

Birds of Prey

“I am Feather Blade. We don’t belong to any country, any planet and any world. We are hired hunters and we call ourselves Birds of Prey. We bow to no emperor, yield to no king but our loyalty can be bought. What is your offer?”

This is how I begin every consult. Our last mission took place on Wayward Rock. We had to use a magnifying glass to locate the planet but the Sovereign was willing to pay a high price to get his daughter back -- alive.

If you’ve never been to Wayward Rock or haven’t a clue where it is, count your blessings. It’s a swampy, hot, hellish nightmare with mosquitoes the size of your hand, snakes that can swallow you whole, and flying lizards that wouldn’t mind eating your eyeballs for breakfast. The conditions were harsh but our task was pretty simple: locate the Sovereign’s daughter, rescue her and kill her kidnappers.

The details concerning the kidnapping are actually quite funny. The Princess is really very beautiful. She reminds me of my dolls that I never played with as a youngster; pretty on the outside, hollow on the inside.

She secretly posted pictures of herself on the local greet and meet board in the town square, some of them semi-nude. This board was apparently used to help grieving widows find new husbands but the locals found *other* uses for it. Well, it wasn’t long before she attracted interest. The interest turned into an obsession. The obsession led to stalking and before Princess Limone knew it, her casual flirting had turned into a real problem. This is the story we got from Daddy, but I have a feeling there’s more to this than just vanity and I can’t wait to hear it from the princess’s own mouth.

So here we are floating down a murky swamp in the dark of the night looking for any sign of the Princess and clues to where her kidnappers might have hidden her or her body. There are tiny little insects drinking the water droplets off our skin, making us itchy all over, and our clothes are soaked with sweat. Our boat is old and unstable and bright eyes are all around watching us. If I didn’t know any better, I’d probably be wondering what creatures all those eyes belong to... but I know better. This is one of those rare times when ignorance is preferable to insight. Unless they attack, the less I know about the creatures behind those eyes the happier I am.

“Oh no, no, no, no” Archer Eye whispered.

“What’s the matter?” Saber Claw asked. I said the answer before Archer spoke.

“We have a leak in the boat”

Saber pointed his flashlight at the bottom of the boat. “A leak? Well that’s putting it nicely” he said. “Looks more like a big hole.”

“Any suggestions?” I was hoping that my partners would have an alternative to the obvious. Water was rushing in too fast to bail out. The boat was sinking fast.

“We’ve got to swim, love” Archer answered.

“Oh hell” I whispered. Normally I would have yelled such an interjection but in our current situation, I didn’t want to startle the creatures that were hiding behind all those glowing eyes. We made sure that our head flashlights were securely attached before jumping in the dark unknowns of the swampy water.

Considering how hot and humid the air was, the water was shockingly cold. It was difficult to muffle the splash from our entry. The noise frightened the animals. Eyes shifted. The bushes, plants, and branches rustled. I heard a twig snap. Clicking noises moved closer to us.

The three of us treaded water with our backs touching. We automatically formed what we called our circular position of defense. This way no one’s back was left unguarded. On land this method of defense was 97% effective but being suspended between air and water made things more difficult. Unfortunately, we didn’t realize that until much later.

“Well, so much for being quiet” said Saber. His sharp curved sword poised for action. Except for their eyes, we were surrounded by things we could hardly see.

“Now what do we do, love?” Archer asked.

“Now what do we do, Saber?” not having a clue, I passed on the question.

“Oh Crap! We just moved to the bottom the food, didn’t we” said Saber.

“Did you guys feel that?” Archer drew his bow.

“Feel what?” I asked.

“Something went passed my head”

“I didn’t see or hear anything, Archer.”

“Me neither” said Saber.

We swam around in a circle, straining our eyes. The light on our foreheads were too dim to properly see in the intense darkness.

Nothing. The clicking stopped. Most of the glowing eyes disappeared. No rustling in the bushes. All was quiet.

“Something’s not right.” Archer Eye whispered and just as he finished the sentence I heard Saber yell.

“Shoot it! Kill it! Let me go you ugly dragon!”

I grabbed onto Saber’s feet and tried pulling him back in the water. A flying lizard had lifted him out of the swamp. The dragon had held onto Saber’s hand in which he was holding his sword. This made it difficult for him to defend himself. Archer aimed his bow and shot at the creature but his arrows bounced off of its thick, scaly skin and succeeded only in enraging the lizard. It made a loud ferocious noise, twisted and turned to make us let go of his dinner and started spitting down at us. I held onto Saber as tight as I could but some of its saliva caught my shoulder and my skin began to burn.

