



# The Sapphire Dragon's Missing Mate

**Author:** Lorelei M. Hart

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I always felt like something was missing in my life... I never guessed it would be two brothers.

I am the lucky one. Everyone says so. My otter bevy took me in when no one else would, I have two adopted parents who love me, and a degree that allows me to work from anywhere. And maybe they are right and I should be grateful, but I can't quite let go of the feeling that something is missing...something important.

On my 25th birthday, my dragon emerges for the first time, and everything changes. He senses my brothers and demands we find them. My bevy's reaction to my scales and wings makes the decision easy. Now I'm traveling across the country with nothing but my dragon sense to guide me. That is until Arvin offers me shelter...and his heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

I am the lucky one. Everyone says so.

Although I don't know all the details of my birth, I am assured that much is true. My otter bevy took me in when no one else would, providing this orphan of the storm with a warm and safe home. My adopted parents love me and encouraged me to get an advanced degree, allowing me to work from anywhere.

Including an office in the cozy home I've built on the bevy's land once I returned from school. It is essentially a tiny house, but it meets all my needs with a sleeping loft, a compact kitchen area, bathroom, and my desk. I did all my watching of videos and things in the loft, gaming at my desk after business hours. As an investor and stock trader, those hours could be wild depending on what was going on in the various markets around the world. This had a tendency to keep me out of the day-to-day social life of the bevy, making my gaming friends a blessing more than any of them knew.

Maybe "everyone" was right, and I was lucky to have landed here. I could see many reasons why that was so, and I should be grateful. My omega dad still dropped off dinner in my oven to keep warm every night. My alpha dad made sure to talk business with me once a week or so, and they both let me know how proud they were of my success. Also, how worried they were that I didn't get out and see "real" people more. They were right, but I was paying dues now, and when I lifted my head from the screen, usually the rest of the bevy was asleep or maybe working themselves. My schedule was unpredictable, making it hard to plan get-togethers with old friends who had recently stopped inviting me because I never showed up.

I swore up and down I was living the life I wanted, paying my dues in business until

the day came when I could cut back on my hours, but it could be pretty darn lonely sometimes. Adding in the fact that I felt as if something was missing in my life. Something important and just beyond my reach.

My twenty-fifth birthday dawned clear and bright, a sunny day with not a cloud to be seen, and I woke determined to make this day special. My dads had something brewing and had warned me not to plan to work at all. As I passed my desk on the way outside, my fingers twitched. The US markets would be in the middle of the busy trading day, and I hadn't missed one in quite a while. Summoning all my self-discipline, I continued outside. I was starting to think I had a problem. Sleeping more in naps than full rest in order not to miss any opportunities was not healthy, even if I was building my portfolio in a major way.

It gave me warm fuzzies in a way that nothing else did, and I had begun to wonder if that meant there was something wrong with me. The other otters were productive enough in their various jobs, doing whatever they needed to get by, but they all seemed happy to get home and hang out with the bevy. Swimming in the pond and splashing in the stream were big activities, but I'd never felt all that drawn to water. Even as a little boy, I'd sit on the bank and kick my feet, but I much preferred our campfire nights.

Probably because of the s'mores.

Maybe we could have some tonight. Way better than any birthday cake in my opinion, but I'd let my dads handle it however they wanted. Really, at twenty-five, I was a little old for a big birthday fuss, but as their only young, they liked to do something every year. Before they took me in, they'd thought they'd never have a child to raise, and even if I wasn't the otter they dreamed of, they never made me feel any different than any other child. Neither had the rest of the bevy.

At this age, I was probably latent anyway and would never shift. I'd waited and

waited when all the other kids made their first shift at puberty. Maybe this was why I'd been abandoned—my bio parents could tell I'd be a dud. Luckily my adoptive ones did not feel that way.

When the sun hit me, my skin instantly warmed and...tingled? A light breeze skated over my skin, raising goose bumps. I rubbed my arms, wondering where all this hypersensitivity came from. How long had it been since I'd been outside during the day?

Not long enough for this weird reaction. I planted a hand on my forehead, checking for fever then laughing at myself because I was fairly certain a person couldn't tell their own temperature that way.

"Son, are you coming to breakfast?" My alpha father came out on their porch and waved to me. "Your dad made blueberry pancakes and sausage, and there might be a morning gift for you if you've been good."

The corners of my lips twitched. We'd always had the one-present-over-birthday-breakfast rule, but they always acted like it was brand new and dependent on my behavior—whether I was five or twenty-five. And while I tried to act as if I was too old for it, I loved our traditions. Did kids who weren't adopted have such a love of family customs? "On my way, Pops." As if he didn't know that I was headed right for their house. "I've done my best to be good this year." Maybe that felt a little silly at this age, but it was a formula, and we did grin at each other as I approached. "I'm starving."

"You don't eat enough." As I reached the foot of the porch steps, Father reached down and ruffled my hair. "All you do is work."

In the past, I'd argued that point, but I was past it. "I know. I'm trying to get enough in my portfolio to cut back."

“Life is not guaranteed, Son. If you learn nothing more from your dad and me

make it to stop and enjoy the blessings life sends your way. We picked up on that about the time a certain little guy came into our lives.”

“I enjoy my work, Pops, but you’re right.” It was time to make a change, a little one maybe. “Let’s go eat.”

“That’s my boy.” He slung an arm over my shoulders and gave me a quick squeeze. “We thought—Stone? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” That same feeling was back. Hot and cold and goose bumps, and the air was heavy on my skin; the goose bumps spiked... “Pops, I don’t feel right.”

I crumpled to my knees and out from under his supporting arm. Everything was wrong. The pain started in my core and hot outward. Through my torso and down my limbs. Electric fire followed, and I stumbled down the stairs and to the ground in front of the porch. Flat on my face then struggling to rise, but nothing worked right. Things were longer than they should be or shorter, and my very bones changed, became longer and lighter. Realizing my eyes were closed, I opened them to find myself surrounded by some kind of reptile, iridescent blue scales everywhere.

Panic was supplanted by something stronger when I realized there was no lizard...it was me. The dragon who had declined to make an appearance when all my friends were shifting years ago had chosen today. Elated, terrified, I raised and lowered my wings, testing them out. Could I really fly?

Not only fly, soar. Up, up above the bevy lands, learning to handle my wings, although I suspected my dragon had this without any help from me. Together, we climbed higher and higher until the figures of the bevy were toy-sized below me. The wind and sun and everything were so much more raw here, fierce but unable to

penetrate our scales.

It was all too much, and I attempted to go back, but my dragon fought me.

We need our brothers. Find them.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

I knew it was gonna be a crappy day when I stubbed my toe, spilled my coffee in my lap, and burned my toast all within a half an hour of waking up. What I didn't realize was how literally crappy it was going to be. Go bad plumbing, go.

I just got back from cabin twelve, having fixed their plumbing once again. I still didn't know what they were doing over there, and I wasn't going to ask. Either they would lie about what it was to prevent being financially responsible for the damages, or they would tell me, and I was 1000 percent sure if it was something, I wouldn't be able to unhear it. It was best just to fix it and move along.

My boss claimed the bears made the biggest messes in their cabins. If he were here more than once every few months, he'd see how wrong he was. Ninety-nine percent of the time it was the humans who came, destroyed, and then went on their merry way, usually leaving a shitty review online to make their departure that much more memorable. I didn't think these particular humans were going to leave a bad review. They seemed quite pleased with my work, but gods, it was going to be great getting rid of them at checkout this afternoon.

I went back to my cabin and jumped in the shower. Usually, I could handle the grossness of the day, but today, I needed to scrub and scrub some more before I headed back out to do some maintenance. That last job was simply too gross not to. My human nose might not be as sensitive as some of our guests, but even I could smell me. Yuck.

With the water as hot as I could stand it, I washed from head to toe, twice, and got on new clothes. I'd deal with the laundry later. I needed the washers and dryers for cabin turnovers first. The guests always came first. It even said so on the poster at checkout.

I went to the front desk and looked at how many people we were expecting. The weather was looking pretty horrible according to the predictions, and my hope was everybody would get here on the earlier side. I'd love to have them all settled in before the rain.

My boss, no matter how much I explained to him that he was wrong, thought it was a bad idea to have set check-in and checkout times. Instead, he decided I could be on duty the entire day. And if new people came before the old ones left...well, I could figure that out. And I did, but it always meant doing things last minute.

Based on the books, the one open cabin left was now going to be filled with a family of wolves. The only reason I knew their beasts was because they were yearly guests who'd added a week to their stay, which was great. Annual guests were my favorite. When I took this job, I kind of thought most of the people would be like that—they would come, spend their vacation every year, and, when they left, we'd all be sorry it was time for them to go home. That's what happened when the only knowledge you had of these kinds of places came from movies.

I should've known when he gave me free room plus a salary that this was going to be a lot more work than they presented in the ad. And because it was salary, he didn't care how much work I had to do. He was on some tropical island, sipping margaritas with his mate. This was just a moneymaker. Although, at the rate he was keeping it up, I wasn't sure how long it was going to continue to profit. Most of the roofs were on borrowed time and, once they went, it was downhill from there.

Two more checkouts were on the roster, which meant laundry and changing over to do, but they could at least be on the back burner since there were a couple of days before they were going to be used. Even so, it was going to be a long day.

I checked the weather again to see how the storm was coming. My phone had alerted me three times in the past day that we were going to get a bad storm, but half the



time, those alerts were wrong. And, really, “bad” was relative. It wasn’t like we were near the coast or a dam or even low elevations where I had to worry about major flooding.

Still, it was going to be a pain, but we’d get by. The updated radar looked like it was going to hold off long enough for today’s activity. Thank goodness. I grabbed my sign that said S’mores Tonight, placed it in the window, and then went about my day.

It was busy. Between turning over rooms and doing the normal maintenance, I was going nonstop. It was probably for the best because it meant I didn’t have time to think about how much I needed to get done for my math class. How I thought getting my college degree one class at a time was a good idea was beyond me.

In theory, it should be easier than going full-time. It wasn’t. And my new class was extra fun like that. I liked math, but a lot of work went with it. And unlike my last class, there was no waiting until the last minute to finish a paper or reading the chapter. If I didn’t do some of it every day, I wasn’t going to pass at all. I needed to pass. I gave up too much to make school happen not to succeed.

When I was pushing my cleaning cart over the bumpy ground, a guest from cabin three stepped out in front of me. Before I could ask if they needed anything, they said, “I hate to do this to you, but...” Which was always followed by something awful.

“Oh, that’s what I’m here for. What can I do for you?”

“Well, this.” He held out the doorknob to his cabin. Three pieces of it anyway.

“Oh, no worries. I’ll get right on that.” I took the trash, for that was all it was good for at this point, and tossed it on my cleaning cart.

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I smiled and thanked them before going to the shed. I grabbed my tools and headed to their cabin.

The wind was picking up, and the trees had starting to sway a bit. Normally, I’d cancel the evening activities based on the weather report, but tonight, I was going to hedge my bets. Canceling s’mores, a crowd favorite, would only lead to grumpy guests.

There was no fixing the doorknob, not that I thought there was, but I tried. It needed to be completely replaced, which was fine by my boss as long as I gave it a good try first. We had a whole box of them in the storeroom. It wasn’t first, nor would it be the last time I had to change one out. And because my boss was cheap, he didn’t get the electronic ones most rental places used. And of course he didn’t have extra keys made. Nope. So, if somebody lost a key, new doorknob it was. In the long run, he was spending so much more. I didn’t care. It wasn’t my money, and truth be told, replacing these was probably a thousand times better than messing with programming fails on the electronic ones.

That fixed, it was time to get things set up for yummy goodness—s’mores. I started the fire pit, and for the first time in a long while, I wished that maybe I was a shifter, in this case, a dragon. If I were, I could just start the flames and be done. But, no. I was just a boring old human. And that was fine, really. I liked who I was.

But also, there were some days when being able to fly somewhere, run somewhere really fast, or, in this case, start a little fire, sounded like a pretty fabulous idea.

People started coming fairly quickly. Everyone grabbed a stick and marshmallows to toast them. I was always amused watching the very calculated ways people did their toasting. Some of them went slow and gentle until it was a nice toasty brown. Some

just set the sucker on fire. All of them tasted good, I'm sure, but still, it was fun to watch them create and eat their goodies until they were all gone.

I'd have had more supplies for them if it were up to me, but my boss was pretty big into this is how many you use for each activity. If I were running this place, it would go very differently. And there were days when I thought about possibly trying to buy it. Then I looked at my bank statement and my partially finished degree, and I realized that was just a pipe dream.

Instead, I was going to work here until my degree was finished and then find a job somewhere doing something boring. Maybe settle down, have a family, or get a dog. Possibly both. But, until then, I could dream of having something of my own. Right?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

It was hard to tell from way up in the sky what the bevy's reaction to my transformation was, but as I came closer, any delusions I might have had about a cheering crowd faded. Wide eyes, grimaces, and balled fists did not imply their happy support of my new state. They all knew my heritage. It had never been a secret that I was the child of dragons, but perhaps seeing me like this, with all the predatory parts had their otter halves recognizing danger.

