

RECKONING



DRAGONLANDS, BOOK 5

MEGG
JENSEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RECKONING



MEGG JENSEN



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TITLE

RECKONING

Megg Jensen

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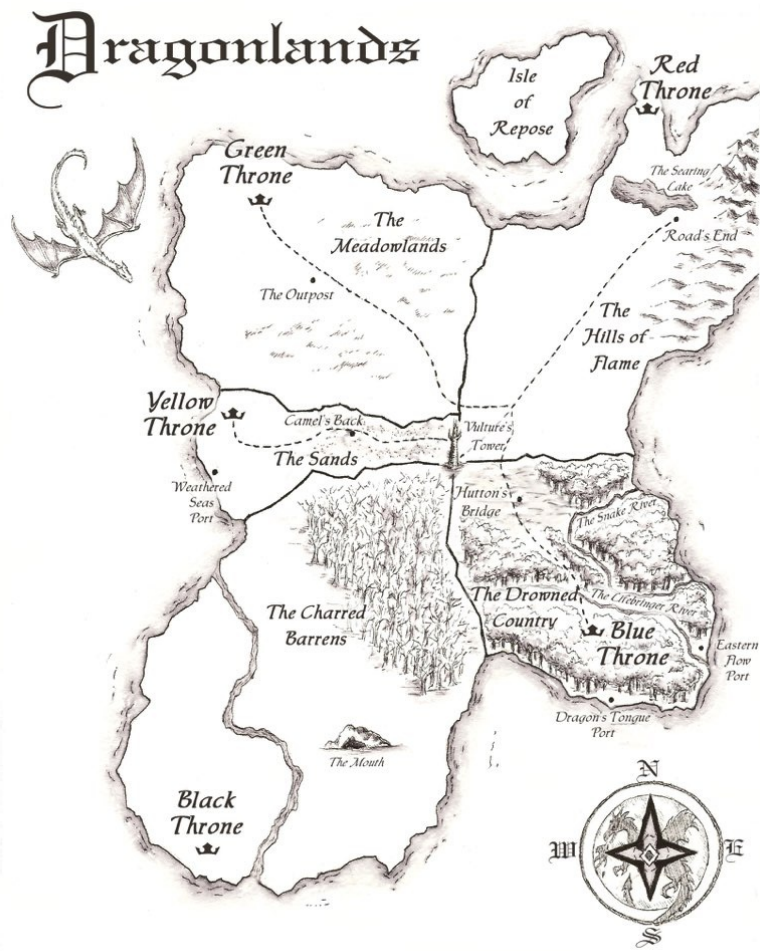
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Donovan's new skin hadn't softened as quickly as he'd wanted. Though the scars from the stitches were fading, he was still fighting against a few stubborn patches. It was never easy breaking new skin. It took time to make it pliable. The elbows and knees were the worst. Bend too quickly, and he'd tear right through. For months he'd rubbed honey-infused oil on the skin. Donovan chuckled. Honey. The giant beast Decarian had licked Donovan more than once, longing for a taste of the honey he'd grown accustomed to during his imprisonment under the Red castle.

Rising from a chair, Donovan walked around the small cottage, letting the skin contract and expand over his skeletal frame. Every time he ripped an old skin from his body, he shuddered. A small part of him still recoiled at what he had become. Immortality was not the beautiful thing he had dreamed it would be.

Five hundred years ago, as a young boy, Donovan had lain in the wheat field on his parents' farm, staring up at the clouds as they lazily rolled by. His younger brother, Mestifito, lay next to him, silent and reverent. The boy was foolish, always lost in his own thoughts. Still, Donovan loved his little brother and swore he would always care for him.

One day, an old woman came to the farm, looking for shelter. Her stooped shoulders and tottering gait tugged at their hearts, and Donovan's parents offered her a corner of their barn, warm and cozy against the impending winter. They also prepared two meals a day for her.

It was Donovan's task to take the woman her food. Every day, after his chores were done, he spent hours with the woman. She taught him about plants and their healing powers. She spun magical stories about beings he'd never seen, nor heard of. Donovan was entranced by her words, and soon he began ignoring his parents and his little brother, favoring his time with the old woman above all else.

