



# MIST DRAGON

DRAGON PROPHECY: BOOK ONE



A DRAGON VEIL UNIVERSE



MPREG ROMANCE

MINERVA HOWE

# MIST DRAGON

DRAGON SANCTUARY

BOOK ONE

# MINERVA HOWE



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Mist Dragon

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# DRAGON VEIL UNIVERSE READING ORDER

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[Ice Dragon](#)

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*Cloud Dragon*

*Shadow Dragon*

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[Archer](#)

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*To all my amazing Patrons on the new Minerva Patreon.  
Thank you for all your love and support. And, as always, to my  
wife, BA.*

*For Jason, Jaymi, and Alex, who work hard to make me look  
better than I am.*



## CHAPTER ONE

“I swear by all I hold holy, Jules, if you spill that on my keyboard, I will rip out your heart with my teeth.” Andy Cuelebre gave his big—no, *older*—brother a glare.

Jules chuckled, the sound like honey moving over pebbles. He sat down a perfectly made almond-milk hazelnut latte next to Andy, sloshing not a single drop over the side. “That might be fun to watch you try.”

“I know you didn’t make this. The bet was, if I won at Jeopardy, you made me lattes for a month.” No way had Jules created the fancy foam art on the top. That was from their younger brother Puck.

It had to be Puck. He was the coffee man.

“What does it matter? You have a latte. Suck it up.” Jules waggled his eyebrows, which were dark enough against his pale face to be truly effective. Asshole. Gorgeous jerk.

Andy always felt as if he were the ordinary one with his dark brown curls and his mostly normal grayish-green eyes. He did well enough, he supposed, but Jules was a stunner.

“So what’s the project for today?” Jules asked, waving a hand at the bank of computers Andy sat before, each screen monitoring something different.

“I’ve got a bead on a book that I need in an auction in Denver. There’s a bookstore owner that’s being...a pain. Outbidding me at every turn.”

“Yeah? Anything I can do?” Jules cracked his knuckles, which made Andy grit his teeth. The popping sound was like a string of firecrackers going off, and it always made goose bumps rise on his skin.

“Go to Denver and bite him? I assume it’s a him. Maybe they’re a them? Go to Denver and bite them. I want this one—it looks like a printing in Middle Dragon.” The world was changing, and the bits and pieces of research seemed to be coming together about all sorts of dragon...lore. Every bit of information they found and digitized helped them narrow things down about what was truth and what was fiction.

“I can do that. I love Denver. I keep reading about this restaurant with cliff divers.”

“Focus, bro.” He snapped his fingers in front of Jules’s face.

“Ha. Like that’s going to happen.” Puck bounced into the room behind them. “Do you like your latte?”

“I haven’t taken a sip but thank you.” He glared at Jules, but it didn’t have any heat. Puck came and draped over his shoulders, the lean body light and cool against him.

“What are you up to?” Puck asked.

“Trying to buy this book.” And get any kind of work done, but maybe it was family meeting time or something and he’d missed the memo. The moms could be that way. They would command one son to do something, and then the others would be told in dragon standard time, which could be hours. “Do you two want something, or are you just bored and bugging the snot out of me?”

“I made you a coffee so be nice. The moms are down in the earthship.” Puck rarely went down in the weird home the moms had built for themselves in the side of the mountain. It was so well camouflaged that Andy never thought about it. Why would he? He had things to do.

The dark web. Books. The periodic weird web job. Life. If the moms wanted him, they could call or text, and he would

run down, but, usually they came looking for one of them up here at the old main house.

“Right. Which still doesn’t explain why you’re bugging me. But you can make yourself useful. Login on that computer at this link as another email and bid on this damn book.” His fingers flew as he put in another bid, because he wasn’t letting this book of dragon history go to... Marks and Reaver LLC., an antiquarian bookstore. Ugh.

“On it.” Puck perched on the edge of his chair, hands working his keyboard. “What are the limits on this one?” Puck asked, completely caught.

“Careful, Andy,” Jules muttered, so low he barely heard it. “He’ll bet the farm just to save time.”

Andy grinned, but he glanced over. “Your limit? Two thousand. Play him, okay? Like a violin. We got this.” They were at barely half that right now, and he really thought it would be enough to discourage this other buyer.

Puck’s wild grin made him roll his eyes. Devious little fuck. Andy adored him. He adored all of them. His brothers, his moms, the occasional weirdo hacker friend of theirs who popped up once in a while. Every one of them was amazing.

That didn’t keep him from occasionally peeking in on someone else and having a lively little fantasy. He never played where someone could see him, but he’d been known to chat up some cyber sexy.

Since Puck was working the book for him, Andy started diving, hunting for others like him, other dragons. He always started with the old words, the old searches. Just to see if anything—anything—new popped up.

Drakon. Aerouant. Erwan. Arach. Ormr. Fenume. Lindwurm. Tananeen. Unktena. Azdaja. Drage. Khoth. Tagnik. Draic. Drago. Dreki.

He followed rabbit holes all over the world, from Santa Fe, where they were, to Colorado and Utah, and then out into the greater world. Europe was a hotbed of histories and all, but it looked like a lot of the dragons had moved on thanks to

overcrowding. The veil, though... It was maybe thinner there? He didn't know for sure, and there was a lot of false information to sift through. One thing at a time.

Jules's phone buzzed, and he glanced at it. "The moms made food. Should they bring it up, or should we go down? They want to know."

"I can't leave this auction. Not yet." His moms would get that. They'd set him on the path of digitizing the old stuff.

"Okay." Jules texted back and then laughed. "You know they'll march up here and yell at us."

"I'll just tell them I have you both working for me." Andy snapped his imaginary whip.

"Well, don't get me to lying. What am I doing?" Puck started to crack his knuckles like Jules had, but at Andy's glare, he stopped.

"Scanning those books?" It was scut work, but they all took turns doing it. They had to make sure each page went into their digital record. Then the book went into the climate-controlled vault.

"Yeah, yeah. This is what I get for not actually making your coffee, isn't it?" Jules laughed, picking up the first book. That one was vellum, so he didn't bitch about Jules not wearing gloves.

"Yep. You shove that off on Puck, you get the shaft."

They all laughed, and sure enough, ten minutes after they all got back to work, a knock sounded, their mom Titania's my-hands-are-full kick perfectly clear.

"I got it," Jules said. He left to open the door. "You should have told me you were ready," he heard Jules say. "I would have come down to get it."

"I know. Help your mama with the rest. Spoiled boys." Her laugh was hearty, warm, and as familiar as the sound of his own breath. She was a tall, stately alpha dragon with red hair that flowed down the back of her crazy kimono dress.

Jules went to help, and Andy looked at Puck. “You got this?”

“I do. Fucker seems to have all the time and money in the world, but I have three accounts bidding against him, nibbling away. He’ll start to see it’s futile. Bring me food.”

Andy snorted because he knew his moms would never let Puck get away with that. They would want Puck to come sit at the table. “Got it.” He went to kiss Mom’s cheek. “Smells amazing. What is it today?” His moms loved to make amazing food from their huge collection of cookbooks. Falafel. Curry. Borscht. He never knew what it would be. But they were always on point.

“Green chile stew and cornbread, sweetheart. Mama has cherry hand pies.” Mom nuzzled him, vocalizing softly. “How are you today?”

“Good. Trying to get a book. Puck took over for me.” He hugged her. “How are you?”

“It’s going to be a cold winter. I want to build a covered walkway between us, please.” She glanced at Mama, who was as round and soft as Mom was angular, and he got it. Mama didn’t love the snow, and she could sit inside all winter if they didn’t shovel all the walkways. A covered one would help.

“Of course.” That he could arrange. Hell, Jules was good with that kind of thing, and he would tell Andy and Puck what to do.

Either that or they could find someone to hire. He really wasn’t into hands-on, when it came to anything other than computers.

She grinned at him as if she knew what he was thinking; then Mama came in with a tray of magical-smelling cherry empanadas, and that was his jam. He loved empanadas, but the sweet ones were the best. Andy wanted dessert first.

“Mama! It all smells so good!” They started pulling out plates and glasses. Jules opened the huge doors that faced the sun, letting the air in, and Mason, the moms’ huge bear dog came to guard.

“Thank you.” Mama beamed. “You boys spend too much time online.” She sat and patted the chair next to her. “Come sit, Titania. Let the boys do the work.”

“Where’s Puck?” Mom asked.

“Working, Mom. There’s a book I want, like I said. He’s bidding.” And now she was going to fuss about him overworking his poor baby brother. Dammit.

“Mmhhh. Tell him to come to lunch, sweetheart. He can bring the laptop,” Mama said, smiling.

He didn’t dare argue; Andy just went to fetch his brother. “Mama says bring the laptop, Puck.”

“Oh, man. Okay. Watch the screen a minute.” Puck signed in on the laptop while Andy stared at the numbers. Then he headed downstairs.

“Hey, Mama. Hey, Mom. Thanks for the grub.” Puck grinned at both of them, then was lost in the screen again, but at least he was out there with them and the food.

“You gave him a limit, yes?” Mama asked.

Andy snorted. “I went in and set one on the account. I know him too well.”

“Like I couldn’t get around that,” Puck pointed out.

“Children, be good.” Mom rolled her eyes, dishing up stew while Mama cut cornbread. “Only one pie first, Andy. Then you need to eat real food.”

“Who wants what to drink?” Jules asked.

Andy grinned. God, he loved the rhythm of their life. And when Puck crowed, pumping his fist in the air, he was even happier. They had the book. And when he glanced at the price, Puck had come in under the limit.

“Good job!”

“You’re welcome. Damn, that was fun.” Puck waggled his eyebrows. “And there’s cornbread!” Puck reached for a slice as Mom put the bowl of green chile in front of him.

“Spoiled brats.” Mom sounded so fond.

“Yeah, yeah.” Asshole. He poked Puck’s arm. “Now, let’s eat!”

Puck nodded, putting the laptop aside after he typed in some information, no doubt payment and shipping. Then it was all about *mmm* noises and thanking the moms for the food. As it should be.

Life was good just like it was.

## CHAPTER TWO

The email came in just as Dustin Ladon was about to tuck into the juiciest yummiest-looking cheeseburger in existence. He did love a good burger, and this one was perfectly cooked and had fried onion rings on it. Who didn't want that?

He would have ignored the missive, but he knew the code name on the "from" field all too well, and he knew better than to keep that one waiting.

So he set the burger down so he could swipe open the damn thing on his phone. If it had come from anyone else, he would have thought it was spam. All the email contained was a link. But he knew better. This was his boss's way of communicating.

Dustin clicked it.

A dossier opened up for a new assignment, the mix of languages easy enough for him to read these days, but that would make it tough for anyone else to read over his shoulder, or on shared internet in the restaurant.

Santa Fe. Web activity suggested the presence of dragon hunters of some kind. Dark and surface web searches indicated a deep knowledge of dragon culture, which could be a serious breach and cause more problems like that awful mess that had happened up in Colorado a few years ago. Vampires, for fuck's sake, and they'd taken out a fairly large clutch of adult dragons.



So he was to investigate, feet on the ground, no digging around on the web for weeks and watching like one of his colleagues had done and fucked up royally.

Good thing he was close, right? It was only about a nine-hour drive. He thumbed through the email, reading the information as they knew it now.

There were a number of books that had been snapped up in auction—things that were of no real interest to a private collector unless they were trying to capture dragons. Then the amount of searches—for every possible iteration—for dragon compounded the situation.

By this point, Dustin did know the difference between a casual dragon enthusiast and someone with an obsession.

He sent back an affirmative that he would take the assignment, then set the phone aside. If he flew, he could make it down there in no time, so he would drop his rental at the airport. He wished he could actually fly, because that would be even easier, but it wouldn't be dark for hours, and daylight flying could end up with him getting gunned down. Not good. Still, he wanted his damn cheeseburger.

An hour and a half later, he was on standby for a flight into Albuquerque, and he was well on his way to convincing the Southwest desk rep that he was desperate due to a death in the family.

“Ah. We've had a cancelation. I'm so glad you'll get there in time to see your mom, Mr. Ladon.” She smiled at him, her expression laden with sympathy, and he would have felt bad, but the two backpackers who had taken the deal they were offering to delay their departure looked happy.

“Thank you so much for all your hard work on my behalf.” He took the ticket she handed him, giving her what he hoped was a grateful and sincere smile. He'd been pretending to be human for a long time. “It means a lot to me.”

“We understand. Have a safe flight.” She blushed and ducked her head.

He nodded, moving off to one side to get in line to board. And once he was on the plane, he would get busy planning his movements. Rental in Albuquerque. Pick up the load of supplies his employer would put in for him, then up to Santa Fe, where he would pay cash for a hotel room on a fake ID. Hell, all his IDs were fake. He was a dragon who'd known what he was from birth. He didn't have a government-issued ID, but he had the best forgers in the world at his disposal thanks to his employer.

He squeezed into his seat, giving anyone who tried to take the middle in his row a death glare. It worked. He and his window seat buddy had a row to themselves. Thank God two people had given up their seats to give him his one.

He had a PO Box that the books these people were ordering were being shipped to, but no address. The PO Box was rented by a holding company, but someone had to come get the mail, right? So he would have to do surveillance, and then follow someone if he could.

It was imperative that they protect every dragon they could. He couldn't begin to imagine how dangerous it could be, if the government started experimenting on them, capturing them. He knew some dragons had theories that their magic would keep them safe from that kind of examination, but he wasn't so sure, and one way or the other, there were other magical creatures who were perfectly happy to destroy them.

He closed all the stuff on his phone and leaned his head back against the seat, closing his eyes. The burger was sitting like lead in his belly. Still. That was what happened when he thought he had a few days off. Served him right.

Somehow every time he dared to relax, another emergency popped up somewhere.

Which meant once this plane landed, he had to hit the ground running. So he let his eyes fall shut again. He had to get what little sleep he could. Once he was in Santa Fe, he was at work until he found what he was looking for.

CHAPTER  
THREE

Andy hummed happily, his arms full of mail.

Not the book he was waiting for, but comics. A few cards for his moms. A bunch of catalogs. He loved catalogs, for all that they were super analog, and he wasn't.

He stuffed all the mail into his SUV, then hopped in and headed back into Santa Fe to the plaza. He needed to pick up a painting for his mom. She loved a Navajo artist named Leland Holiday, and this one was a bison. She didn't have one of those. So it was all wrapped up and ready to go.

The gallery was on the corner across from the La Fonda, and he bebopped in, grinning at Barb, who worked behind the counter. "Hey, lady. Here to pick up that painting."

"Sure." She bent down and pulled out a long, narrow package wrapped in brown paper and bubble wrap. "How's your moms?"

"Good. Good. They're busy doing some project in their bathroom." It involved glass bricks and rain bath showerheads. Sometimes a kid just didn't want to know. "So you have any more Edgar Fuentes in?" Edgar was a local artist who mixed indigenous mediums with salvaged tech parts to make amazing art.

"Not right now, but I called him Monday, and he says he has three pieces to bring in next week."

"Oh my goddess. Call me."

“You’re first on my list.” She winked, handing over the painting. “Have a good one, Andy.”

He headed back into the plaza, thinking maybe he would get a coffee. Or a Frito pie... Maybe both. He didn’t get out as much as he should, really. He spent way too much time digging on his computer.

Oh, who was he kidding? He loved his life.

As he headed across the plaza and down San Francisco to the Starbucks, he felt the scales on the back of his neck prickle and rattle. He stopped, looking around for the danger, and a lady who was walking her poodle ran right up his butt.

“Oh! Sorry. I didn’t expect you to stop.”

“My fault. Sorry.” He stepped off to one side, under the vigas and the awning of the building he stood near. Andy felt as if he needed to put his back to a wall and guard it, but why? He scanned the streets and the surrounding sidewalks, looking to see if anyone was paying too close attention to him, but everyone was busy. Walking. Chatting. Shopping. No one was giving him any mind.

So why were all his dragon senses screaming at him?

Torn, he shifted from foot to foot, not sure what to do. He was feeling super exposed, and he didn’t have a clue why.

When mist began to gather around him heavily enough that one of the ladies passing murmured, “Is it going to rain?”, he decided to just get back to his vehicle and go home.

No one was threatening him, and he couldn’t identify the problem, but he could go to one of the Starbucks in town with a drive-through and not be such a sitting-duck dragon...

He hopped into his vehicle only minutes later and headed to the coffee shop a few miles away, where he grabbed a drink for him and all his family. That way, he had an excuse for just coming home instead of running amok like he normally would when he finally left the house.

His blood pounded in his ears, and he felt so silly for being so scared. No one had even looked sideways at him out there.

So what had set him off? He had no damn idea, but he was headed home, and he was going to stay there for a bit. Until whatever had set him off left town.

If there was someone looking for trouble, they wouldn't find it with Andy. He kept his trouble to the internet.



Dustin started with the plaza. Anything and everything that passed through Santa Fe, New Mexico eventually went through that communal space. It was the beating heart of the city different, with the view right up to the Basilica of Saint Francis, and the shops and museums and hotels all decked out in purple and blue doors and hanging plants. The vibe was amazing, and he wandered, looking at art and jewelry at the governor's palace, where Native artists set up on blankets on the sidewalk.

He debated. Food or a coffee? His boss probably wouldn't thank him for expensing either one, but the lay of the land was easiest to get down when he was blending in with the locals and the tourists. He knew if he stood around and let people stare at him for too long, sooner or later someone would notice he was more magical than human.

Someone always did.

So he decided on a coffee. The Starbucks was only like a block and a half off the plaza, and it was right near a drug store that had Frito pie in a bag, so if he got hungry, he would grab that. Across the plaza and down the way there was a bookstore he wanted to visit, too...

He grabbed a white chocolate mocha and big cookie before heading back outside. He stood for a moment, soaking up the air, which was just starting to get tinged with pinyon smoke. It was too early for all the fireplaces to be going, but someone had a fire pit up and running off the plaza. One of the restaurants nearby, he thought.

He breathed deep, and something caught his attention. Something that had his feet moving, working him back up

toward the plaza. Something... He sniffed, hunting, his head turning in either direction, his eyes scanning. Dammit. The same yummy smoke that he liked so much was obscuring the scent. But it was there. Spicy. Musky. Perfect.

He wanted to track it down and grab whoever it was.

The scent changed direction, and he turned on his heel, trying to catch it again. It took him back toward the Starbucks, and he sniffed and sniffed. He probably looked like a fiend. Or a hellhound.

He grinned, stopping where he was. Okay. Okay, he needed to chill. Once he did his job, maybe he could come back and look for the source of that magical scent.

“Is it going to rain?” someone said, and he sniffed again. It did kind of smell like rain now, and a little mist was filling the air. Huh. Well, he didn’t want to get his ass rained on since he hadn’t checked into a hotel, so he headed back to his vehicle to find out which post office he needed to go to. There was one a few blocks away...

Maybe he would start there.

CHAPTER  
FOUR

“Andy! Your books are in at the post office.” Puck bounced on his bed, which was just enough to piss him off since it was... He looked at his tech watch. Noon. And he’d gone to bed at about six a.m.

“Yeah? You want to go get them with me?” They could hit the snack bar at the Five and Dime on the Plaza or Sabor Peruano by the post office box.

“Sure, man.” Puck was always up for running around, as long as he didn’t have to go it alone. Which was why his brother hadn’t just offered to go for him. Puck was a homebody, for all that he seemed like the carefree baby brother.

“Cool. Get dressed. Ask Jules if he wants to go?”

Puck shook his head, just barely, and Andy frowned.

“Why?”

“His birthday’s coming,” Puck whispered, and Andy chuckled.

“Right. We’ll stop and pick up something amazing.”

“kay.” Of all of them, Puck was the worst at keeping mental secrets. “I’ll go put my shoes on.”

“Cool. Gimme ten.” He could hop in and out of the shower by then, and get dressed. He hopped out of bed, less grumpy now than he had been a few minutes ago. It was impossible to stay all grr with Puck. He was simply too happy to be alive.

Showered and dressed, he made it to the kitchen in nine. Thankfully, Jules was nowhere to be seen, so maybe he was sunning out in the back courtyard. Their house had enough covered porches and sunrooms and courtyards that they could go weeks without seeing each other if they wanted.

Andy was pretty happy they didn't want to do that, but it came in handy when they were trying to sneak out.

He texted their moms, waiting for Puck to find shoes.  
<Need anything from the store?>

<Presents for Jules. Some groceries. I'll text a list>

<Okay.> Man, everyone was more on the ball about Jules's birthday than he was. That should make him feel bad, but they were all about checks and balances. He did the bulk of their researching. And protection. He spent a lot of time working around anyone finding them on the web. He even had a virtual post office box that sent everything to their post office box.

Besides, he was the one who always found the best presents anyway.

He was the one who'd gotten the moms their pizza oven, the one who'd found Puck leather fairy wings for Halloween, the one that managed to get a first edition *IT* for Jules last year.

"Sorry." Puck slid into the room. "Ready."

"Well, come on before you conjure up Jules."

They headed out to his pickup, Puck doing a little twirl when they got outside.

"What a gorgeous day."

"It is, huh?" Andy blinked at the sun, but the sky was so clear he could see forever, and the air was perfect. Crisp but not cold yet. Not that he minded the winter in Santa Fe either. It was snowy and smelled like pinon wood burning, which was always homey.

"Yeah." Puck bounced like he was Tigger, his legs made of springs.

Andy had to laugh at him. "Get in the truck, dork."



“Yeah, yeah. So, Frito pie or causa rellena?”

“Oh man, I was going to make you choose.” He loved either, but he could get empanadas and potato thingies at the Peruvian place.

“I want potatoes,” Puck said. “Like a lot.”

“I’m down. That way I can get the quinoa mousse too.”

“That stuff is so weird but so addictive.” Puck smacked his lips.

“Right? I mean, it’s like quinoa flan. But it’s better than the flan by like, miles.” He got them moving, heading down out of the hills and into Santa Fe proper.

Puck sang with the radio, mimicking the voices so closely that he could barely keep up with them. There was nothing funnier than Puck in full-out Cher mode.

He belted out *Believe* with Puck, the song ending just as they pulled in and parked. “Let me run in and get the book, and then we’re all about food and shopping.”

“Cool beans.” Puck winked at him, and he chuckled. The one thing they all three had in common was Mom’s pale gray eyes. They all three matched in that, exactly.

He climbed out of the truck, checking both ways to make sure no one was going to whack him as he crossed the street. It was common enough in the city, with its twisty streets and busy main roads.

He bounced in, got his book and whatever the hell else there was from all their random online things.

*Brother, someone’s taking pictures of everyone leaving the post office.*

*What?* He forced himself not to look around or hurry. That would just make him look as if he was doing something wrong.

*Yeah. He’s to the right of the door, snapping photos as people come out. Big dude. Red hair.*

Andy did glance around then, but casually, remembering he wore sunglasses. Yes. There. Okay, so maybe the man was taking pictures of everyone, which, weird, but not dangerous to him.

*I don't like it, brother. I don't like it at all.*

*No. Keep your head down.* He headed to the truck and hopped in. He didn't burn out like he wanted to, but he thought he could skip the Peruvian food and go someplace else. Just in case.

"Who is that? Why is he taking pictures?" Puck seemed—preternaturally wiggled out.

"I don't know, bud. I mean, maybe he's doing some art school thing."

"No one who goes to art school looks like that."

"You got a better look at him than I did. Want to go to the Sunrise?" The cafe was cheap and filling and in a completely different area.

"Uh-huh. Please. He made my belly hurt." Puck glanced over. "Not you, huh?"

"No. What do you mean?" His eyebrows pulled down, because he had no idea what that meant.

"Nothing. I'm just hungry." Puck wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Puck." He reached over, because the road was deserted right now. "What do you mean?"

"He's just...wrong. He's hunting someone. I don't like that."

"Oh." Okay, Puck knew shit sometimes. Just knew. So he would re-route their mail. "I'll get us a new place. Maybe in Espanola."

"Okay. That's a good idea. I like that one."

"Yeah. No problem." It wouldn't be hard. He would also change virtual POs. That way if someone was looking for them, they could slide right back into the murk, as it were.

Dragon hunters were a thing. They really were. At least Mom said so, right?

He and his brothers were super lucky. They'd never encountered anything like that in their lifetimes. But the moms were older, and they had experiences that Andy couldn't ignore as fairy tales. He took his family's security very seriously.

They pulled in at the diner and he parked right up front, snagging a spot as someone pulled out. "Come on. We can have pancakes."

"I like pancakes. Can we have sausage too?"

For a fully mature dragon, Puck seemed so young.

"We can. And I want potatoes too. Since I won't get my Peruvian ones." He winked. He would bet they would share dessert as well. "How's your tummy?"

"Better. I'm sorry, brother. I just...you know."

"I do know." His phone buzzed, and he checked it on the way into the diner. Jules.

<What's wrong with Puck?>

Jules always knew. Always. Maybe they should invite their older brother out with them anyway. He could take Puck and the book home, and Andy could run the errands after they ate.

<Sunrise. Pancakes>

<I'll be there in twenty. Pecan pancakes. Bacon. Three eggs.>

He grinned when Puck tilted his head. "Jules is coming. You and your loud brain. He always knows when something is wrong."

Puck's face fell. "Sorry."

"Are you kidding? You can take him home and I'll run the errands. That way he'll suspect less."

"Still. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be...a nervous asshole."

“You’re not and you weren’t.” They grabbed a booth, a server he didn’t know coming to offer them coffee. “Thank you. And some apple juice, please.”

“Milk,” Puck said with a smile that made the girl blink.

“Y-yes. Milk.”

*Pull it back, wonderboy. You’re going to daze her.*

*Shut up!*

“Be right back.”

He grinned. “Jules wants pecan pancakes, and the new people always say they don’t have that, so don’t pull it too much. Charming, but not blinding.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Puck finally relaxed all the way, though. “Does he want three eggs or four?”

“Three.” Which meant Jules was in a pretty good mood. If he powered through four...

“And bacon?”

“Of course.” Man, he wanted to look at that book, but he didn’t dare pull it out here. He had brought it inside in his messenger bag, though, instead of leaving it in the truck.

“I know. I’m curious too. Do you think it’s going to have anything new?”

“I hope so.” They were gathering all the information they could about the upcoming magical overload. No one remembered the last one, as far as he could understand, and the next one seemed...imminent.

The old records all called it going through the veil, or whatever the equivalent was in the written language. Like some sort of mass dragon ascension. Which was nuts.

Where would they go?

Did they all just die?

None of this made any sense at all.

“So what are you going to get Jules?”

“Uh. Well, I know he wanted that Lego thing. The scary castle or whatever.” Lego was so not his thing. He had no patience for the tiny details. He much preferred the sweeping code of the web.

“Oh, that’s too cool. I love that. Get him some new games too. And a jigsaw puzzle.”

“I will. The moms said they would text a list. I’ll get some thrillers as well.” Jules loved murder-death-kill shows and books.

“He’s so very analog.”

“At least until he’s not, right?” Andy winked at his baby brother.

“Yeah. I mean, when he decides to throw it down, look out.”

“Exactly.” Andy had to admit, Jules bordered on the supernatural. He was so damn smart, seeing patterns the rest of them didn’t.

Puck was the charmer, and Jules was the superhero. Andy was the workhorse. The one that did the grunt work. He was okay with that; it was what the middle kid did, right?

“What can I get you guys?” the server asked when she brought their drinks.

“I want the filled pancakes and sausage please,” Puck said.

“And I need French toast, sausage, bacon, and home fries.” He’d seen the French toast go by and changed his mind. “Our brother is coming, too, and he’d like three eggs, a double order of bacon, and pecan pancakes.”

She giggled. “My sister Delfina told me about you guys. She was right. You’re totally hot.” She hustled off, leaving them both gaping.

“Did you hear, brother? We’re hot.” Puck blinked at him.

“Totally.” Andy was going to die, just die laughing.

“Too bad she hasn’t seen Jules yet. She might explode.” Jules was the one who smoldered. Like that *Jumanji* movie

with The Rock, which was a classic, no matter what the moms said.

“Oh man. Ka-boom!” Puck waggled his eyebrows and did a fake smolder. Impressive.

Andy didn't even bother to try.

“Mom said to bring you these new cinnamon roll centers.”

“Oooh. Thank you. What's your name?” Puck asked.

“Kyanna. Nice to meet you.”

“Ditto.” Andy smiled. “Thanks so much. Puck, save one for Jules.”

“Mmmph?” Puck stopped in the act of shoving the third one in his mouth.

“Greedy,” Andy chided.

“Hungry. I like cinnamon.” Puck licked his lips clean and little Kyanna almost died. “So good.”

“I'll tell mom.” She fled.

Andy tried one of the rolls. “Nice. A little too soft.”

“Bah. You just like the crusty outside.”

“I do.” He really did, and would eat cinnamon rolls without icing if given a chance.

The door to the restaurant opened, and a shadow seemed to fall over things for a moment, like a cloud had crossed the sun. Ah. Jules.

He lifted one hand. *Oh, our beloved big brother.*

*Fuck off, dorkfish. Puck? You're okay?*

Puck blushed dark. *There was a man at the post office. A scary man.*

*Do I need to go back and check him out?* Jules stood by the booth for a moment, frowning.

“Sit. We ordered your food.”

“Oh my god, hi. What can I get you to drink?”

“Coffee and water, please.” Jules was polite, but he didn’t crack much of a smile. He tended to discourage that kind of attention.

“Of course. Cream? Sugar?” She managed not to flutter her eyelashes.

“Just a little cream.” He did have to give her a wee smile, because she was such a love, wasn’t she? Jules couldn’t fight it anymore than him and Puck.

“Be right back.” Off she went, and Jules gave them a glare.

“No flirting, you two.”

“But she brought us these?” Puck shoved the cinnamon rolls at Jules.

Jules groaned. “Oh, man. Okay. These are the best. Can we get more?”

“You ask.”

So Jules did, and they got another full plate of the delicious things in no time. It was good to be with his brothers. Alone, Andy got less play.

Their regular food came, and he crunched into bacon, deciding it didn’t matter.

“So what was the guy doing?” Jules asked in a low voice.

“Taking pictures. Of all the people coming in and out. He made my stomach hurt,” Puck said.

“I’ll get a new PO router today,” Andy said.

“Good deal. Let me know if I need to go get the box somewhere.”

“I will.” Jules always worked with him to keep Puck safe. Always.

“I feel so silly, guys. I’m sorry.” Puck’s cheeks went red hot.

“Why?” Jules tilted his head. “You have good instincts, brother. Trust them.”

“Thank you.” Now Puck flushed with pleasure. “So, what were you up to when we left?”

“Helping Mom transplant some plants. It’s getting colder in the morning and she wanted them in tubs in her sunroom instead of outside.” Jules made a face. “That’s what I get for being the action man.”

“She loves that you help her dig in the dirt, brother.” Puck chuckled and leaned hard against Jules for a second. “I can’t believe it’s already fall.”

“I know. Time just flows.” Like crazy. He thought they processed it a little differently as dragons than say, humans did. He knew fae folks had an even different continuum.

“I’m looking forward to the winter this year. I’m hoping for a lot of snow.” Jules could spend hours skiing cross country, exploring the mountains.

Him? He was more of the give-me-Wi-Fi-or-give-me-death type.

Puck pouted. “I want a long fall and a long spring.”

“You just want to bask in the sunroom,” Andy accused.

“Yes! I’m mostly lizard, right?”

His eyes went wide. He could just imagine someone telling their ever-so-academic mother that they were lizardy. She would pop a scale.

Jules snorted. “We’re not lizards.”

“Is that like, an alien thing? Lizard people.” Kyanna refilled their coffee.

“Totally. It’s a family joke, you know?” There went Puck’s million-dollar smile, and that little girl was toast.

“Oh. Cool. My mom calls me llama girl because of my long neck.” Kyanna blinked, then flushed dark pink. “Uh. Bye.”

They didn’t laugh, because that would be so damn rude, but they did all share a grin once she ran off.



“She’s going to be a little addled when you leave, Puck,” Jules noted.

“I was told to be charming.”

“Mmm.” Jules tucked into his brunch. “These cinnamon things are a delight. Okay, so I’ll take you back, and Andy, what are you doing?”

“The moms texted a list.”

“Maybe we should all go.” Puck shrugged when he gave his brother a look.

“I know! But I worry.”

“I’ll be fine.” Out of the three of them, Andy hid his light the best, making people think he was one of them easily. “I’ll wear my baseball cap.”

“Okay, but...”

“Puck. I swear to you, I’ll be careful. I’ll come home.”

Jules chewed his lower lip. Then he sighed. “Of course you will. Heck, that guy was probably a PI after someone’s cheating husband. You just got all freaked out.”

“Oh, man. Or a cheating wife? Seriously? How wild is that?” Puck’s eyes went wide, his imagination caught.

He nudged Jules under the table. *Good one.*

*Thank you. I do try.*

They finished up their food, tipped Kyanna well, and paid their bill.

Jules clapped him on the back as they stood. “Okay, brother. Give me the book, and we’ll see you at home.”

“Okay, but I get to be the first one to read it.”

“Of course. It’s your win.” Jules was nothing if not fair.

“Woo.” Andy fist-bumped all around as they walked out the door, then damn near ran up Puck’s butt as he froze halfway to Jules’s giant SUV.

“Oh no. There he is again,” Puck whispered.

“What? Where?” Andy searched the parking lot.

“Over there in the gray rental.” Puck jerked his chin. “I’m gonna puke.”

“Don’t you dare.” Shadows gathered over them as Jules growled. “I’ll be right back.”

Puck grabbed for him. “Jules!”

Andy followed. No one was confronting this guy alone.

*If shit hits the fan, you take Puck inside.* Jules’s command was sharp in his brain.

*If it’s that bad, we all go. Together.*

*Don’t argue with me.* Jules could be super imperious.

*I’m not. I’m just pointing out we can get back inside and call...someone.*

Jules snorted but headed over to the rental, seeming to get bigger with every step. It was a neat trick, and part of his talent, not anything real. He was a pretty average-sized dragon, really.

The man stepped out of the vehicle as Jules charged up to him, and he leaned back against the driver’s side door, smiling.

Three things became immediately apparent as soon as Andy looked at the guy: he wasn’t afraid of Jules, he was way bigger than Andy had noticed on one glance at the post office, and he was a beautiful son of a bitch.

Still, three of them were better than one, so he dragged Puck over.

“Who the hell are you?” Jules demanded. “Why are you following my brothers?”

The smile on the guy’s face widened, and his eyebrows went up. “Well, look at all of you. So cute. I’m following you to see why you’re so interested in dragons. But now I get it. You are some.”

*Brothers. Brothers. Brothers.*

*PUCK!* Jules’s voice was sharp and firm. *Enough.*

Andy let his nose wrinkle; he arched an eyebrow. “We have too much to accomplish today to deal with an idiot.”

“Oh I don’t know. I think you might want to deal with me. I was sent to see who you were. And if you’re on the map for my employer, then you’re going to be for others. So I think maybe we ought to talk.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Dustin grinned at the puffy little trio who were all growling and bobbing and weaving and trying to be intimidating. Goddess, they were adorable, and he was glad to note that they weren't hunters.

That made his job much easier. In fact, he should just report his findings and head off to the next job, but...

But this was a little enclave of dragons who clearly had no idea how vulnerable they could be.

They were so sweet and puffy, all with pale gray eyes. They were stairsteps—tiny, super tiny, and uber tiny.

And they were all staring at him, mouths hanging open. "I don't suppose you want to go back in and have more of those cinnamon roll things. They looked great." And Dustin was starving.

"What? We're leaving. Goodbye!" Super tiny glared at him. "Now!"

"I'll only follow you." His grin widened. "I have orders to find out where you live."

One of them, the biggest one, flicked out a knife, and the other two ran as he plunged it into one of his tires.

"You little shit." He lunged, but he missed the grab, the guy like smoke in his hands. Well, well. Good thing he had some tricks up his sleeve too.

Spitting poison might not be the best option here, but he could totally use his speed, which could trick almost any eye,

and put a tracker on the littlest one's vehicle. Which he should have thought of while they were in the restaurant.

The trio left in two cars, both going different ways, both of them peeling out. The fear in the air was palpable.

He would feel bad, but they needed to be more careful. He could have been a hunter...

He headed into the restaurant to call his employer and have some cinnamon rolls. His tracker would show him where to go once the...brothers? Once they stopped running.

He wandered in, finding the waitresses whispering, heads together, so curious, so turned on.

He grabbed the same booth the three had sat at, not worried about taking up the table because it wasn't busy at the moment. Their scents were still there, all juniper and pinyon, clay and smoke.

His body went tight, because that scent was pure and rich and absolutely necessary.

He breathed deep, managing not to jump when one of the wait staff came to bring him a cup of coffee. "Can I start you off with cinnamon roll centers?"

"Oh, yeah. My new friends on the way out told me they were amazing."

"They are. Very sexy." Now, was she talking about the dragons or the food?

"Mmm." He smacked his lips, then gave her what he hoped she would think was a conspiratorial smile. "Do they come in a lot?"

"The younger two do. The older one just once in a while. I thought my sister might explode." She winked. "The younger two are so sweet, though, and they always tip and make us laugh."

"They sound like great guys." He sipped his coffee, which was more than passable for a diner. "Thank you. And can I get a Western omelet?"

“Home fries?”

“You got it.”

He checked his phone, the truck circling then stopping at a...grocery store?

Huh. Okay. He would have to see where it went from there.

He called number one on his favorites, figuring he'd catch up his boss.

“Dustin. Are you in Santa Fe?”

“Yeah. That was easy. They're not what we thought. In fact, the exact opposite.”

“Oh?” There was a pregnant pause. “Interesting. Have you talked to them?”

“We had a short conversation that ended with one of them slashing my tire. I did get a tracker on a vehicle. I'm waiting for that one to settle somewhere before perusing again. I want to know their full situation.”

“I want that as well. Full report. Who they are, where they live, what they do.”

“You got it.” This was going to be fun. Those three were cute as hell, resourceful, and clearly thoroughly engrained in human culture.

“You sound joyous. Have you called the rental company yet?”

“No. I will here in a minute. I'm about to have cinnamon rolls.”

There was a long pause. “You are one odd character, Dustin.”

“Yep.” He mouthed his thanks at the server who brought him a plate of gooey goodness. “These things look like heaven. Much better than worrying about a tire.”

“You have three dragons on the loose, remember?”

*Mine.* “Uh-huh.”

“Well, focus on the job at hand.”

Dustin sobered. “Have I ever dropped the ball?”

“No, but there’s always a first time. It concerns me that I didn’t know about these three already.”

“You’re good, boss, but there’s a lot of magical shit going down in Santa Fe. It’s a good place to hide.”

“This is true. There’s a major throughway running through the mountains. We need to map everything.”

“You got it. I’ve got my laptop. I’ll start making the overlay for the map of the States first?”

“That works. I have hits all along the Rockies.”

“Send it to me.” He knew the boss man had all sorts of information he hadn’t shared yet. And hell, if little and adorbs was into dragon lore, maybe it was something he could use to get through the door. He stuffed a cinnamon roll bit in his mouth.

“Done. Have a good hunt. I want these guys on my radar.”

“You got it.” He hung up, then pulled up the rental app and reported the flat. They would bring him another car and pick that one up. Score.

Now all he had to do was eat his brunch and plan his next attack on the hot little dragons.

Life was good.



“**W**here are we going?” Puck stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I’m dropping you at the Smiths. Jules is coming in two minutes. He’s taking you, and then Mom is coming to pick you both up. I’m going to head south on 25, park the car, and get a hotel room on the West Side. I’ll be home in a day or two. Keep my book safe, okay?” Andy was the most mobile and he could pick up a laptop down there and start protecting things.

“Sure. Okay.” Puck picked at his jeans leg. “Do you think—is he trying to hurt us?”

“I doubt it. He seemed more like he was watching. But we can’t afford to lead him to the house, just in case.” The need to protect his family was...huge, pressing at him, making him want to fly.

“Right. So why can’t you just come with us?”

“Because separated, we’re harder to track, and he followed this car. I can park at the mall, get a laptop, and then an Uber to a hotel.”

“Okay. Okay, sure. I get you. Call us every five minutes.” Puck grabbed his hand. “Or at least text.”

“I will. Maybe every ten. I’ll be driving.” He grinned. Dorkpants.

“Fair enough. Where do you think I should wait?”

“By the carts. That way you can see him. You can call him, so you’ll know where he is, real time. Fair?”

“Yeah. I love you.”

He nodded. “I love you, too, and you’ve got this. Call Jules. He’s on his way. Eight minutes.”

Puck got out of the car, and he drove away, dialing Mom. “He’s out, waiting for J.J.”

“Good. I told Jules to drive to the Whole Foods. I’ll pick them up there, just in case we need another layer.” Her voice was clipped, but he could tell she wasn’t mad at him. She was frustrated and worried. “Though you should have just brought him home and let me eat him.”

“Jules wanted to try. I thought he was going to stab the guy. It’s fu—messed up, Mom.”

“I know. It always is when things get weird and territorial. Damn alphas.”

Since Mom was an alpha, that was kind of hysterical. “Yep. They’re such meanies.”



“Be careful, baby. Please.”

“I will. He’s going to be chasing one of us, not both.”

“I know. I worry because you’re the one not coming home. I can protect Puck and Jules and your Mama.”

“And I will be careful. I’m dumping the car at Cottonwood Mall. I’ll need you to hire one of the guys to come tow it and hold it for a few weeks.”

“You know it. You call me if anything changes, and text me to let me know what spot the car is in. They’ll go over it for any trackers.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.” And now he needed to focus on driving. Traffic wasn’t bad right now, but he’d be on the interstate soon, and I-25 could get wild going down to Rio Rancho. Or it could be dead.

He’d pull off in Bernalillo, head across past the res, and toddle down the hill. There was that hotel almost right at 25 and Alameda that had the Denny’s. Or he could hit up something on Fourth Street. Some of those places had been redone and had the best retro vibe.

Hell, if he took an Uber to Old Town, he could get a room at the Hotel Albuquerque. Now that sounded like a vacation. And if he had to be out and about, he should do that. What the hell. He would grab a new laptop at Best Buy. He loved the idea of hanging out and doing a lot of the legwork online.

He’d just have to sign up for a new Gmail account, something that this guy hadn’t seen, if he’d been tracking them online. Though with the PO thing, it looked like he’d traced them through the book.

Still. Cottonwood to Best Buy. Uber to Old Town. Order in from Church Street Cafe, and work.

He could totally live with that.

CHAPTER  
SIX

Dustin pulled up at the mall just in time to see someone towing the car away.

Okay. So. Doubtful that the wee one would buy another car until tomorrow, assuming he did. So he took some pictures of the license plate so he could do a search on the owner. He had access to those kinds of records, and then he could work some magic. Make some calls. Hook into the web.

He had a knack for these things, and he also had a...a feel for this one. This particular dragon, who was just right. Not too big, like the older brother. Not too small.

Just right.

So he found a seat at the Red Robin in the mall lot and started working, his sleek tablet laptop fired up and ready.

It took him twenty minutes to figure out the best bet as far as where the kid would stay.

The Hotel Albuquerque. Not terribly expensive, not modern, close to restaurants and coffee shops, and touristy enough to fit in.

So he moved back to the there, parking around back, then heading in to see what he could see. The guy would be hiding out in his room, Dustin would bet, but at some point, he would have to get food. The place inside the hotel smelled...not like good Mexican food. And he'd seen what this family thought of as good food in Santa Fe.

Dustin picked one of the long couches off to one side of the lobby, and watched the front doors, pretending to read on his phone.

“I have a delivery for room 1002, please.”

“Of course. One minute. Señor Cuelebre? There’s an order for you. Yes, sir. At the front desk.”

He perked up, hoping for his prey. The odds might be against him. This wasn’t a tiny hotel, and there were plenty of people, but he crossed his fingers.

And score. Look who came down almost disappearing in a huge hoodie and a pair of baggy sweats. The scent was unmistakable, though, and so was the way that lean body moved.

“Thanks, man. Have a good night, everyone.” He took the food and headed back for the elevators, moving like smoke.

Dustin rolled to his feet and headed after him, not close enough to get on the same elevator. He didn’t need to now. Room 1002. He couldn’t wait to see the guy’s face when he knocked, and all the careful subterfuge was for naught.

When he got upstairs and knocked, though, no one answered. Like there wasn’t even a peep.

“Mr. Cuelebre? May I speak to you please?” It bothered him that he didn’t know this one’s given name. He hoped the guy wasn’t jumping off a balcony. Even if he was a flying dragon, which most were but some weren’t, that would suck.

He could barely hear the whisper of keys on a laptop tapping furiously, no doubt calling for help.

He knocked again. “I’m not trying to kidnap you, molest you—” much “—or rob you. In fact, I represent someone who protects people like us, and I’m willing to share information.”

*Here, dragon dragon. Have a carrot.*

*Please leave me alone. I have a terrible migraine.*

Wait. Wait. Whoa.

*I can help with that. I can.* Dustin went with it. If he questioned what he was hearing too much, he might lose his shit. *I can. Let me in, sweet one. I won't hurt you. You have my word of honor.*

Dustin held his breath, and he didn't even have the urge to crow when the door opened. The poor kid looked like hell, with bags under his eyes and lines dug in beside his mouth.

"Please. It's killing me."

"Stress," he said in a low voice. "Inside. I'll fix it." He locked the door behind them in case the cavalry arrived, then eased the young one down to sit on the bed. "I'm not getting freaky, but I need to get behind you."

Those pale gray eyes met his before the wee one nodded, then hissed.

Dustin knelt behind him on the bed, then probed at that stiff neck with his fingers. If he could find where the upper-wing joint would be on the dragon...

"I'm gonna puke."

"Nope." He pushed and stroked and finally found the huge gather of tight muscles. He put a finger on either side and stroked down, then prodded the place that would release them with his thumb. Boom.

The little one went boneless and limp in his arms.

He hugged Cuelebre to his chest, sighing. Poor guy. It had to suck to think he was safe and then find out that at any time, someone could find him and his family. So Dustin held him and let him breathe.

The scent of this little one made him dizzy, made him ache with the hints of cinnamon and chile and cumin. He sucked in air, taking more of it in, letting himself sink into the little dragon's aura.

He'd never experienced anything so sweet, so rich as the energy pouring off this dragon. It was almost unreasonable.

*What's your name, sweet?* He knew the family name, but not the given one.

*Andy. I'm Andy. I won't let anyone hurt my family.*

Okay, whoa. He really had heard... Andy. He knew some dragons who excelled at mental communication, sort of like the aliens in all the movies, where they'd advanced beyond the need to talk.

Dustin wasn't that evolved.

He was sort of...a hammer-on-a-nail type. Bang bang bang.

So this was new. Kinda novel. A little freaky. Maybe a lot. *I'm Dustin. I won't hurt you or your family. You have my vow.*

*Okay. Thank you. We're not mean. We're researchers.*

*I'm not the least bit worried now that I've met you.* And he'd managed to extend his assignment just to be near Andy, hadn't he?

Andy took a deep breath and pulled away from him, and he had to resist the urge to grab him back and hold on. "I never do that. What are you doing here?"

"Well, that might be too long a story for right now. But I'm here at this very moment to assure you I'm not here to hunt you or your family. I thought you were dragon hunters, in fact."

