bit of a mentee to her,” Valerius answered.

Caden stirred. “Here I am being all depressed about it when that’s her friend. Esme must be so upset.”

“She is. And angry. And determined. Whoever chose to go after Serai made a mistake. She will not stop until she has the people responsible,” Valerius answered as he brushed his lips across Caden’s forehead. “And, unlike me, who would simply kill them and be done with it, she will make them suffer.”

Caden shivered. “You did say that Dragon Shifters aren’t heroic exactly.”

“We are beings of war and revenge and many other things. But heroic? Until you? No.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not heroic.” Caden’s voice was flat and dull.

Valerius drew a little back so that he could see Caden’s face. “What are you talking about? You risked your life to save those people in the square and--”

Caden was suddenly leaning forward, elbows on knees. “And what have I done since then? I ask people to risk themselves so that I can keep on with my quiet, ordinary life!” Caden was shaking his head. “I don’t know why Iolaire bonded with me. There are so many things that need fixing and I’m not the person to do it! I mean we just

watched someone take their own life because they were so miserable with the world we have! How can that be stopped?"

Valerius leaned forward, resting a hand on Caden's lower back. He could feel the fine tremors going through the young man just like he had through Esme. Both of them was pushed to the edge by Serai's suicide.

"The truth is that it can't be," Valerius told him.

Caden's expression was wrenched. "But--"

"Caden, not everyone can be happy. Not everyone will be treated fairly. There will always be those on top and those on the bottom. And there will always be those who think violence is the answer to change who occupies those positions," Valerius said gently. "I say these things not to discourage you from trying to make things better. I say these things so that you understand that any change you make that helps people is extraordinary, because you are fighting against things that are immutable."

"Then Iolaire definitely shouldn't have picked me," Caden stated. "Valerius, when Mei saw me in the mirror I panicked. I wanted to do anything to have her not have seen me. That was so cowardly. Selfish. Stupid."

"Wanting to have time to adjust and grow before you are in the spotlight is none of those things," Valerius assured him.

"But it is . If you hadn't defanged Marban by giving him that Council position, he would have been asking me for a favor to keep my secret." Caden drew his arms around himself. "Jasper Hawes threatened Landry to get my name. My family was put in danger! Now Mei knows. Tell me that she won't ask for something to keep quiet too."



She would. She would undoubtedly ask for something huge. If not for Caden to come with her, then something that would be terrible for the boy to give. Raziel, who had settled since it was in Iolaire's presence, stirred. The girl's death had been no never mind to it. She had threatened their people and now she was gone. As was good and right. But the thought of Caden and Iolaire going with Mei and Xipil was causing it to smoke and steam

We will pull Xipil's wings off if it is even suggested! Raziel roared.

Iolaire's cooling presence wrapped around his fiery Spirit. Peace. Will never leave you.

Iolaire's words swept into Valerius' mind easily. Raziel's smoke and fire banked slightly and its red eyes hooded.

Will not let you go, Raziel muttered.

"What was that? Were they... talking to one another directly?" Caden realized.

"I think so. We are, evidently, in their way," Valerius remarked dryly.

Caden drained all of his wine in one long swallow, having become somber again. His right leg bobbed up and down. "Keeping this secret is just me being selfish, trying to go home again in a way that I can't anymore, and... and it's got to end, Valerius."

Valerius felt a tightness fill his chest. While he had never craved the spotlight or to rule, it was a part of him. Caden was being forced to abandon all he knew. Any sense of young adulthood he had would be gone. His past life would forever be past.

I can't let him do this.

“I will handle things with Mei,” Valerius told him firmly. “You can--”

“No.” Caden reached for his hands and threaded their fingers together, holding onto him tightly. “No, Valerius. You are not going to have to pay anything more for me to hide. Maybe I’m not the right person for this, but Serai’s actions have shown me that I can’t not try to make things better. And I can do more out of the shadows. I’m done hiding that I’m the White Dragon Shifter.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 10:25 am*

“That is a large decision, Caden,” Valerius told him, “which demands food and rest.”

Caden felt relief welling in his chest. He tried to push that relief aside. That relief, that delay, was just him retreating from what he had to do. He should just call a press conference right now. Announce himself to the world on Valerius’ balcony. That way he couldn’t back out, go hide once more, tell himself that his privacy was worth more than any good he could do in this world.

