



Doce

## *A Torquere Press Arcana by BA Tortuga*

He could hear them talking about him, about Renaldo, Leonid. Like he couldn't understand them. He'd been in this country for fifteen years. He wasn't stupid.

He wasn't stupid and he spoke English and he wasn't Mexican, either.

Assholes.

Sometimes he thought the others were lucky, to not hear all the shit the Americanos were saying.

Joaquim rolled his shoulders, rocking back and forth on his heels as he waited for the rest to show up for the meeting. Balthazar Silva came in first, broad-shoulders and barrel chest easy to identify. The man flashed him a wide smile. "Bom dia, Joa. How are you?"

"Balta." He nodded, smiled. "Good. I am very good. You?"

Every one of them stood, moving to Balta.

"Good. Good." Balta shook his hand, making his skin tingle. It was like the man was electric, somehow. He had a huge presence.

Of course, no one was Balthazar. No one. Balta had been the first one to come up, to break the barrier with the Anglos. All of them -- well, most of them -- wanted to be Balta.

Joa thought that maybe he just wanted to know Balta. He didn't like the cameras so much.

Once all the handshaking was over, the last few riders had straggled in, and the meeting could start. The meeting could always start once Balta was there. He was sort of the universal translator.

"We're all here, huh?" Balta asked in Portuguese, glancing around. "Okay. Good. So, the draw is not so good today. Ed Lamott could not come with his bulls, so many of them are from a stock company in North Carolina."

Most of them groaned. That would mean less experienced bulls. That always meant more hang-ups, more wrecks, and more time for him and Balta, translating for the doctors. Balta went on, pulling out his list, explaining who had drawn what bull, and there were only two animals on the list that he recognized. The rest were all new, including his bull, and Balta's. That was going to be bad.

Leonid tugged his shirt sleeve. "Oi, it's all of us, gets the new bulls, Sim?"

Joa nodded. "Sim. All of us."

"The Americans, too?" Renaldo asked.

Balta grinned. "The Americans, too. We're even, huh?"

"Not here." Leonid rolled his eyes. "They talk, eh? Like we're macacos."

The man scratched his sides, hooting and bouncing, making them all laugh.

That got them a few dark looks, the few guys who could see them from the other side of the chutes growling a little. It was so strange, how mostly the other riders liked them one on one, but resented them as a group.

Balta, though? Everyone talked to Balta.

"It's time." The lights were about to go dark and it was time to get in line and hear David Donaldson butcher Eduardo's name.

They all moved to get in their places, Balta heading off to take his place with the world champions. Not before he patted Joa on the butt, though.

The tingles lasted all the way through the National anthem.

Demon man.

Joa crossed himself.

Demon.

Demônio.

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Balta flexed his arm and bent at the hips before bouncing back and forth, doing what Beau Lafitte would call his twist dance. The rest they all made fun of, from Dillon to the bullfighters to the other riders, but he had a warm-up routine that he liked. It was also one that Joa liked to watch.

Those dark eyes were on him now, like a touch, watching every movement he made. It was heady, fine.

Balta wanted Joa. Desperately, in fact. He wanted the mouth and the sweet ass and those long legs wrapping around him.

Of course, Joa was... shy. It made it all the finer.

Poor Joa. He was so American in some ways. How did they say? Puritan. He believed in women and men and their roles. So, since Balta had an ex-wife and two children back in Brazil, well... That meant Balta liked women, sim?

He twisted again, showing Joa his ass, and he imagined he heard a moan. Imagined because, even if Joa had moaned, Balta couldn't have heard it in this crowd.

The crowd was pumped, screaming and bouncing. The fan club seats were packed, and Balta posed for a few pictures, giving the fans a good show.

"Você é seguinte, Balta." Joa's accent was just a touch odd, lilting.

"Sim." He loved that touch of Texas in Joa's voice, which came out far more strongly when he spoke English. It made him smile. He was up next, though, so he needed to concentrate on his ride, not Joa.

"I'll pull your rope? I have time before my ride."

"Obrigato." He clapped Joa on the back to emphasize the thanks before checking his glove and chaps. Then he climbed into the chute. The bull was little, black, and crouching. Eduardo had the four by four on him and Joa was bending over the chute, tugging his horns. Balta laughed out loud, putting in his mouthpiece and flapping a hand and the bull's ear. Come on, you big bastard.

He surged up, Joa's arm slamming across his vest to catch him before his face smacked against the bars. "Cuidadoso."

Yeah. Careful.

He'd broken a few teeth that way over the years, the hard metal gates surrounding him the most dangerous part of bullriding, as far as he was concerned. He flexed his hand, pulling the rope tight across it and closing his fingers over it.

Joa crawled over him, the man already chattering at him in a mix of Portuguese and English. "Ride, Balta. Mind in the middle. Come on. Estada sobre. Passeio. Pressa. Get out of the chute."

He blocked out Joa, Eduardo, and Leonid, knowing he had to get right in his own mind. The only thing he had to worry about besides the bull was the chute judge. He didn't need a penalty. Balta gritted his teeth and let out a primal shout behind the mouth guard. Then he nodded.

The little bull turned right into his hand, back end rolling hard, head down. The rhythm was odd, unbalanced, and it took forever for him to get his seat.

His legs kicked out, and he hoped he looked like he was spurring, but he didn't count on it. Tucking his chin, Balta groaned, his arm screaming as the G-forces pulled.

Cinco. Seis. Sete. Oito. Deus. Sim.

He heard Coke and Nate talking to him. "Come on, Balta. Off."

Off. Off. The world spun, and he waited until the bull turned back the other way once more before kicking loose and leaping off.

Strong hands grabbed his shoulders, whirled him around and shoved him toward the rail. "Go, man."

Staggering, he headed for the fence, waiting for Nate's voice to scream out, "Safe!" like a demented baseball umpire.

He heard the crowd go wild and he climbed the fence, knowing that little bull was on his ass, somehow. A pair of strong, brown hands yanked him up and over, the bull almost taking his boot off on the way by. The blow to his ankle stunned him a moment.

"You're all right. I got you."

"Let me down easy, huh?" He wasn't sure who to thank. His eyes were still watering.

"You need Doc?" Those hands set him down, light as a feather.

Nate.

Coke would call him 'son'.

"No. No. I am bom, eh? Okay. Just grazed me." He laughed, clapping Nate on the back, going to take his rope from Coke. He only limped a little.

Leonid met him at the bottom of the stair, jabbering at him furiously. "Eighty-eight, Balta. You'll be in the money. You hurt?"

"Just bruised, huh?" Leonid was a sweet one, but Balta wanted to get to Joa. Really, he needed to help pull that rope.

Leonid took his bullrope with a smile, let him climb up so he could get by. He could see Joa, bending and stretching, over and over. His steps slowed, just so he could watch. Look at that behind. Joa was so well-built. Balta could imagine himself, buried deep inside that tight, little ass, listening to Joa cry out for him.

Imagining it now might be inconvenient, though. So he started walking faster, boots clanging on the wire grid. "Ready, Joa?"

"Sim. Sim, Balta. Good ride." Joa's eyes were sparkling, the excitement ratcheting up.

"Now you, huh? You watch when you get off. These new bulls, they're angry."

"Sim. I saw. I'll watch." Joa stepped over the rail, nudging the bull with his boot. The bull bucked up in the chute, front feet rolling over the rail.

He pulled hard, yanking Joa up before the bull could drag him down. "Deus!"

More of their countrymen moved in to help, and there was Nate again, pulling at the bull's horn from the bottom. Nate was a good man. Joa was muttering under his breath, getting settled, setting his hand in the rope.

"Bear down, hey? Make sure you spur if you can." He couldn't let Joaquim think too much.

"Sim. Sim, Balta. Eu sei." Those eyes met his, serious and sure.

"Set?"

"Sim." Joa nodded and the bull started out, spraying snot and spinning hard.

He knew he had to make Joa nod. You always did. Those few seconds before the gate opened were always the worst. Joa spurred and bore down, chin ducked, arm in the air. Look at that man. Just look. Balta whooped, urging Joa and the bull on, both.

Joa started to slide at six and a half seconds, and that muscled upper body clenched, the correction making him scream. He pounded on the top rail, bouncing, Eduardo right there with him.

"He's going to make it!" Eduardo hooted.

The buzzer rang and Joa yanked at the tail of his bull rope, working to get his hand free.

"Eaquerdo, Joa! Left!" If he went off to the right, it would be very, very bad.

Joa turned in a full circle, still spinning. He stepped toward the chutes and made it about three steps before the bull bowled him over.

Balta vaulted over the rail, landing inside the chute and reaching for Joa as Coke flung him toward safety. Joa landed against him, full-force, their bodies smacking together. Balta wrapped his arms around Joa's body, turning them to protect the man with his own frame. The gate slammed closed just in time to lock the bull out and them in.

"Obrigado." Deus. Joa loved his job, Balta could tell.

He loved it a lot. Physically. Balta grinned, trying for a subtle bump and rub. "De nada, Joa. You need to go dance, huh?"

"Sim. Sim." He could watch Joa samba for days. The man stepped back, vest open, buckle undone, shirt untucked.

Oh, he did love how Joa came loose when he rode. It was like the best striptease.

Joa ran back onto the arena, "Oye Como Va" playing while he and Dillon shook it, that tight ass bouncing.

A man had to admire the agility of Dillon's ass. Adam Taggart spoke pretty highly of it, and if anyone would know, it was Tag. The man got around.

Joa's laugh rang out, the eighty-six and a half enough to get the man into the short go.

Balta would wait to see how the short round played out before asking Joa to supper. He would ask, though. The round would only affect how extravagant their meal was.

Joa came around, unfastening his chaps and grinning. "Not bad, eh?"

"Not bad at all. Good thing it was less than me, huh?" He grinned back, knowing Joa would laugh at that.

"Sim, sim." That laugh rang out, bright and happy. "Still in the short-go."

"Yes. There will be three of us, yeah?" He thought the new man, Raul, was going to do well.

Joa nodded, smiling for one of the fans, posing for a picture.

The urge to stick his tongue out caught him, and Balta made a face, sending the girl into a fit of giggles. "Come on, Joa. We need to go get ready."

"Sim." Joa nodded, jogged up to start warming up again.

Balta licked his lips. He could watch that all night. There were other things he could do, though. Good thing he had a good imagination.

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He packed his chaps and ropes, whistling under his breath. He'd placed third in the short go and sixth overall, so he was in the money.

Joa grinned, happy enough that the fact that he couldn't go home to the ranch for the week was okay. His little place made him happy, made all the traveling and stress worth it. And when he was on the road, he had the others with him, keeping him company. Balta was good at that. Balta, who was standing there talking to the reporter girl who was afraid of most of the Brazilians.

He skirted around them, headed for the truck. They were in Tulsa, heading for Topeka, then Omaha, then home to Texas, so he was driving.

"Joa!" Balta came running after him. Well, hobbling, the foot he'd injured in an earlier round obviously still hurting.

"Your foot." He stopped, smiled over into dark eyes.

"Sim. It's fine. Just sore." Balta hadn't ridden his championship round bull, but he didn't look unhappy. "How about dinner?"

"Sim. You want to ride with me? I got my truck." He offered to take Balta's gear, knowing that sore meant hurting.

"I'd love that." That broad smile everyone one loved flashed, just for him. He could tell, because it reached Balta's eyes.

He shouldered Balta's duffel easily, pointing the way out with his chin. Balta patted his ass, laughing out loud with that pure joy of life. Bless him, Balta always made things enjoyable.

"How are you getting to Topeka, amigo?"

"I don't know, huh? I was going to ride with Sammy Bass, but he got his head busted tonight."

Sam Bass was always landing wrong.

"He needs to learn to stop landing on his head." Joa didn't have to think even a second before making his offer. Balta was...Balta. "You want to ride with me? I'm driving."

"Pois nao!" With that little bounce and grin, he could honestly believe Balta meant the 'with pleasure' part.

He blushed, unaccountably pleased. All of them looked to Balta, to have the man as a traveling partner was... an honor.

"So, what do you want to eat, Joa? I think maybe a steak." Sometimes Balta's choices reminded him that Balta always had some ready cash. The man had won more money than most of them ever saw.

"A steak is good." They had decent beef here, good service, and their English was good enough that they were treated well. "Do you know a place?"

"I do!" They got in the truck, Balta groaning a little. "How are you, Joa? Not too bruised, huh?"

"Nao. I'm good." He patted his ribs. "Someone caught me."

"Yeah? He must be very smart." Balta patted his thigh. The man was touchy tonight, fingers on him at every chance.

"He is. Very. And a buon bullfighter, sim?" Joa's cock was aching, hard and swollen.

"Nate? Sim. He's a good man." Easing his legs around, Balta sighed happily. "Better."

"Which way?" He thumped himself hard, telling himself to not look, not have such sinful, dirty thoughts about the good man beside him.



"Right, I think. Onto the highway and then three exits down." Balta would not steer him wrong. Well, unless they were in Brazil. That one time, they had almost ended up in Brasilia...

His cheeks heated, and he chuckled, nodded. "Sim, Balta. Three exits."

Him, Balta, Eduardo. In a truck in the middle of nowhere. It had been funny and annoying and a little hot, which he hadn't wanted to admit then, and decided to forget now. He just drove while Balta hummed with the samba music on the CD.

The steak house parking lot was full of pickups and cowboy hats. He grabbed his hat, smiled. Balta moved through the crowd at the door, smiling at the little hostess, who recognized him. It took them three minutes to get a seat.

He nodded to AJ and Hank, to Coke and Nate. "Must be a good place, hmm?"

"It is. Big steaks, lots of salads. It's not as good as a churrascaria, but it will do." They got settled, and the bread came, and that made it all worth it already.

He ordered a steak, potato, two salads. At Balta's look, he shrugged. "'m hungry."

"Ah, I miss being young." Balta often complained about being fat. He wasn't a small man, but not old or fat.

"You are not old. You are a strong man."

"I am not so strong when it comes to working off mortadella sandwiches."

Oh, yes. Those were Balta's weakness. He had stopped at every stand in the market at Sao Paulo.

"You could come do crunches with me, Balta. That works off even mortadella."

"Hey, my lower back doesn't bend that way, huh? Nao. I will swim or something."

He nodded, chin down -- both at the thought of Balta in the pool and of that poor, stiff lower back.

