

Chapter 1: The Ceremony

Commented [HJ1]: The following edits are developmental edits ONLY.

Cade Arden looked down upon the crowded square from his hidden perch atop the building across from the capitol grounds. The ceremony was well attended, with all of the seats directly in front of the portable stage filled and most of the large grassy areas being used for standing room only. Security had attempted to keep the walkways clear, but the flow of people along the graveled paths was a moving sea of humanity. There were light poles evenly spaced along the lanes, their soft glow doing little to dispel the gloom of a cloudy evening and from where Cade sat, they created the effect of tiny golden pools scattered about the ground.

Eventually, Cade planned to climb down among all the people he was observing, but since he had been labeled as a vigilante, he had to be careful. Closing his eyes, he checked his mental link to verify his bird-clone was fully charged and ready to go, although he hoped he wouldn't need it. His bird was ready to fly at any time if Cade chose to drop his consciousness into it, but for now, he was going to remain alert and separate from his inanimate clone. Once he dropped his consciousness into the mind of his clone, the bird would activate and his human self would become inert. ~~He hoped one day that would change with the help of his drayster or that he would be able to master using his drayster while in his clone, but for now that hadn't happened.~~ Cade had developed the ability to use his drayster with only a mental link while he was in a clone, but it was mentally grueling on him, and the doctors at the Beygja facilities had decided he was not to use this ability unless absolutely necessary. ~~So now, h~~He either benefited from the added strength and protection of working in one of his clones, *or* he went as a human and had the added abilities afforded him through his drayster.

Commented [HJ2]: This reflects changes to the preceding book.

Draysters were ancient technology created by a long-dead race of beings from the planet Khule. During his initiation into the ~~Forseti~~Forsati – a group who was supposed to be fighting for justice across the universe – Cade had traveled to Khule and had been led, seemingly as if by magic, to the resting place of the final, undiscovered, and most powerful of all the draysters. Months ago, when the ancient weapon chose him, Cade had had no idea what it would mean for him, but every time he slid his left hand into that glove and it formed to his hand snugly, he felt a rush of curiosity and excitement.

Commented [HJ3]: In an earlier book, I changed this and several other names for aesthetics and sound symbolism.

While he observed the crush of humanity below him, he flexed his hand, appreciating the reassuring presence of the glove and the knowing that it enhanced all aspects of him in quite

unexpected ways. Although he hadn't fully mastered the art of wielding a drayster with grace and ease like ~~Saered Spear~~Paragon, his mentor, he was getting there. Today, the plan called for him to be in place with the use of his drayster, rather than his clone, but he was keenly aware that plans could change in an instant.

Cade had been behind the scenes in the government; he and his friends knew of the corruption there. With his own eyes, he had witnessed the current president, Luc Godrys, kill the former president so that he could step into command. He had proof that the ~~Forseti~~Forsati were just as corrupted as the government and they were in collusion one with another. And although he and his friends had saved all of humanity from destruction at the hands of the corrupt leaders, no one really knew that and the governmental propaganda had served to sway the population's allegiance toward President Godrys, rendering Cade and his rebel force nearly powerless.

Scanning the crowd, Cade counted the familiar faces, feeling quietly happy that his friends still stood with him, even though the public was basically against them. They blended in well with the crowd, without any identifying marks, so the only reason Cade could see them was because they were his friends. He spotted Wexlan and his sister, Quin, first; they were his newest friends, but he had developed such a strong bond with them because of working so closely with them once he arrived at the Beygja compound. He continued scanning the crowd for the other three familiar faces: Antham, Soren, and Valor. He had known them for many years and knew their faces, their habits, and their stances almost better than he knew his own. He grinned when he located each of them, hiding in plain sight throughout the excited crowd.

