



DRAGON

WINGS 'N' WANDS II

A J SHERWOOD AND
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Wise

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RISE

Wings 'n' Wands 2

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Vasily smiled at the man in front of him, helpless to do otherwise—the man was far too charming, damn handsome, and *familiar* in an odd way. This dream man was slender with lean muscle, and his nearly black shaggy hair fell into his enormous chestnut brown eyes. Vasily found him to be incredibly cute. Even as he stood there, he radiated a certain amount of energy. Like he was between two different tasks and ready to try doing both at once. It wasn't the first time Vasily had dreamed of this man, but it was the first time he'd seen him so clearly, felt him so distinctly.

“There you are,” the man said with such obvious delight it felt like the smile gave a sucker punch right to Vasily's feels. “I'm finally awake enough to feel you. Where are you now?”

He was so charming, and this was only a dream anyway, so Vasily didn't mind answering the question. The man had been like this before in the other dreams—floating about in midair, between land and sky, with Vasily in human form.

“I'm in Brazil. Near the beach. Why?”

“Oh good, you're not too far. You need to come find me.” The man came in closer, taking Vasily's hands in a firm grip, his expression earnest. “I can only count on the two of you. Come find me.”

Vasily felt his dragon lift its head, protective instincts engaging. “Are you in danger?”

“I will be if you don't get me out of here soon. I don't have the ability to do it on my own.” The man rolled his eyes. “Gods above, I told them *not* to go with this design, but did they listen to me? And now we're all suffering for it. You remember the path I've shown you before?”

“Mostly. Are you leading me to you?”

“I’m certainly trying. I’ll start again from the beginning. Make sure you memorize the path.”

The dream abruptly shifted. The man was gone, nowhere to be seen, and that alarmed Vasily to no end. He felt the fear take root in his bones. He frantically spun, looking about, heart clawing its way up his throat.

Shhhh, that smooth tenor voice whispered in his ear. *I’m right here. Pay attention. I can’t maintain this for much longer tonight. I’ll show you where to go.*

With that voice in his ear, Vasily settled, assured that the dreamer was still with him.

The dream shifted again, the location spinning and blurring around him in a dizzying array of greens and blues until he was in a location he knew. The ruins of the Sousa Clan. Only it didn’t look like it was now, but more...intact? Pristine? Like it must have looked hundreds of years ago when the inhabitants still lived there. Streetlights lined all of the roads, glowing faintly. No people to be seen, but the impression of people was there, like they were just out of sight inside the buildings. From this aerial view he could see that the buildings actually did form a very large spiral that ended in the central courtyard.

Vasily had never seen it in that condition, so how could his imagination picture this all so clearly? He felt like he’d stood here before, had been led here before, but was only now remembering it clearly. How many times had he had this dream and only retained fuzzy impressions of it?

He had no time to question. It felt like he was dropped right over the center of the city, oriented northward, and then he was flying through the sky. The night air was cool over his skin, the feeling pleasant, although it felt strange to be in human skin while flying like this. Was this how the mages felt when flying with them?

Then something happened—an impact against his chest, not hurtful, but jarring. Vasily blinked awake, startled by the

sensation. Oh, Luka was restless. He must have bumped against him.

Wait, shit, the dream had abruptly ended. Dammit, come back! Vasily had more questions than answers right now.

Ugh, it was just getting to the part where he actually remembered something, too. He hated dreams that toyed with him like this. And what had that dream been, anyway? It had felt so distinctly real. Real enough he could almost feel the traces of moist night air lingering on his skin.

Luka stirred again in his sleep, muttering under his breath. Such a sleep talker, this one. He'd always been one to talk in his sleep. Vasily looked at him fondly, remembering some nights when he'd taken advantage of it and gotten Luka to agree to all sorts of things. Like getting a credit card and maxing it out on video games. That had been a memorable one. Luka had chased him around the beach for hours, irate but secretly laughing, too.

“—know where that is,” Luka muttered, huffing as if in frustration.

Wait. What? Vasily turned in the bed and paid better attention to his lover. “Luka, know where what is?”

“The man.” He sighed, instinctively burrowing in closer to Vasily's chest. “Go north.”

“He wants you to go north?”

“Mmm.”

Shit. Holy shit, what was this? Was Luka dreaming the exact same dream Vasily had just woken up from?

Urgency took hold of him, a strange urgency he'd rarely felt before. For some reason, Vasily absolutely had to have the answer. He leaned in closer. “What else did he say?”

“Tired of...” Luka grimaced.

Dammit, he better not be waking up right now. Vasily resisted the urge to shake him, as that would have quite the contrary effect. Instead he tried lightly stroking Luka's long

hair, hoping to soothe him back into sleep. “Luka, stay asleep. Where is the man?”

“The lake.” Luka grimaced again and then blinked, eyes barely fluttering open. He tilted his head back to look at Vasily. “Whatzit?”

Vasily flopped back onto the pillow, groaning in frustration. “For once, I want you to sleep talk and instead you wake up.”

“What?” Luka sounded like sleep still glued his mouth together. “Were you trying to convince me to go buy a castle in Ireland again?”

That had been one of their funnier sleep-talk conversations. “No, dammit, I was trying to get you to talk about the man.”

“What man?”

The honest bewilderment in his voice promised more frustration. Vasily already knew the answer, unfortunately, but he felt compelled to ask anyway. “Luka. Do you have any memory of what you were just dreaming?”

“Uhhh...you’re going to be mad if I say no, aren’t you?”

Vasily threw an arm over his eyes and sighed, already resigned. Luka had never been the type to remember his dreams in the morning, which did make teasing him fun, but right this moment, it gave Vasily nothing more than stomach burn.

The mattress shifted as Luka came up on one elbow. “Yup, you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

“You’ve got grump face on.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’d prefer you fucking me over being grumpy. All right, what did I say in my sleep?”

Luka clearly would not let this go. Vasily gave up but kept his arm over his eyes. Just because he felt like it, no other

reason. “I think you were dreaming what I was dreaming.”

A pregnant pause. “I love you to pieces, but I don’t think that lets us share dreams.”

“Trust me, I know. You dream weird shit.”

“You’re never going to let me live it down that I said snake penises in my sleep, are you?”

“Never, but that’s beside the point.” He lowered his arm so he could turn his head, meeting Luka’s eyes levelly. He needed his lover to understand that right now, Vasily was completely serious. “I dreamed of a man who was happy to see me. He said I was one of two people who could get him out.”

Luka’s expression sobered, brows drawing together over those ice blue eyes. “Get him out from where?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t explain that part. He said he had limited time, for some reason, and wanted to show me where he was. I feel like this dream has repeated a few times, but this is the first time I’m remembering it distinctly.” Vasily became more earnest as he explained, hoping beyond hope that this time, for once, Luka might remember some part of a dream. “He started me at the Sousa Clan ruins, in the sky above them, then flew me north. I recognized the first part of the journey—we’ve flown that area before. Then you turned in your sleep, and I woke up.”

Luka stayed propped up on one elbow, that brilliant mind of his churning with this information. “Okay. What did I say that made you think I dreamed the same?”

“It started with you saying you knew where ‘that’ was. Then I asked you questions, like where what is. You said ‘the man.’ That he wanted you to go north.”

“The same direction you were flying in the dream.” Luka looked away, blindly staring into a corner of their room, still thinking hard. “Did I say anything else?”

“The lake.” Vasily watched him, almost holding his breath.

“Was that all I said?”

“Unfortunately. You woke up at that point.”

“Do you know what I meant by lake?”

“No idea. It’s why I tried to get you to go back to sleep.” Yup, he could see it from Luka’s expression, his lover had absolutely no clue what the dream had been. “You don’t remember a thing. Do you.”

“Not a damn thing. And yet what you’ve said sounds familiar. Like some part of me already knew that information.”

Oh? Now that sounded promising. Vasily went from very frustrated back to hopeful. “Then you see what I mean? That I think we were dreaming the same thing?”

“I do.” Luka turned his head so he could meet Vasily’s eyes again. “The details line up too precisely for it to be anything else. You said you’ve dreamed this before. How long?”

“Months, honestly. But they were so sporadic. I only had one, then a second one a month later. It wasn’t nearly as vivid as it was tonight, either.”

“Huh. Think hard, love. Did he say anything else?”

“Something about being awake enough to finally reach us? He spoke in the plural about who he was talking to.”

“Interesting.”

Vasily eyed his expression, knowing the way Luka’s mouth scrunched up very well. “That’s your ‘this is interesting but I have no idea what to do about it right now’ look.”

“I do not have that look,” Luka said, wrinkling his nose.

“You absolutely have that look. You wear it often when Sam gives you curveballs, too.”

“To be fair, that man exists to break my brain. What he knows, and how he thinks, sometimes defies human limitations. I’m so glad he’s Dimitri’s problem and not ours.”

“Preach. Okay, back on topic. If we’re dreaming the same thing, doesn’t that go into seer realm?”

“It does. Which is why I’m a little uneasy about this. My vote is, we try to figure out where the path is and where it

leads. The fact you started over Sousa Clan territory also tells me this might be very important. How, I don't know, but anything Sousa related should be figured out if we can."

"Yes, agreed." Sousa information was like gold nuggets. Perhaps even more precious than that. Not only for magical society as a whole, but for Sam in particular. Dimitri was not only clan, but Vasily's brother, and he'd do anything to protect and help Dimitri's mate. That went without saying. If they could figure out the secrets of the Sousa and repair Sam's broken core, then a lot of stress would be lifted off those two.

Luka left the bed to grab his phone, pulling up a notetaking app. "Okay, start from the beginning. You started at the Sousa Clan and headed north. North where? How far did you get in the dream?"

It was so like his intellectual Luka to take notes while the dream was still fresh in Vasily's mind.

"It wasn't straight north. More like northwest? I headed away from the coastline completely, over the mountains."

Luka flicked between screens, bringing up a map of South America. "Where?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Honestly, I was too focused on him, and there were whole sections of the land I didn't recognize. But I am sure of the direction."

"Any sign of slowing down?"

"No." Vasily was sure of that. "We were in full flight. If anything, gaining altitude. Like we had a long way to go still."

"Huh. There's a few large lakes along that path, but not many. Did it feel like you were going to fly over the Amazon?"

Vasily had to think about it for a second. "Yes...? I can't say why I feel that way, but we were definitely headed that direction at least. Luka, what are you making of this?"

"I don't know. I'm just trying to get facts down. I think we better ask Dimitri and Sam about this, though, come morning."

It didn't take a lot of math to put that equation together. "Dimitri because he knows the land along that route better, and Sam because it's Sousa."

"Yup." Luka saved the notes before putting his phone down on the nightstand with a soft clatter. Then he turned back, eyeing Vasily in an evaluating way. "It's still only one a.m. Can you go back to sleep?"

"I can try. Think I'll pick the dream back up if I do?"

"Doesn't hurt to hope for it."

Seemed like that was all they'd done over the years. Hope. Hope for mages to come back, hope for mates, hope they'd not be split apart when their mate came. Vasily was used to hope. Sometimes that hope was even realized in the best of ways. Luka was right—no harm in trying.

Vasily had a feeling, though, he wouldn't dream anything more tonight, which frustrated him. It was like watching a movie and being forced to stop ten minutes before the ending.

Well, maybe Dimitri and Sam could unravel this more in the morning. Even if he didn't dream anything else tonight. No sense worrying about it now.

He settled back on the bed, Luka cuddling against his chest. Vasily ran his fingers through Luka's white-blond hair, an action both of them found soothing. He deliberately closed his eyes and relaxed his body, but to no avail. Sleep eluded him completely, his mind whirling with possibilities and questions. In order: Who was this man appearing in their dreams? Why appear to him and Luka, of all people? And why did he keep leading them northward? What was it he needed specifically for them to do? Too many questions with only hints of answers that eluded him in dreams.

Dawn was very slow in coming.



Luka rubbed tired, bleary eyes. Neither he nor Vasily had gotten much sleep last night after discussing the dream they'd shared. He'd drifted in and out, but upon waking each time, he'd jolted up and looked to his lover stretched beside him, only to have Vasily shake his head. No new dreams.

Or at least, none of the strange man.

When Luka lowered his hands, he found a large mug of steaming coffee had appeared on the desk in front of him. "Oh, thank you, coffee fairy! How did you know I needed this more than oxygen and sex combined?"

Vasily snorted from where he stood on the other side of the desk. "Because no one knows you like I do."

That was the truth. Centuries together had peeled away all the facades and secrets. And that was even before Luka had realized Vasily was the reason his heart beat and his lips rose into a smile each day. He had initially been drawn to Vasily due to raw attraction. With his very tall, muscular build, angular features, and dark chocolate brown eyes, Vasily had been eye-catching in all the best ways. Luka was ever so glad now that the animalistic attraction had brought them together because he couldn't imagine not having Vasily in his life.

Holding the mug between both hands, he lifted it to his face and breathed in the rich aroma. Sometimes just the smell of hot coffee with a hint of sugar and a splash of hazelnut creamer was enough to get the wheels in his brain turning.

Not today.

This was a drink-the-entire-cup-and-possibly-get-a-second kind of morning.

“Were you able to locate Dimitri and Sam?” Luka asked after taking a sip of the hot liquid of life.

“Dimitri was inhaling his breakfast. I told him to come to the mission room when he finished chewing. I just missed Sam. Apparently the little mage snagged a muffin and ran off for some more testing and consults with the Abe Clan.” He perched his hip on the corner of the desk and placed his enormous travel mug next to Luka’s blue one. “Dimitri promised to shoot Sam a message to come here when he’s done.”

Luka grunted and turned his attention back to the computer screen in front of him. They’d taken over the tracker meeting room to begin their digging, though it wasn’t as if they’d needed to kick anyone out. Right now, the comfortable room was one of the few places in the clan compound that wasn’t completely overrun with dragons and mages.

Since the discovery of the Sousa Clan’s home nine months ago, the Valerii had opened their territory to not only the Burkhard fire dragons but also the Abe Mage Clan from the lost clans of the Sodalicum. More were still poking and prodding at King Rodrigo to let them visit. Everyone wanted to see the ruins or study the translated works of the Sousa that had been recovered so far. But it wasn’t Rodrigo they had to get past.

No, the main roadblock was Dr. Samuel Hunter, lead archaeologist on the Sousa discovery. He was guarding the site like a mother dragon protecting a clutch of eggs.

Not that Luka blamed him in the least. The mage with the broken core was on the verge of being made whole at last, if only they could unlock the key hidden within the Sousa’s copious notes. It also didn’t hurt that fixing Sam’s core meant fixing the broken magical cores of all the remaining Jaeggi mages.

“Go get comfy,” Luka said as he pulled up a detailed map of northern South America. He grabbed an electronic pen from the cluttered desktop while Vasily strolled over to the three enormous leather couches arranged in a U shape in front of a

wall of flat-screen monitors. On the largest of the TVs, Luka brought up a map and drew a red circle around the location of the Sousa Clan.

“So, you said the man had us start right here,” Luka said. “And we flew north.”

“Northwest,” Vasily corrected. “Now that I think of it, we definitely went over the Amazon.”

“Okay, northwest.” As he spoke, Luka drew one line on the computer screen that started from the Sousa site and went more west than north. Then he drew a second line that had the same starting point but was more north, creating a cone that encompassed chunks of Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.

“Oh fuck no.” Dimitri groaned as he walked in the door and took one look at the giant map on the wall. There was resignation in his pale blue eyes and something that may have been a quiver in his square jaw that spoke of despair. “Please, do not tell me this is your search area. Vasily mentioned you two were having some crazy dream and that you need to find a lake. There’s got to be thousands of lakes in that area, and that’s just the known ones. You’ve got millions of acres of rainforest in there, and probably countless undiscovered lakes hidden under the canopy.”

Luka poked his head out from behind the computer monitors set up on the desk and glared at the head of the trackers.

Vasily sat up from the couch and joined him in a good glower. “Unbunch your panties and get over here. It’s not that bad.” Vasily turned his attention back to Luka and flashed him a grin. “We can narrow the area. Move the bottom line up. I don’t think we were as far west as Peru or Ecuador.”

Snatching up the pen again, he erased the first line and redrew it so it hugged Colombia’s most western border.

“For the other line, move it west. Drop French Guiana and Suriname. No! Get rid of Guyana, too.”

Luka followed his instructions, redrawing the second line to make a smaller cone.

Oh, that was much better. The flight path had narrowed to a large chunk of Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela.

Dimitri huffed and dropped onto the sofa near Vasily. One booted foot thunked on the coffee table in front of him that was littered with magazines and wads of crumpled paper. “Okay, that’s better. Sort of.”

“What do you mean ‘sort of’?” Luka snapped. He shoved out of the rolling desk chair and marched over to stand near the TV screen with his hands on his hips. “That’s way more manageable.”

“Except for the fact that ninety percent of that is fucking rainforest!” Dimitri waved one hand at the map. “A flyover is only going to get us the lakes we can see that aren’t covered by the canopy. The only way we’re going to catch the hidden one is to go in on foot. It’s a lot of area to cover. Not to mention the magical creatures that call the rainforest home. I’d rather not stir up a bunch of boitatas and stompers if we can help it.”

Okay, so maybe that was a good point. The magical population near the Sousa Clan had gotten accustomed to dragons moving through the area. He wasn’t looking to disturb everything within the Amazon. That only drove them into the human populations and caused no end of problems.

“Do you remember anything else?” Dimitri asked.

Vasily glared at the screen while Luka swallowed down a sigh, wishing he could be of more help. But even after listening to Vasily describe the dream, he couldn’t recall a single fragment from his own. Things the dragon said sounded familiar, but he had nothing new to add.

“Not really. It was a weird sensation. I was flying in my human form. Everything was moving so fast, and it was so green below me, but I couldn’t tell how fast I was traveling or how far we’d gone.”

Dimitri grunted. “Because you’re not accustomed to flying as a human. Or maybe because dreams tend to warp things.”

Footsteps echoed down the hall a second before Sam popped into the tracker meeting room, a furrow already drawing his eyebrows together as his eyes swept over the three of them and then stuck on the map. A map that had his discovery in a big red circle.

“Do I even want to know what’s going on?” the archaeologist demanded as he pushed his glasses up on his nose. From the look of it, he had just stepped out of the shower, his brown hair still damp.

Dimitri tipped his head toward Sam and called out, “Vasily and Luka’s dreams are being haunted by the same guy who says they have to find him to save him.”

“He’s not haunting us. He’s not a ghost. I don’t know,” Vasily grumbled. “The man is trapped somewhere and he’s been appearing in our dreams for the past several months.”

Sam stared at Vasily for a second and then directed his gaze at Luka, one brow lifted in question.

Luka shrugged. “I don’t remember my dreams, but I talk in my sleep. The stuff Vasily describes from his dreams sounds familiar.”

“And we’re sure this isn’t, like, an evil mage trying to get you to free him from imprisonment?”

That got Dimitri to sit up and completely twist around on the couch. “What the...Have you been hanging out with Nikki again? That sounds like a very Nikki thing to ask.”

Crossing his arms, Sam sniffed and gave a one-shouldered shrug. “A little. A bunch of the mages got together last night to welcome the Burkhard mages who’d just arrived. Nikki was telling stories about their time with the old Jaeggi Clan.”

Nikki was...interesting. They were a bubble of bright energy, but they should also come with a warning that things tended to explode around them. Frequently.

Vasily pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “No, this isn’t some rogue mage or dragon or whatever telling lies. It’s a man. A handsome man who looks to be in his thirties with shaggy, longish brown hair and warm chestnut brown eyes. A nice voice too. Friendly and inviting.”

“Excuse me? Is there anything else going on in these dreams besides a little flying?” Luka demanded.

Vasily could tell Luka was teasing, so he gave it right back. “You mean to tell me you didn’t get to go skinny dipping with him in your dream? Is he flirting with you too?”

Luka did his best to look innocently surprised. “He is. But I can’t blame him. I am sex appeal on two legs.”

“Is he trying to lure you to his secret lair for some dragon nookie?”

“Oh, he didn’t try. We totally made it inside the cave, and we had this seed that was special—”

“Ewww, gross.” Vasily was still smiling, enjoying the banter, but he also sobered a little. “Seriously though, the man I remember from the dream is pretty amazing. I get the sense he is a very intelligent and capable mage. I dearly hope we find him soon so we can meet him.”

The familiar thought *I don’t* flashed across Luka’s mind, and he suppressed it by habit, though it was becoming harder and harder to ignore. To not think about the possibility of finding their mate—or only Vasily’s mate. To ignore the fear that lived inside him, stronger than the hope he always portrayed for Vasily.

“Okay, so he’s not evil,” Sam interjected, dragging his focus back to their main topic. “What’s that got to do with the Sousa Clan site?”

Luka blinked up at Vasily to see the dragon staring at him in concern. Luka managed to smile at him in reassurance. Regardless of mates, whether this mystery mage was one or not, he did need rescuing, and that was most important right now. Looking at Sam, he said, “That’s the starting point.”

“When he’s leading up to where he is, he always starts at the Sousa site. Except it’s different,” Vasily added.

Sam’s face scrunched up. “Different how?”

“New. Or rather, it looked like it was just built rather than the crumbling ruins we found.”

Sam was not an overly athletic guy. Sure, he’d trained to hike up a mountain, but he preferred his books and dusty artifacts over hiking and running.

But that did not stop the mage from vaulting over the back of the sofa and climbing across the coffee table to land in front of Luka and Vasily. “New? You mean like how it was five hundred years ago? You saw it when all the Sousa were alive? What did it look like? Did you see other people? Did you see their devices? Them casting magic?”

Sam was firing questions at them as fast as he could speak, each one coming out ragged and breathless because the mage wasn’t bothering to breathe. He was vibrating in his excitement.

Dimitri walked over and wrapped an arm around Sam’s waist, pulling him back a couple of steps. “Breathe, Sam-a-Lam. You gotta remember to breathe.”

“Who the hell needs air? This is more important! They saw the Sousa when they were alive. Or rather, dreamed it. But that still counts!”

Vasily shook his head and Luka had to bite his bottom lip to keep from laughing. He got Sam’s excitement, but the man looked like he was about to explode.

“I’m sorry, but it was only a flash of the place. There were some bright colors from woven fabrics and the buildings looked intact, but I don’t remember seeing any people,” Vasily explained. “We spent only a second there and then we were zooming out across the continent.”

“What about the man? His name. Did he tell you his name?”

“No, I don’t remember him saying his name.”

“What about his clothes? What was he wearing in your dream?”

Vasily reached up and shoved a hand through his dark brown hair, his lips flattening into a thin, hard line with thought. “Um...it’s fuzzy. But he was wearing this kind of long skirt that tied at the waist and a shirt that also tied to one side. It had interesting geometric designs along the hems. I mostly remember he had a lot of tattoos, especially along his arms. The shirt did not have sleeves, so they were very visible.”

A high-pitched squeal leaped from Sam and he broke free of Dimitri to launch himself at Vasily. He grabbed a handful of his shirt and lifted up on the tips of his toes. “Sousa! You’re actually talking to a living member of the Sousa!”

“What? How? How is that even possible?” Luka demanded. His heart had jumped into his throat. A sudden lightheadedness swept through him, forcing him to grab Vasily to steady himself. Was it even possible? The Sousa were supposed to be extinct. Lost centuries ago. How...how could they be talking to them in their dreams?

“I don’t know!” Sam admitted with a wild cackle. “But isn’t it brilliant? And possible. Totally possible. There are mages walking around here who were alive before the Dragon War. Why couldn’t he be alive still? It would probably mean he’s mated to a dragon, right? Unless the Sousa have some other technology that allowed them to vastly extend their lifespans.” Sam started pacing back and forth, his steps nearly as fast as the words tumbling from his lips. “I haven’t encountered any notes so far about any devices that extended their lives for centuries. Or anything showing how they could enter a person’s dreams. This is all so fascinating, but we need more information. So much more.”

The mage whirled on both of them, a single finger shooting out like an arrow. “What are you two doing awake? You should be asleep right now! What if this Sousa is trying to contact you? Go to bed immediately!”

“Sam, we couldn’t possibly sleep right now. It’s only nine in the morning,” Luka argued.

“Ah! Fine! I’ll go talk to Evora and the other mages. I bet they have a sleeping potion or an amulet we could use. If not, I’ll find a mallet and whack you both on the head.” Sam had barely finished talking before he was running out of the room and down the hall.

Dimitri sighed and shook his head. “I’ll get him to calm down.”

“And not hit us on the head?” Vasily drawled.

“We’ll see.” Dimitri paused and rubbed his jaw as he glanced back at the map one final time. “This would be a lot easier if you guys could remember exactly where he tried to take you.”

On that, Luka had to agree, but it wasn’t like his subconscious and conscious mind were actually communicating right now. Hopefully, if they dreamed of the man again, Vasily would remember something.



Vasily wasn't sure why his brain insisted on waking him up, but it was being very rude about it. Insistent bastard. He was all warm and comfortable, Luka snuggled in against him perfectly, so why the hell would he want to wake up?

Brain insisted. Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey.

With a growl that stayed in the back of his throat, he pried one eye open. He'd take a look around the room, establish that nothing was here, and then go back to sl—

There, at the foot of the bed, sat Sam.

“*Súka!*” Scrambling, he sat up, pulling the covers up as he did so. He was rather naked under the sheets since he and Luka had had some fun before falling asleep, and fuck no did he want Sam seeing all that. “Samuel! The hell!”

“How is it people only use my full name when they're excited or upset with me?” Sam shrugged this off, apparently meaning it as a rhetorical question. “Anyway, what do you remember?”

Vasily eyed the archaeologist perched on his bed with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Sam sat there cross-legged, with the air of a man who had been there for hours, a notebook in hand, pen poised over the paper. There was a wild light to his eyes that the glasses perched on his nose could not disguise.

Oh god. He'd somehow activated Geek Mode. He knew all too well from Luka what that meant. Sam would not rest until he had answers.

“How long have you been here?” he asked uneasily.

“Since one a.m. I wasn’t sure when Luka would start talking.”

He wiped a hand over his face. “*Zhizn’ ebet meya*. Dimitri should be ashamed that you can sneak out on him like this.”

A naughty smirk tilted up the corner of Sam’s lips. “Oh, there’s ways.”

And that was as much information as Vasily wanted to know, thanks for asking.

Insistent, Sam leaned in farther. “Now, what do you remember?”

He was absolutely not going to be interrogated while naked in his own bed. Vasily had limits. This was where he drew the line. He reached past Luka, snagging his phone off the nightstand. Time to call Dimitri. This was his problem child, not Vasily’s.

“You’re calling him, aren’t you.” Sam said this as a statement, like it was within the realm of his expectations.

“Damn right I am.”

Luka shifted under him, upset that Vasily was moving around so much. “The cock is a muscle,” he muttered, sounding irritated. “It must be exercised every day.”

What the hell was his lover dreaming about? Did he even want to know?

Sam regarded Luka with renewed interest.

Yeah, no, do not give that an opening either. Sam’s curiosity did not have limits in the worst sense. With one hand, he called up Dimitri. With the other, he shook Luka with a hand on his shoulder.

“Luka, wake up.” The phone rang and rang, but he expected that. Dimitri was no doubt sound asleep at this point.

Luka muttered something and tried turning, snuggling back into Vasily’s side.

Right, take two. “Luka, don’t you hear Sam?”

“I did,” Luka grumbled, eyes still firmly closed. “But I was confused because I had a thumb up my butt.”

Sam laughed so hard he almost went sideways off the bed.

Vasily lifted his eyes to the heavens and asked, with all seriousness, what did he have to kill to make this stop?

From the phone pressed to his ear came a voice that was half grumble, half snarl, and all irate dragon. “*What.*”

“Your man is in my room, sitting on my bed.”

“Zhizn’ ebet meya. *Why?*”

“He’s here to eavesdrop on Luka dreaming. Come get him right now.”

“*Two seconds.*”

Sam didn’t seem at all worried. Then again, Dimitri couldn’t stay mad at Sam for any real length of time, so...

Vasily focused on waking Luka up. On the fifth try, he finally got one eye open, peering up at Vasily like he’d suggested slaughtering kittens or something.

“Why,” he asked in a voice of doom, “are you trying to wake me up before birds are even properly awake?”

Oooh, a full sentence that made sense! Had he finally gotten Luka completely awake? “Sam’s here.”

Luka lifted his head off the pillow, spied the not-so-patient archaeologist, and his soul just about leaped out of his body. He made the same mad scramble for covers Vasily had and then froze, staring.

Sam was not to be deterred. “Quick, before you forget anything, what do you remember of your dream?”

Mouth open, Luka made a plaintive sound. Like he was trying to herd words together and failing.

Vasily rather felt the same way about it. First of all, way too early. Second, no coffee.

Without even knocking, Dimitri came right in, door almost bouncing off the wall under his force. His attention laser

focused on Sam, trajectory quickly oriented.

“I just wanted to ask questions!” Sam protested.

Dimitri leaned in and scooped him up, right into a bridal carry. “Sorry about this. Meet us for breakfast, though.”

So he still had to get up? Ugh, fine. At least Dimitri was promising him caffeine and food to tide him over. “Yeah, sure. Give us a few minutes.”

It took more than a few minutes, of course. Neither of them were morning people at this ungodly hour, so being coordinated enough to shower and find clothes? Something of a struggle. It took more like half an hour for them to join Sam and Dimitri in the big dining room.

Sam, at least, was sensible in waiting. He’d made coffee, tapioca crepes, and had toppings of melted cheese, chocolate, bananas, and strawberries to choose from. Food, yes, a much better start to the morning.

Vasily sat at the round table, reaching for the coffee. Luka didn’t so much sit as drop into the chair near his, also reaching for the coffee. Vasily deviated, poured Luka a cup first, then handed him the sugar before going back to pouring himself a cup.

Sam was halfway through a plate of crepes. Dimitri looked like he was on his second round, but that didn’t mean Sam wasn’t ready to leap back in.

“You’re awake now, right? What did you dream?”

“I don’t feel like we’re jumping into this conversation so much as storming the beach.” Luka sighed. “I’ll start. I remember nada.”

Sam waved this off like it was to be expected and the question wasn’t really aimed at Luka to begin with. “You didn’t say a word in your sleep, so either you were too deeply asleep to talk, or you didn’t dream of him last night.”

“It disturbs me you know that.”

“Well, why do you think I was at your bedside all night? Vasily, what did you dream?”

He took a gulp of coffee first, because that was priority, and only answered after. “The dream started much the same in a way. But this time, he didn’t start at the ruins.”

Luka, not contributing to the conversation, was already making him up a plate. “Vas, cheese or sweet?”

“Sweet. Thanks, love.” He accepted the plate, cutting into the crepe with a fork as he cast his mind back to the dream, trying to remember every detail. “He asked if I remembered the route he’d shown me the night before. I said yes, so he picked up from the last place I remember flying over.”

“Huh. So he’s very aware and able to converse with you?”

“Yeah. Fortunately. We were flying along, still northwest, but this time I was able to ask him questions. I asked why he was showing me where he was like this, why not just put a pin on a map? And he said he didn’t have a map, this was the only way he could show me where he was.”

“Didn’t have a map.” Dimitri’s face scrunched up in confusion as he poured himself another cup of coffee. “As in, he didn’t know how to pinpoint it on a map?”

“That was my take on it. Hence he’s taking me the same route he once traveled. Which definitely works.” Here Vasily paused, straining to remember. “I feel like he told me a lot, but what I remember him saying was he was far north, almost at the top of the continent. He’s in a very large lake, one with near-constant lightning. He was mad about the lightning part for some reason. I woke up before I could ask him.”

Dimitri had a map standing by. No, let’s face it, Sam had a map standing by. Dimitri was the one sitting closest. He twisted in his seat to open it, holding it with arms stretched out so Vasily could see it.

“What do you remember of the path?”

“We crossed through Mato Grosso, then entered the Amazon. I think we passed Manaus? But I didn’t actually see the city, I just felt like we’d flown far enough to do so.”

“Hmm, okay.” Dimitri’s head cocked to the side as he considered. “So his location is...Colombia? Venezuela?”

Ecuador?”

“Ecuador doesn’t feel right. We weren’t heading west enough to go that direction. Colombia or Venezuela, yeah, that I can agree with.” Mentally, he wished he’d been able to sleep a bit longer. To get more information if nothing else. North, lake, and lightning weren’t much to work with when he knew very little about northern South American geography.

“I can think of a few possibilities. One more likely than the others.” Dimitri tapped a few places on the map. “But I think we’re at the point we need to report this in. We’re going to need various teams to check all this out.”

Luka put both hands over his heart in mock surprise. “What? You don’t want to tramp all over Venezuela and Colombia for days on end? Imagine!”

“Smartass.” Dimitri snorted at him before refolding the map. “Vasily, I think you should report this in.”

“Look, I have to be efficient. I started this day with multiple brain cells and I’m down to two. Sam can report this in.”

Sam frowned at him. “It’s only seven a.m.”

“I’d like to remind you whose fault it is that I only have two functioning brain cells right now.” Vasily added a pointed glare for effect.

It seemed to bounce right off. “I made you breakfast.”

“That just keeps me from murdering you.”

Tsking him, Sam wagged a finger. “No, Dimitri keeps you from killing me.”

Luka was glaring now too. “You bank on that.”

“Damn right I do. But back to your point, yes, I can explain all of this to Rodrigo. You get to be in the room, though—you know he’s going to ask a million questions. If he doesn’t, Ha Na will.”

A valid point. As long as Vasily had more time to drink coffee and get his brain fired up, it was fine. Answering

questions meant stringing together actual sentences and right now that was too much.

Sam scraped up the last of his breakfast, expression thoughtful. “Do you think I should throw together a PowerPoint presentation first?”

Today would be one long-ass day.

4

The only thing that saved them from a Sam PowerPoint presentation was an explosion in the mages' workshop. On the plus side, it was a non-Nikki-related explosion. On the minus, the mages had been attempting to replicate one of the simpler Sousa designs from the materials they'd translated. It had not gone well.

No one was injured and the fire was put out quickly, but it meant they were not making the kind of progress they'd been hoping for.

Though, from the way Sam was bouncing on the balls of his feet, the setback had not dampened his mood.

After a quick consult with Thiago, the king's advisor, they managed to get a meeting with Rodrigo in the late morning. Luka had always known Thiago was a kind and caring soul. The old dragon must have sensed that Luka and Vasily were exhausted and needed time for their brains to function before attempting to speak coherently to Rodrigo.

Just after ten, Luka, Vasily, Dimitri, and Sam went to the king's office, where they found Rodrigo waiting with his mate, Ha Na, as well as Thiago and Evora, the head of the Valerii mages.

The king rose from where he'd been reclining behind his desk and clapped his hands together. He rubbed them and grinned. With his white hair and sparkling blue eyes, he looked like a very skinny and naughty Santa Claus. "So, Sam says we're on the cusp of a new and even greater Sousa discovery."

Luka exchanged a look with Vasily. The archaeologist would say something like that. The man was used to pitching

things in the very best light so he could find funding for his expeditions. Rodrigo was an incredibly lenient and compassionate king, but Luka had no desire to mislead their benevolent ruler. Under all the softness was an icy temper no one wanted to set loose.

“Cusp might be a generous word,” Luka said. Rodrigo motioned for them to sit at a long table that stretched in front of a series of doors that had been thrown open to allow in a warm, salt-scented breeze. The soft crash of the ocean waves was a soothing backdrop as they found their seats.

“Luka? Vasily? Are you sleeping well? You both look so tired,” Ha Na said as she slipped into a seat to the left of the head of the table. After Rodrigo had her chair properly pushed in and pressed a kiss to her cheek, he settled into his own seat and took her hand. She tucked her blue hair behind one ear and shot him a dimpled smile.

Smitten.

Their king was utterly smitten with his mate, and it was kind of fucking adorable.

“Not as much as I would like,” Luka admitted.

Vasily directed a sharp glare at Sam, who was grinning and bobbing in his chair beside Dimitri. “It would help if we didn’t have unexpected guests in our room.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Gawd, it was one time. And it’s not a big deal. It’s not like I was waiting outside your door while you were having sex. I was busy with Dimitri. He needed—”

Dimitri wisely clamped a hand over the chatty archaeologist’s mouth and cleared his throat. “Maybe we should move along to why we’re here. Tell them about the Sousa you’ve been talking to.”

“Sousa? How have you been talking to a member of the Sousa?” Evora demanded, her question shooting sharp and crisp across the table. The way her dark brown eyes peered at them made her look even more lethally dangerous than she normally did.

“In our dreams,” Vasily answered. He went on to tell them about the dreams he’d been having that featured the strange man in native clothing and jewelry who had been leading them from the clan village north to a lake.

Luka sat quietly, only offering that he’d been having the same dream...even though he didn’t recall a second of it.

When they came to the end of their story, Dimitri pulled out a large map with Lake Maracaibo circled in northwest Venezuela. “Based on what Vasily has described in his dreams, I think Lake Maracaibo is the best match and is a solid place to start searching.”

Luka winced. As they spoke, Rodrigo’s expression had chilled and become decidedly less excited. The king sat in silence for a second and then turned his gaze on Evora. “Please tell me my dragons have not lost their minds.”

“Hey!” both Luka and Vasily protested.

“No, this has to be real! The details Vasily has been able to provide are things he would only know if he’d spent a lifetime studying the Sousa, which he has not,” Sam said.

“No, I don’t think they’re insane.” Evora paused and shrugged one slender shoulder. “Well, not for this reason anyway. It seems they are experiencing what is called dreamwalking. I have not experienced it personally, or even heard of anyone doing so. However, there are a few mentions in some rare texts. I would need to reach out to the lost clans in the east to see if they have more knowledge of it.”

“So...this is real? An actual member of the Sousa Clan has reached out to Vasily and Luka?” Rodrigo asked.

“Yes, and he desperately needs our help. He’s trapped,” Vasily pressed.

Rodrigo nodded. “Very well. We need a scouting party pulled together. Dimitri, your tracking team. Are they still occupied with the Sousa village?”

Luka couldn’t stop the sigh of relief that rushed from his lungs. He slumped in his seat, his head coming to rest on Vasily’s big, strong shoulder. It hadn’t occurred to him that

Rodrigo might not believe them or think it was all some fantasy, but when he'd listened to Vasily talking, he understood the king's point of view. This was coming from a dream. They had nothing concrete to go on.

But then, the very first mage discovered in five centuries had been located by accident in the middle of a festival. Who was to say they couldn't find a lost mage civilization in a dream?

"Ilya is the only tracker we have working the village at the moment. He's overseeing a few other dragons who are protecting the mages scanning the materials and taking notes on the village. The last of the old Jaeggi explosives were taken out by Gregori over a month ago," Dimitri explained. "To start, I'd like to keep this as small as possible since we're not entirely sure this is the right location. I propose myself, Vasily, and Luka scout the area. Sam would need to be there if we do encounter Sousa technology."

"I think you should take another mage with you," Ha Na chimed in. "Supposing you do find this trapped Sousa and you can get him free, it's likely he may need some medical attention. Also, if you think I am not going, you are sadly mistaken."

Rodrigo lifted Ha Na's hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. "Excellent point. On both accounts, as I am not staying behind either. That said, Evora, could you select a talented healer to accompany the scouting party?"

Evora snorted. "If you think I'm not going, you are once again sadly mistaken. I'm sure Thiago feels the same way." She directed her smirk at Dimitri. "Though, if Ravi Burkhard hears about this, he will invite himself into joining your party as well."

Luka shuddered. Chaos in dragon form. Dimitri had told more than a few stories about the havoc Ravi wreaked in the Burkhard Clan. But Ravi was also a fast wind dragon and a skilled fighter. They shouldn't need his fighting skills, but with mages present, protection of those precious people was their top priority.

Rodrigo nodded. “Evora, approach the Abe and get them up to date and on standby. Dimitri, when can you be ready to leave?”

“Since this is only a scouting mission, minimal supplies are needed. We’ll fly in and out. We should be ready to go in two days at the latest.”

“Okay. Get it done. If there’s a Sousa mage trapped out there, we need to find him as quickly as possible. And if we’re lucky, he won’t be the only one.”



LUKA FLOPPED ONTO THE MATTRESS, HIS EYES BURNING AND his head aching. The day had started too early and run too long. Dimitri’s whole “only a scouting mission” and “minimal supplies needed” were a bunch of horse shit. There had been endless errands to run, mages to track down, bags to pack, and research to complete. Not to mention, they had to ensure everything was running smoothly with the Sousa village site before they ran off to make a mess somewhere else.

Sleep.

He just wanted sleep.

“Come on, love.” Vasily prodded him, his deep bass voice softer than usual. “You’re almost there. Just get under the covers.”

Luka mumbled something into his pillows. Without lifting his head, he scratched at the bed until he finally caught the edge of the blankets and pulled them down. Bare skin hit cool sheets and Luka sighed. His very wise mate had caught him before he could collapse and convinced him to shed his clothes. He might not care whether he fell asleep in his clothes now, but when he woke up, it would make him grumpy. He’d left on only a pair of boxers. Sam might have promised not to lurk at their bedside, but neither of them were taking any chances. Even if Dimitri slept on the mage in his dragon form, Sam would still find a way to sneak out.

Sleep claimed Luka even as the mattress shifted beside him and Vasily pressed a kiss to his temple. He wanted to roll over to kiss his sweet mate more thoroughly, but rolling took too much energy. Kissing was even too much.

Luka went from his comfy bed to flying. But not as a dragon. He was hovering above the world in his human form. That was...strange.

“There you are! Do you know how long I’ve been trying to reach you?” That familiar voice was exasperated and relieved.

Luka twisted in the misty air and found the man Dimitri had told him about. No, the man he’d seen in his own dreams so many times but could never recall. Something inside him ached as he stared at the man in front of him, ignoring it as best he could. He still didn’t understand why both he and Vasily dreamed of this man, and the possible reasons scared him, but this was a mage who needed saving. At the end of the day, that was what mattered the most. Determination filled Luka. He could focus on that and things would be okay. They would.

“I remember you,” Luka said finally.

The man’s eyes glowed and a smile spread across his face. “I should hope so!”

“No, I don’t remember my dreams. I can never recall what happened when I wake up.”

The man tipped his head back and groaned. “No wonder this is taking so long. I guess I should have focused on the other one.”

Luka threw out his hands in front of him and waved them frantically. “No! I can do this. I can remember this time. I swear! We’re coming for you. We think we’ve got the location.”

“Okay, let’s try this one more time. Concentrate. Remember!”

The strange man with the shaggy brown hair had barely finished speaking when Luka noticed they were hovering above the Sousa village. The buildings looked almost new and

intricately woven blankets with bright colors waved in the breeze. There was intact pottery and mosaics painted on the walls. But no people.

Before he could ask, they were soaring through the air. The lush green rainforest below was little more than a blur. They moved faster and faster, but the sensation was weird. No wind whistled past his ears and there was no chill biting at his skin.

No! Focus!

They were moving northwest from the village. This felt more like Venezuela.

After what seemed to be only seconds, they slowed down as they approached a vast lake. Or maybe it was an inlet or bay just off the coast that opened to the Gulf of Venezuela and the Caribbean Sea. Day had become night and the sky crackled with strike after strike of white lightning.

They came to a stop as dark clouds roiled and bubbled overhead. Lightning slammed down again, seeming to almost form an electric spiderweb.

“Here! Where the water is the deepest!” the man shouted.

Luka stared down at the water, his gaze skimming over to the shoreline, trying to memorize landmarks while praying they were still there now.

When he lifted his eyes, he jolted. The man was right in front of him, so close Luka could make out the thick fringe of his eyelashes as they framed wide chestnut brown eyes over an adorable button nose. The man lifted both hands and cupped Luka’s cheeks. And while he could feel no cold from the wind, Luka swore he could feel the warmth of the man’s touch.

“Remember me. I need you. I won’t last much longer. Please, remember me.”

“I will, I swear. I’ll remember.” Luka reached out to grip the man’s wrist, but he was gone.

He blinked, but there was only blackness. His heart hammered in his chest and he gasped, sitting upright in bed.

The blankets were tangled around his legs and a cold sweat clung to his skin. It didn't matter.

He remembered.

"I got it! I remember where he wants us to go! We need to leave now!" His dragon urged him up, up, up. The emotion was so strong he couldn't begin to either ignore or temper it. Luka tried to launch himself from the bed, but his feet were still trapped in the blankets. Just as he was about to face-plant on the hard tile floor, Vasily's strong hand grabbed his arm and hauled him back. His shoulders slammed into his mate's wide, warm chest.

"Whoa! Wait a minute. It's one in the morning," Vasily said, his voice deep and sleep rough.

"I don't care. I remember. He showed me the spot." Luka twisted in Vasily's arms so he could see the faint outline of his face in the darkness. "We're right. It's Lake Maracaibo. The lightning lake. He's toward the south, in the deepest part."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Vasily released Luka's arms and wrapped him up, pulling him in tight as he lay down so Luka's head was resting on his chest. His lover's heart pounded under his ear. Fast. Too fast for someone who was calm and trying to sleep.

Why was he so excited? Was it because Luka had finally remembered something he had dreamed? Or was it because they finally had a solid lead on a location?

"Try to get a few more hours of sleep. Even if we could leave now, it would still be dark when we arrived. It'll be easier to find him in the light," Vasily said.

Luka huffed, but there was no closing his eyes. He was too awake now, his brain spinning in a million different directions while his stomach twisted into knots.

"Vasily...he feels familiar," Luka whispered into the darkness.

"I know," his lover answered almost at once. "I thought...I thought it might be because he's visited my dreams so many times, but...I don't know."

Vasily's arms tightened around him and Luka burrowed in, the familiar fear rearing its head, saying he could lose this someday.

"He could be *our* mate," Vasily murmured after several seconds of silence.

That was the dream, right? That there was one mage for both of them. That they'd find the perfect mage who fit them like a missing puzzle piece. A mage whose twists and strange edges slid into theirs as if they'd been made for them.

But in all their long history, there had never been a mage mated to two dragons.

It was always one mage per dragon. And if one died, there were no second chances. No new piece to fit into that hole.

Luka had always been torn between the hope of the two of them having one mage or the two of them never finding a mage mate. After the Dragon War, the odds of two dragons never finding their mate had been astronomically high. It had been easy to hope for a single mate for the two of them because it seemed like a farfetched dream. Lovely and unobtainable.

And then Cameron Burkhard had appeared. Suddenly mages were back and, with them, the kernel of fear that the world was right, they were wrong, and they'd be torn apart. And when Sam had appeared, a countdown timer had started in the back of Luka's head, constantly ticking away the time he and Vasily had together. The worry Luka felt plagued him so much he often found himself wishing their mate would never appear. It was somehow easier to hope for no mage mate than a shared one.

Not that he could *ever* tell Vasily his thoughts; it would destroy his other half.

And now there was this Sousa mage. The idea that he was a potential mate left a lump lodged in his throat, making it hard to swallow.

What if this mage fit only one of them?

And if Luka was the one left behind, how was he going to survive?



Vasily always enjoyed flying with his clan. The freedom of the air, the sense of camaraderie with the other dragons—it all made him intrinsically happy. So was he smiling as they flew north? Absolutely, but this time, the pure joy of flight was tempered by other emotions: Hope. Concern. Doubt. He wanted to be right about everything.

After waking up at one o'clock in the morning, there was no way for him to even consider waiting another day. They had all hastily packed and launched into the air just as daybreak touched the sky.

Forests, rivers, lakes, cities—all of it passed below them in a blur. The days when they had to be careful where they flew were long past, and honestly, Vasily was glad. The freedom to take to the air whenever he wanted was a heady thing. It felt like it took no time at all, instead of hours, to reach their destination.

He didn't need a map or Dimitri's guidance to know when the lake came in sight. It was more an inlet, really, connecting directly to the sea, and huge, with a city arrayed at the top and protected forest and grass areas wrapping around the bottom. A postcard kind of place, to be sure.

And somewhere in the lake was a mage who needed help.

The question was where, exactly?

It wasn't like Vasily expected the mage to be obvious from the air. If he were out in the open, he would have been found long before now. Still, this all looked like either city or the protected government land it was. Just where could he be?

Rodrigo, with Ha Na riding on his back, circled around to fly at Luka and Vasily's side. They slowed to a lazy pace, almost hovering.

"You sure this is the area?"

"Dead sure." Luka said with full confidence. "I just don't know where exactly in this area. As soon as he showed me the lake, I woke up. The only clue I have is he's at the deepest part of the lake."

Rodrigo gave a low thrum in the base of his throat, a sound of understanding.

Ha Na lifted a finger, mischief playing around her mouth. Never a good expression coming from her. "I see much swimming in your future."

He and Luka shared a look, an instant agreement on both their parts, before Vasily answered, "Luka and I will dive into the water and take a quick look around."

"Have fun, dears!" Ha Na waved them on.

Vasily didn't dive right in. He lowered his altitude, adjusting until he was almost skimming the water's surface. A storm hovered overhead, the humidity thick enough to feel against his scales, the coolness of the air not unpleasant after the exertion of flight. Vasily didn't focus on any of that; instead, he cocked his head slightly so he could peer into the water.

Well, he tried, anyway. With the storm moving in, the water's surface was choppy, turning it nearly opaque. Dammit, he could barely see his own reflection. This was useless. He snorted in disgust and frustration, sucked in a breath, and dove sharply in.

The world under the surface of the water was a very different place. It was cool, sometimes with warm spots, but it glided over his skin in a refreshing way. He kept his head down, steadily swimming toward the bottom, most of his momentum due to his lashing tail.

Dragons had amazing lungpower and could hold their breath for much longer than a human. That said, they did have

limits. Vasily was aware of those limits as he swam around the bottom of the lake. Which was much deeper than he initially thought, and he hadn't thought it shallow to begin with. He started at the middle, working his way out in a rough circle toward the shoreline. Every now and again, he'd come up for air, suck in a breath, and dive back in.

Luka was doing the same—he caught sight of his lover's form popping up for air when he did—but he was on the opposite side of the lake. It would help if they knew where the deepest part of the lake was, but of course there was no handy guideline for that.

The lake was relatively clear—surprisingly so. Not many fish, or bugs, or much of anything in here. Some vegetation growing up from the bottom, that was about it. Was it due to all the lightning that hit the lake? That had to be it.

Vasily could feel his lungs burning, the need for air suggesting he go up again now. Yeah, he could pause here and—wait. What was that? A glimmer of something, sharp and metallic, under something else that shimmered for a second.

Burning lungs forced him up, even though curiosity ate at him. Vasily mentally marked the spot in his head before coming up, gasping air. He found Rodrigo and Ha Na hovering nearby.

He called to them, “I think there's something down there. Going back for a better look!”

Ha Na waved him on. He dove back in, orienting toward the spot he'd spied before. This time, he was able to focus better because his pesky body wasn't demanding things like air.

Shit, there really was something there. A cave entrance?

Vasily put more effort into swimming, and the closer he got, the weirder it became. If he was in some kind of Indiana Jones movie, this would make better sense, but for one thing, he had no soundtrack. Still, looking at this entrance felt surreal. It was surrounded on all sides by metallic markings, like an archway that had been framed in. He couldn't begin to

read the symbols, but then, that was Luka and Sam's department. They were the brains of this operation.

The strong feeling of magic permeated the water. He'd bet there was a ward stretched between those symbols. For what purpose, he couldn't fathom. Keeping air in? Protection? All the above? The more he stared at it, trying to find some way around it, or at least a good peek inside, the more frustrated he became. Burning lungs demanding oxygen didn't help.

Also, he didn't understand what he was looking at. A mage needed to look this over. Time to surface.

Vasily kept a prayer in his head as he swam back up. He truly, dearly hoped the mage he'd come to rescue was in there somewhere. He hadn't spotted anything else. That had to be it, right?

Getting his head above water again was a relief. This time, he found the entire rescue party waiting on the banks, including Luka. Someone must have alerted him that Vasily had found something.

Still, he double-checked first. "Luka, anything?"

"Nothing on my end." Luka's head dipped down to more his eye level, wings rustling with impatience and excitement. "What did you see down there?"

"The weirdest fucking thing in this decade. I'll swear on that. There's this cave entrance with a metal arch around it, symbols carved in the arch, and it's under some kind of containment spell? I could feel it, see the glimmer."

"Huh. See what's beyond it?"

"Not even a little. The cave walls twisted around pretty sharply. All I saw was dry dirt."

Evora came in closer, waving him out of the water. "Come with me. I've booked us a hotel nearby for the night. You can describe exactly what you saw, and I'll draw it."

That made absolutely no sense to him. "Uh, why can't I just take you back down with me? You've got breathing spells you can use."

For some reason, she gave him a look like he was being difficult on purpose. “I do not want you barbecued. For one thing, we didn’t bring any sauce.”

Uh. What?

As if to accent her point, the sky overhead gave a warning rumble.

Ah, shit, right. Any storm in this area was 99.9 percent likely to deliver lightning too. Flying through a storm was risky enough, but with lightning in the mix, they really were in danger of being barbecued.

Good sense suggested he follow Evora out of the water, but...

Luka voiced the aggravated whine he could feel building up in his own throat. “We’re so close, though!”

“We’re actually not,” Sam said. He pushed his glasses up, laying things out in a factual manner. “If they’re underwater, we have no easy way to get them out. We need earth dragons and a hell of a lot more magical firepower to manage this rescue. We’ll need to stop here for the day anyway until we can get the right people over here.”

“Dammit.” Vasily hated it, but Sam was right. He knew better than to argue. Besides, Sam was just as eager as they were to get down there, so if even he said to wait, then how could Vasily argue?

He wanted to, though. Oh, how he wanted to.