“I have to do this Valerius. I shouldn’t wait. Perhaps Chione could call a press conference and--”

“Before you tell your parents and sister about what you are going to do? The press would be at their home, your father’s work, your mother’s place of Faith, and your sister’s friends’ houses in moments,” Valerius said evenly.

“Oh, yeah, right.” Caden scrubbed a hand through his hair. He had already put his parents through so much. If he ever wanted them to speak to him again, he couldn’t do this without speaking to them.

Dad will want to have a plan. Mom will want to go to the Faith and have them on board.

“And then, of course, there is Wally,” Valerius continued as he stroked Caden’s back. It was so soothing, especially since it was just a slip of silk between them. “The connection between you, him and Landry will be revealed. It will be a circus.”

“He could lose his business,” Caden whispered, horrified.

“If it is not handled appropriately, yes, that could happen,” Valerius agreed.

Caden leaned forward and put his face in his hands. “Is there no right way to do this? Am I just bound to fuck up everyone’s lives?”

Valerius put a hand on his back. “You have fucked up no one’s life. You never could.”

Caden felt tears leaking from his eyes. “I don’t know what to do. There’s too much at stake. Why did Iolaire pick me?”

Love, Iolaire twittered softly.

Caden saw Iolaire lying down. It stretched out its long neck and laid its head down. But Iolaire was not alone. Not exactly. Caden realized he could see Raziel too. The Dragons’ foreheads were nearly touching, facing one another. Caden’s heart clenched at the sight.

Because you love Raziel? Caden asked. You could have chosen anyone to be with Raziel! Someone better suited than me.

But Iolaire was already asleep and did not answer him.

“Caden?” Valerius was frowning.

“I just...”

Caden thought of telling him what he had seen about their Spirits. It was clear that Valerius had not glimpsed that semi-private moment. He opened his mouth to explain that Iolaire simply wanted to be with Raziel so it had picked the one person that day who was going to die right where Raziel was. That was why he was so different from the other Dragon Shifters. He had never truly been meant to be one of them.

He wasn't special.

He wasn't worthy.

He was just there at the right time and the right place.

He found himself closing his mouth. Valerius thought he belonged to the highest echelon of Shifters and, in time, the reason why would be revealed. He ignored the fact that Iolaire wasn't like the other Spirits either. He also ignored the fact that Iolaire stated it had been watching him for some time. Because this--what he was thinking right there and then--made so much more sense than him being fated to become the ninth Dragon Shifter.

But I am. So now I better be really careful. I can't just trust my own instincts. Because they were not what led me here.

"Earth to Caden," Valerius laughed softly.

Caden gave him a pained smile that he tried to make normal. "Sorry. Just hungry. Like you said. I shouldn't make any decisions on an empty stomach."

Valerius studied his face, searching for what he was really thinking about. But Caden didn't dare tell him. He wasn't giving up this closeness to Valerius. Though he realized it would become obvious in time that he wasn't really one of them and Valerius would turn away.

Though he can't keep Raziel and Iolaire apart! They need to be together.

Fire and ice were filtering towards one another as the two Spirits snored as they slept.

"All right, if you're certain that is all?" Valerius made that sound like a question.

Caden's heart squeezed in his chest as he looked at that beautiful, difficult, but amazing man. He suddenly wrapped his arms around Valerius' neck so tightly that a normal person would have begged to be allowed to breathe. But Valerius just let out an "oomph" and then hugged him back.

"Thank you," Caden said, his voice muffled as he had his face pressed against Valerius' right shoulder.

"I do not know what you are thanking me for," Valerius chuckled uncertainly.

"For... for everything. For giving this a shot. For protecting me. For trying so hard to let me do something selfish and stupid," Caden got out.

Now that he knew he wasn't fated by the Spirits or whatever, he was even more terrified of being in the limelight. He would have to be so careful to even be thought of as one of the Shifters, let alone a Dragon Shifter.

"As I said, this was not selfish or stupid, and I am uncertain if it is wise to have you reveal yourself because of Mei," Valerius answered, his voice darkening slightly at the other Dragon Shifter's name.

But Caden now definitely couldn't allow Valerius to be in Mei's debt because of him. He was not worth it. Not at all.

