

Lake Trip

An Alex Short Story

“Hold still!” Alex dropped slightly as he adjusted his grip under Lucas’s arms. With a powerful beat of his wings, he regained the lost altitude. His tail adjusted, keeping him steady as they flew over the pine-covered mountainside.

Lucas wrapped his arms tighter around Alex’s. “You try dangling like this!”

Alex laughed. “You’re the one who begged me to take you flying.”

“You used to carry me properly,” Lucas whined.

“Sure, when you were six and could wrap your little legs around me.” Holding his thirteen-year-old best friend like a baby didn’t particularly appeal to Alex. He banked right and Lucas wriggled again, throwing off his balance. “Oh, fine, I’m going to crash at this rate.” Alex soared up. “Let go.”

“What?” Lucas screeched.

“I said”—Alex forcefully pulled his arms away—“let go!”

Lucas screamed as he lost his grip on Alex’s sleeves and fell. With a roll of his eyes, Alex plunged down and scooped Lucas into his arms. Lucas clamped his arms around Alex’s neck as Alex adjusted his grip, positioning one arm under Lucas’s knees and the other supporting his back.

“You dropped me!”

Alex winced as Lucas’ high-pitched shout assaulted his sensitive ears. “But I caught you.”

“You! Dropped! Me!” Lucas pressed against Alex’s chest and locked his arms closer around Alex’s neck. Alex coughed as Lucas’s arm pressed against his throat. “Sorry.” Lucas loosened his hold. “No! I’m not sorry! You scared me to death!”

Alex laughed. “I wouldn’t have let you fall. Meredith would kill me. I like being alive.”

“I’d punch you, but I’d have to let go.”

Alex chuckled again. “I’m joking, Lucas. You know I’d never let anything happen to you.”

“Hmph. Are we almost there?”

“I offer to take you swimming and this is what I get, complaining and impatience.” Alex shook his head, but he was grinning all the same. “Couple more minutes.”

“Sorry.” Lucas’s words were almost lost in the sound of the wind whooshing past Alex’s ears. “Thank you for taking me. You know I’ve missed flying with you, or just playing or doing things other than studying and work. Well, at least checking the traps and the other chores are more fun than studying. I don’t understand why Jasper thinks I need to know all this stuff. We live in a cave! When am I ever going to need to know what nobles’ titles mean and who ranks higher than who?”

“I think it’s who ranks higher than *whom*.” Alex barely kept his amusement from sneaking into his voice.

“*Whom* cares!” Lucas released one hand from Alex’s shoulders to wave it, emphasizing his annoyance.

“That one’s just who,” Alex said with a smirk.

Lucas groaned. “You’re as bad as Jasper.”

“Whoa, now. I’m unsure whether to be offended or to defend Jasper.” Alex slowed as the glistening surface of the lake came into view ahead of them. “But as a secret, just between brothers—I agree. I’m never going to need to know the details of how the treasury works and it’s just so *boring*.”

Lucas shrugged. “You might. If you ever meet a pretty girl who breaks your curse and you become king.”

Alex’s mood fell. A nice thought, but ten years into being a shape-shifting dragon-man, it was getting harder to even remember what it felt like to be normal, forget having any hope he could go back to that. He also hated that Jasper and Meredith talked more about their hope that true love’s kiss could break the spell since his eighteenth birthday over a year ago. As if a girl his age would just appear in the forest and fall for a man with a scaly tail who exhaled smoke when he got worked up. How was he even supposed to meet this girl with a magical kiss when he spent his life hiding from people?

But he kept those thoughts inside and just said, “Maybe.”

They approached the pebble-covered shoreline of Lucas’s favorite lake, and Alex swooped down, the slow beating of his wings stirring up dust and dead foliage as he landed. He set Lucas down and folded his wings against his back, rolling his shoulders to work out the tightness from carrying Lucas. Immediately, Lucas spun around and punched Alex in the chest.

“Ow!” Alex rubbed the sore spot on his chest. A bit of heat sparked in his chest, the dragon threatening to wake up. He quickly smothered it, eyeing Lucas with confusion.

“Some friend you are, dropping me.” Lucas scowled, but there was laughter in his eyes.

Alex lowered his head. “I’m sorry for scaring you.” He lightly shoved Lucas back. “But I thought you’d be smart enough to know I’d catch you. Protecting you has been my job since you

were toddling around trying to find every dangerous thing in the cave and give your parents a heart attack.”

“Mm, sure, but you still think scaring me is funny.”

