Pixie Ring

A Modern Faerie-Tale

Aaron L. Ralph

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 1 2025/03/16 14:46

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All characters, places and events in this story are fictitious. Resemblance to any actual persons, locations or situations is entirely coincidental

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Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 3 2025/03/16 14:46

“If two people love each other, there can be no happy ending to it.”

-Hemingway

Pixie Ring

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Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 5 2025/03/16 14:46

Some Rules for Human-Faerie Interaction

- Faerie time is different from human time.
- Do not interfere in the life of a faerie.
- Always respect a faerie's privacy.
- Do not try to figure out a faerie's real name.
- Do not give your real name to a faerie.
- Faeries mean everything they say.
- Nothing a faerie says is black and white.
- Always keep your promise to a faerie.
- Never enter into a contract with a faerie.
- Do not lie to a faerie.
- Do not say thank you to a faerie.
- Do not say I'm sorry to a faerie.
- Do not step into a faerie ring.
- Do not dance with a faerie.
- Faeries are not always kind and helpful.
- Do not reveal the location of faeries.

* *It should be noted that Eddus is pronounced Ādəs.*

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 1 2025/03/16 14:46

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 2 2025/03/16 14:46

Leaning forward on the balustrade, Eddus surveyed the nearly empty rows of seats below. A few people were seated, waiting for the lights to dim and the show to begin.

The small theatre house was in no way busy, nor would it be that evening. It was the mid-week show, a musical farce parodying the story of misconstrued love between various people. The play had been written by some famous bard, but the performance itself was little more than a rehearsal put on by a drama troupe studying the thespian arts at a nearby university. An agreement had been made between the theatre owner and the university theatre instructor: the troupe would once a week get on-stage experience in a live theatre, while the small house would bring in a profit during the slow time of the week.

Eddus Brandt, a self-employed artist who worked alone and mainly by commission, had rarely missed a Wednesday night show in quite some time. One of only a few liberties he took during the week, the outing got him out of his studio and, more often than not, out of his head for at least a little while. Three of the people behind the now-drawn curtain were also well known to him, as they lived together with him. At their urging, he'd begun attending weekly and had seen this particular night's performance at least three times before.

Audience members trickled in slowly, taking their seats, as Eddus looked on from above. The ability to see them coming into the theatre was a new experience. He'd taken advantage of the midweek show's discounted tickets and purchased a seat in one of the three boxes in the house.

His position above was to the left of the stage, and it afforded a view which he'd not had on any of his previous visits. He would be able to see the theatre patrons from his position while they watched the show.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 3 2025/03/16 14:46

He liked the idea that he could observe people's genuine reactions to what they were seeing on the stage. As small a thing as this may seem, it did in some small way excite him, as he might see something that could act as a muse for one of the portrait pieces he often worked on in between commissions.

A soft bell chimed, indicating the curtain would soon rise. To his dismay, that night there would probably not be much in the way of inspiration, despite the view his lofty position afforded. The excitement he'd felt at being able to observe those below him dwindled.

The crowd was sparse, and the traffic into the theatre had ceased. There were not many people sitting in the theatre seats, and even fewer that Eddus could actually see. Most had placed themselves along the outer edges or at the back of the theatre. The farther one sat from the front, the harder it would be for him to observe them in the dim light given off by the stage during the performance.

The illumination within the theatre began to slowly fade as the globes in the wall lighting dimmed. In a matter of moments, the activities portrayed on stage would be the focus of the audience's attention.

As the stage curtain creaked open, the hush that had fallen within the dusk was briefly interrupted as a door at the back of the theatre opened. If at all noticed, it was not reacted to by those seated.

Opened only enough for the person on the opposite side to slip in, Eddus watched as they entered and then disappeared as the door was pulled closed. Vanishing momentarily in the darkness of the back of the theatre and then reappearing as only a silhouette, it quickly moved down the aisle in the dull glow of the illuminated stage. Stopping five rows from the front, the figure made its way to almost the centre of the row and took a seat.

As voices began to ring out in the theatre, a prologue of the recital to come, his eyes adjusted. In the darkened surroundings, Eddus could make out the form and features of the young lady who had entered.

He watched her only passively at first. She was the only patron to have ventured as far forward as she had, and she was in a rather perfect place to be observed during the duration of the play. Her hair was pulled back neatly, exposing a youthful face and permitting Eddus to see any emotion she might display.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 4 2025/03/16 14:46

Halving his attention and looking at the young lady only when an actor spoke a line that he recognised would evoke certain responses from the audience, Eddus began watching the play. Having seen the show several times previously, he could predict when a glance in the girl's direction was warranted. He enjoyed watching her as she reacted, not only to the quick-witted lines being doled out by those on the stage but also to the play in general.

His first impression of her was puzzling. The girl's facial expressions did not mimic those of someone who was enjoying a mid-week show at a small theatre house, having nothing better to do for the evening. Her demeanour suggested something else about the experience. Even the clothing she wore seemed out of place. Although only a simple black sleeveless dress, her attire did stand out as different in comparison to the others present, as they were clothed mostly in the casual dress of the day.

After some time, he ceased paying attention to the performance altogether and watched the latecomer with keen interest as she took in the show. Eddus had never witnessed anyone so enthralled with what was basically an amateurish retelling of a famous story. His interest peaked, whether or not this was to become the subject of an artistic creation. He could not pry his eyes away from the person he looked upon.

Eddus studied the girl in detail. Her reactions did seem slightly off, though not in the sense that they were wrong for what she saw. She did have a very expressive face, but there was something else.

So caught up in watching the behaviour of the spectator below, Eddus had lost all track of the performance and was startled by the applause of those in the theatre, as small as the crowd was. The show had ended. The lighting on-stage brightened, and the performers filed onto the stage.

As the theatre lighting also brightened, Eddus looked from the stage to the fifth row in time to see the young lady stand, still looking at the stage with a smile on her face. Turning, she quickly made her way back to the aisle, the way she'd come in. He watched as she walked up the aisle and made her way to the door, disappearing into the exiting crowd.

The evening's events had turned out to be more interesting than expected. He was happy with himself for having chosen to switch up his routine and seating arrangement.

Preparing to leave the box, his eye was caught by something below, in

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 5 2025/03/16 14:46

the row the young woman had been sitting in. In the seat beside the one in which she'd sat, was something he could not clearly see.

At first, he thought that perhaps the young woman had left her handbag. Moving as far to the left in the box as he could and leaning over the balustrade, Eddus saw that the item on the theatre seat was a pair of black shoes.

Waiting for a few moments, he was sure that the girl would realise and return, though after a few minutes, she did not reappear. Eddus watched the last of those in the theatre making their way out, then hurriedly made his way down the stairs and through the corridor and entered the audience chamber below. He found the footwear on the seat in the fifth row and quickly made his way into the lobby of the small theatre, then out its doors.

Finding no sign of a black dress or anyone who appeared to be searching for anything, Eddus waited. He moved slowly around the dwindling crowd, watching people get into their cars or cabs. Eventually, he was the only one left standing on the pavement in front of the theatre house.

When it was clear that nobody was returning for the items he held, Eddus returned again to the door of the theatre but found it locked. The only light seen through its glass door came from the doorway to a passage beyond the darkened lobby.

As he began to walk along the pavement, Eddus made up his mind to return the shoes to the theatre in the morning and hope that he'd not caused too much inconvenience.



As he entered the small pub, Eddus nodded to Shem, the barman and owner of the establishment. Shem pointed in the direction of the far corner of the bar room, past the pool players, to a table beside a large shop-style window that looked out onto the sidewalk outside. Around the table, sitting on barstools, were two young men and a young woman, Eddus' friends and house mates.

Steering himself toward them, Eddus avoided bumping into a pool player and slipped between two other tables before reaching them. At one end of the small table, the two men sat across from one another, while at the other,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 6 2025/03/16 14:46

closest to him, a young lady sat gazing absently at the tabletop in front of her with a rather sour look on her face.

"Hey, girlie."

Walking up next to her, he gently jabbed the girl in the ribs with his thumb, causing her to jump and almost knock over her beer glass. She frantically scrambled to grab her drink and then glared at him.

"What the fuck, Ed! Are you trying to get killed?"

"How goes it?"

Eddus put his left arm around her shoulder, giving her a squeeze, and then stood next to her at the end of the table.

"You're late. Where have you been?" asked Mo, one of the young men at the end of the table and Eddus' best friend of seven years. He looked at Eddus over the top of his black-framed glasses. "And I'd be careful if I were you, Ed. You're playing with fire there. She's a bit miff tonight."

"I had something I needed to take care of," Eddus told him. He then looked at the brooding girl sitting next to him. "What happened, Stiles? What's wrong?"

The young lady beside him grunted, rolling her eyes.

"What's wrong is that Jay's dumbass understudy fucked up a lift and dropped me this afternoon."

"She's acting as though I, personally, am responsible." Jay, the young man sitting opposite Mo, laughed shaking his head.

"Well, you're my dance partner. If you'd done the lift, I wouldn't have a bruised hip right now."

"It's only until next week," Jay laughed again. "The doc said no heavy lifting until my abdominal muscle mends."

"Are you saying I'm heavy?" Stiles shot him a look and then grinned at him.

"Best not to get involved in this one."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 7 2025/03/16 14:46

Mo hopped off his stool to join Eddus. Stopping short as he rounded the table's corner, he raised one eyebrow, looking his friend up and down.

"Ed..."

"Yes, Mo?"

"Is there something we need to know? Have you decided to join us on the dark side?"

Eddus stared at Mo questioningly for a moment, then looked to Stiles.

"Do you have any idea what he's talking about?" he asked her.

"None whatsoever," Stiles said, nonchalantly lifting her glass to her mouth.

"What's with the flats there, Ed?" Mo looked down at Eddus' hand, in which he still held the shoes he'd taken from the theatre. "They are lovely, but I think you got the wrong size."

"They're not mine." Eddus looked down at the shoes, then back at Mo.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, as you pointed out, they're not my size."

"Why the hell are you carrying around someone else's shoes?" Stiles' lip curled, and she gave Eddus a look of slight disgust. "Who do they belong to?"

"What's going on?"

Leaving the end of the table, Jay joined the others, looking from Mo to Stiles questioningly.

"Nothing is going on." Rolling his eyes, Eddus set the shoes on the bar stool he stood next to.

Jay nodded, eyeing the shoes.

"I found them in the theatre," Eddus said.

"You should have left them there," Stiles snorted, putting her empty beer glass on the table, and waving to a passing waitress. She drew a circle in

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 8 2025/03/16 14:46

the air with her finger, indicating that she was ordering a round. “Whoever they belong to could have gotten them tomorrow.”

Jay nodded in agreement.

“She’s right, you know. The theatre would have put them in the lost and found.”

Eddus stopped him from speaking with an apathetic stare.

“I saw the girl,” he said. “I thought I could catch up with her. Do you think I just carried them out with me on a whim?”

“They *are* nice.” Mo touched the side of one of the shoes.

“You’re not trying them on,” Jay told him, slapping his boyfriend’s hand away from them.

“I only said that they’re nice. They look expensive, and whoever owns them will be looking for them.”

A server appeared carrying a tray with four glasses of beer on it. She placed them on the table and then collected the empty glasses.

“Who leaves their shoes at a theatre?” Stiles asked, picking up one of the glasses and sipping at the beer’s frothy head.

“I would have left them there.” Jay shrugged. He picked up two of the glasses and returned to his stool.

“Yes, I know.” Eddus sighed. “That occurred to me about the time I tried to take them back in, when I couldn’t find the girl outside. The doors were locked.”

“So, what now?” Mo adjusted his glasses, turning his head towards Jay at the other end of the table.

“I guess I’ll take them back to the theatre in the morning.” Eddus shrugged, glancing from Mo to Stiles. “No good deed goes unpunished, right?”

Stiles nodded blankly, turning her attention again to her drink.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 9 2025/03/16 14:46

Drumming his fingers on the table, Eddus gazed at the large window they sat next to. As his friends conversed and retorted to one another with witty comebacks, their banter merged with the other sounds within the pub. Absent-mindedly, he watched the people on the pavement on the other side of the glass pane they sat beside.

He picked up the glass in front of him and looked down at the liquid it held. Wondering if he were even in the mood to drink, a quick movement outside the window caught his attention.

Someone was weaving their way through the patrons milling around in small groups outside. Catching only a glimpse, he watched as the person skirted a smoker, passing between them and the glass for just a moment before ducking between two other people and disappearing. The person passing by was a short young lady. She wore a black dress, and her hair was tied back.

Eddus quickly put his drink down, some of its contents spilling onto the table. He looked at Stiles, who glanced at him with a stern but questioning look.

"I'll be right back," he told her.

Picking up the shoes, Eddus made his way through the crowded pub towards the door.



"Pardon me... Miss!"

The young woman gave no indication that she'd heard his call. She continued walking, keeping her pace, and nearing the street's corner. Quickening his step, Eddus closed the space between them. He caught up with her as she pressed the button for the crosswalk.

Once outside of the pub, he'd had to make his way through those on the sidewalk. After having looked around the crowd, and weaving his way through those standing on the pavement, the girl was a good way past the pub, walking up the street. He'd almost needed to run to catch up with her.

"Miss!"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 10 2025/03/16 14:46

Looking over her shoulder, she then turned to face him, regarding him with a slight look of apprehension. Eddus stopped short a few paces from her. Neither of them said a thing as they stood looking at each other.

More than a head shorter than he, the girl was petite in size and stature. A very pretty young lady; her light brown hair was tied neatly in a bun at the back of her neck. Her almond-shaped eyes seemed to turn up at the ends. She was quite young in appearance and could have easily been in her teens. There was something about the way she carried herself, her posture, as well perhaps as the look in her eyes, though Eddus couldn't quite put a finger on it.

Studying Eddus' face for a moment, the young lady smiled nervously, then turned away, looking towards the street she meant to cross.

"Please, just a moment." Eddus cautiously stepped toward her. "You left your shoes in the theatre."

He held them out for her to see.

The girl looked down at her bare feet for a moment. She laughed aloud, stepping forward and gingerly taking the shoes from his hand.

"I can't go anywhere," she said.

Kneeling down, she placed the shoes on the pavement in front of her and then stood, stepping into each. She then gave Eddus a sidelong look.

"Did you follow me here from the theatre?"

"What? No- No!" Quickly stepping back, Eddus raised his hands in front of him.

It only then occurred how this might look strange – a grown man approaching a noticeably younger woman, alone at night on the street.

"I was in the pub! I saw you walk by!"

"You saw me walk by the pub?" The young woman's expression and demeanour did not change.

Feeling his cheeks flush, Eddus took another step away. He was beginning to feel that, had he thought it through, perhaps taking the shoes back to the theatre the next day would have been easier.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 11 2025/03/16 14:46

"Shem's place, about a block back." Eddus pointed up the road in the direction they'd walked from. "Shem's Tavern."

The girl nodded, glancing in the direction Eddus pointed, a stern look on her face.

"Yeah, I got that. But why would you have my shoes at the pub?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

Feeling something akin to the instinct of fight or flight begin to set in, it took everything in him not to start running in the direction he came from.

"I came out of the theatre to find you." Eddus took another step away. The sooner he could vacate, the better. "I waited, and then..."

Her eyes dancing, the girl broke into a smile. She laughed.

"Hey," she said, shaking her head. "I'm fucking with you."

His heart pounded in his chest as he exhaled the breath he was holding. The girl smiled playfully as Eddus tried to extinguish the visions in his mind of her making a scene or perhaps calling out for help from someone.

"Right then. Well, okay." Eddus glanced away with a sheepish smile, trying to catch his breath and collect himself. "I just wanted to get them back to you."

He nodded to her.

"Have... have a good night."

No sooner had the words left his mouth, he turned to walk back to the pub. His eagerness to get away from this awkward situation was quite urgent. He had to get away, and as soon as possible.

"What's your name?"

In mid-stride, Eddus stopped, taking a deep breath before he turned around. The girl took a few steps towards him, coming to a stop right in front of him, a bit too close for his liking. She tilted her head to one side as she looked up at him. In the light given off by the street lamp, she looked so much like a child. Eddus could see that her eyes were a light brown, amber colour. They seemed to glow as she looked at him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 12 2025/03/16 14:46

"Eddus Brandt," he told her, almost uncertainly.

It felt odd giving his name to her. He'd given her the shoes; he just wanted to get back to the pub.

"Eddus Brandt," the girl repeated softly, a slightly puzzled look on her face.

"That's me."

Giving a small nod, he looked away, taking a step back from her.

The urge to get back to his friends and back to surroundings of familiarity was strong, but there was something in the way in which she'd spoken his name. He could not quite bring himself to turn away from her.

"Where are you going, Eddus Brandt?"

Momentarily, his mind went blank.

"I, uh, well, to the pub. My friends are there."

The words seemed to catch in his throat as he said them. He hadn't necessarily wanted to give her the answer but seemed to have just spoken.

"...and just leave a girl all alone on a street corner at night?" The young woman faked a pout, stepping to him again.

Eddus felt his face warm and he glanced away. He was again uncomfortable with the proximity in which she'd again placed herself. She looked as though she might be little more than half his age, if that. He took another step back.

"Oh, right. Can I get you a cab?"

"You could." The girl nodded, the light seeming to catch her eye again, causing them to glow momentarily as she looked up at him with a smile. "Or you could let me come with you."

Again, Eddus had the instinct to leave as fast as possible. This was not the encounter he would have imagined. She was supposed to take the shoes and go.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 13 2025/03/16 14:46

"You want to come with me to a pub?" Eddus was taken a bit off guard by her answer.

"I would like that."

Slipping her arm into his before he could protest, she turned him in the direction of the bar.

Surprised at her forward behaviour and moving rather stiffly as they began to walk, Eddus thought in vain of a way to distance himself from her.

The girl laughed, as if able to sense his apprehension.

"You've got to loosen up, Eddus Brandt. Tell me about yourself."

Nothing about the way she spoke or acted had in any way changed, but again, there was something about the way she said his name. Everything about him wanted to get away from her, except that he seemed to enjoy hearing her speak his name and almost felt compelled to reply.

"Ed," he told her, trying to shake the feeling. "Everyone calls me Ed."

Their walk was paused as the young woman came to a halt, looking up at him quizzically.

"Ed?" Her eyebrows rose.

"Yeah. It's a... common mispronunciation, and I no longer care to correct people." Glancing away, Eddus rolled his eyes. "It is the bane of my existence. So, call me Ed."

They resumed their slow pace.

"So, what else is there to know about you, Eddie?" the girl asked after considering his answer for a moment.

"Please. No. Just Ed. I'm not a Jack Russell."

Glancing nervously at two people walking past them, Eddus wondered if they saw it as out of the ordinary for a man of almost forty to be walking arm-in-arm with a girl who might not be as old as twenty. He could only imagine what they might be thinking.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 14 2025/03/16 14:46

Watching him amusedly, his companion took no notice of those they passed.

"And what is your name?" Eddus asked her.

He saw the thinning crowd outside of the pub up ahead and knew that they would be walking by them in only moments. He quickly looked away from them and then down at his companion, who was still looking up at him.

"Guess."

"You want me to guess your name?"

"Yes."

Eddus could see the young lady's eyes dance again as she bit back a smile.

"I'm no good at guessing games," he told her.

"Just guess." She narrowed her eyes, the corner of her mouth curling slightly.

"I'm not going to guess your name" Eddus shook his head, trying to pull his arm away from her, but she pulled him closer to her. "I'll get it wrong anyway."

"All right then, what do I look like?"

Turning her head slightly, the girl laughed.

"What?"

"Based on what I look like, what would you say my name is?"

Eddus tried not to look at another passing couple. He could feel his face warming again.

"That's just another guessing game," he said softly, trying to hide his building discomfort. "Just tell me your name."

She shook her head.

"Not until you tell me what you would call me," she said. "Who do I look like to you?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 15 2025/03/16 14:46

"What's your name?" Eddus began to feel the smallest amount of impatience, bordering on annoyance. In her expression, he could see that the girl knew exactly what she was doing.

"You know, that's what your friends are going to ask." Showing no sign of giving in, the girl laughed again, firmly squeezing the arm she still held. "You'd better think of something to tell them. We've almost reached the pub."

They had walked past the few people still outside the pub window and were nearing the door. Through the glass, Eddus could see his friends at the table.

"Come on..." Eddus pleaded.

"Come on, yourself, Eddie." Sticking her tongue out at him, she then smiled playfully.

"Fine, ok? You look like... I don't know... maybe Sarah?" Eddus could feel himself getting annoyed and spoke the first name that came to mind.

The young lady stopped short, looking at him in shock.

"Do I really look like a Sarah?" she asked him.

"I... I don't know!" At this point, Eddus was bewildered. Had he said something wrong? He hadn't meant to hurt the girl's feelings. "I'm- I ..."

"Are you psychic?"

"What? No!"

"Well, then maybe you should play guessing games more often." Narrowing her gaze at him, she gave Eddus a cool smile and reached up with her free hand, patting his cheek.

"Wait, really?" Eddus looked down at the girl beside him in disbelief.

"No." She shook her head, rolling her eyes. "I'm fucking with you again, Eddie."

"Please, don't call me Eddie."

"Abbi," the young woman said.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 16 2025/03/16 14:46

"What's that?"

"Call me Abbi." Glancing at the door to the pub, she pulled Eddus forward, and they began walking again. "Now come on, your friends are waiting for you."

As they entered, Eddus kept his head down to avoid looking in the direction of the bar. He couldn't help feeling as though they were sneaking in, as he wasn't sure about the age of the young woman next to him.

He watched the girl smile and raise her hand, giving a wave toward the bar. Quickly, he looked in the direction she had waved in time to see Shem give her a wink and a single nod and then begin wiping the surface of the bar with a towel.

Stunned, Eddus looked down at his companion, who had turned her head, looking around the pub. He led her toward the table where his friends sat.



"Eddus!"

Mo climbed atop his barstool, raising a half-empty beer glass, as Eddus made his way through the pub to the table his friends sat at, his arm still firmly in Abbi's grasp.

"I won't blame you if you run away." Eddus sighed, looking down at the young lady beside him, who watched in fascination. Mo jumped from the stool to the floor. Setting his beer glass on the table, he walked toward them. "There is no excuse for him."

Abbi shook her head.

"I thought you said that everybody calls you Ed."

"I'm not everybody," Mo said, approaching them. "Am I, Ed?"

He smiled at Eddus and then shifted his gaze to the petite young lady beside him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 17 2025/03/16 14:46

"Wow," he said, a momentary look of surprise on his face, "are you old enough to be in here?"