"If it isn't Mei, it'll be someone else. You knew I couldn't go home again. I just didn't want to believe that," Caden said.

He drew in deep breaths of the Black Dragon King's scent. He wanted to remember his smell, remember the hard feeling of his body against Caden's, remember everything about him. The amount of times he'd be allowed to do this were numbered. He just knew it.

“Well, I--ah! The meat is burning!” Valerius cried.

Caden only reluctantly released him as the Black Dragon King leaned forward to tend to their meal. The fat from the beef and chicken sizzled as Valerius turned them from one side to the other. The knob onions and other vegetables were already caramelizing. He had those on a lower part of the fire so that they wouldn’t cook too quickly or burn before softening.

“Do you have those sauces we had the other night? This meat is so good that it doesn’t really need them, but they were tasty,” Caden said, again feeling the need to repeat and have as many experiences with Valerius as he could.

“Refrigerator. I always have some made up fresh and stored there.” Valerius tilted his head to the refrigerator that was disguised as a piece of furniture.

Caden got up and opened the door. He leaned down and heard Valerius let out a choked laugh. The cold air on his bare ass told him what the Black Dragon King was seeing.

“I think I take it back that you are allowed to have clothes here. I enjoy looking at you in mine,” Valerius told him as he turned onions.

Caden’s heart was still heavy in his chest, but Valerius was so happy that he couldn’t help but feel some of it himself even as he felt like an imposter at the same time. But he wagged his butt to get another burst of rare laughter from the Black Dragon King. He stuck his nose into the collar of the shirt and rubbed it against his cheek.

“I admit I like them because they smell like you and silk against skin...” He made an exaggerated shiver of pleasure.

Valerius was silent for a minute then snorted. “You do realize with that comment we are now well into ridiculous Werewolf Shifter mate territory?”

Caden had filled his arms with bowls of sauce--piquant mustard, sweet, umami tomato and creamy, spicy horseradish--when Valerius said this. It had him almost dropping the bowls on the floor, but Shifter reflexes were damned handy and he managed to catch them before they fell without even getting any of the sauce on his shirt!

“Wha-what do you know about Werewolf Shifter mate stuff?” Caden asked as he carefully brought the bowls over to the fireplace.

Valerius actually colored. “Nothing! I mean beyond what one hears generally.”

Caden’s left foot brushed by a pile of books and his eyes narrowed. “Do you read those romance novels with them--”

“WHAT?!” Valerius made a sound like a roar and a squeak with that one. “Don’t be ridiculous! I read histories--which are mostly wrong--and treatises and--”

“Serious books that would in no way let you know anything about Werewolf Shifter mate things,” Caden finished for him as he put the sauces down. “Have you seen some of the movies? Like The Alpha’s Mate or maybe The Last Omega or--”

“No, absolutely not.” Valerius stabbed the meat on the grill with extra emphasis and placed one of the spatchcocked chickens on a plate for him.

“Right. Sure.” Caden grinned so hard that his cheeks hurt from it. The earlier doubt and shame and fear were all still there, but they were fading into the background. Just being with Valerius was fun. “So, assuming you somehow got this knowledge out of the ether, what about what I said made you think we’re like those romances?”

Valerius’ cheeks were still on fire, which was completely hilarious when one compared them to his very stern expression as he speared onions. “The desire to see a mate in one’s clothes and the smell of one’s mate being pleasing, calming and



arousing all at the same time.”

“I didn’t say I was aroused!” Caden put his hands on his hips.

Valerius stared pointedly at the point between Caden’s legs where the tails of the shirt just hung past. His cock was semi-hard. It was always that way with Valerius even when he had hated the Black Dragon King. Caden tugged down the tails.

“I can smell your arousal so hiding it does not help,” Valerius said almost sweetly. This was clearly revenge for the discussion of Werewolf romances!

Well, two can play at that game!

Caden took the plate that Valerius offered him. In addition to the chicken, it had a thick steak and sizzling pork belly along with the knob onions, peppers and carrots. The sweet charred scent of the vegetables cut through the fatty, rich smell of the various meats. Caden loaded his plate with sauces too before sitting down on the ground by Valerius’ feet. He then stuffed half the steak in his mouth after slathering it with all the sauces mixed together. When Valerius laughed at him, Caden scowled.

