

## Reecah's Gift



A fortnight had passed since that horrific day in Dragonfang Pass—a day that had witnessed the annihilation of the Draakclaw Colony from Dragon Home. All except for the three dragons waiting for her to pull herself together and get on with her life.

Every passing day since Grimclaw's death filled Reecah with crushing guilt over her role in the beautiful creature's demise. She should never have left him, no matter how vehemently he insisted she save herself. Grimelda said her role was to save the dragons—not run away and allow the obliteration of the colony.

Confounding her melancholy were the faces of the two knights she had killed in the courtyard of the Dragon Temple. Visions of their blood dripping from her sword woke her in a cold sweat, night after sleepless night.

In contrast to her unease, her companion, Raver, casually pruned his feathers—his shiny raven’s head pecking away at whatever irritated him. She envied him his simple pleasures—admiring the way he had moved on after such a traumatic event.

Dust motes shimmered in sunbeams shining through the solitary window in the cabin below Peril’s Peak, despite the grime coating its thick glass.

Had she planned on remaining at the dragon hunt camp, she would have turned her attention to tidying up the slovenly interior. If not for her fear of the owners returning to lay claim to their property, Reecah fancied she might have been content to start a new life high atop the world.

Lying on a crude pallet with her hands behind her head, she grimaced. If only life were that simple.

A clamour outside the cabin’s lone door made her sit up. The dragons were scuffling about, impatiently waiting for her to pull herself together and decide on their course of action.

Something about the sunshine flooding the hut melted away her languishing despair. It looked to be a glorious day. Perhaps that was the omen she had been waiting for. A reminder of her pledge—not only to Grimelda, but to dragonkind as well.

They had outstayed their welcome. The king’s men had seen them escape the battle at the Dragon Temple. They would no doubt be searching the area. It wouldn’t do to tarry under their noses.

Reecah shuddered. If the burning intensity on the face of the wizard she had seen at the Dragon Temple was any indication of his determination, her scaly friends were in peril anywhere near Fishmonger Bay.

It was time to put aside her guilt. A dragon war had been set into motion. Facing certain death at the Dragon Temple, she had vowed to avenge Grimclaw's death. To remain mired in self-recrimination was a grave injustice to the noble wynn's sacrifice. It was time to make good on her promise.

She stretched her neck one way and then the other, raising her arms overhead and taking a last deep breath of peaceful solitude. Pulling on black suede boots, she jumped to her feet to gather her gear.

Silence had risked her life returning to the forest between the Dragon Temple and Dragon Home to retrieve her discarded equipment. Thankful, Reecah slipped her quiver over her shoulder and secured her unstrung bow to her rucksack before shrugging it on.

Pausing at the door, her gaze fell on the large table at the centre of the hut. A smirk tightened her lips at the irony. Wait until Jonas and his lackeys discovered who had sheltered at their dragon hunt camp. Reecah Draakvriend. She tilted her head, smiling a little deeper as she corrected herself. Reecah Windwalker, the hill witch, had sheltered here—along with three dragons. If only she could stick around to see the look on their faces.

The door opened with a squeal, drawing the attention of her new friends, Lurker, Swoop, and Silence—green, brown and purple dragonlings, respectively. Judging by their sheepish looks, they were up to something.

Allowing Raver to fly through the open door, she let it slam back into its frame. The raven made his way to the tiered waterfall cascading from the snow-capped peak behind the hut.

Drawing her brown cloak around her and slipping on its hood, she raised her eyebrows to stare at the green dragon. "Well, are you going to tell me, or do I have to figure it out myself?"

Lurker lowered his head, his emerald eyes alight with mischief. He glanced at his cohorts.

Reecah almost vomited when the dragons parted to reveal the remains of more than one shredded troll's carcass. She turned away from the mound of hairy gore. "Do you have to eat those here? That's disgusting."

"*Sorry, Reecah. We didn't think you'd be up and about,*" Lurker said—his voice sounding in her head. He motioned for Swoop and Silence to get rid of it.

It was a fair assumption. She had become less and less social as the days went by. She waved a hand. "Ugh. Leave it. It's time for us to leave."

The dragons considered the carcasses, obviously not done with them yet. While Lurker and Silence ambled over to Reecah, Swoop snapped up a last chunk of troll flesh; noisily chewing it.

Reecah winced at the sound of bones snapping. The brown dragon swallowed, offering her a bloody-toothed grin. It was going to be an adjustment getting used to the habits of her new companions.