I landed in front of my dad's home and shifted back, looking around for my clothes. It didn't take long to remember that my shift had been unplanned, and therefore my jeans and T-shirt lay in shreds on the ground. Nudity was not a big deal among shifters, but never having shifted before, and not liking to swim—skinny-dipping was the rule—I'd pretty well been dressed all the time in public. And at this moment, I felt incredibly vulnerable with nearly every otter standing outside, staring at me, and muttering to one another.

My friends, my adopted bevy...gaping as if they'd never seen me before.

"Come in and eat breakfast, son," Pops said. "Your dad has some shorts and a shirt for you." The fact that my fathers were not behaving as the rest did brought tears to my eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. "They don't mean any harm; they're just surprised."

I followed him into the kitchen where Dad handed me the clothes and, as soon as I was dressed, we all sat down at the table. "I feel like I should be too upset to eat, but I'm starving." As evidenced by the fact that I spoke around a mouthful of pancakes.

"I don't know a lot about how dragon metabolism works, but the otter younglings

always up their calories once they shift for the first time,” Dad said, piling more pancakes dotted with his wild-harvested blueberries on my plate. “Didn’t you know?”

“Nobody talks to me about things like that. I think they maybe didn’t want to hurt my feelings when I couldn’t do it myself.” Everyone had always been so good to me, which made their reaction extra hard to take. I continued to shovel food into my mouth while my mind ran in circles. “They looked scared.”

“They probably are. Our animals are a lot smaller than yours, and less predatory.” Pops refilled my coffee as he spoke. “I hoped this would never come up, but when we adopted you, it was not as smooth as we’ve let you believe.”

“Some of the others objected, and we had to make a deal...” Dad added.

I looked from one of them to the other, waiting. Somehow, I didn’t think the deal was, when he becomes a dragon, we throw a party in his honor.

“Every year, when your birthday came and you hadn’t shifted, we celebrated another year you got to be with us.” Pops’ distress was evident in his expression and his tone.

“To be with you.” And wasn’t that scary. “So, your deal was...” I still needed them to spell it out in case I was wrong. Please let me be wrong.

They linked hands, and I swallowed back the grief already rising. Pops said, “Son, we promised once you shifted, we’d take you away from here. The alpha feared, and still fears, what might happen with a dragon in the bevy.”

My jaw dropped. “He thinks I would hurt someone just because I’m a dragon? If I was that kind of person, wouldn’t I have been dangerous in this form?” What little I did know about shifters I’d learned from watching my friends and their families. The animal side was rarely different natured from the two-legged.

“Oh no.” Dad patted my hand with his free one. “It wasn’t you he was worried about. It was the reaction of others in the bevy.”

“And judging from what I just saw, he wasn’t wrong.” I pulled my hand back and stood. “It was kind of him and everyone to keep me here this long, but I don’t want to be a hindrance to the bevy or anyone in it. I will thank the alpha for his kindness then be gone.”

“Give us a day or so to pack,” Pops said.

“No.” Sadness welled up even stronger at the thought of not seeing them every day. Even though I’d moved out years ago, they were just across the compound with their smiles and hugs and delicious meals they often shared with me. “I’m twenty-five, and I don’t need you to uproot your lives for me. I’ll always be grateful, and remember you with love, but it’s time I made my own way in the world.”

“Son...” Dad started then trailed off.

“He’s right.” Pops assertion probably surprised himself as much as it did me. I’d thought I’d have to argue for a while. “You’ve done well and made something of yourself. I don’t know precisely how much money you have.”

“More than enough,” I assured them. Enough that I would be moving some into an account for them so they’d never lack for anything. I’d always believed I’d be here to take care of them in their old age, but that would not be happening. “Don’t worry about me.”

“And don’t think that just because you’re leaving, we are not your family.” Pop was as fierce as I’d ever heard him. “If you need us, call and we will be there.”

“Wherever there is,” Dad finished for him. “But even if you don’t, please keep us

updated on your travels and what you're up to. You can take the car."

"I'll be on the wing, now that that's possible." I offered them a grin, hoping they would be reassured. "It will be an adventure."

Find our brothers! How long would it be before I got used to a voice in my head?

"Do you know if I had any siblings?"

They looked at each other before facing me again. Dad said, "No. We don't know your backstory at all. We would never have left any behind if we knew of more than you."

"My dragon is insisting I have missing brothers."

Pops nodded slowly. "He would know."

"So, I guess my first job is to find my brothers. Wish me luck?"

They did more than that. They gave me my gifts, a watch and some clothes, and we devoured my birthday cake because obviously any party plans were off with everyone in the place fearing me devouring them. I hugged them and went home to pack a small bag I thought I could figure out how to carry in dragon form. All my presents went in and my wallet, tablet, and other necessities.

They watched me leave, getting smaller and smaller as I circled higher until they were mere specks below me before I started away. I'd devised a strap to carry my minimal belongings, grateful I'd be able to purchase things if I needed them. I had no idea what direction even to try, but my dragon seemed to know, and as heartbroken as I was to leave my home, I let him take the wheel.

After a few close calls with people pointing me out overhead, I switched to flying after dark. Many people did know about shifters, but with dragons being just short of fantastical, I was concerned about what might happen. Rumors of hunters who wanted unusual trophies had been among the stories told around the campfire when I was growing up.

My dragon liked hunting, although that took some getting used to on my part, but when I wanted to eat, I had to land somewhere a bit hidden, shift, dress, and walk to a restaurant. Usually a roadside diner. It also made it possible to charge my phone.

Days in, I was really wondering if my dragon really knew what he was doing. At first, I'd been so absorbed with the novelty of seeing so much of the country, but now, I began to weary.

Do you really know where we're going?

To find brothers.

That was pretty much all he'd say about that. I tried many times. Finally, at the end of one long day of flying, a sharp wind pushed blackhearted clouds ahead of it into my path. When lightning spears shot toward earth followed by loud rumbles of thunder, I hunted for a place to land. Visibility was limited, with starlight shut out by the clouds, so I hunted for the lights of a diner or maybe a farmhouse where I could beg shelter until the storm passed. But when the rain began, it was an instant downpour, and I couldn't wait any longer.

I had to go to ground even if it meant no shelter, but then I saw it. Lights in the distance, a group of small buildings, maybe houses, and I made for them with everything I had left. Landing, I found myself in some sort of small resort area with what looked like nice rental cabins. I'd seen a place like this once when my dads took me on vacation to a lake a couple of hours from home. It was very late, but a porch



light on each glowed in the stormy night, and one had an illuminated sign marked Manager.

I landed, dropped my satchel, and shifted then moved onto the porch where I dressed before knocking. My brothers weren't here, my dragon assured me, but maybe I could find a dry place to stay for the night.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

The crack of lightning in the sky was getting closer and closer when I heard the boom. It was still miles away, but heading in fast. The storm was definitely coming in, and was it a doozy! I watched the radar a few times. There were bands of weather, too. So, we weren't going to have a one and done. Nope. That would be too easy. Instead, we were going to get hit over and over again. Good times. At least I had a few moments to sit in my chair by the bedroom window and watch the show until the next crisis hit.

Two cabins that were meant to leave today ended up choosing to stay in order to avoid traveling in the storm. The wolf family hadn't quite made it here yet but let me know they were on their way, making us full for the night. And even though it meant more work for me in the short run, I was glad the families chose to skip checkout. I'd rather people stay longer and be safe than travel through what was coming or what was already here, for that matter.

The rain pelted the roof. Had I not looked out the window to verify, I'd have thought it was hailing, it hit so hard. It had been a long time since we had torrential downpours like this. Like maybe never.

My phone buzzed. I looked down to see it was cabin eight asking for a bucket. Normally, a bucket could mean many things, from their kid wanted to play with mud to they wanted to tie-dye something. With this kind of downpour, there was a leak, and it was raining in their cabin.

I grabbed some tarps and a couple of buckets and waded my way through to their cabin. Their youngest child sat on the porch, staring out toward the sky. She couldn't have been much more than six and watched the sky with wonder.

“I heard that that means the goddess is bowling.” She beamed up at me.

“If she is, she’s doing a really good job. I think that last one was a strike.” It was still a distance away, but the ground shook with the force of its impact. “Are your parents inside?”

“Mom is. She’s trying to catch the water.”

That was so not what I’d wanted to hear.

Inside, sure enough, there was a leak. It wasn’t a huge one, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t get worse. I put the bucket underneath and pushed the furniture a tad more out of the way. With the wind coming in, this wouldn’t be enough, but it would be a start.

“I hate to ask this of you,” I said to the mama raccoon, “but any chance you could help me get this tarp over the roof?”

It was pre-cut to fit the task at hand. Sadly this wasn’t my first time at this rodeo. Had the weather been perfect, I could probably have finagled it up there on my own, but it wasn’t, and I didn’t trust a ladder to stay where it needed to be. This was a two-person job.

“Absolutely. Fur or skin?”

“Fur.”

I explained the plan, and we went outside where she shifted and carried the tarp up to the roof. Once she was there, she pushed it so half hung down the other side of the slant, low enough for me to get it situated. I tacked it where it needed to be while she held her side firm. Then, when I was done, she climbed back down with the edge of

her side, and I tacked it down. It worked really well, and had I waited even five more minutes to get there, I wouldn't have been able to get it done. The lightning was only about a mile away now if one Mississippi worked.

“Thank you so much. I'll mark down that you get a free day. Or something.” I always had to put the disclaimer or something because sometimes my boss approved things; others, he didn't. Worst-case scenario, I'd buy them something for their kids.

“You don't have to do that. Things happen, and you've been so nice to us.” She and her wife had come with all three of their little ones to spend the week. They were some of our regulars and, in my opinion, made the best cobbler this side of the river.

“Did you want me to make you something warm to drink? You're drenched,” she offered.

“You're not particularly dry.” She'd been on the roof too. Sure, there was some super-power-auto-drying-shifter thing when she shifted back to her human form, but that didn't negate that she'd been on the roof only minutes earlier.

“Drier than you.” She chuckled, and just then, the door clapped open and in came her mate, carrying a couple of huge bags of groceries, the other two kiddos by her side.

“The roads are getting bad,” she said. “I probably should've gone out earlier.”

Her mate grabbed one of the bags and told her about the bucket. The kids listened to their sibling tell them the tale of roof-repair magic their mom had done.

I had assumed the roads already were shit and hadn't planned to drive anywhere in this rain. It was still good information to have. Knowing this, I was doubly happy that everyone was hunkered in for the night. After graciously accepting their offer for a cup of cocoa, I headed back out into the storm and back to my cabin in the hopes that

I could stay in there until the storm let up. Knowing this place, that wasn't going to happen, but a guy could dream.

When I was little, I loved to watch storms through my bedroom window. I learned someplace that electricity didn't play well with glass and got it into my head that behind the window was the safest place to be. And it was safe, as long as the lightning didn't actually strike the house or a nearby tree. It just wasn't the super-hero armor I thought it was at the time. So I settled back in my chair.

With all the wind and falling black walnuts, I thought someone was at my door a few times. They never were. Still, I got up and checked each time, not wanting to leave someone out there if they needed something. My phone was currently working, but that didn't mean everyone's was and, if they were at my door, they must mean it.

I expected to find no one there, just like I had the past couple of times. Instead, I swung it open to find myself staring into the eyes of the sexiest man I'd ever met. His eyes were the color of sapphire, something I didn't even think possible, and a dimple on his chin had me forgetting I was supposed to be greeting him.

"I'm looking for the management."

I stared.

He asked again.

"Oh yeah, I suppose that's me, Arvin. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Stone, and I was flying, and the storm...my dragon preferred I come down here and look for a room."

"Room. Yes. Dragon." Was I making sense? Of course not. How could I be expected

to think with this dragon god standing in front of me.

“Excellent.”

Lightning struck a tree not far behind him and I instinctively yanked him inside. The tree didn’t fall in our direction, but it could have.

“I’m sorry. I got distracted. Can I help you find someone?”

“Yeah, the storm can be distracting.”

It so was not the storm.

“I was hoping you had a vacancy.”

Right! He already said he wanted a room. “Oh no. I’m sorry. We’re all booked up.”

He turned to leave.

“No. Stop. Don’t go out there. It’s only going to get worse.” And something inside me told me I’d regret it the rest of my days if I let him walk out that door. It didn’t make sense. He was some random guy—a shifter at that. We probably had nothing in common and, yet I felt an undeniable pull from him.

“If I can fly ahead of the storm, I might be able to—”

“Stay here,” I blurted out. “Stay here.”

“I thought you had no cabins left.”