"Us? No. No, we're just dudes." Andy straightened his oversized clothes, expression deliciously confused. "I was about to eat. Are you hungry?"

"I stopped at the Red Robin. But if you got chips and salsa I would share." Dustin grinned, because food was a huge social equalizer.

"There's guac too. I love guacamole."

"I do too." God, this was such a sweet little dragon. He got up to get the food bag. "That does smell fine."

"Enchiladas. That's what we were having at home." *It's my favorite.*

"I'm sorry you missed it at home. I like a relleno myself." Andy couldn't seem to help opening up to him, and Dustin

wanted to encourage it.

“Yeah. I love spicy. Why did you think we were hunters?”

“Your searches. Your book-buying history. All your web activity led to someone who wanted to find dragons.” Dustin shrugged. “My boss keeps track of that shit.”

“Why? Are you going to tell him you found us? Are we going to have to move away? Are we going to lose our home?” The panic grew with every question.

“Hey.” Dustin reached out to cover Andy’s hand with his. “No. No one is going to bother you. In fact, now that we know you’re dragons, you’ll be under his protection, which is a pretty good thing.” The boss was...wow. Like an uber alpha.

Not that he was going to allow anyone to hurt this sweet omega. Just the thought made him bare his teeth.

Andy stared at him, fascinated.

“Sorry.” He reined it in. “I’m not all grr at you. I was just thinking too hard.” Dustin began opening bags and boxes. “Ah. Enchiladas por tu...”

“Thank you...” Andy handed over the guacamole. *So, this is the weirdest thing in history.*

*Nah. I’ve seen some shit, honey. This is just two guys having guac.* Dustin grabbed a chip and dipped it into the creamy green goo, moaning. “Damn, this is good stuff.” He’d had guacamole all over, and maybe he’d had better in Mexico, but he wasn’t sure about that.

“I love guac. Always have.” Andy scooped up a bite, then licked his fingers clean.

Dustin stared hard, because the unconscious motion had him caught, his body on high alert. All sorts of things tingled, from his lips to junk much farther down his body. He wanted to taste Andy’s mouth far more than he wanted food, and Dustin found himself leaning toward Andy, only popping back up because the guy might just snap and run again if he gave into the urge so soon.

No, that would wait for a little longer. Until Andy started to trust him. Dustin would prove what he said was true; he wasn't out to hurt anyone. He was here to help Andy learn how to hide better.

And he was here to get to know Andy better. Every inch. Over and over.

"You're staring at me," Andy said.

"That's because you're beautiful," Dustin shot right back.

"Shyeah." Andy shook his head. "You might convince me of a lot of things, but have you seen my brothers? Puck is otherworldly, and Jules is a supermodel."

Dustin shook his head. "They're lovely. Notice I came after you, not them."

"You did. It's a little weird, though. I'm not the one people look at."

"No? Well, people can be strange. I know what I like to stare at." Winking, Dustin grabbed another chip, feeling like flirting might just be something he could excel at. Maybe not. He was a little rough around the edges. But still, he really wanted Andy to like him, enjoy his company, and maybe do the nasty with him.

Soon.

Andy blushed, and he could sense it, the joy, the pleasure, and the hint of arousal.

Dustin cleared his throat. "How's the salsa?"

"Good. Not too hot today. Some days, it's blistering."

"Like the cook was mad, huh?" His dad's always said that when food was really spicy. That someone was mad and was putting it into the food.

"Yes. My m—I hear that too."

He bit back questions. Then Dustin let them out. "You weren't going to say mate, were you? Tell you don't have a mate."

“I don’t have a mate. I have ’net sex with folks every now and again, but not even video. No mate.”

“Good.” He let his satisfaction ring in his voice, and Andy sat up a little straighter, hiding less in his clothes. “That’s what I needed to hear.” He wanted Andy free for him, and Dustin tended to get what he wanted.

They worked through the food, and Dustin moved boxes off the bed as they emptied, making room for him to scoot up next to Andy. He put his arm around the narrow shoulders, sharing warmth, and reached for the TV remote. “Should we watch a movie?”

“I shouldn’t. It’s probably a bad idea.” Andy did, though, just snuggled right in with a soft sigh.

“You think so? I think it’s a grand one.” He clicked the TV on, entering past the hotel stuff to the movie channels. “Explosions, spies, or weird Halloween kids’ movie?” He laid his cheek on the top of Andy’s head, loving his scent.

“Kids’ movie, for sure. I love *Hotel Transylvania*.”

“Then I’m in.” He put the movie on, and they pulled the blanket up over them. He really should take his shoes off, but...

A huge riot of sound shook the room as someone pounded on the door, and Dustin sprang out of the bed, putting himself between the door and Andy just as the lock burst and the door snapped open. He braced himself, ready to fight the fiery female alpha dragon who barged into the room, wondering how the hell someone had found them so quickly and come to challenge them.

He was just about to dive at her when he heard Andy gasp, but he didn’t dare look away from the female until Andy spoke.

“Don’t hurt each other. Please. She’s my mom.”

“Titus Andronicus Cuelebre! What are you doing in bed with a strange dragon!”



CHAPTER  
SEVEN

“Mom!” Andy stared at her. He wasn’t a child! He was fully grown! He could hang out with another dragon.

She arched one eyebrow, her bright red hair like a flame, her eyes flashing silver. “Yes, son?”

“Stop. Stop, someone’s going to call security.” He ran and closed the door, latching it with the hotel lock. He could not believe this was happening.

“This is your mom?” Dustin asked. “Wow. Mrs. Cuelebre. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Dustin Ladon.” Dustin bowed in an oddly old-fashioned courtly way. It was very nice, but he was building up a head of steam, and he really didn’t want Dustin making nice with his mom.

“Yes, she’s my mom. And Mom, I’m fine. We’re fine.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You called for help.”

“Someone was coming in, and my head was pounding! He helped!”

“Did he now?” Mom marched over to peer at Dustin, who smiled, his demeanor back to easy, his bright-green eyes sparking.

“I did. He was so tense he was working into a migraine. I released his wing joints.”

“Good job. He hasn’t had one of those since adolescence.”

“Mom!”

“What?” She sighed. “May we all sit down after I call your other mother and your siblings and tell them that you are not being murdered?”

“Here, you take the armchair,” Dustin said, pulling it out for Mom to face the bed. Then Dustin very deliberately took his hand and drew him back to sit on the bed so they were side by side.

Mom’s eyebrows were moving so wildly, it was like she was signaling alien life. She called home, “Angelica. Fine. No. Yes. I think so. No. Absolutely. Yes, love, I understand.” She clicked out of the call and stared at them. For so long he twitched.

“Mom—”

Dustin put a hand over his. “I imagine you have questions.”

“You have a fine imagination,” Mom snapped. “What on earth are you doing here and why did you scare the fire out of my child? Children. Puck is in the earthship. Hiding.”

“I apologize for scaring anyone. I handled it badly when I realized your sons were dragons. I would have requested an audience with you had I known where to ask.” Dustin’s voice never strayed from calm.

“I’m going to call Puck.”

“You’re going to sit your ass down,” Mom snarled, and he blinked at her, surprised and hurt. She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry. Please sit. You took ten years off my life, son. I thought someone had come to harm you.”

“I’m so sorry. I should have called. I was just...”

“Caught. I understand. We’re going home.”

“But, Mom. I was having a night off. Out. I—” He bit his lip, hoping Dustin would step in.

“I can bring him back up tomorrow, lady. I promise to keep him safe.”

Mom pressed her lips together, staring at Dustin. Then she blew out a breath. “Turn that movie off, and we’ll all go. Dustin, you will be our guest. I’ll settle the bill at the desk since I broke the lock.”

Andy opened his mouth, and she shook her head. “No. No, you have to come home. Your mama is sobbing. You and your...friend...can hang out together, but I need you home. She’s making herself sick.”

“Oh.” Stricken, he stood so he could pack up his laptop bag. “I’m sorry, Mom. I never meant to upset her like that.”

Dustin helped, finding his hoodie and shoes while he got his new laptop, and Dustin made sure all the trash was put away. “Did you leave anything in the bathroom?”

“No. I got disposable stuff from the front desk.”

“Are you renting the car?” Mom asked Dustin. “Or are you driving your own?”

“Renting.”

“Fine. We’ll drop it off at the airport. It’ll be safe, and there’s a key drop-off. Then you can ride in with us.”

Dustin searched Mom’s face, then nodded. “I appreciate it. I want to meet everyone and apologize to your omega wife and to your other sons.”

So formal. But it seemed to be a language pattern Mom got, and there was already a glint of respect in her eyes for Dustin. Wild. Cool, but kinda crazy.

Andy slung his bag over his shoulder, nodding. “Okay. I’m ready. I didn’t buy too much.”

“Mmm. Just the basics, hmm? A computer?”

“Well, yes.” He grinned a little at his mother. “I mean, I can wash my underwear in the sink, but I can’t just sit here with no access.”

Mom laughed and drew him in for a hug. “Oh, I vow. I won’t lose my middle boy. None of us work without you, Andy.”

He squeezed her tight. “I’ll meet you downstairs in the parking lot.”

“Good deal.” She met Dustin’s eyes. “I’ll be there in a heartbeat.”

“Of course.” Dustin bowed again, then took his elbow to lead him out into the hall and down the stairs instead of the elevator. Mom could take that and go to the front desk. “That’s your mother? I mean, damn. I’m impressed, honey.”

He glanced sideways at Dustin. “Because I’m not impressive?”

“Oh, Andy. You make me nuts. I can’t stop staring at you. I want to sniff you. Maybe lick you all over. But you’re an omega all the way. Impressively brilliant? Yes. Scary? No.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t sure whether to be upset or flattered. “Wait. Licking?”

“Hell yes.”

“I can totally be into licking when my mother isn’t bursting in.” At least he was fairly sure. “First, though, let me call my baby brother.”

Puck needed him, and he knew it.

He dialed and Puck answered immediately. “You’re not dead?”

“Of course not! He’s nice. He’s coming home with us.”

“What? No. No, brother. He makes my belly hurt.”

What if that meant that when Dustin saw Puck, then he would want to lick Puck?

Andy took a deep breath. He guessed that would be what it was. He could be happy if Puck found his mate. Dustin might just be so interesting to him because he was another dragon who wasn’t family. He’d never met one of those before.

“It will be fine, Puck. You’ll see. Mom is willing to let him come home with us, and she’s pretty good at judging character. Maybe he makes your belly hurt for another reason.”

Dustin gave him a raised eyebrow look that almost rivaled his mom's. Not quite. His eyebrows were dark brown, not red. Come to think of it, Jules's black slash of brows was more intimidating too. But Dustin was good at it.

"Another reason?"

"Yeah. Maybe he's—" The words *your mate* froze on his lips.

Okay, don't be a dick. Say it. *Say it!*

*Don't you dare. He's not my mate.*

His gaze flew to Dustin. *He's not?*

*No.*

"Maybe he's what, brother?"

"Here to help us do something. Prophecy abounds, right? I mean, maybe he's meant to help us find something or do something."

"Mom didn't eat him? She said she might."

"No. I told you. She approved him coming home. We're taking him to the airport to turn in the rental and then coming home."

"Can you bring hamburgers home, please? Maybe milkshakes?"

"Totally. I'm right with you. I'll bring something yummy for everyone. Tell Mama and Jules to breathe, okay? We're coming home. With company."

"Is he nice?"

"He is. He's..." Stunning. "...different than I imagined."

"How? Like, he's not all sarcastic and mean?"

"No. No, he really helped me. I stressed myself into one of those headaches I used to get. He fixed it." And the relief had been stunning. Almost too much, which was why he'd blacked out for a few minutes. "And we ate guacamole together and we were going to watch a movie."

“Like, that fast?” Puck sniffled. “Well, I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I’m sorry you were so scared. You don’t have to stay in the earthship.”

“I will until you get home. Mama is wiggling.”

“Okay. We’ll visit with you and eat together. I swear, it’s okay. You’re okay.” He hated when Puck panicked. “I need you to make sure Jules is Zen, okay?”

“Sure. Okay.” Puck took a deep breath that he could hear. “I’ll tell him about you guys coming up. He might sleep at the moms’ house. You know how he is.”

“I know how we all are. Just try to give it a shot. We’ll see what Mama thinks of him.”

*Is the omega mom pickier?* Dustin asked in his head.

That was so weird but so cool. It made his ears ring a little.

*She is. And she’s very perceptive.*

*Then I might need to bring her a gift. We can stop somewhere, maybe?*

*Sure. That would please Mom. Seriously. It would tickle her to death.* Mama was the queen of Mom’s castle, and she would do anything for her. Anything at all.

*Cool.*

“Did you hear me, Andy?” Puck asked.

“Huh? Sorry, a car went by that was super loud.”

“I said, are you going to be okay if Mama sends him away?”

No. “I don’t know. I think he’ll have good information for us to mine. I want to really sit and talk with him.”

“And watch movies?”

“It was *Hotel Transylvania*.”

“Oh, we love that one! I’ll get it pulled up and ready for when you get home. I’ll put pillows and blankets in the media

room.”

Puck was always up for a good puppy pile. “Thank you, brother. I really appreciate it. It means a lot that you trust my judgment.”

“I love you. I want to try to let you have this guy and pick his brain, so I’ll reserve judgment.”

He grinned. “I love you too. Here’s Mom. We’ll be home soon.”

Mom waved at them, and pointed to her Range Rover. “Get in, son.”

“Can I call shotgun?” he shot back.

“I can put you in a car seat if you need it...”

God, she was quick with a comeback. “Only if I can watch cartoons and have cookies on the drive.”

“You can have a humble pie if you’re not careful. I’ll be right behind you, er, Dustin.”

Dustin gave him a searching look, then smiled at his mom. “I’m counting on it.” *Don’t let her take you straight home. Come for me.*

*I will. I want*—Him. He wanted Dustin.

Wild, but incredibly true.

*I do too.* Dustin lifted a hand, heading to his rental, and Andy’s mom glared at him until he got into the Range Rover.

“Jesus, Mom! You’re acting like I’m a child!”

“Well, that’s how you’re begging to be treated. Why wouldn’t you call us and let us know you were okay? You sent that email and then went silent. I thought I’d get here and find you dead!”

“I don’t *know!*” And that wasn’t a lie. Dustin had started talking to him, and he had been...lost. Totally lost.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” She got them rolling, and to his relief, she followed Dustin. “Goddess save me from my children.”

“What? Do you think there’s something wrong with me?”

“No. I mean, nothing new.” She shook her head. “My middle child. I never would have thought.”

“Mom, I need you to stop being so cryptic.”

“Tell me what happened. In detail.”

“He knocked on the door, and I emailed, then all of the sudden my head started pounding like it used to, and I couldn’t see. He knocked again, and I heard him inside my head, promising to help.” And it hadn’t been a lie.

“Inside your head. Are you sure?”

“Yes. Like, I could hear him, but not out loud. Am I going nuts?”

“No. But I wouldn’t mention that to your brothers just yet.” She gave him a mirthless grin.

“Okay... I won’t. He did help, though. He made it go away, and when I woke up, it was like there wasn’t anything else but him.” And he felt like a moron.

“Yes. Stop being all freaked out. I’m not angry at you, and you didn’t do anything wrong. Except not call your mama. That you’ll never hear the end of.” She followed Dustin onto the highway, then to the big junction where they split off to the airport. “As far as safety protocol, the only thing you did wrong was stop to get a laptop.”

“I thought that would be safer than using my phone,” he pointed out.

“It probably was, and you’re smart as hell. How did he find you, then?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask.” He hadn’t thought to ask. He didn’t have his car, he had turned off his phone...

“Hmm. I’ll have to ask him, then.”

“Are you going to eat him?”

“What? No. No, of course not.”



Andy breathed out a sigh of relief. He really didn't want that. Dustin was... There was something about Dustin that Andy wanted to be near, wanted more of. He needed Dustin to be safe. In fact, he wanted his mom to like Dustin.

"We'll figure all this out, and then you two can spend some time together, okay?"

"Okay. I just...my head was killing me."

"I know. Tension. You've always had a very interesting reaction to danger. Like Puck does."

"What does Jules have then?"

"He responds to fear with anger. Like slashing someone's tires." She said it gently, but she sounded resolved. "Thank goodness your new friend was after something and wasn't just a random citizen who you all mistook for someone nefarious."

"Mom! Give us some credit. We're not stupid. He confronted us before we did anything." Dustin had called them dragons first.

"I know, son. I also know how feeling found out can make your judgment unsound. At least temporarily."

"What are you saying?" He watched the road fly by, and she pulled off onto the exit ramp for the airport.

"That this is all new territory for you. That's all. I need to know from now on you'll breathe a moment before making decisions."

"You're never going to let me out of the freaking house again, so I only have to make smart online decisions, right?" Shit, he wasn't a baby. Or a teenager. He was a grown dragon.

"Andy, stop. I'm allowed to be worried about my children, and I am allowed to take you to task for acting like your head is stuck right up your ass!" She turned into the airport, right on the ass of Dustin's rental.

"I didn't mean to!" She had to understand. He never did this. Never.

“I know that. I do.” She shook her head, pulling off at the rental car return. “I love you. That’s all you need to know.” Then she glanced at him. “And I trust you. I just wasn’t ready for this.”

“Ready for what? Have I caused the end of days by liking him?” His head was pounding, just throbbing.

“No. Not at all. We need to stop and get you a drink on the way out.”

“Dustin wants to get Mama a gift too. It doesn’t need to be anything fancy.”

“He can get her some conchas,” Mom said. “Stop working yourself up, son. I won’t be mean to anyone, and I’m not angry at you.” They pulled in to park behind Dustin while he went to drop off the keys. “I promise.”

“Uh-huh.” He watched Dustin walk into the drop area, and his heart picked up speed. He had no idea what was going on, or why Mom was so weird, but he just knew he was in trouble.

One way or the other.

CHAPTER  
EIGHT

Dustin knew the moment he got into the Range Rover, into the front seat next to Andy's mom, no less, that the situation was not good.

They stopped for him to buy a gift, and for Andy to get a Sprite while they picked up enough fast food to feed an army. He tried to talk to Andy then, but like a border collie, Andy's mom herded them apart and got them back in their car, where there was little conversation most of the hour and fifteen-minute drive back to Santa Fe.

Then they wended their way up into the hills beyond the city to a huge old adobe that backed up into the Sangre de Cristo foothills, and Dustin whistled his approval. "Nice."

"Thanks. You feeling better, baby boy?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm going to go take a shower here in a bit. That'll help."

*You okay, sweet?*

*Head's hurting. Everything's weird.*

*Are you sure you don't want to eat?*

*No, no, I had plenty at the hotel.* Andy hurried away, and when he would have followed, Mrs. Cuelebre put a hand out.

"Help me carry in the food and the bags, Dustin," she said. "We need to talk."

Ah. The interrogation was about to begin. "Certainly." He slung Andy's new laptop bag over his shoulder, then grabbed

his bag in one hand, and most of the food bags in the other. He could do all the lifting. He followed her into the house, a big set of double doors leading into a courtyard, then into a shaded foyer. She led him to the kitchen, waving a hand.

“I’ll show you where to put your bag in a bit. First I need to feed and reassure my wife and my heathen children.”

“Mmm.” He kept it noncommittal. “Can I do anything?”

“Oh, you’ve done enough, haven’t you? Trying to form a mating bond with my son?”

“Trying is a strong word.” He let his eyebrows climb like they wanted to. “It ambushed me, lady. I promise you that. I came looking for hunters. All your son’s online activity pointed in that direction. And after what happened up in Colorado...” He let that trail off, because he could hear footsteps thumping, and while he would imagine she knew about the slaughter, what if her kids didn’t?

“Yes. Well.”

“Andy?” The youngest, clearly, burst into the kitchen first, looking around wildly.

“He went upstairs to take a shower, Puck. He already ate. He’ll be back down soon.” Mrs. Cuelebre smiled.

“Where is my boy?” Another woman, this one tiny and soft and round, barreled in at full speed, stopping to squint at him.

“Upstairs. He’s fine, my love.”

“Mrs. Cuelebre.” Oh, this is where Andy got his looks—fierce, dark-haired, worried. “I’m sorry we worried you.”

“You’re going to be. That’s my son!”

“I understand.” He pulled out the bag of pastries and tea that he’d bought for this mama.

“Please accept my apology. I misunderstood the situation, or I would have explained myself to your sons before things got out of hand.” Dustin glanced at the son who had slashed his tires.

Jules grinned at him, expression completely unapologetic. “You just get on with that, man. I’m dying to hear it.”

“Jules.” The more imposing of the moms snapped. “Get paper plates. I am Titania, and this is my omega wife, Angelica. Welcome to our home.”

He ignored Puck’s gasp as he bowed and held out the bag to Angelica. “A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

“Oh, damn.” Her eyes went wide. “Oh, wow. Seriously, Ti-Ti?”

“I’m afraid so, Anj.”

“Hmm.” Angelica took the bag from him, peering inside. “Well, I do like pink conchas.”

“Did I miss something?” Jules asked, and Puck nodded mutely.

“Apparently several somethings,” Dustin said, keeping a straight face. These ladies were lightning quick with their mental gymnastics.

“I want the explanation!” Jules slammed plates down on the table.

“Julius Caesar Cuelebre! I will not tolerate such rudeness.” Titania folded her arms and stared her son down.

*Your mom is amazing, sweet. She really is.* He sent that to Andy.

*They both are. Jules is going to set you on fire.*

*Now we both know your mom is the only fire dragon here.*

*Okay, he’ll scare you to death.*

Jules growled. “You show up here, you threaten me and my brothers, and then I’m the one being rude? This is my home!”

And that was an amazing growl.

“I’m not sure anyone is being rude,” Dustin said. “But your mom is on a roll, so I would listen to her.” He couldn’t help it. Dragon parents were fierce. “I would love to explain,

though. We did bring food, if you like. I'll tell you all I can over a meal."

Jules stared at him, and Dustin just stayed calm and relaxed, waiting him out. He wasn't here to harm anyone, and he would prove it.

"Jules, honey, please. Let's eat before it gets cold." Angelica murmured, patting her son's hand. "Did somebody get me a milkshake?"

"I did, love." Titania handed it to her. "Jules, I got you that inedible chicken thing you like."

Jules unbent enough to smile at his mom. "Okay, okay. Let's eat. What did we get Andy so I can set it aside for him?"

Dustin fought the urge to snarl, and he had to take a deep breath and let it out before he protested that it was his duty to provide for Andy now.

"A couple of fried pies," he answered. "He ate at the hotel."

"Ah. I bet he had Church Street Cafe delivered. He loves that place."

"He did, in fact. The guacamole was excellent."

"It so is, and he says the enchiladas are almost as good as Jules's." Titania winked at her oldest son.

"Almost." Jules gave him a glare.

He wasn't going to roll his eyes. He would be doing the same thing if someone had threatened his brother. Huffing and puffing and blowing the house down. So he counted to five. "I'll have to try yours sometime." He sucked his straw to shut himself up. Hey, that was a good milkshake.

Andy's alpha mother winked at him, tossing a sandwich at Jules.

Jules pouted but sat down and started doctoring fries once they were handed to him. Puck watched him from six feet away as if he was a poisonous snake.

“Puck,” he said gently. “You have my vow that I will not harm you, your family, or your brother. Come and sit, please. Your mom got you a limeade to help settle your stomach.”

Puck took his hand off his belly, guilt scrunching up his eyes and mouth. “I’m not hungry.”

“Of course you are. Dragons are always hungry,” Mama Angelica said. “Come along.”

“I—I don’t like you. Andy’s wrong. I know he is.” Puck shook, and Jules rumbled softly.

“He’s surrounded by us, and me and Mom will eat him if he hurts you or Andy or Mama. Fair?”

Titania chuckled and snapped her teeth together. “Chomp.”

Dustin snorted softly. “If he’s wrong about me, they can eat me,” he agreed. He knew better. He and Andy had formed a bond already. He could hear Andy upstairs, thinking too hard, his headache ramping up again. So he sent a wave of soothing thoughts. *Hush, sweet. It will be fine.*

*My head hurts. So bad.* Andy sounded desperate.

*Where are you?* He was up and moving so fast that the others couldn’t grab for him, hunting his—Andy. He needed to get to Andy and help him again. The headache had to be some sort of fear response, but Dustin thought it might be mixed with some sort of prescience, and that would cause all damn kinds of imbalances.

*Here. I’m here.*

He followed the thought, his mate calling him, demanding his appearance.

*I’m coming, sweet. I am. I hear you.* Dustin charged up the stairs, driving hard, and he found what had to be Andy’s door. He was right. When he let himself in, Andy lay on the bed, curled in a ball, his hands on his head. “Oh, love. I’m so sorry you hurt. Let me help.”

Andy pushed right into his hands, sobbing softly, and the sweet skin was so heated, feverish.

“Breathe. Breathe, now. I have you.” And he was serious about that too. He had Andy, and he wasn’t letting go.

*Please. It hurts.*

*I know. I can tell.* He hit that spot on Andy’s back again, pressing in hard, demanding it let loose so Andy could relax. *I have you. Let yourself breathe, in and out, sweet one. In and out.*

*Thank you. I’m sorry. I’m messing this up.*

*What do you mean? I want you to feel better, but you haven’t messed up anything. I should have protested separating us. You need me here.* Andy’s touch had released tension he hadn’t known he was holding, so they were bonding. Period. So no matter who it was, anyone else would play hell getting them apart.

“Son? Son, it’s Mama. Are you okay?” Mama Angelica’s voice sounded outside the door.

“I am. I just... I need him, now. Please.”

She sighed softly. “I’m not sure this is the best idea, but, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I’m really sure. I’m sorry.”

“We’ll come down as soon as his head is better. He promised his brother movies and food, so we can all eat dessert together, yes?” Dustin hated to hear Andy’s family worry about him, but this was no one’s fault. There had been no indication that there might be an omega to bond with in his information, and he wasn’t sure Andy even knew that was what they were doing.

“Perfect.” She came into the room, and then she pressed her hands on both of them, and the feverish heat eased. “You know Puck. He’ll worry himself into anemia.”

“Oh.” Andy relaxed the rest of the way. “He will. I know. I promise.”

“It won’t be long, ma’am. I know this is a lot to take in.”



“It is, but we’ll discuss particulars later. In a few days. Right now, a little rest and then dessert and movies.”

“Yes, Mama. I love you. I’m so sorry for—”

“Shh. I understand. I honestly do. Breathe.”

He waited for her to close the door before Dustin kissed Andy on the forehead. “She really does understand, sweet. I swear. We’ll just rest until your head is back to good, and we’ll go down hand in hand, okay?”

“Okay. I feel—like such a freak.”

“No.” He said it firmly. “You’re just not as old as I am, I imagine. And your talents are very different than mine.”

“What are your talents? I’m a computer geek.” Oh, someone was hiding his light under a bushel.

Dustin let that go for now. He didn’t want to put more stress on Andy yet. “I find things. I see patterns. Puzzle pieces. Like how I knew what hotel you’d go to even though I’d met you for like, three minutes. I’m good at that sort of thing.” He thought the whole breathing poison might worry Andy just a wee bit too. He could never hurt his mate with it, and if he believed Andy was his mate, which he did, he had to have faith in that fact.

“Ah. Mom wanted to know. I thought I’d been careful.” Andy rested hard against him. “Welcome to my wing of the house.”

It was a beautiful room—comfortable and cozy, filled with blankets and pillows and softness, books and a huge TV.

“The whole wing, huh? Do you have a cool bathroom?” He could use a shower at some point. Or a nice long soak with Andy on top of him. He could go either way. Andy inspired him to want to snuggle and not just get things done the fast way.

“I do. I’ll show you in a minute. Before we go back downstairs.”

“Sure, honey. I bet you have a whole computer room too.”

“We have an entire wing. We spend a lot of time working on our machines.”

He could see that, and he appreciated it. The world had gotten larger for people like them.

“Well, you want to be comfortable, hmm? I’ve been on the road. A lot. So this seems cushy.” He was looking forward to sinking into Andy’s space for a little while. Hibernating some. The thrill of the hunt suddenly held a lot less appeal than it had only hours ago.

“Your neck hurt too?”

“Not near as much as it did. In fact, I’m a little dizzy with the release of it. I had no idea I was so bound up.”

Andy took his hand and began to massage it, rubbing and stretching his fingers, working the pad of his thumb. He began to purr, the caress heavenly.

“That’s a good sound, right?”

“Goddess, yes. That’s amazing.”

“You’re hands need work. They’re really torn up.”

“Lots of work with the heavy bag. I need them to be able to take a hit.” But it made them sore more often than not.

“Are you hit a lot? Who hits you?” Andy kissed one of his knuckles. He felt that kiss, all the way up his arm.

“I do my share of rescuing people, sweet.” He wouldn’t go into many of the things he’d seen. Andy didn’t need those pictures in his head. “I work for someone who strives to protect other dragons at all costs. Luckily for me, it’s mostly like private investigator work. But some days, it’s dangerous.” He chuckled. “Like when someone slashes your tires.”

“Yeah. Jules doesn’t like being threatened. It stresses him out.” Andy chuckled softly. “Like whoa.”

“I think you and Puck being threatened stressed him out more. I owe him an apology, but he wasn’t in a place to hear it.” Dustin tilted his head to one side, pondering that. “I may

not have sounded sincere, either. Ninety percent of my attention was focused on you.”

Andy’s body heated in a flush, and Dustin swore he could smell his omega’s arousal. “Me?”

“You. I could hear you up here, and you were so unhappy. I wanted to rush up here and hold you.” He wasn’t a flowery kind of guy, but honestly, the words came easily to him. “I needed to be with you, Andy. It’s nuts, huh?” He stroked Andy’s curly hair back from his forehead, looking into those pale gray eyes and finding all sorts of emotions there.

“Yeah, but I can handle a little nuts. I really can.” Andy leaned into his touch, lips parted and so sweet. He wanted to take a—

The door flew open. “Are you okay? The moms went back home.”

Puck and Jules both crowded into the room, and Dustin bit back a sigh. Of course they were concerned. They were used to doing things as a family, and this was a new and alarming situation for them.

“Dude!” Andy sat up straight and stared at his brothers. “You could knock. I’m fine, okay?”

“Mom got you pies,” Puck said, his voice soft. “Come down and watch the movie?”

“Okay. Have you met Dustin yet?” Andy sat up but stayed touching him, staying close. “I mean beyond the whole tire-slashing part...”

Jules rolled his eyes. “You mean there’s more to know?”

“Yes.” Andy snapped it out, and Dustin grabbed his hand.

“It’s okay, Andy. This is hard to figure out so fast. Hi, Jules. I’m Dustin Ladon. I’m an investigator for a party who is interested in keeping dragons safe, and I had bad information about you and your family. I thought you were hunters. Now, how about we all go watch the movie together?”

“Hunters?” Puck gasped. “There are hunters? Here?”

Andy shook his head. “No. No, not here.”

“No. No, I thought you were from your web history.” He glanced at Andy. “The last hunters I know of died out a few years ago.”

“Good. Good. Oh, your bo—”

Andy rolled his eyes. “It can wait. We have desserts and movies tonight.”

“Okay.” Puck glanced at Dustin over and over, like it was a nervous tic. “Come on. How’s your head?”

“Fine as long as Dustin is close enough to touch.”

“No shit?” Jules tilted his head. “Well, slumber party in the den it is!”

Oh, Jules was wicked. Dustin approved. “Come on, we’ll go down and be social animals.”

“At least there’s pie, right?” Andy winked at him. “And *Hotel Transylvania*.”

“That sounds great, honey. Lead the way.” At least this whole getting to know his mate wouldn’t be boring. Crazy-making, but not boring.

CHAPTER  
NINE

Andy woke up to the scent of bacon, and he frowned. He wasn't in bed, and he was warm—almost too warm. He looked up, smiling at the welcome sight of Dustin, sound asleep, lashes hiding those intense emerald eyes.

He slid out from the sectional, stepping over Puck and Jules without thinking, heading into the kitchen where Mama was cooking breakfast. “Morning. You don't have to cook for us, you know.”

Jules was one hell of a cook.

“I wanted to. Your mom's out in town.”

He blinked. “Mom? She never mentioned she was going anywhere? What happened? Is she okay?” Had something gone wrong? What if she felt like she had to go do damage control for his actions. Worry slammed into him.

“Stop it.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “She's fine. She wanted to do a big shop before the snows come.”

“Oh.” His shoulders slumped with relief. “Oh good. I mean, I'm just surprised she was willing to—”

“Leave us with your fella?” Mama snorted. “She likes him. And he gave us his vow as a dragon to keep you safe.”

“I—Yes, he did. And I believe him.”

“So do I, oddly enough.” Mama winked, then moved to flip bacon.

“Okay. So I'm not in trouble?”

“No. Did you do something wrong?”

He didn't think so. “No?”

“Well, then, no.” She laughed. “You're so sheltered sometimes. I forget how you've been tucked away up here in the hills most of your life. I was very worried, but mainly because you sent that SOS and then didn't call or write back to tell us you were okay.” She moved one set of bacon strips to paper towels to drain.

“I was... I was just caught in him, you know?” He started the coffee pot.

“I do. I've been there, my boy.”

“Andy? Are you okay?”

He looked at Dustin, who had just walked into the kitchen, his dark hair ruffled, his clothes wrinkled, and Andy's heart melted. Oh, he was so very beautiful that it wasn't fair.

“Uh... Uh-huh.”

“I heard you, I thought. Worried about your mom?”

“She's fine. Shopping. That's all. Coffee? Do you drink coffee?” *You're beautiful.*

*Thank you.* “And I do drink coffee.” Dustin touched his wrist. “Is there anything I can do, Mrs. Cuelebre?”

“Call me Angie. Do you cook?”

“I do. Our dads taught us how to in case we were alone at some point. It's been handy.”

“Who's we?” Andy asked.

“My brother.” Dustin chuckled. “He never took to it the way I did. He can burn water boiling it. But I love it.”

“Ah. Where is he?” Mama handed him some eggs. “Scrambled, please.”

“Right now? Somewhere in Eastern Europe, helping relocate a family of young dragons who got stuck in Ukraine.” Dustin grabbed a bowl out of the clean dish drainer to start cracking eggs. “Soft curds? Scrambled hard?”

“Scrambled hard, please. Andy, butter bread for the toast?”

“Yes, ma’am.” That he could totally do. He wasn’t the best cook, but he could follow instructions.

Puck came in, yawning so hugely he looked like a cartoon character. “Is there coffee?”

“It should be finishing up now. Can you pour everyone some? And don’t try to poison Dustin.” He was only half teasing.

“That would be Jules’s job.” Puck pulled down cups. “Morning, Mama. You’re making breakfast.”

“We all are. It’s a joint effort.”

Puck peered at the egg pan. “Hard scrambled, yes?”

“Yes.” Dustin nodded. “Morning.”

“Morning. I don’t want to fight today, so we’re going to have to get along. Fighting makes me weird.”

“I don’t intend to fight at all. In fact, I want to get to know everyone.”

*Oh, thank you. He’s nervous.*

*I can tell, love. He’s such a sweet soul, I can tell.* Dustin expertly stirred eggs, keeping them from getting brown while very much getting them done. They looked delish. Like his mama’s bacon.

“Toast, son.” His mama waved a fork at him.

“Right. Sorry.”

“How do you take your coffee, Dustin?” Puck asked politely.

“Sweet. I have a terrible sweet tooth.”

“We have sugar cubes. They’re so much more fun than just spoonsful.” Puck almost—almost—smiled at Dustin. “Two lumps? Three?”

“Three. I like your style, guys. Sugar cubes. I haven’t had those since I was a kid.”

“I insist. They’re so much better than the sugar from the bowl.” Mama put the rest of the bacon in the pan. “More eggs. I’ll keep those warm over here.”

Dustin handed them over, and like a machine, they all made food until Jules wandered in. “Wow. I slept hard, I guess.”

*That’s because he knows I’m really no danger,* Dustin told him.

*Or because he stayed up all night plotting your demise.* “Coffee?”

“Please. Where’s Mom?”

“Shopping.” He and Mama spoke together.

“Oh, man, she abandoned us?”

Mama snorted, which she was doing a lot this morning. “She knew we had an alpha male dragon with us. She felt safe leaving.”

“What if he brings trouble down on us?”

“He won’t!” Andy jumped to Dustin’s defense.

“How do you know? You’re thinking with your cock.”

“Julius!” Mama stared at him, and everyone stilled, then she started to chuckle, the sound merry and light.

“He might be at that.” Dustin sipped his coffee after turning off the egg pan. “I might be too. But I’m not one to let anything come between me and my job. Your brother is— Well, I think we need to explore what we are, but if there was some kind of emergency, I would put my life on the line to protect you all.” The words rang with truth, and a sparkle of magic curled in the air like liquid gold.

Mama smiled and nodded, like she was satisfied. “Good. Good man. I like to hear those words.”

So did he. In fact, that made Andy incredibly happy.

And a little heated.



He drifted toward Dustin, and Puck stepped in front of him. “Here! Here’s a plate for you, Andy.” He thrust an empty plate at Andy.

“Ow.” Andy rubbed his chest. “Thanks, bud.”

“Anytime. Bacon. Yum.”

*What are you doing?*

*Protecting you from doing something stupid.* Puck stared at him, wagging his eyebrows like he was telegraphing space.

*I am not doing anything stupid! You heard him! He’ll help protect us! And he knows a ton of dragon lore. We need him.* Andy generally didn’t spend a lot of time having to explain himself to his family, so to be the focus of their scrutiny was weird.

*We’ve been doing just fine.*

*Sure, because just fine was how he found us.*

*Boys. Enough. Please. Eat your breakfast.* Mama didn’t seem like she was still amused. *Now.*

“Yes, ma’am,” they all said, in unison.

They all filled a plate, and Mason the big bear dog came to sit and beg, having been polite while they were cooking and guarding the patio doors.

“Hey, buddy.” Dustin looked at Mama. “Does he like bacon, and is he allowed?”

“He loves bacon, and he has been here since Jules was born. Right, sweet baby?”

Mason yawned and lifted a paw to Dustin to shake.

Dustin shook, then offered Mason a bite of bacon. “Well done, Mason.”

The more Andy knew about Dustin, the more he liked him.

“So did you all grow up here?” Dustin asked, and Mama nodded.

“Titania and I have been here a very long time. We love this part of the country. It’s soaked in magic. What about you?”

Where's home?"

"I haven't had a real home base in a long time, but my dads were settled in the mountains in the Pacific Northwest." Dustin grinned. "We were pretty isolated, so people just thought we were preppers, I think they call it now."

"Oh, absolutely not the desert. How different for you!" Jules sounded gleeful, and Puck glared.

"You can't take him with you. Sorry."

"Hmmm?" Dustin actually frowned. "Where would I take him?"

"Out doing...mercenary stuff." Puck flapped a hand.

Dustin's expression cleared. "Of course not. That's not his strong suit. He's got a head for tech, though. I think you all might."

"We do. We can mess your world up without breaking a sweat." Puck nodded and smiled. "It's a talent."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Well, yes, but one assumes you won't do that because you love your brother."

That gave both Puck and Jules pause, and Andy could see it.

*I love you both, too, you know. So much.*

Jules nodded once, and Puck took his hand and squeezed.

"Yeah. Who sent you? Seriously." Jules shook his head. "Is he one of us? Do you know him well?"

"I do. I've known him a long time. And he's a dragon. He's all about saving dragons from bad circumstances. Keeping us all safe." Dustin chewed his lip. "He saved me and my brother from a tough spot. I would trust him with my life."

"Yes, but do you trust him with Andy's?" Mama asked, and that question sounded way more serious than he liked.

"I do." Dustin nodded and said it immediately, then crunched into bacon. "I called him to tell him you weren't hunters, but that's all he knows now. I wanted to talk to all of

you first. His instructions were to find you and make sure you had a good situation. He was worried that I was able to sniff you out.”

Mama nodded. “Yes, the boys need to tighten security on the electronic end. You and Titania can discuss the physical. I’ll work on the magical with Jules.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dustin touched his leg under the table, and it warmed him. Andy felt like he was in one of those Christmas snow globes with the whole world swirling around him. Nothing would stay still long enough for him to figure it out. But his mama was solid as a rock, his mom was fierce, and he and his brothers were wicked smart.

Somehow he’d figure this out, right?

This was normal?

*You’re so much more amazing than normal, Andy.*

Goddess, Dustin made him blush. He’d always been the least interesting one in his family. The one who had lots of connections online but that no one swooned over in person.

And Dustin had chosen him. Him.

He still couldn’t believe it.

*Your brothers are adorable. You touched my soul the moment we met.*

Tears stung Andy’s eyes. *That’s so sweet. Thank you.*

“More eggs?” Jules plopped more food on his plate, making him jump.

“I—okay?”

“You seem peaked. Maybe nauseated. Either way. Eggs.”

He was going to hurt someone if his brothers didn’t stop poking and let him breathe. He knew, *knew*, they weren’t jealous or anything. They were genuinely worried about him. But he wanted his time with Dustin. He needed it.

“So, what’s on the agenda today?” Jules asked. “More auctions?”

“You two are going to let Dustin and Andy spend time together,” Mama snapped.

“Oh, so we get a day off to watch more movies and laze around?” Puck asked. “We can all lounge together.”

“Mom is bringing food, but I need you to let them bond. Seriously. It is important, and I will bite you if you don’t let them hang out together.”

Like that was going to happen.

Andy gave Dustin a desperate look. Maybe he should just go hide in his room... His head throbbed at the very idea.

*It’s okay, love. I don’t mind them being around if we can touch each other. Movies are a good idea. You can lean on me, and we can just learn each other’s breathing. Our heartbeats.* Dustin was being very kind about his brothers.

He wanted to murder them.

Puck gave him a pleading look.

“Okay, but Dustin and I get to sit together.”

“You can even sit on his lap. Jules can make popcorn.” Puck was so easy. He was the good-natured one. The one who couldn’t stop his sunny disposition for long. Jules was the shadow dragon. He could hold a grudge for days.

And he was just... Andy.

Dustin chuckled. “All about the food.”

Mama shook her head. “You have no idea. Okay, you can do the dishes, boys.” She picked up her cup of coffee, and Mason rose when she did. “I am going to go sit in the sun in the back courtyard. No fighting, do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Even Dustin chimed in on that one.

He was fitting in so well.

Now if Andy could just convince his brothers of that, he’d be doing great.

## CHAPTER TEN

Andy was avoiding him.

Dustin sat in one of the many sunny courtyards in this huge maze of a house and typed out emails to his brother and to the boss, catching up on some pesky admin work. Every job had a paper trail, after all.

But he was...itchy. Irritable.

Every time he tried to touch Andy in more than an incidental sort of way, one of the brothers popped up to interrupt. Like this morning. He'd grabbed Andy for a kiss in the hallway, and Jules had breezed up on them like someone in one of those old farce movies where people popped in and out of rooms with no rhyme or reason.

And Andy had just shut down. And now he was buried in his computer room, where Dustin felt like he had no place.

Headphones on, music blazing, head filled with noise and numbers and words—Andy was untouchable up in his little world, totally unreachable.

Dustin had no idea what to do. The brothers sat in there with him, fingers flying on keyboards and track pads, and he—was useless as tits on a boar hog, as his pops used to say.

He gave up on trying to email his brother. He picked up his phone to call instead. Surely Austin was done with his assignment by now, unless things went really pear-shaped.

“Yo, bro! How goes it?” Austin sounded like he was laughing, and he could hear water running.

“Weird. How did the rescue go?” Did he even want to know what was going on?

“Easy-peasy. They’re in the Alps. Digging in for the winter. You?”

“Been a strange couple of days, bro.” He pushed his laptop away and kicked back in his chair, enjoying the sunshine. The big patio doors were open, and the air coming in felt crisp, but the sun was like a drug, making him sleepy. “You got a minute or two?”

“I am fishing, believe it or not. I got all the time in the world.”

“Wow. Fishing.” Goddess, how long had it been since he’d done that, especially with his brother. “So I was on assignment.”

“The hunter thing, right? Southwest US?”

“That’s the one. Not hunters. Not even close. And one of them... I think I might be mating.”

There was a moment of silence. “Mating? Like *mating-mating*? Are you serious? Who is he?”

“A very young dragon named Andy. He’s—He’s amazing. I’ve never met anyone who made me want to protect him like he does. Never met anyone I wanted so much either.”

“Andy, huh? So, tell me everything else. I want to know about him.”

“I wish I knew more. He’s a hacker type. Has moms and two brothers. Big old adobe in Santa Fe.” He tilted his head to the side to watch the birds outside.

“So parents still? Seriously? Wow. I’ve never seen that. These guys, how young are they?”

“I think human aged.” He could be wrong about that. Titania and Angelica had been around longer, but the boys seemed less...ageless. More grounded in the now. “I haven’t come out and asked.”

“Wow. Wow, how fascinating is that? When can I meet him?”

“Soon. I need to—” He lowered his voice, checking behind him. “His brothers are cock-blocking me, Austin. I might explode. My balls are so blue I look like the gum girl in the chocolate factory movie.”

“Dude. Take him to—are they putting you up? I mean, do you have a bedroom?”

“I’ve been sleeping in the den. With everyone. It’s like scout camp.” He was so damn frustrated he wanted to scream. “And now he’s hiding from me.”

“So go get him. You know he’s just as nuts. Can you do the mind-meld thing like we can? I mean with him?”

“Yeah, why?”

“DUDE!” Austin’s shock was audible, and a little mortifying. “Go and think dirty thoughts at him. Seduce him. He’ll figure out how to lock his bedroom door.”

“You think it will work? I mean, it’s worth a try, but if we’re knotted and his brothers burst in, I might hurt them, and I promised not to.”

“Bro, that needs to be on him. To make his brothers butt out. They’re his family. Would you expect him to deal with me right after we got introduced?”

“Goddess no. I would kick your ass.”

“Well then...” He could almost see Austin’s arched eyebrow, the way his eyes twinkled.

“Yeah. Yeah, I get you. So how long are you fishing? And where?” He wanted Austin to be safe.

“I’m up at Slide Lake. I’ll be reachable, always. When it’s time, call for me?”

“I will. The boss said for me to hang out here, so I should have a while. I’ll holler. Love you.”

“You too. Later.”

“Bye.”

They never hung up without telling each other I love you. Their work was too dangerous. They never knew what might happen.

Dustin propped up his feet and contemplated his socked toes. Then he put his brother out of his mind and focused on Andy. It was time to start the seduction.

Now.



A soft tickle buzzed at the base of Andy’s brain.

*I want you, mate.*

His toes curled and he fought his moan with all he had.

*Stop it. Be nice.*

A tiny chuckle sounded in his head, and it felt like a caress. *I am being nice. Very nice, love. I want you. I’m getting tired of waiting.* That mental voice was a purr, deep and rich and all Dustin.

Andy felt bad. He knew it had to be driving Dustin nuts for them to be even ten or fifteen feet apart like they were. It sure was making Andy itchy and irritable and like his skin was too tight. But Puck and Jules were...relentless. They kept pushing in between him and Dustin any time something good started to happen.

*Where are they now?*

*Huh?* He didn’t care. He just wanted to go and touch, go drag his fingers over Dustin’s body and learn every inch. It was maddening.