“What?” Alex blinked and gaped in feigned shock. “When have I ever—”

Lucas pursed his lips and glared. “All the time. Like yesterday, when you growled at me while I was focused on reading.”

Alex couldn't suppress his laugh, but he quickly quieted his merriment at the hurt on Lucas's face. “I'm sorry. I won't do it again. The growling or the dropping.” Lucas continued to glower. Alex's shoulders crept toward his ears as his face heated. “I didn't mean anything by it. Brothers, right?”

Lucas's mouth twitched. “Aw, fine. I forgive you. Only because you're curling your tail around your ankle again, and I know that means you feel bad.”

“Hm?” Alex glanced down. The narrow part of his scale-covered tail had curled around his ankle, the black spade-shaped end tucked around the inside of his calf. He relaxed his posture and his tail uncurled. “You notice more than you let on.”

“Just because I talk a lot, doesn't mean I'm not watching while I talk.” Lucas grinned. “Besides, I'm already plotting how to get back at you.”

“Wait a minute, I have to stop but you get to—”

“Talking is over!” Lucas started undressing. “Time for a swim!”

“Oh,” Alex said, “so you only stop talking when I *want* to talk, I see.” But Lucas was already running into the lake, water splashing around his legs. Alex shook his head. “You're lucky I love you.”

Alex sat on a boulder and watched while Lucas swam around the lake. He would have loved to join Lucas, but his massive leathery wings made him a poor swimmer. He just wasn't built for water. Not since he'd been cursed. Eventually Lucas would tire of swimming, and he'd get out and drag Alex in up to his waist and insist on some splashing and foolery. But for now, Alex just observed. Little things like these were his way of trying to make up for how much his friends had sacrificed to protect him. Lucas didn't have a normal life, and Alex knew how much Lucas wished he could have friends other than the boys in the village that he saw infrequently. Alex couldn't help with that, but Lucas was the only friend Alex had, more like a brother than a friend, really—and Alex tried to be a good friend and brother. Even if it meant he had to carry Lucas and listen to him talk on and on too loudly right next to his ear.

Lucas flopped onto his back and floated, a content look on his face. Alex smiled. Seeing Lucas happy always made him happy, but a tiny part of him was sad that he couldn't join Lucas in the lake.

In the quiet as Lucas floated, some sound reached Alex's ears. Branches being pushed aside. The rustle of dead leaves. Not too close, but not far, and moving in their direction. Alex stiffened.

The forest was mostly quiet. Lucas resumed his swimming, but Alex could still faintly hear the sound of something moving without much care through the forest. Creatures usually didn't come near him. There weren't even any bird calls nearby, as they'd all vacated the area as soon as he and Lucas had arrived. No animal or even monster would be headed their way—they could smell him and would avoid the scent of dragon. Which meant...

He sniffed, turning his head, searching for the scent he dreaded. *Human*. Fear ignited dragon anger in his chest as he bolted to his feet.

“Lucas!” He ran toward the lake, panic growing as Lucas didn’t hear him. “Lucas! We have to go! Now!”

Lucas stopped swimming and treaded water in place, frowning. “What?”

“Come here!” A tiny bit of smoke crept up his throat. *Calm down, Alex, stay calm.*

Lucas shrugged and swam toward the shore. Alex cast a glance around. The shouting could have drawn the person’s attention. He sniffed again, trying to determine if they were closer. The scent seemed stronger, but maybe that was Lucas coming closer, or just his dragon senses becoming stronger, stoked by his emotions. Alex snatched up Lucas’s clothes and shoved them at Lucas as he exited the water.

“What’s—”

“Someone is nearby,” Alex said, keeping his voice low. “Hurry.”

Lucas paled and tugged on his trousers, the process slowed by the water dripping off his body. Alex glanced back toward the trees, nervous energy crackling through him. Footsteps and the sounds of rustling foliage grew closer. Far too close. Alex opened his wings and bounced on the balls of his feet as Lucas struggled into his shirt, ready to snatch Lucas up as soon as the boy got his boots on. Maybe he should just hide, but he couldn’t just abandon Lucas, leaving him to fend for himself against a stranger he knew nothing about.

Lucas grabbed a boot as a lone figure emerged from the trees. Alex’s limbs turned to stone. The large man stared back, his face pale beneath his massive beard. As Alex’s gaze locked on the bow in the man’s hands, his senses came rushing back. He picked up Lucas, not caring that Lucas hadn’t gotten his boots on yet. They’d just have to get Lucas new ones.