"This is Mo." Eddus looked sternly at his friend. "Feel free to ignore him. At the end of the table there is Jay, and the young lady chugging her beer is Stiles."

Stiles raised a hand, still drinking from her beer glass, and extended her middle finger at him.

"Ma'am, I do not mean to alarm you, but you seem to have something on your arm." Mo winked at Eddus and then smiled at the girl beside him.

"Guys, this is Abbi." Eddus sighed. Feeling almost as uncomfortable as he had been outside minutes before, he shook his head.

"Hi!" Abbi smiled, looking at each of them in turn.

"Seriously, though," Mo said, still grinning at her. He tilted his head toward Eddus. "You should have that seen to."

"Go sit down, Mo." Jay rolled his eyes as he stood up. "And stop being an ass. You're going to scare her away. I'll get another stool."

He nodded to Abbi as he walked past them.

"The missus has spoken..." Mo gave a look of mock sheepishness and trotted back to his seat.

A moment later, Jay reappeared with a bar stool, which he placed beside his own, between himself and Stiles. He then stepped toward Abbi, gesturing to the table.

"It's nice to meet you, Abbi," he said. "Will you join us?"

"I'd love to."

Abbi glanced from Jay up at Eddus with a smile and slid her arm out of his.

Following a smile and nod from Stiles, Abbi climbed onto the stool Jay had placed between himself and the actress. She was taller sitting on the stool than she had been standing on the ground.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 18 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus took the seat beside Mo, opposite his guest.

"Abbi, right?" Stiles stood on the crossbar of her stool and waved to the waitress, indicating two more drinks, and then sat down again. "Is that short for Abigail?"

"It is," Abbi said, glancing again at Eddus. She gave him a playful wink, her eyes bright.

"You've got to tell me something, Abbi. What the hell are you doing with this guy?" Stiles inclined her head toward Eddus.

"Stiles, don't." Shaking his head, Eddus shot her a scowl, hoping she'd get the hint.

"Is that what you think?" Abbi narrowed her eyes, looking across the table with a teasing smile. "I'm not with Eddie. He's here with me."

"Well, that clears things right up." Stiles rolled her eyes with a laugh. She took glasses of beer from a waitress who'd come to the table, placing one in front of Abbi, then slid the other across the table to Eddus. "I take it those were your shoes Ed ran out of here with?"

"They were!" Abbi laughed. "I can't believe he found me so far from the theatre."

"I can't believe you walked over four blocks with no shoes on," Eddus said, looking to his right at Mo, who quickly raised his glass to his mouth, glancing toward Jay.

"I took them off as soon as I got into the theatre." Abbi shrugged her shoulders, poking at the froth at the top of the beer in front of her with her fingertip. "The truth is, I never wear shoes if I don't have to."

"What the hell, Ed?" Stiles said sarcastically as she sat down, shaking her head. She gave him an annoyed look. "You are unbelievable."

"What did I do?"

"You walked out of here carrying a pair of shoes and come back with a woman on your arm," Stiles said, nudging Abbi with her elbow and giving her a wink. Abbi glanced from Stiles to Eddus, biting her bottom lip.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 19 2025/03/16 14:46

"A trick you'll have to teach us," Mo laughed.

"Excuse you!" Jay shot Mo a look, who attempted to duck as Jay grabbed a handful of peanuts from a bowl on the table and threw them at his boyfriend.

"I take it Eddie doesn't do this often?" Abbi raised her eyebrows, looking around the table. Eddus gave an exasperated sigh, tapping the side of his forefinger against his forehead.

"If you're referring to returning lost shoes to their owners, I don't think so, but I couldn't really say," Stiles snorted, "but you are the first girl I've ever seen "Eddie" with, well, period. He's not exactly the outgoing type. Which again brings up my previous question of how you came to be here with him."

"I'm sitting right here." Eddus was beginning to tire of being spoken about as though he were not.

"I did notice he's a little shy, but I think it's cute," Abbi said to Stiles, giving Eddus a sly look, like she could sense his annoyance. "And I asked him here, didn't I, Eddie?"

"Please, don't call me Eddie."

Stiles stared at Abbi for a moment, before shifting her gaze across the table. She tilted her half-empty beer glass, pointing a finger of the hand she held it with at him.

"Ed, I don't know how you convinced this girl to come back here with you, but I swear to Christ, if you let her go, I'll kill you myself."

Eddus walked along the sidewalk. It was nearing midnight when he finally left the pub, having said goodbye to his house mates and leaving them in the bar. The moon shone directly overhead and would have brightened the sky had there been no clouds.

He was not alone. He'd offered to walk with Abbi. He didn't feel it was right to let her walk alone, although it occurred to him shortly after leaving that he had no idea where they might end up.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 20 2025/03/16 14:46

"Your friends are nice," Abbi said.

"Thanks. They really seem to like you."

"And you?" Abbi turned her head for a moment. Her eyes studied Eddus, a pondering look on her features.

Shaking his head, Eddus looked at the pavement to his side. The girl did have a way of saying things that made him uneasy and put him on the back foot. She'd been doing it since the moment they met. He wondered if it were her nature or some sort of game she delighted in playing.

"Me? Abbi, I don't..." Eddus was unsure how to finish the answer.

In truth, he did like her, although they'd only just met. He found her very attractive, and despite his discomfort at the thought of their difference in age, he had rather enjoyed her company at the pub with his friends. It was, in fact, the first time he'd ever had someone come there with him while he was out with his friends. He couldn't think of her as a plus one, as he hadn't asked her to come with him, but he did, in a somewhat uncomfortable way, enjoy her company.

And there may have been nothing odd about her actions. It could have just been him. He didn't have many friends, and the few he did have in no way acted as she did. Being older, he had a set way of behaving he'd accustomed himself to. It may have been nothing more than his interaction with someone younger as well as his unfamiliarity with the actions of the younger generation.

"You're very shy, Eddie."

Eddus began to step away from her, but Abbi slipped her arm through his firmly and gave him a wry smile. She looked to be enjoying herself. She gazed at the ground in front of them as they walked with a contented expression on her face.

"May I ask you a question?" she said after a moment.

"Sure." Halting their pace beside a small appliance repair shop with a brick face wall with no window, Eddus turned to regard his companion. Holding his breath, he waited for her to speak. He'd agreed to answer her question without thinking about it.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 21 2025/03/16 14:46

"How did you know that the shoes belonged to me?" Eyes sparkling with amusement, Abbi tilted her head as Eddus took a step back and away from her.

It was not a topic he relished the idea of talking about. How had he known? How would the young lady react?

It should have been enough that she'd gotten the shoes back. He didn't feel comfortable telling her that he had been observing her. He only wanted to be helpful and do something nice.

"I was in a box seat." Eddus took a deep breath and then just spoke. "I saw you when you came into the theatre, and I couldn't take my eyes off of you."

Taking another step away, there was nothing for him to do but watch her reaction to what he'd said, which was more than he'd meant to say. The moment of silence that passed felt like an eternity. A thoughtful and suspicious look crossed Abbi's face, and she stepped toward him.

"You were watching me at the theatre?"

Eddus' heel met a hard surface – the wall of the building they'd stopped beside – and he realised that he could not move back any further. His heartbeat quickened as he began to feel that the offer to walk Abbi home should perhaps have been foregone. He could have gotten her a cab. Whether just in his own mind or not, he was again beginning to feel the inappropriateness of the situation.

"How long were you watching me, Eddus Brandt?"

Feeling trapped and wanting nothing more than to be somewhere else, something within him urged him to answer her question. It was as though he wanted to give her an answer.

"Throughout most of the show," he stammered. He almost could not form the words. With his back against the wall, he watched her stern expression.

"You were watching me the whole time?" Abbi folded her arms in front of her and shook her head, brows furrowed. She moved away from Eddus slightly, glancing around uncertainly.

"Abbi, I- I didn't... I wasn't..."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 22 2025/03/16 14:46

Barely able to take a breath, Eddus could hear his heart pounding in his head. He could feel the cool brick against his back. His temples pulsed, and he felt sweat break out on the back of his neck. Quickly, he looked down and away. A silent moment passed.

"Hey, Eddie."

Not wanting to look up, Eddus inhaled slowly, shutting his eyes for a moment. Exhaling, he opened them, looking at the young woman in front of him.

"Eddus...?"

Abbi spoke softly. Her whole demeanour had changed. She'd closed some of the space between them, smiling at him with a look of concern.

"I'm only fucking with you." She extended her hand toward him.

Numbly and without thinking, Eddus slowly raised his arm.

Abbi took his hand, and it was all Eddus could do to just stare at her, trying to catch his breath. This had been some sort of game.

His knees felt as though they could fall out from underneath him.

"Abbi, I owe you an-"

"No!"

With her free hand, Abbi quickly reached up, pressing the tip of her finger firmly to Eddus' lips. Her smile was gone, and she again looked serious, almost angry. She lowered her hand; her eyes locked on his, and she shook her head.

Perhaps it was the shadow of the building in which they stood, but her eyes appeared to have darkened in colour. They looked black, and despite her short stature and small frame, she appeared almost threatening.

She must have noticed the way in which Eddus watched her reaction because her features immediately softened, and there was a pleading look in her eye.

"Please," she said softly, shaking her head again, "don't."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 23 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus' only response was to nod slowly, still not fully knowing just what had transpired. He studied the girl's face for a moment and found no sign of what he'd just seen. Her eyes glistened and again seemed to be the same amber he'd noticed shortly after they'd met. He could now see nothing about the petite young lady that was in the least bit threatening.

"You don't owe me anything, Eddus Brandt." Abbi squeezed his hand as she gently pulled him away from the building's wall. She tilted her head slightly to one side, indicating they resume walking.

Legs weak, Eddus managed to move forward, trying not to stumble. He walked slowly next to the girl, her hand clasping his, trying to understand what she'd just said. He'd only wanted her to know that he hadn't meant to make her feel uncomfortable. He hadn't meant to tell her that he had been watching her throughout the show and had actually felt a bit of panic as he was speaking the words.

Glancing at his companion, Eddus tried to make sense of either of her reactions to what had just happened. She kept her head down just a little as they walked in silence, and he could not see her face, only her hair, which was tied neatly at the top of her neck.

Conflicted, a part of him wanted to continue their quiet walk and be done with it as soon as possible, while there was something else in him that wanted to see her face again, and he hoped that she'd turn to look at him.

It was not long before the silence was broken between them. After a few minutes, they approached the street corner where Eddus had called out to her earlier. On the other side of the street was the entrance to City Park, the biggest park in the city.

"May I ask you something, Eddie?" Abbi spoke softly, looking across the street and into the shadows of the park. She had still not turned her head to look at him.

Squeezing his hand once more, she depressed the button for the crosswalk as they stopped walking and they waited for the signal to change on the other side of the street. They could have walked, as there was no traffic at this hour, but they waited.

"Yes, and please don't call me Eddie."

Eddus inhaled deeply, wondering again why he'd said yes. He really didn't want to answer any more questions.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 24 2025/03/16 14:46

"Why were you watching me in the theatre?"

Eddus felt his chest tighten. He looked up into the overcast night sky, then down at the pavement, and sighed.

"Is this... Are you fucking with me again?"

A light began flashing green on the other side of the road, indicating that they should cross.

"I'm not," Abbi said, shaking her head. She looked up at Eddus. "I was before, but now I'm curious. Why were you watching me?"

They crossed the empty street, stopping after stepping onto the pavement, which became a narrow path lined with lampposts that led into the park The path disappeared into the trees some distance past the park entrance.

Turning to face him, Abbi looked at him expectantly. Her hand still in his, she took a small step toward him.

"Well, two things, really." Eddus held her gaze as he spoke. "I noticed a beautiful girl who was rather overdressed for a Wednesday night rehearsal show, and-"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"I do." Eddus forced himself not to look away from her. He had again said something he'd not intended to.

Abbi lowered her eyes and looked down at the dress she wore, then back up at him.

"And the other reason?" she asked.

"It was the way you looked during the show."

Abbi smiled, her head to one side, a questioning look on her face.

"I don't know. You looked... like you'd never been to the show before," Eddus continued.

"I hadn't."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 25 2025/03/16 14:46

"I don't mean tonight's show in particular." This gave him a chuckle. "I mean any show. One might have thought that you'd never been to a theatre."

Abbi shook her head, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Really?" Searching her eyes for any sign of jest or mischief, Eddus realised that she was not joking.

Abbi pursed her lips.

"Well," Eddus chuckled, "you chose a rather poor show to attend for your first time."

Slowly, a smile crept onto Abbi's face. She bit her bottom lip, her eyes flashing in the light of the street lamp. For a moment, Eddus wondered if she'd been fooling with him after all.

"Well, I thought it was wonderful," she said. "And how would you know anyway? You were busy watching me."

"I've already seen the performance three times this month. Wednesday nights are a rehearsal for the drama students at the university."

"Oh..."

"And it was the fact that you thought it was wonderful that I was watching you. It was written all over your face."

Abbi nodded, thoughtfully.

"But why did that make you want to look at me?"

"I watch people. It's what I do. I mean, I'm an artist," Eddus told her. "Truthfully, if I'd had anything to draw on there with me, I'd have loved to– I would have drawn you right there."

Abbi watched him as he responded, then was quiet for a few moments.

"Do you do that often?"

"Do what?"

"Draw people without their consent, without them even knowing that you're watching them?" Her eyebrows knitted as she asked him the question.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 26 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus suddenly felt numb, like he'd been doused with cold water. He realised how what he said must have sounded. Blinking at her in surprise, he caught his breath.

"My- no! God, no! Did that sound creepy?" Instinctively, he tried again to step away, but Abbi didn't let go of his hand.

Abbi closed her eyes, biting back a laugh.

"Eddie," she sighed, opening her eyes and giving him a look.

"You're messing with me again."

"Yes," she laughed, shaking her head, and glancing up the path into the park. "Well, this is me."

"You live in City Park?" Eddus looked around.

Behind them was the street they'd walked up, lined with shops that were closed until the next day's business hours. In front of them lay the six hundred and fifty acres of trees that made up the park in the centre of the city.

"Of course not," Abbi shook her head, "but I can cut through part of the park and be home in a few minutes."

"Ok, so not far." Eddus looked up the path, then back at the girl in front of him.

"Why do I make you so nervous, Eddus Brandt?"

"Well, no, not nervous." Eddus shook his head. "It's just that I don't talk to many people."

"I kind of picked up on that."

"And I'm not someone who meets a lot of new people. I don't remember the last time I was with, or even spoke to, someone so good-looking."

The feeling of unease was again returning, and Eddus began to wonder why he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"Now I'm only good-looking?" Abbi pouted. "I liked it better when you thought I was beautiful."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 27 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus quickly looked away from her. They stood in silence for a moment before Abbi took a step back from him, letting go of his hand.

"I'd better go," Abbi said.

"Is it safe?" Eddus looked into the park. "Should I not walk you home?"

"I don't usually show a guy I just met where I live, Eddus."

"Oh, right. Well, yeah. Of course not." Eddus' face warmed.

"I love fucking with you," Abbi laughed, wrinkling her nose. "You make it so easy."

"Well, I'm glad I could be entertaining, at least." Smiling at her, Eddus realised that this would most likely be the last they would see of one another.

As much as it had been a roller-coaster ride, fielding her questions and not knowing when she was being serious or not, he would probably miss the time they shared that night. Though he was very unfamiliar with it, oddly, he had enjoyed the interaction.

To his surprise, Abbi took two steps forward, stood on her toes, and kissed him just below the bottom lip. She paused and then stepped back with a little smile.

"You are the sweetest human being I've ever met, Eddus Brandt," she said, taking another step away from him.

"Abbi." Stunned for a moment by the young lady's action, Eddus took a deep breath, summoning all of his courage. "I've really never asked anyone this before. May I – and please, tell me if I'm being inappropriate – can I maybe see you again sometime?"

"I would like that."

Eddus took another breath, holding it for a moment as the two of them stood looking at one another.

"Can I give you my number?" he asked. His hand touched the pocket he kept his phone in.

"No." Abbi shook her head.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 28 2025/03/16 14:46

"Oh, right."

"I don't have a phone." Abbi tilted her head slightly, her gaze meeting his, "but you'll see me again, Eddie. I promise."

She turned and began walking along the path into the park. Realising something, Eddus called out to her.

"Abbi..."

The young woman stopped walking and turned to face him.

"Where are your shoes?"

Glancing down at her bare feet, Abbi wiggled her toes. She then looked back at him and shrugged.

"I must have left them in the pub," she said, "but it's all right."

"It is?"

"I'm sure you'll get them back to me." Abbi giggled, and Eddus could have sworn he saw her eyes glow for just a moment as she turned away.

Watching her walk slowly through the park gate and then in the direction of the tree line, Eddus was suddenly sorry that their encounter was over. Turning toward the street behind him, he sighed and began walking.

He glanced over his shoulder at the park path. Perhaps he hoped to catch one more glimpse of what was most definitely the most peculiar person he'd ever met, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Another coffee?"

"Yes, please, and leave the pot.

"Long night, hun?"

"Honestly, not really, but at the same time, absolutely."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 29 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus had returned home in the early hours of the morning, having taken a longer route walking home. He'd only fallen asleep after what seemed like an eternity of replaying the night's events in his mind. He could not stop thinking about the young woman he'd met, the way she smiled at him when she seemed to know that she was getting to him, and the way he liked hearing her say his name.

The waitress, a woman of about fifty named Janice, shook her head and smiled sympathetically, refilling Eddus' coffee cup.

"You're still hanging out with those kids, aren't you?"

Eddus sipped the hot black liquid, then looked up at Janice with a slight shake of his head. He was too tired to even try and figure out what she meant.

"Yeah, the two gentle fellows, and that little actress girl you come in here with," Janice said.

"Ah, those kids."

"Ed, it's none of my business, but you're not a young buck. Trying to keep up with those youngsters is going to catch up with you."

"You're probably right, Jan, but one of those "fellows" is my best friend, and all three of those "kids" are my house mates."

The waitress shook her head with a look of mild indifference. "Like I said, hun, it's none of my business. But you do look like hell."

Eddus managed a weary smile.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, last night had nothing to do with any of them."

Janice shook her head with a knowing look and then lifted her gaze.

"Well, speak of the devil."

Glancing up in time to see Mo entering the diner and looking around, Eddus raised his hand and gave a single wave.

"You going to eat anything, hun?" Janice asked him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 30 2025/03/16 14:46

"Just keep the coffee coming."

"Will do."

"You're an angel."

Mo slid into the booth on the opposite side of the table and then grinned up at the waitress.

"Morning, Janice."

"Coffee, Mo?"

"And pancakes, please."

Janice gave Eddus a thin smile and walked toward the kitchen to put in the order.

Mo sat for a moment, studying his friend from across the table, not saying anything.

"What?"

"You look like hell," Mo laughed.

"That's what she said."

Mo grinned, blinking in surprise. "Does that mean things went well between you and Cinderella?"

"No." Sipping his coffee, Eddus shook his head. "It means Janice also thinks I look like hell this morning."

"Well, she's right. You look like you didn't get any sleep last night." Giving him a wink, Mo adjusted his black-rimmed glasses. He stopped in mid-motion, and then raised an eyebrow. "Wait a sec. Things didn't go well between you and the shoe girl?"

"Not in the way I can clearly see that you'd like to imply."

"What?"

"And the shoe girl's name is Abbi."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 31 2025/03/16 14:46

"What's a shoe girl?" Janice had returned to the table, placing a coffee cup in front of Mo and then filling it.

"May I?" Mo glanced across the table at Eddus. He reached for a small dish on the table with several packets of sweetener in it.

Emptying the contents of his own cup, Eddus rolled his eyes and gave Mo a nod before looking up at Janice, who again topped him up from the coffee pot she held.

"Ed here came to Shem's last night, carrying with him a pair of shoes that he'd found in the theatre," Mo said. "A few minutes later, he runs out the door without a word, carrying said shoes. He returns a little while later with this tiny little bombshell in a black dress. Then, at the end of the evening, he leaves with the young lady, and this is the first I've seen of him since."

Janice raised her eyebrows at Eddus with a nod of approval.

"Good for you, Ed. I take back what I said earlier; you look great this morning." She winked at Mo, who grinned as he slid to the far side of the bench he sat on and leaned against the wall, stretching his legs out the length of the bench.

Eddus looked up at Janice.

"Nothing happened," he told her blandly, narrowing his eyes at her, "and don't you encourage him! He's bad enough on his own."

Turning, he then glared at Mo.

"And the reason you haven't seen me until now is because you refuse to get out of bed before nine in the morning."

"The bombshell," Janice said, "were they her shoes?"

"Her name was Abbi," Eddus said, rolling his eyes, "and she wasn't a bombshell."

Mo made a coughing noise. He nodded, pointing at Eddus, and then used his hands to make an hourglass shape in the air in front of him, giving Janice a wink.

"I thought you were gay," Janice said to Mo.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 32 2025/03/16 14:46

"I am gay," Mo told her, "but I'm not blind."

The waitress shook her head, looking at Eddus.

"Were they her shoes?"

"Well, of course, they were her shoes. Do you think I'd give her someone else's shoes?"

"None of my business, hun," Janice said. She glanced at Mo, who again grinned at her. "It could have been some kind of experiment in picking up women. I mean, from what I'm hearing, it seems to have worked out all right."

Eddus shook his head.

"I just wanted to return her shoes. I would have left them at the theatre, but by the time I'd looked around for her outside, they'd locked the doors. Then I happened to see her walk by outside the pub. I had no intention of bringing her back with me; she kind of invited herself along afterward."

"I think he doth protest too much, Mo."

"Janice," Eddus was beginning to feel annoyed. "Even if I were to adopt using shoes to lure random women into pubs as my signature move, I don't make enough money to support the endeavour."

"Then, whose are those?" Janice pointed to the bench he sat on.

Beside him was a small pair of black shoes, the ones Abbi had left at Shem's. He'd collected them from the pub earlier that morning.

"They're Abbi's," Eddus sighed. He quickly glanced at Mo, who was staring at him with a silly look on his face. "Apparently, she has an aversion to wearing them, and she left them at the pub."

Janice let out a short, sharp laugh.

"None of my business, hun," she said as she walked away.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 33 2025/03/16 14:46

"You walked to City Park?"

Mo had finished eating, and Stiles had joined them on her way to the university. She'd ordered a plate of scrambled eggs and a bubble gum milkshake and was interrogating Eddus as to what had happened after he left the pub the night before.

"She lives out that way."

"And then?" Stirring her milkshake with a long spoon, Stiles tilted her head with a look on her face that was more expecting than questioning. She pulled the spoon out of the tall glass and began licking the pink ice cream off of it.

"And then what?"

