



The White Dragon's Dilemma (Dragon's Reign #6)

Author: X. Aratare

Category: Fantasy

Description: Caden believed he wanted to hide being the White Dragon Shifter for as long as possible... if not forever! After all, he still thought he could live a normal life. But as dangers arise that only he can face, Caden must decide whether remaining in the shadows is something the world can afford.

WARNING: This is a long serial that is divided into book-length segments. Every single one ends in a cliffhanger. We anticipate there being 9 volumes.

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CHANGE

As Captain Simi placed the two Faith members, Cary and Jennifer, into separate vehicles, Valerius stared beyond the phalanx of police and Claw to the city beyond. People were flowing out of the Gash. He could almost feel their anxiety, grief and confusion. What had been a wonderful, beautiful moment had been turned into a bloodbath. Literally.

It cannot be allowed to remain that way, Valerius thought grimly.

What would you have us do? We can crush and smash as many of these puny beings as we like, but there will always be more, Raziel responded. Or so those two seemed to believe.

Valerius felt a wave of despair flow through him. People's beliefs were as insubstantial as ghosts and yet they had so much power.

We will talk to the others, Valerius said. Once all the Dragons are here, they may have other ideas.

Raziel snorted. Good ideas?

Hopefully, Valerius answered.

But what do we do now? Raziel sounded almost lost and his Spirit was never lost.

Valerius' gaze went back to the Gash. Not all that long ago the Below was the scene

of another tragedy. Both this one and that could have been so much worse. He watched as the bomb squad placed both bomb vests into heavy containers. Simply destroying them would be safest, but they needed to be studied first. Perhaps something about their design or their parts would lead back to other members of this murderous crew.

“We have to go,” Valerius said to Caden.

Iolaire’s eyes widened and Caden’s voice came over their link, Where?

Iolaire was kneading the ground into mush. Both it and Caden were so anxious about the possibility of more bombers inside the city that they didn’t know where to look or where to go.

“To the Below.” Valerius turned towards Lana and said to it, “I want you to escort the vehicles containing the prisoners back to Reach. See that nothing happens to them.”

Lana nodded its head and took off. Its wings flapped and caused dirt and grass to lift off of the ground and spin violently. Valerius shielded his face with one forearm. Iolaire slid one of its wings between him and Lana, blocking the debris from striking him. Valerius looked up at Iolaire’s beautiful face.

“Thank you,” he said.

Iolaire leaned down and nuzzled the front of his chest. He laughed as its cold breath tickled his bare skin. He kissed the snout as a reward.

Why do you want to go back? Caden asked. I want to see my mom, Rose and Marban, but--

It’s not to see them. But for everyone else to see us, Caden, Valerius said. We must

show them that other people's intentions cannot stop us all. Like Cary and Jennifer said about there being more humans than Shifters, there are more people like us who do not want this violence than there are that do. We must remind everyone of that.

Iolaire lifted its head proudly as Caden said, You're right. Let's go back now. We must be with them. Show them there's no reason to be afraid. Not if we stick together.

There were reasons to be afraid. But being brave was more important right now. The Faith were acting out of fear and a belief that things would always lead to ruin unless something drastic was done. In this case, his something drastic wasn't burning the world down to ashy nubs, but instead standing strong in front of those with their own fire.

Valerius took two running steps forward before shifting into his Dragon form. Raziel and Iolaire lifted off the earth practically at the same moment.

Remember when you couldn't shift and couldn't fly? Valerius asked.

They were wingtip to wingtip now and easily flying beside one another.

Oh, this is all Iolaire! Caden told him.

On the contrary, the two of you are working in sync, Valerius disagreed.

I... I guess you're right. It feels so natural, Caden admitted.

Because you were always supposed to be with Iolaire and vice versa, Valerius said. He felt Caden melt a little at his words. Let's go once around the city. Let all the people see us together. Let them take heart that we are one in this.

Yes!

He could almost feel Caden grinning with the joy of flying together. The wind and sun caressed both their scaly bodies. Valerius could smell the arctic scent of ice that hung around Iolaire like a mist. His own fiery scent like exotic spice joined it. The two Dragons gazed at one another as they flew fast around Reach's towers.

This is how you envisioned us flying before, Raziel, Valerius stated as they flew as if one.

Yes, Iolaire is meant to be with us and we with them , Raziel answered simply.

They swung past the find curve of the city and were at the Gash once more. People were thick on the ground. He could hear crying, gasps, and shouts as people stretched their hands up into the sky towards the Black and White Dragons.

Where should we land? Caden asked nervously as he took in the thick crowd below them.

Hover. They will clear a path. I am going to shift into my human form, but you should stay in your Dragon one once we land, Valerius instructed.

He felt Caden's hesitation before the young man asked, Are you sure? Hiding my identity any longer feels really unimportant.

I know. But the things I said before about preparing your family stand, Valerius reminded him. And Iolaire's presence helps calm people.

Yeah, likely more than mine does, Caden admitted.

Yours will when people learn to see you and Iolaire as one, Valerius assured him. But

right now you are too new to them. That will change. I promise.

The two of them lowered slowly towards the ground. Their twin sets of wings caused more wind than Lana's had by a long shot. But as he had told Caden, people moved out of their way quickly, but not in a panicked manner. Finally, there was more than enough room for both of them to land. They lightly dropped to the ground and drew their wings against their bodies.

Raziel and Iolaire immediately went to one another and pressed their foreheads together. A jet of flame left Raziel's mouth while one of ice issued out of Iolaire's. People cried out with joy and awe to see two Dragons interacting together. It was a rare sight indeed, and to show affection like this was unheard of, as the press who rushed out of the Below, made sure to point out.

"Roger, are you getting this?" One reporter asked the cameraman hot on her heels.

"I so am," he assured her.

She stepped into the shot, fussing with her wind blown blonde hair. "Folks, we've heard the Green Dragon King Illarion call the White Dragon his mate! But..." She gestured at Raziel and Iolaire in their communing moment. "As we can see here, it looks like the Black Dragon King Valerius has something to say about that!"

Oh, you've got to be kidding! Caden groaned. Illarion has NO chance! He never had a chance!

Valerius chuckled. I thought you were going to say something quite different.

What?! Illarion is so not my type and--

No, that you would be embarrassed that Iolaire and Raziel are so affectionate in

public, Valerius admitted.

Oh... no, not at all. Do you find it embarrassing? Caden was suddenly all uncertain.

Immediately, Valerius realized his mistake and quickly amended his words, On the contrary, I am quite pleased.

You are? I mean you are! Caden laughed. I just worried you wouldn't want--

People to know about us? Caden... I want everyone to know. I want to write it across the sky and have it burn so bright that everyone sees it, Valerius found himself saying.

R-really? Caden sounded almost dazed at the idea. You're that happy with me?

I have never... never been happier, Valerius answered.

Even with everything going on? Caden asked, still a little tentative.

There is always something going on. There is no perfect moment where the world is still and there are no problems. Valerius didn't know if he was assuring Caden of this or warning him.

The reporter's chirpy voice interrupted them, "Are they... I do believe that they are purring ! Dragons purr , people! That is something you do not learn everyday!"

Are we... yep, we're purring, Caden confirmed with a laugh.

Indeed. I would say that it takes away some of our dignity, but cats purr and no one thinks they aren't dignified, Valerius murmured.

No one could say that Raziel isn't dignified, Caden assured him.

Why is there laughter in your voice? Valerius asked suspiciously.

Oh, no reason! But Caden's thoughts betrayed a memory of Raziel's butt up in the air, tail wagging, as it played hide and seek with Iolaire. No reason at all.

Best not be , Valerius snorted.

Rose! Marban! I don't see Mom though, Caden told him as Rose and Marban pushed their way through the growing crowd to the circle of space that had naturally formed around them.

Unlike when Iolaire was only present, no one eagerly pressed forward with Raziel there. They all kept a respectful distance. Only Marban walked beyond the line of the crowd with Rose tentatively following after him. Her eyes were fixed on Raziel's jaws, leary of fire, evidently.

Raziel and Iolaire had broken apart and were both watching the newcomers approach. Iolaire leaned down and greeted Rose with an affectionate nuzzle. Marban gave Iolaire a pat on the snout, a small smile appearing on the Swarm Shifter's face. Even Marban was not so completely jaded that Iolaire did not affect him in some way.

Your mother and the other members of the Faith have been removed from the Below by the Claw, Valerius explained. She must not be treated differently in front of others.

Right, yeah, of course. Caden longed for his mother, but it was clear he was relieved that Rose and even Marban were all right. So what should we do now? Just seeing us isn't enough.

No, it is not. Valerius sighed. I have to give a speech.

The Swarm Shifter soon turned his attention fully to Valerius, evidently knowing too that a speech was coming or needed. The old man had become his Councilor as much as Chione had. He would have thought it absurd not that long ago, but here it was.

The Black Dragon King shifted into his human form. His gaze swept from the reporters to the common folk. There were people who had stains of blood from the bomber on their skin and clothes. There were people whose eyes were shadowed, whose lips trembled, who kept those they loved closer to them than before. He said nothing as he looked upon them, meeting their gazes evenly and calmly. Though no one called for quiet, the crowd hushed all on its own, even the reporters.

“As you know, I am not one for speeches,” Valerius said, his voice lifting up into the quiet.

There were some who gave him faint smiles in return, acknowledging this weakness of his. But most looked hungry to hear him talk. To tell them something comforting. To give them strength and purpose and a way to counteract this chaos.

“I wish there were words out there or in here.” He touched his chest. “That would ease your fears and the fears of those who are doing these terrible things. For, mark me, these people are afraid as they strap bombs to their chests or leave them in public squares or set them off at meetings. Fear is a constant. It is how we deal with it that counts.”

Iolaire gazed down at him and nodded. It understood. It had heard Cary and Jennifer’s words. And behind all of what they said was a sort of terror of the bad things that could happen so they were making their own bad things happen to somehow counteract that. Valerius looked at Marban.

“Fear is in many hearts because things are changing,” Valerius said. “Some changes are long overdue.” Marban lowered his head even as he nodded. Valerius looked at Rose. “New voices are being raised. New perspectives are being heard.”

Rose flushed and leaned against Iolaire’s shoulder.

“A new Dragon, a ninth Dragon, has joined us.” He smiled up at Iolaire. The White Dragon let out a billow of snow that came down in icy, glittering flakes. “These are good changes.”

There were murmurs all around from the people gathered there. The reporters were frantically taking notes of the speech so they could give their takes or ask him questions afterwards. He wondered what they would all think about what he was going to say next.

“But change--even good change--is frightening,” Valerius stated simply. “While it has been 30-years since Shifters were revealed to exist, the truth is that we are still changing because of it.”

He saw nods. There were flashes as pictures were taken of him and Iolaire at that moment. He wondered how it would look to those who would see them later or who were watching now. Iolaire gazing down at him with love. Rose appeared pensive but showed no fear at being cuddled by a Dragon. Marban with his hands pressed together as if in prayer, his expression stoic and serious, giving his full attention to Valerius.

“For as many good changes as there have been, there have also been bad ones, too, in some people’s views,” Valerius acknowledged. “Some have felt left behind by these changes. Some feel their futures have been proscribed or even eliminated by them. Anger, rage really, flows through some veins because of this and they want a different change. Perhaps for all the changes that have been wrought to be undone

and things to go back as they were.”

There were lowered heads and some clenched fists. That rage was here even now in those that weren’t planting bombs. Not yet anyways.

“And there are those who see that anger and feed it. They believe that this anger will lead to a terrible place and they must stop it at all costs,” Valerius stated, which had confusion rippling through the crowd.

He knew they had thought he was implicating Humans First and their ilk in the bombing, but now it appeared he wasn’t.

“The truth is that what was begun 30-years ago, is still ongoing. And people are fighting on many sides, trying to get their voices heard, and attempting to make the changes they want to happen.” Valerius drew in a deep breath. “There is nothing wrong with that.”

People were blinking. Even though he had allowed dissent all during his reign, the truth was that some people didn’t quite believe he liked it. Sometimes he didn’t. Many times he didn’t.

He put a hand on Marban’s shoulder. “Marban and I have not seen eye to eye on many things.”

Marban gave him a crooked smile. “I’m just here to speak for the common men and women, King Valerius. I am not nobility like you. Our perspectives are bound to be different.”

“Perhaps, though Marban is being... humble.” Valerius returned that crooked smile. “We all know how intelligent he is and how he has served his people well. That is why he is bringing about a Shifter and human council that will be formed in the

coming months to address the changes people want and those which might need to be made for a fairer, just society.”

Marban’s eyebrows rose. Even though this council had been talked of privately at the highest levels, it had yet to be formally announced by anyone, let alone Valerius.

“This council will not be for show. It will advise, argue and present options. It will be listened to. It will make change,” Valerius stated. There was more frantic scribbling by the reporters. This was news. The people of the Below looked skeptical and he couldn’t blame them. “But I don’t expect you to believe me. In fact, I want you to doubt until it’s proven to you.”

“Actions speak louder than words,” Marban agreed with that classic avuncular smile of his.

And who says old Dragons can’t learn new tricks? Caden beamed at him.

I would have been the first to say that not so long ago, Valerius admitted.

“We have to hear all the changes that are wanted. The different futures we can have. All voices will be heard,” Valerius continued grandly. But then his voice dropped and his gaze ignited with fire. “But those who choose to use violence against innocents to try and change the world, need to know that they will not succeed.” There was a pause as Valerius encompassed all present as he explained, “Because we will not let you.”

The crowd erupted into applause and roars of agreement. Valerius waited for it to die down so he could be heard again.

“There are more people who want to help than hurt. There are more people who want discussion and not violence.” After each statement, the crowd again yelled their

approval. Valerius stuck a hand out, a finger pointed towards the cameras as he spoke to those who would use violence for their fight. “There are more of us than there are of you. And we will not let you change us!”

The roar was deafening as he finished his speech. His arms lifted to his sides like wings. The crowd began to chant his name over and over again. He had never seen the people look so enamored with him. He could have led them to do anything at that moment.

I have goosebumps, Valerius! Whoa! That was amazing. The people are behind you! Caden enthused.

Marban leaned in and said, “I thought you weren’t a speaker, King Valerius. Why have you been hiding your light under a basket?”

“Because you have to follow up such words with actions that are just as spectacular,” Valerius admitted as the crowd’s applause washed over him.

When you speak, you’re making a solemn promise to the people, aren’t you? Caden realized.

Yes, every word I say must be delivered upon.

And that was why it did not excite him to make a rousing speech. It did not make him feel lifted up from the ground as if on wings. There was none of the heady feeling of power from moving hearts and minds. All there was--all there ever was for him--was the heavy responsibility to those who cheered and clapped.

“You will do it.” Marban clasped his hands in front of him like the monk he pretended to be, letting the sleeves fall over them. “Because you must do it. And I have never seen you fail at something that must be done.”

Valerius frowned as he thought of his brother lying dead on the ground. “There is more information on the bombers, Marban, that we have discovered. We need to discuss. Come to Reach after you get your people settled here.”

Marban nodded. “I figured as much. I will be there.”

Marban bowed, which had yet another ripple of surprise and joy from the crowd. If Valerius’ greatest critic bowed to him at this moment then something truly remarkable was happening.

Uh, oh, reporters, Valerius , Caden warned just before the surge of media came towards them. Lots of them and they look like rabid dogs on a scent.

And this is another reason I do not make speeches. Valerius sighed. Because the press treats them only as propaganda.

Which they most times were. Valerius was glad of the press’ skepticism. But not now. Not yet. After people had calmed. But there would be no waiting. They had to get their stories. The questions came fast and furious as the reporters thrust out their microphones to him like swords.

“Do you know who is behind these bombings?”

“Is it one group or many?”

“The individuals you carried out of here were wearing Faith robes. Is there some connection between the Faith and these bombings?”

“You mentioned those who feel left behind in this world, are you referring to those in Humans First?”

“What would you say to Jasper Hawes’ contention that humans are second-class citizens?”

“Is this council going to have any members from Humans First upon it?”

“I am already hearing that Jasper Hawes is interested in this council! What say you, King Valerius?”

“I’m hearing Jasper Hawes is calling the council a sham and will have no part in it! What are your thoughts, King Valerius?”

“How is a council formed in the next few months going to keep us safe from bombs?”

“Are you being silent about who is behind the terror because you do not know?”

“Or do you know and just don't want to say?”

“We need to know who is behind this violence, King Valerius! Tell us! Who are our enemies?”

That last question hung in the air like frost. They wanted the “us” versus “them” narrative. Chione would, undoubtedly, be reaching out right now to the press to tell them that appropriate information would be shared at the appropriate time. Valerius could already hear the gnashing of teeth. But there was no answer he could give that wouldn’t cause innocents to be harmed. He would not make that part of his change like the Faith had.

Come, Caden, let us fly to High Reach, Valerius said. We must speak to the others and prepare for Queen Jahara and King Anwar’s arrivals.

With that, he shifted once more and he and Caden took to the skies while the

reporters still called after them, looking for enemies.

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PERSPECTIVES

Caden stood on the plaza outside of the throne room. He was dressed in one of Valerius' large cable knit sweaters whose sleeves hung a few inches below his fingertips and the hem brushed the tops of his knees, along with his favorite jeans and boots. He'd never seen Valerius in a sweater, let alone this one, but the Black Dragon King had fished it out of somewhere and helped Caden put it on, smoothing his hands down Caden's shoulders and arms.

"It's a little big!" Caden had laughed.

"It is perfect," Valerius had countered, his eyes hooding, as if it pleased him to see Caden in his clothes.

"It smells like you so I love it," Caden had murmured.

They'd kissed, and to Caden, it felt like expecting to fall but flying instead. His heart had seemed to expand several times larger as he pressed his face against Valerius' chest afterwards and the Black Dragon King stroked up and down his back.

"I wish we could just stay here and ignore everybody and everything," Caden said, relishing the coziness of Valerius' tower.

"I know. I feel the same," Valerius murmured. His breath puffed against Caden's hair. It was warm. Valerius was always so warm. Caden snuggled closer.

"But we can't, right?"

“Are you asking or confirming?” Valerius chuckled.

“I know we can’t,” Caden sighed.

“Your parents and sister will be here soon. Along with Wally and Rose. I’ve invited them for dinner,” Valerius told him.

“To talk about everything?” Caden tensed as he went over in his mind for the seemingly thousandth time what had happened in the Below.

“Yes, but also to plan what to do about your identity. We need to tell them what you want to do,” Valerius reminded him.

“Hide here with you. That’s my plan,” Caden stated.

Valerius’ shoulders lifted as he chuckled almost silently. “I wish you would hide behind me, but whenever I wonder where the trouble is all I need to do is find you .”

Caden snorted. “Yeah, well... I feel like I’ve had enough excitement today.”

They pulled back from one another, though Caden’s hands lingered on Valerius’ waist. Valerius was also dressed, but no oversized sweaters for him. It was all silk and leather and black knee-high boots. He looked delectable. He looked like what he was: the Black Dragon King.

“Is there anything I can do?” Caden asked.

Valerius lifted an eyebrow. “About what?”

“Everything?”

Valerius smiled. “No, not right now. You are a symbol to the Faith so perhaps later I will ask you to speak to Jennifer and Cary again to make sure they know nothing more but...”

“But?”

“I tend to think they weren’t given more information than they needed to know. They’re true believers so they wouldn’t have asked any questions either.” Valerius frowned, his plush lips flattening.

“What will the other Dragons say about this?” Caden asked.

“We will find out. Tonight.” Valerius leaned in and kissed Caden again.

Caden could still feel that kiss as he watched the sunset. He wrapped his arms around himself and leaned on the plaza’s balcony, looking over Reach. It wasn’t cold exactly but he felt cozy and Valerius’ scent was still all around him, which made him feel safe and loved. He thought briefly on all of the other relationships he’d had in the past. Nothing came close to this one. Even as the world was crazy, he felt so sure and steady with Valerius.

He half turned his head as he heard Valerius’ voice as he spoke to Chione in the throne room, filling her in on all that had occurred. He was just telling her that he would address the dragons at dinner after Queen Jahara’s arrival.

“King Anwar will not appreciate that,” Chione warned. “Perhaps we should wait for his arrival tomorrow?”

“He should fly faster if he does not wish to be left out!” The scowl was deeply evidently in Valerius’ voice.

Chione sighed. “You do not mean that--”

“Perhaps he should have taken a plane and then he would have been here--”

“You are just worried he’s going to judge your decor again.” Caden could hear Chione’s indulgent smile.

“He said it looked like ruin chic last time. I think he only meant the ruin part.” The scowling tone was more intense.

Caden couldn’t help grinning, but the grin quickly died. He tightened his hold on himself.

What are we going to do, Iolaire? How can you face an enemy that could be anyone?

His Spirit cooed its own concern.

Maybe we should wait for King Anwar. Maybe he’ll have some ideas that aren’t about High Reach.

The White Dragon Spirit appeared to be smiling. It loved High Reach because the entire castle felt and smelled like Raziel. Even with the other Dragons here, Valerius and Raziel reigned supreme in Iolaire’s eyes.

Yeah, I agree.

Caden heard the crunch of footsteps on the stone steps that led down from the plaza to the lower level of the castle. Illarion’s head appeared and then the rest of the well-dressed Green Dragon King followed after. Caden grimaced. This was the last thing he needed! He thought about making a quick retreat into the throne room, but then held his ground. He had wanted to see the sunset. He wasn’t going to let Illarion

chase him away.

The Green Dragon King obviously knew he was there but he sauntered over to Caden, hands in the pockets of his well-tailored suit, and eyes on the horizon, as if he didn't. He stopped a foot away and leaned on the railing without saying anything. Caden clenched his jaw harder.

“What?!” Caden snapped finally.

Illarion turned his handsome head to look at Caden, eyebrows rising as if surprised by Caden's snappishness. “Do you have some reason to be angry with me?”

Caden's mouth opened and shut. “Are you serious?”

Illarion leaned his hip against the railing. “Yes, of course. Why would I not be?”

“You--you came here flying and all rude and attacked Valerius and--”

“That was to get Valerius' goat, not yours,” Illarion said with a wave. “I came here to--”

“Claim me as your mate ?” Caden's lifted eyebrows and words had Illarion nodding and looking slightly sheepish.

“Yes, well... that may have been premature .”

“Premature?!” Caden hadn't thought his eyebrows could go higher. “You didn't even wait to meet me before you proclaimed I was yours! As if that was ever going to happen. Not.” Caden shook his head. “You didn't even know if you liked me--”

“I do like you. You're fiery!” Illarion laughed then seeing the growing scowl on

Caden's face, he held up his hands as if in surrender. "I mean... you speak your mind."

"I'm surprised you like that considering what you do to your people," Caden retorted.

In a surprisingly mild tone, Illarion asked, "What do you know of how I treat my people?"

Caden realized somewhere inside of him that he should quit this topic or go inside or do something-- anything --than confront the titanic Green Dragon King. He was probably creating an international incident or something. He was, undoubtedly, causing trouble for Valerius, which he most certainly did not want to do. But his mouth seemed to be operating separately from his body. After the day he'd had, maybe that wasn't totally surprising.

"You put people in camps! Prison camps! There's no freedom in your territory! I'm sure you do terrible things, but since there's no press in your territory we only hear rumors. But they are enough!" Caden yelled and his eyes darted over Illarion's shoulder to the throne room, but Valerius and Chione were still deep in conversation. Simi and Ngoye had joined them.

"Yes, I do. After what has happened today, can you blame me?" Illarion's eyes were narrowed, but his tone was more conversational than angry.

Caden wondered how much Illarion knew about today's attack. Probably more he should.

"I..." Caden's voice dropped off then he said, "not everyone is a terrorist! Not everyone is an enemy! There are innocent people that you are locking up!"

Illarion bobbed his head. "Yes, you are likely right that there are some currently

innocent people in the camps.”

“Currently ?!” Caden’s eyebrows were practically joining his hairline now.

Illarion’s eyes and voice became serious. “You are very young and naive.”

“I--”

“If you do not know this about yourself, the world will teach it to you,” Illarion interrupted Caden’s outrage. “Caden, there is the possibility of violence in every person. Push them hard enough and you will find it. And if they are the type of person pushed in the wrong direction by what you want then they will cause you and yours trouble.”

Caden couldn’t deny that. “Putting people in camps isn’t the answer!”

“Then what is?”

Caden’s mouth opened and shut. “Is that why you’re doing it? Not just to shut down dissent?”

Illarion leaned his back against the railing and crossed his arms over his chest. “In Russia, things are felt deeply. The people there have suffered. Every generation has had something to bear. Famine. War. Pogroms. Plague. It has made the people there hard and strong, but when you feel like there is nothing to lose, you will throw yourself into the fire.”

Caden frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve sensed unrest since the beginning. I knew that, eventually, humanity would catch on that they were going to be last and least .” Illarion grunted. “And when they

did, anyone who offered them a dream of changing that would succeed in riling them up. And then I have Mei on my backside!”

“What about Mei?”

“She plans to attack me. She is preparing for war. She wants more land and I have it,” he said with a shake of his head. “I cannot let my territory be weakened by dissent on the inside when I have her just waiting on the outside with her mechanical men!”

A sudden thought occurred to Caden and, once more, his mouth opened, “Did you... were you behind Mei’s robots going crazy?”

A sly smile crossed Illarion’s face. “In my territory we have the best hackers.”

“So you did it!”

“I did not say that. Did I?” Illarion winked at him.

“Valerius needs to know that hacking Mei’s robots isn’t part of the Faith’s abilities!” Caden protested.

“Tell them your suspicions then. But simply because someone other than the Faith may have had a hand in it this time, does not mean they could not be behind it next,” Illarion responded with a shrug. “But the destruction of Mei’s little army has bought me time as she frantically seeks a solution to it. Can’t go to war if you can’t trust your army.”

“You and Mei can’t go to war at all!” Caden cried and he knew it sounded ridiculous. He was just walking right into Illarion’s judgment of him being naive.

Illarion though was more surprised that he said it. “You think we can choose this?”

“Yes, of course! You guys want to fight? Fine. But not now! We need to face the Faith and fix that problem before anything else,” Caden told him. But even as the words came out, he knew that they were foolish again.

“Caden, so innocent!” Illarion chuckled, but not cruelly. “This thing with the Faith, the other thing with Humans First, and even the other, other thing with Mei, none of them will ever be fixed .”

“You make war and strife sound inevitable.” Caden’s shoulders slumped.

“This 30-years of peace has been the anomaly, Caden. Not the war coming. That is what is normal,” Illarion said and patted his shoulder almost kindly. “You should align yourself with the strongest Dragon so that your life, at least, can be safe and secure.”

Caden straightened and said stoutly, “Valerius is the strongest.”

He expected Illarion to scoff at this, but the Green Dragon King said, “He could be. But he cares too much. Today, that speech was beautiful. I felt it in my own bones. He should have taken advantage of it and led the people to tear down the temples of the Faith, make some of the Faithful hate Shifters instead of wanting to blow up people to make more.”

“You mean incite a mob? Valerius would never do that!” Caden shook his head violently.

With a sad smile, Illarion nodded. “I know. And that is why he is not the strongest.” Illarion pushed off of the railing and headed towards the throne room. He threw over his shoulder, “Think on it, Caden. We may not share a bed. But I could give you the peace you want. You would love my territory with its mountains, lakes and rivers. Iolaire would have plenty of snow-kissed land to enjoy. Your family would be treated

as royalty. And, in the end, what is better than that?"

Caden frowned after Illarion's retreating back. He wanted to answer: justice, prosperity and peace for all. But that sounded naive even in his own ears.

But just because it might not be possible does it mean we should just give up? Shouldn't we just keep trying to make a more perfect world?

"He does not understand you would never choose safety over Valerius," Tez said from the darkness of the steps where Illarion had emerged from. "You both are so romantic!"

Caden's frown became a smile. "Tez, you were eavesdropping."

The Gold Dragon King grinned and hopped up the stairs two at a time to join Caden. "Maybe a little. It was such a fascinating conversation and I cannot believe I am saying fascinating in the same sentence as Illarion."

Tez's mouth flattened after saying the Green Dragon King's name as if it tasted bad. That caused Caden to smile more.

"He was a little... different this time around," Caden admitted. "Not as, uhm, well..."

"Stupid as he normally is? Yes, I agree," Tez answered with a nod. "He so often plays the strong man who seems only to see the surface layer of things that one forgets there is some depth to him."

Caden shifted his position so that his right hip was resting against the cool stone. "Do you think he's right?"

Tez gave a cough-laugh. "No, well, not exactly." He flashed very white teeth at

Caden. “I think dissent from one’s people is a good thing. Too often those in power forget what it is like to be at the bottom. They take for granted that what they experience is what everyone experiences. They forget the least of us. So the people must rise up!”

Tez’s arms lifted as if conducting an orchestra of the discontented. Caden could almost see villagers grabbing their torches and pitchforks.

“Even violently?” Caden thought of what would have happened if even one of the planned bombs had gone off as it should have.

“Yes, even violently.” Tez nodded and the feathers in his hair bobbed along with him. Caden must have looked horrified as he added, “Sometimes the only way people will listen is if you have a gun to their heads, Caden.”

“What about the innocent victims? The people in the Below have nothing! And now they have to be afraid of being blown up, too?” Caden gripped the railing.

Tez’s expression was thoughtful. Like Illarion, he did not react in anger to Caden’s arguments. Caden realized that this had to be because of age. The dragons had lived so long and seen so much. They thought about things rather than reacted. At least, they were this way with him. Patient and trying to teach. But he didn’t know if he wanted to learn their lessons.

“One way the Faith could have looked at this is as that those in the Below would be best served by the bombs,” Tez said finally.

Caden goggled at him. “You can’t be serious!”

Tez put a hand on Caden’s right forearm. “But don’t you see, Caden? The best and most immediate way out of poverty and the underclass is to become a Shifter. The

Faith wanted to give the people in the Below that chance.”

“And those who weren’t so lucky would get death?” Caden’s voice was bitter.

Tez nodded sadly. “That is the price.”

“I’m surprised you would be okay with this, Tez!” Caden cried.

“I would like a solution that benefits all, but there is always a cost, and oftentimes the poorest of us pay it,” Tez explained. “So it is not that I am okay with it as you say. I just acknowledge the truth of it.”

“Are you going to say I’m naive, too, like Illarion for wanting a different solution? A different paradigm?” Caden asked.

Tez smiled broadly at him. His sunny face became even more appealing. “Not in the least! I think that Iolaire and you are here to bring hope . So keep believing in that other solution. Keep seeking it. Maybe you will find it while others have not.”

With a final squeeze of his forearm, Tez too walked off towards the throne room. But Caden was not left alone for long.

“You look very cozy!” Esme’s bright voice called to him as she came up in a shimmering blue dress that looked like ice captured in fabric.

“You look beautiful,” Caden told her earnestly.

“Oh, flattery will get you everywhere!” Esme twittered and kissed both of his cheeks as she held his hands in hers. When she pulled back, she studied his face critically. “How are you doing?”

“Not... not really good,” Caden admitted then sighed. “But I should be glad. Everyone but the one bomber is okay. My mom is fine! Rose and Marban are good! Valerius is wonderful, as always. And I’m...”

“My dear boy, no one expects you to be fine. I’m not!” Esme admitted.

“You lost your friend,” he said, thinking of Serai.

Esme’s expression grew pensive. “Was she my friend? I hardly feel like I know her at all.” She shook herself. “You’ve come into quite the mess, haven’t you? Well, I suppose it is to be expected. Another Dragon Spirit wouldn’t have just appeared when things were calm.”

“How did...” Caden stopped himself. Asking for her backstory might be rude or presumptuous.

But she smiled as she finished his sentence, “How did I join with my Spirit? Oh, now that is a tale! I will tell you the abbreviated version.”

She looked out at the slowly darkening horizon and said nothing for a long time despite her smile and light laugh earlier. It likely wasn’t a happy story. Valerius had indicated that none of the other Dragon Shifters were made because of good things.

“I had been in service to a king of a country that I will not name,” she said finally. “I had outlived most everyone. My faculties were still remarkably good. I was considered both ancient and wise for the time period. People did not live so long back then.”

Caden resisted the urge to ask her how long ago this was.

“But my time as counselor to kings was coming to an end. But my enemies--and I

had so many of those--determined that I should not go into that good night peacefully," she remarked dryly.

"They wanted to kill you?" Caden sounded aghast.

"Oh, yes." Her smile was still amused. "And rightly so! I had earned their enmity. And I didn't blame them for their actions except..." She bit her lower lips for a moment. "I wonder if those in the Faith who are behind Serai's part knew this about me."

"Knew what?"

"As I said, I did not blame them for wishing me dead or seeking to kill me, but they involved an innocent to do it." Her face looked pale and drawn for a moment. "She came for tea, as she always did, and brought me some of her mother's special medicine that helped with aches and pains. But this time it was poisoned."

"She didn't know?" Caden guessed having heard the word "innocent".

"No, she didn't. She saw me start to froth at the mouth when I took it. She was screaming and calling for help. I slumped to the floor. Everything was terribly distant except for her face," Esme mused. "She looked like she'd been stabbed in the heart and then she..."

Esme went silent. Her hands flexed and released in front of her.

"She took the medicine and drank it down herself," Esme said simply.

"Oh, my God, Esme..."

"It was when she was dying that Scylla came to me," Esme continued. "You see she

was my granddaughter and... and her own mother--my daughter--had sent her with the poison.”

Caden opened his mouth and nothing came out.

“Scylla asked if I wanted revenge. And as my dear granddaughter lost her life, I said yes . Give me life so that I might take revenge,” she answered.

