



The Dragon's Flamebound Mate (Dragon Flight Academy #1)

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Description: Let the games begin.

Winning isn't everything. I know this. But try telling my dragon that. As a flight leader at the world's top dragon academy, we have a legacy to uphold. With the Flight games just around the corner, I need to be the focused teacher the students expect of me.

My task would be a whole lot easier if my new co-leader, Ash, didn't call to my dragon so. Everything about the eagle shifter has my attention from his amazing flight skills to his mesmerizing eyes to the way he looks as he walks away. He is here to help our team, but something tells me fate sent him here for so much more.

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Chapter 1

Zayne

The meeting I'd been dreading slash anticipating for what felt like forever had finally arrived. I wasn't sure exactly which emotion was stronger, the dread or the anticipation, but it didn't matter. Not now that the time had finally come.

When I'd woken up this morning, in a lot of ways, it seemed like a day like any other. The only thing different was it being the beginning of the new school term. Vacation was complete. Students would be arriving back to campus soon—those that didn't live on the school grounds year-round, that was. All the teachers who had traveled during break would return. Everything would be back to normal, or as normal as it got around here.

I'd been through this before. In so many ways, it was old hat. But today? Today was different. I just didn't know how that different was going to look. At least not yet.

My solitude would be gone, and that was the one thing I'd miss. And it wasn't like I lived in the dorms and would be surrounded by bunches of students at all hours of the day and night. In that way, I was exceptionally lucky.

I lived on the far end of the lake where the school resided—sectioned off from just about everyone, thanks to the tall trees that provided my cabin the privacy I'd so desperately craved. In theory, it meant that I really wouldn't notice the extra activity going on around the school. As long as the students kept their activities quiet, I would continue to enjoy mine. But in theory and reality tended not to be the same.

I'd lived as far away from the school as I could from the first day that I'd been hired on. This area of the school grounds didn't have a home on it until I built mine fifty-two years ago. At the time, I had no idea that I'd still be here all these decades later. Silly me, I thought it was going to be a stepping stone.

Was it truly solitude that I needed, or was I sinking into a prison of my own making? The answer to that remained a mystery, one I wouldn't have even questioned a couple of years ago. But something had changed over the past year. If only I could put my finger on it.

I took a longer sip of my coffee, tempted to splash the hot liquid onto my face to snap myself out of those thoughts. No, it wasn't loneliness that had me in such a funk. Or maybe it was a part of it. It was the fact that after fifty years of being Flight Leader—the best at the Academy—my job was now in jeopardy. No one had said anything to me directly, but I heard the whispers from students, staff, and even the parents. My team had been slipping the last few years. My rank—and respect—as a Leader slipped further from my firm grasp.

Last year, we finished dead last in the division games. We hadn't even gone to the championship. I'd never missed a championship round in all my years of teaching. And as much as I'd like to say it was a bad batch of students, it wasn't. Students were only as good as their Leader, and last year, their Leader sucked.

Unsurprisingly, there were now whispers from parents that I'd lost my edge, rumors from students that I was washed up—washed up at the ripe age of four hundred. I wished I could say they were wrong. I wanted them to be wrong. But looking in the mirror that day, the day we lost, I saw exactly what they did and vowed to be better. If only I knew how.

I set my coffee cup in the sink and went outside. I could call upon my dragon to fly me over the lake, like I did most mornings. But even my dragon didn't want to come

forth right now. I had a meeting with Flight Commander Emmon, the leader of the entire school who operated much like a principal or headmaster at a human school.

What I was going to find out, I had no idea. I liked to think that their faith in me would override everything, that they'd give me some pointers and another chance. I strongly suspected that would not be the case. As a dragon clan, we took the Dragon Flight games seriously, and if our school wasn't winning, then, well, we needed to make a change.

I'd be the first to agree with that—except, in this case, the change was me. And even though it probably was a good move to remove me, I wasn't ready to leave yet. This had become my home, and when it was time for me to go, I wanted to be with my team on top.

I made the mile walk around the lake, enjoying the fresh air. Would I be demoted to Flight Trainer? It was still a noble position to hold, and I wouldn't turn it down. It would suck, though.

Or maybe I'd be let go completely and have a whole new team brought in to lead our elite division? Would I be moved down to challenger league? Or worse, sent to do something completely unrelated.

Being fired meant I'd have to move out of my cabin, find a house somewhere else. I'd need to begin again. And when I was younger, the thought of a new adventure was exciting. Now... Now it meant losing my home, where my heart belonged.

What would I even do if I wasn't a Flight Leader? I could go into broadcasting, become a commentator at the games. I shook away that thought—I did not have the social skills necessary for such a thing. There was only so long that I could fake it before I burned myself out completely.

Journalism I could do. Did they still have sports journalists writing articles about the various teams? That seemed to have gone by the wayside with all the modern tech.

Statistics were never my strong suit, so I wasn't going to be the type to run any numbers. My Flight Trainer, Hayden, was skilled at that, which was why I kept him on my team. I hoped that my Flight Trainers would remain even if I was let go. It wasn't their fault that I had struggled so much the past few years. I didn't even know whose fault it was.

Mine, I suppose.

The reason was lost on me, though. It felt like I was doing the same thing I always had in the past to win. But then again, maybe that was the problem. Maybe I was stagnant while everyone else was growing.

The main entrance was quiet when I opened the doors. I waved to the janitor, Sal, who had worked at the school almost as long as me. He smiled back. You could always count on Sal to make your day a bit brighter.

“Good morning, Zayne. Ready to have the whole crew back?”

I nodded. “It'll be good to see the students again.”

“Indeed, it will,” he said.

I hoped I was here to see them all. Would I be able to say goodbye? Some of my team members had been with me for several years. The longer I let my brain wander, the more dire the situation looked.

After a wave good-bye, I made my way to the Flight Commander's office. It was on the third floor of the building. Much of our classes took place outside, but there were

times when indoor lessons were necessary. Students needed to learn technique, along with their other subjects that were equally as important to dragon flight, including math.

The office door was open, and I walked right in. Emmon smiled when he saw me. That was a good sign, right?

“Zayne, how are you?” He stood up and shook my hand. He’d been on a trip for the past few weeks. Like me, Emmon lived at the school full-time, but during the break, he liked to travel.

“Good.” I sat down.

“I trust you know why we’re having this discussion.” Nothing in his tone was harsh, but it still stung.

I grimaced but nodded. “Yes, sir. I assume it’s time for a change.”

“It is indeed. But judging by your face, I think you might have started thinking this is going to be a more drastic change than I’m looking for.”

“I trust your judgment on this,” I said. “I’m sure that you are getting pressure from parents, other teachers, the students themselves. Heck, I’m sure even Lord Malric has weighed in.” Lord Malric was the Emberstone clan leader. Having our clan do well in the dragon flight games at any level was good for his reputation—ours really, but he took it personally. The Emberstone clan had four dragon flight schools, and we competed in several leagues at various levels. Mine was the elite division. Or it was. I supposed I was going to find out which soon enough.

“Yes, there are always complaints from all sides, whether we win or lose. I’m more concerned about you as a person, though, Zayne. Are you all right? Is there anything

that we can help you with?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say yes. Of course, I was fine. I had to be fine. Instead, I just shook my head.

“I don’t know. I took the summer break as a time to really think about things. I just... I don’t know. Is that pathetic? Four hundred years old, and I just don’t even know why I’m in a funk.”

“Not at all. Living a long life doesn’t mean we have all the things figured out.”

“If you need to let me go, I understand,” I said. “Please don’t keep me on out of pity.” That would be so much worse.

“Absolutely not, Zayne. Two things—it’s not out of pity that we’ll continue to keep you on as Flight Leader. We won’t fire you for a bad season, or even ten bad seasons in a row. That’s not how we operate, nor should it be how any of the clans operate. We’re going to pull in some new people, though. New ideas. A lot’s changed in the flight world in recent years. The strategies that won us competitions twenty years ago aren’t the same as the ones that will win them now.”

Great. I really needed to be reminded just how outdated I was.

“Have you heard of Ash Halloway?”

The name sort of rang a bell, but I couldn’t say that I could picture him. I shook my head.

“He’s a golden eagle shifter. He’s been doing stats and commentary for the Dragon Flight games at the regional level for years. I hired him as your second-in-command.”

I still wasn't sure who he was talking about, but hearing he was an eagle and going to be my second were two things I hadn't even considered on my journey down "what-if" lane on my way over here.

"As a trainer?" I wasn't saying I didn't want that, more I was trying to figure out exactly what was happening.

"More than that. A co-leader."

Co-leader. It was worse than being fired. This was the equivalent of a babysitter.

"Commander—"

"This isn't up for debate, Zayne. The decision's made."

I groaned. Why did this seem so much worse than being fired? I didn't have a choice.

"All right." It wasn't as if there was any point in arguing.

"If it doesn't work out this season, with the two of you leading together, we'll come up with a different plan."

I had a feeling that different plan would be me not being Flight Leader. "All right."

"I trust that you will accept an outsider?" He guised it as a question, but it was a command.

"Of course," I said. "The fact that he's not a dragon means nothing to me. It's just... co-leaders? Not many teams do that." I wasn't sure if any did, now that I thought about it.

“No, no, they don’t. Maybe it’s the edge we need.”

I clenched my jaw. Perhaps it was. It wasn’t as if things could get worse than last year’s performance.

“All right,” I said. “Bring it on.”

“Perfect. He’ll be here this afternoon, and I’ll set up a meeting with the two of you. When the students arrive, I expect the two of you to be working in perfect harmony.”

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Chapter 2

Ash

“Is this celebratory, or are we drowning our sorrows?” My friend, Laken, sat down on the stool next to me at the dimly lit bar that had no one in it but the two of us. It was a fair question given it was eleven in the morning on a weekday, and the only people who would be at a bar day-drinking were people who had a problem. And a problem was exactly what I had.

Settling my nerves, I picked up the whiskey glass I’d ordered twenty minutes ago and took a sip. I resisted the urge to down it completely and instead had been swirling it around, taking light sips. While alcohol was a solution, it was far from a good one, and I knew future me would thank me for being responsible. At least slightly responsible.

“I’m still trying to figure it out.” It was honestly probably both.

“Is it working?”

I couldn’t tell if he was attempting to be funny or not. “Not so much.”

He patted me on the shoulder. “You’re going to do great. Emberstone Clan is known for being incredibly accepting of all shifter types. I’ve always heard good things about their schools as well.” Gotta love a good hype man, but as great as he was at the role, there was hesitation in his voice.

I sighed. I knew all those things he said held truth. I'd been in the dragon flight games world for a long time. Maybe too long, if I was being objective about it. But having them be true and having the situation be good were two very different things.

“There's never been a non-dragon Flight Leader. There are hardly any dragon teams that have co-leaders and none of worth,” I countered. Was I good enough? Heck yeah. But they didn't think so. Not if they thought I needed a babysitter. I still didn't understand the entire situation, but I got a strong feeling it was me they weren't overly comfortable with. Which begged the question: Why was I, an eagle, accepting their offer?

Never mind the fact that I was technically half dragon. My alpha father was a dragon. I was the only one in my clutch who took after my omega father, so I was a golden eagle like him. I literally grew up among dragons. But to say I was one of them was a stretch and a half. And really, eagles didn't consider me one of them either. I was stuck in a place of not belonging.

“And Flight Leader Zayne is one of the best.” At least I wasn't paired with a newbie, right?

Laken snorted.

Maybe not, right.

“Not in the last few years, he's not. He's a bit washed up.” He was being dead serious. “I'm surprised they didn't give you the job outright and can his ass.”

Laken wasn't helping. Not one tiny bit.

I scowled at that. That wasn't a kind way to think about how Zayne was doing. The man had clearly been going through some shit for the past decade, which was why his

flight teams weren't doing as well. That, and he had drawn the short end of the stick as far as talent goes.

Though, in his fifty-year career, he had been known for building up talent out of nothing. He could coach even some of the most uncoachable dragons, turn a team of misfits into champions. The world had seen him do it, it was how he earned his reputation. Sure, last year was different, but that didn't undo his entire legacy.

"I... I'm nervous," I admitted.

"Well, yeah, anyone would be. But you got this job for a reason, Ash. You're talented." He set his glass down, giving me his undivided attention. "You know what you're talking about. It's not like you're a fish trying to teach these dragons how to fly. You're an eagle. Flying is in your blood or... whatever the fuck. Something inspirational."

I snorted. "You think that helps? Just saying 'something inspirational?'"

"Listen, I don't need flowery words to show my encouragement. You don't need the words. You're a skilled flyer and an amazing teacher. You know dragons. It's not like you're some rando off the street."

"No, I suppose I'm not." I sighed. "I appreciate your vote of confidence. It's just... what if they don't accept me? Don't respect me? Not all dragons are accepting of outsiders on their teams." And even those that were never saw me as an equal. It sucked, but that was the way it was. "They might not treat us different on regular things, but dragon flight games are a whole different thing. It's serious."

"You're going to be co-leading with Zayne, right? If he doesn't enforce respect on his teams and make sure that no one treats you any different, then he can go fuck himself." Laken grabbed my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. "That's not

the way that school—that clan—has built up their reputation. So they’re either going to live up to that reputation or expose it as a sham.”

This was true. It didn’t change the awkwardness of the situation if I arrived and was immediately shunned for being other, but it meant things would balance out... eventually... probably.

They say never meet your heroes—they’ll disappoint you every time. I wasn’t sure who “they” were, but I needed them to be wrong on this one. I was finally getting the chance to meet mine, and the idea that he might be a jerk terrified me.

“It could be an incredibly great experience. Maybe this Zayne guy is super friendly and nice.” Laken sounded nowhere near as confident as I needed him to be.

I snorted at that. “He’s known for being a loner. He lives on the opposite end of the lake from the school, secluded from the rest of the buildings. He’s pretty famous for denying interviews or any sort of press interaction. Hell, he might dislike me on principle, since I was a member of that press for a long time.”

Although even as I said the words, I didn’t quite believe them. He was shy or private or whatever, but he didn’t have a reputation for being a dick. He might look at me as a burden—who wants a Co-Leader—but I didn’t think he’d hold disdain over me because of my career path.

“Yeah, but you know how the media likes to twist things. They just like the drama and sensationalizing the coaches.” Laken reaffirmed my initial thoughts. Good. Maybe I was right.

“Indeed. I’m nervous about being an omega on an all-alpha team.” Not as much because of Zayne, but because of the younger dragons. Things had gotten better over the years, but in a lot of ways, omegas were still thought of as objects to many.

Depending on his current crew, some of them might be part of that many.

Our crew. I needed to stop thinking of it as his. We were going to be Co-Leaders, and until I embraced that fully, I wasn't ever going to be an equal in anyone's eyes, especially my own.

"You've been in all-alpha spaces before."

"Yes, on an eagle team." Which I supposed wasn't that different. Not really. "But I am the first Flight Leader who's an omega and a non-dragon in the whole division."

"Shit, really? Damn. I didn't realize that."

"Yeah, it's going to be a trip." Please let it be a good one.

"What do you think's been going on with this Zayne guy that he's done so poorly the past few years?"

I bristled at that for reasons I didn't understand. My friend wasn't wrong. Zayne's teams had done poorly, and just like their winning streaks were a reflection of their coaching, so were their losing streaks. But bringing it up like that felt like a dig, and Zayne deserved better than that.

"I don't know. It's possible something's going on with him personally. Or maybe it's the chemistry of the crew. Or maybe it was a thousand things." And at the end of the day, the why didn't really matter as much as the how to prevent it from happening again. "His coaching staff has remained the same, but he's had new team members over the years. This year there are two new team members."

"And you're going to walk into that madness."

“Yep.” I took another swallow of my drink, bigger than my previous sips. “Sure am.”

“When do you have to be there?”

I checked my watch. “In three hours.”

“You’re going to arrive smelling like whiskey.”

Crap. I hadn’t considered that. Way to make a good first impression.

I pushed the drink away. “Well, not now, I’m not.”

My friend laughed. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

He threw a twenty down on the bar, which would cover my drink, his drink, and a tip. Loved this place and was going to miss it. Some human bars charged more than that for one drink. Yikes.

“Let’s get you some real food. I can even help you move into your new place.”

“I have two duffel bags. That’s it, but I’ll take you up on the food. I could go for a burger about now.”

“No kidding? Two duffel bags.? You moved halfway across the country, and that’s all you got?” Why did he seem so shocked. I’d never been a big “stuff” kind of guy.

Moving halfway across the country had me reducing the few items I did own. Who wanted to deal with transporting junk from one place to the next? Minimal belongings worked much better.

I shrugged. “Yep.” It wasn’t worth explaining, and he probably only mentioned it so

he could change the topic of the discussion. I'd been wallowing, and that wasn't a good way to start off a new job.

"I know you winged shifters are weird, but set down some roots, man."

"Yeah, yeah. Maybe someday." Roots were not my priority. For now, I'd settle for fitting in. "But first you promised to feed me."

"I did, but only if you promise to let me snatch one of your fries."

"Why would I give you my fries? Get your own."

"Nope. I'm getting onion rings... and some of your fries." He stuck out his tongue. "Take it or leave it."

"Fine, I'll take it." He pulled his keys out of his pocket. "Shall we go to Hayden's Burgers?"

"You think I'd let you take me anyplace else? It's a celebration meal... only the best will do." Celebration. Dead man walking. Same thing, right?

Things felt pretty normal from there. We went to our favorite hamburger joint, where I ordered extra fries to make sure I got my share, we talked about his work, gossiped about people we knew in common, and had an all-around great time. But hanging over us the entire time was the weight of all the changes that were to come.

They weren't front and center, but if a moment of silence was a bit too long or someone in the restaurant walked by with a team shirt on, it would be there in the wings, ready to pounce. It was nice having the reprieve, as short as it was. It helped me clear my head before the two of us headed to my new home. At least home for the near future.

I still wasn't confident that this was all going to work out. I might not even make it through the first semester. Sure, I knew the games better than most, but knowing something and being able to impart wisdom on that subject were two very different things. Only time would tell.

One thing was for sure: I needed to give this my all. No letting myself second-guessing my way out of a job. Laken believed I could do this—that I would do this. It was now my turn to do the same.

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Chapter 3

Zayne

So, I wasn't fired. That was a good sign. Not that things were sunshine and roses, but I knew that walking in. Worst-case scenario I had a shitty year, and during that time, I could figure out a next step. Best-case scenario, this was the kick in the ass I needed to get back on the top of my game and it would help launch my Co-Leader into a similar position... somewhere else. One thing was for sure, I needed to not mess this opportunity up.

Unfortunately, I had mere hours to prepare for meeting a new member of my team—and even less time to gather and prepare the curriculum for my new team. They didn't need to come in here to find a disorganized mess and that's what it currently was. Why? Because I'd half believed that I was two steps out the door already and acted accordingly. I needed to dragon up and get my act in gear if this was going to work.

Having a new person on board, a new Co-Leader, meant that a lot of things would have to change. They would have their own ideas on what to do, and given that they were Co-Leader, they had every right to demand changes. We also needed to figure out who would be responsible for what tasks. It was a whole lot to take in and process.

I sat in my office, my feet propped on the desk. My notes were open in front of me. I had the profiles of the five students who would be on my team this year. Three were returning from last year, two were brand-new. It was a nice mix in that way. Some

leaders preferred to keep the same teams for a minimum of two years at a time. They believed it would strengthen their ability to work together, and there was some truth in that. But also, when people got too comfortable together, they tended to get lazy. Not all of them, but enough. This was an ideal blend.

“Have you met the eagle that will be working with us?” Hayden startled me. I hadn’t realized he’d even walked back in with his tea. He was a dragon who was born into the Emberstone clan. Larger and older than me, but his strengths lay in his ability to calculate stats. He was an invaluable member of my team, that was for sure.

I shot him a glare. Referring to a person as their species instead of their name didn’t sit well with me. It was dehumanizing, which even though we were not technically humans, was eww. “His name is Ash.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean anything by that. I just—” And maybe he didn’t mean anything by it, but that didn’t make it any better.

“I know. It’s just... I’m sure he has an uphill battle as an eagle amongst dragons. We need to be as respectful and helpful as we can. If the students pick up even a hint of speciesist behavior, they’ll run with it.” The last thing this team needed was to be labeled speciesist. As hard as this was going to be for me, it had to be exponentially worse for Ash. He was not only new to the school, he wasn’t a dragon at a dragon academy.

“Of course, yeah. Being an omega doesn’t help either.”

I was just about to ask what he meant by that. I had no idea this Ash was an omega. Not that it mattered—omegas were perfectly capable—but this was an all-alpha team. Not on purpose, that was just how it had worked out. He was going to stand out in so many ways. I vowed right then and there to make sure he felt welcome and not like an outsider.

The door to our area opened, breaking off our conversation.

“And this is the locker room. Y’all will be spending a lot of time here,” the commander said. “This is where your office will be. We’re not really set up for two Co-Leaders, but I’m sure we can figure something out.” Ideally, he would have his own space, but that wasn’t going to happen, not unless his desk was on the other side of campus, and that would exclude, not include him. “Share an office, have a small office, flip-flop—whatever works for you.”

Share an office. It wasn’t ideal, but out of the options, it was the best of them, for sure.

I looked around the tiny space that I had. It had enough room for my desk and two extra chairs for my trainers, plus a filing cabinet. One wall had a whole whiteboard we used to brainstorm, but the area was not what I would call spacious. I didn’t like the idea of sharing, but I liked the idea of sending him far away to work even less. Maybe we could get one of those two-person desks. I’d seen them in catalogs over the year but had never looked closely enough to know if they would fit.

Calm yourself, Zayne. I was getting too worked up, trying to problem solve for someone I hadn’t even met yet. This wasn’t like me.

I looked up and took in my new Co-Leader for the first time. He was both everything I’d expected and nothing like it all wrapped into one. I tried not to stare, but it was nearly impossible.

Ash was tall and lean. He wore a pair of jeans and a light blue polo. Nothing about his outfit was outwardly alluring, yet I was drawn to him. His scent hit me first—pine and something else, like how the forest smelled after an early-morning rain—it was fresh and clean. Then it was his eyes—almost golden, like pools of honey. Then his smile—so bright, shining like a beacon of positivity and optimism. So very different

from my usual scowl.

It stirred something inside of me. I didn't like it. He was supposed to be a business colleague, nothing more, and yet, when I looked at him, all I wanted to do was make sure he never lost that smile. This wasn't good.

"Zayne, this is Ash. He's going to be your Co-Leader. Isn't that exciting?" Exciting wasn't the term I'd be using, that was for sure.

The Commander's gaze bore into me, as if willing me to do something besides sit there with what had to be quite the scowl on my face. The muscles in my face were drawn tight. I wasn't even upset, just in complete inner turmoil, and I could neither figure out the complete why nor could I snap myself out of it.

No one had told me he was an omega. And that shouldn't matter at all. I was a professional, and yet, it sort of did. No one had told me he was gorgeous. Another thing that really shouldn't matter at all and yet sort of did. Ugh.

I hadn't been prepared for just how much I would enjoy the look of him, how his scent would knock me off my feet. I didn't know how to react to it, and when that happened, I kept quiet. It was better than acting on impulse and getting my ass in trouble. One thing about being as old as I was, you'd already made mistakes like that and learned from them.

But did I really learn the right lesson?

Instead of giving a boisterous welcome, as I should've been doing, I simply nodded. Hayden, who had been with me a long time and understood my moods, swept in to recover.

"Welcome, Ash. We'll get the office situation figured out soon. For today, we

thought it might be best to get to know one another and go over the profiles for the kids,” Hayden said. At least his brain was working and not hyper focused on the omega in front of me.

No. Not an omega. My Co-Leader. What was wrong with me?

“That sounds great to me.” Ash looked to me, as did everyone else, as if expecting me to say something. Do something.

“Let’s go to a conference room,” I said, my voice gruffer than I meant it to be. We really needed to get out of this small space so I could get some air that wasn’t filled with his delicious scent and get my head back in the game. “We can take notes all together, discuss what we’re working with. Hayden, call Kellen and tell him to meet us there.”

I grabbed my laptop, stood up, and walked out the door. I was being a rude jerk, I knew this, but for some reason I was in survival mode. I’d make it up to my new coworker later. Unless I already scared him away.

As I passed Ash, our shoulders brushed—and my dragon roared to the surface.

For what, I did not know. The creature had been quiet for so long. Seemed odd for him to start bellowing now. But then again, everything about this situation was odd and unsettling.

I just assumed that my team would follow me. And they did.

Our Commander must’ve decided it would be best to leave us alone, because it was just me, Ash, and the two trainers in the room when we got to work.

“I’m Kellen. My expertise is in combat aerial maneuvers, so a lot of my role is in that

area. Hayden manages the strength and endurance training, as well as stats.”

Ash was already taking notes as he walked. He sat down at the edge of the table I was at. Did he know what his scent was doing to me? No, of course he didn’t. But still... how could he be so oblivious to how alluring he was?

“What about the students? Are they—” he asked.

“We’ll go over them right now.” I was glad for the distraction from his smile—his eyes. Talking about my team was something I could do on autopilot, at least the three returning from last year.

“Great. I—” His voice was calming. Intoxicating like the rest of him. I needed to not be distracted by him.

“We have five students on the team. Four primary flyers and one sub. Scott and Christa are our captains. Those two and Isaac are our returning team members. They’ve been with us for three years now. Jay and Susan are new.” I didn’t interrupt my trainers. That wasn’t my style. Yet I didn’t give Ash a chance to speak. I needed to maintain my focus.

