Summary

Jacob and Ezekiel are learning more about their new pet every day. Now it's time to see how she likes the rest of the family. And if Franklin will like having a playdate.

Notes

Franklin the Tea Dragon is being borrowed (with permission) from the lovely Jenksel, who suggested the idea of a playdate to me in the first place! So happy our babies get to play together at last!

Jacob is always the first one up in the mornings; like his plants, he wakes up with the presence of sunlight. Thistle is always up with him, quietly padding along next to him and perching on the edge of the counter to watch him make breakfast, usually holding the stuffed Tigger toy that Ezekiel had given her. He’s finished buttering his toast and is about to peel a banana for her breakfast when she looks at him with her intelligent owl eyes and says, “Mum.”

Jacob almost drops his coffee mug. “What did you just say?”

She wriggles a little on her perch, her wings half-opening and fluttering slightly like they do when she’s excited. “Mum!”
Thistle nearly leaps off the counter when Jacob whoops.

“What’s all the noise going on in here?” Ezekiel asks, sticking his bedhead into the kitchen and yawning.

“She spoke!” Jacob replies. “Thistle, she just spoke.” He looks at her again, and she’s hopping in place now from excitement, looking between them. “Can you say it again? Huh? Who am I?”

“Mum! Mum!” the bujanga kitten repeats happily, leaping at him, and he catches her in his arms. She twists in his arms to expose her soft belly for petting, clearly expecting to be praised for her apparent achievement.

“Holy shite. I didn’t know they could talk,” Ezekiel remarks, reaching out to gently rub one of her ears between two fingers.

“Jenkins told me there ain’t a lot known about ‘em, so who really knows?” The historian gently scratches under her delicate ribs, watching the tip of her tail flick in delight. He tilts his head a degree, contemplative. “You know, crows and parrots can learn English. Gorillas can learn ASL. There was a border collie that had a 1,000-word vocabulary. And we know that she’s smart. Maybe she really does understand us and knows what she’s saying.” Jacob does get the feeling sometimes, looking at her dark owl eyes, that there’s an intelligence in there, an understanding that goes beyond just an animal’s base comprehension. Curious, he points to Ezekiel. “Who’s that, Thistle? Huh?”

She twists her head to look at Ezekiel, ears pricking forward. “Punk.”

“Oh!”

Jacob has to set Thistle on the counter when he doubles over laughing, the thief sputtering indignantly beside him. “That’s—that’s what you get!” he crows. He’s not entirely surprised with Thistle addressing him as Mum, since Ezekiel constantly calls him that when speaking to her. It makes sense, in a way, too, since Jacob rarely ever calls the thief by his first name, not unless they’re having a row.

“Ezekiel! I’m Ezekiel. E-zek-iel,” the younger man says firmly, poking one finger at her snout.

Thistle cocks her head, looking decidedly smug. “Punk,” she repeats, then turns her gaze back to Jacob. “Mum.”

Over the next few days, Thistle displays her growing vocabulary. All of the plants are green at first, but Jacob finds that with a bit of repetition, she can differentiate between types, but mostly in generalizations—tree, fern, vine, herb, fruit. She knows all the colours and counts up to eighteen, after which she reverts to many. She can name her favourite toy—Tigger—and her favourite music—Queen. Their bedroom is nest, the townhouse is den. He is still Mum, and Ezekiel is still Punk. (After another attempt to get her to say his name, Thistle had looked at Ezekiel, decidedly smug, and amended, “Punk-ass.” Jacob had laughed so hard he fell off the sofa.) When they leave for work in the morning, she nods solemnly and says, “Mum Liberry. Punk Liberry. Thistle den.”

After a week of learning her vocabulary, Jacob lays on the sofa with her on his chest; she’s still small enough to lay on him comfortably, though she’s already bigger than a housecat. “I am so proud of you,” he murmurs, running a fingertip down her spine; she shivers happily. “You’re such a smart girl. You’re so smart.”

Thistle scoots a little more up his chest and tucks her head into the crook of his neck. “Love,” she
purrs. "Love Mum."

