



# Soar (Wings 'N' Wands #3)

**Author:** *AJ Sherwood, Jocelynn Drake*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Salem's guide to making a dragon break up with him:

Step 1: Don't sleep with him. (No, seriously, don't.) And definitely don't let him into your apartment, he won't leave.

Step 2: Deny being mates and don't fall in love with him.

...Step one and two failed. Gregori is too stubborn and irresistible.

Salem is currently taking suggestions that don't involve giving in to his feelings.

(Please note, do not try making the dragon jealous. Jealousy sex is too much fun and cannot be resisted. This will backfire.)

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The party was in full swing for the bonding ceremony. Gregori had honestly feared he'd never see the day Dimitri and Sam could bond with each other. He wasn't the only one in the clan, either. It was likely because of that the party was even more boisterous than usual. Relief lifted their spirits. The worst hadn't happened, Sam was fully healed and able to use magic, and he and Dimitri would now have centuries together instead of decades.

Plus, the trio was happily together. The entire clan had spent two hundred and fifty years worrying about Luka and Vasily and what would happen if they ever found their mage. To have all those worries proven to be nothing was a definite relief. Gregori felt like he had given Amaru good advice and a boot in the right direction, though he frankly could not wait for their bonding ceremony. He was going to give an absolutely wicked toast.

A happily ever after indeed.

Sam's family had flown down in force for the ceremony, of course. There were a lot of happy tears and hugs, with only some of it fueled by alcohol. (At least three people had spiked the wedding punch. Gregori knew that for a fact, as he'd watched them do it. No, he hadn't stopped them. Where was the fun in that?)

They'd gone for a beach wedding, and with the sun setting over the water, it was a truly beautiful sight. The blue of the water and the golds, purples, and oranges of the setting sun all washed over the white-and-silver themed decorations. People were dancing on the beach, a few drunkards were singing in the old tongue, and the area was filled with lots of laughter and conversation. Gregori hadn't seen his clan this happy since mages had started popping back up. It was a very, very good evening.

Normally, with a party this good, he'd kick back, drink, and enjoy. But something had caught his attention.

To be specific, someone.

Salem, Sam's twin, wasn't in the throng. He sat on the outside edge, on the grass, watching with a faint smile. The sunset washed over him, touching on that thick, dark brown hair, bathing his paler skin in warm tones. He looked downright edible, in fact.

Yeah. Gregori would love to get his hands on that.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? He took his beer with him as he sauntered over. Salem didn't twitch, just glanced in his direction before focusing again on whatever it was he looked at.

"Mind if I join you?" Gregori waved to a patch of grass near him.

"Feel free."

All right, good start. Gregori dropped into place, sitting close enough to feel the body heat off the man, but far enough away to not crowd him.

"Whatcha staring at?"

"My brother." Salem's faint smile grew. "When he first told us he was coming down here, my parents tried really hard to talk him out of it. I didn't think it was a good idea either, but I recognized there was no talking him out of it, so I didn't argue. Turns out, it was serendipity he did come down here alone. Who knew he was a dragon's mate?"

"No one. But I'm just as happy he did come."

“Happy, relieved, bemused. I’m all of that. Sam’s focus on fixing his core paid off in the end.” Salem shook his head before lifting his beer to his lips. “People have got to stop underestimating my brother. He’s a smart man, he knows what he’s doing.”

“That he is. Any reason why you’re over here and not over there?”

Salem took another swig with a grimace. “Too much gushing. My parents are a little too thrilled Sam’s finally married. They’re positive he’ll be happy now. Also positive they’ll get grandkids soon.”

“Ah. Well, they might at that.” Gregori shrugged in ignorance. He had no idea what Dimitri and Sam had decided in terms of kids.

“Is that all you dragons think about? Mates and kids? You don’t have any fun?”

Oh-ho, look at that expression. Salem eyed him up and down with definite interest. Gregori felt his libido sit up and take notice. “I wouldn’t say that. It’s not like we’re celibate as we wait for our mates to show up.”

“I did hear that.” Salem was definitely interested, leaning in slightly toward Gregori. “Nikki said something about dragons being able to partially shift. And doing really fun things with their tongues.”

“It’s a skill we all develop.” Gregori leaned in as well, putting his mouth closer to Salem’s ear. “If you’d like a demonstration, I’d be happy to oblige.”

“Oh, I’m definitely interested in a demonstration,” Salem purred back.

“How about we go inside?” Gregori offered. “Four walls, A/C, and lube await in my room.”

“Lead the way.”

Fuck yeah. The only thing that could make tonight even better was hot jungle sex, and it looked like Gregori was going to get lucky.

He tried not to look too eager as he stood up, offering Salem a hand. The mage took it with a smile that was filled with anticipation. His hand felt good in Gregori’s—a little too perfect, truth be told. Keeping on the outskirts of the party, he led the way inside. Gregori’s room was toward the middle of the courtyard area, along the left side, and there was basically no one there except a drunk guest sleeping on one of the benches.

Gregori pushed his door open, setting his beer down on the console table near the door. Salem promptly did the same, kicking off his sandals, then he seized Gregori by the hips and pushed him back against the closed door.

Oh, so that’s how it was going to be? Fine by him. He went easily, letting Salem lead. Salem was a few inches shorter, but not enough to deter either of them. He leaned in, snaring Gregori’s mouth with his. The man’s mouth was hot and tasted like beer and male, and Gregori was enamored immediately.

He kissed back, wanting more, hungry for every taste he could find. He toyed with the hem of Salem’s shirt, lifting it and finding warm skin underneath. Mm, lovely. That all felt amazing.

Salem broke the kiss enough to pull his shirt completely off, then reached for Gregori’s. Gregori cooperated, wanting more skin-on-skin contact. The second those were out of the way, tossed carelessly aside, he dove back into the kiss. He just could not get enough of this man’s mouth. It was like a gateway drug.

He felt his breathing ramp up, his whole body flaring to life as his libido kicked in. This man was far too delicious under him, sweetly responsive and hot as fuck. He

grabbed the waist of Salem's shorts and tugged at them, needing them off. Salem's hands found his as well, pulling at them roughly, off and down.

Gregori kicked both shorts and boxers aside, relieved when Salem did the same, then got his hands on a perfect ass. Mm, yes, so very sweet under his hands.

Salem groaned into his mouth. "Ass play is my weakness."

"Happy to oblige."

He walked Salem back toward the bedroom, tongue tangling with the other man's. Truly, he'd never kissed a sweeter mouth than this one.

Their breaths came harder, more like pants, skin heating up.

Salem pulled back, flushed, lips parted in a way that turned Gregori on even further. "Do you eat ass?"

"I'll eat you out until you're begging," Gregori promised him. His dragon was strangely excited about this and threw in a deep rumble under the words.

"Promises, promises," Salem murmured wickedly before falling back onto the bed without a care, spreading his legs in invitation. Stretched out like this on top of the covers, he was definitely a picture. Salem was a highly attractive man, leanly built, and from the tan lines on his shoulders and thighs, he spent a good portion of time outdoors. Those deep, ocean blue eyes were full of invitation as he looked up at Gregori.

Gregori was all too happy to take that invitation. He knelt at the edge of the bed, lifting both of Salem's thighs up to rest on his shoulders. Salem was curious about how a dragon did rimming? Oh, he'd show him rimming.

He eased into it like a tease, tracing that puckered ring ever so slowly, just getting the taste of it on his tongue. Then he eased his tongue into it, a gentle fuck.

Salem's thighs quivered in his hands, a garbled sound coming from his throat.

This one definitely liked ass play, all right. Gregori internally grinned even as he partially shifted his mouth, lengthening his tongue several centimeters.

"Ahh, ah, oh god," Salem said with a groan.

Seemed like he enjoyed it. Now, to really have fun.

Gregori doubled down, fucking his long tongue in and out, sometimes widening it, hearing the noises pouring out of Salem's mouth, the man too gone to form words. His thighs kept tightening over Gregori's shoulders, then relaxing, unable to stay still under the rimming.

Honestly, Gregori could do this all day. He loved every second of it. Feeling that tight channel loosen around his tongue felt divine, too. The only thing better than this would be sliding in and fucking the man silly.

"Gre—" Salem gasped under a particularly strong thrust and had to try again. "Gregori?—"

Gregori hummed, more like a thrum in his throat, which he knew would make his entire tongue vibrate.

Salem thrashed under it, nearly sobbing. Ooh, that was a fun reaction. Let's do that again.

On the second foray, Salem did sob, nerves overloaded with pleasure. His hands

scrambled for purchase in Gregori's hair, pulling almost painfully.

"Pl- please ."

Impressive, he got a word out. Honestly, Gregori was at his limit as well. He needed in that tight ass. Now.

He lifted his head up, looking down the long, lean body in front of him. Salem was stiffly erect, leaking pre-cum. His whole body was dewed with sweat and flushed.

"Fuck me," Salem ordered, or maybe pleaded. "I like it rough, just fuck me."

"Oh, I'll fuck you," Gregori promised in a low rumble.

He levered up onto the mattress, knees on the edge. He wasn't precisely gentle as he got his dick lined up with that sweet hole and pushed in.

Salem keened as his head thrashed on the pillow back and forth. He flexed around Gregori's dick as he pushed inside.

" Yesyesyesyesyes ," Salem hissed.

He gave the man no pause. The second he was balls deep, he pulled back and thrust in again, forcefully enough to move Salem toward the headboard.

With a cry, the mage got a firm handle on Gregori's shoulders, holding on for dear life as he was fucked over and over again, moving across the sheets with each thrust. Each little grunt and pant when Gregori thrust into that tight heat only drove him higher, made him want to impossibly fuck the man harder. So good. This was just so damn good. He couldn't remember sex ever feeling like this.



Salem clenched around him, entire body latching on to Gregori, shaking as he came hard all over both of them, a cry caught behind his teeth. As he came, his ass clenched down on Gregori's dick, squeezing in the most delicious way. Gregori groaned into the man's shoulder, his climax literally pulled out of him. His hips thrust in micro-bursts, needing to move some as he pumped hot cum into Salem.

They both dropped bonelessly to the mattress, breathing like they'd just finished a marathon. Gregori knew he should probably move, not crush Salem, but he couldn't find the energy or the willpower to do it. He was loath to move, and even more loath to separate. Which was strange for him. He liked cuddles after sex, but he wasn't normally this clingy, so why?—

Mate , his dragon informed him.

Oh.

Shit.

Seriously?!

For a full second, Gregori.exe stopped working. Reboot required. Wait, even with a reboot, he couldn't quite wrap his head around it. Salem was his mate? He'd literally just had a one-night stand with his mate?

Well, no, it couldn't be that anymore. Salem was his mate, after all.

Delighted, he smiled, and his dragon started purring in contentment. Finally, after centuries, they had their mate. Life couldn't get more perfect than this.

Salem shifted under him, sounding amused as he asked, “Do all you dragons purr like this after sex?”

“Uh.” Caught flat-footed, Gregori mentally scrambled for a better answer than that. “Well, um, not always? I’m just particularly happy right now.”

“Can you be happy and let me breathe?”

Oh, right, he was crushing the man. Gregori lifted up and gingerly pulled out, a hell of a lot more carefully than he’d pushed in, and caught the slight wince on Salem’s face. He might have been too rough. Salem noticeably didn’t complain, though, and settled right back into the mattress with a sated sigh.

Gregori rolled off the bed and into the en suite bathroom, dampened a hand towel, then came back to clean Salem up. The man complied with a sigh and a smile, apparently enjoying the attention.

“You’re a considerate lover,” Salem complimented, eyes closing as he relaxed utterly. “Whoever is your mate will be lucky to have you.”

That seemed as good a segue as any. Gregori chucked the towel into the hamper in the corner, then sat next to Salem on the bed. “About that. You’re my mate.”

For a second, it looked like Salem had fallen asleep, that was how still he was. Then his eyes popped open and he jerked upright into a sitting position, staring at Gregori incredulously.

“I’m what ?!”

“You’re my mate.” Okay, surprise was expected. It was fine. Humans always took a minute to wrap their heads around the idea.

Salem kept staring at him, like a man waiting for the last piece of the puzzle so the rest made sense. “You can’t possibly know that already.”

“Uh, actually, dragons usually know pretty quickly. It’s mages that take some time to get used to it. I’m absolutely not rushing you,” Gregori tacked on hastily. “I just thought I should tell you.”

“If I’m your mate, that means I have to move down here to live with you, right? Like Sam did.”

“Well, generally speaking, that’s how it would go. Yeah.” Gregori tried to gauge Salem’s expression. He did not look happy, which made a hollow pit open up in Gregori’s stomach.

Salem abruptly rolled off the bed, feet hitting the floor with a thud. “No.”

Shit. Gregori’s hollow feeling turned into raw panic as he scrambled up as well, following Salem. “Salem, listen?—”

“No. Okay? No.” Salem grabbed his clothes off the floor, jerking them on even as he argued. “I’m not turning my life upside down to move here, first of all. I have a nice house, a good career, a whole circle of family and friends up in the US. I have no desire to lose any of it. I can get dick from anywhere?—”

“Ouch, that was hurtful.”

“You can find another mate somewhere else.”

“That’s not how this works.” Gregori felt at a loss for words. He’d never heard of a mate arguing like this before.

Salem turned in place to stab a finger against Gregori’s chest, expression fierce and determined. “There can’t be only one right person for someone. It’s not like we’re soulmates.”

“We are,” Gregori corrected gently. He didn’t want to alarm Salem any further, but he had to know the truth, too. “I am yours, as you are mine. Salem, I’m not asking you to give up your life or career on the spot. Just let me court you?—”

“No. If I let you court me, then you’ll expect me to change.” Salem turned on his heel, stopping at the doorway only long enough to cram his feet back into his sandals. He threw a parting shot over his shoulder. “I’m not going to change my mind. I don’t want a dragon mate. Go find someone else.”

The door slammed behind him. Gregori winced and ran a hand through his hair. Well, shit. That didn’t go over well.

What did he do now?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem loved his brother dearly, but international travel just took it out of him. Salem was ever so glad to go back home. Especially since he seemed to have picked up a...complication.

Yeah, he wasn't going to think about Gregori.

Salem had somehow managed to get someone other than Gregori to take him to the airport in time for his flight. Gregori had been insistent, so Salem had had to play a very elaborate game of hide-and-seek, using Sam as cover, until he'd managed to sneak out while Gregori was occupied with something else. It was an early flight, which Salem disliked, but it meant he'd get home at a decent time tonight. Which was necessary. Salem had work tomorrow. He'd taken off as many days as he had dared and now had to pay the piper for it tomorrow. Them's the breaks.

He was still glad he'd come down here, complication notwithstanding. It had been worth the very long trip down to see his brother with a working magical core and married to a man who adored him. Sam had glowed like Salem had never seen him before. It had almost sparked envy within him. But, well, Sam had always been the one who was good at long-term relationships, unlike yours truly, so it stood to reason Sam was the one to get married. Salem would stick to the hit and runs, thank you muchly.

Salem queued up with everyone else to board the plane, a small carry-on bag hanging off his shoulder and memories of last night flitting through his head. He'd been a bit surprised when Gregori first approached him and flirted. A hookup with a dragon hadn't been anywhere on his radar. But he'd liked the look of Gregori, his lean, powerful build sparking interest. Then those dark eyes had snared his, hinting at lust

and mischief, and Salem had folded like a cheap sheet. The sex had been amazing. Off the charts. Quite probably the best sex of his life, if Salem was honest. If it was like this with Dimitri, Salem didn't blame Sam for latching on to his man.

All that said, it had kind of been ruined when Gregori had insisted they were mates.

Now, Salem knew the stories. Knew dragons could apparently sense when they'd found the right person. But they were mortal, right? Even they could make mistakes. It was far more likely Gregori had weddings on the brain and had jumped to conclusions. If there was anyone who should not be married, it was Salem.

Salem didn't really believe there was only "the one" to marry. Frankly, he had seen too many relationships end in disaster. Not everyone made it. Hell, even the majority didn't seem to make it these days. Salem was aware dragons were the exception to the rule there, too, but he also knew he wasn't the exception.

Anyway. Not thinking about it.

Salem shuffled up to the door and greeted the stewardess, who was immaculately made up with a pencil skirt and low heels.

For some reason, she looked him over closely before asking in accented English, "Are you Salem Hunter?"

"Uhh...yes, I am." The hell?

"Your seat has been upgraded to first class."

Salem stared at her for a full second, not quite registering. First class? Salem had settled for economy, not willing to spend the extra money. Oh, maybe Sam had done this for him. He'd married into a filthy rich family, after all; a few hundred dollars

wouldn't faze him much. That was sweet of him.

"Sounds great." It honestly did. Not having his kneecaps pressed up against the seat in front of him for hours sounded lovely. Salem would take first class any day.

She escorted him to the second row, window seat, which was his preference. Salem stowed his bag overhead, only taking his Kindle out, and settled in with a sigh of decadent pleasure. He could stretch his legs. He had actual elbow room. Oh my god, this was awesome . Also terrible, because with this knowledge, how was Salem ever supposed to convince himself back into economy seats? Salem didn't see it going over well with future him.

He really owed Sam a hearty thank-you for upgrading him.

Someone plopped into the seat next to him. Salem looked up automatically to track who it was and just about came out of his chair.

"Gregori!" Salem hissed, shock crashing through him in waves. "The hell are you doing?!"

The rat bastard grinned at him like his reaction was funny. "I was going to fly myself up, but I thought it might scare the pilot, so I did this instead. This is better, right?"

Salem knew Gregori was speaking English, but he still wasn't making any sense. "What do you mean you were going to fly up?"

Gregori's brows twitched into an almost frown. Like he was confused by Salem's confusion. "You didn't think I had just let you go?"

"Uhhh...I said no. An emphatic no. So yes?"

“I’m all for consent. For the record. But I finally found you after waiting for centuries. I can’t accept a no.”

Salem slumped in his chair. First class no longer appealed. Its appeal had flown right out the still-open door, in fact. “You’re the one who upgraded my seat, aren’t you?”

“I am, yes. I wanted you to be comfortable on the flight. Besides, I don’t fit in economy.”

Salem could believe it. Gregori had the stereotypical build of a dragon with long legs. Trying to cram him into an economy seat would be akin to squeezing more sardines into a can.

“Gregori. What can I say to get it through to you? I am absolutely not going to be your mate.”

Gregori smiled—the boyish grin he’d used to charm Salem into taking him to bed to begin with—like Salem had said something funny. “Not a blessed thing.”

Kinda figured.

The captain spoke in Portuguese over the speakers, and while Salem didn’t speak anything of the language, he could decipher it well enough. Everyone had boarded, please fasten your seat belt, yadda yadda. Salem glumly buckled up. This flight was going to be awkward as hell.

Gregori also buckled up, but his attention was on Salem. “Explain to me why you fight this idea.”

Salem side-eyed him. It didn’t sound like he was trying to provoke him. More like he wanted to honestly understand. All right, fine, he’d play along.



“I’ve already told you, I’m not going to throw my life topsy-turvy for a guy.” Salem made his tone firm. Unwavering. No arguments allowed here, bucko.

The confused frown was back on Gregori’s face. “I already told you, as well, I would not demand you do so. Has someone tried to before?”

“Eh...once. It was a disaster, and I’m not going into it. My point is, I have a life. I’m not throwing it all aside to move to Brazil.”

“That’s fine, it’s why I’m coming with you.”

Salem looked at this man and, for the first time in a long while, felt the urge to violence. Gregori really wasn’t backing down an inch. “You seriously think it’s a good idea to live with me?”

Gregori blinked like he’d said something so far out of left field, he actually had to think about it. “You’re my mate, so where else would I be?”

“Ha, you’ve clearly never lived with me, so you don’t know better. I’m horrible to live with. The only people who have put up with me long term are family, and even they don’t choose to do it now I’m an adult.”

“I think you are making yourself out to be a villain, and you are not.”

“I promise you, this is reality. Especially with my career and its demanding hours, I do not make for a pleasant roommate.”

“You are a doctor, yes?”

“Yeah. Pediatric surgeon. Which means I also have crazy student loans to somehow pay off. My schedule’s insane, I work long hours, and I’m often deadbeat tired the

second I get home. I'm really not great dating material."

Gregori still looked like he was earnestly listening, as if he absorbed every word Salem said. "How long are your surgeries?"

"Depends on the surgery. Longest haul I've ever had was thirty-two hours, but it wasn't expected. They had some bad complications. Usually, surgeries are anywhere between three and six hours."

"Wow. That is a long time to be focused on a task. No wonder you're exhausted by the time you're done."

"Exactly. And when I'm tired, I'm mean. No one wants to be around me until I've gotten at least eight hours of sleep. Not even me. Plus, I'm beyond klutzy. I do some really stupid shit. Things people get pissed off about."

"I'll remember. If you have such a long day, I'll make sure to promptly tuck you in. Wait, do you eat properly on those days?"

Oh my fucking god. He was taking notes . Mental notes, but still. Salem slumped in the seat, groaning. "Gregori. Seriously?"

"What?"

"Don't use that innocent tone with me. You're over there taking notes on how to take care of me, aren't you?"

He grinned and leaned in to kiss Salem's cheek. Which startled him all over again, as no one had ever kissed his cheek. And why the hell was he cute doing it?

"Your work is very important. You're saving children's lives. I want to support you."

Salem would have hit Gregori by now if he wasn't so earnest and sincere. He still might.

All right, time to turn these tables. "Don't you have a life of your own?"

"Of course. But my mate is my priority. We'll have to learn how to blend our lives together to live in harmony. Every couple has to learn this."

He wasn't budging. Try again. "Is it really okay for you to live so far away from your clan?"

"Hmm, truthfully? I don't know." Gregori scratched his chin, looking pensive and thoughtful. "In the memory of our clan, no one has ever lived separate from it. Not for any length of time, anyway."

"Length of time being...?"

"A week or so. Even if they do leave clan territory, they're usually visiting another dragon clan, and they're not alone. We have some of our clanmates with us. Dragons are kind of homebodies, in a sense."

So a self-declared homebody was willing to drop everything and follow Salem to America even though he had absolutely no experience being away from his clan? Wow. Salem wasn't sure whether Gregori was determined or pigheaded.

The conversation stalled while the plane taxied out onto the runway and then quickly lifted into the air. The flight steadied out gradually, becoming smooth. Looked like they weren't going to have much turbulence. Well, externally. Plenty of turbulence for Salem.

It was clearly too late to convince Gregori to disembark and go home—he was stuck

with him on the flight—but Salem could at least try to convince him once they landed.

“Gregori. Hasn’t it occurred to you that you might be wrong?”

“About us being mates?”

“Yeah.”

Salem could see amusement play over his features in the dim lighting of the plane, like Salem had just asked something silly.

Gregori pointed to the tray table still folded up. “What color is the table?”

“Answer my question.”

“I am. Answer mine.”

Salem rolled his eyes and played along. “Grey.”

“And what color is your Kindle?”

“Blue. What are you doing?”

“Proving the point. You are absolutely sure on those two colors, correct?”

Ah, Salem saw now what he was getting at. “It’s that clear-cut for you?”

“That clear-cut. The dragon within me knows. There’s no room for error or mistake.” Gregori leaned in a little, tone soft. “It’s why Kaiser Jaeggi couldn’t convince his dragon lover to throw the true mate aside. Despite everything that happened

afterward. Rejecting our mate, once we've found them, is worse than cutting off a limb. We wouldn't be able to live with ourselves."

Salem looked into those deep, dark brown eyes and realized there was not a single word, in any language in the world, to convince Gregori to give up. He was as sure of them as he was of gravity keeping people on this planet. Salem had no idea how to respond.

"It's all right," Gregori assured him, tone gentle. "Our mages always take a little longer to come to terms with it. A relationship isn't built in a single moment. I don't mind courting you for a while, learning about you. I don't want you to give up your vocation, everything you've worked for. It would be a disservice to both you and the ones you can help. We'll find a middle ground, I promise you."

How did you argue in the face of such absolute conviction? Salem was asking for himself because he sure didn't know what to say.

Gregori kissed him on the forehead this time, lips soft and gentle, before undoing his seat belt. "Be back in a moment."

Salem watched him go toward the bathroom, still speechless. Seriously, what was Salem supposed to do with him?

The woman sitting on the same row leaned in, her expression suggesting she found him to be incredibly stupid.

"A dragon is proposing to you," she said in a very condescending tone. "Lock that shit down."

Why, this nosy bitch. Salem pinned a smile on his face and gritted out, "Not a fucking chance."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

His mate was stubborn.

Incredibly stubborn.

Though, maybe Gregori should have anticipated this considering Sam's track record. Salem's twin brother had been incredibly stubborn when it came to Dimitri and just about anything that wasn't his ultimate goal of fixing his core.

Sam was still stubborn at times, but Dimitri had learned many useful tricks for softening up his mate.

Gregori was hopeful he would be able to do the same thing with Salem. It was just going to take time.

But before he got down to wooing and convincing Salem they were meant to spend their very long lifetimes together, he needed to care for his mate. Salem wasn't anywhere near as pampered or cared for as he needed to be, which only succeeded in locking up Gregori's brain. He feared Salem's stubbornness would interfere with his plans. Salem utterly refused to give Gregori an inch. He'd have to somehow worm his way past the man's defenses if he was to care for Salem the way he wanted to.

It was ingrained in all dragons to treasure and cherish mates. The dragon's first duties were to protect and care for their mate, but Salem wasn't letting him.

Salem wouldn't allow Gregori to hold his carry-on bag during the walk from the plane to baggage claim. He wouldn't allow Gregori to handle his additional roller bag when it came off the carousel. When it was time to go into the city, Salem wouldn't

even allow Gregori to hire him a proper town car to take them to his home. Salem insisted on summoning a rideshare—a very boring sedan with a driver who smiled a little too much at Salem.

While Gregori was contemplating ways to scare the driver into diverting his attention away from Salem, his mate even closed the door in his face and threatened to not allow him to ride in the car with him. Honestly, it smarted. Both dragon and man didn't like the outright rejection. Gregori soldiered through the emotion because he couldn't let it stop him now. Salem would be a hard man to win over—Gregori suspected a lot of relationship trauma lurked in his past, but he wasn't sure—and he couldn't let it deter him now.

Before Salem could lean across to lock the other rear passenger door, Gregori launched over the trunk, hit the ground, rolled back to his feet, and grabbed the door away from Salem's fingertips. Applause broke out around them at his little performance, and he offered a small wave to his audience. At least someone was appreciative of his efforts.

He slipped into the back seat directly behind the driver. Yes, this was better. He could glare at the driver in the rearview mirror without Salem noticing.

"I can't believe you!" Salem groused as Gregori finally settled in the seat next to him. "You're not coming back to my place. I won't allow it."

"I'm only accompanying you to make sure you arrive safely. You've traveled a long distance, and you didn't seem to sleep well on the plane. If something were to happen to you?—"

"Nothing is going to happen to me. And I didn't sleep well on the plane because someone decided to join me on my flight home rather than stay in Brazil where he belongs."

“I belong with my mate, no matter where he travels,” Gregori stated, and he believed it with his whole heart. Yes, he would much rather be in Brazil, surrounded by his entire clan and the dragons he’d known most of his life, but his mate came first. He’d waited a very long lifetime to find his, and he wasn’t about to squander this chance to win Salem’s heart.

“Sir?” the driver interjected from behind the wheel. “Is this man bothering you? I see a police officer at the other end of the platform. I can go get him for you.”

Salem didn’t answer right away, leaving Gregori to stare slack-jawed at his mate. Would he really hand him over to the police with claims of harassment? Ouch, it was like another slap to the face. His heart stung with the rejection, and this time it was a little harder to dismiss it.

Finally, Salem let out a long sigh and sank a little lower in his seat, his arms folded tightly over his chest. “No, it’s fine. He’s just annoying. No point in dragging the cops into this. Just take me home, please. It has been a really long trip.”

The driver didn’t ask any more questions and focused on getting them safely out of the twisted insanity of Logan International Airport.

It had been several decades since Gregori had last visited the United States, and he had no memory of being in Boston. While the most important thing was remaining near his mate, a small part of him was excited at the prospect of exploring a new city with such a long and interesting history.

The sun was only beginning to set when they came into view of the downtown area, skyscrapers poking at a sky that was steadily turning shades of orange and purple. The lights grew more brilliant against the growing darkness, and the pleasant crispness to the air reminded him January was a bitter winter month this far north. His dragon made happy little growly noises at the prospect of seeing snow falling from



the sky again.

Brazil's temperate winters, warm beaches, and crashing waves were wonderful, but sparkling snow and long icicles called to distant memories of his birthplace in Russia—a place he hadn't called home in a very long time.

He looked over at Salem to ask how often Boston saw snowfall, but he bit back the words when he noticed Salem had closed his eyes and his breathing had evened out with sleep as his head rested against the window on his right.

Yes, once he got Salem to his home, he would see about procuring his mate a healthy meal and then tuck him into bed. He'd mentioned something about returning to work the next day, and he needed to catch up on his sleep. Gregori would have to step up his game after this, too, and pull some kind of plan together. His usual tactics in flirting might not work here. He'd have to try different ones.

After close to an hour of annoying traffic, the driver finally pulled over in front of a building that didn't look very impressive. Gregori had seen plenty of pictures of the neat and refined brownstone townhomes in Boston and had expected something more like that for Salem, considering he was a talented surgeon. Maybe it was more impressive on the inside.

He nudged Salem awake. In a heartbeat, the doctor opened the door and stood—probably an occupational hazard of his medical training, to be ready to go even before his brain fully kicked in. While the driver jumped out to help with their bags, Gregori paused long enough to tap the top of the driver's unopened soda sitting in the holder next to his seat, freezing the contents solid. That would teach him not to look at Gregori's mate for too long.

A bitter wind smacked him in the face as he climbed out of the car and walked around the trunk on the slightly slushy road to grab his suitcase, even as Salem told

him to leave it there.

“You’re not coming in!” Salem argued as Gregori stepped onto the curb.

Wisely, the driver got the fuck out of there. Since Salem had already confirmed he didn’t want to involve the cops, the man darted for the driver’s seat and sped away, leaving them to handle their disagreement on their own.

“You said you were only accompanying me back to my place to make sure I made it here safely.”

“Yes, but you’re not inside.” Gregori tried to take the hand currently pointing a finger at his chest, but Salem batted his hands away. “You’re standing outside where it is very cold, putting you in danger of catching a cold. We should get inside.”

Salem opened his mouth to argue further, but some god took pity on Gregori and sent a fierce winter wind winding through the tall buildings to blast them, stealing away Salem’s breath. Salem had just spent several days in the balmy, luxurious heat of Brazil. Just enough time for his body to forget what winter felt like.

He shivered and snarled under his breath as he grabbed his bag. It thunked against the stone steps as Salem climbed up to his door, Gregori patiently following behind him. After several attempts to get his key in the lock, Salem opened the front door to reveal a long hallway with many doors.

Was this an apartment building? Did he not live in the entire thing?

Salem hurried down the hall—his roller bag bouncing along the ugly brown carpet with its strange, uneven bumps—to another door. Salem darted inside the second he unlocked it, but Gregori caught it before Salem could close it in his face.

“No!” Salem snapped.

Gregori fluttered his eyelashes and worked up his best sad puppy look, complete with pouty bottom lip. “But...I have no place to stay.”

“I don’t care.”

“But...I’ve never been to Boston. How am I going to find a safe place to stay? You’re the only person I know, Salem.”

The mage growled and pushed on the door, but even Gregori could feel he did so half-heartedly.

“Please, don’t leave me alone,” he continued, fully willing to lay it on as thick as necessary. There was no way he was letting Salem out of his sight. Not when he’d just found his mate. Nope. Not happening. “I just got here. I don’t know where to go,” he whimpered.

“Oh my god! Do you have no shame?”

When it came to his mate, not a single drop.

Groaning loudly, Salem stepped back and released the door. “One night. That’s it. Tomorrow, you find a hotel to stay in or a B&B or something. I don’t really care.”

Gregori immediately perked up and marched into the apartment, ready to explore all of Salem’s private domain so he could squirrel away every nugget of information he could about his mate. Except there was so little to explore.

It was a square.

Just standing at the door, he could see the entirety of this apartment in a single sweep of his eyes. Well, no, a bedroom lurked behind a door to the very far right, along with presumably a bathroom. But the kitchen, dining table, and living area shared one room—and it wasn't a big room.

"This is all there is?" The words tumbled from his tongue before he could stop them. He winced, knowing he shouldn't have said those words.

"That's it!" Salem shouted. "Out! Out! Out!" He placed both of his hands on Gregori's chest and pushed. The poor man put all of his weight behind it, but Gregori didn't budge a single centimeter. Why would he? He was finally inside of Salem's house. He was never leaving again.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. It was rude of me," he said over Salem's grunting and pushing.

"It was rude!" Salem snapped, looking as if he was just one more explosion away from a stomped foot. He stopped trying to push Gregori out the door and crossed to the center of the room to stand in front of a small, well-worn blue love seat. "It's not like I want to live this way. But medical school is damn expensive in the US. Not to mention all the loans I had to take out to pay for school and books and just living. It's not like I could hold down other jobs while doing my residency. And now, if I don't want to spend the rest of my life paying off those loans, I have to live very simply." He waved his hands at the shoebox apartment with its very simple furnishing.

Gregori bit his tongue. The entire apartment could fit inside his parlor back in Brazil and he'd still have room left over. Not to mention his bedroom, bathroom, walk-in closet, private library, and even his secret hoard room. It bothered him his mate had worked so hard to become a successful doctor and now had to live so plainly. He should at least have some comfort to come home to after spending the day saving young lives.

But Gregori didn't say any of this because he didn't want to belittle the sacrifices Salem had made to attain his dream.

“Your home may be small, but you have done a wonderful job of making it feel cozy and inviting. Even for unwanted guests.”

Salem's shoulders slumped and he moaned as he rubbed his eyes. “How can you be annoying and charming at the same time? It's against the laws of nature.”

It took all of Gregori's control to hide his smile. Charming was a step in the right direction.

“Fine.” Salem dropped his hands down to his sides and glared at Gregori. “You can stay. One. Night. That's it. You'll leave in the morning. Find a hotel or something. I don't care.”

Gregori had won this battle.

Now on to the next one—convincing Salem they had to share a bed. For warmth, of course.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

This dragon!

Sam had told him all about his Dimitri. How Dimitri was thoughtful, passionate, tender, and funny.

He'd said absolutely nothing about how tenacious, stubborn, annoying, and sneaky dragons were.

Salem thought he'd left Gregori behind in Brazil, but the dragon had shown up on the plane.

He'd thought he would leave him behind at the airport, but now Gregori would be sleeping in Salem's apartment.

If the overgrown lizard thought he could get into Salem's bed, he had another thing coming.

This was a whole lotta bullshit.

Dinner turned out to be nothing more than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with a handful of stale chips. Not that he thought a lack of hospitality would actually scare Gregori off. It was simply all the energy he had when it came to making a meal. The hours of travel had exhausted him, his body didn't know what season it was—let alone time zone—and tomorrow he had to go back to work.

And Gregori would be out on the street.

Salem wouldn't worry about the dragon at all. He came from a rich clan. No doubt Gregori would find a posh hotel to cater to all his whims and provide him with the level of comfort he was accustomed to.

After brushing his teeth and pulling on a pair of soft cotton sleep pants and a T-shirt, Salem grabbed a spare blanket out of the closet and tossed it on his tiny love seat. "You'll sleep there."

Gregori's eyebrows shot up to his hairline and he stared at Salem like he'd lost his mind. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Nope." Salem jerked the blankets back on his bed, preparing to slide in and sleep the sleep of the dead.

"But I won't fit. This sofa is tiny. What if I fall off it in the middle of the night?"

"Then I guess you'll continue sleeping on the floor." Salem stretched out on the soft mattress. It seemed to embrace him, welcoming him home at last. He pulled the blankets up and over his head. "Turn off the light when you're done getting changed."

Gregori said nothing. Salem lay frozen in bed, listening to the sounds of his unwanted houseguest sifting around in his bag, getting changed, brushing his teeth, and finally the click of the light, sending the entire apartment into darkness.

Was that really it? No more arguments from Gregori? The stubborn dragon had fought him on everything else since they'd left Brazil. Was he giving up so easily? He'd been positive Gregori would fight him tooth and nail to sleep with him. Especially after they'd already shared a bed once—quite spectacularly too.

More to the point, why hadn't he really gotten rid of Gregori yet? All Salem had to do

was call his brother, get someone to issue orders, and Gregori would have no choice but to leave. He knew this. He had the power to make it happen. And yet he found himself unwilling to pick the phone up and make the call. He didn't understand why he hesitated. It was like some part of him wanted Gregori here. Which was ludicrous. Every time he'd let a man in, it had gone nuclear bad. Hadn't he learned his lesson by now?

Grumbling at himself, he scooted farther into his pillow. Some days, he wondered just how smart he really was, as when it came to men, he sure couldn't seem to learn from his mistakes.

The mattress shifted as if a new weight pressed on it near his feet. He shoved the blanket off his head and squinted, willing his eyes to adjust more quickly to the overwhelming darkness. A large shape poised like a tiger at the foot of his bed, ready to strike.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"Your bed is more than big enough to fit both of us," Gregori replied, inching farther up the mattress.

"No. You go sleep on the couch."

"But I won't fit." He inched closer. Salem was sure most of Gregori was now on the bed. "Plus, I need to think of you."

"Me?" he squawked. The dragon had lost his damn mind.

"Mmm." He moved up, but he didn't settle on the other half of the full-sized mattress. Instead, Gregori had crawled up to loom over him. Salem pushed backward into his pillow to put more distance between them. When Gregori spoke again, his voice had



dipped into a low, rough whisper that caressed his entire body. “I need to make sure you’re properly relaxed so you can sleep. You know I can help you relax.”

Salem’s traitorous mind instantly conjured up images. Gregori’s hands moving over him, stroking him, while his thick cock?—

“No!” Salem burst out. He wasn’t entirely sure if he was talking to himself or Gregori. Or both. Yes, both Gregori and his stupid libido needed to hear it.

“What are you afraid of?” Gregori taunted. He dipped his head, and Salem stubbornly turned his mouth away. He was not kissing this asshole. But this didn’t deter Gregori. His wicked tongue licked a long stripe up the side of Salem’s neck to his earlobe, which he sucked into his mouth. A moan of longing and desire rose in Salem’s throat and his dick instantly hardened.

“Afraid you’ll enjoy it too much?” Gregori’s hot breath skimmed over his wet skin, sending goose bumps down his arms. Fuck, he could even feel his nipples hardening and Gregori had only licked him. His body betrayed him!

Gregori lowered his head again, and this time his teeth nibbled along Salem’s collarbone before licking his tender flesh. “Afraid you’ll beg me to fuck you harder, faster? Afraid you’ll lose your mind while riding my cock?”

With a snarl, Salem placed his hands against Gregori’s chest, only to find hot, silky skin waiting for him. He shoved with all he had, but the dragon was too fast for him. As Gregori rolled onto his back, he wrapped an arm around Salem’s waist, pulling him along for the ride. Salem ended up straddling his hips, the blankets a tangled mess between them.

“Even if we were to have sex, that’s all it would be,” Salem said. “Just like in Brazil. No strings. Just sex. It doesn’t mean anything else.”

“Did I say it would mean anything else?” Gregori’s smug tone had Salem itching to smack him. So, he did the next best thing. He kissed the shit out of him. The dragon couldn’t talk if his mouth was otherwise occupied.

Salem shoved his tongue into Gregori’s mouth, immediately tasting the mint of his toothpaste, but he quickly forgot it when those big hands cupped his ass and squeezed. He moaned, not caring about his earlier protests. His bone-deep exhaustion had evaporated, and he just wanted to get fucked. This wasn’t about being mates or being in a relationship—only carnal pleasure and getting off.

At least Gregori seemed to be on the same page now as he clawed at Salem’s clothes, breaking off their hungry kiss long enough to remove his shirt, pants, and briefs. Salem reached down to get rid of Gregori’s pants, but he only encountered endless skin. The devious sneak had climbed into bed completely naked!

Gregori rolled them across the bed so Salem was on his back again and shoved all the blankets to the floor. His hot mouth left Salem’s and kissed along his throat and down his chest. Salem spread his legs, fitting the dragon perfectly between them as Gregori paused to worry one nipple into a diamond-hard nub. As he moved to the other, Salem threaded his fingers in Gregori’s silky soft hair—long enough to drag along his skin like a tease—and tried to shove him lower. His cock ached and needed some goddamn attention, but Gregori only chuckled and continued his painfully slow pace lower.

“So annoying,” Salem said with a grunt while still managing to writhe as wave after wave of delicious pleasure washed through him.

“First you didn’t want sex. Now you want to rush it,” Gregori teased before licking Salem’s hip, purposefully avoiding Salem’s leaking dick like the bastard he was.

“Gregori!” he growled. “Fuck me already!”

“But your body isn’t ready for me.” Before Salem could argue, Gregori grabbed both of his legs and settled them on his shoulders. His breath grazed Salem’s dick and he could feel his ass lift into the air as if Gregori was preparing to thrust deep inside of him. A whine of need slipped out before he could catch it. “Do you have some lube or should I just prepare you with my tongue?”

A shiver ran through Salem’s entire body. It was so tempting to let Gregori fuck him mindless with his tongue. Their time in Brazil had been brain melting. But that would take all night, and it wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted Gregori’s thick, hard dragon cock stretching his ass and turning his brain to mush.

Without saying a word, Salem jerked open the drawer of his nightstand and dug inside. Useless things flew out to litter the floor as he searched. The entire time he worked, Gregori slowly licked up the side of his dick like he was licking an ice cream cone. He swirled his tongue around the head, lapping up the pre-cum to the point where Salem was a panting, frustrated mess who barely knew his own name.

A sob nearly broke from his throat when his fingers closed around the familiar tube and he thrust it at Gregori. “Here!”

The dragon plucked it from him as he finally took all of Salem’s cock to the back of his throat, sucking hard enough to make Salem’s eyes roll into the back of his head and his toes curl. The orgasm—which had been tightening like a stretched rubber band—came to the very edge of snapping, and Gregori allowed his cock to slip from his lips to slap loudly against Salem’s stomach.

Salem sucked in a ragged breath and was opening his mouth to shout at him when two slick fingers shoved into his hole, removing all knowledge of words and speech. The burn and stretch were so fucking wonderful. Gregori worked them in for several hard thrusts and pulled out.

“E-enough,” Salem stammered, lucky he even remembered the word. “Fuck me!”

Gregori moved, but not how Salem had expected. He thought the dragon would just push his cock inside in one smooth stroke, but he actually removed Salem’s legs from his shoulders and flopped down in the empty space beside Salem. His brain was still trying to figure out what the man was doing when he grabbed Salem and pulled him across his body.

“Since you just want to use my cock,” Gregori murmured, “I thought I’d let you ride me so you can run the show.”

Rage and indignation bubbled up from the pit of Salem’s stomach. He clenched his fists, ready to release a torrent of curses down on Gregori’s head, when the evil dragon grabbed his hips and adjusted him so he could push his cock unerringly into Salem’s waiting hole.

Oh God yes!

He tried to cling to those wisps of anger before they could blow away, but it was impossible now that he was so full again. Perfection. No one had ever felt this good to him. Sex had never been so amazing.

With his hands braced on Gregori’s chest, he started to move. Slowly at first, treasuring the wet slide and intense feel of Gregori’s girth rubbing against the walls of his channel. Even the way he was slightly leaned forward allowed his own dick to brush tantalizingly along Gregori’s rock-hard abdomen.

More.

He needed more.

He sped his movements up, fucking himself on Gregori's cock harder and faster. Gregori's hands tightened on his hips, fingers digging into his ass, threatening to leave bruises, and he loved it. He would never say it out loud to this stubborn dragon, but he loved all the ways Gregori touched him. It was as if the dragon knew all his secret sexy buttons without ever being told.

Gregori used his insane strength to lift Salem up and slam him down faster and faster, while also thrusting upward. The slap of their skin and their broken pants for air filled the room. Salem whimpered, the edge of his orgasm seeming to cut through him. So close. He was so close, but he couldn't seem to topple over the edge no matter how good it felt.

Without needing to be told, Gregori lifted Salem up, removing his cock from him completely. Salem cried out, his brain trapped in a fog of need and desperation. He didn't know how it happened, but he found himself on his hands and knees on the bed. Just as it was registering, Gregori slammed his cock back into him from behind. The dragon wrapped one arm across Salem's chest, pinning his back against Gregori's front, while his other hand frantically stroked Salem's neglected dick.

At the same time, Gregori continued to thrust deep inside him, the angle just perfect to hit Salem's prostate again and again.

The world exploded in a heartbeat. His screams of pleasure coupled with the banging of his headboard against the wall were deafening. Somewhere, a neighbor's dog howled, and someone pounded on one of his walls and shouted, but he didn't care. The orgasm just kept going, leaving him spilling everything within him over Gregori's hand.

The world started to come into focus and he heard Gregori shout, his cock swelling as he came deep inside of him. Salem's own dick twitched, wanting to join in the fun one last time, but there was nothing left.

Sleep started to claim what little remained of his poor brain as Gregori gently laid him back down on the mattress and drew the blankets over him to keep his now sweaty skin from growing cold.

He wanted to say something to Gregori, but he couldn't remember what it was. Nothing seemed as important as sleep now.

Tomorrow.

He'd remember tomorrow.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem went off to work at a crazy early hour and Gregori watched him go with a worried knot forming in the base of his stomach. This really wasn't going well. He'd seen the struggle with Dimitri and Sam, he'd heard stories of other people needing to court their mage mates for things to click properly, but...this felt different. This strong opposition to even considering them being mates felt like a repeated slap in the face.

And Gregori had no idea how to get past it.

He'd hoped the sex last night would soften Salem a little, but it didn't seem to have worked. Salem was used to having quick flings, apparently, as he was fine with unattached sex. Which was an entirely different problem—one Gregori had no solution for.

He hesitated for a strong moment, but he really needed a game plan, so it was time to face the music.

Gregori settled at the (very tiny) dining room table, stretching his legs out and crossing them at the ankles, then video called Sam. If there was anyone who could help him right now, it was Sam. It should be fine, as he and Dimitri weren't leaving for their honeymoon until next week, so Dimitri wouldn't kill him for interrupting anything.

Fortunately, the time difference was only an hour, and Sam was an early riser, so it went through on the second ring.

Sam was impeccably dressed, hair still damp from a shower, and with a glare hot

enough to melt ice caps.

“ You ,” he greeted with a snarl. “ Where the hell are you ?!”

Gregori somewhat regretted not telling anyone he was getting on a plane. Only somewhat because it was harder for them to force anything when he was literally on a different continent.

“Um. Boston.”

Anyone who knew Sam knew he was brilliant—absolutely brilliant—and the man proved his super brain once again.

“ Oh my god ,” he breathed, jaw dropping. “ Salem ? REALLY ?!”

A little sheepish, Gregori rubbed the back of his neck. He wasn’t sure why he was feeling shy but...he was. Go figure. “Yeah.”

“ You’re absolutely sure ? What am I saying, of course you’re sure. But neither of you said anything about this before he left yesterday !”

“Yeah, about that, he’s...” Gregori winced again. “Um. Adamantly refusing.”

All delight was wiped off Sam’s face, replaced by an understanding grimace. “ Now that sounds like my brother. You’re calling for help, aren’t you ?”

“Please?”

“ Hang on—no, wait. Give me five minutes, I’ll call you back .”

“Sure.”



Gregori couldn't sit still, his nerves wouldn't let him, so he got up and paced around the apartment. Which didn't take long. Seriously, this place was such a shoebox. He understood why Salem couldn't afford better, between massive student loans and incredibly high housing prices, but...he really, truly wanted to offer Salem a better place to live. He also knew even breathing a suggestion of this would hurt Salem's pride and definitely get him tossed out on his ear.

His phone rang with a video call and he gratefully accepted it. Only to blink, head jerking back in surprise. Sam had spent the five minutes rounding up several people and then projecting the call onto their war room screen so everyone could see and speak to each other.

Well, this way he could get it over with all at once? Without having to repeat himself. Gregori chose to look at the silver lining.

"Hi," he greeted with a sheepish smile.

Rodrigo gave him the patented look all parents wore when their child had just done something stupid. "Gregori. If he's your mate, then say something."

"I'm sorry."

Dimitri held up two fingers a couple of centimeters apart. "We were this close to putting together a search party, I hope you realize."

"I was kinda on a plane for a long time. But I promise to not be radio silent from now on."

"Appreciated." Ha Na sighed, a hand over her heart. "We were very worried. Now, Sam said you're in Boston?"

