

MAGES &
DRAGONS
BOOK 2

A brown dragon with large, leathery wings is perched on the letter 'S' of the word 'SKY'. The dragon is facing left, with its tail extending downwards. The background of the cover features a close-up of two faces in profile, one on the left and one on the right, appearing to be in a close embrace or about to kiss. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, blues, and pinks, with a large, glowing orb in the center. At the bottom, a small town or village is visible, nestled in a valley.

REACHING
FOR THE SKY

CATHERINE LIEVENS

Jarvis and Marlow were together for decades—can they get their love back?

It's Jarvis's turn to find his shield, and he almost wishes it weren't. He and Raleigh knew each other as children and had been together a long time when Raleigh was taken from him, and he doesn't know if he can keep his distance while Raleigh deals with his new life.

Marlow has no idea who he was in the past, but he knows who he is in the present, or at least, he thinks he does, until he and his son are attacked and freaking mages appear from out of nowhere. It's a whirlwind as he and Jason are taken to a castle in the middle of nowhere and he's told that he's supposed to be the protector of one of the mages.

And that they were in love before he was Marlow.

Jarvis gives Marlow everything he can ever remember wanting—a family, someone to love, and a place to call home. He and the mages and shields are in danger, though, and Marlow is ready to fight to keep his new life and the love of his life safe.

Even though he can't remember him.

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Reaching for the Sky

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Reaching for the Sky
Mages & Dragons 2

By

Catherine Lievens

Chapter One

Everything around Jarvis was familiar. After so many years spent in the castle, he would have been surprised if anything had been different.

Well, something was. A new person was at the table, and Jarvis couldn't look away from him.

Parker had only recently moved into the castle. He'd done so with his best friend, and now the two of them were part of the family. After so long, it was odd to have someone new, but not in a bad way. Besides, Parker and Ansley were together, and Jarvis couldn't begrudge either of them for that. He wanted Ansley to be happy.

He just wished he wasn't so jealous.

He'd lost his shield, too, and he still didn't know what had happened to him. He wouldn't find out until Ansley perfected the spell he'd used with Parker, and while Jarvis was impatient, he was also terrified. Parker couldn't remember his past. He couldn't remember Ansley from before, and he never would. It was probably a good thing in their situation, because they hadn't been together before, but Jarvis and Raleigh had.

They'd been together a long time. They'd dreamed of building a family, and all those dreams had vanished with Raleigh. Jarvis had been desperate to find him again, but over the years, he'd started to make his peace with the fact that he never would.

And now Raleigh was within reach. There was a chance that Jarvis would finally have him again.

But Raleigh wouldn't remember him. He'd probably go by another name and have friends, possibly a family—the family he and Jarvis had wanted to build together. Jarvis wanted children, but it was Raleigh who had been convinced they would make good fathers, especially together. It was a good thing they hadn't had the opportunity to have kids before

Carlyle went rogue, if anything, because Jarvis hadn't had to tell them that their father had vanished.

But Jarvis and Raleigh had been separated for a long time. Jarvis wouldn't be surprised if Raleigh had found someone to share his life with, and he didn't know if he was strong enough to find out for sure. He needed his shield because he needed to be protected and to be able to defeat Carlyle, but he didn't know if his heart would survive.

Something knocked against his arm, jerking him out of his thoughts. He looked to the side at a frowning Penley.

"What is it?" Penley asked. He leaned closer. "You haven't been yourself lately. What's going on in that big head of yours?"

Jarvis snorted. "It's not that big."

"I'm not sure about that. I mean, you *are* the smartest of all of us."

Jarvis had always been their unofficial leader, although he suspected that had more to do with the fact that he was the oldest than because he was smart. Even Tyne was a few years younger than Jarvis, and while Jarvis didn't exactly feel like a grandpa, he was a good decade older than most of the others. That had always kept him slightly apart from them, even during their years together in the castle. He didn't mind being the person they came to when they had a problem, though. It kept his mind away from his own problems, and he had plenty of those.

And it was all his fault.

As Carlyle's master, he should have seen that Carlyle was going down the wrong path. He should have stepped in before Carlyle got out of hand, but instead, he'd been too focused on Raleigh and their life together. He should have kept an eye on Carlyle. If he had, he would have been able to stop him before he wreaked havoc.

To this day, he still didn't know what Carlyle had been thinking. He'd wanted more power, but to do what? Take over the world? Become rich? Jarvis supposed some people

enjoyed having power over others, and while he couldn't comprehend it, maybe that was what pushed Carlyle to do what he'd done.

Whatever the reason behind Carlyle's actions, it was too late to change things. Carlyle was back, but the shields weren't, except for Parker. That left Jarvis and the others vulnerable, which didn't sit right with him. He might be the unofficial leader, but he was the leader nonetheless, which meant his job was to keep everyone safe. In turn, that meant finding the other dragons before Carlyle could, and *that* meant getting over his fear of heartbreak once he found out what Raleigh's life had been like without him.

He wouldn't begrudge Raleigh for having built a family or for having someone he loved. They'd been separated for decades, and Raleigh didn't remember Jarvis. It wouldn't be fair for Jarvis to expect him to have been alone the entire time, but that didn't mean it was easy to accept that they might never be together again. Jarvis wasn't sure what he'd do if that happened.

Like the situation between Ansley and Parker had shown, having the mage and his shield bonded in a loving relationship was important. It helped the magic flow and strengthened the dragon and the mage, which Jarvis hadn't realized because he'd always had that with Raleigh. They'd grown up together, and they'd been each other's first love.

Raleigh had also been Jarvis's last love, but Jarvis didn't expect he could say the same for Raleigh.

"Jarvis?" Penley said.

His tone told Jarvis that he'd been trying to get his attention for a while, and he remembered that Penley had been talking to him.

He forced himself to smile. "I apologize. I've been lost in my thoughts lately."

Penley gave him an understanding smile. "I think we all have been since Ansley found Parker. We're so close to getting them back, but the fact that they don't remember us is scary."

He was right. Jarvis had to remember that he wasn't the only one in this situation. Not every mage had been romantically involved with their shield, and none of them had been with them for as long as Jarvis had, but their shield was still a part of them. They'd been torn apart when Carlyle had cast his spell, and while finding them again didn't mean they'd be reunited in the way they had been before, it would still be better than not knowing where they were or what was happening to them. Everyone around the table wanted the dragons back. Jarvis wasn't alone in that, and he needed to remember that, because the other mages deserved his attention and support.

And who knew, maybe by doing so, he'd be able to stop obsessing over Raleigh and the life he was living without him.

"I think I finally perfected it," Ansley said from the other side of the table.

His words caught Jarvis's attention. "The spell?"

Ansley nodded. He looked slightly worried, but Jarvis knew that was because he tended not to have faith in himself and what he could do. He'd been hesitant through the entire process, even after he'd found a way to locate the dragons. Jarvis suspected he'd feel that way until all of them were reunited with their mages, and while he wanted to insist that Ansley knew what he was doing, he doubted Ansley would believe him.

Focusing on the result was easier than trying to change Ansley's mind.

"Does that mean we can cast the spell again?" Tyne asked.

He was usually quiet, but it wasn't surprising that he was stepping into the conversation this time. He might be gruff and appear uncaring, but he wanted his shield back as much as every other mage.

Ansley nodded again. "Now that I have Parker, I have more control over the magic. I've also had more time, and I know it sounds weird because I've had decades to work on the spell, but I didn't know what I was doing or looking for. The spell

has worked once, so I know it does, and it's easier for me to cast it now. I've been experimenting and training by using it to find Parker around the castle, and it's working just fine."

"What about the fact that you have to find dragons who aren't yours? Does that change anything, since you're not linked to them the way we are?"

"That's the tricky bit. I won't know until I try finding one of the dragons. I think including the mage in the spell will help, though." He looked around the table. "I just need someone to volunteer. Who wants to be the next mage to find his dragon?"

* * * *

Marlow opened the door of his son's bedroom and staggered back. He couldn't remember when he'd been his son's age, but there was no way his bedroom had stunk as much as Jason's did. It was a mix of smelly feet, farts, and some kind of spray, maybe deodorant.

It was disgusting.

Marlow groaned and walked into the room, headed straight for the window. Jason was spread out on the bed, reading, but he rolled to his side and followed Marlow's path through the room with his gaze.

"I don't want to be cold," he whined.

"And I don't want to die. You might not smell it because you've been in here for hours, but trust me. It's a miracle you're still conscious."

"It's not that bad."

"It *is* that bad." Did every ten-year-old boy stink so badly? Marlow didn't know, but maybe he should look into it.

He threw open the window and leaned out, taking a deep breath. Fall was coming, but so far, the weather had been great. It wasn't as hot as summer, but warm enough to keep the window open.

He turned to his son. “Have you done anything that isn’t reading today?”

Jason had to think about that for a moment. “I brushed my teeth this morning.”

“You sound like you want an award for remembering to brush your teeth. You know what I mean, Jason. Have you done your chores?”

Jason’s expression told Marlow that he hadn’t. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Jason had a list of chores he needed to do, and he knew it. Marlow couldn’t blame him for wanting to spend his Saturday reading—mostly because he wished he could do the same—but still. It was only the two of them, and Jason was old enough to do his part when it came to keeping the house clean or, at the very least, decent. Marlow didn’t expect him to deep-clean the house every weekend, but the least he could do was put the dirty socks Marlow could see peeking under the bed in the laundry basket.

“Give me the book,” he said, wiggling his fingers.

“But, Dad,” Jason protested.

Marlow arched a brow. “You know the rules. Chores and homework before reading or playing on your console.”

Marlow supposed he should feel lucky that Jason tended to be a reader more than a gamer. When he started playing, though, especially when he played online with his friends, he could be focused for hours. Marlow wished he could do the same, but unfortunately for him, he was an adult, and he had responsibilities that didn’t include playing for hours.

Jason huffed but got to his feet. He placed a piece of paper in his book so he wouldn’t lose his page, then handed it to Marlow.

“Come on. If you’re quick, we can go out for ice cream,” Marlow tried to bribe him.

Thankfully, that was enough for Jason to start smiling again. He looked around the room for a moment as if overwhelmed, but Marlow was relieved to see him crouch to grab the dirty socks.

Maybe they could make the house smell slightly better by the end of the day.

He left Jason to it and headed to the kitchen. Saturdays were their pizza nights. After an entire week of working and cooking, Marlow liked not having to think about it for one evening. He also liked not having to clean the kitchen and empty the dishwasher and the extra time he could spend with his son. Jason always had something interesting to talk about, usually books, sometimes animals and insects. He especially liked reptiles, which Marlow suspected had something to do with the fact that they were both dragon shifters.

And as far as Marlow knew, they were the only ones in the world.

That probably wasn't true. He'd never known another dragon shifter that he could remember, but then he didn't have any memories. He just remembered waking up in the middle of the woods decades ago, not knowing anything, not even his name. He hadn't aged since then, so he didn't know exactly how old he was, but he didn't need to know. He didn't need to know anything except that as long as he and Jason were careful, no one would find out what they could turn into.

It hadn't always been easy. When Jason was a kid, he had a hard time controlling his shift. Marlow hadn't known how to help him because he couldn't remember being a child or having ever dealt with dragon shifter kids. Luckily, Jason was now mostly out of that phase, although Marlow couldn't help but wonder what would happen as he grew up. Would the complicated teenage years challenge his control over his shift? Hopefully, Marlow wouldn't have to worry about that for at least a few more years, but sometimes, that question kept him up at night.

That wasn't the only thing that did. Several weeks ago, he'd felt a wave of magic, and he still didn't know what had caused it. If he'd been on his own, he might have left town to try to find out, but he couldn't leave Jason behind. Jason had school, so it wasn't like they could go on a trip, especially because they didn't know what had caused that wave.

Marlow was sure it had been magic. He didn't understand why he was convinced of that, and he couldn't remember ever having anything to do with magic, but he supposed part of him remembered. Part of him also remembered how to turn into a dragon, even though no one had taught him since he'd woken up without memories.

"I'm done," Jason said from the kitchen door.

Marlow turned to him. "Are you really done, or are you Jason done?"

Jason stared for a moment before huffing and vanishing again. This time, Marlow did roll his eyes. Was it that much to ask that Jason keep his room clean?

They both got through the early afternoon cleaning session, and once it was time to go out to get ice cream, Marlow was relieved to see Jason was bouncy like always. Sometimes Marlow wondered if he was too hard on his son, but he wouldn't know who to ask. Jason's mother wasn't in the picture, and while Marlow had made friends with some of the other parents at school, they were human. He didn't want to involve them in his life because he was terrified of what would happen if anyone found out what he and Jason were.

"What flavor will you have today?" he asked as they climbed into his truck. It smelled of wood, even in the cab.

Jason took that question seriously and thought about it for a few moments. "I think lemon and strawberry."

Marlow wasn't surprised. Jason liked things to stay the same. He wasn't adventurous, which might seem weird since he could shift into a dragon, but he'd always been cautious, maybe because Marlow was, too. Marlow had never told Jason what had happened to him and how he couldn't remember anything beyond the time he'd woken up in the forest, and for now, he didn't plan to change that. Jason was a kid, and he should have the opportunity to live his life without having to worry.

But Marlow couldn't help but worry. After that wave of magic, he couldn't afford not to. He didn't know what the

wave meant, but something told him it couldn't be good.

And unfortunately, there was nothing he could do to protect Jason, because he had no idea what was coming for them.

Chapter Two

“Can we get ice cream again?” Jason asked as soon as he climbed into the truck. He dropped his backpack at his feet and twisted in his seat to look at Marlow with puppy eyes.

Thankfully, Marlow had seen those eyes often enough that they no longer worked on him. “No.” He put the truck into gear and carefully backed out of the parking spot.

“Come on,” Jason whined.

“I said no, and put your seatbelt on.”

Jason grumbled but obeyed. It wasn't a surprise that he was attempting to push the boundaries. He was growing up, and sometimes it wasn't easy to deal with. Marlow wished he could have his little boy back, yet at the same time, it was incredible to watch his son grow into his own person. Even though Marlow had no idea what he was doing as a father, Jason was turning out to be a good kid, and hopefully he'd end up a good man. Marlow was excited to find out what Jason would do with his life, to see him find new interests and things he was passionate about, but he also enjoyed it when Jason was his little boy again.

Like when he begged for ice cream, even though he knew Marlow would say no.

“Everyone's going to get ice cream,” Jason accused. “Except for me.”

“I already told you that I don't care what everyone else does.”

“But it's not fair.”

“Why isn't it?”

“Because Charlie is allowed to have ice cream anytime he wants, and I'm not.”

“I'm not Charlie's father, so I don't make his rules. I make yours, though, and you have to follow them.”

Sometimes, Marlow wondered if it would be easier if Jason had chosen someone else to be his best friend. Charlie was a sweet boy, but Marlow disliked the way his parents raised him. He felt they were too permissive, and that wouldn't be good for Charlie in the long run.

But like he'd told Jason, it was none of his business. He wasn't Charlie's father, which was a good thing, because Charlie was hyperactive on the best of days, and Marlow didn't have that much patience.

"How did school go?" he asked as he drove them home.

"Fine."

"What did you do?"

"The usual."

If Marlow hadn't known this was Jason's usual answer since he'd started elementary school, he would have thought his son was angry at him.

But no. It seemed like every day Jason went to school, he did the usual, and nothing happened. It was like trying to get answers from a wall, but it amused Marlow to attempt it every day. It had become a game between him and Jason, so he wasn't surprised to see Jason smiling.

He turned his attention back to the road. A man was standing in the middle of it, and Marlow just managed to slam his foot on the brake. His arm shot out instinctively, pushing Jason back against his seat. The truck stopped, and for a few seconds, Marlow couldn't move.

Then he turned to check in on Jason. His son's eyes were wide and he was a little pale, but his attention was on the guy still standing in the middle of the road.

"Are you all right?" Jason asked.

"I should be asking you that," Marlow told him. "Is everything okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. What's that man doing?"

Now that Marlow was reassured that Jason was okay, anger took over. “I don’t know, but he’s going to find out what happens when he does something so dangerous.” Marlow unhooked his seatbelt and opened his door. Before hopping out, he turned to Jason. “Stay in here, all right?”

Jason nodded. He was clearly a little frightened, but he seemed to trust that Marlow knew what he was doing.

Marlow didn’t. He just wanted the satisfaction of yelling at this asshole.

He slammed the driver’s door shut and strode toward the guy. “What the fuck are you doing standing there? You could have caused an accident. I have my kid in the truck, you fucker.”

The road they’d stopped on was in the middle of nowhere. They were surrounded by trees and little more, and the guy’s attention was completely focused on Marlow. It was unsettling, and Marlow stopped before reaching the guy, because something told him he needed to stay as far away as possible.

He didn’t understand why. The guy didn’t seem like much. He was tall but very thin, as if he didn’t eat enough. His long blond hair was tied behind his neck, and his eyes were of a blue so pale that it gave Marlow the creeps. Between the eyes, the hair, and the pale skin, the guy appeared washed out, almost as if he belonged in a dream.

Or a nightmare.

“Hello, Raleigh,” the man said.

Marlow took a step back. He’d never heard that name—that he remembered. “My name is not Raleigh,” he said.

“Oh, it is. You just don’t remember it.”

Marlow swallowed. “You know me?”

“I do. I know your real name is Raleigh and that you lost all your memories.” He smiled.

He was creepy.

“Well, you should be more careful. I could have hurt you.”

“No, you couldn’t have. I’m much too powerful for you to hurt me.”

And there was a creepy smile, too. It made Marlow want to turn and run to Jason, but he didn’t want to show this guy that he was scared.

Even though he was very much terrified.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The man raised a hand. “For you to die.”

That was it. Marlow had had enough. “Well, I’m not about to, so tough luck. Get off the road, asshole.”

He turned, but since he expected the guy to do something, he kept an eye on him. That was why he wasn’t surprised to feel something move behind him. He reacted quickly, but somehow, something managed to touch him even though he was standing far enough away that it wasn’t physically possible. It brushed against Marlow’s side, and he jumped away, twirling around as he did so.

The guy wasn’t alone anymore. Two other guys stood beside him, almost as if they thought it would intimidate Marlow. He would have died rather than admit it did, even though he was pretty sure these guys were human.

Well, maybe not entirely, considering that he was pretty sure the blond guy had just used magic against him.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the blond said.

Marlow turned to face him again. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Oh, I can, and I’m telling you to die.”

Marlow didn’t wait to see what would happen next. He shifted, not caring that his clothes ripped around him. His only thought was that he needed to keep his son safe, and to do that, he had to be able to defend him from these three guys. There was only one way for him to do that.

By sprouting fangs and claws.

He heard Jason cry out behind him, but he didn't dare look away from the three men in front of him. He just hoped there weren't more of them hiding between the trees.

The two men framing the blond ran at Marlow. One of them looked like he'd rather run the other way and kept peeking at the other, so Marlow focused on him. He was pretty sure that a good roar would send the frightened one running, but the second guy seemed determined.

Marlow didn't know what to expect. He couldn't remember ever fighting in his dragon form, although he was sure he had because of scars he'd found on his body. A dragon against two humans wasn't a challenge, though. As soon as the first guy reached him, Marlow raised a paw and slapped him—possibly too hard, since the guy flew and landed against a tree. The second guy squeaked and looked back at the blond, and that was when Marlow realized these two had been a distraction.

The blond had raised both his hands, and they were sparkling with what looked like tiny energy bolts. He was smiling as if this was the happiest moment of his life, and when he raised his hands higher and drew them back, Marlow knew he was in trouble.

That was when white-blue light started swirling over the road between him and the blond.

* * * *

Jarvis stared at the portal he'd just opened. He was terrified, and right now, he wished he'd managed to convince the others to wait to find Raleigh. It would have no doubt been better to find any other shield, but no, everyone had insisted that Jarvis deserved to find Raleigh, so here he was.

A hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed. He turned to look at Ansley, who had a worried expression on his face. He was the only one who could understand what Jarvis was going through, yet at the same time, he couldn't. When Jarvis had opened the portal after finding out where Parker was, Ansley hadn't known that Parker wouldn't remember him.

Jarvis wasn't sure if that was better or worse, but either way, this was it. He was about to see Raleigh for the first time in decades, and he had no idea what he'd find on the other side of the portal or how Raleigh would react to seeing him. If things went the way they had with Parker, Raleigh wouldn't remember Jarvis or even that his name was Raleigh. It made Jarvis wonder what he'd chosen as his new name, but the only way for him to find out was to go through the portal.

He couldn't disappoint the others. They'd given up the opportunity to find their shield today so Jarvis could find his. They would try to find everyone, of course, but it always took a while for Ansley to be able to cast the spell again. Even with Parker's help and the bond they shared, Ansley was pale and clearly shaky.

"You should stay here," Jarvis told him.

"I'm coming with you."

Jarvis had expected him to say that. "I can ask someone else."

The other mages and most of the people who lived at the castle were gathered in the courtyard. They all wanted to see Raleigh as soon as he arrived, even though only the mages knew him. Everyone was excited, and it touched Jarvis's heart. These people had become his family over the years, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm the only one who knows how jarring this will be for you, and Parker understands the position Raleigh will be in," Ansley gently explained. "It might be better for both of us to be there, but if you want to take someone else, I'll stay back."

"I'm just worried about you. You seem exhausted."

"Guys?" Parker called from his spot next to the portal. He was peeking through, and Jarvis wondered what he could see.

He didn't have to wonder for long.

"I'm pretty sure that's Carlyle," Parker continued.

For a second, Ansley and Jarvis stared at each other with wide eyes. Then they exploded into motion. They ran toward

the portal, and Ansley snagged Parker's hand and pulled him through. Jarvis could hear the others swearing behind them, but he didn't slow down. He couldn't afford to—Raleigh was in danger.

How had Carlyle found him? Ansley had explained that the only way to make the spell easy on him was to have the mage with him when he cast the spell. It helped focus the magic, because even though the shield hadn't been around for decades, they still shared a bond with their mage. It was that bond that Ansley used.

But the same couldn't be said for Carlyle.

Jarvis burst through the portal. He gave himself a few seconds to look around as he tried to understand what he was seeing.

They were on a road surrounded by trees. A man was sprawled at the bottom of one. He was struggling to get to his feet, and he seemed to be hurt. Another guy was nearby, hiding behind another tree, looking like he might start screaming at any second.

Carlyle stood in the middle of the road. His hands were raised and sparkling with magic, and he looked pissed. The thought that Jarvis had managed to make him feel that way made Jarvis grin, but he wasn't here for Carlyle.

Luckily, he'd opened the portal in between Carlyle and Raleigh. Jarvis's shield was in his dragon form, standing on the other side of the portal, looking confused. Jarvis's heart raced, and his chest tightened with emotion. It had been so long since he'd seen Raleigh that it took everything he had not to throw himself at him. Considering what he knew of the memory spell Carlyle had cast, it would be safer if he kept his distance from Raleigh.

Ansley raised his hands to mirror Carlyle's position. He drew on his magic, and Jarvis moved to help him, but Ansley shook his head.

"Parker and I will keep Carlyle at bay. You need to focus on Raleigh."

Jarvis felt guilty about leaving Ansley alone to face Carlyle, but he was right. They were here for Raleigh, and the only way to stop the fight was to take him away. Once at the castle, he'd be safe, and Carlyle wouldn't be able to reach him.

Jarvis didn't have a choice. He ran away from Carlyle and in Raleigh's direction. Raleigh was still in his dragon form and appeared wary, but thankfully, he didn't try to eat Jarvis right away. Still, Jarvis kept a safe distance between them and raised his hands. Too late, he realized what Raleigh might think he was doing, so he quickly lowered them again.

"I'm not going to attack you," he promised.

Raleigh grunted. He looked behind himself as the wind picked up. Ansley was using it to push Carlyle away, but it wouldn't work for long, which meant Jarvis needed to get a move on.

"I know you don't understand what's happening, but I promise I have answers. I'll give all of them to you as soon as you're safe. You need to come back with me through the portal."

Raleigh stared at him for what felt like an eternity. Jarvis held his breath as he waited for Raleigh to tell him to fuck off.

He wasn't surprised when Raleigh finally shifted, but it was like a fist to the stomach. Jarvis yearned to touch Raleigh's face, but Raleigh was looking at him in a way he never had. It was clear he didn't trust him, and while Jarvis understood why, it still hurt like hell.

He waited for Raleigh to say something, but instead, Raleigh turned and ran toward the truck parked in the middle of the road, seemingly not caring that he was naked. He cried out when he saw both doors were open and rushed toward the passenger door.

Jarvis had no idea what was happening, but he ran after him. Luckily, he'd noticed that the other mages had come through the portal and were helping Ansley. There was no way to know how powerful Carlyle was, but they were holding their own, and for now, that was all that mattered. It gave Jarvis the

opportunity to focus on Raleigh and what was happening to him.

“Jason?” Raleigh called out, looking out at the forest around them. “Jason!”

“What’s going on?” Jarvis asked. He kept his focus on Raleigh’s face, even though he was dying to see how much Raleigh’s body had changed. One he’d known by heart. He would have been able to recognize it even with his eyes closed.

He wasn’t sure he could anymore.

“Jason!” Raleigh called again.

Something crashed between the trees on the right of the road, and Jarvis raised his hands, ready to defend Raleigh. He realized he wouldn’t have to when a young dragon burst from between the trees and threw himself at Raleigh.

He was way too big for Raleigh to be able to hold him, but that didn’t mean Raleigh didn’t try. He grabbed the young dragon and hugged him, and Jarvis’s heart squeezed.

That was a child. Raleigh had a son.

* * * *

Marlow was never letting Jason go. When he’d turned and seen the truck was empty, even though he’d told Jason to stay inside, he’d thought that something had happened. He still had no idea why Jason had left the truck, but the only important thing was that Jason was safe.

Someone cleared their throat close by, and Marlow remembered the guys who’d appeared in the middle of the road. He turned, and even though Jason was too big in his dragon form, Marlow didn’t let go. He couldn’t have, even if he tried.

He faced the man who’d promised he’d explain everything. He didn’t know if he could believe that, but he didn’t think he had a choice. He had no idea what was happening, but it was

clear that the blond from earlier wanted to hurt him. Marlow didn't know why, which meant it probably had something to do with his past.

And this new guy seemed to have known him.

He appeared to be in his late thirties, although that might not mean anything. Marlow looked like he was in his late thirties, too, yet he was decades older. He didn't know if this guy was a dragon shifter, but he could be one, or maybe another kind of shifter or creature who, like Marlow, didn't age.

But that wasn't what caught Marlow's attention. No, that was the man's eyes.

Even through the glasses, Marlow could see them. They were wide and hazel, and if he wasn't wrong, they were slightly damp, as if the guy was about to start crying. Marlow didn't understand why, but he didn't understand a lot of things in the current situation. Actually, he didn't understand any of it.

But the guy in front of him called to something in him. For some reason, he wanted to reach out and pull the man into his arms.

There was nothing exceptional about the guy. He was cute in a nerdy kind of way. His brown hair was cut short, and the many silver strands on the side caught the light when he moved. He was tall but slightly shorter than Marlow, and even though he was fully clothed, Marlow could see he wasn't an athletic kind of guy, which fit his nerdy impression. Something told Marlow he was right about all of it and that this man would much rather sit on the couch with a book than go out for a run.

"We need to go," the man said.

That was the moment Jason chose to shift back to his human form. Holding him in this form was easier, which was a relief, but he was as naked as Marlow. Between them, it didn't matter. They were used to shifting and playing together. However, Marlow didn't want anyone else to see his kid

without clothes on. So instead of listening to the man, he strode to his truck and dumped Jason into the passenger seat.

“I thought I told you not to leave the truck,” he gently scolded.

“I was scared.”

Marlow could understand that. He’d been terrified and still was, although it was mostly for his son. “You don’t have to be anymore, all right?”

Jason’s gaze moved to something happening behind Marlow. Marlow had almost forgotten that the blond who’d attacked him was still there. He didn’t know what to expect when he turned, but it wasn’t to see a group of men facing off with him. Everyone’s hands were raised, and Marlow didn’t know how to make sense of what he was seeing.

It was a lot. One of the guys was shooting what looked like lightning bolts at the blond. Another one was controlling the wind that was going nuts around them, although Marlow didn’t understand how he was doing it.

And through all of that, the blond was smirking. He was still standing, and his two minions framed him. It was a relief to see they weren’t coming after Marlow anymore, but he was starting to suspect that the man who’d been talking to him was right and that they needed to go. With one wave of his hand, the blond guy sent the one shooting lightning bolts flying. Luckily, the guy controlling the wind used it to slow down his friend’s descent, and others rushed to help him, but it could have been bad.

“I know you have about a million questions,” the man trying to convince Marlow to leave said. “I’ll answer every single one of them, but not here.”

Marlow looked at him. “Who are you?”

The man rubbed his hands on his jeans-clad thighs. “My name is Jarvis.”

Marlow felt he recognized the name for some reason, but it didn’t make sense, because he was sure he’d never seen this guy. He doubted his memories were coming back—if they

could come back, they would have started long ago. But even though his memories weren't returning, *something* in him recognized Jarvis. It was telling him that he could trust the guy and that he should go with him.

Marlow had a choice to make. He didn't know what the blond wanted from him, but it wasn't good. The others were protecting him, though, and even though he didn't know them, either, if he had to choose, he knew who he'd go with.

Yes, he had a million questions but couldn't ask them unless he went with Jarvis.

"Jason needs to come with me," he said—that was non-negotiable.

Thankfully, it didn't seem to be a dealbreaker. For some reason, Jarvis stared at Jason for a few seconds before he nodded. It made Marlow wonder what was happening all over again.

"I wouldn't even think of leaving him behind." He turned to look at the fight. "All right. Climb into the truck."

That wasn't what Marlow had expected. "Aren't we supposed to leave through that door thing you opened?"

"Portal, and yes. We're leaving through it. It'll be faster to use your truck, though."

Marlow didn't know if he and Jason would ever be allowed to come back to get their things. He hoped so, because he'd spent a while building himself a life here. He wasn't new to dropping everything and leaving, unfortunately. He'd had to do it a few times since he didn't age.

