



# The Guardian Dragon's Unexpected Mate (Oro Escondido #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Dragon guardian Jake takes his job and his duty to his adopted son very seriously. So when Samuel shows up, claiming to have just as much right to his son as he does, since both of their sisters were his parents, Jake doesn't react well to the news.

Samuel comes from a dragon wing that's conservative and rather hidebound, and all he wants is to do what he's been ordered to do. Get his sister's child and go home. But then he has to fight a bad-tempered jerk to even see Grant, who is the best toddler ever, and to spend time with him.

As winter rages around them, Jake and Samuel finally start to thaw, and Jake sees that Samuel doesn't want to come between him and his son, not really. Which is when he becomes Samuel's champion. Can they find enough common ground to make them into the family they both so desperately need?

This is a dragon shifter mpreg romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

## Chapter

### One

Samuel couldn't believe this.

He'd flown in on a plane, landed in Albuquerque, and had rented a little car. He had a week to figure this mess out—his parents had explained, clearly and succinctly, that his job was to come out here, get Susan's child, and bring it home.

And so now he was here, in this goddess forsaken desert place, which wasn't even near an airport. It was unreasonable.

He was feeling relatively unreasonable. It was cold. It was windy. It was snowing. It was not the ocean, and he did not approve.

How could Susan have even come here? There were no trees, at least until you got up into the mountains, and then there was snow. Not to mention the cactus—everything here was pointy or bitey or brown.

Get Susan's child. And come home .

Samuel wasn't one hundred percent sure what the next part of that sentence was going to be. He had the sinking suspicion that his father would inform him that his life was going to be caring for this child now, because they were busy and he was...not.

Which was all right, he supposed. He liked children, and hopefully this child would like him. He didn't know.

He just knew that he was here and driving, and it was hard to keep the car on the road, and nobody knew he was going to be there.

To be honest, Samuel wasn't even sure if he was going to be allowed inside the wing. He didn't have a phone number, a contact. He had Susan's alpha's name, the name of a town, and a map.

Or at least a list of directions on his phone when he had service.

Oro Escondido.

Hidden gold.

This place most definitely did not seem golden.

In fact, the whole of the trip thus far seemed as if it was trying to tell him to leave, to go home to his boring, quiet life staying under his father's radar.

It took most of the day to make the drive, and by the time he pulled into the tiny town, he was shaking and starving and scared.

Not to mention utterly exhausted.

Really, he should have planned better. He just—He simply hadn't seemed to have any time. He went from working in his library to his father coming in, handing him a plane ticket, and informing him that his sister was gone.

Not gone to New Mexico and this little tiny town gone. But... Dead.

It didn't seem reasonable. And now, twenty-four hours later, he was here in a place where there was a single road, a row of shops, and darkness. Thank the universe, there was a little coffee shop in the downtown area and a bookstore side by side.

He thought surely the coffee shop had Wi-Fi so that he could see if there was a hotel or an Airbnb or something where he could just close his eyes for the night. Then, in the morning, he would go and—do something, even if it was wrong.

But he needed caffeine, food, and possibly a kind word. Absolutely Wi-Fi.

He parked the car and wandered into the mostly empty coffee shop searching for a menu. There was a stand on the counter that called it the Blazing Bean. A young man ducked out of the back room, his bright green scales not hiding at all. Really, wasn't that dangerous, since this was an unwarded place that humans could see?

Hopefully, he didn't look as lost as he felt right now.

"Welcome to the Blazing Bean." The scales swirled out of sight as if they'd never been there. "It's really coming down out there, huh? What can I get for you?"

He stared at the menu board as if he'd never had a coffee drink before. He was just so tired.

"Hey, would you like to sit down? Maybe have a little juice while you decide?"

"Yes." His cheeks went red hot. "Yeah, I'm sorry. If you don't mind, I'll totally pay for the juice. I just. I've been on the road for hours."

"Where are you coming from?" The kid handed him a bottle of apple juice from a cooler. "Does this work?"

“Perfect. Thanks. I’m driving in from Albuquerque, and the weather has totally been kicking my butt.”

“Albuquerque, huh?” The kid offered him a curious smile. “I’ve never been that far.”

No, no, he didn’t imagine so.

This little one was still learning to control his colors.

“It’s pretty big. I flew in this afternoon. I wasn’t expecting it to be so large, really.” He yawned and sighed. He was relaxing, admitting the juice had helped a lot. “So what’s the best coffee drink, and do you have anything to eat?”

“I like the white chocolate raspberry mocha, but the boss made this new one called a peanut butter and jelly latte. It’s pretty cool if you’re not allergic to peanuts.”

“Huh.” Samuel pondered that, but not for very long. “I think I’ll try that.”

“As far as food goes. We have turkey and provolone sandwiches. We have an Italian spicy sandwich. We have a protein pack that has eggs and nuts and dried cranberries and cheese. And then there are about a handful of pastries leftover from this morning, and those are all half off.”

“Oh excellent. I would like the turkey sandwich, a pastry, and then the peanut butter and jelly latte.” He pushed over two twenties. “This should cover everything plus a tip.”

The young man blinked. “Wow, thank you. That’s very generous.”

“No problem. You’ve been incredibly cool.”

And it was nice in here and warm, quiet, and he could think.

“Is there Wi-Fi?”

“Oh my God, yes. Can you imagine if there wasn’t?”

“Believe it or not, yes, yes, I actually can,” he chuckled. “I don’t suppose now that you know if there’s a hotel?”

“Oh.” Now the kid was putting on his sympathy face. “We don’t. We have a couple of places that rent cabins. Like, um, Airbnbs. I can?—”

“Hey, Greggo, are you about... Oh, we still have a customer.” A pretty lady wearing an apron and a shirt that said Blazing Bean came out from the back.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m making him a turkey and provolone.”

“I’ll get the sandwich.”

“Okay. I’ll make the latte.” The kid, Greg, smiled his way. “He needs a place to stay.”

“Oh?” She gave him a thorough once-over. “I’ll call Mariposa. She has cabins for rent, and she always has one ready for overnight guests, just in case. You passed them on the way into town, I bet.”

“I wouldn’t have noticed them if I had,” he admitted. “I was trying really hard to stay on the road. That would be fabulous. I have to make some phone calls in the morning.”

And then he would be out.

He would find this dragon who had his niece or nephew—they weren't even sure—and tell him he could take the baby and care for it.

Then he would drive back to Albuquerque, get back on the plane, and go. Easy peasy.

At least, he hoped it was easy.

“Let me get Mariposa on the phone. She'll be able to hook you up, get you a nice warm bed for the night, and then you can always come back here for coffee,” the lady said.

“Yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you.” He hadn't expected to meet so many kind people; it was a little unnerving, especially given that they weren't actually in the wing.

He could be mean. He could be a serial killer. Or a spy. Or something else incredibly nefarious that he couldn't think of right now.

But this lady and her barista acted like he was welcome, as if he was just like what he seemed. A traveler in a snowstorm who needed a place to stay.

The lady pulled out her phone. “Hey, Mari. Yeah, it's Georgia. Look, I have someone who needs a cabin. He's been on the road and—You bet. Okay. I'll tell him.” She hung up and smiled at him. “She'll meet you at the parking area of the cabins in about half an hour.”

“Oh. That's a kindness. Thank you. It's on the way back out of town?” He could just take the sandwich and coffee to go.

“If you go back up the road about a mile, where it turned back up toward the canyon? That's where you'll find them.”

Samuel nodded his head and waited for his food. They ended up giving him a little box of six pastries for the price of one, which he thought was so dear.

After saying his thank-yous and goodbyes, he got into his car and drove it back to the cabins. He had to look closely to find them, because he hadn't seen them at all on his way up.

But, sure enough, there was a sign, small and lit with a single light bulb, and behind the sign there was a cluster of rustic cottages along the riverbed.

Then he caught sight of a lady, standing outside and waiting for him in the cold, like it was no big deal.

He parked and then stepped out of his rental, the cold air outside like a sharp slap to the cheek. He gasped a little, then held out his hand. "Thank you so much for letting me stay. This trip was unexpected."

She took his hand and shook, her grip firm and warm. "No worries. All is well. There's a reason we keep that cabin open for emergencies."

"Do you often get random emergencies in this little town?"

"More often than you would expect. There's not much between one place and another. People get out here and get stuck or they need help. There's all sorts of reasons. It's just good practice. Let me show you the cabin. Do you have a bag?"

He nodded his head. "And supper."

He grabbed his things and followed her to a log cabin with a bright red door on the front. "What do I owe you?"



“We’ll settle up in the morning. It’s chilly, and the snow is only going to get deeper. So tomorrow you can decide how long you think you’ll stay, and we’ll make a plan.”

Okay, weird, but also incredibly kind. “Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate it.” He took his goodies into the tiny single room. It wasn’t fancy, but it was clean, warm. There was a light and a TV and a picture of a lake and a sunset hanging on the wall. Add to that a bed with big pillows and a bathroom, and he couldn’t ask for anything more. So he didn’t.

He turned on the television for noise and light while he ate his sandwich, which was incredibly good, and drank his peanut butter and jelly latte.

This was a quaint, decent, kind town.

Too bad he wasn’t going to be able to stay.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

### Chapter

### Two

“ S hhh. Grant. It’s okay, kiddo.” Jake Lothe rocked his son, holding him close. He was getting old enough to say whole words, and he was walking, but he still had night terrors about what had happened to his birth parents. Or at least that was what Jake supposed Grant dreamed about when he woke up screaming like this.

He hummed a soothing non-tune, just letting Grant feel how close he was. Letting his heat comfort the baby.

“Da,” the baby sobbed. “Da. Hep me, Da.”

“I’m right here, son. Everything’s all right. Daddy has you.”

Goddess help him, he was tired.

No one had expected Jolie and Susan to lose their lives. And especially not in some stupid-ass accident.

They’d been goofing off, daring one another to fly faster, higher, harder, and when the storm had blown in, they simply hadn’t come back down fast enough.

Jake hadn’t seen it happening.

He’d been putting together his new house. Getting ready for a party to celebrate the

fact that he was the new guardian. That was the one thing he'd worked for his entire life and actually achieved.

The scream had been so loud throughout the entire wing. The ground had vibrated with the sound, and he ran outside, just in time to see them both plummet to the lake.

Both of them.

Ablaze.

He didn't understand it. He wasn't going to.

Everyone knew that they weren't immortal, but they lived a long, long time. Everyone knew they weren't supposed to die in their prime because of a storm.

Because of lightning and winds and stupidity.

That was the thing that drove him mad, the stupidity of it all.

He felt himself tensing, and he knew he was holding the baby too tight, so he forced himself to relax.

Grant stared up at him, those dark violet eyes piercing him.

Grant couldn't remember. Grant hadn't seen.

The problem Grant did have was every dragon in this wing—almost every dragon—had seen what happened. Every time they looked at Grant, all they thought was that he had lost his mothers.

Part of him was tempted to leave to go find another wing altogether and start anew.

Just tell everyone no, he's mine and let it be that.

Another part of him loved this wing fiercely and always had. He was a guardian. He had wanted nothing but this for his entire life. And now that he had it in his hand, he found he couldn't release it. He couldn't simply walk away. No matter what.

"So we're going to make it work, baby boy. I promise." He pushed himself to keep his voice light, and he started walking, bouncing Grant a little. "I have you. And we're going to teach everyone to love you for you. I swear it."

Just like he did. Grant was sweet. Goofy. Happy. Most of the time. And he deserved a wing that thought he was amazing. Jake was going to work on that, one mind at a time.

He just had to figure out how to erase the memories of every dragon in the wing. No problem.

Bumper came wandering in, the wet nose pushing up to touch the baby's leg, then backing up enough that his whiskers tickled the baby, making him wiggle and chuckle softly.

"Hey, you," he said to the big, less-than-bad wolf. "How's it going?"

Bumper tilted his head from one side to another and gave him a lupine grin. Then Bumper leaned in and tickled the baby's feet with his whiskers again.

"I'm trying to get him to sleep. You're not helping."

That earned him a long stare, and he knew it—as well as he knew how to breathe—that the wolf was thinking, when did I ever promise to help?

Bumper had found him on his spirit quest. Or maybe he'd found Bumper. Jake wasn't sure on that fact any more than he was sure about how he'd known Bumper was the wolf's name, but he did. And they were together, and that was that.

Just like him and little Grant. In it for the long haul.

Grant started to fuss again a little, and he checked the baby's diaper. Nope. So he must need a little supplemental nutrition. Grant was totally eating baby food during the day, but he was growing so fast, and he needed a bottle at night still.

"Come on, bud. Let's get a bot, huh? I could have a little nosh too. I bet Bumper would join us, huh?"

"Ba Ba Ba Ba Ba," Grant chanted, obviously totally into this idea.

Jake headed toward the kitchen, wandering through the long halls of his low adobe. Most of the guardians had tall homes. Logan had two stories, so did Jason and Bea. Hell, Lars's house was four floors.

Well, if you counted the tower room, which he did, because that thing was a Victorian monstrosity.

But he'd been overjoyed at the long adobe with most everything one floor, but with other levels too. One room flowed into another into another into another. It was one of the perks of being a guardian of the wing.

You got promoted, you received a home, and it was amazing. The magic assured that your home was what you needed, and when one guardian left, and the new one came, where the old house was, a new one sat.

He'd been surprised because his affinity wasn't for platinum or gold or silver. His

affinity was for the stones. Specifically emeralds, but rubies sang to him as well, and he could do some things with the diamonds that were pretty impressive. Still, the guardians tended to be the dragons that had metal affinities, the more precious the better.

He glanced out of the big plate-glass window into the night. The snow was still coming down, beginning to drift. It was getting so deep that it felt as if it was creeping.

Luckily, they were warm and snug in their homes. All he had to do was ensure that he didn't have to go out and do any guardianing. Right now, immediately.

Jake supposed he should do like Logan and have a manservant slash nanny slash housekeeper slash keeper of the keys slash 'Oh my God Simon is amazing' type of dude.

But he was fairly sure Logan had grown up with Simon.

Not to mention, there was only one Simon in all of the universe, and Logan had somehow lucked into him.

Asshole.

Still, Dakota deserved the help just for putting up with Logan. That sweet omega was just up to his nostrils in wing business.

"There we go, buddy," he told Grant once he got the bottle made up. "That will hit the spot. And when you're back to sleep, I'll make me up a hamburger from that pack I got out of the freezer. And you too," he said when Bumper nosed him. "Yum."

Something about this storm wasn't going to let him sleep. It was...bringing

something. He wasn't sure what. But he felt that in his bones.

He wasn't sure he liked it.

In fact, he was sure he didn't.

He almost called Justin to ask if he should call the others. Have someone—maybe Lars—go out on patrol.

But the snow was so deep, and he found himself waiting.

Just waiting to see what was up.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Three

O kay. The snow was very deep.

The snow was so deep that it covered the wheels of the little car, and Samuel didn't know what to do.

He didn't have any food. He didn't know how to get hold of this...man? Dragon? that he was supposed to get hold of. It was very unnerving.

He really needed a cup of coffee. How was he supposed to figure this whole thing out?

He closed his eyes and had a very private little cry.

It seemed ridiculous to panic over something as silly as snow, and he had electricity. Not to mention there were other people here.

There were others here who obviously knew what they were doing, because they didn't seem to be so scared, but he couldn't even figure out how to get to the car without getting all wet and then...

Oh dear.

The snow was very deep.



His plane ticket was for tomorrow morning. He was supposed to have taken care of this. His parents were going to be calling at any moment, wanting to know where the baby was and why there weren't pictures and why he wasn't already heading down the road and...

He hadn't even started. He was still in his fuzzy pajamas because they were the warmest thing he had.

Also, there was an entire series of Top Chef reruns on, and he could watch this show for hours, with the searing and sautéing and chopping and?—

His parents were going to kill him.

A knock sounded at the door, which made him jump a good foot off the couch. Oh goodness, who was going to be out there in the snow like this? A serial killer? He couldn't imagine anyone else braving it. So he wasn't going to answer the door. Because no one needed to find him once the thaw came, frozen to death like some outre Donner party member.

Except the knock came again, and what if that was the lady who owned the cabins. Mari? Did she live up here? Maybe she could give him some food.

So he put on his slippers and went to peek out the little fish-eye thing in the door.

A blond man stood there, his longish hair hanging out from under a hat with a huge pompom on it, his parka and boots looking like they could stand up to the weather.

"Hello?" he called, not willing to open the door to such a big stranger.

"Hi! I'm Lars. Mari sent me. I have coffee and doughnuts and breakfast sandwiches and it's all going to freeze. I promise I'm not here to hurt you. Can you let me in?"

“Oh, hello, Lars. I’m Samuel. I’m new. Please come in. Excuse my pajamas. I was cold. I thought maybe you’d be a serial killer.”

That earned him a warm smile. “Well, that would be awful and incredibly inappropriate. I bring food.” The dragon popped in with a huge smile and settled at the single low table after dragging it between him and the bed. Then he began to take out goodies—pastries and sandwiches and chocolate and coffee.

“Oh coffee. Thank you. Thank you very much.” His belly snarled, desperate for a bite.

“That’s more than all right, my dear. You’re not from here, are you?”

Samuel shook his head. “No. I arrived yesterday because I’m supposed to come and get a baby. My sister, she came here and she had a baby, and then she and her alpha died. We just discovered this, and my parents sent me here to retrieve the baby so I can take it home.”

Lars’s eyes went very wide. “That’s... That’s different. You just found out? Who is your sister?”

“Susan de Lamar was her name. I’m Samuel de Lamar.”

“You didn’t know her alpha?”

Samuel shook his head. “My parents may have, but they say they didn’t. You see, I work in the library. I’m in the library all the time. I suppose she came out here to visit something she hadn’t seen before. She liked to explore, and she loved to fly.” Samuel didn’t know what else to say. “I don’t suppose you knew her? Or of her. This is the only information I have, and I’m supposed to be on a plane in the morning. On the way back.”

Lars tilted his head. “Did someone tell you? That you were supposed to come retrieve this child, I mean.”

“Yes, my parents.”

“Fair enough.” Lars bobbed his head like a great big bird. “Did anyone tell your parents that you were supposed to come and retrieve this child?”

Samuel felt his cheeks heating, and he leaned forward as if he were telling his secret. “Honestly, I doubt it. My parents tend to...” How should he put this? “...get what they want.”

“Ah.” Lars pushed over the coffee with a smile. “What about you? What do you want?”

“For my feet to get warm and to drink this coffee.”

That made Lars laugh, and he found himself laughing along. “Fair enough. Let’s share a meal. We can talk, get to know each other. The snows are very deep, and I don’t think there’ll be any flights leaving tomorrow from Albuquerque. It may take as much as a week.”

“The whole week!” Oh dear. “I don’t know what I’ll do. I only brought two days’ worth of clothes and nothing for this...this weather.”

Lars smiled as if that was the easiest problem on earth to fix. “We’ll go to my house if we need to. I’m sure I have clothes that’ll work and boots as well. First, we’re having a meal, making friends. Those things are very important, don’t you agree?”

He did with all of his heart.

He was scared, sure, but he also felt like he was free for the first time in, well, ever.

No one was watching him.

No one could watch him. It was exhilarating.

And terrifying.

Maybe this was how Susan had felt. Deep down where his parents could never see or hear it, Samuel understood why she'd never returned to their wing. No one was evil, but things were very strict there. Incredibly structured. No one would ever just offer to let a stranger stay at their home.

"My car will never make it anywhere, though."

"Well, see? That's another reason I'm handy." Lars grinned widely, but it wasn't toothy at all. "I have a big SUV with chains. It will get us anywhere we need to go. Still, we have bacon and cheddar and egg croissants, some pottage, and a grand selection of doughnuts. So, dig in."

Samuel grabbed a doughnut and bit into it, the sweet and salty maple and sea salt flavor bursting on his tongue. Oh, these were fresh. Not that he hadn't appreciated last night's day-old ones. But yum.

"There, I can already tell that's better." Lars grinned at him again, still, nose wrinkling with the expression. "It's so good to make a new friend."

"Thank you." That was another thing that was odd, because nobody new ever came into the wing at home. Not really. They were born into it, of course, it wasn't like it was a dead cell or something, but nobody new came. They were off the beaten path and... "Did you know my sister?"

Lars gave him a quiet look. “I did.”

“So do you know her baby?”

Do you know how she died? Do you know anything? All of a sudden, he had a thousand questions, and none of them would come out because he wasn't sure that he wanted to know the answers. This was so nice to just sit and be somebody new with somebody new. And yet there were so many things he had to know. So many things he had to tell about and report back with and...he just didn't want to.

“We're having breakfast. Questions? We have plenty of time for questions and answers. Right now, we can just enjoy the snow. And the food. I've decided I'm going to quite like you, you see, and that you and I are going to be friends.”

It was weirdly impossible to argue about that, because Lars sounded totally sure about it. They were going to be friends. He wasn't going anywhere. They were going to have breakfast.

“All right, I think I can do that.”

“It's less hard than you would imagine.”

“I'm so used to just fulfilling orders. As a librarian, I'm always gathering information for someone...”

“I just want to know about you.” Lars motioned to the TV. “You like cooking shows?”

“Oh my gosh, yes. I find them very soothing, even the competition ones. I mean, I don't particularly like when they get mean, but I love to listen to them talk about food and come up with new recipes and the chopping and all is very rhythmic.” He waved

a doughnut, his enthusiasm quite real.

“I kinda love it too. Simon, my brother’s housekeeper, he’s like a phenom in the kitchen, and I love to watch him go to work on—what is it he calls it? Mis en place? When he’s chopping all the stuff for like, soup.”

“That would be mirepoix, I bet. Celery, carrots, and onions.”

“See, I knew you knew things. I’m not the world’s biggest cook. I do like to bake, though. I find that very entertaining and very mathematical.”

He nodded. “Baking is a science, absolutely. It seems to me that there’s much less freedom in the baking world.”

“Well, anything that requires yeast and baking powder. You kind of get the idea that at some point those things could just explode.”

Samuel looked at Lars, amusement filling him. “I suppose on a small level, you’re absolutely right. At least with the baking powder.”

They ate and they chatted about television and food, and Samuel found himself quite happy to just spend the morning talking and visiting and being friends.

When his phone started to ring, he almost cried.

“That’s going to be my parents. They’re going to want to know what’s happening.”

“No one has to know that your phone works,” Lars suggested, a wicked little gleam in his eye.

“What?”

“No one has to know that your phone is ringing. I don’t hear it.”

Lars had to know his sister. That had Susan written all over it. Susan always was the one who forgot to follow the rules, forgot to show up for dinner, forgot to be where she was supposed to be. Forgot to answer her phone.

“You don’t hear it?”

“Nope.”

“Huh. Okay. Me neither.”

He’d never once in his entire life not answered when his parents called.

He was either going to pass out, or he was going to throw up.

Or he was going to...

“Just have another doughnut.” Lars’s suggestion was absolutely more pleasant than anything he’d thought of. So he did. “It’s going to be all right,” Lars assured him. “I don’t know how, exactly, but I do know that it’s going to be okay.”

“I hope so.” Samuel wasn’t sure what was happening, but he could feel little tendrils of excitement kind of moving through him. He thought it was all right. He thought maybe this was something new.

So much of his life had been involved in finding old information for people, but this was new.

And it wasn’t for people . It was for him.

Just for him.

He thought, maybe, he hadn't heard that phone ring, either.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

### Chapter

### Four

Jake finally had to put chains on his truck and headed out to the main road that ran around the wing to pick up a load of books from the bookstore. And he needed a coffee. He knew both Amber and Georgia would be open just in case there was a weary traveler out there who needed a place to stop.

The damn snow had come in, and it just wasn't melting one bit.

"Okay, buddy. We're off and running." He strapped Grant into the truck, his little man all bundled up to within an inch of his life. He did love a baby in a snowsuit.

Grant squealed, because he did love riding in the truck. "Da-da-da-da."

"Yep. You and me, bud." He hopped in and drove them carefully out to the bookstore, pulling into one of the almost-cleared parking spaces. Looked like maybe Logan had been over to help Amber out. He had a nicely controlled flame and could melt snow in a heartbeat.

He grabbed Grant, heading into the store. "Morning!" he called once he was inside.

"Good morning, my love. How are you, and how is your beautiful daddy?" Amber took Grant without even asking, snuggling the little boy and loosening his snowsuit. She did adore him. "Are you coffeing or teaing today?"

“Coffee. Coffee. Coffee, Coffee.” He winked at her, knowing her kettle was at the ready. “Are you going to play godmother while I’m next door?”

“Of course. If you could bring me a croissant. She’s got it waiting for me in a box.”

Spoiled woman.

Amber rolled her eyes and winked at him. “It’s a thing. Go on now. I’m hungry. I’ll get Grant a cookie.”

He headed next door to the coffee shop, not surprised to find it empty. It smelled so good in here though—cinnamon and hazelnut and chocolate and pastries. He was just going to die.

Georgia looked up from the counter. Oh, she must have had a bunch of kids call out because she never worked the front register in the morning. “Good morning, Guardian. How are you? Where’s my baby?”

“Next door with Auntie Amber.” Damn it, he should have brought the baby.

“Oh, I’m gonna hold her croissant hostage.” She winked and chuckled. “What can I get you this morning?”

“My usual, please.”

“Fire and ice. I’m on it.” She set to making his coffee complete with chile and white chocolate. It was delicious, and he just craved it.

“How’s your morning going?”

She smiled at him. “It’s been slow, thank goodness. Everyone else is in the wing.

They're just staying home, which I understand. No one wants their teenagers flying in this weather. Did you hear about the new guy?"

"There's a new guy in the wing?" Because he hadn't heard, and he didn't care how new a guardian he was, he should know if somebody new came into the wing. Damn it, he always felt like he was thirteen steps behind everybody else. He was going to speak to Logan about this. This was just absolutely not?—

"No, he's staying at Mari's cabins. He came in, stopped at the coffee shop, and then I eased him in that direction. Definitely one of ours though."

Well, now he felt like an idiot, but at least he hadn't said anything out loud. Because then he would have looked like an idiot and sounded like an idiot. "No, I hadn't heard anything about him, but I haven't been out and about, you know, with the baby."

"He was a pretty little thing."

"He's a child?"

"No." Georgia shook her head. "No, no, no. He was just tiny and adorable. Great big violet eyes a la Liz Taylor. Violet . You can just barely see the little purple scales, and his hair is like snow, except for at the ends. Totally pretty. It's kind of nauseating, to be honest, but he was very sweet and a little nervous about the weather. He apparently is not from snowy climes."

Weird. Jake had never seen anybody with that kind of coloring, except for Susan, his sister's mate. He wondered if they were the same type of dragon Susan had been.

She'd been from a strict keep, somewhere in the deep South. She'd been a keeper of knowledge—this amazing intellectual with this memory that just was like a steel trap. She had gone through all their dragon lore and had been organizing it. It was...

Boring.

Boring is what it was, incredibly, but apparently, they needed that sort of thing.

At least that's what all the old people thought.

He didn't think so, but he'd never seen Jolie so in love, so happy, and Susan had made them all laugh.

"Do you think he needs anything?" He could stop by, check the kid out. Take coffee and food. He didn't like the idea of anyone stuck up at the cabins in this snow.

"Oh, I think he'll be fine. Lars headed up to see if he was okay."

"How did Lars know he was there?"

"I think he saw Mari out flying this morning." She shrugged, tamping the espresso machine and running a delicious-smelling double shot.

"He is aware that there's a blizzard out. That there was, anyway?"

"You know, Lars. Snow bothers him not at all. Besides that, he's so curious, like one of Logan's cats." She chuckled softly, teasing as she measured out milk. "The little one is driving one of those little bitty sedans. He's not going anywhere today. Says he drove in from Albuquerque."

"What's he doing here?"

"I don't know. I guarantee, though, we'll find out. Lars can ferret information out of anybody."

Jake nodded. There was no lie detected in that. Lars was a hound dog with a scent in his nose. Right. “I’m sure he’s just heading from one place to another and knew that there was a wing here. Hoped there was. Whatever.” Whoever it was, they could stay outside the wards for now.

“No, I’m sure. Although you know... Every so often, people come and stay.”

He knew that happened, but they shouldn’t just stay because people got hurt. “Yeah, like Jolie’s Susan.”

“Yeah.” Georgia offered him a down-turned lip, a soft sigh. “I know. That whole thing sucked.”

“It did. Thank goodness Grant wasn’t with them.”

“I can’t even say such a thing,” Georgia whispered. “It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened here, I think. At least in my memory, and I don’t need that kind of excitement.”

“None of us do.” Suddenly, he didn’t want to talk anymore. He just wanted to sip his coffee and go browse some books. Commune with the words that someone else had written. Feel someone else’s truth for a while.

“I’m sorry, Jake.”

“Thanks.” He knew everyone felt bad. But that didn’t even buy him a cup of coffee. “You should come see Grant. You’d get a camera thing if someone came in, right?”

“Hell, Teaball would tell me.”

“So true.” Amber’s weird lizard-bird familiar saw and heard everything that went on

at the little row of shops Amber's bookstore occupied.

"How's he taking Dakota's retirement?"

"Amber takes him to see the twins every night, or he lets himself in and sleeps with them." Georgia shrugged, but she was obviously tickled. "She swears he thinks the cats are going to eat them."

"Oh, now, Tawny and her mate are good familiars." He knew how it was. People thought his wolf might turn on Grant, too, despite companions like that being commonplace for a guardian. Hell, Jason had the meanest pair of raccoons he'd ever met. And they had opposable thumbs.

"Oh, I know. I would be more worried about Teaball." Georgia handed him his coffee. "That little carnivore is vicious."

"Ah, fuck, the little lizard-bird is mean as hell and vaguely terrifying." He couldn't imagine being Dakota and having to actually listen to the little shit talk. Apparently, Teaball was kind of an asshole, which surprised no one, not even Amber, who reportedly loved the little bastard.

He shook his head. "I still can't believe that Dakota had twins. I have to admit, though, those little girls are beautiful."

Not as beautiful as his son, of course. His son had these amazing eyes just like his mom's, but everything else about him reminded Jake of his sister.

"They are. Of course, Grant is. All babies are beautiful so that we don't kill them until they get older."

"That's reasonable. There were a few nights that yes... I understood that. For the

most part though, Grant's a good boy. He likes to eat; he likes to sleep; he likes to be comfortable. Really beyond that. He's all right."

She handed him the coffees and the pastries. "I'm probably going to close right after the lunch hour, so if you could tell Amber I'll take her back across. I don't see any reason for any of us to be open. Tonight, they say that there's going to be more snow, so the humans won't be traveling."

"I'll let her know, sure." He paid and tipped and then headed out. It was bitter out here, that was for sure, and the wind was beginning to pick up again.

Jake didn't mind the snow. It kept people from poking around and made things safer in the wing. He didn't spend near as much time out and about as everyone else had.

Most of the guardians spent an enormous amount of time in the human world amassing wealth. Jake really didn't feel any need to leave. He was a builder. He could spend hours and hours in his wood shop creating things, if left to his own devices.

Grant had ensured that he had no more of that—either devices or own time, to be honest. One wouldn't think that a tiny thing who slept so much could take up so much of his time.

It didn't make any sense, but given every other parent in the history of parents had said the same thing, Jake would accept it as true.

He headed next door into the bookstore, that jingle of the little bell above the door making him smile. He searched for Grant, who was sound asleep in his carrier.

"Hey, lady. Georgia says that she's going to close at lunch, and that she'll give you a ride in. You and lizard boy."

“I think that’s probably smart. I’ve been listening to the radio, and I don’t love this blizzard condition. Do you think that Mari’s going to be okay? Should we bring her? In with us, I mean.”

The wing’s wards didn’t stretch as far as Mari’s little set of cabins. It wouldn’t take hardly any time for her to get in past the wards, but if the snow was too deep for her to get anywhere, and if flying conditions were just too bad...

Jake shook his head. He didn’t love leaving her behind. “We should totally make sure she’s safe. Even if she refuses, we should offer. I can call Lars. You said he was over there, right?”

“With the new dragon.”

Fuck, what were they gonna do with the new dragon? They couldn’t just bring him in past the wards, but they couldn’t leave him stranded.

Hell, if he had nefarious intent, he would just go boom.

Which, okay, would be kind of fun to watch, but not nice. Very not nice.

He grabbed his phone, dialing Lars.

“Jake, buddy, how you doing?” He could hear that Lars was on the road.

“I’m good. Are you still at the cabins?”

“I am not. I am, in fact, taking Mari and my very new best friend over to the house.”

“Are we on speaker?”



“We are not. But thank you for asking.”

“Right, so.” He pursed his lips. “Are you sure that this is wise?”

He didn’t even know what happened if someone passed the wards in Lars’s car and happened to explode. He wasn’t even sure that the explosion was an actual thing, but an explosion inside a car?

That was bad.

It was just not good.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

He was gonna kick Lars’s butt for that little singsong bullshit.

“I will call your brother.” Probably not the bravest thing to say, but it was the most effective for sure.

He adored Lars, loved him. The man was giving and caring and quick and clever and completely not the wisest guardian in the history of the Earth, and there was a long history of the Earth.

“Nonsense. We don’t need help. We’re fine. I’m going to drop Mari off at Amber’s house, and then I’m going to head to my place. I’ve spoken to Samuel about it. He’s perfectly willing to come with me, and we’re going to have a glorious time while the snows are there. He’s even called his rental car company.”

“Lars...” He didn’t like this. He didn’t want Lars alone with some random dragon no one knew.

“Oh no, no, don’t worry at all. We’ll be fine. Would you like to stop over for supper? Maybe in a day or two.”

He heard over the line. “Do you honestly think it’ll be a day or two?”

“Maybe longer, sweetpea? The snow is so unpredictable.”

Lars’s skill wasn’t making weather, was it? He’d forgotten to ask. He should totally ask.

Logan would know.

“Oh.” That was small, panicky sound.

“You should come to supper, Jake.”

There was something in Lars’s tone, something that told him there was more to Lars taking this guy in and giving him a place to stay for a few days to weather the storm.

“Okay. As soon as the storm stops dumping, I’ll come over.” Maybe he would get someone to watch Grant for him so he didn’t put his baby in any kind of jeopardy. But then, he could always bring Bumper with him and let the big wolf do his job.

Although really, he couldn’t imagine the dragon who’d made that worried little noise being dangerous.

“Excellent. I want to cook for you.”

Jake chuckled. “Sure. Just nothing with weird vegan protein.”

“Oh, now, you take all the fun out of it. Actually, I was going to smoke a couple of

chickens. Maybe a turkey breast.”

Lars had an amazing outdoor kitchen in his huge, rambling gardens. The covered area had a smoker, two grills, and a counter with a plumbed sink. Jake had some envy there.

“I can get behind that. What should I bring?”

“Cheese and crackers?”

Sweet dragon—Lars would pick something that he would have at the house already.

“I could totally do that. Thanks, man.”

“Of course. I’ll give you a call, and we’ll set up a solid date either tomorrow night or the night after.”

The phone went dead, and Jake looked at Amber. “So tell me. What happens if a guardian, say Lars, was to take a stranger dragon, say the guy at the cabin, and drive him across the wards? I mean, in his car, and he’s bad.”

“Who’s bad?”

“The dragon.”

“Which dragon?”

He was going to scream. “The new one!”

She tilted her head. Teaball was doing the exact same thing. “Do you think he’s bad? Georgia didn’t think he was evil.”

“Georgia isn’t a guardian.”

Amber shrugged with her hands. “Lars is.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point then? You’re guardians, right? You’re supposed to guard. I mean, you’re not supposed to ‘ian’, right? Obviously, if Lars thinks it’s fine, it’s fine.”

But it was Lars.

And he loved Lars...

But it was Lars.

He’d feel so much better if it was Logan. He would feel twenty-seven thousand times better if it was Jason.

Or Bea. Bea would have just eaten the other dragon. She wouldn’t have even spoken to him. It would have just been chomp, nom nom nom, and then no one would have to worry about any of this. Why on earth had Mari called Lars?

He stared at Amber. “Okay. I was just curious.”

Amber shook her head. “Never seen it happen, you know. The burning-to-a-crisp deal, yeah. That’s kind of fun. I don’t think there’s an actual physical explosion, like kaboom, but who knows? Wards change. Guardians change.”

Jake arched one eyebrow. “You sure you don’t want to be a guardian, Amber? We can promote you. Jason’s leaving...”

She glared at him. “Bite your tongue. Me? No. I want to run my little bookstore. Really. That’s it. That’s what I want. I just want to run my little bookstore.”

“Uh-huh. I think what you want is to be with your girl, but that’s okay.” Jake grinned. “It’s too bad, though. You would make a great guardian.”

She shook her head, warding him off with her hands, waving them in front of her. “No, I’m too much of a busybody. I really like to do all the fun stuff.”

Jake just snorted, nodding. “I guess that’s okay, too. It takes all kinds.”

He was willing to let it drop with Amber. Still, he was really worried about Lars. He didn’t want to have to just run over there to appease his niggling doubts. He would wait until he was invited to dinner.

