

Mossyeoat



THE BAND OF UNLIKELY HEROES BOOK 2

DAWN FORD



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*To the child who reads this and then dreams in stories. I believe
in you.*

CHAPTER I

“What are they doing out during the day?” Princess Horra Fyd whispered to Balk, her mercenary companion. They sat at the shadowed edge of a forest between the magical Weald and the old witch lands. Though elves eradicated witches in a long-ago war, their half-breed offspring with orcs remained.

Balk pointed at the group of six ugly worqs. “And since have they become civilized enough to roast their meat?”

The elf’s lethal spell had left the land poisoned, creating a mostly dead zone. The extensive area, which from its center out was a day’s ride in every direction, lay flat and open, leaving no way to get around the worqs without being seen.

“This was supposed to be the easiest way back to the castle.” Horra couldn’t help the whine that crept into her voice. She’d been on the run for weeks, hunted by an evil elf called the Erlking, and then taken captive and thrown into her own dungeon.

“A well-versed warrior troll princess would know what to do in this situation.” Balk’s teasing reply made her frown. His

stubbly face, however, was more somber. Not that she blamed him. The worqs, under the Erlking's control, had held them both prisoner in her castle, and they'd suffered the same maltreatment from them. "I told you we should've went back through Bough Valley. It's faster and safer."

She ground her tusks together. "You know why I didn't want to go that way. It isn't safer." However, turning around now seemed to be the smartest course, even if it would take them half of a day out of their way. "This is the Erlking's fault. You never saw worqs like this before he tried to take over Oddar. His dark music magic is affecting creatures in strange ways."

Balk grunted a laugh. "Like the giantess beast knocking a bridge to pieces?"

His reference to Grendel, the bookish girl giant turned monster, made her cheeks flush. "You know I'm right. A giant girl doesn't turn furry and start throwing boulders around for no reason. You're the one who told me about your daughter, Floke, and how you believe the Erlking is responsible for her disappearance." Horra would've said death, but Balk had become obsessed with the idea she was still alive.

Balk shifted in his saddle. "Aye, I did. But I didn't realize you were such a scaredy mouse. The girl was only a little wooly around the edges. If you're going to fill your warrior foremother's shoes, you'll need to work on your bravery."

Her frown deepened to a scowl. "Nothing about Grendel was little, though she was smaller than she had been when I first saw her." Thoughts of that event still made Horra shiver. "I'm not the only one scared here," she hissed back. "I don't see you rushing out there to battle the worqs."

One of the worqs pinched off a piece of the meat from the sizzling chunk. The cook punched him, which started a fight that four of the six worqs joined in.

Horra grimaced at the display of violence.

The look Balk sent her left no doubt why he wasn't facing off with the brutish creatures. Neither of them could take on one of them, even on a good day.

Their animals both danced nervously in place.

Horra took a deep breath to calm herself and almost choked. She stuck her tongue out and gagged. The worqs reeked worse than a stagnant swamp on a humid summer eve. Nimble, her pet gulgoyle, sniffed and snorted, smoke curling from its nostrils.

"Don't you worry about those big, bad bullies. None of them will take a whip to you again." She patted her pet's neck once and stopped, surprised at how hard, almost rock-like, that it had become.

Nimble had been her mother's pet, saved from a group of dwarfs who had mistreated him. Horra had taken on the responsibility of caring for Nimble after her mother died. After she'd witnessed the worqs beating him, she vowed to rehabilitate the gulgoyle so it could defend itself if it ever needed to again. He was more than a pet to her.

As a half-dragon and half-gargoyle breed, turning to stone wouldn't be uncommon. However, Nimble had never shown signs of doing so. She wasn't sure if it was good or if she should be worried about her immediate safety.

She played with the leather reins to disguise the tremble in her claws, the memory of the worq's brutality toward her still vivid in her mind. "Let's turn back. There's no way the two of us can take on a half-dozen of them."