“I don’t. I mean, we don’t. I mean...it’s dangerous out there. You can stay in my

cabin. It's fine and no charge." I didn't want him to think I was attempting to fleece him out of money.

"I would pay." He set his bag down. That was a good sign, right?

"Let's not worry about that now. Let's get you settled in. It looks like this storm is going to be a doozy."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

I got very lucky. The resort was completely booked, but Arvin was kind enough to share his home with me and get me out of the storm. He worked here doing just about anything and everything that needed doing while he finished his degree. I admired his hardworking ethic, having had to work through university myself. My fathers helped a great deal, but since I didn't want to pile up loans, I worked two or three jobs at a time to make up the difference, using any extra to begin my investments. Arvin, a human, was just a few years behind me on his path to success.

Having never been particularly attracted to any of the otters in our bevy or others who visited, I had assumed either I did not have a fated mate, or I would have to find mine among dragons—none of whom I'd ever met. When away at school, I'd dated a bit, but nothing serious. Other shifters—no humans. Friends who crossed that bridge always said it was a river too wide, and I could see that made sense. Sort of.

And when I left the bevy, it wasn't on my list of priorities. I had to leave per my dads' deal, and I was searching for my brothers. Twenty-five years old, raised as an only adoptive child, and somehow never considered whether I might have siblings. It sure took my dragon long enough to show up and tell me. Were they also looking for me?

As I settled under the covers, I expected to drift off right away. While traveling, I had not stayed indoors until now, instead napping under trees or anywhere I could find out of sight. I could easily have afforded a room, but my dragon preferred being outdoors.

Until now.



He seemed content to be here in this little house, curled up inside me and at rest. Which should have meant I could also be at ease, but my mind would not stop. I'd never been as attracted to anyone as this guy who'd answered the door in the middle of the night wearing only striped pajama pants and a welcoming smile.

With a full house, every unit filled, he'd done what most would not and offered me a room in his own place. A very comfortable if small spare room holding only a bed and nightstand and about six boxes of books. Apparently some of his classes had been old-school and required actual textbooks, but some were novels, and I finally got up and helped myself to one in order to make myself sleepy. When I was once again under the covers with two fluffy pillows behind my head, I realized it was a textbook...Philosophy 101.

I could have gone for another, but since I'd spent a good deal of my time dozing in a class by that name, it seemed a good choice. My eyes were soon heavy, and the clunk of the book hitting the floor barely pushed back the waves of sleep overtaking me.

"Ready to go?" Arvin bounced on his tiptoes, and I looked down at him from my superior dragon height. Crouching, I extended a wing so he could climb on. "I can't wait to meet your family." He had my satchel over his shoulder so I could change when we got there and introduce this human to my dads and the others who had been so kind to me. We'd been flying for days, in the sunshine instead of at night like my first trip. So much better for sightseeing. Although I could not talk when I was in this form, the human had no such trouble, and he'd spoken to me about what we passed and what he was thinking...just everything. It was such a better trip than the way here.

We landed in the forest just outside the bevy compound, and I dressed, so ready to introduce Arvin to everyone. While I'd loved listening to him, it was also so nice to be able to reply. "Are you tired from all that flying?" Oddly, I couldn't remember making any stops...but we must have.

“Not at all.” He grinned at me, white teeth flashing between full lips. “You’re an excellent ride, very smooth, and the snacks were great.”

Snacks? Something else I didn’t remember, but I was glad I’d fed him. More than glad. “Okay, it’s right this way.” We started off through the trees and onto a path I’d walked many times while growing up. “And here’s the stream where everyone likes to swim.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. I enjoy swimming in the river at the resort. We should do that sometime.”

“Uh, for sure.” I’d get over my dislike of water to spend time with this man. Somehow. We used the flat rocks to cross the stream and came up on the other side. We were close enough to the compound now that I could see the houses, and my steps sped up.

“I hope your dads are home,” he said, huffing a little at my side.

Slowing, remembering I’d been told that humans were not as fast as shifters. “They usually are.” But maybe I should have called? “Looks pretty quiet though.” More than quiet, when we entered the open area inside the compound, there was nobody around at all. No kids riding bikes or playing ball, nobody hanging out laundry or carrying things here or there, no smoke from fires. There was power, on a limited basis, mostly solar, but just about everyone still cooked on a woodstove.

“Were you living with them?”

“No. I lived in a tiny home right over...” It was gone. I panicked until I remembered that the tiny home was movable, on a sort of sled. But, where was it? Did they hate me so much that even the place I lived was no longer welcome? My gaze flicked from side to side, imagining eyes peeking from narrow gaps in curtains. Did they

think I was here to harm them?

“Something is wrong,” I muttered. “Arvin, you’d better wait beyond the tree line.”

“If you’re going, I’m going.” Arvin pulled his shoulders back. “I’ve got your back.”

“I’d feel so much better if you would stay back.”

“No.” He said nothing else, but the spark in his eyes would rival any dragon’s flame in determination.

My dragon wanted me to fly him away immediately, out of harm’s way, but I couldn’t leave my former people without knowing if they were all right, no matter what they thought of me. Until less than a week ago, they’d been kind to me, and my dads had never changed. “All right, then.”

Nerves creeping up and down my spine, I marched directly toward my dads’ home. The stillness soaked into my bones. Never had this place been without the sounds of life, of people going about their days.

I climbed the porch steps, my heart thudding so loudly, Arvin could probably hear it. “If anything happens, just run,” I whispered before turning the doorknob. Nobody locked their doors here; I doubted anyone even had a lock at all. “Hey, I’m home to visit.”

My dads stood in the kitchen doorway, frozen, their eyes wide. “What do you want, dragon?” my alpha dad demanded, raising his hand to reveal a fire extinguisher. What the... “Get out of our home.”

“What’s going on? Have you been attacked by something?”

“We want no trouble, whoever you are. Just please go in peace,” Dad pled. “We’ve never been attacked by dragons before.”

Attacked by dragons? No recognition colored either of their expressions, and their tones held fear and anger and not a drop of the love I’d always seen there. “Pops? Dad?” I looked from one to the other. “Don’t you know me?”

A beam of sunlight woke me from the worst dream of my life. It had been so hard to leave, but the idea of going back and my family either pretending not to know me or flat out having forgotten me was a hundred times worse. Was this a premonition?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

Dream walking wasn't unfamiliar to me. I'd done it a few times as a child, but it was always because someone really close to me was about to leave this plane. Sort of like our last goodbye. It wasn't something I intentionally did. It ran in the family, and my grandmother could dream walk with intent. But me? It was only during those few very sad occasions.

Which was why this dream walking freaked me out. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to this stranger. Not even close. I felt it deep in my core that we were meant to meet, and I refused to believe it was only to have him instantly depart from this world.

Seeing his heart break the way it did tore a hole in mine. My first guttural reaction was, "Oh no, he's leaving. He's leaving now. He can't leave me." Everyone else was slipping away from him. Why would I be any different?

But then this little word in the back of my head kept pushing forward. Mate. Mate. Mate.

I didn't wake the way I normally did. No, I was yanked from slumber to find Stone already awake, sweating and shaking. I rushed to him, wanting to help. But his eyes were closed tight. I wasn't sure if he was hiding from me, not wanting me to see him like this, or if he had already fallen back asleep. I hoped it was the latter because that would mean there was hope that he wouldn't remember the dream in the morning.

Suddenly, I felt like I'd invaded his privacy and needed to make amends. I hadn't done it intentionally, but that didn't make my presence any less invasive. Those who loved him had rejected him so completely. Was that real life manifested in his dreams or his biggest fear? In any case, I couldn't imagine how deeply that cut. I was only

with him for a few minutes of actual dream time, but it slammed into me in a way I'd never forget.

And then there was my part in the dream. What did that even mean? Was it my conscious mind working there under the veil of sleep? Was it his imagination directing me? I had no idea, but he seemed peaceful and it was time for me to go back to the couch.

Nothing about him looked like he was in any danger of dying. It wasn't like when my grandmother was in hospice, or my uncle was in his coma, both of them saying their goodbyes. Those connections, those bonds of familial ties and the purpose of those dreams had been crystal clear. This was different. So very different.

Tonight was more like I was an active participant in the dream. Like I had made those decisions. It didn't make sense how I could manage that, but what about dream walking did make sense? What it categorically didn't feel like was Stone reaching out one last time. There was great comfort in that.

Mate. Mate. Mate. The single word kept repeating over and over again, like an echo. I wasn't a shifter. I didn't have mates. That was not what humans did. Making the entire thing even more perplexing than it already was.

Humans got married. That was one of the things about shifters I'd always been jealous of. I would see shifter bonded pairs and recognize how much they truly loved each other. My parents never had that, nor did any of their friends. I'd known from an early age finding my always and forever would be a crapshoot. And then, if I did find someone, I worried I wouldn't be able to recognize it and hold onto it. I didn't have my beast guiding me. I was also jealous of them having their beasts, but what little kid didn't?

There was so much trial and error in human dating, which was probably why I really

put myself out there. I couldn't remember the last time I went on a date. It was before I started this job, for sure.

But now there was this push coming from inside me to do more than date. It was telling me loud and clear to snag this man, this dragon. That he was mine. That I was his. That we belonged together.

I snuggled back into my sleep spot and tried to will myself back to sleep. It failed. I tried box breathing, counting the rain drops, thinking of all the states and capitals. None of it worked.

All I could think about was Stone and how much I wanted to comfort him after his dream, and how I wanted to make him smile, and how I didn't want him to go once the storm cleared.

He was obviously traveling. The only reason he stopped here at all was because of the weather, and the storm wasn't going to stick around for long. That's how they worked. They came in, caused destruction, and moved on. Was that how I'd feel about Stone when it was time for him to leave?

Would I be the one left behind? He didn't seem to recognize me as his mate, so that was a really strong possibility. But also, there was no denying that he was physically attracted to me. He tried not to show me, but it was obvious. Tight pants don't lie.

But why? Why wouldn't he say I was his mate? Isn't that what shifters do? And why would I keep telling myself he was my mate, out of nowhere, if he wasn't?

I pulled the blanket over my head. This was too complicated. I replayed the dream over and over in my head, trying to look for clues. His family weren't dragons. That much was clear.

And maybe dragons were different. Maybe they didn't know they had mates. Maybe they were more like humans. But if that were the case, why would I be having these intense feelings like this?

In the end, it didn't matter. Not really. Because what would be, would be. I'd have to talk to him about it in the morning. Waking him up to tell him I thought I might be his mate wasn't even close to a good idea, as much as that was exactly what I wanted to do.

I tried to go back to sleep again only this time, just as I was almost there, it hit me. If I went back to sleep, what was going to happen? I could end up back in his dream. And then what? If he doesn't want me, he sure doesn't want me meddling in his nocturnal wanderings. What if he didn't even know that I really was there? There would be no reason for him to. This was hardly a daily occurrence.

It was a rare gift that I had, one that I didn't have any real control over. So it wasn't something I would have even shared with him had we had time to have some deep talks about ourselves. Most people wouldn't say, "Hey, nice to meet you. Let me tell you about the time that my grandmother was dying, and we visited each other in our dreams like when I was a little kid, and she used to make me cupcakes in her kitchen cups." That wasn't how small talk worked and, so far, that was all we had.

I was just going to have to wait until morning to figure it all out. But, until then, I needed to stay awake.

My grandmother taught me how to block people out of my dreams. I'd never done it. I never felt the need. Not once had anyone ever attempted to share a dream with me that wasn't for a goodbye. But maybe the information she gave me could be useful to Stone. I knew I wouldn't appreciate someone poking around in my head if I didn't want them there.



Lightning cracked, my little cabin shaking once more.

This was going to be a long rest of the night, but staying awake was for the best. I started to make a mental to-do list for all the things that were going to need to be checked and possibly repaired in the morning. The tarp-covered roof of the cabin was the number one at this point, but with trees and branches down, it was going to be far from the only thing. I twisted and turned to help ward off sleep. Being productive helped me stay awake, also.

It was going to be a long-ass night, and I was probably going to look like poop in the morning. Well, if he really is my mate, he won't mind. And if he wasn't, it was probably best I figured that out sooner rather than later.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

The beam of sunlight that woke me must have been a fluke because the storm was still present when I forced myself to my feet. Turned out that having flown as much as I did right after my first shift was a bit much on the bones, muscles, and probably scales. I couldn't say that for sure since I had no scale action going on right now. But it made sense that it would take time to build strength in a new form. My dragon was still this morning, and as the sunlight disappeared behind the cloud cover, darkening the room, I reached for the lamp and pulled the chain.

Nothing.

The wind kicked up, lashing branches against the window, and I quickly dressed to go find my host and see what was going on. My host likely had a lot to deal with in this unseasonal storm with all the people who were staying in the resort, but when I arrived in the living room, I found him just coming in, shedding a poncho in the doorway and leaving it on the porch. "Wow. When I went out, I thought it might be letting up, but it's anything but. Road's shut down and power's out."

