

## Winged Flame & Flowering Heart

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# Winged Flame & Flowering Heart

by [SpangleBangle](#)

## Summary

As the resident witch of a nameless town on the fringe between civilisation and the lawless dragonlands, Neil has made himself a nice little home. He is safely anonymous, and two mountain ranges away from the family who made his life hell. He has work, friends, even an occasional lover in one of the dragon-herders when he's in need of company. But his comfortable routine and home are all threatened with rumours of a danger to the dragon herds, something hurting and killing them without explanation. As a witch raised on his father's cruel breeding farm, he could be the only one to find the cause of it, and to treat it. But doing so may start a deadly chain-reaction to destroy all he has built, and all those he holds dear.

# Chapter 1

Wow, it's finally here - my piece for the 2018 big bang, and basically the only thing I've been working on for the past six months. A huge thank you to defractum for modding the event with such patience and excellence, and a magnificent round of applause to the artist syrren I was matched with, whose pieces of art are honestly phenomenal and I feel very privileged to have matched with them for this. [Check out syrren's art here!](#)

There was some inspiration taken from the HTTYD films and the Lady Trent Memoirs by Marie Brennan, as a slight disclaimer, but there is no crossover here or anything actually referencing them. I just really like dragons :D As another side note, I had no idea what to title this fic until literally last week, so it will always be 'dragon cowboys fic' in my head. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

There will be warnings listed at the start of each chapter as a heads-up. Warnings for ch1: semi-explicit sex, homophobic hate-speech, a labour and childbirth scene, mentions of scars and general canon backstory.

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When Neil woke to the sound of the innkeeper's cockerel crowing from the other side of the river, his first instinct was to look to the door. This wasn't such an unusual impulse perhaps, especially for someone who spent more than a decade constantly fleeing the scene of his own existence. But today the urge was not born of paranoia or itchy feet – but of the gentle nudging of finely-tuned prescience.

The charms he hung above his doorway stirred gently in the slight drafts from his windows; he had set them himself, in this house he had built over the course of a summer, and he hadn't known to account for the wood to shrink and warp in the wintertime, so now he had to suffer the occasional drafts and small bits of snow, if the blizzard was very determined. The charms were made of a common combination of things – his own hair, some herb stems, a few feathers from various birds, some intricately knotted bits of string and cloth, some twigs and buds from auspicious trees, a flower or two. But he had mixed in particular other ingredients in the swinging mobile, such as the rarity of a handful of dragon scales, each one worth more than anything else in his shop, each daubed with a finger-prick of blood from different people. Some had been given willingly, some unknowingly. Either way, the charms worked just fine.

He carefully watched the movements of the slowly-rotating charm fixed to his lintel, and smiled to himself when he saw the hazel-shimmer scale spinning independently of the others.

He got himself out of bed with a bounce in his step, and set about cleaning his little room more thoroughly than was his habit each morning. He knew he had some hours before his visitor would arrive, but he had a great many things to do until then, so he might as well start in this room.

First step was always to stoke the fire in the shop, so its cheery heat could work through the small cottage. He bathed in a bucketful of water he had drawn from the well the previous night, with a

soft bar of soap he had cooked himself. He made a note to make more soon, as this was his last bar of the batch. He finger-combed his shoulder-length hair to work out the worst tangles and set his comb near the hearth to remind himself to use it later. He threw on a fresh set of clothes, inhaling the sweet scent left from being stored in a cedar chest which had small bags of dried sage and rosemary tucked between its folds. He forced open the shutters of his windows, and swept the old rushes out the door, then replaced them with new ones from his storage cellar, springy and fresh-smelling, to cover the scrubbed wooden floors throughout the cottage.



The sun was just starting to rise by the time that was done, and he could hear his own chickens starting to cluck and the goats to stir outside. He paused for a quick bite of the last of his staling bread and a sweet apple from the woods on the other side of the town, then moved about his morning jobs. He fed the chickens and goats, collected eggs from the roost and settled them carefully in a basket padded with grass. He milked the nanny goat and checked the progress of the



cheese he'd been making in his cellar, and tucked four rounds into the egg basket with a quick smile of satisfaction. He moved through his one-storey cottage, tidying his private back rooms and checking inventory of the supplies in his brick-lined, chilled cellar. He left a small offering of dried meat behind his house, for the local foxes in exchange for their ignoring of his chickens. He combed his drying hair into something a bit neater than usual and tied it out of his eyes. He dusted and swept the front room of his house, which doubled as his shop, and neatened a few teetering piles of herbs.

The routine was as familiar as his own breath, after nearly five years of it. He creaked and settled in it, like his house in cold weather, comfortable and worn. His hands knew what to do, and he moved about with a rhythm inexorable as sunrise and set. After so many years, the routine no longer frightened him the way it had done at first – to be predictable, to be complacent, to be settled.

He was hundreds of leagues and two mountain ranges away from the people who had chased him, and safer in this tiny frontier town on the border of the dragonlands than he had ever been. The lowland 'civilised' folk in their grand cities might call the frontier a lawless and godless place, where any urchin would skin you as soon as look at you, but to Neil it had become his home. He had made a place for himself here, comfortable in obscurity, an invisible requisite of the place, and he relished it.

He gathered up his basket, slung a rough-spun sack over his back, and held a carrying pole with two empty buckets in his free hand. And, in the slowly brightening morning, made his way to the top of the hill and over it to the small settlement tucked away there. The low cottages and shopfronts were waking too; the day began before the sun for most here. He saw some young women gathered about the communal well, gossiping and yawning behind their hands as they waited their turn in line. He exchanged a polite nod with them, ignoring a few of their titters and blushes at seeing him. He made his way to the inn first and let himself in without knocking.

The inn was a grand old building, Neil always thought. It was possibly the oldest one in this nameless town, its wooden beams smoke-painted and glossy from generations of polishing. The stools at the bar were always mismatched and too-new to his eyes, due to the occasional breakages from rowdy nights, or mendings with whatever wood was handy without a thought for its grain or colour. The taproom was the main room of the place, dominated by a low bar which hid its various bottles and mixtures. There was a kitchen stashed in the back, and a small number of cramped guest rooms for those with enough coin.

"Roland," Neil called out into the empty taproom, setting down his load on the bar. His voice was thready from disuse and he coughed and hummed to restore it. He could hear the innkeeper moving about somewhere in his stores, but didn't want to intrude or throw off the count if he was taking stock.

"Just a moment," Roland called from some hidden little room, and Neil leaned against the polished bar to wait. He rubbed his fingers over the smooth, shiny wood, tracing whorls and the occasional nick or dent that hadn't been ground down yet. Roland always took great pride in this place, taking time each night and early morning to clean ale and food spills and to work sweet, pricey beeswax into the well-loved wood to make it shine and shimmer like a fine mirror. Neil peered at his reflection in the glossy wood and absently tucked some hair behind his ears, tidying himself like he tidied his house each morning.

"Neil," Roland greeted him warmly once he was done, dusting off his hands with a wide smile. "Isn't this a surprise?"

Neil smiled back, his eyes darting out of habit over the strong barrel of Roland's chest and the breadth of his arms and shoulders; very handy for ending brawls or kicking out drunks if needed. But it had been a long time since Neil had been afraid of the strength in the innkeeper's frame.

"I have eggs and cheese for you."

"Always business," Roland sighed, though he smiled.

He joined Neil at the bar to inspect his basket, humming in pleasure at the fragrance of the soft, sweet cheese when Neil nicked the wax covering to show it to him. They worked out a fair trade – a mixture of coins, and a bottle of strong liquor that Neil intended to repurpose for some of his work, rather than for drinking. They shook on it, and Neil tucked the coins into the purse on his belt and the liquor into his carrysack.

"Are we expecting visitors today?" Roland asked, eyeing Neil's neatened appearance and leaning on his elbows on the bar.

"This afternoon," Neil nodded. "I believe so."

"I'll get a room ready," Roland nodded, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I suppose you'll be off on your way?"

It was a casual question, hiding another. Sometimes, once they had finished their business, Neil would let Roland lift him on that well-loved bar and kiss him, hold him close and soothe him with his hands, and do the same in return. It rarely progressed to anything under their clothes, and they both preferred it that way. One thing most people got right about the frontier was that it could be a lonely place, and those who made their living there tended to have a more relaxed attitude about some things city folk would think scandalous, heretical or sinful. And for a man inclined towards other men, like Roland, the frontier could be the only place he could live a life like his – owning his business, respected in his community, valued and known in all honesty. It might be easier for him to find lovers here, but it was still a small community, not much changed each day, and Roland had yet to find someone to settle down with.

As for Neil – he enjoyed being touched by those he trusted, enjoyed the companionship and comfort of sharing body warmth, after living so long on his own. The fact he found this more easily with men than women was of little interest to him, and had ceased to cause him any consternation some years ago. Neither of them were under any illusions as to other partners they might have; it was more of a fact of life out here. They were well pleased with sharing the occasional kiss and comforting touch, and going their separate ways.

"Yes, I have more things to buy today," Neil said, a gentle decline. With the visitor coming later, he was quietly hopeful to find warmth and touch elsewhere that day. Roland smiled in understanding and fondly tucked another stray curl out of Neil's eyes.

"Journey well," he said in good-bye, and raised a hand as Neil left his inn.

Neil went about his business in his usual fashion, on the occasional days he wandered into the heart of the settlement. He visited the baker, the butcher, and the run-down little milliner's place to pick up more fabric and ribbons and string for his work. He methodically exchanged most of his purse of coins for weight in his carrysack, picking up all sorts of odds and ends he needed, or wanted, or food for his stores. And when that was done, he joined the line at the well and drew up two full

buckets. He set the yoke carefully over his shoulders, and walked back over the hill to his little house on the edge of everything.

He spent his morning at his usual work – mostly, sitting in front of his hearth and sorting through the many, many boxes and bottles and jars of herbs and plants and some other more unusual ingredients, and making them up into things worth far more than the sum of their parts. He laid in a new batch of medicines and poultice-bags, to be taken to the physicker on his next trip. He made hangover cures and fertility aids and a salve to help scars fade and hair to regrow. He made charms against fire, pendants to protect from conception, inscribed careful runes of soot and blood on wave-worn stones to ward away thieves.

He refused to make the ‘love potion’ requested by one enterprising young maid at his door, and sadly accepted the return of a charm for good health he had made for a recent mother, even more recently bereft. He made up teas and tinctures, bundled up feathers and wildflowers and sparrow bones to be used for scrying, etched wishes for a strong crop and fair spring on wooden posts to be hammered around a local farmer’s land. He accepted the trade of a box of misshapen horseshoes (but still, good iron and better for omen-casting) from the farrier for the rest of his cheese. He traded a decorative necklace of dragon teeth for a heavy purse of coins and a rare jewel from some noble’s missive, sent on a weary journey to the hinterlands for treasures to adorn his master’s mansion. He sat and listened to the chickens cluck, and watched the clouds twirl overhead.

And all the while, the hazel dragon scale spun and spun on its cord, all independent of any breeze.

He had been busying himself in his small garden, encouraging the weeds as much as the herbs and plants, when a prickle at the back of his neck told him his visitor was near, at last. He uprooted an onion that was getting too wild, smoothed the soil tenderly back around a thistle bush, and got to his feet. He could see a figure in the distance, heading down from the road that travelled up to the dragonlands and eventually petered out somewhere in the wilderness for lack of paving or care for its maintenance. The figure was short but broad-chested, dressed in strange leathers and worked hide. From such a distance Neil couldn’t see the man’s face, but he didn’t need to. The man was on foot, leading two packhorses that plodded docilely behind him.

Neil dropped the unruly onion next to his mortar bowl and quickly washed his hands clean of soil and the occasional bits of petals and leaves that tended to stick to his skin, as if pulled there. Then he stood outside his door, leaning in the frame, to watch his visitor approach.

The man did not hurry or rush, did not acknowledge Neil waiting for him, did not raise a hand or his voice in greeting. He simply kept his steady, rolling pace; the gait of a man used to living in the saddle, but who relishes stretching his legs when he can. As he drew closer, Neil could see the wintry sun sparkling off water droplets in his wheat-sheaf hair; he must have bathed in the river. The thought made Neil smile. He could have detoured to Roland’s inn, dropped off his things, ordered a bath and a meal before coming to Neil’s little cottage. But every time, he came to Neil first.

The horses didn’t seem overburdened, but both bore bulging saddlebags. That seemed fortuitous, but Neil couldn’t concentrate on what new treasures his visitor might have to sell him, when he was close enough now that Neil could see the dark hazel glint of his eyes in the tanned skin of his face, and the golden-brown beard on his cheeks.





The man stopped the horses in front of Neil's door, and for a moment they just looked at each other in greeting.

“One day I’m going to sneak up on you,” the man said, his voice rusty as an old metal gate, aching to be unlatched.

Neil grinned at him. “Not a chance. Hand me your packs and let your horses out with the goats, it’s still too close to winter for a lengthy discussion on the front step.”

The visitor obliged, and Neil thoughtfully considered the weight of the packs as he set them inside his house. He didn’t bat an eye at the sword and brace of knives handed in to him, simply leaned them against the wall.

“Come on in,” Neil said softly when the man returned without his horses. “Sit down, sit down. Tell me your stories.”

Once the man stepped inside, his dragon-scale charm rang out a note, clear as a bell, and stilled once more.

“It’s good to see you, Andrew,” Neil smiled as he started setting tea leaves into a kettle hanging over the hearth, and got out some bread and the very last of the soft cheese he had hoarded for himself.

Andrew was quiet, as usual, and sat down in the visitor’s chair on the other side of the hearth. He took off his boots at Neil’s gesture and leaned back in the chair, stretching with a tight grimace. He took off his outer jerkin of burn-scarred hide, revealing a loose undyed cotton shirt tucked into his trousers. He hadn’t bothered with the lacings, Neil noted, probably had just shrugged it on after bathing. The loose neck of it gaped down over his chest as he settled, and Neil’s eyes caught on a patch of reddened skin under his collarbone.

“How recent is that?” Neil frowned, his fingers straying towards his jars and mixtures.

“Two weeks old,” Andrew rasped, and tugged his shirt back into place. “It’s mostly healed.”

“I could get it to heal faster.”

Andrew waved a hand dismissively. Neil sighed but set down the jar of herb-spelled wax he used to treat burns. He sat in his own chair and took a minute to simply look at his visitor, cataloguing changes and familiarities. He looked tired, but that was normal for his visits. His skin was weathered from the sun and harsh winds of the dragonlands, but his gaze was as steady and calm as the mountains, as always. He seemed to have picked up a few new scars and injuries; aside from the burn on his chest, he had an old bandage wrapped around his left fingers in a rough splint. That one, at least, he let Neil look at.

Neil joined his silence as he unwrapped the fingers and assessed the swelling and bruising. It was simple enough, perhaps a fracture and a sprained knuckle or two. Andrew quietly told him he’d gotten his hand tangled in his reins when his horse took fright to a snake a few days previous. Neil told him to pay more attention to what was on the ground than in the sky. Neil fixed up a better splint and worked a poultice into a fresh bandage for him, grinding the herbs directly and charming them with his breath. He tied the bandage with a ribbon from his stores and a strand of his own hair, and knotted it five times.

Andrew nodded his thanks once Neil was done, chewing slowly on the bread Neil had set out for them. Neil poured them tea, settled in his chair, and waited. Sure enough, once he was settled and

used to being inside a dwelling again – Neil had seen him looking around the room, blinking as if in surprise at the walls and lack of wind – he began to talk.

Dragon wrangling, by profession, tended to attract solitary, quiet types. It involved a great deal of lonely work out in the wilds of the world, accompanied only by feral beasts and the occasional horse. Many people, like Andrew, had sought the profession after growing tired of the demands other people placed on them in more civilised places. They took to the wilderness gladly – dragon-herders, gold hunters, trappers, cattle drivers, sappers and hermits all. They ventured out to be away from others, and the land swallowed them up without a word. But very few people could honestly last out there for a long time without talking to another person. There came a point for everyone, no matter how withdrawn, where they would need to see other people again, to talk and listen and touch, and that was when they came down to the frontier to refresh themselves at the towns like this one.

Andrew was one of the quietest of the several dragon-herders Neil did business with, but even he was not immune to the need for company every now and then. When he had first come to Neil's unsteady shack, drawn by rumours of a new witch in the area willing to trade rarities and foodstuffs, he had bargained only in grunts and frowns for at least two hours. But his mouth had eventually unglued itself, and the words had come flooding out in a mighty rush.

Neil privately thought of it as 'tree-talk' – the kind of babble that spilled out of you whether another soul was there or not, and could not be stopped once started. It didn't really matter if the company was a tree or a rabbit or a person, there came a point where you simply *had* to let your thoughts into the air and shatter the titanic silence. Words that demanded to be born into the air. Neil was more than familiar with it, from his years running. He had cried out his sorrows and his grief to many an unsympathetic tree in his time. So he had not been alarmed when Andrew had first begun talking and talking and talking about the rock formations he had seen, and the acrobatics of the dragons he followed. He had just sat and listened with grave attention, soaking up and treasuring the words from an enforced barren silence of his own, until the flood slowed to a trickle, and then dried up completely. Andrew had been surprised at himself, Neil had known, and seemed unlikely to return once he left, perhaps embarrassed at his own behaviour to a stranger in a rickety lean-to without even a proper chimney.

But some months later, when Andrew had travelled down again to resupply and rest, it had happened again. And then the next time. And eventually they had both come to expect it, and Neil always looked forward to the newest flood of stories and thoughts that Andrew carried with him.

So now he poured tea, cut bread, and listened as Andrew unburdened himself of several months' worth of thoughts and sights and stories. He listened to stories of the herd dynamics of the dragons in Andrew's territories, the progress of the fledges in flight, the way one of them had nearly set the whole grass plain on fire before its mother had stamped out the blaze. He listened to stories of clouds, streams and the silences of mountains. He listened to rambling thoughts and wonderings about stars and owls, whether people could ever live in flocks like the dragons did. He listened as Andrew described a hatchling he had found dead, abandoned in a crushed nest but with a flower laid in the centre of the destruction by a grieving dragon-sire. He listened to memories from growing up in a lowlander orphanage, and begging on the streets. He listened to descriptions of the strange plants Andrew had found in his roaming, and carefully set aside the samples Andrew produced from his bags. He listened, and listened, and listened. And as the words began to slow again, ebbing back, Andrew's voice grown strong and deep from use and then hoarse from over-use, he changed the contents of the kettle.







Andrew raised an eyebrow at him enquiringly as he cleaned out the kettle and laid a new tea mixture inside. In reply, Neil washed out both their mugs instead of just Andrew's, and sat back down. He did not miss the flare of warm interest in Andrew's eyes at the gesture, and smiled to himself.

He had first started giving Andrew wildflower tea on his third visit, when Andrew had been rambling about wanting company of a very specific kind, and how lonely it could be in the wilds. Neil had calmly informed him that several men in the town could be applied to for companionship, and that it would be best to drink the tea before and after his visit, if he wanted to stay healthy and secure. Neil was no child, he knew that one of the main reasons the wildfolk came down to the frontier was for physical comfort and pleasure. He was very aware of the potential for disease to spread through such visits, and had been concerned that those settled in the town might sicken beyond his ability to help them, particularly the men and women who worked out of the brothel at the south end of town. So he had thought and studied and consulted with what physicker's books he had stolen from various places, and come up with the wildflower tea. It was a clever mixture of herblore and witchcraft, and Neil was very pleased with it. Drinking it would cleanse and purify the body of any illnesses lurking out of sight, and the magic would protect the drinker against anything the herbs could not stave off for several hours, until the tea passed out of their system.

He didn't go around announcing its existence or selling it by the pound, but had quietly made it known to those who seemed to need it. And to Andrew, so he would be safe and keep coming back with more stories to astonish and brighten his quiet days.

It had been nearly a year of Andrew's visits before Neil started to join him in drinking it, on occasion.

"What's in the packs?" Neil asked as he poured the wildflower tea, making sure it was good and strong. "Anything exciting?"

"Dragons are always exciting," Andrew reminded him as he did each time. "I have shed scales, old teeth, some claws, egg shards. A poison spur and a set of bull's horns. No meat this time – it was a lean winter, I couldn't get to any of the carcasses fast enough to beat the scavengers. A roll of hide I cured myself. Some sheep's wool. I also have some deer antlers and moose bones, and some rare plants and rocks."

Neil beamed and sipped at his tea; it was tart and sweet on his tongue, and he could feel the familiar touch of his own magic start to pulse through him, cleansing and protecting. His fingertips and cheeks started to feel warm and flushed, and he relaxed into the feeling.

"I can trade for almost all of that, and I know some people in town who would take the rest."

"Do you have my share from the last haul?"

"Of course," Neil replied. He wasn't offended by Andrew asking, or the implication that Neil might have cheated him by keeping all the profits for himself. He knew Andrew simply wished to make sure, tying up loose ends from his last visit before they made the next trade. "Do you want it now?"

Andrew considered him, draining his cup. "It can wait," he conceded, and set the cup down with a quiet clink on the wood of the table between them.

Neil lowered his eyes and finished his own cup, making sure they had both drunk all of it. He pushed the kettle back onto the hearth to keep the tea warm for afterwards. He glanced out the

window and saw with some satisfaction that it was getting towards evening, the sun flirting with the horizon to the west. Barring any emergencies, no one should disturb them until the next morning.

Without any further ceremony, Neil got up and walked to his bedroom, reaching up to touch the charm hanging from the lintel as he passed. He heard Andrew's quiet, sure steps behind him, and the door latch closing. Neil tugged at the tie holding his hair out of his face and ran a hand through it to work out the kinks, then stilled when he felt Andrew's hand there too. He turned back to his visitor and smiled as Andrew pushed both hands through his hair, careful of tangles, seeming to admire it in the light of the setting sun.

Neil lifted a hand to the loose lacings of Andrew's shirt, and slipped his palm over the warm skin it exposed. He was careful around the edges of the healing burn. He knew Andrew would be hesitant to initiate, even after several years of doing this, so Neil leaned down to press his mouth to the curve of Andrew's neck, just over his pulse.

Andrew sucked in a sharp breath, and Neil felt his pulse instantly jump and set to racing. He mouthed at the skin, sucking and pressing his tongue there, until Andrew's hands left his hair to hold his hips instead. They stumbled into the wall and Andrew pressed him there, staring into his eyes for just a second before kissing him with an urgent fire.

Neil sighed into his mouth and kissed back just as eagerly, hungry for touch and pleasure after many months without Andrew's company. Andrew's hands pressed at him, holding him between the wall and his body and exploring the contours of Neil's body, despite having touched him many times before. Neil shuddered and arched into his touch, holding onto Andrew's shirt and wishing for it to be gone. Hands grabbed at his backside and pulled at his thigh, and Neil easily let his leg be lifted and hitched over Andrew's hip. Andrew pressed closer with a heady roll of his hips, and Neil moaned at the hot jolt of desire that surged through him.

"Here?" Andrew asked against his jaw, sounding vaguely surprised and more than a little wanting.

In answer, Neil held onto Andrew's wide shoulders for balance and drew himself up with a hop until his legs were locked around Andrew's waist. Out of reflex, Andrew grabbed at his thighs to hold him up and keep him from falling.

"Here," Neil said firmly. "Now."

"Demanding," Andrew said hoarsely, but obliged with another long roll of his hips, pinning Neil into the wall and pressing up against him.

It was harsh and clumsy and rough, bumping up against the wall, but Neil relished every moment of it, in being held up and surrounded by the heat of Andrew's body, his bulging arms and thick waist. Neil managed to yank on the lacings of both their trousers enough to take them both in hand as they rocked and ground hard against each other, desperate and needy. It was also very fast, so much that they were both rather stunned even as they gasped for breath.

Neil laughed once he had collected himself a bit. "You didn't find anyone else since last time?"

"No," Andrew panted.

Neil grinned and kissed him vaguely; sex always made him feel giddy and stupid afterwards, like he'd held his breath too long underwater before surfacing.



“No matter,” Neil said, and relaxed his legs to drop back to the floor. He plucked at Andrew’s shirt and wobbled back towards the bed, sitting down to rest his shaky legs. “Want to try again?”

“Give me a moment,” Andrew muttered, but joined him there anyway.

The next time, they took their time a bit more carefully, and were left worn out and panting in the aftermath. Neil lay on his stomach, his cheek pressed into his pillow, breathing slowly as cool evening air caressed the bare skin of his legs and back. He was feeling a little dizzy this time, but it was rather pleasant. Part of it was his magic; it always went a little haywire after sex, and he’d already given Andrew an accidental spark as he came. Andrew hadn’t been bothered – he spent his time around fire-breathing dragons, he’d had much worse – but Neil wanted to ground himself before anything else leapt out of his skin. And part of it was the relief and satisfaction, like he had stretched a muscle that had been tight without him knowing it. He knew he did not regard these things the way many other people did, did not need or crave it, but he enjoyed this with Andrew and occasionally with Roland, enjoyed the silly rush and bone-deep pleasure if he trusted the other person to handle him with care. He’d tried with people he didn’t know well, real strangers, and had just been uncomfortable and unhappy. But he and Andrew had been at this arrangement for some years now. It was familiar, comforting, and easy between them.

“Are you alright?” Andrew asked, his hand lightly massaging into Neil’s hip, solicitous as he tended to be these days.

“Yes,” Neil sighed contentedly. “I enjoyed that.”

Andrew hummed quiet agreement, his hand still squeezing and rubbing. He didn’t usually linger in his touches like this, but Neil had no objections. It was very pleasant to lie there, feeling tired and gently aching and wrung out, with a warm hand easing the stretch of his hip.

He opened his eyes to stop himself dozing off and watched Andrew. He was staring off into the middle distance, frowning slightly, even as he massaged Neil’s hip. He was bare as well, though his trousers were tangled a bit around his calves. The dusk light was gentle on his fair hair and the lighter skin of his torso that saw less sun. He was sat beside Neil, his neck marked with strawberry bruises from Neil’s kisses, and Neil traced his eyes over the evidence of dragon-chasing. He was strong, though Neil had always known that. He was built wide and sturdy for all his short height, and the years had made him firm with muscle – and the occasional need to physically brawl with dragon yearlings, Neil supposed. He had not lived a life unmarked; claw scars and old burns dotted him, mostly on his arms and shoulders, mostly minor, when the protection of his dragon-leathers had been insufficient or he had been caught unprepared.

There was one memorable set of three long scars over his chest and shoulder, where a bull dragon had lashed out. Neil had nearly lost his faculties when Andrew had turned up in the dead of night for that injury, slumped and bleeding over the neck of his exhausted horse, delirious with pain and the poison of the bull’s spurs. Neil had taken him in and fixed him up, but none of his arts or knowledge could erase the livid scars or fade them.

Andrew’s body was as familiar as his own by now, and Neil no longer cared about exposing his own scars when they lay like this. Andrew had asked once where they had all come from. Neil had said he didn’t want to answer, and Andrew had left it alone after that which Neil greatly appreciated.

Neil turned on his side and reached up to touch the crease between Andrew’s brows. Andrew blinked, startled out of his thoughts, and looked down to Neil.

“What are you thinking?”

“That I should be gone soon.”

Neil felt a frown on his own face. “But you just arrived, and you’re tired. You need to rest. Roland said he would have a room for you.”

“I didn’t mean right this minute,” Andrew replied, getting a little distracted as his eyes wandered over Neil’s naked form. “But I won’t be staying in town for as long as usual. I have a long way to go still.”

Neil sat up properly, drawing the blanket around his shoulders to ward off the chilly night air, though he would have liked to have Andrew look at him some more. “Where to? New territories?”

Andrew shook his head. “I have to fetch someone from Kingstown and show him the dragons. I need his help.”

Neil didn’t ask, just kept his eyes on Andrew’s face. He took careful note of the slight creases in his forehead and cheeks, the puffiness under his eyes. Neil had passed it off as exhaustion from a demanding and lonely profession, but now he wondered if they were from worry and sleeplessness instead.

“I think something is hurting the dragons,” Andrew said slowly, reluctant. “I don’t know what. But something is wrong, and I can’t get the others to believe me. I need an unbiased opinion.”

By ‘others’ Neil knew he meant the loose community of dragon-herders out there; they all tended to know each other, even if they didn’t socialise much. That Andrew had apparently been seeking them out to speak his mind instead of avoiding them was almost more worrying than the idea the dragons might be vulnerable to something.

“Is this person an expert of some kind?”

Andrew snorted. “Hardly. But he’s discreet, and I trust him to think properly about what he sees. If something *is* hurting the flocks, I don’t want to cause a panic.”

Neil nodded thoughtfully. Dragons were held to be nigh-indestructible, it was partly why many armies liked to have a dragon unit if they could afford it, and many nobles to own them for prestige and protection. If there was some kind of disease going through the seed herds that produced the yearlings for training, there could be unrest across the continent. Neil knew of many places where the only thing keeping peace between nations was the threat of trained dragons on either side torching everything in sight at the slightest transgression.

He got up and poured them both the last of the wildflower tea, now brewed almost strong enough to chew and turning bitter, but all the more potent for it. They sat together on Neil’s rumpled, body-warmed bed, thinking dire thoughts of dying dragons.

“When do you leave?” Neil asked quietly once their cups were empty.

Andrew hesitated, his frown deepening. He trailed his hand over Neil’s thigh, fingers light and gentle. “The day after tomorrow.”

Neil nodded. "I'll see what I can do for a quick sell of most of your haul. It won't be as good a price as if I wait for the spring caravan traders, but you'd have more coin on leaving, to get you to Kingstown and back."

"I'd appreciate that."

"The rest I'll use for cures," Neil mused. "The very best stuff really should be kept for the caravan – there's a buyer in the lake country who would pay a lot for the egg shards and poison spurs, and she always sends a messenger with the caravans to look for those kinds of things. No one up here would pay a fraction of what those are worth."

"Do what you think's best," Andrew said. "Just keep my share of the profit aside."

"Of course. Do you think you'll come back through here once you've fetched this man?"

"I don't know. It might be faster to go direct to the breeding grounds, but we might be short on supplies."

"Well." Neil pointed to the charm above his doorway. "I'll know either way."

Andrew snorted again, his eyes tracking the aimless wafting of the feathers and scales suspended there.

"I could make you some charms and protections before you go," Neil offered. "To speed your way and keep you safe."

"No."

Neil tilted his head; after a brief period of scepticism, Andrew had grown to trust and rely on Neil's skills, he knew so. Normally he went back to the dragonlands with at least a handful of fresh charms for good health tucked into his packs. He had even given Neil that dragon scale specifically to put in that charm, so Neil would know when he was nearby or in trouble. And so that if Neil ever needed help, he could snap the scale and Andrew would know. He had said he would come running, if that happened.

Andrew grimaced. "The man I'm looking for is very... close-minded. It'll be hard enough to convince him to join me without seeming like a superstitious pagan."

"But you *are* a superstitious pagan," Neil said, smiling a bit. "And a heretic and sodomiser too."

"And you're a soulless, black-hearted sorcerer in league with devils."

Neil just laughed and leaned into his shoulder. "Alright, no charms. Lowlanders are morons. You'll forgive me if I make a few just to keep here, though."

"If you want."

"Can I have some hair?"

Andrew raised an eyebrow at him for that; he was familiar enough with Neil's witchery by now to know that hair was one of the cardinal offerings, and would make a very powerful charm. But he didn't ask what for, just nodded and held still as Neil snipped off a lock and gathered it carefully into a small cloth bag for use later. He swallowed a yawn, not very successfully.

Neil examined his face again and passed his fingertips lightly over Andrew's brows. "Go to the inn, Andrew," he said. "Get some sleep. Come back tomorrow night and I'll give you what you need for your journey."

Andrew usually got annoyed at being given marching orders like that, but he seemed too tired to take issue with it tonight. He got up and started to dress himself, and Neil was briefly distracted by the thought it was as enjoyable to watch him putting on his clothes as to watch them coming off. Maybe he was still being a bit stupid and high off his magic sparking earlier.

"Do you want anything to help you sleep?" Neil asked, knowing that Andrew tended to have nightmares when he slept indoors. Bad memories, Neil had surmised from several of his ramblings, and being so used to sleeping under the stars.

Andrew shook his head. "I'm exhausted enough I doubt I'll dream."

"Alright," Neil said, yawning himself. "Tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."

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Neil spent the next day, once he had got his house in order, running about the town and jogging to the next one or two over, trying to find quick buyers for Andrew's haul. Normally, he would have kept the best and biggest pieces aside for the large trade caravans that rolled through the frontier with each change of season, or travelled down into one of the bigger towns or even a city closer to the lowlands. It could take months or several seasons to finish selling on all the treasures, sometimes.

But Neil had no time to wait, and was forced to accept lower prices for the immediacy of ready coin, with some favours and bartered items in the bargain too. Where he couldn't sell, he traded, and where he couldn't trade he promised charms and wards. His best piece of luck was in selling the roll of cured dragon hide to the weapon-smith in the town five leagues to the west, who took the entire roll with wide eyes and happily exchanged it for a fat pouch of silver and gold coins, and a promissory note for another ten gold that could be cashed in Kingstown. The woman had said she planned to make a suit of flexible armour with it that would be worth five times what she had paid Neil. Neil did not demur; dragon hide was exceptional, completely impenetrable to any weapon not cursed or charmed with powerful magic, invulnerable to fire and acid and would protect the wearer from most blows or falls, unless it was from a great height. On his way back home, his carriesack less bulky but almost as heavy as it had been that morning with coin, he made a detour into the deepest part of the woods to seek out another hedgewitch.

She was even more reclusive than he, and preferred the solitude of the woods and to commune with the animals and wilds directly rather than 'muddy her hands', as she had said once, with all the work and hassle of being a more mercantile witch such as Neil was. Compared to her, Neil was positively gregarious and outlandishly sociable.

He whistled a greeting in the song of the lark, so as not to alarm her with his approach, and waited outside the hedge of vicious thorns and barbs that concealed her home. He waited until he heard an answering birdcall, then walked calmly through the wall of thorns that dissolved before him like a mist, leaving not a scratch and swallowing him up whole, to the view of anyone who might be watching.

He had often thought he would pay in his own blood to learn the wards and runes for that particular trick, but he had never been quite desperate enough to offer. He liked this witch, but he didn't really want anyone to have a pint of his blood to work spells with, regardless of how much he liked them. There was trust, foolishness, and then just sheer stupidity.

The witch was sitting in the middle of the clearing made by her ring of brambles, twigs in her hair and rags clothing her body. She was smeared with mud and tree sap, and greeted him with a whimsical whistle though her gaze was fixed on the sky.

He whistled back and laid down on the grass next to her, looking up at the canopy of leaves.

"I think I shall be a robin today," she announced. "And you?"

"I will be a fox."

"You always choose fox," the witch tutted, and tossed her tangled hair over her shoulder. "You should be a bird like me sometime."

"I wouldn't dare steal the skies from you," Neil smiled. "Besides, foxes and wolves and cats are drawn to me. I don't think they mix well with songbirds."

She gave a downhearted, fluting whistle. It reminded him for a moment of a woodpigeon, but then her whistle changed to the rapid trill of a blackbird.

"The clouds move for you," she observed, eyes wide and sure on the heavens.

"What do you see in them, little robin?"

"Decisions, always decisions with clouds, silly. Home or adventure, my fox. Security or risk. Great good or great harm. Great love and great pain."

"Nothing too major then."

She shoved his arm crossly.

"I won't tease," Neil promised with raised hands. "Thank you for telling me. I'll think carefully on it."

"See that you do. Or you'll get rained on for sure."

"That will happen anyway."

"Then it's a sign you aren't reading your clouds correctly, you dolt."

"I'm more concerned with herbs," Neil shrugged.

"More fool you then. A plant takes so long to grow, all it knows is what was new when it was a mere shoot in the cold soil. The clouds are far more reliable for your news. They react and change immediately. *Herbs*. Honestly."

Neil smiled fondly at her. He sometimes had to remind himself he was the elder of them both, she had such a way of bossing him about. He could have quite happily laid there to debate with her for days, but he needed to be back home before nightfall.

“I have prizes from the dragonlands for trade.”

“Ah yes,” she crooned. “Your brave fire-soul has returned again. The clouds move for him too.”

“Really?” Neil asked, distracted from opening his sack. “What do they say?”

“It’s very rude of you to ask,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “They’re his clouds, not yours. Bring him here and I will read for him, if he wants.”

“I suppose that’s fair. And I’ve told you before, he’s not ‘my’ anything. We enjoy each other’s company, that’s all.”

“Oh, sure,” she said, with a vast weight of sarcasm on her voice.

Neil rolled his eyes and pulled out the collection of shed scales Andrew had collected over the season. They were a weighty stack, even with the five he had left at home for his own use. Each one shimmered a different colour when held to the light, shooting off rainbows like a pearl under waves, though they each seemed a solid colour at first glance. Each one was vaguely square and about the size of Neil’s palm, and weighed less than an apple in his hand. The outer side, slightly curved, was roughened and striated like tree bark while the inner side was smooth and slippery to touch. They were always such a joy to handle, and Neil handed over the stack almost with regret.

The other witch held them without taking her gaze off the clouds above, her fingers moving quickly and knowingly over each one.

“Ooh,” she hummed, then let out a series of low croons and chirps, rocking slightly in place. “Well, this is a queenly gift, my fox. The things I can make with these! I could push the whole forest into bloom in winter, or summon a tornado, or banish the sun and reverse the moon!”

“I’d appreciate it if you did none of those things,” Neil commented. “But I do need them kept safe.”

“They’ll be nice and secret and safe here with me, don’t worry. They can be our little stash, for the pinch and stretch times.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she said with a rather patronising air, “What I said earlier. You have choices in your road, and no matter which way you go you will need power before it is all done. When you need them, they will be here for you. I promise you that, my fox, on my blood.”

“Thank you,” Neil said, troubled.

“You said these were for trade? What do you want in return for their safekeeping?”

“I want to pillage your stores.”

She laughed at that, high and piping like a flock of sparrows. “At least he’s honest!” She laughed to her clouds. “Pillage away.”

He got up and went into the ramshackle little hut that sat leaning against the inner edge of her bramble fortress. There was nothing in there except whatever trinkets he had traded her for previously, and a treasure trove of her own carefully-collected and preserved plants. She knew all the best places to find rare and efficacious plants in these woods, and made it her business to collect



them whenever she went on her evening wanders through the underbrush. He'd asked her once why she did it if she had no intention of making anything with them. She had replied that she liked to hold the knowledge safe and secure in case of ruination. She was odd, even by witch standards, but Neil was relentlessly fond of her. She had been a good ally and friend to him in his years on the frontier, and he would be grieved to see anything happen to her.

He stuffed his carriesack full to bursting with dried leaves, roots, petals and plants, and the occasional jar of basic salves she had made herself, infused with wild berries for potency. He left a loaf of fine soft bread for her as thanks, and went back out to her. She had set the scales carefully to one side, though her hand rested almost reverently on the top one. Neil was not concerned she would be seduced by the explosive power imbued in each scale; it was why he had brought them to her, rather than selling them unscrupulously. She would hide them and make sure no one would use their power. Aside from Neil, apparently, in some future disaster.

He tried not to think about that; she was always full of portents and dire predictions. And, much like her clouds, the futures she saw could change on a hair. Most often, her words did not come to fruition, and Neil had not lived as long as he had by worrying himself into his grave.

"I'll be off again," he said and hoisted his sack higher on his shoulder. "Thank you, little robin."

"Journey well, my fox. Come back again soon."

She whistled a farewell song for him, and he echoed it back as he slipped through her brambles, insubstantial until the instant he passed beyond them, when they turned back into alarmingly real and painful spikes again.

He made his way back home, his stomach rumbling as his feet found their way without needing any instruction. The sky was darkling twilight as he walked, the sun not quite set and the stars not quite risen, turning it all to the colour of crushed blackberries and candle flame.

He noticed a pale column of smoke rising from his little house, once he got close enough, and quickened his pace. Luckily, it wasn't bandits or a knocked-over lamp. It was Andrew, stoking the fire and cooking. He had quite obviously used the bathing facilities at the inn to wash and shave his beard off, and he looked tidy and well-scrubbed. Not that Neil particularly minded the occasional bit of dirt or scruff, but he had to admit he liked how Andrew looked even more when he had several months' worth of travel dust and grime scrubbed away.

"How did you get in?" Neil asked instead of a greeting, dropping his carriesack on his work table.

"You set your wards to welcome me," Andrew reminded him, all calm, as he portioned out scoops of stew and vegetables. "I wasn't sure when you'd be back this evening, so I started dinner without you."

Neil frowned to himself, but it was his own fault for being so generous with his wards. He muttered under his breath and sank down into his chair with a sigh; his legs and back were aching from all his wandering about.

"Did you sleep?" He asked after a moment's pause.

"For most of the day," Andrew nodded. Neil looked him over as he settled with a mug of weak ale from Neil's stores; he did look more rested, the bags under his eyes not quite so burdened. Andrew didn't ask how Neil's errands had gone – he had eyes and ears, and would have known to interpret

the bulge and jangle of Neil's sack. They ate dinner together in companionable quiet, Andrew's stories tucked away into his head again. Neil closed his eyes for a few minutes once he was done, basking in the warmth of the fire to his side, and the contentment of a full stomach after a long day.

He heard Andrew moving around again, refilling the kettle. His nose informed him that more wildflower tea was on the go, and he opened one eye. Andrew was rinsing out their cups, and offered Neil's to him when he saw Neil looking. Neil thought it over, considered what he wanted, and shook his head.

Andrew did not react other than to put the cup away, and pour himself one to have on his own; Neil supposed he might have visited with Roland or one of the other men in town during the day, or maybe he simply wanted to be as safe as possible and cleanse himself before he left the area. He sipped it without urgency, his gaze faraway but less troubled than it had been the previous night. Neil thought of the forest witch calling Andrew a brave fire-soul, and that the clouds had messages for him. He wondered what they were saying, what the future had in store, whether Andrew would be affected by whatever grave choices she saw for Neil.

He hoped her talk of calamity was simply more of her usual chatter, and had nothing to do with the dragons or this journey to Kingstown. He hoped that Andrew would return, safe and sound, as he always did. With more stories and firm kisses and admiring hands.

He got up and started making a charm, his hands and mind busy. He bound the lock of hair Andrew had donated last night with one of his own, braiding them tightly together and weaving them around a potent collection of herbs, feathers and one of the precious dragon scales, for extra power.

He bundled the lot into a fine cloth bag, and tied it tightly to a leather thong. He held it out to Andrew, mouth set.

"I said I didn't need any charms," Andrew said.

"I know. But take it anyway. For my peace of mind."

Andrew frowned at him.

Neil sighed. "I have concerns, about this trip and the reason for it. I would feel much easier seeing you go knowing you were carrying some sort of protection. Something I know will keep you safe."

"That's what the sword is for."

Neil passed a hand over his eyes briefly. "I visited another witch today. She told me of some signs she is seeing, and they worry me. I would feel much better if you took it, Andrew."

Andrew looked at him for a long minute, then silently accepted the charm and hung it like a pendant around his neck, tucked under his shirt out of sight.

"Thank you," Neil sighed, and started getting the various monies and traded items out of his sack to split the profits. Andrew joined him quietly, and they split the pile without needing to consult; they knew the worth of each other's part in these trades, and did not wish to cheat or begrudge each other. As part of the trade-off this time, Andrew took the majority of the coins and Neil accepted the items and rarities; he would trade them further, or use them in cures and spells and charms, and further split the profits in each transaction. Andrew was in need of hard, tangible funds rather than possibilities – it was a long and unfriendly journey to Kingstown, and once in the city he would be

unable to live off the land as he was used to doing. He would need to pay for lodgings, food, less distinctive clothes while he looked for his contact. And then they would both need to travel all the way back to the dragonlands. So much could go wrong... but Neil reminded himself that Andrew would have his freshly-made ward and charm, and he was clever and resourceful enough to live off the barren wilderness, so the over-ripe lowlands should be no problem. When that was done, Neil retrieved the little tin where he kept the coins gleaned from other trades which he owed Andrew since his last visit.

When all was said and done, Andrew had a hefty pouch of resources, and Neil had greatly improved his stocks.

“You’ll be off at dawn, I suppose,” Neil said eventually.

Andrew nodded. “Before that, likely.”

“Will you stay a little while tonight?”

Andrew looked pointedly to the kettle, and the single cup on the table.

“Not for that. I’d like to kiss you, if you don’t mind.”

Andrew apparently did not mind, and led Neil back to his bed. He sat, pulled Neil close into his arms and kissed him with a careful attention and overwhelming focus that had all worries slipping out of his mind, and his thoughts stumbling to a blissful stop in the wake of sweet sensation. His hands were warm and strong, his mouth sweet and hot, and Neil let himself melt even as he lingered and hungered for it to never end.

Neil had only meant to delay him a few minutes, but it was fully dark and the moon was high in the sky when Andrew pulled back from their embrace, saying he should get some sleep before his journey the next morning. Neil nodded, sleepy and dazed. He ran a hand down the rumpled front of Andrew’s shirt where he had been clutching it, and pressed his palm to the charm resting at the centre of Andrew’s chest.

“Be safe,” Neil mumbled. “Journey well.”

“I will. You too.”

Andrew kissed him again once, a quick caress of lips, and let himself out of the house. Neil curled into his blankets and slipped into dreams.

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Weeks passed, as was their wont. Neil did not want for occupation, thankfully. There was always much work to be done out on the frontier; wherever there were people, there would be a need for charms and herbs and poultices and advice. And when the townsfolk were settled and quiet and without urgent need, he had his goats and chickens and garden to tend, and his stores to inventory and check and transform into boxes and jars of higher worth. The charm on his lintel remained unanimated and relaxed, even the hazel scale, and Neil told himself not to dwell on the possibilities of what could be happening to his friend.

He spared a thought on the spring equinox, knowing that it was the cue for the dragons to begin migrating to their summer territories, and Andrew would want to be there to mind his flock. Neil

spared a charm and a prayer that he and his companion had made it up there safely, and were observing and hopefully concluding that the flocks were all perfectly healthy and safe. And then Neil got back to his meditation under the moon's gentle gaze, and banished all thought to open himself to whatever wisdom or visions the world had for him on such a night.

The next day he was roused long after sunrise by the chiming of his lintel-charm, where two blue-tinted dragon scales were spinning on their shared cord. Neil dragged himself from his bed, bone-weary from his vigil the day before, from sunrise to moonset. He pulled on a loose outer robe to cover the symbols he had painted on himself for the vigil and had not bothered to wash off yet, and opened his front door with squinting eyes.

"Neil," a cheery voice greeted him in the bright morning sun, and he craned his neck up to smile at his visitors. "You look rough, are you sick?"

"It was spring equinox yesterday," Neil reminded them in a croaky voice. "I've only just had a little sleep."

"Oh, damn," his other visitor said with a concerned frown on her face. "We're sorry Neil, it's easy to lose track of exact days out in the dragonlands."

"I know," Neil smiled and tied his robe a bit tighter around himself. "Come in, both of you. It's good to see you both again."

With his greeting and welcome, they were able to pass through the barrier of his wards and step into his home. The tall man, Matt, stooped to embrace him once they were inside and his wife Dan fondly cupped his cheek and kissed his forehead. He leaned into them both happily. It had been too long since their last visit, and he realised how much he had missed them.

"What brings you here?" He asked once there was food ready and tea brewing to break his two days of fasting. He had dragged one of his blankets into the front room and wrapped himself up in it, while Dan and Matt shared the other seat. "I thought you would be busy with the migration now."

"Wymack agreed to watch our flock for a little while," Dan replied.

Neil raised his eyebrows curiously; he had never met the oldest dragon wrangler out in the wilds, the most experienced and toughest of them all, but had heard plenty of stories. He was somewhat of an authority in this part of the world on anything to do with dragons, and had a reputation for being as well-armoured and unyielding as a dragon himself.

"We needed a break," Matt admitted and curled his arms around his wife's waist where she sat on his lap. "It's been a hard season, with more trouble than usual. We've lost more hatchlings than I've ever seen before, and the yearlings are struggling."

Neil bought himself time to think by chewing on a fresh tiny apple, biting it right down to the core and carefully setting the seeds aside; he wanted to plant a few and curate the trees, if he could. And if not, he had quite a few wards and medicines which would benefit from the caustic poison they could release under the right conditions.

"Is it some kind of sickness?" He asked eventually.

“We don’t know,” Dan said. She looked exhausted as she rested her head on her husband’s shoulder. “*Some* people are trying to say so. But we’ve had hard years before. Sometimes these things just happen, it’s the natural cycle of things. The dragons could be over-breeding and exhausting their food and territory, so the number of successful yearlings drop as they compete. It happens in herd species all the time. Once things are back in equilibrium, everything will be fine.”

Neil surmised that Andrew had been to share his concerns with them at some point, but didn’t mention it. Neither Dan nor Matt particularly liked Andrew, and were always confused and distressed when he reminded them he and Andrew were actually quite friendly and shared a bed occasionally. He had no wish to start that whole argument again, especially when they had both just arrived and he was so short on sleep.

“How long will you be staying down on the frontier?”

“A couple weeks,” Matt announced, and Neil beamed in pleasure. “There’s quite a few people we’ve missed.”

“Am I on that list?” Neil teased, half-serious.

“Of course,” Dan laughed gently, and reached over to stroke his cheek again.

Neil leaned into her hand with a contented sigh, remembering those lonely first months when he had come to the area, and known nobody. He had lurked on the outside of the town, too afraid to wander in and make his skills known in case somehow, out here, a bounty hunter was looking for him. He would have probably remained that way if two recently-married dragon herders hadn’t been looking for a witch to bless their union and sell on the claws and teeth and scales they gathered from their flocks. They had brought Neil his first custom there, and had told the other dragon herders about him once they left and praised his skills to the townsfolk. Soon he began getting customers, and building his life. They had been his first friends in this wild place, and he would never forget their kindness.

For the next few weeks, Neil was happily occupied with his work and his friends and his home. Matt and Dan spent the time catching up on sleep, making use of the bed in Roland’s inn, and visiting friends and acquaintances dotted along the frontier border. They spent a lot of time with Neil, much to his pleasure, either to talk about their nomadic life in the wild, or to watch and listen as he went about his work, fascinated by it. Matt sat quietly with him as he made up a complicated ward to help a young woman who suspected she was being stalked and watched by a spurned ex-lover, designed to alert her to unfriendly eyes and provide a physical sting to the man in question if he got too close, which would increase to a painful burning if he persisted. Matt had watched, asked questions, held things, and told Neil he was scary sometimes with what he could do with a few plants and runes and touches of his hands. Then he had caught Neil up in a tight hug and messed up his hair.

Dan liked to go out and about with him in the woods when he needed to collect more plants or in monitoring his gardens. She said she enjoyed learning the different kind of wilderness that Neil called home; the piney forests and flower-filled meadows were very different from the harsh, rocky steppes and gorse plains of the dragonlands. They talked as they roamed and filled baskets with fruit, blossoms, buds and roots, and Neil let his own stories and thoughts pour out to her. He never said anything about his past before he came to the frontier except in very vague generalities – his mother had taught him most of his herblore before she died, he had seldom stayed in one place for very long, so on and so on – but let his thoughts spill free otherwise in loosely-related skeins. She

held them for him, ordered them, and handed them back gently. He always felt peculiarly cleansed when they returned from their walks, even if his throat was scratchy from so much chatter, and the occasional flush of weeping that came over him sometimes when his thoughts strayed too close to his childhood.

And the three of them often spent the evenings in Neil's house by the fire, content in each other's company and not needing to fill it. Other times they sat in the taproom of Roland's bar, and Neil watched bemusedly as they bantered and drank with the other patrons, cheerfully adding to the noise and camaraderie of the place. One of his favourite moments was when Dan challenged the entire inn to arm wrestling, and beat every one of them easily. Their reputation as rough, tough dragon wranglers was more than upheld.

The only sour note was that after a while, the lintel charm started to behave a little oddly.

The hazel scale began to shudder and twist in a strange way, as if it were being pulled in different directions at once. Normally, when Andrew was nearby, it would spin or maybe sway. When Andrew had been injured, that time with the bull raking him with its claws, the scale had shuddered and swung like a pendulum until Andrew had set stumbling step in Neil's house.

Neil had never seen it jerk about or twitch before, and he couldn't help the sense of foreboding that rose in him, thinking of the forest witch's cryptic foretellings and his own misgivings. He began looking for signs, casting bones and shells together, tossing carved birch rods, had even performed a sacrifice of a songbird to read its entrails. None of it worked, none of it gave him any indication of what could be happening to his friend, or what his charm might be reacting against.

Dan and Matt noticed his increasing abstraction and obsession with the charm, but had little to offer by way of solace or distraction.

"You don't understand," Neil said for the seventeenth time. "It never does this."

"Neil, sunshine, maybe the magic has just gone a little old?" Dan suggested, wearily patient. "Does it need – I don't know – refreshing? Redoing? Remaking?"

Neil clenched his jaw. "Your charms have hung there longer than his, and have never needed refreshing."

"Well, he's here more often than us," Matt pointed out, and Dan scowled at the reminder. "Maybe it's worn out from his visits."

There was nothing especially suggestive in Matt's tone, but Neil felt the back of his neck heating in mingled embarrassment and annoyance anyway.

When Neil said nothing, Matt gently folded arms around him. "I'm sure everything is fine, Neil. Come out to the garden, and show me your strawberries. They were looking more pink than green yesterday, maybe they're ripe now?"

Neil allowed himself to be nominally distracted for the rest of the day, but when he was trying to sleep that night he kept twitching awake at the soft jangles the charm made as its components rattled and clinked against each other.

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Dan and Matt stayed in town until the summer flowers began to unfurl and show promise of blooming, and then had to be on their way back to their flock. Their farewells with Neil were fondly bittersweet, and he held onto their embraces and cherished the kisses and touches to his forehead and hair and cheeks. He made sure they were amply supplied with charms for good health, safety and protection from conception, as per Dan's request ("who wants a baby weighing down your stomach when you're chasing giant flying lizards? Not me, that's for sure," she had laughed), and they made him promise to stop worrying about the charm. He waved them off until they disappeared over the top of the next hill, then returned to staring at the erratic lurching of the dragon scale.

Two days later, the charm pulled itself off the hook in the lintel to crash to the floor. Neil stared at it in horror, his heart in his throat, and over the cacophony of his scrambled thoughts he heard hoofbeats, and raised voices.

He stumbled out his door and into the road, head whipping this way and that to pinpoint those voices. Just coming into view beyond the curve of the road were two short figures leading horses, arguing loud enough for Neil to hear their voices but not their words. He peered into the setting sun at their backs and ran to them, his heartbeat louder than his steps and his breath coming in panicked gasps.

He stumbled to an abrupt stop just before them, eyes wide and hand to his chest as he fought for breath. He looked between the two men rapidly.

"Oh," he panted. "Brother. Twin brother. Same blood. Oh, oh."

"What's wrong?" Andrew frowned, reaching out to hold Neil's arm.

"My – my lintel charm. It's been acting strange," Neil stammered, still looking between them. "It – it fell off. I thought, I thought you were dead."

"I'm perfectly fine," Andrew assured him, holding his shoulders and squeezing gently. Neil nodded and covered his face with his hand to try and collect himself. Andrew kept hold of him until he was breathing easier and the awful, churning panic in his guts had settled.

"And who is this?" The other man, obviously Andrew's twin, asked. Neil looked to him without the haze of anxiety clouding his vision; the two were of a height, and wore the same face and general colouring. But beyond that, they no longer looked identical. Andrew was broad and muscular, strength in every part of him, while his brother was on narrower, leaner lines. His skin was blotchy with healing sunburn, while Andrew was weathered and tanned from many years in the wild. Andrew wore his hair longer, unbothered about keeping it cut unless he was in town for a long time, while his brother's had only hints of shagginess, perhaps from being out of the city for a few months. Andrew stood with firm confidence radiating from him, earned from years of self-sufficiency, while his brother had a bit more of a stoop to his shoulders. The brother also had a pair of expensive-looking eyeglasses on a cord around his neck, and he was obviously unused to the rough, practical clothes that hung awkwardly on his shoulders, loose where his brother's were snug.

"This is Neil," Andrew said, slowly letting go of his shoulders. "My friend. The man we're here to see."

Neil carefully noted that Andrew neglected to mention he was a self-professed witch.

"Neil, this is my brother Aaron, from Kingstown. He's a physicker from the university there."

Neil nodded politely to him, and got a sneer in return.

“Your friend doesn’t seem very stable,” Aaron said, dismissing him in a glance and turning back to his brother. “And I told you, I have to get back home. I’ve been away too long as it is on your fool’s errand. I haven’t time to drop in on your acquaintances, and I shouldn’t have come in the first place.”

“You’re welcome to leave any time now,” Andrew shot back, and Neil blinked at the harsh tone. He sounded at the very end of his patience, something Neil had almost never seen in him before. “The road is that way, Kingstown is due south. That’s keeping the sun on your left when it rises, in case you forgot. Again. But good luck travelling without any food or supplies – this town is the last one in that direction for ten leagues.”

Aaron scowled at his brother and folded his arms. It would have been a better gesture if his arms were even half as large as Andrew’s, which were about as thick as Neil’s waist. He’d had several opportunities to make the comparison.

“How about we go inside,” Neil suggested into the sticky silence as the brothers glared at each other. He lightly touched Andrew’s back and led the way, taking hold of the halter of one of the horses. Just before they got to the front door, Neil paused and turned to Aaron.

“Try to go in.”

“What?” Aaron snapped.

“Try. I need to know something.”

Aaron looked at him as if he were simple, and made a production of stepping very slowly over the threshold and standing in the front room. Nothing happened – no cry of pain, no shimmering shield, no force pushing him back.

“Same blood,” Neil muttered thoughtfully. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“Would it work for children of someone who is permitted?” Andrew asked, tilting his head curiously. “With half blood?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t considered it as a flaw in the ward before.”

“What the good God are you both on about?” Aaron scowled, looking around the plant-stuffed room with unease. His eyes bulged when he saw the sparrow bones scattered on the table.

“My wards should not have permitted you to enter,” Neil said as he stepped in, Andrew on his heels once he’d led the horses out to graze with the goats. “I had not welcomed you inside. But because Andrew is always welcome, you are too. It’s strange.”

“Wards?” Aaron repeated disbelievingly. He took another look around, his eyes seeming to catch on the feathers, charms, bundled herbs, and inscribed runestones about the place. “You’re a heretic,” he spat accusingly.

“I’m a witch, actually,” Neil informed him and rather enjoyed his start of disgust. “I suppose the polite term would be ‘pagan’, but I don’t think you’re going to be polite regardless.”

Aaron shied away from the worktable with its many occult items, huddling in the centre of the room and looking about himself with a curled lip.

“Relax, you aren’t going to burst into flames,” Neil snorted, then looked to Andrew. “I didn’t realise your brother was religious. Or that you had a brother.”

“He was raised by my uncle.”

“Ah.” Neil let the subject slip to the floor; he’d listened to Andrew’s disconnected ramblings about his uncle, a rabid preacher of the southern faith with a distinct lack of compassion or human understanding. Andrew was less than fond of him, and Neil disliked him by association.

“I can’t believe you’d consort with heretics,” Aaron sneered at his brother.

“It’s different up here,” Andrew said, in the weary tone of someone who has repeated a phrase so often it has lost all meaning.

Aaron rolled his eyes, apparently sick of the phrase too.

“Tea?” Neil offered, blandly rolling over their issues.

“I don’t have time to sit around drinking tea in the house of a lunatic!”

“Oh shut up Aaron,” Andrew sighed and sat down in the guest chair. “You can’t travel any further tonight, unless you want to rough it on the ground again. I should probably tell you there’s an inn here, with beds and bathing facilities, before you make your decision.”

Aaron threw up his hands in frustration and stalked out again, muttering under his breath. Neil saw him going to talk to the horses and goats, and drifted close to Andrew.

“He’s a delight,” Neil said wryly, and perched on the arm of the chair.

“I’ll be glad to get rid of him again,” Andrew sighed, rubbing tiredly under his eyes.

“I take it the trip wasn’t a success.”

“He spent the whole time complaining about the ‘barbarism’ of my life and was too busy hiding from the dragons to observe them,” Andrew grumbled. Then he visibly willed away his annoyance and pressed his hand to Neil’s back, smoothing up and down gently. “I’m going to stay here a couple days before heading back.”

Neil smiled down at him, warm pleasure curling through him. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Anything exciting happen while I was gone?”

“Dan and Matt visited. It was nice. Spring equinox.” Neil shrugged and leaned closer into him. “A few new people in town. I’ll tell you all the new gossip, if you want.”

“By all means.”

Andrew curled a hand around Neil’s knee, his thumb rubbing into Neil’s thigh. Neil was about to lean down and kiss him as Andrew seemed to be wanting, when he heard Aaron coming back towards the house again. He sighed and stood; he didn’t want to deal with a hissy fit over ‘sinful

relations' or sodomy, as the southern faith called it. No wonder Andrew had left the lowlands if his brother and uncle were so unreasonable.