"You know what that means." Balk gave her a meaningful look.

Vinegar and beans! She didn't want to go back across the damaged bridge—if it still stood. But she knew he was eager to

get back, fulfill his oath to her kitchen maid, Sageel, who had helped save them both, and return to hunting for Floke.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I know, but we don't have a choice." She flicked the reins, and Nimble responded immediately, acting desperate to go back the way they'd come.

Balk, on her father's massive Stempner steed, followed her lead.

Crack! The sound of her companion's horse stepping on a dead branch shattered the silence. Surprised shouts exploded from the group they were trying to avoid.

Horra stiffened in her saddle and jerked her head around.

Balk's face reflected a desperate apology. He mouthed, "Go!" and slapped his reins across his horse's flank.

Her heart hammered as she coaxed Nimble into a run. They tore back through the forest. Balk veered away from her to draw the worqs' attention. It was a plan they'd made as they traveled to the Weald in case of trouble.

The gulgoyle's wings were up and open, a sign it wanted to fly. Unfortunately, Nimble's first owners clipped its wings, rendering them useless for flight. But the gulgoyle was swift and its eyesight keen enough to avoid obstacles and trees as they raced.

She glanced behind her, losing sight of Balk in the dense forest. However, she caught sight of the worqs splitting up—four going after Balk and two coming after her.

The lessons she'd had about them being unintelligent were far from correct. Either they were evolving or someone was training them. Like the Erlking. Horra's heart pounded as hard as her gulgoyle's feet struck against the forest floor.

The ground rumbled, distracting her attention and skewing their path. Nimble bounced off the trunk of a thick stringy pine tree. A ripple moved across the gulgoyle's hide and was gone.

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She jerked the reins left toward the Weald and a denser section of trees. Horra knew if Nimble could get through the thicket, the worqs could as well. However, she had no proper plan and was going by instinct only.

Several birds exploded in the sky as she passed beneath the trees. Their distressed cries added to the racket, making her more tense.

Crack!

Pop!

Rumble.

Horra jerked her head around. Nimble's strides were more frenzied, making it harder for her to catch what was going on. At the last moment, she noticed a movement in her peripheral vision.

Were the trees moving?

Nimble dodged something on the ground, tossing her sideways. Her claws were slick with cold sweat, and she almost tipped out of the saddle, managing at the last minute to secure her hold on the pommel.

Thwack! A crooked arrow sunk into a tree to her right.

Horra squealed and ducked low.

Something else whirred by her head. Nimble bellowed. When she glanced up, she saw a fresh arrow sticking out of the side of her pet's shoulder. Anger churned in her gut. Those worqs would pay for that!

Nimble dodged and bounced off trees in a fierce effort to escape their enemies. No help was in sight. Horra yanked on the leather straps, jerking her pet left and then right, not daring to be an easy target. Fear pounded a drum in her chest as a prayer for safety sprang into her mind.

The acrid scent of dragon fire drifted to Horra's nose as her pet careened forward, accompanied by hot, belching breaths.

The gulgoyle was tiring. Blood trailed down its side where the arrow still protruded.

If only she hadn't gone this way back to her castle, Nimble wouldn't be injured now. If only she could reach the wooden-cloak, tucked inside her knapsack belted to Nimble's side, she might've hidden them in plain sight.

Too many doubts and should-haves bombarded her mind until she thought it would explode.

Crunching and more rumbles echoed around them. Hair raised on Horra's arms. Steeling herself, she darted a glance behind and found only trees. She didn't have time to question anything when Nimble collided with another tree. But this time, they didn't bounce off.

Horra went sailing over Nimble's head, the reins still in her claws.

Leaves scattered and floated in the surrounding air before she hit the ground hard, landing on her back.

Above her wasn't a tree. It was an enormous orange giant.

No, two enormous giants. In the middle of the Wilden Lands, far away from their northern home in Giborham.

Horra screamed.