But this time was different. This time, he wasn't leaving because someone might realize he wasn't human. No, he was leaving because someone had tried to kill him, and that changed everything. Jason did, too. He hadn't been born the last time Marlow had left everything behind, and Marlow couldn't do it to him. He wasn't sure he'd have a choice, unfortunately.

He quickly climbed into the truck. He and Jason had a change of clothes in the back, but Marlow didn't waste time

grabbing them. They could dress once they were safe.

“Who are they?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Are they magic? Like wizards or something?”

“I don’t know, Jason. I just know that they’re protecting us, and that we need to go with them.”

Jason’s eyes were wide as he curled in on himself. He was visibly terrified, and while Marlow wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms again, he focused on what Jarvis had ordered him to do instead.

He started the truck, then watched as Jarvis helped the lightning bolt guy to his feet and guided him toward the truck. Marlow didn’t protest when Jarvis hauled the guy in. If the truck was going to pass through the portal, putting as many people inside as possible made sense.

Once the guy was in the truck, Jarvis moved to stand next to the wind guy. They had a short conversation, and Jarvis raised both of his hands.

Marlow watched as the portal widened. Jarvis waved at him to go through, which he did carefully. It would be just his luck if half the truck went through and the portal cut off or something. What would happen to him and Jason if things went that way?

He didn’t want to think about it. They couldn’t stay behind, because the blond was going to kill them if they did. That meant trusting Jarvis and doing what he said, so that was what Marlow did. He felt he could trust Jarvis.

He hoped his instincts were right and that he wouldn’t regret any of this, but at this point, he wasn’t sure of anything, least of all what he was getting himself and his son into.

Chapter Three

Jarvis was in awe. Not only had he found Marlow again, but it seemed that Marlow trusted him, even though he didn't remember him. Of course, it would take a lot more and many explanations for things to get back to normal between them, but this was a start and a first step he hadn't expected.

He also hadn't expected Marlow to have a son.

There was no denying it. Jarvis had seen how frantic Marlow had been when he'd thought something had happened to the boy. Where there was a child, there had to be a mother, which was what worried Jarvis. Did they have to go back for Marlow's wife? If they did, would he be able to stand living with her in the castle?

He didn't know what to do. Usually, he was the guy in charge, but he didn't think he could be in this situation. Thankfully, he was distracted by Carlyle, and while he wasn't sure it was much better, at least he wasn't obsessing over Marlow's love life.

"You might have gotten one, but I'll find the others before you do," Carlyle drawled.

Penley rolled his eyes. "Please don't start monologuing. You're not that good a villain."

Carlyle seemed confused by Penley's words, which made sense, since he'd spent around a hundred years stuck in a stone. The moment of confusion was what Jarvis needed. He grabbed Penley's hand and pulled him through the portal behind Ansley and Parker, and while Carlyle threw a fireball at them, it was too late.

The truck containing Marlow, his son, and Tyne had already gone through the portal. Now that there was no one left behind, Jarvis closed it with a flick of his fingers.

For a moment, everything was still and quiet. Jarvis glanced at Marlow, wondering how he was taking this. There was no way to tell from his expression, because he'd turned to his son

and was talking to him. Jarvis desperately wanted to find out what they were talking about. He wanted to be there for them.

But it wasn't his place, and it might never be.

He cleared his throat. "I think everyone should head inside," he told the people waiting in the courtyard.

They were all staring at him with wide eyes. They'd seen most of the fight through the portal, and even though it had taken a lot out of Jarvis to keep it open for that long, he was glad he had. It had allowed Penley and Tyne to come through to help, which meant no one had gotten hurt.

Except for Jarvis's heart.

"But we just got Raleigh back," Penley protested.

"I promise you can talk to him, but not right now. He and his son need to wrap their minds around what happened, and I'm sure they have many questions they want me to answer."

Jarvis hadn't thought Penley's eyes could get any larger, but they did. He stared at Jarvis in shocked silence, and Jarvis knew what was coming even before Penley opened his mouth.

"He has a kid?"

"I know exactly as much as you do at the moment," Jarvis said, trying to smile. He was pretty sure it came out as a grimace, but thankfully, Penley didn't say anything about it.

"I'm sorry," Penley whispered.

"Don't be. You don't have a reason to be sorry, and I'm sure he's happy. You know he always wanted a family."

"With you."

Jarvis had to close his eyes for a second. "But I wasn't there for him. Please, everyone, give him some space."

"I'll get Tyne inside," Thorne said as he stepped forward.

He was the man in charge of pretty much everything practical around the castle. He wasn't a butler exactly, but Jarvis wouldn't have known what else to call him. As far as he was concerned, it didn't matter. Thorne was vital to their

survival and the upkeep of the castle, and that was that. Over the past twenty years, Thorne had become a friend, family. He was still paid for the work he did, but everyone cared about him, and he cared about everyone. It was clear in the way he rushed to Tyne's side and helped him out of the truck.

The sight of him finally seemed to get through to the others, and they started moving, too. Matthias rushed to Parker, while Ansley squeezed Jarvis's shoulder. Penley's assistant, Sandy, ran toward him, already asking questions about what happened.

Jarvis watched his family. They drifted toward the castle, giving Jarvis what he'd asked for. God, he loved all of them so much.

He waited until everyone was inside to turn to Raleigh. He didn't know what to call him, but he knew that wasn't Raleigh's name anymore. He'd introduced himself, but they hadn't had time for more, so he stepped up to the truck and cleared his throat. "As I told you earlier, my name is Jarvis."

Raleigh stared at him for a moment. "I'd say it's a pleasure to meet you, but unfortunately, considering the circumstances, it's not." He held out a hand through the open window. "I'm Marlow."

Jarvis took his hand. He had to resist the urge to press his cheek against it, and instead, he quickly shook it. "Marlow," he softly repeated.

"Is that going to be a problem? Because the blond guy called me something else."

"He called you Raleigh."

Jarvis wasn't sure how long it would take to get used to calling Raleigh by another name, but it didn't matter. Like he'd seen with Parker, it made sense that Marlow had a new name, because he wasn't the person he'd been when he was Raleigh. Jarvis didn't know how much he'd changed yet, but he'd find out.

"You think I could get our clothes from the back of the truck?" Marlow asked.

“Let me grab them for you.”

Jarvis had to try a few times to climb into the back of the truck, but it was easy to find the backpack once he was in. Marlow gave him a thumbs up when he raised it so to see if it was what he was looking for, and Jarvis quickly climbed down and handed the backpack through the window.

Then he turned around.

He and Marlow had been together a long time, but they'd been apart for even longer. As much as he wanted to feast his eyes on Marlow and reassure himself that he had the man he loved back, he didn't. He needed to behave as if he'd never known Marlow, which meant not gawking at him while he was dressing.

Eventually, the sound of a door opening told Jarvis he could turn around. When he did, Marlow was out of the truck and standing in the courtyard with his hands on his hips. He was looking around, and Jarvis tried to imagine what it was like for him to go from whatever small town he'd been living in to standing in front of a castle.

“This place is impressive,” Marlow eventually said.

“It is,” Jarvis agreed.

“And the woodwork is beautiful.”

Jarvis's heart squeezed. “Is that what you do for a living?” Raleigh had always been interested in woodwork. To be fair, he'd always been interested in whatever he could do with his hands, but wood had held a special place in his heart.

“It is.”

“Well, you'll be happy to explore the castle, then. There's plenty of wood for you to examine.”

Marlow arched a brow, and Jarvis realized how his words had sounded. He looked away.

If Marlow had been Raleigh, they would have joked over it. He wasn't Raleigh, though, and he never would be again. That meant that Jarvis had to get to know Marlow and that he

should forget about Raleigh and the person he'd been. Marlow might have the same face, but they weren't the same person.

He cleared his throat. "As I said, I'm sure you have many questions, and I can answer them."

"I'd like that, but what about Jason?"

"Why don't we take him to the kitchen? Our cook, Lillian, will be happy to have a child to feed. She keeps muttering about none of us having children."

"What you just said only added more questions to my list, but that sounds okay."

Jason had hopped out of the truck and was already poking around the courtyard. He quickly joined his father when Marlow called for him, and Jarvis led the way into the castle.

He was already thinking about what their next step would be. He and Marlow would have to go back to Marlow's home to pack. Jarvis doubted Carlyle would try to get to Marlow again, but he couldn't be sure, which meant he couldn't send Marlow and his son back to their home. It was just too dangerous, but he didn't know if Marlow would understand that.

* * * *

Marlow didn't know where to start, so instead of asking the questions as they came to him, he kept quiet and looked around.

He was in a castle. It was a proper castle, too, like the ones in Europe.

Wait. Were they in Europe? As far as he knew, they could be anywhere. He wasn't sure Jarvis would tell him their location, but he had to try. "Where are we?"

Jarvis smiled at him, and Marlow couldn't help but think he had a beautiful smile. He didn't know much of Jarvis—or anything, really—but he liked his smile.

“In Michigan.”

That wasn't the answer Marlow had expected. “There's a castle in Michigan?”

“As you can see, there is. It's hidden behind a number of spells and magic, which is why most people have never heard of it. We don't want tourists to start knocking on our door.”

“Of course not.” He'd keep this place to himself, too, if it was his.

“I'd give you a tour, but I suspect that you want answers more than anything.”

“I do, because I have no idea what's happening.”

“You'll find out soon.”

Marlow believed Jarvis. It was reassuring to see him so calm, and it helped Marlow relax. Whatever it was about this guy, Marlow couldn't dismiss it. It might have been a while since he'd had someone in his life, but that wasn't the reason he was so interested in Jarvis.

He just wasn't sure what that reason was or even if it mattered.

They entered the castle through a small door, and Marlow got instantly lost. Thankfully, he had Jarvis to follow, and he did so as he stuck close to his son.

It was easier to focus on Jason than on everything that was happening. Jason was looking around with wide eyes, his hand clutching Marlow's. That didn't happen often anymore, but considering what Jason had just seen, Marlow wasn't surprised he needed reassurance. He needed it, too. He didn't think he'd ever been so scared for his son, and he realized how close he'd come to losing him. If one of those lightning bolts had reached the truck, Jason would be gone, and Marlow couldn't even think about that.

They eventually reached the kitchen. It was massive and looked like it belonged in a restaurant, and since Marlow had seen a whole bunch of people in the courtyard, he imagined it

was similar. If all of them lived here, it would take a small army to feed all of them.

Several people were flitting around the kitchen, but one glance was enough to tell Marlow who was in charge. The woman stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot. When she was done, she leaned over to peek into the oven. She had to be in her fifties, and while her hair wasn't completely white, it was headed that way. She wore a wide apron that covered her clothes, which was a good thing, because it was dirty with streaks of red. Marlow couldn't smell blood, which was a relief.

She straightened and turned their way. She stared at Jarvis for a moment before her focus moved to Jason, and a smile appeared on her face. It made her look gentle, which was what Jason needed.

“And who do we have here?” the woman asked.

“This is Jason. He's Marlow's son,” Jarvis explained.

He and the cook stared at each other for a moment before she nodded. “Well, Jason, I'm Jillian. I'm the person responsible for the food in this castle. Would you like a sample of the things I cook? Because I need an assistant, and I think you'd be great at that.”

Jason looked up at Marlow.

Marlow nodded—even though he didn't know these people, he felt he could trust them. Besides, he needed answers desperately. If he wanted to keep Jason safe, he had to know what was happening.

Jason beamed and rushed to Jillian's side. Marlow watched to make sure his son was all right, but Jason wasn't thinking about him anymore, especially after Jillian took out chocolate chip muffins.

“I lost him,” Marlow declared as he grinned at Jarvis.

“So he'd choose a muffin over you?” Jarvis teased.

“Every single time. His stomach is the most important thing, not his father.”

Jarvis's expression changed, but Marlow couldn't read him. He wasn't sure why he felt like he needed to, but there was nothing he could do. He had other things to focus on, and as much as he wanted to get to know Jarvis, they were more important.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

Jarvis gestured at the door, and Marlow followed him out of the kitchen. Thankfully, he didn't have to tell Jarvis not to go far. Jarvis only walked to the end of the hallway and stopped by a window.

When Marlow did the same, he saw the lake. It was breathtakingly beautiful, and he felt a moment of jealousy at the thought that Jarvis lived here. Between the view and the woodwork, Marlow wished he could move in and never leave.

"I realize that what just happened has to have been terrifying," Jarvis gently explained. "We can take a break if you need one."

"I only need to know what's going on."

Jarvis nodded. "All right. Let's start from the beginning, then."

Marlow listened to him as he explained who Carlyle was and who he and his friends were. Marlow's mind spun as he thought of magic and the spell that had been cast on him. Carlyle had taken his memories, and from what Jarvis was saying, there was no way to get them back. He'd never remember his past.

But that was okay. He had a future, and that was all that mattered.

"Every mage had a dragon shifter shield," Jarvis explained. "They're always dragons, and their role is to protect their mage. And when they're bonded, to help the mage control their magic and to make them stronger. That's why Carlyle separated us from our shields."

"How many mages live in this castle?" Marlow asked.

"There are six of us."

“So Carlyle took the memories of six people?”

“He did. We’ve already recovered Parker, who’s Ansley’s shield. They came with me to pick you up, but I don’t know if you noticed them during the fight.”

Marlow hadn’t. He couldn’t believe there had been another dragon shifter close to him and he hadn’t known. “I’d like to meet Parker.”

“You will. He’s excited about helping you wrap your mind around everything. He’s had to go through it recently, so he knows how hard it is.”

Marlow nodded. Now that he knew what was happening, he had different questions. “What was my name? Raleigh?”

“It was.”

It didn’t feel like it fit, but maybe it had once. Marlow wasn’t the person he’d been back then, though. It just wasn’t possible for him to be.

“I realize that asking you and your son to move into the castle with us is a lot, but I want to keep both of you safe, and there’s no safer place than the castle. It’s surrounded by spells that keep Carlyle away, and he’ll never be able to find either of you as long as you stay here,” Jarvis continued.

“Jason has school.”

“We can arrange something. It doesn’t have to be forever, Marlow. Eventually, we’ll be able to deal with Carlyle, and once we do, you’ll be free to go back home.”

There was pain in Jarvis’s voice as he said that, and it made Marlow ask another question he was dying to know the answer to. “Who was I shield to?”

He already knew the answer. He didn’t have to ask to be sure that he’d been Jarvis’s shield. It was clear in every movement Jarvis made toward him and in the way he talked to him. He wasn’t sure why Jarvis hadn’t led with that, but then he remembered what Jarvis had said about the dragon and the mage being bonded.

What did that mean? That they were soulmates? Wouldn't he remember Jarvis if they were?

He might not remember Jarvis, but he couldn't deny he felt something toward him. For some reason, he trusted him and wanted to give in to his request to move in. Something told him that Jarvis would never hurt him, which would make sense if they were soulmates or even only shield and mage.

Jarvis looked away for a moment, but his gaze moved back to Marlow. "Me," he whispered.

Marlow had been sure of it, but hearing the words still made him breathless.

* * * *

Jarvis didn't know how Marlow would react to the news that they were shield and mage. He probably didn't realize how important a bond it was, but that was okay. Jarvis didn't expect anything from him, especially since he had a child. Jason had to be Marlow's priority, not Jarvis.

That was why they'd been so hesitant to start a family back when they'd been together. They both wanted kids, but Marlow's job was to protect Jarvis. He risked his life every time he did it, and neither of them had wanted their children to grow up without one of their fathers. It was why they'd waited, and Jarvis was glad they had. He didn't know how he would have dealt with not knowing where Marlow was and not being able to tell their children what had happened to their father.

But he hadn't had to, and Marlow had gotten what he'd always wanted. He was a father now, and Jarvis didn't begrudge him for that. After everything that had happened, Marlow deserved happiness and to have everything he'd ever wanted.

"This is a lot to take in," Marlow said as he rubbed his forehead.

“I realize that, and I’m sorry I’m dumping all of this on you. Let me get Thorne. He can put you and Jason in a guest room, and you can get some rest and maybe a shower. You can have all the time you need to think things through and make decisions.”

“Decisions about what?” Marlow asked.

Jarvis swallowed. “About what you want to do. It would be better if you agreed to stay here, but I understand you might not want to, especially since your wife isn’t here at the moment. We can find you somewhere else to stay and cast spells on the place to keep you safe from Carlyle. It won’t be the same as the castle, but I understand you might not want to move in with a bunch of people you don’t remember.”

Marlow raised his hand. “Wait a second. You’re assuming a lot of things.”

Jarvis was, but it was easier to assume than to wait for Marlow to tell him about these things. If he told himself that Marlow had someone in his life, it would hurt now, but he could start making his peace with it.

He didn’t know if that was possible, but he was going to try.

Marlow raked a hand through his hair. “All right,” he said. “You say the castle is the safest place for me and my son, and I believe you. That means we’re not going anywhere.”

Jarvis’s knees buckled in relief. He leaned against the wall, hoping Marlow wouldn’t notice.

“And I don’t have a wife or anyone else we need to warn,” Marlow continued. “It’s good to know they would have a place here if I did, though.”

“What about Jason’s mother?” Jarvis couldn’t help but ask.

“She’s not in the picture. She never was, and while Jason knows her and that she’s his mother, they don’t have a relationship. She didn’t want children and was happy to leave him with me when he was born.”

Jarvis didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t even sure there was anything he should say. He also probably shouldn’t feel

happy that Marlow didn't have a significant other and was a single father.

Or maybe he did have someone. They were talking about Jason's mother, but while she and Marlow weren't together, it didn't mean he didn't have anyone. Would Jarvis dare ask?

"Well, whoever is important to you, we can move them to the castle. We won't leave anyone behind, especially when it comes to Carlyle." There. It was a roundabout way to ask, but he'd asked.

Marlow stared at Jarvis for so long that Jarvis felt the need to do something. He didn't want Marlow to see how nervous he was or to make himself vulnerable. Once, he wouldn't have hesitated, but this wasn't Raleigh. Marlow might look like Raleigh and talk like him, but every moment Jarvis and Raleigh had shared was gone. They were only in Jarvis's memories, and while he wanted to tell Marlow about every single one of them, he couldn't. It wouldn't be fair to Marlow.

"I don't know if I can trust you," Marlow eventually said. That hurt, even though Jarvis understood where he was coming from. "I understand. Unfortunately, I don't think there's any way for me to show you I'm trustworthy. You only have my word for what happened with Carlyle, but please keep in mind that he's the one who attacked you, not me."

"I just don't get it. He knows I don't have any memories left because of his spell, so why would he want to hurt me?"

Jarvis looked out the window again. The guilt was strong, even after all these years. "Because it would hurt me."

"That sounds slightly psychotic. From what you said, I thought that he wanted more power, but you're saying that he came after me specifically to hurt you."

"Because you're my shield, and he's hated me for a long time. After all, I was the one who locked him up in that gemstone. He had to spend decades in there, and even now that he's free, he doesn't have all his powers back yet."

"It sounds like you need to make sure he doesn't get them back at all."

“We’re trying, but we have no idea how powerful he is or what he’s done for all these years. He was trapped, but we don’t know what actually happened to him. Was he conscious? Was he plotting his revenge the entire time? We don’t know, and I don’t think there’s any way for us to find out.”

“So he could have been studying magic or something the entire time?”

“I suppose anything is possible.”

Marlow’s expression was grim. “Well, even though I don’t know if I can trust you, I need help protecting Jason. I don’t know if Carlyle will come after him, but if he wants to hurt me, he can do so through Jason. Considering he attacked me, and you saved me, I’m going to go with what you’re suggesting and stay in the castle with my son. We’ll have to go back to grab our things, and I need to find a way to continue working so I can earn money, and of course, there’s the school thing to deal with, but we’ll figure it out.”

“You don’t need to earn money,” Jarvis blurted out.

“If I want to continue to eat, I do.”

“You don’t understand. You’re rich. Your family is rich.” So was Jarvis, and while he was ready to give Marlow every penny he had, Marlow wouldn’t understand why he was doing it.

Marlow seemed shocked. “I have a family?”

Of course he didn’t care about the money. Jarvis should have expected it. “You have an entire clan, so yes, you have a family, and they’ve been desperate to get you back. We’ve kept in contact all these years, and they regularly call me to find out if I know more about where you are.”

Now it was Marlow who needed the support of the wall. “I have a family,” he murmured. “Does Jason have grandparents? Uncles and aunts?”

He sounded so excited that Jarvis found himself smiling. “I can tell you all about them.”

Marlow grabbed Jarvis's hand and squeezed it. "Please. My life is in shambles, but it'll all be worth it if it means I get to know my family. What have they been doing all these years without me? I hate that I can't remember them."

"I don't think it'll be easy for them to deal with that, but they know about the memory spell. We contacted them as soon as we realized what was happening with Parker." Jarvis wanted to give Marlow everything he wished for, and it was fairly easy right now. He could give Marlow his family.

"Your aunt Martha is the clan leader," he explained. "But usually, I talk to your mother, Olga. We've always been close."

"Because I was your shield?"

Jarvis didn't like that he spoke in the past tense, but it made sense.

They needed to take this day by day, step by step. The last thing Jarvis wanted was to send Marlow running, which was what would happen if he overwhelmed him. Even though he wanted nothing more than to bury his face against Marlow's neck and hide in his arms, he couldn't. They didn't have that kind of relationship anymore, and maybe they would never have it again.

Jarvis didn't know how he'd cope if that happened, but once again, he reminded himself to take things day by day. It was the only way for his heart to survive.

* * * *

This was a lot to take in, and Marlow didn't know where to start. He had a family. Jason had grandparents.

Marlow had always wondered if there was someone out there who missed him. He had no memories of anyone, let alone an entire clan of dragons he belonged with.

He didn't even remember Jarvis, and the bond they shared was supposed to be really damn important. Jarvis had tried to

downplay it, but Marlow wasn't an idiot. He wanted to confront Jarvis and push until he told him everything, but he suspected Jarvis would close himself off because he believed he had a good reason not to tell Marlow everything.

Maybe he did. Marlow didn't know the entire situation, and even as it was, he was having a hard time wrapping his mind around what was happening. Having more info about his past dumped onto him wouldn't make things easier, but part of him wanted all of this to be over with. He didn't want to have to wait to know everything. It would only make him more anxious.

"I don't know if I'm ready to meet my family," he said. He wanted to ask Jarvis about their bond, but not now. He and Jarvis both needed time.

Marlow didn't remember anything, not even Jarvis and whatever they'd shared, but Jarvis remembered everything. Marlow wasn't the person Jarvis had known, but to Jarvis, that had to be hard to believe. When he saw Marlow, he had to see Raleigh, and that couldn't be easy. Everything they'd shared was gone.

It was a miracle that Jarvis could even stand to be in Marlow's presence.

"You don't have to do anything right now. I don't want to lie to them, but as long as they don't ask me if we've found you, I won't have to. I'll hold off calling them until you're comfortable with it."

Marlow looked out the window at the lake. He could see himself and Jason settling down here, which he hadn't expected. Until half an hour ago, he'd thought Jason would grow up in their small town and they'd both move away once he was ready for college. If they moved into the castle, though, they'd never have to leave again. They could make a true home here without fear of people realizing they wouldn't age, and they could be with other dragon shifters. Jason needed that, and while Marlow had a hard time admitting it, he did, too. He'd been alone for too long, and while he loved Jason, it felt good to have someone else, *adults*, to befriend.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“You don’t have anything to thank me for. I’m sorry we didn’t reach you sooner and that Carlyle found you.”

“That wasn’t your fault. From what you said, he’s going to hunt every shield to make sure you mages can’t get to them.”

“He will. I was never sure of what he wanted, but I’d say that now, it’s revenge. We trapped him, and while he took our shields away from us, I wouldn’t be surprised if that wasn’t enough and he wanted to permanently take you away this time. He’ll do everything to hurt and maybe even kill us, and once he’s rid of us, he’ll focus on taking over the world or whatever he has in mind. We need to stop him.”

And they could only do that if they found the other shields—and if all the mages and their shields were bonded. Marlow hadn’t missed the fact that the mages would have more control over their magic and be more powerful if they bonded with their shields, but he didn’t know how it worked.

“Are we bonded?” he asked.

Jarvis’s cheeks flushed. “We are. We bonded a long time ago, and while we haven’t been together for decades, we still are. You don’t have to worry about doing anything you’re uncomfortable with. I already have everything I need from my shield.”

That might be true, but something told Marlow that Jarvis didn’t have everything he needed in other parts of his life. Marlow was afraid to ask. Had he been even more important to Jarvis than a shield? Had there been more between them? Marlow couldn’t remember, but Jarvis could and had possibly been yearning to get it back all those years.

The problem was that Marlow didn’t know if he could give him that, at least not right now. He needed time to deal with all of this and for him and Jason to settle down. It wasn’t easy to go from being a carpenter and single father who happened to be able to shift into a dragon to someone who was supposed to protect Jarvis against a power and revenge-crazed man who could wield magic.

“Everything will be fine,” Jarvis said with a smile.

He still looked like there was more he wanted to tell Marlow, but evidently neither of them wanted that to happen now. Marlow supposed they would have time now that he was back with Jarvis—maybe. He knew they needed to find the other shields before Carlyle could, because if they didn’t, neither Marlow nor Jarvis would be alive to fix their relationship.

Chapter Four

The sound of running woke Jarvis up. He blinked at the wall in front of his bed for a moment, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. There was a loud screech, and then something banged against the wall. He jumped, and it took his racing heart a few moments to remember there was a good reason for all the noise.

It wasn't the first time there'd been a child in the castle. He and the other mages had moved here after what had happened with Carlyle, and none of them had children, but some of the people who had worked for them over the years did, and no one had wanted to separate families. The kids had been homeschooled, and everyone in the castle had kept an eye on them. They were all grown up by now, but Jason wasn't.

Jarvis rubbed his face. It was odd to hear these noises and to know there was a child in the castle again, but not in a bad way. Sometimes the castle felt more like a museum than a place where people lived, and Jarvis didn't like that. It had been his home for decades, and he wanted to continue living here. He wanted himself and the other mages to build families, find their dragons and finally settle down and *live*. It would take time, and there was no guarantee that the dragons would all want to stay, but Jarvis had hope. They'd fill the castle with laughter and love eventually.

That was what he should focus on. His life was a mess right now, but he was one of the lucky ones. He had Marlow back, even though they didn't know each other anymore. They didn't have to know each other to be mage and shield, and Jarvis couldn't tell if they'd ever be anything else again. He wanted them to be, but the only thing that mattered was that Marlow was safe. If it meant that he and Jarvis would never be together again, then Jarvis would learn to live with it.

He just hoped he wouldn't have to.

"What are you doing?" someone loudly hissed in the hallway.

“I was playing,” Jason answered.

“You can’t play here. You’re going to wake someone.”

“But it’s late.”

“Seven in the morning isn’t late for everyone, even though it is for you. Let’s go back to our rooms.”

Jarvis listened to Marlow talking to his son. It still made him feel weird to think that Marlow had a child, especially since the child wasn’t his. It wouldn’t be easy to wrap his mind around that, or maybe it would. In the end, there was nothing to be angry about. Marlow had done what he could with what he had. He hadn’t remembered anything, and he certainly hadn’t remembered Jarvis. How was he supposed to know there was someone out there with whom he’d been planning to have a family? Jarvis was glad he’d gone ahead with it, even though he wasn’t involved. Marlow was a good father, and even more importantly, he was a good person all around. He deserved everything he’d ever dreamed of.

Everything *they’d* ever dreamed of.

Jarvis rolled to his side, and his gaze caught on the framed picture on his nightstand. Now that Marlow was back, he felt a bit like a creep for keeping it there. He didn’t know what Marlow would think of him having a picture of him on the nightstand, but he didn’t think he could get rid of it. Besides, technically, it wasn’t a picture of Marlow but rather of Raleigh.

Jarvis picked it up and stared at it. It was in black and white, which meant he couldn’t see the wonderful hazel of Marlow’s eyes, but he could imagine it well enough. He’d seen those eyes every day since they’d met when they were children, and even though they hadn’t seen each other for decades, he’d never forgotten them. He didn’t think he ever could.

It would probably be easier if Jarvis gave up. Marlow wasn’t Raleigh, which meant there was a good chance he wouldn’t want to be with him. When Jarvis thought about it, it was enough to make him panic, but he tried to keep calm. What if Marlow didn’t want him the same way? He wasn’t

Raleigh anymore, though, and maybe once he got to know him, Jarvis wouldn't want Marlow.

He snorted. He didn't truly believe that, and he didn't think anyone would. But what was he supposed to do?

He put the photo back down but couldn't look away from it. He'd decided not to tell Marlow they'd been together. It was bad enough that he hadn't been able to deny that Marlow had been his shield. Marlow had asked, and Jarvis was pretty sure he already knew the answer, so it would have been pointless to lie. Besides, Jarvis didn't want to lie to him. The fact that he felt hurt because of what was happening was his problem, not Marlow's. He was the one who had to deal with the pain, and that was okay. Marlow had already been through enough, and he shouldn't have to go through anything else that could hurt him.

Besides, Jarvis had plans. He wouldn't tell Marlow they'd been together, but he had every hope that Marlow would fall in love with him again. They'd shared too much and had felt too strongly for each other. It was impossible for him and Marlow to stay away, even though Marlow didn't remember him.

Jarvis couldn't know for sure what would happen until things progressed, but for now, the hope that they'd eventually be together again was enough to get him moving.

With one last glance at the picture in the frame, he got up. Since it was seven, staying in bed would be no use. He might as well get up, have breakfast, and start working.

Even though he'd found Marlow, the others hadn't found their shields yet, and that was a priority. Then they'd have to get rid of Carlyle, which wouldn't be easy. Jarvis didn't know how they would do it yet, but he'd figure it out. He wasn't the unofficial leader for nothing.

After a quick shower, he dressed and headed downstairs. He wasn't surprised to hear people talking in the kitchen, so instead of stepping into the dining room like he normally would, that was where he headed. He paused at the door, taking in what was happening in front of him.

Jason was sitting at the counter, gesturing as he told Jillian something. She was listening to him and nodding, her expression delighted. It was good that she was taking Jason seriously, even though he was young. It was also good to see that she'd already adopted the boy. Jarvis wanted Jason and his father to feel like they were home here, because they were. Even though Marlow had never lived in the castle, not even as Raleigh, he belonged.

