

Pixie Dusting

By Susan Buckner

Pixie dusting is the last thing farmers do every autumn, before the fairies let it snow. The pixicide is made of ground troll scales and pulverized gnoll bones, and it's guaranteed by the fairies to keep pixies out of your fields for a whole year. For us farmers, keeping pixies out of the fields is a number-one priority.

Our flax fields cover most of our allotment, but Pops put in the rapeseed as a cash crop last autumn. That was probably why we missed dusting that acreage until well into the winter. I noticed it, because it's my job in winter to go over the inventory, and I noticed, with a sinking feeling in my stomach, that we had way too much pixie dust in the shed.

"Um, Pops?"

"Yeah, Darlene, what is it?" Pops was worn out with trolling the borders of our land, and he didn't need the news I was about to give him.

"We must've missed a field last autumn." I leaned over his dusty, troll-scaled shoulder and showed him the invoices. "We forgot to dust someplace."

"Tarnation!" Sometimes Pops sounds like Granddad. "Must've been that rapeseed field. I knowed we put it in too late."

There wasn't really anything to say. Pops knew, and I knew, what was going to happen come spring, when the pixies hit that field. It wouldn't be pretty.

"Is it too late to dust it now?"

We both looked out the window at the snow-sprinkled fields, fallow now and bleak under the winter-gray Magica sky. It was the time of year for trolling the fields and setting traps in the woods for goblins and gnolls. Pixie dust needs to go in before the ground froze, and the furrows looked iron-hard to me.

"Well, let's give it a go," Pops grunted. "Tell your brothers to tend to it first thing in the morning."

Ray and Jimmie went out the next day in the tractors, hauling the excess dust. Even under the drear winter light, it glittered and sparkled, making iridescent gleams along the battered rows. They harrowed the glowing pixicide into the half-frozen earth, making the muck shine with false hope. Then we all sat back and waited.

Yule came and went, and the pixie-dusted field lay under its shimmering protection. Because of the long Magica months, we weren't sure when Spring would come, that is, if the fairies would let it come this year. Fairies don't think like humans, and they like the long winter twilights. But eventually, the skies lightened from steel-gray to warm blue, and a green swathe appeared on the fields, as the first plants of Magica sprouted. Then the warm spring rains came, and the flax fields came to life, and the swift-growing flax quickly choked out the weeds and grew.

The rapeseed fields still lay brown and fallow. We were probably doomed. Once you get an infestation of pixies in your crop, you might just as well give up for the year. But maybe the late dusting had helped. Maybe.

The rapeseed sprouted late. It was well into May. The first faint green showed in the brown rows. And then the pixies came.

"Pops, you better come see," Jimmie yelled from the front window. His voice was boy-high with alarm and excitement. We all crowded up against the Plexiglas to see what he was so riled up about.

At first, there wasn't much to see. Just a waist-high stand of yellow-flowered rapeseed, tossing in the May breeze. Only the wind wasn't blowing that hard. I cupped my hands right up against the window, and pressed my face to the plastic, and I saw them. Their skin was almost the same hue as the flowers, and their long white hair glittered like snow above the tossing green. They were dancing and fluttering through the field, ripping out handfuls of rapeseed and tossing it about. It looked like there were thousands of them.

"Get the equipment!" Pops shouted. "The horse, the hens, get them inside!"

We all scattered out of the house, and instantly realized the infestation was worse than we'd thought. A couple of dozen of the little fiends had already attacked the tractors. Irreplaceable parts showered in all directions as they battered at the farings and tore apart the engine housings. Two rode by on featherless hens, cheering in tiny voices. The hens squawked despairingly, and I knew that was the end of the eggs for a while.

"Get the horse!" Pops shouted to me, and I took off for the pasture. Luckily, we hadn't been settled in long enough to have cattle or sheep, but we did have one old black

gelding we kept for running errands. I found him huddled up against the wall of the barn, covered over with a swarm of pixies. They were plaiting his mane and tail into ragged knots and nibbling mice trails into his coat.

I got the halter on him, knocking pixies to the ground, and led him towards the barn door. He was anxious to bolt, what with the pixies pinching him and gnawing on his hocks, but I led him through the door, and the pixies dropped away. They wouldn't pass the hex-sign the fairy had put on our door last season.

Inside the barn, all was quiet. Luckily, the harrows were inside, along with the thresher, and other equipment we wouldn't be using till fall. Of course, that was a moot point now, because we wouldn't have a crop in the fall to use the equipment on. I put the horse into his stall, and spent some time in the silent barn, listening to the pixies dancing around the farmyard. As the sun started going down, I came out of the barn, shut the door carefully, and made a dash for the house.