On a warm, lazy afternoon, a beautiful young woman came to see the old lady about a salve. In her short time in Donovan's farming community, the old crone had gained quite a reputation as a healer. Yet, this maiden was no farm girl. Her hair hung in golden ringlets about her shoulders. Her green eyes sparkled like the emeralds Donovan had seen embedded in cave walls. Her hands were lily-white and softer than a lamb's first coat. He'd never seen skin so supple before. The girl smiled and winked at him, beckoning to him with one cocked finger.

Donovan followed her into the barn, curious. She untied the strings on her cape, letting it flutter to the ground. Then, to his horror and delight, she pushed her gown off her shoulders and stood naked before him.

Donovan's heart thudded in his chest. What if the old crone came upon this scene? What would she think, and would she tell his parents?

He averted his eyes from the girl, who stood unashamed in front of him in all of her naked glory.

"It is okay to look," she said. "I have come for you, Donovan. Just for you." Her hand rested on his arm. "Don't you want me?"

Donovan felt conflicted. He thought of the lovely red-headed girl, Magda, to whom he was promised. They were to be married within the next moon. He would begin his adult life with her pledged to her, and no other, for all time. "I don't even know your name," he said.

"It's Bianca." She leaned forward and whispered. "I won't tell if you won't." Her breath tickled the sensitive skin of his neck. She reached for his breeches. Her fingers deftly loosened the ties, and Donovan did not stop her, even though he thought he should.

Her green eyes seemed to pulsate, drawing him closer. His mind swam, and he leaned in, drowning in her milky skin.

After, they lay together in the hay, arms and legs tangled and their breath warm on each other's skin. Donovan buried his face in her hair. "I am promised to another. I will gladly put her aside for you."

Bianca laughed. She sat, pulling her dress back over her shoulders, hiding her beautiful breasts. He was both disappointed and relieved. He still feared discovery.

"Silly boy. I do not want marriage from you. I have all I need now." She stood, rubbing her hands on her tummy.

"I don't understand." Donovan struggled to pull his breeches over his weakened legs. He'd never been with a woman before, and he was surprised at his exhaustion. "We have done what is only to be done between a man and his wife. Even if we are not bound in the eyes of others, we are bound in my heart."

He reached out for her hand, but she jerked away from him. "You must keep this a secret. Never tell."

"I can't," Donovan said. "It wouldn't be fair to poor Magda. She'll be disgraced."

"Not if you keep your mouth shut," the girl hissed, her green eyes pulsing with a red tint. "After all of the time we spent together, I thought you were the right one. Perhaps I should have chosen your younger brother. He is old enough to copulate."

"I don't understand," Donovan said. "You have only just come here. How can you know Mestifito?"

"Fool," the girl said. "I am the old woman who has been living in your barn. I came here looking for a father to the child I must bear. I chose you. I thought you would be happy."

Donovan blanched. "You are the old woman? How is that possible?"

"Magic," she said. The words floated in the quiet air, hovering between them.

"There is no such thing as magic," Donovan said. "And do not speak of it. The penalty is death."

"Now you understand why it is so important to keep your silence. If you tell anyone what happened here today, they will execute you. Do you want your pretty little head to roll along the grass?" She reached out, running her fingers through his brown hair.

Donovan steeled his hands into fists at his sides. "It will be your head that rolls."

Before he could take another breath, Bianca's fingers wrapped around his throat. Donovan tried to swallow but couldn't. Panic rose in his chest.

"I thought I could trust you. Clearly, I chose poorly." The young woman's grip tightened. Her size belied her strength. "You will have to pay, then. But how?"

Donovan's eyes frantically searched the barn. He was looking for something, anything he could use as a weapon.

Bianca chuckled, her once-melodic voice tinged with insanity. Her green eyes pulsed once more, turning completely red. Her pink lips parted to reveal sharp, pointy teeth. Before Donovan could take another breath, before he could beg her to stop, she pierced the skin of his neck with her teeth.

Fire shrieked through Donovan's veins. His eyes rolled back. He should have felt pain. Instead, the sensation was more pleasurable than losing his virginity in Bianca's arms. This new experience made him feel like he'd left boyhood behind forever.

Donovan pushed Bianca away. Her teeth ripped from his skin as she stumbled backward. Blood coursed down his neck to his shoulder and dripped down his arm. "What have you done?" he gasped.