"Take me to this inn," he told his brother, apparently ignoring Neil's presence. "I'll stay there tonight, but I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Can't come soon enough," Andrew bit out, and levered himself out of the chair with a grimace; Neil guessed he was stiff and sore from riding. Neil slipped on some more appropriate clothes – he hadn't been quite dressed when he went running out of the house, and needed some shoes and an outer jacket of some kind. He didn't suppose that had endeared him to Aaron, in retrospect.

"What are you doing?" Andrew asked.

"I thought I'd buy some of Roland's new mead," Neil said, and smiled warmly at him. "He says a splash of it goes very nicely with the wildflower tea. We could try it, if you like."

Andrew didn't answer verbally, but once his brother had left the doorway he pressed a hard, searing kiss to Neil's mouth. Neil would have happily pulled him to bed there and then, but he wanted to get rid of the annoying brother first.

"If you say anything religious or judgemental while you're here, you'll get punched in the face," Andrew informed his brother as they walked. "And not just from me. Keep your opinions to yourself. This isn't the lowlands, there are no constables out here, and no one will intervene for you."

Aaron nodded tightly and hitched his share of the saddlebags higher on his shoulder. Neil thought he looked a little nervous as they approached the town, and wondered if Andrew had bothered to tell him that the frontier wasn't *quite* as lawless and violent as the rumours said. Neil didn't enlighten him either; it might be a good remedy for that attitude.

"There are two of you?" Roland greeted them with, raising his eyebrows at the twins as he leaned over his bar. There weren't many people there yet, just a few loafers half-sensate in the corners.

"No," Andrew said shortly. "We shared a mother, that's all."

Roland's eyebrows rose further and Aaron looked briefly chagrined. Neil kept his mouth shut.

"Aaron needs a room for the night," Andrew carried on. "I'll settle the cost tomorrow. He'll want water for bathing, but no help."

Roland smiled at the hidden meaning of that – *don't proposition my brother*. Aaron didn't seem to catch on.

"Alright," Roland smiled. "Neil, good to see you. What can I do for you?"

"A cask of mead, for me. I'm cashing in that favour about the fire protection, remember."

"Two surprises in one day," Roland commented and pulled a small barrel up from the other side of the bar, patting it fondly. "Though Andrew, I only have the one room free at the moment. I can't get you a separate room."

"He can stay with me for the night," Neil offered after a questioning glance at his friend.

“And where will you sleep?” Aaron asked him suspiciously. “If Andrew’s in your bed?”

There was an awkward moment of silence throughout the inn; everyone was aware of Neil and Andrew’s arrangements whenever he was in town. Although they didn’t sleep in the same bed, it was an open secret that they spent most of the night in it.

“I’ll go sit naked in a bear cave and commune with spirits for warmth,” Neil replied, perfectly deadpan. “Or hang upside down in a tree until sunrise, whichever looks better for the weather.”

Aaron seemed ready to believe him until Andrew snorted in amusement.

“Well, Aaron, let me show you to your room,” Roland breezed past the moment, easing out from behind the bar. “Follow me.”

Andrew picked up the cask, though Neil said he could carry it just fine, and they walked back to Neil’s house.

“How did you put up with him for months?” Neil asked as he started filling the kettle.

“I frequently ground my teeth. I’ve had a headache ever since I found him.”

“I have a remedy for that.”

“Yes?”

Neil smiled and reached out to lightly touch the sharp corners of his jaw, then pressed a slow kiss to his temple where a vein had been pulsing. Andrew’s breath left him in a great gust, and his hands found Neil’s waist.

“Better?” Neil smiled.

“Try the other side.”

Neil did so, brushing his lips over the skin gently. “Better?”

“Yes,” Andrew murmured, working his fingers into the dips of Neil’s waist.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Neil said quietly, listening to the kettle beginning to whistle. “And I missed you.”

“I’m practically indestructible,” Andrew said, tilting his head to tease a kiss along the edge of Neil’s mouth. “Even dragons can’t kill me, remember.”

Neil pulled back a little. “Don’t tempt things like that.”

Andrew squeezed his hips, firm and slow. “I didn’t mean it seriously.”

Neil stroked over a faint bruise on his cheek, some unimportant injury nearly healed. “I would be very upset if anything happened to you,” he said, very quietly. “The charm – it’s been driving me distracted, thinking you were hurt or in danger.”

Andrew solemnly held his gaze for the space of several long heartbeats. It seemed like he might ask a question, but instead he said, “I’m not planning on dying anytime soon. And I’m quite attached to

you, too.”

Neil pressed his shuddery sigh into Andrew’s mouth, ignoring the heavy thud of his heartbeat like a drum in his chest, the tremble in his fingers. It was just a remnant of his anxiety over his friend’s safety, nothing more. Andrew held him close and kissed him until they were dizzy for breath and the kettle was screeching.

“Tea first,” Neil whispered against his mouth. “Tea first.”

Andrew pulled on his lip gently, then let him go. They gulped down their scalding cups of wildflower tea, cooled a little by a mouthful of honey-sweet mead, and Neil tugged him by the hands into the bedroom. They stepped carefully over the fallen charm as the magic and herbs burned through their bodies, leaving them clean and ready. Andrew tugged off Neil’s shirt and tossed it to the ground, hands eager and wanting as he stroked and palmed all over Neil’s bared skin. Neil could hear himself making quiet breathy gasps with each touch and kiss and couldn’t care, plunging his fingers into Andrew’s hair to have something to hold onto. He was just so glad Andrew was safe, and had returned to him.

He ran his hands down Andrew’s chest and paused, feeling the bump underneath. He pulled out the bag of charms that he had given Andrew on his last visit, a curious tightness in his throat.

“You kept it,” he mumbled. The bag was scuffed and stained with sweat and dirt, but the contents were unbroken and undisturbed, fresh and vibrant. He thought of Andrew keeping it on all the time he was away, despite not wanting to seem like a pagan down in the ‘civilised’ south, maybe even touching it or holding it in his hand. Maybe thinking of Neil as he did so.

“Of course,” Andrew replied in a low voice, and looped the leather thong over his head. “You gave it to me. To keep me safe.”

To bring him back.

Neil set it down on a small side table and kissed him urgently, heart going double-time in his chest. They stumbled towards the bed, Neil pausing to snag a small jar of balm. He tossed it onto the bed and stepped out of his trousers, kicking them off his ankles. He sat naked on his bed and pulled Andrew closer by the hips, pushing up his shirt to kiss at his stomach. Andrew made a vague noise of surprise as Neil kissed and mouthed at the thick muscle banding Andrew’s torso, dipping his tongue into the rivulets between them as Andrew panted for breath and stroked through his hair. Neil tugged at the lacings of his trousers and took him in hand, lowering his head to taste and swallow around his length for just a moment.

Andrew swore breathlessly, his fingers shaking a bit as he stroked Neil’s hair. Neil bobbed his head again, enjoying the feeling of having Andrew in his mouth, then pulled off. He glanced up; a deep flush had spread up Andrew’s chest and into his face as he stared down at Neil with wide eyes.

Neil grinned, pleased with himself, and laid back on the bed. Andrew climbed down with him once he was bare, and Neil pushed the jar into his hand. Andrew paused, glancing to Neil for confirmation.

“Yes,” Neil whispered, shifting to part his legs around Andrew’s. “If you want that too.”

“Yes,” Andrew whispered back, and opened the jar.



He scooped out a large blob of the slick balm, and Neil leaned into his side, kissing at his neck as Andrew began gently pushing and stroking with those fingers. They kissed with a heady need, Neil's breath hitching with each steady movement of Andrew's fingers inside him. They hadn't done this more than a few times in their years exploring each other, and they were careful. Neil clung around Andrew's broad shoulders and shuddered with each slow stroke, his kisses turning distracted and imprecise, but Andrew was just as unfocussed. When Neil's hips began to rock and ride into the motion of Andrew's hand, accustomed to the feeling and wanting more, Andrew pulled it away.

Neil dragged one last heated kiss from Andrew's mouth and turned on his side, bracing up a knee on the mattress. He heard Andrew shifting onto his side as well to curve around Neil's back, his torso hot and heavy. A touch more balm, and then Neil cried out in pleasure as they slowly moved together. He clutched at the blankets and shivered at the feeling when Andrew came to rest inside him, their bodies flush and curved together. He reached back and pulled Andrew's arm around his waist, and Andrew obliged by squeezing him closer, holding him tight and secure and safe in his arms.

"Alright?" Andrew panted into the back of his neck, his body strained from the effort of staying still to let Neil adjust.

Neil nodded rapidly into the pillow, his hands twitching and pleasure shooting all through him at having Andrew so close, so close. He rocked his hips just a little and groaned lowly at the heavy, full feeling. Taking that as his cue, Andrew started to move his hips in slow, firm rolls, holding Neil in place and pushing deep into him with each rock.

Neil happily surrendered control, and let himself be held and overwhelmed, feeling safe and secure tucked into Andrew's chest. Andrew left wet, smeary gasps and kisses over his back and shoulder, his hand pressed tight into Neil's stomach and grounding him, securing him. Neil clutched at the swell of his arm and forgot to touch himself, too focussed on the quickening, deepening push and pull of their bodies and the intense waves of pleasure and desire coursing through him each time.

He could feel it building, like a squirming ball somewhere deep in his gut, growing and growing inside him, almost like the way his magic felt when he was exerting himself. It tingled and rushed over his skin and he could hear his own groans and cries as if from a great distance, breathy and desperate. Their bodies rocked and strained, and Andrew's hand pushed down to Neil's groin, tugging around Neil's length, and the ball in his pelvis burst.

His body arched, shuddered, his breath stopping as pleasure overcame him completely. He could feel Andrew's hand moving, magic coursing through his veins, and liquid heat spilling deep inside him as Andrew panted and moaned Neil's name into his back, his body locked in a tight knot around Neil's.

Magic slipped through his grasp as Neil's heart pounded in his chest, seeming doubled and greater than normal, unbalanced, unwieldy and escaping his control. Something across the room shattered as the magic flooded out of him, but the rush of it coupled with his pleasure left him little facility to worry, to think, to do anything but breathe and tremble.

Andrew's frame slowly relaxed, limb by shaking limb. Neil cried out in protest as he started to pull away, the loss of him too much to bear after such intense closeness. Andrew paused, then stroked soothingly over Neil's stomach. His fingers were sticky with Neil's release, but it was calming

nonetheless. He kissed very gently over Neil's shoulder, skirting the edge of an old, scarred-over brand of the letter W.

"Easy now, easy now," Andrew whispered into his neck. Neil vaguely wondered if he said that to his dragons when they got spooked, and whether he should be annoyed, but it was too comforting, and he felt himself slowing down and breathing deeper regardless. Slowly, slowly, Andrew pulled his hips back, until their bodies were separate again and slickness trickled between Neil's thighs. Andrew stayed pressed close, curved tightly around Neil's back and holding him safe. He shuddered at the feeling, and the pleasant burn of his hips and back from the exertion, the tightness in his thighs. Andrew kept kissing his neck and shoulder, stroking his stomach, until Neil was able to stop shaking and take slow breaths.

"I'm okay," Neil mumbled into the pillow eventually.

Andrew hummed acknowledgement but didn't stop his soothing touches, apparently not convinced that Neil was all the way back in his head. Neil didn't mind – and he didn't want Andrew to stop either. It felt too good, having him so close, so gentle, after the rush of pleasure and magic. He tilted his head back, eyes closed, and Andrew kissed him gently, soft on his tender mouth.

Andrew was just being careful, he told himself blearily. Just being considerate of his bedmate. Just making sure. And Neil would be selfish not to make sure in return.

"Are *you* alright?" Neil breathed into his cheek. "Was that good?"

Andrew nodded, and gently pulled on Neil's sore hips to turn him so they could lie face to face. Neil's body felt like melted butter, and he slumped where he was set, grinning tiredly.

"That was very good," Andrew muttered. "And I missed you too."

Neil's grin softened, and he rested his forehead on Andrew's chest. They lay there quietly for a long time, drifting in aimless thoughts and small touches, until Neil began to shiver from the cool air and the stickiness on his thighs became unpleasant.

"Tea," Andrew muttered, and Neil nodded in agreement.

They got themselves upright, both stretching out. Neil looked around his bedroom and his mouth dropped open in surprise; it looked like a strong wind had blown through, pushing everything back from the bed and against the walls. A small vase of flowers had shattered, and they lay sadly in the shards of the pottery, the rushes on the floor soaking up the spilled water.

"At least it wasn't a shock this time," Andrew commented.

Neil coughed in embarrassment. "It was just a slip. I got – distracted."

"I'm taking that as a compliment," Andrew said, and Neil smiled at him.

"You should."

Andrew cupped his cheek in his clean hand, his thumb pressing gently over Neil's smile. Neil kissed it sweetly, and they got up to sort themselves. Andrew brewed fresh tea and got some food, and Neil stripped off the messy blanket and fetched water and washcloths from his cellar. They

cleaned themselves, and sat together on the warm bed to drink their tea; double strength, just in case.

Neil sipped and leaned into Andrew's shoulder, trying not to think that this was all getting more emotional than they had intended, starting out. It wasn't that he minded that – it was even better than their first nervous, tense explorations of each other marked by fierce boundaries and long negotiation. It felt amazing. But the whole point had been just for convenience, just for satisfaction when both needed it. It wasn't supposed to be so... tender. He wasn't supposed to be so attached.

His mother would be ashamed.

Well. His mother would be ashamed of a lot of the things he was and had done since losing her.

Andrew touched his forehead, where a frown was sitting. "What are you thinking?" He asked.

"Nothing important," Neil replied, and finished his cup. Whatever his mother might think, it was irrelevant. Doing things her way had gotten her killed. And Neil was still alive, still safe, hidden out of sight more effectively than she had ever managed. Just because she had been his mother didn't make her right. He put it all out of his mind, and focussed on the warmth of Andrew's body beside his own.

They spent the night together, talking for a while of all that had happened since their last meeting, kissing some more, and gently touching and holding each other. When at last they couldn't keep their eyes open any longer, they laid down under the blankets with some distance between them, and slept.

Neil woke with the rising of the sun, and opened his eyes to catch Andrew watching him with an almost wistful, yearning expression on his face. Before Neil was awake enough to question him, the expression eased away into bland attentiveness, and Neil thought he must have imagined it.

"Good morning," he yawned, slowly stretching out the stiffness in his back and legs. "Did you sleep alright?"

Andrew mumbled something that sounded vaguely affirmative, so Neil smiled and rested a hand on his chest. He liked to feel Andrew's heartbeat and breathing sometimes, under the strength of his firm chest. It was oddly reassuring. Andrew reached down and gently pulled on Neil's thigh, pulling him in close and working his fingers into the muscle. Neil hummed in surprised enjoyment, feeling his lower back and hips protest a little, but not in a painful way. The stretch eased the vague soreness, and he began to think he would enjoy aching some more, if Andrew wanted that too. He was considering fetching the jar of balm and saying as much, when the rattle of the front door opening startled them both.

Neil shot upright so fast his vision swam, and Andrew was pretty quick in tumbling out of bed too.

"Andrew?" Aaron was calling, sounding cross. "Where are you in this heathenous place?"

"Wait," Andrew called back sharply, but that didn't stop his brother from opening the bedroom door and seeing them both, very naked, and very obviously fresh from the single, narrow bed in the room. Aaron went bright red and his eyes bulged, and Neil grabbed for a robe to cover himself. He turned away and hurriedly dragged it on, hands pressing the material tight over his many, many scars. Hot shame poured over him like boiling pitch; he no longer had issues with Andrew seeing him and knowing him, but this stranger of a brother was another matter entirely.

He hugged his arms around himself, trembling.

“Aaron, wait the fuck outside,” Andrew was saying, whip-sharp. Footsteps, and the front door slammed again.

“I need to somehow change the wards,” Neil mumbled. “To keep that horse’s ass *out*.”

“I’m sorry,” Andrew said quietly, and skimmed a gentle hand down Neil’s back. Neil shuddered and leaned into him, and Andrew wrapped both arms around his waist.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed of you, or me, or what we do,” Neil forced out. “It’s not that at all. It’s the scars.”

“I know. I understand.”

“It took me so long to be okay with just you seeing, and...”

“I know, Neil. I know.” Andrew kissed his cheek so softly it was like a songbird had fluttered its wings there, and Neil nearly crumbled. “I’m not thrilled about him seeing mine either. Easy now.”

Remembering how Andrew had soothed his neediness the previous night was both embarrassing and comforting, and both put warmth back into his chest. Andrew held him until he was still and calm again, and Neil had to wonder if he was the only one getting too invested.

“Take your time,” Andrew said as he unfolded his arms and started getting dressed. “I’ll deal with Aaron.”

Just before he left, Andrew picked up the fallen lintel charm and hung it on its hook, then closed the bedroom door behind himself. As Neil centred himself and slowly pulled on fresh clothes, he heard them arguing again outside the house. He heard something about *you had no right* and sodomy and heresy and carnal sin and *what I do is none of your damn business* and eternal damnation and *I will not let you insult my friend* and righteous fire and *Luther’s poisoned your mind and soul* and maybe it was the witch who was the real corruptor...

Neil closed his eyes and straightened his shoulders, then walked out. The brothers were in each other’s space, fists in shirts and jaws thrust forward as they yelled.

“Enough,” Neil said firmly. “Enough. You’ll scare my goat out of a month’s milk. Aaron, I really do not care what you think of me, and I’ll be glad to see the back of you. Your opinions mean nothing out here, and you are hopelessly hateful. Andrew, you forgot this.”

And while maintaining eye contact with Aaron, Neil held out the safety charm on its leather cord. From Aaron’s expression, he had seen Andrew wearing it before but hadn’t realised where it had come from. Andrew looped it once more over his head and tucked it under his shirt, then rather pointedly kissed Neil’s palm.

“Now what did you want so urgently?” Neil asked Aaron, who looked nearly apoplectic with shock and disgust.

Aaron’s expression warred with itself, then settled on cold disdain. He drew himself up to his full height (still short, still somehow shorter than Neil) and said in his most insulting tone, “The

innkeeper wants paying now for the room. I'll get my things, buy some supplies, and leave this God-forsaken pit of sin."

"Then let's go."

"You aren't needed, witch—"

"We will all go," Neil said icily, and set himself between the twins. He did not care what this man thought of him, but he did not want Andrew to become upset by it. Neil knew how long and hard Andrew had struggled with himself, being comfortable in his skin and his desires after the orphanage and living on the streets, easy prey for any predator; it had been something necessary to know, once they started undressing each other regularly. He did not want some hateful words from this unfortunate excuse for a brother to disturb him, or send him back to that bleak place of loathing and emptiness.

As the three of them walked in tense silence towards the town, Neil touched Andrew's wrist gently, and received a quick squeeze back in affirmation.

They were about halfway back to the town when a young girl with a blue cap over her hair came sprinting up to them.

"Marnie," Neil greeted her in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Katelyn needs you," the girl gasped. "It's Ellen – the baby's breech."

Neil felt himself go pale in a sickening rush. "Andrew—"

"I'll get the bag, you go," Andrew cut him off tersely. "Take Aaron."

Neil ran after Marnie with Aaron stumbling and asking questions behind him while Andrew ran back to the house. Marnie led them to a low, run-down cottage behind the brothel and Neil could already hear cries of pain from inside. He burst in and went to his knees beside the bed, pushing past anxious family members hovering outside. Katelyn had the poor girl's legs over her shoulders as she tried to gently turn the babe with her hands, her hair escaping from her blue cap which had been knocked sideways from Ellen's feet.

Neil hovered his hand over the girl's distended stomach, taking in the situation rapidly. The babe was in the wrong position, trying to come through feet-first. Ellen was weeping, her whole body shaking from pain and the stress of the labour. He gently squeezed her shoulder and stroked her sweat-damp hair.

"You'll be okay Ellen, try not to panic," he told her as soothingly as he could. "Breathe slowly, try not to push. Katelyn, what do you need?"

"Time," she grated out from between the girl's bloody thighs. "I'm trying to turn it, but I'm concerned about hurting Ellen. She's been in labour a long time, she could be too tired. I don't want her to hurt herself."

He met her eyes; they were both wondering whether the babe would be breathing if and when they finally delivered it. And if Ellen were bleeding too badly to survive.

“There’s no point,” Aaron said quietly, pale-faced and looking sick. “You should give her poppy milk and wait.”

“That’s spectacularly less than helpful,” Katelyn snapped at him. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m a physicker from Kingstown,” Aaron said.

“Oh, great,” Katelyn rolled her eyes. “Stay out of my way, incompetent.”

Andrew slammed through the door and handed Neil his emergency bag of herbs and charms and implements. Neil opened it immediately and ordered one of the family members to fetch water, and started grinding up a handful of herbs and leaves.

“What is the witch doing—”

“Stay out of it,” Andrew ordered his brother, one arm sufficient to hold him back. Neil put them both out of his mind as he concentrated solely on what this girl needed, and how to make it. He poured the leafy sludge down her throat and stroked her hair again.

“That should pause her contractions and stop the bleeding for the moment,” he told Katelyn under the cover of the girl’s pained moans. “Any progress?”

“Some,” Katelyn said. “I’m going to need your help to turn it.”

Neil quickly made up a yellowish paste and coated his hands in it; the magic and living plants in it singing on his skin. “Ellen, I’m going to touch your belly. I’m sorry, but it’s going to feel quite unpleasant.”

She started to cry again, and Neil grimly pressed his hands onto her belly. Katelyn directed him, and in a moment he could feel the shape of the babe within her. He started massaging his hands, working the paste into her skin and murmuring spells and charms under his breath, using his magic to push them down into the womb and the struggling babe. Marnie helped him silently, her young face serious and determined. Katelyn started counting, and they carefully moved the babe the last few degrees into proper position, ignoring Ellen’s hoarse weeping.

“Good girl Ellen, good girl,” Katelyn panted. “Big pushes now, really good and strong. Just a few big pushes and it’ll all be over.”

Bless her, she tried, but her body had nothing left to give. She tried, Neil could see how hard she tried, but there was no strength left. He washed his hands in the bucket of water and made another potion, then dropped it under her tongue. Within two heartbeats, her whole body seemed seized with a burst of energy and she pushed for all she was worth, screaming and cursing and sobbing.

And suddenly, in a rush of blood and mucus, there was a baby, and she joined voice with her mother. Neil beckoned for Marnie and one of the family members to take his place and see to the exhausted girl, and joined Katelyn to inspect the babe. He whispered blessings for good health and made a charm of the cord and the remnants of caul, sealing it into a jar and instructing the father of the new baby to keep the jar safe and undamaged until the babe’s third year, when its contents should be buried under a newly-planted tree. Then he and Katelyn did the messy work of making sure Ellen was as intact as possible once the afterbirth came away, and staunching whatever bled; Neil’s kit was severely depleted by the time they were done.

When, at last, they could relax and say the process was over, Neil sat back on his heels and smiled. Ellen was holding her cleaned, pink little baby to her breast with an expression of stunned joy, stroking her daughter's tiny wrinkled cheeks, hours of pain set aside for the euphoria of its culmination. They would both need careful monitoring of course, but the worst was over.

He looked to Katelyn, who was grey and limp with exhaustion. She was bloody up to her elbows, and there was no saving the gory mess of her blue apron, but the grin she flashed him was fierce.

"Thank you, Neil," she said to him.

He just smiled; he would have embraced her, but they were both bloody and he didn't want to make it worse. He looked around; the twins were standing out of the way in the corner, both looking a little sick. Andrew caught his eyes, and there was a sudden intensity in his stare that stole Neil's breath.

Aaron was gaping at Katelyn. "You saved them," he said, blinking owl-like behind his eyeglasses. "You saved both of them. How?"

Katelyn fixed him with a stern look. "Skill. Practice. Luck. And perseverance."

"At the university, we were taught never to attempt breech births," Aaron said. "To just let the mother pass as painlessly as possible. That it's a lost cause."

Katelyn wrinkled her nose derisively. "Typical of them."

Aaron frowned. "You've been to the university?"

"I made it to fifth-level before I left," Katelyn said, casually. Neil had no idea what she meant but Aaron looked reluctantly impressed. "And I left on my own terms – it was too restrictive, and just plain wrong, what they teach there. I've learned more and saved more lives out here than I ever did in the clean and tidy rooms of the university medic wing."

Aaron had nothing more to say to that, but instead just stared at Katelyn as she and Neil scrubbed themselves clean, and she did what she could for her clothes.

"Now if you don't mind," she announced to the room at large, "I need a bath and a drink."

And she left. Aaron kept staring after her like a pole-axed cow. Andrew came over and helped Neil to his feet, letting Neil lean into him.

"That was amazing," Andrew murmured close to his ear.

"Katelyn and Ellen did all the work," Neil protested, but smiled. "I just came in at the end."

"Still." Andrew kept looking at him with that intense stare, and stroked his cheek with the backs of his knuckles.

"What's that look for?" Neil asked quietly.

Andrew hesitated. "Not here. I'll tell you later."

Neil raised an eyebrow at him, but Aaron had recovered some of his wits and was making indignant noises at their behaviour.

“Let’s go to the inn,” Neil said. “We’ll settle your account and then I might go back to bed, honestly.”

“I might join you,” Andrew muttered, but quietly enough so his brother didn’t hear.

When they got to the inn, Roland was busy arguing with his cook, so they waited at the bar in tense silence. Andrew kept watching Neil with that powerful focus, which didn’t help the awkwardness. Neil was considering just kissing him to break the tension into a proper fight instead when Katelyn appeared from the bathing room, freshly washed and looking much better for it in a change of clothes. She nodded familiarly to Neil, politely to Andrew, ignored Aaron, and reached over the bar to pour herself a foaming tankard of beer. She settled with it at one of the tables with a determined face.

Aaron didn’t do anything until she had gulped a third of it, then went over to join her without saying a word to his brother. Neil watched in mild surprise as Aaron started interrogating Katelyn about her skills. She bore it with good grace, though he knew she was tempted to verbally lash him every so often for his statements and assumptions.

He turned back to Andrew and met his stare head-on. “What is it?”

“I forget sometimes,” Andrew said slowly, quietly, “That you’re not just a witch. You’re an apothecary too.”

“Hardly.”

“More than enough. Your herb-lore is second to none to anyone out here or in the cities.”

“What are you getting at?”

Andrew considered him, head tilted. Neil wondered if Andrew realised he tended to mimic his dragons sometimes. “Will you come out to the dragonlands with me?”

Neil’s jaw dropped and a flush came over him. “I—”

“Not permanently,” Andrew assured him, touching his side gently. “I know you don’t want that. But for a season. If something is hurting the flocks, I think you might be best qualified to spot it. Maybe even treat it.”

Neil stared, speechless with his mind spinning in circles.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important, you know I wouldn’t,” Andrew said softly. “Think it over? I won’t bring it up again until you do, I promise.”

Neil just gaped.

“What can I do for you gents?” Roland swaggered up to them, smug in victory, then seemed to read the mood. “Or I can come back later...”

“I came to settle Aaron’s tab,” Andrew said with a glance at his brother. “But now I’m not so sure.”

“Huh,” Roland said, looking at them as well. Katelyn was actually smiling; had Aaron hidden enough of his true personality to somehow be charming? What a world, Neil thought. “He looks like they’ll be a while.”



“Do you need the room urgently, Roland?”

The innkeeper grimaced. “Not really, but I don’t like him. He was riling up my patrons all last night and this morning, sermonising and preaching. I’d rather he didn’t stay. Your brother is a real ass.”

“I’m painfully aware of that.”

They watched Aaron and Katelyn for a minute, then Andrew sighed and called over, “Aaron! Staying or going?”

Aaron jumped and scowled over at them. He exchanged a few more words with Katelyn, who leaned back in her seat with a secretive little smile. “Staying, for a few days.”

“Fantastic,” Andrew muttered. “Roland, try not to punch him anywhere breakable if he gets out of order.”

“I’ll do my best. Do you want a room? I have one free now, one of the merchants left.”

Andrew looked to Neil, who thought back to how pleasant it had been to sleep side by side, and wake up together. He chewed the inside of his cheek and lightly curled his fingers around Andrew’s.

“You can stay with me,” he said quietly, and ignored Roland’s grin. “Come back later tonight. I need – I need the day to myself. To think. I mean, work.”

“Alright,” Andrew replied, calm as a still lake. “I’ll see you later.”

Neil hesitated, pressed a light kiss to his lips, and darted out the door. He was in the woods before he knew it, and plunged onwards into their cool, damp, quiet depths.

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It wasn’t that he didn’t want to help, Neil thought as he sat on an old log somewhere deep in the wood. It wasn’t that he couldn’t help.

It was that it would be so dangerous for him.

And what about his life here? He couldn’t just uproot himself again – couldn’t, wouldn’t, could not face doing that again and ripping himself away from the home he’d made.

It would only be for a season, Andrew had said.

But a season could be long enough for his father to find him again.

His fingers crept up to his shoulder, tracing the branded W burned into his skin, the same one seared on the flanks of every one of his father’s herd. He could still smell the char of the burn, his smoking flesh, even all these years later.

These dragonlands were on the other side of two mountain ranges, he reminded himself. He was far away from his father’s territories.

But the trade in dragons, their breeding and training, was not so large a field as one might think. There were only so many wild places unconquered by man, only so many breeds and flocks. It

wouldn't matter to a really determined wrangler if he had to trek over two mountain ranges to find the right bull stud or mare to rejuvenate his herd. Borders were for men, and the dragonlands in any country existed apart from them, wild and free. A bounty hunter wouldn't bat an eye at the journey either.

He was safe hiding away in this nameless frontier town, protected by his friends and his skills in service to the town. It was a vague place, easy to disappear into, and protective of its more permanent inhabitants.

The dragonlands were even bigger and vaguer – but much easier to track somebody in. Here, friends might set down false trails, or he could lay them himself with disguises. He could vanish into the woods or backtrack through streams or race on the roads to the south. Out in the wild, it was leagues and leagues of flat, barren country with nowhere to hide. From the right vantage point, you could see for weeks' worth of travel in any direction, and see all the herds and animals and people crawling about like ants. A campfire would light up the sky for leagues around on a clear night.

But maybe nobody was looking for him anymore.

It had been so long, it had been more than fifteen years since his mother ran away with him. It had been more than six years since her death. Maybe his father's people couldn't care anymore to track down whispers of a child who was most likely dead in some anonymous ditch or filthy alleyway by now, like his mother.

Maybe his father and all his people were dead, and Neil would never know.

But that was too much to ask for, too much to hope for. His mother had told him to never stop running, never stop hiding. There was no way to ever be certain. No way to ever be truly safe.

He put his head in his hands, his pulse throbbing behind his eyes.

Andrew had no idea what he was asking, what he was asking Neil to risk.

Except, he did know. He knew that the herds were in some kind of danger; Neil trusted him enough to believe it, whatever the cause might be. Andrew knew that if there was a danger, the whole business of dragons could collapse. And with it, war would roll over the continent like an inexorable wave. There was more at stake here than Neil's childhood ghosts.

And he would be with Andrew the whole time – who knew his ranges down to the pebbles, and was on a first-name basis with every bush and flower. There could be nobody better to have at his side if he needed to hide in the dragonlands. Andrew was more than capable, more than cunning enough, to hold his own in a fight or a race for safety. Surely, with Andrew's cleverness and toughness and strength, and Neil's magic and herbs and intuition, they could avoid or head off any trouble that came their way.

And... Neil missed the dragons. For better or worse, he had grown up around them. And he missed getting to walk through a herd of them, feeling their rough scales breathing under his hand, seeing the sunlight glow through their wings, the fiery flumes of their breath. He missed their songs. He missed the freedom of flying on the yearlings' backs. Hearing the stories from Andrew and his friends could never quite compare, could never quite fill the ache of knowing such majesty of nature was alive out there, and he was hiding himself away from it.

Neil rubbed through his hair.

The forest witch had told him he had a great choice ahead of him.

Damn her and her clouds. Neil didn't want to die. He didn't want to put Andrew in danger. He didn't want to lose this calm, quiet, beautiful life he had made. He didn't want it to change.

But he knew, deep down, he had already made his decision.

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He arrived back at his home close to dusk, walking slow and careful in the deepening night. Andrew was in his home again, and Neil spared a moment to wonder if they could just stay there forever, together. Screw responsibility and the rest of the world; why couldn't they just stay in Neil's odd little house that he had built, eat dinner, tend goats, and fall asleep naked and calm together? Why couldn't they just have that?

He closed the door behind himself and sat down in his usual chair. Andrew greeted him with a gentle stroke to his hair, but didn't push him to talk. They ate in silence, and when all the bowls were clean, Neil sat himself in Andrew's lap and rested his head on a strong, broad shoulder.

Andrew's arms curled around him tight, protective, safe. And warm, so warm and soothing.

"I will go with you to the dragonlands," Neil whispered.

## Chapter 2

Warnings: semi-explicit sex, reference to Andrew's backstory with Tilda and Luther, Luther's bigotry and Nicky's abuse, death of dragons, sickness, near-death experiences.

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Neil stood in the front room of his home, hugging himself and looking around.

He had stopped up the windows, thoroughly banked the fire. Everything vaguely perishable was stored in the cellar. His clothes and materials were closed up in chests. His witch's tools were either packed and ready to leave with him, or securely locked away where no one could harm themselves by using them. His garden would go wild in his absence, but it might be better for the thistles that way. He had driven his goats and chickens to the inn, where Roland would care for them in his little stables. He had said his goodbyes to those he saw regularly, and had given Katelyn ownership of almost all his medicinal stores in his absence, and an exhaustive journal detailing their use. He had left a coded message made of buds and leaves out in the forest for his friend, though no doubt her clouds had informed her already.

All was in readiness. His house was in order.

He just had to leave it.

Andrew was waiting outside patiently, horses ready and loaded with their packs and supplies. He had said his farewells with his brother, who was planning to stay, of all things, and study with Katelyn for a few weeks. He would be her apprentice in exchange for room and board, and do his best to absorb her eminently practical wisdom. Neil didn't especially care, other than the fact it settled Andrew to know his annoyance of a brother would be somewhere close by and not chancing it travelling back to Kingstown on his own.

Neil reached out to touch the sturdy mantel of his hearth, tracing a nick in the wood where he had gotten too vigorous with the adze, and slipped. He looked back to the charm dangling from the lintel of his bedroom, swaying gently in the breeze creeping in through his shoddy window casements.

He couldn't help feeling that he would not set foot here again, in his little home. And he didn't know if that was normal worry, or a hint from his witch's intuition. He patted the chimneybreast with a fond hand, and walked out the door.

He made sure it was all locked up, and turned his back on his house.

"Thank you," Andrew said quietly when he was mounted on the spare horse. "I know what this means to you. And I appreciate you coming to help me."

Neil nodded, brushing a hand over his watery eyes. Andrew only knew some of what it meant, but even that was enough. Damn wind. "Let's go."

Andrew nudged his horse into a smart trot, and Neil did the same. He looked back once, at his house with the little nameless town sitting just behind it. His home for over six years.

He turned back to the road ahead, stretching wild and unknown up towards the dragonlands.

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Andrew set a good pace, Neil discovered. They alternated between loping canters, easy trots and leading the horses on foot. Well familiar with the trick, Neil knew it would conserve the horses' energy and build their stamina, and actually make the journey faster overall than if they had galloped the whole time. It also stopped the chafes and blisters from the saddle getting too bad; he hadn't ridden a horse in over six years, and had lost the knack for enduring it.

They rode for most of the day without any breaks, aside from watering and resting the horses. They ate hard travel-bread and dried meat in the saddle at noon, with a few gulps of water to wash it down. Andrew was quiet, but Neil didn't feel up to conversation himself, so the silence didn't feel

strange. He wasn't sure what Andrew was thinking – outside of the vulnerability of their bedroom arrangements, he tended to have a rather hard-to-read face – but Neil was preoccupied by fending off unwelcome memories of his years with his mother, and worries over what this expedition might mean for his life expectancy.

As they travelled, it wasn't immediately clear that they had entered wild, uncontrolled territory. The ground began to slope up and become rockier, as they headed in the vague direction of the mountain steppes lurking on the horizon, but it wasn't as if the world abruptly changed a league away from the town. The only discernible difference Neil could see at first was the lack of people – no houses in semi-hidden view, no fences around small fields, no herds of anything. No distant calls of woodcutters or townspeople, no lowing of cattle or grunting pigs in their pens. To be fair there was little enough of that at the frontier anyway, but even those small blips had ceased. They saw not another soul, nor tracks of any other than the two sets of horse-prints likely left by Andrew and his brother from the other direction a few days previous. The road also began to peter out, the hard-beaten path lined with stone giving way to a narrow track, until towards evening it was little more than a vague outline snaking through the land, more mud and dust than anything else.

As evening came on, Andrew seemed to stir from his quiet, introspective fugue and look about them with a more critical eye. He seemed to spot something over to the east and turned his horse's head wordlessly. Neil tugged gently on the reins of his horse and nudged its belly with his feet until it followed Andrew. They left the road without ceremony to walk through some scrubby grass and rocks, winding around a couple of boulders and a few patches of brambles until they found what seemed to be a semi-permanent camp.

It sat in the corner made by two large slabs of rock thrusting up from the earth at an angle; a smallish area a few paces wide with flattened earth and grass marking its floor. There was a rock-lined fire pit sunk into the ground, and a small stack of firewood hidden in the lee of the upright slabs, kept dry and out of the weather. Andrew dismounted and used one of his knives to dig in the earth in a few spots around the place and under the roots of some coarse shrubs, and uncovered some sealed jars of food. He began unloading his horse, dropping the packs and saddle beside one of the slabs and giving the mare a perfunctory brush, before letting her roam and graze on the grass and weeds about the place. Neil followed suit, trusting that the horses wouldn't run off in the night if Andrew did.

Andrew began making the fire, sat cross-legged on the hard earth with the packs around him and a serious look on his face. Neil quietly settled his own supplies and placed his bedroll in the lee of one of the slabs for later, then sat on the other side of the pit.

The ground was rocky and unforgiving under his aching legs, and he grimaced in anticipation of a sore night. Clearly he'd been too pampered, in his house with its comfortable straw mattress and pillows and blankets. He'd slept in much harsher and more awful conditions on the run with his mother, after all. He knew he would get used to it, and would just have to put up with the discomfort for a week or so until then.

He stretched his legs and back carefully as Andrew threw together something hot and satisfying on the fire. They ate in silence, the ruddy glow of the flames slowly becoming the only source of light as the sun set at Neil's back. The moon hadn't quite risen yet, but the stars blinked into view one by one.

"Did you make this place?" Neil asked eventually, the only words he'd spoken since leaving his home. Andrew blinked in surprise at the sound of his voice, apparently startled out of his own head.

“I found it,” he replied a few moments later. “Some bandits were using it as a base for a while. Then they got themselves killed and I repurposed it. It’s useful to have a few places like this, to store things and know where shelter can be out here. I have a few locations in mind for our route back to the herd, so it won’t be completely uncivilised the whole way.”

Neil smiled and had a few sips of water from the leather skin. “Good to know. My legs are feeling more delicate than they ought. I’ll toughen up soon enough though.”

Andrew hummed acknowledgement and looked away to watch the distant shape of a small flock of bats taking wing, vaguely silhouetted against the brightening stars and moonlight.

“You’re all quiet,” Neil pushed gently. He was used to the quiet when he was alone, but with a fire and a full stomach he was used to a story or a fond touch from Andrew, and this calm but cool distance was a little unnerving.

“I don’t mean to be.”

“It’s alright – you don’t have to talk if you don’t want. It’s just different. All of this is different.”

Andrew looked back to him for that, his eyes glinting strangely in the flickering firelight. “Are you alright?”

Neil nodded and rubbed at his jaw. “It’s a little hard, being away from home. I’m missing it. But I suppose that’s natural, after six years in the same place.”

“I suppose.” Andrew considered him thoughtfully. “I’m not used to travelling with other people. It’s always me on my own out here, in the quiet. Until I brought Aaron with me, it had just been me on the road for years.”

Neil watched him right back.

“It’s strange, having you out here with me.” Andrew mused. It seemed like he might say more, but his jaw remained tight and shut after that, his thoughts and attention likewise.

Neil wasn’t offended, and rolled himself into the swaddle of his bedroll soon after. It was a nifty thing that the wild-folk had come up with – two blankets sewn together and stuffed with wool and feathers and down to make a soft and warm base, with another quilt stitched on top at one side to make a kind of flap for a person to slide into, and tuck around themselves. Andrew had loaned his brother his spare, which Neil had inherited for the journey. It softened as much of the ground as possible, and kept the worst of the cold earth from him. With a saddlebag for a pillow, it was nicer than many cold holes Neil had slept in when on the run, though quite a step down from his bed at home. It would keep him warm enough, however, especially with the shimmery heat of the fire slowly burning down to ash beside him. He fell asleep as the moon began to climb in the sky, watching Andrew staring serenely up at the canopy of stars, thoughtful and remote as the moon herself.

At daybreak, Neil was heartened to see Andrew *had* slept at some point in the night, as his bedroll was unfurled and warm to the touch when Neil checked its emptiness with the tips of his fingers. When he strained his ears he could vaguely discern the sound of him making water a ways from their camp, and sat up in his bedroll.

The sun was peeking a little above the horizon and Neil took a minute to admire the sky; he was used to being surrounded by woods and hills and the vague trails of woodsmoke from the town, and it had been quite some time since he'd seen so much bare sky stretched out above him. Its pink and orange blushes tangled coyly with the bright, fresh blue and the occasional puffy white cloud, a silent symphony and wealth of knowledge far above him. For a moment he regretted not having his friend's gift for cloud-reading and stargazing; he thought she would have much to say about the portents of such a sky. But even as he watched, the blue began to grow in strength and the pinky reds to wane, and the birds to wake and take wing, calling out to each other in the fresh new day.

He had got himself up and some breakfast on the newly-stoked fire when Andrew returned to camp. He was quiet, but Neil let him be, and they prepared themselves for another long day of travel. Neil packed up their bags and rounded up the horses while Andrew re-buried his jars of supplies, stocked up the firewood pile again and obscured the more obvious traces of their night.

They were back on the little track again within the hour, and set off at a slowly increasing speed to warm the horses. That day passed much the same as the first, in quiet and focussed travel. Neil watched around them to distract himself from sour memories or gloomy thoughts.

They kept moving generally upwards and to the north, heading for a kind of plateau looming their side of the mountain range. The ground became increasingly rocky and gravelly, with the occasional large boulder deposited on its own or slabs and bluffs pushing up through the earth. The track had completely disappeared into the low, scrubby grass and they now followed instead Andrew's own internal maps.

Shortly after noon they came upon a giant skull lashed to a post, standing in the middle of nothing. It was more than three times larger than a cow's skull, and the fan of intricate spikes and gruesome teeth in its jaw belied its origins of a more reptilian kind. It wasn't the largest Neil had seen, and guessed it was from an immature adolescent or yearling, perhaps. It sat in complete isolation, no marking around it. Andrew nodded to it with a grunt of satisfaction.

"This marks the unofficial border to this area," he explained gruffly. "We're now out of the frontier and into the dragonlands proper. Welcome to the wild."

Neil smiled and reached out to gently touch the teeth of the skull, each one longer than the length of his hand. He murmured a funereal blessing and picked a flower to rest on top of it.

"What are you doing?"

"Paying my respects," Neil said, and nudged his horse to walk on.

"We're making good time," Andrew commented to the clouds a little while later, and Neil looked at him in surprise. "You travel well."

"Practice," Neil shrugged. "How long do you think it will take to get to your herd?"

Andrew squinted at their surroundings and raised his hands to take measurements of their distances, presumably referencing them against his own internal calculations. "The flock will have likely moved further north since I left with Aaron. Probably about a week until we find the previous location. Then we'll see how far they've moved."

Neil nodded thoughtfully, more than a little pleased to be coaxing words out of his friend again. "Did you leave them on their own?"



“No,” Andrew said with a hint of a frown. “Othertimes, I might have. They’re dragons, they’re very tough creatures. But with everything else going on... I asked Nicky and Erik to mind them until I returned.”

“Your cousin?”

Andrew grunted.

“I didn’t realise he was out here too. And who’s Erik?”

“Nicky’s partner. They had a handfasting and betrothal ceremony last year. They plan on a marriage of some kind.”

“That’s lovely,” Neil smiled. “I could officiate for them, if they like. I know a real priest might not, but obviously I don’t have those prejudices.”

Andrew didn’t reply, looking off towards the mountains again, almost like he was trying to see his charges flying about up there.

“So Aaron is the odd one out in the family, then?” Neil teased gently, drawing his horse alongside Andrew’s and trying to catch his eye.

His face twitched, but he gave no reply. He just nudged his horse into a faster gait and Neil followed suit with a quiet sigh.

That night they made camp just in the grass where they stopped at dusk, Andrew dismounting and unloading the horses without a word. Neil guessed they were too far from another of his little spots, and resigned himself to a night in the open. Better to get it over with, he told himself, and get used to it sooner.

Andrew had drawn his knives to go hunt for some meat when a quiet, coughing bark rippled through the air. Neil tilted his head to better catch the sound, then mimicked it as best he could. He could feel Andrew staring at him but Neil just sat down on the ground and listened to the bark, this time closer.

Step by step, a fox approached their camp, ears laid back anxiously. Neil slowly lowered himself to lie on his stomach, at the fox’s level. It approached him shyly, making inquisitive little whines as it sniffed at his face and hair. Neil mimicked them back, allowing himself to be sniffed and nudged with a cold nose. He nudged back, playfully nuzzling into the young creature’s ruff. It seemed like an adolescent, skinny and unsure about hunting away from its family den. It yipped and nuzzled him back, tongue lolling out in a grin. Neil rolled on his back, hands up like limp paws on his chest, and laughed as the little fox pounced on his chest a couple times, panting and chuffing.

It licked his face a few times, then settled down with its head on his chest, tail wagging a little. Neil smiled and scratched the fox’s ruff gently, earning a contented whine. He settled a hand on its back, feeling its rapid little heartbeat and quick breaths under his hand. The stars were coming out above him, and he hummed and grunted soothingly in fox-speak, like a mother to her kit.



He heard Andrew slowly settle on the ground beside him, a particular kind of startled silence to him.

“Foxes are drawn to me,” Neil explained in a hushed voice. “Wolves sometimes too. Mostly the young ones. My friend the forest witch has an affinity for birds, they’d nest in her hair if she let them.”

“You never say her name,” Andrew observed quietly. “Is it a secret?”

“No, she just changes it all the time. She was a robin the last time we spoke, and a lark the time before.”

Neil heard a slight rustle as if Andrew had turned his head, and turned his own to meet a serious gaze.

“You keep surprising me,” Andrew murmured.

Neil smiled at him. “I’m full of strangeness, it comes out in bursts sometimes.”

Andrew didn’t reply, but his eyes narrowed a little as he watched Neil. Neil waited for him to speak again, or move off to hunt, but he seemed content to lie on the ground in silence and stare.

Normally it wouldn't have gotten to Neil, but after two days of the almost-silent treatment and battling his own memories all day, he was feeling a little raw.

"I don't mind if you don't feel like talking," he said, a little tightly, "But I'd prefer to know why, and if it's something I've done, rather than this thing you're doing where you ignore me all day and don't respond when I talk. It's hurtful."

Andrew's eyebrows rose and his gaze flicked away for a little while as he thought. The little fox chirped soothingly to Neil, and he rubbed through its ruff in apology for tensing up.

"I apologise," Andrew said at length. "I didn't realise it seemed that way. It's very strange having you here."

"So you said before."

"I'll try to explain." Andrew paused, turning back to watch the stars above them, and the moon starting to shiver into the sky. "Life out here is very... barren. Even when you choose such a life, it gets to you after a while. The silence, the isolation. Some people go mad if they stay out here too long. When I first left the cities and ran out here with Nicky, it was hard on me. The circumstances of our leaving were not pretty, and we were both hurting. I welcomed the silence at first. It was a relief not to have anyone but my own thoughts to talk to. Well, and Nicky, but he isn't built the same. He needs people; he settled in the herder camp to the east, where Wymack and his closest people do most of the war-training for the adolescent dragons. He prefers it there, it has enough people to keep him happy and enough isolation to keep him steady."

Andrew paused, seeming lost in his thoughts. Andrew didn't talk much about Nicky or why they had left Luther's house, and his twin, behind. Neil had guessed it wasn't a happy departure, but didn't want to push. When it seemed Andrew might disappear into his silence again, Neil reached out with his spare hand to touch Andrew's arm. Andrew's gaze flicked to him briefly, then he cleared his throat.

"Out here, you need to box things up, in your head. You can't concentrate on your herd if you're stuck in an old memory, or wishing you were elsewhere. And thinking of some things can be too painful, when you know you're weeks of travel away from those things. Like a bed, or a meal cooked by someone else, or people you miss. It can eat away at you and wreck you, if you let it."

Neil gently stroked his fingers over Andrew's bicep.

"So when I'm here," Andrew continued doggedly, "I don't think about the frontier. I don't think about my family. I don't think about the past. I don't think about you, or your home, or the town, or anything like that. I concentrate on my work, on my flock. It's all separate. I don't think about those things unless I have to, unless I need to. When it all gets too much, when I can't help but think of those things, when the isolation is too much and everything feels too crowded in my head and I can't escape old memories, I let myself think about them. And it helps. Until I can travel back. And when I'm at the frontier, or with you, I try not to think about my herd. It works better that way. I can concentrate only on where I am."

"And having me here breaks open all those boxes," Neil said quietly.

Andrew nodded. He reached into his shirt and pulled out the charm he wore around his neck. He held it in his hand, fingers fidgeting with the cord and the soft material of the bag.

“I don’t let myself think of you unless I have to,” Andrew said. “You, and your house, are a kind of focal point. I know where you’ll be, what the house will be like, what we’ll do. I know we’ll have dinner together, drink tea, go to bed maybe. I know you’ll listen to me and whatever spills out of my head, and talk with me. I know that when I’m with you, in your house, I don’t have to worry about my herd or the dangers of being out here or constantly being alert. I can relax. It’s a certainty. Knowing you will be there to welcome me back, is like having a – it’s good.” He cut himself off, lips pressing into a hard line.

Neil gently dislodged the young fox, who huffed and trotted off to resume hunting. Neil turned on his side and rested his arm across Andrew’s stomach, leaning his chin on Andrew’s shoulder.

“I miss you too, you know,” he replied quietly. “I like having you in my home. I enjoy your company, in whatever form that takes.” He pressed a light kiss to Andrew’s arm. “I’m sorry that me being here muddles you and makes travelling strange. But I think it would help if you were to talk. Stop you from dwelling too much on whatever is going on up there, let it out instead of letting it fester.” He lifted a hand and gently touched Andrew’s temple.

“Probably,” Andrew admitted with a sigh, closing his eyes briefly. “It’ll be an adjustment.”

“It’s not easy for me either. The past two days have been hard – my own boxes overspilling and making a mess, I suppose. Have I ever told you about my mother?”

Andrew turned his head to meet Neil’s eyes. He shook his head minutely.

Neil smiled sadly. “She was a very strong, very old-blood witch. She taught me nearly everything I know. I don’t like talking about my father, you might have noticed. Suffice to say, my scars are from him. My mother took me and ran when I was young, when she couldn’t take it anymore. We travelled for years, always on the move, always afraid and on the lookout for his people and his vengeance. Life with her was – harsh. Her fear made her cruel, sometimes almost as cruel as my father. When I was younger, I told myself it was all out of love for me that she was doing such things, and that I loved her too for doing it. I think by the end, it was more survival and habit than love. But that was still something, still kept me alive. I don’t know, it was complicated.”

This time, Andrew gently took him out of his memories with a touch to his hand.

“She died some years ago. My father caught up with us. We got away at first, but she eventually succumbed to her wounds. I’ve been alone since. I’m safe at the frontier, there’s few places better to hide. But travelling always reminds me of her, and her death, and him.”

Andrew gently pressed his thumb under Neil’s eye, which was watering a little. He blinked away the edges of tears welling up, and coughed to clear his chest.

“Thank you for coming anyway,” Andrew said quietly.

Neil nodded acknowledgement. “No more silent treatment?”

“No, no more. I will try.”

“Thank you.” Neil kissed his fingers and shuffled a bit closer to him. He swallowed and consciously lightened his voice. “So, when you say you think of me, what kind of thoughts are they?”

“Memories, mostly. Conversations we’ve had. Some... other things.”

“What other things?”

Andrew raised an eyebrow at him, then made a crudely expressive jerking-off gesture with his hand.



Neil laughed and felt his cheeks flush despite himself. He covered his face in his hand. It reminded him almost painfully of one of their conversations years earlier, when Andrew had first propositioned him. They’d been talking idly about that sort of thing, and Neil had been saying that he had never been with anyone or seen anyone he wanted to be with, but he was curious about what it might feel like. Andrew had offered to blow him, perfectly nonchalant. It had probably been meant reasonably seductively, looking back, but Neil had been too confused by the unfamiliar term to pick up on it; he’d grown up in a hundred different places, but had never heard that exact piece of slang before. He’d asked Andrew to explain what he meant. And he had. In such graphic and exacting and emotionless detail that Neil had been rather horrified. He had awkwardly turned Andrew down that time. It had taken a few more months before Neil brought it up again, to say he was curious to try it.

And years later, here they were.

“I guess I should have known,” Neil smiled into his palm, though he was less embarrassed than oddly pleased by the admission. “Do you really...? Out here? In the open?”

“There’s no one else out here to see.”

Well, Neil couldn’t really fault that logic.

“I suppose you wouldn’t think of me like that?” Andrew asked, the edge of his lips tugging up a little in amusement.

Neil covered his face completely. “Occasionally,” he admitted into his hands, then laughed at his own shyness. He knew Andrew’s body very well, and Andrew knew him in return. He knew what quiet sounds Andrew made in pleasure, his face when he was finished, when he was getting close. He knew where Andrew flushed or leaned into a touch, knew how to make him feel good, knew the feeling of his member in hand, in his mouth, and within himself. He wasn’t ashamed to admit he sometimes thought of all that when he needed a release of his own. And Andrew knew all the same things about him, probably even more as Neil tended to lose himself in the moment while Andrew kept himself a bit more contained. Surely a conversation about how they took their own pleasure shouldn’t make him feel like a fumbling novice all over again.

“More surprises from you,” Andrew murmured, and smoothed a hand slowly up the edge of Neil’s thigh. Neil shivered and for a moment his heart raced in anticipation. But then he shifted on his side and was reminded how sore he was from riding, and how tired he was in his bones. With a smile, he caught Andrew’s hand on his thigh and lifted it away.

“Not tonight. But I did pack a jar of wildflower tea, just in case.”

Andrew hummed acknowledgement and stroked the back of Neil’s hand in understanding. When they set up their bedrolls that night, they were close together to share heat, and Neil drifted to sleep feeling much more settled.

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For the next week they made steady progress across the gradually spreading plain before them, stretching majestic and bare in all directions. And instead of travelling in silence, when they were walking or trotting the horses, they talked.

It was slow and faltering at first from Andrew, but Neil listened patiently and coaxed words from him with delicate questions and gentle smiles. In return, he gave up a few stories about his years with his mother. He stayed away from the worst parts, the closest calls with his father’s agents, and talked instead of the lessons she’d given him when she was in an agreeable mood, how she had nurtured his growing skills and knowledge of their shared connection with the earth and magic. At the end of the week, he recounted with a sad smile how a pack of wolves had come to their aid once in a fight, forming a defensive ring of snarling jaws around them both.

“Could you do that with foxes?” Andrew asked, moving easily with the motion of his horse under him. “Call them to your aid?”

“I don’t know if I could call a whole den like that,” Neil replied. “Foxes tend to be more solitary when they’re grown, anyway. I suppose I haven’t had the occasion to try.”



Andrew hummed thoughtfully, watching him for a little while.

“What?” Neil smiled self-consciously.

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

Andrew sighed and rubbed at his roughening jaw, scratching a little at his growing stubby beard. “I enjoy your witch stories.”

Neil grinned, feeling warmth spread through him. “Really?”

“Mm. I grew up believing in nothing, thinking it was all fairytales and lies made to distract children from the real world.” His expression darkened, and Neil knew he was thinking of his own dark years in overcrowded and callous orphanages, and the abuses he’d suffered there. Neil reached out to him, not quite able to close the distance, but Andrew smiled faintly at his outstretched hand and continued.

“I didn’t believe in folklore, or the religion being spouted on street-corners by the missionaries. The only thing I thought might be real were the dragons, because of the teeth and claws merchants and nobles owned. I still thought it might be lies, the teeth from cougars or wolves or something, but I was curious. And when I came out here, I found them. Dragons were real after all. And I met you, and realised magic could be real too. The world wasn’t quite as hollow and empty as I’d always thought.”

Neil nudged his horse closer and reached out to squeeze Andrew’s hand on his reins, leaning close over the gap between their horses. Andrew looked away, but he let go of the reins to squeeze back.

“I have lots of witch stories,” Neil promised him. “I’m sure I won’t run out even if we’re out here for a year.”

“You’re laughing at me.”

“I promise I’m not.”

Andrew glanced at his face for confirmation, and Neil leaned over to kiss his cheek. Andrew looked almost shocked at the gesture, swallowing hard. Neil squeezed his fingers again, then let go.

“I do have a story to ask from you, though.”

Andrew raised his brows in question.

“What exactly is the history between you, Nicky, Aaron and your uncle? You’ve never told me the full story, and I think I should know if I’ll be meeting Nicky out here. I don’t want to say something in poor taste by accident.”

Andrew sighed and nodded. “I suppose. As long as you tell me more witch things after.”

“It’s a deal.”

Andrew took a little while to collect his thoughts, and his voice was tight and batten-down when he spoke. “The woman who gave birth to me and Aaron was called Tilda. Her brother is Luther.

She was an opium addict. Luther never knew who our father was or the circumstances of the conception, and he'd cast her out years previous for her addictions. She gave us both as babies to an orphanage when it came down to a choice between feeding us and feeding her habit. Apparently a day or so later she regretted it, and took one of us back. Aaron. She fled to Luther, begging for help. She never told him she'd had twins – maybe she didn't remember. Luther said she showed up at his door, dressed in rags and holding a screaming baby, high off her head. He took the baby from her and turned her away. He found her dead from an overdose a week later, outside the back door of his church."

Andrew stopped for a moment to breathe, closing his eyes as he gathered himself.

"I grew up in the Kingstown orphanages, as you know. We tended to get passed around if beds were needed or one burned down. When I became too old for them, I was turned out on the street. I started begging and learned to steal. I joined a gang for a few years; cutpurses and cat-burglars mostly. One night I got caught by a city constable as I was trying to lift a diamond necklace from a noble's house, and the constable got quite a shock. The man was one of the new faith's followers, and took his sermons from Luther's growing church. He brought me to Luther's door, saying his nephew the altarboy had been caught stealing. Everyone was very confused when Aaron turned up in the doorway. It was obvious we were twins, and Luther agreed to take me in too."

"What did you think of that?" Neil asked quietly.

Andrew shrugged. "It was a bed and free food. And I'd always wanted some sort of family. At first it was alright; Luther was strict, but I'd had much worse in the orphanages. He told me about Tilda, and what he guessed about her actions after we were born. I got to know my brother, and Luther's son Nicholas – Nicky. But after a while it became apparent there was an ugliness under Luther's saintly face. His sermons were full of fire and hatred and violence, and he frequently sent Nicky away to a 'special school'. Nicky always came back shaking and thin and sad. It was a year or two before I found out what the school was for."

"What?"

Andrew's face twisted, his hands clenching. "It was to 'cure' young boys who wanted other boys, to teach them how wrong and terrible they were, how they would suffer in eternal damnation for their sins, and should suffer now to punish them for their misdeeds." Andrew took another slow breath. "Luther was very hard on his son. I think Nicky tried to learn and stop himself from wanting, but Luther kept catching him looking at the baker's boy, or the smith's apprentice, and then Nicky would be sent away again. It was killing him inside each time."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

Neil raised his eyebrows and took his hand again.

"I knew how to sneak around a lot better than Nicky did," Andrew replied. "It was years before Luther caught me with one of the choirboys. And when he did, he vowed to send me to the school with Nicky at daybreak, and not welcome either of us back until we had learned for good or died in the attempt to beat it out of us. Well, I wasn't having any of that, and I was done with watching Nicky suffer. I convinced him we should run away. I tried to convince Aaron to come too, but... he'd been raised by Luther, treasured and rewarded for his adherence to the faith while Nicky disappointed over and over. Luther was paying for his schooling, and enrolment at the university,



and he felt he owed Luther for that. Besides, he had the same views as my uncle. He agreed not to raise the alarm as we left, but that was the extent of his help. He said he didn't want to see us either until we had repented. So we left."

"Where did you go?" Neil asked, stroking his hand gently.