"Yeah, the darkness gave that away." I smiled to show him I wasn't really cranky about it. "We had solar back home, so as long as the batteries held out, we had power. Do you have any backup?"

"I have a generator," Arvin confirmed. "Actually every unit has a small one, since power loss around here is way more common than it should be and the trees and angle of the slope make solar nearly impossible. Just not enough hours of direct sun."

"The generator should be great, especially since your guests also have the advantage of using them. I take it you were out starting them up?"

“And giving quick lessons in how not to drain them dry with unnecessary power usage. I have some extra diesel, but it’s not an unlimited supply, and you know how people are with all their devices they want to charge.”

“So I hear.” The bevy with its limited power did not encourage such items. I used my batteries for my work and small, efficient appliances. “Everyone is okay, then?”

“Yes, but I did have to work hard to convince one couple that the road is shut down, and the storm is predicted to go on for a while, so their SUV will definitely not make it out of here. Even if they shifted and ran as their wolves, they’d be wet and miserable and have to come back for their car anyway.”

“Do they need to be somewhere right away?”

He rolled his eyes so hard, I almost repeated my omega dad’s saying, Careful, they’ll stick like that. “No. They just don’t like to be confined. Must be a wolf thing.”

“You’re stuck with me for the duration, too, I suppose. My dragon wasn’t crazy about flying in the storm last night.”

“I’m glad to have the company. No need to rush off. Are you hungry?”

My stomach rumbled, answering without words, and I clamped a hand on it. “Sorry. I guess I am. Do you have any cereal or granola bars?”

“Why? Do I look like the worst host in the world?” He brushed past me on his way to the open kitchen. “Or do you just like the sounds of crunching first thing in the morning?”

“No, but since I didn’t see a woodstove, I assumed you wouldn’t want to use generator power.”

“Propane, baby.” He grinned and pulled eggs and bacon out of the refrigerator. “I can toast the English muffins on the griddle, too, because the toaster would waste electricity.”

“Sounds amazing. What can I do?”

He put me to setting the table while he whisked eggs and fried bacon. It had never occurred to me that you could cook on a standard stove when there was no power, but of course gas or propane would work just right. The only thing he had to do was use matches to light the burners because the electronic ignition did not work. I wasn’t sure if that was approved by the manufacturer, but everything looked and smelled amazing.

Soon we were sitting at the table eating bacon and the fluffiest eggs ever. The English muffins were better than any I’d ever had from a toaster. “Try it with some of the jam.” He pushed a bottle toward me. “I buy it from a little old lady who sells it every summer for a little extra money. She’s famous around here.”

I opened it and inhaled the fragrance of summer. “Blueberry. My dad picks them and puts them in pancakes or makes pies.”

“Yum. I think we might be able to find some around here, if you want. Once the storm ends, that is, and I finish cleaning up the aftermath.” He sounded a little annoyed, but the look in his eyes told me he was looking forward to getting things back the way they should be.

“Do you get a lot of storms around here in the summer?”

He shrugged. “We get a few, but most of them blow through without doing too much damage. It’s only when they linger like this that things flood or get ruined other ways.”

He looked even better than last night, although I did miss seeing his defined abs as revealed by his lack of shirt the previous night. Arvin's breakfast conversation flowed, but I kept getting lost in his eyes or focused on his lips. Even his forearms held my attention, the muscles flexing as he speared eggs with gusto. My dragon was very pleased to see him eat well, responding with a satisfied purr deep inside me.

When we finished eating, Arvin stood to clear the table, but I bounced onto my feet too and picked up my plate. We carried everything to the sink where Arvin washed and I dried. Standing so close to him, I breathed his scent and swayed closer.

"Stone, I need to tell you something," he said.

"Me too." I wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him to me, descending to take his lips in the kiss I'd been wanting since he answered the door last night. At first, he tightened up, lips firmly pressed together, but after a moment, he relaxed and brought an arm around my neck, holding on tight.

When we stepped back, he tilted his head to the side, looking curious, and before he said anything, I hurried to say, "I'm so sorry if that wasn't welcome. I misunderstood."

"I was surprised. But it was welcome."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

It happened so fast, I didn't have time to consider whether it should, or could. A simple kiss, sweet and warm and unplanned, deepened into a passion beyond anything I'd ever experienced. My university dating had been great, but it paled at the first touch of this human's lips. Or maybe it had begun to simmer when he opened the door to admit me to his home.

I slid my hands down his back to cup his firm buttocks and lifted him against me. He wrapped his legs around my hips, and any questions I had to ask melted away when our cocks ground together, rock-hard both. "Which room," I ground out, already walking out of the kitchen."

"Mine," he groaned. "Did we turn off the water in the sink?"

I didn't have any idea, but I turned, still carrying him, until I could see the tap. "Off." We moved into the living room, and I turned toward my room, not wanting to presume, but he shook his head.

"My bed is bigger."

"We aren't going to need a lot of room for what I have in mind," I grunted, but veered off toward the closed door opposite mine. "You're sure about this?" I had already decided we needed no questions, but this person was too special for any misunderstandings. And I was pretty sure we'd already had one when I kissed him...but maybe it was a fortunate one.

"Yes." He peppered my neck with kisses. "So sure." Even my overdeveloped sense of fairness was fine with that, and my dragon's purr added to everything.

Mate,he affirmed and then faded deep inside me, presumably to give us much appreciated privacy.

Arvin's room was not much more decorated than mine, but it did have a queen-sized bed and dresser as well as an ancient upholstered chair by the window. "Do you sit there to watch the storms over the river?" I asked, an image of him in my lap doing just that popping into my mind.

"Sometimes," he murmured, "when I don't have to go deal with a crisis of some sort or other."

"Will it hold us both, do you think?" I shifted him upward as he'd begun to slide a bit.

"For storm watching, yes." He nuzzled my earlobe from his new position. "But for anything more athletic, I recommend the bed."

"Then let's start there." We could always try out the other furniture later. I eased him down on the bed and grasped the hem of his shirt. "Raise your arms."

"Are you going to undress me like a child, then?"

"Like a man." When his shirt was gone, I pushed him to lie on his back. "Lift your hips." And I eased his jeans and undershorts down his legs and off over his bare feet. Did he ever wear shoes? Not for the next few hours, he wouldn't.

I stood over him, taking in what the pajama pants had hidden last night and hardening even more at the sight.

"Are you going to just stand there fully dressed and stare?" A grin lifted the corner of his sexy lips. "You'll make me blush."

“What? Oh.” I stripped as quickly as I could, making Arvin laugh when I got tangled in the leg of my boxer briefs and had to take a few hops to avoid landing on my butt on the bedroom floor. “Sorry, staring is rude.”

He reached out a hand and drew me down beside him. “More like flattering. When a dragon god finds me worth looking at, me, a lowly human...”

“I’m not a god, and you’re anything but lowly.” I lifted his hand to my lips and brushed them over the back. “But I don’t mind making you blush.” The storm still raged, and the room was dim, but my vision, always good, had grown sharper in the past days, and the flush over his skin was enchanting. “Let’s see what else I can make you do.”

Standing, I grabbed his calves and pulled him to the edge of the bed then dropped to my knees. His cock bobbed enticingly in front of my lips, and I traced the edge of the head with my tongue, leaving the droplet of pre-cum for last. Arvin’s hands planted on my shoulders and gripped tight as I closed my lips over him and lowered my head an inch at a time, exploring the contours, tracing the vein. Retreating only to take him deeper each time until his fingers gripped tight, and his breathing rasped over me. Gliding my hand downward, I toyed with his balls for a moment, feeling him ramp up, closer to where I would eventually take him. But not quite yet. Bottoming him out in my throat, I fingered his hole, the slick copious. He was so ready for me, but I wasn’t going there until he came in my throat.

He released my shoulders, digging his fingers into my hair and grasping hold of the strands. “Don’t stop. Whatever you do, do not stop.” As if I would. Hot spurts of cum filled my throat, and I swallowed as fast as I could, wanting every bit of him inside me before I was inside him. When he let go, leaving my scalp stinging, and fell back panting, I rose to my feet and pressed his knees to his chest.

“You’re so slick. I didn’t know humans could do that.” I fitted my cock to his



slippery hole. “But I’m glad.”

“An omega is an omega,” he said, watching me through heavy-lidded eyes. “And I’ve never been this slick before. It’s for you, dragon god.”

“Stop calling me that.” I might get used to it.

“I need you.”

I drove in, feeling the walls close around me, tight and slick, and holding me in such a way, I had to stop and count in my head to avoid being a major disappointment to the man who my dragon was sure was my mate. But he felt so damned good. Praying for strength, I began to move again, slowly, which was almost worse than fast because I could feel every bit of him gliding against my oversensitive cock. It had been a while since I’d been in bed with anyone, but that wasn’t what this was about.

This was everything I’d heard about a mate vs. someone else and more. You’ll know when you meet them. It will ruin you for anyone else. Already this was true. Did humans even have mates?

He flexed his internal muscles, dragging me right back into the moment and the sensations and ruining any possibility of holding back. “Arvin, I’m so sorry but you’re just too sexy, too hot, and too tight.”

The human bucked his hips, making it so much worse...better...worse.

And I stopped fighting it and poured into him, my swelling knot locking us together.

I looked down to see his eyes widen. “It’s true, then? About knotting?”

“Shifter alphas all do,” I panted, rolling us to lie face-to-face, “as far as I know. Don’t

humans?”

“I don’t have a lot of experience.”

That didn’t bother me in the slightest.

I held him close, trying not to worry that he might not feel the way I did, might not even understand having a mate. I’d explain. I’d ask my dragon for guidance. I’d do whatever I needed to to make this work.

Because he had, indeed, ruined me for all others.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

There was nothing sweeter than being held by Stone. This feeling, this connection, was something I'd never understood when people talked about it—specifically when referring to their mates. They spoke of this all-encompassing sensation that made you feel safe, at home, and alive all at once. My human friends never held the same emotion as they raved about their love lives. No, it had always been my shifter friends exclusively.

Silly me. I'd always thought it was just people exaggerating. Trying to make their person seem as wonderful to you as they were to them. Not intentionally being deceptive or anything. More that they were so in love that they simply saw things differently. That, or they simply experienced romance differently than I did. Not once had I ever thought it was possible for me to feel this way.

And it was more than just the post-joining aww that endorphins bring. I didn't understand it fully, but this sense of completeness, it was real on a cellular level. There was no part of me that wasn't touched by him. He was part of me, and I was part of him.

His warm breath tickled the back of my neck, reminding me that not only was he there but that he was close. Not that his body was letting me go; we were as physically close as two people could be, and I was cherishing every last second of it.

My phone had been buzzing nonstop, and I was sure it had everything to do with the storm. But in that moment, being here with him was far more important than any job, any class, any...anything. We just lay there together in peaceful silence. As his knot slowly subsided and he finally withdrew, the sense of loss was immediate. I rolled over to face him. He'd positioned himself up slightly on his elbow, looking down at

me with a wide smile as I faced him.

I reached up to touch his cheek. “I feel like there’s some things we probably need to talk about.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I push too fast?” He tensed, the exact opposite of what I’d wanted to accomplish with my comment. Gods. I was messing things up and quickly.

“Oh, no, no, no. Nothing like that. We should probably talk about last night and the...the dream.” Might as well jump right into it.

His eyes went wide. “You were there? Like, really there?”

“Yeah, and that’s something I sometimes do,” I said, feeling the awkwardness grow between us. “Not on purpose, and usually not with anyone I’m not related to, and usually only in really specific circumstances.” Could I do a worse job explaining it? “But what I wanted to talk about wasn’t exactly that part—it was more the afterward. When we woke up, my brain kept poking at me and pushing, telling me that you are my mate.” I bit my bottom lip. “I don’t mean to be clingy and that guy...”

He cut me off with a kiss. “I feel it too,” he mumbled against my lips. “I feel it too.”

I didn’t fully understand the entire mate thing with shifters, and I didn’t need to. All I needed to know was that he was mine and I was his. Together, we were going to be connected in this way forever. The rest of it was all details. Important details, but details nonetheless.

He wrapped his arms around me, and we snuggled, enjoying each other’s embrace as I backtracked enough to tell him about my dream walking and how he could keep me out if he wanted to. To my surprise, he seemed more interested in letting me in. I wasn’t exactly sure how to make that happen, but it was something we could figure

out.

But not today. It quickly came to a point when I could no longer ignore all the beeps from my phone.

“I’m sorry.” I sat up. “With the storm and everything, it could be an emergency.” It had better be for disturbing me so.

“No, no, no. This is your place.”

“It’s not really my place. I just work here.” I hoped that didn’t disappoint him, but I wasn’t the owner or anything.

To my surprise, it looked like it was a relief for him, like he’d rather I not own this place. I’d ask him about it later. But, for now, the phone was still buzzing. I grabbed and unlocked it. Over a dozen notifications, which were over a dozen more than I wanted there to be.

Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t the residents looking for repairs or information. It was random messages from local agencies, mostly talking about not traveling and another storm band coming through tonight. Pretty much, it was all the typical things that came with this kind of weather.

I could have ignored it after all. Nothing on my phone needed my immediate attention. But ignoring them meant potentially ignoring a guest, and I wasn’t willing to do that. If something were to happen to one of the cabins and they needed assistance for safety, I had to be aware. Telling them I met my mate, so sorry they had their roof cave in, was hardly the responsible way to run this place.

“Nothing urgent.” I climbed back on the bed. “I promise you I wasn’t ignoring you.”

“No, you weren’t, but also, it would’ve been okay if you had. By my count, there are a dozen cabins here, that’s a lot of people that might need you. I’m guessing you need to work now?”

“I don’t want to leave you though.” Needy and whininess level achieved. Ugg. I needed to figure out how to handle these big emotions because this wasn’t the way.

“I don’t want you to either, but, whatever it is, we’ll both do it. That way, we can be together, and you can meet your responsibilities.” He climbed off the bed and pulled on his boxer briefs. “And whatever it is, it’s gonna start with a sandwich.”

“Did you just say you’re gonna make me a sandwich?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Cliché, I know. But, yeah. Unless you want to make me one.”

I laughed. “That’s even more cliché, but I can do that. Or,” I countered, “we could make them together.”

I had a can of chicken in the cupboard. It was hardly what I would call delicious fare, but we mixed it with some mayonnaise and mustard and ate it with the last of the English muffins, and they were good enough to make the most basic sandwich feel fancy.

If the day had gone differently...less work, more alone time, I’d have cooked him a nice meal. But that would require many things, including a trip to the store and, according to all the reports I saw, that wasn’t going to happen. It would have to wait.

But one good thing was that no decisions needed to be made about him leaving today because the storm wasn’t going to allow it. With another band coming in, staying put was the safest option. It gave us time to figure everything else out.

When there was yet another crack of lightning and another shake of the house, followed by the unmistakable sound of a tree branch falling to the ground and hitting another roof, I couldn't be upset by it. As we ate our mediocre sandwiches in the tiny little cabin that I didn't even own, in the middle of vacation rentals, life could be a whole lot worse than this. A whole lot worse.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

I woke in the morning to the sound of silence. It was such a relief. While I was grateful for the storm because it brought me my dragon, I was equally grateful for it to be gone. I got up, trying not to wake Stone, and went to make some breakfast. We still didn't have full power, but that was okay. That was going to be rectified soon enough.

Yesterday had been remarkably fun. My mate and I walked around the property to see how bad the damage was and take care of any immediate safety issues. There was a lot of work that was going to need doing when the storms were completely through, but it would be a fool's errand to tackle them before the weather had completely cleared.

At one point, Stone brought out his dragon to help move a tree that had fallen and was wedged against a cabin. His dragon was gorgeous and matched the color of his eyes. I wasn't sure if that was a dragon thing or not. I'd not known any other than him, but it was stunning and suited him. Now, when I looked into his eyes, I could see his beast, and I loved it.

There was a crap ton or five to do. But the second swath of the storm came in and put an early end to our day. I didn't mind. I couldn't think of anything better than being "trapped" with my mate in the cabin. We talked some more about dragony things and mates, but also about my dream walking. We also discussed really important topics such as hobbies and favorite movies. It was the perfect way to pass a rainy afternoon. And we found an even better way to spend our night.

But, now it was time for me to get back to work. I was going to be busy until the sun set. And even with that, I definitely wasn't going to get it all done. As long as I made



a dent and the property was safe, I'd be happy with that. What I wasn't going to be happy with was being away from my mate all day. It had been one thing to ask him to go for a walk with me so I could assess the damage. It would be quite another to ask him to act like an employee.

I talked to my boss via text. He was pissed that the drive was partially washed away, as if I could do anything about that. He mumbled a few times about selling the "headache" and being done with it. It wasn't the first time he mentioned it and wouldn't be the last. He was all about the profit, and he saw things like this as personal attacks on his goals. It was weird.

Before I started cooking breakfast, I checked my phone once again for news. I visited all the local groups and news sites as well as checking out social media. The pictures of the surrounding communities were awful. We'd really lucked out here, protected on our mountain...my boss's mountain. The mountain.

Many roads were still blocked in multiple places, power lines were down closer to town, which would get first priority over our lack of utilities, and a lot of the dirt roads were completely washed away. It was far worse than the original reports I got yesterday.

Unlike my mate, I needed cars and roads to get places. Most of the people who were here also needed them. The authorities announcing they had closed the road to all unessential traffic meant that no one with the exception of my mate, was able to go anywhere—at least without leaving their vehicles behind. We were all stuck.

I crossed my fingers and toes that I had all the supplies I needed for today's work. I had a sneaking suspicion that everything was exponentially worse than it was during my walk with Stone yesterday. Last's night's visit from Mother Nature had been especially windy, and the rain pelted down so loudly a couple of times I thought it was hailing. There was bound to be more damage.

I cooked the eggs, the smell of the buttery goodness wafting through the small cabin. Either I was too loud or the food smelling too delicious because my mate came over to me just as they were finished. Stone wrapped his arms around me from behind and nestled into where my neck and shoulder met. I must have woken up my mate.

“Good morning,” he murmured, pressing his lips to the spot right below my ear. “I missed you.”

“I’ve been up ten minutes max.” I turned off the flames and rotated in his arms so I could hug him and hold him close. “But I missed you too.”

“What’s going on today? What are your plans?” he asked, holding me in his arms.

“Today is going to be awful.” I sighed. “There’s going to be a lot of cleanup here. I normally don’t mind, but you’re here. I don’t want to leave you. I need to get my work done. Other people are counting on me. This isn’t some paperwork I can blow off.” I was for sure trying to convince myself more than Stone.

“I’d love to help you. I’m not great with fixing things, but I’m strong. And if we need to move things like trees, my dragon’s right here for you.” He winked at me, probably remembering the way I ogled his naked body right before and after he shifted. It wasn’t like I was rude about it—Stone was just—Stone. Looking away wasn’t an option. “I can hand things to you like a boss.”

“Are you sure?” I loved the idea, but in no way, shape, or form did I want my mate to feel obligated. He didn’t work here. I did. If anything, he’d already helped far more than he should’ve.

“Yeah. I’d love it,” he said.

We had our breakfast and then went to look at all that needed to be done. Just as I

suspected, it was a lot more than the last time. Even with the two of us, it was going to be more than a day's worth of work. Possibly even a week.

A couple of the guests offered to help, and, while it was probably out of compliance with insurance regulations or whatever, I gratefully accepted their offers. I planned to give them part of their rental back. My boss wouldn't like it, but oh well. It wasn't as if he was willing to send a crew.

It was nice, almost feeling like I was in a pack like this. That was another thing I never had as a child, but thought it would've been nice. Maybe I was projecting my expectations of what a pack might feel like, but we all worked together like a family, and that felt very pack-ish to me.

We got a lot done and worked late into the evening before exhaustion took over. I cooked out on the fire pit and had brought out all the fixings for s'mores. Unlike what my boss wanted, I brought them all out—every last package of chocolate, marshmallows, and graham crackers I had. Hard work deserves a sweet little reward.

The guests, Stone, and I ate until our bellies were full and our hands were sticky. It was wonderful, but not as wonderful as when we shut the cabin door after the fire was out. It was just the two of us again. We chatted, explored each other's bodies again, and fell asleep in each other's arms. It was the perfect end to the day.

Until the middle of the night when my mate woke up with a start, sitting up and pulling away from my arms.

“Are you okay?” I asked, even though it was clear that he wasn't. He was sweating, breathing fast and hard. His heart was beating so loudly that even I could hear it with my human ears. He was the opposite of okay.

I wrapped my arms around him. “What's going on? Talk to me.” This wasn't a dream

I was part of, and not knowing what it was made it exponentially more difficult to figure out how best to help him.

“I need paper, please,” he finally said.

“Okay.” I jumped out of bed and went to find a little pad and a pencil from a junk drawer and brought it to him.

He started sketching. “I dreamed about my brothers. I saw them. I never could do that before. Do you think that’s because of you?”

“I don’t know.” I wished my grandmother was still around. She’d understand this all. “But whatever the case is, we have a direction now, don’t we?” Or at least something to look for. His artwork was pretty clear. I had a feeling it wouldn’t be too terribly difficult to google.

“Yeah. But you have your job and everything.”

“We’ll figure that out. Family comes first. Always.”

“Not always.” Stone pulled me into a hug. “But from now on. Definitely from now on.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

Between the storms and cleanup, the days were getting away from me, and my dragon grew more insistent that we head out to find my brothers. He hadn't been big on giving me too many details about them, just a steady demand that we join them. Immediately. And while we'd flown here almost entirely under his direction, I'd begun to wonder if it had been to find my brothers or if he'd wanted to find our mate first. If so, he'd done me a great favor because there was no better mate anywhere than the one Fate had granted me.

But a few days had passed, and the dragon had seemed content to stay here, for now. The storms had rolled through and on out, and I'd enjoyed helping my mate clear up the mess left behind. As we went from cabin to cabin, I offered my assistance but was not nearly as helpful as I wished I could be. Watching his skill at so many tasks made me admire him even more.

And he was willing to go with me on my quest. There was some chance it would cost him his job and while I could take care of us, I didn't like him risking what he saw as his security here. My mate was not the type to let me support him, at least not for now, but I hoped it would be all right.

The one thing I had was the location I'd sketched and a hope my dragon knew what he was up to. Arvin was my family just as much as my brothers. And while my dragon was constantly encouraging me to find them, my mate's presence made me feel more confident. I didn't know my brothers. They were strangers to me.

I was sitting in the chair by the bedroom window, looking out at the innocent blue sky that bore no resemblance to the storm clouds that had settled over this area for so long, when Arvin came in. "Stone, I'm looking forward to the trip."

“Great. Are you sure you want to?” That came out wrong.

“Unless you’d rather I didn’t.” He sounded terse, and he was right to feel that way.

“Arvin, sweetheart, you’re my mate, and I am only really happy when I’m with you. I think that’s true of most shifters.”

“And this human.” He came over and sat on my lap. “Seems like the chair will hold us both.”

“But nothing athletic,” I reminded him.

“Before we go, I wanted to ask you a favor anyway.”

“Anything, omega. What can I do for you?”

“Mark me.”

I began to lift him, to carry him to the bed, but he leaned in to me. “No, Stone. Here.”

“And if the chair breaks?”

“It’s only an old chair. I’m willing to risk it.”

It involved some shuffling of clothing, but then I was nestled in his ass crack, his slick guiding me toward the hot hole where I wanted most to be. He was always tight and welcoming, and this time, we were going to make it official. We were mates, and we knew it, but his requesting I mark him?

A knee on either side of me, he rose and fell, caressing my cock with his body while I reached between us to stroke and bring him along with me, and we both came fast,

cum filling him and spurting over both our chests. As my knot swelled, I bent and sank my teeth into the side of his neck, marking him mine. We cuddled together then on the chair that had not broken and was apparently fine for anything athletic.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

Tonight, in his arms, I instantly fell asleep. I didn't actively concentrate on not dream walking or use any of the methods my grandmother taught me to avoid it. Not because I was intending on popping into my mate's brain or anything like that, but I simply forgot. It had been a long day, and my body was just so exhausted. More tired than it should be. But after a week of cleaning up the mess, I could barely stay awake.

When I found myself awake, sitting in a field I'd never been to before, I instantly recognized it as a dream. It was realer than the ones I usually had, and my brain was definitely more "awake" than normal. A sense of guilt washed over me as Stone came into view. I was invading his space.

"There you are." He waved me over. "You've been gone a while."

"I have?" I'd just gotten into this scene, or so I thought. Maybe I hadn't, or possibly I was filling the role of myself in a dream that had already started. I should've paid far more attention to my grandmother than I had.

"Yeah, you have. The babies need you."

"The babies need me?" I looked left, and we were no longer in the field.

Now we were in a house I didn't recognize, looking down at two bassinets. Each one of them had a baby in it, or at least a baby form. I couldn't see their faces or fingers. Everything that was covered by their sleepers was crystal clear. The rest? It was barely out of my view. It wasn't that they were missing like in an old horror movie. I just couldn't tilt my head to the correct angle to see them.



“Who are these babies?” I asked.

He looked down at me, “Honey, don’t you know?”

I shook my head, “No, tell me. Were they lost in the storm?”

“They’re ours, my love. They’re ours.”

The scene changed again before I could say anything more about that. I wasn’t sure if I left his dream or he left mine, or maybe we hadn’t even been sharing it in the first place. It was so confusing.