Bianca scrambled on her hands and feet, making her way toward the barn door.

Anger twisted in his stomach, drowning the compassion he'd lived by his whole life. Something had taken a hold of him. In mere moments, Bianca had changed him. He tried accessing his heart, but it had burned up and turned to ashes. Donovan was a new man. He knew things he'd never dreamed could be possible. Dark knowledge flooded his mind.

"Oh, no you don't." Donovan held up a hand, magic coursing through his veins, and the barn door swung shut, bathing them in darkness. "Now, tell me exactly what you wanted with me, and I will consider letting you live."

"I needed to plant a seed in my womb," she said, tears crackling in her voice.

Donovan smiled. Now who had the upper hand? "Did it work? Are you pregnant with my child?"

"It is too soon to tell," she said. Her red eyes glowed in the darkness.

Donovan walked languidly to where she cowered in the hay. "It is not." He wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. Something whispered deep inside him, telling him long-forgotten secrets. "You would have felt the pain of implantation. Like a dragon, latching on with its claws."

The woman didn't answer. She breathed shallowly.

"Did you?" he demanded.

"Yes." It was only a whisper.

"Then together we shall fly to the east, discover a new land, and raise our family." He took her

hand in the darkness. She stood, pressing her body against his.

"I chose wisely." She covered his neck with wet kisses.

"I have been awakened," Donovan said. "We fly tonight under the cover of darkness. Leave behind this village with its antiquated notions of magic. Except for one thing—we will take my brother Mestifito with us. I cannot bear to be parted from him."

"Anything you desire my love. Anything."

Pia's screams ripped through the otherwise peaceful Hutton's Bridge. Bastian sat on a log with Connor, wringing his hands.

"I don't remember it taking so long when Farah was born," Bastian said. He looked toward the village hall, which had served as an inn before the fog had fallen over their village.

"With our youngest, Calvin, it took three days." Connor patted Bastian's shoulder. "Don't worry. Pia and the babe will both be fine."

Bastian was grateful for the soothing words. Unfortunately, he knew as well as Connor did that childbirth could be like a battle. There were no guarantees anyone would get out alive. Pia's continuous shrieks did nothing to alleviate his concerns. Granted, the woman could be dramatic at times. But Pia's screams were genuine pain.

Though their affair had lasted only one night, Bastian did care for the former prostitute. She had carried his child to term when she could have easily ended the pregnancy. She had given up her livelihood to travel to Hutton's Bridge and live in the fog with the refugee children and the caretakers.

Not without voicing her irritation at least once a day, of course. Bastian chuckled. Pia spent the majority of her time grouching, but not once did she ask to be returned to Ashoom. She was settling to the calm of everyday life with them.

The Dragonlands had been quiet in the months since Connor destroyed the Red castle. Almost too quiet. Bastian couldn't shake the feeling something was still out there hunting them. He refused to let his guard down. Maybe he never would. Months of peace could not erase the destruction he had witnessed since leaving Hutton's Bridge through the fog a couple of years ago. Nor could it change the prophecy the Green dragons so strongly believed in.

The Green still considered him their warlord, sending him messages via pigeon at least once a week. Bastian read them, then tossed the parchment in the fire. He had no use for their prophecies or their pleas to meet with them. Instead, he hid in Hutton's Bridge, waiting. For what, he did not know. In the meantime, it seemed right to be with his daughter and the mother of his soon-to-be-born babe.

Another wail interrupted his thoughts, followed by a separate cry, high-pitched and demanding.

"It's here." Bastian stood, wiping his damp hands on his pants. He hadn't realized how nervous he'd gotten as time passed.

"Go on," Connor said, hugging his friend. "Find out if you have a son or another daughter."

Bastian jogged toward the village hall, passing the children who played ball. He waved to his daughter, Farah. She dropped the ball, kissed Vatra, Connor's dragonling, on the cheek, and ran to her father.

"Is it time now, Papa?" Farah slipped her hand in his. It wasn't so small anymore. At five, she was growing so quickly Bastian could hardly keep up with all of the changes. Her blond curls bounced over her shoulders.

"Yes, didn't you hear the baby cry?" Bastian gave Farah's chin a light pinch.

She laughed. "No, I was too busy playing ball. My team was winning!"