But, damn. He wandered over to check on Grant, who giggled and waved to him, and he played with his son for a few seconds. Then he went and wended his way around the store, looking for books, trying not to be a jerk. It was tough, and finally, he just hid back in the stacks and pulled out his phone to call Logan.

He was afraid that—Well, he just needed some reassurance. And Logan was the acting platinum dragon, even though that really wasn’t his job. But Jason Delray was mostly retired, so it was so confusing sometimes. He wasn’t sure where his place was on the phone tree, to be perfectly honest.

Maybe he was supposed to be calling Bea and she was supposed to be dealing with it. He just didn’t know. But. Logan would have an idea of what to do. And he’d waited long enough.

“Hello. Tell me there’s an emergency,” Logan said by way of answering the phone.

“What?” Jake wondered if maybe he’d fallen into an alternate universe. Then the screaming in the background registered. Oh, the twins must be colicky today.

“An emergency. Fire. Ice. Acid. Volcanoes. Thunder snow. Tornadoes filled with crocodiles. A plague of locusts. You saw three ravens today. I don’t care. Tell me there’s something you need me to deal with immediately that is not in this house.”

That he could do. “I think that your brother is trying to bring a strange dragon through the wards, and I’m afraid he’s going to explode in the car.”

There was a moment of silence before he heard a door close. “Are you serious? Or did you just make this up for me?”

“Oh, no. I’m serious. I actually mean it. Lars has an unknown dragon in his SUV, and they’re passing the wing barriers.”

“Hold on. I’m going to put you on the three-way call.”

“Oh, no. No, I—” The line went on hold, and he slumped against the bookshelves.

Great.

Now he was going to have to explain to Lars why he’d talked to Logan when Lars had just called him.

This whole guardian thing was very stressful.

“Why the hell are you calling me?”

Uh, that wasn’t Lars, that was Bea. It was way more dangerous to bother Bea.

“I’m calling you because Jake called me. And I would normally call Jason, but Jason’s gone flying with his wife.”

“In this weather?” Bea growled. “Are you sure?”

“Well, he left like a week ago and they went to Hawaii. Hey, aren’t you a guardian? Aren’t you supposed to be on top of shit? Surely there’s a mailing list?”

Jake sighed. “I think Jason made a Facebook group.”

Logan snorted. “Who uses Facebook in this day and age?”

“Not me,” Bea rumbled low. “Can’t you people just call like normal people?”

“Well, I sort of did,” Jake pointed out. “I mean, right. This is the phone?”

“By call, I mean text.”

Goddess, he had a headache.

“Look,” Logan interrupted. “Pay attention. Apparently, Lars has picked up some stray and is bringing him through the wards. Jake here seems to be worried that there’s going to be an explosion.”

“Is he carrying C4? I have use for C4.”

“Bea, we’ve discussed this. No. No explosives.”

Jake rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know that. No, he doesn’t have C4. He’s just—he’s a strange dragon. Do we just bring them through the wards willy-nilly?”

“Did the kid just say willy-nilly?”

Logan sighed. “Yeah. He just said willy-nilly. He was raised by his grandparents or something. We love him though.”

“I was not raised by my grandparents. You make it sound like I was raised by wolves! I was simply worried about the wing.” Jake was really very frustrated with this whole thing.

Why didn’t anyone care? Someone should care.

“You said Lars had him,” Bea pointed out. “The current position is that Lars is a guardian. He should be able to bring people through the wards. It’s in his job description.”

“Not only that,” Logan added. “Bad guys really don’t explode. I mean there’s burning—more like holy, magical fire. I mean it’s unpleasant and not particularly good smelling, but there’s no actual boom. It’s just fire. Also, I want bacon.”

“Mmm...bacon. Does that mean that fire-breathing dragons can just pass-through, even if they’re crappy?” Bea asked.

“It’s been a very long time since anyone passed through the wards uninvited, but the rumor is that even fire-breathing dragons can in theory be caught on fire, but that’s not the point. They do not explode. Unless there are explosives on them when they catch on fire, then yes, possibly explosions. Is there a place without screaming babies that we can get bacon?”

“I hate you both.” Jake squeezed his eyes closed and hit the end call button. He was totally making a text group for all of them, and fuck Jason and his damn Facebook group.



If everyone was just hunky dory with randos coming through the wards, who was he to argue?

He would just be hanging around waiting to say “I told you so” when it all went terribly wrong.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Five

“Are you going to get in trouble for bringing me here?”

“Hmm?” Lars grinned over at him from where he was chopping some sort of vegetable. Samuel wasn’t sure what kind, but whatever Lars was cooking smelled really nice.

“I know that that someone, what did you say his name was? Jake? Was very concerned about me being here. The one who’s coming to dinner. Are you going to get in trouble?”

“Oh no. No, I never get in trouble for what I do. I just sort of figure it’s better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. But that’s okay. Jake will get over it.” Lars waved his knife around airily.

“Are you sure? I don’t wanna be trouble.” Samuel had been there now for three days at Lars’s house, and the snow had finally let up enough to allow this Jake guy to come over for dinner tonight.

Samuel was a little freaked out. Maybe he should just see if his little car would go back to Albuquerque, and he could just tell his dad that the baby was gone. Like just disappeared or something. He wouldn’t say the baby was dead because that would be very bad as far as karma or something, but...

He could just pretend, right? He could be a good actor. Really, he couldn't. He couldn't lie to his dad; he never had been able to. So he guessed he had to stay and try to do what he was there to do.

He wasn't sure how he was supposed to go about that, but he would try. Maybe he would talk to Lars about it at dinner. Maybe this Jake person would have some insight about his sister. He just wasn't sure.

Things were so complicated. And the snow, well, it had insulated everything and made him feel safe and happy while they watched movies and had hot chocolate. But he knew that had to come to an end at some point.

"Maybe you should be trouble." Lars made the best sounds, this one sort of a nasally snort. "You know, honestly, the world doesn't have enough trouble. Not like terrible trouble, but, you know, good trouble."

Samuel smiled because there was very little choice. Lars was just joyful. He was so jealous. He wanted to be joyful and brave at the same time; he just couldn't figure out how.

"How is your brother?" Changing the subject seemed to be the most logical answer right now until they could figure out what to say about this whole rule-breaking question.

"Oh, Logan? He's fine. The babies have colic, and they're both very grumpy. It'll pass." Lars offered him a wicked grin. "I ordered a swing set for them, and it totally worked. Until it broke. And then didn't work because, you know, that's sort of the definition of broken, but I ordered him another one. It should be coming soon, and things should get better."

That grin got wider as Lars went on. "I have not heard from him, his Dakota, or

Simon, though. Which means that they may have taken Logan, tied him up, and put him in the basement.”

Samuel blinked. That sounded like a joke, so he chuckled. But what if it wasn’t?

“Does that happen a lot around here? People being tied up in the basement.”

“Less often than you’d think. As a rule, we seem to have a genuine lack of basement bondage.”

Now Samuel knew it was a joke, and he laughed good and hard. He had read more than his fair share of books about bondage in all of its forms, from sexual to spiritual to physical to psychological to environmental.

This he understood. In theory, if not in practice.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Well, I don’t know, Samuel, is there anything you can do to help? Can you cook?”  
Lars raised a silvery eyebrow.

“Can is a big word. I mean, I have... I can... There are certain things. Maybe. Like I can make mustard sandwiches. And I can heat up soup. And I can chop things without cutting off my fingers.”

“Oh.” Lars nodded as if that made total sense, of course. “Come here and crush these tomatoes for me. That is something that you can do. It’s fun, it’s splashy, it’s messy, and you can’t screw it up.”

“That last bit is my favorite,” he said. He started helping out, and he had to admit, he was having fun.

Lars was a good teacher, and he was elbow deep in kneading pasta dough when lights flashed in the drive.

“Your company is here.”

“Excellent. You keep it up. I’m gonna run out and meet them.”

“Them?” He’d noticed that little slip.

“Well, I know for sure that it’s Jake and the baby. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to hear that he picked up another couple on the way.”

Butterflies filled his stomach. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to meet more than just one or two people. And there was a baby. What kind of baby? Well, it had to be a dragon baby, didn’t it?

But somehow his intuition started to twitch. Samuel wrapped the pasta dough in cling wrap like Lars had told him to, and then he just sort of stood there, waiting, his hands covered in flour.

Lars came back inside, leading a man who had a baby strapped to his chest. And that seemed to be their only guest. There wasn’t anyone else.

Samuel stared, because the man was stunningly beautiful. He had dark hair and coppery brown eyes that looked almost metallic in the kitchen light. He was broad-shouldered and incredibly masculine and just...glorious. Samuel knew he was staring, but he couldn’t stop.

“Samuel, this is Jake Lothe. Jake, this is Samuel. We’re all going to have dinner together. Samuel’s been helping me make pasta. I know you like pasta.” Lars seemed perfectly at ease. Unlike him.

Jake just sort of stared at him. Then nodded, though he didn't look particularly thrilled. And Samuel wasn't sure what to do in this situation when someone was rather rude. He was used to the very formal manners of a wing being observed at all times.

"Is there anything else you wanted me to do?" he asked Lars, and Lars shook his head.

"No, sweetie. We're just going to have to wait for half an hour for the dough to rest."

He nodded and then scrambled off to wash his hands, feeling completely and utterly unsure of himself.

"Who the hell is that?" he heard Jake growl. "What is he doing here?"

"He's looking for information about his sister, Susan, who passed away. They just found out about the passing. I suggest you be kind, or I shall be very put out." Samuel had never heard Lars sound quite so stern. Then again, he hadn't known Lars for very long, and he'd never given Lars a reason to be stern. "Are we clear, dear?"

"What are you on about?"

The baby began to cry, tearing at Samuel's heartstrings.

"Now now, little one. All is well." Lars sounded so calm.

"How can everything be well?"

Samuel stepped back into the room where they all stood and said, "I assume that this means you knew my sister Susan. I don't know what happened, but I heard there was a baby and I'm here to help."

Wait, those weren't the words that were supposed to come out of his mouth. He was here to take the baby. He was here to take the baby home.

"I don't need any help," Jake snapped.

Samuel stood taller, drawing all of the haughtiness and surety that he had learned from his parents. "Pardon me? Perhaps the baby does. My sister's child."

"This is my child," the man shot back, and the earth beneath the house began to shudder. "You're not welcome here."

"What?"

"You are not welcome here." The shaking became more pronounced.

Samuel glanced at Lars, who seemed utterly panicked. He wasn't prepared for this. Not yet. But he would be.

Samuel shifted, his form sleek and made of almost pure light. He streaked out of the door, taking off toward the mountains, so that he could plan.

He wasn't prepared for this yet, but he would be, and then there would be no more arguing about who was welcome where.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Lars snapped, getting right up in Jake's face. "That was my houseguest, not yours."

"Why? Why on earth would you let him in the wing!" Jake had taken just about all he was going to take from the whole fucking wing. "He was here for my kid!"

"No." Lars poked his chest. "You heard him. He was here to help. Do you really

think he wants to take a baby back to that dreadful place?”

“What dreadful place?” Jake felt as if he was being smacked around by the gods. His head hurt, and he made shushing noises, bouncing Grant while he avoided Lars’s poking finger. Damn, that hurt.

“His wing, of course. Why do you think Susan left? It sounds incredibly unfun. Hidebound. Setting the dragon world back a hundred years single-handedly. And now you’ve scared him off into the snow.”

Jake gaped at Lars. “What the hell, man? Why am I the bad guy here?” He was just reeling a little. “I mean, I didn’t intend to run him off, but?—”

“But you did.” Lars sighed. “I really ought to go find him before he gets hurt.”

Jake blinked. There was a random dragon loose inside the wing. “Shit. He can’t just be wandering around out there.”

“No. No, he might get hurt.” Lars shook his head. “I’m disappointed.”

“Disappointed!” Jake roared it, trying not to let Grant get utterly freaked out. “How do you think I feel? Everyone just assumes I know what I’m doing, so no one will tell me anything! I’m not on the damn Facebook groups or whatever! I’m supposed to be a guardian, but I get in trouble if I try to go guard things!”

He was so tired of feeling like he was fumbling in the dark.

Lars just stared at him, blinked. Then stared some more. “Feel better?”

“Not really.”



“No? Good, because I don’t either. It’s not like there’s a training program.” Lars shook his head. “We’re just making do. We do the best we can.”

That wasn’t the answer he was looking for, to be honest. He wanted sympathy, empathy, answers, something.

“If we’d known that something was going to happen to Susan and Jolie, if we’d had any idea about the baby needing you full time, no one would have asked you to be a guardian, but it’s not like we can just take the responsibility from you. After all, Jason is leaving, which means that we’d have to find two, and that takes time.”

“Take the responsibility. What the fuck? Nobody said I wasn’t going to do it. I said I needed help.” All he wanted was someone to guide him on what he was supposed to do and let him know he was doing a decent job of it, for fuck’s sake.

A huge whomp rang in his ears—the unmistakable sound of another dragon landing.

Logan.

It had to be Logan.

Lars always called Logan.

Just like he would have called Jolie.

Fuck, he was mad.

“So what? You had to call in reinforcements?” All his pain and fury lived in his words.

“Excuse me?” Lars’s eyes flashed, the gray going pure silver. “I don’t believe you

remember quite who you're speaking to."

He didn't have any reason to allow his dragon to surge to the forefront, but it sure tried. "I'm speaking to the man who brought a stranger into our homes and allowed him out into the wing. Someone that we didn't know, and who acts as if he is free to roam about. Like he belongs."

Grant began to cry, and Lars reached for him. Jake snarled, teeth snapping. "Don't touch him."

"Get out." There was a flash of lightning, a blinding crack outside that sounded so vast that the entire world stopped for a moment. "You are not welcome in my house."

A sudden ice wrapped around his heart as Grant sobbed.

The door opened, and there stood Logan, the huge alpha dragon almost glowing gold. "Enough!" Pure silence landed in the room. "Enough, brother. Don't do something that you would regret because your feelings are hurt. And you?" Logan's golden gaze landed on Jake. "Do not disrespect my brother or his home."

"Fine." Jake grabbed Grant's little chair, allowing anger to pour through him. "Don't touch my child, and you keep all of these strangers away from him. If you don't, then I will, and if Lars isn't capable of telling when others are dangerous, maybe he ought to step down!"

"Get out!" Another flash of lightning hit the ground, ozone making him nauseated.

"Stop!" The utter command in Logan's voice stopped them both still, and even the baby quit crying. Logan glanced at Lars. "Please go get our wing's guest and bring him back. Also extend my apologies."

Then that hard gaze turned to Jake. “You and I are going to have a talk.”

Logan went over to little Grant, taking the chair from Jake’s boneless grip. One finger came to rest on Grant’s forehead. “Rest, baby doll. Everything will be all right. Uncle Logan has this.”

Grant’s eyes closed, the little body relaxing with a hum.

He desperately wanted to ask why Logan could do this to his son and the son of a bitch couldn’t manage it with his twins, but he figured Logan might just burn him to a crisp.

Some things weren’t worth trying, no matter what the temptation.

Instead, he inclined his head as Lars left the room. “What would you like to talk about, Logan?”

“Sit down, Jake.” Logan waved at the kitchen table.

Jake sat, putting Grant down. “I’m not going to apologize.”

“To me? No, you don’t owe me one.” Logan raised one golden brow. “But Lars is pretty peeved.” Logan sat opposite him.

“I don’t understand why it’s okay that he brought that dragon into the wing?” Jake raised his hands to shoulder level, then sort of flailed with them.

“That’s because for the first time, you perceive someone as a threat. People have been coming and going from the wing ever since you moved up as guardian.”

“Are you kidding? That little dragon is no threat to me.” Even as he said it, something

in his brain whispered that it was a lie. Something about his sister's mate's brother made him itch.

"Not physically, perhaps, but he has a claim to Grant, and that has to make you a little nuts."

"I don't want him here." That sounded so petty, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

"How do you know? He's decided he wants to stay and help. Why not let him and see how it goes?"

"I cannot fucking believe this," he growled, not really sure how this was happening. "I cannot believe that my son's safety means so little to you. That you would bring him into this situation with a stranger without even considering his well-being, just assuming that he is going to be fine, that Susan didn't leave for a reason?"

Logan's response was whip quick and left the air singed. "Is that a challenge?"

"What?"

"I said, is that a challenge? Are you suggesting for one second I do not care for the most vulnerable in our wing? Are you suggesting for a moment that I would allow one of our children to be harmed?" Logan's gaze was deadly still, but those eyes weren't gold, not anymore.

They blazed a bright red, the flames licking inside them, and Jake could feel the heat coming off of them. "If you are, then I suggest that we immediately call the council of the guardians together and we hold a quorum."

That calm was terrifying, because Jake was smart enough to understand what it

meant. He'd overstepped. And he offended Logan, who was the best dragon that he knew.

He shook his head.

"No. Of course not. I'm hurt, and I'm confused and angry. I'm also sorry. That was stupid. I just... I just don't understand why we're allowing him in, why you're welcoming him. He wants to take Grant."

"He's been tasked by the other wing to help raise Grant, as far as I'm concerned, at any rate." Logan sat, staring at him. "By our laws, that wing has equal claim to Grant, and as far as I see it, we have a few choices. We can welcome this Samuel into our wing and allow him to become one of us. He would have access to Grant and be able to help you. Thereby fulfilling the law. Alternatively, we can agree to share time. But that does mean fifty-fifty. You have had Grant for a year. Are you willing to give him up for a year now? Or say you keep him for six years. Are you willing to keep him until he's six, and then wait until he's twelve before you see him again?"

Jake stared over. "You're not serious."

"It is the law." Logan's lips twisted. "However. Samuel is here. Lars says he feels as if Samuel may not be happy at home and may be willing to stay here and help with Grant. So he raises Grant with you, you have an extra hand. We fulfilled our legal requirements, and Grant is here where he belongs."

Logan paused, looking at Jake. "Of course it's up to you. You can say no. It's also up to Samuel, who apparently has said 'no' kind of clearly. And I don't know what you're going to do about apologizing to Lars."

"Oh gods."

“Indeed. Like I said, ball’s in your court, man. We were trying to help.”

“Why didn’t somebody tell me?” He felt like he was just flailing out here without anyone giving advice. If they’d been telling him what he was supposed to do, what he needed to do, this wouldn’t have happened.

“I’m sorry.” Logan’s words surprised him, but they sounded sincere. “Like I said, I assumed you understood what the laws were in this case.”

“How could I?” How often did this happen? “I didn’t understand anything. I’m not sure I understand anything right now.”

But the one thing he did know was that he’d fucked up, and that he had to stop thinking with his anger and start using his common sense. He had to trust that the other guardians had his back. None of them had ever done anything hurtful to him. No one had ever suggested anything awful. Nothing like that.

And he’d treated Lars like an idiot.

“What do I need to do?”

“I think the smartest thing right this second is just to go to my house. If you would, keep an eye on Dakota, maybe snuggle a baby.” Logan rolled his eyes. “They’re very grumpy. I’ll go find Lars and the new dragon, get them both back here, and then I’ll come home, and we’ll have a beer. Possibly a steak? In my office with the door closed because it’s a very serious guardian-only meeting, fair?”

“Yes, fair. Very serious guardian-only meeting.” He stood and held out one hand. “I was out of line. Forgive me.”

“You were, but we are family, remember that. Forgiveness is yours. Always.” Logan

pulled him into a hard, warm hug.

And he wrapped his arms around his friend, squeezing tight in return. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, thank me when I find Lars. You can come home and have that beer in my office with the door locked. That would be great.”

“Sounds great.” He breathed a sigh of relief. He thought, with Logan at least, that he was back on solid ground.

Now he just had to apologize to Lars. And to figure out what it was about this little omega from his sister’s mate’s wing that made him worry so much. Something about the whole situation just...made him itch.

It wasn’t right.

Not at all.

By the time Lars found Samuel, he had allowed the mountain to fill him with ice and snow.

He would not be kind to this rude, classless person. He would not be warm and friendly. He wasn’t sure what was wrong with his sister, but whatever it was, he did not approve.

His dragon met Lars’s head-on. Not with violence or with anger, of course. But simply with the cold. Calm.

I’m sorry, Lars said. I never thought that he would say something like that. It was terribly rude.

Yes. He supposed it was to be expected. When can I arrange to see the child?

Oh now don't be like that. He's just very tired. He's trying to do all of this on his own, and he's a new guardian, and you showed up. It's all very complicated. Please try to understand.

I understand completely. I appreciate that you allowed me to come into your wing so that I could retrieve the baby. It was very kind of you, but it is obvious that he isn't interested in working with me.

Lars had told him wild, fantastical stories about how he could make a home here, and how this could be a friendly place for him.

Then he could see his nephew every day and help with his raising. He could help with the library here and make it his own.

Their librarian was eager to retire, Lars had told him, and there was going to be a place for him, but it all had been a lie.

This was not a place for him.

He didn't feel Lars was consciously trying to harm him, but obviously these people did not understand him.

And that hurt. Because for a moment, he had thought maybe?—

He tamped all of those feelings into a box tight inside of him.

No.

Ice. Cold. Simple. Strong.



Ice.

Well, no one can make any decisions in this cold. The weather's awful. It's getting late. Come on. Jake is gone. Just come to the house, we'll have a nice supper, and maybe we'll play a game. Just the two of us. Just two friends. No baloney, no politics.

That was incredibly tempting.

And these winds were ruffling his scales something awful.

Unlike Lars, who was oddly enough, the same color and hue that he was—the winds were ruffling him viciously. Where Lars was metallic and sleek and shiny with scales like coins that seemed to tinkle as he moved, his scales were softer, almost feathery, and white. Not in the least metallic. In fact, his scales were made of light.

Everywhere he went, he glowed, which really explained how Lars found him almost immediately. He was sort of a come-shoot-me-now kind of dragon.

There's tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, Lars tempted. And we still have that huge chocolate cake. And there's whipped cream. We could just... We could just be friends. Have a slumber party.

He'd never had a slumber party.

Can we have movies and popcorn late?

Lars beamed him. Of course we can. Are you kidding? Popcorn and movies are my favorite.

All right, one night. But then tomorrow, I have to... I have to make a plan.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow is a perfect time to make a plan. Come on, follow me. We'll go home. It'll be great.

Samuel nodded, willing to do that.

Also I have to tell you. You are spectacular. All that light is so pretty .

Samuel preened a little bit. No one had ever said that to him before, either. Thank you. Let's go.

He could manage this. One night. A single great memory.

And then tomorrow Samuel would go and speak to that awful, mean dragon and inform him that he was not going to raise that baby to be mean too.

So there.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Six

Lars had brought the Samuel guy back in.

That was the word Jake had gotten at Logan's house, where he'd camped out overnight, having a steak and a beer minus the guardian meeting.

Grant was toddling around the kitchen, because the babies fascinated him, and the big cats, Tawny and her mate Auryn were great babysitters, bumping Grant back into play if he wandered too far. It was sort of like one of those big balloons at a concert. Boing. Boing.

Jake sipped his coffee, knowing the other shoe was going to drop sooner or later.

"Ah, good morning, Jake." Simon walked into the kitchen. "I was about to start breakfast. Good morning, little one."

Grant ran directly to Simon, his little legs pumping as fast as they could. He adored Logan's housekeeper and personal assistant.

"Mon! Mon! Mon, Mon, Mon." Grant's voice was sort of like two stones slamming together and grinding. It was more than a touch aggravating that Grant had learned to say Simon's name, Amber's name, Teaball and Bumper's names before he learned to say daddy.

So freaking unfair.

Simon scooped Grant up. “Oh, my love. It is so good to see you. Have you been playing with the babies?”

“Babbie!”

“Oh yes, my little Frankenstein’s monster baby.” Simon laughed, giving Grant a hug before putting him back into play. “So are we hungry?”

Jake rolled his eyes and snorted. “I don’t know. Are we?”

“Don’t be a jerk. You’ve already gotten in trouble once today.”

He couldn’t help this chuckle. “Porcupine man, I’ll have you know that I got in trouble yesterday . This is a completely different day, you know? Fresh start and all that.”

One of Simon’s eyebrows lifted, and Jake couldn’t help but wonder if those were little hairs or tiny little quills up there.

Man, that would be awkward. Seriously, what if all of Simon’s hairs were just spikes and?—

Okay, that would make sex weird and... Ew, that was bad. He didn’t want to think about sex and Simon in the same sentence. Or even in the same paragraph.

He was pretty sure that Simon and sex didn’t even belong in the same chapter of anything.

“Well, I don’t know. I think any amount of trouble that involves you having to go and

be fetched for a spanking carries over to the next day.” Then he got a wink. “And don’t think I don’t realize you and Logan went to have your ‘meeting’, so he wouldn’t have to deal with colicky number one and two.”

“The girls are having a bad time, are they?”

The twins got a fond look, a smile. “It’s hard to be a baby.”

“Are you getting any help?”

Simon snorted. “Dakota is an amazing father. So is Logan. Logan’s just very tired.”

“Of course.” He hadn’t meant any offense. “I just know how busy you are.”

“It’s my honor, my privilege, and my calling. Bacon or sausage?”

“We can’t have both?” Dakota trailed in, bundled in sweats, and beamed at Grant.

“Look at you wandering around, little man. Are you ready for breakfast?”

“Ood!”

“Well, that was definite. Good morning, Jake.”

“Good morning,” Jake kinda thought Dakota was a wonder among omegas. He really did put up with just about everything, and it never surprised him when somebody was in his kitchen first thing in the morning.

Of course, he’d probably had plenty of time to talk to Logan about Jake’s snafu last night, but still, that smile was very kind. Always.

“So, how is the little man this morning?” Dakota wiggled his fingers at Grant who

giggled and bounced a little bit.

“He’s feeling much better today. Yesterday was a little stressful.”

“So I hear. That’s okay. It’ll get fixed one way or the other. If there’s anything I’ve learned from living in this wing, it’s that these guardians, Lars and Logan, I mean, just sort of smooth everything over. Bea, not so much.”

“Yeah, not so much with me either. To be fair, I think instinctively I knew he was here for my baby. And it really upset me.” He spread his hands in a wry motion.

“Well, of course it did. Grant has been yours for a year. You’re his dad. It doesn’t bode well for anybody who tries to take him away from you, but from what Lars seems to think, this omega is not here to actually take him away. He’s trying to find a place here in a wing that’s safer and kinder than his, just like all of us did. We’re the island of misfit toys wing, right?”

Jake had to laugh at that. He was laughing a lot more this morning than he had yesterday. “I guess we are. I just felt like more of a misfit yesterday than I had in a long time.”

“Well then, we need to fix that too. There’s no reason for it. You feel like you’re going it alone, but you’re not, right, Simon?”

Simon nodded. “Absolutely. Or no, I’m not sure what the question was. Let me start breakfast.”

“Yeah, breakfast would be good.” Dakota tilted his head. “So what are you going to do about Lars?”

“I have no idea. None. I mean, I could send him a box of chocolates.”

“You’re apologizing, not seducing. Try again.” Dakota tapped his fingers on the counter, and little Grant repeated the action. “That just doesn’t work. You’re gonna have to actually grovel. Maybe Le Creuset? He has his eye on the braiser. Either that, or possibly you could get him new finials for his staircase. He has an Amazon wish list.”

“Okay, well, I can do that.” It was going to cost him way more than he had expected, but Lars was worth it. Lars was a good friend.

Even though he had that interloper in his house right now.

Jake still didn’t approve.

Not that disapproval equaled aggravated, because that wasn’t mature.

Or calm.

And Logan had expressed to him over and over and over and over and over last night that the whole point of this was to be calm, collected, and mature and end up with no one trying to take his son.

“You’re making the house tremble again. Logan’s going to notice,” Dakota whispered, going to pick up one of the twins.

“Can you tell them apart?”

“Of course I can. Logan can’t. We forgive him, but Ari here is absolutely the alpha, whereas Mari is the omega and a little quieter. Mari is, of course, more stubborn than her sister, and she always gets what she wants because her sister makes sure of it. Also if you look really close, Ari has the tiniest little freckle right beside her nose. On the left-hand side. Mari has the tiniest little freckle on the right-hand side of her

nose.”

“Mari is the one with the freckle, and it’s on the left side.” Logan came storming through the kitchen. “I need a cup of coffee.”

Simon nodded, quills rattling. “Mug’s all made up. Coffeemaker’s full. We’re having bacon and sausage and eggs. Do you want pancakes?”

“Do we have maple syrup?”

“Have we ever not had maple syrup?”

One of Logan’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, there was that one time during the great maple syrup migration of 1042 where you didn’t have it on the table. It is early to be sarcastic with me.”

“Oh, someone has a hangover. Here, babe, let me get you something.” Dakota went to get some headache powder from the cabinet, surreptitiously handing Grant a wooden spoon and a pot for him to play with.

Oh, evil omega.

The banging started immediately.

Bang bang bang ! “Yay.” Bang bang bang . “Yay.”

“I hate you.”

“You adore me. Also the freckle’s on Mari’s right side.”

Really. Is this what parents did if there were two of them? Children and parents, that



was? They sat and discussed freckles?

He supposed that he should be grateful that they weren't discussing poop. He did remember when Grant was the age of the twins—poop was the big thing. There was a lot of discussing it.

Bea had loved that talk. She had come over to have coffee just to amuse herself at length going on about the quality and consistency of Grant's poop. She was kind of an asshole.

That was the thing, though. They were a family, for all their weirdness and their warts and stuff. Sometimes they didn't communicate perfectly, and they often disagreed, but they were family.

He pulled out his phone to make the Amazon order for Lars.

"Get the Le Creuset," Logan told him. "The finials will seem chintzy."

"Have you seen what they cost?" Jake asked, eyebrows going up.

"Yes, but one solid present says I'm sorry way better than a bunch of weird little things."

"Hmm." That had a ring of truth to it. So he clicked buy it now.

"Anyway, Lars is bringing Samuel over today to meet Grant. That way, it's a neutral place."

Jake swallowed his immediate denial. "Okay. Sure. I can see it."

"That's the spirit." Logan beamed at him. "I love it."

Jake didn't, but he kept it to himself. He did go to pick up Grant, though, getting smacked on the nose with a wooden spoon for his trouble. Whack .

"Amber says Mari says he's nice," Dakota offered over. "Does that help?"

"No, not particularly." He didn't care if the guy was nice. "This one, I need to go away." He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to have to remember any of this. He just wanted to get on with life.

He didn't want to have to deal with anything more than what he was dealing with now.

That was fair.

"This is just a meeting, just a time for this new guy, whose name I have forgotten already."

"Samuel," Dakota offered helpfully.

"Thank you, mate, Samuel. What was I saying?" Logan asked.

"That this was just a meeting."

Jake thought that maybe Dakota was going to hit Logan over the head with a rock. Instead, Dakota just handed him one of the twins and went to pick up the other one that was beginning to scream.

"Right, this is just a meeting. You get to meet him, he gets to meet the baby, Everyone gets to sit. We'll have tea or something."

"Tea." Jake just stared at Logan.

“Okay, we’ll have beer. They can have tea.”

Dakota’s eyes narrowed. “There will be no beer. Simon, we’ll need a light snack. Something you know, vaguely lunchy, snacky, vaguely tea-like. Nothing that will hurt anything if somebody starts to throw it.”

Man, he remembered when Dakota was this really mild-mannered scared little guy. Now it looked like perhaps he had Logan’s balls in his tiny little fist. Interesting.

“That sounds absolutely lovely, Dakota. I will make sure it happens.”

“Thank you, Simon. I appreciate it. Holler if you need anything else. Logan and I are going to take the babies and feed them.”

“But—”

“Now.”

“Going to feed twins. I’ll be back.” Logan had the hang-dog face on, but when their eyes met, Logan winked at him.

Simon chuckled softly, shook his head. “Mates.”

“Can’t live with them, can’t kill them?” he asked.

“Said like a bachelor alpha.”

“Yep. That’s what I am.” Jake unbent a little bit because what else could he do? Everybody was being so kind. He supposed he could do the same thing and let this Samuel guy come and meet Grant.

“There see. That’s what everyone wants. Just to see that you were going be okay with things.”

Jake shook his head. He wasn’t sure he was ever going to be okay with this when he was feeling...bitter. Still raw. Maybe that was the problem. He’d lost his sister, but so had Samuel. So, maybe he needed to be more open.

“They’ll be over in about an hour,” Simon said.

“How do you know all this stuff without anyone ever talking to you?” Jake asked.

Simon tapped his temple. “I’m plugged into the communication and the family hotline.”

“I guess that’s one way to do it.” Man, Jake missed that sometimes. Sure, the other guardians could talk to him, especially when it was an emergency, but without his sister, he didn’t have someone that he could just babble at all the time. It sucked. And it made him feel so isolated.

Anyway, he just figured he would bow to the other voices in the room and do this meeting even if he didn’t want to. Really. There were going to be two other guardians there at the time. What could it possibly hurt?

Samuel didn’t want to do this. Oh, he was going to; he didn’t have a choice. There wasn’t any of this that he had a choice in, but he didn’t want to.

He also didn’t want to call his parents. He didn’t want to go back to the coast. He didn’t want to stay here at Lars’s house, and he didn’t want to have to drive his rental car back to Albuquerque.

Or get on a plane or something.

Again, his choices were limited, if not nonexistent, so...

He put on a pair of black dress pants. He put on a pair of black dress shoes. He put on a decently formal shirt. He didn't have a tie, so he wore a big oversized sweater over the top of it. Then he carefully braided his hair and tucked it under the sweater. Then he put on the glasses that he didn't really need, but they were a great affectation, and they made him feel more like a librarian.

Then he put his things in his pockets, and he headed downstairs to where Lars was waiting.

"Well, don't you look nice?" Lars was wearing faded jeans, heavy biker boots, and a bulky sweater that basically mimicked his own.

"Thanks. It's my one dress outfit that I brought." If he needed more, he would buy more.

"Well, you look fine." He thought Lars might be nervous. He was vibrating a bit. Crackling with static electricity. "Come on; it's not far at all. And the roads are... Well, they're a wreck. So we're going to wear coats, and I'm going to put on the chains, so we'll be safe as houses."

They started heading to the mud room, and when he peered out, all he saw was snow. His shoes were in so much trouble.

"So the baby is at your brother's house?"

"Yes."

"And your brother's another guardian?"

“Yes.”

“You said he had children.”

Lars chuckled. “Yeah, two. Twins. Ari and Mari. They’re amazing. They’re very little, they’re very loud, and they adore me.” Lars chuckled softly. “Logan has a person, dragon, man Friday, valet, housekeeper, keeper of the keys? His name is Simon. He’s amazing. We all want one. Logan’s the only one who has one. We’re all jealous.”

Okay, that was confusing. “So why didn’t you get him?”

Lars pinked, blushed, shook his head. “Obviously because I didn’t need him.”

“Oh, all right.” The last thing on earth he wanted to do right now was to make Lars upset with him. Everyone else in this keep hated him. He wasn’t going to lose the one friend he had here in this place. So he just went with it.

They bundled up, and he grabbed the books and the toy that he had brought to amuse Grant.

Grant.

The baby’s name was Grant.

They’d had an Uncle Grant that he hadn’t seen in as long as he could remember at this point. He had fond memories, though, of him, and he knew that Susan had adored Grant, so that made him happy.

The drive wasn’t bad. Little bumpy, a little slide-y. Kind of exciting, if he were honest.

Lars seemed capable as a driver, and so he didn't actually get scared. It was sort of like a roller coaster. There was a little gasp and a little whee, but he kind of trusted that everything was going to be fine at the end and no one was going to die.

And that was a little ridiculous because he could just fly.

No one dies doing that.

He could almost hear his sister, her voice dry as dust.

He didn't understand exactly how they'd lost Susan. No one seemed to want to tell him.

Well, most notably, Lars didn't seem to want to tell him.

He assumed that this Jake person didn't want to discuss it either, which was fine, because he was never speaking to that one ever again.

Surely someone in this keep would tell him how his sister passed away, and if there was some sort of record of her passing.

If there was some sort of memorial. A stone or a plaque or something. Oh, really, there should be a stone. If there wasn't one, he could pay to put one up. That was only fair, right? As long as they could tell him where they had laid Susan to rest.

If they had. Some dragons preferred to go back to the ash they all assumed they had been created from, although so many dragons didn't spit fire, and?—

“Are you all right?” Lars asked him as they pulled into the drive of a giant house.

“Hmmm? I suppose. Why?” What had he done wrong?

“You were singing.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Samuel ducked his head. Susan had always told him he did that when he was stressed, or when he was thinking too hard. “I tend to forget I’m not alone in a library.” Not that he didn’t get in trouble for singing there too. Someday, he’d have his own library, where he was the only worker, and no one would glare at him for singing there.

“Ah. I sing when I’m in the shower. Or when I’m cooking. Sea shanties for the shower. Opera for cooking.”

“Sea shanties? How fun! This is the desert, you know,” he dared to tease.

“Even more reason. Humidity by magical thinking.”