“ And in Salem’s apartment, from the looks of it ,” Sam muttered, staring hard over Gregori’s shoulder. “ So you must have done something right to get in there .”

Gregori propped the phone up on the windowsill so he could free his hands. He liked to talk with his hands, and having one unavailable cramped his style.

“To be blunt about it, he likes having sex with me. Although he won’t verbally admit it. I managed to weasel my way in to stay the night, but he’s also determined I need to go back home today. I...don’t know what to do.”

Vasily and Luka shared a glance that spoke volumes before Vasily spoke.

“ How much have you communicated with him ?”

Considering their own fiasco with Amaru, he could see why Vasily asked. “Everything. I’m not trying to keep secrets or only say what I think he wants to hear. I told him he’s my mate on our first night together. We argued and talked about it most of the flight up here. He knows I believe it to be true, at least. He’s not arguing that point so much as he just doesn’t want to uproot his life here. He doesn’t want a mate and he doesn’t want to move to Brazil. Those are his sticking points.”

All eyes turned to Sam, the resident expert on Salem, who blew out a stressed breath and shrugged.

“ Yeah, sounds like my twin. He can be incredibly stubborn when he sets his mind to something. He’s also not at all a romantic at heart. The idea of having one soul mate out there is pretty much anathema to him. He’s completely sacrificed even the idea of having a relationship in favor of having a career and didn’t blink an eye at this decision .” Sam wiped a hand over his face before stating bluntly, “ You, my friend, don’t have an uphill battle on your hands. You’re fighting up a mountainside .”

Gregori winced. He'd had a feeling this was the case but hearing it said out loud was disheartening.

Ha Na fretted upon hearing this. " But he has to convince him somehow ."

" I'm not saying otherwise ," Sam assured her gently. " But pushing my brother to do something is the surest way to fail. Stubborn was invented to describe him. So here's my suggestion, Gregori. Win him over ."

"I'm all ears for suggestions."

" Don't try to drag him into your world. Try to join his ." Sam paused for a second, visibly weighing his words. " For instance, you could volunteer at the hospital where he works ."

Luka tilted back in his chair to give Sam a questioning look. " As what ? A candy striper ?"

" Those no longer exist, way to show your age, but they do take volunteers to help with the kids. To read stories, play games, that kind of thing. I think if Gregori shows up at the hospital and says hi, I'm an ice dragon, I'd love to volunteer for the children's department , they'll snatch him up before he can complete the sentence ."

Now there was a stunningly good idea. Trust Sam to think of it. Not to sound egotistical, but Gregori was absolutely sure he was right, too. The whole world was still enamored with dragons, so Gregori volunteering at the hospital would be a shoo-in procedure.

Besides, he liked kids. No hardship on his part.

Sam was not done. " The thing Salem hates more than anything is people whose

entire lives revolve around their partner. So showing him you have your own things going on will go really, really far .”

“I could hook up with the local police or fire departments too,” Gregori mused. “Fire department especially. They’d love me.”

“ There you go ,” Sam encouraged. “ Do that. Oh, actually, my colleague is at Harvard and would love to have an in-depth conversation with you about languages. Remember how I said no one alive aside from the dragons speaks Old East Slavic anymore ? She’s been begging me for more recordings. A quick talk, maybe some special lectures, would benefit the scholastic world, if nothing else. And I think coming back to find you were gone for the day doing something academic would also strongly appeal to Salem. He likes the brainy types .”

Gregori felt like he should be taking notes. “You think all of this is going to help? More than me trying to woo him?”

“ I guarantee it. Be thoughtfully unromantic, if that makes sense. Salem’s eating habits are trash because he doesn’t have the time or energy. Cook for him, help him keep the apartment clean, just be supportive without making a big deal of it. You’ll get him addicted to having you there before he even knows what’s happening .”

Now that Gregori could definitely do. Hell, refraining from taking care of Salem and spoiling him would be harder. He was relieved to have this instruction. “Already done.”

Rodrigo shifted uneasily, leaning around Dimitri to speak to Sam. “ How long do you think it’ll take to convince Salem and bring him down here ?”

“It doesn’t matter if I need to stay up here for years,” Gregori insisted firmly. “I’m not leaving without my mate. And I’m not forcing him to do something he doesn’t

wish for.”

“ I understand ,” Rodrigo assured him, mouth pulled down into a tight frown. “ I wouldn’t leave without my Ha Na either. But, Gregori, no dragon has lived outside of his clan for a long stretch of time .”

He did understand. Gregori wasn’t blind to the possible obstacle. But what was he supposed to do?

Ha Na shared her mate’s frown. “ How long ?”

“ Historically, I don’t know if any dragon has spent more than two weeks away from the clan. I literally don’t know what will happen to Gregori. It could be fine. It could also throw his entire physiology out of rhythm. This is entirely unprecedented .” Rodrigo ran a hand through his hair, looking more and more perturbed. “ In days of old, it was unheard of for a mage to argue about going with their dragon. I think sometimes the dragon would join their clan, but there were always many other dragons around them .”

“ Could take quite the toll on his mental health, too .” Dimitri joined the Frown Brigade. “ Sam, how much does Salem use his magic ?”

“ Doesn’t ,” Sam responded without a second of hesitation. “ I think he uses the simple cleanup spells, does a few major workings a year with the rest of the family, but that’s about it. I would say, day to day ? He doesn’t use his magic at all. Why ? You think it plays into this ?”

“ A mage not in tune with his own magic can’t even fully accept himself, much less his dragon ,” Rodrigo said. “ I don’t like this situation one bit .”

“I realize this is unprecedented, and will likely be stressful at first, but I’m not

leaving without Salem.” Gregori couldn’t even imagine trying. Even short flights to other cities for day trips would strain his control.

“ Forcing Salem back won’t work either ,” Sam maintained. He looked around the group and grimaced. “ Look, none of this is ideal, I get why everyone’s worried. But some things take time. This is one of those situations, and rushing or pushing really isn’t going to help anything .”

Rodrigo blew out a long, stressed breath. “ I do not like this .”

Gregori didn’t either, but what could he do? His hands were rather tied.

Ha Na put a hand on her mate’s shoulder in support, but her eyes were on Gregori. “ For now, let’s give this time. I think Sam made some very good suggestions. Gregori, are you going to take them ?”

“All of them,” he asserted strongly.

“ Then do them. We will all help you as much as we can from here. If you feel lonely and disconnected, you are to say something. One of us will come up and visit you .”

That did make him feel better. “I promise I will.”

“ Good. For now, let’s do a once-a-week check-in with you. Just to see how you’re faring and to monitor you. I know how you men are, you’re terrible at admitting when you actually need help .”

Gregori was all set to protest this, but in light of recent events...eh, she had him there. He sheepishly shrugged instead.

“ Uh-huh .” Ha Na rolled her eyes. “ It’s a good thing you’re all loveable. I will call

you every Sunday, all right ? Tell me honestly how you're doing .”

“I will.”

“ Good. I think we should end the call here. You have a lot to do today .”

“I do. Love you all, bye!”

He ended the call, staring at the screen for a long moment. All Gregori could do was his best. He would follow the advice he'd been given and give both himself and Salem time.

It would all work out in the end. It always did. He just had to be patient.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem went to work.

Sanity was at work. Routine was at work. There were no handsome, charming, pesky ice dragons at work. The last bit was the most important.

He went into his office first, reviewing the schedule of what surgeries he had this week. Salem's office looked like most surgeons' offices—in a word, organized chaos. He had multiple file cabinets and a bookcase taking up one long wall, his desk crammed on the other, with just enough space for a chair, his small fridge and microwave, and absolutely nothing else.

Would Gregori's long, lanky legs even fit inside—ugh, brain. Stop. Just stop.

Salem shoved computer glasses onto his nose and forcefully focused. There was one follow-up today, a ten-year-old patient he remembered well because of the kid's sass. He had been an interesting case. The kid had fallen off a water slide and damn near burst his spleen in the process.

Other than him, Salem had...a surgery this afternoon? He wasn't supposed to.

Frowning, he opened the calendar appointment, then clicked on the link leading to the patient's file. First page was a note from the other surgeon in the department. Dr. Kyle was maybe two weeks out of graduation, his residency completed, and this case was too much of an outlier right out of the gate. He'd deferred the surgery by two days with an urgent plea, asking Salem to please take lead and let him assist.

Honestly, Salem preferred it when the young surgeons did this. If they weren't



confident in the procedure for whatever reason, he would absolutely take lead, letting them assist and get the experience necessary so the next time they saw something like this, they'd have confidence.

Salem shot off a quick email to the surgical team in general agreeing to take lead, mentally rearranging his schedule. He'd need to get some takeout a half hour earlier than he normally ate lunch to accommodate this, but it was doable. He knew better than to go into surgery on an empty stomach.

A commotion of raised voices started up out in the hallway. It got louder and louder, to the point Salem's instincts insisted he get up and check. It sounded like trouble brewing.

It didn't take long to find the problem—an overweight man in a patient gown, one leg in a cast from hip to toe, wobbling around with a death grip on a crutch, all the while shouting.

“You're not putting those fucking things in me!”

Two nurses—Jessy and Min—were trying to corral him, likely afraid he'd fall and do damage if allowed to run free, and the head nurse of this floor was right in his face. Nora was a massive woman, taller than most men, and it was never a good thing when she got involved. It usually meant things had gone south.

“Sir. You sit your ass down before I make you. You are not allowed to make a commotion like this. You're near the pediatric wing, which means kids can hear you.”

“I don't give a fuck!” the man snapped back. “You're not putting any of those damn needles in me! They hurt!”

Unfortunately, Salem could put the pieces of this puzzle together without much help. Some men were such babies about pain. It was pathetic.

He stepped right in, planting himself at Nora's side and giving the man a hot glare.

"You're walking around on an injured leg and you're complaining about a needle?"

The man almost looked abashed for a second before his bad temper bounced back. "I don't want them!"

Jessy leaned in and quickly filled Salem in under her breath. "He's due for surgery in thirty minutes. Multiple fractures that need to be pinned to heal right. I can't get an IV or IV anesthesia started with him."

In other words, surgery was already delayed because of his tantrum.

Salem spoke to Jessy, but his eyes were on the man. "Cancel the surgery."

The man's head snapped around as he protested, "You can't do that! I need the surgery!"

"Clearly you don't if you're acting like this."

"Who's going to fix my busted leg?!"

"That's now a you problem." Salem got right in the man's face. "You don't talk to my nurses like this. The only reason I can even function as a surgeon is because of them. Without nurses, I couldn't do shit. You don't get to disrespect them, I don't care how scared you are of needles."

His pale skin was already red with anger but now it turned nearly purple with

embarrassment. “I’m—who said I’m scared? I just?—”

“You would not be throwing a tantrum about two tiny needles unless you were scared. But a man of your age should be better at handling his emotions. I’ve three-year-old patients who handled pre-op better than you. Now, go get dressed and get out. We will not be making you a referral.”

Nora got a grip under his arm and forcefully turned him about. “This way.”

The man whined, but he had no choice but to move as Nora hauled him back to his room.

Salem would call security if necessary, but he trusted Nora to have this one in the bag. Frankly, even he wouldn’t mess with her in a dark alley. They’d never find his body.

“Thank you, Doctor Hunter,” Jessy said, beaming. “I figured it would take another man to shut him down.”

“Always does with the misogynists. Everyone okay here?”

“We are.”

Satisfied, he gave them a nod and went back to his office.

Salem had barely attained his seat when his work BFF sailed through the open door, parked one hip on his desk, and slurped coffee. Alexis had very strong Greek heritage and it showed in the high brow of her face, her dark silky hair in a loose curl around her shoulders, and her olive skin tone.

“Hello, Alexis,” he greeted, deadpan. “May I help you?”

“Dish! I need wedding details. How was Brazil?”

He’d known Alexis since freshman year in college, and they had basically survived residency together, so to say he confided everything in her would be an understatement. Salem had no compunction about spilling the beans.

“Wedding was beautiful. I have literally never seen my brother so happy, which made the long-ass flight worth it.”

“Hell, I’d be crying tears of joy if I had a dragon husband, for that matter. I bet you wished you could have stayed longer.”

“Yes and no.” Salem leaned back in his chair, feeling a wave of fatigue hit him all over again. Thanks to Gregori, he had not gotten a lot in the way of sleep. “A complication followed me home.”

“Is the complication handsome?”

He shot her a warning look. Alexis was of the opinion he worked too much and lived too little, so she would not be sympathetic to his plight. He knew this, so he must be venting out of habit.

“An ice dragon by the name of Gregori has decided I’m his mate.”

“Ooooh.” Alexis leaned in, riveted now. “You said no.”

“Of course I said no.”

“I figured. You’re too much of an idiot to say yes.”

“Alexis...” Salem groaned, already wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“I’m just saying. You only do casual hookups these days—ever since college really. I’ve seen guys approach you and you shoo them away without even a backward glance. Good guys with amazing careers, hot bodies, decent personalities, and you can’t even drum up interest. So of course a sexy dragon with the hots for only you is an aggravation. I sadly didn’t expect different.”

Salem just stared at her, waiting for her to accept he would not change and move on. “Can I go back to work now?”

“No.” Alexis gave him a sweet smile and started pumping. “How many times have you had sex with him?”

“Too many times.”

“Oh, more than once? Damn, you really do like him.”

“I absolutely did not say that.”

“It’s okay, after nearly a decade of knowing you, I also know how to translate you. You said he followed you here? Where is he now?”

“My apartment.”

Her eyes bugged right out of her head. “Oh. My. Fucking. God. He charmed you into letting him stay? The sex must be fantastic!”

It was. He knew better than to admit it out loud. “I haven’t had a chance to review the surgery notes. Why was?—”

“You’re not going to switch the topic until I have two things. One, name. Two, picture.”

“Why the hell do you think I have a picture of him on my phone?”

Alexis looked at him like she knew that he knew this stalling was absolutely useless, and why he bothered was beyond her and to hand over the goods already.

Ugh, fine, might as well get this over with. Salem grabbed his phone, pulled up the Insta for the wedding, and scrolled through for precisely three seconds before he found a picture of Gregori and Dimitri.

He handed his phone over, just wanting to drop the subject. “Gregori. Guy on the left.”

Alexis took it, whistling low. “Wow. Stunning. Aren’t dragons pansexual by nature?”

“Yeah.”

“Awesome. So when he gets tired of you being an idiot, I’ll shoot my shot.”

Normally Salem would make some sarcastic comment about her going for it, but this time he couldn’t. He didn’t like those words at all, and he shifted uneasily under them. Surely this wasn’t jealousy. Not when he’d already made it clear he wanted nothing to do with a relationship. He didn’t own Gregori—the man was free to pursue whoever.

The more of a pep talk he gave himself, the more sour his emotions became.

Salem took his phone away from her and pointedly changed the subject. “Why was Kyle nervous about this surgery?”

“Fine, fine, I’ll let you off the hook.” Alexis shrugged her shoulders, sipped her coffee, and played along. “So, get this. The kid is one of those. Situs Inversus.”

Salem jerked his head back in surprise. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

Situs Inversus was a very rare genetic condition where the organs in the chest and abdomen were positioned in a mirror image of normal human anatomy. Salem had seen this in person precisely once, years ago, when he was still in residency himself. Well, no wonder Kyle was hesitant to be lead surgeon. It could definitely be confusing having everything flipped, and the last thing you wanted was confusion at a surgery table.

“There’s a growth on the kid’s liver, and biopsy is showing it’s not cancerous, but it’s also not stopping. It’s grown a centimeter in the past year and it’s already causing both pain and discomfort. So it’s got to come out.”

Salem nodded in understanding. “Okay. I feel like Kyle made a good call here. I already sent an email saying I’d take lead this afternoon, but I want to go meet my patient.”

“Sure. I was actually on the way myself to explain why we delayed until you got here. This will go over even better.”

He gathered up his iPad, wanting to make some notes, and followed her. Then doubled back for three markers. If this surgery had been delayed, then likely both patient and parents were now anxious, no matter the reason. It was best to release the tension ahead of time if possible.

His patient was only one hallway away, and when Salem stepped in, he found the father—who did look stressed out of his mind, wringing a worn-in ball cap between two hands—and mother, a simply dressed woman in her late thirties. The ten-year-old was in a patient gown, sitting upright in bed, with an IV in one hand already and a

blanket clutched close for comfort.

Yup. Way too much tension in this room.

“Hi there,” Alexis greeted everyone. “I bring to you good news. This is Doctor Hunter, who, fortunately for us, just got back from his brother’s wedding yesterday.”

That was his cue. “Hi, all. Let me explain a bit about why they delayed surgery for me to come in. Did anyone talk to you about what Situs Inversus is?”

“Um, Doctor Alexis did,” the mother admitted. “But I’m sorry, I’m not sure if I really understand it all. How will this affect him long term?”

“It won’t.” Salem shot her a reassuring smile. “The nice thing about this condition is it isn’t at all harmful. He’ll have a normal lifespan, just like the rest of us, without any issues. Except in times like these, when he might need a surgery, and it sends the poor staff’s heads spinning. Let me tell you something, looking at the mirror image of anything gets confusing. And when those organs are teeny-tiny, it doesn’t help anything. Now.” He braced his hands on the side rails of the bed and looked at his patient directly. “You, sir, have nothing to worry about there. So don’t let it fret you. Now, Doctor Kyle waited on me because he knows I’ve seen a patient like you before.”

Half the tension in the father fled out of his body language. “You have?”

“I have indeed. It’s incredibly rare, no lie, so I’m one of the very few in this hospital who has.” Salem gave him a comforting nod. “I promise you, I’ve got this. After today, Doctor Kyle will as well, because he’s still assisting in the surgery. He wants to see all of this with his own eyes so he’s not caught flat-footed again.”

“Sounds great,” the father muttered. “Damn, I never expected this as a complication.”



“No one did. I read from the chart that you guys tried a variety of different methods to avoid surgery, but now it’s unavoidable, so let’s just power through it so your son can heal.”

Salem straightened and pulled his markers out of his pocket. “In that vein—Cas? You want to help me and Doctor Kyle out?”

“Uh...sure?”

“This will be the one time you’re allowed to draw on your body.” Salem offered him the markers like a gambler would a hand. “Pick your weapon of choice, sir.”

He seemed excited and immediately picked a black.

“Good! Now, normally, your liver would be over here .” Salem lightly touched the spot in question. “But we don’t want to cut over there, ’cause your liver is over here . So let’s make sure we mark the right spot, okay? I’m going to pull this gown up some, thank you, Mom, for the help, and first thing’s first. Let’s mark off the spot where your liver isn’t.”

Salem wrote in a mostly legible scrawl with bright blue, Wrong side ! Abort abort !

Cas started laughing and drew a bunch of access denied symbols to join the words.

Good, this was working. Salem circled the area where the incisions would be. “Right spot.”

Cas immediately switched to drawing arrows and OK s around the circle. Salem joined in, marking a treasure trail from the wrong side to the right side, then made an elaborate X to mark the spot, much like a pirate map.

“Phew, okay.” Salem admired their handiwork. “Don’t think mistakes can be made now. Whatcha think, Cas?”

“Can I keep drawing?”

“Sure.” Anything to occupy his mind so he didn’t stress out. “Want mine too?”

“Yeah.” Cas took the offered marker, happy to keep going.

Alexis spoke to his parents in a soft voice. “We’ll get surgery prep going in about two hours. I don’t think this will take long at all. He should be back in his room by midafternoon. I promise you, he’s in great hands.”

Salem shook hands with both parents, gave the same assurances, then left because he did have a lot to do in the next few hours if he wanted to squeeze in lunch somehow before the surgery.

Falling into step with him, Alexis said almost rhetorically, “What is it about us letting kids draw on themselves that makes them so happy? It’s like a magical charm.”

“Lure of the forbidden, I guess.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Alexis looked at him and acted like she was waving a magic wand in front of him. “Handsome ice dragon is forbidden. Is it working yet?”

Salem sighed, letting his eyes roll off down the corridor somewhere. “Memo to me, stop talking to you about my love life.”

“You don’t have a love life. That’s the point.”

And how to argue with that?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The video call had helped.

Not just for the insight into how to handle Salem, but also, seeing his family's support and concern for him buoyed Gregori's own flagging confidence. Reluctant mates were one thing. Salem was borderline hostile toward him and the very idea of being mates. It wasn't like Gregori didn't respect the hard work Salem had put into achieving his dream or the sense of duty he had toward healing all those sick kids. He just believed Salem could have his career plus the love and support of a mate.

For Salem, it was one or the other. Work or a relationship.

The hard part now was convincing Salem both were possible.

But first, Gregori needed to prove he was useful and self-sufficient.

A tiny pang of guilt pinched his heart as he opened Salem's closet and peeked inside. This was not snooping. It was research. Critical fact gathering before an operation—the operation being the sneaky winning of Salem's heart.

The closet wasn't very helpful. Several suits of varying dark colors, collared shirts, jeans, and a handful of T-shirts. All of it was very functional and interchangeable, as if Salem wanted to be able to reach into his closet and randomly grab something without needing to give it much thought. On the floor were one set of dress shoes and three pairs of worn sneakers.

He snatched up Salem's suitcase he'd used in Brazil and quickly sorted it. If he'd eaten the man's ass, he could sort his undergarments without blinking. Some clothes

were tossed in the wash, and he set aside the suit he'd worn to his brother's wedding so it could be taken to the dry cleaner. The toiletries were dropped in the teeny-tiny bathroom, which held a shower stall that was not conducive to sexy shenanigans. Hell. Could he fit in there by himself?

He checked out the labels on Salem's shampoo, conditioner, bodywash, and deodorant, memorizing them. For the cologne, he might have popped off the cap and sniffed the sharp, spicy fragrance. It was nice, but it smelled even better warmed on Salem's soft skin right in the crook of his neck.

With a sigh, he pulled his stubborn brain away from thoughts of silky skin and the tenor of Salem's moans and turned toward the kitchen.

No, kitchenette.

How did anyone cook in here? It had zero counter space, and the coffee maker took up what little existed. All the appliances were tidy and clean. The only thing in the sink was a spoon from when Salem had stirred his sugar and creamer into his travel mug full of coffee. Sam had mentioned his brother had horrible eating habits. It was likely Salem's kitchen was clean because the man never used it.

The freezer held a stack of hamburger patties covered in frost and lost to freezer burn. The same for a small bag of chicken breasts. The bag of frozen green beans had probably suffered the same sad fate.

The fridge was terrifying.

Bags and containers of old takeout, most of it fast food. He didn't recognize all the names, but it was a wide mix—American, Asian, Italian, and more. All of it old and forgotten. Part of him wanted to shake Salem. How could he call himself a doctor and eat this crap? There was no way he'd let his patients eat a diet solely of processed

garbage.

With a huff, Gregori located a garbage bag and tossed all the takeout into it. Dr. Salem was getting a hot, healthy meal tonight whether he wanted it or not.

However, if these meals represented Salem's dinners, then logic said his lunches and breakfasts weren't any better. Yep, Gregori would need to start prepping his lunches as well. A healthy meal would carry him through the day and through those difficult surgeries.

Folding himself up at the itty-bitty dining room table, he scratched out some quick notes for what to get for dinner, as well as ideas for filling lunches. They would provide the boost Salem needed to get through the second half of his day.

Gathering up the list and Salem's suit for the dry cleaner, he quickly made the rounds. He dropped off the suit at the closest dry cleaner and then grabbed a rideshare to a local market. It was tempting to load up on all the fresh fruit, veggies, and meat, but he didn't want to overwhelm his skittish mate. Best to sneak in under his defenses.

He made one last stop to grab a Crock-Pot before zipping back to Salem's apartment with his haul. The good doctor had presented him with a spare key this morning, telling him to lock the door behind him when he left to find a hotel. Like he expected Gregori to simply shove the key under the door and actually leave.

Nope. Now he had a safe way to come and go during the day while Salem was at work.

Back at the apartment, Gregori quickly put away all his goodies and threw together a hearty stew, which would fill and warm his mate when he returned from a long day at the hospital. The leftovers were easy to keep, allowing him to have it for lunch for a

couple of days as well. Not to mention, it would bubble and cook all day, filling the apartment with a yummy smell. Hopefully it would soften any grumpiness from Salem when he returned to find his dragon still staying at his place.

With dinner cooking and lunch set for Salem tomorrow, Gregori moved on to the next item on his list—making himself useful at the hospital. Not only would this prove he was independent and helpful, but it just might provide Gregori with more insight into his own mate.

He caught another rideshare to Mass General Hospital, where he strolled up to the reception desk with an easy smile, his hands shoved into the pockets of his long wool coat. Not that he was feeling the chill of the winter afternoon thanks to being an ice dragon, but he always received some very odd looks when he wasn't appropriately dressed for the bitter cold.

The man with thinning brown hair and thick glasses blinked owlishly at him as he stepped up. "Good afternoon. Which department can I direct you to?"

"Hello, I am interested in volunteering a few hours several times a week. Who would I need to speak to?"

"Wonderful!" The man shuffled through some papers before finding what he was searching for. He placed a couple of sheets on a clipboard and grabbed an ink pen, handing it all over to Gregori. "We'll just need you to fill out this information and I'll contact someone over in human resources. When you're done, they'll run a background check and someone will contact you for a short interview. It usually only takes a few days."

Gregori frowned. A few days wasn't much, but he didn't want to wait. He needed to be able to show Salem some tangible results of his efforts. "Would it be possible to get an interview a little sooner? Possibly today? You see, my mate, Doctor Salem

Hunter, is a surgeon here, and I would very much like to support his work by entertaining the children in his care.”

The man’s brow furrowed a little. “Mate?”

Gregori nodded and smiled a little sheepishly. “Yes, my name is Gregori Valerii, and I’m an ice dragon from the Valerii Clan.”

The little man’s face paled and his mouth bobbed like a landed fish. For a heartbeat, Gregori wondered if he should call for a doctor to help him, but he finally found his voice and ability to breathe.

“A dragon? You’re a real live dragon?” the man said with a gasp.

Gregori shifted his eyes from dark brown to his dragon’s amber gold with the vertical slit for a pupil. His grin grew and he winked at the man. A high-pitched squeal left the man but was cut off when he slapped his hand over his mouth.

“Oh my god!” His words were muffled, but the sentiment came through loud and clear. Being a dragon was a good thing. The receptionist cleared his throat a couple of times and finally lowered his hand from his now flushed face. “You know what? Let me make some phone calls. Cecelia is the one who oversees all the volunteers, and I bet she could totally make some time for you today. If you could just take a seat over there and fill out the paperwork, I’ll give her a call.”

With a bow of his head, Gregori walked over to the seating area, biting back his own smug grin. He filled out the information as best he could, using Salem’s apartment for his place of residence. He also provided contact information for Dimitri and Rodrigo since they would be his best shot at getting a good reference. If Salem found out Gregori had called him his mate, Salem was more likely to skin him than recommend him as a volunteer.

In the background, Gregori could hear the receptionist's harsh whisper as he talked to someone. It would peak with notes of uncontained excitement, only to drop again as he got himself under control. The call lasted only a minute. Another minute passed before Gregori heard the clack of hard-soled shoes on the tile floor approaching at just short of a run.

He lifted his head after signing his name to find a woman standing in front of him, her lovely silvery-gray hair pulled up in a bun. Several strands hung down around her face, which was flushed from her fast walk from her office to the lobby of the children's hospital.

"Good afternoon. Are you the gentleman who is interested in volunteering?" she said, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Gregori smoothly rose and extended his hand. "Hello, I'm Gregori Valerii."

"Of the Clan Valerii, right? The ice dragons who live down in Brazil," she chimed in the second he stopped speaking.

"Yes..." He shook her hand, trying not to smile at her growing blush.

"I'm sorry, but I've always been a huge fan of dragons," she gushed, erasing decades from her face. It was as if simply meeting him was fulfilling a lifelong dream for her. "I've been closely following all the news related to the various dragon clans ever since King Alric of the Burkhard Fire Dragons announced you all were still alive."

"It's a pleasure to meet you..."

"Cecelia. Cecelia Brandt." She released his hand and motioned for him to accompany her. "If you would just come with me, Mister Valerii, we'll discuss your application."



The office was small but cheery, with lots of pictures that looked as if they'd been drawn or painted by the young patients at this hospital. The only dreary thing about the room was the view of the gray winter sky and bare trees. He slipped into a seat in front of her desk and handed over the paperwork. She glanced over it quickly, clicking her tongue softly in the silence of the room.

With a final nod, she set it down and looked at him. "Now, as I'm sure you understand, we must run a basic background check on everyone who comes to work at the hospital, even our volunteers. Just for the safety and well-being of the children in our care. As much as I would like to skip it for you..."

Gregori waved off her comments. "No, I understand. You must do what is best for the children. I would never want to put them in any kind of danger. I have put down contact information for the head of my clan, Rodrigo Valerii, as well as my boss, Dimitri Valerii. They would be happy to provide character references for me and answer any of your questions."

"Wonderful. I'll be sure to give them both a call this afternoon." She paused, her smile growing a mix of giddy and secretive. "Now, Kevin at the front desk did mention you said our wonderful Doctor Hunter is your mate. I'm sure if he were willing to vouch for you, we could speed things along."

Gregori winced, really wishing he could curl up in a ball. He could feel the heat of Salem's rage if he found out Gregori had dropped that bomb at his place of work. "Actually, I would rather you didn't tell him about this. I kind of want it to be a surprise. Plus, I'm sure he would be very unhappy if everyone found out about this part of his personal life. He's a very private person."

Cecelia nodded. "I completely understand. I'll keep my lips sealed." She even made the motion of zipping her lips closed and tossing the key over her shoulder. "After our chat, I'll make sure to have a little talk with Kevin, reminding him about the

hospital's policy about gossiping.”

A huge sigh of relief escaped Gregori and he slumped in his chair. He really didn't want to make Salem a source of gossip in his workplace when he deserved to be respected for his knowledge and skill. Doing otherwise would only bring Salem's wrath on Gregori's head and undermine what he hoped to accomplish.

“I don't have any specific training when it comes to kids, but I'm happy to read stories and play games with them. Anything to help take their minds off why they're in the hospital in the first place,” Gregori admitted, wanting to be completely honest with her while still selling himself as a good volunteer. “I'm also happy to teach them about dragons. I'm fluent in six languages, too.”

Cecelia clapped her hands quietly and wiggled in her office chair. “Perfect. All the kids are going to be so excited to meet you. I really wish I could take you in to meet them today. But I'll make some phone calls and see what I can do to get this background check pushed through quickly. I know the hospital would appreciate any time you can give us.”

Knowing the long hours Salem pulled as a pediatric surgeon, Gregori suspected he'd have a lot of free time on his hands. If he couldn't spend it directly wooing Salem, then this was really the next best thing.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem trudged home after a long day of surgeries and opened the door to his unlocked apartment. Apparently, he still had Gregori as a houseguest.

Why, why didn't he understand Salem was a horrible choice for a partner? Salem had been nothing but an asshole since their meeting. Wasn't that enough to tell the man this wasn't a good idea?

With an internal groan, he stepped inside. Whatever was cooking right now smelled divine. Like comfort in a bowl. Did he smell stew?

Gregori stood at the kitchen counter, getting bowls out, and he leaned backward to see Salem past the open cabinet door. "Hey there. You're in late."

"Surgeries," Salem explained shortly. "Why are you still here?"

Gregori grinned at him and notably didn't respond.

Dammit. Why was this dragon more stubborn than the many ex-boyfriends Salem had? Just that question alone would have made him single again in five seconds. Apparently, seven-hundred-year-old dragons were made of sterner stuff.

Salem toed off his shoes, shucked his jacket and briefcase, and went to the sink to wash his hands, which was a compulsory habit by now. He did it automatically, all while side-eyeing Gregori as he put stew into bowls and utensils and such on the table.

"Winter stew," Gregori explained, like Salem had asked the question aloud. "A recipe

from home. I felt it a good choice since it was such a brisk, chilly day. Come, sit.”

Salem sat. Mostly because lunch was a very distant memory, and it seemed a waste to not even try the stew. It smelled delicious. He took a bite and then groaned. Dammit, of course Gregori was a good cook on top of being charming and handsome. Universe, must you stack all favor in one man’s direction?

“Hard day at work?” Gregori asked him with concern. “You look so tired.”

“A bit challenging, but today was also par for the course.” Might as well be blunt with this. Maybe Gregori needed to hear it. “I’m always tired from work, okay? I’m always burned-out and bad company.”

“Sounds like you work too much.”

“You’re not the first to say so. I doubt you’ll be the last.”

Gregori’s head canted to the side. “Shouldn’t you be trying to keep me with you? To help support you.”

While it sounded amazing on paper, Salem knew it wasn’t how things would pan out. “No. You’ll just get burned-out trying to take care of me, then resentful, and the whole attempt will explode. Messily.”

“You sound very sure of it.” Gregori’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Annnnd that was as much information as Salem felt comfortable giving. He didn’t like discussing his dating history. Mostly because it brought up painful memories. No, thank you on rehashing it all.

Pointing a spoon at him, Salem argued, “This is a bad idea, what you’re trying to

attempt. Don't make me call up the ice dragons to come fetch you home again."

"Oh, they know where I am," Gregori assured him, locking eyes in challenge. "I am also far too old for such threats."

Yeah, okay, fair. It had been worth a shot, though. "I thought dragons always lived with their clans."

"For the most part. We do have a history of following our mates into other clans, though. It just didn't happen very often."

Huh. Well, that was news to Salem.

He didn't have the energy to argue anymore, so he focused on the stew. He scraped the bowl clean, then got up to rinse it and put it into the dishwasher. Only to find the dishwasher running. Gregori must have cleaned up after himself. Salem put the bowl back into the sink with a mental shrug.

"It's late, what are you going to do next?" Gregori asked.

"Bed."

"Ah. Good night, then."

Seriously? No argument still? Did the man have the patience of a saint?

Shaking his head, Salem set the thought aside and went about the routine of getting ready for bed. Because it was a cold night, he ended up in a long-sleeve shirt as well as sleep pants. Then he snuggled into bed, sighing with pleasure as he settled. Ah, his bed was such a good friend.

He could feel sleep already tugging at his mind, trying to seduce him under. But he could also hear Alexis's voice in his mind calling him an idiot. Just wait until she learned Gregori could cook and clean up after himself—then Salem would really have his sanity called into question.

The thought amused him, in a dark way, as sleep sucked him under.

Salem woke up the next morning to his alarm blaring. Gregori wasn't in the bed with him, but when he sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes, he saw messy sheets on the other side of the bed. So Gregori had slept next to him, and he'd been too deeply asleep to notice.

All right, this? This limbo thing had to stop. He emotionally couldn't take it. If Gregori wouldn't take a no, then at the very least Salem had to lay down some ground rules. He had to define and cage this before Gregori started getting ideas. Past experience told Salem so.

He dragged himself out of the bed, took a shower mostly to help wake up, brushed his teeth, and then felt human enough to have a conversation. Well, maybe. A cup of coffee would aid him in this endeavor.

Salem headed for the coffee maker only to find a pot already made up and Gregori making breakfast. Dammit, the adage about winning a man's heart through his stomach was true. Gregori played dirty—he knew precisely what he was about.

Salem stared at the man suspiciously as he poured himself coffee and doctored it as he preferred. Gregori cocked a brow at him, amused, even as he flipped over bacon.

“You,” Salem informed him, “are a hard nut to crack.”

“That's my line,” Gregori returned mildly. “What is it going to take for me to

convince you I'm not leaving?"

Salem believed nothing at this point. He'd heard too many broken promises. Human hearts were too fickle, and he wasn't sure if a dragon's heart was made of sterner stuff, honestly.

He sipped his coffee, turning to put a hip against the counter. Okay, time to face this head-on. Trying to avoid Gregori did fuck all.

"All right. You want to stay."

Gregori removed the pan from the burner and turned toward him. "Are we talking about this?"

"Yes. Because otherwise, I'll end up strangling you."

"That's fair. Yes, I want to stay with you."

"I really, really do not get why. Unless you're a glutton for punishment."

Gregori grinned. The surprisingly boyish grin made him look almost mischievous. The messy fall of his hair around his shoulders—he'd obviously not done anything with it yet this morning—only reinforced the impression. "I've been accused of that from time to time."

"Ha. Why doesn't this surprise me? But fine, if you want to stay, I won't argue, but I insist upon some ground rules."

Gregori waved him on, all smiles still. "Hit me."

He looked far too cheery for this conversation. It conversely worried Salem. Like he

was missing something big, something Gregori knew, and it was going to bite him in the ass later.

He shook the thought off. “All right. You can stay, but only if you don’t expect something from me. I want to be clear: We’re not mates. We’re not in a relationship. Do not expect me to act like a boyfriend, or someone you’re dating, because I won’t.”

Gregori’s eyes narrowed, smile dimming. A second drew out into several seconds before he finally dipped his head.

“I can work with that for now. Sex?”

“I’m not turning down sex.” Because he wasn’t a moron. “If we can act like roommates with benefits, sure.”

“Roommates with benefits, huh.” Gregori’s head canted to the side. “Interesting. Agreed.”

Why did Salem feel like there was a high-speed armchair analysis going on over there? The way Gregori stared unnerved him. Like he could see right through to the back of Salem’s head and hear things Salem didn’t say.

Fuck. He wasn’t playing along with that.

Turning back toward the counter, he set his coffee down. “Okay, if we’re agreed, then no more arguments about this. I hate arguing more than anything. Is breakfast almost ready?”

“It is. Just waiting for biscuits to be done, which should be another two minutes. Pour me a cup of coffee?”



Surprised by the question, Salem took a second longer than necessary to respond.  
“Uh, sure.”

He’d just laid down the law with Gregori, but the man had rolled with it surprisingly well. Almost too well.

Why did Salem get the instinctual feeling he’d won the skirmish but he hadn’t won the war?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Gregori had no idea what had made Salem suddenly change his mind and let him stay. Something clearly had happened between their last argument and this morning. And while it wasn't what Gregori wanted, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He had the opportunity to stay with his mate without it turning into a fight. He'd take full advantage of the situation.

For a few days, he let the status quo be. He stocked up the kitchen with groceries so he could cook for Salem. His very busy pediatric surgeon needed more home-cooked meals.

In between housework and cooking, he tried to make more of a life for himself here as well. He went to the police first, introducing himself, and offered help as they needed it. They in turn introduced him to the fire department, who were delighted to see him. Fires were very prevalent in winter, as people's heating systems misfired and caused house fires on a fairly regular basis. Gregori, with his flying speed and ice magic, could smother those flames faster than conventional methods. He was very welcome with them.

Pleased he'd found a good way to spend his time—and made friends in the process—Gregori returned to the apartment in a very good mood. He hadn't had time to cook today, so he picked up pizza on the way in, along with a bottle of wine, with the hopes of tricking Salem into a home date. Should be easy; the man liked to eat.

He found the apartment door unlocked, and he could hear what sounded like Salem talking to someone.

Stepping inside, Gregori found the cutest sight ever. There was a little girl, no more

than six, with flaming red hair lying in loose curls around her shoulders. She looked very distressed, her hands on Salem's knee, watching the proceedings with full attention.

Salem sat on the couch with thread, scissors, and a stuffed animal of some sort all laid out on the coffee table in front of him.

What the hell was going on?

Salem glanced up as he entered, shooting him a fleeting smile. "We're in surgery over here. Is that pizza?"

"Yeah, I picked up some on the way in. Surgery?" Gregori put the pizza on the table so he could come in closer and see this for himself.

Ah, it was a stuffed bunny. With its head completely detached. "Who guillotined the bunny?"

Salem snorted a laugh—the first one Gregori had heard from him. Aww, look at how cute he was.

The little girl was the one who answered. "Grammy washed Bun Bun 'cause she was sticky, but her head came off."

"Ohhh." This was no surprise, considering how well-loved Bun Bun looked.

"Grammy had me bring Bun Bun to Mister Doctor 'cause he knows how to sew."

Salem shrugged. "Comes with the territory. All right, I think we're ready to get Bun Bun's head back on."

Why did this look like an ongoing relationship? Gregori had met the neighbors on this floor already, and everyone had been very welcoming to him. Surprised he was with Salem, too, as they had assumed him to be a confirmed bachelor at this point. No one had mentioned Salem was the resident fixer of stuffed bunnies, but Gregori could tell she had been here before based on her easy body language. She'd made this request and gotten her stuffed animal fixed.

The way Salem deftly stitched the material, slowly reattaching head to body, also told its own story. He'd clearly done this before too, as he wasn't fumbling or hesitant.

Gregori studied his bowed head and marveled at his mate anew. Every day he spent with Salem, he saw some part of this man's heart. He'd already known Salem must have a big heart to be a pediatric surgeon. Watching his tired mate patiently fix the bunny for his neighbor's grandchild only highlighted how big.

Gregori suspected Salem kept him at arm's length because he had been burned by too many bad relationships in the past. If he could just get it through his mate's head that he'd never, ever hurt him, half the battle would be won. Gregori recognized a trauma response when he saw one. Not that Salem trusted him enough to talk about it openly.

Well, he had time. Really, they had all the time in the world. Gregori wasn't giving up on him. Salem's walls would come down on their own eventually, and Gregori would be able to love him properly. Right now, he just had to be patient.

"There!" Salem finished off the last knot and snipped the threads. "All done. Tell Grammy no more washing it in the washing machine, okay?"

"Okay!" She hugged her bunny to her chest, beaming. "Thanks, Mister Doctor!"

Then she darted out.

Gregori followed her to the door, watching as she went straight across the hall and into her grandmother's apartment. Safe and sound then, good. He closed and locked the door behind her, as he doubted they'd leave the apartment again tonight.

Salem immediately went for the pizza, then made oohing sounds.

"Wiiine. Thank fuck. I need alcohol today. I'm so buzzed I can't settle or relax."

"Glad I got some, then."

Salem did a little happy dance as he grabbed glasses and plonked himself down at the table. He poured them both a glass before promptly sipping his.

"Ahhh, a good red goes down right. Where were you today?"

"Oh, signing up with the police department and fire station." Gregori accepted the offered glass and took a sip. Mm, the wine was delicious. He'd guessed the correct one to grab.

Salem paused with the lid to a pizza box half open. "Uhhh...why?"

"Well, they're in line with what I do. And I need something to occupy myself aside from feeding you and sexing you up."

"I mean, you're right, but why those two places?"

"Well, I'm a demolitions expert." Gregori shrugged. He was secretly very pleased at Salem's interest. This was the first time he'd ever asked Gregori any questions. "I figured the police was an obvious choice. And they agreed, but they also had me sign up with the fire department to help with all the house fires."

“Oh right, ice dragon magic. You’d be good at suppressing fires.”

“That I am.”

Salem gave a sage nod. “I bet they cried tears of joy when you signed up.”

Gregori snorted a laugh, shaking his head as he grabbed some slices for himself. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“The tears were secret, held inside.”

“Uh-huh.”

Salem consumed a full slice before asking, “What was the weirdest or best story when it comes to your job?”

“Hmm, I don’t know about ‘best’ but I do have a crazy one.”

“Hit me.”

“Well, this was while working with the Brazilian film studios, actually. I do freelance work with them if they’ve got a scene where something goes kablooey.”

From Salem’s expression, he hadn’t expected this. “What, really?”

“Yup. They use explosives in some form or fashion sometimes to get the right effect, and they hire experts so it doesn’t do actual damage. Kinda hard to blow up a car on camera without actually blowing up a car, if you get what I mean.”

“Okay...so you’re on a movie set, and...?”

“It was one of those crazy action movies. Not a blockbuster hit, either, although I saw the movie later and it wasn’t half bad. Anyway, in this scene, a prop plane slams right into an eighteen-wheeler, and they both explode upon impact. Not exactly what would happen in real life, but movie magic at its finest, am I right? My job was to rig the whole thing so they would explode on impact. I talk with the crew, get things set up, we walk through angles and whatnot. Prop plane is actually on wires, with a massive crane guiding it in, so it can’t go off the rails and hit something else. Takes a full day to set this up.”

Salem looked very interested in where this was going.

Gregori put his pizza down, hands getting involved in the storytelling. “The only person not happy with me is the action director. He’s wanting all sorts of impact from this scene. He kept arguing, telling me I wasn’t using enough powder for him.”

“Powder?”

“Powder explosives,” Gregori elaborated. “Most pyrotechnic explosions are a mix of gunpowder, kerosene, and select minerals for some razzle dazzle. Like something you’d see in fireworks.”

“Ohhh, gotcha.”

“Anyway, he’s arguing with me about this. He wants more of this, more of that, and I’m arguing back with him because what he wanted was insane. It would have blown up the whole set. I’ve never in my life raised my voice at someone like I did with him. He was being so stupid about the whole thing. I shut him down and told him I wasn’t adding anything more to it. Like, I’d walk and break contract if he didn’t let this go. He stomped off, fuming, and I thought that was the end of it.”

Salem rolled his eyes. His mouth was full of pizza, but his expression said it all.

“Yeah. He didn’t listen. Good guess. The bastard snuck back onto the set and added another twenty barrels of kerosene. Basically another two hundred gallons, as they were ten-gallon barrels.”

“Oh my god!”

“I had no idea. I thought it was a done deal, right? I was only on set again the next morning to oversee everything, as I was still under contract. So we’re all set up for filming, they get some cameras up close and running, but under protective bulletproof glass just in case. The action director was far closer to the set than he should have been, directing a camera, and I thought about saying something to him, but I just didn’t want another argument. I figured, he’s an adult, he’s responsible for himself. And then it’s lights, camera, action. Whole thing went kablooey.”

Gregori spread his hands wide as he made an explosive noise. “Never mind having a burning plane and truck, they blew sky-high. Everyone was knocked down due to the shockwave, including me. The director and cameraman were so close, they took almost a direct hit. I scrambled up to my feet and immediately used ice magic to suppress the out-of-control fire. It damn near burned down the whole set before I could get it contained.”

“Oh. My. God.” Salem had stopped eating, riveted now. “Were they okay?”

“Well...mostly? The cameraman was largely protected by the camera in front of him and the protective shield, so he wasn’t too bad off. Just a little scorched around the edges. The action director had been outside the shield, though, ’cause he kept popping in and out like a jackrabbit. He did not fare as well. His face and hands looked like he’d been on the beach cooking all day, he was so red. Eyebrows were clean burned off. As was some of his front hairline.”

“Wait. Wait. He’d stepped away from the protective shield?”



“I didn’t say he was smart.”

A startled laugh erupted from Salem. “He must have looked comical.”

“Oh, for sure. All the while, he kept babbling about how he hadn’t added that much kerosene, it shouldn’t have done that, yadda yadda. Honestly, if he hadn’t confessed, I might have suffered the fallout. All of the evidence was burned, after all.”

“Did he keep his job?”

“Oh, hell no. Man was promptly fired. Then sent to the hospital for treatment. No one trusted him afterward. I understand he had a hard time getting hired again.”

“What, no one wanted to risk him blowing them up?”

“Hard to imagine, right?”

Salem snickered and sipped his wine. “It’s damn lucky they hired you, above anyone else. You were able to put the fire out, after all. A human expert would have struggled to keep people safe.”

“I am a favorite for them to hire for this reason.”

“I bet.”

He really did look entertained by this. In fact, this was the most relaxed Gregori had ever seen him. It made him want to capitalize on the whole situation.

“I’ve got the movie saved on my cloud drive, if you want to watch it.”

“Wait, did they actually use the footage in the movie?”

“They did. Director said no sense in wasting it.”

“Ha! That’s hilarious.” Salem paused, glass in hand, his expression one of temptation.

“I don’t understand Portuguese, though.”

“I can turn on English subtitles.”

“Oh, in that case, you’re on.”

Looked like his home date was going swimmingly. Gregori hid a smile behind his pizza. See? Pushing Salem was not the right choice. If he kept laying out breadcrumbs for the man, though, Salem would come to him in no time.

Gregori would bet on that.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

S tuck in rush hour traffic, Salem let his mind roam. He didn't need many brain cells to switch from gas to brake and back again. It had been almost two weeks since he and Gregori had struck the "roommates with benefits" deal, and honestly? Salem hadn't expected Gregori to last the two weeks. No one ever did. It was actually a little alarming how well things were going. Gregori seemed happy to feed him, and of course they were having sex on the regular because, well, obvious reasons. Gregori had stopped pushing about the mate thing and now they were just hanging out. Salem had been surprised by how much he'd come to genuinely like the dragon. He was a very interesting man who was competent at a lot of things—something of a weakness of Salem's; he adored the competent—and his brand of humor was so akin to Salem's, he'd gotten Salem to laugh quite a few times. When Salem did get snarky, he snarked right back.