"Oh, now. No pouting! This is celebrating your ride in the short go!" Waving at the waiter, Balta ordered a bottle of wine.

"I don't pout!" He chuckled, grateful that Balta couldn't order caipirinhas here. He'd nearly embarrassed himself in Sao Paolo with the drinks.

"You have the lips for it, doce. They can be very pouty." Balta stared at his mouth for a moment, a flash of heat sweeping him.

He pursed his lips, eyes crossing as he looked down, or tried to. "Do not."

"Sim. Oh, sim." Now Balta was really staring, licking his own lips.

Joa's cock was heavy, balls aching in his jeans. His belly went tight, hard. "I. I. I."

"Shh. Hush, now. Your salad is here, huh?"

His salads. Oh, they looked good. He grabbed the salt, his fork, then dug in. Balta sprinkled a little vinegar on his salad before joining him in the munching. Conversation died a little, because the food was good. He ate both salads and more bread, his body demanding the food. The little waitress flirted with Balta, bending close and shaking a little, making Balta laugh.

They never flirted with him. Maybe he was just too much of a... how did they say? Dork. Or maybe it showed that he would rather be flirting with Balta.

Deus.

Please, no.

He bent to his steak, lecturing himself with every bite.

"Hey, you. Are you all right?" Balta's boot nudged his under the table.

"Sim. Sim, buon." He gave Balta a smile, a nod. It wasn't Balta's fault that he was... sick. "How's your steak?"

"Yummy. It's just right. Did they do good on yours? Juicy?" One eyebrow went up and down.

"It's good." Especially now that he slowed down to taste it. "Not as good as Pei's, sim?"

No one's food was as good as Dad's, though.

"Never. Still, I like the spices they use." The toe of that boot nudged his again.

He shifted his feet, not sure if he was in the way or if Balta was just playing. A sharp little prod along with a huge grin from Balta answered that question. Silly man. Joa chuckled, then nudged back.

Balta trod on his toes, making him jump a little. "Do you want dessert?"

"We could. They have anything good?"

"They have, uh, tres leches cake, carrot cake, and some amazing cheesecake thing." Balta loved American cheesecake.

"Carrot cake for me, I think. Something healthy." He winked, loving that hearty, healthy laugh.

"Carrots are good for your eyesight. I will have cheesecake, huh? With fruit."

"Fruit? See, healthy!" They were laughing hard enough that people were beginning to watch.

Coke wandered by, slapping Balta on the back. "Y'all are getting your fun on."

"Sim, sim, Coke. It is good to be us, huh?"

"You know it, Fox. You so know it." Coke grinned, nodded to him then. "Eat some of that cake for me, huh?"

"Yes, sir. I can do that."

Coke moved on, whistling a little, drawing some stares of his own. He was a funny man; Joa liked him.

Not as much as Joa liked Balta, though.

No one was Balta.

Balta caught him staring, smiling hugely. "I think he likes you. Coke isn't everyone's friend, you know?"

"Sim. He doesn't have a monkey's face, eh?" Joa thought the bullfighters were all touched by God, to hurt so badly and keep coming back.

"Nao." Balta stretched, patting his belly. "Mmm. I will sleep well tonight."

"I think I will too, Balta. I think." He had some beer in the room; it would feel good going down.

They sat silent while they had coffee, and he squirmed a little, because Balta looked at him like he was more important than cheesecake. Better.

"I... I have some cerveja in the room, if you want." He'd... he'd share his beer with Balta. Not in the room, though. That was too much temptation.

"Do you?" One dark eyebrow winged up, Balta tilting his head. "I would like that."

"Bom." Oh, Deus. Temptation, temptation, temptation.

They paid, then headed for the door, nodding to the ones that recognized them. There were many, and they were forced to stop just inside the door for a picture and an autograph for a little boy. From Balta, of course.

No one knew him. Not yet. Maybe not ever, but that didn't matter. He made money, good money.

Balta clapped him on the back before the fans left, smiling. "And this is Joa. You know, he dances with Dillon when he rides, huh?"

The little boy clapped and bounced. "I know you!"

"Yeah? You like to dance?" He bounced and shook it a little, watching the boy's pale eyes sparkle.

"I like to ride. You ride good." Before he knew it, he was signing the little one's hat, too.

Joa was beaming when they walked out, grinning from ear-to-ear. "That was fun, hmm?"

"It was. And now you owe me a beer." He would swear Balta touched his butt when they moved around the truck.

By the time he'd driven them to the hotel, he'd convinced himself he was hallucinating, was being tempted by a demon.

He pulled into the valet parking, took the ticket from the man, and grabbed his gear. Balta hauled his bag, the limp mostly gone. In fact, Balta looked better than good. Almost bouncy.

Joa watched all the way to the elevator. Watched that denim-covered backside bounce.

Balta jabbered at him all the way, switching to Portuguese when they gained some company on the second floor. It was probably a little rude, but it kept their conversation private.

Balta's room was on the eighth floor, his on the tenth. "Do you want me to bring you a beer down?"

"Hmm. You're sharing with Eduardo, huh? Yeah, bring it down. See you in ten?" Balta winked, the long eyelashes fluttering a little.

"Sim, sim, Balta. Ten." Ten would be enough time to... take care of the problems his body was threatening so that he could treat Balta with the respect the man deserved.

As the elevator doors closed, he pressed his wrist against his aching cock. He might not need ten minutes at all.

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The beer was colder when Balta kept it in his room, and didn't let Joa dawdle on the way. They had taken to having a beer together often, and Balta could only be happier if Joa would take a hint.

He wanted more.

Much more.

He saw the way Joa looked at him, wanted him. Desired him.

So innocent, sometimes. Joa was so... shy. And the kid seemed to think that Balta was above the sins of the flesh.

Ha.

Balta needed to touch, to taste, to experience Joa's body like the ripe peach that it was.

"Esta bom, Balta?" Joa's touch to his knee was like match to paper.

"Huh? Oh, sim. Fine." He smiled, swallowing back the moan that tried to escape. "So, Eduardo has a date, huh?"

"Sim. A little girl from Texas. Laredo. I sleep in the lobby tonight, I think."

"What?" That would never do. "You can stay with me. I don't mind at all!"

"Yeah? I sleep quiet, eh? I can take the chair here, even."

"Why?" No, no. No sleeping in chairs. "You will stay here. I have plenty of room."

"Obrigado, Balta." Joa sat back, drinking deep.

"You're welcome." He smiled, resisting the urge to push his toes against Joa's leg.

"Is there a gym here in the hotel? I should go in the morning, hmm?"

"I think so?" He should go, too. He would watch Joa sweat, watch those incredibly defined abs work.

"Bom. I like the gyms. Room to move, eh?"

"Mmm. I like more organic exercise." He winked, wondering if Joa would catch the clue.

"Organ... Oh! Oh. I. Sim. Sim, exercise is good, uh, like that."

Deus. Balta sighed, trying not to show his frustration. He could be patient. "It is. It can be very good."

"You... you, uh. I mean, you waiting for your wife? Because you aren't. I mean, the girls, they love you."

"My wife and I are not together anymore, Joa. I can never get married again, you know this."

Joa nodded. "Sim. Sim, desculpa."

Balta smiled widely. "I am not sorry. Now I can pursue other things, huh?" Now he leaned over and patted Joa's knee.

The look in Joa's face was confused, but the body? No. Not confused -- Balta could smell Joa, smell hunger. He let his fingers stay, let them stroke Joa's long leg. "I am not so admirable. Joa."

"Not... You are an amazing man, Balta." Those muscles jumped and bunched, begging his attention.

"I am just a man, huh?" One who very much wanted to kiss that full mouth that was sort of... hanging open.

"Sim. A good man, Balta." Joa's cock was full, hard, pressing against the zipper in his Wranglers.

"You are determined to make me a saint." His fingers crept up, along the inside of Joa's thigh.

"I am?" Joa's lips parted, wet with the beer, little pink tongue flicking out.

"It seems so, huh?" Oh. Balta leaned closer, like a wolf scenting the air. "I am not."

"I should. I should not drink so fast, eh? Makes me flushed."

"It does. Makes you hard in your pants, too." The back of his hand just brushed the hardness. "Like a good ride."

Joa blushed dark, head ducking. "I try not to."

"Why?" Poor bebe. Joa could be so innocent. "There is nothing wrong with it."

"It... " Joa's voice dropped. "Balta, it is a sin."

"Is it?" Maybe it was, but it felt so good. Balta loved God, but he wasn't sure the Almighty cared about that stuff. Or about bullriding, though he'd never say it out loud.

"The priests say so."

"Ah. Well, if you knew how many of them indulged." He winked, trying to lighten the mood.

Joa chuckled, leaned back. "I do crunches on Sunday morning."

"I know. While I sit in church." Balta usually skipped the cowboy church, though, opting for a local priest.

"Sim. See? The cowboy saint."

"Stop." Balta leaned so close that his eyelashes brushed Joa's cheek. "Me beija." Yes. Kiss me. Let me kiss you.

"Balta?" Joa turned, their lips barely brushing together, barely touching.

"Sim." He needed it like a man in the desert needed water. Balta turned his head, kissing Joa full on the mouth. Their first kiss. He tasted hops and mint from the toothpicks Joa chewed on, underneath that was something male and heady, something he needed more of.

Balta reached up, sliding a hand behind Joa's head to hold him in place. They kissed slowly, not so deep at first, then harder. Joa opened for him like an unlocked door, promising him pleasure and desire. Sweet. Like doce de leite. Oh, that would be good, too, but it could wait until much later. Right now he needed to stay simple.

Soft sounds pressed into his lips, Joa's eyes closed, fingers opening and closing near his thighs. Balta took one of Joa's hands in his, lifting it to press against his chest. He needed Joa to touch him, too.

The moan he got thrilled him as much as a bull that turned into his hand, Joa's fingers sliding like water over his chest.

"Mmm." His pleasure rumbled out of him in a tangible way, the sound all about praise.

The curious touch climbed up to his throat, dipping into the hollow, touching the rough skin there. Inching closer, Balta pushed down to hold Joa against him, fingers splayed against the small of Joa's strong back. Soon he would take off the shirt, feel that skin bare.

"I shouldn't..." Joa's hips rolled against him, that heavy cock full, waiting for him.

"I want you to." Coercion? Oh, sim. He was not above it.

"I want... I watch." Joa groaned, pushed back into their kiss. Yes. Joa watched him like a hawk. Like a dog who was starving for a bone. And he kissed like Balta was the only thing in his world.

Balta let his hand drop down, just barely brush the swell of Joa's ass in the denim. He waited, testing the reaction. Some men never took well to such things. Joa was sensual enough to like it, if he let himself. When Joa arched, muscled body bucking a bit, Balta had to bite back his cry of triumph. Yes! Yes.

His lips slid across Joa's jaw, tracing the strong shape, and his fingers dipped lower. A tiny bit. Joa moved like he was riding, the motion unconscious and easy. It made Balta's mouth dry, made his cock beat against his zipper. His need was on him, pushing him, and he didn't want to scare Joa.

Their lips parted, Joa blinking, looking dazed and so beautiful. "Balta. I."

"Shh. Not unless you're going to tell me you want more." He smiled, fingers grazing Joa's lips.

Joa groaned, lips following his fingers. Sensual man. Humming, Balta pressed his finger against the center of Joa's lower lip. He'd bet Joa had no idea how many nerves lived there. Joa's tongue slipped out, stroked the tip of his finger. Those eyes never left his, not for a moment.

His breath caught, and he had to have another kiss. Then another.

"Balta... Balta, I-- I should go. I will. I will shame you." Joa was swaying a little, cheeks flushed dark.

"Shh. No. No, you could not do that." The hardest thing he had ever done was back off, just holding on with one hand on Joa's shoulder.

"No?" Joa smiled for him. "I... I would not, not for anything, Balta."

"No. I am the one who should be ashamed, huh?" He let his expression slide into rueful. "I want too much."

As he knew it would, Joa's worry turned to reassurance. "No. No, Balta. No, it is me, sim? Me that wants."

"Joaquim." Shaking his head, Balta laughed. "I think we want each other."

"Do you... what is wise?"

"I think in this I do not want to be wise." He took Joa's face between his hands and kissed that bruised mouth again, trying one more time.

Joa moaned, the sound vibrating against his lips, then that hard, muscled body pressed against him. Balta smiled against Joa's mouth, letting his hands go where they wished, pushing his hard cock against the flat belly. Oh, sim.

They shuffled, trying to find a place for their feet, their boot toes knocking together.

Balta chuckled before standing and moving to join Joa on the bed. That would be so much easier. One of Joa's hands settled on the small of his back where the bones were fused. The touch was familiar, not even sexual, intended to support, heal. The warmth made him moan happily. He was old some days, far older than the rest of the riders, and his back was as bad as Coke's. The bullfighter and him, they could compare bolts and screws.

"Does it hurt, Balta?" That hand began rubbing in gentle circles.



"Hmm? Not so much, huh? It just feels good when you touch."

Joa nodded, continued the careful, searching touches.

Balta loved that Joa took such good care of him, but right now he needed more. He needed for Joa to touch him like a lover. "Mi toca aqui," Balta said, dragging Joa's hand around to his belly.

"Balta." Joa's hand spread wide, fingers splayed, palm hot on his stomach.

"Oh. That's good. Bom." His muscles tightened, his nipples going hard.

"So hard." Joa blushed, ducked his head, but that hand moved, explored his belly, his pecs.

"For you, huh? I want. I look at you all the time and want." So bad. Joa needed to know.

"Sim?" Oh, that pleased his Joa.

"Mmmhmm. Always." He watched and watched. And now he touched. Balta pushed a hand down to flip open the button of Joa's jeans. That heavy prick was close now, close enough to feel its heat, to feel how Joa needed him. Going for broke, was how the American boys said it. Balta went for broke, opening Joa's jeans and reaching in.

The first thing he noticed was that Joa fit perfectly in his hand, the other that all that skin was hot and smooth and bare. All of it. Deus.

"Joa." He was almost shocked, though he knew Joa waxed his chest. It was just unexpected enough to give him hope for Joa as a naughty man, once they got started.

"I... It feels good, sim? With my clothes."