But I was back at the cabins this time. For some reason I was grabbing pillows out of the storeroom like my life depended on it. That wasn’t even the weirdest part. I was insisting that they be hung up on a clothesline...a clothesline we didn’t have. I was going to have to build it. and in the way you only can in dreams, I instantly knew how to accomplish the task.

“Do you need some help with that?” I looked over to see one of the regulars from the cabins standing there. A kangaroo who hadn’t been around this season yet. Dream me didn’t care that he was coming in a couple of weeks. Dream me decided I needed to see him now. Dreams were weird.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.” None of this scene made sense. Why was I messing with our stock of pillows and a clothesline of all things. I wasn’t sure I’d ever even used one before. If I had, it would’ve been when I was a small boy.

“I remember when I was expecting my first one.” The kangaroo was looking at my belly.

When I dropped my glance to see what he was looking at, there was no mistaking

what it was. I was pregnant. Not even a little bit, either. I was super-duper mega pregnant. My belly was the size of a small island.

“What the fuck?” I willed myself awake.

It didn’t work.

I tried again.

It didn’t work.

Finally, I attempted one of the little tricks my grandmother taught me about staying out of people’s dreams, hoping that would keep me out of my own. It worked, and I was back in bed, eyes open, wondering what the heck that was about.

I climbed out of bed and padded toward the kitchen to get a drink.

“Where are you going?” Stone asked sleepily.

“I need a glass of water.” I walked to his side of the bed and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Go back to sleep.”

He didn’t say anything, and I went on my way. I got my water, but when I came back, he wasn’t asleep like I assumed he would be. Instead, he was sitting up looking far too serious. He had been in the dream too. There was no other explanation.

“Did you have a dream?” I sat on the bed beside him, intertwining our fingers.

“Yeah. Were you there—I mean you were, but was it you-you or imagination you?”

“I don’t know. I think I was there. In my dream, we had children.” And also I was

pregnant, but he hadn't been there for that part, so I was going to ease into it.

"Twins?"

"Twins." Adorable twins. I'd been too scared to pick them up during the dream, afraid that if I did, I'd be holding a faceless baby or something equally disturbing.

"It's weird. I don't know if it was my dream or yours." He pulled me into his arms.

"Does it matter?" I asked. In a way it sort of did, I supposed. But also, not really. We just had to come to an agreement on what we were or weren't willing to do when it came to dream walking—you know, the ground rules.

"No, I suppose not." He kissed the top of my head. "But the dream... I think it was more than just a dream."

"Meaning?" Did dragons have some dream lore I hadn't learned about yet? It was impossibly possible.

"What if...could you be pregnant?"

"Pregnant? Do you think?" I'd never considered dreams literal, but that didn't mean they couldn't be.

"There's one way to find out." Stone got out of bed, held his hand out for mine, took it, and led me outside. "My dragon is the best one here to ask." He brushed his lips against mine and ran a few feet away before taking his scales.

Just like the other times I'd seen his beast, my breath was stolen. He was a magnificent creature.

His dragon sniffed me head to toe. I giggled nervously. Why would a dragon be smelling me up and down? But when he shifted back, Stone wrapped his arms around me and twirled me. I knew the answer before he even said the words. “We’re going to be parents!”

“Are you sure?” I wanted it to be true more than I’d ever wanted anything. But I refused to get excited until there was no question about it, I was going to have a baby...possibly twice in this instance.

“My dragon is positive.”

“But it’s so soon.” I wasn’t born yesterday. I understood pregnancy could happen the very first time. But it was sooo fast. “I guess I should put my notice in. I don’t want to be traveling when I’m too far along.”

“You probably shouldn’t be leaving any time soon.” He at least had the decency to look uncomfortable saying it.

“Excuse me? I’m not a barefoot-in-the-house kinda guy.” Or maybe I was—I literally did not wear shoes in the house--socks if it was very cold—but that wasn’t what I meant and he had the kindness not to point that out. I hadn’t really figure that out yet...or any of this. “I mean I don’t know what I mean...ignore that outburst.” Understatement of the year.

“Never be sorry for sharing how you feel.” He cupped my cheek. “We’ll figure all this out, I promise you.”

“And I promise you the same respect for you so graciously give me.” He deserved far more. He deserved everything.

“The eggs should arrive in only a few weeks. It’s best if we just stay here. We’ll find

my brothers, we will, but our babies come first.”

“Did you just say eggs?” For some reason, it just now registered.

“Yeah.”

“I’m human,” I reminded him.

“And you’re carrying two baby dragons.”

I put my hand on my belly, “Two? Are you sure?”

“My dragon is.” His dragon was helpful in so many ways.

“So you’re saying in a couple of weeks.”

He shook his head. “A few.”

“I’m going to lay eggs like a chicken?” Yes, my brain was still catching up to all of this.

“Not like a chicken, honey. Like a dragon. You’re going to lay eggs like a dragon.”

Because that made it less terrifying...oh wait, except it didn’t.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

We'd discussed the two of us going to my brothers before now, but with the babies on the way, plans had to be altered. I was hardly going to take my pregnant mate go flying around the country in all weather with no idea where he'd lay his head or our eggs. And while he tried to be as helpful and positive as possible, I knew any omega dad would have to put the children first. And this omega human was showing me how to get things set up in a way I'd never seen before.

As a human, he probably would have expected to carry his child, usually just one, for a full nine months, but having mated with me, a dragon, everything was very different. And having grown up with otters, I was not much help with what to expect. Fortunately the little old lady who sold jam was also the local midwife. Her name was Parma.

We arrived at her home on a very warm afternoon. Her jam stand was on the honor system, and people were supposed to take a jar and put money into a little box. It struck me that folks in the area must be very honest if they could be trusted to do this and not just steal all the jam and all the money others had left.

"Come right up here," she called from her front steps. "I don't have time to wait for you to dawdle when your appointment time is almost past."

"Does that mean we're right on time?" Arvin whispered.

"It means what I said it means," she growled, and I caught a glimpse of her other side. The midwife was a coyote of all things, not what I'd have thought of as a nurturing type of animal, but maybe I was just relying on stereotypes and folk tales. "Come in before you end up laying those eggs in my yard."

Inside the home was much more welcoming than I'd expected from her greeting. Parma had us wait in the front room for a few minutes while she got ready for us, making me wonder why she'd rushed us if she wasn't "ready for us." But she soon came bustling out and guided us into the next room, which held a surprisingly scientific type exam table, a sink, and lots of other things that looked seriously medical in nature. "Now, you can go behind that screen and change," she told my mate, "while I wash my hands."

It seemed unnecessarily modest for a shifter practice, and if the screen didn't look like a part of the room, something always there, I would have thought she just did it for the sake of my mate's human sensibilities. When he was dressed in the provided white cotton gown, she had him climb up on the table and lie back.

"I feel very strange," Arvin told her. "My belly is so hard."

"And how else would eggs be?" Parma looked up from the little stool she'd wheeled over to the foot of the table. "If they aren't hard, how will they protect your little ones?" She busied herself, examining my mate, hemming and hawing under her breath. Standing, she felt all over his belly, pressing around the egg and nodding. "You are doing very well, Arvin. Even dragons have a rough time when they get this close to laying their eggs. Is your nest ready?"

"My what?" His cheeks lost all color. "We need to have a nest for...the eggs?"

"Well, yes, of course." She tsked. "Where did you plan to lay them? In the compost heap in the garden?"

"We don't even have a compost heap." He moved to sit up, but Parma gently pushed him back down. "Should we have one?"

"No," I told him softly. "We just need a nest." Unfortunately, I had no idea how to

build one. It was the job of the omega. I didn't know a lot about being a dragon, but even I knew that. And since my mate was the furthest thing from being a dragon, I blamed myself for not realizing that. How would he know about building a nest? "We will take care of it as soon as we finish here and have lunch."

Arvin shook his head. "No lunch. We have shopping to do, and it can't wait."

"I don't want you missing a meal, omega."

"And I don't want to lay our eggs in a compost heap." His gritted jaw and fisted hands were in contrast with the awkward position, feet in stirrups and wearing only the white gown, but I knew serious when I saw it. Unfortunately, the nearby town did not have any drive-thrus, or I would have suggested we grab a bite there.

"We don't have a compost heap," I reminded him.

Huge mistake. He burst into tears. "I can't even do that right. How can I be a dad without a compost heap? We want our children to eat their vegetables—and we can't even grow any."

We were going way off track here, but I wasn't sure how to get that straightened out. I wasn't going to let my mate go hungry. Lately, if he did, he got dizzy, and I had no intention of seeing him faint while shopping for nesting materials. In a quandary, I caught the midwife's eye, hoping for a little help here. Why didn't I bring along some granola bars or cheese and crackers? It was all on me!

"Boys, I will fix you some sandwiches for the road." Parma straightened from where she was bent over my mate's belly. "And then you can shop for that nest." She washed her hands again and left the room. After Arvin had dressed behind his screen, and we were ready to go, the midwife returned with a brown bag and a sheaf of printouts. "Nice roast chicken on sourdough, some apples, and although I don't



recommend too many sweets for my patients, I included a couple of brownies. They're very high protein and made with beets."

"Thank you." Arvin took the bag from her. "I've never had brownies made that way, but I am sure they're delicious. Then his expression became very concerned. "I don't suppose they are still chocolate?"

"Cocoa and chips," she assured him, passing the papers to me. "Just some tips for the next little while, a few nest ideas from Pinterest...things like that. If you haven't laid the eggs within two weeks, come back, and we'll make sure everything is still going as it should. All right?" She didn't wait for an answer, just led us out onto the porch, closing the door behind us.

"Well, that was interesting." Arvin rested a palm on his bump. "Roast chicken, she said?"

For a guy who didn't want any lunch, he did justice to everything she'd made, including half of my sandwich and both brownies, which he pronounced very good despite the vegetable content. Then he flipped through the nesting printouts and got out his phone to find more ideas. Our town might not have fast food franchises but what it did have was a terrific bed-and-bath store.

As soon as I parked in front, he was out of the car and marching into the shop, determination in every fiber of his being. He'd been waddling lately, but there was nothing like that happening as he pushed a cart up and down the aisles then sent me to get a second one and filled that as well. He bought pillows and blankets and quilts and bolsters and some things I didn't quite have names for, but he seemed to know what he wanted, and I was only glad I would have no trouble buying them for him.

After taking the first two carts to the front of the store and returning with a third empty, I found him staring at a big turquoise pillow in his hands. "Mate, are you all

right?”

He nodded slowly. “The pillows in the dream... This was one of them.”

“Wow.” My mate was human, but he had quite the gift of dreams. “Maybe we need a clothesline, too.”

We bought one, just in case and loaded it into the car along with all the other things we’d bought, many of which he recognized from the dream. Then we headed back to the cabin, where I made the mistake of suggesting he rest after all our exertions and start again in the morning. But no way was that happening.

I carried it all in and he then had me move the dresser from our room into the guest room to make enough room for all of our purchases. He constructed into the most beautiful nest, all the colors of the rainbow and every shape and size folded and stacked and combined into a nest worthy of our eggs. Our twins.

And now we had to wait.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

“Can you explain to me what it is we’re doing again?” Stone followed me as I waddled toward the storage building where we kept the linens.

“I told you. We need to get something,” I replied. It was actually many somethings. I couldn’t let go of the dream I’d had. As perfect as the nest was, I needed it all it could be, and if that meant my little dragons wanted low-end motel pillows, then low-end motel pillows they were going to get.

“From where?” he asked, following closely while not being on top of me. He really was the best mate ever.

“Fine, just come with me. You’ll see.” I didn’t want to explain everything. I was already out of breath, the eggs pressing on my diaphragm. According to the midwife, they were going to be here any day now. I could only hope.

Stone had been a great support through this pregnancy. I wasn’t exactly handling it well, at least not emotionally. One minute I was happy, the next minute I was crying. I was exhausted all the time. I was already the size of a house—and yes, the cabin was small, but still, that made for one huge person.

One of the most difficult things to deal with was how hard my belly was. It was harder than hard and, even though I was told more than once that it was 1000 percent normal, it still messed with my head a little. Sometimes I even questioned whether I was turning into a robot, metal in my middle the only logical explanation.

Except it wasn’t logical at all. Not with eggs in the picture.

And what had to be the hardest was that I wanted my mate's attention pretty much all the time. It didn't matter if he was working remotely or reading a book or sleeping, I wanted him to be there for me. And not once had he balked. He'd been great. So beyond great.

We were putting everything on hold for the babies, or, more accurately, he was. He needed to find his brother, and I felt awful that he hadn't managed to at this point. He assured me that his dragon was busy chilling curled up inside of him and wanted to stay here. I took that as a good sign.

But still, that wasn't what I wanted for my mate. I wanted him to get where he needed to be, to meet the family he never knew existed until recently, the ones who weren't going to pretend they didn't know him the way I'd seen his otter family do in dreams. And, from what I understood, it wasn't as far from the truth as I'd like, if not with his adoptive parents, with the rest of the bevy where he was raised.