"Well, what happened after you got to the park?" Stiles shook the utensil at him. "And if you leave out any details, I'll cut your tongue out with this spoon."

Eddus chuckled, glancing at Mo.

"With friends like these…"

"Hey, I'm with her on this one, Ed. I've known you for seven years, and I've never seen you speak to a woman outside of work until last night, let alone offer to walk her home. So, none of that 'gentlemen don't tell' crap."

"What are you talking about, Mo?" Eddus sipped his coffee with a smile. "I talk to Stiles all the time."

"Yeah, well, don't expect me to start calling you Eddie." Stiles pushed the scrambled eggs around on her plate with the spoon she'd been stirring the milkshake with.

Eddus glowered at her from across the table.

"The park, Ed!" Mo waved his hand in front of him. "What happened? Focus, man! Details!"

"Ok, ok, every detail. Here goes." Smiling, Eddus glanced between the two of them. "After I walked Abbi to the park, I walked home."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 34 2025/03/16 14:46

For a moment, no one said anything. Mo was leaning forward on the table, an expectant look on his face, while Stiles stared at him blankly.

"Mo, hold him down." Stiles held up the spoon and then pointed it at Eddus, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." Eddus laughed, amused by the looks on his friends' faces. "We walked from Shem's to the park. We talked a little until we got there, and then we parted ways."

"Piss off, man! What really happened? You're holding back!"

"It's the truth."

"Ed, did you do something to put her off?" Mo leaned back, glancing at Stiles.

"What? No!" Eddus laughed again. "We walked, we talked, and then we went our separate ways."

"For fuck's sake, Ed!" Stiles stared in disbelief. "What the hell did you do? That girl was all about you."

"Perhaps she wasn't," he told her.

"Dude, she was making eyes at you all night long!"

Eddus shrugged, shaking his head.

"So, nothing happened?" Stiles looked disgusted.

"She kissed me and said I was sweet, but that's it."

"Well, I guess that's something," Stiles said, still looking disappointed. "At least you guys kissed."

"No, we didn't."

"You just said-"

"I said she kissed me."

Stiles glared at him with a puzzled look on her face, her mouth slightly open.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 35 2025/03/16 14:46

"*She* kissed me."

"What, like on the cheek?"

"On the chin, actually," Eddus chuckled.

Stiles laughed out loud.

"Ed, that is the most unromantic thing I've ever heard," she said. "So, after she kissed you on the chin, you what, dropped her at her place and just left?"

"No, we parted at the entrance of the park. She said she'd cut through the park and be home in just a few minutes."

"So, you didn't even walk her home?" Mo looked confused.

"Un-fucking-believable." Stiles looked at Mo, who shrugged at her. "Are you going to at least see her again?"

"I don't know. I think she kind of blew me off." Looking down at the table, Eddus was quiet for a moment, running his finger along the rim of his half-empty coffee cup. "At first, she said she'd like to see me again, but when I tried to give her my number, she said she doesn't have a phone. Then she disappeared into the park."

"Ouch..." Mo said under his breath, shaking his head.

Eddus glanced from him to Stiles.

"Ed, I'm so sorry." Reaching across the table, Stiles touched his hand, her expression sympathetic.

There was a light tap at the door. Taking a deep breath, Eddus paused his hand momentarily, mid-movement, the pastel between his thumb and forefinger still in contact with the canvas. He exhaled slowly, resuming the motion of his hand and completing the stroke he was making.

Inspecting the line to make sure that there was no visible hesitation

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 36 2025/03/16 14:46

mark, he then placed the piece of coloured chalk on a small table beside his easel and then went to the metal studio door, sliding it open.

Outside the door, Stiles flashed him a smile as she donned a dark denim jacket over a white t-shirt and form-fitting jeans.

"Hey, Ed."

"Hey back. Are you doing an audition today?"

"Nope, day off," she said. "I've got vocals this afternoon, though. I'm just hanging out until then. We're going for breakfast, if you'd like to come with."

"Thank you, but no." Eddus could see Jay and Mo closing the door to their flat at the other end of the floor. "I'm just finishing a piece. Then, I think I'll walk for a bit."

"A new piece?" Stiles' face brightened, her blue eyes widening. "Did you get a commission? Can I see it?"

Shaking his head, Eddus gave her a smile.

"Not just now. It's not comm work; it's just something I'm doing... and it's not done."

"Oh, come on, Ed! You just said you're almost finished." The girl leaned to one side, trying to see past his shoulder. "Please?"

Eddus could not hide his amusement at her interest, and he slid the door open enough for her to enter. Smiling at him, she turned her body sideways and slipped between him and the door frame. Turning, Eddus watched as she stepped into the room and looked around.

"Holy fuck, Ed." Stiles stopped short as she caught sight of his current project and then slowly approached the canvas.

Centred on a dark background, Eddus had drawn the detailed side-profile portrait of a young woman, from the shoulders up. The woman depicted was looking forward, her chin slightly raised. The subject of her gaze was not portrayed, but from the way she'd been drawn, it was clear that whatever it was at which she looked was a source of light, illuminating the look of child-like wonder on her face.

Not taking her eyes off it, Stiles stepped closer to the piece.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 37 2025/03/16 14:46

"Is this the girl you brought to the pub?"

"Abbi, yes."

"This is stunning, Ed." Turning to him, she looked perplexed. "It's absolutely beautiful. But, why?"

"Why?"

Stiles nodded, again looking at the canvas on the easel.

"Was she not a good subject for the piece?" Eddus smiled, still watching her.

Stiles shot him a sidelong glance through narrowed eyes.

"This was the reason I met her in the first place," he told her.

"So you could draw her?" Stiles turned her head with a quizzical look.

"Well, this is how I saw her at your show that night." Joining her in front of the canvas, Eddus gestured to the drawing. "I had a box seat, and I saw her in the audience watching you guys on stage. I guess I just got inspired."

"Why were you in a box seat? Aren't they more expensive?"

"I don't know," Eddus admitted. "Different perspective maybe. I come every week, so I'd seen the show already. And the seat was discounted because it was a Wednesday. I just wanted to switch things up a bit, I guess."

"This is amazing. It looks just like her. Did you draw her from memory?"

"Yes."

"That was six weeks ago, Ed."

"I started this three weeks ago."

Stiles glanced at him and rolled her eyes before closing the short distance between herself and the picture in front of her. She studied the detail of the portrait.

Eddus cringed as she lifted her hand and touched the canvas ever so lightly with her finger.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 38 2025/03/16 14:46

"Did she really look at us like that?"

"She did," Eddus affirmed. "It's part of the reason I first took notice of her."

"She looks mesmerised."

"Yes." Smiling, Eddus recalled how Abbi had admitted never having been to a theatre before. "She really was."

"I wish that everyone who comes to the show would look at us like that."

Stiles met his gaze.

"I don't," Eddus chuckled softly. He found himself wishing he could have put Stiles' expression on paper in some way.

Stiles' mouth opened, a hurt look on her face.

"Ed! That is so mean!"

"I'm sorry," Eddus told her, "But if everyone watched you like that, I'd have nothing to draw."

The morning was cool, almost to the point of being chilly. Closing her eyes, Abbi took a deep breath, letting crisp air fill her lungs. She loved the chill. Her chin raised, she smiled into the sunlight that shone through the tree branches high above her.

She sat by herself on the end of a park bench, her hands folded on her lap, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight and the cool breeze on her shoulders and legs. Gently kicking her bare feet, which didn't quite touch the ground, back and forth, she opened her eyes, taking in the scenery of the park.

Abbi had been coming to the park since she was young. She'd never really taken to going into the city itself, but she loved City Park, especially on mornings such as this one.

She loved the scent of the trees and the feel of the dew on the grass beneath her bare feet. The crispness of the breeze on her shoulders gave

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 39 2025/03/16 14:46

her goose bumps. The sound of the leaves rustling and the way they glowed in the morning sun always made her smile. Most of all, she loved watching.

This was one of her favourite areas of the park. It was one of a few places with a wide-open space, no trees except for those that surrounded the area. She loved to watch the people around her in the park. Joggers, dog walkers, couples – she didn't know any of them, but she did enjoy seeing them as they passed by her. Mornings like this one were perfect.

A couple of kids kicked a soccer ball back and forth to one another. A small group of cyclists zipped by, splitting in two, some going behind the park bench she sat on, the others passing in front.

Abbi watched each in turn with mild interest, a small smile on her face.

A middle-aged man in a suit and brimmed hat took a seat at the other end of the park bench. Nodding once in her direction, he then turned his attention to the newspaper he held and began unfolding it.

Glancing at the man, Abbi pushed herself forward on the bench until her feet met the ground and stood up. Smoothing her dress, she narrowed her eyes and then smiled at a young child holding her mother's hand, who waved at her as they passed by.

Stepping off the paved walkway, Abbi walked slowly in the cool grass beside it, enjoying the feel of it beneath her feet.

The path she followed led out of the park and into the city beyond. She glanced at the park's entrance and then turned away from it, walking for several minutes on the grass.

She wandered away from the pavement until she was far enough away so as not to be in the way of anyone walking, she sat down in the grass, crossing her legs under her. She smoothed the fabric of the dress she wore, then slowly moved her hand back and forth, just high enough over the ground so that the tips of the blades of grass grazed her palm. Smiling as it tickled her hand, she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

Continuing the motion, Abbi slowly opened her eyes. Her head slightly tilted to one side, she gazed lazily toward the entrance of the park. She watched as three kids on bicycles rode in on the path and then veered off into the grass, attempting wheelies and "hopping" their bikes.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 40 2025/03/16 14:46

Turning her attention again to the park's entrance, she saw a man casually strolling along the path. He, too, seemed to be watching the others around him as he walked. He didn't seem to be looking for anyone in particular, just taking in the sights around him. There was also something familiar about him.

Sitting up onto her knees to get a better look, Abbi's smile broadened, and she felt her heart give a little jump. The person she was looking at was Eddus Brandt, the man she'd met a few weeks earlier. She'd gone to a pub with him, and he walked to the park with her afterward.

Getting to her feet, she slowly began to follow him, keeping her distance. She fought the urge to go to him and say hello. While she was happy to see the man who had been so kind to her, she still hesitated. Not knowing what he was doing, she didn't want to disturb him.

Eddus walked along the path slowly, casually looking around him. He didn't seem to be in any hurry or have anywhere to be going, and he made his way further into the park, the trees along the area around the path on which he walked becoming a bit denser.

Abbi continued following him at a distance. As Eddus left the pavement, walking through the grass and towards a small open area between the trees, she closed the distance between them. Quickening her pace, she then ducked behind a tree that he'd passed as he entered the small clearing.

He stopped walking. The sun shone through the canopy above, formed by the trees that surrounded the open area, lighting the ground beneath. Aside from the grass that covered the ground, there were several groups of mushrooms. There were about four or five groups in the clearing in which he stood. Each group of mushrooms had grown forming a circle. Some of the circles were larger than others.

From where she stood behind the tree, Abbi peered out at him.

Carefully, Eddus made his way between the rings of mushrooms, looking at each one as he slowly passed it. At the fourth one he came to, he halted. For several moments, he looked down at the formation in front of him, then looked from side to side. He lifted his foot.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 41 2025/03/16 14:46

"You don't want to do that, Eddus Brandt..."

Eddus lowered his foot to the ground beside his other one. Glancing right and left, he saw nothing but the clearing and the trees that lined it in front of him. Slowly, he turned around.

"Abbi...?"

"Hello, Eddus."

Abbi stood beside a smaller ring of mushrooms a few meters away from him, next to a large elm tree. She wore a black, knee-length dress with short sleeves. Her head tilted slightly, her light brown hair falling over one shoulder, she gazed at Eddus with a mild look of amusement on her face. In the light of day, she looked even more like a child than he remembered.

"What are you doing?"

"Abbi, how did you – what are you doing here?"

"I was following you."

"You were?"

Eddus looked in the direction from which he'd come. He hadn't noticed her, or anyone else for that matter, on the path he'd been on.

In truth, he never really took notice of anyone he passed unless they caught his eye as a good subject for a future artistic endeavour.

Abbi approached him, stopping about a pace away. Her amber eyes glowed in the sunlight as she looked up at him with a smile. It was the same smile that had randomly come back to Eddus' memory as he worked on her portrait.

She shook her head with a small laugh.

"It's good to see you, Eddus. I've missed you."

"You missed me?"

"Very much so; didn't you miss me?"

Taken aback by the question and still stunned to see the young woman

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 42 2025/03/16 14:46

in front of him Eddus could not seem to find his voice. He didn't know how to answer, even if he could. In truth, hardly a day had gone by that he hadn't thought of her, but miss her?

Abbi's eyes danced as she tried to suppress a smile at Eddus' visible discomfort.

He opened his mouth but said nothing.

"Eddie, I'm fucking with you." Abbi laughed. She was quiet for a moment and then extended her hand, glancing at the ring of fungi that Eddus stood beside. "Will you walk with me?"

Eddus hesitated a moment before taking her hand, his heart quickening.

Several times, he'd thought about the night the two of them had met and how her actions that night had been so different from what he was used to. At the time, it had been so foreign to him, almost to the point of annoyance, but upon reflection, her mannerisms had evoked something he wished to feel again. It had been almost like the feeling of knowing one shouldn't do something but doing it anyway.

Leading him back out of the small clearing, Abbi steered him between the rings of mushrooms around them. Once away from the area, they walked to the paved pathway, walking beside it rather than on it.

As she put her arm through his while they walked, Eddus became very self-aware and glanced around quickly. There were several people in the vicinity, though none of them gave any notice to the two of them. Although he and Abbi were not attracting any attention, he felt more uncomfortable in the light of day with her on his arm than he had the night they'd met.

The sun shone through the trees above, supplying brightly lit areas along the pathway between those in the shade of their canopy. For several minutes, neither of them said anything as they walked along the path.

Eddus watched Abbi as they walked. She wore a content smile as she took in the scenery. Closing her eyes, she slightly raised her chin, letting him guide her as they walked. The sunlight bathed her youthful face, and he couldn't help but wonder again about her age.

"Don't you just love the forest, Eddie?" Abbi spoke, her eyes still closed. As she opened them, she shifted her gaze to him. Eddus smiled nervously, quickly glancing away.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 43 2025/03/16 14:46

"I do, though I don't think of City Park as much of a forest," he told her sceptically as they passed an overflowing rubbish bin beside a park bench.

"Nonsense," Abbi said, looking out at the surrounding trees. "The forest is beautiful. It just isn't much of a park."

"You think so?"

"Eddus, do you realise that we are walking through the oldest area of the city? This square mile of trees is all that is left of the forests that were here for hundreds of years. Before humans. Maybe even before time. This forest is the only magic left in this area."

"It is? Magic?" Eddus chuckled.

"Why do you think the city was built around the forest rather than just clearing it?"

Eddus stopped walking and turned to face the young woman beside him. There was no playfulness in Abbi's voice and a sombre look in her eyes.

"This is a serious subject for you," he said. "You're not... fucking with me?"

Eddus had lived in the city his entire life. He'd played in the park growing up. As he got older, he visited it as a place to be alone with his thoughts, as well as finding artistic inspiration there. He had never thought of City Park as anything other than a park.

Abbi's face flushed. She nodded and glanced away.

"I guess so," she said. "My people have been in this area for a long time. I was born here."

"Here in the park?" Eddus joked, regretting the question instantly. He did not want to come across as insensitive to what he could see was something she felt deeply about.

"Close enough." Abbi tilted her head up to look at him through narrowed eyes, a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

"How old are you, Abbi?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 44 2025/03/16 14:46

"Eddie!" Abbi's eyes widened, a mock look of offense on her face. She leaned away from him.

"No, I- I didn't..."

Abbi quickly raised her hand, putting her fingertip lightly against his lips. She gave her head a little shake, and then smiled.

"You should know better than to ask a girl that question, Eddus Brandt," she said, "and the answer is that I'm older than you may think." Her eyes glowed momentarily. "I'm not quite old enough to take offense to you asking it, though."

She smiled, removing her finger from his lips, and tapped the tip of his nose. Slipping her arm again around his, she pulled him forward again.

As they walked, Eddus again looked down at his companion, who now rested her head lightly against his shoulder. He then laughed.

"Abbi?"

"Yes?"

"Do you ever wear shoes?"

"Not if I can help it," Abbi said absently. They continued in silence for a moment. Her arm tightened around his. "This was my favourite part, you know."

"Excuse me?" Eddus looked down at her again.

"We walked together the other night," Abbi said. "The play, the pub, your friends... The walk home was my favourite part."

"Well, I didn't exactly walk you home."

"Close enough."

"And the other night was six weeks ago," Eddus said, amused.

"Six weeks?" Abbi looked up at him, a perplexed expression on her face. "Really? I thought I was only gone a couple of days."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 45 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus nodded. He knew the feeling. Sometimes he got so stuck into a piece he was working on that he would lose track of time completely. There were times he'd emerge from his studio after completing a piece, and he wouldn't know what day it was.

"Time really goes by so fast. I didn't mean to be gone that long."

"I had begun to think that perhaps I wouldn't see you again."

"Eddus." Abbi stopped walking. "I told you that you would see me again."

She looked insulted. Her expression was genuine.

"I promised."

"Yes, you did."

"I keep my promises, Eddus Brandt."

Eddus nodded thoughtfully. The girl remained downcast, as though hurt by the idea that he had doubted her. He waited for her expression to change and for her to smile again, but it did not. He decided to change the subject.

"What do you do, Abbi?"

"What do you mean?"

"For a living. I'm an artist. What is it you do?"

"Why do you ask?" A momentary look of uncertainty crossed her face, which was quickly replaced with an almost mischievous smile.

"It's probably coincidence," Eddus said, "but I just wondered if our meeting here today meant that perhaps we take the same day off."

They started forward at a slow pace after the young lady studied him for a moment.

"I have a flexible schedule." Abbi closed her eyes again as they walked.

Eddus remained quiet for a moment. Looking at the top of her head, which remained against him, he tried to imagine her in a shop or perhaps waiting tables. He'd only asked it to make conversation, but now he was

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 46 2025/03/16 14:46

even more curious as to what the young lady did for a living. She obviously didn't want to say it, so he didn't press it. Another thought came to mind.

"Abbi, how did you find me today?"

"I was nearby, and I saw you walking between the trees," Abbi told him. "I know the spot you went to pretty well. At first, I wasn't going to interrupt, but I couldn't let you disturb them."

"Disturb them? Abbi, there was no one else there. Disturb who? The mushrooms?"

"No, Eddus." Abbi looked into his eyes and reached out a hand, touching his elbow. "I couldn't let you disturb the faeries."

Again, Eddus found that he had no answer to what he'd just heard, so he remained silent. He half expected her to tell him that she was messing with him again.

Abbi abruptly halted, turning to face him, her brows knitting. She pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes for a moment, deep in thought.

"Come with me," she said, taking Eddus by the hand.

She led him back in the direction they'd come from. Her pace was quick as she pulled him along the path back to the clearing she'd found him in. Stopping at the mouth of the clearing, they stood for a few moments in silence.

"You can never disturb these," Abbi said, gesturing to the several rings of mushrooms in the grass. "And not just these ones. If you ever see rings like these anywhere, don't disturb them. Don't touch them. And never step into one. Ever. Just, please, avoid them if you can."

She looked at him with a serious yet pleading look.

"The mushrooms?"

"Yes. No. You don't understand, Eddus; it's not the mushrooms." Abbi set her jaw, and then pulled him by the hand.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 47 2025/03/16 14:46

Leading him between the rings to the one he'd been about to step into earlier. She knelt down, dropping lightly to her knees, sitting with her feet under her, and then motioned for Eddus to sit with her.

Eddus studied her face as he looked at her. He could see in her expression that this was not something she was playing at, and he could hear in her voice that there was a sense of urgency, though he could not understand why. Slowly, he lowered himself to the ground and faced the young woman, unsure of what to expect next.

"This is a pixie ring," Abbi said, turning her head toward the circle. She gently touched the outer edge of one of the fungi with her fingertip.

"I heard them called faerie rings when I was growing up."

Watching Abbi trace the rim of the white mushroom with her fingertip, Eddus then looked at her face, still unsure as to what was happening. Her expression was sombre as she withdrew her hand and met his gaze.

"They have been called many names," Abbi said. "But what they're called is not as important as what they are."

"What are they?"

"You probably wouldn't believe me."

"You can tell me."

"It would be better if I showed you." Abbi sat still for a moment, thinking.

She took a deep breath, as if unsure of what she was about to do, then reached down to a white mushroom standing alone on the outside of the circle and broke a piece of its cap off, holding it out to him.

"Eat this," she said.

Sceptically, Eddus looked from the piece of mushroom flesh in the girl's palm to her face, slightly shaking his head with a look of uncertainty.

"I don't know..."

Abbi paused, tilting her head. She watched him for a moment with a slightly puzzled expression before her eyes widened with a look of surprised realisation.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 48 2025/03/16 14:46

"Eddie! Do you really think I would drug you?" She laughed, a sparkle in her eyes, as she flashed him a smile.

"Abbi, no-" It was Eddus' turn to look surprised. He chose his next words carefully. "I didn't mean anything like that."

"It's just a mushroom, Eddus," Abbi said.

She took the piece in her hand and broke it in half. Putting one of the pieces into her mouth, she chewed it. Again, she offered him the other half. He took it from her, examined it for a moment, then hesitantly put it in his mouth.

"There now." Abbi smiled. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Eddus smiled sheepishly.

"I suppose not, but if it's just a mushroom, then why did you want me to eat it?"

"I wanted to know if you trusted me before I showed you what I'm going to show you."

"What are you going to show me?"

Saying nothing, Abbi gave her head a slight shake, her eyes smiling.

"What if I hadn't eaten it?"

With a soft laugh, Abbi shrugged and raised herself a little on her knees. She turned to face the pixie ring, her knees just outside of the mushrooms. She nodded, indicating he do the same.

"I want you to lean into the ring with me," she said. "You can put your hands on the ground if you need to, but don't go all the way inside."

Repositioning himself in the same fashion, Eddus looked at the ground inside the ring. He saw nothing but the same kind of grass and dirt that they sat in outside of it. The ring didn't look big enough for him to go all the way into if he tried.

Abbi gave him a little smile.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 49 2025/03/16 14:46

"Do you trust me?" she asked.

Not waiting for a response, she placed her hand on his shoulder, gently pushing him forward. Not looking away from one another, they leaned forward together.

Eddus was suddenly aware of music playing and saw movement from the corner of his eye. Putting his hands on the ground to steady himself, he turned his head to see that there were dozens of people around them.