"The streets, at first. I got us somewhere to sleep for a few nights, thanks to my years with the gang, and they owed me for not ratting them out. But I knew that Nicky couldn't cope with that kind of life; for all Luther's cruelty, Nicky had been raised to a degree of wealth and comfort that I had not. He wouldn't last on the streets, and he was too fragile to care about any decision. I didn't know what to do, until I remembered all the stories about dragons, and how free and wild the people are at the frontier. I brought us out here. We found our lives. Nicky healed, in time. Meeting Erik helped a long way with that. Nicky hasn't been back to the lowlands since we left. When I brought Aaron out here and we met with Nicky and Erik, it went about as well as Aaron meeting *you* did."

He went quiet, and Neil let him. They walked their horses in silence, and Neil kept hold of his hand.

"I'm sorry," Neil murmured eventually. "I understand why you didn't tell me before. That is... awful. Can I ask one more thing?"

Andrew grunted.

"Why did you go for Aaron for help? If there's so much bad blood between you all, why bother?"

Andrew sighed. "I knew he would be a physicker by now, well-trained. He was discreet when we were young, and I thought I could trust him to help me if there was some sickness affecting the dragons – that he'd put the crisis above whatever feelings he had towards me. And it had been such a long time. I suppose I was hoping he'd changed, seen the cruelty in Luther's zealotry, maybe that he wanted to see us again too. Instead it seems like Luther drew him even deeper into the faith after we left."

"I'm sorry," Neil said again. "Thank you."

Andrew nodded and spurred his horse back to a canter, letting go of Neil's hand. They rode on in silence for the rest of the afternoon, and Neil gave Andrew the space he needed to collect himself and put away painful memories after their conversation.

When they had set up their campfire for the night and finished eating, Andrew surprised him by moving to Neil's side and laying down with his head on Neil's thigh.

"You promised me witch stories."

"So I did," Neil said, and talked until his voice was hoarse, his hand resting in Andrew's hair. They fell asleep slumped together, their bedrolls pulled vaguely over themselves for warmth, limbs tangled.

Neil woke to the sound of an unfamiliar male voice. "Aww, would you look at that!"

He startled upright, Andrew jumping and jerking away at the movement too. He had a knife out towards the strangers in a heartbeat, but relented as soon as he got a look at the two visitors

standing on the other side of the dead fire.

“For fuck’s sake, Nicky,” Andrew grumbled as he put the knife away.

Neil squinted sleepily at the two tall men who had snuck up on them. One was dark and the other fair, and both were at least a head taller than both himself and Andrew. They wore the tough clothes of the wildfolk, their hair long and decorated with feathers and braids, and easy smiles on their weathered faces. They were strong and broad, the blonde one especially, and Neil guessed he must be Nicky.

“Who is this beautiful man?” The dark-haired one asked, beaming and coming to sit near Neil.

“The one you were cuddling?”

“Fuck off,” Andrew said.

“My name is Neil,” Neil introduced himself with a cautious smile, holding out his hand. “I’m a witch.”

“Oh, lovely,” the man grinned and shook his hand enthusiastically. “I’m Nicky, Andrew’s cousin, and this is my husband Erik.”

Neil blinked at them in surprise. “*You’re* Nicky? But you and Andrew don’t look at all alike.”

Nicky laughed good-naturedly. “I know, I know. I take after my mother, she’s from the desert tribes to the south.”

“You are *the* Neil?” Erik, the fair one, asked him with an amused smile. He had a slight accent, one Neil had heard before across the mountains. “Ah, I see now. Yes, very beautiful.”

“You can both fuck off,” Andrew grouched, and stomped about packing away their camp and getting breakfast ready.

“What are you talking about?” Neil asked.

“Andrew is always talking about his witch friend Neil,” Nicky grinned, and fanned his face like a swooning lady. “And how beautiful and charming you are. He sighs over you, you know.”

Neil blinked in surprise, his neck warming in embarrassment.

“I do *not*,” Andrew insisted, glaring at the two visitors. “And what do you two want? You’re supposed to be watching my dragons.”

“Calm down, calm down,” Nicky said, rolling his eyes. “They’re very close. We saw your campfire last night and thought we should check it out, in case it was bandits or poachers. Instead we found you, being surprisingly adorable.”

Andrew swore at him some more, but Neil could tell he wasn’t angry, maybe just a little startled at their arrival. Neil watched the three of them banter and tease each other over the fire, and smiled to himself. Seemed like Andrew had found a family after all.

He was surprised by Nicky’s chatter and irreverence; from Andrew’s story, he had been expecting someone withdrawn and fearful, ashamed of himself and terrified of the consequences. But then Neil saw how he and Erik smiled at each other, and thought he understood.

“So,” Nicky said with a cheeky grin as they all sat down to eat some porridge, “Has Andrew whisked you away to the wild to make an honest man out of you? Or a very dishonest one?”

“No,” Neil smiled back despite himself; Nicky’s playfulness was infectious. “He thought I might be able to help with the dragons, and figure out what’s affecting them.”

“Oh, Andrew,” Nicky said in a scolding tone, “Firstly, I will tell you again there is nothing wrong with your damn dragons. Secondly, what a waste! I thought you’d have jumped his bones already! And if not, you definitely should.”

“Thank you, and shut your mouth,” Andrew shot back acidly.

“I’m very good at multitasking,” Neil added in with a sideways look to Andrew. “I’m sure we’ll have time for both.”

Nicky whooped, Erik laughed, and Andrew flushed. Neil just smiled at him.

“Did you honestly abandon my herd just to harass me?” Andrew demanded of his cousin.

“They’re dragons, they aren’t sheep,” Nicky sighed. “They’re only a night’s travel away. Are you back for good?”

“For a season,” Andrew said with a glance to Neil. “After that, we’ll see. Neil can only stay that long, he has his own life to get back to.”

“Now that’s a shame,” Nicky pouted.

“Maybe beautiful Neil will fall in love with the place,” Erik suggested, eyes twinkling. “Maybe he will stay. If Andrew persuades him enough.”

Neil smiled blandly at him and switched to the language he was sure must be Erik’s native tongue. “I’d be happy to marry you and Nicky together while I’m here, if you like. Andrew told me you’ve had a handfasting already, and I know there aren’t a lot of priests around up here.”

Erik’s eyes widened, and he switched joyfully to the language too. “You’ve been to my country?”

“Some years ago,” Neil nodded. “A very beautiful place. I hadn’t expected to find someone like you all the way out here.”

Erik shrugged. “It was a long journey, but worth it to find the dragons. Thank you for your very kind offer, but one of our friends at Wymack’s camp is a priestess of wider acceptance, and she has already offered. We would like her to do the ceremony.”

Neil accepted that with a formal incline of his head, and made a gesture meaning ‘good health’ in Erik’s culture. Erik beamed and returned it.

“Andrew, you need to hold onto this man,” Nicky said firmly to his cousin. “He has so many talents!”

Andrew rolled his eyes, but he gave Neil a guarded glance. “Full of surprises,” he muttered, and Neil grinned. He had a feeling he would be making wildflower tea later, though he didn’t need his witch’s intuition to tell him that.

“Well, if you’re back for a while, we’re heading home,” Nicky said. “Wymack’s had a new batch of adolescents from Allison’s herd, he needs more hands to help train them.”

“You didn’t see anything wrong with the herd? Nothing strange or suspicious?” Andrew asked.

“They are all fine,” Erik said with a shrug. “Oh, one hatchling died, but it was the little weak one. The runt. The others drove it out. We tried to nurse it, but nothing helped.”

Andrew frowned. “What did you do with the body?”

“It was too small to have useable claws or teeth,” Nicky said, “And its wings weren’t big enough to fly yet. We just buried it.”

Andrew grunted acceptance, frowning down at his hands for a while before tilting his head back to watch the sky.

“Is that unusual?” Neil asked him after a while.

“No,” Andrew replied slowly. “But there wasn’t a runt in my herd. All the hatchlings were healthy when I left with Aaron to find you. It must have sickened in the interval between my leaving and Nicky and Erik’s arrival.”

Neil saw Nicky shake his head and start to disagree, but then Erik laid a hand on his arm. They exchanged a conversation in a few looks, until Nicky shook his head again and leaned into his husband. Neil smiled to see it; it seemed they would be very happy in a marriage, if they were close enough to understand each other so well.

“Let’s go,” Andrew said abruptly, jolting to his feet and brushing off his hands. “I need to see my herd.”

Neil nodded and stood as well, Nicky and Erik joining them. “We’ll see you at Wymack’s camp?” Erik asked. “Renee says she will perform the ceremony at autumn equinox.”

“Auspicious,” Neil murmured approvingly. Erik grinned at him.

“We’ll be there,” Andrew nodded. “Thank you both for looking after them this spring.”

“You’re welcome, cousin,” Nicky smiled, and tugged Andrew in for a loose embrace, slapping his back. Andrew did the same, and they broke apart. “Take care now. Goodbye, beautiful Neil, it was a pleasure to meet you at last.”

“Journey well,” Neil smiled back, exchanging more handshakes.

“They’re off to the west a bit,” Nicky called as they all mounted up. “I’m sure you’ll see them in the sky.”

Andrew gave him a salute, and Neil waved. The four of them separated, Andrew urging his horse into a canter with Neil just behind. As they raced along, Neil trusted his horse to follow Andrew and raised his attention to the sky, watching for large, dark shapes. It took an hour, but at last he spotted them.

Dragons.

His breath caught in his chest at their far-off silhouettes, wheeling gracefully high up in the sky in a loose V formation. He could see the stretch of their batlike wings, larger than any bird could ever hope for, and watched as a few spiralled up and up and up on thermal currents, so high they seemed like specks, then folded their wings and plummeted towards the ground. Neil strained his ears to hear their joyful calls and songs, and watched with a tight throat as the swooping dragons snapped out their wings to glide up again, seeming to dare each other to risk going closer and closer to the ground before pulling up.

He watched some of the larger ones wheel about and start to slowly descend, followed by much smaller, less confident shapes that seemed to wobble in their elders' wake. He could see a few tiny speckles hovering in a loose clump in the middle of the formation, and one or two large shapes close to the ground with more speckles; mares with hatchlings too small to fly properly yet, Neil guessed.

Neil glanced over to Andrew, and caught the fierce smile on his friend's face as he watched his herd swoop and flit about.

"They're beautiful," Neil called to him, and Andrew's grin widened, his eyes bright and wild.

"Stay close," Andrew called back, then fished a bone whistle out of his packs and lifted it to his lips. He blew out a piercing series of trills, his fingers moving deftly over the carved holes. The notes shivered out across the plain, mimicking dragon calls in a very precise meter.

Neil watched breathlessly as the herd wheeled as one at the sound, and began to approach them at speed. Andrew called out again and again, and Neil gasped as he saw how much ground a grown dragon could cover in a few effortless beats of their wings. They called back to Andrew and started to descend in careful spirals; Andrew was gathering his herd in, calling them to ground. Neil saw the grounded mares round up the hatchlings and hurry them along towards the meeting spot, loping gracefully overland on four legs with their wings tucked along their backs, tiny passengers clinging to them.

"Dismount," Andrew told him, and quickly gathered his packs off his horse. Neil followed suit, feeling how restive and nervous the horse was getting from the flock of dragons circling above, their giant shadows dwarfing everything and casting a chill over them. "And stay close to me."

"I'm close," Neil assured him, dropping their packs to the ground and standing behind Andrew a little. It had been many years since he'd met a full flock, and he had a strong feeling Andrew's herd would be very differently-behaved than his father's flock, who had been taught to fear and obey their human masters under threat of incredible pain. Neil could never imagine Andrew branding or hurting his dragons, or disciplining their natural wildness at all.

The adults dropped to the ground first, about fifteen of them, all majestic giants at least thirty feet from snout to tail-tip. The wind blown up from their sail-like wings nearly blew Neil off his feet, but he grabbed Andrew's arm for balance and managed to stay upright. The horses were gone before the first dragon settled. The dragons were of every hue and shade, scales shimmering in the bright morning light, throwing off incandescent rainbows as they shifted. Smoke leaked steadily from their well-toothed mouths, acrid and thick. Neil stared at them in awe; they formed a circle around Andrew and Neil, heads lowered on snakelike necks to inspect their herder.

Andrew raised his arms and put the whistle away, starting to hum and sing in something that sounded almost like a language, punctuated with guttural growls and wide gestures. When he was done, one of the biggest dragons stepped forward. It seemed like an old mare, her bronze scales

shiny and polished with age, her snout heavily scarred from previous battles. Her paws were bent like an old woman's arthritic hands, and she moved with ponderous care, her great spiked tail swaying over the ground. She lowered her regally-spiked head, more than twice the size of Andrew's whole body, and butted up against him like a housecat.

Andrew laughed and laid his arms around her head, rubbing back and embracing her as she rubbed her giant head against his chest, only Andrew's tough leathers keeping him from getting flayed on her scales. Neil could hardly believe he hadn't been knocked off his feet, but he stood firm and strong against the weight of her nudging. Neil could hear him humming to her, and her replies shook the ground under his feet and vibrated in his ribs. Neil could hardly breathe from wonder. The old mare gave a snort, and smoke billowed up around Andrew. She nuzzled at him again, then drew back. It seemed to be a signal for the other adults to crowd forward and give him the same treatment; nudging him with their heads, calling and singing, and snorting smoke around him. The old mare lifted her head and gave a long call to the rest of the airborne flock, who started to dive and land all around them and deepen the circle.

There was a definite hierarchy, Neil observed. The oldest dragons landed closest, peering curiously over the backs of their elders, followed by the immature adolescents, yearlings, and hatchlings of descending size. A guard of mothers and a few older males formed the last ring, protecting the young.

Neil was so absorbed in watching Andrew greet and pet – pet! – the enormous creatures that he didn't notice the ones behind him closing in, until he heard a low growl shudder through him, and a fire-hot snout whack into his back.

He fell on his face and rolled, scrambling for his feet, only to see that a giant bull had crouched over him, grisly fangs bared and smoke pouring from between them. The bull stared him down, golden eyes fixing him with an unblinking stare, wings billowing up and a taloned forepaw lifting to crush him.

Neil could do nothing but stare his death in the face, breathless and terrified.

Andrew ran forward, waving his arms and yelling at the top of his lungs. He stepped over Neil and shoved the bull dragon's jaw fearlessly, calling out a strident challenge and waving his arms. The bull roared at Andrew, its breath strong enough to send Neil's shirt flying up over his face, the sound of its roar telling the most animal part of Neil's brain that he was going to die. He curled up on himself in terror, arms over his head like a child.

Andrew roared back, doing a surprisingly good job of matching the sound and timbre, and waved his arms some more. He stepped forward and shoved the bull's jaw again, forcing it up and away from Neil.

"Stand up, Neil," Andrew said hoarsely. "Stand up, stand up!"

Neil obeyed, shaking all over. Andrew roared at the bull once more, then grabbed Neil and ran him over to the old mare, who had her hackles up as she watched the spectacle. Andrew turned Neil to face him, then slowly cupped his cheeks and leaned in to hold him.

"I'm sorry," Andrew said against his ear, holding him pressed tight into his body. "I didn't see them approaching you. Relax, Neil, I promise you're safe. I need to introduce you to the herd before they'll accept you."

“How?” Neil croaked, feeling frightened tears spill from his eyes.

Andrew squeezed him gently. “Relax your body. I’m going to touch you and hold you close, they’ll recognise it as specific grooming behaviour. Trust me.”

“I trust you,” Neil said quietly. He forced himself to take slow breaths and relax into Andrew’s hold, despite the forty-odd giant reptiles surrounding them and making threatening noises. He closed his eyes and forced his muscles to go limp, focussing only on the familiar shape of Andrew’s body. He smelled powerfully of smoke and reptilian musk, but his arms were as warm and strong as ever.

Once Neil was no longer shaking, Andrew held his head still and started to gently rub their cheeks together, crooning and humming as he did so. Neil held still, bemused, as Andrew nuzzled at his cheeks and neck, then tilted his own head back to expose his throat for a long moment. Then he tilted Neil’s head and started nuzzling the other side of his face, repeating the song. His beard was a little scratchy, but it was overall kind of pleasant, if a bit confusing. Andrew didn’t seem at all embarrassed; he was calm and focussed, steady as always. Andrew exposed his throat again.

“Now do the same to me,” he said under his breath.

Neil did his best to copy the rubbing and nudging motions, though he didn’t try to sing. He had no doubt he would accidentally say something offensive and get his head literally bitten off for it. As he rubbed against Andrew’s cheeks, he noticed the old mare’s hackles had come down and she was watching them intently; one of her eyes was clouded over with a long scar in the centre of the lids, and he realised she was partially blind.

“What is this doing?” Neil whispered as he started on the other side of Andrew’s face.

“I’m introducing you as my mate,” Andrew said calmly. “They’ll accept you into the herd that way. This is a courtship behaviour, they do this when they’re choosing mates and preparing nests. Adults have scent patches on their cheeks, and doing this rubs their scent on their mate, marking them as a bonded pair.”

Neil felt himself blush. “Is this how you introduced Aaron?”

Andrew snorted. “Of course not. There’s a different behaviour for litter-mates.”

Neil exposed his throat for a long moment, then glanced to the old mare. Andrew released him as she approached again, and Neil tried to stand tall. He held still as she inspected him, nostrils flaring as she no doubt verified that Andrew had rubbed his scent all over Neil. Andrew settled his dragon-hide jacket around Neil’s body as she ducked down to nudge him, crooning softly.

Neil held his breath as she butted against him, her good eye peering at him. Hesitantly, he rested a hand on her cheek and held firm under the weight of her head pushing at him, aided a little by Andrew’s subtle hand on his back.

“Hold steady,” Andrew warned him in an undertone, and a great gust of smoke billowed around them. Neil did his best not to inhale it. “Here come the rest.”

The mare backed off and the other adults crowded around, giving him the same treatment as they’d given Andrew. They lingered over him a bit, snuffling at his hair and face and making a slightly different call than they had for Andrew.

“They’re learning your scent and welcoming you,” Andrew explained. “They see you as part of the herd now.”

“Oh good,” Neil said weakly, trying not to let his knees buckle as all those *teeth* grazed up against him. The dragons on his father’s breeding farm had been much more cowed, even with each other. They isolated themselves and cringed away from humans, well-trained in their fear. While on one level Neil was amazed at how different wild dragons were, how sociable, on another level he could still hear the bull roaring, mere seconds away from killing him.

Speaking of the bull.

The last adult to join the circle of sniffs and smoke was the giant bull, and he approached reluctantly and with clear disdain. Andrew growled at him until he ducked his head submissively, and gave a rather perfunctory nudge and whuff at Neil before stalking away, and snapping at a juvenile who tumbled too close in playing with its peers.

“Don’t go near that one without me,” Andrew advised, watching the bull with narrowed eyes.

“I had no plan of it,” Neil said, and staggered over to Andrew, who caught him from falling again.

“You did very well,” Andrew murmured to him, idly stroking over his hair, which had somehow crisped up *and* frizzed from all the smoke and wet dragon snuffles. “And I’m sorry about the bull. I didn’t want you to be scared of them.”

“I’m a bit shaken,” Neil admitted. “Is that the bull that almost killed you?”

“Yes. He doesn’t like me very much.”

Neil began to laugh. At first it was almost a hiccup, then started to turn more breathless and hysterical. He clung to Andrew’s chest as tears rolled down his cheeks, convulsing with helpless laughter. Andrew held him close again, stroking his hair and down his back. “Easy now,” he whispered, again and again.

Neil was about to reply that no, it wasn’t easy, he’d nearly been killed, they were surrounded by dragons, he very much wanted to go home and cry for a while, the dragon-herders had to be crazy to do this, he was terrified out of his skin – when a large head nudged at him again. He would have bolted if Andrew hadn’t been holding him.

“It’s alright, it’s the matriarch,” Andrew said, and Neil turned his head.

The old bronze mare was butting at him again, her rumbles changed to a different tune, her jaw bumping against his hip with determination.

“What is she doing?” Neil asked shakily.

He saw Andrew smile in his peripheral vision, and felt a hand stroke his cheek. “She’s reassuring you. She understands that you were frightened, she’s trying to soothe you to sleep. The adults do it to youngsters after a fall, or during thunder. She gets especially broody and protective, being the leader of the herd – and now you’re part of the herd too.”

“Oh,” Neil whispered, his laughter drying up in surprise. “What – what do I do?”



“Lie down,” Andrew said, carefully letting go of him. “Let her roll you about a bit. I promise she won’t hurt you. Rub at her face if you feel able. When you’re still and calm, she might lick you. It washes off.”

Neil lowered himself to the ground, though something in him objected to being so wholly vulnerable to a creature so huge, so able to destroy him without a second thought. He nearly balled up again when her snout lowered to press against his ribcage, pushing him against the earth. But then she began to nuzzle him, obviously taking great care not to hurt him, crooning away. He shuddered and forced himself to go limp and accept it. It reminded him eerily of the moment he had allowed himself to reach for his magic the first time, coached by his mother, letting it course through him and settle into his bones forever.

The mare made a humming that even to Neil’s ears sounded pleased, and she gently turned him with the edge of her snout and her gnarled-up forepaw. She snuffled all over him, humming and singing, and rolled him to and fro, almost like a mother rocking a baby in the cradle. Once Neil had gotten used to it, it did actually feel very soothing. Her rumbles shook down into the earth, passing through his whole body, and the pressure and so-very-careful motions of her rolling him, attending to him, felt almost like a mother’s embrace. His eyes stung at the thought, and he relaxed fully into her ministrations, closing his eyes and letting his limbs ragdoll about as he was rolled and turned in the soft grass.

Without thinking about it and moving more on gut instinct than conscious decision, he bared his throat submissively and reached up for her great face, resting his hands on the planes of her jaw.

She harrumphed and rested her head on his body, pressing him down into the ground, smoke curling around her head. Neil rubbed his hands firmly over her face, careful of the raspy edges of her scales and sticking to the softer, fleshier parts around her nose and under her chin. His fingers found the scar over her damaged eye and traced it, feeling the muscles twitch under his hand.

She crooned to him, and he tried to mimic the sound back to her. He didn’t sound nearly as accomplished as Andrew, but she seemed to understand, judging by her affectionate nuzzle and nudge at his face.

“She likes you,” Andrew said quietly.

Neil opened his eyes and saw Andrew had settled cross-legged on the grass nearby, watching. Neil smiled and rubbed his hands over the matriarch’s face. “I like her too. You gave me one of her scales, didn’t you?”

Andrew nodded.

The matriarch lifted her head and rolled him a few more times, towards Andrew. He fished up slumped by Andrew’s knee, and she gave a self-satisfied snort and hobbled away. Neil stayed laying there, sprawled out and wide-eyed. Andrew rested a hand on his shoulder.

“That was... something else,” Neil breathed. “I didn’t know they could be so sensitive.”

“They’re wonderful creatures,” Andrew agreed. “They’re very intelligent, and a social species. They bond very powerfully to their herd-members, and spend a lot of time reaffirming and strengthening those bonds. I’ve spent a very long time trying to understand them, and they still surprise me.”

Neil hummed thoughtfully, watching as the herd mixed with itself now they had reunited with Andrew, the hatchlings dissolving into play fighting and aborted snorts of fire, rolling and pouncing on each other, tugging each other's tails. The yearlings seemed to alternate between childish playing and attempting to mimic the behaviours of their elders, copying the tilts of their head and movements of their legs. The adolescents were more subtle about it, mingling with the adults though keeping respectfully back from any interactions. The adults seemed to be going through some sort of grooming, arranging themselves in small groups and taking turns rubbing against each other in very particular patterns, singing and humming; Neil saw a few couples performing the cheek-rubbing of mated pairs. The groups changed once all members had been greeted, and the patterns resumed and changed depending on the makeup of each new grouping. He watched as the very elder dragons, the matriarch included, performed a more solemn and slow version of the same ritual among themselves, moving with a timeless grace and dignity.

Then, without any discernible signal Neil could sense, the whole lot of them took wing and sprung up into the air, wings beating hard to climb into the empty sky. They spiralled up in a great musical flock and resumed their plunging and wheeling. The flightless hatchlings gave disappointed noises and tried to flap their scrawny wings, but couldn't stay in the air for more than a few moments. One or two adults stayed with them, patiently enduring being clambered over and relentlessly badgered by the energetic little ones.

Neil realised Andrew was looking down at him almost expectantly.

"They're beautiful," Neil smiled up at him, and closed his eyes as Andrew bent to kiss him, sweet and tender.

Andrew helped him to his feet, and he swayed a little before regaining his balance. He felt calm, washed-out of his fear and hysteria from the matriarch's gentle reassurances, smothered in joyful awe instead. "What now?"

"Now we find the horses and follow the flock until they land for the night," Andrew replied. "For now, just watch them. Get familiar with their behaviour, let them become familiar with you. Once they know you, I'll introduce you to the young ones, and we'll see if we can figure out what's going on."

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They spent the day following the flock as it roamed about, Andrew pointing out and explaining specific flight patterns and behaviours as their horses valiantly tried to keep up with the magnificent creatures' wings. Sometimes Andrew paused or diverted off to pick up semi-precious rocks or old bones from the ground, stuffing them into his packs out of apparent habit for Neil to sell later. The flock hunted as it moved, the biggest adults roaming out in small squads to scour the plain. They covered enormous distances in just a few wingbeats, and rounded up wild game apparently effortlessly, bringing the meat back to the flock and sharing it in the air. Neil smiled whenever he saw a returning adult being mobbed by the youngsters, too young to adhere to the hierarchy of feeding. They landed once or twice to sup from fast-flowing rivers and graze in flower-filled meadows; Andrew explained they ate soil and grass and small rocks to help their stomachs grind up and digest the massive quantities of meat they needed each day.

When dusk began to settle, Neil saw the matriarch change her flight pattern to circle, and the other adults followed her lead to make a slowly-descending whirlwind of wings, until the flock was

grounded in the spot she had chosen and began grouping up and grooming each other in what Neil had realised was a ritual repeated whenever the flock landed.

Andrew and Neil coaxed the last bit of energy out of their horses, and got as close to the herd as they could before the horses started to whicker and whinny. They took the packs away, and let the horses run to safer ground. Andrew assured Neil they would return on his whistle once the dragons were in flight the next morning. They walked through the crowd of settling dragons, wading through the miniature flock of hatchlings and yearlings being corralled at the centre. As they walked, Andrew held his hands out and trailed them over the flanks of his flock, reminding them of his presence and performing his own kind of grooming ritual with them all. Neil mimicked him after a while, gaining confidence as the adults snuffled and nuzzled him back, friendly and gentle. They worked through the whole flock until they found the eldest dragons again.

Andrew walked up to the matriarch and hugged her throat, stretching his arms wide and rubbing over her neck, singing steadily. She bent her neck to cradle around him like a human's embrace, singing her reply and nuzzling at his head. After a few minutes, the matriarch nudged at him and he rested his forehead against hers, smoke curling up through his hair as she breathed and he rubbed under her closed eyes.

Andrew looked over his shoulder and gestured for Neil to approach. The matriarch licked Andrew's torso with a great swipe of her blue tongue, coating him in slimy saliva, then turned to inspect Neil. This time, he wasn't afraid as she sniffed and nudged at him while Andrew wiped himself dry. The matriarch crooned to him and Neil let her press him down and roll him some more, apparently making extra sure he was no longer frightened. He rubbed over her face and leaned back into her movements, which seemed to please her as she licked him too.

"What's your position in the herd?" Neil asked as Andrew laid in a fire and started cooking a human dinner.

"Respected elder, generally," Andrew replied. "The matriarch treats me like one of her own litter sometimes. She permits me to help with the youngsters and in managing the herd, and gives me trust and affection like an adult of one of her own broods. I imagine she'll treat you the same, once you've been here a while."

Neil smiled and kept to himself the thought that Andrew had found a mother in a dragon, where his human one had abandoned him as a babe.

They ate their dinner to the sound of the herd singing to the rising moon, lifting their snouts to serenade the stars in a nightly chorus as old as time itself. Neil and Andrew leaned back against the matriarch's chest, feeling the vibration of her glorious song shiver through them.

As they settled down to sleep, surrounded by the rustling of wings and the smell of smoke, Neil thought he was so very lucky to be there.

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They travelled like that with the flock for over a week, and Neil slowly learned their habits and individual tics. Neil learned to recognise each adult and adolescent by sight and sound, both in the air and on the ground, and grew to know their groupings of siblings and mates and dams and sires. Andrew shared all he had learned of them over the years, their complex social structures and behaviours, the dynamics and hierarchies that governed the herd and more, and Neil knew he was only scratching the surface of all Andrew knew. Andrew began to teach him to recognise specific

calls and vocalisations, and to try and make them himself though Neil thought his vocal range could never quite reach the depths of all the roars and low noises.

Neil watched as Andrew guided his herd with a gentle touch, using their trust and affection for him much more effectively than fear and pain had ever done on Neil's father's breeding farm. Neil watched as Andrew used his whistle to call the herd down every so often or direct their flight pattern, rewarding the adolescents in particular with chunks of hand-fed meat and affectionate pats to their faces, singing to them like the adults did. Neil realised he was habituating them to obey simple commands from him, even as they learned social skills by mimicry from the adults they mingled with constantly. Neil watched as Andrew ingratiated himself with the hatchlings, scrawny little things about the size of large dogs, all awkward limbs and uncoordinated scrambling. He spoiled them outrageously, feeding them meat and sweet grass while rubbing their round little bellies and singing almost without pause. He never remonstrated them for occasionally singeing or scratching him, simply brushed it off and praised them when they managed to control their fire. Sometimes when they landed, a bold group of hatchlings and yearlings would follow him about hopefully, nudging at his hands and pockets in the hope of more treats and pets.

Neil observed as Andrew demonstrated the anatomy of his dragons, using the patient, mellow adults as they sunned themselves and allowed Andrew to stretch and pull on their limbs and wings. He listened as Andrew talked about their diet and the mechanics of their flight, their normal behaviours and distress indicators. When the matriarch was in a particularly fond mood, she permitted Andrew to guide Neil into climbing over her like a hatchling, exploring her broad back, clambering over her head between her spikes and settling behind her wing joints, sitting astride her.

"Have you ever flown with them?" Neil asked as he settled himself in the dip of her spine behind the wings, his legs spread wide over her spine and knees tucked up like a horse-racing jockey. He ran his hands over her scales in wonder, admiring how different the world and the other dragons appeared from such lofty heights.

"A few times," Andrew sighed, his gaze going faraway. "It's... I can't even describe it. You'd have to experience it to understand."

Neil smiled fondly at him, watching wonder and delight wash over his friend's face as he lost himself in pleasant memory. There was such a joy to Andrew out here, Neil was learning. A kind of wild freedom, and an unburdening as if he could forget all his human worries and grim past when he was with his herd. It made him stand tall and confident, more free in his words and affectionate in his conversations with Neil, often reaching out to touch or hold him in some way as they talked or sat together. Neil knew it was just a side-effect of being so hands-on with his dragons, but that didn't stop him from leaning into and seeking out those gentle strokes and touches to his hands, arms, back, and face. Didn't stop him from returning them either, enjoying how Andrew closed his eyes and pulled him closer when he did. They hadn't opened Neil's jar of wildflower tea, always too tired after a long day of tending to the dragons, but they often fell asleep pressed close after kissing each other senseless.

It was beautiful.

The flock reached a large lake eventually, fed from many small streams coursing down the mountainsides, and the flock landed with joyful cries and immediately started plunging into the water. The adults waded out into the deeper centre, ducking underwater and rolling, while the younger ones splashed and played closer to shore, shooting water at each other from their nostrils and trying to dunk each other underwater.

Neil shook his head to watch them; they looked for all the world like human children paddling in puddles.

“The flock will stay here for the rest of the day,” Andrew announced with satisfaction, dismounting and relieving his horse of its packs. Neil copied him with a sigh of relief. “The adults will fish, and try to teach the adolescents how to do it. Time for a rest and a wash, I think.”

Then, without a blink, he started taking off his clothes. Neil stared in shock as Andrew dropped his clothes to the ground and stood bare and beautiful in the hot sun.

“There’s no one else out here,” Andrew reminded him with a smile, and started walking towards the water. “Come on.”

Neil bit his lip and shook his head, suddenly shy. Andrew shrugged and waded into the water, naked as sunshine and twice as lovely. Neil found a large rock to sit on at the water’s edge, and watched all bemused as Andrew stood in the shallows, water up to his hips and lapping gently around him, washing himself with a bar of soap from his packs. The water trickled and cascaded over his skin, glinting in the sun like dragon scales. The dragons were being entertaining and wonderful, but Neil couldn’t take his eyes off Andrew.

His muscles rippled under his skin, strong and firm, and his many scars and old marks did nothing to blemish him. A shaky sigh escaped Neil, thinking of those wide arms around him, Andrew’s low voice murmuring in his ear, hands stroking down his sides and playing with his hair. He sighed again, familiar heat starting to curl in his gut, mingled all through with an inescapable fondness.

When Andrew finished washing and started swimming with long, strong strokes of his arms and kicks of his legs, Neil slipped off the rock and made a small campfire just above the shore, in the soft and warm grass. He scooped wildflower tea into his small travelling kettle and set it to boil on the fire before taking off his clothes too and sitting in the shallows. He washed himself, surprised by the warmth of the water under the baking summer sun, and waded back to his little camp. He sat warm and steaming by the fire, watching Andrew swim and enjoy himself.

Andrew eventually finished swimming and waded back, gleaming and sparkling in the sunlight as he walked calmly up to Neil’s camp, glorious and beautiful. Heat spiked in Neil’s gut, and as much as he desired, he also just wanted to be held and kissed, and to do the same in return. He reached up and took Andrew’s hand, tugging gently.

“I made tea,” he said, flushing as Andrew’s eyes roamed over his bare form and the evident arousal in him. Andrew licked his lips, desire stirring in him too, and joined Neil by the fire. They drank their tea quickly, hands straying to each other’s skin, yearning and hungry.

When their cups were empty, Andrew wrapped his arms around Neil’s waist and pulled Neil into his lap. “I thought you didn’t want to be bare,” Andrew murmured into Neil’s neck.

“As you said, there’s no one here,” Neil replied, a little flutter of nerves quickly soothed by Andrew’s warm hands on his hips. “Besides, I... I want...”

Andrew rolled Neil’s hips down into his own and Neil’s voice tailed off into a groan, their slick skin sliding easily.

“Mmmhmm,” Andrew said in understanding, sounding more than a little pleased with himself. Neil’s thighs spread and slipped around Andrew’s hips, gravity sliding him down against Andrew until

there was no space left between them, and Andrew fixed his mouth over Neil's neck to kiss and suck.

Neil passed him the jar of balm he'd brought and looped his arms around Andrew's neck, tucking his head into Andrew's strong chest. Andrew smoothed one broad hand down his back soothingly, and his other fingers slipped gently within him. He was slow and teasing, coaxing moans and gasps from Neil as he crooked and stroked his fingers, Neil helpless and astounded in his embrace. His hips rode mindlessly into the motion, rocking their bodies together and searching for more. Andrew was murmuring in his ear, praise that Neil couldn't parse but set his skin burning with desire. Andrew's arms were tight and snug around him, squeezing and holding him close as his fingers teased.

Neil clutched at his shoulders and back, wordless but not quiet in his pleasure. He kissed desperately over Andrew's chest, panting into his wet skin as the sun beat down on their backs, a caress of its own. Andrew slowed down, drawing out each tiny stroke of his fingers with excruciating thoroughness, until Neil's whole body was shaking. Magic was building in him, starting to surge out of his control, but he could hardly sense it with Andrew working a magic of his own with just his hands.

Neil cried out in frustration as Andrew stopped stroking and simply pressed down, massaging firmly and knowingly.

"I could come just from this," Neil confessed breathlessly, shocked at himself.

"Do you want to?" Andrew murmured, low and gravelly in his ear.

Neil shuddered, his hips twitching and bearing down needily. "No," he moaned. "Want – want you inside me."

Andrew went completely still, his breath catching in his throat. Neil began to think he'd said something wrong, when Andrew removed his fingers only to replace them with his length, pushing deep. Neil could only gasp as Andrew's hands cupped his backside tightly and snapped his hips up over and over, driving quickly into him, panting into Neil's neck and groaning.

It was hard and fast, and neither could last long under such provocation. Andrew gasped out Neil's name and clutched him tight enough to bruise, so wonderfully close and tight, and Neil tumbled over the edge as he felt Andrew's release inside him. His body arched and surged in Andrew's hold and magic slammed out of him before he realised it was out of control, feeling wild and untamed and much more than he usually held in himself. It burst out of him in a shockwave of force, flattening the grass around them and leaving Neil shaking and utterly spent.

He drifted blissfully and thoughtlessly, his body singing with raw pleasure and sparks of magic. He could feel water around him, warm and silky, and gentle hands holding him, but it all felt far away.

He only came back to himself when he realised a familiar voice was softly calling his name, stroking his cheek. He sighed and curled into the touch, knowing it intimately and trusting it more than anything in the world.

"Andrew," he breathed contentedly.

"I'm here, Neil. Can you hear me?"

“Mm,” Neil hummed. He gained clumsy control of his hands and found Andrew’s chest, pressing and grounding himself. He blinked his eyes open and smiled up at Andrew’s dear face above him, though the concerned frown was unwelcome. Neil reached up with a trembling hand to smooth it, relieved when it eased away.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m glorious,” Neil grinned tiredly, leaning up to kiss him. Andrew kissed him back for a little while, then pulled away.

“You went... distant. You didn’t respond to me. I carried you to the water and bathed you and you didn’t notice at all.”

“I’m sorry I worried you,” Neil murmured, cupping Andrew’s cheek and rubbing his thumb through his beard. “It happens sometimes if I use a lot of magic at once. I promise I’m alright. I felt very safe and cared for.”

Andrew ran a hand down his side, and Neil vaguely realised they were laid down on the warm earth, curled up tight in each other’s arms. “Your magic ‘slips’ are getting worse.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Neil sighed happily. He didn’t want to think, but Andrew was clearly worried, and Neil didn’t want that at all. “I think it was because of the earth, I haven’t done that so connected with nature before, bare on the ground like that. It overwhelmed me. It’s okay.”

“You weren’t touching the earth, I was,” Andrew mumbled, and Neil gently covered his lips with his own, distracting him as sweetly as he knew how. Andrew sighed and relaxed into him, letting it go and stroking over Neil’s skin instead. He kissed carefully and thoroughly everywhere he could reach without letting go of Neil, and Neil shuddered and sighed blissfully.

“Are you alright?” Neil asked, slurring his words a bit with pleasure.

“Yes,” Andrew assured him, then murmured so quietly that Neil didn’t think he was supposed to hear, “You’re here, everything is good.”

Neil kissed his face gently, feeling warm and loose and contented, happy to stay there forever with the earth under him, sun above him, and Andrew all around him.

“It’s a good thing we’re staying here tonight,” Neil mumbled some time later. Andrew hummed enquiry. “Because I’d get very distracted sitting a saddle right now.”

Andrew snorted amusement and eased a hand down to his backside, massaging gently. Neil sighed his enjoyment and laced his fingers in Andrew’s hair.

They lay there for hours, dazed and tender, watching the sun slowly stretch over the sky and the dragons playing in the lake. They had to eventually move to get dressed when they started getting chilled, but even then they didn’t stray far from each other. Andrew pulled Neil into his side again and held him close as they ate and watched the stars rise to the flock’s serenade, and Neil thought again that this was more than they’d both intended, but brushed it away and relaxed back into Andrew’s comforting embrace.

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The next week, Andrew introduced Neil to the youngsters. They were adorably keen to get to know him, apparently having smelled Andrew's scent rubbed all over Neil very thoroughly and wanting to get on the good side of the herd-member with all the treats by being affectionate with his 'mate'. The hatchlings were excitable and easily pleased, flapping their useless wings ecstatically when Neil tried humming to them. The yearlings were a bit more reserved, but gave over to puppyish behaviour when Neil proved he was persuadable to sneak them treats and fuss with them like a litter-mate. The adolescents were more curious, and seemed to pick up a habit of watching Andrew and Neil and mimicking them like the other adults in the herd.

"They're learning social rules and strategies by copying the adults," Andrew explained, while Neil laughed at the few adolescents trying to embrace and mimic kissing, completely unsuccessfully. They gave it up and took to shyly rubbing their cheeks together like mated pairs instead, playing at it.

"How do you know all this?" Neil asked him, stroking fondly down Andrew's chest.

Andrew smiled at him and squeezed his thighs. "By watching, like they do."

Neil grinned and rubbed his cheek playfully against Andrew's, earning a surprised laugh and a thorough kiss.

As Neil learned more about the youngsters and the flock, he began to notice oddities. There were about twenty adults and elders, around fifteen yearlings and adolescents, and a flock about the same size made up of hatchlings though Neil could never get an accurate count on them, seeing as they scampered about on their little legs and refused to sit still for even a moment. But the longer he spent with the flock, he noticed the numbers starting to decrease.

A few hatchlings started to weaken for no reason Neil could see, losing shine in their scales and their energy, becoming listless and weak until eventually they couldn't keep up. When the flock was forced to leave them behind, flying in a pattern of grief, Andrew rounded them up himself and tried to nurse them, feeding them wild goat's milk and honeyed concoctions, even cooking morsels of meat for them, but nothing worked and they eventually died. The same thing happened to one of the yearlings, though it held on for much longer before dropping out of the sky. Andrew let the flock move on while he tried to help the grounded yearling, but although it lasted longer than the hatchlings, its fate was the same and had suffered wounds from its fall.

When Andrew was forced to do the grisly work of declawing and removing its teeth and spikes to sell, and carefully removing the poor creature's valuable hide, Neil meditated under the moonlight and tried to seek wisdom.

It was obvious to him that something *was* affecting the dragons, but he had no idea what was causing it. There were no initial symptoms Neil could see, nothing unusual the dragons were eating or drinking that might poison them. It seemed that they were just randomly weakening and fading, with sudden onset and no discernible cause. It was affecting the young ones much more, Neil supposed because the adults and elders were hardier and stronger, with greater reserves of energy and ability to fight off sickness. But other than that, Neil was baffled.

He came out of his trance to see Andrew had finished his work and was sitting staring into the fire. He had washed himself clean of blood and other nastiness, and he had a bulging sack sitting next to him. He was dry and composed, but his eyes had tears standing in them.



Neil sat beside him, at a loss. He knew most dragon-wrangers regarded their herds almost like cattle; they would be saddened if one sickened and died, but would get on with their work easily enough, and would be able to slaughter their herd if it would sell enough. But it was plain as day that Andrew *loved* his herd and was part of the family, and it wounded him deeply to see them in pain, especially when he could do nothing about it. He had always seemed so composed when handing over the remains to sell, and Neil had never really thought about what the process would entail. And now he knew how intimately Andrew knew each dragon, he could feel his own eyes stinging at what Andrew had needed to do.

“I’m sorry,” Neil whispered, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

Andrew closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, shaking a little.

“Come here, come here,” Neil said, gently pulling Andrew into his arms.

He resisted at first, and then slumped heavily into Neil’s chest. Neil held him tightly, arms firm, and thought he knew what caused Andrew to leave his flock and run to the frontier, when everything became too much. Neil stroked his hair and kissed his cheeks and temples, resolving to hold him up like Andrew did for him so often.

“I’ve got you,” Neil whispered as Andrew began to weep in choked-off, miserable sobs.

Neil rocked him tenderly, letting Andrew cling to him and hide in his neck, and smoothed a hand over his hair. When the weeping gave way to numb silence, Neil filled it with quiet stories of wonder and magic, charms he had made and spells he had cast, and tales from his travels.

This might be more than just a sexually beneficial arrangement between them now, but while they were out here they might as well be a mated pair like Andrew’s beloved dragons, and Neil was more than willing to give in to the soft protectiveness welling up in him as he held Andrew in his arms, and soothed him to sleep.

The next morning, Andrew lay awake, still and sightlessly staring in Neil’s embrace for a long time before getting up, his face blank and composed once more. He was quiet as they travelled back to the flock they could see flying a few leagues away, but Neil understood and rode in silence beside him.

“Andrew,” he said as they drew close to the flock again, which was in its grief formation to circle tenderly around the parents of the dead yearling, adults flying close to rub alongside and gently nudge them for comfort. “Will you let me attend to the next one?”

Andrew met his eyes and nodded bleakly. They both knew there would be another soon.

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It only took a week for the next yearling to start to weaken. It had been perfectly healthy the day before, romping with its litter-mates and flying circles around the adults, but then the next day it was slow and sluggish, and struggled for a long time to get airborne. Neil and Andrew watched grimly as it flapped and strained to catch up to the main flock, wobbling in its course.

That night when the flock landed, Neil made his way to the exhausted yearling. Andrew kept back, watching from a distance and ready to intervene if needed, but he trusted Neil to know what he was doing for the most part.

Neil approached the listless yearling where it was slumped on the ground, whining and blowing hard for breath. There was no smoke in its mouth and its eyes were glazed as Neil walked up to the poor creature. He spent a while sitting at the yearling's head, stroking and rubbing over its face and neck and doing an approximation of a soothing croon. The yearling nudged at him weakly, trying to get closer, and Neil let it rest its heavy head in his lap and folded his arms around it. The yearling's mother came over, making concerned trills, and tried nudging at its ribs and side as if looking for injury. The mother and child called to each other, the mother sounding distressed and upset while the youngster cried for help.

Neil took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in his throat, then focussed down into his power.

He extended his senses to include the yearling, and let go of his own sense of body. He buried himself deep in his intuition and magic, and let it ebb towards the hurting youngster. It carried him on the dragon's breath into its lungs and swirled about in there, moving to the tide of its heartbeat and breath.

All around him, he sensed pain. He could almost see the healthy structures, but there was a sense of tension and constriction, as if a boa were wrapped around every part of it. There was a kind of darkness threading through everything, working deeper into the yearling's body. He eased out of the lungs and into the blood, pulsing quickly throughout the whole body. Everywhere was the same; pain, darkness, an ever-ratcheting tightness like a vice slowly working closed. The poor creature's heart was labouring, fighting hard to keep the whole body working under the stress, and wearing itself out in the process. It should have had more than a hundred years of beats left, being such a young thing, but it was already ageing and tiring like a very elderly creature.

Neil drifted partially back to himself, and with difficulty lifted his heavy arm to gesture to Andrew. Keeping his eyes closed, he began to give instructions for what he needed. Andrew passed herbs and tools from his kit into his hands, and fed the resulting poultices into the yearling's slack jaw when Neil was finished. Neil sank back into his magic, trickling through the yearling's body and watching as his herbs and charms did battle.

They began to fight against the dark weakness, burning it away, and the lungs and heart started to heal and loosen. The shadowy threads were in retreat, blocked and burned off wherever Neil's herbs and arts reached. He began to cast a charm of strength, his voice weak in his throat, but his magic was strong and sure, deepened from the earth under his legs and the full moon rising above him.

He dimly felt a warm hand on his own, squeezing tight, and felt an unsteady, erratic pulse of power course through him. It was familiar, but Neil was too deep in his examination of the yearling's body to properly focus on it. He watched as the yearling's body began to purge itself of the darkness, clearing it out towards its bowels with a few nudges from Neil's magic. He could hear the yearling's breathing steady, its heartbeat slow, and started to relax his grip and ease back.

But then, just as he was about to swirl back into his body, the dark ball of sickness concentrated in the yearling's bowels swelled. Neil watched in horror as it started to push back, slipping around the greener tinge of his herbs and magic, growing and thickening, spreading through the youngster's body with a vengeance. It moved so fast, faster than Neil could comprehend, and in less than half a heartbeat it was snaked throughout the yearling's body again. Neil heard an agonised cry from the creature, and raced through its veins, seeing too late the dark threads ripping and twisting into its spine and wriggling up towards its brain.

He beat them there, slipping through a kind of barrier until he was inside the dragon's brain and conscious mind all at the same time, experiencing it all.

He had flashes of memory that did not belong to him – poking his snout through fragile eggshell, blinking in the light and crying out, his mother's face descending in a vague orange blur and singing a song of love and welcome. Flight, tumbling and rolling, feeling the strength in his wings and the wind bearing him up and away. His first hunt, swooping down on a rabbit that could never run fast enough and feeling victory in the sweet taste in his mouth. Singing with the flock, pouring his heart out to the moon and recognising each and every member of his herd by the sound of their call. Begging the small two-legged dragon for treats, listening to his rough and unpractised song, rolling over to get his belly rubbed with tiny, hot forepaws. Colours that Neil had never seen before, sounds more layered and complex than Neil could ever comprehend, scents mapping out a landscape more intricately than his eyes ever could...

While Neil floundered in the deluge of lights and memories and sounds, he could feel the darkness encroaching too. It pulsed into the yearling's brain, winding its filthy tendrils throughout it all.

Fear overwhelmed Neil, animalistic fear and distress. So much pain, so much fear, fear of death, yearning for his mother, so much fear...

The yearling's heart stopped with a last convulsion, and everything went empty and black.

Neil reeled back from it, but it was all around him, coming for him too, he couldn't find the way out, there was no way back to his body, the darkness was all around and would swallow him whole

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A sense of light, of warmth, half-familiar power stuttering into his body. Hands on his skin, arms around his body. Fire, an ever-burning fire, great power and magic and strength of will calling him back. A fire-soul, strong and bright...

"Neil," a voice was whispering, echoing in the stunned expanse of Neil's mind that still trembled with borrowed memories of flight. "Neil, Neil. Come back to me. I'm begging you, come back, Neil, come back, don't leave me, come back..."

A hand on his neck. Moonlight above him. Pale hair at the edge of his vision. Lips brushing his, breath blown into his mouth, hands pumping down on his ribs, a scared kiss pressed to his cheek.

He pulled himself back to his body, following the trail of fire and the tether of touch. He seemed to stretch, wanting to reach further towards the fire-soul and the source of the bright power, but his own body was calling him. He was pulled for a painful heartbeat, then snapped back into himself like a whipcrack.

He heaved in a great shuddering breath, and heard a relieved cry and hands gently helping him sit up as he struggled to breathe, spots swirling in his vision until he could calm down. His heartbeat slowed and he coughed, adrenaline and the remnants of magic fizzing in his bones. He groaned and turned towards Andrew's warm body, unable to support himself.

"Neil?" Andrew asked, voice strained and on the edge of breaking. "Neil?"

"I'm here," Neil croaked, pressing his face into Andrew's warm chest and the scent of his skin. His senses seemed spun out of control, heightened for a moment from his exposure to the dragon's mind, and in that moment he knew exactly what Andrew's scent was like, and he breathed in deep.

“I thought I’d lost you too,” Andrew whispered, holding his limp body tight into himself and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You stopped breathing, I couldn’t feel your heart—”

“I’m okay,” Neil croaked, having trouble keeping his eyes open. His chest ached from Andrew’s attempts to keep his heart beating, but he was more than grateful. “You saved me. Fire-soul...”

“What?”

“Little robin says you have a fire-soul,” Neil mumbled, pressing a clumsy hand over Andrew’s heart, where he could still dimly sense that great well of power. “I followed it back.”

“You’re not making any sense, Neil.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay. I couldn’t save the yearling.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Andrew said, gently stroking his hair. “You tried. I could see it was getting better, for a little while.”

“It’s not a natural illness,” Neil managed, sleep calling him. “It’s something else. Something magic. And you’re magic...”

“Neil?”

“It’s magic...”

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Neil woke from confusing dreams that alternated between memories of being a dragon and a human. He had run from his father and taken wing, soaring through the sky until he found his mother’s bones, then followed a bonfire out to the dragonlands and swallowed the embers, then roared them out in a great slew of flame.

He blinked slowly up at the sky. The sky wasn’t right. It was dark and strange-looking, and the rain he could hear didn’t seem to touch him. Maybe he was in a tent? There was a definite closed-in feeling, and body warmth suffused the air around him, slightly musty and smoky.

He slowly rolled onto his side, his whole body aching and heavy, and realised he was tucked up in his bedroll. He wriggled sluggishly, trying to free himself to cool off a little, and cursed under his breath when he couldn’t manage it. Unbidden, a call rose up in his throat, a call for his mother to help him. It hummed and tingled in his sore throat, and he couldn’t sustain the note.

He coughed and tried to squirm free again, but had to stop to catch his breath. He called again, a little stronger this time, and heard a confused far-off reply coming from his mother – no. Not his mother. His mother was dead. The grieving dam of the dead yearling he had tried to save.

It all came crashing back on him, and he closed his eyes and breathed through the intimate sense of death, the memory of the yearling’s last few terrified moments.

Footsteps intruded on his dark thoughts, a familiar gait and rhythm to them. He turned towards them, and watched as Andrew bent and lifted the edge of the tent – was it a tent? – to step into the space. He was holding a steaming bowl and mug in each hand, and set them on the ground near Neil.

“Andrew,” Neil whispered.

Andrew jumped; he must have thought Neil was still asleep. He knelt by Neil and gently propped him up, untying the top part of the bedroll and pushing it down.

“Hello,” Andrew said quietly once Neil was settled, leaned back against Andrew’s chest.

“Where are we?” Neil asked, tilting his head to try and see Andrew’s expression. He felt weak as a babe and just as helpless, trapped in his swaddling.

Andrew gently stroked his cheek and lifted the mug, which proved to have hot, sweet tea inside. He helped Neil sip before answering. “You’ve been asleep for two days. The matriarch has been looking after you, she’s shielding us under her wing from a storm.”

Neil blinked around at the ‘tent’ a bit more carefully and realised the sky looked wrong because he was seeing it through the thick membrane of a bronze wing, and the musty body heat was being generated by a giant reptilian body somewhere behind him.

“I dreamed I was flying,” Neil mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing. Is that food?”

Andrew carefully spooned it into his mouth, uncaring by having to baby Neil, even wiping the corner of his mouth when he needed it.

“Thank you,” Neil sighed when he’d eaten it, feeling his stomach bulge happily after two days of not eating. He was already starting to feel a little stronger, but he was content to be held. Andrew stroked his cheek again gently. His body was calling for more sleep, but Neil fought it.

“Do you remember what happened?” Andrew asked.

Neil nodded. “It’s a magical force acting on them. I couldn’t see enough to know what exactly it was, but it was no natural poison or herb. It had a life of its own, and it struck precisely and maliciously. When I tried to force it out, it fought back and killed the yearling even faster. It seemed like it was feeding on the yearling, burning up its life-force to grow, like a parasite.”

Andrew absorbed that with a solemn nod. “Another hatchling died this morning.”

Neil grimaced and rested his head against Andrew’s jaw, the best he could do for an embrace in his weak state.

“Do you know why it’s affecting the young ones so much?”

“I have a hunch,” Neil admitted. “You remember all those old stories about how dragons are immune to sorcery? Well, sorcery doesn’t really exist anymore, no one knows how to practice it, but it was a kind of magic. I’d guess that adult dragons have some kind of resistance to magical

forces. Maybe it's in their hide as they mature. I don't know. But it could also be a question of strength; the young and the very old are always the first to fall to plagues, in humans. When I'm stronger I'd like to examine all the adult dragons, see if there are traces of this thing in their bodies too."

"It nearly killed you before," Andrew said tightly.

"Only because I was still connected to the yearling as it died," Neil said, tilting his head up to watch Andrew's face. "I'll be more prepared now, and ready to pull back. Besides, I have you to tether me. Fire-soul."

"What do you mean? You said that before, but you were babbling..."

"You have power in you," Neil said, lifting a weak hand to press against Andrew's broad chest. "I couldn't sense it before because you don't know how to access it. But there is magic in your heart, Andrew. It burns like a furnace."

Andrew frowned down at him, confused and lost. "I'm not a witch."

"You could be, if you wanted to be trained. When I was sunk in my magic, I could feel it. It was like a beacon, calling me home." Neil rested his cheek on Andrew's chest and sighed. "I can't feel it now, but I know it's there. I could find it if I tried."

"I don't understand."

Neil gently stroked Andrew's chest, closing his eyes when he could no longer keep them open. "You don't have to do anything about it, if you don't want it. It's just there, like your stomach or your hands. It won't harm you."

Andrew relaxed marginally, though he still held Neil close.

"One thing I do know," Neil said, trying to get the words out before he sank back into sleep, "If the sickness is magical, that means a witch is causing it. We can find them, and stop them. And we will."

Andrew pressed a gentle kiss to his temple, and Neil slipped into dragon dreams.

## Chapter 3

Warnings: semi-explicit sex, violence, vomit, animal death/sickness, violence, minor character death, discussion of Neil's backstory and scars.

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Neil needed to recuperate from his near-death for more than a week, and to his surprise the herd stayed put for him.

“You’re part of the herd,” Andrew had explained when asked. “They’ve had too many deaths recently, they don’t want to lose you too. Besides, no one tells the matriarch when to fly.”

Neil hobbled over to the matriarch’s side and pressed himself against her stomach, feeling the great expanding and contracting of her ribcage and the sonorous drum of her heart. He closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the feeling of her breath, and the slow rumble of her stomach. He let himself drift, held somewhere just in-between the state of being wholly in his body or wholly in hers, and opened his senses. He was listening and watching for any trace of the dark constricting sickness that had killed the unlucky hatchlings and yearlings; for the past few days, once he’d regained a little strength, he’d been checking her health whenever he could. He still found no traces of it in her, and he was getting practised at hovering close enough to sense a body, while staying within his own. He had no wish to get trapped in a dying being again.

A warm hand on his back brought him out of his focus and he leaned back into it with a smile, feeling Andrew rub gently over his spine. He turned his head and saw his friend standing close, leaning against the matriarch’s side and watching Neil intently.

“I’m fine,” Neil assured him, inching closer.

Andrew didn’t reply, simply ran his gaze all over Neil as if checking for some injury he might have incurred while asleep. Neil stepped into the circle of his arms and pressed slow, soft kisses to Andrew’s mouth, trying to reassure him. Since Neil’s near-death he had been very protective and anxious in his own way, reluctant to leave Neil alone for long periods and was constantly checking on him. That tended to take the form of touching and holding, an arm around him or a hand on him at almost all times. He frequently checked for Neil’s pulse when he thought Neil was asleep, his fingers light and delicate against the inside of Neil’s wrist or his throat, lingering until he calmed himself enough to fall asleep too. Neil had thought to feel smothered and uncomfortable from such attention, but had instead found himself blissfully submitting to it. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had looked after him so tenderly; not even his mother, or when he was a small child.

Neil stroked gently through Andrew’s fair hair as they kissed. He knew it was simply a reaction to Andrew’s panic over nearly losing his friend, and feeling responsible for putting him in danger. Obviously it wasn’t as if Andrew thought, or wanted, or felt anything like... obviously not. Andrew was very serious about taking care of his herd, and now Neil had been included in that group too. It made sense. Neil had been telling himself as much the past week whenever Andrew touched him, and his own heart started to race and too many confusing things started fluttering around his brain.

Obviously so, he told himself with determination as Andrew cupped his cheeks and kissed him so slow and gentle it felt like a sunrise dancing on his lips. Obviously...

And *of course* Neil was only indulging it because he didn't want his friend to be upset or blaming himself over the whole thing. It would be horrible of him to let Andrew turn himself in circles over the incident and therefore pull his focus away from his herd. Obviously so, he thought to himself as he sighed and ran appreciative hands down Andrew's strong chest, mapping out his muscle and massaging into it, feeling Andrew's heart quicken under his palms. Obviously.

Because if it were otherwise, he thought as Andrew grazed his teeth over Neil's sensitive lower lip with a maddening pressure, they would have to confront the fact that this whole arrangement had gone off the rails somewhere along the way. And neither of them could possibly admit to, or be ready for, anything like a... like a commitment. They each had their own lives – Andrew out here, Neil back in his little town. If they ever admitted to wanting more, it would break this whole thing into pieces. Because there was no way they could find a middle ground; Andrew needed to be away from people, to be with his herd, and Neil needed his little network of friends and family and familiar people. If they were wholly committed to just each other, it would only bring them pain from trying and failing to bridge the very obvious divide between their lives.

So, *quite obviously*, Neil concluded as he sighed at Andrew's hand stroking his neck, anchoring and tethering him, this was still only comfort between friends who had shared a traumatic experience. There could be no other possible conclusion.

Andrew vaguely brushed their noses together and pulled back from the kiss a little, his eyes serious and warm. "Are you ready to move out today?"

"I think so," Neil replied, his lips tingling from the weight of Andrew's own still a phantom touch. "I'll try to keep up, but I'm not as strong as I should be."

Andrew stroked a hand down Neil's side comfortingly. "Well, I'm not having you riding your horse in your condition."

Neil raised an eyebrow, grinning despite himself. "My condition? Did I fall pregnant somehow? Is it yours?"

Andrew gave him an unimpressed look and poked his ribs. "You can ride with the hatchlings, on one of the mothers. They'll keep an eye on you when I have to pay attention to the rest of the herd."

"Demanding," Neil teased, nudging his nose into Andrew's cheek for a moment. "But alright. If you insist."