“I--I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have--”

She tightened her hands around his. “You should ask. It’s important. History doesn’t repeat so much as rhymes . And the truth is that remembering the innocent in all of this--the ones that will be twisted to another’s purpose--will give us the strength to do what is hard when the time comes.”

Caden could only imagine how hard it had been for Esme to take revenge against her own daughter. He couldn’t imagine what Esme had been through to do it. Yet Esme had said her enemies had been right to hate her and seek her death. What had happened between her daughter and her to earn that?

Caden caught movement at the edge of his vision. His head turned as he saw that in the distance was a fogbank. It was huge and seemed to shimmer with its own light.

“Ah, she’s here,” Esme said with satisfaction. “Queen Jahara has arrived.”

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:38 pm

QUEEN JAHARA

Valerius lifted his head. The scents of the continent of Africa swept on the wind to him: the dusty spice of the desert, the warm sweetness of the jungles, the icy rush of the mountains, and the bitter, burnt scent of humanity.

Chione, who was in the middle of relaying who would be their guests for dinner that evening--Marban and Rose, Wally and the Bryces--stopped in mid-sentence as Valerius got up from his throne.

“What is it?” she asked, head cocked quizzically to the side.

“Queen Jahara is here,” Valerius said and stepped down from the throne.

He headed towards the plaza where Caden and Esme stood, arm in arm, gazing out at the horizon that was a wall of glowing white fog. Valerius could see people in the streets staring out at the unnatural phenomena, pointing and talking amongst each other. After all they had endured recently, Valerius hoped they were not afraid of Jahara’s sideshow.

Chione quickly followed Valerius onto the stone plaza, but Illarion practically pushed her out of the way as he settled himself at Valerius’ left side. Tez, seeing Illarion positioning himself as an equal, did the same at Valerius’ right. The urge to grasp both of their heads and knock them together was almost overwhelming.

“What are you doing?” Valerius growled.

“We should all greet Jahara as the equals we are,” Illarion remarked.

The Green Dragon King seemed awfully pleased with himself. Valerius had glimpsed him speaking with Caden earlier. He had almost stalked out there to put an end to it, but the conversation had appeared relatively congenial and Caden had made no signs of distress.

“And why are you scampering up beside me, Tez?” Valerius asked.

“Because the Green Dragon is lesser than the Gold,” Tez said with a wink at him.

Valerius stopped in mid-step, which had the two Dragon Shifters stumbling forward. This allowed Chione to step up to his side. She smiled and shook her head as she joined him. He offered her his arm, which she took. They walked past the Green and Gold Dragons who were scowling at each other and not him, as if the other were responsible for losing face.

“Well played,” Chione murmured with amusement.

“I have my moments,” he answered.

Upon hearing his voice, Caden turned excitedly towards him and jogged the ten feet that still separated them. There was high color in the boy’s cheeks and his eyes were wide with excitement. Valerius grasped him around the waist and lifted him up before spinning him around. Caden laughed. He gently set Caden down on his feet. The young man leaned against him still, cheek turned to the side, resting against his chest, humming softly.

“Hey!” Caden cried. “Queen Jahara is coming! I mean Esme says the fog--”

“Yes, that is her. She controls the wind and can create fogs and mists that can stagger

the senses.” Valerius squinted at the fog wall approaching. “That one is 100 feet tall, I think. Impressive.”

“It’s so cool. I’m really excited to meet her!” Caden enthused.

Valerius was not surprised. Queen Jahara rarely left the continent of Africa, which was her entire territory, yet much was known about her as the causes she supported were wildly popular. With her stewardship, all of the African nations had entered a time of historic prosperity for all of their people and not just the lucky or corrupt few at the top.

The African wildlife that ignited so many people’s imaginations not only was protected under her reign, but thriving. Creatures that were feared to be near extinction were making huge comebacks. And she had merged her conservationism with technology. Science and nature combined in ways only imagined in books and on the screen. It was indeed Afro-futurism taking place in real life.

Caden went on, “She’s like the person on climate change and space technology and--”

“Queen Jahara is a wise steward of her territory, and...” he sighed, “some would argue the whole of the planet.”

“Yeah, I heard that all her cities now are completely green and she’s introducing hover cars essentially and--”

“Yes,” he replied dryly.

“And people are actually getting chip implants and--”

“Yes, she’s wonderful, yes,” Valerius interrupted with a sigh. “I hear quite enough

about all of that from President Goodfellow.”

Caden grinned at him. “Are you jealous of Jahara’s good press?”

Valerius sniffed. “Never.”

Caden got up on his tiptoes and kissed Valerius’ nose. “You shouldn’t be jealous! You’re wonderful, too.”

“Hmmm. Not in the aspirational way that Jahara is.”

“You’re just... a little scarier.” Caden grinned.

“Jahara would not actually be pleased by that,” Valerius said dryly. “At least, she wants her enemies to fear her and her friends to love her, though she has few of those.”

Caden cocked an eyebrow in surprise. “I know that she pretty much has instituted a matriarchy in her territory, and that took some violence in the beginning, but things are pretty peaceful there now, aren’t they?”

“They are, because she has an iron grip on her people as strong as Illarion does, but in a slightly different way,” Valerius explained. “She has more of a velvet glove over that iron fist.”

“Oh, that’s not what I expected,” Caden said.

“She does not trust people easily,” Chione remarked mildly, which really was mild. Jahara believed the worst of people, but, then again, she’d been given reason to by the nearest and dearest to her.

“Why?” Caden asked, his gaze flickering between him and Chione.

Their eyes met. How much to tell? Normally, Dragons were reticent about telling others of their creation stories. But each of them knew one another and Caden was now one of them.

Valerius said, “Her father bartered her to others to pay his debts.”

“Bartered?” Caden’s forehead furrowed and then cleared as horror crossed his face, “You mean sold her--her body to--”

“Yes.” Valerius frowned. Just talking of this angered him. What had happened to Jahara had left a mark that had not left her to this day. She had an antipathy towards men that was well earned. But she was suspicious and quick to suspect treachery from everyone. “But she was very smart and very patient. She slowly stole and hid the things she needed to escape her father and her abusers and for her to take her revenge.”

“How? What did she do?” Caden looked to be all huge eyes at that moment.

“One day, when her father went to town, she slipped her bonds and managed to elude her jailors,” Valerius explained, imagining her fleet-footed race on bare feet into the thick jungle, heart in her throat, eyes wide with adrenaline and fear as she looked for predators both animal and human. “Her father and three others tracked her, but what they did not understand was that she was tracking them in return.”

“Things did not go well for them, I take it?” Caden guessed.

“She used poisoned blow darts to take down three of the four men. Her father first,” Valerius explained dryly at Caden’s wince. “But the last man caught her. She is not a large person. She struggled, but physically, she was no match for him.”

“Please tell me that her Spirit found her then.” Caden’s eyes glowed for a moment with a white light much like his did when anger suffused him and Raziel surfaced. But Valerius’ eyes glowed red while Caden’s glowed white.

“Zephyra found her,” Valerius assured him.

“I can well imagine what happened to that guy attacking her.” Caden was grinning.

“Yes, you can. One of Zephyra’s abilities is to create a scalding mist. His meat was cooked on the bone,” Valerius explained.

“Oh, gross! Deserved but gross!” Caden twisted around to look at the fog bank that glowed of its own accord. He squinted and let out a gasp. “I see--see a line of cars?”

“Yes, Queen Jahara--unlike some people --would not assume Dragon form in my territory without permission,” Valerius stated with a side-eye at Illarion, who pretended not to notice.

“So she’s able to use one of her gifts without shifting,” Caden mused.

“All of us can to a certain extent,” Illarion said, which surprised Valerius. The Green Dragon King held what gifts he had and could use very close to his chest.

“What can you do, Illarion?” Caden asked innocently.

Valerius met Illarion’s gaze. He shrugged at the Green Dragon King, basically telling him that he had opened the door now he had to decide whether to walk through the open doorway or have it hit him in the face.

“I can do... things,” Illarion muttered.

“Things?” Tez smirked, scenting a teasing moment appearing.

Illarion’s eyes narrowed at him. “Yes, things that I will tell Caden at another time if I so choose and--”

“Telling him you have poison breath is hardly news” Tez pointed out. “I’m betting that’s all you can do.”

Illarion’s eyes narrowed more. “I can assure you that if I wished, I could melt the flesh from your bones right now with--”

“Guys, not everything is a fight,” Caden interrupted gently.

“Oh, anything can be made into one.” Tez smiled winsomely.

Caden shook his head. He wasn’t angry, but he said firmly, “Some aren’t worth it.”

“I’m just teasing the Green Meanie,” Tez pouted.

“Yeah, I know.” Caden shook his head as if Tez were a big child, which he sometimes was. “And, Illarion?”

The Green Dragon King lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re big. You’re bad. Everybody knows it. Happy?” Caden asked.

Illarion pursed his lips and then laughed. “Perhaps! Happiness is overrated. But I am content that the truth is known.”

Tez rolled his eyes. “Stroking his ego won’t help, Caden! He is a bottomless pit of insecurity, because he knows that Valerius could wipe the floor with him.”

Valerius grinned but hid it by stroking his beard. Illarion growled, bared his teeth, and went over to the railing, pouting. Caden turned back to Valerius.

“Tez is right,” Caden whispered. “But, hey, you aren’t insecure.”

Valerius kissed him.

Esme smiled at Caden. “I’m curious what all of your and Iolaire’s gifts are.”

“Yeah, gifts. I guess I have those?” Caden smiled uncertainly. It was more of a question than a statement.

He is still unsure of himself, Raziel , Valerius said.

Raziel, who was resting its chin on its front legs, let out a breath of smoke, showing that it, too, could obscure the air just as well as Zephyra. Iolaire is strong, if small. Special.

Special how? Valerius lifted an eyebrow.

Special. Raziel’s face was obscured by smoke except for its red eyes.

You are of no help.

“You seem to have gifts that counter ours so far, Caden,” Tez remarked. “That ability to force us back to human form for one. Which means that, even though you are the smallest Dragon, you become the largest in comparison!”

“Are you worried about that, Tez?” Esme asked.

“Me? Bah! No! Eldoron is too beautiful for Iolaire to send it away!” Tez crossed his

arms over his chest.

“I wouldn’t use the power on you, Tez. I just had to stop the fight,” Caden assured the Gold Dragon King. “I promise.”

Tez hummed but then beamed. “I believe you! It would just be so unnerving! To shift without the desire to do so.”

“I’m sure,” Caden sounded sorry.

Valerius nearly rolled his eyes. “Illarion had it coming.”

“Yeah, he did. Besides, it didn’t hurt him permanently or anything,” Caden murmured.

“Only his pride, dear,” Esme remarked as she looked at Illarion’s back that was stiff as a post. “I do not think that will ever recover.”

“What a shame,” Valerius remarked dryly.

Kaila suddenly burst out of a side door dragging Mei behind her like a kite.

“Is she here?! Is she here yet?!” Kaila cried as she pulled Mei all the way to the railing and then leaned them both over the side so that they were dangerously close to falling over. With the hand that wasn’t surgically attached to Mei’s wrist, she waved frantically at the fogbank.

“I do not think she can see you yet, Kaila.” Mei yanked her wrist free of Kaila’s hand and rubbed it.

Kaila bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet. “She’s coming! She’s coming!”

Mei's eyes narrowed. "Yes, so she is. How wonderful ."

"Is Mei not a fan of Jahara's?" Caden asked. "I would have thought with both of them being so into technology that they'd be fast friends."

Valerius snorted and ran his hands up and down Caden's back. "Mei thinks of technology as something to be utilized. Jahara views it as something to be coaxed."

"Huh." Caden frowned.

"Jahara views Mei as part of the problem in many ways," Valerius said.

"She believes that technology can be abused . It's absurd!" Mei sneered. She smoothed her hand down the front of her crimson silk shirt and black pants. "And you shouldn't expect her to like you either, Caden."

"Why?" Caden frowned.

"Mei, it is not all men that Jahara dislikes," Chione said firmly.

"All men are suspect until she checks them out. Caden is not just a man but a Dragon. One that came out of nowhere," Mei answered with a wave of her hand. Her smile was not kind. "Valerius, you know her. She will not be friendly."

Caden blinked. "But--"

"It is all right, Caden," Esme stated. "Jahara will be suspicious, but you'll win her over."

"That is highly unlikely," Mei scoffed. "Look at that fog wall. It's a show of power. We can't see how many people she brought with her."

Mei was right, but he had no concerns about Jahara. If she brought an army, he could deal with them just as he had dealt with Mei's people.

"Mei is not so brave without her mechanical men," Illarion snorted.

Her arms crossed over her chest tightly. Her eyes narrowed. "You speak tough now, but Jahara has absolutely no love for you, Illarion."

"As if I care." Illarion shook his head in disgust.

"Not even you can ruin the Iridescent Dragon's appearance!" Kaila cried at Illarion. She was still bobbing up and down eagerly.

"You two are great friends, Kaila?" Caden asked with a gentle smile.

"Indeed! Zephyra and Lana are close. Zephyra's scales are a brilliant, shimmering blue, purple and green. She has orange wings. She is beautiful!" Kaila said with almost childlike enthusiasm.

"Wow, she sounds amazing," Caden responded kindly.

"She has always been good to the creatures of the sea. I am certain she will like you, too, Caden," Kaila assured him.

Valerius put an arm around Caden's shoulders. "Indeed, she will." Unspoken, but heard by all was the addition, Or she will regret it.

Illarion let out a dark chuckle. Tez's eyebrows rose. Mei smiled with a wicked satisfaction while Esme simply shook her head.

"She is our guest, Valerius," Chione chastised mildly.

“I do not recall inviting her. But she will be treated with respect,” he answered just as mildly with the unspoken, So long as she acts with respect .

“Oh! The fog is almost here! It’s so cool!” Caden exclaimed and pointed towards the towering wall of white streaked through with blue and white light.

All of them went over to the railing to watch as the fog wall reached the bottom of the mountain that housed Reach. Valerius watched as the city was swallowed up and the lights seemingly extinguished. The wall drew closer and closer. It reminded him of boiling clouds. Caden drew closer to him as the first wisps of it touched their faces, kissing their skin with dampness. If Jahara was attacked, this cloud would have been a scalding mass which would have burned flesh from bones, cooking people where they stood in their own fat, and turning lungs to leather. But it was not. It was merely a parlor trick.

She thinks we cannot see her in this pea soup! Raziel muttered. The moment she gets close to our jaws...

She just wants to “appear” before us as if by magic, Valerius stated with mild exasperation.

The fog completely obscured the plaza now. The very top of High Reach was covered over as well. He could barely see Caden who was mere inches from him. But Valerius turned to look towards the center of the plaza, nonetheless certain Jahara was there. Caden clung to him, clearly discombobulated by the thick whiteness all around him.

Then the fog disappeared.

It did not lessen and drift away. No, it simply vanished. And ten feet from him was Queen Jahara and her retinue of matriarchs. She wore bold, bright colors that

shimmered in the dusk light. A crimson skirt that flared wide at the knee down to her feet. A loincloth of pink over it. There was a slash of bare skin across her midriff showing a flat, muscled stomach. Her top was made of fine blue and gold material. Bracelets lined her forearms and others curled around her upper arms. A large gold choker encircled her neck and a single gold circlet was around her forehead. Jahara was beautiful, elegant and imposing. Even if she were dressed in rags, one would know she was a queen. She wore her nobility like armor.

While Jahara appeared to be a woman in her late twenties, the women who surrounded her were of all ages from one that looked no older than thirteen to others that were clearly grandmothers or great grandmothers. Many of their dark skinned faces reflected lives that had not been easy.

Many of these matriarchs had done back breaking labor for over half a century while others had been the heads of companies, lawyers and doctors. They were the wisest women from villages and cities all over Africa. In order for an idea to reach Jahara's eyes and ears, it had to get past them. And they had advised her well so far.

Jahara's green eyes fixed upon Caden. Her expression was as hard as diamonds for a moment. The suspicion that Mei had credited her was showing full on. But then it softened into something much closer to confusion. Caden, in a sweater too big for him with those large, innocent eyes, hardly looked the part of any villain. Not that looks couldn't be deceiving but still.

For his part, Caden was staring at her with amazement and interest. Jahara blinked and quickly looked away from the young man as if he affected her in ways she had not expected. Her gaze landed on Valerius. He knew better than to expect a bow. Jahara bowed to no one. But she did incline her head as did her wise women in greeting.

"King Valerius, thank you for your hospitality," Jahara intoned in her rich, low voice.

“You are most welcome, Queen Jahara. I am pleased to have you in my territory,” Valerius answered coolly. He was polite, but his displeasure hosting all of them was not lost.

Before she could respond, there was wild clapping and Kaila barrelled out of the group and dashed towards Jahara. There was a faint smile on Jahara’s face before it was obscured by Kaila engulfing the smaller woman in a hug then Kaila spun her around, much like what Valerius had done to Caden.

“Jahara! I’ve missed you! That was a wonderful trick to appear like that!” Kaila squealed in delight.

“Kaila! I am happy to see you as well. My heart sings, my sister. But please set me down,” Jahara said to the Turquoise Dragon with a self-conscious laugh.

Kaila gave her one more squeeze before setting Jahara on her feet again. “You must not be so formal, Jahara! You are here among friends!”

Jahara’s gaze swung to Mei. “Hmmmm, friends.”

Kaila clasped both of Jahara’s hands in hers, and just like with Mei, she tugged the other Dragon queen after her right over to Caden. Like a proud child showing another child her toy, Kaila gestured to Caden.

“This is Caden! His Spirit is Iolaire! He is the White Dragon King!” Kaila exclaimed. “And, Caden, this is Jahara!”

Chione was looking down studiously, her lips twitching suspiciously. Esme did not hide her amusement at all. Illarion stared up into the air, letting out sighs of boredom. Tez looked like a little boy looking for an opportunity to tug Jahara’s ponytails. If she had any.

Caden smiled sweetly and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Queen Jahara.”

He extended his hand and Jahara hesitantly took it in a loose grip.

“And you, King Caden,” she answered.

“Oh, I’m not--”

“Yes, Caden, you are,” Valerius reminded him softly.

Caden blinked. “Uhm, okay, sure.”

“You do not claim your title?” Jahara’s sculpted eyebrows.

“I...”

“You do not wish territory?” Jahara pressed.

“Well, uhm...”

“You are always there when tragedy strikes?” Jahara’s eyes narrowed.

“Now, no, that’s not always true!” Caden looked alarmed.

“None of these terrible things are Caden’s fault,” Valerius informed her coldly. “As you will discover at dinner.”

Jahara tilted her head to the side. “I am all ears and eyes, Valerius. I cannot wait to hear the explanation for how Caden and Iolaire do not live up to their name and history.”

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EVERYTHING CHANGES

Later...

Caden put his hands to his face and covered his mouth with them. He had so much to say that he feared it would just spill out of him, but he had to be logical and adult about this so that his parents and his sister would hear what he had to say rather than hear only how he said it.

The three of them were sitting on a couch in the southern tower suite like three birds on a line. It had seven bedrooms and was five stories. More than enough room for his family, though they didn't know that this was their permanent home. Not yet. And he supposed that they could decide not to live here. He had to convince them otherwise.

Caden though was keenly aware that from the balcony behind him he could see the pond where he and Valerius had made love. He quickly pushed that from his mind. The last thing he needed to be thinking of was the Black Dragon King's incredibly beautiful body when he was trying to talk about something serious.

"These are very nice rooms, Caden," his mother said with a sweet smile.

She seemed to have recovered from what had happened that afternoon. His father though did not. His father was seated between his mother and sister, holding onto their hands as if he feared they would be snatched from him. Though he absolutely hated to see his father afraid, Caden knew that might make giving up some of their freedom a little easier.

“I’m glad that you think so. Do you like your room, Tilly?” Caden asked his sister.

Tilly--reflecting the tenseness of their parents--immediately brightened and said, “Yeah! It’s so cool! I have this four-poster bed with purple hangings! And my own bathroom with a tub you can swim in and a shower so big you could have a party!”

Purple hangings and a great bathroom are enough to pull her out of a funk, Caden thought with amusement.

Iolaire twittered in agreement. It loved Tilly and her brightness, especially when things were so gloomy.

“And it’s on its own floor too.” Caden grinned at his sister.

“Totally! I can...” She cast a glance at her parents and quickly amended whatever she had been thinking of saying to, “Play my music like so loud and no one can hear!”

“Well, it’s only for a few days, honey. Don’t get too used to that,” their mother said.

“Oh, Mom--”

“Actually,” Caden interrupted Tilly’s oncoming diatribe against their mother. His single word had them all going silent. The knowledge of what he was going to say next hung in his mother’s eyes. His sister appeared wide-eyed. He covered his hands with his mouth again. “Actually, I was thinking that maybe... that this should be permanent.”

“But, Caden, we have a house, a home, my garden, your rooms...” His mother’s voice petered off as no one else objected.

Tilly bit her lower lip and swung her feet back and forth. She was fighting with

herself very hard not to say anything. Tilly and their mother's fights were legendary, especially when Tilly thought their mother wasn't being "rational".

His mother cleared her throat and said, "I know that today was scary. Hard and scary. And we've been all out of sorts since all of the changes that have occurred, but things will get back to normal."

"What's normal?" Tilly asked, losing her fight with herself over saying nothing, evidently. "Caden being a Dragon Shifter? The Faith planting bombs--"

"Tilly, that wasn't the Faith! That was just some individuals with messed up ideas. Not the religion as a whole!" Their mother disputed, but with so little heat that Caden wondered if she even believed it any longer or was just mouthing platitudes. "And we don't even know if they were the ones that planted all of the bombs--"

"Like the one that almost killed Caden?" Tilly's voice went shrill and high spots of color appeared on her cheeks. "Caden, did they do it?"

"Yeah, I think so." Caden scrubbed a hand over the back of his head. He was actually sure of it, not just because of what the two members of the Faith had said after the botched bombing, but Serai's confession before she killed herself. He didn't want to tell them about her, but he would do so if he had to in order to convince them that staying in High Reach was safest. The only bombing he wasn't so sure about was the one at the Humans First meeting, though it would have been amusing to have those bigots become the Shifters they so hated. But the Faithful cherished the Spirits. A Humans First meeting would be the last place people like that would be. But he just said, "They want to make more Shifters to stop us from losing the war that's coming."

"War with who?" His mother lifted her hands in the air.

“Humans,” Caden said.

“There’s not going to be a war with humans, Caden!” His mother looked between his father and his sister.

Tilly rolled her eyes and swung her legs harder. She might be acting a little like a brat, but that was only because they’d nearly lost their mom today and that had shaken her down to her bones. She was using anger to hide her fear.

“I don’t know whether there will be or won’t be,” Caden answered her. “But that’s what the Faith...” Seeing his mother’s warning look, he quickly amended, “That’s what certain people in the Faith think and they’re preparing for that.”

“By setting bombs?” His mother let out a sharp laugh as if she had never heard something so absurd in her life. She confirmed as much when she added, “That’s ridiculous!”

“Why is it ridiculous?” Tilly’s lower lip was quivering now. “Caden became the Ninth Dragon Shifter because of what they did. Sounds like they have the right idea.”

“That’s monstrous though! The Faith is not about that--”

“You said it wasn’t everybody in the Faith,” Tilly reminded her. His sister’s arms crossed tightly over her chest. “So maybe the whole Faith isn’t about that, but some of the Faithful are.”

“But--but it's just absurd!” Their mother shook her head as if she couldn’t quite believe it, but did accept it was the truth.

“So, here’s the thing, as crazy as it sounds to us--as crazy as it is --Valerius and I think it would be safer for you guys to stay at High Reach from now on,” Caden

finally got out.

Valerius had offered to be with him to make this offer. But Caden had said he should do it alone first. Valerius could come in later. Although maybe Chione would be a better seller of the delights of High Reach than either of them. And maybe he should throw in Rose and Esme too. But he had to be the one to broach this first.

“If we move in here the media will get wind of it and your identity will be revealed,” his mother said in a reasonable tone.

“You’re right. It would be, but considering I intend to reveal who I am anyways it does not matter,” he explained.

Tilly’s head shot up and her mouth opened in an “O” of surprise. He wondered if his sister was happy about that. It would give her some bragging rights. Not to mention plenty of Dragon rides. Iolaire hooted in agreement. She would have had her Dragon rides no matter what.

But it also would separate her from her friends, from everyone. Forever, she would be known as the sister of the Ninth Dragon Shifter. The other Dragons were so old that if they still had living heirs no one knew of them any longer. His family would be the first in history to be connected to a Dragon Shifter. They would be breaking new ground with every breath they took and moves they made and words they spoke.

“Caden, if you do that...” His mother paused and swallowed before continuing in a low, rushed voice, “if you do that there is no going back. There is no being anonymous. You will not be able to have a normal life.”

It was Caden’s turn to swallow. “I know, but the truth is that the moment I became the Ninth Dragon Shifter any chance of a normal life was over. People took risks to give me even a few days of normality and I...” Caden rubbed his hands over his face

again. “I am actually ashamed that I let them do that at all. I put people in danger. I allowed evil people to try and use my desire for a normal life against my friends. Landry...”

“She’s getting out, by the way.” His father’s head had been lowered the whole time, not looking at Caden or anyone, but lost in thought. He lifted it now. “Justice St. John let me know.”

“That’s right!” Tilly beamed. “Since the Faith--I mean the bad members of the Faith or--or whatever did the bombings then Landry isn’t going to prison!”

Caden let out a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding. “Thank God, but I thought that she would still be in there for the smoke bombs and whatever else Jasper roped her into.”

His father shook his head. “The only charges they’ve filed are in regard to the smoke bombs. Those aren’t serious.”

“Smoke bombs. Thank God,” he repeated again.

A lightness filled him. Landry was free! She wasn’t going to stay in prison her whole life! He couldn’t wait to talk to her. He’d reach out to her first thing tomorrow and invite her up to High Reach. They had so much to catch up on.

Momentarily, he felt bad about taking her away from Wally. He had left the man with no one to help him but Rose and Marban. But maybe Wally would close the Emporium now. As crazy as that sounded to have Wally existing without his Emporium, Caden would need Wally by his side now that he had decided to fully be the Ninth Dragon Shifter.

“Yes, it’s a good thing, but she revealed your identity to Jasper Hawes, Caden, and

her brothers are still very much in Humans First,” his father reminded him.

“Yeah, but Landry isn’t her brothers,” Caden said firmly. “She knows what Humans First is selling is garbage anyways. She’s proved her loyalty to me already.”

“Family has power. She would be going against the hold that has on her just for your friendship,” his father said.

He looked at his father then. His father appeared exhausted, drained and almost defeated. As if the idealistic power of the law that had been kindled in his breast again had been snuffed out.

“Dad, what do you think about living here?” Caden asked.

“Grant is not going to give up our home, Caden!” His mother shook her head in disbelief. “Because it wouldn’t just stop at that. If us being here is the only way we’re safe then how will your father practice law at the firm? Or Tilly go to school? Or me practice with the Faith and do all the charity work that I do? We’d have to give up our lives!”

Caden winced. “I know, Mom.”

She gaped again at him. “I just don’t see--”

“And I’m sorry. But you’re my family and that means your lives have to change as well,” Caden told her.

His throat felt tight. He had been thinking only of himself since this thing had begun. He had not thought of his family. Not fully.

“I agree with you and Valerius, Caden, that we should stay here,” his father said.

His mother gasped and clutched at the top of her blouse. “Grant!”

His father grasped her hands in his and brought them up to his mouth. He kissed the back of both of her hands. “Ellen, we almost lost you today. You are worth more than a home, a career, or anything.”

“Grant...” His mother blinked. Tears filled her eyes and hung upon her lashes. They slowly dropped down to her lap, pattering against her skirt. “I don’t...”

“What about you, Till?” Caden asked his sister.

There were tears in his sister’s eyes too, but she quickly blinked them back and wiped the one that wouldn’t be tamed by her dark lashes. “I always wanted to live in a castle. So knock one thing off my bucket list!”

“Not to mention meeting all the Dragon Shifters. King Anwar will be here soon,” Caden told her.

She nodded, swiping away tears, making sure that they didn’t drop but a few millimeters from her eyes. “That’ll be cool. I’ll have so much to tell my friends. They’ll be so jealous. They’ll be allowed to come here and hang out, right?”

“Of course,” Caden told her, and that was undoubtedly true, but only after the Claw did background checks on them and their families and everyone related to them six ways to Sunday. But he didn’t want to upset her anymore. Tilly likely knew this anyway. She had always been smart about things.

“What will we do?” their mother asked, her voice small and lost.

“Mom, there are so many things you can do,” Caden told her. “You’re--”

“The mother of the White Dragon Shifter,” his father said.

“I was going to say smart , but what you said is true as well.” Caden found himself blushing. His mother’s importance shouldn’t be dependent upon him.

“I... I... yes, but...” His mother blinked.

“Like everything you say is going to be uber important, Mother of Dragons,” his sister said with a twitch of her lips.

That had his mother blinking even more. “Do you suppose that I might meet with the High Sister?”

“Dear, I think she’ll be the one wanting to meet with you ,” his father said with a faint smile as well.

“What about me?” Tilly asked brightly. “I’m important too, right? I’m the one and only sister to a Dragon!”

Iolaire tossed back its head and trilled with happiness at the thought of people knowing that Tilly was its sister.

“Iolaire thinks that’s a very important role.” Caden grinned at her. “But, in all seriousness--”

“I was serious!” Tilly lifted her chin. “I’m royalty.”

Caden guffawed a little. “Okay, I guess since I am a king that you are Princess Tilly.”

“Darn straight!” Tilly did look serious then. “I won’t be able to go back to school, will I?”

Smart. She's so damned smart.

"I don't know," Caden admitted. "But I don't think so."

"What about her education, Caden?!" His mother sounded scandalized.

"Mom, I'm pretty sure that the smartest people will be brought in to teach her," Caden said dryly. "Private tutors with the heads of their fields. The best teachers around."

"Chione!" Tilly cried the Sphinx Shifter's name as if it was a prayer. "Do you think she would teach me? I would love to be Caden's Councillor!"

Caden blinked. For a moment, he imagined Tilly older, walking beside him with a tablet just like Chione did with Valerius. She would have the cool composure that Chione possessed. She would handle politicians and powerful people of all stripes with a dry, but polite disdain. She would be utterly loyal to him. He blinked and the image disappeared, but when he looked at Tilly head on, he could see a shadow of it.

"Yeah," Caden said slowly. "I'm sure she would."

In fact, he would ask Chione himself. Wally and Rose were already his advisors, but Tilly would have a very important role.

Tilly's smile faltered for a moment and she put a hand to her chest as she said with a little awe, "You mean that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do, Till. I'm going to need you. I'm going to need all of you," he added as his gaze took in all of his family sitting before him.

"We will be there for you, Caden," his father assured him, and that assurance was

welcome this time instead of suffocating.

Now that he was really going to put himself out there as the Ninth Dragon Shifter, the full weight of that responsibility fell upon his shoulders. He would need as many people in his corner as possible. And his father was no longer fighting another battle for himself, but was now fighting fully for Caden.

“And what about you, Dad? Going to take that job clerking for Justice St. John?” Caden lifted an eyebrow at his father. “You looked really chummy together earlier today.”

“Grant?” His mother’s voice rose in shock.

His father squeezed her hands. “I was going to tell you after the Faith event, but...” His father’s lips twisted. “But things got in the way.”

“Yes, things.” His mother nodded sadly. “I just can’t believe that people I knew--thought I knew--could do something so awful.”

“They’re zealots, Mom.” Caden frowned deeply. “It’s not logical. And I think that certain people can hide parts of themselves when you’re not looking for that kind of crazy.”

His mother nodded again. She looked up at his father. “Will you take the job clerking for the Chief Justice?”

His father gave her a wan smile, “Do you think I would turn away from helping decide the most important legal questions of the day?”

She gave him a smile. “No, of course not.”

“Besides, I don’t think it would be proper for me to be representing people any longer since my son will have a role in ruling this world,” his father said with a long breath. “Working for the Supreme Court will have a purity that I have longed for in any case.”

“And it will be safe. The Supreme Court is as safe as High Reach. Maybe safer,” Caden said and felt a welling of relief at that.

“Everything is going to change, isn’t it?” His mother asked.

“Yeah,” Caden said.

“But not for the worse,” Tilly pointed out and gestured around them. “Have you checked out all the incredibly cool tech? Not to mention that the staff comes in and like brings you anything you want including frozen Cokes and Pixie Stix--”

“You’ve already asked the staff for things?” Their mother’s eyebrows rose perilously into her hairline.

“Uhm... maybe?” His sister’s shoulders lifted up.

“Hmmm, Tilly, we must not take advantage of them. They have more important work to do than fetch you things,” their mother cautioned.

“But they didn’t seem to mind!” Tilly protested. “They even asked me what kind of mattress and pillows I’d like! There were so many choices. Hard. Soft. Medium. Down. Down alternative.”

“Tilly!” Their mother scolded.

“So I shouldn’t mention that you were smelling over two dozen different kinds of

bath soap and other toiletries for the one that you liked best?” Their father mentioned teasingly.

His mother flushed. “Oh, well that was because they asked! I didn’t--”

“And I didn’t either, Mom!” Tilly crowed. “They seemed to really care about what I wanted so I told them. They even have a list of my favorite foods.”

“How are we going to pay Valerius for all of this? Even with my new salary, I am certain that it won’t cover all of this,” his father said.

That was a good question and, yet Caden was sure that he already had the answer. “I don’t think Valerius will want you to pay for anything.”

“We can’t accept charity, Caden!” His mother protested.

Caden met his father’s eyes. “While I might not have my own territory, I do have territory. This is my home.”

His father lifted an eyebrow, and then after a moment, he smiled and nodded. “I see.”

