

THE TREASURE OF PARAGON BOOK 4

THE
DRAGON
OF
SEDONA

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The Dragon of Sedona: The Treasure of Paragon, Book 4

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PROLOGUE



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Appalachian forest, North America

“**R**un, Maiara, run!” Her father shoved her along the path, tugging their horse’s reins behind him. The weary beast could move no faster, laden down as she was with pelts and supplies. Prickling fear raised the hair on Maiara’s nape, and she desperately tried to incite the animal to move, joining her father in his efforts, but the mare dug in her hooves. The headstrong beast won the battle of wills.

Maiara’s moccasins slipped on the slick mud, flinging her to the forest floor. She broke her fall with her bare hands, the earthy scent of decaying leaves filling her nose. Above them, her hawk circled, the bird’s shrill screams a warning as their pursuer closed in. Crushing pain throbbed within her rib cage, more from her pounding heart than from the fall.

She couldn’t think about the pain. Not now. With a single-minded focus, Maiara scrambled to her feet and

clutched her father's arm. "Leave her!" She pried the reins from his hands despite his protests.

An arrow whizzed past her ear and lodged in the tree behind her. Her father's blue eyes widened over his ruddy cheeks. Finally he saw reason. Abandoning the mare, he grasped for her hand. His was large, burly and pale. Hers was small, dark and smooth. There was comfort in that hand. Trust. He'd saved her life before.

"Run," he commanded. She did.

They wove among the trees, the monster haunting the edge of her vision. At first, the thing appeared to be a man, in the image of a warrior from the Mohawk tribe, bald except for a roach of black hair decorated with porcupine quills, bones, and feathers. War paint striped his cheeks. Despite the bracing chill, he wore only his breechcloth and a pendent, an orb the size of a human eye that winked at her as it pulsed a soft blue light at the base of his throat.

The monster may have looked like a man, but if what followed Maiara and her father had ever been human, he was no longer. Now, he was a *wendigo*, a demon sent from the netherworld to rid this land of her kind, a relentless shadow, disappearing when the sun was high only to stretch toward her again. He would not rest until every one of her people was dead. The blue wink of the stone around his neck turned her blood to ice. Whatever that was, it was unnatural, perhaps a remnant of the evil curse that had made him.

Another arrow flew and she ducked, narrowly avoiding its barb. The *wendigo* stopped at the place their mare blocked the path and roared. Its eyes glowed as red as burning coals, and its mouth opened wide enough to swallow her entire head. All illusion of its humanity melted with that bone-chilling roar.

Now the mare moved, tried to gallop away, but the *wendigo* snared its haunches with a set of razor-sharp claws that sprang from its hands. In a flurry of flashing teeth, the hell-spawn tore through the pony, ignoring its equine shrieks. Blood sprayed. Maiara pressed her hand to her mouth as the scent of death reached her, and her stomach threatened to spill its contents. She averted her eyes, but the crunch of bones echoed through the woods long after the horse's squeals abated.

Maiara strained to put more space between them and the demon. She gripped her father's arm tighter and forced him forward. They both knew the meal wouldn't be enough for the *wendigo*. The savage beast had an insatiable appetite.

"You must protect yourself." Her father stumbled. He could not keep up with the pace of their run. She used every muscle in her diminutive frame to help him to his feet. "It's the only way." He was pleading with her now as if she were a petulant child.

Another arrow, another roar. As she'd feared, the creature had already resumed its hunt. It would never quit. Never stop. Not until Maiara was dead.

"Now, Maiara. Go!"

The demon's gaping maw drooled only yards behind them. Her father's gray hair was slick with sweat. Through a throat raw from panting she rasped, "No! Try harder."

His feet gained purchase and they were off again. "How did it find us?" he muttered more to himself than to her. They were fools to think the *wendigo* wouldn't pursue them, not after everything. He stopped short, clawed at his chest as if it hurt. "Maiara! You must leave me."

"I won't," she screamed, shaking her head. She would not abandon her last living family.

“You have no choice.” He squeezed her hand again. Her father had raised her. Her father had saved her. He’d always been wise, and now the truth in his gaze cut straight to her heart. “Don’t let your mother’s death be in vain.”

