

Chapter 1: Cade Arden

A siren blared. Lights flashed. Cade's world tilted dangerously as he swerved left, to squeeze ~~in~~ between two buildings to evade the pursuing police officer. He had been trying out his new bird clone, enjoying the exhilaration of flying faster than his humanoid clone ever ran, ~~yet all while knowing, certain~~ he was pressing his luck. He'd never been caught by the police before, but tonight, that was a risk he was willing to take. His friends ~~had~~ warned ~~him~~ about this particular mission, but Cade wasn't worried. ~~He thought it was pretty dray, He liked his odds,~~ and the payback was worth the risk.

~~Cade's evasive~~The maneuver didn't have the effect ~~he Cade~~ was looking for, however. The officer continued to pursue him, arcing into the narrow thoroughfare, ~~the~~ sirens ~~were~~ now blasting an ear-splitting dissonance, and the flashing, spinning lights reflected ~~ed~~ off the metallic surfaces a million times over with dizzying irregularity.

The alleyway was narrower than it had seemed before—although, ~~Cade reasoned,~~ that could just be a shift in perception, given that a humanoid clone ~~with near-human proportions~~ would experience this space between the two buildings very differently than his giant bird would.

"~~Crap Dang it!~~" Cade spread the wings of his bird clone, pulling up short.

Cade was mentally controlling the clone from miles away, and everything that the bird ~~experienced/witnessed or that happened to it,~~ Cade ~~did too~~ also experienced.

~~As Cade T~~turning his head side to side, the bird's eyes rolled, ~~around trying to take~~ in everything at once; the vibrant red and white of the lights ~~spinning-spun~~ atop the cop's hover car ~~and~~ bounced off the buildings, ~~and those reflections danced across the black surface of the bird's eyes, distracting Cade. Cade's vision couldn't focus.~~ When the siren blared again, too close to Cade's own craft, Cade dove to the right into another side alley, tipping sideways to fit his clone's long wingspan ~~into~~ the even narrower space ~~between the metal walls.~~

He could feel the clone's heart racing. As the officer's craft followed him, the tight, metallic corridor magnified the echoing wail of the siren, ~~turning it into a thousand sirens that only grew louder with each wave of the echo.~~ Cade tried to flap his wings, but they hit ~~metal~~ the walls; he was losing altitude. He scraped the ~~metal walls of the~~ building with his talons trying to push off, but he couldn't grab hold of anything. ~~The scream of the sirens echoed in the small space as red light filled the alleyway, turning the glossy surface of the bird's feathers into a dazzling display of dancing red pinpoints, and filling Cade's field of vision with a hazy red.~~

Cade shifted his angle, struggling to reach the open sky above, ~~half~~ climbing, half flying. His clone's breathing was heavy, but controlled, ~~and his beak slightly open.~~ Cade had been training for situations like this. He heard the hover car door slam behind him, a quiet but unmistakable thud amidst the ~~siren's~~ racket ~~all~~ around him.

A deep voice shouted through a voice magnifier, projecting ~~his words~~ inside the comm device lodged in the bird's head, "This is law enforcement! Land your clone immediately!"

With a mighty flap, the bird cleared the oppressive sides of the alley and let the air catch on his wings, lifting him higher. He was free.

Then something stung ~~the his~~ clone's wing, ~~and he~~ It flinched, teetering in the air, as his wing went numb and limp. He spiraled downward, beating his one working wing while trying to stay aloft. With a thud, he smacked into the edge of a slanted roof, his feathers catching on the

solar panels. He tumbled back into the alleyway and hit the ground hard, blinking as a muscular man approached.

Through the clone's eyes, Cade could see the pale, blue circle on the man's forehead, ~~indicating that he was a~~ clone. ~~Of course;~~ Law enforcement officers did ~~n~~ot risk their own lives to chase lawbreakers. The policeman ~~cast~~ flashed a yellow light on ~~the clone~~him and shook his head.

"Pick up your clone at the station during business hours tomorrow."

He pulled out a palm-sized metal box and pointed it at the bird-~~clone~~'s forehead. There was a flash of electricity, and everything went dark.

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Cade groaned. He was ~~lying on his~~ back on the floor of his best friend's basement, ~~sprawled on the floor~~ with the mental connector stuck to his forehead. Pushing off the now-silent connector, he sat up, holding his head to ~~ward off any incoming headaches. keep a coming headache at bay.~~

He forced his eyes open, groaning again and looking around. Valor's basement was small and boxy compared to the spacious home Cade had grown up in, but this space felt homier, ~~so it and~~ was where he and his friends ~~preferred usually wanted~~ to hang out. Given that ~~he Cade~~ and Valor had known one another since they were kids, ~~Cade~~he had spent countless hours there and the stainless-steel walls and white carpet were familiar and comforting to him. It helped that Valor's parents didn't care what pranks they devised while down there and rarely looked in on the boys, giving Cade and his friends ~~—who were prone to bending rules—~~ more liberty than a group of boys their age, ~~—who were prone to bending rules—~~ should have been given.

