

THE TREASURE OF PARAGON BOOK 6

HIGHLAND
DRAGON 

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Highland Dragon: The Treasure of Paragon, Book 6

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PROLOGUE



Paragon

In a dark, lonely, and unmarked grave beyond the boundaries of the Obsidian Palace, Aborella waited like a seed planted in the dirt. She'd lost track of how long she'd been trapped beneath the earth. Unconsciousness had relieved her suffering periodically, but without a source of light, she had no idea how many days had passed since the empress had sentenced her to this fate. All she had left was the hope that Eleanor would change her mind and come to collect her.

Her chest ached thinking about the woman she once considered a friend. The betrayal Aborella had experienced at her hands caused her more pain than the crushing weight of being buried alive. The fairy sorceress had drained herself to the point of death trying to protect the Empress, but things had gone horribly wrong. Aborella was fatally wounded in battle, and although the empress had saved her life by feeding her a dragon's

tooth, she'd taken out her anger and frustration on Aborella, abandoning her to fester in a shallow grave. Eleanor, it seemed, did not tolerate failure, even from her.

Her spirits lifted when the sound of a female voice grew near, until she realized it was a soothing timbre, not Eleanor's shrill, nasal tone.

"Sylas? Sylas!" the voice called in a loud whisper.

Aborella became more alert in her earthy tomb. Whoever this was must be in league with Sylas, Eleanor's eighthborn son and rumored leader of the rebellion.

"Oh Goddess of the Mountain! Sylas?" The female voice was closer now, just above Aborella. The sound of digging, not by shovel but by hand, met her ears. The owner of the voice must have noticed the grave and thought she was Sylas. Aborella waited, hoping, praying to the goddess the woman would succeed in reaching her. If she could enjoy a single breath of fresh air and see the stars above her, it would be the sweetest mercy.

Already the weight over her was lighter. And then dirt brushed her cheek and was lifted away. Aborella stared up at a dark shadow within a deep red hood. Gloved hands, filthy with dirt, hovered over her face, two full moons acting as dual spotlights behind the woman's head.

"Thank the goddess," the woman murmured as she determined Aborella wasn't the dragon in question. "Sylas, I'm going to kill you."

She reached toward the pile of dirt beside the grave, and Aborella's heart raced. Was she going to bury her again?

Aborella couldn't let that happen. She had to show

this hooded creature she was alive. Using all the energy she had, she tried to raise her hand but only managed to twitch a finger, which the stranger didn't see as it was still buried. The woman scooped another mound of dirt. Aborella opened her mouth to scream and instead drew in a full, cleansing breath of night air.

“By the Mountain!” The stranger tossed the dirt aside. A short, high-pitched gasp came from inside the hood. “How are you alive?”

Aborella tried to answer, but all that came out was a gurgle. When had she lost her ability to speak? She knew that half her face was smashed, courtesy of Nathaniel, who had also taken three of her limbs, but when she'd first escaped to the palace, she had spoken to Eleanor. And she had just proved she was able to breathe. Which meant perhaps her lack of voice was due to fear or the fact she'd had no food or water for however long she'd been buried. Without making a sound, she forced her lips to mouth, *help me*.

Quickly, the hooded figure unburied the rest of her. It was a blessing Aborella couldn't see the stranger's expression inside the deep hood. Her injuries were extensive—one leg completely gone, the other severed above the knee, one arm torn off unevenly, facial disfigurement—and it would only depress her to see the stranger's disgust manifest at the sight. She needn't have worried; the hood hid any reaction as the woman hooked her hands under Aborella's armpits, braced her heels in the dirt, and dragged her from the grave.

“Oh, my dear goddess. You're a fairy!”

The woman must have seen her wings. Aborella held

absolutely still, which wasn't difficult considering how weak she'd become. She was suddenly relieved her voice hadn't worked. If the stranger was looking for Sylas, she was undoubtedly a rebel and would kill Aborella where she lay if she recognized her. Fortunately, her regularly dark purple skin was bright white now, a symptom of her drained magic, and her face must be unrecognizable thanks to her injuries. With any luck, the hooded one would assume she was some wayward fairy set upon by thieves and would leave her to die.