It would be far too easy to fall for him.

And that was very much a problem.

Salem gave his cheek a light slap and muttered, "Focus, you. Focus. Do not fall for his charm. You know you don't do relationships."

Sadly, his dating history made Sam's look like textbook perfection. At least before Dimitri, Sam had managed several long-term relationships. Dimitri, of course, being the finisher, as he would let Sam go over Dimitri's own rotting corpse. Salem's longest relationship had lasted three months. And half of the time had been spent in blistering screaming matches. Salem was not easy to love—he knew this about himself—and he would avoid dragging someone into a toxic relationship like he would avoid poison. It was far better to be a serial dater. One date, two, everyone got

off and they could part ways amicably. No heartbreak.

The whole pep talk to himself only succeeded in depressing Salem. He dragged more than walked into work, irritated the workday was only beginning. He had several post-op check-ins, one surgery for a routine tonsil removal, plus probably something else he was forgetting off the top of his head.

He used his ID card to open the back door, headed up via elevator, and stepped off at the children's wing, all purely on autopilot. He walked along, messenger bag over his shoulder, thoughts only on getting to his office and checking the schedule.

Then he heard it.

No, surely not, he was just hearing things?—

A bright, deep laugh echoed through the hallway.

Salem turned his head, much like the scary mannequin head in a haunted house, absolutely aghast to hear that laugh in his workplace.

What the hell was Gregori doing here?!

Salem abruptly spun on his toes and jogged along the hallway. He had a suspicion of where the laugh came from. There weren't many places people off the street could go unless patient or staff, so for Gregori to have weaseled his way in, he was likely—bingo.

The children's wing had an absolutely huge outdoor deck that took up most of the courtyard space. It was fully encased in glass to protect against the winter elements, with large sliding glass doors that could be opened in good weather—a protected way to get all the kids some Sunny D and somewhere to go other than their depressing

hospital rooms.

Salem had passed by this place thousands of times. On a few rare occasions he'd stepped in to speak with a patient or family, but never had he just stopped and watched. He'd also never realized how big this courtyard was because he'd never expected it to be able to hold a fully transformed dragon.

Salem had seen some of the dragons transformed and flying about, of course, during his visit to Brazil. Even then his heart had kind of leapt into his throat in absolute, childlike awe unlike anything he'd even felt as a child.

Somehow, seeing Gregori left the prior memory of awe right in the dust.

God above, but he was stunning . The weak morning light still filtered through the glass, and it bathed the long length of Gregori's spine and the tops of his wings, painting the pearl white scales with a touch of wild honey. The dense muscles of his body cast a strong shadow—underneath, the scales almost looked blue. Truly, a painting come to life. Salem found himself pulling his phone out of his pocket and taking a picture. Then another. How could you consider yourself a human being and not catch this moment?

Especially when the kids who had any kind of mobility at all were climbing on Gregori as if he were some jungle gym. He had several kids on his spine, his wings, his tail, and he'd gathered together with his arms the ones in beds or wheelchairs so he could nudge them with his nose.

This was unfairly cute. It was like attacking Salem with a whole litter of puppies without warning, and dammit, who let Gregori in here?!

Because he couldn't help himself, he took a full minute video of cuteness, then forced himself to stop and skedaddle before someone—Gregori—could catch him watching.

It would be absolutely mortifying because there was no way in hell Gregori would ever let him live it down.

Only when he gained the safety of his office did he dare breathe easy. All right. Let's check the schedule. Let's see, there was a post-op for?—

His office door slammed open. "Salem!"

Salem straightened in his chair, then slumped backward. This morning was doomed, wasn't it? "Alexis. I'm checking my schedule."

"That's him, isn't it? The ice dragon who followed you home."

Fifteen minutes. They were only fifteen fucking minutes into the workday. And somehow, in those minutes, Gregori had beaten him to work—he'd likely flown, which was cheating—and volunteered with the kids. Alexis had heard of this, and now she was confronting Salem.

Giving up, he confirmed on a weary sigh, "Yes, the dragon is Gregori."

"I about swallowed my tongue when I saw him. Nurses at the station told me he'd come in before you, asked if he could play with the kids, and apparently had already done all the paperwork for it. Even the kids who've been struggling with depression got out of their rooms as fast as they could. He's been coming for two weeks, supposedly. How am I just learning about this?"

He knew which kids she meant and just about bowled over in relief. "Tyler and Jessica?"

"Them and Hillary."

Wow. Gregori had more charm than Salem had realized. Hillary was sixteen, had been struggling with heart issues her whole life, and it took something serious to get her out of a funk. She'd seen all the usual tricks doctors and staff had up their sleeves to get a child's attention. Although Alexis was right, it was anyone's guess how he'd not known about this for two weeks. He wasn't that locked into the surgical room, was he?

Don't answer that.

"I don't blame them, mind you, I went in there too. How many times does a person come in close contact with a dragon? Except you." Alexis waggled her eyebrows. "You get all up close and personal."

"Alexis, stop. You're truly disturbing when you do that."

"I do it to disturb you."

Of course she did. He was resigned at this point.

"Now, let's recap, as I haven't seen Gregori in human form at this point aside from the single picture you showed me. He is incredibly built as a dragon, not an inch of fat anywhere to be seen. Is this true in human form too?"

"If you think about it, it would take extreme upper body strength to fly, wouldn't it? Not to mention, the ability to launch yourself into the air, so naturally your thighs and calves would also be very strong."

"I'll take that as a yes. So a handsome, very strong dragon is courting you, is smoking hot in bed, somehow finds your personality cute?—"

"That's because it is cute."

Salem buried his head in his hand. And now Gregori had joined them. Why, universe, why?

“You forgot lunch again this morning,” Gregori scolded. “I came to bring it, thought I’d play with the kids while I’m here.”

“I can feed myself—” Salem protested.

“But you don’t. You skip lunch unless it’s already in your office. It’s a bad habit.” Gregori fully opened the door and stepped inside. In one hand he held a multitiered lunchbox. One of those fancy lacquered ones like you saw in Asian dramas, even tied up in a cloth like one would be.

Where and when had Gregori even bought it? Because Salem sure as hell didn’t have one!

“I don’t know all your favorites yet,” Gregori said almost apologetically. “So I made a variety. Share whatever you don’t want to eat. Hello, who’s this?”

Alexis wasted no time introducing herself. “Alexis. This idiot’s best friend. Nice to meet you.”

“Charmed, Alexis. Please help him eat all this, I know I made too much.”

“I’d be delighted ,” she assured him brightly.

“Good, good. I’ll go back to playing with the kids, I promised them I’d only be gone five minutes.” Gregori set the lunchbox—could it really be called such a simple thing?—down on the only clear spot the desk had to offer.

Then he caught the arm of Salem’s chair and yanked him in close.



Startled, Salem instinctively braced with his hands up, which meant they landed on Gregori's shoulders. He had no time to do more than open his mouth on a protest when Gregori put his mouth right next to Salem's ear.

"So how many pictures did you take?" he breathed.

Heat shot to his face as the full impact of his sentence hit home. This rat bastard; he had noticed Salem! He just hadn't let on so Salem could dig himself right into a grave!

Gregori chuckled softly, pulling back just enough to catch Salem's mouth in a firm kiss. Tongue was definitely involved. Salem may have been sucked into the kiss before he realized what Gregori was doing, and could the dragon stop being so damn smooth?

Gregori broke the kiss, winked at him, and straightened. "I'll see you later."

Then he left. Like he hadn't managed to upend Salem's morning in a minute flat.

Dammit!

Alexis watched the door close behind Gregori, and she blew out a breath.

"Salem."

"Don't say it." He groaned, this time dropping his head into both hands.

"I love you like a brother, but goddamn, man. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Aleeeeeexis, please, you know I'm bad at relationships! Gregori is too good. I'd run roughshod over him and break him without even meaning to. Would you inflict me

on him? Knowing how badly I sabotage relationships without even trying? Be honest.”

“It’s really a pleasant reminder of your emotional growth, you now being self-aware enough to know when you’re being an ass.” Alexis shook her head and for some reason reached for the landline phone on his desk. “But yes, in this case, I would.”

Salem stared at her over the tips of his fingers. “He’s not done anything to offend you, has he?”

“Look, any man who can take your personality in stride and then manage to tease you? Clearly isn’t looking at you with rose tinted glasses. I have never in my life seen you blush until today. And you still let him kiss you, which tells me volumes.”

Oh. Oh shit. He rather had given too much away by not breaking the kiss. “I was taken by surprise!”

“Honey, I’ve seen you dead drunk and still able to punch a man out for trying to kiss you.”

Shit, she would remember that incident.

Alexis bent down enough to look at the directory taped to the wall, then punched in three numbers.

“What are you even doing, anyway?”

“Calling the Psych department. You need an examination.” She shot him a deadpan look that screamed try me, motherfucka. “You’re normally a smart man, but this? This is stupid. I’m getting you checked out.”

Salem just sighed. At least the lunch was guaranteed to be good. The rest of the day looked like it was going to suck, though.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem came in from work absolutely dead tired. He'd had one emergency surgery after the next, with upset parents—one had actually attacked his nurse, and Salem had jumped down the man's throat before security got there, throwing his screaming ass out—then he went an hour over his shift time due to the paperwork about the incident. He'd not eaten the lunch Gregori had dropped off—had in fact left it in his office—breakfast was a faraway memory, and honestly, he was so tired he wasn't even sure if he was hungry at this point. Appetite? What was that? Must be something for people who had energy. AKA, not him.

He really should eat, though. Salem had been exhausted like this many, many times before. Ever since he started med school, really. He and energy deprivation were old buddies at this point. He knew from experience, if someone put food in front of him right now, he'd consume every bite like a starving wolf. He also knew if he didn't eat, and slept instead, he'd wake up at three a.m. absolutely starving.

All right. Food. Food that was fast. Ramen?

Maybe ramen. Yeah.

He stumbled over to the stove, turned it on, rummaged for a pan, found a clean pot and got it on the stove. Then he rummaged in the pantry.

Ramen? Raaaamen? Yoo-hoo? Dammit, where was the ramen? Oh no. Oh no, was he out? Dammit, unless the ramen pack had developed ninja powers, there was none to be found in this pantry.

Salem leaned against the counter and felt like crying. He didn't have the energy to

think of what else to eat. It was too complicated of a question. He didn't even have food in the house. Just ingredients to make food, and that wasn't the same thing at all.

From the exterior hallway, he heard footsteps—a very familiar heavy tread—and he knew who it was before the man even arrived.

“Why’s the door open?” Gregori questioned. He stripped off his shirt the second he came in, throwing it in the general direction of the laundry cubby, nose flaring as he sniffed. He had his hair in a braid today. He should braid it more often, he looked great with his hair pulled back. “And what’s that smell? It’s like burning metal.”

Salem focused on him and all those lovely muscles. He never got tired of looking at the muscles. “You only wore a shirt today?”

“Yeah, weather was nice.”

The weather had not been nice. It had been above freezing. Then again, for an ice dragon, today was probably balmy.

“You’re fine shirtless,” Salem murmured.

“I know,” Gregori replied, tone rich with amusement. He came in closer, nose still working. “Uh, is the burner on?”

Oh. Right, Salem had turned it on for ramen. But there was no ramen. And he’d forgotten to put water in the pot. Oops.

He moved, fetching the pot off the stove and then putting it in the sink.

“Ack!” Gregori swooped in and snatched the pot up. “What are you doing, there’s plastic Tupperware in there—ugh, it’s now ruined.”

Oh shit. Salem took the pot away from him and set it on the counter so he could survey the damage.

Gregori quickly sidestepped around him, snatching the pot up again. “Don’t put it down on the butcher block, it’s still hot!”

He watched as Gregori put the pot under the water, cooling it off, and felt like a failure all over again. Fuuuuuck, this always happened when he got so tired. He just made one stupid mistake after another. It always made people upset with him. For the matter, Salem got upset with himself as well, but he unfortunately lived with himself, too.

Gregori put the pan back down, then crab-stepped to the side to turn off the burner.

Aw shit, Salem should have turned it off. He’d forgotten about it completely.

Only then did Gregori look down at him, confused, his brows drawn down together in an unhappy line.

“It’s okay.” Salem sighed, already turning for the couch. Fuck it, he’d just sleep and scrounge in the kitchen after he took a nap and could function better. “You can leave. I understand.”

“You think I want to leave?”

“Everyone does by this point.” Salem flopped onto the couch—an inelegant sprawl that had nothing to do with dignity. Between talking to Alexis earlier and being reminded of the last ex-boyfriend who had gone off the rails because of stupid shit Salem had done, and now this? When he’d again done something stupid? He honestly felt like crying. Even he wasn’t sure why because there was too much to cry about. “It’s why I don’t do relationships anymore.”

Gregori came in closer, kneeling at his feet and looking up at him. For some reason, he didn't appear mad. Which made no fucking sense to Salem.

“What happened with previous people?”

Why the fuck was he asking questions? Why wasn't he just leaving like everyone else had? Salem was an asshole. He'd been an asshole since Gregori had met him, he'd denied they were mates to the man's face even when he knew those words hurt Gregori, and he'd just shown the man what kind of walking disaster he was when dead tired. Shouldn't Gregori, even with his vast store of patience, have gotten fed up by now?

Salem thought about not answering, but when he was this tired, he had no filter, so words started pouring out of his mouth.

“They left. I told you. I'm an asshole even on good days, although honestly, I try not to be, but the asshole just slips out. And after dating me for a while—generally takes three weeks—I'll have a day like today. Where I'm super tired and I can't focus, and I make one stupid mistake after the next, and they get mad. One boyfriend accused me of weaponized incompetence. Which isn't true. I do my best at everything. Except dishes because I hate doing dishes?—”

Gregori snorted at this for some reason, like it was funny.

“—and really, who likes doing dishes? Are there people who do? And can I hire them? I will pay them a stupid amount of money to do my dishes.”

“It's okay, I'll do your dishes.”

“You will?” Salem smiled, relieved. Then frowned again. “But that means you're staying. You want to stay?”

“I do.”

“You make no damn sense, you know that, right? Being mates can’t be the only reason for you to put up with me like this. You’re literally the first who wasn’t family. You’re very strange if you want to stay. I do not understand you.”

“Then you can learn more about me as we go. Tell me more about the shitty exes you’ve had. You’ve had at least one break up with you because you did stupid things while exhausted.”

Salem tsked him, wagging a negating finger. “No, no, all of them left because of it. They got tired of cleaning up after me. And because I’m an asshole.”

“Hmmm. I think you were being an asshole to me deliberately.”

“Yeah. So you didn’t get attached to me. I tried telling you, I’m no good as a romantic partner. But you’re stubborn. Are all dragons stubborn?”

“When we find our mates? You bet we are.”

“Nice.” Salem slumped sideways a little, head lolling on the back of the couch. “I bet Dimitri was able to catch Sam by being stubborn. But Sam’s a good romantic partner. He always has been. He’s had more long-lasting relationships than I have. My longest one was three months.”

“Ah-ha,” Gregori murmured, like he’d just been handed some piece of a puzzle and knew precisely where it went. “And when did you stop trying?”

Salem snorted a laugh and sank farther into the couch in the process. Really, the couch was a buddy. Couch would catch him when he fell. “Years ago, man. Years ago. I think it was three months into my residency? Somewhere in there. Boyfriend



lost his shit because of some stupid stuff I'd done in my sleep-deprived state, and the next thing I knew, I was out on my ass. Sam came and got me, and I stayed at his place until I was awake enough to drive home."

"So to recap, you've never had a supportive partner who picks up the slack for you when you need it, you've had multiple people say you are an asshole?"

"No, no, I am an asshole. I own my assholery. Is that a word?"

"It is a word, yes, but I don't think you're an asshole. I think you've been hurt too many times, you internalized it, and now you're keeping people at bay to avoid being hurt again."

Salem didn't like the sound of that. He didn't like it whatsoever. "How dare you do an armchair analysis of me."

"I now understand why you're fighting me so hard."

"No, no, you don't get it." A laugh erupted from Salem, but it had no humor to it. "You don't. You really don't."

"What don't I get?"

"How hard it is. How truly hard it is to be around me. You somehow managed to last three weeks, but I bet you're getting tired of my attitude now. I've been told how awful my personality is. At length. By various guys I dated. I only know how to work, they said. I don't know how to have fun. I don't know how to relax. I'd rather pay down my debts than spend money on luxury gifts for them. I'm only good for sex. I wear everyone out, eventually. And then you'll be disappointed."

For some reason, Gregori lifted Salem's fingers to his mouth and kissed them. He

didn't look happy. "By chance, do you know where all of those exes of yours live?"

"It's been years of no contact, of course I don't."

"Pity. I feel like I need to rain down some hell and comeuppance. No matter, I'll find them later. Right now, I need you to understand two things. One, I'm not leaving you."

"Your stubbornness is your only flaw." Salem sighed. What was he supposed to do to convince Gregori that this whole thing was a bad idea? Especially when the man didn't want to hear it.

"Two, I'm not angry when you have these klutzy moments."

Salem blinked at him. Huh. Who'da thunk. "You're not?"

"No. Actually, watching one of the most intelligent men I know enact a comedy of errors was kinda funny. I have a feeling it's going to be hysterical by tomorrow. So I'm really, truly not mad. I am a little concerned because at the rate you were going, you might have destroyed the kitchen."

Salem held up two fingers with a sort of sarcastic pride. "I've destroyed two kitchens."

"Make that very concerned. New rule: You are not allowed to do anything when this tired."

"But I'm hungry," he whined. "I wanted ramen, but we have no ramen, and I don't have any more brain power so I can't think of what else to eat."

Was he too tired to see straight? Or was Gregori silently laughing at him? How could

any part of this be funny? Salem didn't get it.

"You're seriously cute right now," Gregori murmured. "All right. How about this? You sit right here, and I'll run down to the bodega and get something to eat."

"Genius," Salem breathed, captivated by the mental image of food arriving, in its complete form, in front of him. "Buying food. Why didn't I think of that?"

"I'm questioning this as well, but I don't think you have any higher thought processes left right now. Not enough spell slots, I guess. You lie down, take a nap."

"Noooo, food first!"

"Take a nap," Gregori ordered this time, lifting Salem's legs up to encourage the whole lying-down thing. "I'll get you food and wake you up once I'm back so you can eat it. Then put you to bed."

"You're putting me to bed and everything?"

"I am."

Okay, if he had some adultier adult willing to do adult things like bedtime, then he could stop trying to function now. Salem was making a hash of it anyway—better for Gregori to take over. Salem yawned and yanked a couch pillow in closer. He felt a throw settle over him.

"No olives or mushrooms, okay?" he said as he drifted off.

A soft chuckle from Gregori before lips lightly touched his forehead.

"You got it. Sleep, Salem. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He settled into his nap with a smile on his face. This whole dragon roommate thing definitely came with perks. And you know what? If Gregori wanted to take over, Salem had no problem letting him. It'd be nice if Gregori never left. If, for once, someone stayed with Salem. That would be very, very nice indeed.

D ate night! Date night!

It was freaking date night!

Salem didn't know this, of course. Gregori was going off his own schedule for their dates. The last home date had worked out really well, but today he felt like pushing boundaries and taking Salem out. Salem had complained of being tired of only going to work and home, nowhere else, so Gregori had suggested a change of scenery would do them both good. Maybe have dinner out on the town. The grumpy surgeon had caved to Gregori's proposal of going out to celebrate Salem's much deserved night off.

It being Sunday, Gregori had checked in with Ha Na, and he'd done it early in the morning while Salem still slept. For the most part, Salem's day off work was spent sleeping. Not that he blamed the man in the least. He put in some extremely long hours at the hospital, and when he came home, he spent more hours picking at Gregori, trying to convince the dragon they were a horrible match. It had to be draining.

Gregori had said as much to Ha Na, but he'd put it in terms of but improvements ! And there were improvements. Salem didn't argue with him on a daily basis anymore. In fact, he quite liked having Gregori living with him, even if he didn't say it.

What Gregori did not mention were his body aches, especially along the spine, so as not to worry Ha Na. In truth, he wasn't used to staying in human form like this for weeks on end. He clearly wasn't flying enough. But that was a later him problem.

He'd fly some after Salem went back to work tomorrow. His dragon was being rumbly and irritable, so a flight was definitely in order.

Tonight wasn't about mates, bonding, or their eventual happily ever after.

It was about getting to know each other. Sure, they'd screwed like rabbits, and Gregori had a detailed catalogue in his brain of all the secret spots on Salem's body where he could lick or suck and make Salem scream himself hoarse, but how much did he actually know about his mate that didn't involve sex or Salem's work?

Next to nothing.

He trusted his dragon's instincts, which said they were mates. He could feel they were meant for each other deep down in his soul. It was just that the rest of him was waiting to understand what made them so perfect for each other.

"So, let's get the most cliché question out of the way," Gregori started as he carefully maneuvered Salem's car on the somewhat busy street. The sun had set a little over an hour ago and the car headlights shone brightly on the wet streets. The temperature had warmed up just enough to melt some of the piles of snow around the city. Thankfully, the roads were well treated against ice, but Gregori had no intention of risking Salem's life for a silly date.

The plan was a little fun and a quick, quiet dinner before whisking him back to the apartment for some under-the-covers snuggling. And yeah, probably sex. It was the one thing they were getting right at the moment.

Plus, his mate was ridiculously sexy. Why in the world would he pass that up?

"I'm afraid to find out what you're thinking," Salem muttered from the passenger seat.

“What made you decide to be a pediatric surgeon?”

“Oh, that. I was trying to one-up my brother.”

Gregori had been slowing down for a red light, but he might have tapped the brakes a little harder than he'd expected at Salem's words. They both lurched forward, but he quickly recovered, smoothing out their deceleration with no problem.

“What?” he choked out. He glanced over when they were fully stopped to find Salem had the cheekiest grin. God, he wanted to lean over and kiss it right off.

Salem slumped a little more in his seat and leaned against the door.

“Sam and I have always been incredibly competitive. Especially after we discovered he couldn't do magic. It was like he decided he had to be better than me in everything he did to make up for the fact I could do magic and he couldn't.” Salem paused and made a dismissive scoff. “Like my magic is impressive at all. My parents never had any great formal training. They just passed on what little they knew to me, and then it was always with the warning to not let any outsider see me using magic. I told Sam he wasn't missing out on anything interesting, but he never believed me.”

“Probably because he couldn't stand the idea of being left out of something his twin could do,” Gregori suggested.

“True.” Salem sighed and scrubbed a hand across his face. When he resumed speaking, his tone was lighter again. “Sam figured out pretty quick that the one place we were evenly matched was in school. He just had to be better in everything, and well...I couldn't stand it. If one of us got an A in chemistry, the other had to get an A-plus. For a while, our high school was worried they'd have two valedictorians, but then I discovered I'm not very good at Spanish, and Sam ended up being the class valedictorian.”

“Spanish was your demise?” Gregori teased.

“Rolling those fucking R’s,” Salem grumbled. “Anyway, we both went Ivy League for college. Thankfully, separate colleges, because we probably would have driven each other crazy. His freshman year, Sam sent an email to me and my parents announcing he was going to work toward getting his doctorate in archaeology and become a professor. Naturally, my parents were over the moon at the idea of having a child with a PhD.”

“So, you had to one-up him,” Gregori said as he hit the blinker to indicate they were turning right.

“Of course! Changed my major to biology and emailed the next day that I was planning to go into pediatrics with the goal of becoming a surgeon. They’d have two doctors in the family.”

Gregori chuckled and shook his head. “And you’re just stubborn enough to stick with it regardless of how difficult the course ahead of you.”

“Yep,” Salem said, popping the P. “School was a freaking nightmare, but I discovered early on I was good at memorizing things and applying them quickly. I didn’t struggle as much as I thought I would.” He sat up in his seat and turned toward Gregori, leaning his left arm on the center console. “Don’t get me wrong; I love what I do. I love my job. Healing sick kids is the best job in the entire world.” He stopped and snorted. “But I don’t have some great altruistic reason for becoming a doctor. It’s all Sam’s fault.”

“I have a feeling he would take pride in your statement.”

“Probably so,” Salem said, his voice sounding distracted as he looked around at the park they’d just pulled into. “I thought you said we were going ice skating. I figured



we'd go to the small rink they set up downtown."

"I considered it, but I was afraid of how busy it would be. I wanted something a little more private."

"Yeah, but the pond isn't set up for ice skating. We can't even be sure it's properly frozen before we..." He stared at Gregori. The ice dragon only smiled at his mate. He'd figured it out. Nothing was going to stop Gregori from having a little private time with his man.

Salem huffed and slumped in his seat. "You're not as smooth as you think you are."

Challenge accepted. He was more than happy to show Salem exactly how smooth he could be.

He parked the car in an open spot within view of the pond and turned off the engine. Just as he'd hoped, the small park was completely empty. Some lamps were lit, illuminating a scattering of picnic tables covered in snow and playground equipment with small footprints around it from children who'd ventured out during the day.

He glanced over to see Salem pulling the knit hat lower on his ears and then resettling his scarf around his neck before tugging on a pair of gloves. "Are you sure that's going to be enough to keep you warm?"

"Of course. I'm used to these winters." Salem smirked and leaned in close to him, taunting laughter glittering in his eyes. "Have you forgotten what it's like to be out in the cold after so many years in Brazil?"

Gregori shifted in his seat so his face was only a handspan from Salem's. "The cold doesn't bother ice dragons. We're built for it." He swooped in and planted a quick kiss on the tip of Salem's nose before the man could jerk away.

“Ah!” Salem cried out and Gregori laughed as he climbed out of the car. He strolled around to Salem’s side and waited for his date to finish bundling up so he could get out.

Together, they crossed the field, which had only a decimeter of snow covering the ground. The last storm hadn’t dumped a lot of the white stuff. Just enough to make the scenery pretty and the roads annoying.

As they reached the pond, Gregori took hold of Salem’s elbow, stopping him from getting too close. There was a layer of ice on the pond, but even from a glance he could tell it wasn’t nearly thick enough to hold their weight. “Stay here for a minute. Let me fix the ice.”

“Work your magic,” Salem urged, motioning toward the pond.

With one last look at Salem to reassure himself he wasn’t going to do anything rash, Gregori edged the last few feet to the pond and knelt. He pressed his fingers to the thin coating of ice and called on his magic, sending it racing across the pond, adding several decimeters of thickness to what was already there. When he was done, the ice on the small pond was thick enough to hold a full-size dragon, let alone two men.

Satisfied his mate was going to be safe, Gregori straightened and walked out onto the ice. He turned toward Salem and held out his hand. “It’s okay now. Join me.”

“You know, it might have been smarter if we’d bothered to get some actual ice skates,” Salem observed even as he shuffled to the edge of the pond and took Gregori’s hand. His fingers instantly tightened on Gregori’s, clasping him in a death grip. He lifted one foot to step on the ice and stopped. “You’re sure this is thick enough to hold both of us?”

Gregori lifted both of his brows at Salem. “Do you really think I’d put your life in

danger?”

“Good point,” Salem muttered as he stepped onto the ice.

With an evil chuckle, Gregori pulled Salem into his arms, squeezing a startled yelp out of him as he slid easily across the ice. Salem’s free hand was twisted in the front of Gregori’s coat while his face was smashed into his chest. His entire body was tense as if he was just waiting for the icy water to close over his slender frame.

Not a fucking chance.

“See? You’re safe. The ice isn’t going to crack. I won’t even let you fall. Just hold on to me,” Gregori murmured in Salem’s ear.

Was there a better way to spend the evening than having his mate wrapped in his arms as they glided around the ice?

Slowly, Salem lifted his head and looked around as Gregori slid on the ice in another lazy circle. Gregori was holding nearly all of Salem’s weight with ease.

“You can do this without skates?” Salem’s grip on his coat eased slightly and he relaxed, leaning on Gregori.

“Of course. I’ve been sliding around on the ice for centuries without ice skates, chasing around my clanmates and playing games.”

“But how—” Salem’s question died off as he snapped his head up, eyes wide. “You don’t mean in Brazil, do you? Sam mentioned your clan is originally from Russia.”

Gregori nodded. “We could do this in Brazil if we wanted. We can freeze entire lakes if we’re in the mood. But most of the time, we lounge on the warm sand, soaking up

all the sun.”

Salem chuckled. “Like the giant iguanas you are.”

“Oh, I think you find me far more attractive than a giant iguana.”

A low huff escaped Salem, and even in the low light, Gregori could make out the blush starting to spread across the apples of his cheeks. The man could deny it all he wanted, but he still recalled the pictures Salem had taken when he was in his dragon form with the kids. The surgeon had been impressed, which had pleased his dragon to no end. The silly beast had preened and purred at the knowledge that Salem had watched it for so long.

“Whatever. Do you miss Russia?”

Gregori slowed his sliding around the pond and shifted Salem so his back was pressed to Gregori’s front while he wrapped one stabilizing arm around his waist. This way Salem could see where they were going without awkwardly craning his neck.

“No, not really. We’ve lived in Brazil for so long, it feels like home. We love the sun and warm weather. So many of us have become surfers over the years. The tropical colors are nice, and the local food is delicious. Even if I had a craving for the fare I grew up on, there’s plenty of dragons living within the clan who can make it exactly as they did when we lived there.”

He turned his face into Salem’s dark brown hair, unable to resist breathing in deeply the haunting floral scent of his shampoo. It reminded him of waking up early in the morning and breathing in Salem while he still slept. The same scent had also lingered faintly on his own pillow back in his apartment in Brazil. The pleasant smell would have faded by now, the last traces of his mate disappearing from his personal space.

He shoved the thought away. This was going to work. Salem would eventually fall in love with him, and they'd find a way to build a life together. It didn't matter if it was here or in Brazil. The important thing was having each other.

"That's good," Salem said, breaking into his thoughts. "I figured you might get homesick every now and again."

Gregori shook his head, rubbing those fine strands against his lips. "Not homesick for Russia. But occasionally for the people who lived with us there who are no longer with us."

Salem stiffened. "Because of the war," he whispered.

Fuck. No, this wasn't the romantic conversation they were supposed to be having. He was supposed to be asking him silly, unimportant things, like favorite movies and favorite types of music. War was not romantic.

The man in his arms started to move on his own and Gregori aided him, steadying him when he nearly fell twice as he fought to face Gregori again. Salem stared up at him for several seconds in silence, those deep ocean blue eyes narrowed like he was trying to peer straight into Gregori's soul.

"It's so weird."

Gregori cocked his head to the side. "What is?"

"We learn about the Great Dragon War in school. I think as early as grade school. Then again in more detail during high school, but it doesn't ever feel real because it happened centuries ago. My own country wasn't even a thing yet when it happened. We were taught the major events and some of the names. The important thing was all the dragons died off, and the mages were pretty much on the same path to

extinction.” One of Salem’s hands drifted up so that the fingertips of his thick gloves grazed Gregori’s cheek.

Gregori turned his head and pressed a quick kiss to those fingers. “But you know that isn’t true. Dragons and mages aren’t going anywhere. We have a chance to grow. To make a new age for both of our kinds.”

“True. But you were there. All the stuff I memorized for school was actually real for you. It just blows my mind. I’m sorry for all the clanmates you lost in the war.”

“Thank you, but let’s—” Gregori had been about to redirect the conversation to something lighter, but he lost his footing. He’d attempted to push off to send them casually sliding across the ice, but his balance wobbled as his left foot tried to slip in the wrong direction. He gripped Salem tightly around the waist and a Russian curse might have tumbled from his lips as he regained his balance.

“Whoa!” Salem gasped, his fingers digging into Gregori’s shoulders. “That was close.”

Gregori was now bent in an awkward position, and he was forced to tip his head up to meet Salem’s eyes. “Yeah. Too close.”

“Maybe we should?—”

Salem never got the chance to finish. One of them moved. In the end, Gregori wasn’t even sure which of them it was.

In the blink of an eye, they were crashing hard to the ice, a loud “oof” jumping from both of them. Gregori landed on his back, knocking the wind out of his lungs, while Salem at least landed mostly on top of him.

That was not supposed to happen.

He was an ice dragon. King of the motherfucking ice. Always in control.

And he'd slipped like a newborn dragon after making his first icy patch.

This. Was. Embarrassing.

It didn't matter though. The only important thing was the well-being of his mate.

"Salem! Are you okay? Did you hit the ice anywhere? Are you hurt?" The questions surged from Gregori, but he doubted Salem heard him as a loud burst of laughter rocketed from him.

His mate's entire body shook with laughter. Gregori lay completely still, soaking in the glorious sound, memorizing it for later. Salem laughed far too rarely, and it was nice to know what his deep belly laughs sounded like.

Salem slipped and struggled, finally shifting so he was lying on Gregori with his forearms braced on his chest, staring down at him. Salem's knit hat was askew, barely on his head any longer, and his cheeks were now bright red from his amusement and the bitter cold.

"You fell!" Salem cackled. "Mister Powerful Ice Dragon fell on the ice."

"You distracted me!" Gregori felt sure the embarrassment burning through him was in danger of melting the ice.

Salem's chuckles changed to snickers, and he bent his head even closer. "And I bet I'm the best distraction you've ever met."

Gregori reached up and cupped Salem's frozen cheek, all the humiliation forgotten under the intense warmth of Salem's smile. He wanted this. A lifetime of smiles just like this one, where Salem stared down at him like he was the only person in all the world. He didn't care how ridiculous or silly they were being. Didn't care if they were in the United States or Brazil. He just wanted this smile. God, he loved this man beyond reason.

It was such a terrifying and elating realization, but he felt the truth of it seep into his bones. He loved Salem with every fiber of his being.

And he had no idea how to tell him.

As the seconds ticked by, Salem's broad grin melted into something softer. He leaned into Gregori's touch and his eyes closed as if he was soaking in the affection. Gregori carefully pulled him in, wanting to seal the moment with a kiss.

But just as their lips were about to touch, Salem's eyes popped open in something akin to horror and he shouted, "Dinner!" right in Gregori's face.

Salem jerked back out of Gregori's touch and smiled again, though this one seemed a little tense. "Dinner! You promised me dinner. We go. I mean, should go. We should go. Now. Let's go get dinner. I'm starving."

As he spoke, Salem fought against the slippery ice, trying to push back up to his feet. Gregori bit the inside of his cheek. He wasn't the only one who'd gotten sucked into the moment. Yes, this was excellent progress.

With his head clear and a little more confidence to bolster his mood, Gregori climbed to his feet and helped to steady Salem as they made their way across the pond.

"I was looking online and saw there is this Thai place with very good reviews not far



from here. Would you be?—”

His words were cut off by the scream of screeching tires in the distance, followed by the loud bang of metal slamming into metal and the shattering of glass. But it didn't happen just once. The crashing kept rolling on and on, as if several cars had collided not too far from them.

Dinner was definitely on hold.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem's instincts sent him turning sharply, orienting to the horrendous sound of crashing metal, only for his heart to drop into his stomach. It was a multicar pileup, more cars joining the accident as he watched, smoke already coming out of some of the engine compartments. He could hear the cries of pain, the screams of panic, and every doctor instinct hardwired into him said move and move now .

“Gregori—”

“Give me two seconds.”

Gregori stepped back and shifted into dragon form without any warning. Or much time, as he seemed to shift in a matter of seconds. Then he scooped up Salem close to his chest with one paw, thighs bunching, before launching himself into the sky. Salem's stomach dropped for a totally different reason as he went from ground to air with no transition, but it was a short flight. Literally more like a hop to get them to ground zero as efficiently as possible.

Salem's mind was already locking into the groove of emergency mode, but some part of his brain still observed that Gregori hadn't hesitated. Even with danger right on hand, his first instinct was not to shield Salem from it, but instead to depend on him for help. This really, really made Salem happy. He couldn't begin to describe how much.

The second they touched down, Salem snapped into action. “Gregori, bring people over to this bus waiting area if they can be moved, otherwise don't move them.”

“Got it.”

He yanked his phone from his pocket and immediately dialed 9-1-1.

“ Nine-one-one, what is your emergency ?”

“This is Doctor Salem Hunter of Mass General, there’s a multicar accident at the cross of?—”

Even as he calmly related all the information she’d need to dispatch ambulances, he ran to the first car, getting there in seconds, and pried open a door. An elderly woman with a hematoma to the forehead sat in the driver’s seat, dazed, blinking at him like she couldn’t quite put together what had happened. Likely a concussion.

“Hi,” she greeted. “Is that a dragon?”

“It is,” he returned, tone calm. If she wasn’t panicking, all the better. “I’m Doctor Hunter, can I examine you?”

“Sure. You’re handsome. Is he your dragon?”

“He would argue he is.”

She laughed. “Ahh, young love. It’s fun to see. Doctor, my head hurts.”

“That’s what happens when you’re in a car accident.” He went through the motions of checking her pulse and eyes, but it seemed the contusion on her forehead was the worst of it. “I want you to sit right here and watch the pretty dragon throw cars around. Can you do that for me until the EMTs get here?”

“Oh sure,” she assured him dreamily. “Free show.”

He didn’t want to move her without a neck brace and there was nowhere safe to move

her to right now anyway. If she'd stay put, it would be better for all involved.

"You do that, then. I'll have someone check on you very soon."

"Okay," she agreed, still in a dreamy state.

She'd be fine for a few minutes and hopefully he could direct EMTs to her quickly.

Salem turned and went to the next car, doing triage there and finding the same. Bruises, some possible mild concussions, but nothing too serious.

"FIRE!" someone bellowed behind him. "Get out, get out!"

Fire? Shit! Car fires were the absolute worst, almost impossible to extinguish because of all the natural fuel in a car's makeup. A car fire here, with so many people trapped and pressed in close, was a disaster in the making.

He whirled, desperate to call Gregori, because if anyone could suppress a car fire, it would be an ice dragon. Turned out he was a beat too slow. Gregori had reared back on his hind legs and shot ice from his mouth, covering the car in question with it, the whole hood now one big ice block.

Well. That would definitely suppress a fire. Also, why was it hot as hell? Salem didn't think he was the type to be turned on watching other men throw their weight around but?—

Gregori was not done. After the fire was suppressed, he reached for the driver-side door, punching claws right into the metal like it was butter, then wrenching the whole door off before tossing it casually aside.

Yup, it was hot as hell. Salem promised himself then and there that the very second

they were home alone, he was jumping this man and fucking him senseless.

Salem gave himself a mental smack and jogged toward the now dismantled car. “Gregori?”

“Better take her,” Gregori called to him. “Whole car smells bad.”

Hazardous fumes, no doubt, even if the fire was suppressed. He understood and put some more speed into his jog until he got to the car.

The driver looked young—a professional in her twenties with office clothes on and an outraged expression.

“This damn fucking car,” she swore. “I can’t get—hey, Mister Dragon? Please help again, this seat belt won’t let me go.”

Gregori used a single claw to rip the seat belt in half, leaving the rest hanging like mangled lines.

“Thank you so much. This damn car.”

Salem gave instructions as he helped get her out. “Wait, wait, let’s go slow and easy. You’re in the center of this crash, so you got knocked around a lot, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m mad as hell, but I’m fine.”

She sat on the ground nearby so he could look her over, and she did appear to be mostly fine, just some bruises from being knocked around.

“I’m so sorry about this.” She put a hand to her forehead, looking shaken on some level but mostly angry. “This damn car chose to do a software update and shut down.

Nothing I could do to stop it, and believe me, I tried. It even locked me in. I couldn't open the doors."

Salem paused in taking her pulse to look at her, sure he wasn't hearing this right. "You're telling me that while you were driving , the car chose to do a software update and caged you inside until it was done?"

"You agree it sounds stupid, right? Ugh, I'm so mad. Never buy a Tesla."

"Trust me, after this? I'm not even tempted."

"If it wasn't for your dragon, I'd have been toast. Literally. Thank god an ice dragon just happened to be nearby because I know for a fact the fire department can't put out a car fire quickly."

She wasn't wrong. Without Gregori, she could have been burned to a crisp, and no matter how hard the first responders fought to get to her, they might not have been able to do it in time.

"Tesla has no idea who they just pissed off." Her eyes narrowed, lips peeling back in a feral snarl. "I'm a product liability lawyer. They won't know what hit them."

"You're good to move and I think we need to get you farther away from all these fumes." Salem straightened and extended an arm. "I want you to latch on to me and move slow and careful, just in case."

"All right."

The second she was upright and moving, Salem got a firm grip around her waist and walked her to the bus area.

“Also, I’m happy to be a witness for you when you take your case to Tesla.”

She blinked big brown eyes up at him. “Thank you. I appreciate it. For the record, who are you?”

“Doctor Salem Hunter. I’m a pediatric surgeon at Mass General.”

“Ohhh,” she breathed, eyes lighting up. “You’re an awesome witness. Do you happen to know the dragon?”

Might as well tell the truth to a lawyer. Scary things might happen otherwise. “I’m supposedly said dragon’s mate. He’s Gregori Valerii of the Ice Dragons.”

“Holy shit, do I have awesome rescuers. I might not have survived without you two.”

“Gregori did most of the heavy lifting on this one.”

Sirens came in louder and louder, and Salem was ever so grateful because trying to deal with this many patients on his own and without any equipment was stressful, to say the least. He carefully deposited the lawyer onto the bench.

“You stay right here, please. I’ll send EMTs in your direction.”

She held up a hand. “I’m fine, not high priority, make sure everyone else is okay first.”

He agreed with the assessment, so he gave a nod before turning on his heel and jogging back toward the disaster.

Gregori was busy ripping off car doors and helping people get out if they wanted out, so Salem dove back in. The EMTs swarmed the scene, and he quickly took charge of

them, directing them to the worst patients first, then following up with one pregnant mother who was having cramps from all the stress.

Salem had her transported to the children's hospital immediately, calling ahead for her and reading those on staff in on the situation so she could have the best possible care the second she cleared the doors. It was all he could do, but he trusted his colleagues. They had it from here.

In between patients, he kept stealing glances at Gregori. Salem found it impossible not to. He'd grown up hearing the same stories, reading the same history as everyone else on the planet. He'd known dragons were insanely strong and could counteract most disasters. Seeing it in action was worlds different. The brute force alone was incredible. Watching Gregori rip off car doors like they were paper maché was just... hnnng . That did some funky things to Salem's libido, no lie there.

Equally impressive was the magic he threw around. For all that history claimed mages were the most adept at magic, Gregori was clearly a master of the ice magic in his body. He could do incredibly delicate things with it at the children's ward, but he apparently could also freeze whole stretches of cars without much trouble as well.

Honestly, Salem wasn't sure at this point which one was more of a turn-on—the magic expertise or the displays of brute strength. He did know he would be very disappointed if Gregori didn't manhandle him tonight. Very. Disappointed.

As quickly as it had all started, it stopped. Salem abruptly realized his last patient was loaded into an ambulance and on their way, leaving him with nothing to do. Well, he had to talk to the cops on scene so they could follow up with questions if they had any, but afterward there really was nothing else to do.

Maybe he could use the excuse of washing off Gregori to get him naked. Ooh, naked and wet, a combination he liked a lot.



A female voice called out, “Uh, Doctor Hunter?”

He turned to find a cop with an iPad looking a little frazzled, blond hair escaping her bun under her hat.

Salem had to slap the naughty images out of his head before he could respond. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Hi, I’m Parker with the MPD. I understand you were the first on scene along with Gregori.”

Since when was this woman on a first-name basis with his dragon? “I was, yes. You know Gregori?”

“Oh, we all do,” she assured him brightly. “He stopped by, said hi, told us if anything serious went down and we needed dragon power, to just call. He’s really cool.”

Well, yes, he was very cool, but Salem had mixed feelings about other people knowing this.

“Anyway, I wanted to get your statement real quick of what went down. Gregori said it was the Tesla at the hub of all this?”

Still a little testy about the way she used Gregori’s name so casually, Salem wanted to be snippy but repressed the urge. Stop it, stop it, you can’t very well refuse Gregori’s advances and yet monopolize him at the same time. Don’t be an ass, Salem.

He pinned a smile on and answered smoothly. “It was. The driver said the car went into some kind of software update and locked up completely. This seems to be true, from what I saw. Her car was rammed into the vehicle ahead of her after it shut down. She couldn’t even undo her seat belt. Gregori had to tear off door and seat belt

so we could remove her from the vehicle.”

“Oooh, that’s bad.” She noted a few things on the iPad, pen moving quickly over the screen. “What else happened here?”

He gave his report, keeping his tone mild, reviewed what she had written up, and signed off on it. Good, that chore was done.

Now, where the hell was his dragon?

It was still a fucking mess out here. Cars piled on top of cars, ice all over the place, glass shards littering the pavement. It would take hours to get all this cleaned up and traffic moving again. It was also, fortunately, not his problem.

Salem looked about and spied Gregori, who was talking to three police officers. He’d shifted out of dragon form at some point and was back in human form. He seemed to be wrapping up as well, as he spotted Salem and gave him a wave, then said something in parting to the police officers before coming Salem’s way.

Salem met him halfway, grabbing him by the front of his waistband and yanking him in. Gregori startled as Salem seized his mouth in a hard kiss, then melted right into it with a deep, delighted hum.

Pulling back, Salem breathed over his mouth, “You and I need to be home. Now .”

Gregori grinned at him, eyes sparkling with delight. “I think I can manage that. Care for a short flight?”

“If you think I’m sitting in traffic right now, you’re crazy. Get those wings back out.”

Gregori was all too delighted to do so, stepping back and transforming into his

dragon.

Just wait until Salem had him naked and in a shower. Then he'd be really happy.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem slammed Gregori into the wall as soon as they stepped into the shoebox apartment. He opened his mouth to ask what the rush was, but Salem's cold lips covered his in the next heartbeat, wiping the thought away completely. A moan rattled up his throat as Salem's tongue plunged into his mouth in a hot, greedy kiss.

Fuck. His mate was horny.

What kind of dragon would he be if he didn't give his mate exactly what he wanted?

Cold fingers brushed his skin as Salem's wandering hands found their way under his clothes.

Okay, so sex, and Salem needed to warm up. And he knew just the place to tackle both needs at the same time.

Gregori tilted his head to the side, deepening the kiss and taking control as he shoved Salem's coat to the floor with a thud. He broke off the kiss and Salem tried to blindly chase after him, but he was stopped when Gregori jerked his sweater over his head.

"Shower," he ordered as he tossed Salem's sweater to the floor with his coat.

"Shower? There's barely enough room for one person. Although, damn, I do like the idea of you wet, but I doubt you can manhandle me in this damn shower," Salem whined, hitting just the right whiny, bratty button inside of Gregori. Yes, he was happy to follow his mate's lead in the day-to-day things, but he so loved getting to be bossy in the bedroom. And judging by the way Salem lost all control, it was the right button to push with him too.

“You don’t think I can handle you in such a tight space?” Gregori asked, his low voice nearly a growl in Salem’s ear.

A shiver ran through Salem’s entire body and his eyes rolled up into his head. That was all the answer he needed.

Grabbing Salem by the shoulders, he turned the man toward the bathroom and marched him while toeing out of his own shoes.

“Get undressed,” he ordered as he reached past Salem to turn on the water for the shower.

Clothes flew about the room as Salem stripped and then attacked Gregori’s jeans. The little devil’s nimble fingers brushed his bare cock as he managed to get the water to the right temperature.

“Gonna let me suck a dragon cock this time?” Salem teased. He leaned in and opened his mouth over one of Gregori’s nipples, lightly biting down while fondling his dick.

“Nope.”

“What?” Salem squawked.

“Next time,” Gregori promised as he shoved Salem under the hot spray. There. That would take care of warming him up, as well as erase the lingering smoke smell from being near the accident.

Salem stepped into the spray and turned to face him. He lifted his hands to his head, pushing the water and wet hair from his face. Rivers of water poured down his chest, coursing over the decadent hills and valleys of his body. For a moment, Gregori could only stand and admire the perfection.

“See? There’s not enough room for you,” Salem complained, breaking Gregori’s paralysis.

“You’re not thinking creatively enough.”

Not giving Salem a chance to argue, Gregori squeezed inside the tiny cubicle and slid the door closed behind him. Salem gasped, probably preparing his argument, when Gregori dropped to his knees. He grabbed both of Salem’s legs and tossed them over his shoulders while nuzzling the rock-hard cock right in front of his face.

“What? I—we can’t—this—” Salem was reduced to fractured sentences and incoherent noises as Gregori slipped his mate’s dick into his mouth. The sound drove Gregori like nothing else could. He loved it, how Salem relinquished complete control to him, the trust and need like a live wire connecting them. He felt the love he harbored for this man surge to the fore. He basked and indulged in Salem as he never had before. As he slowly bobbed on the thickening member, he sneaked two fingers between Salem’s cheeks, teasing his hole. The warm water combined with the blow job and frequent sex made Salem’s ass all too willing to let him inside—just some token resistance to keep up appearances.