"Of course they were," Bastian said. "Kurt made all the little ones play on the opposite team. You're lucky he let you play on his."

"It's because he's sweet on me, Papa. Someday Kurt and I are going to be married. Then I'll be like Pia and have a baby!"

"Don't even think about that now. You're just a little girl." In less than ten years, she'd be old enough to have children of her own. Bastian couldn't wrap his mind around it. She seemed so young, but in a world where people rarely lived past forty due to disease or battle, they had to live hard and fast.

The two made their way into the inn. Bastian peeked in the doorway. "Can we come in? Farah and I want to see the newest addition to our family."

"Of course! Please!" Hazel, Connor's wife, pulled the door open all the way. "Pia is doing great and so is your baby."

"Boy or girl?" Bastian asked as he followed Hazel through the common room and up the steps to the bedroom.

"You'll see for yourself," Hazel said. She pointed to the first door on the left. "There they are."

Farah burst past them into the room, but Hazel grabbed Bastian's elbow. "Yes?" he asked her.

"Be gentle with Pia. The birth was very difficult. She needs help, Bastian. I need to know now if you will be the one to give it or if the healers and I will need to step up."

Bastian looked at Hazel with wide eyes. He hadn't expected that question. When Vinya gave birth to Farah, she'd been up the next day cooking and cleaning. Bastian shouldn't have been surprised after all of Pia's screaming. And yet, he hadn't given a moment's thought to Pia's health, just the baby's.

"I will do whatever is necessary," Bastian said. "My duties around Hutton's Bridge are light. As long as I have someone to supplement care while I attend to chores, I think I will be able to do what is needed."

Hazel's soft smile warmed his heart. He'd said the right thing. Now he just needed to live up to it.

"Thank you, Bastian," she said. "You're a good man. Not many men would ask a prostitute to keep their child, much less take care of her after the birth. Especially considering..."

Hazel didn't need to finish the sentence. Bastian knew she was thinking of Tressa, just as Bastian did every moment of every day. He hadn't seen her since the battle on the Isle of Repose. Still, he couldn't stop wondering how she was since Connor had taken her to the Black in the Charred Barrens after finding her nearly dead in the snow of the Barrier Mountains.

He could have gone to her, and yet he chose to stay in Hutton's Bridge.

Bastian took a deep breath, then stepped into the room. Pia lay in bed, covered to her waist with blankets, the babe cradled in her arms as it suckled on her breast. Farah stood next to them, cooing at her new sibling, her hand gently stroking its head.

"Bastian," Pia said, her eyes droopy and tired. "Come in and meet your son."

He stepped quietly to the side of the bed. The little boy's head was covered in flaming red hair. A lump formed in Bastian's throat. A son. A perfect little brother for Farah. The little boy's mouth was wrapped around Pia's breast, taking his first meal.

"He's strong like his father." Pia gazed up at Bastian, her eyes asking a question he wasn't ready to answer.

He could make no promises to her, even though she'd given birth to his son. Bastian would never marry unless it was for love. His first marriage to Vinya had been purely for the survival of the people of Hutton's Bridge. He'd experienced love with Tressa, and he refused to settle for anything less.

He did not love Pia. They both knew it. Even a moment like this wouldn't change his mind.

"Can I hold him?" Bastian asked after the boy had unlatched from his mother.

Pia offered the baby to Bastian. A small trail of breast milk seeped from the side of his mouth. Bastian wiped it with the blanket his son was swaddled in.

"He needs a name, Papa," Farah said. "Can we call him Goat? I love goats! They're my favorite. And he kinda sounds like one with those silly noises he makes."

Bastian ruffled Farah's hair with his free hand. "No, we aren't naming him Goat." He looked to Pia. "Do you have a name you'd like to give him?"

She shook her head. "He is your son, Bastian. You should name him."

Bastian looked down at the little baby, his mouth set in a blissful smile and his eyes gently closed. "I'd like to name him after my uncle. He was the physic here in Hutton's Bridge. He cared for everyone from birth to the grave. Adam. What do you think?"

Pia smiled. "I like that."

"It's not as good as Goat," Farah said, a scowl on her face.

"Adam," Bastian said. "It's settled. Your name is Adam."

To show his appreciation, baby Adam spit up, leaving milk all over Bastian's sleeve.

