

Every relationship had its share of compromise.

Lenya had heard as much, anyway. The last five hundred years hadn't held much *relationship* for him, and he certainly didn't feel the need to *compromise* in any of them. He understood compromise as a political concept, certainly. As an interpersonal one....

Well, he was used to getting what he wanted.

"Marry me," he'd said, down on one knee, a beautiful adamantine ring in one hand and Joaquin's hand in the other. He'd gotten that through tears.

"I'm moving the tower," he'd said, like that was some reasonable thing to do. Moving a whole white mage tower with penthouse. He'd gotten that through some confusion and admittance that there was very little Joaquin could do to stop him from acting within his own country.

"I'm thinking glass," he says, the framework of the spell complete with design and components held fully in his mind, ready for work.

"I was thinking...wood," Joaquin replies carefully, looking up from where he's kissing Lenya's stomach. He looks almost guilty.

"I could just make the glass."

"I can *chop wood*. ...and you can watch?" That does sweeten the deal a little, but Lenya's lips remain pursed.

"You want a cabin?" Lenya asks. He fails to hide his distaste. Wood lodges can be...nice. For a long weekend retreat. He doesn't want to live in one. Centuries in his immaculate, perfectly personally curated ivory tower had not prepared him for long-term glamping.

"I wouldn't call it a cabin. Exactly." For a man who wouldn't call it a cabin, there was reticence in the soft kiss he pressed above Lenya's belly button.

"What would you call it?"

"A—" He searches for the correct word. One that isn't 'cabin.' "Cottage."

"A wood cottage."

"Mhm."

Lenya lifts Joaquin's beautifully square jaw, looks into his beautiful dark eyes. "That's called a cabin. We're gods, darling. I won't live in a cabin."

Joaquin sighs and sets his face to his fiancé's pale stomach.

Lenya thinks that's that. He's gotten what he wants. The cabin foolishness is done. He continues thinking about the delicate frosted patterns that will frame each pane as he runs his fingers through Joaquin's hair, teasing the curl around his finger.

"Hey uh, Mr. Lenya—"

"Again, just Lenya, dear," he corrects, looking up over his glasses as Cayden slides into a seat across from him, sliding a hot cup of tea across the table like an offering.

"Lenya, is there like, something up with Joaquin?"

"Usually, in my experience. What do you mean?"

"He just seems. Kind of. In a mood. His mouth was doing the thing—" Luci imitates Joaquin's incredibly sad little frown impressively. There's no doubt he's a Calloway when he looks like that, he could be Joaquin's own son, and that gives Lenya a feeling. He isn't fully

proficient with those yet but he categorizes it as deep fondness. The sort he feels for his own younger siblings. Paternalism. "And just seemed kind of down during our lessons."

"Did he 'go for a ride?'"

"Yeah, he took the black horse with the spot over its eye."

"Windstrider."

"Right," Cayden says, skeptical like he hadn't been fished out of a circus in a country where magic is illegal, and this horse's name is somehow weird.

Lenya sighs and closes the interior design book he'd been browsing.

"I'll talk to him when he gets back." Lenya tucks the book under his arm. His voice softens. "Thank you for the tea. Again, you don't have to—"

"No, I know, I want to, and it's kind of uh, reflex?"

The mage reaches out to pat Cayden's pulled-back hair. "You like taking care of others. It's very sweet."

Luci grins and blushes, looks down at the table between them.

"Yes, sir."

"And stop calling me 'sir,' we're family." He touches Luci's nose as he turns to go before the kid gets misty-eyed. Luci makes the same perfect :c face Joaquin does. The sentiment gets him. In the wake of it, thinking about how Gidley booped his nose gets him all over again. Lenya has already left the room.

"Hey there, cowboy," Lenya calls. He's sitting on a fence in front of the stable when Joaquin comes riding back nearly an hour later. His lover smiles just seeing him. He looks best in moonlight but Lenya wants to pull him off that horse and kiss him stupid just the same awash in late-noon sun.

"M'lord." Joaquin tilts the brim of his hat and brings Windstrider alongside the fence. He leans expertly with thighs and abs tense to get within kissing distance. Lenya cups his jaw and scratches under his chin. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"A little birdy told me you rode off to clear your troubled mind."