He smiles and kisses the top of her head between her horns. "I love you, too."

When she’s four months old, Jacob convinces Ezekiel to bring Thistle to the Library with them. He wants her to meet the rest of their team. And Franklin, too. The little tea dragon would probably enjoy the company.

“Ready to go to the Library?” he asks.

“Liberry?” Thistle sits up immediately, ears pricked forward. “Thistle Liberry?”

Jacob nods. “Yep. Library. You’re gonna meet the rest of your family today.” He grabs a knapsack and holds it open for her to crawl into. She knows the routine. He’s never told Ezekiel, but he’s regularly taken her to the open-air farmers’ market with him by hiding her in the knapsack, the top unzipped just enough that she can peep through. He wants her to be used to strange people—what a nightmare it would be if he opened the front door and she mauled a Girl Scout over some Thin Mints.

Once she’s tucked into the knapsack, she pokes her head back out before he can zip it up. “Tigger?” she queries.

“You want your Tigger? Alright.” Jacob finds the well-loved little toy in the fern pot, her favourite napping place, and tucks it into the knapsack. “Good?” She whistles affirmatively and tucks her head down so he can zip it up, leaving a gap.

“The bike’s not going to scare her, d’you think?” Ezekiel wonders as he shrugs on Jacob’s jacket.

“I dunno,” Jacob lies, though he knows it won’t. She actually likes the motorcycle; sometimes she’ll ask for rides with a buzzing growl like a revving engine. He imagines that it feels like flying to her, flying at super-speed. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Ezekiel looks doubtful but puts on his helmet without argument.

Jacob sets the knapsack in front of him on the saddle, holding it between his thighs; Thistle does not do well riding on the back. When he starts the engine, he feels her wriggle excitedly inside the knapsack, her snout poking out of the small gap.

When they walk into the Annex, Jenkins, Cassandra, and Eve are all waiting for them, as Ezekiel had texted for a ‘team meeting’ before they left the townhouse. “Well, we’re all here, Jones, what’s up?” Eve asks, leaning back against the edge of the table.

The thief only shrugs. “Well, that’s really for him to explain, it was his idea anyways. Hippie, the floor’s yours.” He makes a go-ahead gesture.

“Gee, thanks,” Jacob retorts dryly, then turns back to the others, walking up to the table, holding onto the knapsack and feeling Thistle’s eager squirming. Noticing the movement of the bag, everyone stares at it with degrees of confusion and suspicion. “Well, Mr. J, you remember that little…field trip that Jonesy and I took to Malaysia a few months ago? And we, uh, encountered some of the local wildlife?”

Jenkins no doubt knows exactly where this is going, judging by the look that he’s bending on Jacob right now. “Mr. Stone…”
He shrugs apologetically. “Sorry. You know I’m a softie. Just ask Jonesy.” Setting the knapsack on
the table, he unzips it and tilts it forward; Thistle crawls out onto the tabletop, eyes wide and head
turning this way and that to take in her new surroundings. Her Tigger toy is clamped in her mouth,
floppy limbs dangling between her forelegs.

Cassandra makes a sound that only bats are capable of hearing, one hand smacking Jenkins’ arm
excitedly. Eve pinches the bridge of her nose with a sigh, though her lips are twitching.

“This is Thistle. She’s a bujanga, from Malaysia. They’re a kind of forest guardian, and she
imprinted on me as her mother because females have plant magic like I do,” Jacob explains. “She’s
only going to get a little bigger than she is now, and she eats fruit and nectar and some bugs. And she
can talk.”

Jenkins’ eyebrows shoot up. “Actual speech, Jacob?” he asks.

And just like that, they’re back on a first-name basis again, which means he’s already forgiven.
“Yep. And she doesn’t just repeat what you tell her. She actually knows what things are called and
learns new words on her own,” he explains, then looks down at her. “Thistle.”

She turns her gaze up to him, blinking; he points to himself. She drops the toy and says, “Mum!”