There was a soft knock on the doors to the tower suite. Caden could hear the Claw guards speaking to someone. There was a pause and then the sound of booted feet came towards them. Caden looked up to see Captain Ngoye standing there. Though she was far above guard door duty, she had assigned herself to his family’s tower suite.

“King Caden,” she said and that had his family freezing. Caden hid his own surprise at his title

“Yes, Captain?” Caden asked.

“A member of Queen Jahara’s Matriarchs is at the door. It seems that the Queen has requested a meeting with you. What shall I say?” Captain Ngoye asked.

Caden considered this request. He had no reason to deny it. In fact, he should get to know his fellow Dragon Shifters as well as he could and seek more allies among them.

“Tell her,” Caden said, “that I would be pleased to meet with Queen Jahara.”

CENTRAL TERRITORY

It was the youngest of the Matriarchs who was at his family's door. The one that was closest to his sister's age. Her hands were gripped behind her and she was swinging back and forth as if nervous and needing to burn off some of the excess energy that filled her. Her patterned red dress flared out with every movement. She was also scrunching her toes against the bottom of her sandals.

He wondered if she was a little cold in High Reach where despite the days being warm, the interior of the castle was always cool. Maybe that was why she moved rather than nervousness. After all, she was a Matriarch, no matter how young, and he was... well, him.

"Hello," Caden said with a smile. "I heard you were looking for me."

Her large dark eyes were fixed upon his face. That smile had her swaying pausing for a moment. "Hello. Yes, the Queen wishes to meet with you, King Caden."

Again with the "King Caden". The swaying started again but then jerked to a halt as she did a half curtsy to him, which had him feeling both touched and uncomfortable at the same time.

"You don't need to do that," he told her with a wave of his hand.

Her already large eyes widened and there was another half sway. "Why not?"

He wasn't expecting such a direct question. He opened his mouth, but nothing came

out at first. Why not? Good question. Because he wasn't worthy of being curtsied to by anyone? Well, that was arguable.

Iolaire was worthy to be sure. Maybe simply being one of nine beings who ruled the world was reason enough for curtsying? That could be. It was the honor of the post instead of the person. He could accept that. So maybe he should get used to it. Maybe he would. Tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the day after that. But not right now.

"Because it makes me feel uncomfortable," he confessed to her with a one shouldered shrug. "I'd rather you just called me Caden."

She considered this, not swaying, and then nodded. "Okay, Caden. I'm Dahab."

"That's a pretty name," he said with another smile.

She nodded, reminding him of Tilly in that moment so strongly despite her being a Matriarch. "It means gold."

His eyebrows rose. "Very cool."

Another nod. "Will you come?"

"Yes, of course. Lead the way." Caden closed the door behind him and followed after her down the hallway. "I have a sister about your age."

"Yes!" Dahab's big eyes twinkled with delight. "I have researched everything about you and your family."

Caden blinked. "Everything? And ah... before or after you got here?"

How many people knew he was the White Dragon Shifter before he announced

himself? Was there anyone who didn't know? He was starting to wonder if his identity had ever been a secret. At all. To anyone but maybe the person on the street. But it did make sense that someone like Queen Jahara would know who he was. Like Rose had said there were countless cellphones and the cameras in the square that day. Some of those had undoubtedly caught him in the act, so to speak.

But Dahab did not confirm when she had found out about him, instead she proved that Queen Jahara could have known within minutes of him becoming the Ninth Dragon Shifter. She listed off the ages of his parents, their resumes, when they met, when they married, what they did in their free time, and more. Then, with incredible zeal, she spoke about Tilly. About where his sister went to school, her friends, hobbies, grades, favorite music and more. Caden blinked a lot.

"You know, Dahab, if you didn't seem so nice, I might think you were a stalker," he teased her, although he was a little unnerved by everything she knew!

She lowered her head. "I am sorry. The Queen has told me not to investigate people who I shouldn't. And if I do investigate them... not to tell."

Caden laughed. "I think Queen Jahara might be right. Though..." He looked down at her. She was hardly five feet tall. "I'm impressed by all you know. You must be quite something with the net."

She smiled up at him winsomely. "When I found out you had a sister near my age I had to know everything! She has kind eyes."

"Oh? A fan of Tilly's, are you? That shows wisdom!" Caden then colored. "You are one of Queen Jahara's advisors so I guess you must already be wise."

That smile grew. "Queen Jahara believes that one must listen to many voices to find the best and truest way forward."

Caden considered this. “So that’s why she has you who are young and then some of those great-grandmothers too as her Matriarchs?”

She nodded. “Though I am not a true Matriarch as I am not the head of my family and being a greater age than my own thirteen years is needed to bear that title. But Queen Jahara says that the voice of youth is often overlooked. Our passion and sometimes black and white thinking are seen as naive in many eyes. But while there is some truth in that, youth can sometimes see things far more clearly than those who are jaded by experience.”

“And maybe a little beaten down by failure,” Caden added with a flattening of his lips.

“Yes! You are that voice for the Dragons, you realize?” she asked.

“Uhm, I’m definitely the youngest by a long shot.” Caden nodded. He felt that trill of fear again even as Iolaire gazed at him lovingly. The weight of responsibility made him want to hide like he had been doing at Wally’s straightening werewolf hoodies and dusting Sphinx Shifter sculptures.

“The question is if you have something to say!” Dahab continued brightly, which had him dreading that responsibility even more.

“Oh, right,” he said faintly.

“We’re here!”

Dahab’s pronouncement was unnecessary as the doors were wide open to the suite where Jahara was staying. The central room had a large fire going and there were colorful pillows on the floor and more overflowing the sofas and chairs. The Matriarchs were seated everywhere, talking and laughing amongst each other. Jahara

was not there however. When they caught sight of him and Dahab, there were universal gestures of welcome for them to come inside and join them.

Caden pasted a smile on his face as he felt a little overwhelmed with all those eyes upon him. While some were seemingly filled with bland disinterest, others mild intrigue and yet others with shrewd intent, he had a feeling that no matter what their outward level of interest indicated that they were all watching him carefully. Iolaire's wings were twitching and it was making soft chirrups.

Yeah, I feel nervous, too, buddy.

A woman in middle age gestured for Caden to take a seat on a loveseat that was opposite where all of the women were sitting. He would be front and center. Caden thought about saying he'd rather stand or pretending to be Valerius and imperiously asking to speak to Jahara instantly. But he found himself sitting down with an embarrassing amount of alacrity while Dahab sat on the arm of a nearby chair. His quickness in obeying did not go unnoticed.

"He's a polite boy," A Matriarch with a gray stripe in her braided hair remarked. She was sewing together two bright pieces of cloth.

"And a pretty one!" Another Matriarch gave out a big belly laugh.

A Matriarch with half-moon glasses that gave off a blue-white light that accompanied phones and tablets--they must have been linked to the net--gave him a sharp look. "But has his beauty stopped him from developing his mind and his heart?"

"Aye, the pretty ones get by on those looks alone." A Matriarch in her twenties with smooth and straight long locks tilted her head to the side. She was a beauty herself and used kohl to make her eyes appear catlike.

“I’m not that pretty!” Caden blurted out.

That had a waterfall of female laughter--though not unkind--filled the air.

“Don’t be mean!” Dahab defended him. “Caden is kind and brave! Not just pretty!”

There were murmurs of agreement, which had Caden feeling very grateful to Dahab.

One of the oldest Matriarchs in the room, her hair in short white curls, and her nutbrown face so creased with wrinkles that her eyes were nearly hidden by them said, “Kindness and bravery are always valuable, but can be crushed by experience and cruelty.”

There were more nods and murmurs of agreement. Caden, himself, knew that was true, but he wanted to hang onto both those things as long as possible. He thought they served him well and were different from what the other Dragons had to offer. Without intending to and without even realizing he was doing it, he said that outloud.

The oldest Matriarch smiled so broadly that her face became one huge wrinkle, but it was a kind face. “That is very true! And one may argue that balance above all things is necessary among the Dragons.”

Caden leaned forward, elbows on his knees, curious what these women thought about the dragons. “Do you think the Dragons need balance?”

There was more delighted laughter.

“They need many things!” The Matriarch in her twenties roared, but then she sobered, “Has not King Valerius been more active these few days you have joined with your Spirit than the last decade?”

“He doesn’t really like people,” Caden began. More trilling laughter that had Caden blushing and holding up a hand. “That came out wrong, though it is true.” Bright smiles flashed at him. “The fuller truth is that he really wants people to govern themselves like they used to.”

That had the Matriarchs falling quiet. Only the crackle and pop of the fire broke the silence.

Finally, the shrewd Matriarch with the electronic eyewear said, “But things are not as they used to be. They will never be how they used to be. Acting like they are will not make it so.”

Caden chewed his inner cheek. “I know that Queen Jahara has instituted many--and needed --changes to her territory, are you sure that every Dragon should do the same?”

“You think the other Dragons are not as wise as our great Queen? For if that is what you mean, I am well in agreement!” The Matriarch who had called him pretty remarked with another belly laugh.

He flashed a smile before becoming serious himself again. “I admire Queen Jahara hugely. I’ve read and watched so much about her. The things that she’s doing are amazing and show a mind that is looking far into the future. I can honestly say that I’m not like that. I have ideas. Some big. Some small. And I want to do things, to make things better for everyone, but what if I’m wrong? I’m no Queen Jahara.”

The sewing Matriarch gave him a smile and a nod. “Maybe we should add wise to kind and brave to describe King Caden.”

There were smiles all around and not in mirth.

“Was this a test?” He asked as he straightened up and looked at them all.

“We’re trying to take the measure of you,” the oldest Matriarch answered. “Is that a test? Or is that just revealing the truth about you?”

“So there are no right or wrong answers then?” Caden asked.

“There is only you, King Caden. Who you are. What you believe. What you wish to do. What you will do,” the Matriarch with the half-moon glasses answered.

“I’ve just decided to accept this.” Caden gestured to himself as if he were indicating something physical that had changed about him, though he still looked as he always had except for the eyeshine. “I’ve been pretending that nothing has changed since I joined with my Spirit.”

The Matriarchs listened intently.

“I know how foolish that sounds and was.” Caden let out a dry cough laugh. “But when I think about what being a Dragon Shifter means... I understand why I didn’t want to accept it. Iolaire is wonderful. Valerius is...” He rubbed his chin as a ridiculous smile crossed his face, “well, I would never change meeting him. Without all of this happening, he and I wouldn’t... Well, we wouldn’t have met.”

He stared past the Matriarchs to the dark balcony and wondered if Jahara was there, listening. He decided that it didn’t matter. Whatever he passed onto the Matriarchs would make its way to her.

“Dahab tells me that Queen Jahara sees worth in the voice of youth and inexperience,” Caden continued, which earned a grin from the youngest Matriarch. “That would definitely describe myself compared to the other Dragons. I’m just not sure I agree with her about the worth thing though.”

“Is that why you resisted your father’s efforts to get you your own territory? That you feared your inexperience meant you were not yet worthy to rule?” It was Jahara who asked those questions.

She had been out on the balcony. She drifted into view, mist encircling her like a cloak that glittered under the moonlight. The suspicion that had clouded her exquisite features was reduced, maybe even gone.

Caden stood up and faced her. “I would be worried about the person in my position who would think otherwise. I’m not being falsely humble. I’m seriously worried.”

That had Dahab racing over to him, and much like Tilly would have done, she embraced him. “Do not doubt yourself. You bring light and change.”

When they broke apart, Jahara was regarding him speculatively, more so than before.

“Dahab is wise beyond her years. Some say that she has a sort of Second Sight,” Jahara murmured then shook herself and extended a hand towards him. “Come. Join me. I would speak to you more.”

Dahab grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

So there was a test of sorts in all of this. Whether or not I am the sort of person who Jahara would take an interest in.

Caden made his way out onto the balcony. Dahab shut the balcony doors behind them so that they had some privacy. The balcony was bathed in startling moonlight. Caden tilted his head back and let it wash over his face. Iolaire did the same, churring, and imagining flying with Raziel in the moonlight.

Soon, Iolaire , Caden promised.

When he finally lowered his head and looked over at Jahara, she was leaning one hip against the stone railing and was regarding him with a half smile on her lips.

“You are not only a Dragon of ice, but of moonlight also, I think,” she said.

Caden glanced up at the moon again and felt its pull on Iolaire and him. “I think you might be right.”

“So, King Caden--”

“Caden, please,” he said and it wasn’t because he felt unsure about the title this time.

She nodded and accepted the change. “And you may call me... Jahara.”

“I have a feeling that you don’t offer that very often. Even to other Dragons,” Caden guessed.

“Right you are.” She smiled back and her smile was beautiful. Seeing it made him realize how rare that expression was on her face. “But I do not think I will regret offering the right to you.”

Caden was struck by her phrasing and the use of the word “regret”. “Lots of people have let you down.”

He didn’t make it a question, but a statement. Even if he hadn’t known how she had been betrayed by her father, a man who should have loved and protected her, not sold her, he would have felt the waves of distrust around her.

“People do that,” she answered simply.

“It’s so strange to hear you say that,” he said.

Her delicate black eyebrows rose. “Oh, why?”

“Because what you’ve done with your territory shows such... hope and belief in people,” he admitted. “It’s like seeing the beginnings of Star Trek or something realized. A federation of highly intelligent, moral people working towards common goals of improving not just the human condition, but the entire planet and beyond!”

A smile twitched her lips. “So my goals belie my cynicism?”

“Yep, or they indicate...” He stopped and bit his lower lip. “Forget it. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Tell me what you were going to say.” She was openly interested. He wondered how long that would last after he said something.

“I just thought that maybe the goals you have set for your territory is the real you. Not the real you.” He grimaced. “The you that didn’t have so many disappointments and regrets.”

She did not look offended, but more considering. Finally, she nodded. “Yes, maybe it is what I would have been like through and through if I had not been made to regret.” Then she gave him an almost impish look. “But like you, Caden, if the bad things hadn’t happened to me I would not have joined with my Spirit and all the good that I have done would not have happened.”

“True!” Caden nodded. “Too true.” It was his turn to be impish. “So did you come here to court me?”

He expected her to snigger or let out belly laughs herself. He could not see her ever wanting him romantically. She did not do that however.

“If you mean romantically? No. But we court friends and allies and even enemies,” she told him. “Other than Illarion and likely Tez, every Dragon has come here to court you as something other than a lover. But that does not mean what we offer is any less.”

Caden blinked. “Uhm, no! I mean... no, it isn’t.”

She smiled more broadly. “Besides, you may find that you want some distance from your lover. Africa has called many to her shores. You should come and see her.”

“I would love that,” he answered truthfully. He had dreamed of seeing the futuristic cities of glass and steel that dotted Africa’s ancient terrain like jewels.

She nodded. “I think in the times ahead that she would be a safe haven for you and... others. Perhaps all others.”

Caden leaned against the railing. “What do you mean a safe haven? Do you know about the Faith and--”

“Those who seek to create more of our kind by violence?” She nodded. “I have watched them for some time.”

“Why didn’t you tell the other Dragons?” Caden asked, alarm filling him.

“Not because I am on their side, Caden,” she assured him, not seemingly offended by him suspecting her. “But because I was not certain and how can one warn about individuals one cannot identify as a threat? No, that would have led to paranoia and arrests and the creation of more unrest.”

Caden could see that. “Yeah, but do you have any ideas? Any solutions?”

She studied him for long, silent moments before finally asking, "Solutions?"

"As to how to stop them," Caden qualified.

"I do not think they can be stopped, Caden," she answered.

Dismay filled him. If someone as smart and forward thinking as Jahara saw no way forward who could? He burst out, "What? No, that--"

"I did not mean I did not have a solution," she interrupted gently. "I merely have no way of stopping people from believing something they wish to. The solution I do have is controversial and some will never agree with it. But I do not need everyone to agree."

Caden frowned. "What is it?"

"It is actually about territory . You did not want your own territory because you felt you would be standing on your own," Jahara stated and he nodded. "The way things are now is that the Dragons are spread out. The Shifters are everywhere too. They are the lesser amount compared to humans so danger is greater. If we were to be in one territory, we could ensure far greater safety for everyone."

Caden nearly gasped. This wasn't anything he had expected to hear. How many times had he heard the old adage that Dragons were incredibly territorial? He'd seen Valerius' growing annoyance with every incoming Dragon himself!

"Are you suggesting that everyone come to--"

"To my territory? To Africa?" She took in a breath as if she could not quite believe she was offering it either before finally answering, "Yes, that is exactly what I'm suggesting."

POINTS OF VIEW

“We must infiltrate the Faith,” Marban said as he paced from one end of Valerius’ main room to the other. “That is the best way to tackle this! The Faithful have no single nation, no standing army, nothing but a belief.”

Valerius sat at the head of his table and watched as Marban paced, paced, paced. The Swarm Shifter, once more, reminded the Black Dragon King of a monk in his robes, especially with the facade of the kindly, wise and religious grandfather persona securely in place. That was until he heard the cold and calculating tone in Marban’s voice, which blew that illusion away.

From where she stood, warming her hands over the fire pit, Esme lifted her eyebrows at Marban’s directness, but Valerius saw approval in her expression as well. This was the first time that his “new” Councillor had met with others officially.

“But not all of the Faithful are contaminated with this desire to kill others in order to bring more Shifters into the world,” Chione pointed out. She was perched on one of the sofas, tablet in hand, faint frown on her lips. Her stunning yellow-gold wrap dress sparkled in the firelight. “How will we find the right ones? Those captured today indicated that not all involved in this plot... belief... cause, whatever it is, even wear white robes or profess to be of the Faith. I am guessing that those people will be the ones in charge.”

“But some of the Faithful are infected and that is the best place to start. The only place really.” Mei sipped her wine on the opposite couch. “At least we will have a haystack to look for our needles.”

“Yet what kind of beliefs would our mole have to espouse exactly?” Chione asked.

“We have those two from the bombings today,” Marban said, his voice dipping into the arctic zone, before smiling brightly and adding, “If the Claw are having any difficulty getting them to talk, my people are always available, Valerius.”

“Getting them to talk is not the problem,” Chione answered, that frown deepening. “They wax poetic about their ideals, but I just can’t believe... It is so bizarre that they are willing to kill for this belief. It cannot have been around longer than 30 years, probably far less than that. And they have no proof it will work--”

“Had no proof, you mean, dear. Caden is that proof,” Esme corrected her.

“Iolaire and Caden would have joined no matter what. We all know this.” Chione put a hand to her chest. “Our Spirits are meant for us. That Iolaire chose that moment was only because it was needed.”

“That almost proves their point more.” Esme pinched the top of her nose.

“Indeed! And can we really blame them for valuing the Spirits over humans?” Mei scoffed and shook her head. “Hardly surprising. I’m shocked at your innocent heart in this, Chione. I would have thought that would have been burned out of you long ago.”

Valerius knew she was upset over not discovering how her mechanical men were hacked. Caden had intimated to him that it was Illarion and not the Faith behind that. But he had not yet passed that information onto Mei. He did not need to see yet more of his castle turned to slag as the Red and Green Dragons squared off. But her mood was poor as she still could not figure out how it was done, let alone who had done it.

“I am aware of the power of belief. But it still shocks me even to this day,” Chione said and adjusted the shoulders of her dress.

“But you have used religion to control populaces before, haven’t you? Back in the day of the pharaohs and beyond?” Mei shook her head more violently. “Perhaps serving Valerius has made you soft.”

Chione’s delicate eyebrows rose. “Really? Do you think so? Simply expressing doubts and sadness over blind belief is softness ?”

“Prove to me otherwise.” Mei narrowed her eyes. “Do what Marban says. Send in people to infiltrate the Faith and then ruthlessly destroy anyone who espouses those poisonous beliefs that destabilize our world. If not, I say you are soft!”

“Chione is my Councillor, Mei,” Valerius said. His voice calm and cool, but it still had the Red Dragon Queen’s gaze flickering over to him to see how angry her words had made him. “She does what I want. So if you are doubting Chione’s ruthlessness then you are doubting mine . Are you doubting me, Mei?”

Mei quickly looked away. “No, of course not, Valerius. I’m just—”

“Speaking without thought,” Esme remarked icily.

“Not everyone is as perceptive as you, Esme. So perceptive that you did not know that you had one of the traitors underneath your own roof.” Mei smiled sweetly.

Esme did not wince, even if Valerius was certain there was no one in the world who felt worse than she did about missing Serai’s other allegiances. And though he wanted to point that out to Mei, he knew that the Blue Dragon would not appreciate him “protecting” her. It would look like weakness. Where he could speak out for his own people, Esme was a Dragon, equal to Mei. She had to stand on her own in this.

“You’re quite right, Mei. You would, of course, never have that problem,” Esme replied in a voice just as sweetly poisonous, “because you no longer actually have

any real people around you any longer.”

“Machines are much more reliable,” Mei answered.

“Like today? When they filled Valerius’ dungeon with inches of slag? Very reliable indeed!” Esme let out a trill of laughter.

“I will find out who did that!” Mei hissed.

“No doubt, but even if you do, there will be another attack and another and another. Machines are dumb things, Mei. They do not love you. They can be reprogrammed,” Esme said. “What happened that made you withdraw from everyone and everything? Did you find a snake in your home?”

Mei pressed her lips together.

Illarion let out a bark of laughter. “She’s right! Someone betrayed you! Was it a lover? One of these Faithful freaks? Maybe both! You came down on Esme without mercy for her failure with Serai, so I am betting it was exactly like that with you!”

Mei flushed and went back to angrily drinking her wine, ignoring everyone.

“Marban, do you have people you would suggest for such an operation to infiltrate the Faith?” Esme asked.

“Of course.” Marban smiled avuncularly. “They would not be associated with the Claw or any of you. They would not even be associated with me .”

“Marban has someone for every situation,” Chione said with a faint smile.

Marban bowed. “I am happy to be of service. These members of the Faith threaten

the very stability of the world. They are worse than Humans First.”

“Why any of you allow this religion to exist at all is insane! There is no Faith in my territory!” Illarion’s right hand flew into the air and he nearly sent his vodka with it.

“You think there is none in your territory!” Mei scoffed. “You would have no idea. You imprison everyone.”

“Better that than having them run in the streets blowing up innocents!” Illarion retorted and grabbed the bottle of vodka and refilled his glass.

“You do not consider anyone innocent, Illarion,” Esme stated. Her eyes narrowed. “But if you were to have bombs going off in your territory that would show weakness . It would give succor to those who loathe you. And that accounts for almost everyone.”

Illarion’s lizard green eyes narrowed. “But I do not have bombs—”

“Yes, you do,” Mei interrupted. “Why are you lying? You’ve had more unrest in your territory than in any other. That is why you are locking everyone up, because you don’t know who the enemy is.”

“Is that true, Illarion?” Valerius’ voice was soft. He had thought the bombings in his territory the first, but they clearly had not been.

If I had known earlier maybe I could have put a stop to this sooner.

Except that would have meant he wouldn’t have met Caden now. And he would not change that for the world. But Illarion should have come to him. The Green Dragon King’s silence had allowed this cancer to spread.

“What concern is it of yours what happens in my territory, Valerius?” Illarion spat.
“You are not the boss of me!”

Illarion’s face purpled with suppressed rage. His head jerked towards Valerius and he let out a low hiss.

I can almost see his poison breath , Raziell muttered.

Oh, yes, he would love to gas us, Valerius agreed. But we need to deal with them. All of them.

You wish to rule them? Raziell’s red eyes widened a fraction.

We cannot do this on our own, Valerius finally admitted. This threat is not contained in one territory. It cannot be addressed by one Dragon. Not even one as mighty as you, Raziell. We will need to use that might in a different way.

Flames and smoke billowed from Raziell’s nose and through the cracked open jaws. What do you mean?

Valerius let his eyes sweep over the Dragons. We must rule them.

I would rather burn them to ashes, Raziell muttered, but despite its words there was no heat in his Spirit’s words.

You just do not like change or responsibility. And I feel the same , Valerius admitted. But we must protect Caden and Iolaire.

Bombs cannot harm them!

No, but a world where innocents die like leaves in the Fall will, Valerius countered.

More smoke obscured his Spirit. Only red eyes could be seen glowing through the smoke like clouds scrubbing across the moon. His Spirit was considering it. Valerius turned his full attention back to the others. He felt Marban's eyes upon him, as well as Chione's. Both of his Councillors were aware that he and Raziel were communicating.

"How long have the Faith been operating in your territory, Illarion?" Valerius pressed.

"I have no Faith in my territory!" Illarion growled. "While it might be amusing to have humans worship us, I would rather them simply fear us and keep their heads down!"

"Religion is the opiate of the masses?" Esme asked with a lifted eyebrow.

"It breeds trouble! In that, I think you must agree with me. Do you not recall all of the discord in all the world's religions when our existence was revealed?" Illarion pointed out. "How many died? Suicides? Murders? Worse?"

"Not all religions, but in many, yes, there was discord," Esme said, "but here we are only 30 years later and things are, mostly, in control on that front."

"Except for the new religion we allowed to be made and now threatens to upend our rules? Yes, things are well in hand." Mei pursed her lips and took another large swallow of wine.

"You are avoiding my questions, Illarion!" Valerius slammed a hand down onto the table. That had everyone on alert. "We cannot hide these things from one another!"

Illarion bared his teeth, but then shrugged. "I thought it was a local matter. I did not realize it was some worldwide conspiracy. Satisfied? Otherwise, I would have run to

you, Valerius, and hid behind your skirts!”

“I believe he’s telling the truth, Valerius,” Esme said after regarding Illarion for long moments. “He truly just thought that his territory was slipping through his greedy, grasping fingers. And that’s not to say that the Faith did not find fertile ground there with his repression.”

“These Faithful worship the Spirits. A Dragon Spirit such as Mephous would be one of the most sacred,” Chione pointed out.

“For all we know, dear, these Faithful could have different versions of the same belief,” Esme suggested. “Maybe in places such as Illarion’s territory, they believe bringing more Spirits--more Dragon Spirits, perhaps--that Illarion’s power would be neutralized or lessened in some way. They would likely call it a balance or some such nonsense. What’s interesting is Caden and Iolaire’s ability to stop the shift... well, in a way that also would curb certain Spirits’ power.”

Valerius had to repress a smile at the memory of Illarion falling from the sky. He could see that happen countless times and not stop being amused by it.

Kaila let out an audible sigh and rested her head on the balcony railing. She had been silent up until now, which Valerius wasn’t surprised by. Planning and plotting was not Kaila’s strength. Ask her to deck someone and things went just swimmingly.

Kaila sighed again and said, “We should not be talking without Jahara.”

Tez, who had also been silent as he was a lover and not a fighter, looked speculatively into his wine glass from his position beside Kaila on the balcony.

“It is not as if we won’t repeat the same things over and over again,” Tez mused. “So, in truth, she will miss nothing. And, in the end, Valerius will make whatever decision

that he wishes to regardless of what we say.”

Valerius lifted an eyebrow. “I listen to what you say.”

“But not all of it is sound?” Esme’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Yes, yes, we all talk, but you are a man of action, Valerius, after hearing every side. What are your thoughts?”

“He should not be making any decisions without Caden and Anwar either,” Kaila remarked with another put upon sigh.

"Caden is with his parents, telling them certain news, and Jahara is settling in. They will hear what we have said," Valerius assured her.

“I’m sure many people, such as my Rose and Wally, may have things to offer on this plan as well,” Marban said. “Hearing different viewpoints will be wise. And discussing it many times will offer new options.”

“You are a criminal. So, I suppose, we have the underworld’s view on things!” Illarion said and drained his glass before refilling it again. Despite not truly being able to get drunk, Illarion did get belligerent when drinking vodka.

“Marban is my advisor and head of the Shifter Council,” Valerius corrected.

Marban’s eyes widened a fraction at his defense. Valerius was surprised he had made it so now he had to deal with the consequences.

“If you want to consort with criminals, Valerius, what do I care?” Illarion’s eyes gleamed with dark amusement believing he had found a soft spot in Valerius’ armor.

“Sometimes you need a criminal’s point of view,” Marban said easily, not ruffled at

all.

Perhaps he might have been offended on some level, but Valerius guessed since he had spoken up for him that Marban was not one to care about Illarion's regard.

"Marban and I have had our differences, but I can assure you that he is one of the smartest people in the world and eminently suited to helping find a solution," Valerius stated. "And we need his viewpoint as well as most of yours."

Marban beamed grandfatherly at them all. He was practically preening. But what Valerius had said was true. He would likely never hear the end of it either.

"But his plan will take too long!" Kaila slapped a palm against the stone railing. "Many will die before we find out anything through these spies! We must do something now!"

Esme looked at Kaila with compassion. "What would you have us do, Kaila? Our gifts are far more suited to attacking enemies we can see and sense. These Faithful are invisible to us until they strike."

Kaila crossed her arms over her chest. "I do not understand these people! The Spirits are all about life. Not death!"

"But like with Caden, the Spirits will try to save all those they can if that death comes." Tez patted her arm and shook his head sadly. "It will be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"So we send out these spies and wait? We do nothing else?" Kaila nearly wailed, but Valerius couldn't blame her for it. He felt like wailing too.

And then all of them were looking at him. Raziel snorted in surprise--and maybe

alarm--that they were seeking guidance so nakedly from them. Even Illarion was staring at Valerius with a sort of beseeching gaze. He had clearly found no solution--no long term one anyways--in his concentration camps. Packing people like that together in misery and despair would be like stacking dry tinder near an open flame.

“No, we cannot just go with one plan of attack,” Valerius agreed. “But what those other plans are... we need more input. It is not just our fellow Dragons that we need to speak to, or our closest advisors, but the humans in power need to be told of this too.”

“But how can we trust any of them?” Illarion burst out.

“He’s right,” Marban said with a grimace. “How many more Serais are there out there?”

Esme looked down at her clasped hands. “I’ve gone over and over in my mind her behavior for the past year. I cannot say that I detected any perfidy.”

“Because she loved you. She loved the Spirits. She thought she was protecting us all,” Chione answered sadly. “So it would not have come across as betrayal in her actions and words because to her it wasn’t.”

“Can we really keep the leaders of the humans unaware of what is going on though?” Valerius asked them. “How many of these Faithful could there be in the higher echelons of government?”

Illarion took a swig from the vodka bottle. “I found those traitorous scum at the highest levels of mine!”

“You did?” Esme stared sternly at Illarion. “It sounds like you had a full on civil war on your hands. Why did you not speak to us? Why did you keep this to yourself?”

Valerius thought of how he had dismissed the rumors of the camps from the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Canada as just Illarion being cruel. His biggest concern had been fighting one Dragon. Now that seemed almost quaint. He would have loved to just fight Illarion and have all the problems in the world cease. But now things were so much more complicated.

Illarion gritted his teeth and ground out, "It was an internal matter! Do you tell Valerius when your people shit the bed, Esme? You are not as open with him as you are asking me to be!"

"If my territory were on the verge of collapse, you better bet I would have let Valerius know!" Esme snapped, high color in her cheeks.

"If one territory falls then the rest of ours are in danger too. The whole world could drop into chaos," Tez said with a death stare at the Green Dragon King.

"I was not going to fall!" Illarion was purpling again.

"Civil war is on the horizon in your territory and you thought that would have no nevermind for the rest of us?" Esme stood up very straight.

"Do not worry, I have a plan for when he falls," Mei said. "If he cannot handle his people, I can."

Illarion whirled around on Mei. "I destroyed your mechanical men! ME! I will destroy them all!"

"You bastard!" Mei was on her feet.

The two of them were about to shift. Valerius was about to grab them both by the scruffs of the neck and throw them outside. But the doors to his rooms burst open and

Caden, followed by Jahara, swept into the room. Caden's eyes held that strange white color that entered them when he was accessing his gifts.

“STOP!” Caden shouted. “EVERYONE, STOP!”

Valerius felt that pressurized wave of Caden's magic as the White Dragon Shifter stopped Illarion and Mei from shifting. The Red and Green Dragon Shifters staggered and nearly collapsed. Esme caught Mei around the waist and helped her back onto the sofa. Kaila and Tez managed to keep Illarion on his feet, but he quickly waved them off and drank more vodka to fortify himself.

Caden met the gazes of everyone in the room. “What the Hell is going on?” Before anyone could answer him, Caden continued, “You know what? I don't care! Because nothing justifies whatever was going on here considering what is going on out there!” Caden thrust a finger towards the balcony and the darkness beyond. Caden then gave out a soft laugh and looked at Jahara. “Seeing this, do you really think having all the Dragons in one territory is a good idea?”

“What?” That was echoed out of every throat.

Jahara smiled faintly. “I still think it is a good idea. I never said it would be an easy one.”

Valerius rose to his feet. He needed fortification before he heard what Jahara had to say. So he ordered, “All of you, except Caden, leave. I wish for time alone before we meet again for dinner.” And with a suspicious twitch of his lips, he added, “Do not give the White Dragon Shifter reason to impose his rule over you. It seems he has a temper equal to mine.”

Caden blushed.

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WAITING

The others streamed out of Valerius' rooms except for Jahara and Chione, who lingered in the doorway, intent on drawing Jahara after her. But Jahara ignored the hint. She stood there, smiling slightly, and looking meaningfully at Valerius. Caden pinched the top of his nose as Valerius simply crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her.

"Do you think you are somehow exempt from the description 'everyone except Caden leave'?" Valerius asked meaningfully.

"I wanted to make sure that you understood my proposal fully before meeting with the others," Jahara explained simply.

She continued to be calm and composed despite Valerius looking like a volcano about to blow.

"I can explain it to him, Jahara," Caden offered as he maneuvered himself between Valerius and Jahara.

"Though you are open to my plans, you do not believe in them fully, Caden, as I do. So I must make my own case," she answered with a soft smile.