"Is it you?" A low, deep voice came from a thicket of trees to the left.

"Sylas?" The stranger turned, and Sylas stepped into view, dropping his invisibility as if it were a blanket wrapped around his being. "Stars and lightning! Thank the goddess!"

He rushed forward and swept her into his arms, kissing the face under the hood. "I'm sorry it took me so long. I had to wait for that young fuckup at the gate to fall asleep."

"I felt the tug on our bond and followed it here, but Hades if I knew exactly what it meant! How did you escape?"

"It's too long of a story to tell you here. I've been hiding in the gardens for days. We need to go." He took her hand and began to lead her away.

Aborella swallowed, fresh agony washing over her as a slight breeze irritated her wounds. She forced herself to remain silent. If Sylas recognized her, he'd cut off her head and feed her to the forest animals.

She was partially hidden behind the skirt of the

stranger's cape, but as the woman turned, the light of the moon drenched her pale skin.

Sylas pulled up short, his gaze locking on Aborella. "What in Hades is that, Dianthe?"

Dianthe. That was the stranger's name. A fairy name. Interesting.

"I thought she was you!" Dianthe pointed a gloved hand toward the grave. "I thought that wicked mother of yours had tortured and buried you here as some sort of warning to us. Instead, I found her."

"Who is she?"

"Definitely a fairy. Probably raped and tortured by Obsidian Guard scum and left here to die. They didn't even make sure she was dead before they buried her. It's... sick!"

Sylas was shaking his head. "We have to leave her. There's nothing we can do."

"Why?" The hood turned toward him, the gloved hands squeezing into fists. "I can heal her, Sylas. You know I can. If she's survived this long, I can bring her through this. Fairies have unbelievable regenerative properties. If we can get her back to Everfield—"

"And how exactly do you suppose we do that?" He rubbed his eyes, his words tinged with exhaustion. "I'm lucky to be alive, woman! We're risking everything by lingering here."

Dianthe placed her gloved hands on her hips. Now Aborella wished she could speak. If she could make a sound, she'd protest going to Everfield. She'd been born there and was universally hated by its people. Even if the three of them could successfully avoid detection by the

Obsidian Guard and make it to Everfield in one piece, the people there would surely execute her the second anyone recognized her.

“Fine,” Sylas whispered, pacing nervously. “But this is on you. She’s your responsibility.”

“When have I ever shirked my responsibility to you or anyone else?” Dianthe’s soft voice held a note of anger for the first time that night.

“Give me your cloak. It will make her easier to carry.”

Dianthe removed the red hood and began unfastening the buttons. Aborella had never seen a fairy like her. Her skin was the color of roasted cinnamon and shone like silk in the moonlight. Most fairies were born the color of flower petals—the darker the color, the more powerful the fairy. Dianthe’s deeply pigmented skin was highly unusual, and when she glanced in Aborella’s direction, another difference revealed itself. Most fairies had green eyes. Dianthe’s were the color of warm honey. She was beautiful but markedly strange, different from any fairy Aborella remembered from home.

The lights went out as Sylas tossed the cloak over Aborella’s body and face, wrapped her up, and scooped her into his arms. Nothing more was said. Aborella had neither strength nor voice to change her fate. She closed her eyes and gave herself over to it.

CHAPTER ONE



A world away from Paragon, in a place between places, Xavier, son of Eleanor and heir to the kingdom of Paragon, also woke to perpetual darkness. The scent of stale air, moldy stone, and the metallic tang of new blood assaulted his senses. Moans of pain echoed against unyielding stone walls. Someone was being tortured. Someone was always being tortured here.

His chest grew heavy with despair as the understanding of his predicament invaded his consciousness again. To be sure, there was nothing new about his reality. Rather, Xavier's renewed anguish was caused by the intense and realistic dream he'd had moments before. He'd been flying in the sun, the sweet smell of a tribiscal vineyard filling his lungs, his wings carrying him on a soft, warm breeze. He'd dreamed of freedom, of Paragon, of flying. He'd dreamed of the mountain.

It felt like an eternity since he'd spread his wings. He almost wished he hadn't experienced the dream. The

ultimate despair of his predicament only cut deeper in comparison.