The mages had chosen the castle with their shields in mind, not only themselves. They'd known that, eventually, they'd want to make a home here, and that hadn't changed. If anything, it had become a possibility again now that they were finding the shields. It wouldn't be a peaceful life until they dealt with Carlyle, but that was all right. It didn't need to be peaceful as long as they were all here.

Jillian looked up and smiled. "I'm not used to seeing you up this early," she said. "What can I get you?"

"Coffee is perfect for now. I don't want to bother you, so just continue whatever you were doing."

"Jillian said she'd teach me how to make cookies," Jason declared.

"Did she? Well, you'll be happy to know that she makes the best cookies in the world."

Jillian scoffed, but Jarvis could see she was pleased. "No one is making cookies until after breakfast, so all of you go sit down in the dining room. It's time to eat."

* * * *

Marlow was happy to follow Jillian's order. At the moment, he felt so lost that even having someone telling him it was time to have breakfast lifted a burden off his shoulders.

Everything was different, yet at the same time, some things were the same. Jason had still woken up at an ungodly hour in the morning. If they'd still been home, Marlow would have left him to it, but they weren't. There were too many things

Jason could get into that he shouldn't, so as soon as Marlow had realized his son was awake, he'd forced himself out of bed. That was good, since he'd found Jason bouncing a ball in the hallway.

It was a lot, but it was good to see Jason was already settling down. It was one less problem Marlow needed to focus on, but he was still keeping an eye on his son. Even though Jason seemed happy enough, it couldn't be easy for him to leave everything behind. Marlow had hoped they would have more time before they needed to do that, but unfortunately, they didn't.

They would have had to leave eventually, since he wasn't aging, and he didn't think Jason would continue aging at the same rate he was now. He didn't know anything for sure, since he'd never met another dragon, but he suspected that Jason's aging would slow down once he reached his late teens. Then they really would have had to move, but that was at least ten years away. Marlow felt guilty about having to move Jason already, even though he knew he didn't have a choice. They hadn't settled down yet, so it was impossible to say how Jason would take things once they did, but he was young. He'd adapt, probably better than Marlow.

He settled at the long table in the dining room, gesturing at Jason to take the seat next to him. Jason looked like he wanted to sit next to Jarvis instead, but Marlow glared at him, and while he huffed, he sat next to him.

"I wouldn't have minded having him next to me," Jarvis said.

Marlow shrugged. "It's fine. He'd talk the ears off you, and I'm sure you don't want to have to listen to him babble just after waking up."

Jarvis didn't agree the way Marlow had expected him to. Instead, he grinned. "I don't see why not. Meals are always a bit of a mess around here because of how many people there are. It's nice to have new faces and see his enthusiasm."

Marlow snorted. "You're going to find how many things he's enthusiastic about soon enough."

“That’s good. Children should be curious and encouraged to be.”

Marlow stared at Jarvis for a moment. There was something peculiar in his tone when he talked about children that made Marlow wonder if he had kids. As far as Marlow knew, there were no other children in the castle, but that didn’t mean anything. If Jarvis was as old as Marlow, he might have kids who were adults and had left to live their lives.

Marlow didn’t know anything about Jarvis, and he didn’t like it. He wanted more information about the man, like what made him smile.

He blinked. He liked Jarvis, of course, but he also liked the others. Why did he want to find out what made Jarvis smile in particular?

Well, that was easy. He wanted to find out about Jarvis because he felt drawn to him. It could be the bond they shared as a shield and mage, but something told Marlow it wasn’t just that. He could tell there was more between them, but also that Jarvis would keep the information close to his heart.

Marlow didn’t blame him. It couldn’t be easy for Jarvis to have to deal with the fact that Marlow couldn’t remember him. They’d shared many memories and clearly had been close, but Marlow couldn’t remember any of it, while Jarvis remembered everything. Marlow himself wasn’t quite sure how to deal with that, and he felt guilty that he was relieved Jarvis hadn’t pushed anything yet. Eventually they’d have to relearn to work together as mage and shield, but not right now, and hopefully, not for a while.

Somehow, Marlow doubted they’d have a lot of time.

“What are your plans for today?” Jarvis asked, as if they had this conversation over breakfast every morning.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’d like to go home to pack some things, but I don’t want to leave Jason alone.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m pretty sure Jillian would love to babysit Jason.”

Marlow had noticed that the cook had a soft spot for Jason already. He was curious as to why, and while he should ask Jillian personally, Jarvis was right there. “She likes kids?”

“She does. Her daughters are grown and have left the castle, but they all lived here for a while.”

“So it’s not the first time there are children in the castle?”

“No, it’s not. We might not look like we’re used to kids, but in some ways, we are. I don’t want you to worry about Jason bothering any of us. He’s your son, and that’s enough for us to welcome him. It’ll take some time to adjust, but I promise neither of you is a problem.”

Marlow glanced at Jason, but he was busy stabbing a pancake. That meant that Marlow could focus on Jarvis.

“Is it because I’m your shield?” he asked quietly.

“Are you asking if everyone is welcoming of Jason because you’re my shield?”

“I guess.”

Marlow liked that Jarvis took his time answering and thought about the question. “Well, I suppose in part, that’s the case. The others are happy that I found you and don’t want to give you a reason to leave. It’s more than that, though. They were your friends before. You and I are linked as a shield and mage, but there was more to your life than me. We didn’t all live together like we do now, but we were friends, especially after we started working together to defeat Carlyle. You and the shields were especially close, but you were also friends with the other mages. We were a family, even though I realize it sounds odd.”

It did, mostly because Marlow couldn’t imagine having so many people in his life who cared about him. As far as he could remember, it had always been just him, then him and Jason. Of course, that was because he couldn’t remember most of his life. He only had the past few decades, and until he’d had Jason, he’d been alone. Even Jason’s mother hadn’t been enough for Marlow to feel less alone, which was probably one of the reasons they didn’t make it as a couple.

For a moment, Marlow wondered if he could ask Jarvis whether he'd had someone special in the life he didn't remember. He wanted to know if he'd left someone behind, someone who was still pining for him and waiting for him to come back, but he didn't dare. For one, he wasn't sure if there was anything he could do about it. Even if he *had* left someone behind, he didn't remember them and never would. Would it be fair to reach out to them?

Marlow didn't think so. It was better to focus on the situation at hand, himself and Jason, and helping the mages with Carlyle. Once all of that was over, he hoped he'd feel more settled. Only then would he allow himself to think about what he might have left behind when Carlyle's spell had taken him.

But for now, he couldn't afford to let this distract him. It was too much too soon, and he needed time.

The problem was that he didn't know if he'd have it.

* * * *

Jarvis wanted to spend more time with Marlow, even though he knew it was a recipe for heartache. He couldn't seem to help himself, which was why after breakfast, instead of going to his office to work, he offered to take Jason and Marlow on a walk inside the castle. Jason looked like Jarvis had offered him the moon, and while Marlow was more hesitant, he still gave Jarvis a grateful smile.

"He's going to be bouncing the entire day," he murmured as they followed Jason out of the dining room.

Most of the others were still there, eating and talking. Jarvis hadn't missed the way they'd stared at him and Marlow, but it was to be expected. Jarvis and Raleigh had been together a long time, and everyone expected them to be together again now that Marlow was back. Jarvis didn't want to disappoint them, but he kind of wanted to point out that Marlow wasn't Raleigh. They couldn't just fall back into a relationship, even though they'd been together before. There were no traces left

of Raleigh in Marlow, as far as he knew, and while Jarvis hadn't changed much, Marlow was an entirely different man.

It didn't mean Jarvis wasn't attracted to him—he was. He'd always found Raleigh incredibly handsome, and that hadn't changed just because Marlow had lost his memories. But since Marlow wasn't Raleigh, it meant that the man Jarvis had been in love with for so long was gone. Jarvis needed to mourn him, and it would take some time. He didn't want to rush into things, and he hoped the others would realize that.

He didn't know what would happen between him and Marlow, but he had hope. He wanted to fall in love again. He wanted Marlow in his life. He was fine taking things slow as long as it meant that Marlow wasn't going anywhere.

He watched as Jason ran ahead. He kept stopping to stare at stuff, and Jarvis was happy to answer every time he had a question. It was strange to have a child here again, especially one Jarvis felt so close to, but he liked it.

“You don't have to answer every single one of his questions,” Marlow said quietly.

“Why shouldn't I answer his questions? He's asking them for a reason.”

“Yeah, but he's a lot.”

“Not too much, though. It's strange to have a child here again, especially one so energetic. I heard him in the hallway this morning.”

Marlow groaned. “I'm sorry about that. I tried to tell him he could sleep in since he didn't have school, but to him, getting up at six in the morning *is* sleeping in.”

Jarvis laughed. “You'll get your revenge once he turns into a teenager and will want to stay in bed until eleven.”

Marlow cackled. “I can't wait. I already have my vacuum cleaner ready.”

They smiled at each other, and it felt so good. There might not be any recognition in Marlow's gaze, but maybe there didn't need to be. If he and Jarvis were going to do this again,

they had to start from the very beginning. Jarvis wasn't sure how to do that since he and Raleigh had always been in each other's lives, but he'd find a way.

He'd do that and so much more when it came to Marlow.

"Can you tell me more about what happened before?" Marlow asked.

Jarvis had expected the question. Marlow had had some time to wrap his mind around what was happening. It made sense that he wanted more answers now, but Jarvis was hesitant. He'd already decided he wouldn't tell Marlow the two of them had been together. He didn't want Marlow to think he had any expectations, and honestly, he'd feel better knowing there weren't any on him, either. He and Marlow could get to know each other again, and hopefully, by the time they did, they'd be closer to what they'd been before.

"Well, you already know about Carlyle."

"I only know that he was your apprentice and went mad for power. You haven't told me much more than that."

Jarvis stared into the distance. If there was one person he could talk to about his feelings for Carlyle, it was Marlow. He might not remember, and he might not be Raleigh anymore, but he'd always be the same person at his core.

"I feel guilty," Jarvis admitted. "Carlyle was my apprentice, and I should have seen that something was happening."

"Please don't tell me you've been blaming yourself for what happened all this time."

"I'm afraid I have been. You're not the first to react this way when I explain it. The other mages have pointed out several times over the decades that what Carlyle did was entirely his fault."

"They're right. I might not remember him, but meeting him once was enough for me to know he's an asshole."

Jarvis thought of the boy Carlyle had been. He couldn't pinpoint when things had changed, but he didn't think that the precise moment mattered. "I'm not sure what to tell you when

it comes to him. I don't know when or how he changed. I took him on as an apprentice when he was a young teenager. He hadn't had the easiest life, and in hindsight, some of the things he did and said pointed to the fact that he wanted more. He expected magic to fix his life, but that isn't how things work. I taught him everything I knew about magic, and he was a great learner. He was always attentive and listened to everything I said, which was good. I thought I was doing a good job as a teacher. He was gifted, and he could have been a great mage."

"I'm pretty sure you were doing a good job. What happened with him after that doesn't mean you weren't good."

"Once I'd taught him everything I knew, he got stronger and stronger, and it was time for him to stop being an apprentice. That's when things got odd."

"When he stopped spending time with you?"

Luckily for Jarvis, Jason was distracted by a coat of armor. He was poking at it and giggling when it made noise, and while Jarvis was pretty sure it would eventually crash to the floor, for now, Jason was safe and giving Jarvis and Marlow the space they needed.

Jarvis nodded. "Before, I could keep an eye on him. I knew what he was working on, so it wouldn't have been easy for him to sneak around. I would have realized something was wrong right away, but once he set off on his own, it was impossible for me to see how much he was changing. We still saw each other every day, but he was closed off about his work, and while I was a bit worried, I thought it was normal. He was trying to show me what he'd learned from me and that he was good enough to be a mage on his own."

And he had been. Carlyle had always been a great student and incredibly gifted. Maybe that was why Jarvis hadn't seen what was right in front of his eyes. Maybe he'd ignored it because he'd wanted to believe he was a good teacher. He didn't know, and it didn't matter anymore. What was done was done, and all of this was in the past.

"He got more and more secretive, even with his shield," Jarvis continued. "Then, Emory vanished."

“Emory?”

“Carlyle’s shield. He was a dragon like you, of course.”

“What happened to him?”

“No one knows. We haven’t seen him since then. When I went to Carlyle because I was worried about his shield not being around, he attacked me.”

Jarvis didn’t want to talk about this anymore. He felt guilt and responsibility heavily on his shoulders and wished he didn’t have to think of the past. Back then, Marlow had been next to him every step he took. He’d been there to support him, to tell him that none of this was his fault. Jarvis had almost believed him.

But it *was* his fault. He’d been in a unique position to see what Carlyle was up to and how dangerous he’d become, but he’d been too busy with his own work and his relationship with Marlow. If he hadn’t been so selfish, he could have stopped what had happened, and no one would have had to suffer the way they did. He and the other mages wouldn’t have lost their shields, and Marlow and the other dragons wouldn’t have lost their memories.

Carlyle might have been the one who’d cast those spells, but Jarvis had been the one who taught him how to do it. He’d been the one to teach Carlyle everything.

* * * *

Marlow knew the moment he lost Jarvis. Jarvis suddenly turned to him, and his expression told Marlow they were done with this conversation. “I apologize, but I remembered I had something to do. I need to go.”

Marlow couldn’t stop him, and he didn’t try. He nodded, and Jarvis rushed away as if he was afraid Marlow would come after him.

Marlow was tempted. He wanted more answers, but even more, he wanted to tell Jarvis that what had happened wasn’t

his fault.

Did it matter that he'd taught Carlyle what he knew? Marlow didn't think so. Carlyle had been an apprentice, so *someone* would have taught him. It was unfair for Jarvis to take on this pain and guilt, because he hadn't been the one to cast these spells. Carlyle had, and as far as Marlow was concerned, he was the only guilty person in this situation.

Everything was so fucking confusing. Whenever Marlow talked to someone to get answers, he felt like he got more questions instead. He still wasn't sure how the bond between mage and shield worked, and he didn't know if asking Jarvis would be right. He knew Jarvis was keeping something from him regarding their bond, and he was afraid to ask what that something was.

He'd been watching Parker and Ansley since he'd arrived at the castle. He hadn't talked to either of them yet, but he was fascinated, especially by Parker. Parker was a shield and a dragon shifter, like Marlow. Like Marlow, his memories had been taken from him. He could understand Marlow in a way no one else could, and Marlow wanted to talk to him.

Watching Parker and Ansley together made something in Marlow yearn for Jarvis. In turn, that made him wonder if mages and shields were supposed to be together as couples. Jarvis had been careful when he'd explained the bond, and he'd never mentioned the shield and the mage being in love, but he might have intentionally avoided that.

Was that a thing? Or were Parker and Ansley an oddity? Something told Marlow they weren't, but he was too afraid to ask.

He also didn't want to hurt Jarvis. No matter what Marlow was going through, at least he didn't know what he was missing. He had no memories of the past, so he could only focus on the present. Jarvis didn't have that luxury. Whenever he looked at Marlow, he probably remembered when Marlow was Raleigh. Marlow had noticed Jarvis reaching for him several times, almost as if it was natural for him to do so.

Had it been? Had Jarvis and Raleigh been together? And if they had been, what did it mean for Marlow?

He liked Jarvis. He didn't know if he could fall in love with him, but that was because he didn't know him yet. If his old self had loved Jarvis, then maybe his new self could do the same. Was that something Marlow wanted? He didn't know the answer to that and to so many other questions. The only thing he knew for sure was that it was a lot to take in, and he'd need more time to wrap his mind around the fact that his life had changed so much in such a short length of time.

It wasn't for the better or worse. It was just different, and he'd learn to live with it.

And maybe he wouldn't have to learn to live with it on his own. Maybe Jarvis would be there with him, ready to help with whatever he needed.

Marlow didn't know anything for sure when it came to his past, but he could easily imagine a future with Jarvis in it.

Chapter Five

Jarvis was avoiding Marlow. Marlow didn't need to know Jarvis to see that, just like he didn't need to be told why. Jarvis clearly felt too vulnerable when he spent time with Marlow, and staying away was easier for him.

It was easier for Marlow, too. He already had enough to deal with. Spending time away from Jarvis meant he didn't have to focus on their past relationship yet, but it wouldn't last forever. He didn't want it to. He wanted to know what everyone around him was hiding, including Jarvis.

He could ask anyone, and they'd probably answer. Unless Jarvis had explicitly told them not to tell Marlow anything, they'd want to give him what he needed. Marlow wanted to take it, but he could tell Jarvis wouldn't be happy about it, and for some reason, he didn't want to make Jarvis unhappy.

Something told him this was a regular pattern between them. He might not remember, but he was sure he hadn't wanted to make Jarvis unhappy in the past, too. That could mean they'd been friends, but it also could mean something else, and Marlow was desperate to find out.

But he was just as desperate never to know.

He rubbed his forehead. None of this was easy, and sometimes he wondered if he had what it would take to deal with the situation. It was too much, and he didn't know where to start. He'd thought that Jarvis would help him, but it was clear that wouldn't happen, at least not now. The problem was that the awkwardness between Marlow and Jarvis was affecting everyone. Jarvis had started taking his meals early or late or eating in his office. Marlow was sure he still saw the other mages, but most of the time, he was in his office, which meant they had to go look for him there. He'd retreated because he didn't want to see Marlow, and it had taken him away from his family. It didn't feel fair, even though none of it was Marlow's fault. He wanted to fix it, especially when his son asked about Jarvis and why he wasn't around.

They needed to talk.

He looked up. Jason was happily chatting away with Jillian, and Marlow felt a wave of gratefulness. Jillian was human but never treated Jason differently because he could turn into a dragon. He enjoyed spending time with her and treated her almost like a grandmother, which was a pleasure to see. At the same time, it made Marlow feel guilty. Jason had grandparents out there. It wouldn't take much for him to get to know them, but right now, he couldn't, because Marlow didn't want him to. The situation was complicated enough without adding Marlow's clan to it. He was glad Jarvis had agreed to keep his return a secret, and while that wouldn't last forever, at least it meant he had time to wrap his mind around everything and try to find a solution.

Because he couldn't continue like this. Something was going to break eventually, and Marlow needed to make sure it wasn't something important.

“Do you mind keeping an eye on Jason?” he asked, leaning over the counter. “I need to talk to someone.”

Jillian didn't look surprised. “Are you finally going to tell Jarvis to get his head out of his butt?”

Marlow barked out a laugh. “I don't think he'd appreciate it.”

“He doesn't have to. He also doesn't have to behave like an idiot, which is what he's doing.”

Marlow glanced at his son, but Jason was busy kneading something, so Marlow could focus on Jillian. “Do you know anything about what's happening?”

“I might be human, but I have ears. Jarvis is avoiding you.”

“You know why?”

“You'll have to ask him. You'll also have to push, because he'll push you away and convince himself he's doing the right thing and that it's best for everyone. He feels responsible for what happened and for the safety of everyone here, and sometimes, he takes on too much.”

Marlow didn't want to consider the possibility that Jarvis might continue pushing him away. He was Jarvis's shield, and while he didn't remember anything about it, it was an important role. He was supposed to protect Jarvis, but how could he do that when they were never in the same room? He didn't know if Jarvis was avoiding him to protect him or more probably, to protect himself, but it needed to stop.

Jason barely looked at him when he told him he'd be right back. He'd been busy since they'd arrived at the castle, but it was good to see. Every day, he had something new to do. Marlow needed to start organizing his homeschooling, but he didn't know where to start, and he already felt overwhelmed as it was. Still, he needed to keep his son a priority, which meant coming up with something.

He added it to his ever-growing mental list of things to do.

The castle was massive, and Marlow had gotten lost more than once since moving in. Parts of the castle weren't used much, but even when staying in the areas that were, it was easy to get turned around and end up in the kitchen while trying to get back to his rooms. That was why he wasn't surprised when, instead of reaching Jarvis's office, he found himself in a hallway he didn't recognize. He hesitated between going back or moving ahead, but he was afraid of getting completely lost. Considering the castle's size, it might be a week before someone found him.

He turned to go back, only to bump into someone. He quickly raised his hand to catch them, and Parker laughed.

"I know that expression."

Marlow grinned. They hadn't had an opportunity to talk yet, but it looked like that might change. "Please tell me you got lost after you moved in here, too."

"I still get lost. It's why I tend to stick to the same areas most of the time and carry a map. The castle is great, but I'm terrified to explore in case I can't find my way back."

That was what Marlow had been thinking, and it was a relief to find out he wasn't the only one. "I was looking for Jarvis's

office.”

Parker’s expression softened. “You’re ready to talk to him?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m ready as much as I don’t want him to continue avoiding me.”

“It’s not easy.”

“It definitely isn’t. How did you do this?”

“I pushed through it. Ansley had a period of time during which he avoided me, too. I don’t think he had the same reasons as Jarvis, but the advice I can give you is not to give up. Mages can be stubborn, and they have all their memories, while we have none. It’s easy for them to tell themselves they’re doing it because they want what’s best for us, and I have no doubt they do. The problem is that they believe they know what’s best of us because they think they know us, but they don’t.”

“Sometimes, I don’t even know myself.”

“I get that. I didn’t get my memories back, and sometimes, it’s infuriating. I wish I could get my hands on Carlyle, because he took so much away from me. There’s nothing I can do to change the past, though. I can work to make the present and the future the way I want them, which is what I’m doing, or at least trying to do. You need to give yourself and Jarvis time. It’s not easy for either of you, although for completely different reasons.”

Marlow had no doubt about that. Maybe he was the one who had it easy because he didn’t remember, but it was still frustrating. He wanted Jarvis to talk to him and tell him what was going on instead of avoiding him. It would be easier to fix things together rather than attempting to do so separately.

But he wasn’t sure Jarvis saw things the same way.

“Were Jarvis and I together?” he asked.

He should ask Jarvis, but he didn’t think the mage would tell him. That would tell Marlow the truth, but he needed to hear the words.

Parker grimaced. “You should ask him. I want to tell you, but this is between you and Jarvis. All I can tell you is that while you can’t go back to the relationship you had before, you can build a new one. You might not remember him, but it doesn’t mean you’ve changed so much that you won’t want him once you get to know him.”

So Parker was confirming that Jarvis and Marlow had been together. Marlow didn’t know if he realized it, but that was okay. Now that he knew for sure, he was more than ever convinced that he and Jarvis needed to talk.

He’d had enough of this avoiding bullshit. They wouldn’t defeat Carlyle by hiding from each other, and he was too dangerous to ignore. They needed to be a team and to do that, they needed to talk, and Jarvis would have to answer Marlow’s questions.

Marlow wasn’t sure he was ready to ask them, but he was about to find out.

* * * *

When someone knocked on the door of Jarvis’s office, he hesitated. It could be one of the other mages, but it could also be Marlow, and Jarvis had been doing his best to avoid him. He didn’t see a reason for Marlow to come to his office, but what did he know? Even though Marlow would never remember him, it didn’t mean he didn’t want more answers, and Jarvis had promised to give them to him as best as he could.

Then he’d proceeded to avoid him and do the exact opposite.

He stared at the door from behind his desk. He’d been trying to work, but like every day since Marlow had entered his life again, he’d been failing miserably. It made him feel guilty because he was supposed to find a way to protect his people from Carlyle and send Carlyle back into the gemstone or permanently defeat him, but instead, he was daydreaming about Marlow. It wasn’t right, but no matter how many times

he tried to focus on work, thoughts of Marlow always distracted him.

And now, he was behind the door, wanting to talk to Jarvis.

Jarvis didn't need to answer to know it was Marlow. Something in him knew his dragon was there, and he desperately wanted to open the door. He wanted to fall into Marlow's arms and make him promise never to leave again. He wanted to kiss him for the first time in decades and to tell him he loved him.

But he couldn't do any of that. He loved Raleigh, but he barely knew Marlow. There was no way to know how much Marlow had changed since he'd lost his memories. Parker wasn't the same man he'd been before, but it wasn't a bad thing. He'd always been a bit of an asshole, especially when it came to Ansley, but now, he cherished the mage. Jarvis was still getting to know him as his new self, and he liked him.

But he was terrified to find out how much Marlow had changed.

"I know you're in there," Marlow said from the hallway. "I'm not going anywhere until you talk to me."

Jarvis wanted to scream at him to leave him alone. It would sound too much like he was having a tantrum, and he wasn't a child, no matter how he was behaving.

He sighed again. He really didn't have a choice, did he?

"Come in," he called out. There would be no changing Marlow's mind. Maybe Jarvis could see what he wanted, quickly answer his questions, and send him on his way.

If only his life was that easy.

The door opened, and Marlow burst in as if he was afraid Jarvis would change his mind. He was tempted to, but it was too late. Marlow was here, looking like he belonged in Jarvis's office.

He stood in the middle of the room and peered around. Jarvis stayed quiet and gave him time, even though he wanted to ask what Marlow wanted. Rushing him wouldn't help. It

would probably make him even more nervous, and Marlow had never done well when he was nervous.

Or rather, Raleigh hadn't. There was no way to know how Marlow behaved under pressure.

"What can I do for you?" Jarvis eventually asked.

Marlow tore his gaze away from the bookshelves and strode toward the desk. Jarvis wasn't actually working on anything, but thankfully, he had an open book in front of him. At least this way, Marlow would think he was doing something productive.

"You said that you'd answer my questions when I was ready to ask them."

"I did. What do you want to know?" Jarvis wanted to ask why he hadn't asked the others, but he knew the answer.

Marlow hadn't asked Ansley or Tyne because he felt drawn to Jarvis. It wasn't just because they'd been together. Even before then, they'd been shield and mage, best friends, and that wasn't something they could ever change. They would be in each other's lives forever, whatever that meant for them.

Once, Jarvis had hoped it would mean they could build a life together and have a family. He wasn't so sure about that anymore, and it scared him.

"I want to know about us."

Jarvis's stomach churned. "What did you want to know in particular? About the bond we share? It's a bond every shield and mage have, and I realize it can't be easy for you to deal with. You've been dumped into this situation and don't know much about it."

Marlow's eyes narrowed, and he flopped into the chair in front of the desk. He leaned forward, never looking away from Jarvis. "I think it would be easier to deal with if you were honest with me."

"I've been honest with you since the beginning." Jarvis hadn't told him the entire truth, but he hadn't lied.

Marlow snorted. “Fine. You’ve been honest, but you’ve also avoided telling me things.”

Jarvis wouldn’t get out of this conversation without telling Marlow the truth. He had to know. He wouldn’t be here asking this question if he wasn’t ready for the truth, and it didn’t make sense for Jarvis not to answer honestly. He didn’t want to lie to Marlow.

Even though telling him the truth would hurt like hell.

He licked his lips. “All right. Ask me your questions.” His voice was little more than a whisper, but Marlow heard him anyway.

“Were you and I together?”

“We’ve been together since we were children.”

Often, a mage’s power ran in the family. Even more often, mages and their dragons became couples and built families together. When a child born of a mage and a dragon was a mage, he could never shift into a dragon. He wasn’t even considered a dragon shifter, even though part of him was. The mage’s powers were stronger, which didn’t feel right, but that was how it worked. Jarvis’s father was a dragon, while his mother was a mage. Jarvis had gotten his powers from his mother, and he’d been raised with the clan.

Marlow’s clan.

They’d played together as babies and toddlers. Jarvis was only six when Marlow had declared to anyone who listened that he’d be Jarvis’s shield. At the time, people had thought it was adorable. Not everyone had believed him, and choice had little to do with being someone’s shield, but he’d shown them wrong. He’d become Jarvis’s shield. They’d fallen in love, and even though neither could bear children, they’d had plans to start a family.

All those plans had vanished after Carlyle had attacked. Jarvis’s heart had been crying out for Marlow since then, and it wanted nothing more than for Jarvis to crawl into Marlow’s lap and hug him. The thought of how many nights they’d spent

in that position made him want to cry, but he didn't want to scare Marlow.

Besides, he had a question to answer.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," Marlow said. His expression was set, which told Jarvis he wasn't letting go.

Jarvis couldn't look at him while he explained, so instead, he stared down at his hands on the desk. "You and I were together as a couple," he confirmed. "Dragons and mages often are, although not always. We grew up together. We've always been shield and mage since you were six and told everyone that was what you wanted. We fell in love as teenagers and were each other's first everything." And Jarvis had thought they'd be each other's last, too.

He didn't begrudge Marlow for having Jason and for trying to build himself a life when he couldn't remember what he'd left behind, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

"I'm so sorry," Marlow whispered.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. None of this is your fault, and while I'm still in love with Raleigh, I realize you're not the same person anymore, and I don't expect you to love me or want me in any way. You're my shield, and there's nothing we can do about that, but I need you to know that it doesn't mean we have to go back to what we had before. I know we can't because you're not Raleigh anymore, and he's the man I was in love with." And the man who'd been in love with Jarvis.

This time, it was Marlow who ran. He looked like he'd seen a ghost, and when he got to his feet and rushed to the door, Jarvis didn't try to stop him.

How could he?

Chapter Six

Jarvis had avoided Marlow for days, and now, it was the other way around. Every time Jarvis walked into a room, Marlow found an excuse to leave. Jarvis had started avoiding meals and spending time with the others because he had enough of their pitying glances. They meant well and truly felt sorry for him, but he didn't want to be pitied.

He wasn't sure what he wanted, or rather, he knew what he wanted, but it was impossible for him to obtain it. He wouldn't get Raleigh back, and clearly, Marlow didn't feel about him the way Raleigh had. That was all right. Jarvis had made his peace with it, and in a way, it was a good thing that Marlow was avoiding him. It meant Jarvis didn't have to look at him and torture himself about everything he'd lost and would never get back.

While Jarvis had stopped avoiding Marlow, he still couldn't focus on his work, and it was becoming a problem. After spending an hour and a half staring at the same page in a book, he decided to take a break and left his office. He didn't want to make Marlow uncomfortable, so he stuck to the hallways that weren't as frequented as the rest of the castle. It wasn't hard, considering how big the place was, and it was peaceful.