Cassandra makes another glass-shattering squeak, almost vibrating; smiling, Jacob points to Ezekiel
next.

“Punk!”

Eve lets out a bark of laughter, and the thief levels an unimpressed glare her way. Attracted by the
noise, Thistle turns towards the Guardian and cocks her head, tapping her hind foot the way she does
when she’s uncertain of something. “Ave?” she says hesitantly; Eve blinks in surprise.

“Ave,” Jacob corrects gently.


The Guardian smiles at that. “Yeah, that’s me. I’m Eve.”

The young bujanga turns to face Jenkins and Cassandra, her back foot tapping again. She knows
their names, but she struggles with polysyllabic words. Most of her vocabulary insofar is limited to
one or two syllable words. “Ssan…sand…C’sand…” Thistle huffs.

“Cass,” the redhead suggests.

Thistle contemplates that for a moment, then says perfectly, “Cass.” Bobbing her head, she looks to
Jenkins next, eyeing him up and down. “Jen?”

“I believe that is a female name, little one. Try again.”

As she huffs in frustration, Jacob reaches out and runs a finger along the edge of her wing. “Mr. J.”

“M-Mis…Mist…Mista J.”

Jenkins smiles at that, and she takes that as a sign of approval, settling the name.

“We’ve kept her at home until we knew she was good and settled, but I thought that maybe she
could spend some time with Franklin,” Jacob suggests; sensing her attention is no longer needed,
Thistle picks her toy up once more and resumes looking around. “I mean, she’s happy in the
townhouse, but I want her to be able to come to the Library, too. And her and Franklin are both
dragons…of a sort. Maybe they’d be friends?"

“That’s a good idea. Jenkins, don’t you think so?” Cassandra asks, tugging on the old knight’s arm.

“Well…I don’t see why not,” Jenkins says after a moment of thought. “But perhaps you should hold
onto him, Cassandra, and Jacob, could you hold Thistle as well? Just in case? She is somewhat
bigger than him.”

Cassandra waves a hand at him, already halfway out the door and down the corridor, calling for their
tea dragon. The historian holds out his arms to Thistle with a small two-tone whistle; she hops up
into his arms, still looking around in fascination, trying to crawl up his shoulder.

Stretched out atop a bookcase taking an idle nap, Franklin hears Chá Huā calling for him and lifts his
head with a wide yawn, quickly coming awake. Peering downwards, he sees her coming up the
corridor towards him; he climbs down the bookcase and bounds over to meet her. Chá Huā seems
very excited about something, making happy noises as she scoops him up.

There is Bái Shān, Xiàng Rì Kuí, Fēng, and Lăo Hŭ, all of their little clan in the room with the
exception of Xĭ Què. But what is most interesting is that Lăo Hŭ is holding another dragon in his
arms! Franklin tries to spring forward, eager, but Chá Huā wraps her arms a little tighter around him,
holding him still. He chirps a bright greeting, wondering where this new one had come from.

Thistle whips her gaze around to the source of the bright trill, ears cocked forward. Cass is holding
another in her arms. She knows that he is not one of her kind, but he looks like her, and he seems
excited to see her at any rate, squirming happily in Cass’s arms.

Mum sets her down on the table again, though he stays tense. To protect her? Is the new one
dangerous? He doesn’t seem like it, small as he is. She sets her Tigger down behind her before
turning to look at the one-like-her-but-not.

Franklin wonders what exactly she is. He knows that she isn’t a tea dragon, but she looks similar to
him. Her magic, though, it feels like Lăo Hŭ’s, like that deep, rich magic of the earth and growing
things. Ah, now he understands!

He knows that Lăo Hŭ and Fēng are mates. And even though they are both males, they must have
found a way to produce their own egg. He has a cousin, and this is her introduction to the rest of the
clan. It’s not uncommon for hatchlings to stay separate from the clan for a while after their hatching,
and the introduction to the clan is important. No wonder they are all there together. She’s meeting
them for the first time.

Chá Huā sets him on the table, and he steps forward to greet her.