It seemed to be some sort of formal gathering. There were men dressed in suits and other fancy clothing of many bright colours, while the females were clad in gowns or dresses of all styles in equally as many colours.

While few of them looked like ordinary people, many of them had brightly coloured hair and skin ranging in tones from pale green to translucent blue. A few were so white that they almost seemed colourless.

Some were walking and talking with one another, while others danced to the lively tune being played or stood together in small groups, drinking from what appeared to be wooden mugs.

As he looked on, something occurred to him. Almost every person Eddus saw had a pair of wings on their backs, even those who looked to be ordinary humans. Most had what appeared to be large, almost insect-like wings. The wings were similar to those of a dragonfly's, and some were like a butterfly's but with semi-translucent membranes.

Eddus found himself staring. Slowly, he realised that the wings on their backs were moving – not in a flapping motion, but they slightly opened and closed as these beings interacted with one another. It was much like one might move from one foot to the other absent-mindedly while engaging in activity or conversation.

Suddenly aware of himself, Eddus quickly glanced to the right and left, his heart pounding. The area they were in seemed enormous, and he could see some kind of translucent barrier around it. Following its edge with his eyes, Eddus saw that it encircled the entire area like a dome.

"Abbi..."

"I'm right here, Eddus."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 50 2025/03/16 14:46

"Abbi, what is this?" Catching his breath, Eddus turned his head to look at her.

He could see her head, arms, and shoulders. She also had both hands on the ground. Her eyes shone as she watched him take in the surroundings.

"This is why you don't ever step into a pixie ring uninvited. You'll disturb this."

"Yes, but..."

"Look up, Eddus."

Raising his head, Eddus could see the trees through the barrier that surrounded them. They were gigantic, as if they'd been enlarged to hundreds of times their size, or as if he'd somehow been made smaller.

He looked around at the barrier where it met the ground. The mushrooms of the pixie-circle outside of the barrier were tall enough that, were he to stand next to one and raise his arms as high as he could, he would still not be able to touch the underside of the mushroom cap.

"This isn't possible, Abbi."

"I told you the forest is a magical place."

The edges of his vision began to blur and darken. Sweat beaded on his forehead, though he felt cold. His airways felt restricted.

Eddus shook his head, panic setting in.

"This can't be-"

"Real?" Abbi watched Eddus with amusement. "We should probably go now."

Eddus felt Abbi's hand touch his own.

Nodding blankly, he watched as she backed up, disappearing through the barrier beside him. A moment later, he felt her hands on his shoulders, and she pulled him backward. He fell onto his back as she pulled him past the point of sitting upright.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 51 2025/03/16 14:46

He quickly tried to sit up, but she gently pushed him back down. Letting himself relax, he felt the cool grass against the back of his head, and he could feel Abbi's fingertips as she gently stroked his forehead.

"Just rest for a minute, Eddus. You're disoriented."

Taking a deep breath, Eddus felt confusion, not disorientation. It was like his mind had been playing tricks on him. He was looking up at the starry night sky through the gap in the trees' canopy. He could see the sliver of moon peeking into the gap from behind the branches overhead, illuminating the clearing. He scrambled to his feet, almost losing his balance.

"It's dark! Why is it dark?" he asked. "How long were we-"

"Eddus, calm down. Be careful." Abbi placed a hand on his shoulder and one on his back, helping to steady him. "We need to get away from here."

Looking down, Eddus saw that his foot was at the edge of the pixie ring, just touching one of the mushrooms. He numbly followed Abbi back to the pathway, stepping where she guided him as they passed between the pixie rings in the moonlight.

"Abbi, what was that?"

She had led him to a park bench next to a lamppost beside the pathway, where he sat down quickly, bewildered, looking up at her.

"Eddus-"

"What the hell was that?"

"I shouldn't have shown it to you." There was a hint of worry in the girl's voice.

"I'm not even sure what it was you showed me." Eddus leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "What kind of mushroom did we eat?"

"Look at me, Eddus Brandt." Abbi knelt in front of him and looked into his eyes. Taking his hand, she was quiet for a moment. When she did speak, she spoke solemnly. "I promise you, it was just a mushroom."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 52 2025/03/16 14:46

"But I was hallucinating..."

"You weren't," she told him. "Eddie, you could eat every shroom in this forest, and it wouldn't do anything to you."

"I wasn't hallucinating?"

"Did you see a large group of people dancing and drinking?"

"Yes."

"Then you weren't hallucinating."

Eddus said nothing but continued looking at her in disbelief.

"Those are my people, Eddie."

"No." Eddus shook his head, smiling nervously, sure that she was messing with him again. "The people were – they were green. And the trees..."

"Yes, they are." Abbi sat down on the pavement, crossing her legs under her dress. "They're faeries, Eddus."

"What?"

"They're faeries. You weren't hallucinating. I saw the same thing you did."

"What I saw wasn't possible, Abbi. Those people... they- they had wings. Wings! They weren't..."

"Human?" Abbi smiled, raising her eyebrows. She was visibly amused and made no attempt to hide it. "No, they weren't human."

"What?"

"They're faeries, Eddus. Pixies. Well, most of the ones I saw, anyway."

"But that's impossible, Abbi." Eddus stood quickly, stepping past her. "Isn't it?"

He took a few steps away and then turned to her again.

"Faeries don't exist."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 53 2025/03/16 14:46

"But you saw them, Eddus." Abbi rose to her feet, brushing off the backside of her dress with her hands. "Faeries do exist. You saw them."

"I don't know what I saw!"

"I exist, don't I?"

Eddus stood still, looking at her questioningly, as she stepped forward, closing the gap between them. She reached out and grasped his hand, looking up at him.

"I'm real, aren't I, Eddie?" she asked softly.

"Of course you're real, Abbi." Slowly, confusion washed over him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm a pixie, Eddus Brandt. I am a faerie."

"You can't be. But, how?" Eddus stammered. "You don't have wings."

Abbi was quiet for a moment. She pursed her lips with an anxious look on her face.

"I do have wings, Eddus Brandt," she said softly.

Eddus studied the young woman. The dress she wore fit her form, leaving little to the imagination about the slim body beneath it. There was no way she could be hiding such appendages.

For a moment, Abbi stood, watching him surveil her. She looked down and away; the expression on her face had not changed, but her breathing had quickened.

"You won't see them. Not here. Not now. Not in this realm." The look on her face was one of concern and fear. "I'm so sorry, Eddie."

All Eddus could do was nod.

He couldn't *not* believe what she was telling him, but his mind also could not accept it. Unlike having seen what he had inside the pixie ring with his own eyes, his mind couldn't accept what he could see no proof of. But if what the young woman had shown him had been real, then what she was now telling him could very possibly be real as well.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 54 2025/03/16 14:46

Shuffling her bare feet for a moment, Abbi met his gaze. Her face expressed worry and even fear. In her eyes, Eddus could see both emotions, but they did not tell him she was being dishonest.

Eddus' mind was in a jumble. He felt numb, looking down at the young lady in front of him, who said nothing.

Abbi again shuffled her feet, still looking worried.

"You just apologised to me," Eddus said slowly, breaking the silence.

"I did." Abbi's eyebrows rose in surprise for just a moment before knitting once more. She looked down again, shaking her head.

"But you wouldn't let me apologise to you."

Abbi smiled, glancing up at him. She still looked worried, but Eddus could see relief in the way that she looked at him now.

"Are you not going to ask me about what I just told you?"

Her eyes met his for a moment.

"No." Eddus shook his head. "I mean, yes- I don't know. I don't know how to wrap my mind around whatever it is you showed me today. And I could ask you a thousand questions, but honestly, I don't even know what to ask you right now."

Abbi nodded in silence. She watched Eddus for a few moments before she spoke.

"I stop you from apologising because you don't owe me anything, Eddus Brandt," she said quietly. "And I don't want you to owe me anything. So far, you've only tried to apologise for things I only play with you about. It is sweet of you, but you do not owe me a thing."

"I don't understand. What do you mean? What could I owe you?"

The corners of her mouth curled slightly, and gave a small shake of her head.

"I should never have shown you what you just saw. And for it, I owe you more than I can ever give to you," she said.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 55 2025/03/16 14:46

"I still don't understand. I'm still not sure what you showed me, or if I can even believe what I saw."

"I didn't ask you if you wanted that burden."

Eddus laughed.

"Truthfully, as truly unbelievable as it is, I don't know if it's a burden."

"Eddus."

"Is it – the faerie ring – something that you've not shown many people before?"

"I trusted you, Eddus... I do trust you. I showed you one of our most guarded secrets. I showed you – I've never taken anyone into a pixie ring before." Abbi shook her head, suddenly looking distressed. "...With, or without permission."

"Wait, what permission? You need permission?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Well, it's not forbidden," Abbi said with a thoughtful look. "I've never taken anyone in before, but perhaps I should have asked first."

"Will there be trouble? I mean, will you be in trouble?"

"We're really not supposed to bring anyone into our realm without first being granted permission." Abbi shrugged, looking away. "But then again, I didn't take you all the way in."

"But, why?"

"I don't know. Maybe it is so that the person being brought in can be vetted or something. I've never even thought about it before."

With his free hand, Eddus gently turned her head toward him, lifting her chin.

"Why would you risk it? I mean, why me?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 56 2025/03/16 14:46

Abbi turned her head slightly.

"I couldn't tell you not to disturb the pixie rings without showing you why..." Her voice trailed off.

Eddus watched her in the dim glow given off by the park's lamppost.

"Abbi, what is it?"

"Six weeks." Drawing in a deep breath Abbi bit her lip, her eyes meeting his.

"What?"

"You said that it had been six weeks since we'd last seen each other," she said, speaking quickly. "I really didn't mean to be gone so long. And I have missed you, Eddus. I wanted you to know that. I really would have kept my promise. Sometimes I just lose track of time, and I couldn't explain it to you without-"

Abbi stopped mid-sentence. She leaned forward, raised up on her toes, and pressed her lips to his, kissing him gently.

"You really are the sweetest human being I have ever met."

Eddus blinked in surprise at her action. He remembered that she'd said the same thing to him while saying goodbye the night they met. It dawned on him that now it had a much different meaning than it had six weeks prior.

"But, what... What kind of trouble will it mean for you? I don't want you to get into trouble. What will happen to you?"

"Well, it *could* go unnoticed." Abbi wrinkled her nose, smiling, but only for a moment before she became serious again. "Or this might be the last time I ever see you, Eddus Brandt."

Pulling him by the hand, they began to walk again.

Eddus glanced at the young lady by his side as they made their way up the sidewalk. Abbi wore a content look but said nothing. He wondered how she could be so calm in light of what she'd just told him.

He tried to imagine what sort of trouble she could get into. He felt somewhat responsible for the fact that she might be facing some sort of

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 57 2025/03/16 14:46

consequence. He hadn't asked her to show him the pixie ring, but he didn't want to think about the fact that he might not see her again.

It was all still impossible for him to wrap his mind around. If he wasn't dreaming or hallucinating, then Abbi was literally from a different world. He had so many questions.



"Well, hello there, stranger!" Janice smiled from behind the counter, looking mildly surprised as Eddus entered the diner, holding the door open for Abbi.

They'd walked from City Park, and it was the only place Eddus could think of that would still be open at that late an hour.

"Do you live here, Janice?" Eddus laughed. He couldn't remember a time he'd been to the diner, and she wasn't busy waiting tables. Usually, he came to the diner late in the morning, and yet here she was, late at night.

"It sure feels like it, hun. One of the girls is on maternity leave, so we're all helping pick up the slack."

Leading Abbi to the corner booth and then waiting for her to be seated, Eddus sat down across from her.

"I'm guessing you must be Abbi." Janice smiled as she approached the table, placing a menu in front of each of them.

"How do you know my name?"

"Lucky guess, hun."

"Eddus, did you tell her my name?"

"He didn't have to," Janice said with a twinkle in her eye. "A bombshell, in a little black dress, with no shoes on."

She looked at Eddus, giving him a wink.

"Janice! Why would you say that?" Eddus quickly looked at Abbi, his face warming, then back at the waitress. "You're as bad as Mo."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 58 2025/03/16 14:46

"Bombshell?" Looking surprised, Abbi knitted her eyebrows. "Eddus?"

"It was something Mo said, not Ed," Janice told her. "And it just means that you're a pretty girl, hun."

"I know what it means," Abbi laughed, looking up at the waitress, "and I highly doubt that Eddie would have said anything like that. I just like seeing him get nervous."

Janice's eyebrows rose.

"So it's "Eddie" now, is it?" She looked at Eddus with a knowing smile. "Two coffees?"

"Honey, please."

Both Eddus and the waitress looked at Abbi.

"Honey in your coffee?" Janice asked her.

"Just honey, please. And water?" Abbi bit her lip as she looked up at Janet.

"Not a problem," Janet said. "One coffee and one water with honey. You want ice in that, hun?"

Abbi shook her head.

"Hot, please. Like coffee, if it's no trouble."

Janet nodded and then made her way behind the counter.

"What are you thinking right now, Eddus Brandt?"

Slowly, Eddus raised his head. For several minutes, he had been silent, looking at the table. Abbi had finished her beverage and was watching him and reflecting on the day's events.

"I was thinking about how you've kissed me twice in the relatively short time we've known one another." Speaking slowly, Eddus lowered his gaze

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 59 2025/03/16 14:46

again to the half-finished cup of coffee in front of him and then looked across the table at her. He paused. “How do you do that?”

Abbi opened her mouth to respond but stopped herself as the waitress walked past them. She waited a few moments.

“You were so nice to me the night we met,” Abbi said as soon as Janice was out of earshot. “I knew that I was making you uncomfortable, and yet you were still so sweet to me... And kissing you tonight was forward, I know. It was probably wrong of me, considering the circumstances.”

Eddus smiled and waited a moment after she’d stopped talking. He studied her facial expression as she looked back at him. She had the worried look of a child trying to justify a wrongdoing.

“That is not what I meant,” he told her softly.

“Then what did you mean? How do I do what?”

“Every time you ask me a question... I seem to answer it whether I want to or not, and I usually end up saying more than I should.”

“More than you should? What do you mean?”

“I’m not really sure what I mean.” Eddus turned his head, looking through the window beside them at the empty street outside. “It’s not your fault. I just seem to speak more openly than I’m used to when you ask me a question. Like the answer I just gave you. It was exactly what I was thinking about when you asked me, but I doubt I would have given that answer had anyone else asked.”

Abbi shook her head but said nothing, an amused expression on her face. Eddus emptied what was left in his cup and smiled at her.

“As I said, it’s not you,” he said, putting his hand in his pocket to retrieve his wallet. “Let’s get out of here.”



“About kissing you.” Abbi spoke softly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 60 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus took the initiative and took her hand as they left the diner. He felt it was easier to continue their conversation outside as they walked. They'd walked about a block and a half without speaking before Abbi broke the silence.

Eddus was surprised to hear what she said when she finally spoke. He'd given it no more thought after they left the diner.

"I didn't mean anything when I answered you earlier," he said. "I just told you what it was I was thinking."

"We're not so different, you know, pixies and humans."

Not knowing how to respond, Eddus pursed his lips. He didn't know what that meant, but he didn't really want to think about it right then. Pixies were faeries. They were myths. He didn't want to think about anything other than the young woman beside him. The one he'd met weeks before.

"Abbi, how old are you?"

"Eddus." Abbi shook her head, glancing away.

"How old are you? Earlier, you asked me what I was thinking about, and I *was* thinking about the two times you'd kissed me, as well as wondering if perhaps it was not inappropriate. That is, I hoped-" Eddus took a deep breath. "I just don't want you to feel any regret at our having met."

"I told you that I am older than you think I am." Abbi's voice bordered on discomfort, and she avoided looking directly at him. "Without going into it, may I ask that you please trust me?"

"Without going into it?"

"We're adults, Eddus. You've done nothing wrong, and I am not a young girl who needs protecting."

"I just want to be sure. I need to be sure." Eddus nodded, glancing down at her.

"And I'll never regret meeting you, Eddus Brandt."

They turned off the main street onto a smaller side street leading into the city's shipping district.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 61 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus pondered her last statement in relation to what she'd said when he asked her age. He wanted to trust her and couldn't think of a reason not to.

"You're funny, Eddie."

"In what way?"

"I literally showed you another world today. My world. I then tell you that I, myself, am fae – a pixie – and you don't even ask me anything about it." Abbi laughed. "But I kissed you, and you're worried that I may regret something?"

Eddus looked down at her as they walked. She gave him a smile, shaking her head.

"I'm sure that I'll have more questions than you can answer when I've had time to think about things," he told her.

At the moment, he didn't want to think about those things. To do so would be to open the floodgates.



"You live here?"

Abbi smiled curiously as she watched Eddus unlock a metal door on the corner of a three-story building, using the keypad on the wall next to it.

They'd walked several blocks into an area known as the shipping district, for its industrial warehouses that acted as the shipping and receiving hub for much of the city. It consisted of one of two main streets that led into the district and was joined by smaller side streets that led to various other businesses and warehouses.

Street lamps illuminated the sidewalk, usually one or two per building they passed, depending on the size of that structure. Most of the buildings were closed for the night. They were dark, save for light peering out of one or two windows with a security guard inside.

The building Eddus had taken her to was at the end of a street that made a ninety-degree turn, became another street, and carried on further into the district. It was a warehouse, and rather large. Its ground floor had several

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 62 2025/03/16 14:46

large metal roll-up doors with bays in front of each to give trucks access to back up to them for loading and offloading. Above it, the second and third floors had rows of darkened windows.

Abbi peered up at the building and then glanced at Eddus.

"Up there," Eddus told her, pointing up the side of the building. The door unlocked, and he opened it, smiling nervously as he held it open for his guest. He lived here, so it only occurred to him right then how this setting may seem strange to her. "I live on the third floor."

Abbi was quiet as she followed him into a small foyer. As they entered, the foyer was instantly lit as the overhead fluorescent lights, attached to motion sensors, came on. The room was small, with a bare concrete floor and walls that were painted an industrial green. The walls were peeling in places. The only thing in the room was an elevator, directly across from where they'd entered.

Eddus pressed the button on the wall next to the lift and gave Abbi what he hoped was a reassuring smile. She nodded, looking around.

A few moments later, the elevator slid open, and they stepped in. Eddus pressed a translucent button on the panel, which glowed upon being pushed. The only other thing on the panel was an emergency stop pull button. Abbi looked amused, glancing in his direction, as they waited in silence until the door slid open again.

As they stepped out of the lift again, lights came on, illuminating another small foyer, much like the one they'd entered through. It had the same bare concrete floor and industrial-green walls. It was also empty, except for a mat, which lay in front of a closed door to the left of the lift.

Using another keypad, Eddus opened it for his guest and followed her in down a dimly lit passage with crème-coloured walls. They stepped into a large, dark area. The only light was from a fixture above a closed door about halfway down a long wall to their right.

Looking around the dark area they'd entered, Abbi's eyes adjusted. She could not make out much, except that it seemed to be a very large and open space. It could even have been an empty room. Across from the door with the light over it, several paces away, she could just make out a table with chairs around it.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 63 2025/03/16 14:46

Touching Abbi's shoulder, Eddus led her along the wall to their right. They passed a metal sliding door next to a door across from the table with a small mat in front of it. Eddus opened it for Abbi. Turning on the light as they entered, he closed it behind them and watched as she looked around.

She wore a little smile and a look of mild interest as she took in the surroundings.

"This is my place," Eddus said.

They stood in a lounge area with a high, pressed ceiling. The area they were in was a lounge that opened into a kitchen roughly the same size as the lounge. Sparsely furnished, the place was well lit by a chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. The room was nicely painted and trimmed in dark red wood, giving it a comfortable feel.

The only furniture was a small antique desk in the lounge's corner and a large wooden bookcase that stood against the wall. In front of the bookcase, on an area rug, was an armchair and a small side table with a floor lamp beside them. In the kitchen was a table with chairs on either side of it. Along the wall between the two areas, there was a door leading to a hallway.

Eddus took his guest gently by the hand and led her to the armchair. After she was seated, he pulled the chair at the desk out, turned it, and sat down facing her.

"It's not much, but it's home," he said with a smile. He studied her expression as she looked up, around her, and then at him. She didn't seem uncomfortable or anxious at all.

"I like it," Abbi said simply, her eyes smiling.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Eddus glanced around the large, open room.

"I don't have many guests," he said sheepishly. "I spend most of my time in my art studio."

"Back there?" Tilting her head, Abbi glanced in the direction of the hallway.

Eddus looked at the opening in the wall that bisected the sections of the flat for a moment. He shook his head quickly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 64 2025/03/16 14:46

"No, the studio is next door. I'll show it to you sometime," he told her, pointing to the other wall.

Abbi nodded, remembering the metal sliding door they'd passed as they came to the door of the flat they were in.

Eddus looked again at the hallway.

"That leads to the other rooms. The bedrooms and the bathroom." He paused for a moment as something occurred to him. "Are you tired? You know, I have no idea what time it is, but I do have a spare bedroom made up that you can sleep in."

Abbi lowered her gaze in thought, as though she were considering what he'd just said. She nodded slowly and then looked up at Eddus.

"I don't want to be any trouble," she said, an almost worried tone in her voice. "I can make my way back home pretty quickly."

For a moment, Eddus said nothing, his eyes resting on the young lady as she looked down again.

"It's the middle of the night." Eddus blinked as Abbi quickly looked up at him. "It's no trouble. I promise. The spare bedroom really is already made up. Really, it's the least I can do."

Abbi didn't say anything. She tilted her head slightly and then gave a single nod.

The two of them walked down the hallway. The first door they passed, on the right, Abbi deduced was Eddus' bedroom from what she glimpsed as they walked by. The next one they came to, which Eddus opened, was on the other side of the hallway. There were two others further down the passage, one on each side.

Turning on the light, Eddus stepped inside the room he'd just opened. Inside it was a bed with a small side table next to it. There was a small closet opposite the bed. A chest of drawers and a small desk were the only other pieces of furniture in the room.

"Give me a minute, and I'll get you a t-shirt you can sleep in," Eddus said, "if that's not too-"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 65 2025/03/16 14:46

"I would like that." Abbi had followed him in, looking around the small, tidy room. She smiled as her gaze stopped at the bed, and she glanced up at Eddus.

"The bathroom is just next door." Eddus quickly stepped past the young woman to the door, feeling that it was perhaps improper for him to be in the bedroom with her. "I'll go get that shirt for you."



"Abbi?" Eddus' eyes opened as he heard the hinge of his bedroom door creak softly as it was opened.

Not long before, he'd come to his room, having bid Abbi good night. Laying down, he closed his eyes, and in a few minutes, he was just drifting into sleep when he heard a movement.