Or at least, it had been peaceful until Jarvis had found Jason poking at a coat of armor.

"Haven't you learned your lesson with the one that fell?" he asked.

Jason jumped in surprise, then grinned when he saw Jarvis. "What are you doing here?"

Jarvis arched a brow. "Shouldn't I be the one asking you that? The castle is my home."

"It's my home, too," Jason pointed out.

He looked so much like his father that it made Jarvis want to run away screaming. Looking at Jason reminded Jarvis of Raleigh when he'd been a child, and it wasn't easy to

disassociate that from Marlow. This was neither Raleigh nor Marlow, though. It was Jason, who was an entirely different person, no matter how much he looked like his father. “What are you up to?”

Jason shrugged. “Just looking around. Dad said I need to start studying soon, so I’m having fun for now. I thought moving here meant I wouldn’t have to go to school anymore.”

He sounded so offended by the fact that he’d still have to go to school that Jarvis almost laughed. “Don’t you like school?”

“I don’t know. I guess it’s fine. It’s boring sometimes, though.”

“Then maybe homeschooling will be good for you. It won’t be the same as going to school, but you’ll still learn.”

“I don’t know if I want to learn with Dad. He’s not good at math.”

This time, Jarvis did laugh. “Well, people can’t be good at everything.”

“Yeah, but he really sucks.”

“And you’re good at math?”

Jason smiled. “Better than my dad.”

Jarvis knew Marlow was trying to do what was best for his son, but clearly, what was best for Jason wasn’t to have Marlow teach him math. “How about I talk to one of my friends? Thorne is the one who takes care of all the accounts around here. He has to be good at math to do that.” And even if he didn’t know where to start homeschooling Jason, he’d be better placed to come up with a plan. It was clear Marlow had no idea what he was doing, and neither did Jarvis. However, Jason wasn’t the first child to live in the castle, so Jarvis knew they could do this.

“I know Thorne,” Jason said as he bounced on his feet. “He’s nice.”

“He is. Now, why don’t you let me show you a secret passage?”

Jason's eyes widened. "There's a secret passage?"

"This is a castle, isn't it? Of course there's a secret passage." It wasn't one Jarvis used because he didn't need to, but having it was nice because it made Jason smile, and Jarvis wanted him to smile.

Who was he kidding? He wanted Jason to smile because he was Marlow's son. Jarvis wanted him to be happy and to want to continue living in the castle so that once the mess with Carlyle was over, Marlow might be more inclined to stick around. Jarvis wanted to be Jason and Marlow's future, but he didn't know if he could be that and Marlow's past at the same time.

He led the way to the secret passage and made a rather dramatic gesture as he reached for one of the books on the shelf.

Jason watched him with wide eyes as he pulled down the book, and the bookshelf creaked and groaned as it opened. Jason attempted to rush inside, but Jarvis stopped him.

"You should always be careful. You don't know what's behind this."

"But the castle is safe."

"It is now, but it might not always be." Jarvis didn't want to scare Jason, but he didn't want anything to happen to him in case Carlyle got to them. "But it's good you know about this secret passage now. That means you'll have a place to hide if the castle is attacked."

"I don't want to hide. I want to fight."

"You have a lot to learn." Jarvis patted Jason's shoulder. "Now, why don't you let me lead the way?"

He raised a hand and decided to impress Jason a little bit. He wiggled his fingers, and a blue ball of light appeared in front of them. Jason looked like he wanted to rush ahead, but, to Jarvis's surprise, he stayed where he was. He allowed Jarvis to take the lead, so Jarvis did.

He didn't know how to behave with children. Jillian's daughters had been adults for a while, and Jarvis felt like he'd forgotten how to be with kids, but he seemed to be doing okay with Jason. Jason seemed impressed by everything Jarvis did, even the tiniest of spells.

"What's going on between you and my dad?" Jason eventually asked.

Jarvis had no idea how to answer his question. "It's complicated."

"Because he doesn't remember you?"

"He doesn't remember anything, not only me."

"Is that why he's always alone?"

Jason said it in a matter-of-fact way that hurt Jarvis's heart. He didn't want Marlow to be alone, and thankfully, he didn't have to be anymore. "I suppose it was easier for him to hide the fact that both of you are dragon shifters when he stayed away from people."

"We don't have to hide anymore."

"No, you don't. Everyone here knows what you are, and we don't care."

Jason nodded, but he wasn't finished. "My dad doesn't have a boyfriend."

How could a ten-year-old make Jarvis want to run away? "I see." He wasn't sure he did. What was Jason implying? Should Jarvis ask, or should he just ignore this? He knew which one he wanted to do.

Thankfully, Jason didn't push. He seemed happy with himself now that he'd told Jarvis that his father was single, and he continued to explore the secret passage until they reached the end of it next to the kitchen.

Which was where Marlow found them.

* * * *

Marlow had been combing through the castle, looking for his son. As long as Jason hadn't left the castle, he was supposed to be safe, but Marlow knew him. He could get himself in trouble even when he didn't mean to, and Marlow half expected him to make something explode. It certainly would be possible with the number of things stored around the castle that a ten-year-old shouldn't stick his nose into.

He'd checked the courtyard, where Jason spent a lot of time, and when he hadn't found his son there, he'd gone to the kitchen. Jillian hadn't been able to tell him where Jason was, though, and he'd started to worry.

Which was when a bookshelf in the hallway opened.

Marlow stared as it moved away from the wall. He could hear voices, and thankfully, one of them belonged to Jason. Marlow had to resist the urge to rush forward and grab his son, give him a good shake, and ask him what he'd been thinking. It was his fear talking, and he'd never do that to his kid in any other circumstance. He needed to deal with his fear, but Jason didn't.

Jason jumped out of the wall and turned to someone behind him. "That was great."

"Glad you enjoyed it. I'd like to ask you not to explore the castle's upper levels on your own, but I suspect you wouldn't listen to me."

"There is so much to see. Why can't I explore those areas?"

"Well, this is your home now, but you're not the only one who lives here. There are dangerous things in the castle, especially in our offices."

"I already promised I wouldn't go in any of them."

Jason sounded like he wasn't happy about that promise, and Marlow would have to remind him he'd made it, just in case. Jason wasn't usually a liar or one who disobeyed rules, but he did get himself in trouble sometimes. It would be the worst kind of trouble if he got into the ingredients for spells the mages used.

He cleared his throat, and both Jason and Jarvis jumped. Jarvis was out of the bookshelf now, too, and he and Marlow stared at each other.

“Hey, Dad,” Jason said as he tried walking past Marlow.

“Don’t you dare,” Marlow told him. “What were you thinking? No one knew where you were.”

“I was fine.”

“I can see that you are, and I’m glad, but I heard Jarvis tell you not to explore the empty areas of the castle. Is that where you were?”

“I wasn’t doing anything dangerous. I was looking at books.”

Marlow believed him. His son was curious, which was why he was so bent on exploring the castle. It was also why he read a lot, and he’d been fascinated with the books around the castle since they’d arrived. Thankfully, the mages had made sure the dangerous ones wouldn’t be in reach of Jason. Marlow had no idea what he was dealing with here, and he didn’t want anyone to get hurt just because his son tried a spell he found interesting. Marlow wasn’t sure he’d be able to cast it since he was a shifter and not a mage, but he wasn’t willing to take the risk.

“He *was* looking at books,” Jarvis confirmed.

Marlow avoided looking at him. He didn’t know how to behave with Jarvis anymore. They’d been together, and more than that, they’d known each other for their entire lives. He couldn’t imagine them as children, and it was even harder for him to imagine them as a couple.

But Jarvis hadn’t lied. Marlow had been avoiding him, but during that time, he’d been doing a lot of thinking and exploring, too. He’d found a hallway full of framed pictures of the mages and their dragons. The only good dragon he recognized was Parker, but he’d seen all the mages, and he and Jarvis had been central to many of the pictures. It had been obvious to him from the way they looked at each other that

they were very much in love, and he didn't know how to deal with that.

Raleigh had been in love with Jarvis. Marlow wasn't Raleigh, yet at the same time, he was. He'd changed from the Raleigh Jarvis had known, but deep inside, he was still the same person.

And he really liked Jarvis.

That was why he'd stayed away. He was afraid he'd rush into a situation he wasn't ready for, and he suspected that was what he'd do, if given the chance. He'd yearned for a relationship for a long time. He could survive well on his own, and he had. Jason had been the center of his universe for a long time, and that had been okay. Marlow didn't *need* someone in his life.

But he wanted someone. He wanted the intimacy of waking up in bed together. He wanted the teasing, the soft touches, the sharing of burdens. He wanted someone who would love him completely, and maybe that made him selfish, but he didn't think it made him an oddity. Human beings wanted to be loved, and even though he was a dragon shifter, a big part of him was human.

And all of him—dragon and human—wanted Jarvis.

Marlow had already fallen in love with Jarvis once. It had happened over years, since they'd known each other since they were kids. While Marlow wasn't Raleigh, he had no doubt that if he allowed himself to spend more time with Jarvis, he'd fall in love with him again. The idea made him giddy, and at the same time, it terrified him. He didn't know how to deal with having someone like that in his life. Jason's mother had been a one-night stand, and after she'd gotten pregnant, Marlow had promised himself he wouldn't do that anymore, and he'd kept that promise. He hadn't wanted empty physical satisfaction, and for ten years, he hadn't had it. He didn't care about sex, even though he enjoyed it. What he did care about was love and giving his son a family, and his entire being was pushing him toward Jarvis to obtain that.

Seeing Jarvis with Jason reinforced that feeling. They were spending time together, and while they didn't behave like father and child and might never, it gave Marlow a deep satisfaction to see them together. He didn't need a co-parent, but it was vital to him that Jarvis and Jason had a good relationship.

Marlow and Jason were never going home. Even if they could, it would be smarter for them to move on from their little town. Here at the castle, they had a family and were protected. Their lives had changed, but that didn't mean it was bad. It would take them some time to settle, but they could do it, and once they did, they'd never have to leave again. No one here would care that Marlow wasn't aging. Once they found the other shields, there would be a whole bunch of dragons who could teach Jason how to deal with his shift. Marlow would always be Jason's father, but now Jason could have uncles and people who supported him as much as he deserved.

And Marlow wanted his son to have that. He wanted Jason to have another parent, maybe another father. Jarvis wouldn't be the worst person to have as a father, from what Marlow had seen, and while he wasn't ready to say all of that out loud yet, it was definitely in the back of his mind.

But maybe it was time to bring it to the front of his mind. There was nothing he could do about the Carlyle situation. He wasn't a mage, and aside from volunteering to go with the mages to find the other shields, there was little he could do. Jarvis had to focus on Carlyle, and Marlow didn't want to distract him, but maybe it was what Jarvis needed. At the very least, Jarvis should be able to decide if he wanted to be distracted or not.

Marlow hoped the answer would be yes.

Chapter Seven

Jarvis looked around the table. They were gathered to have a meeting about Carlyle, but they couldn't start yet because Penley wasn't there.

"Does anyone know where he is?" Jarvis asked.

Keyon and Dallin looked at each other, then at Jarvis again. Keyon shook his head while Dallin shrugged and said, "He was in the library the last time I saw him."

"He knew about the meeting, right?"

"We all knew about the meeting," Tyne grumbled. "You sent a group text, remember?"

"That doesn't mean he saw it."

"He did, and he's late. Stop being a mother hen."

For a moment, Jarvis was offended, but then he realized he *was* being a mother hen. Penley wasn't in danger. He hadn't left the castle, and none of the defensive spells had been triggered. Carlyle hadn't snuck into the castle and hurt Penley, and Jarvis couldn't begrudge Penley for being late. He'd get lost in a book, too, if he could, but unfortunately, he had important things to do.

Like finding a way to defeat Carlyle.

He rubbed his forehead. He'd been obsessing over this for a while, but it had gotten worse recently. Now that he'd found Marlow again, he was terrified that Carlyle would hurt him, even though he realized it probably wouldn't happen. He didn't know how Carlyle had found Marlow, but he'd attacked him because he'd been easy prey. He'd been alone, but he wasn't anymore, and not just because he was safe at the castle. No, if Carlyle wanted to attack one of the dragons, he'd choose someone who had no idea what was going on, which was another thing Jarvis was worried about.

How had Carlyle found Marlow? Who would he go for next? There was no way for anyone to know, and while things

had been urgent before, it was getting worse.

He looked at Ansley, who was quietly talking with Parker on the other side of the table. “When do you think you’ll be able to cast the spell again?”

“He needs more rest,” Parker interjected. “Casting this spell takes a lot out of him, even though he’s bonded to me.”

Jarvis didn’t want to push Ansley, and he certainly didn’t want him or anyone else to get hurt, but he wasn’t sure they had more time. “How long?”

“I’ll be fine tomorrow.” Ansley glared at Parker, and while Parker looked like he wanted to argue, he snapped his mouth shut and glared.

It was good to see those two together. Jarvis had always been hesitant about Parker when he’d still been Byron, because he hadn’t treated Ansley well, but that was in the past. Everything in Parker’s life but Ansley was in the past, and it was good to see how much he’d changed. Jarvis hadn’t liked him much before, but he adored him now, and he could see how happy Parker made Ansley. Things hadn’t been easy for either of them, but they were together now, and that was all that mattered.

“So how does the spell work?” Marlow asked.

He sounded hesitant, which made sense. It was the first time he’d sat in on one of these meetings. He’d soon realize there was nothing intimidating about them. Usually they spent their time bickering about something or other, talking, and not much more. Things had gotten more urgent since Carlyle had come back, but this was still an opportunity for everyone to relax together as a family.

Maybe they should start organizing evenings to do that. Right now, they needed to focus on Carlyle, but that wasn’t easy when one of them was missing.

“I think we should go find Penley,” he said.

Tyne rolled his eyes but got to his feet. He walked out, and while Jarvis was grateful that someone was finally listening to him, maybe he should have been the one to go. He was tense

and had a hard time focusing, and Marlow being in the same room wasn't helping much, so he wasn't particularly useful at the moment.

"If you can find the other shields, can you also find Carlyle?" Marlow was asking Ansley.

"I rely on the bond between shield and mage to find the shields," Ansley explained. "That's why I need the mage in question to be with me when I cast the spell. Parker was the easy one, since I could focus on our bond, but we have nothing of the sort to find Carlyle. I've tried coming up with another seeking spell and using some smaller ones I already knew about, but it's like he's gone from the surface of the earth."

"He's shielding himself," Keyon said.

Jarvis was sure Marlow would ask what that meant, but the word was explanatory. Marlow looked thoughtful, though, and Jarvis wondered if maybe he'd be able to see something the rest of them couldn't. He was new to the situation, and having fresh eyes might be a good thing. Even if it wasn't, this situation involved Marlow. He was one of them, and he'd been the one Carlyle had attacked. It wouldn't surprise Jarvis if he wanted revenge, although that didn't sound like the Raleigh he'd known.

Once again, he reminded himself that the Raleigh he'd known didn't exist anymore. Marlow was an entirely different man than Raleigh had been, and that was fine. Jarvis was getting used to the idea, and while he wasn't entirely comfortable with it yet, knowing he'd have to face the memory loss wasn't as daunting as it should have been. He'd seen what Ansley had gone through with Parker, and it helped. Having Marlow close did, too. They might not be together anymore, and Marlow didn't behave the way he had before, but he was alive and safe, and in the end, that was all Jarvis cared about.

"I'd ask how that works, but I don't think I'd understand," Marlow said. "So who are you going to look for now?"

Ansley shrugged. "It's all the same to me. We'd decided Jarvis should be the one after me because of how important he

is to all of us, but now, it won't make a difference. I guess the other guys will have to talk it through.”

They'd all want to find their shield right away, but that wasn't possible. Jarvis wondered how they'd decide, although he already had an inkling of whose shield they'd find next.

Tyne would insist on being the last one. That was who he was, and he'd never changed across the many decades they lived together. As gruff as he was, he cared about the other mages as if they were brothers, and in a way, they were. He'd want them to find their shield as soon as possible and wouldn't see a problem in taking a step back until they could.

That left three of them. Jarvis suspected the next one they'd find would be Penley's shield, Bennett. Penley was the youngest of them, and everyone tended to mother him. Jarvis wouldn't be surprised if they all insisted on finding Bennett for that reason.

“Well, whoever you're looking for, I'd like to be there when you go,” Marlow volunteered.

Jarvis was surprised, but maybe he shouldn't be. Just like Parker had volunteered when Ansley had cast the spell to find Marlow, it made sense that Marlow would want to be there for the next shield. He and Parker could understand the other shields better than anyone. They were dragon shifters, shields, and none of them had any idea what was happening.

The sound of voices coming from the hallway made Jarvis sit up. Tyne walked in, a flushed Penley right behind him. He was clutching a book to his chest, and his eyes were wide. “I'm so sorry. I started reading and lost myself in the book. I didn't realize it was so late.”

Jarvis pressed his lips together so he wouldn't smile. “It's fine. Sit down, and we can start.”

* * * *

Marlow felt entirely out of place at this meeting. He had no idea what the mages were talking about, and he wasn't sure

they wanted his input. He didn't know the entire situation, as the few questions he'd just asked had exposed. He and Jarvis needed to talk again, but there were still so many questions Marlow needed answers to that he had no idea where to start.

It was best if he listened, and he did plenty of that during the meeting. The mages and even Parker talked about Carlyle and quickly explained a few more details to Marlow as they did so. That was how Marlow found out that Carlyle had found minions. No one knew who they were, but it was because of them that Carlyle had managed to get out of the stone he'd been trapped in.

"Does that mean they're mages?" Marlow asked.

He'd expected the answer to come right away and to feel like an idiot, but instead, everyone gave it some thought.

"I'd like to know how they got their hands on the gemstone," Keyon said. "We've always known someone stole it while we were unconscious, but who was it? How did it get in the hands of these two guys?"

"It had to have been a servant," Dallin answered. "I looked into it so many times over the years, but I still can't tell you which one. We don't know what that servant did with the gemstone once they got it. They could have sold it or kept it and made it a family heirloom. It all depends on who they were and what they needed."

Which meant they still had no idea about who the minions were.

"Would he be weaker without them around?" Marlow asked.

"More than weak. I don't think he'd be able to deal with things," Dallin told him. "He's been trapped in the gemstone for decades. Think about how quickly technology evolved over just the past ten years. He has to be entirely lost, and having people who can tell him what a cell phone is and how to use the Internet will be invaluable. He probably needs help to do everything, including grocery shopping."

"There's also the fact that he thinks people should revere and serve him," Tyne grumbled.

As far as Marlow knew, that was the only way Tyne ever spoke. He was grumpy on the best of days, and it was clear he wasn't happy about this meeting.

He wasn't the only one.

Marlow wished they didn't have to talk about this. He wanted Carlyle to be gone and for everyone to be all right. He wanted this terrifying moment to end and to be able to settle down with his son and maybe find a partner.

His gaze drifted to Jarvis. He was talking with Penley, who still appeared flustered. Penley was adorable in a younger brother kind of way, and it was clear everyone here was protective of him. It made Marlow wonder if his shield would be the next they'd find. He wouldn't be surprised, and he suspected Penley needed to be protected more than anyone else around the table. There was something fragile about him, almost as if he'd break if someone touched him. Everything in Marlow screamed at him to protect the young mage, but if he had to make a decision during a fight or a dangerous situation, he wouldn't hesitate to protect Jarvis instead. He didn't like feeling that way, but he couldn't deny it, and that probably had everything to do with the fact that he was Jarvis's shield.

Everyone around the table deserved to be protected. The problem was that Marlow was only one dragon, and he was supposed to be focusing on Jarvis. Until they found the other shields, though, he might have to work overtime.

This was his new life now. He was still a carpenter, but he hadn't worked since he'd arrived. He'd grabbed his tools when they'd gone back to the house he'd shared with Jason, but he hadn't unpacked them yet. He didn't know if he could, even though his fingers itched to get to work again.

The mages had opened their home to him and Jason. They were keeping the two of them safe, and that was all Marlow cared about. Knowing that Jason was here while he went out with the mages to find the other shields would mean that he'd be able to focus on the search and wouldn't obsess over his son's safety. He knew that Jason wouldn't be alone even if something happened to him. He wouldn't have to go to his

mother, which wouldn't have been an option anyway because she'd signed over her parental rights. She and Jason saw each other sometimes, but she didn't want the responsibility, and Marlow didn't blame her. Having a kid was great, but it was also complicated, and sometimes it made Marlow want to scream. He wouldn't exchange his son for anything, but even he couldn't deny that Jason was frustrating sometimes.

But Marlow wouldn't have to raise his son on his own anymore. Even if he never found a partner, he had Jarvis and the other mages. He'd probably have the dragons soon, too. Everything would be all right.

He had to convince himself of that.

He looked at Jarvis again. The distance between them was frustrating but understandable. Neither of them knew where they stood with the other, and even though Jarvis had confirmed that they'd been together as a couple, Marlow still didn't know what to make of it. It had been easier to avoid Jarvis, but Marlow was angry at himself for doing so. They needed to fix things between them, and that wasn't going to happen as long as he did that.

But it was complicated. Marlow didn't know what he wanted from Jarvis. Jarvis didn't expect anything from him. He certainly didn't expect them to fall back into the relationship they'd had before, which wouldn't be possible anyway since Marlow didn't remember any of it. It was good to see that Jarvis hadn't taken Marlow running away as a rejection, but the careful distance he kept between them was starting to grate on Marlow's nerves. He had to do something, especially because he'd been the one to start avoiding things this time.

Or maybe Jarvis was just trying to give them space. He couldn't deny he'd needed it, especially the first few days, but he was fine now. He wanted more, and while he didn't know if this was the right moment, it wouldn't stop him.

He already had something to fight for. Jason was his world, or rather, he had been before. Now that he had so many new people in his life, Marlow realized that it had been a lot to put

on Jason's shoulders and even more on his. He didn't need to be alone anymore. He didn't need to hide what he and Jason were. With the mages, they could be themselves, and it was a relief. They'd never have to hide again.

But Marlow was hiding from Jarvis, and it didn't sit right with him, which meant it was time for a change.

Chapter Eight

Marlow leaned back on the bench but kept an eye on Jason, who was staring down at some insect he'd found. He'd asked Marlow if he wanted to see it, but Marlow disliked anything with more than four legs, so he was staying as far away as possible from whatever his son had found.

He didn't actually have to keep an eye on Jason. For all the trouble that Jason got in sometimes, he was almost eleven and could be left alone for some time. This was a new place, though, and while Marlow knew they were safe, it didn't mean Jason couldn't find something to get into that he shouldn't, especially with the number of mages who lived at the castle.

But at the moment, he was focused on the creepy crawly, which meant Marlow could spend some time coming up with his next step.

He and Jarvis had to get over the awkwardness between them. Everyone had noticed it, and while no one had pushed to know what was happening, Marlow suspected it wouldn't be long before someone did. From what he'd been told, they'd all agreed that after Parker, Marlow should be the next shield to be found because of who he'd been to Jarvis. They all cared about Jarvis and wanted him to be happy, but right now, he wasn't.

And it was because of Marlow.

More specifically, it was because of the circumstances around Marlow. If they'd been a couple and as loving as Marlow suspected, it had to be hell on Jarvis to see Marlow every day and not be able to touch and kiss him. It explained why he'd avoided Marlow so much in the beginning and why he wasn't pushing for them to talk again now that Marlow was the one avoiding him.

The problem was that it was hard to focus on his love life when Carlyle could attack at any second. Marlow didn't even know if he'd survive the fight with the asshole, and it made him feel guilty about maybe wanting more with Jarvis.

He was pretty sure he did want something more with Jarvis. It couldn't be anything like what there'd been before, but it didn't need to be. Marlow wasn't Raleigh. He never would be again since the mages had confirmed he wouldn't get his memories back. That meant Jarvis would have to fall in love with him all over again, and while Marlow wasn't sure it was possible, he was certainly willing to give it a chance.

"Dad?" Jason asked.

Marlow turned to look at his son to make sure he wasn't bringing the insect to him. Luckily, his hands were empty, so Marlow patted the wooden bench seat. "What is it?"

Jason settled down. He bounced his knee, a sure sign he was nervous. Marlow gave him time. He knew that pushing his son to tell him what was on his mind wouldn't help. It would only make Jason retreat into himself and make him even more nervous, and that was the last thing Marlow wanted.

"Why do you never have a boyfriend or girlfriend?"

That was the last thing Marlow had expected. "I'm sorry?"

Jason shrugged. "You know. I've met some of Mom's boyfriends, but I've never met any of your girlfriends."

Marlow had always been honest with Jason. Since he was a child, he'd told him that while most people fell in love with people from the opposite sex, not everyone did. He'd also explained that he liked both men and women, even though it had felt pointless because he hadn't been planning on dating anyone. He wanted Jason to know that not everyone was alike, which was okay because diversity made life fun. He must've done a good job because Jason was growing up a nice kid, and Marlow was incredibly proud of him.

Even though he didn't know how to answer his question.

Like always, he went the honesty route. He tried to do that as often as he could with Jason, and so far, it had worked well for them. Of course, he couldn't be entirely honest with Jason, but that was okay. He didn't need to be.

"That's because I haven't been dating," he explained. "Especially when you were younger, having a job and you to

take care of took most of my time.”

“So it’s my fault?”

“No. I just decided I wanted to focus on you, and I don’t regret it. I suppose that as the years passed, it was easier for me to be on my own. I have habits and do things a certain way, and it wouldn’t be easy for me to have to compromise on some things, even for someone I like.”

Jason was silent for a moment as if he was thinking about Marlow’s words. “You don’t think you’d be able to compromise with Jarvis?”

Marlow should have seen this coming. He doubted any of the mages would have told Jason that Jarvis and Marlow were together once, but it would have been easy for him to overhear a conversation. Since Jarvis had shown him the secret passages in the castle, Jason had been using them every day. Marlow had walked through them once to make sure they weren’t dangerous, but he had to get used to the idea that with how big the castle was, he wouldn’t always know where his son was. That was all right as long as Jason carried his phone and Marlow could call if something happened.

“I don’t know. Jarvis has been on his own for as long as I have.” Probably longer, although Marlow couldn’t be sure about that. Something told him Jarvis had never dated anyone else after losing him.

He shouldn’t feel guilty because he had. He’d even had a child with someone while Jarvis had been stuck waiting for him. Marlow hadn’t known he had someone at home. If he had, he would have done everything in his power to find Jarvis. But instead, he’d had to come to terms with the fact that he didn’t know who he was and build a life. It was a life he’d enjoyed, especially after Jason had been born. He’d always felt like he was missing something, though, and he supposed that finding out about the mages and Jarvis especially explained that feeling.

He’d been missing Jarvis.

“But you like each other.”

Everything was simple in Jason's life. Marlow wasn't about to take that from him, but he wasn't quite sure how to make Jason see that things didn't always work out, even when everyone involved wanted them to. "I do like Jarvis. The problem is that we have many things to discuss, and we share a history that's difficult to come to terms with. He remembers me, but I don't remember him. He even remembers when we were children together, but I never will, which is one of the reasons this is complicated."

Jason nodded as if he expected that answer. "Maybe you don't have to remember. I like Jarvis, too."

"That's good."

"I guess that if you like him, and he likes you, then you should be together. What happened before doesn't really matter."

Maybe he was right. Maybe what Marlow and Jarvis had shared truly didn't matter.

But the future did. It was what they were fighting for, what they were ready to face Carlyle for.

What they were ready to die for.

* * * *

Jarvis couldn't look away from the bench on which Marlow and Jason were sitting. They were quietly talking now that Jason was done poking at whatever he'd found on the other side of the courtyard. It was clear from their expressions the conversation was important, and Jarvis wished he could be there, sitting on Jason's other side or maybe holding Marlow's hand through whatever was happening.

But instead, he was creeping on them and staring from the window.

He shook his head and stepped back but couldn't go far—and he didn't want to. He might feel like a creep, but Marlow was his family, and he'd been without him for so long.

Watching him, even from a distance, soothed something in Jarvis that he hadn't realized needed soothing.

"What are you doing?"

Jarvis jerked back. His heart raced as he turned to glare at Tyne, who looked unrepentant, then amused, which was an expression Jarvis didn't often see on his friend's face.

"Looking out the window."

Tyne leaned closer. It would have been impossible for him to miss Marlow and Jason. "I see."

Jarvis glared at him. "You don't see anything."

"I see that you've been keeping an eye on your man."

Jarvis sighed. It was useless to deny that Marlow was his man or that he'd been watching him. As far as Jarvis was concerned, Marlow would be his man for the rest of their lives. The problem was that Marlow didn't remember him. He didn't remember what they'd shared, and Jarvis couldn't see where they could go from here.

Should they try building a new relationship? Should they get to know each other all over again? That would probably be the smartest idea. Jarvis had known the old Raleigh, but there were no signs of him left. The only thing left was Raleigh's body, but it was now filled with a new person.

It wasn't a bad thing. Jarvis had loved Raleigh, and it was odd to see him so different, but it was also incredible. Falling in love with Marlow would be so easy. Watching him with his son was enough to make Jarvis's heart go all gooey.

"Why have you been avoiding him?" Tyne asked.

"I haven't been. He's the one who's trying not to spend any length of time with me."

"Why? What happened?" Tyne crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder against the wall. He was here to stay, at the very least until he got an answer from Jarvis.

Jarvis hesitated only for a moment. He felt it was his duty to protect the other mages and carry as many burdens as he could

so they wouldn't have to, but they weren't his children. They were his friends, his *family*, and there was no one better for him to talk to when it came to Marlow.

“He came to my office the other day and asked if he and I had been a couple. I confirmed that we had been because I didn't see the point of lying to him. I'm not sure it was the right thing to do, though. He ran out of the room, and since then, he's been staying as far away from me as possible.”

“Sounds to me like he's scared.”

Jarvis thought he was. “I just don't see what he should be scared of. It's not like I'm going to force him to be in a relationship with me now that I have him back.”

“You've been clear about that?”

“I told him I didn't expect anything from him. He's not Raleigh anymore, and I've come to terms with that. I don't need him to be Raleigh, even though losing him hurts.”