Thistle stands up on her hind legs as the one-like-her-but-not approaches, opening her wings
halfway. Cass had brought him in, and he seems to be an accepted part of the clan, but still, she’s
wary. She doesn’t know what he is.

“Franklin,” Mum says gently. “Franklin. He’s a tea dragon. Think of him as your cousin.”

A cousin. The word plucks some memory. Kin, but distantly. Family, nonetheless. She folds her
wings in and lowers herself back to all fours, edging forward to meet him. He smells like Cass and
Mista J; he must be their kin, then. She turns the name-sound that Mum had told her over in her mind. “Fran,” she says. “Fran?”

Franklin hears her say part of his name, tilting his head, and she mimics him.

“Fran?” she repeats, and he understands that she uses the same names as the rest of the clan does. But he does recognise her name, Thistle, and translates it into a proper tea dragon name, Ji. He stretches his neck forward, accepting her name for him.

Ji looks him over critically once more, then lowers her head and gently butts her head against his jaw. Well, it’s not exactly a proper greeting, but he’s used to the peculiarities of their little clan by now. He wriggles in delight, warbling happily; she whistles back at him, mimicking his excited chirps. Turning around, he bounds towards the corridor, eager to show his new cousin the rest of their territory.

Franklin leaps off the table, turning it into an easy glide down to the floor, and bolts to the door before turning back to look at Thistle expectantly, chirping in an obvious invitation to follow. Thistle turns to Jacob, warbling inquisitively.

“Go on,” he says, gesturing with one hand.

Seizing her Tigger once more, Thistle sprints after Franklin, and the two vanish down the corridor, their chirps and whistles fading into the Library.

Jenkins watches them go with fond indulgence and shakes his head. “I do believe we may have created a monster, Jacob,” he remarks.

“I’m thinking you may be right.”

The dynamic duo, as Ezekiel immediately dubs them, spends the rest of the day together, running through the Library and making a general nuisance of themselves. They’re thick as thieves almost instantly, and Jacob isn’t entirely surprised. They’re not that far apart in age, after all.

The only…interesting event of the day is when they decide to visit Little Ness’s pond. It’s vacant now that she’s grown enough to join her mother in the big tank, and it’s a favourite place of Franklin’s. Right up until Thistle pushes him into the deep end.

Tea dragons, as it turns out, are not very strong swimmers. They enjoy playing in the shallows but rarely go deeper than they can walk, unless being pursued by a predator. The shallow end of the pond is Franklin’s favourite place to give himself little tea dragon birdbaths, but like others of his kind, he doesn’t do much swimming.

Bujangas, however, are excellent swimmers. Their natural Malaysian habitat hosts the third largest mangrove habitat in the world, several thousand square kilometres of it. They’re born instinctively knowing how to swim, and a particular bujanga delicacy is the oysters that grow on the submerged roots of mangrove trees. And it is a common bit of play amongst young bujangas to push one another into the water from high points.

Jenkins, who had been closest to the enclosure, comes running in at the sound of Franklin’s shrill, terrified squealing to see the tea dragon flailing in the water as Thistle watched him in stunned disbelief, confused by his reaction to what she understood to be a fun game. The old knight quickly
plucks Franklin out of the pond, setting him back on solid ground; the tea dragon glares at his cousin, looking cross and quite sodden.

“Fran?” Thistle pleads. “Mista J?”

“Here now, children, it was only an accident,” Jenkins soothes. “Thistle, I’m afraid that Franklin does not like to swim like you do. And Franklin, she just wanted to play and didn’t know you couldn’t swim.”

After a moment of solemn contemplation, she tentatively ventures, “Fran…water no?”

“Water no,” he confirms.

Thistle looks at the drippy and displeased Franklin, then turns and leaps into the pond with a splash. Immediately, Franklin squawks in alarm, peering over the edge, then makes a confused sound seeing her paddling around the deep end of the pond with surety. Her ears furl closed, and she dives with barely a ripple, surfacing again a moment later with a polished, shiny pebble from the bottom in her teeth. Climbing out of the water, she sets the pebble at Franklin’s feet and warbles softly.