*Andy. Focus. Where are your brothers now?*

*Um. Puck is in the kitchen, and Jules ran down to take Mama and Mom some soup he made.*

*So can you escape to your room?*



*No. Puck is bringing me food.*

*Mmm. Too bad. I want to strip you down and touch you all over. I want to kiss and lick you.*

He glanced at the door, making sure Puck wasn't coming. Because he really needed to push the heel of his hand against his cock, which was hard as a rock.

*Uh-huh. No touching, sweet one. That's mine. You're mine.*

*What? No fair.*

*No one gets to touch it until I have. And I haven't.* He thought Dustin sounded wistful.

*I want you to.* He was aching and wet and needing and miserable.

*I know. We need to make a stand. Because I just told my brother about you. He wants to meet you. I've never even thought of introducing him to someone before.*

*He wants to meet me?* Andy grinned. Someone wanted him, wanted to meet him. *I want to meet him too.*

*He does. He's fishing up near Leadville. He could be here in no time.*

*Okay. I want you. I want to be with you, skin on skin.*

Puck walked through the door. "I brought you soup."

"Th-thanks, Puck. What kind is it?" His hands shook when he reached for the bowl.

"Oh, brother, what's wrong?"

"I—I need him. I need to touch him, and I don't want to make y'all mad."

Puck sat down, staring at him from just a few feet away. "It's making you sick? Not to be with him?"

"Mama says it's normal. It's a biological call, you know?"  
*Please, brother. Please understand.*

"Oh." Puck chewed his lower lip. "Oh, Andy. That stinks. I mean, I knew you were anxious, but I thought you—I didn't know it was making you hurt."

“Just...let us have tonight? We’ll be down to breakfast?”  
*Please let this work.*

“I’ll head Jules off when he gets back. I’m sorry, brother. I am. I didn’t know. And if he’s hurting like you, well... He’s been very nice.”

“He is. He’s very nice. He has a twin brother, did you know?”

“No. I didn’t know he had a twin. He said something about a brother.” Puck nodded at his soup. “Go on. I’ll bring you another bowl for him and then you can lock your bedroom door.”

*You’re not angry? Please don’t be angry.*

*I’m not angry at all.* Puck bent to kiss his cheek. *I worry. But I’ll be fine.* He headed off toward the kitchen again.

Oh. Puck was the best brother. He made a mental note to get Puck that new tablet he wanted.

Tech equaled love, after all.

When the second bowl of soup was there, he tried to think of what would be a good thing to say to Dustin that wasn’t too perverse.

*Andy? Where did you go?* Dustin’s gentle poke was all the impetus he needed.

*I have soup for you. Here. In my room.*

*I’ll be right there.*

So Andy sat and waited, hoping no one headed Dustin off at the pass. And when the door opened, it was Dustin. Who slipped in and locked the door behind him.

“Alone at last.”

He nodded and smiled. “There’s soup.”

“I like soup.” Dustin came to sit across from the bed.

“I do too.” His body ached with needing.

“We can eat after, right? Sneak down and heat up the soup?” Dustin reached for him, and he was lost, so he grabbed

Dustin. Hard. He pushed against Dustin, his lips parted as he dragged up along his mate.

Dustin moaned, pulling him flush against that hard body, hands sliding down to grab his ass so they could press together. The kiss went white-hot, Dustin invading him, making him feel every tiny bit of where they rubbed and slid.

He blinked down, expecting to see flames.

“Mmm. I know.” That little laugh made him feel like he was in on a joke, not as if he was being laughed at.

“You feel it too.” He tugged Dustin over to the bed. His bed.

“I do. I’ve never felt anything like it.” Dustin kissed him again, pressing him down.

“Never.” He agreed wholeheartedly, rising up to take one kiss after another.

Dustin pushed a leg between his, giving him something to press against, and the friction made him clench up in an effort to control the next wild rush of need that hit him. This was... beyond hot. This was nuclear.

He bit his lip to hold in the wild cry that wanted out, and he shook with the near unbearable need that crashed over him in waves.

“So sweet. Oh, Andy. You’re perfect.” Dustin’s voice was filled with awe. That alone threatened to make him fly. This stunning dragon-man thought *he* was amazing. Him. Dustin touched him as if he were precious.

And he was just the middle one, the plain one. The one that worked on the tech.

“You’re mine. That’s what matters. I don’t want them. I want you.” Dustin pressed against his belly, and he felt just how much he was desired.

“Yes. I want you. You’re the most beautiful dragon I’ve ever seen.” And that was no lie.

“Good.” Not exactly humble, his Dustin. But when Dustin reared up to take his shirt off, Andy had to admit he had no reason to be. That was a work of art, that chest and belly.

He groaned, his hands mapping Dustin’s body, roaming over the ridges of hard muscles. His mouth watered, and fog began to fill the air.

“Look at that.” Dustin laughed out loud, the sound full of wild joy. “My talented sweet one.”

“I can’t help it. It leaks when I’m excited.” And he was, wickedly so, excited and happy.

“I don’t want you to stop.” Dustin kissed him hard enough to make his lips sting, then began working on his clothes, pulling and tugging until he was bare.

“I don’t want you to stop, either.”

“I won’t. I promise. Not even if elephants break down the door.”

Such a good promise. Jules could be the elephant in the room, and he’d made no promises like Puck had.

“No. No brothers. Not here. Not now. Pay attention, sweet one.”

Oh, Dustin made him blush. “Yes. Yes, paying attention.”

“Good. Look at me.” Dustin smiled, then kissed him hard, deep, really letting him feel it. He moaned, wrapping his arms around Dustin’s neck. He felt daring, his skin rubbing along Dustin’s, at least above the waist.

His nipples were hard as rocks, and every touch made him shiver. He wanted to push closer and move away, all at the same time.

“No running away from me, love.” Dustin knelt up to push his pants down, and then the urge to put some distance between them faded completely. Andy stared at Dustin’s cock, utterly fascinated, his breath coming hard in his chest. Dustin was...beautiful. All of him. And that hard length of cock was stunning. This was what an alpha dragon looked like, and Andy couldn’t look away.

And he couldn't help but think those ones he'd seen in online porn had been fake.

This was perfection.

*They only wish. We're way more impressive.* His laughter inside his head was the most delicious thing, like they were sharing the joke on a cellular level.

*I know. Oh, goddess.* He put his hands around Dustin's cock and squeezed gently, then measured it from base to tip and back again.

Dustin moaned, hips rolling, pressing up into his touches.

"I want to... Can I put my mouth on you?" Andy asked.

"Yes. Anywhere you want, love. Any part of me."

"Okay." More mist flowed around them, cocooning them in a very private wonderland. He moved up to kiss Dustin on the mouth, then trailed his lips down over that strong neck to one shoulder, nibbling a little on the way.

"Tease." Dustin sank a hand into his hair.

"No. Curious." He wouldn't deny Dustin anything at all. "I swear."

"I want you to be. I'm just the one teasing, love. I'm not worried. I know we'll both get what we need." Dustin massaged his scalp, then his neck, relaxing him. He could feel the vibe coming from Dustin, and it was one of utter care and joy. There was no worry there. How could he be all tense with that energy?

He couldn't, so he moved down to press his lips to Dustin's chest, then lap at one tiny nipple, which had drawn up hard and tight for him in seconds.

It was so easy to suck gently, at least until it had Dustin humping up against him, reminding him that needy cock waited for him. That had him sliding down to taste there.

He licked, letting the flavor of Dustin's skin sear through him. So hot, much hotter than Dustin's chest or belly. And the hardness that lay under the silky flesh was so amazing, and

pulsing with life. Dustin petted his head and shoulders but didn't push him, letting him discover things at his own pace. When he pointed his tongue and pushed it against Dustin's slit, he got a rush of moisture, and the salty bitterness was so perfect he had to moan and close his eyes to savor it.

He groaned deep in his chest, and when he reached down to cup the heavy sac, Dustin cried out for him.

"Andy!" Dustin lifted his chin with one hand. "Look at me, love. Not too much more of that. I want to be inside you, not coming in your mouth."

"I'll be more careful." He smiled faintly, then went back to letting his lips and tongue drag over every inch of Dustin's need. The scent here was strong and musky, and Andy buried his nose against the base for a long moment, breathing deep.

"Stubborn Andy," Dustin said on a laugh. "You think your brothers are the mulish ones, but you're just as bad. I can tell you get it from both your mothers. Formidable. All of you."

"Formidable. I like that." He kissed his way up Dustin's belly. "You're addictive."

"I hope so. I don't want you to ever get tired of me." Dustin slid his hand down Andy's back to pull him up for their mouths to meet again, one finger sliding along his crease. He shivered at the feel of it. He knew how much pleasure that touch could give; he had toys. But he'd never felt like this. Like he was wet and ready and already open. No, he'd wanted and dreamed, but the reality was so much better.

*It's going to get better still, I swear.*

He believed it, and he begged for more, body and soul.

Dustin laughed, a puff of air that made him shiver, and kissed him, making the tip of his tongue a little numb. How fascinating was that? Andy touched it to the roof of his mouth, mist coming out of his nose, and his eyes crossed.

"Just remember that I can't hurt you, love. No matter what."

“Okay.” He stroked Dustin’s cheek, wondering about the worry he saw in Dustin’s eyes, which were glowing right now. So pretty.

He could stare into those emerald green eyes all day and night.

“You are mine. You won’t hurt me. I know.” And he was lost, utterly.

“Never.” Dustin rested their foreheads together. “But I can be a little scary. Not like this, but I’ll warn you. I don’t want you to find out later on and be mad.”

This seemed like an odd conversation when Dustin was stroking a finger over his hole, then pressing gently inside him, but hey, who was he to judge?

“So tell me.” He didn’t care. “You don’t eat babies, do you? Or dogs?”

He might care about that.

“No. No, love. It’s my talent.” Okay, he’d not as yet seen Dustin be anything but extremely confident. “I spit poison. It’s my talent. Like yours with the mist.”

He blinked rapidly. “Like... Cyanide.”

“Kind of more like snake venom. But it can’t hurt you.”

“Oh. Neat. That’s...handy.” And the little tongue-tingle was hot as hell.

“Yeah?” Dustin hugged him hard to his chest, letting him know how pleased he was.

“Mmmhmm.” He stroked the back of Dustin’s neck. “I’m not worried, and you can tell me all about it later. Right now, I need you.” He tried to climb up Dustin’s body.

“You have all of me.” Dustin lifted him up, spreading his ass cheeks wide, making him feel totally exposed.

“All of you. Please.” He’d never done this before, but that was okay. He could handle it. He’d imagined a lot.

“Let me get you open, sweet. You’re wet enough, but the stretch will be intense.”

“Promise?” Andy wiggled back against Dustin’s touch. He wanted every sensation. There would never be another first time between them no matter how good it got.

“I do.” Dustin sank two fingers into him, pressing him open inexorably, making him pant and shake. Yes. That was a burn but such a pleasurable one.

He leaned down, hiding his face in Dustin’s throat as he felt those fingers press deeper, spreading him wider.

“Okay?” When he nodded madly, Dustin moved on, working him with three fingers until he felt ready. Then Dustin raised him up, lying back. “It will be easier for you this way to begin with. You take what you can. You control it.” The broad head of that searing hot cock prodded at his hole.

“Uh. Uh-huh.” His eyes went wide, and he stared at Dustin. “You’re big.”

“You make me very inspired. I can feel my knot swelling already.”

“You can?” He tried to look down, but he couldn’t get his chin any farther than his chest. “I mean, I’ve seen models.”

Dustin hooted. “You have? Were they terrifying?”

“Intriguing. We’re meant to fit together, aren’t we?” He hadn’t expected so much talking during sex. It was fascinating.

“We are. You’re going to be perfect.” Dustin pulled him down then, and he caught his breath, his cock jerking, his muscles clenching and relaxing as he tried to make room inside him.

“Oh! I feel you. I mean, your knot.” No one in the porn business actually seemed to know where a dragon’s knot might be. It made sense that it was just where it was.

“Good.” Dustin’s voice was going...guttural.

“Uh-huh. Good. So—” He rocked back up and sat down a little harder, taking Dustin a little deeper.



“Yes.” Dustin hissed, a little curl of what looked like purple smoke escaping his mouth. Was that like...poisonous fumes? Would it hurt someone who wasn't him?

*No. No, I can only hurt someone if I hit them with a direct stream of poison. Like that dinosaur.* Those green eyes sparkled at him, Dustin inviting him to laugh. This was so much more fun than all the novels he read where sex was just grunting and groaning and slapping.

*I love those movies!* He rubbed their noses together, stealing a hard kiss.

*We'll watch them with your brothers later.* Dustin put one hand behind his head, keeping him there, and then rolled with him so Andy was on the bottom. He thought the kid gloves were off, and he was right, because Dustin began to drive into him, taking him hard and deep.

He spread his legs wide, offering up everything he had.

Dustin moved them hard enough that the bed shuddered, and he raised his hands and grabbed the headboard, bracing himself. “More.”

“Anything you need, sweet.” Dustin gave him more, gave him hard thrusts and little kisses that made his lips sting and his tongue go numb again, but as soon as he blew out mist, that dissipated. It was utterly fascinating.

And that knot. It swelled in him until they were wedged together, until he could barely breathe from how deep and good Dustin felt.

Dustin was so deep that Andy never thought he'd be the same, not ever again.

They rocked together, the friction making him groan, and his balls pulled up until he was sure it would take nothing to send him over the edge. Nothing at all. And he was right. All Dustin had to do was nip at his lower lip.

He shot so hard his bones rattled, and white noise filled his head.

Dustin shouted, and wet heat filled him until Andy didn't think he could hold any more.

When the noise in his head eased, it became his name, chanted, over and over again, so steady and strong.

*My perfect mate.* The words echoed in his head, and he did feel perfect. Wonderful. Amazing.

And not itchy.

*Not even a little,* Dustin agreed, a wealth of satisfaction in the words.

*Still not unlocking the door until morning.*

*Not even to warm up the soup?* Dustin asked.

*I have a microwave up here.*

Dustin's pleased laugh shook him in all the right places. *Excellent. Then we can wait and watch movies tomorrow.*

*Uh-huh.* Andy patted Dustin's chest, and it wasn't long before he slipped into a deep, nourishing sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dustin rolled up his sleeves, his phone open to a recipe, the early-morning sun streaming in the windows over the kitchen sink.

He knew Andy's brothers had to be worried, so he wanted to make cinnamon rolls from scratch to make up for it. He'd found all the stuff he needed to make them, and some bacon, so he was off and running.

He heard the softest little sound and looked up to see Puck standing there wide-eyed, staring at him.

"Hey, Puck. The coffee is making. I'm told I do a righteous cup. Do you like cinnamon rolls?" He knew Puck and Jules both liked bacon.

"Uh-huh. Hey." Puck stayed at the door. "I like them, yes. Is...is Andy okay?"

"He is. Sound asleep. Thank you for letting him escape for a bit. It did us both a world of good."

"It did?" Puck's eyebrows rose, then went back down. "He said he was hurting. Jules is a little, um, mad at me."

"Jules wouldn't want Andy to be hurting, right?" He measured out flour. "He didn't see how bad it was. You did." He thought that was worth pointing out. Puck seemed to need some confidence.

"I don't want him to hurt. That's sad, you know? No one wants to be sad or hurt." Puck almost smiled. "Jules yelled a

little, then Mama yelled, then Mom yelled, so I went to bed before supper...”

“Oh, no way. You need something then. Do you want some cinnamon toast? Just to tide you over?”

The smile actually did show up then. “You’d do that?”

“You made soup. Which was delish, by the way.”

“Well, it was frozen. I just chopped up cheese and avocado and stuff to go in.”

“Still, thank you.”

It felt like a huge victory when Puck took another step into the room. Gigantic.

“Have you made these before?” Puck asked, nose working as he mixed up cinnamon and sugar for the toast.

“I have. Not this recipe, but it’s pretty close.” He had to let the rolls rise before baking, so he had time to chat. “Can you warm my coffee up when you pour one? My hands are gross.”

“I can, yes.” That got Puck all the way into the kitchen this time, warming his coffee before pouring a fresh one.

“Thank you.” He gave Puck a smile. “So, why did the moms yell at you?” They had seemed...reluctantly on board.

“Mama yelled at Jules. Then Mom yelled because Mama cried. Then Jules yelled at Mom. Then Mama blew ice all over the floor and it was over.”

“Oh, wow.” He was kind glad he and Andy had missed that. “Well, I’m sorry I’m causing so much trouble, but I can’t help it, exactly.” And nothing would make him give Andy up now. Nothing.

“That’s what Mama said. It’s natural. Right. And it helps Andy and you be whole.”

“It does.” He got the toast into the toaster oven, then grabbed his coffee. “And I’m not a bad guy, I promise.”

“We aren’t either. We love him, and we want him to be happy.” Puck sighed softly. “Are you going to take him away

from us?”

“No.” The answer popped right out, and he put that aside to examine later, but he couldn’t see Andy haring off somewhere else.

“Well, then. Welcome to the family.” Puck actually smiled this time.

“Thank you, Puck. That means a lot.” Dustin paused. “Now, your brother might not be as gentle.”

Puck scoffed. “He loves cinnamon rolls.”

“Well, that’s one in my favor then.” Assuming they came out right.

“Yes.” Puck sat on one of the barstools. “It snows where you come from.”

It wasn’t a question.

“It does. I’m from the mountains in the Pacific Northwest. The high reaches.” He was used to cold air. Santa Fe had the most amazing light though. There was something about it.

“There will be snow here too. We like to ski and snowmobile.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Though Andy says he doesn’t leave the computer much.”

“No. No, he falls into rabbit holes and stays for weeks. Sometimes, he’ll be on for days at a time.” Puck chewed on his lip. “It’s a little scary.”

“But you like to delve into the web, too, don’t you?”

“Not like Andy. He needs an anchor.”

“What do you mean?” He handed Puck the toast.

“He means that Andy is an addictive personality and sometimes we just turn off the router.” Jules walked right up to the coffeemaker.

Dustin tilted his head. “I’ll keep that in mind. I like that.”

“Yeah. I mean, he should focus some of that energy on you now.” Jules gave him a wry look. “Since we won’t get rid of

you easily.”

“Nah. I plan to stick around. Puck says you like cinnamon rolls. It will be an hour or so. Want some cinnamon toast like I made Puck?”

“No, thanks. I’ll wait for the good stuff.”

“There will be bacon too.” He felt like he was making progress. Not that it would be this easy. This was a close-knit family with a routine. They would resent him poking his nose in, he would bet.

“Cool. Where’s Andy? Still asleep?”

“Yes. He was worn out. He worried himself into it as much as anything.” Dustin didn’t make it accusatory, just matter-of-fact.

“I hear that. You’ve thrown a wrench in our carefully ordered lives.” Jules almost sounded like he was joking.

“I guess I have. And Andy has derailed me completely. I’m going to have to explain to my boss that I have a family to protect now.” Dustin knew he couldn’t be running off willy-nilly. No way. These guys would be like sitting ducks. Once someone paid attention, it was like the universe was pointing a finger and everyone else saw the signal.

“Mom and I do a good job, but if you’re here, you’re here, right? Coming and going is weird.”

“Yeah. And that way there’s just another layer of security.” He’d seen more than Jules had ever imagined. The moms maybe had been around, but they’d chosen to raise their kids as passing for human, which was all good and well. Until you factored in that a major event was coming. All the signs pointed to it.

The toaster oven beeped, so he handed Puck his toast.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, no one has tried to kill you, right?” Andy came in, robe trailing over T-shirt and shorts, yawning.

“Me? Today?” he teased, and Andy growled.

“Not funny.”

“Sorry. No. No one has even growled.” He winked, reaching out to his lover. “I’m making cinnamon rolls to serve the savage dragons.”

“It goes a long way.” Puck poured another cup of coffee, then added cream and sugar before handing it to Andy. Cinnamon crumbs were an added bonus.

“Thank you, brother.” Andy yawned wide. “Cinnamon rolls? Really? Yum.”

Then he got a quick, chaste kiss. *I can feel you inside me.*

Dustin’s cheeks heated, which was unusual for him. Not something he expected. *Good. I want you to. You’re my mate, sweet.*

Jules gave them a suspicious squint. “Are you mind-melding like the moms do?”

“Yeah. I mean, we can too,” Andy said. *But this is different. This is deeper.*

*You know it, mate.* He couldn’t help but smile at Andy. *I love your voice inside me.*

*Same here, love.* Dustin glanced at Jules. “Trust me when I say we’re not excluding you or laughing at anyone. But if you’re like my brother, you would make gagging noises and stuff every time we said something nice to each other.” Dustin rolled the dough around butter and cinnamon and nuts and more, interested to see how it came out.

Puck laughed out loud. “He really does have a brother.”

“A twin. He’s an ass, and I would die for him, but he doesn’t want to hear about me macking on my mate, for sure.”

“No one wants to hear that,” Jules drawled. “Do you need help?”

“These just need to rise. Does anyone want juice?”

“Fresh?” Puck perked up. “We have oranges.”

“Puck, you did not just ask him to make us juice,” Andy protested.

“I got this, sweet. I love shit like this. Really.” He never got to be with—with family. He and Austin were rarely in the same place.

“So does Jules. He’s super good at it.” Puck grinned. “I’m super good at talking to people.”

“What else is Jules good at?” Dustin grabbed three oranges, juggling them before tossing them one by one at Jules.

Jules raised an eyebrow but pulled out a cutting board and knife to slice each one in half. “Keeping the moms placated. Running errands and interference. Being the voice of reason when I’m not freaking out.”

“Slashing tires. He’s super good at that part.” Oh. A laugh. He’d gotten a laugh from Puck.

“Well, I saw that in person,” Dustin said.

“You’re lucky.” Jules’s voice was dry as dust. “I usually don’t work in public.”

“Hey, I’ll take it. It was a good show.” He winked at Andy, who chuckled, and even Jules snorted out a little laugh.

They progressed.

“Well, if it will be an hour until breakfast...” Andy rose, drifting toward the back stairs that led to the big computer room.

“Nope.” Dustin reeled him in. “Come on, you hooligans. Juice in the sunroom. You all need some vitamin D.”

“Vitamin what?” Andy lifted his face for a kiss, and wasn’t that sweet?

He gave it, lingering a little. Enough to get an *awww* from Puck and an *eww* from Jules.

*Okay, this is fun...* Andy’s chuckle made him grin.



“Come on. Let’s all go sit.” They’d managed a creditable puppy pile before, and that was when everyone but Andy hated his guts. They could just rest and be warm. Did these guys ever get to be dragons?

*When we were little, before we started school.*

“You went to school?” That shocked the question out of his mouth.

“We did.” Jules chuckled. “It was mostly homeschool, but we did some stuff in remote schoolrooms. We didn’t manifest scales until we were teenagers.”

Puck nodded. “Makeup is a thing.”

“Wow.” He supposed they would call what he and Austin had done homeschooling now. He always thought of Anjelica Huston in that *Addams Family* movie saying private tutors...

“The moms wanted us as functional as possible in both worlds, you know?” Andy leaned against him. “They think—”

Jules glared at Andy.

*They think what, love?* Andy didn’t have to say it out loud.

*Something is coming. Something big.*

*My boss thinks so too. That’s one reason I came looking for you.*

*It’s scary, huh? I don’t want to lose you.*

*You won’t.* If they crossed the veil, they would go together. Mates always did. Now, what was on the other side, he had no idea.

“No chatting without us.” Puck poked Andy, who jumped. “Be nice. You have to share with us.”

Jules just grinned at him, expression wicked as hell.

“Yeah, yeah. Come on.” He set an alarm on the voice-activated speaker thing, then led them all to the sunroom. He sighed happily as the light beat down on him, warming him.

Together they drank juice and basked—all three brothers going loose-limbed and lazy. That’s what he thought. They

needed basking. They sat curled up in chairs too much, staring at screens. He had nothing against the web or video games, but this was the life.

He loved the way they chatted, just soft and easy, friendly. It was obvious that these boys spent their lives in each other's pocket.

Dustin dozed, really listening with his heart too. He needed to be able to hear them all at some point, just in case something happened. They were his family now. Just like Austin.

Andy rested against him, fingers splayed against his chest. There were waves of peace pouring from his mate. Dustin got it. His mate and his family. That had to be a good feeling.

And the sun was perfect, the room warm, little dust motes dancing in the sunbeams.

“Do you want me to check the rolls? See if they're proofed?” Jules rolled up before he could even answer.

“Thanks, Jules.” He knew the timer would go off soon, but who knew how long it would take? He was used to high altitudes, but the dry was not something he was familiar with.

“Sure, man.” He heard the oven door open, then close. “Should be good in thirty-five minutes.”

“Excellent. Joint effort.” He held out a fist to bump, and Jules did it. Okay. Okay, cool. His clever breakfast plan was working.

*You have a clever plan? Really? That sort of rocks.* He was going to pinch Andy.

*Well, it seemed clever at the time, but I was also hungry.* He chuckled, pulling Andy a little closer.

*I love the way I can feel you, deep inside me. Like a promise.*

*I love the way you hear me.*

Puck flopped over on his back, arm whapping Andy, and started snoring.

They both stopped to stare, then laughed together, just whooping.

“Dork,” Jules murmured.

“Yeah, but I can tell how much you care about him.”

Andy nodded. “He’s the best little brother. Seriously. The absolute best.”

Jules nodded. “True. He’s just so loving and open. And then there’s Andy, who’s so fast and wicked smart and giving.”

“And our big brother who keeps us safe. He’s fierce.” Andy’s pride in his oldest brother was clear as glass.

Dustin rumbled happily at how they cared for each other. “My brother can fix anything, and he’s fast. Really fast.”

“Yeah? Is he mechanical or electrical or what?” Jules’s head tilted. “I’m always looking for a mechanic to teach me.”

“He does all the things. He started out studying mechanical, of course. He didn’t have electrical when we were kids. But he caught onto that quickly. He can even replumb your sink.” Austin was so much more...useful than he was.

“What do you do?” Jules asked.

“Well, I guess I’m a finder. I can track down almost anything.”

“Like me?”

“Yes. Just like you.” He cupped Andy’s jaw. “You were the finest thing I’ve ever found.”

Jules gagged.

They all cracked up so hard at that and woke Puck up. He flailed, snorting. “Is it time for rolls yet?”

“Close enough I need to go start bacon.” He climbed to his feet after taking a kiss. “Be good, you lot.” He left them all relaxing, together, and he felt good about it. He and Andy were well on their way to fully bonded.

That worked perfectly well for him.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The book Andy had won was a wild mix of children's stories, old dragon language, and some sort of code that he'd never seen before.

He knew about the children's stories—they had been added in order to teach those that had been left without... education? He knew there had to have been ones like that, because once dragons had been plentiful, and then suddenly magic was gone.

Fairies. Dragons. Nymphs. Merfolk.

The code was...fascinating. Baffling. A little maddening. And he had to be careful doing his research online. He didn't want to attract anyone like Dustin's boss who might be less pro-dragon. So he spent half of his time protecting himself, and the rest of it moving in painfully careful steps.

Dustin had gone outside to do...some kind of martial arts training montage, and while that was lovely to watch, he needed to be in here working while Dustin wasn't watching over his shoulder.

It wasn't a trust thing; it was a focus thing.

Andy needed to sink into the wild white noise of puzzles and ciphers.

It took him almost two hours before he ran across a mention of a similar code, and that was from someone called reavermark56. Wait. Could that be the bookstore he'd been bidding against for the book? He didn't really believe in

coincidence, and that had been Marks and Reaver Antiquarian Books...

So he found himself a sock puppet—teethandclawsrus75—and pm'ed the guy. He eased in with a query.

<You like codes?>

The message came back pretty quick. <some of them>

<me 2. fav?> He wasn't sure how to make this work for him.

Dots appeared and disappeared. Then appeared again. He could tell he wasn't the only one trying to be cagey. <Cryptid languages>

<Dude. Like elves?> Or dragons. Dragons were cool. <Or yetis?>

<I've seen some fae stuff...>

<yeah? It's intense. All those vowels.>

<And those th thounds??>

He giggled madly. Exactly. Wow. Okay, cool. <th-th-thooaaththiueeeioieuth>

That was a joke. Jokes were cool, right?

<hahaha. do you have a line on anything cool? always looking for books>

Bingo. This had to be his rival for the book Puck had snatched away in the bidding. They seemed cool, whoever they were, but he still needed to be cagey.

<me 2. love reading. it's a passion, amirite?>

<Yes. old ones with cool sh\*t>

Oh, goddess. What did he say now? <I got a couple 1st editions? U?>

<I have a few, yeah.> A picture popped up of an eighteenth-century magical beasts history in a leather binding. Gorgeous. Smart. It was rare but not something someone might get sticky about.

<Nice illos. Is that a gryphon?>

<Looks like it yeah. There's some neat stuff on drgns too.>

Oh, good segue. He was about to type in a reply when he heard the door open behind him, and he could smell his mate, all sunshine and wind and musk.

<Dragons R cool. Love them>

“What are you up to, love?” Dustin asked, plopping down in Puck’s vacant chair to wheel over to him.

“Chatting with some guy that I think is another dragon book collector.”

“Oh?”

Uh-oh. He heard some disapproval in the way Dustin made that more than one syllable. Too bad. He was the tech guy. Not Dustin.

“Yep. I’m trying to see what he knows.”

“And you’re being careful.” It was a statement not a question, so at least he felt as though Dustin trusted him.

“I am. It’s hard, really, to know what to say and all.”

“Well, just don’t give in and say too much in order to get information. You’re a smart guy. Let them nibble.”

“Right. He showed me a scan of a Bestiary. Wanna see?”

“I do.” Dustin leaned over his shoulder, peering at the screen. The warmth was astonishing.

He pressed back into Dustin, clicking on the image. It was in Latin, but there were notations in old dragon... Whoa.

“Look at that. That’s not a human language.”

“No. It’s old dragon. That’s—I wonder if they know what that is.”

“Shit, I didn’t.” Dustin pulled out his phone. “Do you want me to check with my boss and see if he knows who these guys are?”

“Do—you know he’s good, right? Like you know-know?”

“I do. He’s no supervillain just waiting for the right time to pop up. He’s saved my life more than once.” Dustin rubbed his lower back.

“Well then, please. Because if we’re both dragons, that’s good, right?”

“Yes. Then you can have an exchange of information and worry less. I would like that.” Dustin’s low chuckle was all self-deprecation.

“Would you now?”

<Yeah. If u c cool dragon stuff, holler. I’m a buyer.>

He knew that. But was this guy a dragon?

“Hey, boss. Yeah. No, I’m good. I have a lot to fill you in on, but—Uh-huh. So I need to know about a Marks and Reaver Antiquarian Books, Denver.”

<Me2. I am into it big time> That was not only true, it was noncommittal enough that he could be a D&D-playing techie. He didn’t blow fire or anything.

“Right. You think so? Okay? No, we’ll be careful.” Dustin hung up. “The boss thinks that bookstore is affiliated with a family of dragons in Colorado. There’s a decent bit of evidence to believe it, but he hasn’t been able to corroborate it one hundred percent.”

“Ooh. Maybe I can?” That would be cool, if he could remember.

“Yeah, we can work that angle.” Dustin grinned at him.

<U got pics of your collection>

Oh, whoa. He found a picture of some of the decently but not amazingly cool books, stripped the digital info, and sent it over. That was a nice thing to nibble on. Right? The vault wasn’t something he was going to show off.

<LOL I see a couple that got away. So you’re bidding against me, huh?>

Score! <Me? Are you a dealer?>

<I have a bookstore. Antique and rare.>

<Cool! I just collect. No selling.>

<There are a lot I don't resell. Anytime you want to talk books holler.>

<Cool. U2. I'm on a lot.>

“Okay, love. That's long enough for one chat. Just in case.” Dustin pulled him around in his chair to kiss him hard.

He intended to argue, but that kiss made him a little dizzy. Dustin was a force of nature, and so damn hot. So amazing.

He wrapped his hands around Dustin's shoulders, holding on tight. Those muscles flexed under his hands, so strong. He had to wonder if these chairs would hold them...

“Don't even think it, brother. I will beat you.” Jules came up with a plate of sandwiches.

“What?” He pushed back, and the chair roller caught on the floor tile, spilling him out with a plop.

“Oops.” Puck bounced over and helped him up. “Hey!”

“Hey. I talked to the guy you poached the book from.” That was so damn cool.

“Like for real? Was he mean? Was he mad? What was his handle? Can I talk to him?”

“Not yet,” Dustin and Jules said at the same time.

Oh, goddess help him, they were going to be such good friends.

Puck's lips parted in shock. “Andy!”

“What?” He wasn't getting in the middle of this...

“You got to talk to him!”

He held up his hands, appealing to his brother and his mate.

“Let us do a little more digging. Andy is a little more careful about what he says to people,” Jules noted.



“And I was here, supervising,” Dustin added, and Andy glared.

*You were not!*

*Oh, yes I was. You did well, but you were far too happy to talk to someone.*

*What? What if they're dragons too? We could make friends!*

*And if they are, we will. An exchange of information can be good. But we have to be careful.* “Jules is right, Puck. Let us dig a bit.”

Puck stuck his tongue out at Dustin. “You’re a turd. Seriously. I’m sleeping with Andy for a month.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Puck.” Dustin’s warm laughter rang right out. “I mean, we can all slumber party once a week...”

“Nope.” Puck scooted behind him, hiding from Dustin. “You can sleep with Jules.”

“Ew.” Jules said it mildly, though, his brothers already getting used to his mate.

“I hear Jules is gassy,” Dustin shot back.

“Stop it, all of you.” Andy had to laugh though. “We’ll let them puff up and be big mean boys, Puck, and then we can play.”

“That’s only fair. You. Me. The PlayStation.”

They high-fived each other.

Dustin rolled his eyes. “Goddess help us.”

Jules nodded. “Yes. Until then, be careful. In fact, contact them only when we’re around.”

Andy rolled his eyes. He didn’t need a keeper, and neither did Puck. Really. But the big manly types in the house felt like they needed to be useful...

*I will pinch you.*

*I dare you.* He stuck his tongue out at Dustin.

“So, what else can we learn from your boss?” Puck spun in his chair, flying out from behind Andy and almost falling.

“I think I’ve learned from you that we need to go outside and get exercise!”

“You just did some jujitsu thing or something.”

“You could all take something from that. But above that, it’s a gorgeous day. I would settle for a hike to show me around the hills.”

“Outside?” Andy asked. “Like in the sun?”

He really didn’t do that.

“Yes, love. You’re a dragon.”

“Hmmm.” Jules shook his head. “I’d go tonight...”

“Boys. You’re dragons. We’re going out.” Dustin sounded so serious.

They all looked at each other, and Jules sighed. “Let’s call the moms. They love a hike.”

“I can run down and ask them if they want to come,” Dustin said. He was just so...physical.

“Okay!”

Dustin ran out, and Andy got up and locked the door behind him. “We don’t hike.”

Puck spun his chair again. “You know if he shows up with the moms we’ll have to go.”

“Mom and Mama will explain that we’re not sunshine dragons,” Jules said. “Though we did bask in the sunroom, so I understand his confusion.”

“Mmhmm.” Andy turned back to his computer screen. He would make it up to Dustin in blow jobs.

He kinda thought Dustin liked those more than he did hikes anyway.

CHAPTER  
THIRTEEN

“I feel like I’m in a holding pattern, man,” Dustin told his brother. “I mean, the mating part is amazing, but otherwise, I feel completely useless here. They locked me out yesterday when I tried to get them to go for a hike. I did get the moms to go...”

“What? What did they say? Is he like, five?”

“No.” Not exactly. The boys were remarkably untouched by the world, for all that they were also very human and techy. “I guess they don’t do outdoorsy like we do.”

“They’re dragons.”

“They’re dragons who have been kept inside where it’s safe since they were old enough to present.”

“Ah.” He could almost see Austin’s nod.

“I don’t know, man. I just need to figure out how to engage in a different way than I’m used to. I mean, he’s my mate. I feel it deep down.”

“You two need some time alone, so you can breathe and hear each other, man. Does he fly?”

“I have no idea.” That was a great thought, though. He could take Andy up to the mountains for a few days. Go flying together. Alone.

“Take him outside, unplug him and play with him, and let yourselves breathe, man.”

“I will.” The longer he sat with that idea, the more he liked it. He needed to get to know Andy. Just Andy.

“Good. Good, this will be good for you both. Call me after.”

“I will. I still want you to meet him. All of them. And the food here is so damn good.”

“Yeah? Excellent. You know how I feel about being well-fed.”

“I do.” Suddenly, he missed Austin like a sore tooth. “Try to keep your schedule open. I want to see you.”

“You tell me when, I’m there. Swear to the heavens.”

“Thanks, brother. I’m off to find my mate.”

Well, first he was off to talk to the moms. Good thing they seemed to like him...

He wandered down to their little earthship house, knocking. He was empty-handed, but he would offer to cook.

“Come on down, Dustin.” Ah, doorbell cam.

“Thank you.” He headed inside, humming under his breath as the air got cooler. “Good morning, lady,” he told Titania.

“Good morning, Dustin. Come have a seat. Angelica is making apple fritters.”

“Oh, is there anything I can do to help?” Apple fritters? He was in.

“Just stay out of her way. We’ll hold down the kitchen chairs to assure they don’t float away.”

“Hmmm. Good idea.” He could totally sit. He took the coffee Mama handed him and plopped down.

“So, what’s on your mind? Have the boys driven you to drink yet?”

“Not to drink, no.” He sipped his coffee, gathering his thoughts. “But I want to take Andy away for a few days.”

“All right. I don’t know that going into town is a wise idea.”

“No. No, I was thinking Colorado. Maybe up in the San Juans. I want to take him away just for a few days. I need to get to know him better.”

Both mothers frowned and then stared at each other. Then Angelica looked away with a sigh.

“We’re trusting you with our son,” Titania murmured.

“I know. And believe me, I know how precious that is. I promise you, I will protect him.”

“You’d better. He’s yours to protect for an eternity.”

“Exactly.” Dustin blew out a sigh. “I know his brothers worry, but I need to really connect with him.”

“You do. You need to be able to breathe together.” Titania’s smile was wicked. “Make noise.”

“We do.” Fly, though he wouldn’t mention that now. The moms might ground them. He thought that the moms had kept their boys grounded, to keep them safe. He got that. He really did. Those boys were a handful.

But just Andy would be something he could deal with.

Angelica presented a plate of fritters with a flourish. “Tada.”

“Oh, yum.”

“Eat up. You’ll need your strength. Andy doesn’t love being unplugged.” The moms were having altogether too much fun with this.

“Well, I’m hoping to keep him very busy.” And now he needed to find a cabin up in the mountains. Like up in the San Juans, where they could fly without being seen. And where they could definitely make noise.

“You have our blessing. Just bring him home before the snows hit.”

“I will.” It was early enough, he thought. To spend a week-ish. “I appreciate the confidence.” He nibbled a fritter. “These are so good.”

“They’re my specialty. My mate loves them dearly.”

Titania rubbed her belly, the smile almost wicked. “And yet, I share.”

“I make enough for you to hoard.”

He chuckled. “If I take some to the boys will they unlock the door?”

“Yes.” Angelica winked at him. “Also, the spare key is above the door.”

“Ah, now you tell me.”

Titania raised an eyebrow. “Well, you are supposed to be some sort of investigator.”

“Ha.” He shook his head. He would not feel ill-used. He was an interloper here. Still.

“And this was the first time they locked the door, so it really hadn’t come up.”

“Yeah.” He tried not to be too hurt by it. Andy felt a little overwhelmed, he was sure, and he was the more experienced of the two of them. Right?

“You’re real. The boys aren’t used to that. They’re used to virtual relationships. Be patient with him. He cares for you, very much.”

“I’m trying. I’m just used to charging in and taking the situation in hand.” He winked over his coffee to show he was willing to laugh.

The moms nodded in sync, and he knew they were talking together. It wasn’t intimidating, though, more comfortable. He and Andy could do that. If Andy would listen. Sometimes he wondered if Andy felt disloyal to his brothers doing it.

Maybe he’d just pushed too hard, too fast.

Maybe...

No. No, in fact, Andy had called to him, to make love.

So he grinned at Titania. “Can I take some of these up?”

“You can, of course. The boys will be tickled. I’ll start another batch for my lady.”

“Thanks.” He got up and kissed her cheek. “I’ll make supper tonight. How do we feel about Italian?”

“We’re fans. I’ll bring dessert? I’m craving a devil’s food cake.”

“Sounds amazing.” He did love them already. All of them. Even Puck and Jules. Which was good, so he didn’t kill them.

“No killing my babies. They’re going to end up being important your whole life.”

“I believe you.” He shook his head. Oh, he was in so much trouble if the moms were hearing his thoughts already.

“Good.” Angelica kissed his cheek in return. “Go on, now. Maybe we all can play rummy tonight after supper.”

“I’d like that.” He took the covered plate of fritters she handed him. “I’m off to make nice. No hiking.”

“Sounds good. Thank you.”

He blinked. “For what, Mama?”

“Caring. This is tough, mating, and I appreciate your heart.”

“I’m doing my dead-level best.” He felt better. Lighter. Now to face down the brothers when he asked Andy to go away with him.



“I shouldn’t have locked the door.” Andy wasn’t a fucking child, and this wasn’t how grownups dealt with each other, was it?

No.

How was Dustin supposed to respect him and like him if he acted like a spoiled brat?

Andy went to the office door without even speaking to Jules and Puck, and headed downstairs to talk to his lover and apologize.

“Hey.” Puck followed him. “It was a joke.”

“No, it was mean. I mean, really dumb.” And he was mad at himself. Not really at his brothers. They would egg him on given half the opportunity.

“We were just playing...”

“I’m not a child!” he snapped. “He’s important to me.”

“Sure. Okay.” Puck sounded hurt, and he hated that, but dammit, he needed to find Dustin. He felt itchy. Raw.

“I know. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at me. I hurt his feelings, and that’s shitty.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll go and keep Jules upstairs.” Puck touched his shoulder, then trotted back up the steps.

Andy got to the kitchen door just as Dustin was coming in, carrying a covered plate.

“I’m sorry. That was mean. I was stupid. Forgive me?”

“I was just coming to ask the same thing.” Dustin held out the plate. “I shouldn’t have pushed so hard.”

“I was being childish.” He took the plate and set it aside. “Kiss me? Please?”

“Mmm.” Dustin slid both hands around his waist to yank him up against that hard body for a kiss that curled his toes.

*I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.*

*I know, love. I know. I just wanted to do something with you. Dustin stroked his cheek. I talked to your moms. I want to go on a weekend away. Just a few days in the mountains. You and me.*

*I’d love that.* It was a little scary, but he believed in Dustin, and he wanted a chance to be...just the two of them for a few days.



*Oh good.* That smile was worth the worry. It was like Christmas morning.

Andy snuggled into his mate, relaxing as the sound of Dustin's heartbeat surrounded him. That reassuring pound made him sigh happily. "When do we go?"

"Friday. I can get us a cabin by then. And we can talk to Puck and Jules."

"So we're having a vacation?" That was a cool idea. Something new.

"We are. Something far nicer than a night in a hotel in Albuquerque." Dustin winked for him, then reached over to snag something from the plate he'd set aside. "Apple fritter."

"You were at the moms." Andy loved that smell. It meant home.

"I was. I wanted to let them know I wanted to take you out of town for a few days. I know everyone is worried I'll try to take you away, so I wanted everyone to know what was what up front." Dustin held it up for him to nibble.

Oh, that was... He took a kiss before he took the bite. *Thank you.*

*You're welcome, love.* Dustin's heart was so perfectly in rhythm. Thud. Thud. He adored that sound. *I want to take you flying. I want to play in the swells with you.*

*Oh... I haven't flown in real life. Just simulation.*

*No? Well, I want to fly. With you.*

Excitement flared in his whole body, and Andy nodded. *Yes. Okay. Please.* He ate the fritter, his heart so happy that he hadn't run Dustin off with his churlish ways.

*Oh, sweet boy, you'll never run me off. I'm yours. All the way to the bone.*

*Promise? I can be immature.*

*And I can be demanding. We'll figure it out.*

*We will. We are. Whatever.*

Dustin kissed him again. “Should we go tell the brothers or look at cabins first?”

“Come to my room. We can surf for cabins together. I’ll tell them there are apple fritters down here.” He didn’t want company right now.

Well, he wanted Dustin’s company. It wasn’t sex, even. It was connection, friendship, care.

“Okay.” Dustin left half the fritters on one plate, transferring the rest to the plate that had been turned over to cover them. “Come on.”

He took Dustin’s hand, sending, *apple fritters on the table*.

*Thanks, bro.* That was Jules. Puck was probably nursing hurt feelings too.

*I love you both.* Then he focused on Dustin. This was hard, but he had to figure it out. He needed to learn how to be what everyone needed.

*We’ll do it, love. I’m here to help, not make trouble. I hope they learn to lean on me, as well.* They headed up the stairs, Dustin humming a little, a tuneless thing that just spoke of happiness.

*They will.* They were good guys, just a little...stupid, he guessed.

*No. None of you are stupid. I mean that.* Dustin squeezed his hand. *You’re used to being the three of you. That’s all.*

And now there were four of them, but the two of them were...experiencing a different relationship, for sure.

“Are you thinking naughty thoughts, love?” Dustin asked.

Hell, yes. “Of course not. I’m all sweetness and light, remember?”

“You. Hmm.” Dustin laughed out loud, and he had to grin. “I think you’re more sugar and spice. A little of both.”

He dared to pinch one of Dustin’s nipples. “Me? Spicy? Like green chile?”

“Ow!” Dustin clutched his chest. “A little like that, yes.”

“Did that really hurt?” He was horrified for about a heartbeat before he caught sight of Dustin’s grin. “You ass!”

Dustin snorted. “So innocent. Locking me out hurt way more.”

“I know.” Guilt stabbed at him again. “I am sorry.”

“I know. And I won’t rub it in anymore. I did want to be honest, though, because it’s important.” Dustin set the plate on the dresser just inside his door, then led him to the bed.

“Yeah. I was dumb. I’m sorry.” He sat down, hiding behind his hair.

“Stop. I’m so happy you were coming to talk to me, love. That’s the important part. We’re learning each other. It takes time.” Dustin sat next to him, pushing his hair off his face.

“I’m embarrassed.” He knew better. He’d been stupid. Like really stupid.

“Are you kidding?” Dustin laughed again. “I acted like a PE teacher, insisting you go hiking.”

“It’s a little unnerving—all the things that can happen outside. Bears, fires, falls, spiders.” The issues were endless.

“Mmm. They can happen inside, too. Well. Maybe not bears, though I have seen it happen on TikTok.” Dustin started tugging at his clothes.

“I love that you know TikTok.” And he loved the way that Dustin was looking at him even more.

“I spend a lot of time in hotel rooms with nothing else to do.” Dustin got Andy’s shirt off and started on his pants. “Of course I read a lot too.”

“I do too. I love stories.” He sucked in his belly, smoothed his hair. Why wasn’t he the pretty one?

“We’ll have to read to each other sometime.” Dustin stroked his cheek. “You’re beautiful, love. And all mine.”

“I am yours, and I promise to do better.”

“So do I. Now, will you kiss me?” Dustin tugged him close, his naked body rubbing Dustin’s clothed one.

“Over and over.” He wrapped around his lover, his mate, and he moaned as their lips met. The kiss was deep and thorough, making him moan when Dustin pressed in with his tongue to taste.