Evora led them back into the air and into town. It was nothing more than a short hop from here, and they landed again easily on the outskirts of town before walking in. Evora had picked a nice hotel with a lake view, so it wasn’t much of a walk. Ooh, had a nice roofline, too—something flat. They could potentially fly in and out from there.

Like Evora had prophetic powers, or perhaps seer powers, they’d barely reached the lobby of the hotel when the skies opened up. He could hear the lightning strike the water, see the charge of it leap across the water’s surface. Yeah, that explained the no fish thing all right.

Evora patted him on the shoulder with a knowing smile.

He just sighed in response, head dropping for a moment. “Yes, yes, you were right.”

“I just needed to hear it.” Evora winked at him before making her way to the desk.

He followed Evora to the front desk, took the room key, and went upstairs.

The hotel was a nice one, with terracotta floors and white walls, built to keep the heat out. Bathrooms were a tad on the small side, so he and Luka took turns in the shower. Vasily wanted the smell of lake water out of his hair. Once he was out of the shower and into dry clothes, he didn’t know what to do with himself. It was barely three in the afternoon, too early for dinner, and he was too keyed up to want food just then.

He moseyed out to the veranda. It was covered, so he could stand at the railing and look out over the lake, watch the storm. When people said this area got the most lightning strikes per acre in all of South America, they weren’t kidding. That was the second lightning strike he’d seen in the past half hour, and he hadn’t been paying the lake strict attention during that time.

The smell of lightning—a tangy ozone that reminded him so much of magic—filled the air. He breathed it in deeply and his dragon once again longed for what they’d never had—a mage mate. It would have felt like a betrayal if he hadn’t known Luka felt the same yearning.

In truth, Vasily did harbor some worries. For so many centuries he hadn’t needed to worry much about his relationship with Luka. There were no mages, nothing to interfere. Now that the hope of a mage mate was back within the realm of possibility, he could not help but feel these niggling tendrils of fear. Of course he wanted the best for Luka—that went without saying. If this mage was Luka’s mate, then he would be very happy for him. But losing Luka would destroy Vasily. If this mage turned out to be Vasily’s, then he would have to somehow convince him to keep Luka with them. His heart would not be able to choose between the two.

But fighting with the fear was the hope—the *knowing*—that there was a single mage for both of them. It beat inside him like a drum, and he'd much rather listen to it than fear.

A sound came from the side, and he turned his head to see Evora come out of her own room to join him. Their balconies had only a thin rail separating them, so she came in close enough to lean her head against his shoulder.

“Worried?” she asked softly, the word barely audible over the rain.

“Yeah.” It would be a lie to say otherwise, and he had no reason to lie to his clan-sister. “Yeah, I am. I feel in my gut that finding this mage is what I need to do. But Luka...”

He didn't need to say anything else. She knew. She patted him on the arm in silent comfort.

“The mage is talking to both of us, though.” That thought kept haunting him, coming back whenever doubts started to get the better of him, gave him something to cling to. “Is that a sign? That he's talking to both of us?”

“I think, in this case, it's not wrong to hope. But stay grounded, don't pin all your hopes on that. I want you to really think of what to do if he's not both yours and Luka's. If you charge in on hope alone, you will end up in a world of pain. I'd have several backup plans in place. I do agree him being able to reach you in your dreams is peculiar, but it might not mean what you hope it will mean.”

The words struck hard. *It might not mean what you hope it will mean.* Yeah, he got that. Vasily managed a tight nod. “Yeah. I know what you're saying. I'm trying to not let either hopes or doubts get the better of me.”

“That's all you can do right now. That and focus on getting him out of there. Him, and whoever might be down there with him. This isn't going to be easy considering they're under hundreds of thousands of gallons of water.”

Imagining the work entailed made him wince. “I know. Honestly, I'm not even sure how to get him out of there.”

“Not in any sense. But come inside with me, describe precisely what you saw. Rodrigo is already calling in the Sodalicium to report the finding. The more information we have, the better.”

That he could definitely do. With the right dragon and mage power, this job would be a lot easier.

Not easy, though. Definitely not that.

B

Luka was worried.

He had tried to hide it all evening, was even joking like usual during dinner, but after centuries together Vasily knew better.

Not that he'd said the words, but Vasily could see the worry clear enough in his eyes, those beautiful clear blue eyes, and tugging at his shoulders, drawing his face into an almost frown. Luka kept deliberately relaxing his shoulders whenever he caught Vasily looking, and then a second later, the tension would be right back.

Why he thought he could fool Vasily after centuries together was the question. He knew this man better than anyone else. It didn't take a telepath to know why Luka was worried, either.

Luka was ostensibly making tea at the small coffee bar in their room, but the water had already gone cold once because he was just standing there staring at it. Sometimes he'd pick a tea packet up...only to put it back down again a second later.

Completely lost in his own head, this one. Vasily came up behind him, wrapping both arms around Luka's trim waist, resting his chin on Luka's shoulder. He gave a low thrum in his throat, a sound of comfort.

"All right, yes, I'm worried." Luka sighed and gave up pretending he was making tea. "You are too."

"I am." No use acting otherwise. "What are you worried about?"

"You want the list alphabetically or categorically?"

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are, but it’s hard to put all this into words.” Luka could not seem to look up from the cup of almost tea in his hands. He did seem to be struggling to put everything into words, and Vasily was not surprised when he defaulted to the old tongue. “I think I fear what you fear: he belongs to one of us but not to both.”

Well, Vasily could not argue with that. “But we need to focus on hope, my love.”

“Because he’s talking to both of us?”

“Yes.”

“You know there could be another reason.”

Luka was ever practical, and Vasily couldn’t argue because he had no idea why the mage could enter their dreams to begin with.

“Vasily.” Luka’s hands wrapped around Vasily’s. “If he’s yours, then—”

“Shh.” He didn’t want to hear it. His heart couldn’t bear it. “We’ll talk about this only if it comes true.”

Luka dipped his head into a nod, still tense and unhappy.

“I love you.” Vasily meant every word. Repeating them over years and years together had never worn those words smooth. He felt them deeply each time he said them. Even if the mage and Luka were the perfect match, he couldn’t regret loving this man. He could never do that.

“I love you just as much.”

Luka turned in his arms, sliding one hand up into Vasily’s hair, angling in for a kiss. He met Luka halfway, the kiss soft and sweet. Even after centuries together, Luka’s kiss still thrilled him. He tasted those lips, eyes fluttering closed, and some part of him prayed he’d still be able to kiss this man next week. Next year. Next century.

A slender hand dropped to his waist, pulling at the shorts there, tugging them open enough for his fingers to slip inside.

Luka wanted sex, and Vasily was ready to oblige him. Right now, they could both use the reassurance.

He tugged Luka's shirt off, tossing it carelessly to the floor. His hands and eyes roved over Luka's pale skin like he'd never seen it before. And yet it was all so very familiar to him. He could map it with his eyes closed, but he took his time... lips trailing over every sensitive spot, grazing teeth against his nipples as Luka liked it best.

Luka knew how to please too, his hand working Vasily's dick like a maestro. His fingertips played with the underside, stroking the main nerve, before his thumb came up to massage the tip. It felt glorious. Vasily was torn between having him do that the rest of the night and telling him to stop before he came right then.

Leaning in, Luka bit at his ear. "You're so easy to rile up."

"Guilty. And you have fun riling me up."

"Guilty," Luka riposted, a happy hum wrapped around the word.

The teasing was effective, too, Vasily's impatience rising. He stripped Luka's pants to his feet, with Luka kicking them away, then knelt by degrees, mouth trailing down over snowy skin. Luka leaned back against the counter, a sigh slipping free from his throat as Vasily got his mouth on the base of his cock.

To him, Luka always tasted a bit like coolness. Like his ice dragon lurked just below the skin's surface, hinting it was there. The skin warmed steadily as he got his mouth properly around the tip, sucking idly. Right now, he was in no hurry. He'd rile up Luka just as much, returning the favor.

Those fingers were back in Vasily's hair, tangling, gripping to the point of pain as Luka sank into Vasily's mouth over and over. Vasily enjoyed every second of it.

Luka lifted Vasily's hand, bringing it to his mouth, sucking on a finger until it was good and wet. Knowing his silent cue all too well, he brought his hand down to Luka's entrance. His wet digit slipped in easily, but he only took it to the first knuckle, just teasing, not giving Luka what he really wanted.

“You bastard.” Luka groaned. “I swear, if you went a full day without teasing me, you’d expire on the spot.”

He hummed agreement, not denying it. Hearing the earthy catch in Luka’s throat, feeling the impatient shift of his hips, made it all hotter for him. Teasing, then satisfying Luka was the epitome of pleasure for Vasily.

A climbing whine built in Luka’s throat. Ah, he was truly being driven over the edge. Perfect. Vasily teased a little more, but he knew Luka’s limits, and he was teetering right on the edge. Best to not push him too far.

Vasily pulled off, enjoying the noise of protest from Luka, but also knowing he’d best get pants out of the way and lube over here. Otherwise he’d miss the timing altogether. He kicked his shorts off while leaning over the bed, snagging a tube of lube from his duffle bag’s side pocket.

His lover welcomed him immediately, pulling Vasily in with both arms wrapped around his shoulders. Vasily sank into the kiss, enjoying the leisurely exploration very much as Luka’s tongue invaded his mouth. Without prompting, Luka lifted one leg, wrapping it around Vasily’s waist, giving him not only access but a hint.

So impatient, this one. He mentally smiled even as he popped the lid off the lube, squeezing a generous amount onto his fingers, giving Luka exactly what he wanted. Luka broke the kiss with a groan, eyes turning gold as passion ignited. His fingers dug into Vasily’s shoulders, breath shortening until it turned to panting.

So beautiful. He was so beautiful like this. In this moment, Vasily was the entire focus of Luka’s world. He loved it, loved having this man’s undivided attention, loved the feeling of his tight ass squeezing and flexing around his fingers.

Luka was too far gone for words now. He tossed his head back, a sound of pure need reverberating in his throat.

“Shh, I know,” Vasily murmured. “I’ve got you.”

He maneuvered Luka so he was balanced against the edge of the counter, drawing the other leg up. Luka assisted in this,

hands falling away from Vasily's shoulders to hang on to the wood, spreading his legs in welcome. Vasily held his dick steady with one hand to position himself before pushing slowly in. He kept his eyes on Luka's, felt the man's gasp as he was penetrated, saw his eyes flare wide before falling to half-mast, taking pleasure in the burn of penetration. The second he bottomed out, Vasily stilled, but only long enough to get his hands wrapped around the backs of Luka's thighs, getting purchase there. Then he pulled out an inch before pushing back in, eyes never leaving his lover's.

Luka slid his arms around Vasily's shoulders, using him as a counterbalance, and he didn't shy away from Vasily's intense study. He smiled into it, showing his pleasure, eyes sometimes fluttering shut for a moment as pleasure crested and waned like the tide. In moments like these, with them as connected as two people could be, every doubt and worry fell away. Vasily knew he was right where he should be, loving and being loved in return.

He didn't thrust in hard. Just a steady rocking, because tonight, he didn't want to rush this. Tonight, he wanted to stay connected to this man for as long as possible, until passion overwhelmed them. Luka seemed to be in the same mood, as he did nothing to hurry Vasily along. He simply clung to him, heel digging in to keep Vasily in place.

Sliding in and out of Luka's warm heat was perfection. Vasily leaned in, nosing at Luka's jawline, laving and sucking on a patch of skin right under Luka's ear. He had to touch more, taste more. Right now, he craved every inch of Luka.

"I love you," Luka gasped, the words soft but clear. Then he repeated it, in every language he knew.

Old Slavic. "I love you."

Russian. "I love you."

Portuguese. "I love you."

German. "I love you."

Tears burned in Vasily's eyes, his heart so full he wasn't sure it could take this much joy. Still, underneath the emotion

burned the uncertainty. The fear. It was as sharp as a knife twisting agonizingly slow inside of his heart.

Vasily didn't want to think about it. He wanted Luka only in this moment. He lifted his head, snaring Luka's mouth in a hard kiss, thrusting harder. Determined to do nothing else but love this man.

Luka kissed him back just as hard, just as hungry. The sound of the cabinet thudding against the wall rhythmically with their thrusts barely penetrated. He didn't care if someone else knew what they were doing. Right now, all he could care about was Luka.

After so many years together, he could read the signs easily. Luka was on the verge of climax. He twisted, fingers digging into Vasily's shoulders, almost painfully.

"That's it," Vasily encouraged, still fucking him steadily. "You're so beautiful when you're like this. That's it, my heart, come. Let go. I've got you."

Luka clamped down around him hard as he came, hot semen splashing both their abdomens. A gruff pant accompanied the release.

Seeing, hearing, and feeling him like this took Vasily right over the edge. He thrust in once more, hard, needing to be as deep as he possibly could before coming himself. Vasily shook under the force of it, his grip on Luka almost punishing. He saw literal stars behind his eyelids that was how hard he'd just come.

For a long moment, they stayed as they were. Luka on the counter, Vasily still connected with him, their heads on each other's shoulders. He didn't want to move, but he knew he had to at some point. Discomfort alone would demand it.

"We're going to be sticky and gross in about thirty seconds," Luka whispered.

Unfortunately true. Vasily could feel it happening already. "Shower?"

"Yeah."

They didn't say another word to each other as they pulled apart. Vasily went ahead to start the water, getting it warmed up, then Luka joined him. There wasn't a ton of space for two dragons, but they weren't interested in being apart, either. Vasily took the complimentary bodywash and gently washed Luka's skin, starting at his shoulders and working his way down. He knew Luka liked the attention, and truth be told, he liked to pamper Luka. It was a win-win.

He tried not to let the worries creep back in. Failed. Dammit, at least keep his anxieties off his face, then, to not add to Luka's worry.

Luka's hands framed his head as he leaned up and kissed Vasily's forehead. "It will be all right."

Shit, he could hide nothing from this man.

Still, he tried. Again. He even managed a smile, or at least, his mouth felt like it was tilting upward. "Maybe he's meant to be both of ours."

"Maybe." Luka's smile looked just as forced. "We won't know until we get him out of there. It's pointless to worry about it until he's out, right?"

"Right." All true. But logic didn't rule over emotions.

If Vasily had a time machine or seer powers, he would have used them in a heartbeat just to find out one way or another. But for all the magic he had access to, this wasn't one of them. All he could do was wait.

And pray.

7

Vasily slipped into the water in his dragon form as quick as a seal. He slithered over to Luka, who was also in his dragon form, though only his head was peeking above the waves, like an overgrown caiman escaped from the Amazon River basin. Swishing his tail back and forth, he glided to Luka and bumped their noses together. Vasily honestly could not help himself. Luka in dragon form was an incredibly beautiful sight. All ice dragons leaned toward the silver, white, and light blue spectrum, but Luka was so pale he looked like crystallized snow, like a sculpture given life by magic. His mate let out a huff and nuzzled him before motioning toward the shore.

Evora stood on the grassy bank in a black one-piece bathing suit. Her arms were folded over her chest while a small waterproof plastic bag dangled from a cord wrapped around her wrist. A frown tugged at the corners of her lips and even her nose wrinkled slightly as she eyed the murky water.

Her mate's expression wasn't much better. The usually dignified Thiago was pouting. He glared at the water as if it had personally insulted him, his mother, and his entire clan.

"I don't understand why I can't accompany you as well," Thiago grumbled. By Evora's answering sigh, it was clear this was not the first time Thiago had complained. Vasily dipped lower into the water to hide his smile as he swam toward Evora.

The head of the Valerii mages turned to her mate and pressed a kiss to the point of his chin. "There's a good chance this mage has been down there for more than five hundred years. The magic protecting him could be fragile. The fewer people traipsing through there until I can get an accurate read

on the situation, the better. It's for my protection as well as the mage's." She leaned in to kiss his chin again, but Thiago dipped his head in time to capture her lips.

When they parted, the rigidity had slipped from his shoulders and he nodded. "Just be safe."

"Luka and Vasily are more than capable of protecting me. We'll go slow, I promise."

"You have everything you need? Spell ingredients? Cell phones for pictures?"

Evora chuckled softly, the sound low and throaty. "I have everything."

Vasily jerked his gaze away from the happy couple as a ripple of unease washed through him. Evora was normally a chilly, standoffish person who maintained a facade of unflappable control and calm. But when she was with her mate, the world caught glimpses of another side to her. Someone surprisingly warm and cuddly, indulgent and passionate.

Sam, meanwhile, was arguing with Dimitri about going in with her. Vasily had absolutely no interest in getting into the middle of that argument either.

When he looked at the shore again, he found Evora carefully wading into the shallows. She winced as she searched for solid footing.

"How far of a swim is it?" she asked as Vasily drew close.

"A good distance. But now that we know where we're going, it should take less than a minute to reach the grotto."

Evora sniffed. "As if I'm going to hold my breath the entire time." The water lapped at her knees as she opened the plastic bag and dug around the contents for something. "We will approach carefully. You and Luka will stop outside the entrance to the grotto to give me a chance to look things over. I'll signal when we are to continue inside."

"It didn't look like there were any wards on the exter—" Vasily stopped talking at simply a look from the mage. He

cleared his throat and dipped his head toward the water's surface. "Yes, ma'am," he mumbled. The only people who argued with Evora were King Rodrigo, her mate, and those who didn't value their lives.

The mage pulled a tiny piece of thin paper from the bag and closed it again. It looked like a piece of pale blue tissue paper, or maybe one of those breath strips. She placed it on her tongue and whispered a word he didn't catch. Pursing her lips, she blew out as if she was blowing a bubble with gum.

A thin, almost transparent bubble formed at her lips. She pinched it with her fingertips, pulling here and there until it was big enough to completely cover her head. With a satisfied smile, she placed it over her head and settled it down to her shoulders. He'd seen a variety of underwater breathing spells cast by the mages when they wanted to do some diving off the coast, but this was a new one.

With her own personal air pocket in place, Evora dove into the water, disappearing under the surface with practiced ease. Vasily followed a heartbeat later and caught her slender form in a firm but gentle grip. He tucked her close and sped away, powered by the whip of his tail. Luka fell into position next to him and Evora, protecting the mage, even though there was zero threat under the water. The constant lightning strikes made sure no predators wandered here.

Less than a minute later, they were treading water outside of a cave opening that could have fit at least two dragons. He still couldn't begin to read the symbols carved into the middle archway, but he was hoping Evora could make some kind of sense of it. She had prepared an underwater camera to take pictures so Sam could decipher it if she could not.

Evora spent a painstaking two minutes examining the entrance from nearly every conceivable angle. Vasily was close to coming out of his skin with impatience to get inside. Luka was no better. The dragon was swimming back and forth as if pacing. They were both almost out of air when the mage motioned for them to proceed.

Oh? They could go inside? He had not attempted it before, fearing what would happen if the ward threw him back. But if Evora was confident they could enter, then he certainly would not question her.

Vasily caught the mage by her waist again and darted inside. The water quickly grew shallow to the point where he could walk on the bottom and stick his head above the water's surface.

The interior of the cave was pitch black, but as his eyes adjusted he picked out the faint glow of magic along the left side of the cave. It was just enough to lead them forward around the curve of the rocky path.

“Lift me onto your back,” Evora requested. Vasily raised the mage so she could scramble out of the water and onto his back, where she sat. The plastic bag rattled a few times as if she were digging in her supplies. He cautiously walked forward as she worked her magic since he could see enough to move. Besides, the small tunnel they were in did not have much length to it. It only took a dozen strides to enter a much larger space. A few seconds later, little balls of light rose into the air one after another. They floated gracefully deeper into the vast cavern, shoving back the shadows to reveal...people. Hundreds and hundreds of people.

“*Yebena mat*!” Luka said in a harsh whisper, as if he was afraid of waking the slumbering souls.

Holy shit indeed. God, please let them be sleeping. He didn't want to think they'd stumbled upon a graveyard for the entire Sousa Clan, their bodies perfectly preserved for all time. That would crush Sam.

Fuck, that would crush the guy who'd been calling out to them in their dreams.

“This...this is more than I was expecting,” Evora murmured. “Move close to those stairs over there leading out of the water.”

Vasily half swam, half walked over to the stairs that had been carved into the rock, trying to disturb the water as little as

possible. “Be careful,” he reminded her as he let her down.

“I can see the wards crisscrossing the cavern. Basic protections wards. Nothing to worry about. They’re not designed to harm a person, just convince them to leave with no memory of the place,” she replied, already reaching into her bag of tricks. “You and Luka remain in the water until I clear them.”

A low growl rumbled from Luka’s throat, but he settled with his dragon chin on the top step next to Vasily, waiting as commanded but ready to snatch the mage back in a heartbeat if anything looked bad.

They watched Evora work. The mage made every spell she worked look both elegant and simple, no matter what she was doing. Every sweep of her arm and flick of her fingers were almost a dance. The air sparked and tingled. An electric scent of burned ozone filled the air, overpowering the heavy dankness from the centuries of rotting plant life and water.

After a few minutes, she released a breath of relief and dropped her arms back to her sides. “The protective wards over the cave are gone. You both get your human butts up here. The wards remain on those platforms over there. Don’t touch them or get too close.”

Vasily and Luka shifted back to their human bodies while she was still giving instructions and clambered up the stairs after her.

“Luka, can you read the Sousa writing?” Evora asked.

“Some. Not as well as Sam, though.”

Evora grunted and pulled out one of the phones. “Vasily, you’re on camera duty. Take pictures of all the symbols on the walls and of the platforms. They can give Sam something to work on until we can determine if it’s safe to bring more people down here. Luka, you’re with me. I may need help figuring out these platforms and their technology.”

Vasily accepted his phone from Evora and pulled up the camera app. “You don’t think Sam would sneak off and try to come down here alone, do you?”

The mage said nothing. She just stared at him, one arched eyebrow lifted.

Luka choked on a laugh. “You mean the same guy who sneaked into our room in the middle of the night and sat at the foot of our bed waiting for me to talk in my sleep?”

Vasily shook his head and raised the phone to start taking photos. “You’re right. He would.”

The ceiling of the cavern was nearly two stories tall, the space wide enough for a full-grown dragon to completely extend its wings without brushing the sides. And all along the walls, symbols were either painted or carved into the rock. Though, most seemed to have been painted. There were even a few where it seemed as if the message had started out carved and then changed to paint, as if whoever had been working in there had run out of time.

Vasily dutifully snapped picture after picture, making sure to zoom in here and there to get the fine details. The language was unlike anything he’d ever run across, and he spoke at least half a dozen. Luka was fluent in even more thanks to his endless folklore studies. Sam was going to have his work cut out for him. They were still working on the translations from village. To translate what was on the walls would take another few months.

Unless they could wake up some of these people on the slabs.

As he finished with the left wall, he walked over to where Luka and Evora were studying a long stone slab with people laid out side by side in similar dress, with swirling tattoos all over their bodies. It was hard to tell if they’d aged, though he thought it was unlikely since there were several children mixed in with the older adults. At a glance, it appeared as if most of the people were older or children. And among the adults, the majority appeared to be women.

“How many are here?” Vasily asked as he rested a hand on Luka’s tense shoulder.

“Just eyeballing it, I’d say over four hundred.” Luka reached over and grabbed Vasily’s phone. He flipped on the flashlight to get a better look at the device that was resting on the forehead of each person. “My guess is the little device is what’s keeping them asleep.”

“So they are alive?”

That earned Vasily a dark look from Luka and Evora.

“What? I can’t see their chests moving. How do you know the Sousa didn’t have a more advanced form of mummification than the Egyptians?”

“This is not a crypt,” Evora snapped. She grabbed Luka’s wrist and redirected the light to a second device resting on the person’s chest over their heart. “They are alive and in a state of suspended animation. They don’t age and probably don’t even dream. These people are completely unaware of the passage of time.”

Vasily rubbed his jaw and narrowed his eyes at the line of slumbering mages. “They’re going to be in for a hell of a shock when we wake them up.”

“Assuming we can,” Evora mumbled under her breath. She shook her head and turned her gaze to Luka. “Can you read any of the writing around the slab?”

“Not really. Some of it appears to be warnings, but I don’t know what they’re warning against. We need Sam or one of the Jaeggi archaeologists to take a look at it before we go messing with things.”

Evora nodded. “Agreed. It seems a logical guess that the device on the forehead keeps them unconscious while the one on the chest probably monitors or controls body function. But I wouldn’t know how to deactivate either. At least, not without risking harm to the mage.”

Vasily snatched his phone back to take some more pictures of the symbols on the slab as well as the people and devices they were wearing. “How was this powered for five hundred years? I thought you said in the past that a magic spell decays with time.”

“It does,” Evora replied firmly, as if the very idea that any spell had lasted five hundred years was an affront to all she believed. “By the look of these devices, I would have guessed the spell contained in these wouldn’t have lasted more than a month or two. Six at most. I don’t know how they—”

The mage was cut off by an explosion of words out of Luka. It was a wild mix of Old Slavic, Portuguese, and Russian, which meant it was all gibberish when slammed together.

“Pick a language!” Evora snapped.

“Dragons!”

Both Evora and Vasily raced to where Luka had wandered farther down the line. His mate was standing next to a short but robustly built man with long black hair and a stern expression even in his sleep.

“That is a fucking dragon!” Luka said, jabbing his finger in the direction of the sleeping man. Evora batted his hand away as if afraid Luka was going to poke him. “I knew the air smelled funny in here. Like it wasn’t only mage magic. But he is a freaking dragon.”

“A lightning dragon, to be more precise,” Evora said, leaning as close as she could without touching the protection bubble that encased the entire slab.

“I wonder if he’s the only one,” Vasily murmured, talking to himself.

Evora huffed and gave his shoulder a shove. “Quit wondering and go see. Both of you. Quick count.” The mage pointed at Vasily to check the next row while Luka took the one after that.

It took only a moment to check over the people. Their count wasn’t precise by any means, but it looked as if the people slumbering in the underwater cave were not only the lost Sousa Clan, but the lost Lightning Dragon Clan as well. At least a third of the bodies belonged to dragons.

They gathered off to one side, frowning at the bodies.

“Why are they here?” Luka grumbled. “Dragons and mages? Why? This is so weird.”

“And how are we supposed to wake them up?” Vasily added.

Evora shook her head. “How long have we been down here?”

Vasily woke up his phone and frowned. “About forty-five minutes. We should head up before Thiago gets more impatient and comes down looking for Evora.”

“Agreed. But first, we need to check out that.” Vasily’s eyes followed where she pointed to the right side of the cavern. The shadows were deeper there, but he could clearly make out a single lonely slab with one body.

“Why are they over there alone? Who would be apart from the rest?” Luka inquired.

“Did the Sousa Clan have a chief or a king? Even maybe the Lightning Dragon King?” Evora answered, already walking toward the person.

“Or a human sacrifice. You know, this kind of looks like an altar all by itself,” Luka said.

“Lovely thought,” Vasily muttered. He picked up his pace and grabbed Evora’s arm to stop her so he could move ahead. “Another option is that this person was supposed to be a sentry guarding the dragons and mages. How about you let me approach first in case he suddenly wakes up swinging?”

Vasily didn’t even look back to see Evora’s inevitable glare. They knew nothing about this person, and Vasily’s priority was keeping the Valerii mage safe. Everything else came second—and that included the Sousa mages and lightning dragons.

With every muscle tensed, Vasily crept closer, trying to not make a single sound. He scanned the area surrounding the person, but it didn’t seem as if there were any additional wards other than the bubble encasing him. There were a few other devices around the slab, which put him on edge, but nothing that looked like a weapon.

As he reached the top of the two stairs leading up to the platform, Vasily choked on the breath that suddenly froze in his lungs. For a second, he couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. Not even his heart beat.

It was him!

Oh god. At last. It was him!

“It's him!” he finally shouted in a low, rough voice when he could get his vocal cords to work. The image of the man from his dreams had played over and over in his head as they searched through the bodies. His hopes had dimmed and his confusion had grown with every face he saw that wasn't the man's.

But now they'd found him. They'd fucking found him at last!

Luka rushed to his side, slamming into him, his arm wrapping around his waist. “*Chert!* It is! We found him!”

The words had barely left Luka's tongue when a loud gong sound echoed through the cave. The noise reverberated off the stone and rattled Vasily's molars. Luka pressed one ear to his chest while covering the other with his hand. Vasily's brain was still trying to form the question ‘what was that noise?’ when the man on the slab sat straight up and noisily dragged air into his lungs.

Yebena mat', he was awake!



A maru sucked in his first full breath in the gods knew how long, his whole body coming alive with it in an almost overwhelming way. While sleeping, he'd had a limited sense of hearing, smell, and sensation, but now that he was finally properly awake, it was all coming in at once like a deluge of sensory information. Part of him wanted to take a minute and process everything, but the rest of him was so desperate to get up and off this platform that he moved anyway. Gods, finally, he was out of that suspended sleep spell. The very first thing he'd do was find where Irany was sleeping and kick the ever-loving shit out of—

Oh.

Wait. These were his mates. Both of them watching him with wonder written all over their faces. He looked them over, greedy for every detail. Their dream selves looked precisely like their awake selves, except these guys were wet for some reason. But damn, weren't they beautiful? And his. All his.

Vasily was even larger in life, quite possibly the tallest man he had ever seen before and very filled out with muscle. Amaru would have ever so much fun exploring all that lovely, lovely muscle. He had a sharp look to him, with angular cheeks and a chiseled jawline. He was every bit the ruggedly handsome type and Amaru had absolutely no complaints.

Luka, on the other hand, was almost the opposite. He was shorter, more of a willowy build, with pale skin and shoulder length white-blond hair that Amaru could not wait to sink his hands into. He looked ethereal, which was a lie, because there was obvious strength there.

For a moment, Amaru shoved aside the frustration and ire as pure joy engulfed him. He couldn't begin to understand every emotion he felt just then, but it didn't matter, either. He was awake. He had his mates. They'd come for him, answering his call, and nothing could make him happier.

Well, not true. He absolutely had to get his hands on them.

His instincts wanted him up and off this bed, and he rolled. In his mind, he'd just roll up onto one knee, smoothly. In reality, his body creaked from lying still for too long, and it ended up more like a lurch, as fully discombobulated and ungraceful as a toddler who hadn't figured out how to manage their heavy head yet.

Both dragons rushed forward, catching him, a hand on either shoulder. Feeling their skin against his made it all so much better. They were real. Not a figment of his imagination, or a dream, but truly here with him. Amaru beamed at them, lifting a hand to hold on to either arm. Somewhat for balance, mostly because he had absolutely no desire to lose contact with them anytime soon.

The desire was so strong that he had to do something. Had to express it somehow. He caught a hand from each of them and kissed their knuckles. It still did not feel like enough, but he didn't think jumping them straight off the bat was a good idea either. It was fine. They'd get to kiss lots later. They were definitely startled by the gesture, but both grinned at him too, pleased. It'd be a pleasure getting to fully know these two.

"You found me so quickly," he said to them both, smile so wide it threatened to crack something. "I'm incredibly lucky."

Their smiles turned complex, and he realized belatedly that they probably would not understand him. They also weren't alone. A slender woman with angular features and short black hair regarded him with the same fascination. From her bag, she drew out a charm necklace and offered it to him. He did not recognize the design per se, but he could detect enough of the elements to guess what it was for and promptly put it on.

"You understand me now?"

Vasily immediately relaxed. “Yes, we can.”

“How are you?” Luka asked him. “Are you hurt at all?”

So sweet, his Luka. “Not at all. Stiff. Very, very stiff. And mad. Mostly mad. Irany and I will be having many, *many* words. None of them will be nice words, and I might need a sharp, pointy object at hand during the discussion. But that’s later. Thank you, Magess, for the charm, and who might you be?”

She came in closer as she answered. “I am Evora, head mage of the Ice Dragon Clan.”

That made complete sense to him because he knew his dragons were ice dragons. “Oh, of course, you would have brought her with you to help wake me up. Good, good, it’s going to be a chore to do this all on my own. Nice to meet you, Evora. I’m Amaru of Sousa.”

She seemed powerful, which was to be expected of a mage in her position. Amaru had a thousand questions to ask, but first and foremost, he wanted his clan awake. They had all slept quite enough.

Being an efficient sort of person—fine, nosy, call it what it was—he decided to work and talk. With his mates’ help, he climbed completely off the table and headed for the nearest family member. “I am really, truly upset about this whole thing. I should not have slept so long. I don’t know how long it was, mind you, but I can tell it was far too long. Damn idiot, we really shouldn’t have gone with his design—”

Huh. Wait, why weren’t they waking? Frowning, he cut himself off and focused once again on the spell controls carved into the platform. He activated one, then another, trying to turn the sleep spell off and turn on the full function and release spells.

Nothing.

“This half-baked smeared pipe,” he grumbled.

Turning, he gestured for his mates. “I need some dragon’s breath. Looks like the controls are too low on power to function right.”

Evora came in closer with the others, studying what he was doing and pointing some kind of small black box at it. Which brought all the questions to play, but he'd get to that in a moment.

“So you know how to activate all of this?”

“Of course. It's not my design—Irany made this, which is why it's not functioning as it's supposed to; idiot never gets anything quite right—but that's why I was on a separate platform from the others. I'm the fail-safe. If something went wrong—and to no one's surprise, it did—I was to wake and fix the problem. Only, because of the lightning dragons sleeping with us, they kept dreaming interesting things, and lightning kept striking this general area, which kept resetting the spells, so of course it messed things up even *further*. Ugh, the whole thing upsets me. Don't get me started. I can give a whole discourse on what should have been done down here. Anyway, Vasily, Luka, one of you give me dragon's breath.”

For some reason, they looked at each other uncertainly before Luka gestured for Vasily to go ahead. What? Were they being shy or something? Silly dragons. They'd have to get over that quickly. Amaru didn't have a shy bone in his body.

He popped up on his toes, as Vasily was deliciously tall, and got a good kiss in. Mm, definitely needed to kiss this man some more. At leisure. Preferably while Luka was fucking him, but they could negotiate that later.

It had been a very long time since he'd used dragon's breath for anything, so to have that cool power floating in his lungs felt strangely thrilling. Like he'd become even more awake and aware of the world around him in the process.

He pulled back with a wink. “Thanks, handsome.”

For some reason, Vasily looked almost stunned? Vasily didn't seem to know how to meet his eyes for a second. The reaction made very little sense to Amaru, but he had only been awake for maybe five minutes at this point. There was probably quite a bit to unpack here. Just wait, after six months with Amaru, he'd not have that problem.

Anyway, back to waking people up. He turned, and using the power he'd just been given, once again tried the controls.

Which once again failed to work.

Amaru kicked the platform and snarled at it. "Fuck you, Irany. I'd say fuck you and the dogs who bred you, but your parents are nice people. I'm not going to curse them. They must have found you under a rock somewhere, as you have about as much sense as a shadow dweller."

Luka leaned in closer, head almost over Amaru's shoulder. "I take it they should have woken?"

"That's what it was designed to do." Amaru wiped a hand over his face and resisted the urge to go beat up Irany in his sleep. It was a very near thing, but his better sense managed to restrain his temper. "I want the record to note that I did *not* agree with this design. I could see several flaws in it, but did anyone listen to me? Oh no. And now here we are. Magess—"

She held up her free hand in a staying motion. "Evora, please."

Oh, she was nice. She had the face of a woman who took no shit, but she wasn't nearly as stuck up as she appeared to be. "Thanks. Evora, frankly speaking, we're going to need a lot more power down here to override the controls and get people awake. Even you, I, and these sexy dragons with us aren't enough to do it. Can we pull in people?"

"Absolutely."

"Aww, you're so nice. I like you. Let's be friends."

Evora's eyes and mouth lifted into a genuine smile. "I like you too. I'd love to be friends. But Amaru, I've got a few questions before we bring in help."

"Fire away. Who knows, I might have answers."

"How did you get everyone down here?"

"Eh?" For a second the question made no sense. Then he remembered how everyone aside from him was wet, and the light dawned. "Oh. Wait, did you swim your way in here?"

“We did,” Vasily replied with his deep voice.

His voice did things to Amaru. No lie. He’d absolutely take advantage of it later—dammit, brain, above the belt line. *Above* the belt line. Think sexy thoughts later.

“Uh. Well, we have a—” He turned to point and then stopped dead. The entrance he’d been guarding for who-knew-how-long was not there any longer. In fact, it was completely filled in with stones and rubble, and from the looks of it, had been like that for a long while based on the moss growing on it. “Fuck. Um. So we *had* a tunnel entrance we used. Which is clearly not accessible anymore. No wonder you had to swim your way in.”

“Ah. That makes more sense.” Evora frowned at the tunnel. “Hmm. I think we need to come up with a good plan B.”

“Earth dragons?” Vasily suggested.

“That’s my first wish. We need to pull in the Sodalicum for this.”

“The who’s-whatzit?” Amaru had never heard of this group.

Sweet Luka immediately explained for his benefit. “Things have changed a lot since you went to sleep, Amaru. We’ll catch you up on all of it, but the short answer is the Sodalicum is a nation of dragon clans and mages. All types. The earth dragons are part of them.”

Amaru didn’t think he was joking. He looked perfectly serious. Still... “You’re telling me multiple dragon clans are all sharing the same territory?”

“Yup.”

“Voluntarily?”

“Yup.”

“And no one’s died?” His voice rose incredulously because he just could not picture this. At all.

Luka's expression turned sad. "As I said. A lot has changed while you slept. Dragons don't fight each other anymore."

Uhhh. Amaru rubbed his temple because that whole thing threatened a headache. He could not wrap his head around it. You know what? That would be a later him problem. He had quite enough on his plate already.

"Right. Um, so that's a thing, I guess. Well, if you can call in earth dragons to help, that would honestly be the easiest method. It's not like we can get everyone awake and out of here according to the original plan. Let me check one more thing."

"Sure." Evora encouraged him to go on.

Irans platform had been rather like his, a fail-safe to his fail-safe, so he wanted to wake him up if at all possible. Plus, he owed the bastard a good reaming out. Not to mention several vigorous *I told you so's*.

He found him without trouble, stomped over there, and resisted the urge—again—to punch him, although that last part was the hardest. He'd kept his mates waiting because this moron couldn't think a simple design through. Or create good enough fail-safes in case something went wrong.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it. It would just piss him further off and then he'd not be able to think straight.

Drawing in a breath, he forced himself to calm down and reached once more for the controls.

Unfortunately, with the same outcome.

"Goddess of luck, why do you fail me so?" His head dropped as resignation filled him.

A large, warm hand came and rubbed between his shoulder blades in a soothing way. He looked up, comforted by Vasily's concern. How'd he get so lucky to have two sexy, sweet mates like this?

"No good?" Vasily looked over the table. "I can offer dragon's breath if you want to try again."

“No point, but thank you, sweets.”

Vasily almost looked flustered at the endearment? Which was cute. It made Amaru want to call him all sorts of names to see which reactions he could garner. Why yes, teasing was his love language, why do you ask?

Luka joined him on his other side. “Who is this?”

“Irazy. The inventor of all this.” Amaru waved a hand to illustrate his sleeping clan. And the Tupã. “If anyone can help me figure out what went wrong and how to undo it, it should be him. Maybe. Honestly, I have dwindling faith on that score, but at the very least he should be awake to fix the problem he started.”

He sighed again, aggravated. So typical that it fell to Amaru to fix what had gone wrong. Forget inventor, his role in the clan should be fixer.

Amaru looked around again, at friends and family, at his whole clan. It felt wrong to leave them down here like this. He was the guardian, after all.

As if he was able to read this thought off his face, Luka put an arm around his shoulders in comfort. “We won’t go far. We’ll pitch an encampment right on the lake’s banks and be a stone’s throw away if something happens. With the right reinforcements, we’ll be able to wake everyone up in no time.”

Amaru leaned into the hold, taking comfort in it. “Thank you. It just feels wrong to leave them like this, even though I know there’s nothing I can do in this moment.”

“We’ve been down here over an hour.” Evora made a ‘come hither’ motion with her hand. “We need to go before my mate loses his mind up there.”

Oh, she had a mate waiting on her? Poor dragon, he probably was pretty unhappy. “Then let’s go. I’m more than happy to see the sun again.”

“I bet.” Evora reached into a bag tied to her waist that rustled strangely. What was it even made of? “I’ve got the spell ingredients to create an air bubble, if you’d like one? Bit too far to hold your breath.”

She really was nice. “Please and thank you.”

Amaru looked up at Luka. He didn’t want to part from either of his mates for long, and he was shameless when he asked, “Will you swim me up?”

Luka’s smile was surprised, like he had not expected that request at all. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” Amaru smiled back, happy to stick close to Luka for a while longer.

Sunlight and having his mates would put him in a much better mood.

But seriously, how did he wake up his clan?



Amaru was...well...Luka hadn't known quite what to expect when they'd finally located the mage. Sure, he'd dreamed of him. Supposedly multiple times, but he only recalled one and it was all fuzzy and murky now. Certainly didn't do him justice.

Appearing to be in his thirties, Amaru was about five-nine, with a slender build covered in lean muscles. Even after centuries of being away from the sun, his skin was a luscious copper brown—what he could see that wasn't hidden under countless tattoos. Luka's gaze skimmed over them, taking in what seemed to be mostly abstract designs with a smaller number of pictographs of animals and plants. The scholar in him was curious about what they all meant.

Amaru's wide, chestnut brown eyes were almost obscured beneath floppy dark hair that brushed the nape of his neck and the couple of beaded necklaces that hung there. A ridiculously thick fringe of black eyelashes framed his eyes, highlighting them better than any bottled eyeliner could dream of.

The only thing more hypnotic than his eyes was his lips. Amaru possessed surprisingly thin, delicate lips for such a large mouth that had only stopped moving while they'd made the underwater trip back to the camp on shore.

As they reached the surface, Amaru laughed and thrust his hands toward the cloudy sky. It would have been nicer if the sun had been there to greet him for his first day awake in five hundred years, but it was likely Amaru was just happy to see anything that wasn't cave walls or the inside of his own eyelids.

Placing a foot on shore, Luka helped Amaru onto land and shifted back into his human form. The mischievous mage reached up and poked a finger at Luka's hand, touching the exact spot he'd kissed when he'd awoken, as if he could sense the place had stopped tingling and he needed to fix that.

Luka tried his best to not read too much into it. Almost immediately failed. *No, come on, brain, don't be like that.* Amaru was affectionate by nature. He probably would have kissed anyone who'd been standing there. Gregori. Rodrigo. Sam. Anyone.

Then why did his hand tingle? Only Vasily was supposed to make him tingle like that. This was all weird and confusing...and wrong? *Was it wrong?*

He glanced over Amaru's head at Vasily as the dragon made it to shore with them, deposited Evora safely, and shifted. Those dark chocolate eyes had been a comfort for so many years—always the support and confidence Luka needed to move forward—but this time they seemed to reflect the same turmoil twisting knots in his own stomach.

Was Amaru their mate? Or Vasily's mate? Or...even his mate?

He didn't know what he was supposed to feel. The dragons he knew who'd been lucky enough to find their mates talked about a sense of completeness, overwhelming joy, of their dragon becoming possessive, of being able to take a full, deep breath for the first time in their existence.

But he didn't feel any of those things. His dragon was silent. His brain was filled with tangled questions and his heart...just ached.

"There you are!" Ravi's bellow jerked Luka from his twisting thoughts and he forced a smile as he watched a crowd descending on them. He was surprised to see the Burkhardts, but either they'd grown impatient waiting or Rodrigo had called them in. Considering who these men were, it was fifty-fifty odds.

At Ravi's side were his mate Sora, Gunter, Nikki, Sam, and Dimitri. And they all had their eyes on Amaru. Sam, in particular, looked as if he were vacillating between fainting and exploding out of his skin. Luka got it. Amaru didn't just represent a lifetime of research into a people thought long lost from the world, but he was also living and breathing hope.

"I'm assuming you know these noisy people," Amaru said out of the side of his mouth before the others reached them.

"Yes, they're all friends. Some are from my clan and some are from the Fire Dragon Clan we're friends with."

Amaru twisted around, cocking his head with eyes narrowed at him. "The ice dragons and fire dragons are friends? I thought rival dragon clans didn't get along with each other."

"You don't have to worry. Both ice dragons and fire dragons are your friends. We'll explain more later," Vasily interjected as he came to stand beside Luka so Amaru was bracketed by them.

As soon as the others reached them, they were buffeted by everyone speaking at once. Waving his phone in the air, Sam's voice rose above the others to say, "You sent pictures, I need more information than just pictures."

Of course he did. No one was surprised by this.

They attempted to do some introductions but didn't get far before Sora threw out his arms, putting some breathing space around Amaru.

"Everyone wait! I need to check him over first."

Luka dipped his head to speak directly into Amaru's ear. "Sora is an accomplished healer from the Abe Mage Clan."

"But I feel just fine," Amaru whispered back to him.

"I don't give a damn if you *feel fine*," Sora replied in the same whisper, proving he was listening to their conversation even as he checked Amaru's pulse on his left wrist. "You've been asleep for a long time in less-than-ideal conditions. You need a full examination."

Amaru threw him and Vasily a look with a crooked grin and a twinkle of laughter in his eyes, but he didn't say a word while Sora felt his throat and then shifted to magic, using a quick spell to check over his other vital signs.

Only a couple of minutes passed before Sora sighed and nodded. "Okay, everything appears to be in working order, but I still need to do a full checkup after he's met King Rodrigo and Queen Ha Na."

With the healer's approval, their group started to walk toward the camp with the white and multicolored canvas tents poking out among the trees and bushes like a miniature town.

"How did things look down there?" Dimitri asked.

"Not great. Amaru was able to make a small fix to stabilize the system and keep everyone asleep, but we're going to need more help..." Vasily paused and let out a deep breath. "Help and supplies. With that many people and dragons down there, we're going to need some big plans."

Dimitri grinned broadly. "You're in luck. While you were down there, playing around in the cave, Ha Na and Rodrigo have been proving why they're in charge. Ha Na called back to the clan to get more Valerii and supplies here to support our efforts to wake the Sousa safely. Rodrigo has been chatting with King Alric back in Germany about possibly getting more of the Burkhard Clan here to help with things."

Luka exhaled, some of the tension in his chest releasing so he could more easily breathe. Now that they'd established that the area was safe, they could afford to bring in more help. And they were going to need it. This was way bigger than they'd expected it to be.

As they entered the in-progress camp, Luka smiled at Amaru's wide-eyed gawking, taking in everything he passed. His footsteps slowed and a couple times they had to promise to take him back later so he could check out one thing or another.

Thankfully, Rodrigo and Ha Na were waiting for them in the center of the camp, chatting softly about the plans that were starting to come together already.

“Amaru, I’d like to introduce you to King Rodrigo, ruler of the Valerii Clan of Ice Dragons. And this is his mate, Queen Ha Na,” Luka stated.

Amaru glanced at Luka for a second and then offered a deep bow to Rodrigo and Ha Na with his hands extended before him, palms up.

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that.” Ha Na lightly chuckled. She captured both of his hands in hers and smiled sweetly. “We’re just happy to have you with us.”

“Yes,” Rodrigo agreed, his voice a deep, gravelly tone. “We certainly never expected to find a member of the Sousa still alive after five hundred years.”

Luka winced and even Vasily cringed, covering his face with his hand.

Amaru ripped his hands out of Ha Na’s grip and whipped around to regard Luka with wide eyes and pale cheeks.

“What?” he screeched, the word cracking in his throat. “Five hundred years? Are you telling me I’ve been asleep for *five hundred years?*”

10

Five hundred years?

How...how...how was that even possible?

This...wasn't supposed to happen at all.

Amaru felt like his brain was slogging forward, struggling to process all that was happening as the dragons and mages finished setting up the encampment. He had been shown a spot to sit and rest, which he very much appreciated. He needed some time alone to decompress. It wasn't just the onslaught of sensation after five hundred years of being in a very deep sleep; it was everything else as well. Knowing he had lost so many people without even a chance to mourn them. Knowing the world had changed beyond his recognition. He didn't know how to emotionally respond to half of that.

Almost as if his brain needed to escape from reality, it kept fixating on other things. Like the style of clothing everyone wore. All their clothes were so strange, made with weird fibers. And then there was their technology. Every last one of them was carrying around these small flat boxes that lit up and flashed all these pictures. His fingers ached to wrap around one of those boxes so he could take it apart and figure out how it worked.

But not now. Later. When he didn't have five hundred freaking years of history to catch up on. And food. Wow... gods, could he possibly eat five hundred years' worth of meals in one sitting? He was willing to give it a try.

“Amaru?”

He jerked his head up from where he'd been staring off into nothingness as his mind continued to reel. Luka's sweet face was smiling at him, his pale blue eyes warm but full of concern.

“Yes? Sorry? What? Were you saying something?”

Luka motioned toward a sky blue fabric structure that seemed to have popped up in a matter of seconds. Where had that even come from? Had his mind gone blank for that long?

“Would you like to go inside and sit down? I think it's going to rain again soon. Vasily has run to find you some clean clothes and food.”

Amaru nodded and allowed Luka to guide him inside. He ran his fingers along the thin fabric and then over the long, slender poles that held it all up. They weren't wood but some other material. He sighed and shook his head.

“Something wrong?”

“No!” Amaru spun around and grinned broadly at Luka. The expression was genuine as he really did feel the excitement build, like a spring bubbling inside his chest. “Nothing is wrong. I was just thinking that I'll need at least five hundred years to study and understand all these new inventions and materials. It's...daunting.”

“But an exciting new adventure?”

“Yes! Yes, it is,” he agreed with renewed energy. Luckily, he'd found his mates. Once they were all bonded, he'd benefit from the dragons' nearly immortal lifespan. He'd have all the time he needed to understand this new world he found himself in. “First, though, I need to get caught up on what's happened to all the mages and the dragons. And how did you uncover my clan in the first place?”

The light coming through the doorway to the giant room was blocked by Vasily's large form. His arms were full of colorful garments as well as a bucket of water. “I stole some clothes off Luka and Sam,” he announced. “You appear to be closest in size to them. I also brought a bucket of warm, clean

water, soap, and a towel. I thought you might want to freshen up after years of being locked in that box. It's not much, but it should hold you over until we can get back to the hotel for a shower."

"What's a hotel? And a shower?"

Luka and Vasily exchanged a long, wide-eyed look.

"Um...a hotel is a business where you can rent a room to sleep for a night when you are away from your home," Vasily explained. "It'll probably be easier to show you what a shower is instead of explaining it."

"We'll leave you alone so you can have some privacy," Luka said, shoving Vasily back outside once he'd set down the clothes on a chair.

Amaru stared at the two in silence as he watched them disappear and close the fabric door behind them. Did mates need privacy while bathing? In his clan, the mated dragons and mages were never apart, even when bathing. Was this an ice dragon thing? Or had times changed that drastically?

He shrugged and added it to the endless list of questions rattling around in his brain. The water was comfortably warm and the bar of yellow soap had the most wonderful scent. It reminded him vaguely of Vasily. He'd only caught a faint whiff when he'd kissed the dragon, but Amaru was pretty sure the dragon had given him a bar of his own soap so Amaru would smell like him. Yes, that made perfect sense.

After scrubbing clean and rinsing, he dried off with the fluffy towel and wrapped it around his waist so he could turn his attention to these new clothes. He picked up each item and slowly inspected them, marveling at the amazing softness. It was easy to tell which were Sam's and which were Luka's simply by the smell. Amaru tossed aside Sam's items. He was clean with Vasily's soap, so now he should be wrapped in Luka's garments. That was only logical.

A loud, unrestrained squeal erupted from his mouth and brought both dragons running.

They found him sitting on the floor of the tent, playing with the metal invention filled with teeth that fit perfectly together.

“What’s wrong? Are you all right?” Vasily demanded.

“Have you seen this?” Amaru cried. He held up the garment and shook it at them. “This is amazing. All these teeth fit together to pull the fabric together when you drag the little metal bug up and down.”

“The metal what?”

Luka groaned and leaned against the other dragon. “The zipper. He discovered the zipper. I almost had a heart attack because of a zipper.” He patted Vasily on the shoulder. “You help him get dressed. Ha Na has some food ready. I’ll fetch him a plate and be right back.”

One dragon disappeared, leaving him with the larger of the two, who was wearing a very strange expression, as if torn between laughter and tenderness. That was just fine with Amaru.

He allowed Vasily to help him to his feet and listened as he explained each piece of clothing. Thankfully, there wasn’t much due to the heat and humidity that squatted over the lake.

The underwear was lovely and soft, nicely hugging all his boy bits. But it got stripped right off and tossed aside. As soft as it was, it didn’t allow anything to breathe. All his important parts were going to be drenched in sweat and itchy in no time. That was a no to underwear.

The T-shirt took three tries. First Vasily said it was inside out. And then backward. Whatever. It was soft and colorful and smelled like Luka.

Finally, the shorts. Good name since they were short enough to come to his knees. Vasily warned him against the metal teeth that would bite his boy bits if he wasn’t careful.

“And look at this.” Vasily gently took his hand and shoved it into one of the openings at his hip. A secret compartment! A secret compartment for storing things! “They’re pockets. They let you carry many things at once, leaving your hands free.”

Amaru squealed a second time. “Pockets are brilliant! Why didn’t my people invent pockets? Everything should have pockets! Here! Here! Give me something. I need to store something in my pockets now!”

Vasily spun around in the tent, but the space was nearly empty. There was only a chair, the things Amaru had used to bathe, and a couple of large bags. He snagged one of the bags and dug around in it until he came up with two small items.

“A pencil and a small notebook,” Vasily explained as he brought them over to Amaru. He thumbed through it, revealing many blank white pages and the pencil marks on the page. “Luka packed a couple spares ahead of this trip. You can use it to make notes for ideas or things you might have questions about. Both fit perfectly in your pockets.”