"I do insist," Andrew said and gave him one last firm kiss before stepping away. "Breakfast is there by the bedroll. I have to sort the horses and break camp."

Neil watched him go with a smile, and got himself ready for the day. Once he was ready to set out, and had said his thank-yous to the matriarch for her shelter and care, Andrew helped boost him up onto the back of one of the 'nanny' dams who would be watching the flightless hatchlings while the rest of the flock flew overhead. She was a fine, emerald-sheened creature with a habit of sighing out clouds of smoke whenever the hatchlings scrambled over her face or her crown of spikes. She bent her muzzle to nudge under Neil's legs as he climbed up her foreleg, lifting him as if he were one of the little hatchlings himself, until he situated himself in the dip behind her wing joints. She sniffed at him as if to check he was alright, and fondly blew smoke in his face when he patted her jaw.



“I’ll check back with you every so often,” Andrew said from where he was mounting his horse; Neil’s was tied on a long lead rein to his. “But I’ll be following the main flock, I might be out of sight. Whistle if you need me urgently.”

“I know,” Neil said patiently, and smiled down at him from his perch some twenty feet up in the air. “I’ll be here.”

Andrew lingered for a moment, as if waiting for him to collapse, then resolutely turned away and galloped after the rapidly-departing flock. The hatchlings gave their usual reedy chorus of disappointment that they were too small to join the rest of their family in the skies, but were distracted soon enough when they realised Neil was staying with them. The nanny dragon started walking at a stately pace after the shadows of the spiralling flock, Neil swaying on her broad back with each slow step. The hatchlings scampered about in the grass nearby or hitched rides on her back. Some of the more enterprising ones came up to Neil as he settled himself cross-legged in his seat to snuffle and nibble at his clothes and hands.

They were about the size of large wolfhounds and three times as excitable, not to mention the wings and tails that flapped about with a distinct lack of co-ordination. They were inquisitive, funny little things, and delighted in whatever attention Neil gave them. As they tried climbing over him like they did with the dragon adults, he had to stop the sharp edges of their talons or wings or tail-tips from gouging his eyes or scratching his skin. He laughed and lifted one particularly inquisitive hatchling off his back and into his lap, hugging it gently and scratching the smooth, unscaled hide of its hot little belly. It gave a blissful croak and flopped across his thighs, squirming for more attention.

“Oh, you lovely thing,” Neil laughed and rubbed both hands over its belly, ducking as its tail lashed from side to side. He fancied he could feel the fire in its belly, not quite ready to be breathed out, still sparks compared to an adult’s banked bonfire. He could feel its heart thundering away, fast and hard in its bellows-like ribcage. It started to sing to him, a bit meandering and occasionally waltzing away from the melody Neil recognised as a happy song to express fondness and joy. He sang back to the best of his ability, and smiled as the miniature flock of babies took it up all around him, chirping and whistling when they couldn’t reach the right notes.

The nanny dragon huffed her amusement and took control of the song, steering them into the right harmony, and Neil eased a hand over her wing joint in appreciation. The hatchling in his lap and the ones clustered around him cuddled up close as they all sang, rubbing affectionately against his body and sighing and snuffling when he petted them in return.

When his voice grew thin from the unexpected stretch of singing, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the happy body sprawled in his lap. Keeping a light tether to his body and surrounds, he dipped cautiously into his magical senses and swept them through the hatchling. It startled at first, but then licked his hand when it realised what was going on. Neil took a quick look into each of the hatchling’s major systems, looking for the sick darkness and constriction he had seen in the ailing yearling he had failed to save.

He didn’t find a single trace or thread of it, to his relief. Then he slowly laid down a protective charm he had been constructing during his week of rest, pricking his finger slightly on one of the hatchling’s talons and using the thin smear of blood to draw a protective sigil on its flank. With another few words and a small push of his will, the blood sank into the hatchling’s hide without a trace, and the charm blossomed into effectiveness. It sent a vague sense of *green* through Neil’s senses, guarding and shielding the hatchling. He hoped it would be able to stave off the sickness, if

it tried to attack the hatchling. He knew they wouldn't know for sure until the next dragon sickened, but he reasoned some sort of preventative action was better than waiting to react, or fail to react, to the next magical attack.

He drew back out of the hatchling's body and opened his eyes, to find it watching him with rapt attention. It tilted its head, its large eyes focussing intently on his face, then gave his cheek a long and slobbery lick of its tongue.

Neil laughed and scratched under its chin for a moment, then gently pushed it out of his lap. It went easily enough, choosing to race after some of its littermates and start a play-fight with them rather than bother Neil. Its place was quickly taken by another hatchling demanding attention, and Neil got to work.

He passed the day like that, inspecting and casting protective charms against all the hatchlings in the little flock, calling them to him with careful whistles and trills if they didn't seek him out. He started to tire around midday, and his fingers were sore from pricking them and breaking open the scabs for each new charm. The nanny dragon craned her head back to look at him as he released the last hatchling, almost as if she could sense his tiredness. She peered at him for a few moments, then gently tugged at his clothes in careful teeth. She stopped walking and stretched her foreleg out in a very clear demand for him to dismount. He tried, but found his balance unsteady when he got to his feet. She chuffed smoke at him and hovered her head close by as he climbed down, permitting him to clumsily clutch at her face for balance.

When he was on the ground once more, she nodded in satisfaction and hunkered down, raising a wing almost like a parasol to shade the grass nearby from the fierce sun. Gratefully, and with more than a little wonder at her intelligence and care, he laid down in the cool shadow created by it and closed his eyes. As he drifted into an exhausted nap, he felt several bony and hot little bodies settle around him in a makeshift nest, and fell asleep with his cheek pillowed on a hatchling's belly.

He woke to a gentle hand in his hair, familiar fingers that smelled of horsehide and dragon-smoke combing through the locks and brushing them out of his eyes. He smiled and turned his head into it so he could graze his lips over them, and opened his eyes.

"Hello," he said bemusedly.

"Are you alright?" Andrew asked, sat down beside him with a few hatchlings snoozing in his lap. "I saw the hatchling flock had stopped."

"I overtired myself," Neil admitted with a yawn. "But the hatchlings should be protected now. I'll do the same to the rest of the flock once I'm recovered."

Andrew stroked his cheek thoughtfully, his thumb pressing into the crease of Neil's smile. "Thank you," he said at length. "But you should be resting."

"I was," Neil pointed out, and kissed his thumb. "How long was I asleep?"

"An hour or two."

"See, not too bad. How's the rest of the herd? Shouldn't you be with them?" Neil asked, watching his face.

"I thought you might be hurt."

“I’m okay, Andrew, really,” Neil said as gently as he could, reaching out to take Andrew’s hand in both his own. He squeezed gently and kissed Andrew’s knuckles. “You don’t need to worry so much. I won’t be making the mistake of going too far again, believe me.”

Andrew didn’t reply, though his lips thinned in a minute frown.

“Really,” Neil continued and carefully kissed each one of Andrew’s scar-rough knuckles. “I’m more durable than you think. I won’t shatter. Not that I’m not enjoying all the attention, but I don’t want you to be so distracted with worrying over me you can’t keep watch on your herd properly. I don’t ever want to be a hindrance to you.”

“You aren’t. If anything you’re the opposite.”

Neil smiled up at him. “What do you call this then?” He asked, and gestured at their stopped progress and the unwatched dragon herd.

Andrew’s brows dove down in a scowl as a slight flush rose on his neck. “This is nothing.”

Neil just smiled at him, then levered himself upright with a pat to Andrew’s hand. “I promise I’m fine, Andrew. And you know I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“I know,” Andrew replied softly before he tore his gaze away and got to work waking up the sleeping dragonlings using him as a pillow. He cleared his throat once everyone was awake and on their feet again, with the nanny dam heaving a smoky sigh as she once again became a climbing frame for the little ones. “Come on, let’s move out.”

“Is the herd headed anywhere in particular?” Neil asked, brushing the grass off his clothes and the occasional petal or stem clinging to his fingertips.

Andrew pointed to the imposing, craggy mountain range looming to their north. “It’s coming up to summer breeding season, and the mares will want to be settled in their caves and valleys to make their nests and hatch their eggs. The matriarch has been flying the herd faster and at a more definite direction today, she must be aware of the delay. Ideally they want to have their nests ready before midsummer, which is their main breeding period.”

Neil nodded thoughtfully and looked about to the hatchlings scampering around. “Then these little ones will have some younger siblings to torment soon.”

“Hopefully. Then they won’t be hatchlings, they’ll be younglings.”

“I see.”

“Mm. We’d better catch up to the rest of the herd.” Andrew said, his fingers twitching at his sides with a restless energy.

“Let’s go then.”

Andrew glanced to him and something seemed to soften in his face for a moment; he reached out and with careful fingers plucked a beetle from Neil’s hair. It perched all curious on Andrew’s kiss-soothed knuckles, its antenna waving in the fresh wind, then flew away with iridescent flits of its wings.

“Thank you,” Neil said lightly, and tugged on Andrew’s shirt just a little. “Come on, dragons to herd. Off with you.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and walked off calling to his horse, while Neil smiled to himself and climbed between the wings of the nanny dragon. Andrew looked back to him once they were both mounted, and raised a hand in vague acknowledgement before setting heels to his horse, and pursuing the rapidly-moving adult dragon herd. Neil watched him go with an all-too familiar warmth in his chest and stretching his cheeks into a smile, and reminded himself once again that nothing would ever come of these... dalliances. That they could play at silly sweethearts all they liked out here in the wilderness, as long as they could both walk away back to their respective lives afterwards. That way neither of them would get hurt.

As he watched the dust kicked up in the wake of Andrew’s swift horse, he wondered if he had truly convinced himself or not.

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It took them about a week to reach the foothills of the mountain range, and as Andrew had said, the flock seemed to be moving with more urgency than before, taking longer flights between rests and keeping in the air until sundown to cover more distance. During that time, Neil did his best to recover his strength and slowly worked his way through the flock, healing away any traces of sickness and laying protective, blood-bound charms onto all the dragons, even the adults just in case.

“I wonder, if I laid the charms onto the eggs in the nests once they’re laid, if that would have the same effect,” Neil mused as he stretched out a kink in his back from a day of hard riding. “That way they’d be protected immediately, but I’m not sure if it would transfer into their bodies once they hatch.”

Andrew pursed his lips speculatively. “I suppose it can’t hurt to try.”

“Mm. I’ll have a think, see if I can figure out a modification to ease the charm into their bodies once the outer shell is broached,” Neil said. He gave his friend a sideways look. “And maybe I could teach you how to do it, if you like. Then you could protect them even when I’m not here to lay the charms next season.”

As expected, Andrew tensed at the mention of his magic, something he was still clearly uncomfortable even considering, never mind using. He turned away to brush lather from his horse’s coat, slipping her a handful of oats from a bag. Neil dipped into his inner senses for a moment, letting the world take on a shimmery haze as he looked out through new eyes, and could clearly see the steadily burning blaze at the centre of Andrew’s soul, pulsing quietly along with his heartbeat and with tendrils of flame licking out into his hands and head with each beat. There was no question he had magic – a similar force, liquid like moonbeams through dew drops, flowed within Neil’s body, as it had in his mother. Neil simply wondered that he hadn’t looked for it before now. But then, he reasoned, he’d had no idea Andrew might have magic. He’d never mentioned it, never performed any magical feats. He’d clearly had no idea what lay mostly-dormant within himself.

Neil gently placed his hand overtop Andrew’s, and watched as the fiery magic in his friend pulsed stronger, questing towards the silvery glints in Neil’s fingertips and glowing brighter where they touched, pushing up to the very edge of his skin like a cat eager for a friendly touch. Neil called up some more of his own magic, concentrated it in his hand so it seemed to shine out through his skin

in his altered vision. Andrew's flames flared brighter in response, rushing in great waves into his hand and filling up his fingers and palms like a small sun, its light yearning to touch Neil's own.

*Magic calls to magic*, his mother's raspy voice sounded in his memory from a long-ago night when Neil was still struggling to gain control of the force within himself. She had called up a ball of silvery magic in her fingertips and touched it to his skin, where it swelled and sucked the excess magic from him like a leech battenning on a wound, until the small amount remaining was in his control again. She had swallowed the ball with a nonchalant air, absorbing it into her own force where it was more easily used, and smiled gently at him in praise for gaining control.

Neil blinked himself out of the bittersweet memory and traced his finger over the back of Andrew's hand to watch the silvery and red lights flicker and call to each other.

"What are you doing?" Andrew asked, frowning down at their hands. "You're doing something."

"I'm watching your magic react to mine. It's beautiful."

Andrew yanked his hand away as if burned, and Neil tried not to feel hurt even as the fire under Andrew's skin left glowing streaks and spots in Neil's vision like a flaming torch tossed into the night.

"I'm not a witch."

"No, you're not," Neil agreed quietly. "But you have power in you."

"I don't want it," Andrew said in a harsh voice, scowling out at the grass. "I don't want to hear about it, I don't want to think about it, I don't want it in my life. Stop it."

Neil watched as the fiery magic flared unsteadily in Andrew's body, as if it were feeding on his anger, moving in uncontrolled fits and spurts through him instead of settling tranquilly in his core like Neil's did. Then Andrew took a deep breath and sighed it out to master himself, and Neil watched in astonishment as the fire was driven back to its source in his heart, brutally curbed and cut off to wither in his hands, restricted back as far as it would go.

It wasn't true control, nothing like the balance and ease with which Neil managed his own magic, but it was something reflexive as if Andrew had done it a hundred times before without realising it. The magic burned hotly in his heart, trying to break out of its containment, but could not release and instead pulsed erratic and unsteady, out of his natural rhythm. Neil had the distinct feeling that when Andrew's control wavered, it would flood back into his being once more like a dam breaking and with as little direction.

Neil lightly rested a hand on Andrew's tense shoulder, relieved when he wasn't shaken off. "Is it such a bad thing, to have magic? To be a witch like me?"

Andrew was silent a long time, his focus somewhere on the twilight plains and dragons settling down for the night a hundred-odd paces away. When he spoke, there was barely-leashed fury under his words.

"If it didn't help me when I was small and vulnerable and screaming for anyone and anything to help me, I don't want it now. I survived without it this long."

Sadness curled like thick smoke in Neil's throat, choking the words from him for several long minutes. He firmed his hand on Andrew's shoulder and rubbed his thumb there as comfortingly as he knew.

"I felt very similarly, when my mother explained what it was to me, when we were away from my father. It had never helped me when he hurt me, never stopped me from bleeding or healed the wounds or stopped them from scarring." He slipped his hand down to Andrew's, and guided it under his shirt to press against his many scars. Andrew's hand twitched, but he didn't pull away. He glanced at Neil from the corner of his eye and traced carefully over one particularly thick scar, a souvenir from an attempted disembowelling at the hands of a guard allowed free rein on the disobedient child. "I felt betrayed by it, too. But my mother explained to me. These things happen in their own time, to their own course. The moon can't change from crescent to full in one night, she said. It must go through all its phases in the proper order first. Magic is much the same; it blooms according to its own time and needs."

Andrew said nothing, though his hand traced kindly over Neil's scars.

"I'm not saying you have to become a witch like me," Neil continued, "But it is a part of you, and denying it will only harm you in the long run. And I don't want you to be hurt, Andrew."

He could see when Andrew's throat bobbed as he swallowed, and a muscle in his cheek twitched.

"Would it help to see it, like I can?" Neil asked.

Andrew gave him a cautious look. "How? What would I need to do?"

"Nothing. You would need to let me touch against your mind, but otherwise nothing. I promise it won't hurt, and I won't pry."

Andrew mulled the offer over for long moments, then sighed and offered up his hands between them. "I trust you," he muttered.

Neil closed his fingers around Andrew's hands and squeezed gently. "Thank you. For now, just close your eyes and breathe with me. And you can tell me to stop at any time."

Andrew swallowed again with nerves, but did as Neil had said. Neil centred himself and let his awareness flow towards Andrew, using the focus of his hands like he had used the dragons' bodies to examine their sickness. He floated free of his bodily tether and brushed up against Andrew, travelling through his hands up to his head and shifting his perception until he could sense the edges of his friend's mind. He touched on that edge as lightly as he could, like a bee slowly settling on petals. He could sense Andrew's confusion and alarm, and gentled his touch even further.

*It's me,* he whispered soothingly. *It's Neil. It's okay, I promise.*

There was a sense of curiosity and recognition; it seemed Andrew could sense Neil's presence at the fringes of his thoughts.

*Hello,* Neil thought to him.

*Neil?* Came the muddy, unfocussed response in Andrew's voice.

*Yes, it's me. I can hear the loudest of your thoughts, but I won't push any deeper.*

*What do I do now?* Andrew asked, his mental voice a little clearer as if he were concentrating on projecting the words – raising his voice, as it were.

*Stay calm, and open your eyes when you feel ready. I'll direct a little of your magic so it changes your sight to see things differently. It's quite an easy trick, once you know how. But you must stay calm – it can be alarming at first.*

A vague sense of acknowledgement echoed from Andrew's mind, and after a few steady breaths Neil could sense Andrew was opening his eyes. Neil carefully called to the tiniest sliver of Andrew's fiery magic and shaped it, directing it into the waiting space in Andrew's mind. He eased it there as slowly as he could, so that the altered vision would fade in gradually with each blink rather than a sudden, startling change.

He knew when the change had fully settled when he heard Andrew's sharp intake of breath.

*It's okay,* Neil soothed as he kept the magical connection going. *It's okay.*

He knew the night would have come alive with strange shapes and colours flashing and glimmering in the wind – normal magical currents that flowed like the winds and seas, mixed with the natural energies of all the living things around them, with occasional sparks of intention and emotion carried like seeds on the wind, as well as the occasional pulse of magic from them both tainting the air as they breathed it out. Not to mention the various intangible beings made of pure magic that floated through the world on ephemeral wings, affecting everything from the growth of flowers to the progression of the seasons to the direction of human consciousness and understanding, guiding and changing with unseen ministrations.

*Look at me,* Neil directed him. *You can see my magic, can't you? The light under my skin?*

*It's like mother-of-pearl,* Andrew's thoughts mused in wonder, unguarded and unfiltered. *Fuck, you're so beautiful.*

*Thank you,* Neil replied, affection welling up in him unbidden. *Look to our hands. Can you see your magic?*

Andrew's thoughts went formless and wordless, superseded by surges of confusion, alarm and awe. Neil waited patiently for him to understand and recognise what he was seeing, watching the lovely flames twined around his bones and pulsing out from his heart flare stronger than before and reaching out into his hands, towards Neil's magic. Neil gently stroked his fingertips over Andrew's palms, the sensation far away with his attention split into the mental and magical. It seemed to soothe Andrew though, with echoes of warmth and tenderness colouring the edges of his mind. Their magics surged towards each other, straining under their skin but unable to breach the physical barrier, instead swirling brightly like the northern lights contained in their hands.



*See?* Neil said fondly. *It's a part of you, like mine is a part of me. And it's amazing, your fire-soul. And beautiful.*

Andrew's thoughts recoiled and withdrew, confusion and consternation ringing clear even as he retreated. *I want to stop*, he 'shouted'.

Neil immediately drew back into his body and broke the mental and magical connection between them, ending the altered sight and breaking away from his awareness of Andrew's mind. He took a few breaths to reconnect with his own physical self, and slowly opened his eyes.

Andrew was staring out into the velvet night with wide eyes as if he was straining to see the fantastical shapes and colours that had existed for him just moments before, his breathing a little fast and panicky.

"Andrew," Neil called softly and squeezed his fingers. "It's alright."

"Do you see those things all the time?" Andrew croaked. "Those – colours. Those things in the air."

Neil shook his head. "Only when I choose to. It can be overwhelming and confusing, to see the world like that for long periods. Small glimpses are fine, but too much can unsettle you. You could learn to access that sight again, if you wanted."

Andrew shuddered and closed his eyes, though he couldn't hide the longing mixed with his distress.



“No more,” Andrew said weakly. “No more, not tonight. I can’t – no.”

“Of course,” Neil said and bent his head to press his lips to Andrew’s trembling fingers. “I won’t say any more about it.”

“I just want to look after my dragons,” Andrew said, a note of desperation in his voice. “That’s all I want.”

Neil interlinked their fingers and started walking towards the settled herd, with Andrew following numbly in his wake. Neil led him back to the bronze matriarch and gently pushed Andrew to lie down beside her. He smoothed a kiss to Andrew’s temple and covered him in his cloak, and the matriarch curled her forepaw protectively around him with a low croon humming in her throat. Neil sat sentry until he was sure Andrew had dropped off into dreams, then followed suit.

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The next day, Andrew made no mention of what he had seen or experienced, and gave no hint of being alarmed by any memory of it. It seemed as if he wanted to forget the whole thing, or at least pretend so for a little while, and Neil let him be for the time being. He knew very well how difficult it could be to accept magic, especially after living without it for nearly three decades. At least Neil had been introduced to his magic as a child, when the imagination is more free to accept the extraordinary and the mind is more adaptive to the wondrous.

When they reached the start of a canyon-like passage through the mountains, the dragons suddenly took flight from where they had been resting, and began to circle higher and higher. They gave loud calls to each other, their wings frantically beating, and even the flightless little ones became agitated and climbed onto the nanny dam who took wing as well, her head scanning back and forth over the ground.

Andrew frowned and cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his querying whistle to his spooked herd. He kept calling to the matriarch, and Neil thought he recognised the trills for asking about danger. When he realised that, he started carefully watching their environment too, palming his belt-knife and calling magic under the skin of his other palm, ready to be loosed. He couldn’t see any threats, but that didn’t mean there weren’t any nearby. He saw Andrew rest a hand uneasily on his sword in its scabbard on his hip, fingers fidgeting with the leather-wrapped hilt and making sure the blade would easily slide free if needed.

At length, the matriarch replied to Andrew’s questions.

“One of the sentries sent out a danger call,” Andrew translated for Neil, his frown deepening. “They aren’t sure what spooked him, but they aren’t taking chances with the hatchlings. And they get very protective of their breeding and hatching grounds.”

“Understandably.”

Andrew’s gaze darted between his safely-airborne dragons and the mountain sides looming around them – seeming eerily like the jaws of a trap, now Neil considered it.

“Come on,” Andrew said after a minute. “Let’s ride out and see if there’s anything there.”

“What would dragons class as a threat?” Neil asked as he ran to catch his horse’s reins and mount up. “They’re the biggest predators out here, aren’t they?”

“A rival herd, maybe. A lone bull looking to assert dominance, or a young female trying to start her own flock,” Andrew replied and kicked his horse into a fast canter, Neil beside him. “A forest fire. Dangerous weather. Or a direct threat.”

“What do you mean?” Neil pressed.

Andrew’s mouth twisted. “Poachers, egg-stealers, hunters looking to take the things I usually bring you to sell. Soldiers, maybe.”

Neil swallowed and leaned forwards in his saddle to let his horse run faster. His thoughts immediately ran to his father, and his father’s employers, but he reminded himself that those lands were far away, more than a hundred leagues over yet another mountain range. He was safe from them.

Of course, that was no guarantee that the neighbouring country on the other side of *these* mountains didn’t want to poach or steal from Andrew’s herd to bolster their own military’s numbers, or eliminate a threat if they were planning to invade through the pass.

They ranged along the pass for the rest of the day, and into moonrise, looking for traces of any threat or past presence of something dangerous. The pass wound up through the mountain range in a generally northward pattern, and Neil saw offshoots and other paths threading through and intersecting with their main path. He saw caves and open spaces and small ravines all hidden and scattered around the pass, and could easily see why the dragons had chosen this place for their breeding and hatching grounds; it was sheltered, secretive, remote. A wonderful place, with lots of hidey holes and secure caves, to raise vulnerable hatchlings fresh from their nests. As hard as he and Andrew looked however, they found only what could have been either a well-eliminated campsite, or the remains of some scuffle between a predator and its prey. It was too dark by that time to see clearly, and they were both exhausted.

Andrew kicked at the central area of disturbed ground again, anxious lines drawn on his forehead and around his mouth.

“If it *was* a camp, it’s long broken-down,” Neil said wearily. “And only one or two people, at most. I can’t pick up any magic traces around here, so there hasn’t been anyone here in a long time. They must have moved on, if there were people here at all.”

Andrew listened to him, that was obvious from the tilt of his head, but his hand stayed firm on his sword-hilt and his gaze on the ground.

Neil tried again. “Do you want to sleep out here, or go back to the herd? They must have landed by now. If we don’t leave soon, it’ll be too dark to safely navigate the scree falls back the way we came. I don’t want either of us, or our horses, to break our legs in the dark.”

That seemed to work. Andrew sighed regretfully and turned back to where Neil waited with the horses. “We’ll go back,” he said begrudgingly. “But I want to come back here in daylight and have a proper look.”

“As you like,” Neil said. When Andrew made to walk past him without replying, Neil reached out to catch his fingers. Andrew turned towards him in surprise, still tense from their search. Neil smiled tiredly at him and squeezed his fingers. “We’ll keep them safe, Andrew. It’ll be alright.”

Andrew's shoulders sagged abruptly, all the worry washed out of him in a rush. He looked down to their hands, his jaw twitching, and carefully laced their fingers together. He swung their hands just a little and leaned in to kiss Neil's cheek.

Neil closed his eyes and leaned his head into Andrew's temple, rubbing their cheeks gently together in dragon-like affection. A tiny, vulnerable sound escaped Andrew's throat at that, and he raised a hand to rest on Neil's neck. His thumb gently tapped over Neil's pulse in time with his heartbeat, steady and tender.

Andrew mumbled something under his breath, and Neil asked him to repeat it.

"I said, sometimes I can't believe you're real, but then I don't think I could have imagined you either."

Neil blinked, caught off-guard. He kissed Andrew's temple. "Why wouldn't I be real?"

"Because you're like a pipe dream," Andrew sighed, sounding both saddened and resigned. "And those never last."

"I don't understand."

"It doesn't matter."

Andrew started to pull away, so Neil tugged on his hand again. "I'm here, Andrew," he insisted, still confused but not wanting to see that hopeless look on Andrew's face ever again. "I'm here and I'm real, and I'm not going anywhere."

"You will," Andrew said bleakly. "Once the season is over and the dragons are safe, you will. And I'll go too, and things will be just like they always were."

There wasn't anything Neil could say to that – he was right. Neil would go home, and Andrew would stay with his dragons, and they would settle back into their previous arrangement. Something deep in his chest seemed to twist at the reminder that this had never been intended to be so tender between them, and they were only hurting each other pretending to be something more than they could ever be. Neil looked to the ground, feeling suddenly ashamed of his own selfishness in greedily seeking out Andrew's comforting touches and encouraging Andrew to do the same with him, simply because it felt good. It wasn't fair to either of them.

"I –"

"Don't listen to me," Andrew interrupted him suddenly. "I'm – I'm tired, and concerned for my herd. Just – ignore me. Forget I said anything. It's those boxes breaking open again."

Neil rather doubted that, but nodded hesitantly. Andrew squeezed his hand and kept hold as they walked silently back along the winding pass with their droopy-headed horses, the lot of them tired beyond endurance. Neil watched the back of Andrew's head the whole way, their hands still securely linked, trying not to think too hard.

They made their way back to the herd, now grounded and arranged in a defensive circle around their young, with the largest bulls positioned in the outer ring for defence. They picketed their horses nearby, who were too exhausted to protest being so close to the dragons, and set up their own little camp in the centre of the flock. Initially they set up their bedrolls with more distance

between them than they had since starting this journey, both a little awkward and upset from their conversation. But late during the night, through seeking hands and uneasy shufflings, they found themselves curled up together again like it was the most natural thing in the world. Neil opened bleary eyes to find his cheek pillowed on Andrew's broad chest, and arms tucked securely around him, snug and warm. He closed his eyes again and relaxed into a proper sleep, feeling perfectly at home once again, despite the lack of walls and a familiar house around him.

He woke again in the morning to a quiet sigh of breath ruffling his hair, and a hand gently stroking over his back. Andrew's heartbeat under his cheek was quick, but not in alarm. His arms tightened a little around Neil's waist, and a kiss found itself deposited on his crown by tender lips.

"Maybe one day," Andrew whispered, so quietly that Neil knew he had not been intended to hear. Maybe Andrew hadn't intended to say it, either. Neil didn't like the mournful note in his voice, or the way it plucked at his heart and clenched up his throat. He never wanted Andrew to be unhappy – he wanted exactly the opposite of that. He wanted... he wanted Andrew to be well, and content, and appreciated and, well, *loved* by someone worthy of him. He hoped to still be friends with Andrew when he inevitably found his perfect partner and began a new part of his life without Neil's embraces.

Thinking like that made too much pain swell in his chest, so he stopped feigning sleep and tilted his head to see Andrew's face. His expression wiped clean of any regret instantly, and his arms loosened.

"Sorry, I must have rolled toward you in the night—"

Neil didn't let him finish his excuse. "Andrew, while we're out here – we both know how things stand. But while we're here, mightn't it be better to keep on as we have? It's enjoyable, and we only have each other for company out here. And if it helps both of us to feel more settled and secure, why shouldn't we enjoy the company?" He smiled just a little. "At the very least, so the herd doesn't reject me if they no longer think we're mated."

Andrew grabbed hold of the flimsy pretence with both hands, his expression lightening. "You want to keep on as if we're a – a mated pair, then?"

"I'd like to," Neil said quietly, pressing closer to him. "It's very soothing. I know you find it soothing, too."

"It is," Andrew replied, distractedly.

Neil smiled and twisted his hips to roll them so he ended up sat firmly in Andrew's lap, with Andrew laying on the ground underneath him looking a little surprised. His hands were quick enough to find Neil's thighs and backside, though, holding him almost protectively, as if he were afraid Neil might fly away out of his grasp if he didn't hold tight. Neil rested his hands on Andrew's strong chest and smiled down at him, feeling the early morning sun bathe his face in its golden warmth.

"So while we're here, we'll just... forget about the frontier, and all that," Neil suggested hopefully. "We'll just be *here*, and do what feels good."

"Yes," Andrew said quickly. "Yes."

Neil swallowed the tinge of guilt at such willing self-delusion in them both, but banished his fears with the knowledge they were both fully aware of this, and where the boundaries would be once they got back to the frontier. For the immediate moment, they could just enjoy each other. He leaned down, sliding his hands up Andrew's chest to his shoulders, and kissed him with a slow, intent heat. He was rather enjoying having Andrew underneath him like this, though he usually revelled in being held and cradled under Andrew's strong weight. But this was nice too – having Andrew content in his arms, under his hips, letting Neil take control of the kiss and do what he wanted, while his hands roamed with appreciative attention. Neil was tempted to start moving his hips in slow rocks and ride them both towards a slow release, when Andrew's arms curled around his waist and simply held him close in a strong, yearning embrace.

Neil relaxed onto him, desire fading as affection replaced it, and let their kiss deepen and slow with tenderness rather than hunger. Each brush of their lips was a caress, each breath shared as their hearts beat in time, with the earth holding them up and the sun warming their bodies as it eased over the horizon.

*I want this forever*, an errant thought intruded, but Neil pushed it away. He had this for now, and that was more than he'd ever dreamed of having anyway.

The unmistakable sounds of a herd of very large dragons waking up shook them from their focus on each other, and Neil regretfully slipped off Andrew's body and got to his feet. Andrew lay there for a moment blinking up at the sky with a most becoming flush on his cheeks and to his lips, before joining Neil in a more upright position.

The dragons were restless and took flight earlier than usual, milling about in the entrance to the pass until the matriarch seemed to judge it was safe enough, and they started winding through the narrow corridors of rock. As he and Andrew followed under them, he was amazed all over again at how the dragons simply moved. He had become used to their awesome wingspans and the distances they could cover on the flat plains, but he was surprised all over again with how manoeuvrable and flexible they could be in such tight confines. They were massive creatures, the biggest on life that Neil had ever heard of, but they twisted and turned with a sinuous grace through the tricky wind currents of the pass and the sharp juts of rock around them. The adolescents and yearlings were less graceful than their elders, and Neil reminded himself they had likely only been to the hatching grounds maybe once or twice since their own birth. They tended to hop and glide short distances, landing on the rocky ledges and scrambling about a bit until they could glide on easier currents, or spiral up on thermals to broader avenues, or jumping between footholds underneath the flock. The hatchlings were all settled on the back of the nanny dams and the occasional sentry, content to be carried where the pass was too narrow for the adult dragons to walk. Neil smiled to see them; they looked like farmer's children piled in the back of a haycart, off to the market for the day.

Andrew was distracted as they rode, his head on a swivel and only one hand on his reins, the other on his scabbard. Neil elected not to bother him for the moment; he had those anxious frown lines over his face again as he scanned the pass once more in daylight for any threats. Neil joined him in keeping a lookout once he could tear his eyes away from the flying wonders above them and their majestic shadows running the ground with them. He could see no more indicators in daylight than they had at night, but he kept at it just in case. He could fully appreciate the need for vigilance, especially after years of living taut as a lute string, on the constant watch for threats while he and his mother fled his father's lands.

Neil turned his thoughts away from that and focussed again on their surroundings, setting his mouth in a grim line. He didn't like remembering those years; he reminded himself they were far away, *he* was far away, and he was as safe as he had ever been. Between himself, Andrew, and the great flock of impressive creatures surrounding them, he was probably safer than he'd been at any point in his life. It made him wonder how vulnerable and exposed he would feel once he said farewell to the flock, but quickly turned his thoughts from that as well. No point dwelling on that, especially when he and Andrew had agreed just that morning to focus on the present.

By noon they had reached the site they had found the previous night, the possible campsite. They dismounted and went over it again with fresh eyes as the flock wheeled and sang above them. Once they had completed a few sweeps, Neil joined Andrew in frowning at the ground once more.

"Has it changed?" Neil asked in confusion. "Are we in the right place?"

"It's definitely been altered," Andrew said grimly. "These rocks were collected over to the west side like a windbreak, before. Now they're scattered, and I can see drag marks in the dirt as if branches were brushed over."

"To erase footprints?"

Andrew nodded and folded his arms, making the leather sleeves of his outer jacket stretch and squeak a little under the provocation.

"Do you think animals could have done something similar, if they passed through?"

"Possibly," Andrew said. "But it seems like too much of a coincidence that the flock got spooked by something, and we found this place last night, and said out loud that we were suspicious and would return today to get a better look. And it's been very neatly altered to make it look even less like a campsite. But it's a bit too neat for my liking – if animals had denned here in the night, there would be more mess. I'd expect dung or hairs to be left behind, for some kind of scent trace. There would be more disturbance in the soil; animals wouldn't even think of being neat."

Neil couldn't fault his greater experience and camp craft, and though his own skills were rusty from years of disuse, now Andrew had pointed it out the whole place seemed far too tidy. Neil cast veiled looks at the rocks around them, all the possible hiding places. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing up, imagining eyes on them from a hundred different spots.

He had the sudden thought that this pass was great for hiding pairs and new families of dragons – and would be even better for concealing humans intent on something sneaky. He rubbed his hands over his arms and tried to get the prickly, anxious crawling on his skin to dissipate. He edged a bit closer to Andrew, who was also looking around with a grim expression.

"We don't know if someone is following us, or if it's just travellers who got scared from seeing people coming towards them," Neil said, trying to keep his fears in check. "For all we know, they saw us as the dangerous force pursuing them. We don't have any clear evidence."

"You're right," Andrew sighed, "But I still don't like it. We'll have to be careful."

"I don't think either of us are ever careless."

Andrew smiled faintly at him for that, and brushed his hand over Neil's side as he passed. They mounted up again and kept going, making their way through the pass and following the flock on its

way. They slowed down in mid-afternoon and landed in one of the larger clearings, with the more agile dragons perching on precarious rocks all around the rest. Neil watched as they proceeded with their usual greeting and bonding rituals, and then separated into new groups divided by age. The elders and the very youngest grouped together, while the fertile adults gathered a little way off from them.

Neil split his focus between the two groups as he and Andrew stayed on the outskirts. The elders were inspecting the flightless and immature youngsters, checking them over by scent and touch. Neil was curious; he couldn't remember seeing those two groups mixing before, unless they were directly related. Now they seemed to be purposefully mixing outside of family groups, and becoming acquainted with each other. Each elder seemed to collect a few youngsters, who began joyously clambering all over their noble bulk without a care for their steeds' dignity. Neil grinned to see the bronze matriarch having her tail tugged by an energetic little one, bearing it with steady patience.

Meanwhile, the adults of mating age were inspecting each other as well, new songs humming in their throats that Neil hadn't heard yet, sometimes doing shy little cheek rubs before breaking away and seeming to reconsider. As they watched, the group of adults seem to come to some kind of conclusion, and took wing as a flock of their own. They spiralled up in intricate loops, seeming to dance all together as they wove and twined around each other. Neil felt his jaw drop a little as they continued soaring up and up even higher until he couldn't recognise individuals anymore, and could only watch their sinuous progress silhouetted against the clouds.

"They'll fly all together for the next few days," Andrew explained in a subdued voice, watching their progress too. "They won't land until they're sure of their partner, not even to eat or sleep. Then they will break off into pairs and find a cave to mate and prepare a nest. The flock won't recombine until all the eggs are hatched."

"Oh," Neil said, squinting against the sun to try and see their elaborate courtship flight. "How long will that take?"

"A few weeks, give or take. The elders will take care of the young ones in that time, and solidify them as part of the herd and start teaching them how to behave."

Neil looked at him from the corner of his eye. "So what do we do for that time?"

Andrew gave him a tight smile. "Relax a little. Spend time with the elders and youngsters, look at any illnesses that have cropped up. I usually make new supplies or things to trade. I'll start working with them a bit more seriously. We'll keep an eye out for the flock; they'll be stationary and vulnerable until the new hatchlings have arrived."

Neil smiled back shyly and skimmed his fingers over Andrew's knuckles. "Maybe some other things too, if we have time."

Andrew's expression didn't change, but his fingers curled tight around Neil's to keep them close. "Well, you did say you could multitask."

Neil grinned and ducked his head to press a lingering kiss to the underside of Andrew's jaw, gently teasing with just the slightest edge of his teeth and the tip of his tongue. A hand fastened on his hip as Andrew shuddered pleurably, then moved down to tightly squeeze Neil's backside and startling a laugh out of him.

“Just checking everything’s still there,” Andrew murmured teasingly against Neil’s lips. He gave Neil another smart little pat then stepped back with a glint in his eye. “For later.”

Sparks shot up Neil’s spine like a wildfire catching in a neighbouring tree, fast and sharp and shocking. He grinned back, feeling heat in his face and belly, and just about refrained from tackling Andrew to the ground then and there. From the slightly smug look on Andrew’s face, he knew the impulse must be painted clear across his own.

But rather than act on it, Andrew chose instead to walk off with a superior air, taking great satisfaction in Neil’s frustration and fondness. After all, Neil reflected, they had plenty of time for that later.

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Neil watched as a few couples of dragons began to wheel downwards in slow loops, weaving in and out of each other as they neared the ground again.

“Ah,” Andrew said quietly, a pleased smile on his face. He started walking towards where one particular couple seemed to be heading in to land, and Neil followed in bemusement. He didn’t really want to watch the dragons mating – he’d heard the loud noises and fiery crackles from his father’s breeding farm and had been terrified of whatever had been causing it for most of his childhood – but he doubted that was Andrew’s intention anyway.

As the dragon pair flew closer to the ground, Neil could make out more identifying features of both of them, and carefully leafed through his memory to try and identify the individuals properly.

“Those two are both female, aren’t they?” Neil asked Andrew.

Andrew smiled and nodded. “Mmhmm. They’ve paired up almost every year since I’ve been with the flock, and they take less and less time to decide each season.”

The two female dragons, one a midnight blue and the other a smoky orange, landed with grace just ahead of them and began tenderly nuzzling cheeks and pressing close to each other. Once they’d done that for a while and thoroughly rubbed their scent over their partner, they faced each other and began to sway and dance together, stepping in time and perfectly mirroring each other as they sang in low, contented trills. For all their size and bulk, legs and tails and wings and spikes all, they stepped with delicacy and care, each clawed toe placed with precision and gentleness. There were no clumsy bumps of limbs or accidental knocks; they moved exactly where they planned, and seemed to take joy in the perfection. They danced together in the scrubby grass of the narrow pass, treading it into flat circles with the passes of their feet and tails. For a moment Neil was absurdly reminded of cats turning circles in the spots where they intended to sleep. He was proven almost correct a little while later, when they stopped dancing and simply lay down together. They curled around each other in the area they had danced, long necks and wings draped over each other. Their tails intertwined and they rested their head together, singing more softly now but just as beautifully. They weren’t mating, but there was no mistake as to the purpose of their closeness. They sang to each other and puffed gentle clouds of smoke around each other, cocooning themselves in affection.

“It’s a courtship behaviour,” Andrew explained softly as they watched from a little distance off.

“They’ll spend a little while being intimate and strengthening their bonds, before finding a cave to mate and start building a nest together.”



Neil slipped his fingers into Andrew's. "Why do they need to make a nest? If they're both female, there won't be any eggs."

"No, there won't. But the activity will further strengthen their bond as mates, and opportunities to give each other gifts." Andrew glanced at him quickly out of the corner of his eye and lightly squeezed his hand. "Dragons aren't so different from us humans, really."

Neil kissed his cheek softly, smiling into his cheekbone.

"It was seeing things like this that helped me heal," Andrew said a little while later, in a contemplative tone. "And helped me to understand. People like Luther and Aaron, they like to say that people like us, sodomisers and sinners and what-have-you, it's all out of sin and lack of morals. They preach that the only natural thing to be is a husband and wife making babies and anything else is wrong. But *real* nature is not nearly so regimented. That sort of obsessive rejection is only in humans, and we made it up all on our own. Just look at those two – they've been a bonded pair for years, and they're perfectly happy. None of the herd cast them out for it, or become aggressive or demanding about the lack of offspring they produce. The herd recognises that they are happy together, and that is more than enough."

Neil heard the raw edge under Andrew's words, half-buried resentment and hurt that was years old, the feelings of a young boy told that his own natural wants were unholy and threatened with dire punishment if he didn't change what could not be changed. He kissed Andrew's cheek again gently, over and over across the ridge of his cheekbone and the ticklish edge of his beard, until the minute tension in Andrew's frame had been replaced with soft pleasure and contented sighs.

"The world has its own complex rhythms and structures," Neil agreed quietly. "Humans are the only species that try and change them, or pretend they are different because they don't like what they see. It's a beautiful thing, that you've been able to see that despite everything."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"What, beautiful?" Neil smiled and laced their fingers together. He could feel his cheeks warming with embarrassed nerves, but he wasn't going to lie. "Because it's true. I think you're very beautiful, Andrew. Through and through, more than just your looks. You are beautiful."

Andrew shivered and clutched at his hand, his eyelids fluttering. He leaned closer into Neil and wrapped an arm tightly around Neil's hips to hold him close. "You don't give yourself enough credit there either," he mumbled, and Neil felt soft wonder bloom within himself, warming him from top to toe and making him want to just stay there forever, timeless and gentle and all each other's.

Their attention was pulled away from their embrace when the dragon couple got to their feet and began to walk towards the cliffs, where Neil could see several dark shadows indicating the mouths of caves speckled throughout the pass. The female dragons walked close together, often pausing to nuzzle and sing to each other, as they looked for the cave they wanted.

Neil smiled as Andrew gently turned him and started walking back toward the elder herd again, keeping Neil close by his side like they were truly a bonded pair too.

That evening, when the sun had slipped beneath the horizon and the moon and stars had begun their shy dance, Neil followed Andrew to the new little pack of the elderly and the hatchlings. Above them, most of the adult dragons still wheeled and whirled together, attempting to decide who to

court. A few more couples had spun down and gone in search of caves, but there was still a large majority in the sky. They silhouetted strangely against the stars and moon, a carefully-swirling cloud that made it seem like the stars winked and flashed in their wake.

The elders had formed a snugly knot of bodies with the hatchlings securely tucked under their wings and shielded by their bulk. The elders were patient with their hyperactive young charges, often hooking a tail or a forepaw out to bring one or two back into the huddle when they got too restless and began to wander. Eventually, as night time settled itself around them, they began to tire and seek the comfort of a scaled belly to curl up next to and soon enough the constant chirrups and scampering sounds of uncoordinated tails and feet quieted and changed to little snorts and contented yawns with whispers of smoke at the edges. The elders murmured and hummed sedately to each other while Neil and Andrew set up a small campfire and ate their dinner. Neil was tired too from the long, emotional day, but Andrew insisted they stay awake a little longer.

“You’ll see,” Andrew would say whenever Neil made a token protest and pretended to start crawling into his sleeping mat. Neil would pout but acquiesce, and sit back down at Andrew’s side. His head began to droop the longer they waited, and at some point found itself on Andrew’s broad shoulder. He was half in a doze, but smiled to himself at the feeling of Andrew’s warm arm around his waist, and his hand lightly stroking Neil’s hip.

Andrew nudged him from half-sleep with a gentle kiss to his jaw. “Neil,” he said quietly, “It’s starting.”

“What is?” Neil yawned.

Andrew nodded to the elders in their cosy huddle wordlessly. Neil rubbed grit from his eyes and saw they had all tilted their heads up towards the sky, long necks elongated and snouts toward the stars. The moon was now directly overhead them, at its zenith, and the cloud of dragons had changed their flight pattern to circle around it. Their wings sent fleeting shadows cascading through the pillar of moonlight seemingly contained and amplified by their bodies, pearly light shimmering and reflecting off their multihued scales to make pale rainbow flashes sneak across Neil’s eyes, even in the darkness.

The elders took voice as one and began a sweetly joyful serenade of their family. Their harmonies blended with each other with as much skill as the fliers above, seeming to throb and twist out into the night with joy. To Neil, the sound was almost like nature itself given song – wild, free, and pure in a way he had never found in human cities.

Beside him, Andrew rummaged in his packs and brought out the hand-carved wooden flute he sometimes used when commanding the flock. He wet his lips and began to play in haunting counterpoint to his flock, swooping along with the bronze matriarch and joining in the blessing of his flock. His eyes were serious and his expression pensive as his fingers danced and fluttered over the flute. Neil sat silent witness to his soul pouring out in sweet music, wondering and marvelling that Andrew must have taught himself this skill just to talk with his dragons. Neil had never had any time for music whenever he and his mother were in cities, but he could certainly see that Andrew could have performed this beautiful song for a sold out amphitheatre and left the audience speechless. Not that Andrew would, Neil reflected fondly. He was too much a wild creature himself.

The dragons and their loving herd-master sang until the moon had passed from directly overhead and began to head towards the horizon after the long-departed sun. They held the last notes as long

as they could, echoing and trembling out into the starlight, and the adults kept flying their courtship dance overhead. The elders' heads drooped over their snuffling little charges, and they began to settle into sleep as well.

Neil felt electric, like the song was still coursing through his head and pounding in his bones. He was giddy and restless, like he could run for hours or cast a charm to bind the moon, could jump into the air and take wing himself without a second thought.

Andrew smirked a little at the expression on Neil's face. "Aren't you glad I woke you up?"

"Let's walk out a little bit," Neil said.

"Why?"

Neil grinned and traced the edge of Andrew's hand. "Because I want to blow you, but not right in front of the dragons."

That certainly caught Andrew off guard and he blinked and gaped for a charming moment, before recovering and clearing his throat. He got to his feet without another word and offered a hand up to Neil. Neil's grin stretched and he took Andrew by the hand, leading him quickly away from the flocks into the darkness of the pass.

Neil kept getting distracted as they walked, needing to pause and kiss Andrew a few times when the urge became too strong, to squeeze his hand and trace fingertips over his cheeks. They were both in quite a flustered state by the time they found a suitable grassy slope to lay down on, hands wandering and clutching and their breathing already coming fast. Andrew tripped over his own ankles and Neil grabbed his arm to steady him, but then Andrew just shrugged and folded his legs.

"Here's as good as anywhere," he said, a little breathlessly.

Neil laughed and joined him on the grass, kneeling in front of him and cupping his cheeks as they kissed. Andrew's hands roamed over Neil's shirt, fumbling at the ties with less than his usual finesse. Neil grinned against his lips and gently held Andrew's hands still.

"You first, this time," Neil insisted into the corner of Andrew's jaw. He got distracted for a moment kissing there, then remembered what else he was going to say. "Mmn... I want to make you come first. Is that alright?"

Andrew shuddered and scraped his teeth over Neil's earlobe, tugging gently. "Yes," he murmured, his breath hot over the wet skin. Neil gasped in surprise at the sensation and felt Andrew's soundless chuckle in the puff of air tickling his ear. Not wanting to be beaten, Neil turned his head and licked a slow stripe up Andrew's sensitive neck, then blew gently on the skin. Andrew swore and jerked with a muffled groan, and Neil was able to gently push him to lay down.

"Stop trying to distract me," Neil said, though he was smiling too much to sound cross. He made his way down Andrew's front in kisses, pressing his mouth tenderly to the rough weave of the shirt and the warmth he could feel radiating through it from Andrew's skin. He knelt back on his heels and started untying the laces of Andrew's trousers with one hand while his other rubbed Andrew's thigh. He got a hand on Andrew's skin proper and pressed and squeezed gently, coaxing surprised and wanting noises from Andrew's slack mouth. He was panting already, a little overwhelmed but he didn't tell Neil to stop – far from it, his hips pushed up into Neil's hands.

When Neil braced a hand on the ground by Andrew's hip to steady himself and glanced up one more time to check Andrew wanted this too, Andrew gave a strained and hoarse "Yes, Neil," in permission. Neil licked his lips and lowered his head, and busied himself with lips and tongue and throat. He heard a thump as Andrew's head hit the grass behind him and would have stopped to make sure he wasn't hurt, if Andrew hadn't been gasping *don't stop* over and over. So he listened to Andrew's low stream of groans and gasps instead, working hard to coax the loudest noises he could from his lover. He couldn't play the flute to sing with dragons, but he could try his best to make Andrew sing.

Neil pulled off for a moment to catch his breath and glanced up; he smiled softly at the expression on Andrew's face, all fierce and vulnerable pleasure. He wondered if this was how Andrew looked whenever they were intimate, and had a moment of raw regret that they usually couldn't see each other's faces with how they preferred to do things. He would have loved to see this expression more often.

"What?" Andrew gasped out. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Neil replied and pressed a tender kiss to the soft skin under Andrew's navel. "Not at all."

He took Andrew into his mouth again with gentle attention, slowing everything down and teasing him closer and closer to release, but not quite pushing him over the edge. Andrew groaned Neil's name in frustration, his hands shaking a bit. Neil took one of his hands and pushed it into his own hair, and Andrew tangled his fingers there with apparent relief, cradling the back of Neil's head. Not hard enough to grab or force, but enough to hold him close and let Neil know what he liked with each twitch of his hands and roll of his hips.

Neil could taste the hot, fiery edge of Andrew's magic starting to bleed through his skin, his control tearing itself to shreds with the conflicting power of pleasure, and Neil absently opened up his own senses just a little, lowered his natural defenses. Andrew let out a hoarse cry as his magic surged along with his release, and Neil easily swallowed both. As he kissed and sucked gently at the flesh in his mouth, soothing him in the aftershocks, he held the sensation of Andrew's borrowed magic in himself for a moment – almost scalding hot and sooty at the fringes, but beautiful nonetheless. He pressed his hand more firmly to the earth and pushed the magic out into the ground instead, safely channelling it away. There was a thought somewhere in the back of his mind, something to do with his own magic surges and slips, but he could hardly think straight with Andrew running shaking hands through his hair and stroking his cheeks.

Neil ran his tongue over his teeth, laid down on his side and propped his cheek on Andrew's hip with a contented hum as Andrew played with his hair and slowly came down from his high. Neil kissed gently at the delicate underside of Andrew's wrist where his pulse fluttered and raced, like a hummingbird's wings.

Eventually, Andrew gave a long sigh and brushed his knuckles over Neil's cheek in a soft caress. Neil raised a hand and linked their fingers together, holding their hands to his cheek.

"I enjoyed that," Neil murmured into Andrew's palm, smiling. "Thank you."

Andrew gave a puffing chuckle. "I think I should be saying that to *you*. Let me return the favour?"

Neil considered it; he was hard, but he didn't really mind. He didn't feel the need. He would much rather lie here, and told Andrew so. Andrew hummed in thought, then his other hand came to rest on the back of Neil's neck, a warm anchor. Neil untangled their hands for a moment to redress what

parts of Andrew he had undressed, then resettled himself. He held Andrew's fingers to his cheek and yawned as weariness came over him again from the long day and longer night vigil.

"Sleep," he thought he heard Andrew murmur as dreams cocooned him. "Sleep, dear one."

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Andrew and Neil spent the breeding and nesting period resting from their travels, mending clothes and tack, and watching the elders teach the hatchlings – who were fast coming up on being called yearlings, with the new eggs being laid in the caves nearby – how to be proper dragons. Neil watched, perched halfway up the ravine on a boulder, as the elders showed the littler ones how to stretch and flex their wings on the ground, practising the smooth motions and minute changes they would need to hurtle masterfully on the wind. He smiled to himself as he watched one particularly enthusiastic one lift herself off the ground briefly from the force of her practising, and her triumphant shriek and disappointed whine when her feet touched the ground again a moment later. The elders were joyous, taking turns nuzzling her and blowing smoke gently into her face. She pranced about smugly from all the attention, though she didn't seem to get jealous when the others gradually received the same treatment on their temporary lifts; rather she just gambolled about with them in childish glee until the elders called him to order.

Andrew spent more time with them too, while Neil tended to watch the proceedings from a safer distance (mastery of their fire was another lesson they were all struggling with, and Neil had no wish to add burns to his already large collection of scars). Neil watched from afar as Andrew charmed them and began to teach them to obey his commands as well, like he did with the adolescents and adults. He started teaching them to respond to his flute whistles and gave them treats and affection when they did as he asked. They were delighted to do well under his instruction, and Neil often smiled as he watched how gentle Andrew was with them, how much care he put into them. Neil asked him once why he was training them in such detail – he knew that other dragon herders would regularly take the adolescents away from their herd to be specially trained for their buyers, often in the armies of the surrounding countries, or anyone else who approached the dragonlands with a hefty purse and a letter of purpose. But he knew Andrew never took his herd apart or sold his youngsters. Neil had often wondered how Andrew got away with that.

"I have a deal with Wymack," Andrew evaded the third time Neil asked. He wouldn't be pressed further, and Neil dropped the subject despite his curiosity. He sweetened his questions with a kiss, and soothed the grumpiness from Andrew's frown.

Neil knew he would remember the moment Andrew brought him up to one of the caves to see a full nest of glimmering dragon eggs for the rest of his life. They were about the size of a human head, and shone with multi-coloured hues that sparkled and shimmered entrancingly. Neil had seen shell fragments before as a child, but they had never had such a lustre or shine to them; he guessed that must degrade once the eggs were hatched. Or perhaps the dullness was a result of how they were hatched on his father's farm.

The parents hovered protectively over their new brood of about five eggs carefully nestled in bedding of vegetation and earth, but allowed their herd-master and his mate to inspect their eggs. Neil could see from the indents in the earth of the cave floor that the dragons had been taking turns sitting over them, and the image struck him as funny. He had never imagined dragons to brood like chickens over their clutch of eggs. He was forcibly reminded once more of how his father's breeding farm had twisted and perverted the creatures' natural instincts; his father's workers were

instructed to take the eggs away from the mother in her cage once they were sturdy enough to be handled, and the eggs were hatched away from the other dragons, surrounded only by human handlers and their littermates. They would imprint on the human workers and be reared by them to be slavishly obedient, and cruelly punished for any hints of their wild nature. The process bred a frighteningly well-trained adult dragon unit, but who were violent and unpredictable with any but their usual handlers. Not many buyers had cared about that, as long as they had a fearsome fighting unit at their disposal to destroy their enemies on a whim.

As Neil watched Andrew crouch and reverently hold his hands out to the eggs, tracing the shimmering shells with delicacy and awe, he was so glad he had agreed to come to the dragonlands with Andrew, to see such things as nature intended them, not as his father and his ilk had corrupted things for their own cruel benefit.

“You’ve never brought me egg fragments to sell,” Neil said quietly as he watched Andrew handle and inspect the eggs for damage or weakness, checking their temperature by holding them briefly to his cheek.

“No,” Andrew replied in the same tone. “If people knew how beautiful they were, the eggs would be stolen and the life killed just to keep the shell intact for a mantel decoration. Besides, the hatching process breaks them into tiny pieces that get trodden into the earth. It helps enrich the soil here, makes sure there is good feeding for the herd’s prey during mating season.”

Neil smiled fondly at Andrew as he stroked the eggs and meticulously placed them back in their nest. He arranged them just so, exactly how they had been before he picked them up. The expectant parents lowered their heads to sniff at the clutch, and warbled approval that they didn’t need to move the eggs around. Andrew reached up to gently rub and scratch the softer scales under their jaws with natural affection, then stepped back to join Neil. They watched for a moment as the parents lay down around their nest, curling protectively around their precious eggs and heating them with their bodies, and began to quietly sing and croon to each other and their future offspring.

Andrew lightly tugged on Neil’s hand and led him away, to leave the little family to their private world. Neil followed him out wordlessly, feeling more than a little breathless that he’d been so privileged to see such a thing, and come so close to the eggs, to be so trusted by the dragons and to witness their nesting behaviours. Andrew gave him an understanding look and kept hold of his hand as they made a slow circuit of all the caves to inspect all the eggs laid that season, and the sense of awe and wonder didn’t diminish at all with the repetition.

Neil asked after a little while if Andrew wanted him to draw protective runes on the eggs like he had for the rest of the herd to protect them from whatever curse or sickness was being cast on them. He had been working on possible runes in his spare time since the herd fragmented into their caves, and thought he had a workable combination. He was quite proud of his invention, actually. Andrew replied it would be better to wait a few days – the eggs were still fresh, and for all that their parents accepted Neil as part of the herd, they would probably naturally panic at having the scent of blood in their nests and having a relative newcomer poking about their clutches. Their instincts would settle in a few days, and they would recognise what Neil was doing and allow it. In the meantime, they split their time between the hatchling-elder herd and visited with the same-gender pairs. Although they had no eggs, they seemed more than content to build a nest and lay down in it together, and it warmed Neil’s heart to see. These mated pairs were more welcoming to Neil and allowed him much closer than the pairs with eggs to watch over, and Neil fancied it was because they recognised something familiar in him, knowing that he was marked as Andrew’s mate.

Neil was napping on the back of one of the female-paired dragons, tired out from his last round of etching his blood in safety runes on the eggs, when Andrew gently shook him awake.

“What?” Neil mumbled blearily, squinting at Andrew perched on the dragon’s neck, holding himself up on her head-spikes like the proverbial angel on the shoulder. Andrew brushed Neil’s hair out of his eyes, looking bright and excited in the gleam of his gaze and the tilt of his head.

“The eggs have started hatching,” Andrew said, and that was all Neil needed to wake up and dance his way down the dragon’s foreleg to the ground again. He gave her snout a grateful pat and jogged after Andrew. As they ran, Neil could hear a new song lilting on the breeze. It seemed hopeful and joyful, welcoming but perhaps concerned at the core. It seemed like a nervous echo of the salutation the elders had given the others as they circled overhead in their moonlight courtship.

Andrew led him unerringly to a cave not too far away, and Neil recognised the mated pair as they drew close. They were some of the youngest in the herd, and Neil could remember Andrew telling him this was both of their first mating season, and their first clutch of eggs.

Andrew announced their presence with a soft song of his own, and crept forward carefully with Neil on his heels. They slowly moved in a crouch, approaching the nest at the back of the cave and the nervous dam and sire twined about their eggs.

The eggs were trembling, light shimmering off their shell even in the dim light of the cave. A few were rocking and tilting, knocking together with gentle clicks as the tiny dragons inside stretched their limbs for the first time. (Tiny was relative, Neil reminded himself – these new hatchlings would be the size of adult cats and about as co-ordinated as baby deer once they broke free of their shells.) The parents crooned and nuzzled at their eggs, calling to their young to come into the world. Andrew settled in a squat nearby to watch, and Neil stayed a little behind him. He knew tensions were high in the cave, and he didn’t want to accidentally get too close. He didn’t want to spook the adult dragons into defensive action and potentially trample their precious eggs in their rush to protect them. One egg on the edge began to make knocking sounds, and Neil could just about see the silhouette of shadowy little snout nudging at the top.

“Come on,” he whispered under his breath. “Come on, little one.”