Above them, her hawk cried out another warning, this one sharper than the last. She heard the bowstring snap, the whoosh of the arrow. Her father’s eyes widened and, in a final burst of speed, he shifted in front of her. The arrow, meant for her, landed in his back. He collapsed against her. Her scream was silenced by a sharp bite of pain. The tip of the arrow that had passed through her father’s body pierced her chest.

Trembling, she thrust with all her might, tearing the arrowhead from her flesh and allowing her father’s dying body to fall from her arms. A sob caught in her throat.

“Go,” he whispered. His eyes turned unblinking toward the heavens.

Too late now. Too late. She raced down the path, breathless, thighs burning. Blood from the wound in her chest blossomed like a rose on the front of her deerskin tunic. The *wendigo* closed in at alarming speed.

She had no choice and no reason now to stay behind. At a full run, she scanned the trees, extending her arms. Desperate prayers to the Great Spirit tumbled from her lips. With a last glance toward her faithful hawk above, she did what she had to do.

She escaped.

CHAPTER ONE



2018

Sedona, Arizona

Alexander felt like Wile E. Coyote, only instead of blowing himself up trying to kill the Road Runner, his efforts to free himself from the purgatory he suffered were repeatedly thwarted by a different sort of bird.

His personal vexation was a red-tailed hawk hundreds of years past its natural expiration date, yet far too stubborn to die. Unlike the cartoon Road Runner, the hawk made no attempt to run from him with a resounding *meep, meep!* and leave him in its dust.

On the contrary, this bird rarely left his side. Despite his many attempts to separate himself from the winged creature, it remained an obsessive, magical pain in the ass.

“You’re not going to stop me this time, Nyx,” he said, meeting the hawk’s intelligent amber eyes. Ironic that she

resisted so thoroughly when his motivation revolved around her. The two were cogs in a never-ending wheel of pain. He only wished to throw a wrench in the gears and save them both.

He called the bird Nyx after the Greek goddess of the night. Red-tailed hawks weren't nocturnal animals, but this one had ushered darkness into his life. The kind of darkness that lived on the inside of a man that no amount of desert sun could ever reach.

At one time, the bird had belonged to his mate Maiara. She'd called the hawk Nikan, the Potawatomi word for "my friend." The two had been inseparable until the night Maiara was brutally murdered. After her death, after her body was burned, the hawk attached to him like a tick burrowing for blood, presumably bound to him by the grief they shared.

He refused to call her Nikan after that. She was no friend of his. She was a ghost. A demon. She was Nyx, the night, and her darkness had been with him ever since.

A stab of longing cut through him. Thanks to Nyx, not a day passed he didn't think of Maiara. The bird was a constant reminder of his loss.

"You have to let me do this," he pleaded with her. He wasn't beyond begging. Anything to end this horror-go-round of an existence.

The early morning sun was blinding as he scanned the horizon from the top of one of the massive red mesas Sedona was known for. In his hand, he gripped a roll of thin, sharp wire. In his mind, he held an appetite for death. No, that wasn't entirely true. It wasn't that he wanted his life to end, just the pain.

For a dragon, losing a mate was like having a thin flap of skin scraped from their body. Everything was painful, sting-

ing, astringent. His body and soul were raw nerves, left with no protection against the elements, no shelter from the burning sun. He hurt. Everywhere.

With a deep breath, he took in the beauty of his surroundings one final time. The landscape's signature red color, courtesy of iron oxide that veined like blood through the stone, provided a sharp contrast to the cerulean sky. The topography was roughly as dry and coarse as the surface of Mars, yet brimming with life, the occasional grouping of desert trees or cactus growing from the stone. Survival in the bleakest of circumstances.

There'd been a time he'd found its mystique comforting. Not anymore. A clear indication the time had come to end this madness.

"You don't want to go on like this, do you?" He stared at Nyx as if to will an answer from her. She let out a shrill cry that let him know exactly what she thought of his plan. "I will never understand you. This has to be as much a nightmare for you as it is for me. Whatever Maiara did to you to make you immortal has bound you to me. Never able to live as a wild bird. Never able to mate with your own kind."

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "Have you ever stopped to think that if I died, perhaps you could be free? Truly free."