Salem’s loud groan echoed off the walls. Because of the awkward position, Salem couldn’t move, leaving him at Gregori’s mercy and the pace he set. He gleefully sucked Salem’s cock, loving the feel and weight of it sliding across his tongue.

He shoved his fingers deep, stretching his ass while searching for the magic button to make his mate lose control.

Salem cried out, muscles clenching in his ass and trembling thighs. “Gregori! Fuck! Coming!”

There was the spot. He stroked it once more while sucking Salem. His cock jumped

and pulsed, sending cum straight down Gregori's throat as Salem shouted above him.

As soon as Salem was finished, Gregori pulled his fingers free and wrapped them around his own aching dick. He needed only a few hard, fast strokes to send him over the edge while he licked his lover's cock clean.

Bed. Tiny shower. Didn't matter.

Sex with his mate was always perfect.

"Don't look at me like that," Salem griped as he squirted some mustard onto his sandwich. "This is fine for dinner."

Gregori couldn't stop his frown as he stared at Salem's plate, which contained a simple deli meat sandwich, some baby carrots, and a handful of pretzels. He'd wanted their date to be special, with a fun evening of sliding around on the ice before slipping off to a tiny restaurant for some yummy food.

Well, at least the night had been memorable, though maybe not for the reasons he wanted.

Salem stuck his tongue out at Gregori as he slapped the other piece of wheat bread on his sandwich and carried his plate over to the tiny dining room table. Gregori wordlessly finished making his own sandwich and joined him after setting down two glasses of water.

"This wasn't what I'd planned for the night," Gregori muttered.

Salem grunted as he chewed a bite of his sandwich. "What part are you complaining about? The ice sliding in the park? Rescuing a bunch of people? No, wait! I got it! You're complaining about the sex."

Gregori lifted his eyes from his untouched sandwich and couldn't help smiling at the cheeky grin Salem was sending in his direction. Okay, so maybe the night wasn't the most romantic thing ever, but they'd had fun on the ice and saved a lot of lives at the crash site. And yes, the sex had been pretty fucking awesome too.

"Fine. Not complaining," Gregori grudgingly replied as he picked up his sandwich and took a bite. He watched Salem as the sneaky bastard ate and hummed to himself. It had to be the happiest he'd seen the man since they'd first met. Even his post-orgasm glow after their first time in Brazil hadn't lasted this long. "But I've got to ask—what brought on the sudden horniness?"

Salem shrugged one shoulder and suddenly refused to meet his eyes. "What? I thought you enjoyed it."

"I'm not saying I didn't enjoy it. I think it was pretty clear I did."

Salem continued to eat his sandwich and pick at his carrots for a couple of minutes. Just long enough for Gregori to be convinced he wasn't going to answer.

"I don't know. I guess it was a few things." Salem picked up a carrot and pointed it at Gregori. "Of course, there was the crazy dragon strength thing. Who wouldn't get hot and bothered watching a dragon rip doors off cars and then gently help someone climb free? It was sexy as fuck and you know it."

Gregori leaned forward and bit the tip of the carrot in Salem's hand. "I didn't know it, and it's definitely nice to hear. Was that the only reason?"

"No. I guess it was also a turn-on to be treated as an equal."

Gregori jerked backward, instantly straightening up and blinking at the man opposite him. "I don't understand. Why would I not treat you as an equal?"



Salem shrugged again and glared at his mostly empty plate. “I don’t think you’d mean to do it. Sam has told me how overprotective dragons can be around mages, especially the ones they identify as their mates. It’s like you all think we don’t have a lick of common sense and we need a babysitter to make sure we don’t get into danger.” Salem’s head snapped up and he narrowed his gaze on Gregori. “But you didn’t tonight. You focused on getting all the trapped people out of danger, while trusting me to do my job and help those I could.”

“Ahhh...” Gregori murmured, sitting back in his chair. Salem wasn’t wrong. Dragons were notoriously overprotective when it came to mages. Next to impossible with their own mage mates. But had that worry been nagging in Salem’s head this whole time? About not being treated as an equal? Gregori would have to watch himself if that was the case.

“What does ahhh mean?”

Gregori smirked at him. “It means, ah, I understand what you’re talking about. My dragon was worried about you while we were dealing with the crash, but I took care of the fires, removing the worst of the danger from you. While I wasn’t keen on letting you out of my sight, I knew you could handle the medical issues better without me underfoot, and my strengths were needed elsewhere to help other people.”

“Why do I get the feeling Sam had a slightly different experience when he was with Dimitri?”

Gregori almost choked on his laugh. “Because he did. I was there. When Dimitri wasn’t trying to win over your stubborn brother, he was practically pulling his hair out with fear.”

“Sounds about right.”

Shifting in his chair, Gregori stretched out his legs and rested his hands on his stomach. “Sam is a brilliant guy, but he spends most of his time with books or in a lab studying ancient relics. He went from the lab to a Brazilian jungle with caiman, snakes, and mythical creatures like stompers. All of them out to make him a snack. Dimitri did everything he could to protect Sam while giving him the space he needed to work. You”—he paused to point at Salem—“have so far not wandered off to be eaten by anything other than me, so my protective instincts haven’t been triggered.”

“Smooth.”

Gregori winked at him. “But don’t misunderstand Dimitri’s actions. He definitely respects your brother. He views him as an equal. Sam has just learned to adapt to a dragon’s instincts. We have one drive in our lives—protect our mate. It defines us and gives us joy.”

“And these same instincts are screaming to you I’m your one and only mate in the world?” Salem countered, and for once he didn’t sound combative. Just very curious. “How can you even be sure?”

“Hundreds of years of personal experience.”

Salem sat back in his chair with his arms folded. His expression shouted Convince me .

Was it wrong to take some hope from this? It was the first time Salem had brought it up on his own, and he wasn’t being mean or sarcastic about it. Rather the reverse, like he was curious and wanted to understand. Gregori felt hope soar in his chest and he mentally scrambled, trying to pull together the right words. Maybe this time, he could get through to Salem.

“Do you think I fell in love with you when we first had sex in Brazil?” Salem’s

expression fell a little and growing redness started at the tips of his ears. Gregori threw his head back and laughed. “Recognizing your mate has nothing to do with emotions. Well, at least not love.”

“So, you’re saying there are dragon and mage mates out there who don’t love each other?”

“Nope. I’ve never met mates who didn’t love each other.” Gregori shook his head. The idea of two mates not falling head over heels in love was just ridiculous. “But it’s not love at first sight. Lust, maybe. Not love. There are plenty of mates who meet and can’t stand each other at first, but it doesn’t change the fact that mates are meant to be together. It’s written in our DNA, and the first one to recognize it is always our dragon.”

“It was your dragon who told you I was your mate?”

Gregori nodded. “Yep. It knew immediately and passed the knowledge on to me. A dragon always recognizes its mate. They have to in order to fulfill their drive to ultimately protect their mate.”

“Instincts,” Salem said, skepticism tinging his tone.

“You don’t believe in instincts? The same drive directing birds flawlessly across thousands of kilometers twice a year. Or driving a salmon back to the same stream it was born in. You haven’t had a gut feeling when you were treating a patient, where test results were telling you one thing, but your instincts told you something else?”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, I get it. Sometimes our subconscious processes something the rest of our mind hasn’t caught on to yet. But it’s a little hard to believe we could even find each other. Millions of people around the world and you just happen to find your one person.”

“I’ve waited centuries to find my mate. There are plenty of dragons who wait even longer, and others who never find their mate. I’m lucky.”

Salem snorted. “Trust me, no one is lucky to have me as a mate. I have the world’s worst record when it comes to dating.”

“Everyone does until they meet the right one.”

“If I could bottle and sell your optimism, I’d be out of debt completely right now.”

Gregori grinned at him. That wasn’t at all on his usual snark levels. Perhaps he was getting through to Salem after all. He almost didn’t want to keep talking about it, fearing they’d end up in a fight again.

“I’m still not convinced.”

“You will be. Since my dragon realized who you are, it hasn’t wavered. Not for one second. You are my mate.”

“Whatever.” Salem rose and picked up his empty plate. He scooped up Gregori’s on his way to the kitchen. “It’s late. We should turn in. Tomorrow is a busy day.”

Salem was clearly uncomfortable talking about this further, hence his abrupt escape. But that was fine. He had asked and hadn’t gotten mad at Gregori’s answer. Uncomfortable was better than mad and was good progress. Salem just needed more time to think about what he’d said. More time to get to know him.

So why did Salem walking away hurt?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

For all that he'd felt they'd taken a step forward, it was also starting to feel like Gregori had backslid two steps.

A month in the United States. A month of trying to convince Salem they were meant to be together and their lives would fit together like the teeth of a zipper.

Gregori felt no closer to having his mate.

He knew Salem's stubbornness wasn't really stubbornness—it was a trauma response. Salem had given him enough pieces to put the overall picture together, and Gregori was pissed at all those other men who'd convinced him he wasn't worth the effort.

Even though Gregori knew the root cause, he felt almost helpless at times, unsure how to reach through the pain to Salem's heart. His frustration was mounting, his own heart hurting, because he couldn't claim his mate the way he wanted to.

Not to mention, he was battling his own suffocating wave of homesickness. The first couple of calls back to the clan with Ha Na had helped, but now he felt like it was a struggle just to keep the mask of optimism in place. If he let on for a second that he was having trouble, he was scared Rodrigo would order him back to Brazil.

But he couldn't leave his mate.

If he left and returned to Brazil without Salem, how was he supposed to hold his head up? Had any dragon in all their history failed to win their mate's heart? Putting aside his own battered pride, how was he supposed to go on without Salem? What would

be the point of going home? How could he possibly live on another continent without Salem? Just the idea was heart-wrenching. No. No, no matter how bad things got, leaving would be so much worse.

At least he had the kids to distract him.

While he might not have been making any kind of grand headway with Salem, he was bringing lots of smiles to the children's wing of the hospital with his regular visits.

The little ones were easy to win over. They loved story time with him and playing games. Naturally, using the dragon as a jungle gym was everyone's favorite. The harder ones to win over were the teenagers. Too often, they'd spent most of their lives in and out of hospitals, leading them to be more jaded and withdrawn. They'd seen it all and had their hopes dashed time and time again.

But little by little, they'd started coming to see him as well, asking all kinds of questions about dragons and mages. They liked the small magic—snow falling in the playroom and roses made of ice. Jessica had pulled in a reluctant Hillary for the first couple of weeks, but Hillary was coming on her own now that Jessica had been released following her latest round of treatments.

Today had been three new books about dragons and a Candyland tournament that he lost at the very end. It had been a close one. But six-year-old Jason won it and got to wear the paper crown they'd made the day before. Cheers went up and laughter filled the playroom, allowing these very sick kids to forget for a little while exactly how sick they were.

“Well, I think my time is up for today,” Gregori announced, and he pushed to his feet and dusted off his jeans. As expected, the cheering turned into cries for just five more minutes. Unfortunately, it was getting close to dinnertime. These kids needed to get back to their rooms for rest and he needed to run to the store to pick up a few things

for dinner if he was going to have it done before Salem got off work.

“Come on! Make it snow!” someone called out, and others joined in immediately.

“Haven’t you seen enough snow already?” He laughed. The city had been coated in yet another few centimeters last night, a fresh white layer covering the old dirt- and grime-filled snow.

“Nooooo!”

“All right! All right!” Gregori made a show of pulling the soft long sleeves of his sweater up his forearms. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them, smiling at all the little ones gathered around him, cheering and laughing.

With a deep breath, he tapped the power buried inside of him and tossed up his hands, willing the air at the top of the room to chill and snowflakes to fall.

Except nothing happened.

There was no tingle in his chest from the magic. No cold kiss of air as the power swept out of him. Just nothing.

His heart skipped and a knot tightened in his stomach. That had never happened before. For as long as he could remember, he’d never had his magic fail him. It was...odd.

“Come on! Make it snow! We wanna see snow!” The children’s cries broke through his mild panic, and he sucked in another deep breath. Maybe he was just a little tired. That had to be it.

He pulled on the magic again and tossed his hand up, but still nothing. This was

wrong and very weird. At least this time, there had been an odd twinge in his chest. Something was happening.

Closing his eyes, Gregori mentally poked at his very quiet dragon, reminding it they had kids to entertain. When he pushed his hands toward the ceiling this time, the magic rushed out of him like normal. He opened his eyes to see fat snowflakes lazily floating toward the floor, landing on the tops of heads and on little pink tongues as the kids danced around the room.

Gregori clung to his smile as he watched the kids playing in the snow for another minute while stuffing down the panic churning in his stomach. It was nothing. It had to be nothing. Just stress. The status of him and Salem was constantly on his mind and had to be interfering with his ability to use magic. That was probably all it was.

With one last wave goodbye to the kids, he stepped out of the room. As he left, the snowflakes slowed to a stop while the nurses wrangled the kids back to their rooms.

“You know, doctor, that’s an interesting way of approaching the problem,” purred a slimy sounding voice, followed by Salem’s very warm chuckle.

“I don’t know if it’s interesting so much as common sense,” Salem replied. Only it didn’t sound like a brutal takedown of an idiot. No, it sounded just a little too warm and friendly.

Gregori spun on the balls of his feet, searching for the source of the voices, his own problems with magic long forgotten. Someone was flirting with his mate and that shit needed to be shut down immediately.

A quick scan of the main floor revealed Salem standing near the nurses’ station in his white doctor’s coat over a set of blue scrubs. His hair was a little messy from a long day of running his fingers through it, but there was none of the late-day fatigue in the



smirk he directed at the guy leaning on the counter right next to him.

In fact, the weasel was way too close to Salem to begin with. Had he never heard of personal space? The only person allowed to stand so close to Salem was him.

“Medicine can only get a patient so far. Having a positive mindset has its own healing properties. But why do I feel like you already know this, Doctor Kentrup? I’ve seen you with your own patients, and you get them in a fit of giggles before they’re brought into surgery,” Salem continued, completely unaware Gregori stalked toward them.

“Well, you might not believe this, but it’s not just the kids who find me entertaining,” the blond with the tan even in the dead of winter continued. He smiled his perfect pearly white smile, looking like he should be an underwear model rather than a pediatrician. Gregori was more than happy to ruin his smile with a fist. “If you’d let me take you out to dinner, I could show you how amusing I can be.”

“You want to try out your latest material on me?” Salem chuckled, and Gregori nearly ground his teeth into dust. Why wasn’t Salem telling this jerk to take a hike?

“Well—”

“No,” Gregori barked, cutting the man off as he came to stand so close to Salem that his chest bumped against his mate’s back. He straightened to his full height, which gave him an enjoyable couple of inches to tower over the interloper.

Blondie blinked at him, rising from his lean to take a step away from him and Salem.

“I’m sorry. Who?—”

“I’m Salem’s mate. I’m guessing you haven’t gotten the memo going around the hospital. He’s not available. Shove off.”

“Gregori!” Salem hissed, and the point of his elbow landed in the middle of Gregori’s stomach, but he didn’t notice it because his full attention was on the other man flirting with his mate. “You’re being rude.”

“It’s not rude to apprise this man that he’s making an ass of himself in front of you and the nurses,” Gregori bit out. He narrowed his eyes. “Move along. He’s not for you.”

The man’s smile returned. “I think that’s for Salem to decide.”

The comment cut deeper than it should have and Gregori lost a bit of his steam. He was right, Salem should be the one deciding. He should be the one telling this asshole to fuck off, but he wasn’t.

“Doctor Kentrup, I think we should continue this discussion another time,” Salem interjected briskly, his tone shifting from warm and friendly to pure business.

The other doctor looked at Salem and gave a small nod before disappearing down the hall.

Salem whirled around and poked Gregori in the middle of his chest. “What the hell do you think you were doing? He was a colleague and this is my place of work. There’s no room for your caveman nonsense here.”

“He’s right, Salem,” Gregori snapped. Even as he spoke, he knew he should rein his anger in, but he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. This felt horribly like the straw that broke the camel’s back and he couldn’t grasp his usual patience no matter how hard he tried. “You need to decide. Whether you want to admit it to yourself or not, I’m your mate. More obviously, I’m the man you’re living with. The man you’re sleeping with. The decision shouldn’t be too hard, but still you stood there flirting with him.”

Salem gasped, his mouth hanging open for a full second, while his face turned bright red. “I wasn’t flirting. We were just talking. Besides, I didn’t ask for any of this. You can go back to Brazil anytime you want.”

His mate spun around and marched down the hall.

“You might not have asked for this, but I’m still your mate,” Gregori growled at Salem’s retreating back.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem slammed into his office, shutting the door with force, and didn't feel any better for either action. He dropped heavily into his chair and just sat there, fuming.

How fucking dare Gregori go off on him. They weren't in a relationship, they were fuck buddies at best, so Gregori had no right to?—

Well, except they kinda were. Dammit. Gregori had made a very valid point earlier. He was the one Salem lived with. He was the one Salem had regular sex with. Even if they weren't in a true relationship, they still had a mutual understanding, which made Salem the ass in this equation.

If he'd actually been flirting, which he hadn't .

Goddammit.

His office door jerked open.

Salem sat upright immediately, a protest poised on the tip of his tongue. He expected Gregori, coming in for round two, but it wasn't. It was Alexis.

Who, oddly, seemed mad at him.

“What?!” he snapped at her.

Alexis kicked the door closed behind her, hands on hips, and glared right back at him. “You are such an asshole.”

“How am I the asshole?! It’s Gregori who’s seriously overstepping boundaries!”

Alexis locked eyes with him, brows coming together in a frown. A he can’t be this stupid frown. “You’ve got a doctorate, so supposedly you’re a smart person, but I swear to god, love is making you stupid.”

“Whoa, whoa, I’m not in love with him.”

Alexis ignored him and kept talking. “Salem. You were flirting with someone right in front of Gregori. Of course he’s upset with you. I’m upset with you and I’m not even part of this relationship!”

Everything in his head screeched to a halt. “Did it...really look like I was flirting?”

His best friend’s face suggested he was losing his few remaining IQ points quickly.

“Uh...duh? Because you were.”

“I wasn’t! It was only banter!”

Alexis kept staring, like a woman waiting for him to start making sense.

“No, seriously. I mean, I could tell he was attracted, but I wasn’t trying to flirt back. I’m not going to hook up with him. What would be the point? Um.” Looking back on it now, with hindsight doing the bulk of the work, it was obvious to see where he misstepped. “I guess I should have just shut him down.”

“Ya think?”

“Can you not hit me with sarcasm while I’m still processing the fact I was an idiot?”

“Let me think about it...no. No, I cannot. Sarcasm is how I’m currently coping.”

Yeah, okay, fair. He’d likely be doing the same in her shoes.

But if it had looked like he was flirting even though he really wasn’t, then...shit. Gregori had justifiably flown off the handle. Dragons were possessive even on the best of days, but with their current relationship limbo, naturally he was more sensitive than usual.

Salem flopped back in his chair, groaning. Okay, he’d fucked up.

“You need to fix this, Salem,” Alexis insisted. “I refuse to stand here and watch while you blow a good thing up.”

“How?” Salem didn’t lift his head, he just felt exhausted all of a sudden. Like he’d been carrying around a weight and it had finally gotten around to crushing him.

“What do you mean how?”

“I mean just that. How? How do you propose I fix this? He only wants to hear one thing, Lexy.”

Her outrage dwindled, concern coming more to the fore. “Are you guys not properly talking?”

“Heh. That’s a mild way of putting it.”

Salem felt a migraine coming on and felt the distinct need to put himself on a drip. This whole situation was giving him quite the headache.

Seeing she wasn’t budging or satisfied with his answer, Salem put more effort into

framing this insanity into words.

“Look, Gregori is absolutely positive I’m his mate. He might be right. He’s explained to me how he’s so sure, how mates work, and I’m...inclined to think he might be right. But I don’t know if I want him to be.”

Alexis promptly drew out his visitor chair and plonked herself into it. “Why not?”

“Because it means throwing my world topsy-turvy. You know that thing Redditors will tell you to never, ever do? That’s what he wants from me. He wants me to quit my job here and move to Brazil. You know how hard I’ve worked for the past fifteen years to get my degree, my own place. Now I have it, and I’m supposed to just give it up? Everyone ends up leaving me eventually, you know how hard I am to live with, so upending my entire life for a relationship that probably won’t survive three months doesn’t even make sense.”

Alexis didn’t have an immediate answer for him. She stared at the floor for a long moment.

“You see?”

“I do, but I don’t. Salem, you are perfectly capable of sustaining a committed relationship.”

He snorted in disbelief.

“No, seriously, I know the ex-boyfriends you had convinced you otherwise. But they were also asshats.”

A startled laugh escaped his mouth before he realized it. “I mean, they were, I can’t argue that point.”

“Look, I’ve lived with you for a month. Remember? When the pipes in my apartment burst and I stayed with you?”

“Oh yeah...yeah, I do.”

“I didn’t feel the urge to kill you even once.”

This was news to Salem. Of course, they’d been so focused on fixing her situation so she could move back into her apartment, they’d not had the mental energy to argue. That was what he’d always chalked it up to, anyway. “You really didn’t find me impossible to live with?”

“I really didn’t. Also, you know that age old saying? If you wouldn’t accept someone’s advice, don’t accept their criticism.”

“Well, now, put like that, and I seem like the idiot for taking any of my exes’ words to heart.”

“You said it, not me.” Alexis lifted her head, searching his face. “Salem. You can’t leave this status quo as it is.”

“I know.”

“Do you? This man is throwing everything he has into this relationship. If you don’t want him, you have to make it clear.”

“I’ve been making it clear since day one I don’t want a long-term relationship.” This was NOT on him. Salem had always been adamant.

She was back to looking at him like he was missing brain cells. “Your mouth is saying the words, sure. But you’re still regularly having sex with him, you let him



live with you, and he's bringing you lunches on a regular basis."

Erk. Okay, Alexis had him there.

"Look, I'm not blaming you. I've seen how charming he is, and from all accounts the sex is fantastic ?—"

Even that felt like an understatement.

"—and having a gorgeous man who cooks for you on a regular basis would make anyone swoon. Plus, from what you've said, you're even going out on dates. Dates that go well. I get it, okay? I understand why it's really hard to look into those dark brown eyes and say no. My willpower would crumble too."

Salem nodded fervently. Exactly. That was exactly the issue. He had a hard time saying no when Gregori was being so sexy and charming. How did you say no to his face and stick to your guns?

"But, Salem, you've got to make a decision here. Either commit to him fully or break up. Limbo-land just drags the inevitable out. And causes issues like today."

Salem winced. She had him there. If he and Gregori were being more honest with each other, moments like today wouldn't have happened. He did feel guilty. Maybe he should have shut the guy down immediately once he'd figured out it was flirtatious. Salem hadn't seen the harm at the time, as he wasn't interested, but from the outside it likely hadn't looked that way. That much was on him.

To Alexis, at least, he could speak his mind without other factors clouding the main issue. "Honestly, I feel like my emotions are in limbo too. My brain is telling me this is a really bad idea. But I keep thinking, with every day Gregori lives with me, that this isn't really so bad. We do get along great day-to-day. I just don't know which

one to listen to, head or heart. Listening to my heart usually gets me in trouble.”

“I don’t think it would this time. Gregori’s a far better man than anyone else you’ve ever dated.”

“Heh. I mean, that’s true, but also not much of a challenge. I seem to draw in the shitheads.” Salem wiped a hand over his face before tacking on, “There’s another possible wrinkle. And it’s the other reason why I’m hesitating.

“He says he’s willing to live with me here but...ice dragon. Even Gregori’s admitted to me that dragons have never lived outside of their clan. Emotionally, physically, I don’t know if he can do it long term.”

“Like a guinea pig?”

“Maybe? I know he’s been anxious and trying to hide it from me. I think this is already impacting him, but he won’t admit as much to me.”

“Because he’s afraid you’ll break things off and force him home.”

Salem shrugged, the thought bitter. “Yeah. Probably. What am I supposed to do? I don’t want him to go back, I’m selfish enough to like having him with me. But I don’t want to commit to something that’s going to take me to a whole other continent. I don’t feel like I have a choice, either, which grates.”

“Knowing how independent you are? I bet.” Alexis shifted in her chair, still frowning. “Okay, I see the problem. Problems, really. Still, it looks to me as if you really like him.”

It felt like a concession to say the words out loud, for some reason, even if Gregori wasn’t around to hear them. “I do really like him.”

“Then the two of you have got to get on the same page. All advice you’ll get boils down to this point.”

Salem couldn’t disagree. It was the main issue here.

He felt horrible about hurting Gregori, too. Maybe this called for some of Gregori’s favorite takeout and make-up sex before they had a conversation. As much as the man drove him nuts, Salem still didn’t want to call it quits.

But if there was an easy answer to this, Salem sure didn’t see it.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The cold wind rushed along his scales, lifting him high above the clouds. The moonlight glided along his long white body as he flew kilometers in a matter of seconds. He rushed away from the hospital, needing to put some distance between himself and the source of his pain.

Naturally, he headed east, buzzing past the bright lights and skyscrapers of Boston and then into the bay. His dragon felt a little better now that he was flying. But only a smidgeon. Which didn't bode well for the near future.

Flying cleared his head and the bitter cold wind cooled his temper. His rage and frustration with Salem calmed, but it was only replaced with anger with himself.

Why couldn't he have kept his head? A few witty, cutting remarks could have diffused the situation and easily reminded Salem which of them was the better choice.

But was he the better choice?

Maybe the doctor with the million-dollar smile was the better choice for him. They were both doctors, which meant they had plenty in common. He was handsome and amused Salem with his somewhat witty remarks.

Meanwhile, all Gregori had managed to do since he'd left Brazil was annoy the fuck out of Salem. They had made progress, or at least he thought they had with the agreement Salem had hammered out with him, but for all Gregori saw progress, it felt like he was fighting his way uphill. He slid back far more than he gained ground. He'd tried so hard, but today he'd hurt Salem. After promising he wouldn't, no less.

He felt like either crying or raging. Even he wasn't sure which.

Lifting his head, Gregori stared straight ahead at the distant horizon. He was already pointed south. In a matter of hours, he could be basking in the warmth of his clan. No longer alone in a place where he wasn't welcome or wanted.

As tempting as it was to simply fly straight home to the Valerii, what would be the point? His every thought would be about Salem. He wouldn't be able to close his eyes for a second without worrying about what Salem was wearing or eating or if he was getting enough sleep.

Tomorrow, he had surgery on a case that had been bothering him for days. After they'd had sex last night, Salem had lain in his arms talking about the little boy who had next to no hope of getting better.

Who was going to hold Salem if the surgery didn't go as well as he hoped?

Who was going to help him laugh at the end of the long, bad days?

Who was going to celebrate with him on the good days?

He couldn't leave. Even if Salem didn't want him to stay.

Gregori didn't know how long he flew. His mind was a twisted mess, and he needed to talk to someone to get his head screwed on straight before he attempted to see Salem again. Maybe Sam would be able to help him salvage this disaster he'd created by losing his temper.

He landed in the middle of a park lit by a handful of bright streetlamps and shifted into his human form. A sort of low-grade exhaustion pulled at his muscles, and he felt weirdly cool. Perhaps because he'd worked up a sweat. With a mental shrug, he set

the feelings aside. He pulled his phone from his pocket and initiated a video call with Sam, while silently praying he wasn't catching the archaeologist at a bad time—something prone to happen more times than not when dealing with newly mated mages and dragons.

“Gregori !” Sam's excited voice filled the empty park. “I was just thinking of texting you. How are things going ?”

Gregori tried to force a smile, but he knew he fell short. “Not great.”

Sam squeezed his eyes shut and swore loudly. “My brother can be such a fucking stubborn ass .” When he opened his eyes again, Sam wore his determined, don't-screw-with-me face. It was an expression he'd had frequently when they'd been trekking through the forest for the Sousa ruins. “Let me call you back .”

Before Gregori could reply, the mage ended the call, and Gregori felt the first hints of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Really, how could he lose this fight when he had someone as determined as Sam in his corner? Having Salem's identical twin working on his side had to count for something.

Barely a minute passed before a video call rang on his phone. When he answered, he was greeted by Sam, Dimitri, and Luka in the tracker team's meeting room. Sam had put him up on the main display again so the team could brainstorm his little problem.

“Okay, so what did my asshole of a brother do this time ?” Sam demanded without preamble.

Gregori sighed. “As much as I would like to blame this on him, this was really my fault. I lost my temper.” He then launched into a painful retelling of the flirty doctor, Salem's refusal to brush the man off, and Gregori sticking his nose in where it didn't belong while making a scene for all the other doctors, nurses, assistants, and patients

to see.

“I think I’ve destroyed what little progress I’ve made with him,” Gregori said, forcing the words past the tightness in his throat. “I can’t even get him to admit we’re dating. I do know about his exes, and what they did to him, so I was trying to be careful and not hit his buttons. But today, I feel like I acted poorly, like one of his exes had done. I’m not proving myself to be a better man.”

“Gregori, I don’t think it’s that bad,” Dimitri said.

“Dimitri is right.” Sam leaned forward, both of his forearms resting on the table in front of him. “Salem can be a complete asshole, but he can be reasoned with. He’s running scared and trying to keep you at arm’s length, but he’s not succeeding, right?”

“I haven’t made any progress in getting him to admit we’re mates. He loses his shit every time I even mention Brazil.” He almost said how much he loved Salem, how much it hurt to be rejected time and again, but he bit it back. That was a separate problem right now.

“But you’re still there. You’re living in his place. That’s big.” Sam pushed up in his seat, leaning toward the camera. “Salem sucks at relationships. He needs space. Lots of space. He’s never lived with anyone. Hell, I’m not sure he’s ever let a guy sleep over at his place.”

“I know things look bleak now, but you’ve got to remember how the courtship period didn’t go well for any of us,” Dimitri chimed in. “Sammy and I were fighting almost the entire way up the mountain and through the forest. He wouldn’t even share a tent with me until he woke up in the middle of the night with a stomper on his chest.”

The mage in question slowly turned his head toward Dimitri, eyes narrowed. “Sammy ? I can’t imagine why I wanted to strangle you during most of that trip .”

Dimitri grinned at him. “ Yeah, it totally boggles the mind .”

Luke barked out a laugh and then choked it back when Sam turned his threatening glare on him. “ Vasily and I weren’t any better when it came to Amaru. It’s even worse because Vasily and I were together for years before we found Amaru. You would have thought Vas and I had our shit together .”

“ You had mate brain ,” Dimitri said with a little groan. “ It’s a real fucking thing .” He turned his gaze toward the screen and pointed. “ And now you’ve got it. Finding your mate lowers your IQ by dozens of points. Things you never would have done or thought before are now common. It’s not just about being possessive and overprotective. You’re going to be constantly plagued with doubts and insecurities in regard to your own worthiness .”

Okay, so Gregori had to admit he was likely dealing with a little mate brain. He definitely didn’t feel as sharp as he usually did, and he was constantly haunted by little self-doubts dancing through his mind.

“ And after you are finally bonded with your mate, you’re going to be constantly forgetful, absentminded, consumed with thoughts of your mate, and horny ,” Luka added.

Dimitri snorted. “ What do you mean after? All that kicked in before Sam and I were bonded .”

Gregori rolled his eyes and grinned, some of the fear and pain easing from the center of his chest. Calling home had been one of his smarter ideas.



“Speaking of mates, where are yours, Luka? Already need a break from them?” Gregori teased.

Luka lounged in the leather office chair and flipped Gregori off as he returned the smile. “ Not at all. Vasily and I are currently taking shifts watching over Amaru. Someone ...introduced him to nanotechnology ,” he said with a little bit of a growl. Gregori couldn’t imagine who was insane enough to introduce Amaru to something so advanced and potentially dangerous. At a guess, it was probably Sora. Or possibly Ravi.

Yeah, it was most likely a Ravi thing. The wind dragon had likely been talking and not thinking about the ramifications of what he was saying. Particularly when it came to someone as dangerously brilliant as Amaru.

“ Amaru has just gotten some working, but only at a very basic level in tandem with some exploratory spells. Right now, Rodrigo has put the kibosh on doing any kind of surgery with them, but I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before Amaru wears him down. Besides, we’ve still got lots of Jaeggi hanging around, needing their cores fixed, and they’re all offering to be guinea pigs for Amaru. It’s a scary combination, so we’re taking turns keeping an eye on him as he works to make sure he doesn’t take any unnecessary risks .”

“Damn the torpedoes and full steam ahead,” Gregori muttered.

“ Pretty much ,” Luka agreed. “ But on the plus side, if it works, there are a lot of people who can be helped by his discovery .”

“ He’s a magical Tony Stark, and we should all be afraid ,” Sam murmured.

Gregori scrubbed a hand across the top of his head and sighed. “I wish you luck. Hopefully, I’ll be able to bring Salem there one day so he can join Amaru in his

chaos.”

“ Are you sure you don’t want Dimitri and me to come north to help you ? I can try to talk some sense into Salem. At the very least, I can try to beat some sense into his thick skull ,” Sam offered.

Gregori shook his head. “Would Salem have ever been able to talk you out of going to Brazil once you got it in your head it was your only course of action?”

Sam sighed heavily and his shoulders slumped. The twins’ matching stubborn streaks were a mile wide. Dimitri reached over and wrapped an arm around his mate’s shoulders, pulling him in close.

“ Not a chance ,” Sam murmured.

“Plus, I’m afraid if you’re here arguing with him, it’ll just put more pressure on him. I don’t want to pressure him into agreeing to be my mate. I want him to make the choice on his own. And...he’s just not there yet.”

“ Don’t lose hope, Gregori ,” Dimitri urged with a gentle smile. “ You’ll get there. We all believe in you and Salem .”

“Thanks. This has helped.” He straightened and grinned, feeling a little better than he had. “I should get going now. It’s late. Salem should be getting home from the hospital soon, and we need to talk.”

“ Good luck !”

“ You’ve got this !”

“ Tell my brother I’m going to kick his ass if he doesn’t pull his head out of it soon !”

His friends' supportive cheers buoyed him until the phone went dark and he found himself once again sitting alone in the park, kilometers away from his family. God, he missed them all. Loneliness crashed over him, and he felt small under the weight of it.

Never in his life had he felt so lost.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem came home feeling both tired and apprehensive. He'd not been able to contact Gregori most of the evening, mostly due to one emergency after the next at work. He'd barely had the sense to order takeout before leaving work. Frankly, he didn't have a ton of brainpower to spare, but he was determined to fix things with Gregori.

Normally, he barely got to the door before Gregori pulled it open. Something about dragon hearing letting him know the second Salem was near. Tonight, though, he had to open it himself. It took some maneuvering to get the door unlocked and himself inside while holding a large takeout bag, but once through he realized the lights weren't on.

Was Gregori not home?

No...wait. This wasn't his home.

A chill went through Salem when the realization hit. This wasn't Gregori's home. His home was on a beautiful beach on a completely different continent. He was only here because Salem was here. No other reason.

If Salem rejected him hard enough, Gregori wouldn't stay. He'd leave. It was as simple as that. The thought impacted him like a punch to the gut, panic quickly chasing it. Salem had resolved to try and trust Gregori, but he couldn't very well do it if Gregori had finally gotten sick of him.

A pained breath escaped him and he looked around frantically for some sign of Gregori still being there. Surely their argument earlier hadn't been the breaking point. Not when Salem had regretted it so, so much. Ugh, dammit, he couldn't even blame

Gregori if it had been the tipping point. They'd fought so much over the past month; today's incident could very well have been the straw that broke the camel's back. Salem wouldn't even be mad at him for it.

The doctor in him, the one trained in emergencies, kicked him into gear. First, put the food down, then canvass the apartment; he might very well be in the bedroom, it wasn't like Salem could see through to the room with the door shut. Don't panic just yet, he could just be out getting dinner or?—

“Salem?”

He whipped around, spotting Gregori coming out of the bathroom, sleep pants on and nothing else, damp hair loose around his shoulders. Relief sucker punched him in the sternum so hard he bent a little under the force. Still here. Gregori was still here. Thank fuck.

The takeout boxes hit the table a little harder than he intended as Salem dropped them. He also didn't care. Reaching this man was the absolute priority.

Salem more or less threw himself at Gregori. The dragon didn't expect it, rocking back on his heels, almost losing his balance. Salem locked his arms around Gregori's waist and held on tightly, face buried against the bare skin of Gregori's shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered. He wanted to speak louder, but Salem's throat was so tight with emotion it was hard to force anything out. “I'm so sorry.”

Those large, warm hands pulled him in, Gregori wrapping himself around Salem.

Normally Gregori was effusive and talkative, so this silence from him was strange.

Panic made Salem babble. “I didn't think of it as flirting. I was trying to de-escalate

the whole thing without pissing him off. You know how men get when they're rejected, most don't take it well, but I didn't think of how it looked from the outside. I'm not interested in him, but I should have been clearer on it. More firm, I guess. I'm so sorry. Next time this happens, I'll shut it down immediately."

He could feel it in Gregori's body language when he accepted it and settled.

"I'm sorry—" Gregori breathed.

"What?! No, don't you dare apologize. This wasn't on you."

"Still—"

"No. Okay? No. This really, truly isn't on you. This was my screwup. Hell, if our roles had been reversed, I would have done more than yell."

A hint of a smile lurked in Gregori's voice. "Is that right?"

"I'm the bad tempered one, this is established, you know damn well I'd have been throwing something. Hands, tables, something."

Something of a laugh might have come from Gregori before he impossibly tried to hug Salem harder.

There was something about this moment. Some sense of foreboding. Like something was out of place but Salem couldn't put a finger on it. There was a sense of desperation in Gregori's grip, and he wasn't saying much, when normally he'd make the first move and not shut up. This whole thing felt very, very wrong.

Had Salem screwed up so badly? Was that it?

And why had Gregori come out of the shower? It was kind of the wrong time of day for it.

Salem's doctor brain kicked in. Was Gregori sick? Could dragons even get common colds?

Leaning back, he put a hand to Gregori's forehead. No, temperature felt fine. Breathing sounded fine, too.

Gregori caught his hand, smile more genuine. "I'm fine, doctor."

"You're damn fine, but that's not my concern right now. You're acting kind of off. Why are you coming out of the shower? Are you feeling cold, or?—"

Gregori shook his head, smile increasing a little. Like Salem's concern pleased him. "I went for a flight earlier. I was washing off the sweat."

All right, that sounded plausible on the surface. It could very well be the truth. Still, his doctor sense insisted something was very wrong. It just wasn't readily apparent. People took longer hot showers if they were battling loneliness or depression. The heat and water helped allay the symptoms. Was that the other reason for the shower?

Gregori had never lived outside of his clan. Never been this far, for this long, away from other dragons. He had to be feeling homesick, at the very least. But he wasn't complaining about it. Shouldn't he be complaining or at least commenting on it?

Ugh, Salem really was an asshole. He should have been monitoring Gregori's condition better than this. He knew it was uncharted territory. Gregori didn't feel confident confiding in Salem, probably afraid of showing a weakness Salem could use in an argument, which was also on him.

He kicked himself a few more times. Stupid asshole. Why did he have to be such an asshole when Gregori had been great this entire time?

“If you’re feeling sick, or even just off, you have to tell me, okay?” Salem hadn’t been the best listener before now, but he was damn well changing this immediately. “Don’t bury it, talk to me.”

“Well, right now, I feel hungry.” Gregori straightened enough to look toward the table, his nostrils flaring in a dramatic way. “I smell favorite foods.”

All right, Salem would let this go for now, but if Gregori thought the conversation done, he was very mistaken.

“I picked up some favorites on the way home. You didn’t have plans for dinner, right?”

“Uh, no, I didn’t.” Gregori dropped a kiss on his forehead before releasing him, heading for the table. “Good thinking, too. This smells delicious.”

Salem played along because forcing someone to talk never really went over well. He fetched plates while Gregori took packages out of the bag. He kept the conversation light and easy as they sat around the table and ate.

For all that Gregori said it smelled good, he didn’t really eat much. Salem was accustomed to Gregori eating a good three times what he himself would eat—shifting, flying, and using magic all consumed calories—but tonight he ate the same amount Salem would. Which was a very telling sign. Gregori was not feeling well, but whether this was physical or emotional was hard to discern without his patient talking to him.

Patient. Ha. Even his brain didn’t know how to describe Gregori. Were they



boyfriends? Mates? Something else entirely? And sadly, it was entirely Salem's call. Gregori would agree to anything as long as he got to stay with Salem. Even trying to have a Define the Relationship talk wouldn't work because Gregori would agree to anything but breaking up.

Ugh, so frustrating.

"I'm dead on my feet." Salem shot Gregori a quick side-eye as he rinsed his plate, prepping to put it in dishwasher. "How about we watch TV and unwind?"

"Sure. Anything you want to watch?"

He had to give Gregori something. Anything. "Wasn't there a show you recommended? Because you'd read the book."

It took Gregori a second. "Oh! Yeah, Apothecary Diaries . I read the manga for it. I haven't had a chance to watch the anime, which is just sad."

"Let's watch it, then."

Gregori gave him a puzzled look. "I thought you don't watch anime?"

"I've never tried it," Salem corrected. "I don't know if I'll like it or not but I'm willing to watch it."

For a second, just a second, Gregori looked his usual self, delighted Salem met him halfway on something. It was just for a second before he went back into the exhausted state he was trying to hide behind a smile.

"I think you'll enjoy it. It's definitely not for kids."

“Pull it up, then. Er...what app?”

“Crunchyroll. It’s fine, I’ve already added it to your TV.”

He had? Since when? Granted, Salem didn’t watch a lot of TV.

They piled onto the couch, Gregori with the remote in hand. He loaded the show and started it, insisting on keeping the Japanese and having subtitles. Which was fine; Salem didn’t mind subbed shows.

The first episode in and Salem was hooked. This really was pretty good. And Gregori was right, it wasn’t a kid’s show, clearly meant for teens and adults. Too much politics and adult themes for it to be okay for kids.

By the second episode, Gregori had gone from sitting upright next to him to leaning against his shoulder. By the third episode, he was lying on his side, head pillowed on Salem’s thighs. Salem carded fingers through Gregori’s long silky hair, giving him some affection and comfort.

This man clearly wasn’t feeling well. He also wasn’t going to admit it to Salem.

Salem couldn’t press, either. Well, he could, but on what grounds? As a friend? As a boyfriend? Or, as Gregori so dearly wanted, as a mate? It was hard to push forward when Salem didn’t know how to commit to a certain path.

In a medical sense, he could do—and had done—an exploratory surgery to find the root of a problem. If only Salem could do so on his own heart and emotions, that would be smashing. Dammit, this was why he avoided relationships; they got messy and he had no idea how to handle most of it. Hookups were so much easier.

For Gregori, though, he had to figure this out. What they were doing right now was

not sustainable.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Days passed. The feeling of lethargy and a semipermanent cold proved impossible to shake off no matter what he did. Gregori tried to ignore it and push through. He was finally at a good stage with Salem and didn't want to admit to something being wrong. Especially when he didn't know what was wrong.

Going about day-to-day life, he could feel Salem watching him. The doctor was watching, at least, and he'd caught Salem frowning a few times. Like he knew something was wrong even if Gregori wouldn't own up to it. But he didn't say anything. Neither did Gregori, too afraid to figure out what it might mean.

It brought a weird mood into the house, but there was little he could do to dispel it.

Fortunately for him, a call from the fire department came through. Gregori could sorely use some action, so he eagerly responded. Once he was on scene, he was glad he had because this was chaotic madness.

Black smoke poured from every window of the five-story apartment building, filling the sky and turning the afternoon to twilight. Gregori's heart clenched at all the lives being destroyed, the families who were now going to be homeless. He stood beside the fire chief as she shouted orders at her team. The street was filled with trucks and hoses pumping gallons of water into the building with little evidence of it making any difference. The smoke burned his nose and the mist of water hanging in the air kissed his cheeks.

She had called him to the blaze not more than five minutes ago.

"What's the situation?" he demanded when the fire chief took a breath.

“Chemical fire at the start of things. Landlord had a construction company in doing renovations on the third floor. Possibly a stray spark set things off. We’ve gotten everyone out from the first and second floors. Third was empty. I’ve got firefighters still checking the top two floors. We’re also struggling to bring this fire under control.”

Gregori nodded. That meant the entire structure was in danger of collapsing. There was no way it could hold his weight as a dragon. He would need to remain in his human form to tackle this.

“Where do you want me? Putting out fires or focusing on saving people?” he asked. This was her specialty. He was more than willing to follow her command to make sure the firefighters and the residents got out safely.

“Put out as much of the fire as possible. Then my people can focus on getting out the tenants.”

As they spoke, another firefighter ran over and handed him a helmet and a jacket. “We’ve got a spare respirator we can loan you. It’s gonna be hard as hell to breathe in there.”

Gregori shook his head as he slipped on the jacket and helmet. “Nah. I’ll be fine. My magic allows me to breathe.”

With a smirk and a little salute to the fire chief, Gregori jogged toward the building and up the short set of four stairs to the front door. Even before he stepped inside, heat blasted his face, melting away the chill he’d experienced in the winter air. Part of him wished he had a mage with him. They had plenty of fire control spells at their disposal. Any one of them could have put this inferno out with little effort.

The linoleum tile curled from the intense heat and crackled under his feet as he

quickly passed through the first floor. There were eight apartments, along with a small lobby area, and the doors to each place had been kicked in. He peeked into each apartment to check for fire, his eyes skimming over places in various states of disarray from the tenants' daily lives. Grey smoke hung close to the ceiling, but there was no sign of flames licking away at the walls.

He circled back—moving faster after clearing the first floor—to a set of stairs at the back of the building. The smoke grew thicker, making the narrow passage almost as black as night. He pressed his hand to his face, trying to block it as much as possible until he reached the door to the second floor.

The hot metal scalded his fingers as he ripped the door open to reveal dancing orange and yellow flames. He backed up a step, shielding his face with his arms. Fire nearly consumed the second floor.

But it was nothing in the face of his ice magic.

Gregori thrust out his right hand, calling on all his powers to freeze everything in front of him.

Nothing happened.

Not even a fucking snowflake.

Oh no. This was not the time for this bullshit. It was bad enough his magic had gone wonky in front of the kids, but not now when lives were depending on him.

With a growl, he reached deeper, trying to drudge up every speck of power inside of him, but when he tried again, nothing happened.

He mentally poked his dragon. What the fuck is going on with you ? There are lives

at stake .

Silence was his only reply. His dragon didn't even stir or acknowledge his words. If not for the fact he could feel his dragon, he would have almost said the creature wasn't there at all.

Panic seized his chest, tightening muscles and sending a chill down his spine despite the insane heat. What was going on?

“Gregori ?”

He heard the voice directly in his ear and jerked around. There was someone coming up the stairs behind him in full gear.

“Is there a problem ?”

The voice was coming from the man approaching but sounded closer. It took him far too long to realize the helmet he was wearing was set up with a walkie-talkie system so the firefighters could speak to each other while still wearing the mask and respirator.

Gregori forced a smile and gave the man a thumbs-up, even though he wasn't feeling it.

“Chief asked me to back you up ,” the firefighter explained. The name Calhoun was painted on the side of his helmet.

All right, now we have a life clearly depending on us. Care to get in the game ?  
Gregori snarled at his dragon.

This time when he called on his magic, ice blasted from his palm and fingertips,

suppressing the fire in a heartbeat and coating the walls in thick ice. Much better. Calhoun cheered in his ear and Gregori breathed a small sigh of relief.

They worked their way slowly through the second floor, extinguishing every fire. Where the walls and other supports appeared weak, he added a wall of ice to provide temporary support. The air wasn't as hot as it had been, but the ice wasn't going to last long.

Calhoun remained on his heels every step of the way, offering his advice on where to head next and warnings when the floor looked too weak to support either of them. Gregori was grateful for the company. It seemed to stir his seemingly apathetic dragon enough to give him the magic he needed to put out the fires.

Yet, he could also feel the firefighter's watchful eyes when the magic failed to come on the first and second tries on occasion. Frustration and fear mounted in Gregori's chest. He was hundreds of years old, and he'd never had a problem like this.

Finally, they cleared the second floor and hurried to the third. The more Gregori used his magic, the better it responded. By the time he finished with the third floor, it was acting exactly as it should. Calhoun spoke with some of his fellow firefighters to get an update on how many people were in the building. The fifth floor had been completely evacuated, but there were two firefighters left on the fourth floor and they still had apartments to check.