His cock rubbed against Dustin’s soft shirt, the touch maddening.

“Mmm. You feel like home, sweet.” Dustin put a hand under his ass to lift him up.

“I will be.” He made the promise, and he meant it. He would be Dustin’s home, and be a good brother.

“You’re amazing.” Dustin rocked him against that hard body, and he could feel the length and heat of Dustin’s need. Maybe he’d dodged the mythical bullet on this one.

He groaned and reached down, pushing his hand between them to cup Dustin’s cock.

“Too much cloth still, love.”

“I know! I need you naked.” He tugged at buttons and zips, trying to get to skin. He was burning inside, his need stronger than before.

Dustin shrugged out of his shirt, then let Andy strip off all the rest of his clothes. That cock was hard for him, flushed a deep rose, so pretty. He leaned down, giving the heavy prick a sucking kiss.

“Fuck! Andy. Killing me here.” Dustin petted his head, hands gentle for all his strong words.

He knew better. The pleasure poured in between them, so he kept on tasting, sucking. Dustin arched into all his touches, praise raining down around him, that voice rough as a cob.

Dustin stroked his hair, tangling in his curls, but not hurting at all. It was like a fantasy come to life.

Soon enough, though, Dustin pulled him away. “Enough, love. I have other plans.”

He couldn't hide his groan, not even a bit, and his lips felt swollen. He blinked at Dustin, who tugged him up for a kiss, making his lips tingle even more.

He rubbed all along his mate, feeling himself buzz, inside and out. He ached, deep in the pit of his belly.

"Lift up, love. Come on." Dustin lay back on the pillows, hoisting him up over that rigid cock.

"Oh..." His toes curled, and he leaned back, letting Dustin begin to fill him.

"That's it, sweet. Take me right in." Moaning, Dustin pressed up, really letting him feel it.

All he could do was nod, a deep groan escaping him.

Dustin pulled him down, sinking deep into him, and Andy panted, his body shaking from the impact.

Those pretty eyes sparkled for him, gleamed, and he shuddered, his whole world clenching.

"Never let anyone tell you you're not the beautiful one," Dustin said, pulling him down again. "You're stunning to me. I love your smile." Dustin reached up to stroke his lips.

"Oh." His heart hiccupped, the world spinning around them, with Dustin the only constant.

"Yes." Dustin arched up, filling him again, and he panted, trying to get his ears to stop ringing.

He burned, deep in the pit of his gut, and he curled his toes, taking more of that heavy cock. In fact, he bounced, trying to get to the root.

"No hurting yourself, love," Dustin told him, hands back on his hips.

"You don't hurt. This doesn't hurt. You're made for me." And he was made for Dustin.

"And you were meant for me. I would never harm you for the world."

He knew. He believed it from his scales inward. That was why he felt so bad for locking Dustin out, making him feel unwanted.

“Shh...focus. Focus on me, how much I need you.”

“Want you...” He could do that. Andy could concentrate on one thing for hours, right? So he stared into Dustin’s eyes and let his mate feel what he was feeling. Or at least he tried to.

*You don't have to try so hard. I feel you, in my soul.*

That was what he’d needed to hear. Those were the words he craved. Dustin had a way with letting him know how much he was needed. It felt like a balm on an ache he’d had that he hadn’t even been aware of until it eased.

Dustin’s eyes seemed to swirl, the greens and golds like a mist, like clouds. All the world’s secrets were hidden in there, and they welcomed him in, allowing him to drown in his mate. He rose up, then dropped down, and Dustin’s lips quirked in the sexiest smile he’d ever seen.

“Perfect mate.”

“Yours. All of me.”

“Yes.” Dustin got him moving in a rhythm, up and down, making his toes curl. Every time he slipped back, he took more in. Dustin was huge and hard and hot for him, giving him everything he could want.

His entire body opened, and he found himself fighting his dragon, his wings, himself. Andy didn’t want to lose it and go all dragon. Not now.

“Shhh. Soon, love. Soon. We’ll fly. But for now, stay grounded with me, right here and now. This is about connecting.”

“I’m trying.” He’d never felt this before. This intensity left him breathless. “I’m new to this.”

“So am I.” Dustin cupped his cheek. “I want to fly with you. I want everything.”

“You have it.” He squeezed down with his inner muscles, giving Dustin more sensation, and mist flew from his mate’s nostrils. He breathed it in, feeling the tingle in his lungs.

“Don’t—” Dustin tried to pull away, and he leaned in, fastening their mouths together.

*You can’t hurt me.*

*I don’t want to.*

*I’m still here.* If that was poison his love was breathing and it was going to hurt him, he’d be dead. Instead, he tingled, the happy, near-tipsy sensation making him chuckle.

“What?” Dustin almost frowned. “Are you okay?”

“You’re making me high.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, in the best way.” He sat up, sinking down fully on that fat cock. “Whoa.”

“God, you’re pretty.” Dustin laughed, and he sounded just a bit giddy too. That was too cool, that they could breathe into each other and make something totally new.

“I am?” He began to move, stretching up tall before sinking down and taking it all.

“Yes. I’ve never seen anything so amazing.” Dustin petted him, stroking his belly, his chest, really letting him feel those callused hands. Then one wrapped around his cock, and he shuddered, his ball sac going tight with the rush of pleasure.

Dustin thrust harder, giving him the friction he needed, and a green and gold mist surrounded them in no time, swirling and filling the room.

His eyes rolled as he flew, soaring with his mate until the pressure inside him was too huge to ignore. He bucked and bounced, and when Dustin’s knot lodged too tight for that, he rocked back and forth, whimpering.

“Please...”

“Come for me, beautiful dragon. I need to feel you come.”

“Yes.” He nodded hard, his body swaying and jerking, his grunts loud in his own ears. He shot so hard he couldn’t catch his breath, his belly pulling tight, his balls up against the base of his cock.

Dustin rolled him, slamming into him for a few wild, breathtaking thrusts, before he was filled to his limits, heat flooding him. His whole body spasmed, accepting his mate’s seed, his perfect gift. The moment stretched out between them, and he hung onto it as long as he could before he reached up, encouraging Dustin to cuddle down.

“I’m not too heavy?”

“Never.” He was caught, and he was where he wanted to be.

“Good. Mmm. Thank you, love. I’m so glad you came to find me.” Dustin kissed his neck. “I needed to see you.”

“I needed to let you know I was sorry. I’m new at this, but I’m going to be better.” He swore it. He wasn’t dumb, just a little silly and used to only dealing with his brothers.

“We both will. Soon we’ll fly together.” Dustin ended that on a jaw-popping yawn.

“Uh-huh. I can’t wait.”

Well, he could wait for a while. He was floating down from a delicious high.



CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN

“Are we almost there?”

Dustin glanced at Andy for the third time in half an hour, smiling. “We have forty-five minutes or so to go.” Andy wasn’t used to traveling. At all. In fact, he would say the exact opposite was the case. To be fair, though, the scenery held Andy’s attention. What he seemed to be objecting to was being trapped in the car, even with all sorts of pillows propped up around him.

“Oh, that’s not bad. Not at all.” Andy changed the radio station again. “It’s beautiful out here. So green.”

“It is. The leaves will be changing soon, huh?” They would get up into the Aspens soon. He couldn’t wait to see Andy’s face when that happened.

“Yes. All the golds are so pretty. What’s your favorite time of year?”

“Spring.” No doubt about it. He loved the renewal of the world after a long winter. “What about you?”

“I love winter. I love the snuggling and soup and fires and hot tea.”

“Mmm.” Dustin totally saw that. His mate was a homebody. He would love any reason to stay in and have a puppy pile and drink cocoa. Dustin was a fan of that as well. “I plan on lots of snuggling the next few days, baby.”

“I can’t wait. This is...it’s exciting. The moms aren’t big on travel.”

“They kinda have that grounded earth-mother thing going on.” Dustin grinned. He was all about flitting all over, but he could see himself settling down in Santa Fe. Though he and Andy might have to talk about building on their own casita...

He could see that. If not a casita, maybe they could build on, add a room or two or three. The adobe was huge, but he was hoping for babies. Not that he was mentioning that to Andy yet. That might cause instant panic.

He wasn't absolutely sure Andy knew about babies. The ridiculous thought made him chuckle, and Andy blinked over at him.

“What's funny? Share!”

“I was just thinking about how weird family is.”

“Oh, tell me about it. I have protective moms, a growly older brother, a freaky baby brother, and we're dragons.”

“That's the least weird thing about you.” He winked over, getting a happy laugh in return.

Andy was relaxing for him, easing, and opening up, and it was a glorious thing to see. Hell, Dustin could feel it inside him, like a bubble of energy. They were responding to each other, and Dustin was grateful for the time alone. Puck and Jules had been surprisingly gracious, Puck offering to watch all of Andy's sites for him online, and Jules promising to keep him from exposing them all...

Andy sang along with the radio, and that charmed the hell out of him, so he reached out, stroking his mate's cheek. Andy made this lovely sound, almost a purr.

They needed to get to their cabin soon.

Dustin grinned, then sang along, knowing he sounded like a bellowing frog. It didn't seem to matter to Andy. In fact, they just sang together like it was meant to be.

When he pulled into the little parking area by the cabin he'd rented, they were laughing and touching, but they both went silent for a moment looking at the fairy-tale place they were going to be staying the next few days.

“Wow. That’s amazing,” Andy said finally.

“It really is.” It had looked good online. It was better in person. An A-frame, it sat against the backdrop of the mountain, and planters full of fall flowers bloomed in front of the house.

Andy took a couple of pictures, then unbuckled his seat belt. “Let’s explore!”

“Okay, baby.” He hopped out as well, tickled as a pig in shit that Andy wanted to see what was what. He could see a couple of hiking trails up behind the house, and he would bet that was where they’d find a place to fly, but for now, the house was where they’d start.

The key was where it was supposed to be, and when they opened the door, the entire back of the cabin seemed to be glass, the sunlight pouring in.

Andy’s eyes were huge as he stared. “Wow.”

“Oh, man. Talk about a place to bask.” That was amazing. There was a giant daybed back there, with pillows piled three deep.

“It’s like a fantasy house.” Andy came to him, pulling him into a hard, happy hug. “Thank you. So much. This is amazing.”

“It is. I’m super pleased.” This was so much more than he’d expected. “Let’s look out back. There’s supposed to be a deck and a hot tub.”

“Ooh. I do love hot-tubbing. Can...can we do it naked?”

Yeah. They needed their own space. Absolutely.

“We can totally go naked. This is a private cabin. I mean, we’ll check the area this afternoon. I’m all about security.”

“I bet you are.” Andy shot him a glance, lips curling. “You know, it’s hot, having an alpha.”

“You think?” He grabbed that sweet ass as he went by toward the back door, which was tucked away at the edge of all those windows, almost totally camouflaged.

The cabin backed up to miles of forest and mountains, and the hot tub was protected with a wooden fence. They would be safe here, from anyone.

“Ohhh.” That sound was so...sensual. He was looking forward to firing that up.

“Let’s see if they stocked all the food I ordered, huh?” That had been an extra fee, but he’d done his research, and he trusted the company managing this place.

“You thought of everything.” The fridge was well-stocked with steaks and chicken breast, grapes and strawberries, milk and butter and veggies.

“I tried.” There were plenty of pots and pans, plates and silverware. “Not like you can order pizza up here, huh?”

He checked the firewood situation, which was great. There were split lots and kindling, and another whole cord of unsplit logs with a splitter frame and hammer. No axe murders on the mountain, he supposed. All in all, they would be super comfy for a few days.

“Now, come give me a kiss so we can start our vacation right, love.”

“Oh, that’s a hardship.” Andy flew into his arms, the act so damn honest that it stole his breath.

He folded his arms around his mate and took that kiss, lighting up the room. Goddess, he felt the craziest stuff when Andy kissed him like this. Protective. Happy as hell. Proud. Just...all the things.

Andy clung to his neck, looking dazed once the kiss ended.

Reluctantly, Dustin set his mate away from him. “Let’s unload the car, huh? Then we can be in for the day and just be lazy.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Andy cupped his cock, teasing him, before bounding away to the car.

Oh, he was going to bite that man. Dustin followed more slowly, just breathing in the air when he got outside. It was

lovely in Santa Fe, but this was more...pristine. More remote. And they would fly here. The conditions were perfect.

They got their bags and the cooler, with the treats he and Andy had shopped for, into the house, and he pulled the car around so no one would see it from the road. Caution might just be his middle name. He liked to be on the safe side.

Andy came out to stand on the back deck, curly hair shining in the afternoon sun. "It's cooler than I imagined it would be. I bet it's cold at night."

"I bet it is. Your mama sent me a couple of sweaters and a jacket for each of us. Just in case." The moms were such a hoot. They were all about every eventuality, which Dustin was used to being his job. Still, that meant he understood them far better than say, Puck, who was this combination of wild and scared of everything.

"My moms are very into just in case." Those gray eyes went comically wide. "Like very-very. I'm sure you noticed."

"I did." He snorted. "That's okay. I was just thinking how I get them. You know?" Andy and his brothers were precious. Important. He felt that in his bones. He would do his dead-level best to protect them too.

"I bet. Mom is fierce like you, but I have to tell you, Mama would eat someone's face off." Andy's grin was warm as he led them back into the cabin. "One time, when this guy broke into the house with a gun, Mom wasn't home, and Mama took care of business."

"I can see that. It's always the sweet ones." He winked, then went to kiss that mouth again. "But with the jackets, we can stay warm out here. Inside, we can have a fire and snuggle."

"Totally. I love fires. They're so romantic." Andy's hand slid up along Dustin's belly under his shirt.

"I do too. I like snuggling even better." His abs rolled under the touch, and he moaned a little. This was Andy at his most free, and Dustin loved it. Sensual, tactile, maybe a little needy.

“Mmhmm...” Andy’s eyes grew lighter, the electricity between them building.

Which was when Andy’s stomach snarled like a cornered bobcat.

Dustin chuckled. “We should eat, huh?”

Andy gave him a wry smile. “I guess so. We have those subs we bought on the way up.”

“Yeah. We can explore cooking together later.” He headed for the cooler.

“Yeah. We can make soup or something. After we make love a few times.”

“I like it. In fact, that’s the best idea I’ve heard since I came up with this one.” He winked at Andy, who laughed. “I just have to keep you so busy you don’t fret about being offline.” He wasn’t joking about that, for all that he smiled saying it.

“That’s impossible. I’ll be surfing on my phone in the wee hours while you sleep. But I promise to be focused when you’re awake.” Andy wagged his eyebrows, teasing him.

“Yeah, yeah.” He did love a challenge. Dustin pulled out the subs and a couple of drinks. “Turkey, bacon, and avocado.” He handed that over to Andy.

“And the Noah’s Ark,” Andy teased about his all-the-meats club sub.

“Hey, I let them put vegetables on it.”

Andy tilted his head. “I guess green chile counts as a vegetable.”

“I got bell peppers and onions too.”

“Mmm...bell peppers are yummy. I like the avocado-tomato combo. It’s like deconstructed guacamole.”

“It is.” Guac was a good thing. He’d have to try that sub sometime. “What’s your very favorite food?” Dustin wanted to learn everything about his mate.

“Enchiladas with chips and salsa.” That was immediate.  
“What about you?”

“Fried seafood.” He loved shrimp and crab and flaky white fish all fried up with a crispy batter. While he was from the mountains, living in the Pacific Northwest had provided ample opportunity for him and Austin to get to the coast.

“Yeah? I’ve had fish sticks. They’re okay. I like tartar sauce a lot.”

Fish sticks? Gag. Nope. He would have to get some supplies at Whole Foods on the way back into Santa Fe and do a fish fry for Andy and his family. “Tartar sauce is amazing. Fish sticks are an abomination. Unless you’re making cheap fish tacos.”

“I’m not a fish taco person. I want beef and potato, ooh, or bean and bacon.” Andy licked mayonnaise off his fingers.

“Have you ever had them with really good spicy slaw? And jalapeno tartar sauce?”

Andy paused, head tilting. “No. That sounds amazing.”

“I’ll have to make them when Austin comes to visit.” He took a huge bite of his sandwich. Oh, yum. He did love spicy meat and peppers and all the good stuff in a sandwich.

“Do you two look just alike?” Andy asked. “Are you just the same in personality?”

“We’re identical, but I would bet you say we look different enough.” Austin wore his hair long, and he was leaner than Dustin, preferring speed to brute strength. “He’s way sneakier than I am.” He supposed all siblings would say that, but in this case, it was true. Austin was far better at slipping in and rescuing people. Dustin was better at watching from a distance and reporting his findings. Or at making a stand.

“Ah. That’s Puck. He’s nervous, like wildly, and he...well, he affects people, you know?” Andy met his eyes. “Not you, I guess. You made his belly hurt, the first time you came over.”

“Does that happen to him a lot? Like, his feeling for people manifesting physically?” He tried not to talk with his

mouth full, but man, that sandwich hit the spot.

“A lot, yeah. He’ll get a belly ache when something big is going to happen. Some people make his head ache...” Andy shrugged. “I’m way less in touch, I guess.”

“Yeah. I get the prickle on the back of my neck.” And he got the urge to taste the air, which he would just keep to himself. Maybe that was the poison-spitter in him.

“I’m just misty. I hide pretty well...well, except from with you! I couldn’t believe you found me in Albuquerque.”

“I think I knew already... I saw you and I felt like someone had cut me off at the knees. I told myself it was just a matter of probability, but I think it was far more than that.” Not that he’d been willing to admit it at the time. He’d been on the hunt, and that was always a matter of pride for him.

“I still can’t believe you didn’t choose one of the others.” Andy had a wondering expression on his face. “I’m not complaining, but I’m stunned.”

“Baby, I could never choose them. You’re my mate.” He reached over with his not-gooey sandwich hand to touch the tip of Andy’s nose. “I mean, I only saw how little they were and how adorable you were when we met. They just sort of... blurred.” Andy had been like a beacon to him, even if he had tried to hide in his mist.

“You’re the first one that has said that. Ever.”

“Well, I’m sad if that made you feel less, but I’m glad it’s me to see you for who you are.” He crumpled up his wrapper. “Am I a pig to want my cookie now?”

“Oh my God, no. I mean, I’m still hungry too. Enough to eat two cookies, maybe.” Andy popped up like a jack-in-the-box to go grab the six-pack of cookies from the cooler. They’d picked one of each flavor except oatmeal raisin. They agreed that raisins were great, but in cookies, they were a sad bait-and-switch for chocolate. “I think I want a peanut butter and a chocolate chip. You?”

“White chocolate macadamia.” No doubt about it. He loved the combo of smooth, sweet white chocolate and salty,



crunchy nuts.

“Oh, cool. Those are yummy too. Oh, and biscochitos. Mama makes the best biscochitos.” Andy brought the cookies over, and Dustin pulled his mate down onto his lap.

“Yum. Those are the ones with anise and sugar and cinnamon, right?” He’d had those at one point in his life, but he would love to try the moms’.

“Yep. They’re so good.” Andy fed him a bite of cookies, which made him lick his lips and stare at Andy’s mouth. He loved this new, freer Andy. He really did. Made him hot and happy.

Andy was focused on him, gaze exploring his face, memorizing him.

“Sweet one.” Dustin took Andy’s cookie to feed him bites, wanting to return the flavor. Such an intimate thing, feeding someone. There were fingers and lips and there was licking, and it just made time slow down so they could breathe together and love each other.

He moaned as Andy leaned in and lapped his lips clean. His little mate was so sensual, when he allowed himself to be.

Dustin stroked Andy’s back, keeping him from tipping over with that hand, and smiled into those pretty eyes. “So. What should we do next?”

“Hot tub? Explore the upstairs? Start a fire?”

“Oh, let’s see what the situation is upstairs, for sure.” He rose, holding Andy in his arms. They didn’t need to get busy right now, but he sure wanted to see where they could.

“So strong, my alpha.” Andy cuddled right in.

“Yours.” He kissed Andy’s neck. “So, the stairs look a little tight for this, though. The sideways carry.” He stopped to fling Andy over his shoulder. “Better.”

“You brute!” Andy grabbed his butt, laughter chasing him.

“I am. A real barbarian. Rar.” He ran up the last few steps, Andy bouncing.

“Goofy dragon.” Andy laughed so hard he almost lost his breath.

“Mmmm. Oh, wow.” He set Andy down. “Talk about something out of a fantasy.” The upstairs was one big loft, with a huge bed, a chair and a half and footstool by the windows, and a small library on the back wall under the eaves.

“Oh wow.” Andy went to look out the windows, taking everything in.

“That’s a heck of a view.” The windows looked out over the deck, but it also panned up over the mountain behind them. He might think this had been designed by a dragon... He’d have the boss look into it.

“It’s beautiful. I love it. This is the best present ever.” Andy leaned against the windowsill and sighed.

“It is. We can cuddle right here in the chair, huh?” He grinned, walking over to pull Andy into his lap as he sat down.

“Oh, we so can.” Andy snuggled right in, lips soft on his throat.

“That feels so damn good, honey.” It felt right. And he was happier than he could ever remember before, holding Andy in his arms with nothing else to do.

“It is good, mate. I want to stay right here.”

“Then we will. Look at the ravens.” The big black birds were probably heading south, as they were wont to do in fall, but there was a pair of them wheeling and playing over the rise behind them.

Andy called to them, and the sound was surprisingly dead-on.

Dustin laughed with delight. “Spend a lot of time as a kid perfecting that?”

“Yes! We had a trio of ravens as protectors. They were amazing. They talked with us.”

“Ah. That’s really cool, love. Austin and I had a wolf.”

“Neat. What was his name?”

“Lobo. No one was particularly creative.” He winked, but he had a pang for their old friend. Dragon protectors could live longer than normal, healthy lives, but they were animals, not magical creatures. They eventually crossed the rainbow bridge.

“Ours were Huginn, Muninn, and Chuck.”

“Chuck, huh? I mean, I guess they tell us their names, right?”

“That’s what the moms say.” Andy sighed, leaning hard. “We needed this.”

“We did. Thank you for trusting me.”

“Always. Always, mate. You deserve that.”

“And you deserve my attention, sweet. Tell me about what you do. I want to know all about your research.” He stroked Andy’s back. Nothing sexual. Just getting to know his lover, soothing them both with touch. The mate bond needed that, and he was willing to give it and so much more.

Andy made his heart happy. And as much as Dustin would have said he didn’t need that, now he knew he did. Hell, he was willing to give up the job he’d carved out for himself and Austin and become Andy’s family’s full-time protector. That was a huge thing for him.

“I think there’s a huge shift coming—and I don’t mean metaphorically. I think the magic has grown too big for this world, you know? It’s pushing at the seams, and these prophecies are trying to tell us to prepare for a mass migration.” Andy’s eyes lit up. “I think that our world is about to change, drastically.”

He nodded slowly. “My boss thinks so as well. That’s one reason he’s so keen to have eyes on all the dragon enclaves he can find. He really thinks something big is coming.” The problem was no one seemed to have any idea what it was. So how did they prepare for it, if no one could figure out all the signs and make them line up with anything? “Have you figured out what that means? I mean, how things are going to change?”

“It has something to do with the veil, and there will be a space for all of us? But I think it’s going to be hard to leave this world. I honestly don’t know. Maybe we’re wrong.”

“Maybe.” He had no idea. The veil was one of those things that all dragons seemed to know about, and all of them had family who had crossed it, but... But no one on this side of it knew what it was, did they? Was it just a euphemism for dying? Dragons weren’t invincible. In fact, their bodies could be surprisingly fragile for purely magical creatures with long lives.

Shit, he had no idea.

“So how did you and your brothers hook up to the web? The moms don’t seem particularly techie.”

“I read about it. Learned about it in remote school when they were sending videotapes. Then I started learning about computers, about routers, and once I had basic knowledge and basic web access, I could get online and learn faster.”

“It does grow that way, huh?” He knew exactly what Andy meant. Once you got into the computer side of things, the knowledge was there. Sifting through it required some critical thinking, but it was good.

“I have a knack, you know? It makes sense to me. I’m way better at computers than anything else.”

“That’s how I feel about finding things. And protecting them. My brother is good at moving people. Taking dragons out of dangerous situations. I always had to sit at the safehouse when we traveled together.”

“Have you met many others, then?”

“Some, yeah. A few families. A good many omegas who hadn’t presented yet and were abandoned.”

“Wow. Crazy. And you chose me.”

“Oh, Andy.” He tilted that sharp chin up to take a kiss. “I’ve been waiting for you a long while.”

Andy searched his eyes, then dove in for another hard kiss. Oh, that one was a little toothy, and he felt his body respond.

This was so damn perfect. He couldn't ask for more responsiveness. More care.

“Mmm...we've never made love in this chair...”

“Or any chair. I say we give it a try.” If they ruined the chair, well, he would offer to buy it. It was comfy.

He and Andy could put it in their new add-on to the house...

CHAPTER  
FIFTEEN

Andy padded downstairs as Dustin napped, finding a bag of chips to munch on while he explored more. There was a Ms. PacMan arcade game, a pool table, and a jukebox, which was crazy cool.

Who had a jukebox? Why didn't they have one?

They needed that.

He looked out the front windows, smiling at the difference in the front and back views from the cabin. A pair of ravens looped around out there still, and...was that an elk?

Whoa.

That was large, like the statue in Santa Fe. How pretty! Up close and personal. He'd seen some from the road once, on a trip up to Durango, but this was... Wow.

And when the ravens dived down to gronk at it, making it grunt, that was hilarious.

He called out to the ravens, and the birds wheeled to look at him. Then they flew toward the window, but veered off before they hit, which gave him a breath of relief. They perched nearby on a low-hanging tree limb, staring at the window.

*Hello, friends. I'm visiting here. It's beautiful.* He glanced around, then pulled the spare button off the inside of his coat where it lay on the back of the sofa. It was silver and shiny, a good offering. He eased outside, which was chilly, but not bad, and left the button a few feet from the stoop.

Then he went back in.

The big male hopped over, peering and pecking at the button, then picked it up and dropped it at his mate's feet.

The female raven screeched, then gronked several times before picking it up and flying away. The big male followed, and he headed back inside. Maybe he should make cocoa.

“Are you making nice with the avians?” Dustin asked, making him jump and laugh.

“I am! Did you see the elk? It was huge!” He'd always wanted to see one in the wild.

“I did. That was so cool.” Dustin came to drop a kiss on his mouth. “Salty. What are we up to?”

“I ate chips, lusted after the jukebox, and played with the ravens.”

“A jukebox, huh?” Dustin put an arm around him and guided him over to it. “Oh, cool. No change needed.”

“Right? Do you dance?” He started flipping through the titles.

“I do. Maybe not well.” Dustin's cheeks had gone pink when he glanced up. “I mean, the only one who's seen me do it is Austin. And he says I suck.”

“So do I. You want a fast song or a slow one?” Puck was the dancer—no surprise there—but Andy did like moving to the beat.

“Let's start fast and then slow down.” Dustin moved up behind him, hands on his hips.

Oh, that was...that was almost like sex. He chose a rocking Eagles song, leaning into Dustin when the first chords started.

“Hello.” Dustin moved with him, letting the music take them back out into the room, dancing him around.

Austin was wrong. Dustin was an amazing dancer.

He felt a little like he was flying, Dustin's hand on his hip, body hot against him. They grooved together, the heat between them rising like it always did, but it was also...sweet. Wonderful.

Dustin twirled him, making him laugh. This was the most fun ever, and he loved it.

"You move so damn well with me, baby." Dustin grinned down at him now that they were face-to-face.

Andy stole a quick kiss. "We can dance. Those others don't know. We can dance."

"We sure can." Dustin danced him back to the jukebox as the song ended, and it was Dustin's turn to choose a song. Which was slow and bluesy and perfect for close dancing.

"Mmm..." Andy pressed close, humming deep in his chest. "That's nice."

"It is." Dustin's voice had gone deeper, his body hot and firm against Andy's, their hips swaying in time.

He closed his eyes and let Dustin guide him, lead the dance, and it was surprisingly easy to follow his mate's rhythm, sway and move the right direction. He trusted Dustin not to steer him wrong.

They danced through three more songs before they collapsed together on the couch, laughing.

"Whew! That was working up a sweat," Dustin said. "Maybe we should have a drink."

"What do you want? I can get it."

"A beer, please."

"That's so cute." Dustin was such a dude, and picked up a six-pack of some kind on the way up.

"Hey, I knew one dragon who was so old all he drank was beer. He said when he was a kid, water couldn't be trusted. I always thought that was kinda BS for a dragon, but whatever works..."



“It’s true, historically, but for a dragon? I bet he just... metabolized faster.”

“I guess so.” Dustin patted his butt when he got up, making him laugh.

“You like it?” He shook his booty as he walked over to the kitchen to grab a Coke, a beer, and the bag of chips.

“Baby, I could write odes about your ass.”

“I’d rather you just touch me. Odes are fine, but I prefer focus.” He wiggled harder, hoping it was hot and not stupid.

“Mmmm. Well, bring it back over here and I will.” Dustin was growling now, and that sent shivers up and down his spine.

He bounced to Dustin, not enough to make bubbles explode, but enough to show enthusiasm, and plopped down on Dustin’s lap again.

“Beer?”

“Uh-huh.” Dustin’s thigh flexed underneath his ass, bouncing him again.

“Oof.” He had to admit, that jostled his cock and balls in the best way, making his ass cheeks clench. Dustin was way better at this than he was at dancing, and Andy thought he rocked at the boogie.

“You smell good, mate.” Dustin nuzzled under his ear with a soft hum.

“Good. I want to, to you, I mean.”

“Well, you do. I love how you smell like rain and herbs.”

Andy snorted. “The herbs are Mama’s homemade soap.”

“It’s still all you. Puck doesn’t smell like that.”

He whapped Dustin’s arm. “Don’t be sniffing my brother.”

Dustin laughed out loud. “I’ve been in a puppy pile with him. I couldn’t help it.”

“Still. No sniffing. Only me.” He made his best mean pirate face, his eyebrows wiggling madly.

“Arrrr.” Dustin got it. Or maybe he’d heard Andy’s thought. Either way it worked, and they both cracked up. “No sniffing,” Dustin said through his chortles. “Or nosing or licking.”

“Absolutely zero licking. Not even a little.” Now he went for serious, because Dustin was his. “I am not sharing that part of you. At all.”

“I know. I feel the same way.” Those green eyes glowed gold for a moment, Dustin staring into him, letting him hear how much his mate approved of his little burst of possessive energy.

“Good, because if I’m yours, you need to understand you are mine right along.” He held Dustin’s face. “I *am* yours.”

“Good. No more locking me out?”

“Only if you make me hike when I don’t want to. I’d totally go with you on a misty fall afternoon. Just not in the bright sun.” Andy grinned.

“Got it.” Dustin kissed him deeply, making his lips tingle. “Not a sun-worshipper?”

“Look at me. I’m gray and dreary, and I live in the blasted desert.”

“You are not gray and dreary at all.” Dustin stared at him, eyes wide. “Now, desert, yes.”

That look made him blush all the way down to his toes. “No one else has ever seen me like you do.”

“I’m glad. I want you to feel special.”

He did. Not just special, but amazing. He felt like he was wanted.

“You are.” Dustin stroked his cheek. “So much. I want all of you. All the time.”

“Yes.” He swore his body was on fire, was literally burning up on the inside.

“I feel better, baby. Thank you for coming with me. Just— We need to finish bonding. Your family is amazing, but I need

to know you first.”

“Yes, we were getting a little crowded, weren’t we?”

Dustin’s grin went wry. “A little. I feel like I’m harping on it, and I don’t mean to.”

“No. No, it’s...weird, I know. I only date online. You and I never got a chance for me to impress you with my wild texting ability.”

“Oh, honey, you can text me anytime.” Dustin’s fingers danced on his lower back. “But no more flirting with strangers, deal?”

“Ditto. We’re flirting together. That’s all.”

“Perfect. If you need to come up with a way to get information that doesn’t involve that kind of thing, I can help.”

“I didn’t flirt with that other dragon.” Much. “I hope he’s cool.”

“I’m curious to see as well. Another contact would be good.” Those fingers just kept at him, teasing him.

“Uh-huh...” He blinked, nice and slow, his body hot and tingly but also relaxed. His mate was so good to him. He began to rock, hips rolling to rub himself on Dustin’s thigh.

“Mmm. Sweet baby. You’re hard for me.”

“I’m burning up. I want you, so much.”

“I want you, too, love. So much.”

Andy stripped off his shirt, then started tugging off Dustin’s. He needed skin on skin. Dustin helped him, and soon they were rubbing against each other. His nipples were hard as nails, and every time they touched, his eyes rolled.

Dustin finally plucked at one, and he shouted, his whole body rocking back and forth. “Again! Do it again, love.”

“Like that, do you?” Dustin pulled at the other one, twisting just slightly. Not enough to hurt. Just enough to be delicious.

“I didn’t think so...” But he so did.

“Mmm. Yeah. It’s amazing, what you can get into with me, baby.” Dustin’s grin was all predator.

“Yes. We are, I mean. Amazing.” He couldn’t talk. All he could do was breathe.

“We are.” Dustin lifted him up to strip off his loose sweats.

He was aching, and he could feel his body tightening, melting for his mate. “Please.”

“I got you, baby. I do.” Dustin stroked a hand over his cock, and Andy swore it felt like pure fire, dragging over him. He jerked, dancing for his mate, his ass cheeks clenching.

His belly tightened, and his balls drew up. He didn’t want to come like this. He wanted to be filled.

“I won’t disappoint you, love, I promise.” Dustin rose, pushing his own pants off.

“You won’t.” He licked his lips, attention on that fat cock.

Dustin stroked himself, his hand moving in sharp jerks, that cock growing even harder as he watched. “This is what you want, baby. My knot. I know it.”

“Uh-huh.” He whimpered, his hand finding his cock, the touch almost burning him.

“Mmmnn.” Dustin arched, the move so sexual, so fucking amazing, that he pushed Dustin back down on the couch and climbed on top of him, determined to get that cock inside him.

He was soaking wet and ready. So ready.

“Fuck, baby, you’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Andy would argue, but Dustin meant it, he could feel it in his bones. So he had to accept that his mate really thought that, and it made him bolder. Made it easier to feel like he deserved the attention he was getting.

“I need your cock. I need it. Now.” So he took it. Every inch. And it was perfect.

Dustin moaned, his whole body shuddering. “That’s it. baby. Right there. Fuck, you’re nuclear. I can’t.” Dustin tossed

his head from side to side. “I can’t fucking breathe.”

He didn’t answer; he rode. He bounced and took every inch of Dustin. That cock filled him so perfectly. He could feel Dustin’s knot, and he knew this was going to be wild.

“Need you.” His head fell back, and he stared as he let himself ride.

“You have me, baby. All of me. I promise.” Dustin thrust up into him as he pushed down, giving him friction, jolting him and making him moan.

“All of you...” He brought Dustin’s hands to his chest, begging for more sensation, more attention.

“Mmhmmm.” Dustin stroked his pecs, then pinched his nipples again, harder than before, the sting making him gasp. He hadn’t known to need this, but now that he did, he was going to lose his mind. Every time he pushed down, Dustin stroked or flicked or pinched his little nubs, just sending him soaring with need.

“I need you. I need—” He clenched, tightening his body to bring Dustin along with him.

“Andy!” Dustin’s hands slid to his hips, yanking him down until he could barely move, he was stuffed so full.

“Yes. Yes, Dustin. All yours...” Andy arched and threw his head back, his hips rocking.

“Feel us, love. We’re on fire.” A curl of purple steam escaped Dustin’s nose, and he had to breathe it in, because he loved that tingle. Anyone else might keel over, but he craved Dustin’s essence. “Do you know how hot that is?”

“You are. You make me burn.”

“I want to. I want to be what you need.” He felt totally in over his head, but Dustin made it easy to believe he was wanted. Craved.

Cared for.

“You are. I need you to fill me up.” He felt so sexual, so wanton.

“Come on, baby. I’m close to knotting you so hard I have no choice but to come.”

That was what he wanted to hear. Just that. He nodded, his eyes burning, his lungs tingling. And his ass was on fire, pleasure running up and down his spine. “I’m ready, Dustin. Please. Fill me. I need it.” He started babbling, his breath coming in deep rasps.

Dustin growled, hands like iron bands around his hips. That knot swelled and swelled until he wanted to scream, and those bright green eyes glowed for him, gold around the edges. So fucking beautiful. He could feel heat inside him, could feel how close Dustin was to letting loose.

He nodded and moaned. *Fill me. I need to feel you deep inside. Please.*

Dustin growled, the sound sliding right up his spine, and this incredible fullness spread him, pushed him to his limits, and Dustin shot for him, more perfect than anything he’d ever felt.

He let the heat of Dustin’s orgasm push his own out of him, filling him perfectly, satisfying him to the core.

“Oh, goddess, baby. That was so damn fine.” Pulling him down, Dustin cradled him against that wide chest. “Still out of breath.”

How proud was he that he’d done that?

“Uhn.” That was the best he could do.

Dustin laughed, holding him close as that wide chest shook. He loved how he bounced when that happened. Dustin was so wonderful.

And this was just the first day of their vacation.



Dustin checked the weather and the wind direction, then whipped up a quick breakfast of avocado toast. Andy might bitch about Dustin waking him up early after they spent

so much time in the hot tub last night, but once he figured out what they were doing, Dustin thought he would stop that on a dime.

It was time to fly.

The eggs were done quickly, and he put two plates together and on a tray with two glasses of orange juice. He carried them up to the loft, humming, happy to be alive. Something about the way they had connected yesterday had finally clicked into place. Just...boom.

Andy was sleeping, a happy smile on his face, sprawled out and utterly relaxed.

He grinned, setting the tray down on the side table. "I brought breakfast, baby." Dustin reached out to grab Andy's foot and shake it.

"Mmm...smells so good, but it's awful early, love..."

"I know. And we can have a nap in a bit, I promise, but I have a plan. It's not hiking." Though, to be truthful, they would have to hike up the mountain to a good takeoff place.

"I brought nice hiking boots. I am willing. Able. All that stuff." He sighed and snuggled into the pillows.

"Did you?" Dustin bent down to kiss him, then fed him a bite of the extra toast he'd made, and jam. A little sweetness went a long way, right?

"Mmm... I love blackberries..."

"Yeah? I'll keep that in mind, baby. I love them too, so we'll have to go picking at some point." He knew some good spots up in the Northwest. Did blackberries grow in New Mexico? He had no idea. There was a lot he didn't know and would need to find out.

"Mmhmm..." Andy curled up, head landing in his lap.

"Hey." He stroked Andy's hair, which curled around his fingers. "Mmm. You feel so good."

"You smell good. Like heaven." Andy nuzzled, and he shook his head.

No. Nope. Eating. Hiking. Flying. No mouthing.

“We have plans, baby. That has to wait.” He pulled Andy up to sitting, knowing he was teasing them both. But this was important. Their bond would flourish on the trust.

“More important than my mouth?” Andy’s eyes went wide.

“Well...” He chuckled. “Here, have some eggs. You’ll need your energy. We’re going flying.” Dustin waited to see if there was bouncing or apprehension.

“Like for real? For real flying? What if I suck at it?”

“You won’t. You’re going to be amazing.” He believed that with everything in him. He knew Andy played a ton of video games with flying. How amazing would it be for him to finally get his chance to do it up here in the mountains?

“Okay. Okay. Let’s do it. I want to do it.” Andy sat up, nose working. “I’m hungry though. It smells good.”

“I hope it is. You need your energy.” Flying could take it out of a dragon, though it was so exhilarating, and energy could be taken from sun or stars or wind. They were magical, after all. Andy had so much to learn just about himself. He had all the book knowledge in the world but very little practical.

“If I suck, promise not to tell the others?”

“I swear it. And we can practice again before we leave.” He fed Andy a bite of egg. “It takes some practice sometimes. But it’s worth it.”

“Okay. I want to try. I’ve always wanted to.” Andy’s dragon was right there beneath the surface.

“Good deal. Eat up, baby. We want to get out there early. It’s unlikely anyone would see us all the way up here, but we have to try to be careful.” Andy was nowhere near learning to fly and cloak from sight at the same time.

“Okay.” Andy snapped up the avocado toast, sharing bites with him before licking his fingers clean. “Yummy.”

“Thank you.” He made a little bow. “Okay, baby. Come on.” He held out a hand.



Andy reached out and took it. “I guess I have to get dressed. Jeans and coat and sweater, you think?”

“I think so, yes.” Dustin tugged Andy up for a kiss, then patted his ass. “I’ll hike up later and get anything we leave behind.” Though he was hoping to carry it. Still, if something happened and he had to drop it, better that than Andy crashing down.

He couldn’t believe his lover hadn’t even tried to fly. It seemed like such a natural, necessary act.

He couldn’t wait to show Andy how amazing it was. Then they could take the brothers too. But Andy first, so he could help herd Puck and Jules.

Every dragon deserved to soar.

“Ready,” Andy said a few minutes later, grabbing the last piece of side toast with jam on the way out of the bedroom. “How high do we have to get?”

“We’ll go a ways up since this is your first flight. It’s way easier working with gravity than it is fighting it.”

“Okay.” He could hear Andy’s mind going a million miles a minute. Buzz buzz buzz buzz. So he took Andy’s hand and swung it, remembering what it was like to be a kid on his first flight. He and Austin had been crazy excited.

There’d been no fear, just anticipation and eagerness, but Andy was older, more settled, so it stood to reason he was more nervous.

“What’s your favorite thing about flying?” Andy asked.

“The wind on my wings. It’s amazing how the variations in temperature and pressure can make you soar, let you float. I love it so much.” He would do it every day if the world allowed it, but there were very few places where a dragon could just...fly.

“Are you scared I’m going to fall?” Andy’s fingers were cold as frogs.

“Not even a little bit. I think you’ll be a natural.” Andy was way better at all things physical than he gave himself

credit for, and he was very in touch with all things dragon. All but his inner one. This would help with that. Andy would be able to connect with something he could only do as a dragon, and that would rock.

“I love how you believe in me.”

“I do. You’ve shown me how resourceful you are, how smart. I know you can do this.”

“I want to. I really want to. More than anything.”

“Then you will.” Dustin wrapped an arm around Andy as they headed out to climb up the rise behind the cabin. It was chilly, this early, but Andy spent the climb exploring and searching everything he saw. So curious, and Dustin was so glad to see it. That whole I-don’t-do-outside thing was to have solidarity with Puck and Jules, and he’d known it. Just known it.

His omega was awake and interested, stealing kisses and offering him smiles.

They climbed up higher, until the air was cold enough they could see their breath. Then he started looking for a good launching point off the face.

Andy peered down. “You won’t let me fall, will you?”

“I won’t. I swear it. I will catch you if somehow you don’t make it right the first try.”

“Okay. Goddess, I’m scared. What if I can’t remember how to be a dragon?”

“Hey, of course you can. Come here.” He pulled Andy close. “Breathe with me.” Andy could handle his poison, dammit. So he would share it and help Andy relax.

“Breathe with you. I can do that.” Andy stepped right up to him, lifting the sweet face without fear.

“Mmmhmm.” He breathed out, letting a trail of his steam push forth, letting Andy take it in. He knew it would make Andy tingle; that was what he always said happened. It would energize him, maybe, make it easier for the dragon to come.

In fact, he let himself imagine his dragon, sliding the image into Andy's thoughts.

*So beautiful. So big. All green and gold. I love how your scales shine.*

*I want to see you, Dustin told Andy. I want to know your dragon. I know you can show me.*

*I'm gray...* He could feel how much Andy craved to be seen as beautiful.

*I bet you're silver.* Why couldn't Andy see how lovely he was? Dustin would spend his life teaching Andy how glorious he was and could be.

Andy slowly began to undress, and the dragon came in a sudden rush, shocking the hell out of Dustin. His mate was indeed lean and long, and a gorgeous mixture of silver and deep and dove gray.

*Oh, Andy. You're so stunning. Look at you.* His own dragon fought to get out, so he backed away from Andy, throwing off his clothes.

Andy bowed for him, the long body flowing, almost impossible to look at, he was so beautiful.

Desire crashed through him, but so did pride and love and the need to show Andy how wonderful flying together could be. He wanted to give this to his mate, wanted Andy to feel this fierce joy. He nuzzled Andy's jaw, groaning as their scales slid and clicked together.

Andy's hum filled the air around them with sound, and he let his tongue slide out to press to Andy's muzzle. Now. *Lift your head and feel the wind, love.*

They would start with that, and then he would have Andy spread his wings and feel the wind current on them, let him learn to figure out which direction they were going. It was a little like a precheck for a plane.

Andy's face lifted, his nostrils flaring. That was right, just like that.

*Feel it?*

*I do. From there.* Andy swiveled his head to the west. Which was mostly correct. There was a little southern tilt to it.

*Now lift your wings straight up over your back. All the way unfurled and up.*

*Unfurled.* Andy spread them out. *And up.* The glittering wings reached for the sky, and Andy almost face-planted.

So he stuck his shoulder under Andy's neck, holding him up. *Crazy how that puts you off balance, huh? A little more gently. That will keep you from going down.* Dustin stepped back again, so Andy could let his wings go up, and Dustin mirrored the action, stretching them tall. *Better. Better. You've got this.*

Andy huffed out a cloud of glittering mist in a clear bout of giggles. *Great. I totally have this.*

*I went down on my nose the first time I did that. Got a snootful of gravel. Maybe a small lizard.*

The giggles intensified, Andy laughing for him, head bobbing and wings fluttering. His every emotion was right there to read in his body language. To Dustin's shock, Andy's body began to float above that ground, just from laughter alone.

That was a new one on him. How... Mary Poppins.

*Okay, love. Breathe deep and touch back down.*

*Huh?* Andy glanced at the ground, then plopped back down. *Did you do that?*

*No, love, that was all you.*

*It was?* Andy looked around, sucking in a deep, deep breath. *Should I try to do it again?*

*Yes. But let's try it this way.* Dustin raised his wings then brought them down, lifting up a few feet before touching the ground again. He wanted Andy to know what he was doing, to have a feel for it. Not knowing what one was doing during flight could be super dangerous.

Andy watched him, then brought his own wings down, soaring about fifteen feet in the air. Dammit!

*Whoa, love! Come back down now and land lightly.*

Andy landed in a crouch, and it was a damn good effort.

*You're a natural. I'm jealous, baby. Seriously. I was never that fast at learning anything.*

*All that arcane lore, I guess. Andy's laugh was a tiny bit strained. Am I freaking you out?*

*No. No, you're making me proud. Do it again?*

*Yeah? Okay. Okay, I can try.* Andy flapped again, and he soared up into the air.

*That's it, love. That's it. Keep working until you're up here with me.* Dustin launched himself into the air, hovering about twenty feet up, keeping afloat with gentle laps of his wings.

Andy was a natural, lifting up to meet him, a little overeager, but so happy to be in the air.

*Good. Good. Now, turn slightly into the wind and stretch out, pushing more back than down with your wings.* Dustin prepared himself for Andy to shoot off into space.

Sure enough, Andy's body cut through the air like a flaming rocket, and he fought to catch up. Someone was meant to fly. Dragons could have all sorts of affinities. Water, fire, ice... Andy was obviously a child of the sky.

Andy buzzed the tops of the trees, offering him a nervous glance over one shoulder.