“Luka won’t mind you giving these to me?”

The dragon shook his head and smiled. “Not at all.”

Just as he was tucking the little book and writing instrument into one of his many pockets, Luka returned with a plate heaped full of food that smelled delicious. He was accompanied by many people who set up chairs and cushions in a chatter of excited, friendly noise. Thank the gods the translation amulet could keep up with all the conversations.

When they were all settled and his tongue was once again happy, Amaru looked at King Rodrigo. He was the one who most likely had all the answers.

“Okay. What did I miss?” Amaru asked. Choked laughter and groans instantly filled the tent. He wasn’t surprised. A lot could happen in that time, but at least the world hadn’t ended. That was a plus, right?

Rodrigo cleared his throat. “There’s a lot of ground to cover, and I think it might be best to introduce you to some of the general technological and world events slowly. We should probably focus more on what’s likely to impact you.”

“The Dragon War,” Vasily murmured, his voice a quiet, deep rumble that felt as if it had come from a wound in his

soul. Luka reached across and covered one of Vasily's hands with his own.

"The what?" Amaru asked. The question nearly got stuck in his throat when he gazed at the solemn faces that had once been joyful.

Rodrigo succinctly painted a picture of vicious battles between the Jaeggi Clan and countless dragon clans. Of a curse that wiped out entire mage clans and resulted in the death of thousands of dragons.

Only when Evora lunged forward and caught his nearly empty plate did he realize it was slipping from his dead fingers. He flashed her a weak, grateful smile as she set it aside, not needing to be told that his appetite had disappeared.

Yes, he'd not had any prior contact with these now extinct mage clans, and he'd known only Tupã lightning dragons, but that didn't mean his heart didn't ache for the lost mages. They were his kind, his people. Even the territorial dragons of his past would rage at so many lost souls.

"And...and the Jaeggi Clan now? Were they also wiped out in the fighting?"

"Not entirely," Sam replied with an uncomfortable wince.

"There are some who remain—descendants left to suffer under the horrible mistakes made by one mad man." Rodrigo reached out and placed a hand on Sam's slumped shoulder and squeezed while the dragon who appeared to be Sam's mate grabbed his hand in both of his. "They are left with broken cores, unable to achieve their true potential as mages, or fully bond with their mate if they are able to find one."

Amaru's eyes widened. "That's horrible. I literally cannot express how horrible that is."

Sam sat forward eagerly. "It's why I went looking for your clan. I had hopes you could fix me. Not right now, of course, but after your clan has been awoken and rescued, can I ask for your help?"

"Of course!" Amaru felt like that was a given, not even a question to be thought about. "For all the help you are going to

give me, I think it only fair I help you. As soon as I have everyone awake, and my lab returned to at least a semi-functional state, you will be my first priority.”

Sam’s expression was one of utter relief and anticipation. “I cannot tell you how much that means to me. Thank you very much.”

“If I was faced with this problem, of not being able to bind myself to my own mates, I too would’ve turned the world upside down for any clue. Trust me, I will fix you one way or another.” In fact, Amaru had a very good idea of what was wrong just by looking at Sam right now, but he didn’t want to get ahead of himself. A little bit more time to study him was called for before Amaru blurted anything out.

A broken sob escaped Sam, making Amaru jump. He watched as Sam fell into Dimitri’s arms. The dragon hugged him so tightly the little mage nearly disappeared in the bigger man’s frame. After several seconds, Dimitri helped Sam out of the tent while the mage continued to cling to him, his shoulders still shaking.

Someone touched Amaru’s hand and he looked over to see Luka smiling at him. “Sam has been searching his entire life for a way to fix his core. He has a brother who took more after his mother’s side of the family and his core is fine. Sam is an archaeologist and studied what little could be found about your people in hopes it would lead him to a cure.”

Amaru sat there, expression pained. “I can’t believe that much knowledge was lost. I can’t wrap my head around it.”

It was Sora who answered, looking sad. “My clan was the one who retained most of its medical knowledge, but we have never faced a problem like this one before. We studied it, we’ve tried different methods, but nothing seems to work to heal the core.”

Amaru now saw exactly where the problem lay. Healing was not the right tactic.

Hopefully, Sora inquired, “Would you mind if I studied with you?”

If that much knowledge had been lost, then... “I think you should. This is no time to be keeping secrets, and I owe all of you for your help anyway.”

Sora’s expression was one of absolute relief and anticipation. “I am truly looking forward to learning from you.”

“I can assure you, we will be learning from each other. I have a lot of questions for you too.”

“Thank you, Amaru,” Rodrigo replied. “But I would very much like to know why your entire clan, along with several lightning dragons, is under the lake and has been for the past five hundred years.”

Amaru slumped in his folding chair, picking at the rough fabric on the arm. “Well, it wasn’t supposed to be for five hundred years, I can tell you that. I told them not to go with Irazy’s design. I warned them it was going to have issues, especially when there were that many dragons locked away with us. But did they listen to me? No! Irazy’s design was faster and easier. It didn’t have half the precautions it should have had!”

Amaru lifted his head to find everyone staring at him. No one blinked. No one said a word. Yeah, they hadn’t been expecting that outburst. Maybe he was still frustrated and a touch bitter over sleeping for five centuries.

Though, he shouldn’t complain too much. This little time hop had handed him two sexy dragon mates. Maybe he got two to make up for the trouble.

He rubbed a hand through his hair and huffed an awkward laugh. “Sorry. Umm...what’s under the water is about a third of my clan and just a fifth of the old Tupã Dragon Clan. This plan was a final desperate effort to protect my people while they tried to destroy the Woodsfather.”

“The Woodsfather? What’s that?”

“Powerful, colossal giants. Are they not around anymore?”

“We certainly haven’t seen them.”

Amaru was actually relieved to hear that. “Then I’ll explain further. The Woodsfather dwell in the wild woods—or at least used to. They have enormous claws and are taller than any tree. Normally, they avoid humans, but someone stumbled across one of their dens and they took it as an attack upon their territory. Just one would give a party of dragons and mages trouble to defeat because their hide is practically impenetrable. In this case we had a full clan attack us. We feared what would happen if some of them got loose and chose to attack their territory. Those who couldn’t fight, as well as a few specialists like myself, were left to sleep under the lake. We’d be protected while the rest of my clan and the dragons fought the Woodsfather. We thought it would take only a few weeks. Maybe a few months at most. Then the survivors would come wake us up. But if no one came to wake us up, it must mean there were no...” His voice drifted off as the lump in his throat grew larger and larger.

All those people. Friends. Neighbors. Gone.

He wasn’t aware of the tears slipping down his face until Vasily reached up to touch his cheek, wiping them away. It seemed only natural to let himself get pulled into the dragon’s arms. His cool skin was a soothing balm. Not to mention it felt nice to be held again after so many years.

He finally allowed himself to cry for all the lost mages and dragons. His people lost to their private war, as well as all the mages lost to the Dragon War on the other side of the world. He listened to the other mages and dragons quietly slip out of the tent, promising to talk more and make official plans tomorrow.

That was fine with him. He’d had enough of strangers and big news for one day.

Except for mates.

He stayed in Vasily’s arms for an indeterminate amount of time. Frankly, he didn’t want to leave them. Eventually though, his nose was runny, he felt soggy, and the urge to sit up got the better of him. When he did, Vasily offered him a box with white looking handkerchiefs of some sort. They were

very soft, if thin. He promptly took two and used them. Only then did he realize Luka had left at some point. That did not please him whatsoever, but he could hardly complain if Luka had something else he needed to do.

“Better?” Vasily asked him tenderly.

Amaru gave a shallow nod and even sort of meant it. He would be grieving for a while yet, but it did feel better to release some of the emotion that had built up inside of him.

Right now he wanted a break from thinking of everything he had lost. It was time to shift his focus to the present and what he could do now.

“I told you what happened to us in the past. Now I want to ask questions of you.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want to rest?” Vasily asked. He loosened his hold on Amaru so he could move back to his seat, but Amaru didn’t budge. Why would he? This dragon was a very good cuddler. The only thing that might be better would be to cuddle both dragons at the same time.

Later. They would work up to that.

“I’m done resting. I slept for five hundred years. No more of that ever again. I want to know everything. Now.”

11

Luka had not been able to take staying inside that tent a moment longer. Watching Amaru and Vasily together had been more than his heart could take. They were so natural together and it was clear Vasily felt protective of Amaru already. Being on the receiving end of that protective nature for centuries, there was no mistaking it.

He tried not to be jealous, tried not to second-guess the hope they both harbored. Unfortunately, he pretty much failed at both. He could feel the jealousy and uncertainty churning uneasily inside his gut, a truly sickening sensation. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

He tried once again to talk himself back into hope. Vasily had reassured him time and time again that no matter how things shook out, he would never leave Luka. Luka believed he meant it. But Vasily could not speak for Amaru's heart or feelings on this matter. And Luka was under no illusions about who would win if a true mate put their foot down. A war that had destroyed their entire world was evidence enough of that.

He went to stand by the lake, needing a minute by himself. He stared out over the water, knowing what lay beneath the surface. Knowing he could not leave until the job here was finished. Hopefully, things would somehow work out. Right now, he just didn't see how.

Luka heard footsteps approaching from behind him and turned to see who it was. Gunter and Nikki walked toward him hand in hand, their trajectory obvious as they approached him.

"Luka, you got a second?" Gunter gestured toward the lake. "I have some questions about what you saw down there."

Luka could use the distraction right now. “Of course. What do you want to know?”

“Did you get a firm headcount on how many people were down there?”

“Actually, no, I didn’t. But Amaru knows exactly how many people were there.”

“Ah. I will ask him then. Evora said the technology and magic were not things she had ever seen before.”

“That’s true. It was in line with what we saw from the Sousa ruins, of course. Actually, if anything, what we saw in the ruins was nothing but a shadow compared to what I saw down there. I’m not sure if even modern technology could do what they did. It just shows we really did lose a lot of knowledge in the war.”

Nikki made a face. “You can say that again. I mean, the Sousa had always been cutting edge back in their day, but I find it amazing that even in modern times we can’t understand how they did what they did. For that matter, I’m still trying to figure out how Amaru connected to you and Vasily in your dreams.”

Nikki wasn’t the only one who wondered about their connection. Luka had a lot of questions about that himself, but he hadn’t yet found the right moment to ask. Or really, he hadn’t found the courage to ask. He had a gut feeling Amaru had been able to connect with Vasily because they were mates. Luka may have just been in close enough proximity to have been reachable as well.

“I honestly don’t know who is more excited to wake everyone up at this point. I know Amaru is very excited—understandably so—but all the other dragon clans are as well. It means so many potential mates for all of us.” Gunter winced a little before adding on apologetically, “I don’t know how this will play out, but if Amaru and Vasily are mates—”

Nikki promptly threw an elbow into his ribs. “What the hell are you saying right now?”

Gunter jumped, already on the defensive. “I’m only saying that in history there has never been a triad with two dragons and a mage.”

Luka’s heart sank. He had feared that might be the case, but hearing those words out of Gunter’s mouth felt like a judge’s gavel striking down. Like his fate was sealed. Honestly, he didn’t know whether to rage or cry and found himself frozen instead. It felt almost inevitable. Like all of his worst fears were realized even though nothing had been decided yet.

“There’s never been mention of a non-binary mage in history either,” Nikki shot back, a frown tugging at the corners of their mouth. “And yet here I stand. You of all people should know better than to put too much faith in those historical records. Considering how much was lost, we can’t judge everything by them.”

Gunter gave a half-hearted shrug. “Point made. I’m not trying to cause trouble here. But Luka, if the worst does happen, I don’t want you to feel like you have to stay here. You are always welcome with the Burkhardts.”

The offer was very sweet and generous. Luka was not about to dismiss it. “Shouldn’t you ask for permission before you say those things?”

Gunter snorted like he was being ridiculous. “I can assure you, my king and consort will have no issue with what I said. Besides, we are finding new mage clans and families every day, it feels like. Because of the website, they tend to come to us more than here in Brazil.”

“That’s true.” Nikki nodded in support of this. “These days, the mages almost outnumber the dragons. I’m not saying you need to consider this right now. You might very well be able to keep Vasily. Just because history records don’t have a triad in them doesn’t mean it’s not possible. Besides, even if it’s never been done before, there is always the first time.”

Luka appreciated what Nikki said and the support being offered. Unfortunately, it didn’t do much to overcome the fear churning inside him. He feared Gunter was right. He feared he

would be single again for the first time in centuries before the month was even out. And while he kept telling himself to hold on to hope, it felt like a very thin line leading to nowhere.

Somehow, from somewhere, he managed to dredge up a smile. “If it comes down to that, then trust me, I will definitely consider Germany.”

Nikki shot Gunter another challenging look. “My bet is it won’t come down to that.”

Gunter favored his mate with an indulgent smile. “You’re ever the optimist.”

“That is my job in this relationship, yes. Anyway, Luka, if you need a listening ear, I am always available. Also, if Amaru needs a shopping buddy, I am absolutely down for that. I’m sure at this point the poor guy has no clothes to speak of.”

“He’s borrowed some of my things for now. But you’re correct, we will have to do some proper shopping. Thanks, both of you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Anyway, back to my original point.” Gunter once again gestured toward the water. “I know you weren’t in any state to do actual reporting, but Evora took quite a few pictures, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“I’d like to have a copy of all of those. For historical records, you understand.”

Ah, yes, that made sense. Of course he would be interested in having the pictures of everything before it was disturbed.

Luka fell into a discussion with them of how to get the pictures, of what else he experienced and saw, but even as they talked, a part of him wasn’t involved in the conversation. Part of him was still dwelling on the possibility that he might not be the first recorded triad in history.

He might instead be yet another name on the list of those who had lost in the competition with a mage.

If it came down to that, then he probably would take up their invitation to move to Germany. It would be far too painful to stay here and watch Vasily fall in love with someone else. Even trying to imagine that nearly split his heart in two. Watching it would be impossible. It would be salt in an open wound for it to be Amaru, too, because Luka was attracted to the mage. His dragon had not said anything to him, though, which worried him as well.

Luka tried to keep the thought off his face, but he was fairly sure he'd already lost.

I

It wasn't that Vasily understood everything about Luka; even after centuries together he was not arrogant enough to claim that. But Luka leaving when Amaru needed comfort was very outside of his normal behavior. Generally speaking, Luka was always the one to offer comfort when it was needed, so him leaving made very little sense.

Especially since Amaru was their mate.

It had taken less than five seconds for Vasily to realize it once he held the mage. The second he had drawn Amaru into his arms, his dragon had quite smugly declared MINE. If Amaru had not been so obviously distraught at that moment, Vasily might very well have crowed it to the heavens. It had not been the time or place, he recognized that, and there was no guarantee Amaru even knew they were mates. From what he had seen, the humans tended to take a little bit longer to realize things.

He had just one question for his dragon, since it was in a talking mood. Luka? Was Luka also his mate?

His dragon very audibly rolled its eyes. *Duh. Yes, of course Luka was mate.*

Vasily let out a not so subtle breath of relief. Thank any god listening. He had not known what he would do if Luka wasn't.

But why had Luka not realized it?

It did not take a dragon's nose to know this stank of potential trouble.

Amaru had pulled himself together, but he looked a little fragile to Vasily's eyes. Like he was just hanging on by a

thread. If not for Amaru's obvious need for him, Vasily would've already been out of the tent and tracking Luka down. As it was, he was loath to move because Amaru apparently had no intention of regaining his seat.

Was this something like having a cat sit on you? A mate on his thighs seemed to have the same sort of paralytic powers.

"Someone said something about earth dragons. You think earth dragons will help us?"

To Amaru, this probably did sound ridiculous in the extreme. Five hundred years ago, the concept of asking another dragon clan for help would've been laughable. He did remember those days, so he was patient as he answered.

"I am absolutely positive. They have already helped considerably when dealing with the Jaeggi. Frankly speaking, no dragon can afford to ignore your clan. We don't have enough mages as it is, and the expertise of your clan is something we desperately need."

Amaru's eyes narrowed, expression shrewd. "You say this because of Sam?"

"He is definitely part of the equation. Sam is my clan brother. But you must understand, there are a lot of dragons without mates, and there's a very good chance at least some of our potential mates are among your clan. I would help you regardless, as I know how dear your clan is to you, but..."

It was like he already knew Vasily's thoughts before he said them. "I know. And that makes me incredibly happy. If you are sure the earth dragons will come to help, then I want to speed them along their way. Can you call them for me somehow?"

"My king is probably doing that as we speak. But if you want to pitch in on the conversation, I am sure there are going to be details they will ask you."

"Yes." Amaru nodded decisively as he got up. "Then let's go."

Somewhat to his surprise, Amaru took his hand as they walked out of the tent. Vasily was not quite sure what was

going on here. Was Amaru touch deprived after being in a deep sleep for five hundred years? Was he just physically affectionate? Was it something else entirely? He absolutely was not complaining, but he was a little bit confused.

Or perhaps this was one of those cases where the mage picked up quickly on who their dragon was? Unlike the mages they had discovered in this generation, Amaru was of the time where dragons and mates were very common knowledge. This could play out more like Cassie and Sasha's mating had, where the mage took no time at all to put the pieces together. If that was the case, Vasily would only be relieved. Amaru was in a very difficult position and he could use the support of both of his mates through this.

He could not help but look around for Luka as they walked to Rodrigo's tent. Seriously, where had his other mate gotten off to? It was so unlike him to leave in a moment like that. Vasily's unease grew, and he resolved to find Luka at the first given opportunity.

Vasily slapped the tent on the side—a sort of knock to announce their presence—before opening the tent flap and stepping inside. He half expected to find Rodrigo on the phone, but instead he seemed to be video chatting. He had a tablet on the table in front of him, with Ha Na seated next to him in a folding camp chair.

Chalo's deep voice could be heard as they entered, the Earth Dragon King sounding excited and trying to mask it with a more sober tone. “—and you are sure they are all still alive and well?”

“I'll take that question.” Amaru stepped around to lean over Rodrigo's shoulder, then blinked comically down at the screen. “What under the moon and stars is this? That's not a mirror spell?”

Ha Na explained patiently, “No, dear, this is not a spell. It's technology. We are using science to communicate, not magic.”

You would think Amaru had been told Santa Claus was real, the Easter Bunny would arrive tomorrow, and he could have birthday presents every day for the rest of his life. That

was how excited he became. The pure, dazzling joy and anticipation on his face hit like a sucker punch to Vasily's heart. God above, he was breathtaking when he was happy. It made Vasily want to keep him happy all the time. If only Luka could see him in this moment. It made Vasily sad he had missed it.

“Science,” Amaru breathed, absolutely giddy. “Science is capable of this? Oh dear me, I'm no longer mad about being asleep for five hundred years. Well, I can't say that, I'm still mad, but science that can do this is a very nice consolation prize.”

Chalo seemed to be equally delighted in seeing Amaru. “Hello, are you the Sousa mage, Amaru?”

“I am indeed. You are the Earth Dragon King?”

“That I am. My name is Chalo.”

Amaru's smile did not dim one whit. “I am absolutely delighted to speak with you. Are you willing to help dig my clan back out?”

“That was a very frank question but I do not mind it. Yes, I am. I think I can speak for all of us when I say that whatever help you need, you may have it.”

Vasily had not expected any other answer. Amaru seemed to still be taken aback by this, like he did expect some kind of an argument, but he looked too relieved to even think about arguing.

“I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Whatever assistance I can offer you in return for your help—”

Chalo waved this away. “Mages are in trouble. Of course we will help.”

Vasily had tried to explain to Amaru more than once that mages were just too precious for dragons to ignore. It was not that Amaru had disbelieved him, but such a drastic attitude change must've been hard for him to wrap his head around. He still looked a little surprised at this ready agreement. Surprised, but not willing to argue, either.

“Then, thank you again. What can I tell you to make the situation easier?”

“I have seen pictures of the grotto, and I know the gist of how the interior was laid out, but what of the tunnel leading down? Is it completely collapsed?”

“That, I am not sure about. When we first discovered the tunnel, it was not very wide. We used a mixture of magic and architecture to widen the path and make it more uniform. It should have held up better than it did, so I’m not quite sure why it collapsed. I am hoping it’s just the mouth of the tunnel that did so, but I can make no promises. I am assuming an earth dragon can get a better sense of it than I can.”

They fell to discussing logistics, Rodrigo taking over the conversation to coordinate everyone coming in. Vasily just stood and listened as decisions were made. What amazed him more than anything was how readily Amaru answered every question posed to him. Despite the fact that he was very behind on technology and could barely understand some of what they referenced, he got the gist enough to answer. In his shoes, Vasily would not have fared nearly as well.

Amaru had been chosen by his entire clan to be the fail-safe if something had gone wrong. In this moment, Vasily could entirely understand why. This man was one smart cookie.

The conversation with the Earth Dragon King acted like a linchpin. Amaru hopped from one person to the next, coordinating with them, pulling in others, and then demanding of Vasily who else he needed to talk to. It was almost a scavenger game in a sense, except he wasn’t looking for things but for people.

Vasily had to wonder if this was Amaru’s normal speed or if he was just that determined to get his clan out as quickly as possible. He had a feeling it was a healthy mix of both, which meant it was just as well Amaru had two dragon mates because it would take both of them to keep up with him.

Throughout the rest of the day, he expected Luka to catch up with them, but it failed to happen. What had been a mild

worry now blossomed into downright concern. Vasily had no real idea of what was going on through that pretty head of Luka's, but he knew it could not be anything good. Luka had always been the one who'd had the most reservations about their future. Vasily was very afraid Luka had jumped to the wrong conclusions when Amaru turned to Vasily for comfort. He would love to straighten his lover out, but it meant finding him first. Luka had seemed to disappear into thin air.

To say he was frustrated was the understatement of the century.

They ate dinner, cleaned up, and Vasily showed Amaru to his own tent and helped him settle in for the night. When he was sure the mage was comfortable, he retreated back to the tent he was supposed to share with Luka. Not that Luka had made any kind of appearance yet.

Determined to hash this out, he propped himself up on a pillow and scrolled on his phone while he waited for Luka to return. He had to return at some point. All of his stuff was still in the tent.

That was his thought, at least, while he waited. And waited. And...waited.

Hours dragged by and Vasily's eyelids grew heavy. He kept fighting the impulse to sleep and felt himself losing. Getting up and stretching had no lasting effect. He finally propped himself up on one elbow, thinking the slightly uncomfortable position would keep him from dozing off.

The next thing he knew, it was oh dark thirty, and he had somehow collapsed onto his side with his arm tucked underneath his head like a pillow. When he lifted his head to check, he found Luka sound asleep next to him.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Had Luka deliberately come in after Vasily was asleep? This timing was all too suspicious.

Vasily glowered at Luka, his frustration back with a vengeance. He vowed to himself that he would talk to Luka first thing in the morning. He wanted to know exactly what

Luka was thinking and straighten all of this out before the situation bent out of shape.

Luka would not be allowed to avoid this confrontation.

R

“Ravi, if your husband discovered I let you anywhere near the explosives chest, he’d skin me and mount my head on the wall.”

Explosives chest?

As if by magic, Amaru found his feet stopping and turning toward that voice. It sounded like Gregori, the dragon he’d met recently.

“Amaru?”

Luka’s voice tried to penetrate his thoughts, but it didn’t have much of a chance. Amaru understood explosives, but now he needed to know what an explosives chest was. He very much wanted to know what Ravi was doing with an explosives chest. It sounded far more entertaining than glaring at his own failed notes on how to fix the devices keeping his clan trapped in sleep. Plus, he’d briefly met Ravi when he’d first arrived at the camp and the wind dragon seemed like he knew how to locate fun things.

“Just...just going for a little walk. It’ll help me think,” he replied, waving his hand toward his mushy brain. It wasn’t his fault his brain was mushy. Five hundred years of sleep and being surrounded by two hot dragons would turn anyone’s brain to mush.

“Uh-huh. I can’t imagine why I don’t believe that,” Vasily muttered under his breath.

Amaru smiled. Of course his mates knew him. Besides, this would be fun, and they all needed fun.

Toward the edge of the camp, Amaru found Gregori standing in front of a bright red tent with Ravi and another

person next to him who seemed familiar, but then he'd met so many mages and dragons recently they were all a blur of faces and names. For now, each one had a hold on one of Gregori's arms as they seemed to plead with him.

"Who?" Amaru whispered, trying to keep faces and names straight.

"Gregori, Ravi's the brunet and the blond is Nikki. Nikki uses they/them pronouns, by the way."

This made little to no sense to Amaru, but he thought he understood. "Oh, is Nikki one who embraces all genders?"

"Uh..." Vasily blinked at this. "Sure? That's one way to put it. This is something you're familiar with?"

"Sure. Genders are something we decide for ourselves, really. There are some that don't like to be caged by one, so embrace multiple. I will address Nikki that way."

"Cool."

"Come on, Gregori!" the mage begged. "Rodrigo already said the earth dragons are going to come help clear the tunnel and secure the grotto. It's not like you're going to need all the black powder. You can loan us a little."

"Loan you?" Gregori gasped. "What? Like you're going to return the black powder after you use it?"

The mage fluttered their eyelashes at Gregori while their smile turned sly. "We promise to give back any we don't use."

Gregori laughed in Nikki's face. "Nikki, you're insane if you think you and Ravi would have any left over after you two finished playing."

"Come on, Gregori! How about some C4 then? Dimitri said you always have a little on hand. I've never gotten to play with it," Ravi begged.

"C4? What's that?" Amaru interjected.

"And that's our signal to go find other people to play with," Vasily announced in a loud voice as he grabbed one of

Amaru's arms. "Come on, Amaru. I think Luka's got an old iPod you can take apart."

Well, that only made him want to know what the stuff was even more.

"Amaru!" Ravi shouted, releasing Gregori to descend on him. Nikki continued to hold on to Gregori as if he was afraid the dragon would shift and escape before they could wrangle explosives out of him. "You need to join us. We're bored and Gregori won't share a tiny bit of explosives with us."

"For good reason!" Gregori chimed in. He leaned forward, eyes locked on Ravi. "I heard about the confetti bomb you and Cassie cooked up."

"Oh my gawd!" Ravi moaned, tossing his head back dramatically. "It was just one teeny tiny storage closet that got redecorated, and we weren't even using anything like black powder."

"That's my point exactly. If you can trash a closet without explosives, I'm afraid to see what you and Nikki would do with them."

Amaru pulled free of Vasily's hold and skipped over to Gregori, taking Ravi's place opposite the one they were calling Nikki. "But if you're there with us, you can make sure we're safe. Plus, I need to understand what this C4 thing is."

"C4 is explosive clay. You can mold it into different shapes and stuff it into tiny crevices, then make it explode. Hi again! I'm Nikki Burkhard, Gunter's mate."

"Hi, Nikki! C4 sounds amazing and I want to see how it works." He turned his gaze on Gregori. "Please, Gregori. I've been asleep for soooooo long. I'm missing out on so many new things that have been invented. Please, teach me about C4 and black powder and all your lovely explosives."

Was it over the top? Possibly.

Was he throwing everything he had at Gregori? Pretty much.

Was it working? Maaaaayyybbbeeee...

While he batted his eyes at Gregori just like Nikki, the dragon threw a look past them at Vasily and Luka. Amaru glanced back to see Vasily wincing and shaking his head. Luka lifted both hands as if trying to ward off Gregori's glare.

"Don't look at me. I have no control over any of this," Luka quickly argued.

Gregori moaned. "Okay. Fine. A little explosives. But we need to move farther from the lake. I don't want to risk anything rattling the grotto or mixing with those storm clouds."

"YAY!" Amaru squealed. He threw himself at Gregori, wrapping his arms around the dragon's neck while pressing a kiss to his cheek. "This is going to be amazing!"

"Uh-I-yeah," Gregori stammered, his cheeks flushing a bright red and his eyes darting to the ground. "Why don't you go find a nice clearing away from the camp and the lake where we can work? I'll get some supplies."

"Deal!" Ravi agreed. "I think we already have a place. Amaru? This way!" Ravi pointed toward a break in the trees and started toward it.

Before Amaru took a step, he paused and glanced at his dragons, who hadn't moved an inch. Their expressions were strange. Kind of a mix of open-mouthed shock and amusement. Was this bemusement? Possibly. If anything, Luka seemed more relaxed than he had been yesterday and this morning. The tension that had pulled his shoulders tight was gone and so were the little lines around his mouth. Maybe he liked blowing things up too. This was what they all needed.

"You're coming with us, right?" Amaru asked. A little prod to keep them together.

Vasily rubbed his chin, half hiding his smile behind his hand. "Probably best if we do. Just to protect Gregori from you, Nikki, and Ravi."

"Hey!" Nikki cried out as they followed behind the wind dragon.

“Yep! Definitely coming with you,” Luka suddenly agreed. He bumped his shoulder against Vasily’s and smiled at him. “It’ll be fun.”

Could this day get any better? Time with his dragons, new friends, and explosives! If only he could figure out how to tackle the sleeping clan issue. Maybe he could just blow the devices up and that would fix it.

No. He’d probably blow his clan up as well.

Blowing up Irany might be nice, but not the rest of them.

He wove his way through the dense trees, following behind Nikki as they talked about all the interesting things they’d learned about the Valerii and Sousa since coming to Brazil. They made some off-hand comments about them being far more interesting than the Jaeggi they’d been held captive by. Amaru filed that unexpected nugget away for later. Now might not be the best time to ask about things like that when they were doing fun stuff. But Vasily and Luka might know.

Yes, that was a better plan. Cuddle up with his dragons and ask them about Nikki and their time with the Jaeggi. That would work.

As Vasily and Luka walked beside him, he flashed both dragons a smile. This was as it should be.

Those thoughts flew from his head when he spotted Ravi in his slate blue dragon form in the middle of a newly made clearing. It might have had a little clear space, but the wind dragon was low to the ground, wings spread, as he whipped around and around in a circle, using his long spiked tail and wings as scythes to cut down smaller trees and bushes and then push the debris out of the way.

Nikki’s wild cackle could just barely be heard over the commotion Ravi was creating. “I don’t think this is what Gregori had in mind!”

Ravi stopped, his tongue briefly hanging out the side of his mouth as he panted like a giant, blue-scaled dog begging for treats. “I didn’t want to walk anymore. This spot just needed a little tidying up.” After a couple more turns, Ravi shifted into

his human form and ran the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead.

They were just stepping into the clearing when Gregori arrived with a black backpack slung over one shoulder and huffed, his eyes dancing across the various piles of trees and bushes.

He moved to the center of the clearing and carefully placed the bag on the ground. Their little group quickly gathered closer, trying to peer inside as soon as he opened the bag. Amaru had blown up plenty of things over the years, but it had all been magic based. What kind of explosions could he make with black powder and C4?

Gregori reached inside and then stopped and jerked the bag closed again. “Exactly what were you planning to do with this stuff if I did loan it to you?”

Ravi and Nikki exchanged a look.

Oh, this was going to be good!

Nikki shrugged one shoulder. “I was just telling Ravi that I was tired of all these dark skies and gray clouds.”

“We thought it might be interesting if we could maybe blow the clouds apart to see the blue sky again,” Ravi continued.

Nikki pulled a colorful cloth bag out of their pocket and held it up. “I might have also snagged a few fun spell ingredients. If we can’t blast the clouds apart, maybe we could change the colors from gray and black.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Vasily asked in a flat voice.

Nikki spun toward Vasily and shook their head, a broad smile on their lips. “Nope. Not at all. The clouds can already change from white to gray on their own. I was thinking we could use a little moonlight to wash the clouds white again, a touch of rainbow mist for color, Ravi’s wind power as an activator, and then the black powder to blast it everywhere across the sky.”

“You’re going to need a special casing to keep the moonlight and rainbow mist separated,” Amaru chimed in, luring everyone’s eyes to him. “If you try to combine the moonlight and rainbow mist into a single potion, the moonlight is going to wash it out every time. To keep the colors crisp, you’re going to want a phased release. Moonlight to wash out the clouds first, and then the rainbow mist mixed with the black powder. When Ravi’s wind magic hits the container, it should activate the moonlight a second or two before activating the rainbow mist and blasting powder.”

“Oh my god! I love this idea!” Nikki grabbed both of Amaru’s shoulders and gave him a little shake. “How do we do this? We need to do this now! How do we do it? Should I run back to the camp? What can I get?”

“We don’t need anything.” Amaru turned his gaze to Gregori and smiled his most winning smile again. “We just need to borrow some dragon ice carefully shaped into a pair of capsules that can fit inside each other.”

Gregori held up a hand over his eyes. “Stop with the cute faces. I can’t take it. I’ll do it. Not because you looked like that, though. I really want to see if this would work.”

A squeal of mischief and excitement escaped Amaru as he squatted on the ground and grabbed a stick. He quickly sketched out a rough design of what he had in mind and how Gregori should shape the ice.

“Not to rain on your parade or anything,” Luka began as he looked over Amaru’s shoulder. “But won’t you need magic words for this spell? Ravi can’t cast a spell and there’s no fucking way we’re going to let any mage attempt this insanity.”

“Dragons are durable. Mages are not,” Vasily added.

Amaru violently shook his head, sending his hair falling into his eyes. “No. No. No spell words because this isn’t technically a spell. We’re just using each ingredient’s natural power. Ravi’s wind magic will give it an added boost so we don’t have to use a ton.” He pushed his hair back and grinned

at his mates. “This might still do nothing other than cause a little explosion.”

“But that’s fun too!” Ravi said.

He held his breath, waiting for either Luka or Vasily to shut down the idea as too dangerous, but both dragons surprised him by sitting down in the dirt and creating tubes of ice in their hands.

Almost from the start it became a competition between Luka, Vasily, and Gregori as to who could make the best ice tubes with the correct thickness that fit inside of each other. Many, many efforts were tossed aside. There might have been a few dick-shaped tubes that were also tossed aside as they grew more creative in their efforts. Amaru cackled with Nikki as they shouted out advice about the shape of the head and whether the ice dicks should include balls.

It wasn’t a bad idea. Amaru actually grabbed up his stick and tinkered with his design. Maybe the moonlight should be housed in the ice balls and the ice dick could carry the rainbow mist and black powder.

In the end, they returned to his regular design because he couldn’t guarantee the rainbow mist and moonlight would release at the same time. Plus, Gregori complained about exploding ice dicks in the sky.

The cleared field was covered in melting ice tubes and a scattering of penis-shaped icicles, but they finally had something that might work. With extreme care, Nikki placed the moonlight in the first tube while Amaru mixed the black powder Gregori gave him with the rainbow mist.

“Ravi, remember that you have to move fast,” Luka admonished as he sealed the smaller tube inside the one holding the moonlight. “The ice will start to melt as soon as it’s in your hand. You need to launch the tube at the clouds before the moonlight can escape.”

Ravi had already shifted into his dragon form. He snorted and shook his head. “I’m faster than the wind, snowman.”

With a final roll of his eyes, Luka placed the ice tubes in Ravi's palm. The wind dragon was little more than a blue streak as he raced into the sky, faster than any dragon Amaru had ever seen. The lightning dragons could move in a flash, but only over short bursts. Ravi's flight was flawlessly smooth and frighteningly quick.

Just before it seemed like the blue speck was going to disappear into a large thunderhead, he stopped and made a throwing motion.

Amaru grabbed Nikki's hands with both of his. They were both practically vibrating as they watched and waited. This was such a crazy idea. There was so little chance of it actually working. He—

White washed through the cloud before his eyes, seeming to drain away all the gray. By the gods, the moonlight was working!

BOOM!

"Fuck! That was too much black powder," Gregori muttered.

It didn't matter. The clouds became a different color in an instant. One was strawberry red. The one next to it vibrant new-leaf green. Another sunny yellow. On and on. All the colors of the rainbow spread across the sky.

"Holy shit! I can't believe we did that!" Nikki screeched.

"It's beautiful," Amaru whispered. "Just beautiful." So much better than gray, stormy skies.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he looked up to see Luka smiling at him. "That is pretty amazing."

The words had barely left his lips when a deep, long roll of thunder rumbled out of the multicolored clouds, followed by the soft patter of fat raindrops.

Amaru held up a hand, catching the rain to find that it wasn't clear. "Huh. Green rain."

"It's blue over here." Vasily held up his hand to show it was now streaked with pale blue.

Ravi landed next to them and shifted into his human form, his face spotted with purple water.

“Shit,” Gregori growled. “Rodrigo is going to freak. You know what? I was never here.” The ice dragon snagged his backpack and sprinted back to the camp, leaving them all behind.

“I think Gregori has the right idea,” Vasily stated.

Luka nodded. “Yep. We were never here.” With a laugh, both dragons ran toward the camp, leaving Amaru laughing so hard he could hardly keep his balance as he ran with Nikki and Ravi. Even if they got in trouble, it was worth it. Totally worth it.

14

Vasily had certainly had worse mornings, but he could not say this morning ranked as good either. For one thing, Luka had disappeared before he had woken, again. He'd been there for the explosions yesterday, but it seemed as though Luka was avoiding being alone with Vasily. Frankly, he was a little surprised he'd seen Luka yesterday at all with the way he was acting. If his mate was avoiding him so assiduously, things might very well be going to shit. There was no rationalizing or trying to deny it. Luka was definitely avoiding him. Worse, it seemed like he was avoiding Amaru too. It was not a difficult equation. Luka seemed to be of the opinion that Amaru and Vasily were mates but he was not.

Part of Vasily feared Luka might be right, but he couldn't be. Vasily's dragon had been very firm and smug yesterday when confirming that the three of them were mates. He was ever so grateful for that confirmation because without it he might well have shared Luka's fears. Vasily firmly held on to the hope that his dragon was right. He just did not understand why Luka's dragon wasn't saying something. Or was fear drowning the dragon's voice out?

He didn't know, and he wouldn't know until he was able to find Luka.

The first thing he did upon waking was look for Luka, but wherever his lover had disappeared to, it wasn't anywhere near the camp. Yes, he could track Luka down, but before he left the camp he wanted to at least say something to Amaru and make sure his mage was all right without both of them—at least for the hour it would take to track Luka down.

Vasily ducked into Amaru's tent with a greeting on his lips that died unspoken. Amaru was absolutely nowhere to be seen.

Worse, the cot looked unslept in.

Just where the hell had he gone?

Vasily's sixth sense, 'now it's my problem' alarm promptly went off.

Swearing, he turned about and searched the camp. He distinctly remembered tucking Amaru into bed last night and making sure he had everything he needed, so where had his mage gone? It was very obvious he had spent maybe two seconds in his cot before leaving it. Was it just because Amaru had slept so much recently that he couldn't fathom lying down again? Or had some idea popped to mind that he wanted to explore? As long as he hadn't found trouble in the dead of night, it was fine. It did mean, however, that he was now looking for both of his mates instead of just one. He came across other people as he stalked through the camp, stopping to ask if they had they seen Amaru or Luka. Eventually, someone had seen Amaru and pointed him to the research end of the camp.

He hoofed it over there, finding Amaru within seconds. He had a folding card table in front of him, a screwdriver in hand, and what looked like a thousand pieces of...something... spread out over the table. It looked like electronics, but damn if Vasily knew what he'd taken apart.

Amaru sat hunched over it like Gollum with his ring, muttering to himself in dire tones. He did not look happy.

A little concerned, Vasily approached and leaned over the opposite side of the table. "Amaru?"

His head popped up, eyes blinking owlishly for a second as he clearly switched mental tracks. Then he smiled broadly. "Favorite person! Hello. How are you this morning?"

"I'm fine. Did you sleep?" he asked because Amaru did not have the air of a man who had slept at all.

Amaru waved this off. "Not tired. Slept too much."

"What are you doing?"

“Trying to figure this thing out. But now it’s all in pieces and my repair spell isn’t working because I don’t know how this works.” Amaru glared at the bits on the table like this was entirely their fault for not cooperating.

Just from the casing, Vasily guessed this had been a cell phone last night. Whose might be the question. He smothered a chuckle at Amaru’s frustration because that expression wasn’t meant to be cute. Mentally, he promised himself to find a pawn shop later and buy a bunch of cheap electronics for the mage to play with. Starting with a cell phone was like diving into a new video game on the extra hard level.

It was a shame Luka was missing this. He mentally aimed a kick in his other mate’s direction. Just wait until he laid hands on him...Vasily wasn’t sure if leaving Amaru in this moment was all right or not. He seemed safely occupied?

Amaru, in a fit of frustration, reached for a sharp rock on the ground and took a jabbing stab at a wire.

Vasily frantically caught his arm before it could impact. No. Not safe to leave Amaru alone. Dammit. Luka would have to wait. “Let’s not destroy either the phone or your hand.”

Amaru glared at him, anger rising. “It. Won’t. Come. Apart.”

“How about you let that be for now? We can go shopping for you.”

“Oh! Yes. Excellent.” Amaru bounced up, although he cast one last disapproving scowl at his project. “I need many things. All sorts of tools and elements if I’m to have a workable space.”

Vasily had meant more clothing, but okay. He could see how Amaru would need tools too if he was to work on the problem of waking up his clan. “It should be interesting to figure out what modern tools will work for you.”

“Hmm, yes, I pondered this problem while working on *that*.” Another glare. “But tools are tools; it’s me who needs to adapt to them. Right, so, where do we go?”

“Let’s start with spell elements. The mages around us will know best what we have on hand, or what can be brought over, and they can start pulling that together while we shop for actual tools and clothes.”

“Clothes?” Amaru looked down at the clothes he wore, then back up with a growing frown. “But I like wearing Luka’s clothes.”

Hearing this absolutely delighted him. Amaru might not know they were mates, but he clearly liked Luka quite a bit. “He only brought so much to wear, you know.”

“Then buy him more clothes so I can borrow them.”

“Your logic is hurting my brain.”

“I’ve been accused of that more than once.” Amaru came around to lean up against Vasily’s side, almost snuggling in, really. He batted those enormous chestnut eyes, so cute Vasily’s heart almost stopped. “I like screwdrivers.”

Snorting a laugh, Vasily promised, “We’ll get you a wide variety. Plus other things.”

“Are you playing sugar daddy so early in the morning?”

He turned his head to watch Luka approaching them. Fucking finally, there was his quarry. On the one hand, he was relieved Luka had finally shown his face. On the other...this still smelled like trouble. He was smiling but it looked more than a little complicated, perhaps a touch fearful as well. That reaction only made Vasily more concerned.

“He needs tools. And clothes.”

Amaru turned to give that same oh-so-innocent look to Luka. Which impacted instantly—it was almost like Luka forgot how to breathe for a second. Vasily couldn’t blame him for that reaction; the look wasn’t even aimed at Vasily, and he couldn’t help but think Amaru was entirely too cute for his own good.

“I can wear your clothes, though, right?” It was clearly not a question.

Luka somehow managed to get words out. “But then I’d have nothing to wear.”

Amaru’s smile turned lecherous. “Oh no. How terrible.”

The flirting was cute and made him happy all over again. *See, Luka? He likes you too.*

If he reacted quickly enough, he might be able to rope Luka into the shopping trip. Time spent with Amaru would surely knock some of these wrong impressions out of his head, and perhaps Vasily could find a moment to speak with him. “Tools. Spell elements. You two can argue clothes later.”

Amaru stuck his tongue out at him. “Fine. Hmm, let’s see, where’s Evora? She’d know what we have in stock, right?”

“She’s probably the best person to ask, yes.” Vasily had passed her in the search for Amaru, and she’d been getting breakfast at the mess tent, so he turned and led them in that direction. “We can eat breakfast while you ask her.”

“Sounds good.” Amaru bounced along at his side.

Luka walked with them, his attention on Amaru. “What were you doing earlier? That looked like a cell phone you took apart?”

“Right, it was. I hate not knowing how something works. It’s like ants crawling under my skin, truly just...” Amaru broke off with a full body shudder. “Everyone has one, too. Everyone. Everyone but me, and I don’t even know how they work. Horrific. I must change this as quickly as possible.”

“Amaru.” Luka was definitely laughing on the inside, Vasily knew that look well. “Do you have any other speeds aside from full steam ahead or dead stop?”

The mage sniffed as if this question was beneath him. “I slept for five hundred years, woke up to a world that’s like a treasure trove full of fun things to learn, and you expect me to not dive in right away?”

“Okay, fair point. But, uh, Amaru? Whose cell phone was that?”

“No idea.” Amaru bounced along without a care in the world. “I found it lying about with no owner around.”

That poor sap, whoever it was.

It was still early enough not everyone was at the mess tent. They lined up at the tables, choosing what to have for breakfast and getting coffee. Vasily’s suspicions stirred when he saw Amaru doctor his with milk and sugar like he knew exactly what to do. Had someone introduced him to coffee last night? To help him stay awake?

Well, damn. This spelled trouble.

Amaru filled up a plate, spied Evora, and beelined right for her.

“Evora, I have questions.”

She waved him to a chair opposite her at the card table. “Sit. I might have answers.”

He promptly did so. Vasily took position at the head of the table, there basically to eat breakfast and take notes on what Amaru needed. At this point, Amaru was the only one who had a clue of what to do next.

“I need”—Amaru’s hands lifted in a broad gesture, like he was hugging the whole world—“everything. Tools, spell elements, all of it. I understand from Sam that my lab is basically a shell right now. Nothing remains?”

“Not much,” she admitted with a grimace. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault. Damn tomb robbers. Well, I suppose I can’t call it a tomb, as no one was there.” Amaru pulled a face and slurped his coffee.

Luka joined Amaru’s side of the table, settling in with his usual heaping amounts of everything. Luka could, and had, out-eaten people twice his size. He claimed it took that many calories to look good.

“What spell elements do you need?” Luka prompted. “Start there.”

“Hmm, yes, right now I need elements that can break things. Shadow of an eclipse?”

Evora nodded. “Have that.”

Encouraged, Amaru pressed, “Caipora’s howl?”

From the blank expression on her face, she did not have that. “I didn’t realize it had power?”

Amaru blinked back at her, also confused. “Why wouldn’t it? It’s a mystical being.”

“You have to remember, we’re not native to this area,” Evora reminded him patiently. “And when we came, there was no one native to teach us anything. We stuck to what we knew.”

“Oh. Damn. Well, that doesn’t bode well for the rest of my list. Uh, how about iara’s song?”

“Nope.”

“I, er—shit, let me think.” Amaru popped a bite of bread into his mouth and chewed, brows beetling into a straight line.

Vasily ate with a sinking feeling in his stomach. If Amaru couldn’t figure out what spell elements to use to replace the ones they didn’t have, would that mean he couldn’t work?

Luka swallowed coffee before offering, “If you tell her the power levels of those elements, couldn’t you and Evora figure out how to substitute?”

“Well, yes, in theory, but there’s a reason we use certain elements.” Amaru rubbed his forehead.

“Right,” Evora agreed, matching his frown. “Not all elements have the right impact or result that we want. Otherwise, we could just use the same ten elements all the time and be perfectly fine.”

“Now wouldn’t that be nice?” Amaru rolled his eyes. “What I wouldn’t give for that to be the case. But in this instance, I need something with a malignant edge, and sound based, to offset the design. It was supposed to be sound-

activated to begin with, so the *wrong* sound should trigger the fail-safes and wake people up.”

“Ah.” Vasily could follow the logic, but he had no idea what to offer. This was absolutely not in his department. His job was to safeguard things and kill the annoying ones.

“Rushing wind of a hollow cave?” Luka suggested.

Amaru shook his head. “Not powerful enough.”

“If Amaru’s looking for mystical things, then they must be at least a three or four in power,” Evora explained. “What you suggested is natural, so it’s a two.”

“Cackle of a drunken gnome?”

“Two power, and also the wrong resonance for what I need.” Amaru’s leg started bouncing, his agitation clear. “Scream of a banshee has the same problem.”

“Dammit, that was my next suggestion.” Luka joined the other two in frowning.

Look at him. Them, really. Vasily didn’t have a prayer of offering anything intelligent in this conversation, but Luka kept up just fine. Geek that he was, he knew enough to even suggest things. He and Amaru were so perfect together. He wasn’t sure who was more pleased, himself or his dragon. They were so cute in that moment he wanted to hug the stuffing out of them. It took willpower to restrain his hands, and he still had to sit on them.

On the other hand, Luka’s reaction to Amaru was now confusing him. He had been so systematically avoiding them up until this morning. Now he seemed glued to Amaru’s side. Was this a matter of his dragon not being able to stay away from Amaru for too long? Seriously, this was making less sense by the second. Vasily felt a headache coming on just trying to figure out what was going through Luka’s head.

Luka was still deep in thought, plowing through a stack of eggs, but Amaru noticed Vasily was acting weird. His hand came over to touch Vasily’s wrist, gripping there in comfort. Which did actually make him feel better. It did not solve the problem of Luka though.

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure this out. I always do. Oooh, maybe we can go hunt down what I need? Luka, what do you think? These creatures that I mentioned, they haven’t gone extinct, right?”

“Uh, no, they’re still very active.” Luka brightened, eyes coming up to meet Vasily’s. “We’re the trackers in the clan, too. We know the area very well around Brazil. How about it, should we take him hunting?”

Could his heart take being around them like that for days on end without respite? Vasily didn’t know. The cuteness might well kill him at this rate. “Uh, sure.”

“Let’s not jump to that quite yet,” Evora cautioned. “Hunting down the elements you need will take days, and I’m not sure if that’s time we have right now. Let’s leave that for plan B and discuss this a bit more. We can go through what we have in storage and see if there’s anything else that works for you. If it doesn’t, that’s when we come back to this idea.”

“Fair. I’ll do that with you after breakfast.”

“Then we take you shopping.” Luka nudged Amaru playfully, bonking shoulders with him. “Because you can’t keep wearing my clothes.”

Amaru blinked big brown eyes at him, the very picture of sadness. “I can’t?”

For a second, Luka almost faltered. “Uh…” Then he rallied. “You can’t. You must have your own clothes. Besides, don’t you want tools?”

“Mmm.” Amaru gave a dreamy sigh. “Tools. I want one of those small boxes too—the cell phones you all have.”

“We’ll get you one,” Luka promised with a chuckle. He was entirely amused by Amaru. “We’ve got a full day of shopping ahead of us. Vasily, who’s got a vehicle we can borrow?”

“Uh, I think Dimitri does? I’ll go ask.”

“Grab Gregori,” Amaru suggested brightly. “I know he wanted to take me into town too.”

Vasily was not quite sure why Gregori was suddenly brought into this or why Luka looked strangely satisfied? Seriously, there were too many parts to this that made no sense.

“Cool. Amaru, eat your breakfast. Don’t just drink coffee,” Luka chided.

Amaru obediently put another bite on his fork, but he eyed Luka sideways as he did so. “You sure we can’t just buy you more clothes? I’m good with that option.”

“I’m not. Behave.”

“There’s perks to letting me have my way, you know.”

Luka snickered even as he pointed a stern finger at Amaru. “You’re not winning this fight.”

Amaru didn’t argue but he notably didn’t agree as he popped a bite into his mouth. The machinations were clearly underway inside his head.

Vasily chose to rise, bus his plate, and go find Gregori. The sooner they got shopping done, the sooner he could sit on Luka and get some answers. Because he absolutely was not going to bed again until he had straightened this situation out.

15

It took some doing, but after they returned from their shopping trip he was able to snag Luka and haul him into the trees for some privacy. Luka seemed resigned to the conversation but also strangely afraid at the same time. Vasily did not understand that expression whatsoever. Luka had never once been afraid in all their time together. It made an ill, twisting sensation churn in his gut.

The very second he was sure they were out of earshot of the rest of the camp, he stopped dead. Even the typical birdsong and insect noises were muted in comparison to what they normally were—like the wildlife around them had taken notice of the mood and chosen to make themselves scarce.

Luka hesitantly asked, “Is...is Amaru Gregori’s mate?”

Why the hell did he think that? “Of course he isn’t. Why would you think that?”

“Oh. Um. He...gets along well with Gregori, is all.” Luka became absolutely crestfallen, his shoulders slumping like he was caving in on himself.

Vasily tried to meet Luka’s eyes dead on, but his lover’s gaze was fixed on the ground. If this talk was that hard on him, if looking away made it easier for Luka to stand here, then Vasily would not argue the point right now.

“Luka. Please, talk to me. What is going on?”

Luka struggled to lift his gaze from the ground and failed. His arms were crossed around his chest in a very defensive manner. He almost looked defeated, and Vasily’s heart squeezed uncomfortably just looking at him.

“He’s...yours.” Luka’s voice was a strained whisper.

This was precisely what Vasily had feared. He corrected him firmly. “He is *ours*.”

Luka shook his head in denial, expression absolutely miserable. “That’s just what you want to believe.”

“It’s not only me saying it. My dragon has been very confident about this from almost the beginning.” Were these words penetrating? It did not look like Luka actually believed them. Which was a very strange thing because Luka had always believed what Vasily told him. But what else could he possibly say to convince him?

Unable to just stand there, Vasily pulled Luka into his arms. Luka latched on, hands tangling in Vasily’s shirt at his back. He made a sound almost like a sob, but Vasily felt no tears on his chest. He tried to comfort Luka even as he tried to convince him.

“Tell me why you are struggling to believe this.”

It took a long moment before Luka found his voice. “Honestly, I have dreaded this moment for years. The more mages were found, the more sure I became that when you found your mage, I would lose you.”

Oh god. Vasily had had no idea Luka felt this way. He had never breathed a word of it to him. Had this fear carved into his heart so deeply he could not accept any other truth? Was that why he was struggling in this moment to see the obvious?

“I prayed, for years, that we’d never find our mage mate. How selfish is that? But I wished for it, ardently, because... because I couldn’t face the fallout.”

“But you aren’t going to lose me.”

