

Lotte Skale and the Wyvern Hatchery

by Shanna P Lowe

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Chapter 1

Lotte Skale crouched next to the skeleton of Mrs. Gibbs' beloved milking cow, half-submerged in blood-saturated mud. Deep scratches marred the bones and exposed the missing marrow. According to the woman, who stood crying next to Lotte in the middle of the fenced pasture, she had left the cow out earlier that morning, just as sunlight chased away the night, and sometime in the hour before Mrs. Gibbs had come out to milk her, the cow had already been stripped of its flesh.

Lotte shivered from the overwhelming stench of copper emitting from the carcass. She adjusted the blue scarf she wore over her nose. Beside her towered her father, Orm, curling a finger to his chin in thought. A fog shrouded most of their view of the pasture, only the faint outline of Mrs. Gibbs' cottage and barn visible behind them. Somewhere beyond the wall of gray was a cliff to the forested plateau that stretched across southern Holan's coastline.

"Libby has been in my family for over ten years." Mrs. Gibbs dabbed her tears with the sleeve of her patchwork dress. "I have six children. It's only a matter of time before those blasted things go after one of them."

"I assure you we will track them down and guarantee they never bother you and your family again," Orm said.

"You had better," she said. "Word around Twisp says you're the best at hunting pixies. I hope for all of our sake you live up to that kind of reputation."

"I would argue that we're the best, but . . ." He trailed off, eyebrows furrowing together. He squinted at the ground for a moment and then bent over to retrieve a small lump from the mud.

Lotte knew what her father had found even before he wiped the object clean. He turned toward Mrs. Gibbs, outstretched his hand, and revealed the fist-sized body of a pixie.

Mrs. Gibbs screamed and staggered backwards.

"The pixie is dead." Orm brought the creature close to his face for observation. "It can't hurt you now."

Lotte's father wore a hooded cloak and scarf, identical to her own attire, which covered most of his face; however, the narrowing of his brown eyes told Lotte that her father was concerned. She stood up and peered closer at the pixie in his fingers.

The creature resembled a giant mosquito with a round body, translucent wings, and a needle snout with tiny, serrated teeth on the end. The pixie's bent arms descended into sharp, blade-like points. Yellow bulbous eyes dominated its head. Pixies were truly a horrifying sight. If Lotte had not handled them on a daily basis, she imagined her own reaction being similar to Mrs. Gibbs'.

"What do you see?" Lotte asked, as her father remained fixated.

"Look here." Orm whispered so only she could hear. He pointed toward the pixie's long snout. "Notice the red patch on the chin?"

Lotte squinted at the tinge of color where her father gestured. "That's not blood?"

"No," he said. "It's a marking. Study the wings—they are wider and more rounded at the tips than pixies native to our region."

"Huh." Lotte could not tell. Then again, she was not a magical creature expert like her father. He noticed details no one else could.

"These are eastern desert pixies, native to former Urtica," he said.

Lotte blinked in surprise. Urtica was once the capital of Vroavalon before King Bouldermaul and his Guldkem City rose to power. The ruins of Urtica were located in the Ka'Rok desert, which was clear across the continent of Asoleenya and would require a month of heavy travel by horse to reach. Lotte was puzzled as to how a swarm of eastern desert pixies had arrived in southern Holan.

"Could black market traders have brought them?" she asked.

Orm shook his head. "Pixies are as prolific as rats and mice. They're hardly worth half a copper coin. No, Lotte—it's here for the same reason other magical creatures are appearing in our region from all over Asoleenya."

"King Bouldermaul." Just whispering the tyrant king's name caused the hairs on Lotte's neck to rise. It seemed like most of the crippling problems in Asoleenya stemmed from his siege of the land, ten years prior. In this case, his mad quest of eradicating anything magical was causing many creatures to relocate.

Lotte frowned in sympathy. She and her father were also refugees, having been driven from their home in Urtica due to the war.