“What?” Caden asked around a mouthful of steak.

“Slow down, my little anaconda. We can get more,” Valerius told him.

Caden swallowed the meat down and looked up at Valerius through his lashes. “Sorry, it’s just with Mom and Dad mad at me, I haven’t really had anything good to eat. Well, except for the picnic basket you left, but that wasn’t enough.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” Valerius was cutting his meat into bite-sized pieces while Caden considered how rude it would be exactly to just pick up the whole chicken and start ripping pieces of the juicy meat off of it with his teeth. He sighed and picked up his abandoned fork and knife as Valerius continued, “In general, Shifters need more food

than humans, especially protein. You shouldn't skimp on meals now. Iolaire will not feel well if you do"

"R-right. I'm responsible for Iolaire. I've got to be a good steward." Caden's head lowered. He was a poor choice. A poor steward. He had to do better.

Valerius put his fingers under Caden's chin. "I was not criticizing you. I think you are doing a marvelous job with Iolaire. It seems very well adjusted and happy."

"You think?" Caden's smile was a little more wobbly than he'd hoped it would be and his voice a little more needy for some kind of proof he wasn't too terrible at taking care of the precious Dragon Spirit.

Valerius' forehead furrowed for a moment and he studied Caden's face again in a way that told Caden he knew something was wrong but didn't understand what it was. "Of course. But it is not something I think, but that I know. I can see it. These are facts."

"Oh. Good."

Valerius released his chin and they both went back to eating silently. Caden attempted to chew. He told himself that if he took smaller bites he would get more of the sauce in his stomach and that was worth everything.

"So..." Caden said after a particularly luscious bite of chicken with mustard sauce. "Do you know anything else about Werewolf mate stuff?"

Valerius was in the process of bringing a piece of beef loaded with horseradish sauce to his mouth when Caden asked that. His hand froze and a drop of sauce almost landed on his pants, but those lightning quick reflexes came in handy again as Caden caught the drop on his fingers and licked them clean. Valerius did not blink while he did this.

“I might. The better question, Caden, is if you know anything,” Valerius pointed out as he finally brought that bite of steak to his mouth.

“Oh, yeah!” Caden nodded vigorously. When Valerius stared at him in bafflement, he explained, “There’s a lot of hot guys who are Werewolves and they are often without shirts. They strut around all angsty and stuff. Even when they do go with girls, it’s still fun, because there’s always some heated bromance that keeps my interest and-- what? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Valerius started chewing again, which he hadn’t been as Caden had explained his enjoyment of the Werewolf mating movies. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Caden narrowed his eyes. “Look, Tilly dragged me to the first one. I was like you and thought that they would suck. But they didn’t. Now she doesn’t want to go so I have to go on my own to the theater or wait until it hits a streaming service.”

“I see,” Valerius responded neutrally.

Caden’s eyes narrowed more . “Don’t knock them until you try them!”

Valerius’ shoulders started shaking and then he was snorting and falling over onto his side on the couch, laughing. “I’m sorry, Caden! Really, it’s just I was imagining watching one of those with you while you ogled the Werewolves and--”

“That was before I got to see you up close with your shirt off, okay? But you have to admit that Werewolves are built .” Caden took a huge bite of onion smothered in the tomato sauce. He could have been offended by Valerius’ reaction, but he wasn’t. It was so good to see Valerius laugh. And this time he had really let go. He was actually wiping tears from his eyes as he sat upright again and reached for his plate once more. “So in the movies, the mates always go into heat. But that’s because the couples are mostly opposite genders so...” Caden shrugged. “I guess that’s not going to happen here. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me about Dragon

physiognomy.”

Valerius snorted again. “Caden, even if there was, you know we cannot have children. Shifters are incapable of having children no matter what the sexes of the couple are.”

Caden frowned. “Yeah, which is why I never understood about the heat thing because--”

“That is the least part of those films that doesn’t make sense,” Valerius grumbled under his breath.

Caden’s mouth opened and shut before he crowed, “So you have seen them! You have! Oh, you bastard! You were teasing me while all along you’d watched them too!”

“I may have happened to see some part of one or more of them on television, but I--”

“Oh, no, you don’t! I can tell a fan when I hear one!”