Another scream reached his ears from somewhere deep inside the dungeon, and Xavier came fully into his reality. The wail of agony echoed against the stone and then pinched off as if whatever wretched soul had uttered it had run out of breath. He stretched a talon to the stone and etched a line next to the others. Hundreds of others. If he'd calculated correctly, he'd been trapped in this cage for nearly two years.

Footsteps approached—a guard with his nightly meal. The sandy-haired young man was dressed in clan colors but was oddly a stranger.

“Ye must be new,” Xavier said. “I donna recognize yer face.”

Without speaking or making eye contact, the guard slid the tray he was carrying along the stone floor, through the slot in the door, and into the cage. Venison, bread, greens, and water. It was a decent enough meal, although Xavier would kill for a whisky.

“Ye might be new, but it seems ye ken the rules well enough. Why does that arse ye slave after bother feeding me if he plans to leave me to rot in this hole?”

The guard didn't answer him, but then he was already halfway down the hall before Xavier asked the question. None of them ever lingered. Feed the dragon and then leave quickly, Lachlan must have told them. Wouldn't want to risk Xavier breaking the mind control Lachlan kept them all under and perhaps convincing one of them to let him go.

Anyway, Xavier knew exactly why Lachlan

continued to feed him. He had to. The very existence of the *builgean* depended on Xavier's magic. If he died, their world would collapse. If he became weak, the crops might wilt and the animals would stop producing young. His magic was keeping the clan alive. His clan.

Without the *builgean* and his clan, there'd be only one place for Lachlan to go, and the evil fairy would do anything to keep from returning to his kind.

Xavier closed his eyes against the rage that burned in his blood and turned his vision red. He must get free, must save his people from the scourge that even now sat on his throne and ruled his clan.

He stared at the food. His stomach rumbled with hunger but somehow still managed to roil at the thought of his predicament. He was helpless here. Trapped. There was no way out. He'd exhausted every option. Unless one of those guards had a change of heart or his oread, Glenna, found a way to break the spell containing him. He wouldn't be holding his breath for either. In two years of trying, they'd never managed to budge the gate.

All the while he contemplated his fate, his mind kept taking him back to his dream. The sun. The mountain. The beauty of Paragon. Why was his head going back there now? It had been a long time since he'd thought of the place as home. Happy memories of his childhood were few and far between after almost three centuries. Still, he was a child of the Mountain, he supposed. You could take a dragon out of Paragon, but you'd never get Paragon out of the dragon.

A child of the Mountain. His mind flashed through images of his youth, the myths and legends of his people.

Xavier had never been a religious dragon, but every citizen of Paragon understood that the mountain was the physical manifestation of the goddess. The scribes who had taught him in school always said the goddess of the mountain was his creator and his protector. Funny, in all the days he'd spent in this cell, he'd never once thought to ask her for help.

There was a first time for everything. He fell to his knees and bowed his head, his arms spreading, palms upturned, and eyes closed in the way of his people. When he spoke, he did so in his first language, one he hadn't used in hundreds of years. The words, his solemn plea for help, came to him in a rush.

Goddess, I am unworthy of your compassion, but your creation needs your help. Please, I beseech you, send a warrior to free me from this fate or else one to deliver death upon me, for in freedom I can free those you have entrusted to my protection or in death I can force my captor to do the same. I ask this by my birthright as the Treasure of Paragon. By the Mountain, let it be.

He opened his eyes to the same dark world, the same stink and despair. Nothing had changed. Still, somewhere deep inside his heart was a flicker of hope. He reached out and pulled the food toward him and began to eat. There still was no whisky, but thanks to the prayer, he had faith.

CHAPTER TWO



September 15, 2018
London, England

A very Tanglewood sorted the magazines in the witchcraft section of Relics and Runes, separating those based on Wicca from those on Druidism and Asatru. Even though she'd lived a considerable portion of her life in New Orleans, a city known for its connection with magic and the supernatural, she'd never realized there were so many forms practiced by ordinary humans. Many ordinary people she'd met in this store applied witchcraft with varying degrees of success and talent.

Still, none compared to her sister Raven, who could absorb any spell from the page and execute it perfectly the first time or Clarissa, who could make things happen simply by singing. Even a modicum of magic was impressive to Avery, who had none herself despite being mystically tied to them both.