"I think he hates it!" Farah said, laughing. "Should have named him Goat."

Bastian wiped his son's chin again, purposely ignoring Farah. He wished he could feel as light as she did, but the reality of the world outside Hutton's Bridge weighed heavy on his heart. Bastian hoped his son would grow up in a Dragonlands filled with peace, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something out there was watching them.

Tressa lay in bed, her head resting on a fluffy pillow. Her dark hair spread out in a fan. Her hands were in fists at her sides. Her eyes were squeezed shut so tightly that her tears had nowhere to go.

"You must get up," Granna insisted. "You can't wallow down here forever."

"I can," Tressa responded. "And I will."

"You lost your dragon. Fi is dead. Jarrett is missing. Bastian is having a child with another woman. I know all of these things are making it difficult to get out of bed and put one foot in front of the other, but you must." Granna shook Tressa's shoulders. When that failed to rouse her, Granna tugged on her hair.

"Ow!" Tressa exclaimed as she shot upright. She opened her swollen, stinging eyes, and glared at her great-grandmother. "That was uncalled for."

"That is the least of what you deserve," Granna said. She stood and paced Tressa's room. "When you arrived in the middle of the night all those months ago, I was sure we'd lost you for good. When you plummeted into that cave, crashing in a heap, legs folded under you, wings broken and bloody, I thought that was the end. But, no, Tressa, you changed back into a human. You healed."

"And I've never changed into my dragon again," she said, bitterness lacing her words. "It's gone."

"You thought it was gone forever when you were in Desolation, but it came back. Why not again?" Granna asked. She stopped her pacing to pour two cups of tea.

Tressa took one, wrapping her hands around the delicate porcelain. Warmth spread up her arms. "It feels different this time. I feel... empty."

"That could just be your emotions." Granna settled in a chair carved from an old tree stump. "You've been through so much since leaving Hutton's Bridge a couple years ago. Now that you've had time to catch your breath, you're bound to feel different."

"It's not that," Tressa said. "You know it as well as I do. The dragon is gone. Forever. Whatever Donovan did to me in Desolation is now permanent. He claimed I could regain my dragon by drinking dragon blood, but we both know that isn't the case. My teeth are stained pink from all of the dragon blood I've drunk since coming back here." Tressa's lips curled backward, to show her great-grandmother.

Granna sighed. "I know, I know. We have tried everything in our power to help you, Tressa. You have two choices. You can continue to drink and hope that one day you will sprout wings again, or you can choose to give up on the dragon and be just as you were before. You spent most of your life without a dragon. You can go back to who you were. There was nothing wrong with who you were before."

Tressa threw the teacup at the wall. It shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. "I don't want to be who I was before leaving Hutton's Bridge." She thought back to the meek girl who was hopelessly in love with a boy she could never have. That girl didn't know how to fight. That girl hadn't traveled the length and breadth of the Dragonlands and passed over the Barrier Mountains into Desolation. That girl was a memory. She might as well be dead.

"I need my dragon back. Otherwise what good am I? Do you expect me to work in textile weaving belts and ropes again? After everything I've done!" Tressa fell on the bed, crushing a pillow to her face. She took deep shuddering breaths, her chest heaving. "I can't go back. I can't."

"There's no shame in weaving," Granna said. "It's an honorable trade."

Tressa smeared her tears onto the pillow and sat up once more. She frowned. "I know that. I don't want to go back to what I used to love weaving. All I wanted was to marry Bastian, have a family, and live a quiet life."

"And now?" Granna asked. She blew on her hot tea. "What do you want now?"

"I want my dragon. I want Fi to be alive and back with Sarah. I want Jarrett to break whatever magical bonds hold him in thrall. I want..."

She couldn't say Bastian. Not anymore. She'd given him up a long time ago. Still, when she heard he was having a child with another woman, she couldn't help but think of the night she'd told him about the child she'd lost. His child. The one they'd wanted for so long. She remembered how he'd taken her in his arms, kissed her, and helped her to heal that hole in her heart. Unfortunately, that night had reopened a door she'd long thought closed. Part of her ached again for the redhead who had captivated her for so many years. "You didn't send word to Connor about Bastian, did you? That's how I know he's alive?"

Granna shook her head. "I did as you asked. I will not tell."