Yes. Yes, he imagined it did, feel so good. It felt good now, against his hand, the skin sleek and hot. Balta squeezed. Joa cried out, scrambling up close to him, then pulling away.

"Joa? Did I hurt?" He would never hurt. Not unless Joa asked.

"No. No, I. So big, Balta. Us. It's so big."

"Then it is good." So good. So beautiful, his Joa, with his wide eyes and tender mouth. Balta could imagine that mouth doing all manner of things.

"More than good." Joa had begun to rock, moving that heavy caralho into his hand.

"Look at you, doce. So pretty. All for me."

"Balta." Joa's moan was sweet like candy and he could hear his name in that voice for years.

He kissed Joa again, speeding the motion of his hand. He had to know what other noises Joa had in him. Joa groaned for him, fingers finding his nipple, circling it. His breath caught, his cock jumping. That simple touch nearly had him going off like a rocket. Then Joa pinched, tugged.

Balta felt it start at the base of his spine, moving up hard from his balls. He came fast, not prepared for it at all, not even undressed. It would have been embarrassing but for the look in Joa's eyes.

Joa grunted, lips pressing against him, tongue slipping in to taste him, again and again as seed poured over his fingers, Joa's orgasm answering his own. The scent caught him off guard, strong and male and delicious. Oh, deus help him, there was no going back now.

Of course, now was the tricky part -- to stop the worry and blustering and oddity.

Balta waited until Joa opened his mouth before taking one final kiss, forestalling any sort of protest. It was too perfect to ruin.

\*\*\*

Joa was in the truck, waiting for Balta to go. He had the cooler with the water and beer and Coke between them, he had his sunglasses on, he was ready.

Ready.

Honestly.

He would drive and head for the next event and not think about what he had done.

He had... With Balta deSilva.

Him.

In the bed.

In the dark.

Together.

Balta came out of the hotel lobby, the sun shining on him in his crisp white shirt and tight jeans, and he looked like... like. Dessert.

Joa's cock jerked, tried to fill, and he thumped it.

Good. He had to be good.

Vaulting into the cab, Balta smiled over at him, but frowned a bit at the cooler.

"You ready? I got beer, water, Coke for the trip."

"We could put it in the back, huh?" Something in Balta's gaze made his cheeks heat.

"It... It would be harder to get to." Still, he nodded, started up the Chevy and headed out.

"It would." Those brown hands moved restlessly, Balta drumming out a beat on his thighs.

He didn't know what to say, what to do, so he drove, trying not to chatter endlessly.

Balta smiled at him suddenly, reaching across the cooler to touch his arm. "How are you today, huh?"

His own smile answered -- without any permission from him at all. "Nervous, some. You?"

"I am good. Feeling very good, indeed." The wink went with the smile like coconut and caramel.

Mmm. Caramel. His stomach growled, loud enough that Balta chuckled. After the short go today, he would have a candy, as a reward.

"We should stop and get some food soon, huh?" Balta stretched his arms, cracked his neck. "You know what I want?"

"What?"

"Mortadella."

"Mmm." Joa nodded, chuckled. "Is this place big enough to have mortadella?" At home he had to drive to Austin to get it.

"No. But I want a mortadella roll and some cheese bread." Balta craved the worst of the Brazilian foods. The man had a fat tooth to rival Joa's sweet one.

"Mamae makes the papos-de-anjo for me. Those? Those I could eat." By the dozens. He loved the little sweet bits of pastry all dripping with syrup.

"I like those, too. More, though, I like empadinhas. With shrimp and hearts of palm, huh?" Balta licked his lips dramatically.

"Sim." His belly snarled again and he patted it. "When I am home for the break, I will eat good."

"You should not let your belly get so empty, doce. It's not healthy." Balta popped the lid of the cooler. "Have a water, huh?"

"Obrigado."

Doce.

The name made his cheeks feel hot.

"No problem." Balta got a water, too, drinking deep. "You think we'll get a good draw?"

He nodded. He'd ridden two and was feeling strong. He could handle anything today. Any bull. And Balta? Well, with Balta them bulls didn't matter a bit, not really.

It was all in Balta's head. The man could ride any bull there was. He just had to believe it, and some days, Balta didn't think it was true.

"I will ride today, I think. Make some money." If not, he'd made some already.

"Good. I think I will, too, huh?" Scratching his belly, Balta resettled in his seat, looking happy. Smiling.

"Mmmhmm. I think Sam takes the event, though. Or Beau." Sam needed the ride.

"I hope Sammy. Beau is on a roll, though." Sammy's head had recovered, and the man was riding some. They chatted until it was time to pull off and find some food. Even Balta's tummy was rumbling.

They settled on the IHOP -- eggs and bacon and pancakes and juice and coffee...

Hash browns. There were hash browns, too. Balta could eat.

By the time they were done, Joa was swollen, full like a tick. Good thing there was time until he rode.

"Oh. I shouldn't have finished your chocolate chip pancakes." Balta was groaning, patting his belly.

"You got chocolate on your lip, Balta."

"Do I?" Balta glanced around, and he could almost see the disappointment when there were people in view. Balta licked it off. Slowly.

Joa groaned, buried his face in his coffee cup. So fine.

"Are you all right, doce?" Balta's foot nudged his under the table.

"Uh-huh. Good. Real good."

"Me too, huh? I feel like it's a good, good day."

Joa grinned. That was a good sign, wasn't it? When Balta was feeling good, the world turned better. He believed that with all he was.

"We should make sure the hotel has a pool, huh? Take a swim."

He nodded. He liked the water, almost as much as working out. "And a gym."

He needed his workout.

"Sim. And a buffet. I want breakfast omelet in the morning." Balta loved those silly omelet stations, and to his credit, he always got lots of vegetables. And fruit. Watching Balta eat pineapple was a great joy.

"Sim, Balta." He was a waffle man himself.

"And one of those wafflemakers for you."

He had to laugh, because Balta noticed everything.

"Sim. We ride today and then there's a good hotel tonight, huh?"

Something that all the guys weren't at.

"I like it." Slapping his hand on his leg, Balta stood. "I'll find the man with the bill."

"I will put the tip." He put a five dollar bill on the table and slid from the booth, shoulders popping.

By the time he had gone to the bathroom and all, Balta was back in the truck. The cooler was in the backseat of the king cab.

And Balta was there.

Right there.

Big and fine and close and so male.

Not to mention the fact that now Balta could reach out and touch his thigh while he drove. So distracting. His leg bounced with every touch. Every one.

"Are you hurting?"

"Hurting? No. No."

"Oh. So this is a good ache?" Balta's fingers slid sideways, the pinky touching his cock.

"Balta!" His fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

"It is, then." Chuckling, Balta sat back, allowing him to breathe. "I like your reaction, doce."

His cheeks were burning, his body tight. "Balta, we must be good." Right?

"Why? There is nobody here but us." Balta looked so innocent, and a little hurt.

"But I... The things you make me feel, Balta."

"We should explore them, sim? A lot."

"Balta... You are a demon."

"I am. I told you I was not a nice man." The sound of Balta's button and zipper opening was loud. Very loud.

Oh, Deus. What was? "Balta?"

"Hmm?" Balta glanced over, smile melting hot, eyelashes almost hiding those gleaming eyes.

"What are you doing?" They were in a truck. His truck.

"We didn't get to, this morning. I told you, I am feeling very good." Laughing, Balta started moving, arm swinging, up and down.

Joa didn't know what to do, where to look. Okay, driving. He was driving. He wasn't a child; he'd heard men bate caixeta in the darkness in the hotel room. But not in a truck.

In daylight.

On a Sunday.

"Are you unhappy, Joa? I am not." Balta's voice had gone deep, rough. He could smell Balta's skin, hot and musky.

"No. No, Balta." No, unhappy was not what he was.

"Oh, good. I would not make you angry." Moaning, Balta shifted a little, leg brushing his.

His lips were so dry that they burned when he licked them. See? This was why having the cooler up front was a good idea.

"Did you want a drink, doce?" Like there was nothing hanging out, Balta lifted and turned and dug in the cooler. Which waved things all over.

Oh, Deus. His fingers wanted to touch, to wrap around that heavy bit of flesh. When they did -- completely of their own accord -- Joa gasped at himself.

Balta gasped, too, sitting down hard in the seat. "Joa. Doce. Oh, that's good."

"I..." His hand moved like it had its own mind, working up and down, exploring every inch of Balta's prick.

"Mmm." That sound. He would hear it in his dreams for weeks. "Watch the road, Joa."

"Sim." His eyes were on the road, but his heart, his soul was touching Joa.

Silky skin, melting hot, rubbed against his palm, and he could feel how damp the tip was. Balta was humping up, little noises coming from deep in his chest. It was Balta he was touching. Balta.

His Balta.

"Oh... Doce. More." Balta's hand clamped down over his, moving it faster.

He blinked, staring at the road, at the traffic, at the cars.

"That's it... That. Uhn." The long, low moan was the only warning he had before Balta spilled out of his hand, seed hot and silky and wet.

Oh, God. Deus. Lord. He.

Oh.

Oh, he was.

Goodness.

"Joa?" Balta was hoarse, panting. "Are you well?"

"I. Sim. I think so. You. You are a demon."

"I just needed to express how you make me feel, huh? Do you need, Joa? We could pull off."

"I can't, Balta. It is daytime." His cock throbbed, ached. He needed, so badly.

"So? I just came in your hand, doce. At this point, you owe me an orgasm." Balta made it sound so reasonable.

"I owe you." Wait.

How did that work?

The truck started heading for an empty picnic area, all on its own. Balta had bewitched it.

Humming, Balta watched him like a hawk, and as soon as he parked, the man was on him. One broad hand opened his jeans, and Balta's mouth fastened on his neck.

"Balta!" His prick had left a spot on his briefs, and nothing ever had felt like Balta's hand.

"Joa." Balta's hand slid down his prick, the thumb rubbing his foreskin back and forth.

"Sim." He whimpered, wanting to move, to touch, to do something, but one of his hands was on the steering wheel clenched down, one hand was sticky, and he simply couldn't. Balta made it easy not to think, though, rubbing him, stroking him, keeping him at a fever pitch. Joa didn't have to do a thing.

His toes curled in his boots, the leather tight where he stretched it. Deus. Deus, please.

"Soon I'm going to use my mouth on you, doce. I would now, but I can't bend." Balta's lips moved against the skin of his throat, little stinging kisses pressed there.

"Baltazar!" His spine bowed impossibly, his balls emptying themselves in harsh spurts. His hips thrust restlessly, randomly, slamming up into Balta's hand.

"Oh." The sound was a long moan, Balta sounding delighted, adding to his pleasure. Such an amazing thing, to be here, in the day, doing this.

He slumped back, blinking at Balta. How was he supposed to ride, after this? After being melted.

Balta laughed, and it sounded like pure joy. "Such a very good day."

"I... There is still very much more day left."

"There is!" Balta patted his cock. "Think what we can get up to!"

Oh, Deus.

Save him.

\*\*\*

The ride had not gone well.

Balta limped to the back, his rope dragging, the bell scraping on the concrete floor. Joa did not ride for at least a half hour, so he could hide a little before he had to pull rope.



Sam Bell came walking by, gave him a look and a head tilt. "Shit, man. What truck hit your ass?"

"I think it was half Brahma, huh?" His foot throbbed, his hip aching.

"You need a hand or you got it?"

"I could use some help." His boot was never going to come off, and he needed to wrap the ankle.

"kay. I done fell off already, and Beau's got Packer to pull rope. Come on. I got you."

"Obrigato, Sam." Sam Bell was a good man, one a rider could always count on. Balta gave him a smile. "Do you think Joa would be upset if Eduardo pulled his rope?"

"Nah. He's a good kid." Balta wasn't sure if Sam meant Joa or Eduardo. One hand shot out, caught one of the younger riders. "Kid, run up and let Ferreira know that Ed's fixin' to pull rope."

"Yes, sir."

The boy ran off, and Balta laughed. "They all think you are so scary, sim? It must be the eyes."

"Nah. It's the vicious fucking temper and the bar fights." Sam winked at him.

"That, too." Sam, Beau, and Jason Scott had once completely destroyed a club in Tampa. Right down to knocking the bar over. Ace and Sandy had been... less than happy. In fact, Balta had never seen Ace turn that color of purple. It was something to strive toward.

"How is your shoulder?" He knew Sam's shoulder was less than happy. Like his leg.

"Shit, I keep threatening to cut it off. We're almost there, man."

"Thank you." If he could just sit down. Yes, that would be much better.

Sam nodded and reached for his boot. "No hollerin'. If you do, Doc'll be in here."

"No, no. I just need the boot off." Turning his head, Balta clenched his jaw, determined not to let a sound out.

Sam moved, quick as a viper, yanking the boot off and steadying his ankle.

"Fuck!" The very English word was satisfying sometimes. Like right now, when he could feel his foot swelling.

"Man, you need to see Jonesy, at least. You want ice?"

"Ice, yes. Jonesy, no." Not yet. Maybe once Joa had ridden. His good day was going bad so fast. "Did you see my ride? My rope just popped right out."

"Nah, man. I was in the back throwing a fit." Sam winked. "You gonna make it to the short go?"

"No." That was all right. He had a good feeling about the next event, one that was not part of a Joa high.

"That sucks." Sam'd been shut out. Some days the man couldn't ride for... what did Andy Baxter say? Love or money? Hot or cold, but never both.

"Sim." He smiled and grinned. "We are a pair, huh?"

"Yeah, you know it." Sam shook his head. "You got a beer in that cooler? I'll go fetch ice and we can each have one, if so."

"I do." That was so good of Sam, it really was. Of course, the way Beau was riding, maybe Sam needed someone to talk to, as well.

"Cool." Sam headed out, leaving him in the back with his throbbing foot, Joa's cooler, and the distant roar of the crowd.

Balta sat back, contemplating his toes. They were turning black. This was two events in a row now that his lower leg had taken a beating. Bones could only take so much pressure.

"DeSilva." Doc was standing there, hands on his hips. Pra caralho. That man was everywhere.

"Bom dia, Doc." Balta tried not to roll his eyes. He certainly couldn't run.

"Howdy. Sports medicine has a spot waiting for you."

"No, no. I don't need to take up a cot, huh? I'll just put ice on it. Sam Bell is helping." He didn't want to go sit with people who were bleeding.

"Is it broken?"