Luka shook his head gently against Vasily’s chest. “I see the way you and Amaru look at each other. Part of me wants to hate him, but I can’t. He’s so charming, even I get swept up and want to spend more time with him. The two of you are just so perfect for each other that I cannot deny the obvious. I’ve always been braced for this—”

“I think that’s exactly the problem,” Vasily interrupted. “This negative mantra has played in the back of your head for

so long that to you this feels inevitable. Beloved, I'm going to say this again: *he is both of ours.*"

Luka did not say anything. He just stood there, stiff and miserable.

Right, that had not worked. Vasily bit back the impulse to shake him. "Isn't your dragon saying the same thing?"

Luka's voice was barely above a whisper. "My dragon has been perfectly quiet this whole time."

There was no way in hell that could be the case. They had been together for far too long, and Luka had said before that his dragon liked Vasily. Why would he not have anything to say about this? Vasily's own dragon had quite a bit to say about it and his dragon was not nearly as chatty as Luka's. Luka's dragon being silent made no sense.

What he did know for certain was this was destroying Luka. Luka was already resigned to losing him. Vasily, on the other hand, would absolutely never agree to breaking up with Luka. Even if Amaru demanded that of him, he wouldn't be able to do it. Not that Vasily anticipated that, because Amaru clearly liked Luka a lot. Him insisting on wearing Luka's clothes spoke volumes in and of itself...not to mention all the flirting he did.

Something wasn't connecting here, but Vasily could not pinpoint what. All he could do was offer suggestions at this point.

He kissed Luka's forehead, still holding on to him. "First of all, I don't care how this goes down, but I am never letting go of you. Understand that if you understand nothing else."

There was that sound again, like Luka was crying on the inside but refusing to show anything on the outside. That half sob wrenched at Vasily and he hugged Luka to him tighter.

"I don't understand why your dragon has not said something at this point. But it might be a case like Gunter's or Dimitri's. Remember how their dragons took several days before confirming the obvious?"

Luka finally lifted his head to peek up at Vasily. “Do you really think so?”

Ah, there, finally a spark of hope in those clear blue eyes. “I will bet anything you care to name that’s the case. I think you need to spend a lot more time with Amaru. Do that, and try to put it out of your head, this fear you have. It could be the fear is blocking your dragon’s voice. Please, please try to listen to your dragon. Don’t write off everything as inevitable.”

Luka seemed to feel like this was a valid point. At least, he did not argue or get that not-arguing face he wore when he disagreed with Vasily but wasn’t going to say so out loud. He seemed to actually be thinking about it. Vasily held his breath and let Luka take a moment to think.

“All right,” Luka finally said. “I’ll do as you ask. I’ll spend more time with him. I’ll give my dragon a chance to say something.”

Vasily hugged him back, hard. He was relieved that Luka would try. He also felt helpless and devastated that Luka felt this way. He’d never anticipated Luka would be put in this position. Not when his own dragon was so sure the three of them were mates.

Before this conversation, Vasily had been trying to figure out how to tell Amaru that the three of them were destined together. Now, he wasn’t so sure if he should say anything at all. It felt abhorrent to reject his mage mate once he’d found him, and Vasily absolutely did not want to do that to Amaru. But if he could not convince Luka that Amaru belonged to both of them, he might have to do precisely that.

His dragon growled in irritated warning and he growled right back at it. Yes, it sounded wrong even in his own head, this decision. But Amaru he had known days. Luka had been half of his heart for over two centuries. If it came down to which would hurt worse, obviously losing Luka was the real nightmare. It would kill him to make that choice, but he could not live without Luka.

Vasily prayed this was a decision he would not be forced to make.

16

The next morning, Luka stuck his head inside Amaru's tent to find him yet again tinkering with...well, he wasn't entirely sure what it had been. The electronic device looked as if it had exploded on the table, a mess of wires, processors, transistors, and other electrical guts spread across the flat surface as Amaru poked at it with a tiny screwdriver.

"Amaru?"

The mage's head instantly popped up and a wide grin spread across his face even as his floppy hair dropped to cover his eyes. How he could even see what was in front of him was a miracle. Luka didn't know whether to suggest a haircut or bobby pins.

"Luka! You came to visit me!"

"Are you free?"

He shrugged one thin shoulder, his smile turning a little lopsided. "I'm just taking this apart. Keeping my hands moving sometimes helps me think."

"I wanted to see if you would like to have lunch with me, but if you're busy, I don't want to disturb you. I can drop this off and let you get back to work."

Even as the words came out of his mouth, he was mentally scolding Vasily. This had been a terrible suggestion. There was no way Amaru had any interest in spending time with just him. Vasily was the interesting one of the two of them. The fun one. The sexy one.

Besides, Amaru was Vasily's mate. Not his. Trying to get alone time with Amaru just felt wrong.

Yet, Amaru surprised him by dropping the screwdriver with a clatter on the table and hopping to his feet. “Of course I want to have lunch with you!” He scurried over and snatched up the plate from Luka’s left hand, then furrowed his brow at the contents. “What is it?”

“This would be called a very simple meal: hamburgers, pasta salad, potato salad, and a brownie for dessert.”

Amaru narrowed his eyes at Luka. “Didn’t they call that pile of greens we had last night a salad? These don’t look like the same thing at all.”

Luka’s shoulders shook as he fought down a laugh. “There are actually a lot of things called a salad that probably shouldn’t be. But my favorites are the desserts.”

“That. I need to be introduced to more of those types of things.”

“We definitely will. Once we return to the clan house, the cooking will massively improve. We don’t have all our supplies or a full kitchen to work with here.”

Amaru quickly shook his head, his large eyes going impossibly wide. He pulled the paper plate close to his chest as if he was afraid Luka would try to take it back from him. “No! I’m not complaining. All the food I’ve eaten so far has been amazing.”

“Do you want to sit outside? There’s a nice breeze right now and the sun is actually out. I thought we could enjoy it before the next storm moves into the area.”

Amaru nodded and followed Luka out of the opening of the tent. Luka started to lead him over to where some old logs were set in front of a firepit. It was where much of the clan sat in the evenings and chatted before tumbling into their respective tents. He glanced back to find Amaru had stopped a few feet away, frowning as he searched the area.

“Amaru? Something wrong?”

“Where’s Vasily? Isn’t he going to join us?”

Luka's heart sank. Of course Amaru would rather have lunch with Vasily. They were mates, after all. He clung to his smile while parts of his soul fractured and flaked off. "He's supposed to be having a meeting with Dimitri, I think, and ate earlier. But if you would rather have lunch with him, I can go get him for you."

"No!" Amaru practically shouted. He scurried over to Luka's side and plopped down on the log. Patting the open space beside him, he directed a dazzling smile at Luka. "No! I was just thinking we could eat together. All three of us. But if he's busy, I'm happy to have time with just you."

Something twisted and fluttered inside of Luka's chest, as if Amaru's words were picking up the pieces of his broken soul and gluing them back into place. He hesitated for only a second before sitting next to him.

"Are you sure? Vasily would be happy to see you."

"Of course I'm sure. I don't get to spend time with just you much. All three of us can be together this evening." Amaru leaned close and placed his head on Luka's shoulder. He tipped his face toward Luka and fluttered his ridiculously long eyelashes. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

A chuckle escaped Luka and some of the tension balled up in his chest eased so he could breathe. "I am, but I think I'm mad at Vasily for not warning me how wickedly adorable you can be."

"Yes, but I only use my wicked adorableness for good, such as extra desserts."

"Uh-huh. I'm not sneaking you an extra brownie unless you eat the other food on your plate," Luka warned, even as he knew he'd sneak Amaru an extra brownie regardless of what he ate.

With a smirk and a little bounce, Amaru straightened and attacked his burger. He moaned softly with the first bite, losing himself to the delicious food the Valerii cooks had made.

"I feel lucky to have caught you," Luka murmured after they'd both settled in.

“Really?”

“You’re always in talks with the other mages. It’s not easy to grab a moment with you.”

Amaru’s grin was back as he leaned over to bump Luka with his shoulder. “If I’d known you were trying to get me off alone, I would have made it easier for you.”

Luka choked on his burger. Not what he was expecting the man to say. “You’re crazy,” Luka rasped when his throat was clear.

“Maybe a little. You have to be with my clan. We’re always trying crazy new things and cooking up new devices. Half of them are blowing up in our faces, but that’s how new discoveries are made.” Amaru paused with a forkful of potatoes halfway to his mouth as he cocked his head at Luka. “Do you get to spend a lot of time with Vasily? He said you both work on the same team.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that lately he didn’t get to spend nearly enough time with Vasily, but that didn’t seem helpful right now. He also hadn’t been expecting Amaru to ask that question. Certainly felt like the question was from left field.

“Not as much as you might think,” Luka admitted. “We’re both on the same team, but we have very different jobs. He’s a weapons specialist and a highly trained tracker. There’s nothing he can’t find in the wild once he sets his mind to locating it. I’m just...a glorified bookworm. I do fight, and I can hold my own, but I’m mostly there because of my speed. I’m the fastest in the clan.”

Amaru wrinkled his nose at Luka. “I don’t like how you say that. Glorified bookworm. The historians are the ones who preserve our past. They keep alive those who passed away centuries ago. You’re important too.”

Heat rushed to the tips of Luka’s ears and he had to drop his gaze to his half-eaten food or risk blushing himself to death. He’d never questioned his place on the team, but he

knew his job wasn't as exciting or as sexy as what Vasily or even Gregori did.

“Soooo,” Amaru drawled out. He wiggled his butt, inching even closer to Luka so they were touching almost from shoulder to knee. “Tell me. In all your studies and research, did you ever learn anything about the Sousa?”

Laughter launched out of Luka, forcing him to toss his head back. “Imp!” He cackled.

Amaru giggled and resumed eating, grinning wide. “I know Sam studied my people. We've already had long talks about all the things he and other historians got wrong about us. Mostly other historians. Sam is quite smart.”

“He is. He's devoted his life to trying to learn all he can about your people.” Of course, Sam's future as a mage was riding on his ability to unlock the secrets of the Sousa.

“But what about you?” Amaru bumped him again, to the point of almost laying his head on Luka's shoulder.

“I did. A little. But nowhere near as much as Sam. He learned to read your writing. I mostly collected stories told by other dragons and some mage clans. The Sousa...” Luka paused and tipped his head up toward the blue sky he could see through banks of thick white clouds. “You were like the Atlanteans of South America. Other than the stories from the metal dragons, no one had actually seen you, and most of the stories from the metal clan were of the Tupã lightning dragons. They didn't talk about you much.”

Amaru picked up his burger and took another large bite. “We didn't get out much,” he admitted around a mouthful. “The Tupã were very protective of the Sousa Clan. Our clan never grew very large, despite the fact that we faced few natural disasters or diseases. It was like they believed if other clans met us, we'd be destroyed overnight.” He toyed with a spiral pasta noodle with his fork, moving it around the plate. “But it's our own fault too. We didn't push to explore more of the outside world. We were happy to be lost in our inventions and our quiet clan life.”

“Keeping to yourselves meant you weren’t hurt by the war like the other clans. Entire mage clans were wiped out in a night. Dragons lost their mates in the blink of an eye. And as a result, dragon clans were decimated.” Luka looked down at Amaru, taking in his beautiful face and his wild hair. “A dragon can’t live without their mate. Some do for a while, but grief and madness consume them completely before they die a matter of months later. Most just follow their mate into death.”

“And you were alive for all of that, weren’t you? You fought in the war. With Vasily.”

Luka nodded. He placed his plate on his lap, the last bit of his appetite leaving him as his brain dusted off old war memories. Not that he blamed Amaru. It was only natural for him to have questions about something that had so changed the majority of the world.

“I did. It was dangerous and frightening. We lost the majority of our Ice Dragon Clan, but we were willing to face complete extinction if it meant stopping Kaiser Jaeggi and his followers. We put aside old grievances and fought alongside dragons who we’d viewed as enemies only months earlier.”

“But after...when the Jaeggi were defeated, you didn’t go back to regular life, right?”

“There was no going back,” he whispered, his voice becoming low and rough. “All the leaders of the remaining dragon clans got together and agreed that dragons would simply disappear from the world. Humans were left to think we’d all died in the war. We thought it was safer for us since nearly all the mages had been wiped out. The Burkhard dragons were the only ones I know of who remained in their ancestral home. We tried to return to Russia, but there were too many ghosts waiting for us there. Rodrigo wanted to give us a fresh start, so we moved to Brazil.”

“The metal dragons?”

“They went with the earth dragons into the east. We didn’t realize it at the time, but they scooped up several of the remaining mage clans and took them along. Together, they

formed the Sodalitium. We lost all contact to the point that we began to believe they were just a legend.”

Amaru grunted. “And since the metal dragons were the only dragons the Tupã even remotely spoke to, the Tupã and the Sousa were lost as well to time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? That we were forgotten?” A scoff left the back of Amaru’s throat. “Like you didn’t have a lot of bad things happening to keep you busy.”

Luka allowed a half smile to tug up the corner of his mouth. “You might have a good point.”

“Besides, the important thing is we’ve found each other now, right?”

“Very true.”

“And you like me, right? I’m not too much for you? I can tone it down. A little.” Amaru’s expression scrunched up. “Sometimes. Maybe. If I concentrate on it, I—”

“No,” Luka interrupted sharply and then huffed a soft laugh. “You’re perfect exactly the way you are.”

As the words left his mouth, he realized he meant it completely. This wasn’t about reassuring Amaru or helping him feel secure in strange surroundings. He truly did like Amaru. The mage was brilliant, sassy, adventurous, and so very funny. How could he not like him?

But then, why wasn’t his dragon piping up? Shouldn’t he be grumbling or purring or fucking something? There were plenty of times it was a chatty asshole when it was just him and Vasily. This...this was strange...and incomprehensible.

Luka needed it to start making sense, this whole situation. Hear that, dragon self? Speak. He was in serious danger of falling in love with this man, mate or not, and his dragon better say something now, before Luka’s heart was past the point of no return.

17

Vasily closed his eyes and rubbed them with his thumb and his forefinger, but it did nothing to rid him of the image of Amaru and Luka sitting so close together that their shoulders rubbed. Amaru had seemed to hang on to Luka's every word. But then, why wouldn't he? Luka was amazing, his brain overloaded with thousands of years of history and stories from all the known dragon and mage clans. Not to mention folklore about the mystical creatures who remained hidden in the shadows of the world.

That wasn't the only thing that drew Amaru in if he was smart. Luka was sweet, thoughtful, and adorable. Vasily had spent many an evening staring at the man as he lost himself in books. Luka's calm presence and lopsided smile made the world a better place.

He was the perfect mate for Amaru.

He just couldn't believe that Luka and Amaru weren't also mated. He had no idea what was going on there, why Luka's dragon wasn't saying something, but it was worrying.

Dropping his hand back down to his side, Vasily released a sigh and tried yet again to focus on the map in front of him. Not that he was having much luck. His brain was a useless lump of gray matter keeping his head from collapsing in on itself. Vasily had never felt so unable to concentrate and so utterly useless in all of his life.

"It's a good thing you were born an ice dragon rather than fire."

Vasily's head popped up at Dimitri's words. Both he and Gregori stepped into the large tent they were using for planning, smirks already lodged firmly on their faces.

“Why’s that?” Vasily asked.

“Because you’re staring so hard at that map, it would burst into flames if you were a fire dragon.”

“Shut up,” Vasily muttered as he straightened and folded his arms over his chest. Dimitri stood beside him while Gregori threw his lanky frame into one of the folding camping chairs.

“I don’t know why you’re even trying to work.” Gregori waved a hand at him. “When Dimitri found Sam, I swear his brain stopped working for months. We’re lucky it remembered to run his heart and lungs.”

“Gods, I can’t wait for it to be your turn,” Dimitri grumbled, glaring at Gregori. “I’m going to follow you around, recording every stupid thing you do and say, then replay it for the entire clan during the holidays.”

Gregori rolled his eyes. “That was the glory of finding your mate before the war. No cameras. No videos. No proof of your stupidity following you through the centuries.”

Vasily tried to tune his brothers out and return to what he was doing. Except that when he looked at the map, he could no longer recall why he’d pulled out the map of the area in the first place.

Fuck, he missed his brain.

“Why are you stressing?” Gregori asked with a little laugh. “You know Amaru is yours. Everyone around the camp knows it. That’s why we’ve tried to give you a wide bubble of space so you can get your moves on.”

Dimitri snorted as he dragged over another folding chair and dropped into it beside Gregori. “Most likely he hasn’t noticed we’ve been giving him space because he’s been so wrapped up in the mage.”

He wanted to snap at them that he’d also been concerned with rescuing the Sousa and Tupã dragons from their imprisonment, but who the hell did he think he was fooling? Yes, he wanted to bring them all safely out of the grotto.

However, Amaru had ruled his mind from the first gasp he took upon awakening.

“I just... Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep my hands off him?” Vasily held his hands out in front of him, fingers curled almost into claws and trembling. “Every time I’m around him, anytime I can even smell him, I want to grab him, pull him into my arms, and not let him free ever again. This isn’t my dragon wanting to claim him.” He paused and mentally rolled his eyes at himself as his dragon huffed in his mind. “Well, not only my dragon. When he’s out of my sight, I can’t focus. I’m constantly wondering where he is and if he’s safe. Even when I know he’s with Luka, I can’t relax until I see him with my own eyes.”

Vasily shoved his hands into his hair and pulled on the stands, as if the pain would finally pull his brain out of the perpetual fog.

“And when you are with them, the anxiety only lightens a little,” Dimitri finished for him. The dragon shrugged. “Rodrigo assures me it gets easier when you go through the bonding ceremony. The magical tether between you becomes a constant reassurance.”

Ouch.

Vasily fought to keep the wince off his face as he dropped his hands to his sides. Dimitri had been with Sam for months now, but they couldn’t complete the bonding ceremony until the mage’s core was fixed. And if Sam’s core was never fixed, that niggling fear would never leave Dimitri. Not to mention Sam’s life span would be significantly shorter since he wouldn’t have a dragon’s power to draw on.

“It’ll be okay,” Gregori said. “Amaru is yours. It’ll work itself out soon enough. He’s got a lot on his plate dealing with all those sleeping dragons and mages under the lake.”

Licking his lips, Vasily hesitated, nearly choking on the ball of words clumped at the back of his throat. “What if you’re right?” He dropped his gaze to the map, but his mind returned to the conversation he and Luka had shared. “What if

Amaru is my mate?" He lifted his gaze up to his friends as he balled one hand into a fist. "Just my mate."

Gregori stiffened while Dimitri shifted in his chair, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "What? You don't think Luka is his mate too?"

"No, I do!" Vasily pounded on his chest with both hands to stress his point. "I know Amaru belongs to both of us, the same way I know Luka and Amaru are both my mates. But Luka..." Vasily's throat threatened to close up on him. "He doesn't know if Amaru is. His dragon isn't saying anything and it's left him lost and insecure. I don't know what to do to help him."

Vasily paced away from his friends, suddenly feeling as if he were trapped in a cage. He wanted to shift and take to the sky, to feel the wind slipping along his scales. Only with that freedom would he be able to take a full, deep breath.

But if he did that, when he looked over, he wouldn't see Luka's dragon on his right where he belonged. Flying was never as enjoyable without Luka at his side.

"I'm losing my mind. I know it," Vasily mumbled under his breath as he turned back toward Gregori and Dimitri. "In my mind and in my heart, I know Amaru is my mate. With the same certainty, I know Luka is my mate. By that very clear logic, that would have to mean Amaru is Luka's mate too. Right?"

But what if he was just fooling himself? He and Luka had been together for years. It could be his heart refusing to face reality because it might mean letting Luka go. And that thought was akin to dying. He didn't want to keep breathing without Luka's smile there to greet him each morning.

How was that fair to Amaru?

"I sat down, thought this through, and realized that if I had to make the choice, I'd choose Luka."

Dimitri hissed out a loud breath, Gregori echoing it. Vasily winced, because he had to agree, that was an unthinkable sentence for a dragon to utter. But it remained the truth.

“It tears at my heart to even say that, but I can’t...I can’t let go of Luka. I just can’t.”

Vasily hadn’t realized Dimitri had gotten out of his chair until a pair of strong hands landed on his shoulders and tightly squeezed. He blinked a couple of times, forcing his eyes to focus on his friend and leader’s stern expression.

“Listen to me, Vasily,” Dimitri growled. “My mate is a stubborn, grumpy, sassy male Jaeggi mage with a broken core. If you had told me that five hundred years ago, I would have ripped out your throat with my bare hands and laughed while you slowly died at my feet. Fate has plans for us we can’t even fathom. That’s why it’s better to not try. If you were born to have a mage mate and a dragon mate, then so be it. Quit worrying about all the precepts and history of our people. Shit got broke a long time ago thanks to that bastard, Kaiser Jaeggi. Every time we find a new mage, we’re writing a new piece of history.”

“What about Luka?”

Dimitri sighed long and heavily. “Sometimes I think you don’t see it because you’re so close to him. Vasily, Luka would do anything to put your happiness first. If you walked up to him and demand he tear off his own wings because it would make you happy, I don’t think he or his dragon would hesitate. I have no doubt he saw you and Amaru happy together. That was enough for his brain to proclaim Amaru belonged to you and there was no place for him, no matter if he did have feelings for the mage.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? What do I tell Luka to convince him Amaru belongs to both of us?”

“I don’t think there’s anything you *can* tell him. His brain is stuck in mate-fog. Not a goddamn one of us has an ounce of common sense when we first find our mate. And that includes unintentionally sabotaging the best thing in our lives. You need to give him time, and you need to hold on to your hope. Keep fighting for both Luka and Amaru. Eventually, those brilliant brain cells of his will start working again and he’ll figure this shit out.”

“In the meantime,” Gregori chimed in as he came to stand beside Dimitri. “We’ll keep hoping and helping where we can. You know the entire clan loves you and Luka. We’ve always supported you. The clan just wants you both happy.”

To Vasily, happy was only one thing—Luka and Amaru.

He had no idea how to get that short of tying them both to his bed.

Probably not the best option.

Or the smartest.

But he wasn’t tossing it out yet. Maybe that would be plan B if he didn’t come up with a better one first.

18

The nighttime campfire chats were turning into his favorite and most hated time of the day.

He loved sitting around with the Valerii Clan and the visiting Burkhard Clan telling stories and laughing.

He hated that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get both Vasily and Luka to sit with him.

He'd come close once or twice, but then something would happen and one of them would dart away for some emergency. Usually Luka. If they hadn't enjoyed such a wonderful lunch, he'd start to believe Luka didn't actually like him much.

This was ridiculous.

Vasily and Luka were his mates. The gods had gifted him with two. He must have been a very good boy in a past life or something.

Or maybe he'd been bad, because this was not working out how he'd expected. It was torture to be chasing after one of them all the time. His enjoyment with one was always tempered since he was constantly wondering how to grab the other one to join them. Was it time for an intervention? To play matchmaker? Or better yet, therapist. Those two had issues and Amaru was tired of being stuck in the middle. Why couldn't he have them both?

Though, Luka had been amazing today. So sweet and gentle. He hadn't expected that in a dragon. All the Tupã dragons he'd known were more like Vasily—a bit rough around the edges, overprotective, and grumbly. But one look at Luka left him wanting to cuddle the dragon close and never let him go.

Especially when something very fragile entered Luka's eyes whenever Amaru said Vasily's name. It was like watching his heart shatter in slow motion. Amaru had done it simply to drop the hint that he was happy to have both of them with him. But the mere mention of the other dragon looked as if Amaru was driving a knife into Luka's chest. In the end, he had to stop or risk hurting Luka beyond repair. What in the world was going on?

Despite how well the lunch had gone, Amaru found himself missing a dragon tonight. Luka, again. Vasily sat on one side of him with his magical smile and laughing eyes, while Sam was on the other.

Not that he had a problem with Sam.

Except sometimes talking to Sam made him a little homesick for a past that didn't exist anymore, even after they woke up the remaining members of his clan.

But other than a little ache in his chest, Sam's quick mind was a wonder to hear. The man had pieced together so much about their culture and civilization on just tiny shreds of information. There was more he couldn't wait to tell him and show him, but that was only going to happen after they returned to the village.

Amaru released a heavy sigh, slapping his hands on his thighs. "That's it. You were simply born to the wrong clan."

"Wh-what? What are you talking about?" Sam stammered, his eyes lost behind the firelight dancing off his glasses.

Reaching out, he tapped the side of Sam's head with one finger. "Your brain works like a Sousa brain. You should have been born into my clan."

A shaky laugh tumbled from Sam's lips and he shook his head. "From what you've told me, you're all inventors and tinkerers. You're mechanically inclined. I'm pretty sure I'd need Dimitri's help to change a light bulb."

"Pfft...nonsense. We're all thinkers. Problem solvers. It just comes out as inventors." He poked Sam's slumped

shoulder and grinned. “You’re a natural detective and thinker. You’re good at figuring things out.”

Dimitri leaned forward from where he sat on the other side of Sam, his arm wrapped possessively around his waist. “No offense, Amaru, but I’m glad Sam wasn’t born a member of the Sousa. He’s perfect exactly how he is, and I wouldn’t want to wait another second to have found him.”

Sam smiled softly and leaned in close to Dimitri to rest his head on the dragon’s chest.

Amaru rested his elbow on his knee and his chin on the palm of his hand. “What you’re saying is you’re glad your mate isn’t asleep under the lake right now,” he teased.

“Very glad,” Dimitri growled.

The murmur of conversation was shattered by an irate shriek. Amaru’s head jerked up and around, seeking the source of the noise. Ravi’s children were twins, a boy and a girl, and as expected of wind dragons, they were into absolutely everything at once. Even being only six months old didn’t stop them. They were a whirlwind of motion or dead asleep. There was no in between. In this moment, there seemed to be some kind of altercation going on as Haruto shoved his sister Asuka and she landed hard on her diapered bottom. The little one stared at her brother for a heartbeat and then opened her mouth in a wail worthy of a banshee.

“Haruto! You can’t push your sister!” Ravi chastised. “You must be nice to her.”

In the blink of an eye, the crying little girl shifted into her dragon form and took an angry snap at her brother’s chubby leg. Thankfully, Ravi was faster. He scooped the little boy up in one arm, pulling him out of Asuka’s reach.

“Asuka! No biting!” Ravi said, grabbing the little dragon by the tail before she could take flight.

“And I think that’s enough fun for one night,” Sora announced as he climbed to his feet. “We’re getting cranky. It’s bedtime.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Luka’s sweet voice invaded the circle and Amaru jolted upright. When had the other dragon joined them?

Amaru twisted around to see Luka approaching the fire carrying a large blue cooler with both hands. The dragon’s gaze darted over and locked with his for a moment, a half smile lifting one corner of his mouth, before he looked back to Sora.

“We have a surprise dessert for tonight—shaved ice.”

A happy cry went up among several of the other dragons and mages around the fire. Amaru grabbed Vasily’s arm and leaned close enough that his lips nearly touched the dragon’s ear. “What is shaved ice? How do you even shave ice? Why is your ice hairy?”

If Amaru hadn’t been holding on to him, the dragon would have fallen out of his folding chair with laughter. When he could catch his breath, he leaned back toward Amaru. “The ice isn’t hairy. It’s just a name for crushed ice covered in a sweet, flavored syrup.”

“Luka crushed ice for us?”

“Actually, Luka is one of the few dragons in the clan who can naturally make these tiny ice pellets that are perfect for shaved ice. Most of us can make snow or ice that covers things or blocks of ice. Luka is one of three or four dragons who can do the pellets.”

He turned his gaze back to the dragon in question to find him kneeling and carefully scooping ice into cups and cones before handing them off to dragons and mages to be covered in colorful liquids. Luka had the most ethereal smile, as if doing this little thing for his clan and the dragon babies made him so very happy. Happier than Amaru had ever seen him. For once, the fragility and shadows around his eyes were gone. This was the Luka he’d been trying to get to know for days now.

“Would you like to try it?” Vasily inquired.

“Yes, please!” Amaru was already launching to his feet. He joined the line of dragons and mages, waiting to receive his cup of ice from Luka. “Thank you so much for making ice for us tonight.”

Luka blinked at him in surprise and then looked away, but not before a hint of red touched the tips of his ears. “It’s not a big deal. Just a little ice.”

“Luka makes the best ice for shaved ice and slushies,” Vasily said.

“Stop it. It’s just a little ice,” Luka mumbled as he handed over a cup of ice to Vasily. Amaru bit his bottom lip as he caught sight of Vasily’s fingers lingering on Luka’s for a long second before they separated. There! That! Something was clearly between them. Why wasn’t it happening for all three of them?

His brain was still tugging at those questions when Vasily ushered him along to a table covered in bottles with colorful liquids. The dragon distracted him by showing him how to cover his cone of ice in a rainbow of colors and flavors. Curse his sweet tooth!

But it was made better by the fact that Luka sat down near them when he was done serving the clan, his own cherry red cone of shaved ice in front of him.

“Amaru, how was your visit to the grotto this morning?” Rodrigo asked as he accepted a bite of ice from his mate’s spoon.

“Not good. The condition of the devices keeping my clan members is deteriorating faster than I’d expected. If the break from the lightning storms continues, we could inch along for a few more weeks, but another big storm could cause a serious cascade of problems and failures,” Amaru replied.

“To make matters worse, I heard from the mages back at the clan house,” Vasily chimed in. “We don’t have several of the spell ingredients Amaru has requested. We’re going to need to go hunting. Preferably sooner rather than later.”

“Get me that list of what you don’t have. I’ll see if I can think up some alternatives or possibly some locations of where we used to find those ingredients.” He scooped a bite of ice into his mouth and groaned. It was like biting into a super sweet, icy peach. “Oh gods, this is amazing. I think I need this all the time!”

Luka peeked around Vasily and smiled at him. “Anytime you want this, just tell me. I’m happy to prepare one for you.”

“The next one, I’m putting a sleeping draft into your ice,” Sora called out across the fire. The mean healer hadn’t even looked up from where he was helping to feed his daughter her bright blue ice while Ravi fed Haruto. “I can tell you’re not sleeping.”

Amaru gasped and waved his spoon at Sora. “That’s not nice, Healer Man!”

“No drugging Amaru yet.” Vasily slid an arm around Amaru’s shoulders and gathered him in as close as he could while they remained in separate chairs. “I think I’ve still got a few more tricks up my sleeve to get Amaru to sleep.”

A little snort left him as Amaru continued to eat his ice and rest his head on Vasily’s arm. He’d sleep when he was dead, not before. Amaru had spent the last five hundred years in an enforced nap, and more sleep was an absolute fucking no.

Yes, fine, the human body needed sleep. Amaru would likely crash eventually. Just...not now. Even if he wanted to, the idea was repugnant. A shudder went through him at the idea of closing his eyes again.

No. Just...no.

19

“Vasily!”

His head popped up and his gaze locked on Sora. The mage’s long dark hair was pulled up in a messy bun and he wore a weary smile. But then, there was a good chance he was tired thanks to the perpetual motion machines currently in his arms. Haruto and Asuka were clearly eager to be into everything they set their dark brown eyes on.

The twins had been an instant favorite of every mage and dragon within the clan. It had been centuries since the last dragon baby was born to the Valerii. There was something in Vasily’s chest that clenched at the sight of them. Was there any better proof that all dragon kind had a good shot at escaping extinction than those chubby, smiling faces? Would he be able to one day hold his own child?

Haruto squealed and reached out, making grabby hands at Vasily. Asuka didn’t want to wait for Vasily to approach. She shoved against her father’s chest. At the same time, she shifted into a tiny two-foot-long dragon with shiny lapis blue scales. She frantically flapped her wings to keep from hitting the ground.

Vasily lunged forward, catching her with both hands even as she appeared to get enough lift to remain in the air. As he straightened, he found that Haruto had also shifted into his dragon form. He was sitting on his father’s shoulder, his claws tangled in the remains of his father’s bun while his arctic blue tail was wrapped around his bicep.

“Dear god, how are you keeping up with both of them now that they can shift?” Vasily asked, cradling a squirming Asuka.

“Practice,” Sora replied. At that second, Haruto launched himself off Sora’s shoulder, heading straight for Vasily’s head. Sora snagged the baby dragon by the tail and held him in place while his little wings frantically flapped. The dragon’s mouth opened and closed like he wanted to bite Vasily’s nose. “No. No biting.”

With surprising ease, Sora pulled Haruto into his arms and reached into his pocket. He pulled out two plastic rings filled with water. “Would you mind freezing these?” Sora asked as he extended them to Vasily.

He shifted Asuka, trying not to watch as Haruto continued to crawl over his father like he was a jungle gym. Vasily snagged the rings and froze them both with just a tiny burst of energy.

Sora took one back and held it up so Haruto could see it. At the same time, he jerked his chin toward Asuka. “Give the other one to her. They both started teething last week.”

Vasily looked back down and nearly jumped. The baby dragon was gone and he found himself holding a rosy cheeked, drooling baby with messy black hair. He hadn’t even felt her shift. Asuka instantly accepted the teething ring, biting down on it and cooing as it numbed her sore gums.

“Teething baby dragons that can shift must be fun.”

Sora let out a tired chuckle. “Fun is not the word I would’ve chosen, no. Fortunately we have a lot of help, otherwise what sanity I had left may have already retreated to a different continent.”

“I wouldn’t blame it.” At the same time, Vasily was rather envious of exactly this problem. He would love to have two baby dragons to juggle even while they drove him insane. At the moment though, he more than had his hands full with his mates. Babies were definitely a conversation for a much more future date. Assuming he could get their relationship straightened out.

“I’m glad I ran into you. I wanted to talk to you about Amaru,” Sora said. He turned around and started walking

deeper into the camp. Vasily automatically followed, marveling at how the man was now holding a little boy who was also enjoying his icy ring. How in the world did Sora have the brain power to keep up with these two and still think about Amaru?

It could be worse.

Sora and Ravi were the fathers of two wind dragons. They could now shift, but they hadn't discovered their ability to manipulate and conjure wind yet.

According to news Ravi brought from Germany, King Alric and Cameron's child had discovered fire.

Anyway, not the point right now. He had a feeling Sora did not have good news to impart. "Amaru? What's wrong?"

"Have you seen him sleep recently?" Sora asked as Haruto tried to launch himself out of Sora's arms without shifting. The dad shifted his son to his other hip while keeping his eyes locked on Vasily.

Shit. He had not. In fact, he had seen signs Amaru was not sleeping much but he had been so focused on Luka that he had not properly followed up. He mentally kicked himself even as frustration welled up inside of his chest like hot lava. He could not be in both places at once, he knew that rationally, but both of his mates were apparently in their own brand of trouble right now. He had to figure out how to balance their needs.

"I haven't. Have you?"

Sora shook his head grimly. "He's not sleeping. The light is always on in his tent, and I've caught him wandering around at night. I don't think he's had a solid night of sleep since we pulled him out of the cave. That mage is seriously sleep deprived, Vasily, and it's becoming dangerous for his health."

Vasily nodded. That was the answer he had expected. "I'll talk to him."

"You need to do more than talk to him. Make. Him. Sleep. Because if you don't, I can mix up some mean sleep spells to knock his ass out."

There was a good chance Amaru wasn't the only one sleep deprived right now, but he was not about to cross this mage.

"I will. I promise. He'll get some sleep tonight."

"Good." Sora nodded and stretched out his empty arm to Asuka. The little girl shifted into a dragon and dutifully flew to her father with her teething ring still in her mouth. She curled up, head on his shoulder and tail wrapped around his wrist. "I don't want to use magic or drugs on him. It's better if he falls asleep naturally, but we're to the point that any sleep he can get is good for him."

"We'll figure this out. I think you could do with some sleep too."

Sora flashed him a crooked smile. "Don't worry about me. We're off to locate Dada. He promised to lie down with us for our afternoon nap."

Vasily smirked as he watched Sora stroll away with both children in his arms. An afternoon nap curled up with his mate sounded like a little slice of heaven. He just had to convince Amaru that he had to sit still long enough to fall asleep.

Vasily hunted down his mage while his head churned. Some of the ideas he had to lure Amaru into his tent were half-baked in the extreme, but really, Amaru was unpredictable. Predictably unpredictable might be a better way to put it. If talking about technology and tools, he was predictable. In terms of wants or words, Vasily couldn't begin to guess what he'd do next.

After fifteen minutes walking around camp, he finally found his quarry. Amaru sat cross-legged on the grass, a notepad in hand, scribbling something furiously. The closer he got, the better he could see the page, but that didn't mean it made any sense. It was all in a language he couldn't read, with lots of numbers. Felt like he was staring at advanced calculus, and Vasily couldn't do calculus if his life depended on it.

He stepped around and kneeled at Amaru's side. The mage was so locked inside his head, he didn't even notice someone

had joined him. He kept writing, flipped the page, wrote some more, came back to the previous page, and grimaced.

“Damn lightning dragons,” Amaru muttered crossly before flipping the page again. “It’s their fault after all. I figured. Ugh, I can’t wait to get Irany awake so I can shake his ass—”

Sora had not been understating how much Amaru needed rest. He was dangerously sleep deprived. He had dark circles under his eyes, and he was so tired he couldn’t seem to sit up for more than a second before his body tried to drop. He was constantly jerking himself back upright. He reminded Vasily of a toddler fighting sleep.

Shiiiiit. This was not good. His frustration rose another notch. How could he possibly have missed this? Well, he knew how he’d missed it. He did not know right this second how to fix everything, but at least in this moment he could get his mage to sleep.

He put a gentle hand on Amaru’s shoulder. “Amaru?”

For a second, he wasn’t sure if any of that penetrated. Then Amaru’s head jerked up, eyes blinking owlshly as he visibly switched tracks.

“Oh. Hi, handsome!”

He smiled. Amaru was cute like this, all defenseless looking, even if it alarmed Vasily too. “Hi yourself. Why don’t you come to the tent with me?”

“Why?” Amaru was sleep deprived but apparently not stupid. “You’re trying to get me to sleep, aren’t you? Sora said I needed sleep. Ha! I’ll sleep when I’m dead. I’ve more important things to do.”

Damn, his guard was up. Why was he resisting this so hard? If Amaru were a toddler it would make sense. But most adults yearned to take naps. Right now did not seem to be the moment to argue the point, but he was certainly going to dig into this later. For now, he’d switch tactics. “You’d think more clearly after a nap.”

“I napped for five hundred years and I’m not even the one who enjoys that!”

Just like wrangling a toddler. Just like it.

Amaru stopped suddenly, squinting at his own handwriting. “I just wrote a sentence.”

“Yes, you did.” Vasily almost said that as a question.

“I don’t know what it means.” Amaru stared even harder.

Um. Yeah, somehow he had to convince Amaru to come to bed. There was no telling what he’d do if left to his own devices. Unsupervised.

“Amaru, don’t you want to be able to read your own handwriting?”

“Of course!”

“Then don’t you think you need sleep to clear your head?”

Amaru stared at Vasily like he was trying to put those two sentences together, but they kept getting tangled up somewhere along the line, causing a whole disconnect. “So that went from what the fuck, to what the fuck, to I don’t remember what started this?”

So persuasion had failed. Time for a second tactic.

He leaned in, scooping Amaru up, and stood. Amaru felt incredibly right in his arms—perfect really. Like he’d been born to be held close to Vasily. He swallowed hard around the emotion. He couldn’t think that without thinking of Luka, which damn near broke his heart.

“Uppies?” Amaru looked around in confusion. Like he couldn’t figure out why he was suddenly off the ground. “Where we going?”

“How about you come with me?”

“You’re trying to make me sleep again,” Amaru said accusingly, like Vasily was some kind of serial killer. “I have enough coffee to outlast you. Let go.”

“I’m not asking you to sleep.” Lie. But could he convince Amaru otherwise? More at eleven. “Just lie down with me.”

He expected Amaru to remain suspicious. Instead he abruptly lit up like a treat had been offered. “Snuggles? You want snuggles?”

That worked. Vasily, helpless to do otherwise, smiled back. Amaru’s happiness was damn infectious, and he was not immune. “I do.”

Amaru stopped trying to squirm away and threw both arms around Vasily’s neck, snuggling in. “Why didn’t you just say so? I can snuggle for a little while.”

Vasily’s dragon was so puffed up with achievement that the silly creature was damn close to roaring. He bit back that impulse, somehow.

Amaru stayed happy in Vasily’s arms the whole walk back to Amaru’s tent. Vasily ducked a little to get inside, laying Amaru down on his bed first before toeing off his boots and climbing in with him. Amaru immediately turned, welcoming him in, one arm around Vasily’s waist, his leg thrown over Vasily’s hips—like it was Amaru who was intent on keeping him here now.

He carded his fingers through Amaru’s thick dark hair, smiling down at this man who did funny things to his heart. Mental note: offer snuggles and not naps. Honestly, no hardship on his part.

For a second, he thought Amaru asleep, then the mage’s head tilted back. He could barely keep his eyes open, fighting off sleep with sheer stubbornness.

“Vas? Where’s Luka?”

With those three words, Vasily’s heart sank. Luka had promised him he would try, and he should be here for moments like this. The fact that Amaru was asking for Luka was proof enough that both dragons belonged to Amaru. He felt a sense of despair wash through him. He didn’t know what else to do to convince Luka. Words, arguments, persuasion—none of that had worked. It felt like something sharp and merciless had been driven into his heart. Before twisting.

Fighting to keep his face neutral, and feeling like he failed, he got an elbow under him. He just couldn't keep lying here pretending it was all fine. And maybe dragging Luka here would be the right tactic.

"I'll get him for you."

Amaru growled in frustration, hand and leg latching on, hauling Vasily back in. Or trying to; he wasn't as strong as Vasily.

"Noooooo. No leaving. Snuggles!"

Uhhh. While cute, this was not helpful. "I thought you wanted Luka?"

Amaru got this look, the one that said he had just listened to something very stupid and now Had Opinions About It. He snagged Vasily by the nape of his neck and leaned up.

The first brush of lips sent a tingle through Vasily's system. Then those lips pressed in, demanding a response. Vasily couldn't even think of resisting. He sank into it with a sigh, kissing back, loving that sweet taste. He'd wanted to kiss Amaru for days. So, so badly.

Drawing back, Amaru breathed against his mouth, "Yes. Obviously. I want you too. No leaving. Use your cell phone and your words."

Well, yes, he knew that. He wasn't sure why Amaru was saying the obvious. For some reason it seemed Amaru felt like this was in question.

"I know that you want me."

Amaru beamed, his smile somewhat loopy if satisfied. "Good! Now, get Luka over here."

Vasily obediently pulled his phone out of his back pocket and texted Luka.

Come cuddle? Amaru refuses to sleep without you.

"I must figure out how cell phones work," Amaru grumbled, his eyes envious, bottom lip pushed out in a pout. "They're so convenient."

He regarded Amaru, trying to see how the logic connected, but it didn't quite work. "Uh, Amaru? You can use a phone without knowing how it functions."

"Blasphemy!"

A response came back, the phone chiming with an incoming text.

Coming. Which tent? Luka asked.

Amaru's

Kk

Amaru lifted up, squinting at the phone like it was blurry. Or trying to be cryptic on purpose to thwart him. "He said he's coming. Right?"

"Right."

"Damn translation spell needs to be refocused or something, all the words are running together."

Vasily was 99.9 percent sure the spell was functioning fine. Would he say that? No, he chose life. "After our cuddle, you can look at it."

"Mmm'kay." Amaru's eyes blinked closed, then shot open again. "Can't sleep. Too much to do."

"Just a cuddle," Vasily soothed, stroking a hand gently up and down his back.

"Mm, right, cuddle. Must make time for cuddles. Where's Luka? Why isn't he here?"

"He's coming."

"Mm'kay. You not leaving."

"No, I won't leave." Even he could hear how his voice cracked on that one. It was so hard to keep his emotions in check.

Footsteps he knew well approached. Luka ducked into the tent a second later. He took them in, brows climbing into his hairline. Amaru and Vasily probably did look very comfortable and established.

Amaru pointed an authoritative finger at Luka, then pointed to his other side where there was room on the cot. “You. Here.”

That warm, sweet smile on Luka’s face put a pang in Vasily’s heart. Look at him, he really couldn’t resist Amaru. Now if Luka’s dragon would just say something...

“Yes, sir. Can I take my boots off first?”

“I’ll allow it.”

“You’re so generous.”

Amaru snickered, and he kept an eye on Luka as he waited.

Shoes, then belt, were taken off before Luka scooted in closer, the cot dipping a little under the additional weight. Amaru barely let Luka get settled before snagging an arm and pulling it over his waist, like hauling a disobedient teddy bear into the right position. It was, frankly, adorable.

Luka found it so, too, obediently snuggling against Amaru’s back. Even as he moved, he gave Vasily a ‘what the fuck’ look.

Vasily lifted his shoulders in a barely perceptible shrug. He kept telling Luka he belonged with both of them. Perhaps now he would believe him. Amaru certainly wasn’t being shy about what he wanted.

What he did know was two things. One, Amaru wanted them both there. Two, while Vasily’s dragon had been happy to have Amaru to himself, it was downright ecstatic about this cuddle pile including Luka. Smug, too, like it had finally achieved a dream or goal that had been centuries in the making.

His dragon was so happy, in fact, that he couldn’t begin to cage the feeling. A rough, rumbling purr started up, vibrating his chest and throat. He couldn’t help it. Vasily had two of his favorite people right here with him. Luka’s dragon did not join in, but he visibly relaxed. In that moment, everything was so comfortable and perfect. It gave Vasily hope. They belonged

together, he knew it; this moment felt like a validation and confirmation.

“Purring,” Amaru slurred, his body growing steadily lax in Vasily’s arms. “No fair.”

Luka lifted his head a little to see Amaru’s face better, but it was clear he was dead asleep. Finally.

“I didn’t realize he was this sleep deprived,” Luka whispered with a concerned look at the mage.

“I didn’t either. He masks it well. Sora hunted me down and put a bug in my ear about it.”

“Ah. Of course he’d be able to tell.” Luka bit his lip uncertainly before asking, “Did he really insist I be here too?”

“Was on the verge of throwing a fit about it.” Vasily tacked on pointedly, “And he wouldn’t let me leave either. Kissed me and told me to stay. He wants both of us. Do you believe me now?”

Luka’s brows shot back up again. He glanced from Amaru to Vasily, confusion mounting in his expression. “So he wanted us both. I, uh...honestly, I am very strongly attracted to him. I am trying to spend as much time as I can with him. I just don’t know if all of this is enough.”

From what Vasily could see, Luka was in a better place than he had been two days ago. Clearly, some good strides had been made. Two days ago, Vasily would never have been able to get Luka into this cuddle pile with them. It was what gave him the patience to not push.

Well, not push much. “Just give it a little bit more time. I think you’ll see it for yourself soon enough.”

“I think...we should talk about this later. Let him sleep.”

The last thing Vasily wanted to do was wake Amaru back up. It was true, this was not the time or place to talk about this. He agreed and settled back into his pillow, getting comfortable. Leaving right now would only disturb Amaru. And honestly, he hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in a while. Napping with these two was absolutely no hardship.

A smile teasing up the corners of his mouth, he slipped into dreamland.



Amaru's wild cackle filled the tent and Luka's heart. The mage had the best laugh in the world. It was so large and free. How it fit in his body in the first place was a mystery. Maybe that was why it spilled out of him so frequently. There was no room in his frame to hold it in.

The mage rocked away from him and then back, only to lean most of his weight against Luka. Amaru did that often and Luka was not quite sure why. Amaru seemed to be a very physically affectionate person by nature. Luka certainly wasn't complaining; he just wished it would activate his dragon somehow. The more time he spent with Amaru, the more he enjoyed the man and his attraction grew. But he was no closer to that *knowing* a dragon experienced when they found their mage. His dragon, in fact, was horrifically silent.

As much as he enjoyed being around Amaru, at the same time it depressed him. Maybe angered him. No one had told him anger could feel so much like fear. It felt like Amaru was taking Vasily away from him. Luka did not believe this mage was his. And despite everything else Vasily had said, it wasn't Vasily's choice on whether they could stay together. Luka knew very well the instinct of a dragon to claim their mage was stronger than anything else. Vasily would not be able to ignore it.

Luka was very afraid that he had already lost both of them. All he was doing right now was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He once again jerked his brain back into the present moment. If nothing else, this was an amazing opportunity to learn more about the Sousa Clan. He'd be a fool to pass that up. A storm had rolled back in, confining everyone to their

tents and limiting what they could work on. The rain hadn't been bad enough to completely chase them from the bank of the lake, but the near-constant low rumble of thunder argued it wasn't safe for them to make trips back to the cave.

They'd been able to sneak in one quick trip for Amaru to confirm his clan mates were in no immediate danger, but even so, no one wanted to leave the area until the Sousa and the lightning dragons were set free from their slumber.

In the meantime, they were waiting for the arrival of the earth dragons from the Sodalicum to help clear out the original path that was used. Staying put also gave them time to pick Amaru's brain about his language, culture, and history. Of course, that was when Amaru wasn't asking them questions about their magic and technology.

Most of the time, Amaru was surrounded by several Jaeggi mages, Sam, and a mix of other dragons and mages who popped in and out of their camp from the clan's compound. But thanks to a mix of meetings and a heavy lunch, everyone was either napping off their meal or stuck in a meeting, giving Luka some rare alone time with the Sousa mage.

"You know, I don't understand why you're so determined to learn my language," Amaru said with a little huff. "We have translation amulets that allow us to understand each other when we speak, and I've already shown you the translation spell that allows you to translate the written language. Why not use that?"

Luka shook his head. "First, learning a language is more than just a means of communication. By studying a language, you learn about a people's culture and values. You get a richer understanding of their history. Everything you are and who you've been impacts your language. I want to know everything I can about you."

Amaru rested his cheek against his palm and released a sort of swoony sigh as he batted his long eyelashes at Luka. "You say the sweetest things."

Why was he so charming? It almost felt like salt in an open wound, even though Luka smiled helplessly back. "Plus, I

can't always assume I'm going to have a mage with me to cast a translation spell or hand me a translation amulet. All the clans went through a period where we had very few mages and little hope of finding more. We've learned to live life with limited access to magic."

"Not anymore." Amaru captured Luka's fingers in his free hand and held on tight. "I'm not going anywhere. You'll never have to live without magic again. I'll cast all the spells and make all the amulets for you. I promise."

Luka froze, words trapped in his throat while his heart raced. That. He wanted all of that. He wanted Amaru there every second of every day. He wanted a life with his smiles, laughter, and endless questions. Was that even possible to have? Or was Amaru being kind to him because of Vasily?

This whole situation was so fucking confusing that he felt like it was going to give him a migraine.

"Am I interrupting?" Vasily drawled, and Luka fought the urge to wince. There was no censure or anger in his tone. He genuinely sounded playful and teasing, but Luka's conscience was still hurting.

"No! We were just wondering when you were going to join us. Come on!" Amaru released Luka's finger and patted the open cushion on the other side of his body, which would put the mage perfectly sandwiched between them.

"Sure, but I was just popping in to tell Luka that Rodrigo is looking for him."

"Now?" That actually sounded good to Luka. It felt awkward trying to stay here in this moment.

"Unfortunately. Something about the earth dragons he wants to discuss with you. I don't think it'll take long, and I can keep Amaru company while you're gone."

Amaru huffed. "Why is it so impossible to keep both of you at my side at the same time?"

Amaru saying stuff like that was why Luka had false hopes. "I'm sure Vasily can keep you occupied until I get back. This won't take long."

“Fine. I guess it’s okay if you leave. You’re only leaving me for your king.” The mage made a pretty show of pouting, which left Luka chuckling to himself as he gave up his spot beside Amaru to Vasily.

As he passed Vasily, he flashed his love a smile, hoping it didn’t give away the turmoil that was roiling in his stomach and filling his brain.

The world was so confusing now with Amaru there.

Thankfully, the meeting with Rodrigo, Evora, Sam, and Dimitri was incredibly short. The earth dragons were less than a day away. In all likelihood, they’d be arriving that night—assuming the thunderstorms relented for a few hours. They just needed a quick discussion about options for allowing earth dragons into the cave, how important it was to actually preserve the writing on the walls, and what spells they needed to maintain the integrity of the cave while the earth dragons cleared a path.

Not that they could decide much until the earth dragons arrived, but they at least got a priority list made.

If Sam had his way, nothing would be harmed or touched, but they had reassured him that even if they lost the writings on the walls, they would have access to the creators themselves. Living history. That helped to calm him... a little.

Didn’t matter. Luka could barely keep his mind on what they were talking about in the first place. He wanted to get back to Amaru and Vasily. The mage was right. It wasn’t often they had the chance to spend time together where it was all three of them.

When Rodrigo set them free at last, Luka turned to go back to the tent, even though he wasn’t sure that was the best option. Still, he had promised Vasily he would try. He couldn’t go back on that promise, not when it meant so much. When their future was on the line.

The closer he got to the tent, the louder the laughter he was hearing became. Someone was having a good time. A wide

grin automatically spread across his face at the sound of Amaru's wild laughter pouring through the thin fabric.

But the grin stiffened when he leaned inside to find Amaru and Vasily wrestling amid the blankets and pillows. Vasily was tickling Amaru and the mage was twisting under him, laughing and gasping for air while seeming to half-heartedly bat at Vasily's hands.

Then it was like everything slipped into slow motion. Even from the other side of the tent, Luka could see how their eyes locked and they both stopped moving. Vasily was leaning over Amaru, his hands still on his slender waist. Tension was a palpable, living, breathing creature in that room, drawing the two men closer and closer together. His own lips tingled as he waited for one or both of them to cross that distance and take the kiss that was hanging between them. His breath stuck in his throat, *hoping* his dragon would claim these two men as his mates.