Gregori and Calhoun moved up to the fourth floor after some firefighters helped a young woman down from the fifth. She was covered in soot and sweat, but there were no visible burns on her. Gregori prayed she suffered from nothing more than a little smoke inhalation.

On the fourth floor, the other team had beaten back the flames on one half of the building, so Gregori moved to the other half, working to extinguish the fire and shore



up the support beams for a little bit longer. They didn't get more than a few feet before they heard a frantic bark from what sounded like a small dog.

Gregori rushed forward, spreading ice everywhere, snuffing out the fire with a sharp sizzle and hiss of ice covering hot surfaces. White steam replaced black smoke with every step. Halfway down the hall, he reached a closed door, and using his right foot, he kicked it in with a massive bang. Fire rushed out to greet him, but he fought back with wave after wave of ice until even the fallen beams and black walls were crusted with frost.

He charged inside with Calhoun on his heels. A tiny Yorkie met him in the living room, but when he tried to grab for it, the dog darted away, leading him down the hall to a single bedroom, where a young man lay unconscious next to his bed.

Without missing a step, Gregori scooped up the dog and handed it over to Calhoun, then picked up the young man. His eyelids fluttered and he coughed, each breath a harsh wheeze. They took the survivors out to the hall, where they were met by the other team. Gregori and Calhoun handed over the tenants before Gregori charged back into the apartment to make one last sweep, making sure no one else lived there.

A hand grabbed his arm and jerked him around so that he faced his companion. “Time to get out !”

“We need to check the rest of the floor!” Gregori shouted back, only to fall into a harsh fit of coughing. He swayed slightly on his feet. Was the heat finally getting to him? Or the smoke? Why wasn't his magic filtering the air for him?

“ Other team confirmed this was the last one. We need to clear out now !”

Gregori hesitated, looking around the apartment. His eyes skimmed over simple furniture and a TV with a gaming system. There was a basket of laundry beside the

couch. Had the guy been meaning to wash it? His brain locked up. What if they missed someone?

“ We leave now !” Calhoun repeated. This time, his hand tightened around Gregori’s arm and gave him a hard pull toward the door.

Gregori stumbled and was forced to follow the firefighter out. Of course. He wasn’t in charge here. He was following their lead.

As if rising out of his own mental fog, Gregori followed Calhoun down the stairs and out of the building without further incident. He glimpsed people in a rough semicircle several yards away, watching the fire. Some were wrapped in blankets and streaked with soot. Others seemed to be gawkers curious about the fire. He glanced over his shoulder to find the black smoke had significantly reduced and the only flames visible were now on the fourth and fifth floors.

Even after reaching the safety of the street, Calhoun didn’t release him. He dragged Gregori over to one of the ambulances and covered his mouth with an oxygen mask. As much as he wanted to say he didn’t need it, he couldn’t deny that first deep breath was amazing. The last of the fog cleared from his brain.

The firefighter next to him pushed off his helmet and removed his respirator, so Gregori could see the smiling face of a middle-aged man with dark hair and bright brown eyes. “You doin’ okay now?”

“Yeah, better. Thanks.” It was hard to be convincing when Gregori had to stop twice to cough up some black crap from his lungs. “Calhoun?”

“Yep, but you can call me Derek.”

“Thanks for your help, Derek. Gregori Valerii,” he said, sticking his hand out to

shake Derek's.

“No problem, man. Dragons are a national treasure for all of us. Someone needed to watch your back.”

Gregori huffed out a weak laugh before placing the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose again. He didn't feel like much of a treasure right now, but it was fine. At least he got some of the fire out and helped to save the guy and his dog.

Derek cocked his head to the side so he was in Gregori's line of sight. “But are you sure you're okay? I know the docs probably can't help a dragon much, but you seemed...a little off.”

Gregori flashed his new friend a weak smile. “Yeah, I'm not feeling quite myself recently.”

“Do dragons get colds?”

He laughed a little easier this time. “Not ice dragons.”

Fuck that. He'd never heard of any dragon catching a cold. It just didn't happen.

But deep down, he knew this wasn't a cold. He also knew it was getting worse, not better. It wasn't about adjusting to his new scenery or his new life here with Salem. This was about being away from his clan—exactly what Rodrigo had been worried about from the very beginning.

And while he was being painfully honest with himself, there was also a chance Salem's continual denial about them being mates was having a negative impact. But what the hell was he supposed to do about it?

Leave Salem?

Fat fucking chance. No dragon left his mate. He wasn't worthy of having a mate if he was willing to leave him unprotected. He didn't deserve to have a mate if he wasn't willing to put up with a little magical inconvenience.

No, he would just have to find another way to get his magic working and stir his dragon from its lethargy. Because if he didn't, he could die the next time he tried to use his magic to save people.

It should have been a simple procedure.

That thought kept repeating in Salem's head like a mantra, even as machines blared out warnings, people scrambled around the table, and something like panic shot up his spine. It should have been a simple procedure. He shouldn't have a twelve-year-old girl crashing on his table when all he was supposed to do was come in here and take out a damn appendix.

All of his experience, training...it started clicking over in his head even as he tried to diagnose the problem. She was crashing, not breathing. He'd barely gotten her open, the laparoscope cued, when she'd crashed so suddenly.

"Beth, did you check if she was allergic to anesthesia?"

Beth had ten years under her belt as an anesthesiologist and didn't make rookie mistakes, but he had to check because right now, anything could be the culprit.

"Yes, she wasn't allergic."

Shit, so it wasn't that.

"Pull out," Salem commanded sharply. "Tape those incisions shut, I don't need her hemorrhaging blood— shit !"

Her pulse flatlined.

Salem leapt into doing CPR, both palms flat on her sternum as he pulsed. One, two,

three—come on, kid, come on—four, five, six—do not fucking die on me—seven, eight, nine?—

For all of his experience, despite his training, there was so fucking little he could do right now, other than perform CPR and pray. Even his magic was no help here. There wasn't a single fucking spell he knew to magically get this girl breathing again, her heart beating. What was even the use of magic if he couldn't save one child?

Her pulse leapt back up, jerky, but at least there. She sucked in a ragged, full breath, then another, coughing a little around it.

Salem disengaged, sweat beading his forehead, his own heart going a mile a minute.

Beth had already shut off the anesthesia flow; the other nurses assisting removed the robot and taped the incisions shut. Surgery wasn't happening today, not until they knew what had caused this madness. Salem was just glad they were only delaying a surgery and not prepping for a funeral.

He watched the monitors like a hawk, and while her numbers weren't great, she at least had a pulse on the screen and not a flat line. Frankly, he wasn't going to rest easy until those numbers improved.

"What the hell happened?" His fellow surgeon, Tren, looked at him, a mirror of all the confusion he felt, a hard tic in her jaw. "This should have been an easy in and out. Beth, you sure this wasn't an allergic reaction?"

"I tested her," Beth insisted. "The kid's got weird allergies as it is, I wanted to make sure she was fine. And she should have shown a reaction before even making it to the room."

That was true. They started all medicines and fluids a few minutes before wheeling

into surgery to make sure there wasn't going to be a reaction before cutting people open. If Beth had gone the extra mile and tested her as well, then it likely wasn't because of the drugs.

Salem had become a pediatric surgeon for one simple reason: He liked kids. He wanted them to grow up to be healthy adults. It was simple as that. To see a child under his care nearly die shook him to his core, and to say he was upset was a very gross understatement. His whole being trembled. Part of him was angry.

"Salem...you don't think the parents fed her something, do you?" A dark frown swept over Tren's face. "They better not have."

Tren was one of the best surgeons they had in this hospital and Salem had always enjoyed working with her. She was a month out from completing her residency, and he hoped to keep her once she was done, mostly because she thought things through like this. And he saw her point almost immediately.

If the appendix hadn't burst—and they'd be seeing very different symptoms if it had—and if she wasn't allergic to the anesthesia, then what options were left?

Someone did something stupid.

Unfortunately, it was a real possibility.

First surgeries of the day—generally speaking, about seven a.m.—they rarely had this problem. Kids were brought in about five a.m., and breakfast wasn't really a thing so early in the morning, so it wasn't a struggle to keep the kid from eating anything before surgery. But this surgery was at two p.m.—a whole different ballgame. Kid got hungry, parents often tried to sneak a snack in or something, and if they weren't caught by a nurse? Then real trouble came crashing in.

Like now.

Salem wasn't certain that was what had happened here, but he unfortunately saw it far too often, so the chances were good. Snarling, he whirled around, heading for the door. Over his shoulder, he snapped out orders.

"Clean her up, get her into a room, monitor her closely. I do not want anyone leaving her side for more than two minutes until we're sure she's out of the woods. Tren, with me. We're getting to the bottom of this."

"Oh, I'm right with you." Tren cracked her neck to either side, anger creeping into her voice. "I'mma bitch slap someone if they did feed her."

"Only if you beat me to it."

Salem took off his gloves and tossed them in the can, removing the outer surgical gown but not bothering to change beyond that as he speed-walked down the hallway and into the waiting area. There were several anxious parents waiting on news of their children, and he had no true recollection of Clarissa's parents, having only met them briefly for five minutes.

He stopped in the doorway of the waiting area and called out, "Clarissa Anderson's parents?"

Three people responded immediately. Unless he missed his guess, it was mother, father, and grandmother. Or at least, the ages looked about right. The blonde woman in jeans and a sweatshirt had to be related to the grandmother, as they had similar heart-shaped faces, their blue eyes a perfect match for each other. Clarissa took after her father with her dark brown hair and olive skin tone.

"Is she all right?" the mother demanded, nearly running for him. "You just went into



surgery, it was supposed to be longer than this, right?”

He had no interest in answering her questions until he had an answer for his own. “Did you feed her?”

The mother stopped dead in front of him, baffled. “No, of course not. She didn’t even get a sip of water after midnight. Did something happen?!”

So she hadn’t done anything. But the grandmother had gone deathly pale, cringing with guilt, and Salem had a feeling he knew what had happened.

His attention zeroed in on her. “What did you feed her and when?”

“It-it was just a granola bar,” the grandmother stammered, her voice reedy and thin. “She was so hungry, and?—”

The mother whipped around, aghast and spluttering. “Mom! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The father started muttering in Italian, sounding disgusted. Also distraught. He switched to English to demand, “My daughter is fine?”

“No. No, she’s not. She damn near died on the table.” Tren muscled in closer to face the grandmother down, body language saying she was this close to pushing up sleeves and starting a fight. “We nearly lost her. We nearly had a dead child on our hands because you couldn’t follow simple instructions.”

Clarissa’s mother latched on to Salem, eyes pleading. “Tell me she’s alive.”

“She’s alive.” Something he was glad to say. “Tren’s correct in it was a damn near thing, but she is alive.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

It was a demand he was willing to respond to because the grandmother needed a wake-up call. “She stopped breathing, heart stopped, literally all life functions were shutting down.” The next part he delivered while staring at the grandmother, who was looking quite corpse-like. “That’s why we say no food before a surgery. The body goes into shock and often there’s precious little we can do to reverse the situation if the child crashes. Fortunately, CPR got her back to breathing. I have a nurse watching her closely until we’re sure she’s out of the woods. I’ll let you two back in there shortly so you can sit with her as well. But you?” Salem looked at the grandmother. “You don’t see her at all until she’s out of this hospital.”

“Not even then,” Mom snarled at her own mother. “Get out. Now. Do not try to contact us before we call you. It might be years before you get to see Clarissa again. I’ve had it with your stupidity.”

The tears were overflowing. “She-she was just hungry. I was only?—”

“Out!” the father snapped at her. “Now!”

Salem didn’t blame him for the outburst. He shared in the anger.

Tren took it a step further, signaling hospital security and having her escorted out. The grandmother cried and wailed the entire way, but no one had sympathy for her.

“I am so sorry.” Clarissa’s mom had tears ready to fall. “My mother has always been stupid with anything medical. She tries to sneak Clarissa cookies all the time too, despite Clarissa being a severe celiac. It’s been a nightmare. Please, please tell me you can still do the surgery.”

“Not today.” Salem said this firmly because hell no. “Right now, her whole body is

dealing with the trauma it was just dealt and a surgery is absolutely not wise. I know her appendix isn't in great shape. I know it needs to come out soon. This is going to be something of a balancing act. I want to give her at least two days before we try the surgery again. I'll keep her on antibiotics to make sure that appendix doesn't burst on us until we can get to it. She needs the antibiotics anyway to make the surgery more viable. I also want her admitted the night before because—no offense—I just can't take the risk again.”

“Completely understandable.” Father was still looking hopping mad, his accent growing thicker with his anger. “I do not want to take risk again. You keep her here.”

“We will. Please, whatever instructions you receive, follow to the letter.”

“We will,” Mom promised fiercely. “And my mother isn't going to see her for a long time.”

Good. Maybe Clarissa would actually make it to adulthood safely. Salem was one hundred percent a believer in the philosophy that stupidity was the number one cause of death worldwide.

“We'll get you back soon once she's in a room,” he promised again. “Sit tight.”

“Thank you.”

With a final nod, he turned and walked to his office. He had a little downtime now that his surgery was cut short, and he needed at least ten minutes to decompress before he went and checked on Clarissa. He was still shaking.

He got to his office, sat down, and put his head in his hands, just breathing. Just pulling in air through his nose, releasing it through his mouth, and trying to get over the scare.

Kid was fine. Clarissa may have taken five years off his life, but the kid would be fine. Salem repeated those words about five times before he started to believe them.

Still, this whole situation grated. Anyone who worked with people would say how stupid the general public was. Things like this happened. It wasn't the first time, wouldn't be the last. God, what a depressing thought, that he'd have to deal with a situation like this again. Hopefully without losing a patient.

Sitting back in his chair, his eyes caught the calendar hanging on the wall. A joke from Alexis, the art featured dragons in full flight—a beautiful picture. Seeing it made him wonder what the past had been like. Before modern medicine came on the scene, when the mages had all sorts of spells and potions to do the same jobs. Would he have been able to heal an appendix without needing to take it out? Would surgery look entirely different if he just knew the right spells and potions?

But of course, it had all been lost in the Dragon Wars. All of the medical knowledge, all of those spells were lost, rendering the magic known today impotent in comparison.

Gregori insisted he was a mage, a mate. But how could he possibly believe that when he couldn't even save one kid with his magic?

“Universe, if you're trying to pull a joke on me, it's not fucking funny.”

Sighing, he got up and headed for the door, pulling on his doctor's coat as he went. He needed to check on Clarissa. If she was fine, maybe he'd head home early. Right now, he wasn't in the right headspace to help anyone.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Gregori lay flat on his back, eyes hooded as he watched Salem ride him. It felt exquisite, the push and pull as Salem rocked back and forth, his dick sliding in and out of slick heat. He kept his hands on Salem's thighs, loving the contact, sometimes reaching up to tweak a nipple just to hear Salem groan.

The pace was easy, not frantic for once, because right now the sex was less about getting off and more about comfort. For once, they were on the same page, but Gregori wished they weren't, as it meant they'd both had a really shitty day.

Look at Salem, those slitted eyes, his mouth open in a pant. His legs trembled under Gregori's hands from the exertion, but Salem didn't speed up. Didn't ask to change positions. Just kept riding Gregori with that perfectly slow pace.

With every fiber of his being, Gregori wished he could slow down his own climax. Extend this somehow. It wasn't to be, sadly, his groin already tight and hot with the impending feeling. He could only take Salem with him right now.

Gregori shifted his hand over to Salem's lovely dick and started stroking in time with his thrusts. Salem made that groan again, the sound like music to his ears, speaking purely of pleasure.

With a half shout, Salem came hard, the cum hot over Gregori's hand. He felt Salem's channel squeeze around him and it sent him over the edge. His hips slammed up as he spilled himself deep inside his mate, the climax more of relief than passion, but welcome nonetheless.

Gregori's lungs worked, drawing in breath, though it had a catch in it. Damn soot still

caused him problems. He ignored it, basking in the afterglow settling in. Salem collapsed over his chest, completely boneless. Hell, half of Gregori's now softened dick was still in him. He was so warm, so cuddly, the thought of moving sounded sacrilegious. Gregori's dragon let out a rumbling purr, a sound of perfect contentment. Their mate had come to them for sex and comfort, and right now, it made his dragon quite happy.

Gregori, though, wanted to know why. This was very unlike Salem. Should he ask? Or let it be and just indulge in the moment?

With a sigh, Salem pulled off and flopped onto his side. Then he waved a hand, speaking a spell. "Sui gev adi."

The warm tingle of magic flowed over Gregori and he went from sticky to clean in a second flat. Uh. Since when did Salem know this spell? Gregori hadn't seen this magic in a very, very long time.

"You learned the cleaning spell?"

"Sam taught it to me." Salem lifted a single shoulder in a shrug, not proud of this, merely stating a fact. "Amaru apparently taught it to him."

Trust Amaru to know this and have no qualms teaching it.

"Of course, my magic is only good for things like this," Salem tacked on, tone bitter.

He hadn't meant to poke a stick into the hornet's nest, but it was obvious he had. Welp. Guess they were talking about it.

Gregori put a hand to Salem's lower back and snugged him in closer. "Bad day?"

“Yeah. Shitty.” Salem burrowed in a little, a long sigh slipping out of his throat. “What should have been a routine appendectomy damn near killed a twelve-year-old girl this afternoon.”

Well shit. No wonder he was so upset. Not being able to help a child tore at Salem. He was a damn good pediatric surgeon for a reason.

“What happened?”

“Her grandmother fed her something before the surgery.”

“Uh. I’m not an expert on surgeries, but isn’t that a giant no-no?”

“It is. The body can’t process food well while under anesthesia, so it tends to go into shock. You’d think, with as many medical TV shows out there, people would get it through their heads to not do this. But you’d be surprised how many times we’ve had to cancel a surgery, or had an emergency on our hands, because people don’t follow instructions. In this case, the grandmother was the type to believe nothing could be wrong with her precious angel. She apparently tries to feed this poor girl gluten all the time even though she’s a hardcore celiac.”

“Ouch. That’s just stupidity layered on stupidity.”

“Tell me about it. Ugh, I hate people.”

Gregori nodded in sympathy and support. “People suck.”

“Anyway, this little girl crashed on the table. I had to do CPR to get her back and it was a close call. She’s now under observation and we’ll have to reschedule her surgery in the next day or two. Which shouldn’t have happened. But the kicker was, the entire time I worked on her, I kept wondering why I was born a mage. My

magic's fucking useless. It can't even save a little girl."

Oh. Ohhhhh. No wonder he was in this funk.

Well, Gregori could do something about it.

He leaned in, kissed Salem's forehead, then dropped the bombshell bluntly.

"Actually, the medical magic is still known to us."

Salem's head popped up so fast he damn near clipped the top of his head against Gregori's jaw. His deep blue eyes flared wide.

"WHAT?!"

Look at him, so surprised. His Pikachu face was so cute and made Gregori want to tease him. He shouldn't, though. Salem was part cat. He was sneaky in how he'd get his revenge.

"I don't know if you met him, but Ravi's mate, Sora?"

"Uhh...I don't know if I did meet him. If so, it was in passing."

Salem had been in Brazil for only the wedding, literally about four days in total, so it would make sense that he didn't meet everyone. All right, time to explain.

"You've heard of the Lost Clan?"

"Oh, yes."

"Okay, so obviously they weren't really lost. We just didn't know where they'd gone.



Part of the Lost Clan was the Abe Clan. They were renowned healers even back in the day. Like seeing a specialist or a guru in today's times. There was very little they couldn't heal. When they left, they took all their knowledge and records with them. Their history and expertise is still intact. The whole family still practices medicine to this day."

Salem's expression was reminiscent of a child who had just been told Santa Claus was in fact real, rode unicorns instead of reindeer, and gave out kittens to good children. He was so excited and almost dubious at the same time, the two emotions duking it out over his face to the point of it being comical.

"And...what can they do?"

"Basically anything. Plus, Amaru's still got all of the knowledge in his head of what his clan could do, which is why he was able to heal Sam. Amaru and Sora's family have been putting their heads together for months now, comparing notes and information, and let me tell you, they've really gone leaps and bounds past what they were already able to do."

"Narrow this down for me." Salem went up on one elbow, studying Gregori with intensity. "What exactly can they do?"

"Now that is not a question I can easily answer. I can tell you what I've seen them do. They healed King Alric's shoulder to the point he can fly again, when before he couldn't even lift his arm in a full range of motion."

"But how long was he injured?"

"Well, it happened at the tail end of the Dragon War, so..."

Salem's eyes crossed. "Five-hundred-year-old injury?! And they cured him?"

“To the point he can fly again, at least. I’m told he’s still not a hundred percent, but given how old the injury was, it’s still something of a miracle.”

“Not something of, it’s an absolute miracle.” Salem flopped back down, eyes still blown wide. “My god. I had no idea this information was kept alive after the war. I know Sam was able to do some serious magic after his core was fixed, but...”

“Pretty sure the Abe Clan has forgotten more about medicine than the collective world has ever known.”

“Can they do surgeries without needing to actually cut someone open?” Salem pressed.

“Uhhh, you’re asking questions I don’t know the answers to.” Gregori paused, thinking hard, then ventured tentatively, “I think so? At least on some things. Yeah, I’m not sure. I do know a lot of our ailments are getting fixed via either spells or potions. It’s honestly been really nice. I feel like I’ve gone back to the old days.”

“Fuuuuck,” Salem whispered. He put a hand over his eyes, visibly agitated. “If I had known any of that, I might not have almost lost a patient today.”

Gregori saw an in, and he wasn’t above taking it. Anything to convince Salem to give magic a chance, a real chance. It might be the right lure to pull him out of this insane work schedule of his and into the clan. Gregori was not above twisting arms.

“I do know Amaru and Sora are taking on students.”

Salem snapped upright, looking just as excited as he had been a second ago. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Absolutely am not.”

Gregori stroked his back, loving this excitement from Salem. It was such a rare thing to see. Most of the time, he was so jaded and beaten down with exhaustion, he barely smiled. It was part of the reason Gregori tried so hard to get him out of this place.

Feeling like he was winning a long-standing argument, he tacked on, “I’ve got both Amaru’s and Sora’s numbers. Want to call them? They’d love to talk medicine with you. Amaru especially doesn’t know how to shut up if medicine is the topic.”

“I...” Salem paused, brow furrowing. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I should. I don’t even know what I don’t know, if that makes sense.”

“Sure. You know modern medicine, but magical medicine isn’t something you grew up learning.”

“No. No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t something the Hunters knew. Shit, I’m...I’m both vexed that this information has already been out here for hundreds of years without my knowing, and excited at the possibility I really could use magic to help my patients.” Salem frowned before asking, “Wait, how does one have a medical license to practice if you’re using magic?”

“Sora question.” Gregori had no clue. “I heard he traveled the world as a nonprofit doctor before meeting Ravi. If anyone could answer the question, it’d be him.”

It didn’t take two seconds for Salem to make a decision. “I want to talk to them.”

“Sure. I’ll text them both, see who’s got time to chat and when. Amaru’s up to his neck in projects, so it might not be him. Honestly, Sora’s not much better, as he’s juggling projects, twins, and Ravi, but I have more faith in him finding an hour to talk to you than Amaru.”

“Because he can stay on topic?”

Gregori snorted a laugh. “Pretty much. Amaru’s excitement runs away with him.”

“Got it. Well, regardless, I have a lot of questions. In fact, I might have triple the questions once I sit and think on this for a second.”

“That’s fine.”

In a rare moment, Salem tilted his head back to look at him, gaze almost penetrating. “And what’s wrong with you?”

Gregori’s dragon sat up and did a little happy dance at this question. Such a lovely moment, having his mate focused and worried about him. He felt like throwing a party.

“Homesick,” Gregori admitted. He didn’t want to worry Salem or give him any grounds to argue with Gregori about returning to Brazil, but he did want to be honest with him. It was something of a fine balancing act. “I’m just really missing everyone. Plus, I’ve been feeling a little off.”

Salem’s face said I knew it , but he didn’t look happy or vindicated with this answer. Quite the opposite, like it worried him more. “Are you coming down with something?”

“No, I don’t think so. No sore throat or fever or anything. Just really tired and not feeling myself.”

Salem lowered his hand to Gregori’s forehead and the unhappiness increased. “You’re running a low-grade temp.”

“Oh. Makes sense, I had some minor smoke inhalation today. I bet that’s why.”

“Hmm. It could be part of it.” Salem didn’t look sold, though. “All right, the second you start having any symptoms, tell me.”

He really was worried. It touched Gregori deeply, but he also couldn’t help but tease Salem to ease his worries.

“Does that mean we can play doctor?”

“Do not make me tranq your ass.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“ When you are well”—Salem gave him the stink eye, but there was a twitch to his lips like he was laughing on the inside—“we will come back to the topic of playing doctor.”

He didn’t. Oh my god, he did. He was playing right along. Delighted, Gregori tried to snuggle in more, batting his eyelashes at Salem in a really ridiculous way.

“Can’t we negotiate this?”

“No. We cannot.” Salem rolled his eyes. “You’re like that camel in the story. I give you an inch, you take a mile.”

“Guilty.”

And if Salem kept being sweet like this, Gregori would continue to take advantage. It was how he rolled.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

“Z hizn’ ebet meya!”

Salem paused in adjusting the tie around his neck. That was one of the first times he’d heard Gregori use Russian. In this case, it didn’t sound like a good thing.

“My Russian is a bit rusty.” He resumed tying his necktie as he got ready to leave for the hospital. Gregori poked around the kitchen, slamming the refrigerator door closed and then hunting through the cabinets, but his head snapped around at Salem’s words.

“You speak Russian?”

Salem rolled his eyes. “I was being sarcastic. Is something wrong?”

Gregori grunted and returned his attention to the kitchen. “I forgot to make a run to the grocery yesterday. We’re out of...fuck...everything. I can’t make you lunch today.”

Gregori had still cooked regularly during the past week, which amazed Salem—he wasn’t sure how the man found the spoons. Not only did he have obligations at the hospital with the kids and volunteering with the fire department, he now had a couple of universities demanding his time, wanting to learn more about the Valerii Clan, the Dragon War, and what had happened with the dragons over the past five hundred years. Honestly, Salem expected things to have blown up from stress by this point. They usually had at roughly this junction whenever someone tried to stay with him. But ever since their blowout argument, Salem and Gregori had steadied. Salem kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Gregori to lose patience. SOMETHING.

Only it just never materialized?

He put the question mark on it because surely even Gregori's patience would run out soon. Salem knew full well he wasn't easy to live with. Within the confines of his own head, he could admit he wasn't looking forward to their inevitable ending. He kind of liked cuddling Gregori's great big body each night and feeling those strong arms wrapped around him from behind. He maaaay have found Gregori's deep, steady breathing in his ear to be the best white noise. It wasn't like he was jealous , per se, of the kids who got to spend the afternoon listening to Gregori tell stories and do magic tricks. It was just a smidgeon of fear of missing out. Or something.

"Don't worry about it."

"But I want to make you something."

Salem grabbed his winter coat off the hook and pulled it on. "Hey, you're super busy. I understand and I'm not upset about you not cooking, okay? Don't worry, today there's going to be real food at the hospital. Nurse Cutler is taking a cooking class, and she's been bringing in enough food to share."

He hadn't even finished speaking when he could feel a six-foot-two dragon looming over him, breathing out little puffs of frosty air. "A nurse has started cooking for you?"

"I wouldn't say she's cooking for me. She told us she wanted to try out some recipes on us."

"And would you say she's a good cook?" Gregori's voice dipped lower, just a hair away from threatening. Not that Salem felt like he was in danger at all. No, just the opposite. Gregori's low, grumpy voice was sending all the blood to his dick.

Bad dick! He didn't have time for a quick fuck. He needed to get to work.

But that didn't stop the little devil on his shoulder from goading Gregori.

"A good cook? Yeah, I think she's doing a great job. Yesterday she made a green curry that was some of the best I've ever had." He spun on the balls of his feet, smiled up at Gregori, and gave his cheek a little pat. Why was it so fun to tease him? Salem really shouldn't, but the jealousy was warming. "Have a good day! I've got an early surgery to prep for."

He was out the door before Gregori could reply or even ask any more questions about the food he'd been eating recently.

Was he stirring up trouble for no reason?

Maybe.

Was he an evil little shit?

Definitely.

Salem forgot all about his conversation with Gregori as soon as he arrived at the hospital. He had one surgery to prep for and two new patients who'd been brought in during the early morning hours. He'd be taking over their cases from the doctor who'd been on call overnight. Things were brisk, but there wasn't anything too unexpected or that had him running from one end of the hospital to the other. There was even enough time for Alexis to get in a few shots about stealing away his hot dragon.

He walked toward the lounge to grab a refill on his coffee and to see if Nurse Cutler did have a new lunch to share. Otherwise, he needed to pull up the delivery app and



place his order now.

“I was just looking for you.” Gregori’s cheerful voice echoed down the hall.

Salem turned toward him, and his mouth fell open far enough to nearly bang his chin on the floor. The man was carrying two very large bags of what he was willing to guess was food. What. The. Fuck.

“I thought you said you didn’t have time to cook. Did you order all this?”

“I got to thinking that I could postpone my time with the kids to this afternoon, which gave me enough time to run to the grocery store, make you lunch, and throw a pot roast in the slow cooker for dinner tonight.” Gregori paused long enough to press a kiss to his temple. “Do you think anyone else is hungry?”

Salem snorted. The amazing people he worked with were bottomless pits. If there was free food, they were hungry.

He followed Gregori into the lounge and hovered at his shoulder as he unloaded both hot and cold food from his two bags. Caprese salad, beef stroganoff, short ribs, mini fried chicken drumsticks, and more. It was an eclectic hodgepodge of foods, but every one was a favorite of Salem’s.

His mouth watered while his brain frantically pulled up his schedule. Thank freaking god he didn’t have any procedures scheduled for the afternoon. If he dared to gorge himself on all of this, he was going to be lucky to waddle through his rounds. Fuck. He was going to need a nap.

“How did you have time to make all of this?”

Gregori flashed him a wide grin. “You should never doubt my skills. And did it

escape your attention it's Valentine's?"

Salem blinked up at him. "Uhhhh...it is?"

"Is this a plausible deniability thing?"

"Uhhh, no, I genuinely had no clue."

Gregori's smile didn't waver, but any response was stopped by the appearance of Alexis, Nurse Cutler, and several others.

"How?" Salem demanded, holding his hands up at Alexis.

"Jeremy texted me. He spotted Gregori heading for the elevators carrying some heavy bags that smelled good. And oh god, he was right!" Alexis batted her long eyelashes at Gregori. "This is amazing. Did you happen to bring enough to share with this poor, withered soul who doesn't have a dragon to love her?"

"Of course. Let me fix a plate for Salem, and then you can dig in."

Nancy Cutler whistled and fanned herself as she came to stand next to Alexis. "Is this the infamous dragon I've heard about who has won over the kids and is making you such amazing food?"

Salem rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to shut this down fast, but Alexis beat him to it.

"You have no idea! Last week, Gregori made this cheese bagatelle pasta in a cream sauce. Doctor Stingy over there let me have a tiny bite, and I swear I haven't recovered from it yet."

“So not only does he cook, but you’ve got all this hotness to come home to?” Nancy inquired. She clicked her tongue and shook her head at him. “How have you not put a ring on his finger yet?”

Gregori shoved an obscenely heavy plate into his hands, but his eyes were locked on Nancy. His charming half grin had come out to play. “And why haven’t we met yet?” He extended his hand toward the young blond nurse. “Gregori Valerii.”

“Nancy Cutler. A pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve watched you playing with the kids. I swear all of your visits have done wonders to improve their morale.”

“Thank you. I’m just glad I can brighten their day a little bit.” He released her hand and sidled closer, allowing Alexis to dive into the various dishes, piling up her own plate. Wait a minute ! Where the hell did she even get a plate ? Salem hadn’t even noticed her stepping away from the counter where the food was spread out.

“This smells delightful,” Nurse Cutler mentioned even as she lifted a spoonful to her nose to sniff. “How did you get such a crisp edge on this fish?”

“Oh, it’s the...” Gregori paused, face contorting. “Dammit, what word...it’s the pan lubricant.”

Salem busted up laughing. “You mean oil?”

“That was it!” Gregori made a face at him. “ You try speaking multiple languages and see how often you lose a word.”

He couldn’t help but keep laughing. “Still, of all the words to choose, lubricant? Really?”

Gregori rolled his eyes at him and went back to discussing the finer points of cooking

with Nurse Cutler. Salem dug in, the delightful taste of yummy food he didn't have to cook filtering through his taste buds. He ate and watched Gregori talk, and he might have basked in the moment. Seriously, what was this feeling of...pride? Surely not. He'd staunchly kept Gregori at arm's length, emotionally speaking.

Other nurses filtered in, hearing of food and wanting a share. Salem didn't mind.

Or at least he didn't until Lisa started batting her eyelashes at Gregori. Lisa was pretty, knew it, and flaunted her oh-so-perfect breasts as she lavished praise on Gregori. Salem didn't like her at all, as she'd already been through three husbands, every relationship ending because she'd cheated. She was a good nurse but not a good person.

Gregori finally got a word in edgewise and pointed to Salem. "I actually brought him lunch," he explained. "I just thought I'd make enough for everyone to have a break."

That wouldn't deter Lisa. Her last two affair partners had been married men. She didn't so much as blink. "Oh, you're so sweet."

That tore it. Salem drawled in a warning tone, "His breakfasts are especially good. So this will be the only time I'm willing to share."

Lisa looked at him uncertainly, took in his Try me, bitch face, and wisely decided to stop flirting.

The look Gregori gave him, one of delight, was worth it even if Alexis was making cooing noises next to him. Look, on certain things, Salem had no tolerance. Gregori happened to be one of those things.

Salem was jealous!

It was a beautiful look on his face. It truly made all the hectic racing about worth it. Seeing him immediately stop the nurse once she'd crossed the line had filled Gregori's heart past the bursting point. He would absolutely reward his jealousy later too. For now, he basked.

Gregori opened his mouth to take a bite of chicken when alarms blared throughout the entire hospital, piercing his ears. For a heartbeat, all six of the hospital employees sat frozen at the table, staring at each other in shock. As one, they all jumped up and ran down the hall as a voice came over the intercom announcing a code Gregori had never heard before.

Salem almost tripped over his own feet, but Gregori grabbed his elbow and saved him, getting him moving again. When Salem looked up to meet his gaze, the doctor's face was frighteningly pale.

"What is it? What's happening?"

"The alarm...the code..." Salem started, but his voice was too low to hear over the siren, forcing Gregori to read his lips. "There's a bomb in the hospital."

Everything inside of Gregori froze solid and his brain locked up. A bomb in a hospital full of sick people. Full of sick and innocent kids.

A bomb in a hospital that contained his one and only mate.

Gregori stepped in front of Salem, his hands wrapped tightly around his biceps, holding him in place. Every instinct screamed for him to first fly Salem a safe distance from the hospital before returning to deal with the bomb.

But even with the fear filling Salem's eyes and the fine tremor of terror in his frame, Gregori knew there was no getting Salem out of the building until he knew each and every child was safely away. And that was why he loved him. No matter his own fear, he would always put the safety and well-being of children first.

"How long will it take you to get all the children safely evacuated?" he shouted over the alarms.

Salem swallowed hard. "Hours."

That single word knocked the air out of Gregori's lungs. That couldn't be right.

"It's the middle of winter. Too many of these kids will die if they are taken out in the cold. There aren't nearly enough ambulances available to shuttle them off to nearby hospitals."

Not to mention all the ones hooked up to countless machines to keep them alive. Evacuating an entire hospital was never a quick affair.

Gregori nodded and forced a smile he didn't really feel. "Okay. You work on getting all the kids safely out of here. When they're clear, you get out of here too. I'll come find you. I promise."

He released Salem, but before he could draw away, Salem grabbed his arms, his fingers like claws digging through his sweater to nearly pierce flesh.

"No! What are you doing? Where are you going?"

“I’m going to defuse the bomb.”

Salem looked him dead in the eye with a war of expressions. Unease being the most dominant one. “Can you...can you do that? You don’t have equipment or?—”

“Hey, it’ll be okay. This is what I do. I’m a bomb expert, remember?” He cupped Salem’s cheek, sliding his thumb across the cheekbone. “Plus, I’ve got dragon magic to keep me safe.” As he said the words, he felt a stirring of unease considering how finicky his magic had been recently. But he couldn’t let Salem know. His mate needed to focus to protect the kids and get them to safety, which he’d never be able to accomplish if he was terrified something was going to happen to Gregori.

“But...but...” Salem stammered, his eyes darting around them at the nurses, doctors, and even police officers who were now rushing past them down the halls. “Shit. I do not like this. But you’re the most qualified here to handle it. Just promise me, if it looks like something you can’t handle, pull out.”

“I absolutely promise.”

The mage bounced up on the tips of his toes and slammed his mouth over Gregori’s in a hard, demanding kiss that didn’t last nearly long enough. Salem broke off the kiss and glared at Gregori, his hands still tightly gripping his arms. “Don’t you dare get hurt or I will be very pissed at you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Gregori said with a wide grin.

Before they could say anything else, Salem was running off in one direction, shouting orders and generally being the amazing person he always was. Gregori knew he could only hope to do the same thing.

He spun on the balls of his feet and ran through the halls until he finally grabbed the

arm of one police officer.

“My name is Gregori Valerii. I am a dragon and a bomb expert. How can I help?” he blurted out before the cop had a chance to say anything.

The irritation melted away from his grizzled face in a heartbeat and he almost looked like he was going to cry. “We’ve been looking for you!”

Okay. That wasn’t what he’d expected to hear, but it was nice.

“We were told a dragon was working here, and we were wondering if you could help with the bomb or maybe just getting people out of here.” The cop grabbed his arm and pulled him along as he continued to speak. “We got a bomb threat about ten minutes ago from a parent who lost his child back during the summer. Our negotiator tried to talk them down, but they’ve already committed suicide, leaving us to defuse the bomb.”

“Do you at least know where the bomb is?”

“Yes. Basement.”

“Bomb squad?”

His new companion grunted as he rushed down the stairs at his side. “They’re en route, but it’s going to be at least ten minutes. The team leader has been online since we located the bomb, examining it.”

Now the million-dollar question. “Does the bomb have a timer?”

The police officer swallowed hard as he looked up at Gregori. His face was pasty white, and beads of sweat were streaking down from his temples despite the chill



hanging in the air. “We’ve got less than ten minutes until the bomb is supposed to go off.”

That sounded about right for Gregori’s luck recently.

He nodded and continued to race down the stairs to the basement. The officer at his side waved off anyone who tried to stop them as they hurried through a pair of heavy steel doors painted tan and covered in various official warnings stating this domain was for hospital staff only.

Glancing over, he picked up the name Ortiz from the cop’s shiny gold badge on his chest. “Officer Ortiz, how did the guy get access to this part of the hospital in the first place?”

“Former employee,” he grumbled. “Guy worked as a janitor here for two years.”

Gregori clenched his teeth and swore a string of Russian curses. The man had come in here for two years, saw how this place had healed countless people, and then when they failed to save his child, he decided no one here was allowed to live. His heart broke at the man’s loss, but it didn’t give him a right to steal away so many other lives and destroy countless other families.

They charged into a large open area that served as a storage room for boxes upon boxes of supplies stacked to the ceiling. Machines roared in the background. Water heaters, furnaces, and countless other items whirred and growled as they kept the hospital running.

Around a blind corner, they located four police officers in a lot of protective padding as they crouched in front of a tall black metal cabinet. All four heads swiveled in their direction at the pounding of their footsteps.

“The dragon!” Ortiz shouted on his right, and all the cops breathed a sigh of relief. There was no way in hell Gregori was going to tell them it was too early to feel relieved. He might know bombs, but every last one was different. With time so short, there was no telling if he’d be able to defuse it in time.

“What’s the situation?” he demanded as he joined the group to stare into the cabinet. Thankfully, the bomb itself didn’t fill the container. It sat in a large box at the bottom of the cabinet. The timer rested on top of a shit ton of C4. Bright red digital numbers showed they had less than ten minutes.

“It’s a fucking messy homemade .” The voice sounded somewhat small and distant, as it came from a tablet showing the face of a haggard Black man in what looked to be a vehicle. This had to be the team leader for the bomb squad. He went on to describe what he saw and the six different possible ways to diffuse the bomb. The only problem was they needed more time to study it, and he didn’t trust his view of the device through the tablet.

Gregori accepted a flashlight from one of the cops and shined it on the inner workings of the bomb as he inspected it. “Third green wire and the yellow striped and blue striped wires are fakes,” he called out. “Cutting them will detonate the bomb immediately. At first glance, the best options are red, yellow, and first green wires—cut in that order—or I’m thinking blue, first green, and red.”

“I’m sorry, but how the hell does a dragon know shit about bombs ?”

Twisting around to look into the tablet again, Gregori grinned broadly. “I’ve been tinkering with bombs and explosives since black powder first appeared in Russia. Sooo...” He glanced up at the ceiling for a second as he did a bit of math before looking at the squad leader again. “About seven hundred years, give or take a few decades. I’m also the demolitions and bomb expert for the Valerii Clan.”

“ Got it. Glad you’re here with us .”

Gregori nodded and turned his attention back to the bomb. “We need more time to study this before we start cutting wires willy-nilly. Can it be moved? Just drop it out in the middle of the parking lot? My dragon could easily carry something this size.”

“The case holding the bomb is welded to the bottom of the cabinet and the cabinet is welded to a support beam. There’s no moving either of them,” one of the other cops answered.

“How’s the evacuation going?” someone asked.

“Less than a quarter of the patients have been moved outside the hospital. The director says it will take an hour just to get out everyone in ICU.”

A cold ball of ice settled deep in the pit of Gregori’s stomach, and he scrubbed a hand over his face. There was no time to get everyone out, which meant someone had to take a chance and snip wires.

“How far are you from the hospital?” Gregori inquired.

“ About eight minutes .” The squad leader’s low voice only added to the weight in his stomach.

That was at least two minutes too late.

He’d never arrive in time to tackle the bomb personally.

“Okay.” Gregori stood from his squat and held out his hand for the tablet. “I want everyone out of here now. I’m going to diffuse the bomb.”

“Wait! We can’t let you do that. You’re a civilian,” a cop argued.

“I’m also the only person here with experience defusing bombs. Not to mention, I’ve got magic and I’m a dragon,” he added with a little wink.

“Can you defuse it with magic?”

Gregori shook his head. “No, but I can use my ice to protect the hospital some if the bomb does go off.” He also planned to shift into his dragon form at the last second and use his enormous body to shield the hospital from the blast, but he didn’t want to actually say those words out loud.

“ The dragon is right ,” the bomb squad leader barked. “ Everyone out ! We’ve got eight minutes left to evacuate as many people as we can. Get to fucking work !”

The cops didn’t linger another second, booking it for the entrance he’d used minutes earlier.

Before Ortiz could escape, Gregori caught his arm.

“If this doesn’t work out so great for me and you see Doctor Hunter, could you deliver a message for me?”

Ortiz blinked wide brown eyes at him for a second and then nodded.

“Tell him I have always been so proud to be his mate, and I love him with everything that I am.”

“Doctor Hunter. Got it. I’ll tell him, but you gotta not die here. The doc’s going to appreciate your message a hell of a lot more coming from you.”

He clapped Ortiz on the shoulder. "I'll do my best."

The cop tried to smile, but in the end, he said nothing as he ran for the exit with the others, closing the big doors behind him.

Gregori set the tablet aside, warning the squad leader that he needed a moment to prepare the room as best he could before they discussed which wire to snip.

After sucking in a deep breath, Gregori turned in the direction of the doors and summoned up all his magical power to cover the door area around the cabinet in a thick layer of ice. And just like with the kids and the apartment fire, nothing happened. Not a flake or a whisp of frost.

Look, I don't know what your deal is, but you have got to pull yourself together this second . He squeezed his eyes shut and balled his trembling hands into fists as he directed all of his attention at his dragon. Our mate isn't leaving this hospital until every kid is evacuated. If we don't do everything we can to stop this bomb, our mate is going to die. Those kids are going to die. Are you even listening to me ? Salem is going to die !

There was a faint stirring in his chest, but nothing to indicate he had his powers back.

"Please..." The single word tumbled, fractured, from his throat. He roughly wiped away a stray tear that had slipped free. Help me now and I swear I'll find a way to fix all of this with you and Salem and the clan. Please, don't let Salem die today .

This time, the dragon stirred with a little more energy in his chest. It felt as if the great beast had lifted its head and blinked sleepy eyes to look around at its surroundings. It wasn't much, but Gregori had to take it as a win.

Calling on all his magical powers once again, he threw out his hands. Ice blasted

forth, forming three walls around him and the bomb that were several feet thick. It wasn't much, but it was a start. With just enough room left for him to shift into his dragon form, Gregori jogged back to the bomb and picked up the tablet.

“ Ready ?”

Gregori glanced at the time. Two minutes left.

He flipped the camera on the tablet and held up the flashlight with his other hand, giving the bomb squad leader a good view of the bomb. “Thoughts?”

The man made a noise like he was sucking on his teeth as he reviewed what was on his screen. “ I find myself leaning more toward your first suggestion of red, yellow, and first green wires .”

“Okay. I was thinking the same.” He flipped the camera back around so he could look at the man. “I'm ending the call so I can shift and cut the wires.”

“ Wait —”

Gregori forced a tense smile. “If all goes well, I'll call you back in a couple of minutes.” He didn't give the man a chance to argue. He just hung up and placed the tablet face down on the floor.

After another deep, steadying breath, he lifted his right hand and forced it to shift into scales, each finger tipped with long, incredibly sharp talons. There was no point in using wire cutters when his nails were even sharper. He could slice through all the necessary wires in a heartbeat and then shift.

Kneeling in front of the cabinet, he carefully slipped his talons under the appropriate wires and sucked in some air through his clenched teeth. His heart hammered so hard

he swore it shook his entire body.

We cut the wires and immediately shift, okay ? For Salem. We do this to protect Salem .

His dragon shifted again. It wasn't much, but it was enough for him to believe the giant lizard was at least paying attention to him as the last seconds ticked down on the timer.

Five.

Four.

Three.

I love you, Salem.

Gregori plucked each of the wires in the correct order, slicing through them with ease. As his nail went through the green wire, he forced his body to shift. Pain rippled through every tendon and crackled through his bones, but he fought through the agony to wrap his enormous body around the bomb. He tensed, breath held, waiting for the world to explode around him and end his life. A dragon's body was built to survive a beating, but not so much C4 exploding at once.

But one second ticked by and then another and another.

He was still alive. His heart was beating.

Slowly, he cracked open one eye to find the time on the bomb stopped at one second. He was alive, the hospital was still standing, and the bomb had been defused.

Very carefully, he pulled away from the cabinet and shifted back into his human form. The process was painfully slow and his entire body was soaked in sweat when he was done. He took one step back from the bomb and his legs collapsed under him.

The relief rushing through Gregori was bitter. His dragon should have been begging to rush back to Salem's side to make sure their mate was safe, but it felt like it curled up in his chest again and returned to sleep, indifferent to the entire world.

Something was very wrong with his dragon. This wasn't just a little homesickness. This was bad, and he had no idea how to fix it. Especially if fixing it meant leaving Salem's side.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The worst thing ever was having to function even though he was worried out of his mind. Salem couldn't sit there and stew, he had patients to look after, and while they had an emergency evacuation procedure, it was hard to pull off when they had this many young children. Any available nurse from the other departments rushed in to help, and honestly, it was the only reason why they were able to manage.

Then he sat there, near his most delicate patient, his eyes on the child—but his mind on a dragon.

In this moment, where everything was uncertain, when he couldn't turn and seek Gregori out for reassurance, it was easier to define his feelings. Easier to see the shape of them. Salem had suspected it all before but had deliberately not looked too close, a little afraid of what he'd find.

But now? When he had nothing to do but worry? It was too obvious to ignore.

The worry felt as deep as a knife, sinking in right through his heart. The need to hold Gregori, to reassure them both he was fine, went just as deep. At some point, his heart had taken Gregori fully in. Even Salem wasn't sure how or when it'd happened, only that Gregori was incredibly precious to him.

Shit, what timing for a realization. When Salem couldn't even do anything about it.

It felt like an eternity went by before they got the all clear. Salem didn't know precisely if Gregori was all right, but he tried to take no news as good news. The building hadn't collapsed, there was no sign the bomb had gone off, so odds were very good his dragon was fine.

Salem repeated the mantra a few times as his heart still felt wrung out from the stress.