I flipped on my laptop and plugged it into the projector so we could bring up the students’ information for of us to see.

Then I sat back and let Kellan take over. One by one we went through the slides, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each of the students we knew well and sharing the information we had on the new ones. He took notes, asking relevant clarifying questions as needed, and didn’t once try to take over the conversation.

Ash was going to fit in with my trainers perfectly. That was for sure. The only problem in this situation was me. I was the one thinking of my Co-Leader as an

omega, loving the way he looked, and being completely distracted by his scent. I was the unprofessional one, and that needed to end. Now.

It would be so much easier if my dragon hadn't picked now to start pushing at me. I still didn't know what he wanted, but did it really matter? He had no say, especially not after being silent for so very long.

"I think we can all agree that Christa is the strongest leader out of our captains. I think we should make a conscientious decision to foster that while building up Scott's skills." Kellen cleared his throat and didn't begin speaking again until he met my eyes.

Great. He noticed I was off my game, which meant the others probably did too.

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Chapter 4

Ash

A grueling four hours later, we were all still sitting inside the conference room. We weren't talking about unnecessary things. That wasn't it. But it was a lot to take in all at once, especially with the distractions, ones that should very much not be distractions at all.

Zayne had gotten up and walked around a few times as we each talked about the students we would be teaching. It was clear that he valued and respected his trainers and loved his students. I remained quiet through most of it, only offering my thoughts when I felt strongly about something and asking clarifying questions as needed.

Each time, Zayne just looked at me as if he could see right through me. He never outright ignored my ideas, but he didn't embrace them either. It was like I was there, but not really. I didn't get it. Was it because I was an eagle, or because he thought I was a threat, or worse, a burden? Maybe it was me being an omega. It didn't really matter. The result was the same.

If this was how the entire season was going to go, we were in for a long one. I would persevere. This was my one shot at this, and I refused to mess it up or let prejudice stand in my way.

Finally, as the evening stretched on, Hayden and Kellan stood up, resolve across their faces. Well, that and exhaustion. It would be impossible for them not to have been.

“Zayne, we’ve got to call it a night. We’ll be back at it tomorrow. We have time before the students arrive. Then class begins.” Hayden wasn’t asking.

Zayne didn’t look up from where he sat, staring at the wall. “Thank you. We accomplished a lot today.”

The two trainers gave me a tense smile. They had been nothing but welcoming. Meanwhile, Zayne had been cold and distant. He probably felt threatened by my mere existence, which meant I needed to watch my every step. I knew things would be uncomfortable here. I was hardly the ideal Co-Leader being an eagle alone.

I remained back, hoping to speak with Zayne alone. It would be my chance to understand where his head was at. It seemed as if he didn’t even notice I was still in the room. Or maybe he noticed and hoped I’d leave if he pretended I wasn’t here. Why was this dragon so confusing? I cleared my throat.

“Did you need something? Do you know where your room is?” he asked as if coming out of a daze. At least he wasn’t snapping at me. At least there was that.

“Yes, I’ve got one of the cabins on the grounds.” It was nicer than I thought it would be but hardly luxury.

He nodded, his eyes still not meeting mine. I could take a hint. The alpha dragon didn’t want the omega eagle around telling him how to do his job. Except, that was what I was there for. It was my job to make sure he did his job better and bring our team to a championship. And I was going to do it no matter how much he didn’t like me. I’d tread lightly at first, ease my way into this, but at the end of the day, I had to prove myself to the games. This wasn’t just about this team or the two of us. Not really.

“Listen, it doesn’t feel like we’re off to a great start.” What an understatement.

“Why not?” he asked, his voice gruff.

Did he truly not see it? Was it all in my head?

Just those two words made me question my train of thought. The way he looked at me so intently... What was it that I was worried about? The only thing I knew about Zayne was that he was gruff and quiet, and a damn good Flight Leader. So why was I surprised that was how he was behaving? He was being exactly like his reputation, and somehow, I took it personally. If I continued going down this route, I was going to end up miserable and my job was going to be a thousand times harder than it already was.

I cleared my throat again. “It’s just that... I guess I don’t really know how you feel about me being here.”

“I don’t know yet.” At least he wasn’t lying to make me feel better. I would choose honesty over patting me on my head and telling me I looked good any day of the week. “I’ll know once I start seeing the results of your work.”

“Right. Okay, so you’ll be taking my thoughts into consideration, then? Working them into the curriculum? We are Co-Leaders. I’m not just one of your trainers.” Why couldn’t I leave well enough alone? This was my first day.

He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, the muscles in his forearms flexing. This wasn’t the time to look at muscles rippling underneath his bronze skin. Not that there ever would be. This was my job, and work didn’t mix with play, no matter how sexy the alpha in front of me was.

I forced myself to look into his eyes and nowhere else. I didn’t need to be distracted by his looks. Or his scent, which had permeated the room when he walked around. His eyes were just as alluring, but at least meeting them was a sign of respect, unlike

ogling his muscles or trying to get a glimpse of his ass.

Eagles didn't have the keenest sense of smell, as a rule, but it wasn't non-existent. Our strength lay more in our sight and hearing. But with Zayne, I definitely noticed when the scent of sandalwood and cool water hit my nostrils as Zayne walked by. His scent was stronger than most and not in a gross, he needed to shower sort of way. It was quite the opposite. It had me wanting to rub up against him.

I needed to stop. The last thing I needed was to be the omega stereotype—the one who fell for their alpha boss.

Only... he wasn't my boss. Not really. We were colleagues. Equals.

“Yes,” Zayne said. “Nobody on this team is just anything. They aren't just trainers any more than you are just a Co-Leader. They are members of our team, and it's important you understand that from the get-go.”

My eyes fell. He was right.

“I take my Flight Leaders' and Trainers' opinions seriously. I don't know a lot about you, Ash, and I only just learned that you were arriving today. So, excuse me if I'm not bursting with joy over my plans for the year being thrown away last second, but ignoring my team isn't my style and never will be.”

“No, of course not. I didn't expect—” Crap. I deserved every single bit of his judgment right now.

“I don't like to be interrupted.”

I clamped my mouth shut. For a man who didn't like to be interrupted, he sure did it a lot.

“I know what’s being said about me,” he continued. “And I know the pressure the Flight Commander is under from the parents and the rest of the clan. They want us to win so we look good to the rest of dragon society.” He let out a long sigh. “Maybe you’ll make a difference, or maybe the problem really is me. Time will tell, I suppose.”

Did the alpha just admit that he could be the problem? I wasn’t expecting that. It sure made things look more promising about us working together. That was for sure.

“Right... but we should actively work toward getting along and working together. Don’t you think?”

“Is that not what I’m doing?” He looked honestly perplexed. Had I been reading too much into his actions? Was he one of those people who always looked angry even when he was having the best time ever? “Is that how it feels?”

Crap. I hadn’t meant to make him feel bad. Only... how could I get him to see that?

“It’s just that I—I don’t feel overly welcome.” And there it was, laid out without any sugar coating. If we were going to make this work, we needed to trust each other, and that included being honest.

But also, it sounded ridiculous—like I was a little kid who was sad their teacher didn’t call on them and not a grown-ass man starting his first day of work.

Zayne stood then, gathering his papers and laptop.

“I’m not responsible for your feelings, Ash,” he said. “If I were you, I’d keep them to yourself.”

Right. Okay. Message received.

“Listen,” I said, exhaling sharply. “I came in ready to play nice. I have a lot of respect for you and the career you’ve built in your tenure here.” And now it sounded like I was kissing his ass. Why couldn’t I find the right words around him?

He scoffed. “Is that another way of telling me I’m old?”

“Well... you’re not young.” And just like that, I made it worse.

“Not like you, huh?” he snapped. I deserved it.

“Youth has nothing to do with this conversation.” Even if I was the one who’d inadvertently brought it up. “I have good ideas. If you listen to what I have to say, try the techniques I have, we’ll have a winning team.”

“Sure. Easy as that? Just let you run the whole show?”

“That is not what I said.” Only, maybe I kind of did. “At least that’s not what I meant.”

“Mean what you say and say what you mean.” His eyes flickered, his dragon close. “If you do that, we won’t have any further problems.”

“Argggg.” I clenched my fists at my side. Why was this man so infuriating and why couldn’t I control my emotions around him?

I’d worked with the top alphas in this industry for my past jobs. It wasn’t like I couldn’t hold my own in a conversation with them, but with Zayne? With Zayne it was like I lost my ability to communicate.

If I kept digging, I was going to end up in a science fiction world below the earth.

“Argg? That’s your response?” He started to head out the door, stopping only long enough to call back. “Maybe read a dictionary tonight and learn some words. We both need this to work, and if things keep going this way, it won’t.”

And then he was gone, leaving me there to stand in a mess of my own making. At least the others weren’t there to see it. It was going to be hard enough in the morning, walking back in here after the way today went.

“I can fix this.” Being my own hype man wasn’t working, dread seeping through every pore of my body as I left the building and made the walk to my new home.

I wasn’t even unpacked yet, and as I walked in the front door, nothing about the place felt like home.

“Maybe I should’ve stayed where I was.” I leaned against the closed door and closed my eyes, replaying the entire day in head and seeing all of the ways I could’ve made things better and didn’t.

My eagle pushed at me. He wanted out. I stripped my clothing, opened the bathroom window wide open, and shifted. That was one thing I had over the dragons here, I could shift inside, fly away, and disappear into the trees.

I took to the air and explored the grounds from the sky. It was a stunning campus. Did I fly over Zayne’s house? Yes, I did. I could see why he wanted it there and wondered if he ever got lonely being so far from the others. Maybe that’s why he came across as so grumpy?

The why didn’t matter, nor did his potential loneliness, or even the location of his house. The only thing that did was getting through this season and showing the world what I could do.

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Chapter 5

Zayne

The first day of class was always annoying. At least to me. We needed to go over all the rules, introduce ourselves to the new students, remind the returning students that they didn't know everything, and establish the tone for the coming season. And while doing all of this, we had to deal with the chaos of lost students, late students, students who sat in the wrong class for ten minutes before realizing it, and on and on.

It was always a tiresome day.

It didn't help that I had spent the better part of the evening going over my conversation with Ash in my head dozens of times. No matter how many ways I looked it, it was never good. The conversation had been a train wreck from the very start, and it only got worse.

Kellan, Hayden, and I positioned ourselves at the front of the small auditorium-style room, looking much more ready than we were. There were five rows of seats, allowing the room to hold up to twenty students. Twenty was too many, in my opinion, but some years they were full for many classes. They wouldn't be full for this class, only those on the team would be here.

The teaching area had a large projector screen and an open floor in case a small or medium dragon needed to shift for whatever teaching was happening that day. Larger dragons had to stay in human form or we needed to switch locations. On those occasions, and when the lessons required multiple shifters in their dragon form, we

went outside.

All five of the students in our flight were in attendance. We had four primaries and one alternate who was there in case we needed a sub due to injury or illness. I tended to rotate them in during the season, even if we didn't strictly need them. It was important for them to be at the ready, and you couldn't do that never having real flight time.

We had three males and two females on the team and the perfect blend of old and new. Even ten years ago, I'd have been sure we were heading to victory, but this year my confidence was shot. Being surrounded by a solid group of coworkers helped, but not enough to alleviate my worries. It didn't help that I was still flustered by my last interaction with Ash.

The moment we'd met, he'd gotten so deeply under my skin that we ended up arguing like the students often did. In hindsight, we fought over nothing. But I couldn't let it go, to the point I swore I saw him circling my house in his eagle form.

I'd like to say I learned from that and figured out how to work with him better, but so far, that hadn't been the case.

Every student showed up early and ready to go. They were excited for the new year, and so far, I hadn't sensed any dread after our poor results last season. By all accounts, we should be able to start class. There was only one problem, my Co-Leader still hadn't arrived.

I let out a long sigh that did nothing to hide my frustration. Punctuality was important to me, which I had thought I made clear in our discussion the other day. But also—why was he late? Was he hurt? Did he oversleep? Was he stuck at the office with intake paperwork? It shouldn't matter. Late was late. But with Ash, nothing was as simple as it should've been. At least, not for me.

In the days since Ash arrived, we'd had countless meetings between me, him, and our Flight Trainers. My attraction to him had not waned; if anything it grew, and my attitude hadn't changed either. The latter of which I was not proud of.

It wasn't Ash's fault I was well on my way to being a washed-up has-been. If I had any self-preservation instincts at all, I would step aside and let Ash take over my team for the whole year. If I kept up my behavior, then we were in for a rough one. And I had no one to blame but myself. Only at this moment, I couldn't seem to stop myself. It was as if I was watching myself self-destruct in slow motion.

At five minutes after the hour, I stood up from where I was leaning against the desk. "Welcome, everyone, please take your seats." We were going to start with or without him.

The students spaced themselves out so that there were a few desks between each of them. Scott and Christa were seated at the center front. They had been a part of my team for three years now and were captains of the team. Behind them were Isaac, Jay, and Susan. Jay and Susan were new to the team. Though I had taught Susan's parents long ago, Jay was new to the clan as a whole. His family had moved over from the Ebonshire clan when they migrated to America.

Silence came upon the room when I spoke. Hopefully, that level of influence would remain for the length of the season. The more seriously we all took this, the better the odds were that we would come out the other side on top.

"Let's start with introductions. You all know me, or at least you should. Even if we hadn't met in person, once I was assigned as your Flight Leader, I'd expect that you all did some cursory research to know what you are getting into." I'd also reached out to each of them individually, but this wasn't really about what they should or shouldn't have done in the past. It was to give them a not-so-subtle hint that we weren't going to handfeed them information all season.

“In your research, you probably came across my Flight Trainers—Kellan and Hayden.” I was dragging this out far longer than I needed to. When I wasn’t actively teaching, I kept my explanations short, but I needed Ash to show up. I didn’t wish to explain his absence with excuses, I’d rather he have to do it himself. It was far from a good way to start the semester. That was for sure.

Hayden cleared his throat and flicked a glance toward the door.

“We heard that was an additional Flight Trainer this year. Is that not the case?” Christa broached the subject that weighed on everyone. Great. So the rumors of my demise had reached the kids. Of course it did.

So much for not having to explain Ash’s tardiness away

I nodded. “We do in fact have an additional Flight Leader.” I emphasized the title. It was important that the students understand what the hierarchy was. They needed to respect all of their leaders, while also recognizing that Ash’s decisions were at the same level as my own. If they didn’t, this was never going to work.

I had my own hangups about him being here, but the kids didn’t need to know that. As far as they were concerned, the coaching staff was a cohesive unit that got along.

The door opened and Ash bustled inside. His usually carefully styled hair was a mess on top of his head. His button-down shirt was untucked, and one sleeve was folded up.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. He grinned and waved to the students as he caught his breath. “I’m Ash.”

“Get lost on your way to class?” I asked with a raised brow.

Ash's teeth clenched, his smile stretching. "Yes. Something like that."

The tension that filled the room was palpable. The students' stares landed on my shoulders like a lead weight.

"No worries," I forced myself to say, pasting the fakest of smiles on my face. "Class is just getting started. We're just about to do introductions. Why don't you go first?" I crossed my arms and leaned back against the desk.

"Great." Ash stepped further into the room and the scent of his pine and fresh rain hit me, but with it came a hint of smoke that was out of place with his usual aroma. "I'm Ash. I'm sure you can all tell, I'm not a dragon. I do fly, though. I am an eagle shifter."

"Like a bald eagle?" Scott asked.

"Um, no. Not like a bald eagle. Specifically, I am a golden eagle."

"Wait, so we're not going to be taught dragon flight skills by an actual dragon? What do you know about dragons?" Jay sat up straight, shouting out his words.

That would not do.

I stood straight then, dropping my relaxed demeanor. "Whoa. I realize it is the first day of class and we have yet to go over the rules and expectations, but I can assure you—shouting at your instructors is never allowed. You show them respect at all times or there will be consequences." I put on my best glare, and though I'd never taught Jay, he seemed to get the message. If this was the sense of entitlement he came with, we needed to squash that, right quick.

"Apologizes, Flight Leader Ash. I was just surprised."

“Understandable.” Ash already gave him more grace than he deserved. “Believe it or not, I do know a bit about dragons. My alpha father is a dragon, so while my shifted form is not a dragon, I am half dragon.”

My brow furrowed. I hadn’t known that detail. How had I missed that?

“I was raised at a school, not unlike this one, and I have been a part of the flight teams in an unofficial capacity for some time.”

That part I had known.

We spent the next bit of time going over the rest of introductions. Despite the awkwardness at the beginning, things were going smoothly.

I kept a close eye on how Ash commanded the room. The students paid close attention to him while he spoke. After his initial entrance, their gazes followed him when he paced the front of the room. His enthusiasm and obvious passion and expertise in the subject came out the more that he talked. I had seen it throughout the past few days and now the students were.

Kellen and Hayden handed out the supplies the students would need for the season—our playbook, their practice colors, and a few other things. Later, once competitions began, they’d get their official colors.

When it came time for the students to talk about themselves, they each opened up to Ash as if he had been a part of the team forever. He engaged with them like their words were golden and ideas fascinating. I was seeing him in a whole new light.

Was I too jaded to be doing this anymore? I listened to my students, I knew that I did. But did I give them that level of attention anymore? Was it the same for my Flight Trainers?

Looking at my teaching strategies through the lens of how Ash tackled the first day of class—minus the tardiness—perhaps I was losing my edge. The thought left me unsettled, though not surprised.

When it came time for the session to end, the students stood, shook all of our hands. Many of them lingered with Ash, expressing their sincere welcome.

I clenched my jaw. Even in my earliest years, students didn't flock to me the way they were with Ash right now. There was something about him that put them at ease and had them opening up in a way they didn't with me.

Once it was just the leaders in the room, Ash turned to us. "I am so sorry for being late—"

I held up a hand. "Save it. We made it through our first class without issue. Mostly. I want to keep an eye on Jay and why he felt the need to express his thoughts on you not being a dragon." I wouldn't tolerate prejudice among my team.

My own hangups where Ash was concerned was an issue, one I was going to push through, but none of them had to do with Ash being an eagle. If anything, all of them had to do with my own shortcomings. Fuck.

What a time to have a revelation.

"Right. Well, that was fun. I'm going to get my paperwork done for my next class. I'll see you all at the outdoor session tomorrow." I walked out the door, not looking back.

I needed some air and some space between Ash and me. This was going to be a long-ass season.

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Chapter 6

Ash

Well, that went well. At least better than I thought it would after getting the glare from Zayne when I walked inside.

Zayne's chilly attitude toward me hadn't thawed in the days we had been working together. I thought arriving to class early would earn me some extra points. I was even going to surprise the leadership with homemade muffins. Instead, I'd nearly burned down my cabin when the hand-mixer had short-circuited the outlet, causing sparks to fly and a towel to catch fire.

The whole place would have gone up if I hadn't found the fire extinguisher under the sink. Thank goodness I figured out how to use it in time. The place stank of smoke, and I had a feeling it was going to be constant reminder of how horribly everything went for quite some time. Smoke had a way of seeping into everything and holding on tight.

It was not my strongest start to a day.

Once the fire was put out, I'd been unable to get the electricity back on. I would need to contact the groundskeeper or someone about the cabin. I couldn't live there without electricity. At least not for long. I wasn't high-maintenance by any means, but my milk staying cold, my lights turning on, and my shower not being ice-cold were pretty much nonnegotiable for me.

Sooner or later, I needed to speak with Zayne about his attitude. This team wasn't going to make it very far if he didn't pull his head out of his ass. He wasn't outright rude to me, but he wasn't welcoming either. And the students would pick up on it quicker than anyone else. They were smart like that.

And then there was Jay. He responded quickly to being called out on his speciesist bullshit, but there were a couple of times I caught him looking at me as if I were less-than, and that wasn't going to fly. Hopefully, he was acting out of embarrassment and not actual disdain for non-dragon shifters. Only time would tell.

Once he left the room, I faced Hayden and Kellen. They both gave me encouraging smiles.

"Any advice?" I asked.

Kellan grimaced. "Zayne's a stickler for punctuality."

I nodded. "Yeah, I gathered that." He hadn't even given me a chance to explain.

"You did great with the kids, though. They listened and they're excited to work with you. Just as we are. Zayne will come around. He doesn't have a choice." Kellan didn't seem to notice anything with Jay. Please let that mean it was all in my head and he was done with the not-being-a-dragon thing.

I nodded but kept quiet. Yeah, he didn't have a choice, and we could coach the team without being best friends, but something inside me wanted more from Zayne than just acceptance. I wanted him to see me as an equal, as part of the team. As something more.

Something that included touching.

I shook that thought out of my head. Zayne hardly looked at me as a person, let alone as something more than that. To him, I was a reminder of his past failings, even if they were truly his. And I wasn't so sure they were.

One thing was for sure, the attraction I felt was one-sided and needed to stay under wraps. The quickest way for me to lose this job would be to start showing inappropriate feelings toward my boss. Even if we were Co-Leaders, Zayne still outranked me based on his tenure.

Since I was new, I didn't have other courses assigned to me yet. Instead, I was set to simply fill in where needed and perhaps shadow a few of the other classes eventually. I wasn't sure if this was protocol or what the rationale was, but either way, it meant the rest of my day was free.

Lucky for me, I had a mess to deal with at my cabin. It would keep me busy and distract me from the situation I managed to get myself into.

I hustled across campus, speed walking through the halls of the west building named Taldrek Hall, after one of the first Flight Commanders at the school. The students affectionally called it Talls, since it was a tall building and saying Taldrek Hall was too much of a mouthful.

The courtyard between Talls and the lake was filled with students, some in individual study groups, some as whole classes enjoying their lessons outside, and a few sneaking a kiss.

I could shift and fly across the lake to my cabin, but I opted to walk. I needed the time to clear my head, but that wasn't the only reason why. If I was ever going to fit in here, people were going to need to see me as part of the school. Hiding behind my wings wasn't the way to foster that.

The groundskeeper, Bryn, was just walking out of my cabin as I arrived. Perfect timing.

“What’s the damage?” I crossed my fingers all it needed was a new wire or two and some paint. Immediately, his posture changed, and I knew that was not the case.

He shook his head. I grimaced. This wasn’t going to be good.

“The power surge from the outlet short circuiting fried the panel, so we need to replace that, along with the outlet and the wires in the wall that burned, and that’s only part of it.”

“Well, shit. I assume that’s not a quick fix?”

Bryn shook his head. “Fraid not. I’ll have to get a real electrician out here. No electricity in the house until the work is done. You’ll have to talk to the Commander about getting a room in one of the staff dorms.”

Great. Just great. Nothing sounded good about being in a dorm as the only eagle on the grounds.

“Thanks, Bryn. I appreciate you taking a look.” It wasn’t his fault, and objectively, it could’ve been so much worse. At least I wasn’t hurt and got it out quickly. Burning down a cabin on my first day would not win me any points.

He told me he’d be in touch and got on his way. I wasn’t ready to deal with it yet, and I sat on the front steps with my head in my hands. It wasn’t the end of the world, but it was an inconvenience I didn’t wish to deal with. I really wanted to start this job on the right foot and so far, luck was not on my side.

“Something wrong?” Zayne’s voice started me, and I jerked upright until I was

standing.

Of course, he was here to see me looking dejected and helpless.

“Only everything.” I hated that I let that slip.

I wasn’t one to feel sorry for myself. I told myself when I took this job that I was going to take the punches in stride, because I knew there were going to be rough patches. An omega eagle shifter leading a dragon flight team was unheard of, but I was going to do it and do it well.

“Something wrong with the cabin? I smell smoke. I smelled it on you this morning when you arrived to class.”

He noticed that? I sometimes forgot how much better their sense of smell was to mine.

I waved my hand toward the front door. “Minor mishap with a hand-mixer and a poorly wired outlet. Unfortunately, the panel is fried, and I won’t get power back until it’s repaired. I need to head up to Winghaven Hall to talk with the Commander about temporary housing.” My stomach rumbled embarrassingly loudly. “And I need to eat.”

He didn’t speak for a few seconds, his eyes on the cabin.

I don’t know what I expected out of Zayne at that moment, but having him suddenly reach a hand out and tug me toward the woods wasn’t it. I slipped my hand in his without thinking, and he didn’t let me go. His hand was warm, rough like maybe he had a hobby that caused callouses. His grip was strong, and even though he wasn’t that much bigger than me, his hand felt twice the size of my own. After about twenty yards, my brain came back online.

“Um, where are we going?” It didn’t matter. I was going to go with him no matter where it was if it meant he kept holding onto me.

“My house.” That was unexpected.

My legs stretched to keep up with his longer strides. “Your house? Why?”

“I have food and an extra room. You can stay with me.”

I had to be dreaming. There was no way the man who had been nothing but angry with me was suddenly taking care of me like I was precious. None.

“Wait, what? You can’t stand me!”

The path we were on wound between the thick mass of trees that separated Zayne’s cabin from the rest of campus. It was well placed, the trees making it feel a lot farther away than it actually was.

Zayne stopped when we reached the steps that led up to his house. “I’ve been less than welcoming, I will admit that. I have... somethings to work through regarding my job, your position, this season... so many other things. But I have nothing against you personally, Ash.” The sincerity in his eyes made my stomach feel like I was dropping altitude rapidly.

Zayne kept hold of my hand and led me up the stairs and inside the house. It was warm, cozy, and much larger than my cabin. The interior was illuminated by soft sunlight that filtered in through the large bay window on the opposite side of the house. The upstairs had an open area with a railing that looked over the living room. It was like something you might see on one of those home-buying shows.