The dragons echoed his sentiment, calling gently to the dragonling, licking the top of the egg with their great tongues to soften it a little more. The infant inside pushed more insistently at the top of the egg, making it bounce a little. If Neil concentrated, he could feel the muffled flare of energy and natural magic inside the egg, still weak. There was a tiny sound, like a chirrup, and Neil held his breath. It was calling back to its parents. It pushed again, and there was a faint cracking sound. A fine line appeared at the top of the egg, and a little plume of hot breath escaped through it. The dam and sire sang more insistently, and a few more eggs began to knock and crackle. A larger crack formed in the first egg, and then a few more. The cracks connected at last and began to split down the sides of the egg, and – a tiny emerald snout pushed up, up, and out of the top, balancing a shell fragment. After such delicate beginnings, the egg abruptly shattered and spilled its precious contents in a wet, confused heap. The parents sang out a joyful note, like a bell struck, and hovered close as the infant dragon adjusted to the sudden space around its limbs. It was a shiny emerald colour like its mother, its scales delicate and soft-looking. Its wings were furled up tight along its spine, far too small to even extend yet, but ripe with promise. Its tail was the longest part of it by far, tangled a little around its feet as it tried to squirm into a standing position.

It was chirruping and opening its mouth, showing tiny needle-like teeth, turning its head towards its parents. Its eyes appeared huge in its head, and shone a bright gold as it blinked up at those who had created it. Its nostrils were quivering as it slowly teetered onto all four paws and stood, unbalanced and shaky, but upright. The parents crooned with joy and nuzzled the little one so, so gently, and began licking the wetness from its scales and inspecting its body for damage.

“Well done, you two,” Andrew breathed, and Neil thought his smile would split his skull. He found Andrew’s hand and squeezed tightly, unable to communicate the astounded elation he felt. Andrew squeezed back just as tight, and they watched avidly as the rest of the clutch began to shatter and break free, and were treated to the same welcoming snuffles and songs as the first-hatched. The new hatchlings sniffed at each other too, learning the scent and shape of their littermates in a beautiful collection of emerald and sunflower jewels given motion and voice.

However there was one egg that lagged behind the others, and the whole family watched with concern. The hatchlings edged back while the parents crowded closer, their croons turning anxious even to Neil’s untrained ear. The egg had a hairline crack along the top, but its knocking and shaking was slowing down and becoming weaker as the infant lost strength with each fruitless push. With the crack in the top, it would be rapidly losing heat. If it couldn’t break through fully and acclimatise to the outside air and the comforting warmth of its family, it would perish.

The infant inside rattled a little, nudging against the crack. Neil heard a thin, piteous whine from within the rainbow shell and pressed a hand to his chest; the sound cut through him like a crying child. He watched with his heart in his throat as the shakes and wobbles changed to weak trembles, and then stilled.

The sire nudged at the top of the egg with a sad lowing cry, then withdrew. The dam did the same, and turned to the hatched infants crowding for attention. Neil told himself it was just nature’s way – not every egg would hatch, and not every infant would survive its first months. That was just life, an infinite balancing act between life and death that was neither cruel nor kind. It simply was.

But Andrew could be a force of nature all on his own.

“No,” Andrew said, quiet and firm, and was by the unhatched egg in a flash. He knelt down and pressed his palms to its sides, keeping it as warm as he could. He began to sing gently, mimicking the parents’ song as well as he could. He bent down and crouched with his ear against the egg, listening with an intent scowl. Relief flashed over his features briefly – he must have heard some sign of life still flickering within. He kept singing and carefully poked a hole in the breached top of the egg with his knife. He fluttered a fingertip over the hole, and Neil caught his breath as a shadow moved within the egg, and the edge of a pale, mint-sheened snout reached up to sniff his finger.

“Come on now,” Andrew said, his voice tender and soft as Neil had ever heard, and started scoring careful fracture lines on the sides of the egg. “Come on out now, little one.”

Neil couldn’t help but stare as the infant dragon, thought already a lost cause by its parents, began to struggle again. He could hear the minute clacks and knocks of tiny claws and limbs pushing at the shell, an awkward tail uncurling and thumping against its confines to the sweet counterpoint of Andrew’s encouragement.

And finally, finally, a piece of shell cracked free, and a little paw poked out.

“That’s it,” Andrew smiled. “That’s it, come on.”



The infant dragon croaked weakly, then with a final thrash, broke free. The egg shattered neatly along the weakened lines Andrew had made, and the exhausted little dragonling flopped on the bare earth. Andrew waited a moment, making sure it was still breathing, before gently pressing his hand against its ribcage and massaging to keep it warm. It was a runt, Neil could see; Andrew's hand was nearly the same length as its torso. No wonder it had been too weak to hatch without help. Andrew was singing the welcoming song again, smiling and attentive as he gently wiped the dampness from the hatchling's pale green scales. Its head turned towards him, bulbous golden eyes wide and fixed on Andrew's face. It cheeped gently, reedy and weak, but in clear response to Andrew. It took a few rattling breaths, then laboriously clambered to its tiny feet to stand for the first time.

"Hello there," Andrew murmured fondly, stroking his fingertip over the ridge of its spine. "Well done."

Neil was paralysed for a long minute. He couldn't help but think of the struggle he and Katelyn had waged to safely birth Ellen's babe, back at the town. And that his place was back there, with his humans, while Andrew's was so clearly with his dragons. Sooner or later they would be pulled in different directions, and it would only hurt worse the tighter they clung to each other.

"Neil, come see," Andrew said without looking away from his hatchling, and Neil banished his thoughts to the back of his mind and locked them down tightly. He knelt beside Andrew and smiled as the hatchling turned to him and began to warble and chirp. Neil sang back as well as he knew how, and felt warmth bloom in his chest when the hatchling perked up at the sound of his voice and wobbled closer to him. The other dragons drew further away, absorbed in their own private huddle and ignoring the little one who had so nearly been part of their family, and so nearly died.

"You saved her," Neil murmured in wonder. "Even I thought..."

"There was still fight in her," Andrew replied, quietly proud. "She just needed a little more help, that's all."

Neil cupped his jaw and pressed a kiss there firmly. "Beautiful," he reminded Andrew, and watched him flush with pleasure.

The infant dragon had taken a few trembling steps closer, still unsteady where her littermates were already scampering with confidence and starting to climb on each other. She pressed up against Andrew's hands like a cat, her frail body shaking with the effort. Andrew scooped her up in his arms easily and cradled her against his chest, his arms around her in a warm nest of their own. She huddled into his chest with a soft peep, her tail waving a little over the crook of his elbow.

Neil reached out and softly caressed her delicate scales with his fingers; she felt almost downy-soft, her round little belly radiating precious heat. She squirmed happily under his touch and snorted a minute puff of smoke into Andrew's arm.

"Oh," Neil whispered. His throat felt all choked up.

Andrew leaned into him and kissed his cheek in apparent reply and understanding. Neil swallowed a few times to clear his throat.

"She's imprinted onto us as her parents, hasn't she?" He asked.

Andrew hummed affirmation. "I thought she would, if I helped her hatch. It's why I usually don't interfere. But her dam and sire had turned away." He shrugged, careful not to dislodge his newest charge.

"Will she be accepted into the herd properly now?"

"Yes, if she survives." Andrew said it so blandly, but Neil knew he would be heartbroken if she passed now after helping to hatch her and taking responsibility for her survival. "She'd be viewed as my offspring, and I'm part of the herd."

Neil's mouth twitched. "How does motherhood feel so far?"

Andrew deigned not to reply. Neil kissed his shoulder vaguely and rested his fingers on the dragonling's belly again. "What a precious little thing," he murmured reverently.

They sat quietly in the cave to the sound of dragonsong and infantile chirrups, with eyes only for each other and their – for lack of a better term – daughter.

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The other clutches of eggs soon followed suit in hatching, and before long the pass rang with the song of new life, like a chorus of church bells in a city. It shimmered and echoed beautifully off the rock falls and spiralled out into the night sky to dance among the stars.

Andrew and Neil continued to nurse their unexpected little dragon, and she soon grew steadier on her legs and able to run around. Her littermates treated her like a stranger, rather than siblings, but they were happy enough to play with her and let her chase them around the cave when Andrew and Neil were needed to supervise and check the other broods and their parents. She was still small, and found it more difficult to warm in the mornings, but Neil had spoken charms for vigour and strength and tenacity over her as she slept that first day, and he was confident she would continue to grow stronger. Combined with Andrew's expert care and tendency to give her cuts of meat from their cooking fires, and to allow her to nestle between them as they slept in their own makeshift nest, Neil had no doubts she would not only survive, but thrive.

"Should we give her a name?" Neil asked one evening as he lay next to Andrew, with the dragonling curled up contentedly on his stomach with both of his and Andrew's hands resting on her back. Her scales were a pale, minty green tinged with silver glints and Neil was hopelessly attached to her.

"What for?"

"Well, she's ours," Neil said, turning his head to meet Andrew's curious gaze. "I know you don't name the rest of them, but she's different, isn't she?"

Andrew's expression was inscrutable as he examined Neil's face and the dragon using him as a bed. Finally, he agreed. "What do you want to call her?"

"Dewdrop," Neil said softly, stroking a finger between her tiny furled-up wings.

Andrew hummed thoughtfully. "Alright."

Neil grinned and walked his fingers over the back of Andrews' hand to circle around the rough callouses on his knuckles, and the few delicate freckles scattered over the skin.

"I thought you'd give her a stupid name."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you like to think you're funny." The twitch in Andrew's cheek made it clear he was teasing.

Neil rolled his eyes. "Why do I put up with you?" He teased back.

Andrew blinked slowly, a tiny smirk on his lips. "I'm a great fuck."

Neil laughed. "That you are. The best." He carefully scooped the sleeping Dewdrop off his stomach and settled her to the side. She didn't stir, and Andrew easily rolled into Neil's embrace instead, his steady weight pressing Neil into the earth, comforting and firm. Neil ran appreciative hands up Andrew's arms and settled his thighs around Andrew's hips. "It's not only those talents, though."

Andrew raised his eyebrows in mock surprise as he tickled fingertips up the underside of Neil's thigh. Neil shivered and smiled up at him. "No," he said fondly. "Not just those things."

Andrew's hand stilled, and the mischief melted from his expression. His face became serious, maybe a little questioning.

Neil licked his lips nervously. He didn't have the words for this, for these feelings or wants or hopes. He didn't want to speak them aloud in case they became a promise ripe for the breaking. So instead, he cupped Andrew's cheeks and hoped his kiss spoke the words for him.

As Andrew kissed him back with slow tenderness and careful hands holding him close, Neil fancied he heard a reply to his unspoken words.

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Once the hatchlings had become strong enough to leave the caves, the herd began to recombine. They reunited with much joyful singing and grooming, family units congratulating each other on the new arrivals and greeting them while the small youngsters, formerly hatchlings, inspected their newest herd-mates with surprise. They were a raucous bunch, and Neil laughed to see Dewdrop scamper away from Andrew to join in, diving headfirst into a pile of hatchlings and youngsters with a merry caw. Tails, paws and wings flapped every which way, and Andrew's shirt billowed up in the backdraft to smack his face.

"Very dignified," Neil grinned at him.

Andrew grabbed Neil's shirt and shoved it over his face too, making him laugh even harder.

The herd spent the whole day in delirious fun, rolling about under the scorching sun and playing, even the elders acting like energetic hatchlings themselves. Neil and Andrew joined them, being happily nuzzled and passed between dragons big and small, reacquainting themselves with all the herd members. The elders and adolescents flew in complex swoops, while the youngsters just learning to fly did their best to mimic them from the ground, under the watchful eyes of the nanny

dragons and sentries. They all made enough noise to seem to shake the mountains to their roots, but Neil knew that must be his imagination. Besides, there was no telling a *dragon* to be quiet.

For a day, everything was perfect.

Before they had all ventured out of the nesting caves, Neil had checked and double checked that the protections he had laid down on the eggs had carried through to the hatchlings. To his great pleasure, they had. Every single one was protected, he reflected. Every single dragon in the herd. When he closed his eyes and reached out with his senses, he could almost see the shimmering barrier tucked tight against their bodies, giving a hazy appearance to the space around the herd. He was just trying to instruct Andrew how to see it, surprised and very pleased by his curiosity, when he felt the touch of an all-too-familiar brand of magic against his mind as it flitted over the herd and tried to invade it with spectral fingers, their grasp slipping fruitlessly against Neil's barriers. He could feel the impotent malice and rage radiating out from the hidden witch, far too familiar.

He gasped and recoiled, drawing his defences up high while he struggled for breath.

Andrew was asking what was wrong, mentally and verbally, but Neil ignored him and followed the tendril of power back to its source. A frightened wail burst from his throat and he flinched back as the other witch recognised him, too.

*Hello, Nathaniel*, the witch said in a cruel voice, whispering out to him across the plains. *Fancy seeing you here.*

"Neil!" Andrew was clutching his shoulders, cheeks bloodless. "What's wrong?"

Neil could hardly speak for the fear ratcheting tight around his chest like a vice. "Enemy witch," he managed. "Trying to attack the herd."

"Where?" Andrew asked as he grabbed his sword from his scabbard.

Neil pointed in the direction of the witch, though he was shielded and cloaked against Neil pinpointing them. "Hidden," he panted, torn between his memory and his body. "Dangerous."

Andrew gave an ear-splitting whistle to his herd, sounding the alarm. They responded immediately, taking wing with the flightless little ones gathered on their backs and in their claws. Those carrying the young spiralled higher and higher, while the rest formed a protective vanguard, flames licking between their teeth as they swooped over the area to find the threat.

Andrew ran to his horse and Neil struggled to keep up, to stay in the moment, not to vanish into horrible memories. Neil's horse followed Andrew's out of habit, and Neil clutched to the reins and tried to breathe as they galloped in the direction of the witch.

Soon enough the dragons, with their enhanced senses, had spotted the witch. They gave an almighty roar, echoing frighteningly off the rocky walls, and swooped down on the spot. It was so much louder than the bull's roar had been, when Neil had first met the herd, and it took all of Neil's strength not to curl into the foetal position and scream at the gut-clenching sound. Andrew joined them in a battle-cry, raising his sword in the air, and the witch broke from cover with a flare of magic. He was cloaked and hooded in fabric that would camouflage him against the rock and scree, but there was no hiding when you were running for the hills and firing bolts of power back at a herd of enraged dragons who were also trying to cook you with their fiery breath.

They pursued at a breakneck pace through the pass, dragons above and men on the ground, to chase down the witch as they ran. With a muttered incantation Neil managed to construct a shield in front of himself and Andrew to protect them from stray bolts of power being blasted in their direction and slamming into the mountains instead, a hundred little rockfalls in their wake.

Seeing he was about to be overrun, the witch turned and raised his hands, face contorting with hate. With a thunderous boom, he unleashed a huge spray of magic, hurtling it into the ravine surrounding them. Neil yelled and grabbed the reins of Andrew's horse, trying to steer them away from the gigantic slabs of rock beginning to avalanche all around them.

It was all chaos for far too long – dragon roars, sheets of flame surrounding them, the unending crunch and thunder of rocks and the terrified beating of his heart.

At last, at last, the cacophony faded and Neil was able to look around without panic smearing his vision.

The dragons circled overhead, calling anxiously to their herd master but unharmed. In the commotion, Andrew had pulled Neil to him and all around them, in a perfect blast radius, was a smoking circle of molten rock and licking flame. Andrew's eyes shone with unearthly light, and magic pulsed off him in erratic waves as he stared at the destruction around them. Neil could feel them both shaking like leaves in a hurricane, and Andrew seemed unable to catch a full breath. The acrid smell of smoke and the after burn of too much magic sizzled on the air.

A few paces away, his legs trapped under the rock he had caused to fall, was Jackson the Wesninski witch. He was pale and gasping, staring at the boulders crushing his legs and lower body as if surprised he couldn't feel them. His face was just as mean and cruel as Neil remembered, and he fought down a wave of nausea.

"Andrew," he croaked, and nodded towards Jackson. Andrew strode towards him, still leaking magic from every inch of his skin, and replaced his sword with a wickedly sharp knife.

"Who are you?" Andrew demanded and crouched down, jabbing the blade tight across the witch's throat and a hair's breadth from slicing it open. "Why were you attacking my dragons?"

Jackson barely gave Andrew a glance. His gaze slid instead to Neil and he began to laugh wildly. "This is just too good," he wheezed, bloody foam flecking his lips. "We'd all given up on finding little Nathaniel, and here he is after all!"

Neil flinched back from him and Andrew pressed the blade tighter, blood starting to pulse from the line he was cutting.

"I suppose you were the one to shield the damn dragons?" Jackson asked, still ignoring the threat close to killing him. "Clever little Nathaniel. Did Mary teach you that? Bitch always was too powerful for her own good. Smart of you to get a bomb under your power, though. Shame you had to whore yourself out for it, but I'd bet you've done worse things over the years."

With a snarl, Andrew's hand jerked and blood sprayed in a crimson flash. Jackson gurgled for an awful moment, then his soul slipped from his body and he was just a jumble of broken corpse on the ground. Andrew cursed under his breath, spat on the body, and wiped his knife and face clean of blood with the bottom of his shirt.

"Neil?" He said in a gravelly voice as he stood. "What was he talking about?"

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Neil whispered, and was.

He stayed on his knees, shaking and retching, for a long time. Dimly he became aware that Andrew was beside him, a hand on his back, and Neil was sobbing hard enough to hurt his stomach. Andrew didn’t say anything, just knelt with him as he slowly got himself under control. Magic no longer streamed from him, and instead he looked wan and exhausted.

Neil passed a shaking hand over his face, dried his eyes and focussed on taking slow breaths. His stomach still felt bundled up in knots, but there was nothing left to bring up. Andrew rubbed soothingly up and down his back and waited for him to speak.

“His name was Jackson,” Neil managed eventually in a thready voice. “He worked for my father. Some of my scars are from him.”

“Who exactly was your father, Neil?” Andrew asked in a quiet, insistent tone. “I know he was a right bastard, but he seems to be more than the average asshole if he has witches to send after you, and to attack my dragons.”

Neil bit his lip hard enough to bleed and forced out, as vile as the bile shivering in his empty stomach, “He’s known as The Butcher. He raises war dragons for the Moriyama armies.”

Andrew’s eyebrows shot up; even several country borders away from Moriyama lands, and cut off in the dragonlands, Andrew would have heard of Neil’s father and the atrocities he committed on servants and peasants on his lands, never mind the carnage his dragons wrought for the tyrant kings of that country. He pressed a hand very gently to the shoulder that bore the W-shaped brand burned into it. “Lord Wesninski,” he murmured, and Neil sobbed to hear that name.

“He brands all his property like that,” Neil admitted queasily. “He did that when I was nine, the first time my mother tried to run away with me.”

Andrew winced and stroked carefully over the outline of the brand. “I can see why you’d want to run away. And why you didn’t tell me.” He pressed a gentle kiss to Neil’s forehead, who sagged in wordless relief. He had expected anger, recrimination, for lying about something so big. Instead, he was forgiven and comforted. Tears were threatening again, old memories leaping to the fore, and Andrew held him as he trembled and wept in their grasp.

Eventually, when Neil was left wrung out and aching, he slumped into Andrew’s hold and simply breathed. Andrew let him be for a while, his arms strong and comforting as always, uncaring of the vomit-stink of his breath or the sweat that coated them both from the encounters that day.

“Jackson called me a bomb,” Andrew said blandly when Neil was calm. There was a dangerous edge to his voice.

“It’s something my father calls offensive-style witches under his control, like Jackson,” Neil whispered. “He sends them out to scare people into doing his bidding, tells them to burn everything down if they don’t obey. His weapons, enforcers and bodyguards.”

“Did you make me your weapon?” Andrew asked, still in that steady but finely-controlled voice.

Neil felt sick all over again. “No,” he said immediately. “No, not at all. I didn’t even know you had magic until just recently. I would never manipulate you like that, like he suggested. I don’t want you because of your power. I would never,” he pleaded for Andrew to believe him.

Andrew pulled back to search his face, and the forbidding expression on his own softened. “Then what happened here?” He asked instead and jerked his chin at the smoking crater around them.

“That was you, yes,” Neil sighed. “I would guess the danger and stress of the situation ruptured your control, and it exploded out of you. To protect us from the rock fall.” Neil gave a tiny smile. “Like my magic slips when we’re... together. Just with more purpose.”

Andrew grimaced and looked around at the ring of destruction surrounding them with distaste. Neil rested a hand on his chest and searched for the flame of his fire-soul and magic. It was still there of course, would be until he died, but much depleted.

“You’re tapped out for now,” Neil assured him, knowing he did not like having such a dangerous force within himself. “It won’t happen again. I can teach you control, to make sure it won’t when you’re fully recovered.”

Andrew’s jaw clenched and worked from side to side as he thought. “Perhaps that would be safest,” he said begrudgingly.

The dragons circling above began to land, their calls more anxious for not being answered. They trotted up to Andrew and Neil and began to snuffle and nudge at them, reassuring themselves the whole flock was unharmed. They took extra care taking in Andrew’s scent, and as one they raised their muzzles to the sky and let out a whooping call, something celebratory.

Andrew laughed bitterly.

“What does it mean?” Neil asked.

“It’s recognition that an adolescent has mastered their fire-breathing,” Andrew replied. “They must figure I’m a late bloomer. Let’s get back to the rest of the flock.”

They hauled themselves to their feet and began the slow walk picking their way back through the pass; their horses had thrown them and fled in the confusion, or been crushed by falling rock, they weren’t sure. The vanguard of adult dragons accompanied them from the sky, watching and protecting.

Andrew called up a weary confirmation that the threat was gone once they reached the rest of the flock, and leaned heavily on the bronze matriarch when she landed and gave him another thorough examination, and a wet lick of her tongue.

The herd was nervous and jittery for the rest of the day, often taking wing with their young at the slightest hint of anything unusual. Neil and Andrew made camp and tried to rest.

“What do you think your father wants with the dragons?” Andrew asked in the dark of the night much later.

Neil swallowed the ashen taste in his mouth; he had rinsed away the vomit several times, and had a little to eat and drink since, but he still felt shaky and queasy. “I don’t know. I think it’s a fair bet Jackson was behind the wasting sickness. And he won’t have been working alone. I’m sure his partners will have gone back to report to my father.”

“It wasn’t just my herd that was affected,” Andrew said slowly. “There was sickness all across the dragonlands.”

“There must be more teams of them working to weaken the herds,” Neil said with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“We need to warn the others, figure out what to do.”

“How? You’re all spread out over hundreds of leagues.”

To Neil’s surprise, Andrew smiled. There was a hard glint in his eyes. “Easy. I’ll get Wymack to call a muster of the herds.”



## Chapter 4

Warnings: semi-explicit sex, violence, armed battles, animal injury/mild gore, references to child abuse.

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Neil twisted in the saddle to peer behind himself at the flock of dragons following them up high.

“Are you sure about this?” He asked, facing forward again and trying to get a look at Andrew’s face. Difficult, seeing as they were sharing the same horse and Andrew was in front.

“Not entirely,” Andrew admitted, the wind whipping his words away almost as soon as they left his mouth. “But I’m all out of other ideas.”

Neil sighed and settled his arms around Andrew’s waist again. As much as he hated to admit it, he agreed. They were just lucky only one of their horses had been killed in the encounter with Jackson, or this trip would take even longer. Neil wanted to argue the plan more, but it was hard to have a conversation with the back of someone’s head while riding a cantering horse. He had asked if Andrew would feel more comfortable at Neil’s back – he knew exactly how Andrew felt about being touched from out of his line of sight – but Andrew had just replied that then he wouldn’t be able to see over Neil’s head.

They had been travelling as fast as they could away from the flock’s usual territory and heading inland, towards the central area where the dragon trainer and unofficial arbiter of the dragonlands, Wymack, kept his establishment. One bonus was that taking the herd away from their more fringe territory, and away from the nesting caves, would make it harder for more enemy forces to come after them or pick them off as easily. No doubt they were leaving a wide and obvious trail for them, but unless they brought the full Moriyama army on a substantial invasion of the dragonlands, they wouldn’t be idiotic enough to follow the herd into a more central and more densely populated area. The herd ranged out in their wake, occasionally breaking apart into hunting parties or falling back a little to stay with the younger individuals whose flight stamina was still low, and the nanny dragons carrying the flightless hatchlings on their backs. It had taken quite a lot of persuasion from Andrew for them to abandon their territory, especially with so many new and vulnerable hatchlings, but the matriarch at least seemed to understand the danger. And where the matriarch went, the rest of the flock followed.

Neil was a little apprehensive as to whether they would be welcomed when they were leading a horde of dragons across several other territories with the expectation that this Wymack would have enough facilities to stable them safely and securely.

“Wymack never turns anyone away,” Andrew had said when Neil raised the point. He remained sceptical, but was willing to keep his opinions to himself for once until he had met the man himself.

Neil rested his forehead against the back of Andrew’s neck to shield his face from the wind. Andrew switched the reins to one hand and moved the other to cover Neil’s hands on his stomach, squeezing gently and linking fingers. Neil smiled and placed a kiss on the nape of his neck. Part of him wanted to remind Andrew that doing silly things like taking the reins out of both hands was how he had fractured his fingers the previous year, but it felt so nice that Andrew didn’t want to stop touching him either.

It was a mixed blessing that they needed to share the horse; it was a bit uncomfortable to be squashed together and having to synchronise their riding rhythms, but the closeness meant it was easier to stay warm in spite of the whistling wind whipped up in their wake, and from the wingbeats of an entire dragon herd close by. Neil was more than certain that if Andrew had sat behind him, they would have been distracted for several different reasons involving the close press of their hips and thighs, and thought perhaps it was sensible after all that Neil sit in the back position instead. And seeing as Neil hadn't been sleeping well since the encounter with Jackson, it gave him an opportunity to try and rest a little more. He couldn't fall asleep while riding, his survival instincts were far too acute for that, but with Andrew holding the reins and directing the horse, and Neil sandwiched in behind him in the saddle, it gave Neil some time to close his eyes and relax his body, and attempt to mediate and clear his mind.

He kept having nightmares whenever he closed his eyes – awful memories from his time in his father's manor intertwined with the more gruesome times of living on the run with his mother, and dire fears and worries spun into form. Whenever he woke, he was unsure whether they were portentous or more normal nightmares; his intuition had been very quiet recently, and he was concerned it was showing itself to his subconscious instead.

The only thing that really helped was falling asleep with Andrew holding him close; Neil could only ever feel safe and comforted in Andrew's embrace, and the warm weight of his arms and body pressed up against Neil's did a great deal to soothe him to restful sleep, at least at first. And when he inevitably woke when the dreams turned sour, Andrew was there to rub his back, or stroke his stomach, or pull him closer until his fears quieted and his eyes could close once more. Neil knew Andrew was worried for his flock too, and concerned about Neil's health, but he didn't have the ghastly spectre of old monsters lurking and potentially aware of Neil's whereabouts despite many, many hard years trying to disappear. But Andrew was understanding, and never complained when Neil woke him with his shaking and tossing about, simply soothed him back to sleepiness and gave him gentle kisses and touches when dawn broke and Neil felt too tired from his restless night to want to rise.

Neil just hoped they were riding the path towards solutions rather than more questions without answers, and more problems.

They kept up as fast a pace as they could without laming their overburdened horse, and relied on the dragons to bring in extra meat to replenish their supplies as they had no time to hunt or gather food while setting such a pace. If Neil had thought riding an uncomfortable way to travel before, at a greater speed he was even more acutely aware of its shortcomings; a back bounced out of shape by the constant motion of the horse, sore hips from sitting bandy-legged in the saddle, restless feet from being unable to run, headaches from the sun and wind... he didn't complain, knowing Andrew was uncomfortable too, and consoled himself with the knowledge that there would be beds, hot meals, and hot baths at Wymack's training complex once they arrived.

Neil was roused from his sleep-deprived doze one day by the screeching roar of an unfamiliar dragon, echoing out over the vast empty plain on which they rode. Rationally, Neil knew the sound must have carried for leagues out here in the open, but the irrational part of his brain wanted to scurry for cover.

Andrew must have felt him tense, for he took a hand off the reins again to stroke Neil's fingers and turned his head enough to be heard to say, "We're not in any danger currently. We're still a day's ride out from Wymack's place. That was probably one of the adolescents he's training."

Neil nodded, realised Andrew wouldn't be able to see, and squeezed Andrew's hand instead to show he understood. The flock flying behind them seemed to perk up in interest at the sound, and a few of the elders began to fly slightly higher than the others, as if ordering themselves into some semblance of formal hierarchy. It reminded Neil of soldiers and militia straightening out their lines when they marched through towns, and rural villagers ironing out their best clothes for the merchant caravans, and he smiled. It seemed the urge to impress strangers was universal between the species.

That evening, Andrew reined their hardworking horse to a trot, then a slow walk, then to a stop. Neil lurched out of the saddle onto unsteady feet, and a moment later Andrew swung down as well, though with considerably more grace.

"I thought you said we would reach there by nightfall," Neil queried as he stretched out his aching back and legs.

"We could, if we pressed on," Andrew said, squinting out into the setting sun in the direction of their destination. "But we'd arrive during full night, and I'd rather arrive in the light of day. For one thing, Wymack will be less grumpy if we don't drag him from his bed, and for another the dragons will be less fractious, and less likely to fight with the other herds if they have a chance to inspect each other in sunlight."

Neil couldn't really argue with that logic, though he sighed at the lost opportunity of gaining a bed and a thorough wash that night, as he had been hoping. One more night wouldn't make a lot of difference, he knew, but he was starting to miss the comforts of his home in the frontier town. The novelty of sleeping rough under the stars was definitely wearing thin, and he was hungry for the creature comforts of a chair or bed that wasn't made of rocky earth, no matter how pleasant it was to lie in Andrew's arms each night.

The next morning they took a little more care with their appearance, much like the preening dragons above them, though by that point all of their clothes were in need of thorough washing and mending, their bodies likewise. They tried their best to look a little less wild for courtesy's sake, and walked on foot the last hour or so of the journey, with the dragons wheeling overhead.

As they walked, the unmistakeable sounds and scents of habitation grew stronger. The high notes were occupied by whistles and flutes, similar to the one Andrew used with his flock, and occasional bird calls. There was a sweet scent of wildflowers delicately lingering under the rest, only just discernible. The middle notes were occupied chiefly by the savoury smells of roasting meat, baking, and the waft of fresh grass, hay and earth; the sounds of voices and indistinct words from people and the bleats of animals too. The sourer, lower notes had a tang of acrid smoke, latrine pits, animal musk and the constant low rumble of dragon roars.

Neil was mystified for some time where exactly all this was coming from – the plateau was flat for leagues and leagues around them, and Neil could see no sign of any kind of encampment. Certainly not one large enough to generate so many signs of its presence. And even though he knew sound and scent could carry a long way out here, it seemed ridiculous for them to carry even over the distant mountain ranges.

Andrew caught him looking about in puzzlement and merely smirked and adjusted the way Dewdrop was clinging to his shoulder, boosting her up a little higher so she was in less danger of falling.

"Are you going to keep me in suspense?" Neil said.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Andrew said, and scuffed his boot against the hard-packed dirt of their path.

Neil blinked down at their feet and frowned. He had become used to following no path but the one in Andrew’s head, or the way the dragons flew. He had ceased to be surprised at how accurately Andrew could navigate them across such an expanse of land with so few landmarks. But as he looked down, Neil slowly realised they were walking along what might, in the loosest of terms, be called a track of some kind.

The grass was worn away in a shallow rut which seemed a little curved, and it meandered here and there in a general downwards direction, as if were following the slight slope of the plateau. Almost like a river – but one that had long-since run dry and its bed become overgrown with grass and weeds. Except perhaps, where the pilgrimage of feet over the years had kept the line, had stopped the undergrowth from obscuring the shallow dip completely.

Slowly Neil looked all around them. He couldn’t pinpoint where exactly they had joined the dried up river-bed, as its slight rut was too shallow to be seen for more than a few tens of feet in any direction. He had no idea how long they had been following it, but had no doubt Andrew’s unerring sense of direction and his mental maps of the dragonlands were responsible. Looking forwards, in the direction of the noises and scents they had been following, Neil could just about see the river bed running forwards. As he peered and tried to figure out the landscape, and its possible history, Neil began to see slight irregularities in the ground around them. There was a downward slope, to be certain now he knew to look for it, and ahead there was something... almost like a mirage. When Neil tried to focus on the blurry area, the details wisped away. All he could tell was there was *something* irregular about this section of the plateau, but they weren’t close enough for him to see clearly. Perhaps, if it was a true mirage like those of the far south in the deserts, they would never get close enough and would simply chase the mirage to the end of their road fruitlessly.

Neil narrowed his eyes at Andrew, who just smirked and kept walking along the path of the riverbed. Neil cast his gaze skyward for a moment, trying for patience, and resigned himself to simply following along and being confused. That had been his life plan for many years anyway, no real reason to change that now.

Neil had his answer some time later, when a jet of flame burst from the ground about half a league in front of them, accompanied by the roar of a dragon and an annoyed yelling from multiple people. Neil stared fixedly at the spot where the fire had erupted, then sighed.

“Underground?”

“Underground,” Andrew grinned. “Kind of.”

Neil rubbed under his eyes. He was tired, his back ached, his skin itched with the need for a wash, and he felt grimy and worn out. He was not in the mood for riddles. “I’d appreciate a clear answer,” he sniped.

Andrew’s grin faltered a little, and some seriousness came to his expression. He gently caught Neil’s hand and squeezed it in his own; as apology or reassurance, Neil wasn’t sure, but it settled his annoyance like a gentle touch smoothing ruffled feathers. Dewdrop took the opportunity to scramble across to perch on Neil’s head, seeming to enjoy the slightly taller vantage point and scratching at his scalp with sharp, uncoordinated claws.

Neil winced and carefully resettled her so she was clinging to the material of his shirt instead of his scalp, and waved her away from his eyes in particular. He had no desire to be blinded by one overenthusiastic dragonling.

“We’re close to the entrance now,” Andrew said once Dewdrop was settled again, his thumb tracing the edge of Neil’s knuckles. “We should reach it within the hour, I promise.”

Neil nodded. “Thank you. I don’t mean to be snappy with you, I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” Andrew said easily, and leaned up on his toes to kiss Neil’s cheek. Neil almost fell over, and was suddenly aware of why Andrew became so flustered whenever Neil did that to him. It was such a nice, tender surprise.

There was a crease between Andrew’s brows as Neil regained his balance, a worry unspoken that he had chanced too much or pushed past an unknown line. Neil smiled back at him and walked close enough to lightly bump Andrew’s hip with his own. Andrew let go of his hand in favour of draping an arm around Neil’s waist, and Neil held him around the shoulders in return. The little crease eased away, and intrepid fingers brushed vaguely under the hem of Neil’s shirt to press with gentle knowledge against an old scar and the puckered skin around it. Neil felt a flush in his face at the gesture; Andrew had mentioned something about wanting to map out Neil’s scars with his mouth last night, though they had both been too tired to explore the idea then. Perhaps, once they were bathed and rested... Neil shivered a little despite the heat of the sun overhead, and took mental inventory of his supplies. His pouch of wildflower tea was becoming quite depleted, as there weren’t the right sorts of plants out in the dragonlands for him to replenish the key ingredients. He would have to address that at some point, he thought, and tucked the concern away to the back of his mind for now.

As they walked, the old riverbed widened and deepened until they were walking in something more closely resembling a proper riverbed, or a trench of some kind. The land around them began to get more disturbed and uneven, and the area of mirage vanished from sight as the ground became increasingly broken and rough. The flock overhead were calling excitedly, having no doubt spotted their destination from virtue of their height advantage.

Then, in what felt like less than the space between two breaths, the ground opened up before them and Neil stopped stumbling in his tracks.

The earth veered down in a dramatic... hole, for lack of a better word. The river bed they had been following plunged down along a nearly-sheer fall of rock plummeting down, and Neil could imagine the waterfall it had once been. The cliff fell down into a deep crater, what had no doubt once been a lake, surrounded on all sides by a roughly-circular amphitheatre of open space that extended down for at least fifty feet below them.

Looking around, it was no wonder Neil had been surprised by the ‘mirage’ area – the bowl was disguised by the rough landscape, the break in the terrain obscured by the unevenness of the ground and very effectively hidden from plain sight. From an aerial view it would be ludicrously obvious, but from human eye-level it was neatly hidden among the folds of the landscape.

The waterless lagoon was far from deserted, however. In the bowl below them were great animal pens and corrals housing, of course, several herds of dragons. There were some areas that seemed to be just housing, some others with different purposes, and some much smaller human habitations. The cliffs around the dip were pockmarked with caves, similar to the ones used by Andrew’s herd for nesting in the border pass, and as Neil watched he saw several tiny human figures going in and

out of these spaces, and walking along pathways and across bridges hewn into and strung across the bare rock. Dragons seemed to go as they pleased in the larger passages too, and Neil thought he could see a pattern in it if he just looked for long enough.

There was a banner in the centre of the bowl, attached to the building in the middle that seemed to be some kind of meeting area or official place; the cloth was tattered from the wind and had several scorch marks on it, but it had been dyed a bright, garish saffron colour, like sunsets and pumpkins and fire and autumn leaves all crushed together into one bright declaration. There seemed to be a white device in the centre, something vaguely paw-shaped or claw-like, but the banner was flapping too vigorously in the wing-swept wind for Neil to see it clearly.

“Wymack’s place,” Andrew said with a vague wave of his hand.

“I can see that now,” Neil replied, solemn and straight-faced. He couldn’t hold the expression for long though, and replaced it with a relieved smile and pressed that against Andrew’s jaw in a dragon-like nudge. “How do we get down there?”

Andrew was distracted by the almost-kiss for a few minutes, chasing Neil’s lips teasingly and caressing up the sides of his torso. At last he settled for carefully biting into the tender flesh of Neil’s collarbone and gentling the pressure with a soft kiss. “Mmn... there’s a staircase built into the cliff wall,” he replied eventually. “But we should announce our presence first. Wymack gets grumpier than usual if people waltz in without asking permission.”

Neil would have loved to stay there teasing each other, but he was too conscious of the people way down below them who might be looking their way, and the grime on his skin. With a regretful sigh, he covered Andrew’s lips and stepped back out of his embrace. Dewdrop squawked at the lost opportunity to clamber over both of them with impunity and settled back onto Andrew’s shoulder once they stopped moving about.

Andrew’s hand lingered just a little on Neil’s hip before he conceded temporary defeat and turned his attention back to the task at hand. He tilted his head towards the lip of the bowl and led the way towards the edge. Neil was starting to get nervous about it breaking underfoot and sending them on an impromptu wingless flight of their own, but Andrew stopped short of the rawest edge. Andrew reached for a large iron bell hanging suspended between two beams of fallen rock, leaning on each other like a collapsed doorway.

“Cover your ears,” Andrew warned, then took hold of the orange-dyed rope fixed to the clapper of the bell and rang it sharply five times. The sound echoed out into the amphitheatre like a more methodical dragon’s roar, shimmering out loud enough to make Neil’s jaw ache even with his hands over his ears. From Andrew’s wince, he felt much the same.

The dragons below and above them reacted rather predictably with roars of their own and calls to each other, making the bell largely defunct, but Neil chose not to point that out. At the very least, everyone in the encampment would be aware of someone announcing their presence.

Peering down into the bowl, Neil saw several figures emerge from the central building and start to walk towards the edge of the cliffs, and a zigzagging loop of a path meandering up what would have been the back of the waterfall, when the riverbed was still in flow.

“It’ll take the welcoming committee a little while to get up here,” Andrew said dryly, and sat down on one of the tumbled boulders. He seemed unconcerned about his appearance, and simply stared down into the amphitheatre with a fixed gleam in his eye while Dewdrop preened through his hair.

Neil joined him, deciding there wasn't anything else he could do to make himself more presentable, and lost himself watching the ant-like movements of the people down there and the bigger shapes of the dragons chasing and playing with each other in the open-topped pens and enclosures. Andrew's flock kept wheeling above them, circling and waiting on a signal from their herd master to land.

After a little while, Neil became aware that Andrew's staring had taken on a grim, fixed quality. Neil tried to see if he was looking at anything in particular, but couldn't see anything in his line of sight. He watched as Andrew swallowed and pressed palms to the rock underneath him, as if reassuring himself he was still seated.

Neil perched his chin on Andrew's shoulder. "What is it?" He murmured.

Andrew's hand absently wandered to Neil's knee, kneading the joint a little and holding firm. "Heights," he replied shortly. "I don't like heights."

Neil let his gaze drop down, down, down into the sunken bowl, mentally tallying the feet and yards. He didn't experience the vertigo or fear he imagined might strike other people from such an exercise, but he could see why it might be daunting to someone with those anxieties.

Neil turned his head and laid his cheek along the top of Andrew's shoulder, draping an arm lightly around his hips and splaying his hand out on Andrew's stomach, much like he had done when they were sharing a saddle. He could feel the slow bellows of Andrew's breathing in the muscles of his stomach and chest, and the rapid step of his pulse beating like a drum and echoing into Neil's ribcage too.

"I'm here too," Neil reminded him. "And I'll be with you the whole way down. You'll be alright."

Andrew gave a shaky sigh and leaned back into the curve of Neil's body, trusting to his strength to keep them from toppling backwards off the boulder. Neil held him snug and secure and breathed with him. He could feel the press of the world in that quiet moment – sun and sky and dragons overhead, solid ground and tumultuous rock underneath, and Andrew's warm body in the space between the two, with magic swirling slow and content beneath their skin like a current, an undertow, an invisible force pulling them closer and closer. It was both unbearably heavy and terrifyingly weightless, as if they both might float away or be swept under if they didn't hold tight to each other as their anchor, their ballast, their lifeline.

"You're doing something," Andrew murmured an eternity later, sounding vaguely confused. "Something magic."

"I'm not doing anything," Neil said into his shoulder with a smile. "Can you feel something?"

"Maybe..."

"Do you want to see?"

Andrew was quiet, no doubt remembering how unsettled and alarmed he had been the previous time Neil had helped broaden his senses. But eventually he nodded, and Neil kissed his neck in thanks. Neil dipped into his magical senses and brushed up against Andrew's mind once more, delicately asking permission. Andrew welcomed him cautiously, and Neil influenced his magic again to bring the altered sight to bear on them both.

He felt Andrew startle a little when the new colours and shapes bled into his reality, but he calmed again after a moment and leaned a little harder into Neil.

Neil kept the connection going between them, but otherwise did nothing, letting Andrew take control of the sight and simply providing the access for him. Their minds brushed at each other's fringes comfortably, companionably, not needing to talk. Andrew looked around them slowly, examining the world with fresh eyes, as it were, and growing accustomed to the strangeness of the vision. He spent quite a while looking upwards at his flock and at the napping dragonling perched on his other shoulder, no doubt watching the flickering lights of their life-forces within their bodies, and the shimmer of Neil's protective wards on their hides.

Eventually he brought his focus downwards, and let out a quiet gasp of amazement. Neil smiled into his shoulder, knowing he was watching the interplay of light under their skin – the wildfire ebbing and crashing up against the boundaries of Andrew's skin and hands, surging up to the surface as if begging for release, and the pearly glow of Neil's magic strengthening and billowing like moonlight on the wind. Neil pressed closer into Andrew's back, locking their limbs together more securely, and watched as their magic responded by flaring in both of them like two polar opposite bonfires, questing and longing for contact but unable to breach the physical barrier. They were both aflame; not simply glimmers, not isolated peaks and flames, but both completely lit up with the full extent of their magic reacting to the other's, and the simple joy and companionship in their closeness.

Andrew gently lifted Neil's hand off his stomach and held it up to his face, watching the soft silvery swirls pulse in time with Neil's heartbeat. "Beautiful," he whispered, and hesitantly pressed his lips to Neil's palm. The magic surged up blindingly bright at the point of contact, and the flames under Andrew's cheeks surged to his lips at the same time. Neil almost fancied he could feel the lick of flame against his palm as well as the soft brush of Andrew's lips. "Beautiful," Andrew said again, watching the light slowly fade in its brilliance but not disappear completely.

"Can you feel your magic?" Neil asked into his neck.

"I think so," Andrew replied, and Neil was momentarily pleased that he had managed to acknowledge the magic as *his*, and not some intruding force outside his control. Neil lightly unclasped their hands and settled them back on Andrew's stomach.

"Watch it in your hands," Neil instructed quietly from over his shoulder. "Breathe slowly, and just watch it for now. Try and let yourself understand how it feels."

Neil watched and held him close as Andrew held his hands up before his face and watched the flames twine about his bones and flow under his skin, moving with the natural currents of his body and the beat of his heart.

"I can taste smoke on my teeth," Andrew mumbled with a frown. "Is that... normal?"

"I'd imagine so," Neil smiled and briefly nuzzled into his neck. "Mine feels like cool water running over my skin. Seems understandable yours would taste like fire."

"It's like... it's like I've licked a hot coal," Andrew mused, flexing his hands and swallowing reflexively. "But it hasn't burnt me. It doesn't taste bad. It's just... strong."

"Very good," Neil murmured. "Imagine it welling up, getting stronger. Carefully, not too much at once, but in a slow spread."



Hesitantly, with each breath, the flames under Andrew's skin grew and swelled, gaining white tips and blue cores as they burned hotter and stronger. It didn't flash out of his control, but it was obvious there was a strain from the way Andrew's breath hitched and quickened.

"I feel like my mouth is burning," Andrew said, a little nervously. "But I can feel no fire or pain. It's very hot. There's smoke in my throat."

"Like a proper dragon," Neil said. "You're doing really well, Andrew. Now imagine it quieting and calming, drawing back towards your chest and out of your hands."

Andrew did as instructed, getting the hang of it a little faster this time. The flames eddied down as if banked by a light rain, growing sulky and sullen and retreating from his extremities. They still pulsed towards Neil's touch, but were easily pushed back into Andrew's centre, and retreated meekly instead of fighting it like Neil had witnessed the previous time.

"What does it feel like now?"

"Ash under my tongue," Andrew reported. "Kind of like a candle flame. When you pass your hand through the top of a candle, you know? Warm, but not hot."

"Excellent, Andrew," Neil smiled and kissed his neck a few times in praise. It was a mark of how distracted Andrew was by the magic that he barely reacted to that. "Now I want you to breathe with me for a little while and just feel your magic in your body. I'll slowly break the vision's connection, and your awareness will fade in clarity and immediacy. But you'll be able to find it again, with practice."

"Alright."

One breath at a time, Neil weakened the flow of magic between them so the otherworldly colours and shapes slowly blurred out of existence again for their physical sight, letting it slip away gently and gradually. They breathed a regretful sigh at the same time when the last trickles of preternatural colour ebbed away. Andrew's arms came to rest over Neil's, tracing gently over his hands and keeping him close as they sat in quiet thought.

"I have magic," Andrew said eventually, his words hesitant and long-drawn in his mouth, a reluctant admission.

"Yes, you do," Neil said softly into his neck.

"I have magic," he said again, a little stronger. Neil hummed. "I have *magic*."

"Mmhmm, yes indeed," Neil smiled.

"Oh," Andrew breathed, sounding a bit overwhelmed as if he'd only just realised, and hadn't had Neil telling him so for several weeks now. Neil didn't begrudge him his slow acceptance and was simply proud of the progress he had made. "Thank you, Neil."

He didn't need to specify what for. Neil gently squeezed his hands. "You're very welcome, Andrew."

They might have stayed there for the whole day, thinking and enjoying each other's touch, if it weren't for the voices approaching from underneath them. The owners were still a little distant, but

it was enough warning for them to stand and be ready to meet the welcoming committee, as Andrew had dubbed them. Dewdrop kept napping on Andrew's shoulder like some kind of parrot on a pirate.

The party, when it reached the top of the path set into the back of the waterfall and made their way up a shallow slope to the top of the plateau near the bell, was made up of three adults who all shared that wind-blown, carefree look of the wild folk. They were a very tall, grizzled old bear of a man with enough scowl in his expression to make stones bleed, and two women of seemingly opposite substances. One was tall and willowy, with slender lines and fair hair framing a kind face, while the other was short and dark and well-curved, with serious eyes tucked behind eyeglasses and a cloud of spiral-soft greying hair.

"That passage is getting too rough on my knees," the man huffed in a low voice to his female companions.

"You're just getting old," the blonde woman teased him, while the short woman paused to catch her breath as well.

The man made an affronted noise, then strode forwards. Neil held firm against the impulse to back away – the man's height and manner and age put him in too much mind of his father, and his childhood reflexes to stay well out of reach.

"Well then Andrew," the man said as he reached their boulder, casting a glance up at the wheeling flock and the hatchling using him as a perch. "What's the problem now?"

"Wymack," Andrew greeted him coolly, then glanced to the women with a little more warmth. "Abby. Bee, good to see you."

"You're looking well," the plump woman smiled back.

Andrew gave her a small smile of acknowledgement and turned back to the man – Wymack, Neil realised. The man of the stories, in the flesh.

"My flock was attacked in their nesting grounds," Andrew said plainly. "By a witch sent from the Moriyamas. We suspect there is something greater afoot than just one attack on one herd out of pure chance. You recall what I said last spring?"

"About this mysterious sickness, that I do," Wymack grimaced and folded his arms. "I suppose you'll be over the moon to know you were right about that."

"Not really," Andrew shook his head. "Not if it means the dragons are dying."

Wymack squinted at him as if surprised. "Well, someone's mellowed over the summer. I suppose you'll want me to host your flock for the time being?"

Andrew nodded. "And I want you to call a muster in the meantime, while you're at it."

"Oh, is that all?" Wymack scoffed. Abby, the tall woman, seemed worried, while Bee merely concerned. Neil noticed she was watching *him* very steadily too, assessing, contemplating. It made his skin itch, and he wished again for a bath. "You have any idea how difficult that will be, you ungrateful little scum-sop?"

Neil almost lashed out for his harsh words, but Andrew's hand on his arm forestalled the motion. He didn't seem bothered by the insult in the slightest.

"I wouldn't expect an old man well out to pasture and gone completely to seed to understand the full magnitude of the situation," he shot back smoothly, "Especially with his wits going as soft and flabby as his body, and likely to melt into uselessness any one of these days. But I'd hope he could accede to the wisdom of those vastly more intelligent than he."

Andrew gave a significant glance to the women, who both smirked and laughed behind their hands.

Wymack stared him down for a tense moment, then barked out a rough laugh and relaxed his posture. "Ah, it's been a while since we had a muster alright," he mused and rubbed at his rough beard thoughtfully. "And I don't like the sound of this witch attacking you. Too many hatchlings have died already, and it's barely a month into the nesting season. I don't like the sound of this, not at all."

"So you'll call the muster?" Andrew pressed.

"I'll sleep on it, and call it tomorrow if it seems a good idea," Wymack frowned, apparently more out of a sense of dignity than out of real concern for the validity of it.

For a moment Neil was reminded of Andrew facing off against the bull dragon, persuading it to back down. Wymack was no dragon to be cowed by threats, but he had his own face to save and dignity to preserve. He couldn't be seen to bend to the whims of any young upstart with ideas. Andrew nodded in satisfaction.

"Anyway, who're these with you?" Wymack asked and turned the considerable force of his attention to Neil, who again forced himself to stand his ground and meet his eye, rather than backing away and looking at the ground as his father had forcibly trained him to do in his presence.

"The hatchling was rejected by her parents, so I'm rearing her for now. This is Neil, a friend," Andrew introduced him with a hand on his back to steady him, much like he had during Neil's introduction to the dragons. "He's a witch. He's been helping me identify the sickness in the herd, and protecting them against it."

The eyebrows of all three people shot way up.

"This is *the* Neil?" Abby asked, obviously failing to suppress a smile.

Andrew stared at her for a moment, then pinched the bridge of his nose. "I take it my cousin is here and has been gossiping."

"Of course," Bee grinned at him, her eyes seeming to wink over the top of her eyeglasses as she watched them both. "What else do you think he does, beside cooking and cleaning and looking after the camp and minding everyone's business for them?"

Andrew sighed, but it was clear to Neil that he was secretly pleased to have his family close by.

"Besides, he and Erik will be getting married on the equinox," Abby chipped in. "He's been awaiting your arrival for days. He won't get married without you there, he says."

Neil swallowed a late surge of guilt; with everything else going on with the dragons, and the attacks, and deaths, and Jackson, the upcoming event had been knocked clear out of his head. And with it, the remembrance that he was only supposed to stay the summer in the dragonlands, and the autumn was coming on faster than he liked.

“Well, his wish has been granted, I’m here,” Andrew said, a little more gruffly than usual. Neil smiled gently at him, knowing the apparent apathy was a cover for the swell of emotion he didn’t want to let overwhelm him at the present moment.

“Yippee,” Wymack groused, but his weathered face creased into a rueful smile a moment later. “Come on then, let’s get you all squared away. I imagine you’re both dying for a proper meal and a hot bath, eh?”

“Desperately,” Neil muttered, making the women laugh and the man smile at him.

Wymack started back down the slope towards the pathway snaking down the waterfall with a sigh. “Come on, best get this over with before my knees rust away completely.”

Andrew whistled a command up to his flock to stay circling and wait for him; the matriarch called back an acknowledgement that made Dewdrop wake up again with a croaky little whistle of her own. As they began the slow, hair-raising descent down towards the bottom of the sunken, dead lake with saddlebags and belongings in hand, Neil sent his thoughts to touch on Andrew’s mind for just a moment.

*I’m here*, he reminded Andrew silently as they walked unavoidably down the long drop.

Andrew glanced to him, and replied in kind with a sense of soft affection radiating from his mind. *I know*.

Neil smiled back warmly and let his awareness linger like a tender caress before pulling back again, and focussing once more on where to place his feet.

Once they reached the bottom of the path with many shaking legs and sore feet between them, Neil was free to look around the encampment that made up Wymack’s domain from a more sensible vantage point.

The central building took most of his attention simply for its location, like the hub of a wheel. It was one storey with a sprawling layout and multiple add-ons and lean-tos haphazardly stacked around it. It seemed to be some kind of meeting space or lodgings, as Neil watched several people coming and going through the main doors. The central chimney was wafting sweetly savoury smoke over the camp, and Neil’s stomach almost cramped in hunger at the thought of something hot and new that he hadn’t had to hunt and dress and clean and cook himself.

Scattered around the edges of the bowl were other buildings that seemed to have a variety of purposes – one was obviously a smithy, another just as obviously a stables for horses, and some others seemed to be stores. In between the two zones was the majority of the space, and that space was taken up by huge enclosures many storeys high with either open tops or netted tops, equipped with doors tall enough for an adult dragon to walk through. It didn’t escape Neil’s attention that everything was built from stone and clay brick rather than wood, with metal doors, and the roofs were shingled instead of thatched. It was hard to burn down a stone house, after all.

The camp wasn't full to bursting with people, though there were enough people wandering around to make Neil acutely aware of the fact it had just been himself and Andrew, alone, for quite some time now. Even just walking with Wymack, Abby and Bee was setting an itch between his shoulder blades and uneasiness in his legs, a wanting to run for cover and go somewhere quiet to be alone. He thought maybe he could understand Andrew's reluctance to immerse himself in frontier town life whenever he came to the settlement, and his preference to ease himself back into company with Neil first.

The wildfolk of Wymack's camp had that strong, wind-blown look of experienced outlanders, clothed in anything that would fit or be trimmed or restitched to fit, caring less for dirt and scraggly hair than being able to get to their weapons in a hurry. Even as Neil thought that, he noted that they were all much cleaner than he and Andrew were, and surmised that there must be good bathing facilities here and not just the occasional bucket of water and cake of soap to use. They watched the small party with interest, peeking out of buildings and lingering in their activities to watch them follow Wymack towards the central building. Neil saw Andrew was keeping an eye on the others as well, and exchanging occasional nods with some of them. Neil supposed *he* was drawing the most attention, being a complete stranger to the place while Andrew had clearly been here a few times before.

The central building proved to be a hub in truth as well as appearance, with a large gathering space in the front room with several trestle tables, and some rough chairs stacked against the wall. Several people were eating a meal at the tables, and the fire in the mantel against the far wall was banked low, but still burning. There were a few kettles and pans being kept warm over the top of it, while a few people in aprons were bringing platters of food out from one of the side rooms, presumably a kitchen.

As they walked in, the people inside glanced up curiously. Most of them nodded politely to Wymack and his flanking companions, then stared unabashedly at Neil and Andrew. One of them made the hair on the back of Neil's neck stand up – a woman about their age, with a placid expression, dark hair bleached pale with multiple swathes of dyes combed through it, and the pendant and over-robe of the southern faith. Neil wasn't very familiar with all the hierarchy of that church, but thought she had the garb of a priestess rather than a casual believer. She smiled genially at Andrew, who nodded back, and kept watching them between sips of whatever was in her clay mug. There was nothing hostile in her demeanour – quite the opposite, actually – but something about her put Neil on edge regardless. And he had survived so long by listening to his instincts, whether natural or magical, and they were telling Neil she was *dangerous*.

Neil was almost about to reach out with his witch senses to get a feel for her when Wymack cleared his throat, distracting him.

"I guess you want to clean up before having food?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

Neil and Andrew exchanged a look. Andrew's mouth twitched and he absently touched Neil's hand. "You go ahead to the baths, I want to fill Wymack in on the situation a bit more. We'll be here when you're done."

Neil beamed his gratitude and leaned down without even thinking about it to kiss his cheek. "Alright, I won't be too long."

There were a few interested murmurs from around the room, and Neil reminded himself belatedly that they weren't alone anymore, able to touch and kiss and hold without comment. Before he could

apologise for such an unmistakable gesture of intimacy, Andrew squeezed his hip and pressed a light, chaste kiss to his mouth.

“Take your time,” he said calmly, and turned back to Wymack with an air of unruffled ease.

“I’ll show you to the baths, Neil,” Abby offered with a kind smile and twinkling eyes. “Would you like to drop your clothes in the laundry room? We can lend you some spares while they’re being cleaned.”

“I’d appreciate that, thank you,” Neil said politely as he followed her out of the gathering room, and the many curious eyes. She took him to another room within the building, where piles of clothes were stacked beside several tubs and washboards full of soapy water, and wet ones were hanging to dry on lines in front of the open window. Abby instructed him to leave his clothes in a fabric bag on a shelf to one side, with his name written on a tag attached to the top. She added in a room direction for him and told him they would be safe there, and would be delivered back to his room when they were clean. Neil could see no sign of who was in charge of the laundry that day and presumed they were having a meal or out and about somewhere in the complex.

Then she led him to an area at the back of the building that emanated heat even through the stone walls enclosing it.

“Luckily for us, there’s still water under this old lake, it’s just very far down,” she smiled and came to a stop outside the door. “We managed to dig a well down to it, and one of our cleverer people thought of a way to make a kind of sauna for us. It’s handy having dragons about to heat rocks for you, who would have known.”

Neil smiled back at her. “How many of these do you have?”

“Oh, just the one. It’s a communal room.” She correctly interpreted his apprehensive look. “But we do have a privacy notice if you’d rather be alone for a little while. I can’t promise everyone will stay out if you’re in there a long time, but it will keep the more polite ones waiting. Luckily for you, it’s busiest in the evenings.”

“Ah,” Neil nodded in thanks as she passed him a wooden sign to hang on the door handle.

“What size are you, hmm,” she mused and looked him up and down. After a moment she nodded and reached into a storage chest to the side, and pulled out a set of breeches and a plain overshirt in undyed cotton. “These should do for now, until your things have been cleaned.”

“Thank you, Abby,” Neil said and held the bundle gratefully.

She smiled back at him kindly and cupped his cheek for a moment. “Welcome to Wymack’s camp, Neil. It’s good to meet you in person. Will you be able to make your way back to the dining hall on your own?”

Neil nodded, and she left him to it with a wave of her fingers. After hanging the notice on the door, Neil slipped into the bathing room. There was a set of shelves to one side, where Neil presumed he could leave his belongings, and disrobed quickly. He walked through the steam-filled room to find a large pool of gently bubbling water in the middle, with some benches stacked around its rim. He lowered himself into the water with a long groan of pleasure; the water was almost blisteringly hot, courtesy of the super-heated rocks placed at the bottom and in the panelling of the pool, and it was very welcome. He waded in, walking on the boards at the bottom meant to protect naked feet from

the hot rocks, and swam a few strokes in the deep water. He could feel the stress of the past week melt away like shedding a second skin, and rolled in the water blissfully. He ducked under it to wet his hair and face and leaned on the side with another long sigh.

There were some stacks of soap and cleaning brushes to one side, and Neil gleefully set to scrubbing himself pink. It took a little while to untangle his hair and wash out all the dirt that had accumulated in it from sleeping on the ground for weeks between washes, but he felt much better once it was done. He felt a little guilty about the murky quality of the water when he was done, but reasoned it must be refreshed throughout the day for others to use. He swam to the other end of the pool and leaned against the lip of the pool for a while with his eyes closed, breathing in the thick soupy steam and letting the hot water sear away the many aches and pains in his bones and soothe the stiffness in his muscles from days of hard riding. His thoughts drifted like soap bubbles on the surface, and he sank into calm weightlessness with relief.