Tyne nodded. Like Jarvis, he'd lost his shield, and like all the other mages now, he knew that when he found him again, he'd be a different person. He always tried not to show emotion, but Jarvis knew him. He'd also gone through all of this, so he knew how painful and difficult this was going to be.

He'd be there for Tyne and everyone else. He'd be able to support them and, hopefully, ease their pain.

“I just don't want you to make a mistake,” Tyne murmured as he turned his attention back to the courtyard. “We all want you to be happy, and even though we knew Marlow wouldn't have his memories, we thought it would be good for you to have your shield back.”

“It is. I don't know if I can ever thank you enough for allowing me to find my shield next after Ansley.”

Tyne shook his head as if dismissing Jarvis's words. “You don't need to thank any of us. We had to choose someone, and you made the most sense. I just don't want either of you to make a mistake that will hurt you. You belong together. You always have. You give me and the others hope that we can

have what we had before we lost our shields, and they lost their memories.”

“I don’t know if we’ll be able to have the same thing,” Jarvis cautioned.

“I know that. But if you fall in love again, it means all of us will be able to get back to something that looks like the relationship we had with our shields before they were taken from us. None of us know what to expect of our dragons now that they’re different people.”

“Marlow is still the same deep inside. It’s what makes him *him*, and he might not have any memories, but he still has his heart. I’m sure the same will go for everyone else.”

Tyne nodded, but Jarvis could see he wasn’t convinced.

Things had always been complicated between Tyne and his shield. Peyton had been in love with Tyne, but for some reason that no one had ever understood, Tyne had kept pushing him away. Maybe he’d thought he’d have more time, or maybe he just hadn’t wanted that kind of relationship with his shield. Whatever the reason, he’d changed after Peyton had been taken from him. They all had, which was understandable.

Whatever Tyne needed or wanted, Jarvis wanted him to have it. He was terrified of what was happening between him and Marlow, and while it would be worth it to solve this situation because they would be closer if they did, doing so to give Tyne and the others hope was yet another reason for Jarvis to stop avoiding his shield.

Whatever happened, Marlow was in his life to stay. No matter how different it would be from the way they’d been before, Jarvis wasn’t giving up on him. Even if they were never together again, having Marlow in his life would be worth it.

They’d been lovers, but they’d also been friends. Jarvis couldn’t allow his pain to take that away from either of them, especially not when Marlow needed friends the most. He had to stop fucking around and do the only thing he could do.

Talk to Marlow, be honest with him about what he wanted and wished for, and pray that Marlow wanted the same.

Chapter Nine

If Jarvis wanted to set things right with Marlow, he had to do it now. Ansley was ready to cast the spell again, and the other mages deserved to have their dragons back. Jarvis needed to set things right as soon as possible, even though it made him anxious. It was time. Both he and Marlow deserved it, and once this conversation was over, they'd finally know where they stood.

That was what made Jarvis nervous. He already knew where he stood. He loved Marlow, even though he wasn't the man he'd known. His love for him would never change, no matter what happened. He hadn't been sure in the beginning, but he was now. He'd watched Marlow and knew that nothing would take him away from his shield, especially not Carlyle. If Marlow wanted to put some distance between them, then Jarvis would, but otherwise, he was done resisting. He didn't know what would happen or what they would decide, but he couldn't continue hiding.

This felt like the best time to do it. Ansley was about to cast the spell again, but Carlyle had been quiet. Jarvis didn't fool himself into thinking it was because he'd given up. That wouldn't be like Carlyle, or at least not like the Carlyle he'd known. Maybe Carlyle had changed, too, but Jarvis suspected that if he had, it was for the worse. He'd be full of revengeful anticipation now that he was free, and Jarvis couldn't even blame him. If he tried putting himself in Carlyle's place, it made sense that he'd want revenge for being trapped in a gemstone for decades. He wouldn't understand why Jarvis and the other mages had done so. He'd thought he was in the right when he'd attacked them, but even if he was in the wrong, it hadn't been enough to stop him.

Carlyle was in the wrong and had been since he'd started this. The man he'd been when he was Jarvis's apprentice wasn't there anymore, and Jarvis needed to let him go. The problem was that he'd never been good at letting anything go, as his love for Marlow demonstrated.

So Jarvis was ready. He should get up from his chair, leave his office, and go find Marlow. That way, he could tell him he loved him and that he wanted to fix things between them, even if they didn't get together.

But he was rooted in place. He couldn't seem to make his feet work, no matter how many times he told himself to stop being an idiot. He was stuck in his chair and relieved when someone knocked on the door because he expected it to be a distraction.

It was, but not the right kind of distraction.

"Come in," he called out.

The door opened, and Jason peeked in. Jarvis almost groaned because where Jason was, usually, Marlow wasn't far behind. Sure enough, the door opened wider, and Marlow walked into the office.

Jarvis forced himself to smile. He was happy to see the two, but it was putting a wrench in his plans.

Even though he wasn't quite sure what his plans had been.

"What can I do for you?"

Jason and Marlow looked at each other. Jason bounced on his feet, but to Jarvis's surprise, the explanation didn't burst out of his mouth. Instead, he let his father speak. Marlow was visibly embarrassed and awkward, which reminded Jarvis of how he'd been when they were kids and teenagers. It was endearingly adorable, and it made him miss what he and Marlow had before.

He didn't know if he would ever get that back, but he was willing to try. He was willing to give anything to have Marlow in his life the way he'd been before. He'd never missed anyone as much as he missed Marlow, and he wanted that feeling to stop.

"We wanted to know if you wanted to come out with us for a bit," Marlow explained.

That was enough for Jason. "We're going to shift," he told Jarvis.

“That sounds like fun.”

It did. Jarvis had memories of riding on Marlow’s back while he was in his dragon form. They’d done it since they were kids, and while it had taken another meaning as they grew up, it had always been a simple pleasure, a moment for them to be together without having to think about work or the many problems that waited for them when they landed.

“We were wondering if you wanted to come with us,” Marlow added as he shot Jarvis a smile. “I’m sure you used to fly with me before.”

He might not remember, but he’d assumed right, and Jarvis couldn’t refuse. He didn’t want to, and after all, he’d been planning on talking to Marlow. What better opportunity than when the three of them were together and Jason was in the air? “I’d be delighted to come.”

Jason whooped and ran out of the office. Marlow seemed just as pleased, although he was more discreet about it. He waited for Jarvis to put everything away, a smile curling his lips the entire time. Once Jarvis was done, Marlow held the door open for him, then followed him outside.

Jason hadn’t gone far. He was poking at yet another suit of armor in the hallway, but he snatched his hand back when he heard them coming.

The first one he’d tipped over had a big bump in the helmet now.

Marlow groaned. “Didn’t I tell you to stay away from the suits of armor?”

“But they’re fun. I want to wear one.”

Jarvis eyed Jason, then the suit. “I think it’s too big for you.”

“Do they make suits of armor for children?”

“They were used in battle, but I’m pretty sure I saw some ceremonial ones for kings when they were kids.”

Jason’s eyes went wide. “I want to wear a suit of armor that belonged to a king.”

Marlow groaned. “Please don’t encourage him. He’ll tip them over until he manages to sneak into one.”

Jarvis laughed. He hadn’t spent a lot of time with Marlow and Jason together, and he’d been a fool. When he was with them, he was happy, even when Jason got himself in trouble. He wanted more of this.

It was almost as if they were a family.

They weren’t, at least not yet, but that could change. It *would* change, especially after Jarvis and Marlow talked.

And apparently, the time had come for them to do just that.

* * * *

Many bad things were coming. Marlow didn’t need to remember Carlyle to be sure of that. They were only supposed to find the other dragons for now, but war was coming. Carlyle would make sure of that, and Marlow was terrified.

He hoped they’d find the other dragons before Carlyle attacked, but even if they did, what were the odds that they could defeat Carlyle a second time? They had no memories of how they’d done it the first time around, or of anything else when it came to being a shield. Marlow didn’t know how Parker managed it, but he seemed almost relaxed in his role, while Marlow was terrified to do something wrong and allow Jarvis to get hurt.

What would happen to him if he did? He doubted anyone would blame him except himself, but it was enough. He’d started training with Parker and Tyne, but spending time with them had made him realize that it was time to stop being an asshole.

He’d never be Raleigh again, but he didn’t need to be. He’d lived his life as Marlow for a while, and he liked it. He had Jason, their home, and his woodworking business. Most of that had been left behind when he’d moved, but not Jason, and there was Jarvis, too, now. He was essential to Marlow, even

though they'd only recently met. Marlow could tell there could be so much more between them if only he gave it a chance.

He was ready.

Going out had been Jason's idea. He was itching to go flying, which was understandable. Here at the castle, he could shift and fly anytime he wanted. He didn't have to hide because, as Jarvis had explained, the mages had cast spells on the area around the castle. They'd wanted the place to be welcoming for their dragons when they got them back, and they'd made it so that even if someone were to happen around the castle, they wouldn't be able to see it or whatever dragon was in the air. The castle was isolated, too, and as far as Marlow had seen, there weren't any tourists in the area. It made him like his new home even more, and while he wanted to keep an eye on Jason just in case Carlyle chose the moment he was in the air to attack, he was happy to allow his son this freedom he'd never had.

Jason had suggested they ask Jarvis to come with them. Jason wasn't playing matchmaker exactly, but he and Marlow had talked again, and Marlow had told him that he liked Jarvis and wanted to ask him to be his boyfriend. He'd warned Jason that things might not work out, but he'd wanted his son to be aware of what was happening because he already knew that Marlow and Jarvis had been together before Marlow lost his memories.

He'd accepted it easily. Marlow should probably have waited a few more days and checked with him again, but he couldn't. He was too scared that Carlyle would find the castle and take everything from him before he could get it.

So here they were. The castle had several courtyards, but that wasn't what they were headed for. It also had towers, and all of them were wide enough that a fully grown dragon shifter could shift and use them to fly out. It was clear they'd been designed with that in mind, and knowing that the mages had done this without having their dragons around touched Marlow. They'd been trying to get their shields back since they'd lost them, and they'd always been convinced they would.

Marlow hadn't known about any of this. He'd been alone with no memories, yet there had been people out there who cared about him and wanted him back. The thought was enough to fluster him, and he told himself now wasn't the moment to make himself cry.

He had some seducing to do.

As soon as they were on the tower, Jason started stripping. He wasn't shy about getting naked because Marlow wasn't and had raised him that way. It wouldn't have made sense for them to want to hide when they shifted, although Marlow expected Jason to try eventually. He was only ten, but soon, he'd be a teenager and want his privacy. Marlow would have to come up with something that made it easy for him to shift in a group setting, but it could wait.

At the moment, he felt like everything but his family could wait.

"Don't go too far," Marlow warned his son. "I never want to lose sight of you."

"But, Dad," Jason whined.

"No. This is our compromise. You can shift and fly as long as you stay where I can see you and close to the castle. You know what's at stake and what could happen if you decide to vanish."

"I won't be allowed to fly for a month," Jason grumbled.

"Exactly, and that might not be the worst you have to live through."

"I hate that guy," Jason muttered, kicking at his shoe.

Marlow had to say he agreed. He hated Carlyle, too, even though he'd only spoken to the guy once. That one time had been enough, and he wasn't looking forward to repeating the experience.

Carlyle had taken everything from him. Marlow could never get all of it back, even if he and Jarvis fell in love again. He'd lost all memories of the two of them as children and teenagers, and he would never remember how it had been to grow up

with Jarvis and fall in love with him for the first time. He'd lost his family, every speck of knowledge he'd had about being a shield, and so much more. He would always hate Carlyle for that, and while he didn't think he had it in him to kill the guy, he certainly wouldn't shy away from attempting to trap him in the gemstone again. Something told him that Carlyle would rather die than have that happen, which made it all the more appealing.

Jarvis sat on one of the many wooden benches that peppered the castle. His back was against the tower's wall, next to the door they'd stepped out through.

"Did you want to talk to me? Or would you rather shift and fly with your son?"

"I'd like to stay with you, if that's okay."

Jarvis's smile was soft. "It's always okay."

Marlow sat next to Jarvis, and together, they watched Jason as he shifted and jumped into the air. He kept his gaze on Jason for a moment, trying to put his words together. He didn't need them to be perfect. He just needed them to be right and to tell Jarvis how he felt. It would be useless to beat around the bush, especially because Jarvis had to know why Marlow wanted to talk to him. It didn't make it easier, but Marlow told himself not to expect a rejection because he doubted that was what was coming. Jarvis had already been clear that he'd never stopped loving Raleigh but also that he wanted to give Marlow a chance.

It was all Marlow wanted.

"We've been dancing around each other since I arrived," he said slowly.

He kept his gaze on his son because it meant he didn't have to look at Jarvis. He was terrified of what he'd see in Jarvis's expression and wasn't ready to face it yet.

"We have," Jarvis agreed. "We've been behaving like children, haven't we?"

Marlow grinned. "I suppose we have been. It's entirely understandable, though."

“It is. You’ve been through a lot, and I’m not surprised you needed some space and time. I hope you’re feeling better about what happened, although I know that nothing will ever fix the pain of losing your memories and having to survive on your own for so long.”

This wasn’t what Marlow wanted to talk about, dammit. He didn’t want to talk about how scared he still was, about losing his memories, about the relief of finding his family, or about how worried he was that even though he was trying, he wouldn’t be able to find a place in the group.

He belonged here. That was what he kept telling himself and what he had to believe.

He looked down at his hands. “I’m still trying to come to terms with all of it, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about today.”

Jarvis was silent, for which Marlow was grateful. It was like Jarvis knew when to give Marlow time to think, and maybe he did. Maybe Raleigh had been the same way.

“I’m not Raleigh anymore,” Marlow declared. “I never will be. I’ve lost all the memories that made me Raleigh, and I can’t get them back. But I was in love with you back then, and even though I don’t know you, part of me feels like I do. I want you back. I want what we had back, even though I realize it won’t be the same. I just hope you can give me a chance as Marlow and that the memories of what you had with Raleigh won’t be too much to deal with. I can’t promise I’ll be like him, but I can promise to stand next to you when you face danger and to protect you to the best of my ability.” He didn’t have much of that at the moment, but he’d been working on it, and he wouldn’t stop until he was sure he could keep his mage safe.

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Marlow was saying everything Jarvis had wanted to hear and so much more. Jarvis had been ready to beg him for a chance, to have to give Marlow time to get used to all of this, but

instead, Marlow was telling him that he wanted him. He wanted a relationship with him, even though he couldn't remember him.

Jarvis loved him so much. He didn't care that Marlow wasn't Raleigh. He'd known he wouldn't be and mourned it, just like he'd mourned Raleigh. It wasn't easy to let go of him and of what they'd shared, but Jarvis needed to if he wanted a real chance with Marlow. If they were going to make this work, Raleigh had to become a memory, even though it was hard for Jarvis to feel that way since he was sitting next to him.

Except that wasn't Raleigh. That was Marlow, and he looked so adorably nervous and awkward that Jarvis wanted to kiss him.

So he did.

Marlow had been telling him that he wanted a relationship with him, and Jarvis had been dying to kiss him since the first time he'd seen him again. He'd denied himself for a long time, and he was done. He wanted what Marlow was offering, and he wanted it now.

He turned in his seat, and Marlow finally shifted to look at him. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes wide, and maybe he expected a rejection because when Jarvis launched himself at him, he squeaked and had to scramble to catch him.

Jarvis had to remember that they weren't alone. Marlow's son was flying above their heads, which meant they couldn't get too much into it and that they couldn't get too distracted. It wasn't going to be easy, which he realized as soon as their lips touched.

This was heaven. Jarvis remembered this, but at the same time, it was completely different. He and Raleigh had kissed like old lovers for a long time because they had been. They'd started dating when they were teenagers, and by the time Jarvis had lost Raleigh, they'd been together for decades. The way Marlow was kissing him differed from how Raleigh had kissed him, and maybe that would change, but for now, Jarvis loved it. He knew Marlow wasn't Raleigh, but sometimes, it

was hard to remember, and every time Marlow did something Raleigh would never have done, it was a bit easier.

So the kiss was familiar, yet at the same time, it wasn't. Marlow's lips were soft and he tasted the same, but he was much more hesitant than Raleigh had been.

The stone under their feet shook, and Jarvis scrambled to turn. He half expected Carlyle to be attacking because it would be just like him to interrupt this moment, but instead, he found Jason had landed in front of them and was sitting and staring at them with his head cocked. It made him look a bit like a giant cat, which caused Jarvis to start laughing.

"Did you want something?" Marlow grumbled at his son.

Jason gave them a toothy smile, then pushed himself into the air again. He flew above them a few times before flying down to the next tower, and Jarvis stared at him for a moment before turning to Marlow.

Even though he looked like Raleigh, at the same time, he didn't look like him. Raleigh wouldn't have been blushing because they'd kissed. Marlow was, and it made Jarvis fall in love with him a little bit more.

"You kissed me," Marlow said.

"Well, hopefully, what you said means you wanted to be kissed."

Marlow nodded quickly. "It does. I just didn't expect you to do that."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Maybe for you to ask for more time, or to take it slow. I'm ready for that. We don't have to rush into anything."

"I don't mind rushing. We belong together, and it doesn't matter that you don't remember it. We can take things slow if you want, but I'm all in. I'm done avoiding you because it hurts. I finally have you back after decades of looking for you. I don't want to be in pain, especially if it's a pain I'm creating."

Marlow grinned. “Good.”

They didn't kiss again, but that was okay because Marlow took Jarvis's hand and linked their fingers together. Jarvis almost asked if he wanted to go fly with Jason, but he didn't. He wanted to keep Marlow with him, even though he was pretty sure he'd be keeping him for the rest of their lives. They would have time to be together, but Marlow would also have time to fly with his son.

For now, they could enjoy this. It made Jarvis feel like they were teenagers again, and he loved it. This was what they had to restart from. They needed to learn to be together again, and they would.

Jarvis was sure of it.

They watched Jason for what felt like hours, but Jarvis never felt bored. It was almost as if they were a family, and he realized that they were. Even if they'd never managed to be together again, they would be a family because it was what he and the other mages were. They belonged together, and while the time would come for them to go their own way after they found all the shields and defeated Carlyle, this place would always be home. It was where everyone would come back every once in a while, and while Jarvis would miss his friends, he couldn't wait to see what the future would be like for every one of them.

And himself.

Eventually, Jason got too tired to fly. He landed in front of them and shifted, then quickly dressed. His stomach growled as soon as he was in his human form, which meant it was time for them to go hunt for a snack.

Marlow and Jarvis did so by holding hands. Jason went inside ahead of them, running to the kitchen. They followed more sedately, not talking, but they didn't need to. Just spending time with Marlow like this was enough for Jarvis.

When they got to the kitchen, it was to see that Jillian wasn't alone. Penley and Dallin were sitting at the counter, eating cookies and drinking milk. Jason snatched a cookie

from the ceramic container and sat next to Dallin, and the three of them turned to look at Marlow and Jarvis. Jillian was the only one who didn't, but that was because she was taking more cookies out of the oven.

Penley beamed as if Jarvis had told him he was giving him the moon. "I knew you'd do it," he said.

Marlow's cheeks flushed. He'd never been a blusher before, but Jarvis found he liked it. "It was time for us to get our act together," he told his friends.

Penley and Dallin looked at each other. Dallin was smiling like a loon when he turned back to Jarvis. "How about we take Jason for the night?"

It was Jarvis's turn to blush. His friends weren't timid about what they were implying, and he was pretty sure that even though Jason was only ten, he already knew how that worked. "You don't have to."

"We want to. We could pitch a tent in the courtyard for the evening and camp out. It'll be nice because it's not cold yet, but it will be soon, and I think Jason would like to go camping before it snows."

"I sure would," Jason agreed.

This wasn't a decision Jarvis could make. Even though he and Marlow were building their family, he didn't feel he had a say in how Marlow was raising Jason yet. If he said no, then that was that.

This would take some time to get used to, too. Even though Jarvis had always wanted children, he wasn't sure he could see himself as a father. It was a nebulous image, made even more so by the fact that Marlow had raised Jason on his own for ten years.

But all of that was okay. They'd learn to be together, and Jarvis would learn how to be a stepfather. Then maybe one day, they would decide to have more children, and this time, they would raise them together like they'd always dreamed.

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How was Marlow supposed to say no? Not only did Jason want to spend time with two men who were now part of his family, but their offer would give Marlow and Jarvis a night on their own. They wouldn't have to be worried about Jason bursting in and interrupting whatever they were doing.

Marlow had a good idea of what they could get up to, and he couldn't wait. From the way Jarvis kept peeking at him, he suspected he wasn't the only one. There was only one thing he could do.

He turned to Jason. "You promise you'll listen to your uncles?"

Jason blinked, possibly at Marlow calling Penley and Dallin his uncles when he'd never had any, but the confusion quickly cleared from his face, and he nodded enthusiastically. "I promise."

Marlow trusted that his son would keep that promise, so he looked at Penley and Dallin next. "Are you sure you want to do this? Jason is a good kid, but he can be a lot."

Dallin's smile was gentle. "We wouldn't have offered if we weren't sure."

"I can't wait to spend the night in a tent and show Jason some magic," Penley added.

Marlow wouldn't sleep in a tent even if they paid him to do it, so he had a hard time believing him, but he wasn't going to argue any longer. If Dallin and Penley wanted to do this, then he'd be happy to let them.

It wasn't easy to say yes, though. Marlow and Jason had never spent a night apart since Jason was born. There had been no one to volunteer to take Jason, and Marlow had been fine with that, especially once Jason had been older and had started sleeping through the night.

"All right," he said.

Jason bounced on his feet and came to hug Marlow. It was quick, just the sensation of his arms around Marlow's waist, but Marlow's heart skipped a beat.

His son was growing up, and they weren't just the two of them anymore. Marlow had to learn to let go, especially when he knew Jason would be safe. He wasn't leaving the castle, and he'd be with at least two mages. Besides, he doubted Carlyle wanted Jason. He wasn't one of the shields Carlyle wanted revenge on. He was just an innocent boy, and Marlow wanted to keep things that way.

Jason ran out of the room, no doubt headed to his room to pack the things he wanted to take to the tent. Penley and Dallin only stayed a few more minutes to reassure Marlow that Jason would be fine, then they vanished, too, leaving Marlow and Jarvis behind.

They looked at each other. Marlow didn't want to assume they'd do anything tonight, even though he wanted to. The situation between them was easier to deal with for him than it was for Jarvis, and he didn't want to hurt his mage in any way.

"You could sleep in my room tonight," Jarvis blurted out.

His gaze skittered away as if he expected Marlow to reject him, but he couldn't have been more wrong. Why would Marlow reject him after they'd agreed to try to make things work between them? Wasn't this what they both wanted? Maybe they should take more time to get to know each other again, but Marlow didn't think it was necessary. He wanted Jarvis, even though he didn't remember him. He'd been missing something until Jarvis had walked into his life, and Jarvis filled that hole in his life. He didn't care what other people thought about this being too fast. Hell, he barely even knew other people, and the people he did know would understand.

"I'd like that," he murmured.

The smile Jarvis aimed at him was everything. Unfortunately for them, they still had to go through the rest of the day and the evening before they could rush to Jarvis's rooms.

*

Marlow didn't think time had ever been that slow, but he was ready to scream by the time dinner was over. Instead, he watched Jason disappear into the courtyard with Dallin, Penley, and Keylon. Jason didn't even wave or look back. He talked a mile a minute without even looking if the men around him were listening to him.

"He'll be fine," Jarvis promised.

"I know. I'm not worried that he won't be. It's just odd."

"We'll find something to distract you."

Those words were enough for Marlow to stop thinking about his son. He and Jarvis stared at each other until a muffled laugh from Ansley interrupted them. He winked at Jarvis, who looked away, but he was smiling. It was just gentle teasing between friends, which wasn't something Marlow was used to, but Jarvis was. He rolled his eyes, then grabbed Marlow's hand and pulled him toward the door.

"We'll see you tomorrow morning."

Ansley's laughter followed them down the hallway, and Marlow couldn't help but smile. He might not be used to this, but it was his now. He was home.

Finally.

He and Jarvis stayed silent as they made their way through the castle. Marlow loved living here, but right now, it felt too big and like they were never going to reach Jarvis's rooms. He had to resist the urge to run because while he was eager, he didn't want Jarvis to realize just how much.

Although Jarvis probably already knew, considering he seemed to feel the same way. As soon as they were in his living room, he slammed the door open, then pushed Marlow against it.

"Tell me now if you only want to go to sleep," he said in a ragged voice.

Marlow answered with a kiss. He grabbed the back of Jarvis's neck and pulled him closer, intent on devouring him. He wanted Jarvis more than he'd ever wanted anyone else, and he had no intention of pushing him away.

Ever.

Jarvis took Marlow's silence for what it was and pulled him toward the bedroom. Marlow stumbled and almost fell, but Jarvis was there to hold him up. Marlow would have cursed his unexpected clumsiness, but it looked like Jarvis didn't care. He just wanted Marlow naked, and Marlow wanted the same thing.

There was an urgency to the way they moved, as if they wouldn't get another opportunity to do this. Marlow knew that wasn't the case, but he needed the bond between him and Jarvis to be real to him again. He had no idea how it had felt, so maybe he could still feel it but didn't know that was what he felt, but he needed more. He'd lost everything, not once, but twice, and Jarvis was giving him his life back.

As soon as they were in the bedroom, Jarvis turned to him again. Their lips met again in a hot kiss that was Marlow's entire world. As they kissed, they both struggled to get the other naked, then themselves. That was only marginally easier, but at least Marlow could use both his hands to open his jeans and push them down his legs. He stumbled again because he hadn't gotten around to taking off his shoes yet, but that was easily taken care of. He toed them off, then shook his jeans off his ankles.

The problems started when he had to take off his t-shirt, because he didn't want to stop kissing Jarvis. Jarvis seemed to be in the same predicament because he pushed Marlow away, then quickly opened the buttons of his shirt. His fingers were fast, but they slipped a few times, making him swear. Marlow wanted to help, but he wanted to get naked even more, so he focused on that for the few seconds it took him to take off his t-shirt and boxer briefs.

Then he could focus on Jarvis.

Luckily, Jarvis had made quick work of his shirt and was already pushing it off his shoulders. Next went the undershirt before he, too, stumbled on the pants still around his ankles. He swore as Marlow caught him, and together, they moved toward the bed.

Jarvis sat on the edge of the mattress while Marlow knelt in front of him. Jarvis wore dress shoes, and Marlow had to fight with the laces for a second before freeing his mate's feet. Jarvis tossed the other shoe somewhere behind Marlow, then grabbed Marlow's arms and pulled him onto the bed. Marlow went because there was nothing he wanted more, and he got everything he could have dreamed of when their naked bodies pressed together.

Jarvis groaned and wrapped his arms and legs around Marlow, only to seemingly think better of it and reach under one of his pillows. Marlow leaned down to kiss him, but cold plastic smacked against his chest. He looked down to see that Jarvis was pressing a tube of lube there and arched a brow because Jarvis had clearly grabbed it from under his pillow.

Jarvis's cheeks flushed. "What?"

"Nothing," Marlow murmured.

This time, when he leaned down, he did manage to kiss Jarvis when he leaned closer. He also took the lube from Jarvis's fingers and opened it without looking down. Jarvis had been clear about what he wanted, and Marlow was eager to give it to him. He wanted to give Jarvis the world, but he couldn't. He could give him all of himself, though.

Jarvis seemed as eager as Marlow was and just as impatient. Marlow was torn between wanting to be inside Jarvis as soon as possible and wanting to savor every inch of Jarvis's skin. He could have both, but not at the same time, so he needed to make a decision. Considering how much huffing and puffing Jarvis was doing, he couldn't take long.

As soon as possible it was then.

When his fingers were slick, he pushed himself up with the hand still holding the tube and reached between them. Jarvis

let his legs drop wide in a welcoming gesture that told Marlow he'd made the right choice.

Jarvis moaned low and long when Marlow's fingertips brushed against his hole—the touch had jarred the butt plug Marlow found there. Marlow froze for a second with a question on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't dare ask it. The answer didn't matter, anyway. Clearly, Jarvis wanted this, and he'd prepared himself for it.

It was less work for Marlow to do and less time before he could be inside his mage.

Jarvis's cheeks turned even redder when Marlow gently bumped against the plug again. There was no need for words right now, so Marlow kept them to himself. He grabbed the plug, wiggled it a few times, then quickly slipped it out because he was pretty sure Jarvis would take things into his own hands if he didn't hurry. That didn't sound like a bad idea, and maybe next time, Marlow would tease Jarvis until he broke down and took over. Not tonight, though.

He dropped the plug on the bed and pushed two fingers into Jarvis. Jarvis keened, but the plug had prepared him well, and his body welcomed Marlow. He was slick and soft, pulling Marlow in until Marlow wanted nothing more than to slide his cock inside of him.

So he did. Jarvis made a victorious sound when Marlow finally slid his fingers out and dropped on top of him. He opened his legs even wider, and just like Marlow had imagined, his cock slid right in as soon as he gave a little push.

Jarvis groaned and wrapped his legs around Marlow's waist as if he never wanted to let go, and maybe he didn't. Marlow never wanted to leave this bed, so he knew how Jarvis felt.

Everything turned even more intense when a rush of something coursed through Marlow, causing him to cry out. He distantly heard Jarvis doing the same, and they clung to each other. It didn't hurt, but it felt foreign until it settled somewhere in Marlow's chest, close to his heart. That was when Marlow realized what it was.

Magic.

After decades of being apart, he and his mage had been reunited, and the magic was celebrating. Marlow had never thought of it as a sentient being, and he wasn't sure it was, but either way, it was almost as if it was happy that this was happening. It dug deep into Marlow's chest, and while Marlow still couldn't remember everything, it felt like coming home anyway.

Because that was where he was. In Jarvis's arms, in his bed, he was home, and he was never leaving again.

Their lovemaking slowed down, but it wasn't any less intense. They moved in sync, kissing until they were out of breath. Marlow had been stupid to think they could do this slow the first time. They needed each other—forever this time.

When they came, they held each other, unable and unwilling to let go. They stayed like this even though they should go shower and get dressed in case Jason needed them, but it could wait.