“This is... gorgeous.”

“Thanks. There are two spare rooms, plus an office, so plenty of space for the two of us.”

Us. Why did I like the sound of that? It didn’t mean anything, not really, and yet I still held onto the two-letter world.

I followed him into the largest kitchen I’d ever seen inside a house. He could easily prepare a meal for the entire staff in here. That was if he cooked. I knew so little about him.

There were two ovens and a massive island with a marble countertop, and once again, it reminded me of those house shows.

“Oh wow. I doubt this place would start on fire if I tried to make muffins.” I probably should’ve left off the last bit, but my guard was down, this side of Zayne one I rather liked.

He leaned against the counter and looked at me. I shuffled my feet, not meeting his eyes. What was there to say?

“Yeah, you’ll be fine if you decide to bake again.” He chuckled and then got suddenly serious. “Listen, I’m sorry that I’ve been so standoffish, Ash. I’m sorry that your first few days were not welcoming. I’m sorry I was a dick. I have a whole lotta sorry in me. I never wanted to make this job difficult for you.”

Holy Feathers. Those were not the words I was expecting to hear.

“But you don’t want me here.” That was fact. Or at least I thought it was.

“On the contrary. I do want you here. I hate that I need help with leading the team. I hate that I seem to have lost my ability to do my job effectively, to be a good leader. I

hate that I wasn't who they needed me to be." He sucked in a long breath. "I think you'll do well for the team."

"Then why the cold shoulder?" Zayne was nothing if not confusing.

He stepped closer to me, until the heat of him brushed over my skin. His touch was intoxicating, and I wanted to lean into it. Being this close to him meant that his scent, which reminded me of flying low over calm waters, hit me full force.

"Can't you feel it, Ash? Can't you sense what our beasts are telling us?"

"Yes," I whispered. I thought it was only me and refused to listen to my eagle, but now that he said the words out loud, I was ready to accept them, to embrace them.

"I can, too. And it terrifies me." His gaze roved down my face, lingering on my lips. I licked them, and Zayne groaned. He reached out and cupped my cheek. "I'm terrified of what this means."

"I thought this was just attraction at first. I never thought that... I thought I just—"

"I knew. I knew it when you walked into my office. I knew it when I saw you this morning at class. You're my mate, Ash."

"Yes," I breathed. Then his lips crashed down on mine.

Zayne was my mate.

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Chapter 7

Zayne

The taste of Ash exploded on my tongue when I coaxed his lips open and deepened our kiss. My hand went to the back of his neck, and I held him against me. He leaned into me. His chest flush with mine and the heat of our bodies mingling.

My thumb brushed over the silky-smooth skin of his cheek, and he shuddered against me.

“Zayne,” he whispered.

“Yes, mate?” Gods, I loved the sound of that. Loved the taste of him. How I had I lasted this long without him?

“Is this real, or did I get electrocuted this morning and this is just a dream?”

I chuckled softly. “It is real, mate. If you want it. We can slow down. We can just talk—”

We needed to talk, there was no denying that. But for now? Now I wanted my lips, teeth, tongue, hands, and cock to do it for me, not my words. My mate seemed to feel the same way.

Ash’s lips slammed down on mine, cutting off my words. If I had any doubt that he felt it too, that was long gone. He pushed at my shoulders until I was pinned against

the cabinet. This wasn't a shy, meek omega—he saw what he wanted and he took it. Gods, that was hot.

He tugged at the shirt I wore until it was untucked from my pants, and then his hand was pressing against my bare skin. His touch lit a fire under my skin. I needed more of him. I needed everything.

I nipped at his lips, and he hissed in a breath.

“I do want this, Zayne. I didn't let myself even think it. I was going to ignore this attraction. But I've wanted you from the moment I saw you.”

My heart pounded in my chest. This was the bond between mates. More real and powerful than anything I'd ever felt before. Fuck, how cold had I been to this wonderful man who was mine. He was to be treasured and cared for, not ignored. I had a lot to make up for.

“The bond between mates cannot be ignored. Ash, I'm sorry... I should have—” So many things.

He put a finger to my lips. “Show me with your body, Zayne.”

That I could do.

I swept Ash into my arms and continued to kiss him as I walked him through my house to the primary bedroom, the one I hoped we would share from now on.

When I came upon him looking so dejected and hurt, I didn't think before I acted. He needed a place to stay, and I had one. But then his hand slipped into mine or mine into his, I wasn't even sure which anymore. It didn't matter, all that did was the way his skin felt against my own and how it changed everything in that split second. I was

no longer able to deny to myself who he was to me, and containing it? Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

Once inside the bedroom, I set him down, and we pulled apart long enough for us to remove our shirts. Ash was all toned muscles and smooth skin, while my body was more buff and my chest coated in hair. He ran his hands down my chest, each caress telling me more than our words had been able to.

Ash leaned forward and pressed a kiss to one pec, then the other. His mouth traveled downward until it latched onto my nipple.

My cock grew hard, and I pushed down the track pants I wore and kicked them across the room. This was really happening. Ash was mine and I was his.

While Ash laved at my nipple, I began to explore his body more thoroughly. My hands roved over his shoulders, his chest, until I reached the lean line of his hips. I worked my hand underneath the waistband of his pants until I found what I was looking for. My mate's cock was long, hard, and hot beneath my hand. He wanted this every bit as much as I did.

Ash hissed at the touch. The sounds he made while I jerked him had my own cock leaking. I had no idea it could be this good, and I never wanted this moment to end.

"Slow down." Ash clutched at my shoulders. "I want you inside me before I come, and I'm already so close."

So was I.

As much as I wanted to see him come undone just by my hand, watch as he blew his load over my body, I knew my dragon wouldn't be satisfied until I claimed Ash in the most primal of ways. There would be more time for other play later. Lots more time.

“You know what that will mean, Ash?” I refused to mark my mate without his permission, and asking while I was balls deep wasn’t consent.

He nodded. “I’ll be yours.”

“And I’ll be yours. We’ll be mates, Ash. Forever.”

“And always.”

The smile that lit up his face spurred me on. My mate wanted this just as I did.

I lifted him up and put him so that his head was cushioned by my pillow. He leaned to the side and inhaled deeply before wiggling his head on it. He was getting my scent on him, and my dragon roared at the sight of it.

“You picked me up like I was nothing.” He pulled his bottom lip in with his teeth and then added, “It was hot.”

My mate was smaller than me, but he wasn’t a little thing, and thankfully, my dragon strength came in handy. Ash spread his legs for me. The slick that dripped from his hole told me just how much he wanted this. He was so ready for me.

I covered his body with my own. We were chest to chest, face to face. Every inch of our exposed skin touched. Our heat and our scent mingled together to make one.

The feeling of this connection overwhelmed me for a few seconds, and all I could do was savor it. Nothing else remained but our flesh touching and our scents dancing together.

And then he wiggled beneath me, his moan pulling me back to the present.

I kissed him while I reached between his legs. He lifted his knees, giving me access to where he wanted me most. When my fingers found his hole, it was warm with slick and pliant under my touch. It didn't take me long until I had two fingers worked inside him. Meanwhile his mouth never left mine.

“Fill me up, Zayne.”

He bucked his hips.

“Fuck. I need you.”

If he kept going like this, I was going to be the one coming too soon.

“Breed me. Make me yours.”

The heat that filled me at his words felt like the sun burst inside my chest, sending flames of liquid lust down my spine and into my limbs. There would be no denying him, even if I wanted to, which I didn't.

My cock ached with my need to be inside him, to spill my seed deep in his body and mark him as my own. To fill him with my cock and seal us together the way our lives would be one after this.

“You're sure?” I needed to make sure. I don't think I could handle it if he regretted a single moment of this.

Ash's legs locked around my waist, and he urged me forward. “Fuck yes, mate. Now. Fill me with your seed. I want it to brand me from the inside out.”

I could not deny what my mate needed.

As I pushed into him, Ash sucked in a breath and buried his face into my shoulder. The muscles of his channel tightened around me. I went slow, allowing Ash to adjust to my size. His eyes fluttered open and his gaze locked on mine.

Then his hips rolled upward, drawing me in deeper. His hands clutched at my back. I followed his rhythm.

“Fuck, just like that, Zayne. More, more!” He kept on babbling, his words incoherent but his message loud and clear.

I smiled and kissed him. My mate knew what he wanted and took what he needed. I moved, slow at first, but quickly building up speed until I was pounding into him. Ash’s moans filled the air, and his hard cock leaked.

Our breath quickened as we moved as one, our bodies undulating in sync with one another. I couldn’t get enough of him, the way his muscles flexed and moved. The way his abs contracted each time I thrust into him. He looked up at me with such desire that it took my breath away.

“Come for me, mate. Breed me,” he urged. And I came undone.

Finally, I couldn’t hold back any longer. With one powerful thrust, I spilled my seed deep inside Ash. He was my mate. Mine. My cum marked him as such, my knot filling him, keeping us together.

Ash’s body trembled with pleasure and then he too was coming. His own cum coated our stomachs.

I pulled Ash close, holding him tightly while we both came down from our orgasmic high.

“That was...” His words fell away and were replaced with slow, patterned breathing as he drifted off to sleep.

“Sleep well, my mate.” I kissed his brow and rolled us over until he was on top to avoid him feeling mushed and covered us with a blanket.

I listened to his soft snores until my knot subsided and then eased him onto his side. He snuggled into me, becoming my little spoon as he napped. My body longed for sleep, too, but my dragon and I were enjoying this peaceful time with out sleeping mate.

When I woke up this morning, there’d been no way I could’ve predicted the way it would turn out. Heck, my sorry ass did everything to ensure it didn’t, with the way I acted at work. But fate seemed to always have a way, and now here I was holding my always and forever in my arms and we were about to start our lives together.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, and allowed myself to finally fall asleep in the only place I wanted to be—with my mate. The rest of the world would still be there when we woke—we still had to work together, to bring out team to victory, but now we were doing it together as mates, and the world looked a whole lot brighter.

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Chapter 8

Ash

The first time I walked into this room, I had been so anxious, worried that I'd made the wrong decision by coming here. This time, I walked in, hand in hand with my mate, feeling like I was on top of the world. Whatever lay in store for us next, we were in it together.

"That was incredibly quick work." Hayden gave a knowing smile. Had Zayne and I been the only ones not to fully realize the connection between us?

When he met me at my house and took my hand, my life changed. Suddenly it was no longer me against the world, it was us. There was no better feeling in the world, except maybe the feel of his knot filling me.

Which I hadn't had enough of in the short time we'd been mated.

Zayne and I were seated in the conference room we had used in the past to go over our curriculum plans with Hayden and Kellen. Now we were all in here with the Flight Commander, going over an entirely different topic—one I much preferred, despite the awkwardness.

Based on the shocked expressions on most of their faces, it was a surprise to them—maybe not the fact that we were mates, but the fact that we got over our bullshit so quickly.

“Well, I’m sure all of you sensed some of the tension between us,” Zayne said, and everyone but the Flight Commander bit back their laughter.

Zayne’s hand was laced into mine, resting on the table in front of us. My mate was the tactile type—not something I had expected from him, but I appreciated it; it showed me that I wasn’t alone in this, that he was with me 100%.

Looking back, I didn’t think we had spent much time in the past twenty-four hours not touching one another. I wanted that to continue for years to come—a lifetime, even.

“It was impossible not to. At first, I assumed you didn’t like each other, considering Ash was basically here to take your job,” Kellan said, “but then...” He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to, Hayden nodding his head in agreement and the Flight Commander looking a bit more perplexed than he had been when we first called the meeting. “Glad you two finally... connected.”

Hayden’s eyes widened, and he smacked Kellan on the shoulder.

“What?” Kellan said. “We were all thinking it. No offense, Zayne.”

Zayne chuckled. “None taken.” It wasn’t like it was an illogical conclusion to jump to.

“So now you’re mates?” Hayden said. “Congratulations, obviously, but what does that mean for the team?”

That was the question of the day. My ideal would be that we were partners in all things, including continuing our jobs as Co-Leader, but if that wasn’t what the school thought best, I’d step aside and let him take over. He worked so hard to get here and coming in and snatching it from him wasn’t going to happen. If us being mates meant

I was done with this part of my life, I'd gladly let it go.

"I suspected that we were mates the moment I met him. Though I didn't know how to say anything. When I ran into Ash after class the other day, well, I couldn't wait any longer to find out." Zayne lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. If I didn't have on my most professional demeanor, I would've melted into a puddle of goo.

"Oh, goodness," Hayden said. "I think this is amazing."

Commander Emmon smiled wide. "Never thought I'd see the day, Zayne. Not going to lie, you struck me as the bachelor-for-life type."

Zayne wiggled in his seat and cleared his throat. "I had always hoped for a mate, and I'm happy to have found Ash."

"Me too." I smiled at Zayne, and he smiled back at me.

"Boo," Kellan said. "If you two are going to make moony eyes at each other all season, this is going to be rough. I might prefer the two of you being at each other's throats."

Zayne crumpled up a paper from the pad in front of him and tossed it at Kellan. "Don't be jealous."

Being ever the professional, Kellan stuck his tongue out in reply. It was tiny moments like these that reminded me how well this group in front of me knew each other. I was still the newbie.

"We are happy for you," the Commander said. "And I think a celebration is in order, perhaps with the entire staff. This is unprecedented. We've never had a mated pair on the same flight team, let alone as Co-Leaders. Perhaps we should look into separating

the two of you.”

My body froze, words refusing to form. I understood why he was saying it, and I knew it was a very real possibility even before we stepped foot in here. That didn’t make them any less terrifying.

“No,” Zayne said, his hand gripping mine tighter. “I think we’ll be fine—I know we will. Ash’s ideas are great for the team, and they already like him. He stays.”

That was a surprise to me. He had the opportunity to have his team back on his own, yet he wanted me to remain. Sure, I was willing to give up everything for him, but I wasn’t expecting him to feel as strongly about me.

We hadn’t talked about what things would look like going forward. I had been too afraid to bring up the subject. In hindsight, we should’ve, but we were too busy communicating in other, more physical ways.

“Ash and I can manage this. As long as Kellan, Hayden, and the team feel comfortable, we want to stay as Co-Leaders,” Zayne continued.

“Of course. Heck, we’ve been able to manage with the two of you not getting along. This should be amazing. If the two of you are mated, mates are immune to fights, right?” Hayden’s support meant a lot to me.

I chuckled. “Not sure that’s quite the case. I’m sure there will be plenty that Zayne and I will disagree on when it comes to the team, but we’ll listen to each other.” At least that was the plan. Being mated didn’t make the two of us less stubborn than we were before.

Zayne nodded. “Agreed. Commander, if you are not opposed to it, I think we should give it a try.”

The Commander's eyes widened, and he held up his hands in surrender. "It's your team. I'm not going to dictate how you do things. Definitely put together some rules and make sure that everyone is on the same page. You'll have to speak with your students as well."

That was going to be awkward. It was one thing to tell your coworkers you were mated, another to tell your students.

"Of course. That's our next thing to do." Zayne tightened his grip on me.

"I assume you'll no longer be needing your cabin, Ash?" Emmon asked.

"No, I've moved in with Zayne. It was out of commission for a while thanks to an electrical issue, so the timing is perfect." I winked at my mate.

"Is that how it is?" the Commander chuckled.

"Yeah, that's how it is," Zayne bantered back.

I didn't know a lot about their relationship, but it was nice to see how well they got along. There was so much about my mate's life before me, but it filled me with joy that he had people around him who cared about him, and everyone in this room fit that description.

"Perfect." Emmon clapped his hands once. "Now, if it happens that the two of you end up expecting, as is typical with newly mated couples, we can go over our leave policy."

My eyes widened. I had not thought of that. I mean, I had asked him to breed me but hadn't really put any thought to what being a parent and working would look like. It had been more dirty talk than anything. Or maybe it was my eagle asking for a

family.

Being mated to a dragon meant that I'd be laying eggs in a few weeks' time most likely. Their bodies had a different timeline than golden eagles, but being half dragon, I'd most likely have a dragon pregnancy.

My nesting instinct would kick in soon enough, and then I'd lay our eggs. Three months from now, we would have hatchlings. Oh, goodness. That thought was terrifying. How was I going to be a good enough father to dragons? It was only yesterday that I nearly burned my own cabin down.

Zayne let go of my hand and instead put his arm around the back of my chair, pulling me close. "We'll deal with that as it arises, Commander. For now, we're going to focus on the team."

"Of course," he said. "Like I said at the beginning, congratulations to the both of you. We'll be putting out a school-wide communication, and perhaps, if we can finagle it, we can have a staff outing to celebrate."

I liked the sound of that. It was very human, but humans had some great ideas. They had some shitty ones, too. But wedding celebrations, which was as close as they came to matings, I put up there with some of the best—they always included cake. You couldn't go wrong with cake.

"Thanks, Commander. We appreciate it." Zayne gave him a nod.

The Commander stood up and left the room, and then it was just the leadership team here. Hayden was still grinning like a fool as he looked at us.

"I can't believe this. Just days ago, the two of you seemed ready to go to blows, and then instead, you went a completely different direction." He was clearly amused.

“We were never that at odds,” I said.

“I suspected my attraction to Ash was more than just a physical thing pretty early on,” Zayne said. “Regrettably, I didn’t handle myself well at first. I thought by remaining quiet and processing in my own time, I was doing the right thing. Instead, I came off looking like a jackass.”

“You really did,” I teased.

“Thankfully, Ash has forgiven me.” Zayne kissed the top of my head.

I was still not used to the sight of his gorgeous smile. He’d spent so much time scowling when we first met, I was beginning to suspect he was one of those people unable to smile. Apparently, Kellan wasn’t used to the sight either, because he looked at Zayne like he had grown two heads.

“Oh, this is going to be weird.” Kellan smirked. “In a good way. It’s just... I’ve never seen you look like that, Zayne.”

I planned to make it my mission to have him smile like this every day. Heck, every hour.

“I have a feeling we are in for a whole new ballgame.” His hand dipped down, settling on my lower back.

“We’re not here for a ballgame.” Hayden stood up and walked to the whiteboard. “We’re here for the Flight Games, and I had an idea yesterday.” He grabbed a marker and suddenly we were back at work.

Things were different now. Zayne and I were no longer at each other’s necks, neither of us attempting some shitty pissing match to prove our worth. But that didn’t mean

that we agreed on everything. We didn't.

What we did do, was work with our team, tweaking Hayden's plan into what I thought might be the strategy that could take it all the way to the finals and walking away with the championship.

But at the back of my mind, not very far away, was that nagging feeling that I might be missing a good chunk of the practices, that the two of us were going to be parents. What had started as shock, and then nerves, had morphed into excitement and anticipation. There was the very real possibility that my mate and I were about to grow our family, and I couldn't wait.

Some things were more important than a job, and mates and family topped that list.

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Chapter 9

Zayne

It took me a long moment to pinpoint the exact feeling that had come over me in the past few days. Finally, I realized—it was optimism mixed with hopeful anticipation. It was a new feeling for me, and I was quite enjoying it.

Optimism for the future, for the flight team, for everything. With Ash by my side, it seemed as if I could do anything, like I was on top of the world.

Hopeful anticipation for whatever came next for Ash and me personally. We could be starting a family—we actually might have already begun. And even if we weren't, we were starting our lives together, and it was new, different, exciting. At four hundred years old, I wasn't used to the feeling. It had been a long time since I'd truly been looking forward to something. Being with Ash made me realize just how low I'd sunk into my funk.

Of course, we had our flight team to consider, and we needed to communicate the recent changes with them. Today was our first practice outside, and it was as good a time as any to broach the subject. They probably had already heard the rumors. It wasn't as if we were being secretive, but this would be their first time officially hearing it.

When we held our classes outside, we generally worked at the lakeshore, where there were a set of bleachers for the students to sit on and a platform where the teachers could instruct from. A small table was available for note-taking, and we also had a

tripod set up in case we wanted to film any of the practices. Sometimes, we liked to record the students flying so they could look back and learn from what they saw. All the footage had to be on an incredibly secure server to ensure it didn't get into the wrong—human—hands.

One thing the academy was great at was making sure the teachers had what they needed to do their jobs, and that included classroom spaces that were unconventional.

Today would be more about getting a feel for how the team worked together and also introducing the subject of Ash and me being mates than any real strategy formation. It was pretty likely that the students had already heard through the grapevine about the two of us. The school operated much like a small town where news traveled fast, especially when we weren't hiding it.

Once I stood up, the students went quiet. Scott and Christa sat at the front, as they usually did, setting a good example for the other three. Or at least that was the theory. There were times when they giggled or gazed into the distance—they were students, after all.

“Welcome, team. Today, we'll do a couple of outdoor exercises, and you'll have the opportunity to see me and your other instructors perform some maneuvers as well. But first, we need to talk about something.”

The students all scooted closer, perched on the edge of their seats as if I was about to deliver juicy gossip. Yeah, they for sure knew what we were going to say. They never paid this much attention to actual lessons. It would be fabulous if they did.

“After our class the other day, I spoke with Flight Leader Ash privately. The two of us discovered a few things.” A lot of things, and it wasn't exactly talking as much as mating, but that wasn't something we needed to be discussing. Being that all of my students were dragons—and the result of fated mates—I knew where their minds

would go as soon as I revealed that Ash was my mate. I didn't like them thinking about him in that way, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

"Oh my goodness, you're mates!" Scott didn't even pretend to let us deliver the news. "I thought you scented different, but I wasn't sure!" He clamped a hand over his mouth. "Sorry! I didn't mean to—"

I held up a hand. "That's quite all right. You are correct—Flight Leader Ash and I are, in fact, mates. This doesn't change anything about the leadership structure. He and I will still be leading this flight together." Ash stood next to me, always my equal, as we faced the group of students.

We were met with wide smiles and curious stares.

"Won't he have eggs now?" Jay asked.

Jay had a filter problem, or more accurately, a lack-of-filter problem. At first, I thought maybe he was going to be a problem, but now I saw it as it was—he was young and in need of guidance. This team was going to be good for him.

"He can speak for himself," Ash said, his tone calm. "And yes, it's quite possible that we will be expecting a clutch of eggs. We won't know for a few days."

I wanted to lace my fingers into his and offer him my touch, but I refrained. Ash and I discussed it, and we decided to try to keep our PDA to a minimum around the students. We knew better than to say it would be completely non-existent. That wasn't how shifters were, and had we gone to that extreme, not only would the students think it weird, but our beasts would revolt. Nobody needed that.

And the reality was, when we were in class, we needed to be a Flight Leader team first. I didn't love that arrangement, but it was important to Ash so the students saw

him as a Flight Leader first and my mate second.

“But, like... if you’re expecting, shouldn’t you, like, take time off? I mean, stress isn’t good for the eggs, is it?” Jay asked. He seemed ever hopeful that he wouldn’t have to deal with Ash as a Flight Leader, and once again, I was beginning to think that his lack of filter was more truth serum than being young. Gods, he was tiring.

I crossed my arms over my chest and fixed my gaze on the young dragon. He seemed to shrink as I stared at him. Good.

“That will be a decision that Flight Leader Zayne and I discuss together,” Ash replied. “We will make the best choice for our family at such time that it’s needed, and quite frankly, the decision doesn’t need your input.”

My mate wasn’t one to let others tell him what to do. I loved it.

“Exactly,” I added.

I already knew that Ash would continue to work as long as he was able and it was safe for the eggs. Most omegas worked while they were carrying unless there were complications or they decided to be stay-at-home omegas. Ash wanted to work, and I didn’t blame him. He worked so hard to be here. Giving it up because he found me and was carrying our young wasn’t fair to him.

“For now, things are going to proceed just like they would if we weren’t mated.” Only with less arguing than earlier.

Jay folded his arms over his chest and scowled. I would definitely have to look into what his deal was. And to think I’d let his previous comment slide, making excuses for him.

“So, on our first day of outdoor exercises, we usually like to do something a little fun. When we were in the classroom the other day, we got to know each other in our human forms. Now, it’s time to get to know each other in our dragon forms.”

“Except the eagle,” Jay said.

I shot him a glare, and the smug attitude on his face washed away. “Yes, except the eagle, who will likely be flying circles around all of you.”

One thing Ash and I hadn’t done yet was fly together, and I was really looking forward to it. Ideally, we’d have done it in private, the two of our beasts getting to know each other, but the timing didn’t work out, and here we were. We planned to head out and spend a day, just the two of us, enjoying the nature around us and taking to the air soon. It was going to be fantastic.

The four of us got ready to take our beasts, the team acting as the spectators. We’d shown them parts of the routine and described how we would accomplish them, but they were going to be pretty in the dark when it came to what our presentation was going to represent. It had been an idea sparked by my mate, and it was going to floor them.

Starting first with the trainers, then with my mate, and finally me, we got into position. We stood in formation ready to take to the air. We’d planned this in very intricate detail, wanting to show our team what they could do. It was a dance in the sky. And that wasn’t what it was officially called, but that was how Ash described it when he came up with the idea, and he was right.

Ash began our performance, flapping his wings as he stood on the ground, giving us the tempo. His wingspan was mammoth compared to the size of his body. His feathers caught the light just perfectly, and you could see the subtle movements in them as they moved so gracefully.

I counted in my head, “1-2-3-4, 2-2-3-4-, 3-2-3-4-, 4-2-3-4,” and then up Hayden and Kellen went, making a big circle around the field. One, then two, then three of them. And that was when it was my turn to go up. I took to the air and went through their circle, over and around them, making a flower, petal by petal in the air.