He watched as his guest, wearing the shirt he'd given her to sleep in, quietly entered the bedroom. She pushed the door back to its original position, open only enough that a thin beam of light crossed the bedroom floor due to the light being left on in the hallway and crossed the small room to the bed.

"Is everything alright, Abbi?"

"Yes," Abbi said quietly.

Eddus could only see her silhouette in the darkness. He said nothing, watching her stand there, not moving. He wondered if he should get up but hesitated as he wore only a pair of running shorts.

Silently, Abbi took a step forward toward the bed, standing just beside it. Lifting the corner of the thin blanket and sheet, she silently climbed in and lay down facing him.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Eddus didn't move, still uncertain as to what to do. They lay facing each other in the dark, both only able to make out each other's features.

"Is this ok?" Abbi reached forward to touch his arm.

"Yes."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 66 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus felt his heart quicken at her touch; the word seemed to catch in his throat. He felt a conflicted nervousness being in such close proximity to the young woman beside him.

They'd held hands while walking together. They'd several times been closer than he was at all comfortable with. And she *had* kissed him… twice. But in this circumstance, he was even more uneasy. Besides their obvious difference in age, they lay only inches from one another, each in various states of undress, the thought of which made him feel something akin to panic.

He could feel the heat of her body next to him. He lay pressing his back against the wall in order to give her as much space as he could.

"Are you – is everything alright?" he asked her, holding a breath.

"Everything is fine, Eddus Brandt," Abbi said softly, almost in a whisper. "I just didn't want to sleep alone in a new place. Are you sure that you are ok with this?"

Upon hearing her speak his name, Eddus exhaled and relaxed, his tension easing. He couldn't say why but hearing her say it somehow caused him to relax.

"Yes," he said.

"Good." Abbi's eyes seemed to glow softly in the darkness for just a moment before she leaned forward, closing them and pressing her lips to his.

Eddus caught his breath again, as all of the nervousness he'd just felt ease quickly returned. He again pressed his back against the wall, his heart racing, and his chest tight, making it difficult to breathe.

Abbi kissed him again quickly, then shifted under the blanket, rolling to her other side, turning her back to him. She reached behind her. Finding his hand with hers, she pulled his arm around her at the waist. Pulling him again gently towards her, she leaned back into his chest.

Managing only shallow breaths, Eddus tried to calm himself. He steadied his breathing and tried to think of something other than the small body pressed against his, its owner holding his wrist firmly.

Abbi gave what sounded like a contented sigh. She gently pressed his hand against her side.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 67 2025/03/16 14:46

A thought occurred to Eddus as he felt her shoulder touch his chest.

"Abbi..."

"Yes, Eddie."

"Do you really have wings?"

"I do." Smiling in the darkness, Abbi nodded, closing her eyes. She pushed her left leg back until her foot met Eddus' shin. "I will show you sometime."

Saying nothing, Eddus tried not to tense at her touch as she gently rubbed her foot against his leg. He closed his eyes, hoping that sleep would come quickly.

Abbi's reflection peered back at her from the bathroom mirror with the same expressionless look that she gazed at it with. She sighed, studying herself in the glass.

It was early. She wasn't sure what time it was, but she could see out the bathroom window that there was a hint of light in the sky. She'd woken a short time before. Carefully, so as not to wake Eddus, she slipped out of the bed and made her way to the bathroom to get some water.

Dropping her gaze, she looked to her neckline, then to the glass in her hand that she held just below her chin. Her attention then turned to the rest of her reflection; her body clothed in the black t-shirt Eddus had given her to sleep in.

She smiled, gently biting her bottom lip. The shirt was much too big for her. It certainly wasn't one of the form-fitting dresses she usually wore. Although Eddus wasn't exactly large-framed, the shirt's shoulder seams hung almost a hand's width down her arm on either side, as well as its hem coming to just above her knees.

The sight of how small she looked in it amused her. With her free hand, she grasped the collar between her fingers, lifting it to her nose and inhaling deeply. She felt that she would have worn the garment every night if she could.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 68 2025/03/16 14:46

Setting the glass on the sink's counter top, she then looked at the other items there, to the side of the sink. A folded white hand towel had been laid to the right of the basin. On it were a comb, a straight razor, and a soap brush. There was a glass with a toothbrush standing in it along the back wall under the mirror. There had been an empty glass beside it, which she'd rinsed and filled with water.

She took another sip of the water and then poured its remains down the drain. Giving the glass a quick rinse, she placed it again beside the other. Running her finger along the smooth handle of the folded straight razor, careful not to touch the tang, she then turned off the bathroom light and quietly walked back to Eddus' bedroom.

Inside, she paused before pushing the door almost closed again, looking at the man on the bed. He lay on his side, his back to the wall, just as she'd left him. It was the same position he'd been in when they'd fallen asleep. Under the thin blanket, his hand lay on the sheet in front of him, where it had been resting on her side.

Abbi smiled, watching him slumber.

She tip-toed to the bed's edge, gently climbing in again, where she lay with her back to him, careful not to touch him so as not to wake him. She closed her eyes, but she did not feel that sleep would again come to her. She never slept long.

Memories began flashing in her mind.

She remembered the warmth of the sun shining on her face through the tree canopy and the smell of the trees on the wind in the park the day before. She recalled the excitement she felt at seeing Eddus walking along the path.

To be honest, she'd thought several times about him after their late-night walk the night they'd met. Seeing him in the park, she recalled their meeting and the time they'd spent together. At that moment, remembering how much fun she'd had watching him react awkwardly to her teasing him and the questions she'd posed, she felt the urge to be in his presence again.

As she replayed the day's events in her memory, she stifled the urge to chuckle at the memory of Eddus' hesitation when she'd offered him a piece of the mushroom in the park earlier that day. It had actually been spur of the moment. She'd just wanted to watch his reaction.

From behind her, she heard Eddus inhale deeply as he slept.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 69 2025/03/16 14:46

Catching her breath, her heart momentarily quickened. Her stomach clenched, almost to the point of pain, and she felt scared, like curling into a ball. Realisation hit her like a slap to the face.

Not only had she told a human about her realm, she'd also shown him the portal and therefore given him the knowledge of how to access the faerie world. Exhaling slowly, she opened her eyes, suddenly acutely aware of the darkness around her and a feeling that this place was foreign.

She shuddered slightly. The consequence for herself did not even enter her mind, but what it could mean for her entire world. She may have inadvertently placed it in danger. What if...?

Eddus stirred slightly, and Abbi felt his hand come to rest on her ribs. She traced his hand with her fingertips and sighed. Smiling at the feeling of his touch, she recalled his manner toward her how cautious he was around her.

She couldn't imagine the human that lay behind her ever doing anything that would hurt her. Nothing about him even suggested that he could be a threat to her or her realm. She'd not come into the city much, but he was the nicest person she'd ever met.

Closing her eyes, she gently pushed herself back until she felt the warmth of the man's chest against her back and laughed softly as she felt his hand ever so slightly tighten, pulling her to him. She tried to imagine his awkward reaction if he were to somehow become aware of the action.



"Hello..."

Abbi stopped mid-step as she exited Eddus' flat.

She'd been as quiet as she could so as not to wake him, and was surprised to see someone else present. Across from the door to the flat was a large kitchen area, which also surprised her. She'd not seen it the night before, as there had been no lights on when she and Eddus came in.

Wearing a loose fitting blue tracksuit, Stiles, the young woman whom Abbi had met at the pub with Eddus, closed the refrigerator door and started toward a large wooden table. She carried a carton of milk, a box of chocolate

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 70 2025/03/16 14:46

powder, and a large glass with a spoon in it.

"I didn't know anyone else was here." Abbi looked around, wondering just how big the place was. There was a large lounge area opposite the hallway she'd entered through with Eddus the night before. It was part of quite a large open plan. There was a door at either end of the far wall.

Stiles set the items she carried onto the table, then waved Abbi over.

"Yeah, I think we're all here, at least for a few more hours," she said. "Would you like some chocolate milk?"

"May I please just have milk?" Abbi pulled out a chair and sat down. "Who is 'all'?"

"What do you mean?"

Stiles walked back to the sink, taking another glass from the cabinet above it, and then returned to the table. She filled the glass with milk and placed it in front of Abbi, then pried the top off of the box of chocolate powder and began scooping it into her own glass.

"You said that you're all here."

"Oh, that." Stiles poured milk over the powder in her glass and began stirring it with the spoon. "I'm going to assume that since you're here, Ed's still here. Jay and Mo will probably sleep for a couple more hours before they're late for their classes, as usual."

"All of you have rooms here?" Abbi looked over her shoulder toward the door she'd come out of. "How big is Eddus' place?"

"I think that it's the same size as ours." Noting the look of confusion on Abbi's face, Stiles laughed aloud.

"We don't all live in there," she said, nodding to the flat Abbi had stayed in the previous night. She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb. The far wall spanned the entire width of the open lounge. "Our flats are back there."

Abbi sipped her milk. She sighed, smiling.

"This is so good," she said.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 71 2025/03/16 14:46

"Sure you won't have any chocolate?" Stiles pushed the box of powder toward her.

Abbi shook her head. She then sipped the milk again, this time closing her eyes.

"This is perfect."

"What, just milk?"

"I think the only thing better than milk is cream," Abbi sighed happily. She sipped the milk again.

"Or maybe honey," she added thoughtfully, and then nodded. "Yes. Honey is the best."

"Milk and honey, huh? The guys must love you." Stiles laughed. "Cheap date, aren't you?"

Abbi shrugged, setting her glass down.

"I don't know," she said, "I've never been on a date before."

"Right, sure you haven't..." Stiles smirked at Abbi, who glanced down at the table, then looked away. "Shut the fuck up! Seriously?"

Abbi looked at Stiles sheepishly, her face warming.

"No, seriously?"

"Is that strange?"

"Well, I wouldn't say strange, so much as uncommon, maybe." Stiles tilted her head, still looking at Abbi in disbelief. She didn't want to make the girl uncomfortable, but she wanted to know more. "Have you really never been on a date? In your entire life?"

Abbi shook her head.

"What about that night at the bar a few weeks back? When Ed found your shoes? You two looked pretty close when you walked in."

Abbi shook her head again.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 72 2025/03/16 14:46

"I think Eddus saw that as more of an inconvenience." She smiled, remembering the night. "When I told you that he was with me and not I with him, I meant it. After he'd given me my shoes, I seriously thought he was going to run away."

"See now, *that* would have sounded more like Ed than did his bringing you back with him." Stiles sipped her chocolate milk, then swirled it around in her glass.

"Well, to be fair, I did mess him around a little while we talked on the street," Abbi laughed. "I just wanted to see how far he'd let me push him. I think I annoyed him. I was surprised he didn't tell me to go away. When he didn't, I just came into the pub with him."

"I think it's more likely that he would have run away than tell you to get lost. He's a bit shy, but he's never rude. Ed's a really nice guy."

"He is. I don't think every guy would chase down a complete stranger to give them a pair of shoes."

Stiles chuckled and shook her head, carrying her glass to the sink.

"You know, I think he still has them," she said over her shoulder as she poured her glass into the sink and then rinsed it. "He went back to the pub and got them the next morning."

"Yes, I saw them by the bed in his guest bedroom."

The glass still in her hand, Stiles paused for a moment before setting it down next to the sink and turning to Abbi.

"You two didn't sleep in the same room?"

Abbi said nothing. She wasn't going to make the false claim that she and Eddus had slept in separate bedrooms, but she also wasn't going to offer that they had actually slept in the same bed.

"Ok, never mind." Stiles spoke slowly, shaking her head. "What time did you guys get here? I'm usually up pretty late, and I didn't even hear you come in."

Returning to the table, she pulled out the chair next to Abbi and turned it around, sitting on it with the chair back between her legs.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 73 2025/03/16 14:46

"I think it was around two thirty."

Stiles' brows rose. She laughed softly.

"Abbi, I've got to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I think you're a bad influence on Ed."

"I am?" Abbi blinked in surprise, her face warming. She wondered what she could have done to bring Stiles to this conclusion.

"Hell, yeah," Stiles grinned. "Out till two? I think the last time he was out past midnight was the night he met you. Before that, I don't think he'd been out later than eleven the entire time I've known him."

"Is that a good thing?" Abbi asked, still slightly unsure.

"Well, you have my stamp of approval," Stiles laughed. "You can stay."



"This place is really something." Abbi looked around as she stirred a teaspoon of honey into a cup of ginger tea.

She sat across from Stiles at the table while Eddus made coffee at the counter. He'd emerged from his flat, wearing jeans and a collared t-shirt, greeting the two ladies with a smile as he made his way to the coffee maker.

"The outside of the building doesn't do it justice," Stiles commented. She'd put away the chocolate powder and was now sipping some kind of protein drink. "I think Ed did it that way on purpose."

"What did he do?"

"Well, all of this. He renovated this entire floor." Stiles looked around for a moment. "From the outside, you'd never guess anyone lived up here, but from in here, you can easily forget that we're in the shipping district."

Abbi looked around the kitchen area, which opened into a large lounge with two sofas. There was a television mounted on the wall, facing the sofas.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 74 2025/03/16 14:46

The walls were each painted a different colour, yet they complimented one another. The kitchen floor was a wood laminate, while the rest of the flooring was tight-weave carpeting. Nothing about the surroundings suggested that it was part of a warehouse.

"You each have rooms of your own?"

"Rooms, lounges, bathrooms, kitchens... there are three flats on this floor," Stiles said, nodding.

The two looked at Eddus, standing at the coffee machine on the counter. He picked up his cup and joined them at the table, pulling the chair next to Abbi out.

"That's amazing." Abbi put both hands around her cup of tea, gently blowing at the steam.

"It's really not," Eddus said with a shrug. "The whole floor used to be all offices and storage space. I just knocked out a couple walls and closed in a few others."

"He's full of crap, Abbi." Stiles snorted, rolling her eyes. "The whole floor has been sound-proofed so that you can't hear the noises outside. The apartments are very nice. I'll show you mine sometime."

"Do you own the entire floor?" Abbi asked Eddus.

"He owns the building," Stiles told her, lifting her glass. She used a cloth to wipe the ring of liquid under it.

"The whole thing?"

"It was an investment. It pays the bills," Eddus said, glancing at Abbi, "and it's not as great as all that. It's nothing compared to where you're from."

Abbi said nothing. She gave no reaction to his statement, only sipped her tea again. Her heart began to race and her stomach knotted as she thought about the events of the day before.

For a few moments, the three of them sat in a silence that lingered, almost to the point of being awkward.

"Am I missing something?" Stiles looked back and forth between the two of them. "What's going on?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 75 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus shook his head, looking apologetically at Abbi.

"You're not missing anything, Stiles."

"Have you been to her place?" Stiles' gaze shifted to the girl across from her. Her eyes widened. "He's been to your place!"

Staying silent, Abbi's hand remained clasped around the handle of her teacup. She dropped her gaze, looking at the steaming liquid it held, and lowered her head.

"Stiles," Eddus said, tapping the table with his fingertips. "Don't jump to conclusions."

He didn't need to be able to read facial expressions to know that his remark had made Abbi uncomfortable. Immediately, he knew he shouldn't have said it.

"Then what's going on?" Looking at him questioningly, Stiles' brows knitted.

"Nothing. I've never been to Abbi's house," Eddus said. He met Stiles' gaze. Abbi looked across the table and then turned her head toward him. "I just meant that she lives in a nicer area than this."

Glancing away from him, Abbi remained silent. It was true; Eddus had never been to her house, her actual dwelling. He'd barely had a glimpse into her world. And she had no real opinion as to whether the faerie realm was nicer than the human world. She'd never thought to compare the two.

"I didn't mean anything by it, Abbi," Stiles said, pursing her lips. She then opened her mouth to speak again.

"Please, don't apologise!" Abbi's expression changed to alarm as she quickly looked again towards Eddus' roommate.

"Okay." Stiles set her glass on the table, visibly surprised at Abbi's reaction. "Are you alright?"

"Of course." A quick smile, and Abbi glanced at the tabletop. "Really, I'm fine. And this place is lovely. I just don't want you to have the wrong idea."

"I was just happy for Ed." Stiles gave her a sympathetic nod.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 76 2025/03/16 14:46

"Because you thought he'd been to my house...?"

"Well, yeah. I've known him for a long time, and he's never had a girlfriend for as long as I've known him."

"I'm sitting right here." Eddus rolled his eyes, giving his house mate a look. He shifted his gaze to Abbi for a moment, then again to Stiles.

Abbi hadn't seemed to react to the implication of the word girlfriend, which was a relief. In fact, she let go of the teacup and placed her hand on his.

"Well, I like this human." She smiled as Eddus quickly looked at her in surprise. She narrowed her eyes at him. "In fact, he's the sweetest one I've met."

"Well, as far as humans go, he is a good guy." Stiles shrugged. She glanced at Abbi's hand on Eddus' with an amused expression but did not say anything more.



As Abbi put the straw to her lips, sipping her second vanilla milkshake, she looked at Eddus, who watched her, looking slightly amused and seemingly deep in thought.

"Where are you?" she asked him.

"What? I'm right here."

Eddus blinked with a small shake of the head. Although he'd been looking directly at her, he'd not noticed that she'd turned her attention to him. She watched him now, her head slightly tilted, her eyes searching his.

"Where were you?"

"I was just looking at you," Eddus chuckled.

"I know, Eddus Brandt." Abbi narrowed her eyes, then smiled at him playfully. "You were staring at me."

Feeling his face flush, Eddus looked away.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 77 2025/03/16 14:46

They sat at a small round table for two on the sidewalk outside of a café in the old part of the city. In the days they had been together, they had gone to a different place to eat each day. Abbi had chosen their current location, having seen it as they walked through what was the most historical part of the city.

Eddus had been watching Abbi for some time – the way she enjoyed the sweet ice cream beverage and the way she looked so content as she sat.

As he watched her, his mind had wandered again to the events of a few days before, to their meeting in the park, and then to the winged beings inside of the mushroom ring. Everything that had happened ran through his mind like a whirlwind, like some kind of dream.

Deep in thought, he didn't even notice when the waitress set another glass on the table and then refilled his coffee, nor when Abbi glanced up at him with a surprised look and a quick smile when she realised he hadn't said anything for some time.

"I didn't mean to stare," Eddus stammered.

"What were you thinking about?"

Pausing for a moment, Eddus ran his finger along the edge of the serviette under the coffee cup in front of him. He did very much want to talk with Abbi about the things he'd been pondering, but he felt as though it was something that should be spoken of in different settings. He wasn't sure that speaking in public about it was something that she would be comfortable with. He knew he wasn't comfortable with it.

"Are you going to draw a picture of me?" Abbi changed the subject.

She turned her head, holding her chin high in a mock pose as if for a portrait. Shifting her eyes, she gave him a sidelong look. Dropping the pose, she laughed and stirred the ice cream with her straw.

"I just might," Eddus chuckled softly.

He had enjoyed watching her. Almost every time she'd sipped at the drink, she would close her eyes with a look on her face like it was the first milkshake she'd ever had and as though it was one of the best things she'd ever tasted. Until she'd mentioned it, he hadn't considered it, but he would have loved recreating this scene on canvas.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 78 2025/03/16 14:46

"Oh, really?"

Abbi shook her head slightly. Biting the tip of the straw between her front teeth, she absent-mindedly looked at the street they sat beside with a little smile on her face.

"I think I'd enjoy drawing you again," Eddus said, nodding his head.

Slowly, a look of realisation came over Abbi's face. Her brows furrowed, and she released the straw, turning her head sharply towards him.

"What do you mean again?" she gasped. "You've already drawn me?"

She pushed her chair slightly away from the small table, its legs audibly scraping the sidewalk.

"When? When did you...? And without asking me?" Abbi's voice rose slightly. Her brows knit and she looked down at the table.

Again, Eddus felt his face flush. Her reaction to his statement startled him. He hadn't even given any thought to the portrait of her since the day he'd finished it.

He glanced toward the only other table outside the café. It was unoccupied, but still, he didn't want to cause a scene. There were patrons on the other side of the café's large street-facing window, sitting inside.

"It was after we met. Abbi, I didn't-"

"Eddie, I'm just fucking with you." Abbi sighed and raised her eyebrows. She shook her head as she smiled at him, suppressing a laugh. "Can't you tell by now?"

"I wish I could," Eddus said wearily. He looked at her blankly, his heart still racing. He held his breath for a moment. "And please, don't call me Eddie."

It was the only thing he could think of to say to make him feel like he was somehow in control of the situation. He'd almost forgotten about her teasing and how she seemed to rather enjoy making him uncomfortable. Strangely, while he didn't think he would ever get used to it, he kind of enjoyed her telling him that she was fucking with him. He even found himself looking forward to the next time she would say it. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 79 2025/03/16 14:46

"Did you really draw me?"

"I shouldn't have said anything." Eddus opened his eyes, shaking his head.

"But you did draw me?" The young lady's eyes sparkled. "Can I see it?"

"I didn't mean... I really shouldn't have. Why?"

Abbi smiled. She took the straw again between her thumb and forefinger, stirring the slowly melting ice cream.

"Why wouldn't I want to see it?" she asked. Her expression became concerned. "Why wouldn't *you* want me to see it?"

Eddus blinked for a moment, a look of slight confusion on his face.

"Is it not very good?" Abbi asked.

"What? No, the piece is very well done, or at least I've been told." Truthfully, the only other person to have seen it was Stiles. Eddus shook his head. "I meant, why do you ask things to mess with me?"

"I like watching you squirm, Eddus Brandt." Abbi leaned forward and put both elbows on the table, resting her chin in her hands. She paused for a moment. "So, you've already shown it to someone else as well?"

Her eyes again sparkled as they fixed on him, and he could see the playfulness in them. For a moment, in his mind, Eddus could then see the finished portrait of her in her current pose, a half-finished glass of ice cream beside her elbow. He very much wished to capture her face and its rather neutral expression, though the way the light hit her eyes suggested she was up to something.

"Do you just like making people uncomfortable?"

"No," Abbi shook her head and leaned back in her chair, not seeming to mind that he had ignored her question, "just you."

Eddus picked up his coffee cup.

"Just me?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Is that a bad thing?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 80 2025/03/16 14:46

"You tell me," Eddus said, watching her, amused. "What did I do to incur this?"

Abbi shook her head again, rolling her eyes.

"I like you, Eddie," she said. "I meant it when I said that you're the sweetest human I've ever met."

For a few moments, they sat in silence. Abbi gazed at him with a little smile on her face, and he looked at her, wondering how many humans she had met. She was outgoing, to the point of being forward. And if their interaction at the pub the night they met was anything to go by, Abbi was likeable and could make friends easily. She had to have met her share of nice people.

