

## Chapter 1

### Picus the Thief

*Turn your gaze to a half-remembered world of childhood that exists below the tall grass and flowering hedgerows. Look very carefully and you may be able to trace faint pathways through the undergrowth, leading to small mounds of dry foliage in curious, deliberate shapes – Leaf Castles! These are perhaps the last visible remains of the Hidden Kingdom.*

This story starts on a night nearly two thousand years ago, in the dense forests that surround an area known today as Transylvania. The countryside all around is pitch black and freezing rain tumbles from bruised clouds.

Now, pick a solitary droplet of rain and follow it through the swirling clouds as it is buffeted by winds: past the rocky outcrops and down into the canopy of trees, right to the forest floor. Imagine it land with a small *pat* – like a bead of blood falling on wet leaves – amongst the tangled roots and briars; where dramas, unseen by Human eyes, play out.

Through the storm someone is running for their life. It is the Vampire, Picus. Picus the Thief.

Needless to say, almost as soon as he had stepped outside, the rain had found a way to gush down the back of his neck. His wings were sodden and refused to work. Swerving to avoid an arrow that zipped silently through the trees, narrowly missing his exposed neck, he stumbled into a miniature, evil-smelling swamp at the towering base of a tree and lost a boot.

Picus, who liked the finer things in life, such as good footwear and not smelling like a blocked drain, cursed the day he was born. It was one thing to be pursued through a dark wood during a thunderstorm, battered by raindrops the size of his head, shot at with arrows and called terrible names but it was quite another thing to lose one half of his second favourite pair of magic boots.

The immensely powerful, fat and furious Vampire who was catching up

with Picus despite his best efforts to escape was currently wearing his favourite pair.

‘When I get my talons into you, I’ll rip your fangs out with white-hot pliers!’ Picus heard the thunder of large feet behind him. And they were getting closer. ‘I’ll chop your miserable, thieving head off and boil it. I’ll shred your tongue and use it to string my harp. I’ll ... I’ll make you eat your own feet!’

That’s just weird, thought Picus.

Without warning, a Were burst out from behind an acorn husk just ahead of the fleeing Vampire. The monster shook its greasy pelt and pounced at Picus, who suddenly found himself staring into a mouth full of pitted, yellowing teeth – the beast’s jaw working like an industrial meat grinder.

Picus laughed. The Were was just one of Raben’s defence mechanisms. Nothing more than a Summoned Ghost. Without slowing, he turned his wrist in a complicated series of pentagons and the spectre vaporised into a thick, black fog that briefly obscured Raben’s path, making him run headlong into a tree root.

Despite missing footwear, Picus accelerated and, to take his mind off the rain, had a think about how he came to be in this mess: Gambling!

In a word.

More like licensed thieving, he thought bitterly. You sit down for a relaxing game of Blood Tarot with some apparently honest Vampires and before sunrise you’ve lost your shirt. And all your money.

*And your best boots.*

Going to Raben’s castle in the dead of night and stealing Raben’s property was sweet revenge and had seemed like good fun until he’d been caught slipping out of a ground floor window by the old crook’s disturbing son, Corbeau. The latter had raised the alarm by yelling so loud that half the Vampires in their family crypt probably woke up for the first time in centuries. Very shortly after this, Corbeau threw a priceless goblet from Atlantis at Picus’ head at which point what had seemed like a bit of a prank suddenly became a

desperate fight for survival: Raben, wearing boots that made him move as if running on air, despite his size, and Picus zigzagging past Raben's sentinels through the forest surrounding his lonely eyrie that perched high on a mountain at the far edge of Vampire country.

Picus grinned.

It would still be quite something, though, if he did get away. Raben was not just a card cheat but also one of the most vicious, dishonest and generally cowardly Vampires Picus had ever had the pleasure to nick stuff from. At least I'm honest about pinching stuff, he had time to think, before three Wood Sprites darted down from the canopy of foliage above his head and started firing their nasty little arrows at his face. 'Stop that!' he said, batting the first two away. One got through and stuck in his cheek. 'Ow!' Another embedded itself in the back of his hand. 'I said, "Ow". What's wrong with you guys?' The arrows were tiny but they hurt like hell and he knew, from past experience, that the little holes they made itched for days. 'Look, seriously, you little squirts, I'm warning you ...' Clicking his fingers, and making a curiously metallic sound in the back of his throat, he conjured up a large hammer out of thin air.

But then he had second thoughts. Sprites were usually OK; these had probably been put under some kind of off-the-shelf Loyalty Charm by Raben, who seemed to have a magical menagerie working for him in the forest.

Picus blinked and traced an outline in the air with the tips of his fingers. A bottle replaced the hammer, hovering just below his attackers who were chattering away, enthusiastically re-loading their pig bristle bows. Picus blinked again and the bottle flexed, gave a sort of inhalation and sucked all three very surprised Sprites in.