Once I was completely around their circle, that was when my mate joined us. He came through as their circle got smaller and smaller and “plucked” the petals from the flower one at a time, following them down to the ground.

Of course, there were no actual petals, but the imagery was going to be there, at least. I hoped it was. We’d find out when we checked the cameras after the routine was over.

One by one, we landed, with my mate perching on my head. That had not been in the plan, but it thrilled me to no end. He was my mate and having him this close to me had my dragon wishing he could purr, but it was more than that. It showed the team that he wasn’t less-than, something that might visually be perceived if he was standing on the ground with my beast towering over him.

The team stood up, and their jaws dropped. Christa began to clap first, followed by the others. Even Jay joined in. We shifted back into our skin, grabbed our robes, and went over to them.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Christa began.

Her co-captain nodded along and added, “That was like when I was little, and I picked daisies with my mom and my grandma, and one by one, we plucked the petals watched them flow to the ground as we made our wishes.”

They got it.

They saw it for what it was.

Ash's plan worked.

I grabbed my mate's hand, not caring that we were at work, and gave it a squeeze. This season we were going to do it, we were going to nail it. We had this.

For the first time since last year's horrible finish, I truly believed that we could do this. Ash had not only brought skill and amazing technical abilities with him, but he'd also brought creativity we'd been lacking. No, not we—me. I'd been lacking, and my trainers went along with it. No more. Now that we had Ash, the four of us were going to work together to highlight the best we each had to offer. We were going to give our students everything they needed to thrive.

This season was going to be epic.

Chapter 10

Ash

I stood under the warm spray, letting the water cascade down my shoulders and loosen the muscles there that ached. The day couldn't have gone better if it had been orchestrated by the dragon gods themselves. When Hayden recognized what my vision had been, it was all I could do to blink back the tears. My routine had been a big risk, and it paid off. They were all on board—even Jay. At least, I thought Jay was. He tended to go back and forth. I chalked it up to youth.

Our team accepted Zayne and me as mates without batting an eye—mostly. Jay seemed to have a hang-up where I was concerned, probably some internalized prejudice toward other species, or perhaps it was just because I was an omega. Either way, he wasn't outwardly rude to me, and until he was, I couldn't do much except my job. I knew the other leaders saw his behavior as well, so I wasn't imagining it.

At his age, it was probably residual from his upbringing. There were a lot of dragon families that had this feeling of superiority over all others, especially those without scales. If he'd been surrounded by that his entire life, it was going to take a while for him to see that and make the decision to change. Having me as one of his Co-Leaders was probably a good thing for him, even if it was a pain in the ass for me.

The rest of the team had been excited, not only by what they saw but by what we told them was to come. They loved Zayne and were happy for him and me. And Hayden especially was thrilled at the direction we were taking the team. With that kind of buy-in, there was no stopping us this season.

After our outdoor practice, the team had hit the gym for conditioning. That was where my perfect day began to unravel. Oh, I'd had a lot of fun, but getting into a weightlifting competition with young dragons was not the best idea—not when you were an eagle, anyway. I knew halfway through that I was going to be paying for my competitive nature later that night.

After the gym, I went to the childcare classroom we had on campus. As part of my onboarding, I needed to shadow each of the different types of services we offered. Plus, I wanted to learn more about the childcare options available to the people that worked at the school. As far as I knew, I wasn't expecting yet, but now that it had been brought up, it was all I could think about.

I was not disappointed in the program. The teachers were amazing, and the children were a delight. The facilities were fabulous, and it was included in our compensation package. It was the best of all worlds.

Chasing the kiddos around was more exhausting than the bench-pressing competition Scott and I had gotten into. It was also a lot more fun. There was something so magical about their giggles of joy.

Now, I was ready to go home and unwind with my mate for the rest of the day. Unwind meaning taking a long hot shower and snuggling with him until I fell asleep. I was bone tired, and I couldn't think of a better way to end my day.

Unfortunately, a young dragonet named Violet had different plans. She insisted that I be the one to spoon-feed her purple Jello, even though she could use a spoon very well on her own, something she was quite proud of. Kids were hilarious like that.

When her belly was full, she proceeded to smear the Jello into my hair as if it was the most delightful game she'd ever played. Had it been someone else's hair, I may have agreed with her.

In her defense, it did look a lot like fingerprint. And despite me being tired and sticky, we had a lot of fun. I needed to catch a shower before I went home, or all the bugs were going to be coming around.

I went back to our office, grabbed some spare clothes, then hit the locker room showers, letting the steamy water cascade over me. It was delightful.

“You were amazing out there.” The sound of my mate’s voice echoed in the showers, and I jumped.

I put a hand over my beating heart and leaned against the tiled wall to catch my breath. I knew I wasn’t at home and behind a locked door, but it still startled a full year of life out of me having him come in like that. For a badass dragon, he sure was quiet and stealthy as a cat.

“Did I scare you, mate?” Was he serious? I’d just been high-jump worthy.

I laughed. “Yeah. I thought everyone had left.”

“They did. We’re alone here.”

The hunger in his eyes had my cock stiffening. I was on full display for him. Naked as the day I’d hatched. Meanwhile, he wore a pair of track pants and nothing else. His feet were bare and so was his chest.

The steam obscured my view more than I’d have liked, and I instinctively moved closer to him.

The air turned thick with tension and the anticipation of what would happen next. We shouldn’t even be considering this. We were in a locker room for goddess’s sake—a shared space where anyone could come in at any time. Plus, it was inappropriate to

use the team's locker room in such a way. Right?

"I put the sign up that says the room is closed for cleaning."

"Oh." My smart mate, thinking of everything. "That sort of ruins the thrill of being caught, don't you think?" I wasn't so sure it would've been a thrill, but I was glad not to find out.

He let out a low growl. "I will take no chances at anyone seeing my mate in that way. That's for me only."

And just like that the electricity between us was back. I loved it when he was all possessive and protective like that. It was hotter than his flame.

Zayne crossed the room and pinned me against the wall, his body flush against mine. The scent of him enveloped me, and I melted against him, pliant against his demands.

"I watched you in the gym today. Your body is a work of art, Ash." He nuzzled into my neck, kissing my wet skin and licking at the water droplets.

My eyes fluttered closed. "Oh fuck. How can you turn me on so fucking fast?"

"It's a gift." Zayne's hands trailed down my body and settled on my waist. "Any special requests, mate? I'm dying to make you feel good."

He cornered me in the shower, made sure we weren't disturbed, and asked me what I wanted? I didn't deserve this man.

"Anything. Anything you want." I turned my head, hoping to capture his mouth, but he moved away.

I whimpered with need.

“What do you want? Specifically. I’m here to serve you.”

Oh fuck. That shouldn’t have been so hot. Something in his gaze told me that I needed to be honest and direct.

“On your knees. I want you to suck me off.”

His eyes flashed, and for a moment they looked like the eyes of his dragon. Then he dropped to the floor without hesitation. Again, I was pushed against the wall, this time with his hands on my hips, holding them firmly. He nuzzled his face into my groin.

“Even freshly clean, you smell like you. Pine and morning rain. You’re so fucking perfect, Ash.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he was the perfect one, but then his mouth was on my balls. He drew them into his mouth one by one, his tongue teasing my sack. It was a sensation I’d never experienced before and amped up my desire in a way that shocked me and had my knees ready to give. If his hands hadn’t been on my hips, I might easily have ended up on the shower floor.

Pleasure shot through me, radiating down my limbs like an electric current as he continued his worship with his mouth. Zayne dove in with the same intensity he put into everything else.

He let my balls drop from his lips and then he moved to the base of my cock. His lips pressed against the base and his tongue laved at my hard length.

“Zayne...” I breathed. I reached down to thread my fingers into his hair, then stilled. I

held my hips steady, even as his grip loosened, not wanting to buck into his face.

“Let yourself go, love. I can take all of you.”

He worked his way up my length and kissed the tip of my cock before swallowing the whole thing down in one quick motion. His gaze met mine. Water droplets coated my lashes, and the spray hit his face. I etched the image into my memory. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

His eyes told me he wanted me to let go completely, and he gave me a slight nod. Zayne hummed around my length.

I couldn’t stop my hips from thrusting, even if I wanted to. It felt too good, my brain no longer in control. My cock slid deeper into his mouth. His eyes rolled back in pleasure. He kept his mouth open and let me fuck his mouth. No. Not let me, encouraged me.

Gripping his hair, I held him still while I worked my cock in and out of his mouth. His tongue swirled around my length. In and out I went, my mate making sexy sounds of pleasure with each movement, his own cock pushing his wet track pants into a tent.

Then he was drawing me in deeper, so deep I feared I was going to choke him.

“Zayne, I’m so close, baby. So fucking close.”

“Come for me. Come on me.” His words were mumbled as he spoke around my cock, and they hit me like a command, my body reacting accordingly. I slipped from his mouth and instead of thrusting back inside, he gripped the base of my cock and began to stroke.

I came with a shout, covering him with my cum.

As I came down from my orgasm, I nearly collapsed from the intensity of it. Zayne helped me sink to the floor. We held each other under the warm spray for a long while.

I reached for him, ready to return the favor, but he stopped me with a laugh. “No need, mate.”

I arched a brow. “Really?”

“Really. Good thing we’re already in the shower.”

I laughed and rested my head against his shoulder. “I just wish we were home.”

He helped me to my feet and together we washed the spend from our bodies. I wished my cum could linger longer on his skin and perhaps soak in to mark him as mine.

“I feel the same, mate.”

“Did I say that out loud?” How embarrassing.

“No, but I can read it on your face. I have similar thoughts about marking you. Some day I want to fill you full of my cum and then plug your ass so it stays there all day, then later I’ll unplug you and fill you all over again.”

That should not have sounded sexy, but fuck me, it was.

Desire shot through me and my cock hardened again. I groaned against him. “Zayne. You can’t say that when we’re supposed to be cleaning up. We’ll never leave this shower.”

He grinned. “How about I race you home and we can resume there?”

I didn't even pretend to put my clothing on or to dry off, instead padding out the back door and instantly taking my wings. I had the advantage in this, my shift able to happen without reaching a clearing. I was going to beat him home and then greet him with my mouth exactly where he wanted it most.

Chapter 11

Zayne

For the first time in years, I was excited. Never before had my team shown so much promise after just a week of training. They were working hard, sure, but it was more than that. They were excited about the season and ready to really amp up their game.

Not only were they slaying it as a team, but I'd met with their other teachers at the school, and the students were all staying on track with their other studies. For the returning students, multiple instructors said it was their best academic year yet. I couldn't be more proud.

There were times when I had students who only wanted to be there for the games and had no desire to learn anything else. A lot of times. But that wasn't how things worked around here. It was more like the human college version—their studies were important and would help shape the rest of their lives, and without passing grades, they couldn't compete. Looked like that wasn't going to be a worry this year.

The only concern I had was for Jay, but he had not done anything that raised a red flag big enough to take action. Every time he said something he shouldn't, all it took was a glance or a sentence and he stopped. I wanted to be wrong about him, and had almost convinced myself I was early on, but I couldn't pretend anymore. Sure, it was just an inclination I had that perhaps his attitude wasn't fully accepting of Ash, either as an eagle, an omega, or both, but I trusted my gut on this one.

I didn't love that he thought that way about my mate, and that alone was an issue. But

it went far beyond that. An attitude like that was going to negatively impact his future, and as his teacher, that ate at me.

As great as everything was going, it wasn't perfect. Ash and I had been so busy with classes, him getting acquainted with the school as a whole, and me making sure all things were in order, that the two of us had had no time to simply slow down and enjoy ourselves. Our picnic slash day of flying still hadn't materialized, and most nights we ended up eating dinner late and falling straight into bed, not always to sleep right away. It was great, but this go go go wasn't sustainable. Not in the long run.

Before being mated, I'd spend my entire weekend studying flying footage, analyzing new formations we could try, and figuring out what we needed to practice. My life was work, work, and more work. It was great for the team, until it wasn't.

The weekend was about here, and we hadn't discussed plans. Perhaps my mate would want to do something different than all work, because... he understood life better than I did when it came to that. My stomach twisted itself in knots as I thought about the weekend ahead where we had the time to ourselves and absolutely no plans. It shouldn't be so stressful, and somehow, I managed to make it so.

I arrived home first, put my laptop and things away in my office, then paced around the kitchen, waiting for Ash to arrive. He got here not long after me, his smile wide when he opened the door.

"Hey, how was your day?" he asked.

We'd had class together this morning, but since then, we hadn't seen each other. He had been shadowing the math department, and I'd been in meetings. I wasn't sure which was worse. Although the way Ash fit in with all the departments hadn't gone unnoticed. The staff loved him.

“Good. How about yours?” As good as meetings could get, anyway.

He toed off his shoes. “Good. I feel like there’s so much to learn and catch up on here. I spent two hours in the library picking out a few of the clan history books that I’d like to go over.”

In the short time we’d been together, I’d gathered that my mate was a voracious reader. He’d spent a lot of time inspecting my bookshelves. I was less so, but I did enjoy it from time to time.

I cleared my throat. “Any thoughts on dinner? Would you like to go out? I feel like I should—” No, that wasn’t a fair thing to say. I stopped myself, thinking over how I wanted to phrase my thoughts. I didn’t want him to think taking him out was a chore, even if I hated the thought of leaving my house after a long week of work. He’d mentioned a place he and his friend used to frequent before he moved here. Ash wasn’t like me. He enjoyed people-ing.

Ash beat me to it. “I thought we’d go over some of the footage we took this week, maybe talk about the team. I wouldn’t mind familiarizing myself with our past competitions as well. I watched footage before joining the team, but now that I know them better, I want to watch it again. The team from the Azurewing clan is going to be tough to contend with this year. Justine moved up from the lower division, and she’s pretty good. Unless... you don’t like to work on weekends?”

This wasn’t him being nice or trying to do what he thought I wanted to do. He had really thought about this and came up with this idea. We really were made for each other.

“No, that’s—honestly, that’s exactly what I would be doing if...” Sometimes I needed to think more before speaking. Sometimes I needed to think less. I was kind of a mess like that.

“If I wasn’t here?” Ash filled in, and I hated it.

“That’s not what I meant.” Even if it was what I’d been about to say.

Ash stepped forward and wrapped his arms around my middle. He pressed a soft kiss to my jawline. “I don’t need you to change anything about your routine for me. We’re building a life together. You don’t have to work around me. Tell me exactly what you’re thinking, and I’ll tell you what I’m thinking, and we’ll figure out where those two things overlap.”

“Talking isn’t easy.”

“It is if you trust that I’m not going to get upset or annoyed. I’m pretty low-key, mate, I promise.” He kissed my cheek. “How about now that I’ve told you what my thoughts were for this weekend that we finally have just the two of us, you tell me what your thoughts are?”

“I can do that... but you’re distracting me by being so close.” I pressed a kiss to his lips, letting my tongue explore. The kiss deepened. So much for talking.

He backed away, breathless, with a broad smile. “Easy there. That’ll come later.” He winked and adjusted his jeans.

“Like I said, I figured we would go over some footage, talk about our ideas for the team. You can work however you like to work, I’ll work however I like to work, and then we can toss ideas out there and see what fits—see how they align.” He was so much better at this communicating thing than I was. “I don’t need a special date or any sort of outing. I like to stay in. I love this place, and I feel at home here. We can do dates and travel during the off-season if we want, but right now we have a competition to plan for.”

I let out a breath. “Those were my exact plans. Then I started second-guessing, thinking perhaps we should do something else, go someplace else. I haven’t had to do this relationship thing before.” Waiting for my mate had always been my plan. I’d been beginning to think that would never be in the cards for me. I was so happy to be proven wrong on that.

“I’ll teach you.” He winked again. That wink was going to be my undoing. “Do you shift at all on the weekends? Go out flying?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Once I start thinking about formations I want the team to work on, I practice them myself. See how they feel, see what comes naturally, what doesn’t, find out if there’s any way I can help work them through it.”

He nodded. “Well, I can’t exactly do it that way, but I can fly. And soon, I’ll have a different set of wings.”

I raised a brow. “That’s right, you will. Do you feel any different?” I quickly glanced at his abdomen and looked away.

“You’re so cute when you’re shy and unsure,” he said. “I don’t feel any different, yet. I’ve been trying to see if maybe I sense something, but nothing so far. It’s very early, mate. I may not even be pregnant.”

I hated the look of disappointment on his face. “I know.”

“Would you like me to be feeling different?” Both hands were on his middle. We’d talked about the possibility of having kids few times, but we hadn’t talked about our feelings around it.

I nodded eagerly. “I can’t wait to build a family with you.”

“Me too. I still want to work, though, and coach. Our family will come first, of course, but I’m not going to not work. I hope you know that.” He grabbed the back of his neck. “The childcare here is amazing. It isn’t like we’d be choosing between quality care and home care.”

I wasn’t sure if that was him explaining it to me or if he was trying to convince himself.

“Only the best people have been hired for that department.” Which was mostly true for all of them, but doubly so there. “And I figured you would want to keep your job. You worked too hard to get here to have to start all over again.” I hesitated. “Maybe it’s time for me to retire. It’s not like I’m fresh out of school myself.”

He shot me a glare. “No, mate, it is not . I like working with you.”

“All right.” He hadn’t left room for argument, so I wasn’t going to give him one. Besides, I liked working with him too.

“You think about dinner—either takeout or if we want to make something, or... I don’t even care what we do as long as it consists of food. I’m going to go shower. I was combing through a lot of dusty books.”

“That sounds great. I’ll queue up some of the footage I have. We can put it on the big screen.” We had set up cameras in multiple locations with the hope of catching every move from different angles. It didn’t only matter what they looked like from the front, every single movement counted.

“Perfect.” He gave me another quick kiss and skipped into the bathroom.

“I think this is going to work out just fine,” I said to myself as I heard the shower turn on.

No part of me felt like cooking and even less of me felt like driving to town for food. I dug through the freezer and found a pizza. There was nothing delicious about it, but it would do.

Pizza in the oven, I cued up the footage and checked the timer. There was still 7 minutes left on dinner.

“Plenty of time.” I shucked my clothes on the way to the bathroom. “Knock, knock,” I called into the cracked doorway. “Any room in there for one more?”

“Only if that one more can reach the spot in the middle of my back that I keep missing,” he teased.

“That one more is the king of back scrubbing.” I walked into the bathroom and under the shower with him. “Fair warning, dinner will be ready in six minutes.”

“Six?”

“Yep. Six.”

“Then why aren’t you kissing me already—”

I reached behind his head and pulled him to me, giving him a searing kiss, one that was a promise of things to come.

Spoiler alert: I burnt the pizza. Totally worth it.

Chapter 12

Ash

The weekend was amazing. We worked, flew together, and spent a whole lot of time naked. I was pretty sure that I'd never get enough of my mate, and I was fine with that. The only downside of the weekend was that we did need to venture into town for groceries, but we bought a cake, so it wasn't that much of a downside.

As much as I loved my new job, Sunday night was hard for me because it meant the end of our alone time together. At least we were lucky and shared a job. We might not spend the entire day together, but we never spent them completely apart either.

But as much as I wished it weren't so, Monday was back to reality, and things were ramping up. While we had come a long way in a short period of time, there was still so much to cover. Zayne and I had written up a ton of notes from the videos we watched over and over again over the weekend. From a distance, the team was perfection. But the judges weren't looking at it from a distance.

That morning, we had presented our ideas to our flight trainers and gotten feedback from some of the other flight leaders at the school. Everyone was on board with the new the maneuvers Zayne and I had put together. It was a new direction for the team, but given how the last few years had gone, that was needed.

Zayne and I had done some flying together, testing them out. It was incredible to be in the air with him—his dragon form soaring alongside my eagle. We played too, but work had been our focal point.

How different would it be when my wings sprouted and I could fly with him in my human half-form? I was excited to find out.

“Any questions?” I asked the students after presenting the formation we were going to try this afternoon. “Or suggestions, even. This isn’t a dictatorship. You need to be on board with this if it’s going to work.”

All I got were blank stares. A moment of panic hit me. Was confusion normal? Did I explain it wrong? I glanced at Zayne, but he had the same confused expression I did.

“Was there something you all didn’t understand?” I asked.

“I can’t picture it,” Scott said. His forehead was scrunched in concentration. “Maybe if you show us?”

It was a fair ask, but also... he was looking directly at me—not Zayne, not Kellen, not Hayden.

“Mr. Holloway, you haven’t shown us your flying. Not since last week,” Christa chimed in.

I rolled my eyes. As if last week was so long ago.

“It’s going to be different with me in my eagle form than with you guys in your dragon forms. You know that, right?” They had to. It wasn’t a surprise.

“Yeah, but you said yourself last week that your bone structure isn’t all that different from ours. And any maneuvers you’re capable of, even in your smaller form, we should be capable of as dragons,” Christa was quick to point out.

Oh, goodness. Of course they were paying attention to that. There was no way out of

this one. If I had known I was going to be on display for this particular maneuver, I would have practiced it more. A whole lot more. Unlike our initial demonstration, these moves were pretty new to me, combinations that were unique—at least I hoped they were. None of us had seen them, so that was a good sign.

Never one to back down from a challenge, I simply nodded. “Of course.”

The maneuver that Zayne and I had choreographed for them was a tricky one. I didn’t blame them for wanting to see it. To do the maneuver, I would fly high in the air, and I’d make a sudden banking turn in which I tilted sharply to the side and dropped down in altitude as quickly as possibly before flipping back to move forward again. In theory, it sounded simple, but it could become disorienting if you weren’t used to it. It was meant to look as if I dropped straight down mid-flight.

And it was created for dragons. Their bodies worked differently than my eagle’s did, something I’d been reminded of frequently since my first shift. Growing up in a dragon family, it was hardly a secret. Would my body be able to handle the same disorientation that dragons did with swooping back up? Looked like I was about to find out.

“It’s going to look quite different with just me up there. When you’re all working together as a group, the plan will be for two of you to drop down, while the two below you move up.”

If they could pull it off, it was going to win the crowds over.

“Why doesn’t Flight Leader Zayne show us as well?” Christa suggested. “We can see it run in a two-person formation rather than a four, right?”

Of course, they wanted us to demonstrate a move we had just come up with over the weekend—one we pretty much had no time to practice—one that relied on having

similar body types to complete the intended illusion. I didn't think the two of them were trying for a gotcha, not the way the same comment by Jay might mean. This was them wanting to understand what we were asking of them, and the least we could do was to try.

"You know what would be really cool?" That was Jay speaking up. He tended to stay quiet while I was speaking, and on multiple occasions, I'd wondered if he tuned me out completely. I got the vibe that he didn't appreciate being taught by a non-dragon, but something in his voice sounded intrigued. At least I hoped it was intrigued and not that he was going to come out with another rude comment.

"What if we dropped something and caught it? Or passed an item between each other. That was something that the dragon legions used as a battle tactic way back when they were fighting demons."

I knew quite a bit about dragon history, but that was something I hadn't pieced together before.

Zayne's eyes lit up. "That's an excellent idea. I recall Commander Shane telling us about that when he visited last year. Good memory, Jay."

I could picture it then—a four-person team flying in formation, passing something between them. It would be incredible, something that hadn't been seen in competition in a long while, at least as long as I'd been aware of them. It would take a lot of practice to pull it off perfectly, though. Not that this routine wasn't already going to take a ton of practice.

"Right now, we don't have anything they could drop between them," Hayden said, scratching his chin.

"I've got a spoon from my lunch." Scott lifted it up.

To my surprise, Zayne reached out and grabbed it. “Sure. Let’s give it a shot.”

It was a tiny, white, plastic spoon—the disposable kind. We were supposed to pass that between us? It was tiny. Way too small for Zayne’s talons, yet he took it from Scott as if it was going to be easy as pie.

The more I thought about it, the worse the idea was. Plastic utensils tended to miss the garbage can, when students dumped their trays. They didn’t quite fall where you wanted them to thanks to their design. And they were fragile. More than once, I’d broken one stirring my yogurt and yogurt was hardly firm.

Zayne smirked . “You take the top.”

It was a challenge. He was challenging me. Suddenly I didn’t care how impossible the task was. I wanted to win, and I would. Game on.

“Sure thing, mate.”

We all went outside to our class space there. Inside had been great for watching the slides, but we needed a ton of room, and the building didn’t have it. The students and our trainers sat down while Zayne and I got ready. None of us were strangers to nudity, so we stripped off our clothes and shifted.

We took to the air. The nice thing about Zayne in his dragon form was that he could speak to me. It was something all dragons within the clan could do, and it was especially easy between mates. The first time he’d done it this weekend, I’d been shocked. I knew it was a thing. The dragons in my family used it all the time, but not me. Everything was silent... or had been.

We flew around for a while, getting warmed up.

“Are you ready, mate?”

I let out a short screech to let him know I’d heard him. I wasn’t able to talk back to him. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But he was great at understanding me, at least so far.

I had the spoon clasped in my talons. Such a silly thing to be passing between us, but if it worked, it would be epic. For the actual competition, we’d use something more aerodynamic, obviously.

“Two laps around. On the third, that’s when you drop, but wait for me. I’ll move up. That’s when you drop the spoon, and I’ll grab it. All right?”

Of course. Easy. So easy. Never mind that the two of us had only flown together a few times and we’d never practiced this. I wasn’t sure about him, but I’d never even attempted this—not with anyone. Yet, we were doing it with an audience and the expectation that we’d be able to master it quickly. More importantly than that, we needed to convince them they could do it, too.

If I had been in my human form, I’d have been sweating. Good thing I had my feathers on.