He chuckled, making sure Andy was on the right heading, but his mate was doing really well, and he was super proud.

*I'm okay? You think I'm doing okay?*

*You're doing amazing. Just don't get so far ahead that I can't get to you if I need to.*

*I won't. Can I go up? Like straight up?*

*Yes. But if I tell you to stop, you glide back down, okay? It was so easy to get disoriented on the first few flights.*

*Okay! I'm going to go so high!* And then Andy shot right up.

Dustin went at a slower pace, staying directly beneath Andy in case he faltered or tired and dropped like a stone. Though that looked doubtful.

He didn't like how high Andy was going. The air was thin up there. *Come down, love.*

*I... I don't know how.*

*Let me show you.* He shot up into the air, following Andy, and when he got there, he spread his wings, stopping the upward momentum. He banked, circling down, letting Andy see how he could coast.

Andy shuddered but managed to open his wings, the wind stopping.

*That's it. That's it. Come on, love. Follow me. Are you shaking?*

*Am I? This is harder than I thought.*

*You're doing amazing. But no more showboating. Now we do the easy stuff. Floating on an air current.*

*Okay... Stay with me. I'm a little nervous.*

*I will.* He spread his wings and gently let them push down, the air current allowing him to glide.

Andy followed him, flagging visibly, but they stayed together. They did a few rounds of the area about their cabin, and then he thought it was time to come in for a landing.

*Please. Please, love. I'm tired.* Andy was close to him, close enough he could catch him and land them both if he needed to.

*I'm right here if you need me. Watch me. Your body will do what I do, you're such a natural.* He wanted Andy to know how to land, but he was on alert.

*Love. Love.* Andy's eyes glowed like embers, so focused on him.

*That's it. With me. Come on. Stretch out your legs and reach for the ground.*

Andy stretched, claws outspread, a roar filling the air along with a wave of glittering mist.

Goddess his mate was magnificent.

Dustin came in for a landing in the clearing in front of the cabin, turning as soon as he was down, ready to catch Andy if need be. Andy had a landing like a tumbling boulder, but he popped up unharmed, wings righting as he shook off dirt and leaves.

*Well done, mate. You're so good at that.* He meant it. Andy had surprised him.

*It wasn't too graceful.*

*It was the perfect landing. Nothing is broken and you're alive.*

Andy's laughter filled his head, bright and happy and relieved. *That was fun.* Andy shook leaves off his wings, then came to bow to him.

He rubbed their muzzles together. "It was." And now he knew why the boys had never flown. How were the moms supposed to corral all three of them if they could fly like that?

Those three would have taken over New Mexico and west Texas, at least.

Possibly Durango.

*Do we need to get our things?*

*Later. I say we soak in the hot tub.*

*Oh...* That need made him smile. *Please. Please, that was hard work.*

Dustin licked Andy's muzzle. *Okay, think about being your human self again. Then you run on inside while I shield you.* Andy would be vulnerable all naked and tired, and if someone was watching, Dustin could protect him.

Andy puffed up, that mist rolling from him. *Are there hunters? Here?*

*No, love. No. But cabins like this can attract people who want to hide off the grid. I'm always cautious.* He breathed out without his poison, dispelling the mist some.

*Oh. Oh, sorry.* Andy began to shimmer, shrinking down. "I didn't mean to."

*I'm glad you'll defend me. I love that.*

*Always. Absolutely always, Dustin.* Andy started shivering, heading toward the cabin.

He waited as patiently as he could, then called on his human form, racing inside. Woo. That air was crisp. He pushed into the house, wrapping his mate in a blanket before going out back to fire up the bubbles and the patio heaters.

Andy curled up on the sofa, buried in the blanket.

"You okay, baby?" he asked on the way through. He was going to get them robes and such from the loft.

"I am. I think I got cold up there, that's all."

"Well, we'll warm you up soon enough." He came back down, running the towels and robes out to the tub, then coming back to get Andy, blanket and all.

"You're so strong, lover. What did I do to deserve you?"

"Hmmm. You were a very good boy?" he teased. "Maybe I did something amazing to deserve you."

"Did you? I can see you doing amazing things..." Andy nuzzled into his jaw.

"I've tried to be a good dragon." He chuckled, unwrapping his prize so he could lower Andy into the hot tub.

"Mmm...bubbles." His sweet mate unfolded with a low moan, just spreading out under the water.

"It's crazy how much colder it is up here than it is in Santa Fe, even this early in the fall." Dustin slipped into the tub too.



“Right? It’s what? Nine thousand feet up here?” Andy slipped into his lap.

“Something like that.” He grabbed Andy’s ass cheeks and sank down deeper in the water so they could both stay nice and warm.

“Mmm...” Andy gave him a heady kiss, just adoring him.

They rubbed slowly, kissing and touching, the tub jets pushing them gently to and fro.

*So that was flying with your mate. I approve.*

Yes, he did too. Dustin licked at Andy’s lower lip. *It was perfect.* He couldn’t have asked for a better first flight. They had a little work to do, but they could go out again before they returned to Santa Fe.

*It was. It was good, hard work. My muscles feel like rubber.*

“I can help with that.” He rubbed his hands up and down Andy’s back, wanting him to recover some. He would do anything to make his mate feel good.

“Mmhmm. You have great hands. Can we try again tomorrow?”

“We can. In fact. I’m planning on it.” That way he could haul all their stuff down. He’d take a knapsack up with them and pack all their gear to carry down in one claw.

“Excellent. I can’t get good if I don’t practice.”

“Nope. And you need to have practice for when we teach your brothers.” He dug in anywhere he felt a tense spot.

“Oh, I bet Puck loves flying. Can you imagine it? Him in the air?”

“I imagine it will be like a very drunk bird.”

Andy laughed for him, long and hard, just bursting into giggles again every time he almost stopped. Until he gasped for air. “So mean. But so true.”

And he couldn't imagine Jules up there. He just didn't seem like he was very...up.

“Jules will see us do it and want to try. But—”

“But what?”

“Can we make this our place? Take them somewhere else to fly their first time?”

Oh. He kissed Andy hard. “We can. This is just us.”

Andy leaned hard against him. “Oh. Oh, I'd love that. I love it here. It feels magical.”

“It does.” He just kept stroking and rubbing, letting Andy feel his care. He would love to bring Andy out here permanently, but he wasn't sure that was the smartest idea on earth. Not to mention the moms would have a word or two to say. But they could come here often. They could soar together.

They could enjoy their privacy and make love everywhere.

That was worth a ton of driving and effort. His Andy was worth anything.

CHAPTER  
SIXTEEN

They flew and fucked, then fucked and flew. There might have been some eating in there, but really? No.

Flying and fucking.

Andy thought maybe it would be okay to spend the rest of his life doing this. He was tired and sore and deliciously happy.

And hungry.

God, he was hungry.

“Are we out of food?” he called up to the loft, peering into the fridge.

Dustin came to stare at him from above. “Baby, there’s tons of food in there.”

“But not anything I want.” He wanted...something specific, and Andy smacked his lips trying to figure out what he needed to taste. Nothing in there sounded right, not the grapes or the lunch meat or even the cheese.

“You want?”

“I don’t know! Something not in here.” Something savory and yummy.

“Hmm.” Dustin came down, sweatpants slung low. “Well, we can go try to find a burger place.”

“I like burgers. And sausage. And chili dogs.”

Dustin blinked at him. “Okay.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, baby. I think we can find a diner, if nothing else. There’s always a truck stop or one of those places with a gift shop attached.”

His mouth watered. “Yes please.”

“Okay, baby. Come get dressed.”

“Thanks. I’m just so...hungry.” And apparently picky.

“I can see that.” When he got to the top of the stairs, Dustin kissed his mouth. “You’re adorable.” Dustin pulled on clothes, then grabbed his phone. They’d set up a hotspot so they could check in every few hours as a compromise. “There’s a place in Creede that has burgers and sammies. Sounds right up our alley.”

“Perfect. Thank you.” He squeezed Dustin’s butt, a rush of energy buzzing through him. “Pretty pretty.”

And nice and firm.

“You’re welcome.” Dustin went up on his toes. “Yum.”

He chuckled, then moved to get dressed. He needed that something burger or sandwich-y. With melted cheese.

And onion rings. His mouth watered. That sounded perfect.

They locked up and headed out, and he moved close to Dustin, not sure if the hair standing up on his neck was the chill or something else. Maybe he was just getting used to being alone with Dustin.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I feel...weird.” He kissed Dustin’s upper arm.

“Hmm.” Dustin led him to the SUV, scanning their surroundings closely. “Well, we’ll just keep an eye out.”

“Okay.” He burped. “I don’t think I want to fly today.”

“Sure, baby. We’ll have a last leisurely day before we go home tomorrow.” Dustin gave him a bit of a frown.

“Thanks. I’m sorry. I’ve just never been away from home so long, I guess. Although it’s been so much fun.” He’d learned a lot about Dustin, and about how they fit together as well.

“It has. I’m really loving our movie marathon.” They had decided on pre-2000 superhero movies. The Batmans and Supermans of the funny, campy years.

“Yes. And I think listening to you read is the most relaxing, peaceful sound on earth.” They were working on Legends and Lattes, and Dustin did the voices so well. He was such a hoot.

“I’m glad, baby. I thought you would have a meltdown being unplugged so long.”

He leaned across the console in the car to beg a kiss before they got moving. “You compromised. It was easy.”

“I love you,” Dustin said simply.

The drive into Creede took about half an hour, but the moment he walked into the Tommyknocker Tavern, he knew it was worth it.

“OMG it smells so good.”

“Did you really just say OMG?” Dustin goosed him. “Out loud.”

“Yep. I so totally did.” And he wanted one of everything.

“Anywhere is fine, guys!” someone called from behind the bar, so they sat and grabbed menus.

“Look at the Mammoth Mountain.” It had sausage, beef, bacon, cheese, and peppers and onions. “I want that with onion rings.”

Dustin blinked at him. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. I want it. You can have whatever you want. I need that.”

“Okay. I’m getting the Honeywagon. It has all the meats and coleslaw.” Dustin folded away his menu. “You want some wings too?”

“Uh-huh.” He bounced. “No slaw for me. Nothing green.”

Dustin’s brow furrowed again. “Okay, baby. What do you want to drink?”

“Milk.” Even he frowned when he said it, but the thought of a Coke made him want to hurl. Weird.

“Milk. Okay. Sounds good to me. Not a beer?”

“Milk. I’m sure.” He wanted an icy cold glass of cow juice.

“Sure.” Dustin watched him closely. “Is it all right if I have a beer?”

“Uh-huh.” His leg bounced, and he looked around. “It’s fun in here.”

“Thanks.” The bartender came over. “Milk and...”

“A Coors, please,” Dustin said. “And a glass of water.”

“Excellent. Do you know what you want?”

They ordered, and he leaned back with a smile. “Thanks for indulging me. I don’t know where my taste buds are, but they’re definite about what they want.”

“Then we give them that.” They were the only ones in there, so Dustin took his hand, which made him all tingly. He loved how Dustin cared for him. “Are you looking forward to heading home?”

He pondered that. “I am, but getting to be with just you, loving you and flying...that’s been so special. I think we need to talk to the moms about space.”

Dustin nodded, eyes going distant for a moment. “I might ask Austin to come down. He’s good with the land, with seeing where to put things.”

“I—This is hard. Really hard. I love home, but I loved this so much. I don’t know how to make this...right in my heart.”

“We’ll work on it together. I don’t want to take you away from home, baby. I just want us to have some space to be us too. We’ll work it out. Okay?” Dustin squeezed his hand.

“Promise? You’ll make it work?” He held on, and he knew that he could trust his alpha to make it happen.

“I will. I promise.”

“Here you go, guys.” The bartender brought the food. “I hope the onion rings work. The cook made them special because they’re not on our regular menu.”

“Ooooooh. Thank you.” He really appreciated it.

“I’m sure they’re amazing.” Dustin gave her a big smile.

“Holler if you need anything else.”

“Thank you.” Whoa. Whoa, wow. He was starving and a little nauseated all at once, but he took a deep bite, because it still smelled so damn good. And the nausea went away like magic. “Yummm.”

“Good, huh?” Dustin didn’t reach for one, which was good. Andy might have broken his mate’s hand.

“Perfect. Goddess, I was starving.” It all was greasy and meaty and perfect. He snarfed up another onion ring. “They were so nice to make these for me.”

“They were. It’s a small-town place. I bet they get a lot of requests and figure if they can, why not. We’re heading into off-season in a hurry.”

“Yeah. I’ll leave a good tip.” His whole body swayed happily, the onion rings giving him life.

“Look at you! You are just buzzing.”

“I was craving these, you know. The whole thing.”

“Well, I’m glad we could put that in the belly bank for you. And this sandwich is amazing.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I mean, it looks good, but no.”

Then he dug into his sandwich, devouring it like he was a lion with a fresh gazelle.

He ended up with a whole new order of onion rings halfway through, devouring them while Dustin polished off the wings and another coleslaw.

“Oh, goddess, I might explode,” Dustin said, sitting back with his hand on his belly.

“Uh-huh. It was perfect. Thank you for indulging me.”

“You’re very welcome, baby. I figure we snuggle and be lazy today, hot-tub tonight, and head back tomorrow.” Dustin grinned up at the ceiling.

“What’s making you smile, love?” He glanced up too.

“You are. I love lounging around with you. Gonna make me soft. I need to get back on my workout regimen.”

“What do you like to do for a workout?” He just didn’t eat when he was feeling puffy.

“When we’re not on a job, we do four hours a day. Weights and cardio. I like to do bodyweight stuff and trail running or hiking, but sometimes a gym is my only option. I have to live in the human side of my body a lot, so I keep it strong.”

“Four hours...wow.” He blinked over. “I’m not sure I could do that...”

“You could if you had to.” Dustin snorted. “But you don’t have to. I might let you watch.”

“You’d like it if I watched, and I know it.”

“I would.” Dustin flexed a little for him, and that was almost as good as onion rings. Almost.

His mouth went a little dry, and he licked his lips to wet them.

“I can smell you,” Dustin said in a low voice.

“Get me one more order to go and we can do more than cuddle.”

“You got it.” Dustin waved down the bartender. “I intend to cuddle the fuck out of you, love.”

“One more?” she asked.

And in ten minutes, they were heading back to the cabin with another box of onion rings.



It was like a romance novel, but with crunchy, salty goodness.

CHAPTER  
SEVENTEEN

Dustin had worried he was never going to get Andy out of bed.

And when he did, his lover puked. A lot. For like, half an hour.

“Too many onion rings, baby?” he asked, putting another cool, wet cloth on the back of Andy’s neck. They needed to hit the road, but his poor baby was so sick.

“Uh-huh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to. I swear, love. I *swear*.”

“I know, baby. I’m a little worried about you.” Dragons weren’t prone to food poisoning, but that sure seemed like what Andy had going on.

“I’ll be okay. I promise. I’m just so damn queasy.”

“Breathe, huh? I think I have some crackers, and we can stop and get you a Sprite or some ginger ale.” He wanted to make Andy feel better, and he had a feeling his lover would be happy to get home to his own bed.

“Oh, I’d like that. Please.” His sweet mate was green around the gills.

“Okay. Let me find the crackers. The car is all packed and ready to go.” He could dig out some crackers now. Then they’d stop for something to drink.

“I’ll sit in the car.”

No more onion rings for Andy. That was rough. He hated to see his lover so down.

He found the crackers in the cooler full of snacks he'd packed up. They were saltines, so nothing buttery or herby. Good deal.

He got the crackers to Andy, then finished packing up the car. By the time he was halfway done, his mate was helping, the queasiness seeming to ease.

"You look better." He studied Andy with a critical eye, but he didn't think Andy would barf now if they got on the road.

"I'm okay, I think. I'm sorry." Andy looked so sheepish. "I must have overeaten last night. I'm an idiot."

"No you're not. Cravings can be crazy things." He reached out to stroke Andy's cheek. "I'm not mad. I just want you to feel good again." It had been an amazing trip.

"I'm glad you're not angry. I feel much, much better."

"I'm good." He helped Andy settle in the SUV so he could get them moving. Something was making him want to get Andy back on his home ground. Back where everything was familiar.

Back where he could defend his new family.

He chuckled at himself. Like the moms and Jules weren't capable of protecting them all.

"What?" Andy reached over to touch his arm. Just touching. He thought Andy felt this weird need to be close too.

"I was just thinking how Jules would feed me my teeth for not thinking he could protect you."

"Yes. He takes his job very seriously. He worries a lot."

"I can tell. I'll help with that." He would do everything in his power to make life easier for Andy's, and now his, whole family. "Why don't you rest, baby? You still look pale."

"Do I? I feel a little bloodless." Andy winked for him. "I'll be fine."

"Good deal, baby." He held Andy's hand, and his lover dozed for a long while. Long enough that he didn't stop for a goodly bit, wanting Andy to sleep. He finally pulled off at a

clean-looking gas center, wanting something to drink and maybe a burrito, if Andy could take the smell. If not, he would grab some peanut butter crackers and a candy bar.

“Going to go in, baby. You want anything?”

“Fizzy drink?”

“Sure, baby.” He headed in, and his phone binged, Austin’s face showing up.

“Hey, bro.” Dustin headed for the coolers at the back of the store. “What’s up? You still fishing?”

“Nope. I’m on a job. Just needed to check in with you, you know?”

“Yeah.” He glanced around, feeling...watched. “I’ve been needing to get back to Andy’s place. We’re on the road, and he’s been sick. It’s weird out here today.”

“Weird? Do you need me? Weird how?”

“I don’t know. I keep feeling like I need to get him home. Maybe it’s just because he’s been sick, but he said yesterday he felt like he was being watched. It’s just off.” He hated that their idyll was ending this way too. “Can you come down?”

“Yes.” No when or maybe or after this job. Just yes.

“Thanks, bro. I just feel like something is about to happen.”

“Hey, if your spidey sense is tingling, I am on my way. I’ll call it in to the boss too.”

“Thanks. Yeah. He can kinda put out feelers.”

“Totally. I’ll be there in five-six days, tops.”

“Okay, bro. I appreciate it.” He grabbed snacks but left the burrito behind. He would beg one from the moms when he got back to Santa Fe.

He needed to warn the moms about their company, warn Andy, and warn Puck and Jules as well. Dustin headed back outside, humming under his breath, feeling better that his brother was going to be backing him up.

Dustin walked around the corner and stopped short. His SUV had a huge grizzly bear standing in front of it, front paws on the hood, lips wrinkling, huge teeth catching the light.

Shit.

He paused for a long moment, a hundred things running through his mind. One of the main ones was that there were no grizzlies left in Colorado. So this was either an escapee from a zoo or a sanctuary, or this was a shifter.

Either way, he needed it to get the hell away from his mate.

He ran toward the car, letting his roar enter his voice. "Hey! Leave him alone."

Black eyes turned toward him, and a gruff vocalization filled the air.

Dustin skidded to a stop. "Don't hurt him. I don't want to hurt you." There was no...threat in the stance the bear took right now, so he circled, trying to get to the other side of the car. He needed to be able to defend his mate at close range.

She bobbed her head, stomping one foot, then staring at him again, so serious.

"Okay." Okay, what was she trying to tell him? "You don't know him. Or me." He would feel pretty silly if it was just a bear.

She huffed out a breath and sat back on her haunches, grunting and waving her paws at him, face so serious. She was absolutely trying to say something.

*Mate? There's a bear. Did you see?* Andy sounded amused more than scared.

*I did. She's doing interpretative dance. All I can think of is the mom in that Brave movie.*

*Well, she's totally a mom, or a mom-to-be.*

*Yeah?* Okay, he could go out on a limb here. "Do you need help?"

She sighed heavily and relaxed, nodding frantically. Oh, bingo.

“I can’t help too much when you’re a bear. You don’t fit in the SUV.”

*Does she need help?*

*Yes.*

*Okay, how?* Andy blinked at him.

*Well, she’s going to have to shift, honey.*

*Shift?*

*She’s a bear shifter, baby. We need to get a blanket out. You can hand it to me out the window. I don’t want to take a chance on you getting out.*

*Oh. Nonsense.* Andy opened up the door. “Let’s make some mist. We don’t want anyone seeing this, hmm?”

Dustin was going to pass out. “Baby!”

“Yes. She is pregnant. Be nice and grab a blanket.”

He grabbed a blanket just as he was told, but he slid across the hood of the SUV like an action hero to get to the side of the car the bear was on, putting himself between the bear and Andy. Just in case. The mist surrounded them, and she moaned as she shrank down to human size.

Dustin wrapped her in the blanket. “I got you.”

“Thank you. Hunters. They took my mate...”

“Who did? Where?” He was going to bite someone.

“Let her get in the car and get warm, Dustin. Do we need to get any other cubs?”

“No. No, this is my first.” She started crying, silent tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, lady. We’ll help. We will. Where is your mate? Should we go find him? I can fly now!” Andy’s eyes were glowing again.

“No, you will not.” He glared. “Tell us what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She sniffled. “They’re going to kill him if they haven’t already.”

“Can’t you hear him? Inside you? Don’t you know?”

“I keep trying. But if they have him sedated...” She started crying. Hard. “I’m sorry. Hormones.”

“It’s okay. We’re going to help. Can we take you to our home in Santa Fe and recoup? Make sure you’re safe?” His Andy was doing so well.

“Please. And then I can—I can see if I can feel him. I know some people to call to help, but my phone got smashed.”

“Of course. We’re about an hour away from home, and you’ll be safe.” Andy reached out and took her hand.

“Thank you.” She leaned her head back once she slid into the back seat, and her soft sobs trailed off when Andy handed her his phone.

*You are a good man, Andy.*

*Me?* Andy smiled at him. *You have to help when you can.*

*I’m proud of you.* He’d known he and Andy were meant for each other. The mate bond wouldn’t happen if it wasn’t fate. But it made him deeply happy to see Andy had the same hardcore need to assist people that he did.

*Get your brothers ready for this, mate. We’re going to need help.*

*On it.*

He would call Austin too. See if his brother could wrap up his job and come sooner. They needed to find her mate. He hated to leave the area, but instinct was driving him. Get to the safest place he could think of in the shortest amount of time. Something was happening.

Something odd, and he needed...help.

So he would take... “What’s your name, hon?” he asked, hoping he wasn’t interrupting her conversation.

“Ursula,” she answered. “I have a friend searching now, but he has to be careful not to get caught too. He’s a wolf shifter.”

“Good. Good, I’m going to get my brother on it too. He does this for a living, huh?”

*Is Austin really coming then? Should I tell the fam about that too?* Andy’s mental touch was soft, teasing.

*Yeah. I mean, he may not be able to get here for a few days, but he can help.* How much did he love being able to communicate this way. Goddess, Andy was amazing.

*On it. We’ll have to get the guest room set up and all.*

*Thank you, love.* Dustin fought the urge to speed. That wouldn’t help. It would draw unneeded attention and not be safe, dammit.

*Did you get snacks? Does she need anything? Poor lady. This sucks. No one should be so scared...*

*There’s stuff in the cooler, and I got some at the store. There’s a drink for you in the bag.* And he totally agreed. Fucking trophy hunters. Someone was always out there looking for shifters. Or bears. Either way.

“Would you like something to eat? A snack? A drink? Something?” Andy turned and offered her a gentle smile. “My moms know you’re coming, and Mama’s already making a beef stew.”

“I don’t know.” Ursula laughed, but the sound was mirthless. “I’m not sure when I ate last.”

“Oh, that sucks. Maybe something little, something to get your mouth wet.”

“I would love some water.”

“Okay cool. There’s some of that in the cooler, I’m sure.”

Dustin nodded to her. “There is. There are grapes and cut-up pineapple and some berries.”

“Thank you.” She dug into the cooler, finally pulling out a water and some berries. She was so pale, and he felt awful for



her, huddled in that blanket and feeling hopeless. Maybe he'd fly back up here tonight and look for her mate.

His phone rang again. "Brother? What's wrong?"

"I need you to come. I have a lady here who says someone's taken her mate. I need help finding him."

"Is she a bear, by any chance?"

"Uh, yeah. A pregnant one." How the hell had Austin known that?

"Dude. I'm tracking her mate. She's safe?"

Dustin blinked. "As houses. I'm taking her home with us."

"I'm going in tonight for an extraction."

"No shit. What's the sitrep?" He would keep his end of the conversation noncommittal, but he needed to know the details.

"Five hunters. Vampires. They were trying for her, next. They're pissed that they lost track of her. You just drive until you get her safe."

"I will. We'll hole up in Santa Fe and you come to us. If you need me..."

"I'll call."

"Fair enough. I'll fortify everything there."

He heard Andy's, *Fortify? What?*

*Austin is going after her mate. That's the job he's on. He says they're vampires. The hunters.*

Andy's eyes went wide, and then he was on his phone, texting furiously, thumbs a blur.

Dustin didn't blame him one bit. Andy was well aware that vamps had taken out an entire family of dragons not far from where they'd been staying.

The house where the murders had happened had quickly become a dark, haunted place of legend. No one dared take it on, even though it was a perfect place for dragons to raise young and fly...

*Don't think about that! That's terrible.* Andy was turning a little green, eyes filled with tears.

*Sorry, love. I promise, we're going to keep everyone safe.* His sweet mate didn't need that kind of worry, so he would keep it to himself. And Austin would be on his way to them soon. Together, he and his brother were unstoppable.

*We have to. Oh, it feels so wrong, to be so far away when they might be in danger. How do you and your brother do it?*

*We've just had a while to get used to it, I guess.* He would know if something happened to Austin, if his brother needed him. That had kept them going over the years.

*Right. We've been together forever.*

Dustin thought he heard a little bit of shame there, a lot of worry.

*That's nothing to be ashamed of. Families are incredibly important to dragons, even if we often can't stay together. I'm glad you all have each other.*

*We have each other.* Andy reached out and took his hand. *You're a part of us now.*

*Thank you.* He would keep driving until the moms and the brothers were there with him to help protect what was theirs, and this poor bear who needed help.

It was the best he could do.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

The drive home seemed to take hours.

Puck was in constant contact with him via text, while Mama cooked, and Mom and Jules did rounds and built up their wards.

<Are you close?>

<We are. We're north of Santa Fe>

<Good. Good. I'm worried. I want you here where I can see you. Jules pushed out a space for the bear. It's a good, warm den for bear or lady. Mama has clothes and blankets. Everything.>

<You guys rock> What else could he say? He'd already brought a mate into the house, and now he was bringing a bear shifter in crisis with a pack of vampires after her. He was a winner.

"Almost there," Dustin murmured, as if he knew what Andy was thinking. He probably did. He was pretty good at hearing things.

"Everything's ready. Jules created a space for Ursula so she can rest."

Dustin glanced in the rearview mirror. "Good. Austin will call as soon as he's secured her mate."

"Do you think he's okay?"

"Well, he's in work mode, so things are quiet, but I would know if something had gone wrong."

He nodded, trying not to fidget or make weird noises or anything he would normally do to let off stress. Ursula was asleep, and he wanted her to be able to stay that way.

“You’re doing great, mate.”

“Bah. I’m voted least likely to help in any given situation that doesn’t involve code.”

“Well, you’re the one who got her in the car.” He got a wink.

“Yes. She needed help. It was the right thing to do.” It had been the only thing to do, in his heart.

“Exactly. Don’t put yourself down, love. Ah, home, huh?” Santa Fe appeared over the rise, and he could have wept with relief. Dustin turned off into the foothills above the city, heading for the house.

It had been amazing to be away, but something was calling him home, drawing him in, and he couldn’t deny it. Whether it was safety or some other mystical thing, he had no idea, but he was eager to get his hands on a keyboard and find out what the dark dragon web said.

That was *his* strong suit, what he could contribute to Dustin and Austin and their employer’s network.

He was tapped in, and the dragon world was changing. Lighting up. The magic on the air was heavier, like a climate change.

All the portents pointed to something big.

The closer they got to the house, the more he relaxed, his smile wide, his foot tapping.

“You don’t need to be so obvious,” Dustin teased, his laughter plain.

“I was fine until uh—” He jerked his head.

“Mmm. Well, here we are.” Dustin pulled in, and Jules and Puck spilled out the door to greet them.

“Brother!” They surrounded him, as if to make sure he was whole; then Jules came to him, hugged him tight.

“Welcome home.”

Ursula stood, wrapped in her blanket, and immediately Mama was there, utzing her inside, promising her tea and a hot bath and help. Her gentle voice floated back to them, but he lost track of it, because Puck glommed onto him, not letting go. He must have been so worried.

“Dustin. Glad to have you back,” Mom said, clapping his mate on the shoulder.

“Thank you, lady. I appreciate it.” Dustin beamed at his mom, and he really did think his mate wanted to be part of the family.

“Of course. Come in. The weather is about to turn, I fear.” Mom’s eyes flashed and her gaze landed on him. “Are you well, son?”

“I ate the entire menu at a restaurant. It was bad.” And gross, and uncomfortable too. His belly muscles were raw.

“Oh.” She came to take his hands and peer into his eyes. “Come and sit. You can bundle up on the couch and I’ll make you some tea to tame your tummy.”

Tears stung his eyes, which felt a little ridiculous. Let down from the flight with the she-bear, no doubt. “Okay.”

“Come on, brother.” Jules wrapped an arm around him.

He glanced back at Dustin, who smiled and nodded. “I’ll check on Ursula.”

“But then you’ll come right back?”

*I swear it. I will never leave you. Never.* “Go on, dork.”

He nodded, letting his brothers drag him to the big lounge area and swath him in blankets. “I’m fine, really. You make me queasy again and I will hurt you.” The last thing he needed was to start barfing all over once more.

“No. No, of course not. Was it fun?” Puck asked, and Andy nodded, whispering low—

“I went flying, and it was *amazing*.”

“Whaaat!” Jules put his hands on his hips and glared.

“Dustin says you can come next time. He wanted me to be able to help keep you hooligans in line.” He grinned, feeling a little smug.

“No! Were you scared?” Puck asked, and he shook his head.

“Not even a little bit, no. It felt natural. Right.”

“Wow. That’s so cool. I’m so jelly.”

“No one says jelly anymore, Puck,” Jules pointed out.

“Bite me.”

Jules snapped his teeth at Puck, and okay, he could go on vacay again. Maybe not until tomorrow, but still—

“Stop being turds. Did you make a room ready for Austin? Dustin says he’s coming.” And Andy wanted to make a comfortable place for him. Somewhere he could feel at home.

“I did. I gave him a room with an en suite. It’s all ready.”

“Thank you. I hope he finds her mate.”

“That’s wild that he’s looking for her mate and you and Dustin found her.” Jules was shaking his head.

“I want to believe it’s a coincidence.”

“There’s no such thing as coincidence, Andy,” Puck whispered. “You know that.”

And Puck was right. He did know that, but if it meant that this little bear-family got to be—

“Andy! I have to go!” Dustin burst in. “They have Austin. They have my twin.”

The world fell out from under him, but he nodded, because he would expect Dustin to do the same if it were his brothers. “Hurry. Come back soon. Be careful!”

“Do you need me to come?” Jules offered immediately.

Dustin paused, then shook his head. “I need you here protecting my mate. I can’t... Please. Keep him safe.” Dustin

gave him an agonized look.

“I will. We will. Of course I will. If you need us, let Andy know. Mom and I can come.”

“I love you. Go and bring them here—brother and bear.”

“I’m going to kill them all.” The grim look on his mate’s face told him Dustin meant it. Then he was off and running, and he didn’t hear the car start back up. Was Dustin flying?

“Oh.” Andy fought the urge to burst into tears, because he knew it was the right thing to do, to encourage Dustin to go and save his family, but his soul hurt.

“Baby.” His mom came to grab him in a hug, and he clung to her, the sobs starting now because Mom had that effect on him. She just made him let out what he was feeling.

“He had to go. His brother needs him. He had to go.”

“He did. And he has to come back.” Jules sounded so very sure.

“He will come back.”

He sniffled, his nausea roaring back, but he didn’t let it get to him. He had to be strong and believe.

And will Dustin to come home to him.

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

Dustin flew as fast as he could. North like an arrow, his hastily muttered wards keeping him from being seen from below. He hoped. Austin had been taken. Austin needed him. He was going to find his brother and kill the vampires who'd taken him.

*Brother, can you hear me?*

*Yes. I'm here with Atlas. We've been caged. I can break out, but not without hurting the bear.*

*Here where? Can you show me what it looks like outside.* He had an idea of Austin's coordinates from where his cell phone had last been, but he needed landmarks. A building. Something. Austin needed to help him find them.

*There's a cave at the north tip of Blue Mesa Reservoir. I'm in here.*

*Okay, I'm not far. How many are there?* Dustin was encouraged by how with-it Austin sounded. How ready to move. That meant whatever the vamps had planned they hadn't started yet. Thank the goddess.

*A dozen. Fucking bloodsuckers. Bring fire. Lots of fire.*

*I will.* His poison could only do so much against vamps. Though it could disable them while he set them on fire, which was always good. *How's the bear?* He needed to know how mobile they would be once he got them out if there.

*He's healing faster than I thought he would. Especially now that he knows his mate is safe.*



*Good. Good. How did you get made?*

*They were waiting for me. I think they know about the boss.*

*Shit.* That meant there might be trouble higher up the chain too. And any number of dragons would be compromised. But he had to think about one problem at a time. Right now, he needed to get Austin and the bear safe. Too bad retrieval was way more Austin's thing and his was finding and watching.

But he had the same skills training as his brother. He could do this.

The night was fully fallen by the time he reached the reservoir, and really, he and Austin hadn't planned this terribly well. It would have been way easier first thing in the morning. Still, he started scanning for the cave, hoping it stood out to him.

*I'm here. I just need to find you now.*

*I'm laying down a tiny line of acid on the base of the bars. I need you to get Atlas out.*

*I can do that.* He understood why Austin hadn't just shifted and taken out the vamps. The bear would wind up being collateral damage if they were in a small space together, and that wasn't acceptable.

*Once you do, I'm melting these fuckers, then I want to get the hell out of here.*

*I hear you, brother.*

Okay. Okay, so he needed a way in. He flew low, scanning the crags and cuts of the surfaces around the reservoir. It had to be there, visible to his dragon eye.

The vampire guards watched the mouth of the cave, and he had to decide, and quickly, whether to be stealthy or to cause a huge commotion. If he drew the guards out with a distraction, then Austin and the bear could maybe push the acid-weakened bars out of their way...

*I'm about to make a whole lot of noise, brother.*

*Okay. Make them pay for caging me. Let me know which direction to steer Atlas once we hit the cave mouth.*

*I will.* He drew in a great breath of air, sliding to a landing a good twenty feet to the right of the cave as he faced it. Then he let out a roar that shook the ground under his feet.

A bunch of bloodsuckers came tumbling out of the cave, gunfire splattering the air. He defended with one wing, the bullets bouncing off with little stinging bruises. He waited until they gave chase, leaving the mouth of the cave unprotected, and then he laid down a cloud of poison, stunning many of them.

*Go to your right when you come out! It's ready.*

He breathed more poison out, the vamps staggering around. He had to be careful not to get the bear when he popped out of the cave. He swiped out with one claw, taking the head off a vamp with a semiautomatic rifle.

Screams came ringing out of the cave, and the roar of an infuriated bear sounded, a vampire's torso flying from the darkness. There. That way he knew the bear was fine and was working his way out. All he needed now was to see his brother.

The screams preceded the dark-violet, near-ebony scales of his brother, the acid breath melting every man in its path. He was so damn jealous sometimes. Acid seemed so much more handy than poison. Of course, he didn't have to worry about melting his mate this way.

Not only that, he could lay down a fog of nonlethal poison.

Acid just burned.

Once Austin left the cave, he roared, grabbed the bear in his claws, and flapped his wings. *Which way are we going?*

*Follow me.* He lifted off and circled around until he was pointed back south, arrowing for his mate's home. He needed to see Andy, to make sure he was safe. If he'd left his mate vulnerable to an attack...

The bear was complaining and roaring softly, unhappy with being up in the air. Dustin didn't blame him. Austin wasn't known for having the softest touch on earth. But a rescue was a rescue, right?

*Did you tell him I have his mate?*

*We didn't get the chance to discuss much.* Austin's wry mental tone made him puff out a laugh.

*Did we get them all?*

*As far as I know. I set their nest on fire. It'll burn deep into the ground.*

*Good. I'll call it in to the boss as soon as we get home.*

*Yes. We'll fortify the house as well, just in case.*

*We will.* Andy and his family were the priority now. He was happy to have the bears safe, but he had to protect what was his. Had to.

*I have your back, brother.* Austin was exhausted; Dustin could hear it.

*Do you need me to take the bear?* Austin was too big for him to carry on his back, but he could give him a draft to follow in, which he did. That would make it easier for Austin, coasting in his wake, letting the air current carry him.

*No. No, he's not fighting me anymore. In fact, I think he's decided to nap for the duration. You said the omega is with your mate?*

*Ursula. Yes. She's in hysterics, but safe, warm, and fed.*

*Poor thing. They'll be glad to be reunited. He's been a bit frantic.*

*I understand.* He would tear the world apart to find Andy if he went missing. His mate was more precious to him than anything but his brother, and they were equal now, which felt odd, but not disloyal. He thought Austin would understand.

*I can't wait to meet him. Will we need to stop for the day or can you be there before dawn?*

*We can be there before dawn. He would carry the bear the last bit if need be. I know you're tired, but we can make it.*

*I would rather we were both safe. Austin's mental voice never wavered, but he could feel the waves of fatigue coming off his brother, could tell how shallow the beats of Austin's wings were becoming. It's closer than you think.*

*Yes.*

He checked his orientation. They might not make it. Not with Austin flagging. He made a split-second decision. *Andy? Love? Can you hear me?*

*I can. What do you need? I'm here. Talk to me.*

*I need Jules to get on the highway and head north. Bring the same vehicle we came home in. Austin needs to rest and we won't make it before dawn. If he can meet us partway... Dustin could carry Austin in his human form and the bear if he had to, but that would slow them down just as much. And as dawn got closer, the chance of being seen always got worse.*

*Of course. We'll meet you. We'll meet you.*

*Love.*

*No. I'm coming. I will not let you down.*

Goddess. He wanted to roar, but how could he? He was so proud of Andy. His brave mate. *Thank you. Bring blankets and food and sugary drinks for the shock. My brother and Atlas are in rough shape.*

*You have it. Anything else, let us know and we can stop to get it.*

*I will. We'll come down adjacent to the highway but out of sight over the trees.*

*We're coming. I love you. I'm coming.*

He glanced back over his shoulder. *Keep me posted on where you are. If we have to stop, I'll tell you where to pick us up.* He just needed to get Austin and the bear far enough from the vamps' hideout to be sure no one could follow them if they'd left anyone alive.

*On it.*

Dustin glanced over at his twin. *My mate is bringing a car, blankets, food. Everything we need.*

*He is? I can make it.*

*Right.* Austin was barely clearing the tops of the trees, and the bear's claws were filled with boughs already. *You just warn me before you crash.* They would have to set it down before dawn and wait for Andy to come to them. But he knew his mate would show up come hell or high water.

His mate would do exactly the same thing Dustin would do if the roles were reversed. They were together in this. Forever.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

“Can’t you go any faster? He says Austin is drooping bad.” Andy hated to be a side-seat driver, but Jules seemed to be plugging along so damn slow. He needed to get to his mate.

Jules gave him the tiniest glance before his gaze returned to the road. “Are you kidding? I’m going twenty over. I might as well be in Texas.”

“Ha ha. I guess you don’t want us to get a ticket. Mom would kill us.”

“Puck’s going to kill us anyway. He’s dealing with Ursula. She’s trying to go into labor.”

Andy dropped his head into his hands. “What a mess.”

“It’s because you went flying, you know. You caused trouble in the universe.”

Andy hoped Jules was just kidding. “That’s not funny. And maybe we just got caught in the bears’ trouble.”

“I’m giving you shit. Are you kidding? This is the most excitement I’ve had in years.”

“Jules!”

“Your mate will be fine. If they have to land, they’ll just wait for us.”

“Yeah, it’s like a bad joke. Two dragons and a bear land in the woods...”

“You forgot to mention the vampires.” Jules’s voice dropped. “Did you see any?”

Andy shook his head. “Not even one.”

He wasn’t sure what he’d ever do if he did. They could kill dragons in groups.

“I guess that’s good. I mean, I know it is. I don’t want that.”

“I know. I do.” He had to grin, even though he felt queasy as fuck. “Even you’re not that nuts.”

“Ha-ha.”

*Andy? We have to stop. I’ll tell you the mile marker once I get us down and get Austin and Atlas well hidden.*

*All right, love. We’re coming.* “Jules, they’re heading down. He’s getting me a mile marker.”

“Okay.” Jules checked the rearview. “We’re good right now. We’ll have to stop on the way back and get gas.”

“Oh man. With a bear.”

“He’ll have to shift if he can. That way he just looks like a guy taking a nap.”

“Right. Right. Duh.” And he had the mist. It worked a charm on a camera. “Sorry, sorry. I just... I mean, I helped with Ursula. I’m just...”

“Tired. I can tell. You look exhausted.” Jules frowned. “Was it a bad vacation?”

“What?” He blinked over at his brother. “No! It was amazing. We had so much fun.”

“It’s not like you to get sick and toss your cookies. That’s usually Puck’s job. Maybe you were channeling his bad feeling.”

“Nope. I just ate too much.” He grimaced. “Like way too much. Like a dozen plates.”

“Dude! Seriously?”

“I know.”

*We're north of Purgatory on highway 550. Dustin gave him the mile number.*

*We're ten miles south of Durango. Thank the goddess, they were close. Soon, love.*

*We'll wait for you here. Thank you, mate. I love you.*

He made sure the blankets and food were ready, climbing into the third row to make sure everyone would be warm and dry and fed and...

“Andy? Dude, pay attention! What mile marker? You didn't tell me.”

Andy rattled it off. “Sorry! I just want to be ready. He sounds so tired, and he says Austin and Atlas are even worse.” He blinked. “Wow. That's a lot of A names.”

Jules snorted. “Are you stoned?”

“No. No—I'm nervous. This is his twin. What if he hates me?”

“He won't. Trust me. You're the most likeable of all of us.” Jules sounded so certain. It warmed him that his brother liked him as well as loved him.

“I hope he does. I just...wow.” Andy's eyes filled with tears, his world overwhelming and scary and suddenly he needed a hug, so badly.

*Mate? Mate, what's wrong?*

*Nothing. Nothing, I'm fine.*

*Are you sure? You're crying; I can tell.*

He didn't want to add to Dustin's worry, so he sniffed it back. *I'm just a little overwhelmed. It's been a long day.*

*You're right about that.*

He had to smile at his mate's wry tone.

*Yeah. Started with puking and a road trip, ended with two bears and a road trip.*

Soft laughter trickled through to him, and he checked the mile marker as they hit the other side of the Purgatory ski area.



*Ten more miles, love.*

*I'm so ready.*

*Is Austin all right? Just very tired? Did someone bite him?*  
God, the thought of being bitten made Andy queasy as hell.  
*Did anyone bite you?*

*No. No, I got a few bullets bounced off me, but I'm pretty  
scaly in dragon form. I'll be sore.*

*Shot!* Nausea squeezed his belly. *Ugh.*

“Hey, no puking in the car,” Jules said. “I can’t cope with that.”

“Don’t say puke!”

“Why? Will you puke?”

“Jules!” He started giggling, tickled.

“There.” Jules put on the turn signal and coasted to a stop, pulling off to the side of the road. “Watch my back.” He hopped out to unload blankets.

*We’re here. If the bear can shift, it would help. We brought blankets and clothes and everything.*

Also, hurry, because vampires were scary.

*We’re coming out.* Dustin and a man who looked just like him sprinted out of the woods supporting a huge man who was far more obviously naked, rushing him to the car.

Andy began to pour mist out, covering the SUV and the area so they could get everyone bundled inside.

“We’ll make introductions on the road,” Jules rumbled. “I’ll have to stop and get gas before we get home. I’ll get hot food and coffee then, but there are sweats and socks and blankets.”

“And Cokes and cheese sticks and tamales.”

“Thank you.” He got a huge hug from Dustin. “You worried me so much, but I’m so glad to see you.” Then Dustin helped stuff the bear into the back, wrapping him in blankets.

He and Austin hopped into the back seat, and Jules got them moving again.

“Good driving, getting here. I was just worn out.” Austin leaned his head back and sighed.

“No problem. You were busy fighting from what I hear.” Jules turned them back toward home. “I was just trying not to get pulled over. I’m Jules.”

“Austin.”

“Hey, Jules. Thanks so much, man.” Dustin put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I really appreciate it.”

“You’re family now.”

Tears threatened again at Jules’s words. What the hell was going on with him?

*Easy, mate. I’m here. You did perfectly. Thank you.* Dustin’s thoughts wrapped around him and eased him. And Dustin’s hands on his shoulders helped even more. Touching was so important with mates. His moms always said so.

*I tried. I was worried. Do the vampires know where you are?*

*No. I’m pretty sure they’re all dead, love.* Dustin sat back, and Andy could feel how tired he was. His brave mate, flying all that way in such a short time.

*Good. I love you. Rest now, okay? I’m right here.*

*Are you okay? The nausea gone now?* Dustin’s thoughts broke off as he yawned audibly.

*Fine. Fine. I’ll keep Jules awake. You sleep.*

*No. I want to be with you. When we stop for gas, you can move back here with me and Austin can sit up front. I want to hold you.*

*Yes. Yes, I could handle that.* “How are you, Atlas? Ursula is at our place, and she’s so happy you’re coming to her.”

“Ursula. I thought she was gone.” That rough voice was full of agonized hope. “She’s well?”

“She and the baby are just fine.”

“Oh...” A low rumble filled the air. “She is so brave.”

“She’s amazing,” he agreed. “She was going to make sure we understood, that someone needed to help you.”

“Yes. She’s my rock.”

He glanced back at Dustin. “I understand.”

Dustin’s lips curved in a smile. “So do I.”

“I’m going to start gagging,” Jules said.

“Don’t talk about puking!” Andy was going to swat him.

Austin snorted, and even Atlas had to chuckle. “Are you pregnant too?” he asked.

Andy stilled, the world going all white noise with the question.

*Love? Dustin’s voice cut through his sudden fog. What is it? Are you okay? Do we need to stop?*

“I’m fine,” he bit out. “Fine.”

He couldn’t be pregnant. They’d only done it a handful of times. He just couldn’t.

Jules glanced at him sideways. “You think that could be it?”

“No way. I wouldn’t have morning sickness this soon, right?”

“Well...” Atlas rumbled out a laugh. “My lady had it the day after her heat.”

“Oh, goodness...” Andy stared at Jules. *Don’t be mad.*

*Why would I be mad? Are you leaving?*

*Leaving to where? That’s my home!*

*Then don’t be stupid.*

“I’m not stupid!”

“Children, please,” Austin said. “My head is killing me.”

“Don’t be a bitch, Austin,” Dustin shot back. “They did come to our rescue.”

That was so like something he and Puck would do that it made him laugh.

Jules rumbled softly, and the air in the SUV grew darker with his brother’s anger.

Fuck him. That wasn’t going to work.