Valor and Soren had also been- ~~recruited by the Forsati~~~~chosen to work with the Forseti~~ ~~and, Valor made it in, and,~~ even though Cade had left the organization after he uncovered the problematic connection between the corrupt government and the ~~Forseti~~Forsati, his ~~friend~~two friends had chosen to remain enrolled. Putting their very lives on the line, they had opted for the clandestine adventure of being double agents, carrying information from within the ~~Forseti~~Forsati to Cade and the Beygja. Cade had had misgivings, at first, because if they were discovered, the penalty was death, but they had managed to create a network of allies within the ~~Forseti~~Forsati and their connections had been a great service to the Beygja. Until their mission to blow up the master clonebridge, then the two of them also had to leave the order. Their identities had been linked to the event and they had been added to the rapidly growing list of "wanted"

people. Now, they, too, were in hiding under the protection of the Beygja, after swearing fealty to their cause.

A big grin crossed Cade's face when Soren glanced up in his direction and nodded imperceptibly. That night, they were all in their new humanoid clones, but they were not the only clones in the crowd. Because clone technology had been made affordable to practically everyone, most of the citizens had them now and used them regularly. However, unlike the rest of the clones in the crowd, Soren's clone did not have the blue indicator light on his forehead. No one knew that the Beygja had developed a way for humans and clones to connect without the revealing forehead connector and it gave them a favorable edge.

Cade's father, Jeff, who was a genetics engineer, had worked day and night to recreate the technology that used psi waves to connect the consciousness of the human being to his clone, bringing that machine to life. Through a small incision in a simple surgery, they placed psi transmitters at the base of the human's skull. This tiny piece of technology replaced the metal disks they used to wear on their foreheads and paired with the transmitters in the new humanoid clones that were specifically designed to look like a fallible human, rather than an oversized, powerful clone. After practicing day and night with the new psi wave technology, Cade and his friends had perfected their abilities and now were in the crowd, mentally connected with no signs that they were. This combination of improvements provided them absolute concealment in the crowd and the ability to mentally communicate with one another. They had mastered it all in training and at play; that night, they'd test it out for real.

Eyeing the whole space, Cade made note that the platform where the ceremony was going to take place was surrounded by several rows of armed guards on the lookout for any troublemakers. Cade wasn't planning on there being any trouble, but in the past he had experienced Godrys' guards to be jumpy and trigger-happy. That night, though, he was pretty confident that they wouldn't start anything because that would shine an unfavorable light on President Godrys and his recently acknowledged allies, the ~~Forseti~~Forsati, in front of the hundreds of press members with their cameras.

An unhappy expression crossed Cade's lips as he looked at ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor, his old ~~Forseti~~Forsati instructor, standing on the stage with the president. This ceremony had been planned to reward ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor and show appreciation to the ~~Forseti~~Forsati for their devotion

to justice and their most recent actions to further that cause. The absurdity of the situation caused him to clench his fists and his jaw as he climbed down from his vantage point and entered the crowd. Shaking his head, he remembered how he had once been so proud to be chosen to join their ranks, to be a ~~Forseti~~Forsati Elite, even. It felt like a lifetime ago, although it had been only a few months.

Now that he was down among them, Cade scanned the crowd of faces around him – all citizens of ~~Sacerus Gladius~~Gladius on the planet ~~Geweald~~Galtra – he could see the excitement and trust shining in their eyes. He knew that many of them were there because they believed they were supposed to be and that the majority of them mistrusted the ~~Forseti~~Forsati, but they believed wholeheartedly in Godrys, as though everything he said was gospel truth. If Luc Godrys thought ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor and the ~~Forseti~~Forsati were good, then they had to be. Cade, however, was not of that mind and it was the reason why he had chosen to join with the Beygja, instead. Although that group of people was called “vigilantes” or “rebel,” Cade felt fully aligned with their purpose and was proud to stand with them, albeit in hiding.