“Archer, it’s no use, help me pull Saber away from it!” With his help, we were both able to pull Saber a little closer to the water, but the creature wouldn’t give up.

“Saber!” Archer yelled. “Can you reach your sword with your other hand?”

“It’s worth a try” Saber yelled back. His furthest reach was just millimeters away from his weapon.

“I can’t” he yelled back. “Don’t let go of me!”

“Drop it and I’ll throw it back up to you.”

Archer let go of Saber’s feet so that he could catch his sword. The dragon felt the pull lighten and took advantage of it. It twisted and pulled harder but I pulled down with all my might.

“Hurry up!” I screamed fearing that I would lose my grip.

“Now!” Saber signaled.

Archer fearlessly caught it and immediately threw it back up, but I was out matched and Saber slipped out of my hands.

“No! No!” I was frantic.

I watch with a heavy heart as the animal started flying away with our friend. Luckily, he had caught his sword just in time and with a swift, mighty swing took off the lizards head. Both Saber and dragon fell into the swamp with a gigantic splash.

“What a rush!” Saber laughed. “I thought I was lizard food.”

“I thought you were lizard food too!” Archer teased. He and Saber splashed each other with water.

“You *were* lizard food. You just managed to get away. Good to have you back in one piece. I started to worry there for a minute.”

Saber splashed me with water. “Don’t get all girly on us, Blade.”

“Who are you calling girly? I could feel the fear in your feet.”

“Fear isn’t the right word. Terrified is more like it. I nearly peed on you, Blade.”

We laughed and played like children over our victory until we noticed that several of the dragon’s friends were flying in our direction.

“Dive!” I yelled looking up at the sky.

Lucky for us that dragons can’t swim. The water was deep and surprisingly clean a few meters underneath the surface. We couldn’t go up, at least not for a while, so we continued our search for Princess Limone underneath. We all knew that soon we would have to risk going up for air but until then we concentrated on looking for clues to the whereabouts of the missing Princess. The lights which were attached to our foreheads lit up the water world superbly. Life forms swam past us, apparently not in the least bit interested in our existence.

I was running out of air and signaled to my friends that I was going up. I handed my head flashlight to Saber and he and Archer escorted me half way up. I was very careful and only surfaced my face for a quick second before retracting and diving back down. I signaled to the others that the dragons were still there and to be careful. Each took a turn surfacing and was successful in eluding the dragons.

As we swam back down a curious fish took notice of us. We ignored it but it wouldn’t go away. It was a small little thing; yellow with a greenish blue stripe going down its back. I got annoyed and threw one of my blades at it in hopes that it would go away and leave us to our work. This was not a clever idea. The small, innocent fish grew before our eyes. It showed us its jagged teeth from within its mouth and kept growing until it was the size of... well, I don’t know but it was definitely larger than any of us.

We still couldn’t swim up so we tried swimming away from it. For such an immense fish it swam pretty slowly but it was fast enough to follow us very closely. Archer let the way swimming into a small cave. Saber and I swam in after him. The monstrous fish tried to pursue but couldn’t fit into the small opening of the cave. We watched as it angrily charged us with no avail. It became so furious that it grew even more. I wasn’t sure if the fish was unbelievably stupid or unbelievably clever. If it had let itself become a bit smaller it would have eaten us for sure. On the other hand, maybe it wasn’t hungry and just wanted to drown us. It was blocking the cave’s entrance so we couldn’t get out. We’d already been holding our breaths for quite some time and started to feel the strain on our lungs.

We swam the depths of the cave looking for another way out until I could no longer hold my breath. Saber and Archer also stopped. I could see exhaustion and hopelessness in their eyes. All my will power could not stop me from opening my mouth and gasping for air. My partners must have wondered why I was smiling until they could no longer help but gasp for air themselves. Who knew that we could breathe under water, at least under this water on Wayward Rock?

We saved our celebrations for later and continued. We had to find another way out. During our search, we came across a door that was semi-hidden in the wall of the cave.

Archer looked at me for instructions and at first I was reluctant to give him the okay to open the door. Anything could have been waiting for us on the other side -- including the Princess. It was the thought of all the money that prompted my permission.

