

06/30/16

Oya, Surya, and I came to Ecuador for a summer of teaching English at a camp, or so we thought. What we did not know was that we had been drawn to this area, because of an ancient calling. This calling was stronger than nationalities, language, or personal history. Last month, the three of us had been bewildered 20-something Americans, stepping into a new country for the first time. We had nothing in common except that all of us were native English speakers. Oya's parents came from Nigeria decades before she was born; Surya's parents came from India to begin teaching at a mid-size university, and stayed to raise a family. My family had been in the States a few more generations, but we had emigrated from Scotland right before my grandmother's time.

We came to teach, but what we were unaware of before we got here, was that we also came to learn magic. We just found out we could shapeshift into dragons, and our supervisor for the teaching program was Maria-Jose, dragon wrangler. She and her husband are old spirits, making dragons look like sleeping kittens in comparison. Jose—never call her Maria, as I learned the first day—and Diego, her husband, a wizard, had trained many hundreds of dragons during their long journey. While I was impressed with Diego's magic handling abilities, I was far more in awe of how Jose artfully wrangled the summer school kids we were supposed to be teaching, as well as three incredibly clumsy dragons. She was amazing.

Surya is a lithe dragon, lean and fast; he is the color of sunlight yellow, with hints of red, orange, and goldenrod across his wingspan. He can change color, from the warm sunrise colors of pink and orange to brightest yellow at noon to sunset purple and dark maroon. He hasn't fully mastered his color changing abilities, but he does know an amazing trick of fluttering his wings and shifting from red to orange to yellow and back again. He's still working on his full body.

Oya is an iridescent indigo-black dragon, with several scales of powerful, proud red along her side. Oya is graceful and sleek, with a long mane. While she doesn't have Surya's capacity for color, her scales appear to move, mesmerizing as she flies.

I am an Earth dragon, scales a variety of spring green leaves with wings the color of warm earth. While Oya and Surya are both fast and sleek, I am easily the largest dragon, and my roar can be heard from many miles away. I cannot change my scales, but I am surprisingly adept at camouflage. I've won all six games of Hide and Seek that Jose set up, each time testing us on a different dragon skill.

Diego and Jose were driving us around, having us tap into our dragon powers while in human form. Another trainee dragon was wedged into the back seat with Surya, Oya, and me. Surya's parents called, so Diego dropped him off at a barn, Jose smiling. When Jose smiles, we get nervous. Surya's test, we later learned, happened at the barn. Once he returned to our camp, he shared his power: create, breathe, and control fire. Oya and I learned that not all dragons breathe fire. Dragons, like humans, all have unique talents.

The other dragon in training gave me a bad vibe. Daisy seemed determined to live out every Asian stereotype--she even had the too-tight, too-short school-girl outfit, and underwear so skimpy, it may as well not have been there at all, I am disgusted to report. The only thing that made the situation bearable, as she sat on my lap and made googly eyes at Jose's husband, was that I could tell Jose did not trust her. Little of the advice she shared—as a dragon trainer for a so many long decades—made any impact on Daisy's overt and fake enthusiasm. When Surya got out, I unceremoniously shoved her to one side of the car, so that Oya and I could talk to Jose without her in my face.

We had not been driving long, when I felt power surround the car. Diego began muttering under his breath and my attention was drawn to the road like magnets to North. We

were no longer on the twisting, crowded streets of Riobamba, but instead on tarmac straight out of the American Midwest, or perhaps an airport.

Something scratched at my perception, and I felt my dragon powers focusing. We were traveling at 140 km/hr, but suddenly, everything slowed. I could feel each person's heartbeat; Diego and Jose calm and steady, Oya's speeding up a little, and Daisy; something was off about her rhythm, but I could not figure out what.

My dragon senses were pulled outside the car. A Jeep was heading towards us on the straightaway, with two hooded figures in the front seat. I knew instinctively they were well over two miles away, but I saw the khaki hoods and strangely sparkling eyebrows. I watched as a third passenger rose from the backseat, bringing a gun to bear on us. I saw the gun, which hadn't been cleaned in a long time, and I saw it fire. I tracked the bullet as it traveled toward our moving vehicle. I knew we were moving fast, and that bullet faster, but I saw every rotation of the bullet.

Right before it hit and shattered the windshield, I reached my hand *through* the glass, snapped my fingers, and plucked the bullet from the air. I reached for it, thinking 'strawberry,' and suddenly, I pulled my hand back into the car, holding a strawberry the size of a quarter. The glass windshield remained intact, and the Jeep sped away to the right.

I felt the dragon's magic flow through me, happy that I tapped into that mythical power. I felt Jose eyeing me critically, while Oya was far more excited.

"Eat it!"

I took the bullet that I tracked through space, plucked from thin air, and magically turned into a juicy strawberry into my mouth and chewed. I got the texture of a strawberry correct, but unfortunately, not the taste.