She flapped her wings and leapt to his arm, her talons digging into the black leather. Not that her grip was a threat to his dragon skin anyway. He might have looked human with his wings tucked away, but he was far tougher and healed much faster than any man. The hawk rubbed its head against his bearded cheek, its soft russet feathers ruffling at the contact. She brushed her beak against his nose.

As he stared at her, he saw his reflection in her tawny

eyes. By the Mountain, he looked like shit. Even in silhouette, he could tell he badly needed a haircut and to trim his beard, and he knew the rest of him wasn't any better. He was emaciated and likely smelled of liquor and self-loathing.

He gently nudged her back onto the branch of the juniper tree. "That's enough. Wait there. This will be over soon."

It was hard to kill a dragon. Technically, he was immortal. Poison wouldn't work. Walking in front of a semitruck wouldn't work. If alcohol could've done him in, he'd already be dead. By the Mountain, he bought tequila by the case. It would be easier to run his motorcycle off a bridge, but a fall for a dragon wasn't much of a threat. Dragons couldn't drown or burn to death.

There was only one foolproof way to kill a dragon: decapitation. He checked that the wire was properly fastened around the base of the tree and placed the noose around his neck, then backed up to get a running start.

This was going to hurt.

Glancing toward Nyx, he was relieved to find her gone. Maybe his lecture had gotten through to her after all. She'd left him. It was a sign.

He ran for the edge.

Three steps from the brink, Nyx flew straight up, sheering the side of the cliff. He cried out. Her wings fluttered against his cheeks and talons scraped his neck. Unable to stop his momentum, his feet slipped out from under him and he became a baseball player sliding into home, only the plate was open air beyond the cliff's edge. His dragon's wings tried to punch out but got caught in his leather jacket, store bought—not part of the specially designed wardrobe his oread had made him to accommodate his extra

appendages. *Fuck*. For a second, he seemed to hang in the bright blue sky, Nyx with his noose in her claws hovering over him.

“You mangy-feathered, slimy-beaked, bit—” He dropped like a stone.

His back collided with the gravel in front of his motorcycle. *Oww*. Immortal or not, it hurt when bones broke. Perfectly still, he stared at the hawk as she banked and circled down toward him, her cries echoing off the cliffs.

“I really hate you,” he whispered. It came out as a squeak. He worked to pull breath into his aching lungs as a sickening slurp indicated his bones were already healing. Not too much damage, then. Slowly, he raised a hand and ran his fingers through his hair. The back of his head was sore, but there wasn’t any blood. He was fine. Depressingly whole.

The crunch of wheels on gravel turned his head. A minivan had pulled off the highway and parked next to his bike, and a tall white man wearing dark socks and sandals was climbing out of the driver’s seat.

“Hey, are you all right?” The man hurried to him and leaned over Alexander, the floppy brim of his hat casting shade over his face and blocking his view of Nyx.

“I’m fine.”

“What are you doing lying on the side of the road?”

He glanced toward his bike. “I’m, uh, just resting.”

“Buddy, this is not the place. Someone could run you over.”

He cleared his throat. If only that would be enough to do him in. “Hmm. Right. I’ll be on my way then.” He allowed the man to help him up and gave his neck a good crack.

“Hey... Hey! Are you that guy? You know, that guy who

paints the desert scenes with the bird.” The man turned to the van and yelled, “Honey, it’s that guy!”

Alexander groaned. Oh dear goddess, please open the earth and swallow him down to hell pronto. This was the last thing he needed today.

A woman in a Minnie Mouse T-shirt, jean shorts, and a green visor hopped down from the passenger seat of the minivan.

“My word, it is him. Alexander! We just bought one of your paintings. You’re so talented.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “I really have to go.”

“Oh wait, can we get a picture?”

“I, uh...”

The woman had already pulled one of his paintings from the back of the van. He recognized it—a piece he’d done a few years ago of Nyx, the red rock, and the blue sky. It was a money piece. It meant nothing to him; he’d just painted it for the money. It was the Thomas Kinkade of his work, beautiful and meaningless.

She held it in front of his chest, her husband holding the other end of the canvas, and then popped her arm out to take a selfie. He did not smile.

“One, two, three...” she prompted.

The glare from the cheesy grins on either side of him was almost blinding. Out of sheer guilt, he popped the corner of his closed lips a quarter of an inch. A series of clicks later, she slid her phone back into her pocket.