Understanding the apology, the tea dragon picks up the pebble, and the two decide to leave the pond room for now, scampering off and leaving a drippy trail in their wake.

Jenkins watches them go with a fond smile. Children.

Come the end of the day, however, nobody can find them. Soon, the Guardian, Caretaker, and all three Librarians are on the search, wandering up and down corridors calling for them. Knowing Thistle, however, Jacob makes a beeline towards the Green Room, where he keeps all his ‘Library’ plants—ones that have special environmental needs or dangerous properties, like the scorpion thistle that sprays caustic fluid when it’s handled too roughly, or the viper sundews that will snap at anything that moves near it when it’s hungry.

Standing perfectly still, he listens for any signs of life and hears it—soft snuffling and quiet huffs, coming from one of his giant ferns.

Jacob leans out into the corridor and shouts, “Found ‘em,” then walks over to said fern and lifts up the heavy curtain of fronds. Curled up in the rich potting soil around the base of the plant, Franklin and Thistle are snoring in a heap. The tea dragon is sleeping mostly on top of his larger cousin. There’s a shiny pebble resting next to Franklin’s head. And he’s got his chin resting on her Tigger toy, too.

“Well, he’s definitely family,” Jacob chortles softly as Cassandra joins him. “She doesn’t even let Ezekiel touch that toy.” And when he puts it through the wash, she’ll sit in front of the washer and dryer the entire time, watching it go ‘round and ‘round.

“You sure she can’t stay here?” Cassandra prompts in a hushed whisper as she helps him untangle the duo. Franklin grumbles but doesn’t really wake up; Thistle doesn’t so much as twitch when Jacob scoops her up and gently tucks her into the knapsack with Tigger.

“No, no, we’ve got our own routine in the mornings, and she likes climbing in the crabapple tree,” he replies. “But we’ll definitely schedule another playdate.”

She leans forward and kisses his cheek. “Thank you, Jacob. I was worried that Franklin was gonna get lonely here, all by himself without another dragon. I’m glad you smuggled her home with you.”
He smiles and stands up, holding the knapsack in both arms. “No problem, Cass. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ezekiel falls into step beside him as they walk out of the Library, helmet tucked under his arm. “Still asleep?” he asks, and Jacob nods. “Good. Here.” He reaches up and slides Jacob’s helmet on for him, given that both hands are occupied, fastening the strap under his chin.

Despite the roar of the engine, there’s not a peep or a wiggle out of the knapsack the entire ride home, and when he carries her upstairs to her favourite fern and gently slides her into the planter, she only snores a little bit. He tucks Tigger in beside her, and one wing curls around the soft toy, pulling it close. *Franklin must’ve really given you the runaround, kiddo,* he thinks, letting the fronds fall over her so she seems to just vanish into the plant.

Hands rest on his shoulders, sure fingers kneading into his muscles, and he groans quietly, still crouched on his heels beside the fern. “You put the kid to bed?” Ezekiel asks, thumbs pressing firm circles into the knots at the base of Jacob’s neck, right where he gets wicked tension headaches after a long day.

“Yeah. Oh, down a little.” Jacob sighs.

“Here?”

“Ow, yep, that’s it. I pulled a muscle sparring with Eve this afternoon.” Ever since his sabbatical with the Monkey King, he’s actually been able to go toe-to-toe with their Guardian, and he’s not too humble to say that he’s made her eat crow a few times.

Ezekiel leans down and kisses the top of his head, inhaling the warm scent of his hair. “C’mon, babe. Bedtime.”

“Well, you’ve got to admit it, today was a wonderful day,” Cassandra says in a hushed voice as Jenkins dresses for bed. Franklin is draped across her belly, snoring quietly. His shiny rock, a present from Thistle, is on the bedside table.

“It was,” the knight agrees without protest. “For once, I can say I’m actually glad of Jacob’s habit of adopting strays.”

She leans over and kisses his cheek. “Sweet dreams, noble knight.”

Jenkins smiles. “To you as well, fair lady.”

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