Lurker accompanied Reecah to the edge of the cliff fronting the field around the cabin; following her gaze over the rugged terrain to where the land abutted the glimmering ocean many leagues away. "*Where're you going?*"

The question threw Reecah. "Are you not coming with me?"

Silence and Swoop joined them—all three dragons avoiding her hazel eyes.

"What? I thought we agreed? We need to convince the high king that his mandate to eradicate dragonkind is not an acceptable solution to settling our differences." She paused, staring at each of them individually. They refused to meet her gaze.

She grasped Lurker by the chin, forcing him to look at her. "You can't be serious. I need you."

A sadness came through in his voice. *“I’m sorry, Reecah. We’ve struggled with this. Dragon Home is our colony. We can’t abandon it in its darkest hour.”*

“But...but...” Reecah searched the faces of the others. They nodded, confirming Lurker’s words. “There’s nothing there for you but death. Dragon Home is destroyed. Everyone is dead.”

*“We don’t know that.”*

“Silence went back and scouted the area.” She turned to implore the purple dragon. “You said no one was left alive.”

Silence bowed her head.

Reecah returned her attention to Lurker. “If you go back, you risk being killed yourself...”

She spun to face the drop-off. “Damn it!”

She had promised herself not to cry anymore. She must be strong if she wanted to face the high king. Wiping her cheeks, she turned back to her friends. “It would kill me if something happened to you.”

*“We feel the same way about you, pretty Reecah. Nevertheless, we cannot leave our home. Besides, our presence will likely hinder you. You won’t make it anywhere near the castle with us at your side.”*

“Then I’m going back to Dragon Home with you.”

Lurker glanced at his dragonkind, shaking his head. *“That we cannot allow. You’re the last Windwalker. Grimclaw pledged Draakclaw Colony’s allegiance to you. We forbid your return to the killing zone.”*

Reecah didn’t want to vent her frustration on her companions but she had no one else. Sounding off at Raver wouldn’t be nearly the same. Lifting her chin, she straightened her shoulders and tried to cast them a stern look. “If you’re supposed to obey me, then I command that you take me with you.”

As soon as she said it, she hated herself. Who was she to order *anyone*, let alone three dragons who had lost everything? She, of all people, knew what that was like.

“I’m sorry. That was wrong of me. I won’t order you to do anything you don’t want. Please forgive me.”

*“You’re a Windwalker. Of course we’ll do as you command,”* Swoop said, looking at the other two, who nodded. *“But we respectfully ask you not to come. If Grimclaw’s death is to mean anything, you must go to your king and plead our case before there aren’t any dragons left in the world.”*

The dragon faces blurred before her. Her tears flowed freely but she didn’t care. Let them exhaust themselves so that she could move on. Unable to speak past the lump in her throat, she kept her eyes on the ground at her feet.

A soft breeze wafted up the mountainside, ruffling her cloak and blowing her brown hair in front of her face. A hawk’s call echoed off the peak.

Lurker nuzzled his face against her stomach, almost sending her stumbling over the brink. *“Remember what you said to Silence in Dragon Home?”*

Reecah shook her head. She couldn’t think beyond the moment.

*“We’ll always be here for you. No matter what happens.”* Lurker nuzzled his snout beneath her left breast. *“As long as you feel us here, we’ll always be together.”*

His words gave her goosebumps. He’d remembered. Those were words spoken by Poppa a lifetime ago. Instead of pacifying her, it made her cry harder.

Shoulders shaking, she smiled and laughed through her tears, half spitting as she spoke. “Oh, great. Now look what you’ve done. Come here.”

She wrapped her arms around Lurker’s head and held him close. Eyeing Silence and Swoop on either side, she motioned for them to lean closer. Arms stretched wide, she included them in the embrace.

“I pledge to you with my last breath, today marks the end of silence. From this day forth, the Great Kingdom shall know we will no longer suffer the people’s prejudice.”

She sniffled loudly and squeezed their heads together. “I will never forget you.”

She kissed Lurker’s cheek and laid her head against the top of his nose. “Especially you, my dear friend. Thank you for allowing me into your circle of trust.”

“Circle of trust! Circle of trust!” Raver landed on top of one of Lurker’s horns, surprisingly gripping it the first time with his mangled toes.

Reecah looked up at the crazy bird and laughed, her heart warming despite the fact it had just broken.