All he received was dead silence.

Luka jerked from the doorway and forced leaden feet to march away from Amaru and Vasily. He kept going into the surrounding forest until the camp disappeared completely from sight. His human side ached to shift into his dragon form and fly away. To fly as far as he possibly could. The other side of the globe wouldn't be far enough.

But his fucking dragon was still so incredibly quiet in his mind.

Pain was a living, breathing thing inside of him. He now understood that his dragon's silence had been the kindest way his dragon could tell him that he had lost Vasily. There would be no happy ending for them. No ever after with a mage to complete them.

He couldn't see through the tears in his eyes or think rationally right now; he just had to find some quiet place to lick his wounds. Far enough away no one would find him. His heart felt like it was shattering into a million pieces, the shards digging into his chest, and he could barely breathe around the pain of it.

Luka's knees buckled and he slowly slid to the ground, his shoulder banging into a tree trunk. He barely noticed the bark biting into his flesh or the rain pouring down on him.

Amaru wasn't his.

Neither was Vasily.

And Luka had to give them both up.

It was the right thing, the proper thing to do. It was the only way Vasily was going to be truly happy. That was the only thing that mattered. Vasily had given him so many years of blissful happiness, and Luka cherished every last second of them. He wouldn't trade them away for anything, even knowing now that he'd have to give Vasily up.

The least he could do for Vasily would be to step back and let him properly bond with his mate. To not cause any problems. Let his lover bask in the happiness every dragon deserved to find with their mate. Right?

Luka heard something that sounded like keening through the rushing noise in his ears. It took a long minute to realize it was him, but he couldn't get it to stop.

Why couldn't he get it to stop? A strangled laugh burst forth, one that turned into a sob, and at that point the tears he'd been holding back started to fall. He gave in and wept and wept and wept.

He would need to take Gunter up on his offer after all. He couldn't stay with the Valerii Clan. There was no way he could wake up every day knowing his love was wrapped around his mage mate. Maybe Luka's infatuation with Amaru would fade with time. Everyone was enamored of the mage. He was so lively, friendly, and engaging.

But Vasily... Vasily was supposed to be his.

And now Luka was so completely alone.



A maru, like any mage, had dreamed of what it would be like to find his dragon. He hadn't expected the dreams to become reality; after all, daydreams rarely did pan out that way. With that said...this was most definitely not it.

Was he supposed to beat the obvious into their heads? Surely not.

And yet, here he sat. Dragonless.

Vasily, at least, seemed to know Amaru was his mate. Amaru may have been seriously sleep deprived, but he remembered their kiss vividly, thank you. Vasily clearly knew. Luka, on the other hand, was all sorts of torn up about the situation. And for the life of him, Amaru had no idea why. For whatever reason, Luka seemed convinced Amaru was not his. Nothing Amaru said or did seemed to penetrate that belief either.

Luka had taken off like a deranged bat last night, interrupting the kiss with Vasily, who had run after him. He had not seen either dragon since, which was most definitely not a good thing because it left him feeling both frustrated and pissed off.

He was beginning to understand why fate established a one dragon per mage policy. Managing Luka and Vasily was turning out to be a full-time job.

Normally, he would love to devote every second of his day to taming both of his dragons, but right now the priority had to be waking up both his clan and the lightning dragons. Plus, he still wanted to punch and kiss Irany for screwing up the sleep device so horribly. Punch him for making him sleep for five

centuries. Kiss him for delivering him into the waiting hands of two sexy dragons.

Both of his dragons needed a stern talking to. Maybe even a spanking.

Amaru stopped walking and a slow smile spread across his lips at the image of Luka bent over his knee, those wide, pale blue eyes turned up toward him, pleading, his front teeth lightly biting down into his bottom lip.

Vasily would be kneeling in front of Luka, his lips damp and parted from the kiss they'd just shared.

“Amaru? You okay? Your face is bright red.”

Amaru sucked in a harsh breath and choked on it. “Where am I?” He looked around, stunned to find he was standing in the middle of the Valerii camp with Sam standing next to him. Luka and Vasily were nowhere to be found.

“You’re in camp. What’s wrong? Have you been getting enough sleep?” Sam pressed. He laid a hand on Amaru’s shoulder and Amaru immediately jumped away from the mage.

“Yep! Fine! Getting plenty of sleep!” Amaru chirped. Technically, he wasn’t sleeping at all at night, but he figured he’d stored up five hundred years of sleep. He could go quite a while without sleeping. But right now, with that crisp image still dancing through his head, he didn’t want anyone but his dragons touching him. “Where were we going? That’s right! The meeting. More dragons are here to help.”

“It’s a small group of four earth dragons along with King Chalo of the Earth Dragon Clan. They arrived last night and slept late from their long flight in. Apparently, Rodrigo and Chalo were catching up this morning, but everyone is being called together to make official plans,” Sam said.

That was right. He knew all of this. He needed to get his brain focused on saving his people and dragons. There would be plenty of time to think of Luka’s bare ass later. Vasily’s too.

As he resumed walking, Amaru glanced up at the sky. Bright blue was starting to peek between the rolling gray

clouds, giving the promise that the storm system might be finally moving on. They were likely going to have the opportunity to get back to the cave and wake his people up. Or at least, wake up Irany so they could make some progress on getting the rest of their people conscious.

When they reached the giant white tent, Amaru poked his head in and almost backed out again. The space was crowded with dragons and mages. A lot of them he'd seen before, but too many were new. Maybe he could just go back to the old CD player he was taking apart and someone could come tell him what he needed to do.

“Amaru?”

Vasily's warm, deep voice stopped his retreating feet and he found himself automatically walking toward the dragon, who was smiling at him. Smart feet. Take him to his dragon. Then they could find their other dragon together.

He almost skipped across the tent and took Vasily's extended hand. With their fingers entwined, he rose up on the tips of his toes to search for Luka.

Poop.

His other dragon was standing on the other side of the tent, looking pale and lonely even though he was completely surrounded by dragons. Why was that expression on his face? None of this made sense to Amaru, but he wanted to get to the bottom of it—whatever the problem was—and fix it promptly. He wanted to walk across the table to get to Luka's side, but that was probably a bad thing in front of two dragon kings.

Fine. Later.

“Amaru, I would like to reintroduce you to King Chalo of the Earth Dragons,” King Rodrigo announced, motioning toward the large, boulder-shaped man standing beside him. He was at least head and shoulders above everyone else, his nose far too large for his narrow face. Were all earth dragons like this? They were like walking mountains. “I know you talked on a call earlier, but I also know you're sleep deprived. He and

several members of his clan have come to help get your clan safely out of the cave.”

“Okay! Thanks so much for the help!” Amaru lifted his hand and stuck up one finger.

Every dragon and mage in the tent gasped or choked. Not exactly the response he was expecting.

Vasily tore his hand free and lunged for Amaru’s raised hand, covering it with both of his. “Wrong finger! Wrong finger!” Very gently, Vasily lowered his middle finger to make a fist with the rest of his digits and lifted his thumb. “Like this. That works as the okay sign.” When Vasily turned to stare at him, his cheeks were bright red, and several of the other dragons were laughing behind their hands.

“Sorry about that.” Amaru grinned at King Chalo, holding up his fist with his extended thumb. “Everything is good now.”

Rodrigo’s face was still in his hand. “Amaru, who taught you that other hand gesture?”

“I think Ravi did.”

“Oops!” the short wind dragon said. He backed toward the door with a wide grin. “You know, I think I hear my husband calling me.” The dragon was out the door before he even finished speaking.

Chalo chuckled, a deep sound like rocks tumbling down the side of a mountain. “Rodrigo says you’ve been asleep for five hundred years. Lots to catch up on.”

“I know! I can’t wait!”

Dimitri cleared his throat and spread out a large sketch of the cave with markings for where the Sousa Clan and the dragons were still slumbering. “From this rough drawing, we can see the underwater entrance to the cave as well as what had been the other entrance via land on the opposite side.”

“When we arrived, we entered through the cave on land and walked down.” Amaru stepped up to the table and frowned at the paper as he searched his memory of that day. It was foggy now after so many years, clogged with the sounds

of crying, frightened children. The elders had moved slower down the steep rocky path. Dragons had helped where they could, but for the most part they were keeping watch, protecting their backs.

The one thing that seemed to stick was the clawing darkness. Even with the help of light spells, the darkness couldn't be pushed back far enough for his liking.

Or maybe it had been a sense of foreboding that this plan was going to fail so miserably. Yes, they were going to wake up. He was living proof of that. But had they lied to themselves even as they'd marched deep into the earth that this would all be done so easily? That the dragons and mages could defeat the Woodsfather with just a snap of their fingers if they didn't have to worry about protecting the village?

Lies. So many lies...

"Amaru?" Vasily's gentle voice pierced the fog and his firm hand squeezed his shoulder, pulling him free.

"Huh?" He jerked his head up and found everyone watching him with a mixture of concern and confusion. "Sorry. Lost in thought." He flashed them all a smile, but something about the weight in Luka's gaze from across the room made him think the dragon didn't believe him. "The path we took in was narrow. Not bad for humans, but there was no way a full-grown dragon in wing form could get through. It seemed stable at the time." He paused and shrugged. "But then, I guess a lot can happen in five hundred years. Something shifted and it caved in."

"Do you know where the entrance to this cave is?" Dimitri asked.

Amaru shook his head. "Not a clue. The dragons flew us over several days. Most of the time, we were flying at night."

"That won't be a problem," King Chalo said. "Once we get down into the cave and to where the rocks have fallen, we'll be able to feel the path."

"Feel the path?" Rodrigo carefully repeated, arching one eyebrow at the taller man.

“Don’t worry about it, Snowy. It’s an earth dragon thing. You wouldn’t understand.” As he spoke, the king reached out and gave Rodrigo’s nose a little tweak.

Rodrigo batted his hand away and then might have given his own mate the evil eye when Ha Na dared to giggle. Though the expression melted away as quickly as it formed under the weight of her broad smile.

“While we’re confident the earth dragons can clear the old path, our main concern is the structural integrity of the cave where the mages and dragons still rest,” Evora said, putting an abrupt stop to their silliness. “Once you start moving rocks, can you be sure you won’t cause rocks to come crashing down on the sleeping mages?”

“You’re not going to wake them up before we start working?” Chalo asked.

Evora shook her head, but it was Amaru who chimed in. “The majority of the Sousa down there are either children or the elderly. We thought it would create less of a panic if we had an exit ready and waiting for them when they woke. We considered letting people swim out...”

“Not a first choice for that many children and elderly,” Chalo finished with a nod. “I understand.” The earth dragon rubbed his pointy chin and frowned at the map. “No, I don’t think this is going to be a problem. We’ll have two dragons digging out the route and two in the cave keeping an eye on the ceiling. Even if we have to claw out an entirely new path, this shouldn’t take more than a day or two.”

“Thank you, my friend.” Rodrigo sighed, clapping a hand on his back. “The assistance is much appreciated.”

Chalo held up one finger, stopping the ice dragon. “Now that we have that settled, I do have a couple of questions for you.”

“Of course.”

“I had a long chat with Roca before I left. He and his father had scuffles with the Lightning Clan centuries ago.”

Amaru leaned in close to Vasily. “Who’s Roca?” he whispered.

Vasily pressed his cheek against the side of Amaru’s head as he replied. “King of the Metal Dragons. Their territory ran north of here through Central America and down into parts of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. The metal dragons fought in the Dragon War and later moved with many of the other fractured clans east to form the Sodalicum.”

That was a good start, but Amaru was going to need to hear a lot more about this war since its effects were still being felt around the world.

“Do you know if old King Cote is down in the cave?” Chalo asked.

“He’s not,” Amaru answered. “King Cote took his eldest son to fight Woodsfather, along with the majority of the Lightning Clan. His youngest child, Princess Maíra, and only a handful of the lightning dragons were put into a deep slumber with the Sousa Clan. They were to be our protection when we woke up.”

Chalo grunted and stared silently at the table for a second. “Very well. Roca sends a reminder all the same. These dragons went to sleep when we weren’t getting along all that well.”

Luka snorted from where he stood near Rodrigo. “When we were all snarling and fighting over the tiniest strips of territory.”

“Hey, battle scars were a way of showing off to mages that we were strong fighters,” Dimitri countered.

A low, derisive scoff erupted from Sam as the mage elbowed Dimitri in the stomach. “Idiots. Battle scars are *not* sexy. Having my dragon in one piece is sexy.”

Chalo coughed, though it sounded like he was covering up a laugh. “Yes, well, my point is Princess Maíra and the rest of the lightning dragons might react poorly to waking up to a bunch of ice dragons and earth dragons standing around them.”

“Ah, yes. Good point.” Rodrigo rubbed his chin, his brow furrowing slightly. “To keep things from escalating, we’ll need to keep the number of dragons to a minimum when they awake. At least until we can tell them everything that has happened and how much time has passed.”

“My other question is whether you’ve given any thought as to where you are going to put all these mages and dragons once you wake them up?”

Rodrigo opened his mouth to answer but not a sound came out. It was one question no one had asked. Everyone—Amaru included—had been so focused on waking up the sleeping mages and dragons that no one had talked about what happened afterward.

Chalo grimaced. “You can’t be thinking to take them all back to your compound. Yes, it’s big for your clan, but you’re talking about taking on another four hundred people.”

“And what? You think you’re taking them all back to the Sodalicum? It took you over two days to fly here. You think they’re going to want to spend two days in the air after being asleep for five hundred years?” Rodrigo asked, a rosy flush painting his cheekbones.

“I thought we’d just go home,” Amaru said.

Silence slammed down on the entire tent, causing Amaru to flinch. Apparently, he was the only one with that idea.

He swallowed hard and took another step forward. “It makes the most sense. It’s our home. The place we know after everything that has happened.”

“But...Amaru...” Sam said haltingly. “Your village, it’s ruins now. Most of the buildings are standing, but the roofs have all caved in. The jungle has overgrown parts. There are no supplies.”

Amaru nodded. “I know. We can set up temporary places like these tents until we can get the homes repaired, and I’m sure our ice dragon neighbors wouldn’t mind helping us with supplies until we get on our feet.”

“It would make the most sense,” Ha Na said. She placed her hand on Rodrigo’s and squeezed. “The younger ones like Amaru might be able to adapt to five hundred years of technology in the blink of an eye, but the older folks would need more time and space to make the transition gradually. A familiar place will help.”

Evora grunted. “Also, keep in mind they will be waking to the news that most of their clan was lost. Those deaths will be fresh for them. Home is the best place to soothe those wounds.”

Everyone fell to talking out the logistics. Amaru, of course, pitched in with his own ideas, but it was difficult to make decisions on his own because he did not know what supplies or technology could help with all this.

He turned to ask either Vasily or Luka a question, only to find that neither of them were there. What the hell? Where did they go? They had been there not two seconds ago. Had they seriously left him alone again?

All right, that tore it. His frustration shot up to the max. It was so strong that he felt his nails biting into his palms, literally fighting with himself to keep from chasing those two down and bonking their heads together. He had no idea why they were so conflicted and constantly disappearing on him, but his patience in figuring it out had packed up a suitcase and fled.

As soon as this was over, he was chasing them down and getting to the bottom of this. They would not be allowed to escape. And if they knew what was good for them, they would not try to escape either.



The very second that the meeting ended, Amaru was out of the tent and looking for his mates. He was somewhere between a speed walk and a jog as he canvassed the area, but with no luck. Wherever Luka and Vasily had gotten off to, it did not seem they'd stayed in the camp.

Fuck. Now what? He didn't know where to look from here.

Gregori wandered past, looking at his phone.

Oooh. Now there was a person who would know all. They were buddies too, so he had no doubt he would get answers if he asked questions.

"Gregori!"

Gregori paused midstep, head coming up and around before he spotted Amaru. "Oh, hey. What did you do to Vas and Luka? They shot out of here like bats out of hell."

Amaru's ire increased a notch. So others had seen this too? Wonderful. "Yeah, about that. They keep abandoning me at random moments. And it makes no fucking sense. That is how to use fucking right, right?"

"Uhhh...yes, it is." Gregori looked warily at him.

Amaru blew out an irritated breath and stopped just shy of being right in Gregori's personal space. "Look. I am confused. Also irate. I should be between both my mates and I'm not, and this isn't right."

Gregori's caution disappeared and he relaxed into a grin. "So you do want both of them?"

“Of course I do. They’re both my mates, and I thought they both knew that. Now, it looks like Luka is convinced he’s not, and I don’t understand why. I need details. ALL THE DETAILS.”

Gregori’s grin slid into impish territory, eyes narrowed slightly. “Oh, I can give you details. How about you come to my tent and I’ll tell all.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Gregori’s tent wasn’t far; he’d landed in a tent just near the tree line. No one put a tent right on the shoreline of the lake for obvious reasons. Amaru followed him right in, noting that Gregori had not only a cot set up, but a folding table and three chairs. With a deck of cards on the table. Game night? Or something.

“I feel like we need booze for this conversation.”

“Gods above and below, yes.” Amaru dropped into a chair and took the glass Gregori offered him.

Gregori joined him, opening a bottle of clear liquid with a very strong smell. “You tried vodka yet?”

“Not yet.” Amaru frankly didn’t care what it was.

Gregori poured him half a glass.

Amaru sniffed it, tried a sip, and was pleasantly surprised. It had a nice bold flavor. He knocked it back with a sigh. “All right, I’m less inclined to murder those two chucklefucks.”

“Been talking to Nikki recently, I see.”

“Uh...yes? Why?”

“Just an observation. Don’t think they used chucklefucks back in your day.” Gregori poured himself a glass. “So, you want to know some history because those two have said fuck all to you. You have come to the right place. I have never been one to either mind my own business or shut up. Well, to start with, let me ask one question. You sure they’re both your mates?”

Amaru tried not to roll his eyes in despair. Failed. Oops, well, there was always tomorrow. “Of course I’m sure. I wouldn’t be able to connect to them in dreams if I wasn’t their mate.”

“Oh. Yeah, duh, that makes sense. We all wondered why you could only connect to those two, but if you’re mates, then a bond would be there.” Gregori took another sip as he studied Amaru carefully. “Amaru, did you use the words ‘you are both my mates’ or any combination thereof?”

“I, uh, didn’t?” Amaru couldn’t see why the phrasing was important. “But surely they understood me when I said I wanted both of them?”

“No.” Gregori sighed, a gusty sigh like he’d been afraid that was the answer. “It’s clear from their actions they don’t understand what you meant. So, your boys have been together two hundred and fifty years, give or take a couple decades.”

Two...hundred... “You’re saying they got together after you guys moved to Brazil?”

“Yup. That okay?”

“Of course it’s okay.” Why was this even a question? “I’m not going to begrudge them being together while waiting on me. I’m not that petty. Okay, I’m petty, but I’m understanding in this case. Just...I didn’t expect it.”

Gregori nodded even as he poured Amaru more vodka. “Dragons don’t seek out other dragons to have sex with. Or a relationship. That’s how it used to be, so of course you wouldn’t expect it. Once the war did its damage, we sometimes did turn to each other. For comfort, for release. There wasn’t anyone else for us, after all. That’s how Vasily and Luka started. They turned to each other for a night of fun. Then a few days later, they did it again. Then again. And eventually, they moved in with each other, and they’ve been inseparable ever since.”

Two hundred and fifty years. They’d been lovers, friends, partners, husbands for two hundred and fifty years. All while waiting for him, not even sure if he was alive or...the thought

caught in his throat, making it hard to swallow for a second. Amaru threw the vodka back to help him clear the lump. It helped. Only a little, though.

“I’m not upset with them. At least, not for that.” He stared morosely into his empty glass. “I am upset they won’t talk to me and Vasily keeps abandoning me for Luka. And trying to get Luka to stay near me for more than ten minutes is like pulling teeth from a snake trying to eat me.”

“That does not surprise me. Luka has been waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

This phrase did not make any sense to Amaru. “How do shoes play into this?”

“I mean he’s always been the more pessimistic of the two. What you must keep in mind is that these two have been waiting with bated breath for hundreds of years. Not only to meet you, but also to be torn apart.”

Freezing in place, he ran those words through his mind. Then did it again because something was askew there. The calculations weren’t working. “Wait. Wait, I thought they knew they were mates? It’s why they’ve been together for so long.”

Gregori’s pitying look was back. He shook his head in a firm no. “I’m afraid not. They stayed together because they love each other. They never once truly believed they were mates.”

It rather felt like someone had taken a new concept, tied it to a sturdy rod, and then smacked Amaru right in the back of the head with it. He felt dizzy with the realization and also a bit stupid for not considering it before.

“So they’ve been, what, waiting for their relationship to implode? *For two hundred and fifty years?!?*”

Gregori gave a small nod, his smile sad. “That’s about the size of it. Honestly, we all sort of thought that. There are no records of triads in the history books. I think Gunter and Nikki even offered Luka sanctuary if he needed to leave the clan.”

Right, so he needed to kill those two later. They should not be encouraging Luka to leave.

Amaru thumped his glass closer to Gregori. “Booze me, daddy.”

“Sure thing, honeybunch.”

He accepted the vodka and knocked it back. Just how did he approach this problem? Two hundred and fifty years was a very long time to live with the fear of losing someone precious. It probably felt inevitable at this point, which was why Luka kept drawing back from him.

Wait, he had more questions. “Were they ridiculed by the other dragons over this?”

“Uh, well, ridiculed is kinda a strong word for it.” Gregori chafed the back of his neck, grimacing. “More like, no one could understand why they were bothering to be together? It doesn’t make sense, no matter how you look at it.”

Shit. That was what he was afraid of. He handed the glass over again. “That was a ‘more booze’ answer.”

“Sorry. But without you in the mix, them as a couple did not make sense to us dragons. We let it go because with the situation being like it was, it’s not like we had a lot of hope we’d ever find our mates, y’know? So no one tried to stop them or anything. Still, we’ve always been one mage per one dragon, so it looked weird to us.”

“Ugh, so you’re telling me they’ve spent all this time getting weird looks from people. And having me appear put a finger right on a sore spot?”

“Pretty much.”

Amaru held his glass out again.

“Another ‘more booze’ answer, huh?” Gregori generously filled it again. “The good news is, you know they love each other and you don’t have to chase them both.”

“I thought the good news was they’re cute enough I won’t strangle them for this.”

“Ah. That too.”

“Okay, yeah, apparently it’s up to me to fix this. Story of my life, right there. I’m always fixing something. So what were the magic words again? ‘Stop being stupid, you’re both my mates, get over here for nookie?’”

“As an incantation, that’s not a bad one.”

Amaru drank the rest of the glass and felt the sweet burn of alcohol down his throat. “At least one thing has gone well today. I have found vodka.”

“You’re welcome. With those two, you’re going to need it.” Gregori tilted his head sideways to look at the sky some more. “Those two are flying around the lake. Are they looking for something?”

“A brain cell,” Amaru muttered, reaching out to snag the bottle. He’d empty it at this rate.

Gregori snorted a laugh. “I’m never going to let this die.”

“Even if you do, I’ll bring it back.”

Leaning an elbow on the table, Gregori looked intrigued. “So what are you going to do next?”

“You mean after those two idiots finally stop and land?”

“Yup.”

Amaru eyed him, not trusting that expression. He still looked impish. “We’re free entertainment for you right now, aren’t we?”

“Of course! And I need to know ahead of time when to have beer and popcorn at hand.”

Well, he had helped Amaru out. Plus the vodka. Eh, what the hell. “Well, when they finally do get their asses down here, I’m going to make it more obvious that I want both of them. Maybe then they’ll stop panicking and actually pay attention.”

“If it helps any, Vasily does know you’re both his mates.”

“That...actually does help, thank you. He told you that?”

“He did. As for Luka...my advice? Go slow, use small words.” Gregori took the bottle back to pour himself a glass with the rest of it. “They’re both smart, but when you get their dicks involved, they can be really stupid.”

“Trust me,” Amaru drawled, a dark eye on the sky. “That I’ve figured out.”

Now, how did he fix this?



Luka had no idea where he was.

Well, he was on a rooftop, right along the ocean shore, but other than that he had no idea. Vasily had been chasing him hard and Luka had flown blindly to get away from him. He'd hated doing it, but he also had been incapable of facing the man in that moment. He had run before making any conscious decision to do so.

And now here he sat, on the roof of the building, with no idea what to do from here. He had not felt this lost since the Dragon War, when he'd had to face the fact that he had lost most of his family and clan. The pain was just as bright, just as poignant now with the idea of losing Vasily.

Fuck, he really would not be able to stay in his clan. He might have to go live with the fire dragons after all. Losing his home and clan on top of everything else felt horrifying—like he was teetering on the edge of an abyss—but the idea of staying and watching Vasily and Amaru together made him so ill he almost lost the contents of his stomach right there.

If there was a good decision to make here, a way to mitigate the damage, Luka did not see it.

At this point, throwing himself into the ocean looked like a viable idea.

There was a flap of wings overhead. Startled, he craned his neck up and around, his first panicked thought being that Vasily had found him after all. But one glance into the sky assured him it was not Vasily. The form was more slender, the scales a soft hue of gray.

Rodrigo.

Now what was his king doing out here when he should be busy at the camp?

Rodrigo swooped over the building once in a lazy circle before backflapping and landing lightly on the cement roof, shifting back into human. He smoothed his hair down with one hand as he walked closer, those sharp blue eyes evaluating Luka with a paternal air.

“Did you come looking for me? Or is this a chance meeting?” Luka’s bet was on the former.

“You are lucky it is not my lovely wife who hunted you down,” Rodrigo responded mildly as he took a seat next to Luka, his legs dangling over the side.

That was all the answer Luka needed.

“What ails you, child?”

The question, spoken in soft tones, almost broke Luka. Where to even begin?

“You ran from Vasily. That alone tells me something is very wrong.”

Even those words felt like an understatement. Catastrophic was the word Luka would’ve used.

He had to stop and think about it. Not because he didn’t know what was wrong, but he had to figure out where to start to explain it all. In the end, he went for the most succinct explanation. Frankly, Luka was afraid his throat would close up and seize before he could get everything out.

“The inevitable happened. I have lost Vasily to Amaru.”

God above, those words felt like acid on his tongue. He had no alcohol on him to ease the pain either, which felt like a travesty just then. For the first time in a long while, Luka desperately wished to get drunk.

Rodrigo put an arm around his shoulders in comfort. “Are you so sure of that?”

The question didn’t make any sense to him. He looked into Rodrigo’s face, trying to riddle out his true meaning.

When Rodrigo held his eyes and he did not see anything else, Luka protested, “Haven’t you seen them together?”

“I have, yes.”

“And isn’t it obvious to you? That they belong together?”

“I have also seen the three of you together and made the same observation. The three of you are picture-perfect together.”

Rodrigo was not a man who wasted effort on pointless optimism. He had always been the type to say things directly without sugarcoating. Luka knew this. He knew, but in this moment, he could not help but question it.

And yet, the small part of Luka that had not given up hope desperately wanted Rodrigo to be right. That hope felt like grasping a burning coal tightly in his fist. Despite the fact that it burned, he could not bring himself to let go of it.

Rodrigo’s expression softened to one of pity. He patted Luka’s shoulder as if comforting a child.

“I’ve never said this aloud to any of you, but there was a time I saw no hope for the clan. In those bleak days after the war, after everything we lost, I did not see how any of us would survive. I did not see how any of us who still had not found their mates would ever be truly fulfilled. My heart broke for all of you, but also for myself.”

It had been something they had all worried about. Luka understood. “Everyone in the clan hoped and prayed you would find your mate first if mages ever showed up again.”

Rodrigo chuckled, the sound so low it could barely be heard. “Well now, that’s damn counterproductive. I was praying everyone else would find theirs first. But the point I’m making is this: In those dark, dark days I did not see hope. I did not see a path forward. But despite the bleakness around us, I chose to create hope. That was one thing I refused to let go of.”

It was because of his hope, because of that drive they had moved to Brazil. Which was one of the better decisions the

clan had ever made. They had healed in this land in so many different ways.

Rodrigo's tone shifted, no longer comforting, but advising. "Hope is a choice and it is work. It's choosing to rise above your fear and listen to what your heart and dragon are saying without letting fear rule you."

"I feel..." Luka had to clear his throat and try again. It felt very difficult to speak right now. Honestly, all he wanted to do was curl into Rodrigo's arms and cry. "I feel there is no hope to be found in the situation."

"I think the only reason you cannot see hope is because you have the blinders of fear on."

Luka was arrested in place as surely as if those words had been a spell. Rodrigo meant every word, that was clear from his expression, and it made Luka wonder what he had missed. What had he failed to realize or see because of those blinders fear had put over his senses? Was he jumping to all the wrong conclusions?

That tendril of hope, the one that refused to be snuffed out, wormed its way back through him. This time he grasped it firmly, voice shaking as he asked, "You would not be sitting here talking to me about this unless you knew something for sure, right?"

Rodrigo got that enigmatic expression he sometimes wore when he refused to give out the answer but wanted you to figure it out yourself. "Why don't you ask your dragon?"

Luka winced. "My dragon has been silent this whole time."

"That is not possible. Your dragon is part of you. It would not be silent. I don't think it has refused to speak to you. I think your fear has suppressed its voice." Rodrigo picked up Luka's hand and put it firmly over his heart, holding it there. "Why don't you try asking? Without assumptions, without fear: ask."

Frankly, the idea terrified Luka. On the other hand, he could not see how the situation could get any worse. And

wouldn't it be better to know for sure?

So, even though he felt an inner quake in his core, he chose to follow the advice and leaned into the support Rodrigo offered. Luka closed his eyes, turning his attention inward, facing his dragon as he had not done before. Then he sucked in a breath for courage before mentally asking his dragon, *Amaru?*

The response was both immediate and in the loudest, most frustrated roar Luka had ever heard.

MAAAAAAAAAATE!

The response was so strong it startled Luka, and he nearly fell off the roof entirely. Rodrigo latched on to him, steadying him, and Luka held on to his king even as he demanded more of his dragon.

Are you sure?

The dragon huffed at him like he could not believe Luka was being this stupid.

B-b-b-but Vasily...

Also mate.

That was not what Luka had been asking, but at the same time it answered every possible question he could ask. Amaru was his mate. Vasily was his mate. And perhaps for the first time in recorded history, there was a triad with two dragons and a mage.

Tears burned in his eyes as a sob of pure relief tore out of his throat, and then more kept coming, purging all the pain of the last few days. Luka was so overwhelmed, he didn't know what he felt. Grateful that he did not have to lose anyone. Overjoyed. Relieved. Desperate to get back to the other two and straighten everything out before it became even more of a tangled mess.

But mostly, he was so full of love that he felt it might very well start shining out of his pores.

Rodrigo held him tightly until his sobs quieted before offering him a handkerchief. "You see? Don't listen to fear. It

doesn't know anything anyway.”

Luka wiped his eyes and blew his nose, his smile so big it threatened to split his face. “Fear is a dirty, lying bitch. You’re right, hope is so much better. Thank you.”

Rodrigo let go of him to stand before offering him a hand up. “I did not want to see you needlessly suffer any longer. Besides, as I said, if I had not come after you, my lovely wife would have. And she was talking about borrowing Cheryl from Cassie. She kept saying something about this being a clue bat situation.”

Privately, Luka felt like the clue bat may not have been amiss. That said... “I’d rather not be beaten up.”

“I thought that might be the case.” Rodrigo gave him a pointed look. “I don’t need to tell you what to do next, right?”

“No, *Velichestvo*. I will get my ass right back to my mates.”

“Good. Fly to it.”



For the first time in Vasily's entire life, he wanted to strangle Luka.

To be fair, Luka needed strangling just then. The urge was justified.

He kept flying around the area, making larger and larger loops as he did, his eyes scanning both land and sky in search of his elusive mate. No sign of him yet, but Vasily was not giving up until he found Luka.

He understood Luka was struggling right now, and that his dragon not speaking to him had made him assume the worst. Hell, for that matter, Vasily shared the concerns. But that did not mean Luka could run away from this conversation, run away from him, avoid coming home at night. The fact this was the second time in twenty-four hours that Luka had run from Vasily hurt more than words could describe and only fed his anger.

Vasily suspected Amaru was figuring things out, too, and if they did not talk to him soon, there was literally no telling what Amaru would do. Or think. Vasily would rather nip that situation in the bud before it turned into a large, poisonous, explosive flower.

But of course, to do that, he had to find Luka first.

The longer he flew, the more agitated he became. In fact, he was getting so mad that he might lose control of himself in a second. At this rate, he would end up on the local news after he made snow fall in Venezuela—wait. Wait, was that Luka? Over there, on the rooftop of the building next to the beach. He wasn't alone either. Huh, that was Rodrigo.

Really? His king had found Luka and didn't think to at least drop him a text?

Rude.

Vasily would deal with that later. Right now his full focus was on Luka.

Without tempering his speed much at all, he flew straight for the rooftop. A few hard backflaps made sure he did not crash right into the building, but it was definitely not in his top ten most graceful landings. Vasily did not care. The second he got boots on cement, he started stalking straight toward Luka.

Luka turned his head to watch him come and it was then Vasily realized his lover had been crying. The trail of tears was obvious on his cheeks. At the sight of that face, Vasily's own heart broke. His ire almost fell by the wayside, forgotten in the face of such obvious pain. There was nothing that upset Vasily more than seeing Luka hurt. It usually put him in a homicidal rage.

Right now, he was torn between comforting his lover and latching on to make sure Luka did not try to run for it again. In this mood of his, Luka might very well try to fly off again. Like hell would Vasily let that happen.

He expected an argument or something, but instead Luka launched himself right at Vasily. Startled, he froze midstride. Instinct had his arms coming up and around Luka's waist, holding him close. Luka held on to him just as firmly, arms wrapped around Vasily's shoulders.

Rodrigo gave them a wave, already shifting. "I'll let you two talk this out. If Amaru asks where you are, I'll tell him, so make this quick."

That failed to be reassuring. For that matter, it was not meant to be reassuring. Vasily gave him a nod and focused on Luka.

"You understand you took about a century off my life, right? Beloved, why the hell are you running from me?"

Luka pulled back a little, tilting his chin up to meet Vasily's eyes. There was still too much of a bright sheen in

those ice blue eyes, but Luka strangely did not look upset anymore. In fact, he looked overjoyed? Vasily had no other word for it, but he felt even that was lacking.

“I’m sorry,” Luka said, his words tumbling after each other, each one quicker than the one before. “I’m sorry, I just panicked. I didn’t know how to face you, or myself, or Amaru, and fear sent me running before I even knew what I was doing.”

With the apology, some of Vasily’s ire faded. Luka did not seem interested in running anymore, so he dared to relax his hold a smidgen.

Before he could frame any other words in his mouth, Luka kept going. “But it’s all right, I have my answer now. My dragon finally spoke to me. I know Amaru is my mate. For that matter, I know you are my mate.”

Vasily’s mind went blank, trying to process what Luka had said. When those words did penetrate, relief almost sent him to his knees. He hugged Luka tightly, rocking a little back and forth, so happy he damn near sobbed like a baby.

For all that he had been sure, for all that his dragon had reassured him all three of them were meant to be together, it would not have mattered if Luka had never received the confirmation. Luka had to know for his own sake. Now he had it, it felt like five hundred tons had been lifted off Vasily’s shoulders.

Luka pressed kisses against his shoulder, neck, jaw, and ear, all while whispering reassurances. “I’m so, so sorry. I love you, I love you so damn much. It’s all right. I know you were right, I won’t doubt us ever again. I am so sorry I scared you. To be fair, I was scaring myself.”

Vasily caught him by the nape of the neck and drew him into a hot, hard kiss. Luka kissed him back, lips just as hungry, and for all that he had spent centuries kissing this mouth, right now it felt new. Like he remembered all over again that he could not take Luka for granted.

Dropping back onto his heels, Luka panted for breath, that beautiful smile Vasily had fallen for on his face. “I promise to make this up to you later.”

“You’re damn right you will,” Vasily growled at him. This most definitely called for make-up sex.

“Amaru?”

It was a damn good question. “I don’t know precisely what he thinks of the situation. With the way he flirts with both of us, I am absolutely positive he’s attracted to us both, but I don’t know if he realizes we are his mates.”

Luka nodded as if in agreement, his brows furrowed together in deep thought. “This might be difficult to explain to him. Tricky, at the very least. We should probably start with saying that we both know we are his mates. Though to be honest, I don’t know if there is a good starting place to explain everything.”

If there was, Vasily certainly could not think of it. Then again... “Knowing Amaru, I am sure he will get the conversational ball rolling for us.”

“Eh, good point. I feel like we should bring alcohol for this conversation.”

Vasily nodded in firm support of this. “I think alcohol is a great idea. Everything goes better with alcohol. Especially apologies and weird explanations. Call ahead, ask Gregori to set two bottles and some glasses aside for us.”

“He always has a stash. He’s probably the best one to borrow from.”

As long as they replaced the bottles later, yes. Otherwise Gregori had very clever ways of reminding the borrower that payment was due. Usually this reminder came in the dead of night.

Anyway, that was a later Vasily problem. Right now, he had a potentially upset mate and a difficult explanation to get through. He could worry about replacing bottles later.

Luka texted, fingers flying across the screen, and without looking up said, “We have the flight back to camp to figure out how to tell Amaru about us. I don’t want to let him stew too long.”

“Neither do I, but do you honestly think a short flight is going to be enough time to figure that out?” Vasily sure as hell didn’t.

Putting the phone away, Luka looked determined. “Then think fast.”

Vasily had the distinct impression they were screwed.



Where the hell were his idiots?

Amaru left Gregori's tent with a slight stagger (turned out vodka was something of a hard hitter) but absolutely determined. After speaking with his friend, he now understood better where Luka and Vasily were coming from, so while he was still very frustrated with them, he did feel both understanding and sympathy. With his hands balled into fists so tight at his sides they were trembling, Amaru alternated between wanting to shake them and kiss them. He would probably do both. Yes, both was best.

How could they think the gods would separate them? Anyone could see Luka and Vasily were a package deal. They were made to be together. The only thing they were missing to make them complete was their mage. His dragons were lucky he was so smart and had keen eyesight.

Okay, so maybe he was the lucky one to have been blessed with two gorgeous, adorable, kind, thoughtful dragons who only wanted to take care of him and make him happy.

Amaru wasn't blind. He knew he was a handful. Whatever. Four handfuls on his very chaotic days. That was why he needed two dragons to keep up with him.

Logical. That's what this was. It was logical they were all mates. The problem was Vasily and Luka weren't accustomed to using logic when it came to mates. Thank the gods he was there to save them.

Luka's bright laughter sliced through the camp and pierced Amaru's chest like an arrow. He stood frozen for a second, marveling at that sound. He'd never heard Luka laugh like that before. It was all the better when it was followed by the deep

chuckle of Vasily. His mates were happy. Really happy. Maybe that meant they'd started to pull their heads out of their asses. Yes, he needed to find them and join in this happy.

Breaking into a jog, Amaru followed the sound to find Luka and Vasily were walking toward him together, their fingers entwined.

“There he is!” Luka said. “We were just coming to find you.”

It was obvious they had somehow figured it out. Or perhaps they had reached some kind of understanding. He did not know what exactly, but seeing them so relaxed together told him at least half the problem was solved. All he had to do was make sure they were all on the same page.

Amaru opened his mouth to demand details because he absolutely did not want any more misunderstandings. There were five hundred years' worth of cuddles to catch up on. But he didn't get the chance to speak.

The once sunny sky had darkened in the past several minutes as black clouds poured across the heavens, making it appear as if the sun had already set. That was until a massive lightning bolt slammed into the choppy black waters of Lake Maracaibo. A heartbeat later, ear-splitting thunder rumbled through, rattling all of Amaru's organs.

The next second, the alarm talisman on his belt gave a shrill sound. It scared him so badly he nearly jumped out of his skin, and then he eyed it with growing worry. He had set up an alarm to tell him if anything went wrong with the life-support systems and if this thing was screaming at him, then nothing good would be happening down below.

“We have to get down there!” Amaru shouted at his mates while pointing at the lake.

The relaxed happiness evaporated from their faces in an instant while their eyes nearly popped out of their heads. Vasily reached him first and gently placed his hands on Amaru's slender shoulders.

“It’s too dangerous to go down. We have to wait until the storm passes.”

“We can’t wait. The storm is the problem. I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but this alarm means the life-support system isn’t functioning right. If we don’t get down there now, my people are going to die!”

Vasily nodded once and turned his head to look at Luka.

The other dragon had already pivoted on his back foot, turning away. “I’ll go alert Evora and dig up the other mages. We’re going to need more help to get safely to the cave.” He’d barely finished speaking before he was gone, running across the camp.

“Do you need to pack any tools or supplies to make repairs?” Vasily demanded, his head whipping back around to Amaru.

“N-no. No! I already packed a bag for my next trip down.” That was supposed to happen tomorrow morning, when the earth dragons were going to start digging the tunnel.

Barely fifteen minutes passed before he was speeding through the water in Vasily’s arms with Luka right beside them, both of them dazzling in their dragon forms. The mages available at the campsite had been divided into two teams. Those who had full casting ability were left on the shore to provide a protective shield to hold off the lightning strikes from the water as long as possible. Those who were unable to do magic but could follow his instructions on fixing devices went to the cave. After they were fixed, Amaru could go behind them and give the device any kind of magical charge it might need.

As they surfaced in the cave, Amaru automatically flinched at the barrage of screaming alarms and flickering lights coming from each of the sleeping people. Shiiiiiiiiit! This was worse than he’d expected.

He ripped off his breathing bubble and clambered onto the stone floor out of the water. For a second, he stood frozen, taking in everything and trying to organize it in his head.

There was no need to look at the devices to know what was happening—catastrophic failure of everything.

“Amaru, what’s happening?” Luka demanded.

He glanced over to find his mate had switched from dragon to human. More and more mages and dragons were climbing out of the water, poised to help him.

Amaru dashed from one panel to the next, looking at the readings in order to answer that very question. This absolutely should not have happened. He should’ve had several weeks more before anything like this occurred. But it didn’t take more than thirty seconds to realize lightning had struck precisely where it should not have.

“The lightning sent feedback through the sigils, overloading the devices, and they’re finally crashing. The system was designed on a web of independent spells and devices.” Which was Irany’s first giant mistake, but there was no time for that rant now. “The device that keeps everyone asleep is putting them into a deeper and deeper slumber, which means we can’t wake anyone up until it’s fixed. At the same time, the life-support system for each person is failing. If the system fails, they will die in their sleep.”

Spinning completely around to face the assembled helpers, Amaru lifted his voice above the alarms. “We need to repair the life-support devices.” He tapped a spot over his heart where they would find the device. “Each person go to a person whose device is glowing red. I’ll shout out instructions on how to fix it. Once it’s fixed, raise your hand in the air and I’ll give it the magical charge it needs.”

With those thin instructions, everyone took off like a shot. It wasn’t hard to find a device malfunctioning since it was just a long string of glowing red down the line. Amaru dove in, shouting out instructions and answering questions as quickly as he could. He might not like how Irany had designed the slumber system, but at least Amaru understood how it worked so he could patch it. Fixing it completely was an entirely different matter. He would need Irany awake and spearheading

that task. Right now, his only concern was keeping everyone alive.

Thankfully, he'd spent the past few days working with the different mages, explaining how the Sousa brand of technology and magic functioned. Most seemed to be catching on to it and were following his instructions well enough. As he finished the first patch, he drew some energy from his golden core and pressed it into the device, giving it just the right amount of magic to keep it running.

As he lifted his head, six hands were in the air as Sam and the Jaeggi mages waited for him to run over to check their work and charge the devices. Amaru darted off, his feet slapping on the damp stone as he moved from person to person. The shriek of the alarms dimmed slowly as each Sousa mage and lightning dragon was saved.

He continued to run from person to person, stopping only to fix a device here or there himself before someone else was calling for him. He only realized he was becoming exhausted when he hit an uneven patch in the cave floor and nearly face-planted on stone.

An arm shot out and caught him around the waist. He looked up to find Luka pulling him safely into a gentle, comforting embrace.

"You look like you could use this," Luka murmured. Amaru didn't get the chance to ask what he was talking about. Luka's soft, parted lips covered his in a kiss that dissolved all the bones in his body and wiped his brain completely clean. What was he worrying about? No idea. Didn't matter anymore. He was finally kissing Luka.

A tantalizing stroke of the tip of Luka's tongue was followed by a rush of crisp, cool energy. It flowed throughout his entire body, waking up blissed-out nerve endings and covering his arms in goose bumps.

Luka broke off the kiss and smiled at him. "Does that help?"

“What—Arrrghh! Freeze brain! Freeze brain!” Sharp cold rushed to the top of his skull and briefly encased his head.

Luka huffed a laugh. “Sorry about that. I may have given you a little too much.”

Amaru could only splutter, the pain already forgotten as he stared up at Luka’s entrancing smile.

“You looked like you could use a pick-me-up. Feel free to draw any power you need from me or Vasily.”

Amaru’s heart leaped into his throat. “From both of you?” he squeaked. Did this mean they’d started to figure it out? Did they finally realize they both belonged to him? Without him needing to shake some sense into them?

Luka’s expression softened into something so sweet and gentle it nearly made Amaru swoon on the spot. “Yes. Both of us.”

Amaru started to lunge in to seize his precious dragon for another kiss when one of the mages shouted.

“Uh! Amaru, need a little help here!” the mage cried, his voice edged sharply with panic.

A low, evil growl rumbled up Amaru’s throat. Somebody’s ass was getting hexed. He had his mates. Now they needed some serious alone time so they could properly worship each other and celebrate their new relationship. He did not need this chaos interrupting him.

“Later. We can talk and...other things...later. I promise.”

Narrowing his eyes on Luka, he pointed a finger, tapping the tip of Luka’s nose. “I’m holding you to that promise.”

“Amaru!” This shout was from a different mage. Things were deteriorating faster and he needed to get ahead of it if he was going to ever get mate quality time.

He darted off and tackled another couple dozen life-support devices while snagging kisses...er...dragon’s breath from both of his mates. Each time was totally necessary and not because he was enjoying the novelty of kissing two different sexy men whenever he wanted.

It took nearly three hours before they got the worst of the system failures under control, but this was nothing more than a very temporary fix. If another strong storm blew into the area, there was a good chance he wouldn't be able to patch the problem again.

What's more, this problem was going to keep him from getting private time with his new mates because he would need to stay alert for more failures. It wasn't enough to simply have help. He needed Irany awake now. The bastard made this mess, and it was his turn to deal with it.

Grumbling to himself under his breath, Amaru stomped over to where Irany the Bastard was sleeping peacefully on his little rock slab, oblivious to the fact that his life and the lives of his remaining clan mates had nearly ended. With a couple of quick jabs on the control panel, he detached Irany from the overall system and started trying to pull him out of his sleep cycle.

Could this stop the man's heart? Possibly.

Could it melt his brain and send it oozing out of his ears? There was a chance.

But right now, it was a chance Amaru was willing to take. He couldn't keep going at this rate. He needed help.

When the slumber system was shut down completely—and Irany's heart was still beating—Amaru growled. The lazy asshole wasn't waking up. He climbed onto the stone bed, straddling him so that his knees were on each side of mage. Grabbing his shoulders, Amaru pulled him upright and shook him as hard as he could. "This is your fault! It's your system! You fix it! I found my mates and I want sex, dammit!"

A hand landed on his arm and he jerked his head around to find Vasily and Luka staring at him with their mouths hanging open.

"Amaru? Are you upset?" Vasily asked.

"Upset?" His voice cracked but he ignored it. "Of course I'm upset! I've missed five hundred years of nookie!" He redirected his glare back to Irany. This man needed to be

hexed. Anyone standing in the way of him and his mates needed to be hexed. Fuck, he should just start hexing things because it would make him feel better. “All because this chucklefuck—”

“How do you even know that word?” Luka protested.

“Nikki, who else? Don’t distract me. This chucklefuck screwed up the design so badly that we didn’t wake when we were supposed to. How can you not account for lightning dragon magic when you’re going to be fucking sleeping right next to them?”

With his fingers still dug into Irany’s shoulders, he looked over at his dragons, who were smiling at him like he was being ridiculously cute. Did they not understand he was a dangerous man with a hex? He could hex with the best. Boils were his specialty.

Irany deserved it, too. Then again, if he hexed him now, he would not be able to help Amaru. Dammit, he couldn’t win today.

A little sigh slipped out and his shoulders slumped. “I have a right to be upset about this. Five hundred years! I missed five hundred years of sexy times! Of morning cuddles, and dragon flights, and being able to pamper my mates, and argghhhhh.” He shook Irany one more time before releasing him.

Irany’s limp body flopped back down on the stone. But no sooner did his back hit the surface than Irany was flying upright again on a harsh gasp of air, his dark brown eyes popping open.

Amaru screamed and tried to leap up, but he tripped over Irany and landed less than gracefully in Vasily’s waiting arms. Exactly where he wanted to be.

“What? Where? A-A-Amaru? What’s going on?” Irany stammered. He rubbed his eyes and looked around the cave filled with dragons and mages in weird clothes that he most definitely didn’t recognize.

“Finally!” Amaru jabbed one finger at a very confused Irany while wrapping his free arm around Vasily’s neck. “It’s

your turn to deal with this mess. I'm running off for hot sex with my mates!"

Irans still looked at him with that very annoying blank expression. "Huh?"

"Figure it out, Irans. I am done cleaning up your mess. Whatever happens next, do NOT call me. I can promise you I will be very, *very* busy."



Vasily was still reeling from Irany waking up when Amaru wrapped both arms around his neck and planted a hard, demanding kiss on his lips. He struggled to catch up and actually kiss his mage back when Amaru pulled away and declared in a loud voice, “Mates.”

“Yes,” Vasily whispered in choked relief while his dragon roared in his ears. Relief was not a strong enough word. It felt like his soul shivered with joy, almost like it purred. Finally, finally he did not have to worry about how to tell Amaru. He did not have to worry about losing Luka. For the first time in his life, everything had clicked into place.

Amaru released one arm and leaned out to snag Luka by the collar. He dragged the other dragon close and gave him the same hard kiss. Though, Luka at least looked like he was expecting it and managed to participate.

“Mates!” Amaru announced a second time when he ended the kiss.

“Yes,” Luka replied with a brilliant smile. In that moment he was breathtaking in his joy.

But Amaru wasn’t finished yet. With a hand tangled in both his and Luka’s hair, he forced Luka and Vasily together as he again repeated, “Mates!” It was hands down the best worst kiss of his life. Their lips were crushed awkwardly together and their teeth clacked against each other because they were both laughing.

“There! We’re all mates. Now stop trying to run away from me!” Amaru might have sounded like he was complaining, but every word was said with a huge smile.

Luka reached up and lightly caressed Amaru's face, leaving his palm against the mage's cheek for him to snuggle. "Yes, we're both your mates, and we are never letting you go. I swear. The same way I will never let go of Vasily."

Vasily's throat tightened and he had to clear it a couple of times to get just a few words out. "Same, my love. Same. I never want to be without you and Amaru for the rest of my days."

Amaru laughed brightly and hugged them both. "We are definitely talking more about this later. I want to make sure we are all on the same page. I don't want any more misunderstandings—"

Iransy roared something, breaking into their impromptu love fest.

"Shit," Amaru muttered.

"What did he say?" Luka asked.

"Oh! That's right! He doesn't have a translation amulet. He wants to know what's going on." Amaru wiggled until Vasily placed him on his feet again. The little mage skipped behind Vasily and dug into the waterproof bag hanging off his shoulder. Amaru made a little noise of triumph and held up another translation amulet before jogging over to Iransy.

"Here. This is so you can understand them and they can understand you," Amaru explained as he slipped it over Iransy's head.

"Yes. Okay. But who are they? What's going on? How—"

Iransy didn't get any further because Amaru smacked him in the center of his forehead. "Chucklefuck!"

Luka sighed. "I'm having a talk with Nikki about introducing slang to you a little slower."

"Ow!" Iransy whined, rubbing the new red spot on his forehead.

"Five hundred years! We've been asleep for five hundred years!" Amaru shouted into Iransy's face.

“I thought you were exaggerating! How is that possible? We should have been woken up.” Irany shoved long black hair out of his face, looking very much the part of someone who had just woken up from an unexpected power nap. There were creases in his cheeks, showing red even through the dark olive skin. He kept wrinkling his nose, too, which was almost comical since his nose was decidedly too large for his face. He was somewhere between the vibe of mad scientist and teenager in trouble.

Amaru reached out to smack Irany again, but Vasily caught his hand this time. He could understand Amaru’s frustration about the entire situation and some deeper pain he was possibly not dealing with, but it wasn’t fair to take it out on Irany.

“He doesn’t know everything,” Vasily murmured.

The mage’s shoulders slumped and he leaned into Vasily, resting his head on his chest for a second. “You’re right.” He sighed and turned his eyes back to his fellow clan member. “One of the reasons we didn’t get woken up was because the dragons and mages never returned to wake us. This—” He paused and gave a jerk of his chin toward the other four hundred-ish members of the Sousa and lightning dragons still asleep. “This is all that’s left of our people.”

Irany’s eyes skimmed over the long row of sleeping mages and dragons, his face growing pale as he took them in. Vasily’s heart went out to the man. It was a lot to take in after waking from a five-hundred-year nap.

Amaru gave him a little pop on the shoulder. “But we can’t focus on what we’ve lost. All our attention needs to be on saving every person we have left, right?”

“Y-yes, you’re right. We have to save our people.” Irany’s voice gained strength as he spoke.

“Well, right now, you have to save our people,” Amaru corrected him.