A giggle escaped him, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. “You’re amazing.”

“Thank you. All right, now. Buck up. Jake is a good man, a good dragon. He’s still reeling from losing his sister and getting Grant. And becoming a guardian. I’m not saying that’s an excuse, but he’s had a rough year.”

He wanted to ask what that mattered to him, but that was unkind to Lars. He was so tired of not knowing what to do, of feeling off-kilter.

Lars grabbed his hand for a moment. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Of course it is.” He tilted his chin up, just like Susan had always told him to. If nothing else, it made him look more confident than he felt. “Let’s go.”

The adobe house was fancy, but homey in that kind of ‘I have more money than God, but I’m going to pretend to be rustic’ sort of way.



“Don’t worry,” Lars whispered. “This is just the front area. We get through that entryway there, and it’s like baby hell.”

The last thing he wanted to do on earth was laugh, but Lars cracked him up, so he started to giggle about the time a silvery dragon peeked out. “I thought I heard you come in. Hi. I’m Dakota. It’s good to meet you. Sorry for all the weirdness and the mess. Babies, you know?”

“Hello.” Okay, so that was adorable. Dakota looked like he’d been through a tornado—long hair all coming out of his braid in little tendrils, a white burp cloth on his shoulder, and what looked to be coffee stains dripping down his front. How could anybody not like that?

“See?” Lars stepped up and hugged Dakota hard. “Told you. They usually go in and out the kitchen door. So this is the only place that’s suitable for guests right now.”

An amazing dragon with bright blue quills appeared behind. Dakota, one eyebrow raised, said, “Pardon me?”

“This is the Simon I was telling you about. He’s amazing. Even if he’s a terrible housekeeper.” Lars grinned, and the Simon guy kind of rattled his quills, but Lars didn’t seem even the least bit worried.

“Don’t bad mouth my hero,” Dakota said. “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“Starve,” Simon shot back. “Starve and have a psychotic break with reality. Now can we all come away from the door and have some tea? I have a meal laid out.”

There was no way that Samuel was going to be able to eat anything, possibly ever again. He was so tired of being worried and being queasy, and he just wanted to go home.

Better the demon that one knew than the demon one didn't, he supposed, but right now, all he wanted was to go home to his library and look at his books and pretend that everything was going to be okay.

"That sounds great. Hand me your coat." Lars came back to him, took his coat, and then they stomped through the entryway.

Well. Lars and his boots stomped. He kind of slid and clicked in his fancy shoes that were undoubtedly ruined.

They entered into a mass of chaos and noise and color. The huge sunken living area was filled with toys and blankets and stuffed animals, the kitchen was a miasma of amazing scents—bacon and bread and chocolate.

There was absolutely chocolate.

While still expensive, this space wasn't fancy or sterile. It was a home.

The mean dragon—who he was not going to speak to—sat there with his sister's baby, then there were also a set of twin little girls with fiery red hair and huge green eyes and obvious tempers. That was proven by the fact that a huge alpha dragon snatching sparks out of the air as they tried to set one another on fire.

Well, he supposed that immolation was an effective thing, but it tended to cause trouble.

"Do not set your sister on fire. If you do that, I will have to listen to your father yell at me for not watching you, and I don't want to have to listen to him snarl about you setting things on fire." The big dragon looked up as they walked in. "Hi."

Dakota's lips twisted. "Uh-huh."

“Yeah, sorry. It was a long night.”

Dakota snorted. “Yes, there was an enormous amount of beer. He gets no niceties for being hungover. None.” The words were tough, but the smile that Dakota gave the big dragon was adoring, so he supposed that this was just an ongoing discussion. Twins tended to lead to a lot of discussions.

Discussions and long sleepless nights.

The big dragon came right up to him and offered him a smile. “Hello. I’m Lars’s brother, Logan. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Samuel de Lamar. Thank you for the invitation to see your home.”

Really it had been an invitation to see his nephew, but niceties were niceties.

“You’re very welcome here. Come on and sit down.” Logan grabbed his arm and tugged him to the chair directly opposite the person he wasn’t looking at. “I think you’ve kind of met Jake, and this is Grant.”

Samuel did glance at the baby, and...oh. He was immediately captivated. Grant was...simply amazing. Samuel felt the familial bond with him right away.

“Look at you, little one. So adorable.”

Grant stared at him for a moment, then squealed, held out his arms, and lunged.

The move clearly took Jake by surprise. “Whoa, buddy.” Jake caught Grant before he could fall. “He’s stronger than he looks.”

“So am I.” He held his hands out, and Grant landed on him with a thud. “Oh, sweet

baby. Hello, I'm your Uncle Samuel."

"Bee!"

"That's right! Sweet baby! And so smart!" He was in love. Totally and completely.

Grant stared up at him, tugging at his sweater, making him grab those little hands and laugh. "No pulling. It's the only really warm sweater I have with me."

"You weren't prepared to come here?" the Jake one asked.

"Not for this extreme snow, no. How could I?"

Jake's mouth twisted a bit, but he didn't growl when he answered. "We have a shop in the wing where you could supply yourself some."

He didn't know what to say, but was he supposed to say...thank you?

He didn't want to talk to this person. They weren't nice, they weren't polite, and they obviously weren't worthy of his attention.

But he also didn't want to be rude, so took a deep breath and simply said, "Thank you."

Then he went back to focusing on the baby.

"Don't you have the most beautiful eyes, little one? You look just like Susan." What a gorgeous baby.

Grant beamed at him. "Bee!"

“That’s right, you’re the baby. Those are your friends too, right? The other babies?”

Grant gave him a wide grin, the couple of little teeth just gleaming. “Bee!”

“Oh, you are a brilliant little one, I can tell. I brought you some books and some toys.” He dug in his knapsack and pulled out one of the soft, untearable books that he’d brought, along with two soft stuffies with sewn-on eyes that the twins could have.

He hadn’t intended on giving anything to the twins, but they were watching him, and even though they wouldn’t remember, somewhere in their hearts they would know if he had forgotten them.

“These are for the girls.” They were little soft dragons with long tails—a green one and a purple one. “A friend of mine makes these.”

“You have friends?” Jake asked, and he scowled over, stung.

“Of course I have friends.”

“Jake! Dammit!” Dakota glared at the Other Dragon.

That was what Samuel was going to call him from now on, the Other Dragon.

“You don’t have to be an ass. Of course he has friends.”

“I just meant?—”

“It doesn’t matter,” he interrupted. “They’re handmade. I hope the girls enjoy them.”

Fucker.

Oh, didn't that feel good to think?

"What did you say to me?" Jake surged up, eyes flashing, and Samuel wrapped around the baby, his light shielding them both from the Other Dragon.

"Nothing." He'd been talking to Dakota.

"You—" Jake took a deep, deep breath, then let it out. "I know what I heard." That even tone didn't fool him for a moment. The Other Dragon was in a temper.

"He didn't say anything, Jake," Dakota murmured. "Sit down."

"I—" Jake glanced back and forth between them, and then he scowled. "I would never hurt my son. You don't have to protect him from me."

Logan rolled his eyes. "He would never hurt someone who has the protection of this wing, either. Jake, just chill."

"I'm trying." The Other Dragon sat down, watching him warily. As if he were the dangerous one.

Grant poked at his arm. "Da!"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose that's your Da." He felt tight-lipped at having to admit that.

Jake's face transformed utterly, joy suffusing it. "That's it, buddy. I'm Da."

Grant squealed, legs kicking, and he lunged for Jake. "Da! Da da da!"

Samuel wanted to squeeze Grant close, but that wasn't nice, so...he handed the baby over.

“Hey, bud.” Jake grabbed Grant and swung him up, kind of tossing him in the air.

Grant’s laughter was huge and bright, almost visible in the air. He clearly loved the Other, and Jake was so in love with that baby. One could see it on his face, in every move he made while he held Grant.

It was a hard thing to admit, even to himself.

“Come on, have a seat.” Lars brought him over to a padded chair close by. “The toys are adorable. Very special. Would you like a cup of tea?”

No. What he wanted was to leave, to take the baby, and to go to Lars’s house and just enjoy him, but that wasn’t going to happen today. They would have to discuss all this in short order. But that wasn’t today. He needed to deal with Grant’s father.

That he wasn’t looking at.

Even if the baby didn’t have a father.

Except that wasn’t true, was it?

It sucked being fair.

“I would love a cup of tea, thank you.”

“You like lemon and one cube of sugar?”

Samuel grinned at Lars. He remembered. “Thank you.”

The Other actually growled.

He sat quietly. You don't have to be an asshole. I'm not mean. You're the one who was evil to me. So just shut up and be nice and leave me alone. I'm just here to see the baby. He's half ours.

The Other was staring at him, his eyes flashing. Grant is mine.

Samuel's head tilted. No one else had heard that. That was just him.

He'd heard of this. He'd read about this.

It happened—mental communication—but there had to be a connection, and there was no connection here. There would never be a connection between them.

He stared right back. You leave me alone .

The Other's eyes went wide and a little shocked.

He wasn't a stupid dragon. He'd spent his entire life surrounded with all of the information in the world.

And that was why his parents had sent him.

The thought surprised him, but it was true. He knew the rules; he knew about the laws; he knew what was possible and what was not possible.

And they had done this to him on purpose. Not because it was convenient for them, or because he was well-suited, but because they knew that he knew the rules.

Unfortunately for them, he also knew how to break them.

“Here's your tea, sweet pea. It will all be all right.”



He's not allowed to call you sweet pea.

Interesting. He didn't know if the Other knew that Samuel could hear him. Fascinating.

He turned a brilliant smile on Lars. "I appreciate all that you've done for me—letting me stay in your home, letting me stay in the wing. Bringing me to see the baby, even. I can't repay you for how kind you've been."

He can call me anything he wants to.

No. He's not—He's not for you. Those eyes went bright gold, the dragon right there on the surface suddenly.

Samuel crossed his arms over his chest. That's my decision, not yours.

A low growl did sound then, and Grant stopped giggling, looking at his father with big eyes, then reaching up to pat his cheeks in that way babies had when offering comfort.

Logan raised an eyebrow. "You okay there, Jake?"

"I'm fine," the Other ground out. "Just fine."

Liar.

The twins began to fuss, and he backed off, unwilling to upset the balance more than he already had.

If I'm lying, it's because how I feel that this is my business. No one has helped me with this. They're all afraid —Jake broke off, taking a deep breath and bouncing

Grant when he started to make that sound that meant he was going to start crying. It's been hard.

What were they afraid of? Which they?

He sipped his tea, trying to decide what to do. He had to admit, his curiosity was burning. I'm sorry it has been difficult. But you make yourself disagreeable.

A little smile crinkled up the Other's eyelids and one side of his mouth. Gee. Thanks. I'll keep that in mind.

See that you do. His hand only shook a little when he said it. He'd just told an alpha Guardian dragon off.

Gods help him.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

### Chapter

### Seven

Jake was on day three of trying to be...pleasant.

Nice might be a stretch too far, but every day, he was taking Grant to someone's house: Logan's, Bea's, Amber's. Not Lars's, because he'd still overstepped there and was being chastised silently for it, which, didn't that make him grit his teeth?

And every day, Samuel was there to see Grant, like he'd earned some kind of visitation rights by simply existing.

Jake had to admit that Samuel was great with Grant. Really good with him. And Grant adored him.

He was licking his wounds, and Jake knew he should get over it. He had shit to do. He had guardian business to take care of. His section of the wing was probably feeling neglected. But dammit, he was not about to leave Grant alone with Samuel and all these people who should have had his back and didn't.

He was the one who'd grown up in Oro Escondido. He was the one who'd served faithfully, first as Jason's assistant and then as a guardian.

So why was everyone yelling at him?

Jake sighed, smiling at Grant as he cooed when Jake put him in the SUV. "Going to

see Samuel, huh? I know you like that.”

“Da.” Grant made grabby fingers at him, and he leaned down to let his son pat his cheeks. He had a feeling when Grant did that he was trying to smooth out his frown lines, so he smiled harder.

“You, I adore.”

“Da-da-da-da.”

“That’s it, buddy. Sing for your Da.”

The snow was starting to thin out, so today, he was heading to meet Lars and Samuel out on the rim of the wing, out on the highway at the Golddigger Grill. Lars was wanting hamburgers, apparently.

Jake wasn’t going to even get into how he felt about being at Lars’s beck and call...

He pulled in at the restaurant’s little back lot, then pulled Grant out so he could go inside, diaper bag over his shoulder.

Lars was out there, waiting for him, which was weird. “Hey, it’s slick going right up here. Samuel even fell, so I just thought I’d warn you. I don’t want you to fall.”

The temptation to snap no? was huge, but he managed not to, because honestly, that was very kind of Lars to come out here and wait in the cold.

“Thanks, man, do you mind holding Grant for me while I get up there?”

“Sure, of course. Come here, lovely boy.” Lars took Grant from him and helped him off the slick slope. Then he handed the baby back without question. “Thanks for

indulging me,” Lars said. “I’m grindy. I need something decadent and bad for me.”

Jake wasn’t sure what to say to that. He wasn’t sure what to say to Lars about anything. Sometimes, he thought Lars wanted to make up. Sometimes, he thought Lars hated him.

And then there was that fucking Samuel guy.

His head was pounding.

“No problem, I like their pizzas here.” And Grant was getting used to going out—every day.

Jake thought he liked Logan’s house best because the other babies were there. The rest of them he was kind of indifferent to. He liked Jason’s house of course, because of the grandbaby.

But Grant and the twins had a special relationship.

They headed into the restaurant, the rush of heated air making him shiver a little bit, the snow on his pants and boots melting away. They wiped off their shoes and headed in where Samuel was waiting, the man wrapped in a huge coat.

Honestly, someone needed to outfit this guy. Those shoes were just not appropriate for wintertime.

Maybe Lars could do it.

Of course, that thought just made him growl even harder.

What was wrong with him?

Samuel lit up when he saw Grant. “Hello, little one!” Then he inclined his head at Jake. “Dragon.”

“Omega,” he acknowledged. Jake sat Grant’s carrier down, then shrugged out of his coat before unstrapping Grant, who waved his arms and called to Samuel.

“Am! Am!”

“Here I am,” Samuel said, picking up Grant.

“Eeeeeee.” Grant made the best noise, and Jake sighed. How could he be mad at that? Grant was so happy to see the guy.

“Well, look who’s out and about.” Lila came to hand out menus, her smile lighting up the room. “Hey, buddy,” she told Grant. “Such a handsome little one.”

Samuel beamed. “He is amazing, isn’t he?”

“Yep.” She raised an eyebrow at Jake, and he shook his head. Surely, she’d heard the gossip about how Samuel had come to take Grant, which he would fight tooth and nail. He would let people come and visit, of course. That was the letter of the law.

But no one was taking his son away.

Samuel had colored ribbons running through his hair today, and Grant was playing with them.

“Hello, this is Samuel de Lamar Samuel, Lila. Lila owns the grill here, and she makes the best hamburgers in the entire world. Samuel is Susan’s sister. And isn’t that a tongue twister?”

Samuel glanced at Lars, a smile playing around his mouth. “Well, it’s less of a tongue twister because Samuel is Susan’s brother. But Susan was my sister...”

“Right.” Lars winked at Samuel, and he wanted to just hit something. “Samuel is staying with me. We’re having the best time.”

“Oh, well, welcome. Susan was an amazing dragon. We miss her and Jolie every day.”

“She was amazing. I wish I’d gotten to meet Jolie. I would have welcomed her into our family.”

Jake doubted that very sincerely. Jake had heard Susan talk about the wing she’d come from—hidebound, conservative, absolutely unwilling and unable to change. Jolie would have hated it.

Grant curled into Samuel, just jabbering away. He’d be damned if it didn’t look like Samuel was listening. He knew it wasn’t true. There were very, very few, if any, words in that stream of nonsense, and none that were actually understandable. But it did seem as if Samuel was understanding.

“Samuel is a hot tea drinker, Lila. He’ll take Earl Grey with sugar and lemon, no cream. And I think I would like a Coke.”

It infuriated Jake that Lars knew all of these things about this dragon. It made him even madder that he was pissed, which in turn made him mad because he didn’t want to be angry, and it didn’t make any sense.

So what if Lars was into tiny, skinny, and silver? He wasn’t.

Samuel glanced up at him, the look oddly hurt, and then he glanced away, going back

to talking with Grant about goddess knew what.

“You said you were going to have the pizza,” Lars said after Lila left. “They have one that’s got jalapenos on it. That sounds really good, and if I hadn’t wanted a burger so badly, that’s what I would go for.”

“I can share. We can get a couple of different kinds,” Jake heard himself offering. Somehow he felt as if he had to make up for that pained expression Samuel had given him.

Samuel’s face brightened. “I would like that, thank you. That way I don’t have to—” He broke off, flushing.

“Commit, if you don’t like it?” Jake asked.

“Yes. Some of the chiles are too spicy for me.”

“Ammmmmm.” Grant grabbed Samuel’s chin.

“Yes, little one. Samuel. That’s me.” Samuel kissed Grant’s little grabby fingers.

That was...cute. Okay, it was cute. So what? Jake looked at the menu, which hadn’t changed in at least five years. He wasn’t one to hold onto being mad. So what was his deal here?

Fear.

He hadn’t known Susan was connected to a powerful dragon family. What if they really could take Grant away? It would kill him.

I don’t want to take him. I just want to love him too. He’s happy with you.



He blinked at Samuel. “Are you sure?”

Lars tilted his head. “Is he sure about what?”

“He says he doesn’t want to take Grant with him.” Jake never looked away from Samuel. “I mean, he’s your nephew too. Of course you can love him.”

Okay, stop being so mean . “Well, I’m glad we’ve come to an agreement. I’m not looking to take your son. I’m just here to be the other half of his family.”

“And what are you going to do when I have a mate?” Whoever he chose for an omega wasn’t going to know what to do with this little dragon.

Samuel seemed to get just the tiniest bit smaller, and he shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll still be his family, I’ll still be his Uncle Sam. It’ll still be okay.” What are you going to do when I find a mate here? When I am getting loved by an alpha and have a place here?

The idea of Samuel having a mate here stoked a fire deep inside him, and he rumbled even as Lars nodded. “We’re going to find him a house. I’m thinking in the wing close to the school. There are some very cute little apartments there.”

“And what are you going to do for money? Do you work?”

“Yes.” Now Samuel was angry. Jake could see it in his eyes. “I’m a librarian and archivist.”

“We have no need for anything like that. Here, we have Amber.”

“That’s different. That’s a store. We need something inside the wing.”

Jake shook his head, opened his mouth to speak, and Samuel interrupted him.

“Then I’ll find something else. Or not. Money is not one of my problems. Don’t worry, Guardian. I won’t sponge off your wing. I am not the enemy here. I have means.”

“But what are you going to do when you don’t bring the baby to your parental home?” How was Samuel going to stand up to his parents?

“Is that what you want? You say you don’t want Grant to go, but is that what you want?”

“No, no, I want you to go.” As soon as he said it, Jake knew it was a mistake. “That’s not what I meant.” He stopped and sighed for a second, trying to dig himself out of yet another hole. “I want this worry to go away. This is hard enough raising a child on your own. I don’t want to worry about whether or not you’re trying to steal him.”

“I’m not trying to steal him. That’s why I’m here. I’m going to inform my parents that it is in the child’s best interest to remain in this wing and that I will remain here and fulfill our duty for raising him half time.”

Samuel blew out a hard breath before continuing. “He’ll be here in the wing. You won’t have to worry about letting him go flying halfway across the country or what have you.”

“I don’t want him gone even part of the time. Not overnight. And I don’t know you yet.”

Samuel slammed his hand on the table, not enough to scare the baby, but just enough to make Jake pay attention. “What do you think I am doing here? I am trying to make it so that we are all used to one another. I have not asked you for anything. All I have

done is be here as it is our duty to be present. I am meeting you in neutral ground.”

“I didn’t—” he started.

“Stop.” Samuel shook his head. “I have not asked to have the child overnight. I haven’t asked to have Grant unaccompanied. I am making friends and I’m trying to be decent with you. I have moved my entire life here to this wing where I do not have a place and where no one obviously wants me, so that Susan’s child can know his other family. And yet you sit there and you judge me and dislike me and push at me.”

He hadn’t been given a choice, had he?

Have I? He swore that was Samuel’s voice.

“If you have a mate, then I will rejoice in your mating with you, and I will be at your wedding and I will help Grant learn to love your mate, I will keep Grant when you go on your honeymoon.”

Jake opened his mouth to speak, but Samuel refused to let him get a word in edgewise.

“I am not the enemy. I’m just trying to do what’s right. And I’m tired of you being mean to me. I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask for Susan to die. I didn’t even get to know she had a baby while she was still alive.”

“And don’t you wonder why?”

“Every motherfucking day,” Samuel hissed. “Every day, I wonder why she couldn’t have called me, even if she didn’t want to call them. I was a good brother. I never got to meet Jolie, but we spoke. We wrote letters. I don’t know why. But I do know that whatever happened, it wasn’t my fault. Have you ever wondered why she was

prevented from telling me?”

Jake blinked.

He hadn't.

He hadn't even thought about that.

What if she had written? What if she had tried to let Samuel know, and no one told Samuel. How awful that would be?

How awful it was .

“No.” He shook his head. “No, I hadn't thought of that. I'm sorry. That had to hurt very badly.”

“It did.” Samuel's eyes glimmered with tears. “We didn't know she was gone. We didn't know she had a son. What if we hadn't found out? I wouldn't have got to meet Grant. I wouldn't have had a chance to come here, meet you, Lars, everyone.” Samuel offered him a tiny grin. “Can we share pizza?”

“A couple of pizzas maybe, and burgers. Oh, let's get sliders.” Lars literally bounced. “We can get potato skins and jalapeno strips, two pizzas, and sliders.”

“And onion rings?” Samuel asked.

Jake rolled his eyes. “French fries, once they cool off. Grant would love it if we got French fries.”

“Then we absolutely have to have French fries,” Samuel agreed. “I'm not here to take away from your family. I just want to have a part of Grant's too. It doesn't have to be

bad.”

“No, no, of course it doesn’t. We’ll work this out after lunch.” Even if he didn’t want to.

Goddess, he didn’t want to. He wanted to just squeeze little Samuel until he squeaked.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Eight

“N o, mother, I’m fine.”

“No, I won’t be returning.”

“Yes, mother, only my things.”

“I have Grant here, and we’ll share time, father.”

“Father, all will be well. Grant is best served to be here.”

Samuel felt as if he was saying the same things over and over and over again.

No one was listening.

He sat in his very small apartment that was honestly just one large room, the loft of another building. It had a tiny fridge and a little kitchenette, a bathroom, and a place for a bed.

Some art and all his clothes, which sat in big boxes around the apartment, waiting for him to be able to do laundry and get a clothing press.

They hadn’t mailed him so much as a single book.

They'd also sent the big comfy chair that he had at his rooms in his old wing.

It was a good little apartment—clean and comfy, and it got lots of light.

He spent a lot of time watching out the windows when he wasn't walking around.

He'd had to return the car to Albuquerque, of course, and his parents were never going to send him a vehicle.

So he walked.

If it was very far, he flew. Luckily, no one noticed him. He was a cloud. He was a bolt of lightning. He was a gust of wind.

Samuel knew that the City Council was deciding whether or not they needed a library building or simply a place for books in the school.

He would be satisfied with a place in the school building, somewhere the children could get books easily and learn things.

He didn't push though. That wasn't his way. He just spent as much time as possible with Grant and wrote letters outlining the importance of a library.

That allowed Jake to do whatever it was he did as a guardian, which seemed to make the alpha pleased.

So he could hide away in his little apartment when he didn't have the baby.

Most of the dragons were kind of curious.

Samuel understood. He would be curious if he wasn't the one who was new, but he

was.

He was new, and this was incredibly unnerving.

Unlike his wing, though, this was a town. This felt to him like the towns he read about in books with many little buildings instead of a few big spaces. People had yards with flowers, and there were schools, little schoolhouses. Bakers and butchers, a candy store, and a place that sold vegetables from a cart.

It was all the things that seemed so odd when one lived in a space where there were cooks and housekeepers.

He loved the idea of these little nuclear families. It reminded him of television and stories. And it felt good.

Not all the time. Sometimes he could see things—places where older dragons were sad. Or where children in the schoolyard excluded one or the other. But, for the most part, it felt right.

Then there was this snow part of the Oro Escondido equation. That was very odd. The snow was huge. Just this vast, endless white that drifted up.

Every so often, he would go out in the middle of the night and fly, swooping through the new drifts, making signs and signals. Letting the snow sink into him and chill him, but make him laugh too.

A soft tapping came to his apartment door, startling him.

Who could it be?

He wasn't expecting to keep Grant today, but maybe it was Lars.



Samuel went to the door, feeling very small and nervous, telling himself it was probably just a wrong address.

Regardless, he opened the door and found a matched pair of elderly dragon ladies standing there. “I—Can I help you?”

“Most likely,” one of them creaked.

“But I imagine,” the other one said.

“That. We can?—”

“—help you more.”

The dragon on the left held up a wicker basket with a huge bow on the handle in her clawed hand. “We realized no one brought you?—”

“A welcome basket.”

“How rude.”

“Dragons today, they don’t know?—”

“—how to say hello.”

They offered him a pair of matching toothy smiles.

Right. “Won’t you please come in? Would you like a cup of tea?”

They floated in, settling on the sofa together. They were light purple, and they both reeked of age and ancient magic.

“That would be?—”

“A blessing.”

“Thank you.”

How dizzying. “I’m Samuel. It’s very nice to meet you both.”

“Anna.” Okay Anna was on the left, and on the right?

“Hannah.”

“We are twins.”

“We live downstairs.”

“You’re very quiet.”

“We like quiet neighbors.”

They spoke so fast—machine gun fire, one sentence coming out of one and ending in the other’s mouth. It was actually rather pleasant in the weirdest sort of way.

“I have pea flower tea, Earl Grey, and hibiscus.” He pulled out three mismatched mugs, glanced at the ladies, then put the mugs back and grabbed tea cups. They matched at least.

“Oh, pea flower please.”

“For both of us.”

“Two sugars.”

“Lemon.”

“No milk.”

He set the cups up, smiling at them nervously as they checked out the room. If they lived downstairs, they understood what the apartment looked like. Yet they seemed so curious. “I’m sorry for the sparseness of the room. I just moved in.”

“Do you have a baby?” Anna asked.

“Sometimes, yes. Susan—the dragon who was in the accident and who died?—she was my sister, so I came to help with the baby, Grant.”

Hannah tilted her head. “Jake’s son.”

“Yes, Jake’s son.” He wasn’t going to deny that little boy his father, whether it was biologically true or not.

“Why aren’t you staying with Jake then, if you’re going to be raising the child?”

Anna’s eyes flashed bright gold. “Hannah, you can’t ask that.”

“Of course I can. I just did.”

“It’s all right.” It wasn’t all right. “Jake and I are strangers to one another. It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to live there.” Also, he’s an asshole, a giant bleeding asshole. It was probably not fair to think, but it hurt Samuel’s feelings that Jake found him small and unattractive.

Even though he could hear Jake's thoughts, he didn't really want to. Every time they were turned toward him, they were filled with...disgust? At least frustration. None of them were very nice.

"Well," Anna said. "I'm sure that now that you're here full time, it will all work out quickly. It's a lovely house from what I understand."

Hannah rolled her silver eyes and snapped a bite of the air. "It's ridiculous. It's not how it's done. The child should live with both parents."

"You are an old fuddy-duddy." Anna rolled her eyes too. "Some of us are more progressive than others."

"Kind of," Hannah rumbled softly. "Spinster."

"Gecko," Anna shot back, and Hannah gasped.

"Did you hear what she called me?"

Oh goddess, please let this water boil faster. "Hmm? What did you bring in the basket?"

Please don't let it be a coiled serpent or poison gas or Turkish delight...

He would rather have poison gas.

"There's bread."

"And jam. Prickly pear and plum."

"And some carne seco."

“Oh, and pretzels. Anna makes them. Terrible shapes...”

He laughed. “I like pretzels.”

“Yes, dear. We know.”

That should send chills through him, but instead, a warm glow suffused him. He felt seen. “Well, thank you. That’s lovely.”

“Oh, and I made mustard to go on them. Homemade.” Anna laughed. “We won’t be neighbors long, but we wanted to say hello and thank you for filling the space for a bit.”

He blinked, but the kettle clicked off, which allowed him to avoid the strange turn in the conversation.

Pouring tea. Lalala.

He wasn’t sure what the ladies wanted, but he welcomed the company.

He was going to be here for a while after all. People were going to have to just get used to him, learn to like him. After all, librarians were very good at making themselves useful.

The ladies chattered, and they never did come to a point of any sort. They drank their tea. Gossiped about the wing. And when it came time for them to leave, he felt as though they had been there to size him up.

Samuel wondered what they had concluded.

“Have a good day, ladies,” he called from the doorway. “Be careful of the snow.”

Although, someone had come after every little dump of the white stuff and cleared the stairs and the walkways.

Samuel wasn't certain who. He was never awake early enough to see them.

He sighed, trying to choose between cleaning and reading a book.

Of course, the book won. What was there to clean once he washed the dishes?

Even though they'd been odd as ducks, he kind of missed the ladies already.

At least they'd been company.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Nine

“ Y ou need to go get him, Jake.”

“No.” The word fell out without any effort on his part.

Logan glanced over at him, sighing. They were on their way to flame the parking lot at city hall so the elders didn’t slip on the snow. “Buddy, if you gave him a couple of rooms, it could save you so much time. He could watch Grant, and you could get so much more done.”

“No.” The thought of Samuel in his house, getting under his skin even more than he did already made Jake want to just...roar.

“Jake, people are talking.”

“So?”

“So what the hell is wrong? He’s done everything right, but this kid needs you to accept him so the wing can.”

Jake blew out a breath. “He hates me, Logan.”

“How do you know he hates you? Hate is a very strong word. He’s just a little guy. Harmless.”

Harmless? He didn't think so. Not even close.

He'd seen the lightning hit the ground more than once when he'd said something that hurt Samuel's feelings or pissed him off or whatever. "He has an apartment. He can stay there. He doesn't even have a job."

"It's supposed to be watching Grant. You have a job." Logan snapped back. "A full-time job. An important job."

Jake knew that, but he wasn't having that silly little skinny dragon in his house. It was unthinkable. It just made him itch to think about it.

"I just don't get it, man. He's given his word that he'll stay. He's told his people. We've even had discussions with Susan's family acknowledging that Grant's time with their clan is being fulfilled. He gave up everything to come here and take care of Grant."

"Have you asked yourself why, even once? Have you wondered why he would give everything up to come here and be a babysitter? What did he give up if it was so easy to do it?" Jake could hear himself. He knew how mean he sounded, and he didn't understand it, but he did know that he didn't want Samuel to get too close. He knew that.

He shook his head. He knew that it meant drastic change.

"Well." Logan's voice held more than a touch of heat to it now. "I can tell you, without question, that he left his hoard behind. That they sent four boxes of clothing and two chairs, along with a couple of pieces of art. Now you tell me, if you are a librarian and you hoard books, how is it that you don't get a single book from your family? From your hoard." Logan slapped his hands together, the resulting sound sharp and loud. "Damn it, you have got to have more sense than this. You're not an



asshole, naturally. Why have you chosen this man to vent your spleen on?"

"Why do you care?" Jake snapped, then his shoulders slumped. That was part of it, wasn't it? He just wanted someone to care as much about him as they did this stranger.

But it was more than that. He could hear Samuel in his head. That was—momentous, and no one knew.

"Because I care about you and Grant, Jake. This is so unlike you. You're generous to a fault. You're kind and caring. You take people in. Why not him?"

"Because he'll completely change my life, and I'm not ready for that again."

Logan's gaze sharpened. "Well, now we're getting somewhere."

"I've had enough change for right now." At least Logan was listening to him, he thought. That was what it felt like, at any rate.

"All right, that's fair." Logan's brow furrowed, the big dragon obviously deep in thought. "So, what disturbs your current pattern the least right now? With the knowledge that you have to share time with Samuel. There's no way around that."

This invitation to snap, to say "just tell him to go away" was huge, but he didn't, because Logan was trying to be fair, and so should he. "What are our options?"

"You could do every other day. You could do twelve hours every day. You could do a week at a time."

"No. No, a week at a time is too much! Besides, he obviously isn't equipped to take care of a child. Not to mention, he is going to have to go to work as well." Jake

frowned. “Why on earth did they not send him his things?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say to punish him, because he didn’t just take the baby and leave. He could have said that you’d had him for a year, they got him for a year.”

“Oh. Well, that doesn’t have anything to do with me.” Who was he? He wasn’t this way. Logan was right. This was so...fucking mean.

“Who else would it have to do with exactly? Besides you and Grant, I mean. He’d be better off going home where his things are, where his job is, where his life was. Obviously, he didn’t want to take Grant away from you.”

“Okay. That’s—” He sighed, then stopped pacing his kitchen and sat. “I don’t know what to do. I’m not... I feel totally out of whack. I itch. I ache in my chest. I miss Jolie. She would be able to tell me what to do.”

Logan stared at him for a long moment. Then he nodded. “I get that. What happened was awful. But don’t make it worse. Don’t take it out on Samuel. And Grant, really, who adores him.”

Jake took a deep breath and thought of Susan, of how she smiled at his sister. At how she’d accepted him wholeheartedly. And he growled. “Fine. I’ll fix it.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “You will, huh?”

“Yes.” He would make it right. He didn’t want to be this guy. He wasn’t this guy, dammit, and just because Samuel made him nuts for some reason, that didn’t negate that he’d loved his sister, had adored his sister-in-law, and he wanted Grant to know that, if nothing else.

“Okay, cool. I’ll let you. And if you need me, you holler, okay? I’m on both your

sides. Not one or the other.”

“Sure but Lars is on his side.”

Logan broke out laughing. “I imagine so.”

Jake actually cracked a grin. “Well, he’s always been a jerk.”

“Yes. Yes, he has.” Logan stood, then clapped him on the back. “Go forth and deal.”

“Yep.” He had a plan. It might not be a good one. But it was all he had.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Ten

The knock came just as Samuel folded the last of his clothes away into his dresser. The ladies downstairs had given it to him when he'd still had boxes sitting around for their second, he assumed daily, visit.

This time, they'd brought a little dog that looked like a Muppet.

He frowned. Now what?

When he opened the door, he was met with a rush of frigid air, and he was brushed aside by a large man. Who wasn't Logan or Lars.

"Okay, get packed."

He gaped at the Other, who stood in his apartment, taking up far too much space.

"What? No, I will not." This was his apartment. The Other couldn't just throw him out of his own apartment. This was his place. Lars had assured him that this was his for as long as he wanted it.

"What? Did you say?" Jake scowled at him.

"I said no, and unless you're here to do a visitation, get out." He was not going to cry. He was not. He might zap this son of a bitch out of existence.

Oh, that was a very angry thought.

He huffed out a breath and electricity sparked.

“I’m trying.” Jake looked around. “Logan said your stuff was in boxes.”

“I just got it unpacked.”

“Well, we’ll pack it up later.” Jake grabbed the two pieces of art he had yet to hang.

“Come on.”

“I said no!”

“Look, I can’t leave Grant sitting in the truck, no matter how warm it is.” Jake set down the art, then picked him up like a sack of potatoes. “Your books are on their way to my place.”

“What are you doing? Why is the baby in the truck? Why are you carrying me? I just put my clothes away!” He was very confused.

“I didn’t have anyone to watch Grant.” Jake changed directions. “You really should pack a bag. I might not get back today to get your clothes. The chairs are yours, right?”

“Yes. You have to watch the baby. Please.”

“Promise you’ll come right back down?”

“I swear. Go be with Grant.”

“Okay. We’ll wait for you in the truck.” Jake went up with him and grabbed a chair,

then and headed out the door.

“That—that’s my chair...” He was very confused. Very. He grabbed his suitcase and put some clothes in it, feeling conflicted as hell.

He thought about calling Lars, but if he waited too long, Jake might come looking for him and leave Grant in the truck again. Which, okay, who was going to steal him in Oro Escondido? Hannah and Anna? But still.

He went down the stairs, his suitcase and phone in hand. He hoped Jake was still here, and hadn’t stolen his chair.

“Do you want your other chair today?” Jake asked as soon as he walked outside.

“Um—”

“You watch Grant. I’ll get it.” Jake trotted back upstairs.

Grant squealed at him. “Ammu.”

“Oh, my Grant.” He opened the back door and tickled that sweet belly. “I do love that snowsuit. Are you the best boy?”

“Ammu! Ammu!”

“That’s right, baby. I am your Ammu.”

Grant kicked and danced, just so joyful.

A thud sounded as his other chair landed with surprising gentleness in the back of the truck. “Let’s roll. It’s not supposed to snow, but I don’t want to have to tarp anything.

I locked up.”

“Ah, Jake, dear. Finally taking Samuel home?—”

“—are you?”

The twins peered out their door at them.