“Ugh, it tastes like gun oil.” I groan, swallowing rapidly, to diminish the acrid oily taste. Oya and Jose’s husband howled with laughter as Jose smiled. She patted my arm, saying that was a great first foray into telekinesis and transmorphing matter. High praise, indeed!

Later at camp, after Surya shared--and showed off--his dragon-fire, Oya shared her own power: hypnosis. Luckily, it didn’t work on us or Jose, but it did work on the camp counselors. Daisy had not had a successful test, and angrily stalked away when we returned.

That was a great night, alternating starting and putting out fires, hypnotizing willing volunteers to do the Chicken Dance when someone said “five,” and practicing morphing inedible objects into tasty treats. It took lots of practice to get the tasty part right.

07/08/16

I finally figured out why we were dragons, drawn to this place.

A volcano hit, worse than any movie, and far more terrifying, because it was fueled by magic--we didn’t know that at the time, of course. Daisy had learned just enough to think she knew everything. Unfortunately, when Jose kicked her out, she found a wizard without Diego’s scruples. He taught her to harness the darkest magics.

The volcano blew in the middle of the night, and we had no warning—and we couldn’t find Jose. We couldn’t find anyone at all. Oya, Surya, and I were staying with a few priests during our training. The padres were all missing also, so we grabbed the car and drove to the next city. Two other vehicles followed our hasty retreat. But the lava kept coming, glowing closer no matter how fast we drove. It destroyed everything, including cell towers. The lava followed relentlessly, and there was always more of it. It didn’t matter how high we climbed or how many rivers we crossed. It wouldn’t stop.

The three vehicles stopped at a restaurant in the next town. It was easy to see the mountain smoldering with lava and smoke, but we needed food. We checked outside, but the lava was following us, drawn as if magnetized. The lava flow did not bother with physics or gravity, it followed us more like a tsunami wave than molten rock kilometers from its heat source.

The people in the other two vehicles were waiting for the food, burgers in a fancy Italian restaurant—a strange choice with lava hot on our tails. The food came, but Surya, Oya, and I placed them inside bread baskets.

“You want to eat? Follow the food!”

We were back on the road before the lava overtook the parking lot. We continued driving, moving from Riobamba to the coast, quickly running out of land to escape. Oya drove, and I grabbed a small white dog who had been chasing us, when we stopped for more people.

After at least a full day of running from the lava, we let the others go ahead. Surya parked the truck and we piled out. He was right. The lava was after us, not bothering the other vehicles as they raced away. As the sun set on the valley flooded with lava, it finally dawned on us. Humans were susceptible to fire and flame, but dragons weren't. Oya and I may not be able to control fire like Surya, but it wouldn't damage us.

“We are such idiots.”

“I feel like a moron.”

“Guess we should turn around, huh?”

As one, we changed into dragons and went to save the people the lava stream had stranded. As it turned out, the lava was stalking us. It had started with Daisy's rage, but could not have kept up for so long without help. Jose and Diego, knowing what she was doing, had magically enhanced one thread of lava to stay mere feet behind us, for as long as we ran. It had

been a reminder that while we had the brains of humans and spent our lives thinking like humans, we had the hearts of dragons, and that we need to honor both.

08/17/16

Oya and Surya split, our group training at an end. Jose had praised us as “acceptable.” We learned how to control our dragon powers in human form, and learned to accept our dragon selves. Oya was a dragon that controlled patterns, Surya a dragon of light and fire, and I am an Earth dragon.

A few weeks on my own, I found out about an illegal, underground carnival. Their main attraction was a huge wolf shifter. I didn’t know any details about him, but I was determined to save him. There were plenty of shifters in modern society, but there always seemed an undercurrent of humanity that liked things that were different to suffer.

I walked in as a human, having finally learned how to conceal my magic. I found him: gigantic, all white, chained. My heart broke as crowds of semi-horrified people paid to get close to him. For “a nominal extra fee,” they could “challenge the Beast,” where one walked within his chain length and growls, waving arms around like drunk fanatics. This man, who happened to have two shapes like me, was forced with sharp prods to pretend to defend his territory, growling pathetically. I knew he wasn’t going to fight back; he had been forced to be a Wolf too long, his magic balance was off, making him apathetic to any challenge. The stress lines around his white muzzle made him look indifferent, haggard, and dangerous to no one.

Watching from the side of his cage, I lost my control. My Dragon thundered free in the middle of the cavern. At first, I was my usual large dragon self, but his whimpers fueled my sympathy magic and I grew three times my usual size. While I might not have fire, I had rage and a mighty roar, which blasted a dozen people from the cave on their backs. There was one

beautiful moment where the others remained in place, frozen in fear at the unexpected turn of events. I growled menacingly, which effectively broke even the bravest soul, and hundreds of people ran in every direction. What are humans going to do against an enraged Earth dragon? In an earthen cavern?