“Thank you! What a special moment,” she squealed.

She loaded the painting into the van and the two waved their goodbyes. He watched them drive away from the seat of his motorcycle.

Once they were gone, Nyx landed on the handlebars of

his Harley-Davidson and cooed her apologies. He glared at the bird. “So, that’s how it’s going to be? No way out.”

She chirped and lifted into the clear blue sky.

He revved the engine. “What a fucking Monday.”

CHAPTER TWO



Sedona, for all intents and purposes, was a desert, consisting of red rock, dry weather, and plenty of sun. Technically, the area got about sixteen inches of rain a year, an amount that earned it the label of semi-arid, not a desert, if you were a stickler for the details. Still, for an average of 278 days per year, Sedona's rocky terrain baked beneath cheery golden rays without a hint of a raindrop.

This was a land of spiritual awakenings, of rejuvenation, home to an untold number of energy vortexes—intersections of natural, electromagnetic earth energy that humans here said had transformational properties. People came from all over the world to meditate, reflect, and heal here. And he'd witnessed their triumph hundreds of times.

If only it worked on dragons.

Alexander loved the heat and the rust colored terrain as much as his dark heart could love anything—it reminded him of the volcanic environment of Paragon, the realm where he was born—but he was still waiting for that healing to kick in.

Before Maiara, before everything was ruined, he'd

grown up in a palace among his siblings, a middle son of whom the royal family had relatively few expectations. And so as an introspective and creative child, he'd taught himself to sketch and paint. Art in all its forms had been his escape from the boredom that accompanied his privileged circumstances.

All that was over now. It was a million years ago, lost in the wreckage of his memories. His art did not hold the same joy or provide the escape it once had. Hell, if it did, if he had one way to lose himself, life might be tolerable.

He passed the sign at the entrance to the Church of New Horizons and cut the engine to his Harley. If his landlord didn't hear the bike, he might make it inside without another awkward conversation about taking part in the classes at the retreat. He'd rented a room here for years, but never partook in the spiritual hikes, meditation, or yoga. Actually, he thought the whole lot of it was bullshit. But the owner and landlord, determined to save his tormented soul, had never given up on trying to convince him to participate.

Nyx, who'd been flying above him for most of the ride home, landed on his shoulder and rubbed her cheek against his. "Yeah, yeah. I forgive you. I don't understand you, but I forgive you."

Silently, Alexander walked his bike up the drive and parked it in his spot in the small lot, then crept around the side of the stucco walls of the southwestern style building. He breathed a sigh of relief when he set foot on the stairs to his second-floor apartment until the sound of sandals on gravel preceded a cheery, "Hello, friend!"

Alexander closed his eyes and pivoted slowly to face the owner of New Horizons and his landlord, Master Gu. As usual, the man wore loose-fitting black pants, a long-sleeved

red tunic that tied at the waist, and a silver braid that ran down the center of his back. One clouded eye stared unseeing into the beyond while the other looked straight into him.

His appearance gave him a stereotypical master of martial arts vibe, but the truth was David Gu wasn't a master of anything. New Horizons was his invention, not an established religion, and until fifteen years ago, the guy had been a car salesman in Detroit. Somehow, though, he'd established this retreat house and regularly filled it with people willing to pay top dollar for guided meditation, yoga, and learning how to harness the healing energy of the Sedona vortexes.

"Good morning," Alexander said flatly.

"Your aura is muddled today," Gu said, his brow dipping. "You need meditation and acupuncture to open your chakras and purify your qi energy."

Alexander removed his sunglasses and gave the man a steady look in his good eye. He wondered what had tipped him off to his foul mood. Perhaps the rocks embedded in the back of his leather jacket. He tucked his glasses into his inner pocket. "My aura is top notch, my friend, and my qi is flowing like the piss of an incontinent badger. I think your aura reader is on the fritz today."

Master Gu shook his head. "My aura reader is operational. Your bird, for example, has a beautiful spring green aura as she always does. Yours, on the other hand, is usually blue and today it is dark gray and muddy."

"My bird has an aura?" Alexander laughed. The guy was wackier than a two-headed javelina.

"Oh yes, a strong one. She's the first, you know."

"The first what?"

"Bird with its own aura. Normally, birds have a collec-

tive energy. All the same. Bright blue and white like the sky. Your bird is different.”

