

Tatterhood



THE BAND OF UNLIKELY HEROES BOOK 3

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*To my dedicated readers.
You make all the hard work worth it.*

CHAPTER I



~Horra~

Beneath a canopy of tall oaks edging the Riven's boundary, Horra bent over the gnome girl she'd just shot with a slime bomb when a ball of toxic-smelling mud smacked her cheek.

Goo ran down her neck and clung to her thick red curls. "Rowan, stop shooting! You're hitting me again," she yelled at her druid companion.

Though a month had passed since her father returned with the grubby worm antidote from the swamp where he'd grown up, they were still hunting creatures the evil elf Erlking had infected with the magic-siphoning bugs.

Horra's shoulders pinched. Saving grubby-infested creatures had become an unending job. And being this close to the Riven, the mysterious land between the elven hidden kingdom and her kingdom of Oddar, put her on edge.

"Honestly, Rowan. It's the middle of the day with the best

light. How do you keep missing?” Frustration with the Erlking’s plague and Rowan’s inability to hit a single target flared in her gut. She made a mental note to get his eyes tested.

“Sorry, Princess. It must be the configuration—”

“It’s a user issue, Rowan, not a technical one.” She interrupted him before he could natter on and on about his newest invention, which he dubbed the *externigrubber*. Frustration crept into her voice, and not only because Rowan had misfired a dozen mud bombs at her in just a few hours of hunting. Her target, a worq, had ducked at the last minute, allowing her large ball of swamp sludge to hit the innocent girl she was currently leaning over.

Horra captured the grubby worm squirming in the muck beside the girl and slid it into a jar she dug out of her knapsack. It was the third she’d gathered today alone. Pidge, her pet pudge wudgie and mighty huntress bird, would be in for a treat later.

The gnome girl moaned and then gagged. She rolled onto her side and coughed.

Horra couldn’t blame her. The scent of their new repellent, a diluted mixture of swamp mud, was pungent despite its weakened mixture. She helped the girl sit up and swiped the goo from her face. “Sorry about that. You weren’t my intended victim. Your abductor was. What’s your name?”

A blank look crossed the girl’s innocent, round face. The fact that she couldn’t recall such a simple thing as her name was a sure sign of the worm’s damage to her memory. Horra wondered how long the worm had been infecting the poor child. Her huge blue eyes filled with tears. She must’ve realized this wasn’t where she was supposed to be.

Whimpers turned to loud wails as the child’s face crumpled. “I want my mom!” she screamed between desperate gulps and sobs.

“Stupid Erlking,” Horra muttered under her breath while waiting for the child’s crying to die down. Saving the children was her newest mission in her battle against the Erlking. Her previous mission had been finding the trolls infected with the grubby worms that made them go insane. Though she was determined to face whatever magic trick the dark elf threw at them, Horra shuddered to think of what would come next.

Horra eyed the red-faced, wailing child awkwardly. No matter how many children she’d saved, the terror they experienced when coming out of the haze was the worst. And trolls were not normally nurturing creatures. They were fierce and formidable. She patted the child’s back, hoping to give her some level of comfort.

Nimble, her gulgoyle pet, rumbled in the background, also nervous about the loud cries. He was already on edge from the scent of worq permeating this forest so near the Riven, though how the beast could smell anything above the swampy concoction was beyond her understanding.

“Princess? What have you done to that poor gnome girl?” Rowan stepped out of the brushy edge of the forest. His clackity voice had recently deepened to a low boom. It, along with his demeanor, had become more like that of her late instructor, Woodsly.

The similarity was unconscious on Rowan’s part. Being Woodsly’s seed and heir to the druid warrior race of woodgoblins, some kind of resemblance was inevitable. She wondered, not for the first time, why he couldn’t have inherited Woodsly’s nubby tail instead. She could tolerate that much better than his identical voice and attitude.

Dropping her claw from the child’s back, Horra rolled her shoulders and tried to hide her frustration. “I didn’t do it on purpose.” She stood, leaving the gnome bawling on the

ground. “The worq moved at the last minute and my bomb hit her instead of him. Now she’s confused.”

Horra glanced around the gloomy area, finding no sign of her target. They’d ventured into a well-known unsafe space close to the Riven, an elven danger zone, and there was no telling where the worq had gone. “The worq’s disappeared, and now she’s woken up to strangers in an odd place. I’d be crying too if I were her.”

Horra walked back to Nimble and strapped her mud-flinger back in place next to her saddle. She turned and ran into a thick, mossy barrier. She let out a gasp. “Vinegar, Rowan! What’d I tell you about personal space?”

“That you are inordinately fond of it?”

Horra frowned as the moss on his bark tickled her arm. Had he actually just poked fun at her?

“Apologies, Princess. What do we do with the squawking child now?” Rowan stepped back and glanced at the sky. Though Springtide brought longer days, it was early in the season and the sun still set before suppertime.