A long and bizarre sequence of events had brought

her here. Raven had married Gabriel in June. Soon after, Avery had learned that Gabriel was actually the exiled heir to the kingdom of Paragon, a realm of a world that existed in a parallel dimension to Earth. Gabriel and Raven had managed to keep his origins secret until an evil fairy sorceress named Aborella had tried to use Avery to get to Raven and the truth could no longer be denied.

Around three hundred years ago, Gabriel and his seven living siblings—Tobias, Rowan, Alexander, Nathaniel, Xavier, Sylas, and Colin—had been evicted from their world and sent to Earth by their evil and ruthless mother, Eleanor, under the pretext that she was saving them from their malevolent uncle who'd murdered their oldest brother Marius at his would-be coronation. But in February, Raven and Gabriel had discovered everything they'd been told by their mother was a lie. She'd sent her children, the Treasure of Paragon as they were called in their world, to Earth so she could keep the throne for herself. They'd spread out across the globe, believing that diluting their magic in the human world would keep them safe from detection. Over time, the eight lost touch with each other.

Now Gabriel was working tirelessly to reunite his family. And although he did not speak about it frequently, he seemed more inclined by the day to challenge his mother for the throne.

Which was none of Avery's business really, considering she was a simple human who was connected to Raven by blood and Clarissa, Nathaniel's mate, by a magical bond. They were the three sisters, a bound trio. Unlike Avery, Raven and Clarissa were extremely

powerful witches. The only special skill Avery had ever possessed was the ability to comfort Raven and Gabriel's baby... well, technically, their egg. The half dragon, half witch hadn't hatched yet. For some reason, Avery was the only one besides Raven and Gabriel who could hold the egg without getting zapped by its defensive magic.

Which brought her to this moment. She'd decided to remain in London, living in Nathaniel's place, Mistwood Manor, at least until Raven's baby was born. She also desperately wanted to explore the magical connection she shared with Raven and Clarissa.

What would it be like to have magic? Since she'd learned of Raven and Clarissa's powers, she'd questioned whether she was somehow defective. Was she a dud? A cosmic mistake? Not only was she completely without magic, her human existence was equally dull and ordinary, a truth that came sharply into focus in Nathaniel's bookstore, which specialized in the extraordinary.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket, and she brought it to her ear with a cheery greeting.

"Thank you again for watching the shop while we're away, Avery," Clarissa said. "We owe you one."

Clarissa was legally obligated to perform one more show for her record label, this one in Italy, and she and Nathaniel had left that morning. Normally, Nathaniel's store manager, Albert, would take over while Nathaniel was gone, but the man was ill with some sort of stomach bug. Avery had agreed to fill in during his absence.

It was the least she could do considering Nathaniel had opened his home to her these past weeks, sheltering and feeding her with no expectation that she do a single

thing to repay the favor. Sure, she'd worked here for him a handful of times and made some calls for Clarissa in support of her new indie music venture, but all in all, she spent her days riding Nathaniel's horses, soaking in his heated pool, or wandering aimlessly through his orchard without contributing one shilling for her upkeep.

"Don't think twice about it, Clarissa. I'm having a blast. The people-watching in Cecil Court alone is worth the effort. It wasn't like I had anything else going on tonight." In fact, there was nothing on her calendar at all. She'd taken a leave of absence from her job working with her mother at the Three Sisters Bar & Grill and hadn't a clue what she might like to do next with her life. She understood this couldn't go on forever, but she refused to think about when it had to end.

"Well, thanks again. Nathaniel and I know the shop is in good hands. Oh, before I forget, I told Emory to stop by with some dinner for you. He's going to stay in London and run a few errands for Nathaniel until it's time to drive you back to Mistwood. He should be there with the best curry you've ever tasted within the hour."

"That's so sweet." Avery loved Nathaniel's driver, Emory, and looked forward to him stopping in. Plus curry was a favorite. "Have a great show and tell Nathaniel not to worry about a thing."

"Thanks. Love ya."

"Love you too." There was a click and the call ended. Avery smiled. The exchange of I love yous between Clarissa, Raven, and herself had come naturally over their time together. They were as close as sisters could be despite Clarissa not being related by blood. Avery called

her a “sister from another mister.” She couldn’t remember what it was like before the woman had come into her life.