Once we were at the storage building, I fiddled with the key. I probably should have changed the padlock six months ago when it first started sticking, but I didn't want to have to explain to my boss why I had to spend the extra money, and it hadn't been enough of a pain that I was willing to spend my own money. I got it open, and we went inside. I started grabbing pillow after pillow after pillow and throwing them into the laundry cart.

"Pillows for my nest." I explained as my mate stared at me, mouth open.

It took him most of a minute for him to reply in words, but he instantly helped me grab the pillows. "You already have a nest. Do you need us to fix it?"

"I need these to go with it." What part of this wasn't he getting? Probably the part that only made sense to me because I was the pregnant one.

“I didn’t even know we had these pillows.” Stone had been helping out around here a lot. But I didn’t let him help as much as he wanted to. He had his job, too. Sure he could and did do it remotely, but asking him to do mine on top of his own— I couldn’t bring myself to do that.

And I hadn’t exactly told my boss about the pregnancy yet. He would only find some reason to be pissed at it and, since I was a short-timer, I figured why rock the boat.

“Well, I do need them.” They weren’t even good, but that didn’t make a difference to me. “I dreamed we need them.”

I piled them the rest of them into the laundry cart and pushed them back toward where I’d had Stone set up my clothesline earlier in the week. There were no poles in the ground. Instead he’d attached a hook to one of the trees and a second to the cabin. To that he added the line. It was pretty darn clever, if you asked me.

If you asked the squirrels, they would say the same. I based that 100 percent on the fact that they couldn’t stay away from it while it was up. Stone sketched them one day, only in his sketches, they were wearing circus hats.

For some reason, I still hadn’t been able to figure out, I couldn’t let that particular pillow dream go. For whatever reason, it was important enough for me to have it stick so strongly. No harm could come from indulging in it, so I figured I might as well.

We hung up the pillows, which was exponentially more difficult than I’d imagined. Then I was going to bring the laundry basket back, but Stone insisted he return it.

“Now what?” he asked when he came back to find me staring at my pillows. There were about thirty-five.

“We let them air out.” I shrugged. “That’s as far as my dream got.”

“Okay. Do you want to take a nap?” He spoke my love language.

Also, obviously, that was a trick question. I always wanted to take a nap or go to bed early these days. Pregnancy liked to keep me on my toes, though, and a few times I couldn’t sleep despite best practices.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

We went up to the house, and I lay on my side while he curled up behind me, holding me close. I fell asleep pretty quickly. It was no surprise—I was absolutely exhausted. What was surprising was that when I woke up, it was getting dark out. I’d missed most of the day. Which was fine. Between the two of us, we were managing to get a lot of the little things done around here.

I didn’t know why I was so vested in the place, but I was, and, as much as I was excited to go meet Stone’s brothers and maybe start a new life, I also really liked my old one. If not for my craptastic job, this would be an ideal setting for growing our family.

I woke starving and headed for the fridge for something to eat. Everything sounded awful. I even tried a cracker from the cupboard. Nope. My body didn’t want food, as much as it was lying to me.

“Argg!” I cried out in frustration.

My mate ran in. “What’s—”

I cut him off with a look. “I’m just feeling weird.”

That was the very wrong thing to say. The next thing I knew, he had me flat on my back on the bed, the midwife on her way over, and my mate taking control of

everything like a boss.

It became obvious what was happening shortly before Parma got there. She offered me a choice of laying the eggs on the nest or giving birth to them in a more old-fashioned way. I opted for that. It was how I always expected to give birth, and I couldn't think of one good reason not to.

Soon I was squeezing and pushing, trying to deliver our eggs. My mate stood by my side, cheering me on, giving me someone to hold on to, and doing anything and everything I asked of him. I might've been the one who laid the eggs, but he was the MVP.

"Look what we made." I was so overwhelmed with happiness. I didn't know if they were boys or girls or one of each. Heck, I didn't fully understand how they were going to get out of there, only that they were.

The one thing I did know was that I already loved them completely.

"You did all the hard work." He helped me get settled on the nest with them.

That was where he was wrong. The man had been holding down the fort, while working his job and putting up with my cravings and mood swings. He did the heavy lifting on this one. "I couldn't have done it without you, my love."

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

With our two beautiful eggs in the nest, I learned that some things were instinctual even if you were not born a dragon. Or at least they were for my mate because Arvin not only constructed the beautiful nest—which he did have Pinterest help for—but he also laid those eggs like a champ.

“You know, I thought I might be disappointed to have eggs instead of actual babies to cuddle.” He said this while stroking one of the eggs, so the words didn’t hold much sting. “But then I forced myself to realize that I would never have had the babies this fast, so having them here in their shells is bonus time with them.”

“And you’re a lot more comfortable, with that hard belly gone.”

“I am flabby,” he said, patting his middle. “You’re right.”

He was perched on top of the nest right next to our two magnificent eggs. That meant my desire to leap up and fling my arms around him and swear I did not mean anything like that was thwarted. It was too risky. I hadn’t seen his belly since he laid the eggs anyway. He hadn’t even left the nest except for quick races to relieve himself and had not showered. He had changed into clean clothes a few times, but I wasn’t there when he did. “Mate, looking at you sitting there with our eggs, you’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. I imagine it takes a little time for your tummy to get over being stretched out with two very large eggs, but if it never did, that wouldn’t change my opinion of you in the slightest. Look what you made.” I waved toward the gleaming shells. “And you did it without having any dragon DNA or parts of your own somehow. You should be very proud.”

He stroked first one shell then the other, preening. “I am, actually. They look well,



don't you think? Healthy?"

"I was raised with otters remember? Last time I saw anything dragon egg related was when I pecked and clawed my way out of my shell, and my memories of being a newborn are nonexistent." I drew a breath. "But, that said, I can't imagine any eggs looking better. They're shiny and clean and, speaking of which, wouldn't you like to take a quick shower and maybe outside for a breath of fresh air?"

He shrugged, still focused on the eggs. "No, I'm good. Hungry though."

"Want to go to the kitchen and have something? I can watch the eggs while you eat a snack."

"But you always bring me my food here." His gaze flicked up, piercing me. "Why do you want me away from them? Do you want to take over?"

"No, that's not it." Arvin's phone rang, and I picked it up. "Hi. Cabin eight. Be right there." I hung up. "They need a sink cleared. What do these people put down them anyway?"

He chuckled. "Anything. Everything. And it's not even usually the kids. The parents just stuff things down and figure the garbage disposals can handle it."

"But we don't have garbage disposals in the cabins."

"No we don't." He rolled one of the eggs a quarter turn. "Does that side look dull?"

"Not at all." I left him to go unclog the sink. Since he'd laid the eggs, he couldn't do his job because that would have involved leaving the nest. While my stock trading, which I still did every day although not as many ridiculous hours, would easily have supported us, we wanted to stay here at least until the babies came, and that meant the

job had to be done.

By me.

I'd never considered myself particularly handy, but before Arvin settled in with the eggs, I'd shadowed him and helped him enough that I could manage most of what needed to be done. That first week seemed to have brought most of the storms, so at least I hadn't had to do roof repairs or anything big like that. Yet.

The family of bunnies who were staying in cabin eight had filled the drain with carrot trimmings—a very stereotypical choice, I thought. But as I lay on my back under the sink, loosening the trap, my annoyance at having to leave my mate in his stinky state faded back a little. The rabbits were so apologetic, and I'd heard my mate complain many times that his boss was so cheap, he refused to put in garbage disposals. Among other things. Arvin often said, if he owned this place, he'd do such and such improvements. He could make a success out of it with his hard work and great ideas. But, as he also said, he wasn't the boss, and we could only do what we could do. He did not want us putting money into someone else's property. So I did my best to help. Until the moment the eggs were laid, he'd argued with me and not wanted me to do his job as well as mine, but he seemed fine with it now. As a dedicated omega daddy, he was doing exactly what he should be.

Well...maybe not exactly. As I finished up with the drain and put my tools back in the box, I was trying to figure out a way to get my beloved mate to take a shower. He was ripe, and that couldn't be good for him or the babies. How would he feel if they hatched and then held their little noses and said, "Pee-yew!"

Walking back to our cabin, I had no ideas at all. He was dedicated to exactly what he should be, and he was eating and drinking, so those things were all in line. Parma had warned me that this might happen, but she hadn't had any really great ideas about how to fix it. Trudging past the kitchen I spotted the case of premium wipes we'd

picked up at the big box store a few towns over when we were buying baby things.

Maybe?

I tore the box open and pulled out a half dozen packages. They were supposed to go in a dispenser, but this was not the time for that. I carried them to the bedroom. My mate was asleep, curled around the eggs. A vague image of cleaning him up while he slept flitted into my mind and was rejected. He'd notice for sure, and he needed his rest. Amazing how much energy it could take to fuss over things.

So I settled myself on the chair by the window and waited for him to wake up. The restful atmosphere in the room as well as doing two separate jobs had worn me down, and the next thing I knew a couple of hours had passed and my mate was awake, watching me sleep.

"Hey, alpha." He was sipping a bottle of water from the cooler I'd stashed next to the nest so he wouldn't get dehydrated while I was off fixing things. "You needed that rest. Thank you for putting up with me."

"Thank you for taking such good care of our children." I blew him a kiss. "Hungry?"

"Not right now."

He looked so grungy, and he smelled worse, but I could help at least a little. "How about a sponge bath."

"You have a sponge?" He looked skeptical. "You're just trying to get me in the tub."

"Nope." I picked up the packages of wet wipes from the floor next to the chair. "I think if you use enough of these, you will feel refreshed."

“But they’re so expensive,” he protested. “Do I offend you that much? Am I that stinky?” He sniffed his underarm and winced. What will the babies think?”

“And you 100 percent can’t take a shower? Not even a super-fast one just so the babies smell you all nice and clean?”

He looked from me to the bathroom door and back again and then, bam! He was running for it. “Sit on the nest and don’t take your eyes off them.”

“There’s clean clothes in there for you,” I hollered after him.

I sat down by the eggs and had a great chat with them about their awesome omega daddy who loved them so much, and in about three minutes he was back. There was no way he could have done a great job in that amount of time, but he was wearing different pants and pulling a shirt over his damp hair, and he seemed so much more relaxed.

“You look good with them,” he said, chewing on his lip. “Maybe I’m being selfish, keeping them all to myself?”

“Selfish? Never. But I did enjoy having a turn to hang out. If you want to do this again tomorrow? I’m all in.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

“You really need to get outside, honey.” Stone squatted beside me, looking like he’d rather be having any other conversation other than this one. I didn’t blame him. It was embarrassing.

The worst part was that he was right. I did need fresh air. It had been over a week since I’d spent more than the time it took me to brush my teeth and take a three minute shower away from the eggs.

We were at the point where the babies were going to be born any day now. According to the midwife, they could be here as soon as tomorrow, which, giving some room for error, could mean any second. I didn’t want to miss a single moment of their hatching.

But I also hadn’t seen sunlight, except through the window, in a long time.

Those were the facts. What I was going to do with them, I still hadn’t decided.

“Stone, I know. ” And I needed the sunshine. “but what if they’re born while I’m outside?”

“Hold on. I have an idea.” He righted himself and left the house. He wasn’t angry or anything. His “idea” was obviously not in our cabin, but what it was? I had no idea. I was almost curious enough to get up and look out the window to see where he was heading. Almost.

“Your papa’s being silly,” I said, stroking each one of the eggs.

I wasn't sure if eggs were like babies in the womb who could hear me, or if they could sense us close by. But I figured every word I said had an opportunity to get to them, and that made it worth it.

Even before I laid them, I talked to my babies. I'd told them so much since discovering I was pregnant. I told them about my grandmother and what an influence she had on me growing up. I told them all about my math class, which I'd managed to both finish and ace last week from the nest. I also shared with them all about Stone's dragon and how they were going to be big and strong like he was.

When I discovered they were coming in the form of eggs and were therefore by default dragons, it piqued my curiosity. Would be the same color as my mate? Each other? According to Stone, we'd know when we knew. I didn't have a preference.

I spoke to them about pretty much anything and everything that came to my mind. When I showered, I'd hear their father chatting with them. He did when I was around too, but it was still all kinds of adorable to listen to him share his favorite stories with them while I washed away the day.

I could only imagine them being good and done with all the chatter. They were going to be born and have their first words seconds later. "Please, please, please stop talking."

A few minutes after he left, my mate came back in with the laundry cart.

"What are you doing?" There were no turnover cabins today and, even if there were, this wasn't one of them.

"I told you I have an idea." He took the couch cushions off and put them in the bottom of the cart. Then he piled our bedding in there followed by a bunch of the pillows I'd insisted we needed that the nest hadn't had room for.

“You’re still not explaining what you’re doing.”

“Trust me.”