"May I ask you something?"

Placing the cup on the table again, Eddus met her gaze. He didn't wait for her to answer.

"Why won't you let me apologise to you? What exactly did you mean when you said that I don't owe you anything?"

"Have you ever been out of this country, Eddus?"

Eddus nodded. While growing up, he travelled with his parents, vacationing in foreign countries. He'd also gone abroad in his junior year of high school, though he didn't know how this had anything to do with what he'd asked.

Abbi gazed thoughtfully in front of her at the table before continuing.

"The best way I can think of to explain things to you is that it's like the differences in cultures. Every country has its own cultures, and sometimes those cultures can seem rather strange."

"I don't understand."

"My people," Abbi began, looking at Eddus, "the fae – faeries – all of us. We're very similar to humans. We can look similar to, or even the same as, humans. We can speak the same languages. We enjoy many of the same things."

Eddus nodded, waiting for her to continue.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 81 2025/03/16 14:46

"Some of your foods we can't get enough of." Abbi glanced at the glass in front of her. "But, like any people foreign to one another, we have our own customs and cultures, and ways."

Eddus thought about this.

"And not accepting an apology is one of your ways?"

"Yes. No-" Abbi's expression conveyed that she was trying to find the right way to say what she was thinking. "Eddus, an apology binds the person who gives it to the person it is given to. It is a debt that must be repaid, and the person who gives the apology remains in the other's debt until it is paid. It's not a small thing."

Eddus held her gaze, then let it drop for a moment.

"Are you fucking with me again?"

"Not at all. You don't owe me an apology. You never did. You don't owe me anything, and I don't want you to. I do like you, Eddus Brandt. You're my human, and I don't want anything to change between us."

"Your human, huh?" Eddus chuckled. It amused him that she referred to him in that way. And knowing that she was not, in fact, human, he found that, as foreign as it sounded, he liked hearing it.

"Well, yes, my favourite human." Abbi lowered her chin, still looking at him. She wore a coy smile. "You're... my human."

Gazing at the young woman across from him, Eddus wondered just what kind of debt an apology carried with it. Not wanting to upset her, he refrained from asking.

He didn't quite understand everything she'd said to him. It also wasn't often anyone claimed he was their favourite before, apart from the supervisor at an ad agency who once asked how the company's favourite artist was.

"I don't know what to say," he chuckled. "That's probably the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"Don't." Abbi glanced at him, shaking her head.

"Don't what?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 82 2025/03/16 14:46

"Don't say it."

"I wasn't going to apologise for anything." Eddus looked at Abbi quizzically.

"I know." Abbi seemed a little uncomfortable as she glanced away from him.

"Abbi, what is it?"

"Don't... thank me."

"Really?" Eddus blinked in surprise and then laughed. "I do feel that I should. I don't think I've ever been anyone's favourite anything before."

Abbi shook her head, her lips pursed.

"So, I shouldn't thank you for probably the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me?"

Abbi again shook her head. She looked into Eddus' eyes.

"I'm not supposed to apologise or say thank you?"

"You show those things; you don't say them." Abbi watched Eddus nod slowly, still visibly confused. "To display gratitude or sorrow shows a feeling, a respect for the person you're acting towards. Words don't always hold much weight. Without meaningful actions, words are nothing, and can be of great insult to the person receiving them if he suspects the words to be insincere."

"I think I understand," Eddus said slowly, wondering for a moment if she'd ever thought him insincere. He did his best to dismiss the thought.

"It's the only way I can think of to explain it. Thanks is shown." Abbi shook her head, watching him consider everything she'd told him. "I don't think you could ever do anything that you'd need to apologise to me for. And you certainly don't need to apologise when it's me giving you a hard time."

Eddus lifted his cup of now-cooling coffee, smiling behind it at her acknowledgement. Once again, he resisted the urge to ask about her age. She still looked to him like a child, but the answers she gave, as well as their explanations, weren't anything he'd expect to hear from someone young or inexperienced in life. If there was evidence that she was older than he

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 83 2025/03/16 14:46

thought, as she said she was, the way she spoke with him and answered the questions he asked certainly pointed to it.

"Abbi," he said after a few moments, "I think I understand now. Though you really didn't need to apologised to me in the park. You could never owe me anything for what you showed me."

Abbi's smile faded, and she pursed her lips, lowering her eyes.

"I wish that were true, Eddus Brandt," she sighed, shaking her head slightly, not sure if the stab of guilt she felt was at knowing that he had to come to grips with what she'd revealed or for having shown him at all.

Eddus stared absently at what was left of the contents in his cup, not knowing what to think. Holding the cup's handle between his thumb and forefinger, he tipped it slightly, gently swirling the black liquid in it.

"What other questions do you have?"

"Other questions?" Raising his head to look at her, Eddus shook his head, a blank look on his face.

Still thinking over the answers he'd just received; he didn't quite fully grasp the ones Abbi had already given him. The words and their meanings were clear enough, but...

"You have more questions for me, don't you?" Although she smiled, Abbi wore a thoughtful, almost sympathetic expression. "You told me that after you'd had time to think about it, you'd have plenty of them. I suspect that if I were in your shoes, I'd have so much to ask. And I want to give you answers."

"You do?"

"Of course, I do." Abbi smiled at Eddus, who sat looking at her as if he were lost. She felt a small pang of sympathy for him. She knew that humans had a hard time comprehending the idea of faeries. While she did feel as though she'd needed to let him know about her, she still felt that perhaps she'd been wrong to do so. "I'll answer anything you want to ask me."

"You probably say that to all your humans." Eddus smiled. Giving her a wink, he picked up his coffee cup again, holding it between both hands.

'She is right,' he thought. He should have had a list of things to ask the

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 84 2025/03/16 14:46

young lady smiling at him, the right edge of her bottom lip gently between her teeth.

His mind was blank after hearing what she'd told him moments before. He wondered if she was at all uncomfortable answering his questions. He also wondered how many times she'd answered these questions before.

"I don't have any other humans." Abbi spoke softly, her smile fading. Her gaze rested on the cup in Eddus' hands, her face holding no specific expression. Her voice's tone hadn't changed, except for the lowering of its inflection, but something about what she said gave Eddus the impression that his words had affected her.

"Abbi-"

"I don't have any other humans, Eddus Brandt." Her eyes dropping further, Abbi was silent for a few moments.

"You don't?" It was all Eddus could manage to say. He placed his coffee cup on the table in front of him again. Reaching across the table, he gently took the girl's hand and studied her expressionless face for a moment. "I really didn't mean anything."

"I know." Abbi smiled, but Eddus could see that her mouth and her eyes were not portraying the same thing. "I've never told anyone about my world. And I would certainly never show anyone."

Eddus said nothing. The guilt he felt was strong, and he wanted to say something, even after what Abbi had told him earlier. What he'd said seemed to have more impact on the young woman than he'd intended.

"*You're* my human, Eddie." Answering an unspoken question, Abbi's voice remained soft. Her fingers tightened around his. "My only human."

Again, Eddus remained silent, a little smile on his lips. While he still had the nagging feeling that perhaps his spending time with Abbi was a bit improper given the age gap between them, he did like it a little more each time she spoke those words: both his name as well as him being her human. It was strange, but he found himself looking forward to the next time she said them.

"Why are you being so quiet?" Abbi said, after what felt to her like a long, uncomfortable silence. This time, when she spoke, there was a pleading in her tone. "I like you, Eddie, and I trust you... Please say something."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 85 2025/03/16 14:46

"I feel as though I should have chosen my words differently," Eddus began. "I said them in jest, but I feel..."

"You worry too much, Eddus. I apologised to you the other night because I should not have told you what I told you or shown you the pixie ring. I should have asked you first." Shaking her head, Abbi sighed. "And I'm not upset by what you said. I just want you to know that you are the only person I have ever spoken of the faerie realm with and the only human that I've ever trusted with that information."



"Here's a question."

Eddus looked down at his hand for a moment.

Abbi's demeanour seemed to brighten when he spoke.

Eddus felt relief as she raised her eyebrows and leaned forward slightly.

"It's about your dress."

Abbi blinked a couple of times. She drew in a breath, her mouth slightly open, before breaking into a smile and laughing softly.

Eddus hesitated, slightly taken aback by her reaction.

"My dress? Well, I certainly didn't expect-" Abbi started, glancing down quickly, then back at Eddus. "Do you not like my dress?"

Again, he hesitated, feeling that he should have chosen different words or perhaps a different subject altogether.

"Eddus?"

"No, I do like your dress." Eddus began to feel uncomfortable. "I've liked all of your dresses."

"Well, that's good. I like the way I dress." Abbi's hand went to her chest as she glanced downward again.

"I do, too."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 86 2025/03/16 14:46

"So then what's your question?"

"Well, it's just that – I'm not sure how to say this." Eddus' face warmed, and he did his best not to look away. "You've been staying with me for a few days now, and every day you wear a different dress."

"I can't wear the same thing every day, Eddie."

"What? Of course not. I know, I just..."

"Well?" Abbi's eyes narrowed as she watched Eddus' uncomfortable look. She wasn't smiling, but there was a hint of mischief in her expression.

Eddus caught the glint in her eye and took a deep breath. He opened his mouth and just spoke.

"You didn't bring anything with you, but you wear something different every day." Eddus could see a slight look of realisation come over the pixie's face.

Abbi's lips pursed, and she stifled a smile.

"How is that possible?"

"I have wings, Eddie."

"Are you two all right here? Can I get you anything?"

Abbi watched Eddus look up before turning her own head toward the waitress who had come out to check up on them.

"Would you like another coffee?" The waitress smiled at Eddus, her eyebrows raised. She gave no indication that she'd heard Abbi's statement as her gaze turned to her. "And can I get you anything? Another milkshake?"

Abbi smiled up at the young lady, shaking her head. The waitress looked back at Eddus, who gave her a nod. She collected the coffee cup and the glass from the table and turned to go.

"Do you have any fruit?"Abbi asked, stopping her departure.

"Fruit?" The waitress thought for a moment. "We have pear halves with ice cream on the dessert menu."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 87 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus leaned back in his chair, watching Abbi look up at the waitress. Her face lit up at the response.

"Would you like chocolate or vanilla ice cream?"

"Oh! Vanilla, please."

Abbi smiled as she watched the waitress leave. When she'd disappeared into the café doors, she turned again to Eddus.

"I have wings," she said, repeating what she'd said as the waitress had approached their table, picking up the conversation where they'd been interrupted.

"She could have heard you, you know," Eddus said in a hushed tone, glancing toward the café.

His heart had stopped momentarily when the waitress appeared at their table. Abbi had been speaking in a normal voice, as though she really didn't seem to have any concern about being overheard.

"I change my appearance when I come to this world," Abbi continued. "Changing what I wear is really not that hard."

"Oh." Eddus pondered this. "So, you can just..."

"I decide what it is that I want to wear, and that's what I wear."

"Just like that?"

"Wings, Eddus."

"Right."

Studying the tiny young woman across from him, Eddus shook his head slowly, deep in thought. He'd only just been able to quiet his mind and stop himself from thinking about the impossible idea.

"What are you thinking?" A look of concern on her face, Abbi reached forward with her hand.

"You can wear whatever you want?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 88 2025/03/16 14:46

"Yes."

"Anytime?"

"Yes."

Eddus was quiet for a moment.

"So, you really didn't need the t shirt I gave you to sleep in?" He chuckled.

Abbi smiled, her eyes glowing momentarily.

"Not really," she said, remembering how much she enjoyed seeing her reflection in the mirror. "But just so you know, you might never get your shirt back."

"These are wonderful."

Turning slowly, Abbi took in the many sketches and pieces of art that seemed to line the room, almost from the ceiling to the floor.

Eddus said nothing, not wanting to disturb her. Her gaze reminded him of the night he'd first seen her so many weeks before, and he wanted to see her expression for as long as possible before it changed.

Seeing it again, and this time in his own studio, just made him want to pick up the nearest medium and start working. He almost laughed aloud at the momentary sadness he felt when it occurred to him that he'd already done this piece.

"You drew all of these?"

Eddus nodded, fighting the urge to mention that not all of the pieces were technically drawings. He knew what she meant, and he wasn't going to say anything to change the look on her face.

Abbi took a step closer to the piece she was looking at, touching the edge of it with her fingertip. It depicted a man and woman sitting on a park bench, holding hands as they faced one another in the light given off by the lamppost to the right of the bench. Late afternoon, or perhaps early

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 89 2025/03/16 14:46

morning, their surroundings and the tree line behind them, could be seen, but in shadow.

She felt she could safely assume that the park they sat in was City Park or someplace very similar. The lamppost in the piece was of the same old-fashioned style as the ones there, and the park bench on which they sat was positioned along a narrow path, much like in the park.

Eddus stepped a little closer to her, still behind her, but enough to the side that he could continue observing her facial expression.

"You get paid to make these?"

Glancing over her shoulder at Eddus, Abbi then continued observing the artwork. She moved slightly to her left, looking at a small canvas depicting simple glass on a tabletop against a darkened background. The glass was half full of water. Drops of perspiration on the outside of it, and there was a small pool of water around the base of the glass on the surface it sat upon.

"Well, not these," Eddus told her. "Most of the work I'm paid to do has already been collected. These I did on my own."

"For fun?"

"I guess you could say that."

Eddus chuckled softly, turning his head, and looking at the several pieces that lined the walls of the studio. No two pieces were the same. People, trees, buildings; close-ups, distant perspectives... He loved to draw the things he saw, and while most times he was not unhappy when drawing them, he'd never really considered that they were done for fun.

As he watched the young woman in front of him, his mind began to wander. He'd always been artistic and was lucky enough to be able to make money at it, but it was deeper than that. It was almost a compulsion to express the things he saw day to day on paper or canvas. In every instance he could remember where he'd drawn something that he hadn't been commissioned to do, he'd felt almost a need to do it. He couldn't imagine life without the art he made, or making more of it.

"Eddie..."

Hearing his name brought him quickly out of his thoughts. Abbi now stood facing him. She looked up at him, her head tilted slightly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 90 2025/03/16 14:46

There was a pause, and the two of them looked at one another. Eddus wasn't sure what was happening. He'd been so engrossed in thought that he'd not even seen Abbi turn toward him,a questioning look on her face.

"Did someone pay you to draw me?" she asked him.

Blinking in surprise, Eddus took a small step backward.

"Of course not," he almost stammered. It was certainly not a question he'd expected.

Abbi was quiet for a moment more. She bit her lip, turning her head toward the many pieces of art she'd been looking at.

"You said that the pieces you had been paid to do had been collected." Abbi looked back up at him uncertainly.

"They have."

"You said you'd drawn me, but..." She glanced around.

"Oh, no, Abbi," Eddus said, placing a hand on the young woman's shoulder, biting back a smile and the urge to laugh in relief.

He gently turned her in the direction of the far corner of the studio. It was in that corner that he liked to work. In it stood an easel, draped with a thin black sheet. Upon finishing the portrait, he sprayed it with a matte adhesive and covered it so as to let it dry. Later that same day, he'd met with Abbi in the park and hadn't been back into the studio since, having spent all of his time with her.

Stepping past her, Eddus stood for a moment next to the easel before taking the sheet between his fingers. In that moment, he suddenly felt very self-conscious. His house mate had already seen the piece, but this was different. This was the subject of the portrait. He gently lifted the black sheet, letting it fall behind the easel, and then stood, watching Abbi's face. He felt like a child turning in an assignment.

For a moment, nothing happened. Neither of them spoke. Neither of them moved. Eddus felt numb watching his guest remain expressionless as nothing but her eyes moved, scanning the piece.

"Eddus," Abbi said softly, turning her head. The light glistened in her eyes as she met his gaze. Slowly shaking her head, she blinked a few times,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 91 2025/03/16 14:46

her eyes glowing for a few moments longer than they had in the past. “I love it. It’s beautiful.”

Eddus studied her face. In that moment, everything in him wanted to ask her to hold her pose so that he could draw her, sketch her, paint her... The expression on her face, the slight smile, and the look of wonder, much like the one portrayed in the portrait in front of her, coupled with the way her eyes shone, would have made the perfect work of art.

“Did I really look like that?”

“You did. And this is exactly how I remember you,” Eddus said, the image of her watching the show coming to his mind. “The way you looked that night was the reason I couldn’t stop watching you.”



“There you go again.”

Eddus stopped walking and turned to look down at Abbi. Her eyes held a glint as she looked up at him with an amused smile.

The day was overcast, though not so heavily as to suggest rain. The sun did peek out from behind the veil of light grey from time to time as they walked through a part of City Park that Eddus had never been to before.

Shortly after his house mates had left for the day, Eddus had taken his guest into his art studio.

While there was a slight swell of pride while watching her reaction to the pieces she looked at, he did find it slightly disconcerting when showing her the picture he’d drawn in which she was the sole subject. And although she had already teased him about it in the past, he half expected her to make mention of the fact that he had not asked her permission before beginning the piece.

Afterward, they left his building, walking again, as they did every day.

“What was I doing again?” Eddus asked with a slightly sheepish look.

“You were somewhere else,” Abbi told him. “What had you so serious?”

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 92 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus gave her a thin smile, unsure if he wanted to tell her what he had been thinking about. His mind had indeed wandered again, as it did often, to the events of the day they'd met in this very park. While he still wasn't completely sure that he'd seen what he'd seen that day, he couldn't help but wonder about things.

He shook his head slightly, not wanting to say anything.

"And don't you dare apologise to me, Eddus Brandt." Abbi's eyes flashed as she narrowed them.

Eddus chuckled, shaking his head again. He'd not been about to apologise, but rather was fighting a slight embarrassment at the thought of saying aloud what he had actually been thinking about.

"Ok," he said, hoping that Abbi didn't notice his quick glances to the left and right to make sure that nobody was in earshot. He took a slow, deep breath. "I, uh, you're a pixie, right?"

"Half pixie, yeah."

"Wait- Half? Are you half human?"

"My mother's a faerie." Abbi gave him a sidelong look. "My father is a pixie."

"Ah, right."

"So, yes, I'm a pixie. Is that what you're thinking about?"

"Well, no, not really. It's your hair."

"My hair?" Abbi glanced toward her shoulder, her eyes remaining narrowed. "Just what's wrong with my hair, Eddus Brandt?"

"Nothing." Eddus blinked in surprise, shaking his head. "I love your hair."

The left corner of her mouth lifted in a faint smile, and Abbi tilted her head.

Eddus took a step back as he realised what he'd said and clenched his jaw for a moment.

"Then, what about it?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 93 2025/03/16 14:46

"Don't pixies have short hair?" Eddus almost breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Abbi break into a smile.

"Eddie, just because there's a hair style called the pixie cut, doesn't mean that all pixies have short hair. That hairstyle was named by humans." Abbi giggled and stuck her tongue out at him. "And I like my hair long."

Feeling foolish, Eddus nodded, turning to the side. Abbi took his hand and gave it a squeeze. They walked in silence for a few moments.

Eddus looked down at her.

"What's it like?"

"Long hair?" Abbi glanced at him with a smile.

"I meant being a pixie."

"I don't know. I've never been anything else," Abbi laughed with a shrug. "What's it like being human?"

Eddus sighed.

"What exactly are you asking me, Eddie?"

"Look, I don't know what I'm saying," he said. "I don't really know. I- I-"

Abbi chuckled.

"Just ask me, Eddus."

"You have wings, right?"

"I told you that I do," Abbi said seriously. "Not in this realm, but, yes, I do have them."

"But how does that work? Not in this realm?"

"As I have said, I can change my appearance. We have to when we come to your world. Humans have trouble processing it. Most people can't handle it. How would you feel if you saw people walking around the city with wings? Would you have approached me the night we met if you'd seen that I had wings?" Abbi asked amusedly. "So, when I come here, I take a human form."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 94 2025/03/16 14:46

"It's so strange to hear you say that." Eddus shook his head.

"But it's true. At any given time, there can be hundreds of faeries in this city alone."

"While that is both interesting and, no offense, borderline disturbing, that's not what I meant." For just a moment, the memory of the winged beings he'd seen when Abbi had shown him the inside of the pixie ring came to mind. He still couldn't seem to picture the girl with wings. "It's strange to hear you say 'human form'."

Abbi nodded with a look of understanding and sympathy.

"It's just me, but without wings," she said.

"It's even stranger to think about," Eddus said, more to himself than to his companion. He couldn't stop his gaze from going to her bare shoulders. His eyes then quickly met hers.

"Birds and insects have wings," Abbi told him teasingly. "You could ask them about it."

Eddus rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, but they're probably not very good conversationalists."

"You'd be surprised." Abbi giggled, tightening her grasp on his hand.

They walked a bit further in silence. Eddus' mind did not race, but still, he had questions. He really had no idea where to start. Abbi was so different. She was like no one he'd ever met. She was playful sometimes to the point of annoyance, and yet there was something else about her. Something that no matter how much she riled him, he seemed to want more of.

Also, she wasn't human, which everything Eddus knew told him was impossible. It should have been completely impossible to comprehend, except for the pixie ring. He'd seen that with his own eyes. He'd glimpsed into another world – her world.

"How long have you been coming to earth?" Eddus glanced at her and then quickly looked away.

"Eddie, what are you talking about?" Abbi looked up at him with a puzzled expression. She then laughed as it dawned on her what he meant.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 95 2025/03/16 14:46

"I live on earth, the same as you do," she giggled. "I'm from another realm, not another planet."

Eddus felt his face warm. Her answer was more confusing to him than if she had said she was from another planet. Until a few days ago, he didn't know that other realms existed. He at least knew that there were other planets.

"Do you mean like another dimension?"

"Sort of," Abbi said nonchalantly. "What we call a realm is more like another plane of existence. Things are different there."

"What things?"

"Well, you already experienced one of the differences," Abbi said as she smiled at Eddus, "the day I showed you the pixie ring."

Instantly, he knew what she meant. It had been almost midday when he'd leaned into the pixie ring with Abbi. They had only been inside the ring for a matter of minutes, but it was late at night when she pulled him out. He remembered the panic he'd felt as he lay on his back, realising that he was seeing the moon overhead in the dark sky.

Eddus nodded, a surreal feeling coming over him, as though he were remembering a vivid dream but still unsure whether or not it was a dream. He didn't fully grasp the idea of other realms or planes of existence, but he found it intriguing. They continued walking.

"And to answer your question, not long," Abbi said, glancing up at him.

"Excuse me?" Eddus looked off-guard. The short time in which they'd said nothing while they walked seemed longer than it had been.

"Coming here," Abbi looked at around at the trees. "To your world. I mean, I have been coming to the forest since I was a child, but I rarely went beyond the park."