Orm adjusted the leather satchel he wore until it sat on his belly. He rummaged through it until he found a hunting game pouch and carefully placed the pixie inside. After tightening the drawstrings, he slipped the pouch into a pocket on the inside of his cloak.

“We will have disposed of the pixies by the end of the day,” Orm said to Mrs. Gibbs. “I suggest you stay close to home until I send word of our success.”

Mrs. Gibbs nodded silently before turning and scurrying through the field, soon vanishing in the fog.

When Orm was sure they were alone, he pulled down his hood and tugged off his scarf, revealing the cluster of freckle-like birthmarks that covered his face. He and Lotte shared peculiar features for humans, making them easily recognizable. In King Bouldermaul’s era, such notability was deadly. Lotte never took off her garment unless they were home, finding safety in its weight.

Orm waved for Lotte to follow him and led her to the pasture's split-rail fence. He climbed over and approached the cliff that materialized through the fog, and Lotte followed him. They stopped at the base, and Lotte ran her hand down the rockface, causing dirt and small pebbles to shower onto her boots. Her father hummed and noted, "Too loose" under his breath before scanning the steepness of the cliff. Even with proper equipment, the vertical drop would prove too difficult for them. There were stairs about five kilometers north that led up the cliff, but they would lose the pixies' fresh trails if they wasted time looping all the way there and back.

“We’ll have to use magic,” Orm said, and Lotte’s heart thumped.

Only after she turned fourteen years old, Lotte’s father taught her to use magic.

Orm searched his satchel, once again, and pulled out two smooth oval stones. Deep blue veins glittered with light, and when he handed one to Lotte, an electric sensation warmed the palm of her hand. Carved into one side was the Helyait word for levitate.

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“Do you remember the phrase?” Orm asked.

“*Sfavatt*,” Lotte said, mimicking the coarse, guttural accent of their region's Helyait dialect. The fish-like humanoids typically spoke in whines, whistles, and clicks underwater, but

on land, they created their own language to communicate with Humans and other Landwalkers. Growing up among the Helyaits, Lotte was almost fluent.

“Now the next part is *galm*--repeat after me, *sfavatt galm*.”

Lotte did, knowing the phrase translated to “rise slowly.”

“Helyait magic—the magic embedded in that rune—intertwines with their language. When you speak the phrase, you will activate the magic.”

“I know how it works,” Lotte said.

“Do you, now? Alright, prove it then.”

Oh, she planned to. Her father acted as though she did not live in a town where magic was used on a daily basis. Clutching the stone to her chest, Lotte repeated the incantation.

The rock pulsed, warming Lotte’s hand. The briny stench of beached seaweed filled the air, and Lotte felt her body become weightless. Slowly, she floated a few feet off the ground, her head now looking down on her father, until her feet dangled above Orm.

Her stomach churned. She wasn’t used to being so far off the ground. Ten feet at the least. Looking up, she gauged at least seventy feet more. Lightheadedness clouded her mind, and she came to a stop, suspended in the air.

“Focus, Lotte. Remember my words—and will the magic with your mind.”

Ignoring the rising panic, Lotte closed her eyes and blocked the rest of the world out. She whispered *sfavatt galm*, picturing herself moving up the cliff. Her body jolted gently, and she ascended. The moisture of the morning fog formed a layer of slick on her exposed cheeks, but as she rose higher, the air became slightly cooler and drier. Blinking, Lotte found herself breaking out of the fog. Soon she reached the top of the cliff.

Lotte exhaled, “*Riv*.” *Stop*.

She dropped hard, like an anchor on a ship, and missed landing on the ledge. She barely registered the wind whipping past her body as she fell, before an arm wrapped around her waist and caught her, forcing a breathy oof out of her. She turned her head up to Orm who smirked at her.

“Shall I finish explaining?” he asked.

Heart hammering in her chest, Lotte jerked a nod. She refused to look down. She didn’t want to know how close she was to the ground below. Thankfully, her father either was quick to react or predicted her failure—most likely both.