Of course, I trusted him. I just was clueless as to what it was he was up to. Next thing I knew, he was picking up one egg and then the other and laying them gently inside the laundry cart, and it all made sense. He was making a portable nest for our little ones.

“Okay, outside time,” he said, wheeling the cart right to the front door. “Get out there.”

I wasn’t going to argue. His plan was actually quite genius. I wasn’t sure why we hadn’t thought of it before. Probably because the house was so small, doing things like going out in the yard or grabbing a cup of tea didn’t feel impossible like I had heard was the case for so many other nesters.

Or maybe that was the human side of me, and I was going to suck at being a dad. I pushed the anxiety away. Stone and I had talked a lot about my worries over being the father of dragons. He assured me I was the exact father these babies needed. The sincerity of his words had me almost believing it too.

I stepped outside, narrating everything I saw to the babies—I described everything in singsong, from the river to the trees to the blue sky to a twittering bird on a branch.

My mate stayed right by their side, promising to keep an eye on them, just like when I showered, and let me know if they made even the slightest movement. I appreciated it and had to admit I felt a ton better. How could I not? It had been days—possibly a week.

“Thank you for that,” I said.

“Oh, anytime. I don’t know why this hadn’t crossed my mind before, but now that it has, we have it in our pocket.”

“We aren’t going to need it again, though. The babies are close. Very close.” And I couldn’t wait to meet them.

Stone helped me change into my pajamas, less because I needed to and more to be nice. When I was all settled, we each lowered one of the eggs back into the nest.

“I think I felt our baby move.” Which didn’t make any sense. There couldn’t be any room for them in there.

“Do you think it’s time?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Stone tucked the laundry cart in the corner and snuggled on the nest with the eggs and me. We watched and watched and watched the eggs.

Nothing.

An hour went by.

Nothing.

We finally decided I’d been imagining things, and he took the cart back and started on dinner. My poor mate had been working so hard. He did not only his own work but also took over mine, everything except for the paperwork which I could do here, that was.

Stone said he didn’t mind, and I believed him. There was no reason for me to believe



otherwise. But also, he had to be getting tired, and that would get better once the babies were here.

We were having his famous grilled cheese for dinner. Famous around here, anyway. He was able to cook it on a large griddle attachment for the grill and would sometimes make it for the guests. Word had been getting around to the point a couple of reservations requested the Grilled Cheese Package for their stay, which didn't exist. But they were that good, and I'd been craving them.

And then I saw it. An egg moved. It wasn't my imagination. This was happening.

"Stone, it's time."

"Time?"

"Time!"

He came in a minute later with the grilled cheese. "We're going to need this. The midwife said it could be a couple of hours from the first movement."

We sat there, telling our babies what wonderful dragons they were and watching as one little move became two, became three, and eventually there was a crack in one, then a crack in the other. The crack became a little hole, and then a shell popped off.

Sitting there, looking at us, was our first little dragon.

I wanted to reach in and say hello, to greet him with my touch. But, as soon as they were held by their parents, baby dragons shifted into their baby form, and they were still too far in the egg. The odds of our baby getting hurt were too great. I needed to be patient.

I sucked at patient.

Eventually, the shell fell away, and our first little dragon looked around. He was stunning—the same sapphire color as his father.

I looked to my mate. “He’s...he’s you.”

His eyes were filled with tears.

Our little dragon hopped over to me, and, when I picked him up, he shifted for the first time into his human form, letting out a gorgeous cry. I never thought I’d think of a cry as beautiful, but I did. I helped him latch on, getting his first meal as we waited for his sibling.

The second egg inhabitant didn’t mess around. It was as if once they heard their brother cry, they went to town and had that egg open. Less than a minute later, he was out. Our second little dragon was a ruby color and he, too, was looking for his meal.

“They’re beautiful.” I looked down at our two sons, both of them eating happily.

“They’re perfect.”

We’d already picked out some names. We decided to call the first after my uncle Tyler and the second after my father, Ryler. It saddened me that Stone didn’t really have anybody to name them after, since he wasn’t sure about his adopted dads after all the dreams, but we all had each other now, and that was what mattered.

Stone climbed into the nest beside me.

“Happy Birthday, little guys.” He looked down at their sweet faces then kissed my cheek. “I love you, omega mine.”

“I love you, alpha mine. I love you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

It was finally time to set out to the location on the sketch where we should meet my brothers. I couldn't wait to meet them and to introduce them to my mate and the babies. The drive would take a couple of days, I estimated, and I hoped that our delay from my original journey wouldn't have cost us the opportunity to find them.

I made a special harness so the babies could fly with us. It was more like a sack, lined with the softest of blankets and they should feel perfectly comfortable, and for about five minutes, I thought we could take off and fly on our journey. Maybe three minutes. When we first planned our trip, it had been to fly there with my mate on my back, but babies changed everything.

My mate was piling things we'd need by the door and as I stood there holding my sack, so proud of my craftsmanship, I quickly became aware that traveling with two children and a mate was a little more luggage heavy than the single dragon who'd arrived here. The diapers alone would be bulky enough to be a problem. The car seats, traveling playpen, portable beds, cooler for snacks for us, several bags of baby clothes...the items went on and on.

"Do we need all of this?" I asked.

"Yes. If we're traveling, we need the babies to be comfortable. If they aren't, they will make sure we aren't, right?"

"Right." They had loud ways of expressing their displeasure. But I wanted them comfy as well. "Glad your car is on the big side, though." It was an SUV. "And I'm still not completely sure we'll fit everything."

“I have faith in you. And if you have to leave anything behind...what is that bag?”

“Uhh, just a bag.” I was filled with doubt that he’d appreciate my handmade baby flying bag. Maybe it would be better not to take them aloft until they grew older and could learn to hold on. “I was trying something.”

“It’s nice. Now...let’s see. I have onesies, jeans shoes...” He went on listing the things he’d already packed and going back for more. “You can start loading.”

I stuffed my great-idea sack in one of the duffels piling up by the door then grabbed two by the straps and got to work. The front seat was us, the back seat the babies, and fitting everything that meant fitting everything in the storage area behind the seat. And in the cargo rack. I was starting to feel like a dust bowl family traveling cross country instead of just for a week or a little more away with every intention of returning. Truly, I did not know what would happen once I connected with my brothers, but we’d be coming back and officially moving if that was our decision.

And I would kind of hate to have to move because this place had become home. It was where I met my mate, where we made love for the first time and mated a bit later. Where we conceived our babies and where they hatched. Home. Maybe my brothers would want to move here?

But I agreed with my dragon that finally setting out to get to my brothers had to happen. I needed to know them and see if they knew more than me about what happened to separate us. Having been raised by otters made me wonder where they grew up.

Finally, we had everything into the car with Jenga-like packing skills I never knew I had and off we went. One of our regular guests would be filling in as a temporary manager and had said if we ever decided to leave permanently, he’d be very happy to take on the job.

We said we'd let him know.

A lot of internet searching had gone into making the whole journey thing work out. Dragons thought in terms of flight, and mine was no different. As the crow flies did not work as well for a car as for wings. But we thought we had it figured out and, at the end of the first day, when we arrived at a motel we'd scoped out online, we were feeling pretty good about our research and my dragon seemed content. The babies had been very good for their road trip, so far, only crying when they were hungry or needed a change. Ryler and Tyler were born travelers.

And Arvin seemed to be enjoying the trip, too.

It seemed the only angsty one in the group was me. As we approached the end of our trip, I felt the strongest urge to turn and run. I'd gotten along without any of my birth family all these years, I'd lost most of those who were part of my childhood, and maybe I would do better just going with the family I had now. They were better than just about any I could dream of.

And speaking of dreams, there was that one where I dream walked with Arvin right at the beginning and had that whole rejection scenario. Could my brothers do the same? Might they reject me too? "Omega, maybe this is a mistake."

He was looking out the window and turned toward me quickly. "You've talked of nothing but finding your brothers since you arrived at the cabins months ago. Your dragon says you have to find them."

"But what if they don't like me? What if they say they were better off without me? I don't think I can handle the rejection."

"That does not sound like the alpha I know." He gave me a stern frown. "What are you doing in your head that is making you feel this way?"

“At some point, my parents gave me up, lost me, or otherwise let me go be raised by otters. I have no idea where my brothers were raised or if they were together. Did our parents keep them or one of them? Just why did any of it happen?”

“All those years you were with the otters, did you ask your adopted fathers any of this?”

“I tried a few times, but they said they didn’t really know anything. And I didn’t want to push it because they were so good to me. They helped me get a great education and treated me like their own son. Even when the alpha said I had to leave because of my dragon, they wanted to come with me.”

“Sounds like you scored in the adoption department.”

“But why did it happen?”

“Maybe your brothers know. We can turn around right now and go home, but I don’t think your dragon will like it.”

“No. He won’t.” At the very thought, he was restless inside me.

“And if we do go back, you stand no chance of finding out what they know and giving them a chance to know you. These are your blood relatives, and it’s time you got to know them. At least that’s what I think.”

“How are you so smart?”

“When I was sitting with the eggs and wouldn’t shower, wouldn’t go outside, wouldn’t do anything, you were the smart one. I was so emotionally tied in, I couldn’t see what was good for me, and good for the babies too.”

“Well, you needed me.”

“And now you need me. So, alpha dragon god, we’re about to arrive at our destination, and whatever happens, you have the boys and me, but I’m feeling like you’re also going to have some awesome brothers. If they are related to you, how could they be anything else?”

“I think we’re there.” I could feel them there even before I saw them. My brothers, and we were home. Maybe it wasn’t just a short trip after all.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:30 am*

“Is it weird that I’m nervous?” Arvin looked up at me, his anxiousness palpable.

“It’s not weird. This is exciting and big and new. Of course you’re nervous.” I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close.

“Are you?”

“Absolutely not.”

He looked up at me in confusion.

“I’m not nervous because my mate is in charge, and he’s got this.” His lips brushed mine for an all-too-brief kiss, breaking off as the rumbling of a car coming toward the cabin alerted us that at least one of my brothers was here.

“It’s showtime.”

My mate missed being up at the cabins when we moved to be close to my brothers. As much as he didn’t like his boss and the way he was treated, he loved being up here and running the place.

When we moved to be with my brothers, it was the right decision at the time. It still was. Having the cousins growing up together gave them something we’d never had. We were exactly where we needed to be.

But last year, I surprised him. His boss had finally followed through on his threat and put the place up for sale. For our anniversary, I bought it for him. Arvin didn’t run it

like he did before, but we summered here. Our previous fill-in had moved to another state, so we had hired a caretaker from town, a wolf shifter named Salvy, who was looking for a place to stay and had always loved the mountain. Salvy had done a great job keeping things up, and, in the summer, we came with the kids to help out and spend time where our family began.

Of course our family had grown since then. We went from a family of four to a family of seven a couple of years later. As challenging as twins had been, four babies at once...that was wild. Wild and wonderful. Although I had to admit, there might have been a little victory dance when the last of them was out of diapers.

When my mate and I got outside, my brother Aldryn and his mate, Eli, and their kids were already getting out of their van. Our kids ran over to them, hugging their uncles and then grabbing the children, needing to show them the brand new disc golf course we had put up only a few days ago.

“I guess the kids have a plan.” I chuckled.

“I guess so,” Aldryn hugged me. “Thanks for inviting us.”

“Thanks for coming.”

I showed my brother and his mate to their cabin, and when I came back, my other brother, Tatum, was there with his family. His mate, Vinnie, and their kids were already headed down toward the disc golf course to join the others. Apparently, it was a big hit.

And my otter dads would be here at some point in the summer. All those rejection dreams, well, the rest of the bevy still didn't want any part of me, but my dads were crazy about their grandsons and my brothers' kids as well. They'd been childless and yearning before me, and now...they could come and have all the kids they wanted to spend time with every year.

I hugged my brother tightly. It was hard to believe that once upon a time we were nothing but a prophecy of sorts, and now here we were, the three of us with our mates and all of our children, heading into a vacation together at the place where I met mine.

Legend has it that dragon shifters used to be plentiful, just as many of them as there were of other shifters, but their numbers dwindled. Somehow that tied into us. Three dragons born to a fated pair, their eggs would be emerald, sapphire, and amethyst, and they would be the beginning of the resurgence of dragons. It was weird finding out that meeting my mate was prophesied, that people were waiting for him. But that didn't change the fact that I was exactly where I was meant to be—with the person I was meant to spend the rest of my life with. I wouldn't change a thing if everything in my past was needed in order to get me to this life I now had. Not a thing.

“How are you?” I asked Arvin, putting his hand in mine.

“This is kind of how I always pictured it being,” he admitted, leaning against my side. “A place where families could all get together and spend time without having to cram into each other's houses or go to fancy hotels. Where they could just be themselves—together. I can't thank you enough for buying this place for me. For us. For our families.”

“It's the first place I ever felt like I was home.”

Arvin came around front and pulled me into a hug. “This is where I first felt like I was home—right here in your arms.”