# THE FINAL TRUTH

DRAGONERA: THE DARK ONE CHRONICLES BOOK 7

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# CHAPTER 1 - A CHILD

Planet Earth.

Home to humans, dragons, elves, dwarves, harpies, and countless others. The world where all life was born and where all life eventually ends. Our Mother Earth.

Earth had changed.

What once was a collection of different landmasses had been merged into a supercontinent given a simple name: Tera. For those who had known the world before its formation, an event that would one day be called "The Merging", life had become a living hell. Everything that humanity had built and achieved in its recorded history had been effortlessly erased. Entire cultures, cities, and natural wonders were lost. Sections of the old world that were once completely dry sank beneath newly formed lakes and the massive super ocean surrounding Tera.

But those lost to the depths of the ocean were the lucky ones.

Humanity's greatest feats and wonders — castles, monuments, entire cities and nations — had been eradicated from the face of the Earth. Sure, there were still small traces of the old

world, like shattered skyscrapers and abandoned suburbs that somehow avoided being swallowed by the destruction. But the scars from The Merging would never fully heal.

The governments of the world had been wiped out. President Burke died within the first hour, as did nearly every other leader before the formation was complete. Because they had become so numerous, humanity's numbers took the heaviest toll. Over a third of the population died within the first moments of Tera's formation. Over two billion people dead within seconds.

Tera, or rather those who now ruled it, had no trouble in slaughtering even more humans. Six billion would soon become four, over half of the original population dead in just four years. Eventually, that number soon fell to a measly one million. With so few left to fight back, they stood no chance at mounting a revolution against their new oppressors.

The survivors were given two options: submit or die. Submission meant serving the Dark Eye for the rest of their days, doing its master's bidding and praising the Wyrm. Resistance meant swift, brutal death or forced submission through slavery.

Tera brought Hell to Earth. Both for those who remembered the days before "The Merging" and especially for those born into this new reality.

This was the world that she was born into.

At just four years old, the little girl knew just two things. Her parents and their harsh life. She had no idea what the old world was like, only the tales her parents told to soothe her pain and suffering.

She didn't completely understand their stories, but she clung to their words like a glimmer of hope in her heart. Hope that there was some kind of better life waiting for them, like the

old one her parents knew. To her, that world seemed like paradise.

In this harsh and hellish world, the only comfort that she knew was the warmth of her parents. Though they didn't have much, scrounging and scraping just to survive, they'd learned to manage what little they had to give her the smallest comfort.

Her father, a man of few words and kind hands, worked on the massive black monument she'd been born under. Every day, he was dragged away from the comfort of his family and forced to work on the monument. In the moments when he wasn't working, he fought to bring what scraps of food he could from what little the guards gave out. It wasn't much, but it kept starvation at bay.

Her mother was a kind-hearted woman who did her best to keep her comforted. With so little of their own, she had to make do and learn new survival skills in order to keep going. When Father returned home, she stitched the wounds he received from the guard's whip, and the cuts he suffered working on sharp rocks all day. When he was away, she snatched up what fabrics she could find or scavenged from fallen slaves in order to attempt making new clothes for their daughter. They weren't much, just rags stitched together, but they were made with love for her little girl, the one small brightness in the dark she had.

The little girl wasn't exempt from hard labor, either. From a young age, she was forced to break rocks with a hammer that was far too big for her to lift. The first day she was forced to work, they beat her across the face when she refused. Once she was beaten into submission, she failed to pick up the hammer, resulting in another beating. The pain she felt from those beatings was so foreign that she spent hours crying after. But as time went on, she learned to bear the pain and not cry out. Crying only brought more beatings from the guards.

In just four years, she learned how to suppress her pain and tears, all in the name of building giant stone statues of people she'd never seen before. All toward some grander scheme she couldn't, and didn't want to, understand.