Archer gave a tug but the door wouldn't budge. Saber pulled as hard as he could but the door still wouldn't open. I thought I'd give it a try but instead of pulling, I gently pushed and just like that we had entrance to the mysterious realm behind the door.

Archer and Saber were a little bothered and made silly gestures that said, "Now why didn't I think of that."

We went in and closed the door behind us. Inside was a short hallway that led to another door. Pushing or pulling wouldn't open it. There was a big red button next to it and we were all nervous to touch it. Red buttons, or buttons of any color, always meant trouble. We stood here for a good ten minutes before I finally pushed the button. I wasn't about to turn back. The water that we were swimming in slowly drained out. When there was none left, the door opened automatically.

"This mission gets interesting by the minute" Archer said. He seemed happy to be able to speak again.

"I'm surprised we're all still alive" said Saber.

"Think of the money, men" I said.

"There's more to life than money, love" Archer commented.

Dear old Archer. He was the sentimental fool that would give you the shirt off his back only to shoot you with one of his arrows two minutes later to get it back and then sulk the whole day because there's now a hole in his shirt.

"Yes, there's also adventure" I answered.

The first thing I noticed when we entered the door was the smell. After smelling murky swamp water, frightful fish breath, scaly lizard spit, and Saber's putrid feet, the fresh clean smell of the room was a pleasant change. It was an aroma of morning dew on blooming

flowers that were tied together with ribbons of rainbow. It was a scent fit for a king, queen, sovereign, or as we soon discovered... a princess.

We walked into what appeared to be a bedroom and found Princess Limone asleep in a snuggly position with a man, presumably her kidnapper, by her side. Archer dragged her out of bed.

“Don’t be afraid, love, we’re here to rescue you.”

“”Do I look like I need rescuing to you? Don’t touch me!” Limone tried her best to wiggle out of Archer’s grip.

“Let her go!” Demanded the man, who was now safely under Saber’s sword.

“And who might you be?” I asked.

“I am her mate, Revol. She ran to *me*, I did not kidnap her.”

“Is this true, Princess?” I asked.

“The heart does not surrender to the logic of the mind. I am a tortured soul because I fell in love, but the heart wants what it wants. Yes, I gave myself to Revol.”

“And do you love her, Revol?” I was merely entertaining myself. I knew what his answer would be.

Revol looked deep within the Princess’s eyes as he spoke. “My passion for her burns deeper than love.” His voice was soft and his cheeks flushed a bright shade of pink.

“The Sovereign will pay me nicely for the return of his daughter and he has requested your body for double the reward. So, Revol, how much is your life worth to you?”

“If it’s money you seek, I have none...”

Those were part of Revol’s last words. His life was ended by a feather blade thrown with such precision that his brain took a full minute before realizing he was dead. He continued speaking with my blade embedded deep in his chest.

“Even if I had money, I certainly would not be able to match what the good Sovereign has offered you.” He didn’t feel a thing before his body fell to the ground.

The Princess was hysterical. “You’ve murdered him!” She screamed and cried with such sorrow that I almost felt sorry for her.

“Love, you’ll find another mate.” Archer tried consoling her. Her agony was so great that the she finally fainted.

“So this is royalty...” I said looking at Limone as she lay lifeless in Archer’s arms. “Let’s collect our money.”

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An oddly familiar but foreign scent was in the air. Being the curious creature that he was, Mandar followed the invisible trail which led him to the clearing where Plume was born. There was another flying object standing a few feet away from Pax and Everly’s cloaked shuttle. It was guarded by three people that were the same size as Bebokian’s but spoke with a twang in their dialect. He wasn’t sure if they were friend or foe so he camouflaged himself as a bush, watched, and listened.

“Earth looks like paradise compared to Wayward Rock. We should get more assignments like, love.”

“Yeah, I could get used to this. How about we stay awhile longer and have us a little vacation once we’re done?”

“Now now men, I know this place looks mellow but we can’t be certain of that until we venture into the forest.” She screwed on a new feather to the end of her blade.

“Love, all work and no play... that’s no way to live.”

“I would thank you men to concentrate on the assignment. This Everly person isn’t going to capture herself. If everything works out as planned we can have a little vacation, but until then...” She threw her blade in the trunk of the nearest tree and it landed millimeters from where Mandar was standing. “We shall be cautious. There’s no such thing as an easy mission.”

Mandar felt a hard breeze as the blade flew closely past him but he did not flinch. He looked at the deadly weapon and thought ‘Foe’. No longer needing to watch, he silently disappeared into the forest.