"Make it exceedingly brief then." Valerius put his hands on Caden's shoulders as he moved up behind him. Those hands massaged him and Caden nearly purred.

Chione took out her tablet and stylus to take notes, but Caden knew there was no

need.

Jahara tented her fingers beneath her chin, her gaze going distant as she marshaled her thoughts, before she spoke, “I believe a war is coming on many fronts. These wayward Faithful. Groups like Humans First and others of its ilk. Even wars between us if we keep separate territories. We cannot defend the entirety of the world, Valerius, but we can protect a part of it. My suggestion is that we form a single Shifter territory, free of humans, while the rest of the world is free of Shifters. Each area is governed by their own. Each area need not worry about the other except at the highest levels of power. With our combined strength and know-how, humanity--even the zealous--will not be able to reach us. Many who feel the desire now to oppose us will no longer feel a need to, because they will no longer be competing with us for scarce resources. While those who want to help us in destructive ways will similarly not feel that urge as they will see a thriving community that needs no assistance. That is my proposal.”

Caden had never fully understood the phrase “the silence in the room was deafening” until that moment. Chione was frozen over her tablet, her stylus having gone still. Her expression was shielded from him by her long dark tresses. He turned to look over his shoulder at Valerius to glimpse the Black Dragon King’s expression. But while he saw Valerius’ face well enough, there was no expression there to read. No scoffing, but no interest either.

“That is an idea, Jahara,” Valerius finally said with no inflection in his voice.

“You disagree?” She lifted a delicate eyebrow.

“I would never dismiss any of your ideas out of hand. I admit, this one does not seem feasible or attractive to me, but I need to think about it and give you more than a simple gut reaction,” Valerius answered.

Chione's head lifted and her expression was visible. She was proud of him! Caden was similarly proud, but baffled, by Valerius' mild response. Did it mean that he thought Jahara's idea had merit? Was he contemplating a mass exodus of Shifters to Africa or maybe a larger parcel of the world? Or was it simply so unworkable that he didn't want to offend Jahara by simply laughing?

Jahara gave him a slight bow. "That is all I ask. I will see you both at dinner. And Caden?"

"Yeah?"

"I have to say that whatever I expected of you... well, it is nice to be proven wrong. Perhaps the world has jaded me a little. But you are a breath of fresh air," she told him.

Caden stood up taller, knowing this was a rare compliment. "I have to admit that you are as wonderful as all the media made you seem."

She laughed delightedly. "And you're charming, too. What a combination!"

She then turned and joined Chione by the doorway. Chione had tucked her tablet underneath her right arm and smiled broadly at Jahara. She placed one hand on Jahara's lower back before escorting the Dragon Queen out of the room. When the doors were closed behind them, Caden slipped from Valerius' arms and went over and locked them before sagging against the solid wood.

"Can we just hide in here? Like not go out again? Except for food and stuff? Because I really don't think it's safe out there," Caden told Valerius with a weak laugh.

Valerius stuffed his hands into his pockets and sauntered over to Caden with an understanding look on his face. "Ah, the burdens of leadership."

“You mean of yelling really loudly at Mei and Illarion? Or arguing with my parents? Or maybe hearing from a person like Jahara--who is clearly smart and sensible--that she thinks we are all better off leaving the world and humanity to its own devices?” Caden’s arms lifted heavensward with each question. He slumped back against the doors once more and ran his hands through his hair until he was sure it was sticking up on end. Iolaire was sitting in a cat-like “loaf” inside of him, wide awake and fully engaged, but with no wisdom to offer. “Iolaire’s all interested, at least.”

“I know things seem dire,” Valerius began.

“Seem ?!” Caden cried.

“Seem ,” Valerius confirmed. “But I hate to tell you this, things often seem dire when one is in charge, because what comes next sometimes hinges on the leader’s decisions.”

“You know if you had asked me a year ago--hell, maybe even only a month ago--I would have thought if I was in charge that I would have all these ideas and that I would just implement them no problem.” Caden made a sweeping gesture with his right arm. “I would have no doubts! None! Now, I have the chance to make real change and I am like hell no , don’t trust me! I have no idea what I’m doing!”

“Believe it or not, Chione would say that the latter shows wisdom , and that because you do not think yourself worthy of ruling that you are more likely to actually do so than someone who does,” Valerius told him.

Caden scrubbed his face. “You know I really hoped that when all the Dragon Shifters got here that things would be better. Easier. Clearer. That all these great minds coming together would have answers. But the answers are--”

“Worse than the problems? Yes. I feel the same way. Which is why we need some

time away from both problems and answers.”

Valerius curled an arm around his shoulders and led him over towards the staircase that ran along the curve of the wall. Caden had expected Valerius to take him to the couches by the fireplace, but they climbed the stairs until they reached the platform with the shower and tub.

“Are we getting ready for dinner already? I thought maybe we could hang by the fire and--”

“I’m going to make love to you. In the shower.”

Caden blinked. “Oh.”

“And then we will determine whether to go and meet the others downstairs, because after Jahara releases her bomb, I am not certain the meal will not turn into a food fight, since it can’t turn into a Dragon fight with you around.”

“But shouldn’t we be there to--to--”

“What? Stop the other Dragons from reacting just as we have done? They need to listen to her ideas and process them.”

Valerius slipped Caden’s shirt over his head and tossed it off of the platform. It spread its wings and soared downstairs out of sight. He then went to the fastening of Caden’s pants. The backs of a few fingers slid underneath his waistband. Caden sucked his stomach in as the touch tickled, but then he released that breath so he could feel Valerius’ skin against his own.

“What do you think about her idea? One territory for Shifters and another for humans?” Caden asked even as some parts of his brain short circuited as Valerius

unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. Cool air circulated around his cock even though he was wearing underwear. The change in temperature had his cock hardening faster than before. He quickly toed out of his boots. “Do you think it's a good one?”

Valerius did not meet his eyes, but instead stared resolutely at Caden’s pants as if they were the only problem in the world. Finally, as he slid Caden’s underwear and pants off of his hips, he said, “Jahara is very smart.”

“So you think she’s right? That we ought to abandon the world and--”

“No, I did not say that,” Valerius calmly interjected as Caden’s pants fell to his ankles.

Valerius gestured for Caden to step out of them. Then Valerius kicked them and Caden’s shoes off of the platform. Caden hoped that none of them landed in the fire. He was quite fond of those clothes.

“Then what--”

Valerius ended his question with a kiss. It was a firm yet gentle yet somehow desperate kiss. When they broke apart, Valerius’ eyes were hooded but his expression was a little grim.

“Like you, I hoped the others would come to us with solutions. Jahara is the only one who has so far,” Valerius said quietly. “She has been thinking long and hard about this problem. I am certain that she did not come to this decision lightly. She must have considered all other options before deciding on the one she did and offering her territory as the birthplace for this new nation of Shifters.”

“Yeah, I think she has, too. That’s what scares me,” Caden admitted.

“It scares me as well.”

Caden blinked. “But you aren’t scared of anything!”

Valerius smiled gently. “I only wish that were true.”

Caden felt a wave of almost panic flood him as he thought of the world that Jahara offered. It would be one where his parents and sister would be separated from him. There could be no exceptions to the rule of human and Shifter separateness, he guessed, especially not with a Dragon Shifter. How could any of the “lower” Shifters be obliged to follow the rules if the “greater” ones would not?

He imagined that the Dragons would naturally divide up whatever territory they were given into smaller ones. And he couldn’t believe that Mei and Illarion wouldn’t plot and fight one another whether they had 100 cubic miles or 1 million. It was in their natures. And would the humans--whether Humans First or Faithful--really stop their war? No. They would still fight too as proxies even.

Yet there was a kind of sense, too, to what Jahara said, and even a kind of appeal. If there were no humans to take jobs from then the natural inequities of living forever would hardly matter in some ways. Not to mention that combining the knowledge of people who were immortal would be invaluable in terms of understanding the past and building a powerful and visionary future.

Perhaps the territory on Earth was just the beginning anyways. A launch pad to the stars and other worlds could be constructed and rockets launched where Shifters could establish new colonies so that a single territory on Earth would not be too “cramped”.

But Caden couldn’t imagine an existence without humans. He loved them. He had been one of them not so long ago. He was still one of them in many ways and he

wanted to hold onto that. Besides, humans were great! They understood that there really wasn't all the time in the world. Shifters needed to be reminded of that and so much more.

"You do not want to live in a world where Shifters and humans are separated?" Valerius tilted his head to the side.

Caden realized that he had been silent for a long time and he wasn't sure he hadn't missed part of their conversation. "No! I don't. But if you--"

"No, I did not enter the world again only to retreat from it," Valerius assured him with a shake of his head.

"But you said that Jahara was smart and had thought this through and--"

"All of those things are true, but life isn't logical," Valerius sounded amused. "We have to believe--against all logic and good sense--in the world we want to live in."

"Oh," Caden repeated and a slow smile crossed his face. "I thought that..."

"That I would say something different?" Valerius' mouth twitched suspiciously.

"I actually thought you would blow your top at the idea that your territory wasn't chosen as the one for us all to populate," Caden pointed out with an impish grin.

With a rather superior look, Valerius said, "If I were to get behind Jahara's idea, I assure you that my territory would be the one chosen."

Caden tipped back his head and laughed. "I bet!"

Valerius was still smiling but he was slightly more serious as he said, "I should have

said our territory. It is not just mine and Raziel's anymore. You and Iolaire are its masters too."

Caden's smile turned from amusement to something far different. It was slow and warm and sweet as honey. "I suppose with the burdens of leadership come some of the perks."

Valerius cupped Caden's face. "Let me show you more of those perks."

Caden was drawn to the heat of Valerius' body. Even with clothes on, Valerius radiated heat, a volcanic warmth that somehow didn't burn in a painful way. Caden leaned his naked front against Valerius' clothed one and he half expected steam to rise up as ice met fire. He bit his lip to stifle a moan from exiting his mouth.

There was something so illicit about being naked with someone who wasn't. It was a form of weakness, he supposed. No one felt more exposed than when they were naked. How many people dreamed of being nude in high school? But with Valerius, there was this extra edge of sensualness. The leather of his outfit felt slick against Caden's skin. The button fly of those leather pants brushed a little roughly against his cock. Caden shivered and his cock rose more. Precum drizzled against the leather.

Valerius leaned past him and there was a squeaking sound as he adjusted the faucets on that ridiculously huge shower with jets and a huge rain shower fixture. It was like entering a monsoon. Despite Valerius being dressed they both moved into the water.

Caden moaned and water sluiced over his lips and down his chin. Valerius caught it in his mouth as they kissed. The leather became downright slippery as water flowed over it like a rock face. Caden curled his left leg around Valerius' powerful thighs. The other Black Dragon King was like a mountain. He was strong enough to withstand anything Caden wanted to do, which was to use him as a jungle gym at that moment.

Both of Caden's legs wound around Valerius' waist as the other Black Dragon King effortlessly lifted him with one hand on his bare ass. Caden moaned at the touch. He wanted more than just a firm hand on his buttocks though. He pushed against Valerius' leather clad front to indicate his need. Valerius was hard and the front of his pants was tented with his own need. Valerius skinned his lips from his teeth in a wild smile even as the water slicked his mane of hair back from his face.

"Don't you want to tell me what happened with your family?" Valerius teased even as there was the sound of his pants being undone.

"They're staying. They didn't like the idea at first, but I think it will grow on them. Just think." Caden nipped Valerius' lower lip. "We'll have to hide our love from my father's watchful eyes."

"I think I can take your father."

"Oh, I doubt it."

"Maybe you're right. So, I suppose, I must win him over."

A wash of warmth that had nothing to do with the water or Valerius' natural heat flowed over him. Sudden tears pricked his eyes.

"You mean that, don't you?" Caden stated more than asked as his voice thickened with emotion.

Valerius answered simply, "Yes. For you I would face all my fears and I would win against each and every one."

"You would?" Caden's voice sounded thicker still.

Valerius moved wet curls from his forehead with his left hand. “Caden, there is another reason that I wouldn’t accept Jahara’s suggestion, even if I felt it was inevitable.”

Caden had to swallow deeply to clear his throat enough to speak. “What reason is that?”

“You. You would be so sad if we retreated. If we didn’t have hope ,” Valerius murmured as he drew his hand down the side of Caden’s cheek.

Caden’s eyes closed and his tears of joy were washed down his cheeks as well as the shower water. They were hidden in the rush of other waters. Finally, he opened his eyes and he curled one hand behind Valerius’ head, and gazed upon the Black Dragon King’s face.

“I trust you to make the best decisions. You shouldn’t worry about me ,” Caden told him.

“But that is how I know I am making the right decision, Caden. If it pleases you then I am doing what is hopeful, what is good and what is brave. You are my North Star in this.” Valerius put a finger to Caden’s lips to silence his protestations to the contrary. “I value what you have to say, but in this, I must insist on my right to determination.”

“But, Valerius, Rose says how innocent I am and she’s right! I--”

“You don’t see yourself clearly. And I know that Rose believes in you as well as I do. She just fears you will be hurt by the world,” Valerius interrupted. “Caden, you were chosen . It was not luck or chance or a mistake that Iolaire joined with you.”

Caden blinked. Tears were stinging his eyes again even as emotions of a different sort clogged his throat. “I-I’m trying to believe that. Even as Iolaire tells me that we were

meant to be together, I can't help but wonder if there wouldn't have been someone better--"

"No, you are exactly the right person for these difficult times. You have no idea how you've changed things for everyone-- for me and Raziel --in such a short time." Valerius swallowed and the emotions he felt were written on his face. Love and pain and a desire so keen to convince Caden of what he felt that it could have cut through anything. He refocused on Caden's face. "Whatever else you believe, I need you to believe this."

"What?" Caden's voice was barely above a whisper.

Valerius leaned in. Their lips were but a few millimeters from one another's. He was breathing Valerius' breath. They were sharing the very air. Fire and ice. Ice and fire.

"You are--and have always been--the ninth Dragon Shifter," Valerius told him. "We were just waiting for you to introduce yourself."

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:38 pm

ONE

“ Y ou still do not know your worth,” Valerius whispered to Caden. His voice was filled with concern.

Iolaire chose well, Raziel muttered. Why does the boy doubt himself?

Caden does not see himself as we and Iolaire do, Raziel. He has no idea of the power he wields outside of being a Dragon Shifter, Valerius explained.

Were we ever so unsure? Raziel wondered.

It was a surprising thing for his very confident Spirit to ask.

We were perhaps never wise enough to doubt our worthiness, Valerius admitted.

I am very wise. Raziel flapped its massive wings.

Of course.

I have always been wise. You... you are learning, his Spirit preened.

Undoubtedly.

But just like Iolaire, I chose well too, Raziel said, its voice soft, but there.

Thank you, old friend.

“Everything feels so fragile now,” Caden breathed. “It’s not felt this way since... Well, I don’t know. But so much is at stake. I just can’t help but think someone else would have helped you more than me.”

“No one could have, Caden. You reached me. I will have to somehow help you see how important you are to me,” Valerius said.

Caden gave him a rather watery smile. “You already have. Thank you. For everything.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. If anyone should be thanking anyone, it’s me who should be thanking you,” Valerius told him as he drew the backs of his fingers down the tender column of Caden’s throat.

“I’ve made things difficult for you though, haven’t I?” Caden grinned a little impishly.

“You’ve made things interesting . And it has been a long time since I even wanted to be interested in the world,” Valerius confessed.

Caden twirled wet fingers in Valerius’ hair. “I remember when you were just an image on television or the net. Someone so far away from me. Untouchable. I can’t believe I could make such a difference to your life.”

“You’ve made me see the world a little differently.”

“And you’ve made me see the world a lot differently.” Caden cracked a grin.

“We will keep being that different lens for one another,” Valerius promised.

Caden’s arms slid around his neck. “So we’re supposed to go down to dinner soon

and watch heads explode as Jahara offers her suggestion of one large territory.”

Valerius couldn't hide his grin. “Yes, I suppose. That will almost be amusing.”

“Only almost?”

“Since you took Mei and Illarion's ability to shift away for the next 24 hours, you have reduced the amount of fun to be had unless they decide to have a cage match in their human forms on top of the dining room table,” Valerius replied dryly.

Caden guffawed. “I was worried that they were going to destroy this place with their big Dragon butts. Iolaire agrees that would have been disastrous for the grill and it really wants to have you feed us meat again.”

“By hand?”

“Absolutely.” Caden leaned in closer.

That would have been bad, Raziel muttered. Our place to feed would have been violated by the Green and Red Dragons!

Indeed. A terrible tragedy would have occurred.

You are not being serious! Raziel muttered.

I am very serious about our BBQ.

Raziel blew black smoke at him. But Valerius couldn't quite care when Caden was looking at him as if he was far more interesting than meat .

“But right now I'm hungry for something else,” Caden teased.

“So am I.”

Valerius covered Caden’s mouth with his. The hot water from the shower sluiced around their lips and dribbled down their chins. It almost tickled. Caden’s hands drifted down to Valerius’ pants. Valerius felt him undo the button and then those clever hands tried to tug them down... except they wouldn’t go down. Caden tugged some more. Valerius decided to help him. Both of them were wrestling with his pants. Their kiss ended.

Caden asked with an amused glint in his eyes, “Valerius, how did you get into these? They’re like painted on you.”

Valerius frowned too. They had been loose earlier. He tipped his head back and groaned. “Leather shrinks when it gets wet.”

There was a moment’s silence from Caden then, “So we can’t get them off until they dry?”

“If we wished to get them off in one piece we’d have to wait. But I am not a patient man,” Valerius said as he effortlessly ripped the pants apart at the seams. “These were one of my favorite pairs too.”

Caden let out a peal of laughter then. Considering that Valerius had his shirt and boots still on with strips of the black pants hanging on out of them, he doubted he looked sexy. The shirt was silk and could have been unbuttoned, but he simply ripped open the shirt, the buttons flying everywhere, before toeing off his soggy boots. He spread his arms wide.

“Better?” Valerius asked.

“Everything is always better with you. But I have to know. How can you have a

favorite pair of leather pants when you've got like 100 pairs, which are exactly the same?" Caden's lips were twitching as he asked that. Valerius expected more laughter to burst out of him in a second.

But he wanted a different sound from Caden. He stepped up to Caden and reached around him. He grasped one globe of Caden's buttocks in each hand and squeezed. Caden let out this hiccupy type sigh and the pupils in his eyes went wide.

"I can have a favorite pair of leather pants because," he paused and squeezed Caden's ass again, which had that wonderful sound escaping through the young man's parted lips, "good things happened to me on the day I wore them."

"What good, ah, thing happened with that pair?"

Caden's gaze on his mouth was not because he was fascinated with what the Dragon King's answer was. Valerius leaned down so that there were mere millimeters between their lips.

"I met you for the first time," Valerius murmured and kissed Caden.

The young man moaned into his mouth and his legs were up and wrapping around Valerius' waist. Valerius grinned as he felt their cocks duel between them. He pressed Caden's back against the cool rock of the tower and heard the young man hiss at the temperature change. For an ice Dragon Shifter, Caden enjoyed warmth far more than cold.

Valerius ground his front between Caden's spread thighs. He was already very hard and leaking. Caden was just as needy. They could easily climax just by grinding against one another. But that would hardly be as satisfying as being inside of Caden. The heat. The tightness. The way Caden's body cradled his sex like it was meant to be there.

He blindly felt for the bath gel. He should use lube--and he would remember to keep some down here next time--but he wouldn't last running up to the platform where his bed was and returning. His cock was already straining towards Caden as if it thought it could spear inside of the young man all on its own.

Caden's fingernails raked down his back. The burn of those nails was washed away with the water. But there was a primal need in that touch. He found the plastic container and it nearly slipped from his grasp. He crushed the plastic in his hands and like the pants, the bottle was destroyed. The scent of sandalwood filled the shower. His hand was covered in amber gel. Caden let out another laugh, this one husky as much as delighted.

"Eager?" Caden breathed as he licked the shower water from Valerius' neck and left shoulder.

"Always." He hardly recognized his own voice. It was a growl of need and desire. Caden's legs were unwinding from his waist and he was getting down. "What are you doing?"

"Making this easier," Caden said as he almost coquettishly turned his back on Valerius.

He placed his hands on the back of the wall, allowing the shower spray to run down his naked body. Valerius followed the path of the water as it began on the top of Caden's blond head and then ran down his neck and along the young man's spine before taking one of three paths. Down one buttock, down the other or along the crevice between the two. Valerius swallowed as he imagined what was in that deep valley between the globes of tender flesh: the opening to Caden's body.

Caden arched his ass up so that it was outside of the direct spray. The water pooled in the hollow of his spine and ran off his sides. He looked over his shoulder at Valerius

almost challengingly. There was that white glow in his eyes and Raziel surged forward in his chest. He slammed a hand over his heart.

If we shift here, Raziel, we will destroy the BBQ. Iolaire does not want that , Valerius found himself babbling.

Hunger... Raziel rumbled.

His Spirit had never acted this way. It wasn't just that Raziel was trying to shift them, but more to break down some other wall. He met Caden's gaze and he could see Iolaire behind those eyes.

Make us one, Raziel stated.

Valerius' eyes were led to that tempting, teasing ass that was so prettily raised. He swallowed as his mouth was flooded with saliva. He went to Caden. His one hand was still full of gel even though most of it had oozed between his fingers and was washed away by the shower water.

Caden reached back and parted those golden globes, while still keeping his ass lifted, to reveal that pink swirl of muscle that Valerius longed for. He reached with his amber coated hand and allowed the shower gel to drip down between those cheeks. The golden liquid dribbled down over Caden's anus, which opened and closed.

Valerius' slick fingers trailed down from the top of that crevice slowly along the soft, mostly untouched flesh. Caden's eyes hooded and a shiver ran through his body. Valerius' fingers circled Caden's opening. He did not move quickly even as he felt the pressure of Raziel against his chest's inner wall.

There was a delicate tracery of ice that started to form on the top of Caden's spine. The crystalline-like structures glittered before being swept away by the hot water.

Despite the ice, Caden felt incredibly warm to him. As hot as a furnace. Or maybe he was simply burning .

His skin felt like it was a thin crust over a molten lake. He had never felt more present and yet about to fly apart. It was the shift in that moment where he was neither man nor dragon. Caden was in the same state. They were man and dragon.

Valerius pushed one finger into the center of Caden's opening. There was resistance. There always was even when the body was as willing and ready as the mind. The gel made his hands so slick though that he was soon inside. Caden shivered and more frost formed on his arms and the backs of his hands. His eyes glowed blue-white and Valerius was sure that his were red like the embers of a raging fire.

His finger sank into Caden up to the knuckle. Caden let out a sigh of pleasure and arched it back, which caused Valerius' digit to sink in even deeper. He moved it inside of Caden, relishing the silky insides of the young man's back passage.

Caden's hands were back on the wall as Valerius began to finger him. He felt Caden's back passage tighten with pleasure, trying to keep him inside, trying to find that sensation of fullness. Valerius drew nearer so that his body was practically on top of the young man's. His heat hit Caden's cold and there was a burst of steam.

He couldn't see through the shroud of white. But he didn't need to. Instead, he acted by a sense of touch. He added a second finger to the first. He drove both fingers inside and drew them apart as he pulled them out, stretching Caden's tight opening. A third finger slid inside and he dragged them all out with excruciating slowness until only the tips were inside and Caden's opening threatened to snap shut behind them. Caden whined and forced his ass back to recapture those fingers.

Valerius leaned over Caden's body. His mouth was nearly even with the cusp of Caden's left ear. He let his breath--so hot that it dried the water--trickle out and

banished the frost that stretched out like tattoos along Caden's neck and shoulder.

"Hold on, my love. I will make us one," Valerius murmured, his voice dark and deep and coming from his very bones.

Caden let out a soft whine that caused Valerius' cock to leak precum. He swallowed again as words became impossible. He plunged his three fingers into Caden up to the hilt. Caden bore down upon them. It was like having his hand in a vise and he imagined it around his cock. That imagining had a pulse of need go through him. More water turned to steam. His skin was almost perfectly dry as the water simply evaporated in an instant. He wasn't sure if he imagined that his chest was burning with hellfire.

He drew his fingers out of Caden completely. Caden trembled and gasped when he did so and needily drove his ass back against Valerius' groin. Valerius let out a short laugh of need mixed with frustration.

"I must make myself slick or I will hurt you, my love," Valerius said with a desperate hitch in his voice.

"Need you," Caden breathed and snow swirled around both their bodies.

It instantly evaporated when it touched Valerius' skin, but the snow-kiss helped cool him down enough that his hands only shook a little as he slicked himself with the remaining shower gel.

He positioned the head of his cock--almost purple with the swell of blood--against that still tight opening. But neither of them could wait any longer.

Make us one.

He wasn't sure who said that. Was it him? Raziel? Caden? Iolaire? All of them?

Valerius plunged inside Caden's body with a reckless abandon. Caden's hiss of pleased-pain though had him holding himself exquisitely still.

"Did I--"

"No, it's good. Need this," Caden assured him.

But still Valerius did not move. Instead, he peppered Caden's shoulders, the back of his neck and the top of his spine with kisses and licks. He tasted snow on his tongue. Frost melted away under his lips. His teeth made drag marks in ice.

He allowed his hands to move from Caden's hips all the way up his back, melting away the frozen covering that encased Caden in a protective sheet of frost. Caden groaned and arched his back into Valerius' hands as huge slabs of ice fell from his bare skin and crashed to the floor where they shattered into a million pieces and swirled down the drain.

Valerius sank another inch. He was fully seated inside of Caden now. His cock tingled as he felt his own heat mix with Caden's coolness. There was a prickling sensation on that tender skin that had him curling forward as his orgasm threatened to surge within him and overcome all his self control. He rested his forehead against Caden's spine and just breathed to let this moment pass.

Caden reached back with one hand to grasp one of his. They threaded their fingers together and he put those joined hands over Caden's heart. He could feel the thump of it like a bird beating at the bars of a cage. He pressed another long kiss on the very top of Caden's spine. Caden's heart stopped galloping and took on the rhythm of his own, which while fast, was not so violent.

Valerius then began to move inside of Caden's body. The young man's back passage clung to his cock like a second skin. Even with all of the slickness of the gel and the stretching, Caden was still so very tight. But he was also large. He knew that there would be pain so he distracted Caden by lightly biting his shoulder. Caden let out a moan as his tongue bathed the hurt even as his hips pulled back and then pistoned forward.

Caden's heart rate began to speed up again as the rhythm of their lovemaking took on that primal beat. The thrust. The slap of skin against skin. The withdrawal that left only the tip of his cock inside before it hurtled forward once more. Heat built up between them until it was impossible to know where he ended and Caden began. They were one. A being of pure pleasure.

The young man looked for him and Valerius was there. They were kissing. Tongues and teeth meeting and breaking apart. Lips clinging to one another. Fire and ice. Plumes of steam surrounded them, acting as another lover to caress their skin.

The beat of their hearts joined the slap of his balls against Caden's ass. Their staccato breathing joined the band. Moans interspersed that and grunts and mewls and indescribable sounds of lovemaking that no one would mistake.

Valerius was practically breathing in Caden's skin as he leaned over the young man's bowed form and rocked their bodies together. He could no longer bear to draw almost all the way out of Caden. To be separate was simply wrong. Instead, he shifted in and out by inches and then pushed deeper. He ground his front against Caden's ass, needing to be deeper, more fully seated.

Caden pushed back with equal ferocity. He wanted them to be as close as possible for when their orgasms came. Those were not far away. Valerius could feel the thin crust over the lake of fire inside of him cracking. Caden glittered like an ice fairy. A vision that would lead men into the wastes of the frozen north. A vision to drive men mad.

But this vision he had caught. It was his. No one else's. And the fire inside of him would burn away all this ice and Caden would be tender and exposed and his .

The steam boiled around them as the crust of control shattered. Valerius held Caden tightly to him. Their mouths searched for each other for a kiss. Their bodies were fused together.

The orgasms--when they came--seemed to pull out every ounce of cum from within both of them. They wrung them dry. Valerius let out a shout as his seed was spilled inside Caden's silken insides. Caden's cum splashed their joined hands and painted the wall with pearlescent streams. Steam and snow swirled around their joined bodies as Caden bore down on Valerius' cock to get that last spurt inside of him. To capture that last trace of essence.

Hands still joined, bodies still connected, they sank down to the floor of the shower as the water poured over their heads and they kissed. Slow, long kisses as the aftermath of their lovemaking pounded through their veins.

Valerius' eyelids had fallen shut at some point, but he could see both Raziel and Iolaire. The two dragons had their foreheads pressed together. Their eyes were closed too. They were purring. Raziel's black wings curled around Iolaire, protecting the White Dragon from everyone and everything.

Later, after they had recovered, dried themselves off and dressed, Valerius and Caden had gone down to the dining room, hand in hand. They had said nothing though Caden had been humming happily. Valerius found himself smiling like a fool, except he felt anything but foolish.

When they opened the doors to the formal dining room with its three-tiered chandeliers and fabulous golden chairs with rich red upholstery, they had expected to find the other Dragon Shifters shouting at one another over the first course.

But there was barely any discussion. The room was mostly silent.

In fact, the other Dragon Shifters were staring out the doors that were open to another protected square and the night outside. They were all staring at a beautiful sight. Across the starry sky was what looked like a curling strand of ice crystals and wrapped around it was what looked like an equal strand of red ones. Not only could everyone in this room see them, but everyone in Reach could and maybe farther than that.

Caden squeezed Valerius' hand in his. Valerius looked down into Caden's face. He could still see Iolaire's as well. He pressed a kiss to Caden's forehead before turning back to the other Dragon Shifters.

Valerius' voice was clear and certain as he asked, "So are we ready to save the world?"

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ALONE OR TOGETHER, SEPARATE OR ONE

“If I had to say what they are doing, it looks like Raziel is showing off while Iolaire is the cheerleading section,” Caden said as he watched the Black and White Dragons in the magic mirror in the throne room.

Both Valerius and Chione lifted their heads from where they were going over some of the preparations for King Anwar’s arrival later that afternoon on Chione’s tablet. Valerius’ eyes narrowed as he took in the scene Caden was referring to. Iolaire was in its familiar cat-like “loaf” position while Raziel was standing before Iolaire on all four limbs. Raziel’s wings were spread wide and its head was lifted towards the sky. Those wings were so huge and so wide that the mirror could only show a part of them though it was “zoomed out”. Iolaire’s eyes grew larger in appreciation as Raziel flapped mightily and let out a gout of flame into the air.

Chione gave out a delighted laugh. “Caden’s right! Raziel is putting on a show for its mate!”

“They are not... I mean to say... the word mates ... we have not discussed...” Valerius’ voice faded off into a sigh as Raziel lifted its head up and looked magnificent.

Iolaire “clapped” with a rustle of wings, enjoying every minute of the show, and evidently feeling very proud to have such a mate. Caden bit his lower lip. He and Valerius had not talked about this. The “helix” in the sky had so clearly announced to the world that something had happened. Something momentous, but not yet complete. Something that neither he nor Valerius were ready for.

Chione's eyes were wide. "But last night... in the sky--"

"Yes, yes, that..." Valerius' eyes slid to Caden as though asking for an assist. "That was... well, it was a display of--"

"Fated mates, if I ever saw it!" Chione cried.

She tipped her head meaningfully towards Caden. She evidently thought that Valerius was being thoughtless about his feelings on the matter. Caden was pretty sure she believed that Valerius was being pigheaded about how he felt about Caden. Except he was still a little shell shocked about what had happened himself. And yet pleased, too, which was pretty much what he imagined Valerius felt.

Except we haven't talked about it. Not even when he held me just before we fell asleep together.

"If Iolaire and Raziel were fated then neither of them would have had a choice in the matter of being mates," Valerius pointed out as if this fact alone would change the fact that Raziel and Iolaire were now somehow sharing a joined space and that had never happened before. The barrier between them was simply gone as of last night.

Last night was so great, Caden thought and that stupid smile crossed his face that he simply couldn't scrub off, if he had even wanted to.

"Valerius," she stated dryly. "Fated mates or chosen mates or whatever mates, they appear to be... mates."

"They are rooming together," Valerius said and his mouth was twitching as if even he knew how silly that sounded.

But it's sort of like that. Valerius and I are now sharing a home and Iolaire and Raziel

are now sharing a home.

“Valerius!” Chione’s hands flew into the air. “You best have an answer about what this is and what is happening! I’m not the only one to think that Iolaire has chosen a mate. Look.”

She tapped frantically on her tablet and thrust it towards Valerius. Caden could only hear the breathless commentary of the television reporters.

“--the red and the white is quite telling in the helix that still reigns high in the sky today!” A female “expert” evidently on Dragon mates was saying. “There have been rumors swirling out of High Reach that Iolaire gets to choose among the Dragons who will be its mate. And, evidently, some initial choice at least has been made! The red could signify that Iolaire has chosen the Red Dragon Queen Mei--”

“WHAT?!” Valerius shouted at the tablet. “No, that is not the case! How could they--”

“What about the Black Dragon King Valerius? Though Raziel is black, it is most associated with fire. Perhaps the red part of the helix is to symbolize flames or fire,” a male news reporter said.

But the first “expert” in a patronizing tone answered, “Oh, no, that couldn’t possibly be right.”

“WHAT?!” Valerius shouted again, purpling. “What kind of expert are you? None! None at all!”

“Why couldn’t it?” the male reporter sounded nettled.

“Exactly! Why not?” Valerius echoed as if the reporter and “expert” could hear him.

“Because of the way their relationship began with a battle . How could they be fated mates if Raziel was trying to kill Iolaire?” Caden could almost imagine the expert’s cat-like smile of satisfaction on the expert’s voice after making her point.