“Yes, ma’ams. Have a good one.” Jake steered him to the passenger side and shut him and Grant in safely. He hopped into the driver’s side, then gave Samuel a sideways grin. “If you let them, they’ll corner you like a rat trapped on a sinking ship.”

“Every day. Yes. They’re very...focused.” He turned to look at Jake. “What’s going on?”

“You’re coming to stay at my place.” Jake got them moving, eyes on the road. Which, to be fair, was fairly snowy.

“I—I am? Why? Is there something wrong?” Had something terrible happened?

“No. I mean, no more so than you having an apartment when I need you close to help take care of Grant.”

The change of attitude was...dizzying. Samuel had no idea what to make of it.

And he didn’t know what that meant exactly—he wasn’t a babysitter. He was...family.

“And I called your family to get your books.” Now Jake’s voice hardened. “What the hell, Samuel? They were fucking awful. I had to threaten them with showing up and

demanding my tribute for Grant just to get them to send stuff. I want you to count every fucking book. If you don't get all your stuff, I will go shake their asses down."

Samuel stared at Jake. "I—You got my books? You mean it?"

His heart was beating so fast. Oh, thank you. Please. Thank you so much.

"Yes. You're welcome. And I can absolutely see why you left that place. Your father is a dick." Jake really seemed mad. But for him, not just at his father.

"Yes. They both are. You got my books, though." He began to cry, trying to keep it silent. "I can't believe it."

"I did. And a few other things that your mom said you would want. That kept me from going and taking your share as well as Susan's." Jake gave him another grin, the friendliest look he'd ever seen on the man's face.

If Jake didn't ever do anything else but this, it would be enough. It was more than anyone else had ever done. Samuel just didn't know what to say so he went with, "Thank you."

"We'll go tomorrow, and we'll get the rest of your things. And if there's anything you need, all you have to do is let us know."

"Us?"

"Right. Me. You can let me know. This is going to be your home now, and you should be comfortable. There's plenty of room, and it's comfortable and safe and close. We're on the outskirts. There's plenty of room to fly. I hear that you like to fly a lot."



He nodded. He really did. He hadn't been able to just easily go out and about for a long time, but he enjoyed it.

"So you...create electricity?" Jake asked.

He thought Jake was trying to be friendly. It was strange, but it was better than the constant anger.

"No. No, weather. Wind, lightning, that sort of thing."

"Oh. So you and Susan did the same thing?"

He nodded. It had been that way with all of his mother's descendants; she bred true. "I assume that Grant will as well."

"I don't know because he hasn't shown any sort of inclination."

"He's awfully young."

"I don't know, I... I haven't seen anything."

The worry in Jake's voice made Samuel trill softly, offering comfort. "I think everyone's different."

In all of the thousands of tomes of dragon affinities he'd read, no one could come to any kind of logical conclusion about how dragons got their affinities or when they came into their power. It happened when it happened. "I guess sometimes the hardest thing is waiting to see."

"Ammu!" The baby called, making Samuel smile.

“Grant!”

“Ammu Ammu Dada!”

The happy little song soothed his soul. “Yes, dear, you’re being very patient. We’ll be back to your house soon, okay? Then we’ll go in, we’ll have a bottle, and we’ll play for a little while.”

The little one crowed, arms and legs kicking wildly.

“He likes you.”

Samuel shrugged. “I love him. He’s family.”

“Were you very close to your sister?”

“When we were young, yes. And then? Schooling happened. Life happened, and she left to explore the world, and I didn’t. Everyone was put out.”

“Ah. And you went into your library?”

“I did.” It had been the one thing he was proud of. “I—I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re not.” Jake said it firmly. “Look, I had to have an attitude adjustment, okay? I admit it. I was an ass. I’m sorry. But Grant needs his family, and we can help each other, right? And I have room for your home library. What you do with the public one is up to you.”

“I accept your apology. Thank you.”

He didn’t know how long this change of heart would last, but it didn’t matter. Once

he got his books here, they'd be in the wing, and from there, he could do anything if he had to. And if Jake meant it, all the better.

They drove out of the wing proper, leaving the town, at least that's what it seemed like. It wasn't what it felt like.

In fact, it felt like the farther they drove, the heavier the magic was. Much like going to Lars's house. Made sense, he supposed, because Jake was a guardian, and this was the line of defense from the rest of the world.

"I haven't seen your house. What's it like?"

"Big. It's big. It's wooden. It's... It's kind of like a bachelor pad, I have to be honest. Lots of big rooms. Not a whole lot of art or anything on the walls. It's sort of like a big man cave."

"Well, that bodes well for Grant. He'll have plenty of room." He was totally not a man cave kind of dragon, but he could put things up in his area and make it nice. "What's your favorite part of the house?"

"The media room. I can watch movies, there's chairs that recline, and they have cupholders. Big-screen. I play video games in there sometimes. It's very comfy." Jake waved a hand, his enthusiasm plain.

"Oh, that does sound fun. I had a friend in my former wing that had one of those, and it was very, very nice to have parties."

"I can't imagine you at a party."

Samuel blinked. "No? Well. I've been to some." Maybe not dozens, but he'd been to quite a few, especially formal ones. Of course, he didn't count those. He was talking

about friends.

“Do you miss them?”

“Parties?” What a weird question.

“No.” Jake chuckled. “Your family, your wing.”

“No, all of my friends have gone, had families. Mates. They have lives all their own.”

“Well, now you do too. You have a life all of your own. You have a family and a home. And we’re going to learn how to get along together.” Jake nodded like he had made some kind of decision. “We’re going to have a good life. You have a whole set of rooms. This is me. Us.”

They drove up to this place that Samuel swore looked like a bunch of building blocks had kind of been tossed together. There were sunken levels and windows and floors and angles, and something that he was certain was a tree house, he thought, sitting right on the top.

It was lit up, and it was warm and inviting and absolutely not what he expected. “It looks like a giant threw toys down. It’s so pretty.”

“Thanks. I really like the Lincoln Log look, and it has all sorts of nooks and crannies. And the tower you can fly from.”

An enormous porch wrapped around the house, hammocks and swings and lounges strewn around. A deck wrapped around the second level, too, with comfy spots to sit and eat or watch the sun and moon. Or a good storm. There really was a tower, and it had huge windows where a dragon could keep their clothes dry when they wanted to take off...

“I can’t imagine a more wonderful house,” Samuel said.

He felt, literally felt, warmth emanate from Jake. “Thanks. Okay. Come on in, and you can get Grant that bottle while I move your chairs in.”

“I can do that.” He really could. He figured kitchens were kitchens were kitchens, right?

Samuel unbuckled Grant out of the car seat, chuckling as the baby cooed and laughed and kicked, so happy to see him.

He got them in the front door and then put Grant down in order to strip off his snowsuit. Little bit was dressed in the cutest sweatsuit ever, with a great big dinosaur on the T-shirt and on the butt of the pants. It was adorable. Not as adorable as his nephew, of course, but it was sweet nonetheless.

The mudroom led to a lovely great room with a huge fireplace and lots of places to lounge about. The kitchen was off to the left and, Samuel was right, a kitchen was a kitchen was a kitchen.

This one was lovely. It reminded him a lot of the one in his parents’ house, and he could totally make a bottle in it.

So he put Samuel down, keeping an eye on the little boy as he made up a bottle.

By the time he’d done that, Jake was in, carrying his two comfy chairs like they weighed nothing. “Do you want them both upstairs, or do you want one down here? Or maybe you want them both down here?”

Like he knew. He hadn’t even seen anything.

Samuel shrugged. “Why don’t you just leave them there for right now, and then I’ll make a decision? I... I don’t know how to make a decision without seeing everything, and Grant needs his bottle. I promised him a little play, too. Is his bedroom up with ours?” He almost swallowed his tongue. “I mean yours and mine. Not ours.”

Jake chuckled. “It’s cool, I understand. That’s fine. I’ll show you the rooms as soon as the baby goes down. We’ll have to take him upstairs anyway.”

Jake put the chairs down by the stairway and headed in. “The house is really straightforward. You have a sitting room and a bedroom on one side, I have one on the other side, and Grant has one in the middle.”

“A sitting room?” he teased.

“Well, his is going to be a playroom, I imagine, but maybe he’s going to be the most grown-up baby in the history of babies, and maybe he’ll just go from bottle to boardroom.”

That cracked Samuel up, and he found himself laughing, not just a polite chuckle, but like full-out deep in his gut laughing.

“Yeah. I know. I think about things too much.” Jake grinned at little Grant. “I just love him so much.”

“Of course you do. He’s your son.” And that was obvious.

“Yes.” Jake cleared his throat. “Are you hungry? I have a take-and-bake pizza we can share.”

“I’d like that. If you don’t mind sharing. I love pizza.”

“I don’t mind at all. Is sausage and onion all right? I can add stuff...” Jake trailed off, looking doubtful.

“I love sausage and onion. I’m not a picky eater. Not at all.”

“That’s good. Things get catch-as-catch-can around here when Grant gets fussy.”

“I have cookbooks...” he offered.

“Yeah?” Jake chuckled. “But can you use them? I mean, I burn meat. That’s about it.”

Oh, he liked meat, which so many people didn’t believe. But it was hardly grilling season. “I’m sure I can cook if I put my mind to it. I lived where I just had to choose from a menu and have it sent to my rooms, sad to say.” But he liked the idea of learning to cook. With Jake.

“Well, we could both try.”

“Sure. I’d go for it with you.”

Jake glanced at him, and he tried his best to stay relaxed and easy in his skin.

Grant made a bahbahbah sort of noise, and he realized he needed to do all the feeding and things. Playing. Bathing.

“Oh my gosh! Did I forget you? No!” He laughed and grabbed Grant up, dancing Grant about before giving him a bottle.

Grant sucked hard, his little body having used a lot of energy.

So hungry.

He jumped, staring down at Grant. He'd heard that more as an idea than as words, but he'd heard it all the same. "Are you? Well, baby, I have you. We'll fill your tummy right up."

"Did you hear him?" Jake asked, giving him a shrewd look. "I do too. Everyone tells me he's too young, but I know I hear him."

"He wanted me to know he was hungry. It was clear as a bell."

"Ah, yes. Hunger seems to be the great motivator." Jake moved to the fridge to pull out a pizza box. "Speaking of, let me bake this off. That way it will be ready by the time he's changed and sleepy."

"Sure." He cuddled with the baby, singing softly, letting the song go on and on.

Grant slowed finally, then burped on his own and went boneless. Oh, someone was so tired. Samuel went to change him from the diaper bag by the door. Jake would have to show him where everything was. But Grant could doze as he was until after they ate.

He was surprised how quickly Jake had gone from the Other to someone who was...kind. Easy.

Daddy.

That's right. He's your daddy.

He watched Jake as he rocked and walked with Grant. He was a rather fine figure of an alpha. Now that Samuel allowed himself to look. Clearly stubborn, but he'd gone



to Samuel's family and demanded his things, and that amazed him.

No one ever did anything like that for him. No one ever had.

So that had raised Jake a lot in his estimation.

Jake slanted him an ironic glance. "You think loud."

He flushed hot. "Sorry. But you were mean."

"I was. I admit it. I'm not that way, though. For real."

"I'm not either. I'm just a bookworm. I love reading and organizing and sharing information."

"Well, the town archives could use your help. And the school and community library is yours for the picking."

"Oh, have they decided to keep a separate building?"

"For the town, you mean? Yes. They say it needs to be open three days a week, at least."

"Oh my. I'll be very busy then." He rocked Grant, smiling down at the baby. "You and I will learn so many new things together."

"He's such a sweetie, huh?" He half expected to hear animosity back in Jake's voice, maybe jealousy, but he just didn't. Jake sounded happy to have him here.

"He's beautiful. Very good-natured." He looked at Grant right in that stunning little baby face. He wasn't sure if he wanted the baby to resemble Susan more or less. He

just didn't know.

Whatever made the pain smaller.

"I loved her very much, you know," Jake offered. "She fit right in. Everyone liked her."

"What about her mate? Did she love her?" Did someone think she was the most important being in the universe?

"Absolutely. No question there. Jolie adored her on sight."

"Good. Good." His eyes filled with tears, and he sighed a little bit. "I wish I'd come with her."

"My mother says if wishes were fishes, we'd all swim away."

Samuel chuckled softly. "My nurse, the one who raised me? She would say if horses were wishes, you'd all ride off into the sunset."

"Yeah? I guess we're all part of the same family." Jake was trying. The house was warm, the pizza smelled good, and Samuel had a cuddly baby in his arms.

It could be far worse.

Chapter

Eleven

Jake felt like his bad mood had finally broken.

Which was amazing, because he'd sure been sick of growling and snarling at everyone.

He got up the morning after bringing Samuel home—to his house—and made coffee, then stood at the kitchen window, watching it snow.

Again.

He wondered if the wild weather was due to Samuel. He was a weather talent, after all. Right? Maybe his nerves were—Hell, he had no idea. Maybe it was just going to be a good year for the drought relief.

Maybe he would make pancakes.

Grant began crying restlessly in his crib, and Jake started to go to him when he heard the crying stop and then the happy sound of, “Ammu Ammu!”

Oh, that was a pleasant sound—that little cry of enjoyment and excitement. Someone did love his Ammu.

He wasn't sure if Samuel drank coffee or not. In fact, the things that he didn't know

about Samuel were sort of vast.

Jake knew Samuel liked spicy food. He knew that he liked pizza. He knew that he loved Grant and books. That was really it.

That was basically his entirety of knowledge about the man he was now living with. Honestly, he should do something about that.

Samuel came down the stairs, his long, snowy hair in a messy braid. He carried the wriggling Grant in his arms, and they were dressed remarkably the same—in big fuzzy pants, fuzzy socks, and a huge sweatshirt each. Grant was gonna smother.

“Say good morning to your dad, Grant,” Samuel said.

“Da da.” Grant wiggled and struggled to get down, so Samuel put him down on his feet and he ran over, grabbing Jake’s leg. “Da da da da da da da da. Ba. Ba. Ba ba ba ba ba. Ammu!”

“Well, that was clear.”

“Someone’s hungry.” Samuel had paid good attention because he went right to the cabinet where the bottles were and began to fix one up, not even having to ask any questions about where things lived. It was actually impressive.

“Good morning,” Jake said. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Good morning to you and yes, please, if you don’t mind. My rooms are beautiful. Thank you. The view of the moon was absolutely spectacular.”

It had been a huge full moon last night. His bedroom had windows to the east as well. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Light and sweet, please.” Samuel assembled the bottle, and Grant, finally figuring out what he was doing, tried to climb up his leg, dragging his pants almost down and off. “Grant, sweetie. I don’t think that your dad wants to see my backside.”

Well, that was the first thing that Samuel had gotten wrong this morning because the peek he’d just gotten was sort of breathtaking. Wow.

Samuel handed Grant the bottle and dragged the pajama pants back up over the pert little round ass that was going to give Jake palpitations.

He got busy making coffee. “What’s your position on pancakes?”

“There’s a position? I mean...they’re fluffy and yummy and come with butter and syrup. There’s no bad there. Sometimes, they come with spicy meat. Also good.”

“Excellent. I’m craving pancakes. I’ll make them.” He grinned, grabbing eggs and heavy cream out of the fridge. He used pancake mix unashamedly. Oh, he needed sausage too. Spicy meat and all. He would warm the syrup up when everything was ready. He was going to do this and not mess it up. Surely he could make pancakes.

“Yum.” Samuel gave him this warm look that he felt all the way down to his toes. “It’s very pleasant to have someone to breakfast with, and to have Grant. Thank you.”

“Like I said, I was being an ass.” Now he felt as if a bubble had popped and he was back to being himself.

“Well, yes, but I suppose if it were my job to protect Grant like you do, I might feel the same way.”

Hey, that was the first time Samuel had unbent enough to give him some slack there, and he would take it.

“Thanks.” He cut the sausage off the log of meat, then plopped the slices in a pan he’d warmed up so it could cook while he mixed up pancakes. “I’m still so new to both dad stuff and guardian stuff that it keeps me up at night sometimes.”

“It’s gotta suck. They say you haven’t been a guardian for very long...”

Jake shook his head. “No, I’m the newest.”

“And Lars said that soon after you were promoted, Grant came to you. Very soon after that.” He got a sympathetic look. “That had to have been very hard... I mean, one of those things is very hard. And it wasn’t just one thing, right? You had to learn how to be a guardian. You had to move house. You had to take a new position in the wing. Your sister died, and your sister-in-law died, and you became a new father of an infant, which you didn’t expect and didn’t have nine months to prepare for. That’s a lot of hard things. In a row.”

It was as if Samuel actually got it when no one else did. Like Samuel actually saw that this was awful.

And wonderful.

But it was a lot no matter what.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to make it through the days then. I’m not one hundred percent sure now.”

“That I can understand. I’ve been here a few weeks, and I’m not one hundred percent sure where I fit in.” Samuel offered him a little half grin. “So do you have another job? I know that Logan has to go away for business, and I know that Lars does...something. It’s all very amorphous.”

“Most of our wealth is in our hoards, of course, just like everyone else. Logan has a number of going interests. Lars, I think, is mostly just searching for new things for his hoard and calling it work.”

That seemed both fair and reasonable for him to say. Everyone knew Lars wasn't actually working, but the man did have amazing adventures and managed to find a lot of things on his travels.

“Ah.” Samuel nodded. “Lars is a force of nature. He adores you, you know.”

“Yeah, like a sibling you want to whack in the face.” He grinned. “I love Lars, but we butt heads.”

“I can understand that. He's very different from you.”

What did that mean?

“Well, he is particular, very...not fussy, but he does appreciate having things a certain way, whereas you seem to be a bit more rustic.”

“I am. I do a lot of hand work. I like to chop my own wood. I'm just...a guy.” He sighed. Way to recommend himself to someone. Which was a weird thing to think, because was he recommending himself to Samuel? The thought stirred something in his gut. And below it.

Samuel grinned at him. “Exactly! You are very much a guy. I imagine Lars worries you'll think he's rather floofy.”

“He is. I adore him.” He tilted his head. “What do you think of Lars?” He wanted to know where Samuel's interest lay.

“He’s super fun and so very kind. He is an amazing friend. It’s so nice to have a fellow omega to hang out with.”

Jake blinked. “Lars is a guardian.”

“Mmmhmm.” Samuel put Grant to his shoulder to burp him.

“Guardians aren’t omegas. I mean, I know Lars is kinda fussy…”

“It’s a family job, isn’t it?”

“Guardian? I mean, Lars and Logan are family, but if that was the case for all of us, Bea and I would be right out.” Jake snorted softly. “And Jason isn’t related to anyone.”

“Ah. In my keep, it’s all family.” Samuel did seem a bit confused, though.

“So omegas are guardians?” That seemed… Omegas were generally smaller. Gentler.

“Absolutely. Like Lars. Guarding can be a growing sort of thing…”

“It can. But I don’t think Lars…” Well, whatever. If Samuel thought Lars was an omega, so be it. He would tell Logan, though, because that was an odd assumption, Jake thought. “I have to run into the wing today. Want to go see the library?”

“Absolutely!” There was a happy warmth in Samuel’s eyes now.

Jake poured pancake batter into the pan. “Don’t get too excited. It’s not much.”

“That’s okay. I’m ready to get started. I want to combine the public and school collections and make something the whole wing can use. Lars says there needs to be



so many more books. I want to catalog everything and get started ordering.”

“What’s your favorite thing to read?” He was so curious about Samuel now, so interested in his likes and dislikes.

“What do I like to read or what do I like to collect? Those are two very, very different questions. And what I like and what I do are also another set of two different questions.” Samuel gave a self-deprecating little laugh.

“Okay, give me both.”

“I mean, if I’m just going to be lazy and read for pure pleasure? I like romances. Also murder mysteries, but cozy ones, not scary ones. I spent an enormous amount of time collecting history and science books. Different philosophical texts from every given time. And dragon books. There are just not enough books out there about us. Especially children’s books. Children deserve to read. All sorts of things from all sorts of universes. So I’m very committed to a very solid children’s section.”

That was probably the most words he’d ever heard out of Samuel, and Jake found that he really liked it.

“What about you? What do you like to read?” Samuel asked.

“I haven’t really thought about it. I mean, I do know how, and I do read for pleasure, but a lot of times, I do audiobooks because I can do my craft while I’m doing my reading. I know that’s probably not the same.”

He didn’t know why he felt weird saying it.

“Why not? Words are words are words. We’re going to start Grant here on the written word simply because we want him to develop that part of his brain. But when he

grows up, he can do it as he will. The important part is that he learned to love the story.”

“I can see that.” He told Grant stories all the time.

“Yes, little love.” Grant held his arms up and Samuel lifted him to kiss his cheek. “Don’t the pancakes smell lovely? Yes, and the sausage is yummy. It’s so rare to get it.”

Rare? Jake cast Samuel an astonished glance. “Why on earth would it be rare?”

Samuel shrugged. “We just weren’t allowed it often. I imagine Mother thought it was déclassé or too fatty or not fishy enough or something? Fish was very big with my family.”

“Ohh. Do you like fish?” He went trout fishing now and again.

“Sure, just not for every meal. And really not for breakfast. I like to eat. And I’m going to learn to like to cook. I hope.”

Jake laughed, because there was something remarkably charming about Samuel today. Something gentle and kind and funny.

“Well, today we’ll go and retrieve the rest of your things. So that you can be home for good. I hope that’s all right.”

“Yes.” Samuel’s cheeks went pink.

“Also, you’ll need to look at some bookshelves. Because your hoard is coming.”

Samuel just beamed, nodding enthusiastically.

“Then if you want, we can go to the bookstore, pick out a few books for Grant. And a couple for us and have a coffee in the coffee shop.”

“Together. I would love that. I mean, yes, of course.” Samuel’s blush went darker. “I know I must seem like such an idiot, but this is very exciting. My own rooms. Beautiful home. You. The baby. Friends. A library and my hoard. It’s almost too good to be true.”

Then Samuel sobered. “I would give it all back for Susan to be here. For Susan and Jolie to be here together with Grant. I would go back in a second.”

“I believe you. But that’s not going to happen. So we have to work with what we have and make our lives good and Grant’s life amazing. Fair?”

“That’s more than fair. I just didn’t want you to think—At all.” Samuel shook his head, looking a little green around the gills. “That I would ever wish.”

“Of course not. None of us would ever wish this on anyone. And if they did? Well, we would not allow them in the wing.” No way, no day. No one that selfish need apply.

Samuel nodded, wiping the tear from his cheek. “Yes. Yes. Of course. Turn over your pancake. It’s burning.”

“Shit.” He winced, because Grant immediately started singing.

“Shi-shi-shi-it-it-it!”

“Whoops.” Samuel danced him around. “It’s okay. We need some fruit, hmm? Let’s see what there is.”

“There’s some canned peaches?”

“Peaches will work.” Samuel started singing something about peaches and distracted the baby, making him laugh and giggle as he moved toward the pantry.

It was a bit of a mess really. Jake just threw cans in, and it was sort of random. He could almost feel Samuel clicking his teeth.

Someone needed things in order.

He understood, but he just didn’t have that urge to clean shit. With Grant, it was more about just keeping his head above water.

Maybe Samuel would help with that. He sure hoped so.

That was part of them making each other’s lives better.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Twelve

Honestly, Samuel wasn't sure how Jake managed to do anything.

It wasn't that the house was dirty. It was not. It was clean. But nothing was in order.

Nothing.

Not anything.

He started with the pantry, carefully organizing cans by date and by type and making sure that the pasta all stayed where the pasta belonged, and everything was nice.

Then he went searching for the spice cabinets. Jake absolutely didn't have a lot of spices, but the ones he had were just in a drawer, not even in a cabinet. They called it a spice cabinet for a reason, but that was fine.

Samuel organized those, and the silverware and glasses, and then he started to work on the baby's room.

He made certain the baby's toys and books were all put into a semblance of order in a way that the baby could play and enjoy everything.

Then he went hunting for Jake's bookshelves. He knew the man had to have some. He hadn't seen any yet, but that didn't mean anything.

He knew at the bottom of his soul that every house had bookcases. Some people just chose not to decorate with books, which seemed strange, but he had to give acknowledgement to the fact that Jake had moved recently, and he had a baby.

“No babbie.”

“Right. You’re a big boy.” Who really wasn’t a baby anymore. Grant was a toddler.

And none of that changed the fact that Samuel needed books.

He looked at Grant, who looked back at him. “Do you know where your daddy’s bookshelves are?”

Grant stared at him.

“You know, books? Do you know what books are? Where the books are?”

Grant toddled right over to his bookshelf with all of his baby books and pulled three or four of them out, two fisting it.

“Yes, yes, very good. Those are books. Those are your books. Where are your daddy’s books?” He held his breath, hoping Grant knew.

Jake had promised that Samuel’s books were coming. He had also promised that there were going to be bookshelves.

That was apparently what Jake was doing right now in the basement workshop room thing. Jake was making bookshelves like the ones he’s shown him online, but Samuel’s books were not here yet, nor were his bookshelves so...

He needed to touch books.

Grant grabbed his hand and took him down the hall toward Jake's bedroom.

Oh, he wasn't sure he was supposed to be in there.

But what if that is where the books were?

But he was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to be in there.

Grant kept pulling.

"Are the books in here?"

Grant pushed at the door, which swung open, and indeed, there were books and clothes and an unmade bed and...

"Oh dear. Oh dear." He shouldn't be in here, he really shouldn't be, but the books were all in a jumble.

Samuel decided right then and there if he found a single dog-eared book, he was going to go downstairs and spank Jake with a shovel.

"I'm sure, without question, that this room is not safe for you, Grant. There are too many things everywhere, so come, and when you have your nap, I'll go deal with the books."

His hands positively itched to get them off the floor. Jake had said he wasn't much of a reader, but there was a sizeable collection of tomes. And he wanted to explore them.

"Oook!"

"You want to read a book?" Oh, that would solve both his and Grant's urges. "Let's

go pick one and sit to have a read, hmm?”

He'd visited the bookstore and the library space with Jake a few days ago and had brought home a few new books for Grant. Time to break one out.

“I foresee many hours spent sitting and reading together while your daddy carves his weird little wooden animals at night, sweet one.”

“Aminal.”

“That's right! Should we read a book about animals? Maybe about bears? There are caterpillars too. Fish. Birds?”

Grant made a roaring noise and toddled over, grabbed a stuffed penguin out of his toy box and flung it right at Samuel.

“Penguins it is. There's got to be a book in here about penguins.” He found the book in question, and they sat in the big rocking chair, Grant holding his stuffed penguin, beginning to blink slow, with Samuel reading along.

When Grant finally slipped into real sleep, he rose and gently placed him in his little bed with the rails. So cute, his little brow still furrowed with concentration, and his penguin tucked against his chest.

Then Samuel headed back to Jake's bedroom as if the books were calling his name.

They needed care. Poor little books. He hummed and gathered them up, putting them in stacks by genre.

Jake liked mystery and suspense. History. Philosophy of the pop culture kind. Motorcycle maintaining and all that. He had books on birds, one of which was a



lovely hand-bound volume with watercolor paintings.

Samuel sat down hard. “Susan. Oh, Susan, you did these.”

He went through page after page, sobbing, hands under his cheeks to keep teardrops from falling and smudging the pages.

They were beautiful, and they were happy. Filled with beautiful plumage and bright little button eyes and the joy of flight.

Susan had loved nothing better than flying. Possibly not even her son.

After all, she’d sacrificed her life to it.

At the very end of the book, there was a drawing slipped in, and it was a sketch of newborn, little Grant. He had been tiny and held in what had to be Jake’s sister’s arms.

Samuel wanted to wail, to scream, but he couldn’t.

Grant was asleep.

There was a part of him that recognized the irony of this whole situation, of the need to scream, to wail and tear at his clothes, and throw things with the knowledge that the baby was sleeping and books needed stacking and soon there would be supper and a fire and another book.

And tomorrow would come, and Susan would still be dead, and he would still be alive.

And so would Grant.

It seemed to him that was a lot for one dragon body to hold in.

He put the drawing back in where it had been and closed the book so he could set it to one side.

He wanted to speak to Jake about this one and ask if they couldn't put some acid-free paper in between the pages. Possibly give it a place of honor somewhere where it could be cared for, because this was truly one of a kind.

One day, he assumed, it would be Grant's.

Of course it wasn't his. It was Jake's, and he would respect Jake's wishes.

Possibly.

He was going to talk very hard though.

It was there that Jake found him—sitting on the floor, sorting books, drying his tears.

Sorting books took a very long time because he had to stop and look at each one as he went so that he knew how to organize them, of course.

“Hey.” Jake raised an eyebrow at him sitting there, surrounded by stacks of fiction and nonfiction and photo books. “You okay?”

“I'm not sure. I'm sorry I snooped, but I found Susan's bird book.”

“Oh, shit. I meant to show you that a few days ago, but I couldn't find it. You should put it in your hoard.”

“Really?” He picked it up to hug it to his chest.

“Yes.” Jake’s eyes glittered with emotion. “That way it’s safe. I have good intentions, but I end up hiding it away so I—” He shook his head. “You keep it.”

He started crying again because this was literally the kindest thing anyone had ever done for him. This was the biggest gesture he could imagine, and he didn’t know how to pay Jake back.

“You’ve really done a lot of work in here. You didn’t have to. You do know that, right?” Jake didn’t sound angry. In fact, he sounded gentle. “I think maybe we should go downstairs and have a snack and a cup of coffee. We can just sit near the fire. You should bring the book if you need to.”

He stared up at Jake. “I’m sorry, I can’t stop crying.”

Jake nodded. Don’t worry. Sweet, everything will be fine.

That just made the tears come harder because that was real. That mental touch couldn’t be faked or lied through.

And it shocked him when Jake simply lifted him and the book up and carried him out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

He hiccupped, clinging to Jake with one hand, the book in the other.

“Here. Curl up here on the couch, and I’ll stoke the fire up, then bring you a cup of tea, hmm?”

“Thank you.” He sniffled, watching Jake move around, his big, rangy body clad in jeans and a heavy sweater that was covered in sawdust and wood shavings. “Were you coming to change?”

“I was. But that’s okay. I’ll just brush this down.”

“Oh, I can sit here, I promise. Go get comfy.”

Jake chuckled. “All right. The kettle is on. Back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” He headed back upstairs, and before Samuel could even blink, he was back, wearing sweatpants and another huge sweater, socks on his feet.

“I’m sorry, you must think I’m a fool.” His cheeks were on fire.

Jake shook his head, mane still carrying a few wood curls. “No, no, you were probably long overdue for that. You’ve had a lot of changes too. Even more than me at this point. You’ve moved twice, found out your sister had a baby. That she died. You lost your hoard, you got your hoard back, and it’s still not here. I was a big dick, but now I’m better and... It’s a lot. You’re allowed to mourn.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.” He still felt like an asshole, but he’d take the out.

“I like what you’ve done with the pantry,” Jake told him.

“Oh, thank you. I just. I like when things are in order.”

“Well, order away.” Jake turned to look at him. “Just stay out of the workroom. I know where everything in there is, even if it doesn’t seem like it. And there are things that are very, very sharp that could cut you.”

Samuel leaned forward, daring to tease. “I do know what a knife is,” he said. “In fact, I have quite an extensive knowledge of medieval weaponry.”

One dark eyebrow winged up. “I’m scared to ask. Why?”

“There was a project that the children were doing at the school of my wing, and so I had to help them find books. And you can’t help someone find a book if you haven’t read the book, really. It’s always helpful to at least have a working knowledge of the book.” Samuel nodded, because that was that.

“Fair enough.” Jake chuckled, pouring hot water into mugs holding tea bags. “I mean saw blades and other things too, though.”

“I’ll stay out, I promise.” Samuel wasn’t really a snooper as a rule. Of course, now he was curious to see what was down there. Maybe Jake would show him.

“You can go see, just don’t organize it. Like I said, everything’s in its place, even if it doesn’t seem that way.” Jake brought the mugs over and sat. “Better?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“That was perfectly reasonable. Don’t stress it.”

“Thank you.” He sighed, looking at the book where he’d laid it on the coffee table. “It just took me by surprise. She really was happy here though. I’m glad.”

Jake nodded easily. “It’s a good place. She was loved.”

“I’m glad.” Samuel didn’t know what else to say. She hadn’t been adored at the wing he’d come from, but she hadn’t been disliked either. The wing was very basic, simple, cold.

Susan had always just wanted more than what was available to her with the rules and structure of their particular wing.

And he was sure if you asked his mother, she would say Susan got the end she

deserved. Samuel knew better. He just hoped that she hadn't been in any pain, that it all happened so fast she didn't even know.

"Don't dwell on it. That way lies madness." Jake gave him a faint smile. "Tell me more about you. Do you like to watch movies?"

"Oh, I do. I haven't watched a ton of them, but I'm a big reader. Surprise." Samuel was always a little bit ashamed of how much he loved to read, but it was better than anything because there were no limitations, just what he could imagine. "But I do like funny movies and movies about space."

"Like serious space?"

His eyes went wide. "No! Like goofy aliens explosion space."

That made Jake laugh hysterically. "Oh, I love it. I like explosion movies. I also like a good murder mystery."

He nodded. "I could tell that by the books in the bedroom. I have some suggestions for books, I mean if you're interested."

"Sure. Always. And you're welcome to borrow any book that you'd like."

"Oh, that's an honor, thank you." That meant something when someone let you borrow their books. "You don't dog-ear them, do you?"

"Oh, you sound like Amber! No. Just because I may have broken a few spines before I knew what that meant..."

He chuckled. "Okay, fair enough, fair enough. We'll teach Grant early. He'll learn. Oh!" He clapped his hands. "Did I tell you that when I asked him if he knew where

your books were, he went to his bookshelf and pulled out books? So he knows what that means.”

Jake beamed. “He’s so smart. He’s going to be the ruler of the world.”

Samuel nodded. “I can see it—a kind, benevolent ruler. Nobody mean.”

“No, that kid doesn’t have a mean bone in his body.” Jake just looked so proud. “You’ll be a good influence on him too, I can tell.”

Samuel flushed, his cheeks heating. “Do you think so?”

“I do. Absolutely. He needs an omega influence, and you’re so smart and kind, but you have grit.”

Grit? Him? He didn’t know about that, but it was a nice thought. He had stood up against Jake, though, for Grant, for what was right. “I just want him to be happy, to grow up and fly.”

“Yes. That’s amazing. You weren’t doing what your family wanted. You did what was best for that little boy.” Jake reached out and took his hand. “Thank you.”

A jolt rocked Samuel and he gasped.

Remember, Jake is going to find an omega, a mate, and you’ll have to be okay with it.

I’m not going to find another omega.

“What?” What had Jake just said?

“Did you hear me?”

“Of course I did.”

Jake arched one eyebrow. “And how long have you been able to hear my thoughts?”

“As long as you’ve been able to hear mine.” That was obvious, wasn’t it?

“So...just now.”

He pursed his lips, eyebrows lowering. “Don’t. You heard me a lot. I know you did.”

“Hmm.” Jake’s eyes twinkled. “I guess I might have, yeah.”

He almost stomped his foot. “Are you always this maddening?”

“Only when you’re thinking about me mating with someone else.”

Samuel frowned deeply, shaking his head. “Well, it’s going to happen. One day, you’ll find somebody that’s not me and have babies, and I’ll be the nanny—the librarian nanny, the spinster librarian, nanny. I mean, I was going to be the librarian spinster anyway, but now I’m a nanny too.”

“I think that spinsters are really just bachelors,” Jake pointed out.

“Bachelor infers that they’re happy go lucky and stuff.”

Jake gave him an arch look. “You’re not happy?”

He blew out a frustrated breath. “I didn’t say that.” I won’t be if you got another mate.



I'm not getting another mate. I already have a mate!

"Where?" That was totally uncool. Samuel was not going to put up with being lied to. "No one mentioned that you had a mate. Do you have it locked in the basement? Do you have a place to hide a mate in the basement? Is that why you don't want me down there?"

Jake stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "All right, one, I said don't go in the basement yet because I want to clean it first, but if you're worried, we can go now. Two, there is not anyone locked up in the basement. Three, are you the most wildly imaginative individual on Earth?"

"No." He crossed his hands over his chest and pursed his lips. He was not going to be an emotional dragon, even if he really wanted to be. He wanted to stomp his feet and cry and bite something a little bit, because he didn't want Jake to have another mate. He wanted Jake to have him.

"I intend to, you sweet, silly dragon."

His breath whooshed out of his lungs. "What?"

"I intend to have you. Dragons don't hear one another unless they're related. Or mated..." Jake crossed his arms over his chest and watched him, one eyebrow up.

"No." He shook his head. Surely not. It was coincidence. It was—It was because of Grant.

Though that would explain why he'd felt so strongly about Jake from the get-go. "But you were so mean to me."

"It didn't have much to do with you. I was mad because..." Jake shrugged. "I wanted

the wing to be willing to have my back and I didn't understand that that's what this was. This was them having my back."

"I don't understand. You mean about the baby and my family, don't you?"