We lapped once.

Twice.

On the third time around, I prepared to dive.

“Now,” Zayne called out through my mind.

I flipped, careening downward, upside down. I let the spoon fall from my talons.

For a brief moment, I lost sight of Zayne. Then, as I righted myself, I saw him—his talons snapping around the spoon. He righted himself, and we were back in line.

Perfectly executed.

A round of applause, whistles, and cheers erupted from our students. We had done it. And if we could do it with this spoon, it was going to be achievable for the team.

We landed near the bleachers. The tiny spoon was absurdly small, clutched in Zayne's massive talons. How he didn't break it would forever be a mystery.

I let out a happy screech, thrilled that we'd done it.

"Thank goodness we got that on camera," Hayden said. "That looked perfect."

"Students, that's exactly how we want it to be done," Kellan said. The relief on his face spoke volumes. He hadn't expected us to pull it off any more than I had.

"Are you all ready to give it a try?" I asked as soon as I shifted to my human form.

"Maybe?" Christa stood up and took it from me. "There's only one way to know for sure."

She and her co-captain went first. It took them half a dozen tries, but they did it. From there everyone took turns, and Kellan became the sixth dragon team member so that everyone could have a go.

It was going to take a lot of practice and finding the perfect item, but they could do this. I was more confident of that than ever. The only thing left was finding the perfect item for them to use. It had to be visible for those watching, predictable when dropped, and strong enough to handle a dragon's talons. We'd figure it out, soon

enough. But for now, the plastic spoon would do.

“You did great up there, mate.” Zayne wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me closer to his side as we watched them practice. “Honestly, I’m not sure either of the trainers would’ve been able to do that.” He leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “I wasn’t sure I could either.”

“Same, mate. Very much same.” But we had, and now it was full throttle forward.

Chapter 13

Zayne

Ash and I walked back to our home after dismissing the students and having a short meeting with our trainers. It was earlier in the day than we usually left, but as wonderful as the practice was, it was exhausting. Rewarding, too, but it took a lot out of all four of us. I was pretty sure the trainers were heading for a nap.

Our little demonstration and the students' initial practice at the new maneuver definitely solidified our plans for our upcoming competition. Even if our young dragons didn't master the passing of an item between them, the maneuver was still impressive. I was pretty sure they could, though. They were determined. I wasn't sure if it was because they knew that Ash and I did it without practice and they wanted to prove they were as good as us or if it was so cool that they were itching to show it off. The reason didn't matter, only their desire to make it happen.

We could master the other aspects of it later and implement them in future competitions if need be—anything to give us the extra edge we needed. Even if Ash hadn't been my mate, I'd have been proud to have him as my Co-Leader. He was gifted in piecing maneuvers together and this was only one example.

"That was awesome." Ash squeezed my hand tighter, his excitement palpable.

"Honestly, I didn't think we would pull it off. I thought we'd get close, close enough to give the students the motivation they needed, but I never expected it to be so perfect. I want to watch the footage, see if we actually did it right, or if our form was

sloppy. I couldn't see well enough to tell."

And that was one of the reasons he was so good at this. He didn't take "good enough" as a result. He wanted it to be done right, to improve with each attempt, to grow.

"Me neither. I was too focused on getting that spoon." That spoon was actually in my front pocket, and I gave it a pat. It was a miracle the silly thing hadn't cracked between our talons and falling to the ground.

"Why do you still have it?" Ash asked. "It's in your pocket, right?"

"It is." I grinned. "You'll see." We reached our house and began walking up the steps. "I'll show you."

Once we were inside, we kicked off our shoes and tossed our stuff in the office. No more work for tonight, if I could help it. Part of working hard was knowing when you needed a break, and we for sure did.

"I don't feel like cooking," Ash said. "I'm too excited. Maybe we can buzz over to the cafeteria for dinner later?"

I didn't feel like cooking either. Or making sandwiches. Or going into town. That pretty much left the cafeteria as our only option.

"That sounds like a good plan. First, let me show you something. I know I gave you an initial tour of the house, but we didn't go too in-depth into some things. You might already be curious."

That caught his attention.

Ash still hadn't let go of my hand and now he gripped my forearm. "Is this about

your hoard? I've been wanting to ask, but we've been so focused on the team. And other things."

I grinned. The other things was us being in bed together. When we weren't working, we were exploring each other's bodies. It was a pretty sweet life, if you asked me.

"I have been extremely curious about what you hoard. I haven't noticed any signs of things you're drawn to. I thought maybe you didn't have one."

That surprised me coming from a half-dragon who grew up around dragons. Did some of his close friends and family not have one? There was a blip in time when it was "uncool" to have one, but then dragons had changed from hoarding gold and jewels to more mundane things. Mine was more mundane. Boring, even.

"Oh, I have one," I said, "but the items are small and can be easily tucked away." I sighed.

I thought I'd long since given up being embarrassed by the items that I hoarded. It wasn't a typical collection. It wasn't cool. It wasn't worth a bucket of money. In fact, it was rather outdated, making the pieces that I found these days few and far between and no more valuable.

"Consider me intrigued."

I pulled Ash into the spare bedroom. It had a small bed and a tall cabinet that held the entirety of my hoard—minus a few pieces I kept in storage and the few rare, really valuable ones that I kept locked in the safe in the basement. I opened the drawer, pulled out the first case, and opened it up.

"Oh, wow," Ash said as he looked over the items. "Collectible spoons. I did not see that coming."

How could he? I was an old dragon with a little-old-lady collection. Of course, when I started my hoard, it was simply spoons. Collectible spoons hadn't been a thing back when I got my first one, but when they came in style, my collection pivoted and morphed into a real hoard. How could it not? They were freaking fabulous.

My jaw tensed and I forced myself to relax. This was my mate. He loved and wanted me for who I was, not what my hoard did or did not contain.

“Yeah. It started small, I didn't even realize I was doing it until my brother and I were traveling together and we visited a market and he teased me for buying cutlery. Then in the 1880's when I was living in London and traveling a lot, the whole souvenir spoons became popular.” Other than my family, I'd never told anyone about this. “That was a great time. People would buy them on their travels. I collected so many of them. Most of my hoard is from that time. Then those became fewer and far between, less popular. Refrigerator magnets became the thing.”

I closed up the box and pulled out another and another, placing them on the bed and opening them up.

“They're all dated.” Ash's fingers brushed over the labels that were carefully placed underneath each spoon.

I nodded. “I have an entry book. I have them all stored in order of the time that I acquired them and when they were made. Some of them, I have some history on. I have a few in the safe downstairs. They are my most valuable pieces. Until today.”

He looked at me. “What happened today?”

I reached up to the top drawer and pulled out an empty case. It was a shadow-box style where I could nestle a spoon inside and have it on display. I pulled the plastic white one from my pocket and placed it inside.

“This... this spoon is my most treasured piece of my hoard now.”

“Zayne, you can’t be serious. It’s plastic.”

“I’m dead serious.” I met his eyes. “It is my most valuable. I have spoons made entirely of gold. I have one that’s completely encrusted with diamonds. But this... this is priceless.”

“Scottie ate with that today. You didn’t even wash it.” His words said one thing, but Ash’s eyes conveyed what this moment meant to him. He was blinking back tears.

I laughed. “I’ll wipe it down, then, if you insist. But there’s no reasoning with my dragon on this one, love. This is the pinnacle of my collection. I don’t know that there will be anything that will ever match it... unless, of course, we save our children’s first spoons.”

Which, let’s be honest, we would.

“I suppose those will be important.” Ash grinned and pulled me in for a kiss. “I’m honored to be a part of this collection. And now that I know what you hoard, I will be on the lookout. Is there anything particular that you and your dragon like?”

“Shiny ones,” I said.

“Then shiny is what I will find for you, my mate—anything worthy of you.” He pulled me into a hug and sank against my body.

“Thank you. I know it’s not glamorous. A friend of mine hoards diamond earrings. Another has a collection of ruby rings.”

Both of which sounded boring to me. Good thing dragons didn’t all like the same

thing; it made building your hoard easier.

“Yes, and there are others that collect ties or board games. Your collection is yours. It’s unique to you, and I love it. Thank you for sharing it with me, Zayne.”

“Thank you, mate.”

“You know what?”

I looked at him and shook my head.

“I think that today calls for more than a school dinner. Why don’t we shower and head into town? We can grab dinner.” He snuggled in closer, inhaling deeply.

“You mean go on a date like humans do?”

He looked up at me. “Exactly. They get some things right.”

“Oh yeah, and what would those some things be?” I asked, the tiredness from the day suddenly gone.

“I’ll show you.”

He popped in the shower as I put my hoard away, and I joined him as he was finishing. He stayed with me, washing my hair and back and everywhere, paying extra close attention to the places I was extra dirty—or had extra dirty thoughts, at least.

“Dinner first.” He drove and went straight to a chain restaurant that was supposed to be like a “local neighborhood bar.”

“Really doing up this human date thing, aren’t you?” I teased.

“You have no idea.”

Dinner was fine. The place was loud and had televisions everywhere, but the company was great, you couldn’t go wrong with a burger, and they had cake for dessert. It wasn’t someplace I’d long to come to out of the blue, but we had a nice time, but through all of it, my anticipation was building. This was only the first part of our date, and I was beyond curious as to what the second half would contain.

I had a lot of ideas floating through my head, but none of them were the two of us going glow bowling. In all my years, it was something I’d never done. It didn’t look too hard. The ball was big, and the pins were set up similar to dominos. Or so I thought.

“If you step over this line, it will automatically give you zero points no matter how many you knock down,” he explained. “The scoring is 100% automatic here.” He pointed to the screen above us. “Want me to show you how?”

“Nope. I got it.” I picked up the green ball I’d picked and attempted to put my fingers inside. They were too small. Instead, I cradled the ball in front of me and walked up to the line, rolling the ball down the lane in an attempt to prove I really did “got it.”

I very much did not. The ball inched down the alley and straight into the gutter.

“That’s okay. You get another turn.” He picked up his ball and his fingers went right inside. “And if you want pointers, I got you.”

It was time to concede. “I would love some. This is harder than it looks. Doesn’t help my fingers are too big for the balls.” That was when I learned that the balls were in all weights and hole sizes. Once I found the right one, it was game on.

My mate still kicked my ass, but at least my gutter balls were few and far between. We laughed and laughed the night away.

“That was wonderful.” We climbed into the car. “Thank you for taking me out. I didn’t realize I needed that.”

“I know something else you need.” He settled his hand on my thigh and started inching it up. “When we get home, I’ll show you exactly what it is.” He leaned in close, “It requires both of us being naked,” and nipped my earlobe.

Best. Mate. Ever.

Chapter 14

Ash

Nausea hit me the moment that I woke up. Of course I knew what it was instantly. At least I hoped I was right. I'd been waiting for a sign, any sign that would tell me if I was expecting a clutch of eggs, and now I had it. I couldn't wait to grow a family with my mate.

My joy was overshadowed by my inability to talk through the violent regurgitation that wracked my body. Every time I opened my mouth, my stomach seemed to revolt, and I threw up more. It was to be expected, and everything I knew about pregnancy told me it meant that the pregnancy was healthy. And as much as I hated it, that thought got me through.

I'd been in the bathroom for at least twenty minutes, every time I thought I was good to go, I was proven wrong. As gross as it was watching and hearing and smelling someone puke, my mate sat on the floor next to me, rubbing my back, offering what little comfort he could. Not once did I sense even a smidgeon of disgust rolling off of him. He left briefly to retrieve a glass of water and a warm towel for my head, but aside from that, he was glued to me.

"We have to get to work," I finally managed to choke out. "The team has endurance training with Kellan today."

"Our class isn't until this afternoon," Zayne said. "Kellan can handle it on his own."

As much as I hated to leave him in the lurch, that was music to my ears.

“Oh, thank goodness.” I rested my head against the cool wall, taking deep, gulping breaths. Thank goodness we kept our bathroom clean and that it had tile everywhere. There was such comfort in the coolness they held.

“Are you all right, mate? Do you need anything? Let me take care of you.”

It was weird because I felt sick as a dog, while at the same time being better than all right. Knowing the cause of my stomach woes meant our dreams were coming true was everything.

“Fresh air, I think. Maybe something to settle my stomach.” I wasn’t quite so sure on the second part. We’d find out soon enough.

Zayne helped me to my feet. His eyes widened when he looked down at me. I followed his gaze, expecting to see nothing unusual, but my usually flat stomach bulged like I had eaten too much.

“Oh, wow,” I said. “That was unexpected.” And so very quick. No wonder my body was in such turmoil. Things were progressing very quickly.

“No kidding,” Zayne said. “You look great.”

I laughed. “I just spent the morning vomiting, and now I look like I indulged in too many tacos. I look far from great.”

“Shh. No one is allowed to talk about my sexy mate like that.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off with a shake of his head. “I mean it. You’re amazing.” He placed a gentle hand over the roundness of my stomach. “Those

are our eggs in there, yours and mine. You're absolute perfection."

"I appreciate your vote of confidence." I also appreciated his steady legs, because mine were shaking uncontrollably. I wasn't sure if it was being in that position on the floor for too long or if it was a symptom of my pregnancy. I really hoped it was the first.

Zayne held my hand as we walked down the hall to the kitchen. He helped me into a chair. I appreciated his attentiveness.

"Okay, let's start with toast and water. Not coffee."

"Oh no, I am going to need coffee, mate." He wanted me to have coffee. The team wanted me to have coffee. Not having coffee wasn't good for anyone around me. "If it upsets my stomach, I'll stop drinking it, but I do need my coffee."

"All right, then. Just take it slow."

I had to give him credit. He obviously didn't think it was a good idea, but not once did he decide his opinion mattered more than mine. I couldn't say that I'd be as good of a mate had our roles been reversed.

Zayne set to work, and within a few minutes, he had a slice of toast, lightly coated with my favorite pear jam, in front of me. I took a tentative bite, chewing slowly to keep my body from rejecting the nutrients. Surprisingly, it tasted good. I'd been afraid that everything would instantly have me running back to the porcelain throne.

"Commander Emmon said to let him know if I started seeing any symptoms and that we could make an appointment with the physician here," I said. While I was 100% sure that I was pregnant, hearing it from the physician would ease my nerves.

“That sounds like a brilliant idea. As long as I have known Vexis, he has always enjoyed when there is an omega expecting on the grounds.” Vexis being the physician. “He gets bored with treating broken limbs from flight training and sprained ankles from students running too fast in the quad.”

“Well, I think I will have a ton of questions. Does he have experience treating a pregnancy like ours? With a non-dragon shifter or half-dragon, I mean.”

I wasn't sure what to expect and the unknown was always scary, but doubly so because in this case, it wasn't just me I had to worry about. I had little ones on the way, and right now, I was the only thing protecting them from... everything.

“He's older than I am, so I imagine that he has seen a thing or two. If not, I know that Lord Malic's son just mated with a human, and Dr. Hugo, who used to be an Academy doctor, treated his human mate.” My mate had looked into this. Not that that surprised me.

“I suppose I can ask my parents any questions. They had the same experience as us.” They were going to be thrilled. I had let them know a few days after Zayne and I had been mated. They were, of course, over-the-moon excited that I had found a dragon for my mate. They'd have accepted anyone, of course, but being that I was technically half-dragon, they loved it.

Zayne handed me my cup of coffee and spread some jam on another slice of toast. He slid the plate across the counter. I nibbled on the corner of the bread.

“I could get used to this treatment. I'm starting to feel better,” I said.

“Good, that's good. I wish there was more that I could do for you.”

“Oh, don't worry. If I get too sick, I'll just have you wait on me hand and foot. I'll lie

on the couch every day, get myself a little bell that I can ring. You can deliver me my snacks and drinks.”

I’d been teasing, but Zayne smiled as if the idea of being my personal waitstaff thrilled him. “I’d be honored to do whatever you need.”

“I think that I’ll be fine.” I took a small sip of my coffee. “Already, the nausea is gone. My big belly is still here, though.” I was still floored by that. I swore it wasn’t there last night. Or maybe it was and I’d been too busy paying attention to my mate’s body to focus on my own. Both were very real possibilities.

Zayne grinned. “But it’s gorgeous.”

He might think so, but I wasn’t so sure.

“Good thing we wear mostly track pants to work, because otherwise, I wouldn’t have anything that fits soon enough. I’m going to have to get a new suit for our first competition if the eggs aren’t laid.” I really wanted to be there for the competition, but family came first. It wasn’t like I couldn’t watch the tapings later.

“That’s a month away,” Zayne said. “Our eggs should be laid by then.”

I stood up straight, my spine stiffening. “How can you travel to a competition if my eggs are here? How will we— We can’t leave our eggs, Zayne. What will we do?” He could go without me, but the thought of him being gone with our eggs here with me, no one else to protect them, was terrifying.

He came to my side and wrapped me in his arms. The warmth of him calmed me. “Easy. Slow down, mate. Many dragons have brought their eggs along for travel. We have a special transport van that can fit most nests, and the team will help us as well. We have specialized things for this. You won’t be the first omega who has had to

travel with their eggs.”

That caught me off guard. It wasn’t something I’d ever heard about, much less had experience with. If my mate thought it was feasible, I at least needed to hear him out. The team couldn’t go to competition without a Flight Leader, but also...

“Is this really a good idea? Me working and having eggs?” We’d talked about it before, but that was all in hypotheticals. The hypotheticals were over, and now we were in real territory.

“Of course. Our children are going to be so proud of you—the first omega eagle Flight Leader who won a championship while also in the middle of nesting? It’s amazing.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think you’re inflating my accomplishments. We haven’t won anything yet.”

“We will. I have all the faith in the world.”

I didn’t have the strong confidence my mate did in us coming out victorious, but enthusiasm and confidence were contagious. By the time we finished our conversation, I was beginning to feel the same way.

“I’m going to go call Kellen and let them know we’re going to miss today, and then we can head over to see Dr. Vexis.” Zayne got up from his seat and started toward his office. He kissed the top of my head as he walked by.

I’d met Dr. Vexis in passing when I first arrived, but didn’t know him very well. No one on staff had made me uncomfortable, including him. Given that he enjoyed working with pregnant omegas—and I wasn’t being thrust upon someone whose only desire was to deal with flight training concerns—I considered that a positive as well.

Still, it was good to know there were other options if I needed them. I had a feeling I wouldn't.

After getting dressed, the two of us walked to campus, hand in hand, the fresh air already making me feel a thousand times better. The weakness in my knees was now gone.

Dr. Vexis was already in the office when we arrived, a huge grin on his face.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he said, coming up and patting Zayne on the shoulder. "I'm thrilled for you, Zayne. You deserve this."

Zayne put his arm around my waist. "I don't, but for some reason, the Fates sent him to me anyway."

Gods, he was the sweetest thing ever.

Dr. Vexis had me start out by peeing in a cup and then hopping up on the table for a quick exam. The results from the urine test came back almost instantly, letting me know that, yes, those really were eggs in me and not just the result of too much food. My blood pressure was great. My heartbeat sounded strong. My lungs were clear. Everything was exactly how it should be.

In human TV shows, they always had them hear the heartbeat now, but with the shells in the way, that was something that wasn't quite feasible. Instead, he pressed down, trying to figure out how many eggs there were.

"I'm sorry, it's too soon," he said, turning toward a cabinet, opening it up, and digging around. "But soon enough, you'll know."

When he turned back around, he had a bottle in his hand.

“These are prenats. Be sure to take them. They have extra calcium for the shells. And... you’re not going to like this, but maybe don’t do any of those tricks I’ve seen you doing for the next little bit.”

That caught me off guard. “Tricks?”

“Yeah, that diving thing I saw the other day. I was pretty sure one, if not both of you, were going to land on the ground. I was tempted to prepare the trauma unit for one of you. It was pretty impressive.”

I thought back to the time he was talking about. It had to be with the spoon. And if my doctor was on this campus, seeing all the flights for who knew how many years, and he thought it was impressive, then we had nothing to worry about come competition—that was assuming they mastered it, which they would.

“Don’t worry, Dr. Vexis, not doing that again for a while. I got nauseous standing up this morning.”

“Ah, that’s very good.”

I knew what he meant. It was a good sign that everything was healthy. I still didn’t like hearing it.

“But do yourself a favor—take these on a full stomach. You’ll thank me later.”

“When do I need to come back?”

“You’ll know.”

I wasn’t sure that I would, but I knew where to find him if I had any questions.

My mate was already thanking him, and a minute later, we were on our way home. Once we got there, Zayne tucked me into bed and told me to get some rest.

I wasn't turning that offer down. That was for sure.

Chapter 15

Zayne

I n preparing for our competition—the first one of the season that would establish our rank for the rest of the year—I found myself stressed. I was no stranger to it, but every other season, I'd been able to focus solely on leading my flight. This year, however, I had plenty of other things to keep my mind busy.

I loved it. It made my life so much more full, but it was mentally taxing in a way I had not expected. And then there was the protective side of my beast that clawed at me to protect Ash, to make sure the competition went off without a hitch. He never cared when it was just me.

Ash had been waking up every day for the past four days, emptying the contents of his stomach before nibbling on some toast until the nausea went away. It passed just as quickly as it came, but I still hated to see him so sick in the mornings. I helplessly stood by his side while his body violently evicted his stomach contents.

Never before had I been so inept. By the time we made it to class, he was back to his normal self. It didn't matter what he ate, the result was always the same. When he woke up in the morning, he was sick.

Of course, when we spoke to the doctor, he assured us it was normal. No. Worse than that, he said it was good. And while I understood the science behind saying that, it wasn't possible to embrace his take when it was my mate who was suffering so miserably. How, after thousands of years, we hadn't come up with a remedy for this,

I did not know. It didn't seem fair.

Ash assured me he didn't mind. That had to be a lie, because no one could go through that every morning and be happy about it. Although, given that I would happily take it from him, maybe I did get it more than I realized. He was doing it for our young, as I would do it for him. Whatever. I still hated it.

Our flight team was excited about the turn of events. I'd been worried they would look at it as us letting them down. There was no denying that the season was only going as well as it was because of my mate. As much as Ash wanted to be there for the team, he wasn't able to give his all the way he had been.

The team was more looking forward to having a clutch of eggs to dote on almost as much as I was. Raising dragonets was a community endeavor in the dragon world, and being an Academy, they were few and far between around here. Our dragonets were going to be the most spoiled little ones for miles.

Once our clutch was laid into our nest, we'd be visited by as many family members as could arrive. I'd be shocked if cousins I hadn't seen in centuries showed up. We'd welcome them with open arms, but it would be a lot to take in.

I imagined the staff were going to be over-the-moon happy for us and ready to contribute to the nest in whatever way they could. It was the dragon way. I loved the way dragons came together to give dragonets the best start in life.

Originally, we thought we might use Ash's family nest, the one he was hatched in. Having a nest that was saturated with the scent of family was exceptionally good for the eggs. Unfortunately, since Ash's brother still had their family nest at his home, and his three-year-old clutch still used it as their little comfort spot, we didn't feel right accepting it. New dragonets didn't make the needs of their older family members any less important.

His brother offered a few times, but I didn't like the idea of taking away my nieces' and nephews' little play area before I'd even met them. Instead, Ash and I decided to procure a new nest rather than use a family one, as was tradition. It would become a new family nest. The plan had been for us to shop around in our free time.

Only there was no free time. When we got home from class, we rested or prepared for practice. Any time my mate was not working, he was sleeping, sleep his body needed. Growing the next generation was hard work, and every day that passed, I was more and more in awe of him.

Now that it was Friday, perhaps we could spend the weekend catching up. It was weird to think that I missed him even though we spent so much time together, but I did. Working together was amazing, but so was snuggling on the couch and telling stories from our past or sharing dreams for our future.

I, of course, wanted to make sure my mate was well-rested and taking care of himself. That was far more important. I was more than happy to dote on him, hand and foot. In fact, I loved it and planned to continue even after our little ones arrived.

We walked inside, hand in hand, and the door had barely clicked closed when he leaned against me. My poor mate was beyond exhausted.

"Practice went well today," he said, his voice slightly rough, with an edge of tiredness to it. "It was a good run. They're really coming along nicely. I really think we're going to be unbeatable. I know we're not supposed to get too cocky—anything could happen—and I'm sure other teams are practicing just as hard as we are, but I've been incredibly impressed by this team."

"I have been as well." You never knew how things would go when you added new teammates. Sometimes it was gold and other times dirt. You never knew until you saw them working together for the first time.

“I’m looking forward to sleeping for a while, though, so I hope you didn’t have big plans for the weekend.”

“I did not,” I said. “Whatever you need.”

“I need to cuddle you and sleep.” He rubbed his cheek against mine.

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” I led him to the bedroom, helped him get undressed, and then the two of us climbed into bed, Ash snuggling into me and falling asleep almost instantly.

I watched him as he peacefully slept, listening to his even breaths, and wondered what he was reaming about. I’d expected him to wake up close to dinner time, but he didn’t, his exhaustion too intense. While I understood his desire to keep working, seeing him like this worried me. He needed to stay strong for our clutch. But the truth was, I’d be doing the same thing, and I couldn’t fault him for that.

“We need a nest, Zayne. I can’t keep piling blankets onto the floor.”

Ash had spent the morning circling the mishmash of blankets. He’d started to say something about it a few times, but then got back to circling it. It wasn’t until we were outside in the fresh air going for a long walk that he formed the words to tell me what was wrong.

And he was right. If we wanted a nest that we could take with us if need be, it wasn’t going to be a pile of random blankets. But also, he hadn’t fully decided what his nest would be, which was how we ended up in this holding pattern.