Ray and Jimmie had put a sketchy supper on the table. None of us was hungry; Pops didn't even come to pretend to eat. Just sat in his wing chair in front of the big window, watching the faint glimmers of pixie-light as they trampled the ruined rapeseed crop into the ground, and started on the flax. Of course, we'd dusted the flax fields, but your protection needs to be solid; once they get in, they've pretty well got the run of the place. They tore up the fields all the next day. And the next.

"This is awful," Ray shouted, over the pitter-patter of dancing pixie feet. They couldn't get into the house, since Granddad had had it hexed when it was built; but they danced on the roof and pummeled the doors anyway, or else threw rocks and bits of broken tractor at the walls.

"What're we gonna do?" Jimmie wondered, his face pressed to the Plexiglas windows. "They won't even let us outta the house."

"We need a professional pixie duster." I tore my gaze away from the trampled brown fields and looked beyond it, to the troll-forest decked in the Spring's flowers.

Both boys looked at me in surprise. "Yeah, but those are only in the forest," Ray said. "You gonna go in there, look for a gnome or something?"

"I thought maybe a fairy," I said, just to hear them gasp, but I knew that was the only answer.

The fairies lived in the mountains beyond the forest. They were the real rulers of Magica; but they liked the dusk and dawn and late nights under the moons. When we

humans first came to Magica a couple dozen years ago and settled down, the fairies pretty much let us do what we wanted. Granddad was one of the first humans to make a treaty with the fairies and helped set up the fairy-human government. As long as we followed the rules, they didn't meddle in our affairs and we didn't trouble them. The human part of the agreement meant not hunting the magical animals like unicorns, and keeping our borders trolled, staying away from demons, and, unfortunately, pixie dusting.

"I'll have to go out at night," I said, planning aloud. "And I'll have to take the horse. The bikes won't work in the forest."

"You'll never get him out of the barn," Ray protested. "He won't come past the pixies. And how are you going to get out of the house?" We looked to where pixies crowded the lower edge of the windows, snickering and pointing. "They'll be all over you before you get ten feet."

"You'll have to make a diversion," I said. "Turn on all the outside lights, they're like moths to candle flames. I'll sneak out the back door, and we'll be gone. Then you can turn the lights off, and you'll be safe."

When it was fully dark, I had the boys turn on all the front lights. The merciless halogen bulbs revealed a farmyard as stark as Magica's moons, pockmarked and battered with machine parts. The pixies rose in a cloud from the flax fields and started swarming up to the house. I waited until the yard was full, then slipped out the back door into the dark.

The black gelding, Max, was still in his stall, whuffing a little at the remnants of the hay I'd fed him. He nickered when he saw me and came towards me as if he expected a treat. I rubbed his nose, then slung the saddle on his back and led him to the door. I eased it open a crack and looked outside. The pixies were swarming the house: It looked like a seething mass of white hair and yellow wings. I swung onto Max's back, and we cantered towards the forest.

Pixies don't go in the forest. Their little brains get lost too easily, and gnomes and goblins like toasted pixie-on-a-stick. Once away from our farm, and on the dirt track that led through the middle of the forest, I was pretty safe. From pixies, anyway. For the trolls and goblins, I'd have to count on Pops' antique AK-47. New mechanical things didn't work so well, in the forest. Probably because the fairies don't understand them. Anything they can't figure out in terms of magic, they just don't let work.

Max trotted along the forest track, while I shone a flashlight into the trees. "Hey, trolls!" I yelled, swinging the light. "Just passing through! Hey! Trolls! Here we

come!" Trolls aren't much smarter than bears back on Earth; they'll leave you alone unless you startle them or get between a mama troll and her spawn. It's only near farms that they've gotten crazy and dangerous.

Deeper into the forest, and the only sound was Max's hooves thudding on the track. A couple hours into the forest, I knew, there was an old stone hunter's hut, where boys like my brothers camped out on gnoll hunts. I planned to pass the rest of the night there, then go on the rest of the way through the forest at dawn. The hut had been hexed by a reliable fairy, so I knew it was safe.

Problem was, the rest of the forest wasn't so safe. Wild animals lived there, griffons and unicorns and wyverns. They weren't so bad themselves, but where they were, there were dangerous ones too, like chimeras and dragons and manticores. There weren't too many demons this far north, but what there were lived in the depths of the forests, waiting for dumb humans, like me.

The three moons of Magica were up and pouring their tricky light into the forest. I rode with my chin over my shoulder, clutching the rifle. This was the kind of weather gnolls and goblins liked to hunt, and even though they probably wouldn't take down a human girl on a horse, still, why give them the chance. The greenish, shifting light made things difficult to spot, and I almost ran into the hut before I saw it. I hauled back on the reins, and Max half-reared, startled.