“Drop the boy, monster!” The man nocked an arrow and drew the bow. Alex swallowed back fiery rage at the insult and bent his knees, preparing to launch into the sky.

“He’s my brother!” Lucas wrapped his arms around Alex’s neck. “Leave him alone!”

Confusion and shock registered on the man’s face, and Alex leapt into the air with a forceful beat of his wings. He soared upward as quickly as possible—

Agonizing pain ripped through his right thigh and Alex screamed, though it sounded more like a roar. Smoke poured out of his nostrils. His vision tinged red. *Control it, fight it, control it.*

“Demon! Come back here, foul abomination! Return the ensorcelled boy, hideous...”

The rest of the hunter’s insults were lost to the wind whistling past Alex’s ears.

“Alex! Are you all right?”

Pain throbbed from Alex’s right thigh. A sharp, stabbing ache that worsened with every small movement of his leg. He tried to answer and snarled instead. *Control it, control it.*

“Alexander, you can fight it,” Lucas said, his voice pleading. He buried his face in Alex’s shoulder and hugged his neck tighter.

More smoke poured out of Alex’s nostrils and mouth. He beat his wings faster, harder, trying to get Lucas back to the cave. *Lucas. Focus on Lucas. Protect Lucas. You shift now, you’ll drop him and won’t be able to catch him.* With each jagged breath, he tried to steady himself as much as he could while maintaining his frantic pace through the sky.

“*He’s my brother!*” He focused on Lucas’s words, more comforting than Lucas could possibly know. *I have a brother. I have family. I am human. I am human!*

“Alex?”

“It’s all right.” His voice came out deep and rumbling. “I’m fighting it. You’re safe.”

“I know,” Lucas said. “I’m worried about you.”

That helped calm Alex further, momentarily distracting him from the arrow lodged in his leg. He focused on flying and controlling the fiery rage in his chest until the mouth of the cave they called home yawned before them. He slowed his descent and landed. Pain shot through his leg as his feet touched the ground and he stumbled back, dropping Lucas before he completely lost his balance. Lucas jumped out of his way.

Alex fell onto his backside, tweaking his tail. His wings fluttered at his sides. His groan turned into a snarl as smoke curled around his head. *Don't shift; you shift now, it'll be harder to control.* He clutched his leg, staring at the bloody arrow sticking out the front and back of his thigh.

“Alex!” Lucas ran forward.

“Stay back!” A mouthful of acrid smoke accompanied the words. Alex held up a shaking hand, and Lucas skidded to a stop.

“I'll get Mom.” Lucas fled into the cave.

What do you do for an embedded arrow? Alex's claws pricked at his throbbing leg. *Pull it out? I'll bleed out!* Blood already soaked his black trouser leg, making it stick to his skin. The answer hit him. He'd have to shift. Something about the magic involved in shifting back and forth always healed his wounds—something he'd discovered on accident after burning his hand once, years ago. *But if I shift now, it'll be dangerous. I might lose control and go after that hunter.*

He focused on controlling his breathing and pushed the pain out of his mind. No pain. Just breathing. The grass as he spread his palms over the ground. The blue sky above him. The cool air on his skin. Normally, he liked being hot, but right now, he needed the dragon to cool down. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Steady. Calm.*

“Oh, Alex!” Meredith and Lucas ran out of the cave, trailed by Jasper at a slower pace. Alex focused on Meredith’s kind face and some of the tension in his chest uncoiled. He relaxed as the taste of smoke lessened and the reddish tint to his vision faded.

“I’m going to find Dad!” Lucas split off, running in the direction of the goat pen.

Meredith knelt beside Alex and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “How are you doing?”

“Steadying.” Relief flooded Alex when his voice came out its usual tenor. “I think I can control it and choose to shift once the arrow’s out.”

Jasper stopped on Alex’s other side. “You did well, making it all the way back here.” Pride shone in his eyes, and Alex relaxed further. The dragon rage demanding retribution went silent.

“All right.” Alex nodded. “Now’s a good time, I think.”

Meredith frowned, her face pale. “Right.” Her hands trembled as she gripped the shaft of the arrow. She broke off the end, removing the fletching. The movement jolted the shaft in his leg, and Alex dug his claws into the dirt and stifled a snarl. Meredith looked to him. He nodded as sweat beaded on his face. Meredith pushed on his leg, shifting him so she could grab the shaft under the arrowhead.

“Alex?”

He raised his gaze up to her eyes. “Yes?”