“What?” Irany squeaked.

“You fucked up. If your system wasn’t so complicated, and if it had accounted for the lightning magic of the dragons, the backup system would have kicked in and we would have woken up centuries ago. So, this is your punishment. I’m leaving you here to work on the system with...”

“Yo!” Gregori chimed in. Vasily jerked around to see the dragon holding one hand up in the air while keeping his eyes locked on his phone as he furiously tapped it with his thumb.

“There! I’m leaving you with Gregori Valerii of the Valerii Ice Dragon Clan. He’s very nice and will fill you in on everything. Also, you’ll have Sam. He’s a mage and probably knows the most about the Sousa and our devices.”

Iransy made a grab for Amaru, but the wily mage darted away and cackled. “Wait! Where will you be? Why are you leaving me?”

Amaru snuggled up against Luka, then grabbed Vasily’s shirt, tugging him in close. “I’m going somewhere, anywhere, with my mates. We deserve some time alone.”

Yes. Alone time. Away from the various dragon clans and mates and all the chaos. They needed many private hours. It had been days since he’d last made Luka moan with pleasure and now he had another mate to explore and learn. Amaru probably made the very best noises. He had to figure out all the spots that made him shout, squeal, and beg.

“Mates? As in plural? As in you have more than one?”

Amaru snorted. “Of course I have more than one. You honestly think one dragon could handle me?”

“And that is why you are being sent far, far away,” Gregori said. The shorter dragon strolled over, grinning, while he shoved his phone into his waterproof bag.

“What are you talking about?” Vasily asked while cuddling his mates.

“I’m talking about the fact that no one in camp wants to hear the two of you handling that one,” Gregori answered, pointing right at Amaru’s grinning face. “Besides, those of us who are still stuck single after all these years don’t need to

watch the nauseating early stage of new-mate cuteness. I don't think my stomach can handle it."

"Screw you," Luka groused.

"No! You three go screw each other," Gregori said with a cackle. "I've already made hotel reservations and sent the information to Vasily's phone. Sam and I will watch over Irany for a little while. We—"

Vasily didn't even allow him to finish. He grabbed Amaru and tossed him over his shoulder and dashed for the lake entrance. Luka's bright laughter chased after him and Gregori was shouting something at him, but he couldn't make it out. Didn't matter. He had his mates and he was escaping.



THE THREE OF THEM NEARLY TUMBLED INTO THE HOTEL ROOM in a tangle of limbs and giggles. Vasily had given the hotel Gregori selected only a cursory glance as he checked in while Luka kept the highly distractable Amaru under control. Mostly it was Luka whispering the word "sex" into Amaru's ear every time he thought about wandering off to marvel at some new bit of technology he'd not encountered before, such as cars and elevators. He'd even demanded Luka fly him up to check out a helicopter that passed by.

As Vasily kicked the door shut with a little more force than necessary, Amaru broke away from Luka and threw himself across the massive king-sized bed. His light frame bounced and Amaru squealed.

"This! This is much better than our beds at camp." He spread out his arms and legs, moving them as if he were making a snow angel. "We need a bed like this."

Vasily stood back and watched Luka peel his shirt off over his head while at the same time toeing out of his boots. There was a body he'd fucking missed. Luka was all long, lean muscles and snowy white skin. A few scars marred his back and sides from the old war and a few rainforest beasties that hadn't realized they shouldn't fuck with dragons. But Vasily

had already spent years memorizing every inch of Luka's body with his fingers and mouth.

He shifted his gaze to the mage who had propped himself on his elbows and was staring at Luka with wide eyes, eating up every inch of Luka that was revealed. Amaru was his new target. He was happy to remap Luka's body and explore every inch of Amaru's tattooed frame.

Luka shoved down his pants and underwear in one swift move and crossed to the foot of the bed. The grin that spread across those perfect lips did crazy things to Vasily's heart, but he was loving this wicked tease of the mage.

The dragon pressed his hand into the mattress a couple of times and clicked his tongue. "Our bed is better."

Amaru gulped and swallowed hard. "*Our* bed?"

"Our bed." Luka crawled onto the mattress slowly, like he was stalking the mage. "So much better. Softer. Smells like me and Vasily." He grabbed one of Amaru's borrowed shoes and tossed it over his shoulder. "Soon it's going to smell like you, too." He added the second shoe to its brother on the floor before wrapping his long fingers around Amaru's ankles and pulling the mage closer.

"Yes," Amaru moaned. He tossed his arms around Luka's neck and tried to pull him in closer, but Luka stiffened.

The wicked dragon turned his head toward Vasily and narrowed his eyes. "Are you planning to join us?"

"Eventually," Vasily drawled from where he was leaning his shoulder against the wall, admiring the sight of his two mates against the navy comforter. He reached down and adjusted his hard cock as it strained against the front of his cargo shorts. "I'm enjoying the sexy show in front of me."

"Get your ass over here," Luka snarled. "This isn't a peep show. You have to participate or you're not getting any of this sexy ass." As if to further make his point, Luka shook the ass in question.

Yes, Vasily was done looking. Now he needed to touch.

And kiss.

And lick.

And bite.

He needed to make them both his for all time. No one would ever be able to question that Luka Valerii and Amaru Sousa were his.

Vasily shucked his clothes, tossing them about the room as he walked up behind Luka as the dragon was kissing and peeling clothes off a writhing Amaru. Gripping Luka's hips, he pulled his dragon mate backward until his cock was neatly nestled between his round ass cheeks. With one hand on Luka's rigid dick and the other around his throat, he pulled the dragon up so he was kneeling on the edge of the bed.

A low whimper leaked from Luka as Vasily slowly thrust forward, rocking against his ass, giving just a tease of what was to come. Luka felt so good in his arms like this, pliant and trembling, begging for Vasily to take complete control.

It was made all the better when he peered over Luka's shoulder to see Amaru lying on the bed, his legs splayed wide and welcoming as he squeezed his hand around the base of his cock. The flushed red tip glistened with pre-cum, begging to be licked away.

"Oh fuck," Amaru choked out. "I think I'm going to come just watching you two together. I've never seen anything so sexy in all my life."

"Is that what you want?" Vasily asked. He kept his voice pitched low and deep. A shiver ran through Amaru and he loved it. "We'll do whatever you want. If you want to watch while I bend Luka over and fuck him hard and deep, we'll do that."

"Only if Amaru lets me suck his cock while you fuck me." Luka made a show of licking his lips, and it was enough to make Amaru crack.

The mage released his dick and crawled frantically toward them. He threw himself at Luka. Rough, desperate kisses were pressed to Luka and then found their way to Vasily's mouth.

He groaned as Amaru's tongue thrust into his mouth in a dirty, sloppy kiss that had him thrusting hard against Luka's ass.

"Both. I want you both," Amaru panted. "I want to be in the middle. I want to kiss and touch you both. Need everything. All of it. Now."

"Done!" Vasily growled. He released Luka and the dragon tackled Amaru to the mattress with a bounce. They both giggled for a second before their mouths became otherwise occupied.

Vasily crawled into the bed on the other side of Amaru so he was sandwiched between them. He kissed and licked his way along his neck to his collarbone, tracing the swirling lines that covered so much of the sexy man. Most of his arms and shoulders were covered in either swirls or geometric patterns. What entranced Vasily the most was the one right above his naval. He definitely had questions to ask about what all the designs meant, but that could wait for later. Everything felt so right about this. The taste and feel of Amaru's warm skin were like the mage was made specifically for him. And then when he lifted his eyes, his gaze was filled with the sexy sight of Amaru and Luka eating desperately at each other's mouths.

His dragon purred and preened with such pride the creature was in danger of getting a different kind of swelled head. But all that mattered was his mates were happy.

"Shit!" Luka suddenly swore as his head popped up.

"What's wrong?" Vasily demanded, tensing to jump into action.

"Lube?"

Vasily grinned. "Front pocket of my backpack." Thank god he'd stopped in the camp long enough to grab his bag packed with the most basic of supplies.

And thank god lube counted as basic supplies.

"On it!" As Luka sprang from the bed and across the room to the bag Vasily had dropped near the door, Vasily rolled Amaru to face him, once again claiming that perfect mouth. Those talented hands ran over his body, fluttering here and

there as if he wanted to touch everything he could, all at the same time.

Vasily slipped a hand between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around Amaru's cock, giving it a hard, slow stroke that made the man's eyes roll back into his head. That certainly slowed him down. It was like finding a magic lever or button on his body.

"Vas!" he choked out.

Vasily's fingers circled the base of Amaru's cock and tightened, staving off any orgasms that might try to break free. "Slow down. We're just getting you good and hard so you can fuck Luka. And the second you're balls deep in his ass, I'm going to push inside of you. That what you want?"

Amaru frantically nodded, his mouth hanging open but no words coming out.

Vasily continued to slowly massage and stroke Amaru's dick while claiming his mouth in a torrid, bone-melting kiss. He only broke it off when the mattress shifted under Luka's weight.

His cocky dragon mate smirked as he dropped onto his back in the dead center of the bed and spread his legs wide, giving both of them an excellent view of all of his glorious body. Before Amaru could fall on him like a starving man before a feast, Vasily grabbed his left hand and dropped a large dollop of clear, viscous gel onto his fingers.

"Stretch Luka. Slowly." Vasily lifted his gaze and smirked at the dragon who was now glaring daggers at him. "Do it slowly. That's how he likes it. Slow."

"Fuck you, Vasily! Don't be mean! I—" Luka's words dissolved into a fractured whimper. Amaru pressed a finger into his hole down to the second knuckle.

"Oh wow. He...he feels amazing. Tight. Hot and cold at the same time," Amaru said breathlessly. "I thought...the inside of your bodies would be cool. The...ice...but..." Luka moaned again as Amaru added a second finger. Luka stretched his arms above his head, fingers tightening on the pillows. His

abs clenched and tightened under silky skin as he lifted his hips, trying to take more of Amaru's fingers.

Smiling to himself, Vasily squeezed one of Amaru's ass cheeks, marveling at the perfect plumpness. It was begging to be bitten like a ripe peach. Later. Right now, Amaru's little hole was calling to him. He circled it with one lube-slick finger before pressing just the tip inside.

He continued to tease the mage, working him so slowly, loving the way his body swallowed him up.

"Holy shit, Vas!" Amaru panted. "Not that slow!"

"You were asleep a long time. I have to prepare your body slowly," Vasily countered, barely managing to bite back his smile as he continued his torture.

"I was asleep! Not dead!" Amaru shouted.

"Vasily Valerii, quit being the slow police!" Luka said.

"The what?" Vasily snickered. Amaru had finally broken Luka's wonderful brain. It was a sure sign all the blood had left it for his dick.

"What? Shut up! Never mind. I just need someone to fuck me now or I'm going to die."

"Same," Amaru said with a grunt. He removed his fingers from Luka and applied some lube to his cock before lining the head up to Luka's stretched hole. As he pushed inside, Vasily worked on stretching Amaru's hole even further to accommodate his sizeable girth.

The fact his two mates were seizing the reins of this delicious fuck was probably for the best. His hands were trembling, his skin coated in sweat, and his dick was throbbing in time with his heart. As much as he loved torturing Amaru and Luka, he was already at his breaking point. He needed to come, and right now, his first choice was deep inside of Amaru's ass.

Snatching up the lube, he coated his own dick, never taking his eyes off Amaru pushing farther into Luka. Both of his mates were moaning and cursing in their pleasure.

The second Amaru was fully seated inside of Luka, Vasily pushed the head of his cock into Amaru's stretched hole. He tried to go slow, but the sneaky mage surprised him by pushing backward, nearly impaling himself on Vasily's cock.

Amaru wanted to drive? That was fine with him.

He reached around the mage and grabbed Luka's legs behind the knees, pushing them up toward Luka's chest. The new angle took Amaru even deeper inside of Luka, wringing more sounds of ecstasy from them both.

"Do it, Amaru. Fuck us both," Vasily gritted out between clenched teeth as he held on to the orgasm that had already started to build at the base of his spine.

The mage hesitated for only a second. His first few movements were jerky, but their brilliant mate quickly found a rhythm that almost had Vasily regretting his words. Almost. With each thrust, Amaru either thrust hard into Luka or fucked himself on Vasily's thick cock. Moans and desperate chants filled the hotel room, drowning out the slap of sweaty flesh and the angry creak of the bed.

Vasily opened his mouth to warn his mates he was dangerously close, but he never got the chance. Luka cried out as he came, semen splashing across his stomach as he desperately jerked himself. At the same time, Amaru sped up, his movements growing more frantic as Luka's orgasm triggered a cascade. Amaru shouted as he came, his channel tightening around Vasily, sending him over the edge.

The world went white with pleasure so sharp he thought he was going to pass out. Nothing had ever felt so good. But then, nothing else ever would now that he'd found both of his mates.



The vague idea of waking up properly floated through Amaru's mind. He wasn't sure it was a good idea. He was modest enough to admit not all of his ideas were good ones.

Wait, why was he asleep in the first place?

The question brought him further out of dreamland, demanding an answer. No, seriously, why the hell had he been sleeping? He had Things To Do. Aside from two hot dragons.

From somewhere off to the side came the sound of an animal roar. Like a dragon but not?

"Mmm, Mom?" Amaru muttered, struggling to get his eyes open.

Vasily chuckled, the sound more felt in the vibrations of his chest than heard, as he leaned in and kissed Amaru's forehead. "Hi, sleepyhead. You actually awake?"

"Mmm." Verdict still out on that one. It wasn't that he wanted to keep sleeping, he was just so damn comfortable. Moving felt like a crime. Blasphemy. Something.

A warm hand stroked up and down his bare back, which only encouraged him to sleep longer. Wholly unfair. He knew Vasily was doing that on purpose.

"Sleep longer, baby, if you need to."

A kiss again, this time on his forehead. Luka had done that one.

Even the suggestion irked him. It conversely prompted him to wake up further.

"What was that sound?" he asked, forcing an eye up.

“Oh, that? My text notification sound.”

“I still can’t believe you use a velociraptor sound,” Vasily commented.

“What, it’s funny! Anyway, it was Dimitri being a smartass, nothing to worry about. Amaru, you’re determined to wake up, aren’t you?”

Ha, both eyes open! Both at half-mast, but they were still capable of seeing, and that was what counted.

“Hungry,” he said as justification. The second the word was out of his mouth, though, he realized it was true. He actually was hungry. He blamed the two mouthwatering dragons in bed with him; they’d expended a lot of Amaru’s energy last night.

“Then I’ll call something up for us.”

That made no sense to him. “Call?”

Vasily explained as Luka rolled over on the bed, reaching for something. “Room service is what it’s called. Basically, the hotel has a kitchen to serve guests, and you can order food from them that they’ll bring to your door.”

“Ohhh. Damn, where has that been all my life?”

“We’re all fans of room service.”

Luka placed an order for lots of food—Amaru didn’t recognize half of it, and it didn’t matter, he was hungry enough to eat anything—and then left the bed altogether.

“It’s going to take a minute, so shower?”

“I’ve heard of this. That room where water falls from the ceiling?”

“Temperature controlled water.” Luka winked at him. “You’re going to love it.”

Wet, naked dragons pressed against him. Soap at hand. Yes, please.

For that, Amaru’s brain willingly came fully awake. He rolled off, heading for the shower. Vasily was right behind

him.

Then he paused in the bathroom and really looked it over. That tiled stall on the back end of the room was a shower? It didn't look all that different from the bathing rooms at home.

Vasily stepped in, turned on the water, and Amaru's interest went from casual to intrigued. Wait, that had serious pressure to it. And oooh, it was heating up. He could feel it doing so. Amaru stepped in closer, sticking an arm under the spray, analyzing it. It was getting warmer by the second, although the pressure didn't change.

He realized Vasily and Luka were watching his reaction, smiling like they found his curiosity cute or something. He wrinkled his nose but couldn't contain his questions. "How hot does the water get? Where is it piped in from? The roof?"

"Water tank behind the wall," Luka corrected him. "The water is sourced from the city water plant. It's piped into the building and then routed to here. As for temperature, it does have an upper limit. It won't get hot enough to burn human skin."

Fascinating. He absolutely must study the system later. It was different from the one he'd grown up with, and an improvement, and he wanted to integrate it into the rebuild.

"For now"—Vasily waggled his eyebrows in a ridiculous manner—"strip. It's naked time."

Naked time always sounded good to Amaru. He readily started stripping.

He had doubts about the shower being able to hold all three of them, mostly because Vasily was *not* a small man, but they made it work.

Mostly.

Look, trying to fit was half the fun, all right?

"Fortunately, we all love each other," Luka commented, even as he slid shampoo into Amaru's hair.

"Oh yeah, otherwise this would be beyond awkward."

Vasily's hands ran over Amaru's back, soaping and washing him. Then down farther. Stopping at a particular place on Amaru's ass cheek.

He knew without even asking but asked anyway. "You're curious what that tattoo means, aren't you?"

"I'm curious about what all of them mean."

Amaru kept his head tipped back to keep the soap out of his eyes as he answered. "Most of them are a record, of sorts. They designate rank in my clan, levels of magic I've mastered, things of that variety. It allows anyone who doesn't know me well to tell at a glance what I'm certified to do and how much experience I have."

"Huh." Vasily's fingers traced along the thick black lines on his arm. "Like a résumé on your skin."

"I don't know what that is, but sure."

"Okay, but hopefully no one is going to see the one on your ass."

Amaru had known that was coming and deadpanned, "When one is young, and unfamiliar with the potency of alcohol, things happen."

Both laughed, like they could well picture this scene.

"Okay." Luka paused in scrubbing, apparently too busy laughing to focus. "That explains why it's a bunny."

"I like rabbits," Amaru said, defending himself mildly.

"We can tell. All right, rinse."

He rinsed out his hair, then got his hands on Vasily and Luka. So much fun washing firm muscles and warm skin. He might have quickly become addicted.

"Shower time has just become a group activity," he informed his lovers.

Vasily looked him over, wholly at ease as Amaru got his hands absolutely all over that powerful chest. He looked entirely amused. "Is that right. Why?"

“Because I said so.”

“Well, who am I to argue?”

Such a good dragon. So obedient. Amaru dropped a hand to wash that lovely dick, a reward for good behavior.

Vasily leaned in to kiss him, slow and leisurely. Mmm, delightful. Kissing this man was entirely too lovely to ever consider stopping.

A sharp hand slapped him on the ass. “You two quit that. We don’t have room for sexy times in here.”

He separated, more than willing to take this back to bed. “I see your point, but that just means we dry off and move this over to the bed.”

“I’m not actually complaining about this.” Luka shot him a wink. “But I think food will be here soon. Let’s dry off, eat, then go for round...is this three or four?”

“Four.”

Amaru would say sue him, he hadn’t had sex in five hundred years, and he was way overdue, but...well, the other two had no trouble keeping up with him so clearly it wasn’t an issue.

Luka shut the water off, and they stepped out and dried off. Amaru even found boxers to put on. Yes, they were Luka’s boxers, your point being?

Turned out Luka’s sense of timing was correct. They were barely into clothes when room service knocked at their door. Amaru happily sat on the bed, took the plate offered to him, and the coffee, and proceeded to scarf it down.

Delightful. Food he didn’t have to either cook or clean up after was perfection.

No one talked for a minute as they stuffed their faces. Vasily cleaned his plate first and headed for seconds since the cart still had toast and jam on offer.

“Amaru, I do have a few things I’m curious about.”

“Shoot,” Amaru said. “I probably have answers.”

“You didn’t act surprised that we were mates. How long have you known?”

“Basically from the beginning. Because I could connect to you in dreams, I knew.” Amaru swallowed more coffee. He felt like Vasily was ramping up to his question.

Luka, however, seemed sidetracked by this new information. “Is that typical?”

Ah, he should have expected that question. They hadn’t talked everything through yesterday. “Pretty typical. I mean, not every mage-dragon pair does it, but it’s standard. I didn’t realize at first this is *not* standard for mages of this generation. I honestly thought you knew before you even left to find me that you were both my mates.”

“Crossed lines of communication,” Luka murmured, eyes pensive on his plate. Even though he sat next to Amaru on the bed, he seemed far away.

Amaru gently knocked his shoulder into Luka’s. “Yeah. All of us were assuming the other knew certain facts. It wasn’t until Gregori told me more about you two that I realized where the lines of communication had gotten tangled.”

“He’s good about kicking people in the right direction.” Luka looked up and gave him a small smile. “Fortunately for us.”

“Now, my turn. Why did you keep running from me? Surely your dragon said something.”

Luka grimaced. “I was so afraid of losing Vasily that I was suppressing my dragon. Which made everything worse, of course. I took the silence to mean I didn’t get to have either of you.”

Amaru was rather horrified at this answer. Luka must’ve been terrified right down to his marrow if he’d been suppressing his dragon’s voice that much. “But you came back to me and Vasily anyway?”

“I finally overcame my fear enough that my dragon was able to get a word in edgewise.” Luka leaned in to kiss him softly, a man who was utterly, blissfully content. “I know for a

fact I have both of you as my mates. You don't need to worry, love. I will never run off again."

Thank every god for that. "Good. And no more miscommunications either. We have hit our quota for this relationship."

"All right, but that segues into my next question. You're not upset we were together first?"

He looked at this man who he loved beyond words and asked, "Are you stupid? Why would I be upset about that?"

"Jealousy?" Vasily offered.

Even he looked nervous about this. What was Amaru supposed to do with his adorable idiots? "Listen, you two, I am not jealous. Mad that I missed out on so much time with you, yes, but not jealous. Really, I'm relieved."

Luka and Vasily both instantly relaxed, the tension dropping from their faces.

To make sure they were completely clear on this, he added, "I know something of what the war did to you. How bleak it made the world. The two of you had no real hope for centuries you'd ever find your mate, so if mutual sex bonded you two together—"

Vasily snorted a laugh, eyes crinkling up in the corners in a charming way.

"—and gave you some solace, I'm relieved."

"But you still plan on killing Irany for this," Vasily tacked on knowingly.

He sniffed in disdain. "He gets to help me fix this mess first. Then I'll kill him. I'm not doing even *more* of that moron's work for him."

"My mistake. Okay, but that brings me to another question. What's your dating history?"

"If you're trying to see if I was overwhelmed by you two last night, your timing could use some improvement."

Vasily rolled his eyes. “I got that you have some sexual experience, but were you dating anyone before you went under that deep sleep?”

“Ohhh that’s what you’re worried about. That I might wake up some lover who will go apeshit.”

“It’s a valid concern,” Luka said. “You had no idea we were waiting in the wings. We’re not angry if you did have someone.”

These two were truly so sweet to him. Sometimes clueless, but still sweet. Amaru was glad to give them another answer that he knew would make them happy. “I wasn’t dating anyone. No jealous lover ready to punch you.”

From their reactions, they truly had been worried about this, as they both blew out a breath of relief. Considering it was the jealous loss of a lover that had sent the Dragon Wars into a spiraling pit of madness, he couldn’t blame them for being nervous about it.

“I did date some,” Amaru said as he got off the bed, putting his empty plate and cup on the cart. “Not a lot—honestly I was too work-oriented to pay attention to romantic gestures—but some. Every time I dated, it never felt quite right. I wasn’t able to put a finger on why. I knew none of the Tupã dragons were meant for me. Of course, it’s obvious now.”

“You were looking in the wrong clan.” Vasily reached out, snagged him by the waist, and drew him in to sit on his lap.

Dragon lap was acceptable, so Amaru sat, arm comfortably around Vasily’s shoulders. This unapologetic cuddling was absolutely, one hundred percent approved.

“I was. And now I have both of you, so really, I’m glad I didn’t push myself into a steady relationship when my instincts were warning me off. That said, there’s something we three need to talk about. Bonding?”

Luka leaned over the two-foot span separating them to take Amaru’s hand. His soft, gentle expression spoke only of love.

“I’d like to. Very much. Can a bonding spell include all three of us?”

“Of course.” Amaru had to keep reminding himself that these two were new to the idea of polyamory. They hadn’t been raised realizing it was a possibility. “Even if it didn’t allow it, I’d damn well invent a spell that could. All right, hmm, I want a ceremony for this. You?”

Luka nodded firmly. “I do. Vas?”

“Of course I do. That goes without saying. But if we want a ceremony, we can’t bond now.”

Amaru flicked his fingers in a ‘that’s a given’ manner. “After this mess is settled. Say, in about six months. That should give me time to get my clan awake and back home, and us time to adjust to living together. Then we can plan something.”

“Sounds reasonable. Uh…” Vasily didn’t seem to quite know how to meet his eyes. “How do you feel about kids?”

Also an important topic, but his shyness asking just made Amaru’s evil side come out. “You’ll have to try harder to get me pregnant.”

Luka choked on air as he laughed, listing sideways on the edge of the mattress.

Exasperated, Vasily looked him dead in the eye this time. “You know good and well what I meant. With so few children, I feel obligated to have at least one or two.”

Amaru patted his chest soothingly. “Don’t worry, love, it’s fine. I like kids. We can discuss how many we actually want ___”

Luka’s phone rang. It sounded like a song of some sort, and rather catchy. He rolled over the bed to the nightstand to fetch it, swiping Accept to answer.

“Yeah?” Luka’s expression went from pleased to pissed in a second flat. Impressive.

Still, that expression did not bode well.

“Shit. Seriously? Wait, how did you end up calling us? Of course you drew straws for this, of course you did. Okay, hang on.” Luka switched it over to speaker as he moved in closer, offering the phone to Amaru.

Amaru stared at it with severe misgiving. The screen had Gregori’s face on it, and there was no reason in heaven or under the earth for Gregori to be calling them unless it was to interrupt the sex marathon. “If I take that phone, will I have to put pants on?”

“*Sorry,*” Gregori responded, not sounding sorry in the least. “*Even if you don’t take it, you need to put pants on.*”

“I’m pretty sure I have a good counterargument for that.”

“*Mine will be better. So, people over here think they’ve figured out how to wake everyone up. But they kinda need you.*”

“Shit!” Amaru dove off Vasily’s lap and reached for the nearest pair of pants to be found, which were on the floor. “I’ll be there in a second—”

“Those are my pants,” Vasily pointed out patiently, taking them from his hands.

Oh. Right. Those wouldn’t fit. He dove for another pair. “Tell them to hold off for like, ten minutes.”

“Amaru, those are mine,” Luka protested.

“Eh.” He didn’t stop, tugged them completely on, then looked around for a shirt. Not to mention shoes.

Vasily translated this without trouble. “They *were* yours. Gregori, anything we need to bring with us?”

“*Amaru.*”

“Got it. See you in a few minutes, then.”



A maru was not thrilled with this meeting. Luka could tell from his expression he was dangerously close to hexing Irany in a fit of pique, leaving, and going straight back to the hotel. From everything Luka had heard from him—and observed on his own—he couldn't blame him. This was not a mess of Amaru's making, which had to grate. Worse, his entire clan was in danger, and he couldn't immediately fix it. For an engineer-type like Amaru, that was claws on a chalkboard, right there.

For the safety of everyone else in this tent, Luka might have to dive for Amaru and distract him with kisses. For science.

Evora had a coffee carafe and mugs on hand, her ever-present tablet, and snacks. She was a woman well prepared for an early morning meeting. Luka expected nothing less. Thiago sat in a chair next to her, not looking entirely awake but there for moral support.

Sam, Dimitri, Sora, and Irany were also around the folding table. Luka wasn't sure what Vasily was up to, but he was right outside the tent next to the Jeep, doing something. Well, this wasn't really a conversation he could follow, so Luka chose not to haul him into it.

Truth told, a lot of this was probably going to go over Luka's head, too, but he wanted to grasp as much of the situation as he could.

Evora cleared her throat to catch their attention and calmly started. "The problem is spell elements. Frankly, we don't have the right ones, and even though we've been racking our brains, we can't think of good substitutes."

For some reason, Irany winced. “Sorry.”

Luka did not understand that. “Uh, someone explain to the rest of the class?”

Amaru put a possessive hand on his thigh as he turned a little in his seat and explained. “Here’s the issue. When Irany designed the system, he put in the necessary life supports, protections, etc. He also designed a fail-safe in case something went wrong. It was meant to do a giant reset on all of the platforms.”

This did and didn’t make sense. “I thought you said the life supports are independent?”

“They are. They’re not linked to each other. But they are linked to the power supply and to the fail-safe.”

“Ohhh.” This now made more sense. Of course they’d have to be linked to something powering them. It was like having a monitor, a CPU, a keyboard, and mouse. All independent, but still connected to the same power source. “Is it the fail-safe that keeps getting rebooted?”

“Bing bing! Look at my mate being all smart.” Amaru leaned in to kiss him, chaste but definitely not quick.

Luka liked it very much, thank you.

“Amaru, focus!” Irany whined.

Drawing back, Amaru glared at him. “You’re still on the extinction list with me, buddy. Don’t push it.”

Irany turned a shade paler and clamped his mouth shut.

Why did he have the distinct impression Amaru was the more powerful of the two? A tingle of pride went through him at the thought.

“*Anyway.*” Sam pointedly moved them along. “What’s happening is the lightning keeps hitting things, supercharging them, and tripping the fail-safe. It’s like smashing a giant reset button over and over again. Unfortunately, the fail-safe was insulated very well. We can’t get into it, and we can’t crack it. Turning off the system and releasing everyone isn’t an option

because the controls were fried after being reset so many times.”

“Only thing to do now is to break the fail-safe. Do that, we can stop it from rebooting everything again and actually properly turn things off. Wake people up.” Evora looked stressed just saying the words. Thiago ran a hand up and down her back, soothing and supportive, and it looked like she leaned slightly into his touch.

“What we need are malignant elements. Something more powerful than what we have in storage.” Sam made a wry face. “Unfortunately, popping over to the local supermarket isn’t an option.”

“Sooner rather than later,” Sora tacked on with a perturbed frown. “It is very hard on the body to be jerked around like this. Do it enough times, and we are looking at multiple instances of heart failure.”

“Yikes.” Vasily winced. “By all means, let’s avoid that potential pitfall. Does that mean we have to go hunting for the right elements?”

“We do. I wanted to wait until the earth dragons arrived so I could show them where to dig the tunnel, but with Irazy awake, he can do that.”

Evora said apologetically to the two Sousa mages, “I wish we had more than shadow of the eclipse or rushing wind from a hollow cave, but...”

Irazy waved the apology off. “It is what it is. We just need to work with what we have or collect what we need. Such is the way of mages. Right now, we need to figure out what we need and where to get it.”

Amaru sat back, an interesting mix of exasperation and boredom on his face. “Caipora’s howl, iara’s song, and anhangá’s hair.”

Irazy just about came out of his chair. “What? No! Are you insane?!?”

Luka would be defensive of his mage, but considering some of the antics Amaru had already pulled...

Evora had her Head Mage face on. The one that didn't allow for any bullshit. "You said a caipora's howl has a power level of four."

"I did, yes." Amaru's expression had morphed into one of shit-eating glee.

Luka had every right to be alarmed. He didn't trust that expression one iota.

"Iara's song is also a four."

"Correct again."

"And anhangá's hair is...what, exactly?"

"A three."

"You said you needed rushing wind from a hollow cave earlier to combine the elements."

"You really do have a good memory." Amaru's grin didn't falter.

"That's a level thirteen spell!" Irazy spluttered, eyes wide in his face. "Are you insane?!"

Amaru leveled a look at his fellow mage with eyes that said 'sit yo punk ass down.' "Let's review the basics of magic, shall we. In order to break a spell, one must use a counter spell of a higher power level. Your fail-safe is a...what, in power?"

Plopping down in his seat, Irazy groaned into his hands. "A twelve."

"A thirteen is the *least* of what I need in terms of power in order to break it."

Ah. That made perfect sense to Luka. He even saw the logic behind it with this information. "Everything you listed is wind-based except the hair. I take it the hair is the physical binding agent to attach the rest to?"

Amaru pointed at Luka. "Even a dragon gets it. Granted, my Luka is brilliant, but if a non-mage can grasp it all, then even you should get it, Irazy."

“Can you stop being mad at me already?” Irany lifted his head to reveal a grimace. “I didn’t do this on purpose.”

“You ignored my warnings. Repeatedly. I’ll stop being mad at you later.”

“When’s later?”

“I’ll consider it next decade.” Amaru pointedly turned to the rest of the table. “Anyway, we need them. Not just for this, either, but I need them in order to fix Sam’s core.”

Everyone startled, not just Luka. Wait, what?

Sam half lunged over the table, grasping Amaru’s hand in a fierce grip. His eyes searched Amaru’s in desperate hope. “You can fix me?”

“I can.” Amaru’s expression softened. “Sorry, I haven’t had a chance to properly examine you. Dimitri put a bug in my ear about it, it’s just we’ve all been too hectic to spare ten minutes. Still, I can see from here the gist of what’s going on.”

Sam looked torn between crying and screaming in joy. Still, he stayed firmly planted in his seat.

It was Sora who spluttered out, “Explain. Please. Why do you need malignant elements to fix his core?”

“Because it’s a curse.” Amaru said this matter-of-factly.

Uh. What? “Babe, run that by me one more time.”

Luka wasn’t alone in this; every person at the table stared at Amaru in a poleaxed way. Like he’d announced he was going to live underwater from now on, as soon as his new gills came in.

“It’s a curse.” Amaru looked uncertainly from face to face. “You, uh, did know this? No, I can see from your faces you didn’t.”

Sora put up both hands in a pleading motion. “But his core is broken, correct?”

“Not in the sense you mean it. I’ve seen evidence you have tried to apply healing to the core, but that won’t work while the curse is in effect.”

“And you are absolutely sure it is a curse?”

Iransy looked as confused as Amaru. “Of course it’s a curse. What did you think it was?”

“A magical backlash.” Evora had to swallow, hard, to gather her composure enough to force words out. “When Kaiser Jaeggi used the spell to destroy all the major mage families, the spell was insanely unstable, and the backlash hit him and through him impacted his entire clan. There isn’t a Jaeggi who isn’t affected by it even generations later.”

“Uh. That’s not how backlashes work.” Iransy scratched at his hair, sending it in interesting directions. “Like, that’s completely impossible.”

Amaru was more patient explaining. “I know a lot of magical theory and knowledge got lost in the Wars, so let me outline this better for you. If you do an insane spell that’s not stable, it will backlash, yes. It will backlash against the caster and *possibly* whoever is nearby. As in, in the same room. But it can’t carry farther than that. It’s not sentient, after all, it’s just power. Raw, uncontrolled power.”

Of course. Of course, why hadn’t Luka realized? Said like that, it was obvious.

Sam’s brows were compressed into a straight line as he thought hard. “Then how...? You said curse. Did someone intentionally curse the Jaeggi line?”

“Must have. Probably for revenge. You had whole mage lines dying left and right, after all. I’m sure someone got mad and cursed the whole family line in return. I certainly would have, in their shoes. But a curse is the only way to explain why Jaeggi who are *still* being born today are having the same issue with their cores.” Amaru pointed a finger straight at Sam’s chest. “And I can see it clear as day, too. That said, we can’t just break the spell on one of you and have it do a ripple effect. Sadly. We’ll have to fix you guys one by one. But the good news is, once we have you fixed, the curse stops with you. None of your children will be in danger of having it.”

Sam sagged, leaning in against Dimitri, and a tear slipped from his eye.

The weight of it had been dragging at Sam for years. Luka knew this, knew how hard Sam had fought even being mated to Dimitri because of his broken core. To hear Amaru so matter-of-factly explain the cause, all while knowing the cure, must have felt like an answer directly from heaven.

For his friends, Luka was thrilled. Also relieved. He didn't want Dimitri left alone in fifty, sixty years because Sam hadn't been able to bond to him.

Dimitri held Sam close, eyes also bright with tears. "Amaru, you better be sure of this."

Iransy held a hand up. "I can see it too. Granted, it's not something you'd be able to discern unless you were trained for this. Amaru and I both are."

Sora's eyes were narrowed. "You can tell all of this without even an examination?"

"Curse breaking is one of my specialties." Amaru shrugged like this was no big deal. His delight in seeing Sam's and Dimitri's reactions was subtle, nothing more than a curve of his lips. "But the iara's song and caipora's howl are in part for you, Sam. Which means I need to finally go out hunting for these elements."

Amaru slapped his hands against his thighs, like that wrapped up the meeting and he was ready to go now.

Evora held up a hand to stay him. "Wait, wait. Why you?"

"Two reasons. One, it's Iransy's turn to deal with this mess, since it's his fault to begin with."

Iransy winced, hunching down in his chair again.

"Two, who better than me to go? You don't remember how to collect any of these elements. I do. My two mates are very familiar with Brazilian geography and are expert trackers."

Luka had to admit that was sound logic all the way around. "I think he's right. I know several places where caiporas and

iaras like to nest or lure in victims. With travel times, it might take us, hmm, two or three days?”

“Which means”—Amaru looked over at Irany—“you have three days, max, in order to get up to speed and set everything up. We’ve got our clan to wake up and cores to heal, no time for slacking.”

Irany seemed past the point of protesting. He just groaned an acknowledgment.

“I’ll take that as agreement.”

“Keep me posted,” Evora requested. “And if you need more hands, call us. I’ll send in support.”

“Will do.”

Vasily stuck his head inside the tent. “We ready to go yet?”

Luka twisted in his seat to look at his mate, who really did look all kitted out and ready to head into a rainforest. “Is that what you were doing with the Jeep? Getting ready to go?”

“Sure. Well, I was pulling out everything we need from the Jeep and repacking it into the rig.” Vasily seemed amused at Luka’s surprise. “Come on, this isn’t rocket science. I’ve heard mages muttering about needing different spell elements for days now, and Amaru kept rattling off the same ones. I figured a trip into the rainforest was inevitable.”

“Look how smart you are.” Amaru hopped up from his seat to give Vasily a loud smacking kiss. “And you’re entirely right. I just need, like, three things from the mages’ tent and then we’re ready to go. Are we flying?”

“You can ride me,” Vasily offered.

“Yes, I certainly can,” Amaru purred back.

So, from the sounds of it, they’d be having hot monkey sex while in the rainforest. At least, Luka fervently prayed that was what he was hearing from those two. Sex with no interruptions from people would be lovely.

Vasily better have packed enough lube. Luka was not above making him fly home to get more.

He headed for the baggage rig, as he'd need to carry it if Vasily had Amaru.

Luka heard more than saw Amaru double back to the tent and give a parting shot. "And Irany, leave my screwdrivers alone!"

What was it with him and screwdrivers?



Vasily smirked at Luka, who chuckled softly and shook his head. Something had changed in Amaru since they'd set up camp in this section of the rainforest. It wasn't confidence—Amaru had woken up with plenty of that. There was just something about the way he walked ahead of them, humming a tune to himself as he climbed over fallen logs and wove his way between the trees. In the distance, they could easily hear the rush of water from the stream that was a favorite hunting ground of the iara.

“Do you think it's because he got laid?” Luka asked in a whisper.

Vasily shrugged. “You tend to walk with an extra spring in your step after getting some.”

Luka snorted. “You're confusing spring with limp. I'm usually limping after one of your frisky nights.”

“Who's limping?” Amaru wrapped one arm loosely around a slender tree and used it to spin to face them.

“I was teasing Luka,” Vasily replied.

“We noticed you seemed extra perky,” Luka added.

“Why wouldn't I be? I'm hunting ingredients with my two charming and handsome mates. We're *alone*. And very soon, we're going to break that damn machine so we can wake up my clan.”

Vasily paused and rubbed his chin to hide his smile. “Huh. Here I thought it was because you got laid.”

Amaru skipped over and hopped up on a fallen log so he was now the same height as Vasily. A wide, wicked grin

spread across his face, causing Vasily's heart to skip. "Well, I won't deny that sex with you and Luka definitely keeps me in a good mood."

"And from killing Irany," Luka tossed in.

"True."

"I was beginning to think this stretch of the forest felt familiar to you," Luka said.

Amaru jerked around to face Luka so fast he lost his balance. Vasily wrapped an arm around Amaru's waist, pulling him in close so he was supporting most of his body weight as he stared at Luka.

"What do you mean?"

"We came this way with Sam when he was searching for your village. We couldn't be more than a three- or four-day hike from it now."

The mage's entire body stiffened while he stared off through the dense trees as if trying to glimpse the place he'd once called home.

"Would you like to see it after we collect the ingredients?" Vasily asked softly, his arms tightening around Amaru's waist. "Since we know the exact location now, it would take nothing to fly there. King Alric and his consort, Cameron, arrived a few days ago and have been heading up the preparations for the return of your clan."

"No. I—" Amaru seemed to cut himself off and then jerkily shook his head. "No, you said it's just ruins now, right? Not much to see. I'll wait until I can visit with the rest of my clan." He sucked in a deep breath and turned in Vasily's arms, flashing him a bright smile that Vasily wasn't entirely sure he believed. "We need to get the ingredients and hurry back to the camp. My people need to be woken up and Sam needs to be healed."

With a little push, Amaru stepped free of Vasily's hold and hopped down from the log. Vasily shared a look with Luka to prove he wasn't the only one who saw that little pause. There was a good chance Amaru hadn't emotionally dealt with the

loss of so many of his clan mates, but there was no rushing these things. For now, they would watch over him and be there to catch him when he stumbled.

“So...since we’re close to the river and the iara’s hunting grounds, we need to figure out who’s going to be the bait,” Luka announced, redirecting their conversation to their purpose in being in the forest in the first place.

“Obviously, the bait has to be the cutest person if you want to be sure to lure the iara close enough to start singing,” Amaru pointed out. “That’s got to be...”

“Vasily.”

“Amaru.”

“Luka.”

They all answered at the same time, but each of them gave a different name, resulting in a wild cackle rising out of Amaru.

Vasily settled on a smirk. He wanted to be serious and not smile at all, but Amaru’s amusement was too contagious. “Well, that didn’t work out how I expected at all.”

“Really?” Amaru cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes on Vasily. “You don’t think Luka is the cutest, most adorable dragon who ever existed?”

A choking noise escaped Luka, but Vasily ignored it and narrowed his own gaze at the mischievous mage. “You have an evil streak in you I did not expect. Luka is most definitely the cutest dragon to ever exist, but that wasn’t the question. You said person, and I think that’s you. Don’t you think I’m cute? Do you think you’re stuck with an uncute dragon as a mate?”

Amaru raced across the short distance that separated them and threw his arms around his waist. “No! You’re adorable. And sexy. Very sexy! Too sexy! I don’t think of you as cute because you’re sexy.”

“Hey! Am I not sexy?” Luka chimed in, his voice artfully cracking at just the right spot.

“No! You’re sexy too!” Amaru was forced to release Vasily so he could leap into Luka’s waiting arms. His wicked dragon mate smirked over Amaru’s head at Vasily.

“So, I’m sexy, but Luka is cute and sexy,” Vasily teased, just barely keeping the laughter out of his voice.

The mage released Luka and huffed loudly. “And you called me evil. I think you’re both far more evil than I am. You two aren’t allowed to team up against me like that.”

Luka placed a hand on Amaru’s hip and dragged him in close, pressing a tender kiss to his temple. “We can be as evil as you.”

“Plus, it’s nice to have someone new to tease.”

“And when the teasing gets too much, I’ve found the make-up sex is all the sweeter later,” Luka whispered in Amaru’s ear.

“Hm. Okay. I think I need to try out this make-up sex tonight. That teasing was very mean.” As if to prove how much he’d suffered, Amaru jutted out his bottom lip in a pathetic pout.

“Good idea, but first we need to get the iara’s song,” Vasily reminded them.

“I thought I would act as bait,” Amaru suggested with a small shrug of his shoulder. “I can capture the song as she tries to lure me in.”

“No,” Vasily and Luka said in unison.

“I don’t like the idea of one of those bloodthirsty mermaids getting anywhere close to you,” Vasily continued.

Luka touched Amaru’s chin and the mage turned to look at him. “Can an iara smell that Vasily and I are dragons?”

“No, not until they are very close. They don’t have a great sense of smell, actually.”

“Then let me be the bait. You will hide close by and capture the song as she approaches. Vasily will also hide

nearby in his dragon form as backup to protect you or me in case there is a problem.”

Amaru glared at them both when Luka finished with his idea. “You know I can do this. I’ve actually done this before.”

Vasily wrapped an arm around Amaru’s tense shoulders and pulled him into his embrace so that his back rested against Vasily’s chest. “It’s not an issue of whether you’re able to do this. We are confident you can. It’s a question of should. You now have two mates who will forever be incredibly protective of your person. Plus, we all know Irazy needs your help to wake your people. If something were to happen to you, it could doom all that remains of the Sousa and the lightning dragons.”

The mage dropped his head to Vasily’s shoulder and loudly moaned, “Evil! You’re even more evil when you use logic. Okay, Luka gets to be bait this time, but I get to do it next time.”

“All right. You can be bait the next time when the fate of your entire clan isn’t hanging in the balance,” Luka agreed, pressing a quick kiss to the tip of Amaru’s nose.

“Maybe,” Vasily muttered into Amaru’s hair. It was going to be a cold day in hell when he let his mage mate put himself in harm’s way.

With everyone’s jobs worked out, they continued to hike toward the stream. It wasn’t one of the main tributaries of the Amazon River, which raised some interesting questions about how the iara managed to find its way to this stream. All the stories and myths linked to them clearly stated they made their home along the Amazon River. Someone was either far away from home, or the myths were liars.

The stream was swollen and swiftly moving over the large boulders that jutted out here and there. Trees and bushes crowded close to the shore, offering cover for Vasily and Amaru. Luka strolled out onto a nice flat rock and stretched a quarter of the way into the river.

Vasily slunk into position and frowned. There was a problem. The trees here were all too close. He couldn't shift into his dragon without his dragon's enormous body slamming into the trees and creating a great racket that would scare off the iara along with any other animals in the area. Luka could undoubtedly handle a single iara with no issue, but he wanted to be ready in case there were other problems.

Setting his bag on the ground, Vasily kneeled behind a bush and peered through the branches to find the sexy dragon making a big show of dropping his bag on the rock and stretching his arms over his head. He squatted and splashed some water on his face, neck, and arms. Yes, he very much looked like the helpless explorer who wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. The perfect target.

Less than ten minutes had passed of Luka relaxing in the shade while snapping pictures on his phone when a soft sound rose above the burble and splash of the water. At first, Vasily thought it was merely bird song, but it was blending in with the water and the play of the breeze through the leaves.

A hand rapidly patted him on the shoulder and he looked where Amaru pointed. Something was moving slowly upstream in the water, drawing closer and closer to Luka. It could almost be mistaken for a caiman, except for the tiny flash of fin poking above the water.

“You good?” Vasily whispered to Amaru.

The mage nodded once as he shoved something small and slightly glowing into his ears to protect him from the iara's song. He then unscrewed the lids from two jars at his feet. He was clearly ready to uphold his end of the bargain.

Vasily turned his gaze toward Luka only to have all the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. A woman's head was now sticking completely out of the water not more than a dozen feet away from Luka. Her green hair clung to her head and swayed hypnotically in the rushing waters. Her full lips were the same shade of green and were perfectly offset by her light brown skin. Enormous brown eyes dominated her round face. She was surprisingly lovely.

Maybe.

It was hard to tell.

His mind kept being dragged back to her mouth and the way it moved as she sang.

A loud snarl in his head snapped his thoughts out of the swirling fog and he cursed himself. Saved by his dragon. He'd let the damned iara distract him when he should have been paying attention to his mate, who was in danger.

Jerking his gaze to Luka, he found his mate leaning back on his hands away from the iara as if he'd intended to crawl away from her but was now frozen.

His dragon didn't like this. Not at fucking all. It was clawing at his insides to shift and let it tear the iara apart, but he couldn't act. Not yet. Amaru needed time to gather as much of the song as possible.

The iara swam closer and closer, her song growing louder, but it couldn't touch his mind now. His thoughts were full of Luka and his own frantic dragon. Why didn't Luka move? Was he even breathing? He needed to give some sign to show he was okay.

The devil fish lifted up out of the water enough so that the waves lapped at the undersides of her breasts. Her sleek dolphin-like tail splashed out of the water once as if excited. She placed one web-fingered hand on the edge of the rock where Luka was resting. Reaching out her left hand, her black-clawed fingers just touched the toe of Luka's hiking boot and Vasily's control snapped.

Power rushed through him, stretching muscles and reforming bones into his dragon form in the blink of an eye. He extended one wing over Amaru's head to protect the mage from falling debris. The iara had snatched her hand back from Luka but not withdrawn completely, as if still debating whether she could pull her prey into the dark, swirling waters.

Vasily pushed his head through the brush and snarled low and deep in the back of his throat. "Mine."

Luka tipped his head back toward Vasily and grinned. “Took you long enough,” the bastard taunted, proving he’d had no problems with the iara’s song.

The iara let out an ear-piercing screech and dove into the water, disappearing in a quick splash.

“You were waiting for me?” Vasily grumbled.

Luka leaned his head in, bumping his forehead against Vasily’s snout just like he did when they were both in their dragon forms. “I know you like to rescue me every once in a while.”

Vasily huffed. Cheeky wretch. He shifted back to his human form and turned his attention to his other mate, who was screwing the lid on the final jar. Amaru pulled the song-canceling plugs from his ears and scooped up the jar at his feet.

“Look at that! We filled two jars! Two!” The mage did a strange little dance as he held the jar in the air.

“That’s good?” Luka asked as he walked over to join them.

“Good? It’s amazing!” He held the jars up to both of them. Inside each of them was a purplish cyclone that was battering the sides of the glass. “You can tell by the dark color that she was very old and powerful. That means we have more than enough to work the spells on the slumber system, help Sam, and still have plenty left over to help tons of cursed Jaeggi. We shouldn’t have to harvest from another iara for a long time.”

“Excellent. One down,” Vasily murmured.

Amaru flashed them a bright grin. “And one step closer to freeing my people.”



He couldn't sleep.

He'd slept at one point, thanks to a pair of tantalizing dragons determined to wear his ass out.

When the sex was over, he was just a pile of sweaty, limp limbs trapped under two dragons. There wasn't any better place to be in all the world. He'd passed out to the feeling of someone gently wiping his body with a cool, damp rag.

But now he was awake, his brain racing and heart pounding for no reason whatsoever.

Normally, people liked to sleep. Sleep meant rest and hopefully feeling refreshed the next morning. He used to feel that way about it. After five hundred years of being locked in his own skin, knowing that something was wrong but unable to force his eyelids open, sleep was the furthest thing from restful. Now, sleep felt like a prison.

Amaru knew this was not the right way to look at it. He wasn't an idiot; he knew the human body needed rest. He could manage naps—something less than an hour. But true, deep sleep? Emotionally, he just could not look at it the same way. It was why he kept avoiding Sora whenever the man tried to talk to him about it. He knew he was being irrational, he did. He did know sleeping now would not mean he would be asleep for another five hundred years. But explain that to his panic. Reason with his anxiety. Amaru had tried and utterly failed.

Nope. No going back to sleep now even if he was comfortable. Soft snoring drifted from both Vasily and Luka, providing a pleasant harmony to the night sounds trickling out of the forest around them.

With extreme care, he slipped out from under Luka's arm, placing it down in the middle of Vasily's chest, and slid out of the bed. Snagging a pair of shorts, he hopped on one foot and then the other, struggling to quietly get dressed in the dark. He didn't want them waking and dragging him back to bed. Their concern was sweet and kind, but sleep wasn't happening.

And well, just maybe...his dick and ass needed a *small* break from the marathon of sex they'd been enjoying. He might need to make up for missing out on five hundred years of missed sex, but his body was starting to argue that he shouldn't try to make up for it all at once.

Spacing it out would be wise.

Just a little spacing, though. Only a little.

Wearing enough to cover his vulnerable bits, Amaru snatched up the tablet Luka had loaned him and slipped out of the tent. A fire was flickering low thanks to a fire spell he'd used, and their campsite was blissfully empty of anything that might want to eat him because of the protection spell he'd erected. It was nice to see that five centuries of sleep hadn't rotted his brain and made him forget all the basic spells he'd known.

Since Vasily and Luka had mentioned they were near his village, the thought wouldn't leave his mind. It had been very tempting after they'd acquired the iara's song to hop on a dragon and fly off to see his old home. The priority was finishing with their ingredients gathering, but part of him missed home. The homesickness was a real thing even though he knew it wasn't the same place. But it was still home.

Still, he could look over all the pictures and notes Sam had sent him of the village. It would give him a good idea of what damage the village had sustained over the years. From there, he could start prioritizing a to-do list of repairs so they could make the place habitable again.

Well, habitable by their old standards.

Since being awoken, he'd glimpsed amazing technologies that would have to be worked into their own tech so the Sousa

could leap ahead to at least the present day. From there, well, it would only be another year or two before they naturally surpassed everything that was out there. This was their thing. Technology and gadgets had been their life's work.

Each clan, whether dragon or mage, had their own spark. Their specialty made them different. For the Sousa, it was technology. Specifically, the kind that made day-to-day life easier. They did little when it came to weapons technology. The Sousa were more invested in the preservation of life rather than harming living creatures. Their lack of offensive capabilities was part of the reason why they'd had so much trouble with defeating the Woodsfather.

Not that it was a concern now.

The reminder of everyone he had lost felt like a burning, sharp pain in his heart. Amaru had never dreamed his clan would be defeated or destroyed because of those creatures. He had honestly thought their precautions were overkill in some ways. He knew he needed to take time to grieve, but he also felt like this was not the time. There was too much to be done. Too many people depending on him. He could schedule his breakdown for later.

Besides, it wasn't like he was alone. He had to remember that. The lightning dragons and the remaining mages of the Sousa would be woken soon. They all had new friends in the Valerii ice dragons, the earth dragons, and even the fire dragons, though he'd only met a few members of the Burkhard Clan. Together, they would be stronger.