Valerius’ shoulders slumped. “That was a misunderstanding. Surely everyone can see that Iolaire and I are... are quite all right now!”

Chione tapped the tablet and the program turned off. “Yes, well, it’s just not a traditional way for fated mates to meet. Normally, it’s love at first sight and--”

“I told you that they are not fated , but chosen ! You cannot have both. They are mutually exclusive!” Valerius was scowling at her. “If they are fated then they have no choice in the matter. If they are chosen then--”

“Yes, yes, but I’m afraid our media will fill in what the people don’t know about Dragon mates. Think of all the books, movies and television shows that have told the world of Werewolves and their mates,” Chione pointed out to him. “People will draw on that.”

“Those are fiction .” Valerius’ eyes were narrowed as if he were offended for them to be compared to fictional mates.

“I wonder why the helix is red and white and not black and white,” Caden interrupted them. He felt rather impish at that moment. “Red really does describe Mei. After all, Xipil is red and doesn’t she spew magma? Red is a much better signifier for her.”

Valerius’ eyes narrowed further. “Really?”

“Yeah, they’ll never guess it is Raziel until we tell them,” Caden said.

“Yes, you will have to tell them,” Chione said, hands now on her hips. “Will that

come before or after Caden announces himself? Will you do it at the same time? Should we wait at least until Anwar arrives and has some chance to meet Caden?"

"We're sorry." Caden grimaced. "We know a lot is going on and this..." He pointed to the two cooing Dragons. "Wasn't what we intended. At least, I knew how Iolaire felt, but I wasn't sure about Raziel--"

"I was." Valerius rubbed his temple. "Raziel's fear should have told me everything I needed to know."

"Fear? Raziel doesn't seem afraid! I can't believe Raziel is afraid of anything!" Caden defended the Black Dragon stoutly.

"Oh, Raziel was. It knew that a change was coming. Not just for the world, but for us..." Valerius gazed at his Spirit in the mirror almost tenderly. "Even a good change--the best change--is still alarming to my mighty Raziel."

Caden felt himself smiling broadly. He and Iolaire were the best change! It was strange. He should have felt uneasy that he and Valerius were still hesitating to tell what had happened between Iolaire and Raziel the night before. But he wasn't. Instead, he just felt a deep certainty that everything--between him and Valerius in any case--would work itself out in time. Still it was a little bit stunning.

"Neither of you has to apologize." Chione sighed. "It's rather thrilling to be honest. But, I admit, that adding the glowing helix in the sky has not made my job easier. But it cannot be helped. Indeed, it should not be. It should be celebrated."

"It is pretty spectacular," Caden said.

Caden came up the steps to the throne where Valerius was sitting and got in his lap without any shame in front of Chione. To his delight, Valerius accommodated him

without thought. He was immediately tucking Caden against him with practiced ease as if they did this all the time.

“We will have to get you your own throne up here,” Valerius murmured, but he didn’t sound in any hurry to stop Caden from getting into his lap.

Caden grinned. “Yeah, but I don’t mind this seat. In fact, it’s the best in the house.”

Chione giggled and covered her mouth with one hand in that girlish way of hers. All three of them looked into the mirror where Raziel and Iolaire were still gazing at one another lovingly. It was Iolaire’s turn to preen obviously because it was sending up goutts of ice into the air that turned into snowflakes and fell beautifully around both Dragons. Raziel looked on approvingly and opened its maw to eat some of the snow.

“They have just accepted everything between them without question, without worry, without thought to timing,” Valerius murmured as he carded his hands through Caden’s hair.

“They see each other as the only important thing.” Caden cuddled back against Valerius’ powerful chest. He said to Chione, “They didn’t exactly tell us what they planned last night. That they were going to move in together or... or whatever they’re doing.”

“Are you upset that it has?” Chione asked, but then said, “Forget I asked that--”

“I’m not,” Caden quickly stated. He looked over at Valerius. “Are you?”

“No,” Valerius answered, and there was no hesitation which had any small doubts Caden had, falling away. “But Illarion will not be the only one to feel slighted by this. Anwar will have a field day of being upset.”

“You know he would do that in any case,” Chione reminded him then pinked.

“You have always acted as if you like him!” Valerius laughed.

“I do! I mean... I do , but King Anwar can be a little trying.” She suddenly smiled. “But here I am worried about Anwar when...” She gestured to the two Dragons who were playfully nipping at one another. “When there is something so much more important.”

Valerius chuckled and kissed the top of Caden’s head. “Your parents... have you spoken to them about this?”

“I’ve sort of been avoiding them,” Caden muttered and pressed closer to Valerius as he imagined his parents’ reactions to the news reports. They would know that the red part of the helix meant Valerius not Mei. He was sure of it.

“Oh, good, your father will surely be storming in here any moment now,” Valerius laughed weakly.

“Probably,” Caden admitted and gave him puppy dog eyes. “I promise I’ll talk to them after I go meet Landry at the prison. If you could just avoid my father until then, you’ll be safe.”

Valerius let out a rumbling laugh. “I highly doubt that. I would come with you to greet Landry, but--”

“That’s too much publicity. I know. Don’t worry,” Caden told him and kissed his stubbled jaw. “I’m betting that the last thing she wants is publicity. Rose and Wally should be here in a few minutes and then we’re taking off.”

Chione was nibbling on her lower lip and a slightly worried expression was on her

face. “Caden...”

“Yeah?” He looked at her expectantly.

“Just remember that... well, that Landry has been through quite the ordeal so she might not completely be herself,” Chione told him, her words strangely hesitating.

Caden frowned. “Yeah, but she’ll be with friends so it’ll be all right.”

“Yes...” Chione looked down at her tablet, still gnawing at her lower lip as if debating telling him something else. She must have thought better about it because instead she reminded him, “Remember that Anwar will be here for lunch. Don’t forget that you need to be back for that. Potentially it will be one meal that doesn’t end in disaster.”

“Last night’s dinner went well,” Valerius murmured.

“Really? Because the first course hadn’t been served before everyone stormed off!” Chione cried.

When they had entered the dining room, all of the Dragon Shifters had been remarkably silent. At first. They had all been staring at the helix in the sky that, until that moment, neither Caden nor Valerius had realized was there. Both of them later said that they had felt a strange pull from the sky, but Valerius had told him that Dragon Shifters often did. Dragons were creatures of the air and high places so it made sense that they should want to be up in the atmosphere no matter what. He had just assumed that Raziel had wanted to fly more than face the other Dragons at dinner.

The eyes of every Dragon Shifter had turned towards them, however, as they had entered the room. Caden had blushed furiously as their intense lovemaking--with the

fire and ice and both Dragons having a part in it--was not private any longer. Everyone knew. Everyone seemed to know more than them! And then everyone had then started talking at once.

“What is that symbol?” Mei demanded, standing up from her seat, and pointed towards the helix. “It is the mating symbol, yes? Like some kind of--of signal to the masses?”

“We were to all have a chance to win Iolaire!” Illarion fumed, pounding the table with one hand. “You went behind our backs, Valerius!”

“You barely had time to make it romantic!” Tez lamented. “I would have bought you flowers and spread the whole room in a carpet of petals. You mated between meetings!”

Kaila patted his back. “You can still do that, Tez. I don’t think they’re going to make love only once.”

Esme looked mildly amused and very pleased for them. “I will say it would have been a little bit more polite to wait for Anwar. He will never get over this.”

Jahara said dryly, “One is glad one had other reasons to come to Reach than to court Caden and Iolaire.”

Marban lifted his glass of wine. “Shall we have a toast to the happy couple?”

Caden and Valerius both just stared outside. They had each known that there had been something different and very special about what had happened between them. The sense of peace and well being that they both experienced now--a kind of shared sense of calm and rightness--confirmed that. But, in a way, like Tez had said, they hadn’t had a chance to talk about it. It had been done between meetings...

“Guys,” Caden surprised himself by saying as he stepped forward as if protecting Valerius. “Guys, you all are incredible.” He looked at Illarion and added, “In your own special ways.” He cleared his throat. “But it was only ever going to be Valerius. If there was going to be anyone at all.” That had everyone going quiet. Caden flushed hotter but pushed on. “But I hope you realize that it was a truly good and important thing that you’ve come here for, which is to address the growing violence and unrest in the world. We wouldn’t have known about the Faith in each other’s territories if we hadn’t come together. And I don’t think we can find a solution to it on our own.”

Illarion’s arms were still crossed over his massive chest, still scowling, as he said, “Valerius always takes everything that he wants and does so underhandedly.”

“That is absurd!” Esme glared at Illarion. “It is as if when you look at Valerius, you see yourself reflected back to you but have no understanding of what you’re seeing!”

“You are just sore because you announced to the world that Iolaire was your mate and now clearly they are not, Illarion!” Tez pointed out. “If you had not been so quick to stake your claim--”

“What did you come for, Tez? You had no interest in Iolaire? Probably not! Because you are only in love with yourself!” Illarion roared.

Tez’s eyes narrowed. “At least, there are things about me which are lovable, which there are not about you!”

“Why you--”

“ENOUGH!” Valerius’ voice echoed throughout the dining hall. He pinched the top of his nose. “Caden is right. Raziel and Iolaire have decided upon one another. But that is hardly the reason all of you should be here. We need a solution to the Faith, to Humans First, to all of it. And I would task you with coming up with solutions. Some

of us already have one or two to share. But we need far more and we need to come to a consensus.”

The legs of Illarion’s chair scraped back along the floor and he stood up, throwing his napkin onto the table. “I see no reason to offer my insights to you. None of you has the courage to go through with what I would suggest.”

“You mean the stomach to imprison practically everyone in your little authoritarian regime?” Esme scoffed. “No, we don’t. But it’s not working anyways, Illarion. You need help as much as anyone.”

“You can’t be serious about leaving just because we’re not going to be mates!” Caden cried.

Illarion gave him a nasty smile. “If you wanted my help, you should have considered who you chose.”

“I... that’s not fair!” Caden yelled and flushed. Fairness was for children. Not Dragon Shifters. “That’s ridiculous! You don’t like men or me romantically! It would never have worked between us! You know that! You’re using this as an excuse to simply leave! But we can work on stopping the violence and--”

“I will stop the violence in my territory. I need no help from any of you.” Illarion stormed out.

Mei rose. She looked tired and put out, likely because he had taken her ability to shift. “Illarion is right about one thing, Caden. You need to be more particular about your allies. I understand Valerius, but asking Illarion to stay? Why? He has nothing to offer.”

“But we haven’t heard from him--”

“He offers only prisons and death,” Tez said as he too got up and took Kaila’s hand. “Besides, he will only offer what costs him nothing and gains him everything.”

The two of them joined Mei in leaving. Esme sighed.

“I suppose I will be eating in my room again tonight. I am certain, you two, would rather be alone,” Esme said to them as she got up as well and headed out after kissing both of them on the cheeks.

Jahara finished her wine and stood. “Do not be too worried, Caden. This was never going to be easy. We just have to keep trying.”

“You really want all of them in your territory, Jahara?” Valerius asked.

She smiled. “I may not like them all. I may not trust them. But I want all of them to live . What would you give for that, Valerius?”

And with that, she left. Chione and Marban were left.

“Would you like to have dinner with me, my dear?” Marban asked her.

“Yes, I would. Thankfully, there is plenty of wine.” Chione poured herself a large glass.

“Despite what Esme says, I think Caden and I would like to join you,” Valerius said as he pulled out a chair for Caden.

“There is plenty of food, too,” Chione said with a faint smile.

And they had eaten and drunk under the light of the moon and the helix without talking further about it. Both Marban and Chione had likely sensed that both Caden

and Valerius did not wish to. But really, Caden had still been absorbing it himself.

“Lunch will happen,” Caden said, snapping back to the moment. “I’m sure of it. I mean even though Illarion said he was leaving, he hasn’t. According to the staff, he’s not even packed. So that’s good, right?”

“I was actually thinking it would be better if he did leave,” Valerius said dryly.

Caden kissed his cheek. “I know, but we need everybody. I mean we need to try to have everybody in on this.”

“We will try,” Chione said with a faint smile.

At that moment, there was the sound of two running sets of feet and the throne room burst open with Rose and Tilly standing there, cheeks red with excitement and both rather breathless.

“C’mon, Caden, we’ve gotta go!” Tilly wheezed.

“What? Uhm, Till, you need to stay here--”

“No, I’m going to welcome Landry out of the joint. Is that what prison is called? Anyways, I’m totally going and you owe me, because our parents are coming to talk to you right now and I delayed them,” Tilly said in no uncertain terms.

Rose nodded with a pained smile. “They look a little concerned about you.”

Caden scrambled from Valerius’ arms. The Black Dragon King did not keep him though he looked rather pained.

“Go on, Caden. Escape,” Valerius told him. “I will handle your parents.”

“But I...” Caden flapped his arms. “If Landry weren’t getting out like in twenty minutes I’d stay, but--”

“Who are you kidding? Go! I may shift and fly out of here myself.” Valerius laughed and gently pushed Caden towards Tilly and Rose.

“Okay. Thanks!” Caden kissed him before running down to his sister and friend. “Is Wally here yet?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s got the Bug ready and waiting to go.” Rose flashed a grin.

The three of them raced out of High Reach and into the courtyard where Wally was indeed there in his rickety car, the Bug. What little hair he had was sticking up on end as all the windows were down. Caden wondered if he simply hadn’t been able to get them all up.

“C’mon, kids, we can’t keep Landry waiting!” Wally called and waved one small, pudgy arm at them.

The three of them piled into the car with Caden up front. The last car door had barely closed before they were barrelling out of the castle and down the road towards the prison.

“I hope we aren’t late,” Caden said with a frown as he saw the little car straining to keep above forty miles per hour.

“We’ll make it, kid,” Wally assured him.

“I just don’t want Landry standing there with no one to greet her,” Caden explained as he nervously twisted his hands together. “Her brothers haven’t left Humans First over this. In fact, they’re seen as martyrs. You know, wrongfully imprisoned and all

that. Since Landry chose us over them I'm just not sure that any family will be there for her."

"We're her family now," Tilly said stoutly.

"Damn straight," Rose added.

They arrived at the prison just in time to see Landry coming out of the massive gates. But though Caden had been afraid she would have been alone, he hadn't considered that the press would be there.

Of course they would be!

There was a gaggle of reporters waiting just outside of the prison. They rushed towards Landry and Caden let out a hiss of breath. Landry froze. Though her hair covered her eyes like it always did, he could see her alarm. There were dozens of microphones thrust towards her.

"Oh, man, we've got to get to her. She's all alone!" Caden cried.

Except, in a moment, Landry was not alone. Humans First thugs suddenly flanked her like two oversized bookends. And then there was another figure who put a gentle arm around Landry's shoulders.

It was Jasper Hawes.

COMPLICATIONS

“ I don’t understand this,” Caden breathed out as Wally pulled the car over into a parking space in the jail’s parking lot. “What is Landry doing with him ?”

His eyes were locked on Jasper Hawes. The leader of Humans First was smiling in that fake, plasticky manner of his that rubbed Caden in all the wrong ways.

But the media is just lapping this up!

They were shouting questions at Jasper at a machine-gun-like pace. That didn’t phase the Humans First leader at all. In fact, he just smiled wider and appeared completely in his element.

Jasper had his right arm around Landry’s shoulders. She was smiling too, but wanly and it didn’t reach her eyes. But she stood there, not shrugging off that arm, but instead standing beside him.

“I’m going to put a stop to this! She doesn’t want to be with him!” Caden cried.

But Wally put a hand on his right forearm to stop him. “No, kid, don’t do that.”

“What? Why? I’ve got to rescue Landry!” Caden explained as he tried to open the door again. But Wally reached across and pulled it closed.

“She may not want to be rescued,” Wally said.

“You can’t believe that! She doesn’t hate shifters! She’s not with them!” Caden gestured to Jasper and his acolytes that stood behind him as if he were some kind messiah. This had to be put a stop to.

“She certainly looks like she’s with them. The press clearly believes it. I thought this might happen,” Rose said and her lips skinned back from her teeth.

“Thought what might happen? I don’t understand why Landry is with that creep !” Tilly crossed her arms over her chest and gave an exaggerated shudder.

“There must be some explanation! Landry might have been taught a whole lot of guff about shifters, but she knows that’s not true now!” Caden’s brow furrowed. “He must have caught her off guard. Maybe she doesn’t feel like she has any choice but to pretend she’s okay with this.”

“Caden, a belief system like Landry had, doesn't just disappear overnight. She thinks humans are better than shifters. It’s easier to fall back on her prejudices so her racist brothers and family don’t kick her out than stand on her own,” Rose reminded him.

Hope was a fragile thing. Belief in others was even frailer and that echoed in her voice. Wally’s eyes meet Rose’s in the rear view mirror. There was some kind of silent exchange between them. Rose lowered her eyes to her lap.

“No, no, that’s not true! Not with Landry. She was willing to go to prison rather than give me up to Valerius,” Caden said with a violent shake of his head. “I can’t believe that now when she’s cleared of all charges that she would run to Humans First. It doesn’t make any sense!”

Wally was studying the scene with an almost bland expression. “Prison is tough, kid. She was supposed to get in with Humans First to find out their secrets in exchange for getting her sentence reduced. But the truth is that they likely protected her while in

prison for real. That creates some loyalty.”

But Caden wasn’t buying it. “Landry would know that the protection Humans First gave her was conditional. It wasn’t out of the goodness of their hearts and they would expect something back.”

“Leaving prison doesn’t mean she isn’t afraid of what they could do to her if she doesn’t keep up her part of the bargain, Caden,” Wally pointed out as he turned off the car. The engine ticked. The sound had Caden feeling like a racehorse at the starting gate.

“But Valerius will protect her!” Caden cried. “He can keep her safe from Humans First!”

“Are you going to have her live in High Reach?” Rose scoffed.

Her expression had become tangled. No longer was it filled with disdain. That was still there, but she also looked worried.

“That would be awesome! Are you going to move into High Reach, too, Rose?” Tilly turned pleading eyes upon the Swarm Shifter. “It would be so cool!”

Rose blinked. “I--I don’t think I’m invited--”

“Yes, you are,” Caden said firmly. “You are absolutely invited. More than that, I really want you there. You, too, Wally.”

“Are you really saying that I should move into the castle of the Black Dragon?” Rose boggled.

“Yeah, I am,” Caden said without hesitation.

“Does Valerius like cats?” Wally asked.

“I’m sure that Valerius will love your cats especially when you explain how you believe he’s similar to them,” Caden answered him, his lips twitching.

Wally sat there, behind the wheel, looking thoughtful. He shook himself. “No, I shouldn’t. I’ve got the Emporium, though business would boom if people realized I had a direct connection--”

“I need you as my Councillor, Wally. You are the Chione to my Valerius, especially since I’m going to reveal who I am,” Caden said. “So the Emporium might have to take a back seat to your new responsibilities.”

“Ah, running the world or running the Emporium? It is a tough call in terms of importance, but I guess you win out,” Wally said.

“This will be so cool!” Tilly straightened up in her seat. “All our friends in High Reach? Brilliant! There’s like no downside to this now!”

“You found downsides to living in a castle near the most powerful person in the world?” Rose teased her.

“I know that sounds really bad, but living in the castle is sort of going to crimp my social life,” Tilly said. “I mean some of my friends are going to freak out. Some are going to be okay with it. But some of them may just stay friends with me because of who my brother is. And I’ll never know about the people who try to become friends with me. Who knows what they’ll really want.”

Rose put a hand over his sister’s. “That’s actually pretty tough. Sorry, Till.”

She shrugged. “Compared to what others go through, it’s nothing. It’s just that

everything is going to change.”

Everything is going to change.

Caden was still watching Landry. The press were asking her questions now. He tried rolling down the window. The crank came out in his hand, but the window was cracked a few inches so he could hear what was being asked and answered.

“... you’re being released, because the Claw and the police made a mistake in thinking that you and your brothers planted the bomb in Dragon Strike Square,” a female reporter stated, “How do you feel about how you’ve been treated? Do you think you were targeted because of your human sympathies?”

Landry licked her lips and looked like a deer in headlights for a moment. Caden felt terrible for her. She clearly was being put on the spot. He thought she would mutter something and hide behind her bangs. But she didn’t. In fact, she brushed her hair out of her eyes. Caden’s eyes widened.

“Oh, boy,” Wally muttered.

“What’s Landry doing?” Tilly cried again though he had a feeling that she knew.

Landry lifted up her chin. “King Valerius is the one responsible for what happened to me! He saw a convenient scapegoat for his bad leadership. The fact that people--reasonable people --aren’t content with being second-class citizens because they’re human doesn’t make them criminals!”

Caden gasped. Rose growled.

Tilly let out a low moan, “Whoa, what’s she talking about? She thought her brothers were guilty, too!”

“She can’t believe this,” Caden was saying almost as if it were a mantra. “She can’t. She knows it’s not true. She--”

But Landry wasn’t finished yet, she continued, “There are more humans than shifters on this planet, yet we have to fight over the scraps while the shifters get everything . They have all the wealth and all the power. The human part of the government is a complete sham!”

“She hasn’t met President Goodfellow,” Caden murmured as he recalled the tenacious politician hanging outside of Valerius’ rooms.

Landry thrust a fist into the air as she said, “Well, I’m sick of it! I wrongfully ignored what was happening to humans when I was forced to work a menial job as a store clerk.”

“Hey!” Wally cried woundedly.

“But after I was put in prison for a crime I didn’t commit just because I think that humans deserve equal rights to shifters, I’m done! ” Landry pumped that fist into the air.

Caden saw Jasper’s Humans First flunkies cheer and shout in response, but it wasn’t just them that approved. He thought he saw nods and smiles from some of the reporters too. People who had been passing by and had stopped to see what the commotion was about adding their voices to the flunkies. There were large nods and cries of assent.

“Why is no one sticking up for the shifters?” Tilly asked and he saw a determined expression cross her face.

“Tilly, don’t,” Caden said before his sister decided to jump out of the car and tell

those people what was what.

“Why? Someone has to speak up!” Tilly asked, her body held rigid and quivering with righteous anger.

“Because your brother is going to announce that he’s the White Dragon Shifter to the world soon and the press getting wind of any kind of fight with Humans First would be a PR disaster,” Wally explained as he tugged on his chin.

“But, Wally, if Humans First is the only one who speaks then that’s the only stuff people will hear on the news!” Tilly lamented.

“That’s incredibly smart, Tilly,” Caden said slowly as he nodded. “You’re right about that. There’s got to be voices in opposition to this... hate.”

Landry was beaming and nodding at the reporters and her little cadre of supporters. Caden felt sick to his stomach as he recognized that Landry was finally getting the type of attention she might have always craved but had never been given.

“Maybe she’s still working undercover for Chione,” he said lamely as Landry was ushered into a big, black SUV driven by the Humans First people. She took pride of place beside Jasper Hawes. “Chione was a little cagey with me earlier about Landry.”

“If Landry was going undercover why wouldn’t Chione tell you?” Rose asked. “You’re the White Dragon Shifter! She’s not going to keep stuff like that from you. Caden, you’ve got to remember who you are !”

Caden grimaced. “I’m Landry’s friend. I have to talk to her. Wally, can you follow that car?”

Caden pointed to the Humans First vehicle.

“No problem, kid.” Wally nodded and started up the Bug. It sputtered to life and shook for a moment like it was an old animal shaking off sleep.

“I’m hoping they take her home. Then I can talk to her,” Caden said as he sat back in the car seat and hoped it didn’t shake loose from the frame.

Wally was good at tailing vehicles. Despite his car topping out at 40 miles per hour and there being few cars on the road, Wally stayed far enough behind that the Humans First people didn’t seem to know--or maybe they didn’t care--they were being followed. Caden had thought they would go to Landry’s house, but they didn’t head there at all. In fact, they went to a rather nondescript townhouse along the edge of the mid. This was near where Caden and Valerius had used the secret exit to leave Reach. He had a panicky moment when he thought they might be leaving the city. But the garage door opened and showed a normal space and not a road curling deep into the wall. Wally parked the car just around the corner.

“What are they doing here?” Tilly asked, her brow furrowing.

“They’re definitely up to no good,” Wally said, making a face.

“You know, just because the Faith were behind the other bombings doesn’t mean that Humans First couldn’t pull a copycat,” Rose said darkly.

“We need to know what’s going on in there,” Caden said and stopped meaningfully. Rose and Wally looked at one another. “You guys did it before. And, besides, they know my face and they’d totally see Iolaire’s big butt.”

Iolaire, who had been observing all of this with a somewhat sad expression on its face, rustled its wings at the description of its “big butt”. Its butt was perfect. It was completely perfectly proportioned. Raziel thought it was the most perfect dragon butt out there, thank you very much. Caden rolled his eyes.

It's still big. Nearly as big as that townhouse! We couldn't hide! Caden reminded Iolaire.

His Spirit twittered sadly that yes, perhaps that was true. Just perhaps though.

"I guess the kid has a point," Wally sighed. "Ready to play spies again, Rose?"

Rose nodded even as she pretended to look put out. Caden thought she seemed rather excited. "I suppose. Caden, you and Tilly stay put. Don't even think of straying outside the car."

"She's treating us both as if we are little kids," Tilly sniffed indignantly.

"I know, right?" Caden agreed, attempting to look affronted.

But he sort of had been thinking of wandering past the townhouse. But that really would have been foolish as there were likely cameras and lookouts. Would Jasper Hawes and his people really not notice the White Dragon Shifter just sauntering past? No.

"We're so much smarter than that!" Tilly harrumphed as Rose gracefully shed her clothing.

"You might be, Till, but your brother... I don't know about him," Rose laughed.

"I'll keep him safe!" Tilly assured her.

Wally, too, had stripped his clothing in seconds. Caden was really going to have to figure out how they did that. Was it just practice? Or were there tips and tricks he could learn to do the same?

“We’ll be back, kid, in two shakes of a rat’s tail,” Wally told him.

“Isn’t the phrase two shakes of a rabbit’s tail, Wally?” Tilly asked.

He grinned at her. “You just haven’t seen a rat waggle its tail!”

And with that, Rose shifted into her bee form and Wally into his rat form. While Rose became a whole hive of bees, Wally became just one rat this time. Tilly’s eyes were wide with amazement as she gently reached into the very center of the swarm of bees. Rose crawled on her hand and arm, not stinging her of course, which had Tilly laughing.

“Her little feet and wings tickle!” she explained.

Caden grinned. He picked up Wally as he saw the rather fat rat trying to crawl up to the window crack and squeeze through. While rats were able to get through impossible tight spaces, he didn’t want Wally to have to try. So he just opened the car door, patted Wally on the head and gently set him down.

“There you go, Wally,” Caden said.

Wally squeaked appreciatively. Rose’s hive flew out the open door as well. The two of them went towards the townhouse. Wally leaped along the road towards the ground floor and basement while Rose soared to some of the windows, splitting into smaller groups to go investigate the second and first floors. The moment that Wally hit the small grassy front area he suddenly became many rats instead of one. They oiled through the grass like water and disappeared from sight. He and Tilly were silent for long moments before Caden shut the car door with a thunk.

“Do you think they’re going to be okay?” Tilly asked in a small voice.

“Yeah, for sure. They can’t be hurt easily, Till. Remember what Rose said about what she experiences when someone kills one of her bees?” Caden reminded his sister.

Her arms were tightly wound around her chest again. She gave a shudder once more. “I don’t want to think of anyone killing even one bee that makes up Rose.”

Caden had to agree. The thought of it was sickening. Had he made the right call in asking his friends to go inside of the townhouse? What if the Humans First people were just in there talking up stupid propaganda? They already knew that the Faith were behind the bombings.

Maybe he was just doing exactly what Landry said, which was to ascribe bad motivations to Humans First because they hated shifters and really hated Valerius. Maybe it was because he wasn’t overly fond of Jasper Hawes’ smirky face. Or the fact that he may have lost a good friend to them. Had he put Wally and Rose at risk for prejudice?

“Caden,” Tilly said as she put a hand on his shoulder, “you shouldn’t feel bad about Landry. You didn’t do anything to make her act that way. And she’s wrong, too, about what she thinks.”

Caden blinked in surprise and took his eyes away from the front of the nondescript townhouse to look at his sister. Tilly was looking at him out of eyes much too old for her face. She was solemn and serious and caring.

“Are you sure you’re thirteen, Till?” he asked her with a laugh that was meant to lighten up the situation.

But Tilly didn’t fall for it. “I just know you.”

Caden swallowed.

“You always think it’s your fault or something you did when things go wrong or people are mean,” she said calmly and in that too adult way of hers.

She should have been the White Dragon Shifter, Caden thought, though freezing someone as a teenager was rare and could be quite awful for them.

“I don’t know how Landry could say those things,” Caden admitted. “After all she went through to be loyal to me...”

“She revealed who you were to Jasper and he told you he planted a bomb in our house, Caden,” she pointed out.

He paled. “She--she had no choice! Her brothers--”

“Of course, she did!” Tilly’s eyes flashed and she reminded him fiercely of Rose at that moment. “Her brothers have been jerks since like forever! And they chose to join Humans First and do bad stuff.”

“But--”

“No, Caden! They live in the Mid, not in the Below! Their parents have good jobs. Her brothers work construction and make bank. Yeah, so Landry is a clerk, but what’s wrong with that? Wally was totally helping you guys the best he could,” Tilly pointed out. “There are tons of people who have it so much worse than them, but they aren’t blowing up people or wanting to hurt others! You know, just because Humans First wasn’t behind these bombings, doesn’t mean they didn’t think they were good ideas.”

He couldn’t deny she had a point. It was why he had asked Rose and Wally to check out what was going on inside of the townhouse. He had read a lot into Landry’s decision to out him to Jasper. But what would have happened if she hadn’t? Would

Jasper have hurt her or her brothers? The thing was that he didn't know. Jasper seemed like a sociopath to him. Who knew what the guy was capable of? But, then again, maybe it was easier to think of Jasper as someone who would hurt people instead of Landry simply choosing her brothers over Caden and his family.

Landry's brothers are still in prison. They still need Humans First's help. Maybe that's why.

Caden shook himself. There were a handful of "good" reasons that Landry could have chosen Jasper and Humans First and a ton more bad ones. But it didn't actually matter. She had chosen. She had expressed that choice in no uncertain terms to the world. Did he really think that talking to her would change that? But he still had faith in her. He couldn't just end their friendship without speaking to her, could he?

"Caden!" Tilly was shaking his shoulder this time.

Caden's head shot up towards the townhouse where Tilly was looking, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. A rat and a whole swarm of bees were charging away from the townhouse as if they were on fire.

"Get the door, Caden! Let them get in!" Tilly cried.

Caden fumbled with the door handle and was able to pop it open just as both the bees and the rat flew inside. Wally was running so fast that he did look like he was flying. They both shifted almost instantaneously and Caden's hand was stuck behind Wally's bare back as if in an awkward embrace.

"Wally? Rose? What is it?" Caden asked as Wally, without even reaching for his pants, was turning the key in the ignition.

Rose, too, didn't attempt to dress as she was slapping the back of Wally's seat and

saying, “Go! Go! Go!”

The Bug sputtered to life and there was a terrible grinding, squealing sound as he cranked the wheel and aimed them towards the center of the street. The car reluctantly coughed and then they were moving at a cool twenty miles per hour.

“Guys, what the Hell is wrong?” Caden asked as he glanced back at the townhouse. No one had emerged from there so they hadn’t been caught.

So what’s the rush?

“A bomb,” Rose breathed out, sounding like she had been running full speed. “Humans First has planted a bomb somewhere along King Anwar’s route to High Reach. We’ve got to let everyone know!”

Wally looked grim as he added, “We might already be too late.”

LOVE CHOSEN

Earlier...

Caden's parents entered the throne room not three minutes after Caden, Tilly and Rose had escaped from it. Valerius only wished that he could run off and avoid this.

He knew he should rise from his throne and greet the Bryces like the family they were--or, at least, would be, once they accepted things--but he felt he needed the protection the throne offered from Grant Bryce's rather stormy expression. Chione stood at his side at attention with her tablet under one arm. Even she looked a little uneasy in the face of two protective parents.

Can I blame them? Would I want my son mated to someone eons older than him? And would I want anything less for Caden than two extremely loving and protective parents?

"King Valerius," Grant said as he stormed up to the steps of the throne. He did not mount them, which told Valerius he had been right in keeping the high ground. "Where are my son and daughter?"

Of all the questions he could have asked, Valerius could actually answer this one rather easily and forthrightly, "They went to go pick up Landry from prison. She has been released, as it is clear now that the Faith set the bomb in Dragon Strike Square and not her brothers. So her actions in helping Humans First place smoke bombs in the square are... much less serious."

But still punishable as they intended to cause damage and mayhem. But such punishment can wait.

Ellen Bryce had followed her husband up to the throne more slowly. She gave a curtsy which Valerius acknowledged with a nod of his head. He would have to figure out what formal protocols were necessary or not. They lived here. Their son was a Dragon Shifter, too. He and Caden were sharing a territory. And he and Caden were... mates . But though he needed no protocol to feel kingly, sometimes keeping these things were necessary for others and order.

Valerius glanced at the mirror and saw Raziel rather moodily lying down, massive head on its forelimbs, eyes half shut, looking lonely and put out since Iolaire was not there to admire and hoot. He felt the same way about Caden not being there. But they would both have to buck up and not be teenagers about it.

“In any event, Caden and Tilly will be back shortly,” Valerius added.

“I’m so glad that Landry was released. I take it that it was your doing, King Valerius,” Ellen inquired. She was rubbing her hands together anxiously and he hoped it wasn’t because she was nervous about being in the throne room with him.

“Chione’s, actually,” he answered her with what he hoped was a genuine smile.