Each new day brought harder challenges that make life even more hellish than it had been the day before. For the little girl and her family, it became as normal to them as waking up and going to sleep. But for others, the slaves that couldn't take it anymore, escape was the only desperate choice left. Those who tried to run away were immediately shot down by sharp sticks from the air that made a *whooshing* sound. Those who died that way were the lucky ones. Any that dodged the sharp sticks were chased down and killed by four-legged crawling monsters that jumped from the walls to attack their prey.

The first time she saw the monsters, the little girl screamed until her throat was raw as blood flowed across the arid ground beneath their feet. She nearly ended up being killed by the monsters that day, only saved when her father picked her up and rushed her away from the gruesome scene. The image of the monsters' faces, blood spilling from their teeth and mouths, would haunt her for the rest of her days.

Every new challenge pushed her and her small family to their breaking point. Her first summer was so hot that she nearly died of heat exhaustion. The first winter was even worse. Her family cuddled together in the middle of the night to stay warm beneath a single ragged, patchwork blanket. It was a miracle that she even survived, but, by some unseen and unknown providence, she made it over and over again.

The stories that her mother told her about the old world were the most comfort she had during those dark days. She told her stories of giant metal things called 'buildings' and how there were once green fields where little children could run

around and play. How there were once bodies of water called lakes, oceans, and rivers that people could swim in, or even drink from. The stories may have been a small comfort, but they brought some ease to her weary soul every time she learned about the magical, wonderful world her parents once knew.

It seemed like things would never change for them.

One night, however, as she laid down to try to get some sleep, her curious mind couldn't help but wander. The day had been extra hard, as more and more of her friends became too sick to walk. Was she going to be next? Would she get so sick she couldn't walk, or would she become something the crawling monsters chewed on?

Panic settled in as her thoughts continued racing.

Suddenly, a new sound caught her attention. The sound of her parents' voices. She had gotten used to them talking to one another like this during the night, but this time was different. They were speaking in hushed whispers, and even though she could barely make out what they were saying, their words seemed frantic. Like they were scared or nervous about something.

And although she knew she should sleep, for tomorrow was sure to be harder than today, she couldn't help her curiosity. Drawing closer, she picked up what seemed to be the tail end of their conversation.

"Are you sure about this?" Mother asked in a worried tone. "You know what happens when people try to escape."

"I am." Father replied in a tone that was both certain and shaky. "It took me some time, but I was finally able to get it."

"And you're certain that this can help?"

"It could be the start of ending it, yes. All we have to do is get out of here and find the resistance."

"The resistance?" Mother scoffed with a joyless little laugh. "What has the resistance accomplished in ten years?"

"They're the only ones fighting back against the Dark Eye and that monster."

"Fighting back? They've done nothing but hide away while the rest of us suffer and die!"

"Humanity isn't the only one that is at a threat of being wiped out! You know that."

"What have they done for us here, love? The people here suffer! They're enslaved, beaten, and killed! What has the resistance done to help us?"

"You know what we're up against!" Father's tone turned grim.

"But we still suffer. Our DAUGHTER suffers!"

The little girl hid behind a medium-sized rock. She couldn't understand the gravity of the conversation they were having, but she could tell from Mother's voice that it was something awful and frightening.

"It's precisely because of our daughter that I am telling you we have to attempt to get out of here!" Father said. "She's only four. She doesn't deserve this kind of life."

"None of us deserve it. But yet we're here, love."

"I'm aware. But if you had an opportunity to escape with her, to get a better life wouldn't you take it? Wouldn't you do anything in your power so that she could have proper food? Water? A bed that isn't covered in rags?!"

The little girl couldn't help but flinch at the sound of her parents' voices. It wasn't like she wasn't used to the sound of angry yelling. She heard it constantly from the slavers. But to hear her own mother and father sounding so angry at one another brought silent tears to her eyes.

"You know damn well that if I could give her the opportu-

nity to have a better life outside of this hellhole, I would." Mother said, a quiver of shame in her voice.

"We do have that opportunity though." Father insisted. "We have a way to finally end this madness! To free the world from that damn thing in the sky."

The little girl shuddered. She knew too-well what "that damn thing in the sky" was.