Eddus nodded thoughtfully and became quiet again. He liked the way she referred to City Park as a forest.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 96 2025/03/16 14:46

"Why do you ask?" Abbi halted, looking up at him.

"Just wondering," Eddus said. "Something you said the night we met."

Abbi said nothing but looked at him expectantly as he continued.

"Are there no theatres in your world?"

Blinking in surprise, Abbi shook her head, her brows furrowed as she thought for a moment.

"But I didn't say anything about my world the night we met."

"No, you didn't."

"And I only showed you the pixie ring a few days ago." The young woman sounded confused.

Amused by her expression, Eddus smiled at her. He felt the urge to put an arm around her but resisted, unsure as to whether or not it would reassure her.

"That night," he told her, "You said that you had never been to a show before. I just wondered if perhaps you didn't have them where you are from."

"Of course, we have theatres." A smile slowly formed on Abbi's face. She shook her head. "My world is much like your own."

"Have you really never been to one?"

"I hadn't been to one here except for the night that we met."

Eddus nodded. He said nothing, waiting a moment for Abbi to speak again.

"Why do you ask?"

"Nothing really. I was just thinking about what you said."

"What about it?" Abbi began to genuinely wonder why he had asked.

"Was that night really the only time you'd ever been to see a play here? Were you just trying something new?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 97 2025/03/16 14:46

"Well, I haven't been coming here for long – into the city, I mean." Shrugging nonchalantly, Abbi glanced away. "I'd never really been very far out of the forest before that day. I saw people going in, and I thought it would be fun."

Eddus spent several moments considering what he'd been told. Had she really never been into the city? She had told him that her people had been here since before the city was settled. Surely, they had been outside of the park, or forest, as Abbi called it. This brought to mind another question.

"How many realms are there?" he asked.

Letting the young lady lead him by the hand as they walked, she steered him toward the path and a park bench beside it.

"Quite a few, actually."

"Really?"

Abbi nodded, her lips pursed.

"Can you show me some of them?" Eddus asked.

She'd shown him her world; perhaps there was more that she could show him. He began to wonder about the other pixie rings he'd seen and if they went to places other than the faerie realm.

"No." Looking up at him, Abbi shook her head. "I wasn't really supposed to show you the pixie ring, Eddie."

"Have you been to any other realms?" Eddus was more than a little intrigued.

"A few, yes, but..." the young woman's brows knitted and her voice tailed off.. "Not all of them are accessible, and not everyone can, or should, cross into them. Some of them are dangerous."

"But you come here."

"It's not dangerous here."

Abbi stopped walking in front of the bench. She sat down, patting the wooden slats beside her with her hand. She waited until Eddus took a seat beside her.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 98 2025/03/16 14:46

"It is different here. We've been coming to this realm for thousands of years. You could say forever, but I'm not sure."

"You said I could never disturb a pixie ring. Why can you come here, but I can't go there?"

"Eddus..."

"You said you should have gotten permission to even show me the pixie ring."

Nodding but not meeting his gaze, Abbi closed her eyes, turning her head away.

"Did you have to get permission to come here?"

"No, Eddie, I didn't. I can't really explain it." Abbi turned to the human beside her. "Something happened a long time ago. It was long, long before I was born. At one time, humans and faeries did coexist and even sometimes lived amongst one another."

"Faeries and pixies lived in this world?"

"And elves, and gnomes, and dwarves, and trolls, and sprites. There are many more."

"Sounds like a faerie-tale," Eddus chuckled.

"In some ways, it was."

"Did people– humans– know what they were? Did they know that faeries lived here?"

"Where do you think faerie-tales come from?"

"So, what happened?"

"I don't know the particulars, Eddie, only the stories."

"What are the stories, then?"

"Well, there was a time when the two worlds were close. Faeries and humans were friends. Allies of sorts. The two coexisted with one another."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 99 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus sat, looking at Abbi expectantly.

"Faeries would come here as welcomed and honoured guests. They used their magic to help the humans. They helped with everything from harvesting crops to building great structures. They had a lot of knowledge about the plants and which ones could be used for cures. The humans often threw great festivals and celebrations in honour of their honour. Faeries loved the humans, and the humans loved the faeries. Man would frequently visit our realm and attend our celebrations and festivities as well."

"I don't understand. What happened to change things?"

Abbi sighed, giving a little shrug. The breeze blew a stray lock of her hair across her forehead. The look in her eyes was that of being in deep thought, though what it was she was remembering hadn't happened to her or in her lifetime but rather in history. She was portraying the tales that were passed down in her world from parent to child – the stories of her people.

"Over time, it became one-sided. My people loved to come to this realm. They loved to be of help to the people here. According to the stories, mankind came to expect the things they were receiving as gifts, and the faeries began to feel taken for granted. The faeries began to pull back and lessen the work done. At some point, one human, who was the leader of his people, thought to try and relocate his people into our world, in hopes of establishing some sort of settlement there."

Abbi slowly shook her head, looking at Eddus.

"At first, he came alone and tried to persuade our people to let them settle in our realm, but was refused. The man then returned with many more. At that time, men did cross the realms more freely, but usually by invitation. They came uninvited. It's not known if they were there to once again try and persuade our people or if they intended to use force to get what they wanted, but they came armed."

"What happened?"

"They were imprisoned, Eddie. Being armed, they were considered enemies of our world. The realm takes no chances when it comes to threats to our world, even the smallest threat. They were put to death, and shortly after, our world ceased any interaction with this one for hundreds of years."

"That's awful," Eddus said.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 100 2025/03/16 14:46

He had no trouble believing what he'd been told. Governments were always in some sort of conflict with one another, though invasion was no longer really a thing. Wars were fought over resources, money, and power, and while armies did occupy the lands in which they fought, even after they'd won the conflict, it was rarely to establish more than control there.

"There was a very long time that humans and faeries had no contact."

"But you said that there could be hundreds of faeries in the city."

"There are," Abbi said. "The Faerie Realm closed every portal. For centuries, the realm was sealed from this one. It's not certain when the first one was re-opened or even who did it. Over time, my people had been forgotten by humans or remembered only in stories. But at some point, the faeries did start coming back."

"I don't get it."

"I don't know why, but faeries did start coming back to this world. They even started helping humans again, though not on the scale they once did. They – we – come and go in secret now."

"But I'm not supposed to disturb the faerie rings, and you need permission to even show me your realm?"

Abbi nodded, pursing her lips. She wished that she had more answers for him. She found that she actually liked telling Eddus about her world and its history. She loved that he wanted to know about it. She hadn't thought about how she was going to explain certain things, though, especially things she herself didn't know the answers to.

Looking around as she pushed the glass door open, Abbi paused for a moment.

The diner wasn't full, but several tables did have people seated at them. Looking from right to left, she identified the person she was looking for.

Letting the door swing closed behind her, Abbi began walking toward the last booth along the wall to her left. She smiled at a man sitting at one

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 101 2025/03/16 14:46

of the booths she passed. A few paces from the corner she was walking towards, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, miss..."

Abbi turned her head and saw that it was a young waitress who had spoken.

"You're going to have to put on shoes if you want to come in here."

"She's with me."

This time, the voice came from the booth that Abbi had been walking toward. Mo waved at them from the bench he sat on.

"She's not allowed in here without shoes on."

"Come on, Heather." Mo raised his eyebrows from behind his black-rimmed glasses, a big smile on his face.

"But she-"

Mo inclined his head toward her, his smile widening.

"Okay." The waitress sighed and removed her hand from Abbi's shoulder. "Just this once."

Abbi looked from Mo to the waitress with a smile. She quickly sat down across from him, tucking her bare feet under the bench. Mo shifted his gaze toward her and gave her a wink.

"Can I get anything for either of you?" The young waitress narrowed her eyes at Mo, who grinned at her, and then she glanced quickly at Abbi.

"I'm good," Mo said. "Maybe another juice. Would you like anything, Abbi?"

"Hot water and honey?" Abbi glanced across the table at Mo, who nodded, raising his eyebrows. She looked up at the waitress. "And may I have some fruit?"

"We have a fruit cocktail. Would that be alright?" The waitress asked.

"Yes, please!" Her face lit up at the thought of more than one kind of fruit

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 102 2025/03/16 14:46

together, and Abbi nodded excitedly.

"So, a glass of juice, a fruit cocktail, and a cup of hot water..."

"And honey, please?"

"And honey. Would you like a tea bag with the water?"

Abbi shook her head.

Looking again at Mo with a slightly puzzled expression, the waitress turned away and started toward the kitchen.

"You're a doll, Heather!"

Heather looked back with a smile, narrowing her eyes at him, and then continued walking away.

Mo sat back in the booth, chuckling as he watched the young lady walk away, then looked at Abbi, who gazed at him amusedly. Neither of them said anything. Mo raised his eyebrows, giving her a questioning look.

Abbi looked at him for another moment before she spoke.

"I thought you were-"

"Gay?" Mo chuckled again, nodding.

"I was going to say with Jay," Abbi told him.

Mo nodded again.

"Does she know that?"

"Yeah," Mo laughed.

Abbi glanced in the direction the waitress had gone.

"Oh, that." Mo shook his head, still smiling. "She knows. She even knows Jay. When she first started working here, she tried to flirt with me, with him sitting next to me. J-Man politely let her know that I'm spoken for. Every so often, I tease her about it. It's all in good fun."

"Why do I have to wear shoes?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 103 2025/03/16 14:46

"Well, it's a rule," Mo said. "I think there's a sign or something."

"I wasn't wearing them the other night when I came here with Eddus."

"Was it the same waitress?"

"I think her name was Janice."

"Ah, well, Janice is cool."

Again, they sat in silence for a moment. Lowering her gaze, Abbi touched the serviette that was wrapped around the eating utensils in front of her. She let her hand fall to her lap and again looked across the table.

Eddus was attending a meeting with a client, and Mo had asked her to meet him at the diner. She wasn't sure why he wanted to meet there instead of at the flat. She kind of got the impression that he wanted to talk to her in private.

Mo smiled as their eyes met. Abbi smiled back. Mo had a pleasant face and a smile that one couldn't help returning.

"I've been told that you don't like being thanked, so I'll just say that I am glad that you agreed to come."

"Eddus told you that?" Abbi's smile faded, and she leaned back in her seat a little, feeling uneasy.

Mo nodded silently.

"Did he say anything else?" Abbi bit her bottom lip.

"He just said no thank you's and no apologies," Mo said, a look of concern on his face. He reached toward her, his hand resting on the table.

Abbi felt her stomach sink, and she was suddenly cold. She could feel her heart beating within her chest as well as hear it in her temples.

"Is that... all he said?" she asked quietly. Her eyes searched the tabletop as she blinked back tears, trying to control her breathing.

"Well, yeah," Mo could see that the girl was in some sort of distress, though he could not determine the cause.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 104 2025/03/16 14:46

"Did- did he say why?" Abbi held her breath, her head down, staring at the table.

"He said something about a difference in cultures." Mo nodded as he spoke. "Abbi, are you from another country?"

Relief washed over her. Shaking her head, Abbi exhaled the breath she held. She laughed while trying to stifle a sob.

"Oh, Abbi..." Mo said gently.

Abbi raised her head to look at Mo. A tear spilled down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away with the back of her hand.

"Are you ok?"

Simultaneously, Mo and Abbi turned to look at Heather, who had returned with their order and stood beside the table holding a tray.

"Sweetie, are you all right?"

Abbi looked at her for a moment before nodding.

The waitress gave her a sympathetic smile before taking the items from the tray she held and placing them on the table. She placed a bowl containing fruits in front of Abbi, followed by a coffee cup of steaming water and a small bottle of honey. She then placed a glass of juice in front of Mo and gave him a questioning look.

Mo said nothing, only gave the waitress a nod. Heather glanced again at Abbi before turning to make her rounds.

"Abbi, did I say something I shouldn't have?" Mo sounded confused.

Shaking her head, Abbi exhaled a long breath. There was no way that she could explain to him the way she'd reacted to what he'd said. For a moment, she was terrified that perhaps Eddus had told his friend more than he should have. She'd taken a big risk that day in the park when she showed Eddus the faerie ring. Something had only just dawned on her when Mo told her what Eddus had said; she had told Eddus not to disturb the pixie rings, but she hadn't told him not to talk about what he'd seen.

"You said nothing wrong." Taking another deep breath, Abbi felt her heart calm. She met Mo's concerned gaze. "I was just worried..."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 105 2025/03/16 14:46

She really didn't know what to say. She couldn't say anything without giving away the very thing she did not want known, or at least opening the door to questions that could lead to it.

"It's ok, Abbi. I understand." Behind his black-rimmed glasses, Mo's brows knitted, and he gave a small shrug. "I thought that perhaps you were from another country."

"No," Abbi shook her head, a half-smile on her lips.

Mo gave her a little smile, still visibly puzzled. "I just thought that cultural differences meant that you were foreign."

"I'm from right here. I mean, I have travelled some, but my people – my family – have been here since before this city was here."

"Well, it wasn't my intention to upset you." Mo paused. "I hope that didn't sound too much like an apology."

"You don't have to tiptoe around me, Mo." Abbi smiled to herself. She poked at a cherry in the bowl in front of her with her finger. "Please don't treat me differently now. I don't want any special treatment."

Through his spectacles, Mo watched her for a moment before nodding and giving her a reassuring smile.

"I actually asked you here because I wanted to talk to you about something that I couldn't really say in front of Ed."

Abbi looked up from her fruit cocktail. She studied the young man's face. His expression hadn't changed. He still wore the same friendly smile.

"I thought Eddus was your best friend." She tilted her head slightly.

"He is."

"What can't you say in front of your best friend?"

"Abbi, did you know that Ed doesn't have any family?"

Abbi nodded. Eddus had told her that his parents had been in an accident when he was a young man. He hadn't said much more about it. She also knew that he had been an only child.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 106 2025/03/16 14:46

"I've known Ed for a long time," Mo said. "He has no family, except for us. Jay, Stiles, and I are his family. I'd like to think that we watch out for him. Like family."

Abbi chewed her top lip thoughtfully. Mo's expression and demeanour hadn't changed. His voice was still friendly and pleasant, as it always had been, but somehow Abbi felt that he was making a point.

"Dof- have I done something wrong?" she asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

Mo's brows furrowed, and he blinked several times before meeting Abbi's gaze.

"No. Quite the opposite," he said, shaking his head.

"I don't understand."

"Abbi," Mo leaned forward in his seat, folding his hands in front of him on the table, "I have not seen my friend as happy as he has been since meeting you for a long time, maybe ever."

"Now I really don't understand..."

"I've known Ed for seven years. I've lived with him for five of those seven years, and he's always been reserved, to say the least. He's always kept to himself. He works from home. He rarely gets out more than to do grocery shopping and for client meetings. His clients even come to the house to collect their orders. You have no idea how long we had to hound him to come to the theatre once a week,' Mo chuckled softly. " To say he's reserved around most people is a bit of an understatement."

"He is shy," Abbi said. She picked up the bottle of honey next to her cup of hot water. Opening it, she then squeezed some of its contents into the water and placed it back on the table. She began to slowly stir the water with a spoon, looking again at Mo.

"Another understatement." Mo shook his head again, still smiling. "But not with you. He goes out now. He rarely ever used to. We see him around the house, which was also rare until you came to stay with him. You seem to have really opened him up."

"I don't know; I think I make him rather uncomfortable." Abbi picked

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 107 2025/03/16 14:46

up the cherry she'd been poking at and bit it in half. She closed her eyes for a moment, savouring its sweetness.

When she opened them, Mo was looking at her with an amused look on his face. She glanced at the piece of fruit she held and then again at him.

"Yes, you do make him uncomfortable. I could see that the night he introduced you to us at the pub." Mo gave her a warm smile. "It probably has a little to do with your difference in age. But I think it has more to do with the fact that besides his three roommates, Ed doesn't interact with many people besides those he works with. He's quite the recluse."

"He is shy, but that doesn't sound like the Eddus I met."

Abbi had been with him several days, in which they'd visited many places within the city. While he had been spending most of his time with her, he'd not come across as reclusive or antisocial with anyone they'd encountered.

"It's not," Mo said, taking a sip of his juice, "and that's my point. I don't know how you convinced him to bring you back with him that night, but I am glad that you did. As Ed's best friend, I have never seen him like this. He's like a whole new person, and I do believe that's because he met you."

"Again, I don't understand." Abbi put the other half of the cherry in her mouth. She chewed it thoughtfully. "Why that about being his family and watching out for him? I thought that perhaps you disapproved of me."

Mo's eyes widened. He laughed softly, shaking his head.

"I don't disapprove of anything about this, Abbi, least of all you. You're good for him. I've never seen Ed happier. He's the happiest I think he's been in a long time."

Abbi smiled in relief as she lifted her cup to her lips. Its contents were only a little more than lukewarm, but the water was still sweet. She drank most of the liquid before setting the cup again on the table. Relaxing a little bit, she leaned against the back of the bench she sat on with a sigh.

"Are you two ok?" Heather asked with a smile. She'd made her way around the diner and was on her way back to the kitchen. She glanced from Mo to Abbi, her gaze lingering for a moment. "Can I get you anything? Is your fruit cocktail all right?"

"It's delicious," Abbi told her. She had only eaten one piece of the fruit,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 108 2025/03/16 14:46

but she'd enjoyed it immensely.

"Are you feeling better?"

Abbi dropped her gaze. Pursing her lips, she gave the waitress a small nod.

"Can I refill your water...?"

Shaking her head, Abbi gave her a thin smile. The waitress nodded and turned her head to look at Mo.

"I think we're good, Heather. Thank you," he told her.

Abbi did her best not to cringe as Mo said the words. She looked at Mo, who smiled up at the server, and tried not to feel uneasy. They were not her words, nor were they spoken to her.

Heather raised an eyebrow at him, then looked at Abbi, giving her a wink. She turned away.

"There is one more thing I would like to ask you." Mo spoke while watching Heather walk away. He turned to Abbi.

"Oh?"

"Yes." Using his finger, Mo pushed his glasses up on his nose. "And before I ask it, Abbi, I want you to know that I am truly happy for Ed. And I want you to know that I truly do like you."

"What's your question?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but what is this?"

"This?"

"As I said, I don't want you to take it wrong, Abbi, but this – you and Ed. Is it genuine?" Mo was not smiling now and had a serious and uncomfortable look on his face. "I know that technically it is none of my business. Even Jay told me to leave it alone, but I have to ask. Ed is my best friend. And I am so happy for the both of you. Really, I am. I know that he is happy, and I've never seen him this way. But is it... serious?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 109 2025/03/16 14:46

His eyes searched Abbi's questioningly. He didn't look angry, but more concerned. Abbi studied his features, thinking about his question.

It hadn't occurred to her that there was anything to think about. Eddus had invited her to stay with him, and she'd gladly accepted. Eddus was the perfect example of kindness and the nicest person she had ever met. She was happy when she was with him. It had never occurred to her to consider anything further.

"Can I say that I don't know...?" Abbi asked softly, dropping her gaze.

Mo sat quietly for a moment, looking at the young woman in front of him. It wasn't that he'd expected an answer; he just needed to say aloud what he was feeling. She'd only been staying with Eddus for a week, but he was, in fact, very fond of Abbi. A romantic at heart, Mo hoped that his best friend had found that special someone, like he himself had found his partner in Jay.

He was happy beyond words that Eddus had finally come out of his shell after so long, even if only a little bit. He hoped within himself that the attraction between the two would nurture and grow into something that would bring his friend peace.

"Abbi, again, please don't take my asking wrong." Shaking his head, Mo sighed. "I just don't want to see my friend get hurt."

Abbi's eyes welled, and she bit her lip, swallowing hard.

"I love Eddus..." Abbi's brows knitting, she spoke just above a whisper. She was bewildered, almost dumbstruck. She watched Mo's unchanging expression. "Mo, I promise to you that the last thing I would ever do is to hurt him."

"I believe you, Abbi. And I didn't mean to upset you. I really am happy for the both of you."

"You've given me something to think about," Abbi said, blinking several times, "but I promise you that I'm not upset."

She folded her hands in her lap, lowering her head.

"You know, you're the only person who calls Ed by his real name," Mo said after watching the young lady across from him for a moment. "I don't even think the people he does work for call him Eddus."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 110 2025/03/16 14:46

"It's his name," Abbi said. "He told me the night we met."

Mo nodded pensively with a soft laugh.

"And 'Eddie'?" he asked.

"I really only meant to call him that once, after he told me to call him Ed." Abbi looked away sheepishly with a half-smile.

"He really hates it."

"I know it," Abbi said. "That's why I said it in front of you guys at the pub. After I saw how much it irks him, I just had to give him a hard time."

"Will you do me a favour, Abbi?" Mo leaned forward with a mischievous smile.

"I will if I can," Abbi said, uncertainly.

"Please, never stop calling him that."



"Hey."

"Hey back."

Closing the door to his flat, Eddus walked to the lounge area, where Mo was laying on the sofa reading a book, his head resting on Jay's thigh. He sat down on the adjacent sofa, nodding to them.

"How goes it?" Mo dog-eared the page of the book he held and closed it, receiving a scowl from his boyfriend. Jay quickly grabbed the book, opened it, and tried to flatten the corner of the page that had been folded.

Eddus smiled, nodding again as he leaned back against the pillows of the sofa.

"No class today?"

"Long weekend," Mo said with a smile. "Faculty holiday. Four days of freedom."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 111 2025/03/16 14:46

"Is Abbi still asleep?" Placing the book between his thigh and the arm of the sofa, Jay glanced in the direction of Eddus' flat.

"She's showering. We had a bit of a late night."

"Is that why we didn't see you after the show?" Mo's eyes widened, and he grinned at his friend. "Eddus, you dog!"

"Be nice, you!"

Jay gave Mo's forehead a sharp tap with his fingertips. Mo gave Eddus a wink before turning his head to look up at Jay, who narrowed his eyes at him.

"We took in a movie."

"He's just being a schmuck." Shaking his head, Jay rolled his eyes at his partner and looked up at Eddus.

"By the time it let out and we walked to Shem's, you guys had gone."

"Really, Ed, don't mind this one." Jay tapped Mo's forehead again, who still wore a grin. "You don't have anything to explain."

"We did have a quick drink before coming home." In truth, Eddus had ordered a cappuccino and Abbi a glass of cranberry juice.

While he didn't owe any sort of explanation, he did feel bad that he'd lost track of what day it was. He hadn't even given it a thought until he saw a digital display showing the time, day, date, and temperature in a window that he and Abbi walked past after the movie. Upon remembering that it was Wednesday, they made their way to the pub in hopes of catching up with his friends.

