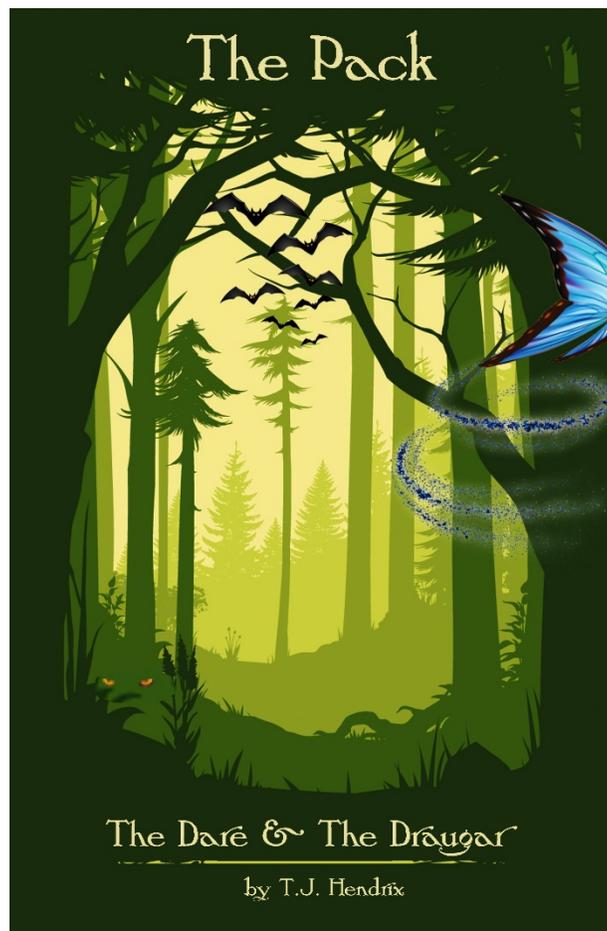


# THE PACK

## THE DARE & THE DRAUGAR

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## 1 ~ THE DARE

The moon was up and Harmony could see the train tracks stretching out in front of her like silver ribbons. She hadn't turned on her flashlight once since she snuck out of camp. At first it was so no one would see her, but now her eyes were used to the dark.

She decided to step tie-to-tie in the center of the tracks. The ties were quiet. If she stayed on them, no one could hear her steps – if anyone was even out there looking for her. She'd been walking for about a half hour. No one seemed to have noticed she was gone.

Obviously she'd done a really good job sneaking out of camp. She smiled to herself in the dark. She'd never actually snuck out of camp or home or anywhere before. It seemed pretty easy so far. Actually it was kind of exciting, she thought.

Harmony imagined Olivia, back in their tent asleep. She hoped Olivia wouldn't wake up before she got back. Olivia would think Harmony had violated their pinky swear. There was no way around that.

But Harmony was sure that when she got back, she could explain that she'd crossed her fingers during their pinky swear – so it was technically invalid.

They'd only just met, but Harmony was pretty sure Olivia would forgive her. Olivia was nice. Not nice enough to keep Harmony from sneaking out tonight, though.

And really, it wasn't that scary out here. It was so quiet she was sure every creature in the forest was asleep.

Harmony was glad she'd taken the dare from the boys: sneak out, find the Ghost Tree, and bring back a twig with white needles as proof. She was sure she'd get to the tree any minute now, snap off a twig, and head back.

She looked ahead to see if she could spot another one of the white mile-marker posts along the tracks. She'd already passed a couple. The Ghost Tree was supposed to be just past mile marker 25. The last post she passed was Mile Marker 23. It was so bright out tonight along the tracks that the numbers were easy to see up close.

But it was totally black a few feet past the rail bed on both sides. The trees were so thick none of the moonlight reached the ground. It only touched the treetops, she noticed. They looked like they were outlined in silver. Harmony felt like she was traveling down a river of moonlight through a deep, dark-walled canyon.

She walked on through the quiet forest, hoping to hear an owl. So far no luck. She started thinking about what she'd do the next morning.

At breakfast, she'd set down her tray, then pull the white-needled redwood twig out of her pocket in front of them all. She imagined the looks on their faces: Olivia, stunned. The boys, bug-eyed, but impressed. Renny, the one who made the dare, looking just a little scared, knowing he'd have to sneak out at night and do the same thing or be branded a wimp. Maybe she'd set the twig down on his plate for emphasis. The thought made her smile again.

Best of all, none of the boys could ever make comments about her being “just a girl” again. If they did, she would look at them and say, “Ghost Tree,” and they’d go pale and get quiet. HAH!

True, she could get kicked out of Camp Coho for sneaking out. But she wasn’t going to get caught. Since sneaking out had been easy, sneaking back in should be easy too. Only Olivia and the boys – Renny, Zac and Tosh – would ever know she’d been outside the camp gates. They’d never tell on her. She was sure of it. The leaders and staff and RAs would never find out.

She walked on, determined to find the Ghost Tree. Mile Marker 25 was supposed to be about a half-hour walk west from the Camp Coho gates, just off the tracks. She should be getting close. A redwood tree with white needles growing right along the tracks shouldn’t be hard to spot in all this moonlight.

A loud snap rang out from the forest, followed by crunching noises.

She thought they sounded like feet on dry twigs. Big heavy feet. She heard them again. Crunch, crunch, crunch – and then another snap.

She stopped to listen. Was it something with four legs? Or two? Just when she was about to figure it out, the sound faded to silence.

Harmony looked to either side. She realized her heart was beating fast.

Was the crunching big enough to be a bear? Or not? Maybe it was? How would she know what a bear sounded like in a forest? She’d never been in a forest before. Or around a bear, unless you counted watching them on TV. Would a bear stop walking when she stopped?

Or what if it was someone following her, like in a horror movie, she thought. Or maybe it was those stupid boys, pranking her. That seemed like something they would do, and maybe the whole reason they dared her to go out into the forest in the first place, she realized.

She grabbed the flashlight in her pocket and wondered if she should turn it on. But if she did, anyone out there would see it. And whoever – or whatever — was out there in the dark would know exactly where she was.

She knew it was not, it was absolutely NOT, a hungry ghost. There were no such things as hungry ghosts who haunted the forest and came out from the base of the Ghost Tree at night looking for lost loggers and hunters to eat. That was just a stupid story the RAs told everyone at the campfire to keep the campers from sneaking out into the forest alone at night. She was sure of it.

And besides, she wasn’t a logger or a hunter. She was a kid. She was almost a teen-ager, she reminded herself. And she wasn’t lost.

“I am not scared,” Harmony thought fiercely. “I’m just in a stupid forest in the dark. It’s probably a deer. Or a rabbit.”

She could hear no crunches now. Maybe she’d just imagined the crunches. She imagined a fuzzy rabbit hopping through the forest making the noise instead. That seemed believable.

For a minute she wished she was back in the tent with Olivia. But just for a minute. When she didn’t hear anything more, she took a few cautious steps, then started walking.

Then the crunching sounds came back. Whatever it was, when she stopped, it stopped. When she moved, it moved. The noise wasn’t close, but it wasn’t far away, either. She stood still and wrapped her fingers tighter around the flashlight in her pocket, wondering what to do.

A single, sharp snap rang out in the forest. It sounded like something big stepping on a branch as thick as her arm.

SNAP. SNAP. SNAP. She counted three more, all getting louder. Something was definitely moving closer.

Then it was silent. Harmony strained to hear the next snap. Or crunch. Or any sound at all.

She realized she could hear nothing except her own heartbeat.

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