The bell over the door dinged and Avery whirled, thinking it must be Emory with dinner. Instead, a reedy man in a stained T-shirt that used to be white stood in the door.

“Welcome to Relics and Runes. Can I help you find anything?”

He didn’t answer her. A muscle in his cheek jerked. His lashes fluttered.

An uneasy feeling wormed in Avery’s gut. The man standing before her seemed agitated and unkempt. His red-rimmed eyes darted around the room. The stench of cheap alcohol and cigarettes met her nose. Avery’s gaze caught on his inner arm where track marks and fresh punctures marred his skin.

Her smile faded.

“Can I help you?” she asked again softly. Her gaze darted out the window to the people passing by in jackets. The weather hadn’t changed, and his short sleeves seemed utterly inadequate. Maybe he’d stopped in to warm up. The poor man was obviously in distress. “Are you hungry? Do you need a place to sit down for a minute?”

The twitch in the man’s face grew more pronounced, and he turned around as if he might leave. He placed his hand on the knob, but instead of opening the door, he turned the lock and flipped the sign on the window to Closed.

When he turned back around, a knife had appeared

in his hand. “You can help me by giving me what’s in the till.”

Their eyes locked. She had only compassion for the man, but what she saw in his visage was anything but kindness. Survival instinct kicked in, trumping any concern she might have had. She rushed for the back door, but before she could open it wide enough to get through, his hand slapped above her head and slammed her into it, cutting off her escape.

His rank breath hit her face. “Where do you think you’re going, huh?” He spun her around and pressed the knife to her throat.

One thing she’d learned working in a bar for so many years was how to handle threatening situations. She’d dealt with her share of drug addicts and alcoholics as well as drunk men who simply wouldn’t take no for an answer. The key was to remain calm. She slowed her breathing and looked him straight in the eye, flashing her warmest, most practiced smile. “Let me move to the register. I’ll give you what you want.”

His eyes narrowed, and he pressed the blade harder against her skin. Warm blood dribbled along her neck, and she resisted the urge to wipe it away. His eyes flicked to her breasts. “You’re a pretty thing, aren’t you?”

Her skin crawled. Avery knew she was in trouble. If she somehow made it to the front door, could she unlock it and get out before he sank that knife in her back? He shifted the blade, moving it from her throat a fraction of an inch as he tried to get a better look at her chest. She didn’t give him a chance. Crossing her arms in front of her hips, she circled them, thrusting his knife-holding

arm up and away from her as her knee barreled into his crotch with every ounce of force she could produce. His body doubled over from the pain. She used the opportunity to catch his arm by the wrist and thrust it up the center of his back.

He screamed a string of obscenities. The knife clattered to the floor. He tried to grab her with his free hand, but with her other arm locked on his shoulder, his struggling wasn't effective. "You fucking bitch!"

"I will break your arm, asshole! I know how to do it." She rammed him into the counter, grunting at the force, and released his shoulder to reach for her phone. Big mistake. The man twisted out of her hold, his fist connecting with her jaw in a blow that sent a burst of stars exploding in her vision. She stumbled backward, crashing through the table of magazines.

Avery watched in horror as he swept the knife from the floor and raised it above his head. *Don't pass out. Don't pass out.* The room was spinning. There was no way she could get out of the way in time. He dived toward her, the blade sinking toward her heart.

"Aargh!" Faster than she'd ever thought she could move, Avery brought her knees in tight to her chest and kicked him in the gut with both feet. The knife missed its target. The man flew back. Somewhere glass shattered. Avery tried to sit up to see what had happened, but black dots swam in her vision and she flopped back on the floor. She heard a sharp crack like splintering wood. Another grunt and a thump.

"Miss? Avery?" Emory's face appeared above her, his bushy gray eyebrows bent in concern.

“Chest... hurts.” A searing pain swept from above her right breast toward her throat.

He pressed a hand under her collarbone. “You’ve been cut. I’m calling for help.” His phone was already to his ear.

Avery blinked twice, trying her best to remain conscious, but her vision had become an ever-constricting circle. In the end, she gave up and allowed herself to sink into the pressing darkness.



