

CHAPTER 3



It was the most horrifying aspect of Horra’s mother’s fairy tales: fairies could disappear at will, leaving behind a pile of fairy dust. It never failed to make Horra’s hide crawl, but seeing it in real life was much worse. Goosebumps bloomed across Horra’s arms and legs and settled into a sickening ball in her stomach.

“What is that monstrosity?” screeched a disembodied voice. A second later, more sparks exploded. The fairies returned to their corporeal forms. Both of their brows were furrowed and their lips puckered.

The wudgie stood as tall as Horra unless she counted the long feather bobbing on top of its head, which floated up to the chins of the fairies. Pidge’s feathers, black as a tar pit, gleamed in the moonlight like spilled oil. Her claws clicked on the stone terrace as she fluffed her feathers.

It screeched and nudged Horra’s hand. She usually carried minced mice in her pockets. “Not now, girl. I’ll bring you a snack later.”

Horra turned toward their guests, anxious to introduce her

favorite pet. “This is Pidge. I raised her from an egg.” She stroked Pidge’s soft head and spoke in a low voice so as not to excite her. “Pudge wudgies are extremely rare, you know. Their ebony beaks catch a great price on the underground market. I’ve made it one of my missions to save their species.”

“They’re hunted for good reason. They’re vicious.” The brunette fairy held her nose, so the tinkling voice sounded more like a broken chain now. It suited her far more than the annoying chime-like sound it had been.

Pidge glared at the fairies with wide golden eyes as if she understood their words. She snapped her beak and screeched, and the fairies squealed in reply.

The male fairies moved in front of the princesses protectively.

“Pidge will attack if you act scared. But we know there’s nothing to be afraid of, right?” Horra scratched the wudgie’s neck to distract her from the sugar-coated princesses.

“Beg your pardon, but I’d keep that beast under control. One scratch and my queen will insist you get rid of it,” a male fairy spoke through tight lips.

The wudgie screeched and hobbled across the stones until she could spread her wings to fly back to her nest.

Horra turned toward the male fairy. “This is a sanctuary. Fairies have no dominion here.”

“Can we go back, now? I’m feeling a bit ill.” The blonde fairy was flushed a bright pink, matching her gown, and not at all becoming.

She’d look better in a shade of green.

Woodslly cleared his throat, which made the blonde turn crimson. He tapped his quill against the parchment. “Princess Horra. Perhaps it’s time to go.”

Weariness weighed on Horra’s shoulders. It’d been a long

day, and she'd looked forward to spending time here. But it was obvious fairies and pudge wudgies didn't mix.

Horra reluctantly turned away from the lush gardens. The stiff collar poked, and her ear twitched again. Though her troll hide was thick, the spot wore thin. Soon she'd have a blister.

"Come along, then. It's time for the evening meal. I believe the cook is preparing goose liver gruel tonight. It's not my favorite, but bitter grog eases the greasy aftertaste."

Both princesses gagged, then the blonde fainted dead away on top of a thorny henbane bush.

The male fairies were there in an instant to catch her, but it was too late. The thorns sliced through the dress like butter, and silver blood seeped through the gown.

Horra rushed with her arms out. Oh, no! No matter what she thought of them, one of the fairies getting hurt would be a disaster to handle. She was stopped short by a fairy guard who stepped between her and the princess.

The second guard produced a bottle, uncorked it, and poured it on the wounds. The blood dissipated and the dress stitched itself back together.

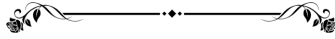
"What was that?" Horra asked, stepping around the first guard in surprise. She loved potions and ointments, it was her favorite subject. She reached out to touch it.

A sword materialized in the hand of the male fairy blocking her, grazing her nose, and making it itch. "Stand back. No one touches the princess."

A hobgoblin stepped through the Conservatory's doors and thumped a fist to his chest, then bowed. "Dinner is served."

The blonde fairy swooned again.

Horra rolled her eyes and ushered them out before anyone got injured.



ANNOYING, tinkling music filled the dining room where tables overflowed with food. Roast swamp swine, turnips au gratin, garlic three-weed salad, and two of Horra's favorite condiments—horseradish relish and beet-juice cocktail—adorned the marble table top. No gruel. This was a feast of special preparation, and the metal trays and plates all gleamed beneath a chain-suspended candle chandelier.

Horra was certain the hobgoblins must've worked double-time to accommodate their unexpected guests.

Horra's mouth watered as she walked to her chair. However, the queen was seated in it. King Divitri didn't notice Horra's confusion since he was in a deep discussion with the royal fairy.

She couldn't imagine anything a fairy said could be nearly that interesting. "Father?" she asked.

He waved a hand as if to dismiss her, not even looking her way.

Her throat tightened as she held back the sting of the slight. The king wasn't overly affectionate, but he also didn't ignore her in public, either. This wasn't like him at all. However, the two opposing royals were quite oblivious to her presence.

Horra turned around to ask Woodsly where to sit, but he was no longer behind her. She hesitated. Except in the Conservatory and the swamp, she was always told where to go and what to do. She was at a loss.

Not so the fairies. They were all seated by the time Horra caught her wits and walked to where the last empty seat remained—at the far end of the table by the male fairy who had pulled a sword on her.

Vinegar! Woodsly must've been called away when she wasn't looking. Now who would she talk to?

A hobgoblin servant placed Horra's steps by the chair. She could almost feel everyone watching as she climbed into it, especially Torren, who loved to tease her about 'the weather down there' or any other of his incessant digs at her size.

A glance his way assured her, though, that Torren's attention was focused on a fairy princess alone. Hmph! That was why female trolls made better rulers.

Horra bowed her head for grace, but no grace was uttered as per usual. The fairies dug into the food with astounding speed. She frowned at their manners and again at the twinkling notes of the music that had been playing since she'd entered the room. No musicians cluttered the corners as they did at the holiday balls. There were no instruments at all.

Was it fairy magic? It was all tinkly-sounding, like the fairies. She turned around, trying to locate the origin of the magic with no luck.

The first platter to pass by her had one spoonful of three-weed salad left. Her beet juice was "accidentally" taken by the male fairy next to her, who apologized but didn't offer her his glass. In front of them, the decanter was already empty. She signaled the hobgoblin servant, who was stopped on the way by the brunette princess. The hobgoblin turned and headed back toward the kitchen.

Each of the next platters came to her empty. She glanced around the table. The fairy's plates were not that full. Neither were any of the royal troll's plates. The table had been loaded with food enough for twice as many as were now present. How had the food disappeared so quickly?

At least the roast was only half gone. Just one more fairy to go before her turn. She searched again for the hobgoblin servants to signal that she needed more beet juice, but they were missing.

The platter of swamp swine was finally passed to her. All

that was left was the snout, the hooves, and some juice around the bones of the beast.

She turned a suspicious eye toward the male fairy. She glimpsed a grin as he wiped his mouth.

Horra slammed her fork down on the table. All talking ceased and everyone turned to stare at her.

Her father frowned and blinked as if just awoken from a dream. "Is there something wrong, daughter?"

"May I please be excused? I'm full." She held up the last platter to show him.

His cheek ticced. No doubt he'd think she ate it all.

"Fine, you're dismissed. But we'll discuss your eating habits later." King Divitri's words were slurred slightly, and Horra wondered how many spiked beet juices he'd ingested already.

Horra sneered at the too-satisfied male fairy and climbed down the steps with as much dignity as possible.

She pushed the dining-room door open and strode through. Before she could close it, it slammed shut behind her.