I snapped his chains with my claws. Somehow, we could communicate. This wasn't the image-sensing Surya, Oya, and I had when we were training together. The Wolf and I could truly communicate together.

He showed me his collar--a jeweled monstrosity of money and magic wards, designed to house both a bomb and a power damper. He showed me memories of the pig who ran this macabre circus, holding a switch, always threatening to make two exhibits—one of the wolf's body, and another of his severed head.

I understood, but warned the wolf to stay very still. While I can't create fire, I am an Earth dragon, and superheated rocks become magma. Granted, my rocks-into-magma talent was still far from mastery, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to do what I wanted. I grabbed a mouthful of rocks and then took the cold, ticking metal in my teeth. I closed my eyes and prayed.

He told me he'd rather be dead than trapped, so if I accidentally killed him, that was fine with him. I huffed impatiently, before collecting my magic inside my mouth. I just needed to create enough heat to cover the six inches of precious metal in my mouth, not the poor Wolf's fur and neck. I felt my size shrinking as my magic collected within the rocks.

I felt the metal liquefying, the ticking slowing and finally stopped as the metal pooled into its circuitry, neutralizing the bomb. I spit the superheated rocks and foul-tasting metal out of my mouth and opened my eyes. Luckily, I only scorched both sides of the wolf's neck, but no permanent damage.

*"Can you fight?"* I asked him as he stood up and shook himself vigorously.

His response was both physical and telepathic. His roar equaled mine. His eyes sparkled a fierce green, and his magic swelled. The stress lines around his muzzle faded as he began loping toward an exit, where two of the circus jailors were hiding.

Together, we howled, sending a message to any innocent person to get out and that anyone left was about to face our wrath.

The wolf was busy with the jailors and I felt someone behind me. That fat asshole who'd rigged a magic bomb to the damping collar was behind me—angry at me for destroying his life's work. I grinned ferociously, as only dragons can. Using my beautiful, numerous fangs, I chomped off a leg, which tasted rotten and foul. I spit it out and threw it to my right and him to my left. Finally, this little insect who had chained up a beautiful person and animal, met something that scared him. Me.

I felt the earth and realized there was an old volcanic shoot nearby, that was still connected to a magma pocket. I turned around, shit on the one-legged little shit, and began digging. Within moments, given my immense size, I found it and the magma began to flow sluggishly into the chamber.

I found the wolf, who had since transformed into a human, gave one last look at the ringleader, who struggled from my messy, sticky gift as the lava lit the cavern. Chuckling in dragon form can be just as terrifying as growling, and the operator of this now-closed establishment shriveled on the ground, begging for me to not eat him. I carefully lifted the human, and rose through the smoke. Running on magic-fueled adrenaline, I didn't know where to go, except to escape that mountain.

We flew for hours, but I started noticing the wind, dragging each wing down harder, how my arms holding the human were starting to shake. I wasn't an old dragon; my stores of



magic were relatively small. We landed in a wooded glade, but had steep mountains surrounding us. I instinctively go to mountains and forests, it's my safe place.

I landed, transformed, and he hugged me. With my last bit of magic, I pushed just enough to make us clothes and a blanket. I tried to tell him I overextended my magic, but unconsciousness swallowed me. I was asleep before I hit the ground.

I woke up groggy, one hell of a magic hangover pounding through my head. Before opening my eyes, I could feel a warm, vibrating pressure leaning against my back. Fighting exhaustion and the seductive warmth, I realized he transformed back into a wolf to keep me warm while I slept. He woke up and stretched every muscle group, before shaking himself human.

What a sight. I loved how his magic sparkled and slowly faded back into his human skin. However, my admiration was very short, because I needed to refuel.

"Food," was my croaked hello. I must've been out for a few days, because there were several rabbits hanging and what looked like a deer roasting on a fire. The dragon took over, and I ate all the rabbits, raw, bloody, and some still covered with fur. With the edge taken off, the two of us finished the deer in a more leisurely fashion. We shared some "getting to know you" stories. The horrors of the circus were saved for another time.

He, Edward, offered me the last flank of deer, saying he had been pretty well fed, given the circumstances.

"Thanks, but I need more than just food. I used up too much of my magic. Food helps, and I need more of that, but I also need..." He raised an eyebrow at my distended stomach. I closed my eyes, feeling the life force of the meat that I had just consumed and shifting it to the magic that my incorporeal dragon could enjoy. I opened my eyes to him enjoying the view: me.

“Your magic is different. That was amazing to watch. What else do you need to restore your magic?” He asked, stretching again.

There are three things and Earth dragon needs to restore the balance of magic: food—both human and dragon; to physically manipulate and play with the earth and its counter affinity: water; and sex. Looking across the campfire at Edward, there was no way I was about to mention that last one. He felt different, not like those playmates I had before, when we got what we needed and then moved on. My instincts told me he would be more permanent, so I was not going to have sex with him. As enticing as that idea sounded...