Orm lifted them both to the top of the cliff.

“*Amat* to move forward. *Nerla* to lower.” As he spoke, the magic reacted. Orm’s boots touched the ground. “Then you use *riv*.”

“Thanks,” Lotte said, pushing away from her father. Her legs quaked at her near death encounter. They stood before a jungle dense with vines, leafy shrubs, and flowering fruit trees. Smells of sweet floral mixed with decaying leaves and wet dirt, as the humidity layered everything with water droplets. Vibrant birds with hooked beaks tweeted from high branches, and cicadas droned from their hiding spots. Moss covered every inch of the forest floor, boulders, and the trunks of trees, like thick woolen sweaters.

“You will get the hang of magic soon enough,” Orm said. He held out his hand for Lotte’s rune.

She moved to return it, but froze as she noticed something different about the rune. The bright veins from before—the magic—had dulled.

“What happened to it?” she asked, lifting the rune up for him to see.

“The energy in magic is fleeting.” Orm took the rock to inspect it. “Think of it like oil in a lamp—it eventually burns out.”

“Does it ever come back?” Lotte asked.

“Not with inorganic material. There is no way for them to rejuvenate the energy needed for magic naturally, unless you transfer magic from one source to another.”

“Living creatures can replenish themselves, though.” Lotte jabbed a finger in the direction of Twisp. “Helyaits don’t run out of magic. They use it for everything.”

Orm nodded. “They eat, drink, and sleep to renew their magic energy supply—as do other magical beings. Some can even absorb sunlight and heat for the same reason.” He tosses the rune into the air and catches it playfully. “Shall we find the pixie nest, now?”

Excitement rose in Lotte’s chest, and she trailed after her father eagerly into the forest. This was her first hunt. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to participate with her father’s captures of pixies. Yet, the rule was she must wait until she was fourteen years old.

Last week was her birthday.

Orm unsheathed a large knife with a broad blade from its holder on his belt, and he swiped an arc in front of him, cutting a path through the thick foliage. The process was slow, with leaves and branches constantly sliding off Lotte’s hood. After the fifth attempt at adjusting

it, Lotte gave up trying to fix it. No one was around, anyway, to see the constellation of freckle-like birthmarks that covered every inch of her pale face.

Having such a distinguishable feature was dangerous in the era of King Bouldermaul, especially when the wrong person could report them for illegal use of magic. That was why Lotte and her father, who also shared the trait, hid under cloaks and scarves.

Orm swung one last time before a deer path split the forest. They followed it up a steep, rocky slope and down to a shallow creek where mosquitoes swarmed in clouds over their heads. Luckily, Lotte and her father had lathered their skin and clothes in a spray that deterred bugs from biting.

A grating animal call startled Lotte. She whipped her head up just in time to see a blue-feathered glider raptor soar over her head and land on the trunk of a tree, sharp nails digging into the bark. It had a reptilian face but a bird-like body with a scaly tail that fanned out at the end into colorful feathers. Plumage on its underarm allowed for a brief distance of flight for the glider raptor.

The deeper they ventured into the jungle, the more peculiar creatures they encountered. They were only ten kilometers away from the Immortal Forest, the abode of Asoleenya's most formidable and terrifying magical beasts. It was perilous for a mere human without any magical abilities to enter.

Orm halted his steps suddenly and thrust out his arm, causing Lotte to walk into his elbow. She shot him a confused look, wondering why they had stopped.

“Do you hear that?” Orm asked.

Lotte brushed back the hood of her cloak to expose her ear. All she could hear were the typical jungle noises and a glider raptor squawking nearby. Giving her father a sideways glance, she wondered if he was imagining things. Orm brought his index finger to his lips and motioned for silence. He crouched down and tiptoed forward, and Lotte mimicked his movements.