He remembered her initial reaction to Caden’s bonding with a Spirit, about how Chione had told him that she had lost Caden in a more profound way due to her worship of the Spirits. She seemed to have come around to seeing that was not so, but moving into High Reach might be bringing those feelings to the forefront again.

“Did you send Claw with them?” Grant’s hands were on his hips.

He did not wish the Claw anywhere near Caden and Tilly, but now...

“There was no need,” Valerius stated.

Ellen's eyes widened hugely. “But the Faith--”

“Would not hurt Caden,” Chione interrupted. “He’s the symbol of everything they hope to accomplish.”

“And Humans First?” Grant stared daggers at him.

“They are humans ,” Valerius said softly. “And Caden is a Dragon.”

“Caden is a boy ,” Grant argued.

“No, Caden is a man and the ninth Dragon Shifter,” Valerius corrected him.

Chione stirred beside him and he gestured for her to speak, “I know for you, as a father, he will always be a boy. But he was not a boy even before joining with his Spirit. Caden is worth a million Claw.”

Ellen's hands met in front of her, her fingers lacing together tightly, as she said, “But he’s so new to this!”

“Yes.” Valerius got up and stepped down to her. He took her hands in his. Her eyes widened. “Ellen, I know that as his mother you want to shield him from danger, from pain, from all bad things.”

“You think we’re not recognizing Caden’s strengths?” Grant looked fierce.

“I want to protect him too,” Valerius said with a smile. “But he is a Dragon Shifter and that means...”

“That no one can protect him?” Grant’s shoulders slumped.

Valerius reached over and put a hand on Grant’s shoulder. “Not completely, no. He must be allowed to grow and learn, even if... even as it is painful for those who love him to watch.”

There was silence as both parents nodded.

That went well! Now perhaps--

“What is that symbol in the sky?” Grant asked.

Damn.

Valerius’ gaze met Chione’s. She lifted her shoulders as if to say, You’re in it now! Do your best!

“Oh... that ...” Valerius smiled tightly.

“And why does Raziel look so... mokey?” Ellen asked as she looked at his Spirit in the mirror.

“Oh... that ...” Valerius repeated with a tight laugh. “It’s sort of connected.”

Chione stared studiously at her tablet. He knew that she believed he shouldn’t lie to the Bryces. And really, he shouldn’t. He couldn’t. But how to begin this?

“The news is saying that it is a sign that Caden has... ah, mated with one of the other Dragons,” Ellen stated.

“Mmmm, well, that’s not totally accurate.” Valerius smiled way too brightly.

Grant's gaze narrowed. "Not totally accurate?"

Valerius let out another of those tight little laughs. "Ah, well, you see, it is--"

"Raziel is pining ," Ellen stated as she considered his Spirit.

"Yes, for Iolaire. Our Dragons are... living together," Valerius said. "They are--"

"Fated Mates," Ellen whispered.

" Chosen Mates," Valerius growled. When she looked up at him, he smiled weakly and stated, "Iolaire and Raziel chose one another. If they were fated there would be no choice, you see."

"Choice matters to you?" Ellen studied his face.

"More than anything." Valerius sighed. "Being a Dragon Shifter means both many choices and none . But in love... we are not bound by fate. We are bound by our hearts."

Tears appeared in Ellen's eyes. "Then... then that is good ."

"Ellen!" Grant hissed. "You know that Caden and Valerius are--"

"In love?" Her lips twitched. "Bound by their choices instead of locked in by fate? Is there anything wrong with that?"

Grant crossed his arms over his chest and there was a mulish set to his mouth. "They've just met."

"So did we when we got married!" she laughed. "Or don't you remember?"

A smile curled Grant's lips as he clearly did remember and it was a very fond memory. "We're different from Caden. It was a different time, too."

"Hardly! Love at first sight is eternal!" Ellen laughed again. "Caden is a perfect mixture of the two of us. So, of course, when he finds someone, he finds them fully."

Grant grimaced as if he couldn't quite argue with that.

"So you two married soon after meeting?" Valerius asked, surprised because of how conservative the Bryces seemed.

"Two months, but we knew in two minutes that we were meant for one another," Ellen said with a fond smile at Grant.

"That's so romantic!" Chione brought her hands together under her chin. Her eyes seemed to have doubled in size and shimmered with awe. "So you just knew?"

Ellen nodded. "It was just like in the movies. We saw each other across the quad at school. He was going to get his JD and I was there for my Masters. I remember how the sunlight hit his hair and there was this small smile on his lips that just bloomed when he realized I was looking at him."

Valerius turned towards Grant who was smiling like that at his wife now.

"I had been staring at her for what seemed like forever before she noticed me," Grant stated. "And then time stopped when our gazes met."

"We were not apart a moment after that. Well, except for class. We would have flunked out if not for getting married," she said. "That way we knew we were each other's forever."

“And did your parents object?” Valerius tried to hide any lip twitch.

“My goodness, of course!” Ellen laughed once more. “They thought it was too fast. They thought we were foolish. And that we should wait. After all, if it was real between us, then surely it would last a few years of dating and engagement.”

“But you disagreed?” Valerius was watching Grant carefully out of the corner of his eye.

“We saw no reason to wait for the same reasons they saw the opposite,” Grant admitted with a shrug as a look of affection crossed his face.

“And you’re still so happy together.” Chione clapped her hands.

Grant put an arm around his wife’s shoulders and they pressed their foreheads together. “Yes, yes, we are.”

Valerius felt a wave of relief go through him. People like the Bryces--who believed in love at first sight--clearly would not have a problem with chosen mates. No, not at all.

“But we know how rare it is that a situation like ours works out.” Grant and Ellen were still holding onto one another, but Grant was looking at Valerius with narrowed eyes.

Valerius held up his hands. “I am not asking for Caden’s hand in marriage--”

“Why not?” Ellen asked. “You love our son. Your Dragons are living together. What’s holding you back?”

Chione put her hands by her lips, hiding a smile.

“Caden is...” There were so many things he could say. That Caden was so very young. That Caden was just getting used to being a Dragon Shifter. That Caden’s feelings could change. That just because their Dragons were in love... “Wonderful. And the only thing holding me back is that we have not had a chance to truly speak of it.”

“But with that up there and the press going crazy...” Grant frowned. “Once they know who the White Dragon Shifter is, they are going to want to know who he is mated with.”

“And people will expect things. Certain things. Like marriage and all of that. Not that you should act on what people think,” Ellen quickly amended. “But your Spirits... well, they have spoken, have they not?”

Valerius could not imagine his life without Caden in it. He had just not planned for this. He had not planned on any of it.

Who could plan for Caden? He thought with a huff of amusement.

But the truth was that he was ready for whatever came next. He was ready for Caden now no matter how short a time it was.

“One of the many things that humans have over Shifters is the simple fact that humans realize the nature of time while Shifters lose it,” Valerius answered her. “But some things just are . And that is how I have felt with Caden under all the weight of questions and precautions. Caden just is .”

“So you are going to ask our son to marry you?” Grant tensed again.

“Until I speak to Caden, I cannot speak to you about it,” Valerius answered simply. “Because whatever anyone else thinks: the press, the public, you . It does not matter.

I need to speak with Caden first and foremost. We are just trying to get through this week at the moment.”

“You believe if this thing between you is real then waiting a little bit won’t hurt?” Ellen asked wryly.

Valerius nodded. “Because things already are .” He glanced through the open doors to the balcony where the helix still spun almost lazily in the sky. “No one will rush us. Nothing will stop us.”

“When does Caden plan on revealing himself to the world? He hasn’t quite told us yet,” Grant asked.

Valerius was surprised yet again by the Bryces. They were willing to let this go ? Looking at Grant’s face, no, he wasn’t exactly letting this go. But maybe, he, too, was waiting to speak with Caden. Or maybe a giant sign in the sky that they were together was convincing Grant that this was meant to be.

“He hasn’t... ” Valerius looked over at Raziel then as his Spirit had let out an alert sound. Raziel was up on its feet, red eyes narrowed, gazing out of the doors to the courtyard. “Raziel, what is it?”

At the same time his phone buzzed like an angry hornet in his pocket. He slid it out. The call came through FaceTime. He answered it.

“Caden?” Valerius asked.

The image before him bounced around as Caden was having trouble keeping the phone still. He had an almost sickening sense of car sickness as the screen yawed wide then came back and jumped up to Caden’s forehead then to his chin and back to his forehead before showing a jittery shot of Caden’s eyes.

“V-Valerius!” Caden’s voice was shaking too, but not with fear, but because of his body moving. “Wally! Jesus! Slow down!”

“I can’t, kid! We weren’t seen but we had to get away from there just in case!” Wally answered.

“Why is Wally naked?” Valerius asked, even though he knew of one very good reason that a Shifter would be naked.

“Wally’s naked?” Ellen's eyes widened.

“Long story. We followed Landry and her new Humans First friends.” Caden’s mouth twisted as if he were sucking on a lemon as he said that.

Valerius frowned and saw out of the corner of his eye that Chione had pulled out her phone and was tapping on it rather frantically. He was going to ask her what was going on. Something was clearly going on.

When Caden spoke again, “Wally and Rose shifted and went spying--”

“They what?!” Valerius and Grant both said this in almost unison.

“Is my dad there?” Caden blanched.

“Yes, your dad is here, Caden!” Grant stepped up to Valerius’ side and Valerius held the phone so that both of their faces were visible.

“Oh, hey, Dad.” Caden smiled weakly, but then sobered.

“Caden, what did Wally and Rose find out?” Valerius demanded.

“There’s another bomb!” Tilly’s voice rose up from the back seat.

“Tilly? Oh, my God, you took Tilly with you on some spying mission on Humans First?” Ellen was now on Valerius’ other side. He adjusted the phone again to capture all three of them.

“Tilly stayed in the car, Mom! With me!” Caden protested.

Tilly added. “I didn’t want to, but Caden made me.”

“Thank the Spirits for small favors,” Ellen muttered.

“Where is this bomb? And tell me you are returning to High Reach,” Valerius stated flatly.

That guilty look that he knew so well flashed across Caden’s face. “Uhm, I could tell you that, but--”

“People are already lining up on the streets for King Anwar’s arrival. The bomb is somewhere along the route!” Rose called out also from the back seat. “We have to find it!”

Valerius barked, “Simi! Ngoye!”

But there was really no need for him to call for his two Claw Captains as both of them had been at the throne room doors and were already speaking into their earpieces and striding towards him, having anticipated what he needed.

“We have relayed this information to all Claw,” Simi said smartly as he stood at attention in front of Valerius.

“We will start clearing the parade path,” Ngoye stated.

“No! No!” Caden cried shrilly. “If they see the Claw clearing people out they’ll realize that they’ve been discovered! They might then just detonate the bomb early! Way before we can find it!”

“Caden is right,” Valerius stated and tightened his hand dangerously around the phone.

His blood was up. Another bomb in his city. Yet more innocents were at risk. Humans First taking advantage of the chaos that the Faith had started to sew. Little did Humans First realize that they were playing directly into the Faith’s hands. Deaths would draw the Spirits. Times where heroism or cowardice or anything that defined a person’s core was exposed were prime moments when Spirits joined with their human counterparts.

The Faith really have figured it out, but in the worst possible way , Valerius realized.

“Rose, Wally, do you have any information where the bomb is?” Valerius demanded.

Again, Chione was checking her phone as if waiting on some message. He frowned, but focused on Caden and the others in the wildly bouncing car. He was truly getting car sick just watching this.

“No, just that it was on the parade route and would add some Shifter-lovers to the body count,” Wally answered with his disgust not hidden in his voice. “To think that Landry could be a part of this! I knew she was prejudiced, but I thought it was simply because she didn’t have exposure to Shifters.” Wally banged his hand on the steering wheel. “But after she knew about Caden and me and seemed so sincere...” Wally shook his head violently. The few tufts of hair remaining on his head stood up on end. “I’ve been disappointed before in people, but this really takes the cake.”

“Don’t give up on her yet,” Chione said. Her expression was twisted with pain. “Just... just don’t give up.”

“Why shouldn’t they, Chione?” Valerius asked her.

Chione gazed at him mutely then finally got out, “Because I asked her to stay in.”

“What?!” Caden gasped.

Valerius stared at his Councillor. “You did?”

Chione nodded. “When I went to have her released from prison, we talked. Just because the Faith were behind the other bombings that didn’t mean Humans First wasn’t a threat.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked her.

“Why didn’t you tell me ?” Caden echoed.

“Because she didn’t formally agree. She said she would think about it,” Chione answered. “I was looking to see if she left me any messages. I thought... I thought maybe she was on our side. Maybe she is .”

“But you’ve gotten no communications from her?” Valerius asked.

She shook her head. “No, not yet. And I can’t risk reaching out to her if she’s with Humans First right now.”

“That must explain it!” Caden beamed, looking utterly relieved.

“Caden, if there was a time for a double agent to report in, it would be now ,” Rose

pointed out from the back seat. “Landry didn’t agree to help and we saw how eager she was to align herself publically with Humans First. So, I think you better give up that idea that she’s really working for us.”

“I just can’t believe... I don’t want to... I need to talk to her,” Caden admitted.

The car gave a sickening lurch as Wally must have taken them around one of the curving roads in Reach.

“So, I assume that you are going to the parade route?” Grant asked.

“Yeah,” Caden nodded. “We’ve got to try and find that bomb without alerting Humans First.”

“Caden, you can’t bring Tilly towards a bomb!” Ellen cried.

One of her hands was squeezing the top of her shirt so tightly that Valerius feared she might cut off her own air supply.

Caden blinked and nodded. “You’re right. I’m an idiot. Wally, pull over.”

“Kid, we don’t have time to--”

“Wally, pull over,” Caden commanded and the Rat Shifter did just that.

There was the sound of the squealing of brakes and the phone swam very close to Caden’s face before zooming away as his hand flew forward with the car’s momentum coming to a stop. Caden was then opening his door.

“Caden, where are you going?” Valerius asked as Caden got out of the car.

“I’m shifting and I’m going to fly over that parade route,” Caden stated. He leaned back into the car. “Wally, take Tilly and Rose back to High Reach. I’ve got this.”

“But you need our help!” Rose cried.

“Yeah! I want to help!” Tilly cried.

“Kid, are you sure?” Wally asked.

“Positive. Guys, you’re all helping by getting out of harm’s way. Iolaire and I can do this,” Caden stated. “Iolaire is certain that it can sense where the bomb is.”

“How?” Chione asked with a shake of her head. “The scent of all those people will block out--”

“No, not by scent,” Caden answered grimly. “By how many Spirits are clustered there. Waiting.”

Valerius closed his eyes tightly for a moment. Waiting for destruction and death.

“Raziel will help,” the Black Dragon Spirit suddenly spoke and Valerius’ eyelids opened.

It was the first time that anyone, other than himself and Caden, had heard the Spirit. It was not in their heads, but out loud. The Black Dragon filled the mirror. Smoke and fire flickered between its teeth.

Caden smiled broadly. “Thanks, Raziel. But, Valerius, both you and Raziel shouldn’t come out.”

“What? Why?” Valerius asked.

Caden got this determined look on his face that showed just the type of man he was. “Because seeing Raziel will spook the Hell out of Humans First. But they think Iolaire is just their friendly, neighborhood Dragon even after the park incident.”

“But you’re going to show them otherwise?” A smile curled on Valerius’ lips.

Caden mirrored it. “Exactly that.”

SPIRITS

Caden's tough words to Valerius were slightly belied when after Caden turned off his phone, tossed it to Wally and then... couldn't shift. He wondered if it was because he hadn't taken off his clothes. No time for that. Besides, getting naked in the middle of the street would just add to his embarrassment.

"Nothing's happening. Does it take this long normally?" Tilly asked Wally and Rose. "You guys shifted immediately and--"

"Guys, you can't look at me. I can't do this with you all looking," Caden pleaded with them.

"But I want to see you shift!" Tilly cried.

Wally reached back and patted Tilly's shoulder. "Another time, Tilly. Let's look away and give Caden a little privacy."

"Is that normal?" Tilly grumped.

"There's a lot of weight on Caden's shoulders, Tilly," Rose said and Caden both wanted to kiss her for knowing that and yell at her for reminding him.

All three of them turned in their seats and looked to the other side of the street. It was incredibly weird to see the backs of their heads. But Caden shook it off.

"Take Tilly back to High Reach, Wally," Caden reminded the Rat Shifter.

“Rose and I will keep her safe as houses!” Wally assured him without turning around.

Caden shook his hands, rolled back his shoulders, cracked his spine and prepared to shift.

Okay, let’s do this, Iolaire!

Iolaire rustled its wings and stood up. The two of them then... waited.

Nothing is happening, Iolaire!

Iolaire shifted its wings again and Caden saw an elderly lady had just come out of one of the homes lining the street. She was heading towards the end of her driveway where her newspaper was waiting for her in its plastic wrapping. Caden watched with growing horror as she moved about two inches with every step. She shuffled then stopped to catch her breath, shuffled again and stopped. He gauged the length between her and the paper.

Thirty feet. It’ll be hours before she gets it, Caden realized.

“What’s happening? Is anything happening?” Tilly said in a stage whisper, which probably meant that even the old lady could hear it.

“There’s a person,” Wally muttered. “Oh, boy. This will be a while.”

If we do nothing!

Caden dashed over to the paper. The old woman looked alarmed and brought her bird-like arms near her chest. She likely thought he was stealing her paper, not understanding that most people read online. He jogged up to her, a smile plastered on his face, hoping that he looked harmless.

Like I am if I can't shift! Iolaire, we have to do this!

"Were you looking for this, ma'am?" Caden offered the paper to her.

She blinked behind thick coke-bottle lenses at his face before looking down at the paper as if it was a mimic and might transform into a monster. She was looking up at his face again.

Maybe she thinks I'm the monster...

"Can I help you back to your door?" Caden's voice was getting a little high and tight.

We have to get out there and find that bomb, Iolaire!

The elderly woman took the paper from his hands. "Oh, my, that's quite kind of you."

She twittered and held the paper close to her chest as if it was a sacred object. She then slowly tottered to face her door. Caden's eyes gauged the distance now between her and her door. Could he just leave her at the step? Did he have to hold the door open for her? What if she wanted to chat?

"You look a lot like my brother Billy," she wheezed as they seemed to crawl at a crab's pace to her front door.

"Oh?" He hoped if he kept his responses short then she wouldn't continue the conversation. He was sorely disappointed.

She stopped. Two feet from the front step! She turned to him, smiling vaguely, as she clearly remembered some fond memories.

"You don't look like Billy now . I mean Billy doesn't look like you now , because

he's old, you see. Still my little brother, but much older than you," she prattled on, telling him some story about how Billy was actually a paper boy and here he was delivering her paper just to be kind .

Not to be kind! I need you to stop looking at me so I can shift!

But Caden didn't say that. He just nodded and smiled though that smile was becoming more and more desperate as the story or stories went on. She was now telling him how Billy actually became a reporter and actually wrote for the paper he had delivered for. But then Billy got laid off and wasn't that sad? In any event...

Caden took a step back and said, "Miss--miss--"

"You aren't going, are you?" The elderly woman asked and looked so sad as she murmured to herself, "Of course, you are. Why would you want to listen to an old woman talk about her little brother who passed away well before his time?"

Tears welled in her eyes, but she squared her birdlike shoulders and prepared to hobble in on her own. Caden internally groaned.

"Actually, I do have to go, but I promise that I will be back and I really do want to hear about Billy," he told her.

"Oh, that's all right. You don't have to say that. I'll be fine--"

"No, I'm not making an excuse. I really do have to go, because you see..." His mouth went dry. He was going to reveal to the world he was the White Dragon Shifter. Why not to this woman first? This time he squared his shoulders and said in a voice that sounded almost authoritative, "There's danger in Reach and I have to stop it."

She looked at him skeptically. "Really? Well, then you must be off."

“Yes, I must, but I will be back,” Caden promised her as he memorized the address. “I promise.”

Then he turned and raced down away a few feet and shifted . There was no hesitation. No problem. He became the White Dragon. He heard Tilly clap and cheer. So did Wally and Rose.

Iolaire immediately flapped their wings and they were twenty feet in the air. Caden had them crane their neck around to look down at the old woman. She had dropped her paper and her hands were up to her face like the kid in Home Alone.

I really hope that we didn’t give her a heart attack, Caden told Iolaire.

His Spirit observed the old woman carefully and showed him an image of her giving them tea and cookies in the future. Iolaire thought that she would be just fine.

Okay! Now let’s find that bomb.

Iolaire took them higher into the sky and turned them towards Reach’s main entrance far below. The parade route for King Anwar would follow the main curving road that went from the entrance to the gates of High Reach. Already the route was lined with people at least a dozen deep. Despite all of the bomb threats and the deaths, people were still out in force to greet the Silver Dragon.

The popular Dragon Shifter whose territory encompassed the Middle East and more was known for his style, beauty and sparkling wit. He had turned an area known for its conflicts into one that was mostly peaceful. Viewed as a god by many in the region, he was a beneficent one, at least. He ruled justly and, while not as forward thinking as Queen Jahara in some respects, he had instituted human rights for all in his territory.

Many of the practices and laws that had made women second-class citizens in many of the countries he ruled were now gone. The social stagnation that had kept power in the hands of the few was relaxed. Oil revenue was still important, but he was shifting his territory's economy towards renewable energy and bio-technology. He was intent on making some of the deserts into gardens once more. King Anwar's name meant "brighter" or "more luminous" in Arabic and that was how he spoke of the future. He gave people hope .

And now, he might be walking into death, Caden thought grimly as he and Iolaire began to fly the parade route. I don't see Spirits, Iolaire? Do you?

Caden wasn't sure exactly how this "seeing Spirits" thing was supposed to work. He hadn't seen any before and--

Holy smokes! How did you do that?

Caden gasped as suddenly he saw balls of light dancing on the breeze and bouncing along the rooftops and darting in and out of homes.

Are those all Spirits? There are so many of them!

Truthfully, there looked to be enough Spirits to join with each and every citizen of Reach. And that was just in the city. A brief glance outside of Reach's walls showed that the density of Spirits was less, but there were still a ton. It was a sobering sight.

Iolaire, the Spirits understand that if they join with every human that there won't be any more humans ever again, right? No babies... that's the tradeoff for immortality.

Iolaire hooted sadly that yes, the Spirits did know. But some of them wanted to be in this world so much that they might not hold back. If there were enough deaths... Iolaire did not have to end that sentence. Caden understood. The Faith's plan would

tempt the Spirits just as much as they hoped it would.

Except now the Faith doesn't have to do the dirty work. Humans First is doing it for them. Caden gritted their teeth. C'mon, Iolaire, we've got to find that bomb!

Iolaire narrowed their eyes so that they could judge how many of the Spirits were in any one place. They flew over the entirety of the parade route to check out the density of the Spirits. There were so many of them. They clearly were reacting to the people's excitement and maybe the near presence of King Anwar.

With everything happening, maybe Valerius should have stopped people from congregating.

Valerius, Chione and Marban had talked at length about the risks the night before at dinner. Chione thought that it would deeply offend Anwar if they cancelled any sort of welcome because the other Dragon Shifters had gotten one. Especially since Mei had gotten one.

"Anwar likes a spectacle more than anyone. Considering the fact of that ," Chione had said as she had pointed to the helix with her fork, "he'll be more touchy than ever."

"As if I care," Valerius had grunted and drunk more wine.

"I'm more worried about the people's safety than his offense," Caden had said carefully. "Maybe if we just explain to him--"

"He does not listen to explanations. Not at first. He merely feels the offense and blocks out everything else," Chione answered with a sad smile.

"I want all the Dragon Shifters here to discuss a way forward, but if he has such thin

skin then maybe it's best if he doesn't come!" Caden stated as he gripped his wine glass so hard he snapped the stem. Everyone had looked down at that. Caden flushed. "Sorry. Sorry. Just the Dragon Shifters are supposed to be the adults in the room, right? And some of them are acting like--like kids!"

Chione smiled. "There was a reason why the ancient Greeks described their gods as they did with those characteristics. I'm afraid that the nature of all beings who hold great power can become rather ridiculous if not carefully reminded of their fallibility."

"Do not bother trying to call off the parade. People will come out to see King Anwar no matter what," Marban said as he patted his lips. "And the Faith will use his arrival in any case if they wish to. If not to harm people along the parade route then they will set off one of their bombs in an old people's home or by a nursery school."

Valerius narrowed his eyes. "Meaning that we can do nothing to stop them?"

Marban sighed. "We can , but they will just adapt to all we do. Of course, bring out your Claw and the police and spies and observe every inch of that route. But if they wish to harm someone... they will. We are going to lose people no matter what. But if we lose our way of life... then we truly lose."

Caden thought of that now. Marban was right. The Faith, Humans First or whoever else wanted to harm people would. They would stop some of the attacks but not all. Somehow they had to win over as many hearts and minds as they could. That was the only way to truly stop the attacks.

And I have no idea how we are going to do that, Iolaire , Caden said to his Spirit. Maybe King Anwar will have an idea or two. I hope so.

They had swung around and were now going back up the parade route. They'd seen

all of it so maybe now they both hoped they would notice some more clustering of Spirits. But no matter where they looked, it always seemed like the thickest clustering of Spirits was just ahead. And worse, as they flew over, the crowd grew more excited as did the Spirits who seemed to adore Iolaire. So many Spirits were rising up to greet them that it was getting very hard to see. There were simply too many of the bouncing balls of light.

Iolaire, this isn't working! I'm not seeing more Spirits in one place than another! I can hardly see with all these Spirits around us!

Iolaire flapped their wings, but the powerful burst of air did nothing to the glowing globes of light. They weren't real, or rather, they weren't on this plane so they couldn't be pushed away.

Panic flooded Caden. It was one thing to talk about the inevitability of people being hurt. How one couldn't save everyone. How hearts and minds needed to be changed. How Marban's people would get into these groups and rot them from the inside out in time. Time they simply did not have right now. He had told Valerius not to come out, but now, he was wondering if he had made the biggest mistake ever thinking that he and Iolaire could do this on their own.

We need to--

But Caden was cut off by the sound of silver horns from the entrance to Reach. Iolaire whipped their head around. The road outside of Reach had appeared deserted, which was strange on such a beautiful, sunny day when a Dragon Shifter was to arrive. Caden had simply hoped that King Anwar was late. But in that moment as Iolaire twisted them around to see a massive line of vehicles on the road. They were all black Mercedes except for the first one, which was a silver color the exact same shade as King Anwar's Dragon, Evren, and was at the front of the line.

How did he just appear there, Iolaire?! Caden asked his Spirit in mystification until he remembered. Oh, God! Of course! He can distort light. Make himself--and others evidently--invisible. As well as weaponize it.

There was a large sunroof on King Anwar's car and the king himself popped out of it, standing on his seat so that he could see and wave to the crowd. His short, dark brown hair was combed back. A full, but neatly trimmed beard covered his strong jaw. He wore long purple robes with a deep fuschia wrap over one shoulder.

King Anwar reached down into the cab of the vehicle and emerged with a heavy sack that he held up for all to see. He said something that had the already cheering crowd cheering louder. He dipped a hand into the sack and threw a handful of something to the people who immediately got down to pick up whatever it was. And King Anwar wasn't the only one sending these little golden disks to the crowd. Every vehicle's doors opened and a shower of-- gold coins! Real gold coins! --dazzled the crowd.

It was at this moment that King Anwar looked directly up at them. He was smiling broadly as he spread his arms wide, spraying coins everywhere, as if to say, "See how generous and wealthy I am? You could have had all of this! You could have had me throwing everything you've ever wanted at you and your family and friends!"

But Caden knew in his heart that he only really wanted Valerius. His gruff, grumpy Dragon King. Irritable, short-tempered, generous, brave, wonderful Valerius. And that was when he saw the clustering of Spirits by a two-story shop just around the next bend of the road, not 100-feet from the front of King Anwar's car.

Iolaire! There! Land there!

His directions had been unnecessary as the White Dragon Spirit had seen the same thing he had. Iolaire speared them towards the ground right outside of that building. People let out cries of alarm as they landed with a thunderous boom. People had

scattered out of the way, but they were all looking at the White Dragon with shock. This was not the playful, gentle White Dragon they had come to know and love.

Iolaire immediately had them swinging around to face the front of the shop. There were plate glass windows along the front of the first floor and bow windows on the second. It was likely one of those stores where the owners lived above the premises. Caden had no idea whether the owners were innocent victims of the Humans First plot or co-conspirators in it. He would not hurt people if he could help it, but he needed to find that bomb.

Iolaire lowered their head so that they could see through the plate glass windows, but the glare kept them from seeing anything. Iolaire thrust one of their claws against the glass. It shattered so easily that Caden didn't even feel it. There were rows upon rows of aisles filled with chips, pop, cookies and candy. It was a convenience store. When they drew in a deep breath to smell for the bomb, all they got was nostrils full of chip bags, which they snorted out. Iolaire tried to reach into the shop and feel around, but Caden knew that wouldn't work.

Iolaire, we're bomb-proof even in our human form, right?

The White Dragon Spirit paused in what it was doing and answered in the affirmative.

I know that this wasn't how we planned on revealing ourselves, but now is the time, Caden told his Spirit.

Iolaire assented. They had their immediate family safe in High Reach and they had to get inside the store. The Spirits were clustered thickly by the second story. The bomb was there and it was only a miracle that it hadn't gone off. He could have had Iolaire simply cover the building with its body, but the bombers--and there were people in there, he could hear heartbeats even over the roar of the crowd--would be dead and

maybe innocents too. No, he had to get the bomb out of there without ripping off the top of the building.

“Iolaire!” King Anwar’s voice broke through to him. The Silver Dragon Shifter had left his car and was striding towards them. He was a handsome man, face full of concern, as he called their name again. “Iolaire, what are you doing?”

Caden wondered if Anwar thought he was stealing his thunder or something from the way he had been described the night before. But the Silver Dragon Shifter appeared concerned and not angry.

Here goes nothing!

Caden then shifted into his human form. There was a collective gasp before there were hundreds of flashes as people took pictures of him-- in the nude, of course, great, just great --as he grasped Anwar’s left bicep.

“There’s a bomb! Up there! We have to get it out of here before it goes off!” Caden pointed towards the second story. “Help me!”

He didn’t wait to see if Anwar was coming, but instead jumped up to the second story. One leap. He knew he could do it. He grasped the bottom of the window frame and was about to smash it open when a beam of light streaked overhead and the window simply disintegrated.

Light as a weapon! Wow!

Caden though did not have any more time to admire Anwar’s abilities. He pulled himself up and through the window and into the second floor. Anwar was by his side, having jumped up easily as well.

The two of them saw the following. There were over two dozen barrels--from the smell of them they had fertilizer in them--filling the front room. There were three people there. Two men and a woman. They were all three hunched over a timer. They hadn't quite finished with the bomb yet.

This would have destroyed more than a whole city block...

Caden did not think. Later, Anwar would tell everyone that Caden's eyes went a spooky white as he sent a wave of ice at the three of them. Ice wound around all three of them, freezing them in place. The timer fell from nerveless hands. He then heard some running footsteps downstairs. There were more than these three in on the plot.

Two men raced from the front of the building. No one stopped them because they didn't realize who they were. Caden leaned out of the building and extended a hand towards the running men. Ice shot towards them. Ice wound around the fleeing men's legs and immediately took them down. There were screams from shocked people, but mostly there was stunned silence.

"Look after these... people ," Caden's voice was deep with disdain and barely repressed rage as he spoke to Anwar.

The Silver Dragon nodded and looked a little wide-eyed himself.

Caden jumped from the second story window and landed in that classic superhero pose before straightening up and stalking over towards the still-struggling men. They were on their fronts. He flipped them over. When they saw him their eyes went huge and their nostrils flared with fear.

"You are going to tell me," Caden intoned as his eyes narrowed, "absolutely everything ."

LOVE OVER HATE

Valerius watched as Caden froze the bad guys to the ground on the television his staff had rolled in. Raziel let out a bark of laughter, belching black smoke and fire, thoroughly pleased at Caden and Iolaire's performance. Valerius felt his heart leave his throat and settle back in his chest again. He had not been afraid for Caden. No bomb could have hurt him or Iolaire, but the loss of human lives would have been terrible and would have scarred his mate forever. Illarion grunted beside him. Valerius eyed him.

"He is a mighty little thing, I suppose," Illarion stated with a sniff.

The Green Dragon Shifter was not the only Dragon to have sought him out in the throne room when Anwar's entourage had arrived. All of them had.

Esme gave Illarion a narrow-eyed look. "In any estimation, Caden and Iolaire were brilliant. Little thing indeed!"

Mei's lips twitched before she said, "The press appears to agree with you, Esme. Half a dozen helicopters are circling his location and look! The reporters are running, even in their high heels, towards him and Anwar. What a way to introduce yourself!"

"Anwar will be pleased with the added attention," Esme remarked with a shake of her head.

"Humans First were counting on that, which is why they likely chose his parade to rain upon," Mei answered.

Indeed, the helicopter feeds showed reporters rushing from their marked places on the route to where Caden appeared to be interrogating the suspects. The Claw were also converging on the spot. The reporters and the guard were practically bumping into one another in their haste to get to Caden. Simi and Ngoye were not among them, as Valerius had ordered the two Claw captains to go to the Humans First safehouse where Rose and Wally had overheard the bombing plot.

Humans First had likely abandoned the spot already when they saw that their plan had failed, but there was still a chance that they could be captured. If not now, they would be later. Valerius would make sure that there was nowhere in this world that was safe for them. He even had Marban directing his people to go into every hidey hole that Reach had to find them. But even with his best people looking for Jasper Hawes and company, very capable Claw captains were running things down on the ground.