Caden jumped up onto the couch, right onto Valerius’ lap, and playfully hit his chest and shoulders. Valerius had thankfully anticipated this movement and put his plate down before he had a lapful of Caden. Valerius caught Caden’s wrists to stop the pummelling. Not that he was hurting the Black Dragon King, but Caden surrendered easily nonetheless. Besides, it was far nicer to straddle Valerius’ leather-clad lap. The leather was soft and slick against his inner bare thighs.

“Did you ever want a mate?” Caden asked, knowing that he sounded a little breathy and that his cock was beginning to tent the front of Valerius’ shirt.

“No,” Valerius said quietly.

“Oh.” Caden’s heart fell.

“Not before...” Valerius stopped speaking.

“Not before?” Caden prompted.

Valerius had been looking past him, not at anything, but clearly trying to gather his thoughts. Or maybe consider what he had said or would say.

His jaw worked and Caden saw how hard this was for him to speak about it so Caden quickly said, “We don’t have to talk about this!”

Valerius fixed him with a very intense stare that had Caden squirming. “Shouldn’t we?”

“I don’t know--”

“Caden, soon all the Dragon Shifters will be here and they will all be vying for your hand. They will offer you the world.” Valerius swallowed again and looked almost angry . “They will not mean it. Not even the ones like Tez who will think he does.”

“Because Dragon Shifters don’t share power?” Caden asked quietly.

Valerius gave a tight nod. “There is so much you do not know about them... or me. The type of people we were and still are.”

“I know you,” Caden found himself saying.

Valerius fixed him with another stare, this one full of disbelief. “Really?”

“Yes. I... I know you think I’m naive and I am.” Caden let out a tinny laugh. He would have fussed with his hair or shirt, but Valerius still had hold of his wrists, so he

couldn't use the nervous movement to buy him time before he went on. "I know you've killed people. I know part of you likes that, because if you're lost in that--in the blood and death--then you don't have to feel other things."

Valerius' expression had changed. There was a trace of shock and hope and then it was unreadable again. "What other things?"

Caden's smile was wobbly and not a happy one, but a pained one, yet he pressed on, "Grief and loneliness and a sense of despair."

Valerius' jolted for a second before he could hide once more that those words had hit home.

Caden continued, swallowing hard because his throat was so tight. "I've only been a Dragon Shifter for a short time, and I know you've been a leader for a long, long time, but I don't think it's become easier for you. I think it's become harder. Because you know that so much is always at stake, and you can't save everyone. No matter that you're the strongest. No matter how vigilant you are. Or smart or... you're as close to god-like as anyone and yet... yet even you have limitations."

Valerius just stared at him. The only sound in the room was the crack and pop of the fire. Valerius finally blinked a few times and there might have been some wetness in his eyes, but he hid it again.

"You are not like us, Caden, and--"

"No, and I never will be," Caden said, feeling sick at being this imposter. But he was the ninth Dragon Shifter now and he so wanted to do some small good thing that he could do. "But I think... I think that I can do something that maybe the others can't."

"I'm sure--"

“I can make you feel less alone,” Caden quickly said, warming to this topic. “I can make you smile and laugh.”

A half smile crossed Valerius’ face at that. “You do indeed.”

“I don’t have any great wisdom to offer. I’m not very strong--”

“Caden.” Valerius caught his face, cupping it, his hands trembling a little as he held Caden’s jaw so tenderly. “You are so much more than us, than me.”

Caden tried to shake his head, but Valerius had it in that feather-light hold and then he was bringing Caden’s head down to his and they were kissing. Like in his bedroom, Caden felt like the world came alive when they kissed. He saw lightning behind his eyes. The world seemed to shift. He was warm all over. He felt laid bare yet still safe. When they parted and rested their foreheads against one another’s--almost exactly like their Spirit counterparts at that moment--Caden knew what he wanted at that moment.

“Valerius, I want to stay here tonight. With you. May I?” Caden asked.

Valerius’ eyes closed for a moment before he opened them and they were dark pools that threatened to drown him. “I could not let you go, Caden.”

And that was so like what Raziel had said to Iolaire and what the Werewolf true mates would have said in a movie, but this was so much better because it was real and it was Valerius and nothing else mattered.

Story Continues in Book 5!