“Hey.” Dustin’s voice was super calm now. “It’s okay, Jules. He’ll play nice from now on. He’s just super tired, okay?” *I’m sorry, love. This was not how I wanted all of you to meet.*

*It’s okay.* He opened a Coke for Jules. “We’re cool. I’m sorry for snapping. It’s been a weirdly stretched-out day, huh?”

“No shit on that.” Jules’s voice was flat, but he got the barest nod, which meant that it was time to just be quiet and leave his big brother alone. “Don’t forget to text Puck with an ETA.”

Austin sighed, settling back in his seat. “I’m sorry too. I’ll sleep it off. Holler when it’s time for me to switch seats.” And with that, he seemed to settle, dropping into a doze.

“If you want me to drive at all, let me know,” Dustin said.

“Rest first. Maybe when we stop.”

“Not on your life,” Jules murmured.

He couldn’t stop the way his lips curled. *I’ll tell Puck to avoid him.*

*Please, Jules agreed with him. Seriously. He’d piss himself. Tell him to stay up in the command center with the computers until everyone is in bed and resting.*

*Yeah. I can do that. I’m sure he’s nice.*

*I’m sure.* And that was that. Jules was done talking.

Dammit.

Tensions were high. He shouldn’t get discouraged. He was hungry. His butt hurt. And he was still kinda weepy. Could he

be pregnant? Was that possible so soon? He needed to look into the timing.

He was probably just stressed out—he'd gone from staying home and in his territory with his brothers to mated to traveling to flying to vampires to bears to meeting Austin in short order. It was all a little much.

He turned the music on low so Jules would have it and so Dustin would know it was okay to just go to sleep. They had about three hours to get some rest and figure out how to keep Jules from pouting the whole time Austin was staying with them. Or worse.

Puck would be happy to hide for months, but Jules would be aggressive, and it was their territory, after all.

He really hoped Austin was just worn out. Dustin had been insufferable to begin with, too...

*I heard that.*

*It's true.*

*By your definition. I guarantee he will think Jules is adorable.*

*He's amazing. Everyone is just scared and tired. I'm so glad you're okay. I was worried.*

*I'm fine. I am. We'll need to talk once I rest. But I'm afraid I won't be coherent now.*

*Shh. Shh. Sleep. Just close your eyes. We'll stop soon, okay?*

*Love you.* Soon enough, soft snores told him everyone in the back of the vehicle was asleep.

He breathed a sigh of relief and of worry at the same time. Okay, rescue done.

Now he had to deal with family and whatever this nausea thing was.

Yay.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-ONE

Dustin was ashamed to admit that neither he nor Austin had awakened until they were home. Andy woke him up by shaking his shoulder once Jules parked the car, and he jumped at least a foot, banging his head on the headliner.

“Ow.”

“We’re home. Let me get you and Austin up into your rooms, and then I’ll help Jules unload the car. We have lots of doughnuts.” Andy looked utterly exhausted.

“No, you go sit and see if Puck will make some tea. I slept all the way. I can get Austin to a room. Where should I put him?”

Andy gave him a tiny smile. “Not next to Jules.”

“Yeah.” That had gone so well. “No worries there. I’ll just put him in the guest room downstairs.”

“That’s where Ursula is, I think. The stairs were hard for her.”

“Okay. Then I’ll put him all the way at the end of the hall upstairs.”

“I promise not to eat anyone,” Austin said, opening one eye to glare at them.

“Well, since you already pissed everyone off,” Dustin snapped, “it doesn’t matter.”

Andy's eyes went wide. "No. No, Jules had said something...he made up the green room. There's an en suite. It'll be perfect. Three doors down from ours. Everyone can sleep. There's a tea kettle in the room and everything."

"Thank you. I'm not usually such a bear." Austin snorted. "Bear. Get it?"

"Where's my mate?" Atlas flailed up from the third-row seat. "Ursula!"

"I'll show you." Titania popped up, Andy's mom looking as tired as Dustin felt. "She's waiting for you."

"Thank you." Atlas struggled out of the car, buck naked, and followed Titania inside.

"Come on, Austin. I'll take you to your room and then come help unload. I'll call and get some stuff shipped too. The boss will need to know about this." And that was a conversation he was not looking forward to.

"Yeah. I just need a few more minutes of sleep before we get hold of him." Austin glanced around. "Nice home. Big. You did good for yourself."

"My mate's family has worked hard for it."

Austin rolled his eyes, then moved to give Andy a big hug. "Welcome to the family, Andy. I promise to stop offending everyone on earth once I rest. My whole body is still burning. I fly a lot, but never that much at once."

"Of course." Andy hugged Dustin's twin carefully. "Supper will be at six tonight. If you get hungry before then, help yourself. The kitchen is at the heart of the house."

"Thank you." Austin smiled, the lines dug deep around his eyes and mouth. "Can you show me to my room, brother?"

"I can. I'll grab you some clothes too." Austin was still wearing a blanket. "Come on." He took Austin upstairs, noting that Andy had let them have this minute alone. "Way to go, buddy."

"Shut up. I'm hanging by a thread." They stopped outside the room Andy had assigned Austin, and Austin gave him a

steady look. “Thank you, D. Good save.”

“Shit, you scared the daylight out of me. I’m glad you’re okay.” They exchanged a hug, pounding each other’s backs. “Sleep. I’ll introduce you fresh when you wake up.”

“Yep.” Austin turned and slipped into the bedroom, closing the door in his face. He wasn’t offended. They were pragmatic types. Food. Sleep. Work.

He had some apologies to make, bears to check on, a mate to cuddle and thank. And doughnuts.

He could murder a box of doughnuts.

He grabbed clothes, took a quick spit bath, and dropped off some sweats outside Austin’s door. Then he headed back downstairs.

“Hey, Dustin. Are you okay?” Puck met him in the living room.

“I could use one of those doughnuts. You got them, yeah?”

“Jules and Andy did when they stopped. They’re in the kitchen.” Puck’s smile was a little watery. “That was a scary night.”

“It was. You guys all rocked it.” He put a hand on Puck’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Oh, I just stayed home and helped with Ursula. She’s very kind, but very young. She needed someone to sit with her.”

“You coordinated all sorts of things, hon.” Puck needed to know how important he was.

“Yeah. Well, I’m going to work upstairs after a nap.” Puck patted his arm gently, like he might break. “Enjoy your doughnuts.”

“Thank you, Puck.” He watched Puck walk off before making his way to the kitchen. Oh, now, that was quite the array of doughnuts. Someone had been worried.

“I think they bought the truck stop out of pastries. Honeybuns and hand pies too. It’s a little intense.” Titania grinned at him over the top of the table.



“It is. Good thing we can all eat. And I bet the bears tear into the honeybuns.”

“Atlas ate three already.”

“I’m sorry this was such an ordeal,” he said, knowing he’d brought chaos to her household.

“Are they coming for us? The vampires? They’ll have to bring an army.” Someone was pissed.

“I don’t think so, but I can’t rule out any rogues who might not have chosen to fight. We did our best to take countermeasures.” He and Austin had worn themselves out crossing back on their paths.

“One isn’t an issue. I’m going to make the wards stronger. I want your help tomorrow. Fair?”

“Absolutely. I can do a lot of that kind of work for you. With you.” He chuckled when she smiled and nodded. With. This was his family now, not an employer. Dustin grabbed a filled doughnut and bit into it. Ah, Boston creme. Yum. “Are the bears settled in for now? Is there anything they need?”

“She’s trying to go into labor, but Angelica thinks she just needs to calm down with her mate.”

“I hope that’s all it is. Are we outfitted to take care of a premature bear shifter cub?”

“Not for long. But I know a few people who can help, if it comes to that.”

“And Puck? Is he all right?”

She shrugged. “He will be. In fact, this will be good for all of them. To see that the world is not as easy as they think.”

Dustin thought it was a little sad, to see the fun innocence of Andy and Puck fade. Jules seemed to have been born angry.

“Either way, it was an adventure.” She rose, moving to grab a hand pie. “Make sure Andy gets some rest, please. He’ll want to go do all sorts of surfing to see what he can find out about the vampires, but he’ll need sleep.”

“Yes. He was sick as a dog when we got up.”

“Jules says he’s pregnant.”

Okay, that was blunt.

“I don’t know. He certainly could be.” He might as well be honest. “In fact, I would say we had heat sex. But can morning sickness come on that quickly?” He and Austin had come on the same day, after all. There were no more siblings to know what pregnancy was like for an omega parent.

“It’s unusual, not unheard of, but Dustin—the equinox was two weeks ago.”

“Was it?” He blinked. “I—Oh. Well. I mean, we’ve been enthusiastic ever since we met, so…” Whoops. Then Andy could definitely be in the beginning stage of morning sickness, certainly.

“Yes. Well. Congratulations. Our first grandchild. I—wow.” She brushed one hand through her thick hair.

“I—Wow, indeed.” Goddess, he was suddenly not sure he could eat the rest of his... Dustin glanced at the box. Okay, his fourth doughnut. So it was stupid to say he’d lost his appetite. But that was a lot to think about. Not just him and Andy, but a baby.

“Are you...disappointed?” Smoke curled from Titania’s nose.

“No. No, I think just stunned. I mean, I knew mating and alpha and omega would result in baby, but it never occurred to me the math would happen this soon. And I had this panicky reaction to how am I going to protect them?”

“Ah.” She nodded slowly, appearing pleased. “That was exactly my response back in the day.”

“And what did you do?”

“I panicked. I wished that we had family that could help us, protect us, love us.”

“Well, I know Andy has that.”

She whapped his arm. “And so do you. Take a box of doughnuts and go get my son. Take him to rest. And make

sure you take some crackers or something, too, for when he wakes up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good boy. We’ll meet your brother at supper. Chicken enchiladas.”

“We’ll be here.” He grabbed doughnuts and a box of saltines before he fled. He didn’t find Andy up in the computer center, so he backed off slowly and tiptoed away. No, he found Andy in his bedroom, lying on his bed on his side, arms around his middle.

Oh, goddess, was something wrong?

“Love? Are you well?”

“I’m f-f-f-fine.”

No. No, his mate was milky-white and clammy, trembling in the bed.

“Are you sick again? I brought crackers.” Maybe Andy needed a shower? Dustin sat next to him after he set the food aside, hand on Andy’s lower back. “I’m so sorry you had to come get us.”

“I’m not. I’m sorry Austin is so mad. We tried to hurry. Honest.”

“Oh love, Austin isn’t mad at anyone. Not really. He’s tired, hungry, grumpy, and he almost got himself and his rescue killed, as far as he’s concerned. It makes him snappy. He’ll apologize and mean it as soon as he has rest.” He pulled Andy up into his arms. “I love you.”

“I love you. I’m sorry if I got pregnant. I didn’t try to. Please don’t be mad at me.”

“What?” He pushed Andy back to stare into his eyes. “Never. I may be a little stunned, because I didn’t really give that part a whole lot of thought. But if you are, I’ll work my hardest to be worthy of being a father to our child. Or children.”

Andy searched his eyes. “Ours. I’m glad it was you. I would never want anyone else. Ever.”

“Well, then, you know how I feel. How could I be angry?” His whole life had been about to change anyway. The boss could certainly never argue with him backing off work if he had a baby to protect.

Andy laughed, sniffing at the same time. “Are there any apple fritters?”

“There are. Two.” He’d consumed all the chocolate ones, and was eyeing a lemon-filled.

“Can I have one? I’m hungry.” Andy sighed. “Then I’ll get up and do things.”

Personally he thought that Andy would eat and crash. His mate had an awfully long day yesterday.

“You can have all the apple fritters you want.” He grabbed one out of the box to press it to Andy’s lips.

Andy bit at it, almost taking off his fingers. Poor baby was starving. In fact, they worked their way through the whole box of doughnuts together.

“Shower? Or nap first?”

“I can take a shower, I guess.” Andy’s eyes looked bruised, he was so tired.

“Come on, love.” He lifted Andy into his arms, carrying him to the bathroom. He got the water going, silently praising tankless water heaters, and stripped Andy of his clothes. He checked the temperature as steam poured out, knowing Andy could take quite a bit, but wanting it comfortable. “Okay, in we go.”

“Thank you.” Andy let him push him under the spray, hands by his sides.

“You’re welcome. This will help with the sore muscles.”

“The vampires couldn’t have Austin or the bear.” Andy kissed his jaw, loving on him.

“No. No, we had to make sure of it. I’m so proud of the way you jumped out to help Ursula. And then coming with Jules to get me and Austin... You were amazing.”

Andy laughed. “You flew like a demon dragon. You were the amazing one.”

“Mutual admiration, huh?” He lathered up his hands to wash his mate’s curls.

“Yes. Yes, can we have some boring days? Just something normal and simple with long breaths and getting to know each other?” Andy leaned back into his touch, begging him for more.

“Yes. I want that. I want to hang out with you. Watch movies. Make love. Make food. I know your moms are good cooks, but it would please me to feed them for a few days and let them just rest as well.” So many things. He wanted them all.

“Okay. That sounds good. We can relax. The cold weather is coming. I can feel it.”

“Yes. It was in the air when I was flying down, following me from the San Juans.” The chill had been part of why it had been so hard to fly once he and Austin had gotten tired.

“Does Austin like movies?”

“He does. And popcorn. And then he’ll spend hours doing martial arts practice to work it off.”

“Popcorn is good. We like it too. Jules makes an amazing buttered popcorn.” Andy’s eyelids closed, and he leaned back into Dustin.

“What’s your favorite flavor? I like caramel. Or that zebra stuff.”

“With white and dark chocolate?” Andy hummed under his breath.

“Mmmhmm. Sweet and salty.”

“We order it in at Christmas.” Andy’s eyes flew open. “We’re going to have our first Christmas together.”

“We are.” Dustin felt a little burst of happiness at the thought.

“What do you want? For Christmas, I mean.”

“You.” Dustin rinsed the soap out of Andy’s hair. “Just you, baby.”

“I’m here.” *And I want you to stay. Forever. You and me. Together.*

*I am. I think we have plenty of room on the land to build out a place for us.*

He got a nervous, curious glance. “You’d be okay with that? I know you wanted to be...farther.”

“No. No, that would be fine. I just want us to have our own space, where there’s a clear delineation of space. When we want to be alone.”

“Our own space with a door. I’d like that.”

“Yes.” Dustin rinsed off the rest of Andy’s body before turning off the water and grabbing a fluffy towel. “I want you to be close to your brothers, and be able to work, but when we want to have some privacy, it will be easier.”

“I thought I could move far away, but we’re a family. We deserve to be a family together.”

“We are. I swear, love, I will not ask that of you. I adore your moms, and your brothers are growing on me. Like moss.” He winked when Andy burst out laughing.

“Jules is moss. Puck is dandelion fluff.” Andy’s giggles got louder.

“So true. Though Jules might be stinging nettles.”

“What does that make your brother?”

“Hmmm. A prickly pear?”

Andy chuckled softly. “I can see that. He was sorry, though. I could see that in his face, you know? I really could.”

“He is. And he’ll make nice with Jules if Jules lets him.” He took Andy to the bed, tucking him under the covers before

crawling in with him.

“It’ll just take time.” Andy didn’t sound like he really believed it.

“Mmm. We’ll see.” He tugged Andy up against him, kissing his neck. “Rest now, love. It’s been a long day.”

“It has. I love you.” Andy closed his eyes with a long sigh.

“I love you, too, baby. Tomorrow it will be easier.” He hoped. Goddess help him if it wasn’t.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-TWO

“You know, you really pissed him off.”

“Who?” Austin flowed through a series of punches and kicks, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

“Jules. Andy’s brother. He hasn’t come out of the computer room for almost a week.” And if Jules didn’t, Puck wouldn’t, and it was getting weird.

“Andy says they do this a lot—work with the computers. I said I was sorry.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t believe it.”

Austin shrugged. “This is not my fault.”

“Bro...”

Austin stopped and sighed. “Okay, point me and shoot me.”

“The guys are up in the computer room. All three of them.” He wouldn’t make Austin face that alone. “I’ll see if they’ll come to lunch, huh?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. I like your mate a lot, man. So for him and his moms, I’ll make another try.” Austin gave him a wry smile. “You know I’m shit at social niceties.”

“I know. So is Jules, and Puck is—” How to describe sweet little Puck...

“Insane?”



“Stop!” He shook his head.

“What? He’s a nutter.” Austin chuckled. “I’m not saying we’re any more sane.”

“You haven’t even met him yet. You don’t know. Be nice. I have to go up and invite them down!”

Austin shrugged. “Sure.”

“Why are you so mad?” Was it because he was mated? That didn’t seem like Austin at all.

“I almost died, Dustin,” Austin said quietly. “I’m not mad. I’m wiggled out. This was a close call. You don’t know how close.”

“Shit.” He moved to pulled Austin into a hard hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was—you seemed so confident I would get you out.”

Austin went still for a moment, then hugged him back. “I knew you’d come, and you would kick ass.” Then he slapped Dustin on the shoulder. “Go get them. I’ll explain, and apologize. And then someone will feed me, right?”

“You know it.” He would order something decadent, if nothing else. “I’ll be right back.”

He found Andy in the kitchen smashing avocados with a pointed determination.

“Hey, love. Are you—Is everything okay?” Had Andy overheard Austin? Or part of what Austin had said and not the rest? Or was he just... Crap, he had no idea.

“Hey. I’m making guacamole. There are flautas in the oven.” He looked up and winked. “Two big pans worth.”

“Oh, yum. Austin is hungry. I am instructed to drag your brothers down so he can talk to them. What’s the temp up there?”

“Nervous and worried, but hungry, you know?”

“Yeah. Okay, as long as it’s not frosty, I’m good.” He grabbed Andy for a kiss. “Be down in a few.”

Andy went back to mooshing, and he ran back to the stairs to sprint up, ready to tuck a pocket dragon under each arm and haul them down if need be.

Jules deserved his apology, and the longer Puck got to hide, the worst it would be.

He did knock before he rushed in, because this was their space and he was a visitor, but Dustin wasn't taking no for an answer. He needed this to happen. Integrating family was tough, but it had to happen.

"Hey, guys. Andy is making flautas and guac and such."

Jules glanced up. "Yeah? Cool."

Puck was literally, visibly vibrating, nervous energy pouring off him.

"Can you come down?" He went to touch Puck's shoulder, then smiled at Jules. "Austin wants to talk to you both, and then we can strap on the feedbag."

"I—is he mean?" Puck whispered.

"No, honey. He's really not. He did make an ass of himself, and he can be brusque, but he wants to explain. And apologize. I want you guys to get to know him." He took a deep breath. "Please?"

Puck looked at Jules, who nodded. "We can't hide for an eternity. Andy's having a baby. We'll all be family."

"Thank you." The relief actually staggered him for a moment. Austin deserved the chance to start over, and these two needed confidence, to believe they were special and important.

"You're welcome. Besides, it's lunchtime, right?" Jules stood and reached for Puck's hand.

"It is!" Puck bounced up to grab Jules. "And I could eat my weight in guacamole."

"Well, your brother is smashing your weight in avocados."

"He is the king of smashing." It felt so good to hear Puck joke.

“He is. And he’s determined. Very.” He winked, leading the way downstairs.

“I bet,” Jules muttered. “He’s the peacemaker.”

“So am I, in my family.”

Puck snorted. “Wow. That means Austin is really a pill.”

“Hey!” He had to laugh though. “Okay, here we are.” He grinned at his brother. “Austin, this is Jules and Puck. Guys, my brother Austin Ladon.”

Austin stepped up, offering Jules a hand to shake. “Hey. Pleased to actually meet you.”

“Hey. Same. I’m sorry about the growling. It was a rough night.”

Oh, that was big for Jules to say.

Austin nodded, then reached for Puck. “And how. Puck, nice to meet you.”

Puck shook hands with Austin, his eyes widening, and outside, a cloud went over the sun, throwing the room into darkness. “N-nice to meet you.”

“Can we sit a minute?” Austin clenched and unclenched his fingers when he let go of Puck’s hand, as if Puck had shocked him with static. “I just want to explain why I was such a, well, not bear. We literally had two of those.”

“Y-y-y—” Puck stared at Austin, then at Andy, wide-eyed.

“Hey. Austin’s friendly. You probably need to eat.” Andy headed over, wrapping one arm around him and tugging him to sit.

“Uh-huh.” Puck sank down, and Jules sat across from him while Dustin got some chips and salsa to put on the table. Puck didn’t need to be getting all incoherent because he hadn’t eaten.

“So. I was really short because I didn’t want to tell any of you how close a call I had. They wanted Atlas, not me, and they damn near killed me. I managed to ward at the last moment, but if I hadn’t...” Austin pulled his shirt aside,

showing a lurid mark on his human skin. “They did that to me in dragon form. I’m just now healing up.”

Puck made a sick, scared sound, and Jules growled deep in his chest. “They’ll never get to you again.”

“Thank you. I mean that. And I know now how easy it is to get overconfident. I thought maybe there were three or four of them. Not a dozen. I’ll never make that mistake again. But that doesn’t excuse me being a dick when you did so much for me and Dustin. So thank you. And I’m sorry.” He knew Austin didn’t make speeches easily, so Dustin was super proud of him for using his words.

“You’re family. We stick together.”

Jules’s words made Austin duck his head, blush dark, and he opened his mouth when Ursula and her mate trundled in.

“Can we be family too? We can contribute and defend.”

“Of course you can.” Andy moved immediately to hug Ursula. “We would love to have you, right, guys?”

“Absolutely.” That was Puck, who’d gotten his voice back. “I love bears.”

Austin chuckled. “Dustin told me you guys were nuts, and that you would fold us all in, but I wasn’t sure I believed it. Now I know what he means.”

Atlas’s nose twitched. “Do I smell guacamole?”

“And flautas.”

“We brought chile con queso and dips.” Mama came bustling through the door, Mom behind her. “I love family lunches!”

“Yum. You’ll love this queso.” Jules nudged Austin with his elbow.

“I like all queso dip as long as it’s edible, but this smells like heaven.” Austin stood to let Mama have his chair. “Shall I haul in more seats?”

“Please.” Mom beamed at the assembled lot of them. “Ah, Ursula. Feeling better?”

“I am. The boys said we could stay, too, so... I hope you like honey cakes and fried trout. Those are my specialties.”

Atlas chuckled and got his pregnant mate into a chair before heading to help Austin. He seemed like a man of few words, but that was okay. Some of the rest of them had plenty to spare.

“I do, in fact.” Titania beamed. “I’ve been thinking about keeping bees for honey...”

Ursula’s deep brown eyes lit up. “Yes. I could help with that. Bees are so necessary.”

Andy gave him a wry grin. “This escalated fast.”

“You must have known it would, since you made so many flautas.”

“I was just hungry. I’ll put in more as soon as these come out.” Andy seemed happy, and he leaned against Dustin, snuggling hard.

“Mmmm.” Dustin kissed his neck. “It smells amazing.”

“It really does, Andy. Thank you,” Atlas rumbled.

“Is everyone getting enough guacamole?” Andy asked, moving away to grab more avocados.

“It’s amazing, Andy. Seriously.” Austin met Andy’s gaze, and Andy beamed right back.

“Thank you. I’ll make more.”

“I’ll help.” He could chop shit with the best of them, and that way Andy wasn’t the only one bustling around, though he seemed to have nervous energy to work off.

“Okay. Can you cut up tomatoes and jalapenos for me?”

“Of course.” He winked at Andy, who flushed and grinned, before grabbing jalapenos. He would have to be careful to wash up before touching Andy again after this.

They all moved around the huge kitchen, with Puck sitting with Ursula, talking quietly, while everyone else helped, even

Atlas. It was...the beginning of a new family, he thought. A melding of all of them together.

Two dragon families, a growing sleuth of bears—it was a strange and wonderful thing.

Andy bumped hips with him, and he had to laugh. Strange, wonderful, and perfect. That was all he could think.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-THREE

The snow was an inch deep when Andy woke up.

The weather was definitely changing, winter coming in a rush, and he felt kinda...heavy. Lazy. He wanted to go back to bed. But he needed to talk to his moms. He'd been putting it off for long enough. Austin and the bears were settling in. No vamps had shown up.

And he was starting to show, which was weird. He had a birthline, that was red and firm from breastbone to his pubes.

He bundled up and stepped into his house shoes before heading down to see if his moms were in the kitchen or at home.

Mama was in the kitchen, a huge pan of eggs on the stove. Dustin and Austin had put her breezeway in. It had taken all of a week. And she was so happy. She was up at the house more and more, though he had a feeling when the snows got deep she and Mom would hibernate.

“Good morning, Mama.” He kissed her cheek. “Is Mom coming up?”

“She is. She’s having a lie-in this morning, that’s all. Did you hear that the boys are going to start building back toward the mountain? Apparently Atlas has studied architecture and has a plan.”

“Really?” He gave his mom what he hoped was an innocent blink. “I was wanting to talk to you and Mom about that. About maybe me and Dustin having our own space.”

“Like moving away? With my grandbaby?” Mama’s eyes went wide.

“No, Mama. Like us building out toward the mountain and having our own casita.” He grinned. “Dustin had to deal with me crying at the idea already. Not that he actually asked. I misunderstood what he meant about moving out to begin with.”

“Ah.” She pushed the eggs out on a platter, then began cracking more. “Well, I can see the merit in that. It’s good to have a place where your brothers have to knock if they want to come see you.”

“That’s it. But we’d still be here for me to spend the day over here working with them, and for us all to be together, eat together.” He took over cracking eggs. “What are we having with these?”

“Do you want toast and bacon or burritos?”

“Burritos.” Jules came to hug him, then kiss Mama on the cheek.

“Okay, son.” Mama beamed.

“So, you want a casita, too, huh?” Jules pulled out flour tortillas, cheese, salsa, and sour cream.

“Well, I think it would be good for all of us, yeah. I mean, I want to stay here and be with you guys, but Dustin and I are starting our family too.”

Jules poured them both a cup of coffee, pursing his lips. “Are you going to keep working with us?”

“Of course I am. And watching movies with you, and playing chess, and probably eating most of the time. But I just... I want to be loud with my mate.”

Mama snorted but didn’t turn to look at them.

“Okay. That’s fair.”

He blinked at Jules like he had at Mama. “Really?”

“Yep.” Jules got out the tortilla warmer as Andy handed more cracked eggs to Mama. “I mean, I’m a little jealous, but



that might be more because you found your mate before I did and I'm the oldest."

"You can just build out toward the mountain without making a huge thing—something like your own wing."

"That's a good idea, Mama." He could live with that. He just wanted some more space.

"Man, something smells so good. I swear. I've eaten better here than I ever have in my life." Austin padded into the room, smiling at them all. It was so strange, because he looked just like Dustin, and he was a handsome man, but he wasn't Dustin. He would have known them apart from anywhere.

"Morning, Austin." Jules poured Austin a cup of coffee.

"Thanks. Morning. Good morning, Mama." Austin smiled at Mama as he poured milk in his coffee.

"Good morning. Are you in on the casita plan?"

Austin laughed. "I am. I want Andy's rooms."

Andy pretended to gasp with outrage. "I see how it is."

"What? I know Dustin. He's happy here already. I can see that. But he needs his space. He'll want to walk around naked and belch and do his workouts without an audience. Is there anything I can do?"

"Shred cheese," Jules ordered.

"Okay." Austin looked around. "Puck not up yet?"

He glanced at Jules, who shrugged. "I haven't seen him."

"Ah. Well, I was just wondering." Austin sipped his coffee before grabbing the block of cheese and digging out the grater.

Mama winked at Andy, her eyes twinkling.

Had he missed something? What was with Austin and Puck? Maybe Puck was hiding because Austin made him nervous and, like his twin, Austin wanted to torment Puck over it.

It could happen.

“If you built out from the second story into the mountain and down, we’d have a nice place for equipment and wood. Maybe a workshop,” Austin suggested.

“Atlas said something very similar. He has real ideas. The two of you should talk.” Andy warmed the tortillas.

They were really getting good at these communal meals, and it made Andy’s heart happy. He loved the idea of this—and it was easier than he’d feared, to join five to two to another two who were about to be three...

Math. At least he was good at that.

*Love? Are you sick again?*

*No. I came down to make breakfast, but Mama was here already. It snowed.*

Dustin’s mental caress made him sigh happily. *I’ll be down in a mo.*

*I love you.* He scratched his birthline, caught in the wave of care that Dustin sent him.

*I’ll put lotion on it in a bit, okay? Stop scratching.*

He pulled his hand away, laughing.

Austin winked at him, making him flush a little. He had a feeling Austin knew he and Dustin were talking. He might not hear them, but he knew.

“I’m going to make Dustin some coffee. I know I can’t have any, Jules.” He thought his brother figured this was the funnier thing ever.

“What?” Jules gave him an innocent look. “I just test you to make sure you do the right thing.”

“Uh-huh. You’re a dick.”

Puck stuck his head in the door. “Mama? Are you making—Oh. Austin. Hi.”

“Puck. Coffee?” Austin asked.

“I-uh—yeah?” Puck’s cheeks were bright red.

*Puck? You all right?*

*Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. I promise.*

Andy wasn't sure that was true. But he didn't think Puck looked like his stomach was bothering him, so maybe something else was going on.

*Well, if you need to talk, come find me later, okay?*

*I will.*

Austin handed Puck coffee, and it wasn't long before they had Dustin and the bears with them. Mom was the last to wander in, her snow boots crusted as she took them off just inside the door.

"Gonna get deep out there. I think."

"Good." Atlas sounded completely satisfied by that. "If the snows get big, we can snuggle up under the covers and hibernate."

"We can." Dustin winked at him. "And we can all bundle up in the living area and make a fire and play video games and watch movies."

"Or read to each other if the power goes out," Austin added.

Puck stared at Austin like he'd smacked him or something, ears and cheeks just flaming.

What the heck was wrong with him?

Jules went to sit next to Puck with a plate. "Here. Eat."

"Huh?"

"Burr-eee-tow." Jules said it so slow, with deep sarcasm.

"Oh, screw you."

"Puck." Mama frowned at him.

"Sorry, Mama, but I was thinking about something else. He didn't have to be mean."

"Boys." Mom rolled her eyes like dice. "Seriously. Andy and Ursula are the pregnant ones. They are the only ones allowed to be insane."

“Insane?” Andy asked, fighting his grin.

“Hideously hormonal?” she offered back, and he nodded.

“I love it.”

Andy hooted. “Did you hear that, Dustin? I have permission to be nuts.”

“Mmm. I have no doubt you will soon start bursting into tears.”

“Or being super horny,” Austin put in cheerfully. “I hear that’s a thing.”

“You are a butthead,” Dustin said when Andy was the one to blush now.

“That comes later,” Mama said, and he didn’t want to hear that, but Ursula’s laugh filled the air.

Atlas gave him a thumbs-up. So. That had to be a good thing. Yay.

*I think it will be a very good thing.* Dustin’s mental voice rang in his head.

“So, Atlas,” Dustin said out loud. “I hear you have engineering ideas.”

“I do. Austin and I have been talking about making attached wings to the building, creating a fortress with a central common area and a safe outdoor play area for the babies.”

“And I talked to him about a better garden room for you, Mama. A really nice greenhouse.” That was Jules, who beamed at Atlas when the man fist-bumped him.

“Yeah? I’m just—I’m tickled that we’re going to stay together. I would hate missing my grandbabies.” Mama was a little teary. “We’re a family, right?”

“Of course we are!” Andy didn’t want any crying. None at all.

“We are,” Dustin said firmly. “Austin and I need to talk to our boss, but Austin would like to take a leave of absence, too,

and hang out with us for at least the winter. That way, he can help plan the reno and start gathering supplies, and also just help keep guard over our omegas.”

Mom patted Austin’s hand. “We’re glad to have you.”

Puck stared at Austin, wide-eyed. “You’re staying?”

“I’d like to, yes.”

“He’s staying,” Mama said. “We have a home for anyone who needs it at this table.” She plonked down at the table finally, but he noticed Dustin kept making eggs. Food was a big affair with all these dragons and two bears.

“Thank you. All of you.” Austin was the one to flush now, his high cheekbones stained pink.

Puck stared at his plate.

*Brother, you’re being rude. Do you not want him here? He hasn’t been mean to you, has he?*

*NO! No, he’s just... He keeps looking at me and smiling!*

*He—what?*

Puck had finally lost his mind.

*He just watches me, this little grin on his face.*

*Is that bad?*

*No.* Puck chewed his lower lip. *But I don’t know how to feel.*

*Oh.* Oh! Oh, wow. Maybe Puck thought Austin was hot. Of course, he was. He was like Dustin, who was the hottest man on earth. So Austin would be the second hottest by definition if he wasn’t Andy’s brother by marriage and thus his hotness was null.

*Let it be, Andy.* Jules’s soft mental touch was careful, almost a whisper. *He just needs to figure things out.*

*Okay. I’m not trying to—*Oh. Oh shit, but if—what if Jules liked Austin too? What if—Oh, fuck.

*Shhh.* Now Jules was laughing at him. *Breathe. Let it be. Just think about your new space and be ready to tell us what*

*you want.*

*Right. Space. I want a door and a kitchenette to heat up baby bottles. I want bedrooms and a little sitting room. I want a nice bathroom.*

*Not a computer room?*

*No.* He shook his head, firm on that point. *That's for us.*

Jules met his gaze, the look approving, happy, and Andy felt his spine straighten.

“Baby, you’ve smashed that avocado into oblivion...”

“Oops. Mix it with the other stuff for me?” He felt like he needed to sit down suddenly. His head was a little muzzy.

“Of course.” Dustin pressed him into a chair next to Mom, who immediately popped a glass of juice in front of him.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice thin.

“Drink up, sweetie. Your blood sugars will do crazy things while you’re pregnant.”

“Why do dragons have blood sugars?” Ursula asked. “Aren’t you pure magic?”

“We are, but we’re also bound by some of the physical laws of the bodies we’re in. We choose to be partly human, and it’s the price we pay,” Mama said.

Mom nodded. “And babies take energy, right? This is a great little burst of energy in a glass.”

“Mmm.” And it tasted good. Things he usually loved were tasting weird these days, and stuff he often turned his nose up at were so yummy. The baby had distinct tastes.

Right now, their little one was on a guacamole and vitamin C kick.

The guac landed on the table, Dustin making sure he got first crack at it. His mate had his back.

“Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome.” *More than welcome, mate.*

He beamed at Dustin, who sat next to him. “What do you need in housing, Atlas?”

“Room for big beds. A nice dark place to hibernate in the winter. Lots of food storage?”

“I’d like to be on the bottom floor. Cubs roll, and our kind shifts early.” Ursula patted her belly, gently. “And this one is a tap dancer, I swear.”

“Of course. We can build out a couple of directions,” Jules said.

“And into the mountain,” Mom said. “I think that’s going to be important, somehow.”

“Then we’ll go into the mountain,” Austin agreed.

“Have you seen something, Mama?” Puck asked.

The moms glanced at each other, and they nodded. “Something’s happening in the world. The deeper we are into the mountain, the better.”

Austin leaned forward, elbows on the table. “The boss says the same thing. He’s digging in at his place too.”

Dustin stared at Austin. “He is?”

“I think so, yeah. He seems pretty worried, if you ask me.”

“Where is home?” Andy wasn’t sure why he hadn’t asked more questions about Dustin’s boss. He’d been...weirdly uninterested.

“In the mountains.” Austin shrugged. “We mostly communicate by electronics or he meets us.”

“So...he’s a dragon too? He’s nice?”

“He’s a good guy.” Dustin grinned at Austin. “Nice is relative.”

“He can be gruff,” Austin agreed.

“He’s...solitary, honey. I think he was hatched from an egg.”

Mama chuckled. “That just means he’s old, Dustin. The older a dragon is, the more they seem out of touch with the

world. Even if they're able to keep up with some things.”

“And you're out and about hunting...dragon hunters? Who knows about us?” Mom asked, and Dustin shrugged.

“Vamps. Shifters. There's some rumors about demons. Wolves tend to only hunt if it's a territory thing, but it's happened; some of the other shifters are as old as dragons...” Dustin glanced at him, giving him a reassuring smile. “The boss is really into protecting dragons.”

“We're really into protecting this family—all of us.” Mom didn't sound like she was joking.

“I'm glad. And we're family now.” Austin nodded sharply, once. “I am going to be an uncle.”

“You are.” Tears filled Andy's eyes, but they were happy ones. “All of you are family, and I'm so glad to have you here.”

Then he grabbed a flauta and started eating. He was obviously losing his mind.



CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FOUR

He had to bite the bullet and call the boss.

They'd been putting it off, aside from a text from Austin informing him that the bear situation was well in hand and a nest of vampires had been exterminated. They'd even sent him a pin so he could have another operative check that out and make sure there was no one left to hunt them down and disturb their family.

But the texts and calls were becoming constant, the messages and voice mails more strident than worried. And with good reason. He and Austin had gone rogue, just not calling in now for...he checked his watch.

Fuck. A little over a month. He was surprised the boss hadn't triangulated one of their phones and just shown up.

*Austin? Can you meet me in the living room? We need to call the boss.* He called to Austin mentally, because he didn't want to go looking if Austin was spelunking, looking for ways to get the bears their ground-level den and follow Titania's directive to build into the hills behind the house.

*Sure. I know we've been avoiding it, which is not really okay, huh?*

*No. No, he's been good to us. I owe him an explanation.*

*I know. Might as well face the music. Be there in two minutes.*

He grabbed his phone and headed for the living room, where he met Austin coming in from the back garden. This

house was such an amazing warren of weird little rooms and huge open spaces, courtyards, and gardens. He adored it.

“Hey. You ready for this?” Austin asked with a wry smile on his face.

“No. But we’re being stupid putting it off. We have valid reasons for going off the grid, and you know he just wants to know where we are.”

“What are you going to do if he wants to send us on a job?”

“Tell him no. I have a pregnant mate.”

“Yeah.” Austin gave him a sideways look. “Is it shitty that I want a sabbatical?”

“No.” He waved Austin to one of the big couches, and they sat facing each other. They needed to present a united front. “We’ve done nothing but work for years, and I love helping people, but we have a lot of work to do here.”

“We do. I have things that I need to do here, you know?” Austin seemed so serious.

Dustin tilted his head. “Wanna tell me about it?”

“Not yet.” Austin grinned. “So. Are you quitting?”

“Not if he’ll take me up on a new offer.”

Now it was Austin’s turn to look curious. “What’s that?”

“I want to continue to do surveillance, but long distance. Online. I think the guys can be a huge force for good if we direct them a little. They can dig deep. And I’m really damn good at training people to do what I do.”

“Yeah? There’s a lot of possibilities there, I think. This family seems to believe that there’s something lurking in the future.”

“So does the boss. You don’t see as much of that come across your coms as I do, but he’s worried.” Dustin knew that they needed to stay close to this family, to the mountain. It was like an...urge.

“Well, now we know what to say. Dial him up.”

Dustin took a deep breath and did just that, putting the phone in speaker mode.

“About damn time you checked in,” the boss spat out when he answered. “I’ve been combing the news for your death announcements.”

“Drama llama. We’re fine. We’re battening down for the winter.”

“Where?”

“Above Santa Fe.” He glanced at Austin, who nodded. “I found my mate, boss.”

“You—you what?”

“He’s pregnant—not Dust, obvi, but the mate.” Oh, Austin was super helpful.

“Already!” The boss’s voice rose an octave.

“Yeah. He went into heat pretty much right away.” Dustin couldn’t fight his grin. “He’s amazing.”

“Well, that’s good. It is. But where does that leave me?”

“With several other fully functional teams.” Dustin laid it out. “Look, I need to be here. That nest of vamps was a surprise, which means there might be more. My family needs protection.”

“And this is my family too.” Austin sounded sure, determined.

“I see. So you’re on sabbatical.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mmm. Well. Then at least keep me posted of anything your mate’s family comes across on the web.” The irony in the boss’s voice wasn’t lost on him.

“Of course. My suggestion was going to be that I work from here as a base, do web research and such, maybe train one investigator at a time.”

There was a long pause. “I can see the value in that, but I would need to do a site visit.”

Dustin and Austin exchanged a long look. That was a surprise. They didn’t know the boss ever left...wherever he was.

“Sure, boss,” Austin said. “I mean, we’ll need to check with the house elders. The moms rule this roost.”

“Absolutely. I would never invade another dragon’s space without the proper protocol.”

*Yeah, the ladies would eat him alive. Like MUNCH.*

*I think he’d be surprised for sure.* Dustin grinned at his brother.

“I trust you’ll let me know sooner rather than later. I won’t bite your head off, gentlemen. I just want to know you’re safe.”

“Sorry, boss. We got caught up in being here and in the family, and then we were...”

“Embarrassed,” Dustin finished.

“What’s the status on the bears?”

They exchanged another glance. “Moving in, boss.”

“With the dragons?” Now they had a real reaction. The boss’s voice held real surprise. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“The moms say it’s important to build into the mountain,” Austin added. “Sound familiar?”

“It does.”

“What do they know that we don’t?” Austin asked.

“I think it’s all the portents. Something is coming, and the farther we are from human civilization, the better off we might be. Set up a meet. I want to get there and meet everyone. I’m coming.”

“Sure. Uh, boss?”

“What?”

“They’re going to want to know your name.”

“Ah. And you have no idea.” Now the boss was laughing at them for sure. “Gavin Castellan.”

Austin’s eyes widened, and so did Dustin’s. He knew that name. Billionaire altruist.

“Well, boss. Nice to meet you, formally.”

“Yes. I look forward to seeing you in person. Let me know when.” And the boss hung up on them.

“Well.” Austin snorted. “That went well.”

“Yeah. I... Did you have any idea?”

“Fuck no. I mean, it explains why he has all the resources he does.” The man was on top of everything all the damn time. And he should be. He was a dragon who had fooled the world into thinking he was a reclusive human moneymen. “I can’t wait to tell the guys,” Austin said.

“Leaving me to tell the moms, I assume.”

“Heck yes. Titania is scary.”

He let one eyebrow arch. “Scariest than Puck?”

Austin blushed dark red. “Shut up.”

Yeah, that was what he’d thought.

“Okay, we’ll divide and conquer. I’ll tell Andy though.” He wanted to talk to his mate about all the things, including volunteering his services.

“Such a hardship, right?” Austin winked at him. “You can see how much he loves you, you know that?”

“I do. I’m fucking lucky.” And he was grateful for it. More and more each day.

“Yeah. Go talk to him. When you’re done, I’ll talk to Jules and Puck.”

“Sounds good.” He gave Austin a back-pounding hug. “Looks like you’re staying too.”

“Hell, yeah. That’s the plan.”

He grinned, then raced off to fill Andy in. There was a lot to tell.



The chat program dinged as soon as Andy logged on.

<u ok? you've been gone forever> That was Devon Marks, the dragon who owned the bookstore up in Denver.

<I am! I hooked up with a guy. BUSY.> Also, preppers, but that wasn't common knowledge. <How's you?>

<Tired> He got a laughing emoji face. <Kids are cranky. Big snow has them trapped inside>

<how many kiddos do you have?> He was terribly interested now, and he wanted to know other people who had families.

<I have two. But there are a lot more than that in the house>

<That's too cool.> I'm having one too. I'm having a baby of my own.

<Yeah. It really is, but it's scary too. Keep seeing all these prophecies>

He'd talked with Devon enough now to know the guy wasn't trying to trip him up or anything. They were working through books together. <My mate has a friend who might help us with that. He's coming down this week>

<Yeah? Your mate?>

<Yes.> Please, let this not be a mistake.

<Congratulations. I mean, if this is new.>

Okay. Okay, cool. That was—like a tacit admission that Devon knew, right?

<Thanks>

<Of course, that mating thing is how I ended up with 2 kids. B careful>

<2 late.>

He rolled his eyes. In fact, very too late.

<Whoops.> That got him a laughing face. <Can I call you?  
>

He rattled off his phone number before Dustin could tell him no, because Dustin would totally tell him no. But he wanted to talk to Devon, to hear his voice, maybe ask things his moms didn't know as female alpha and omega.

He'd never really needed someone to talk to that wasn't one of his brothers, but now he felt as though he had all these questions Jules and Puck couldn't answer.

His phone rang, and his heartbeat kicked into high gear. "Hello?"

"Hey, is this Andy?"

"It is. Devon?"

"Yep. Hey. It's nice to meet you, kinda. I mean, not face-to-face, but by voice, anyway."

"Yeah." He took a deep breath, feeling super brave. "It's nice to meet you too. Wow. I never talk on the phone."

Devon chuckled, the sound warm and friendly. "I do for work, but that's about it."

"So you run a bookstore?"

"Well, I have a manager who runs it now. I don't live in the city anymore. But I still do most of the wheeling and dealing, you know? Buying the rare books. My partner runs most of the online auctions where we sell."

"Nice." He laughed at himself, feeling so awkward. "Is this just too weird?"

"Making new friends is always strange at the beginning," Devon said. "But I can tell we're going to be buddies."

"Yeah? I'd like that. I love my family, but I'm the only one of my brothers to be mated, and it's all just so new."

“Hey, I hear you. My mate was the first one of his brothers to find someone. They’ve been wonderful, but it’s been a wild ride. I have two kids, but there are damn near a dozen in the house now, along with their familiars.”

“Wow. Wow! That’s... How many, um, omegas are in the house?”

“Three of us. We also have some adopted cousins. But it’s busy. You?”

“There’s me, my two brothers, and my moms. My mate and his brother. And now we have two bears.”

There was a long pause. “You have two bear familiars?”

“No, two shifters. My moms have a bear dog.”

“Does that cause problems? Bear and bear dogs?”

“Not so far. So...what kind of familiars?”

“Well... Arielle has a giant wolfhound. There’s a cat. It’s a zoo.”

“Sounds like it. Oh, Devon, thank you for calling. I’m pregnant, and my moms have no idea how to be a male omega with a baby on the way.”

“It presents some challenges. But it’s so worth it. I’m so tickled for you. Enjoy it. And don’t be scared. Your moms can help you more than you think. It’s so cool that you have them there. Brand’s folks crossed the veil centuries ago.”

“Wow. They’re that old? Your mate and his brothers?”

“They are. Me not so much. I didn’t even know I was a dragon until I met Brand.”

“Damn. That’s crazy.” How did he not know? That was a new one on him. “So when you met your mate, it came out in you?”

“Yep. Sprouted scales and wings and all that shit.”

“That’s wild. Really.”

“I knew I was pregnant before I knew I was a dragon.”



“That’s crazy.” He put his feet up on his desk, settling in for a nice long chat. There was so much he could learn from Devon, and they hadn’t even started talking about prophecies and such. They could compare notes, and he hoped to hell he had something to give to Dustin’s boss when he showed up.

He wanted the man to be impressed with his work so he would keep Dustin on the payroll. It was important to his mate, and this was what they could offer and still all stay home and be together.

And he thought it was important to Devon to be on top of this as well.

They were so going to be friends.

And that was so cool.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-FIVE

“You ready for this?” Dustin asked. Austin, Puck, Jules, and Andy all sat in the front room waiting for the boss to show up.

“Nope.” That was Jules. “I mean, what if he eats us?”

Puck made a low sound, and Dustin knew his belly was hurting him like it did when he was worried. Change was hard for Puck, and there had been so much lately.

“No one is going to eat my family,” Austin said. “No one. Got it?”

Puck just stared at him, lips open slightly, eyes wide.

This was getting really entertaining.

“Got it,” Puck said just as firmly.

“Okay, so he’s just a dude,” Dustin put in.