"Hmm." He didn't think it was bad enough to keep him out of the next round, even, but it was probably a hairline.

"Look. Will you wear the soft cast, asshole? At least on the drive?"

Doc stopped, frowned as Jonesy went flying by.

"Sim, sim. Go see what's bad. I will keep, huh?"

"I'll have Shaun bring you a cast, old man."

Doc disappeared and Sam showed, a bag of ice in hand.

Old man. Well, he was, wasn't he? There were only two other riders on tour who were close.

Then there was Coke, who everyone called Gramps. Balta wasn't sure, but he didn't think the bullfighter was that much older than him.

Balta grinned at Sam. "Coke is the old one, huh? Doc, too. I am strong as steel."

"You're a force of Brazilian fucking nature, cowboy." Sam grinned at him, tossed him the bag of ice. "Hand me a beer."

"Here." He gave Sam one of the good ones, not the lite beer he kept for the rookies. "So, Beau is looking good."

"He's on a fucking roll, man. A roll. It's good for him." Sim, but maybe not so good for Sam.

"Yeah. So was Jason, huh?" Early points leader Jason Scott had taken the kind of fall they all dreaded and was out for the rest of the season. "I pray for your Beau."

"Yeah. He's got lots of folks on his side." Sam shrugged. "Coke's been to see Jase a couple times at AJ's place. I keep thinking me and Beau ought to go see."

"Yeah?" He wondered if Jason would approve. He seemed to want to be alone, or at least alone with Andy Baxter. "Well, if you do I will send a box."

"That'd be nice. I gotta check with Beau and Aje first." Sam sighed, ducking a little as one of the cameras came by the window of the door.

"Come sit with me." They could lean. Maybe nap. Sam was a champion napper.

"Yeah?" He got this crooked smile and a nod. "Thanks, man."

"Nao problema." Balta squinted at his toes. "Doc will never let me hear the end of this. I'll have to find my size bigger boot."

"You need to get the lace ups. They go around the ACE wraps real good." Sammy settled beside him, sighing a little.

"I like my cayman." Balta leaned on Sam's shoulder, just to show it was okay.

"Spoiled Brazilian." The words were not filled with anger, like they would be with another.

"I am." His sponsor bought the boots for him. For Joa, too, and for the new man up from Sao Paolo, whose name escaped him right now.

"Still, a pair of lace-ups might be good. For emergencies."

"They might." He would think about it. Maybe get Joa to go shopping with him. "You should come to my ranch, huh? Take a few days on the next break. I have a pool now."

"Yeah? Is there decent hunting out there?"

"There is. Deer, javelina. Quail." Balta wasn't fond of bird hunting, though.

"Javelina, huh? You got a pit to smoke one in?" Sammy's leg started to bounce.

"Please, I am from Brazil. I know how to do barbecue, yeah?" He rolled his eyes, grinning hugely.

"Yeah. Yeah, well, I'll talk to Beau, but I'll be there, one way or the other, I think. Come hang out with you."

"That sounds good." Poor Sam. He could have been champion of the world a hundred times over if he could have stayed healthy one whole season.

"It does. We'll see if you remember what I taught you about poker."

"Oh, ho. I will make you play volleyball." Watching American cowboys play volleyball was hilarious.

"So long as you don't make my ass play soccer, man."

"No, no. And it is football." They had this argument many times, the Americans insisting on calling their sport football, even though only one man used his feet.

"Nope. Football has helmet, pads, quarterbacks, tailgate parties."

"Ai." This time he did roll his eyes. "Is there more beer?" His foot throbbed like it needed to come off.

"It's your cooler, man." Still, Sammy leaned over, got them both another, and readjusted the ice on his ankle.

"Ah. Thank you." They could sit for a while, wait for Doc to come back with the cast. If Doc remembered.

Of course, if Doc didn't, Sammy would.

Balta believed it.

\*\*\*

He rode.

He rode so well he won the short go and he had a check and moved into the top ten.

Beau Lafitte took the event, but Beau was a champion, like Balta, so that was good. There was no shame in losing to that cowboy.

None.

Joa headed down to the locker room, whistling under his breath. There were a group of guys around one door, whispering and chuckling.

Oh, Deus. Someone was being evil to someone.

Someone, he thought it was Eduardo, was taking pictures with his phone, and someone else was telling Kynan to shut his mouth. Beau poked Joa on the shoulder from behind. "What was, Joa?"

"Nao sei." He stretched, looking. "Ah. Balta and Sam. Uh. Napping."

Together. And drooling. A lot.

Beau had to push through to see. He was not so tall. Then he laughed, the sound hearty and happy. "Lookit that, man."

Joa shook his head, chuckling under his breath. Bell's eyes popped open, the bright green bloodshot and wide.

Balta jerked awake, too, one hand coming up to wipe his mouth. "Oi. We fell asleep, huh?"

"Yeah. We're old fucks, Brazilian."

"No shit." Laughing, Balta stared at everyone, dark brown eyes bright with humor. "Come on! Stop staring, huh? Get your shit and go."

Eduardo starting laughing and Joa shook his head, heading in to get water from his cooler.

Balta gave him a smile that seemed warmer, kinder. "Look at my toes, Joa."

"Did you break something?" He looked down, wincing at the dark, bruised thing. "Did you get Jonesy?"

"Doc stopped by." Balta waved a hand like it was nothing. "Sam brought me ice."

"Hrm." Balta lied, Joa could tell. "I'll go see if they're waiting for you."

"No, no. Just ask Jonesy to get me the cast Doc promised."

Sam nodded, yawning. "Who got hurt?"

"Packer. Shoulder."

They all winced.

Poor Packer. He had bad shoulder troubles. Balta sighed. "Remind me to send him a care package, huh?"

"Sim." He waved and jogged down the hall to sports medicine. Doc was in there, dealing with the last little things. "Doc? A cast? For Balta?"

"Huh? Oh, shit. No, get his ass in here so I can do it up right." Doc was looking grumpy. There would be no arguing with him.

"Okay. Sure. Yeah. I'll be back." Jogging back and forth counted as cardio.

The crowd had dissipated, leaving Balta, Beau and Sam. "Doc wants you, Balta. I can help."

"Oh, damn it. Why isn't he busy?" Sam helped him lever Balta to his feet, though, and they all started down to sports medicine.

Doc and Jonesy were standing there. Staring. Waiting.

"Ta da. Balta."

Beau chuckled. "See, Doc? We follow orders. He gonna be able to go to supper? I'm buying."

"I don't see why not. He'll just need a soft cast. He's broke it enough to know what that feels like."

"Well, there you go." Beau clapped Joa on the back, looking on top of the world.

Joa looked over, nodded. Poor Balta. That foot looked awful. The next rides would be hard.

Balta was smiling, though, and the lines around his mouth were not so deep, thanks to his nap, Joa would bet. He looked good.

Joa shook his head and headed to gather his gear, Balta's, and load it into the truck. He had a check. He had gas and hotel fees for them and some for the bank. Beau was going to buy supper.

Life was good.

\*\*\*

The world flew by, the truck going fast under Joa's coaxing. Balta hummed a little, mostly dozing. His ankle hurt, but the cast helped, and he'd had three days of healing. Doc had insisted he come in for x-rays, but it was just a torn tendon, just a little hurt.

They had a little time off, now, a few days just to be, and Balta thought many naps were in order.

Joa had found them a little place in Colorado to spend a week away from the noise and the crowds and without having to drive back to Texas before heading to Montana.

That it had two bedrooms was only the briefest of worries.

The damned injury had come at a horrible time for his seduction plan.

His Joa was caring, helpful, worried, and nowhere near naked enough to suit him. They would fix that as soon as he got settled in a bed at the cabin, making pitiful eyes at Joa to get him to come close and help remove clothing. Perhaps a sponge bath... The idea had appeal.

"Mmm." Oh. Did he make that sound out loud?

"Are you hurting?" Those almost green eyes met his, worried.

"Hmm? No, I was fantasizing about a bed." There. That was true, huh?

"Ah. Yes. We're almost there, though, and you can rest."

"We are." Rest. Relax. Fuck Joa until he screamed. Oh, and he wanted Joa to suck him. He dreamed about that pouty mouth. He wanted to feel the heat around his cock, to push in deep, to see those eyes wanting him, so badly. Balta wanted to feel Joa's sharp cheekbones under his thumbs, wanted to feel the tiny bristles of Joa's whiskers against his skin. He wanted to know how tight that tiny little ass would be, wrapped around his prick.

Deus.

His prick was hard in his jeans, but he had already shocked Joa once by pulling it out in the truck. He could wait.

They pulled up to a series of little cabins, each one a good distance from the other. Joa parked. "I'll go get the keys and then get you all settled before I go buy food."

"Thank you, doce." Balta patted Joa's thighs before he slid out of the truck, standing on one foot and stretching.

Secluded and obviously popular -- the cabins were filled with families. Children and bicycles, dogs, smiling fathers.

They would have to draw the curtains and be very quiet. Hopefully, Joa would get the farthest cabin.

Joa came jogging back, keys in hand. "In the truck. We'll have to drive up."

"Oh?" Balta climbed back in, hiding his smile.

"Sim. The one that is left was in the back."

"Good." He lowered his voice, just for Joa's benefit. "There are many children here who do not need to hear what we get up to."

He watched Joa swallow. "You must heal. Rest."

"I will, huh? I will let you do the work." He wondered what Joa would make of that.

"I told you I would, Balta. I will take care of you." Joa drove them into the woods, past one cabin after another.

"Mmm. That is not exactly what I mean, doce."

"Hmm?" Joa looked over, met his eyes, then those cheeks went dark red. "Balta!"

"What?" Balta stuck his tongue out, letting it waggle a bit.

"You are a demon. I swear." Joa's cheeks were going to catch on fire.

That had him laughing, loud and happy. "I am. Balta the demon. Even my mother thought so." Though he really didn't want to think of mama at a time like this.

"I am not surprised." Joa smiled at him, relaxing a bit. "Here. Twenty-five."

The cabin was sitting alone, obviously either the first or last built, because the others were in a pattern.

"I like the privacy, doce. Well done." Oh, this would be nice. "Shall we see what amenities we have?"

"Sim. Sim." Joa hopped out of the truck, grabbing their gear and handing him the crutches.

"Obrigato, doce." Hobbling was a bad look for him, but he did it, easing over the little raised door stop thing.

Joa helped him in and let him explore while the bags were put away. A tiny living area, a kitchen with a table, one bathroom, two bedrooms. He checked the bedrooms carefully, just to make sure



that Joa had put all their bags in one. His gear was in the largest room and Joa was heading out, his own bags in hand. Oh, nao.

"Where are you going, Joa?" He widened his eyes, making it very light, very surprised.

"I thought... With your foot."

"No, no. Even if I was in a body cast I would want you with me." Now he smiled, reaching out to put a hand on Joa's shoulder.

Joa stepped closer. "Sim, Balta?"

"Sim." He would not lie about that. He would not even exaggerate.

Joa's hand landed on his waist -- he would imagine Joa would say it was to steady him, not to touch him. Balta let himself lean, let himself hum a little. Joa felt sturdy, hot, and good.

"Do you want to sit?" Joa was strong, holding him easily.

"Yes." They would have to eat sometime soon, and rest, but for now, he wanted Joa to sit with him, perhaps hold him. Joa helped him to the bed, then knelt in front of him, taking off his boot.

"Oh." That moan had no drama in it, no acting. Damn.

"Desculpe." Joa's warm hands wrapped around his foot.

That felt so good he could have cried. "Such good hands."

"Shh. Lie back, hmm? I'll help."

"All right." Just this once, he would let Joa take care of him and not think about sex. Maybe.

Joa eased the pillows under his lower back and shoulders, then worked his jeans off, leaving him in his boxer-briefs. Then those warm, strong hands started touching his legs. Oh, the Lord was good to him, to bring him this man.

Balta rested, floated, letting Joa do for him.

Joa's hands were like tiny furnaces, easing his pains, making him float. "Do you want me to do your back, Balta?"

"Sim, sim. Favor."

"Turn over. I'll put on sweats."

"Why? Just take your clothes off." Now he was back to calculating. "It will be warm."

"I don't. Turn over." Joa took his shirt off, worked off his boots.

Balta turned over, chuckling, the confusion on Joa's face adorable. Sweet man. He thought he heard Joa's jeans hit the floor, then it didn't matter because Joa was straddling his hips, those hands working his muscles.

The sudden release of tension made him shake. "Oh, Joa. That's... good."

"Sim, Balta. You are tight."

"The foot makes it hard to sit right." His back started to spasm, reminding him that he was old.

"Mmm." The touches came again, stronger this time, fighting his muscles, making them relax.

"Uhn." His eyes actually rolled back. Joa was better than any therapist Doc could shell out for.

Joa started singing to him, the sounds random and soft, meant to soothe. Oh, he liked that. Joa had a nice voice for singing, and the song was an old Brazilian one, something familiar.

"Poor back." Joa's fingers traced over the scars at his lower back.

"Mmm. I don't feel so bad when you're with me." On me. Oh, Deus.

He imagined he felt the softest kiss on his shoulder.

Which made him glad he hadn't dropped off to sleep. Balta help up a hand. "Come here where I can see you, hmm?"

"You had enough?" Joa settled on the bed beside him, on one side.

"Never. I just want to touch you, too." Turning on his side, Balta put a hand on Joa's hip.

The fabric that covered them was soft, warm, stretched thin, but no one near as good as Joa's skin.

Balta laughed, pulling at the waistband of Joa's underwear. "Not sexy, doce."

"They weren't meant to be sexy, Balta. They're to protect the caralho from the zipper."

"Ah. Yes, but now? No zipper." Balta pulled again, tugging down this time.

That lean hip was exposed to him, then the bare belly and that fine, waxed cock.

"Mmm. Now, that's better, huh? Everything can breathe." Look at that. So edible.

Joa's skin warmed, turned a rosy pink. "I should buy food."

That prick began to fill as he admired it; Joa's hunger was right there, so strong.

Rubbing his thumb over the tip, Balta pushed the foreskin back and forth, teasing. "So pretty, doce."

Joa groaned, arched for him in a long, fluid motion, those muscles shifting and bunching. Sim. Balta licked his lips, letting Joa see how pleased that need made him, staring into those amazing eyes. Sweet, sweet man.