In that moment, she ripped the arrow out of his leg in a swift movement.

Tears sprang to his eyes, and his cry of agony turned into a roar. He’d given up trying to control the animalistic sounds and reactions years ago. Fighting his reflexes only made him angrier, and anger fed the dragon more than any other emotion.

“Get—get back.” Alex yelled as he moved forward onto all fours. He glanced apologetically at Meredith. “I’m sorry about my clothes.” He was in too much pain to bother with the buttons beneath his wings on the back of his shirt, and the trousers were already ruined.

“Don’t worry about it, dear.” Meredith moved back, as did Jasper.

He let the heat inside grow. The spark his chest fanned brighter, and he imagined grabbing it, subjecting it to his will. *Shift*. A shudder ran through his body, accompanied by pinches in his muscles. He groaned as heat spread like lightning through his veins, and then his body morphed and grew. He’d grown accustomed to the aching and pulling sensation, the sharp prick of scales growing through his skin, but it still hurt—more than he would ever let the others know. The pain faded away as he finished transforming. His limbs felt heavier now. His head towered over the entrance to the cave. Meredith and Jasper looked smaller, as did Lucas and Peter running toward him.

“Alex!” Peter called. “Are you all right?”

Alex nodded, the movement of his large dragon head slow. A sensation deep in his mind tugged him back to the lake, to track down the hunter. *Burn him. For hurting me. For endangering Lucas. For being on my mountain. He’ll tell. He’s dangerous. Kill him.* Alex closed his eyes, silencing the dragon part of him.

“You need to come back, Alexander,” Jasper said below him.

Alex had explained what it was like to Jasper, and somehow, Jasper always knew when Alex was fighting the curses’ nastier side effects.

“One moment.” His low voice thundered, and Alex would be lying if he said his dragon form didn’t make him feel powerful. But he didn’t need power, he needed his family.

He focused on the heat inside him, pictured cooling it, making it smaller, relegating it to a dark corner. Another shudder went through him before pinching and squeezing covered his dragon form. Several aching moments later, he knelt naked on the grass, the pain over. He checked his thigh—smeared with blood but healed. He grabbed his torn clothes and sat back, his wings crossing each other behind him and tail shifting, then rested his arms on his knees and hung his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I should have heard the hunter sooner.” He lifted his head and sought Jasper’s eyes. “Will we have to move again?”

They had been in this cave for so long and put so much into making it feel like home, he wasn’t sure he could bear the idea of leaving it and the work of moving.

Jasper shook his head. “You were far from here, and it’s only one hunter. I think we are as safe as we can be for now.”

Alex released a slow breath and nodded.

“I’m really sorry, Alex,” Lucas said, wringing his hands.

“It’s not your fault.” Alex stood, awkwardly holding the balled-up strips of his former clothing to stay somewhat decent for Meredith’s sake. “If anything, I owe you another trip to make up for this one.” He winked, and Lucas stopped fidgeting, letting his hands fall to his sides.

“Deal.” A sly smile came over Lucas’s face. “But you have to promise not to purposefully drop me next time.”

“What’s this now?” Meredith planted her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowed. Next to her, Peter crossed his arms, but was doing a terrible job of looking stern.

Alex groaned. “I caught him! And I already promised, anyway.”

“Mm-hmm.” Meredith shook her head, but her lips twitched toward a smile. “Go clean up and get dressed.” She turned to head back into the cave. “And don’t forget you’re helping with supper, Lucas.”

“Yes, Mom.”

After giving Alex’s bare shoulder a reassuring pat, Peter headed back toward the goat pen. Alex headed into the cave, trailed by Jasper and Lucas, who began animatedly telling Jasper about the look of shock and confusion on the hunter’s face when Lucas called Alex his brother.

As Alex scrubbed blood off his leg in his room, he was overwhelmed again with gratitude that he had Jasper and Peter and Meredith and Lucas, and that they had stayed with him through so much. They’d made a good life here, a life that despite its challenges, Alex usually enjoyed. He’d have to be more careful. Getting impaled by an arrow was not something he wanted to experience again, but more importantly, that arrow could have hit Lucas. Or they could have been closer to home and their sanctuary discovered.

Alex got dressed, determination growing. His makeshift family protected him, and he needed to do a better job of protecting them from the danger his presence created. He wouldn’t stop exploring and enjoying himself and having fun with Lucas, because he needed those things to keep his sanity, but he would be more cautious.

As far as he could manage it, his friends wouldn’t have to uproot their lives or lose anything more for his sake ever again.