Next to him, ~~his best friend~~ Valor opened his eyes and blinked. ~~Then, h~~He grinned and ~~ripped~~grabbed the circular clone connector off his forehead.

"Did you see that?" Holding the now-silver connector, he ~~put a victory fist in the air~~ ~~pumped and then~~ He punched Cade in the shoulder. "~~Dude~~Oh, that was totally dray! How'd your end hold up?"

Cade shrugged as ~~next to him~~ Soren, Antham, and Mach also came to ~~next to him~~.

"Got caught," Cade said with a shrug ~~that~~ he hoped passed as casual.

He folded up his long, muscular legs beneath him, appreciating the feel of the soft carpet against his bare feet and ankles, ~~that~~They were peeking out from the hemline of the navy-blue pants of his school uniform ~~because~~ ~~The~~the groupy had come straight from school to Valor's, ~~so h~~He hadn't had time to change, but he didn't mind ~~the uniform~~; ~~the uniform~~it was comfortable enough.

In the last year, Cade had hit his final growth spurt and had shot up to be as tall as his father. He had also worked out religiously, adding a fairly impressive amount of muscle his slim frame. ~~He became one of those men whose strength was hard to guess because he wasn't bulky; he was just tall and toned.~~

Cade irritably ~~brushed off~~ pushed at the straggly bangs that flopped into his eyes; ~~his~~the shoulder length, auburn ~~hair~~strands were ~~was~~ a messy tangle, and in ~~desperate~~ need of a

haircut. He grimaced when ~~his movement only escalated his headache. the motion made his headache escalate.~~

Valor laughed. "~~Aw, really?~~ The legendary Cade Arden got caught? That's bland." He made a face to show he was sorry. "I bet law enforcement will be surprised to see *you pick up your clone.*"

Soren sat up slowly, shoving dark brown hair out of his eyes and rubbing his forehead.

"Looks like Soren's clone didn't make it out ~~clean -too good~~ either," Valor pointed out. "~~Both of you~~*You two* have the disconnect headaches?"

Soren nodded a little and groaned.

Mach ~~sat up from his spot on the ground, folded his beefy arms, and snorted.~~ "~~You both got e~~*Caught, huh?*" ~~He folded his beefy arms.~~ "Better luck next time, I guess."

Antham pushed himself up onto his ~~elbow arm~~ and ran a hand through his sleek, blond hair. "What'd I miss?" He had claimed the only couch in the basement while they connected to their clones, and now he lounged on it, twirling the connector between his fingers. ~~-and Cade rolled his eyes. He looked~~*ing* like an ad for mental connectors.

"Nothing much," Cade replied. ~~-massaging He massaged~~ his temples with his fingertips in an attempt to relieve the pressure ~~he felt~~ there. "Sheesh, they should have given me a chance to disconnect ~~myself~~ instead of ~~immediately~~ zapping my clone ~~immediately.~~"

"Seriously," Soren agreed. Some people could get so sickened by the sudden severance of a connection that the headaches would actually make them throw up.

Valor teased. ~~and made the point that they were both missing—~~ "Or you could just be as good as me and not get caught."

"Whatever, it was my plan that got you guys through!" Cade snorted. "Hey, wait a minute!" Cade turned over to Antham. "Where was your clone? I waited for you outside the law enforcement station so we could go in and swipe the uniform. You never showed up!"

Antham shrugged one shoulder, looking unconcerned. "I knew you'd manage on your own."

"I spent a good fifteen minutes waiting for you! I thought you'd been caught!"

Antham gave a smug smile. "That's one way of putting it."

Cade groaned and put his head in his hands. "Tell me you didn't blow the plan because of some girl."

When Antham only smiled broader, Valor laughed. "I told you! I so told you! Pay up!"

Valor held out his hand.

"Fine." Cade muttered ~~unenthusiastically~~ as he pulled his money card out of his pocket and slapped it into Valor's palm.

Valor ~~scanned Cade's card with his holowatch took Cade's card over to the laser scanner on the wall~~ and punched in an amount.

"Did you wear a hat? ~~to h~~*Hide* your clone's mark?" Cade asked, unable to ~~help but feel just a little curious~~*curb his curiosity* about ~~Antham's antics. what his friend had been up to.~~

Antham tipped his head. "Girls are more into clones than you think. Especially my clone. He's got the looks and I've got the moves. No commitment necessary; girls go crazy for it."

Cade shook his head, accepted his money card back from Valor and said in a tone that sounded far from convinced, "Whatever, man."