"Balta." Joa shuddered, then pushed closer to him with a luscious cry.

"Mmmhmm." His lips pressed against the long throat, traveling over Joa's bumpy Adam's apple. The strong jaw called to him, then the sweet, open mouth.

"I want..." Joa silenced himself, pushing into their kiss.

He kissed back until they had to have air, until they broke apart gasping. Then he asked. "Want what?"

Joa ducked his head, groaned. "You. I know I should not, but I do. I want."

"You have me." Balta rubbed noses with Joa. "You want something new, huh?"

"What?" Joa was distracted, focused on his mouth again.

"New. Something new." He licked at those soft, soft lips. "You want to try something we have not."

Joa chuckled. "Do we have something old?"

"We do." He moved his hand, up and down.

"Uhn." Joa's eyes crossed, those hands grabbing at his upper arms.

"There. You see? We have done this before, though I would not say it is getting old." Balta rubbed with his thumb again, just for good measure.

Joa nodded, swallowed, breath coming faster as his cock began to leak.

"There are so many other things, though, huh?" Oh. Oh, he knew what they could do. Balta tugged at Joa's cock. "Turn so your hips are up here."

"Huh?" Joa looked utterly confused, but moved, following his guidance.

He got Joa turned, front facing him, hips by his head. If the lad didn't grasp what was happening when Balta leaned forward and wrapped his lips around Joa's cock, well, he'd have to help with that, too.

"Balta?" Joa groaned, cheek sliding on his shaft. "You smell good."

"Do I?" His lips moved against the tip of Joa's cock. "You taste good."

"Oh. Oh. Oh." Joa's prick jerked, pressed against his lips.

Smiling, he rubbed his lips back and forth before opening up and sucking again, his tongue rubbing the underside.

"You should not..." The words were moaned against his shaft, Joa's tongue flicking out to taste.

His hand slid around to cup Joa's asscheek, fingers digging in to pull Joa closer. That way he could take more in his mouth.

"Please." Joa's breath brushed over the tip of his prick.

Balta closed his eyes and sucked, wishing he'd thought to put a pillow behind his back. It wasn't bad, though, not bad enough to distract him from the salty flavor, the silky-smooth skin. Joa's lips were clumsy, the hands on his thighs shaking violently.

He stroked Joa's hair, the back of that amazing neck. Balta didn't want Joa to do anything he was afraid of. Joa hummed softly, lips tugging at the tip of his cock, pulling gently. Oh, yes. He encouraged Joa with soft noises and easy hand movements. Well, that and he set a good example.

Joa was sensitive, shivering with every touch. So good, his doce. So eager to please, to learn. Balta moved his hand down and around, stroking Joa's balls lightly.

He could feel that moan, that gasp around the tip of his cock. He went no farther, afraid of introducing too many new things. Instead, he kept his attention on cock and balls, licking and sucking and fondling. Fortunately for him, Joa was a quick learner, mimicking his touches, his mouth.

They began to move together, slowly, and Balta encouraged Joa to do most of the rocking. Hungry doce. Joa fed upon him, tongue sliding, working the tip of his cock until he wanted to scream. His hands threatened to clench too hard, so he moved them back to Joa's behind, squeezing the hard muscles there. He sucked harder, wanting Joa to be crazy for him.

He could feel the deep, desperate sounds, all around his own flesh, Joa becoming clumsy, lost.

Balta pulled back until just the head of Joa's cock was in his mouth, letting his tongue slap against it, letting Joa feel the sting. It was time.

"Balta!" Joa arched, hands landing on the small of his back, pulling him close.

"Mmm." Come, doce. He thought it as hard as he could, unwilling to move back enough to speak.

The lean hips punched forward, fucked his lips for a few thrusts, then bitter, salty seed splashed on his tongue. Balta took every drop in, savoring the taste and the knowledge that he had done that. He had made Joa explode, all for him.

Hot, damp breath panted against his thigh, Joa moaning, muttering to him with soft, nonsense words.

"Sim." His fingers moved to the small of Joa's back, stroking in small circles.

Joa groaned, mouth finding his prick again, wrapping him in wet heat. Gasping, Balta let his body move as much as it could, his back twinging the tiniest bit. Reminding him that he wasn't so young.

Joa groaned and eased him over, strong hands supporting him. Stretching out on his back made it so much easier, and suddenly Balta was awash with sensation. The tiniest brush of Joa's skin on his made him shiver and grunt.

He grabbed a pillow and shoved it under his head, staring down at those parted, swollen lips, at his slick, shining cock, moving in and out of them. The sight nearly made him come, but Balta held on, gritting his teeth. He wanted to see more. Feel more.

Then Joa looked up at him. Stared at him. Balta saw everything in those eyes, all of the words that Joa probably didn't even know teetered there. That was enough to pull his orgasm from him, to make him cry out and come.

His sweet Joa choked a bit, but took him in, swallowing hard around him.

When the violence of it left him, Balta slumped back on the bed, breathing hard, hands reaching for Joa. "Doce."

"Not so sweet, hmm?" Joa moved closer, pushed into his arms with a soft sound.

"Oh, more than. Like doce de liete." Sweet with a little tangy burn, his Joa.

"This is okay? To stay here?" Joa fit against him, so warm.

"It is." All he had to do was to settle himself more comfortably, getting pillows in the right places. Then he hugged Joa close.

"Mmm." Joa hummed, hand on his hip.

"Are you hungry, doce?" He hoped Joa said no. They could get food later.

"No, Balta. No. Here is good."

"Bom." They would stay, snuggle. And sometime during the night, he might convince Joa to try something else new. He couldn't wait.

\*\*\*

He woke.

He went to the gas station and filled up the truck. He went to the grocery store and bought food.

He drove around, searching for a Catholic church to go into, to confess, but he could not find one and Joa was almost relieved. For he was not sure he was sorry.

Finally, he headed back to the cabin with the supplies. He imagined he could still taste Balta on his tongue, even though he'd showered and brushed his teeth before he'd left Balta sleeping to shop.

It was not an unpleasant thought.

He thought Balta would be angry, but when he entered the cabin, there was no greeting, good or bad. In fact, the only sound was faint snoring. He chuckled, put the groceries away, and got himself a beer. Then he went outside to see what there was to see.

The cabin sat up in the trees, and it was calm and quiet. Chipmunks and birds. They were everywhere. Joa wandered along a path, looking. It was different here, than home. More trees, more rocks, and the air? So dry. He chuckled, thought about Eduardo and the way the man missed the jungle. He wouldn't love it here.

When he finally turned back he was breathing a little hard from the altitude, and Balta was sitting in one of the chairs out in front of the cabin, sipping a beer. Wearing just a pair of soft shorts.

He wiped his face, found a smile. "Good nap?"

Good blow job?

"Very good. I can't remember when I was so relaxed lately." Balta smiled, patted the arm of the other little chair.

"How is the foot?" He settled and turned his face up to the sun.

"Better, huh? Not so stiff, now we're out of the truck." Stretching, Balta wiggled his bare toes. The cast was off.

"Sim. Sim." He should go, put on something cooler, something soft. It was nice out here, though, with the wind blowing.

"Sit, huh?" One eyebrow went up. "Unless you want to wear not so many clothes?"

"I was thinking about it. Taking off my boots."

"Why don't you? Feels good." Balta wiggled those poor, swollen toes again.

He chuckled and nodded, toed one boot off. Balta watched with interest, lips wrapping around the mouth of his beer bottle. Evil man.

No looking.

None.

No looking.

Joa got his other boot off, his socks.

"You have pretty feet, doce."

"Feet aren't pretty." He rolled his eyes.

"So sure of everything." He got a wink, a shrug.

What did that mean? Did he seem too much like a know-it-all? Like a chato?

He rolled up his socks, put them inside his boots, hands going to check his phone, his wallet, just like he was at the arena.

"What did you get us to eat, doce? Did you get bananas?"

"Sim. Banana, melancias, biscoitos, pipoca, carne, bife, arroz, pao, queijo. Normal stuff, eh?"

Sweets and meat and cheese. Milk. Bread.

"What kind of cookies?" Balta liked chocolate and caramel, the ones with the elves on the package. Everyone on tour knew that.

"Three boxes of the caramelados." There were Oreos, too. For him.

"Obrigato, Joa." Balta stretched, muscles sliding under skin. "Oh, the air feels good, huh?"

"It does. The town is nice. Tiny, but good."

"We'll have to go explore. Later." Now Balta was staring at his shirt, looking expectant.

"What? Is it dirty?" He looked down, the dark T-shirt fine.

"No. It is still on. I like your belly." That expression left nothing to the imagination.

Joa thought about arguing, but he worked hard, everyday, for his abs, and that would be silly, so he stripped the shirt off.

"That's much better, huh?" Those dark eyes were on him like hands, touching him all over.

He stretched, just like Balta had touched him for real. "Sim."

When Balta beckoned to him, he went, like he couldn't resist. Maybe he couldn't. Balta was a demon, after all. His wicked, dark demon.

Joa thought he might be in serious trouble.

That warm, callused hand closed around his, and Balta chuckled. "You are looking like you might bolt, Joa."

"You make me want things, Balta. Dangerous things."

"Why are they dangerous? We are both adults, both able to keep things to ourselves when we must. Right now is not a must." Balta pulled him closer, free hand landing low on his belly.

His muscles jerked, rippling at the warmth of those fingers. "You are dangerous, Balta."

His fingers slid up Balta's arm, the skin fascinating, the scars bumpy and rough.

"Mmm." Balta loved being touched. The man positively basked in it.

He explored every inch of the scar, then moved to the bicep, tracing the muscles.

"I do love your hands." Balta's hands were on his belly, stroking, touching, tickling.

"Your skin is warm." He leaned forward, lips near Balta's ear. "I can still taste you."

"Oh." Those eyes went wide, and Balta turned, mouth pressing up against his.

Joa let himself have the kiss, let himself moan and push, tongue tracing Balta's lips. Balta needed to shave. The heavy beard stubble was making his chin ache, but it was a good feeling. He chuckled, imagining Balta going to get waxed like him. That would never happen.



"What's funny?" The words were murmured against his mouth, Balta not seeming worried. Curious man.

"Was thinking about taking you with me, next time I wax."

"Oh? I Like that idea. I could watch.

"Watch?" That hadn't been what he'd meant. "I'm very bare during."

"Mmmhmm. I am sure we can find someone who does not mind."

His mouth had to be hanging open. Balta had the most amazing ideas. Embarrassing.

"Balta, you would make me hard." Like he was hard now.

"I would?" The sideways tilt of Balta's grin told him that Balta thought this was a fine idea.

"Wicked man." Demon. "You do. You would. No watching."

"Oh, you will disappoint me." Balta could pout. He had not known that.

It was fascinating. His finger traced along Balta's bottom lip. "I will not."

"Then you'll let me go!" Balta pulled him down across those heavy thighs, kissing him happily.

Wait? Had he agreed to that?

The kisses continued, Balta's tongue pushing into his lips.

Eh. It didn't matter.

All that mattered was the way Balta made him feel, like he was the hottest, most amazing man in the world. Their bellies rubbed together, Balta's fuzzy and hot, the sensation on his bare skin making his eyes roll.

"Mmm. So smooth, huh?" It looked like Balta liked it, too. He could tell by the hardness that rose in Balta's soft shorts.

"We should go inside." He could show Balta more of how bare he was.

"Okay." The easy agreement surprised him, but it pleased him, too. Balta was willing to help him feel more comfortable.

He stood up, grabbed his shirt and boots, using them to camouflage the bulge in his jeans.

"Sweet. You're a sweet dessert, Joa. Life is short. I think I will have dessert first." Balta hid nothing.

He found himself licking his lips, before Balta chuckled and he ducked his head, headed for the cabin. Balta followed, whistling a jaunty tune, one that made him think of samba dancers, actually. That had him laughing again, thinking of fuzzy, hard-bodied Balta in a skimpy carnival costume.

"Have you been to Carnivale?"

"Me? No. No, I was a small-town boy, huh? When I came up here I still had cow shit behind my ears."

"I been back a couple times, to the city, but..." Joa shrugged. He didn't belong there, not really.

"Do you hate it?" Balta shrugged, reaching out to pat his ass from behind. "I like Sao Paolo okay, now, but I was too scared when I was a kid."

"I don't hate it. I feel... like an American, sim?"

"Sim." Smiling, Balta caught his hand and turned him around, giving him a kiss. They smacked together, both moaning even as he reached out to steady Balta.

"Sit with me on the couch? Bed? Somewhere?" Teetering, Balta laughed, leaning on him.

"Sim. Sim. Come on, Balta. Sit."

They made it to the sofa, Balta tumbling down and pulling him close in a breathless rush. Oh, it felt good, even when he bounced some.

"How's your foot?" His hand had somehow landed on Balta's thigh.

"Fine, fine." Turning him a bit, Balta got them settled better, leaning on each other, every breath making Balta's chest brush his. The hair there made his skin tingle, made his nipples tighten, which was a new thing -- touching someone not smooth. Kissing his chin, Balta murmured something that made his ears heat all the way to the tops. Was that even possible?

He groaned, mouth searching just a bit frantically for Balta's.

Balta kissed him like he was a feast, something to be devoured and savored and consumed. Like he was precious. He found himself crawling into Balta's lap, straddling the strong thighs and shifting like it was the best ride ever.

"Mmm. Oh, Joa. Sim." Balta undid Joa's jeans, the zipper sounding incredibly loud. That callused hand closed around him, and he was as hard as if he'd not come for weeks.

He nodded, ready to ride, to feel Balta's touch. "I need."

"I do, too, doce. I need so bad." Yes. Balta's cock was pressing insistently against the fabric of his shorts, a tiny wet spot spreading.

It was easy to reach down, pull the shorts away so he could touch, too.

They stroked each other, kissing madly, Balta's lips bruising his. The flesh under his hand amazed him as much as it had the last time, as much as the first time. The rhythm was wrong -- not like a bullride, or a horse. No. No, this was a new ride.

"Soon I will do this and be inside you, doce." Balta said it against his mouth, so low it almost didn't register.

His eyes rolled back in his head, his abs clenching. Oh. Oh, Deus. He... "Balta."

Fuck.

"Joa." Balta latched onto his throat, sucking hard, pulling blood up just under the skin.