That night, though, he wasn't there to create a stir or wreak havoc. He and the other Beygja were there in an attempt to gain further understanding of ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor's intentions. ~~The event would be televised, but Cade didn't trust the footage that the government was putting out these days. He wasn't going to accept the web of lies without knowing for himself.~~ Most of the Beygja had once been in influential positions within the government and had uncovered the treacherous truths hidden behind ~~this~~ rather fragile veil of lies. Because of this, they all had an understanding of ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor's desire to rule the entire planet.

“Is everyone set?” Cade thought out to the group connection. The new psi technology provided the means for setting up group communication based on specific needs. It was handy in moments like this because Cade needed to only think through a series of simple commands to connect with either a couple people or the entire group involved in the mission. “Sound off, please.”

Following their line of command, the group began mentally replying.

“One,” Wexlan called out. “Set.”

Cade nodded, as he kept walking and scanning the crowd. He pictured Wexlan's new clone, designed to not reflect his Shaelixx heritage, at all. For safety, the new clones were all rather vanilla, with no identifying markings and bland personality traits. Given that they were in

Commented [HJ4]: The original chapter didn't explain why the group risked their lives to attend the inauguration. In fact, the entire chapter was exposition that didn't have any relevance to the original plot. This first explanation is fixing the first half of that problem.

hiding, it was important that these new clones not reflect anything of who they really were, even in gender. The engineers had made these new humanoids androgynous in appearance and that, in itself, was one of the most powerful concealment aspects of them. Wexlan's clone was a pale-skinned, shorter businessman who looked book smart and far from strong, although, when in high gear, this new clone could pick up and throw an object that was five times its weight.

Cade felt the sigh, more than heard it when Valor responded, "Two. Set."

Valor still felt resentful that Cade had chosen Wexlan as his first in command of their squadron. Cade and Valor had been best friends from the moment they met, but Cade knew that Wexlan's wisdom from his Shaelixx ancestors was an asset to their team and made him a powerful second. Wexlan's seriousness countered Valor's playfulness and complimented Cade's abilities in a way that created a formidable leadership team with the three of them. But Valor was still bent and Cade could easily imagine the scowl forming on the face of his clone. Valor had chosen a clone whose form was close to his own: tall, slender, and bony, but his clone appeared to be a much older character who could be a distracted professor, complete with a five o'clock shadow ~~athick glasses~~ and messy hair. Of all the new clones, his was the most masculine.

"Three," called out Quin's voice. "Set."

Cade had seen that the clones of Wexlan and Quin were standing together near the front of the crowd. She had opted to swing her equally pale-faced clone toward the female side that night, so they could carry off the façade as husband and wife. Being sister and brother in real life, Wexlan and Quin worked well together and their ability to understand one another's moves before they were made created a convincing sense of familiarity that a couple would have. They made an amusing pair to look at, however, given that Quin's clone was nearly a head taller than her brother's and her face seemed to be permanently serious, even when she smiled, whereas Wexlan's clone seemed to have a perma-grin.

"Set. Oh! This is Soren," he said, instead of calling out his number.

Cade shook his head slightly, smiling and rolling his eyes. *So like Soren – always willing to break the rules wherever he can.*

Soren's new clone was formed with balletic grace. He had chosen to lean into the grace that night and had dressed femininely. He found it hilarious to be parading about as a woman, knowing that if he were pushed, his clone would knock anyone into the next decade. While she

appeared to be frail and willowy, his clone was anything but that and masquerading as a fragile damsel was a joke that he found to be highly amusing.

“Five,” ~~Sacred-Spear~~Paragon’s voice stated emphatically, as though to remind everyone they were supposed to be counting off. “Set.”

~~Sacred-Spear~~Paragon, Cade’s mentor, was one of the few sentient clones to escape the purging hunts in the past. When engineers had discovered that clones were thinking for themselves and behaving without the commands of their humans, there had been a sweeping destruction of many of them. ~~Sacred-Spear~~Paragon, who had once been part of the ~~Forseti~~Forsati Elite himself, had gone into hiding and remained so to that day. Therefore, he was concealed, rather than being among the crowd. If he was needed, he would join in the fracas, but until then, he’d stay inside the dilapidated building on the edge of town and observe the group through the monitor systems that were attached to each clone in their group.