THIRTY-TWO STITCHES. AVERY TRACED THE NASTY slice that ran from the hollow of her throat, across her right breast, and ended under her armpit. She’d definitely have a scar, but at least she could easily hide it if she wanted to. Or show it off and make up a more entertaining story for how she got it.

It had been a full forty-eight hours since Emory had picked her up off the floor of Relics and Runes and taken her to Accident and Emergency to get patched up. (It was the first time Avery realized the Brits didn’t call it the ER as Americans did.) Since then, Nathaniel’s oreads hadn’t allowed her to lift a finger, which was fine with her considering how sore she was from the fight. Horrified to hear of her ordeal, Nathaniel and Clarissa returned from their trip early, Nathaniel swearing to install better magical security.

Avery inspected her wound in the bathroom mirror, poking it experimentally. The cut was red and puffy but

appeared to be healing. It itched like a mother though. Wasn't that a good sign?

"I can try healing it with magic. I just need to find the right spell." Raven appeared in the door to the bathroom, lines creasing her forehead as she assessed the state of her wound.

Avery waved her hand dismissively. "It barely hurts. Don't waste the effort."

"Barely hurts? You were carved up by some psycho trying to rob Nathaniel's store... I would be shaken to my core if I were you." Raven shook her head. "How can you be so casual about this?"

Avery examined her feelings. Was she shaken up? On some level, she recognized she *should* be shaken. That was how a person was supposed to feel in this situation. But did she truly feel that way? Nope. What she *did* feel was the oddest and most unexpected sense of pride. She'd taken on her attacker... and won.

"I handled it, Raven. This shit happens." She bobbed her eyebrows at her sister. "You should see the other guy."

"Avery..." Raven gave her an exasperated look.

Her phone rang. Saved by the bell. She hated having to explain her feelings or lack of them to her sister. "It's Mom. Weird. I just spoke with her a few days ago. I wonder why she's calling again so soon."

Raven grimaced and backed away.

"You didn't!" Avery scowled at her.

"Sorry."

Avery answered and gave her mother her perkier

greeting, then listened to her ramble about how terrified she'd been when she heard the news.

"I'm fine, Mom. It's barely a scratch. You know how dramatic Raven can be."

"Really? Put me on video."

Avery pulled the neck of her shirt up over her stitches and connected the video on her call. She pointed her screen toward the tiny nick her attacker had left on her throat. "See?"

"That's it? Raven made it sound like you almost died."

Raising the screen to her face, she gave Raven a contemptuous look. "She needs to learn to mind her own business."

"She just cares about you, as do I. I miss you. It's been weeks."

"I miss you too!" Avery smiled at her mother's image. Although she didn't miss her old life slinging beer at the Three Sisters or the responsibility for propping up her mother and father after their divorce, she did miss her mother's warm, breezy spirit.

"It's been months since I've seen you and Raven. Is Raven there? How is her pregnancy advancing? I couldn't get much out of her." Her mother's eyebrows knit with concern.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Raven wave her hands and shake her head. Of course her sister could blab about a little knife attack, but they couldn't tell dear old Mom the truth about the baby, could they?

"Raven is good. Like an old mother hen sitting on her egg." Avery cringed as Raven punched her hard in the

shoulder. “She’s probably around here somewhere. Do you want me to try to find her?”

“Actually, I have a surprise for both of you. There’s something I haven’t told you.” Her mother’s face split into a timid grin.

“What?” Avery’s intuition suddenly flared like the first fireworks of summer.

Her mother moved her phone away from her face to reveal a bustling airport scene behind her. The murmur of voices Avery had assumed were from patrons of the Three Sisters were in fact other travelers buzzing in the terminal behind her. “I’m here! In London! I thought if you and Raven couldn’t come visit me, I’d come visit you!”

“Is that Heathrow?” This was not good. Avery glared at Raven in panic.

“Yes. Can you pick me up?” Her mother gave a squeal through a broad, toothy smile.

Avery’s throat constricted and she worked her mouth, wondering what to say. “Of course, but I don’t actually own a car and Gabriel’s brother lives outside the city. It’ll take an hour or so for us to get to you.”