Alexander cast Nyx a sideways glance. She bonked his cheek with her beak. This bird was different all right. Immortal. Bound to him by a mystical force he didn't understand, like two moons orbiting each other as they gradually drifted into the sun. Different was an understatement. Try tragic.

“Your aura just got darker,” Master Gu said with a tone of warning. “Staying like this is inviting misfortune into your life! The soul longs for balance. No one can endure spiritual pain forever. You must allow me to purify your qi before it is too late. I insist. I will do it for free.”

Rubbing the throbbing ache that had begun over his right eye, Alexander cleared his throat and found what remained of his patience. “Wow, you *must* be serious. I've never known you to offer a freebie to anyone.”

“I am worried about the darkness in you, Alexander.”

He nodded. “Bah. Who could have darkness in a wonderland like this?” He gestured to the postcard views surrounding New Horizons.

Gu stared at him, unblinking, which unnerved the hell out of him.

“I'll think about it,” Alexander murmured despite his better judgment.

A smile warmed the older man's face and he bowed. “As you wish. Don't say I didn't warn you if you wait and things go terribly wrong. The universe has a way of working these things out if you don't deal with them yourself.” The man shuffled off toward the meditation center, gravel crunching under his sandals.

“For the love of the Mountain,” he muttered to Nyx,

rolling his eyes as he bound up the stairs. “I need a damned drink.”

He reached the second floor and slid his key into the lock to his apartment. The one-room flat was perfect for him. Small, quiet, and with enough extra room to serve as an art studio. He pushed open the door.

And a man the size of a bull slammed into him. His head slapped the floor to the sound of Nyx’s screams.

* * * * *

The first thing Alexander noticed when he regained consciousness was the absence of Nyx on his shoulder. A twinge of dread shot through him and he forced his eyes open and searched for her in a panic. He struggled against restraints that bound his wrists. If anyone had hurt her...

A dark, hulking figure stepped into his field of vision. Dark hair, dark eyes that always seemed to reflect fire even when there was none, and a physique expertly trained to inflict maximum damage. Alexander tugged harder against his bindings. “Gabriel.”

“Calm down, brother. We need to talk. It’s important.”

He blinked slowly, then swallowed past the rage in his throat. “Are you real?”

“Of course, I’m real. What else would I be?”

He glanced away. Reality wasn’t always an easy thing for Alexander to ground himself in lately and, considering he’d smacked his head hard that morning, it seemed reasonable to check. Still, the familiar smoky scent that filled the room was definitely Gabriel’s. His brother was there, and that nugget of truth burned in his craw more than the smoke.

When their mother had cast them into this world, she’d insisted they settle in separate lands. Any extended amount of time in the same area would produce a concentrated

magical signature their murderous uncle might use to find them and kill them, the same way he'd killed their older brother. It was why Alexander had settled so far from his siblings and eventually lost touch with most of them.

As many questions as he had about why his brother was there, his first priority was his pet. "What have you done with Nyx?"

"Who?"

"My hawk." He growled, low and threatening. Threats were all he could make. Alexander had spent his childhood as an unwilling participant in Gabriel's training regime; he'd only ever won a fight against the dragon once, and even then, there had been extenuating circumstances. On a good day, Gabriel could easily kick his ass. It had been a long time between good days for Alexander and even longer since he'd had a good meal. On the other hand, judging by the sheer size of his warrior brother, Gabriel had maintained his peak physical condition. That didn't mean Alexander planned to cooperate. Hell, no. There were more ways to win a battle than brute strength.

Gabriel's dark eyebrows snapped together over the bridge of his nose. "The hawk is there with my *wife*." He pointed toward a dark-haired and obviously pregnant woman standing by the window. Nyx was happily perched on her arm. Odd. He couldn't remember the hawk ever intentionally acknowledging, let alone fraternizing with, another person other than he or Maiara.

Seeing her so comfortable with the woman caused a strange uneasy feeling in his chest. He made a kissing sound to call her to him but she stayed where she was. Damn bird. Couldn't get rid of her most of the time and now she was all chummy with his brother's...*wife*?

Alexander's head snapped up. "Wife? Did you say

wife? You're married?"