“Six here,” Antham stated. “I’m set.”

Cade glanced to his right, locating Antham near him, a clone that appeared to be a young man who was barely old enough to be in high school. Cade had been curious as to why Antham chose a clone that looked so young. He discovered that, much like Soren, he liked the fact that his clone’s appearance belied the truth of its abilities. “And...” he had once said to the group, causing Quin to roll her eyes and the guys to all snicker, “besides, high school girls are fun to make out with and he’s good looking enough to catch their attention.”

“Seven. Set,” Elicia said quietly.

Cade smiled, glad that Elicia had chosen to join him and his friends. ~~She was a replacement for their other number seven, but Cade had to admit she was a perfect fit. She was a former Forsati, like Cade and Valor had been invited to Forseti boot camp but had not been, much to her relief, invited to initiation. In fact, she and Valor were a little more than former teammates, as far as Cade could tell.~~ She was a powerful fighter who was swift in her moves and keen in her strategizing abilities, but ~~she had also been fiercely loyal to the Forsati she had a sense of the destructive and insidiously unethical nature of the Forseti, so she had wanted out before they were even halfway through boot camp and their ideals of justice. Somehow, thank goodness, Valor had convinced her of the truth. Cade shook his head. That dog.~~

~~Her clone was the tallest of their clones, with a chiseled jaw, narrow eyes, and closely cropped, spiky hair. That night, she had chosen to dress evocatively, as though she was a~~

~~professional model who had just walked off the runway of the latest fashion show. She was approaching him through the crowd, smiling provocatively at him. He had a keen sense of being the prey being stalked by a panther and he watched all the heads turn and eyes focus on her as she passed. Cade watched as she stalked forward in her evening gown with predatorial precision. She gave him a nod.~~

Overhead, the clouds were thick and low, threatening to unleash the storm that had been forecasted for that evening. Cade was grateful for that because his rain gear provided the perfect cover and he pulled the hood lower over his eyes to conceal his identity as much as he could. No one was really paying attention to him; they were all enthralled with anticipation of the impending ceremony and focused on the stage in front of them, but he believed that being “too cautious” was not a thing. Smiling at Elicia as she stepped up next to him to hold the spot he had anchored, Cade nodded and headed for his post at the streetlamp that stood midway through the plaza, just as Godrys began the ceremony.

Whatever else he was, Luc Godrys was the epitome of a politician. ~~He always had been. The last time Cade has seen him, he'd been groveling for his life, saying he never intended what Dezlor did, and here he was alive and preaching Dezlor's dogma again.~~ His opening remarks were a blending of State of the Planet speech and an inaugural diatribe filled with promises Cade was sure would go unfulfilled, but it whipped the crowd into a frothy frenzy of frenetic energy. Godrys spoke about the terrorists that were attempting to thwart their peaceable existence, naming Cade Arden as the “worst of them all.” Cade felt momentary amusement, listening to the man call him the worst terrorist of them all; the irony that Cade had once dated Meyla Godrys, Luc's only daughter, and now the man was labeling him a terrorist was not lost on Cade. He pushed aside the memories of Meyla, trying to focus on the words pouring out of Godrys' mouth. He missed her, ~~—Do I? Maybe I just THINK I'm supposed to miss her...—~~ but they were now living very different lives. He was in hiding, living in a compound, and with the Beygia. She lived in ~~Saerus Gladius~~ Gladius, worked for the government, and was the president's daughter. Two very different lives.

“We must stand together,” Luc exclaimed passionately. ~~Forsati~~ Forsati, government, and valiant citizens all, we must stand together to hold back the rising tide of anarchy.”