The creek divided into two, and Orm followed the one that flowed into a stagnant pond. Fuzzy cattails emerged from long, broad leaves, which were taller than Lotte's father and obstructed her view of the forest as she crept toward the pond. After a while, Lotte heard the sound her father had mentioned earlier.

Buzzing. Like hundreds of large wasps.

Orm slowly squatted down and grabbed a handful of mud, wiping it over his face and hands, before he held out a glob of the foul muck to Lotte.

“This will help mask your scent. Rule number one for dealing with pixies is to not alert them of your presence,” Orm said.

“Got it.” Lotte took the mud eagerly and wiped it over every exposed part of her body. Her hands shook as she wiped them off on her cloak. Excitement hummed in her veins. This was it! Her first hunt! After all the waiting and begging, she was going to catch her first swarm of pixies. Any normal human would tell her she was crazy for wanting to go anywhere near the flesh-craving pests, but to Lotte, this was a rite of passage—the proof that she was just as useful as the rest of her extraordinary family.

“Keep your head down and stay absolutely quiet,” Orm whispered. “Rule number two for dealing with pixies is not to alert them of your presence.”

“That’s the same as the first rule,” Lotte deadpanned.

“Exactly.”

She snorted, catching her natural instinct to roll her eyes. “How do we tell where we’re going with all the cattails?” With their current visibility, they might accidentally step onto the pixie nest.

In that case, Lotte and her father would be dead.

“That is a question answered by rule number three.”

“Let me guess—don’t alert the pixies of our presence.”

“Close! But no.”

Orm slid his satchel forward and dug out a large, lumpy velvet pouch. Something inside coiled and hissed. Untying the strings of the pouch and opening it up, a vibrant green wyvern slithered onto Orm’s arm, wrapping its body around his wrist for support. The serpent creature with a reptilian face stretched out two sets of feathered wings, one set located a few inches past the wyvern’s head and the other set protruding from halfway down his body.

"Always carry a tracking wyvern with you. That's rule number three," he said.

While wyverns looked like snakes, they acted more like birds. Some were as smart as dogs and could be trained as such. Orm had done so with this particular wyvern.

Taking out the dead pixie from earlier, Orm held it in front of the wyvern's vented nose. Glut—the name they had chosen for the green-scaled creature—inhaled the pixie’s scent. His

mouth snapped open, revealing two rows of serrated teeth, and lunged forward. Orm yanked his head back.

“You were fed this morning!” Orm sounded exasperated.

Glut flickered his tongue with irritation. He coiled his body back and sprung again, attempting to eat the pixie. Lotte laughed when her father swatted the wyvern away. Perhaps Glut wasn’t as trained as Orm often claimed.

“Fly, you foolish creature!” Orm tossed the wyvern into the air.

With a hiss, Glut pumped his wings and rose until he was higher than the tree canopy. The sun forced Lotte to squint as she tracked his movements. Soon, he was just a glimmer of green. Only a few meters ahead of Lotte and Orm, Glut began circling. Orm grinned widely and nudged Lotte with his elbow. Glut had found the pixie nest.

“You know the way home from here, right?” Orm whispered.

Lotte tensed, frowning under her scarf. “Why?” she demanded.

Her father ducked his head. “Too loud!”

“You promised I could hunt pixies once I turn fourteen years old.” She adjusted her volume, speaking under her breath.

“These are not pixies we are used to.”

Orm risked parting the cattails, giving them a sliver of visibility of the pond. At least three dozen pixies zipped above floating on the murky water. Mud mounds on the far bank peaked like skin boils, oozing with more of the pests. The pixies’ nest. In those mounds were their young, born three to five in a litter. Only one sibling would survive—the rest eaten.

“I’m not familiar with their attack patterns and whether or not they have other properties—venom, for example—if we are bitten,” Orm said.

“I’m staying.”

Orm narrowed his eyes, irritation flashing across his face. “You agreed to abide by every instruction I gave you. If you cannot, then we will end this hunt early and forgo any future opportunities.”