Jake nodded. "I do. I didn't understand that Lars was. You're not into Lars, are you?"

"Jake. Lars is an omega. I'm not into Lars." Dipshit.

"Lars can't be an omega, sweetheart."

That was just stupid. "Says who? I mean, it's not really our choice. We don't get to choose whether or not someone else is an omega or not. That's just stupid."

Jake shook his head and said, "No, you don't understand. He's a guardian."

"So what part of Scary Vicious Omega Dragon defending babies do you not understand? Do you think that I wouldn't eat somebody's face if they came after Grant?"

Jake tilted his head. "Okay, fair enough. I see your point, but the real gist of that question is more that I want you to be into me."

Samuel's cheeks began to heat. "I'm not into Lars," he choked out. "And I'm sorry your feelings were hurt."

"And I'm sorry I was an ass. Can we move on?"

Samuel chuckled. "Okay, yes." Jake was such an alpha. Impatient. A little moody. A lot hot.

How could he not be into Jake? All the way.

He picked up his mug. “Want to watch TV? Together, I mean?”

“Yeah, that would be nice.” Jake beamed at him, and Samuel was glad to have hit the right note. “Mind if I come sit with you over there?”

“No. I—I don’t mind one bit.”

“Cool.” Jake rose and slid onto the couch beside him, then grinned at him again. “You pick.”

“Oh... I—anything?” He didn’t know what to choose...

“What do you like to watch? I might be able to suggest things.”

“I like to learn about history. Humans too. I like funny. I like a thriller, as long as it isn’t gross with gore. And I love mysteries.”

“I think maybe there’s a new Agatha Christie,” Jake said, turning the TV on.

“I like her books. I’ve never seen a movie off her work.” His keep was so behind the human times.

Heck, they were behind the dragon times, being so hidebound.

He leaned on Jake, feeling very brave.

“Well, now’s your chance.” Jake wrapped an arm around him, and he would swear the man pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

If this was a dream, it was a lovely one, and he was going to enjoy it while he could.  
So he just settled in, and hoped it would last.

### Chapter

### Thirteen

“So how are things going with Samuel?” Logan asked.

Jake looked over from the tailgate of his truck, where he sat eating his sandwich. The snow had started to melt off, the cloud cover breaking up to give them much-needed sun.

Which had flooded a drain in the downtown, of course. He and Logan had come down to dig it out, and they were going to have lunch before they moved a metric ton of snow and melted it so the same thing wouldn’t happen again tomorrow.

“Good. Good.” He smiled a little, because tonight he was going to work up to a nice, long goodnight kiss.

“I’m glad. I was a little worried for you. You were being stupid.”

“Hey, I get no respect around here,” he teased, but then he sobered. “I was, some.”

“And in some ways, you were just a wounded bear. I get it. But I’m glad you got your head out of your ass.”

“Ha.” He looked around. “Does this winter seem as though it’s deep to you?”

“Snow wise? Yeah. You think it’s Samuel, don’t you?”

“I think it was, yeah. He was scared. Sad. Really worried. Now he seems to be setting himself to rights.”

“I think you’re helping with that.”

“I’m sure trying. I want to take it slow and let him trust me, but man, it’s tough.” Jake made a wry face. His body was...sore.

“Well...” Logan grinned. “I can tell you from experience that the mate bond forms faster if you just, you know, go for it. Do it. Samuel won’t complain, I bet.”

“Mmmhmm. And what if he gets pregnant?”

Logan snarfed a chip before answering. “Hey, Grant is a great age for a brother or sister.”

“Says the guy who begs Lars to come babysit just so he and his mate can sleep.”

Logan burst out laughing. “Guilty. But I do love those kids. It’s so worth it.”

“Well, I would hope so. Would be weird if you didn’t.”

He was seeing a whole different aspect about that this sort of thing these days, especially since Grant was getting older, and he had another adult to help whenever he needed it.

Sometimes, when he didn’t need it.

He also had someone who had a book on every single subject known to man or dragon.

And someone who was trying to learn to cook. It was quite the challenge, but Samuel was trying.

“How’s Grant doing?”

“He’s very happy. The cries of ‘Ammu Ammu’ ring day and night.”

“Is that what he calls Samuel?”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, it’s adorable. He came up with that all on his own. Never occurred to me that he’d be able to talk and make up names, I guess. Not this young.”

“Yeah, part of me wants to hear the girls say daddy, and part of me wants them never to learn to talk. It’s a thing.” Logan winked at him.

“I’d tell you I didn’t understand that, but it would be lying, that’s for absolute sure.” Something Samuel said twinged his memory.

“So, something weird came up between me and Samuel. He insists that Lars is an omega. I told him it wasn’t possible because Lars is a guardian, and he says that in his wing the omegas are guardians all the time.”

Logan didn’t say a word.

“He brought up the idea that, you know, omega bears will do anything for their cubs, and he has a point.”

“Mmm.” Logan watched him with those gold eyes, munching another chip.

Jake tilted his head. “He’s an omega?”

Logan smiled faintly. “Lars is fierce.”

“He is. I just—” Okay, there had to be a reason it wasn’t common knowledge, and why Logan wasn’t committing to telling him now. Jake wasn’t stupid. “Right. None of my business.”

“Well, as it goes, guardian business is all guardian business. But Lars prefers not to make statements.”

“We’re not in any kind of danger, are we?” Or was it just that they were a small wing with no one who wanted to be a guardian?

“Not that I know of, though we do have a lot of natural resources here that other wings would fight for. What we have is a lack of available guardians.”

“That was my exact thought.” Jake made a zipping motion across his lips. “Okay, my lips are sealed.”

“Thanks, Jake. Lars and I both appreciate it.”

“Can I just ask who else knows?”

“Jason, of the guardians and elders.”

That made him feel better. Oh, he would bet Amber and Mari knew. Maybe a few others. But not Bea? So he was on good footing.

“I’m not too slow then.”

“Or Samuel isn’t.”



“God, he’s the most book-learned dragon I’ve ever met.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Not the smartest?”

“I think that’s Amber.” He brushed crumbs off his hands after his last bite of sandwich, then took a sip of hot coffee out of his Thermos.

“You could be right. But she’s also very caught up in her world of books and tea.”

“True. The two of them really need to spend more time together.” He thought Samuel would love Amber. He just really hadn’t had a chance to get to know her.

“You should have a party.”

Jake squinted at Logan. “What?”

“A party. You know? A get-together? Where people come to your house and bring wine and cheese and stand around and talk to each other?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know what a party is. Explain why I should have one?”

“Well.” Logan held up a hand to start ticking things off his fingers. “A lot of people are desperate to see what you’ve done with your house. It will reinforce your status as a guardian. People will get to meet Samuel in an environment you control. Same with Grant. They’ll get to see him, and it will make the memory of Susan and Jolie ease.”

“Hmm.” He pondered that, and he thought Logan had a point. Also, tons of folks had been cooped up at home since the big snows had dumped, and it would be nice for them to get out and do something fun. “Okay, sure. Why not?”

“Good deal. Set a date. Say Saturday in a week and a half.”

“So soon?” His eyebrows flew up.

“Yes. Otherwise, you have time to talk yourself out of it. You can do it. And Samuel will fall right in and be a host. He was raised to do shit like this.” Logan’s grin was knowing.

“Mmm.” Butterflies danced in his stomach. His sister had always been the social one, the one who could effortlessly put together a do and make people like it... “Okay, I’ll talk to Samuel when I get home.”

“Good.” Logan crumpled up his lunch sack. “Back to work, huh?”

“Yeah. Making it safe one parking lot and road at a time,” he teased.

He was going to host a party with his mate.

This was what his life was coming to.

Weird.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Fourteen

He was having a party.

With his mate.

Jake had come home a little over a week ago and announced that they were hosting a small get-together. The guardians and their families. Amber and Mari. His old neighbors, the twins. A few other folks.

But looking at the guest list now, he thought half the wing might be coming. And what did one serve at a winter dinner party in the desert?

He was no cook yet, and they couldn't grill out or make fish...

So he called the one person he really knew. Lars.

"Samuel, my love, I was just thinking about you!" Lars said when he picked up the phone.

"Were you?" He looked down when Bumper nudged him. That big, shaggy head always amazed him, and the wolf was so gentle. Always. He fed Bumper a piece of the grilled cheese he'd just burned to a crisp. The inside was still nice.

"I was! I was going to call and see if you'd like some help cooking for the party. I'd

love to come over and plan, if you're interested."

Samuel huffed out a laugh. "Interested? Try desperate and needy. I'm still working on grilled cheese..."

"Oh, honey! I'll help. I'll totally help. When should I come over?"

"Soon? How do you feel about soon?"

"I can come over this afternoon if Jake won't try to kick my ass."

"No, he had to go down to Santa Fe."

"Ah. Well, then, we'll get our planning on. I'll bring my book." Lars had a planner from hell, one that he used to organize all things. It was pretty amazing, really, and he wanted to learn how to do a little of that kind of organization to keep the household running.

"Sounds good." He would make a cheese and pickle platter. That he could do without burning anything. Oh, and cut and bake cookies.

"I'll be over in half an hour or so."

"Thank you. Seriously."

"Of course! I'll bring pastries. We can nosh and plot."

"That sounds great." He loved that Lars understood. He had no idea what he was doing, and he didn't want to embarrass Jake at all in front of his new wing.

He checked on Grant, who was playing happily with his toys in the living room,

corralled in his baby jail. “Uncle Lars is coming over today. We love him, don’t we?”

“Laaaaaaaaaalallalala.”

“Exactly.” He chuckled. “Watch him for me, Bumper? I’ll give you cheese later.”

Bumper settled down, muzzle on his paws.

“Good boy.” He needed to pull out a couple of entertaining cookbooks and clean up the mess from the grilled cheese disaster.

He toodled around the kitchen, happy that it was finally arranged to his liking. Jake had adjusted very easily, just asking to make sure the grilling tools could be found come spring.

Jake had been easy about most things, but?—

But the touching part.

Jake hadn’t been into touching him. Oh, they’d snuggled on the couch, but that was it. If they were mates, why didn’t Jake want to...to kiss him?

Maybe he was...unpalatable.

He didn’t want to be, though. He wanted to be amazing. Desirable. Sexy.

Especially since, now that he allowed himself to look in that way, he felt that Jake was stunning. Maybe he would ask Lars to help with ways to make himself more attractive too.

Maybe omegas here needed to look different. Maybe he should cut his hair...

He heard Lars pull up before he could finish up his chores and grab his scissors, which was probably a good thing.

Lars flew in with pastries and cookbooks and a new fuzzy blanket for Grant and a lasagna. “This is for your supper tonight.”

“Oh, wow. Look at that.” Garlic bread and salad he could make. So this was lovely. “Thank you.”

“I just know how hard it is to make food when you’ve been busy.” Lars handed him the box of sweets. “Is there tea?”

“There is. I put the kettle on when you said you were bringing pastry. I was going to resort to cheese and pickles.”

Lars nodded sagely. “Also a good choice, but I just happened to have all this.” He waved at the box he’d brought.

“You rock. Thank you very much.” He couldn’t help but smile.

“Now, tell me your ideas.” Lars hunted the cabinets, pulling out mugs for the tea.

“I found a book about charcuterie boards. They seem pretty, but I can’t embarrass Jake, you know? I want him to...like me.” He needed it, when all was said and done.

“Oh, honey, he does. Logan says you and Grant are all he talks about.” Lars patted his back.

“Yeah, but—this is important to him. Do you think I should dress different? Cut my hair?”

“What? No. Not unless you want to. That’s not up to him.”

“No. No, I don’t want to, but—I want to be attractive to him, and I don’t know what that means, here.”

“It means whatever it means.” Lar chuckled. “Have you talked to Jake about this?”

He shrugged, his shoulders tight. “I don’t know how. My father would never stand for it.”

“What?” Now Lars was frowning at him.

“Being questioned.”

“Oh, sweetie, for all of his growling, Jake is not that kind of alpha. In fact, I would bet anything he’s trying give you time to get to know him.”

“Do you think so? I like him, a lot. He’s very kind.”

“He’s something.” Lars winked. “Seriously, Jake and I may have bumps, but we’re friends. He’s a good guy.”

“He is. He’s had some bumps, and I think he wants you guys to like him so much...”  
And Samuel understood.

“We do. He just needs confidence. And to remember his friends won’t blow smoke up his ass when he’s wrong.”

“No. No, of course they won’t. You won’t.” That didn’t help, did it?

“I know how he felt. And I’ll talk to him at the party about it. I do owe him an

apology for being so impatient and not seeing how hurt he was over Susan and Jolie.”

“You rock. So...do you think charcuterie boards are a good idea?”

“I think they’re a great idea. And maybe a dessert board, too. We can order that from the bakery.”

“Oh, yeah? Okay. So, let me show you what I read about...” He opened the cookbooks, and they put their heads together.

Before an hour had passed, they had a budget, a menu, and simple decor. He clapped his hands. “This is wonderful.”

“I’ll be over Saturday to help. What are you going to wear?”

He had no idea. “I have one formal suit...”

“No. No, wear a sweater and jeans or some kind of warm pants.”

“Oh, you think? Just casual and easy?” He liked casual and easy.

“Oh, yes. This is not a formal house. And there will be children. Dakota’s. Jason’s grandkids.” Lars laughed, spinning him about. “This will be fun .”

Oh, he hoped he was good at that. He didn’t feel particularly fun. He couldn’t help but laugh with Lars, though, because there was so much joy. Lars seemed to enjoy having him around.

“So casual clothes, music. We’re going to get flowers to scatter about and fairy lights.”



Lars nodded. “Then some big charcuterie boards. It’s perfect because we place them around the kitchen, and we just leave them. It’s just so easy. Everything can be done in advance, and then we can just be. We’ll let one of the alphas take care of the bar.”

“That sounds perfect.” Samuel didn’t mention that Lars had just said alphas like he was an omega because he felt as if there was something secretive going on about all that.

He wasn’t sure he understood what the problem was, but he did get that it was important to Lars to keep it quiet, so he could just file that bit of information away and stop babbling about it.

He assumed it didn’t matter that he spoke to Jake, because Jake was his mate, and they didn’t have secrets, or they shouldn’t, or maybe they just wouldn’t. He didn’t know.

“So we’ll need ice.”

Lars winked at him. “There’s plenty of that outside. You know, eventually, we’re going to have to get you and Jake together so that the snows stop. Eventually, spring is going to have to happen, Persephone.”

“Shut up. Jake isn’t the king of the underworld.”

“Hmm, he’s more like Hephaestus if he was creating with wood instead of steel? That really doesn’t work, does it?”

Samuel cracked up. “No. I guess he could be Zeus.”

Lars shook his head. “No, he doesn’t really seem the lightning type. He’s way more earthy. Hey, he could be Dionysius.”

“I think I would have him just be Jake.”

Lars beamed at him. “And that is exactly what I would want a mate to think.”

“Yes.” Okay, so if that was the case, which it was for him, then he would have to trust it was the case for Jake. Samuel just needed to be himself. No haircuts or new wardrobes.

And maybe he needed to ask for what he wanted. Maybe he needed to make the move, if Jake was trying to give him time to adjust to the new living situation.

“Do you think I could make cookies? I mean, I’ll order the cupcakes and croissants and all, but...”

“If you want to try, do it! Talk to Dakota. He makes good cookies.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” And he would bet that Jake wouldn’t object to a few cookie trial runs. “Peanut butter?”

He loved peanut butter in every form and cookies were the best.

“And chocolate chip, too, because they’re always a win.”

“Okay. I can try both.” He would see what he had in the pantry, too. He could make an order, but why do that when he’d just have to turn around and make another?

He opened the pantry and Lars peeked in.

“Oh, it’s beautiful. Logan told me you’d made things gorgeous.”

Well, that was a surprise. “He did? Why?”

“You’re a guardian’s mate. We’re curious to get to know you, hmm?”

“Oh.” His cheeks heated. “I didn’t know that.”

“People here want to be friends with you, Samuel. Everyone has just been giving you and Jake some time. But you will see how the wheel of life turns here very soon.” Lars winked at him. “Assuming you ever let the snow stop.”

“I will. I don’t mean to.” He chewed his lip. He hadn’t even thought it was him at first. But now he knew it was his...emotional state that was keeping them buried in snow.

“It’s okay. Great for skiing. Just...believe in yourself. Believe in the bond. You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m trying.” Oddly enough, he believed in Jake. He really did. It was him he worried about. He was so...not a New Mexico dragon, he thought.

His phone buzzed, and he grabbed it to see a text from Jake.

On the way home

“Jake is coming home.”

“Ah, then I should head out. I don’t want him getting grumpy.”

“But you will talk to him this weekend?” Samuel asked.

“I will.” Lars kissed his cheek, then went to rub Bumper’s ears and kiss Grant. “I don’t want things to fester.”

“No, no, festering. Festering is...unpleasant at best.” He kissed Lars on the cheek.  
“Thank you so much. I really needed the help.”

“That’s what friends are for. I can’t wait. I’ll see you on Saturday. If you have any questions, just give me a call and remember, trust yourself!”

Samuel waved goodbye to Lars and went to check on Grant. He was sound asleep, still cuddled under the blanket that Lars had brought him. Such a sweet baby.

Jake came in soon after, stomping snow off of his boots. “Hey, I’m home. Is there coffee by any chance?”

“The kettle is on, if you’d like tea. I even have lemon.”

“So long as it’s warm, I don’t care. Snow out there is deep as an elephant’s butt.”

He winced as he waited for the kettle. “Yes, Lars mentioned that. I’m very sorry. I don’t try. I’ll think sunshiny thoughts.”

Jake gave him the wide, panicked eyes. “Oh, Goddess no. Then we’ll all just be burning alive. Just think normal thoughts. Just average everyday March-y thoughts? All right?”

“Okay. Of course.” Normal thoughts? He went and plunked a teabag in a mug, feeling so unsure. What were these March thoughts? Didn’t March march in like a lion? In like a lion, out like a lamb? But what did that mean, practically?

Where he came from, there just simply wasn’t a lot of weather, rain and not rain. He lived on the ocean.

Oh, he didn’t want this to be awkward. He didn’t want this to be weird. He wanted it

to be okay. His hands were shaking as he cut another slice of lemon.

“Hey.” Cool hands landed on his shoulder. “No one’s blaming you. You’re all right. Breathe.”

“I just want you to like me. I just want everyone here to like me, that’s all,” he confessed, the words tumbling out of him. “I want you to...to really like me. It’s important to be with me intimately.” He was an adult; he might as well act like one, right? Even if he was a shy one. “I’m hoping that someday you might want to kiss me. And be with me in a...a more adult way. Not that I’m pushing, I understand if you don’t. I mean, I really do, but?—”

Jake turned him around and caught his eyes. “Oh, my sweet silly dragon.”

Then those lips crashed down on his. The kiss was wild and sharp, pointed on all edges.

Samuel was still for a second, but only that long before he pushed back, welcoming Jake in and begging him not to stop. Not yet. Because this is what he had craved.

Not just the kiss, which was perfect and wonderful, but the connection, the burn, the knowledge that he wasn’t alone here in this wild sensation. He wasn’t all by himself in this need.

Not alone. Not even close. I need you more than breathing.

You never said.

I was waiting for you to catch up. Jake lifted him up against the kitchen counter, pinning him in place for more of those toothy, wonderful kisses.

He wrapped his legs around Jake's hips, drawing him in so he could bring their bodies closer together.

It was as if asking for the kiss had broken a dam, and now Jake wasn't holding back. That mouth was scorching on his. If the snow wasn't melting out there, he'd be surprised.

"Dada! Me! Me!"

The little voice had his eyes opening, and he groaned. No fair.

Jake moaned too, forehead against his. "Dammit. Here, let me..." He set Samuel on his feet, then gave him one more quick kiss before going to Grant. "Hey, little man."

"Dada! Me! Me!" Those little arms were held up, demanding his attention.

"Oh, do you want hugs too?" Jake lifted Grant and swung him around, earning a squeal of pleasure.

"Da! Da! Ammu! Me!"

"Does your daddy have you, sweet boy?" he laughed, filled with joy.

"Me!"

"He's pretty definite about that. How was your day, honey?" Jake walked Grant to the couch after taking a good sniff to see if he needed changing.

"Me! Laalaalaa! Bankie! Me!"

"Oh, that was so good! That's right. Lars brought you a new blankie!" He applauded,

so pleased.

“Lars was here?” Jake’s gaze sharpened.

“Just to help me plan the party. He told me to tell you what I needed.” And it had worked.

“Then I’m grateful.” Those lips curved in a sensual smile, one like he’d never seen.

“He’s a good friend.” And Samuel adored him. “I was thinking about cutting my hair, but he said only if I wanted to. You liked me as I am.”

“I do like you as you are.” Jake studied him. “And I want to run my hands through your hair.”

“Oh.” He shivered, smiled. “I like my hair. It makes me feel...sensual.”

“It’s beautiful. I want to touch you, honey. When we put Grant to bed...”

“Me!” Grant shouted when Jake said his name.

“You!” Jake lifted him high, kind of tossing him. “You, Grant! My sweet baby!”

“DaDa!” Then Grant looked at him, making grabby hands. “Ammu!”

“Come sit with us, honey.”

He headed right over, bringing Jake’s tea along with a sippy cup of juice for Grant. “I would love to.”

He took Grant so Jake could have his tea. “Did you show Daddy your new blanket?”

Grant pointed into his pen. “Blankie!”

“Oh, I like it. I do.” Jake winked. “Lars is good to you, huh?”

“Lalaaaaa.” Grant beamed at his daddy. “Blankie! Me!”

Jake kissed Grant’s head. “Maybe tomorrow we can go for a walk, all of us together?”

He would love that. “Yes, please. That would be lovely.”

“Good deal.” Jake leaned over to kiss his cheek, so he turned his face to let their lips meet.

It wasn’t a wild kiss or a deep one, but it was another kiss. Hello, mate. I—I would like to spend the night in your bed tonight. Please.

Yes. Oh, yeah. We’ll spend the night together now and from now on.

That statement had his heart beating fast, his body trying to ready itself for Jake. But this was baby time, and teatime, and not sexy time.

Sexy would be after supper and?—

“Oh! Lars brought us a frozen lasagna to put in the oven for supper tonight or any night this week.”

“Did he? That’s...unexpected.”

“Why?” He frowned, not sure what that meant.



“It’s just very nice of him to bring something for me too.”

“He says he’s going to talk to you at the party.” Something about Lars was still making Jake grumpy.

“Okay. I’ll look for him. I do love his lasagna.”

“He likes you too. A lot. He introduced us. That will always be amazing to me.”

“Yes. He was pretty determined, even when I was an idiot.” Jake’s grin was so warm. So happy.

“You weren’t an idiot. You’re fine. It’s just—” Samuel shrugged. Things had been changing, in flux and uncertain, and for Jake, that had been a long time. “Everything has been hard. Hopefully now it will be better.”

“Right.” Jake grinned at him in between blowing playful kisses against Grant’s chubby little hands. “Of course, and starting tonight, with you in my bed, it will be amazing.”

He flushed, his cheeks going hot. “I’m looking forward to it.” He was. His body wanted to be with Jake as much as his mind did. It kind of shorted him out in the best way.

“Me too.” Jake’s gaze was scorching hot, and he swallowed hard.

Then he cleared his throat. “So between now and then...”

“We have baby time. A nice long walk. Lasagna.” And I think we can sneak some kisses in at the same time.

“Good.” Jake reached over to grab his hand and hold on, Grant kind of tipping over between them and giggling madly.

He tickled that little belly, pulling out another of those laughs.

It felt blessedly...normal and wildly special in the same breath.

“That’s perfect.”

And it was.

Chapter

Fifteen

J ake waited as patiently as he could.

They had a long walk. They worked on the party planning a little, which really consisted of Samuel telling him what he and Lars had decided on.

They had lasagna and a bit of TV.

But once Grant had been fed and washed and put to bed, Jake knew he couldn't wait any longer.

He stood, holding out a hand to Samuel. "You ready to head to bed, honey? We can wash up a little, but I'm done waiting." His body was telling him it was time to cement the mate bond.

Finally.

"I—I have to tell you. I've never—no one's ever wanted me. No one's ever tried." Those beautiful eyes were shimmering, so worried.

"That's because you're meant to be mine, love." He reeled Samuel in for a kiss before they headed to the bedroom. "And I haven't exactly had a ton of offers."

"That's insane. You're so fine..." The way Samuel stared at him made his eyes cross.

“Well, it’s a small town. And while some folks are happy to hook up...” He shrugged. “I was waiting for someone.”

“Me. You were waiting for me.” That confidence was as sensual as anything he’d ever experienced.

“I was.” They walked directly to the bathroom, where he pulled off his sweater, Samuel’s curious gaze locked on him. Jake wasn’t ashamed of his body at all, even if he was probably way more confident as a dragon...

“You’re beautiful,” Samuel whispered. “Can I touch you?”

“Of course you can.” He held out his arms to let Samuel come to him.

Smiling, Samuel moved closer, hands on his chest, warm and not at all tentative, which was kind of wonderful. He’d half expected Samuel to be scared.

“So hard. You have amazing muscles.”

Jake chuckled. “I work hard down in the shop.”

“And moving snow.”

“That too.”

“I’ve read a lot about sex, you know.” Samuel kept on touching, fingers dry, dancing over him.

“Have you?”

“Mmmhmm. I do love books. They’re so instructional.”

“So what do they tell you to do?”

“Touch someone in the places that I like to be touched.”

“I think that sounds like a great initial plan,” Jake said very seriously.

“I do too.” Samuel pulled off his sweater, baring a perfect, lean, silvery chest.

“So if I touch you here...” He thumbed one of Samuel’s tiny nipples.

Samuel’s eyes went half-lidded. “I say I like that.”

“Then you know I probably do too.”

“Right.” Samuel reached up, stroking his nipple. “Like this?”

“Just like that.” Jake hummed, pleasure making him go up on tiptoes. “Damn, honey. That feels amazing.”

“I’m glad.” Samuel bit his lower lip, and Jake wanted to do the same thing, so he bent, licking at it so Samuel let go, allowing him to nibble.

Samuel’s lips parted, and he licked Jake’s in return.

“Mmm.” He eased even closer, his hands on Samuel’s ass, lifting him up so they could rub together and keep kissing.

Samuel melted against him, his hard cock evident through his soft pants, poking him and demanding his attention.

Jake pushed one hand around to touch through the cloth, eliciting a soft cry.

“That’s one of the best feelings, hmm?”

Samuel nodded and swallowed hard. “Uh-huh. Please. I’m going to make a mess.”

“Not yet, honey. We have a long way to go.” Jake stilled, letting Samuel breathe.

Samuel nodded, his breath coming fast, but a shudder went through him, and Jake could feel him taking the reins of control back a little.

“Let’s get in bed, honey. That way we can really explore each other and have a good time.”

“Sounds like the best offer I’ve ever had.” Samuel stripped off the rest of his clothes, which damn near had Jake swallowing his tongue, and then he climbed up on the bed.

Jake had to take a moment there, staring at Samuel, who was lean and lithe, silvery and perfect.

Samuel nodded, panting softly. “You have amazing hands, and I’ve been wanting you so long…”

“I’ve been so dumb, huh?” He grinned, pushing off his pants and kicking out of his shoes. “But I get it now.” And he was about to get more, to put it crudely. He crawled up on the bed, covering Samuel’s body with his.

“Oh.” That was a stunned, happy sound, and Jake soaked it up.

“Mmm. That’s perfect.” He rubbed some, taking a long, slow kiss that left them both breathless.

One of Samuel’s legs lifted, sliding up along his, offering him a little more access. He

moaned, because that pressed their cocks together, and he could feel Samuel's heat, his need.

Someone wanted him, badly, and he wanted Samuel as well.

He'd never expected to be here with his mate. Not this soon. Not yet. But it was amazing, and he wasn't giving this up now.

But it also meant he had to do it right.

He slowly dragged his hand up and down along Samuel's torso, touching in lazy, strong strokes, and Samuel moaned deep in his chest. He felt all those vibrations, his chuckle pleased and proud. He'd done that; he'd made Samuel feel good.

"Am I doing okay?" Samuel murmured. "I want to. Do okay, I mean."

"You're stunning. Touch me, sweet. It feels so good when you touch me."

Samuel reached for him, hands warm and careful, but so very curious. They skated over his back and hips, then those lean fingers tested the muscles of his ass, and he grunted, his hips flexing.

"You like that." Samuel grinned at him, then repeated the touch.

"I do. I bet you do too."

"The way you're grinding? Yes."

Listen to that. He'd never expected that little Samuel would ever even think such things. But the way Samuel was smiling at him just made his breath come hard and his knot rise.

Naughty mate.

He dove back into their kisses, letting them deepen, grow a hint of teeth.

Samuel clutched at him, moaning, the sound free and loud and wonderful. He nibbled down Samuel's neck, licking and biting.

"Oh!" Samuel lifted his chin, offering him more of the pale column of flesh, and he swore he could hear lightning crash.

He smiled against that smooth, sweet skin. Then he bit down right where neck met collarbone.

Samuel arched underneath him, legs spreading even wider to give him room.

"Be very sure this is what you want, sweet. I'm not sure that I can stop if I get to the point where we're joined." The warning was only fair.

Nodding, Samuel smiled up at him. "I understand. I do. I want to be yours."

"I want that too." Jake knew a lot of people would say it was too sudden, but it wasn't. He'd been pushing away these feelings for his mate for weeks, and now it was time to do what they did as dragons. It was time for him to knot his mate.

Jake reached down, rolling slightly off so that he could slip a hand between Samuel's legs and test his readiness. He knew Samuel was wet; he had felt it before, but he needed to see how open he was, too. He was never going to hurt his sweet mate. Not ever.

"Oh!" Samuel's eyes flew wide as if he hadn't expected that at all.



“Just making sure this is what you want.” He watched Samuel carefully.

“Yes. Yes, it is. It really is.”

“You’re so wet and hot for me.”

Samuel’s eyelids fluttered. “That’s because I like the way you touch me so much.”

Jake snorted. “I think like is an insipid word at this point.”

Samuel’s laughter rang through the house. “I suppose so, but I don’t even know what else to say. And everyone says I’m kind of fussy.”

“Oh, I think if they could see you now or hear what you’re saying, they would know better. Not that I want that, not one little bit. You’re mine.”

Samuel nodded. “I am. I’m yours.”

Jake pushed a finger inside Samuel, testing him, and then pressed another one in next to it. Yes, his mate was ready, and he would ease the way by giving a little bit of stimulation, but he didn’t think that it was necessary really for more than Samuel’s mental comfort. To give him time to adjust.

He touched Samuel until there was a frustrated noise, and Samuel smacked his back. “You don’t have to be so gentle. I need more!”

“Like what, baby? What is it you need? Tell me.”

“I need you inside me. All of you, not just your fingers.”

Body on fire from Samuel’s words, Jake leaned back and knelt between Samuel’s

legs. “I can do that. I can so do that.” His belly was tight, his balls pulled up, and he knew that it wasn’t gonna last long once they really got going. But he thought Samuel was right there with him in that.

He could see it in those eyes. They were burning for him, and Samuel’s lips were parted, damp from their kisses, swollen and beautiful.

“I’m going to take you now,” Jake said, poised to breach that wet hole.

“Please.” Samuel grabbed his hips and yanked, but nothing happened.

Jake knew he had to control himself, so he only let himself move so much.

“I won’t hurt you.” He looked into Samuel’s eyes, his cock in hand, and pressed it against Samuel’s opening.

Then he moved slowly, pushing forward, not letting anything break the eye contact that they had.

Samuel made a noise, a long slow exhale of pleasure and just watched him, legs rising to cradle his hips.

“That’s it, baby. Take me in.”

“Please. Oh, please. Gods, that feels good.”

Jake nodded, unable to say anything else as he was sliding home into the hottest, wettest, tightest place he’d ever been. Jake tried to breathe, but all that would come were these great gasps of air, and his chest heaved as he tried to control himself.

Samuel patted his back as if he was comforting him, and Jake took a moment to get

used to what was going on. He wasn't completely inexperienced with sex, but this was like nothing else, ever.

"I feel you," Samuel said, and the awe he was experiencing came through the bond they shared so clearly. "I feel you inside me, Jake."

"Yes, and now I'm gonna love you like I've never loved anyone else. Going to knot you, Samuel. We're going to mate."

Samuel's eyes filled with tears, but he was not unhappy, and he sang through the bond that he was thrilled. That he wanted this, and Jake couldn't believe how good it felt, knowing that he was giving them both what they needed.

He started to move, his body sawing back and forth. There was no slow entry; it was just passion. All the way, hot and fierce. He couldn't figure out how to parse everything that he was feeling, so he just let it go, and let the physical part of him take over.

His ass clenched, his thighs were like rocks, and he moved with the rhythm that every alpha knew. Something that was just primal, taking Samuel to the edge as quickly as he could.

Samuel sang for him, words and sounds that just blended into a litany of yes and please and pleasure.

Jake thrust deep, his smile more like a grimace, but he loved this. Gods, he loved this, and he loved this man. He knew that now.

"Mate," Samuel said it in a tiny voice that had hardly any breath behind it. "Please, mate, knot me."

His knot swelled to immense proportions, and he knew they were going to be stuck together for a while. “I’m ready, baby. I’m knotting you now.”

“I feel it. Please, I need more. I need to come. I can’t bear this. It’s too much.” And to prove it, Samuel bit Jake just like he had bitten Samuel, right on his collarbone, leaving a stinging mark.

Jake shouted, slamming his hips down, and that was exactly what both of them required.

Samuel scratched down his back, leaving more marks no doubt, but then again maybe not. He had some hard scales back there.

Still, it didn’t matter. He could see Samuel’s scales rising on his face and neck. Jake could see the dragon coming out, and it was the most beautiful thing ever.

One more thrust, two, and then he could barely move and he was grinding down. Samuel was pulling at him, and they were groaning and kissing, and all of a sudden, he was there, right on the edge of the cliff. He jumped right off, coming hard, shooting deep inside Samuel.”

Samuel cried out, his whole body shuddering and shaking, and he cradled Jake with everything he had. Arms and legs and mouth gave Jake all the love that he’d been needing, and he felt it when Samuel came between them, hot and wet, so sweet that it filled the room with the most amazing scent.

“Uhn.” Samuel collapsed back down on the bed. “Oh, Jake.”

“Yes, love. Wow.” Well, talk about insipid, but it was all he could come up with, because his brain wasn’t working anymore. It was just on autopilot.

“Wow?” Laughing, Samuel kissed his neck.

“Very wow.”

“Oh, good.” Samuel patted his back. “I hope Grant slept through that.”

“Me too. Could be awkward.”

They chuckled together, and he settled down half on top of Samuel to wait for his knot to go down. “Thank you, love.”

“Anytime,” Samuel said. Then he frowned a bit. “Well, as long as it’s possible with Grant and all.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Okay.” Samuel yawned, and in seconds, he was asleep.

Jake laughed softly. His mate was a quick one. He’d have to remember that. That was okay. He could just watch Samuel sleep.

At least until he could get loose and grab the remote.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Sixteen

They'd made love.

Samuel felt a little like he wasn't sure exactly who he was right this second. Like the world had shifted under his feet. It wasn't a bad thing, but it was new. And when Grant woke up and demanded changing and breakfast and loving, it made it a little bit easier because it was just normal. What he did.

Still, there was that bit in the back of his brain that was saying they'd made love.

Jake wanted him. It had been wild and wonderful and passionate, and he'd loved every second of it.

Hopefully, Jake wanted to do it again.

Once he got Grant changed for the morning, Samuel put him in the highchair, handed him a graham cracker, and then went through the process of making a bottle of milk and some scrambled eggs. Grant loved scrambled eggs, and so did Jake. So that was a no-brainer.

The sun shone through the window, making him smile. He didn't think he'd seen the sun since he'd been here, not really. Not like this. And it was a welcome sight.

"Ammu."

“What, baby?”

“Bye-bye.” Grant stared him in the eye as if willing him to do what he asked.

Hmm. Maybe they should go out. They could go to the bookstore, the coffee shop. Maybe Jake would drop him off, or maybe Jake would like to come. He’d ask.

“Let me talk to your daddy and see what he wants to do. He might be busy, you know. Guardians are very, very busy. Once I go to work at the library, you can come with me, and we’ll spend the day having books and sorting books and taking care of books, and making sure books get into the hands of the dragons who want to read them.”

“Book, book,” Grant cheered, going right along with him.

“That’s right, book, book.” He handed over the bottle. “We do love our books, don’t we?”

Grant nodded very seriously while he sucked.

“Books are good. Morning, baby.” Jake came in, kissing him on the forehead and ruffling Grant’s hair.

“Good morning.” His cheeks heated the moment Jake touched him. “I’m making eggs.”

“Yum.” Jake grabbed the coffee pot to pour a cup.

Jake kept touching him—a stroke here, a caress there. The touches kept happening the whole time they were moving around the kitchen, making toast, buttering it. Plating up eggs, pouring cups of coffee and orange juice. It was wonderful and

maddening.