Andy put a hand on his belly, snorting. “With lots of money, all the dragon knowledge there probably is, and he’s more than likely older than the sun.”

“You hush.” Dustin had to grin at his mate, who was so damn fine. “No egging everyone on. Where are the moms?”

“With Ursula and Atlas in the earthship. They decided to meet him at supper.”

“Ah. Probably a good idea. Titania might get all alpha on him.”

“Might?” Andy’s eyebrows waggled. “You have met our mom, huh?”

“Heh. Yeah. She’s something else.” Austin winked.

“She is.” Andy grinned at Austin, and it made Dustin so pleased, to see them bonding.

“So what’s this guy like?” Jules asked.

“Uh, well, we don’t know much about him.” That sounded so dumb, but it was true.

“No? That’s a shame. How did you meet him?” Jules’s eyes were always so sharp.

“Through a mutual friend,” Austin said. “Someone I trust. And he’s never steered us wrong, the boss. Not once.”

“You have friends?” Andy teased. “Are they real ones or imaginary?”

“Hey, now.” Austin poked Andy on the arm. “Mine are more in-person than online.”

“Except the boss.”

“And he’s on the phone.”

Andy’s phone rang then, which made them all laugh. All but Andy, who frowned. “It’s Devon.”

Dustin growled softly. “The other dragon?”

He was none too happy about Andy coming clean, so to speak, about being a pregnant omega dragon with a stranger.

“Uh-huh.” Andy answered the phone. “Hey Dev—what’s wrong? Oh my god!”

They all went on high alert, because Andy’s tone was one of pure horror.

“Put it on speaker, Andy! Let us hear!” Jules demanded, and Andy nodded and hit the button.

“—coming up the mountain. Hundreds of them. We have babies, Andy! Can you send help? The Uinta dragons are too far away!”

“I can. What are their coordinates?” Austin got on the phone, and Dustin knew who he was calling. The boss would have just landed, and he could fly damn fast. He had to be able to at his age.

“Up above Estes. It’s goblins. They’re fighting from inside, but someone needs to cut them off from the outside!” His mate was panicking with Devon.

“Jesus. Goblins. Boss!” Austin was relaying information, so Dustin grabbed Andy’s shoulders from behind, supporting him.

“We’re sending help, Devon. This is Andy’s mate. He can get there fast.”

“Please. We have children.”

“Boss is on the way. He says a few seconds at most.”

Austin and Dustin shared a shocked look.

*Seriously?* Dustin asked.

*That’s what he says.*

*Damn. Damn, that’s crazy. What does he do? Teleport?*

*Why not? Who knows what he’s capable of?*

“He’s here! Brand! He’s here to help!”

“Keep us posted,” Andy yelled just before the line went dead. Then he whirled to look at him and Austin. “Goblins?”

“Baby, don’t—”

“No! Vampires and goblins? Dragon hunters? What else is out there wanting to hurt our baby?”

“All sorts of things.” He kissed Andy hard and fast. “It could be worse. Our baby could be human.”

Andy stared at him, then shook his head. “You—are they going to be okay? They have children—lots of them!”

“If the boss can get there in seconds, think how many goblins he can flame in one breath.” Goddess, that didn’t even bear thinking about.

“Andy, you have to relax!” Puck patted Andy’s shoulder. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

Andy stared at Puck with the most incredulous face. “You’re telling me that? Wow.”

“Andy!” Puck shrank back in on himself.

Andy reached for him right away. “I’m sorry. That was so mean. I’m just totally freaked out.”

“Yeah.” Puck shrugged and stepped away. “I’m going to check on the bears.”

“Puck—”

Puck held one hand up. “It’s cool. Good luck to your friends.”

Andy sat and sighed as Puck disappeared, and Jules shook his head, but he didn’t say anything.

“He’s going to have to learn about hormones, baby.” Dustin patted Andy’s shoulder.

“Yeah, still. That was mean. I hate being mean. I’m just wiggled out.”

“I know. You should take him a little treat in a bit to apologize.” That was Jules.

“I will. Something chocolate.”

Jules nodded and started pacing. “I want to make this place safer. Now.”

“Okay.” Austin watched him, arms crossed. “Talk to me.”

“I’m not risking Andy and the baby. We need to make sure this place is defensible.”

“We can do that.” Dustin had the same idea, and he had some ways. “Let me get something to write with.”

Andy stood and headed for the stairs. “I’m going to see if I can’t get eyes on Devon somehow.”

“Wait, what?”

“Electronically. I promise not to fly away.” He gave them a ghost of a smile, but he was really upset. It showed.

“You guys work on defenses for a minute. I’m just going to go sit with him a minute, okay?”

Both Austin and Jules nodded, and he went running. If his lover didn’t feel safe, then they had a problem. This was his job—to protect his omega.

He headed up to the computer area, finding Andy sitting and staring, tears on his cheeks.

“Hey. Hey, we’re going to be okay.”

“How? I mean, before this, I thought we were safe and happy! I didn’t know everyone hated us!”

“No. Not everyone hates us. We’re just powerful. And that always makes people want what we have.” He stroked his mate’s back.

“I didn’t know. I thought our baby was going to come into a good place.”

“She is. Oh, baby. I’m sorry. It can be scary. But think how happy you’ve all been here.”

Andy shook his head, lips pressed together. “Now I see why the moms are overprotective. I will never let this baby leave this compound. Ever.”

“Oh, Andy—”

“No. No, the world hates us. You ask Devon what he’s thinking right now.”

“I’m sure he’s scared and worried and freaking out. But I also bet he’s not convinced the whole world hates us.” He hoped. He grabbed Andy up to put his mate in his lap, and Andy was stiff, his shoulders up around his ears. “Austin and Jules and I...we can protect the compound, and we can protect you. It just seems really bad right now because there’s all this stuff you just found out about. And you’re pregnant.”

“I am. And I want my baby to grow up. I can’t—Dustin, I don’t know if I can do this. I’m just realizing how freaking

sheltered I've been.”

Dustin stroked Andy's curly hair, loving how it grabbed at his fingers, making them connected. “Maybe so. But you fought for Ursula. You came for me when you knew it could be dangerous. You're brave and strong and smart, baby. And together, we can do this. We're not alone.”

“I just... Can I call Devon? We've only been friends a short time, but I feel like I know him. I need to know he's okay.”

“Of course you can. Try FaceTiming him.”

“Thank you.” Andy sniffed, and Dustin saw the effort it took to hold it together. His hands shook as he dialed up Devon, and Dustin sent a plea to the goddess that Devon was okay and could talk right now.

“Andy?” Devon popped onto the screen, a pretty man with dark brown hair and blue eyes. “Hey. Hi.” He looked pale but composed.

“Is everything okay?” Andy picked at his jeans.

“Dude. That guy you sent? He took out those goblins like they were kids' action figures. He's fucking amazing. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. His name is—” Andy glanced at him.

“Gavin Castellan.”

“Well, there you go.”

Devon's eyes widened. “Like the multimillionaire?”

“I guess. Are you guys okay?”

“For now. Your guy—Gavin—he's talking to Ty, Brand, and Eagan at the moment. I think he wants to stay for a bit.”

“Good. You guys need the protection.”

“Yeah. I think we're a little like a beacon up here. Come and find us, you know?” Devon chuckled, but it wasn't very mirthful. “I can't thank you guys enough.”

“Do you have any idea why the goblins showed up? I’m Dustin, by the way.”

“Devon. Nice to meet you. I don’t know. The alphas are all being super cagey.”

“I’ll call the boss in a bit and find out.” Dustin nodded to Devon. “How can we help?”

“I’m not sure? Just keep the lines of communication open. I’m so grateful Andy got in touch.”

Another face appeared behind Devon, this man dark-haired, but with lovely green and gold eyes. “Hey, is this Andy?”

“Yep.” Devon grinned. “This is Ollie. The Reaver of Marks and Reaver books.”

“Hey, Ollie! Are you okay?” Andy’s worry was a tangible thing, but it was easing now that Devon and Ollie were on the phone.

“I’m good. I mean, that was a crazy thing, but between our alphas, the brownies, and your big honkin’ dragon friend, we got them beaten down. And uh, they’re fertilizer now. Yay.” Ollie did a little victory dance, from the looks of it.

“I’m so glad. I’m so glad you could call.”

“Me too!” Ollie was a hoot, all big eyes and wild facial expressions. Devon was more a dude, he thought. Calmer.

“Andy is worried that this is a regular occurrence,” Dustin mentioned, hoping for reassurance.

“Oh, god. I mean, who knows? We’ve had our share of vampires as a family, but these are our first goblins. I mean, Brand and his brothers are medieval aged. So there’s a lot of power. It attracts weirdness.”

Devon nodded, gaze holding Andy’s. “Something big is happening. I know it, don’t you?”

“I do. And you need to talk to—to Gavin.” Andy was doing so well remembering names. “Dustin and his brother say Gavin says the same thing, and he’s the knowledge guy.”



“Okay. I’ll be sure to pick his brain before he comes back to you.”

“Keep him as long as you need him. We’re putting up defenses here.”

“Sure. I mean, you need to have a good basis for that, but you need to balance that with living your life, man.” Devon shrugged. “Your baby should have a protector showing up soon. A familiar. That will help.”

“Yeah? We had one, I remember. An owl. He was fierce.”

“Yes. You see? And you’ll find out that you’re a lot more dangerous than you think. I kind of exploded a vampire who was trying to hurt me when I was pregnant.”

“Yeah? That’s impressive. Seriously.”

“Yes. You are meant to raise them, love them, and protect them.”

“I don’t feel like I’m ready for that,” Andy whispered, and Dustin hugged him tight from behind.

“Oh my God of course you don’t,” Ollie said. “I was convinced I wasn’t even a dragon and would never be able to give Eagan babies and then I was sure I would suck. You’re not ready for it until you have to be.”

Devon nodded in pure agreement. “You’re fine, Andy. You’re brave and strong and your family loves you.”

“We do.” Dustin kissed his neck. “I promise. We’ll do all we can to make a great life.” He thought he could feel Andy relaxing some.

“Aww...” Both dragons on the phone beamed at them. “So sweet.”

Andy laughed, more a movement than a sound. “We’re still learning, I guess.”

“Always. Absolutely always. I’m going to go, Andy. I need to feed kiddos. You relax, please?”

“I’ll try. You guys stay safe.”

“It was nice to meet you guys,” Dustin put in.

“Ditto. When you get a chance, I’ll introduce you to Brand. He’s my hero.”

Now it was their turn to *aww*.

“Bye!” Devon and Ollie waved, and then they disconnected.

“Do you feel a little better, baby?”

“I do. Yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...freak.”

“You had a right to. I just don’t want you to think it’s never-ending. This kind of thing happens, but we’re not all doomed.” Dustin stroked Andy’s belly.

“No? You don’t feel doomed with a pregnant mate?”

“Maybe that,” he teased. “Hormones. Cravings...”

“A sweet little girl for you to hold.”

Dustin blinked. “A girl? How do you know?”

“She’s living in here with me. I know.”

“Wow. Oh, wow, baby.” He turned Andy in his arms. “I love you so much. I get it. It scares me too.”

“Yeah, but... Devon is right, and so are you. This is too big to not enjoy.”

“It is.” Oh, thank the goddess. “It’s going to be amazing.” And he would spend at least part of every day making sure it was, too.

“Her name is Ophelia. I saw her in a dream.”

“Lia, huh...” He liked that. The nickname came to him immediately.

“Yeah. She looks like you. She’s brave. Strong. Beautiful.”

“I—Damn.” He danced Andy around in a circle. “A baby girl.” His heart was too full. It was gonna bust.

“Yes. Our daughter. Our Lia. Our family is growing.”

“It is, and I can’t wait to meet her. Now, if you want a massage or something, I can wait a little longer.” He was just...damn. So freaking happy.

Happy enough that when his phone rang, he ignored it. The boss could make his excuses to Austin.

He had to keep Andy happy.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SIX

Andy was so damn hungry.

And he didn't want hamburgers or onion rings.

He wanted...chocolate cream pie. Like. A big, puffy one. One of those that was twice as high as the pie crust.

He didn't know how to make one, but he did know how to google shit, so he was down in the kitchen at three o'clock in the morning, crying and trying to make flour, butter, and water into pie crust.

"Andy? What's wrong, honey?" Austin walked into the room, frowning at him, but mostly with concern, he thought. "Where's Dustin?"

"Asleep? I think I wore him out. I cried a lot, and then he knotted me, and then we watched a movie." He was getting to where it was hard to sleep, and he wasn't even that huge yet. It was his racing brain that kept him awake.

"I—Oh. Well, okay. What's the matter?"

"I want a chocolate cream pie so bad it hurts, but this isn't becoming a crust!" And he wasn't stupid, but this was hard!

"Oh, man. Well, that's because it's late. Or early. So it's okay. I can help."

"You can?"

"I am a pie crust master." Austin grinned, pushing up his long sleeves. "Let's start over with some cold butter, huh?"

“Okay. Yes. Please.” Oh, that would so rock. “I’m so frustrated.”

“I bet.” Austin’s expression changed to pure sympathy. “My brother is a meanie, getting you pregnant so fast.” Austin started grating butter. Like with a box grater. “Can you get the dry stuff measured out again?”

“Of course. That seemed to be the easy part.”

“Good man.” Austin got the pastry cutter off the counter where he’d thrown it before getting some ice water out of the fridge water dispenser. “Okay, so the key is to keep everything super cold. I had a lover once who used liquid nitrogen to freeze his butter so he could make things like pie crust and biscuits.”

“No shit?” He blinked. He didn’t even know how to get liquid nitrogen.

“Yep. I just try to make it fast. Then you let it sit in the fridge and rest for fifteen to twenty minutes.”

“Okay.” He just wanted that luscious sensation of cream and crust and chocolate together.

“While we do that, we make the filling. So, what have you got? Pudding? Chocolate? Corn starch?”

“I have Cool Whip and instant pudding. Is that okay?”

“It is. I know we have milk.” Austin pulled out another bowl. “So the pudding and half the milk you would normally use goes in here. Then we replace the other half with Cool Whip.”

Before long the crust was in the oven, the filling was in the fridge, and Austin was making tea.

“Thank you. This cravings thing is weird.” And a little scary, like his body wasn’t his own.

“I bet. Have you talked to Dustin about it?”

“Uh-huh.” He started shaving chocolate for on top. He had a pile of it before he realized he was just eating the little

shavings as he did them. “He’s been super sweet about it, but he’s tired tonight.”

“Well, I was up, and we...well, we’re family now, aren’t we?”

“We are.” And he wasn’t going to let it slide.

“Cool.” Austin gave him this crazy cool smile. It was worth it to be up this late to see it. “So, Dustin says it’s a girl?”

“She is. Lia. I dreamed about her.”

“That’s so cool. I can’t wait to meet her.” The oven timer dinged sooner than he would have expected, and Austin pulled the pie crust out to cool. “Won’t be long now.”

“Have you designed your space here?” Andy wanted Austin to stay, if for no other reason than Dustin wanted his brother close.

“Some, yeah. I’ve been working with Jules on a few things as well, but I’ll be ready to dig in come spring.”

It was hard to do construction in the winter, which was a fair point.

“Atlas says that Ursula is about to have her baby. A week, at most.” Small talk sucked. “Do you play cards?”

“Sure. Dustin and I have played for years. What’s your game?”

“Gin rummy, but I like a lot of games.”

“Oh, I will kick your ass at gin.”

He grabbed a deck of cards out of the drawer at the end of the counter. “I’d like to see you try.”

Austin’s grin was wide, almost sharklike. “Oh, this is fun.”

“You deal.” He handed over the cards, watching Austin’s hands. He could learn a lot by how Austin dealt the cards.

Austin’s eyes narrowed, and Andy went for innocent. He was pretty okay at that. Mostly. So Austin laid out ten cards each, and they were off and running. He could immediately tell Austin was going for runs, not sets.

They had played four or five hands when a cough interrupted them. Jules.

“Late-night cards?”

“Your brother is kicking my butt at gin. Come play 500 Rummy with us instead.” Austin rose to grab the filling out of the fridge, spooning it into the pie crust. He topped it with more Cool Whip and the chocolate shavings.

“Pie?”

Andy nodded. “Pie. He saved my life.”

“Wow.” Jules gave the pie a hopeful look. “Is there enough to share?”

“That one is Andy’s. Is there more Cool Whip?”

“In the fridge out in the utility room. I’ll get it.” Jules zoomed off.

Austin pulled out more butter. “I’ll make a couple more crusts. I bet we have Puck and Dustin soon.”

“Oh, I bet we do.” Andy grabbed his pie and took it back to the table with a fork. “Thank you, Austin. This is perfect.” He didn’t even take a bite to begin with. He just sniffed it, and the scent was exactly what he desired. Chocolatey. Creamy. With a crisp crust. His mouth watered.

“You’re welcome, hon.” Austin grated butter, and Andy had to smile. Just like his mate, Austin was a big, tough alpha protector, but he had this squishy, warm center. Andy was incredibly thankful for both of them.

“I hear I need to grate more butter.” Dustin came shuffling in wearing his robe and slippers, as if Andy had conjured him. “I love middle-of-the-night pie.”

Andy scooped out a bite of pie. “I’m sorry I woke everyone up.”

“Never be sorry for that if you need us,” Dustin said, kissing the top of his head just after.

“I was craving.”

“Here!” Jules ran back in with two tubs of Cool Whip. “I’ll dig out the pudding.”

“Cool. Dustin, get the milk and start making filling, huh?”

“You got it, bro. Eat up, baby. Then we’ll play some cards.”

“Mmmhmm.” Andy couldn’t talk. He was too busy eating. Austin made a perfect pie crust. They were going to have to keep the guy around. He needed this to be on tap anytime he wanted a pie.

Not to mention that it would make his mate happy to have his brother around.

Andy smiled at Jules, who was pulling out three flavors of pudding. He totally got how Dustin felt.



“Hey, have you heard from the boss?” Dustin asked Austin.

It seemed like weeks had passed since the diverted trip to see them when the boss had ended up in Estes instead of Santa Fe.

“Nope. I got an email from Logan yesterday, but that’s it.”

Logan was another operative like them, and Dustin had gotten the same email. The cave the vampires had used as their lair had been cleared, cleansed, and closed with a rockslide.

No more vamps had been discovered.

“I think we ought to call him, man,” Dustin said. “The moms want to know what happened with the goblins.”

“Well, maybe it’s time they met him.”

Dustin blinked. “You mean like on Zoom.”

“Yeah. I’ll set it up. Just the four of us. I don’t want your mate all freaked out again, and Jules would just try to run off and help with anything that might still be stirring. He’s chafing for action.”



Dustin rolled his eyes. “That’s your fault. You keep telling him all these stories about our work.”

“Eh, he’s bored. Andy is all omega dadding and Puck is hiding from him. I’m just helping.”

“Uh-huh.” He would worry that Austin was trying something with Jules, but they totally had buddy chemistry going on. Nothing hanky-panky about it. “I’ll go approach the moms.”

“I’ll bring the tech.” Austin headed off, presumably to get his laptop, so Dustin stepped outside to walk down to the earthship house the moms inhabited.

He knocked but ducked into their entryway without waiting because it was cold out there. Kind of bitter, actually.

*Love? Are you at my mothers’ place?*

*Caught. I am. Did you need me?*

*No more so than always. Are they okay?*

*Yes, Austin wants to loop them in on a call with the boss.*

*Oh... Can I come?*

He took a deep breath, then let it out. *Will you promise not to get really upset again?*

*Yes. In fact, this will help. I need to know what happened.*

*Okay. Boots, please. And I’ll come walk you down.* Dustin turned on his heel, going right back to the main house to get his pregnant mate.

“Where you going?” Austin asked, meeting him halfway.

“Andy wants to come. I won’t let the others, okay?”

Austin rolled his eyes. “So you say.”

“I mean it. I’ll put them on Christmas shopping for little Esther.” Ursula had popped that baby out right before Thanksgiving, and she was growing like a weed.

“Oh, distractifying. I like it.” Austin winked, then passed him by and knocked on the moms’ door before slipping inside just like he had.

“What’s going on?” Jules met him at the door of the main house.

Goddess save him, nothing happened in this compound without everyone knowing it.

“I’ll fill you in after, but a call with the boss. I need you to go see Puck. Make sure he’s okay. Everyone is worried, and this is your chance with us all out of the house.”

Jules squinted at him. “Promise to fill me in?”

“I do.” He held out his hand to shake on it. Jules seemed to really buy into that kind of gesture.

Jules shook his hand. “Okay. I’ll tell him I need help...”

“Shopping for Ursula and Atlas and Esther.”

Jules snapped his fingers. “Bam. Good one.”

“I thought so.” He held out a hand to Andy, who had come down the stairs carefully, boots on.

“Be careful, bro,” Jules told Andy. “It’s slick.”

“Dustin won’t let me fall.” Andy gave Jules a smile. “You’ll make sure Puck is okay?”

“I will.” Jules waved before charging up the stairs.

“He always has so much energy,” Andy said, sounding wistful.

“You’ll get yours back, baby. I know this is tough on your body.”

“Lia is just growing so fast.”

“She is. And your balance is horked. In a lot of ways.” He let Andy hold his arm as they walked the breezeway to the moms’.

“Yeah. I’m so excited to meet her, though. She sings to me. Did I tell you?”

He stopped short, making Andy bump him. “What?”

“I hear her. It’s kind of nonsensical, but she sings. Her voice is so sweet and pure.” Andy’s smile went radiant.

“How can I hear this?” Dustin wanted to know what their daughter sounded like.

“The next time she starts I’ll bring you in.”

“Thank you, love.” He guided Andy to the moms’ door, and like magic, it opened up.

“Are we ready to meet?” Dustin asked.

“We are.” Titania smiled at them, grabbing Andy’s hands. “I feel like it’s been days.”

“I know! I’ve been working hard and resting hard and making pies in the middle of the night!”

“Puck brought me some pie. Austin makes an amazing pie crust.”

“He does.” Andy kissed his mom’s cheek, and Dustin bent to do the same as he came in behind.

“Good work on the wards. You two strengthened them well.”

“Thank you.” Dustin grinned. “We thought you might like to speak to our boss and hear about the situation in Colorado.”

“I do, and I want to know whether he’s coming soon or waiting a bit. Ursula’s a little protective of her family right now.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t blame her. Esther was so tiny. And such a joy. She was going to become a ball of wonder as she grew. She was exploring her world, as were Ursula and Atlas, and another big alpha dragon might set them on edge.

“Well, Angelica is making food. Mason, get down.” Titania grabbed the big dog’s collar.

“Hey, Mason.” Dustin nuzzled the big beast, whose tail started knocking over everything in its path.

“He keeps sniffing my belly.”

Angelica laughed when they walked into the kitchen. “He knows.”

“Of course he knows.” Andy went to hug his mama. “I’m showing a lot.”

“Yes, you are. Are you sure that’s one wee girl?” She patted his belly.

“Only one I’ve heard so far. You’ll have to see if you hear two.”

“Mmm. We’ll see, hmm? Lia might just be loud.”

Dustin blinked. “We could have more than one?”

“Well, you’re a twin.” Titania looked at him like he was insane.

“I know! I just—it never occurred to me. If we only hear Lia…”

“Well, it’ll be easier when she starts moving. Her song ought to be strong enough for you to hear soon, Dustin.” Angelica patted his arm, comforting.

“I do worry.” What if she was afraid of him? Or couldn’t hear him? Goddess, what if he was going to be a sucky dad?

“Don’t. You’re amazing. You love them both; they love you. It’s a match.”

“I do. So much.” He loved Andy and Lia so bad. He would protect them with everything in him and give them anything he could.

“Then quit focusing on the bad, you two, and celebrate this pregnancy.” She rolled her eyes. “Worrywarts.”

“We’re not—” He glanced at Andy, who laughed and stuck his tongue out. “Okay. We will.”

“Sit, all of you,” Mom said. “Austin, hook us up.”

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Austin saluted and opened the Zoom meeting, laughing as the boss popped in, along with Brand and their eldest daughter, Arielle, who was a bright-eyed little firecracker of a girl.

“Hi!” Arielle waved.

“Hey, kiddo,” Andy said. “How’s it going?”

“Good! How’s the belly?” Arielle’s grin was wicked. “Are you huge yet?”

“I am.” Andy stood up, showing off.

“Wow! You look like Uncle Ollie did with the Ks!” Her eyes went wide, and she was clearly impressed.

“You don’t do anything by half measures,” the boss said.

Dustin puffed up a little. “No, sir. So, how’s Estes?”

“It’s been busy. I’ll be up here for a bit.”

“Oh?” Titania sat in front of the laptop. “I’m the mom. Is everything under control?”

“It is. Gavin Castellan, ma’am.” Gavin nodded gravely. “There was an insurgence of goblins, and Ty and I feel like it was due to the fact that they’d been moving back into the mountain with their housing, disturbing a nest of them. But it’s under control, and between the dragons here and their fae friends, we feel as if it’s ended.”

“We’re going to be digging into the mountain come spring. Everyone here seems to feel it’s important.”

“Yes. I would like to be there when you do that.” Gavin smiled, and even that was a serious expression for him.

“I like that idea too,” Austin said.

“Perfect. We can focus on Christmas and having a baby and making pie.”

“Pie?” Gavin’s eyebrows went up.

“Cravings,” Dustin deadpanned.

“Ah. So, I’ll have some delivered for the holidays.”

“Ooh! Although Austin makes the best pie crust. Have you tried it?”

Dustin would be jealous if Andy’s words hadn’t made Austin visibly beam.

“I have not. I hope you’re still in a pie mood when I come.”

“So these are my boys now,” Mama said. “Tell me you won’t try to put them back to work in the field.”

The boss blinked at her, and her eyebrow rose.

“I’m serious. These are my sons. My family. And we have infants here.”

“I see. Well, then you have my word. They can work for me remotely, if that’s amenable.”

“It is.” She nodded, relaxing back into happy Mama. “Thank you.”

Austin reached over and hugged Angelica. “Thank you, lady.”

“You’re ours now.” Mom chortled, rubbing her hands. “Beware.”

Brand’s laugh came across the com. “Gavin, my man, you have lost operatives.”

“Mothers are the fiercest, this I know.” Gavin winked over, and then his brows lowered. “You’re all safe there? Protected?”

“We’ve put in new wards, put in some new security features like cameras and alarms. The dog is damn good at his job.” Dustin ran down what they had.

“Let me know what else you need and I’ll invest. I want you to have a haven to raise those babies.” Gavin’s expression never really changed, but it was clear what he was saying. He would help them put in more sophisticated security.

“We appreciate it, boss,” Austin said before anyone could protest. “We’ll need it when we start excavating, I think.”

“Maybe. Maybe not—I need to get you in touch with Tyson...” Brand said.

Gavin gave Brand an amused look. “I mean for security, my man.”

“Yeah, but Ty can help them with the engineering. So to speak.”

“Ah.” Gavin’s expression cleared. “Yes. I think that’s wise.”

Dustin glanced at Austin. Had they missed something?

“Don’t worry. He’s in the daycare right now, but we’ll hook you two up.”

“Okay.” Dustin shrugged. “We’ll take all the help we can get.”

“Excellent.” Gavin’s smile made them all blink, he thought. It transformed the man from severe to holy handsome Batman in no time. Lord have mercy.

Andy leaned on him. “He’s very pretty.”

“Right? It’s a little scary.”

Gavin snorted. “He can hear you.”

“That’s okay. Dustin knows I’m mad about him. I’m mated, not dead.”

“And pregnant. By me.” Dustin winked broadly. “I know when I have a good thing.” Dustin rubbed Andy’s back, because he could tell it was bothering Andy some the way he kept arching it.

Andy’s head suddenly tilted like he heard something.

“What is it, baby?” Dustin asked, a little worried. It was too early for anything like labor pains.

“Can I talk to you in the other room, please?”

“Sure.” Dustin followed Andy, leaving the moms and Austin to chat, forcing himself not to panic. “What’s the matter, love?”

Andy grabbed his hand, put it on his belly, and there—right there—was a firm, hard kick.

“Oh.” Dustin’s eyes went wide. “Baby!”

“Literally.” Andy grinned.

“Wow.” That was...his heart melted. “I feel her.”

“That’s your girl. That’s Lia.”

“Andy.” He took Andy in his arms for a kiss. “Goddess, I love you. I haven’t told you that enough. I should. And Lia. My baby girl. Papa loves you too.” He didn’t have a lot of experience or role models for parenting. Well, he hadn’t until the moms. But he wanted to do this right. And showing his adoration had to be part of it.

*Brother? All is well? Andy?*

*The baby is moving. I got to feel her.* He couldn’t even describe how that felt. He might expire from happiness.

Suddenly a loud hooting and hollering could be heard from the other room, and Andy chuckled. “You told.”

“I did.”

“Me too.”

He kissed Andy again, kind of making his ears ring from lack of oxygen. And then, suddenly, he could hear a tiny song. Sweet. Fiercely joyful.

*Lia.*

*Papa! Papa! Papa!*

He couldn’t breathe for a moment, and he dropped to his knees, face against Andy’s belly.

Andy stroked his hair with a gentle hand. “You hear her.”

“I do. Oh, goddess. I do.” *I love you. I love you, sweet girl. Your papa loves you.*

Her joy was like a drug.

He looked up at Andy. “Thank you, baby. Wow.”

“You’re happy? Excited?”

“I’m over the damn moon. I want to go fly and tell the whole world, although we know that might be a bad idea.” He kissed Andy’s belly. “So I’ll tell you. And my brother. And your brothers.”

“I wanted you to know first. I wanted this to be ours, then everyone’s.”



“Yes.” That was perfect. Theirs. Sometimes they both lost track of that because he was a twin and Andy had always lived with his whole family.

They needed to remember to find space even in the crowd.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-SEVEN

**A** *ndy?*  
Andy sat straight up in bed, frowning. *Puck? What's wrong?*

*Come look at the Christmas tree with me? You always do, and I'm lonely.*

*Oh, honey. I'm coming.*

Poor Puck. He'd been hiding away from everyone for what seemed like months. Certainly weeks. Andy slid out of bed, grabbing his robe before he made his way down to the family room, where the big tree twinkled with lights and ornaments.

"I made us hot cocoa." Nine mugs sat on the coffee table, three filled with steaming goodness.

*Jules? Man, you'd better be on your way.*

*I am. I'm just putting on pants. It's cold!*

He chuckled, but he was so glad his brother had heard and was responding in the perfect way.

"Good morning, Puck. Merry Christmas." He kissed Puck's cheek, the smell of hot chocolate making his nose twitch in the best way. He did love that stuff, and right now, it suited his cravings. Weird how he'd gone from wanting onion rings to needing chocolate everything.

"Morning." Puck bent to his belly. "Merry Christmas, Lia."

He put a hand on his stomach when Lia kicked. “Want to feel, Puck? She’s doing a little dance for you.”

Puck reached up, and Lia went wild, turning and kicking, announcing herself to the world.

Puck’s eyes flew open wide. “Oh, wow. That’s amazing. Hello, baby girl. You’re such a sweetie. We’re going to be best friends, you and Uncle Puck.”

“Are we playing who’s going to be the favorite uncle?” Jules kissed his cheek on the way by. “I smell cocoa! What are we making the moms and the alpha pair for breakfast?”

“Mmm. Maybe we should make the alpha pair cook.” Andy winked at Puck, who flushed a bright red and ducked his head.

“The moms might be plotting breakfast down at their place as we speak.” Jules laughed, grabbing a mug. “We can hope anyway. Breakfast tacos? Blue corn pancakes?”

“Coffeecake!” Puck cheered, and the three of them cracked up.

“This is the last time we’ll all do this, you know that, right?” Jules sounded serious. “Next year, we’ll have a niece, Esther will be old enough to be excited—it’ll be totally different.”

Puck looked a little broken-hearted, but Andy got it. This one was special. The next one would be too. “Next year, we’ll need more mugs and two that are chocolate milk.”

That made Puck brighten a little. “I make a mean chocolate milk.”

“You make the best, brother.” He gave Puck a hug. “I love you so much. Both of you. I can’t tell you how much it means that you still want me and Dustin here, that you’ve been so good to him. It’s a gift, and I know how lucky I am.”

Jules stopped to blink at him, then came to give them both a hug too. “Love you, Andy. You too, Puck. We’re family, right? No matter what. Even if some of us are weirder than others.” He pinched Puck’s arm.

“That’s me! Weirdo extraordinaire!” Puck’s laugh rang out like a bell.

“Come on. Let’s go sit by the tree and look before it gets busy.” It was still an adjustment for all of them to have five extra bodies in their space. And all larger than life. Dustin and Austin exuded the sort of energy their mom did. Hard as flint and growly and protective. Then there were Ursula and Atlas, who were just as fierce, but in this fuzzy, sweet bear way. They were quite the family.

“Yay.” Puck bounced off, his cocoa sloshing but not spilling.

“Good call,” Jules muttered. “He’s a little wiggled.”

“I think we all are, right? Thanksgiving was easy; it’s all about food. But this has always been so much about us. And now he has to share.” They followed Puck out to sit in front of the tree, and if he had to sit on the ottoman instead of the floor this year, so be it.

“I know. I understand, but we have to grow. Change is coming.”

Andy put one hand over his belly. He knew that. He didn’t want to think about it right now. “Want to feel the baby move?”

“I do.” Jules smiled, reaching out to feel what Puck had. His eyes went dark, his lips dropping open. “Oh, wow. Feel her go.”

“She’s got a great Christmas dance action going on. Dustin says it’s his favorite time of year, so maybe she feels the same way.”

“Maybe she just wants chocolate,” Puck said. “She’s been pushing you for it lately.”

They all had to laugh at that. There were two chocolate pies in the fridge right now. He was going to buy stock in Jell-O pudding and Cool Whip. Or maybe Dustin was. He had more money, right?

It would only be a few more months anyway. Spring.

By the time the desert started to bloom, they would have a little girl to hold and love.

*Love? Is it safe for me to come down now, or does Puck need more brother time?*

His lips curved. *I should have known you were awake and listening in.*

*I always check in when I wake up and you're not by my side. I worry.*

*Give us about another fifteen?*

*Of course. I'll wash up a little and such.* Dustin's mental caress had Lia kicking again, doing her I-love-papa dance.

*Thank you, love.* Dustin got it, he thought. He'd been having some workout time with Austin lately, too, giving them twin bonding.

*Merry Christmas, my own.*

*Merry Christmas, love.*

A wave of joy poured out of him, his little girl so excited, so happy.

Puck scooted back to lean against his legs. "Thanks, Andy. I know Dustin is probably awake. I just need a few minutes."

He petted his brother's curly hair. "I know, huh? I got time for you any time you need me, Puck. I promise. And if I forget, poke me. Just not in the belly."

Puck laughed. "No. No hurting my baby niece."

"I know you wouldn't do that. She's going to adore you."

"She is. She's going to have the most amazing uncles ever. All of us."

He nodded at Puck, and at Jules. "You guys won't let her know a moment of doubt that she's loved."

"Not ever," Puck said it fiercely, a deep scowl on his face. "I promise."

"Thank you."

“Good morning!” A blast of cold air came from the door, and Mason bounded in, barking, followed by the moms. “We brought breakfast enchiladas and cinnamon rolls!”

“Yay! Cinnamon rolls for the win!” Andy applauded, wiggling in his chair. “I was hoping there would be cinnaminy yumminess.”

“I know my boys well,” Mama said. “Ursula wants to make the bacon and sausage, so I told her to come along when she was ready. Is there coffee?”

“Cocoa, Mama,” Puck said.

“Ah, then we will have that first, si, Titania?”

“We will.” Mom took the food to the kitchen before returning to plop down in one of the big leather chairs. “Where is your mate, Andy? He needs to start us a fire.”

Andy laughed, because that was something Jules had ceded gladly to Dustin or Austin. Chopping wood and building fires for the moms.

“I’ll tell him to come down.” *The moms are here, love. Come do your thing and lay a fire.*

*Your mom does remember she’s the fire dragon, not me?*

*She cares not. This amuses the hell out of her.*

*Yeah, I know. I’m coming.* Dustin loved it. He and Mom got along so well already. Dustin seemed a little less certain where he stood with Mama, but Andy thought it gave her a laugh keeping Dustin off guard. She would be all earth mother, then threaten his balls if he messed up.

She didn’t really mean it. He was pretty sure, anyway. She’d never followed through on it with any of her own kids, and she terrorized them all the time.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Atlas walked in carrying a big sack. “I brought stuff for all! Ursula has the bacon.”

Little Esther was clinging to her father, and Jules went right over to take her and give her a snuggle.

“Hey, baby bear. How is my sweetest little Esther?” Jules cooed, and Esther let out a sound that was pure bear. Adorable.

She lunged at Jules’s face, but just to rub noses with him. She was the best. She never bit like that. She might gnaw on something if her teeth were bothering her. She was growing fast, and would be in her bear form in no time.

“I’ll go help Ursula,” Puck said, slipping out of the room just as Austin and Dustin came downstairs.

*Okay, Mom. I’m worried about Puck. Do you think he hates Dustin?*

*No, son. He adores your mate.*

*Then what?*

She looked at him, one eyebrow arching, but he didn’t get it.

*Mom, I really wouldn’t ask if I knew what was going on. Is he mad at Austin?*

*I wouldn’t say he’s angry with him, no.*

He stared back at her, wanting a better answer. Puck might be scared of Austin, he guessed. Maybe his belly hurt when he looked at him and he thought Austin was dangerous or something. That would make it tough to be in the same room.

But he knew Austin wasn’t mean. Austin loved being here, loved Dustin and him. Austin made him pie.

*Think harder, Andy. If it was that, Puck would tell you. He’s never shy about his bad feelings, is he?*

He blinked. No, that was true enough. Puck was always vocal about what he perceived as a threat and, in general, he was right. Dustin hadn’t been anything to be afraid of, but he had heralded a great deal of change when he arrived.

So if it wasn’t that—

Oh. Oh, my.

Mom just nodded, winking broadly, and left it at that.

He wasn't getting messed up in that. Mating was...intense and weird, and Austin was super alpha and Puck was crazy weird, so...

He grinned at Dustin when he came in carrying gifts he'd obviously been wrapping at the last moment, putting them under the tree as he said Merry Christmas. Then he began laying the fire, getting it ready to light for when they opened presents.

“Do I smell cinnamon rolls?”

“And breakfast enchiladas and Ursula and Puck are making meat.”

“Oh, is Puck up?” Austin looked around. “I thought he might still be asleep.”

“What's in a breakfast enchilada?” Dustin asked.

“These have chicken. Eggs. Half and half. Chiles. Tortillas.”

“I'm so in. Baby, you want one?”

Little Esther roared, and Atlas shook his head. “You aren't ready for meat, little goof.”

“Oh. Oops.” Dustin grinned. “What can I get her?”

“Ursula can feed her. Will you take her into the kitchen?”

“Of course.” Dustin took her from Jules. “Come on, wee one. I'll cook some so Ursula can feed her.”

“She's growing so fast!” And Andy couldn't believe how amazing she was.

“I know.” Atlas made wide eyes at them as he unloaded his sack, putting wildly wrapped gifts under the tree. The paper had bears and moose and salmon on a green background. “It's wild. I am waiting for her to be less...feral, though.”

“How long does that take?”

“She'll become a bear cub soon; then she'll be more mobile, able to eat more freely.”



“And then she’ll be into all manner of mischief. Which is when Mason will come in handy,” Mom said.

The big dog raised his head to woof.

“The irony of a bear dog babysitting a baby bear is not lost on me.” Atlas chuckled, the sound rough and low, but happy. “So, do we sing at Christmas here?”

“We do! We have tons of Christmas songs.”

Jules nodded and chuckled softly. “Dragons like singing.”

“And stories,” Mama added.

“Oh, good. We sing all the old songs, and some of the new ones. Ursula likes that one about grandma and the reindeer.”

Andy giggled. “I like that one too.” *Puck? Are you coming back? Is everything okay?*

*Fine. I was just helping with the bacon.*

*Well, come sing with us. Atlas wants to do carols.* He knew Puck loved to sing, so that would be hard to resist.

*We’ll all be there in ten—Ursula, the baby, Dustin, and me.*

*Okay.* That was a reasonable compromise. As long as Puck wasn’t going to hide. It was Christmas, and he’d left his warm bed for his brother’s call, dammit. They would spend time together even if Puck was afraid to show his face. Crap.

Dustin’s warm mental laughter came to him. *He will enjoy Christmas if you have to drag him through it.*

*Yes. Grr. Argh. Rawr.*

*My caveman omega. We’ll be right out. He’s flipping bacon while Ursula feeds Esther.*

Dustin’s chuckle made him grin.

“What are you smiling about, Andy?”

His cheeks went hot, but he shrugged. “Dustin. They’ll be in after a few.”

“Good.” Jules bounced. “It’s time to open presents.”

Austin gave Jules a thumbs-up. “Roger that.”

“Children,” Mom said, rolling her eyes at Mama.

“Next year, Lia will be opening presents. It’s hard to believe.”

“Crazy,” Atlas agreed. “Esther will too.” He gave Andy a hopeful look. “I sure want them to be friends.”

“They will be. I know it. There’s a reason we all came together.” Andy fist-bumped Atlas. “They’ll be cousins. Sisters of their hearts.”

Mom and Mama looked at each other, and they seemed a little misty.

“Okay, breakfast!” Dustin came out with plates stacked on his arms like a diner server. “Mom. Mama. Andy. Jules. Be right back.” He hightailed it back to the kitchen.

“Super server.” He snagged a piece of bacon and munched on it.

“Yep. He’s got the job for life if he wants it.” Mom dug into her casserole. They all had neatly portioned enchiladas, breakfast meat, and giant cinnamon rolls.

“Ha.” Dustin came back in. “You think I don’t want that? I do.” He handed plates to Atlas and Austin, then sat two more down. “Ursula! Puck. Come on. Let me go get mine. Mason, not for you, buddy.”

Mason barked, pouncing on Dustin’s leg, playing madly.

Dustin laughed. “Come on, bud. I have a treat for you in the kitchen.”

Mom grinned at him, her eyes twinkling. “I like him, son. You chose well. Two alphas for one.”

“I know.” Andy munched his enchiladas, moaning with happiness. “So yummy.”

Dustin sat by him when he came back, plate loaded down. “Are you talking about me?”

“I am praising you.”

“That suits me to the ground.” Dustin kissed the top of his head. “Merry Christmas.”

His alpha sounded utterly satisfied with the world.

Andy got that. He looked around at his family, who were eating breakfast as Atlas fed Mason scraps and Jules and Puck edged closer to the presents. Their first Christmas as this new household.

And he couldn't wait for the new year to see what it brought.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-EIGHT

“Holy shit, Austin,” Dustin said. “It’s a whole set of rooms.” He peered at the cave that had opened up in the cliff when he and Austin had tapped a line of what looked like some kind of mineral along the hillside, just like Ty had told them to do.

“This will be perfect for you and Andy, buddy. We can really build this out and make it nice.” Austin’s eyes were huge, and he ducked through the opening to stand upright, looking around.

Spring hadn’t exactly sprung, but after a couple of long chats with Ty of the Estes clutch, they had decided to do a little exploring.

Tyson had been amazing in helping them figure out how to tap into the magic in the mountain, and the ease of it stunned him. They didn’t have to dig. They just had to...ask. It was miraculous.

“Hey, wow.” Atlas trundled in with them. “This is so cool.”

“Right, it’s like the mountain is welcoming us in. Making room for us.”

“It is.” Austin turned in a circle. “Neat. There’s a coyote out there.”

“I—” Dustin stopped. “What?”

What had his brother said?

“Out in front of the cave. There’s a coyote. He’s pacing.”

Atlas frowned. "It's broad daylight. And I'm a bear. My scent should run him off."

"Mason should have run him off..." This was odd. Very odd. Hopefully the poor thing wasn't sick. "I'll go look."

He headed outside, almost swallowing his tongue when he found Andy on the ground, the coyote in his lap.

"Andy! Don't move. I'll get him off you!" He would kick the shit out of that animal if he had to. No one hurt his mate.

Andy glared at him. "You will not! This is Iris, and she's amazing. She came to help with Lia. You be nice."

"The coyote has a name?"

"Yes. She's like Mason. Or like Arielle's dog. She's going to be Lia's protector."

"Oh." That didn't stop his heart from racing.

"Now, apologize."

"What?"

"Apologize to Iris and tell her hi." Andy wasn't joking.

"Okay." He glanced at the coyote, who was giving him the stink eye. "Sorry, Iris. Hello."

The coyote leaned over and gave his hand a gentle wolf's kiss, teeth closing around his hand when he held it out.

Dustin smiled. A familiar. That was what she was.

"So, do you and Iris want to come see what we found, Andy?" Dustin asked.

"I do. Is it amazing?" Andy held his arms up, and Dustin helped him up to standing.

"It is. Come on." He took Andy right through the crack in the cliff. Iris followed more slowly, nose working, cautious as only a coyote could be.

"Dude...that's the coyote." Austin was stunned. Totally stunned.

“Her name is Iris.” Dustin chuckled. He felt the same way, but Andy would kick him in the shins if he showed it. “She’s going to be Lia’s familiar, Andy says.”

“Lia’s—Oh! Oh, yeah?” Austin’s eyes were wide, blinking. “Whoa. Congratulations, and nice to meet you.”

Iris bowed, then yawned, showing off impressive teeth.

Dustin hooted. “Oh, she’s like you, Austin. Threatening and greeting at the same time.”

Austin laughed then. “She is. I think that’s for Atlas more than me, though.”

“Like I said. Bear.” Atlas bowed back. “I respect you, trickster lady.”

She bowed again, then went to sit next to Andy, pretty as you please.

“Look at all this space!” Andy just stared. “It’s better than the earthship!”

“Isn’t it?” Dustin felt like he was at the top of the world. He’d done this. He’d found a place that was here, but their own at the same time.

“I—Wow. And it feels nice in here already. Not cold like I would expect in the rock.”

“Thermals,” Austin said. “There have to be springs nearby.”

“So...this can be our spot? We can make a home in here with Lia and Iris?”

“We can. And more, should they come along.”

“Listen to him,” Austin hooted, nudging him. “Stud.”

“Asshole.” Still, it was true. He would take more, should it be the universe’s will.

Andy gave him a soft smile. “I would love that.”

“You’ll get it when you hook up.” Atlas elbowed Austin.

His brother made a face. “Yeah, no. It’s not in the cards.”

Dustin didn't believe it. He knew that Austin and Puck were more stubborn than he could imagine, but it was a matter of convenience and time. Puck would give in at some point, or Austin would go all alpha and make the push he needed to and Puck would crumble.

Andy reminded him—constantly—that it wasn't his place to interfere or Mama would whap him. No pushing the omega.

None.

Dammit.

He wanted his twin to be as happy as he was.

Andy poked him in the ribs. "Hello? Us. You. Me. Lia. Our space. We need stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Yes. Cradle. Dresser. Kitchen shit. A nice bed. Closets. A sofa."

"Sheets. Dishes. Blankets."

Atlas gave them a wry look. "Ursula and I need all that too. We need a shopping trip."

"Well, I can't go. I'm a touch conspicuous..." Andy patted his belly.

"You are. We'll go." Austin pointed back and forth between him and Atlas. "And maybe Jules..."

