THE HARPY'S DEN

DRAGONERA: THE DARK ONE CHRONICLES BOOK 2

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BROKEN TOWER PRESS

PROLOGUE

"You certain you want to walk out there?" The camp counselor asked.

The man she was talking to scoffed. He was tall, gruff, and grizzled. He looked and acted like he meant business-definitely not the type of person to be messed with. The counselor's question was insulting.

"Of course I am." The man rumbled, with a voice both deep and powerful, "It's just a night stroll, after all. I know the path better than anyone else around."

"Haven't you heard? The last few men who walked out in the middle of the night never returned! All that anyone could find were their jackets or backpacks."

"Ha, must have been wimps then." The mountain of a man mocked, "People who get lost in these woods, don't deserve to be found."

"Hey man, that's really disrespectful to them and their families."

"Please, as if I cared who their families were or what they think."

"Is that so?" The counselor was starting to get a tad annoyed, "What if YOU disappear without a trace?"

"You're making it sound like I don't know what the hell I'm doing," he responded with a laugh, taking out the pistol hidden on his hip, "I always come prepared."

The counselor's eyes grew wide as she reached out and snapped the

pistol from his hand. The big man gave her a dark glare, as if she'd struck him. The counselor didn't flinch.

"Are you crazy?!" She hissed, "This isn't just a campsite for adults, it's a summer camp as well! We do not allow weapons here!"

"And that, my sad little friend," The man snatched his gun back from her, "is why those fools disappeared. They didn't have protection."

"Protection from what?! There aren't any major predators out in our forest!"

"Pray tell then, idiot, what's behind those guys vanishing in the middle of the night?"

"How should I know?! We chose this spot because it was isolated from the bears and wolves! The only wildlife we should have are deer, birds, raccoons, and insects!"

"Obviously not if the multiple reports of men not returning are *true*." The man mocked, placing his pistol away. "You might as well face the facts, missy, something's out there, and it's putting a stain on your camp's good name."

The counselor let out an exasperated groan, shaking her head as she turned away from him. It was true that, as of late, her camp was starting to draw a lot of negative attention. Many parents were concerned that their children would end up missing since the reports began. Lately, it had become a surefire topic that turned any meeting into a bitter argument.

She hated to be reminded that her camp's once trusted reputation had fallen under so much suspicion. Worse, still, was the possibility of the camp being shut down due to all the negative press.

"Are you really going to risk your own life just to find what's taking people away?" She asked, "What if you don't come back? We have enough trouble already!"

The man chuckled as he turned towards the forest.

"Relax, missy, I'll be fine. I've hunted things that your little camp should be glad aren't local in this area."

And with that, he walked off into the forest. Leaving the counselor by herself. As the image of the man grew smaller in the distance, the counselor shook her head.

"Stupid fool..." Was all she said, returning to her cabin.

Neither one knew it, but this would be the last time they ever saw

one another alive. Had he heeded her words, had he turned back, maybe his life could have retained some sense of normalcy. His pride got the better of him, though, as he plunged deeper into the woods. His pride, and something else...curiosity.

To tell the truth, he really was curious to know why several men, and only men, had vanished when taking the trail. The mystery taunted him, demanding an answer.

He wasn't a detective. In all honesty, he didn't like anything to do with the police. They took too long to do a proper investigation and, all too often, they were too late to find any answer at all. He was a free agent who "helped" folks with trouble like this. As such, he took it upon himself to look into any case the police were too incompetent to handle.

The forest around here was as quiet as it always had been. He knew these woods better than most, from growing up in a town not too far from the camp. He'd never heard of anything like this happening before. These woods didn't have any territorial animals that might attack local hunters, or mistake them for prey.

Whatever was disturbing this peaceful forest needed to be dealt with. And who better than the man who knew these woods better than the back of his own hands?

"All right, let's see if we can find the source of all this trouble." He murmured, quietly reloading his pistol as he trekked deeper into the forest.

The man took no extreme measures as he walked along. No reason to. Even with the lack of incredibly dangerous animals, the forest had its' share of risky moments. Steep holes were commonplace and it was easy enough to get lost if you weren't sure just where you were going. There were also some poisonous plants, like Moonseed and Nightshade, that could kill a grown man who was foolish, or unlucky, enough to digest or come in contact with them.

Maybe that was what had happened, made as much sense as anything, the man thought. "Killed by eating plants," the man shook his head, "I wouldn't be surprised if these hikers were some damn city slickers that didn't know anything about forest plants."

Pushing onward into the forest, he kept his pistol ready. The further he advanced, the darker the forest seemed to get. The hooting of owls

never ceased, while crickets chirped their songs. The rabbits, despite being silent most of the time, squeaked as the hooting of an owl grew louder. The almost luminescent eyes of the rabbits appeared in a small field nearby.