Not that Caden appears to need them, Valerius thought with a touch of pride.

Caden crouched down by one of the bombers and lifted his chin. Icicles appeared in the bomber's hair when he did not respond to Caden's question. To get Caden and Iolaire this angry was difficult. But innocent lives had been at stake.

"Iolaire's initial landing though..." Tez waved his right hand through the air while his left was curled around his chest. "It needed more finesse. They must be taught to land gracefully. No thumping! The ground shook and Iolaire's tail took out some cars."

"They were not worried about how they looked, Tez," Jahara retorted dryly. Three of her Wise Women were with her and they nodded sagely. "They merely cared to stop the evil doers, which they have done."

"Well, they should still look good doing it. Their actions will be played and replayed

for the populace. These things are what people remember,” Tez stated. He put a hand to the center of his chest. “I will take it upon myself to teach them to always show grace and power no matter how dire things are.”

“Look how pink Caden’s cheeks are becoming!” Esme chuckled. “I think someone is not used to being filmed nude. I do hope someone in the Claw had the forethought to grab some pants. Or Anwar should give him his wrap, if nothing else!”

“Caden cuts quite the figure! He should show off skin all the time, even though he is not as handsome as me nor is Iolaire as beautiful as Eldoron,” Tez disagreed. “But he does have that young, fresh look. The blond hair and blue eyes plus the athletic physique will have him adorning the walls of many a young woman and man.”

“And not just the young ones,” Esme agreed. She elbowed Valerius. “And what do you think, Valerius? Pants or no pants for Caden?”

“Look in the mirror, Esme, and you can see that Raziel has the answer for you. Is that fire wreathing its jaws?” Jahara tilted her head back towards the magic mirror.

Esme turned and smiled at Raziel whose eyes were glowing a hot red and were narrowed. Raziel was no fan of pants, and did want people to admire their mate, but it did not like Caden being ogled when he did not wish to be!

“Oh, you big black meanie! You know I adore Caden, but many hearts are still going to break when they find out about you and Iolaire and Caden and Valerius being mated,” Esme said unrepentantly. “It can’t be helped.”

Raziel let out a snort of fire. Esme just laughed delightedly.

“Raziel, behave,” Valerius replied softly, though the Black Dragon had nothing but good feelings for Esme and Scylla.

The Black Dragon breathed out black smoke which obscured its sulfurous image.

“Caden and Iolaire are doing quite well. They’re showing mastery of various gifts in both forms. I do not recall being so far advanced that early,” Esme said as she turned back to Valerius. “You should be proud.”

“I am,” Valerius answered. “And you are right. Righteous anger does seem to focus them both.”

The urge to go down there and join Caden was strong. Especially with Anwar acting as if he’d had an equal part in stopping the bombing. Anwar was swaggering right and left, putting an arm around Caden’s shoulders, and saying something loudly to the press. But Valerius kept himself in check. He wanted to give Caden this well-deserved moment in the sun.

He had not been lying or exaggerating when he had told Caden’s parents that their son was an equal to him and the other Dragon Shifters. Not a mascot or second string player.

“This bomb was good, you know?” Illarion scratched his chin.

“The potential deaths of hundreds of people is good ?” Chione’s tone was chilly.

It was the first time she had looked up from her tablet. She gave the Green Dragon Shifter one of her best death stares.

“I think --or rather, I hope--Illarion means that this incident will allow us to discredit Humans First,” Esme stated, casting a cold eye on the Green Dragon Shifter herself. “I’m sure that’s what he means.”

“Yes, yes! That is what I meant!” Illarion snorted. “Now you can show them as the

cowardly thugs they are! You can grind them into dust, Valerius. Roast them on fires throughout the city. That's what I would do!"

"I'm sure you would," Chione said with a shake of her head. "But we have rules and laws here."

"What good are they? No, set an example with them!" Illarion grinned. "Fear is the greatest motivator!"

Grant, who had been watching his son's heroics on the screen, turned stiffly and said, "Treating the members of Humans First just like any other criminals will stop them from becoming martyrs. Also, it will weaken the rule of law to do otherwise. Everyone should be given a just trial. Even terrorists."

"That's very true," Esme admitted with a nod. "Though, I admit, this incident does make me wish a little for the old days where we put heads on pikes. You could line the roads with them"

Valerius thought of Jasper Hawes' smug face rotting as his head was stuck on a pike. The thought warmed him. But he shook himself. That was not the way any longer. And it would give Jasper a "win" even in death. Because it would make him more important than he really was.

"Despite what Humans First has attempted today they are not our main enemy or the most dangerous foe we have," Valerius reminded them.

"No, it is our friends in the Faith that we must worry about," Esme sighed with a shake of her head. "With friends like them one doesn't need enemies! Oh, look, Caden is going to speak to the press!"

The Claw had been moving the press back from the two story building where the

bomb was and where the bombers were all imprisoned in ice, but the media was in a frenzy and wouldn't be denied. Valerius saw this knowledge in Caden's eyes as the White Dragon Shifter drew in a deep breath and stepped forward towards the line of reporters. Caden's gaze slid to High Reach.

He needs us, Valerius said to Raziel.

Yes! Let us go down there! Iolaire is upset! Raziel agreed and the smoke in the mirror cleared.

"Are we going to let Caden and Anwar have all the fun?" Kaila's hands were fisted at her sides and she was staring at each of them in turn with open-mouthed disbelief.

"Fun?" Caden's mother, Ellen, choked out.

She and Grant were clutching one another. Grant, too, looked ready to grind his teeth to dust at the comment when the throne room doors flew open and Tilly ran in followed by Rose and Wally, who were still pulling on clothing.

"Mom! Dad! Did you see Caden? I was watching on my phone and--oomph!"

Whatever Tilly had been about to say was cut off as both of her parents wrapped her in their arms.

"Tilly! Oh, my baby!" Ellen murmured into her daughter's hair.

"Tilly, I'm so glad you're okay!" Grant kissed his daughter's temple.

"Of course, I am!" Tilly got out as she pulled back. Her hair covered her face and she had to blow it out of the way. "I was with Caden, Rose and Wally! Nothing was going to happen to me!"

Rose looked a little uncomfortable at the praise and her eyes almost bugged out of her head when she was drawn into the Bryce family embrace. Her alarmed expression fled though and a look of contentment replaced it as she was hugged and petted as much as Tilly was.

“Rose and the kid are natural heroes!” Wally said as the tufts of hair over his ears waved wildly as he smiled at the quartet of huggers.

He was soon pulled into the group hug too.

Rose gave Valerius a quirked smile over Ellen’s shoulder. “Caden was amazing.”

“We wouldn’t have known of the bomb at all but for you and Wally,” Valerius said.

Rose pinked.

“Any word from Landry?” Wally asked as he disengaged from the hug.

Valerius glanced over at Chione. She was staring down at her tablet with her lower lip between her teeth.

“Chione, any word from Landry?” Valerius repeated Wally's question.

He hoped that the young woman was not a traitor. Caden would be devastated by that.

Chione nodded and showed him a map of Reach where several pins were placed. “Yes, but I’m not sure what it means, though I fear it is nothing good.”

“Could they be other bomb sites?” Esme asked as she studied the tablet.

“Gods, if they are...” Chione whispered.

“They are not on Anwar’s route,” Jahara stated as she too poked her head around to see the tablet. “In fact, they are mostly in manufacturing areas. My guess? One of those places is where this bomb was put together. Maybe these others are gathering places or some such.”

“We need to discover what they are,” Valerius said to the other Dragon Shifters. He took in a breath as he realized what he was going to ask of them. “It has been 30 years since we all flew together for a common purpose. I am asking you now to fly once more and investigate those sites.”

“I am with you, Valerius!” Esme said with a nod.

Kaila clapped her hands. “Fun! Fun! Yes, let’s all fly together! I want to stomp some enemies!”

Mei’s dark eyes glittered. “That these puny humans thought to mar our coming together is enough for me to want to crush them.”

Jahara bowed her head. “I am honored to assist in stamping out this evil, Valerius.”

Tez blinked as if he hadn’t quite expected to be asked to do this. He probably hadn’t. Neither he nor Eldoron were fighters. But he lifted his chin and said, “Well, of course! Eldoron and I shall assist! These attempts to harm the common people cannot go unpunished.”

“And what are you going to do, Valerius? Go down and preen for the press?” Illarion crossed his arms over his chest.

“Where else should Valerius be but by the side of his mate in this time of crisis?”

Esme looked askance at Illarion.

“We have no need of the Green Dragon,” Mei said silkily. “It would simply cause chaos and get in the way.”

Illarion’s face started to purple.

Jahara added coolly, “If the Green Dragon does not think it should be part of eliminating evil then so be it. The public will judge it for its absence .”

Tez’s lips were curled into a cat-like smile. “Or perhaps he is simply afraid of Humans First. You know, go after them here then the ones in his country may rebel more and--”

“I am not afraid!” Illarion seethed.

Kaila shook her head. “If you stay hunkered inside the castle, people will think you are. So you’d best come and help us smoke out our enemies.”

With that, Kaila raced through the doors out onto the courtyard, shifted in mid-step and took off into the skies. Tez grasped Esme’s hand and the two of them raced after her, laughing as they did so. They shifted and took flight. Jahara was the next to go. Her Wise Women bowed low before she strode outside and with a wave of her hand shifted. Mei tipped her head to Valerius before she too went outside, shifting elegantly, before lifting herself into the air with powerful flaps of her wings.

Illarion was glowering. Through clenched teeth, he hissed, “You will owe me for this, Valerius!”

Then with large strides, he ran outdoors and the titanic Green Dragon appeared. It gave one evil-eyed glance back at Valerius before lifting off. Valerius turned back to

the people still in the throne room.

“Chione, keep me apprised if Landry sends you anything else,” Valerius said. “Though I am guessing they will have made her dump her phone so they cannot be traced.”

“Yes, I fear you are right, but I will monitor just in case,” Chione answered with a bow of her head.

He turned towards the Bryces, Rose and Wally. “Caden is now out as the White Dragon Shifter. Everything is going to change. You’ll have to do some media today.”

“Today?!” Ellen put a hand over the center of her chest.

Grant took it and laced their fingers together. “We wish to try and keep a modicum of privacy. If that’s possible...”

“Cool! We’re going to be on TV!” Tilly jumped up and down.

Rose patted her shoulder. “You’re going to be a star, Tilly.”

Wally looked a little crestfallen. “I bet my shop would be jam packed full of people wanting to buy merch from Caden right about now.”

“I don’t think you or Caden are going to be able to work at the shop anymore, Wally,” Rose said. “You’re Caden’s Councillor now.”

“And so are you!” Wally pointed out.

Rat and Swarm Shifters as Councillors. Caden is truly going to shake things up, Valerius realized not for the first time.

“Chione, please set up those interviews and prepare everyone,” Valerius told his Councillor. She would figure out a way to give the Bryces some privacy while still feeding the starving beast that was the press. “Now, I will be back.”

Valerius saw Raziel already had its wings spread in the mirror. Valerius spun on his heel, took massive leaping steps out onto the courtyard before human gave way to Dragon and they were in the air. With two powerful thrusts of his wings, they were away from High Reach and on their way towards Caden.

He glanced right and left to see the other Dragon Shifters fanning out to various parts of Reach. In a way, he wanted to be the one to take out whatever was in those locations. He did want to grind Jasper Hawes beneath his claws. But it was better to show that the Dragon Shifters were as one against this threat. They were united with no daylight between them. It would make good press. But, more importantly, by trusting them--even Illarion--to seek out this foe, he had united them once more. And they had proven to him that they were willing to work under his leadership. He was sure that Chione was proud.

He looked back at where Caden and Anwar were in the center of a massive circle of press and public. It was clear that the Claw was being stretched thin just keeping the crime scene from being trampled. Caden’s heroic actions and appearance were causing a feeding frenzy that had never been seen before. He could feel Caden’s anxiety though ease at the sight of him.

I am coming, Caden! Valerius sent to him as he began to circle down.

Thank God! I don’t think the Claw can hold them back! Caden confessed as he mentally embraced Valerius.

The helicopters that had been hovering over the scene quickly moved out of his way. Raziel sent a spout of fire into the center of the space that had them darting away,

even if it meant losing the shot.

We cannot land, Raziel. We'll need to shift or we'll crush the buildings , Valerius told his Spirit.

The Black Dragon Spirit was so very anxious to reach Caden and Iolaire that Raziel had been increasing their speed instead of decreasing it.

If we must! Raziel muttered.

Just above the tops of the buildings, they shifted and Valerius fell to earth. He landed--gracefully in Tez's opinion--and rose up. He forced himself to not look like cold death at the media. Not that he could have for very long in any case because Caden came running up to him and stopped just short of hugging him. The desire to hug him was so huge in Caden's eyes that it was all that Valerius saw.

“Valerius! Thank you for coming! They want uhm... quotes and stuff and--”

“Do you want them to know about us?” Valerius asked softly.

Caden blinked. “Ah, yes , but I thought you wouldn't want--oh!”

Caden's words were swallowed up as Valerius cupped his face and kissed him. There was an audible cry from the crowd of shock and joy. With the taste of Caden on his lips, Valerius pulled back and rested their heads together. Even through the blinding flashes of cameras, he saw people point up at the spiral in the sky. They now knew what it meant.

Take that, experts , Valerius thought. The Black and White Dragons are mates!

Caden was smiling rather deliriously at him. “You know, kissing me like this when I

have no clothes on is... uhm, well, it's uhm..."

"Anwar! Your sash, please!" Valerius held a hand out towards the Silver Dragon Shifter without looking at him.

"But of course," Anwar murmured in his cultured voice.

The silk fuschia sash was placed in Valerius' outstretched hand. He neatly tied it around Caden's hips very tightly. Caden leaned against him, wrapping his arms around Valerius' chest.

"Thank you," Caden murmured.

Valerius kissed his forehead. "Anytime. Are you ready to do this?"

Caden took a deep breath. "As I'll ever be. Stopping the bomb was harder than this, more important than this by far so this'll be a cake walk."

"We'll only make a brief statement here. We'll arrange interviews with some trusted journalists later in a more formal setting," Valerius told him, finding he needed to kiss Caden's nearest temple.

More flashes.

Caden leaned into the kiss. "I'm going to leave this in your hands. I'm out of my depth."

"You're perfect," Valerius assured him.

The two of them turned to the press as one unit. Even the camera-loving Anwar stepped back, knowing that they should be the center of attention. Valerius slid a

powerful arm around Caden's shoulders. There were more flashes. He was certain that the image of the two of them would be everywhere, on every newspaper, on every website, and the topic of discussion. Better them than giving any air to Humans First and their attempts to terrorize and kill. So while Valerius had no desire for his and Caden's relationship to be tabloid fodder, he would be glad if news of love was covered more extensively than that of hate.

"King Valerius! King Valerius!" Countless reporters called his name, because they did not know Caden's.

Questions about who Caden was, about what had happened, about the Dragons in the sky, about the bombers, about the helix, about the kiss, about... well, anything and everything under the sun were shouted at them. Caden tucked himself securely by Valerius' side, certain that the Black Dragon King would take care of everything. And Valerius intended to do just that.

He held up one hand and the crowd quieted.

"We know you have many questions," Valerius raised his voice so that the sea of microphones could capture what he said. "But, as you can also see." He tipped his head to the Claw breaking the icy cuffs off the bombers and replacing them with metal ones. "This is not the best place to answer them."

"But, King Valerius, what happened here?"

"Was it another bomb attempt?"

"Who is behind it?"

"How did the White Dragon Shifter know about the bomb, if it was a bomb?"

“What is the White Dragon Shifter’s name?”

“Was someone trying to murder King Anwar? Does that mean that this isn’t a local matter?”

“Where are all the Dragon Shifters going?”

Valerius lifted a hand again. “This is an active crime scene. We will issue a statement about this in due course. As to the White Dragon Shifter’s name... would you like to tell them?” He asked the last to Caden.

Caden nodded even as he was practically trying to merge his body into Valerius’. “I’m ah... I’m Caden Bryce. Nice to meet you.”

More questions were sent their way with a rapidity that was almost dizzying. But Valerius kept his head up and a firm arm around Caden. He smiled but held up a hand again.

“We will answer one more question before we must ask you to disperse,” Valerius told them. Then with an almost teasing warning look added, “So make it count.”

The reporters all went silent and then one asked, “Are you and Caden mates?”

Valerius looked down at Caden. Caden looked up at Valerius. Smiles tugged both of their lips.

Confirm it? Caden asked.

I wish to, Valerius told him.

He could see Raziel and Iolaire’s necks curled around each other.

Jointly, he and Caden answered the reporter's question at the same time with the single word of, "Yes."

READY FOR PRIME TIME?

“The White Dragon Shifter is such a sweet young man. He picked up my newspaper and promised to come to see me again after he had saved everyone, of course!” the old woman twittered to the reporter. Her eyes were shining as she talked of Caden. She spoke directly to the camera then, “Caden, you come over whenever you can. I know how busy you must be. But I’m here. I’ll have some tea and coffee cake for you and we can talk about Billy.”

Caden grinned. She had been the first member of the public he’d told who he was and, somehow, that had given him the confidence to do what he and Iolaire had done later with the bomb. He most definitely would be going over there for coffee cake and he hoped to hear much about Billy the reporter.

Tilly, who had been standing directly in front of the television screen, turned around and put her hands on her hips. “You’re a star, Caden. They’ve put the random old person interview up! It doesn’t get any better than that. And you are going to take me with you for that coffee cake!”

He and Tilly were in Valerius’ tower suite. Well, he supposed it was his and Valerius’ suite. She’d accompanied him up to the platform with the bed to assist in picking out his clothes for the media interviews scheduled later that night.

Caden smirked. “I will, Tilly, don’t you worry. Besides, you’re about to get famous too. Our big interview is not that far off. Soon, there will be plenty of potentially doting adoptive grandparents who will want you as their granddaughter to feed coffee cake to.”

Tilly rolled her eyes. “Old people!”

“Hey, old people are great! You love most of the Dragon Shifters and they’re older than old!” Caden cried.

“I know! I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that old people are nice to you for being... well, you know, you ,” she said with a shrug.

“So they don’t base their friendship or affection on fame and that’s bad ?” Caden’s eyebrows rose.

“They’re not jealous! They don’t want to be you! But young people... well, my friends have been calling and texting non-stop since they found out that you’re the White Dragon Shifter!” Tilly was luminous as she held her still buzzing, beeping and blinking cell phone between her hands as if in prayer. She scrolled through the countless messages before biting her lower lip and letting the phone drop from view without responding to a single one. “Mom and Dad said I have to wait to say anything to them for a while, because they are all being interviewed about me! And you, I guess.”

“They just don’t want your texts to pop up on TMZ or something,” Caden told her.

“Yeah, I suppose, but would that be so bad?” Tilly gave him pleading eyes.

“Uhm...”

“I mean TMZ is a little gossipy, but what about EW or something classier like the New York Times ?” Tilly swung back and forth which had the sparking bottom of her snow white dress glitter in the firelight. “Besides, I’m only saying nice things! I love you and Iolaire. Both of you are awesome. We’re fighting against Humans First together--”

“Fighting them... together? What?” Caden’s eyebrows were really rising now.

“Yes, we are!” She pointed a finger at him. “First, we took them down in the park in front of the media! Second, we followed them to their lair to discover their secret bomb plot! Third? Third, who knows what we’ll do! But it will be great !”

“I think this is what Mom and Dad are worried about,” Caden chuckled dryly. “Though you are a most excellent sidekick.”

He went to ruffle her artistically styled hair. She moved as fast as any Shifter to protect her hairdo. “Hey! You’ll mess it up!”

“We can’t have that.” He grinned at her.

“One of us has to look respectable.” That had her looking at his proposed outfits. “Are you really going to wear jeans during our interview?”

Caden had spread out on his and Valerius’ bed five pairs of ripped and faded jeans. Despite the fact that they looked like he had worn them forever, they were all new. Chione had sent out to various shops for clothes that looked like him and suited his personality. He’d already tried them all on and they all fit perfectly. Some accentuated his ass. Others skimmed his long legs. A few flared out around the boots he had decided to wear. Some hung lower than others on his hips. They were all awesome. But which pair to wear?

“Chione said I should pick something that’s me , so it’s definitely jeans, which are down to earth but nice and comfortable,” Caden reminded her.

“But Dad’s going to be in a really expensive lawyer suit! Red tie and all! Mom’s wearing some understated black affair and I...” Tilly spun around to show off the exquisite baby doll dress in silvery white studded with Swarovski crystals and

matching ballet flats. “I am looking fabulous in this dress. While you... you will wear jeans and an untucked black, button down shirt.”

He had picked out a chest-skimming black shirt that was fashionable untucked. It would look great with the jeans--any pair of them!--and his boots. With his blond hair fashionably messy, he thought it would look great. And it would be a nice contrast to what Valerius intended on wearing. His lips twitched as he thought of the studded leather and fur affair that Valerius had already changed into.

He said to his sister, “It could be worse.”

She expressively lifted her eyebrows. “How?”

“I could be half naked in leather and fur like Valerius intends to be, He’s going to be showing more bulging muscles than clothing,” Caden said as he picked the second pair of jeans from the right and slid them on over his boxer briefs.

“I bet you think he looks good in leather,” Tilly giggled.

“I do. He does. But I’d look ridiculous in it.”

Valerius had offered Caden some of his armor to wear, which had the Black Dragon King laughing when Caden modeled it for him. Most of it had not fit and what had made him look like he was in a Sword and Sorcery slave boy outfit. That was not the aesthetic that they were going for.

As he buttoned his pants, he said, “Some of us don’t have Esme as our fairy Dragon mother who has staff to sew them a dress in a few hours like you do. So jeans and a button down will have to do for me.”

Caden playfully poked her side. Tilly smiled so widely that her eyes turned to slits.

High spots of color appeared on her cheeks.

“Esme is like... like the best !” Tilly beamed.

His sister and the Blue Dragon Queen had met after he and Valerius had gotten back to High Reach after escaping the press--and it had been an escape. Anwar had not accompanied them back but instead insisted on continuing his procession as he had more gold coins to give out and no terrorists would stop him! Not to mention, he would have a press entourage the entire time, which he seemed to enjoy a lot more than Caden and Valerius did.

After promising Anwar a private audience later, he and Valerius had flown to High Reach. His family, Rose, Wally and Chione had all gathered in the throne room while they had awaited the other Dragon Shifters to return. Staff had brought them both robes. Caden surreptitiously sniffed his because it smelled of Valerius.

Chione had been telling them that a press event with Caden and his family had to happen that day. The press would eat itself like a snake eating its own tail if they weren't fed something else.

“If we don't give them a story,” Chione had said, “they will make up their own. They are already digging into your pasts. Anything, no matter how innocuous it seems to you, will become a scandal. You have to accept this and let it wash over you. The press does nothing faster than pulling people off the pedestals they put them on.”

His father frowned. “I think I'm grateful that I'm taking that position with Justice St. John and the Supreme Court. I've been proud to represent most of my clients, but there are some... well, I'm sure they'll be mentioned. I hope they don't cause Caden trouble.”

“Dad, don't worry. You did your best to represent the people who hired you and the

firm. Everyone deserves a defense,” Caden told his father stoutly.

“Still, it will be good not to have the conflicts of interest any longer that would have occurred if I had remained in private practice,” his father said.

“So long as you’re happy, I am,” Caden said.

His father hugged him. “Our lives have to change, Caden, because your life is... well, it’s very important.”

Caden frowned. “So is yours! All of yours!”

Chione though said, kindly but firmly, “That’s true, Caden, but so is what your father said. There are only nine Dragon Shifters. What you do, say, don’t do, don’t say, associate yourself with or not will be scrutinized for secret meaning. People will dissect your every word and action and those who are close to you will have the same scrutiny on them.”

Caden felt a sick dread filling his stomach. As he held more tightly onto his father, he reminded himself that this had to happen. He couldn’t have stayed hidden. His family hadn’t signed up for this, but they were a part of it. Their lives would be enhanced and restricted by the fact that he was the ninth Dragon Shifter.

“Your membership in the Faith, Ellen, will be especially looked at. How faithful are you? How does having your son be the ninth Dragon Shifter make you think of it? Everything you say, Ellen, will have weight for the whole Faith,” Chione cautioned.

His mother paled and one of her hands went to the collar of her shirt. “But--but that’s... yes, I guess I can see how that would be, even though I’m not important at all.”

“Mom, you’re totally important,” Caden assured her as he pulled back from his father’s arms.

She gave him a smile and cupped his cheek. “My feelings about religion have always been private, Caden. I’ve been content to be a member and help with local aspects of charity and other assistance. This is different! If what Chione says is true, anything I say may be taken as Faith doctrine because they’ll assume it’s coming from Iolaire or one of the other Dragon Spirits.”

Caden had looked up at Iolaire in the mirror at that moment. Both Iolaire and Raziel were asleep next to one another. Raziel’s much bigger form was curled around Iolaire. Occasional puffs of fire and ice rose from their mouths. They were also purring .

“Iolaire is not really a doctrinal type Dragon,” Caden admitted.

“I don’t know, Caden,” his father said with a mischievous grin. “Iolaire seems to understand that the best things are taking a nap with someone you love. That appears quite wise.” He then slid an arm around his wife’s shoulders and kissed her cheek. “In all honesty, Ellen, I think you’re exactly what the Faith needs. Someone who truly believes and tries to do good while keeping the Spirits in mind.”

Valerius added, “Your voice will be the counterpoint to those in the Faith who seek to harm others in order to bring more Spirits into the world, Ellen. If you consider this then perhaps you see the value in what you bring to the table.”

His mother shivered at the thought of those others who would kill for the Faith filled her mind. “Yes, you’re right. I shouldn’t shy away from this moment, but embrace it for all the good it could do.”

Rose looked a little ill and defiant as well as she said, “Our friendship is going to

cause you Hell, Caden. I'm a Swarm Shifter from the Below who works for Marban. The skeletons in my closet have skeletons. If they realize that I'm more than just a prop for Marban and actually your friend things will get dicey."

"And I'm a liability, too," Wally said while scratching his mustache. "I'm a former crime boss and Rat Shifter. Are you sure you want me anywhere near this? I'd totally understand if you didn't. I'd still advise you from the shadows and all that. Nothing would change just now that the press knows who you are and all, some of the decisions you made before you might want to rethink."

Caden's heart hurt as he saw the honesty on Rose and Wally's faces. They believed that they were liabilities and they didn't want to "bring him down".

"I don't care," Caden said simply with a fierce shake of his head. "Your friendship to me is worth whatever the press would say."

Rose sighed. "Caden, that's sweet, but--"

"Wait! Just wait," he said to her and took a breath. "First, I've got to know if you two want to be in the spotlight. Forget about me and what it might cost me, just tell me what you guys want."

Rose worried at her lower lip. "Okay, if I'm honest, I--I don't want to lose our friendship, but I'm freaked by the publicity."

"I'm freaked, too, so we're even there," he told her with a smile. "But then again, think of all the good it could do to things for people in the Below? Yes, you have a past. Yes, you did things that maybe you aren't proud of. But part of that is because society says that Swarm Shifters are evil. No one but Marban was going to befriend you, let alone help you."

She nodded yet said, “We all have choices, Caden. I could have said no.”

“And end up starving on the streets or worse?” Wally shook his head. “That isn’t any choice at all! I know it would be hard to have all your dark corners exposed, but Caden’s right that you could show a ton of people that things don’t have to be the way they’ve always been. A Swarm Shifter is best friends with a Dragon Shifter! They haven’t even made a movie like that!”

“Same thing with you, Wally. A Rat Shifter and former crime boss as an advisor? Sounds like not even something Hollywood has dreamed up!” Rose teased gently.

“You talk about choices, Rose, but you were a member of the gang, while I ran the gang,” Wally pointed out.

“Yeah, but you got out. You’re legit now,” Caden pointed out. “You got out of that life, too, and are trying to make amends.”

Wally tugged at his mustache. “It’s true and it sounds good. I’m not afraid of publicity, kid. I’ll do whatever you want. But I don’t want you to be boxed into a decision you made before... well, before you see a true media frenzy.”

Caden looked over at Valerius. The Black Dragon King had remained mostly silent. His expression was carefully neutral. He wasn’t going to tell Caden what to do.

This is what it means being an equal partner. He wants me to figure out what I want.

“I don’t have any doubts about either of you. And if I start choosing my friends based on how the press will judge them, I will end up alone,” Caden stated with a shrug. “I know your worth and that’s all that matters to me.”

“Then we’re going to do this thing,” Rose said with a quirked smile.

Caden nodded. “We are.”

It was at that moment that Esme and Jahara landed in the courtyard. Everyone turned. Caden’s breath caught in his throat as both Dragon Queens entered the throne room. He wondered what she had discovered at the locations that Landry had sent.

There’s no question Landry meant to send them, but were they traps? Or proof of Humans First perfidy? And did they learn anything about where Landry is now?

Immediately, staff for Esme and several Wise Women for Jahara bustled into the throneroom with robes for their queens. Both walked up to Caden and Valerius with stately grace. Caden wanted to grab them both by the shoulders and shake them.

“Well?” Caden asked. At their lifted eyebrows, Caden cleared his throat, “Sorry, but you guys look all right so I’m just... What did you find? Please tell us!”

Valerius put a comforting hand on his lower spine. “Indeed, I am curious as well and impatience fills me.”

“Impatience always fills you, Valerius, but it is well justified here, even though what we have to tell you is very perplexing,” Esme said.

Jahara continued, “The location that Esme and I went to wasn’t some bomb-making location nor did it hold a stash of weapons or other arsenal.”

Caden’s forehead furrowed. When Valerius had told him about the locations Landry had sent, he had been terrified that they were other bombs.

“So what was there?” Tilly asked Esme with directness yet a little shyness.

Esme’s eyebrows lifted even as her mouth twitched into a smile at the boldness of a

13-year-old girl who thought to ask her what a terrorist organization was doing. It was--as they say--the beginnings of a beautiful friendship.

“It was a Faith center,” Esme answered.

“What?!” His mother’s right hand clutched the front of her shirt.

“One that is used to hand out food and other necessities to the poor,” Jahara added.

“Poor Shifters go to the Faith?” Rose’s nose wrinkled. “Normally, Shifters go to their own for help. Not the Faith. Sorry, Ellen, they just are a little suspicious of the Faith.”

“They have a right to be, unfortunately,” his mother said.

“The people in line to receive food were human, not Shifter,” Jahara stated.

Something cold curled in Caden’s stomach. “What was wrong with the food?”

Esme and Jahara exchanged looks. It was Esme who said, “Nothing in the batch they were serving at that moment, but we found a stockpile of sleeping tablets in a back room, hidden under some floor boards.”

“Spirits,” his mother whispered as her eyes filled with tears. “So not bombs, but tablets to send them asleep to never wake up.”

“It’s not violent or exciting enough for the Spirits,” Valerius countered. “Such a death wouldn’t likely work.”

“Maybe they’re experimenting,” Jahara suggested. “Pills are much easier to give out than using bombs.”

“Needless to say, the Claw have the matter well in hand. Every staffer has been brought in for questioning and the building as well as all electronic devices are to be searched,” Esme added.

“Are any of the Claw members of the Faith?” Rose asked.

Caden shook himself. “This doesn’t make any sense! The Faith and Humans First are at war with one another! Why would Humans First have data on a Faith plot?”

“They are enemies, perhaps more so in many ways than Shifters and Humans First,” Jahara said. “They would be surveilling each other.”

Caden sagged against Valerius. “Thank goodness that Landry told us about this!”

“Yes,” Valerius agreed with a grunt. “I wonder what the others will find.”

“With all this serious stuff happening, maybe we shouldn’t do the media stuff,” Tilly said, looking a little crestfallen.

“On the contrary, dear girl, now is exactly the time to do the media stuff as you say,” Esme’s rich voice boomed as she put a hand on Tilly’s right shoulder. “The things that seem inconsequential or silly or indulgent are what makes life worth living. We cannot allow those who seek to bring darkness into the world stop us from bringing light.”

Tilly gazed up at Esme with utter joy. “Really? So--so we can do the interview?”

“Tilly, haven’t you heard all the serious stuff that’s going to be asked in the interview?” Their mother though looked at her daughter with a mixture of indulgence and exasperation.

“Yes, but I’m a kid! They’ll just ask me nice questions and, since I’ll be there this time, they might take it easy on you and Dad too,” Tilly pointed out.

“What a wise child! You are quite correct, Tilly!” Esme nodded sagely. “So we must make you the center of attention.”

“More than Caden and Valerius being mates?” Tilly’s eyebrows were hiding in her hairline.

“Well...” Esme considered this, “maybe not. But we can distract them thoroughly with a really good dress. You come with me and I’ll get you set up beautifully!”

“Oh that would be AWESOME!” Tilly looked deliriously happy.

Caden saw his mother about to object, but he shook his head. Let Tilly have this. She really needed something good right now.

“That’s awfully kind of you, Queen Esme, thank you so much,” their mother said.

“Not at all! It will be a joy for me. Now come, child, I want to discuss things,” Esme said and the two of them had bustled off.

Now Tilly swished about in the very dress that Esme had contemplated. It was a beautiful dress. Caden finished buttoning his shirt and stuck his feet in his boots. He spread his arms wide.

“Well? How do I look?” he asked her.

She gave him a skeptical look over, but then smiled. “Actually, I think you look pretty handsome and approachable!”

He grinned.

“Caden! Tilly! It’s time!” Valerius called as he strode through the doors down below.

Both of them looked over the side of the platform down at the Black Dragon King. Tilly let out a breath as she took in Valerius at that moment. He wore leather pants. Black, of course. Black leather boots. One of his strappy armor things with spikes and a long white fur coat. His black hair fanned over the white fur. He looked...