They were a touch slower putting everyone back into their rooms. People were half worn out already from the mad rush; there was no need to push themselves to make some arbitrary speed record. Once everyone was settled back in, Salem took a second to text Gregori.

Ok ?

The response was quick.

Ok. Bomb defused. I'm in one piece.

Only then did Salem feel like he could breathe. He put a hand over his heart, breathing out slowly, before answering.

I'm relieved to hear it. Meet you at home ?

Ok.

He read through the conversation again and frowned. Something was off. Normally, if Salem texted him, Gregori would call back. It was one of those annoying-cute habits of his. He preferred phone calls over texts. And if he really had defused the bomb already, why hadn't he come back to Salem? So much of this felt out of character.

Salem's gut said something was very wrong here. His head was inclined to agree.

His office door opened and Alexis popped in.

"Hey, how's Gregori?"

“He texted saying the bomb’s defused, and he’s fine.”

“Uh-huh...and you’ve got your frowny face on, why?”

“It’s...out of character for him to text back.”

“Awww, look at you,” Alexis cooed. “Actually knowing your boyfriend and shit.”

He just wearily looked at her. Must she? No, this was Alexis, so she must.

She caught his look and cackled. “I came in to tell you surgeries are likely canceled for today. They want to do a thorough sweep of the hospital before they resume anything. Emergency surgeries only.”

“Ahh. Not surprised.”

“But now that I’m here...have you talked with him yet?”

“Alexis.” He sighed, already resigned to having this conversation although he’d really prefer to skip it. Really.

“Oh my god, you haven’t!” Alexis rocked onto one hip, eyes rolling off into the sunset. “Why do I try? Why? You’ve got the emotional maturity of a three-year-old in terms of romance.”

“Harsh. True, but harsh.”

“At least you can admit it, though, which is progress. Whhhhhhhy haven’t you told this amazing man who spoils you that you at least like him?”

Well. For one, like was too shallow of an emotion for what he felt. Salem thought

about saying so, then decided, what the hell. When did he have secrets from her, anyway? “It’s not accurate. I...think I may be in love with him?”

Alexis stared at him for a long second, jaw dropping, then stumbled despite the fact she was standing still.

“Trust me, I know, I never imagined I’d say those words out loud either. Especially not after...y’know.”

“Jerkface? Oh, trust me, I know who you’re talking about. But stay on topic here. Seriously ?!”

Salem scrubbed a hand over his jaw, feeling heat rise to his cheeks, and for god’s sake, he’d blushed more since meeting Gregori than he had collectively in his entire life.

Alexis promptly whipped out her phone and snapped a picture.

“What the hell are you taking a picture for?”

“You are seriously cute right now and Gregori will thank me for this later.” She kept her phone in hand but plopped herself onto his desk, putting them more on eye level. “Salem. I know precisely how hard that was for you to admit, but please, please tell me you’ve said it to Gregori?”

“I, uh...no.”

“Yeah, of course you haven’t.” She sighed, already resigned. “Color me not surprised. Honey, please, go tell that gorgeous man.”

“I’m...can I give this just a bit more time first?”

“Why the hell would you give this more time?”

“Well, for one, every relationship I’ve had didn’t last more than three months?”

She opened her mouth, grimaced, and closed it again.

“See?”

“I do see, yeah, but I don’t think Gregori is like any of those other men.”

“I agree with you, but can’t I ride this out for a bit longer? We’ve hit a really good equilibrium and I’m scared about screwing it up. Just. If we can hit the three-month anniversary and still be solid with each other, I’ll feel a lot more comfortable telling him.”

Alexis searched his eyes. “Honestly? I’m of two minds. ’Cause this feels like trauma making a decision for you.”

Salem winced, as that felt a little too close to home.

“But on the other hand, you finally admitted you do love him, which is amazing , and I honestly never thought I’d see the day. If dating for a while longer will help settle those doubts, then I won’t argue.”

“You do see my point, then?”

“I see you need a bit more time to wrap your head around what your heart is telling you, yes.”

Close enough in Salem’s book.

A notification went off on both of their phones. They checked it immediately, the habit automatic. The notification stated all nonemergency surgeries were canceled for the day and would be rescheduled. Salem didn't mind in the slightest. His nerves had had quite enough excitement for the day.

With that, he stood up. "I'm pulling rank and going home. Gregori deserves some spoiling."

"That's the spirit!" Alexis bounced off the desk. "Meanwhile, I have a ton of errands I haven't had a chance to do. I'm taking advantage. Keep me posted, use protection, don't get pregnant, okay?"

"Hardy har har, you're hysterical."

"I do try."

He texted Gregori as he gathered up his coat and briefcase, telling him he was free from anything today and suggesting they go home. He got a thumbs-up in return.

This was seriously weird. Gregori was very effusive in his communication, so this minimalist effort didn't feel right at all.

He met Gregori at the side entrance, where he'd parked, and one look at Gregori told its own story. The man appeared exhausted, there was a high color to his cheeks, and he was clearly not feeling well.

Shit.

Salem crossed to him quickly, putting a hand to Gregori's forehead with a frown. "You're burning up. Gregori, you should have told me you weren't feeling good."

“Came on suddenly,” Gregori said, then turned his head to cough. “I wasn’t feeling this bad this morning.”

“And you defused a bomb in this condition? You crazy person. All right, home we go.”

“Twist my arm,” Gregori joked with a strained and tired half smile.

Salem seriously did not like seeing him in such a poor state. Perhaps the silver lining to the bomb was being able to take Gregori home and look after him. He had plenty of medication at home, although he’d have to order in food later.

He bundled Gregori into the car. At this time of the day, traffic wasn’t horrific, so he was able to get them home without too much trouble. Gregori shuffled more than walked as they went up, his usual grace and energy just gone.

Gregori insisted on a shower, which was probably a good idea, considering everything. Salem shoved him in, pulling out a fever reducer and something for his cough. The second Gregori was out again, he dried the man’s long hair, as wet hair in winter wouldn’t help this situation get any better. Then he did an exam, but aside from the fever and cough, he couldn’t find anything to put his finger on. It was more a general malaise. Perhaps a cold?

“Cuddles?” Gregori requested plaintively.

Salem didn’t have the heart to argue when the man clearly felt terrible. “Sure.”

Gregori blinked at him. “Really?”

“Yup. In bed you go.”

There was his pretty smile. Gregori still shuffled, but he was very eager to get into the bed. The second Salem slid in next to him, Gregori curled up around him, arm over his waist, happy as a clam.

It took exactly two minutes and then he was out like a light.

Salem smoothed back hair from Gregori's forehead, frowning down at him. He really didn't like seeing his man sick like this. Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do about it.

Those magic lessons in medicine definitely needed to happen sooner rather than later.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The next day, Salem woke to a still very sick dragon. Gregori's fever had broken during the night, at least, but he clearly wasn't doing any better. Salem fortunately had the day off, so he was determined to stick close and nurse his, er, boyfriend better.

This morning he took extra care to sneak out of bed, leaving Gregori sleeping, because right now sleep was the best medicine.

He thought about postponing his talk with Sora, but...Gregori had been true to his word and organized a Skype talk with him, and Salem was far too excited to postpone it. He had so, so many questions for the man. If he had possessed any idea of Sora knowing magic medicine, he'd have bent the man's ear during the wedding. It just proved he and Sam really didn't talk enough. Salem made a promise to himself he'd fix that because he was too disconnected from his twin's life.

Anyway, he took the call while sitting at his kitchen table so he could take notes. He'd ask more about colds, too, with the hopes of helping with Gregori's condition.

Promptly at nine, Skype started ringing. Salem hit Accept, feeling much like a new medical student, with the same kind of interest and anticipation. Learning new things was always exciting!

Sora looked a touch tired, as all fathers of young children were, but his smile was bright and without shadows. He spoke in a confident, unhurried manner, his voice smooth and pleasant. "Salem, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Sora. Thanks so much for this, I honestly have more questions

than anything after what Gregori told me.”

“ I’m hopefully full of answers .”

Salem had no doubt he would be. “All right, give me the basics here. What all can spells, potions, and magical medicine do?”

“ More than what modern medicine can do ,” Sora answered bluntly. “ Off the top of my head, it can correct vision, heal torn muscles and ligaments, correct illnesses and deformities of organs, et cetera .”

He stared at the man, quite sure Sora was pulling his leg. “Are you...are you kidding?”

“ I’m not even exaggerating .”

Sora felt like his brain was a gerbil on a wheel, starting to panic as it moved in an unexpected way. “For instance...?”

“ Hmm, for instance, had a case yesterday where one of the mages fell off the roof while they were doing some building work. Broke their leg in three places, tore ligaments, including Achilles tendon, the works .”

Salem winced. Just a torn Achilles tendon took a year to heal. It was no joke.

“ I expect them to be back to walking and working next week ,” Sora finished with something like a smirk.

All thoughts crashed, rather in an ugly dogpile, right into each other. Salem made a croaking sound, tone tilting upward in something like a question, but he couldn’t begin to formulate words to go along with it. A week. A week?! They should have

been in a cast and physical therapy for a good year!

“ Between healing potions, noninvasive surgery, and our own version of immobilization spells, they’ll make a full recovery in very little time. In fact, let me show you a small piece of what I can do .”

Sora turned his head and said, “ Hey, come here for a second .”

“ What need, Papa ?”

“ You, munchkin .”

Sora reached down and picked up an atrociously cute child. Thick, curly black hair, big brown eyes—the absolute epitome of a child model given life. This must be one of his twins, who Salem had seen from a distance when he was in Brazil. Damn, Sora and Ravi made cute kids.

“ Setz dich bitte ,” Sora directed.

The child plopped himself right on the edge of the desk at this direction, given in German from the sounds of it.

Sora lifted a hand and spoke a spell, most of which went right over Salem’s head, but the second he finished, a thin red line flew out of his hands and drew itself in interesting lines all around his child. In fact—oh my god, it was drawing out the child’s skeletal structure, then major organs, and hooo, there were numbers showing blood pressure, heartbeat, oxygen intake, the works. Like a magical monitor. But better. He could see in a glance everything he needed without taking x-rays, CT scans, ultrasounds, any of it.

Salem whimpered. “Please, please tell me you can teach me this spell.”

“ It’s a little hard to do over distance ,” Sora admitted. “ Takes some practice to get the right hang of it. But I’ll do my best .”

He released the spell, kissed his child on the head, and then turned him loose.

As the child ran off, he instructed, “ Do not go flying without either me or your father !”

There was a giggle of pure mischief but notably no agreement.

Sora sighed. “ He’s already thinking of what to get into. I’m doomed. Why did I agree to two of them at once ?”

“I can’t help you there.”

Salem rubbed his head, feeling like his brain was going to leak out of his ears at this rate. “Sora, you did that so easily. Is it a basic spell for you?”

“ It is. Takes no prep and only captured sunlight. As you just saw. Now, let me fully explain what all you can do .”

Sora launched into something of a Basics 101 lecture of everything, sometimes only giving an overview as he admitted it wasn’t his specialty, but this was what he knew about it. Just the summary was enough to blow Salem’s mind. What Sora explained meant a wholly different approach to medicine, one where Salem could defeat chronic illnesses, conditions, and injuries he could do precious little about with modern medicine.

Dammit, this wasn’t fair. Sora held all of the knowledge Salem would give a limb to possess and here he was on a wholly different continent.

Salem fired off one question after another, trying to find magic's limitations and received basically this answer in return: While there were limitations, they didn't begin to compare to the limitations Salem already labored under. Salem could do vastly more with magic.

When Sora wound down from his lecture, Salem felt like crying. From frustration and envy, mostly.

"Sora." Salem huffed out a breath, already knowing the answer, but needing to ask it anyway. "Last week I had a situation where a little girl almost died on the surgery table. It should have been a routine appendectomy, but her grandmother slipped her food before the surgery, and she crashed on the table. We barely saved her. If I was trained like you are, would that have happened?"

"No," Sora answered decisively. "For one thing, appendectomies are a very, very rare occurrence for us. All of the normal causes for appendicitis are things we can cure. Parasites, bacterial infection—all of those things we have potions for. The only time I've ever seen an appendectomy done was when the woman in question had blunt force trauma to her rib cage, and it was so bad it ruptured the appendix. We chose not to save it as there was already so much damaged, and we focused on the other organs."

"So an extreme outlier."

"Pretty much. Your patient would never have needed surgery to begin with."

Shit. Salem had just known that would be the answer.

He had lamented only days ago how he wished his magic could help save a child. Now, he was told it could. That all the information he needed existed right here in front of him. What else could he do but grasp it with both hands?

“Sora? Any chance you take apprentices?”

Sora grinned, laughing a little. “ I already put together a bundle of textbooks for you. Had a feeling you’d want to know everything .”

“Well, yeah, duh!”

“ To answer, yes, I’m happy to teach you .” Sora pointed downward. “ Type in chat your email and phone number so I can send you things. ”

Salem leapt to obey. “Are these books digital?”

“ They are. Some of them are scans because they’re so old. We don’t dare pass around the physical copies. Makes them interesting to read. I highly suggest printing them out rather than trying to read them on a screen .”

“Got it.”

“ Sadly, I have to cut this short .” Sora sighed, glancing off to the side. “ I’m due somewhere else in about thirty minutes. But start with the reading .”

“Sounds awesome. Sora, thank you so much for this.”

“ Not a problem. I quite enjoyed the conversation. You ask very good questions. For now, I’ll let you go .” With a wave, he cut the connection.

Salem sat there for a good five minutes just trying to process everything he had learned. Failed. Too much input, he needed to buffer for a while.

Shit, to think he could do so much with magic. Half his skills as a surgeon would be obsolete, really, but for the benefit of the patient, it was a trade-off he was more than

willing to make.

Although, dammit, he'd meant to ask about colds and had gotten so distracted he'd forgotten to. Well, he'd text Sora his question in a second. He wanted to check on Gregori first.

Too excited to sit still, he popped up and headed for the bedroom. He and Sora had been talking for nearly three hours, but Gregori still hadn't come out. Could be he was just sleeping his cold off still, but Salem had a million things to talk about, and it was time for him to get up. For more meds, if nothing else.

Pushing the door open, he singsonged, "Rise and—oh shit."

Gregori lay in a fetal position on the bed, making a barely audible low groaning sound, more felt than heard. He looked awful, and every doctor instinct Salem had kicked into overdrive in a flat second.

Diving for him, Salem knelt on the bed, first taking a rough temp with his hand. Gregori was cold and clammy to the touch, which wasn't great.

"Gregori. Gregori, can you answer me?"

Those dark brown eyes fluttered open before closing.

"Hurts," Gregori whimpered. "Can't...can't feel it."

"Can't feel...what? Can't feel your dragon form, is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah."

Salem could not find a word accurate enough to encapsulate his terror. There was

nothing, for all his training, he could do to help Gregori right then. He didn't know enough about dragons to begin to even guess.

He was in well over his head and the nearest help he could call was in Brazil. DAMMIT.

His phone dinged in his pocket. Salem jerked it free, not caring who was trying to reach him. He'd call Sam, get Sora back on the line—oh. It was Sora who'd texted. So he had his number, thank god.

Punching Call, he put it on speaker and laid it on the pillow, grabbing the extra quilt on the end of the bed to tuck around Gregori, as he didn't like at all how cold he felt.

“Hi,” Sora answered, sounding surprised. “Did you already have another question?—”

“Sora, Gregori's crashing,” he interrupted. “He's in a fetal position, cold and clammy to the touch, and in pain. He said he can't feel his dragon.”

“Shimatta,” Sora breathed. “That's really not good. Give me your address, we'll fly up immediately.”

“Thank you, and is there anything I can do in the meantime?”

“Get him on the roof, if you can. Outside. He'll do better outside, and you might be able to coax him into shifting. If he can shift, all the better.”

“Got it.” Salem had no idea how he'd heft Gregori's ass up to the roof, but he was damned if he wasn't going to manage it somehow. “Do you have any idea why he's like this?”



“ Only a guess. We worried, honestly, about him being up there with you. He’s so very far removed from his clan, and a dragon has never done what he’s done. His dragon could very well be in withdrawal right now. ”

So this was Salem’s fault. For being stubborn, for refusing to leave, knowing Gregori would never separate from him. For a full second, he hated himself.

“ Text me his condition on the hour. It’ll be impossible to call while we’re in flight, but I want updates. We’ll leave as soon as I can throw a saddle on somebody. I’ll bring Dimitri and Sam up with me .”

“Please and thank you.”

He hung up, then looked helplessly at Gregori. As fast as they would fly up here, it was still a good eight hour wait. Maybe ten. He wasn’t sure how fast a dragon could fly. It had taken him fifteen hours to get back, but that had involved a layover, so Salem wasn’t sure how to calculate it.

Gregori made a defeated sound. “Sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize to me for this,” Salem choked out. Everything in him burned with regret, with shame, because Gregori had pushed himself this hard so he could stay with Salem. It should never have come down to this. “I’ll be very mad at you later for not answering me honestly and telling me something was wrong, but right now, we’re getting you on the roof. Uh. Can you stand?”

Gregori gave a slow shake of the head. “Hurts.”

“Everything hurts, huh. All right, what’s your password for your phone?”

“Same as...same as day we met.”

This fucking romantic. What the hell was he supposed to do with him?

Salem snatched up Gregori's phone from the bedside table, only to find a picture of himself as the background on the home screen. Seriously, this romantic. Shaking it off, he pulled up the contacts and typed in fire . Sure enough, the number for the firefighters Gregori volunteered with was right in the contacts.

Gregori's eyes slipped back out of focus. Even answering those brief questions had completely wiped him out. It honestly terrified Salem to see how weak he was, but Gregori wasn't going to get better if Salem sat there and panicked.

He dialed the number, keeping one hand on Gregori all the time, hoping his dragon self would feel better with him right on hand.

The firemen were about to get shanghaied into helping him get a dragon on a roof.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem sat on the roof with Gregori, unsure whether to be worried or pissed. Currently worry won out because Gregori looked like shit. He lay on the roof with only a blanket under him, head pillowed in Salem's lap, eyes not focusing. Salem wasn't even sure Gregori was lucid enough to realize he'd been hauled up here.

And there wasn't a damn thing Salem could do to help him.

Right now, he couldn't help but kick himself over and over. He'd known Gregori wouldn't leave him, but dammit, Salem was toxic as hell for banking on that and never even questioning what it would do to Gregori in return. This man had basically broken himself to stay with Salem. If there had ever been any doubt about Gregori leaving, it was long gone now. Salem kicked himself again. He'd driven Gregori to this. And to think he'd told Alexis only yesterday that he needed more time.

More time. Like this much time away from his clan hadn't done enough damage to Gregori.

Fuck, he hated himself.

Anger flared again, hot and heavy. Damn his magic, and himself, for being so useless. What was even the point of being a mage when something like this happened and Salem could only pray for someone else to arrive to help?

He hadn't been kidding with Sora about asking for an apprenticeship, but this situation right here, it made him all the more determined. No one else was going down on his watch and leaving Salem uselessly sitting by and wringing his hands.

The firefighters had been called out to a fire, so they hadn't been able to stay, though they'd promised to swing by later and check in. It left Salem up here alone, with Sora texting him, promising they'd be there in a few hours.

Sora's sole instruction to him was to somehow coax Gregori into shifting if at all possible.

Easily said. How to manage it, that was the question. This situation was unheard of. There was no guide on how to overcome it.

There would be after this, though. Salem would make damn sure of it.

"Don't do this," Salem muttered, stroking Gregori's hair in a rhythmic way. "I just owned the fact I was being an asshole. I can't make it up to you if you're like this."

Was it his imagination or did Gregori try to nuzzle in closer?

The roof door creaked open and a head popped around it. Building security guard, looked like, a retired vet who worked here part time by the name of Joe.

"You two okay up here?" Joe inquired.

Since it was a balmy fifteen degrees, and no one sane would come up here to do anything romantic, he could see why Joe asked.

"Not really. Gregori's in bad shape, he can't shift to dragon form right now."

"Oh shit," Joe breathed. "Can I help?"

"Joe, right now, I don't even know how to help."

Joe didn't seem to like that. He looked at Gregori for a long second before saying, "I'll let everyone know."

Who the hell was everyone? Salem had no chance to voice this question before Joe ducked back inside, letting the door slam shut behind him. Eh, didn't matter, he'd surely figure it out shortly.

Salem turned his attention back to Gregori. He'd tried coaxing, bribes, everything he could think of to encourage Gregori to shift. Nothing had worked. What had he not tried?

His cell phone rang next to him. Oh, Sora?!

Shit, no, of course it wasn't Sora. It was the hospital. Why were they calling him on his day off?

Of course, the answer was obvious. He swiped Accept and snarled, "What ."

The person on the other end of the line paused. "Uh, Doctor Hunter ? Can you possibly come in ?—"

"No."

"It's kinda a serious case ? —"

"Listen to me carefully. Gregori is down right now. I'm going fucking nowhere."

The tone changed and did a one eighty. "Gregori is ?! Oh no ! Okay, I'll make sure you're not on call, and keep us posted on how he's doing ."

Was there anyone Gregori had not made friends with? Forget ice dragon, the man

was a social butterfly.

“I will.” Salem hung up and set the phone back down at his side.

The second he refocused, he realized Gregori no longer stared blindly ahead and instead looked up at Salem. Oh? Relief leapt into his throat. This was the first time in almost four hours Gregori had looked at him properly.

“Gregori?”

“First time,” Gregori whispered, his throat sounding tight. “First time you’ve made me priority.”

“I told you, I’ve realized I’ve been an asshole. I’m not denying you or this relationship anymore. I’m so sorry. You can’t believe how sorry I am. I promise you, after this, I will never put my needs above yours.”

A sound escaped Gregori’s mouth, and it spoke of relief, quiet joy, and something like need. Salem felt like a jerk all over again.

“I love you,” Gregori whispered.

“I know. You literally drove yourself into the ground to be with me. How about you start loving me enough that you stand your ground when I start pushing too hard? Instead of being afraid of how I’ll react.”

“Ahhh.” Gregori sighed again, and this time he had a hint of a smile. “My mate is sassy. Well, today can’t be too bad if my mate is sassing me.”

“You are such a—ugh. Just shift already, you’re driving me crazy.”

“I have been trying, y’know.”

He’d definitely perked up to be able to do this back-and-forth with Salem. That was the good part. The bad was hearing he’d been trying and failing. “You’ve been trying how long?”

“Since I woke up this morning.”

Oh. Well, fuck, that wasn’t what Salem wanted to hear.

“What can I do to help?”

“I don’t know.”

Figured. If Sora hadn’t known, it wasn’t likely Gregori would magically have the answer. Still, it hadn’t hurt to ask.

The door creaked open again and out bustled two people Salem vaguely recognized as neighbors who lived in the building. He’d bumped into the bodybuilding guy—he was a trainer at a local gym—and the elderly woman with him was Salem’s across-the-hall neighbor, Eleanor. She was a widow who was the opposite of your traditional grandmother figure in every way. Even now she wore bright rainbow sweatpants, fuzzy Crocs, and an overcoat that could double as a circus tent.

“Salem,” she greeted, almost sprinting to them. “What’s wrong with our Gregori?”

When had Gregori even met the neighbors? He’d ask later. Right now, Salem rolled with it.

“He can’t shift,” Salem explained, trying to keep how upset he was out of his voice. Basically failed. “He’s been away from his clan too long, we think, so his dragon is

all out of sorts.”

“Well, hell, that was stupid of both of you.”

Salem winced. Kinda hard to refute that.

Bodybuilder—come on, brain, what was the guy’s name?—cleared his throat. “If his dragon is so homesick, maybe bringing up some home comforts will help? My grandparents saw me this week and brought me some pastila.”

Some whatzit?

Gregori made an intrigued noise in the back of his throat. “I haven’t had pastila in ages.”

“Let me go get you some, then.” Bodybuilder seemed relieved to have thought of something to help and immediately jogged back toward his apartment.

Eleanor put a hand to Gregori’s forehead, then touched Salem’s cheek, and she winced. “Of the two, his temperature is better. You’re freezing. How long have you been out here?”

“A while,” Salem admitted.

“I’ll sit with him. You go get a better coat and something hot to drink, then come back up.”

Honestly, he really had to pee, so it sounded good to him. He checked in with Gregori first. “That okay? I’ll be back in five minutes.”

“Go,” Gregori encouraged. “I’m thirsty too.”



“Then I’ll bring something back up for you.”

It was a good sign he wanted to eat and drink. Salem hoped and prayed this was a turning point for them.

He carefully levered up Gregori’s head, pillowing it on his jacket, then darted downstairs. He did a quick bathroom break first, then got his seriously big overcoat—the one where he could be in the bush in Alaska and not feel cold—put it on, grabbed two sports drinks since he didn’t have the patience to heat water first, and ran back up to the roof.

In the five minutes he was gone, more neighbors had arrived. Blankets and pillows had been carted up, along with the promised pastila. Someone had hauled a portable card table up, an extension cord, and was that a coffee maker? Sure was.

At least a dozen people had gathered up here. Half of them Salem didn’t even recognize, but Gregori clearly knew them all, as he comfortably chatted even as he nibbled on the pastila-cake-thing.

It really did relieve Salem to see Gregori inclined up on pillows and eating. It could only get better from here. Surely.

Joe was back as well, and he handed off a mug of steaming coffee to Salem. “Here, drink this, warm up. We’ll help you take it in shifts until he’s in dragon form. You got help coming, he said?”

“Yeah. His clanmates and a renowned mage-doctor.”

“Good, good, all help is good help. I think he’ll feel better once he’s got a fellow dragon by his side.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“If you want, we can sit with him while you take a break?—”

Salem cut him off. “No. I go nowhere until I’m sure he’s back on his feet.”

Joe approved and gave him a nod. “Didn’t expect a different answer but thought I should ask. All right, Doctor, we’ll help you care for him.”

“I appreciate it.”

Speaking of, time to get back in there. Salem carried his coffee and joined Gregori, cozying up to his side. Gregori pushed most of the blankets over to Salem, which he appreciated, as it wasn’t exactly warm out here. He was still warming up his jacket.

Bodybuilder protested wordlessly.

“Ice dragon,” Salem reminded him. “This is like a balmy summer day for him. I’m the one freezing.”

“Oh. Right, I feel stupid for not realizing.”

Gregori finished off the last bite of pastila with a sigh. “Shawn, your grandmother sure can make a mean pastila.”

“Favorite snack from her,” Shawn the bodybuilder agreed cheerfully. “Want another slice?”

“Hmm, maybe later? I feel better. Like I can shift.”

Oh! Yes, yes, yes! Salem immediately put his coffee down and got up on his knees.

“Okay, c’mon, let’s do this.”

Gregori frowned as he handed the plate back to Shawn, then rolled onto his side. Everyone seemed to be metaphorically holding their breaths, praying he’d do it.

Come on...come on...dragon, come out and play, don’t be such a stubborn bastard.

Gregori was clearly struggling and failing, so Salem felt like some incentive would help. He leaned in to whisper against Gregori’s ear.

“Don’t you want to fly with me?”

Gregori’s eyes flew open wide before he abruptly shifted. It was as quick as a blink, much like crazy string exploding from a can. Salem actually flinched in surprise before melting with relief. Finally. Finally! He threw both arms around Gregori’s neck and hugged him.

“You did good. You did so good.”

A cheer went up from the neighbors, a few people even clapping. Salem smiled back at them. They really were invested in Gregori getting better and it was heartening to see.

Gregori sank into his hold before collapsing back on the pillow/blanket pile. Salem could tell in a glance Gregori had definitely exhausted his reserves. A rest was in order.

Salem didn’t push. He simply crawled back under the blankets before doing his own inspection. First, he texted Sora about Gregori finally shifting, then he went by the information Sora had already given him. He took Gregori’s pulse—easy to do, a dragon’s pulse was louder than a human’s—then he put his ear to Gregori’s chest to

make sure his lungs were clear. Stroked his scales, mostly for the comfort. The scales looked dull, and he prayed it was just the cloudy day making them seem that way, but he knew better. Gregori's heartbeat was a bit sluggish and slow for Salem's liking.

Normally, Gregori would be making sexy doctor jokes right about now. Instead, he was wrapped around Salem again, eyes closed, perhaps dozing. Which was fine. Salem knew once Dimitri, Sam, and Sora were here, they'd help get Gregori back to rights. He'd done the one thing Sora had pressed for: Somehow convince Gregori to shift.

The phone buzzed next to him and he checked it automatically. Oh, Sora had texted back.

Good ! the text read. Relieved to hear it. Makes our job easier when we arrive. ETA three hours. Just hang on .

Three more hours, eh? With half the apartment complex up here helping out, Salem felt like three hours was more than doable. So he sent back a quick OK without any qualms.

Now all they had to do was wait.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Gregori still felt in need of a fainting couch. He hadn't felt this bad since the war ended. But on the other hand, Salem was decisively staying right next to him and arguing with anyone who tried to make him leave. It was incredibly heartwarming having his mate at his side. Wanting to be by his side. They'd come a long way since the first time they'd met.

He'd even acted as if they were in a true relationship earlier, which sparked joy. Gregori emotionally was ready to throw a party. A shame his body was not up for it.

Right now, though, his mate was too far away from him. Salem had been petting his scales and murmuring all kinds of sweet encouragement, but now his mate was on the other side of the roof, talking to the neighbors. He could hear his words of gratitude and reassurances as he let them know they didn't need to wait in the cold with them. It was all very nice, but he wanted his mate back at his side.

Wincing slightly, he extended his tail across the roof and carefully wrapped it around Salem's waist, so none of the sharp spines pricked him. A squawk erupted from Salem while the rest of their audience laughed as Gregori picked up Salem and placed him back down in the center of where he was curled.

With Salem snuggled against his stomach and his tail wrapped protectively around both of them, Gregori shifted his head closer to Salem and shut his eyes. There. His mate was next to him and safe, which was all that mattered.

A low, rumbling purr crawled up his throat and Salem chuckled, which only made him happier. His mate was curled up with him and he was happy. With his eyes still closed, Gregori reached out and dragged one of the many blankets close, placing it

around Salem so he stayed warm. While his large body and wings might shield him from the wind, he still needed blankets to stay warm. The other option was magic, but right now, Gregori was just too tired to summon any magic up. He couldn't even keep his eyes open.

“Here I thought all dragons were giant lizards, but it turns out you're really just overgrown, scaly cats.”

Gregori cracked one eye open to gaze at Salem's happy face. There was relief there, but the worry remained. Salem was worried about him. He couldn't quite remember why or bring himself to care. He just wanted to remain there with his mate forever.

Salem's hand drifted across his muzzle, stroking his scales in one gentle caress after another. “I don't know about the other dragons, but you really are amazing. I can't imagine any other dragon being as impressive as you are.”

Gregori's purr grew even louder. He was starting to sound like an outboard motor on a speedboat.

He was still wallowing in the joy of having his mate with him when he sensed the approach of another dragon.

His tail tightened around them, and he tipped his nose toward the sky, sniffing the air. The dragon kindly approached from upwind, and the breeze carried the scent of home. Coconut oil, sunbaked sand, and mage magic. A Valerii dragon drew close. His muscles relaxed and he rested his head on the roof, ready to go back to sleep. No one from the Valerii Clan would dare to threaten his mate. If anything, they could help him keep Salem warm and safe.

Cries of wonder and joy filled the rooftop while Salem sighed. “Thank fucking god.”

The heavy thud of the dragon landing on the roof didn't even stir Gregori. It was only with a great deal of reluctance that he allowed Salem to crawl out from where he had cuddled against his large body.

“Sam!”

“Salem? What the fuck? Are you throwing a party out here?”

“Fuck you! They came to help me. How the hell else was I going to get Gregori on the roof? He was unconscious and extremely heavy.”

“Well, it looks like you not only got him on the roof but shifted. It's a great start.”

Gregori's eyes flicked open at the sound of Sora's voice as he climbed down off Dimitri. It wasn't a surprise to find Dimitri here with his mate, but they brought Sora as well? Away from his mate and his twins? Gregori must have scared his clan pretty damn bad.

“But it's not enough. We need to get him in the air,” Sora continued.

Long talons scraped on stone, followed by the slither of a long tail as Dimitri walked over. The other dragon sniffed him for a second and then nudged him with his nose, trying to get him to climb to his feet, but all Gregori could do was lift his wing to cover his head. His entire body ached, and he was so damned tired. It'd taken all he had just to shift into his dragon form.

“Up. Get up,” Dimitri growled. “Come fly with me.”

Gregori grunted and raised his wing to search for Salem again. He didn't want to leave his mate. Once again, he stretched out his tail and wrapped it around Salem's waist, pulling him in close. His beloved mate yelped in surprise, clinging to the

appendage as he was hoisted into the air.

“Well, that settles it,” Sora muttered. “Sam, help me get the saddle off Dimitri. We’ll put it on Gregori so Salem can ride him.”

“What?” Salem shrieked, his voice spiking so high it became piercing to even Gregori’s ears. “Is this a good idea? I mean, he’s exhausted right now.”

“It’s an excellent idea,” Sam chimed in. “He clearly won’t go anywhere without you, and flying with your mate is a wonderful bonding experience.”

“But—”

“Plus, Dimitri will be there every moment to make sure you and Gregori remain safe,” Sora added.

For the first time, Gregori raised his head and looked around at the people gathered on the roof. He smiled weakly at Dimitri, who lightly butted heads with him, seeming almost relieved to be there.

But he quickly turned his attention to his mate. “Fly?”

There was no missing the fear on Salem’s pale face, but a spark of definite interest lit his eyes. “Are you strong enough to carry me? Because hell yeah, I’d love to go flying with you.”

Gregori didn’t hesitate another second. He released Salem from his tail and, with effort, pushed to his feet so Sam and Sora could more easily get the saddle on him. As soon as they were done, Sam pulled off his riding harness and gave his brother some quick instructions on how to ride on a dragon’s back. It mostly amounted to hang on and trust the dragon to know what he’s doing .



Maybe that wasn't the best thing right now. Gregori's head was still fuzzy and his limbs didn't want to obey him completely, but he'd push through it to keep his mate safe. Dimitri was right there to protect them both as well.

As soon as Salem was secure on his back, Gregori jumped off the apartment building, earning a shriek of fear and delight from Salem. Dimitri roared with approval. The sound was one of home, speaking deeply to his own dragon in an instinctual way. It gave Gregori a boost of energy and he felt lighter, his dragon coming more in tune with him. Dimitri was only a heartbeat behind him, but the second the wind pushed up against the bottom of his wings, Gregori's mind cleared. Strength and magic poured through his body, rejuvenating him.

Tipping his massive head up toward the heavens, he let out his own trumpeting roar that flew out across the city, and it was instantly answered by his dragon brother. His heart swelled with joy almost to the point of choking him. He wasn't alone anymore. His dragon brother who'd fought at his side in the Dragon War, who'd bemoaned their long lives spent without a mate, and who'd gotten drunk with him more times than he could count flew at his side once again.

"Woo-hoooo!" Salem cried from his back, and Gregori barked out a laugh.

And then there was his amazing mate. Salem might be incredibly stubborn, but when he chose to fight for something, nothing and no one could deter him. This time, he was choosing to fight for Gregori, and he couldn't even describe how humbling that felt. With his head clearer, he realized Salem had firmly established their relationship. He might not have said mates, but he clearly wanted Gregori with him and would fight to keep them together. Gregori had been making progress with him all along without realizing it. The relief just about bowled him over.

Flapping his wings, Gregori pushed higher and higher into the sky, soaring well above all the buildings, letting Salem see the entire city. There wasn't a single cloud

in the area, giving them a perfect view of sparkling stars against a velvet black sky. The wind was cold, but it didn't bother him in the least.

“Hey! Gregori! Why am I not freezing?” Salem shouted.

“Magic!”

While his magic couldn't keep his mate seated on his back—hence the need for the saddle and a harness that attached to the saddle—it could protect Salem from the worst of the bitter cold and the fierceness of the wind. It was the only way mage dragon riders could stand to cross vast distances quickly on the backs of ice dragons. He wasn't sure how the other clans managed though, since they didn't have innate control of cold.

He didn't know how long they remained in the air. Enough time to make a couple of circles around the city before working their way back to Salem's apartment building. He longed to keep flying, to take Salem straight to Brazil now that he finally had his mate on his back, but he knew deep down he didn't have the strength yet to make the flight. The worst of the pain and fatigue were gone, but he still had a long way to go before he was fully recovered.

Not to mention, Salem would throw a fit if he was suddenly kidnapped.

Dimitri shifted as he landed on the rooftop, which was now mostly empty of people. A few lingered, talking to Sora and Sam, their eyes trained on the sky as they waited for yet another glimpse of the dragons. Their long, sparkling white scales weren't hard to miss against the black night.

Gregori's landing wasn't quite as graceful, but he tried hard not to jar Salem too badly. Dimitri stepped up immediately to unhook Salem and help him down from Gregori's back. As Salem stumbled over to his brother, Dimitri took the saddle off

and Gregori shifted into his human form with minimal pain.

“Thank god,” Salem groaned, throwing himself into Gregori’s arms. He squeezed him tight, but the hug lasted for barely more than a second before the good doctor pushed back to look in his eyes, check his pulse, and all the other vitals doctors liked to keep track of.

“I’m better now,” Gregori said, his voice a little rough.

“Better? How can you be better already? You looked like you were on death’s door.”

Sora stepped up and murmured a quick spell he’d seen the mage do several times before. It instantly pulled up a view of all Gregori’s major organs and those same vitals Salem had been checking so the surgeon could see for himself on a quantitative basis that Gregori was, in fact, better.

“How?” Salem choked out.

“Being around his own kind, his own clan, can have a huge impact on a dragon.” Sora clucked and gave Gregori a dark look. “He was warned being away from his clan for an extended period of time could be dangerous to his health, but he didn’t take it as seriously as he should have.”

Gregori winced and briefly thought about shifting into his dragon so he could escape, but he couldn’t. It was time to face the music.

“Gregori, what were your symptoms and when did they start?” Sora inquired, turning his full attention on him.

Gregori glanced at his mate, but in the end, he couldn’t meet Salem’s gaze when he answered. “It started after I’d been here about a month. At first, I thought it was just

homesickness, but I noticed one day when I was with the kids at the hospital that my magic was breaking down. There were times when I tried to call on it and nothing would happen. The first time, I got it working again after a few attempts. No big deal.”

“But...” Sora pressed.

Gregori’s gaze slid to Salem, who was looking pale and sickly, and he licked his lips before he continued. “It got worse. The ice magic was barely working, and it was becoming painful to force. It was harder to focus. My body ached...and...my dragon...it wasn’t responding to me anymore.”

“What?” Dimitri barked, and Gregori ducked his head down toward his shoulders.

“It was lethargic and apathetic. It seemed like it just didn’t care about anything.”

Dimitri stomped away, cursing in Russian. When he whirled back, he pointed a finger at him, his face twisted with pain and anger. “You were told to report in the moment you were having any kind of problems. Ha Na said you told her you were fine during your calls. No problems. You lied to her. To us!”

Sam jogged over and wrapped his arms around his mate, whispering reassurance in his ear to calm him down.

The one who had him worried right now was Sora.

The mage shut down the spell he’d been using and tucked his hands into the pockets of his puffy blue coat. “That settles it. You’re coming back to Brazil.”

“No!”

It was exactly what Gregori didn't want. Terror seized his heart and squeezed it tight enough to crush it.

“You have no choice. Staying here is killing you. You can't risk being away from your clan any longer. If you don't accompany us back to Brazil in the next twenty-four hours, I'll have no choice but to tell Rodrigo.”

Fuck. That was the other thing he didn't want. His king could command him to return, and if he didn't instantly obey, Rodrigo could kick him out of the clan.

But he didn't want to disobey Rodrigo. He loved and respected his king. He'd follow Rodrigo to the ends of the earth and through hell itself if he commanded it.

Gregori dragged his eyes over to Salem at last to find his mate staring at him with an unreadable expression.

“Let's go inside. We have a lot to discuss.”

And that sounded a hell of a lot worse than facing his pissed off king.

Salem felt wrecked.

This was bigger than Gregori hiding a cold or a lack of sleep. The dragon had driven himself nearly to the edge of death just in the name of staying close to his mate.

The relief he'd experienced at seeing a bright flush to Gregori's cheeks and a twinkle to his dark eyes all faded as he listened to what he'd suffered. But it was more than that. It was clear things couldn't continue as they were.

He waited until they were all gathered in his tiny apartment. Part of him didn't want to do this in front of the others, but if he was lucky, they would help convince Gregori this was for the best.

"Gregori—"

"Don't," his mate said, cutting him off before he could continue. "I know your tone, and I don't want to hear it."

"You have to." Salem shrugged out of his coat and tossed it down on the couch before turning to face where Gregori was pacing the tiny kitchen like a caged animal, a mutinous expression on his handsome face. "Staying here with me isn't an option. You're going to die if you remain here. You belong with your clan."

"I belong with my mate."

"Wait a minute!" Sam interjected, holding both of his hands up between them in a T as if he were an official calling a time out. "Are you saying you're not going with us

back to Brazil?”

Salem actually swallowed at his twin brother’s pissed expression. This was not the kind of help he’d been anticipating.

“I can’t.”

Sam lifted both of his hands in front of his face, curled his fingers, and shook them like he was shaking Salem. “I swear to fucking god. You’re one of the smartest men I know, but you can be such a fucking dumbass sometimes.”

Anger and guilt blasted through him. “Screw you! That’s no?—!”

Sam stomped a step closer and flared his nostrils. “I know you talked to Sora about magic and medicine. Even asked him about being his apprentice. What’s your grand plan, huh? Go learn how to use magic and medicine together in Brazil for a couple of months and then come back here? Use magic on the kids? Be the only openly known mage-doctor in the world? Tell me how that’s going to work out. You would constantly have a line of people banging on your door. You wouldn’t have a life anymore. Just work. And you think those people are going to be happy with you only treating kids? Hell no. Adults are going to demand you use magic to fix them too.”

Salem’s stomach sank, and for a second, he couldn’t even draw a breath into his lungs. They thought his refusal was about moving. Not about how he’d almost killed Gregori.

But now that thought rattled around his head too. After his frustration with nearly losing the little girl on the table, he’d been grasping at straws. Sora had offered him a lifeline. A way to use the one skill he was born with but had never been able to strengthen to its full potential.

And what if he did come back here and continued practicing medicine with magic? Even if he tried to hide it, eventually word would get out. He'd be wanted for every little injury and illness. There wasn't enough time in the day to treat them all, and they would just keep coming.

Sam's heavy sigh pulled him from the swirling dark thoughts in his head. His brother grabbed his shoulders and squeezed. "Salem, there are hundreds of thousands of pediatric surgeons in the States. No offense, but the American kids can get by without you. This time here has been well spent. You've done a lot of good here. But do you know who has absolutely zero pediatric surgeons who have been trained in modern medicine? The dragons."

Salem stared at his brother and then jerked his gaze over to Sora, who leaned against the wall with his arms loosely crossed over his chest.

"It's true," Sora agreed. "A small number of the Abe Clan has gone through various universities for modern medicine, but we all focused on general medicine. No one has specialized in pediatrics or completed as much training as you have. While I might have magic knowledge, there are plenty of questions I'd love to ask you about modern techniques and illnesses we just haven't encountered. Amaru feels the same. He asked me to kidnap you if you didn't come back on this trip."

"Not to mention, dragons and mages are having babies again for the first time in several centuries," Dimitri added. "My kind have a chance to crawl back from the cusp of extinction. We can't afford to lose a single child."

Sam released Salem's shoulders and lightly punched him in the sternum. "That's right. Dimitri and I have just bonded, but we're going to want children eventually. For the first time in my life, I'm not trying to figure out how to fix my magic. I can focus on living the rest of my life with my mate, and I want our life together to include kids. Do you really think I'd take the chance without you there every step of



the way to watch over your niece or nephew?”

Sam with kids...

That was a terrifying thought.

Sam with kids who were also dragons. That was even more frightening, but also interesting. He'd be the uncle to dragon babies.

Or...

He slowly lifted his eyes to where Gregori silently watched him. The guilt that washed through him this time had claws. Shit, he still wasn't expressing what he needed to, nor asking what he should be. Arguing with his twin wasn't the right tactic here.

He went straight for Gregori, taking his hands into his own, trying to find and force out the words that needed to be said. “Gregori. Despite everything I've done, am I still your choice?”

“There is no choice,” Gregori replied softly. “You're my mate.”

“No. Think about this. I damn near killed you and you're not even angry with me about it.”

“This wasn't your fault?—”

“The hell it wasn't. It was my stubbornness that drove you to this.”

“It was mine,” Gregori corrected him. “My stubbornness led to this.”

Salem let his head drop on Gregori's shoulder for a moment. "So we're both at fault, which is why you won't get angry with me?"

"Yes."

"You are such a..." He groaned. "Goddammit, I don't know whether to apologize or shake you right now. All right. Look." He lifted his head to lock eyes with Gregori. "I do not want to lose you."

He saw the delight in Gregori's eyes blossom and it was such a beautiful look.

"That said, this, what we've been doing up here, isn't healthy. I want us to have a good relationship, not a toxic one. We do better from here on out, got it?"

"I can agree." Gregori's smile threatened to take over his face.

"Which includes not letting me railroad you. If there's something you need, or want, and I'm being an ass, tell me I'm being an ass. Okay? No more suffering in silence."

"I promise."

"Good. On my end, I'll try not to be an ass. Just bear with me, it's kind of a default setting in my personality."

"Sooo," Dimitri drawled. "What does this mean? Are you coming back with us or not?"

Salem finally broke eye contact with Gregori to glance at Sora again. "Will you still take me on as an apprentice even though I put a dragon's life in danger with my assholery?"

Sora huffed a quiet laugh and dropped his arms to his sides. “I’ll be happy to have you as a student. First step will be learning a dragon’s mental health.”

An obvious dig, but no less than he deserved.

Salem turned his gaze back to Gregori.

Gregori lifted his right hand and dragged his fingertips ever so lightly across Salem’s cheek. “I won’t deny I want you in Brazil for my own selfish reasons, but I think you will learn a lot from the mages. They will help you to understand your magic, and you’ll be able to help even more people than ever before. That alone will make you happy.”

Salem shook his head. “Going to Brazil has to be about more than just magic. I told you, I don’t want to lose you, and I want to try for a healthy relationship. Still, I can’t promise that I can be your true mate. Once you’re home with your family, you might finally come to your senses and realize what a truly bad match I am for you.”

Gregori leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to the center of his forehead, and a knot that had tightened in Salem’s chest loosened at last. “I know what kind of person you are, and I’m not worried. But I agree. Come back to Brazil with us. I promise to take better care of myself, and we will take things slowly. If you need space, then that’s exactly what I’ll give you so we can figure this out.”

The promise of learning magic to complement his skills as a doctor. The promise of getting the space he needed to figure out if he could actually be in a healthy relationship with Gregori.

Hell, with access to so many mated mages, he might be able to talk to someone who could explain what it meant to be mated to a dragon, and just why he was so fucking bad at it.

Forcing a smile, he looked up at Gregori and nodded. “Okay. First, I need to write a resignation letter. Then let’s pack. We’re all going back to Brazil.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Just over twenty-four hours later, Gregori tipped his head toward puffy clouds and roared as he glided over deep blue waters, wide strips of white sand beaches, and deep green palm trees. He was home, and he had his mate on his back.

They'd survived a chaotic day of Sora looking him over and treating him while at the same time giving Salem lessons on what mages could do with their magic. Meanwhile, Dimitri had been on the phone with Rodrigo, making his report about Gregori's sad state. His king didn't even ask to talk to him. No, he'd said only one thing.

I'm sending Thiago.

Fuck. The appearance of the king's right-hand man was almost as bad as Rodrigo showing up on his doorstep. He was in so much trouble. He'd lied to Ha Na, which was just as bad as lying to Rodrigo, and he'd put his life in danger when he should have reached out for help.

Thiago had shown up at Salem's apartment less than a half day later with two saddles, magic supplies for Sora, and a scowl.

After some quick packing, some additional dragon-pile snuggles, and a lengthy lecture about Gregori's complete lack of common sense, they finally took to the air, flying toward home.

The first half of the trip had been taken slowly, with them making three different stops before they even made it out of the United States. None of his companions would allow him to push too hard, despite how much better he was feeling. And he

was.

Flanked by two dragons and mages with his own mate on his back, how could he not feel better? His strength was improving. It was easier to shift back and forth between his human and dragon forms. His ability to use magic was almost back to normal as well.

But when they flew over the Valerii compound on their first circle as they headed lower for a landing, he couldn't deny that a core piece of what he'd been missing slipped into place. Magic sparked and tingled thick in the air. Below, several humans shifted into dragons and trumpeted their own welcome. They spread their wings and launched themselves into the air to meet him.