Everything could wait as long as Jarvis was in Marlow's arms.

Chapter Ten

Marlow had a hard time believing how much his life had changed over just a handful of days. He'd gone from being alone or with only Jason for company to sharing a home with a bunch of guys who were his family. A bunch of humans also lived here, but the mages didn't treat them any differently. Most of them worked at the castle, but they still felt like they were part of a family unit, and it amazed and pleased Marlow.

It was a lot to take in, and sometimes Marlow needed time away from everyone, but having Jarvis helped. It would always help, and Marlow was glad they'd finally decided to let go of the past and look to the future instead. It didn't matter that they would never be Raleigh and Jarvis again. From now on, they'd be Marlow and Jarvis, and it made Marlow really fucking happy.

He looked around the massive table. They were eating outside under a pergola that was still heavy with flowers in bloom. The air smelled of their perfume, and between that, a full stomach, and the laughter surrounding Marlow, he knew he'd made the right decision. The people around the table were his future, and it was right for him to have let go of the past. It hadn't been easy, and he suspected that he and Jarvis would need time to truly work things out, but they had it.

Or rather, they would once they were done with Carlyle.

Tomorrow, Ansley would be casting the spell to find another shield. He'd wanted to do it a few days ago, but Parker had asked him to wait. It had made Marlow anxious, but it felt like the right decision, especially because now that he and Jarvis were together, he wouldn't be as distracted as he would have been before they talked.

This was his home. The people around the table were his family. He'd do everything he had to in order to keep them safe, and even though Jason and Jarvis came first, everyone here was important. It wasn't only because they needed everyone's help to defeat Carlyle. These guys were a family,

and Marlow and Jason deserved them. They deserved to have people who cared about them and would fight for them as hard as they would fight to protect them.

But he was worried. He understood why the mages were waiting to confront Carlyle. They didn't have their shields, and without them, they risked a lot by facing him. Marlow didn't fully understand because, from his point of view, Carlyle was only one mage, and he'd be faced with six of them, along with two of their shields.

Of course, he'd been only one mage in the past, too. He'd been faced with six mages and their shields, and while the mages had won and trapped him in that gemstone, it hadn't been without loss. They'd lost their shields, and the dragons had had their memories erased.

But they'd still won. If they could win against Carlyle now, why were they waiting? And why should they believe they couldn't win? Marlow wasn't sure he knew everything about the situation, and he wouldn't find out more without asking questions. He didn't know if dinner was the right place to do that, but he might as well try.

Penley was sitting on his right, and since Jarvis was talking to Dallin on the other side of the table, he was who Marlow turned to. "Can I ask you a question about Carlyle?"

Penley blinked but nodded. "Of course. I'll answer if I can."

"I don't remember him, so I don't know how powerful he was, but you guys have been talking about him as if he's able to defeat all of you even if you fight him as a group."

"He was strong enough to do that. We defeated him, so I suppose it's not entirely true, but he *is* incredibly powerful, and there's no way for us to know if he became even more powerful while trapped in the stone."

That wasn't something Marlow had considered. "How could he have become more powerful?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. We don't know if he was aware of anything in that stone. We don't even know what form he had."

Until now, Marlow had imagined that Carlyle had been turned into smoke or something, but he couldn't stop himself from imagining a tiny Carlyle trapped in the gemstone and pounding at it in an attempt to escape. His screams would have sounded like tiny squeaks.

He smiled. No matter how powerful Carlyle was, he'd always imagine him like that from now on. "Why are we assuming that he's stronger? I mean, I saw how you fought him when he attacked me, so I was able to see that he's strong, but he's only going to get stronger now that he's out of the stone, right? Why aren't we attacking him? Maybe if we face him head-on, we can take him by surprise."

"We can't find him," Keylon said.

He was right. Marlow had already asked this, and the mages had told him that Carlyle was shielding himself. The castle was shielded in the same way, so it wasn't a surprise. "Maybe we don't have to find him. We know he's going to find us, right? He's coming after the shields, and while we have no way of knowing who he'll be going after next, we can prepare for it."

"How?"

"By expecting him to be there. When I was attacked, only Jarvis, Ansley, and Parker were there initially. I don't think sending only a few people tomorrow when Ansley casts the spell would be a good idea. He and Jarvis need to be there, but I believe we should all go."

Jason would stay at the castle with Jillian and the other humans, so he'd be safe. That meant that Marlow could focus on protecting the other people he cared about, and while he hoped they wouldn't encounter Carlyle, eventually they'd have to fight him. They couldn't hide from him forever, and Marlow suspected Carlyle had no plans to hide from them.

Something told him that Carlyle wasn't yet as powerful as he had been. It would take time for him to recover from his time spent in the gemstone, which in turn gave time to the mages to get their shit together and plan.

It would be easier once all the shields and mages were reunited, but they might not have that long. They needed to act as if Carlyle was ready to attack them tomorrow or this evening. That meant stepping things up, and while Marlow didn't want to rush the mages or scare them, they had to realize that the fight was coming, and ignoring it wouldn't save any of them.

* * * *

Looking around the table at dinner, Jarvis felt more settled than he had in a long time. He was surrounded by his family and the people who mattered the most to him, and while he knew there was a war brewing in the distance, every single person around the table had a good reason to fight. They'd fight for each other so that they could all survive. They'd fight for the humans who had become part of their family. They'd fight for Jason, a child who deserved not to be afraid and to grow up with his father.

They'd fight for their shields because that was what mages did.

Jarvis would fight for Marlow. He was terrified at the thought of losing him or anyone else, but none of them had a choice. Carlyle wouldn't give them a choice.

Talking to him wouldn't help, so Jarvis wouldn't even try. He'd done that already when Carlyle had begun behaving strangely. Then, after the first time Carlyle had attacked, Jarvis had tried again. He hadn't understood how Carlyle could do what he was doing, and he still couldn't. It didn't make sense to him, but it didn't have to make sense. Clearly, Jarvis hadn't known Carlyle as well as he thought, and he'd been beating himself up for decades. He still thought he should have seen what was happening and that he'd been distracted by Marlow and his life.

Now that he had Marlow back, letting go of the guilt was easier. Carlyle would have done what he'd done even if Jarvis had tried to intervene. He was stubborn and powerful, and

Jarvis had trusted him. It would have been easy for Carlyle to get rid of Jarvis because he wouldn't have expected it and then attack the others. Maybe it was for the best that Jarvis had been clueless until the very end.

"That's not a bad idea," Jarvis heard Keylon say.

He turned to see who Keylon was talking to and was pleased to see that he, Penley, and Marlow were deep in conversation. Marlow had been awkward in the beginning, which was understandable since he'd gone from being a single father with no family to being part of this messy group of mages and humans. He'd relaxed a lot since he'd arrived, and unless Jarvis was mistaken, he thought that since the two of them had gotten together, Marlow looked more at home.

Hopefully, he did.

"I agree," Tyne said with a grunt.

If he agreed that whatever they were talking about was a good idea, then it probably was.

"Now I'm curious," Jarvis said as he knocked his shoulder against Marlow's. "What are you talking about?"

Suddenly, Marlow seemed nervous again. He looked from Jarvis to Keylon on the other side of the table, almost as if he was silently begging Keylon to take the lead. Keylon winked at him and shook his head, and Marlow turned to Penley on his other side.

Jarvis chuckled. "Just come out with it. If everyone agrees it's a good idea, it probably is."

"I don't know if it's good, but I feel we don't have any other option."

That meant that he was talking about Carlyle. Jarvis didn't want dinner to be ruined by talking about his apprentice, but they couldn't ignore what was happening. Hiding their heads in the sand sounded like the best idea right now, but they wouldn't feel the same way when Carlyle attacked.

Jarvis sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Come on. Tell everyone what you have in mind."

Marlow raised his chin, and his expression set. He looked around the table. Jarvis was grateful that Jason, the human staff, and Parker's best friend Matthias were on the other side of the table. They knew what was happening, and Jarvis would never have thought about hiding anything from them, but they didn't need to be involved in planning the fight against Carlyle. Jarvis and the other mages had already reassured everyone that they would be protected as long as they stayed in the castle, and if they felt it was too dangerous and wanted to leave, then the mages would organize everything and ensure whoever was leaving had enough money to live on while looking for another job and place to live. Jarvis wouldn't ask anyone to stay against their will, especially when it was becoming more dangerous every day.

"I was asking about Carlyle. We don't know how he found me, but we can assume he'll be able to find the other shields, right?"

"He probably used a spell."

"That was a given. Do you know what kind of spell? Is it the same one Ansley uses? He said it couldn't be because he relies on the bond between shield and mage, and Carlyle doesn't have that. He can't focus on the bond we share, which means he has to find the shields another way."

"Probably a modified spell."

Marlow shrugged. "Anyway, I don't think that how he finds them is important. The important part is that he found me, which means he'll be able to find the others. He also knows that we're trying to find them, too. He expects us to be there, and we have to expect him to be, too. Which is why I think we should all go tomorrow. It doesn't make sense not to present a united front when we know that Carlyle could be there when we arrive."

The thought of exposing Marlow to danger made Jarvis start to panic, but he shoved the feeling aside and forced himself to truly think about what Marlow had said.

He was right. They already knew Carlyle was coming after the shields, and while there was no way for them to know

which shield Carlyle would choose next, he might be there when they arrived. Jarvis didn't want to think about what would happen if he wasn't because it could mean he'd chosen another shield. They still had four to find, so there was a distinct possibility that he might get to one of them before the mages could.

Jarvis looked around the table. He wanted all of his friends to find their shield, and he felt slightly guilty because he had his while the others were out there and might get hurt. Feeling guilty wouldn't help, though, and neither would obsessing over the possibility of someone getting hurt. Jarvis had to focus on what they *could* change, and the only thing they could do at the moment was try to find the shields before Carlyle.

He cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry about all of this. I should have worked harder to find Carlyle, especially after I realized he was free."

There was a moment of silence before Tyne snorted loudly. "Stop beating yourself up for this," he said. "No one cares. You have no fault when it comes to what Carlyle did, and it's still not your fault that he's gunning for us again. You couldn't have imagined he'd want to hurt us or that he'd get out of the gemstone. Feeling guilty won't help anyone, least of all you. Instead of feeling that way, focus on finding the asshole. I want this to be over."

They all did. It was time for it to be over, but Jarvis had no idea how they were going to do that.

But he didn't have to come up with something on his own. He had his friends, his family, and surely, if they put their heads together, they could come up with a solution. They would have to work together to defeat Carlyle and were ready to do so.

They just had to decide where to start.

Carlyle had always been stubborn, especially when he was convinced he was right about something. That probably hadn't changed, and there was no doubt that he thought he was doing the right thing, at least for himself. He wanted revenge, and

once he had it, he'd move on to taking over the world or whatever he had in mind.

Jarvis and the others would stop him. They had to, and not only because they wanted to survive.

They'd never meant to be heroes, and Jarvis didn't feel like one, but they were the only ones who could do something about this. The other mages around the country had washed their hands of Carlyle long ago, and they wouldn't be of any use. They'd prefer to ignore what Carlyle was doing until it was too late and try to convince themselves he wouldn't come after them once he was done with Jarvis and his family.

Jarvis didn't want other people to be hurt. He didn't even want other mages to be hurt, even though they would refuse to help if he asked. This was all on his shoulders, but luckily, he wouldn't carry the weight alone.

His family would help him. That was what Carlyle didn't understand. He didn't know what having a family was like, and he wouldn't expect them to fight for each other again after what happened the last time they did.

And that would be his downfall.

* * * *

They needed something against Carlyle. The mages knew him better than Marlow, and they were finally behaving like they were going to act rather than react. It was a good thing, but it might not be helpful.

Marlow was nervous about tomorrow. There was one chance in four that Carlyle would be trying to find the same shield they were looking for, and while it wasn't a given that he'd be there at the same time, Marlow wouldn't be surprised if he was. Then there was the fact that if Carlyle wasn't there, it could mean he'd gone after a different shield. That would put a shield in danger, and Marlow wasn't quite sure how to deal with the knowledge that they couldn't protect all of them.

“What are his weaknesses?” he asked. “I mean, you said he’s probably weaker than he was before but also that he’s recuperating quickly. You guys had to fight him when he came for me, so do you all agree on that? Can you see anything that might tell us how to take him on or who he’ll go after next?”

“I think we should look more into his minions,” Tyne said. “They have to have been involved in him getting out of the gemstone.”

“How could they have done it?”

“Magic,” Penley offered. “They could be mages like Carlyle and us.”

“How would they have found him? And wouldn’t you know them if they were mages?”

Penley snorted. “Do you think we know every mage in the world?”

Marlow hadn’t really thought about that. He’d seen how much these mages cared for each other and assumed that most mages would want to help each other. From what he’d just heard, that might not be the case, and it made him angry.

“We do know many mages,” Jarvis told him with a smile. “But mages tend to be solitary. They don’t usually work in groups like we do here.”

“How did you come together?”

Jarvis looked around the table. “It was Carlyle who brought us together. He was my apprentice, as you know. Everyone here was busy with their own thing. I reached out to them after Carlyle’s shield vanished because I knew I couldn’t face him on my own. There was too much between us, and while I might have tried if Emory had been around, he wasn’t.”

That was interesting. Marlow had only vaguely heard about Carlyle’s shield and wanted to know more. “What happened to him?”

“I’ve always wondered,” Parker interjected. “I mean, if Carlyle is a mage, he has to have a shield, right? Everyone

here told me that mages and shields went together like peanut butter and jelly.”

Marlow almost laughed at the comparison, but Parker wasn't wrong. Everyone had been telling Marlow the same thing.

Mages were powerful, but they needed to be protected because they had to ignore the world around them to access that power. They could cast spells quickly if they needed to, but for anything more complicated or lengthy, they had to focus. That was where the shields came in. They were dragon shifters because they were big and could easily protect a human. Initially, Marlow had thought they worked like soulmates in romance books or something, but he'd been told it wasn't the same thing.

Mages and shields chose each other, or rather, that was how it was supposed to work. Sometimes, clans picked the dragons they wanted to become shields, and mages didn't always have a say in it. Ansley had explained that was how he and Parker had come together. Their bond hadn't been complete until they'd fallen in love after Ansley had found Parker again.

That was another thing Marlow had needed to wrap his mind around. Any shield could protect any mage, but if they bonded, there would be no separating them. It was what had happened between him and Jarvis, and he couldn't help but glance at the man sitting next to him.

They were together now, just like they'd been decades ago. It made Marlow feel stronger, and he hoped Jarvis felt the same because he had no plans of losing him.

Especially not against Carlyle.

“Carlyle's shield, Emory, was a quiet man, intense,” Jarvis said. He was mostly silent, but not as grumpy as Tyne.”

Tyne flipped him the bird, causing half of the table to laugh. The human half of the table looked confused, but they didn't ask questions. They went back to their conversations, and Marlow waited until he was sure they were focused on other things to continue talking.

“What happened to him? Did he support Carlyle when Carlyle attacked you?”

Jarvis hesitated. “We don’t know what happened to him. He vanished before Carlyle attacked, and we’ve never been able to find him. He might be dead, or he might be working with Carlyle. We don’t know.”

The group continued talking about what they were planning for tomorrow, and Marlow was relieved when they agreed they would all go. His mind was still on Emory, though, even after they finished eating and headed back inside. Jason wasn’t happy about going to bed, but he agreed after Marlow told him he could read for half an hour. While he headed to the bathroom to wash up and put on his pajamas, Marlow sat with Jarvis in the small sitting area of his bedroom.

Jason and Marlow’s rooms were next to each other and shared an inside door. Marlow had been relieved because it meant he could get to Jason quickly, but he’d never needed to. He couldn’t help but wonder how long they’d stay in these rooms.

Jarvis wasn’t living with them yet, but that was okay. Marlow didn’t want to rush things, especially considering the difficult circumstances. That didn’t mean he wanted Jarvis to go back to his room. “Are you staying tonight?” he asked.

Jarvis licked his lips. “I can if you want me to. Are you sure it’s a good idea, though? Jason is next door.”

“And he already knows that you and I are together. He likes you and won’t be surprised to find you here tomorrow morning, so I don’t see what the problem is.”

“No problem.” Jarvis leaned closer and took one of Marlow’s hands. “I’d love to spend the night with you.”

Marlow couldn’t help but smile. “Same. I have to warn you that Jason wakes up really early, though, and while he’s old enough to hang around on his own, he usually comes to find me after a while.”

Jarvis chuckled. “And you already know I’m not an early riser. I can make an exception for Jason, though. Besides, I

have to get used to it sooner rather than later, don't I?"

That was true. If Jarvis and Marlow were going to be together—and they were—they would have to find a way to share their lives. Jason was a massive part of Marlow's life, which meant he'd become a massive part of Jarvis's life. He was still young, and it wasn't always easy to deal with him, but Jarvis would have to learn.

Marlow would be the first to admit it would be complicated, but thankfully, Jarvis didn't seem the kind of guy who balked in front of a difficult situation. He wasn't going anywhere, or at least, that was what he'd promised.

Marlow believed him.

When Jason finally came back, Jarvis got to his feet. "I'll go to pick up some things from my room," he said.

"Are you spending the night?" Jason asked.

Jarvis looked at Marlow with wide eyes. It was good that he was asking Marlow how to deal with the situation. Even though he and Marlow were together, and even with the past they shared, it would take some time to view him as Jason's stepfather, although Jason didn't seem to have any problem with that. That was a bit surprising, even though Jason had always been an easy-going child.

"He is," Marlow confirmed.

Jason nodded as if he expected that answer. "Okay."

"You're okay with that?"

"Yeah. I like him, and he makes you smile."

Apparently, that was all Jason needed. He left Marlow and Jarvis and headed to his room, and for a moment, Jarvis and Marlow just stared at each other. This would be their lives from now on.

And Marlow wouldn't have it any other way.

* * * *

This was a lot to take in. Jarvis hadn't expected too many difficulties, but he hadn't expected Jason to accept his presence in his father's life so readily. He'd thought Jason would struggle with it, especially since, from what Jarvis knew, Marlow had been single most of Jason's life. Instead of having a problem with the fact that it had changed, Jason had accepted it as if it were normal.

And it was. Everything with Marlow felt normal and natural, and it was almost as if they hadn't spent decades away from each other. It was odd, because they barely knew each other, yet at the same time they felt familiar and comfortable.

Everything in Jarvis's life was odd at the moment, but at least in Marlow's case, it wasn't a bad thing.

"Sorry about that," Marlow said as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. I have to say I'm surprised he's taking this so well."

"I am, too. I talked to him earlier, and he seemed okay with our relationship, but still. This can't be easy for him."

"This isn't easy for any of us. I don't believe it's easy for anyone who tries to mash two families together, but our circumstances are even more complicated."

Marlow smiled. "Maybe they are, but it doesn't matter. Go on. I'll be waiting for you here."

Knowing that Marlow would be waiting for him there made Jarvis's stomach churn, and he almost changed his mind about going to his room to grab a few things, but there was Jason to consider. It would be better if Jarvis and Marlow didn't sleep naked, which wouldn't be a problem because Jarvis hated sleeping naked. It made him feel too vulnerable, and the few times he'd tried, he'd woken up and had to put on pajamas.

So he headed to his rooms, already thinking about what he needed—his pajamas, his toothbrush for tomorrow morning, and pretty much nothing else. He'd showered before dinner, but maybe he and Marlow would want to shower together

later, so he could grab a towel. Marlow would have plenty of them, though, so it shouldn't be necessary.

He felt out of his depth, yet at the same time, he loved it. He and Marlow were working things out, finding a new way to be together, and that was all he'd wanted.

Well, that and kicking Carlyle's ass.

It had become even more urgent because Jarvis wanted to protect Marlow and Jason. They'd only be safe when Carlyle was gone, so it was time to do more. He wouldn't disappear on his own, which meant that Jarvis and the mages would have to come up with a plan so he wouldn't bother them ever again. Jarvis had thought about trapping him into a gemstone a second time but killing him outright was becoming more acceptable by the day.

He swallowed. That wasn't like him, and he doubted he'd have the courage to kill Carlyle even if he was helpless in front of him. It wasn't just because he abhorred the thought of killing someone. It was also because even after everything Carlyle had done, Jarvis couldn't help but see him as the teenager he'd helped raise. They'd been close, and he'd been so proud of Carlyle. He could have become a wonderful mage if he hadn't gone down the path of darkness.

Jarvis didn't want to think about all of that tonight, but he couldn't help it. Talking things through over dinner had made him see what their next step should be. If he wanted a future with Marlow and Jason—and he did—he'd have to work for it. That wasn't a problem, but dealing with Carlyle would be. He wouldn't go down easily, which meant Jarvis and the other mages would have to hit hard. Jarvis couldn't consider the possibility that one of them might get hurt or worse. He'd only face that if it happened.

What they needed was information. They had to know where Carlyle was hiding and who his minions were. It would also be great if they could find out how he'd managed to locate Marlow. They needed to know how powerful he still was and how powerful he could become, and they needed to stop him before that could happen.

Jarvis had faith that they could do it. Carlyle had been trapped for decades, but he and the others hadn't been. They'd worked hard the entire time because they'd known it was possible that Carlyle would come back. The gemstone had been gone since the day they'd spelled Carlyle inside of it, and frankly, Jarvis had expected Carlyle to be free much sooner.

He was glad that hadn't happened. It had given them more time, and while unfortunately, they hadn't managed to reach the shields in time, that was changing.

They had to have faith in what they could do, in their ability and power, and in their shields. It was the only way everyone would survive.

Jarvis couldn't wait to see the kind of future he and Marlow would build together. He couldn't wait for them to move in together, raise Jason, and eventually have more children and fill the castle with laughter and the sound of tiny feet running around.

Carlyle was the only obstacle to that happening, and Jarvis was finally ready to deal with him.

Chapter Eleven

“We need to decide who’s next, because I’m fucking ready to do this,” Ansley declared the next morning.

They’d gathered in the courtyard, and as Ansley had so nicely explained, he was ready to cast the spell and find another shield.

The four remaining mages without shields looked at each other. Tyne was already shaking his head and taking a step back, which wasn’t a surprise. Jarvis had expected him to want to come last, but he needed to keep an eye on his friend because there had to be a reason behind that. Everyone else was eager to get their shields back, but there was something keeping Tyne back, and it worried Jarvis.

He wanted to know what that was. More importantly, he suspected it was important. What if something had happened between Tyne and his shield in the past? Jarvis didn’t want to think they’d been fighting, or that it was part of the reason Carlyle had been able to take the shields away, but it was a possibility.

The other possibility was that Carlyle was just that strong, which meant it would be hell for them to get him back into the gemstone.

He kept thinking while the others talked about who should go next. He remembered that they’d used other spells on Carlyle before sticking him in the gemstone. There had been a draining spell so he couldn’t access all of his magic, and a spell that would have blocked his access to his shield. Jarvis had been working on those spells since he’d woken up after they’d trapped Carlyle, and he’d perfected them, but he didn’t know if they would be enough.

He didn’t know if anything they could do would be enough.

“How are they going to decide?” Marlow asked as he tilted his chin toward the group.

Jarvis sighed. “They’re going to talk for half an hour, bicker, and each of them is going to try to choose someone else’s shield. Then they’ll choose Penley’s.”

Marlow laughed. “You sound convinced.”

“That’s because I am. I know them, and I know how they think.” Sometimes, it felt like Jarvis knew them better than he knew himself. He certainly knew the other mages better than he knew Marlow.

“And what are you thinking about so hard?” Marlow asked.

“About the spells we’ll have to cast on Carlyle to be able to entrap him again.”

Marlow nodded with a serious expression. “Penley said that it was hard to trap him. It took all your powers combined.”

“It did. I don’t know what Carlyle did to become so powerful, but he found a way.”

“What about his shield?”

“What about him?”

Marlow cocked his head. “Well, he’d know what Carlyle did, right? He would have been by his side most of the time. I’m actually surprised he wasn’t working with Carlyle.”

Jarvis cocked his head. “What if *I* wanted to take over the world? Would you still be by my side?”

Marlow hesitated. Jarvis had no idea how he would answer, but he wasn’t sure what he’d do if Marlow tried to take over the world. He didn’t want to betray him, but he drew the line at killing people.

“I don’t think I would,” Marlow eventually admitted. “If anything because I need to protect Jason.”

Jarvis huffed out a laugh. “Then it’s a good thing I have no plans on taking over the world.”

“It is, but I want to get back to Emory. Maybe Carlyle killed Emory because he didn’t want to support him. How can we be sure?”

“I told you no one knows what happened to him. He vanished a while before Carlyle’s final attack. We tried to find him in the beginning, but with Carlyle attempting to kill us, we couldn’t focus on him.”

“Maybe he isn’t dead.”

“But if he’s not dead, where is he? As far as I know, he’s never returned to his clan and hasn’t tried contacting us. He’s not one of the minions helping Carlyle, either.”

“I don’t know. It might be useless, but I feel we need to find him. Maybe it’s because he’s a dragon shifter, like me, but I think he would help us if he were still alive.”

Jarvis thought more about Emory. He’d tried finding him, but he couldn’t deny that over the years, he’d stopped. If Emory was still alive, it was clear he didn’t want to be found.

But why? He had to know Carlyle was gone. At the same time, he had to have felt that wave of magic. Maybe he thought it didn’t involve him anymore, and he wouldn’t be wrong, but even after Carlyle had been locked up for all these years, it wouldn’t have broken the bond. He and Emory would always be shield and mage as long as magic existed. Their bond was complete because they’d been a couple. That was why Jarvis hadn’t thought Carlyle could hurt Emory, but maybe he’d been wrong.

And maybe he’d been right. The bond between a mage and his shield was precious, and he had a hard time imagining Carlyle killing Emory. It would have torn out a part of him, and Carlyle didn’t like discomfort. No, he wouldn’t have killed Emory, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t have done something that would keep him away. If he had, Jarvis might have been able to find him if he’d continued trying.

He hadn’t, and he felt guilty about that, too.

“You’re right,” he told Marlow. “I don’t think Emory was ever okay with what Carlyle was doing, and he would have helped us defeat him if he’d been able to.”

Marlow’s expression fell. “So you think he’s dead.”

“Actually, I don’t. He and Carlyle had sealed their bond, which means it would have been almost impossible for Carlyle to kill him. His magic would have rebelled against it.”

“But he could have hurt him.”

“He could have, and I have no doubt that he did. Even if he did, though, Emory is probably still alive. That means we could find him.”

“Even if he doesn’t want to be found?”

“We can use a seeking spell. We can’t use Emory and Carlyle’s bond, but Carlyle found a way to locate our shields. I’m sure we can find a way to locate his.”

That would mean more work and more time spent reading old, dusty books, but that would be nothing next to what they’d have to do during the actual fight with Carlyle when they’d have to use their magic against him. But it wasn’t something they needed to think about now. Hopefully, when the time came, they’d have found Emory, and they’d be ready to defeat Carlyle.

* * * *

Marlow didn’t blame the mages for not looking for Emory, but it worried him. He didn’t like the thought of another dragon shifter being hurt, especially by the person who was supposed to keep them safe. The shields guarded the mages, but he felt the protection went the other way around, too. When the dragons needed them, the mages were supposed to have their back.

And Carlyle hadn’t had Emory’s back.

Marlow could see how the mages had been busy and how it would have hurt them to look more into this, but he was glad that was over now. They were going to find Emory if he was alive, and hopefully, he’d be able to help them with Carlyle. Marlow wasn’t sure how he’d feel if Jarvis were to betray him the way Carlyle had possibly betrayed Emory, but surely

Emory would have to see that the only option for him was to help them.

If he couldn't see it, well, they'd have to deal with this on their own like they already were.

He tried to tell himself not to hope. He wasn't sure why it mattered so much to him that Emory was alive, but he might not be, and he had to be careful if he didn't want to be hurt. He couldn't build Emory up in his mind because he didn't know the guy, and even if he was alive, there was no way to know if he'd be willing to help. After all, he hadn't done anything for decades, not even now that Carlyle was back.

There was no way he didn't know. Even Marlow had felt the wave of magic, and he hadn't had a clue what it was. Emory would have known, unless Carlyle had taken his memory, but Marlow didn't see why he would do so. Maybe Emory had tried to stop Carlyle, and Carlyle had taken his memories away rather than killing him.

Or maybe none of that had happened. Marlow needed to focus on what he could do and change, not on imagining things that might not have happened.

"As long as you're sure," Penley said, catching Marlow's attention.

Jarvis snickered next to Marlow. "I told you so."

Penley's cheeks were flushed, but he looked pleased, and the other mages around him were nodding. Jarvis clearly had been right. The mages had decided that Penley should be the next one to find his shield. It wasn't a surprise, but it amused Marlow to see how well Jarvis knew his brothers. They might not be related by blood, but that didn't make them any less family, and he was glad that his mage had had all these people during the decades they'd been separated.

All of that was over now, and they were together. Neither of them would be alone for the rest of their life unless that was what they wanted.

The group turned toward Jarvis and Marlow. Jarvis beamed at Penley, who reddened even further.

“It’s good that you’ll have him back soon,” Jarvis said gently.

“It is, although I can’t help but worry.”

“I’m not going to tell you it’ll be easy, because I don’t think it will be but remember that you’re not alone. You have all of us, and no matter what happens, that will never change.”

Before, Marlow had wondered why the mages hadn’t found other shields. It hadn’t made sense to him that if they needed shields so badly, they would stay for decades without them just because they wanted their old shields back. Now that he and Jarvis had renewed their bond, he knew the mages *couldn’t* have taken new shields. Of course, his bond with Jarvis was deeper than the bond between other mages and dragons. As Jarvis had pointed out, he and Marlow had been together since they were children, and their bond had been fully sealed. Marlow wasn’t sure the same went for everyone else.

It hadn’t been for Ansley and Parker. Ansley could have found someone else, especially considering what Marlow had heard about the way Parker had treated him before, but he hadn’t. Marlow couldn’t imagine the two of them not together, and he was glad they had found their way to each other.

And now, it was time for Penley to find his way to his shield.

“And I’ll take care of the seeking spell for Emory,” Keylon volunteered, startling everyone.

Penley frowned. “Why are we talking about Emory?”