“Wow. He looks like something out of a fantasy movie,” Tilly whispered.

“He does at that,” Caden agreed with a slow smile on his lips.

“Are you two ready for prime time?” Valerius asked as he struck a pose.

He, of course, would say that he was not striking a pose, but naturally stood that way. Which was to say that he looked like some magnificent ancient warrior king that should have his visage carved in stone.

Caden looked over at his sister who gave a thumb’s up before answering, “Ready as we’ll ever be.”

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“What did the other Dragon Shifters find at the locations Landry sent us?” Caden asked him.

Valerius curled his arm around Caden’s waist a little tighter. He had already been briefed by all of the returning Dragon Shifters, even Illarion, on what they had found. Chione had taken it all down.

There was much to tell Caden, but the last thing the young man needed was to be distracted by that at this time. Yes, it was important. Yes, he wanted Caden’s input. But Humans First and the Faith were not the only things to worry about in this world. Introducing people to the White Dragon Shifter was an even bigger thing. This would be the public’s first chance to hear from Caden.

“Perplexing things,” Valerius told him. “Nothing clear cut.”

Valerius, Caden and Tilly were walking downstairs--well, Tilly was skipping ahead of them, twirling her dress--to one of the meeting rooms where a select number of press would be in attendance to ask questions while all others could record. The throne room, Chione had told him, would be too formal.

“And where would Caden sit? In your lap?” Her lips had twitched as she clearly imagined the press’ response to that. He had rather liked the idea himself, but had relented for proprieties’ sake.

Caden’s lighter expression darkened slightly. “I suppose it’s too much to ask for there to be notes such as all our bombs are here? These are our plans? Here are the names and addresses of our leaders? And here is a way to stop us in 10 quick, easy steps?”

Valerius snorted. “If only. No, what we found is quite strange. Chione is putting together a packet for you, Wally and Rose to review.”

“A packet?!” Caden’s eyes widened. “That sounds so...”

“Official?” Valerius smiled. “Yes, Caden, though you have seen little of the sweet of your elite status, you will now taste some of the sour .”

“But I want to know what they found... though I’m not sure how much I can add even when I do,” Caden amended.

Valerius squeezed him. “We each bring something different to the table so we see things in other lights. The sour I was referring to wasn’t knowing what the reports contained or your thoughts upon them--which I most desperately want--but the reports themselves.”

Caden’s forehead furrowed. “R-reports? That sounds--”

“Sour? Relentless? Day-stealing? Night-stealing? Fun-quashing? Oh, you do not know the power of Chione’s reports. They are greater than even Dragon fire.”

Caden let out a snort of laughter. When Valerius gave him a cool look, he laughed harder and curled over. They had to stop a minute in the hall for Caden to recover from his bout of hysterical laughter.

“Laugh it up, Caden, but you will see the truth of it in time. Soon, Wally and Rose will be handing you their reports as well and you’ll be snowed under with them,” Valerius intoned.

Caden wiped away tears of laughter. “You almost look like you’re smiling. Why would you be smiling at the thought of me snowed under by reports?”

“Because you would see that I am right about them and rue this day that you laughed so cruelly at my good advice.” He leaned in as Caden pouted and whispered in his ear, “And then I would save you.”

Caden pinked and grinned. “I think I want some of those reports. Just so you can save me. So long as the saving involved--”

“Are you two flirting? You are!” Tilly cast a suspicious look back at them both. “You need to save that for the cameras!”

Valerius chuckled. She flounced ahead of them happily. Valerius laced one of his hands with Caden’s as they strolled after her.

“I will save you from this report at least for the evening. You have enough to worry about,” Valerius told Caden as they neared the meeting room.

“From the media? Oh, it’ll be fine, right? Yeah, I mean I’m boring! Tilly will steal the show. Dad will sit there and answer in clipped yeses or noes and Mom will laugh uncomfortably every so often. You’ll have to do most of the talking,” Caden rattled off as he leaned into Valerius’ larger form as if to take shelter there. “The press will realize that me and my family are so uninteresting that people will turn off their shows as soon as my name comes up. So it’ll truly be fine!”

Valerius felt for him. He wanted to wrap Caden up in his arms and simply take him away from all of this.

A mountain peak, Raziel suggested. That is where we should go.

Iolaire’s wings fluttered at the suggestion and the “cavern” behind the two Dragons turned into such a peak. They were on the top of an incredibly high mountain with a thick, icy snow covering. The sky was so clear it had an almost crystalline

appearance, like it might shatter. The stars sparkled and the moon glowed. It was a stunning sight.

No one but us, Raziel continued the suggestion.

Valerius heard only the shifting of snow beneath Dragon feet and the whistle of the wind then. Raziel and Iolaire gazed up at the moon, their wings almost touching. It was a scene that had Valerius nearly forgetting all of his and Caden's responsibilities. But that could not be.

Sounds amazing, but we must do this. Their hunger for information about Caden and Iolaire is already insatiable, Valerius warned. We must take control as much as possible of the narrative.

Bah! Raziel stretched one clawed forelimb. We are Dragons! We need no narrative!

Valerius smiled. You do have a narrative though, Raziel. You are the strong, powerful and moody protector of the world. First among equals.

Raziel's red eyes shut to slits. Yes, yes, I am.

And Iolaire is the Dragon with the heart of gold. Fierce, protective yet gentle. A friend to all unless they try to harm the innocent, Valerius said.

With every word, Iolaire's chin had lifted until its snout was perpendicular with the ceiling of the "cavern" it and Raziel inhabited. Iolaire let out a breath of frost.

Indeed, Iolaire is all of those things, Raziel agreed.

That is all the press can know of you because they would be too terrified or respectful to ask more, Valerius told them both. But Caden and I...

We protect you most of all! Raziel stated proudly. They should not ask you questions either!

Iolaire, though, gave him an understanding look. Violence was not the answer.

They need to connect with us, Raziel. On the one hand, they must see us as their leaders, but on the other, they must see us as the same as them, Valerius explained. And in that balancing act, the press looks for good and bad things to report upon.

There is nothing bad about Caden! Raziel said with loyalty that it had never expressed before.

No, there is not, Valerius agreed.

Iolaire cooed at the bigger Dragon. Raziel leaned down and they pressed their foreheads together. Valerius left them as they purred. Caden, of course, had heard all of this and he gave Valerius a quirked smile.

“The press can twist stuff though, can’t they?” Caden asked. “Make something that’s innocent into something not? And take what’s complicated and make it seem black and white?”

Valerius nodded. “I admire your loyalty to Rose and Wally. I think you understand that their pasts will be something that the press will not ignore.”

“They won’t,” Caden agreed with a nod. “But I think a lot more people will relate to them than won’t. Yeah, sure there will be those that judge them. But a whole lot more will see the incredible things they’ve done to get out from under. And it will give people hope, which is, I think, Iolaire’s greatest strength.”

Valerius considered this. One of the biggest problems in society was the lack of

social movement. Even in his territory where it was said that anyone could become anything that really wasn't true. And some would say it was becoming less true everyday. That was what Humans First was feeding on. The sense of discontent. The sense that no matter how hard you worked, it didn't matter. If you weren't a Shifter you could never truly get ahead.

And one had to be the right kind of Shifter as well. The resistance he had faced when allowing Simi into the Claw and approving his well-earned promotions had been considerable and people strove not to say no to him. What if he had not backed Simi? There would be no Snake Shifters in the Claw and that would be a terrible shame for Simi was the best of his guards.

"I think that you are right, Caden," Valerius finally said. "The very fact that Rose and Wally come from difficult circumstances but have made good with their lives will inspire people."

"And we need to be listening to more types of people," Caden said. He then frowned. "Not that I think Chione isn't amazing! She is and really seems to get people, but--"

"But it's been a long time since she was enslaved," Valerius murmured. "Not that it has ever left her. And she carries it with her to this day."

"Enslaved?" Caden's eyes were huge.

Valerius grimaced. "It's her story to tell. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, I... I mean thank you for telling me. It's just... so hard to hear. To know that Chione experienced slavery... it's awful," Caden admitted.

Valerius nodded. "Yes. But she would say that it honed her. Every difficulty she's had to face, she uses it as fuel."

Caden looked thoughtful. He finally shook his head. “The things that all of you have gone through! All you’ve seen and experienced! Nothing has happened to me--”

“Except sacrificing your life to save the people of Reach from a bomb? Or spying on a Humans First meeting as it is blown up? Or--”

“That’s nothing though!” Yet Caden was blushing with pleasure.

“You’ve been asked for tea and coffee cake. I have never been given such an invitation,” Valerius said with a barely concealed grin.

“You saw that interview?” Caden blushed harder.

“Oh, yes, and I am very jealous that you will get to hear all about Billy.”

Caden snorted and lightly bumped his shoulder against Valerius. “Don’t you worry. You’re coming with me!”

“Oh, I haven’t been invited!”

“You’re just trying to get out of it. Besides, it’s your territory. You can go anywhere.”

They had reached the doors to the meeting room. Tilly had already been nodded in by the half dozen Claw who were aligned on either side of the closed doors. They crossed their arms over their chests as Caden and Valerius stood outside.

“When the doors open, all eyes will turn upon us, Caden,” Valerius told him. “Don’t freeze.”

Caden let out a slightly hysterical laugh. “You’re saying don’t freeze to an ice Dragon!”

Valerius grinned. “You must imagine that there is a wall of bulletproof glass between you and the press. They cannot see it, but you know it is there. They cannot reach through it. They cannot hurt you. You are safe behind the glass.”

Caden drew in a deep breath and shook himself. “Okay, okay, bulletproof glass. I can do this. I can definitely do this. Let’s go.”

The Claw opened the doors. The room before them was not some nondescript meeting room with beige walls and no windows. No, it was the bottom of the south tower and there was a whole curving wall of windows beyond a spectacular room with dark mahogany floors, a central fireplace, stone walls hung with rich oil paintings and tapestries.

Caden’s family were all sitting down on one of the sofas on one side of the fireplace while the press was set up in a semi-circle on the other side. Caden’s parents were sitting very stiffly with Tilly squeezed between them. She was holding one of each of their hands in hers and looked a little wide-eyed. There was a second couch for him and Caden.

Chione, Wally and Rose were standing in the back corner of the room. Rose had on a yellow, silk sheath dress with black fringed wrap. Wally was in a suit and tie, but his hair would not be tamed. Valerius half expected him to pull out a black Dragon balloon hat and stick it on his head any moment now. Chione was in a dusky brown dress that seemed to be made of some shimmering material. She was talking to Rose and Wally quietly. He saw that the two now had identical tablets to hers.

“Mini-mes,” Caden whispered to him as he took in the tableau.

Luckily, that had delayed Caden from realizing that all of the reporters’ eyes were on him. On them. Valerius held Caden’s hand tighter. He knew that this would be breathlessly talked about, but he would rather they gossip about him than dig into

Caden's family and friends.

Caden must have realized that the room had quieted as his head jerked towards the phalanx of cameras. Caden swallowed and the phrase "deer in headlights" would not have been inappropriate at that moment to describe the young man.

Valerius already knew that while some in the press would find Caden's freshness and earnestness endearing, others would describe it in less flattering terms. After all, the Dragon Shifters were the ultimate leaders of the world. Who was this boy to be respected? Though Caden's actions that day should have those naysayers in the minority by a long shot.

Smile, Caden, Valerius said as he allowed an easy, small smile to grace his own lips.

Caden swallowed again, but then gave the press a tiny smile and a head duck to acknowledge everyone. Valerius led Caden to the empty couch, allowing Caden to sit down first--nearest to his family--while Valerius sat on the opposite side of him.

They faced off against three reporters. All were among Chione's favorites though not the one she had chosen to be interviewed by at Iolaire's first appearance. She must have done something to annoy his very even-keeled Councillor. He was sure if he had scoured the reporting of that evening like she had he would understand why.

But the three that were there were Carlos Estanza. He was in his mid-fifties with black hair cropped close to his head and the appropriate "wise" frost streaks at his temples. Chione had once referred to Carlos as having "dark chocolate eyes". They just looked brown to Valerius. Carlos flashed both of them a smile, showing a snippet of dazzling white teeth. He was the anchor for a popular morning news program that mixed puff news pieces with "serious questions of the day" that supposedly affected "regular folks".

The next was Lisa Yang. She was known for her serious, hard-hitting pieces. If one wanted a complex idea explained to the public by someone who could make people understand and empathize, Lisa was the best reporter. She understood nuance and didn't do both sides or dumb anything down. She worked at the New York Times.

The final reporter couldn't have been further from the other two in terms of age, background and the viewers she reached, and she reached millions of them every single day. She was a popular YouTube news aggregator of sorts. She would report on news topics that she thought needed more attention to her vastly younger audience than the other two. Her name was Claire Redkins. She was only twenty-two and, unlike her counterparts, she did not wear a suit, but instead dressed similarly to Caden in terms of expensive yet casual clothes. She beamed at them both.

Caden leaned over to his parents and asked, "You guys okay?"

"Fine," Grant answered in that one word, clipped way of his that Caden had guessed he would use. Valerius wouldn't have been surprised if he had added, "your honor" at the end of it despite Caden not being a judge and this not being court.

Ellen let out a burbling laugh that was too loud and sharp. She immediately pressed a hand over her lips and mumbled behind it, "Oh, yes, we're fine, dear."

"Till?" Caden had an almost desperate plea in his voice for his sister to behave normally.

But Tilly just smiled weakly and nodded. All of her self-confidence had melted away under the press' lights. Valerius could very well understand all of their reactions. Caden leaned back against the couch. Valerius squeezed his hand again. He would have to release it at some point otherwise people might think he was controlling Caden in some way. But at the same time, they were mates, damnit! And Caden needed emotional support.

Carlos, who was likely used to making guests feel comfortable as he introduced them to his early morning audience of families, said, “Well, it looks like we’re all here! I, for one, want to express how honored I am to be sitting here and talking to you, Caden. I can call you Caden, can’t I?”

“What else would you--ah, yes, of course you can. I’m just... a normal person,” Caden said after a moment, but then hearing himself added with a self-deprecating laugh that played well with all three reporters, “I mean I know I am the ninth Dragon Shifter. But I’m still... me.”

“And we hope to learn: who you are, Caden,” Lisa said in her cultured voice. “That’s what tonight is all about. At least, the beginning of knowing you.”

Claire broke in, “I bet this is so strange to you. Becoming a Shifter is one thing. Rare as that is, but you became a Dragon Shifter and that’s like the rarest of the rare.”

Caden regarded her steadily. “It wouldn’t matter what kind of Shifter Iolaire turned me into. Iolaire is the rarest of the rare.”

“But you are a Dragon Shifter,” Lisa stated, resting her elbows on her knees as she leaned towards them. “And today, you had to exercise some of the power and responsibility being one entails. It’s not the first time either. You became the White Dragon Shifter because you saved people from another bomb, did you not?”

Chione stepped forward. “Lisa, as you know what occurred today during King Anwar’s arrival is still under investigation as is the original bombing. King Caden cannot address these questions.”

Lisa’s expression did not change. She just stared intently at Caden. Valerius was not sure what he expected Caden to do, but what he did just proved that he was extraordinary.

“Anyone would have done that,” Caden said with all serious truthfulness. “I know that most people think they wouldn’t step up in a crisis, that they wouldn’t have the presence of mind or bravery to act. But it’s not true.”

Lisa’s intentness increased. “You think that most people would have sacrificed themselves to save others?”

Caden nodded. “I do. There’s depths in everyone that they don’t even know. When push comes to shove, when they have their moment, they will rise to greatness.”

Lisa turned to Valerius and asked, “I can see that King Caden believes that, but what about you, King Valerius? Do you believe that anyone would have done as he did?”

Valerius’ smile was small. “No, but the fact that Caden thinks they would is part of what makes him special. And his belief in others often can inspire them to reach those lofty heights he already gives them credit for reaching.”

“You’re both cynics!” Caden laughed as he playfully elbowed Valerius.

He looked at his mate affectionately. “I look forward to you proving me wrong.”

Caden grinned and the tenseness that had filled the young man drained away. This was good. Caden was acting himself. He was losing the tension. The world would see what he did in Caden. They would love him.

“So I have to ask the question that is on everyone’s mind!” Claire said brightly.

“About--about the bombings?” Caden frowned, his smile dimming.

“Oh, no, that’s really important, but...” Claire gave him a sheepish smile, “but everyone really wants to know how you and Valerius went from fighting in Reach’s

skies to being mates. ”

Story Continues in Book 7!

TWISTED WORDS

Don't freeze. Don't freeze. Don't freeze! Caden thought as he stared at the YouTube influencer, Claire Redkins, with slightly parted lips and what he was sure was a dopey expression on his face. He was also certain that this behavior was not inspiring confidence in the viewers. So if he had intended to come across as young, but wise beyond his years he was botching it completely. I'm freezing! Oh, no! Valerius warned me!

But how could he explain everything that had led to him and Valerius being together in a few easily digestible soundbites? There were so many things and so many moments--not to mention so much that he didn't want to share with anyone but Valerius--that there was no way to simply dumb it down to love at first sight, or really, love at first fight. He could see Iolaire and Raziel looking at one another out of hooded eyes. Fire and ice twined together like the symbol in the sky

While the two older reporters were very stiff--he wondered if they thought such questions were unbecoming of a reporter--Claire smiled kindly at him. The tension bled out of Caden a little, not because of Claire's evident sympathy at his tongue-tiedness, but because of Valerius' mental presence surrounding him. Valerius was here. The Black Dragon King would protect him from anything.

Bullet proof glass! He reminded himself. Or rather, Dragon scales and Raziel's fire breath.

"You're nervous!" Claire's eyes widened. "That's so--"

“Lame?” He smiled back. He thought it was lame. Tilly certainly did. He was failing in the cool big brother department, he was sure of it.

“No, genuine, and not at all what I expected,” Claire said. “I mean you sacrificed yourself to save people from a bomb and then, today, on the street, you were so brave, taking charge, and being all badass. That you’re nervous about being interviewed is really cute.”

Cute? Oh, God, that’s probably not what a Dragon Shifter should be called! Raziel must be rolling in his cavern! Caden thought.

Raziel is asleep, snoring loudly, as human things bore him, Valerius remarked dryly.

Indeed, both Dragons had turned their smoldering looks into fully closed eyes. They appeared to be down for the count. Their wings fluttered in a way that reminded him of dogs or cats whose back legs would sometimes twitch when they dreamed about running after squirrels. Caden wondered if their Spirits were dreaming about flying and chasing cows.

I’m sure that Raziel can’t contemplate being nervous of three humans. I mean what could they do to it? Caden pointed out.

The reporters like you. The public likes you. You are... cute, Valerius said and Caden heard his internal snort. But you are also brave and true. Own all those qualities.

Yeah, but shouldn’t I be all polished and careful with the press? Caden asked. Chione wanted to do a press briefing and practice questions before and--

You couldn’t have learned all of that in one day and it wouldn’t have worked, Valerius told him. Your face would betray you. Besides, your genuineness is what is winning them over. Go with it.

Go with it?

Caden contemplated this. If he acted other than true to himself, he wouldn't come across as genuine. If he tried to appear something he wasn't, he had a feeling the press would find out anyway. There was no faster way to lose people's trust than to lie.

Claire's smile was starting to appear a little jagged at the edges as he continued to say nothing. She looked down at her phone, where the question presumably was, then back up at him with mute expectation in her eyes. He remained mute himself.

Filling the silence, Claire continued on rather desperately, "I mean how do you go from fighting in the skies to pledging eternal love to one another? It is eternal right? Fated mates and--"

"Chosen mates," Valerius grumbled, but goodnaturedly, though pointedly.

Caden's deer-in-the-headlights expression faded after Valerius' grumble. He rather loved that Valerius wanted everyone to know that they had chosen one another. While fate may have had something to do with it, their rational--if love was ever rational--decision to be attracted to one another was something Valerius wanted known. They weren't two fools just falling for one another. They weren't pawns in the hands of fate. They were together because it was reasonable and right that they were together.

"Chosen?" Claire blinked.

"We chose each other," Caden managed to say. Now that Valerius had started the conversation for him, he found he could speak again. The ice was melting before the fire. "And I would choose him... again and again and again."

Had he said "again" too much? He wanted to keep saying it. Just keep on repeating it.

Because he would choose Valerius every time. There was no one else in existence he would want to choose more than the Black Dragon King.

He glanced over at Valerius. He could have known exactly what Valerius was thinking if he chose to. He just had to look into the other Dragon Shifter's mind. But he found himself merely glancing swiftly at Valerius' expression and then away to take his emotional temperature.

He was relieved by what he saw. The Black Dragon King had a half smile on his lips that was a play between amusement and... awe. It was as if he couldn't quite believe his luck to have Caden at his side. To Caden that was just crazy. Who was he? No one special! But Valerius made him feel special. Valerius had him wanting to reach the heights of specialness.

"What did the other Dragon Shifters have to say about that? The rumor is that they came here to court you, Caden, but from that symbol in the sky it looks like you made your choice well before all of them arrived. At least before the Silver Dragon Shifter!" Claire chirped.

Shouldn't someone else be asking questions? C'mon, ask us about something else! Anything else!

But the other reporters were so still and quiet that they might have statues. He supposed that even the staid New York Times, let alone a morning show host, wanted the down and dirty about dragon sex!

"There was never any question," Caden found himself speaking again without thought. It was like a cork had popped and his feelings rushed out of him. "It was always Valerius for me. It's always been Valerius. It will always be Valerius."

Caden stared down at their clasped hands and felt a rush of happiness. It might not be political to say what he had, but really, it would have been incredibly insulting to

Anwar if he'd said he'd given everyone a fair shot and then chosen the Black Dragon King. Anwar had just shown up after all! Besides, it was true and the truth could never hurt as much as lies in a situation like this. Not that he would ever lie about his feelings for the Black Dragon King.

Valerius rubbed his thumb in an infinity symbol on the back of Caden's hand. The symbol above. The symbol below. Everything seemed to have double or triple meanings. While he loved that Valerius' words and actions did so, he wasn't so sure he wanted the reporters to be anything but upfront.

"So King Illarion's words claiming you as his mate were...?" Claire let the sentence hang.

Caden realized his lips had pursed as if he was tasting something sour at the mention of the Green Dragon Shifter's name. He quickly wiped away the expression. Though Chione hadn't had long to prep him earlier that day, he was pretty sure she had mentioned something about speaking only neutrally about the other Dragon Shifters. He assumed facial expressions counted as "speaking".

He wasn't even supposed to speak highly of any of them. So gushing about Esme or laughing about Tez or grinning about Kaila or enthusing about Jahara wasn't allowed. Because it might show them favor. And that had worldwide implications. He now wished he had listened harder to what Chione had said.

Realizing that he'd let yet another silence hang, he quickly got out, "The other Dragon Shifters know how Valerius and I... Well, it was obvious from the first that we were... well, you know! Most of them think it's sweet."

He could almost hear Rose rolling her eyes at his choice of words. Tilly was staring at him as if he had vomited on the carpet. Dragon Shifters were not sweet. He glanced at Valerius. His mouth kept moving as if he was having an effort to stop from... laughing?

Oh, God, no!

“I mean... not sweet!” Caden practically shouted. “Really, that’s not... they think it's nice! Uhm, not nice, but cool? No, no, not cool. I mean they are cool with it. Not that they have anything to say really about who we love. We do what we want! Valerius and I are independent Dragons here!”

Valerius snorted. He knew the Black Dragon King had though he covered it with a cough and a crossing of legs. Caden wanted to die at that moment.

Finally, thankfully, Valerius stepped in and rescued him, “I could have saved all of the other Dragon Shifters on the trip if they had reached out to me before flying here. Despite what appeared to be a rocky start, Caden and I quickly found in each other exactly what we were looking for.”

Caden let out a breath. “Yes, yes, exactly. And, once things calmed down between us, Valerius was really there for me. I saw his caring, protective side. I know it’s hard to imagine--” Everyone laughed. Caden hung his head but grinned himself. “He’s a little growly, but he’s got the biggest heart.”

There were collective “aws” around the room. Not from Lisa and Carlos, but definitely Claire and his sister.

“And you, King Valerius? What did you see in King Caden?” Claire asked.

Valerius pursed his lips. “Trouble.”

Caden let out a burst of laughter, which others joined in on after a moment when they saw it was a joke. Valerius’ broad grin and affectionate raking of fingers through the back of Caden’s hair made Caden want to purr just like Iolaire was as it nestled against Raziel’s larger body.

“In all seriousness, besides Caden’s bravery and selflessness, I saw in him change,” Valerius continued. His gaze grew thoughtful and distant as if he were remembering something. “He challenges me to see things differently. He makes me feel like the world is new. And that there are so many possibilities.”

Lisa opened her mouth, but Carlos Estanza of morning show fame stepped in with a question first. “So does that mean that King Caden is getting his own territory or staying in yours? And, if he stays, will there be some sort of joint leadership?”

Caden felt he should have been prepared for this question. Hadn’t he been telling his father and his attorneys the answers since the very beginning? But it would be a really big deal to reveal everything they planned right now. Every word would be spliced, diced and dissected. The stability of the world likely hinged on what he said next.

If he scuppered any idea of a territory of his own, that might actually weaken Valerius’ position. After all, they were mates. Maybe he should request another slice of the world’s pie and add it to Valerius and his own one. But he had no desire to take away anything from the other Dragon Shifters. Yet there was the argument that Illarion was repressing his people so wouldn’t it be good for him to take a part of his? But no, that would lead to war and he felt Chione ready to step in and save him.

“This is my home,” Caden answered, speaking to Valerius and not the reporters. “It’s where I want to stay more than anything.”

“Caden and I have agreed to share territory and rule together,” Valerius stated. It was what Valerius had said before to him, but somehow it felt so momentous. The frantic scribbling of the reporters told him as much. “If Caden wishes to pursue additional territory that will be discussed at a later time.”

Caden let out a breath that he’d been well aware that he was holding.

It was Lisa Yang of the New York Times who raised a pen and said, “But how would the territories be divided? Would every Dragon Shifter be amenable to such a division? And would you put your significant martial might behind it?”

Chione did step in then, “Lisa, as King Valerius indicated, this is Dragon Shifter business that will be discussed at a later time.” When Lisa opened her mouth to object, Chione continued, sweetly, “And it will be revealed to the public at that later time, too.”

Lisa smiled a little tightly, but nodded.

Wow, I didn’t think she’d give up so easily! Caden remarked.

Oh, she hasn’t. Basically, Chione just indicated to her that she’ll get an exclusive on this information when the time is right, Valerius explained and it was so good to hear his mental voice.

Ah, clever Chione.

Always. Besides, Lisa knows that she might not get every question she wants answered, but she will get answers to tough questions we would normally keep quiet on if she plays ball, Valerius said.

“It makes sense that you would share a territory! You’re fated, I mean chosen mates!” Claire quickly amended at Valerius’ scowl at her.

His chosen mate really could put the fear of God into people with a dark look. But if Caden thought that his rambling, painful explanation--not to mention Valerius’ scowl--would end questions about their romance, he was so very wrong.

So very, very wrong.

“What is love like between Dragons?” Claire asked as she scrolled through evidently a ton of questions about his and Valerius’ love life.

The other two reporters stared at her as Claire, once again, trounced whatever unspoken rule about who asks questions and in what order. But Claire ignored them.

“Love... like?” Caden tilted his head to the side as his voice squeaked.

Was she asking if they made love the same way humans did? Or God forbid, was she asking if they had sex in their Dragon forms? And this had him wondering if that was going to happen. Could they have sex in their Dragon forms? And, indeed, what would that be like?

It was definitely something that he and Valerius would be able to give each other as firsts. Valerius had never even touched another Dragon let alone made love to one. And he was certain that Raziel would rather burn other Dragons to a crisp then... then mount them? Oh, God, he really had to stop thinking of this! He could only imagine his face.

“Is the love just between you guys or are Raziel and Iolaire in love, too?” Claire continued on blithely unaware of his growing embarrassment, or maybe she was keenly aware of it. “Do Dragons make love? Can they have babies even if you guys can’t in your human forms?”

“Babies?” Valerius asked with an uplifted eyebrow. “No, no, babies.”

“Aw, but I bet your Dragon babies would be so cute!” Claire’s eyes twinkled. There were high spots of color on her cheeks. She was showing more Crest-white teeth than any commercial.

“No Dragon babies,” Valerius said firmly. “That is not possible.”

He clearly did not want speculation about Dragon babies to get out of hand. It was actually a sore spot for Shifters. They could not reproduce. That was the thing they gave up to become immortal and have their shared existences with their Spirits.

“Will there be a Dragon wedding though? Oh, I’m sure everyone would want a Dragon wedding!” Claire enthused.

Caden glanced over at his parents. They looked a bit bemused, if embarrassed to hear about Dragon babies. But Tilly appeared intrigued about a Dragon wedding...

“That’s uhm... we haven’t gotten that far yet?” Caden once more made his answer sound like a question and it was accompanied by a strangled sound.

“Again, with the cute shyness! But people really want to know all about you, King Caden!” Claire grinned.

“Yeah, I’m not really comfortable with people being interested in me.” Caden scrubbed a hand over the back of his head. That was really an understatement.

“But you’re a hero! Today--”

“I was scared earlier today, too.” When Claire’s eyebrows rose, he put up a hand to stave off the obvious questions. “Not for myself. Being a Dragon Shifter means I’m pretty much bomb-proof.”

The reporters actually laughed. He even thought he saw some smiles on the camera operators’ faces. That relaxed him some.

“What were you afraid of exactly?” It was Lisa, the reporter from The New York Times that followed up.

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be fast enough,” Caden said, recalling his frantic search for

the greatest cluster of spirits and then how he couldn't reach the bombs inside of the store in his and Iolaire's Dragon form. Not to mention the difficulty freezing the bombers and not setting off the bombs. "That, even if I found the bombs, that I would be too late. That, even with all the power I've been given, it wouldn't be enough." He glanced up at Valerius. "Valerius and Raziel are much more powerful than me and Iolaire. But not even they can stop all the bad things from happening. We can just do our best."

Claire bobbed her head as if that made complete sense. Lisa looked thoughtful as if he had given an answer that opened various questions. Carlos gave him a look that was all mock seriousness, but with a friendly edge.

"There was a time when you weren't fast enough. The people in the Below?" Lisa pressed almost gently, but the question was like walking through razor wire.

Caden drew in a breath even as Valerius stiffened. Both of them felt so guilty about that. So terrible beyond words. Valerius blamed himself.

"Caden was not responsible for that," Valerius said, his voice clipped.

"But he was part of what happened. He spurred what happened. Or did you make a mistake, King Valerius?" Lisa asked.

"If love is a mistake," Caden blurted out.

Valerius' eyebrows rose. Lisa stared at him, her forehead furrowing.

"Love? I don't see how--"

"Love. Claire asked earlier about it not being love at first sight between Valerius and me, but love played the biggest role in what happened that day. I know it sounds corny and not something you might think of when you think of Valerius. But he loves

our people. Not just those in this territory either,” Caden said, his mouth dry, his hands sweaty.

“But his actions caused some of those people’s deaths,” Lisa pointed out.

“Valerius thought that I was responsible for the bomb,” Caden explained, rubbing his slick with sweat palms together. “He would do anything to keep our people safe.”

“Yet it ended in people not being safe,” Lisa stated curtly.

Valerius’ hold on him tightened. He sensed that Valerius was now frozen, much as he had been before, with too many emotions crowding his throat. And no way to express them other than Dragon fire. Beyond Valerius, he saw his parents gazing upon him with love and pain.

Caden though, for the first time during this interview, actually felt quite peaceful. He understood all the reasons that Valerius had done what he did. He would share with the world the ones that were necessary for them to know.

“He thought I tried to kill people in the square,” Caden stated simply. “In fact, at the time, he didn’t know that no one had died. And, he feared, that the bomb was the first act of terror I was going to commit.”

“But why?” Claire whispered. “You hadn’t done anything!”

He smiled at her sadly. “Because to enter another Dragon’s territory without permission is pretty much an act of war. And I just seemed to show up out of nowhere when something terrible had happened at the 30th Anniversary of the end of the last war.”

“But I was wrong,” Valerius’ voice was low. “I was so very wrong.”

“Yet I understand why you reacted like you did. You wanted to keep everyone safe. Everything that’s happened since then...” Caden was quiet but then he nodded, “Thinking of the damage I could have done, you had to stop it before it started.”

“But you would never have hurt our people,” Valerius stated.

“But you had no way of knowing that,” Caden reminded him. “Iolaire is just different.”

“You are different,” Valerius stated.

“So the people who died, are you saying that their deaths are justified?” Lisa pressed.

“What? No! That’s not what my son said!” his mother gasped and clutched the front of her shirt.

“Indeed! That’s outrageous!” His father’s eyes snapped.

“You’re mean!” Tilly cried. “I don’t like you!”

“Hey now!” Wally harrumphed.

“So typical of reporters!” Rose snapped.

He knew that Valerius’ lips were drawn back in a snarl. Caden felt Chione coming nearer behind him. He was pretty sure that she was going to lop Lisa’s head off. This was that moment that everyone had warned him about, that he’d seen often enough times himself: the twisting of words. It had to be him though that answered this charge. Not anyone else. It was time for him to step up and be honest.

“No, they are not justified. They could never be. And we will do everything we can to make sure that more deaths do not happen,” Caden said and this time when he met

Lisa's eyes she lowered them. Caden then looked directly into the cameras. "But the people who placed the bomb that started that terrible chain of events that day, they wanted collateral damage. They would say that every death is justified if they get what they want."

"What do they want?" Lisa asked.

Caden's gaze hardened. "It does not matter. Because we won't let them have it."