Home. Home. Home.

He was home.

No dragon should ever have to spend so much time away from their clan. A single dragon was an incredible force of strength and magic, but it was nothing compared to the strength of an entire clan. Joy blossomed in his chest and formed a knot in his throat.

A squeal and shout from Salem snapped Gregori out of his reverie to realize he'd been sharply diving toward the Valerii private beach. Salem had been a real trooper, learning to put up with long hours in the saddle, but he was still too new to dragon riding to attempt anything fancy like a nosedive or barrel rolls. They'd work up to it.

Gregori flared his wings and slowed his descent into a lazy spiral. The entire time, Thiago's silvery-white dragon was on his left with Sora on his back, while Dimitri and Sam were on his right as a protective escort.

As soon as he touched down, Gregori purred and flexed his toes in the hot sand. A soft breeze swept in from the ocean and the waves kissed the shore. The click of the latch on Salem's harness reached his ears and he crouched down to allow his mate to easily slide to the sand.

"Go greet your clan," Salem said with a couple pats on his side.

No need to tell him twice. He bounded off to join his clanmates, but he didn't get far before he was sliding to a sharp halt, spraying sand in every direction.

Rodrigo was there.

The king's dragon was the biggest of all of them, his soft grey scales shimmering in the sunlight. Horns rose from his head like a crown and pale blue eyes narrowed on Gregori.

With his own head hung to the point his chin almost dragged in the sand, he crawled over to Rodrigo.

His king huffed loudly, like he was simply exasperated with one of his children. He butted his head against Gregori's, nuzzling him. "Idiot," he growled, but there was a wealth of affection in that single word. Rodrigo had endured more than one of his dragons doing stupid things in the name of wooing their mates. According to Ha Na, Rodrigo had even had a few not-so-bright moments during their courtship. Gregori wasn't any worse than the rest of them.

As if he could sense exactly where Gregori's mind had wandered, Rodrigo grumped and pushed Gregori to the ground and half flopped on top of him. The weight felt like the best homecoming in the world. It hearkened back to a time when Gregori had been small and alone after his parents died in the war, a time when grief had just about consumed him. Sometimes, the only thing that grounded Gregori was

Rodrigo's weight curled around him like this. It felt like a balm on his battered heart. All the loneliness he'd endured, all the heartache that had torn at him, finally stopped aching. He let out a sound from the heart, one of utter relief, of pure happiness. Finally, finally, he was home.

Rodrigo's move must have been the signal.

Several dragons roared, shattering the somewhat peaceful air, and came crashing down on top of Gregori in a great dragon-pile of scales, wings, and talons. Sand flew in every direction, but when it came back down, it was accompanied by delicate snowflakes, defying the heat of a Brazilian summer to land all about them.

There would be more talks and lectures later. Even more medical exams. And inevitably, a punishment for lying to the king's mate and risking his life. Right now, none of it mattered. He was home and lying under a pile of his dragon brothers and sisters. The hot sand warmed his belly and relaxed every muscle in his body. Magic tickled his nose as the dragons' excitement called up a steady snow flurry on the beach that piled more than a few centimeters of snow upon the once burning sand.

He lifted his head as best he could and looked around until he finally located Salem. His mate stood off to the side with Sam, Sora, and a few other mages. He'd shed all of his winter clothes, dropping them into a pile at his feet, and now wore a T-shirt. His sweaty hair stood up in every direction, as if he'd just run his fingers through it. Concern filled his expression, but when he caught Gregori looking, Salem smiled and gave him a thumbs-up with both hands.

Sam would look after his twin for now.

Not that Gregori could have moved even if he'd wanted to. He was under several tons of dragon, and they seemed quite adamant about not letting him up.



A squeal cut through the air and Salem's head jerked to the left. His expression lit up with such wonder that Gregori's heart skipped. He didn't need to even look to know who had finally wiped the worry from Salem's expression. It just had to be Ravi and Sora's twins.

Gregori smiled as he shifted his gaze just in time to see the two toddlers racing across the sand and shifting before they reached the pile of full-grown dragons. Their flying was getting better. They could go a little straighter and for longer distances before their little wings inevitably grew tired and they dropped, almost like scaly blue stones.

With adorable growls, like energetic golden retrievers, the baby dragons bounced through the snow, burrowing in it only to pop up again in a spray of snow and sand. Eventually they turned their attention to the living, breathing jungle gym right in front of them. They clambered up one dragon and slid down the back of another, a mix of human and dragon-y giggles filling the air.

At one point, one of the twins clamped down on Gregori's tail. Without thinking, he yelped and flicked it up, trying to pull it out of the tiny mouth. But the baby dragon didn't let go, so he ended up flicking the baby across the pile. Thankfully, the baby released his tail and extended their wings, soaring across the dragon pile to land safely in the snow.

A new game had been invented.

Now the babies rushed to clamp onto one tail after another so they could be flicked into the air over and over again. Their cries of joy squeezed his heart.

Yes, Dimitri and Sam needed to have a baby.

Maybe even Rodrigo and Ha Na.

Luka, Vasily, and Amaru would also make great fathers.

Yes, the Valerii Clan was poised to grow at long last with new life, and maybe now that Salem was here, he would understand how desperately they needed him. All those new babies would need a trained pediatrician to look after them.

If he was lucky, Salem would also realize he belonged here because this was his home and his family, the same way Gregori had always been destined to be his mate.

Could he also hope maybe Salem would want a dragon baby with him too?

But only one at a time.

Ravi and Sora were crazy for having twins. If they'd thought Sora's calm nature would temper Ravi's innate insanity, well, they'd been totally wrong on that count. The twins were pure Ravi.

No, one baby would be perfect. A baby with his scales and Salem's crooked smile. That would be perfect.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

The very second the dragon pile released Gregori, the mages descended. All of them.

Or, at least, it felt like all of them.

People Salem could barely remember meeting at the wedding descended en masse, shooting off question after question.

“Gregori, how long did it take before it felt like something was off?”

“Hey, what were your exact symptoms?”

“Was it just your dragon feeling off or was it physical symptoms as well?”

“What helped you shift? I understand you were stuck in human form.”

Gregori seemed bewildered by this onslaught and wasn't sure who to answer first. Growling internally, Salem stepped up, getting his hands into a “stay back” position and buying Gregori some breathing room.

“Stop, stop. You're overwhelming a person who just started feeling normal.”

A few of them looked abashed at his chastisement. At least they had the grace to realize they were being pushy.

He also knew they were asking for a reason. Gregori was an unprecedented case, after all, quite likely the first dragon to ever experience this. They wanted to document it for future records.

And really, Salem agreed with them. This should be recorded, written down for the future, in case some other idiot dragon thought it a good idea to try and live outside the clan. This might not be the best timing for it, but it was fine. Salem knew the answers.

“Okay, in no particular order: No, it wasn’t just the dragon side acting up. He had many physical symptoms as well. He ran a low-grade temp several times, but mostly his body temperature leaned toward cool and clammy. I honestly thought he had a cold or the onset of a flu several times. Exhaustion was one of the key symptoms. Lack of appetite as well.”

Someone whipped out a phone and took notes, while another had a phone out and was apparently recording. Eh, didn’t bother Salem either way.

“Someone asked how long it took for symptoms to kick in?” When Salem got a nod, he kept talking. “About a month, I think. First symptom to come in with homesickness was the lethargy. It just got progressively worse after that. Okay, what was the other question?”

Ha Na showed up then with a very stern, matronly look on her face.

“All of you, I told you to wait! Shoo, off with you. You can badger Gregori with questions later.”

“But, Ha Na?—”

“NO!”

Discouraged, the crowd dispersed, forlornly going back toward the main house. Salem chose to think of it as a house instead of a manor because he needed that level of sanity. Now that it looked like he was going to live here and all.

When he turned back, he found Gregori looking at him with the softest, warmest eyes he'd ever seen aimed at him. It made Salem feel a little self-conscious.

“What?” he asked uneasily.

“You really were paying attention,” Gregori murmured, still sounding awed. “I didn’t think you realized.”

“You live with a doctor,” Salem pointed out with a sigh. “Of course I’m going to notice when you’re not feeling well and what your symptoms are. My mistake was not dragging a confession out of you of just how bad off you were.”

Sora loped over to them, looking as tired as Salem felt, but not slowing down any. “Hi, all. Sorry to interrupt, but I need to do a checkup on Gregori. Can I have a second?”

In private wasn’t said but rather inferred.

That was fine. Gregori was not in the habit of answering questions honestly, clearly, as he’d fucking collapsed before admitting anything was wrong. If stepping away let him answer Sora’s questions truthfully while getting checked out, so be it.

Salem had no intention of leaving Gregori’s line of sight right now. It would surely trigger a relapse. But he could give the illusion of privacy.

He stepped about twenty feet away, finding a rocky outcropping to perch on top of. This way he stayed in line of sight with Gregori—a reassurance for both of them.

Sora performed diagnostic spells, from the look of it. From the way Sora moved about, checking every angle, he was being very thorough in his examination. Salem appreciated it. He wanted to make sure Gregori was on the mend.

The more he sat there—looking out over the dragons, the beach, feeling the humidity in the air—the more he felt like an asshole. It was beautiful here. The sense of community, of family, was incredibly strong. Anyone would give their right arm to live in such a place—except him, who had argued vehemently against it. Argued against it to the point Gregori couldn't be honest with him. Couldn't openly express when he hurt.

Salem sank his head into both hands, eyes closed, kicking himself repeatedly. He'd have to do so, so much groveling to make this up to Gregori. Salem wasn't even sure where to begin.

Over the sound of water lapping at the shoreline, he could hear footsteps shuffling over the sand. He didn't look up. Intuition alone told him who approached.

"You okay, bro?"

"No," he answered on a long sigh. "Sam, I'm an asshole."

"This fact is well established, but normally you're okay with that?"

"I'm not okay with it when it damn near killed my boyfriend."

Sam sucked in a startled breath. "Wow. You're admitting to your relationship?"

Now he did look up to pin Sam with a glare. "Duh."

"No, no, this is huge for you. I mean, you were denying it even three days ago."

"Yes, well, having Gregori collapse right in front of me put things sharply into perspective."

“Ah.” Sam nodded, like this suddenly made a lot more sense. “Crisis will do that. Kinda had a similar moment with Dimitri, so I know where you’re coming from. Um, so, don’t fret? Gregori will forgive you for this.”

“Gregori was never mad to begin with. I wish he would get mad at me. I prefer being yelled at over feeling like this.”

Sam came in closer, slinging an arm around his shoulders in a supportive hug. “I promise you’ll be fine. Dragons are easy, trust me; give them lots of love and attention, admire their hoard, all things are forgiven.”

Snorting a laugh, Salem grumbled darkly, “Hopefully that works here. Will you help me, though?”

“Do what?”

“Pack up and move down here.”

Sam actually jumped a little in surprise. “Shit! You’re serious?”

“It’s not worth it. My job and shoebox apartment are not worth trading his life for. I spent the whole flight down here thinking about it, and honestly speaking, trying to maintain my lifestyle isn’t worth his life. Nothing’s worth that. I do need to have a proper sit down with someone to figure out the logistics. It’s only the finances that worry me. But if I’m a doctor of the Valerii Clan, I get paid just the same, and it’s cheaper to live down here, so I think it’ll work out.” He glanced at Sam only to find his twin looking at him with this proud expression. “What?”

“You really have grown up. Putting his needs above your wants.”

“Are you deliberately getting on my last nerve?”

Sam threw an arm around his shoulders again. “I’m praising you! This is huge for you and I’m so proud.”

“Yes, well, as I said. I spent the entire flight down here thinking. I promised I’d meet him halfway and I’m going to do my damndest to live up to my promise.”

Uncomfortable, Salem tried to shrug Sam off, but he only clung harder.

“I will absolutely help you pack up everything and ship it down here. I know you don’t want to leave him right now. For that matter, I feel like it’s a good call. Gregori needs you and his clan for a while before he’s back to normal.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” Relieved his brother was so willing to help, he relaxed a little. “I’ll make a list of all that needs to happen. I, uh, I know we talked about this briefly earlier, but are there seriously no pediatric surgeons at all?”

“Think about it. Up until last year, we didn’t have kids in the clans.”

Oh. Fuck, right. Only the Sodalicium did.

Sam shrugged and kept talking. “We’ve got a lot of kids incoming—all the clans are going to be having quite the baby boom—so a pediatric surgeon on hand will be super helpful. You know kids get into crap. It gets worse when said kids have wings and the ability to blow elements.”

Salem winced at the mental image. “Oh god. What am I signing up for?”

“Magic,” Sam answered promptly, grinning. “Magic, wonder, and shenanigans. It’ll be worth the ride, I promise you. You’ll have incredible teachers here, and if you tell Amaru what kind of equipment you need, he’ll make it for you.”



Now that was a great idea.

“Don’t tell Gregori yet,” Salem requested. “I need to...I just need to figure shit out before talking to him.”

“Need to let the idea of living in a whole different country settle in your head, you mean.”

“Yeah. I know, logically, it’s the only possible answer. I just need to wrap my head around it.” Salem rubbed his forehead. “I’ve been so focused on one single goal my entire life, it’s hard to make a sharp pivot and do something else. Just let me sleep on this.”

Sam hugged him again. “It’ll be fine. At least tell Gregori you won’t leave Brazil until you two figure everything out. He needs the reassurance.”

“Sure. I can tell him.”

Sam made a good point—he wasn’t arguing that—it was just really hard admitting he’d been so incredibly wrong. Salem had to come to terms with it before he could force the words out of his throat. Also, his urge to beat sense into Gregori still ran strong.

One thing was for sure, though—Salem would do absolutely everything in his power to prevent this from happening again. If things started going sideways, he’d stop it immediately. He’d drag Gregori’s ass to a counselor if that was what it took.

This scare would never happen again.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Escaping a horde of mages determined to examine every freaking scale and beat of his heart was not an easy task. But when his health steadily improved with every second he stood within the halls of the Valerii compound, there really wasn't much for the mages to see any longer.

With a promise to stop by to be poked, prodded, and inspected again the next day, Gregori snagged Salem's hand and dragged him out of the room.

"I know you want to start studying everything you can about medicine and magic, but you look like you could use some sleep," Gregori said the moment they were alone in the hall.

Salem held up one finger and affected a stern expression. "Normally, I would argue with you." That finger wilted along with his shoulders and stern expression. "But I'm not as young as I used to be. In college and throughout my residency, I lived on caffeine and ramen. Who needed sleep when I had so many things to learn? Now...fuck...I can't remember the last time I felt so tired."

It was understandable. While he'd slept on the roof, Salem had remained awake, waiting for Dimitri and the others to show up. And then, while they were waiting for Thiago, Salem had stayed up most of the time, swapping stories with Sora and soaking up as much magical knowledge as he could. Of course, he hadn't slept on the flight down to Brazil. At this point, Salem had probably grabbed only a couple of hours of sleep over fifty-two hours. The good doctor had to be running on pure adrenaline, which was running out fast.

"Um...I can let you crash in my apartment. I don't know if your rooms are ready yet.

If you want to wait at my place, I can track down someone who might know,” Gregori offered.

Salem snorted and wearily shook his head. “After weeks of squatting in my place, refusing to move, you’re just going to toss me aside now? Nope. I think I’ll crash in your room tonight. When I’ve had some sleep, we can figure out sleeping arrangements.” Salem swayed a little on his feet and bumped his shoulder into Gregori’s arm. “Besides, it’s not like I haven’t been in your room, right?”

Very true. Their first time together after Sam and Dimitri’s bonding ceremony, they’d fucked on his bed.

Not like it was going to happen right now. No, he was going to be lucky if Salem didn’t fall asleep on his feet.

A few more turns and down the long corridor finally brought them to his apartment. He opened the door and waved for Salem to precede him inside, but the mage didn’t get more than a couple of steps before stopping shortly.

“I don’t remember this place being so big.”

Gregori chuckled and closed the door behind him. “That’s because you didn’t see any of the rooms. Your mouth was attached to mine when we entered, and it stayed that way. I doubt you saw much of it when you stormed out after sex.”

Salem threw him a look. “I wasn’t exactly in the mood to hear how my life was being turned upside down by a stranger I’d just had sex with. It was supposed to be a fling, but you made it serious.”

“It hadn’t been my intent.”

His mate waved a hand at him. “I know, I know. Not your fault. Dragon instincts and all that.”

“Would you like a quick tour now?” It seemed safer to divert their conversation away from their first argument and the subject that remained a giant, tender purple bruise between them.

“Sure. I can already see your living room is bigger than my entire apartment.” Salem gestured with both hands at the room they were standing in, which had a dark brown leather sofa and chairs set around a big coffee table. When they entered, a couple of tall lamps had flicked on, and the air smelled sweetly of tropical flowers. It was nice to know all the spells on his place to keep it clean and tidy were still working, despite his extended absence.

“I actually don’t spend a lot of time in this room anymore. Before we discovered Amaru, Luka and Vasily would pop by in the evenings for a chat or we’d play cards if we could get Ilya or Dimitri to join us.”

From the living room, he led Salem to his private office and library—a large room with walls covered in bookshelves loaded with books.

“Whoa. This is...whoa. I never really took you to be much of a reader.” Salem slapped his hand over his mouth and turned to face Gregori. “Not that I think you can’t read or aren’t intelligent. I mean, I know you’re incredibly smart. I?—”

Gregori took pity on a very sleepy Salem and stopped his stammers with a kiss to the tip of his nose. “I know what you mean. I also think it’s adorable when you forget exactly how old I am. Most of my life stretched in those long years before the invention of television, movies, and video games. The most common form of entertainment and gaining knowledge was books.”

“Yeah. Duh. Sorry.”

“No apologies necessary. The clan has a large central library. Though, I hear it’s not nearly as big as the library in Burkhard Castle with the fire dragons. However, most dragons will also have a large personal library.” Gregori walked over to a set of shelves, his eyes skimming over the familiar spines. “Old favorites you can’t bring yourself to get rid of.”

“It’s a beautiful library.”

Gregori turned back to his mate, his heart skipping to see him standing in this room, looking as if he’d always belonged there. Currently, he appeared sleepy and mussed, his dark brown hair in a freefall around his forehead, those ocean blue eyes intent on him. Gregori would never tire of seeing him like this, so casual and comfortable. “Thank you. When you start your studies with Sora and the other mages, feel free to use this room if you like.”

Salem made a noncommittal noise and Gregori wisely chose to continue the tour. There was no kitchen since there was a central kitchen and dining hall used by all the dragons and mages. He did have a small cupboard for snacks and a table and chairs for when his fellow trackers stopped by with beer and junk food.

“Okay, I definitely remember this room,” Salem announced as they stepped into the bedroom. A king-sized bed with an elaborately carved headboard dominated it. On the opposite wall was a large TV and a low dresser covered in random knickknacks Gregori had collected on his travels. The extra thick area rug squished under their feet and a happy hum escaped Salem as he squeezed his toes in it. The man had shed his shoes while they were on the beach.

In fact, Gregori wasn’t entirely sure where the bag Salem had packed, his winter clothes, or his shoes were. He mentally shook his head at himself. He’d track down

Salem's possessions after the mage fell asleep, as well as try to figure out what he would still need while he stayed in Brazil.

"I like this carpet," Salem murmured, his words slightly slurred.

And that had to be the end of the tour. He was about to pass out.

"Through there is the bathroom," Gregori said, pointing toward one of the open doors. "Off the bathroom is my closet."

Salem snorted. "That's it? This giant apartment doesn't have a billiards room or a conservatory? Or a ballroom?" He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. "No wonder you were so horrified by my apartment."

Gregori hurried to his side and wrapped his arms around Salem's waist while standing behind him. "I wasn't horrified. It was just smaller than I was expecting. Like most people, I live under the notion all doctors are rich and have enormous homes."

"Yeah, the rich part happens after you manage to pay off all your student loans. If you can pay them off."

It rested on the tip of Gregori's tongue to say he would personally see to it all of Salem's debts were paid off. If not him, then definitely Rodrigo. The king was not going to pass off a chance to have a skilled surgeon in their ranks. Add in a few years of magic training, and Salem would be a priceless gem within the mage community.

But he didn't want to push Salem right now. Not while he was exhausted.

However...

“There is one more room I haven’t shown you yet.”

Salem groaned again, his head dropping back to rest on Gregori’s shoulder. “Oh my gawd, it better not be a ballroom or some kind of crazy game room with a half-court basketball setup.”

Gregori chortled, trying to cover up the sudden racing of his heart. “No, the room is actually much smaller. Would you like to see it?”

“What is it?”

“My hoard.”

Salem stood upright and spun around so fast he nearly fell over. Gregori grabbed Salem’s elbow to steady him, but the mage didn’t seem to notice. The heavy exhaustion clinging to every fiber of his being had evaporated in an instant.

“Seriously? You’ve got a hoard? A real dragon hoard? A room just filled with gold and precious gems?”

Gregori winced. Maybe this was a very bad idea. “Um...dragon hoards are rarely gold and riches. They’re filled with the things that are most precious to us. Most dragons collect completely different things. And no one is ever permitted to go into our hoard, except...”

“Your mate,” Salem finished for him in a tense whisper.

“Exactly. Would you still like to see it?”

Salem chewed on his bottom lip for only a moment before he straightened his shoulders and faced Gregori squarely. “I would be honored to see your hoard.”

The heart that had sunk in his chest now flipped and twirled like an Olympic gymnast reaching for the gold. He grabbed Salem's hand and pulled him back to the library. At the back of the room, he paused in front of the center bookcase and grinned at Salem as he pressed his fingers to the underside of the middle shelf.

"No fucking way!"

"Yep," Gregori replied as the lock clicked and the door swung soundlessly open to reveal a room about half the size of his living room, but it appeared to be even smaller thanks to his enormous collection.

"Holy shit," Salem exclaimed very slowly as he stepped inside, his eyes skimming over the walls covered in framed posters for Broadway plays, old playbills, tickets. But not just any plays. No, Gregori's heart belonged to musicals.

Along with the framed art, there were several glass cases displaying different bits of costumes and collectibles he'd managed to get his hands on over the years.

Salem turned toward him, his face bright. "You like musicals?"

"I love musicals," Gregori admitted as he joined Salem beside a glass container protecting an elaborate woman's hat. "I have loved plays and musicals for as long as I can remember, and I've seen them in every major city throughout Europe and South America. Even caught a few on Broadway." He tapped on the glass. "I bought this hat in an auction in London from one of their productions of *My Fair Lady*. And this over here." He grabbed Salem's hand and pulled him over to another shelf, where he opened a wooden box to reveal a shiny silver straight razor that might have been used by a barber. Or better yet, a murderous barber. "This came from a production of *Sweeney Todd* in Berlin."

"This is incredible."



“I’ve tried to collect something used in a performance from all of my favorites, but as you can tell, I have too many favorites and not a big enough room for my hoard.” Gregori carefully closed the box and tilted his head to look at Salem. “Are you disappointed my hoard isn’t full of gold and priceless gems?”

“What? No! This is amazing. I could spend hours in this room.”

“Really?”

Salem scrubbed a hand over his face as a low laugh rattled up his throat. “I can’t believe we have this in common. I would never have guessed.”

“You like musicals too?”

He dropped his hand and smiled. “ Love them. When I was in college, I tried to catch every performance I could because tickets for student performances were way cheaper than tickets for a Broadway performance. Colleges did smaller productions. I got to see a great performance of The Fantasticks . But I’ve also caught Phantom, Les Mis, and West Side Story. ”

Gregori hummed. “ West Side Story is an old favorite of mine.”

Salem grabbed his hand with both of his, eyes shining bright. “Have you seen Wicked yet?”

Gregori shook his head. “I haven’t seen any of the newer plays that have been popular in the past couple of decades. It’s been hard to get away.”

“Then we have to go together. I haven’t had a chance to either, and I’ve been dying to see it. Particularly with someone who hasn’t seen it yet.”

Salem was going to give him a heart attack if he didn't stop with all these wonderful moments and surprises. Gregori swallowed hard, trying to force his exuberant heart out of his throat. "Okay. It's a date. We'll go see it together."

The mage closed his eyes and smiled, resting his head against Gregori's shoulder. Salem looked like he was drunk with exhaustion. It was time for bed.

Gregori ushered Salem back out of his hoard, but only after he made several promises to show Salem his collection again. He helped him get undressed down to his briefs and slipped him under the blankets. The poor man was snoring before Gregori could even turn out the lights.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem was excited to be having his first official lesson with Sora.

How he'd ended up with Amaru and Evora in on this lesson as well remained questionable. Not that he minded. Evora seemed equally keen to learn, as medical magic wasn't her specialty either.

Well, the more the merrier?

They were in Evora's workspace. Sora only visited Brazil to help with certain situations, so he didn't actually live here. Her workroom was an interesting mix between classic witch-style vibes with herbs hanging everywhere, and a very functional kitchen with a stainless steel table. She'd pulled in several padded chairs so they could comfortably sit at the table and take notes, which Salem appreciated. Really, the place reminded him of his grandmother's workroom, which he'd been in and out of as a kid.

Salem had his tablet with him, which included a whole list of questions, and he was ready to ask them all.

"All right, so Sora gave me an overview of what maladies can be treated without surgery. Which is a mind-boggling list. I'm seriously amazed at how much medical knowledge was lost due to the damn war. But what I'm curious about is, what if surgery is necessary? Say you have an organ that's just toast. Due to a rupture, maybe, and there's an immediate need to deal with it. What then?"

Amaru perked up like this question was meant for him. "There's all sorts of things we can do. So, we will need to do an incision to draw the organ out, of course, no other

way to easily break it down and remove it without taxing the body. And since the body's under stress already, that's a bad idea. So, small incision, about uh...dammit, what was the measurement again?"

"Inch?"

"I was thinking—uh—centimeter, that's it! Anyway, about a centimeter. Then we can chop up the bad organ and pull it free, before restoring it."

Salem followed up until the last bit. "Restore...what? The skin?"

"Well, that too, we can mend the surgery incision pretty readily." Amaru's hands gesticulated as he talked, like he was trying to draw in the air and describe at the same time. "But I meant the organ."

Nope, still wasn't making sense. At least, Salem's brain refused to process these words as sensible ones.

Evora made a noise of interest from her seat at the head of the table. "I remember hearing stories about old mages regrowing limbs. You know how to do that, Amaru?"

"Honey, I can restore broken cores, limbs are easy in comparison."

Holy shit, he really was saying what Salem thought he was saying. Salem just about fell out of his chair.

"You're telling me you can regrow **ORGANS**?!"

"We," Amaru corrected. "The second I teach you the proper spells and methods, you can do it too. We can even grow them in situ , although it gets a bit tricky if it's a major organ. Say, replacing a heart. You have to keep the patient in a medical coma

for about a week before it's safe for them to get up and stuff."

Salem made a noise he'd never made in his life. He wasn't sure if he felt envious, flabbergasted, or if straight-up greed burned in his chest. He didn't just want this knowledge. He needed it. He'd never needed something so badly in his life.

Well, except Gregori, but that went without saying.

Amaru's lips quirked up in a smug little way. "I can see you salivating from here, Doctor Hunter."

"You're damn right I am. Organ failure?"

"Pfft, easy."

"Immune disorders?"

"Tricky, usually more potion and spell oriented, but doable."

"Chronic illnesses?"

"Do not exist in my vocabulary."

Sora cleared his throat to draw attention back to himself. Because he sat right across the table from Salem, it was easy to meet his eyes.

"Salem, you must understand how valuable you are to us, as a community."

Salem pointed a finger toward himself in disbelief. "You guys can replace limbs and organs, and I'm valuable?"

“While we can do the work, very few of us—and that includes the Abe Clan—have medical licenses.”

The full implication of what Sora said hit Salem squarely, and he blew out an understanding “ Ah .”

No wonder, then. They’d be able to treat their own here at home with no issue. But if something happened and they were drawn outside of their community? Then their hands would figuratively be tied unless they were willing to break laws in an emergency. Damn. Talk about a tough spot to be in.

“I’m one of the few who does,” Sora continued with an easy shrug. “But I wanted to travel the world as a nonprofit doctor, so I went the extra mile to get the license. You can see, though, how we desperately need you. You’re legal.”

In a stunning moment of clarity, he completely understood what they were saying. Why they were so anxious and excited to teach him, to make him one of them. He might very well be better put to use here than at his old hospital. It wasn’t like he was replaceable here.

The door opened and Ha Na waltzed in. “Oh, am I late? Did you start already?”

“Barely,” Amaru assured her, waving her into the chair next to Salem’s. “Still covering the basics of what all magic can do.”

Salem rubbed his forehead, feeling like he’d been given too many surprises all at once. “I thought my first talk with Sora covered all of this, but it turns out that was the summary of the summary, in a sense.”

“There’s so much to learn,” Amaru commiserated with him. “Sora’s still teaching me what he considers basics.”

“And I spent forty years with all the basics,” Sora tacked on. “So don’t rush, Salem. There’s time.”

Ha Na’s eyes bounced around the group, her face lighting up. “Oh! Oh, he’s staying?”

“I’m staying.” Salem said this firmly because he one hundred percent meant it. “I’m not returning to America. At least for the foreseeable future, until we hit a make-or-break point. Like hell will I do that after what happened with Gregori.”

Ha Na reached right over and hugged him, her hair smelling of citrus and sun.

“Thank you,” she whispered against his ear. “Thank you so much. For loving Gregori enough to change, but also for staying. My own children will need you in the future.”

“You think I’m better than these three?”

“Once you’re caught up, you will be.” She leaned back, releasing him, her smile warm and grandmotherly. “Trust me. Sora and Amaru wouldn’t be so excited to teach you otherwise. And you can still help the children while you’re learning. Really, learning is a lifetime endeavor. You never really stop.”

The truth of her words hit home. Salem believed this firmly as well. She was right, he shouldn’t look at it as “I can’t work until I’ve learned everything” but more of an apprenticeship. He’d learn while on the job. Although he’d definitely be cramming the basics in first.

“Speaking of, let’s learn a spell.” Sora scribbled something down in a notebook and passed it over to Salem. “This is the diagnostics spell. Try it on Ha Na.”

He picked it up, accepted the bottle of captured sunshine Amaru offered him, and

used it to power the spell. Which he pronounced very carefully.

“Shor dene zata na gev adi .”

The lines immediately drew themselves in the air above Ha Na. Exactly as he'd seen when Sora enacted this very spell. It was heartening for a full second before he realized he had no idea what he was looking at.

“Uh...I read this like a monitor screen last time, was I right or...?”

Sora stood from the table, coming around to his side, and started pointing. “You were right. The numbers above her heart indicate heart rate. Look at it the way you would a physical monitor.”

Salem focused there and read aloud, “Eighty. All right, so I know heart rate is normal.”

“Yup. Now, focus here below it. This is blood pressure.”

“One twenty-two over seventy. Wow, Ha Na, that's an amazing BP for a woman of your age. I'd have thought you were forty with numbers like this.”

She preened, pleased with herself. “Honestly, it wasn't so good when I first came into the clan. But with Sora and now Amaru monitoring my health, it's improved greatly. At this rate, I think I'll de-age.”

“Physically, you've done just that.” Sora gave her a smile before pointing to the next number, lower down. “You see here there's a red number.”

“Oh, yes, right over the abdomen.”



“What does it look like to you?”

“Hmm...perhaps a blockage?”

“Very good. There was a mild case of onset colon cancer, which we caught very early, and she’s undergone treatment for it. It’s why the number is red, but the one next to it is white, showing the improvement of the condition and that her small intestines are healing.”

Wow. Treating cancer, even, without worries of it growing worse.

They kept going, with Evora also leaning around to see better so she could follow Sora’s explanation. Salem frantically took notes and tried to absorb everything at the same time. It was incredible what all this diagnostic spell could do. He’d known this before, from Sora’s explanation, but actually seeing it in person was something else entirely. There wasn’t a disease, condition, or ailment that couldn’t be detected by this spell. Even that was life-changing because, often, half the battle was diagnosing the actual problem.

Sora gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Those are the basics. Let the spell go now. We don’t want to wear you out.”

He let it go, although reluctantly, as it was so fascinating. “How long can this spell be held?”

“Depends. By yourself? About an hour, comfortably. If it’s a group working? Days. Which sometimes happens.” Sora returned to his own seat. “We had a case a good twenty years ago now where one of the dragons got caught in a terrible storm, was hit by lightning, and we all went into emergency mode to save him. Myself, my parents, and three of my cousins did a group working to repair the damaged organs, restore limbs, etc. But it meant we had to keep the diagnostics up for days to make sure he

was healing, no blood clots caused trouble, or any of that. In fact, Amaru's met him."

Amaru popped upright. "Wait, I have?"

"Ha Na, too. Rashi, the amiable guy who helped lead people out of the caves and into the tent encampment."

"Oh my god! But he didn't have anything wrong with him. He flew into town several times for supplies, even."

Sora smirked. "The Abe do their work properly, you know. But he's an example of what it sometimes takes to put people back on the mend. It's not always easy, but it can be done, especially if we have multiple mages all lending strength to the patient."

Incredible. Truly incredible to think they were able to heal a dragon struck by lightning.

Salem looked Sora dead in the eye. "I want to be you when I grow up."

Sora just laughed. "Compliment taken, thank you. It's partially why I'm encouraging Evora to learn, especially since she's got a good eye for detail. If Evora, Amaru, and you all become the main physicians for the Valerii, I don't think you'll even need me to pop over here."

He might be right, but... "I'm still calling you for advice even after I get caught up."

"Fine by me. I'll call on you, too, when my kids get into something. Because let's face it, they'll get into something."

"They're kids." Salem sat back in his chair. "That's their job."

“They do it too well, some days. Okay, for this meeting, I vote we set up a schedule and a training regime. As we just said, there’s too much to learn all at once. Amaru, you’re still catching up on current tech?—”

Amaru gave a defeated sigh, like technology was not only insulting him but also his mother by advancing so quickly.

“—so let’s do this. Salem, walk Amaru through what you do in a surgery. Let him watch videos and such so he can see how the tech operates. Then the two of you can figure out what equipment he can make to work with the magic we’ll teach you. I’ll take you every other day with Evora, teach you the basic potions to treat most ailments, and then gradually advance up to spells. Sound good?”

Really, it was the only reasonable method of attack. “Sounds good to me. Can I have homework?”

“Oh, you’re getting homework,” Sora promised in a tone of doom. “You, Evora, and Amaru.”

Was it wrong Salem was really excited to hear this?

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Gregori lifted his head and stared at the door in front of him, releasing a heavy sigh. He'd walked through this door hundreds of times in the past. This certainly wasn't his first time being called onto the carpet. All of it for stupid shenanigans he'd pulled with his fellow trackers. Just pranks that had gotten a little out of hand.

But this time was different.

He'd lied, kept secrets, and in the end, failed his mate, his clan, and his king.

Just as he lifted his hand to knock, the door swung open and he gasped, barely pulling his hand back in time to keep from hitting Thiago in the nose. Gregori jumped back a step and grimaced.

"Sorry."

"I take it you're done lingering outside his door and you're ready to face the music?"

Of course Thiago knew he'd been lurking outside Rodrigo's private office. The crafty aide to the king knew everything that went on in the Valerii Clan. He'd been at Rodrigo's side for as long as Gregori could remember, and he had even served Rodrigo's father.

Gregori stepped into the office, opening and closing his fists at his sides. The door closed behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to find Thiago had left him alone.

"Drag your sorry carcass in here, Gregori. I'm not going to bite you," Rodrigo called

out.

With a sigh, Gregori stepped farther into the large room. It was hard to believe this was a dragon king's office. The walls were a soft, buttery yellow, and instead of weapons on the walls, there were exquisite paintings of ocean scenes. There was the typical large desk and long conference table, but the other furniture was soft and comfortable, with bright pastel fabrics.

It was all a stark difference to the old office the Valerii kings had maintained in Russia, where the dragons had lived in a stone castle and every wall had been covered in weaponry, pelts, or animal heads. But then, when the ice dragons had lived in Russia, the castle had been a place of protection and war. Before the Great Dragon War was launched against the Jaeggi Clan, the dragons had fought the fire dragons of the west for territory. They'd also fought the wind dragons to the south.

But losing more than half of your clan of dragons and three-quarters of your mages tended to put things in perspective. The Valerii Clan had been on the brink of extinction, their morale as bleak as the Siberian tundra in the middle of winter. Rodrigo had saved them all when he'd announced they were moving to Brazil. They'd needed to shed the weight of the past if they were to have any hope for the future.

When Gregori had allowed himself to dream of a brighter future with a mate of his own, he had to admit someone like Salem had never crossed his mind.

Two walls of Rodrigo's office were covered in floor-length windows and sliding glass doors that opened out onto a courtyard overlooking the beach and ocean. Several of the doors were open now, allowing a salty breeze to sweep in and push about the long sheer white curtain.

Rodrigo poked his head into the office through a set of curtains and waved for

Gregori to approach. “We’ll talk out here.”

Gregori gulped and shuffled out into the bright late-morning light to find a small table set up with a teapot, a couple of cups, and some small pastries. Rodrigo sat in the chair on the right and refilled his cup with a dark, rich tea that reminded Gregori of mornings in Russia. After moving to South America, he’d shifted from being a tea drinker to a coffee drinker, like most of the clan, but this was one of the few ways in which Rodrigo clung to the old ways.

“My winter rose likes to have breakfast with me here so we can watch the sun rise over the ocean waves,” Rodrigo said as Gregori dropped into the only remaining seat. “It’s a peaceful way to start the day.” He held up the teapot, offering it to Gregori, but he shook his head. As nervous as he was, it didn’t seem like a good idea to dump a bunch of caffeine on top of the roiling mess inside him.

“Velichestvo, I beg your forgiveness. I should never have lied to your mate, and by extension, you. I have broken your trust. I-I?—”

Rodrigo waved off his apologies and took a sip of his tea. He turned from where he had been facing the ocean to stare at Gregori with a sad smile. “You are forgiven. It’s like you think I haven’t gone through this with all the other mated dragons in our clan. Every last one of you becomes thick in the head.” He poked Gregori in the center of the forehead with one finger. “You find your mate, and all the good sense I know you possess either pours out your ears or out the end of your cock.”

The king sighed and slumped a little in his chair, his arm coming to rest on the table. “Not that I was any better. When I met my Ha Na, I became a foolish child again, but my silliness was on display before King Alric.” He shuddered. “The ridiculous excuses I came up with to remain in Burkhard Castle just so I could be close to my love.”

He made another dismissive noise and returned his attention to Gregori. “There’s no point in asking why you took such a horrible risk with your life. You did it to remain close to your mate, to protect him and win him over. It is a timeless tale among the dragons. No, what I wish to know is why you did not ask for help? At the first sign of your magic failing, you should have contacted Ha Na, Evora, me, or even Sora for assistance. Is there a reason you felt you could not come to any of us for help?”

Gregori frowned at the pretty floral pattern painted on the top of the table, unable to lift his eyes to Rodrigo. “I...was afraid.”

“Why were you afraid?”

“I was afraid if you or Sora discovered I couldn’t properly use magic or that my dragon wasn’t speaking to me any longer, you would command me to return to Brazil.” He finally looked at Rodrigo and leaned forward. “Salem is a brilliant doctor, but he sees my presence as a threat to this life he has been building for himself. He still won’t commit to being mates but is firm on the fact we are in a relationship. Which is a vast improvement from where we started. Even though he’s here now, I’m still walking a tightrope with him. If I push too much or say the wrong thing, he could pack up and return to the United States without a single thought. Staying in the States and slowly winning him over was my only hope of finally claiming my mate. If I left...”

“All your hard work would be undone,” Rodrigo finished for him. The dragon king shook his head and stared at the ocean waves for a moment. “Did it not occur to you there were other options besides ordering you home? I would have happily sent half the clan north to you. It would have been enough to soothe your dragon and preserve your magic while you won Salem’s heart.”

Gregori’s mouth fell open, but not a peep of sound slipped out. In truth, the thought had never crossed his mind. He’d been so sure Sora or Ha Na would summon his ass

back to Brazil if they caught even a whiff of trouble on his part.

Rodrigo muttered a curse under his breath and rolled his eyes. Clearly, he didn't need an answer from Gregori. "See. Brain out the end of your dick. Every last one of you. Thankfully, your brains seem to grow back after you've been bonded for a while. Dimitri is just now starting to show signs of intelligence again. God help me with Luka and Vasily."

"I'm sorry." Gregori's shoulders slumped, and for the first time in too many centuries to count, he felt like a fledgling dragon who'd disappointed his parents.

"All we wish is to see the members of the Valerii Clan happily mated. Every mage needs to be protected, whether they are a potential mate or not. The risks you took meant you could not properly protect Doctor Hunter. Even when your head is full of nothing but air, you must remember to trust your clanmates and rely on them for support."

"Yes, Velichestvo."

"I am only asking for balance, Gregori. You can't very well be a good mate to him if you kill yourself in the process."

"You are right."

Rodrigo sighed again and took a sip of his tea. "It has been known to happen on occasion."

Some of the weight on Gregori's chest lifted, and he was able to give a tiny smile. His king was taking his stupidity much better than he'd expected, but then Rodrigo had always been a very patient and compassionate leader. He had to be if he was going to survive guiding their clan of lunatics.



With the unpleasantness taken care of, Rodrigo leaned in close and smiled. “So, now that you have him here in Brazil, have you seen any signs of improvement?”

“Some.” Gregori reached for the teapot and poured some of the tea into the empty cup in front of him. “I can tell he’s making an effort to appreciate the little things I do for him. We even have plans for a date. I...” The words he was about to say got caught in his throat and he shook his head.

“What is it? Just say it.”

“It’s greedy of me.”

“Say it anyway.”

“I worry his only reason for coming here was to learn about how to use magic and medicine together. I’m grateful he’s here, but I want him to want to be near me too. I don’t know how I can reach the point where I matter to him.” Gregori drained half his cup of tea. It would have been better if this was vodka. “I sound pathetic.”

“You sound like a dragon completely enamored of his mate,” Rodrigo corrected. “Is he still so leery of admitting to being mates? Despite moving down here for you?”

“Unfortunately, he’s had a very bad dating history. Each ex-boyfriend hammered it into his head that he’s not worthy of a good relationship. It’s taken time for him to see I like living with him and won’t be angry with him even when he screws up.”

Rodrigo’s nose scrunched up. “How horrible. I better understand why he’s hesitant. Still, even knowing where he’s coming from, it had to be hell on you.”

Gregori fiddled with his cup, unsure how much to say before blurting out, “Even with all the languages I know, I don’t have the words to describe how much it hurt to be

continually rejected because of who I am. What I am. There were times I wanted to scream. Other times I wanted to track down every ex of his and put the fear of a dragon into them. I still might do so, actually, as the reminder pisses me off all over again. Even saying 'it's been hell' is such an understatement."

Rodrigo reached out a hand and gripped one of Gregori's tightly, the pressure and warmth grounding him. "I know it is. But as hard as it's been, he's now very vocal about never driving you to that again. He's clearly repentant over it and striving to be a better partner to you."

"He declared we have to go see Wicked together. Just us," Gregori admitted. "It's the first date he's asked me on."

"There. That sounds like progress to me." Rodrigo squeezed his hand before letting go and sitting back in his chair. "Salem might prove me wrong, but he doesn't seem like a big gesture kind of guy. However, I think he will fight for you. Just be patient and support him as you have been, and I'm sure he'll come around eventually."

"Thank you, Velichestvo," Gregori said with a bow of his head.

A loud knock echoed through the office a second before the door opened and footsteps hurried across the tiles. "Velichestvo," Thiago called out. He stepped through the curtains, his face flushed and his normally tidy hair an unsightly mess. "Forgive the intrusion. We need your assistance."

"Is it Ravi or Ravi's twins?" Rodrigo inquired, his voice a weary tone that made Gregori think this was a common occurrence since Ravi and his family had come to Brazil.

"Both."

“I wish we could keep Sora for a bit longer but ship Ravi and his twins back to Alric.” He clicked his tongue and waved a hand. “But I’m sure no father would be willingly separated from his children, and no dragon can tolerate being away from their mate. Ravi and Sora are a package deal.”

“It would explain the regular gift baskets you’ve been receiving from King Alric recently with the thank-you notes.”

Gregori jumped to his feet and bowed to Rodrigo. “I will take my leave so you can attend to this...incident. Thank you for your counsel.”

He beat a hasty retreat out of the room before it occurred to Rodrigo or Thiago to pull him into whatever mess Ravi and his kids had created now.

While he’d been dreading facing Rodrigo, he had to admit he felt significantly lighter now they’d spoken. Not just because his king had been so understanding, but because he’d actually given him some words of hope when it came to Salem. They were making progress. Slow and steady progress.

After weeks of vowing to never go to Brazil, Salem was now here.

Grinning to himself, Gregori stepped inside of his apartment and crossed through the rooms until he finally located Salem half hidden behind a pile of old books, files, and even a few delicate-looking scrolls. When he’d left to meet up with Rodrigo, Salem had mentioned something about Sora sending over some “light” reading.

“Sora and I have very different ideas of what ‘light’ reading looks like,” Gregori said as he entered the room.

Salem’s head popped up and he gave a wide grin, making Gregori’s heart skip. That look made it all worthwhile. Even if he wasn’t the cause of Salem’s smile, he was just

overjoyed to see his mate so very happy.

“All of this is so amazing! I just...I just never expected to discover so much healing magic preserved following the Great Dragon War. I thought it was all lost. When Sora and some dragons dropped this off, I couldn't help but jump in. How was your meeting with the king? He wasn't too angry with you, was he? Do you think I should go talk to him?”

Gregori held up his hand to stop Salem. If the mage kept talking, he was going to scoop him up from his chair and carry him off to bed. He was being too precious and adorable. It was odd. Since getting Salem away from the hospital and his tiny apartment, some of his hard edges had softened and he seemed more willing to laugh. Maybe he was able to finally relax away from the stress of his job, or the fact he wasn't constantly being reminded by his meager living conditions that he was drowning in debt. Either way, Gregori was happy to have his mate smiling.

“No, the king wasn't angry. Just worried about me. We talked and I reassured him I wasn't going to be a dumbass any longer. No more taking stupid risks with my life.”

Salem released a heavy breath of relief and slumped deep in his chair, only the top of his head visible over the stack of books. “So even he has beat it into your head to never do it again? But in a nice way.”

“Heh. Well, it's hard to say no when he did precisely that.”

“I like him more every day.” Salem gave him a sharp, speaking look. “You have learned your lesson, I hope, and I don't have to keep an eye on you?”

“I promise you I have. No more pushing myself to almost dying.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“How goes the reading?”

“It’s astounding!” Salem jerked upright, his face alight with enthusiasm. “Did you know things like the flu and even the common cold can be cured with a potion? A simple potion! And treating pneumonia is nothing more than a spell and an hour of rest. It’s insane. I’ve seen children stuck in the hospital for days, even weeks, as we tried to clear up their lungs. The list goes on and on. So many things that threaten the lives of children in the human world are regarded as barely more than a scraped knee when you can tackle it with magic.” Salem flipped through some pages and hummed to himself for a second. “However, there are some neurological illnesses these old texts make assumptions about that I want to discuss with Sora and his parents. It might be one of the few areas where modern medicine has an edge.”

“That’s wonderful.” Gregori paused and licked his lips. “I heard on my way back here that the room they prepared for you is ready.”

Salem’s gaze jerked up to his face. “Ready to get rid of me at last?”

“You know this isn’t the case at all. If I had my way, I’d just shove you in my hoard and keep you there for all time.” Gregori leaned forward and braced his hands on the table. “I just want you to have the choice of having your own space here. I trapped you with me in your own home and that wasn’t fair.”

“I didn’t give you much choice.”

Gregori shrugged. “Still wasn’t fair. If you want to spend more time with me and learn more about what it means to be mates, then I want to do it at a pace you’re comfortable with.”

Salem’s expression turned into one of thoughtful contemplation. “Yes. Yes, I think I will take you up on it. Some space would do us both some good.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem bent his neck back, trying to loosen the knot forming right at the base of his shoulder blades. The sensation brought back memories of being in medical school, spending hours poring over books and trying to cram facts into his overheating brain.

Which, he basically was back in school, so it made sense.

The second he stopped focusing on words, his stomach made a petulant growl. Oh. Right. He hadn't eaten yet today and it was—he glanced at the clock on the desk—shit, it was already two in the afternoon. Salem's tunnel vision when studying was legendary, but dammit, hadn't he matured enough to remember to at least eat ?

Stomach gave another petulant growl.