“I know, love.” I tugged him closer and kissed his temple. “We can do some shopping this weekend. Or reach out to some friends to see what is available.”

Ash was starting to get tired, and we cut the walk short, heading back home. It was a gorgeous day, and I half suspected we'd be sitting outside and enjoying it before a nap.

We passed through the cluster of trees that hid my cabin from view to find that a group of people had gathered on our front porch.

“Surprise!” they shouted.

Ash and I stopped. I should've been suspicious when the team kept asking me if Ash was getting enough walking in and then being presented with the ideal walk for both beauty and low-impact exercise. But I didn't, and here we were being surprised by a gathering at our own home.

Right away I recognized our team at the front of the crowd. Scott, Christa, Susan, Isaac, and Jay stood in front holding a banner that read “Congratulations!” They were all wearing smiles from ear to ear, and Isaac was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Our trainers, some other co-workers, and fellow clan members stood by as well, their cheerful faces smiling broadly at us. Having the entire community supporting us like this was everything.

“What's going on?” Ash asked.

“It's a celebration!” Scott shouted.

“We heard you didn't have a nest, and we wanted to make sure you got the best one that the school could provide,” Christa said. “We all helped.”

They didn't buy it. They made it... for us.

Ash squeezed my hand and gasped. “Really? For real?”

Emotion clogged my throat. The swell of warmth in my chest stole my breath. This was more unexpected than finding my mate. Nests weren’t random things you picked up; they were important and held such meaning in my community. Seeing everyone come around us to help create one for our family was almost too much.

We walked forward and the crowd parted. On the front porch, directly in front of the door, lay a large nest. It was about five feet across and a foot deep. The inside was smooth, while the outside was woven with different-toned wisteria vines to create an intricate pattern.

“It’s gorgeous.” Ash’s voice cracked.

“We’re hoping it will serve you well for this clutch and more. We’re honored to be able to gift this to you,” Commander Emmon said.

He was met with cheers.

I looked around at the people I had worked with for half a century. They were clan members, as close to me as my own family was, yet this was so unexpected. I hadn’t seen it coming. I wanted to say something profound to show them what this meant to me. Instead, all I was able to say was, “Thanks.”

Kellen and Hayden gave me and Ash a hug, while the team wrestled the nest into the living room. The task was easier said than done, but we managed.

“This is for our clutch.” Ash hugged me close, his voice cracking. “I never thought... when I came here... I don’t—”

“Cake time,” Hayden called out.

“They even have cake.” That was when the tears of joy started freely flowing from my mate’s eyes. Mine too.

We ate cake, opened presents I had noticed them bringing, and celebrated our clutch with the people who would be our dragonet’s community, their family.

What a difference only a few months made. Back then I was a loner wondering if I would even have a job, and now I was a mated, father-to-be who had the support of an entire campus and a team ready to take on the Dragon Games. What could be better than this?

“More cake?” Hayden held out a piece to me.

“Absolutely.” Because all of that with cake was better. Not much else.

Chapter 16

Ash

Now that my nest was here, tucked tightly into the corner where the broad bay window shone the most sun down on it, I was in full nesting mode. It surprised me how quickly everything was suddenly moving. I barely found out I was pregnant and now I was nesting like a boss. I much preferred it this way. I couldn't wait to meet our young. Humans having to wait nine months sounded horrible.

We'd moved my nest at least a bazillion times before I finally settled on this location, and now that I had, it felt right location-wise. Comfort-wise? It still had a long way to go. There weren't enough warm, thick blankets in the house for me to be content with the nest. Therefore, I called for reinforcements.

What a great feeling to know that as I was getting ready to have my clutch, I had so much support all around me. Sure, there was family, but it was so much more than that. We had friends, co-workers—and an entire community.

When they asked me how to help, I let my parents know that I needed blankets. They understood the assignment. Blankets of all kinds began arriving in droves—a box full of homemade heirloom quilts, then another box full of trinkets that I could include in the nest. The colors of the quilts varied between pastels and bright reds and blues, while the trinkets were related to my family's personality. Some of them I recognized. Others were new to me. But there was no denying that each of them was handpicked with love. This wasn't a "collection" or a "theme" inspired situation. They didn't come close to going together, and yet they completely did.

Two of the other items they sent out to me stood out. My omega father had taken a rock and painted a likeness of my alpha father and him in their dragon and eagle forms on it. At least that's what I thought they were meant to be. He was hardly the world's best artist, but everything he created was made with heart. I knew better than to ask, instead going with pouring out my gratitude for how it made me feel.

The second item from my family that was more of a hug than an object came from my younger brother. He'd gifted us a silk scarf from his collection, one I knew he adored. It wasn't an afterthought. He wanted our clutch to be surrounded by one of his prized possessions.

Nesting hadn't just hit me alone. Nope. Zayne was hit with it too. He'd begun taking some of his favorite spoons and tying them to the vines so that the rim of the nest was surrounded by them. Eventually, those might become little toys for the kids to play with. I thought it gave it an extra bit of shine when the sun came in and hit the silver just right. A few of the spoons even had jewels encrusted on them. I loved how his hoard worked so beautifully with our clutch's nest.

I told my mate he had to give me the history of each of the spoons when our clutch arrived so they could hear it too. I loved listening to my mate talk about the things he had experienced in his younger years, and just from the few tales he'd already told, I knew that every spoon mattered. The discovering how was going to be so fun.

After placing a pillow that one of the cooks in the cafeteria sent over in the nest, I stood next to it, my chin resting on my hand while I looked it over. It was missing something, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I circled it a few more times. It was fine but not perfect, and that was bugging me more than I cared to think about.

Zayne came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my middle. His big hands resting over my plump stomach. "And how are you today, mate?"

It was Saturday. Our day off—sort of. We didn't have practice until later. Since the team was doing so well, we didn't need to push so hard, but we couldn't let up on their conditioning. I knew part of the reason we slowed down on Saturdays had more to do with the team wanted me to have rest than anything else, but the truth was that they needed it too. If they got too hyper focused on winning, they were going to make careless mistakes. Finding some balance was essential.

"I'm fine," I said, leaning into his embrace.

"Vexis will be here soon to do the ultrasound."

I hummed with pleasure, both at his touch and the prospect of knowing what our clutch was going to be. The ultrasound would give us an approximate size of the eggs, as well as how many there were. There was the off chance that inside one egg, there would be two babies, but I couldn't let myself think of that. As it was, this whole growing a dragon clutch was pretty overwhelming,

"Any guesses?" I asked. "On how many and all that?"

Zayne chuckled. "I mean, it's somewhere between one and five."

So very not helpful.

"Gods, it better not be five." We'd survive if it was, but goodness gracious, that would be intense during those early days when they wanted to eat every two hours.

Clutches were usually around three eggs. My own clutch was just two. Five? That would require us buying a bus or something. Did they even make strollers large enough?

"How many were in your clutch?" I crossed my fingers that it was only two.

We hadn't talked much about his siblings, mostly because work took up most of our time, and when we did, it wasn't the tiny details. I knew how many siblings he had, but not how many were in his actual clutch. If it was one, that would give us a better chance of not five.

"Four. It was a rather large one, plus there were twins."

I counted it out on my fingers. Five. Yep. There were five of them. I was doomed. With my luck, I was going to have five eggs all with twins, and suddenly, I'd have two flight teams in my own household.

"I really need to meet your siblings." Selfishly, I wanted to hear about what my mate had been like growing up. My brother and I were rather close, but our childhood had been unique in that he was a dragon and I was an eagle. We didn't have the typical dragon upbringing in many ways. I wouldn't change it for the world, though. Not once was I made to feel less-than by my family because of my eagle. Other dragons, that was a different story.

Zayne had introduced me to his parents via a video call, and he'd added me to the family text chain, where he and members of his family included random updates. As a rule, I hated group chats. But with this one, I got to see glimpses of the people who helped my mate become the man he is today. It was fun and sometimes confusing to watch them banter away.

Being that they were all so long-lived, it seemed that they had grown apart over the years—not in a bad way, they all just lived different lives and were spread all across the world. I understood the why, but I found it a touch sad. Maybe I shouldn't. They all appeared happy enough.

"They'll visit. They're excited for my first clutch. I know it seems like they aren't a big part of my life, it's just—"

“I get it,” I said.

“My parents usually come to at least one competition.”

I hadn’t known that, and it warmed me. How sweet to come support your child’s team even when they were centuries old. They were going to be amazing grandparents, that was for sure.

“That’s exciting.” I was glad that the team was going to be worthy of them. I was more than my job, but having them see the product of the hard work their son and I did felt important.

“And they’ll definitely be here to visit our clutch. They visit all of the clutches. They love being grandparents.” That didn’t surprise me, not one bit.

“Mine will as well.” I glanced back at the nest. My brother’s clutch was still young, and I couldn’t talk to my folks without hearing them gush about their grandkids. I loved it. And soon... soon they would do the same about our clutch.

“The nest looks beautiful, mate. You did a fantastic job.” He kissed my cheek.

“Thanks, but it’s missing something. I just don’t know what. I’ve been trying to figure it out and getting nowhere fast.” The feeling had been plaguing me for hours. I couldn’t rest until my nest was perfect, and for some reason, my eagle had determined that our nest needed something... I just didn’t know what. It would be nice if my eagle would just tell me already.

We had soft blankets, big fluffy blankets, small blankets that would fit an infant. There were blankets of varying materials: fleece, silk, satin, cotton. There were trinkets of varying sizes and even some toys that Zayne’s father had sent. And pillows—we had those galore.

Yet even with all of that, it was not complete.

“I might have an idea,” Zayne said. He stepped out onto the back deck and grabbed something off the table. When he brought it in, I realized it was a feather.

“Is that one of mine?”

He nodded. “You dropped it when you shifted last time. I picked it up. I thought it might look nice in here.”

He set the feather on top of one of the pillows. A sense of calm washed over me. “Perfect,” I said. “It’s perfect.”

That’s what our nest needed—a piece of me.

He chuckled. “Just one little feather.”

“That’s all it needed.” I turned in his embrace and kissed him.

A knock sounded at the door, and then it clicked open. “Anyone home?”

I chuckled. I had to love how inviting everyone was, just walking into our home. Since many people had come over to gift us the nest, more of our friends and neighbors had visited. Many of them stated that it was their first time seeing Zayne’s home. My hermit crab of a dragon was getting used to having so many people around.

“In here,” Zayne called.

Vexis was a broad-shouldered dragon that stood tall. He looked more like one of the strength trainers than a doctor. The rumor was that he had been a Flight Leader in his

youth but had gone into medicine because his alpha father had a rare condition that hadn't been researched at that time. His smile was warm and friendly.

"Congratulations," he said as he shook my hand. "It's great to see you again."

"You as well," I said.

"Normally, we would have met a dozen times before now, but it seems that everyone on your team is staying completely healthy, so I haven't had to see much of you."

"Trust me, I much prefer meeting like this." Zayne said. "Last time I needed Vexis for the team, it was to deal with a broken wing that had happened during a collision."

"Yikes," I said.

"Agreed. Shall we get started? I'm sure you're anxious to know what you are having."

"Yes, please."

I sat down on the couch. The doctor pulled up a chair and prepared the ultrasound.

My experience with ultrasounds had all been via television shows, and human ones at that. I wasn't really sure what to expect from one designed for an egg-hunting mission, but it wasn't this.

There was no huge machine and television on the wall, no darkened area, and no medical bed. Nope, it was just us at home, my couch, and a suitcase-looking medical device. It wasn't long until he had it opened up, plugged in, and me lying down so he could begin the imaging.

It was a small wand, one coated in cold cream of some sort, and he slowly rolled it over my belly, back and forth, and up and down, his face unreadable. How I wished for the huge television screens from the TV shows. At least then I could watch what was happening.

On second thought, maybe that wasn't the best idea. It wasn't like I'd know what I was looking at.

He picked the wand up. "You want to know how many eggs, right?"

My mate and I both nodded, and he put the ultrasound down on my belly again and began to trace the eggs, one at a time. "This is the first one and here is the second." And up went the wand.

"Two? There are two?" I was having two eggs.

"You are. This machine isn't the most modern, so I can't tell you how many are in each, but they are both the size I would expect for singletons at this stage."

Two babies. We were having two babies. I couldn't wait to meet them.

Chapter 17

Zayne

“It’s nice that we don’t have to travel for these meetings now,” I said as Ash and I settled into the conference room. Soon, we’d have a call with all the other Flight Leaders who would be at the initial district competition. At our level, the dragon flight games season consisted of three core competitions—though other teams could chose to attend as well.

“Yeah, I can’t imagine what this was like back in the day when technology wasn’t as advanced as it is now.” My mate stuck out his tongue playfully.

I shot my mate a side glare. “Easy with that ‘back in the day’ talk.”

Ash laced his fingers with mine. “Sorry, mate, but you’re considerably older than me. Best just to accept it.”

I huffed. He wasn’t wrong. I wasn’t a few years or even a few decades older than him. It really didn’t impact our relationship at all on a day-to-day level, but once in a while, it would hit us.

“Do you know many of the other Flight Leaders?” Ash asked.

“Yeah, just about everyone,” I said, flipping open the folder I had with the information about the other teams. As always, I’d familiarized myself with most of them before the season began, but for the most part, I’d met them all a time or two

over the years.

Ash opened his laptop, no doubt pulling up digital copies of the exact same information I had. I hadn't moved into a fully digital setting. I liked the way paper felt and the ease of being able to lay everything out before me to take them all in at once. Ash insisted I could do the same thing on my screen or by setting up a multi-monitor workstation, and he was probably right. But I had no plans on changing any time soon.

"The only team I'm not familiar with is Galeclaw Academy. Their Flight Leader recently moved up from Flight Trainer." We'd met but very much in passing. Not all teams treated their Flight Trainers as equals. It always showed in their long-term results, which was probably how there was a Flight Leader position open up for this dragon in the first place.

Ash stiffened, his back straightening. The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch.

"Is everything all right?" I put a hand on his shoulder. "Is it the eggs?"

He was only two weeks into the pregnancy, and it was possible the eggs could be laid anytime, though it would likely be a few more weeks. Dragon pregnancies didn't last an exact amount of time. Dragonets came when they were ready. It was miraculous and wonderful, while at the same time being horrible for planning.

Ash cleared his throat. "I'm fine. Eggs are fine."

"Then what is it?" I asked.

He let out an awkward laugh. "I interviewed with Galeclaw Academy, and, well... this is a bit weird."

“What is it? Have they broken the rules? Or do you know something about them?”

He winced. “A little. I talked quite a bit with them about their program. Nothing that I’m not allowed to know and nothing that would give us any sort of an edge.”

“But?” He wasn’t telling me everything, and from the discomfort rolling off of him, there was something pretty big left to say.

“But you should know—”

Just then, the meeting started, showing me yet another reason to hate virtual meetings. At least with an in-person meeting, they’d have knocked, giving me a few seconds to listen to the rest of my mate’s thought.

Flight Leader Seymour—the current head of the division, which was a role that rotated to the different academy Flight Leaders—called everyone to attention. It was one of those roles that looked great on paper but rotated specifically because it was anything but. Besides the paperwork and dealing with many strong personalities, it was a time suck. I was not looking forward to my next turn, that was for sure.

“Thank you all for joining so quickly. I’m hoping to make this meeting as brief as possible.”

Yes, please.

“First, welcome, Flight Leaders, to the Elite League. As you know, we have just a few weeks before we’ll all be meeting at the Drakonspire clan territory. I trust you all have the information you need about that.”

I flipped through my folder and pulled the paper to the top. There was so much to do before the clutch was here, and the more I thought we were ahead, the more I realized

we were behind.

“And I want to give a welcome to Ash Holloway with the Emberstone Clan. He’s the newest Flight Leader to join the ranks.”

There was awkward applause and waves from the other Flight Leaders, many of whom I recognized from my time as a Flight Leader. I wasn’t the longest-running Leader, but it was close. Ash waved back, a smile slapped on his face. He didn’t love being the center of attention, and for this moment, he very much was.

Flight Leader Carson from Galeclaw Academy gave me—or rather, the camera—a satisfied smile. “Ash, good to see you again.” He winked suggestively.

Now it was my turn to stiffen. Thankfully, we were muted. I fought the urge to turn to my mate and demand an explanation. Clearly Carson, the smarmy bastard, knew Ash. But how? And why did he think it was okay to act like that at all, but much less with my mate.

“I’ll explain after the call,” Ash said behind his hand so no one on the camera would see.

Gods, this meeting needed to be over now. Concentrating while knowing there actually was something that needed to be shared was near impossible.

“All right, let’s begin,” Commander Seymour said, and he began going over the details, not leaving a single one out. At the rate he was going, this meeting was going to last forever. Of course, it felt exponentially longer thanks to my anxiety over the stupid wink.

Ash took notes furiously, and by notes, I meant he pretty much treated it like dictation. Anything I missed was sure to be on his paper somewhere. This was his

first time being behind the scenes for the event, so it made sense.

When he'd worked as a journalist, he'd covered the other tiers of the dragon flight games, but never the Elite level. There was a lot to learn. Most of this would be second nature to me. A few things changed year to year, but we mostly kept it the same.

Once the call was finally over, Ash and I pushed aside our notes. He looked at me. His eyes were cautious, and when he reached for me, his touch was tentative.

"What was that about?" I asked.

He blew out a breath. "I interviewed with that clan for the Flight Trainer position," he said. "I didn't know that Carson was the Flight Leader they hired. That information wasn't public yet. I ran into him at a bar the night before my interview."

My gut twisted. I already knew where this discussion was going.

"It was over a year ago, Zayne." Guilt flooded his eyes, and instantly, my brain connected the dots.

"You slept with him?" I didn't really want to know the answer, but I also didn't want my mate to have it hanging over his head.

"Yes." His eyes fell to the table.

"Did you have a relationship beyond that?" I couldn't envision him with such an asshole, but I didn't want to envision him with anyone, so there was that.

He shook his head. "Once I showed up at the interview and met him, I realized just how much of a dick he was." Ash let out a long sigh. "He knew the whole time who I

was, and yet he still took me home. I wouldn't have accepted the position there even if they had offered it to me. And they did offer it to me. He tried calling me a few times after that, and I just ignored him."

I scrubbed a hand down my face. "This is an annoyance," I said, holding back my rage at the way he had treated Ash. As much as I didn't like the idea of them together in any way, hearing that he had been awful to the man I loved was worse. "And to give you a heads-up, he's going to be a dick this season. And not because of you, but because he always is. He's made more than one comment about me in the past few years once my record started sliding."

My phone buzzed on the table. Carson's contact flashed across the screen. Just what we fucking needed.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." I hit decline and shoved the phone across the table. "Great."

"Zayne, I'm sorry." The sorrow in Ash's voice gutted me. "If I had known then... I wish... I... sorry..."

I held up a hand. "You don't have anything to be sorry for, Ash. We didn't know each other yet and neither of us were saints before we met. It's just... I need to be alone."

It wasn't the way to handle this situation. I knew that. But also, I knew that my dragon was pushing at me, my emotions were high, and that if I stayed here any longer, I was going to say something I wished I didn't.

Why did my mate need to meet Carson back then? He didn't deserve to be treated like meat, to be offered a job with the intention of being able to treat him that way again, and to have the asshole pretty much announce to the entire league that he'd once gotten down and dirty with his opponent.

If I could go back in time and fix it, I one thousand percent would. But I couldn't. Instead, I needed to figure out exactly how to make my mate feel better, for Carson to keep his creepy ways to himself, and to get my dragon to simmer down. Walking out on him wasn't the way to do that. And yet, there I was doing exactly that.

I didn't deserve my mate, and he sure as shit deserved better than me. And still, fate decided otherwise, which meant there was only one option: I needed to become worthy of my mate. If only I knew how to do that.

Chapter 18

Zayne

Carson was an asshole. A grade-A asshole. He always had been and probably always would be. Only this was worse because he was directing his asshole expertise at my mate.

I had zero reason to be jealous of a relationship that my mate had prior to meeting me—especially one that had ended long ago. Jealousy wasn't the issue. Knowing my mate had been treated poorly was.

Did I love that they were together? Absolutely not. But the reality was that Carson had never had the connection with my mate that I did, even if they had spent a night together. And clearly, the man wasn't smart enough to cling to my amazing mate when he had the chance.

Although he had offered him a job, so he must have known my mate was talented. Or maybe that too was part of his circle of using him. It was safe to say that I was pissed about so much of what had happened then and during our meeting.

And then there was my dragon. He had no ability to process anything other than someone, not us, had touched our mate. As much as I hated it, my dragon's emotions impacted mine, even when I knew better.

That was why, as ridiculous as it was, I couldn't stop the green monster that spread through my chest like an infectious disease, clouding my judgment and making my

dragon see red. Try as I could, I couldn't suppress the emotions running through me, the ones amplified by my beast and making me not be the alpha I wanted to be.

I should be staying with my pregnant mate, reassuring him that everything was right in this world and that we were going to conquer the games and life together and parenthood. Did I? Nope. Instead, I left, needing to get my wings on. Maybe if I let my dragon out and flew, I could regulate the emotional turmoil raging within me.

Maybe I needed space and then all would be normal. The push to get away was intense, but so was the pull to stay near my mate. I wasn't going to go far, because even if I wanted to, which I didn't, I couldn't be away any real distance from my mate.

While my actions were telling a different story, I had no desire to run away from my problems. That would solve nothing. In fact, it would do the opposite and grow into something my mate should not have to deal with.

I did need a clear head, to get my dragon under control, and get back to my mate, asking him to forgive me for my less-than-stellar behavior.

After arriving in the clearing, I was barely able to get my clothes off before my dragon took over, taking to the air without even scenting the area to see if we were alone. He needed out, and I was grateful that we had this safe space to do so close to our home.

He circled the lake several times, avoiding the others that were also out flying. Thankfully, no one tried to talk. They must've sensed that I needed space because they avoided my dragon like a boss.

As I flew, I saw Ash walking the distance from Talls back to our home. He smiled and waved at people as he went. Was it possible that he hadn't noticed how close to

the edge the meeting pushed me? Or was he faking it for others? I had a feeling it was the latter, and that only made me feel worse.

Some of the people he passed stopped to talk with him. My mate had been here such a short time, yet he fit in like he had been here for as long as me. Heck, he fit in better than me.

Once my head was clear and my wings were tired, I went back home, clothing in hand. I refused to waste any time getting back to my mate after already wasting so much. I'd be lying if I said my head was in an amazing place, but it was in a far better one than it had been, and I was ready to try and make things right with my mate.

It was no surprise to me that Ash was on the porch settled into the wooden rocking chair. He rocked gently with his hands laid over his belly. He was in tune enough that he was probably worrying about me or mad. In either case, I sucked.

I walked up the stairs, my bare feet barely making a noise on the wooden steps. Neither of us spoke. I dropped my clothes and sat down next to him, wincing a little when my naked backside met the hard wooden chair.

Ash let out a chuckle, which he quickly covered.

I couldn't help but smile. "Are you laughing at me, mate?" Laughing was good. Much better than crying or giving me a well-deserved cold shoulder.

"A little bit." Ash shrugged. "You're going to end up with splinters in your ass. We'll have a hard time explaining that to the students."

"It's worth it. I like sitting next to you."

"Well, if you're going to make a habit of sitting next to me naked on the porch,

perhaps we should invest in cushions.”

“Not a bad idea,” I said. I laced my fingers into his, and we were quiet for a moment. The sun had begun to dip on the horizon, casting a warm glow of the lake. Dragon teams practiced. One of the Challenger league duo teams was out racing across the breadth of the lake.

“I’m sorry for taking off like that.” Understatement of the year.

“No. I’m sorry. I should’ve told you about Carson. It wasn’t fair to let you get caught off guard like that,” Ash said.

I shook my head. “It really wasn’t relevant,” I said. And there was no need for me to know about his past relationships any more than there was need for him to know about mine. This just happened to be one of those weird circumstances where one of our pasts slammed straight first into our present unexpectedly.

“There was no need for you to tell me about him. I’ve had relationships before and so have you.” None of them came close to what I had with Ash.

“Well, it doesn’t help that he’s an asshole.” He let out a long breath. “One we have to work with.”

“No, it really doesn’t.” He was going to need to learn quickly that he wasn’t allowed to do that winky bullshit with my mate, that was for sure.

“And he really is a dick.”

I snorted at that. “Try dealing with him for the last hundred years.”

“You’ve come up against him in competition before?”

I shook my head. “He’s never been in my league until now. He was a Flight Trainer last year, but I didn’t interact with him at competition. I’ve had a few run-ins with him. Even before he got to his team, they were in good shape—our biggest competitors from within the clan.”

My mate didn’t need to be worried about him being skilled on top of worrying about his behavior.

“You think his coaching will give them the edge they need?”

I shook my head. “It’s not likely. Though he will try to get under our skin, especially if he realizes we’re mates.” I’d be shocked if he didn’t realize it already given his behavior.

“I guarantee that he has. He’s already texted me twice, and clearly, he called you. I didn’t read his messages.”

My dragon pushed at me, hating that another alpha was sniffing around our mate. I didn’t love it either, but my human side knew without a shadow of a doubt that my mate wasn’t encouraging the behavior whatsoever.

“I haven’t checked my phone since I left the conference room.”

“If he contacts us anymore, we can bring it up to the Commander to see what he thinks.” My dragon thought burning him to ash was a better plan, but my human plan was solid enough to avoid violence.