The crowd cheered loudly for several moments. Cade looked over at Wexlan and Quin whose clones were closest to him.

“This is crap,” Wexlan muttered mentally.

Cade nodded and Godrys went on, “I pledge my administration to the task of locating and crushing the underground movement of the Beygia.”

The crowd cheered enthusiastically. Cade remained silent and still, choosing to not look around because he didn’t want to see their joy; they had no idea how big of a lie it was.

“We do not stand alone,” Godrys said, bouncing his hands in front of him, the universal signal for quieting down. “The honorable and powerful ~~Forseti~~Forsati have agreed to work with us in this matter.” Fewer people cheered, the sound noticeably quieter and Luc addressed that immediately, “I know there are those who mistrust the ~~Forseti~~Forsati, as many do when faced with an organization that seems to operate outside the circle of our laws. However, the noble ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor has assured me that we *will* work together, share information, and return ~~Saerus~~Gladius~~Gladius and all of ~~Geweald~~Galtra to the peaceful society we all crave.”~~

The cheering and applause made a thunderous cacophony for several minutes. Godrys was as powerful as a speaker as was ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor. Standing quietly in the crowd, Cade seethed and resisted the urge to raise his drayster and blast everyone in sight, first of all Godrys and ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor. He knew the innocent people around him were only enthralled with the lies because it was what crowd mentality could do. But the two men on the stage knew exactly what they were doing and Cade felt angry about that.

Raising his hands, Godrys waited for the noise to quiet so his words could be heard.

“Tonight, we gather to publicly show our appreciation to ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor and the ~~Forseti~~Forsati for their swift actions in response to the assassination of my predecessor by that notorious outlaw, Cade Arden.”

Words that were a mixture of despair over the loss of their beloved president and anger at the mention of Cade’s name filled the air. Cade wanted to scream the truth – *It was GODRYS that killed the president!*

“The willingness shown by the ~~Forseti~~Forsati,” Godrys went on, speaking over the mumble-grumble, “to hold together the reins of government, gave us the time we needed to pull ourselves away from the dark despair of our grief and back toward the light of justice. While it is true that the assassin has not yet been caught, the ~~Forseti~~Forsati assure me that it is only a matter of time. Their plans are to not only catch the killer, but to round up those who support him. We must remain vigilant. We must, each one of us, pledge to assist our gallant allies in any way we

can. We must keep our eyes and ears open, and report any suspicious activity to our police force, which will then pass the information on to the ~~Forseti~~Forsati. In this way, we will root out the evil that lives amongst us and return our planet to peace and justice!”

The crowd was beside itself, the mounting energy beginning to concern Cade. He feared that one or two more of Godrys’ well planned and perfectly landed statements would turn this crowd of peace-loving citizens into a violence-hungry mob. He could see how the deceptive man was able to expertly turn a peaceable situation into a bloodbath in the blink of an eye, but Cade also knew that this preacher-like energy was not Godrys’ normal come-from. He, like all of them there, had become a pawn of the ~~Forseti~~Forsati, but Luc had done so willingly. As Luc turned away from the podium, Cade saw a shadow of concern and uncertainty cross Godrys’ face, but he was certain he was the only one who had seen it.

Luc nodded to ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor who was sitting primly, stoically, adorned in the ~~Forseti~~Forsati maroon robes with the gold symbol of the three interlocking knots emblazoned on the upper portion of his sleeves. ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor rose, stepping toward the podium. In his left hand, he firmly held his drayster staff that he wielded like a cane that was providing him stability to walk. Cade knew that wasn’t the case and he imagined that with every step, each time that drayster came into contact with the ground, a wave of energy went out over the heads of the crowds, further feeding the frantiness. As ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor stepped up beside the podium, Luc crouched down for a moment and pulled something out from beneath it. A curiously smug expression crossed ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor’s face.

