

# Chapter One

I hated milking pixies. Technically I wasn't actually *milking* them, but I couldn't figure out a better term for "chasing down pixies and shaking them until their magic pixie dust falls out." So I stuck to "milking" until a better term presented itself. In any case, pixies will only show themselves to mortals under the dead of night while they get distracted by something they find pretty or exciting. So there I was, on that night, hunkered down by a swarm of fireflies, sprinkling glitter around their lights and waiting for some pixies to show up to get milked.

These are the kinds of duties you get assigned when you're at the bottom of the totem pole. Other adepts get tasked with upholding the family's honor, or traveling to exotic lands to report on mystical cultures far and wide. Meanwhile, I had to milk the pixies. On a school night.

I stretched my aching legs and switched to the red glitter. Blue sure wasn't getting me anywhere. I checked my watch in the dim light of a passing firefly. It was 11 PM. I sighed. The Blackwood family barely afforded me any time to do my homework as it was, and midterms were coming up. At this point the only thing keeping me at the academy was the weight of their name and the donations they made to the board to keep me there.

"Why so glum, chum?" A small green pixie drifted by. "Perk up and—ack!" I snatched the pixie out of the air while it tried to console me. The diminutive humanoid shape was surprisingly hefty for such a small thing. It was a wonder its tiny butterfly wings could keep it aloft in the air like that. I started shaking it into the sad, empty sack of pixie dust.

"What! Are! You! Doing! Un! Hand! Me! Fiend!" The pixie squeaked while I worked. "You! Shall! Know! The wrath! Of! Ten! Thousand! Perils!" It continued howling insults and threats at me while I shook all of its dust into the sack. When the pixie was good and empty, I released it, and it fluttered around my face, intending to make good on its promise of unleashing ten thousand perils upon me. I sighed again, and spritzed it with the water sprayer I brought with me. The pixie sputtered and plummeted to the ground, into a pile of assorted glitter. It quickly lost its train of thought and forgot all about me while its eyes went wide with glee amidst the new wondrous sparkles it found itself in.

"How do you pixies get by with this kind of attention span?" I muttered to myself. I rolled my shoulders and stretched my arms out. I'd need a lot more pixies to round out the night, and at this rate I wasn't going to get any sleep before school tomorrow. I hunkered back down and shook out some more glitter.

"Ohhhhhh, prettyyyyyyy! I can taste the—ah!" I snatched another pixie that wandered near the fireflies. The process was always the same. Lure them in, shake them until all the dust comes out, spritz them with water, and let them forget that it ever even happened. No matter what kinds of threats they made or how much of a fight they put up at the time, they always forgot about their sworn vengeance as soon as they landed in the glitter. They reminded me of ferrets, except they can talk. And fly. Okay, maybe they're not very ferret-like when you get down to the details. These are the things I had to think about to keep myself sane while performing this incredibly important, incredibly boring task.

I was getting ready to switch to the gold glitter when a chill wafted through the air. A tingling sensation went up my spine, and the forest went silent. The fireflies scattered, and the rest of the wildlife went as still as the air. I held my breath and felt the tension all around me.

Something bad was coming my way.

My hand reflexively went to my waist, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. I cursed myself silently for deciding that pixie-milking wasn't a very dangerous affair and didn't warrant walking around armed. I exhaled slowly, and I could see my breath in the cold air. My eyes darted left and right, looking for any signs of movement. I could feel the presence of something weighing down on my senses, just out of reach to get anything concrete. I was pretty sure it knew I was there. Right then, the best I could hope for was that it wouldn't be interested in me.

As if I could be so lucky.

The *thing* crashed through the woods in an explosion of noise. I leapt to the side to get out of the way and narrowly avoided being crushed by it. The first impression I got of the creature was that it was *big*. It smashed into the clearing, scattering dirt and glitter while it wheeled around and snarled at me, sending saliva and mucous careening in my direction. I came out of a roll and took off running into the woods. I didn't have time to look back and get a better idea of what I was up against. It rushed after me, banging into trees and rooting up the dirt as it tore its way through the woods, howling and reaching for me with its two giant humanoid arms.

I tried to round my way around the trees to slow it down, but it was somehow more maneuverable than me even with its huge mass. I caught a glimpse of it holding onto a tree trunk and swinging itself around to get airborne. I skidded to a halt and doubled back just in time before it crashed into the ground where I was heading. It pounded the dirt in frustration and turned back to face me. In that moment, the clouds parted and a shaft of moonlight beamed down onto the creature, giving me my first good look at it.

It was easily the size of a van. The thing was made of bulging muscles and patchy fur covering what looked like scabbed-over skin. It had backwards-jointed legs and huge arms ending in wicked, grimy nails. Its head was the only clean-looking thing about it: mounted prominently on the end of its stiff neck was a polished skull, gleaming white bone with deep black, hollow eyes and large branching antlers. It took me a moment to catch my breath while it threw its tantrum, tearing up the roots of a tree and toppling it. It wasn't just big and fast, but it was strong. Despite my pixie-milking assignment, I was pretty good in a fight, but this thing was going to kill me if it came to that. I backed away slowly and quietly, hoping that it would get distracted and forget about me. One, two, three steps away. Just a little further and I would be out of its line of sight and I could make a run for it, quick and quiet through the woods and back to safety.

*Snap!* I stepped on a dead branch and the sound of it breaking practically echoed throughout the quiet forest. The monster whipped itself around and fixated its empty eye sockets right on me. I had just enough time to gulp in terror before it launched itself back after me. By reflex, I threw the projectile I still had in my hand: the gold glitter. The plastic container burst open on contact with the skull, spilling its contents all over the polished bone. It howled and careened off to the side while the glitter coated its skull and it charged off, away from me, into the night.

I stared dumbfounded after it, watching it rampage off in the distance, while I again slowly backed away. Adrenaline coursed through my body as I wound down from the encounter, and my hands couldn't stop shaking. The sounds of the normal forest wildlife came back, and the autumn air seemed just a touch warmer. My watch quietly beeped as the clock struck

midnight. Pixie-milking time was over. I was expected back at the manor, and nobody was going to be happy about what I had to tell them.