When his skin began to pucker and prune, he climbed out of the pool and took a seat on the wooden benches around the edge of the room, and discovered there were more hot rocks placed under the seating to keep them warm. He relaxed back against the damp wall and closed his eyes. He could feel himself starting to sweat in the hot steamy room, but it felt almost cleansing. Occasionally he splashed water on himself but lingered for far longer than was probably polite. He couldn't find it in himself to care; he'd never been in such a facility before, and idly thought Andrew might have to drag him out of there when it came time to leave again.

Eventually however, he reminded himself that there was food on offer elsewhere and he couldn't stay in there all day. There were some bowls of cooler water by the clothes shelves, and some thin towels. He accordingly rinsed himself and patted his skin dry, then pulled on his borrowed clothes. He left his hair long and loose down his back rather than braiding it back again, wanting to let it dry first. He was vaguely surprised at how long it had gotten – it reached down almost the length of his back now from months of inattention. He left the baths regretfully, and shivered in the cold-seeming air outside it. After putting the privacy sign away – luckily no one had been waiting on him – he detoured to the laundry to drop the clothes he had been wearing into the bag with the rest of them, then walked back to the dining hall.

He knew the instant Andrew had seen him approaching because he almost choked on whatever he was drinking and started spluttering, eyes wide and face flushed. Neil beamed at him, more than a little smug, and stepped around the table to sit beside him.

"I really like the baths here," Neil informed Abby, who laughed and leaned companionably on Bee's shoulder. Bee grinned at Andrew, who was still choking, and passed him a scrap of cloth to mop himself with.

"I'll get you some food," Abby offered, and was up in a flash to collect some platters from the kitchens before Neil could protest he was perfectly able to do it himself. She set a mountain of food in front of him with a motherly smile and settled back in her seat, leaning with her arm around Bee.

Neil had meant to speak a little with them before eating, but his hunger got the better of him and he fell on the food immediately. As he ate and gulped the pale, watered-down mead he was given, he became aware that Andrew was staring at him. A warm hand came to rest on his knee under the table. Andrew squeezed his knee and rubbed his fingers into the muscle of his inner thigh and Neil looked at him from the corner of his eye, *very* pleased to have gotten such a complementary reaction and to be clean and relaxed once more.

“Andrew, focus,” Wymack said and snapped his fingers in front of Andrew’s face, who startled guiltily and took his eyes from Neil’s face and cascade of hair. “You can screw him later, when the rest of us aren’t here to witness.”

Both Neil and Andrew flushed at that, and Bee chided Wymack for being so crass.

Andrew continued explaining about the attack on his flock to cover his distraction, though his hand stayed firmly on Neil’s knee, his thumb stroking a little over the top. Neil didn’t mind at all, and half-listened as he ate and slipped bites to Dewdrop, who was sniffing curiously at him and his food. She seemed especially interested in his hair, which she had only seen before in a filthy braid knotted into tangles, and kept poking her snout into it and snorting smoke in apparent amusement. He tickled her chin with a smile and gently nudged her away; he’d rather she didn’t set his head alight. She fell to nibbling playfully on his fingers and licking crumbs from them instead.

“Are you a new dragon trainer?” A new voice said abruptly from behind him, and Neil would have jumped out of his skin if Andrew hadn’t been holding his leg to the seat so firmly.

Neil twisted around and craned his neck upwards to blink at the tall, tanned young man frowning down at him. There was a tattoo on his cheek that looked like it had been reshaped from an older one, though Neil was too short, and sitting besides, to clearly see the design. The man had intense green eyes and a disapproving stare.

“No,” Neil replied coolly. “I’m a witch, and I’m just visiting.”

The man’s scowl deepened and he took a seat beside Neil without being asked. He didn’t seem to care about the witch part, and indeed no one at the table so much as blinked at his admission. “But you’ve tamed this hatchling.”

“I didn’t tame her,” Neil said, feeling his easy calm starting to crack. “She imprinted on me and Andrew after she hatched and her family rejected her. She thinks we’re her parents.”

The man’s expression turned almost forbidding. “What a waste,” he said dismissively. “We could do with some more *talented* workers around here.”

“What’s the issue, son?” Wymack asked wearily, and Neil looked between them curiously; after a few moments, he fancied he could see a similarity in their faces, their bearing, more than just the way they both sat with their arms folded on the table in front of them and seemed habitually fond of frowning at everything.

“I’m surrounded by layabouts and grifters,” the man announced dramatically and cast a poisonous look at some of the other people in the room. “The only person helping me as he’s supposed to is Jeremy, and I’m not at all surprised by that, but really we could do with some more dedicated help. I’ll never get the latest batch of adolescents ready at this rate.”

“When I last looked in your training arena they all seemed very advanced for their age,” Wymack said blandly and had a sip of his mead. “Your standards are too high, Kevin. We don’t run this place like your previous camp, remember.”

The man looked chastened and fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat. “Yes, father,” he mumbled.

“Good to see you’re still as irritating as ever,” Andrew said to the man, who scowled at him.



“I could say the same of you,” the man shot back. “I don’t suppose you’ve finally brought us any of your flock to contribute?”

“Nope,” Andrew smirked, and the man seemed set to go on another rant until Wymack cleared his throat meaningfully.

“*Anyway*. I want to talk all this over with the rest of the people here before I do anything,” Wymack said, “But I think a muster is inevitable whatever the outcome is. We simply don’t have enough hatchlings this year.”

It seemed that the serious conversation Wymack was after would have to pause again, however, as a high-pitched shriek interrupted him and a tall man came barrelling out of the kitchen.

“Andrew!” Nicky yelled and threw his arms around his cousin, neatly knocking the mug out of his hand and almost flattening him into the table. “Why did nobody tell me you’d arrived? Why didn’t you come see me first, you tiny asshole?”

“Hi Nicky,” Andrew wheezed and tugged at the arms constricting his windpipe.

Nicky began babbling too fast to follow or permit reply, talking apparently endlessly about how happy he was Andrew and Neil (“*Beautiful* Neil!”) had arrived at last, the latest gossip, the struggles he’d had with a late delivery of food, the never-ending wedding preparations, comments on the newest arrivals of dragons, bickering with Kevin... at some point Erik slinked out of the kitchen too and sat down with them, smiling fondly at his excitable fiancé. He started up a quiet conversation with Neil under Nicky’s babble, and Neil was happy enough to introduce him to Dewdrop and chat quietly. Wymack sighed and apparently resigned himself to not being heard. At some point Andrew managed to escape his cousin and slope off to the baths himself, and Neil hardly noticed with all the other people taking up his attention; he’d discovered that Kevin was alright when he wasn’t on a moan about something, and was enjoying talking to him about different dragon breeds and differences between flocks. Kevin seemed something of an expert on training techniques and dragon behaviour, and Neil was happily engaged in their debate when he felt a familiar hand on his knee again.

He turned to smile at a freshly-scrubbed Andrew, looking much more human and relaxed. He hadn’t shaved his beard this time, instead just shaped the wilder scruffy edges into something a bit more respectable, and Neil rather liked the look of it. “Hello,” Neil said softly. He very much wanted to kiss the bright pink tip of Andrew’s nose, but held back for the crowds of people around them. Andrew seemed to read the intention in his face and squeezed his knee in apparent agreement.

“I can’t believe you actually get on with Kevin,” Andrew remarked.

Kevin began to splutter. “He hasn’t insulted me in a few minutes,” Neil shrugged with a grin, and slid his leg closer to press into Andrew’s thigh. “That’s pretty good by my standards.”

“You are a tragedy,” Andrew announced, but with a look in his eye that said Neil was a tragedy he wanted to kiss until neither of them could breathe. It didn’t stop him from curving his hand around Neil’s inner thigh, either.

A silvery laugh distracted Neil from the heat in Andrew’s gaze, and he saw that the priestess woman had joined them at some point. Neil half expected Andrew to mouth off at her for laughing at them, but instead he grinned and turned a bit to include her.

“Neil, this is Priestess Renee. Renee, this is Neil.”

“Hello,” Neil said cautiously. He’d just noticed the old blade scars on her knuckles. No priestess he ever knew had ever been in a knife fight.

“Good morning,” she smiled back pleasantly. “It’s so nice to have newcomers, usually it’s just the same old faces. I’ve heard you’re a pagan, is that correct?”

“A witch, and I’m not looking to convert,” Neil said, rather rudely.

She just smiled wider. “Oh of course, I wouldn’t dream of it. I was just going to say, there’s a lovely spot in the caves with a small river and some fish, it’s very peaceful. If you’d like to use it to meditate while you’re here, I’d be glad to show you its location.”

“Oh,” Neil blinked, and saw Andrew cover a smirk in the back of his hand. “Oh. Thank you, I’d like that.”

“Speaking of the caves, I should really get the flock settled,” Andrew said. “They won’t be happy wheeling overhead all day.”

The rest of the day was spent in shepherding the flock of dragons into a set of caves to one side of the amphitheatre, and Neil discovered that the walls of the bowl were riddled and pockmarked with caves and passages big enough to swallow more than fifty flocks with ease, and many more humans besides. It seemed some of the elder dragons recognised the place, and settled the rest of them down in the caves with ease. They deposited Dewdrop with her littermates and took a walk around the complex, with Andrew, Nicky and Renee pointing out the different places and storage areas. Kevin was keen to have Neil watch one of his training sessions, but by that point it was getting quite late in the day and Neil begged off on the promise he would spend the next day watching, as he had caught the look in Andrew’s eye that said he was getting annoyed by all the people vying for Neil’s attention as the shiny newcomer.

Neil drew him aside after that behind one of the buildings and out of sight of everyone else.

“What’s the matter?” he smiled and rubbed his hands up Andrew’s arms.

“People are aggravating,” Andrew muttered, and reached up to run his hands slowly through the long fall of Neil’s hair. It had bounced into curls from being so long confined in braids, and Andrew seemed to be enjoying touching the soft waves.

“And you want me all to yourself, hm?” Neil teased. “All yours?”

“Well when you put it that way…” Andrew teased right back, and drew him down for a very thorough kiss or five. When they parted, Neil stayed pressed close and lightly nosed under Andrew’s ear and the sensitive skin of his neck, while Andrew stroked strong hands up and down his back.

“I do want that,” Andrew murmured, and Neil felt his knees quake a little.

“Me too,” Neil whispered, and felt Andrew’s arms tighten around him.

“Neil,” Andrew began hesitantly, “About our arrangement—”

He was interrupted by a bell signalling that the communal meal was ready. He sighed, then stepped back. "Never mind."

Neil was curious, but knew when not to push against a firmly planted tree. Instead he just stroked Andrew's cheek and followed him back to the dining hall, and the noisy conversations within. A good few hours vanished in lively conversation, and at some point someone picked up a tin whistle and an out of tune mandolin and entertained the rest with bawdy shanties and off-key singing while everyone else pretended they knew how to dance. It was a good evening, Neil thought as he and Andrew slipped away to the room they'd been assigned, hands hungry and lips burning for the kisses they'd been holding back for hours.

Andrew wasted no time in locking the door and lighting a candle beside the bed. Its pale illumination put a soft edge on the sparse furnishings in the room, and seemed to set Andrew's fair hair to glowing. Neil made sure the shutters were firmly closed and stepped gratefully into the waiting circle of Andrew's arms.

"It's strange being around people again," he said distractedly as Andrew pulled Neil's shirt from him and started laying gentle, reverent kisses on all his scars. "For a little while I just wanted to lay down with you in the grass again."

"I've missed having a bed, though," Andrew commented, then a sly gleam came into his eye. "I'll enjoy making it creak under us."

Neil shuddered pleasurably, a hot swoop in his stomach as he imagined Andrew's powerful hips and back driving them forward, making the slats creak and the bed knock into the wall as Neil cried out and pulled him closer...

"I suppose I'll have to be quiet," Neil said breathily. "For once."

"Or you can be as loud as you want, and let everyone know exactly what we're up to," Andrew said in a voice so low it was almost a growl, and Neil nearly lost his balance at the thought.

He managed a laugh as they stumbled towards the bed. "I didn't think you'd be so possessive of me," he said, trying to get Andrew's clothes off as well.

"Of course I am," Andrew said, just as distracted with his mouth on Neil's skin. "I've never cared about anyone as much as I care for you."

Then he stopped, frozen with his eyes wide as his brain caught up to his mouth. Neil pulled back as well, frantically trying to interpret those words in any other possible way. But he couldn't – there was too much naked truth in Andrew's expression, and apprehension that he would be shot down or laughed at.

"You – care for me?" Neil asked shakily.

Andrew gave a jerky nod, tense.

"As a... as an occasional bedmate?"

Andrew pressed his lips together, then seemed to decide to throw all caution to the wind. He squared his shoulders and spoke in a hushed whisper. "As a treasured companion. As a lover. As someone who doesn't want anyone else if it's not you, hasn't for a long time now. As someone

who's tired of pretending this thing between us isn't more than just sex and convenience. I thought it would be easier if it were just that, but... it's not enough. I... I care too much for you, Neil. I can't keep pretending I don't. This means so much to me. *You* mean so much to me. And if you wanted, I'd care for you for the rest of our lives. But if you don't, then, I won't say another word, not now or ever."

Neil didn't know how to name the sound that slipped from his throat, but it was nothing dignified and everything wanting. Words were spinning round useless circles in his mind, protestations of how they could never last and would only hurt each other if they kept moving further along this path, how Neil was terrified of belonging to someone and breaking yet more of his mother's rules, his worries about being unable to make someone else happy, the fragile situation with the dragons and his father's plans and the danger Andrew could be in if Nathan ever found his son had ties to someone else...

But the expression of raw honesty and vulnerability on Andrew's face stopped all that.

With shaking hands, Neil cupped Andrew's cheeks and stroked them with wonder. "You have such a beautiful heart," he said with difficulty. "And I – I'll do my best to keep it safe. I care for you too, Andrew. So very much."

Andrew gasped, quickly stifled. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a slow breath. Then his hands hesitantly rested again on Neil's back. "Yes?" he breathed, so hopeful and careful.

"Yes," Neil breathed, half a sob, and fell into Andrew's kiss with the knowledge that they had been asking each other that question in different ways for so long now, too afraid to put it into words. Andrew held him tightly and kissed him without any reservation, gleeful and awe-struck and wild with tenderness all at once. And Neil knew, deep in his soul, that he loved Andrew with every scrap of magic and every drop of blood in his body, and he wanted to be the cause of Andrew's smile for the rest of their lives together.

They fell onto the bed together, too overwhelmed by joy and affection for finesse. Once they'd finally struggled out of their clothes and grabbed the little pot of slick balm from their belongings, Neil placed both hands on Andrew's chest to gently pause him.

"What is it?" Andrew whispered, breathless and lit up from within.

"I want to do this a little differently," Neil said with a trembling smile. He pushed so gently, and Andrew slowly lay down on his back, watching Neil intensely. Neil knelt astride his lap, legs wide and his backside pressing against Andrew's thighs, and blushed for his own boldness. "I want to ride you like this."

Andrew swallowed so hard his throat clicked in the quiet room. His breathing was already ragged with desire and his body ready, but his hands were tender and slow as he stroked Neil's hips. "Yes," he said unsteadily, one hand rising to stroke Neil's long, unbound hair.

Neil smiled down at him and uncapped the pot of balm. As he prepared himself, he watched Andrew watching him with such avid attention, memorising each flick of his eyes and bite of his lips, each tender and marvelling stroke of his hands, and the heat of his body under Neil's hips.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," Andrew whispered as Neil hummed in satisfaction at the slick movement of his own fingers. He was just as hard as Neil, and the inside of Neil's thigh felt hot and sticky

from where they were pressed so tight. His stomach clenched and his thighs shook at the anticipation and memory of having Andrew pushed deep inside him.

“I think the same of you,” he smiled back, letting his eyes wander over the thickly muscled expanse of Andrew’s torso under him, the way his chest heaved as he tried for restraint, the shine of his eyes and wet lips as he looked up at Neil, the careful delicacy of his roughly-weathered hands on Neil’s body.

“Come here a moment?” Andrew asked, reaching up for him.

Neil could hardly deny him. He leaned down to lie as close as he could, stomach to stomach and chest to chest, as Andrew framed his face in gentle hands and kissed him with such tender attention Neil thought he might break all to pieces under the sweet provocation. As they kissed, he slowly stretched his hips and pushed backwards, until their bodies met in a careful, slick glide. Andrew moaned into his mouth and Neil treasured the feeling, the burn in his thighs and back and sublime awareness of all the places they touched.

“Andrew,” he whispered, and began to roll his hips back and forth as slowly as he possibly could, feeling each second and each movement stretch into timelessness as they whispered each other’s names and held each other close, kissing as often as they breathed, unwilling to let any distance come between them. Sweet, heady pleasure was all Neil could feel as they moved so slowly, so tenderly together, and he had never felt more at home than when Andrew breathed his name in a prayerful tone and took hold of Neil’s backside in both powerful hands, pulling them deeper together and stretching the cant of Neil’s hips, rubbing him up against Andrew’s stomach with each shift of their bodies.

Neil wanted it to last forever, but his thighs were burning with the strain and his back was protesting, and he couldn’t help the frustrated whine that spilled from him as his legs started to shake and threaten to cramp. He was so close to release, but his hips were starting to jerk as his joints ground out and twinged.

Andrew’s hands quickly moved to massage and soothe his twitching thighs, but Neil knew he couldn’t keep going.

“Let me,” Andrew breathed into his lips. “Let me, dear one.”

Neil’s heart pounded double time and he nodded breathlessly, giving over control. In one smooth movement, Andrew sat up and pressed forwards, bearing Neil carefully down onto the bed and keeping him pressed there, folded almost in half with his legs hitched up tight around Andrew’s waist, weighed down blissfully with the bulk of his body.

“Yes,” Neil groaned and arched his back, digging his heels into Andrew’s spine and clutching desperately at his shoulders. “Yes, Andrew...”

Andrew’s hands moved to cradle Neil’s hips and hold his lower back, and gently took over the motion. He was as slow and tender as Neil had been, savouring every jolt of sensation and gasped-out breath and, yes, making the bed creak in a most gratifying fashion with each deep and sure-handed thrust of his hips into Neil’s body. Neil’s hips and back were still burning with the pleasurable stretch and the tight clenching of his legs around Andrew’s body, but he knew he was safe in Andrew’s arms, safer than he’d ever been, and knew he wouldn’t be hurt.

Neil panted and groaned breathily into Andrew's cheek, senseless noises rippling uncontrolled from his throat, honest and pure. Andrew was whispering in his ear, words too strained and pleasure-soaked to hear clearly, but each shimmered with desire and affection and praise so sweet it made Neil tremble and clutch him all the tighter. Neil gave himself over to it utterly, shaking with the intensity, and to his amazement felt Andrew's magic surging under his skin, and his own rushing up to meet it. As they rocked and trembled closer and closer to release, Neil felt both their natural barriers beginning to break as their control wavered and their whole beings strained for closeness.

When they came, Neil felt Andrew's magic wash over and into him as surely as his seed did, and felt his own rush out as well and cascade over his lover. It flared out in the air around them and knitted them closer as they cried out and shook through the last aftershocks and waves of pleasure together, magic mingling and slowly retreating back into their bodies, but carrying small glimmers of each other's light as they receded.

He didn't realise he was trembling like a leaf until Andrew's gentle hand on his side brought him back to his body, stroking tenderly and softly at his skin and whispering his name. Neil gave a long sigh and closed his eyes in bliss, holding Andrew tight to him despite the jelly-like wavering of his muscles, never wanting to let him go. He felt like he might have floated into the air if Andrew wasn't holding him pinned with such beautiful strength and security.

When his mind and body had settled enough for something resembling coherent thought to form, Neil managed to lower his legs with a groan and lay sprawled out underneath his lover, weak in all the best ways.

"Do you think everybody heard us?" He asked with a quiet chuckle, watching Andrew's sweat-curved hair wisp out from his temples as he smiled down at Neil.

"Oh yes," Andrew replied warmly.

"Good," Neil sighed, and massaged over Andrew's powerful shoulders. "Because I *am* all yours, and you're all mine too, and I'm just as tired of pretending it's not that way between us."

"Possessive of you," Andrew remarked with a lazily pleased grin.

"Well, I want to kiss you every morning and every sunset from now on, so yes, I suppose so," Neil smiled up at him. "Not that it's much of a change of affairs."

"You're impossible," Andrew said fondly, and bent to feather kisses along his cheeks and jaw.

"I thought I was a tragedy?" Neil grinned and tilted his head back.

"You're both. You're a damn dream, is what you are."

"A pipedream," Neil smiled and stoked his back. "Well you're mine too."

Andrew pulled back a little, eyebrow raised. "I've half a mind to kiss those silly words off your mouth," he mused.

"Do it then," Neil murmured playfully, rolling his hips up against Andrew's again to make him groan.

"Fuck, you can be demanding when you want to be," Andrew puffed.

“What can I say, you bring it out in me,” Neil grinned.

“Give me a chance to catch my breath,” Andrew said, flushing with pleasure as Neil stretched under him and pressed their bodies slickly against each other again. “And I’ll break this bed under us if that’s what you really want.”

Neil shuddered and bit his lip, almost giddy at the thought of what that would entail. Unfortunately, his back and thighs chose that moment to cramp and he hissed in pain. Andrew immediately rolled off him, looking alarmed.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked in a sickened voice, all colour and pleasure washed out of his expression. “Neil?”

“No, no,” Neil hastened to assure him, and rubbed at his lower back with a grimace. “Not at all. Muscle cramps, that’s all.”

Andrew didn’t look convinced, so Neil gently beckoned to him and planted tiny, adoring kisses all over his face and neck. “I’m okay,” he whispered over and over again. “You didn’t hurt me, you made me feel so good, you made me want more, I loved it...”

Eventually, Andrew’s tension melted away and he took Neil’s assurances to heart. Then he carefully turned Neil to lie on his stomach and started to work hot, strong hands over his protesting legs and back, soothing the aches and twinges from their activities. Neil would have fallen asleep from how sweetly soothing it was, if he hadn’t been so determined not to miss a moment of it. There was only so much Andrew could do, however, and now that the adrenaline was fading Neil was aware of how sweaty and messy they both were, and that it would be much less pleasant to wake up with the remains of their lovemaking still present on their bodies. When he suggested going to the baths, Andrew teased him for wanting hot water more than Andrew’s touch, so Neil insisted he only wanted to combine the two for an even better experience. There wasn’t much Andrew could say to that, so he agreed.

Neil wasn’t sure how they managed to sneak through the building in nothing but a robe each to cover themselves without running into anyone else, but he was grateful for it, and the noise of the dancing in the dining hall that had hopefully masked some of his more desperate cries. He just hoped others would be as considerate of the privacy sign he hung on the door as they had been earlier in the day, and hobbled into the steaming water with a grunt of relief. Andrew joined him with his own pleased sigh, and took up the task of washing them both and continuing his efforts to soothe Neil’s shaky muscles in the hot water. And in the process, made good on his promise to kiss every scar on Neil’s body with loving attention.

By the time they made it back to their room and replaced the blankets for clean ones, Neil’s mouth was aching with all the kisses Andrew had laid across them, and he could barely keep his eyes open. He curled up against the warm furnace of Andrew’s body, and fell into blissfully dreamless sleep.

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The next morning got them quite a few whistles and knowing smiles at breakfast, but Neil wouldn’t have traded that night for all the world. Instead he sat contentedly tucked up against Andrew’s side as they ate and made conversation with the people less coarsely-inclined to make comments, and felt as if all were right in the world. He still ached a little in a few tender places, but it was a very pleasant kind of ache, and his heart was full of joy with every little glance Andrew sent his way.

Before long Kevin came over to collect on Neil's promise to watch him training the dragons, and Neil regretfully peeled himself away from Andrew's casual arm slung around his waist.

"Have fun," Andrew said dryly. "If you need to find me, I'll be with Renee most of the day."

Neil raised an eyebrow but let it go as Kevin was whinging at him to get a move on. So with a brief salute of acknowledgement, Neil followed him to one of the big enclosures and took a seat off to the side. He watched as Kevin and some of his helpers called out with a series of careful whistles towards the caves, and summoned some dragons to fly down into the top of the enclosure and land on the sandy floor to brief praise in the form of a few bites of meat. Neil spent several hours watching in amazement as Kevin and his group put the adolescent dragons through a series of exercises and commands, demonstrating and practising flight techniques, adjusting to the saddles on their backs and eventually, the riders sitting there too and directing them with more whistles and calls. They flew in precise loops around the enclosure, in rigorous formations that changed at the slightest note from Kevin's mouth. On his command they performed evasive manoeuvres, made sudden turns, rolled in the air, and spat flame at the much-scorched targets all around the enclosure.

It was clear Kevin took great pride in his work, but he never seemed satisfied with their progress. He was always asking for faster responses, cleaner turns, sharper accuracy in their movements. Neil almost told him that such precision was pointless in the real heat of battle, and messy damage would kill someone just as well as carefully-aimed damage, but held his tongue for the moment. Kevin was Wymack's son, and clearly in charge of this aspect of the encampment. Neil didn't want to get into a fight on his second day in the place. Plus, he was feeling rather relaxed and mellowed from his excellent night, and the beautiful revelation of Andrew's sweet devotion, and his own to match it; his temper was less excitable than usual.

Or so he had thought, until he and Kevin walked back to the dining hall for the midday meal and Neil saw that Andrew had gained a black eye, and Renee had bruised knuckles to match it.

"What?" Neil cried and gently cupped Andrew's cheeks to inspect the bruise and swelling. "What *happened*?"

"Relax," Andrew said calmly, reaching up to hold his wrists. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

"That's not the point," Neil snapped and turned on the oh-so-sweet Renee with a fierce scowl. "You did this. I don't care why, but if you touch him again I will lay a curse so powerful you'll wish I'd just disembowelled you right now with my bare hands and teeth to spare you the misery."

Andrew made a surprised, vulnerable sound and stared up at Neil like he was some kind of avenging angel. Gathering his wits a little, he kissed Neil's palm and gently tugged his attention back to himself.

"Neil, it's okay," he said. "Renee and I practise unarmed combat together. It was a fair fight. I gave as good as I got, and it was all in a friendly spirit."

"She *hurt* you," Neil protested, and stroked tenderly over the bruised socket.

Andrew kissed his palm again gently. "Really, it's alright."

Neil's objections were faltering, though there was still a spark of outrage in his chest that someone had laid hands on Andrew with the intent of inflicting pain. "You fist fight with the priestess. Really?"



“Really,” Andrew said with a sardonic little smirk. “She’s very good.”

Neil sighed and sat down heavily on the bench next to him, and flushed when Andrew kissed his cheek. “Not that I don’t appreciate your concern,” he murmured quietly.

Neil leaned into his shoulder a little more. “At least let me take down the swelling.”

Andrew grunted agreement and Neil sketched a charm onto his skin with the tip of his finger, then blew his magic-tainted breath over the bruised area. Each time he puffed, the swelling and bruising reduced until it was little more than a few greenish-purple splotches, and some tenderness under the skin judging by Andrew’s careful pokes at the area.

“You’re a very skilled witch,” Renee complimented him.

“I’m still cross with you,” Neil warned her, but she was unfazed.

“I apologise for the distress I inadvertently caused,” she said blandly. “Be sure to let me know how I can make amends, when you’ve recovered a little from the scare.”

Neil gave her a flat look, but decided not to comment any further and instead took Andrew’s hand tightly in his own.

“Cousin, I highly approve of your taste in men,” Nicky commented, and Neil realised he’d barged in on a family reunion of sorts. “Beautiful but deadly. Very nice. Suits you.”

Neil turned his flinty gaze on Nicky instead, who laughed and cowered behind his fiancé in mock fear. Erik just smoothed a hand over Nicky’s hair affectionately. Neil cleared his throat and pulled a platter of food towards himself. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation,” he apologised half-heartedly.

Nicky waved that away. “No matter, no matter. We were just catching up on gossip anyway.”

Neil settled in to eat his meal and listen to them, though he held tight to Andrew’s hand under the table. Andrew didn’t seem bothered by that at all; if the way he kept tracing his thumb over Neil’s knuckles was any indication, he was rather pleased by it. Neil studiously avoided looking at Renee as he didn’t trust his control not to send a hex or curse her way. She just put him on edge anyway, and now knowing that she had the ability and skill to fight hand to hand, he trusted her even less. What kind of priestess would enjoy scrapping with a heathen like Andrew and be so friendly with him? One who enjoyed the ‘carnal sins’ of another man, to boot? No, Neil decided, there was something very off about her.

Towards the end of the meal, Wymack stood up from where he’d been eating with his two ever-present companions. In deference to him, everyone else paused their conversations and turned to listen.

“Right,” Wymack opened with, grimacing. “I’m sure by now you gossips have all heard the news that Andrew’s flock was attacked by a foreign witch. You might even remember the last time he was here, and was trying to tell us his theories about the causes of the hatchling sickness this year.” Wymack sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, resting his eyes on Andrew and Neil. “As much as I hate to say it, it seems like the little gobshite was right. Someone, or an organisation likely linked to the Moriyama petty kings over east, seems to be maliciously targeting us and our herds.

Now, I don't make a habit of rolling over for whatever assholes are trying to stomp on me, I don't know about the rest of you."

The grim and vicious grins and nods around the room seemed to confirm his sentiment and he flashed back a tight smile.

"Good. So, we're going to call ourselves a muster of all the flocks, and figure out the exact scope of this scheme and how badly they've managed to hurt our folks. Then we're going to think up a way to stop this, because I sure as hell don't like it. How about you?"

A chorus of rough cheers and jeers seemed to satisfy him, and a few people punched the air.

"Alright then, glad we're all on same wing here," Wymack said and folded his arms. "Now. I need volunteer riders to go out and muster everyone. Come on, hands up. Don't make me pick on you."

Neil has a smile behind his hand as the room full of burly, tough, no-nonsense wild people got quiet and shifty-eyed and tried to avoid making eye contact with Wymack directly. Like a group of reluctant children.

"Do you want me to make you all draw lots?" Wymack said sternly.

A few people put up their hands, including Renee. "Alright, that's more like it," Wymack said with a roll of his eyes. He counted them up and fixed the room with another slow, menacing sweep of his gaze. "We need about five more. Come on, or I *will* just pick the people who've annoyed me the most recently."

Neil didn't think he was obligated to be part of the effort, seeing as he didn't know any of these people or their territories, and Andrew was content to sit and watch as well. Reluctantly, after many threatening ultimatums from Wymack, the volunteer muster riders were assembled.

"Good," Wymack nodded and gestured to them all. "You lot, sort what you need to sort, get supplies from the stores, and be on your way before sundown today. Co-ordinate with each other who will travel where and collect which flocks. Any issues, bring it to Betsy."

Neil was confused for a moment until the woman Andrew called Bee raised her hand with a vague smile.

"She also has all the maps and navigational stuff if you need them," Wymack added. He caught sight of Kevin fidgeting in his seat and nodded understanding. "Myself and Abby and Kevin will be in charge of reallocating the duties of those riding out, we'll make sure there isn't an unfair load on anyone. Alright?"

Everyone seemed content with that, so Wymack clapped his hands together. "Right then, enough jawing on. Get back to work, the lot of you."

Everyone scrambled to their feet with much scraping of dishes on table tops and clanks of mugs as the utensils and uneaten food were gathered up and transferred to the kitchens. Nicky and Erik leapt up and disappeared back into the kitchen and pantry, suddenly up to their eyes in work. Renee went directly to Betsy – Bee – to talk to her, making a couple of vague hand gestures as she presumably negotiated directions or maps or something. Neil was just secretly, pettily glad she would be gone for a while and wouldn't be able to hurt Andrew again.

Andrew had been following his line of sight and tapped the back of his hand. "Relax," he said quietly. "It's really okay."

Neil remained unconvinced, but mustered a quick smile and kissed Andrew's cheek, just under his sore eye. On a sudden thought, he brushed his mind against Andrew's.

*While we're waiting for everyone to gather and decide what to do, it would be a good time to practise control of your magic,* Neil suggested when Andrew welcomed him into his thoughts. It seemed easier than before, whether from their honesty the previous night or the strange barrier breaking they had experienced at the moment of completion. Neil made a note to think about that later.

Andrew's brow creased in a thoughtful frown. *You could be right,* he said cautiously. *I don't know if I want everyone to know about it, though.*

*I understand,* Neil smiled and stroked over his hand. *It'll just be us. Maybe we could use that cave Renee mentioned. Nothing flashy, I promise. The basic lessons are mostly to do with meditation, anyway. If anyone asks we could just say you've become more pagan recently and want to connect to the earth each day.*

Andrew quirked an eyebrow at him. *I guess it's true enough,* he said with just enough heat under his tone and suggestion in his mind that Neil could feel himself starting to flush. *Seeing as you have a direct natural connection, or however you want to call it.*

*You're going to make these lessons very distracting for me, aren't you?*

*What can I say, you bring it out in me,* Andrew quipped back, and Neil chuckled.

*Dawn or twilight would be a good time to start,* Neil suggested. *Transitional periods of the natural cycles will enhance your senses and perceptions, which is very useful at the beginning. We could go to the cave after the evening meal.*

Andrew nodded and looked around the hall; while they had been silently talking, most of the other people had left on their various errands.

"What are you doing for the rest of the day?" Andrew asked out loud, and Neil gently withdrew from his mental space.

"I think I was supposed to be watching Kevin's training some more, but I'm not sure now," Neil replied and nodded to where Kevin, Wymack and Abby were huddled in conversation about something. "I guess I'll see if anyone needs a hand with anything, I'd like to be useful. How about you?"

"I'm going to check on the flock and make sure they have enough food and water."

"Okay," Neil smiled and kissed his cheek again. "I'll see you this evening, then."

Andrew hummed agreement and gently stroked a loose strand of Neil's hair behind his ear. "See you later."

They parted, and Neil put himself in Abby's hands as to what he should do with his time. He ended up bouncing between multiple places and doing odd jobs for anyone who asked, seeing as he didn't

know how the encampment really worked yet. He carried messages for Abby, helped make sure the mustering riders had all their supplies, briskly cleaned the rooms of a few people who had moved on from the camp, delivered clean laundry to other rooms, and generally wandered about trying to be useful and learning the configuration of the camp, and the people who lived and worked there. A few hours after the midday meal, the majority of the riders were ready to depart, and set off along the winding track at the far end of the bowl from the waterfall track; it was the old bed where the river had run before it all dried up on the surface, and wound out of the sunken lagoon and eventually back onto the plains of the dragonlands. It was easier to detour that way than try and coax the horses up the rocky and perilous track that Andrew and Neil had come down the previous day, Neil guessed. There was little fanfare other than some friends or lovers saying farewells.

To Neil's surprise he saw Seth, the bad-tempered blacksmith who couldn't order Neil out of his smithy fast enough, exchange a quick embrace and kiss of the hands with Priestess Renee before she mounted up on her horse. Neil watched them speculatively; they seemed a strange match, but perhaps her docile temper calmed his fractious one, and his wildness spoke to whatever darkness was in her that allowed her to fist fight with her friends. He watched as Renee tucked a small flower behind Seth's ear and he insisted on checking her saddle tack and refastening a loose stirrup. After another press of hands and a few quiet words, Renee took her leave and set off at a brisk trot. Neil watched Seth watching her go with a wistful expression on his face, which quickly turned to a scowl when he noticed Neil was looking, and Neil jerked his gaze away guiltily.

That evening, Andrew led the way up to the cave Renee had mentioned, as she had given him directions in Neil's stead. It was hidden behind many different intersecting pathways and twisting caves, far back in the cave system and about halfway up the waterfall's height. By the time they reached it, Neil's knees were sore from the slope of the climb and he was looking forward to sitting down for a good long while.

"This is the place," Andrew said with a nod of satisfaction, and strode forward into the small opening before them. Neil looked around and couldn't help the small, stunned breath he took.

It was a beautiful place – a shaft of some kind of stone like quartz drifted across one wall, and a small stream and pond had formed close to it from the tiny trickles of water making their way down through the cave. Somehow, fish were living in the little pond; Neil guessed the eggs must have been washed down at some point and then hatched, and now the fish were too large to leave. Light filtered into the cave from a few channels in the ceiling, and reflected with a soft white light of the crystals in the walls and the passages. It was a tranquil place, and as Neil sat down cross-legged beside the pond, he felt his senses bloom out into the rock around them, easing into the gaps between passageways and getting a better sense of the honeycombed cave system under the plateau around them.

"This will do very nicely," he murmured, and dipped his fingers in the pond for a moment. He gave a sigh of satisfaction as he sucked the water droplets off his fingers; it was sweet and cold, with a slightly rocky tang to it, as if were fresh from a spring. It tasted like the first water to have fallen to earth, he thought in a brief turn of whimsy.

Andrew had been lightly running his hands over the crystals, but turned at Neil's voice and sat down opposite him. "How do we do this, then?" he asked in a subdued voice, despite the fact they were far away from any other people.

Neil considered him. "If you wanted to be trained as a witch, I would start like how my mother taught me. She took me out to the woods and we stayed there for three months without clothes or

shelter, letting instinct blossom and the world speak to us, practising magic when it bloomed but mostly concentrating on herblore and woodcraft. I don't think that's what you want of your power, is it?"

Andrew shook his head. "I don't want to explode, like I did with Jackson. I don't want to lose control of it – I don't want to hurt people, even by accident."

"Do you want to learn to harness your power and perform magical feats with it? You could, you know. You have a lot of potential."

"I don't know," Andrew said.

"You seemed pleased, the other day, when you saw how you could influence it in your body. You could use it to protect your dragons, like the charms I laid on them."

Andrew hesitated, his fists bunching in his lap. "I don't know. All I know for sure is I want to be able to control it so I don't hurt anyone."

Neil nodded slowly, accepting his reluctance to fully embrace this strange new power. "Alright. For now at least, we'll just concentrate on control. It's the only place to start anyway. I'll always be happy to teach you whatever I can, if you change your mind later."

Andrew nodded back and took a slow breath, relaxing his body on the exhale and sitting taller.

"Mediation is a key practice of any form of magic," Neil started, drawing on his memories of his own lessons, so many years ago. "I told you before that magic is just like another part of your body like your stomach or hands. And that's true, it's an innate part of you. You were born with the potential, which bloomed in its own time and has come to fruit in you recently. But just like any other part of your body, if you don't take care to look after it or maintain yourself in good health, there will be unpleasant repercussions. Instead of a stomach ache, bad bowels or broken bones, magic gone sour can flash out of control in response to your emotions, can bleed into your mind, cause hallucinations and madness in time. That's why learning to touch it and keep in control without thinking about it, is important even if you don't ever intend on using the power. Do you understand?"

Andrew looked more nervous than anything else, but he nodded stoically. "I understand."

Neil smiled at him for a moment. "Good. Now, your magic seems to stem from fire, which is more common in offensive-style witches than more neutral earth-based ones like me. But that's okay – like I said, it's a part of you. Just as you decide how to use your hands, you decide how to use your power. There is nothing inherently bad or corrupting about fire magic, it's all in how you access and shape it. You said yesterday that when you were briefly touching your power, your body responded by giving you a taste and temperature sensation."

Andrew nodded and rubbed a thumb over his lip. "Like heat and ash and flames."

"Mmhmm. That's your body and mind trying to understand something that is both a part of it, and existing separate in a different part of the natural world. It doesn't know how to recognise magic in any way but through familiar senses. Fortunately for us, that makes it quite easy to tell whether you're accessing your power, and in what amounts, once you know what to watch for."

Andrew nodded for Neil to continue, so he did. “One of the key principles of magic is that it resides within your body, to an extent, but it is formed largely within your soul. Which obviously exists in a non-physical way, somewhere that we haven’t figured out yet. That place seems to be linked to the realm I showed you before, the one with the colours and creatures. It overlaps with our own intangibly unless someone is able to dip into the magic through their soul’s connection, and bring it into being here, with us.”

To demonstrate, Neil called up a tiny amount of his magic and reached to the mosses and plants lining the bottom of the pond. As he touched them with his magic, they began to grow in rapid motion, breaking the surface of the water and wavering in the air towards him.

Andrew’s eyes bulged a bit at the sight, so Neil gently released his control over the plants and let them sink back into the water. “You’ve seen me perform magic before,” he commented, stirring his fingers in the pool of cold water to disperse the little clumps of moss that clung to his fingertips. “I did it this morning, on your eye.”

“Yes,” Andrew said hesitantly. “But I suppose... the previous times, it’s been in the service of something else. Like healing, or protecting. Those are familiar enough to me. I don’t think I’ve seen you influence something just for the hell of it like that.”

“How did it make you feel, to see?” Neil asked curiously.

“Alarmed,” Andrew admitted. “It seems less natural, somehow, than encouraging something to heal faster. But also... excited. It made me wonder if I could do that too.”

Neil’s smile widened. “Probably, if you worked at it. It’s alright to be alarmed and confused about all this sometimes – I know it’s a lot to understand, especially in such a short period of time. I had years and years to get used to these things and understand them in small pieces, while I’m having to tell you all of it now, unfortunately. If we had more time here I would go slower with you, but I don’t think we’ll be in the encampment for months and months.”

Andrew watched his hand in the water with a contemplative expression. Neil let him think, and waited for his nod to continue.

“While the magic is formed and influenced in the soul, it resides mostly in your body. This means that your skin forms a natural barrier to stop it from spilling out into the world and affecting those around you. Learning to pull the magic past that barrier is one of the first steps in accessing and using the power, but I’m getting a little ahead of myself.” Neil rubbed the back of his neck; he’d never taught anyone else before, but Andrew was an attentive listener and seemed ready to try. “Because it’s in your body, and it’s linked with your senses, you can learn to control it though your body. This is where mediation comes in. By learning to clear and focus your mind, relax your body, and regulate your natural rhythms, you will be learning intrinsic control at the same time and deepening the connections between the physical and magical. One use for it is to help you think about things that might be troubling you, and figure out solutions. This is why most pagans without magic practice mediation, and to allow them a time to connect with the world around them through their senses, to bring peace and wellbeing. For witches or those with magic, you can use it to reach out to the world around you and influence it.”

“Like your breath and blood,” Andrew said quietly, no doubt thinking of his protective charms on the dragons drawn in blood and the healing properties in his breath.

Neil nodded, pleased he was keeping up. “Exactly. We’ll start with plain mediation for now, and when you have the trick of it we’ll move on to seeing the other realm and those calling and banishing exercises we did yesterday, with calling it up to your skin and pulling it back into your body again.”

“I remember.”

Neil smiled, then closed his eyes and shifted until he was in his most comfortable seated position. Speaking in a low voice, he instructed Andrew how to breathe and relax each part of his body in sequence, to focus on counting his breaths, and to slowly declutter his mind of errant thoughts and focus wholly on the feeling of being in his body. He assured Andrew that it took quite a lot of practice to achieve the state, and even more to sustain it for long periods. He was well-versed in it himself, and could sink into a deep mediation within a few minutes, but was patient with Andrew and called his focus back to his breathing over and over again when he lost concentration.

After some time, Neil didn’t need to keep reminding him, and could sense when Andrew noticed his own mental wanderings and brought his attention back on just counting his breaths. They sat in near-silence for hours, breathing and simply existing in that space together. It did wonders for Neil, allowing him to process the fears that had plagued him since Jackson’s appearance, and to tidy and put away the cruel memories the meeting had conjured. It helped him to think clearly about the situation, and by the time he decided they had been mediating long enough for one night, he had several ideas and possible solutions neatly ordered in his mind.

“Andrew,” he called softly, “it’s time to finish the mediation now. I want you to focus on gently moving your limbs now, and pull your awareness out of your body to the cave around us. When you feel ready, open your eyes. Don’t get up just yet – you might be a bit off-balance at first.”

Andrew followed his advice, and his gaze was steady and serene as he looked around at the cave, now only vaguely lit from the reflected moonlight shimmering over the quartz and water.

“How do you feel after that?” Neil asked.

“Peaceful,” Andrew said in a quietly wondering voice. “Tired, but also awake. Like I could do anything I wanted, or just go to sleep and wake completely refreshed.”

Neil shuffled over to his side, and gently leaned against his shoulder and took his hands. “You did really well,” he replied tenderly. “Do you think you’ll want to try it again tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Andrew asserted. “Yes, very much. Thank you for this.”

Neil dropped light kisses to the backs of his hands, then helped him to stand. They made their way back through the caves and down to the encampment shrouded in deep night, with little more than the moon and stars and the occasional tuft of chimney smoke to guide them. They undressed each other for bed, traded a few solemn and gentle kisses, then fell into deep, satisfying sleep in each other’s embrace.

That day set the pattern for their time during the wait for the flocks to muster – spending much of their days helping around the camp or attending to Andrew’s flock, and practising mediation and discussing magic at night. They were even freer with kisses and touches than they had been out on the plains, finally able to express and ask for the intimacy they both craved from the other. It was a beautiful time of rest and healing and learning, Neil reflected after a fortnight of this. And in the meantime, Neil came to understand the strange collection of people who made up Wymack’s camp.

They were generally an antisocial lot, all drawn to the wilderness and the challenges it brought away from ‘civilisation’, but also aware of the very human need for companionship. Much like the frontier town, there was a core of people who lived and worked there to train young dragons on the commission of their buyers, others who visited regularly, and others who just passed through every so often when they wanted some creature comforts and conversation before going on their way again. It could also provide a sense of stability and home for those like Nicky, who had either lost their homes or chosen to leave them under painful circumstances. And even though with every passing day Neil missed his own home and town a little more, he felt welcomed and at peace in the camp, and the little niche he was making for himself among its people.

And no matter who came through, Wymack and his seconds – Abby, Bee and Kevin, usually – took the time to talk to them, understand what had been happening out in the wider dragonlands, and form at least some rough semblance of judiciary and community. Neil watched as Wymack mediated disputes over territories with a blunt and heavy hand, but never failing to be fair to all involved. He watched Abby offer a home to frightened outcasts and reassure them they could stay at the camp as long as they needed. He watched Bee deftly manoeuvre the personal battles and frictions that cropped up in any settlement with a soft touch and kind smile, and offer solace and advice when needed. He watched Kevin draw others to him by force of his demanding personality, and impart knowledge and understanding of the creatures they all had devoted their lives to, with passion and energy.

It wouldn’t be a bad place to make a home, Neil reflected, not at all. Especially not with Andrew’s arms around him every night, and kisses never far from their lips.

But he couldn’t deny that as the summer started to regress and autumn to sneak on its heels, that he missed his house too. He missed the townsfolk he knew so well. He missed ministering to their problems and helping their ailments with Katelyn. He missed the familiar woods, and his witch friend, his chickens and goats, and the wild woods and tilled earth. He missed having his place in the world, a proper place, and not one sprung up in the absence of others. He began to dream longingly of his little house with its crooked mantle, hand-scrubbed walls, window casements that always let in a draft, the hard work of his daily routine and the bliss of it. He missed talking to Roland and the other townsfolk, trading goods with merchant caravans, travelling around to the other towns.

But he knew that he couldn’t simply walk away from Andrew and his obligations to the flocks and whatever evil his father was cooking up somewhere out there, and nor did he want to. He simply felt... torn and tugged between too many people and places he wanted to call home.

When they lay together at night, Andrew seemed to sense the disquiet in Neil’s heart and did what he could to soothe him, speaking sweetly with affection and touching with gentle assurance. And while it helped and made Neil feel so wanted and cared for and at home, he could no more easily dismiss his homesickness than the clouds in the sky.

Nicky and Erik’s formal wedding came as a welcome distraction. As was tradition in the more rural parts of the world, there was a practice of an informal handfasting before marriage, which enabled all parties involved to experience life together and then decide if it was truly what they wanted. If the answer was yes, they would formalise the arrangement under the witnessing and blessing of a priest, village chief, parent, or other authority figures they chose. Nicky and Erik had been handfasted for a year, and they had chosen Renee to conduct the ceremony with the witness of Wymack’s household, and of course Andrew. Neil had hesitantly mentioned travelling to collect Aaron from the frontier for the ceremony, but Andrew had disagreed. Apparently he had already



asked Aaron to attend during the brothers' trip in the dragonlands the previous spring, and the answer had been a clear and intractable *no*.

Renee had returned from her mustering the night before the autumn equinox, and as soon as she arrived Nicky had asked if she would perform the ceremony the next day. With a tired but pleased smile, she had agreed, and the whole encampment had leapt into action to execute the ever-changing plans Nicky had made for the day.

For Neil's part, he had spent the past night and day in the cave mediating and hoping for visions and guidance, his skin bare but for the painted runes and charms he had laid on it. When he stumbled out of the cave, tired and desperately hungry from fasting and staying awake all night, cloaked in a simple robe to cover his nudity, he was shocked to find the camp in such merry disarray.

Garlands of flowers hung from all the buildings, and home-made rustic charms and superstitious items were out in abundance, all supposed to bring happiness and health. Music echoed out from the central hall, and Kevin's dragons were flying in a beautiful display over the sunken amphitheatre of the camp, performing amazing feats of agility and airborne grace under their riders' direction, and spraying flame and smoke into the air in deliberate patterns. Neil could smell great food and the tang of spilled ale even from halfway up the side of the bowl and his stomach scrunched and growled like a creature of its own right.

As he made his way down the path to the camp, he could see groups of people wandering about, dancing and laughing. As almost all of the riders who had gone out on a muster had returned, the camp was near to bursting with both dragon flocks and humans, so there were a great many revellers. Neil had no idea what was going on, and was more than a little confused and anxious to be approaching the suddenly-wild camp in nothing but a robe.

He reached out tentatively with his thoughts as he walked. *Andrew?*

A warm rush of recognition and pleasure as Andrew felt his mental touch. *Neil, there you are.*

*What's going on down there?* Neil asked. *It all looks so loud and strange.*

*Oh yes, you'd already gone when Renee returned. It's Nicky's wedding day.*

*Oh!* Neil smacked his forehead. *I'm not really dressed for company at the moment. Is anyone in the baths? I need to wash up, then I'll come find you.*

*I'll get it ready for you.*

*Thank you,* Neil smiled. *Save me some food.*

Another warm touch like a caress, and then Andrew withdrew from the conversation. Feeling a little better about the whole thing, Neil continued onwards to the camp and managed to dodge around the strangers and make his way to the baths without colliding with anyone. Once there he found Andrew had put the privacy sign up for him, and left a set of clean clothes on the shelves, ones that were a little fancier than his everyday ones. With a grateful sigh, Neil sank into the hot water and cleaned himself up.

When he was mostly dry and dressed, he wandered out to the dining hall in the direction of all the amazing smells of food and the slightly off-key music echoing about the place, feeling a little

lightheaded from the combination of fatigue, fasting, hot water and loud noise.

The trestle tables and seats had been pushed back to the edges of the room, where they groaned with food, drink, and those needing a break from the raucous dancing occupying the majority of the room. In the middle of it all were Nicky and Erik, dressed in their finest, with flowers adorning their hair and in garlands around their wrists and necks and ankles. Nicky was laughing with delirious glee as his husband whisked him around the dancefloor, and the very air seemed to radiate love and happiness.

Neil stumbled smilingly through the crush of the semi-drunken crowd towards some of the food, and spotted Andrew sitting contemplatively to the side and watching the dancers. His expression lightened when he saw Neil, and Neil made a beeline for him.

Andrew pulled him to sit across his lap with an easy circling of his arms, and Neil went willingly. He felt much steadier with Andrew there to hold him up, and leaned into him with a contented hum.

“Hello again,” Andrew murmured into his cheek as he lightly caressed fingertips over Neil’s spine and hip. “I wasn’t sure you’d be finished in time to join the party.”

“I’m sorry to have missed the ceremony,” Neil said honestly, and kissed the tip of his nose. It was a little pink from the heat of the room and the ale he’d presumably drunk, judging from the slight sweetness to his breath.

“It was pretty boring,” Andrew shrugged. “The after party is what everyone was really looking forward to.”

“Nicky and Erik certainly seem happy,” Neil remarked and nodded towards the radiant, laughing couple.

“Yes, they do,” Andrew mused. He grabbed a large platter of food from behind himself and a mug of watered ale, and Neil fell on them with abandon. Andrew didn’t comment on his alarming appetite or the graceless way he ate, simply held him and watched the dancers while Neil attempted to soothe the demands of his famished and exhausted body.

When he was finished, he sighed and curled up against Andrew’s chest. He was so tired and full he might have fallen asleep right there, if it wasn’t for the noise.

“Better?” Andrew asked.

Neil yawned and nodded. “Much. Thank you.”

“Did you see any visions?” Andrew asked, and Neil’s smile grew. Since they had started meditation lessons, Andrew had become curious about the more esoteric parts of Neil’s abilities; his prescience, connections to the currents of purpose in the world, his ability to read portents and signs in the plants and earth around him. Neil was happy to share his knowledge, and happier still that Andrew wasn’t so adamantly focussed on just attaining bare control of his powers; that he might be thinking of how to use them instead of ignoring them.

“Some,” Neil admitted with another yawn. “They gave me much to think about. I’ll share them with you, and Wymack, when I’ve thought them over a little more.”

Andrew raised a hand and gently ran his fingers through Neil's long, curling hair that he had been wearing loose about his shoulders while in the camp. He seemed to be admiring it in the light of the evening sun and the fire, twisting it around his fingers and playing with the locks. Neil could feel his eyes drooping further and sleep calling to him; it was so soothing, so calming after the worrying visions and thoughts that had occupied his mind during his trance-like mediation.

"Andrew," he mumbled drowsily, "I'm so glad to know you, and to care for you."

Andrew kissed his forehead in a soft benediction and held him closer. "Me too," he sighed, and Neil smiled into his chest.

"Did you want to dance?" Neil asked, though he was half-asleep already.

"This is more than enough for me," Andrew said quietly. "Rest, Neil. I'll watch over you."

Neil mumbled something that was incoherent even to him, and drifted into a hazy doze of partial wakefulness. He could feel Andrew's arms around him and his hands playing with Neil's hair, hear the conversations happening around him and the music thumping through the ground, but it all seemed distant and dream-like as he drifted from thought to thought, sensation to sensation. All he knew was that he was safe, and content, and loved.

When he eventually surfaced from that strange half-sleep, night had fallen but the party was still going. With a little less energy than before, but there were plenty of people in the latter stages of inebriation trying to dance and idly nibbling on cold leftovers. And Andrew was still cradling him on his lap, though he seemed to be keeping his hands busy by carving something with a small knife and slip of wood.

Neil stretched his sore neck and smiled blearily at Andrew's dear face. "Hello," he said in a croaky voice.

"He awakens," Andrew remarked, and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

"I missed even more of the day," Neil sighed in disappointment.

"You didn't miss much," Andrew disagreed again. "Nicky and Erik vanished a while back to break in their marriage bed, and everyone else has just been drinking and dancing. Are you feeling more rested?"

"A little," Neil said and stretched his arms above his head and setting off a series of pops in his back. "I could probably sleep for a few days, but I won't doze off for a few hours."

"Good," Andrew said with a wry twist of his mouth. "I really need to piss and get the feeling back in my legs."

Neil laughed out an apology and slid off his lap with a thump, still a bit clumsy in his body. Andrew quickly hobbled off to sort himself, and Neil smiled around at the room of drunken good cheer still in full swing. He smiled and 'ah'ed in understanding when he caught sight of Wymack, Abby and Betsy cloistered together in a corner, laughing tipsily and all three trading kisses and tender caresses without preference, and with the ease of long-established comfort. Kevin was making rather an ass of himself trying to teach two of his more-trusted fellow trainers, Jeremy and Jean, how to dance the steps he kept fumbling due to the alcohol flush in his face and clumsiness in his feet, but they bore him with good grace and tried to follow his bumbling instructions. Renee and

Seth were leading each other more sedately around the dancefloor, holding each other with careful respect, and as Neil watched an unfamiliar woman with the broad muscles and confident gait of a dragon herder came up to the pair and neatly inserted herself between them, to the amusement of all three. Neil looked between their trio and Wymack's corner, and 'ah'd some more. When he looked down to the whittling Andrew had been amusing himself with, he traced the delicate shapes with his fingertips – it was a baby dragon peeking out of its egg. Dewdrop, Neil realised.

To his surprise, two very familiar faces came up to him when they saw he was awake.

"Matt! Dan!" He cried, and enjoyed being swept into their tight embraces. They were talking at him too fast for his tired and fuzzy brain to really understand, so he just smiled and soaked in their presence and the sounds of their excited voices. They seemed to realise that after a few minutes and Dan just smiled and ruffled his hair affectionately.

"We didn't think you'd wake up," Matt said slowly when they sat down together, and Neil was able to piece together his words. He wagged his eyebrows and grinned. "You looked very cosy curled up on Andrew."

Neil flushed as he always did when they teased him about his relationship with Andrew, and especially at the reminder of how much deeper things had progressed since he last saw them at the spring equinox. "I was really tired," Neil shrugged bashfully. "And he's very comfortable to sleep on."

"If you say so," Matt chuckled and fondly patted Neil's cheek. "How have you been, Neil? We thought you'd be at home, not way out here."

Briefly Neil outlined the series of events that had led to his time with Andrew's flock, and then onwards to Wymack's encampment, leaving out some of the saucier details they didn't need to know.

"Well, shit." Dan said, eloquently. She slung an arm around his shoulders and gave him a fierce, tight embrace. He melted into her hard comfort with a contented sigh. "When Renee told us what was going on to cause a muster, I couldn't believe he was right all along. Bastard."

"Your flock was hurt too?" Neil asked into her shoulder. Matt rested a hand on the top of his head and Neil closed his eyes, enjoying their comfort.

"Well, we weren't attacked like you were, not directly," Matt said. "Only three of our hatchlings survived the nesting period though, and the rest sickened too fast this time for it to feel natural. We lost quite a few yearlings and adolescents too. It was getting pretty hard to ignore the pattern when Renee located us."

"I'm sorry about your flock."

"It happens," Dan sighed. "Hopefully with this muster we can figure out how to stop this infection or plague or whatever it is."

Neil carefully held his tongue over the news that he thought he knew exactly what was going on, courtesy of the visions he'd received during his vigil, and that he had found a way to protect the dragons from further attacks. He was too tired to explain it all, and he should really speak to Wymack about it first in any case.

“Is he asleep again?” A very familiar voice said from behind him.

“No, just cuddly,” Matt chuckled.

Neil prised himself out of Dan’s grip and turned to smile tiredly at Andrew, whose eyes softened a bit at the sight of him. Andrew sat down with him and Neil promptly rested his head on Andrew’s shoulder and beamed sleepily as Andrew rested an arm around his back.

“They lost a lot of their hatchlings,” Neil told Andrew.

“I know, they told me.”

“Do you want to dance, Andrew?”

Andrew peered down at him suspiciously. “You asked me that already. Do *you* want to dance?”

“Maybe,” Neil yawned. “I’ve never done it before.”

Andrew sighed and rubbed over his back for a moment. “Alright. Alright, we’re dancing. Get up.”

They stumbled to their feet and Neil found himself steered onto the dancefloor while Matt and Dan whistled and laughed good-naturedly. Andrew positioned hands in various places and started leading Neil around, who kept stepping the wrong way and bumping into Andrew and the other people. Fortunately seeing as everyone else was at least three sheets to the wind, it didn’t look as terrible as it really was. Andrew soon lost patience with his clumsiness though and just pulled him into a loose embrace as the music changed to a slower beat. Neil could manage that just fine, as they held each other and swayed vaguely from one foot to the other and back again.

“Are you enjoying dancing?” Andrew said with a long-suffering sigh that couldn’t mask the affection underpinning his words.

“Very much,” Neil said honestly and leaned his cheek against Andrew’s with a small sigh.

“Well,” Andrew mumbled, “good then.”

Neil hummed and was happy to be held, but soon felt his exhaustion come over him again in dizzying waves.

“Andrew?” he said weakly. “I think I should lie down.”

Andrew didn’t even reply. He simply put an arm around Neil’s waist, looped an arm over his shoulders, and towed him off to their room. Neil could barely walk, but he recognised Andrew gently undressing him and settling into bed beside him.

“You don’t have to stay if you want to go back,” Neil mumbled as he fought to stay conscious.

“Nonsense,” Andrew said and threaded his hands through Neil’s hair. “I’m staying.”

Neil turned into his hands and let sleep claim him utterly.

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It took a few days for the celebration of the wedding to burn out and for the guests to sober up; even those who didn't know or particularly like the happy couple, as they were too sensible and earthy a people to miss an opportunity for a proper party with lots of food and drink on offer.

Once everyone's headaches had subsided and the garlands had been taken down, Wymack counted heads to confirm all the flocks had been gathered off the plains, and yelled at the top of his lungs for everyone to "get their asses in here for a damn muster already". Neil rather approved of his direct approach to the matter, and took a seat next to Andrew as they filed inside.

Wymack called the meeting to order by virtue of banging his fist on the table until everyone was quiet and settled, then perched on top of the table with his feet on the seating bench. Abby rolled her eyes, but he didn't appear to see. Betsy reached into Abby's lap and squeezed her hand, and the two women shared a fond, exasperated smile.