In dragon lore, Earth dragons have many fleeting “experiences,” just to tide them over until they found a mate. Once they found their balance, their mate, sex made the Earth dragon stronger than ever before. Helped them mature. Something about this wolf made me excited and nervous and hopeful for some future together. So, to be safe, no sex magic for now.

“Dirt. I need to play in dirt. What I really need to create ditches, control water though moving dirt. Is there a village around here?”

We packed up our meager belongings and headed into the woods. Traveling at human speech was slow going for someone who could fly across miles in a moment, but being in the forest, taking each step, and being with Edward made all the difference in the world. I could feel my dragon soaking up the magic of the walk.

Around noon, we came across a sizable village in need of drainage ditches. I spent all glorious afternoon, ditching out dozens of low-lying farms, diverting water to crops, and away from homes. Edward mostly watched, several times asking villagers for food they could spare as payment. He brought me more rabbit, wrapped in delicious, green, leafy vegetables, and tubers that gently prickled my magic senses. He'd make me eat, then resume his vigil.

Sometimes he dozed as a wolf, but I knew he was watching and listening to everything. By the

end of the day, my magic was close to fully restored. The interplay between earth and water was so steeped in magic, I felt almost full.

We camped out under the stars, a few ridges from the village, his fur keeping us both warm. The next day, I asked him if I could brush him. I'd gotten a few brushes from the villages the night before. He immediately stretched in front of me, offering his fur for my inspection. He preened under my ministrations. I realized we were sharing magic, something I had only done with Oya and Surya. And that was to defeat the crazy Asian dragon. This was something completely different, not for battles, but just to share energy. We sent and received the other's calm vibrations. I begin getting a sense of where he wanted the brush a little harder, scraping along the dense follicles of his skin, or where he preferred a lighter touch. He was ticklish under his left arm.

As I brushed, Edward became darker, the stress having turned his fur white. Slowly, through our shared magic, his hair became dark again. Not completely black, but a much darker wolf with several white streaks along his side appeared. He shook himself vigorously, then grabbed my hand and his razor-sharp teeth. He sent me an image of my dragon before releasing my hand and jumping into the lake we had camped by. I transformed back into my regular size, which still dwarfed the 6-foot-high wolf, and jumped in after him. We played in the water for a very long time. Dragons and wolves are naturally playful, especially friends and mates, and our animals enjoyed the play, nuzzling each other. They already knew what it would take the humans much longer to realize: they were each other's mates. The magical animals shared magic, just to feel each other.

Days, weeks, and months passed smoothly along. We—the human we—came to the same realization our animal halves did: we were mates.

One day, we heard about another circus, with another wolf. As it turned out, it was his ex-girlfriend from many years ago. There was little discussion. We both knew we had to close this other circus as well.

We headed out on the long trek to save the other wolf. I was heartbroken, because I thought he would rather be with a wolf, not a hulking dragon. I was fine for someone to play with at the time, but he wouldn't settle for me. Right before we broke into the carnival, he told me to stop flying. We landed, overlooking the dilapidated castle we are about to storm.

"Are you seriously going to give me up without a fight? Nothing? Just rescue Sally and fly off into the sunset!" He roared at me. I start getting prickly and turned into my human form so I didn't crush him. Too much.

"She's your girlfriend from way back, kidnapped, just like you. Tortured in the same way you were. Wolf, like you. I'm not standing in the way of your happiness, asshole. I'm giving it to you." I roared back.

"Fuck that and fuck you if you don't think that I love you. You're mine and you're not getting out of being with me that easily." He crowded into my space, his instincts taking over, trying to alpha wolf me into submitting to his force of will.

"Listen, fur brain, I love you too. But I'm not making you choose. And quit trying to alpha wolf me. I can out alpha-dragon you." I step closer into his space. He grinned at my move.

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed my hand, slowly scraping his calloused thumb over the sensitive skin above my pulse. He looked me in the eyes, lowering his mental shields, so I could sense his heart.

"Listen you stubborn, gorgeous Dragon. I do love you. I want to be with you for the rest of our lives. Sally was a girlfriend many years ago, but I want to rescue her because it's the right

thing to do. If you want me to go away, I will, but only because you told me to. It has nothing to do with her. I repeat: nothing. You're all the partner I want. Not a wolf. Just you."

We're both crying.

"I do not want you going anywhere. I do not want you going away. I love you, too. Maybe later, we should work on our communication skills. But for now," I growl, grabbing him into a sensual kiss, our magic fired by our passion. Sex magic is going to be more amazing than I ever dreamed. Later. Both of our animals are close to the surface, so my voice deepens, as I transform.

"It's time to kick ass."