The child shivered as a brisk breeze whistled through the tree limbs. She appeared to be wearing a thin nightgown, which was not suitable for the fickle springish weather they were experiencing.

“It will get dark soon,” Rowan noted unnecessarily.

Horra perceived the unspoken meaning in his words and sighed. Dark spaces made him uncomfortable ever since their trek through the mountains. For a moment, the young druid warrior had seemed less wooden than normal, like he might even care about the gnome child instead of his own safety. It wasn’t surprising that wasn’t the case. He’d only unrooted a couple short months ago. Merrow, the druid’s mentor, had warned Horra of Rowan’s stunted emotional growth.

Still, Horra couldn’t help but hope. “The worq is long gone

by now, so there's no use pursuing him. We'll need to bring the child back to the castle with us. We'll find her parents and reunite them like we've done with the dozens of other children we've saved."

"Where will we put her?" Rowan's eyes widened. The lighter chestnut color in his orbs was new, standing out from the mossy liverwort leaves covering his body.

"Between us," Horra said. "You'll have to sit on Nimble's back. Let's saddle up. We need to get going. I don't want to be out after the sun sets if we can help it." She knew Rowan understood her meaning. Night meant more worqs than they could handle together. Luckily, they were in the southernmost part of the area surrounding the Riven, and the ride back to the castle wasn't long.

Horra turned toward the girl, ignoring the unhappy tilt of Rowan's branchy crown. He would have to sit upon Nimble's hard-scaled back, something he wasn't overly fond of.

One of Woodsly's sermons came back to her. *Trying to please everyone is a waste of time and energy, Princess. Not even the most favored queen in Oddar's history managed that. The best you can do is please a few every once in a while. And even that is a fool's errand.*

"Isn't that the truth," Horra mumbled to herself as she helped lift the sniffling girl onto Nimble's back.

LATER THAT EVENING, Horra was shoving the last bite of greased grouse in her mouth as King Fyd stepped into the dining room. His face was grim, causing her to choke on her last swallow. "What's wrong?"

"Besides the fact you tracked swamp mud across the kitchen floor and are now sitting in the formal dining room

still coated in the odious mixture? Do you need to go back to Etiquette Basics class?” Humor flickered in his clay-colored eyes.

First Rowan’s joke, and now her father was teasing her. The pinch between her shoulders deepened.

She drank her spruce juice with as much dignity as she could muster before answering her father. It had taken hours to ride back to the castle after their failed mission, and she was famished. “You can thank Rowan for that. He isn’t capable of hitting the broadside of a castle with his newest invention. It flies right or left each time, depending on which side of him I’m standing on.”

Horra placed her utensils on her plate, picked up her goblet, and brushed the flakes of mud from her spot. She glanced up at the sound of laughter rumbling in her father’s chest. She stood and made a face at him. “It’s not funny. I think the grubby worm affected his eyesight.”

King Divitri placed a claw on her shoulder. “I recall a certain princess who couldn’t hit any of her targets with her bow and arrow just a few short years ago. Give the boy a chance. He’s still green and growing. Even though he looks your age, and he’s impressively smart, he’s still a sapling inside. It’s going to take a while for his rings to catch up to his size.”

She stiffened. “I was never that bad of a shot.” She headed for the kitchen with her dirty dishes.

“You were, and you could admit it if you set aside your frustration about getting stuck with Rowan,” he said, following her.

“My frustration isn’t with Rowan alone. We haven’t caught any creature outside the Riven, even after I bombed them and removed the grubby worms. I figured—”

“You figured it would be easier to bring the Erlking down?”

Wars take time. And unfortunately, we're fighting a defensive game at the moment." Her father's voice rumbled in a low octave, a tone he used when he wanted her to think harder about something important.

Horra's mind spun around what he meant. Her battle lessons on the impact of offensive versus defensive tactics weren't lost on her. Woodsly had been thorough in his training. She nodded. "Offensive is always a stronger position." Weariness crept into her voice so that it cracked.

"Exactly." The king crossed his arms over his chest. "You should let Rowan go out with someone else once in a while. Helping him does not have to rest entirely on your shoulders, Daughter."

"Merrow specifically told me I was the one to guide him." A yawn escaped her. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for a day.

Horra nodded at the few hobgoblins remaining in the kitchen and placed her dishes in the marble sink. The evening meal had been over for a while, and the preparation for the morning breakfast complete.

The king stood in the doorway, an unreadable expression on his green face. "You will learn as a leader that some jobs have to be delegated. If not permanently, then at least temporarily. Burning out after one task doesn't do you or Rowan any favors. Now, go clean up and head to bed." He grinned, his tusks glowing white in the low light. He knew she would skip the shower if she could get away with it. "It will all seem better in the light of morning, I promise."