"Right. First off, greetings all. Hope you all had a real nice jaunt out here because the holiday period is now officially over," Wymack said. There were a few rueful laughs, but otherwise the room was grim and fixed on his words. "I've talked to a couple of you individually, but I want us all to share information now about the state of our herds, especially the success of this nesting season. Don't be shy about the numbers either – I want to know exactly how many dragons we've lost in the past year and a half or so, and how many we think might be due to this... plague, or attack, or whatever we should call it. Sing out and be honest, and no one will judge you for being unable to save them all."

Wymack leaned back with a nod and gestured for one of the older dragon wranglers to start speaking. Neil listened attentively as each herd master or mistress detailed their losses, and the circumstances of each. It took several hours to get through everyone, but the room stayed focussed and became even grimmer with each new testimonial of death and suffering dragons. The pattern Neil had surmised became achingly clear; the youngest and most vulnerable of each herd were being systematically struck down by something that at first seemed like a natural illness or toxin. Not many died at first, so no great alarm was raised. As Dan had told him many months ago, these fluxes in population were as natural as the wind and sky, and no one had thought it particularly troubling that it was a slightly harder season. Then more started dropping quicker, regardless of whatever their herd master did to change their diet or location or nurse them back to health. The slightly older ones started becoming affected too. And then more and more began sickening, with no apparent onset of symptoms. They had seen scale-rot plagues, rabid infections, severe poisoning from sewage-corrupted water sources, lung sicknesses and many other types of illness come and go through the dragonlands at one time or another, but no one had ever seen anything like this. The dragons simply seemed to weaken and die with no cause.

One of the very oldest and most experienced herders put forth the suggestion there was some sort of parasite infection or cancer eating them away at the inside, and Neil was quietly impressed by his reasoning, and how close it was to what he had experienced. The man had to admit though, when he had examined the bodies of his own dead flock, he had found no known indicators of parasites or the fleshy lumps that would prove his theory.

Once all had spoken, Wymack conferred with Abby and Betsy, who had been taking turns making notes of all the numbers and details. Everyone else took the opportunity to avail themselves of the table of drinks and small plates of bread and cold foods. Nicky, Erik and their kitchen helpers had been unobtrusively bringing into the room throughout the meeting. Neil brought a selection of food over to Andrew, Matt and Dan and the four of them shared tired, worried grimaces and morsels of food. From the perspective of each isolated herd it seemed bad enough. When it was all put

together like this, it began to take on an even more sinister cast than a simple plague. The timings of when the sicknesses began, when they accelerated among the population, and when they started becoming more aggressive and virulent, all matched up too tidily. It was looking more and more like something orchestrated with the purpose of decimating their herds.

And Neil, unfortunately, had quite a few ideas who was behind it.

Wymack banged his fist on the table again once he'd also had a quick bite to eat. He had the room's eyes in a heartbeat.

"Well, it sure isn't a pretty picture to look at," Wymack sighed. "Even if we lose no more dragons for the next two years, it'll take a very long time to get the herds back in their proper numbers. Betsy thinks maybe even a decade, if we're lucky. Sure as shit, this thing has hit us plenty hard already. Now the question is, how do we stop it getting any worse? And how do we find out the cause?"

Here he gestured for Neil to stand. Andrew pressed a hand to his back briefly, and Neil flashed him a quick smile as he stepped up to where Wymack was perched.

"I'm sure you've all met Neil by now. He's a witch who's been examining the problem among Andrew's herd this summer, and he has some things to say. Neil?"

Neil nodded to him and swallowed as he turned to face the room, and felt the heavy expectation of their gazes. All these toughened people, as hardy (and perhaps foolhardy sometimes) as dragons themselves to eke such a living in the sparse steppes of the dragonlands, were looking to him for answers. His nervous eyes caught on Dan, Matt and Andrew off to the side, and it settled his nerves a touch. He was also among friends.

"Yes. Greetings." He coughed and snuck another look at his friends to calm down some more before carrying on. "This sickness is a malicious attack through witchcraft. When I was examining Andrew's herd, I linked with an adolescent who was struggling against the sickness..."

He sketched in the salient details for the room, skipping over his near-death, and was pleasantly surprised by how they all seemed to take him at his word. He supposed that each and every one of them was more inclined towards paganism than organised religion, perhaps except Renee, and more comfortable with superstition and old magic than city-folk. He talked about developing the protective ward, and the attack from Jackson on the herd.

He took a quick sip of watered ale. "The witch who attacked us when he was unable to cause more wasting sickness was called Jackson. He's an associate of Lord Nathaniel Wesninski, also known as the Butcher. I know this because I – grew up in that house. Jackson was the first witch other than my mother to recognise my abilities, and for some time he tried to teach me what he knew."

Involuntarily, Neil shuddered as he remembered those cruel, bloody lessons in how to hurt someone from the inside, to make them scream in agony without ever touching their skin. Andrew shifted in his seat, drawing Neil out of his dark memories.

"If the Butcher and his people are behind this, it means the Moriyama kings are behind this. This sickness is a slow attack, for what means I don't exactly know, but I can guess at their motivations." Neil closed his eyes for a moment and took another breath. "During the autumn equinox, I entered a meditative trance to try and seek visions and understanding. And I saw the Butcher and his men slaughtering dragons all around, ensuring none of their enemies or

competitors could have the means to defend themselves when the Moriyama armies invade. They want to be the only ones with the power of dragons behind them, and they want to expand their lands. Believe me when I say, the stories about these people pale in comparison to the reality. It would unleash a horror on our lands you have no idea of, and would spell the end of the dragonlands and its flocks completely. They would rather see us all wiped out than have any chance of someone fighting back against them, even if they eventually run out of breeding stock themselves. They mean to conquer, and have the means to do so.”

The room was filled to the rafters with cloying silence and held breaths, invisible thoughts piling up on top of each other and bulging out the walls. Neil quietly stepped back to his place at Andrew’s side, and leaned into the arm that circled around his back.

“Well,” Wymack growled when the heavy air started to creak under its own weight, “That doesn’t sound good to me, I dunno about the rest of you jerks. Now, I suggest we—”

No one heard what he suggested. An almighty shudder rocked the earth under them, and with it an ear-deafening roar and clap of thunderous magic. A second later and enraged and pain-soaked dragon roars split the air once more as the humans scrambled to find their feet after being bucked and tossed there from the force of the quake.

“We’re under attack!” Wymack bellowed, grabbing a greataxe even as he struggled to stand on the shivering ground. “Everyone, to the dragons!”

They poured out of the hall in a stumbling mess of people and limbs and weapons, all heads swivelling to try and find the source of the attack. They didn’t have to look far – the sunken amphitheatre had been ringed by figures standing all around the lip of the bowl, looking down with magic in their hands.

Neil felt a slimy touch on his mind and clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle his panicked scream. *Why hello Nathaniel*, a sultry woman’s voice purred into his thoughts, overspilling with sadistic joy. *A little birdie told me you’d be here, and here you are. Your father misses you something awful, you know. He just can’t wait to get his hands on you. Neither can the rest of us.*

Speaking mind to mind, Neil didn’t need to imagine the horrific torture that would involve. Her thoughts supplied it all in a noxious burst that sent him collapsing to the ground again from the force of her sick glee.

*Get out of my head, Lola*, he yelled back and yanked up his mental walls and defences as high as they could go. She could no longer speak to him, but he felt the probing of her mind and its testing against his barriers. He gritted his teeth and pushed her back, back, *back*, until she became too distracted by something else to focus on him.

A ‘something else’ which proved to be lobbing balls of ever-burning flame down into the buildings of Wymack’s encampment with the rest of her team, and casting them at the dragons pouring from their caves in hordes to defend their flocks. The air filled with furious battle cries as the humans trapped down below surged up the paths to their attackers and the dragons spun up in huge flocks to attack. Fire was falling in sheets like a deadly rain, from dragon throats and witches alike, cascading in a livid mass into the sunken lagoon that Neil realised, too late, formed the perfect trap for just such an ambush.

He ran with the rest of them, torn between finding and protecting his people – who had all raced off immediately to their flocks and weapons, naturally – and going after the witches himself. He



looked around in a panic, trying to assess the situations as buildings tottered and started to collapse from the force of the earth moving under them; fortunately as they'd been built with dragons in mind, nothing was on fire; but people were plenty flammable, even if the buildings were not. Thinking fast and hating himself for it, Neil made a cold assessment of where he would be the most use.

So instead of rushing up with everyone else to attack the soldiers at the top of the bowl with a sword in hand and a battlecry on his lips, Neil ran for a sheltered cave and hid. He was panting from the exertion by the time he reached somewhere suitable, and sank into a trembling sit on the bare rock floor. He took a luxury of one slow breath to calm himself, then plunged his awareness into the earth around him.

He let go of his body, watching it sit lifelessly with vacant eyes rolled back in its head from somewhere within the rock, and raced up ephemeral through the layers of rock and cave and passageway separating him from the attacking force. He found their earth-drawn witches easily enough, and pulled on his own considerable wellspring of magic and the strength of the rock around him to send out a blast of magical force. The five men staggered and their focus slipped, and Neil yanked control from them. The earth stopped quaking and the caves that were threatening to collapse on top of their dragon occupants steadied a little. Neil diverted a flash of magic to shore up the worst cracks and stop an awful chain-reaction of collapses throughout the honeycomb structure that impended. With another snap of his mind, he sent the earth witches flying backwards and burned a hex into the air around them to drain their access to magic and prevent them moving or doing anything but breathe.

The snarls and cries of the fighting and injured and dying wavered and echoed strangely through Neil's awareness, bodiless as it was, but it menaced him into sweeping rapidly through the area with all his senses and force of concentration. He could feel a stampede of feet pressing on his awareness, and magic spitting and sparking all around him as the humans and dragons waged battle on each other. And one after another, dragons swooped down to attack and were caught in barbed nets, stabbed with spears, slashed with blades, shot full of arrows, and caustic liquids flung up to burn horribly through their wing membranes. Their screams and plummeting bodies sent ripples of grief and pain tearing through Neil's soul, and he searched with desperate vigour to locate the people responsible, and the 'bomb' witches under Lola's command.

When he found them, he wasted no time and threw all his strength and ability into the plants and rocks surrounding them. The landscape came alive through him, and it was *angry*. Rocks exploded up from the earth to crash onto attacking soldiers, the earth sank and took men with it to hold them in sickly ooze for other fighters to dispatch, vines and grasses and shrubs and even tiny flowers grew massive and thrashed thorns and razor-sharp leaves at the interlopers in their midst. The land fought back against the attack, but as hard as Neil tried and as many soldiers as he managed to delay, distract or demolish himself, there were more and more bodies on piling up. The weight of so many massive, still-smoking bodies piling on the earth that made Neil's consciousness shriek in panic. So many dragons were dying, and he knew that was the exact plan.

With a silent roar of intent, he buckled the land under the attackers' feet and sent it rippling in a rolling wave of rock-laden earth, knocking them to the ground where they were easier prey for the defending dragon herders and their avenging flocks, and crushing many more beneath the force of it besides. Neil could sense death all around him, death of his inability to stop and death of his own design, and couldn't spare a moment to be horrified by the lengths he found he was willing to go. But he went to those lengths, and kept pushing until the attackers were forced to retreat in their dwindling numbers, to regroup with their remaining witches.

Neil couldn't tell what happened then, other than a searing flash of magic so strong it knocked his awareness back into his body with a sick lurch. When he awoke gasping in his body, he tried sensing out the attackers again, but could find no trace of them other than the carnage they had left along with their dead. They had vanished, somehow.

Then, a more familiar voice crashed against his mind. *Neil!*

*Andrew, what's wrong?* Neil sprang dizzily to his feet and began to run, uncaring of the still-trembling earth under his feet and making his way unerringly through the cave system he now knew as intimately as his own breath, up to the surface of the plateau.

Andrew couldn't respond in words, his mind spinning with adrenaline and grief and rage. Through the muddle, Neil picked out an image: the bronze matriarch, laid down on the ground, labouring for breath and blood spreading beneath her in a ferrous pool.

He pushed his scrambled body to run faster, faster, until he burst up like a rabbit from its flooding warren and sprinted over the impromptu battlefield towards Andrew. Andrew was at her side, covered in her blood, his own, that of his enemies – probably all three. He looked almost deranged as he frantically dug into the wound in her ribcage to try and dislodge the gigantic barbed spearhead lodged inside her, making animal cries of grief and horror.

*Heal her!* Andrew yelled as Neil skidded to a stop beside him in the spreading slick of blood.

Neil caught hold of Andrew's bloody hands and held them tightly, forcing Andrew to look at him. "Andrew, I need you to be calm for a moment. Breathe with me, like we practised."

Andrew looked agonised at the thought of spending one second not trying to save the life of the dragon who may as well have been a mother to him, but forced himself to breathe and steady himself a little.

*I can't save her on my own, I'm too tired from the fight,* Neil said gently. *I'll need your help.*

*How?* Andrew asked.

*When you pull out the spearhead, I'll need to use your strength to bolster my own to heal the wounds. You'll need to call up your magic like we've been practising, as much as you can bear, and give it to me as I heal her. You did it once before, when I was linked to the dying adolescent. You can do it again, especially now you know how.*

Their mental conversation had taken less than a second, but Andrew still pulled at the bit of the delay. *Yes, you can take it all. I'll give you all my power, just save her!*

*I'll do everything I can, I promise you,* Neil replied.

Andrew gave a grim nod, and turned to the wounded dragon before them. On a whispered count to three, he summoned all his strength and hauled back on the spearhead, shouting with the effort as he dragged it from her flesh. As soon as it was clear of the wound, he grabbed Neil's offered hand in both his own and called up his magic in a heartbeat, sending it coursing into Neil.

In a second, Neil felt as fresh as if he'd slept for a week, and could pull the stars from the sky if he desired. Quashing that dizzy rush, he laid his other hand on the dragon's heaving side and plunged deep into her body. He raced through her, finding the many injuries both grave and minor, then

turned back to the major bleeding in her chest cavity caused by the spear. With Andrew's smoky power on his tongue and his own trickling like cold water on his limbs, he bent all his will to stopping the blood from filling her lungs or the space around her organs and drained it back into her body. Once that was done, he used sheer magic to patch the wounds in shimmering force. He forced broken bones back into alignment with the touch of his will, diverted blood to flow through its proper passages on a thought, soared through her body to burn out infection without breaking a sweat.

He swooped and dove into her other injuries, mending them with the expertise of his own knowledge and the blunt force of Andrew's raw magic enabling it all, making it all happen so fast Neil was almost frightened by how easy it was, how easy it would be to do *anything* with Andrew's power.

He pulled himself back to task and concentrated on making sure all the matriarch's injuries were safe and on their way to healed, forcibly scarring over the places he couldn't finesse. Then, almost regretfully, he pulled back from her and towards his own body again.

Andrew was still pushing magic at him at a frightful rate, desperate and losing control of the flow.

*You can stop*, Neil whispered gently. *We're done, she's safe.*

Andrew again couldn't reply in words, but Neil caught a wave of fear as he tried to stop spilling magic and found it out of his control. Neil gritted his teeth and yanked up his magical barriers again, breaking all contact between them strongly enough to send him staggering. The connection broke, and the magic poured back into Andrew with enough force to knock him flat on his back. But he was safe, and his own natural barriers asserted themselves with the contact broken.

Neil knelt creakily at his side, rendered bone-weary from the appalling amount of magic he had burned in such a short time. "Andrew?" he croaked.

Andrew groaned and flailed himself upright, looking grey of skin and wild around the eyes. An enquiring snort above their heads made him turn, and he released a pure cry of relief so bright and strong Neil's eyes stung. He flung his arms around the matriarch's neck and held her tightly as she crooned and blew smoke at him, confused why he was so upset, trying to comfort him. She didn't seem to understand that the blood around her was her own, that she had so very nearly died. Andrew clutched her tight, trembling with stress and shock.

Neil sank wearily onto the ichor-stained grass and looked around at the sad carnage of dragons and humans alike. So many dead, in such a short time. And for what? For his father to have even less opposition as he wreaked havoc on the world?

No, Neil decided with a quiet fury. He had run away long enough, too afraid to think of anything but his own survival.

His father's butchery was an affront to nature and decency alike. An affront perhaps only a witch formerly called Nathaniel had a chance of ending once and for all.

## Chapter 5

Warnings: battles, violence, death, torture comparable to the Binghamton scenes with Lola, animal cruelty, grief, emotional trauma.

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Neil carefully shimmied up the edge of the rocky hillock and peeked his eyes out over the side of the top, laying down against the other side of the rock to hide himself from the people he was spying upon. He lay perfectly still and covered in dirt, dust and the occasional branch, his skin disguised with mud and hair slicked down with some more mud. He had been thinking longingly of Wymack's sauna ever since they left the encampment the previous month, especially as autumn was settling into its stride and the weather was turning from consistently bright and hot to something windier and cloudier, with angry little storm clouds whizzing along overhead if you were lucky, or deciding to keep you company if you were not so lucky.

The sight that necessitated such caution and kept him at his post for several hours without moving other than to blink or breathe, was an encampment in the foothills below the mountain pass on the far side of Andrew's dragons' nesting territory. This was no little fayre or market – this was an army.

Militarily precise rows upon rows of tents stretched out over the sprawling valleys below the mountains, crowding around streams and rivers that flowed in much more polluted shades after passing through the army. There were no flags flown on any of the tents, even the command tents in the centre of the camp, but Neil's sharp eyes had spotted several officer-looking-types wearing red and black insignia on their chests and arms over blank military dress to show their rank. And Neil recognised those markings all too well as Moriyama. Even more uneasily familiar were the ones walking about with the blood-red handprint of the Butcher's men on their uniform.

Neil was no military tactician, but he was smart enough to know that an army camped just outside of your border was almost never an indicator of peace and harmony in the region. Grimly, he watched the soldiers go about the daily business of maintaining their camp and drilling in war techniques, while the officers presumably either debated tactics or did whatever it was cruel men in power liked to do when otherwise unoccupied. If they were anything like his father, they were probably getting in a light bit of blood sport before lunch or tormenting the ranks of camp followers for the pleasure of seeing them scream and beg for mercy.

He hadn't seen anyone he recognised from his father's inner circle yet, but he was carefully memorising the main faces and locations of the most important-seeming people. He also watched their drills, though he knew he would be unable to make sense of it or come up with any meaningful strategies to help anyone. It just seemed like the proper thing to do when spying on an enemy camp, and maybe someone else would be able to use it better.

Neil was also watching the natural surrounds of the camp, eyeing up the hills, streams, forests and faint smear of farmland just beyond his sight on the far side of the camp. He was thinking partly about how this army was feeding and supplying itself, and partly about the cabal of witches he knew would be accompanying it. They would need space to practise their battle tactics, and he thought he spotted a likely area they might use. It was an opening almost sheltered by trees that buffeted in the strong winds coming off the mountains, but had a large riverlet flowing through it

and plenty of rock and earth; good sources of power for witches drawn from any source, be it earth, water or wind. Fire witches would be able to light bonfires and use those as sources, too.

It became both easier and harder to spy on the camp as evening drew in and the light began to fade. Easier, as they started lighting regular cook fires every couple of tents so it was easier to estimate numbers; harder, as he could see much less of what they were doing. As twilight eased its way over the land, Neil's tired eyes caught on furtive movement much further down the slope. He squinted to try and see what it was, but could only make out some grey shapes creeping towards the outskirts of the camp. He watched the animals – they were too long and low to the ground to be humans – stalk the pens of cattle and livestock that had been driven along with the army to feed the hundreds of soldiers. Neil strained his eyes and ears, but couldn't make anything out until a shout of alarm went up in the camp, torches were grabbed and soldiers nearby hurried to the pens. The dark shapes darted away and scampered up towards the mountains, several dragging haunches of meat and dangling limbs from their powerful jaws. Neil smiled to himself as they sang triumphantly into the night; he had always had a bit of a soft spot for wolves, as the creatures responded to his mother like foxes did to him. And anything to inconvenience that army was alright in his book.

He glanced up at the darkling sky and sighed. Time to head back to his own camp before he lost the light completely, and had to stumble back in the dark alone.

He slithered quietly back down the hillock until he was sure he was well out of any sentry's bowsight, then graduated to a hunched-over walk as he made his way higher up into the mountain pass, and along the many twisting and confounding paths and almost-sheer rock faces that led to his camp.

When he made it there, night had fallen fully and someone had gotten a small fire going to cook dinner; it was hunkered in a pit in the earth, and screened all about with rocks so the flickering light wouldn't catch attention. They were careful only to use extremely dry wood that would let off as little smoke as possible, too. They had no intention of being found up here, especially as the army below outnumbered them by several hundred.

Andrew looked up from where he had been sitting guard at the mouth of the cave, naked sword in hand until he recognised that the mud-caked wretch approaching was, in fact, his lover.

Neil sank onto the ground next to him with a weary sigh.

"No change?" Andrew asked in a soft voice. They were always speaking in hushed voices now, in case the sound carried too far.

"No change," Neil said. "No signs of them moving out. Just more drilling and practising. I think I've figured out where the witches are practising, though."

"That's good." Andrew leaned in, paused, swiped a patch on Neil's cheek clean of mud and kissed him very precisely on the clean spot. "Renee said dinner will be ready soon, if you want to wash."

"Renee is cooking?" Neil asked before he could catch himself. Andrew gave him a *look*, and Neil sighed again and raised his hands in apology. He still couldn't warm to the strange priestess or understand why Andrew seemed to regard her as a friend, and couldn't shake his deeply-ingrained suspicions that she must be working some kind of angle, or waiting to poison them all or something. Though he had to admit, Renee's cooking was the best of anyone else's. At least if she were to poison them, they'd have a tasty meal in the process. Which was more than could be said for Neil's flavourless but functional meals, Andrew's dense stews that grew old very quickly,

Matt's bread and roasted meat specialties, Dan's spiced vegetable pots, Allison's oddly-combined ingredients that always tasted sweet somehow, or Kevin's food that was all red meat and protein as if he forgot he was feeding humans, and not dragons.

Andrew kissed the tiny clean part of Neill's cheek again, then gently pushed him away with a wrinkle of his nose. "You smell awful."

"I've been lying in mud all day, what do you expect?" Neil smiled back. "Here's a thought though – if I wash now, I'll let you braid my hair back up."

Andrew's eyes gleamed in the dark before he could disguise his pleasure at the thought, and Neil gave him a smug look. "That's what I thought."

As he got up to go find the buckets of water they'd drawn up earlier from the streams to use for bathing, he felt a strong hand latch onto his backside and give it a firm, knowing pat. Despite himself, Neil almost stumbled in surprise. Andrew's chuckle was almost too low to be heard, more felt through the soles of his boots, but it cheered Neil anyway. He idly swatted Andrew's hand away and made his exit in as dignified a manner as possible.

He passed the fire and the mouth of the sheltered cave on his way, and nodded politely to his camp-mates. Renee was the only one who smiled up at him from where she was stirring the pot on the tiny fire, and Neil walked on quickly. They made an odd camp of people, but they were who had seemed best suited for this spying and information-gathering mission for Wymack and the other dragon herders. Neil, to cover the magical side of any encounters. Kevin for the dragon knowledge, as well as Andrew, Matt and Dan, who could also cover the physical side of any skirmish. Allison was there for that too, and something had been mentioned about her knowing how nobles behaved. Neil could have pointed out that he knew that too, but was loathe to reveal his paternity. As far as everyone but Andrew knew, he had grown up an unfortunate peasant-come-serving boy in the Wesninski manor, and Neil vastly preferred that version of events. He still didn't really know what Renee was there for, unless it was to provide spiritual support (to a bunch of pagans who did not share her faith) and pray for help if they got captured.

He snorted to himself at that notion and settled down by the stream to strip off his filthy clothes and clean the muck out of his everywhere. By the time he was done, he was utterly famished. He wrung water out of his long, curling hair and headed back towards the camp, and the admittedly excellent smells coming from Renee's cookpot.

The rest of camp was huddled there too, waiting like hawks for her to announce it was finished cooking as she tasted a small mouthful. When she smiled and hummed, everyone shuffled a bit closer with their bowls. Renee *tsked* good-naturedly at them and dutifully filled the bowls pushed her way. Neil noticed she gave a little extra half spoonful to Allison, but kept that to himself. Andrew did the same for him when Andrew was cooking, so he couldn't exactly make a deal of it without coming off as an uptight hypocrite. The seven of them ate in contented silence; if nothing else, more than a month in each other's company had accustomed them to each other's quirks and annoyances, even if they didn't always mesh well all the time. Meaning that Kevin could piss off everyone but Renee with just a few words, Allison couldn't let any comment lie without shooting back a mouth of vitriol, Matt and Andrew seemed to have some kind of unspoken pact to outdo each other at any petty task, and Dan was often forced to play mother-come-drill sergeant to the bickering camp when Renee's sweetness couldn't mediate effectively.

When they were all full, Matt elected to wash up the cooking things by the stream, and the rest of them settled around the fire to think and perhaps talk. Neil briefed the others on what he had seen during his shift, and gave Dan the directions to watch the possible witch camp on her shift the next day. With that paltry news well and chewed over until even the bones had lost their appeal, they settled into quiet. There hadn't been an argument in hours, and they all seemed keen to keep it that way. Neil wasn't all that surprised by the taciturn and high-temperature mood swings in the camp; they had all chosen a life in the dragonlands for their own reasons, but the common thread was that they didn't mix well in polite society, and chafed at normal socialisation. They had all run through their polite chit-chat material in the first week, so the quiet was becoming more common.

It was peaceful, Neil reflected as he handed Andrew a comb and shuffled closer to the fire. He closed his eyes and smiled blissfully as Andrew began to carefully, gently, comb the damp knots out of Neil's hair and turn it into a shimmering, soft wave of auburn curls like his own little fire to handle. This was becoming somewhat of a routine for them, and Neil enjoyed it very much. When his hair was combed, Andrew would run it through his hands a while and slowly braid it up around his head, where the length wouldn't be a liability. It seemed to calm Andrew as much as it calmed Neil. They had gotten some looks of bafflement from Kevin, Dan and Matt in particular for such domesticity, but they seemed bored of teasing them about their intimacy and gentleness with each other, thankfully.

Neil had noticed that each time they did it, their magic seemed to well up and shift between them like a slow tide, not quite sharing power but not quite separate, either. Neil didn't know what that meant at all, but if nothing else it helped him feel even closer to Andrew. It was hardly a priority when they were spying on an enemy army, so Neil had relegated it with all the other things to his mental pile of things he couldn't deal with yet.

Once his hair was dry and braided up out of the way, Neil leaned back into Andrew's chest with a quiet sigh, and felt arms wrap securely around him as Andrew perched his chin on Neil's shoulder and held him close. They hadn't quite put a name to what they were to each other, beyond those kiss-smears and confessions, but that was alright with Neil. He was more than happy to let this happen, and give comfort and be comforted in return; and this time, not to have to pretend it was just about convenience and physical want. That it was drawn from genuine feeling, and deep affection. That tender knowledge was worth more to him than any arbitrary declaration of closeness, and knew Andrew felt similarly. Once they had started travelling with the others and it became really obvious just how close they were (some oblivious folk like Kevin had been less than attentive while they were at Wymack's camp, somehow), they had gotten a few pointed questions from the others. But their mutual reticence on the subject and equally mutual need to hold and soothe each other seemed to give the others all the answers they wanted, as they had stopped asking a while ago. Neil knew that Dan and Matt especially didn't exactly approve, as they felt very protective of him and had never really got on with Andrew anyway, or understood their casual relationship before Neil came out to the dragonlands. But they could think what they liked; though he cared for them as his closest friends, this was a choice they had no say over, and he had quite firmly made up his mind.

The others settled down in variously similar states of ease; Dan and Matt were mending and darning clothes for themselves and everyone else, Dan's legs casually strewn across Matt's lap under the heap of clothing; Renee was quietly telling Allison what her faith thought about the creation of the mountains and their importance in the balance of all things (Neil had noticed several times her faith seemed tinged with distinct flavours of paganism, and though he was curious as to why, he was petty enough not to ask out of sheer dislike of her), while Allison watched Renee's expression with quiet intensity. Kevin had taken over guard duty as he did most nights when he was

left as the sole person without another to sidle close to, but he seemed content in it and was amusing himself by tallying up inventory of their supplies and writing notes on their observations of the camp to date.

*Do you want to meditate tonight?* Andrew asked silently, murmuring into Neil's mind.

Neil smiled and rested his hands over Andrew's. *Not tonight, I'm too tired,* he replied. *Don't let that stop you, if you want to. Just be careful not to call any magic up without me around to guide you.*

*Obviously,* Andrew said, with many thoughts colouring his tone. *I might do the breathing one, for a while. It's relaxing.*

*And this isn't?* Neil teased him gently, letting the warmth of his affection bleed through the mental connection too. In reply, Andrew kissed the side of his jaw and pulled him a little closer. *I'm glad you're enjoying the exercises, Andrew.*

*They're useful,* Andrew replied, too casually. Ever since their combined power had saved the life of his beloved flock matriarch, his attitude towards learning more about his own magic had undergone a noticeable shift. He was less focussed on simply obtaining basic control of the power, and more interested in the theoreticals and principles of magic, and healing in particular. Again, Neil wasn't terribly surprised by this development. Ever since he had discovered Andrew had magic, he'd felt Andrew would want to use it to protect his winged family. He was no longer sure if that had been his prescience talking, or simply his extensive knowledge of the man.

They had been observing the Moriyama army for a few days now, and seemed to have settled into a routine for their days. However cosy their little camp could be when everyone was in an agreeable mood, none of them could ignore the reason they were there: to try and find any information on when the army would invade through the pass, what form it would take, and whether there would be any possibility of military help from the 'civilised' lowlanders, as it was equally possible they would simply pay the Moriyama kings a tithe of gratitude for not venturing further south, and allow them the dragonlands as new stomping grounds.

"We aren't learning enough," Kevin huffed one night a few weeks into the job, having grown increasingly frustrated with their lack of progress.

"My plan remains as the best one we have—" Neil started, for the hundredth time.

"No," everyone else chorused, for the hundredth time.

"I'll recognise the officers in the chain of command," Neil said, yet again. "I can get close to them disguised as a soldier. I can try and eavesdrop their meetings and steal their correspondence. We could learn so much about their plans with just a few hours of infiltration."

"Neil, you are not going to walk into that camp," Andrew beat everyone else to the punch, with real worry tightening his eyes and mouth. "They're just as likely to recognise you too, and never let you go. We're not risking that."

Neil started to protest and point out yet *again* why the benefits outweighed the risks, when Andrew tried a new tactic and took both of Neil's hands gently in his own. His thumbs traced light sweeps over Neil's palms, and he spoke quietly. "Neil, I'm asking you not to get yourself killed."



Neil's protests died in his mouth and he had to look away from the quiet emotion in Andrew's eyes. Andrew could recognise his acquiescence, and kissed his palms in thanks.

Kevin rolled his eyes at their antics. "Neil's plan is still shit, but at least it's *something*. We can't stay holed up here forever, or they'll march out from under us and our information will have been of no use to anyone."

"As much as I hate to agree with Kevin," Allison sighed, "I agree."

"There's not much point us sneaking into the camp without Neil though," Matt frowned, "Seeing as he's the one who would recognise these people and would best understand what they're planning."

Renee abruptly turned her sharp gaze to Neil, a question in her thoughtful expression. "You said that your mother escaped with you when you were young, and the two of you avoided re-capture ever since."

"Yes," Neil said slowly.

"Forgive my saying, Neil, but you have quite a striking appearance," Renee said, and gestured to his hair and eyes in particular with a small smile. "A woman and child of such colouring would be easily tracked. You must have disguised yourselves sufficiently to pass beneath notice. Do you remember how you did so?"

Neil swallowed the sudden rush of bile in his throat, and got to his feet. Without a word, he walked briskly away from the surprised campfire and into the comforting, velvety dark of the twisting rock passages and scrubby underbrush. He wrapped his arms tightly around his chest as he sought out a place of solitude, of nature. Somewhere comforting. He found it in a thicket of aromatic heather, clustered together in what would be the sole patch of sunlight in an otherwise occluded and overshadowed passage. He sank down into a meditative position with relief and rested his hands on the calming plants.

There was a tentative brush against his mind – Andrew, seeking permission to talk. Neil gently increased his barriers and pushed back just a little, like a hand on a chest to stop forward progress. Andrew seemed to understand, and his mental presence retreated once more, though the touch left a warmth and comfort like a real, physical touch would. Neil took a slow breath to enjoy the sensation a moment, then concentrated on just feeling the earth around him, the sky above, and the world spiralling on its way all about.

Quiet footsteps intruded some time later, and Neil opened his eyes. He thought at first it might be Andrew, but when he reached out an inquisitive thought, he had a brief impression of firelight and Renee's voice, and knew Andrew must be back at the camp. So instead he waited for the newcomer to show themselves, if they wanted, and was only mildly surprised when he realised that Dan had come looking for him.

She sat down beside him with a friendly smile and trailed her fingers over the plants surrounding them. "You've been gone a while," she commented in vague explanation and question all rolled into one.

"I needed some space," Neil shrugged with one shoulder.

Dan peered at him in the darkness. "What's on your mind, Neil?"

Neil looked away and knotted his hands in the fall of his hair, combing through it in an anxious habit he'd picked up sometime during their stay at the camp, with having it long and loose for a change. It also reminded him of Andrew gently untangling it for him, and the sensation was soothing.

"When I buried my mother's body," he began, shaky and strained, "I promised myself to stop living like we had been. It hadn't done her any good in the end, just stretched out the period of waiting between escape and death and made her a wreck of a person, and changed her into someone as harsh and cruel as the people we were running from. We'd disguised ourselves so many times, been so many different people for too long, I think she forgot who she was before all of it. I didn't recognise her as my mother, by the end. She was just another hard person, with hard hands."

Dan made a low sound of mingled outrage and sympathy, and gently wrapped her arms around Neil and held him close.

He swallowed and gathered up his words carefully, trusting her not to let them fall out of his grasp to spill ugly and sharp on the ground either.

"I've worked hard to learn how it feels to be *myself*, how it feels to be secure in my own skin," he said. "To learn who Neil is, who I've become. I don't want to lose that again. I don't want to forget."

Proving his trust in her to be absolutely correct, Dan let his words sit on the air between them for the space of a few breaths, then gently pulled Neil's head to rest on her shoulder and held him close and safe in her arms.

"We won't let you forget," she promised softly. "We all carry little pieces of you in our hearts, we'll keep them safe. And we'll keep you safe."

She rocked him lightly in her arms, a slow back and forth like a small child, and he relaxed into her embrace gladly. If a few tears slid down his cheeks to wet her shoulder, she didn't seem to care.

"No one's suggesting you craft a whole new person to be just for this mission," she said after a little while of this. "Maybe just dyeing your hair and disguising your facial features a little. Nothing long term, nothing serious. We should all probably do the same, just in case. If I'm understanding Renee's plan, and I think I am, she's going to suggest we all disguise ourselves as soldiers and try to infiltrate the camp. We'd cover more ground as a large group."

"I still don't like the idea of changing myself again," Neil muttered.

Dan squeezed him firmly, but carefully, in her burly arms and gave his hair a ruffle. "Priorities, Neil. Sneaking into an enemy army camp and hoping to sneak back out again alive and unharmed, with useful information tucked into our hats, is by far the riskier part of the plan."

Neil had to acknowledge her point, and sighed out the last breaths of his anxiety and uneasiness until his lungs were clear of the fog. Dan gently patted his head in praise when he had let the last of it go.

"Now I've got you alone, there *is* something I've been meaning to ask you," Dan said with a tone of mischief.

"Oh?" Neil smiled.

“What the *hell* is going on with you and Andrew?”

Neil snorted inelegantly into her shoulder and swallowed down a few bubbles of laughter. “Oh, you know. The usual birds-and-bees stuff.”

Dan chuckled and tugged at his hair. “Really, Neil. I thought you were just fucking, not... getting all soft and tender and cuddling close at night. What gives?”

Neil shrugged and finger-combed his hair out of her hands, collecting it in his own instead as he rested against her. “What comes naturally, I suppose. Don’t we all want comfort?”

“Or love?” She suggested, feather-delicate.

Neil didn’t reply, occupying himself with combing through his hair and watching the wind sway through the grasses and shrubs surrounding them.

“Oh Neil,” Dan sighed and kissed the top of his head. “Just be careful.”

“I won’t get hurt,” Neil said, with a conviction that was as sure as his own heartbeat, and as constant as the sun.

“Okay,” Dan said quietly. “And if you do somehow get hurt... I’ll challenge the fucker to a fight for your honour.”

“I appreciate the contingency plan,” Neil smiled, “But I really don’t think it’ll be necessary.”

Dan gave a good-natured grumble and hauled them both to their feet. “Come on, let’s join the others. It’s getting late, and I want to hear Renee’s plan before we go to sleep.”

She led the way back towards the camp, holding Neil’s hand comfortingly tightly in her own, and sat down with him beside the campfire. “Now,” she said in a business-like manner, holding Neil’s hand in both her own even as Andrew snaked an arm around his waist to help hold him together, “Let’s talk disguises.”

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It took them a few days to gather themselves in readiness for their infiltration of the camp sitting below them on the other side of the pass, and Neil didn’t feel any more ready on the final night before it than he had the first time Renee spoke of her modifications to his plan. He could see the logic behind it very well – was almost annoyed by how much more sensible it would be to do it her way instead of his own – but he was still greatly apprehensive about the disguises. Not to mention the chances of running across more people in his father’s employ. Or perhaps even the man himself.

Suffice to say, Neil had not been sleeping well.

On the night before the infiltration, Neil jolted himself from sleep yet again and pressed a hand over his face, silently begging for his mind to give it a rest and allow him to sleep a full night through. Andrew shifted his arm around Neil’s back in his sleep, instinctively pulling him closer. Normally it would have soothed and charmed Neil greatly to know Andrew felt so soothed by him in turn to want him closer, even during his vulnerable sleep when he couldn’t defend himself or act with anything other than unconscious reason. But tonight the nightmares had put an anxious tremble in his legs and a twitching in his limbs that wouldn’t desist, so Neil gently untangled

himself from Andrew's embrace and heaping of blankets, and wriggled his way out into the frigid night air. Andrew woke from the movement, but Neil just gave a tired smile and whispered for him to go back to sleep. Andrew grunted something under his breath and fell back to slumber almost immediately, and Neil smoothed the blanket back under his chin.

He pulled a spare blanket around his shoulders to ward off the worst of the cloudless night's chill, and was about to set off for a quick run through the night to settle his nerves, when Renee's silhouette at the edge of the cave startled him. Her pale hair shone bone-white and eerie in the starlight, and Neil's shiver was not entirely due to the cold.

She turned at the sound of his shufflings, and gestured for him to join her on watch. Thinking he would be unavoidably rude to ignore her and just walk past – and he was wary enough of her strangeness not to want to provoke an unpleasant response – he therefore did the most sensible and off-putting thing, and took a seat beside her.

"You seem troubled," she observed in a voice soft enough not to wake the rest of their camp.

Neil gave her what he thought was a suitably dry look. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

Rather than take offense at his tone, she simply smiled and raised her fingertips to brush over a beaded necklace she was wearing, trickling her fingers over the varicoloured glass beads and carved stone pendants suspended from it at each inch. "I take it you don't want to tell me what is bothering you."

"Indeed."

"That's alright," she said lightly. "But if you don't mind answering one different question for me?"

Neil raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Why do you dislike me so?" She asked, apparently full of pure confusion and possibly a hint of reproach. "I've been nothing but kind and welcoming to you. Is there something I've done to upset you, other than a difference in beliefs? I'd hope you're not still angry over that black eye business."

Neil regarded her carefully, then sighed out a long breath through his nose. "You are a contradiction, and my instincts tell me you're dangerous. You're a priestess with knife scars and a habit of fist fighting. You belong to a faith that decries sin and heresy, yet you sleep with both Allison and Seth and tried to befriend a *witch* of the pagan faith. You smile sweetly and seem so very nice, but that doesn't convince me there isn't more beneath this surface layer you present so carefully. I don't know who you are under it, or why I should trust that person when you've gone to so much trouble to hide her. Does that answer your question?"

True to form, she didn't get upset at his half-accusations. She merely nodded a little sadly and hummed to herself while she formulated her answer. "I can certainly understand why you'd feel that way," she replied, "But I wish you'd simply asked me earlier, rather than letting suspicion cloud your opinion of me."

Neil raised a sceptical eyebrow, and she smiled at him.

"I am more than what I appear to be, that's true," she said, "But I find that's true of everyone at one point or another in our lives. You are more than the child of a terrifying household, are you not?"

Renee gave him an arch look, and he had to glance away uncomfortably. He had the awful suspicion she knew he was a Wesninski in more than proximity during his childhood.

“We all have a past and actions we would rather grow away from,” Renee said. “I grew up in a slum, to a broken home and a violent necessity. I ran with a gang for many years as a young girl, and if I hadn’t got out of that life I would probably be the head of the organisation that took me in, by now. I would probably be as cruel and violent as the people who tutored me in that life, too. And I likely would not have regretted those actions, however bloody and awful they may have been, as long as my own comfort was secure.” She rubbed a little harder over her necklace and Neil realised it must be some kind of prayer focus. “I was fortunate in that a wealthy woman of the town took pity on me when she caught me attempting to steal her jewellery, rather than calling in the constabulary. She offered to show me a better way to live, and took me in as her daughter. She gave me a new life, a new perspective on morality, and opened the doors of faith to me. She taught me how to try to be a good person. And I try every day to honour her generosity and wisdom by reaching out to others in kindness too, and to help others struggling in the dark to find the light. Does that answer *your* question, Neil?”

Neil had to stare at the ground, shamefaced. He could understand very well the need to reinvent oneself away from the violence of the beginnings, and to tread a new path. She had every right to her secrets and her journey, and he was ashamed of himself for judging her so harshly when he had done nearly the same things.

“I’m sorry,” he said once he had composed himself a little.

“It’s alright,” she said gently, and lightly patted his hand. “That’s the thing about forgiveness, it can be earned again and again. I’m not upset you mistrusted me; I’m sure you’ve had every reason to need to be wary of people who could cause you harm. Perhaps we should start anew.”

“Perhaps,” he smiled tentatively. “Hello. I’m Neil, and I tend to jump to conclusions and get too protective of my friends.”

She laughed softly and shook his hand. “Good to meet you, Neil.”

He grinned back at her and settled a little more comfortably at her side, watching the stars dance above them. They began to chat away the night, and Neil found her surprisingly good company now the air had been cleared. He even found, much to his surprise, that it settled the anxious restlessness in his body in the wake of his nightmares, and after a few hours he was able to crawl back into Andrew’s arms and finish out the night peacefully.

In the morning, they geared up and moved out.

They had each disguised their natural looks to some degree, Neil most especially, so they would resemble common soldiers more than wildfolk. They crept down the pass in the darkness of that period between night and dawn, and split off into their prearranged groupings. Just before they all parted ways, Andrew caught Neil’s wrist and pulled him aside, while the others pretended not to notice.

“It’ll be alright,” he said in a low voice, and cupped Neil’s cheek in his hand. “Meet you back at camp.”

Neil managed a smile for him, even though he looked so strange with his black-dyed hair and beard and smudges of face paints to alter the apparent shape of his face. “That’s a promise,” Neil replied,

and secreted a kiss into his keeping. Andrew rubbed his thumb gently over Neil's jaw in reply (also being careful not to mess his disguise) and tucked the kiss into his pocket for safety.

Neil rejoined Matt, who was to accompany him, and resolutely didn't look back as all the groups scattered. As he and Matt scouted around the perimeter of the camp, on the lookout for watchers to ambush, his gaze was caught by a large, rock-grey form nearby. He pulled Matt to a stop and watched as the wolf stood from its sitting position, apparently staring at them both, and raised its muzzle to the sky. Neil cringed in preparation for a howl, but the wolf was silent. As its amber eyes met Neil's own, a shudder went up his spine. He was about to reach out to the creature with his senses and find out what was so odd about it, when it turned tail and calmly loped away into the woods where, presumably, the rest of the pack was waiting.

Neil shivered and rubbed his hands over his arms. He wasn't usually one for omens, but he knew there was something portentous about that wolf. He just hoped fate would rule in his favour.

Matt nudged his arm and nodded in the direction of two sentries heading their way, though they hadn't seen Neil and Matt just yet. They got into position, and waited for the men to come close enough on their rounds to take them by surprise.

It was elementary, really. A witch and a dragon herder well-used to brawling, versus two sentries who were too bored to do their job properly. The scuffle was near silent, and as they tied up the men to a copse of trees and stuffed gags in their mouths, Neil listened out for any outcry from across the camp. When he and Matt had donned the uniforms and checked they fully looked the part, and there was no hue and cry, Neil judged it time to move on. It seemed everyone had successfully replaced the sentries they had been watching for the past few weeks, and were set to keep the plan in motion.

He and Matt continued the route of the sentries they had forcibly relieved. They knew they only had limited time before they ran up against a security protocol they couldn't understand or give themselves away, and that this would likely be their only shot at getting any information out of this army. If they were successful in getting out, that is. All of them.

So they knew they had to make the most of their short window of opportunity, and that the other groups would be doing the same with their assigned tasks. For Neil and Matt, they were to seek out the Wesninski and witch areas as a priority. Neil would pick up whatever information he could, and Matt was to protect him and lend a hand with whatever Neil decided was necessary. The pairing made sense, but part of Neil still longed to have been partnered with Andrew, so he could take comfort in a held hand or a gentle touch when his nerves jangled like bells in a storm. He didn't think Matt would *mind* holding his hand if he asked, but it wasn't really an appropriate moment to ask when they were walking through the camp pretending to be sentries. It wouldn't exactly help them avoid attention.

Neil indicated with a tilt of his head the direction they should go once they finished their route, and they changed direction as casually as ducks on water, like the most natural thing in the world. They had seen many people wearing the Butcher's red hand come and go from the encampments near the woods and the suspected witch battle area; it made sense that the Moriyama kings in control of this venture would place such a deadly force under the command of their bloodiest weapon. He and Matt had rehearsed their reasons for being there the day before; they had been set a task by one of the unit leaders on the literal opposite side of the army to take checks of all equipment, armour and weapons to make sure everything was ready. They had arguments prepared about supplies going missing for extra pay on the side, faulty blacksmithing and fragile armour, lists of names of their

superiors in case anyone asked, and a forged letter from their ‘commander’ setting them on the task and lists of apparent other inventory checks. Just to make sure they were up to snuff if anyone questioned their right to be roaming around and poking their noses into everything when nobody would recognise them as belonging to the Wesninski forces. They were prepared to walk a fine line between being imposters and simply strangers in a huge force of men who rarely socialised outside of their battle units. It was safe enough to say that unless they were questioned by Lord Nathan himself, who would likely know all the other unit commanders by name, appearance and blackmail material, they had a solid front. And if Nathan found them, they would be in more danger than simply being questioned and having to break out of the camp gaol later. More like life or death, extreme torture and sadism, if Nathan had held true to his ways after all these years.

Neil forced his thoughts off that particular track and back to the task at hand; to find the place most likely to contain information, and yet as few people as possible. They were prepared to scuffle and silence people if necessary, to use lethal force, but they couldn’t take on a whole army by themselves if an alarm was sounded. No, better to find some way to sneak about and take the information with no one realising the camp had been infiltrated until much, much later.

Well, Neil reflected later, it was always nice to have happy dreams about how things should go.

Things started to go wrong when Neil heard Lola’s laugh echo disturbingly out into the dawn, and stopped dead in his tracks with all the breath punched out of his lungs.

“Neil?” Matt hissed, making a show of oh-so-casually inspecting a pile of coiled ropes and scribbling something on his papers as if he were inspecting the spot with Neil. “Buddy, breathe. And tell me what’s going on.”

Neil took a slow breath and made himself look at the ropes too, to solidify their pretence. “The woman who laughed just now,” he said in a shaky undertone, “is called Lola. She’s part of the Butcher’s inner circle. She’s extremely dangerous. She led the attack on Wymack’s place. Where she is, the Butcher will be nearby.”

“Fuck,” Matt muttered. “Do we detour? Do we abort?”

Neil closed his eyes for a moment. “We go towards her.”

“Are you out of your *mind*?” Matt hissed.

“Possibly,” Neil muttered, and started walking with a confidence and ease that was entirely faked. Matt followed him with another muffled curse or two, committed to the façade of their duo. They snaked through the lines of tents with apparent purpose, dodging soldiers starting to rise and go about their duties. Many of them simply glanced at Matt and Neil, saw their paperwork, watched them point at equipment dumps and make tallies, and concluded their presence was probably fine, and it was probably someone else’s problem to report. Someone of a higher level. Of course it helped that Neil had made them charms for discretion and apathy, hoping that if they acted in a sensible manner then those they encountered would largely leave them alone and forget about them. They weren’t especially strong charms, and the feathers under their clothes would likely snap and break the charms long before they were done – especially if they had to leave in a hurry – but it was better than trusting just to luck and their own sleuthing.

They found the central command tent sitting in ugly, bloody-handed splendour at the central part of the unit’s camp. The smoke wafting up from the slit in the top said the braziers were going and it was occupied by several people. Neil thought it likely his father and Lola had been getting up to

some early morning exercise together, a distasteful as the thought was. He'd been a child when his mother ran with him, not a simpleton, and it had been clear even to him that his father enjoyed Lola's cruelty, and that her charms in that department far outshone whatever lustre Mary had held for him at the start, as a powerful descendant of a long line of witches. Plus, he'd had a recent unwelcome splurge of Lola's consciousness against his own, and she had some rather telling memories that Neil would as soon forget he ever saw. He wouldn't be terribly surprised if they had supplemented their bedsport with their shared passion for inflicting pain on those under their power.

Neil didn't share that with Matt; he just said in a soft voice that the Wesninski leaders were likely to be in that tent and they should wait for it to be vacated before taking their chance. As they moved on and kept taking imaginary inventory, Neil carefully tested his own mental defences, and the shielding of his ability that would mask his status as a witch to any others close by – like Lola, or any of her pack of bloodthirsty firebombs. They wended their way through towards the battle practice area Neil had spotted the day he'd first seen the wolf pack harassing the cattle pens.

It started to go further wrong, though not perceptibly so at the time, when they discovered that Lola's brother Romero was in charge of the battle area, but his face wasn't visible until Neil was almost on top of him and it was too late to suddenly veer off and hide.

So Neil opted for boldness instead and strode right up to him, putting all his faith in his disguise and the charms that dangled under their clothes. Matt stepped with him, though Neil could almost smell the tension coming off him in waves. Matt wouldn't know who Romero was to Neil, but he would have seen Neil's quickly-concealed start when he saw the man's face.

Neil waved the slip of paper with their 'responsibilities' in front of Romero's face and gave a lazy drawl of words. "Inspection, Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> on the West Flank overseeing. Show us the training grounds, Lieutenant. And be snappy about it, if you don't mind. We have the entire northern side to do after this."

Romero clearly didn't like being talked down to by someone so much shorter than himself, but Neil was counting on that irritation to get Romero to shoo them out of his way as fast as possible. Romero skimmed his eyes over the page and lingered on the faked signature and wax seal at the bottom.

"Training grounds ain't here," he drawled back, fingering the scrappy edges of the paper as if – Neil's heart nearly stopped. As if he were checking the weight and quality of the paper, checking for the embossed letterhead that a high-ranking officer would be sure to use at every opportunity. "That's on the west side. But you should know that, as you came from the west side. Right?"

Neil rolled his eyes impatiently while nervous sweat rolled down his back. Matt stayed quiet, affecting a bored stance at his side. "Obviously we've already surveyed *those* ones. We had instructions to inspect this additional area. Some information must have been inaccurate. What is in that area there, Lieutenant?"

Neil gestured to the wooded space behind Romero with his arm, hoping to distract him enough to disrupt the attempt at subtly checking the paper for authenticity. Romero obligingly glanced that way, but his grip only tightened on the paper. Neil fought to stay in the moment as a visceral memory of those hands around his neck resurfaced, Romero squeezing the breath from him until he nearly passed out, then those hands keeping him still as he fought for enough breath to scream while Lola decorated his skin with her knife.



“Nothing for you to tally,” Romero shrugged. “Unless you like being cooked to a char while counting hay bales.”

Neil’s eyebrows rose and he could have almost smacked himself. The army’s dragons – being kept most likely under lock and key, conditioned into slavish obedience and fear of pain from their handlers into putting up with being grounded and probably muzzled, so as not to alert anyone to their presence with a roar or two. And not knowing they had been there seriously undermined Matt and Neil’s credibility as parts of the army.

Neil attempted to stay calm. “That idiot clerk must have written out the camp map wrong again,” he said in an aggrieved tone to Matt, who rolled his eyes accordingly. “We’ve been tracking his mistakes all day, it seems. Apologies for the bother, Lieutenant. We’ll be on our way.”

“Not so fast now boys,” Romero said with a smile that was as reassuring as the gleam in a wolf’s eye right before it pounces. “You’ve been at this all night without rest, am I right? Have some breakfast with our unit before you go on with your duties. You might even get a special treat – the Lord Wesninski has an announcement to give this morning concerning a new battle technique.”

“The man himself?” Neil forced himself to say with an eager lift of his voice.

“Oh yes,” Romero nodded, then rested an arm around Neil and Matt’s shoulder’s each, standing between them. “I’d hate for you to miss such an iconic moment. Come sit down and get some food in you. The supply dumps will still be there for half an hour.”

Walking quickly, Romero steered them towards the cook fires with a steely determination in his steps. His heavy arm was like an iron yoke around Neil’s neck, and he was helpless to its weight, not wanting to draw too much attention by refusing the offer.

“Smells good, that,” Matt said as they joined the queue for food, with Romero still holding onto them both. Neil was uncomfortably reminded of a young animal being scruffed to be deposited elsewhere. Romero stood over them until they sat down on the earth with a bowl of food, made sure they weren’t going anywhere, then walked directly into the main command tent.

“We need to leave, *now*,” Matt hissed over his porridge.

“Yeah, no shit,” Neil muttered back. “Finish the bowl, then we’ll slip out before they come out of the tent.”

They probably could have pulled it off, if Lola hadn’t strutted out of the tent and started rallying everyone to form up ranks, sweeping the crowd with her gimlet gaze. They had no chance of sneaking away without drawing her notice, and being pulled to the front and forced to stay, where it would be even more difficult to sneak away. Neil flicked his eyes around at the walls of the crowd and folded in with Matt, trying to stay as near the edges as possible.

Once Lola was satisfied there was a sufficient crowd, she ducked back into the main tent and Neil realised with horror that he was about to really, truly, lay eyes on his father after more than a decade of trying to forget his face. He tried to shift closer to Matt, but the people who had slid between them didn’t budge. Matt looked at him over the top of their heads and gave a tight grimace. Neil knew that he would run at the first signal, and get out at the first opportunity.

And then – there he was. Lord Nathan Wesninski. Butcher, tyrant. Right hand man of the Moriyamas.

*Father*, the errant thought insisted.

He had aged, but he seemed to be enjoying himself sufficiently to seem well-weathered rather than time-worn. He was still strong and broad, and the fire of his hair was fading to blonde in places and white in others. He was dressed up in military uniform, though Neil had no doubt it was made of the finest silks, tailored to him, one of many sets, and would likely never see actual combat. Nathan preferred to get his hands dirty at work, and he didn't require a fancy wardrobe to do that. Neil had thought many times he must prefer the patchy, ragged peasant clothes so he could feel more of the blood spatter against his skin as he worked. For once, Neil was grateful for the slight stature he had inherited from his mother, as he could duck further out of sight behind a taller soldier.

Nathan was giving some speech about power and liberation and liberty, whatever propaganda nonsense the Moriyamas were peddling to justify their ever-expanding conquering and pillaging. Neil tried his best not to listen and to keep an eye on the potential routes out. As well as keep breathing and not have a breakdown because his father was *right there* and the only thing preventing him from recognising his errant son was a layer of inexperienced face paint and a rumpled, ill-fitting uniform.

Lola, Romero, and the gigantic knight-bodyguard Patrick were standing to attention behind their cult leader, watching the crowd with some of the more minor 'outer' circle people that Neil could recognise through the haze of new scars, saggier skin and meaner expressions that time had given them. With every breath Neil could feel a different scar itching, a different sour memory clawing up the back of his throat as he looked on the faces of those who had so cruelly dominated his life – even after he got out from under their thumb, he was still fleeing the phantom of their violence, both awake and asleep.

Neil's attention snagged back to the present at his father's next words. "—the lovely Lady Lola Wesninski, my darling wife, can take so much of the credit for this campaign on her shoulders."

He waved her forward and she gave a faux-demure curtsy to the whooping crowd, then graciously beamed as Nathan kissed her lingeringly down her neck towards her cleavage, to much more cheering.

"Well, a girl does like an opportunity to show off now and again," she called out to the crowd with a wink, sparking off more laughter. Nathan caressed her face with a fixed and intense regard before stepping back to let her have the metaphorical floor.

"We are known to all nations on this continent, on this world almost, as the foremost breeders and providers of war-dragons," she announced grandly. "Largely due, of course, to my excellent husband's breeding and training techniques. I am very pleased to announce that an experiment my people have been conducting has been an overwhelming success. The first project was to get rid of the competition while we perfected our new stocks, and I'm pleased to say that the other competing herds have begun to fail as planned."

Neil caught Matt's glance and clenched jaw, and motioned with his hand out of everyone's line of sight to wait. Matt didn't look happy about it, but he would recognise as Neil did that they stood their best chance of understanding what was going on by staying a little longer.

"We have successfully reduced the competing herds by at least two thirds of their number, and made a significant impact on this year's breeding season. Of course, to begin this work our witches needed to be up close and personal with the herds. To continue dwindling the herds steadily without

stretching us too thin, out witches will instead use focus objects from afar. It will be a little cruder, but no one will be in any position to do anything about it.”

She gave a triumphant smirk to the assembled soldiers, who hollered and clapped obligingly. Neil was well aware that these soldiers would spend most of their time in Wesninski territories either assisting with the breeding farms or terrorising the peasantry, so he was sure they all appreciated a good, horrible plan.

Lola clapped her hands lightly to quiet the crowd, and continued on. “The second project, which I am very proud to announce to you all today, is something myself and my teams have been labouring over for many years now – to create a hybrid or more domesticated breed of dragon, with more biddability. And we have succeeded rather spectacularly.”

Foreboding washed over Neil in a sickly wave and he forced himself to keep his feet and his face in place, despite the instincts screaming in his mind. Lola gave a curt gesture with her arm, and a sudden *pop* of magic nearly knocked Neil off his feet. A dragon had appeared in the sky where there had only been air before. Many soldiers almost broke ranks in surprise to see a dragon hovering above them. The air smelled faintly of rainstorms and sparks, but Neil was too busy staring up at the oddly-docile dragon to really think about that. The dragon wasn’t large, was probably in the stages between adolescent and adult, not quite mature yet. It beat its sapphire wings steadily to stay in the air, not even circling or wheeling like natural flight. It just hung in the same spot, as if waiting for something.

There was something wrong with its hide, but it was too far away for Neil to see clearly.

“As you can see,” Lola said smugly, “These creatures are substantially different from their traditional cousins in the wild. We have embedded power crystals throughout their bodies, fuelled with magic. For the moment they are only connected to a witch, but we are developing ways to refine this process so anyone with a corresponding crystal – a troop commander, for example – can control the dragon. Oh yes, they can be controlled. The crystals allow them to hop between locations, giving those in control of them a real element of surprise. And the icing on the cake is that they can be fully controlled, down to wingbeats and fireballs. No more relying on years-long training regimens and hoping the beast doesn’t decide to fly away after all. Each action can be precisely commanded and carried out. I will demonstrate.”

Lola made a theatrical gesture, entirely unnecessary for performing magic, spreading her arms as if she had wings. At the same time, the dragon flared its wings and rose a little higher in the air, then went back to hovering.

“I possess its control crystal, and as such I control the dragon. Watch. I will make the dragon roll in the air three times and perform an aerial flip.”

This time there was no gesture, no word, no pretence at cheap puppetry. The dragon simply did as she had said it would, moving almost lifelessly in the air to carry out her commands. Lola kept making it do things – from spitting a certain number of fireballs, to more aerobatics – and each time the feeling of awful wrongness in Neil’s body multiplied. When he began to feel physically nauseated, Neil gathered his courage and quickly dipped down his defences enough to reach out to the dragon and touch its mind, lightning-fast, and run back behind his walls less than a second later.

Neil keeled over and retched sour bile on the ground while the soldiers around him made disgusted noises and skipped out of the way. Except for Matt, who was saying something about bad guts and nervousness before battle.

Neil barely paid attention. He could still hear the dragon's silent screaming, the agony it was in from the many crystals stitched and scarred and burned into its hide, the way the magic tore at its body and kept it in constant agony, the way the jumping twisted and wrenched at the poor creature's mind and tortured its traumatised body. How it screamed in fear and confusion at being unable to control its own body, being trapped helplessly while the magic and cruel voice controlled it. How the unnatural agony of it all was threatening to rip the dragon into insensate hysterics, its heart beating too fast and likely to expire far too soon. It was so scared, in so much pain.