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"I was trying out my new humanoid clone, and it's almost as handsome as I am." Antham ~~chuckled~~~~smirked~~ and then added ~~after a little chuckle~~, "Even Meyla wouldn't be able to resist."

Cade's ears turned red and he clenched his jaw. "You know better than to mess with my girlfriend, Antham," he said, fighting to keep his tone level.

"Relax, you know I'm messing with you." Antham laughed, holding up his hands to show that he was joking. "It was some short girl with black hair. Never met her before."

"Keep it dray, man," Cade warned him, unclenching his fists.

Antham chuckled and settled back onto his hands. "Don't be so touchy. Just because you're the boss doesn't mean you can't have a little fun."

Cade rolled his eyes and flopped back onto the floor, covering his face with his hands as his headache throbbed. "That's what we were trying to do tonight, but you didn't show and blasted the whole prank."

"Actually, ~~Antham's right~~~~I agree with Antham~~," Valor cut in. "You take yourself too seriously, Cade."

~~Cade began a protest. "But—" Valor cut him off with a grin. "You really should have seen Wexlan's face. Priceless!" He grinned. "But really, you should have seen Wexlan's face! Priceless . . ."~~

~~Cade's head shot out of his hands~~~~took his hands away from his head~~. "Wait, you got in? I thought the mission had failed for sure."

"Course not!" Valor said, as if the suggestion was ~~absolutely~~ absurd. "Just because you got caught doesn't mean the whole mission failed. This plan was way too important to get blasted."

"Good. That half-breed's got ~~to~~ know his place," Cade grinned.

Mach nodded. "Serves him right for ~~using~~~~stealing~~ our practice field ~~without paying tribute first~~."

~~Soren looked over at them, cradling his head from between his hands. He looked green. "I'm glad getting caught wasn't for nothing," Soren said he managed. He looked like he was going to say more, but slapped a hand over his mouth instead as if fighting back nausea. Cade thought law enforcement might have been a little too severe in cutting Soren's connection with his clone.~~

~~a little sick.~~

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Cade asked, "What'd Wexlan do when he saw you?"

With characteristic exuberance, Valor laughed ~~again~~ and jumped to his feet. "I got in his front door—that code you gave me was perfect, Soren—and, it was dead quiet inside. So, I snuck up the stairs to his room, and everything was dark. I pulled out my compressed light, really quietly, and put my hand on the doorknob." Valor ~~reenacted~~ ~~acted it out~~, ~~reliving~~ the moment for his friends. "And then, BAM! I slammed his door open and flipped on my light and I was like, 'Wexlan Namura! This is law enforcement! You have been charged with a misdemeanor and you will come with me immediately!'"

Cade laughed heartily, the sound infectious, as it usually was. "Did he buy it?"

"Well, I had that uniform you swiped—nice touch by the way—and he had just woken up and he was like, 'What? What's going on?' So, I grabbed him and hauled him right out of bed."

Mach snorted. "No way!"

"You guys should have been there! His face..." Valor tried to imitate Wexlan's face, making his eyes wide and his mouth slack. He cracked up and bent over, laughing too hard to keep talking for a minute.

"And his hair!" he finally gasped. "It was sticking up all over the place! Like this." Valor ran his hands through his disheveled, sand-colored hair, ~~tousling it into an obvious case of bedhead, messing it up to show them what Wexlan's had looked like.~~ "You should have seen him!" He slouched over and imitated Wexlan's face again, ~~making the other four boys laugh. The four other boys howled.~~ ~~Valor's was so pointy chin and bony shoulders on a tall, and skinny frame made the expression even more ridiculous, that the comical effect was magnified by his pointy chin and bony shoulders.~~

When Cade could finally catch his breath he asked, "How'd you get out?"

Valor chuckled. "Just like you said. I told him to get dressed and meet me downstairs in five."

Cade laughed. "And then you just left?" He wiped his eyes. "Oh man! I wish you'd had a visual ~~transmitterfeed.~~"

"I know! It was so dray! I can just see him standing there in the hallway with his clothes on inside out, blinking, and wondering what is going on."

They cracked up.

"You two going to pick up your clones at the station tomorrow?" Valor asked Cade and Soren.

~~Soren looked at Cade.~~ "Yeah, wanna go after school?" ~~Soren asked Cade.~~

~~Cade shrugged.~~ "Might as well get it over with." ~~Cade shrugged.~~

"Well, super dray job guys! I never could have gotten in there if you two hadn't taken the chase for me." Valor grinned.

"See you tomorrow," Soren said, standing up, tucking his connector into his pocket and massaging his forehead again.

"Just wait until we beat Wexlan at the clone games," Cade said, getting up as well. "I think I'll laugh until my ribs crack."