"Sim." This sound tore out of him, and he moved faster, hand pulling at Balta's cock.

Grunting, Balta rubbed him, pulled at him, too. That mouth... it was going to drive him crazy. Balta was the devil. He babbled; he couldn't help it, the words poured out of him, pure need.

"Soon, Joa. Soon I will have you. Be inside you. Stretch you until you scream." Balta bit him. Hard.

He grunted, seed pulsing out of him over and over until his muscles protested.

Balta groaned, hips snapping, that hard cock pulsing against him with hardly a touch. Someone else liked that idea as much as he did.

They slumped together, and Joa felt lightheaded, dazed.

Huge breaths raised and lowered Balta's barrel chest. "Joa. Now I am hungry, huh?"

"Sim." He wasn't sure he could move, though.

"We'll eat." Balta was just sitting there, too. They were both still wheezing.

Joa nodded. Absolutely. He was a fan.

Go eating.

"Cookies." Balta was focused. That had to be why he was a champion.

He blinked at Balta. "Cookies. Caramel."

"Mmmhmm." Smacking his butt, Balta moved him off so he lay on the couch. "I'll get them, yeah?"

"No." He could get up. For Balta. "Your foot is hurt, eh? You rest."

"Joa. Stay there, so I can look at you. I will use you as my table, huh? Eat off your belly." Balta was only limping a little.

The things Balta said. Joa ran his hand down his belly, imagining Balta using him as a table. Such perversity.

Balta came back with cookies for both of them, some fruit juice, and some cream in a can that he had bought to go with fruit.

He realized, suddenly, that he was stretched out with his cock bared, his jeans opened, like a puta.

When he would have scrambled up, though, Balta sat next to him, holding him down with the plate of cookies. "Don't run off, doce."

"I just... I was lying here." Spread and bare.

"Mmmhmm. Waiting for me. I like that." Balta winked, fingers moving the plate so it sat just so, quivering a little when Joa's muscles moved.

"It will spill, Balta." He crunched a little, the plate stabilizing.

"No, it won't. And if it does, it's just cookies." Balta picked up an Oreo and fed it to him.

Oh, yum.

He split the cookie with his tongue, lapping at the cream.

"Joa. Don't tease." Balta laughed when he blinked up. "Okay, tease away."

He would have answered, but he was eating, so he just grabbed another cookie, licked the cream out of it.

Balta laughed, grabbing a caramel cookie and moaning over it. They ate their supper of sweets, and Balta grabbed the can of cream, moving the plate from his belly. "Dessert now?"

"I think we already had dessert..."

"Oh. Well, we can have more." Balta shook the can before spraying some on his belly.

"Cold!" He arched up, which let Balta grab the waistband of his jeans and yank down.

"Is it?" Balta bent, stiff as a board, and licked cream off his belly. That poor back.

He reached out, hand on the tight muscles, hoping to soothe. A low moan was his reward, and Balta licked the cream right off his skin. It was almost ticklish. His belly jerked and his hand pressed against Balta's back again, harder.

"Careful, now." He would swear Balta was laughing.

"Sorry. Desculpa. I. *Balta*."

"What, doce? You don't like it?" More cream, more tiny cat licks; it was crazy.

"I do. Like." His prick was recovering, filling obscenely against his belly.

"Bom." Balta sprayed more cream, just above his cock. "I do, too."

This was like some wet dream, one he hadn't been smart enough to imagine. Good thing Balta was smart enough to think of everything. Everything. Deus. Balta made him wonder about even more. Like what the cold cream would feel like... there.

He waited, even his breath stopped as he waited for the next spray to come. It landed just where he wanted it to, right at the tip of his cock. Balta's tongue felt so hot in comparison that he cried out.

His eyes wanted to squeeze closed, but he needed to see.

Needed to.

"Outra vez?"

"Sim." Balta did it one more time. The combination of hot and cold made him moan.

He reached down, touched the soft, soft hair at Balta's temple.

Glancing up, Balta smiled for him. "You'll tell me if it's too much, sim? If you get too sensitive."

He nodded. "I will. This is so big."

Laughing, Balta licked him again. "It's fun, you know? We have fun together."

"Why me, Balta?" Why did those dark eyes search for him?

Sitting up, Balta reached up and touched his cheek. "Because I knew you were this sensual. Because you looked back at me when I looked. And because I like you, Joa. I like to spend time with you." The cream-cold thumb rubbed over his lips.

He found himself wrapping his lips around that thumb, teeth and tongue exploring it.

"I think you're honest and decent and good; all the things that I am not, huh? And you have a mouth made for sin." The last was said low and husky, Balta pressing gently against his lower lip.

He groaned, let Balta in, sucking the sweet and salt off Balta's skin.

Balta was looking at him like he... what did they say? Like he hung the moon. It was heady. Powerful.

It was like having Balta's cock in his mouth, somehow, knowing that he was giving this pleasure made his balls ache, made his knees curl up.

Balta moaned, and cold cream sprayed against his skin. They both jumped, Balta laughing like a loon. "Slipped. Sorry, doce."

He grinned, hand reaching down automatically to clean the sweet off.

"Ah-ah. I'll do it."

The line his Balta's tongue made was like fire, down his ribs and toward his cock.

"I like my sweet and savory together," Balta murmured against his lower belly. "Like caramel and nuts."

"Sim." He would remember that.

Always.

\*\*\*

The time at the cabin had been idyllic. Balta knew they had to leave the next morning, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to be back where his cell phone got reception and prying eyes would see what he was doing with Joa.

Joa was in the living room, bare feet on the sofa, doing crunches. Joaquim spent an enormous amount of time, every day, doing crunches.

It was very enjoyable to watch, especially when Balta had convinced him to do it without the tank top on. Bare skin shone in the shaft of sunlight that came through the window. Joa hummed

as he rocked, stomach muscles rippling with every motion, the tiny pair of shorts sliding down and down.

There was a shadow there, the trail of glory even waxing couldn't get rid of. So pretty.

Joa's eyes were closed, so he could look his fill without disturbing that rhythm -- up and down, up and down. There was a bead of sweat that trickled down Joa's belly. Balta wanted to lick it off, but he was afraid his back and leg would protest the move. He smiled a little. Their time together had proven that while the spirit was willing, the flesh was... damaged. He wasn't as young as he used to be.

Of course, it had also proven that Joa was more than understanding. The man was focused on him, on pleasing him, on easing his aches. It was an embarrassment of riches, but he was selfish enough to take it. "Are you almost done, doce?" he asked after counting to five hundred. "I want to grill the last of that meat, huh?"

"Sim. Sim, Balta. I have a hundred left." Joa smiled at him. "Then I can help."

"Oh, I don't need help. I just don't want to miss anything."

"Miss?" Sweet, innocent man.

"Mmm. I'm watching, huh?" Enjoying. Pondering asking Joa to suck him.

"No crunches for your back, sim?"

"Nao. Only watching you." He had to get back to the gym. Back to the inversion board. But not today.

The last twenty crunches were luscious, Joa tiring, pushing himself.

Those muscles bunched and pulled, and the sweat ran, and by the time Joa was done, Balta was ravenous, hard as a rock, and forgetting his age. "Come here, doce."

Joa rolled up, those shorts dipping even lower. "Sim, Balta?"

"Over here." Balta spread his legs and pushed a hand down over the bulge in his sweats.

Joa's eyes followed his hand, those perfect lips parted, and Balta could see it -- his cock sliding in, pushing in deep.

"Por favor, doce. I need your mouth." He needed it so badly all of a sudden that he could hardly breathe.

Joa nodded and reached for him, eased his sweats over his straining cock. "Sim, Balta. Do you want the bed?"

"No. No, Joa." Unless Joa insisted. Then he would.

"No?" Joa's hands measured his cock, from root to tip, then his doce knelt before him, lips open.

Deus.

Yes.

"No. I want it here." He helped get his sweats down around his thighs, his cock waving at Joa obscenely.

Joa's hands slid up along his thighs, fingers digging in as they framed his pelvis. Then Joa's tongue dragged over the tip of his cock. Joa had taken to sucking him just like Balta had hoped he would. Like a natural. He stretched, letting Joa have him, spreading and pushing.

He stood and watched the dark head begin to move, lips sliding over his prick. He'd seen men worship on their knees, seen many people do this act, but none of them had been like this. Faminto. Hungry.

Balta stroked Joa's hair, the side of the long neck, feeling heat, the hair and skin soft, the muscle hard. Like he was hard. Aching.

So slowly, Joa loved him. His cock sank deep into Joa's throat, then those lips tightened, dragging all the way back over his shaft.

"Tease." The word was fond. He loved it. Loved the confidence Joa was finding.

"Nao. Tasting." Then that mouth filled with his prick again.

"Doce." His head tried to loll, but Balta held himself still, needing to see.

Soon he would have Joa, watch that strong face as he pushed inside, buried himself inside what would be perfect heat. Soon. Not tonight, though, he would bet. Balta chuckled at his thoughts. Only a greedy man could take what he had right now and wish it was more.

Those dark eyes flashed up at him, worried.

"Feels good, doce. So good." As if the hard and wet of his cock didn't say that already. Still, it could not hurt to stroke his lover's ego.

He stroked all of Joa he could reach, too, murmuring love words. He praised the heat, the wetness, the delicate feel of Joa's lips. Joa moaned and pulled, tongue sliding harder and faster over his shaft. Balta held on as long as he could, watching, one hand on Joa's hair, the other coming to rest on his own belly, helping to keep him from humping too hard. He came with a grunt, his balls emptying, his breath whooshing out of his chest.



His doce didn't miss a drop, such a fast learner, so hungry for him.

His hands finally unclenched, and Balta pulled Joa up for a kiss, tasting himself. "I love your mouth."

He felt the heat of Joa's blush, then Joa stepped closer and he felt the heat of that heavy cock.

Balta hummed, cupping it with his hands. "I love this, too."

Joa's eyes rolled and so did the lean hips, Joa pushing toward his touch.

So pretty. So musky and earthy and good to smell. And to taste. Balta pondered the best way to do what he wanted. "Help me, doce. I want to suck you, huh?"

Joa's answer was a deep moan. "Sim. Sim, Balta."

Maybe if he lay back on the couch, Joa could get up on his chest... "Bed. I think bed."

Joa nodded, fingers trailing down his belly in a careful touch.

Balta laughed for the sheer joy of it, and he hopped up to tug Joa to the bed. "I am not glass, huh?"

Joa's laughter joined his. "You are not. You are a cowboy."

"I am." He was proud that he had grown up in cattle country, that he was from a small ranch community. He grinned. He was tough, too.

"Sim. We are." He'd met Joa's parents, seen the big ranch that had brought Leonid and Maria to America. He'd seen Joa rope and ride, too.

"You are, doce. Make me proud." They got to the bed, and he pushed Joa down, crawling up. If he lie on his belly, he could do all right.

"This okay, Balta? You... if it hurts, you don't have to."

"It's better than okay." He could rest on his elbows and chest, and there was no pressure on his back at all. And he could reach that sweet cock.

He leaned down, tongue dragging on Joa's skin, that was just beginning to show a hint of stubble. His poor spent cock tried to jerk back to life at the thought of waxing and watching, but it wasn't his best effort. Balta concentrated on Joa. On making his doce feel good.

"Baltazar." Joa arched for him, sweet prick leaking.

"Mmm." He licked, sucked, his hands flat by Joa's hips. He couldn't touch much in this position, but Joa seemed to like what he was doing.

He explored every inch of Joa's shaft, first with the flat of his tongue, then with the tip. Balta closed his eyes, pushing Joa's cock down with his tongue so he could suck it between his lips again. The flavor burst through him again, rich and salty. Joa's legs spread, cradling him, hips rolling up. Long legs, lots of muscle, and a long prick, that was his Joa. Balta loved every inch.

He shifted one hand over, cupped Joa's ass, thumb working the strip of skin behind the heavy balls. That had Joa moving faster, harder, and Balta sucked deep. He gave Joa his all.

"Your mouth. Your mouth, Balta."

Sim. His mouth. Joa's cock. Sweet. It was a fine combination. He needed Joa to come.

He let his fingers slide back, just brush Joa's hole, stroke the tiny wrinkled spot, and heat splashed over his tongue.

Lovely. Balta rolled to his side, hand on Joa's belly, the muscles there still standing out from all of the crunches.

"Tomorrow it is back to real life, eh?" Joa's voice was soft, almost sad, he thought.

"It is." He wrapped the hand on Joa's body around one hip, pulling Joa over to face him. "Are you all right, doce?"

"Sim. Sim. This has been... It is like a dream, hmm?"

"It has." He smiled. "I love being with you, Joa. I truly do."

Joa winked at him, kissed him. "Abrigado."

He laughed out loud. "I will not let you go, Joa. I promise."

"Nao? You are sure?"

"I am." He was. No matter what. He was keeping Joa.

\*\*\*

They pulled into the driveway of the hotel, close to the door so Balta could save the foot. There wasn't a guy coming for the bags; the hotels out here in Montana tended to be simpler, the events more rodeo than most. "I'll bring the bags in."

Joa reckoned he'd park along the side.

"I'll check in, huh?" Balta gave him a tired smile, the lines around his mouth standing out. Balta was always smiling, though, no matter what.

"Sim." He parked, then called his momma. "Mae!"

"Joaquim! Onde esta?"

"Montana, Mae. At the big rodeo."

"Sim? You like it?"

He nodded, grinning at himself. "Sim. Sim. It's windy, though. How're the dogs? My house?"

"Buon. Papai bought calves for you. For the land."

His father, his sisters and their husbands were incredibly concerned about his land and the lack of livestock on it.

So far there had been goats.

Chickens.

Buffalo.

Llamas.

Ostriches.

"How are the horses?"

"Peru is having a baby."

"Sim? I'll have to come home to see. Have the vet come out for her, sim?"

"Sim, Joaquim."

His father always wanted to handle the births himself, but Joa knew with the horses it was better to have the vet. Another pick up pulled up next to his, Eduardo and Vittorio piling out.

He waved, grinned. "Bom dia. No. No, Mae. Just more bullrider."

Vittorio ducked his head, but Eduardo waved and called a greeting. Vittorio was always so quiet.