The man knew what that sound meant. He had seen them hunt rabbits before; he'd grown all too familiar with the fearful bunny cries as the owls swooped down on the unlucky few they managed to catch. The rabbits in the field began to run as fast as they could, while the hooting of the owl grew louder and louder. At first, it sounded like things were normal. Life was just proceeding as it usually did in the woods.

As he turned away, a new sound caught his attention. A shrill, piercing cry came from above. Turning just in time, the man saw a rabbit carried away in what looked like a pair of large talons. At first he thought it was a large owl, but the shrill cry was what really caught his attention.

This was different from any other animal cry he'd ever heard. But, what terrified him most was realizing just what the scream sounded like. It started out like a bird, but as it grew in volume, it became a banshee's cry, the blood curdling scream of a mad woman. Hands shaking, he told himself it had to be his imagination.

Then he heard it again. Another horrific scream as a pair of talons swooped down snatching another rabbit from the field. This time, there was no mistaking it. What first seemed like a bird's cry, rose until it cracked and became a woman's shriek. His eyes grew wide as a third pair of talons swooped down and grabbed another rabbit. This time he saw more than just talons. It was brief, but he saw the body of what looked like a teenage girl in the pale moon light, before its large wings carried it away.

A new feeling rushed down his spine, one he wasn't used to. Fear. Just what had he seen? In all his years, he'd never spied anything so...so impossible! Was it a new species of bird? Some kind of freak of nature? Most importantly, where did they even come from and how had no one realized they were here?

Taking a few deep breaths to steady himself, the man focused. He had to remember the reason he came here in the first place. He was

looking for the mystery behind the vanishing hikers. A thought suddenly entered his mind that he didn't want to entertain.

What if these bird-like beings were the reason the hikers had gone missing?

A cold chill rolled down his spine once again. The possibility that they could have been taken by those...things...was quite high. There wasn't, after all, any other large beast of prey in this area capable of taking on a man successfully. And those talons, they were the biggest he'd ever seen.

"Do it for those coming to the camp..." He whispered to himself, checking his clip to ensure it was full, "Do it to keep anyone else from being taken..."

Gathering his courage once more, he set off across the field. Whatever had grabbed the three rabbits couldn't have gone far. No predator strayed too far away from its food source. Especially anything with the giant talons these new creatures seemed to have.

Silently moving through the forest, he kept his gun raised at all times in case he came across what he was looking for. As he walked, he kept his eyes on the landscape around him and the sky above him. If these birds got the jump on him, he'd never have time to react to an attack from above.

The more he pushed into the forest, the darker and more sinister it became. Each tree seemed to wear a terrible, demented face on their trunk. And the further he went, the more horrible each face looked. His gun hand began to tremble as he did his best to steady his breathing.

He searched for fifteen minutes, finding nothing. Then, suddenly, he heard a loud cracking sound nearby. He jumped, and quickly steadied his hold on his gun. Checking his clip once more, the man turned to his left. It was at this point that he should have listened to his instincts and gone back. But the sight of a campfire glowing nearby overwhelmed that preservation instinct.

Gathering his courage, the man slowly approached the flickering light. Who would start a fire out in the middle of a forest? And worse, away from the camp grounds! The cracking sound he had heard before was getting louder. While that could have meant a lot of things, growing up in Georgia, hunting all his life, he knew just what it was. Someone, or something was cracking bones.

Spotting a particularly large tree, he slipped behind it as quietly as he could. What he saw nearly made his eyes pop out of his skull. There, sitting around the campfire were what looked like three teenage girls! But, he quickly realized something was off about the trio.

In the faint glow of the campfire, he clearly saw what had shocked him before. The three girls had enormous bird-like wings sticking out from their backs and where their hands should have been were large bird like talons. The only thing that looked normal about them were their faces, though even those had a feral, strange look to them.

They looked similar, likely related, but were still distinct from one another. The tallest had pitch black hair, with dangerous red eyes that gleamed in the crackling firelight. Another, smaller than the first, had strange turquoise hair, with a curious set of green eyes. The last, easily the smallest, surely no more than fourteen years old, had sunny blonde hair and kept her pale blue eyes on her meal, only casting glances at the older two.

The man had never before seen anything like this in his entire life. These...girls, if he could call them that, were like something out of a freak show! He was about to ask what the hell they were, but one of them spoke up suddenly.

"This was a good night," the tallest commented with a small nod, "These rabbits are a much better catch than last night's pitiful meal." She cleared her throat and glared at the smallest one, "You should try a little harder next time, dearest sister."