“Would it be better if I took a cab? What’s the address?” Her mother patted her pockets like she was searching for a pen.

“No!” Avery blurted. All they needed was a cabbie on a mission to find an invisible mansion. “You don’t want to do that. I mean, his address is so hard to find. I’ll come get you. Just give me a chance to round up Nathaniel and borrow a car.”

Her mother flipped her honey-brown tresses behind

her shoulder and grinned. "Sounds perfect. I'll just grab a coffee and wait."

"Bye, Mom. Love you. See you soon!" Avery ended the call and glared at her sister. "Why did you tell her?"

Her sister shrugged. "I thought she had a right to know."

"Well now she's in London and wants to see us, and we live with a vampire, five dragons, and a Native American healer you raised from the dead!"

"Don't forget Clarissa and Nick." Raven spread her hands and giggled.

"This isn't funny, Raven. What are we going to do?"

Gabriel entered her room, looking concerned. "Why is everyone yelling?"

Avery pointed a finger at Raven. "Thanks to your wife, Sarah Tanglewood and her never-before-used passport is, at this very moment, at Heathrow Airport having a coffee and waiting for us to pick her up."

Gabriel's black eyes widened. "No!"

"Yes." Avery raised her eyebrows. "We need to find Nathaniel. We'll have to ask to borrow Emory to go pick her up."

"Pick her up? Are you insane? She can't come *HERE!*" Now Raven seemed to get it. She stabbed a finger toward her flat abdomen. "I'm supposed to be pregnant. And what about Charlie?" Raven looked over her shoulder toward the hall and their room where little Charlie was baking cozily in the fireplace within a dragon's eggshell.

Gabriel frowned but wrapped a supportive arm around his mate. "We can have the oreads watch Charlie," he said. "But perhaps the best option is to not bring

your mother to Mistwood at all. This place is... Well, it may be hard to disguise its magical qualities.”

“What am I supposed to do? Leave her at the airport?” Avery asked. A knot had formed between her shoulder blades, and suddenly the cut on her chest was throbbing like a bitch.

“Has she actually seen Raven?” Gabriel’s eyes darted back and forth between them. “Can you tell her we’ve left town?”

Avery poked her tongue into her cheek and shook her head. “If you think for a second that I’m going to entertain Mom all by myself this week and make up lie after lie for you, you are crazy. I can’t do it, and it’s wrong for you to ask me to. Shove a pillow under your shirt, or better yet, use your magic to look pregnant. I don’t care. But you are going to face her with me.”

Nathaniel strode into the doorway. “You three are about as subtle as a brick through the front window. There’s no need for raised voices.”

“Have you heard—?”

“Everyone in the house has heard, Avery.” He picked a stray thread off his sleeve. “No one is leaving anyone at the airport. I’ve called Emory. He will take you and Raven to Heathrow to retrieve your mother and bring her back here. Gabriel will stay with Charlie for now. Tell your mother he stayed behind to allow more room in the car. I will ask Tobias, Sabrina, Alexander, Maiara, Nick, and Rowan to use this time to take a short holiday to simplify things. The rest of us can pass as human for a few days. We do it every day in public.”

Avery winced. “Will the others be okay with making

themselves scarce? I feel terrible kicking them out of their rooms.”

Nathaniel gave a little nod. “I think it’s best for everyone involved.”

Avery locked eyes with Raven before reluctantly nodding her agreement. “I guess we’re doing this. Let’s go get Mom.”



BY THE TIME THE TWO SISTERS ARRIVED AT Heathrow and loaded their mother’s luggage into the car, Raven had used her magic to create an illusion of pregnancy. Their mother raved over Raven’s empty belly while Avery rolled her eyes and mimicked her from behind. By God, their mom acted as if she hadn’t seen her in years rather than a few months. Avery intentionally chose the front passenger seat next to Emory and made Raven take the back with her. She’d always hated lying to her mom. This way Raven would be on the spot to answer questions.

“This Nathaniel, he’s Gabriel’s brother?” Mom asked from behind her.

Avery glanced over the seat at her sister.

Raven smiled. “Yes. He has a home in Oxfordshire. It’s a bit of a drive. If you’re tired, I understand if you want to nap until we get there. There will be plenty of time for us to talk later.”