"Whoa, horse," I said, and slid out of the saddle. I planned to lead him inside—he should just about fit—but just then a voice spoke over my shoulder.

"Where are you going, human girl?"

I nearly wet my knickers, it scared me so bad. I jumped a foot into the air, and swung around, leveling the rifle. A tall figure stood at the edge of the clearing, swathed and hooded in a long cloak that seemed to shimmer in the watery moonlight. All I could see of the person was a gleam of eyes deep in the hood, eyes that seemed to glimmer red in the greenish moonlight.

That could mean a demon. Wonderful. Out of the frying pan into the dragon's fire. We didn't see a lot of demons in the farm belt, they hang out in the volcanic zones by the lava, but sometimes they showed up to tempt humans. Normally, they leave us alone, but they liked human females. I wished I'd brought Granddad's crucifix along.

"I'm just about to turn in for the night." The first rule of meeting demons is never let them know you're afraid. The second rule is demons don't always play by the rules.

The figure took a step or two forward. The reddish glow deepened, and I was sure I could see the long jutting muzzle and tapering horns of a demon. My bones turned to water. Max, sensing my unease, shifted and stepped on my foot.

"Ouch!" I jumped back from the stupid horse and got my back against the wall. But the figure had come fully into the light and threw back its hood. What I had taken for a muzzle was simply a long jaw and aggressively thrusting nose. Bright eyes reflected the moons, but not in the reddish way I'd thought I'd seen. I gasped with relief.

"Thank God, I thought you were a..."

"Never fear. You're safe enough here." The man laughed, exposing normal, white teeth, none of them sharpened or fang-like. He wasn't particularly handsome, with that long jaw and big nose, but I was just glad he didn't have pointed ears and horns. "My name is Clyde."

"Darlene O'Connell." We shook hands. His was warm, but not demonically so. "I'm on my way to the fairy lands, on the other side of the forest. We have a pixie problem at our farm."

Clyde gently pushed me into the hut and led Max in behind us. "Yes, the forest is abuzz with your pixie plight. You forgot the rules."

"It was an accident." I sank down on the low wooden bench that ran three sides of the room, and pulled off my boots, one after another. It didn't strike me as odd that Clyde was also removing his shoes. I did furtively glance at his feet, but they were normal, five toes, no claws.

"The rules were, humans must dust their fields against pixies every autumn. We've heard through the grapevine you have quite an infestation." Clyde took off his shirt as he spoke, and I gazed admiringly at his muscular chest. I did wonder at the seamed-looking skin under his arms, but that thought didn't trouble me. My attention got directed downward as he slipped out of tight leather pants, and I saw he definitely wasn't a demon.

He reached over and pulled my tunic over my head, but it didn't occur to me to be embarrassed. "Yes, I need a fairy to come re-dust the field." I obligingly raised my hips as Clyde unbuttoned my jeans. "I'll be leaving by dawn."

"No, you won't," he said, pushing me down onto the floor and wrapping his cloak around us. "You'll find the problem gone when you wake in the morning."

I thought I felt warm leathery wings enfold me as Clyde lay on top of me, but then the feelings left, and I was borne up on a tidal wave of warmth. The tricky greenish light washed me away and I slept.

Harsh sunlight glancing across my face woke me up. I lay on the stone floor of the hut, fully clothed, even to my boot-lacings. I sat up, and didn't feel sore or abused, and I was willing to pass off the night before as the imaginings of a tired mind.

Then I saw the feather. It was a long, metallic-green plume, scaled with tiny flakes of gold. Scrawled beside it on the stone floor, in fading golden script, I read, "Thanks for a wonderful night. The pixies should be gone. Clyde." Well, that's what you get for breaking the rules, I thought. At least it hadn't been a demon. I saddled Max, and we cantered back home through the rising morning light.

When I got home, the pixies were gone. The boys told me what had happened the night before, but I could already guess. The dragon-seared swatch of earth wouldn't yield a lot this year or next, but we might get something we didn't expect from it in the fall. Dragons are unpredictable that way. But the farm was saved. We even got a late crop of flax off the main fields, and Pops sold the feather and bought an adjoining tract of land to plant more rapeseed. We made sure to dust this year.

It's been almost a year since our pixie infestation. Nine months, to be precise. Pops was embarrassed at first, but he's happy for me now. I've been tied down in the house these last three months, my belly swollen to bursting with whatever Clyde left in me. Ray's guessing a baby, but Jimmie's hoping I'll lay an egg. Me, I'll just be happy if it's healthy and has two of everything it's supposed to have.

And once it's born, or hatched, I'll take it out to the stone hut in the forest and let it meet its father. The custody arrangement should be interesting.

The End