The blonde bowed her head a bit lower and sighed..

"I'm sorry..." she mumbled, with a twinge of a whine in her tone, "I got outnumbered by the wolves." She sniffed and peeked up at her sister, mumbling "Thought there weren't supposed to be any around here…"

"Don't give me that! It doesn't matter if you were outnumbered ten-to-one!" she rose up from her seat, wings flaring up, her eyes narrowed, "You're not some helpless human! You're a harpy, so start acting like one!"

"Oh, give her a break, sister," the girl with the oddly-colored hair giggled, "You were no majestic hunting expert when you were her age, I'm sure," She teased, giggling again when her sister puffed up her cheeks.

The tallest took a warning step towards the middle sister, cheeks still puffed and eyes angrily shimmering in the night.

"Brave words from downy-feathered, soft-taloned fledgling!" she insisted, talons clenched and trembling.

The odd-haired sister shrugged and took a messy bite from her rabbit. She mumbled a low "Mmmm," and cheerfully chewed her food. This only further flustered her oldest sister, causing her wings to flap in agitation.

"Were you listening, little sister? I was talking to you!"

"Yup! I heard you!" she chirped in response, taking another bite. Her mouth still full, she giggled, "I just don't wanna respond when you're being a flutterbrain,"

The oldest sister's eyes widened and she let out a little squawk of disapproval.

"Flutterbrain! You ungrateful, arrogant little-"

"You shouldn't fight…" the small harpy mumbled, taking a small bite of her rabbit. She wilted when the tallest harpy glared at her. Pursing her lips, she mumbled, "Mama doesn't like it when we argue,"

"Ugh! No one asked you! Why don't you worry about catching a bunny of your own, instead of telling me what to do?" the first harpy snapped, crossing her arms across her chest with a huff.

"She's right, you know!" The odd harpy perked up, "If she was here, Mama would have your wings on a wall, Flutterbrain,"

Still puffed up with anger, the tallest harpy snatched another rabbit from the fire. Inspecting it to be sure it had cooked enough, she dug in ravenously, taking her anger out on the poor creature. The smallest harpy peeked up again. After a moment of hesitation, she cleared her throat softly.

"So um...how are things going, you know, overall?" She asked.

"Well, there's enough food for us to last a couple more months," the odd harpy responded, pausing for the two to glance at their oldest sister, who was still fuming into her food. The odd harpy giggled and muttered something under her breath before speaking up, "Some of the game just might not be here anymore, but we stocked up plenty so far!" She assured her.

The tallest harpy swallowed and sighed, finally content, "I'm just shocked that Mama won't let us deal with those trespassers" She

commented, glancing down at her food. She shrugged and began to suck on one of the rabbit's bones, "If we really start to run low on food, we could always eat those filthy humans,"

"Sister, you know how Mama feels about humans," the odd harpy pointed out. Clearing her throat, she spoke in a regal tone, "Don't eat the humans!" she giggled at her own impression while her sister scoffed.

The man nearly shouted at the top of his lungs, but he managed to keep quiet. If he gave his position away now, he would surely be dead. Plus, he had to get more information. If these "harpies" were responsible for the disappearance of the hikers, he had to know where they were keeping them.

"Yes, yes, I know, I know," the oldest grumbled in annoyance, sighing and throwing the bone down, "Mama has lectured me more than once about how dangerous humans can get when they set their minds to it," she rested her chin in her claws, "and nothing sets them off more than finding one of their own half-eaten in the forest…"

"I kinda, sorta wish we didn't have to live like this…" the small harpy mumbled, kicking her legs and glancing back and forth between her sisters. He could hear a hopeful tone in her voice, "Why can't we just live with the humans?"

"Are you crazy?" The eldest squawked with a glare, "Humans are trouble! They're all over the place, and they're awful, and they can't even feed themselves sometimes! How are they going to feed us too?"

"Not our problem!" The odd harpy replied in a sing-song tone, "If they want to kill themselves off by using up everything, let them. We're so much smarter and better off than they are. We'll be fine."

"But..."

The odd harpy joined the small harpy, putting her hand on her shoulder. She offered her a soft, sincere smile. The first sincere expression she'd worn so far.

"It's a sweet dream, little sister, but there's no way we can live with the humans, especially now. They're just too ignorant and intolerant. I mean, come on! They still think Bigfoot and Nessie aren't real!"

The small harpy sighed and nodded. With a frown, she peeked up at the oldest sister. At first, she was poking at the rabbits, trying to find

something else to eat. She'd frozen now, though, peering off in the distance.