"Good," Tressa said. "At least one thing has gone right. Bastian doesn't need to think of me like that anymore. We both should move on."

"Exactly." Granna set down her teacup and stood. "Now move on, Tressa. Get up. I will not allow you to lie here any longer. I've let this go on for far too long. Up, I said. Up!"

Tressa groaned. Granna wouldn't leave her alone until Tressa did as she asked. Tressa swung her legs over the side of the bed and let her feet fall on the wooden floor. She stood, straightening out her bedclothes. "There. Happy?"

"Not yet. I want you to head down to the bath, clean up, and get dressed." Granna swept out of the room with the confidence of someone who knew she had gotten her way.

Tressa wrapped herself in a robe. She yanked a dress and a pair of stockings from the wardrobe and then made her way to the bath. She opened the door. Billowing clouds of steam greeted her, the moist

air enveloping her in warm arms. Tressa took a deep breath and entered.

A few women sat at the edge of the pool of water, submerged up to their knees. They cleaned the limbs with sponges while talking amongst themselves. When they looked up and saw who entered, the talk stopped.

Tressa's heart fell to her feet. Sarah. They'd only spoken once since Tressa had returned, wounded to the Ruins of Ebon. When Sarah learned Fi had likely died in the fallen Red castle, she'd spun on her heel and left. Tressa never had a chance to tell her how much Fi loved her wife and wanted to come home to her. Instead, Sarah avoided Tressa as if she carried the plague.

"Can we talk?" Tressa asked her.

The other two women looked expectantly at Sarah, who eventually nodded. "Go," Sarah told them. "I need to do this."

Tressa waited until they left before settling on the bench next to Sarah. "I can tell you anything you want to know."

Sarah didn't speak for what felt like an eternity. The two women simply stared at each other. "Do you love her, too?" Sarah finally asked.

"I did," Tressa said, "but not in the way you think. Fi and I weren't in love. We were like sisters. The dearest of friends. It broke my heart when I realized she was likely under the rubble. I dug until my talons bled. I am so, so sorry I couldn't find her. They wouldn't let us dig further for her body."

"Is it true? Was there really a giant beast hiding under the Red castle?" Sarah asked.

Tressa thought of Decarian. To her, he wasn't dead. His fierce grimace, four horns, and frightening muscles still haunted her dreams. "Yes, I saw him myself. Fi was trying to save all of the Dragonland from him and his minions."

Tears welled up in Sarah's eyes. "She had this damn overconfidence, always thinking she could save everyone. When she took off for Malum the first time, when she first saved you and your friends, I thought I'd never see her again. But she came back. Then she left for battle in the north. Again, she returned to me, even just briefly before going back to..."

"To me?" Tressa asked. "Oh, Sarah, it was never about me. Fi had wanderlust in her soul. She wanted to conquer all of the bad in the world so that someday she could live out her old age with you in a land no longer beset by war. She did everything for you."

Sarah's tears burst forth, rolling down her cheeks like a river breaking through a dam. She wiped them away with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to believe it, but I feared she'd fallen for another. I could handle Fi leaving for war. I couldn't handle the thought that perhaps she died with the name of another on her lips."

"No," Tressa said, scooting closer to her friend's widow. "She loved you and only you, Sarah. I wouldn't lie about this. Please, believe me."

"I do." Sarah took Tressa's hand in hers. "Thank you. And I'm so sorry I wasn't strong enough to talk to you about it before now. I was afraid to face my fears. I didn't want them confirmed."

"I understand," Tressa said. She really did. It was the same reason she wouldn't send word

Bastian. She wasn't sure what she wanted from him, but she couldn't face his rejection all the same. Emotions were a silly thing, carrying far too much weight.

Sarah stood and dried off. "Maybe in time I'll want to hear stories about Fi. The things she did. Desolation. The battles she fought and won."

"I'd like to tell them," Tressa said, though she felt it would be a long time before she'd be able to talk about their night in the catacombs. Fear still ripped through her when she remembered all she'd faced and the comrades she'd lost.

"We'll talk soon, then." Sarah leaned down and kissed Tressa on the cheek. "Thank you, again." She gathered up her dirty clothes in one arm, leaving Tressa alone in the damp bathing room.