Sitting cross-legged on the ground, he started jumping through folders until he found the one he wanted. The first large set of pictures were mostly of writings on the walls and from scrolls that had been collected. A smile teased his lips as he slowly flipped through them, each one tickling old memories buried deep in the back of his mind.

But a chuckle froze in his throat when he stumbled over the first picture that had been taken outside of the building. At first he didn't recognize the cracked tan stones covered with ferns and weeds.

It was the remains of the chief's house.

The head of the Sousa Clan's house had been one of the largest in the village and near the center, as it also served as a main meeting house for all of the clan. Countless discussions had been held there over the years—both good and bad. Celebrations had been planned. Even the final push against the Woodsfathers with the lightning dragons had been planned there.

Now the house was nothing. Not even enough was left to serve as a temporary home. It was only rubble now. Rocks and plants. The life that had once buzzed and zipped around in those rooms was completely crushed, ground to dust.

With a trembling finger, he swiped the screen to the next picture and a choked whimper escaped him. The square. Every summer festival. Harvest moon feast. Weddings. Funerals. Ceremonies to mark the children moving into adulthood. The ceremonies to celebrate when someone reached a new achievement within their trade.

Everything.

Everything was held within that square. More than even the chief's home, the central square of the village had been the lifeblood of the Sousa Clan.

Now...it was nothing. The ornate statues that marked the four points were broken stones. Grasses and creeping vines covered the elegant stonework that had been painted brilliant colors. The banners, lanterns, and stone tables were all gone, eaten up by the forest and its creatures as if the Amazon wanted to erase all memory of the Sousa.

He sucked in a ragged breath and rushed headlong through the pictures, as if the speed would make it easier to swallow.

It didn't.

He could recognize the houses now, even though most were barely standing. Some were little more than a wall or two.

But he saw Cusi's home. And Huallpa's. Both had gone to fight with the dragons and were dead now.

Oh gods, that was where Nand and Inti had lived with their daughter, Palta! Nand had gone to fight, which meant Inti and Palta would be waking to find they were without a husband and father.

Chasca and Copacati had lived next door to Nand. Copacati made the best bread. *Had* made. She'd invite Amaru over to fix little things and always paid him in warm bread. Both women were gone now.

So were Ozcollo, Atoc, Supay, Urpi, and Micos.

Two thousand three hundred and forty-seven Sousa Clan members gone.

Little more than four hundred remained alive now.

And the dragons.

A wretched, broken sound lurched from his parted lips and he quickly covered his mouth with his hands.

The dragons. The lightning dragons, their closest neighbors for centuries. Their protectors and friends. Fuck. They had been family. He couldn't remember a time when he'd crossed through the village and not seen a half dozen dragons wandering about.

They were all gone but a handful now.

This wasn't right. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. They'd had a plan. The damn plan was supposed to save them. The stupid slumber machine didn't matter even if it malfunctioned in the end. The king of the Lightning Dragons and his eldest son had come up with a viable scheme for defeating the Woodsfather. The bulk of the Sousa Clan and the dragons had worked it all out to fight the Woodsfather back and beat them once and for all.

Yes, they'd expected a few casualties, but not many. After a few months of stalking, hunting, and fighting, they were going to wake up the most vulnerable of them and return to life as normal. Little Palta's daddy was not supposed to die!

Chasca and Copacati weren't supposed to be dead! They should have been right there with him so he could tell them all

about his two dragon mates.

It wasn't right. Why was he still alive? This wasn't fair. So many people who he'd known and loved were dead now. Should he have argued harder to go with the others to fight? Would they have lived full lives if he'd been there?

Amaru was the first to admit he didn't know a damn thing about fighting. He knew a handful of protection spells, but actually killing something...that hadn't been his forte.

But maybe he could have thought of some tech to protect the warriors and dragons.

Maybe...maybe he could have come up with something...and they would have lived.

Another choked sob left him and he squeezed his eyes shut, but it was too late to stop the tears from streaming down his cheeks. He couldn't breathe. His entire body was shaking, the pain lancing through him, squeezing his lungs so no air could get in. It was like jagged shards of glass were slicing his throat each time he tried to breathe and all that left him were more broken cries.

“Amaru?”

“Amaru! What's wrong? What happened?”

Vasily and Luka called out for him, their voices frantic. He shoved the hideous tablet away and turned toward the sound. Tears blinded him, but he didn't need to see them. A pair of strong arms gathered him up, followed immediately by another pair, holding him so fucking tight.

From feel alone, he could tell he was sitting in Vasily's lap while Luka wrapped his arms around them both. The smaller dragon wiped his cheek and pressed kisses along his temple while Vasily rested his cheek against the top of Amaru's head and rubbed a hand up and down his spine in the most soothing fashion. Just being sandwiched between them made it easier to draw a breath.

“What happened, dearest heart?” Vasily whispered.

“I-I couldn’t sleep. I thought...I looked through the pictures of the village. My village. And...and I kept thinking of everyone who was lost. All the friends I would never see again.” He turned his face into Vasily’s chest, rubbing his forehead against his sternum. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way. They weren’t supposed to die.”

“I know, baby. It was wrong. It wasn’t fair to you or your people,” Luka cooed.

“But...what if...what if I could have made a difference? What if I’d gone to help the warriors instead of hiding in the damn cave? Would some of them have made it?” His words wobbled off his tongue and both sets of arms squeezed him tighter.

“You can’t let yourself think like that, Amaru. You’ll drive yourself crazy,” Vasily gently chastised. “Both Luka and I fought in the Dragon War. We lost countless brothers and sisters and scores of mages. Family we still miss to this day. I’ve replayed so many of those battles in my head, wondering if I had just been stronger or faster, maybe they would have lived.”

“That’s not what they would have wanted.” Luka cupped Amaru’s cheek and tipped his head up, forcing him to meet ice blue eyes. “They all fought and died so you could live. Our dragon and mage family fought so we could live. You honor their sacrifice by living the best life you can.”

His brain knew they were talking sense. A lot more than what was coming out of his mouth. Yet his heart wasn’t ready to hear it. Everything hurt too much.

“Why don’t you come back to bed with us?” Vasily murmured.

“Will you hold me?” Amaru whispered.

“All night long,” Luka promised.

Vasily pressed another kiss to the top of his head. “We will never let you go. We’ll always be there for you, our sweet darling.”

Thank the gods. He was going to need them.



Three days of hunting for elements later, they had everything Amaru said they needed and then some, as he'd taken advantage of their trip to collect anything in the vicinity. Amaru resembled a housewife in a grocery store who had a list but would grab anything on the shelves that caught the eye.

Luka couldn't blame him. He'd have to rebuild his workspace and storage, after all. He might as well get a jump start on that now.

Amaru loaded up on Luka, Vasily grabbed their gear, and they flew northward once more toward the lake. Flying always felt good, of course; it was indescribable how much a dragon loved to fly. The feeling of the air rushing over his scales, the faint moisture of clouds that brushed against him—it was all perfect. That said, this time, Luka had a hard time enjoying the flight back.

For one reason: Amaru.

His beloved mage was not sleeping. Catnaps, yes. But real, solid sleep? Not really. Unless he and Vasily wore Amaru out with sex—which wasn't a hardship—or somehow ambushed him, Amaru didn't sleep.

It made sense, of course. After five hundred years of sleeping, Amaru was likely sick to death of it. Plus, he had a feeling grief might be keeping the man awake. God knew the man had a lot to grieve about. It had to be hard to settle, to sleep, with a heart so heavy. But Luka also suspected that wasn't the only reason he avoided sleep.

Unfortunately, Amaru was not talking about this. Instead, he was avoiding sleep like a toddler would a nap. That said, he was human. The human body needed a certain amount of

sleep. Not just to function, but illnesses would crop up if too sleep deprived. In Luka's opinion, Amaru was already teetering on the edge of dangerous insomnia. He absolutely did not want it to happen.

He knew Vasily had picked up on this, too. His other mate was just as worried. Vasily was also at a loss on how to fix the problem. Giving it time didn't seem like the best idea. It would just give the sleep deprivation time to get worse. Vasily had mentioned Sora had sleeping potions to use as a last resort, but Luka would prefer not to lean on them if at all possible.

He thought, and thought, and worried over it, but he couldn't think of anything he hadn't already tried. Surely there was a better method out there. Luka just didn't know enough to ask the right questions.

Before he registered it, they were back at camp. People waved in greeting as they landed. Luka found a good open spot near the camp to land, settling down carefully to avoid jostling Amaru. His mage hopped down lithely, like he'd flown dozens of times before. Likely the case with a Tupã dragon.

Amaru smacked a kiss against his shoulder. "I'm off to deal with my lovelies. Luka, Vasily, you joining me?"

"I will," Vasily answered as he shifted back to human form. "I've got to help you carry all that over, after all."

In a snap decision, Luka said, "I need to speak with Sora about something. You go ahead, I'll catch up."

"Sure." Amaru's expression was wild, eyes wide in his face, hair dancing around him like a mad scientist, like a child hyped up with a second wind more than anything.

Yes, definitely time to talk to Sora.

Luka lost no time in doing so. He shifted to human form and went directly for the medical tent near the center. Sora was not alone inside the tent. Nikki for some reason was there too. They had their heads together, both conferring over something...magical...in the middle of the table. Well, Luka

assumed it was, as it smelled like magic. He couldn't begin to identify what they were doing.

Nikki rubbed both hands together, gleeful in a demented way. "I'm so excited for some arson. I'm going to need some cloth and gunpowder. Not for any particular reason. Also, for my information, none of the dragons here are flammable, right?"

Not for the first time, Luka thanked his lucky stars Nikki was Gunter's problem. "Uh, can I intervene before you make things go kablooey?"

Nikki turned, eyeing Luka narrowly. "Is it important?"

"It is, yeah."

"Then I suppose. What's up, buttercup?"

Luka dropped into an empty chair, feeling tired enough to want something of a break. "I'm worried about Amaru. He's not sleeping."

Sora put a hand on the table, leaning his weight against it as he faced Luka with an expression of concern. "Still? I alerted Vasily to the problem."

"And we've tried. Honest, we've tried. But unless we wear him out with sex first—"

"Ooo-la-la," Nikki murmured wickedly.

Luka ignored the commentary. "—he doesn't sleep. Sometimes even if we do, he doesn't sleep. He catnaps. I'd hate to suggest giving him some potion or pill to force this, because I have a feeling that's going to go over about as well as trying to medicate a cat, but...it's worse if he doesn't sleep. Right?"

"He does need to sleep." Sora frowned at the ground, clearly thinking hard. "I can offer suggestions on what potions to give him, if it comes down to that. A natural REM cycle is far more beneficial, though."

That was what Luka feared. "I mean, he had a hell of a catnap, so I guess I understand him wanting to be awake. But still."

“Have you two considered that maybe something else is the problem?” Nikki glanced between them, brow quirked in a pointed way.

Luka didn't get what Nikki was alluding to. “What?”

“Think about it.” Nikki's hands rose to illustrate the point. “Even in sleep, there's a sense of sensory deprivation. Amaru was in that deprivation for five hundred years. No sounds, scents, nothing to ground him to the world. That had to be hell to take. Especially toward the end, when he was more aware but still trapped in sleep.”

Oh. Shit. Luka hadn't thought of it in those terms before, but Nikki made a good point. “Is that why he's fighting it so hard?”

“In a sense, sleeping has traumatized him.” Sora was now staring at the ceiling, thinking hard. “It does make sense. I would suggest things that give him sensory feelings, even in sleep. Something like a weighted blanket.”

Nikki nodded in fervent support of this. “Yes, yes, that's a good one. Also other things. Like a white noise machine.”

Luka whipped out his phone and started taking notes. “Weighted blanket, white noise machine, what else?”

“Cooling sheets are great. Especially with three of you in the same bed, it's bound to get hot, right?”

At that, Luka snorted, amused. “Two ice dragons in the bed, Nikki. Not like you, who's sharing space with a fire dragon.”

“Oh. Okay, so maybe not the sheets.” Nikki put a finger to their lips, still thinking.

Sora's head finally dropped back down as he suggested, “Certain elements would be good, too. Say, put some moonlit water into a diffuser and let it run through the night. Moonlit water has a great calming effect. It'll naturally help Amaru settle. Buy an essential oil diffuser machine, those work great for this.”

Luka noted that down. “Anything else?”

“Read to him,” Nikki offered. “Amaru’s way behind on pop culture and stuff. Vasily’s voice especially has almost lulled me to sleep on occasion.”

“He does have a great bedroom voice,” Luka agreed wholeheartedly. “That’s great. I’ll make sure to pick up some books.”

“No technical manuals,” Sora warned. “He’ll stay awake to listen. Well, I guess you can buy him some, just don’t use them for bedtime material. Something else that’s low-key.”

“I can find some, don’t worry.”

Nikki came around the table to hug Luka around the neck. “You’re doing such a good job being a good mate.”

Surprised by this, Luka awkwardly hugged back. “Uh, thanks?”

“I know you dragons are honestly unsure if you’re doing okay in the beginning, so I like to throw validation at people now. You’re doing good, Luka. Amaru’s got some issues he’s struggling with, but that’s to be expected. You noticed there’s an issue, you’re doing what you can to help him through it. It’s all anyone can ask of you. Okay? Don’t feel like you’re failing him.”

Luka sank into the hug more. He honestly had needed to hear that. It was hardwired into a dragon’s psyche that if a mage was suffering, a dragon had to somehow fix it. Not being able to correct his problem immediately had made him jittery. Nikki’s reassurance meant the world. “Thanks, Nikki.”

“Anytime. I had to reassure my grumpy Gunter more than once. I know how you guys roll.” Nikki leaned back, looking Luka in the eyes. “So, what are you going to try first?”

“All of them,” Luka said firmly.

Nikki’s face lit up in a grin. “Well, that should be interesting. Need a shopping buddy?”

Luka almost said no, but with the way Nikki had rattled things off, it seemed like a bad idea. Nikki clearly had experience with these things. “I mean, if you want to go with

me, I certainly won't turn you down. But weren't you in the middle of something?"

"Please take them," Sora requested dryly. "Before Nikki gets bored enough to try blasting the machines down there apart."

Oh. Was that what they'd been discussing before Luka joined? "That, um, sounds like it would come with a body count."

Nikki sniffed, offended. "You all say the same things. I'd take precautions. It's not like I'd blow people sky high. Much."

Yeah, better to give Nikki a diversion. "Well, can you help me out first? Amaru's got a plan. If his doesn't work, yours can be plan B."

Sora muttered something like "More like plan Z."

If Nikki heard, the mage gave no sign. "Sure! I love shopping. Let's go. Oh, maybe we should pick up some clothes for Amaru while we're out? I noticed he keeps wearing your clothes."

"That's a great idea. We keep getting interrupted every time we try. Although he's insisting on wearing my stuff, for some reason."

"Dragon scent. Heady stuff." Nikki patted Luka's chest like this was common sense, but cute that Luka didn't seem to get it. "But he definitely needs his own stuff, too. All right, Sora, I'm off. Don't lose my plans, no matter how tempted you are."

"Uh-huh." Sora pointedly responded in a tone that did not agree.

Before Nikki could argue the point, Luka got a firm arm around their shoulders and headed out of the tent. "So, do you know any of the stores in the nearby town?"

Distracted, Nikki refocused on him. "Uh, no. Do you know where to go?"

“No idea. I think we’d better google some things while I drive us into town.”

“I can drive us.”

Luka didn’t even entertain that thought for a second. “I heard about what happened to your car, Nikki. Just because we’re an ocean apart from each other, doesn’t mean I’m out of the loophole on gossip. You got rear-ended and your front bumper taken out on the same day.”

“Okay, look. That was not my fault. I was *parked* the second time.”

“And the first?”

“Why you gotta be mean like this? I’m helping you, aren’t I?”

They cheerfully teased back and forth all the way into town. Luka just hoped what he bought with Nikki’s help would actually work.

Otherwise, potions it was.



Well, that meeting had taken way more time than he'd expected.

Like *hours*.

But it was good in a way. It proved that Irany was taking this damn seriously and trying to make up for the mistakes and oversights he'd made with his first design. His poor clan mate had spent nearly every minute working on the problem while Amaru had been away hunting ingredients. By the dark circles under his eyes and his rather haggard appearance, it didn't look like he'd rested at all.

Was Amaru's hard heart softening toward Irany? Maybe a little. A smidge. A crumb. Possibly.

It definitely didn't hurt that Irany had walked Amaru through every inch of his plans and ideas, and then waited for Amaru's approval. He'd accepted suggestions—unlike five hundred years ago when he wouldn't listen to a single word Amaru had to say.

After that, there were more talks with Evora and the other mages on the special handling required for the malignant ingredients. They were also excited to see some of the other ingredients he'd picked up during his travels. The normally reserved and chilly Evora was even effusive in her excitement for some items she stated they were completely out of.

The plan was to wake up his clan tomorrow. Amaru was ninety percent sure he had everything needed, give or take a detail. Frankly, he couldn't wait, even if he did not entirely know what to do with everyone once they were awake. Either way, it needed to happen, which meant they had to just figure things out as they went.

He needed to get to the Valerii Clan's home and check out their storehouse. It was clear they had many things he'd never used or collected before, but he wanted to see what they were missing. Was this a new way he could be helping his future family?

Yes, the Valerii were going to be his clan one day. No doubt in his mind. Luka and Vasily were *his* dragons. Wherever they went, that was where he was going to be. Plus, everyone knew when a mage found his dragon mate, the mage was folded into the dragon's clan. Not that he was going to walk away from helping his Sousa Clan, but his home was going to be with his dragons.

And his number one priority was going to be taking care of his new Valerii mage brothers and sisters.

No. That was wrong. That was priority number two.

Number one was always going to be taking care of Vasily and Luka.

Yes, that made much more sense.

After getting filled in on all the work they'd done prepping the underwater cave and the spells for breaking his people free, Rodrigo provided an update on the work King Alric and Cameron were spearheading at the village. Amaru might have leaned a little more against Vasily, allowing the dragon to pull him into his lap for a reassuring cuddle. Maybe not the most professional thing, but he didn't care as Sam's pictures of his home flitted through his brain.

It was nice to hear that tons and tons of supplies were being moved into the village to make sure all the people were going to be comfortable. Not to mention generators to power new refrigeration, cooking appliances, and other gadgets. When the Sousa moved home again, they were going to be comfortable, but it would take time to chase away the ghosts of their past.

With everything settled and plans in place, Amaru was happy to escape the excessively long meeting. He stretched his arms over his head as he stepped out of the tent. Twisting to

the left and then right, his back popped and creaked. Strong hands instantly found his stiff shoulders and started kneading away the tension.

“Need a break?”

Amaru jumped and laughed as he turned around. He’d thought it was Vasily right behind him, but that question had come from Luka.

“There’s my other sexy dragon. Where have you been?” He tipped his face up and received a sweet kiss that turned a little dirty as Luka tangled his tongue with Amaru’s.

“Preparing things,” Luka purred as he broke off the kiss.

“Now I’m intrigued.”

Vasily placed a possessive hand on Luka’s hip, pulling him in close. “So am I. What have you been up to?”

“Shopping with Nikki.”

“Now I’m afraid,” Vasily muttered.

Luka laughed and leaned his head against Vasily’s shoulder, and Amaru’s heart might have swelled to double its normal size inside of his chest. It wasn’t just that they treated him like the most precious treasure in the world, but that his dragons so clearly loved each other that made him want to swoon.

“All good, non-explosive stuff, I promise. Also, I did get the hotel room we stayed in last time for the night. I thought after roughing it for so long in the forest, Amaru might be in the mood for a soft bed and a hot shower.”

“Yes, please!” Amaru shouted, throwing himself at Luka and Vasily. It didn’t matter what Luka had been shopping for. That lovely private room with the big bed and his dragons all to himself for the night sounded like heaven.

They paused long enough to pack some essentials before his dragons flew him back across the lake to the little city with the wonderful hotel. If the person working at the front desk was at all surprised to see them again, he didn’t show it.

Amaru breezed across the threshold, ready to throw himself down on the bed just like the first time, but stopped dead in his tracks. The room was different. There were new, interesting things that demanded his attention.

“What’s this?” He plunged both of his hands into an exquisite soft, furry blanket that was a lovely peach color. It felt like Luka had skinned some fluffy animal, but the color argued it was maybe one of those faux fur materials. “Sooooo soft,” he moaned.

“I picked up two new blankets,” Luka explained. “This one is a soft furry one that is supposed to be calming to the touch. Another is a weighted blanket.”

“In case we’re not enough weight on him?” Vasily teased.

Luka shrugged. “Apparently not if he can wiggle out.”

“What’s that noise?” Amaru started away from the bed only to turn back and pull the blanket off and wrap himself in it. The room was blissfully cool, and the furry softness of the blanket was hard to release. He shuffled across the room to a round device resting on the dresser emitting soft *ssshhhing* sounds like the lake water splashing into the bank, but so much bigger.

“White noise machine. A lot of people can’t sleep with complete silence. This makes a variety of sounds from plain white noise to ocean waves to thunderstorms.”

Amaru shuddered. “No thunderstorms, please. I don’t mind them, but I’ve had enough of storms for a while.”

“I figured.” Luka wrapped his arms around Amaru from behind and snuggled close. “That’s why I put it on the ocean waves setting. Something different but quietly soothing.”

Amaru twisted in his arms, eyes wide. “I’ve never been to see the ocean. You said your clan is on the coast, right? I’ll be able to visit the ocean when I’m living with you.”

Vasily huffed a laugh. “The compound is next to the beach. If you like the sound of the ocean, we can open the windows to our room at night and you can listen to the real ocean as you fall asleep.”

An excited squeal escaped his lips and he stopped it with a kiss to Luka's smiling mouth. He was going to see the ocean. Swim in the ocean. Walk on the sand. Other members of his clan had traveled with the dragons to the shore and met with other clans or tribes, but he'd barely left his village. There had always been more important things for him to do or study than riding about on a dragon.

Now that he had his own dragons, he couldn't think of anything else more important than being with them.

Just as he was breaking off the kiss to seek out Vasily's lips, the dragon stepped up behind him, his large hands slipping under his shirt to rub across his bare skin and pluck at his nipples.

"Luka, my love, do you think we should put this room to good use? You did go to so much trouble to get it ready for us." Vasily's voice was a delicious low rumble that was causing him to melt even faster under his exploring hands.

"I do. Our poor mage has been neglected and we need to fix that." Luka leaned close and licked along the side of Amaru's neck before sucking his earlobe into his mouth. At the same time, he reached between them, his nimble fingers attacking the button and zipper on Amaru's pants with surprising speed.

Amaru was still trying to form coherent words when his shorts were suddenly around his ankles and his hard cock was resting in the palm of Luka's hand. A shiver ran through his body and he thrust into Luka's touch.

Since their first night in the hotel, they'd had sex so many times he thought his body should have built up the tiniest bit of resistance to their allure. But with just the smallest caress or lick, he found himself racing forward, body trembling with desperate need, and his brain reduced to babbling sludge.

In the end, he wasn't even sure how they made it to the bed. Clothes were gone as if by magic and they were now a tangle of sweaty limbs and questing mouths searching for all the sweet spots.

But his favorite parts were when Vasily got bossy. All the higher functions of his brain shut down at the sound of that commanding growl whispering the dirtiest things in his ear. Luka was no better. Amaru couldn't count the number of times he'd lifted his gaze to find the same glazed-over look in Luka's eyes.

"Luka, in the middle of the bed," Vasily ordered as he rose from the bed. "Amaru, get between Luka's legs. I want you to suck his cock."

Amaru did as he was told.

"And what are you planning, our wicked man?" Luka called out, but it was nearly cut off with a moan as Amaru dutifully licked a long, slow stripe up Luka's dick.

It was a very pretty cock with the slightest curve toward his stomach when it was hard. The head flushed the most beautiful deep rose red, practically begging for Amaru's mouth. There was nothing better than feeling the weight of it on his tongue, sliding in to touch the very back of his throat.

Well, sucking Vasily's cock was just as nice. Amaru's only regret was not having a mouth big enough to suck them both at once. He'd tried. A couple of times. It simply didn't work.

Thankfully, there were other fun things they could do while Amaru played with Luka's dick.

"I thought I'd loosen up Amaru so he could ride you," Vasily stated in a calm, even tone. "He's going to ride you until you come. Then I'm going to fuck that cum even deeper into his ass before filling him up myself."

Amaru moaned around Luka's dick at the picture that filled his mind. He lifted his mouth away long enough to beg, "Yes. That. Fill me up. Make me yours."

"Good boy," Vasily murmured as two strong hands gripped and kneaded both of his ass cheeks before pulling them apart. A cool breeze touched his hole and Amaru whimpered around Luka's cock. He tried to turn the remains of his brain to giving Luka the best blow job of his life, but all his thoughts shattered at the strange, wet something that ran over his hole.

That was not Vasily's finger covered in lube like he'd been expecting.

That was the dragon's tongue.

It persistently licked, poked, and prodded at his entrance. The sensation was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Some part of his brain tried to argue this was naughty, but that part was shoved in a box and thrown into the deepest well in existence. All resistance collapsed and his body welcomed Vasily inside as if the man held a magical key to all his secret desires.

Endless noises escaped Amaru as he pushed backward into Vasily's face, chasing all those wonderful feelings while sucking Luka harder and faster. He wasn't sure what Luka could see of Vasily, but Amaru could feel Luka growing harder and thicker in his mouth.

"That's it, baby. Get him nice and loose for me," Luka gritted out between clenched teeth as if he was already fighting his orgasm. Fingers threaded through Amaru's hair and tightened, adding the slightest edge to the pleasure as Luka started to thrust into his mouth. Fucking it.

Vasily lifted his face away from Amaru's ass and shoved what felt like three slick fingers inside. His body gave no protest at the invasion. It wanted everything his dragons could give him and more. Muscles trembled and sweat glistened on his skin. He was so close already.

When Vasily withdrew his fingers from his hole, Amaru cried out. He didn't want to be empty. Vasily smacked him lightly on one cheek. "Show Luka how badly you want him."

He needed no other prodding. Amaru crawled up Luka with a wicked but lopsided grin. After taking only a second to line up the head of Luka's leaking cock with his hole, Amaru sat down, taking all of him in one fast, hard stroke that left them both crying out.

Placing his hands on Luka's chest for balance with his knees on either side of Luka's hips, Amaru rode his lover hard,

losing himself in the feel of that hard cock filling him so completely.

The bed shifted as Vasily climbed up to the head and stretched out alongside Luka. He captured the man's mouth in a deep, filthy kiss and one hand pinched and plucked at a nipple until it stood up hard on Luka's chest. Amaru lost himself to the sight of them kissing with such passion. His mates had found each other, loved each other for centuries, just waiting for him to find his way to them so they could finally be complete.

Luka suddenly tore his mouth away and moaned. He thrust upward into Amaru while grabbing his thighs.

"That's it, love. Fill our mate up," Vasily coaxed.

Not that Luka needed it. Luka came hard, a rush of semen pouring into Amaru's channel as he shouted. Muscles and tendons stood out on his stretched neck, his face flushed. Amaru reached for his cock to accompany him. He was so fucking close. It wouldn't take much to push himself over the edge.

But evil Vasily grabbed his wrist before he could lay a finger on his own cock. "Not yet."

"What?" Amaru's voice cracked ridiculously high. He was holding on to his control by a single hair. His dick throbbed in time with his racing heart. "Vasily!" he whined. "Don't be evil!"

That outburst earned him an impressively evil chuckle.

No! Caught in the clutches of an evil mate!

"Your turn, Vas," Luka said, panting. "He feels amazing."

Amaru hadn't thought it was possible, but his body flushed even more under Luka's words and slumberous gaze.

Vasily jumped up and lifted Amaru off Luka. He dropped him onto the mattress with a bounce and climbed between Amaru's legs. Gripping him behind his knees, he held up his legs, spreading them wide so he could admire every fucking inch of Amaru. Those hot, dark brown eyes slid over his body

as if they were memorizing every line of his tattoos, every curve and muscle. Possessiveness scorched over him, tightening his need to be filled and fucked hard.

“Vas, please,” he said, his voice broken and rough from the cries of pleasure that had worn his throat raw with Luka.

“I can see. Luka’s cum is already sliding out of you. Can’t have that.”

Vasily released one leg and wrapped his hand around his own cock. The head grazed and caressed Amaru’s stretched opening as if he was patiently gathering up all the semen that was sliding out and pushing it back inside.

Just as he was about to shout at Vasily, the evil dragon pushed deep inside of him in one long, slow thrust. Amaru moaned, his back arching off the mattress. The stretch was exquisite, bordering on painful. Where Luka was long with an average girth, Vasily was shorter but so very thick, leaving him feeling utterly stuffed.

“Fuck yes,” Vasily snarled, pulling out to slam hard inside of Amaru. “Feels so good. So close. Luka, suck him off. Don’t waste a drop.”

Amaru was swearing before Luka’s wicked tongue circled the head of his straining dick. He was screwed. There was no holding back the orgasm now. Luka was sucking his cock like it was his only purpose in life, and Vasily was thrusting into his ass so hard and deep. There was no way to move. He could only explode.

A scream ripped from his throat. Lightning struck, singeing every nerve ending as he poured himself down Luka’s throat. He thought he heard Vasily shout as well, but Amaru’s frantically pounding heart was the only sound in his ears. Stars twinkled in front of his eyes and he blinked them away to see Luka kissing Vasily, allowing him to taste Amaru.

Was something burning?

No, that was just the smell of his brain blackened like burnt toast. Sex with his mates was quite possibly destroying his brain, but he wouldn’t give it up for anything.

After a quick cleanup that thankfully didn't require Amaru to move a single inch, he was joined in bed by both of his loving mates. They cuddled on either side of him, their skin comfortably cool against his own heated flesh. With Luka spooning behind him, Amaru rested his head on Vasily's chest, getting lost in the happy purring of both dragons and the soft crash of the ocean waves. They seemed a bright promise of the long nights he had ahead in their own bed within a home he couldn't wait to see.

This time, when sleep overtook him, it did so easily and without a fight.



Vasily couldn't tell who was more excited for this day to happen—Sam, Amaru, or absolutely everyone else gathered here. They had taken the precaution of throwing translation amulets over everyone sleeping so there would not be any mass confusion upon waking. There were drinks, snacks, and fresh clothes waiting up top.

Finally, finally, they were ready to wake up the Sousa.

Magic technobabble was flying hard and fast this morning. Vasily spoke six languages fluently and couldn't begin to decipher a third of it. Still, things seemed to be going well? The earth dragons had cleared out the entrance down into the grotto, so everyone trooped down there, people carrying different items. Vasily somehow acquired a box of anhangas' hair to take down, the almost translucent strands not phased at all by the dim lighting of the cave.

Amaru flew about like an Energizer Bunny on speed. A well-rested Amaru was apparently a force to be reckoned with. Good thing he had Luka as backup; if Vasily was on his own, he'd be screwed.

"Hey, babe, set that there," Amaru directed him, pointing to a spot near the main controls area.

He dutifully set the box down, got a kiss as a reward for his efforts, then Amaru buzzed off again.

Luka joined him—also setting a container down—smiling fondly. "He's really excited. I can't blame him."

“So many family members and friends to see again, after all.”

He looked around the grotto again. Lots of dragons and mages down here. Well, more mages than dragons. They’d talked it over before dispatching people and decided mages would go over better than dragons. After all, when the Tupā went to sleep, dragons were still highly territorial. The lightning dragons, upon awakening, would not take it well if there were ice, earth, and fire dragons here.

Because of that, they’d drawn in more mages from the different clans. Well, that and Amaru said point blank he needed more power to overwhelm and shut off the mechanics. It apparently had taken two dozen mages to set it up, so he needed at least three dozen to shut it off again.

Vasily trusted him to know what he was doing. Irany didn’t seem to find any fault with that assessment, and he was just as busy running around tinkering with things.

Sam had two cameras in his hand, and, without explanation, he passed one to Vasily, the other to Luka. “Spread out.”

“Got it,” Luka said.

Vasily gathered the distinct impression he was coming in on act two. “Uh, camera? Someone explain?”

Sam blinked up at him from behind his glasses. “Oh, right. I forgot you weren’t there for that conversation. Basically, we want to record all of this. Not only for posterity and historical records, but also for future teaching. This is one of the major workings of our generation and it’s been hundreds of years since mages came together to do something like this.”

“Ahhh. Got it. Where do you want me to stand?”

“Not near Luka and this machine. Uh, how about over there?” Sam pointed to the far corner. “Just pan it around from time to time, catch as much as you can.”

“That I can do.” Actually, Vasily felt better about having something to do rather than stand there and look pretty. Not that he couldn’t look pretty with the best of them.

He took the camera, dutifully went to the corner he'd been pointed to, and started it up. Might as well start recording now. After all, the setup leading to the event was just as important.

Setup kept happening for another twenty minutes or so. It honestly looked to Vasily like a bunch of chefs in the same kitchen. Thankfully, Amaru had been granted head chef position, as no one argued with whatever he said. Not even Irany. (Well, Irany tried once and got a karate chop to the head for his efforts, and he didn't dare say anything after that.)

Finally, they seemed ready. Mages came into a circle around the machine, joining hands, all focused on the console. Considering how long and narrow it was, it took a bit of stretching for the mages to surround it completely. Even with thirty-six of them here.

Vasily clearly heard Irany ask Amaru, "What incantation are you going to use?"

"I give a fuck!"

Ha Na promptly reached up and smacked him in the back of the head.

Amaru cackled like the little basket case he was. Leave it to his mate to take the tension out of the situation by cracking jokes.

Sobering, Amaru looked around at them all. "Everyone ready? Yes? Okay, on three. One, two, three."

Vasily couldn't see shit, of course, but he could certainly smell and feel something happening. The energy in the grotto went from kind of stale to incredibly charged. The smell of ozone, that scent of lightning just before it struck, became so powerful that it threatened to burn the hairs in his nostrils. He had to shake his head a few times just to clear it and prevent himself from being overwhelmed.

At the same time, emotion bubbled up like hot lava in his chest, enough to almost bring tears to his eyes. He hadn't seen a major working like this in centuries, from before the war. To see it again, with all different mages from different clans, brought not only nostalgia but a fierce sense of happiness.

Finally. Finally, the age of dragons and mages was recovered enough to work magic like this again. This would be a memory he'd cherish for a long, long time.

Despite not understanding what they were doing, the moment it worked was unmistakable. The subtle hum of magic and machine abruptly quit. Nothing obviously sparked in the console, but the lights along the panel flickered and died out.

People threw their heads back in delighted laughter, high-fiving each other.

Vasily smiled along with them, whispering for the camera, "They did it. They shut the system off. Finally, the Sousa and the Tupã can wake up. After five hundred very long years, they can wake up."

First one, then several people lifted their heads. They blinked their eyes open, shifted upward onto their elbows. A few rolled promptly off, only to wobble when their knees almost gave out. Not the type to wake up easily or quickly, apparently. Amaru had leapt up, but not everyone would wake up the same.

But as soon as the dragons gained their feet, that was when Vasily realized they might have to do some fast talking.

At least a half dozen dragons woke up, took in the situation, and went into full alarm mode. They dove for the mages, forming a defensive perimeter around them.

Shit. Vasily couldn't blame them; in their shoes he'd be reacting exactly the same. Still, how to convince them?

The dragon nearest him woke up, rolled up to his feet, and took only three seconds to get his bearings. When he saw Vasily, he fell into a defensive stance, arms up in a guard position, absolutely ready to shift and throw down.

Vasily put up one hand in a surrender position, searching for words. "Hold on. I'm not an enemy. Ice dragon, yes, but Amaru is my mate."

He paused, looking Vasily over with new interest. "Amaru's mate?"

“Right. He woke up first. We’ve helped him wake everyone else up.”

His voice was deep, rough from all the sleep. Dark brown eyes were narrowed with suspicion. “We? Who’s we?”

“My clan. Well, all the dragons and mages that could come help, did.”

“Why?”

A loud clap brought their attention around, back toward the opposite side of the room. Rodrigo pitched his voice to carry.

“Everyone, I’m sure you’re confused and alarmed to see so many strangers here. I assure you, we are here to help. I am Rodrigo, King of the Ice Dragon Clan. Since you went to sleep, five hundred years have passed.”

Murmuring started up, people whispering to each other in dismay. Some in disbelief.

The lightning dragon in front of him snapped around, demanding the truth from Vasily with his eyes.

“Yeah. Sorry. It’s really been five hundred years. Irany’s system had some flaws and it kept rebooting, basically. Amaru has had many, many words to say about that. None of them were clean. It took all of us to break you guys out.”

“Shit.” The Tupã dragon’s head fell back, despair washing over his expression for a moment. “But if no one came to wake us up, that means the rest of the clan who went into battle died.”

“Yeah. Sorry again. We don’t know what happened, we just know they didn’t survive whatever they were fighting.”

“Shit,” he said again brokenly.

Poor guy needed a hug. Vasily would offer one but he wasn’t sure how well that would be received. A wail echoed in the grotto. People were either speaking to each other, crying, or making sounds of disbelief. The effect was a little deafening.

Rodrigo wasn't done. "Since you went to sleep, much has changed. A Dragon War broke out and decimated all the major clans, mage and dragon alike. We had to band together afterward to survive. We no longer are territorial. We can't afford to be, frankly. Know that every dragon, every mage here, is your ally. We've been working for days to wake you back up. You will have our full support moving forward to integrate into the modern world. Just tell us what you need."

Amaru jumped into this explanation. "He's one hundred percent telling the truth. I've been awake for almost two weeks now, and I've seen it all for myself. The world has changed. A *lot*. There's zippers and screwdrivers and cell phones, and... gah, I can't even begin to describe it all. But everyone here has worked very hard to help me wake you all up again. They're absolutely friends."

That seemed to relax the dragon in front of Vasily. Some, at least. He dropped his arms, no longer in a defensive position. He just looked sad, now. The sound of protests also died down, replaced with distressed noises.

Vasily remembered the moment when he'd realized most of his clan was dead and that there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. His heart ached in empathy. He offered a hand and a sympathetic smile.

"I'm Vasily. May I call you brother?"

The man looked up, tears standing in his eyes. For a long moment he hesitated, then gripped Vasily's arm in a warrior's clasp, the hand strong. "Caobi. Thank you. You're my brother from this day on."

Better. Vasily's smile turned upward a little. "Good. I'll introduce you to the rest of the clan. You're not alone, I promise you."

"That part, I got." Caobi grimaced, retracting his hand to run it over his face. "Damn. Princess Maíra is not going to take this well."

"Amaru mentioned she was down here somewhere."

“Yeah. Our king and his eldest son went to fight, but she stayed with us in case the worst happened.”

Good thing, too. As the worst did happen. “Let’s go to her.”

Caobi shifted around the platform he’d been lying on, heading that way. “I’m not one of her retainers, but I am one of the guards. Or was. That might change, with so few of us remaining.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why weren’t you part of the fighting force?”

“I was recovering from an injury. It was stupid. I’d been tussling with a few friends, broke my collarbone. I’d have been well in another few days, but they couldn’t wait for me to heal up.” Caobi morosely poked at the collarbone in question. “It’s healed now.”

“After five hundred years, I’d fucking hope so.”

That got a snort from Caobi, a dark humor to the sound. “Truly. Ah, there she is.”

While Caobi’s intentions were good, he was beaten to the punch. By Panu, of all people. Their adopted Finnish mage had gone to help people up and reassure them. Ever since Panu had shed the Taavi name, adopting theirs, he’d proven to be a wonderful addition to the clan. Panu had this mild manner about him. He was one of the sweetest, gentlest souls Vasily had ever met, and people sensed it upon meeting him. Sometimes, when a situation needed to be diffused, Rodrigo would send Panu in first.

So was Vasily at all worried about Panu greeting the lightning dragon princess-now-queen? No. He was curious how this was going to play out, though.

Queen Máira sat on the edge of her platform, her black hair in a loose braided plait over one shoulder, tattooed arms bare, and blinked chocolate brown eyes up at this cute blond-haired, blue-eyed mage offering her a hand up.

“Hi,” Panu said with a winsome smile. “I’m Panu. And you are?”

“Single,” she breathed, entranced as she put her hand in his.

Welp. Looked like they’d just lost Panu to the Lightning Dragon Clan. Poor boy didn’t seem to know what had hit him, but Vasily recognized the signs clear enough. A dragon had just found her mate.

Vasily was so, so glad he’d caught this all on camera. He was absolutely going to make a YouTube short out of it, too, as it was bound to get millions of hits.

Caobi leaned back into his side to mutter, “That mage, whose clan is he in?”

“Well, he was in ours. I think he’s now in yours.”

A subterranean chuckle rumbled in Caobi’s chest. “Yeah, looks that way to me, too. He’s a good man?”

“One of the best. Good mage, too. Trust me, she’s in good hands.” Vasily patted him on the shoulder as he moved past. “Queen Maíra.”

No response. She was still staring at Panu like he hung the moon, sun, and all the stars. Panu seemed just as entranced by her.

New mates. Gah. Not that Vasily could throw stones at that particular glass house. He tried again, patiently. “Queen Maíra?”

This time, she blinked and turned to look at him. Then startled all over again, almost wary.

Caobi helpfully stepped in. “This is Vasily, Amaru’s mate.”

“Oh!” Her guard instantly relaxed. “Pleasure, Vasily. Thank you for helping us all to awaken.”

“You’re quite welcome. Can you help lead all of your people out of here? We have an encampment near the lake that’s got food, clothes, and baths all ready for you.”

Her expression softened into something warmer. “Thank you so much for the kindness. Getting out of the grotto sounds splendid. Panu, will you guide me?”

“Of course.” He offered her his arm like they were in some grand ballroom.

She took it, still smiling at him. Vasily couldn't help but note she was a good three inches taller than Panu. Neither seemed to mind the height difference.

With their new queen leading the way, people fell into line, all helping each other out of the grotto. Vasily stopped the camera with a sigh.

The hard part, he had a feeling, was going to start now.



Amaru had all the conflicting emotions battling it out in his chest as they went ‘home.’ Or what used to be his home. He’d seen the pictures of the village, of course, and knew it wasn’t in the best shape. Knew that time had taken its toll on the place. Still, seeing it in such obvious disrepair was disheartening. Even that word didn’t adequately contain everything he felt about the situation.

But the pictures he’d seen were also inaccurate. Someone, at some point in time, had come in with a hell of a lot of supplies. From the air, he could see repair work underway, lights strung up, and a lot of people milling about working. Repair spells, too. Amaru had been told about a work crew coming in, but he had not followed up on it, too busy with his own project. This was the first he’d seen of it, and it looked like they had made amazing progress.

They landed just outside the main gate. Amaru threw a leg over Vasily’s neck, sliding down to the ground with the ease of practice. He gave Vasily’s shoulder a kiss in thanks for the ride before striding forward, impatient to get some answers. Who was here?

Luka caught up first, as Vasily had to shift and shed the saddle. He didn’t seem at all surprised by this. “Oh, they’ve made good progress.”

He shot his mate a look. There was much judgment in it. “You knew what was going on and you didn’t tell me?”

“We wanted to surprise you.” Luka tacked on, “Besides, we weren’t sure how much progress they’d make before we got here.”

Amaru suspected the second part was the main reason.

He had no room to question this further as Luka lifted a hand and called out a greeting. “Hey, Cam! You guys really did a lot.”

A stunningly good-looking man turned, hands still up as he channeled magic into a doorway. His black hair lay in a long frame around his face, almond shaped eyes lifting as he smiled. “Ah-ha, our favorite ice dragons have finally deigned to grace us with their presence.”

“Hey, we had hundreds of people to wake up and herd here,” Luka objected good-naturedly. “You know herding people is worse than herding cats.”

“All too well. Who’s this?” Cam regarded Amaru curiously.

Luka put a warm hand at the small of Amaru’s back as he did the introductions. “This is my mate Amaru, formerly of the Sousa Clan. Amaru, this is Cameron Burkhard, consort of the Fire Dragon Clan.”

Oh. *Oh*. Amaru had heard this story. This was the mage who’d started it all, the first one discovered after hundreds of years of a dearth of mages. He looked young, which made sense, and kind. He was also hella powerful to be able to work this kind of repair magic all while carrying on a conversation.

Amaru decided on the spot he absolutely had to make friends. Maybe Cameron would be like Nikki and they could blow things up together. No harm wishing for that, right?

“Nice to meet you,” he said, meaning every word. “And thanks for coming in and repairing the place. It makes it a little easier on all of us.”

“That was the goal.” Cameron finished the spell and stepped back, eyeing his handiwork for a moment. He’d apparently been repairing the doorframe and door to the building, and from what Amaru could see, it looked damn near pristine. Cameron apparently agreed as he gave a grunt of satisfaction before stepping back from it. “Amaru, we’ve done quite a bit coming in, but I’m not sure if we thought of everything.”

“We didn’t expect anything at all, so all of this is very welcome. Trust me.”

Cameron gave a buzzing sort of noise, like Amaru had just given the wrong answer. “No, no, that’s not how this works. I know in your age—”

“Stop saying it like that, you make me sound ancient!”

“—you look amazing for your age, don’t worry about it,” Cameron inserted smoothly with a cocky wink. “As I was saying, I know for you, clans were territorial and didn’t help each other much unless there was an alliance in place. But we don’t subscribe to that now. We can’t afford to. A lot of magical knowledge and history were lost. We’re recovering or rediscovering something on an almost daily basis, scrambling to get back to where our ancestors once were. You *will* have our help. We can’t afford, as a world, to not help you. To not make friends.”

The logic impacted Amaru like emotion wouldn’t have. He’d heard this before, but now, standing here, he felt it on a deeper level. His clan wouldn’t have been awakened if not for all the dragon and mage clans coming to the rescue. His home village wouldn’t be repaired like this so that people could actually live here once more if not for all the help incoming.

Amaru wasn’t the type to only receive. He wanted to give back, too, keep these scales even. “I speak for my clan when I say we appreciate it. And will join in. Let me promise you this, first and foremost. All of the Jaeggi mages who need help? I will help them.”

Cameron’s expression lit up with anticipated joy. “I heard you knew how to fix Sam’s core. You think you can do the rest?”

“Ninety-nine percent sure of it. Irany, a colleague, has also promised to help. Frankly, I find the whole thing abhorrent. The descendants of Kaiser Jaeggi didn’t even do anything wrong and yet they have to pay for his mistakes? Ugh, makes me throw up in my mouth. No.” Amaru’s tone firmed, and he meant every word he said. “No. Not on my watch. I’ve already

promised to fix Sam. But I'll teach anyone who wants to learn how to correct this."

Cameron's hand shot into the air. "Me. I want to learn. I might not understand everything said, but I want to record it, too."

"Done."

Cameron looked as giddy as a child on holiday expecting presents. He shot Luka a grin. "Luka, I really like your mate."

"I rather like him myself." Luka hugged Amaru to him for a moment.

Aww, he did feel loved. He could also see why Nikki claimed Cameron as a favorite person. Amaru might do the same.

Cameron waved them both to fall into step with him. "Let me give you a tour of what we've started. First, generators. Ah, those supply electrical power."

"I've seen those at the other camp," Amaru told him, to save Cameron from trying to explain. "I know how those function."

Luka shot him a droll look. "You also took one of them apart."

"Which is how I know how they function." Amaru felt no shame about that. He'd put it back together, hadn't he? And it worked fine. No problem. "How many did you bring, Cameron?"

"About twenty. We didn't know how many to bring, so we figured we could always buy more." Cameron pointed to a work crew farther along who were busy around the hospital building. "Once the earth dragons were done digging the way into the grotto, they shifted over here. We've had them do all the basic repair work, mainly getting the roads and walls back into shape. We mages are handling the finer details, like doors, windows, and roofs. I can at least promise basic shelter by nightfall."

It was incredibly generous, all that had been accomplished. Amaru could easily tell where patches and repairs had been done, the newer stone in shiny contrast to the weathered stone, all looking solid. He could almost see his home as it had once looked. He did not underestimate how much magic and manpower had gone into this. They must have been at it for days to manage all of this.

He stopped dead in the central plaza, looking about. What used to be thriving businesses were nothing more than shells now, but he knew they'd be rebuilt. Flourish once more. It just looked sad in the moment.

"You've done so much work." Amaru turned to Cameron, not even sure how to express adequate thanks. "I don't know if my clan can ever repay this much generosity."

"We are happy to help. Truly." Cameron took one of Amaru's hands in both of his, the mage's hands warm. Comforting. "Your clan symbolizes hope to us. We want to support you."

Yes, he believed that. But Amaru stood by his initial assessment. Just healing Jaeggi broken cores was not enough to repay all of this. "I think we better have you send us apprentices. Whatever medical knowledge we have, we'll pass on to your clan. I won't be able to rest easy unless you agree to this."

"Student exchange program?" Cameron's smile was dazzling, and in that moment, Amaru imagined he saw exactly why the Fire Dragon King fell in love with this man. "I'm all for it! Let's get you up to speed first, then we'll talk logistics."

"Excellent. First, though, let me turn everything on. It'll help speed things up."

Cameron and Luka looked at him like he wasn't quite making sense.

"Uh, love?" Luka's head canted to the side, brows quirked in puzzlement. "Turn what on?"

For a moment, he shared their confusion. Why was he getting this look. "All the lights, sewage system, and repair

golems, of course.”

This did not, apparently, clarify matters. Cameron especially looked even more confused. “The whatsits?”

Oh. He hadn’t figured any of those out yet? Luka, despite spending more time here than anyone, excluding Sam, looked equally puzzled.

Amaru didn’t bother subduing his evil chuckle. This was going to be fun.

“Come with me, young one, and learn my mysterious ways.”

“Said the spider to the fly,” Cameron muttered, but he followed immediately.

It was fine, Amaru was only going to break his brain a little bit. He was young; he’d recover without issue.

The nearest control was for the lights, in fact, which was why Amaru had thought of it. To the untrained eye, it might have looked like a decorative stone. The stone was palm width, a perfect square, set into the lampposts that lined all the streets. He went to the one that stood in the center of the plaza, drew the power symbol in the air above the stone, then smacked it lightly with his palm three times.

Knowing it would work, Amaru turned to see the other two’s reactions. They did not disappoint. When the stone lit up in a warm glow, then spread to the nearest columns in quick succession, neither of them had words. Luka looked about with childlike wonder, eyes round, lips parted with delight, as if Amaru had performed stunning magic for his enjoyment. Amaru loved that look and regretted he hadn’t thought to take a picture of this, just so he could treasure it.

Cameron spun in place, watching as the whole village lit up, spluttering. “How. Seriously, I’m not kidding, HOW?!”

If this blew his mind, Amaru couldn’t wait to show him the rest. “A little captured lightning from the Tupã, some mountain stone, with captured sunlight. It’s the sunlight that keeps it powered.”

The consort of the Fire Dragons whimpered. “Do you know how much money we spend on lights throughout the year? When instead we could be doing *this*?”

“I’ll teach you later,” Amaru promised. “Now, I’m going to go turn on the other two.”

He had two devoted followers as he walked farther into the city. Amaru passed many a person who exclaimed over the lights that had suddenly appeared everywhere. Luka ended up throwing quick explanations over his shoulder. Cameron was too doggedly focused in following Amaru to care whether anyone else was confused.

Finally, he hit the right section. There was one particular building that housed all of their utility spells and machines. This one, too, had been repaired recently. The roof, walls, and doors all looked new. Hopefully everything inside still worked fine, otherwise Amaru would need to do some quick repairs.

He stepped in through the door, looking about. Ah, good, the preservation spells had done their job. When not in use, they had retreated either into their columns set into the floor, or into the floor itself.

“We had no idea what this place was for.” Luka followed him in, looking around. “But this was where the controls for the sewage system was?”

“Sewage and water, really.” Amaru paused in explaining to find the right column. He honestly hadn’t been in there since the last repair, which had been two—no, five hundred plus years ago. Ah, there was the lever.

Cameron sounded indignant. “I tried pulling that.”

“It’s not a pull.”

“I tried pushing, too.”

“Not a push, either.” Amaru used both hands, power activating in his core and traveling through his fingers, into the metal rod, unlocking it. Then he lifted it, pulling hand over hand as he raised it from the floor. The wall panel lifted up with barely a grating sound, coming to a slow stop, covering the entire back wall from floor to ceiling.

“Secret panel,” Cameron moaned. “What’s next, a secret door?”

“Those are only for the dragon hoards,” Amaru teased. “I won’t show you those.”

“Of course there’s secret doors,” Cameron muttered. “Of course there are.”

Much like he had the lights, Amaru drew the right power symbols over the right squares, activating each of them with some of his magic and a slap against the stone. He explained as he went, “Water is the easiest, it’s just moonlit water and power of running water. We tapped into an underground lake nearby to keep it going. Sewage system is running water, moonlit water, and limestone. We have dragon ash filters at the grates.”

“See, you rattle it off like that, and it seems so fucking obvious.” Cameron groaned some more. “I’m so doing this at home. Just watch.”

The fact he could actually envision how it was all put together in a snap proved how brilliant he must be. Nikki had said Cameron was smart, and the mage had not exaggerated. Amaru could only imagine how much fun it would be to match wits with Cameron and invent something fun. Hopefully they’d have enough time to do that while rebuilding the Sousa Clan.

“All right, next. Repair golems.”

When Amaru turned, he found Luka with smartphone in hand, pointed in his direction. He blinked at his mate, not sure what Luka was up to.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Recording this. So people know it’s possible.”

“Oh. Good idea. I’ll explain how it all functions and how to build it for you too, later.”

Luka flashed him a warm smile. “They will all appreciate it.”