When he straightened, Luc was holding a sizeable violet crystal in his hand and he raised the talisman over his head. Within seconds, the crowd quieted and Luc said, “In appreciation of his service, I present the Crystal of Peace to ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor, Leader of the ~~Forseti~~Forsati.”

As a misty rain began to fall, Godrys handed the globe to ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor and stepped to the back of the stage, leaving the ~~Forseti~~Forsati in the spotlight. ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor stood for a moment, silently gazing into the stone in his hand and the crowd went wild. The purple orb was transparent and flawless. Deep within it was a perfectly placed black heart and the entire thing seemed to be alive in his hands, as it glistened with the droplets of the gently falling rain. It seemed to pulse as if it had a life of its own, but Cade knew that was only an illusion caused by a combination of the water droplets that coated its surface and the power of ~~Dezlor’s manipulation~~Dezlor’s drayster.

As Cade stared at the symbol of peace being held by one of the most evil men in the galaxy, he had to stifle a laugh. In fact, the translucent globe with a black heart was exactly how Cade had come to view ~~DemezlorDezlor~~: hollow but holding a nugget of darkness. Thunder rolled over the plaza and ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ lifted his head theatrically, playing into the dramatic scene nature had created for him, as if he had called it down himself. The crowd hushed, eager to hear what he had to say.

Cradling the offering, ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ addressed the crowd, with a dramatically quiet and somber voice, so that the crowd grew instantly silent and leaned forward. ~~Although he was speaking in hushed tones, Cade guessed that, through the use of his drayster, he was somehow projecting his voice so everyone would hear it as though he was whispering right in their ears.~~

“This storm that swirls around us is but a precursor to the storm that threatens us all. Rather than rain, thunder, and lightning, however, what threatens us is Cade Arden and his deluded followers. We must root out this...” he paused for dramatic effect, “*infection*. We must work together to preserve the peace and allow justice to prevail.”

Cade shook his head imperceptibly, feeling disgusted. ~~Demezlor continued to pontificate eloquently and rather convincingly about the virtues of justice and the imminent peril of anarchy.~~ He sounded like he knew something about right and wrong, although Cade ~~knew~~ felt he rarely visited the zone of “right,” as he remembered the night that he had been taken to an overcrowded tenement basement where he saw a room filled with Shaelixx who had been tasked with the sole purpose of processing drugs. ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ had told Cade on that occasion that what they were doing was necessary to keep the money flowing into the ~~ForsetiForsati~~ coffers.

~~He had refused to listen to Cade’s protests about slavery and had argued that the Shaelixx were not really people and that what they were doing was their calling in life: to be slaves. Although they were slaves, they didn’t know they were slaves and they felt happy to be doing the work they were doing. He had, somehow, convinced them all that their calling in life was to be treated like animals and do his bidding. He had also convinced himself that they were happy about it, although Cade could clearly see the opposite was true.~~ Cade had looked around the room that night, at the silent suffering on the faces of the men, women, and children, and knew, at that moment, that the ~~ForsetiForsati~~ way was not right.

His mistake, if indeed it was a mistake, had been voicing his concerns to ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ and boisterously rejecting the twisted logic the man had offered as an explanation. From that

Commented [HJ5]: See: above.

moment on Cade, and his family, became a thorn in ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor's side. The ~~Forseti~~Forsati leader had sent his goons to the Arden home with orders to round up the family and detain them. Cade and his parents had managed to get away, but they had been branded as enemies of the state. Life had never been the same after that.

Cade ground his teeth forcefully and the sound rattled through the psi lines. ~~His teammates had grown used to the sound because Cade clenched his jaw and ground his teeth every time the name "Demezlor" was mentioned. While Demezlor was speaking eloquently and the crowd was enthralled, Cade was disgusted, as were all his friends. Rightfully so.~~

"How can they not know they're being duped?" Elica's voice came through their mental connection.

"Stop grinding your teeth, Arden," Soren's voice reminded him. Everyone chuckled.