Tressa tossed off her robe, sank into the pool, and let the water soften the sadness of the last few months. The world was safe again. There was no sign of Decarian near the rubble of the Red castle. Yet Tressa didn't feel at peace. She had no idea what to do with the rest of her life now that she had no one to fight.

After the gong rang, signaling the burning of the day's final candle, Tressa snuck up from the Ruins of Ebon into the dark night. During the months she'd spent hidden in the great underground city she'd befriended many domestic workers, and they had been more than willing to spill their secrets to her.

When the city was built, the Black's greatest concern was hiding from the rest of the Dragonlands. It wasn't meant to be easy to access their city, and many steps were taken to control entry points. Except for one. The refuse tunnel. Covered in filth from years of moving garbage and waste through the rocky shaft, few dared to travel that way. The stink alone was enough to deter all but the most tenacious, and the layers of slime added insult to an already disgusting journey.

Tressa didn't mind. If she could slip out unnoticed, that was all that mattered. Inside the city she was separated from the one thing that gave her hope and comfort. Her ghost dragons. They had remained outside the city to protect her, hiding from anyone who might see them.

Upon returning to human form, her greatest fear had been that she wouldn't be able to see them anymore. Fi couldn't. Donovan couldn't. The people of Desolation couldn't. But Connor did. In the haze of starlight and snow, he had seen glimpses of her dragons in the night sky.

So far, Tressa hadn't lost them, but she went outside to sit with Alden and the others at least once a week, just in case. Alden told her stories of their days in Hutton's Bridge, before they were tricked into leaving their children behind. Before they were killed and their bodies turned to stone in Desolation. Before she rescued them with her blood.

If anyone had come upon her, they would have seen only a woman in her nightclothes, sitting on the ground, staring at the stars. The ghosts remained hidden from the rest of the world. Only Tressa could see them as clearly as if they stood before her.

Yet if Connor could see them in the right light, anyone else might, too. So Tressa did her best to protect the ghosts from the world by never mentioning them to anyone—not even Granna. It was a secret she held close to her heart. It reminded her she was once a great dragon herself. She had done great deeds.

In the end, though, it was Connor who had saved the Dragonlands by bringing down the Red castle

and trapping Decarian and his minions under the depths of the rubble. Tressa had done nothing but travel to another land in a futile search for answers that never materialized.

We flew to Hutton's Bridge again last night, Alden told her, his voice echoing in her mind, even though she was no longer a dragon. The babe has been born. It was a boy.

Tressa couldn't help but smile. So Bastian had a son now. A son and a daughter. Tressa knew he would be thrilled. He had always wanted a large brood. He and Tressa had dreamed about it, their fingers interlaced, his lips on her neck. She'd wanted to give him a family. Thanks to her great-grandmother's herbs, she hadn't been able to conceive. True, Granna had been trying to hide the dragon blood that coursed through Tressa's veins, but it had also been a blow to Tressa's confidence. Unable to bear children, she was useless to the people in her village, and they had treated her as such.

Are you sad, Tressa? Alden asked. *I thought you'd be happy to know life continues on in Hutton's Bridge.*

She choked back her tears. The world had moved on without her. Tressa felt as if she were stuck in the past with Jarrett and Fi. Perhaps part of her had died with them. The part of her that was still alive didn't know where to go next.

No, I am happy, she insisted. As long as Hutton's Bridge continues to thrive, there is a chance for all of us.

And it was true. The rest of the Dragonlands saw Hutton's Bridge as a beacon of hope. If they could survive, then so could everyone else. The tiny town's adult population had been wiped out twice, yet its lineage continued to flower.

Is the fog still up? she asked Alden.

He nodded. *I do not know why, though. If the Dragonlands are safe, then why hide? It is time for them to emerge.*

Tressa looked up at the sky again. The stars sparkled. The moon hung in all its glory, at the peak of its fullness. Tressa sighed and leaned into Alden further. She couldn't feel him, not in the way she could another human, but still, it gave her comfort knowing his wispy form surrounded her.

Perhaps they will leave the fog soon, Tressa said.

Perhaps you should go home and see them.