Well, he'd let him film and do the thing. He wanted to help with the repairs and such.

This building housed six dominant repair golems. At a glance, they looked like nothing more than carved statues in a rectangular shape jutting out of the floor. Amaru activated each one in turn with nothing more than a slap of his hand against the tops of their heads. They whirled to life, each part of them unfolding, arms coming up and out, heads extending onto necks, four wheels at the bases popping out and gaining traction.

Cameron was now swearing, turning the air blue as he stood next to the door and watched each of them expand, gears rolling.

"Robots. You have robots." Cameron looked almost green with envy. "I want magic robots."

"I'll show you how to make them, too," Amaru promised. Ah, this reaction was priceless. So amusing. Bless Luka for recording it. "They're a bit complex, but I think once you get the idea, it'll be easy enough. I sent them out to repair any of the utility systems, like the sewage and water lines. That way my new allies don't have to worry about it."

A voice called from outside, "CAMERON!"

"That's Alric." Cameron stepped halfway out of the building and waved a hand. "Here!"

Oh, the Fire Dragon King was here too? Not just his consort? Wow, they really were invested in helping.

"Did you see the golems?" Cameron asked his husband, voice high with excitement.

"Yes, I saw the golems, why do you think I'm looking for you? What did you do?"

"Not a damn thing."

"I thought you were in the building earlier with Nikki trying to figure out what the building was for. You kept saying there was magic in the stone."

“There is. I had no clue until Amaru showed me. Turns out it’s for the utilities of the village—water and sewage, to be precise.” Cameron made a face. “Nikki will be smug when they learn about it. Nikki was sure this building did something. We just couldn’t figure out how to turn it on. We couldn’t figure out its kinks.”

Finally, the dragon king stepped into view. Amaru got his first good look at him and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. Handsome, that was his first thought. With that short, powerful form, white wings in his dark hair, and chiseled features, he was quite good-looking. He and Cameron looked beautiful together as a couple.

Alric’s arm automatically came around Cameron’s waist in a hold, which was sweet, like he’d missed his husband even in that short separation. Only then did he take notice of Luka and Amaru—mostly Amaru—as he looked him over curiously.

“You know Luka, I think, and this is his mate Amaru of Sousa.” Cameron did the introductions. “Amaru, my husband, Alric.”

Amaru had this whole handshake thing down pat now. He offered a hand, not surprised by the firm grip he got in return. “Nice to meet you. On behalf of my clan, thank you very much for all the help. I’ll do all I can to repay the favor.”

Alric gave a genuine smile in return. “I’m very glad to meet you, too. And look forward to how we can help each other. I know my mate would love to learn everything you just showed him.”

Cameron nodded in fervent agreement.

“And I’ll teach him. As well as heal your Jaeggi mages.”

Alric’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “I was told you can do that. Please. I don’t like seeing my people suffer.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you. I’m actually glad to run into you like this. I have a somewhat delicate question to pose.”

“I might have a blunt answer, but go ahead.” What could he possibly ask?

“It’s been reported to me that the Tupã princess is still alive and well. That she’s on her way here even now. I thought it appropriate to host a ceremony to crown her queen.”

“Oooo,” Amaru breathed, caught up in an inner vision of said ceremony. “That would be fantastic. Frankly, we all need a good party.”

“I thought as much. Also, I want to recognize her as a fellow leader. Support her as I can. I thought this was a good way to get that message across, that I’m her ally.”

“Do it.” Amaru nodded fervently. “Absolutely do it.”

“Good, I will. Second question.” Alric slowed, visibly phrasing this. “I know that to all of you, the loss of your clan members is still very fresh. May we do a funeral rite for all those lost?”

And now Amaru understood why everyone spoke so highly of Alric Burkhard. The man truly did care about people and knew how to support them in their darkest hours. If Amaru had thought it appropriate, he would have hugged him on the spot. That was how happy he’d just made him.

“Please.” The word came out huskier than he intended. “Please do. We all need to grieve. And I don’t think any of us has found the time to do it.”

“Then I’ll do that, too. If you can help me, guide me in your clan’s traditions, I’d take it as a favor.”

“That I can do.”

His clan and the Tupã had lost a great deal. But if today was any indication, the future held nothing but promise.



The work at the Sousa village continued for another four days. Dragons worked in shifts, carrying all the Sousa mages home again. The Tupã lightning dragons stopped off at their own village down the mountain to find it had largely been leveled. It looked as if the fighting had taken place there, leaving them with little more than rubble covered with vines and trees. Luka hadn't been there when the Tupã toured their old home, but his heart broke for them.

During the Dragon Wars, the Valerii Clan's home in Russia had been physically untouched by the fighting. Yet, there had been no wish to stay when they'd returned to find their home missing so many mages and dragons. Just ghosts.

But the Tupã were missing their brothers and sisters as well as their homes.

Of course his darling mage hadn't hesitated to invite the Tupã dragons to move into the Sousa village. With the loss of their own numbers, they had more than enough room to accommodate the dragon clan, and it only felt natural since the two clans had been so close in the past.

With everyone working together, the village looked as if it had largely returned to its original glory. Most of the homes that had been left at least partially standing were livable once again, and others were being built from scratch. The smaller amenities were mainly the ones still being replaced. The village now reflected a strange mix of ancient and present day—like the little group of kids sitting on the ground in the shade of one of the homes, gathered around a tablet. They definitely needed to figure out how to get these people a reliable internet signal.

“Have you spotted Amaru yet?” Vasily inquired on his left.

They wove their way through the village toward the main square, along with many other mages and dragons. All the Valerii Clan was now present, along with a sizable chunk of the Burkhard dragons. More earth dragons had arrived with a delegation of metal dragons, including King Roca Mayta and Queen Anawarkhi.

Luka tugged at the cuffs of his button-down shirt, settling it across his shoulders more comfortably. After weeks in T-shirts, the formal shirt felt constricting and awkward. But everyone who had somewhat formal clothes had changed for today’s ceremonies.

“I haven’t seen him for about three hours,” Luka grumbled. “I brought him some food and thought we could share some lunch, but I got the finger.”

Vasily’s lips twitched like he was fighting to hold in his smile. They both knew what finger Luka was talking about because they’d received it more than once since Amaru had started working on getting his village back in proper order. It was the raised index finger accompanied by a swift, “Gimme one minute. Just one minute.”

It was never one minute.

They understood. Amaru was determined to bring his village back to its former glory and take care of his people. It was why they’d been working almost around the clock for the past few days.

But the man did not rest.

Vasily had picked Amaru up the past two nights, tucking him under his arm as he carried him back to where they were staying within the village. Luka was waiting for the inevitable moment where it was his turn to cart their mage back to bed.

“I’m a little better than you.” Vasily flashed him a wry smile. “Caught him an hour ago. Figured out if I shoved bite-sized food into his mouth, he’d eat and work at the same time.”

“I’m getting the feeling he doesn’t want to leave here,” Luka whispered while trying to ignore the sudden tightness in his throat. “He’s making so many plans. Not just reconstruction, but improvements and expansion.”

Mentally, he’d been counting down the days until they would finally get to take Amaru home to the Valerii Clan. They’d talked about it and Amaru had seemed excited about living in the Valerii home. It was only natural. When a mage found his dragon mate, the mage always moved in with the dragons.

Both he and Vasily ached to bring Amaru home at last—to see him slip fully into their world and their lives.

But if Amaru wanted to stay...

Vasily threaded his fingers with Luka’s and squeezed. “If he wants to remain in the village with his clan, then we will move here with him. It’s only a few hours flight from here to the compound. The important thing is that we’re together.”

Luka nodded. The little ball of tension that was resting within his chest unraveled a bit, allowing him to breathe easier. There was no question Amaru was their mate. They would follow him wherever he wanted to go.

Hand in hand, they walked to the square that glowed with warm lights as the sun sank below the distant mountains and painted the sky with broad strokes of deep blue, purple, orange, and pink. Colorful bunting and streamers hung on the new buildings and old trees, swaying lightly in the breeze that carried a scent of moonlight and flowers.

After a few seconds of peering over the heads of the gathered crowd, they spotted Amaru waving both of his hands wildly over his head to capture their attention. Weaving their way through the solemn gathering, they met Amaru at a table.

“Here. Hold out your hands.”

When they both did, Amaru placed a large flower in each of their palms. It resembled a lotus, with flawless white petals and a center that was like hammered gold.

“What’s this?” Vasily asked.

“An old tradition to honor those we have lost,” Amaru explained.

He'd barely finished speaking when a heavy silence fell over the gathering. Luka turned his gaze toward the west, where a small platform had been set up. King Alric Burkhard, dressed in a sharp dark suit and red tie, strode up the stairs and turned to face the crowd.

“I wish to thank everyone for gathering here this evening for the memorial service as well as the coronation,” Alric began. His strong, deep voice rang out across the vast square, touching everyone. “The Sousa and Tupã Clans have suffered a devastating loss. We wish to honor their sacrifice. The Sousa and Tupã have lost precious family and friends but are here today because of the strength and courage of those fighters. Their legacy and memory will live on in the minds and hearts of the survivors. We will tell their story to our children and our children's children so they are never forgotten.”

Cameron climbed onto the stage from the left, carrying two of those same large flowers. Very carefully, he handed one over to the king and took up a position next to him.

“To the Sousa and Tupã, we honor you,” Alric said in a low, solemn voice.

The words had barely left his lips when the flowers in Cameron's and Alric's hands started to glow with a warm golden light. A couple of seconds later, the flowers lifted from their palms, climbing slowly into the air, turning as they rose as if carried by hidden angels.

Luka tore his gaze away to find Amaru's flower doing the same thing, but his and Vasily's had yet to stir.

“Think about those you've lost,” Amaru whispered, naturally reading his mind.

It was on the tip of his tongue to remind Amaru that he'd never met the Sousa before. He couldn't possibly know any of the dead. But Amaru's words had already prodded loose old memories of Valerii who had died in the Dragon Wars.

Elga. Maks. Yasha. Deniska.

As one smiling face after another cascaded through his mind, the flower in his hand started to glow. The white petals turned gold, glimmering in his hands like a fallen star. But it didn't remain still for long. Like all the others, it gradually rose from his palms, climbing higher and higher into the sky.

One arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him in close against Vasily's body. With his other arm, Vasily drew Amaru back against them. Tears glistened on their faces as they remembered those they'd lost and cherished the good memories they had.

The heavy weight that had settled on Luka's chest as he recalled the lost dragons and mages flew up into the heavens with the flowers until they twinkled like stars against the velvety sky.

"We send the flowers to the heavens to tell our loved ones that we remember them and we look forward to joining them one day," Amaru whispered.

Luka leaned in and kissed away a tear as it slipped from the corner of Amaru's eye. "It's a lovely tradition. Thank you for sharing that with us."

Vasily kissed Amaru's temple and then pressed one to the corner of Luka's mouth. His own eyes were red-rimmed and watery.

As the last of the flowers disappeared from sight, Cameron and Alric moved to the far side of the stage but didn't step down. They were soon joined by King Roca Mayta and Queen Anawarkhi, as well as King Chalo and Queen Diya.

Rodrigo ascended the stairs last with Ha Na on his arm. Luka bit the inside of his mouth to hold in his chuckle. Their king always had a bit of swagger about him, but the man had become an absolute preening peacock since Ha Na had agreed to be his mate. Rodrigo walked to the center of the stage and pressed a gentlemanly kiss to Ha Na's hand before releasing it.

Rodrigo held both of his hands up in the air, instantly silencing the soft rumble of conversation that had started to fill the square.

“To the assembled dragons and mages, we the kings and queens of the Fire, Ice, Earth, and Metal Clans ask you to bear witness. Tonight we honor the ascension of our sister!” Rodrigo’s ringing voice was followed by a deep, breathy bark from every lightning dragon gathered in the square. It continued in a chant that built faster and faster.

Luka’s heart sped up as he watched everyone shuffle to the side of the square, clearing a long aisle leading straight up to the stage. He lifted on his toes and peered down the far end, trying to catch a peek of the new Tupã Dragon Queen.

Amaru wiggled against him and patted their arms. “Oh! This is going to be so cool! Watch! Watch!”

As Luka started to look again, a fierce roar split the heavens and his head jerked up to see a gold dragon streak across the sky, her huge wings glittering in the fading sunlight to create a dazzling display. The dragon circled the village while the clouds above her gathered and churned, blocking out the sky.

With a second roar, the dragon dove for the square at a heart-stopping angle. At the speed she was descending, there was no way she was going to pull up in time. Even as the panicked thought raced through his brain, a huge bolt of lightning struck, seeming to envelop the dragon and slam into the stone square. Luka pulled Amaru between him and Vasily while raising one hand to shield his eyes.

His vision cleared from the white flash and in the center of the square now stood a statuesque woman with black hair that rippled down her back. A dress of gold and black was draped over her figure, leaving her tattooed arms bare.

“See!” Amaru hissed. “The Tupã have always had such a flair for dramatics.”

Luka could not argue with that.

Head held high, Queen Maíra strode down the clear aisle to the chants of her clan. She paused only to hold out her hand to Panu. The blond mage shook his head, his face brightly flushed as if he was embarrassed by the attention, but the

queen refused to take another step until her mate placed his hand in hers and accompanied her to the stage.

“Poor Panu,” Vasily murmured. “He looks like he’s so in over his head.”

“True, but like all the other mated mages, he’ll figure out that his dragon is completely smitten. He’ll find his footing soon enough,” Luka replied.

Amaru tipped his head up and smirked. “Are you saying you’re both smitten with me?”

“Beyond smitten,” Luka admitted.

“All the smit,” Vasily agreed.

When Luka turned his attention back to the stage, it was to find Rodrigo standing in front of Maíra, holding a crown of woven gold strands that resembled bolts of lightning. Panu had stepped back, twisting his fingers together in front of him while a huge grin spread across his face.

“It is with great joy that we honor our sister dragon today,” Rodrigo stated, lifting his voice so he could be heard by everyone. “We have just met, but the words of your clan mates have reached our ears. They speak of Princess Maíra as a confident, wise, and compassionate leader. That is why we are so very happy to anoint you Queen Maíra, first of her name, and leader of the Tupã.” As he spoke those last words, he placed the crown on her bowed head. “Gone are the days of warring clans. Let us be enemies no more but join hands as family.”

The newly crowned Queen Maíra lifted her head and smiled at Rodrigo as she clasped his forearm. “From this day forward, we are family,” Maíra stated in a loud voice thick with emotion.

Cheers and clapping went up from everyone gathered as they watched the new queen go around the stage and greet each of the kings and their mates. Luka smiled as the queen was also quite adamant about introducing her mate to each and every one of them. Family or not, this woman was determined to stake her claim.

Not that Luka blamed her.

Nope. If it had been him, he would have done the exact same thing with Amaru.

With the ceremonies concluded, everyone worked quickly to set up tables and bring out seemingly endless platters of food. It was time for a feast to celebrate those who lived, the new queen, and new friends.

Amaru eagerly led them over to the buffet, loading up their plates with food common to his clan while marveling at the unique foods that had been brought in by the Valerii Clan. The night was filled with talking, dancing, a bit of drinking, and a lot of eating. Luka was sure he was going to need to let all of his pants out after this night.

But it was worth it to see the light in Amaru's eyes and hear his laughter echoing across the square. He was with his people again. Where he belonged.

The mage shuffled over to him and Vasily, his smile slightly lopsided from either alcohol or fatigue. He wasn't sure which.

Amaru extended one finger and booped the tip of Luka's nose. "You look serious. No being serious tonight."

Luka snagged Amaru's finger and pressed a kiss to the pad. "I was just thinking about how you belong here. With all your plans for expanding and improving the village, do you... do you think you'll want to stay?"

"What?" Amaru squawked like an affronted chicken. "Stay? Here?"

"Yeah. You're comfortable here. This is your clan and they need you. It's fine if you want to stay. We can move here with you," Vasily offered.

Amaru's crooked grin returned and he swayed slightly. "You're right. They do need me." He shook his head, which resulted in his entire body shaking before he flapped his hands at Vasily and Luka. "But that's why I'm making all these plans. So my clan will be taken care of when I move into the ice dragon home." Amaru sucked in a deep breath, blinked

suddenly huge eyes at them, and jutted out his bottom lip. “You do want me to return to the ice dragon house, right?” His voice was soft and slightly wavery, as if the mage was on the verge of tears.

“Holy fuck, yes!” Luka cried. He grabbed Amaru’s arm and pulled him forward until he collided with Luka’s chest. He hugged him tight while Vasily hugged them both. “We would love you to live with us at the Valerii compound. We just wanted you to know we’re happy to follow you anywhere you want to go.”

A soft, happy sigh escaped Amaru. “Cameron was right. Sad puppy face really is effective for handling dragon mates.”

Vasily shook with silent chuckles while Luka threw his head back and let out a bark of laughter. Amaru had fucking played them.

Life would never be dull with their mate.



Normally when Amaru went to fix someone's core, it was a straightforward affair. He had the patient, likely the patient's family hovering nearby, and maybe one person to assist him.

Healing Sam was not that. This was more like a festival all crammed into one room. Or maybe a theatrical production. If even one more person tried to squeeze in here, there wouldn't be enough oxygen to support life.

They were not in the Sousa village, for obvious reasons, but instead at the ice dragons' home. Which was very, very nice from all appearances. He had not been able to explore thoroughly yet, as he'd barely been here any time at all this morning. Amaru had been offered one of the workspaces that was hardly ever used, given about two hours to put all the essentials in there, and then he'd had Sam knocking at his door giving him sad eyes.

Turned out Amaru had absolutely no immunity to sad eyes.

So despite the fact he could have used another three weeks setting things up to his satisfaction, he chose to do a quick and dirty setup, then remembered he'd promised to show Sora and Cameron how to heal someone's core. He told them he was doing it, and of course Sam told Dimitri. How Evora, Ha Na, Alric, Ryu, and Gunter were invited, he left to the gods to answer.

In the corner, there was some kind of computer/camera/something else he couldn't identify set up. Cameron was busy behind it, clicking things and frowning.

Unable to take it, Amaru demanded, "What are you doing over there?"

“Recording this and broadcasting it to the other clan healers at the same time,” Cameron answered absently. “Everyone wants to see this in action.”

“I thought Gunter was going to do that?”

“I offered him a mouse.” Cameron shrugged. “I became the mouse instead.”

Ah. Sounded about right with this lot. Well, it wasn't Amaru's responsibility. Although he'd try to explain more since people were watching.

Sam looked nervous as hell as he stood next to the table. Amaru didn't understand why for a split second, then realized: Sam had spent decades hoping for this day. Now that it was here, he was likely racked with nerves.

Hmm, to be nice, or not to be nice? That was the question.

Dimitri was glaring at Amaru, silently daring him to do anything to rile Sam up more. Yeah, okay, he wasn't going to cross a dragon in protection mode. He chose life.

Erring on living, he put an arm around Sam's shoulders in reassurance. “Nothing to this, my friend. It won't even hurt. In fact, by this time tomorrow, you'll feel the best you've ever felt.”

Sam did seem somewhat reassured by this. “But you said you had to break a curse on me first. Won't that hurt?”

“Eh, curse is weak sauce, as Ravi would put it. I think it'll break without much force from me. Besides, breaking a curse rarely is felt as pain. It's usually felt like a release.”

“Oh.” Sam blew out a steady stream of air, the tension in him relaxing. “Yeah, okay. That does sound good.”

Since Sam probably felt like he was walking around with an ice pick shoved into his core, there was only one direction to go, in Amaru's mind. But the mage would see for himself in a minute.

“All right, take off your shirt and hop on up.”

Sam sucked in a breath, for courage or something, then shucked his shirt in one swift move. Dimitri actually lifted him up, stealing a kiss, which seemed to reassure Sam, as he gave a small smile.

“Ha Na, can you grab those pillows?” Amaru requested.

She promptly did so, sliding one under Sam’s head, the other under his knees.

To the camera, Amaru spoke, “Pillows are just for his comfort. He’s going to be here a good ten minutes, after all. No reason for him to be suffering silently. It’s a hard-ass table. All right, so as Sam’s already mentioned, the reason why the Jaeggi cores are such a mess is because of a curse. I assume someone in the Dragon Wars took revenge on the Jaeggi and cursed their bloodline. It’s why no healing potion, balm, or anything you’ve done has worked to heal their cores. The curse counteracted it. I will say, it’s sneaky as hell. It wrapped around the core like a poisonous vine. If you don’t know what you’re looking at, it would’ve resembled a massive crack or perhaps a broken core.”

Evora piped up from her station near the door. “But it didn’t look that way to you?”

“Eh, not really. I’ve spent the better part of two decades looking at magical cores. Besides, I had something of a heads-up.” Amaru turned to lift his tray of goodies as he explained from the other counter. “One, I was told Sam’s been trying to heal his core for years. That cued me up to this not being a normal core injury—”

“Wait, what’s a normal core injury?” Sora interjected. “For you, I mean.”

“Magical backlash, for the most part. Sometimes, rarely, a malformation of the core from childhood. That one’s usually because of malnutrition. The core is like any other organ, after all. If it doesn’t get the fuel it needs to grow right, it won’t.”

From the looks on Sora’s and Ryu’s faces, this was news to them. Huh. Maybe Amaru shouldn’t assume they knew things.

“We’ll talk more on that later. For now, let’s focus here. So, curse. Because it’s been so many generations since the original curse was cast, it’s much weaker than its original form. I think, given another ten generations or so, it would have broken entirely.”

“Ten generations,” Sam muttered with a wince. “Yikes.”

“Yeah, probably not great news for you. But in other, better news, I can heal you today. Now, for the audience on the other side of the screen, I am using caipora’s howl, iara’s song, and anhangá’s hair. If you don’t know what those are, caipora’s howl is a mystical element, malignant category, with a power of four. iara’s song is also mystical and malignant, with a power of four. Anhangá’s hair is mystical but benign, power level three. Combined with my power, the spell power level overall is a thirteen. Dangerously close to anti-spell territory, I know, but with curses like this you have to strike hard and fast to break them.”

Sora at least was writing notes furiously.

Cameron had more questions. “Why a benign element with the two malignant? To bind them together?”

“Yes, plus a balance. I don’t want to throw three malignant elements at an already damaged core. That just invites disaster.”

He nodded in understanding, likely agreement. “Just checking.”

“Now, another note for those listening. I honestly tried to find spell elements that could substitute for these, as the ice dragons had none of them in storage. But I couldn’t find anything with the same properties. If you have clan members who are in need of healing, just bring them here. Easier than breaking your brains trying to come up with substitutes.” As an afterthought, he tacked on, “And don’t try to mix these together until the very moment you need them. I had a colleague who tried creating the potions and storing them. By the next morning, he was short a storeroom.”

Most of the room winced.

“I’ve never heard of an explosive shelf life before,” Cameron muttered.

“Oh, there’s several elements I know of that do.” Amaru focused on his ingredients, pouring each carefully into a glass bowl. “The bowl has a containing ward around it, to keep the wind elements caged in. They’d fly free and cause havoc otherwise. Now, I’ve done this so many times I don’t measure anything anymore. But the portions are equally split between the three, precisely three notes of song, with a matching length of howl. Three hairs, too.”

He had his eyes on what his hands were doing even as he spoke. The hairs were caught up in a mini whirlwind inside the bowl, spinning wildly about before disintegrating. Amaru fed his magic into it, the warm feeling of power familiar and welcome as it left through his fingertips. He directed it to change form, into something more solid. It changed slowly, melding together into something like a paste. Ah, perfect. He hadn’t lost his touch. Even the color was right, an almost translucent white.

“Note to the viewers,” he added absently. “If it’s not this color and consistency, something’s gone wrong. Don’t use it. Banish it and try again. This looks perfect to me. All right, Sam, ready?”

Sam was back to looking nervous. Mostly around his eyes. Still, he gave a game nod. “I am.”

“Good. Dimitri, you can hold his hand if you’d like.”

Both of them seemed relieved at this suggestion. Dimitri promptly took Sam’s hand, and from the way the knuckles shone, Sam latched on with full force.

Amaru lifted off the ward over the bowl. “Now, you’ll note I’m not trying to touch this myself. Do not. As soon as it touches skin, it activates. Just lift the bowl like I’m doing now and pour it over the core area. Let it settle. It’ll usually puddle into a circular—ah, there it goes.”

The potion was indeed in a roughly circular shape over the core area, and the second it touched skin, it turned from white

to a much brighter glow. Almost painful to look at, in fact, that was how brightly it shone.

Amaru couldn't have done this better if he'd had a year to prep. He rocked back on his heels, smiling, and just waited. Any second now and—

With an audible crack, the potion split right in half, and an eerie, reddish-brown smoke hissed out. It dissipated into the air as fast as it was released.

“Potion will not only break the curse but will also purify it as it's removed from the host,” Amaru explained, eyes still on the proceedings. Just in case. “So no one watching is in danger; it's being purified as soon as it hits the air. Nasty looking thing. No wonder your core wouldn't heal, Sam, with that gunk in it.”

“Tell me about it,” Sam said faintly. His expression was of a man unnerved. “Ewww. I can't believe that was in me.”

“Looks like we're on the tail end of it now...” Amaru paused, eyes narrowed as he examined it better. He saw little traces of it still coming out, but it was definitely slowing down. “Yeah, we're not quite done yet.”

“How do you know when it is done?” Alric asked.

“You don't see anything else come out, for one. For another, the potion will lose its white color. It'll start adopting the color of the curse, whatever that is, and become inert. Notice how most of it is a reddish-brown now? That's why.”

“Ah. And when it is done?”

“Still don't touch it. Skin contact will transfer the curse to the next person. Best way is to use a banishing spell and nullify it altogether. Now, once this curse is fully removed—I give that another thirty seconds—the core will naturally spark to life. Cores are intuitive. They want to heal themselves. As long as nothing is hindering it, they'll do so. I won't need to do a blessed thing to your core, Sam, unless something else goes wrong.”

Sam's face scrunched up into an almost unreadable expression. “Really? I know you said that, but you still think

so after seeing this?”

“Yup. Trust me, your core is already fighting to heal itself. I can see the beginning stages of it.”

He'd never seen Sam happier than in that moment. And pure, naked relief was painted on his face. Then again, Amaru would feel the same in his shoes. A mage with a dragon who he was unable to do the bonding spell for? Yeah, Amaru would do everything in his power to fix his core to not leave his mates brokenhearted.

Sora had a diagnostic spell running, partially to make it more visible to everyone watching what was being done. Plus, and this was just Amaru's opinion, but he felt like Sora was a worrier. He probably felt better if he could track everything from start to finish.

The potion went fixed and inert, obviously done. Amaru banished it with nothing more than a, “*Klak gev adi!*”

It disappeared promptly, as it should, leaving not even a smudge of color behind.

Sora immediately lunged for his tablet and started writing notes like mad. Amaru had basically expected that response.

Sam sucked in a huge breath like a man who'd just found air. “I feel so much better already. Can I sit up?”

“Sure. Hard part's done.” Amaru offered him a hand and between him and Dimitri, levered Sam up to a sitting position. “Sit for a while longer, though, your equilibrium is probably off.”

Sam winced a little. “Yeah, it is. But in a good way. Like I'm just finding my balance again—holy shit!”

Dimitri went into full protection mode, hands on Sam like he was ready to whisk him away somewhere. “What, what?!”

“I can feel it.” Sam's eyes were wide with wonder. Nearly on the verge of tears. “I can feel magic moving through me. It's like this warm, molten surge. I...Amaru, is it really?”

He clapped his friend on the shoulder, grinning. “Yeah, your core is already healing.”

Sora muttered even as his hand flew across the screen. “Core fusing back together, magical flow stabilizing, it’s almost like watching a baby’s magical core coming in at ten times speed. How the hell...?”

“I told you, cores want to heal. Given a chance, they’ll do it on their own. I’d say by this time tomorrow, you can work magic just fine.”

Ryu spluttered, “*Tomorrow?!?*”

“Sure. I mean, if Sam wants to speed the matter up some, he can spend the rest of the day kissing Dimitri—”

Dimitri put a hand to his forehead like some wilting damsel. “I’m willing to sacrifice myself to the greater cause.”

His mate smacked him in the stomach with one hand, laughing.

“—but he’d be well by tomorrow even without the boost of dragon’s breath,” Amaru finished, deadpan. He had a feeling there would be no living with Sam and Dimitri for a while. Those two were already giddy.

“I thought the Abe Clan had done well preserving their medical knowledge,” Sora muttered, mostly to himself it seemed, “But *this...*”

“We didn’t know how to fix cores to begin with,” his father replied. His tone said he took his son’s point. “But agreed. Amaru, I’d like to stay and study with you for a while.”

“I accept all apprentices.” Amaru winked at him, getting a smile in return. “Come one, come all. Any clan who wants to send me people to learn how to do this, that’s probably the faster route. It’s not like I can travel the world and heal everyone. It’d take way too much time and I have my own clan here to rebuild.”

“Truly.”

Alric turned to Sora and requested, “We have already spoken about doing a student exchange for this very reason. Can I ask you to stay and learn on our behalf?”

“Even if you didn’t, Hoheit, I would stay.”

The king chuckled. “Fair enough. All right, that’s settled. What can we do to repay this learning, Amaru?”

“Uh, I’m doing this to repay *you* for getting my clan out of that insane sleep and rebuilding my clan,” Amaru said. These dragons, seriously, they were so hell-bent on protecting mages. All mages, apparently. “You’ve paid in advance. Cameron, not sure what else I can tell people listening.”

“How about location?” Cameron suggested. “And how long to stay?”

“Oh. Sure.” Amaru rattled off that information, then suggested for the other clans to bring samples of elements native to their area with them. Might as well broaden the knowledge base while they were at it.

As he talked, he kept one eye on Sam. He and Dimitri were canoodling without any care for their audience, the most blissful smile on Sam’s face as he laid his head on Dimitri’s chest. That expression alone was why Amaru loved his job. Bringing that kind of joy and peace to one who had nothing but anger and despair never got old.

He’d done well.



Life was hard when your mage mate was a rock star.

It took *hours* to pry Amaru loose from the all the mages asking questions about the elimination of the Jaeggi curse, cores, and other magical wonders known to the Sousa Clan.

They were excited for Sam and all the Jaeggi mages. Three more cores were healed that afternoon with Evora, Sora, and Ryu each taking a turn under Amaru's guidance. Knowledge was spreading. Lives were improving.

Yeah, happy day.

He wanted his fucking mate.

And he wasn't the only one.

Luka was leaning against the far wall, his arms folded over his chest as he grimaced darkly. The only thing he was missing was the storm cloud churning over his head.

“Okay! Okay! I think I need a break. We can heal a couple more mages this evening after dinner,” Amaru shouted in laughing tones.

Vasily took the hint and was already moving. He sliced through the crowd, scooped up Amaru, and tossed the giggling mage over his shoulder before making a break for the door. There were indignant shouts and more than a little mocking laughter, but he didn't care. Amaru was in his arms—sort of—and Luka had fallen into step beside him.

“Did you miss me?” Amaru snickered, though he wrapped his arms around Vasily's waist from behind and squeezed him.

“Missing you doesn’t begin to cover it,” Luka grumbled. “Since waking your clan, we’ve barely had a minute alone with you. We thought once we got you back to the clan house we’d have more time.”

“But then you needed to break the curse,” Vasily chimed in. “Now all the mages are trying to get their hands on you and what’s in that brilliant brain of yours. New mates need alone time.”

A low, happy hum rose from Amaru, and he squeezed Vasily a little tighter. “Alone time is very needed.”

They’d gotten several corridors away from the crowd. Vasily stopped and placed Amaru on his feet just outside their door. The mage had been in the clan house for less than a day, explored countless rooms, but they hadn’t taken him to *their* apartment yet. This was special. It was what they hoped would be Amaru’s coming home for the first time.

“What’s this?” Amaru asked as he looked around the long corridor decorated with bright art and vases filled with flowers.

“Home,” Luka murmured. He nodded toward the door in front of them and a nearly ear-shattering squeal erupted from Amaru a heartbeat before he lunged for the door, throwing it open.

With his heart in his throat, Vasily followed Amaru inside with Luka. The mage zipped from room to room, flopping on the sofa only to bounce to his feet a second later to turn on the TV and touch every gadget he saw. The mage might have drooled a little at Luka’s collection of world history, folklore, and mythology books.

“What’s this?” Amaru held up one of the gaming system controllers.

“That...is going to be a hell of a lot of fun.” Vasily chuckled. “It’s a controller for playing video games on the TV.” He had little doubt their techno geek was going to enjoy video games.

They continued on through the rooms until they reached an empty one. “We cleared this one out for you,” Vasily said as he stepped inside behind Amaru. “You’ll have your own workspace in the mages’ wing to work and experiment, but we thought you might want your own place to tinker with things while you’re relaxing at home.”

Amaru threw himself at Vasily and Luka, clutching them tightly. “You both understand me so well. This is amazing! And I promise that you can come in here anytime you want, and I won’t neglect my mates.”

Vasily lowered his face into Amaru’s hair, nuzzling him. “We just want you to be happy.”

The mage cackled and stepped free of them. “I was in heaven camping in a tent next to a lake with my two dragons. Living here with you is going to be double heaven with a side of chocolate.”

Luka nodded and took Amaru’s hand. “I can accept that.”

He led their mate to the bedroom, which required much bouncing and flopping to test out the worthiness of the mattress.

Amaru stuck two thumbs into the air. “You’re right. This bed is better than the hotel one. I am willing to test it with sex. In the name of science.”

“We appreciate your sacrifice,” Vasily drawled, winning a cheeky grin from both of his mates. “We also cleared space for you in the closet for your clothes.”

“Pfft,” Amaru scoffed from where he was still starfished across the entire bed. “You keep trying to get me out of Luka’s clothes. I’d wear yours too if I didn’t drown in them.”

“Yes, but we thought you’d want your own,” Luka said. “Besides, your section is between my clothes and Vasily’s. That way your clothes will smell like both of us.”

Amaru thrust one hand into the air. “That makes sense. Let’s go with that plan.”

Stretching out on the bed alongside Amaru, Vasily placed a hand on the mage's flat stomach. His dragon was purring. Both of his mates were in the nest and safe. He wanted nothing else in the world. "So, do you like your new home?"

"I do. I love it!" Amaru had barely finished speaking when he sat up, lines crisscrossing his brows as he looked around. "Wait a minute. This is the entire place?"

"Yeah. What's wrong?" Luka asked as he came to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"It can't be. You haven't shown me your hoards yet."

Vasily shared a smile with Luka as he rubbed his chin with one hand. "Actually, there's only one hoard now."

"Vasily and I combined our hoards about a century ago. Seemed silly after a while to keep them separate."

Amaru was practically vibrating out of his skin. "Can I see it? Please! We're mates now. You know you can show it to me. I'd never share it with anyone else. I'll always keep your secret."

"Of course." Luka laughed. As if they would even think about not showing their hoard to their mate. The idea was ridiculous.

Still smiling, Luka rose to his feet and walked over to a bare expanse of wall and lifted a hidden panel. He pressed his hand to the biometric reader and Amaru gasped when a doorway opened out of the wall.

"What?! You have a secret panel *and* a secret room!"

"Thought you'd appreciate that," Vasily said.

Amaru launched himself off the bed and zoomed into the hidden room. Vasily followed slowly, coming to stand behind Luka. He pressed a kiss to the back of Luka's neck and earned a happy sigh. This was their private space, hidden away from the rest of the world. They came here when the days felt too long or the worried looks of their clan grew too heavy. The odds had been stacked against them from the beginning, but this room had always reminded them they still had a chance.

The room itself was simple, with a large, comfortable L-shaped sofa and coffee table. There were some large pillows tossed about on the floor. Bookcases lined the walls, the dark wood shining under the warm glow of the recessed lighting.

The shelves were nearly filled with albums, picture frames holding weird items, and other keepsakes.

Amaru zipped from shelf to shelf, peering at the items, his frown growing deeper until he finally turned toward them. “I don’t understand. What are you hoarding?”

“Love letters and other tokens we’ve saved over the years,” Luka replied. “Those books hold all the letters we’ve written back and forth to each other.”

“And a few grocery lists,” Vasily added.

Luka rested his head against Vasily’s shoulder, tipping his face up toward him. “Only because you doodle the cutest hearts and dragons on the lists for me. I had to save them all.”

“There’s another album in there with all the ticket stubs we’ve saved from trips to the movies, theater, and concerts.”

“Except for this ticket.” Vasily released Luka and walked over to a shelf that held only a black frame with a large theater poster in the center. “This was our first date.”

It looked very old. Something that would have been seen in a different time, the paper now yellow with age. Obviously hand drawn, too. It looked like a woman and man in some kind of a loving pose with a rose offered to the woman. The date at the top was March 3, 1749.

“That was not our first date!” Luka marched over and wrapped his arms around Amaru. “He likes to think it was our first date, but it wasn’t.”

“It was,” Vasily persisted.

“You weren’t even planning to take me. You were going to take Ilya, but he broke his foot. I was your...what...second choice? Third choice?”

“That doesn’t matter. We went and it was the beginning for us. Everything started to change after that date.”

Luka hummed, a light smile teasing the corners of his lips. “Maybe.”

“I want to add to your hoard,” Amaru chirped.

“Of course.” Luka kissed his temple. “We can’t wait to start adding memories with you to our hoard.”

Amaru reached out and grabbed the front of Vasily’s T-shirt, pulling him in closer. “And I think the very first addition we make to the hoard for all three of us should be a sex tape.”

Vasily choked on air.

His brain stopped working and no longer knew what to do with air. It was still stuck on Amaru’s words.

“You want what?” Luka screeched.

“A sex tape. Nikki told me about it. You record us having sex the same way you recorded me breaking the curse today.”

Luka squeezed his eyes shut, his face turning bright red. “I know what a sex tape is,” he said, his voice strained. “But I’m thinking your time with Nikki should now be chaperoned.”

“I’m thinking I’ve seriously underestimated stuffy Gunter and his sense of adventure in bed,” Vasily muttered. “Not that I want to think about that.”

“Well, I guess we should add a recording of our bonding ceremony too.” Amaru paused and cocked his head to the side. “But I think we should do the sexy time thing first. As practice. In here. Surrounded by all your love.”

Vasily bent his head and captured Amaru’s sweet lips in a deep, tender kiss. “Our love,” he corrected. “I love you, Amaru, and I want to spend centuries worshipping you and taking care of you.” He lifted his head and kissed the man who’d been by his side for years. “And I love you, my dragon mate. My Luka. Our time together is still in its infancy.”

“We have so many years ahead of us. We are now complete.” Luka kissed Vasily again and then Amaru. “I love you both with everything that I am.”

“And I love my dragons! When I touched you both in my dreams, I knew I’d found my mates, but I never thought that I’d be this happy.”

Vasily straightened and shrugged one shoulder. “All right then. Let’s make a sex tape.”

Epilogue

The party was in full swing for the bonding ceremony. Gregori had honestly feared he'd never see the day Dimitri and Sam could bond with each other. He wasn't the only one in the clan, either. It was likely because of that the party was even more boisterous than usual. Relief lifted their spirits. The worst hadn't happened, Sam was fully healed and able to use magic, and he and Dimitri would now have centuries together instead of decades.

Plus, the trio was happily together. The entire clan had spent two hundred and fifty years worrying about Luka and Vasily and what would happen if they ever found their mage. To have all those worries proven to be nothing was a definite relief. Gregori felt like he had given Amaru good advice and a boot in the right direction, though he frankly could not wait for their bonding ceremony. He was going to give an absolutely wicked toast.

A happily ever after indeed.

Sam's family had flown down in force for the ceremony, of course. There were a lot of happy tears and hugs, with only some of it fueled by alcohol. (At least three people had spiked the wedding punch. Gregori knew that for a fact, as he'd watched them do it. No, he hadn't stopped them. Where was the fun in that?)

They'd gone for a beach wedding, and with the sun setting over the water, it was a truly beautiful sight. The blue of the water, the golds, purples, and oranges of the setting sun, all washed over the white-and-silver themed decorations. People were dancing on the beach, a few drunkards were singing in the old tongue, and the area was filled with lots of laughter and conversation. Gregori hadn't seen his clan this happy since

magicians started popping back up. It was a very, very good evening.

Normally, with a party this good, he'd kick back, drink, and enjoy. But something had caught his attention.

To be specific, someone.

Salem, Sam's twin, wasn't in the throng. He sat on the outside edge, on the grass, watching with a faint smile. The sunset washed over him, touching on that thick, dark brown hair, bathing his paler skin in warm tones. He looked downright edible, in fact.

Yeah. Gregori would love to get his hands on that.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? He took his beer with him as he sauntered over. Salem didn't twitch, just glanced in his direction before focusing again on whatever it was he looked at.

"Mind if I join you?" Gregori waved to a patch of grass near him.

"Feel free."

All right, good start. Gregori dropped into place, sitting close enough to feel the body heat off the man, but far enough away to not crowd him.

"Whatcha staring at?"

"My brother." Salem's faint smile grew. "When he first told us he was coming down here, my parents tried really hard to talk him out of it. I didn't think it was a good idea either, but I recognized there was no talking him out of it, so I didn't argue. Turns out, it was serendipity he did come down here alone. Who knew he was a dragon's mate?"

"No one. But I'm just as happy he did come."

"Happy, relieved, bemused. I'm all of that. Samuel's focus on fixing his core paid off, in the end." Salem shook his head before lifting his beer to his lips. "People have got to stop underestimating my brother. He's a smart man, he knows what he's doing."

“That he is. Any reason why you’re over here and not over there?”

Salem took another swig with a grimace. “Too much gushing. My parents are a little too thrilled Sam’s finally married. They’re positive he’ll be happy now. Also positive they’ll get grandkids soon.”

“Ah. Well, they might at that.” Gregori shrugged in ignorance. He had no idea what Dimitri and Sam had decided in terms of kids.

“Is that all you dragons think about? Mates and kids? You don’t have any fun?”

Oh-ho, look at that expression. Salem eyed him up and down with definite interest. Gregori felt his libido sit up and take notice. “I wouldn’t say that. It’s not like we’re celibate as we wait for our mates to show up.”

“I did hear that.” Salem was definitely interested, leaning in slightly toward Gregori. “Nikki said something about dragons being able to partially shift. And doing really fun things with their tongues.”

“It’s a skill we all develop.” Gregori leaned in as well, putting his mouth closer to Salem’s ear. “If you’d like a demonstration, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Oh, I’m definitely interested in a demonstration,” Salem purred back.

“How about we go inside?” Gregori offered. “Four walls, A/C, and lube await in my room.”

“Lead the way.”

Fuck yeah. The only thing that could make tonight even better was hot jungle sex, and it looked like Gregori was going to get lucky.

He tried not to look too eager as he stood up, offering Salem a hand. The mage took it with a smile that was filled with anticipation. His hand felt good in Gregori’s—a little too perfect, truth be told. Keeping on the outskirts of the party, he led the way inside. Gregori’s room was toward the middle of

the courtyard area, along the left side, and there was basically no one here except a drunk guest sleeping on one of the benches.

Gregori pushed his door open, setting his beer down on the console table near the door. Salem promptly did the same, kicking off his sandals, then he seized Gregori by the hips and pushed him back against the closed door.

Oh, so that's how it was going to be? Fine by him. He went easily, letting Salem lead. Salem was a few inches shorter, but not enough to deter either of them. He leaned in, snaring Gregori's mouth with his. The man's mouth was hot and tasted like beer and male, and Gregori was enamored immediately.

He kissed back, wanting more, hungry for every taste he could find. His hands found the hem of Salem's shirt, lifting it and finding warm skin underneath. Mm, lovely. That all felt amazing under his hand.

Salem broke the kiss enough to lift his shirt completely off, hands then reaching for Gregori's. Gregori cooperated, wanting more skin-on-skin contact. The second those were out of the way, tossed carelessly aside, he dove back into the kiss. He just could not get enough of this man's mouth. It was like a gateway drug.

He felt his breathing ramp up, his whole body flaring to life as his libido kicked in. This man was far too delicious under him, sweetly responsive and hot as fuck. He grabbed the waist of Salem's shorts and tugged at them, needing them off. Salem's hands found his as well, pulling at them roughly, off and down.

Gregori kicked both shorts and boxers aside, relieved when Salem did the same, then got his hands on a perfect ass. Mm, yes, so very sweet under his hands.

Salem groaned into his mouth. "Ass play is my weakness."

"Happy to oblige."

He walked Salem back toward the bed, tongue tangling with the other man's. Truly, he'd never kissed a sweeter mouth than this one.

Their breaths came harder, more like pants, skin heating up.

Salem pulled back, flushed, lips parted in a way that turned Gregori on even further. “Do you eat ass?”

“I’ll eat you out until you’re begging,” Gregori promised him. His dragon was strangely excited about this and threw in a deep rumble under the words.

“Promises, promises,” Salem murmured wickedly before falling back onto the bed without a care, spreading his legs in invitation. Stretched out like this on top of the covers, he was definitely a picture. Salem was a highly attractive man, leanly built, and from the tan lines on his shoulders and thighs, he spent a good portion of time outdoors. Those deep, ocean blue eyes were full of invitation as he looked up at Gregori.

Gregori was all too happy to take that invitation. He knelt at the edge of the bed, lifting both of Salem’s thighs up to rest on his shoulders. Salem was curious about how a dragon did rimming? Oh, he’d show him rimming.

He eased into it like a tease, tracing that puckered ring ever so slowly, just getting the taste of it on his tongue. Then he eased his tongue into it, a gentle fuck.

Salem’s thighs quivered in his hands, a garbled sound coming from his throat.

This one definitely liked ass play, all right. Gregori internally grinned even as he partially shifted his mouth, lengthening his tongue out several inches.

“Ahh, ah, *oh god*,” Salem said with a groan.

Seemed like he enjoyed it. Now, to really have fun.

Gregori doubled down, fucking his long tongue in and out, sometimes widening it, hearing the noises pouring out of Salem’s mouth, the man too gone to form words. His thighs kept tightening over Gregori’s shoulders, then relaxing, unable to stay still under the rimming.

Honestly, Gregori could do this all day. He loved every second of it. Feeling that tight channel loosen around his

tongue felt divine, too. The only thing better than this would be sliding in and fucking the man silly.

“Gre—” Salem gasped under a particularly strong thrust and had to try again. “Gregori—”

Gregori hummed, more like a thrum in his throat, which he knew would make his entire tongue vibrate.

Salem thrashed under it, nearly sobbing. Ooh, that was a fun reaction. Let’s do that again.

On the second foray, Salem did sob, nerves overloaded with pleasure. His hands scrambled for purchase in Gregori’s hair, pulling almost painfully.

“Pl—*please.*”

Impressive, he got a word out. Honestly, Gregori was at his limit as well. He needed in that tight ass. Now.

He lifted his head up, looking down the long, lean body in front of him. Salem was stiffly erect, leaking pre-cum. His whole body was dewed with sweat and flushed.

“Fuck me,” Salem ordered, or maybe pleaded. “I like it rough, just *fuck me.*”

“Oh, I’ll fuck you,” Gregori promised in a low rumble.

He levered up onto the mattress, knees on the edge. He wasn’t precisely gentle as he got his dick lined up with that sweet hole and pushed in.

Salem keened as his head thrashed on the pillow back and forth. He flexed around Gregori’s dick as he pushed inside.

“*Yesyesyesyesyes,*” Salem hissed.

He gave the man no pause. The second he was balls deep, he pulled back and thrust in again, forcefully enough to move Salem toward the headboard.

With a cry, the mage got a firm handle on Gregori’s shoulders, holding on for dear life as he was fucked over and over again, moving across the sheets with each thrust. Each little grunt and pant when Gregori thrust into that tight heat only drove him higher, made him want to impossibly fuck the

man harder. So good. This was just so damn good. He couldn't remember sex ever feeling like this.

Salem clenched around him, entire body latching on to Gregori, shaking as the man came hard all over both of them, a cry caught behind his teeth. As he came, his ass clenched down on Gregori's dick, squeezing in the most delicious way. Gregori groaned into the man's shoulder, his climax literally pulled out of him. His hips moved in micro-bursts, needing to move some as he pumped hot cum into the man.

They both dropped bonelessly to the mattress, breathing like they'd just finished a marathon. Gregori knew he should probably move, not crush Salem, but he couldn't find the energy or the willpower to do it. He was loath to move, and even more loath to separate. Which was strange for him. He liked cuddles after sex, but he wasn't normally this clingy, so why—

Mate, his dragon informed him.

Oh.

Shit.

Seriously?!

For a full second, Gregori.exe stopped working. Reboot required. Wait, even with a reboot, he couldn't quite wrap his head around it. Salem was his mate? He'd literally just had a one-night stand with his mate?

Well, no, it couldn't be that anymore. Salem was his mate, after all.

Delighted, he smiled and his dragon started purring in contentment. Finally, after centuries, they had their mate. Life couldn't get more perfect than this.

Salem shifted under him, sounding amused as he asked, "Do all you dragons purr like this after sex?"

"Uh." Caught flat-footed, Gregori mentally scrambled for a better answer than that. "Well, um, not always? I'm just particularly happy right now."

"Can you be happy and let me breathe?"

Oh, right, he was crushing the man. Gregori lifted up and gingerly pulled out, a hell of a lot more carefully than he'd pushed in, and caught the slight wince on Salem's face. He might have been too rough. Salem noticeably didn't complain, though, and settled right back into the mattress with a sated sigh.

Gregori rolled off the bed and into the en suite bathroom, dampened a hand towel, then came back to clean Salem up. The man complied with a sigh and a smile, apparently enjoying the attention.

"You're a considerate lover," Salem complimented, eyes closing as he relaxed utterly. "Whoever is your mate will be lucky to have you."

That seemed as good a segue as any. Gregori chucked the towel into the hamper in the corner, then sat next to Salem on the bed. "About that. You're my mate."

For a second, it looked like Salem had fallen asleep, that was how still he was. Then his eyes popped open and he jerked upright into a sitting position, staring at Gregori incredulously.

"I'm *what*?!"

"You're my mate." Okay, surprise was expected; it was fine. Humans always took a minute to wrap their heads around the idea.

Salem kept staring at him, like a man waiting for the last piece of the puzzle so the rest made sense. "You can't possibly know that already."

"Uh, actually, dragons usually know pretty quickly. It's mages that take some time to get used to it. I'm absolutely not rushing you," Gregori tacked on hastily. "I just thought I should tell you."

"If I'm your mate, that means I have to move down here to live with you, right? Like Samuel did."

"Well, generally speaking, that's how it would go. Yeah." Gregori tried to gauge Salem's expression. He did not look happy, which made a hollow pit open up in Gregori's stomach.

Salem abruptly rolled off the bed, feet hitting the floor with a thud. “No.”

Shit. Gregori’s hollow feeling turned into raw panic as he scrambled up as well, following Salem. “Salem, listen—”

“No. Okay? No.” Salem grabbed his clothes off the floor, jerking them on even as he argued. “I’m not turning my life upside down to move here, first of all. I have a nice house, a good career, a whole circle of family and friends up in the US. I have no desire to lose any of it. I can get dick from anywhere —”

“Ouch, that was hurtful.”

“You can find another mate somewhere else.”

“That’s not how this works.” Gregori felt at a loss for words. He’d never heard of a mate arguing like this before.

Salem turned in place to stab a finger against Gregori’s chest, expression fierce and determined. “There can’t be only one right person for someone. It’s not like we’re soulmates.”

“We are,” Gregori corrected gently. He didn’t want to alarm Salem any further, but he had to know the truth, too. “I am yours, as you are mine. Salem, I’m not asking you to give up your life or career on the spot. Just let me court you—”

“No. If I let you court me, then you’ll expect me to change.” Salem turned on his heel, stopping at the doorway only long enough to cram his feet back into his sandals. He threw a parting shot over his shoulder. “I’m not going to change my mind. I don’t want a dragon mate. Go find someone else.”

The door slammed behind him. Gregori winced and ran a hand through his hair. Well, shit. That didn’t go over well.

What did he do now?



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Dictionary

Chert – damn

Súka – shit, fuck

Yebena mat' – holy shit

Velichestvo – majesty

Zhizn' ebet meya – 'life is f*cking me'.

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Cam: *Cassie, that wasn't at all professional sounding.*

Cassie: *Pfft, who wants professional. We're mages. Not a PR firm.*

Cam: *Why did anyone agree to put you in charge of this?*

Cassie: *Because I know how to build a website. And I called dibs.*

Authors

AJ Sherwood

AJ's mind is the sort that refuses to let her write one project at a time. Or even just one book a year. She normally writes fantasy under a different pen name, but her aforementioned mind couldn't help but want to write in the LGBTQ+ genre. Fortunately, her editor is completely on board with this plan.

If you'd like to join her newsletter to be notified when books are released, and get behind-the-scenes information about upcoming books, you can join her [NEWSLETTER](#) here, or email her directly at sherwoodwrites@gmail.com and you'll be added to the mailing list. You'll also receive a free copy of her book *Fourth Point of Contact*! If you'd like to interact with AJ more directly, you can socialize with her on various sites and join her [Facebook group: AJ's Gentlemen!](#)

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Jocelynn Drake

New York Times Bestselling author Jocelynn Drake loves a good story, whether she is reading it or writing one of her own. Over the years, her stories have allowed her to explore space, talk to dragons, dodge bullets with assassins, hang with vampires, and fall in love again and again.

This former Kentucky girl has moved up, down, and across the U.S. with her husband. Recently, they've settled near the Rockies.

She has written roughly eighty novels spanning urban fantasy, romantic suspense, and paranormal romance. For a full listing of all her tales, check out JocelynnDrake.com

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