"Is that so." Joaquin sits back in the saddle, hands crossed over the pommel. He looks over at the stable like he's deep in thought instead of trying to avoid meeting Lenya's eyes.

"It is. I suspect our conversation from this morning isn't over."

Joaquin shifts in his saddle and pats the pommel. Lenya can't pin down all the emotions on his dearly beloved's face. "I'd like to reopen the topic for discussion."

"Are we going to do that...here, or would you like to put your horse away?"

Joaquin considers. He's taller on the horse. He does feel like it might be a better position to argue from.

"Put the horse away, Joaquin."

That answers that. He tips his hat again and winks as he trots off.

Lenya meets him inside, the long robe he wore removed and folded over his arm to keep it from dragging. Joaquin is unbridling Windstrider and removing her saddle, then blanket underneath. This is ritual and Lenya hangs back while Joaquin goes through the motions. He only approaches when the Calloway begins brushing her out.

"Your apartment was beautiful," Joaquin tells him. "I always felt lucky just to see the inside of it."

"It was," Lenya agrees. "I crafted every detail to my liking."

"You were right. You deserve better than a cabin. You deserve the best."

Lenya is silent in agreement, waiting for Joaquin to continue.

"Houses can have wood—and windows."

"Most of them do."

Joaquin turns, gesturing with the coarse brush in his hand. "Did you want to keep talking about it, or not?"

Lenya stands up a little straighter. "Yes. Please, continue. I want to hear your thoughts. I want to know—how you feel—about it."

"I want to build a home with you. In every way." He turns back to brushing Windstrider with a blush across his cheeks. "You have exquisite taste. But I hoped that home would be a little...warmer...than you might have in mind."

"You feel very strongly about that."

"Yeah." Joaquin scuffs his boot, very much like one of the horses would. "I didn't realize it, this morning. I didn't word it well, either."

Not that Lenya gave him the opportunity, the mage thinks. He pushes his glasses up more out of reflex than need.

"Sixty."

Joaquin looks back from his horse. "What?"

"Sixty percent glass. Is that too much?"

Joaquin frowns, then his look loosens some, only to tighten again skeptically. He opens his mouth, closes it.

"It is, isn't it. Fifty-five?"

Joaquin drops his head. He smiles, though, slow coming but warm. A look that makes Lenya's chest tighten. He used to be concerned at the feeling but now knows it is, somehow, a good thing.

"Fifty," he says.

"Fifty?" Lenya asks, voice arching nearly to a whine. Dropping from one hundred to sixty had been giving so much ground to start.

"These big bay windows," Joaquin says, like he's picturing it. Like he spent his ride trying to bring their visions more in line with each other instead of moping. "Arched windows in your library. A bright breakfast nook. Maybe sixty, after all, with a fully glass green house—"

How can Lenya argue with...that? Any of it? He pictures it as Joaquin describes it, fits the windows he'd been imagining into their wooden frames, pictures the cushion-covered seat with a slim little bookshelf worked into the wood on either side.

He nods, jaw a little tight.

"You're frowning," Joaquin says, and clears his throat, puts a hand on his own hip.

"Am I?"

"How do you—feel—about all of that?"

"Good," Lenya answers, and clears his own throat. "I, um. I feel good about that, Joaquin."

“Good,” Joaquin answers, and looks down at the dirt and hay under his feet. He sets the brush down and steps up to take Lenya’s shoulders instead. “Thank you.”

The sentiment is so earnest it breaks through Lenya’s thick emotional armor.

“This is for both of us.” He’s stiff in Joaquin’s hands and stiff saying so. “It has to be up to both of us.”

“I know how hard that is for you to say.” The tenderness makes Lenya roll his eyes even while Joaquin kisses him. Even while Joaquin picks him up easier than he would any of the hay bales. “I can’t wait to see the windows you make.”

“Ugh.” Lenya lets his head drop back against Joaquin’s bicep.

“I love watching you work.”

“I’m going to love watching you cut down a bunch of trees. Shirtless?”

“If my lord wishes it.”

Lenya huffs and sits up to kiss Joaquin’s cheek. Maybe someday he won’t feel like he needs healing every time the crescent of Joaquin’s smile waxes across that handsome face.