"And mated," Gabriel said. A slight smile softened the harsh lines of his mouth. "This is Raven."

Well, that was that. This had to be real. Alexander could never imagine a woman who would put up with his brother let alone marry him. Raven was round bellied but otherwise reedy with long hair the color of polished ebony, Mediterranean features, and light eyes that held wisdom beyond her years. An old soul. She smelled strange, unlike anything he'd ever encountered before. He took a deeper sniff. What was she? Not simply human, that was for sure.

She rubbed a circle over her beach-ball-size belly. "Nice to meet you. I apologize for the way my husband said hello. He thought you'd run if he didn't knock you down and tie you up like an animal." She gave Gabriel a disapproving look.

"He was right," Alexander admitted. "If I'd seen him coming, he'd never have found me. Anyway, we're *supposed* to stay apart, or hasn't he told you?"

"She knows. And that's why I'm here. I have news, brother. News that changes everything." Gabriel dragged the other hard wooden chair out from the table and took a seat across from him. "Our forced separation is officially over."

A chill crawled evenly along Alexander's vertebra and made his scalp itch. He could not have heard his brother right. "What are you talking about?"

"We do not have to stay apart anymore. In fact, it would be an extremely bad idea for us to do so. Everything we were told when we left Paragon was a lie."

As Alexander tried to process the revelation Gabriel had just shared—was it true or was this some kind of a trick?—he heard footsteps and turned his head to find Raven

moving for the door, the hawk still on her arm. "I'll update the others while you two chat."

Alexander tensed. "You can't take Nyx with you." He growled. "She can't go outside without me. She's, uh, trained only for me. You might lose her."

Raven's eyebrows bobbed as if she'd never considered the idea that the hawk couldn't go where it pleased. She nudged Nyx onto his shoulder. "She's beautiful. You've taken great care of her. I've never seen a domesticated hawk before."

He nodded at her, relieved to feel the familiar weight of the bird again. "Who else is here?" he asked, nodding toward the door. "You said there were others."

"Rowan, her mate, Nick, and Tobias," Raven answered lightly.

"Rowan is mated?"

Raven gave him a soft smile. "So is Tobias but his wife is not able to travel like the rest of us."

Pain radiated from the center of Alexander's chest and he doubled over in his chair, his breath coming faster. "*Everyone* is mated?"

Gabriel grumbled, "Raven..."

She glanced in his direction and spread her hands. "I'm sorry, Alexander. I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have unloaded that on you all at once."

Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he swallowed hard. "Please leave."

Raven backed away and he heard the door open and close.

"She was just answering your question. She didn't realize—"

"I know." Alexander closed his eyes against the wrenching pain. "How far along is she?"

“About four and a half months.”

“Congratulations. I didn’t know dragons could impregnate humans.” He shook his head. “Is she human? Her scent is unfamiliar. I can’t put my finger on it.”

Gabriel’s expression closed off like Alexander had sprung a trap, and he found himself no longer staring into the face of his brother but a deadly dragon warrior. *Woah!* That was a face he’d never wished to see again.

“I’m not here to talk about my wife.”

Made uncomfortable by the intensity of his older brother’s stare, Alexander shifted in his chair. “Why are you here, Gabriel? Really?” He’d had just about enough of this crazy visit. Enough of being tied to a freaking chair. And enough of feeling helpless. He lowered his voice. “You know as well as I do that I’m not strong enough to take you, but I am crazy enough to shift and wreck what few possessions I have here if you don’t get to the point and untie me now.” He leveled a deadly serious stare on his brother. “You may be stronger, but I’ve got a helluva lot less to lose.”

“I’m here to tell you we were wrong,” Gabriel said in a voice so low and gritty, it reminded Alexander of asphalt. “About everything. Paragon. Mother. Brynhoff.”

“I heard you the first time you said it, but I don’t understand. How could this be true?”

“Eleanor didn’t send us to this realm to save us. She sent us here to get us out of the way.”

Alexander stilled, waiting for the punchline or at least an explanation. He hadn’t heard the name Eleanor in over three hundred years, not since he was a prince of Paragon and palace guests would address his mother as Queen Eleanor. It was disconcerting to hear it fall from his brother’s lips.