The colossal, slithering monster in the sky. There were days when they looked up and all they could see was its body. And on days where its giant head came into view, even the slavers bowed in awe and fear. Her parents and the rest of the slaves never spoke its name, at least not around her.

All she needed to know was that it was a monster. A monster more terrifying and dangerous than even the wall-crawling monsters.

"But how can you be so certain?" Mother asked. "What makes you sure that we can escape and change things?"

"Because I've worked too hard and too long to not get this done." Father responded. "We have a chance to get out of here. A chance to finally end all of this suffering. If we can take that chance, I'll damn sure make certain that you, I, and our little girl will be given a better life."

The little girl kept as quiet as she could as her parents continued talking. Her mind was still too young, too new, to understand the gravity of the conversation her parents were having. She was confused. Why were they talking so fast? Why did her mother sound scared? What did her father do to upset her? All these questions filled her mind as she rubbed her arms.

Her eyes grew heavy as the conversation between her parents continued on into the night. As her body gave into the fatigue from the day's work, the last thing she heard before falling into a fitful slumber was:

"Put it there, they'll never find it."

The following days brought more of the same strife and pain for the little girl. More breaking rocks, more building statues, and more whiplashes from their masters. As the day progressed, the little girl felt her will to go on giving out. Her arms hurt, her hands bled, and her feet screamed from being forced to walk on sharp rocks all day without rest.

Hot tears filled her eyes as she wanted nothing more than the pain to stop. All she wanted was to go back to where it was mildly safe with her family. She couldn't take it anymore!

She dropped to her knees, covering her eyes with her bleeding hands, and let out a loud cry. Her cry went unnoticed at first, but soon a slaver approached her with anger-filled eyes and a whip in hand.

"Get back to work, brat!" He bellowed. When she didn't stand back up, he raised his whip back to strike . "I said: get your ass back to work!"

The little girl flinched, preparing herself to feel the stinging whip against her flesh. There was a loud *THWAP*, a sound she knew too well, but no pain came. She sniffled and pulled her hands down to look at what had happened.

Mother stood in front of her, arms outstretched, and blood spilling down her right cheek. The slave master gave Mother an angry glare.

"You DARE?" He asked, raising the whip again. "Get out of the way, bitch. The runt needs to learn what happens to those who don't obey orders!"

"Please, sir." Mother implored the master. "She's a child. She's starving and doesn't know any better."

The little girl sniffled. She was confused about why Mother said that. It was true that she was hungry, but at that moment hunger wasn't on her mind.

"And why should I care?"

"She cannot work if she is feeling pain from hunger." Mother responded. "I know that I have no right to ask this of you-"

"And yet you're still talking."

"I know. But please! Think, Master," Mother continued, "she cannot do work if she is too hungry. I beg you, let me take her for a few minutes to get her some kind of food. I'll straighten her out, tell her why she cannot ever stop working. It'll never happen again."

"And just why should I grant your request?"

Mother, in a moment of boldness, took a deep breath before answering.

"Then the Great One will be angry that production has halted because one of those He spared in His grace has been lost needlessly."

The little girl's sniffles continued as she watched Mother stand up to the slaver. The air was filled with intense dread as she waited for the inevitable cracking of the whip. It had happened so many times before to slaves who dared to stand up.

To her surprise, the slave master scoffed and wrapped his whip around his wrist. He turned away from the little girl and her mother before moving away.

"You have five minutes. Waste more time and I'll kill you both the moment you return." He said with a vicious snarl.

Mother wasted no time in picking her up before rushing off towards their small cave. A look of confusion covered the little girl's face. Before her parents would have not done anything to stop a slaver or a master. She was so certain that would have been the case for her, too.

Mother shushed her when she tried to open her mouth to speak as they got closer to their small home.

"Don't speak," she told her. "Just let Mommy take care of you. Okay, sweet pea?"

The little girl replied with a short nod. Even if it wasn't much, comfort from her mother was always appreciated.