Ash sighed. “I’d rather not. I’d rather just focus on the competition.”

He was a better person than I, in so many ways.

“Agreed,” I said.

We sat quietly for a moment. My thumb brushed over the softness of Ash’s hand, wishing today hadn’t been so stressful. The games alone were intense, but adding pregnancy and a dick ex only exacerbated that.

“So, we’re good, mate?” Ash asked.

I nodded, picking up his hand and bringing it to my lips for a kiss. “If you forgive me. I was the ass in this. As much as I wish it weren’t the case, I won’t deny that I was jealous.” I refused to keep secrets between us.

“Of course I forgive you. There really wasn’t anything to forgive. You told me what you needed. Not once did you treat me poorly.”

How did I get so favorably shined upon by fate? How? It for sure wasn’t that I deserved it.

“I won’t deny that it was kind of sexy that you were jealous.”

That surprised me. “Well, I’ll still try not to make a habit of it, even if it does turn you on.”

“Good. But in that case, we should get back to work.”

“On the nest or on training?”

Ash thought for a moment. “Both. We can lie in the nest and relax and go over what we learned today. I have a lot of questions about the competition. Lucky for me, I know a guy who’s been going to these things forever.”

“That sounds amazing, mate. Let’s do it.”

“But first, a shower.” He took my hand and stood up. “I want to wash the day off me and only have our scents, not those of the gym, in the nest.”

“Oh, well, if that’s the case, I think that maybe I should join you... you know, to help you wash your back or whatever.”

“Whatever?” He looked me up and down. “Did you have anything more specific in mind?”

“I can think of many things. Do you have any suggestions in particular?”

He intertwined our fingers and started toward the door, taking me with him. “I have a few. How are your knees feeling after your shift?”

He turned to give me a smirk. Gods, I was a lucky, lucky dragon.

“They feel fabulous, but not as fabulous as you are about to feel.”

Chapter 19

Ash

These eggs had to arrive soon. Why couldn't eagles be like goat shifters who had a knack of knowing the exact day they were going to be born? This waiting, wondering if today was the day each and every day was hard. Not as hard as growing a clutch of baby dragons.

If they didn't come soon, I was going to burst. There might have been only two in there, but they had no more room to grow. My shirts barely fit, and moving around was incredibly uncomfortable. Even shifting to my eagle form took effort. And forget about flying. I pretty much gave up shifting at this point. Without flying, it wasn't fun.

I don't know how my mate didn't laugh at me the last time we shifted together. My center of gravity was so far off that I couldn't even lift off the ground. I looked more like a penguin waddling around than an eagle. But he didn't laugh, and better than that, he didn't look at me with pity. I don't think I could've taken that.

Thank goodness it was Sunday and I could finally rest. It was the only day of the week that the team didn't have some sort of practice or conditioning. And that was by my design, not theirs. I didn't want us to suffer because I was tired. That wasn't fair to the team. But taking Sundays off was a good plan regardless of pregnancy status.

I was beyond impressed by how well things were going on that front. The formation was turning out beautifully. We were more than ready for the competition.

Which was another reason I needed the eggs to arrive sooner rather than later. If they didn't, then traveling to the competition in my condition would be too risky. I didn't want to go into oviposition while I was away from home.

Sure, I could take the nest with me—and we would, if the eggs were laid. But I needed to be home to lay the eggs. I couldn't fathom having them anywhere else.

I grabbed my morning coffee and dragged myself into the living room, then curled up in the nest. Each day it became more difficult to get inside, but I didn't care. It was where I needed to be.

My nest was where I spent a majority of my free time. I would sleep in there, if I didn't love my bed too much. Though, Zayne and I had spent many hours napping in the nest together.

“Do you need anything, love?” Zayne asked. He strolled into the room barefooted, only wearing a pair of gray drawstring sweatpants. My train of thought derailed.

“I don't know.”

He smiled. “Well, if you think of anything, just say the word. You don't need to be getting up.”

I hated being so helpless, but I didn't have the energy to disagree with him. And the truth was, getting in and out of the nest was reserved only for bathroom breaks, and if I could figure out a way for Zayne to take care of that for me, I would've.

Thankfully, my mate loved to pamper. Who was I to deny him? At least that was what I told myself so I didn't feel so useless.

Zayne settled in beside me, moving aside the numerous pillows and blankets that

filled the nest. Together we created a cocoon of warmth that made me forget the uncomfortable pressure in my abdomen... and back... and when I stood, my knees and ankles as well.

He reached over to gently rub my back in slow, soothing circles, his touch expertly easing some of my tension as he spoke. “I can’t believe how close we are to the competition. You’ve put in so much work, Ash. The team’s really come together—thanks to you.”

“We’re co-leaders, Zayne. It was a team effort.” And as much as I originally thought it would be better not to be paired with someone and to show I could do it on my own, I learned through this experience that teamwork is better. Sure, being a Co-Leader with my mate was amazing, but it was a model I thought could benefit all the teams.

“They’ve all come so far. Christa and Scott. Even Jay has turned over a new leaf.” Zayne kissed my temple. “No matter how the competition turns out, I’m proud of you and the team. This has been my best year as Flight Leader.”

As his words sank in, a fluttering of emotion swelled within me. Like a dam bursting, my eyes watered. “Zayne! That’s—” I choked on my the words. I couldn’t make a coherent thought. “Thank you.”

Pregnancy was so wild. Emotion ran all over the place with just a second’s notice. Here I was crying because my mate gave me words of affirmation.

Zayne swiped at my eyes with his thumb. “Baby, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I cuddled closer to him, my stomach getting in the way of me being able to settle exactly how I wanted. “You didn’t, I mean you did, but in a good way. I just need these eggs to—” A sudden pain rippled through my pelvis, and my eyes widened. I

cried out.

It was time. Finally.

“What is it?”

“The eggs. I think...” It was as if my body morphed. My abdomen dropped like the contents inside shifted. Pregnancy was wild and surprised me daily.

Zayne’s hand rested on my stomach. He yelped as my skin fluttered with movement, dawning crossing his eyes. “The eggs... the eggs are coming?”

“They are.” At least I was 99 percent sure that they were. This was a first for me, too.

Zayne and I had a plan for what we were going to do once we knew it was time. We had everything arranged down to the second. Could I think of a single one of the steps? Not even close.

“My clothes, they hurt!” I couldn’t even explain how they hurt. It wasn’t that they were tighter or itchier or anything specific like that. Hurt was the best way to describe them.

Zayne helped me to get first my shirt and then my pants off.

I could already feel the slick building, slick that would ease the way for the eggs to exit my body—thank the dragon lords, because there was no way these eggs were coming out without help. Even with all the slick in the world, it wasn’t going to be an easy task. They were going to make my mate’s knot look microscopic and nobody would every describe his knot as that.

At last measurement, Dr. Vexis said they were above average in size but that there

was nothing to worry about. I loved being above average in school, speed, and looks. Having my eggs size above average? Yeah, that wasn't an area I had wanted to excel in, that was for sure.

Pressure like I'd never felt before wracked through my body. In my mind I thought it would build slowly, that I'd get used to one small step and then another. My mind lied.

"Oh shit. This is going to happen fast." I clutched at the air, hoping to find something I could grab onto so I could bear down. For the first time, I truly feared that I wasn't going to be able to do this.

"Should I call the doctor?"

Wait, wasn't that first on our list? Why didn't we write it down? We were so sure we had everything all set. Gods, how foolish we'd been thinking we'd be able to retain a single thought once it was go time.

"Maybe. I don't—it might be too— Ahh!" I gripped my mate's hand while I pushed. There was no way to hold back long enough to finish my sentence or decide if it was actually time to push. My body commanded it, and I was no longer in control.

I could feel the egg coming, it wasn't going to be long at all, and that unlocked a whole new fear. What if they came out, dropped too far, and cracked all because we didn't remember the stupid plan.

"Help me!"

"Tell me how." I'd never seen my mate so unsure, so scared.

"You've got to catch the egg."

Zayne reached between my legs, just in time. “Oh my goodness. It’s there. I feel it. You’re doing so great, baby. Keep going!”

As if I could stop. My body had completely taken over. The doctor said it would, but it wasn’t until it actually happened that I finally understood what they meant.

I pushed again, gripping the edge of the nest with all my might, a couple of the spoons jingling as I did.

“Just a little more,” Zayne said.

I ignored the pain and pressure as best I could as I bore down. I wanted nothing more than to meet my eggs. The pain was just the last barrier in the way. My body stretched and my hips felt like they were being torn in two, but I kept on pushing.

Zayne squeezed my hand, anchoring me. Then it was like the pressure vanished. Our first-born egg released from my body.

Zayne held it in his hands. I blinked away the tears in my eyes. The shell was golden, flecked with fiery-red speckles over its large scales. It looked massive in my mate’s hand.

“Look, Ash. It’s beautiful.”

“It is.” Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Oh, my precious.” I held my hands out, and Zayne placed the egg carefully in them. He grabbed the blanket we had picked out for the first egg and wrapped it up.

“Are you ready for the next one?”

The next one. His words snapped me out of my euphoria and back into feeling

everything.

Thank our lucky feathers I was only having two eggs. I didn't know how others did more than that. I still wasn't completely sure I was going to be able to handle this one.

I barely managed to nod, the pressure already building at the base of my spine, letting me know it was time. Even as I gathered my resolve, the pain grew more and more intense. I was ready for it this time, though. Knowing what to expect went a long way.

Unsure I'd be able to hold my sweet egg without letting it fall to the side, I set the egg next to me and gripped the edge of the nest once more. My jaw clenched as I bit down so hard that I feared I might break a tooth.

Zayne concentrated on the task at hand. His brow furrowed as he focused, his worry very close to the surface. "Come on, baby. Give me a good push."

I whimpered and I pushed again. My body was sore and tired. Sweat dripped from my brow, and my hair was matted against my head. But my mate believed in me and my dragonet needed me. I knew I could do this.

When the next push came, I cried out as I put all of my might into it. My body stretched and the pressure reached a point where I was sure I was going to burst. Then suddenly it was gone. The final egg slipped from my body with a gush of liquid.

Zayne lifted this egg to show me. "Amazing, mate."

This egg was the exact compliment to our first one. Instead of golden scales, it was red, and instead of red flecks, they were gold. We wrapped this egg in its blanket and set it next to the other one.

“Holy scales. That was intense. And quick. Is it always that quick?” My breath came in heavy pants. The insanity of the past few moments hitting me. Our eggs were here.

“I... I...” Zayne couldn’t seem to take his eyes off our eggs. He held me close and ran his finger through my sweat-soaked hair. Sweat beaded on my brow, and I was an absolute mess. The slick that had eased the eggs out of me clung to my legs.

“I need a shower, but I don’t want to move, and I need to shift, I think.”

I threaded my fingers through his hair. His face was a kaleidoscope of wonder as he gazed down at our eggs.

“Go ahead and shift, mate. I’m here.”

My eagle needed to meet our eggs, and my body longed for the healing a shift would bring.

Zayne helped me out of the nest, assuring me he’d stay in there with them as I took my feathers. My eagle felt like himself for the first time since I became pregnant. He hopped up on to the rim of the nest and plucked one, then two feathers. It hurt like a bitch, but watching them flutter down to our eggs made that momentary pain worth it.

“Fly, mate. You need it.” Zayne encouraged me to take to the air, and I did, but only in the room. Leaving my eggs, even for a few seconds to soar high above our home wasn’t going to happen.

My eagle circled the nest, taking our eggs in with from every angle. They were perfect. Absolutely perfect, and I didn’t think there was a better view than seeing my mate wrapped around them, protecting them.

Chapter 20

Zayne

The day had finally arrived for us to head to the games. We'd been working so hard to get here, and now that it was finally time, I second-guessed whether we'd worked hard enough. I wasn't sure you ever felt fully ready for the Games, especially not the first competition of the season, but we were a thousand percent better than we were last year at this time, so there was that.

This was Ash's debut, and I was thrilled for him. Having our clutch here added a bit of adjustments the team didn't normally have, but nothing too difficult. And having them here, meant there was a new level of excitement running through everyone.

Packing and traveling to a competition were not new concepts to me. I'd been a Flight Leader for half a century, and I'd traveled to more competitions than I could count. But it had never been like this. Not even close.

This one was the first for a lot of things—not just the first competition I was excited about in a long while, but also the first where I would be traveling with my entire nest and mate, and with a team I'd prepared with my Co-Leader. Even if we didn't win, I was proud of everything we'd accomplished.

The team had gathered at my home for a last-minute peptalk before we left. It turned out to me more egg admiring than anything else, but in its own way, it energized them in a way I hadn't seen before.

We were set to leave in a few hours—if the team could decide on how the seating arrangement would work. It was that squabble that showed me just how closely we'd grown together. They were acting far more like clutchmates than teammates, and as annoying as it was, I loved it.

Ash and I sat on the couch while all five members of our team surrounded our nest, gazing at our eggs like they were the most precious things on earth. Which fair enough, because in my eyes, they were. Hayden and Kellan also stood nearby, peeking over the shoulders of the students who couldn't seem to drag themselves away from the eggs.

"It's only fair that Crista and I ride in the van with the nest. And the Flight Leaders, obviously," Scott tacked on as an afterthought.

"I think we should draw straws," Jay said. "Just because you guys are captains doesn't mean you get to ride in the van with the nest. We could split up the time. We're going to stop at some point on the way there, right?"

"It's a two-and-a-half-hour drive. There's no reason for us to stop," Hayden said.

"Well, then whoever rides with the nest on the way there can ride in the other van on the way back," Issac said.

They weren't fighting over being shotgun or who got the captain's chairs. No. They all wanted to be close to the eggs. It seemed everyone had strong opinions on who would be with the nest and for how long, and each of them showed both admiration and a protective side as they did so.

"Some of us are traveling home with our parents. That's not fair."

Ash covered his mouth with his hand, fighting back a laugh. I shared that sentiment.

Who knew that our team would get so attached to our two precious eggs? We could understand the sentiment, we were quite attached to the little buggers also. I never dreamed that our team would adopt them as their own as well.

Since we would only be gone for two days and two nights, we'd gotten a smaller travel nest, which was already placed in the van. It had several of the special blankets, including the ones the team had gotten for us that matched our school colors. It wasn't their nest, but it would do.

The only thing I hated about it was that my mate and I couldn't snuggle up with them in it as much as we'd have loved to. But it was either a travel nest or Ash staying home with them and that wasn't going to happen. Not only had he worked too hard not to see the fruits of his labor, but that wasn't even why. It was me. I couldn't be away from them for two days, either.

"Team, I think it's a good idea if we draw straws." Ash had finally had enough listening to them talk in circles. "You'll all get a chance to spend time with the eggs, just as you have done nearly every day all week. And when we're driving, you're going to be sitting in your seats anyway, so it really doesn't matter who rides in the van with the eggs."

They all seemed to mull that over. Eventually, it was determined that myself, Ash, Jay, and Crista would ride in the van with the eggs, while everyone else rode in the van with the luggage. Once we arrived Scott, Issac, and Susan would get a chance to stay with the eggs while Ash and I got the team signed in. In all the things I thought we might struggle with this competition, who drove in which vehicle hadn't been one of them.

We did allow Scott and Issac to carry the eggs—under very close supervision—from our nest to the van. Ash and I had planned to do it, but our hands were literally shaking as we each made our attempt. The new-parent fear of dropping them had

settled in and taken root. It was best we chose people slightly removed, people who wouldn't let panic cause them to stumble. We trusted them. They'd do anything for our clutch.

We stood outside, each of us getting ready to leave. I held Ash's hand as excitement and trepidation rolled through me. We were on our way to our first competition as Flight Leaders, where our hard work would prove to be successful—or not.

I was confident that we were going to do well. Our team was solid, and we'd had enough practice under our belts to have the routine come naturally, despite its difficulty level. But I'd been confident in the past, as well, and had it not turned out well, so there was still this nagging feeling in the back of my head that we'd fail.

And for me, I'd failed last year and numerous times before. I could handle it. My mate could too, but I didn't want that for him. He'd helped me turn this thing into something special, something that might be a game changer for our school and potentially the sport. It was for him that I needed this win out of the gate.

If we lost, then we'd simply be relegated to the lower division tiers. It wasn't the end of the world, even if it felt like it. We'd still compete, but not in the top positions. And while there were far worse things that could happen, I didn't want that for them. It would shake their confidence and make the rest of the season so much more difficult.

Both Ash and I worked hard at getting them to feel confident, and I expected to see it reflected in my team's eyes. Instead, they all seemed to have reluctance and fear in them. I felt like a failure.

“Team, once we get to the competition, things are going to move fast. We'll get settled into the dorm rooms provide for us. Then there's the welcome dinner tonight, and then tomorrow, competition starts.”

I handed them each a packet with the information so they could have it on hand.

“Some of you have already been to these competitions with me, so you know how it goes. Others, this is brand-new for you. If you have questions or concerns, don’t hesitate to ask.”

The team took a break from staring at the eggs and focused their attention on me and Ash, their hands gripping the folders tightly. They may not have said it out loud, but their faces showed the anxiety that had wiggled its way into their minds and gained a foothold. They said it was good not to be too comfortable when you competed, that a little fear went a really long way. If that was true, we were ready.

I took a moment to catch the gaze of each member of my young team, attempting to reassure them. When I turned to Ash, his own trepidation was visible on his face as well. I needed to spend the trip yanking that worry from him. He had enough on his plate with the eggs traveling with us, the first time competing, and being the only eagle Leader.

“The Dragon Flight games aren’t just about skill and cool maneuvers, it’s about teamwork and building community that will last you a lifetime.” That was what drew me to them in the first place. Competition could be found in all different arenas, from music to chess to soccer, but this camaraderie was really unique and special.

“These games have a history. Dating back further than even I remember.” There were a few giggles. Everyone on the team seemed to find constant amusement in my age. “There was a time when dragons flew freely, but so did demons. It was because of our teamwork and community that we were able to send the demons of Earth back to where they belonged.” Those were dark days I truly hoped we’d never see again. “But once the war was done, dragons continued to be ready. Continued to train.”

I loved that something that began as a way of saving dragon kind could turn into

something that uplifted it.

“We all come from different backgrounds, but what has made us strong—what will make us unstoppable in competition—is our unity and trust in one another.”

Nearly everyone nodded along. Maybe my message was seeping in. Please let that be the case.

“We lift each other up, and together, we’ll thrive. No matter what happens on the field, we’ll face it as one.”

Ash continued from there. “We’ve forged a bond this season. You all have cemented yourselves as worthy team members and made a significant impact on mine and Zayne’s family. We truly believe in every single one of you. And we’re honored to have been your Flight Leaders this season. Let’s remember that when we take to the skies tomorrow.”

Our team whistled and cheered, and even the eggs seemed to pulse with a glow of excitement.

“Let’s get moving,” I said. “We’ve got a victory to secure!”

No matter what happened from here, this season was already a success in my book. We had turned our team into so much more. They took risks, supported each other, were the world’s best hype people, and understood that this wasn’t about winning, at least not completely. We were still going to win. Probably. Maybe. Fingers crossed.

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Chapter 21

Ash

I had attended this competition several times over the years. I had seen my mate's teams perform, too, of course, but this was my first time here as a Flight Leader, and it was terrifying. How different things would've been if we'd ever gotten close enough to each other back then. But different didn't always mean better, and it was difficult to imagine a scenario where life with him was better than this, with him by my side as my partner in all things.

The number of details we had to keep track of was alarming and something I hadn't even considered before we arrived. So far, we were managing, but I had a feeling it was one of those situations where if you dropped one ball, they would all start falling.

It was all very "hurry up and wait" while we organized and the competition got started. Or so we thought. Then Isaac tripped over an extension cord and was sure that he had pulled a muscle, which required a quick shift and flight check for him. Susan forgot her lucky water bottle in her dorm room, so she had to go track that down, only they wouldn't let her into our team area because she'd also left her ID badge behind. It was a whole ordeal I was thrilled was over.

So far, we had been able to avoid Carson, and we all agreed we'd like to keep it that way. It was best not to see him than to have to deal with him, that was for sure. But even knowing he was there added a level of stress to an already stressful situation.

I was introduced to several other teams at the banquet dinner last night. Everyone was

incredibly welcoming and supportive, giving my mate and me well-wishes. Clearly, Zayne was a well-respected member of the community. I couldn't be more proud of him.

According to everyone I spoke to, he was a new dragon now that he was mated. In the past, Zayne avoided the social events, but he went there with me on his arm without a fuss. I even got him to wear a tie. I'd have preferred staying with the clutch all of the time, but this was important. If I wasn't there, by his side the entire time, people would jump to all sorts of conclusions, including that we weren't really Co-Leaders and the title was in name only. Thankfully, we were surrounded by people who were at the ready to stay with our eggs.

When I woke this morning, I thought the day would fly by. It always had when I was a spectator. Turned out, it was different when I was participating. The day was crawling by instead of running. Probably because our first flight competition was just after lunch, and our second one would be later in the evening. We had all morning waiting in anticipation.

We spent it watching the other competitions. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Sure, we could learn from their success and mistakes as far as the tiny things went, but if they pulled out something fabulous we needed to figure out, there simply wasn't time. Either way, we took notes to go over after the games.

Zayne and I sat in the stands, our team a nervous wreck behind us, each of them fidgeting. Next time I was going to give them actual fidgets to make their lives easier and their nerves calmer.

They also took turns sitting in Zayne's and my room with the eggs so that they were never left alone. Zayne's parents had come to watch us compete, and they were currently sitting with them. They were going to be the best grandparents. That was for sure.

“Galeclaw’s team is up next,” Zayne said.

I sat a little straighter, keeping a keen eye on the team walking out onto the field. As with all of these events, the teams would first walk out and be introduced to the judges in their human form. Then they would all shift into their dragon forms. Once the judges gave the all-clear, they would take flight and begin their routine. Each team was given five to seven minutes to perform their prepared routine. It was very formulaic like that, even though each routine had its own personality of sorts.

Galeclaw’s team consisted of five members, all returning competitors. They captivated the audience from the second they stepped onto the field. I wasn’t sure if it was their confidence or their reputation that drew everyone to them. Most likely it was a bit of both.

When their dragons took to the skies, their routine was impressive and executed flawlessly. I couldn’t find a single movement to mark them down on, and I was picky. When their score came back—higher than anyone else’s—I wasn’t surprised. We applauded, as we should. I wasn’t the kind of Leader who got upset when other people did well. Bad sportsmanship never did anyone any good.

“We should get down there and get ready,” Hayden said. Nerves were pouring off of him. Following a team that was so perfect wasn’t ever easy.

I agreed with him and indicated it was time to get the others. We stood from where we were in the stands and walked down to the waiting area before the announcers started speaking again. We didn’t want to disturb others by blocking their view, even if it was only for a few minutes. We held our heads high—now was the time to get into the competition mindset and not let any doubts or anxieties overtake us.

We could do this.

We were ready.

We were going to own the sky.

Of course, Carson found us and took the opportunity to come by. Jackass. His typical smarmy smile adorned his face, and for a split second, I wished I was the type of guy to throw a punch. He was 100% the type of guy who needed one.

Zayne held my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Ash. Zayne. The two of you never returned my calls.” He spoke loudly, as if hoping others might overhear and we might be framed as the bad guys.

Zayne shrugged one shoulder. “Didn’t seem to be anything worth discussing, really.”

Carson chuckled. “I just wanted to extend my congratulations. Ash is a unique” —he winked— “person. You’re lucky to have him. Even if he isn’t a dragon, he sure knows his way around one.”

He was such a piece of garbage. If we were anywhere else, we could end the conversation right here, with him walking away knowing not to cross the line again. But we weren’t somewhere else, so instead, we had to get through this without causing a scene.

My skin burned, both with embarrassment and irritation. Meanwhile, Zayne just looked bored. He was so much better at dealing with horrible people than I was, that was for sure.

“If that’s all...” Zayne gave a little shooing motion.

For a moment I thought Carson was going to say more. He did love the last word.

Instead, he seemed to deflate at not being able to get a rise out of my mate. “Oh. Good luck,” he said, though I didn’t believe for a minute that he meant it.

Once he walked away, my mate pulled me tight against him. “Mine,” he said.

“There was never a doubt.” I wiggled my body against his, blending our scents together. His dragon was close to the surface. So was my eagle.

“I really wanted to hit him.”

I laughed, having been thinking a very similar thought. “It would’ve been fun to see that, but it’ll be more fun if we can enjoy our team’s flight.”

He nodded, and his dragon receded as calm overcame him. I refused to let Carson get under his scales and my feathers. I full-on refused.

The time was ticking away, and we pulled the team into a huddle.

“This is it, team. We’ve done what we can, now it’s time for you all to show the rest of dragonkind what we can do.” Zayne’s voice sounded so confident that even if we didn’t have a solid routine at the ready, I’d probably have still believed him.

Each member of the team nodded, their earlier fears and anxieties washing away now that we were here.

Zayne, Hayden, Kellan, and I stood in our designated area while our team marched onto the field, led by Scott and Christa.

I held my breath and Zayne’s hand while we watched.

The team was introduced, and the crowd cheered for members new and old alike. We

had many supporters who had come from far and wide to watch us. I'd been aware of that all along, but experiencing it was such a different story.

Once the team had stripped down and shifted to their dragon forms, they were given the go-ahead to begin.

Christa and Scott took to the air first, followed closely by Issac and Susan. Jay was our alternate and wouldn't compete until the later competition. We made sure that everyone played an active role, unlike some teams. It was important to us that they all felt their worth.