“Nap? Never. This is my first time to England!” She gave an excited sigh and stared out the window. “Why is it I hadn’t heard about Gabriel’s brother Nathaniel before

you both came here? Was he too busy to travel to the states for the wedding?”

Raven nodded. “He owns a bookstore in London. It’s hard for him to get away.”

She nodded slowly and tapped her chin. “But Gabriel owns Blakemore’s Antiques, and he’s okay with an extended visit?”

Avery lifted an eyebrow and gave Raven a make-something-up-fast glare.

“Gabriel hadn’t seen his brother in a number of years.” Raven smoothed her skirt as if the subject made her slightly uncomfortable. So far she hadn’t lied—precisely. Gabriel *hadn’t* seen Nathaniel in centuries. “He wanted a chance to become reacquainted. Plus Nathaniel is recently engaged. We wanted to help with the arrangements, considering we were just married ourselves.”

“Engaged,” Sarah exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “How wonderful. Love is in the air.”

Avery cleared her throat. “His fiancée is a singer recording her first indie album. She actually offered me a job as her personal assistant.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Avery watched her mother’s smile fade and her lips thin. “That sounds exciting, although would it be fair to take a position short term? You know, when you do come home, I’d love to give you more managerial experience at the Three Sisters. It’s long past time I promoted you.”

Avery tugged at her seat belt. “That would be great,” she said weakly. It wouldn’t be great. It would be a life sentence. If she learned to run the Three Sisters, she

would definitely be expected to take the bar and grill over from her mother, just as her mother had taken it over from their grandmother. The Three Sisters had been in the Tanglewood family since before Louisiana was a state.

“Um, Mom,” Raven interrupted, seeming to sense Avery’s discomfort. “How are things with you?”

“Oh well...” She waved a hand dismissively. “Your father has been around a lot. He was absolutely destroyed when that *Charlotte* just up and left him like she did. I mean, the letter was so cold, and the way she just abandoned you in Sedona, Avery, it was all... just odd. He’s heartbroken. I finally convinced him to box up her things and give them to charity.”

“She was a nutjob,” Avery said. “He dodged a bullet, believe me.”

“Yes, I think we all know that.” She shook her head. “But since she’s been gone, he comes to see me every day. You know David... he can’t be alone. To tell you the truth, I needed this trip just to get away from him.” She laughed a little, and Avery’s heart broke.

Aborella, posing as Charlotte, had put her father under her spell and made him believe she loved him. The fairy had tried to use the same magic on her, but it hadn’t worked as well. When they vanquished the evil bitch months ago, Avery never thought of what her absence would mean for her father. She was sure it was confusing, like a part of his life was completely gone.

For a long time, they traveled in silence until Emory cleared his throat. Avery turned her head to see Raven conveniently knock her purse onto the floor.

“Oh! Mom, can you? I can’t get down there like this.” She rubbed the mound of her belly.

“I’ll get it,” her mom said hastily. She leaned over to collect the spilled items while Emory drove off the road and through the wards around Mistwood. By the time she sat back up, they were nearing the manor. “Oh! Is this it? I didn’t even notice it from the road!”

Raven laughed nervously. “Everyone says that. It’s the trees. They make it practically invisible.”

Avery chewed her lip at the way Raven’s voice rose in pitch. It was her sister’s tell when she was lying. Would Mom notice? She released a relieved breath when Sarah didn’t remark.

Thankfully, Emory wasted no time in parking the car in front of the entrance and popping open the back door.

Avery let herself out and sidled up to Raven. “So far, so good.”

The heavy wood of the decorative front door swung open, and Nathaniel welcomed them inside. “You must be Ms. Tanglewood,” he said, extending his hand.

“Please, call me Sarah.”

“I’m Nathaniel. Welcome to Mistwood.”

Mom shook his hand. “You have a beautiful home.”

They were interrupted when Clarissa descended the stairs and hustled to Nathaniel’s side, extending her own hand. “Hello, I’m Clarissa.”

Avery watched all the blood drain from her mother’s face. “Clariss—” For a moment, Sarah stared, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Then she swooned, toppling to the stone threshold to the sound of her daughters’ screams.