A FEW MINUTES LATER, Horra dragged her clawed feet as she made her way up the staircase to her bedroom. A wail from the

guest corridor made her hesitate. “Must be the gnome child crying again,” she mumbled as she yawned, grateful the servants would take care of the girl. The poor thing sobbed most of the way home until exhaustion made her fall asleep against Horra’s back.

A hobgoblin’s shriek followed the outburst.

Horra scrunched her eyes closed, debating whether she should get involved. When another shrill scream bounced off the stone walls, she moved to intervene if only to ensure she could get a restful night’s sleep. “Vinegar!” Horra moaned.

She rounded a corner, where a lantern was lit. The light revealed a small hobgoblin woman coated with a fruity-smelling drink and sugared petals.

“What’s going on?” Horra demanded, staring at Glory, the disfigured fairy princess who hovered over the servant in a menacing stance. “You’re dismissed,” she told the maid.

The woman exited eagerly, wiping the flowery-smelling debris from her clothes.

Princess Glory waved a hand in front of her gray tattered hood, her face hidden in its shadows. “You reek!” Her voice, which had been gravelly from the Erlking’s hex, was now a surprisingly smooth, younger tone.

“Thanks, but I already knew that.” Horra straightened her aching back to face the ungrateful fairy. Though Horra had sympathy for Glory after one of the Erlking’s hexes had disfigured the princess, she had been more than a handful since they’d rescued her yet again from his clutches. And fairies, being conceited creatures, were already difficult without adding any other pressures. “What have you done to your voice, and what is the problem this time?”

A squeal barraged Horra’s ears.

Princess Glory slashed at the air with fingers as crooked as

a hobgoblin maid's hand. "This place is sucking the life out of me. I'm withering away."

"Not this again," Horra spat. Exhaustion pulled at her shoulders. She'd heard this argument at least a dozen times.

"Yes, this again. You can't keep me hostage any longer. I must leave this dreary castle. I need to return home." She squeaked the last sentence.

Horra narrowed her eyes at the fairy. Torren sounded like that once after he'd mixed together the wrong components of an elixir. The princess had obviously tried some sort of magic to reverse the hex the Erlking put on her. But since being hit by that spell, her magic had been wonky.

"There aren't enough resources to escort you home. We can't allow you to leave on your own, and we don't have the ability to form fairy paths. It's far more dangerous out there than you realize."

Fairy paths would allow the princess to travel the long distance to the Shining Kingdom safely. But the paths took strong magic to create. Trolls had no magic, and the princess's unstable magic made them impossible to project.

"You leave every day," Glory accused. "It can't be that dangerous."

Horra pressed her lips together. "I assure you, Princess, it is. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a shower before I go to bed." She spun and headed back down the hallway.

"Wait." The derision had left the princess's voice. "Please."

Stiff-backed, Horra stopped and glanced over her shoulder. "What?"

"I propose a trade. That's what trolls like to do, right? Trade?" When Horra said nothing, she hurried on. "I simply need a few minutes outside the castle grounds to breathe fresh air. An hour, tops." She pulled a golden vial from her pocket. It glowed with

light, much like the halo surrounding each of the fairies. At least the ones not hexed. So, Horra was correct. Princess Glory had been concocting an antidote to regain her beauty. “In exchange, I’ll give you a potion to remove those dreadful warts from your skin. You’d be beautiful, well, maybe not so hideous, if you use this.” She moved the small jar around in her bent fingers.

Her offer wasn’t appealing to Horra in the least. Anger heated her face like a stoked forge. “How dare you insult me and my ancestors in such a manner? Warts *are* a sign of beauty to us.” She fisted her shaking claws. “You fairies think your version of beauty is a standard all creatures should live by. You believe we are all inferior to your race. Let me make one thing perfectly clear. We trolls may not be fair-skinned or have magic embedded in our blood, but we are fierce and resourceful. Without us, you would still be under the Erlking’s thrall or getting your magic sucked out by the grubby worm, leaving you a dry, glittering husk.”

The princess shrunk back.

“You’ve done nothing but whine and complain since we rescued you, you ungrateful wretch! Do you honestly believe the Erlking would take pity on someone he deemed worthy of hexing in the first place? Surely you’re not that dense.”

Princess Glory straightened her bowed shoulders. Her gnarled wings crackled beneath the hooded cloak stretching tightly across them. “I have something he wants. Badly. He’d be stupid not to trade me for it.”

Horra scoffed. “And what would that be? I’m all ears.”

“You mean warts, don’t you?”

Glory’s snide comment hung in the air between them.

“Princesses? Am I interrupting something?” King Divitri’s voice cut through the tense air.

Neither of them spoke.

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The king seemed ready to wait them out. He crossed his arms over his broad chest, and his right eye twitched.

Horra wasn't ready to give in completely, though. She didn't care that her father expected nothing but her utmost civility toward another princess, especially one who was a guest in their castle. "Take a long look in the mirror, Princess Hideous," she said. "No golden potion or spell could even begin to make your selfish spirit beautiful."