And he’d mentioned Brynhoff, the king and also his

uncle, their kingdom having been ruled by brother and sister for millennia. Brynhoff had murdered Alexander's eldest brother, Marius, at what was supposed to be Marius's coronation. The bloody coup had been the last time he'd seen his parents or his uncle and had changed everything for him as well as his seven remaining siblings.

"What the hell are you talking about? Mother saved us. She used her magic to send us here. It would have drained her. It cost her life as well as Father's." Alexander's last memory of Paragon was of his father, Killian, defending their mother from Brynhoff as her ring glowed and her magic plowed into him.

"It was all a lie." A muscle in Gabriel's jaw twitched.

"And you know this how?" He'd seen the coup with his own eyes, experienced the shock and terror of being cast between dimensions.

"I returned to Paragon."

It was a good thing he was sitting down, because Alexander could've been knocked over with one of Nyx's feathers at the confession. He planted his feet and scooted the chair back from the table, placing space between himself and his brother. "Why the fuck would you do that?"

There was a long pause while his older brother seemed to choose his words carefully. "I was dying. I thought magic from Mother's spell book might cure me." His eyes snapped to Alexander's. "She was there, Alexander, on the throne, next to Brynhoff. She was ruling by his side. They call her empress now."

A pounding pain started in Alexander's temple. This couldn't be real. If it was, they'd separated for no reason. Everything that had happened with Maiara was meaningless. He couldn't accept that. There was too much guilt wrapped up in that package for him to bear.

“Why are you here? What do I care what’s happening in Paragon?” he said.

Gabriel’s mouth twisted. “She sent Scoria to kill us—me, my wife, and Tobias too.”

“Scoria was here?”

“Was. He’s dead now.”

“*By the Mountain,*” he swore. Scoria had been a fierce warrior, devoted to his mother. To Paragon. If he’d truly been in this realm and been defeated, then Gabriel spoke the truth.

“But Eleanor and Brynhoff will send others. Far from keeping us safe, separating us was meant to keep us weak and vulnerable. When we killed Scoria, we became a threat to Mother’s seat of power. You know what will happen next. Eleanor will try to pick us off, one by one. Our only hope is to unite and prepare an offensive so we’re ready for an attack.”

Alexander scoffed. “Won’t our collective magic make us easier to find?”

Gabriel shook his head. “What I’m about to tell you may be hard for you to accept, but you must.”

Blinking slowly, Alexander couldn’t help but laugh. “I threw myself off the side of a cliff this morning.” He watched his brother recoil. “What exactly do you think you’re going to tell me that I won’t be able to accept? I’m no one to judge.”

Gabriel nodded in understanding. “My wife, Raven, is a very powerful witch. She can use her abilities to hide us from Eleanor.”

Of all the things Alexander thought his brother might say, he was not expecting this. So, this was why he’d clammed up earlier when Alexander had asked about Raven’s humanity. Dragons were expressly forbidden from

mating with witches. It was said that the offspring of such a union would be a monster capable of leveling Paragon and everyone in it. Dragon-witch pairings had been outlawed in Paragon since the early fourth century when the Witch Queen of Darnuith had attempted to overthrow the kingdom of Paragon.

He laughed. "A... A witch? You've gone and married an actual spell-casting witch?" He locked eyes with his brother. When Gabriel didn't deny it, Alexander laughed, his eyebrows reaching for the ceiling. "And she's pregnant! No wonder Paragon wants you dead. The favorite of the kingdom has shattered the crown's most sacred edict."

"I wouldn't call it the most sacred," Gabriel murmured.

Alexander grew serious. "I'm in no place to tell you what to do, Gabriel. If you came for my blessing, you have it. As for the other part, the part about Mother coming to kill me, let her come. She'd be doing me a favor." He leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes. "Now untie me."

"You really want to die?" The disapproval in Gabriel's voice raked Alexander's skin.

"It's more complicated than a yes or no answer." Alexander opened his eyes to find Gabriel untying his wrists. He tugged them free and rubbed the circulation back into his limbs.

"Can I ask you one thing?" His brother frowned at him from above.

Why not." In for a penny, in for a pound, right? The sooner he answered Gabriel's questions, the sooner he'd get back to his solitude.

"How did you find a hawk that looks exactly like Maiara's?"

Alexander glanced at Nyx and then back at his brother. "I didn't. This is the same hawk."