Damn bodies. So needy and inconvenient. Ugh, fine, he'd get something. Oh wait, with it being this late, maybe Gregori had made something.

He turned in his chair as he spoke. "Hey, Gregori, did—fuuuuuck."

He'd just done it again.

Salem forehead-planted against the back of the chair. How could he have forgotten he and Gregori weren't currently living together again ? This was the third time he'd called for his dragon without remembering. Like it was natural for Gregori to be there and within range to hear his call. This was just embarrassing at this point. Since when did having Gregori nearby feel natural? Since when did his absence feel like missing a limb?

Granted, Salem was still coming to terms with the fact he apparently cared enough about Gregori to turn his whole world upside down just to keep the man safe and happy. Salem had honestly thought he'd die alone his entire life, so finding out a. that wasn't true, and b. he was apparently capable of this level of devotion still sent his head spinning. It was why, when Gregori had offered him some space to think, he'd taken him up on it. Too much had changed too fast; he'd needed time to process it.

However, it seemed only his brain had needed processing time. His heart did not. Clearly. Two days of being in this apartment had felt lonely. Especially after he'd turned to ask Gregori something, only to abruptly remember he wasn't here.

He'd hesitated to admit his feelings aloud to Gregori because doing so felt like a leap of faith he hadn't been ready for. Hell, he'd been too scared to even acknowledge to himself that he was in love with the man. But the dragon had damn near died to stay with him, and what further proof of devotion did he need? Really. Salem still thought Gregori was insane to pick him of all people, but apparently there was no accounting for tastes. Gregori had put it all on the line.

It was time for Salem to do the same.

Fuck, this was still emotionally scary. How had Gregori done this, over and over again, without having any assurance Salem felt the same? Here he sat, knowing Gregori loved him to hell and back, and he was still nervous as all get out. Why were emotions such messy things? And demanding, too.

Salem sucked in a breath, rooted about for courage, and found some. Hopefully a large enough supply to commit properly to Gregori because it was definitely necessary. And past due.

Argh, dammit. Why were dragons so charming? They worked their way under your skin before you knew it. Or at least, Gregori certainly had.

Salem's stomach grumbled again. It was now on the verge of threatening legal action.

He sighed and got up. "I clearly have been spoiled. I'm far too used to Gregori making sure I eat. How the hell did he even spoil me so fast?"

His analytical brain mocked him. Oh, that's easy, you never take care of yourself to begin with.

Damn you, analytical brain, for probably being correct.

Fortunately for all, there was an amazing mess hall here. The food was out of this world good. Then again, he was mostly surrounded by people who had literal centuries of experience in cooking, so it kinda figured. Salem was definitely reaping the benefits and had no problem doing so.

He grabbed his phone, threw on sandals—no one seemed to wear actual tennis shoes in Brazil, just sandals—and headed out. Salem walked while he thought, pensive.

Surely there was some way to undo the damage here. Salem knew how to date, dammit; just because he sucked at long-term relationships didn't mean he had no game. He had a very good idea of what Gregori liked, having seen his hoard, so it was kind of a no-brainer. The best lure was to find a play somewhere nearby and ask him out on a date. They'd barely had any actual dates, and now that Salem thought about it, it was rather a travesty. Gregori was marvelous fun on a date. He should be dragging the man out every weekend.

Right. Food, then time to look online for theaters and shows.

Also, he needed to say this right, not make it sound like a let's-hang-out thing. This was to mend fences and hopefully get back into Gregori's apartment, so he had to make it clear he was asking him out on a bona fide date.



Honestly, Salem wasn't sure how much longer he could survive a Gregori-less apartment. The silence was killing him slowly.

No one was in the mess hall when he arrived, as it was well past lunchtime for most. There were still some hot plates out with leftover food, so he grabbed what looked good and ended up with a mound of food somehow. Eyes bigger than his stomach? Screw it, he was hungry.

Then he sat and plowed through about half of it in one breath before slowing down enough to pull out his phone.

All right, theaters.

Fortunately, there were a number of them in this area. He wasn't too far from a city, after all, so it stood to reason. Some of them were community theaters, but Salem didn't think Gregori would care. Salem had seen playbills from very small productions in his hoard.

He'd have to borrow some kind of translator earring from Evora. His Portuguese was limited, to say the least. But that was easily done.

Okay, what was playing right now? Salem liked theater too, so he wanted to pick something they could both enjoy.

Hmm, wow, they were doing Hairspray down here? Huh. Guess some shows were rather universal. Oh, Roald Dahl's Matilda, too. Who'd have thought? Other showings were Kinky Boots (hard no), and oh-ho, they were doing West Side Story at the Teatro Riachuelo. It wouldn't even matter if the whole thing was in Portuguese, as Salem knew the story, so he could watch it and not be lost. Plus, he knew Gregori liked theatrical plays, so it would be something he'd like.

Perfect.

Salem searched, found VIP tickets, and paid for them without a single wince. Okay, he winced a little. They were damn expensive. But for this, he was pulling out all the stops. Oooh, there was a way to contact the theater for special requests? Hell yeah. Salem promptly did so, as he wanted a playbill autographed by the cast if he could at all manage it. All right, request sent in. If he didn't get a response, he'd enlist someone to help him message again in Portuguese. Just in case.

Tickets were for tomorrow, which meant Salem set three alarms on his phone, just in case, because he did not trust himself. He could forget to eat. That said it all.

Preparations made, he emailed himself the tickets so he could print them out later, then got up.

Time to hunt down his dragon.

Really, Gregori was so larger than life, he was easy to find. He'd be the type to anchor a group in a tourist country because of his sheer size. All Salem had to do was exit the mess hall, walk past the center courtyard, and down toward the beach.

Gregori was in dragon form, front legs crouched, rear end up in the air with his tail wagging. A clear come get me pose if there ever was one. Facing off with him were Ravi and Sora's twins, also in dragon mode, who seemed determined to conquer this much larger dragon.

The kids launched themselves upward with a war cry, but the attack didn't get very far. Gregori opened his gigantic mouth wide and caught them in a clean snap of the jaws. Salem's heart jumped into his throat seeing this, and instincts almost sent him running down to the beach. Then he realized there was a lot of happy squealing from the twins. Gregori was clearly not biting down at all because their tails were wagging,

bodies wriggling.

Salem wasn't sure what the game was, but clearly all three were having a good time, so he wasn't about to stop them for long. He just needed a five-minute pause.

Gregori spotted him and waved a greeting. "Hah hooooon gaaaa sooo."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Salem deadpanned.

There was a deep chuckle before Gregori signaled with one hand—wait—and then spat both kids high up in the air. They immediately flapped wings, flying about, still laughing. Was this a wind dragon thing? Or something they'd learned from their mischievous father? Despite barely being in the clan for more than a few days, even Salem had heard stories about Ravi.

"Gimme a second, kids!" Gregori called up to them.

"Okay!"

Shifting back to human form, he loped up to where Salem stood on the bottom stone step—right as sand met staircase—then paused there, a smile on his face.

He looked so much better. The change in him in Boston had been so gradual, Salem hadn't quite realized just how much health and weight he'd lost until looking at Gregori now, who was nearly the picture of health. It made Salem's heart ache to see him vibrant and healthy again.

"Hi, babe. Pulled your head out of the books for a breather?"

"Well, yes, but I had a serious question I wanted to ask you."

Salem leaned in to kiss him, soft and slow, tasting Gregori's delight before drawing back.

"Whatever it is, yes."

Man was seriously bad about spoiling him.

"At least let me ask first. Go on a date with me?"

"You're correct," Gregori mused. "That's more of a hell yes question."

Salem had sort of expected this answer, but he was still relieved to hear it. "I've got reservations for tomorrow night. Be ready by five."

Gregori perked up. "Oh really? To what, dinner?"

"That is for me to know"—Salem stole another kiss—"and for you to find out. Five sharp, and dress up a little. I've got a full date planned."

"Ooooh. Yes, sir!"

Smartass. Still, Salem was smiling as he pulled back. The second he did, he saw two rascally blue dragons dive-bombing in their direction.

"Incoming," he warned.

And then promptly got out of the way.

Gregori turned, lightning quick, switching into dragon form smoothly and this time capturing the kids in his wings. They laughed and wiggled, trying to get free, but he had them closely tucked against his body.

“Dive-bombing?!” Gregori said with mock outrage. “Who taught you to dive-bomb your elders!”

“Daddy,” the twins chorused.

“Now doesn’t that just figure,” Gregori grouched.

Salem snapped a few pictures before going hunting for his brother. Right now, he needed more ideas on how to knock Gregori’s socks off. Since he didn’t know the area at all, it was time to pull in someone more “local.” And if Sam couldn’t help him, he knew some dragons who could.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Gregori should have known a date with Salem would be no simple affair. The good doctor fully threw himself into everything he did, so why would Gregori ever think he'd half-ass a date?

Part of him was so elated at Salem having asked him out, he was damn near giddy with it. A surprise date, no less, without any prompting on Gregori's part. He couldn't be more elated and stay in his skin. He'd damn near vibrated out of it already a few times. Gregori wasn't going to let Salem off easy though. After almost two months of brushing him off and ignoring him, Salem needed to put in some serious effort. Prove—even just a little bit—that Gregori wasn't the only one who wanted to be in this relationship.

Okay. Fine. Salem didn't need to try too hard. The mage could have taken him to McDonald's and presented him with the prize for the kid's meal and Gregori would have been over the moon.

But he did have some pride left. A smidge of ego. It wasn't a bad thing to want to feel appreciated and desired.

First stop, Rêveries.

He grinned when the car Salem had hired to take them into the city proper pulled up to the tiny restaurant with outdoor seating under red umbrellas. He'd expected Salem to choose a place that specialized in local Brazilian fare, but he'd opted for a suggestion from Dimitri. Dimitri loved this tiny French restaurant because its food was amazing, the scenery was beautiful, and the atmosphere was quiet and intimate.

“I see you had some help,” Gregori murmured as he stepped out of the car.

Salem smirked and immediately threaded their fingers together as he led the way to the front door. “I might have conferred with a few dragons who have lived here for a century or two. I thought they might have some insight into the best places to go in Rio de Janeiro. Better than a guidebook for tourists.”

They were greeted and immediately shown to a table. A server appeared with menus and water. The second he disappeared, the hostess returned with a broad smile and a bouquet of tropical flowers for Gregori.

Gregori’s heart flipped over as the flowers were placed in his hands. A divine fragrance danced past his nose, and he lowered his face to drink in their scent—and just maybe to hide his enormous grin as it slipped out. Salem was trying so very hard to impress him. The man sitting opposite him in a suit and tie, looking good enough to devour, practically bounced in his seat.

“They’re beautiful,” Gregori murmured.

“Not nearly as beautiful as you.”

Gregori choked on air and was forced to set his flowers aside. “Are you going to be feeding me cheesy lines all night?”

“But you told me back at my place that you loved cheese.”

This fucking tease. Gregori could count on one hand the number of times Salem had teased him, and to see him doing it while on a date sent Gregori’s head spinning. He’d tease back, but only after he got his brain firing again. Right now, it was too busy crooning and making happy noises to be of any use.

Thankfully, the server returned a moment later, saving him from blurting out all kinds of ridiculous things. He shoved the warm, crusty bread with the soft interior into his mouth as he listened to the specials.

“Would you like a selection of cheese to start?” the dark-haired server inquired.

“No, I’m good. Salem is giving me all the cheese I can handle.”

“Wine. Let me order some wine while we figure out our meals,” Salem cut in when the server just looked confused.

Gregori placed his flowers on the edge of the table and turned his attention to his menu, leaving the wine selection to Salem. The rest of the dinner passed enjoyably, and the food ended up being as spectacular as Dimitri’s claims.

But it didn’t compare to Gregori’s lively dinner companion. Salem told story after story of university mischief and shenanigans, from streaking across the campus to cadaver mayhem. There were even a few mentions of childhood nonsense with Sam. The only thing he didn’t talk about was work. There were a few times it seemed like he came close, but Salem caught himself at the last second, smiled, and changed the direction of the conversation.

It wasn’t until they were sharing a delicious flaky fruit tart that Gregori called him out over it.

“Do you miss it?”

Salem blinked wide eyes at him. “College?”

“The hospital. Your job.”



“Oh! Nah. I’m good.”

Gregori totally didn’t believe the ridiculous denial.

He shook his head as he stabbed a strawberry, then held it out on the end of his fork toward Salem. “I don’t want the hospital and your job to be a dirty word between us. Yes, I think you pushed yourself a little too hard, but you also saved a lot of lives, and the kids loved you. I’m proud of all you accomplished there.”

A soft blush stained Salem’s cheeks as he bit the strawberry off the fork and chewed. “Well, a little, I guess. Alexis sent an email, updating me on a few of the patients I was particularly worried about, and she told me which doctors were assigned which of my patients. They’re all in good hands, so I find myself thinking about it a lot less than I would have expected. Definitely less than when I was here before for Sam’s bonding ceremony. But I don’t find myself missing it, per se. Maybe just the routine and the camaraderie. I’m more excited about what I’m learning here with the other mages. And, to be honest, it’s only been three days. Right now, it feels more like I’m on vacation. I might miss it later. Are you worried?”

“You did cite your job as one of the reasons why you wouldn’t move to Brazil,” Gregori pointed out. “I’m right to be worried.”

“Eh. Yeah, okay, good point. But it wasn’t so much the job, it was turning my life upside down for a man and not having it work out. I’ve done it before. It...was an absolute disaster, and I didn’t want to do it again.”

“You were scared.”

“True, but that’s not a good reason to hurt other people or to run from things. It’s just...I had this set plan in my head for my life, and I couldn’t fathom changing it for a guy who was little more than a stranger. Yet, if I’d sat down and simply talked to

you, or called my brother and talked to him, so much frustration and animosity could have been avoided. You would have at least felt more comfortable about telling me you were sick. I'm sorry."

Gregori flipped over his hand and squeezed Salem's. "Don't. You have nothing to apologize for. Just because we're fated mates doesn't mean our coming together is easy. It's still a relationship that requires work. You had zero reason to trust me when we first met. I'm glad we're getting a shot now. So, no more regrets tonight." He lifted Salem's hand to his lips and brushed a kiss across the knuckles. "Now, do you have something else planned for our night out?"

"I do." He twisted in his seat and motioned to the hostess. She smiled and hurried over with a large brown envelope that she handed to him. When Salem turned back to him, he was back to bouncing in his seat. His grin was so wide it nearly split his face in half. "This is for you."

"I wasn't expecting a gift. This is too much, Salem," Gregori murmured as he opened the envelope and slid out a playbill for West Side Story . But it wasn't an ordinary playbill. It was covered in autographs from the cast who were currently performing the musical at Teatro Riachuelo Rio.

"I know we talked about going to see Wicked together for a date, but the touring company isn't coming to town for another four months." Salem paused, reached inside his jacket, and pulled out a pair of tickets. "I've got us covered for that performance. However, you did state West Side Story was one of your favorite musicals, and it just happens to be in town right now. So, I got us tickets to tonight's performance."

Gregori dropped his gaze back down to the playbill he was very carefully holding in both of his hands as his brain tried to remember how to make words. His mate had not only gotten him tickets to one of his favorite musicals, but he'd also managed to

acquire a signed playbill for him. Salem added something to his hoard ! And he'd gotten additional tickets to a musical four months away.

It was almost like he was planning to stay with Gregori here in Brazil.

He was already starting to plan their life together.

"Unless you're not in the mood to see a play tonight," Salem said a little slowly, uneasiness creeping into his tone. "It's okay if you're not. I was also thinking we could?—"

"No!" Gregori's head shot up. He'd been silent too long and Salem had started to panic. This needed to be fixed. He had to stop his dragon from hopping around in his chest and squealing like a six-year-old. "A play sounds amazing. Perfect." He shifted the playbill to his left hand and glanced at his watch. "But if we're going to make the curtain, we'll need to leave now."

Salem's grin returned and he signaled for the check while Gregori carefully placed the playbill back into the protective envelope. Salem paid the bill and summoned the driver over to pick them up. From the tiny restaurant, they were whisked across the city to Teatro Riachuelo Rio, where Gregori got to share his first love with his true love. It was the perfect night. Most of the performance was spent holding Salem's hand as they lost themselves in the music, colorful costumes, and performance.

Gregori had traveled around the world, watched plays and musical performances on some of the grandest stages of all, but nothing compared to spending this moment with his mate. To knowing Salem had planned all of this with him in mind.

When the curtain fell for the final time and the house lights came up, Gregori wanted to remain in these plush seats, not wanting the experience to end. But Salem pulled him up with a devilish grin.

They escaped the crowd leaving the theater and slipped into the black town car once again.

“Sir? Where to?” the driver inquired as they pulled away from the curb.

“Um...” Salem glanced at his phone for a second. “Can you just drive around for a few minutes while we decide?”

“Of course, sir.”

Gregori arched one brow at Salem. “You have more things planned?”

Salem’s wicked grin returned. “A few actually. It depends on what you’re in the mood for. If you’re up for it, Ilya told me about a late-night samba performance we can still make.”

“Hmmm. I think I’m done with big crowds for now.”

“Okay. Then Ha Na mentioned this little dessert shop that offers sweets from around the world. We could go grab something sweet. Or if you’re more in the mood for a nightcap, there’s this quaint bar I discovered that has this retro feel and specializes in whiskey drinks and live music.”

Gregori turned in his seat so he was facing Salem and brushed a lock of hair back from his forehead. “Smaller crowds than that.”

“Got it. Then, Luka told me about this little stretch of beach where we can take a late-night stroll. At this time of year, we should be able to see the bioluminescence.”

A low chuckle escaped Gregori as he leaned in and captured Salem’s lips in a sweet but brief kiss. “Take it easy. You’re trying so damn hard to make this date perfect.

You don't have to try to impress me. Just be you."

Salem took a deep breath, his eyes full of questions for a moment, and then he released it, slumping a little in his seat. "I...I've never tried so hard to get a date perfect. Of course, I've never tried to win someone over after I'd fucked up so badly. I need to show you I'm worth all the trouble you've gone to. That I can be just as thoughtful and amazing as you. I?—"

Gregori stopped him with another kiss. This one lasted longer as he slowly licked his way into Salem's mouth, soaking in the tenderness. "Stop. You've got nothing to prove to me. I already know how thoughtful and amazing you are."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Why don't we go back to the compound and spend some very private time together? We can do a stroll on the beach tomorrow night."

A happy little hum escaped Salem, and he laid his head on Gregori's shoulder. "That sounds perfect to me."

Yes, Gregori was very anxious to get his mate home so he could show him exactly how much he appreciated their date together.

He sat back in his seat, careful not to dislodge Salem's head, and told the driver to return to the Valerii compound.

"Oh shit!" Salem sat up and started frantically typing on his phone.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to cancel the violinist."

“The what?”

Salem flashed him a quick smile and resumed his typing. “I hired a violinist to serenade us on the beach as we walked.”

A great bark of laughter jumped from Gregori as he threw back his head. Being with Salem would never be boring.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Salem felt the handle of the door behind him, pushed it blindly open, and pulled Gregori inside, luring him with soft kisses and two fingers hooked inside the waistband of his pants. Tonight, he was going to show this man just how loved he was. Normally, they came at each other like two cats in an alley, but tonight he wanted it sweet and slow.

The interior of the apartment felt cooler, but he knew the sensation wouldn't linger for long. Not with the heat they were building between them. Their kisses became deeper, hotter, hungrier. His tongue tangled with Gregori's, savoring the man's moan. Gregori's dragon was clearly getting on board because there had been a distinct rumble in that moan.

Don't smirk, don't smirk, there will be plenty of time to smirk later.

Gregori tugged at Salem's shirt, and he returned the favor. They shuffled a little as they got clothes off, heading slowly for the bedroom, but right now getting to skin was the priority. With every piece of clothing he undid, he pressed a kiss against Gregori's fair skin, feeling the heat radiating against his lips. Grazing a nipple with a lick of the tongue had Gregori shivering, but Salem deliberately didn't give the other nipple any attention. Later.

He pinned Gregori to the bedroom door, keeping him there with one hand while he used the flat of his tongue to trail down over strong abs, prying open Gregori's pants as he did so, tugging them down until they pooled on the floor around his ankles. Gregori's hand stole into his hair, gripping it without pressure, but those blunt fingernails felt good carding against his scalp.

Salem mouthed at the base of Gregori's cock, mostly teasing, reaching up with fingertips to lightly scrape his nails against his balls. Then he sank a little lower on his knees to get his mouth around the tip of his half-erect cock.

"Fuck, sweetheart," Gregori groaned, that low dragony growl coming more to the fore. "You're far too good at this."

Damn right he was. Salem's knowledge of anatomy was not just for surgeries, thank you very much. He liked hearing Gregori say it, and his smug meter rose a few more notches.

Salem had a whole plan, but you know what? He was changing his plan. He was going to make Gregori come right here, without even making it to the bed, then fuck him. Sometimes a good plan just needed to pivot.

The fingers in Salem's hair tightened. Almost like a warning. Too bad Salem had no intention of pulling off.

"Salem." Gregori said his name like it should be a warning, but it was too breathy, too filled with need to come off convincingly.

He trailed his fingers backward, stroking the perineum. Lightly, but firm enough to be sensual. He knew just how sensitive Gregori's ass was, so?—

With a shout, Gregori came hard, the hand clenched on Salem's shoulder almost punishing for a second before he gentled it. Salem focused more on swallowing without choking. It was quite the challenge, as Gregori had a lot to give.

Salem pulled off, swallowing the last of it and wiping his mouth, only to find Gregori staring down at him with warm eyes. His breathing was a touch quick, but a mellowness seeped through his body language.



Salem grinned back at him. “If you lie on your back, at the edge of the bed, I’ll eat you out before fucking you.”

“You’re determined to spoil me tonight, aren’t you?”

Salem pressed a kiss against the inside of his thigh before answering. “Objections?”

“Not a one.”

He did help Gregori take his shoes off and then step out of the pants still around his ankles before letting his lover go. While watching Gregori’s fine ass flex, his braid lightly swinging along his spine with each step, Salem almost absently got the rest of his clothes off, chucking them in the general direction of the laundry basket. His entire attention was riveted on the man before him. Salem honestly couldn’t remember when he’d wanted someone this badly.

He deviated to the nightstand very quickly, snatching up lube, before coming back around to the end of the bed. Gregori had followed his directions to the letter. He had sat his ass right on the end of the bed and flopped back, spread out over the middle. Were dragons feline? Because he sure could take up a lot of space without trying.

A thought to ponder later. Right now Salem had higher priorities. Such as enjoying the view. “All of that flying really keeps muscles on you, doesn’t it?”

Gregori grinned up at him, entirely comfortable with this lewd observation. “It does. I know you enjoy them.”

“Damn straight I do.” He lined up with Gregori’s torso and ordered softly, “Pull your legs up.”

Heat entered Gregori’s expression as he faithfully obeyed the order. With hands

under his thighs, he pulled his legs up and spread them, completely on display for Salem and reveling in it, based on his expression. Such a good boy. Salem had every intention of rewarding him.

He fell to his knees again, grateful the rug in here was thick, and dropped the lube to rest in between his own legs to keep track of it. Very annoying, when the lube chose to go missing.

Then he took a moment, caressing the back of those firm thighs, reveling in the here and now. So often, his mind was set on the next goal, the next task. Rarely was he focused and present in the now. But this was something he wanted to lock away in his memory and cherish. Salem didn't want any other intrusive thought stealing joy from this.

He started just above the knee, kissing his way down, feeling every jerk and sigh from Gregori. With both hands, Salem spread his cheeks, revealing his ultimate goal. Gregori's hole was already flexing just from the anticipation, and it was a delicious rush indeed. Like a mixture of smugness and lust coursing through his system. He might have nipped an ass cheek just to hear Gregori startle and laugh. He was always teasing in bed, this one. Past time to return the favor.

Then Salem's mouth found his puckered ring and he made the most of it. Slurping, rimming, tongue fucking him. Gregori's moans were back with a vengeance, thighs trembling. Salem loved the reactions he got from this. Loved every bit of it. But his own body was raising demands, and he rather desperately wanted in that ass.

Besides, at this rate, Gregori might well come again before Salem could even get in him.

Blindly, he fumbled with a hand and got the lube open, slathering a generous amount all over his own dick. Salem worked himself up to full hardness in about two seconds

flat—he was all out of patience.

He had to get in this man. Now .

Salem pushed himself up to his feet, but as he moved, he got Gregori's legs up onto his shoulders. The second he'd caught his balance, he guided his dick into Gregori's tight hole, pushing relentlessly in. From this stance, he could see every flicker of emotion on his dragon's face. The tightness around his eyes from the burn of penetration, the parting of his lips saying how much he enjoyed it, the way his hands knotted in the blanket under him, like he had to grab something as an anchor.

Bottoming out felt sublime, pulling slowly out like a breath of anticipation of something joyful and perfect. Salem's whole body shuddered in bliss at being surrounded by such tight heat. He found a rhythm quickly, his thrusts gaining power and speed, but his eyes never left Gregori's. For once, it didn't feel awkward to meet a partner's eyes during sex. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Rather, it felt like he had so much to express to this man, and keeping their gazes locked on each other was essential to convey it all.

Pleasure started overtaking his common sense. He fucked harder, faster, felt Gregori's ankles lock behind his neck. Gregori's dick was fully hard and erect, beading pre-cum despite having just come not long ago. He was clearly loving every second of this and Salem was glad. He was also scheming on doing it again. And again. Really, he couldn't imagine ever tiring of making love with this man.

Salem could feel his balls tightening, his groin becoming sharper with sensation, knew he was seconds away from coming.

“You're close,” Gregori panted out.

“Yeah. Are you?”

“Yeah.”

Gregori put a hand to himself immediately, jerking off in the same timing as Salem’s thrusts.

The sight of it triggered Salem and sent him immediately over the edge. He pounded into that hot ass once more and then came so hard he felt vertigo. Only his grip on Gregori’s thighs kept him upright. He felt Gregori clench around him, heard the sound he only made as he came, and knew Gregori was right there with him.

Making love with him was always so perfect. Good thing for Salem he got to do it for several more centuries. Decades didn’t seem like enough time.

He ended up kneeling again, head pillowed on Gregori’s thigh, utterly relaxed and loath to move. He should, though. He should clean them both up. Salem just needed a second. Maybe a minute to get his wind back, his brain unscrambled from the ridiculously hot sex, and his coordination rebooted. Right now he had none of that.

“Salem?”

“Hmmm?”

“You dead?”

“Still breathing, promise.”

With a groan, he pulled himself up off the ground. That was to say, he got as far as sitting on the edge of the bed and then all willpower and motivation to move any farther died. To hell with it, this was what magic was for. He used the cleanup spell with a wave of his hand and then flopped down next to Gregori.

Who immediately pulled him in closer, cuddling as he was wont to do. This time, Salem had no problem with it.

“I feel like you’ve been trying to tell me something all evening. Mind putting it into words for me?”

And the man claimed he wasn’t a telepath. Well, Salem should say this aloud, though.

He propped himself up a little so he could look Gregori directly in the face as he spoke. It just felt right to do so.

“Look. This is hard for me to say, so just listen. I still don’t believe in soulmates, or fate, or any of that. But. I choose to be your mate. I—” He gulped. Come on, courage, don’t fail now. “I love you a lot. More than I ever have any other person. For you, I think I can be anything. Screw destiny, my choice is you.”

Gregori snatched him in close, kissing him hot and hard, his joy nearly vibrating through his skin. “I love you.”

“I know.” He found the courage to say it again, and for some reason, it felt easier this time. Less panic inducing. “I love you too. I know it took me a while to catch up with you, but I’m confident in this now.”

“That’s all I need,” Gregori said against his mouth. “I’m so full of joy I feel like I’m about to explode.”

“Don’t, I’m not cleaning it up. Also, I can’t do this anymore. You gave me space to think. I’ve done my thinking and I know precisely what I need. I need student loans paid off, a fully equipped clinic, nightly cuddles, someone to make sure I eat, regular sex, and do not ever give me space again or I’ll smack you.”

Gregori's lips parted in absolute delight. "Then...?"

"I'm not leaving you again. If you'll just say the word, I'll move back in with you tomorrow?—"

Gregori snatched him up in a tighter hug. Or he tried. They were practically glued together as it was. "Word."

"You smartass, I didn't mean it literally."

The hug tightened a little. "I mean it. I don't want space from you, either."

"Good." Such a relief to be on the same page. "Then, lesson learned, let's not repeat this. Now. What do you need from me?"

"You."

"I'm being serious, fav."

"What does fav stand for?"

"Favorite person. Because you are, clearly. Now, answer me. What do you need from me?"

Gregori pulled him in closer, either unable or unwilling to tamp down his grin. "Just you. And home. It's really all I need."

Salem gave him a look, wondering if Gregori was being difficult on purpose. "I'll figure this out eventually. But is that all you want to say to me?"

"No."

“Then what else?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

“I love you.” The words were slightly choked and trembled as bad as the rest of him, but he said them with strength and purpose.

He loved his mate. Salem was his everything. He loved his giant heart and his desire to heal the world. He loved his twisted sense of humor, his stubbornness, and his relentless drive. And he loved how Salem threw himself into anything that was important to him, which now included Gregori.

“I love you so much, Salem Hunter. You’re the perfect soulmate, the very person I didn’t realize I needed. You complete me in a hundred little ways. I love you and don’t ever want to be parted from you.”

Salem slammed into him, knocking him back onto the mattress, his arms wrapped around his neck as he peppered his face with kisses. “I love you. You are my mate and I’m never ever letting you go. All those other mages and non-mages around can go jump off a bridge. You’re mine.”

A bright laugh burst from Gregori, but it was cut off when Salem’s mouth covered his, drawing his tongue into a deep, satisfying kiss. He hugged Salem against him, reveling in this moment.

Salem broke off the kiss and lifted up enough to meet his gaze, eyes shimmering in the low light. “I love you, Gregori Valerii. Thank you for never giving up on me.”

“Never.”

“Good. Then what about this bonding thing? When are we doing it?”



Gregori shrugged one shoulder. “Whenever you want. We can talk to Rodrigo and work on scheduling?—”

“Now.”

Gregori almost choked on his tongue. As it was, he was gasping for air and pushing against the mattress to sit up against the pillows. “Now?”

“Yes. Now. Sam said that when we’re bonded, no one can separate us. Your dragon magic will extend my life so I’ll live as long as you. We’ll also be able to sense how each other feels.” Salem pressed his hand to his heart. “I want it. I want to feel you in here all the time. Can we do it now?”

“S-sure,” Gregori stammered. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was a dream come true. After all the struggles they’d had, it was astounding that he was sharing this moment with Salem, hearing these words come out of his mouth.

“Unless you’d rather wait...”

“No!” Gregori lurched into a fully sitting position and cupped Salem’s cheeks, forcing his mate to meet his frantic gaze. “We will do this now. You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this moment. I don’t want to wait another second.”

“Good. I’m done making you wait for me. Is there anything we need?”

Gregori searched his mind, but there was nothing they needed. Just some magic, the words for the vow, and the words for the spell. Oh!

“Champagne!” He launched himself out of bed and snatched up his pants, which had been left on the floor.

“What? Champagne?”

“Yes, I want us to celebrate the moment properly. I’ll run down and get a bottle of champagne from the wine fridge in the kitchen.”

“Brilliant idea!”

As soon as he had his pants on, Gregori zipped over to the bed and captured Salem’s mouth in a quick kiss. “Don’t move and don’t run off to bond with another dragon while I’m gone.”

Salem cackled and shoved Gregori away from him. “No way! You’re my perfect dragon.”

With those words blooming in his heart, Gregori darted out of his apartment and down the dark halls of the Valerii compound to the kitchen. A low work light burned over the giant stove and the entire place smelled of sugar and cinnamon. Someone had been up late making a dessert. Ooooh...or pastries for breakfast tomorrow.

He moved with ease in the dark room, skirting the center island to head straight for the tall wine fridge in the far corner. He snagged a bottle of champagne with his right hand and snatched up two champagne glasses from a cabinet with his left hand. They would have to do a formal ceremony later with the entire clan, or at the very least throw a celebratory party, but tonight’s bonding with just the two of them couldn’t be more perfect. Salem was the only one he wanted.

With his prizes in hand, Gregori raced back to his bedroom, but he stopped on the threshold as Sam’s voice stretched through the room.

“ It’s two in the fucking morning, Salem. What couldn’t wait until morning like a normal human being ? Damn doctors don’t understand the importance of sleep. ”

“I need your help. I want to bond with Gregori tonight. There’s a spell, right? You and Dimitri cast a spell. What is it?”

“ What ?” Sam squawked. “ Bonding ? Now? Like, right fucking now ?”

“Yes. We don’t want to wait. We can do the big party later. I just want to make him mine right now.”

Oh god, this mage was just melting his heart into a useless pool of goo. How was he supposed to continue? All he wanted to do was gather Salem up in his arms and wrap his entire body around him. Even his dragon was purring and crowing. It wanted to fly to the highest peak of the compound and roar to the world that Salem wanted to claim him.

But it was two in the morning.

As happy as his clan would be for him, none of them wanted to be awakened at this early hour.

Gregori quietly closed the door behind him and crossed to the bedroom, where he found Salem pacing with a bedsheet wrapped around his body like a toga and his cell phone held out in front of him while Sam was on speaker.

Sam’s laughter started as low snickers and finally grew to loud maniacal cackles.

“What?” Salem demanded.

“ Mom is going to be soooooooo pissed at you. This is the equivalent of running off to Vegas and getting married by an Elvis impersonator .”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“ I’m not! You were always the I’m never gonna get hitched child. The disaster dater. She had hope for me, but you ? Never .”

“Whatever. Mom and Dad will be here for the party. It’ll be fine.”

Sam snorted. “ Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that. I’ll be the one watching the shitshow with a bucket of popcorn .”

“Sam!”

“ Fine. Fine. I’m texting you the words for the bonding spell right now. I don’t understand why you didn’t just ask Gregori in the first place .”

“But it’s a spell. I thought only the mages would know it.”

Sam scoffed a second time. “ Those dragons are born knowing the words. I’ll let him explain about the vow .”

Salem spun around, his mouth hanging open. He didn’t even react to the phone in his hand flashing as Sam ended the call. “You know the spell?”

Gregori closed the distance between them and pressed a little kiss to the tip of Salem’s nose. “Dragons are born knowing the words to the spell.”

Salem groaned and threw his hands in the air. Grabbing up the bedsheet so his makeshift toga was away from his feet, he climbed back into the bed and crawled to the center before flopping down.

“Good. You’ve got the champagne, the vow, and the spell. Let’s do this.”

Gregori placed the bottle and glasses on the nightstand and slid into the bed next to

Salem, wrapping him up in his arms and legs. He didn't want to ask, but his conscience wouldn't allow him to remain silent. "You're not worried about your mother?"

"Nah. She'll be pissed for a little while, but in the end, she'll just be ecstatic I'm mated to a dragon. Okay, so what is the vow and the spell? How do we do it? Is it okay if we do this without pants on?"

Salem bubbled over with enthusiasm, and it made Gregori just as excited.

"Yes, we can do this without pants."

A response that got Gregori kicked out of the bed so he could shed the pants he'd pulled on just so he didn't flash someone sneaking into the kitchen for a late-night snack. He jumped back into bed, but this time he sat facing Salem and held both of his hands.

"The words to the vow aren't set in stone. It's a personal promise made between the two mates. You just say whatever is in your heart, but it tends to be a variation of this."

Gregori sucked in a deep breath and squeezed Salem's hands as he stared into his mate's eyes. "Salem Hunter, I claim you as my mate. I swear to love and protect you with all my heart and all my strength. I vow to give my very last breath to see you safe and happy for all of your days. I promise to guide you and support you in all your dreams, no matter where they may take us. And I promise our children will know this same love and devotion from me."

Salem sniffled and pulled one of his hands free to wipe away the stray tears streaking down his cheeks. "Do not make me cry, you asshole."

“It’s what’s in my heart.”

Swallowing hard, Salem nodded and grabbed Gregori’s hand again. “Gregori Valerii.” He stopped and sniffed again. “Gregori Valerii, you are the most amazing and patient dragon in all the world. I don’t deserve you, but I swear that I will always love you. I won’t let my past screw us up, either. Gregori Valerii, I claim you as my mate.”

Gregori leaned in and took Salem’s soft lips in a sweet, gentle kiss. His mate. Salem was one step closer to being his bonded mate at last.

“The spell,” Salem whispered against his lips.

“Yes, the bonding spell.” Gregori straightened and smiled. “This is the easiest part. First, I will give you some of my power with Dragon’s Breath.”

Salem bounced on the mattress with glee. “I heard some of the other mages talking about this and have been dying to try it.”

Gregori chuckled. “We’re mates. All my magic belongs to you now.”

“Okay. Dragon’s Breath. And then?”

“After you draw the power into your body, you’ll focus and say sifa fat-conqi gabofozold vitar gev adi . It means, I claim you as my mate and bind your soul to mine. I will then reply with sifa fat-conqi gabofozold vitae , which means I claim you as my mate and give my soul to you.”

Salem closed his eyes and repeated the words several times under his breath, wrapping his tongue around the complicated syllables until they finally rolled off naturally.

“Ready?”

Salem opened his eyes and nodded. “Ready.”

Releasing one of Salem’s hands, he cupped his cheek and tilted his head up. He sealed their mouths together in a deep kiss, treasuring the feel and taste of his mate. At the same time, he exhaled the breath he was holding, sending a small snippet of his power into his mate’s welcoming body.

He ended the kiss and pulled away to see Salem straighten, his eyes impossibly wide.

“Whoa! That’s peppy. Better than the first cup of coffee in the morning.” He pressed a hand to the middle of his chest with a look of pure wonder. “I can feel you in here. Your power is wrapped around my heart. That’s so amazing.”

“All my magic is yours.”

Salem grabbed his hand again and looked him straight in the eyes as he said, “ Sifa fat-conqi gabofo zold vitar gev adi. ”

A million invisible threads shot straight into Gregori’s chest from Salem, plunging into his soul.

“ Sifa fat-conqi gabofo zold vitae, ” he replied with the same push of magical power.

Those threads looped through his soul and leapt back into Salem, his eyes turning a brilliant gold, binding them together like two pieces of cloth.

Bonded.

He was bonded to Salem at long last.

He had found his mate and claimed him for all time.

Just as that thought was sinking into his head, Salem launched himself at Gregori, tackling him to the mattress. They kissed over and over again, soaking in this perfect private moment.

“I found you,” Gregori whispered against his lips.

“And I’m never letting you go,” Salem replied. “You’re mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.”

Gregori had never been so happy to be claimed in his life.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:47 am*

Ever since Cameron had been found, the Fire Dragon Clan had started celebrating a new holiday completely—the anniversary of when mages had been found. When Gregori told Salem this, his mate just quirked an eyebrow at him and said something along the lines of, We were always here, you just didn't know .

Which was true, but to the dragons, the mages hadn't been part of their world anymore. It had been a devastating loss. Cameron bursting out onto the scene and ripping the blinders off people's eyes had done the world a favor. No one disagreed on that point. So to them, it was worth celebrating.

Rodrigo had quickly joined in on this celebration. Probably in part because of Ha Na, but he was just as enthusiastic about the anniversary celebration as everyone else. Hence why the Ice Dragon and Fire Dragon Clans got together to celebrate. So far, the fire dragons had hosted the event, but there'd been talk about the ice dragons taking turns every other hosting.

Gregori was over the moon to go this year. Not only to show off his mate—because let's face it, with Salem there was a lot to show off—but because it was one hell of a party. He'd gotten to be good friends with the fire dragons over the whole Jaeggi debacle. He liked seeing those friends and catching up.

There was another, unspoken goal with this trip, though. Salem was still studying under Amaru and Sora, but in the past three months, he'd caught up very, very quickly. In fact, Sora had already cleared him to treat a number of ailments and do several basic surgeries. Salem had performed them all on a dummy Amaru had made up for practice. He'd done so flawlessly and could give you a full lecture on why he'd used the spells, potions, etc. that he'd used. He fully understood what he was doing.

He'd been so excited upon getting a stamp of approval from Sora, he'd been like a giddy child. Gregori may have taken twenty or thirty pictures of his expression. Salem had been cute, okay; he couldn't help himself.

They arrived at the castle late in the evening, having started the journey very early in the morning. Gregori wanted to introduce Salem to people, take a shower, and dress up for the party, so getting in the day before said party had been critical. Upon arrival, they had been shown a room and immediately crashed. It wasn't until the next morning he'd been able to introduce Salem to people and show him around the castle, which he'd done extensively until it was time to get ready.

Salem explored their room in the castle, looking about with his eyebrows rising. "Damn. Never thought I'd be in a German castle. It's truly beautiful."

"It is." Gregori had always thought so too, but he could see Salem really liked the place. "Do I need to build a castle?"

Without looking his way, Salem pointed a stern finger in his direction. "No."

"Why won't you let me spoil you?"

"Because you go overboard."

How dare he. Salem was entirely correct, of course, but how dare he be so observant and figure Gregori out.

Just for that, he dragged Salem into the shower. Not as if sex had ever worked in Gregori getting his way, but it was really, really fun to try.

ANYWAY. That was how they ended up losing about two hours of time, which meant they had to scramble to get ready for the party. King Alric and Cameron had requested they come meet them ten minutes before the party officially started.

Somehow, they managed to get into tuxes and looking presentable—well, Salem looked edible, Gregori was presentable in his opinion—and out the door just on time. Gregori knew where to go, having been around in this castle for months at a stretch, so he led the way to the small waiting room behind the big ballroom.

Baldewin stood just outside the door, and as they approached, he gave a wave. “Perfect timing, Gregori.”

“I do try.” He slowed to a stop and clasped arms with the dragon. “How are you, man?”

“I can’t be any better.” He beamed the brightest smile Gregori had ever seen him have. “We got our number, we’re in the queue now.”

With all the dragons finding mates, the list of who wanted kids was ever growing. But there were only so many incubators and only so much magic that could be poured into it. Now, people had to apply for a position in line and wait. No one really grumbled about it. Frankly, after five hundred years of waiting, a year or two seemed like nothing more than a passing breeze.

Gregori and Salem had already talked kids—and agreed on at least two—but Salem had begged to wait for five years first. He wanted to be thoroughly caught up with his training before bringing a kid into the chaos of their lives. Which was completely fair. Gregori suspected it was also because of Salem’s paranoia. What if their child was born but there was an injury, or complications? Salem wanted to be able to immediately fix it. Personally, Gregori felt the same way about it.

“When do you start?” Salem asked.

“Next fall. Which is rather soon, really. Tori’s already making this whole list of things to get done. For all that he hesitated about this idea at first, he’s gung-ho now. Anyway, I won’t keep you. Come in.”

Salem looked a little nervous at the idea of meeting the king and consort, but he gamely pulled on a professional smile and followed Gregori in. Gregori didn't expect the nerves to last. King Alric and Consort Cameron were very personable, charming men. They weren't stuffy on formalities, either. Salem's nerves wouldn't last five seconds.

Baldewin ushered them in, stopping just inside the doorway to announce, "Gregori and Doctor Valerii, sire."

Call Gregori besotted, but he got this little happy zing whenever he heard Salem called Valerii.

King Alric rose to greet them, scooping up his daughter in his left hand as he moved. Wait, wasn't that the same arm injured in the war? My god, had Sora fixed him to the point he didn't think anything of carting a baby around with his bad arm? Wow.

The king looked quite dashing in a dark red velvet suit, his hair slicked back with mousse. His little girl was dressed to match in a frilly red velvet dress with golden ribbons twined about her head in high contrast to her rich, dark hair. You could see the influence of Cameron's DNA in the shape of her eyes, but she was very much Alric's child in looks. A truly beautiful little girl.

Consort Cameron rose with them, coming forward with his hand outstretched and a smile stretched from ear to ear. He was in a dark red suit as well—although not velvet—coordinating with his family, and the color looked very good on him.

"Gregori. Thank you for coming in early. I promise we'll have a better talk after this, I just wanted you to meet my daughter first. Her bedtime is not to be messed with. She gets super grumpy past eight thirty. Doctor Valerii, I'm Cameron. I'm delighted to meet you."

Salem shook hands with him, his stiffness thawing already. "And I, you."

King Alric also shook hands with him, a gentle smile on his face. “You are very welcome, Doctor Valerii. I hope you understand why we wanted to meet you in person.”

“Of course,” Salem assured him. “Sora explained the situation to me. I’m happy to be your pediatrician, truly, and don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope you won’t have to call on me.”

King Alric’s expression turned rueful. “So do I. But I know better than to hope for the best and not plan for the worst. In any case, this is our daughter, Zara.”

“Princess Zara, a pleasure.”

At fourteen months, she didn’t talk much yet, but she seemed to like Salem for some reason. She stretched out both hands to him in a clear bid to be held. Salem took her without pause, settling her in his arms and looking at her with just as much curiosity.

The two kings had been nervous about having so many children with so few doctors on hand. Salem fit the bill nicely, as he could now treat the uncommon ailments a child could suffer. Sora would be able to handle the run-of-the-mill illnesses without a problem, but he’d admitted that Salem’s experience with pediatric surgery put him above Sora’s skills in pediatrics. Which was why Amaru had to take over teaching Salem at a certain point. Right now, Salem was on call for both clans.

Zara looked Salem over, as if trying to figure out where this new man had come from and if she could twist him around her little finger. Salem let her study him for a full minute before pulling a face, which got her giggling.

“Oh good, she likes you.” Cameron put a hand over his heart while blowing out a relieved breath. “This child is picky with people. There’s maybe a half dozen who she allows to pick her up. I think we’re in stranger danger phase.”

“Probably,” Salem agreed. “She’s at the right age for it. Don’t worry, it won’t last, it never does. Sora did a diagnostic of her yesterday and shared the results with me, so I have a fully updated chart on her. Rest assured, we’re keeping a close eye on her.”

First-time parents. Gregori didn’t blame them for being cautious.

Another door into the room opened and Gunter stuck his head in. “It’s time.”

“That’s our cue.” Salem handed Zara back to King Alric, who took her easily.

Gregori and Salem couldn’t leave through the same door Gunter had just used, as it led into the ballroom. Gregori led Salem back out a different way, looped down the hallway and around to the main doors, and then entered through there. It was perfect timing, as King Alric, Cameron, and Zara were stepping out onto the raised dais at the front of the ballroom.

The room was already crowded with people. All the different clans had chosen to come to this celebration, and it made for quite the array. Just from this viewpoint, Gregori saw Nikki in a stunningly sleek red dress, Warin and North near the buffet table, Cassie—who looked six months pregnant, at least, and when did that happen?!—plus Karl, Ranulf, and oh! There was Thiago and Evora. Everyone seemed to have gotten ready and made it on time.

He couldn’t wait to talk to everyone and catch up. It had been months since he’d seen them, after all.

King Alric raised a hand to gain everyone’s attention, still perfectly comfortable making a speech with his daughter on his hip.

“Everyone, thank you for coming. Tonight is the first celebration where we have every clan represented here.”

Holy shit, really? No wonder the room was packed!

“All of you traveled a great distance to be here, and I truly appreciate it. I’ll let you get to the festivities in a moment, but first, I want to propose something. For many centuries, we lived in a period of darkness. We kept referring to the war as if it was the only time marker we had. As if time stopped then for us. But since we found Cameron”—he shot his spouse a warm smile, getting one in return—“many wonderful things have happened. We reconnected with the Sodalitium. We were able to revive the Sousa and Lightning Clans. Whole families of mages came out of hiding. We, ourselves, came out of hiding and properly into the world once more. Friends, I do not think it right to keep referring to the Dragon War as if it’s our time marker. Let us leave the tragedy properly in the past. Let us step fully into this present and embrace our future, as it is so much brighter.

“This is my proposition to you. I would like to refer to our new beginning as the Age of Mages. What say you?”

A raucous roar tore through the room, many punching the air in support. Gregori was right there with them. Hell yeah! Alric was right, that was exactly what this was now. The Age of Mages. An age of hope and growth, while shedding the pain of the past.

King Alric beamed and punched the air himself. “Then the Age of Mages it shall be. Celebrate with me!”

Another roar crashed through the room like a tidal wave. A few mages even set off fireworks that boomed against the tall, vaulted ceiling. Gregori wasn’t sure if it was planned, but it made him laugh. Salem clapped right along, caught up in the euphoria. Gregori looked down at his happy face and fell in love all over again. Because of this man at his side, he wasn’t alone. He had a whole future to look forward to. Including children, which he never thought would happen. King Alric was right; this was an era of hope and prosperity.

It was time for them to soar.