Alden's reply annoyed her. Tressa knew what they all wanted. Even Granna had urged her to visit the place of her birth and see her friends. Everyone thought it would bring healing to Tressa. She knew the opposite would be true. Seeing Bastian with his new woman and their baby would only rip her heart in two once again. Yes, she'd thought the last time they were together was only a reflection of the past. Being away from everyone had proved her wrong. Once she found out Bastian was alive, she knew her feelings for him were stronger than she'd admitted. Now that Jarrett was gone, likely dead under the rubble, nothing stood between them. Except this woman and her baby.

No, Tressa wouldn't go to Hutton's Bridge. She wouldn't stand in the way of Bastian's new family. Nor would she go there and hang about Connor and Hazel. They, too, needed time to rebuild their lives together. She would stay in the Ruins of Ebon. She would find her own way eventually.

Tressa tilted her chin up, gazing into the sky. The stars' beauty washed over her, bring a hint of peace to her wounded heart. Perhaps she could find peace. Maybe time would heal the wounds of the past few years.

A shadow flitted over the moon. Tressa blinked. It was just a bird, or maybe one of the other ghost dragons in flight. Then it happened again. Another shadow.

Tressa stood, as if that would get her closer to the moon. Her neck craned and her eyes squinted as she tried to make out the shape now undulating over the moon. Terror awakened in her belly, a feeling she thought she'd left behind in the catacombs of Desolation.

No. It couldn't be. Not a shade.

It flitted across the sky, blotting out the stars one by one until the blackness of night was once again punctuated by the moon. Then everything began to change.

The pure white of the moon dissolved into crimson spots until it was completely covered in red.

"What is that?" she asked aloud.

Alden and the other dragons looked to the sky.

It is a blood moon, Alden said. I have seen it only one other time.

When? Tressa asked.

Not when, but where, Alden said. In a book in Hutton's Bridge. A book the elders burned when I was just a young boy. It foretold of the destruction of the Dragonlands. The elders said it was nonsense, just the ramblings of a sick man. I believed them. I put it out of my mind. But it appears I wasn't a lie.

A strange, dripping noise punctuated the quiet night. Tressa held out a hand. She was quickly rewarded. Something dripped onto her. Drop after drop. She brought her hand to her nose and flinched at the coppery scent.

"Blood," she said, horror creeping into every corner of her body. "It's raining blood. I'm sorry, Alden. I need to tell Granna and Mestifito. Stay safe out here. We don't know what is coming."

If the stories are to be believed, the end is coming, my dear Tressa. But we will not go down without a fight.

Bastian stood at the window while Pia and baby Adam slept. He'd spent the last three nights sharing a bed with Pia, Adam sleeping between them. Pia had refrained from making any affectionate moves toward him, and he was grateful. Bastian wouldn't have wanted to reject her so soon after Adam's birth. He only hoped this was a sign Pia had finally realized he wasn't interested in her.

He gazed toward the south, as if he could see all the way to the Charred Barrens and underground to the Ruins of Ebon. Tressa was down there somewhere. She hadn't come to Hutton's Bridge, and he had no plans to go to her. They had spent so much time purposely avoiding each other. If their paths crossed, he would talk to her. But, now he had to take care of the new babe and his mother. He owed Pia that much. When Vinya gave birth to Farah he hadn't lifted a finger to help. He'd claimed childbirth was women's business. In reality, he hadn't been ready to admit he was still heartbroken over losing Tressa and being forced to marry Vinya.

Today he did the right thing in caring for the two who slept so peacefully in the bed. He would deal with his feelings for Tressa another day.

As Bastian was about to turn away, a shadow fell across the window. He looked up in the sky, startled to see it had gone completely black. The stars were gone. The moon was awash in a menacing red glow. Bastian squinted at the sky, then rushed out of the room and down the stairs to the common room.

Connor sat in a chair by the fire, a pipe between his lips. "What is it?"

Bastian didn't answer. He ran past his friend and to the door.

"Bastian!" Connor followed close on his heels.

Bastian flung the door open and ran out into the night. He was greeted by a light rain. The water dripped down his face and onto his shirt.

"It's only rain," Connor said, laughing as he stood in the doorway. "Are we so easily spooked by a small storm cloud now?"

Bastian held out a hand. The water felt strangely thick. He turned back toward the village hall, holding his palm toward the flickering light of the fire. "This is no simple rain. Look."

Connor grabbed Bastian's hand, examining it more closely. "No. It can't be."

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