“Because I was listening to the conversation between Jarvis and Marlow, and they’re right. We had decades, and none of us had been looking for him. It’s not right, and I hate that we dismissed him so easily. You’re going to be busy with your shield, and Ansley needs to focus on the seeking spell to find the others. I might need help, but I’m sure I can tweak the seeking spell Ansley used to find Emory, even though I can’t focus on the bond he had with Carlyle.”

“He’s not our priority,” Tyne grumbled.

“He might not be, but we shouldn’t abandon him. Besides, he could help us fight Carlyle.”

Tyne didn’t look convinced, and Marlow thought he might not be. Marlow wanted to believe that Emory wouldn’t go along with what Carlyle wanted since it was wrong, but he was well-placed to understand how strong a bond between a shield and his mage could be. He didn’t think he would follow Jarvis down the path of darkness if that was what Jarvis decided to do, but it wouldn’t be easy for him to step aside, and fighting him would be near impossible.

Luckily, that wasn’t something Marlow would ever have to worry about because there was no way Jarvis would ever do something like that.

Ansley clapped his hands. “Are we ready? Because I have another three shields to find after this one.”

Penley made a small squeaking sound, then quickly went to stand next to Ansley. Marlow stayed where he was, and together, he and everyone else watched as Ansley cast this spell. He had a hand on Penley’s shoulder, and Penley had screwed his eyes shut and looked like he was concentrating really hard. In front of them on the ground was a world map. There were several other maps, most of them folded, but not all. A map of the United States had been opened in the hope that Penley’s shield would be somewhere in the country. Jarvis could open portals all over the world, but the further he had to go, the more tiring it was, especially when he had to open another one immediately to come home. The others could cast the spell to open portals, too, but they weren’t nearly as good as Jarvis, or at least, that was what Marlow had been told.

There was a small whoosh, and a flame suddenly burned on the map. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and everyone crowded around the map.

Penley’s shield was in the country.

Ansley repeated the spell several times until they had a more precise location. It felt like everyone was holding their breath, and Marlow was afraid to break the silence.

But once they had a town name, it was time to go.

Chapter Twelve

Jarvis had known the spell would work. It had worked twice before, after all, and Ansley was becoming better at it every time he cast it. Still, Jarvis had been just as nervous as everyone else, but now that they knew that Bennett was in the country, he could relax.

That only lasted for a handful of seconds because everyone turned to him. He leaned closer to the map to see where he was supposed to open the portal. Of course, it was on the other side of the country.

What could Bennett be doing in Florida? It was just about the worst state as far as Jarvis was concerned. Who would want to live in a place that was hot as hell and had alligators?

But that was where Bennett was, and it was time to go get him. Jarvis straightened and looked around, and everyone's expression was as set as his. They were ready, and if Carlyle was waiting for them on the other side of the portal, they'd fight him. Jarvis didn't know if they would win, but they didn't have to. They just had to get Bennett.

He raised his hands in the direction opposite the one where everyone was scattered and quickly cast the spell, focusing on the small town in Florida where Bennett apparently was. At least he wasn't in Miami or another big city. It would make sense for him to choose a smaller town if he wanted to stretch his wings every so often.

The portal opened. It spluttered for a few seconds until Jarvis managed to settle it, then he looked at the others. "Penley?"

Penley looked both like he wanted to run into the portal and like he wanted to stay back at the castle. Jarvis had gone through this recently, so he understood how Penley felt. He wanted to reassure the younger man, so he moved closer.

"Everything is going to be fine," he promised. "No matter what happens, you won't be alone."

For some reason, Penley was terrified that Bennett would reject him. Jarvis didn't see how that could be possible, but he didn't know what kind of relationship Bennett and Penley had in the past. He'd wondered if the two of them were together, but he hadn't been sure, and he still wasn't.

He and the other mages didn't often talk about their shields. It had been too painful to know they were out there and that they'd decided to stay away for some reason. They hadn't known about the memory spell, but it wasn't easy to deal with even now that they knew the dragons couldn't remember the mages.

Jarvis remembered Bennett. He hadn't been cruel, and he'd quite liked him. He'd been a bit like a mother hen, hovering over Penley, possibly because Penley had been so young. To Jarvis, it had looked like Bennett cared about Penley, even if they weren't romantically involved.

He hoped he hadn't been wrong back then and that the care Bennett had for Penley would carry him to the present.

Penley was trembling as he and Jarvis moved toward the portal. Jarvis didn't even think about it until a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned to frown at Marlow, who frowned right back and pressed his hand harder against his shoulder.

“Parker and I will go first.”

Jarvis opened his mouth to protest, but he couldn't. After all, this was their job.

So Parker and Marlow went ahead. It took them a few seconds, but eventually, Marlow reappeared and waved at Jarvis and the others to walk through the portal. Jarvis quickly did, dragging Penley along. The others followed. Tyne was silent, but Keylon and Dallin were talking excitedly. They were happy for Penley, just like Penley would be happy for them once they found their shields.

Opening portals was tricky, even when Jarvis had a precise location. He had to read the map intensely so he wouldn't open a portal inside a home or a place where people would see

them. It would also not be great to open a portal in the middle of a body of water, which was precisely where Florida was. Luckily, the map Ansley had printed had been precise, and Jarvis had nailed the location. He'd opened the portal on top of an apartment building, and while there were a few couches and places where people clearly spent time relaxing, it was the middle of the day, and with the sun coming down hard, the place was deserted. Someone might still see them from the buildings around them, but Jarvis didn't think so. Even so, he quickly cast a spell that would shield them and the portal from anyone watching.

"Why is it so hot?" Keylon complained as he made a show of wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Because this is hell," Tyne said as he pushed past them toward the door that would lead them inside the building.

"It's Florida," Dallin pointed out.

Tyne shrugged. "Same thing."

He ignored Parker and Marlow rushing toward him and opened the door. They didn't look happy, but they weren't Tyne's shield, and Tyne was better trained and bigger than the other mages. If someone attacked him, even Carlyle, he'd be able to defend himself much more easily than Jarvis ever could.

Maybe Jarvis should have trained with him during all these years, after all.

He suspected that Tyne used physical exercise not to think. He'd been doing so since before they lost their shields, which would explain why he wasn't eager to find his. There had been something there, and Jarvis had never found out what that was. He had no doubt it was conflict, but they would have to find Tyne's shield, too. They couldn't leave him without a shield, especially if they were going to have to fight Carlyle.

Even though Tyne was the first to leave the roof, Ansley and Parker took the lead. Ansley continued casting the spell as they went down the building, stopping on every floor to check whether Bennett was there.

They found him on the fifth floor. By then, Ansley was a little pale and shaky, and Parker was fussing over him. That didn't stop Ansley from stepping into the hallway and looking left and right.

He groaned. "I'm going to have to cast the spell again."

"You're working too hard," Parker gently scolded him.

"I know, but I have to find Bennett. I promise I'll rest once we have him."

"Damn right, you will. I'll make sure of it."

Ansley grinned. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Jarvis found himself looking at Marlow. Before, his stomach had churned unpleasantly when Ansley and Parker were like this. He'd been envious and jealous because he'd wanted his shield back, too. He'd wanted *Marlow* back, and it had hurt not to have him.

But now he did have him, and Marlow stepped closer to take Jarvis's hand. They followed Ansley down the hallway until Ansley stopped in front of a door. He was more than shaking now, and Parker helped hold him up. Luckily, this wasn't the first time they'd done this, so Parker had come prepared. He handed Ansley a bottle of water and a protein bar, and it was clear he would focus on his mage for a few moments while the others tried to come up with a plan to convince Bennett to follow them. It had been easy with Marlow because he'd been under attack, but thankfully, Carlyle was nowhere to be seen.

For now.

Everyone looked at Jarvis, which made him sigh. Of course they wanted him to take the lead. It would have annoyed him, but he'd been their unofficial leader for a long time. He might as well do this, too.

"Even though he won't remember you, it doesn't mean he won't want to come with us," Jarvis told Penley.

Penley was pale but nodded. "I know. I talked to Marlow and Parker, so I know what to expect. I'll be fine."

Jarvis hoped he would be. He raised his hand and knocked, and when the sound of footsteps came from inside, he held his breath. He was pretty sure everyone around him did, and together, they waited for Bennett to open the door.

The footsteps came even closer. Penley sucked in a breath. The door opened, and everyone stared at the man on the other side.

A man who wasn't Bennett.

* * * *

Marlow was pretty sure something was happening, but he didn't know what. When the man had opened the door, everyone had sucked in a breath almost collectively. Marlow had waited for Jarvis to speak, but they were silent and staring instead.

The man in the door was bigger than Tyne, which Marlow hadn't expected. He wasn't sure why, but when he'd thought of Penley's shield, he'd imagined someone more like him or Parker—bigger than Penley but not as big as a house. This guy looked like he might break Penley in half while hugging him.

Marlow should have looked at the pictures on the walls before coming, but between training with Tyne and Parker, trying to understand how to set up a new workshop in the castle, his new relationship with Jarvis, and Jason, Marlow barely had time to sleep, let alone look into the past. He hadn't thought it was necessary to recognize the other shields before they found them, but maybe he'd been wrong.

The guy looked from Jarvis to the group behind him. The hallway was crowded to say the least, and the guy arched a brow.

“What can I do for you?”

They all continued staring without saying anything. It was becoming uncomfortable for everyone, including Marlow. He wasn't sure what to do, but maybe he should take the lead since no one else was.

He cleared his throat. “Bennett?”

The man turned to him and cocked his head. “No. I think you have the wrong address.”

“We don’t,” Jarvis suddenly said.

It was good to see him getting out of his shock, but what the fuck was happening?

“Well, there’s no Bennett here.”

“Do you live alone?”

The man stared for a moment. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

Jarvis took a step forward. Marlow almost pulled him back because not-Bennett looked like he might want to pound him into the ground. Luckily, Jarvis seemed to realize that, too. He quickly stepped back, then glanced at Tyne.

Again—what the fuck was happening?

“My name is Jarvis,” he explained. “I know you don’t remember me and that what I’m going to tell you will sound strange, but I promise I’m not lying.”

“Look, man, I don’t know what you’ve been smoking, but I don’t want anything to do with any of this.”

“Who is it?” a voice called from inside the apartment.

Penley cried out and tried to push past everyone, but Keylon didn’t let him pass. Penley looked up at him, his expression wounded, but Keylon pulled him back.

“I don’t know,” not-Bennett called back. “Maybe you know these guys? They say they have the right address, but they’re asking about a guy named Bennett.”

More footsteps came, and a second guy appeared. He was shorter than the first one and looked much less dangerous. His brown hair was overgrown and shaggy, making him look like he’d just rolled out of bed, or maybe like he’d just come back from the beach. His skin was incredibly tan as if he spent a lot of time outside.

He took in the group, and his gaze stopped on Penley, but not for long. Penley made a sobbing sound, and to Marlow's surprise, it was enough to get the other two's attention again. He frowned and moved forward, reaching for Penley, but stopped before touching him.

"We know both of you are dragon shifters," Jarvis said urgently. "And we know who you were before losing your memories."

That got the attention of both guys. Marlow still didn't know who they were, although he was pretty sure that the second guy was Bennett. That left him with the mystery of who the first guy was, but clearly, he was another one of the shields.

Ansley had managed to find two of them in one try.

He hadn't meant to do it. It was clear the two shields lived together, and Marlow wondered if they were dating. Even if they weren't, how had they found each other? He'd thought for decades that he and Jason were the only dragon shifters around, yet these two had found each other and stuck together. Marlow was suddenly jealous, but not for long.

He might not have known another dragon shifter, but that was okay. He knew them now, and they were his family.

The second guy's eyes had widened, while the first one glared at Jarvis. Clearly, they didn't know if they could trust him, but they also couldn't deny that he knew who they were.

Marlow decided to step in before the first guy decided to get his answers by beating up Jarvis. "My name is Marlow, and I'm a dragon shifter like you," he explained. "I also lost all my memories. I didn't remember any of these guys, and I still don't, but trust me, you want to hear what they have to say."

Not-Bennett looked like he wanted to tell them to fuck off, but the second one waved them inside. "We better have this conversation where people can't overhear. My name is Devon, and this is Meyer."

Marlow still had no idea whose shields they were, just suspicions, but at least now he knew their names.

They filed into the apartment, and Meyer closed the door. He hovered by it, which was good, since the apartment wasn't big. With so many people inside, it was downright crowded, and it was clear Tyne didn't like that because he was eying the window as if he was planning to jump out of it.

"Explain," Meyer said.

Jarvis smiled at him, even though he sounded rude. Marlow couldn't say he blamed Meyer. He'd been where the man was, so he understood how confusing and wild all of this was. He'd been lucky to only have to meet a few of the mages when they'd found him, even with Carlyle attacking him. Meyer and Devon had to deal with the entire group, which couldn't be easy.

"My name is Jarvis," Jarvis explained. "I know that you can't remember me or anyone else here or what we are. You lost all your memories and only remember the past few decades."

"How do you know that?" Devon asked.

He was staring at Penley, who was still in Keylon's arms. It made Marlow wonder if he was Bennett, Penley's shield. Probably, but that didn't tell Marlow who Meyer was.

"Because we knew you before your memories were taken."

Marlow had already heard the explanation, so he focused on Devon and Meyer. He remembered how he'd felt when Jarvis had told him all of this. The first instinct was to tell him to fuck off and not believe him, but neither man could deny that Jarvis knew more about them than anyone else. He knew they were dragon shifters even though they hadn't told him, and he knew about the memories. They had to admit he probably knew them from before, and Marlow hoped that would be enough to keep them where they were.

All they needed was a chance to explain. They were here to take Meyer and Devon back to the castle because it was too dangerous for them to be out here with Carlyle looking for them. He wasn't sure *how* they would convince them to come,

but they'd find a way. Marlow would knock them out if he had to.

He was pretty sure he would need Tyne's help when it came to Meyer, though.

"Wait, you're saying that our job is to protect you guys?" Devon asked.

"Not all of us. We were a little like a family, and during a fight, you protected all of us, but your main concern will always be your mage. You're bonded to him, so he's your priority."

"And who's my mage?"

Everyone in their group turned to look at Penley. His cheeks flushed, and he glanced at the door, possibly wondering if he could run fast enough to disappear through it before anyone answered. It was too late, though. Devon took a step forward, then another.

Meyer raised a hand to stop his friend. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going with them," Devon told him. "You don't have to come if you don't want to, but we felt that wave of magic, and besides, what do we have here? It's only you and me, and think about what they're offering."

"It could be a trap."

"It could also be the only way for us to get back to where we belong. I'm not wasting this opportunity. Besides, there's something here that tells me to trust them." He rubbed his sternum and turned back to Penley as if he couldn't stop himself from doing so.

Marlow hoped they would both listen to that something.

Chapter Thirteen

Marlow was glad to be home after the visit to Florida, although he was a little stunned to realize that he thought about the castle as home. It hadn't taken him long, but he supposed that, in a way, he'd always known he didn't belong in the small town where he and Jason had lived. More than the castle, he'd found his home in Jarvis, and Jarvis was right here.

The castle was buzzing. Meyer and Devon had come back with them from Florida, and they were settling in. Everyone had given them space, although it was clear to anyone with eyes that Devon wouldn't need it when it came to Penley. Every time the two of them were in the same room, Devon hovered around Penley, and if he couldn't be close to him, he watched him from afar. Marlow was pretty sure those two would fix things between them soon.

Meyer and Tyne were another kettle of fish.

Jarvis had eventually told Marlow that Meyer had been Tyne's shield. Marlow and Tyne got along just fine, and Marlow liked him even though he wasn't an expressive person, but Tyne had closed off even more since they'd come back. Marlow had tried congratulating him for finding his shield, but Tyne had turned around and left without saying anything. Jarvis hadn't been surprised at how grumpy Tyne had become, although he didn't know why any more than Marlow did. He'd just noticed that Tyne was the only one who'd been willing to wait to find his shield, which probably meant that something had happened between him and Meyer before Meyer was taken away.

It was anyone's guess what that something was.

But it was none of Marlow's business. He'd be there both for Devon and Meyer if they wanted to talk about what was happening to them, but in the meantime, everyone needed to let them and their mages figure things out. Besides, Marlow had things to figure out for himself, too.

Namely, his old clan.

It would take some time for Ansley to recover from the seeking spells he'd had to cast lately. Luckily, they'd found two shields at the same time, which meant he'd only have to cast the spell another two times. Still, it had taken a lot out of him, and Parker had taken to growling at anyone who even mentioned the spell in front of Ansley. Dallin and Keylon were eager to find their shields, but they understood that Ansley needed time, even though it had to be hell for them. They behaved like it didn't matter, but it did, and everyone was very much aware of that.

But there wasn't anything any of them could do. That meant that Marlow had time to think about something he'd been avoiding since he'd arrived.

His family.

He'd been shocked to find out he had a family, even more when he realized it was an entire clan. Jarvis had explained that not every dragon in the clan was related by blood to Marlow, but a good number were, and he'd warned Marlow that it would be overwhelming. That was one of the reasons Marlow had waited to call, but he felt like he shouldn't anymore. He had a moment of respite before they needed to find the other shields, and he should take advantage of it. Besides, they might need the clan to defeat Carlyle, so it was time for Marlow to reach out.

He was nervous, a bit worried, and he knew he'd be overwhelmed. He'd thought he didn't have a family, but he'd often wondered if he'd left someone behind when he'd lost his memories. He'd raised Jason on his own, and when Jason was younger, he'd had a lot of questions about why he didn't have grandparents. Marlow had never been able to tell him why, but now, he could give him the grandparents he'd wanted.

Hopefully, they'd be happy to find out that Marlow had a child. Marlow wouldn't hesitate to stay away if they weren't or if they had anything to say about Jason or Jarvis. Jarvis had reassured him they were good people, but Marlow wasn't sure he could believe that until he actually met them.

Before meeting them, he needed to contact them. He stared down at the phone in his hand and leaned back in the small armchair in his room. He needed privacy to do this, but maybe he should ask Jarvis to be there. He was used to dealing with the clan. He'd grown up there, after all. They both had.

But no. This was something Marlow needed to do on his own. Jarvis wasn't far if he needed him, and knowing that helped. It was no use wasting time, so Marlow quickly found the number Jarvis had given him and made the call.

It rang a few times before a woman answered. "Who is this, and how did you get my number?"

Marlow cleared his throat. "Martha?"

There was a pause. "Yes?"

"Hi. I'm sorry to bother you, but I got your number from Jarvis."

"Oh." Her voice softened. "How is he?"

"Good. He's good."

"And why did he give you my number?"

"Because you've been looking for me for a long time." How was Marlow supposed to do this? He had no idea what to say or how to make Martha understand who he was. Should he blurt out everything? It felt like a lot, especially on the phone, but maybe it was the best way to do it.

"Raleigh?"

Martha's voice shook a little. It made Marlow want to reach through the phone and hug her, but since he couldn't do that, he settled for the next best thing. "Yeah. It's me."

There was a sob, and Marlow gave Martha time to compose herself. If he was honest, his own eyes prickled at the thought that he was talking to someone who was related to him. She was his aunt, and while he'd wanted to call his parents, he'd also been terrified to do so. She'd felt like the best compromise, especially since she was the clan leader.

"I need to get your parents," she said eventually.

“Wait. I want to talk to you first.”

“What is it?”

“I know that you and Jarvis talked to each other after the mages found Parker, so you’re aware of the fact that I have no memories, right?”

“Oh, Raleigh. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. My name isn’t Raleigh anymore. It’s Marlow, and I don’t remember you or my parents. I don’t remember anything before the fight with Carlyle, and I never will. I need you and my parents to understand that before we talk, because I don’t know if I can get through a conversation with them otherwise. This is a lot for all of us.”

Martha cleared her throat. “Of course. I’ll make sure to remind them of that when I talk to them, and I’ll tell them that you go by Marlow now.”

Marlow smiled. “Will you also tell them that I have a son?”

“*You what?* Oh my God, Raleigh.” She paused. “I’m sorry, Marlow. It’s going to take a while to get used to that.”

“Don’t worry about it. It took me a while to get used to the fact that I had an entire life before losing all my memories. We can get used to it together.”

“Tell me about your son.”

Marlow did. He could talk about Jason for hours, and doing that meant that he didn’t have to worry about how his parents would take all of this. Eventually he’d have to talk to them, and he wanted to do so today, if possible, but for now, he was fine talking to his aunt and having her tell him about his parents and the rest of the clan. That way, he wouldn’t feel so lost when he finally got them on the phone.

Just like with Jarvis, he had a history with them that he didn’t remember. They’d been there when he’d taken his first breath, and it had to have been agony for them to lose him. He couldn’t even imagine what they’d gone through. If he thought about losing Jason, even years from now, when he was an

adult, he started to panic. It was so easy to imagine that his parents would have gone through the same.

But they hadn't lost him forever. He was back, and this time, he had no intention of leaving again.

* * * *

When Jarvis got to Marlow's room, he could hear voices from inside. It made him hesitate to knock, even though the door was slightly open. Clearly, Marlow was busy, and Jarvis should have come back later.

He turned to leave, but Marlow must have heard him because the door flew open. He was holding his phone to his ear, and something in his gaze told Jarvis that the phone call was important.

He tried to think about who Marlow could be talking to. As far as he knew, Marlow hadn't left anyone behind when he and Jason had moved. They'd gone back for their things, and he hadn't asked to see anyone one last time. He'd also never mentioned anyone. If anything, he'd told Jarvis that he and Jason were used to being on their own. Jason had friends, of course, but while Marlow was friendly with several people, mostly other parents from school, he wouldn't call them friends.

"Jarvis is here," Marlow said.

Jarvis couldn't hear what the person on the other side of the phone said, but Marlow waved him inside. Then he lowered his phone, and Martha's voice filled the room.

"I should be angry that you kept this secret for me, but I don't know if I can be," Martha said.

Jarvis went to sit on the small couch by the window. "I didn't tell you only because Marlow asked me not to," Jarvis explained.

Marlow followed, settling in the armchair by the couch and putting his phone on the tiny table between them.

“I know. He told me, and I understand why he asked you to wait. I’m not angry at either of you. I don’t think I can be angry at anyone after finding out that Marlow is all right and back with us.”

Jarvis knew that feeling well. He relaxed against the couch, glad to find out that Marlow had finally taken this step. He’d been dancing around the issue since he’d found out about his clan and family. He’d been understandably nervous and overwhelmed, which was why Jarvis hadn’t pushed. Marlow deserved to do this in his own time, which was what he’d done.

Jarvis knew why he’d felt the need to do it now. Ansley was resting after casting the seeking spell so many times in a row to find Devon and Meyer, so they couldn’t go out and find the other two shields. At the same time, Devon and Meyer were still getting used to living at the castle, and it was good to give them some time. They were safe, and even though Jarvis worried that Carlyle would eventually attack, especially when he realized that they’d found more shields, for now, everything was quiet.

Which was worrying in its own way.

“The only person I’m angry at is Carlyle,” Martha said with a growl. “I can’t believe what he did. He should pay, and not only for stealing your shields. He took away who they were and their memories, and that’s not right.”

Jarvis and Martha had gone over this already after Parker had been found. She’d been pissed back then, too, but it made sense that now that Marlow was involved, she felt ready to go on the warpath.

“He’ll pay eventually,” Jarvis promised.

“When you finally have to face him, my clan will stand by you. He took away one of our own, and he hurt us. That won’t go unanswered.”

Jarvis had already known they’d stand with him, even if he never found Marlow. He’d been born in the clan, and even though he wasn’t a dragon, they were still his family. Martha

hadn't been the leader long, just a few decades, but Jarvis was close to her anyway because of how close he'd been to Marlow since they were kids.

She sighed. "I just wish I could send someone to you now, but we're dealing with a problem, and I don't want anyone away from the clan for too long."

Jarvis frowned and looked at Marlow, who shrugged. He didn't seem to know what was happening any more than Jarvis.

"What problem do you have?" Jarvis asked. "Maybe we could help."

"I have no doubt that you could, and I might ask one of you to come over. You have other things to focus on at the moment, though."

"What we have to focus on doesn't matter. If you need us, we'll come."

"One of our dragons is missing."

Jarvis's mind quickly went to what they could do to find the dragon. "Who? What happened?"

"We don't know. Jenkins went to work, and he just never came back. It isn't like him to vanish like that. No one in the clan would do so, especially after we lost Marlow. We've been looking for him, but we could only find out that he spent the day at work. It's the last time anyone saw him. After he left, he never got to his car."

"We can cast a seeking spell."

"We might need you to eventually. For now, though, we're looking into it, so don't worry and focus on finding the two missing shields. Marlow told me you found another two, and I'm so very happy for you."

It was probably best if everyone stayed where they were. Here at the castle, the mages and the shields were safe. The clan was just as safe, since Jarvis had made sure their mansion was as protected as the castle. He'd cast the same spells there,

so even if Carlyle knew where the clan lived, he couldn't get to them.

But he was worried. He didn't know Jenkins well, but he remembered him and hoped nothing had happened to him. Casting a seeking spell wouldn't be easy without something belonging to Jenkins, but Jarvis could open a portal to the house and grab something of his. He'd have to be careful to shield himself so he wouldn't catch Carlyle's attention, but it could be done.

"Just let us know if there's anything we can do," he told Martha. "We need to be careful, but it doesn't mean we can't see each other."

"We will soon," Martha promised. "I have to talk to Marlow's parents first. They know about the memory spell, but they need to understand it better. I'm sure they'll want to come over as soon as I tell them about Marlow, but I don't want anyone to be hurt. They have to make their peace with the fact that their son will never remember them and that their relationship with him is gone."

"We'll build a new relationship," Marlow promised. "I want you and them in my life and Jason's. It's important to both of us."

"It's important to us, too. It won't be easy for them to accept what happened, but in the end, they have what they most want. You're back, and no matter what your name is or your memories, you'll always be their son, just like you'll always be my nephew. That's all that matters."

Jarvis reached over to take one of Marlow's hands. Marlow smiled at him, and Jarvis wasn't surprised to see his eyes were full of tears.

He'd told Jarvis that after he'd lost his memories, there was only one thing he wished for. He'd been alone and desperately wanted people he could care about and who would care about him. He'd filled that need with Jason, but now, he could have everything he ever wished for.

He had a son, a partner, and parents. He had an entire dragon clan and the other mages.

He had a family.

Chapter Fourteen

Jarvis stared at the map in front of him. He was frustrated, and it took everything he had not to throw it to the other side of the room. It wouldn't have been satisfying unless he'd balled it up, but he could still use it since the spell hadn't worked, so he didn't want to ruin it.

Instead, he scowled at it.

It was a map of the country. He wasn't trying to find the other two shields because he wouldn't be able to, but he should be able to find Carlyle.

He couldn't.

He'd expected it. There was no way Carlyle wasn't shielding himself. Even if he was back at the strength he'd had before, he wouldn't want Jarvis and the others to find him before he was ready for them. That meant shielding himself, which he was doing perfectly.

After all, Jarvis had been the one to teach him that spell.

Sometimes, Jarvis hated that he had, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't think of any situation that could have warned him about what Carlyle eventually did, especially in the beginning. Carlyle had been a good student and a good person. He'd studied with Jarvis until he was ready to set off on his own, and when he had, he'd been fine. He had Emory, and they'd been a happy couple.

Yet something had changed. Carlyle had turned to the darkness, maybe to obtain something he felt he was missing. No one had seen it coming, not even Jarvis, and now, they were stuck. Carlyle couldn't find them, and they couldn't find him. Jarvis had no doubt that, eventually, something would break. It would probably happen when they tried finding the other two shields, which he felt was urgent, but Parker had growled at him the last time he'd mentioned it to Ansley. That had caused Marlow to step in and growl at Parker, and since

the last thing Jarvis wanted was two fighting dragons, he'd waved both of them away.

He understood where Parker was coming from. Even though Ansley kept saying he was fine and ready to cast the spell again, it was clear he wasn't. He was still pale, with deep bruises under his eyes as if he wasn't sleeping enough. Jarvis had known that casting the spell took a lot out of him, but he hadn't realized it was so bad until Ansley had needed to cast it so many times to find Devon and Meyer. He needed rest because they couldn't afford to lose him, but even more importantly, they didn't *want* anything to happen to him.

A knock on the door distracted him. He almost yelled at whoever it was to go away, but clearly, what he was doing wasn't working. He'd been trying to cast a seeking spell on Carlyle for days now, and the result was a still pristine map. There were no signs of any kind of burn, which meant the spell wasn't working.

He rubbed his forehead and flopped back into his chair. "Come in."

The door opened, and Marlow peeked in. He looked around as if he expected something to explode, which could be a possibility, but not in Jarvis's office. That was Keylon's specialty.

"Hey," Jarvis said as he straightened in his chair and waved Marlow in. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

Marlow walked in and closed the door. "Of course."

Jarvis quickly thought about what might be wrong. Thorne had started homeschooling Jason, and while Jason was grumbly about it, he hadn't protested too badly. They were settling into a routine, and Marlow was even setting up a new workshop for his woodworking. There was still something big missing from everyone's lives, something the size of two grown men, but they were working around that. Their lives couldn't be paused because they were still missing two of the shields, even though it was odd to settle in a new relationship and everything while knowing they were still out there and in danger.

Everything in this situation was exhausting.

“Jason?” he asked.

Marlow walked around the desk instead of sitting on the other side. He settled on the edge of the desk next to Jarvis’s map, their legs brushing together. He leaned over and kissed Jarvis, and Jarvis made a pleased sound and kissed him back.

Marlow chuckled and leaned away. “Jason’s fine. I’m not sure that Thorne will be after this, but he’s the one who volunteered to homeschool my son.”

Jarvis laughed. “I think he was bored. Either that or avoiding something.” Like everyone, Jarvis had noticed something happening between Thorne and Matthias, and while Jarvis had been tempted to ask, it was none of his business. Maybe he should talk to Parker. Matthias was his best friend, so he might have told him what was going on, and Jarvis wanted him to feel part of their family.

“Well, he’s not going to be bored for long with Jason. What are you up to?” Marlow looked down at the desk.