“But—”

“Lotte Skale, go home!”

Sharp chirps drew their attention. A pixie bumbled in their direction. Orm forced both of them flat on the ground, wriggling their limbs into the mud. Face down, Lotte closed her eyes

and held her breath. The whine of the pixie's wings grew closer, before Lotte felt the wind of each beat hit her head. Her stomach lurched, feeling as though it would crawl out of her throat.

A soft weight landed on her cloak's hood. She muffled a frightened cry as the pixie scuttled around, its needle beak prodding her neck. The pixie lifted into the air and then dropped onto her back. It prodded once more. Lotte's heart thudded so heavily in her chest that she was sure the pixie could hear it.

In her peripheral vision, a streak of green whizzed by. She heard the pixie screech before something heavier thumped against her spine. Glut. Relief flooded Lotte, and she shimmied them off, carefully rolling over and sitting up. She watched Glut bite the pixie while constricting around its gray body. Bones snapped, and the pixie fell limp. Glut's jaw unhinged, opening wide, and he gulped the pixie down.

Lotte mentally thanked the wyvern for his impeccable timing.

Her father pushed himself up, and they locked gazes.

"Now is not the time to argue," he whispered.

After the close encounter with the pixie, Lotte begrudgingly nodded.

Maneuvering onto all fours, she crawled backward while avoiding Glut inching his mouth down the pixie's body. When she was far enough away from the pond, Lotte stood. Perspiration from her forehead trickled down to her lips, collecting the pond scum on her skin, and she sputtered at the disgusting taste.

Lotte scowled one last time in her father's direction, and she stalked back the way they came. Her fists clenched with frustration. Orm was treating her no differently than before she turned fourteen years old—a child who could not hold her own. Well, he was wrong. She was just as capable as anyone else in her family, thank you very much.

Lotte traveled halfway to the cliff's edge before turning east and soon finding the boot-worn path that would lead her home. Through the trees, glimpses of the ocean glittered as the fog began to disperse. Seabirds cawed, and horns blared from outside the bay. Lotte spotted Twisp floating on the water. A long dock stretched to the mouth of the bay and connected to a wooden saucer of homes and businesses made of reeds. If she squinted, she could probably make out specks of movement from locals and visitors roaming around.

A familiar buzzing noise stopped Lotte in her tracks. She held her breath and listened, noting that the sound was coming from not far ahead. The hairs on her arms rose as Lotte inched

forward and pushed massive fern leaves out of the way. Her eyes searched the forest for the pixie.

There it was!

Lotte stifled an ecstatic gasp. A fat-bellied pixie was circling around a bird's nest in lazy circles. Judging by the two swallows screeching fervently from nearby branches, there must be hatchlings inside. The pixie was preparing for its next meal.

Lotte's lips twitched into a smirk, and she reached for her belt where she kept a cane blowgun in a leather holster, along with a canister of six-inch darts. Loading a dart into the tube, she waited for the right moment. Attacking the pixie while it was airborne was useless – a sure miss. Patience was key. Lotte inhaled deeply when the pixie dropped onto the nest, an alarmed chirp coming from inside the woven dried grass, and she placed the mouthpiece to her lips and exhaled hard. The dart was silent, but a hissing cry told Lotte she had hit her target.

Satisfaction replaced Lotte's earlier anger regarding her father's broken promise. She wished he were here to see it. Then she could rub her victory in his face, proving that he had made a mistake.

Moving underneath the nest, Lotte squatted in the shrubbery and pushed around the ferns and vines until she came across the pixie's twitching body. She picked it up and rotated the pixie until she saw the underbelly. It had a red patch like the one her father had found by the remains of Mrs. Brigg's cow. The pest must have wandered off from the swarm—a big mistake on its part. Lotte removed the dart and tucked the pixie in her cloak pocket, patting the lump through the fabric.