The team began with a diamond formation, with Scott leading and Christa tailing. They kept tight to one another, their wing beats in perfect unison—a feat that was not an easy one considering they were all of differing sizes. I lost count of how many hours we'd spent working on that alone. Watching them synchronized on this made each and every one of them worth it.

Their first few maneuvers went well. They twisted and turned in unison, showing off their skills as a team and individually. Scott and Christa dipped low, while Issac and Susan flew circles in the air. Their careful figure eights gave the illusion that they might crash head on, but their precise maneuver didn't allow for that. I had seen them do it countless times and knew full well they weren't going to crash and even I gasped along with the audience. The illusion was performed to perfection.

Just when it looked as if Scott and Christa would hit the ground, they extended their talons and picked up the batons that were waiting for them.

I bounced on my tippy toes while they flew. With each swirl in the air, my stomach tied itself into tighter knots.

"C'mon, you've got this," Zayne said.

The team had opted to try exchanging an item mid-air, though that was a more difficult task. I had faith in them. They had already done so beautifully that if it failed, they still wouldn't fly away with last place. I preferred they didn't, but it wasn't a death sentence if they did.

Scott and Christ raced upward, baton in claw. They soared above their two teammates, then the four of them flew straight, two high, two low.

Then in unison, Scott and Christ banked left and dropped suddenly, both letting the baton go. Isaac and Susan beat their wings frantically, soaring upward. Both caught the batons at the same moment.

I let out a loud whoop and clutched at my mate. Hayden and Kellan both whistled their support. The crowd leapt to their feet in surprise.

Once the catch was complete, Isaac and Susan's wings fanned out, slowing their ascent. Next, they banked opposite directions to make room for Scott and Christa. Then the four of them were flying in line—a force to be reckoned with.

I couldn't watch the judges. And honestly, I didn't care what they thought. I knew that the formation had been flawless and was ridiculously proud of them.

The four dragons descended until they all landed at the center of the field. They bowed their heads to the judges and changed back to their human forms.

The crowd continued to shout out their cheers.

I hugged my mate and kissed him soundly. "They did it!"

"We did it," he said.

Chapter 22

Zayne

Our second flight went even better than our first. The team, carrying their confidence from their first time out there, outdid themselves in their second round. I couldn't be more proud, especially when the scores came back. There were some really strong performances today and to see our numbers telling the crowd that we had some of the strongest was so healing after last year's failure.

Jay seamlessly fit into Isaac's spot. It was always stressful when we swapped in our alternates at competitions. As strong as they were, the chemistry was always different, and with that came room for error. But we had a strong team this year, and they didn't let any changes get in their way of shining. There were teams that didn't give everyone time on the field. That would never be me. It wasn't fair to leave any of them on the sidelines, not when they all put in their all throughout the season.

The team stood around us in their human forms, all of them practically glowing. We all grasped hands as we waited for the judges to announce the winners. I wanted it to be us, and we'd done well, but even if we didn't, the entire competition was victorious, in my opinion.

Finally, it was time to tell the crowd who was walking out with the trophy. I held my breath as they called our name—Emberstone Elite division. The crowd let out an enthusiastic roar of applause.

The team jumped for joy and hugged each other, tears in many of their eyes.

Meanwhile, I wrapped Ash in my arms and hugged him tight. We had done it.

“This is because of you,” I said. If he hadn’t come, today would’ve been a repeat of last year. I’d have tried my best, but honestly, I wasn’t what they needed—not by myself anyway. It was Ash and me together that made this possible.

“All of us,” he said, “and this amazing team.”

I held his hand as the two of us walked to the podium and accepted our trophy together. This was a monumental day for so many reasons, not for just us as a school and a team, but having a team with Co-Leaders taking home the trophy was historical, as was my mate not being a dragon.

As we stood in front of the roaring crowd, waving and holding our golden trophy high, the thrill of victory coursed through me. Never before had a competition meant so much to me. This was a victory for the whole team, not just for me, and I couldn’t wait to see where their talent led them next.

We walked back to the team, and they welcomed us with open arms. Their smiles and shouts of excitement were infectious.

“Can you believe it, Leader Zayne! This is amazing. I never thought we’d be here. Not after last year.” Christa had every reason to be concerned after the season closing we’d had. If she’d left to go to another school, I wouldn’t have blamed her. She had talent for days and they’d have gladly had her. We were lucky she chose to stay.

I pulled her into a hug. “You deserve this. You and Scott earned your captain titles. Ash and I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

When I looked over, Jay was shaking Ash’s hand, and his mouth was moving but I couldn’t hear his words. Ash clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him into a hug.

What a difference from the first day when they met. Jay had really come a long way this season, and as amazing as his flying had been today, the thing I was most proud of with him specifically was his growth. It wasn't easy.

We took our seats as the ceremony moved on, announcing the winners of the other competitions. It had been a very full competition, and there was a lot to take in and celebrate.

As much as I wanted to return to our room to be with our nest, we needed to show our support for the entire division, not just ourselves. Our team would understand, but this was about more than just us.

Ash held my hand the entire time. I gripped him tightly, never wanting to let him go. I wanted years and years of working by his side like this. Scratch that—make it a lifetime.

Once the ceremony was over, the whole team returned to the room where Ash and I were staying. Normally we'd have gone somewhere to celebrate, but with the clutch here, we all felt the itch to be with them. I had planned to return to the room to cuddle with my mate and our eggs.

The team had other plans.

Our five team members made it to the nest first. Each of them ran a gentle hand down the shells and told our eggs about their achievement. They said it was good to talk to them, that it helped with early language development and with a sense of family. Good thing, since they had dragons talking to them pretty much nonstop.

Ash and I watched. If the scene before me blurred slightly, it was just because I was tired and had nothing to do with the tears threatening to spill down my cheeks.

Scott and Christa both laid their newly earned medals next to the egg. “There. That looks nice right there,” Scott said.

Emotion made my voice come out thick. “Guys. You earned those.”

They smiled at us. “Yeah, we had to fight over who was going to gift their medals to the dragonets. Scott and I won, only because the others have more opportunities to win medals since they’re younger.” That logic didn’t make any sense to me, but they weren’t giving the medals to our young because of logic. They were doing it because they loved them—it was 100% emotion driven.

“These dragonets are a part of the team, Leader Zayne,” Isaac said. “They brought us luck and gave us something to win for. Winning is great, and we certainly love doing it, but honestly, I just thought it’d be cool to be able to tell these little guys or girls that they were at our division competition and they gave us good luck. That’s what we do this for, right? The next generation.”

Words failed me, and I just nodded. My mate was pressed against me, my shirt damp where his face rested. He too was crying. So much happiness it was leaking out of us.

“That’s exactly right,” Ash said, voice cracking. “We’re honored that you would gift our eggs something so important to you all.”

“Well, the trophy isn’t going to fit in there,” Jay joked, but the way he was eyeing the nest, I suspected he actually considered doing just that... or trying to.

The team hung out for a while, but eventually, they all wanted to go celebrate with their families. Any other year, Ash and I would go out to dinner as a bonding time with the team and their loved ones, but I found myself just wanting to be with my mate and our eggs. None of them pushed. If anything, a couple of them hesitated leaving us in the first place.

We gave the grandparents, their new preferred titles, a gift card to a local restaurant to grab dinner. They had been here for so much of the time, and they needed real food, fresh air, and a break. That left us with Hayden and Kellan. I thought for a moment they might've had something they wanted to say or ask. But no. They weren't quite ready to leave the clutch yet.

One more story, one where the two of them described one of our routines in painful details, and they gave our eggs one last affectionate caress and were on their way.

Our travel nest wasn't as big as the one we had at home, so we had to sit outside of it to be with our eggs. I didn't love that, but I'd have loved my mate not being able to make the trip even less. This meant that we were together, and I'd take a sore neck in exchange for that any day of the week.

"This is so surreal," Ash said. "I thought it would take longer to build up our team. Yet here we are, division champions."

In the beginning, I hadn't even sure if it was possible, much less in the time that we'd had. But the team bonded and worked together in a way that I'd never witnessed in all of my many years. Most of that was thanks to Ash. He had this quality that drew people together.

"Indeed. But there are two more competitions for the year, plus the other tournaments. The team will hit some obstacles, mistakes will be made. We aren't going to win everything." And we didn't need to. This season was already a lot more successful than recent years, and we'd only just begun.

"It sort of feels like we already have." Ash laid his cheek against the shell of our golden egg.

"I feel the same way, mate." I reached across the nest and caressed his cheek. "And

it's thanks to you. You brought us together."

"No, mate... we did that. Together."

We stayed in silence for a few minutes, soaking in the alone time together with our eggs.

"Jay talked to me after we won." Ash sat up.

"I saw that. I'd wondered what he said." I'd never have pried. If it was important, Ash would tell me. He wasn't one to keep secrets, and I trusted him 100%.

Ash smiled. "He apologized. He said his behavior earlier in the season was not something he was proud of, and he is immensely glad that I came to be his Flight Leader."

"That's great."

"It is. I didn't even realize how much I wanted him to acknowledge his behavior. I definitely didn't realize it affected me so much."

I had too. There was a part of me in the beginning that suspected that he was going to be a problem in the future, that he was set in his thoughts. As time went by, that fear fell away, and I was glad that I hadn't judged him too harshly at first and kicked him out. Goodness knew there were moments I wanted to.

"This is why we do what we do, mate. To make a difference in the world. One dragon at a time."

"Indeed."

Chapter 23

Ash

As wonderful as the competition was, I was happy to be home, with our regular nest and everything going back to normal.

The Games were invaluable. They showed us how much progress we've made, gave us the confidence and encouragement we needed to move forward, and mended some bridges I didn't realize I needed mended so badly. The experience helped us grow as a team, and it showed us just how much our eggs were loved. It had been more than I ever could've dreamed of.

But regardless, coming home—that's where it was at. There was something magical about being in the space that we'd created for our family.

Normal wasn't truly normal, though, and never would be again. We were about to enter a new era of normal, and I couldn't wait. We had a clutch about nearly ready to hatch, and we were about to take on our new role as fathers.

We barely had the eggs settled back in their true nest before Zayne and I made the easy decision to take time off until the eggs hatched. We'd been working nonstop and wanted to spend this time together, just us. We'd have visitors, of course. Our little ones were loved, and I had a feeling we were going to have a lot of random visitors.

"Is it weird I want to somehow use the little nest too?" I grabbed the back of my neck, trying to release the tension that had been building up there. It was great to have

them in their regular nest, where we could snuggle around them—but also, the travel nest had been an important part of their time on this planet, too.

“We could put it inside, but then we can’t wrap around them.” Zayne named my only hesitation. “We could take it apart and weave it through the permanent nest?”

“Then what happens next time?”

It was way too soon to be thinking about another clutch, but also, we’d discussed having a large family, so ignoring that wouldn’t be helpful, either. And given our careers, moving clutches was a very real possibility no matter when we planned to grow our family. Besides, a travel nest was a good thing to have on hand, even if it was just lending it to his brother or another member of our community.

“Exactly.” His arm came around my shoulder. “Maybe we need to add more pillows.”

We definitely didn’t need more pillows. As it was, we could open a pillow shop and not run out of stock for a year.

We both circled around the nest, hand in hand, as if the answer would just pop out at us, and then... it did. A loose piece caught my eye, and I reached down and wove it in. It was something I’d done a bunch of times before and would continue doing. Only this time, it gave me an idea.

“We can do both.” I grabbed my mate’s face and kissed him hard before running to the junk drawer for a pair of scissors.

It wasn’t difficult to find a piece loose enough to unweave until I had a long piece about a yard long. Zayne watched me, not saying a word, but I could tell he wanted to ask why I was deconstructing our travel nest. Not that I was going to take any more apart.

Weaving it into the full-size nest took no time at all, and now they were in both nests at once and we had room to snuggle them.

“You, my sexy mate, are a genius.” Zayne helped me climb inside and followed after.

We lied down with them in between us, our joined hands resting over them, giving them warmth. We took turns telling different dragon and golden eagle tales that were passed down from generation to generation to teach our history in a child-friendly kind of way. And also, in a way that wouldn’t get us into trouble if humans overheard them. We didn’t need humans knowing our histories.

I don’t know which one of us fell asleep first, but I felt more rested than I’d been in weeks when we woke. The sun was just beginning to set and the light coming in through the window was stunning.

“Our clutch is so beautiful.” I ran my hand over each of our eggs, “It’s going to be weird when they’re gone.”

I couldn’t wait to meet our little ones, but these eggs had been part of my life too. It was going to be difficult to have them not there when I first woke up in the morning or as I fell asleep. Once of my childhood friends had their shells in a shadowbox on the wall. Maybe we needed to consider something like that. I hadn’t heard of it being a dragon thing, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t be.

“Do you hear something?” Zayne asked, and at first, I thought he meant maybe the dragonets were starting to move in the shell, the first sign of hatching.

But then I heard it too, someone was on our porch.

“Vexis.” Zayne shook his head and climbed out of the nest and out the door.

“Hold on, little ones.” I kissed one shell, then the other, before climbing out of the nest and going out to the porch, where I saw my mate sitting with Dr. Vexis.

“Did you come to check on the babies?” I asked.

“No, I came to see if you guys needed time to shift.”

Oh.

It was a weird thing for a doctor to come and offer, but it also sounded like a pretty good idea. In fact, it sounded absolutely amazing, my eagle already itching to get out.

“The closer your clutch gets to hatching, the more your beasts are going to want to get out—especially yours, Ash. Eagles like to soar around their nests, and so it’s natural instinct.”

His explanation made sense, and while no one had ever mentioned it before, looking back, I’d seen it happen with other fathers. I just didn’t know that was what was going on at the time.

“Why don’t you two go and do such. I’ll go inside and sit with the eggs.”

“Will you tell them stories?” Zayne was big into everyone taking on that task.

“No, but I’ll tell them all about dental hygiene and how important it is to their health.”

Zayne chuckled. “Yeah, you’re going to be their favorite.”

Vexis went inside to be with our clutch, and Zayne and I got undressed and walked into the light of the setting sun. It was my favorite time of day, especially when

looking over the lake. The way the water caught the light was something I wished could fully be captured on film, but every time I took a picture, it failed to come close to the beauty of standing or flying there.

I took my eagle first, soaring around Zayne as his dragon took over. It had been a while since the two of us were able to shift together and it wasn't work-related. I wasn't sure exactly what we were going to do—if we were going to hunt or race or just take in the sights. My plan had been to let Zayne lead on that one.

But as he took to the air, instead he hovered without leaving his spot, and I caught the glint in his eye. He wanted to play. I was there for that. Flying had always been fun for me, and when it became work, some of that was dampened. This was exactly what I needed.

My eagle took off as fast as his wings could carry me. I didn't think about where I was going, but I ended up circling the lake. It made sense. This time of day, the only place I'd rather be was in my mate's arms.

My mate, following behind, swooped down close to the water—close enough that my shadow had to have scared all of the fish. He had such agility and grace as he navigated his way around the lake. He distracted me, and I slowed, his beast nearly catching up to mine. That wouldn't do.

I took a sharp left and cut between some trees and shot straight up, higher and higher and higher, till I broke through the treeline.

My clever mate was there waiting for me.

And because I could, I landed on his back. I never in a million years would've done that to any other shifter. But this was my mate, and he enjoyed my silly antics as much as I did.

From there, we flew in through the mountains toward the campus, with me as his passenger. I doubted anyone noticed his stowaway, but if they did, Zayne was going to get either high-fives or knowing glances.

I stayed firmly in place, even when he did a loop. That was until a movement in the brush caught all of my eagle's attention.

It was a hare.

There were a lot of things my beast could ignore. A hare wasn't one of them.

I dashed for it, swooping down and picking it up with ease, and then landed in a clearing, ending its life just as my mate landed. There were times when the chase was fun, but in this case, my eagle was on a mission, one to give our mate a gift.

He landed a few feet from me, and my eagle picked up the hare in his talons, laying it before Zayne's dragon. He devoured the entire thing in one bite. I couldn't do that—needing to not eat the fur and bones for the sake of my digestive system—but his beast was different. He could eat it all and be fine on the other side.

And when he raised his head, he let out a breath of fire in a move that reminded me less of a fierce dragon threat and far more of purring.

Not to be outdone with my offering, he took off, not coming back until he had a fox for me to enjoy, and enjoy it I did as he'd had his fill. There was enough to share, and he devoured the last of it. There was something so primal about the act, and it scratched an itch for my eagle.

The sun was completely down when we landed back home after our antics. We took our skins, intertwined our fingers, and walked inside.

“We should do that more often.” I kissed his shoulder.

“Agreed.”

“And if you have any questions about gum health, the first place...” Vexis hadn’t been exaggerating. He was, in fact, giving our eggs a full-on dissertation on the importance of flossing.

It was all I could do to contain my giggles.

“At least they’ll have a pretty smile.” Zayne whispered in my ear.

“Or they just had a really good nap in there.”

It was probably the latter.

Vexis looked up. “It looks like that was exactly what you needed.” He stood and promised to finish his talk later.

How could there be more? We were gone for hours.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow... mid afternoon work?”

“Do you think the eggs are hatching that soon?” We still had time by my account, but he was the doctor and had just spent time with them, so he’d definitely know better than me.

“Soon, but not that soon. I’ll be by every day so the two of you can fly. It will be better for you both not to hold back your shifts.”

We thanked him, and then after he left, we climbed in the nest to be with our clutch,

where we told them all about our flight.

Epilogue

Zayne

Ever since that first day back from competition—back when we were given our reprieve to go fly—Vexis had either come himself or sent someone in his place to make sure we had time to take to the skies. Although sent might not be the best way to describe it. From what I understood, there were people fighting over the chance to be the one with the eggs, and more than once a group came.

My beast wasn't one who lived to hunt—not really—but during this time, every single day he hunted. My mate's bird did, too. It wasn't necessarily our plan when we walked out of the house, but our beasts always took over and found a creature that needed to be added to our menu. I suspected it had to do with the primal need to provide for our young, who were coming anytime now according to Vexis.

Of course, our time in the sky wasn't exclusively about hunting. We also played, and honestly did a little bit of work, because that was who we were. But we always had fun and came back rejuvenated, ready to tell our eggs all about what we'd done while we were gone.

And while we were enjoying our time in the sky, our clutch heard stories about college life—far more about biology and hygiene than they probably were ever going to need in their lifetime—and even had some picture books read to them. Jay went so far as to describe the pictures as he went along. He was going to be a great father someday.

Today was different. As the time for us to fly approached, my dragon started to get antsy. From antsy he turned ornery, and now he was full-on holding me back.

“Zayne.” Ash reached up and cupped my cheek. “Something feels off with you. Are you alright?”

“I—don’t— I’m fine. It’s nothing.” I didn’t sound so sure, and I wasn’t. “But... let’s not go today. My dragon’s really pushing against that.”

“Oh, phew.” He rubbed his thumb along my cheekbone. “I thought it was just me. My eagle’s like, ‘stay in this nest and do not move.’ It’s not like him. Do you think that means—?”

He looked to each egg and then back to me.

Could it be? Were the eggs going to hatch today? We’d been told it could be any day now—that we would get to meet our young within the week. We were looking for any hint that it might be time and saw them where they didn’t exist. But this was the first moment that I suspected we really had a sign that it might be time.

And when Vexis showed up and we declined his offer to fly, he smiled bright. “All right. Out of the nest.”

I did not like that idea. Not one bit. Neither did my mate, his dragon close to the surface. But this was Vexis, and we trusted him or he wouldn’t be here.

Reluctantly, we both climbed out, neither of us going very far.

He took out a stethoscope—but not with the standard head. Instead, it had more of a wide cone tip, and he put it over the egg. It looked like something out of an old cartoon more than modern medical equipment. I supposed that was probably where they got the idea for the cartoon ones—finding one that had been tossed away and

thinking it was ridiculous and could be a bit.

He listened to our first egg, then our second, then back to our first, and again to our second. Not saying a word, just listening. The silence was getting to be too much when he finally took them out of his ears and gave us a nod.

“I suspect we’re looking at about four hours. You’ll meet your little ones soon.”

Four hours. We had four hours to be ready to meet our children.

Ash’s jaw dropped, worry filling his face as if we weren’t already prepared.

We had cribs and bassinets, clothes that were washed and folded and put away. Diaper stations throughout the house, even though it wasn’t large by any means—but just in case. You never knew when they’d need a new diaper.

We also had two pumps and plenty of bottles so that we could both take turns with night feedings. There were toys and books—pretty much anything and everything that was considered baby gear.

Car seats? Check. Baby wraps? Check.

Slings? Check.

Cribs? Check—both single and double.

Strollers—both all-terrain and city, single and double? Also check.

We had it all. We were ready. And yet, four hours still didn’t feel like enough.

From the look on my mate’s face, you’d think we hadn’t even so much as considered buying a wipe, much less have enough to not go to the store for at least six months.

“We’ve got this, mate.” I took his hand in mine.

We had decided that we wanted everyone to be there for the hatching. It wasn’t normal as far as dragon tradition went. It happened, but not regularly.

Golden eagles, on the other hand—it was part of a long tradition. And Ash wanted to embrace that side of his heritage, and I was happy to do so. Our young were part eagle, and I never wanted that side of them to be overshadowed by their dragon side.

“Phone tree time,” I instructed my mate. And that snapped him into action.

We each took out our phones and dialed the first person on the list. While we did, Vexis sent out a group chat. We weren’t chancing anyone hearing the news on time. They’d all been there every step of the way, and if they wanted to be here, we wanted that for them.

Within an hour, not only was everyone here, but there were people in the kitchen cooking food for everyone, others cleaning the windows on the outside—because they didn’t want to have anything blocking the light from shining down on our little ones.

“Are they bad?” Ash asked. “I thought...”

“Shh.” He kissed the top of my head. “They just want to keep busy.” The windows were plenty clean, but sometimes, waiting doing nothing was the hardest activity of all.

Kellan came in with crystals he’d strung up from an old antique lamp he found in town and hung them along those same windows that were now worthy of a window cleaner commercial. Rainbows danced across the room. It was perfect.

Even though everyone was busy and there was a lot of commotion, it felt like time

was at a standstill. The eggs were exactly the same, no movement. No sound. If Vexis hadn't said they were about to arrive, I'd have assumed today was going to be another day of waiting and nothing more.

In every way, they looked exactly the way our clutch always had. That was until they both moved at the same time. The exact same time. Not one and then the other. No—simultaneously as if it were a routine like we choreographed for the team.

Before I could second-guess what I saw, they did it again.

And again.

“Look at that.” Jay stepped a little closer. “They’re going to be on the team. They’re already synchronized.”

It wasn't me imagining it. They really were in sync with each other.

Little movements became bigger movements—became a crack.

And then another crack.

And then a chip.

And another chip.

Slowly, but with precision, they weakened their shell until it was finally open enough for them to break free. They both pushed out of the shells at the same time, not letting a single second of their birth be a solo act.

Jay was right, they were going to be our star team members when they grew up. If that was what they wanted. Maybe they were going to prefer doing plays or soccer or math team. We'd never push them to join just because it was something we loved.

Our beautiful dragonets were here. While their shells were very different, their dragons were the same exact color, that of my mate's feathers. They might have had scales, but anyone looking at them would know that they were Ash's.

We all took a few seconds to soak in the beauty that was a newborn dragon before my mate and I each picked one up. They shifted for the first time into their human form, where they would stay until puberty.

They both cried—which I didn't love. My initial reaction was that something was wrong. But everyone else seemed to understand the universal truth that crying meant they were healthy, that they were clearing their lungs, and were communicating.

A few minutes later, everyone left to give us time to bond as a family. They went outside—not going far—we could hear them and feel their support while still having some privacy.

I helped Ash into the nest, where he gave our son, Leonidas, his first meal, as our daughter, Lenora, dozed peacefully in my arms.

"They're beautiful." I couldn't stop staring at them, afraid that I was going to wake up and this was nothing but the best dream ever.

We spent the first few days adjusting to our new role as fathers and soaking in every morning. Getting used to sleepless nights and trying to figure out how to meet all their needs while still taking care of my mate all came pretty easily. I'd been terrified I wouldn't be able to handle it, that I'd mess it up and poor Ash would be stuck carrying too much of the burden.

But I did it—we did it. We were a team through and through.

A knock on the door startled me as I rocked with both children, one in each arm, as Ash took his shower.

“Come in,” I called out, not wanting to get up and disturb their slumber.

The entire team came in, including the trainers. In their arms, they carried two rectangles that I could tell were framed art of some sort—but they were covered with a sheet. What were they up to?

“Where’s Ash?” Jay asked.

“Just a minute.” Ash came out a few seconds later, his hair still damp, wearing joggers and a tank. “What brings you guys here? Needing some cuteness overload?”

We for sure had that.

“Always,” multiple of them said at once.

“But we came because we wanted to give you our gift.” Kellan tapped the top of the one he was holding.

They’d already given us so much—but none of it compared to what we saw when they pulled away the coverings.

They’d created the sunset over our lake, not only with paints, but with the shells from our babies’ eggs. The colors worked perfectly. At least I thought they did, my tears now blurring my vision.

“I—it... beautiful... wow.” Words escaped my mate.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“No, thank you, Zayne. Ash. You gave us skill, confidence, and a purpose that was greater than our own.” Jay took a step closer. “And you made me a better dragon.”

He wasn't the only who had become a better dragon this season. With Ash coming in my life, I was finally who I wanted to be. He soared in, stole my heart, taught me how to love, grew my children, and trusted me with his future.

Ash was my everything.