~~Their laughter was stopped cold. "Thanks," Cade muttered mentally and added, "They can't know they're being duped because they believe the Forseti stands for justice. None of them have seen what we've seen or experienced what we experienced. No one even knows about the master clonebridge..."~~

Their number seven stood on the stage in front of them.

Mach.

Cade's heart plummeted. His old friend's identity in the clonebridge attack had been uncovered, and he had been court marshaled. Valor had desperately been trying to hack into the government's systems to find Mach's location, even earlier today, but Godrys and Dezlor had seen it coming and been one step ahead all along.

"He's alive," Elicia murmured through the psi connection.

"I thought he was dead!" Antham whooped. Cade felt something lighten in him. Antham was right! As long as he was alive, there was a chance.

He saw Antham drawn quickly to the stage. Cade couldn't blame him, as he was already falling in step behind him.

"Yes, indeed, tonight will be the first step towards eradicating that infection," Dezlor was saying. Cade glanced up and saw a smile growing across his face.

A loud curse echoed through Cade's audio. "Get out of there! Cade get out!" It was Quin. Cade froze, grasping for Antham's clone back, but couldn't quite reach.

Commented [HJ6]: This was originally included as a one-off mention in the second chapter, but I felt it would be much more emotionally significant on stage. Adding it into the first chapter had threefold benefits: one, adding that emotional significance; two, making the first exposition chapter relevant to the rest of the book; and three, to add impetus to the threat of the clonebridge, which was originally a distant threat that no one was sure would work.

Mach stepped forward. Distantly, Cade noticed that he was unbruised, completely unsullied.

“My name is Mach Tethyr, and I am here to tell you that Dezlor speaks the truth. I am a member of the Beygja. We truly have been an infestation, a terrorist organization.”

Cade watched Antham’s neck jerk up. It was Mach speaking. Cade couldn’t believe it, but it was Mach speaking. The words didn’t match. It didn’t compute. More than Mach was loyal to Antham or Cade or any of them, Mach was loyal to justice. This was wrong. Something was wrong.

“I cannot revoke my part in the raids and deaths of clones caused by the Beygja. But I hope I can help our country heal by stepping forward.”

Godrys put his hand on Mach’s back. Something was unreadable in that man’s eyes.

Cade felt a growl threatening to rip from his throat. None of them should have their hands on his friend.

Dezlor stepped forward next. “Mr. Tethyr is willing to step forward on this auspicious day and make amends for—”

“—No,” Mach interrupted him. He could hear Elicia suck in a breath. “I cannot make amends for what I’ve done. But I am here to give myself over to justice. This is my last request.”

“What does he mean?” Soren muttered. Then again, louder and faster, “What does he mean?”

There was no answer, until Quin finally breathed. “The master clonebridge. It’s operational.”

As if he heard the truth from her own lips, Dezlor smiled almost imperceptibly, then turned to their friend, his prisoner. “Yes, Mr. Tethyr. Justice, on this, the dawn of President Godrys’s career.”

Then an unfamiliar soldier approached Mach with a blaster.

“No!” Elicia’s scream ripped through the psi connection, but it merely ruffled the breeze in the large crowd.

Cade couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Mach knelt on the ground.

The man raised his blaster.

There was a bright light, and a thud, and Mach lay motionless on the stage.

~~Cade's blood burnt. His drayster, too. Several sighs went through the group's mental connection. Feeling his anger mounting.~~

~~Cade began to lose control and unintentionally gripped the lamppost tightly in his left hand.~~ Before he was aware of what was happening, his drayster began to glow, the ~~goldalingildalin~~ flaring in a line up his index finger and causing a yellow light to emanate from Cade's hand.

~~He was clenching the lightpole too tightly. He lost control. A bright burst sizzled through the air. The flow of energy that was capable of manipulating and bending light sent an electrical pulse into the post, the surge overpowering the system.~~ The energy rippled out through the system, causing the lights to flare brightly and then explode in a ripple outward from where Cade stood, plunging the gathering space into an ever-expanding darkness.