As the high of adrenaline dwindled, Lotte realized something was off about her surroundings. The buzzing noise never stopped. In fact, the sound grew louder and began vibrating the leaves on the trees. Blood drained from Lotte's face. Without any hesitation, she sprinted in the direction of her home, leaping over warped logs and ducking under branches, lungs drawing desperate breaths. The buzzing followed her.

"Ouch!" Lotte cried. A sharp pain pricked her elbow. Looking over her shoulder, she saw a pixie looming mere centimeters from her head, followed by a swarm of at least fifty flesh-eating creatures. Was this a second swarm? Why were there so many? And why were they attacking her?

THRAWP!

Lotte collided with the trunk of a tree and collapsed onto her back, her head bouncing on the ground. Thankfully, the spongy mulch cushioned her fall, but the initial impact left her dazed. Instantly, a swelling on her forehead appeared, and the pain was excruciating. Punctures from the pixies' beaks to her face and exposed hands broke her from her haze. The pixies were on top of her, biting off chunks of flesh. Lotte screamed and flailed her limbs, kicking her feet and propelling herself backward until her back hit another tree trunk. She dug her fingers into the furry bark, wailing from the endless barrage of pixies and somehow dragged herself to stand. Panic exploded through the pain. The pixies were eating her alive!

She began to run, telling herself, "Just make it home," and gritting her teeth together.

She felt a pixie scuttling on her arm, and without looking, she yanked the pixie off and hucked it behind her. Another one clung to her back, but there was nothing much she could do. Half a second of hesitation could result in her demise.

The trees thinned, and the dirt path was replaced by a snake of large stones. Soon, Lotte entered a clearing with a massive glass dome with foliage growing on the inside, the top twice as high as the forest canopy, connected to a log cabin. Vegetables grew in several raised beds. Along the dome was a shed, rabbit hutch, and chicken coop. The compound was her home.

The sight of the dome sparked an idea in Lotte. To anyone else, it looked like an oversized greenhouse, but inside lurked the creatures that would be Lotte's only solution against the pixies. She reached for the necklace hidden underneath her cloak, a set of skeleton keys dangling from the end. She raced to the door leading into the dome while fumbling for the right key, and cried with relief as she jammed a key into the hole, the lock clicking, and slammed her shoulder against the door. It groaned open, but the corner caught on something inside, leaving it open only a couple of inches wide.

"C'mon! C'mon!" Lotte shoved the door again.

She yelped as the pixies descended on her, and in one last ditch effort, she kicked the corner that was stuck. The door swung open, and heat blasted her face. Lotte threw herself inside, her body splashing into warm, rancid mud. Out of pure instinct, she rolled to the side and under a wooden work table surrounded by stacks of metal pails and several rakes.

The pixies burst inside like a cork-popped wine bottle, zipping around the many tropical trees and shrubbery. Their movements were sporadic due to the sudden shift in climate, and they

seemed confused for a moment, but recovered fast. Soon, they resumed their search for their prey. Lotte trembled and placed a hand over her mouth, praying for her plan to work.

Another movement joined the frenzied pixies, slithering along the tree branches and on the grounds. It was quiet and calculated, with slivers of vibrant scales flickering between leaves. Just as a pixie landed on the ground in front of the workbench, its yellow eyes reflecting a petrified Lotte, and it chattered with its swarm of its discovery, the air current shifted. Dozens of shimmering bodies and feathered wings exploded from every crevice in the dome. Wyverns of all colors and sizes clashed with the pixies, jaws snapping them out of the air and thumping them to the ground. They constricted the pixies to death.

An orange wyvern with red stripes caught the pixie that had found Lotte. No longer in immediate danger, Lotte crawled on her belly out from underneath the worktable and towards the open door. Wyverns dropped all around her head. Outside, the heat of the dome made southern Holan's air cool and less suffocating than it normally was. Lotte exhaled with relief and scrambled to her feet, bellowing and yanking the door shut.

She trapped the pixies inside.