Sharing that for even a second was even worse than being linked with the yearling when it died, experiencing its final moments. Because each moment for this poor soul was infinitely more horrific.

Neil retched until his stomach was empty, but he couldn't stop the clenching of his belly and the tremor that spread uncontrollably through his entire body. Matt was next to him, patting his back and still trying to cover for them. Neil's magic was in uproar, thrashing against his control at the sickly *wrongness* of what Lola had wrought, what she had forced on that poor, innocent creature. And it would not be the only one – they would never have unveiled such progress if they only had one prototype.

The entire force of dragons with the army must be like that one. And Nathan and his cronies would use each one until it finally died to inflict terror and horror on the countries on the other side of the pass. They would use the threat to control and subdue the people of those lands and use them as chattel for the Moriyama whims. They would turn the whole land into Nathan's domain, and they would violate and desecrate every last man, woman, child, beast, bird, plant and speck of soil for their own sick amusement along the way. He thought of little Dewdrop, safe for now in Wymack's care with the rest of Andrew's flock, but not safe for much longer if they couldn't stop the atrocity on the horizon. He thought of her being captured and experimented on, with crystal shards jabbed into her hide and poisonous magic torturing her for the rest of her life. He almost collapsed from the force of his retching.

"Whoa, let's get you to the medical tent," Matt said with a nervous laugh and a tug at his jacket.

Neil tried to get to his feet, but he was too consumed with the revolting motion of the dragon still spinning in the air above them, dancing to Lola's whims. All his magic was crying out in his soul and rebelling against such abuse of the natural order, making his muscles spasm and his body tremble uselessly. Then, wolfsong, echoing out in eerie chorus. Wolves? It was early morning, Neil fuzzily thought, and wolves were generally nocturnal. There was no reason for them to be singing, but their calls shivered in the air and seemed to shimmer in time to Neil's distress, soothing his retches and helping him get his feet under him, bearing him up and steadying his stomach just enough.

Matt hauled him away quickly, aided by one or two sick-looking soldiers who had been near when Neil started vomiting up his intestines. Neil stumbled along in their wake, not trying to downplay his symptoms at all, and didn't blink when Matt said he'd be fine taking Neil on his own, and then punching out the overly-helpful soldier when he tried to insist.

Matt stashed the unconscious man in an empty tent and passed Neil a waterskin to rinse his mouth.

"We need to leave now," Matt hissed, looking around them furtively. "That officer who was suspicious of us – he's sure to notice we've left his sight now, he'll want to detain and question us for sure. He didn't believe our cover at all."

“His name is Romero,” Neil croaked and gargled more water. “He’s Lola’s brother.”

“The sociopath controlling the dragon?”

“And new wife of the Butcher.”

“Shit,” Matt muttered. “Do you think they’d recognise you from the Butcher’s household?”

“I’d rather not put it to the test. Come on, let’s move. We need to get this information to someone who can do something about it. At least we know what they’re planning with the dragons.”

Matt nodded. “Is your stomach okay now? What set that off, anyway? Did you make yourself sick as a distraction?”

Neil wiped his chin and started walking, though he still felt a bit wobbly. “I’ll be fine, it was that display with the dragon. It was repulsive, so unnatural. Nature screams against it, and I can hear the screaming.”

Matt gave him a vaguely incredulous look for his dramatics, but didn’t question it and just moved with him. They walked faster than was probably wise, but they were both pretty shaken up from what they’d witnessed and just wanted to get as far away as possible. They moved quickly through the encampment, always keeping an eye and ear out for any alarms or signs of pursuit; it wouldn’t be long before Romero sent out people to find them again.

Neil reached out with his mind, searching over the camp for a familiar, fiery warmth. *Andrew?*

*Yes?* Andrew replied, sounding a bit distracted. Neil had a brief sense of urgency, of keeping watch while Renee did something very risky.

*We all need to leave as soon as possible. Matt and I are running for the pass now in case we’re being looked for, but it won’t take long for an alarm to start sounding. We have some very disturbing information to share, too.*

*I’ll set the signal,* Andrew said, the tension in his mind only increasing with Neil’s words. *You two get to safety. I’ll make sure everyone gets out.*

*See you soon.*

Neil withdrew from the contact and checked his shields again out of reflex, holding them high and secure. He kept up with Matt’s longer strides as they skirted the perimeter, having ditched their inventory ‘supplies’ and picked up hunting gear along the way, posing now as more of those soldiers relieved of any duty except helping to find extra food supplies for the ravenous army. They made a bit of a show of seeing something in the woods to the side of the camp, near to the pass, and of stalking it into the cover of the trees. Once they were deep enough in cover not to be seen, they broke into a run to cover more ground and made for their camp as quickly as they could. As they ran, Neil thought he heard the wolves again.

“Eerie, that,” Matt panted as they climbed up towards the mountain pass. “Wolves during the day. Gives you goosebumps.”

“The army probably drove off most of their prey and disrupted their patterns,” Neil puffed in reply, and put the matter out of his mind. There were moving too fast out of the wolves’ likely range to be

hunted by the pack, and there were other things to worry about.

“What about the others?” Matt said a while later, stopping in his tracks with a horrified look.

“They’ll still be in the camp, if Romero starts looking for spies and they’re still there—”

“Andrew will set the signal,” Neil interrupted him before he could get all worked up. He pulled on Matt’s arm to keep him moving.

“How will he know?” Matt protested, and pulled free. He started to go back towards the army. Neil was about to feed him some lie about prearranged signals when there was a great *whump* from one part of the tented camp. They watched in silence as a whole square of tents caught fire, almost as if someone had poured lamp oil onto them before setting the flame. Shouts rang out loud enough to reach Neil and Matt, and oily smoke billowed up as soldiers raised an alarm and started to set up a bucket line to extinguish the flames that were rapidly jumping from tent to tent in such neat rows. It was amazing how much chaos a small fire can create, so quickly, even among disciplined soldiers. It would provide excellent cover for a handful of people to start running around and doing things that would seem odd, if everyone wasn’t so focussed on their firefighting efforts. Neil spared a quick prayer that everyone recognised the signal they had all agreed on, and immediately started to move.

“Told you,” Neil said, and yanked on Matt’s arm again.

“But how did he know...?”

“Matt, questions later. Running *now*,” Neil said. That seemed to put a spur to Matt’s flanks, and together they scrambled up into the mountain pass. They paused at the entrance for a while to make sure they weren’t being followed, then sprinted towards their campsite.

As they got there before everyone else, they ran about disassembling everything and trying to erase all traces of their presence, and brought the horses out from the caves and started saddling them and getting them warmed up. By the time they’d discarded their disguises and got the camp all packed up, everyone else had made it back to camp.

“What went wrong?” Kevin asked at once, vaulting up onto his horse.

“We’ll explain later,” Neil said as he swept his gaze over the site one last time. “Right now we need to get as far away from here as possible.”

No one needed any further discussion, and they set to the wind as fast as their horses could carry them, back towards the dragonlands.

They only stopped to rest the horses in short bursts and gulp down some food and water themselves, travelling long into the night to try and put as much distance between themselves and the army. When they paused to rest the horses, they shared information between each other and tried to decide what to do.

As well as Neil and Matt’s information regarding the dragons and the abhorrent hybrid forms Lola had created, the others had managed to turn up good information too. Renee and Andrew had focussed on numbers and logistics, and had stolen copies of inventory manifests, tactical plans, headcounts and the occasional pledge of support from other petty kings or far-off countries. Kevin, Allison and Dan had managed to eavesdrop and spy on the main movers and shakers of the army, and had identified almost all of the generals, commanders, and representatives of countries

involved. All together, they had a reasonably well-educated picture of the makeup of the force and its intentions.

That the intention seemed to be to invade everything below the mountain ranges they were putting behind them didn't cheer anyone when they stopped close to dawn to snatch a few hours' fitful sleep.

"Who do we bring this information to?" Matt questioned once. "We're wildfolk, lawless outcasts of the dragonlands. No way any king or queen or even mayor of the tiniest town would trust our word to what's coming, and that army could invade any day. Our neighbours have no armies ready to meet them, and all the people in their way will suffer first."

They argued solutions over and over in circles as they fled in the direction of the frontier and civilisation. They were making excellent time, much faster than how Neil and Andrew had travelled towards his flock those months ago. Throughout the discussions and long periods of silent, exhausted travel, Neil was sure of only one thing: he needed magical help. He needed to talk to the forest witch.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became; the robin witch had warned him of great trouble and great choices ahead of him, had hinted that he would need assistance and had agreed to keep the dragonscales safe until he needed their power. She had known something about Andrew's ability, surely. She had said the clouds had messages for him, hinted that his connection to Neil was of importance for more than just sentiment. She had to know *something* about how to counter Lola's creations and the devices she had devised to such strange and dangerous purposes. She must be able to give him some guidance. And if not, she might know how to perform their own muster of witches. Earth-based witches like himself and the robin witch usually avoided conflict, but Neil was sure that if they were needed to defend their homes and neighbours, other witches would join forces with them.

Neil chewed over his decision for a few days, taking the time to try and collect himself and put his memories back where they belonged after such close encounters with his father and his inner circle. He had planned a speech to convince the others, but when he spoke up it all deserted him.

"I don't know what we need to do," he said in the post-meal haze they were sitting in, into the weary and stressed silence. "But I need to go back to my home."

The others looked at him in numb surprise.

"I'll go with you," Andrew said, not entirely unexpectedly. "If there's going to be a war, I need to get my brother to safety."

Neil reached over to take his hand and gave him a sympathetic, thankful smile.

"What about Nicky?" Allison sniped at him. "If you're so worried about your family, what about him?"

Neil watched Andrew's jaw work from side to side before he replied. "Nicky can handle himself. And he'll follow whatever Wymack decides to do no matter what I say. He'll be with Erik and the others, he won't be alone. But it's my fault Aaron is anywhere near here, and he doesn't know how to defend himself. He's a soft city boy, he wouldn't survive ten minutes in combat."

Renee gave an understanding nod and gently patted Andrew's knee. "Do what you need to do for your family, Andrew."

"Well that's grand, but what are the rest of us supposed to do?" Kevin asked. He had been running his hands through his hair for the past ten minutes and seemed in danger of pulling it all out.

"We take it to Wymack," Dan announced, looking each of them firmly in the eye. "With the muster, our people are the only ready fighting force within a hundred leagues. We can try and delay the invasion as much as we can while Wymack sends out riders and messages to all his contacts in the nearby countries; he's sold dragons to generals from every local army for years, he'll know who to contact. We take our dragons and our weapons to the pass, and try and keep those bastards bottlenecked on the far side of the pass. Do you agree?"

Nobody liked the sound of that plan; it had too much of a martyred last-stand feeling about it for anyone to like it. But it was the only thing they could do, so slowly each of them nodded in turn until they were all in agreement. Dan looked grim when they had all given their assent, but didn't waste time in trying to convince them it wasn't anything other than a sacrificial tactic that would, more than likely, get all of them killed if relief forces didn't assemble fast enough. But if they did nothing, that invasion force would just roll into their lands uncontested and conquer everything before anyone had a hope of resisting.

"Then we'll all set off in the morning," she said quietly, "And hope to see each other again in better times."

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The farewells were short, but heartfelt. They divvied up provisions and supplies, said quiet goodbyes, and separated into two groups. Neil and Andrew cut a direct path towards the nameless frontier town Neil called home. As they drew closer, Andrew asked if Neil wanted to go to his little house or check in at the town. After some consideration, Neil refused. Although his heart ached for the comfort of familiar surrounds and his own bed, he knew they needed to find his friend as the highest priority. So instead of taking the path by the river towards the town, they dove into the wild forest that stretched for nearly a hundred leagues to the east and south of the frontier. Neil was reasonably confident that his friend wouldn't have roamed too far, but she might be away from her little base camp in the bramble fortress; sometimes she roamed in the forest for months, travelling it from end to end and back again. He hoped her clouds and birds had told her to stay close to the frontier more recently.

When they reached the bramble camp and calling out for entry gave no response, Andrew started to get twitchy. He hadn't liked being so enclosed in the dense forest, unable to see the sky or the land around him, but hadn't protested the journey. But as Neil searched for a way into the camp without his friend's presence, Andrew was looking up through a gap in the canopy towards the trails of chimney smoke coming from the town.

"Will you remember how to get back to this place if you leave?" Neil asked him quietly.

"Yes."

Neil considered the beautiful aspect of his face in the dappled light of the forest in the late evening. "Go find Aaron," he said in a sigh, though his heart clenched at the thought of being apart from him after spending so many long months attached at the hip and only wanting to be closer. "Explain the situation to the town; they should be able to send relay riders to the nearby towns and settlements to



prepare people. I'll keep looking for my friend. I'll check back here every other day and make camp in this area. When I find her, I'll bring her here."

Andrew looked equally pained at the thought of separation, but he could see the need for it just as well as Neil did. He pulled Neil into his arms and held him close, cradling him so carefully. "I'll check here every other day for you," he promised softly into Neil's neck as they clung to each other.

"Stay safe," Neil forced himself to say. "I need you very much alive."

Andrew's arms tightened possessively around him. "That goes double for you," he replied in a thick voice.

Neil swallowed more words; they would only prolong this painful parting. He leaned his forehead against Andrew's and closed his eyes, trying to soak up the feeling of being held so tenderly as magic seemed to swirl and pulse between them, like their souls were trying to cling as tight as their bodies. Andrew kissed him once, firm and sure, before regretfully stepping away. Neil took his own supplies from his horse and handed Andrew the reins.

"I'll move faster on foot in here," Neil said, trying for practicality. "Give her a rest in the town for a while. See you soon."

Andrew didn't appear able to say anything. He stared at Neil for a long moment, as if memorising him, then turned and walked quickly towards the edge of the forest, and the town that contained his brother and the rest of Neil's small circle of friends.

It took nearly two weeks of searching and anxiety increasing with each slow day spent looking and each blister and bruise he picked up from wandering the forest at all hours, before Neil located his friend. He came upon her suddenly, and in such a way that Neil knew immediately she had been aware of his presence in her forest for some time, and had been hiding.

She was sitting in the crook of a tree's limbs like the birds she imitated, waiting for him to come close enough to see her. She didn't startle at his arrival – in fact she barely looked at him, she was so absorbed in listening to the song of the lark perched on her wrist. She gave him a quick glance and waved her free hand in greeting, and smiled encouragingly to the lark as its song swelled and shimmered about the tree like invisible leaves rustling in the wind.

Neil stood underneath the tree, weary and filthy and worried, folded his arms and waited for her to pay him some mind. Once the lark was finished, it ruffled its feathers a little while the witch crooned warbling praise in her fluting voice, and offered a wriggling worm as a reward. The bird gobbled it and took wing with another little chirrup like a goodbye, and the witch smiled after it fondly.

"What a handsome voice," she mused. Her grin, when she turned it on Neil, was expectant and satisfied all in one. "And you've arrived, so the time has come."

"You say that like I haven't been looking for you for a fortnight," Neil grumbled. "Where on earth were you?"

"Elsewhere," she said.

"You knew full well I was looking for you," Neil said, his temper starting to spark.

“It wasn’t time yet, my fox,” she replied with a vague smile. “But I’ll come back with you now.”

“You realise people may have died from this delay?” Neil bit out. He never usually got angry with her, but his nerves had been fraying the entire time he was marooned in the forest, cut off from his friends and news of the incoming invasion.

“People die every day regardless. And if I had not waited, then even more people would have died from us taking the wrong course.” In one swift move, she vaulted down from the tree and stood toe-to-toe with Neil, suddenly hard and spiky instead of cloud vapour. She prodded her fingernail into his chest and fixed him with an iron eye. “I am moved by fate and foretelling just as much as you, my fox – if not more, as I live it every day while you dabble in mundanity with your friends and play at keeping house. Do no doubt my ability to understand the situation we are in. Who was it that sent you out into the dragonlands forewarned and fore-armed?”

“Andrew did that,” Neil scowled.

She prodded him in the chest. “Then why have you come back looking for me? If I’m of no use, why are you here and not out riding into death and glory with a sword held high?”

“Because I need your help,” Neil bit out, his anger sliding about between justified annoyance and sick anxiety.

“Indeed,” she said firmly. “So don’t snap your jaws and frisk your bushy tail at me, fox. I fly above everything, and I see what you cannot fathom from your den in the ground. Will you let me guide you, or will you go on alone and blind?”

Neil took a slow breath to rein in the fidgeting strain of his temper, and let it out even slower. He forced himself to calmness, and rubbed tiredly at his face. “I would be honoured by a robin’s guidance,” he said eventually.

“Good,” she grinned, her mood suddenly switching from imperious to gleeful. She threw her arms around him and hugged him with all the exuberance of a child. “I’ve missed you, my fox. Now, let’s walk, and you can tell me everything and I’ll pretend to be surprised by any of it.”

Despite himself, Neil had to laugh. As they travelled back towards her bramble-ringed fortress, he told her everything that had happened since his last visit and, true to her word, she pretended she hadn’t seen any of it in dreams or clouds or intuitions. When he got to the part about Andrew starting to use his magic and how it reacted to Neil’s touch, his friend rolled her eyes and grabbed his chin to inspect his face.

“Did your mother never teach you not to mix magic and sex?”

“No, actually.”

“Stupid of her,” his friend commented and poked at his face a bit. “You’d think it was something a teenage witch would need to know most urgently.”

“Not in her mind,” Neil replied tightly. “I don’t want to discuss her. What is happening with our magic?”

“Oh it’s quite simple, you simpleton,” she smiled and patted his cheek. “Your magics have bonded to each other from all that touchy-feely rolling around, you see. Willingly breaching your barriers

and lowering your control during your fun sticky times, over and over again, seems to have drawn his magic out of his control and into yours, seeing as you can control and direct it better than he can. But seeing as you didn't know you were pulling his magic out through his cock, you weren't aware enough to properly direct it, and it would have just flashed out into your surrounds like a lightning strike to the earth. And when he started to learn to access his own magic, and all those *feelings* started getting extremely unavoidable, the bonding kept happening even if you weren't fucking. You've blended your powers, idiot. You could probably breathe fire right now if you really tried, and he could make a passable charm like those plant-pouches you're so fond of."

Neil was struck speechless by shock and mortification to hear her talk so frankly about such an intimate thing. His face felt aflame and he coughed into his fist to try and clear the mortification from his breath.

"How can you tell all that?" he asked in a strangled voice.

She gave him a pitying look and patted his shoulder. "Because I can smell the mix of magic on you, my fox, and you're stupid and soft with tenderness. And I remind you again – who told you about his magic in the first place? I saw this coming years ago."

Neil nearly tripped over a tree root at that, and took some time to regain his composure while his friend chuckled and grinned to herself as they walked.

"So how do we un-blend them?" He asked once he had a modicum of dignity about him. "It's not right, to have taken and exchanged magic like that without either of our knowledge. It seems... violating, somehow. We didn't know what we were doing."

"Of that I have no doubt," she snarked, still grinning. "Don't worry, my fox. You simply need to be made an honest man of the world, and all will be solved."

Neil stopped dead to stare at her. "What do you mean?"

She planted her hands on her hips and stretched her grin wide enough to split her face. "You need a ceremony where you both agree to willingly cede control to each other and allow your magic and lives to be shared. That way you can either pool all your powers together permanently, or extricate them as you wish. Preferably with some sort of witch in attendance to make sure it goes as planned, with maybe a witness or two." She pointed to herself and laughed. "Then maybe consummate the thing to make sure it sticks. Sounds enough like a marriage to me, don't you think?"

Neil could only gape at her.

"What?" she asked in a mock-innocent voice. "Do you mean you *don't* want to spend the rest of your life making sweet gushy love with him and falling asleep in his big strong arms for ever and ever?"

"Stop it," he snapped, turning away and pressing a hand to his face. "It's not – we're not – don't make it out to be so..."

"So true?"

"Stop it!"

She sighed and rested a hand on his shoulder, changing her tone to one less mocking and one much softer instead. "My poor sweet confused fox friend. A simple handfasting agreement only needs to last for a year at the most. If you decide not to have a full marriage after that, no harm done. Besides, isn't it something you want anyway? Whatever the words or traditions associated with it, would the act itself make you happy?"

"Yes," Neil said in a scant, terrified whisper.

"There you are then," she smiled. She gave his shoulder a gentle pat and started walking again. "Come along, we still have a couple hours of travelling left for us. That should give you plenty of time to think."

Neil followed silently in her wake, his heart racing and his thoughts spinning like a maelstrom in tempest.

They reached her home as dusk was falling, and Neil could sense Andrew's presence at the camp a mile away. Literally, he could feel the warm ember of Andrew's magic burning away, like iron being drawn to a lodestone. Now he could recognise it as the scraps of magic that had clung to him from Andrew's touch and care, recognising their own originating soul, and calling out in knowing. He wondered if Andrew could feel him in the same way, could feel a cool breeze or sense of light from Neil's direction. Then he wondered what Andrew would think of his friend's proposal for their problem, and his thoughts scattered into anxious flocks of wheeling birds.

When they reached Andrew's campfire outside the ring of brambles, Neil felt so relieved by his presence that his knees nearly buckled. He longed so deeply to sit himself in Andrew's lap and rest his head on his shoulder, and let Andrew comfort him with his touch and kiss and silent understanding. But he could feel his friend's eyes on him as if she knew exactly what he was thinking, so instead of pressing close and kissing his lover to greet him, Neil simply sat down with burning cheeks and said a quiet hello.

Andrew looked a little confused at the tepid welcome, but took it in his stride as he did so many things, and contented himself with looking Neil over for any signs of hurt or injury. Finding none, he rested his hand on Neil's knee for a moment in silent affection, then withdrew to give Neil his space.

"Is this your friend?"

"I am indeed," the witch answered whimsically, brushing some twigs and leaves out of her hair. "Good evening, fire-soul. It's good to finally meet you with my own eyes, instead of hearing of you in the skies."

Andrew watched her stoically for a moment, no doubt confused. "Alright," was all he said. "What should I call you?"

"I suppose I shall remain a robin for a while longer," she mused. "I like to change, you see. My fox friend here never changes, not anymore. And what shall you be, hm?"

"My name is Andrew."

She made a rude noise with her mouth and waved a hand. "What is a name but a label on the vessel of a soul? I don't care much for vessels, I'd rather speak with the soul of a person. So what shall you be?"

She leaned close and made a show of sniffing at him and wiggling her fingers in a mystical way. Neil smiled to watch her, knowing she was mostly putting on a show for her own amusement and to confuse Andrew even more. “Ah, I have it,” she announced smugly, and flashed a triumphant look at Neil. “A dragon with a fire-soul, how fitting.”

Neil raised his eyebrows. “Do you mean—”

“Yes, yes, of course I mean that,” his friend said with a roll of her eyes. “Do keep up, my fox. Now, dragon, your foxling has been telling me all about these problems with this army and strange magic and hybrid dragons and lots of other messes. And I’ll get to those issues in but a moment. My main concern right now is the fact you’ve fucked each other so thoroughly and sweetly your magics have entwined.”

Neil covered his eyes with his hand as heat flared throughout his body again in embarrassment. Beside him, Andrew went rigid and tense.

“I mean, it’s kind of sweet, but mostly just stupid. But then I suppose that’s love for you, hm?” The witch said slyly. “Not to worry, I have a solution. Simply pop a question, have a quick chase around the bedroom to make it official and it should all be sorted. Easy, right?”

Andrew stared at her blankly for a long time before turning that heavy gaze on Neil. “What is she talking about?”

“Handfasting,” Neil replied quietly, unable to hold his eye. “Marriage. But if you don’t want that, we’ll find another way to separate our magic.”

“What if I don’t want to separate it?”

Neil didn’t dare look up. “Andrew, it’s dangerous. You’ve only just gained bare control over your own power – adding mine to the mix would only cause problems. And I’ve had a taste of what sharing your magic is like, and I’d be afraid of what I could do with that sort of raw power at my fingertips.”

“So?” Andrew asked, and Neil’s heart almost stopped. “Your control is excellent, and I could always learn. I have no need for endless power, I’d stop you from abusing it or becoming like your father’s people. It would balance.”

“As sweet as that is,” the forest witch cut in with a smile, “At the moment there’s no boundary to it – you’ve just got magic flowing back and forth between you like the ebb and flow of a tide. That kind of thing is unstable, and likely to explode out of control the longer it goes on.”

Andrew was silent a long time, and his reply, when it came, took all the breath from Neil’s lungs.

“No,” he said, staring into the fire. “I won’t get handfasted for this.”

“That’s okay,” Neil faked a light tone, turning his face away to hide his disappointment. “We’ll think of something else.”

There was a sticky, awkward silence that Neil hated with every hurting beat of his heart.

Andrew finally broke it with a gentle hand on Neil’s wrist and a soft call of his name. “Neil... do you want that?”

Neil hesitated, then gave a miserable nod. There was a little sound, like a breath catching in Andrew's throat, and his arms wound so carefully around Neil and pulled him into a close embrace. He could feel Andrew press his face into Neil's hair and take a few shuddering breaths. His voice was a quiet rumble, rockfall in the distance, warm and intimate against Neil's ear.

"I want that too, Neil. I want to make you mine forever, you know I do. But not now, not for this reason. If we're to join union... I don't want it to be out of necessity. I want it to be because we're ready and it feels right. I don't want to rush this."

Neil's whole body sagged with tender relief – he'd been terrified that he had completely misread Andrew's affection recently, had read far too much into his words and kisses. But to hear that he wanted the same thing that Neil had discovered he yearned for only that day, though the longing had been buried deep in his soul for so long without understanding...

Andrew very gently laid a kiss to the side of Neil's jaw and held him tight. "It's something I've thought about for so long. Of making a home with you, in your house, or out on the plains, finally feeling at home in your smile. Neil, of course I want that. But not like this. Not for the convenience. It shouldn't be done for such a cold reason, when we have many better reasons for it."

Neil bit his lip over the vulnerable sound that threatened to burst from his chest and grabbed hard at Andrew's hand. Andrew squeezed back just as tightly, burying his face for a minute in Neil's hair. It took them the span of many breaths to calm themselves again, though their grip on each other didn't loosen one bit. The forest witch pretended to be invisible, and watched the twilight stars peek out from the darkening sky instead.

"Tell me what's going on in the town, and with the invasion," Neil asked when he was able to speak calmly again.

Andrew kissed his cheek and began to speak. It seemed Wymack did indeed have a good amount of clout with far too many army commanders and mercenary groups, and his messages of an invasion force threatening to eradicate their dragons and subdue all the lands south of the mountains was spurring them all into action. An army of their own was assembling out in the dragonlands and stretching back almost to the frontier, its ranks growing with each day as scared villagers from all over flooded to it to try and defend their homes, and more and more military groups took offense to the Moriyamas' ambitions on yet another land they had no right to claim. It seemed that official forces governed by the kings and queens of the lands were being slower to assemble; it was clear they didn't believe, or didn't want to believe, the word of a raving dragon herder from the hinterlands. They wouldn't intervene until it was far too late. Apparently Kevin was taking it on himself to relay information between all the interested parties, and had been bringing Andrew news; he had visited just the day before, then raced off to spur more towns and settlements into looking to their defences.

"How's Aaron doing?" Neil asked quietly.

Andrew's jaw clenched. "He won't leave for Kingstown. He refuses to go. I always wanted him to grow more of a spine, but he's chosen a very inconvenient moment for it."

"Why won't he go?"

Andrew's lip curled a little in derision, but Neil could see the secret pride in him. "He says that if there's going to be a war, he'll be needed to patch up the wounded. He says it's his duty to stay

where he's most needed, and help the most he can. I think that midwife he was making moon eyes over has convinced him to stand up somehow."

"She's a physician," Neil corrected him gently and kissed his cheek. "Sounds like you two are more similar than you thought. Is he still being a jerk?"

Andrew's brow creased a little. "Less of one," he admitted begrudgingly. "He even tried to apologise for some of the things he said about me, you – us. That argument we had. It wasn't a very good apology. But I suppose he was trying."

Neil raised both eyebrows incredulously and stroked over Andrew's hand. "That's something, I suppose."

"I think he was just trying to impress that physician he likes," Andrew said dismissively. "I doubt he really means it."

Neil didn't reply, just kissed his cheek again softly. Only time would tell if Aaron's efforts were genuine. He gently let the matter drop and asked for more details on the armies. It seemed that the Moriyama army had tried to push through the pass several times in the past fortnight, but were meeting stern resistance from a force of dragon herders and locals with their homes on the line obstructing them at every turn and blocking their routes through the mountains.

"The dragons are becoming a problem," Andrew added and rubbed thoughtfully at his jaw. "The controlled ones. They can pop out of thin air with no warning, burn a camp to the ground, and vanish again. The only counter-measure we have are our own dragons, and they aren't fast enough. The Wesninski dragons are raiding all along the frontier and dragonlands, killing anything they find that moves and destroying crops that haven't been harvested yet. If they can't get the main force through the mountains before the snows come, they'll try and starve us this winter so we can't fight them in the spring when the snow melts enough for the passes to clear. It's not looking good."

There wasn't much anyone could say to that to immediately solve the problem, though Neil's friend did her best with a cheery suggestion that they all go to sleep and think on it with fresh minds in the morning. Lacking any better suggestions, they followed her into the security of the bramble fence and set up camp for the night.

As they lay curled up together under the canopy, waiting for sleep to carry them away, Neil turned his head to whisper to Andrew.

"Do you really want to marry me?"

Andrew didn't stir much other than to smooth a hand over Neil's head. "Yes," he said softly, simply.

Neil rested his palm over Andrew's chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart as always. Sleep came easily.

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The next morning, they sat and discussed the cruel magic Lola had cooked up for hours but were no closer to a solution.

“What are your instincts telling you?” The forest witch asked him abruptly, narrowing her eyes at him.

Neil sighed and rubbed at his temples. “I just want to go home for a day or two and sleep in my own bed. I want my house. I want my garden. I want to rest for a day.”

Something flashed across her face, something wary and afraid and resigned all at once. But it was gone in a flash, replaced with her usual bright smile. She gave a rippling trill of thoughtful skylark, and flapped her hand. “Then home you shall trot, my fox.”

“What about these controlled dragons? What are we supposed to do about them?”

The witch looked at them both with an unusually sombre expression. Her gaze strayed to Andrew as she said, “You’ll know what to do.”

A chill ran up Neil’s spine and he unconsciously grabbed for Andrew’s hand to hold him tight. Andrew clutched him just as tightly. The witch pretended not to notice their unease and sang a few low, fluting notes in farewell.

“I’ll see you soon, my fox. Be safe.”

“Alright, little robin,” Neil replied with as much levity as he could muster. It fell undeniably flat. “Soon.”

She waved them off with a melancholy air and Andrew tugged Neil close to his side as they walked out of her domain, his whole body tense. “That was creepy,” he muttered.

“She just does that sometimes,” Neil said with a quick smile, trying to convince himself too. “She spends a lot of time looking for omens and portents. Did you go into my house while you were in town?”

“No,” Andrew said. “It’s your house, I wouldn’t want to intrude. Do you want me to help you clear the dust?”

Neil considered it, but smiled and shook his head. “No, thank you. I think I need a bit of time there alone.”

Andrew nodded his understanding and leaned over to kiss Neil’s cheek. They walked in silence under the trees, heading back towards the little town that had become Neil’s home. When they broke free of the trees and Neil saw the very familiar loop of the river and the slight hill that hid his home from view, he couldn’t stop himself from straining forward towards it.

“I’ll go check on Aaron,” Andrew said, giving him a sideways look. “I’ll see you tonight?”

“Definitely,” Neil smiled. “You should get to sleep in a bed tonight too. We can warm up my blankets.”

Andrew twitched a smile in response and they shared a fond, sweet kiss. Andrew patted his chest lightly before taking his share of the packs and starting off for the town at an easy lope. Neil would have watched him until he passed out of sight, but his home was calling to him and he was desperate to see it again after months away and all that had happened since.



The house looked the same as he approached – a little skewed and awkward, built by a novice in a hurry, leaning to one side in places. The roof was uneven and the thatching needed redoing sometime before winter set in, and the garden was hopelessly overgrown and running wild with weeds and opportunists. It would take a lot of work to get it straightened out again, but Neil would relish that if it meant this war was over and they were safe, if he had time to worry about his garden again.

He stood outside his door for a moment, taking it in again and not trying to swallow down the homesickness he had been repressing for weeks and months. The place looked secure, just as he had left it. With a trembling hand he unlocked the door and stepped inside at last.

It was just as he had left it, and tears pricked his eyes. There was a musty sort of smell from all the herbs packed away and the rooms being shut up and needing airing out, a mixture of soil and plants and dust, but that would be easy enough to fix. He walked around his front room silently, touching his fingertips to all his belongings and tools and furniture sitting just where he had left them. He spared a moment to rest his hands on the uneven mantel he had carved himself, feeling the oh-so-familiar nicks and irregularities in the wood that had then been smoothed over by repeated touches.

He turned towards the bedroom and halted in his tracks – the dangling dragonscale charm that hung in the doorway looked... odd. With Aaron and Andrew in the town, he would have expected the hazel scale to be swinging about like it had in the spring, and he had several other charms suspended from it meant to detect danger. The whole thing should have been spinning and moving in some way, but it was completely still, almost as if it had been frozen.

Neil stepped closer to it, all the comfort and relief he had felt at being home again being washed away under the cold sweat of anxiety. He watched his hand reach towards the charm with silent horror, yelling in his mind *not to touch it* that there must be something wrong, but he couldn't stop his hand moving and he was reaching out against his will and *no no no*

His fingers touched the dragonscales and the world vanished in a flash of sour magic and old blood. He was spinning, he was nothing, he was being taken apart and stitched together again with razorwire, colours swelled and popped around him like soap bubbles and through it all he wanted it to stop, he just wanted it to stop *oh please let it stop* he was a dust mote in a hurricane, he was a dragon with crystal sewn under his skin, he was a droplet in the ocean, he was a landmass groaning under the weight of all the life upon it, he was everywhere and nowhere and he could feel magic all around him but none of his own to touch, he couldn't feel anything he could grab hold of and use, he was abandoned to the terror for hours, days, years and was screaming into the void of silence, he was lost and dead and reborn every second, he was in agony, he was formless, he was nothing...

He was suddenly, shockingly, spat out by the world onto the earth, every nerve ending sparking and every muscle spasming and locking. His body – suddenly he had a body again – was so unbearably heavy after the weightless spinning and he could control none of it. He seized and shook and trembled out of control, gasping for breath and begging the world to stop and slow down for just a moment.

But he was not alone in his torment.

“Nathaniel,” a silky voice purred, “So good of you to drop by.”

He jerked and would have run if he could get control of his body for just one second. He tried to get control of himself, tried to push his feet against the ground and get up, but Lola just laughed and laid the unmistakable edge of a blade against his throat, pressing just hard enough to be in real

danger of slitting his throat. Neil froze as much as he could with his muscles still shaking and cramping.

“Ah-ah,” Lola chuckled, “None of that. We’ve gone through a lot of trouble to get you in our sights again, don’t make me have to kill you too soon. That would be such a wasted effort.”

Neil dragged his gaze up the shining edge of the blade to Lola’s hated face, and her wide blood-red smile.

“Still as unhinged as ever, I see,” he muttered and leaned back from the blade as much as he could.

She pouted, like a small child offended by being given the smallest slice of cake. “There’s no need to be rude, Nathaniel. I *am* your new mother, after all.”

An animalistic snarl of disgust rumbled in Neil’s throat and he lunged out with one uncoordinated arm. She was ready for him though, and whipped the knife across his forearm in a slash of silvery movement, breaking the momentum of his swing and deflecting the hit. He felt the sting of the blade immediately and cried out in surprise at the fiery burn of it, like strong spirit on a wound. He cradled his arm into his chest and carefully inspected the long cut she had made in his skin, and blanched.

The cut was shallow, he’d definitely received far worse, but the skin all around the laceration was bubbled and hot to the touch less than a second later, swelling up even as pain pulsed through his arm and seemed to grip tight around his bone, white-hot and only getting hotter. His arm was shaking uncontrollably again, from the pain this time, and Neil could feel the sickly taint of unwanted foreign magic lingering in the wound and burrowing under his skin and muscle, knitting itself within him like a parasite.

“Do you like my new knife?” Lola asked cheerily, dabbing drops of his blood off the keen edge. “Such a useful one. Saves a lot of time.”

“You’ve poisoned me,” Neil gasped out.

Lola rolled her eyes. “What would be the point of that? No, you child, it’s cursed. Do keep up. If you’re curious what it does, just try and heal your wound. Go on.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. Despite knowing it couldn’t end well for him to do as she wanted, the agony was making it difficult to think clearly. He knew how to call up a touch of magic to seal a wound and help a scar vanish; he’d done it many times on minor injuries to himself and those around him. It had never worked on his oldest and deepest scars, but it always worked for the smaller injuries. He clenched his jaw in preparation for the repercussions, and reached for his magic.

And was met with a yawning, sucking chasm right through the very centre of his soul.

He reached for it desperately, like a falling man clawing at the air for purchase, unable to believe the absence of something so fundamental to his very being. He called and reached and screamed for his power to rise to his mind’s eye, and found only empty blankness as deep as an ocean and twice as cold.

He threw himself out of his mind, gasping and shaking, while Lola laughed merrily and played with her cursed knife.

“Clever, isn’t it?” She preened. “You won’t be able to touch your magic at all while its curse lingers in your body. So you might have learned some neat tricks in the past few years and learned a lot from that bitch Mary, but it won’t do you any good now Nathaniel.”

Neil tried again and again to grab at his magic, at anything he was so used to feeling instinctively for years and years, but it was as if the natural world and all its mysterious currents and energies had gone dark. Lola laughed at him with each attempt, as he became increasingly desperate with each wave of renewed pain that pulsed from the wound on his arm.

After a little while Lola seemed to get bored of watching him squirm so much and bleed so little, and gave a curt order to the soldiers pretending they weren’t there to restrain him. He tried to fight them, tried to land any blow at all on any part of them, but his body was in shock and rebelling against him, and they easily overpowered him. In a few desperate moments, he was tied to a metal bracket the height of the tent, his limbs splayed out to each corner and tied tightly to it. His hand and feet started to throb and tingle almost immediately as the cords started to cut off circulation. With a cruel smirk, Lola looped another cord around his throat and tightened it to the pole just tight enough so that every panicked breath was only just enough, so he was verging on suffocation with every inhale. He tried to wriggle free from his bonds, but he was tied too tightly to the device, was too vulnerable, and panic began to spiral through him.

“Sadly your father is a little busy getting ready for the invasion,” Lola said as she cut his shirt from his body and tossed it away like a worthless rag, exposing his mauled and damaged skin to the cool air. “But he’ll join us in a while. He has some things he wants to ask you. In the meantime though, I’m to make sure you’re feeling suitably co-operative for his questions.”

And her knife descended upon him over and over, splitting skin and burying caustic magic deep into his veins, rooting through his nerves and making them squeal in pain. She worked her way up his arms in lazy loops and bloody spirals, his skin blistering in its wake. He yelled himself hoarse as she lingered on his hands, plunging the tip into his knuckles and the delicate skin of his palm and between his fingers, lacerating them as if he’d been juggling glass shards. As she worked on his skin and made blood and sweat drip from his frame, she questioned him about his time on the run. She asked about his mother, the places they’d travelled, the people they’d come in contact with, the favours they’d traded and lives they’d lived. As a reward for each answer she wrung from him, she would let him breathe and stop cutting him as he spoke. If she distrusted his answer, he was punished even more severely.

Soon Neil was in a haze, unsure if he was spilling all his secrets or screaming silently in his mind, conscious only of the agony tearing through his body and the stinging tears dripping salt into the cuts on his cheeks.

A blow to his slashed cheek startled a cry from him, and Lola slapped him again to shut him up. “Now, is your tongue feeling good and loose Nathaniel?”

He groaned wordlessly, his whole body throbbing with agony and the unnatural burn of Lola’s cursed blade cutting him off from the magic that had sustained him and sang through his soul for over a decade. She smacked him again and he bit his tongue bloody trying not to scream.

“Fuck you,” he gurgled when he could breathe again.

“That’s no way to speak to your mother,” a cold voice said from behind him, and Neil froze up completely, his breath turned to ice in his lungs.

Lord Nathan stepped around the wreck of his erstwhile son to join his new wife. His eyes were glacial and his sneer savagely pleased as he surveyed her handiwork and caressed her cheek in praise. He took the knife from her proffered hands and held it to Neil's eye, pressing just enough to let a trickle of blood run down from his eyelid like a tear.

"Little Nathaniel is all grown up now," Nathan said softly, his gaze boring into his son's terrified face. "I suppose you thought I'd given up on dragging you and that worthless bitch of a woman who birthed you back home, teaching you to do better than wander off again. I suppose you thought you were safe from the consequences of embarrassing me in front of the king."

"I was a child," Neil gasped out. "I just wanted to be safe."

Nathan's lip curled and he flicked the razor-sharp edge of the blade under Neil's eye in reprimand. "Who gave you permission to speak?"

Neil said nothing. He knew he was going to die here – he knew it with the same certainty that the sun would rise in the east and an acorn would always fall to the ground. His father would not suffer him to get away another time. Neil was going to die here in extreme pain. He was never going to see his friends again. He'd never go home. He'd never see the dragons spiral up on the air currents and sing their joy to the wind. He'd never feel Andrew's kiss, or see his eyes shine as he watched his flock.

*I'm sorry, he cast the thought out into the world, hoping it would reach Andrew, but knowing that without his magic there was no connection, and he was speaking to the void. I'm sorry, dear one. I don't want to abandon you too, but it's out of my hands now.*

"You do not have permission to speak, but you have all the leave in the world to scream your lying throat raw," Nathan breathed, and the agony began anew.

Neil closed his eyes and went limp against his restraints even as his father carved into his skin and worked the blade as painfully and skilfully as he knew how. Neil didn't want to give his father the satisfaction of seeing him struggle. He would slip quietly into death, ruin the triumph, maintain as much of his dignity as he could. He would think of his friends, the family he had formed for himself, and let the memory of their love carry him into velvet rest.

*Andrew, Neil thought as he disconnected his awareness from the pain in his body, conjuring up all his memories of the man and all their hopes for the future. Andrew. I'm going to miss you. You're amazing, and I only regret not loving you for longer.*

*Abram!*

The voice snapped his head round like a physical blow – acerbic and frustrated and rough and as familiar as smoke.

*Abram! She yelled. Don't you dare give up, not now and not ever. Have you forgotten everything I taught you?*

Nathan paused in his fun at the way Neil went rigid. And through the haze of pain, Neil heard the chilling sound of a wolf howling in full daylight, eerie and piercing as a banshee. Then a howling shriek and a bellowing roar overlaid it, the unmistakable sound of an enraged dragon with a throat full of fire ready to lay waste to those who caught its gaze.

Lola and Nathan ran out of the tent without another glance, yelling for their soldiers to form up and launch spears and arrows at the dragons above. Neil sagged against his restraints, trying to marshal his foggy brain to usefulness. Because his mother was dead – he'd checked her pulse himself and held her cooling body. There was no way he could have heard her voice.

Another wolf howl echoed into the bright midday, quickly followed by human cries of fear and pain and the snarling of an angry animal. They came closer and closer to Neil's tent, and the soldiers still standing guard over him ventured out with blades drawn. A flash of grey, a crunch of bone, and two heavy thumps as the guards fell to the ground in crimson-soaked arcs.

A wolf loped through the opening of the tent, rock-grey and massive. Her eyes were pale yellow and her throat and muzzle was streaked with gore. She was as tall at her powerful shoulder as Neil's hip, and she stopped just in front of him and regarded him with coldly intelligent eyes.

*Not yet, Abram,* her voice rasped in his mind, and Neil could only stare. *We all have tasks to complete first.*

She stepped gracefully around the blood pooling at his feet and bared her rust-coloured canines to delicately nip and nibble at the cords holding him tied to the metal bracket. Once she'd freed one hand Neil could help with the rest, and in a few moments he was staggering light-headed away from the bracket. Without thinking about it, he rested a stinging hand on the wolf's shoulder and steadied himself from falling. Rather than bite his hand off at the wrist, she leaned closer so her back and side pressed up against his wobbly legs. A rush of warmth and magic surged into him from the contact, so familiar and so alien at the same time. The pain of his many gashes faded to the back of his mind as magic swept in to numb the wounds and start healing them and purging the bitter curse like pus in an infected wound.

*Let's move, Abram,* the wolf instructed him, and they did. Neil kept his hand in the thick fur of her ruff to steady himself, drawing on the magic offered to soothe his frayed nerves and shredded skin even if the curse laid into them prevented a proper healing. He paid no mind to the savaged corpses strewn in their path, or the fire pouring from the sky like deadly rain or the immense roars of dragons waging battle on each other. He walked instead beside the wolf as she led him out of the sprawling enemy army camp and towards the woods. As they walked, thoughts began to crystallise in Neil's mind.

His father had to be stopped. The dragons must be saved. The army must be turned back. He had his father's blood and his mother's magic, and there had to be a reason he had been steered here by fate.

An enormous shape wheeled in the sky above them, a shining russet flashing light back to the sun. The dragon broke off her attack on the camp and turned towards Neil and his lupine companion, seeming to dive towards them. Neil found he couldn't be afraid, not when so much had happened to him that day. So he watched quite calmly as a dragon bore down on him and almost flattened him with her wings, banking up at the last minute while a shape vaulted off her back and ran towards him. For the space of a few breaths Neil thought it was an enemy soldier coming to finish him on Nathan's orders, but then Neil properly saw the flashing blonde hair and fierce hazel eyes, and nearly collapsed in sheer relief.

"Andrew," he whispered, staggering against the wolf. "Oh gods, Andrew."

His lover nearly bowled him over, stopping from grabbing him at the last minute as he saw the many, many cuts and lines marked into his skin and the blisters swelling up at their edges. They

stared at each other for one heart-stopping moment, words so unnecessary and inadequate to express their relief and joy and rage.

Andrew swallowed thickly, his jaw and throat working hard, and reached into the small bag tied into his belt. From it, he pulled a small stack of beautiful, shimmering dragon scales.

“This needs to end,” he said in a gravelly voice, and held them out to Neil with pure faith shining in his eyes.

“I can’t,” Neil croaked even as he took the smooth, cool scales in his abused hands. “I can’t touch my magic at the moment. I can’t even feel it.”

Andrew looked at him gravely, then reached out and laid his hand gently over Neil’s bleeding chest. At the touch of their bare skin, Neil gasped. He could feel Andrew’s heart beating like a galloping horse, the breath in his lungs, the wind against his skin. He could taste smoke and coals at the back of his throat as magic coursed through his veins red-hot and ready to burn out of control.

“But you can feel mine, because you’re carrying traces of it with you,” Andrew said. “They couldn’t block that from you. So use mine.”

“Andrew—”

“I allow you to do it,” Andrew interrupted him firmly and held out his hand. “I trust you, Neil. Stop all this from getting worse. Use my power.”

Neil stared into his serious, passionate eyes and saw no reservation, only trust and the deep-seated knowledge that this was *right*. So Neil laid his hand in Andrew’s grasp, leaned on the wolf with one hip, and settled his other hand over the stack of dragonscales. And he *soared*.

Magic bore him up on invisible wings, flying high above the ground with the squadron of dragons under Kevin, Jeremy and Jean’s command. He saw the camp-turned-battlefield below, with soldiers scrambling to fight off the force of wildfolk attacking from all sides with desperation as their whetstone, and the half-wild dragons soaring in perfect attack formations above, setting fire to the tents and supplies and soldiers ten-a-penny with each breath. He felt the earth tremble from all the witches trying to use its power to best each other, felt each footfall like a moth’s wings, felt every drop of spilled blood soak into the soil. He was bodiless, he was painless, he was vast. Smoky magic and bonfire breath sustained him, pulsed through him like a lightning strike that never ended. He could rearrange the stars, he could flatten the trees with a puff of his breath, he could reverse the tides with such raw, unfettered power in his grasp.

He watched from a distance as his body walked with Andrew and the wold back into the camp. He was everywhere and nowhere at once, and it was glorious.

As if through a cracked glass, Neil saw himself approaching Nathan’s central command tent. Wreathed in magic as he was, he could see the wards laid on it clearer than day. Clumsy things, but with vicious power behind them to eviscerate anyone who wasn’t Nathan or Lola from entering without his permission. Neil didn’t bother to even try and dismantle the wards – Lola was too fond of sealing her charms with blood, and Neil carried his father’s blood with every beat of his heart. He walked right through the wards as if they were made of cobwebs, and his companions passed through without a scratch from being joined so tightly to him.

The command tent was empty, as its leaders were busy rallying their forces for the fight. And laid out on the table, next to a map with pins and pieces of wood placed precisely where other armies were, marking out attack routes, was a pile of grisly talismans. They were made of dragon teeth and scales and sinew, bloody little charms, smeared in sickly corrupted magic and echoes of pain and ichor.

He and Andrew looked down at the pile of horrific talismans, and as one reached out Andrew's hand. A whisper of Neil's will, and flame burst from Andrew's fingers, finally permitted to break his skin and burn on the empty air. His skin was not burned or even warmed by the white-hot flames he held, and he calmly extended his flaming hand to the pile of gruesome remains. A touch of his finger, and the whole sorry pile ignited and started to disintegrate from the heat.

The sound of dragon roars only intensified as each token was destroyed, and Neil felt the pain and relief of the controlled dragons wash over him as the enchantments that bound them to Lola's will broke. It tugged on Andrew's soul, and Neil felt it echo against his own.

In a flash of understanding, Neil deepened the connection between them and buried himself in the feeling of Andrew's magic. Together they reached out to the hundreds of dragons in the air above them, and as one they responded to him with joy and willingness. He called them gently to his will without a hint of coercion or violence, and they were more than willing to be drawn to his cause. A whisper of his intent, and the dragons that had been forced into agonising servitude turned gleefully on their former masters. What had been a pitched battle quickly became a rout, and before long the hardened soldiers were breaking and running for cover under the onslaught of fire and talons and wings.

Neil drew back a little from the carnage, but forced himself to steel his will. He couldn't allow this army to regroup, to invade after all. He couldn't allow his father's corruption to spread even further, and he finally had the power to stop it once and for all. With the power of the dragon scales and the ever-burning fire of Andrew's dragon-hearted soul, he extended his senses like an invisible hand over the camp, and brought down his unholy judgement.

The earth shook under his blow and crevasses opened up, giant yawning pits to swallow the soldiers and all their supplies. A fissure began to rip open at the base of the mountains, like a huge moat, blocking the army from any possible way of getting through the mountains. Screams joined the sound of tearing, grinding rock, and Neil threw himself out of the magic with a gasp. He dropped the dragonscales and they shattered into dust the second he let go, all their innate power sucked dry. He dropped Andrew's hand and fell heavily to his knees as the cacophony of fear and death surrounded him, of his own making.

Andrew was saying something, trying to get him to stand, saying he had done what was best, he had to stand up and they had to move, but Neil enveloped himself in the awful blankness of the curse separating him from touching his magic. *Never again*, he thought to himself in horror. *I am no better than my father.*

As if the thought had conjured him, Nathan staggered through the heaving earth and dust-filled air. Blood and burns oozed over his face and he seemed utterly mad as he stalked towards them with murder in his eyes.

The wolf moved forward and Neil dropped his hand from her ruff. As he watched, she stood between him and his deranged father as she had done many times before. Her form seemed to

shimmer and shudder until a woman stood there in place of the wolf, small in stature but large in courage. Nathan stopped in his tracks to see her, eyes bulging almost out of their sockets.

“Mary?” He said in confusion.

“Hello again Nathan,” she replied in that hoarse, brittle-edged voice that Neil had missed so much. But there was a serenity to her Neil had never seen, a sense of calm confidence as if she knew exactly what to do and how to do it. a far cry from the paranoid, irrational and violently suspicious woman Neil had come to love and loathe in equal measures.

“But you’re dead,” Nathan said.

“Only in some senses of the word,” Mary said, quite calmly. “My body died before I could fulfil the purpose of my days, that’s all. And now the time has finally come to finish this, once and for all.”

Before anyone could take a breath, she reached out with a hand wreathed in moonlight-coloured magic, pearlescent and burning hot. Her fingers grabbed in a claw, and the milky light wrapped itself around Nathan’s body. He lifted into the air and scrabbled at his throat, his face turning purple.

“Goodbye, Nathan,” Mary said calmly, and tossed his corpse with a negligent flick of her wrist to crumple lifeless and pathetic on the ground.

Mary turned to her son with a beatific smile that wiped away all the years of pain and hardship that Neil remembered so well. She smiled at him with love and affection, not an ounce of resentment or distraction.

“My son,” she said warmly. There didn’t seem to be any other words, and she looked instead to Andrew. “Look after him better than I could,” she charged him, and Andrew nodded gravely.

As Neil watched, his mother died a second time. This time, there was no distressing gurgle of breath, no oozing of blood, no ash-hot bones to bury. Instead there was a gentle light as her magic bloomed from under her skin, and her substance broke apart like petals on the wind until there wasn’t even a speck of dust on the ground to show she had, however briefly, walked the earth on two feet once more.

Grief choked Neil, and before he knew it he was screaming and pounding his aching fists on the ruptured ground. He wept for his mother, for the thousands of people he had condemned to death with a blink of his eyes, for the destruction he had been so willing to cause, for the pain in his body and the horror of what he had done.

He screamed and cursed the sky until he could do nothing but sink into Andrew’s warm arms and weep, broken and bruised and scarred in more than just his skin. As he blocked everything out and tried to purge the pain from his body, Andrew stroked his hair and told him over and over, “It’s over now Neil. I’ve got you. It’s all over.”

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Neil spent many months wandering between guilt and horror at what he had done, and longing for sleep to bury it all deep once more. Through it all, his friends and his family cared for him.



The forest witch made her amends for steering him down such a path by spending months at his bedside with her herbs and enchantments, attempting and failing to draw out the curse Lola had carved into him and healing his wounds one poultice at a time. She let him rage and weep and refuse to talk, and through it all her hands were gentle and her company sadly understanding, and repentant.

Aaron and Katelyn hardly left him alone, either. While the forest witch tried to heal his magical and psychic scars, they tended to his physical ailments with all their skill. At first Neil had thought Aaron would refuse to treat him – being a corrupt heathen who had seduced his brother, after all. But it seemed that months under Katelyn’s harshly honest hand had wrought quite a change in him.

The wildfolk and dragon herders Neil had befriended at Wymack’s camp called in on him too. Dan and Matt brought comfort and unconditional love and understanding, Renee brought forgiveness and the hope of a better future. Allison brought brash fire to survive, and even Seth the blacksmith brought a caustic drive to get better and be better. Wymack, Abby and Bee could almost fill the newly-opened hole of grief that Mary’s sudden appearance and death had torn in him, and in their gentle care he could feel those old wounds begin to knit together once more.

The townsfolk took turns in helping the others, and brought extra food and clothes to him when they were needed. Roland let him stay in one of his inn’s rooms for months, knowing he was unable to face going back into his home. These people who Neil had patched up and protected and cured of their illnesses gathered around him to repay his service with kindness.

And of course, Andrew was there with him the whole way. He understood as no one else could the terrible, awesome power that Neil had briefly wielded, and the choking relief and regret that he could no longer touch his own magic. He helped bathe Neil’s wounds, combed his hair when Neil couldn’t face leaving his bed, told him stories and kept him company. He gave soft kisses and gentle embraces when they were needed, and soothed away the frequent nightmares. He hardly left Neil’s side, even when Neil couldn’t stand the sight of himself and all his scars, and all they reminded him of.

Kevin frequently passed through as a messenger of the cobbled-together force that had formed to stop the attempted invasion, and showed no signs of disbanding just yet. It was on one of his flying visits that Neil overheard a very strange conversation between Kevin, Andrew and some of their other friends.

“...confirmation that Riko is dead,” Kevin was saying with quiet satisfaction. “Jean was patrolling and spotted him trying to sneak away and desert the encampment.”

“Riko who?” Roland asked.

“No one important,” Kevin replied, and there was the sound of clinking cups as a toast was drunk to the stranger’s demise. The old Neil would have been curious as to what he meant, but it already felt like he’d been awake too long, with memories pressed jagged and unforgiving against his eyelids, so he closed them and flung himself back into sleep.

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The day after the spring equinox, the forest witch and Andrew joined forces. Without a shred of remorse, they hauled him out of the little room that had become his refuge and his hiding place, and dragged him out to the woods. They sat him down in a clearing of trees by a little pond with the sun shining down on his head, and sat to either side of him.

Andrew took his hand and said very quietly, “You may not have the power anymore, but you are still a witch in your soul. This is where you belong, not stuffed away in a dark room like an invalid. We are still bonded whether you’re cursed or not, and you will always have my permission to use it when you need.”

“Always?” Neil asked in a croaky voice, feeling the warm flutters of Andrew’s fiery magic tingle in his senses, soothing the ever-present ache of being cut off from his own soul’s power.

“Yes,” Andrew replied, and kissed his forehead in blessing.

Under their gentle encouragement, Neil meditated. He opened himself up breath by breath to the world around him, and let Andrew’s magic flicker to his grasp. While his hands shook in fear at what he knew he was capable of, he reached out to a drooping flower and gave it just a drop of power, with a taste like hot coals under his tongue. As he watched it perk up and burst into joyous bloom, he could feel the shadows on his mind and soul begin to recede.

The war had been stopped. His father and all his accomplices were dead. The Moriyamas had retreated back to their lands to lick their wounds. The dragons were safe. Neil’s family was safe. He was alive, and very much wanted no matter what fate had forced him to do.

He was not alone in this, and healing could come to anything that was hurting.

# Epilogue

*Three years later*

Neil stood up from the wild explosion of plants that made up his garden and fondly pushed their stalks away from his face. The wind was picking up and sending them swaying, and he could feel a gentle warmth under his skin starting to grow. He looked up to the bright summer sky and smiled as he watched a bird-like shape swooping closer and closer to him.

His husband was coming home.

Neil tied his long hair back once more and idly picked out the occasional stray leaf and flower that clung to him. He weaved and wended his way through the emerald riot of his garden, plucking a flower here and a fruit there with the intuition of a powerless witch who devoted all his time these days to the careful stewardship of the plants in his care. Andrew had encouraged him with his garden in those fragile first weeks when Neil set foot back in his home, a very different man from the witch who had left it so long before. For while Neil could no longer charm a twist of herbs or set enchantment on the wind, he knew more about the earth and its plants and rhythms and motions than any mundane person could ever hope to dream of. He couldn't make a magical poultice, but he could sure as sunshine make one to draw out infection and encourage healing with nothing more than the natural power of his plants.

It had been a long two months, on his own in his little house on the edge of a nameless frontier town. He'd had his work with Katelyn and Aaron to keep him busy with tending to the town's illnesses and emergencies, and he sometimes helped Roland tend the bar on the busiest nights. He had a small den of foxes living at the end of his garden, and the cubs often snuck into his house to keep him company when his nightmares were too vivid and his dreams too disturbed, pushing their soft noses under his hands and pressing against him for comfort. He wasn't lonely, but he was very glad to see Andrew winging his way back home once more, after spending the time tending to his flock and helping Wymack rebuild the dragonlands, one nesting season and one egg at a time.

The emerald-shining young dragon flying circles down towards him let out an ululating cry of joy and love, and Neil cupped his hands around his mouth to let his own song carry out to her, and her passenger both. The dragon let out a triumphant plume of flame and hurtled down towards the ground. Dewdrop landed in the field across from Neil's home, prancing proudly through the long grass at her achievement even as Neil jogged over to her. He laughed and rubbed his hands over her smoking muzzle in greeting while she blew puffs of smoke at him and rubbed against his chest to get his scent.

"Hello, Dewdrop," Neil smiled fondly, calling back to her with the song of a parent greeting their child. "I missed you too."

Andrew dismounted from the saddle between her wing joints with a thump, staggering a little as he regained his land-legs and calmed the nausea Neil knew flying so high always gave him.

"One day I'm going to sneak up on you," Andrew muttered, his voice as warm and beautifully familiar as ever.

Neil grinned at him. "Not a chance, with this noisy young thing flying you about."

Andrew snorted amusement and stepped up close to fold Neil into his arms, holding him so tight and secure. Neil sank into him with relief, clutching him back just as tightly in mingled hello and welcome. Their kiss was slow and longing, months of separation making everything seem delicate and wondrous. Andrew pushed a little of his magic to dance in Neil's body, and Neil sighed in sweet relief at the feeling of it, of feeling at home and complete once more with Andrew holding him and magic in his grasp once more.

When they could bring themselves to part just long enough to walk inside their house, Andrew reached up with one hand to touch the hazel scale suspended and gently swinging in the doorway. His dragon-scale charm rang out a note, clear as a bell, and stilled once more.

Home at last.



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