The sparks from the blown bulbs seemed to break the crowd out of the entrancement ~~of Demezlor's words~~. The startled populace rushed to get out of the downpour of glittering fire, sweeping Cade along with them. When everyone was a safe distance from where the sparks were falling from the sputtering fixtures above and landing with sizzles upon the wet ground, they turned and faced the stage expectantly, as if ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor had the answer – as if *he* was the answer for everything.

Cade knew ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor had figured ways to use his drayster that were far beyond what his drayster's code was capable of. However, he was certain that fixing blown light fixtures and fried circuitry were not among the extended and twisted abilities. That did not stop the man from trying, though, as he raised his staff, holding it out like he were some great prophet who was going to free his starving people from a malevolent ruler. Little did the crowd know, ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor, himself, was the malevolent ruler, not the benevolent savior. Cade could see that ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor hoped he would be able to restore light, but he could guess that everyone around him believed he was just asking for their silence, since the crowd grew quiet at his gesture. After a few moments, when the square remained dark, ~~Demezlor~~Dezlor smiled falsely, the expression never reaching his eyes, which Cade knew was the norm for him.

~~He was a psychopath and a worm. Cade was nearly choking on his anger and group. It was going to take an entire army of electrical engineers to repair the square's electrical system and even Cade knew his own drayster with the ability to repair was not powerful enough to undo the damage he had just mistakenly reaped upon the circuitry.~~

~~DemezlorDezlor~~ called out with a strong voice, louder than before, “Be calm. It is just the storm; nothing but the storm. A bolt of lightning must have struck one of the towers.”

Cade was close enough to the stage to see the tightening around ~~DemezlorDezlor~~’s eyes, indicating that he was aware of the true source of the blackout. His words, though, soothed the crowd and ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ continued on, unwilling to lose the momentum he had stirred up. Grateful that the crowd had swept him away and pretty much buried him in their midst, Cade noticed ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ looked directly at the lamppost where had been standing when the blackout occurred.

~~“No matter.” The head Forsati’s eyes never left Cade’s. “I vow to uphold the government and obliterate all those who attack the innocent in their personal quests for power.”~~

~~“Oh,” Soren muttered through the mental lines, “So Demezlor is going to wipe himself out, then. That’ll help us out a lot.”~~

~~Cade’s team all snickered silently.~~

“One day,” Cade whispered back through the line, “all those on a personal quest for power *will* be obliterated, ~~DemezlorDezlor~~. We promise you that.”

He felt a surge of pride as he heard six different utterances of agreement. ~~In his mind, through the psi line, he smiling, he nodded once and mentally~~ commanded, “Move out.”

~~There was nothing they could do for Mach’s body.~~

He began backing out of the crowd, away from the stage, as everyone reported that they were on the move too. With the lights out and the rain growing heavier, their presence was ignored and they moved through the people like shadows, silent and unnoticed. When Cade made it to the fringes of the crowd, he turned back toward the stage to see ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ toss the sizeable Crystal of Peace in the air histrionically. The dignitaries on the podium collectively gasped in horror, but with no effort, ~~DemezlorDezlor~~ caught the orb as if it were light as a feather.

Turning back to the podium he said, “I vow to always be there to catch those who are falling prey to the wicked and I vow to crush the wicked in the process.”

Regaining their composure from having watched their most cherished symbol be treated with so much disregard, the crowd’s voices rose in a triumphant cheer.

~~“Well, true to form, Demezlor was a theatrical travesty of grand proportions,” Wexlan muttered down the line.~~

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~~“Yes,” Quin agreed.~~

~~“To the rendezvous point, quickly,” Cade commanded, as the crowd began to disperse, all of them chatting about how lucky they were to have the Forseti on their side and Godrys and Demezlur at the helm.~~