They all headed in, Mae still jabbering in his ear about cats and babies and cell phones and calves. Balta met them in the back hallway, clapping Eduardo on the back when he passed by. The smile was just for Joa, though.

He handed over Balta's bag. "Mae, I have to go. Kiss Papai for me. I'll be home in two weeks."

"Te amo." She rang off with him, and Balta led him to their room.

"How's your mama, huh?"

"Good. Good. They bought me cattle."

"A long as it's not alpaca." Balta always laughed at his papai, buying him the weird animals.

"Beefmasters. Although I think there are more buffalo coming."

Buffalo.

Deus.

"Huh." The room was clean, and did not smell like smoke. That was a plus. It had a little refrigerator, which would be good for the smoothies he wanted to try on Balta.

He threw his gear beside the far bed and went to turn the air conditioner up.

"Mmm. You want something from the cooler, doce?"

"Coke, please." He needed a shower, possibly a nap.

"Sure." Balta got him a Coke, wandering a little. He had to wonder what was going on behind those dark eyes.

He chewed his bottom lip as he sat to pull his boots off, then just asked. "You okay?"

"Hmm?" Balta turned, smiled for him. "Sim, sim. Claudia called."

"Oh? Are the kids okay?"

"Mmm. She wants them to come up here and visit a few weeks, huh?"

He nodded. "That is good, sim? You haven't been to see them in a while."

"Sim, sim. I want to see them." Balta's forehead wrinkled up. "I just know how she is, huh? Plans will change a million times."

"At least." He tried to think of something comforting to say. "They can come ride horses at my ranch."

"Obrigato, doce." That got him a smile, Balta coming to flop down next to him on the bed.

He nodded, grinned. Balta didn't have family here to take care of animals, of a ranch. Him? He'd made enough to buy his land, buy land for his parents.

"I am a little sad that we had to leave our cabin." One of Balta's hands slid over, casual as anything, and landed on Joa's belly.

"Mmm. But the work needs you." Hot. Balta's hand was hot.

"I need it, too. So do you."

They were both cowboys. They were.

He nodded. He loved his job. "Sim."

"So." Laughing, Balta sat up and tugged his hand. "Shower."

"I stink?" He chuckled, stripped off his shirt, made sure the curtains were closed tight.

"No. I just want to be in the water with you." Balta stripped down, too, looking good. Tanned and healthy.

He grinned, fingers reaching out for Balta's belly. He'd almost touched when there was a knock on the door. "de Silva? This your room?"

Coke Pharris.

Balta sighed, shaking his head. "Go get the water going, huh?"

"Yeah." He nodded, heading for the bathroom without waiting to hear what the old bullfighter wanted.

He could hear the murmur of their voices, Balta's sharper accent high against Coke's deep Texas drawl. The words made no sense. They were just sound under the running water.

Joa stepped into the water, washing, relaxing, letting the water bash into him.

He waited, washed his hair, rinsed. Balta didn't come, though. That wasn't like Balta at all. There must have been trouble. Once he'd decided that, he turned the water off, grabbed a towel and dried off, moving faster now.

Coke and Balta were gone, but he could hear voices outside the window. It sounded like Eduardo, shouting. It took ten seconds to pull his jeans on and grab a T-shirt and his key card. He just had to hope he wouldn't need his boots.

When he finally got outside, Coke was holding back two cowboys, even with one black and busted hand, and Balta was wrestling Eduardo and Vittorio both, shouting in Portuguese.

Joa went running. "Hey! Hey, y'all! Stop it!"

He grabbed the collar of one man from Coke, yanking him back. Eduardo and Vittorio wouldn't hurt Balta.

"He started it." The cowboy that snarled at him wasn't one he knew. The big rodeo was always full of new faces.

"Bullshit." He knew better.

"I don't give a fuck who started what, asshole." Coke puffed up like a short, broad toad. "I'm standing here to say I'll finish it."

Balta was talking rapidly, one hand on each of the Brazilian riders' chests. He was telling them it was no good to fight. It would get them suspended.

"Fucking wetbacks. Taking good men's money!"

"ey, Cu? You watch it." He could hold his own with these fuckers.

"Keep your shit together, Muscles." Coke was grinning, though, the devil in his eyes.

"What the fuck did you call me, Beaner?"

He shook the asshole in his head. "Cu. I called you a cu. An asshole."

Balta turned on the American cowboys, Eduardo and Vittorio fading back into the hotel. "You want me to talk to Ace, Stevens? Huh? I know you. You're on the little tour. You too, Callahan."

Balta knew everyone.

"No. No, just... keep a handle on your boys."

Coke let the one he was holding onto go, and Joa was about to do the same when the man muttered. "Fucking monkeys."

Joa slammed him into the side of the hotel, easy as you please.

The other American came to put an arm between them. "Hey, now. Come on, Stef. Let's just go get that hamburger."

'Stef' looked at him, a little wide-eyed. He didn't care what the man picked, he'd go in or fight. He was easy.

It was Balta who finally decided them all, pulling him back about six inches. "Go," Balta said, and the two boys went.

Coke hooted after they left, clapped Joa hard enough he stumbled forward a few steps. "Not bad, Muscles."

"Thank you, Coke. For coming to get me." Balta grinned, shaking out his arms and hands. "It could have been bad."

"Anytime, son. Any time at all." Coke smiled back. "I'm hungry. Y'all want to go eat?"

Balta glanced at him sideways, checking to be sure, he'd bet. At his smile, Balta nodded. "Sim, sim. We have not, how do you say? Hung out. In a while, huh?"

"Cool." Those weirdly pale gray eyes looked at him. "Go put some boots on, son, and get a hat. You need a haircut."

"Yeah, Gramps."

Ass.

Balta laughed. "I need my hat, too. We'll meet you out front, huh? Your truck is bigger."

"Sure. I'll grab Nattie."

"Good, good. Give us five." Balta grabbed Joa's arm and steered him back inside. "We'll have to watch Eduardo. He's feeling very upset since he lost out in Amarillo."

"Okay. Sure. Yes. What happened to Coke's hand?"

"Hmm? Oh, when he tied it up with the bull the other day, sim? Uh, when Coop got hurt."

"Ah." He didn't remember. Of course, they got hurt. All of them.

They got back to the room, changing shirts, finding their good hats. "You know, when Dillon got his shoulder out."

Oh, sim. Everyone remembered *that*. He nodded, then shook his head. "The clown is not a bull fighter. Not like some."

Of course, those other clowns couldn't bring the crowds Dillon could, and without the crowds, they got less money...

"He is no coward, though, huh?" Balta looked fine in his clean, starched shirt. Yellow looked good on him.

"No. No, not a coward." Perhaps a fool, but the man was a cowboy.

"You were very sexy, doce," Balta said when they slipped out the door and headed to the front desk. "I like when you are forceful."

"I won't let them say those things about us." He was an American, but he was Brazilian, too.

"No. You did well." Nodding, Balta steered him to the vending machine, pulling out quarters and getting M&Ms.

"We're about to eat, Balta." The man was the worst snacker.

"So? I've been running around for weeks at thousands of feet above sea level."

Wait. What did that have to do with it?

Coke was waiting, Nate standing there, looking like a thundercloud was over his head.

Balta smiled, clapping Nate on the arm. "You not wanting us to go, Nate?"

"No. No, Balta. I'm worried about Hoss' damn hand."

"Oh, hush, Nattie."

"Coke is a big, strong man. Forte. He will let you know when to worry." Look at Balta grin.

"You want me to drive, Coke?"

"Sure, son." The keys were tossed over. "I want noodles."

Son. Joa didn't bother to hide his smile. Fearless Pharris was the only man who could call Balta 'son'.

"Oh, I like noodles. And meatballs, huh?"

"You're awful quiet, Muscles," Coke said. "You like Italian?"

"I do. I like lasagna and anything stuffed with cheese." Joa climbed into the back with Nate, the red-headed bullfighter finally relaxing.

"Hey." Nate gave him a rueful kind of grin. "Looks like you had a good little break."

"We did. Went up to the mountains, missed the last event."

"Well, it was a doozie." Nate laughed, shook his head. "It's good of y'all, to keep Coke company. He's hurtin'."



Joa nodded, but really, it wasn't good. Coke was...legendary.

Almost as much as Balta.

Balta and Coke chattered away in the front, though, like nothing was wrong at all. They always put a good face on.

"Has Doc seen his hand?" That color of black couldn't be healthy.

"Not yet. Coop is out for a good bit, and I can't do this one alone."

He nodded, winced some. The bullfighters, they were crazy. High-dollar crazy. Of course, the others thought he was crazy, too. Too Texan, they said. Too many chances.

The little Italian restaurant smelled good from the outside, spicy and red.

There were a lot of pickups here -- some he recognized, most he didn't. The big rodeo -- there were ropers and roughstock riders, trick riders. Everything. He'd won the event -- two years in a row. Well, his event. He'd tried roping, but... No. Only on the ranch, where only his sisters laughed at him.

Everyone nodded at Coke and Balta, him and Nate getting less attention. The newest kid, Bonner, smiled at him, waved.

He nodded, grinned, and stopped at Bonner's table. "You eating alone?"

"Yeah. I mean, it's cool." Bonner's cheeks went red. The kid was nice, but the other cowboys avoided him because his father was famous.

"Well, come on. There's room." Eating alone sucked.

"Huh? Oh, no. I mean..." Bonner lowered his voice. "That's Coke. And Balthazar Silva."

"Yeah. And me and Nate. Come on, we gotta talk about *something* while Gramps and Balta talk old times, eh?"

"O-okay." Bonner glanced at Nate. "Sure."

"Cool."

Coke and Nate both nodded and smiled, the look almost friendly. He took the seat beside Balta.

Bonner settled in just as Balta's boot bumped his under the table. "Ola."

"Hey. Joa said it was cool to join y'all..."

Joa nodded. He remembered being new, being nervous.

"It's fine, huh?" Balta smiled, nudging Coke with his elbow.

"Sure, son. Eating alone ain't good for you. You competing in broncs or just bulls?"

"Broncs, too. I need the money." Bonner could ride, for sure.

"You got some good ones here. Nattie and me been down to look already."

"Yeah? Well, cool." The kid ducked his head, looking like he might explode.

The waitress came by and Balta ordered a round of beer and Joa thought he saw Balta slip Coke something across the table, which Coke took with a grimace and a nod. Poor Coke. At least Balta was always good for the pain pills.

Bonner stared at Coke's hand, mouth opening and closing like a trout.

"Bonner, son. Relax. We ain't fixin' to start biting you." Coke winked. "Well, Nattie might. He's grumpy."

"I ain't. Well, no more than usual. Who wants a fried cheese thing?"

Joa smiled. Nate snarled a lot, but he was a good man. "I want some. And a salad. A big one."

"Mmm. I want meatballs," Balta said, making them all laugh. Balta could fixate on meatballs.

Coke ordered a sandwich, Nate had the spaghetti, and Joa went for lasagna. He was hungry.

Balta smiled gently at Coke. "I thought you wanted noodles, huh?"

"I do, but I ain't fighting a fork, huh?" That mangled, swollen hand was held up and all of them winced.

"Well, I can share some of mine, if you have a real urge." Balta wasn't shy about feeding people off his own fork.

"We'll see how good it looks."

"There you go." That was one Americanism Balta had picked up with enthusiasm.

"I heard Dillon got hurt. Is he better?"

The question got him a look from Nate and a shrug from Coke.

Balta stared back and forth between them with bright eyes, something evil in there for a moment. Balta didn't say nothing, though. Nate finally snorted. "His shoulder's out, but he'll live."

"Well, that's good. They pay him a lot to keel over from tangling with a bull." Joa smiled. Man, something was up.

"Yeah. Ace said they'd start docking us per injury." Nate sounded... mean. Snake mean.

He looked from Nate to Coke, and let it drop. The politics of bullfighters was different. Harder, he thought, than the riders. Maybe it was because they were so few. They had to do all the rides, all night. A rider had to do maybe two. And they had paychecks. They could be fired. Him? If he rode, he was on tour.

The food started to arrive, saving them all from something awkward. The fried cheese smelled so good. They dug in like starving men, laughing as they fought over the last few sticks.

The entrees came, and before Joa could even blink, Balta was forking up noodles for Coke. "They're so good, huh?"

"They look fine." Coke took the fork in his good hand, humming over them.

"They are!"

Bonner sat there staring with his mouth open. Joa could remember that, remember finding out that the big names on tour were human.

He ate his food, all of them watching Coke as the pain pills started to work, the man looking older by the second. He murmured something about taking Coke home in Portuguese, so as not to offend the bullfighter.

"Mmm. As soon as this date is over, huh?" Balta nodded, handing Coke the red pepper when the man asked.

He nodded. "He's fading, Balta. You drive."

"I will. No worries." Balta was a good friend. It was good to see.

They ordered a second round of beer, and cheesecake for everyone -- except Nate, who got an ice cream sundae as big as his head.

"You like ice cream, huh?" Bonner stared at Nate, then the ice cream, just looking like a newborn fool.

"Shit, yeah. It's better than cream cheese in a crust."

"Nao." Balta shook his head. "Cheesecake is food of the gods."

"Cheesecake is sour and slimy." Nate actually grinned.

They all groaned, but no one stopped eating, and they finally were all full and ready to go. Joa noticed that Balta's second beer was mostly untouched.

Coke stood, swayed a little, and threw money on the table. "I need bed, I think."

"Come on, old man, huh?" Balta stood, too, picking up the rest of the bill without anyone but Joa noticing. "We'll get you back for some rest."

"Yeah."

Nate hushed Bonner, sent him on his way, as they all headed to the truck.

"Here, Coke. I only had the one beer, huh?" Balta held out his hand for the keys, smiling easily, suddenly not limping at all, so Coke would forget the air cast, too.

"Yeah. Yeah, that works. I'm tired." Coke nodded, handed the keys over like it was nothing.

They barely spoke on the way back to the hotel. Nate's mouth was a tight, flat line, and Coke's hat drooped in the front seat, the old bullfighter dozing.

Joa just wanted out of the truck.

He could go for a run.

A long run.

They parted ways without much fanfare, Balta handing over Coke's keys with a short manhug, Nate leading Coke off to sleep.

Balta smiled over. "Bom, doce?"

"You know what's up with them?" There was...something weird.

"Something to do with Dillon, huh? I think he and Coke had a falling out." Balta shrugged, patted his back. "Thank you for being so good at supper. It helped."