“I was telling Grant that maybe we could go out today.” Why was he so revved up? “I wasn’t sure what you had planned, but I thought the bookstore and the coffee shop, maybe? Grant wanted to go bye-bye.”

“I think that that sounds amazing. It looks like it’s going to be a beautiful day.”

“It does, doesn’t it? Sunny. Pretty. The snow is melting fast.”

“It is. You would think that somebody was happy,” Jake teased.

“Stop it.”

Samuel had never really noticed that his happiness had made things more or less snowy, or more or less weathery .

But he was smart enough to know that it happened. He didn’t mean to be meteorological.

It just happened that way.

And here, it really seemed to respond to him. The land was newer, there was no sea to interfere...

“I’m playing with you, mate. You know I don’t mind getting rid of snow...”

“It’s time, right?” He stretched, trying for casual. “So, would you like to go to the bookstore today?”

“Bye-bye!”



Jake glanced at Grant. “I would love that.”

“Yay! Bye-bye! Ammu! Da! Me!”

Jake chuckled, then hoisted up Grant, who was done with his bottle. “My so smart boy.”

“I have eggs for you, Grant. You want?”

“Eggzzz...” Grant growled, sparking at him.

“No tossing fire,” Samuel admonished. “Here we go.”

“Eggzzz... Pease?”

“Good lad.” He handed over the eggs and Grant attacked them.

“Nice. May I have some, or do I need to move the earth?” Jake teased.

“I made you a plate with toast, mate. Just like you like it.”

“Thank you.” Jake waved the coffeepot, and he shook his head.

“I got tea.”

“Ah. Come sit?”

He settled close, keeping one eye on Grant, who was mauling the eggs, stuffing them in his mouth and humming.

“These are good, love.”

“Thank you. I’m trying to learn. I have many, many cookbooks.”

“Well, it’s working.”

Jake’s praise meant a lot to him. It really did.

“Thank you. I don’t...you can figure anything out, right? Anything.” Especially with good friends like Lars.

“I believe so. And you’re so smart.” Jake put the eggs on the toast and munched.

His cheeks heated, and he beamed, so pleased. “Thank you.”

“Anyway, we should go have lunch too. Like at the Golddigger. You didn’t get to enjoy it last time.”

“Oh? I’d love that. We can share—I’d love to share with you.” He wanted to erase some of the lousier memories.

“Yes.” Jake reached over to squeeze his hand, the little motion so sweet.

“Bye-bye! Da! Ammu! Me! Bye. BYE.”

“Hey.” Jake leveled Grant a look. “When we’re ready, we’ll go, I promise. But the bookstore isn’t even open, bud.”

That pooched-out bottom lip pout was amazing. Goddess, that’s cute.

I know, but you can’t give him an inch. Jake winked at him. He knows how cute he is.

There's no way he knows how cute he is! Look at that face!

Ah, just you wait. Jake finished up his breakfast, then sipped his coffee, humming in a happy way. "I like this very much."

"The coffee?"

"Being with you and Grant."

"Me!" Grant kicked his feet and threw his hands in the air. "Ammu!"

"Yes, that's right." Jake bent over and grabbed Grant up to kiss him. "You and Samuel."

Grant crowed and blew sparks, so proud of himself.

Samuel clapped his hands, delighted. "Let me just wash up the dishes."

"Hey, I can do that," Jake said. "You cooked."

"I did." If omegas could be guardians, then alphas could do housework, right? "I can help."

"Two pairs of hands make it fast." Jake handed him Grant to clean up, then began gathering the plates.

He put Grant in the pen, and the baby frowned.

"No! No, Ammu! Up!"

"Let me do the dishes."

“Ammu!”

“Grant, Da and Ammu need to clean up. You can wait a minute.” Jake looked down at Grant, his eyes flashing with earth energy.

Grant flopped down on his butt. “Okies.”

“Such a perfect boy. Thank you.”

Samuel’s words made him beam. “Sankoo.”

Jake’s mouth kicked up on one side, but he didn’t say anything. He just started running hot water.

See? Super crazy cute.

He really is. I’m excited to spend the day with you.

Samuel was too. Stupidly excited, for a normal, simple day like a normal dragon family. And there would be books. He loved books so much.

Books and Jake in the same place...

He might embarrass himself.

Badly.

He grinned, grabbing a towel to dry dishes.

“Are you thinking naughty thoughts?” Jake murmured.

He couldn't stop his blush. "I am."

"Ah, well, good. That's nice. All day, you can imagine things and then tell me about them tonight."

"I can do that. I think I'd enjoy it, in fact." Even though it was going to make for a very long day.

"Mmmm. You do that." Jake reeled him in for a kiss.

"Ammu! Me!" Grant loved to smack big kisses on his cheek.

"You have a very jealous son," he whispered.

"I do. He's the center of the world, huh?"

"You know it. The center of the universe. As it should be."

Jake handed him the last dish to dry, the egg pan. "Okay, little man, let's go get you changed, and then we'll take a drive to the falls while we wait for the stores to open, huh?"

"Go bye-bye? Me?"

"That's right." Samuel picked the baby up. "You're going to go bye-bye with me and Daddy."

They headed to the bedroom to change both Grant and them, putting on warmer clothes. The snow was gone, and the sun was out, but it was still chilly out there.

He felt light as air, and he couldn't stop smiling. Grant was singing, his little voice

like a trucker singing along with that old convoy song. It was hilarious.

“Someone loves to go in the truck, doesn’t he?” Jake rolled his eyes. “That boy...”

“He does. He loves people too, so wait until you see him flirt. He’s just amazing.” Jake turned off up toward the falls, which he’d never gotten to see before. He was as excited as Grant.

“He is.” He reached out, stroking Jake’s thigh. “So are you.”

“Thank you, love.” Jake chuckled. “I feel like I didn’t start out well.”

“We—we had to learn to talk. To each other, I mean.”

“We did. And to trust. But once I knew about your wing, something kicked me in the butt.” Jake winked over. “And it wasn’t Lars.”

“No. No, I know. You are my—” Mate . “—hero.”

I am your mate. Jake’s mental voice was calm. Clear. Certain.

Yes. I’m yours. We’re a family. I spent the night in your bed.

You did. And I want you to spend every night there.

“La la la, Ammu!”

“La la la, Grant!” He smiled back at the baby. “Love you so much!”

“Oh ma!”

He nodded. “So much.”

They drove to the falls, all laughing and singing, and when they stepped out and Jake carried Grant while they walked to the falls, he gasped at the view. “Jake, it’s gorgeous.”

“It is. I love it here.”

He hadn’t thought anything would be better than the ocean, but this rang inside him, magic flooding him.

“It’s just such a good place. You can feel it, huh?”

“I can.” It stunned him, and he reached for Jake’s hand. “It’s like?—”

Coming home.

It was like coming home.

Jake beamed at him. “I was hoping you’d feel that way.”

Grant cheered, like he knew exactly what was going on.

They laughed, and Jake kissed his hand, and he knew it was going to be the best day.

His new family, water, and books? How could it go wrong?

### Chapter

### Seventeen

“T his party is going to be a disaster,” Jake murmured.

He sucked at hosting gatherings, Grant was in a shit mood, and Samuel was so nervous he kept dropping things.

What else could possibly go wrong?

Samuel blinked up at him, eyes huge. It is? Do you want me to call Lars and tell him to help me cancel? I didn’t burn the food...

No, of course not, love. I just want you to be happy and calm down. Lars would be there in ten, half an hour before everyone else.

Okay, but you have to be happy too, right? I mean, this is for you. So that they can see we’re a functional family.

He grinned wryly. “I’m terrible at this, sweetie.”

“Terrible at what? Having friends? Loving me and Grant?” Samuel’s chuckle was fond. “Come hug me a second?”

“Of course.” That was his best skill. “Just being social,” he said as he squeezed Samuel. “I always do the wrong thing.”



“We’ll be fine. I’m a dork, and I’m not the world’s best cook, but we have beer and coffee, soda and wine. Munchies. Things for the kids to do.” Samuel kissed his knuckles. “We’ll be fine.”

“We will.” Jake took a deep breath, then let it out on a laugh. “These are our friends.”

“Yes. This is just a way to let everyone see us as...well, us .”

“And not as a jerk who made your life miserable?” he teased, loving the feel of Samuel pressed against him. He felt like taking Samuel to bed and hiding from the world.

“Yep. You are the bane of my existence.” Samuel’s kisses made his eyes cross, distracted him.

“Mmm. Too bad I don’t get you all hot.”

Samuel chuckled softly. “Right? Too bad I don’t need you more than breathing...”

His eyes widened, his cheeks heating. “That’s exactly how I feel. Like I can’t do without you.”

“You don’t have to. We’re together now, okay? You claimed me. Brought my books home.”

“I did. I’m so smart!” He palmed that tight little ass. “What can I do?”

“Kiss me.”

Oh, that sounded utterly delicious and less like work than he thought it might. He kissed Samuel deeply, aware that he was so lucky Grant was asleep, his time out

turning into a nap.

“Mmm...” Samuel stepped in, humming deep in his chest. “Mate. More.”

“Yes.” Jake held Samuel close as Samuel wound both arms around his neck.

The knock on the kitchen door was less than welcome, but he knew it was Lars, and one never kept the guy waiting. So, he kissed the top of that head, then went to answer.

“Lars!”

“Jake! Am I too early?” Oh, someone had peeked through the window, he could tell.

“Nope. Come on in, man.” He shook hands with Lars after he let the man set his stuff aside.

“I brought some goodies and some platters. Everyone is excited, and there will be plenty of food and happy mating gifts.”

“Thanks.” He winked at Samuel, who flushed. Then he went to unload Lars’s SUV.

You made me all flustered. You’ll have to do it more tonight.

I will. I promise. After we have a huge snack and a little nap. The hosts never eat enough at things like this.

True. We’ll be too busy chatting and nodding and showing off Grant.

We will.

“I swear, you two are so loud,” Lars said when he walked back in.

“You could hear us?” Samuel exclaimed.

“Not words, but I could tell there was a wave of magic going on.”

“New matings are important.” Jake waggled his eyebrows. “Very intense.”

“They are.” Lars’s expression went wistful, he thought, but only for half a second. “I’m so happy for you both.” He started bustling around the kitchen, opening up platters of food, fussing with all sorts of shit.

Samuel came to Lars, hugging him tight. “Thank you so much for your help, friend. Honestly. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Oh, Samuel, I’m delighted to help.” Lars hugged right back, and he suppressed a growl.

Lars stuck his tongue out at Jake over Samuel’s shoulder, wiggling it.

Jake rolled his eyes, but he had to huff out a laugh. Yeah, yeah. He was a jealous butthead. He was an alpha. Sue him.

Lars winked at him. “Come on, honey. Let’s arrange the cheese.”

Samuel nodded. “Okay!”

Which left Jake to start answering the door when it was time. Which was fine.

Logan and Dakota showed up first, Simon’s arms loaded down with food, Logan’s with babies.

“Can I help with anything?” he asked, not sure what to grab.

“Help, Simon. We’re going to put the babies on a blanket?” Dakota kissed his cheek.

“Where’s Samuel?”

“In the kitchen with Lars. Here, Simon.” He grabbed bags, leading the parade.

“Thank you for the invitation. I am honored.” Simon bowed, quills rattling.

“You’re very welcome.” He grinned at Simon over his shoulder. “Are you glad the snow let up?”

“Indeed, it’s about time that you took care of your situation, my friend.” Simon’s grin was purely wicked. “Although I have to ask,” he murmured, violet eyes just glittering with mischief. “In order to get winter back, is that going to mean that you two will have to fight? Are we going to have to separate you to get seasons?”

“Don’t make me beat you, old man. I’m sure, if asked, Samuel could just bring on the snows.” Samuel was literally a force of nature.

Simon just began unloading things, laughing merrily.

People started coming faster then, as if having Logan appear meant that it didn’t matter that they were early. They had all just been waiting to come in and meet the new member of their wing. Everyone brought food and little gifts.

Not housewarming kind of stuff, just little things for their new wing member. A soft blanket. A scarf. A pair of hand-knitted gloves. It was actually quite lovely.

Jake was a bit embarrassed that he’d been so very worried. The house was suddenly full of noise and laughter and children and family, and he felt like, well, honestly, he

felt as if he belonged for the first time.

He really thought he could get used to this. Thank the goddess for Samuel.

“Ammu!” Grant called from where he had been napping.

Oh, somebody was awake and missing the party. And he didn’t think this was a good idea at all. “Ammu! Up up up.”

Samuel chuckled, nodded. “Will you excuse me? Someone’s calling. He would like to join the party as well, and I’m sure he needs his diaper changed.”

They all laughed, and Jake watched Samuel go, his grin wide and proud.

“Looks like you finally came around, eh?” Logan asked him.

“I let go of the worry that it was happening too fast, yes. That was why I had been freaked out about him, and I was projecting it.” Jake was honest whenever he could be. Sometimes, that took wrangling things for himself.

“Well, good. You need a mate, need help with Grant. And the house looks great.”

“Yeah, Samuel has already made it more homey.” And books kept popping up all over.

“Soon you’ll need a housekeeper,” Simon said, rattling his quills. “I’ll begin the search.”

“A housekeeper? Do you think so?” He wasn’t sure about that. Why would they need a housekeeper? They were doing just fine. In fact, he thought Samuel liked running the house.

“A housekeeper because you have a child. More children will come. Familiars will come to help Bumper. You’re the guardian, and he’s running the library. There’s a lot to do. You need someone amazing. Someone like me, but not me because, well, you know...”

Lars smiled and nodded, very enthusiastically. “I think that would be perfect. Someone to cook, to help with the baby, just be a member of the wing.”

“It is part of our culture,” Simon agreed. “Beta dragons need a space and a family. They need to know that they’re wanted. Logan and Dakota have given me so much. And I know that I’ve done the same. For them, I mean.”

Jake hadn’t actually thought about that. Beta dragons were few and far between, treasured members of the society. Many of them did attach to guardian families, providing comfort and stability in this arena where a guardian could be called away at any minute of any day.

Bea nodded. “It’s a hard concept. I admit that Mickey and I were reluctant, but Sarah has been quite a joy and an amazing helper, and she’s now part of the family.”

Bea’s mate Mickey bobbed his head. “It’s a lovely situation. She settled right in, and now I don’t know that we could do without her. I would be heartbroken if something happened to make us lose her.”

Jake lowered his voice, his cheeks hot. “I wouldn’t even know how to begin to find someone.”

Simon chuckled. “That’s my job. As the oldest caretaker of the wing, I will find someone to provide what you need, so you can focus on your work and your mate. Guarding, the library, babies, each other.”

Jake got a little choked up. “You honor me. All of you.”

“We love you more than is reasonable, Jake.” Logan clapped him on the back. “We’re here for you. You have a lot of resources at your disposal.”

“Thank you.” Jake just beamed. “Okay, Simon, knock yourself out. I’ll talk to Samuel.”

What are you talking to me about? And this diaper is a stink bomb.

Do you need help, love?

No, I just wanted you to know.

Jake had to snort. Simon wants to get us a housekeeper.

He felt a short, sharp burst of panic from Samuel. Have I done something wrong?

No, love. Guardian households tend to have lots of help because of our responsibilities.

Oh. Okay. Well, I can help him interview people if I need to.

I’ll let you two talk it out. He wasn’t about to step on anyone’s toes there. If Samuel wanted to deal with that along with Simon, he was super fine with that.

You sure I haven’t done anything wrong?

Oh stop it, you’re fine. It’s tradition. You know about tradition.

That earned him a dark chuckle. Yes, yes I do. All about. That’s fine because I could

spend more time at the library. Organizing.

Is that what we're calling reading these days ? He didn't get an answer for that, just the mental impression of a door swinging closed. He could still feel Samuel's laughter, though, in the midst of all of it.

All in all, the party went super well. Everyone except for Jason Delray and his wife, who were off gallivanting seeing grandbabies, were there.

Wasn't as weird as he thought it would be either.

Usually, Jason was expected to appear at every single function. To be at the head of all of them.

The pinnacle.

Now that was Logan. At least for the time being.

Somehow, he didn't think that Logan was going to let himself be demoted from the head of the team, no matter who came to take Jason's place.

That situation was going to be something else.

Not that it mattered. It didn't.

Jake was the low guardian on the totem pole. The youngest one. The baby.

But a mated one with a family...

Yes. Very much.



Samuel came back into view with Grant, and they all ooh ed and ahh ed over him, and then it was time for food and drinks and a dizzying array of congratulations, and before Jake knew it, it was ten p.m., and everyone but Logan and Lars and their family had gone home.

Lars slumped on the couch. “Oh goddess, that was a good party. So many people.”

He grinned, shaking his head at Lars. “I think you look like a snake that swallowed an aardvark.”

“An aardvark? Really? You’ve been reading a lot of children’s books. A is for aardvark. B is for beaver. C is for chipmunk. D is for?—”

To a dragon, they all hollered out. “Dragon!”

Samuel chuckled. “If you wake up those babies, everyone’s going to regret it. It was a good party though, wasn’t it? So many people, so much laughter.”

Even if he’d hated it, Jake would have done it again just to see that smile on Samuel’s face. “It was genuinely blissful.”

“It was an amazing party, Samuel,” Dakota said. “Honestly, it was so much fun. Everyone had a good time. There were no arguments. The food was great, the music was rockin’. The kids were good.”

Samuel fluttered a little bit. “It was my very first party. I’ve never given a party before. I think I would do it again.” Maybe not tomorrow though.

No, mate, not tomorrow, possibly not for a few months. Someone else needs to take a turn while you just find something amazing that you want to bring for the next party.

Samuel nodded and leaned in toward him, resting one cheek on his shoulder. “Everything was just perfect.” I got presents . Samuel’s mental voice sounded shocked to him. Odd. I mean, seriously, I got presents from people who don’t even know me. Books. Tons of books and all sorts of neat little things. Like they were welcoming me.

Adding to your hoard is important, isn’t it? Jake’s wing had honored him.

And now he felt, sort of...not only ridiculous for the way he treated Samuel, but ashamed of how unsure he’d felt.

He hoped that most of that—at least part of it—had to do with raising an infant by himself and losing his sister all in the same blow. He had been a very, very young guardian when that happened and now?

Now it was as if he’d been uplifted.

Thanks to Samuel.

His mate was so damn amazing.

I love you.

Samuel nuzzled his shoulder. I love you too.

Simon chuckled. “I’ll just pop into the kitchen, and we’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

Samuel blinked up at Simon, confused, but Logan just chuckled.

“Thank you, Simon. You’re a champ.”

“I had a wonderful time chatting and not working. It’s the least I can do.” Simon vanished into the depths of the kitchen, but Lars grabbed Samuel when he would have followed. “Nope. You get to sit. Sarah cleaned up a bit before she left with Bea and Mickey, I put the food away, and Jake swept and mopped, so there’s not much left to do. Let him think he’s helping.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Samuel curled up alongside Jake, nuzzling his jaw, and making him buzz inside. “I’m so happy, mate.”

“I am too. You made me proud, love.”

Logan grinned at them like a proud papa. “You guys are adorbs.”

“Oh, you shut up,” Jake told him.

“Hey!” Logan held up both hands. “I just call ’em like I see ’em.”

“I know, I know.” Jake kissed the top of Samuel’s head.

“I love this. Can you guys come over for supper and cards sometime this week?” Dakota asked.

“Yes,” Samuel said it with no hesitation, and Jake fell in love a little more. “Please.”

“Sure. I think it will be a ball.” God, he was just on cloud nine.

“I’m not the world’s biggest cook, but I can bring a yummy corn dip?” Samuel offered. “I got it off Pinterest.”

“It’s really good,” Jake agreed.

“Mexican dip night!” Lars exclaimed. “Yummy! I claim seven-layer.”

“Then I’ll do queso,” Dakota said.

“Woo.” Logan fist-pumped. “I love spicy.”

“You all left me nothing to do.” Simon reappeared. “Shall we get the kids, Dakota?”

Dakota groaned. “If we have to.”

“You’d miss them before we got home.”

“Shut up.” Dakota chuckled. “He doesn’t lie. I would, but it’s a sweet fantasy.”

Logan nodded. “Just a night or two... Come on, love. Simon. Let’s head home. You too, Lars. These two need to rest.”

Lars stood, hugging Samuel when he did too. “So much fun. Love you, bye.” And he was off and running.

Logan and Dakota headed out, Simon carrying empty dishes, the other two carrying babies. “Night, you too. We’ll set a date for cards in a few days.”

“Thanks for everything.” Jake closed the door behind them, and the silence had a weird ring to it, the kind that comes from the whole evening being loud and just cutting off abruptly. “Wow. Are you hungry?”

Jake was starving. Hosting meant you talked instead of nibbling.

“I’m starving. Want to eat? I’m literally growling with it.”

“Goddess, yes.” They migrated to the kitchen, where they opened containers right out of the fridge and munched, just tearing a swath through the leftovers. “Oh, yum. I didn’t even know these cheese puffs were here.”

“So good, right? Simon called them gougeres . I think they’re amazing.”

“And the dip is good, too. Crab maybe?”

“I think so.” Samuel giggled. “Someone wanted to do something oceany for me.”

“They were all super kind. I can’t believe all the gifts of books. You’ll be reading for days.”

“I know!” Samuel was obviously so very pleased.

He chuckled. “And any you don’t want?—”

“Blasphemer.”

He laughed out loud then. “I knew you’d object to that.”

“I have to love them and sort them and share them and read them.”

A bookish hoard.

How amazing.

“Well, you can read to Grant, huh?”

“I will.” Samuel sighed. “This was the best day.”

He put all the dishes in the sink, then held out his hand to Samuel. “Want to make it the best night?”

“Oh. Yes.” Samuel took his hand, and they turned out the lights to head upstairs.

The books would have to wait.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Eighteen

Spring was beautiful here—warm mornings and cool nights—and Samuel loved it, spending quite a few hours with Grant in the sunshine, watching him run.

Today, though? He didn't feel like going out. He didn't feel like doing anything. He was queasy.

The smell of Jake's morning coffee had made him sweat, but he thought he'd hidden it well. Now, though, Grant was fussing to go outside, and all Samuel wanted to do was lie down for a nap.

"Not right now, baby. Ammu is tired."

"Out! Out, Ammu! OUT!"

Tears stung his eyes, surprising the hell out of him. "Please, baby boy. My head hurts so bad."

"Huuuurt?" He could feel Grant's sudden worry, his care.

"Uh-huh."

"Da! DA!" Then he heard Grant, mentally raising the alarm.

“Shhh. Oh, don’t bother your—” His panic flared, and then he was so nauseated that he had to run to the bathroom, his stomach heaving.

Jake came running in a few moments later, covered in sawdust. “Samuel? What’s wrong?”

All he could do was vomit, his world feeling heavy and off.

“Oh, love.” Jake came to hold him, kneeling next to him. “Did you eat something bad?” Dragons so rarely got sick, but bad food could induce a mild dose of it.

“I don’t think so, but I’m sure queasy.” He wiped his mouth. “I’m sorry to have scared you.”

“Grant can sure shout.” Jake lifted him up. “Do you need a drink? We have Sprite.”

“Please? I think I scared him. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. Let me grab him and that drink.” Jake lowered him to the sofa, then went to hoist up Grant, who was sniffing hard. “Such a good boy! You did just the right thing. I’m so proud.”

Samuel nodded. “I am too. Good boy.”

“Ammu.” Grant stared at him, brows knitted hard.

“I know. I was sick. I’m better. My good baby.”

“Baby!”

“That’s right.”



Grant waved his hands, laughing. “Baby! Ammu!”

Jake chuckled and kissed Grant’s forehead. “You’re the baby. That’s right.”

Grant tilted his head, then patted Jake’s cheeks with both hands. “Da. Ammu. Baby!”

“Uh-huh.” Jake smiled. “You’re a good boy.”

Blowing out a little breath, Grant shook his head, looking very frustrated.

“I’m going to brush my teeth and maybe we can go outside and run...”

Poor baby.

“I can take him if you want to hang on the porch or stay in here and nap.”

“Can we go together? I’m feeling—” Lonely. “—a little blah.”

“Of course, love. I’m sorry if I’ve been working too much.”

“It’s okay.” Jake had been doing a commission, and he’d been in the workshop for days.

“Come on. Do you want extra pillows or anything?”

“I’ll just sit in the swing.” It was already padded and had a throw... “I’m really sorry about this. I just must have eaten something iffy.”

“No problem, love.” Shifting Grant to one arm, Jake wrapped the other around him when he rose. “I’ll just keep an eye on you both.”

“You spoil me.” But he was heavy, tired, and the swing was calling him.

“Baby, Ammu!”

“You are, little one.”

He slumped down on the swing, watching Jake haul Grant out to the yard where his little play area sat. That little boy loved to dig. Maybe he was part dachshund.

Bumper’s cold nose touched his hand, then the big wolf curled up by the swing.

“Hey, you. How are you doing?” He petted Bumper, fingers trailing through the thick fur.

Bumper panted happily, sticking close to him, which was odd. Usually, Bumper followed Grant around nose to butt.

“Are you so good? I can tell that you are.”

Grant waved at him, and he waved back. His hand felt heavy. Really very.

What on earth was wrong with him?

Still, he closed his eyes and just breathed, trusting Jake to have Grant. And Grant’s squeals soon had him smiling, even as he dozed.

When he woke up, he felt like a million bucks, and the sun was warm on his cheeks. He sat up, grinning as Grant ran in circles.

“Ammu!” Grant saw his eyes were open, and sparks flew. “Love!”

“Grant! Love!” He opened his arms up, ready for his hug.

Grant toddled up, with help from his dad on the steps, and came running to give him a smooch.

“You need a bath, little one!” He tickled Grant, listening to him squeal.

“Tink.” Grant patted Samuel’s belly. “Baby.”

“You are the best baby.”

“No. Ammu. Baby!”

Pat. Pat. Pat.

He blinked. “I?—”

Surely not.

He couldn’t be.

“Love, are you all right?” Jake asked.

“I—” He didn’t know what to do, what to say. “Grant thinks I’m pregnant.”

Jake stared at him, blinking. His lips opened, but no sound came out.

“Baby!” Grant beamed and patted his belly. “Baby, Da! Ammu. Baby!”

“Wow. What do you think?” Jake asked. “Could that be why you feel so sick?” He came up to stand next to Samuel, staring from much closer.

“DA!” Grant stared at Jake, and Samuel began to giggle, tickled to death.

“Well, someone sure believes it. And I think Bumper does too.” Bumper sat up, wagging hard.

“But—do you want more children?” They hadn’t even discussed it.

“I do. So does Grant, clearly. Do you?” Jake looked worried.

“I do. I didn’t want you to think I was hurrying us. I wasn’t. I swear to you.”

“I think it just means we’re ready.” Jake’s mouth curved ruefully. “The same thing happened to Logan.”

“Well, you know we have one already, so maybe we won’t be blessed with twins.” That thought horrified him.

“Goddess help us.” Jake snorted, then came to sit by him, taking his hand and letting Grant flop over on him.

“Did you finally get yourself explained, baby boy?” Samuel stroked Grant’s soft blond hair.

Grant grunted happily, wiggling around until his ear was up against Samuel’s belly. “Baby, Ammu. Babe. Bee.”

“I understand now, Grant. Such a good boy.”

Grant giggled. “Me!”

“That’s right! You! My good boy!” He couldn’t stop laughing.

“Not baby.”

Jake tilted his head. “Is he trying to tell us something else?”

“I—I have no idea. I don’t know who to ask. Do you?” He was lost.

“I’ll talk to Logan.” He would find out who the guardians went to.

“Okay. I’d love that, because... I’m worried.” He didn’t want to be excited if it was a lie.

“No, no. No worries. We’ll figure it out.” Jake kissed his cheek.

“We will. Later. Someone needs a diaper change and a nap.”

“Okay. And then you and I can curl up on the couch and be lazy.”

“That sounds amazing.” His belly was...unhappy. “I’m all over lazy today.”

In fact, he might be all over lazy until tomorrow.

### Chapter

### Nineteen

Jake sat in his truck, stunned, not sure what to do next.

He and Samuel had spent a few blissful days wrapped together, napping, watching Grant run in the sun, and just wallowing in their joy.

Today, he'd had to do some guardian work, and now that he was on his own outside of the house, he was freaking out a little.

Not because he wasn't thrilled. He was. Goddess, he was...wow. He was so excited.

No, he felt a little scared.

His sister had found her mate. Fallen in love. Had a baby. And look what had happened.

Who would take care of their babies?

Who would love Grant? Whoever the new baby was?

He gripped the steering wheel, trying not to think too loud. He didn't want Samuel to hear him and think he was either nuts or having second thoughts.

Bea landed on the ground outside his truck, wings making a wild thump, her black

scales glittering in the sunlight.

He jumped half a mile, almost hitting his damn head on the rearview mirror. “Holy shit, Bea! Scare the crap out of me, why don’t you?”

Bea chuffed softly. Hey, stranger. You bring something to eat?

“Yeah, yeah. Here.” He got out of the truck and opened the cooler in the bed.

What’s wrong? Bea shifted, and he dug out a blanket for her to wrap herself up in.

“Just freaking myself out,” he told her. “Thinking too hard.”

“About?” She grabbed a sandwich and perched on the tailgate.

“Well, I have a mate now. What if something happens?” What if a rock fell on him?

“Don’t do stupid shit like acrobatic flying in a storm.”

“Hey.” That was a little too soon to be funny, but it was still true. “I just—Samuel is pregnant,” he blurted.

She blinked at him, her eyes glowing for half a second. “No shit. Well, then, I understand why you’re worried.”

“You do?” Now he was concerned that there was something to be worried about.

“Sure. Once kids enter the equation, it becomes a whole other problem, and you were already dealing with Grant, which was fine because it was just you and him. But now you have Samuel and potentially another baby, or more than one, to deal with, and that makes the whole world turn on a dime.”

“Yeah. It never occurred to me before that something might happen to me when I got Grant. I guess because his moms were dead, I always just assumed that I would be there for him no matter what. But then Samuel told me he was pregnant, and I wiggled out. I just—I’m so worried that something’s gonna happen.”

“Have you talked to Samuel about it?” Bea pulled the sandwich out of the baggie, and she also grabbed a drink.

“No, no, we’ve had some wonderful days off together, and I was really feeling the love. We were in the glow. I didn’t want to harsh that. In fact, I would do anything not to bring Samuel down.” He was feeling so gross physically still, the morning sickness just really riding him, and he was also incredibly joyful about the baby. Jake wasn’t about to drop a bomb on Samuel about how worried he was.

“Okay, so you don’t wanna lay that on him.” Bea waved her sandwich in the air. “But he’s your mate. That means he’s your life partner. That means you need to share things with him. If you told him how worried you were, I bet he would help allay your fears.”

“No. What if he didn’t? What if it just made him wig out? He’s kind of emotional. I think it’s hormones.”

“My gods, just don’t say that to him.”

“Oh no. I already learned that when he burst into tears because I told him that he just needed to breathe during a bout of nausea.”

“Yeah, I know.” Bea gave him a look of total commiseration. “That’s not a good idea. Never ever comment on anything that they do physically or emotionally when they’re pregnant. Just smile and nod or make concerned faces and noises. Hmmmmmm.”



“Right. I can do that.” Jake grinned because Bea was so matter-of-fact. He loved that about her. It was so easy to just talk to her because she didn’t try to get all those social cues right or make him feel better in a touchy-feely way. She just told it like it was.

“Anyway, you’ve got this, Jake. You took on Grant, and you’ve been a great dad to him. He’s a happy, well-adjusted little boy, and when you and Samuel have a baby, you’re going to do exactly the same thing. You’re going to be there for him because you’re a stand-up guy, and if something happens to you, because none of us are immortal despite the fact that we’re a little sturdier than humans, you have an entire community of people that would help your kids.” She stared at him right in the eye as she munched her sandwich.

“You’re right. I do.” They said it took a village to raise a kid and now he was seeing what they meant. “So what do I do now?”

“You mean for the moment? You take a deep breath. You tell yourself that it’s all gonna be okay and then you work your damn hardest to make sure it is. Then you make a contingency plan. Once you have that in place, I can guarantee you that it will feel better.” She winked.

“Yeah? Did you do that?”

“Absolutely. My mate is a good wife, but she’s the obsessive planner, and she wasn’t happy until we had every step laid out in writing so that we could give it to the people who needed to have it.”

“Who did you give it to?” he asked.

“Logan. Then of course Jason, but now that Jason is retiring, I guess we’ll give it to whoever takes his place.”

“Right. Do we...do we have any ideas of who that’s going to be? Is Logan going to...”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t want to. He has his business, and he’s very hands-on still.”

“So, what do we do about that?” Jake had no idea. Jason might be the only one who had been a guardian the last time someone changed over.

“Jason says his replacement will come, man. We have to believe in him.”

“I guess so.” He was a little doubtful, but that seemed to be his job in this wing. Doubting Thomas. Or Jake, as the case may be.

“Do you want the job?” Bea tilted her head. “I mean, I think you could do it.”

“What?” His voice rose on the question. “Goddess no. What about you?”

“Nope. I have a baby, and I want another one. I don’t have time to corral us. That’s no fun!”

“That’s it. We need someone who likes to push us around. I would say Lars, but he’s more the dinner-party type.”

“I—Yeah, Lars doesn’t seem the type.”

“Did you know that in Samuel’s wing, they have omega guardians?”

“No shit?” Something about Bea’s grin told him he was missing something. Maybe Samuel was right about Lars.

“Yeah. I like the idea—Samuel can be fierce where Grant is concerned. He came here, all on his own.” It had been amazing.

“Omegas will fight the earth for children, man.” Bea clapped him on his back. “I’m so glad for you.”

“Yeah? I am too. Another blessing. Another baby.”

“Yes. It makes me so happy to see the wing flourish.” She beamed at him, and the smile would have been creepy, if he hadn’t known her.

A lot of people found Bea really intimidating, but he adored her. She just had no social skills.

In fact, she was a big, scary, evil, perfect friend.

“It does me too, lady. So how much more do we have to do today?” He finally grabbed some food, his body reminding him of basic needs.

“Everything is glorious. We can just fly.”

“Well, I do have to come back to the truck.”

“So practical. It’s not storming. Fly with me, Jake.”

He finished off his sandwich in two bites. “Let’s go.”

She dropped the blanket and shifted, her ebony scales like mirrors.

Jake hooted happily and followed suit, leaping into the sky as soon as he had wings.

Flying was always better than worrying about shit he had no control over.

### Chapter

### Twenty

Jake had found Samuel a car, and he and Grant went into the library three days a week while Jake worked.

It was a lovely drive into the wing, and Grant was a darling go-baby, happy to play in a little playpen while he cataloged books, making sure there were plenty of things for people to read.

“Ammu?”

“Yes, son?”

“Bye-bye?”

“Soon. Play with your dragon. We’re waiting for your daddy.” He was so happy he could hardly bear it.

“Hi, Samuel!” Little Emilia, whose scales showed up as a shimmer of peacock blue and green, smiled at him as she came to the desk with a stack of books. “I made it before closing!”

“You did. I’m so glad.” Emilia loved to read about elves and magic and men fighting for honor and bravery. It was adorable. She was also getting to the age where she wanted to read about horses. “What would you like to read today?”

He'd chosen a few books for her already—a couple of dragon books, a couple of horse stories.

“Would you like any of these too?” he asked.

Her face lit up, and she put her chosen books on the desk, then reached for the three he handed her. “Oh, look! Dragons.”

“Yes! It's a lovely read. You should really like it. I re-read it myself.”

“Thank you.” She hugged the book to her chest. “I love these stories. They're like us.”

“They are. These stories are important, aren't they?”

“Yes!” She bounced. “And I get to read them all now that you're here, Mr. Samuel. Thank you so much.”

“You're so welcome, Emilia. I'm so happy to be here.”

“Ammu! Me!”

He chuckled. “Yes, baby boy. You too.”

“He's so cute.” She slid the books into her little backpack. “I'll see you next week.”

“I'll be here. Have a great weekend!” He waved at her and checked her books in.

The next time the door opened, it was Jake, smiling and smelling like late spring air. “Hello, love.”

“Da! Da, go bye-bye!” Grant beamed at Jake, holding his arms up. “Uppies!”

“Hello, my love. How are you?”

“Dadadadaaaaa. Luff!”

“Yes. I love you too.”

Grant beamed at him, the pure joy pouring off him in waves. Jake lifted him into the air and spun him around, making him squeal, and Samuel chuckled.

“He’s been waiting for you.”

“Has he? Have you?” Jake came to plant a kiss on his mouth.

I have. So much. It’s been a lovely day. Are you hungry? He was.

Starving. What do you feel like? Jake wrapped an arm around him, shifting Grant to the other. Can I help close up?

Oh, I think I want a calzone. I want sausage and cheese and garlic, and then I want a peach pie. He blew a kiss to Grant. “I’m just checking in a couple more books, that’s all.”