The man froze, his eyes widening in horror. Her gleaming red eyes were locked with his own. Part of him prayed to Lady Luck that she hadn't noticed him. However, as an ember rose up from the campfire between them, her lips pulled back in a snarl and her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"HOW DARE YOU!" the harpy shrieked, her voice echoing through the forest.

Immediately the other two sisters leaped to their feet. The man cursed under his breath as he turned and began running. The cries of the sisters behind him at first were distant, but they gaining on him quickly. He cursed their wings, knowing that they would eventually catch up to him. His only chance was to turn around and fire at them with his pistol.

Realizing he didn't have any other choice, he turned and aimed at the sky above him. Firing about five rounds blindly, he hoped that at least one could hit its mark and take one of the monsters down. The moon's light allowed him to see somewhat, and the silhouettes of the three were just barely visible above him. As he continued to run, he found himself in the same field that the sisters had hunted in before. Without any trees, he could aim properly once again.

Turning around and standing his ground, the man held his gun up and aimed carefully, firing three more rounds into the night air. This time, he had better results: one of his bullets grazed the wing of one of them.

Shrieking in pain, the harpy he shot was the youngest one. Immediately, the older two cried out in anger at their sister's injury, diving toward him in a vengeful rage. The man reached for the next clip of bullets in his jacket, but was stopped by the two sisters as their talons pinned his shoulders into the ground with a force greater than he could have ever imagined. It was all he could do to catch the breath forced from his lungs.

"You dirty-" the eldest harpy had him by the neck, talons digging into his flesh, "rotten, pathetic, stupid, worthless human!" She snarled and tightened her hold, "You think you're going to get away with that?"

"No one hurts our baby sister," the odd harpy hissed. The quirky

playfulness from before was gone. Now, her eyes were shining like pools of venom. She motioned toward her talons, flashing in the moonlight, "Especially a filthy coward caught spying on us!"

The man coughed a bit, regaining some of his breath.

"What...did you do...to the hikers?!" He asked, barely able to speak.

"The other trespassers?" The eldest harpy asked. "We took them back to our home, locked them up and threw away the key. Don't worry, you'll be joining them soon,"

The youngest harpy landed in a heap, her wing finally giving out. She moaned softly, sitting up with some effort and trying to get a better look at her injury.

"You aren't gonna kill him, are you?" She pleaded, "Mama will be so mad if you kill him, we're not supposed to kill them!"

"I won't kill him...even though it would be so easy," the eldest harpy assured her. She yanked the man from the ground by his throat, claws digging deeper into his skin, "And I want to. Believe me when I say I want to kill you," she spat, her eyes gleaming red in the dark. Her grip tightened more, her claws piercing his skin. An angry tremor ran through her, and a growl began to work its way into her throat.

The man tried to pry himself from her grip. With what strength he had left, he took a wild swing with the pistol, slamming it against her arm. If she was capable of feeling pain, she didn't show it. The last thing he saw was her eyes gleaming in the moonlight. Then, suddenly his world went dark.

The odd harpy shook her hand, glancing at the unconscious human still hanging in her sisters grip. "His head was harder than I expected…" she mumbled. She cocked her head when her sister threw the human to the ground. The odd harpy gave her sister's arm a warm squeeze. The angry tremorS running through her faded and she relaxed with a sigh. The glow in her eyes faded.

The youngest harpy sighed and stared down at the grass, pursing her lips. She felt terrible, both from the pain of being shot, and from worrying her sisters.

"I'm sorry…" she mumbled. She sniffed, and quickly rubbed her eyes, hoping they wouldn't notice her crying.

The oldest harpy gave the man a swift kick to his side, then quickly walked over to her fallen sister. The little harpy glanced up, a frown

tugging at her lips. Instead of the expected ridicule, the tallest harpy dropped down beside her and threw her arms around her, careful to avoid the wound on her wind.

"No one hurts my sisters," she insisted, kissing her cheek, "You're a weak little fledgling, but you're still mine," she explained, with an awkward, faint blush on her cheeks.

The odd harpy grinned, snatching up the man and fluttering her wings. She rose up into the air, clearing her throat and calling to the other two.

"Let's go! Mama's going be so, so interested in what we found!" The odd harpy giggled a bit, as the tallest tried her best to lift the small harpy off the ground. By the time she finally managed to heft her into her arms, the odd harpy was struggling to stay in the air, rolling with laughter.

"St-stop laughing!" the oldest shouted.

"I c-can fly…" the youngest mumbled, cheeks flushed bright red. Still, she smiled when her sister insisted on carrying her back. Truth be told, her wing did hurt. And it was a nice change of pace. She'd have to take advantage of her sister's good mood while it lasted.

"Ready to go?" the oldest asked.

The young harpy nodded and with a flutter of their wings, they disappeared into the sky.