Once they were inside their home, the little girl found herself placed down on a large rock. She tried to move about, but Mother gently kept her in place, placing a finger to her lips.

"Sh, just stay still now." She smiled. "Mommy will make it better."

The little girl sniffled. She was still confused about what was going on, but she didn't argue.

Mother took her bleeding hands, grabbing some ratty, but mostly clean, fabric. She watched intently as Mother tightly wrapped the fabric around her hands. She opened her mouth to complain, but once more she was silenced.

"Do not cry." She told her daughter. "It might hurt, but it will stop the bleeding."

She tilted her head in confusion. How could something that hurt help?

Mother continued to tend to her before kissing her forehead. A small smile came to her lips, gently stroking her daughter's cheek with one hand.

"I know, things are terrible right now, but you don't have to be so scared, my baby girl." She told her. "Things will get better someday."

Mother got up and headed over to where she kept the fabrics she'd scrounged together. The little girl tilted her head before she saw what her mother had pulled out.

The unusual patchwork bear had been carefully crafted from spare pieces of torn fabric. With its mismatched limbs and eyes, it may not have been a perfect toy, but it was clear there had been a lot of love put into its creation. The hodgepodge appear-

ance was charming and quirky, especially to the little girl. She could see the beauty in its imperfections, and while it may have been ugly to some, she loved it all the same.

To her, it was the first toy she'd ever seen.

To the children of the old world, it was a simple teddy bear.

The little girl gasped in both joy and confusion at the strange doll her mother had brought out. Once it was within arm's reach, she gently took the misshapen stuffed animal in her arms. Mother smiled, petting her hair gently.

"This is something I've been working on for you for a while, baby." Her voice was softer than it was before. "Tonight when you go to bed, hold it tightly. It will take your pain away and make you feel safe no matter where you are."

For the first time in her young life, the little girl felt something different in her heart when Mother said those words. Her mind raced at a thousand miles a second as she glanced at her new teddy bear. It could make her feel better? It could take away the pain and sorrow of the days away just by hugging it?

"However," her mother continued as she caressed her hair, "you can only take it out at night. Don't take it outside of our area. Don't let the masters or anyone else see it. If they do, they'll try to take it from you. Do you understand me?"

The little girl felt her heart sink hearing those words. The reality of their situation came crashing back down on her once more. The joy and happiness that she had felt in that moment were gone in an instant.

But as if it were second nature, Mother gently dried her eyes. A sad smile came to her lips as she kissed her daughter's forehead once more.

"I know, baby, I know." She whispered softly. "But I promise you, once we're done today he will be here waiting for you. For now, he has to remain hidden. Okay?"

The little girl, with some reluctance, nodded her head slowly before giving the teddy in her arms a quick hug. She let out an audible gasp, glancing down at the teddy in her arms with shimmering eyes. It was soft.

Such softness was alien to her after a lifetime of knowing nothing but hardship. Happy tears formed in her eyes as she held the teddy bear in her arms once more before looking at her mother with a big smile.

"Hey!" The slave master shouted. "Is the brat done yet? How long does it take to tend to a runt?"

Mother scoffed quietly at the master's shouting before taking the teddy away from her, after a brief and very quiet negotiation, placing it in a safe area where the demons and slave masters wouldn't find it. She placed a finger on her daughter's lips.

"Remember, don't speak about it outside." She said, kissing her forehead one last time. "Coming, sir!"

The little girl nodded her head as Mother took her by the wrist and brought her back to their harsh labor. It was brief, but in that moment she felt a sliver of true happiness and love from her mother's gift. It almost made the day of hard work ahead better when she knew that waiting for her was something that her mother had made with her own two hands.

A smile, however brief, came to her lips when the thought of the teddy came to her mind. She couldn't wait for the day to be over so that she could hug it again.

The rest of the day was a long and grueling slog of hard work and barely any rest or water. The scary monsters patrolled the area, making sure no one attempted to run or start fighting back. All-too-familiar scenes played out for the little girl as the moon slowly rose into the night sky.

Before they could retreat to their little home, to the warm