“Okay, love. I’ll check the hidey-holes and make sure no one is lurking. Then we can go, hmm?” Jake gave Grant a big smooch before putting him down in his carrier. “Be right back.”

“Be back. Be back. Be back, be back!”

Goddess, Grant made him laugh with his little songs.

Samuel finished up at the desk, stacking all of the books and making sure everything was just perfect for the next time they were open. Then he checked Grant's diaper and got them ready to go.

"Look who I found."

Samuel blinked, glancing over at Jake. "You found someone? I've been watching the door. I don't understand."

Everyone who had come had left.

"Yes." Jake came out from the shelves, holding this little white and silver ball of fur. "She was in the back, curled up underneath the stacks. I just barely caught a glimpse of her tail. Lucky, or I might have missed her."

"Puppy." Grant's eyes went wide. "Puppy!"

"Goddess, it is a puppy. It's just little." Samuel traded the puppy for Grant and kind of snuggled it to his chest. Her eyes opened—the color as clear as the best bright morning, blue like the best summer's day.

Samuel's heart just melted. "Oh my gosh, look at you, you're something else."

That earned him a little wiggle and a tiny whimper. "I think we need to give him some food and some water. You ready to go home? I can wait on the calzone."

"I'll get someone to deliver calzone and peach pie to the house. Fair enough?"

"That would be great." He stroked the little one's head. "Were there anymore? Did you see a mom? I don't even understand how he got in here. Is there a hole? Like in the floor and the ceiling or a wall?"



Jake shrugged, jostling Grant, who was fighting to get down and see the puppy. “I didn’t see anything. I’ll have someone come and just do a good solid once-over while you’re closed. But I sure didn’t notice anything. You didn’t see anyone come? They could have dropped it off.”

Samuel shook his head, and they headed out the door together. “No, no, I was at the front all day. And while we had clients for sure, no one had anything that would have made me think there was a puppy in it. I mean, I have literally a list of every single dragon who came in. I could call them all but...”

“Dragons get their familiars when they need them. That’s a biological thing.” A lovely young woman with skin the color of a moonlit sky wandered up to the desk, her eyes like little stars in the darkness.

“I’m so sorry the library is closed. We reopen day after tomorrow.” Samuel couldn’t help but smile though. There was something about her that was just a comfort.

“I’m not here for the library. I’m here for you. Simon sent me.”

“Simon,” Jake asked. “Like Logan’s Simon?”

She nodded, pulling her long robes around her. There wasn’t a bit of hair on her head, but it seemed perfect, as if that was exactly how she ought to look. “Celeste. I give myself to the guardian’s family and to the children until the end of time.”

She held out one hand as if to offer them something. And before either Samuel or Jake could reach for her, little Grant plopped his fat hand out and set it in the center of her palm.

“Hewwo.”

“Hello, Grant.”

“Cesty.” Grant grabbed a hold of her, his little hand curling around her index finger.

“Home. Hungy. Ammu hungry.”

“I imagine he is.” Celeste smiled. “I’ll order the calzone and peach pie if you tell me what you would like, Jake.”

“Uh.” Jake gave Samuel a panicky look. “I would like a sausage and onion pizza and maybe a cinnamon roll? If they still have one.”

“Absolutely. If they don’t, I can make cinnamon rolls.” She gave them a serene smile and grabbed Grant out from Jake’s arms. “I’ll put him in the car seat. Would you like to ride with Jake, Samuel? I can take your car. The puppy will need formula and puppy pads. That sort of thing.”

“You’re sure he doesn’t belong to somebody else?” Jake asked.

“Relatively. We can certainly ask Bumper when we get home.”

Samuel nodded. “That sounds like a good idea. Bumper should know.” This was insane. He had no idea how a wolf was supposed to know that a puppy didn’t have family. He had no idea how Simon had sent this woman to be...what? Their nanny? Their live-in housekeeper? Their protector?

All the things that Simon was to Logan. It was crazy. He looked at Jake. “Are you freaking out like I am?”

Jake nodded. “I am. This is the most bizarre thing that’s ever happened to me, and that’s saying a lot lately.”

“Right?”

Celeste just sailed calmly on, getting Grant in his car seat, picking him up, and heading to the truck. So Samuel and Jake followed, Samuel cradling the puppy, Jake locking up the library for him.

He had no idea what they were going to do when they got home. Samuel assumed that they would have to make Celeste up a room. Did they have rooms for someone like her at his and Jake’s house? Would rooms for her just appear like some sort of strange, magical required space?

Jake was going to have to call Logan. Have to. This was...out of his range of knowledge. At his former wing? They all lived in a single, huge compound. There were servants to take care of meals and such, but...

Don’t worry, love. I’ll find out what we need to know.

He gave Jake a relieved smile . Thank you.

“I’ll meet you at the house!” Celeste strapped Grant into Jake’s truck, then went to Samuel’s little car. How had she even gotten the key? She was magic.

“I think I’m going to pass out.” He blinked at Jake. “You should call Logan.”

“I will. As soon as—” Jake jerked his chin toward where Celeste was driving off.

“Okay. Come on.” He got in the truck. “Now I think she can’t hear us.”

Jake immediately called Logan and put him on speaker. “Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.”

“What’s wrong?” Logan was so sensitive. “I’m in Dallas, but I can be there in two hours.”

“No, I just need you to tell me what to do.”

“Well, when two dragons really love each other...”

“Ha-ha. So not funny. There’s a Celeste.”

“Oh, go Simon. He said he put feelers out for a Keeper for your family. That happened fast.”

“She—Logan, she had keys to my car! She knew what we wanted to eat!” And it was weird. Samuel knew it.

“That’s their magic. It only works for your family. Her goal is to give you what you need. That’s her purpose, her happiness. Your job is to give her a home, a place to create, and to appreciate her work.”

“Oh. Okay.” Samuel chewed his lip. “I wouldn’t want to make her sad.”

“Only certain dragons are called to be Keepers. No one is more honored. You know that.” Logan stopped. “Surely your wing had Keepers, Samuel.”

“I was...kept in my space. If so, I never met one.”

“Ah.” Logan’s voice went sympathetic. “Well, congratulations. Take my word for it. It won’t take long for you to get used to her being with you.”

“You swear?” Jake chuckled softly.

“Cesty!” Grant crowed.

“Yes, sweetie. Celeste.”

The puppy moaned as if to agree, and Samuel patted his little butt. Her? Poor thing.

“It’s all right. We’ll get you some food and water soon.” He kept petting, stroking the little pup. “He’ll be all right, won’t he?”

“Of course.” Jake gave him a sideways grin. “We saved it. Can you look? Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I think a girl.” He lifted the puppy up to peek at her underside. “Yep.”

“Okay, cool. Wow.”

“Wait, there’s a puppy?” Logan asked.

“Yes. I found her in the stacks at the library.”

“Holy shit. Well, congratulations on the new familiar.”

“Thanks. We’ll see how Bumper likes her.”

“Bumper will open one eye, stare at her, and go back to sleep,” Logan accused.

“Hey, are you implying my wolf is lazy?”

Samuel giggled at the byplay. “He’s a little chill.”

“He’s saving all of his energy to try to keep up with Grant once he’s got more will of his own.”

Samuel didn’t think it had anything to do with Grant’s will, no matter what Logan said. He thought it had to do with the fact that right now, the baby gate was high

enough that Grant couldn't get over it. Goddess help him when that little boy learned how to fly.

"Are your people early flyers?" he asked, the idea suddenly more than vaguely horrifying.

"No..." Jake looked concerned. "Were yours?"

"We both could fly before we could walk, so obviously he took after your side of the family."

"Oh wow." Jake chuckled. "But then I've not taught him, either. Maybe you guys had a better example."

"Maybe, but we can wait a little..." He wasn't ready for flying.

"I think that's a good idea."

Oh, he'd forgotten that Logan was on the line.

Jake chuckled. "Bye, Logan."

"Byeeee." Logan hung up, the beep sounding until Jake hit the end button.

"Wow." Jake glanced over at him as they pulled up to the house. "Okay, so are we ready for all this?"

"Do we have a choice?" This was life—dealing with things you weren't ready for.

"No." Jake took his hand and kissed it. "But I'm here with you no matter what, huh?"

“Ditto. Let’s get the puppy in before Celeste comes back with the food.”

“Yeah. I have an x-pen in the garage.” Jake smiled for him, and Samuel felt a warm ball of light start in his chest and spread to his whole body. “You’re glowing, mate.”

“Ammu!”

“Hmm?” He looked at his hands. “Oh! Goodness. I’ve never done that before.”

Jake chuckled. “Dakota did it when he was pregnant.”

“Yeah? That’s a good thing, right?” It had felt like an incredibly good thing.

“Yes. I think so.” Jake leaned across the console to kiss him, and they piled out of the truck to go inside.

He had a lot of things to do before Celeste and the pizza arrived, but he had a feeling it would be all right.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:21 am*

Chapter

Twenty-One

“S amuel?”

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing?” Jake stared down at Samuel, who sat on the floor, surrounded by paint chips and scraps of fabric.

“Looking at how to decorate the nursery. Lars brought all this over, and Celeste helped me spread it all out. She’s making pancakes. No, no, Gala. No chewing the swatches.” Samuel took the cloth away from the puppy, who had decided her name was Gala and who didn’t need the x-pen because she had Bumper to herd her around and pick her up by the scruff and take her outside when she needed to pee.

This was his life now.

Jake loved it.

“Ammu! Ammu, out!” Grant was grumpy, sleepy, and a bunch of the other dwarves. But he didn’t wanna nap.

Grant wanted to play with the paint chips.

“Baby, go to sleep, or I’m gonna have to put you up in your bed to take your nap.”



“Would it be okay if I rock him to sleep? We could talk about paint chips...” Jake offered.

Samuel seemed to ponder that, while taking a bright yellow chip out of the puppy’s mouth. “She likes the sunflower, and sure. See if it’ll work.”

“Oh, I bet it does. I’m not as frustrated as you are.” Jake scooped the baby up, and Grant snuggled in, victorious.

“He has to take a nap,” Samuel pointed out.

“I’m on it. Napping.” Jake nodded at Samuel and offered him a smile. “Historically, I’ve been pretty good at getting him down for a nap.”

Samuel rolled his eyes. “Historically, you’re like, the best dad ever, but that’s okay, because I am a pretty darned good Ammu.”

“Is that what you’re going to have the new baby call you? Ammu.”

“That’s my name, and it’s amazing because Grant gave it to me. I’m very proud of it.”

Yeah, Jake thought it was special. It was personal, and it was unique, so Samuel should run with it.

“It is. I think it’s kind of great. You knew right away who your Ammu was? Didn’t you?”

Grant looked at Jake and pointed over to Samuel like ‘he’s right there, stupid.’

And that cracked Samuel up.

“Right, right. Dumb Daddy.” Jake rolled his eyes just like Samuel had. “Did you say you were going to paint the nursery yellow?”

“No, love, I said Gala wanted to paint the nursery yellow. I’m considering pastels in all different colors.”

“Yeah. I painted Grant’s red and black and white because they said that’s what babies see first.”

“Yes, but it is a little jarring, you have to admit.” Jarring. Horrifying. Just ugly . “I was thinking about possibly repainting it in a nice anything else.”

Jarring, huh? Amused, Jake chuckled . “Okay, sure. But something green or maybe purple, right, buddy? To match all your dinosaurs.”

“Rawr! Saur! RAWR!”

Gala and Bumper immediately started howling, and Samuel pursed his lips, silently holding up a palette of light green, blue, pink, and peach.

He nodded, bouncing Grant to get him to stop roaring. Nap. Not ramping up. Then maybe he would get a snuggle from his mate.

“It’s wild, isn’t it?” Samuel threw a ball for Gala, and she went running for it, Bumper right on her tail.

Grant threw himself back, trying to get out of Jake’s arms. “Baaaaaaaall.”

“I’m just trying to stand up,” Samuel explained. “My butt is numb.”

“Baaaaaaaall!”

Jake wasn't sure he understood how Samuel did this. The dragon who was used to almost preternatural peace and quiet?

Now lived in the damn looney bin.

Jake stared at Grant. "You're supposed to be napping, buddy." But he put him down in favor of helping Samuel.

"Baaaall!" Grant went crashing after the dogs and went right through the doggy door.

Samuel stared at him. "Wow."

"Yep. Be right back." He chugged out after Grant. Bumper would keep him from getting hurt, but still.

By the time he got out there, Grant had the ball in his mouth, growling as he and Gala fought over it.

Jake had to laugh helplessly, because Bumper looked downright distressed. "I know. Pups, huh? Grant, honey, that's their ball."

"Grr." But Grant started giggling, and the ball popped out, Gala running after it.

"You are a crazy little boy. You make me laugh so hard." He blew a raspberry on Grant's neck after he picked up his son.

Grant patted his cheeks. "Clazy."

"I adore you." He grinned, hauling Grant back inside. Bumper would look after Gala and bring her in when she was tired. "Shall we have a nap?"

“Napses.”

“That’s my boy. If you promise not to kick, we can lie down with Ammu.”

“Baby.”

“Exactly. He’s got the baby, and we can’t let them get hurt.”

Grant nodded to him. “Ammu. Baby. Mine.”

“Yes, your Ammu’s having a baby.”

“Mine.”

“Your brother or sister? Yes.” Jake could feel how hard Grant was concentrating, but Jake just wasn’t sure what he meant.

“Yesh. Mine babby. Mine Ammu. Mine Da. Mine pup-pup!”

“Ah. Yes, my love.” He danced Grant in a circle. “We’re your family. All of us.” Grant was something else. So confident.

Grant crowed and threw his arms wide. “Ammu! Nappies! Come to nappies!”

“Okay.” Samuel chuckled, coming to kiss them both on their cheeks. “I’m so ready.” He laid the swatches and chips on the table. “Couch or bed?”

“Oh, bed, so we can all stretch out. Do you need me to carry you too?”

“No, love. I’m good. What about the puppy? Should I bring her in?”

“No, she’ll be fine. Bumper is obsessed. He won’t let her get into trouble.” That big wolf was in love.

“Okay. Then I won’t let our Grant get in trouble either. Fair?” Samuel smiled, and Grant squealed.

“Totally fair.” He let Samuel lead the way to their bedroom, which was so much more...comfortable now. It had always been utilitarian, but now there were books strewn about and fluffy pillows all over, and his clothes were put away.

It was as if Samuel just made things better by existing.

It wasn’t like he’d been a slob or anything, but now everything felt like...family.

“Da! Seeping! Nap!” Goddess save him from when his son grew big enough to take over the universe.

Because Jake had the suspicion that Grant could. It took all kinds.

He kicked off his shoes and shimmied out of his jeans, trading them out for a pair of soft sweats.

Grant cuddled in next to Samuel, snoring dramatically. He was inhaling with an “ahh,” and blowing each of his breaths out with the little “shew” at the end.

Samuel looked at him, barely holding back his laughter.

He snuggled into the bed covers, pulling the blankets up over them. “Love you guys.”

“I love you both,” Samuel answered.

“Luffs, naps, ni-ni.”

“Ni-ni, baby boy.” He kissed Grant on the head, and he felt Bumper hop up, depositing the puppy on the bed before curling up.

The gang was all there.

And his life was better than he could ever have imagined.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Two

“Samuel, would you like the changing table here?” Celeste was marking off the nursery with painter’s tape, insisting that he sit, because he suddenly felt huge. It was like he’d swallowed a basketball overnight.

Their family attendant, for lack of a better phrase, had proven to be a godsend. She was calm when he was emotional. Physically, she could work like a draft horse.

And she made the best cinnamon rolls ever. As good as Simon’s, and that was saying something.

“That’s a great spot for it. Far enough from the crib that she—” She. He put a hand on his belly. Oh. She.

Jake? Mate? I need you.

“Are you well, Samuel?” Celeste asked.

“Fine. She kicked.”

Celeste clapped her hands and made a happy noise. “Oh, that’s wonderful.”

I’m coming, love! In seconds, Jake was thundering up the stairs, and he heard the click of dog and wolf nails, too.

It's a girl. She's a girl. I know she's a girl. She moved. He was going to pass out.

Jake came and grabbed him up in a hug, swinging him around gently. "Wow! A girl. Can you hear her?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I think so?"

"Baby." Jake kissed him hard, and his ears rang a little. And when he glanced up, panting, afterward, he noticed Celeste was gone. "We're all alone."

"Uh-huh." Samuel blinked up at Jake. "We are?"

"We are."

"Oh." Samuel's cheeks heated, and he grinned. "Are we going to do anything about it?"

"Listen to you. This is a baby's room."

"Your daughter's room." Samuel grabbed Jake's hand. "Show me yours..."

"Ours, mate," Jake told him.

The words still pleased him so.

Jake tugged at his hand, and he followed Jake to their room. He wanted kisses and cuddles, and as excited as he was about the baby, he needed Jake to focus on him suddenly. Just him.

He locked the door behind them, knowing Celeste had Grant and the puppies. "I need you."



“I want you too, baby. It seems like it’s been forever.” Jake took him in those strong arms again, kissing him deeply.

He opened up, letting Jake love him like no one else.

Those big hands slid under his butt, lifting him, and Samuel giggled when he had to wiggle a bit to get around his belly. But that was okay. Jake was right there with them.

“Going to love you forever, sweet dragon. For the rest of eternity.”

“Promise?” Jake grinned. “I feel like we ought to take advantage of the fact that Grant has someone to take care of him when he wakes up from his nap.”

All the while Jake spoke, his fingers were busy tugging and pulling at cloth and then, before Samuel knew it, they were both naked.

“I feel like that’s really a good idea.” Samuel wiggled, working his way back toward the bed till his legs hit the mattress.

“See, I knew you’d share my goal.” Jake helped him lie back on the pillows, then came down with him, spreading his legs to kneel between them. He was hard and ready, his cock rising proudly from the nest of hair at his groin, and Samuel could only stare.

This was his. Jake was his mate, and he still couldn’t believe it.

“I am goal oriented,” Samuel said, reaching for that sweet cock.

“Mmmhmm.” Jake arched, muscles flexing, skin turning in nice dark pink. “I have always liked that about you.”

Samuel giggled. “Don’t lie. You hated me to begin with.”

Jake gave him a hard look. “I never, ever hated you. I was suspicious of the situation, and I was freaked out, but I never hated you. You need to know that.”

So, that had turned serious quickly. Samuel just nodded. “I believe you. I understand. Now kiss me again.”

A huge smile curving his lips, Jake bent down to do just that, hand on either side of his chest so that he didn’t crush Samuel. That made their lower bodies meet, their cocks rubbing together, and Samuel moaned, a rush of wetness making him ready for Jake.

“I want you inside me. I want your knot.” Maybe it was too soon, but Samuel didn’t want to wait. He wanted a wild loving that matched the fire in his belly that was growing deeper and needier all the time.

“Let me just check you and see.” Jake easily slid a finger inside of him, making his toes curl.

“I’m ready for you. I’m always ready for you.”

“I do love that.” Jake reared up, lifting Samuel’s hips with one hand while using the other to guide his cock into place. “I think you’re right. You feel like you’re ready.”

Panting, he arched up, begging for it. “I am. Come on, please,” Samuel said.

Catching his gaze, Jake slid forward pushing right into him, and it was exactly what he needed. The friction, the pressure everything was just what he had to have, and he was not going to last very long at this rate.

Jake began to move, pushing in and out, thrusting, not so hard that it moved him on the bed but hard enough that he felt every inch of it. It was perfect. It was gentle and sweet, and yeah, that was fast and furious, and it was giving him life right now.

“So damn hot, baby, so freaking amazing.” Jake kept moving, kept pushing, and all Samuel could do was let it happen, his hands fisting in the sheets next to him.

“I can feel your knot.” He could too. He could feel it swelling in him. It had been far too long. This whole parenting thing was hard, and he was grateful that they had someone in the house now that could help with that so he and Jake could have time together like this. Being in bed with Jake in the middle of the day felt decadent.

Jake groaned, sweat dripping off of him. “It’s just right. Oh, baby, I can’t?—”

“And you don’t have to. Just take me.” Samuel wrapped his legs around Jake, and they moved together hard and fast. A little awkward because of his belly, but it didn’t matter. They were there together, and happy. So happy.

He could feel it when Jake’s knot swelled to the point where it was hard to move, and he knew that soon he was gonna come because his ass started to clench in rhythmic motions.

“Oh, God, I feel you, baby.”

“I feel you too, Jake.” He clawed at Jake’s back, his body on fire, his lungs desperately needing air.

“Come with me. Come with me now,” Jake said, and he could sense the hard, deep spatter of Jake’s seed inside him.

Samuel cried out, his head falling back, his hips punching up. He came hard, liquid

heat splattering between them.

“Oh, yeah.” He gave a happy moan. “That’s it. That’s what I needed.”

Jake’s soft chuckle matched his little sigh. “I know exactly what you mean.”

Jake pushed off to one side a little bit, rolling them to face each other, still joined where the knot wouldn’t let go. “I love you, baby.”

Samuel reached up to touch Jake’s cheek. “I love you too. We’re gonna have a baby.”

Jake kissed his palm. “We are. I can’t wait to see what she’s like.”

That made Samuel laugh. “Yeah, let’s just hope she’s not as focused as Grant.”

“God help us. If that happens, we’ll need at least two more familiars.”

### Chapter

### Twenty-Three

Jake was working on a drainage ditch with Bea when his phone buzzed where it sat on the tailgate of his truck.

“Can you grab that, Bea? I’m kind of knee-deep in muck.”

Sweat dripped down his back, the late summer trundling into early fall, and they were all pitching in to shore up the town before winter came on again.

Although the snows this year should be less crazy than the last winter.

“It’s Dakota...”

“Put it on speaker.” Weird.

“What’s up, man?” he hollered.

“Amber called me. There are strange dragons sniffing at the coffee shop about Samuel and Grant.”

“What kind of strange dragons?” Adrenaline flooded his body, making his heart race. Who would be looking for Samuel?

“I don’t know. I don’t think they were enforcers of any kind. They looked kind of

aristocratic.”

Shit. He might have been happier with enforcers. This sounded like someone from Samuel’s keep. “What did you tell them?”

“I didn’t tell them anything. I told him I hadn’t seen Samuel. I lied my ass off to buy you some time.”

“Where are they now?”

“I don’t think they could get across the wards without feeling uncomfortable, so they’re at the Golddigger having lunch.”

“Okay. Okay, cool, let me get out of this ditch.”

Dakota laughed. “Why are you in a ditch?”

“Bea and I are having to fix a pipe. Frank Garcia lost his dog and threw his back out.”

“Oh, man, it sounds like Frank’s having a shitty day. I’ll send him a casserole.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Jake said, trying to keep the heavy irony out of his voice. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Anytime. If they come back up this direction, I’ll let you know.”

Dakota hung up, and Bea looked at him from over the side. “Need a hand?”

“Yeah, I need to make some calls at the very least.” He reached up, and Bea hauled his ass up out of the culvert, his feet making sucking noises as the water and mud pulled at him. At least he didn’t lose a boot.

Jake wiped his hands off on a piece of T-shirt he'd brought with him to use as rags, and then called Celeste at the house.

"Jake, how odd to hear from you in the middle of the workday."

"Thanks." He had to grin. Celeste was always so forthright. "Look, somebody has been in town asking around about Samuel. No one has shown up at the house, have they?"

"No. Goodness, I would know if they had, but I'll keep an eye out now."

"Please do. I brought Bumper with me to work today to give him a break from the puppy." Lazy butthead was sitting in the truck, but he was there, and the puppy, Grant, and Samuel were home with Celeste. Samuel had been super tired today.

"Of course, of course. Where were these people when they were last spotted?"

"At the Golddigger having lunch."

"Ah, good. That means they were probably having trouble getting across the wards."

"That's what Dakota thinks, but you never know when somebody's going to fall for a sob story or something and drive them in."

"Goodness, that sounds awful. Yes, I'll keep an eye on it."

"Samuel still asleep?" Jake asked.

"I'm afraid so. He got up and had some decaf tea, and then went right back to bed."

"Poor baby." He knew it was way too early for Samuel to be worrying about having

the baby, but she'd been giving him fits ever since she decided to start kicking and pushing and growing in a big way.

"No one will get in this house, Jake."

"No one's getting past the wards." He wasn't worried. Much.

"I hope so. Should I have Samuel call you when he awakens?"

"Please. Bea and I will wash up real quick and head to the Digger for lunch."

"But you don't want him to meet you, correct?"

"No. Goddess no." He chuckled. "Whatever they want, I want to find out and warn them off. Samuel is part of our wing now."

"Yes. Yes, this is home. I'll keep things well here." There was a thread of steel in Celeste's voice.

"I know you will. I believe in you as part of our family, lady."

"You honor me. I'll have him call when he wakes."

"Thank you." He hit the end button, then looked at Bea. "We need to head into town. I think maybe Samuel's family sent someone to talk to him." It had better be just to talk.

"Well, I'm hungry for lunch. I'll warn Lars and Logan to keep watch." Bea stripped mud off her arms. "They won't be mad if we're a little dirty."

"That's what I figure. Celeste knows, but Samuel isn't feeling great, and I don't want



to wake him for possibly bad news. Golddigger it is.”

“You are on. Do we get to have a fight? Please?”

“Oh, I doubt it. Dakota says they look swanky.” He grinned. “Maybe they’re my in-laws and they just need a hug.” He indicated his filthy clothes.

“You are the best son-in-law ever!” Bea’s eyes twinkled. “I can’t wait to welcome them.”

“Right?” He did put a towel down in the truck seat. “Ready?”

“Hell, yes.” Bea grinned, the look toothy as fuck. “Let’s cause trouble.”

He chuckled, getting the truck fired up so he could head to town. Bea called Logan and filled him in on the way, and they got to the grill, noticing a shiny late-model rental. Far nicer than the one they’d afforded Samuel when he’d arrived.

Jake wanted to growl, but he knew he had to tread carefully. He wasn’t just a mate. He was a wing guardian. He was representing the entire dragon wing. All of his people, not just his Samuel and Grant.

“Fancy.” Bea rolled her eyes as she drawled the word out. “At least he comes from money.”

Jake shot her a glare. “Shut up. Money? They didn’t even want to give him his hoard back.”

She nodded, her expression suddenly serious. “I’m just giving you shit, now. You know how I feel about abusers.”

That was true. Bea didn't hold with assholes. Hell, she was absolutely amazing.

"How do you want to play this man?" Bea asked.

"We go in. We assess the situation. They don't get to go up in the wing. The worst-case scenario is that I get a hold of Samuel, let him know that they're looking for him."

It wasn't as if they were going to be able to take Samuel or Grant. Samuel was fully grown, and there was no doubt about their nonexistent claim to Grant.

None.

"Okay, that works. Just remember, if we have to, I'm very good at biting." She glanced over and offered a grin.

He wanted to smile back, but he just couldn't. He didn't like this—didn't like that no one had even bothered to call Samuel and tell him they were coming. This wasn't how this whole thing was supposed to work.

Jake might not have a lot of blood family left, but he had a lot of wing family, and he knew this was not how they treated each other. These people were after something, and he didn't know what it was. Yet.

Taking a deep breath and nodding at Bea, he headed inside the restaurant.

"Jake, hey, good to have you here for lunch." Lila waved and walked over to not offer her hand, because obviously she saw how filthy he was.

"We thought we'd drop in." He grinned back at her, but he was searching the restaurant, looking for the people who had invaded their space.

The pair were sitting at the far end of the grill by the big windows, a man and a woman, immaculately dressed and coiffed. A little old-fashioned maybe, but they had an air of sophistication and wealth about them. They didn't fit in in Oro Escondido at all.

"Come on. I'll give you a table over here by the windows." Lila knew absolutely what was going on.

"Thanks. We appreciate it," Bea said, her tone gruff.

Lila led them to the table closest to the interlopers and put the menus down for them. "What do you folks want to drink?"

"I'll take a Mexican Coke," Bea said.

"I'll just take some iced tea," Jake added. He was still sizing up Samuel's family. They were of the age to be Samuel's parents, and he wondered what the hell they were thinking.

"I'll be right back." Lila headed off to get their drinks.

"So you think we're gonna get that pipe laid today?" Bea asked, making conversation, he could tell, just to keep things rolling.

"Maybe. It depends on what happens." He kind of jerked his head toward the table where Samuel's people were sitting.

"Sure. It's always hard when wing politics interferes with making things work for the town."

"No shit." He saw the woman's head jerk when he said that word, and he was like,

wow she's so fancy, isn't she, thinking a simple swear word was offensive.

Bea's next salvo got their attention at the next table, for certain. "How is Samuel doing?"

He and Bea had already talked about Samuel this morning, so she was just stirring up shit, which was great. "Oh, you know, he's having some morning sickness still, just a little, and he's really tired today."

"That sucks. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Hey, you know how it is."

"I do. When Mickey was pregnant, I thought she was just going to go to sleep like Rip Van Winkle and not get up again for years."

"Well, between the library and the baby and being pregnant, he's got a lot on his plate."

"Yeah. But he's doing great, and Celeste has been a huge help. It's good to have a family helper." He made a point of raising his voice on that, so they knew Samuel wasn't alone.

Their frowns just kept getting deeper and deeper. It was ridiculous, and it infuriated him.

"He ever hear anything from his family?" Bea asked loudly.

"Not since they shipped all his books and said good riddance."

"He doesn't need them. They don't deserve him. Pieces of shit."

That got a loud, outraged gasp from the lady. The man stood up from his chair, slapping the table with his hands.

“That’s quite enough. Obviously, you know we’re here to see Samuel.”

Jake rose too, allowing himself to pull up to his full height, letting his copper scales show. “If you were here to actually see him, you would have called first. What do you want?”

“We want the baby raised in a decent wing!” the lady said, eyebrows up, hand on her chest.

“Which baby?” He crossed his arms and leaned his hip against the table, waiting. Which one was more important to them? Grant, or Samuel’s and his little girl? They both had the same blood.

“The little boy. He’s Susan’s child.”

“Grant is my son.” He kept his hands hidden because they were clenching with anger. “He was my sister’s son, and he’s been with me his whole life.”

“That’s an oversight.”

“Pardon me?”

That wasn’t Bea.

Or Logan.

Or Lars.

That was their oldest guardian Jason's wife, Theresa, who was standing there, her eyes blazing. "What the hell did you say?"

The other woman drew herself up. "I said, it was an oversight. Samuel was meant to bring him back. He failed."

"Let me get this straight." Theresa tilted her head, her earrings clacking. "You sent your proxy to our wing to fulfill custodial rights for your family, yes?"

"Well, yes, but?—"

Theresa held up one hand, cutting her off. "And so, since your chosen proxy has taken his custodial rights, the letter of the law has been fulfilled. You sent him here."

"To bring the baby home."

"Do you even know his name?" Jake spat.

Samuel's father growled. "He's our grandson."

Theresa just shook her head. "Samuel is your proxy. He came here to fulfill your wing's rights. He chose to remain, and you gave your implicit blessing by sending his things." Theresa looked at him. "Jake, dear. Does Samuel have access to Grant at least fifty percent of the time?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Then you are willing to share custody of Grant with Samuel, fifty percent of the time?"

Presently Jake knew full well that Samuel had adoption papers in with the court, and

it was just a matter of waiting. Theresa was their lawyer, after all. “Yes, ma’am.”

She looked at who Jake could only assume was Samuel’s mother. “The rule of law has been fulfilled. The baby is with your family member half of the year.”

“That’s not the same. We want him at our wing.”

“That would be up to his fathers, wouldn’t it?” Theresa looked to Jake again. “How say you?”

“Samuel and I are fine right where we are. Thanks for thinking of us though. We sure do appreciate it.” He drawled out the words as offensively as he could. Bea snorted behind him.

Jake? Love? Is everything all right? Celeste says people are looking for me.

He pursed his lips. She wasn’t supposed to tell you.

I sort of went all head of household on her.

Your parents are here wanting Grant.

“Are you listening to me, you third-rate dinky wing asshole?”

Jake’s attention arrowed back to the current situation. His brows snapped down, and the very earth around the grill began to rumble. “What did you say?”

“You heard me! I am of the Patriolous Wing! I have a lineage. You’re just—just an upstart.”

There was a crack as a rock exploded outside.

“No, Jake,” Lila murmured. “Don’t kill my business.”

Jake?

Your dad stepped in it, baby.

A rumble of thunder sounded next, black clouds gathering over the building.

“I think, perhaps, you should go.” That was Bea. “I’d go right now, if I was you. Storm’s coming.”

The woman, because he still didn’t know anything but their wing name, moved closer to the man. “Is Samuel?—”

“Aware that you’re here? Yeah. I don’t have to make the earth move, even though I can. Not when he can make the skies split.”

Lila murmured softly. “Should I make him some cheese enchiladas?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I want to see my grandson!”

Jake roared, making Samuel’s parents step back. “No! If you had called? If you had shown up and apologized and asked to see your pregnant son? I might have said yes. But no, you don’t get to poison either of them with your presence.”

“You can’t?—”

“He can.” Logan’s voice was deadly quiet. “He’s Samuel’s mate and a guardian.”



Jake felt like the whole wing had his back, and he couldn't be prouder. Lars walked in with Logan, and Jason arrived moments later, the guardians forming a semicircle behind him.

“This is Samuel's wing. Grant's wing. He's home with his family.” Jake straightened his back, holding their gaze. “Whether or not he speaks with you—ever? That's up to him. His choice.”

“I suggest now that you leave and wait for him to contact you.” That was Jason, glowing like a platinum dragon should.

The woman's shoulders slumped, but she jumped when another crack of thunder sounded. “Yes. I think you're right.”

They're leaving, love.

Good.

I'm heading home. I'll bring food.

Please. I'm starving. Bring enough for Celeste.

Of course.

“I'll make sure they get on their way,” Lars murmured.

“I appreciate it, my friends, I can't thank you enough. Cookout at my house this weekend.” He shook hands and gave hugs all around.

“I'll finish up with Bea,” Logan said. “Go be with your mate once your food is set.”

“I will. Thank you.” He grabbed Logan in a hug. “Brother.”

Logan hugged back, whacking him once.

Lila brought out a whole bag of food a few minutes later. “Here, Jake. All the good stuff, including carrot cake.”

“You are my favorite. Cookout at my place this weekend.”

“We’ll be there.”

“Thank you. All of you.” He headed outside so he could go home to Samuel. What a mind-fuck.

They were waiting for him, sitting outside the restaurant in their car, and he felt his hackles rise.

The alpha opened the car door, stepped out, and lifted a box, “We brought Susan’s child his birthright.”

What? Their son was chopped liver?

“And you couldn’t even be arsed to send Samuel his books until I forced you. Why do you hate him so?”

“We don’t.”

“He never was going to amount to anything. He simply stayed with his books. There’s little need for that in a wing.”

He fought his temper. Again. “Good thing we need him here, then. What is it you

want to give Grant? I'll decide if he needs it."

The dragon handed the box over. "Rubies. They were from her hoard. She left them behind."

Jake felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. "I'll see what Samuel says." That was all he was willing to give.

One oh-so-haughty lip curled. "They're not for Samuel. They are for Susan's son."

"You just handed them to me, and he's my son. I say who gets to decide what." He turned on his heel and walked away before he got ugly.

Come home. They can't have what they came for.

No. No, they cannot. Jake strode to his truck, wishing he could just fly, but?—

Go. I'll get Lars to drive your truck home, Logan told him.

So he took off his shirt, wrapping the rubies in it, and he shifted, taking off for home carrying the food and the gifts, hurrying to get through the wing's barriers where it was safe. This was going to shave off long minutes that he needed to spend with Samuel.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Four

It was storming at Samuel's house. He tried not to let his aggravation at his parents spill over into his life, but he thought it was a win that it wasn't raining in the house, just on the house. And so far, no lightning had actually hit anything of any importance.

That could still happen.

Samuel could tell that Jake was coming home. Was flying home even with the food, and he wasn't sure if he was starving to death or nauseated. Possibly both. He wanted to throw up. The baby wanted him to eat.

God knew, storming took a lot out of a dragon.

"Why are they so mean?" he asked Grant.

Grant blinked at him and frowned deeply. "Mean."

"Yes, they're so mean. And I don't know why. They're supposed to like me."

Grant tilted his head again and toddled over to him, holding his arms up high.

"Uppies. Picking me up."

"You're demanding."

“Picking me up.” The water faucet in the kitchen turned on.

And Celeste moved to turn it off. “Don’t do that.”

“Picky me up.” The refrigerator door opened.

“Not until you shut the door.”

Celeste stopped in her tracks on her way to close the door. Grant tilted his head. And the refrigerator shut. This was so going to be a problem when he turned thirteen or fourteen? They were going to have to put him in a steel box deep under the ground. They’d just drop food and magazines down periodically. Wash him off periodically with the hose.

Samuel grinned at Grant. “Thank you, baby.” And then he picked him up. Grant smelled good, and Samuel snuggled him close. “Your dad will be home soon, and then we’ll have food. Possibly a movie snuggle. Maybe two snuggles? Two are the greatest.”