He stared at the map, and Jarvis didn’t try to hide it. Marlow would be able to tell what he was doing, but that was okay. Jarvis didn’t feel the need to hide from him.

Not much, anyway.

The only reason he felt the urge to hide the fact that he was looking for Carlyle was that he felt guilty. Even though Marlow had told him he didn’t blame him, he’d been responsible for Carlyle. It hadn’t been the same kind of responsibility as when Carlyle had been his apprentice, but Jarvis didn’t understand how he hadn’t seen anything, and it made him feel like hell.

Marlow sighed. “Please tell me that you’re at least looking for Emory and not Carlyle.”

Jarvis blinked. “I thought Keylon was doing that.”

“Yeah, he’s working on it as far as I know, but I wouldn’t put it past you to try to find Emory anyway. Besides, it’s better than the alternative.”

Jarvis looked down. “And I was looking for Carlyle, but I can’t find him.”

Marlow sighed. “It’s not your responsibility to look for him. It’s not your responsibility to feel guilty about what he did. It doesn’t matter that you were his mentor, and it wouldn’t have mattered if you’d been his father, brother, or even shield. He was an adult, and he made his own decisions. They had nothing to do with you, and I need you to finally understand and accept that. You can’t obsess over this because you’ll lose sight of what’s important.”

Jarvis couldn’t help but smile. “You?”

Marlow rolled his eyes. “Me, but also everyone else. Your family, this place, the people who work with you. I know it’s awful not to be able to do anything to protect them because you can’t find Carlyle, but not being able to find him isn’t your fault, just like what he did isn’t your fault. Stop being a martyr, Jarvis. No one wants you to be, and it’s starting to get on my nerves.”

Jarvis stared at Marlow. He didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t expected him to be so honest. Their relationship was progressing, but they were still awkward around each other sometimes, especially when it came to the important things. Clearly, Marlow had enough.

“It’s not easy,” Jarvis said.

“I never said it was. I don’t expect it to be. Carlyle betrayed you. You cared about him almost like a son or a younger brother, and he stomped all over that. He hurt you and the people you cared the most about. Of course you’re still hurting over it. No one expects you not to be. But no one expects you to take responsibility and solve this mess, either. I understand how important it is to find Carlyle, and I’m not blaming you for trying to. It has to be awful not to be able to do anything when you know how dangerous he is. But I miss you. You’ve barely left your office since Devon and Meyer came back, and I don’t like it. I finally have you back. I don’t want to lose you to Carlyle again.”

* * * *

Marlow knew how important this was to Jarvis, and he even understood why Jarvis felt guilty, but he had enough of that. Jarvis had nothing to feel guilty about. Marlow would repeat that until he believed it, so it was lucky they were both long-lived because he was pretty sure it would take decades, if not longer.

He missed his mage. Jarvis and the other mages were always busy, even when it felt like nothing was happening. They studied spells, tweaked them and made them more efficient, and got ready for the fight that was coming. Until now, Carlyle had been fairly quiet, but that wasn't going to last forever. Something would break, and they'd be thrown right in the middle of the war.

Marlow had no idea how to get ready for it.

He'd been doing what he could, training with Parker and Tyne and now Devon and Meyer. Meyer was incredibly intimidating. He kept glowering, looking almost like an overgrown version of Tyne. It was hard to believe that they were mage and shield because they barely talked to each other. Marlow had no idea what was happening there, but he was curious. He liked his balls attached to his body, so he wasn't planning on asking, but he hoped the two of them would get their shit together before Carlyle attacked. They'd need to be a united front when it happened because otherwise, there was a chance they wouldn't win this time around.

That wasn't an outcome Marlow was willing to consider. They had to win the upcoming war, and they would. They'd lose everything if they didn't, and Marlow couldn't stand the thought. He finally had everything he could have ever wanted in his life. He wasn't giving it up without a fight.

But for now, he had nothing or no one to fight. It was time to focus on his relationship with Jarvis, which was why he was here. He understood Jarvis had to work, but he'd been doing too much of that lately, so he needed a distraction.

Marlow was happy to provide it.

He leaned down and grabbed Jarvis. Jarvis squeaked, but it was easy for Marlow to haul him into his arms. He didn't have to go far. He flopped into Jarvis's chair, then settled his mage in his lap.

Jarvis his cheeks were flushed, but he was smiling, and his eyes shone.

"You could have asked me to get up," he said.

"This was way more fun."

"For you, maybe."

"For both of us." Marlow kissed the edge of Jarvis's jaw.

Jarvis settled against Marlow's chest and kissed him on the lips. "Maybe it was," he murmured.

Jarvis felt perfect in Marlow's lap. Marlow hadn't come here to have sex in his office, and he was pretty sure Jarvis would be scandalized by that offer. There were too many dangerous things in the room that could go boom if they knocked into it, so it was better for everyone if they kept their lovemaking in a safer room. That didn't mean they couldn't spend time together, and *that* was why Marlow was here. He just wanted to feel his mage in his arms, to cuddle with him and spend time with him. He didn't want to waste any more time without Jarvis.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long. Someone knocked on the door, and Marlow buried his face against Jarvis's neck while Jarvis answered.

"Yes?"

The door opened. Ansley walked in, looking shaky. In a flash, Jarvis was out of Marlow's lap and rushing toward his friend.

"What happened? What did you do?"

He guided Ansley toward one of the chairs on the other side of his desk, and Ansley flopped into it. He took a moment to breathe and closed his eyes, and Marlow worried that something had happened.

“I tried casting the spell again,” Ansley said in a tiny voice.

Marlow was tempted to peek into the hallway to look for Parker. It was odd that he hadn't been with Ansley.

“I didn't tell Parker I was going to do it,” Ansley added. “He's been hovering, and while it's true that I'm exhausted, I need to do this. So I waited for him to go downstairs to grab a snack. I already had everything ready, and I cast the spell.”

“Did you find the shield?”

“No. I tried looking for Alvin, but nothing. I even used the world map just in case he was in another country, but it's like he vanished from the surface of the earth.”

Marlow had made a point of learning about the two missing shields, so he knew Alvin was Keylon's shield. He had no idea what the rest of the conversation meant, though. Was Alvin dead? Maybe that was why Ansley couldn't find him. Or maybe Carlyle had already gotten to him and was shielding him.

Ansley rubbed his face with both his hands. “It's almost as if the spell isn't working anymore.”

“I don't think that's possible,” Jarvis said gently. “As long as you did what you did last time, it's supposed to work.”

“But it didn't. I didn't find Alvin.”

“Maybe you're just too tired. Parker isn't wrong, Ansley. I understand why you feel responsible and why you want to find the other shields, but it won't do anyone any good if you overwork yourself. You need to rest. Casting a spell in secret isn't the right way to do that. I'm sure the spell is working just fine and that you can't find Alvin because you're too tired to do a good job. Maybe you could teach one of us to cast it.”

Ansley looked like he wanted to believe what Jarvis was saying, and he wasn't the only one. Marlow couldn't consider the alternative.

“It would take too long for the rest of you to master that spell. It's my specialty, not yours.”

“We could try.”

“No. I’ll do it. I just have to rest.”

There had to be a good reason that Ansley couldn’t find Alvin, and the explanation Jarvis had just given was the only one Marlow wanted to consider.

Keylon could get another shield, but it was clear he didn’t want to. He’d been waiting to find Alvin for decades, and Marlow could only imagine the heartbreak if something had happened to his shield while they were separated. So far, they’d been lucky. Even though none of them remembered their mages or anything else from the past, Parker, Marlow, Devon, and Meyer were safe.

Hopefully, Alvin was, too, and the only reason they couldn’t find him was that Ansley wasn’t up to casting the spell.

Chapter Fifteen

The fight between Ansley and Parker when Parker found out what Ansley had done had been epic. Everyone in the castle had heard them, even though they'd been locked in their room. Thankfully, things were back to normal between them. Parker had admitted that he was hovering too much and that Ansley knew what he was doing and should be allowed to do it, while Ansley had admitted that he was exhausted and needed to rest before hurting himself. So Ansley had promised that he'd ease away from magic for a week or two, depending on how he felt, and Parker had promised to listen to him when he said he was all right.

Jarvis wasn't sure how long that would last, but seeing that they were making things work was good.

The same went for him and Marlow. Jarvis had been used to working every day, most of the day. Before getting Marlow back, he hadn't had a reason not to. It wasn't easy to change his habits, but he was trying. He was spending less time in his office and more time with Marlow, Jason, and the other mages. They'd get through this by being united. They were a family, and they needed to behave like one instead of isolating themselves and working on things on their own.

Which was why Jarvis was in front of Keylon's office. He quickly knocked, then opened the door when Keylon told him to. Jarvis's office was neat and well-kept. It reflected his personality, just like Keylon's office reflected his.

It was chaos.

But it was chaos Keylon knew and was happy about. He looked at ease in the middle of it and waved Jarvis closer to his desk.

Jarvis couldn't see an inch of the wooden surface under the computer, many dirty mugs, dozens of open books, and even more scattered pens.

"Did you need something?" Keylon asked.

Jarvis gingerly pushed a dirty plate away from the edge of the desk. "I think we need to find Emory."

Keylon grimaced. "I've been trying."

"I know. It's not easy, which is why I'm here." Jarvis reached into his pocket and took out the bracelet he'd found while digging around in the attic. "This was his."

Seeking spells weren't easy, but they were easier if you had something that belonged to the person you were looking for. It was one of the reasons it was so hard to find Carlyle. Jarvis had nothing of his because Carlyle had made sure of that, and he was shielding himself. Emory wouldn't be able to shield himself unless he was living with another mage, and Jarvis hoped he wasn't. They might need him to fight Carlyle, even though it would be uncomfortable to ask that of him.

Keylon's eyes widened, and he snatched the bracelet from Jarvis's fingers. "How do you know it belongs to Emory?"

"Because I bought it for him. It was his birthday, and his old bracelet had just broken. I asked Carlyle if he was going to buy him a new one, but he waved me off, so I did. I know Emory wore it for a while. I'm not sure how it ended up in my old things, but I'm glad it did."

Keylon pushed away the books on his desk to find a map half buried under them. He dug it out, then placed it on top of the mess. He clutched the bracelet in his fingers and closed his eyes, and Jarvis held his breath.

It took a little while for something to happen. Keylon's specialty was explosions, not seeking spells. Jarvis could have offered to do it for him, but he had the same chances as Keylon of finding Emory. He opened portals, Keylon made things explode, and Ansley located people. Of course, all three could cast other spells, but it was always harder.

But Keylon managed anyway. A flash of light made Jarvis blink, and the smell of something burning filled the room. Keylon snapped his eyes open and frantically looked around as if he expected to have set something on fire, and he had, but in a good way.

There was a burned spot on the map.

Keylon and Jarvis leaned over it. It was a world map, so they didn't have a precise location, but they knew Emory was in Switzerland.

“What the fuck is it with people?” Keylon complained. “First Florida, where it's hot as hell, and now Switzerland?”

“What do you have against Switzerland?”

“It's cold.”

“I don't think it's that cold at the end of September.” So it was a good thing they hadn't found Emory in January. Keylon would probably have refused to go find him.

Keylon rolled his eyes, then pushed away the map and started digging for another one.

Jarvis sighed. This would take a while, and not because Keylon was unable to cast the spell. While Keylon worked on finding more maps and casting the spell, Jarvis took out his phone and sent out a group text. He told everyone that they'd located Emory and to come to Keylon's office, and by the time they were there, crowding into the space, Keylon had burned a hole into a map of Switzerland. He was scowling, but he was also bouncing in his chair. He might not like the thought of going to Switzerland, but he was excited about getting Emory back. He wasn't one of their shields, but he'd been a friend, and they all missed him.

“He's in Lucerne.”

Jarvis had no idea where that was, just that it was in Switzerland. “Can you be more specific?”

Keylon's eyes gleamed. “I'm going to be so freaking specific that I'll find his bedroom.”

He didn't quite find Emory's bedroom, but he managed to find a specific place where he thought Emory was living. That was good enough for Jarvis, who was ready to open a portal to go right now. He was excited but also worried about how Emory would take their arrival. Jarvis had abandoned him.

Hopefully, Emory would be able to forgive him for that and for not helping him with Carlyle.

Jarvis wasn't sure that opening a portal in Emory's living room would be useful when it came to that, but at this point, he was willing to try anything. The problem was that everyone wanted to come along. It had been the better option when they'd been looking for their shields, but Jarvis didn't feel it was necessary when it came to Emory. Carlyle had evidently discarded him long ago, and he wouldn't have a reason to try to get him back.

"That doesn't mean Emory isn't going to attack you," Parker pointed out when Jarvis explained.

"Why would he attack us?"

"You don't know whose side he was on. You said that he vanished before Carlyle attacked us in that final fight. It could be because Carlyle hurt him, but also because they had an alternative plan. You don't know what happened, and you won't until you talk to him. He might be a good guy but also a bad guy, and I'm not willing to risk anyone here."

"Jarvis and I are going," Marlow declared. "You can come too, Parker. Emory is a dragon shifter, so he'll probably be more comfortable with us. Since he's not one of our shields, the mages except for Jarvis can stay home."

"Parker should stay with Ansley," Meyer said. "I'll come with you and Jarvis."

Jarvis looked at Tyne to see if he was going to protest or say he was coming along, too, but he didn't. He stared at Meyer for a moment before turning toward the window.

That was that, then. Jarvis, Marlow, and Meyer would be going to Emory. Everyone else would be staying home.

* * * *

Marlow was nervous. He hadn't known what to expect from Devon and Meyer when they'd gone to find them, but the two

had been the shields of people he liked and trusted. Even though they'd been confused and wary, in the end, they belonged with them, and they'd been able to feel that.

Emory was entirely unknown, except for the fact that he'd been Carlyle's shield, and Marlow wouldn't trust Carlyle further than he could throw him in his human form. Jarvis seemed to believe that Emory would be on their side, but Marlow wasn't too sure about it, which was why he'd insisted on coming along.

Jarvis wouldn't let anyone else do this. He felt responsible because he'd been Carlyle's master, and he'd been close to both him and Emory. As far as Marlow was concerned, he had nothing to blame himself for, but Marlow understood that sometimes that kind of feeling wasn't rational. Jarvis was convinced he should have seen that something was wrong and that he could have stopped Carlyle if he had, but Marlow wasn't sure about that. He might only have met Carlyle once, and he still didn't know all the details of what had happened during that final fight, but Carlyle had struck him as someone who would do anything to get what he wanted. Unfortunately for everyone, Carlyle wanted power and to kill the mages and their shields.

Jarvis turned to Marlow and Meyer. "Ready?"

Meyer grunted while Marlow nodded. The others had followed them into the courtyard and watched from a distance. Jarvis wasn't sure he'd be able to keep the portal open considering the distance, and everyone was anxious about what would happen. Hopefully, Carlyle wouldn't be waiting for them on the other side. If he was, Jarvis would have to quickly open another portal, and while he was more than capable of doing so, it would take some effort.

That was where Marlow and Meyer came in. They'd be there to protect Jarvis and have his back so that in case they needed to run, he'd have the time and space he needed to make sure they could. Marlow had done his best, training with Tyne and Parker, but he wasn't a fighter, or rather, he hadn't been in a long time. He couldn't remember what his life had been before, and he couldn't remember how to fight.

But for Jarvis, he'd do this and a lot more.

Jarvis raised his hands. Marlow could hear him mutter something, then, a few seconds later, a portal shimmered into existence in front of them. The light blue sparks swirled for a moment as if settling. Then it became larger and larger until there was enough space for a grown man to step through.

Marlow peered on the other side. When he'd been told that Emory was in Switzerland, he'd expected tall trees and a lot of green, and he wasn't disappointed. He could see a small house in the distance and a bigger structure closer by. There was no one to be seen, but that wouldn't mean they'd be alone. Emory was there somewhere, and there was no way to know how he'd react to their presence.

"I'll go first," Meyer said.

Marlow probably should have felt guilty about it, but he didn't argue. He stayed back with Jarvis, hovering next to him as Meyer stepped through the portal. Meyer disappeared from view, and Marlow turned to Tyne.

He didn't know what was happening between those two, but it was almost as if Tyne wasn't happy to have his shield back. Maybe he wasn't. Marlow didn't know how their relationship had been before the spell, and he doubted either of them would tell him if he asked. Hopefully, they'd find a way to fix it. The tension had been running high in the castle since Meyer and Devon had moved in, and Marlow wanted to finally be able to relax. It would be impossible if he continued to expect a fight to break out at every turn.

But for once, Tyne didn't look angry. He looked worried and was staring at the portal as if he expected something to happen to Meyer. Marlow hoped that meant that eventually they'd figure things out. If they couldn't, it might be time for an intervention.

Meyer reappeared, and Marlow moved his attention to him. He gestured at Marlow and Jarvis to step through, and they did. Marlow went slightly ahead, ignoring the way Jarvis rolled his eyes. He might feel like they were exaggerating, but

Marlow didn't. If anything were to happen to his mage, he'd never forgive himself.

As soon as he was on the other side of the portal, he looked around. He'd been right about there being a lot of green and trees. That wasn't the only thing he could see, though.

The portal Jarvis had opened was right in front of a wooden structure with a wide roof. It looked like a barn, not like something anyone would live in. It only had two doors, one of them double, and no windows. Right behind it was a lake. The sky was blue, and the sun shone on the surface of the water. Marlow had no idea what time it was here, but if he had to guess, he'd say late afternoon.

To the left of the barn structure and slightly behind it was a brown and white house. The two buildings were separated by a tree and a patch of flowers and plants, but a path led from one to the other. The house was smaller than the barn, but Marlow could vaguely see another structure right behind it, maybe a shed. The house had many windows, along with a chimney and a small wood of healthy-looking trees behind it. The air was fresh and cool, and Marlow closed his eyes for a second.

He could understand why Emory was here. All he could hear was the sound of birds singing in nature. It was peaceful, and in a way, he was sorry they were about to bother Emory. If he was here, it was probably to get away from everything that had happened. In his place, Marlow wouldn't be happy to be pulled right back into it.

Jarvis and Marlow looked at each other. Marlow took one of Jarvis's hands, and together, they headed toward the house. Marlow couldn't hear any noise coming from the barn, so if Emory was home, he was probably there.

Sure enough, the small front door opened before they could reach it. A man stood there, drying his hands with a towel and staring at them. Jarvis stumbled, and his breath hitched, and Marlow knew they'd found Emory.

He hadn't doubted Jarvis or Keylon one second. He'd known they would find this man, but he wasn't sure what to

think of him. He didn't know him yet, and he hoped he wouldn't regret coming here.

"I knew you'd find me eventually," Emory said when they reached him.

Jarvis looked like he wasn't sure what to say. "We should have done so a long time ago. I'm sorry."

Emory shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I know Carlyle enough to be sure you had better things to deal with."

"Still. You were my friend."

Emory stared at Jarvis for a second. "I hope I still am. Come on in."

Marlow and Meyer glanced at each other. Meyer looked like he didn't want to go in, but Marlow felt they didn't have a choice. They were here to get answers and possibly help, and the only way to get that was to do what Emory asked. Besides, he didn't seem like a bad person. He hadn't told Jarvis to fuck off and never come back, and he hadn't attacked them.

Jarvis didn't even hesitate. He walked ahead, pulling Marlow along.

They entered the house. It was pretty, with a lot of wood and white. It wasn't a place where Marlow could imagine himself living, maybe because he was used to the castle's stone walls, but he liked it. It felt like a home, and from the knickknacks and state of things, it was clear Emory had lived here for a while.

Instead of guiding them to the living room, he took them to a kitchen. A pot of coffee was on the table, and Emory took out four mugs from the cupboard before sitting at the table. Marlow and Jarvis followed his lead, but Meyer hovered behind the last chair, looking like he expected Emory to attack at any second.

Emory stared at him with a cocked head. "What's going on? Do you not trust me because I was Carlyle's shield? You should know better. We were friends, and I had nothing to do with Carlyle's actions."

“We know what he did to us, but we’re not aware of anything he did to you,” Marlow said. He dropped Jarvis’s hand and leaned forward. “During the last fight, he cast a spell that took all of us away from our mages. He also took our memories, and for the past few decades, the mages have been looking for us while we’ve been trying to make sense of a life we couldn’t remember. I might have known you before, but I have no memories of it. Meyer doesn’t, either. But we’re here to talk and ask for your help.”

* * * *

Emory looked the same. His hair was a little longer but still brown. His brown eyes still held the same intelligence Jarvis had seen there in the past. His body was more muscled, but for the rest, he was the Emory that Jarvis remembered.

His eyes went wide after Marlow explained what had happened. He turned his attention to Jarvis, and Jarvis knew he’d have to explain once again.

“Is that what he did?” Emory whispered.

Jarvis nodded. “Our shields weren’t there when we woke up after that fight. We knew we’d managed to trap Carlyle in the stone, but that was gone, too, and we were never able to recover it.”

Emory raised his hands. “I don’t have it. You know I was already gone by the time you fought with him.”

“I do. You’d been gone for weeks, and no one knew what happened to you. No one knows even now.”

Emory sighed and looked out the window by the table. “I was in a bad state. I was too weak to do anything, let alone help you fight him.”

Jarvis had known Carlyle would have done something. It was the only reason Emory hadn’t been helping. “What did he do?”

Emory never looked at Jarvis or the dragons as he spoke. “He took my magic. What he could get from me through our bond wasn’t enough anymore, and he needed more to defeat you. He sucked all of it right out of me.” Emory finally looked up. “I was sick for weeks, and the people taking care of me weren’t sure I would survive. I did, but I was only half the man I was before. I was never able to shift again after what he did. The only thing he left me is a long life, and I hate him for that.”

Jarvis’s eyes prickled with tears. He could only imagine what it had been like for a dragon shifter to be unable to shift. His brain was already thinking about the problem and what he could do to fix it, but he didn’t know if Emory would want him to.

“He’s back,” Jarvis gently explained. “I don’t know if you felt the wave of magic, but he was let out of the stone, and he’s hunting our shields. He almost got Marlow.”

“But Marlow is here.”

“He is, but we’re still missing two shields, and even if we find them, we can’t be sure we’ll be able to defeat him. It was almost impossible last time.”

Emory stared at Jarvis for a moment, and Jarvis wondered if he was trying to read him. He wouldn’t be surprised. Emory didn’t seem to be bitter or angry, at least not with him. All of his bitterness was for Carlyle, which was understandable, considering what Carlyle had done to him. Jarvis wanted to promise they would help Emory, but he didn’t know if they could.

“I don’t know if I can help you. I’m not a dragon anymore. I’m not a shield,” Emory said.

“You don’t have to be. First and foremost, you’re a friend, and I’m sorry for not trying to find you earlier. I should have.”

“I didn’t expect you to. I thought you were living somewhere, happy with your shield. We might have been friends, but Carlyle was the link between us. I was just happy to know he was gone.”

“But he’s back.”

Emory smiled slowly. It gave Jarvis the creeps, even though he was pretty sure the smile was for Carlyle, not him.

“Which means I can finally get revenge,” Emory said. “I’m in. I don’t know if I can do anything, but I want to be there when you kick his ass again. I want him to see that even though he tried to kill me, I survived, and I’m still just as strong as I was before.”

Jarvis didn’t know if revenge was the best idea in this situation, and he didn’t know if Emory would be able to do anything to help them, but he wasn’t going to refuse. Besides, Jarvis wanted to keep an eye on him. He didn’t know if he’d ever stop feeling guilty about abandoning him, and he had a new mission in life along with getting rid of Carlyle.

He’d find a way to give Emory his dragon back.

Epilogue

Marlow checked his reflection in the mirror one last time. For a moment, he wondered if he should have put on a tie. It wasn't him, but maybe his family would expect it. They knew the old him, Raleigh, and they'd have certain expectations, even though both Jarvis and Martha had been clear that Marlow wasn't Raleigh.

Marlow couldn't even imagine what they'd gone through and what they were still going through. That was why when Martha had asked if at least Marlow's closest family could visit, he hadn't been able to say no. He *wanted* them to visit. Now might not be the best moment since Carlyle was gunning for them, but Marlow didn't want to allow Carlyle to ruin his life a second time. He'd already taken too much from him. Marlow would retake everything he'd lost, and seeing his family was another step in that direction.

Two hands landed on his shoulders, and Jarvis squeezed. "You look perfect. Remember, they already love you."

"They love Raleigh," Marlow grumbled.

"I can't deny that, and I know it won't be easy for them. But you've talked to them a few times over the phone, and they're trying their best. They already know you're not Raleigh, even though I'm sure he's who they'll see in the beginning. You just have to give them a chance."

"I will." Marlow wanted nothing more. The world might be crazy, dangerous, and who knew what else, but he was safe in the castle, and even with everything happening around him, he was happy.

He was also terrified and anxious, but he didn't want to dwell on those feelings. He'd deal with it and with whatever the world and Carlyle threw at him after meeting his family.

Jarvis kissed Marlow's cheek. "I told them I'd open the portal around this time, so they're probably waiting."

"We should go then."

Jarvis nodded, and he and Marlow looked at each other in the mirror.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t feel up for it,” Jarvis murmured.

“I don’t know what I feel up to, but I know I *have* to do this. I deserve it, and so do they.”

Jarvis stared for a moment before nodding. “Let’s go.”

Even though Marlow was tempted to hide in the bedroom he now shared with Jarvis, he allowed his mage to guide him out. They made their way downstairs, where things had been set up for the small family reunion. Most of the mages and the shields were out of sight, knowing that Marlow would need some time alone with his family, but he kind of wished they could be here to act as a buffer.

His meeting with his family was odd for the shields. Marlow hadn’t asked, but surely, they all had an old clan, too. He knew about Parker because they’d talked about it. Parker’s clan hadn’t been a great place to grow up, and he wasn’t planning to see anyone from there again, but his situation differed from Marlow’s.

Marlow’s clan had been loving. It still was, and Martha had told him she wished she could be there. She had to stay with the clan because they were still searching for their lost dragon, and it was safer for her to stay away since she was the clan leader, but eventually, they’d see each other again.

Marlow and Jarvis walked to the courtyard. Marlow was surprised to see Emory sitting on a bench there, but he got to his feet as soon as he noticed them. Jarvis let go of Marlow’s hand and started opening the portal, and Marlow immediately turned his attention to Emory.

“I’ll go,” Emory said.

“You don’t have to. There’s just going to be a lot of blubbering and crying.”

Emory’s lips curled into a smile. “You’ll be fine. They love you.”

Marlow wanted to ask Emory about his clan and his family, but he didn't dare. After learning what Carlyle had done to the man he was supposed to love, everyone was walking on eggshells around Emory. They were afraid of hurting him, and it couldn't be easy for him to live around dragon shifters when he couldn't shift, or to see the couples getting together. He'd had this kind of bond with Carlyle once. He'd never get it back, and he probably couldn't be a shield to another mage because he couldn't shift.

The sound of voices made Marlow turn. Jarvis was standing by the portal, and a couple had walked through it. They were with a younger man, and the man was staring at Marlow. The couple was talking to Jarvis, but Marlow quickly drew their interest, too.

He swallowed and turned back to Emory, but he was gone.

Marlow frowned. He hadn't talked much to Emory, but no one had. It was almost as if he felt he didn't have a place at the castle, but no one else felt that way. Marlow would have to do something about it, but not right now.

Right now, he needed to meet his family. He needed to hug his parents and to tell them about Jason, who was waiting for them inside. He was probably vibrating with excitement, which wouldn't be great for Thorne, who'd volunteered to keep an eye on him until Marlow felt ready to introduce him to his parents.

Everything would be all right. It had to be, even though Carlyle was still out there. For now, he didn't matter. The only people who did were in the courtyard and the castle, and as Marlow stepped toward his parents, he knew that Jarvis had been right.

No matter what happened, they were in this together and would win.

* * * *

Jarvis watched as Marlow came closer. He was hesitant in the way he moved, but Jarvis suspected that wouldn't last long. Marlow was nervous, but as soon as he realized that his parents loved him even though he wasn't the son they'd raised, he'd relax and finally get what he wanted.

A family. A place to call home. Someone to love.

Marlow's family was the last piece of the puzzle, and it was finally complete.

To Jarvis's surprise, it wasn't either of Marlow's parents who broke the silence. Instead, it was Ferguson, who stumbled forward and threw himself into Marlow's arms. Marlow's cousin had been young when Marlow had been taken from him. He'd always had a kind of hero worship when it came to Marlow, so maybe, it wasn't such a surprise to see him react like this.

Not for Jarvis, anyway. Marlow, on the other hand, was stunned. He turned wide eyes to Jarvis while awkwardly patting Ferguson's back. Ferguson clung to him, and while Jarvis couldn't tell if he was crying, he was ready to bet he was.

"He missed you so badly," Marlow's mother said. Her voice trembled, and she couldn't seem to look away from Marlow.

"I don't know what to say," Marlow croaked.

Olga stepped forward. "You don't have to say anything. We've already said everything we needed to say on the phone, and we know what you've been through. Just let us hold you. Let us love you and get to know the new you."

"And our grandchild," Irving, Marlow's father, said. He was smiling, but his eyes were wet.

This was going to be a cry fest.

But it didn't matter. Even if they never managed to defeat Carlyle, even if they had to hide in the castle for the rest of their lives, it didn't matter. Jarvis had Marlow back, and being with him was like being able to touch the sky. Everything else was an afterthought, but Jarvis had made himself the promise that now that he had Marlow again, he needed to fight harder.

Carlyle was too dangerous to be allowed to roam the earth, which meant that Jarvis would need to put a stop to what he was doing. He wasn't sure he would have been able to do so before, but now, he was.

Because he wasn't doing it alone, and he never would.

About the Author

Catherine is the creator of several series, most of them paranormal, including the Whitedell Pride Series and the Gillham Pack Series. While she graduated in translation, she decided to go the writer's way because it was more fun to create her own stories and characters.

She's been living in Italy for more than twenty years, but she's a daughter of the North—Belgium to be precise—and she misses it so much that she's already planning to move back.

She loves pizza—probably too much—her son, her pets, and of course, books. She sneaks some reading time into her schedule every time she has five minutes free from writing, demands from her various pets and son, and lastly, housework.

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