"Or Puck," Andy said gently. "He loves to shop."

Austin turned a dull red. "Does he?"

*You said no pushing.*

Andy blinked at him. *What?*

*You told me not to push them.*

*Yes, that wasn't pushing. It was a gentle nudge.*

He had to fight not to laugh. "I'm amazed that you want to shop, bro."

"At least I know what you like, right?"

“And my brothers know what I like, so definitely take them. And text. A lot.”

Dustin grabbed Andy’s hand. “We’ll pick out the crib and all.” He wanted Andy to feel like they were doing this for the baby together.

“Okay. Thank you. I think the moms have ours somewhere too. It might be nice.”

“That would rock.” He got a little choked up thinking about it, in fact. His brother touched his shoulder, and he knew Austin got it. They just didn’t have stuff from when they were kids.

But they would be here for their children, like the moms were. They would do this. He had faith.

Andy gave him a hug. “This is amazing. I can’t wait to see what we do with it. Thank you, love.”

“Mmmm.” That was just what he needed to get him back on track. That and the way that Lia kicked at him, demanding his attention. His sweet baby girl was telling him she was there, that she was ready to be a family.

She was home. She was solid and real and growing.

He loved them both so much it hurt.

“Okay, so we need to mark out rooms. We can use the natural walls for some things, and drywall the rest,” Austin was saying.

“Sure.” They would figure that out. Hell, Jules and Andy and Puck had done it for the moms, and Austin was seriously enthused. So it was just about the supplies.

“And we’ll bring in electricity, heat...” Andy beamed at him. “Oh, Dustin. Mate. This is the perfect solution.”

“It is.” He took a kiss, making Atlas and Austin both roll their eyes.

*Gross!* His brother was a turd.

*Bite me, Austin.*



*Nah, he licked you. You're his.*

He laughed, sharing the thought with Andy, who burst into giggles. *He's right. You are mine.*

*And vice versa.*

Yes. "I love our family. I mean, I loved it before, but now..."

Andy's eyes filled with tears.

"But it's getting better all the time. And no one will be mad at you for thinking that, my love." He hugged Andy close, knowing it rang true for him and Austin as well. Things were only going to get happier. Better.

Bigger, somehow, and he couldn't wait.

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

Andy hummed, his headphones on as he dusted.

He needed to clean the whole downstairs today, because everyone he lived with was a slob. All of them.

Well, Ursula wasn't, but she was just coming out of basically hibernation with her cub. He supposed she wasn't in trouble.

Everyone else though? They sucked.

He nibbled on a piece of apple, as he finished the common room, and moved into the kitchen. Okay. Bleach cloths ho.

He checked to make sure his brothers weren't sneaking up on him. He might explode or pee or something if someone scared him now.

He felt...weird. Driven. Off.

Something.

Cleaning would fix it. He started with the microwave, getting it all nice and sparkly.

He sang and sang, rubbing the goo off the stove. Yuck. Man, when he had his own stove, Dustin had better not do this.

Every so often, he felt like someone was watching him, but then, when he looked, no one was there. It wasn't creepy. Just...weird.

He glanced at the door, frowning. He pulled his headphone away. "Mom? Is that you?"

Nothing.

Huh.

He stretched up, pushing a little at his belly. It was hard, and Lia was sitting in a weird spot. There was something... He turned his head the other way. "Dustin?"

He was getting a little freaked out.

*Dustin? Mate? You around?*

*I'm upstairs. Did you need me?* He knew Dustin hadn't waited for him to answer when he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs.

He smiled and leaned on the banister for half a second. *I always need you.*

*Oh, good. What's wrong?* Dustin came into view, padding toward him, reaching for him right away.

"Hey." He leaned in for a second, letting his eyes close.

"Mmmm. You smell like cleaner. I thought your mom said lemon juice and vinegar and baking soda for a bit." Dustin rubbed his belly.

"I was—" He groaned and pressed harder against his mate. "That feels so good, Dustin."

"Yeah? Are you hurting, baby?" Dustin's big, warm hands just made him relax, let all sorts of tension release.

"Yeah. She's sitting heavy, and I'm having those weird contractions that we read about on the internet, I think. Practicing for her to come, I guess." He sighed and let Dustin hold him. "I need to finish cleaning the kitchen; then I want to vacuum."

"Mmm. I think you should take a break. Maybe we can have a little walk. Or a sit." Dustin just rubbed, which made things better.

"But I haven't got the oven cleaned..." He kept trying to straighten up, but his body wouldn't do it, and he found himself close to tears.

“Hey. Shhh.” Dustin took him to the front room and sat before pulling Andy down on his lap. Somehow, the curve of Dustin’s body was so perfect, easing the strain on his back right away. “I’ll get Austin to clean the oven. No harsh chemicals for you. I think we should sit for a few minutes and then go up and have a bath. You’ll feel so much better if you’re floating.”

“Do you think so?” His belly cramped again, and he sighed. He didn’t like this.

“I do. The warm water will help all those muscles that are cramping.” Dustin kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry you’re not feeling a hundred percent.”

“Me too, and Lia is just...acting odd somehow.” She was quiet and heavy.

“She’s saving up her energy, I bet.” Dustin seemed to think that statement made perfect sense, but he didn’t really get it.

“Yeah? Well, I guess growing is hard.”

“It is. Let’s go float. Austin says he’ll deal with the oven, and Jules and Puck are willing to help with anything.”

He still had things to do, but Dustin was being so very convincing, so he just nodded. “Okay. Floating sounds good.”

“Good.” Dustin stood with him cradled in those strong arms, carrying him easily, and he laughed, thinking how he felt heavier than he’d ever been. His strong, wonderful mate. Dustin carried him upstairs, taking him to the bathroom where he turned on the water so it was nice and warm.

“Oh... That looks so good.” He started undressing, toeing off his shoes by feel, because he hadn’t been able to reach them in weeks.

Or see his feet.

Or—

Something popped low in his belly, and he gasped as water poured over his feet. “Dustin!”

“Thar she blows.”

He stared, mouth open, as Dustin chuckled. Laughed! At him.

“Sorry, baby. That’s relief. Your moms said you were probably in labor, but I wanted to know for sure nothing was wrong. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“I want in the tub!” And at that, he simply burst into hysterical tears.

“We can do that, baby. It’s okay.” Dustin stripped him gently, then wiped him down with a towel. “See, now I get naked, and in we go.”

“Okay. It’s okay?” He didn’t want to be in labor. He wanted to be just normal and pregnant, dammit!

“This is perfect.” Dustin drew him down into the water, cradling him again, letting him lean. “My mate. This is so amazing. We get to meet Lia.”

“Oh.” The soft caresses started up again, and Andy felt himself relax. “Right. She’s going to be amazing. I need to tell everyone.”

“Everyone knows, baby. All you have to do is relax.”

“Oh.” Of course they did. The telepathy network news was probably on high alert. “I don’t want to disturb everyone.”

“Are you kidding? The first dragon baby since Puck? Everyone is ready to jump in and help. But the tub is ours.”

“Okay. I just want to stay in here for a little while with you. Hiding.” He sniffled softly. “I’m scared.”

“Shhh. I won’t say there’s nothing to be scared of, because I know this is going to be hard on you physically.” Dustin traced his birthline, which now he noticed was open and kind of...gooey. “But you can do this, and I’m right here with you. Your whole family is.”

“And Lia is right there. Waiting for her birthday. I wanted her to come next week on your birthdays.”

Dustin shook his head. “That day is full. It’s her day.”

Andy laughed, the sound a little weird to his own ears. Maybe a little freaked out. “Okay, that makes sense. I like that. She’s close, but she has her own day.”

“She’ll love not having to share with her daddy and her Uncle Austin.”

“Her papa.”

“What?”

“She thinks of you as her papa, right?”

“Oh. Yes.” Dustin laughed, the sound jumping with joy along the walls. “Papa! Papa! Papa! Just like that.”

“Yes. Mom assures me that at one point, you’ll be tired of hearing it.”

“Oh, I imagine there will be days, but overall, I can’t imagine it.” Dustin gave him a light hug. He could tell Dustin was monitoring his condition, but his mate never pushed.

“No. No, I can’t either. I love her already. I want to meet her. I want to see you hold her.” His body began to tense again. “There’s another one, love.”

“Let me rub.” Dustin rubbed at his belly, careful of his birthline, and he moaned. It helped, but it didn’t, which was so weird. “I’ve got you, baby. You’re doing fine.”

“I am?” He wasn’t so sure. “I feel weird.”

“Do you want to go lie down in bed?”

“No. No, this is good.”

“Okay. Just tell me what you need, huh?”

“I will. I promise.” *Right now, I need you. I need to have you help me have this sweet little one.*

*Anything, love. I’m trying to encourage her. To make this easier on you. Faster.*

*Faster works. I love you. I do.*

He closed his eyes and tried to breathe. All he had to do was trust in the process, right?

Trust in the process and breathe.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY

*What else do you need, brother? We have towels and hot water. The moms say he's close.*

Dustin watched Andy pace. They'd left the tub a while back, and the contractions had gotten worse. The whole family had mobilized. Water. Juice. Robes. Towels. Clean sheets. All the stuff was ready for Lia. It was just a matter of time.

And listening to Andy hurt was going to kill him.

*I need him to be all right.*

*Titania says this is normal. Angelica says he's progressing like a dream.*

*Yeah, what does Puck say?*

*Shut up.*

That had him grinning at least, and when Andy stumbled, he leaped forward and helped, letting Andy lean on him. His mate alternated between wanting him to and declaring that Dustin could never touch him again.

"I can't—there's a lot. It's a lot."

He frowned down at Andy. "A lot?"

"Of pressure. I need help."

"Okay. We need to get you into a place to have this baby. You want our room?"

Andy burst into tears again. "I wish our house was ready."



So did he. It was going well. A few weeks, tops. But it wasn't ready yet. "I know, baby. I'm sorry."

Besides, the brothers—all three of them—were aching to help with Lia.

"Oh, don't encourage me. I'm being a shit. I need you to look at the birthline though. It feels different."

"Okay. To the bedroom." He had the urge to pick Andy up again, but he knew that was a bad idea. So they looked like a three-legged racer.

"Yeah. Yeah, Dustin. Hurry. Call someone. She's coming."

"They're waiting in our room. I promise. Everyone is ready, baby." Dustin got Andy to their bedroom, and sure enough, Puck was there, ready to ease Andy down, Jules hovering with towels and such.

"Hey, brother. I'm going to peek at your birthline."

Andy half-chuckled, half-sobbed, then pulled his loose gown up and off. "Just look. She's coming."

Jules took a look and swallowed hard. "No shit. I can see her head. You ready to push?"

"Uh-huh."

Thank the goddess. That birthline was wide open, and her little hands as well as her head were coming through.

"Is Mama coming?" Dustin asked, and Puck shook his head.

"I don't think there's time."

Andy curled up, bearing down, eyes crossing. "Dustin! Focus!"

"Sorry, baby. Sorry." Where the heck were the moms? They'd been so helpful, passing stuff on through Puck and now they were just going to abandon them? He grabbed a towel, ready to catch his baby as she popped out.

"Hold his shoulders, son. I'm right here." Mama hurried in as Puck supported Lia's head.

“She’s a big baby!” Puck sounded utterly shocked.

Dustin held on as he was told, and Andy grunted, his body trying to flail. They couldn’t let him do that.

“Wow.” Jules popped out with that. “She’s amazing.”

“She is,” Angelica agreed. “Shoulders next, son. Just a slow, easy push whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay.” Andy panted, leaning hard against Dustin. “Okay, I can do this, right?”

“You’re perfect, baby. You can do this. I love you so much. I’m so proud of you.” He poured strength through their bond, wanting to give Andy all the help he could.

“You’ve almost done it, son. You’re doing great.”

“She’s beautiful, Andy,” Puck sobbed softly. “She’s got blonde hair and golden scales.”

“I want to see.”

“Then push, son. Just a minute more.”

Dustin held Andy as he groaned; then his baby girl was there, in Puck’s arms.

“Let Puck get her ready. Yes you can, Puck. I’ll show you what to do with Andy, Dustin.” Mama showed him how to clean Andy up, then showed him how to seal the birthline with his magic. “Now we get the bed changed. Dustin, lift.”

He pulled Andy into his arms, careful not to jostle, while Jules and Austin quickly stripped the bed and put on clean sheets.

Mom was swaddling the baby, and Andy met Dustin’s eyes. “We have everyone but the bears in here, mate.”

“We do. They’re downstairs making food for everyone.” He knew that from Austin who, up until the pacing in the hall, had been giving him regular updates on who was where and how they were all ready to jump in to help at a moment’s notice.

This family was amazing.

“Let me see, please?” Andy begged.

Dustin put Andy back down, which was when Mom brought Lia to meet them.

“Oh.” Andy sobbed. “Oh, hello, little one.”

Dustin felt tears spring to his eyes too. Lia was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, her scales so pure and golden, shining in the low light. He’d already been in love with her, but now he knew he would never be the same.

She snuggled into Andy’s arms, rooting for that heartbeat that she was so familiar with. He helped her to get where she needed to be, and she let out the most hilarious sigh, falling right to sleep.

“She’ll be hungry soon. We’ll handle all that and let you two rest.” Mom smiled at Andy. “You did so well, baby boy. I’m so proud of you.”

“She’s beautiful. She’s utterly perfect.” Andy kissed her head. “She’s all golden.”

“She is.” Dustin hummed. “I can’t believe how beautiful she is. She’s more than I could ever have imagined.” And goddess, she was big enough to be twins.

His solid, brave, beautiful girl.

“Golden dragons are very lucky,” Mom murmured. “What a blessing.”

“We’re definitely that, lady,” Dustin agreed. “So blessed.”

“And tired,” Andy said plaintively. “Can we rest now?”

Dustin chuckled softly. “You can, love. Can I give Lia to Mom so she can eat?”

“Yes. They love her. I can feel it. They love her too.”

“Of course we do, dumbass.” Jules rolled his eyes.

“Then let’s hand her over and we can sleep. Austin will keep watch.”

Austin nodded and gently picked Lia up, tears in his eyes. “You have my word. I will protect her with my life.”

A spark seemed to pass between Lia and his twin, and Titania hummed.

“She accepts.”

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-ONE

Andy rocked Lia, humming deep in his chest as she worked on another bottle. Their daughter was ravenous and solid as a rock.

He assumed it was because she was the most amazing baby in history, but what did he know?

Iris lifted her head and whined, but he thought it was a sound of agreement, not dissent.

Dustin was off with Austin and Atlas, working on their new living space, but that was okay. Puck was dozing in the easy chair across from him, laptop abandoned on the side table next to him. They weren't alone.

*You're never alone, brother. Puck and I will always be with you.* Jules wandered in, handing him a cup of tea.

*Thank you. She's almost asleep.* The sucking had nearly stopped, Lia's mouth barely moving. She was such a sweet, good-natured baby. Dustin teased she got that from Andy.

*Would you like me to burp her?*

This baby was never going to learn to walk, because she was never not going to have someone to hold her.

He handed her over to Jules with a smile. "Thank you."

"Any time." Jules put Lia up to his shoulder after he slung a towel there, and he bounced her gently, patting her back. "I love how she smells."

"Right? She's just the most wonderful thing."

“She totally is.”

Lia burped softly, then relaxed in Jules’s arms.

“And she’s out.” Jules laughed softly, sinking into a chair. “Your place is almost done. Did you know? They’re putting in the finishing touches today.”

“Are they? That’s cool. We all need spaces of our own, now that there are babies.”

“I guess.” Jules looked a little sad.

Puck snored. Lia answered with a huge grunt.

“We just have suites instead of bedrooms, Jules. You know that. We’ll still watch TV together and throw popcorn at the screen, like always.” He didn’t want to feel guilty about this.

“I know. I do. I’m not mad or anything.” Jules sighed. “I just don’t see me having babies. Or a mate.”

“If you don’t, you will have all of us. And we’ll love you.” Because his big brother was the best in the world.

Jules smiled, the sadness fleeing. “I’m going to be the best uncle there is.” Then he winked. “No matter what Austin might think.”

“I believe you.” He believed them both. And Puck too. In fact, he was pretty content with his whole family right now. That might be hormones. Or baby love.

*Sweet? Did you want to come see the house?*

*I do. I’ll be there in a second.* “Jules, can you watch her for me?”

“We got this, right, Puck?”

“Namm gooo.” Puck rolled his head in a semblance of a nod. He said Lia made him sleepy.

Andy laughed, heading out to climb the short distance from the back deck to the new entrance to his home.

Somehow the adobe was stretching, growing into the mountain like the earth itself was welcoming their home, joining them and the moms and the bears.

Ty from the Estes clutch had said this might happen, and he was right.

“Hey, love.” Dustin met him just inside. “Come look. I think we did it all like we planned.”

He and Dustin had picked out things together. Couches. Rugs. Weird antiques from shops around town that Austin had gone to pick up.

The front room was cozy and soft, comfortable and easy, and the little kitchenette was clean and bright. Their bedroom had a huge bed with tons of pillows and a fluffy comforter, because he hated being cold, and his dresser was in there, along with a rocking recliner for him and Lia.

Then Dustin took him to the nursery.

“Oh. Love.” It was like...a wonderland. There were southwest sunset colors, the door was bright purple to ward off the spirits, a Santa Fe tradition. And there were coyotes and cactus lamps and llamas and... His old crib, which had been refurbished.

It was a light wood, the baby bed shining in the lamplight, and it was amazing. Lia was going to be so happy, so comfortable in there.

Underneath the crib, there was a bed for Iris.

“No one will ever sneak up on our baby girl.”

“Nope. Iris is on the job.” Dustin wrapped an arm around him. “Are you happy? There are two more rooms that we haven’t done much with except build them out, so we can... expand. If we want to.”

“Expand. Good to know. Maybe when she’s not a baby, we can discuss it, love.” He could imagine more babies. Someday.

Not today, when he could still remember how hard it was to have one.

“I like the idea of working on it, whether we wait or not.” Dustin kissed his neck. “It’s ready. Are we going to have a slumber party first, or is it just us?”

He shook his head and chuckled. There was no way he was going to offend all his family by not letting them in. No way. “We’ll have a nap for a minute, and then we’ll have a welcome-home party.”

“That sounds perfect.” Dustin danced him around in a circle. “Thank you.”

“For what, love?” Dustin had done all the work. He’d just shown up.

“Giving me this. A home. A place for me. And not just me, my brother. You’re amazing, mate.” That smile said everything.

“We are. We’re doing it. Being a family, together.” And they were going to raise the most beautiful, technologically advanced brilliant little one on earth.

Even if she did grow up in a cave.



# WANT MORE?



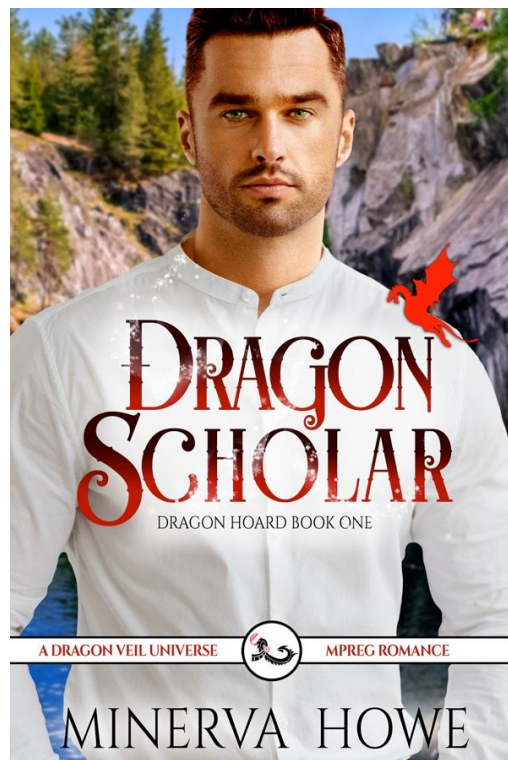
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# DRAGON VEIL UNIVERSE READING LIST

Welcome to the Dragon Veil universe, a place where dragons are real, they're magical, and they're finding their mates. From Colorado to Utah and beyond, dragons have settled in the high reaches of the human world, the mountains making good homes for them. Whether guarded by werewolves or hunted by vampires, the dragons are creating families and making connections that might not seem obvious to begin with but will be a wild ride as they unfold.

## *Dragon Hoard Series*



Devon Marks loves books more than just about anything. They're his job and his passion, and they've brought him to an

auction where he meets the hottest guy he's ever seen. When Brand Drake offers to let Devon come and value his extensive collection at an old mansion high in the Colorado mountains, he knows life as about as good as it gets.

Brand Drake knows he wants Devon the moment they meet, so he goes about adding Devon to his hoard the same way he would an amazing old book. But when Devon starts eating him out of house and home and showing signs that he has emerging dragon traits, he knows he hasn't just found a lover, he's found a mate.

When Devon starts to show signs of something even more amazing, Brand calls on his brothers Eagan and Tyson to help him figure out what to do, as well as how to tell Devon what's going on with his body, which is life-changing, and also dangerous. Someone always wants dragon magic to use, and Brand has to find a way to keep them safe, and to keep Devon with him, hopefully forever.

Read [Dragon Scholar](#) now!



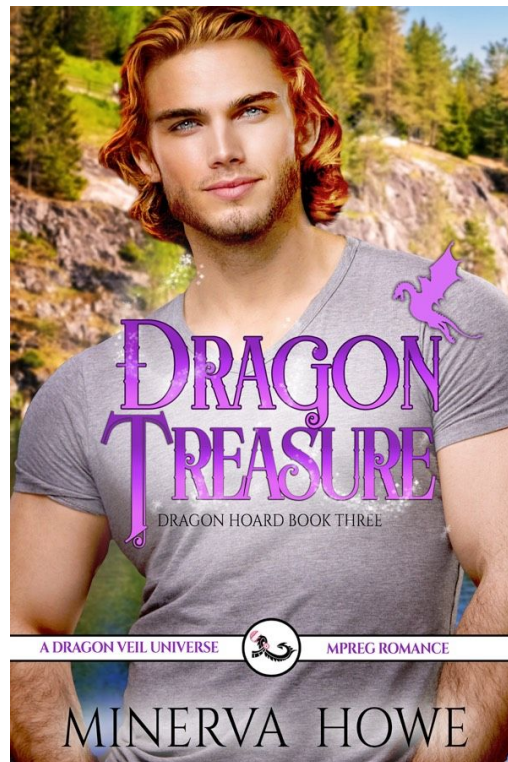
Dragon shifter Eagan Drake knows Oliver Reaver is his mate. He's known it since they met, when Ollie braved Eagan's brother's den to try to save his business partner and best

friend, Devon. The problem is, Ollie is convinced that Eagan needs a dragon mate, and that he's just an ordinary human.

Ollie loves Eagan desperately. He knows he should just leave and let Eagan find his true mate, but he keeps being drawn back to his dragon's side. When a dangerous vampire starts to stalk Ollie at his bookshop, he finally gives in and asks Eagan if he can come home to stay.

Now, if Ollie can just stop being the king of denial, Eagan knows Ollie can give him what he wants most. All his love, and a family of his own. But will Eagan be able to convince Ollie that he's a very special mate and let their dragons soar together?

Read [Dragon Collector](#) now!



Dragon shifter Tyson has been hearing a distant call for months now, a lonely cry that he hopes is his mate. All he has to do is find out where it's coming from. When the mournful voice screams for help, Tyson leaves his home and his brothers in the mountains of Colorado to rescue Myc, another dragon who's in a terrible and dangerous situation. Nursing Myc and his niece and twin nephews back to health, Tyson knows he's found what he's looking for, but he doesn't want to push. He's

waited this long. He can wait until Myc is ready to mate with him.

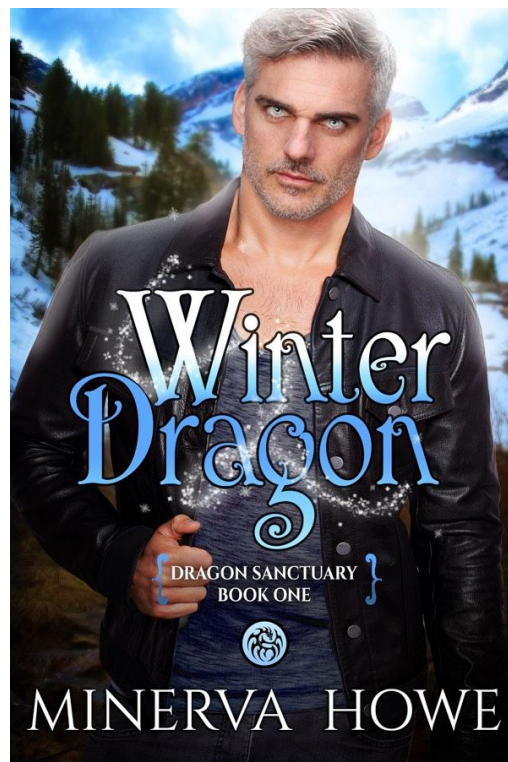
Myc knows Tyson is the one for him, but he's lost his home and his family, and he's not sure he knows how to convince Tyson he's not shy or fragile. He also knows he's added three more kids to Tyson's rapidly growing family, and he's afraid to ask Tyson to mate with him and have more.

Tyson and Myc have to fight the past, their own fears, and their deep, stubborn notions of what's right to come together with the kind of love they both know they can make.

Read [Dragon Treasure](#) now!



### *Dragon Sanctuary Series*



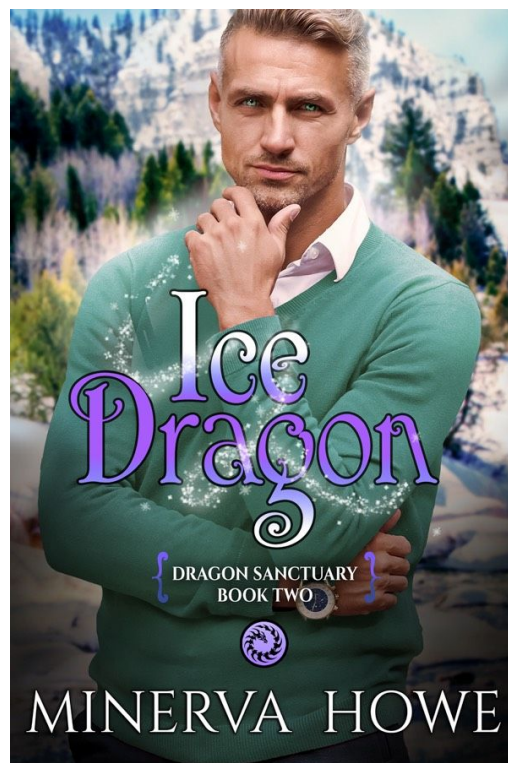
Snowboarder Justin is just having a fun weekend in the Utah mountains with his childhood bestie when they have a terrible snowmobile accident. When he wakes up, he knows somehow that his whole life has changed, because the first thing he sees is a beautiful, silvery man named Samuel.

Samuel is a winter dragon, isolated from humans in both distance and appearance. With his icy blue, faceted dragon eyes, he can't go into the human world without inspiring fear or awe. So he and his two brothers and two cousins have created a dragon sanctuary. When he finds Justin in the ice and snow, he knows he has to take him and his friend home and help them, but it's Justin who catches his attention, and Samuel knows he's found something special.

As Justin and Samuel begin their mating dance, Justin finds himself changing in ways he never expected. Samuel and his family are so magical, and Justin wants to be a part of it. He has no idea what he's in for, or of how much he'll become a part of the dragons he's coming to love. Will Justin be willing to leave his very modern life behind to stay in Samuel's world and be the mate Samuel longs for?

*A dragon shifter mpreg tale!*

Read [Winter Dragon](#) now!

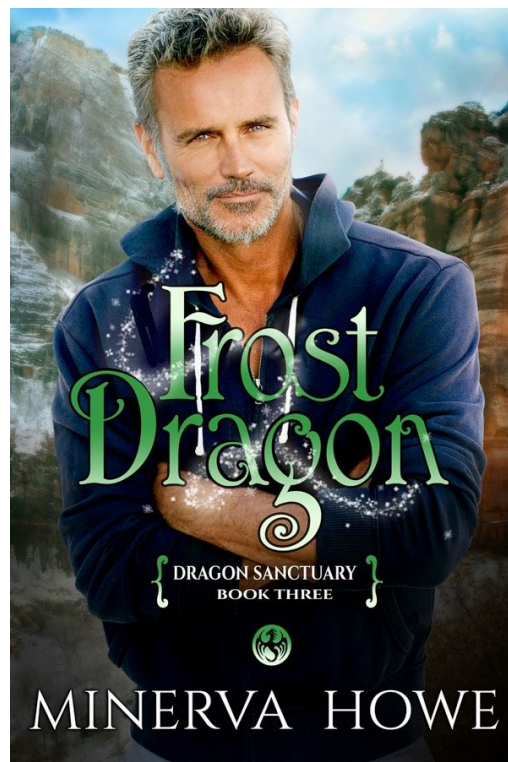


Declan is trying hard not to be jealous of his bestie Justin, who has mated with a dragon and is learning to fly. Owen, who is Justin's mate's brother, and a dragon himself, keeps trying to tell Declan how special he is, but he doesn't believe it. He's

just a guy, right? Not as good an athlete as Justin, not a smart as Owen, not as cool as anyone...

Owen knows Declan is his mate, but he doesn't know how to make Declan understand how special he is. So he sets aside his own worry and confusion and starts to woo Declan into seeing his own magic. As he coaxes out Declan's latent dragon side, Owen struggles with all the changes to their isolated world, and the new danger that brings. Can he keep Declan safe and loved as their family starts to grow even more?

Read [Ice Dragon](#) now!



Brandon is a scholar who is willing to go anywhere to follow the myths and legends he's been obsessed with since he was a child. Dragons. So when his quest for those legends take him from Colorado to deep within the heights of the Uintah range in Utah, where his twin Justin has been hiding out, he happily follows the trail.

Abraham is a contented dragon. As the family historian he has his books, and now he has new avenues of research to investigate too. When he needs social time, he cooks for his brother and his cousins. He doesn't really need a mate. So

when Brandon comes along, Abe is certain Brandon his meant for his cousin Seth, and he rarely comes out of his study.

Frustrated by Abe's lack of response, Brandon sets out to prove to Abe that he's Abe's equal in the library, and in all the other ways. He knows what he wants, and he sees how wonderful it can be to be a dragon's mate thanks to his brother's happiness. Now all he has to do is convince Abe that he can step away from his books once in awhile and that they're meant to be together forever.

Read [Frost Dragon](#) now!



High in the Utah mountains, dragon Seth feels like his brothers and his cousins are all one step ahead of him. They're smarter or more useful or stronger... When his youngest brother Samuel takes a mate who shares some of Seth's interests, his isolated life improves, and he hopes against hope that his mate is coming soon. But after Justin's twin chooses another, Seth decides he's destined to be alone.

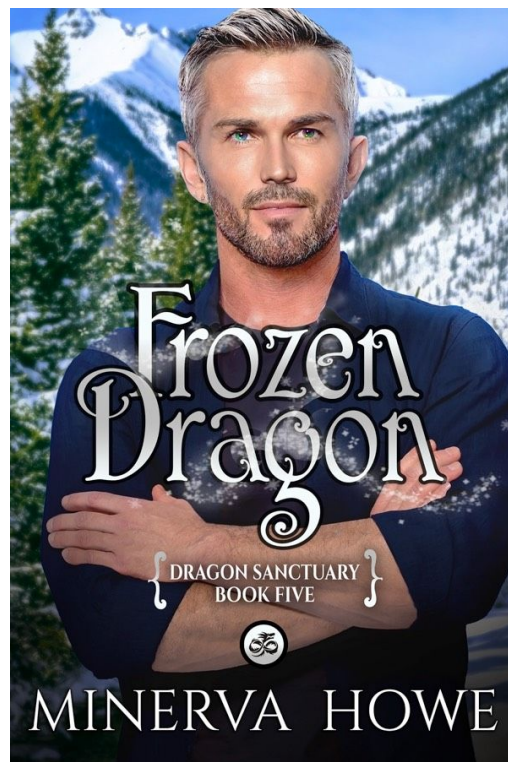
PI Beau Harden has always felt a strong pull to the mountains, so when he's sent to investigate the whereabouts of a missing scholar, he's happy to explore. He heads way up into



the Uintahs, and finds far more than he bargains for in a sanctuary for a certain dragon family, and in Seth. He can't resist the way Seth makes him feel, but he's not sure if can convince Seth he's the guy for the job.

Seth wants to believe that Beau is the one for him, but he's not sure if it's real or if what he wants is just wishful thinking. Will Beau get to the bottom of this mystery?

Read [Snow Dragon](#) now!



Oldest cousin and brother dragon Zeke has resigned himself to being the one lone dragon in his family. As his brother and cousins find their mates one by one, he ignores their protests that he'll find own love someday soon, and contents himself with caring for their growing brood of babies. As the one who's been around the longest, Zeke has learned that he can't always have what he desperately wants, and that he can be happy with what he has.

Gareth has never felt like he fully fit in with his pack. As the one who doesn't shift, he's not an outcast, but he's definitely living on the fringes. Lately, he finds himself looking up the mountain even more than he did a a child, wondering what the seemingly ageless dragons he's heard

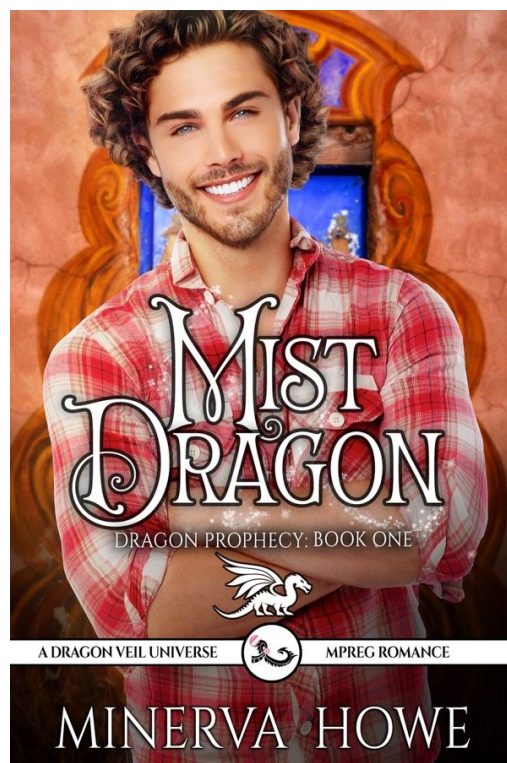
stories of all his life are up to. A chance meeting with a dragon named Zeke during a visit to negotiate supply routes tells Gareth that the dragons are not the horror he's been told they are, and he can't help his curiosity.

When a new danger threatens the very existence of his pack, Gareth starts a trek up the mountain to ask for help. With Zeke he finds more than he bargains for, but can he convince the old dragon of the mountain that neither one of them has to be the odd man out?

Read [Frozen Dragon](#) now!



### *Dragon Prophecy*



Dragon shifter Andy spends his time in his Santa Fe home with his brothers, surfing the dark web for information about dragons and digitizing dragon histories. He's not used to trouble of any kind, so when a stranger shows up who seems to be watching him, he's more than a little freaked out.

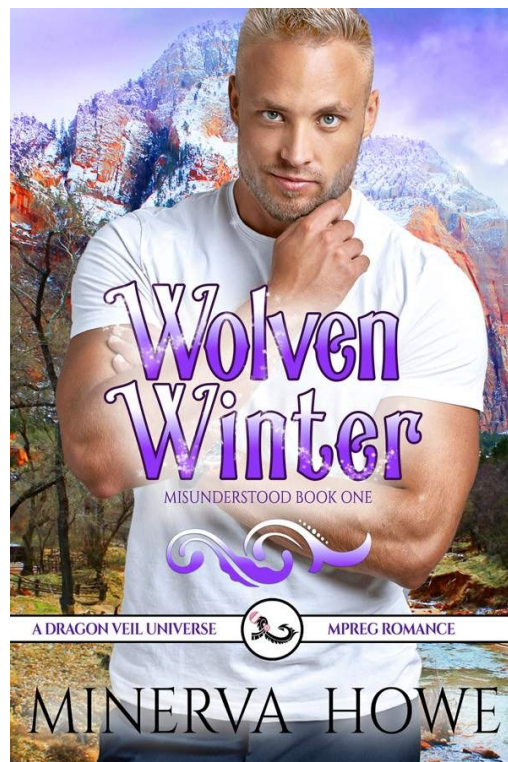
Dustin is used to doing recon on all sorts of creatures, especially dragons like him, in his quest to keep dragons safe. He and his twin brother both work for a mysterious billionaire who funds dragon conservation. So he thinks nothing of it when he's sent to check out a dragon enclave in the high desert of New Mexico. Until he meets Andy, that is. Then he knows he's found his mate.

As Dustin and Andy struggle to find their own space yet give Andy's brothers and moms respect, danger threatens to tear them apart. Can they keep their growing family safe, and find a way to be something new while honoring both of their traditions?

Read [Mist Dragon](#) now!

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### *Misunderstood Series*



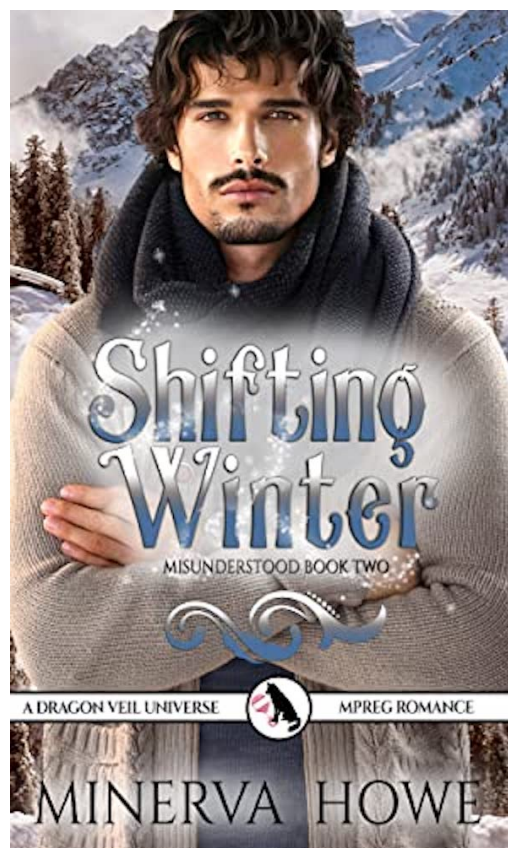
Wolf shifter Niall is convinced his life is as good as it will ever get. While he's been effectively banished from his pack as a stranger who lost a baby and was rejected by his mate, he still has a place with the pack shaman, who lives a hermit-like life up on the mountain. He has a warm home, a dear friend in the

shaman, Adrienne, and a job to do. If he never gets more than that, he can live with it.

Loyal left the pack at a young age to live among humans, an experiment that made him feel banished and unnecessary. Now he's back at the pack's home in the Uintah mountains of Utah, and he's been told that the shaman wants him to do a specific job for the pack: he's meant to make peace with the dragons who live on the dragon peak.

What neither Niall or Loyal expect is to be thrown together, and to find a home together, where they can start their own pack, and give Niall a second chance at starting his own family. Can these two misunderstood wolves find what they need in each other?

Read [Wolven Winter](#) now!



John Leahy had no idea how he became a werewolf, but there's one thing he does know. He's struggling with everything from fitting into the wolf community up in the high mountains of Utah to controlling his shifting. John wants to fit

in, to find a home, but most of all, he wants to impress pack co-leader Keegan.

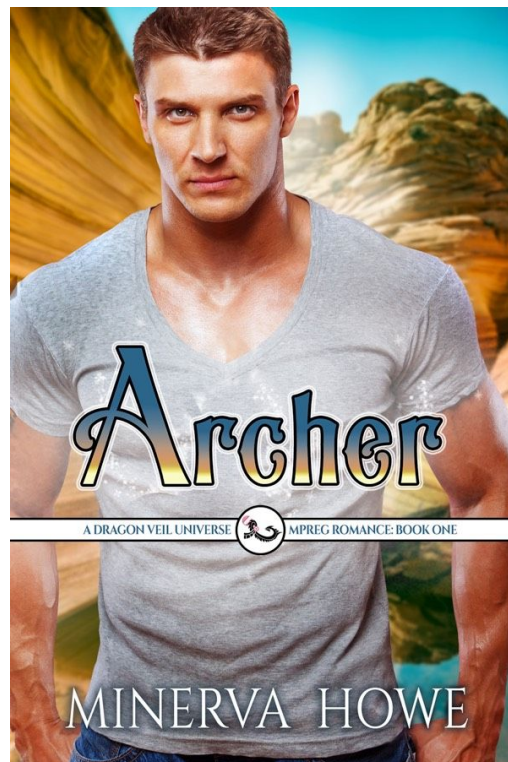
Keegan and his brother took over the pack a few years ago, but there are still some members who think that was a mistake. So it doesn't help things when Keegan takes John as his mate. Even as they work on their mate bond, John is having more and more trouble keeping his wolf side in check. Can Keegan and John start their family even as they deal with the pack and its problems?

*Shifting Winter is an mpreg wolf shifter romance with a happy ending.*

Read [Shifting Winter](#) now!



### *Solitary Dragon Series*



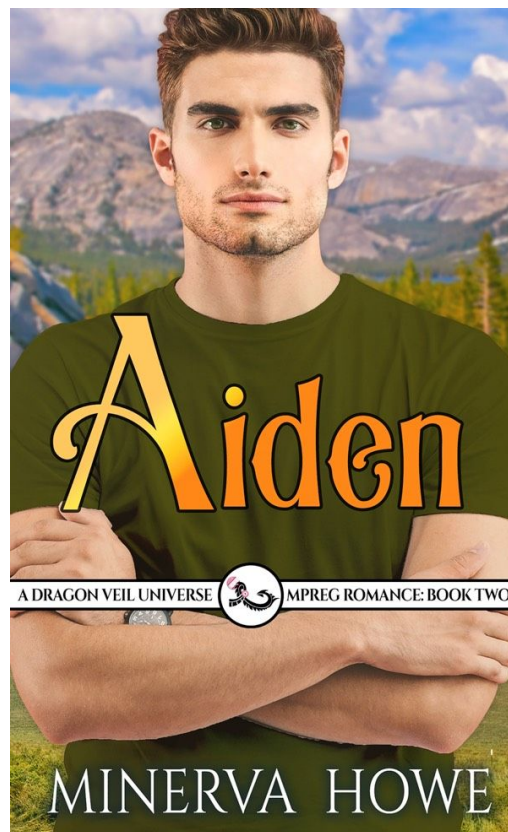
Archer knows he doesn't belong in the human world. So he sticks to his cabin in the mountains outside of Flagstaff for the most part and lives the life of a solitary dragon. Except there's

this gorgeous man named Holt who pulls him down to town more often than he'd like...

Holt has no idea what Archer has done to him, but he's going to hunt the guy down on his mountain and find out. He's gaining weight even as he feels sick as a dog, and he wants to make sure this isn't contagious.

Archer can't believe he didn't know Holt had dragon blood in him, but it's pretty obvious now that Holt is carrying his baby. Can he convince Holt that he doesn't want to be solitary anymore?

Read [Archer](#) now!



Griffin thinks he might be watching dragons through his binoculars while he's on a research project for his graduate program. He desperately wants it to be true, but he also wants to warn any dragons that might be up in the Sierra Nevada mountains that his professor wants to study them. He wants to help keep them safe.

Aiden has been solitary a long time when he inherits his aunt's daughter, who he calls his niece, through a terrible accident.

He's not sure how to raise her or keep her safe, which seems even worse when Griff shows up. But then he realizes he and Griff are mates, and that he's not solitary anymore. Can he convince Griff they're meant to be together and keep the rest of the world, including whoever is watching them, at bay?

Read [Aiden](#) now!

# THE DRAGON VEIL DRAGONS

## **Dragon Hoard**

### *Mates*

Brand Drake & Devon Marks

### *Children*

Arielle

Jasper

### *Familiar*

Tiny (Irish Wolfhound)

~

### *Mates*

Eagan Drake & Oliver Reaver

### *Children*

Katrina

Kynan

### *Familiar*

Buttercup (Cane corso)

~

### *Mates*

Tyson Drake & Mykael Ladon

### *Children*



Nevada  
Sydney  
Leonard  
Siobhan  
Lottie  
Nathan

*Familiar*

Aria (Savannah cat)



**Dragon Sanctuary**

*Mates*

Samuel Draic & Justin Greene

*Children*

Sebastian  
Preston

*Familiar*

Fractal (Arctic Fox)



*Mates*

Owen Draic & Declan Mason

*Children*

Kiefer  
Kendall

*Familiar*

Tanith (otter)



*Mates*

Abraham Draic & Brandon Greene

*Child*

Stella

*Familiar*

Luna (owl)

~

*Mates*

Beau Harden & Seth Draic

*Children*

Penelope

Calliope

*Familiar*

Birdie (bobcat)

~

*Mates*

Zeke Draic & Gareth Gilead

*Children*

Lissa

Laurel

*Familiar*

Spirit (bear)

~

**Misunderstood**

*Mates*

Loyal Gilead & Niall

*Children*

Isabella

~

*Mates*

Keegan Gilead & John Leahy

*Children*

William



## **Solitary Dragons**

*Mates*

Archer Rhone & Holt Seaver

*Children*

Jackson

~

*Mates*

Aiden Fiore & Griffen Lorde

*Children*

Lila

Belinda

*Familiar*

Beryl (Maine coon cat)

# COMING SOON FROM MINERVA HOWE

*New Series coming Spring 2023*

Look for Mending the Dragon's Heart, Heartstone Book One, the beginning of a totally new dragon series with omega rescue and mpreg coming soon!

# AFTERWORD

Waves Madly!

Thanks so much for reading my book! I'm so glad you made it to The End. If you liked the story, I hope you'll ponder leaving a rating at the retailer of your choice or adding a rec at Goodreads or Bookbub!

Also, Minerva has her own Facebook page if you want to go like it, and I share a group with my other pseudonym, Julia Talbot!

Page: <https://www.facebook.com/Minerva-Howe-102698554851288>

Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/juliatalbot>

Get Spanky, y'all!

Minerva Howe

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Minerva Howe is the kinky alter-ego of Julia Talbot. She lives in the great Southwest, where there is hot and cold running rodeo, cowboys, and everything from meat and potatoes to the best Tex-Mex. A full-time author, Minerva is a hybrid author. She believes that everyone deserves a happy ending, so she writes about love without limits, where boys love boys, girls love girls, and boys and girls get together to get wild, especially when her crazy paranormal characters are involved. Visit Minerva's website at: [minervahowe.com](http://minervahowe.com)



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*Cloud Dragon*

*Shadow Dragon*

### Misunderstood

[Wolven Winter](#)

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### Solitary Dragon

[Archer](#)

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## Heartstone

*Finding the Dragon's Heart* — July 2023

*Mending the Dragon's Heart* — April 2023



## Moonlight Mountain

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[History and Haunting](#)

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Bad Boy and a Baby (*June 2023*)

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**Alpha Triplets**

[Hunter's Moon](#)

[Thunder Moon](#)

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**Dragon Triplets**

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**Gryphon Triplets**

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