Grant nodded. “Greatest. Two snuggles. One for me and one for you.”

There was a soft whomp in the backyard. Well, maybe it was more of a hard whomp and a splash. It was really kind of raining very hard.

Jake walked into the kitchen not long after that, drying off with a towel from the mudroom. “I think I managed to keep the food dry.” He dropped a kiss on Samuel’s mouth, but it was easy to see he was still working through a fury.

He had shaken the entire wing with his rumbles in the earth.

Between that and his lightning storm, he felt their point had been made.

“Smells yummy.”

“Lila sent enough for you too, Celeste.” Jake smiled at their family helper.

“Oh, that’s kind.” She smiled, but there was more than a hint of teeth about it.

He had to chuckle, even if there was no humor behind it. Everyone was in high dudgeon. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe they came here.”

“What’s so special about the rocks?” Jake unpacked food bags, grinning when Grant started grunting and making grabby hands.

“Rocks?” Samuel didn’t follow. “What rocks?”

“The parental units. They gave me like, rubies to keep for Grant. Said they were Susan’s.”

“Ah. They were the part of her hoard she didn’t leave with. It’s a shame, huh?”

“Yes.” Jake stared at him intently. “But why these? What’s so important about them?”

How on earth did he know? He hadn’t even seen them, as far as he knew. “Maybe they are just to be for Grant? Does he have the ones she brought with her?”

“He does, yeah. Tucked away in the vault. She had left instructions.” Jake shrugged. “We’ll put them all together, huh?”

“Yeah. Maybe they’ll sing or glow or…” Or maybe they would just make Grant smile. Maybe they didn’t mean anything.

“Let’s eat, huh?” Jake handed him a plate, and it had all the things. Fried chicken. Enchiladas. The hand pies were on the counter...

“Eating is good. Your baby is hungry.”

“I baby!” Grant announced.

“You are. But I have one in my belly, too, remember.”

Grant looked at his belly, then leaned close. “Hewwoooo, babby.”

Like she’d heard him, the baby kicked hard, responding to Grant, whose eyes went wide.

“Babby!”

He loved that Grant pronounced it different than he did baby for himself.

“Yes, that’s the baby. That’s your sister.”

“Babby, Ammu? Babby me?”

“Your baby? Yes. And you’re my little love.” Samuel never wanted Grant to have doubt that he was loved. Cared for. Important.

“Luff.” Grant kissed him, so sloppy.

“I love you too.”

“And I love both of you.” Jake beamed at him.

I'm sorry about my parents. He felt so...unwanted.

I love you. And they get this one pass from me because they made you and Susan. But if they ever hurt you again, all bets are off. Jake reached out to take his hand.

He held on, unsure of what to say. No one wanted him but Jake. Did that mean Jake was fooling himself?

Lightning flashed outside the house, making the pups jump and bark, and Grant began to cry.

Oh, no. What was wrong with him?

"Hey." Jake shifted Grant to one arm, reeling him in. "I have you."

"I'm so sorry." I don't mean to be...this.

This what?

Hurt? Mad? Affected? Stunned?

"Shh. Let me get Grant settled."

"Okay." He sniffled, trying not to upset their son any more than he had.

Jake kissed his forehead, then took Grant to the highchair to have his snack. They fed him in silence, then Jake took Grant to his playpen to have his nap.

Daddy? The little voice made Samuel blink. Daddy, Ammu sad.

Jake looked back at him, eyes wide.



“Was that...”

“I know, baby boy,” Jake told Grant. “I’ll help him feel better while you have a nap, hmm?” Jake’s grin just dawned like sunrise.

Samuel sat down with a thump.

He’d heard Grant. Like heard him.

Honestly, they were just lucky he didn’t have some sort of mental emotional tornado right here, right now.

Between his parents showing up out of the blue without even calling, Grant’s worrying about him, and him hearing Grant? He was a swirl of wild emotions.

Samuel supposed that was a little less dangerous than a hurricane of fury or something, but still.

At some point, the wing was going to start complaining about the rain.

A glass of cold water landed by his elbow, Celeste wandering by without a word.

“Thank you, lady.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going upstairs. I’ll hear Grant if he needs me.” And then she was off again, her scales rattling softly.

He sighed, feeling drained. The rain eased off to a soft patter on the roof, and he slumped onto one of the barstools at the kitchen pass-through.

“Hey.” Jake walked up, putting a hand on his back. “I love you.”

“I love you. I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I’m not enough. I tried, but I couldn’t be the dragon they needed.”

“You are enough.” Jake stroked his hair. “I know I didn’t help your self-esteem much when you showed up, but I was like a wolf with a thorn in its paw. I was hurting.” Jake kissed him gently. “You made it better.”

“I wanted to. Not at first. At first, I just wanted to be somewhere else.”

“I can understand that.” Jake pulled him off his stool, then grabbed the food and tugged him to sit on the couch. “We’ll nosh. Now I see why your sister just ran too.”

“She promised that she would come back for me, but...”

“But then she had a baby. And shit happened. But she led you here.”

“She did.” He suddenly teared up again. “I miss her. I loved her, so much, mate.”

“I know. I miss Jolie too.” They gave up on the food, Jake putting it on the coffee table in favor of holding him in those strong arms.

“I bet. I’m so sorry. I love you, you know. I’m sorry they died, but I’m glad I found you.”

“I’m glad too, sweet.” Jake cradled him close. “So glad. Grant and I are the luckiest of dragons.”

“I love you both. More than I can say.”

“Good. Then your old keep and your parents can fuck right off.”

“Fuck!” Grant said distinctly from his playpen.

Samuel’s eyes went wide. “Jake!”

“Oops.” Jake did not look contrite, but he felt the hum of communication between Jake and Grant, then Grant trilled.

“Sowwy.”

“You’re all right, sweet boy. That’s not a nice word.”

But Daddy said it.

Mmhmm. Daddy was being a bad dragon.

Grant’s happy laughter made him smile. He took a deep breath, then let it out. He had a place here. A family. No matter what his parents did.

He just needed to remember that.

More than that, he needed to embrace it.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Five

Jake ran a bath, putting in some of the oil Dakota swore would make Samuel's skin feel so nice.

His sweet mate had been feeling very down the last few weeks since his folks had been such shits, and while he'd been trying to be upbeat, Jake had decided Samuel needed pampering.

So Celeste had taken Grant to Lars's house for an uncle/nephew playdate, and he had Samuel all to himself.

He had all of Samuel's favorite foods, a hot bath, huge soft clothes that would help keep his lover cool.

So of course he had a fluffy blanket in case Samuel got cold.

"Love? Can you come up?" he called from the top of the stairs.

"Of course." He could hear Samuel puffing his way up the stairs. "I swear, it seems so quiet without Grant, and I think Bumper and his girl have gone to be alone—Oh." Samuel's eyes widened as he followed Jake to the master bedroom and bath. "Look at all this!"

Samuel had one hand on his belly, his eyes were wide, and there was a huge smile on

his face.

“Are you all right, love?” Jake asked. He should have gone and carried Samuel up.

“Yes. Yes, I’m—this is amazing. It’s for me?”

“It is. I wanted to have a special day. Should we start with the bath?”

“Are you going to join me?” Samuel was already stripping off.

“I am.” Jake loved that Samuel was so confident with him now, so ready to accept being loved and loving in return.

“Oh, good. I’m so ready to canoodle.”

“Did you just say canoodle?”

“Yep. I’m in an Edwardian phase.”

“Ah. Like Mary Poppins?” Wasn’t that vaguely Edwardian? He couldn’t think of a book. Jane Austen was Regency, he remembered. Dickens was Victorian.

And Shakespeare had been quite a dragon.

Samuel chuckled and offered him a long, hard kiss. Love you, mate.

I love you too. Now come and have a bath, and then we’ll eat. He paused, hands on the hem of his henley, because Samuel was so damn beautiful it made his heart clench.

Keep going. I love to see you.

Sorry. Jake grinned wryly, then pulled his shirt off over his head, letting Samuel see his chest and belly.

“So perfect. You don’t think I look...too big?”

“No. I think you look like mine. My mate. Who is working to give us a child. I could not be more proud.” His chest swelled with emotion, his feelings for Samuel too big to hold in.

“I love you too.” Samuel chuckled, and they climbed into the huge tub, Samuel sliding to sit between his thighs.

He wrapped his arms around Samuel, the warm water so good on his skin, on his scales. He could feel Samuel relax, letting the water and Jake’s touch buoy him. So sweet.

“Mmm... This feels so good.”

Jake knew, the sun was pouring through the window—warm and comfortable and bright. The steam rose around them, relaxing sore muscles.

“This is amazing, love. I knew it would be just the thing.”

“It is. Thank you. I haven’t been unhappy, but... I’m awfully swollen.”

“You did say you were feeling really uncomfortable.” And with Grant away with Lars and Celeste, they were all getting a breather.

“Dakota assures me that this is absolutely perfectly normal in every way. But I have to tell you, sometimes it feels like I’ve swallowed a live alligator. That desperately wants to get out.” Samuel rolled his head back and forth, leaning against Jake’s

shoulder.

“Alligator, huh?” He fought the smile for all he was worth. “That sounds less than comfortable.”

“Well, she is going to be a dragon, of that we have no doubt. I’m not sure she’s not going to come out with a tail. And wings. I’m pretty sure that periodically I feel wings beating on my ribs. Maybe she’ll have like eighteen legs.” Samuel waved his hands in the air.

“That’s not funny.”

“You want to talk about what’s not funny?” Samuel asked him. And no, he really didn’t think he probably did. And if he did, he sure as shit wasn’t going to say so.

Except he did.

“Uh. What’s not funny?”

“This whole situation wherein this child is rearranging my organs and tap dancing on every single one of them she can find. I’m fairly sure that this morning she grabbed hold of my bladder and squeezed it. On purpose.”

“You are saying terrible things about our daughter,” Jake said, his laughter bursting out.

“You are absolutely right. I am saying terrible things about our daughter, who I am going to love dearly and adore every second of her life, but I am really tired of being pregnant.” Samuel took a deep breath. “Have I mentioned how much I appreciate this? This is amazing.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re happy.” And he was even more glad that Samuel wasn’t going to kill him today. Tomorrow wasn’t assured. At least Samuel wasn’t having twins. Or triplets. He was fairly sure that, if there were triplets involved, Samuel would simply remove himself from his body and refuse to return until it was back to normal.

“I am. Happy, that is. Hormonal, totally, but happy. The cradle looks amazing by the way. Are you going to make a new one for every baby?”

Jake shrugged. “Possibly. How many babies do you think we’re going to have?”

“Well, we have two. Which seems a nice number. But I might go as high as four.”

“Four...”

“Maybe five? I’ve noticed that many book series come in fives. That might be entertaining.”

“Samuel. Mate. What does the number of books in a series have to do with how many children you have?” It was possible that he was being stupid. It was possible that he wasn’t being stupid, and Samuel was going to inform him he was being stupid one way or the other. It was pretty definite that he was taking his life into his own hands at this point.

Samuel just looked up at him. “Nothing. It’s just sort of, like, this decent number, you know? It’s not too even. But it’s not terribly odd. It’s just a good number.”

“Ah.” He nodded sagely. “Well, I guess we can make them each one so they have a cradle to take to their mate when they get married...”

“Oh, I love that idea.” Samuel turned slightly, hand on his chest. “I like that a lot.”



“Good deal.” He did love to use his hands to make things, and the idea of creating a special piece for each of his children was very cool. Family heirlooms could be created as well as passed down.

“Mmmm. So tell me what smells so good.”

“Celeste made all sorts of food for us.”

“Mate.” Samuel kissed him, the act deep and heady, making him dizzy. “I was talking about you.”

“Oh.” He chuckled. “Well, I rinsed off already so I wouldn’t get our bathwater all dirty, so I guess it’s my soap.” His cheeks heated, because Samuel loved him so well.

“Uh-huh. It’s you, silly alpha.” Samuel licked a long line along his throat.

“Is it?” He palmed Samuel’s ass, loving the resilient feel of his mate.

“Mmhmm...” It’s going to be a long time before we’re alone together, you know...

I know. So we need to take advantage. Although we have good friends and family in the wing. Maybe not blood family, but the guardians were like his brothers and sisters now.

“Mmhmm...” Samuel deepened the kiss with a sigh.

He hummed too, licking at Samuel’s mouth, tasting his unique flavor. So damn fine. Jake could do this for hours.

Love. I need you. I want your knot, please. I need it.

He had to smile, because his so subdued librarian could be needy, demanding, completely upfront with his passion.

You have it, love. Anything you want. He slid his fingers down Samuel's crease to his hole, testing how wet he was.

He was soaking, and not from the bath. Someone was needing.

"Love. You should have said you were wanting me. I can find time for you at any point."

"I know you're busy, and I'm...not at my most beautiful..."

"You have never been more fucking beautiful." He slid his hands over Samuel's body, worshipping him. His mate glowed with this pregnancy, his scales gleaming, his eyes bright. How could Jake not think he was amazing?

Samuel moaned, his sweet mate beginning to glow, magic building inside him.

So pretty. He took more kisses, loving Samuel with his mouth and his hands, his balls pulling up at the base of his cock. He was ready to give Samuel his knot, absolutely.

But first, he was loving having his mate close and needy. He stroked Samuel's hot cock, then fondled his balls, letting him feel every bit of friction Jake could provide.

The lazy motions began to get more and more hungry, sharper, and his lover arched, moaned for him.

"So lovely." He plucked at Samuel's nipples, careful to keep that touch gentle. Jake knew how sensitive Samuel was right now.

“Yours. All yours. My love. My mate.”

“Mine,” he agreed, lifting Samuel so he could prod at that tight hole with his cock.

Samuel sank down onto him, taking him all the way in.

Oh, fuck. Jake gritted his teeth, trying to hold on. His knot was already swelling, Samuel’s need, his scent, his glowing scales, all of them were conspiring to steal his control.

Samuel made him breathless.

“Love, how you need me.” Samuel winked at him, licking a hot line along his ear.

“Always. I always need you, love.” He lifted his hips, water sloshing as he thrust up into Samuel’s heat. His knot swelled, his heart pounding.

“Mmm...” Samuel clamped around him, squeezing him tight.

“Love. Soon.” Too soon. But they had plenty of hot water, and they would stay right where they were for a long while. So he was okay with it as long as Samuel was.

“Mmhmm...” Samuel knelt up and leaned in, his lips parting.

He took the kiss Samuel offered, pulling them close together, thrusting until his knot held him fast.

“Never...never get tired of this.” Samuel’s body fluttered around him.

“No. Never. I need you all the time. All the time.” It was crazy how much his life had changed in so short a time, but he was so damn grateful.

“We found each other.” Samuel’s voice burned with joy.

“We did. You were so smart. So brave.” They moved faster, not able to get much slide, but definitely a lot of rock.

“I was. It was worth it. You are worth it.”

“Thank you, love.” Samuel humbled him. Well, most of him. Nothing was humbling his cock right now.

Samuel shifted faster, fingers tight on his shoulders. They panted and kissed, steam rising around them, Samuel’s glow almost blinding him. “Soon. Now.”

“Now. Now, love. Now…” Samuel was perfect, the sight of his need a visible thing.

“Uhn!” He shot hard, feeling Samuel like a vise around him, hot seed on his belly as Samuel came. So damn hot.

His mate slumped close against him, breathing hard.

“I have you, love.” He held Samuel, his whole body shaking with the force of his orgasm. It has been too long.

It has. I feel so much better. So much.

“Good.” He took one more kiss before leaning up to run a tiny bit more hot water into the tub. Samuel put a towel under his head for him, and they lounged in the water.

He could feel the baby moving in Samuel, and he put one hand on the rippling belly.

“Mmm. She’s so active now.”

“I know. Our impatient girl.”

“She wants to play with Grant. He talks to her all the time.”

“He does, huh? Such a proud big brother.” Logan said they would fight like cats and dogs.

“Yes. Should we have the new baby call me Ammu?”

“If that suits you, love.” He liked it actually. It was unique. Sweet. And it was a gift Grant had given Samuel.

“It’s my name, and it’s unique in all the world.” Samuel chuckled softly. “And my boy gave it to me.”

“He did. Are you happy, love?” He could feel it through their bond, but sometimes he needed to hear it.

“I am. This is just the pick-me-up I needed.”

“Good. We’ll get up and eat as soon as my knot goes down.”

“I’m not in any hurry.” Samuel kissed his chin, then settled in with a sigh.

“Me either, baby. Me either.”

### Chapter

### Twenty-Six

Samuel hummed, cleaning up the front room a little before they left for Logan's house. They had been planning to do Thanksgiving by themselves, but Samuel wasn't feeling up to cooking, really, and Lars had just run roughshod over him, insisting that he and Jake and Grant come to the big to-do at Logan and Dakota's home.

"Love, no one is going to see the couch." Jake carried Grant out, having gone to get him dressed and make sure he'd pottied.

"I just want it to be nice, you know?"

Celeste wandered through, one eyebrow arched, and Samuel turned bright red.

"Of course you do, baby. But it looks grand now."

"It does. I'm sorry, Celeste. That was so rude of me to make it sound as if you don't clean well enough, and?—"

She came to Samuel, kissed his cheek. "Sweet dragon, we're fine. Let's go have a joyous holiday."

"Okay." Samuel took a deep breath, then let it out. He was a hormonal mess, but a happy one. "Thank you. I owe you chocolate."

“Apples. I love apples.”

“Fair enough. Apple pie it is.”

“Oooh. With vanilla ice cream and lots of cinnamon.”

“You know it.” Jake winked. “I’ll order the pie from Mrs. Garcia.”

“Perfect.” He wasn’t ready for pastry yet. At all.

“I’m sure there will be pumpkin and pecan pie today, too.” Jake loved pumpkin pie, he knew. That smile made him chuckle.

“There is going to be so much food. Lars has been planning and cooking for days.”

“Simon and Dakota have been in on it, too.” Jake chuckled. “But Lars is bossy.”

Lars did love what he did, but he had...opinions.

“Be nice, mate. Lars helped bring us together.”

“I adore him for it. You know that.”

“I do. He loves you dearly.” Jake needed to hear him say that, over and over.

“He does?” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Luff!” Grant was still a little sleepy, but he perked up at his perceived I-love-you moment.

“That’s right, baby boy. Love.” They got loaded up and headed across to Logan’s

home. He had a little pang for the dishwasher, which was still running, but Jake took his hand across the console, and he relaxed, letting it go.

He needed to breathe, to focus and just enjoy their first Thanksgiving together.

Yes. Our first. It's going to be so amazing. I want you to sit and let me wait on you hand and foot.

I don't need that.

Probably not, but I do—need it.

He glanced at Jake in surprise. Really?

Yes. It makes me happy to take care of you. And I know how hard it's been on you the last few weeks.

I've felt the weight a little. She's going to come out full-grown. And there was still another month to go.

A whole month.

He was excited to meet her, to have his body back, but there was something wonderful about knowing this was the last time he and Jake and Grant were going to be a family of only three.

“Ammu! Turkeys.”

“I know. You love a good turkey, hmm?” Grant was looking forward to all the food, having heard tales now of what Thanksgiving was all about. He was old enough now to sample all the things.



“Turkey lurkey! Turkey jerky!” he teased.

“Turkey urkey!” Grant crowed.

“Turkey murky,” Jake teased, making him laugh.

“I’m not sure I’m into murky food, love.” Although, he was hungry, and he could murder some rolls.

“Well, what is lurky?” Jake chuckled, squeezing his hand.

“Like sneaky. Lurk, lurk, lurk?” He was getting the giggles now.

“Ah. I see. The lurking turkey.” Jake made a gobbling noise that had Grant giggling madly.

Oh, someone liked that!

ME! Grant’s mental voice was...uncontrolled still.

Loud, my love , Jake said.

Sowwy.

Jake grinned at Grant in the rearview mirror. “I know you’re working on it.” He turned off on Logan’s road.

“You’re amazing, Grant. Can you try—” whispering?

Sissery?

whisper whisper.

sisster sisster.

“Oh, very nice, son,” Jake said. “Thank you.”

“Welcome!” Grant waved happily. “Uncles!”

“Yep. Uncles.” Jake pulled into Logan’s drive, parking alongside the throng of vehicles. “Come on, you. Let’s go see who there is to play with.”

“Babies! Babies! Me!”

“You do love your babbies, hmm?” He waited for Jake to lift Grant out of the car before kissing Grant’s cheek. He wasn’t carrying Grant now; Jake had yelled at him. Celeste carried their food offerings, and they went as a family.

“Samuel! Jake!” Logan waved, taking Grant from Jake. “Celeste, bright blessings.”

“Bright blessings to you.” Celeste smiled, then sailed on to greet Simon in the kitchen while Logan handed out hugs like he was Santa Claus.

“Look at you! Come and sit, Samuel, we’ll visit. The girls want their Uncle Ammu.”

“Do they?” Samuel walked in to find Dakota and the twins, hand on his lower back.

Dakota frowned. “They so do. Can you have a seat? I’m going to grab you a drink.”

“Oh, thank you. I don’t want to be any trouble.” He sank into a chair, grimacing.

“You’re not. Not at all. Be right back.”

“Okay.” He felt a little bemused, but oh, his back hurt, so he just sat and listened to it throbbing.

“Ammu?”

“Yes, baby boy?”

“Uppie?”

“Sure.” He leaned forward and lifted, feeling something deep inside him tear, and he cried out, bloody water staining his shirt.

“DADDY! DADDY, AMMU! ME! HELP!”

Jake came racing in, skidding to a stop in front of him. “What’s going on? Samuel, are you hurt?”

“I—” He stared at Jake, panic flooding him.

“Oh, my. Simon, dear, can you get that suite all ready and run a bath.” Dakota seemed so calm. “Logan, call the midwife. Celeste, I need you on baby duty, please.”

“Of course. I will watch over them.” Celeste gave him a gentle smile.

Jake looked panicked. “What? The baby? It’s too early?”

“She doesn’t appear to care.” Dakota rolled his eyes. “Can you walk, honey? We’ll take you and get you cleaned up.”

“Of course I—Oh!” No. He sank back down.

“I can take you, love. Arm around my neck.” Jake bent to scoop him up, so gently that tears sprang to his eyes.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, mate. I didn’t mean to.”

“What? No, of course not. These things happen when they happen, love.” Jake carried him to the guest room Simon had laid out for him.

“But—”

“She’s on her way.” Dakota opened the door on the second floor. “This way you’re safe as houses, well-taken care of.”

“Thank you,” Jake murmured. “This was unexpected, huh?”

“Babies are. No stress. We’ll have food for days. It takes a village.”

He didn’t want to be a village. He wanted turkey and pie and not to be the direct center of attention.

“Hey.” Jake sat on the bed next to him. “Let’s do this, huh?”

“It’s not supposed to be today. It’s supposed to be Christmas!” He sobbed into his hands.

“Well, it’s a holiday, hmm? Maybe she got confused.” Jake took his hands away from his face. “I love you.”

“I’m scared.” And it hurt. He wasn’t ready. “I don’t have any baby clothes here.”

“Well, I know Dakota has some things that we can use.” Jake was calmer now,

holding it down for him.

“Or we can have someone stop by and grab your bag from your house.” Kota brought in juice and ice chips. “Would that make you feel more comfortable?”

He sniffled and nodded.

“Oh, baby, I never thought of it.”

“Jason is on his way. He can detour by your place and Theresa can pack some things.”

“Oh, way more trustworthy than Bea,” Jake teased.

“Bea is on patrol. Just to be sure. She and Jason are taking turns.” Kota offered Samuel a warm smile. “You are surrounded by family here. You are supported by love.”

“Thank you. Is Grant okay?”

“Celeste is with him and the twins. As soon as we have you all cleaned up, we’ll let him come see you’re okay.”

“Thank you,” Jake said. “He’s probably scared.”

“He’s going to be fine, guys. I swear. He’s going to be great, and you’re going to have a baby.”

“I need to get cleaned up. Please.” Samuel needed all this noise to stop for a second.

“Jake, why don’t you go and call Theresa and tell her what Samuel needs?” Simon

had come back in, and he was serene and smiling. “Dakota and I will help Samuel and then you can bring in Grant.”

“Love?”

“Please.” He needed to break down a little, but he didn’t want Jake to worry.

“I’ll be right back.”

As soon as the door close, he began to sob, terrified and overwhelmed, and Dakota was right there, holding him.

“I’m sorry,” he hiccupped between sobs.

“Oh, Samuel, it’s okay. It’s going to be fine. She’s just ready.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. She didn’t want to miss Christmas.”

He sniffled. “Or Thanksgiving.”

“That too. Everyone was so looking forward to the season. She can feel that, you know.”

Dakota helped him clean up, and once he was dry, he felt much better. “Thank you. I’m a little scared.”

“You’re great. Honestly. You’re amazing.” Dakota kissed his temple. “Logan says the midwife is here. She’s coming up with Jake.”

“Okay.” That would allay his fears too, Samuel knew, if she told him all was well. He just—He needed to breathe.

Sally knew her stuff. She was solid, no-nonsense, and incredibly kind, and Samuel had a smile for her as she walked in. “Look at you, being an overachiever.”

“It’s all right?”

“It’s eighteen days, honey. You’re perfect. That baby is just ready.”

“Okay.”

Jake stood back, smiling, waiting. He was a good man, for all their troubles at the beginning. His smile was...glowing.

“I need you, mate.” He reached out, and Jake came right to him.

“I told Grant you were having his sister. He farted. Loud.”

“Hmm.” He tried not to laugh. “Well, maybe he has stress tummy.”

“You’re looking well. I’m going to go downstairs and wash up, have a bite to eat. You’re perfectly fine. Feel free to get in the tub, walk around. Whatever your body says.”

“Thanks, Sally.”

“Do you want me to bring up Grant?” Dakota asked.

Jake nodded. “Why don’t you before everyone eats? I’ll hang with Samuel.”

“I want him to know I’m okay. Please.” He felt more comfortable. Steadier.

“Good deal.” Dakota gave them a thumbs-up and hastened off.

He looked at Jake. “Are you all right?”

“I am right as ramen, love. Now that I know all is proceeding according to nature and you’re not in danger? I’m ecstatic.” Jake kissed his knuckles.

“Are you ready?” He’d expected a few more weeks.

“We’re pretty prepared, baby. We wanted to be so we could enjoy the holidays.” Jake chuckled, the sound warm, happy, his thumb sliding over Samuel’s hand. “And now she’ll be with us.”

“Yes. She’ll need a Christmas dress.”

“Ammu? Ammu? Want!” Grant came toddling in, eyes wet.

“I’m right here, my love.” He looked to Jake, who nodded, then got up to lift Grant to the bed.

“Gentle, baby boy. Ammu is a little sore.”

Grant jabbered at him, just telling him all about it, and he held on, trying not to tense as another contraction started.

“I hurt?” Grant said suddenly, the fear in his voice ringing in the words.

“No, sweet.” He panted, sweat popping up on his forehead. “It’s part of having a baby.”



“Babby? Sisser? Now?” He stared down at Samuel’s belly. “Sisser! Come out!”

“Oh!” Samuel felt his belly clench again, way faster than he’d expected.

“She’s coming, Grant. I promise. But Samuel needs to rest now.”

“Okay. Da. Come. Ammu seeps. Now.”

Jake laughed. “I need to stay with Ammu, baby. But Celeste is downstairs, and so are the twins, hmm?” Jake winked at Dakota, who Samuel saw hovering in the doorway.

Grant frowned, and Samuel grinned. “Uncle Kota can take you, okay?”

“Okay. I come back soon?”

“Yes. Soon.” Samuel reached out to ruffle Grant’s hair. “I love you.”

“Luff. Babby. Bye!”

He ran out, and Samuel moaned, the contraction hard and heavy.

“What can I do, love?” Jake asked. “Do you need to lean on me, or for me to rub your belly?”

“I want to get in the water. Please. Then I want you to hold my hand.” And he wanted to hit Jake with a rock, a little bit.

“Okay. Let’s get you in the tub.” Jake lifted him, taking him to the bathroom.

The tub was big and full, and he sighed as the water eased him a bit. “Better.”

“Yeah?” Jake sat next to the tub, holding his hand, as he’d asked. “Good. You were looking peaked.”

“This was unexpected.” He hadn’t even been in labor, he didn’t think.

“Mmm.” Jake squeezed his hand. “I should have realized. Logan told me what to watch for. I just didn’t realize I was seeing it.”

“I just...” His body tightened, but at least he could breathe.

“You were doing that thing. Nesting?” Jake squeezed his hand, smiling. “It was cute.”

“Hush you. Was I?” He held on tight. “I love you. We’re having a baby.”

“We are. And I can’t think of a better day. I’m thankful for you and our family.”

He had less of an urge to whack Jake now.

He was sure it would return in short order.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Seven

Jake was going to lose his mind.

Samuel needed to have this baby. He'd been in labor for hours, he was exhausted, and Jake was starting to get more than a little worried.

He watched Samuel pace, back and forth, back and forth.

"Is he okay?" he whispered to Logan, who was delivering more tea and ice chips.

"He is. This is hard work."

"I just worry."

"That's your job. Well, and being supportive, leaving when he screams at you, and rubbing his back when he doesn't."

"Right. I just hate that he's hurting."

Logan nodded and shrugged, opening his mouth to answer when Samuel screamed, "Jake! Jake, I need you!"

"Shit." He ran to Samuel's side. "I'm right here, love. Right here." He grabbed Samuel's flailing hand. "Sally?"

“We’re getting ready to push. Let’s move to the bed instead of the chair?”

“I don’t want to!”

“Love, I think we need to.” He stroked that sweaty hair. “I’ll help you.”

“NO!” Samuel screamed, convulsing, and Sally nodded to Jake.

“She’s coming. Move him.”

Jake lifted Samuel up, carrying him to the bed. God that sound made him want to die, Samuel being in so much pain. He would do anything to take it from him.

“You can push now, Samuel. She’s crowning. Jake, help him. She’s got dark hair like you.”

“Okay, love. It’s going to feel so much better soon. But now you need to push.” He settled in behind Samuel, cradling him, giving him something to press against.

Samuel leaned against him, bracing himself. “I can do this. I want to see her.”

“I know you do. And you will. You’re so damn brave, Samuel.”

“Okay, Samuel. Breathe. Breathe. And push.”

From there it went fast—at least for him. Samuel was a fighter, working to birth their little girl.

Their daughter.

And Jake talked to both of them the whole time, letting their girl know it was safe,

letting Samuel know he was loved beyond anything Jake had ever experienced.

“Relax. Breathe. The head is out. I have it.”

“Is she okay?”

Sally nodded. “She is.”

“Oh.” Samuel slumped back against him. “I need to rest soon.”

“I know, love. I know.” He mopped Samuel’s forehead. “You have this. Our Black Friday baby.”

“Be good.” Oh, that was a chuckle.

“I’m trying. You know me. I get mouthy.” He was trying to make Samuel smile, distract him.

“All right, now we’re pushing nice and easy. This is just the last part, all right, Samuel?”

“Yes, Sally. I hear you. Nice and easy, and we have a little dragon.”

“That’s it.” Jake kissed the top of Samuel’s head. “Nice and easy.”

Samuel was glowing, his scales so bright he was hard to look at. That had to mean it was close, right?

Another two slow pushes, and the sound of their little girl crying filled the air.

Samuel’s eyes glowed, shining through his soul. “That’s Gwyneth. Our baby.”

“There she is.” His breath hitched in his chest. “Oh, Samuel, she’s beautiful.”

She was a bright icy pink, her scales sparkling and shining like diamonds. Her eyes were wide, and she was hollering to beat the band.

“That’s it, little bit,” Sally said. “You tell the world you’re here.”

I love you, Samuel. Look how perfect she is.

Sally handed her over to Samuel, placing her on his mate’s chest. Samuel began to cry, but there was a smile on his face, a peace. He was exhausted, but he was already so in love that Jake could tell it didn’t matter.

Da? Babby?

Yes, love. You can come see her in a bit, but she and Ammu are fine.

Babby . Grant’s happiness poured out, and Gwyneth stopped crying. Sisser!

She chirped, and he smiled. They were going to be best friends.

“Okay, Da, it’s time for you to hold her so Simon and I can get Samuel cleaned up.”

Jake nodded, letting Samuel ease his daughter into his arms.

“Go introduce her. We’ll be a few minutes. Can you send in Celeste?”

“Of course. I’ll be right back, love. You did so well.”

Samuel lifted a hand, smiling, but he was already half asleep.

Celeste passed him in the hall, stopping to press her finger to Gwyneth's forehead. "I will defend her until the end of days."

"I know you will. You honor us, Celeste." He let her kiss Gwyneth's head.

"You are my family." She headed in to help Samuel, and Jake kept going to introduce his daughter to his son, to his wing.

Everyone was waiting in the main room of Logan's house, and he walked through the door, feeling like the proudest dad and also like something out of an animated lion movie.

"Everyone, please meet Gwyneth. Samuel's and my daughter."

"Da! Babbie!" Grant ran to him, fingers opening and closing and making grabby hands.

"Here, Grant. I'll hold you up so you can see." Dakota rescued him, lifting him.

"Babby," Grant breathed, and she looked right at him, grunting.

"Give her a kiss, honey. Gentle."

"Pwetty. Pwetty babbie. Luff." Grant kissed her cheek. "Sisser."

"Such a brilliant young man," Dakota praised. "She's amazing, Jake. Congratulations."

"Thank you." His heart couldn't be fuller. He had his mate. His kids. His wing.

He wasn't a broken dragon any longer.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Eight

### EPILOGUE

Samuel sat in his library, sorting books, Grant playing with a puzzle, Gwenyth in her little rocking seat, padded so she could sit up without him having to worry about her sliding. She watched the whole world with huge, curious eyes, and he loved how she paid attention to everything from her brother to Bumper and Gala to the books he put into place on their new shelves.

Jake had made him the most amazing room, with floor-to-ceiling cases for his books, a rolling ladder that moved all around the room, a comfortable seating area, and table and stands for maps, books, and even old scrolls.

So sweet, his mate.

“And this one, my sweet girl, was my favorite book when I was a little boy. It’s all about a young omega prince trapped in a tower who gets rescued by an alpha, who seems like a gruff peasant but is really royalty in disguise.”

That caught Grant’s attention, and he toddled over, abandoning his puzzle to come sit on Samuel’s lap. “Wead it to me, Ammu?”

“Of course, sweet boy. Let’s start at the beginning.” He opened the cover, the beautiful hand illustrations making him smile, nostalgia flowing over him. “Once



upon a time...”

He worked through the whole book, Grant leaning on him, little Gwyn cooing at the good parts, responding to his voice, no doubt.

Even Bumper rolled over on his side to watch him read, and he hummed when he closed the book, the tale still making him happy deep inside. “The End.”

“Ammu. It’s you!” Grant clapped a kiss on his cheek, then sighed happily. “We have cookies now?”

“Mmm. That sounds lovely.” He let Grant slip down to the floor. “Where do we go for cookies?”

“Kitch! No cookies in da library.”

“Exactly. And why is that?”

“No books and sticky fingers!” Grant bellowed it, making Gwen start, her lip quivering.

“It’s all right, sweet. He’s not angry.” He went to lift her out of her seat. He’d put her in her little play crib in the dining area off the kitchen and let her have a little nap after she had a bottle. She seemed a little tired.

“Do you want me to take her, love?”

A frisson of awareness made him tingle, and he glanced up to find Jake watching him from the doorway. He was covered in sawdust and grime, so clearly, he didn’t want to come in. Also sweet.

“How about you take Grant?”

Jake chuckled. "Come on, buddy. I think Ammu doesn't want me to take sister because I'm all gross."

"You've been working."

"I have."

"I just mean that's not gross, my love. It's your job." He bounced Gwen when she fussed. "How long were you listening?"

"Long enough to know that's a great book." Jake gave him a wink. "I think Grant's right. It's you."

His cheeks heated. "Only because you're my alpha prince."

"And you're my omega mate." They headed downstairs, the canines padding along behind them. Jake got Grant settled in his chair, then washed up. "So, what kind of cookies did Celeste leave for us today while she and Simon are off antiquing?"

"White chocolate macadamia for us adults, and snickerdoodles for the wee one."

"Snickeydoooods!" Grant cried.

"Yep. And milk for you and a bot for sister."

"Sisser get cookies?"

"Not yet, kiddo," Jake said. "When she's bigger."

"Bumper and Gala have doodies?"

"They can have a little bite, yes," Jake agreed. "I'll break it up for you."

“Sank you.”

Samuel chuckled, moving to get cookies out of jars and pour milk and?—

Jake came up behind him, kissing the back of his neck. “I love you, mate. I’m so glad you came here and were brave enough to tell me what was what.”

“And I’m glad you decided to let yourself love me,” Samuel returned. “I love you too.”

And he had never been happier in his whole life. He had a family, one he loved, who loved him. He had a wing who accepted him.

Somehow Samuel thought it was only going to get better from here.

The End