"Eh. I don't like troubles. You know." He stretched, back and shoulders popping.

"I know. I'm a bad man, huh? To be so interested." Balta shrugged a little. "Does this place have a pool, do you remember?"

"Sim. Around back. You want?" He could swim.

"I do! My foot can float and I can exercise, huh?" One tanned hand patted Balta's belly. "Too much cheesecake."

He reached out, touched too, so fast. "I'll get my trunks."

"Okay, doce." Balta caught his hand, reeling him to kiss his mouth.

Balta tasted sweet, spicy, and the kiss left him blinking and dazed, lips swollen and almost bruised.

That same hand that had been on Balta's belly popped Joa's butt. "Go on. Get changed before we find another way to exercise."

"Water's better for you." He grinned and tugged his shirt off. He was ready for the water.

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Balta made sure he had plenty of room around him before starting to swing his arms, warming them up. His shoulders creaked, but started to loosen up well enough. He wasn't feeling one hundred percent, but he was all right.

The event was going well. There had been some good rides, and the bulls were on their game.

Sam Bell was laughing, chasing Beau with a water gun. The day had been hot, brutally so, and Beau and Sam were both sunburned red.

Coke and Nate warmed up in the arena, but Coke was moving slow, like he was even older than normal. Balta knew how that felt. He and Coke were of an age, really.

There was something... off about the man, something broken and gray.

It had to be Dillon, the way Nate and Coke had been acting the night before. Balta knew there was something going on there. He'd seen the way their clown looked at Coke, had known it before Dillon had, really.

Balta probably looked at Joa that way.

It would be a shame, should they have to smother Dillon in his sleep for Coke. Doable, but still, a shame. The man was talented.

His hand knocked into someone, sending the man staggering, and Balta turned, grabbing an arm. "Sorry! Oh, Raul. Desculpa."

That was the name he could not remember the other day. Raul.

"Nao tem problema." He got a quick, relieved smile. "Que calor, nao?"

"Sim." He clapped Raul on the back, liking the openness of that grin, the way Raul's light-brown eyes sparkled with humor. "Could be worse. Could be Texas."

He made a note to have Joa work with this one on his English. He had charisma.

"Sim, sim." They talked for a while, about the heat, the stock, the other bullriders. Raul was staying with Eduardo. Poor man.

He grinned, shaking his head, finally. It was time to go pull Joa's rope. "Well, if you need to get away for a bit, I have a good place, and I can always use some help cleaning it up on break, huh?"

"Sim. Obrigado." Raul nodded, watched him. He remembered how different everything seemed, when he was first in the states.

Somehow Raul had slipped under Balta's radar, but he would make it a point to take an interest in the man from now on. Eduardo was not the best guide, with his weird shyness and his temper.

"You ready to ride, Joa?" Balta asked, pushing up next to the rail.

"Sim. Sim. I pulled a good one." Joa was bouncing, rolling at the hip.

"Bom. You should work on Raul with his English, huh?" He got a look at Joa's bull, who was ready to go, Balta could tell.

"Raul?" Joa got his rope set and climbed over, not really listening to him anymore. Joa rode with music in his head.

"Mmmhmm. He needs friends." Balta kept up a slow, steady chatter, hoping the rhythm matched Joa's music.

Joa set his hand, curled his fingers around, slapped his glove shut. Balta pulled. That was when the talking stopped and the concentrating began. He just pulled that rope.

It didn't take long, Joa sitting forward, teeth bared as he nodded. The gate opened and the bull whirled out, finding a rhythm early, rolling from shoulder to hip.

Now was the time for shouting. Balta leaned on the gate, out over the chute, hollering loud. "Sit up! Sit up, Joa!"

He watched as Joa's abs tightened, those thousands and thousands of daily crunches drawing the man in tight, keeping in him the middle. Six. Seven. The buzzer went off, Joa making a solid ride. It wouldn't be a round winner. Still, with Joa it was personal. The score didn't matter to him, only the ride.

He waited for Joa to bounce out of the arena before going to the edge of the metal platform to wave. "Way to go, huh?"

"Sim." Joa nodded, pulled himself up and onto the stairs. "It was enough."

"It will get you back for another ride." He held let his hand rest on the small of Joa's back, just under the vest.

"Sim. When do you ride?"

"Uh." He checked the board. "Not for half hour." He had at least two sets of riders to go.

"Bom." Joa stripped out of his chaps, his vest.

Balta tried not to drool. He wasn't the only one watching, so he had to be careful, for sure.

"Bonner is up, sim? We should watch."

"Yeah. He's a good kid, eh? Shy." Joa hung his rope up.

"He's gonna do good." They leaned on the rail, bumping hips. Bonner had drawn a mean one.

"He's gonna get creamed." Joa was not hopeful, sometimes.

"You think so? Want to bet?" He had an extra five dollars.

"Sim. I seen this bull. What you want to bet?"

Balta opened his mouth to answer when the gate flew open and Bonner went out. Mostly sideways.

He winced as the bull turned back into the chutes, the bull driving Bonner down. Nate was yelling, hollering out for the bull, but it was Coke -- Fearless Pharris -- who was right there, screaming loud as that broken hand grabbed Bonner, threw him before Coke and the bull slammed back into the chutes.

Shit. He heard it go, something in Coke's body cracking. Balta knew that sound intimately. He was moving before he thought, but Joa stopped him.

"Nao." Joa jumped the gate, boots first, kicking at the bull's head.

"Joa!" He watched Coke go down, the bull kicking out of the chute again. The ground crew slammed the gate closed, and all they had to do was wait for Doc. And pray.

He leaned down, saw Coke's eyes wide, rolling. "Tell him. You tell him it's okay."

Joa groaned, looked up. "Is he talking to me, Balta?"

"I think he means Bonner, doce." Balta nodded, not sure Coke even knew who was there. "I will tell him, Coke. I will make sure."

"Good man." Those words were understandable, but that was all. Coke's eyes rolled back in his head and the man started spasming wildly, foam spraying from the open mouth.

Joa scrambled up the side of the gate, Nate screaming for Doc, Doc hollering for a backboard.

Balta crossed himself and started praying.

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He won the event, stood there with the check, smiled for the cameras, but it felt false.

Fake.

Nate had left before Chris Taggart had roped the last bull, and behind the chutes, no one was smiling.

Joa rolled his shoulders, shaking the sponsors' hands and nodding.

"There you are, huh?" Balta found him when the sponsors let him go. "We should go to the hospital."

"Yeah. Yeah, now. Has anyone heard anything?"

No one was talking.

No one.

"I don't think so." Balta looked pale under his tan, his mouth tight. It had been bad. Very bad.

"Okay." He grabbed his gear, nodding as Eduardo came over, saying they were going to the hospital, going to pray.

Eduardo nodded solemnly. "I will stop by the church. I have my phone on."

Everyone liked Coke. Everyone.

"I will call, when we know."

Beau and Sam had gone ahead, but Packer and Bonner were waiting with Balta, and all of them piled in the truck, no one thinking about Brazilians or Americans or Australians.



Coke was their own.

They rode silently, knowing just where to go at the hospital because of the cluster of trucks, then hats. Troy was there, and Nate.

Nate was pacing, phone to his ear. "Ace, you get the money thing dealt with. Now. You get on the horn with Sandy and call up here or I swear to God..." The man stopped, nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. I know. I'll call as soon as I know. Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

"How is he?" Balta asked, stepping up to speak for all four of them.

"Neck's broke, hand's broke, collarbone's broke. He ain't conscious yet. They're bringing a surgeon for it all."

Balta crossed himself, and Packer cursed, the sound explosive and vicious.

"What can we do?" Joa couldn't think of anything, but he had to ask.

Nate shrugged. "Ace is dealing with the money part. Just keep the fucking reporters away from things, I guess."

"We will help as much as we can."

Beau came out from around a corner. "Sure. Sure. Nate?" Beau jerked his head toward the corner.

Nate followed, Sam Bell right behind.

Joa watched Beau start talking and Nate shake his head. Nate's face looked dark as a thundercloud.

He frowned. Coke must be bad. Real bad.

It was a shame. The man was a legend.

Beau's face went red, and he shook his head, holding up his hands. Sam got all tight-lipped, folding his arms over his chest.

Joa looked at Balta, who shook his head.

Right. They didn't involve themselves in the Americans' problems. Not the ones of the personal kind.

When Nate came back, leaving Sam and Beau deep in conversation, Balta put a hand on the man's broad shoulder. "Do you need some food, amigo?"

"I don't think I can, man. I gotta figure out who's gonna stay when I have to go. I gotta work the rodeo for the next three days."

"We'll work it out." Nodding at him, Balta smiled. "Joa and I can stay for two more days before we have to go. We can help, huh, Joa?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. No problem."

Nate smiled. "Good deal. He won't wake up and start fighting for at least a couple days."

"We'll help watch over him." Balta was a good man, no matter what he said.

"Thanks." Nate rubbed the back of his neck, grabbing his phone as it rang again.

Balta turned to him, putting a hand on his arm. "I think we need to get Nate a sandwich, at least."

"Sim. I'll go." Sandwich. A coffee. A cupcake. Chocolate.

"Obrigato, doce."

"I'll go, too." Sam Bell smiled at him a little, hands in his pockets.

They headed down the hall, following signs. "Nate okay?"

"He's pissy. I guess I cain't blame him." Sam shrugged. "That was a good ride in the short go, Joa."

"Thanks. It's a good event for me." If what was true?

"It is. You and Montana, man." They got to the tiny cafeteria, which was mostly closed. There was a bored-looking girl at one register, and a case of refrigerated premade snacks.

He grabbed two for Nate and the entire basket of wrapped cookies. Someone would eat them.

"You guys here for the rodeo clown?" the girl asked with a pop of her gum. "I heard that was bad."

"He's not a clown, ma'am." Sam's lips pulled back from his teeth, but it wasn't a smile. "Mr. Pharris is cowboy protection."

Joa nodded. "A bullfighter."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Uh, I'm a townie."

Wonderful. Joa offered her a warm smile, trying to remember how Balta did it. "He's a legend. Very important."

"Poor guy." Now she actually looked sympathetic, and he could hear it the moment Sam's teeth stopped grinding. "Well, I hope he gets better real fast."

"We all do." He put the cookies and sandwiches on the counter. "Is there water? There are a lot of men waiting."

"Yeah. Back here." She showed him the coolers with bottled water and sodas.

"How many, Bell?"

Sam shrugged. "Get a dozen. I'll put in for half."

He grabbed a dozen waters, and a handful of Cokes.

Sam handed over some cash. "I'm gonna make some calls, okay? Tell Beau I'll be outside?"

"Sure. Sure I will." He carried the food and drinks back, making sure Nate got the first pick. "Any word?"

"I don't know, man. I wanna be here when Hoss wakes up."

"Well, then we need to find you a place with a bed, not just a pull out chair or a cot. Someone can go get you clean clothes."

It was Sam that stepped up. "Nattie. Go to the hotel. Me and Beau'll take it today. If anything happens, I'll call you."

"Yeah? It don't matter what time, huh?"

"I know, man. You go, call your woman back, sleep."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. I'll..." Nate rubbed the back of his neck. "Don't let him do nothin' stupid, he wakes up before I'm here."

"Shit, I'll send Boug here to sit on him. The man's got leverage." Sam winked.

"That's a good idea." Balta moved close to Joa, hip bumping his slightly. "Thank you for getting food."

He smiled, nodded. "It's been a long day."

"It has." Balta didn't say it, but Joa knew. It could have been one of them. It was always that way. You worried about your friends, but you thanked God it wasn't you.

"Let's take Nate to the hotel. Get some rest." No one knew what tomorrow would bring.

"Sim. Sim. Beau and Sam, they'll stay." Balta went to Sam, whispering something before steering Nate toward him, making the man drink some water.

It took some doing, but they got Nate in the truck, started the roundabout drive to the hotel. Balta kept up a steady stream of chatter, letting him drive, Nate's head bobbed, the man exhausted, dozing.

He pulled into the driveway, parked, the sudden silence shocking.

Nate snapped upright. "Sorry. Sorry. Where's my room?"

"You're on the first floor. Two doors down from us. Come on."

"Thanks." Nate looked completely done, gray and staggering.

Balta glanced at him, raising a brow. "Come on, Nate. We'll get you set, huh? Help call the wife."

God, he felt like all he did was nod and follow. His own tie up with the bull in the chute, plus the rides were starting to catch up to him, too, leaving him aching, sore.

They got Nate to his room, boots off and on a bed before Balta dug out Nate's cell phone and found Nate's wife's number. They left the man mumbling over the phone, already half asleep.

Then they went to their room, the gear puffing up dust as they dropped it.

"Oh" Balta groaned, looking at the bed with longing. "We should shower first, huh? I'll never get up if I sit."

"Yeah." He wasn't sure he was going to make it. "Go ahead. I'll sit and wait."

"Oh, doce." Balta caught him before he sat down. "Wait. Come on."

Gentle hands stripped off his clothes and boots, Balta clucking over Joa's bruises. He brushed off the concern, but truly, it felt good, to be cared for. They made it to the shower, Balta all but holding him up, hands moving on his skin. Balta washed him carefully, getting blood off his scrapes.

"Baltazar." He kissed Balta's jaw in thanks.

"Mmmhmm. You're all bruised, Joa." Those hard hands were gentle on his leg, where the bull had hit him in the chute. "I will have to get you some ice."

"You don't have to take care of me."

"Why shouldn't I?" Balta smiled up at him. "You care for me so well."

He felt the heat in his cheeks. "You are... Balta, sim?"

"I am. But I am your Balta." Balta stood, rinsing him off under the flow of the water, grabbing a towel once they were done. There was always one hand touching him, helping him.

He headed for the bed, stopping only to turn the air conditioning down. Balta got him lowered to the bed, got the alarm set for in the morning and their cell phones laid out. Then Balta slid into bed and snuggled with him.

"Will Coke be okay?" He knew that Balta didn't know any more than he did, but, still, he asked.

"He will. Coke is a tough old bird, huh? That's what they say I think."

"Sim, sim. That's it."

A tough bird, like Balta.

The old ones were cowboys down to the bone. They would always survive.

Please, Deus. Please. Let them always survive.

Doce

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