"Never mind that." Jay fiddled with one of Mo's tightly curled locks as he spoke. "I'm actually glad you missed last night's show."

"Really?"

"I'm glad you had a reason to miss the play, Ed. While I, for one, love having you show your support every week, I have to admit that you've sorely needed something else."

Both Eddus and Mo listened to Jay, looking at him with interest. While

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 112 2025/03/16 14:46

not at all shy, Jay didn't often voice an opinion on matters that had to do with the personal goings-on of others. He usually found it vulgar to weigh in on things that didn't concern him directly, and he didn't like being rude.

"Personally, I think that your having met the young lady in your flat is probably the best thing to have happened to you in a long time. I am glad to see you spending time with someone outside of our little family." Jay glanced down at Mo, then again met Eddus' gaze. "No offence..."

"None taken," Eddus chuckled amusedly. "So, I can take it that you approve?"

"Of Abbi? Yes. Well, I like her, from what I know of her," Jay said. "And if she makes you happy, then I think it's great. That's what really matters."

"Gee, thanks, dad." Mo laughed. He tried unsuccessfully to dodge Jay, who rapped his forehead a bit more forcefully.

"Be nice, you!" Jay scowled at his boyfriend, to which Mo gave Eddus a sheepish look.

Eddus lowered his gaze, smiling to himself and thinking about Jay's words.

'...from what I know of her...'

To be honest, *he* didn't really know that much about Abbi. While she'd answered all the questions that he'd asked, she spoke little about herself personally. He didn't know anything about her or even if she had a family. He barely knew where she lived, and that was only after having been given a glimpse of the faerie ring.

He knew she was young and that he was somehow attracted to her spirit and playfulness, despite her seeming to find pleasure in making him uncomfortable, as though it were a game. And despite the discomfort he sometimes felt when he was with her, when she spoke his name, everything in him felt right.

Also, he knew that she was not human. In light of the very little he did know; he really knew nothing at all.

"So?"

Eddus blinked and looked at Mo and Jay, who both seemed to be

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 113 2025/03/16 14:46

watching him expectantly.

"So, what...?" he asked. From their expressions, he guessed that they were awaiting an answer. He'd been so deep in thought that he'd zoned them out.

"It's not that hard a question," Mo squinted his eyes at his friend. "Does she make you happy?"

"Abbi?"

"No, 'Eddie,' the other young lady staying in your flat with you," Mo laughed.

"She... she does," Eddus said absently.

His mind wandered again to the fact that he didn't know much about her. She was a faerie. And while she'd said that faeries and humans weren't that different, he really didn't know what that meant.

It then occurred to him that he didn't need to know anything about the girl. Oddly, he enjoyed her company, and that was more than enough.

"You don't have to answer that," Jay sighed, giving Mo a look that was something like a glower but also a look of fondness. "I'm sorry your friend is such an ass sometimes, Ed."

Glancing quickly toward the door to his flat, Eddus chuckled, stopping himself before telling Jay not to apologise. It amused him that he automatically checked to make sure that Abbi was not in earshot.

"May I ask you another question?"

"Of course." Shaking his head, Eddus met Jay's gaze.

"Just how old is Abbi?"

"How old-?" The question caught him off guard, and he gave a short laugh. "I honestly have no idea."

"You know," Mo said as he rolled onto his side and sat up, looking from Jay to Eddus, "I've wondered the same thing."

"I'm just curious, Ed," Jay spoke at the same time, giving his partner a

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 114 2025/03/16 14:46

look. “I mean, it doesn’t matter. Abbi is a sweetheart, and from the little I have seen, you two are good for one another.”

“Again, I don’t know,” Eddus said.

“She’s of age, isn’t she?” Mo lowered his voice, a concerned look on his face. He gave a sharp grunt as Jay jabbed an elbow into his ribs, giving him a pained glance. “Well, you have to admit, she does look young.”

“Well, I think Shem seemed to know her. The night we met, he waved at her when we went inside the pub, as though he’d seen her before.”

Eddus recalled the slight feeling of relief he’d felt at the pub owner’s acknowledgement. There was no speech in the interaction between them, but surely the pub owner would have said something if he’d thought that Abbi should not have been there.

The memory of the petite young woman curled up next to him in his bed at night then came to mind. He felt sure she was an adult, albeit a young one. He certainly wouldn’t have entertained her at all the night that they’d met if he’d really had a question about it.

“I have asked her, but she’s only ever said that she’s older than I think and that it’s impolite to ask a woman her age.”

“Well, it is,” Jay said matter-of-factly. “Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. It doesn’t matter how old she is. You’re both adults. It’s just so good to finally see you happy.”

“Yeah,” Eddus said, not looking toward his flat this time. A moment later, he couldn’t help but grimace slightly as he heard the door to his flat close, and looked up to see Abbi turn toward him with a smile.

Breathing in deeply, Eddus inhaled the scent of Abbi’s hair. Facing him, she lay on her side sleeping, her hand resting gently against his chest. Her head was slightly tucked, and her forehead just touched his chin.

They’d gone to bed in the usual manner that night, as they had for the past two weeks. Eddus walked Abbi to the spare bedroom. They’d embraced, and she’d kissed his cheek before they said their good-nights. After her door

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 115 2025/03/16 14:46

closed, Eddus left the passage light on and went to his room, where he'd undressed, donned a pair of running shorts, and got into his bed.

He didn't close his eyes to sleep but watched the bedroom door. He was waiting, as had become his custom each night, for it to open and for Abbi to come in and climb into bed with him, where they would fall asleep next to one another.

After a few minutes, he smiled as he saw a shadow move along the crack of light at the bottom of the door, pausing for a moment. Every night, she would hesitate outside before silently pushing it open and entering.

Tonight was no different, though she did stop outside of the bedroom for slightly longer than she had on previous nights. The door then opened, and she entered, pausing again for a moment before walking to the bedside.

Eddus watched her in the dim light coming from the open door. She stopped in the same place on the floor that she had every night. He lifted the bed cover for her, but she remained still, looking down at him.

Slowly, he lowered the sheet's edge. Unable to see her face well in the shadowy light, he wasn't sure if something was wrong.

After another few moments, she moved. She reached down with both hands, grasping the hem of the oversized t-shirt she wore every night. She raised her arms, pulling it over her head, then let it drop to the floor beside her and then stood motionless in the darkness.

Eddus watched from where he lay, not moving and uncertain of what to do or say. In the soft light, he could only see the bare skin of the right-hand side of her body.

Abbi leaned forward and lifted the bed sheet. Getting into the bed with Eddus, she moved as close to him as she could and kissed him softly. Without a word, she put a leg over his, and then lifted her body onto his, laying her head on his chest, before he had the chance to try and move away.



In the soft light, Eddus' gaze rested on the top of Abbi's head. Her long hair, which she untied at night, fell behind her shoulder onto the pillow on which she lay. Every so often, he could feel her breath against his skin. Other

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 116 2025/03/16 14:46

than the movement of his thumb, softly caressing her hip, where his hand rested, he tried not to move at all so that he did not wake her.

His mind was a blend of conflicting feelings and emotions, as the memories of the night's events played in his mind like a movie on loop. The emotion he felt was guilt, and the guilt he felt was for the contentment he could not help feeling.

Though he'd done nothing to stop her, he had never quite become fully comfortable with Abbi coming to his bed every night, even though he made room for her and, on many nights, like this one, even lifted the cover for her to join him. It wasn't as though he didn't want to be with her.

He felt an undeniable attraction and was both thrilled and amazed that she seemed to genuinely enjoy his company. He would have been more than happy for her nightly company, if only he could get over the fact that she wouldn't talk about her age.

They were both adults, although she was much younger than he was. And between them, as consenting adults, there was nothing wrong with their interactions.

He'd wrestled with the emotion more than once, starting with the very night he'd met her and allowed her to invite herself along with him to the pub, and then again, weeks later, when deciding to begin her portrait.

Not that he'd felt it was wrong to draw her. He had, in fact, drawn many a young person, even doing child portraits, though they'd all been commission work.

The feeling of fault came when he thought of Abbi not simply as the subject of the piece of art he worked on but as the young woman he'd met after the theatre. He could not keep himself from recalling that meeting – the girl who, by all accounts, made him feel extremely uneasy, asking him questions that he couldn't seem not to answer.

At the time, everything he knew and felt told him that she was just a muse he'd come across and happened to have met. And yet, every time he put pastel to canvas, he would think about that night and wish that they could meet again.

Then, by some twist of fate or perhaps coincidence, his hopes were realised that day a couple of weeks earlier in the park. As strange as the events of that day were, Eddus felt an exhilaration as though he'd reunited

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 117 2025/03/16 14:46

with a long-time friend. Although he knew nothing about her, and even less after her revelation of the pixie ring, he couldn't help but want to prolong their time together.

For two weeks, there was a small, nagging voice at the back of his mind. Each day they spent wandering the different parts of the city, a new place each day. Each night after the first, he let the young woman, or pixie, as she'd told him she was, come into his bed, and he fell asleep with her by his side. All the while, the inner voice persisted, though it became more muffled as the days went by.

Now here he lay next to her, his hand resting on the bare skin of her naked body, while the voice in his head reprimanded him. He did his best to silence it. He would not, could not, let it convince him that the night's events were wrong.

He only wished that it were not the night before she would be leaving to return to her world. She'd only told him shortly before they'd gotten ready to go to bed. He didn't want whatever this was to end.

Eddus could not keep himself from imagining Abbi disappearing into the ring of mushrooms as she stepped into it. He wondered if she would let him be there to see her go into the pixie ring.

Exhaling a long sigh, he kissed Abbi's forehead. As much as he didn't like the thought of her leaving, he couldn't help but be curious. Just after she'd told him that she was a pixie, she told him that she had wings as well. He wondered what she looked like with wings. Were they suddenly there when she stepped into the ring? How...?

He couldn't imagine it. Earlier, as she'd sat atop him in the darkness, he'd run his fingertips from the small of her back up her spine. There was no trace or hint of anything there but her smooth skin.

Closing his eyes, he once again inhaled the fragrance of Abbi's hair, remembering...

As he drifted off, he could again see her face above his as she got into the bed with him earlier and silently climbed on top of him. Her eyes shone brightly in the soft light as she lowered her face to his, kissing him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 118 2025/03/16 14:46

"You have a scar on your chin."

With the spatula he was holding, Eddus flipped the pancake he was cooking before giving Abbi a quick smile. She sat at the small table in the flat's kitchen. Wearing the t-shirt she'd put back on that morning, she'd come out of Eddus' bedroom to find him at the stove. Taking a seat at the table, she watched him as he cooked.

"I saw it while you were sleeping."

"You were watching me while I slept?"

Raising his eyebrows, Eddus gave her a wink. He stacked the fresh pancake on top of another on a plate beside the stove, then turned off the burner and placed the plate in front of the young woman at the table.

"Would you like syrup or cream?"

Abbi's eyes widened in surprise, her face lighting up.

"Cream?!"

"Would you like cream, then?"

"May I!"

Eddus chuckled softly as he opened the refrigerator and retrieved a glass bottle from it. He placed it in front of her, then picked up a second plate of food from beside the stove and sat down across from her.

It was moments like these, watching the excitement on her youthful face as she poured the cream over her pancakes, that he was unable to stop himself from wondering.

Avoiding the cutlery beside her plate, Abbi used her fingers to tear off a small piece of the pancake. She put it in her mouth, raising her chin. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply as she chewed. Swallowing the food, she reopened her eyes, giving Eddus a half-smile and glancing at her plate.

"I love cream," she said, tearing another bite. "It's my favourite!"

"I can see that."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 119 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus watched her with amusement. He poured syrup over his own plate and then picked up his knife and fork.

For a few minutes, they sat in silence. Eddus ate slowly, trying not to be too obvious while watching her.

Abbi was focused on her breakfast, eating at a quicker pace than he. When she'd finished, she used her fingertip to wipe up a drop of cream on her plate and licked it. She stopped mid-motion, her fingertip still between her lips, as she noticed Eddus looking at her, his head tilted slightly. He said nothing, only watched her with an amused look.

"I love cream," she said again quietly. She quickly dabbed her fingertips on the serviette next to her plate and folded her hands in her lap, straightening her back.

Eddus nodded, chuckling again. He put a bite into his mouth, prying his eyes away from her. He didn't want to look away. He enjoyed watching her. But even now, after weeks together, he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

"Where did you get it?"

"From the supermarket," Eddus said, laughing softly. "It can even be delivered right to your house."

Abbi looked at him blankly for a moment, then giggled, shaking her head.

"Not the cream, silly." She wrinkled her nose. "How did you get the scar?"

"Oh. It was a bicycle accident." Eddus smiled, shaking his head. "It was my first bicycle. My parents got it for me on my fifth birthday. The first time I rode it, I went off of the sidewalk in front of our house, and the front tire hit a large root of a tree in our yard. I wasn't a very good rider, and I fell."

Eddus dropped his gaze, a thoughtful look on his face as he recalled the past.

"I'm still not sure whether I hit my chin on the handlebars or the ground."

"That sounds awful."

"I got seven stitches and had to stay a night in the hospital."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 120 2025/03/16 14:46

Abbi, who shook her head and narrowed her eyes at Eddus as he looked up at her. She was trying to imagine him that young. She wondered what he was like as a child.

"It was great," Eddus said. "I was the first of my friends to get stitches. I also got three days out of school."

"I wish I knew you back then."

"That was a long time ago... Probably before you were born."

Although Eddus looked amused, he felt a touch uncomfortable at the thought.

Tilting her head slightly, Abbi shrugged. She glanced away, looking at the tabletop, then back at Eddus with a coy smile.

Eddus sighed, setting his fork down on the edge of his plate.

"You don't have to go," he said quietly.

The smile faded from her face, and Abbi nodded.

"You could stay here," Eddus said, a hint of hopefulness in his voice. "You can stay, you know. You're welcome... for as long as..."

His words trailed off.

"I have to go back, Eddie." Abbi spoke softly, and her expression was sombre. "At least for a little while."

Eddus nodded silently. He didn't look directly at her as he thought about the last time they'd said goodbye and how long it had been before they'd seen one another again.

"I don't want to go," she offered, "but I've been away longer than I should have."

She reached across the small table, touching his arm. She could see that he was thinking about something.

"You know, I- I'm going to miss you." Eddus' gaze fell to Abbi's small hand resting on the back of his. A moment passed in silence.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 121 2025/03/16 14:46

"Me too." Abbi's fingers gently caressed his. She watched a look of worry come over him. "But I will be back."

"Will you, though?"

"Of course I will. Why would I not come back to you, Eddus?"

"I don't know," he said, uncertainty in his voice. "We're so different, you and I."

"How could you think that?" Abbi gave him a smile, squeezing his hand.

"Well, you're... a pixie. And I don't even really even know what that means, but..." Eddus sat back in his chair, withdrawing his hand. "Abbi, I'm just a man. Just a human."

"How could you think I wouldn't come back to you, Eddie? I told you, I keep my promises." Abbi spoke softly, lowering her gaze. "And I do promise. I will come back."

"I know."

Eddus sighed, pushing the plate in front of him away.

"And you're not just a human, Eddus Brandt." Abbi's voice had not risen. She looked up across the table. "You're *my* human."

"You really don't have to go."

"But I do..." Abbi gave a sad smile, shaking her head slowly as she looked up at Eddus.

The wind rustled through the leaves of the trees around them. They stood facing each other. Behind Abbi, at her feet, was the ring of mushrooms, the portal to her world.

They'd spent the day in the company of one another. Taking a longer than usual lunch at the diner, they then slowly made their way to the park, detouring down several side streets along the way.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 122 2025/03/16 14:46

Abbi had held Eddus' hand and was, for the most part, in her usual happy spirit, though she wasn't as playful as she normally was.

Eddus had remained rather quiet, watching his companion as though he wanted to commit her every movement to memory. He said little, speaking only when she said something that required a direct reply. Neither had spoken of it, but both had been avoiding this moment.

Their walk from the park's entrance to the clearing in which they stood had been a silent one. As they turned away from the path they walked beside, Abbi slipped her arm around Eddus' waist. He put his arm around her shoulder as they walked.

As the rings came into view, Abbi felt Eddus slow his pace and hesitate when they neared the small clearing in the trees. Leaning her head against him, she tightened her arm around him, gently urging him forward. She turned to face him as they reached the pixie ring, standing with the circle of fungi just behind her.

"You don't have to-"

"I do, Eddie."

"You can stay with me if you want."

"I do, Eddie," Abbi repeated.

"You do?" Eddus blinked, slightly confused by her answer. He held his breath, waiting hopefully for her next words.

"Yes. I do so wish that I could stay with you, Eddus Brandt." Abbi's eyes seemed to flash brightly in the afternoon sun. She slowly lowered her head, looking away. "But I do have to... I have to go back."

The hope Eddus felt deflated with his lungs as he exhaled. With his left hand, he touched Abbi's shoulder.

"I really would stay with you." Abbi looked back up, shaking her head again. "But there are rules, and I've been away for too long already."

"Rules?"

"I'm not really supposed to stay in the human realm for longer than..." Abbi pursed her lips and sighed. "I will come back to you, Eddie."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 123 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus' eyes met hers for a moment before he nodded slowly. He kissed her forehead. Abbi quickly reached up, pulling Eddus face to her eye level, where they held one another's gaze for just a moment before she again pulled him, their lips meeting in a long kiss.

"I promise you I'll be back." Abbi's amber eyes glowed as she hugged his neck.

"I know," Eddus said softly. He slipped his arms around her waist, embracing her.

The night he met Abbi, she promised that he would see her again. He again remembered how serious she had been when she told him that she kept her promises. He wanted to believe her completely. He did believe her, but the thought of how long it had been between the night they'd first met and the afternoon when they'd met for the second time cast more than a shadow of doubt.

Eddus wanted to ask her when, but held his tongue.

Releasing her grip, she again looked into his eyes as he straightened his back. Her hands found his, and she smiled.

"I have to go now, Eddie."

Eddus felt a sudden panic grip him and opened his mouth to speak.

Abbi's lips pursed, thinning her smile, as she stepped backward into the pixie ring and vanished before he could make a sound.

Managing only a gasp, his heart raced, and his mind struggled to believe what he'd just seen. Eddus looked first to his hands, which only a second before had held Abbi's, and then to the ring of mushrooms he stood in front of. He peered at the ground inside of it but saw nothing but the same grass and soil he stood on outside of it.

He'd thought about it, this very moment, more than once. He'd imagined it just the night before, but it could not have prepared him for what he'd just witnessed.

Suddenly very hot, he could feel perspiration on his neck and forehead. Looking around to see if anyone else had been present, Eddus took a step back.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 124 2025/03/16 14:46

A feeling of panic washed over him, and he felt that had to get away from where he was. Hurriedly, he made his way out of the small clearing. He was careful to stay as far away as he could from the other circles of mushrooms, though not as far as he would have liked, as there were several around. It was not until he was out of the clearing and could see the paved path that he looked back.

It looked like any other group of trees in the park with a small clearing between them. From that distance, he could no longer see the mushrooms.

Breathing a sigh, Eddus turned and made his way to the park bench. Wearily, he sat down. Though he hoped that his heartbeat would slow, he could not unsee Abbi disappearing as she stepped into the pixie ring.



'You can never disturb these.'

Abbi's voice rang in Eddus' memory. He could still hear the seriousness in her voice, and he could still recall the pleading look in her eyes.

'...not just these ones. Don't disturb them.'

These. Eddus could barely see the trees around the clearing, let alone the rings of fungi on the ground within it, but he knew that they were there. He'd seen them almost every day for the past week. He'd come to City Park in hopes of finding the young lady he'd spent time with months before.

It was well after midnight. There was almost no light at all. The lampposts that lined the pathway through the park were too far away to cast any light, and the moon was only a sliver in the sky and was mostly blocked by the canopy of the trees.

If he looked at the ground, he couldn't even see the forest floor, but he could just see the trees surrounding the clearing he stood at the mouth of. If he tried focusing on the trees, he could see only darkness, but he could just see the faerie rings, though not clearly. And every time he shifted his gaze while looking at the trees, he couldn't be sure if the rings didn't seem to shift and move.

Taking a step forward, he again heard the young woman's voice in his mind.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 125 2025/03/16 14:46

'If you ever see rings like these anywhere, don't disturb them.'

Taking out his cell phone, Eddus turned on the flashlight app so that he could see a bit better. It wasn't very bright, but enough that he could make out the ground in front of him.

Using the light on his phone, he carefully navigated between the pixie rings until he came to the approximate spot where Abbi had stopped him from stepping into one of them. It was the same clearing in which he had encountered her. He was sure of it, but he was also certain that the pixie rings were now different. They seemed to be bigger than he remembered and closer together. There was very little space between them, and there were definitely more of them.

In the glow, Eddus studied the ground in front of him. The ring of fungi was there. He shifted his feet slightly so that he was standing as close as possible to the spot where he and Abbi had knelt with him before they leaned into the pixie ring. He thought about kneeling there again but decided against it, as now if he kneeled, his feet would touch, if not be inside the ring behind him.

Pausing, he reflected on why he was there. He wasn't sure that coming into City Park in the middle of the night was the best course of action he could have taken. Although he was now a bit more sober, at the time he'd decided to come to the park, he'd had a few drinks.

He'd been at Shem's with his house mates. It was Wednesday, and he'd taken in the play his friends were part of, which he'd resumed doing after Abbi had taken her leave.

The evening began the same way each midweek had for the past few months. He'd walked from his home in the shipping district to the diner, where he'd had his usual: a sandwich and a coffee.

From there, he made his way slowly to the theatre, where he purchased his ticket and sat somewhere in the middle of the theatre – not so close as to have to look up at the stage the entire time, but not so far back that he might have to sit amongst the other patrons.

After the show, Eddus met with his house mates, and they'd gone, as always, to the pub for drinks before going home for the night.

If it hadn't been for certain remarks made to him by Mo, inquiring as to whether he'd seen Abbi at all, which turned into conversation about whether

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 126 2025/03/16 14:46

or not he'd tried to find her, he wouldn't even be in the park at this time.

"You didn't see her?" Jay and Stiles were busy talking to the waitress, leaving Mo and Eddus alone to talk for a few minutes.

Eddus inhaled deeply as he shifted his gaze from his friend to the half-empty beer glass on the table in front of him, shaking his head and exhaling a long sigh. It wasn't the first time he'd had this conversation, and it had usually been with Mo. His other two house mates did ask him about Abbi, but it was usually Mo who brought up the subject, and usually he brought it up while at the pub.

Mo pushed his glasses up with his forefinger, watching his friend sympathetically. He'd asked Eddus every week if he'd seen Abbi. It was both out of simple curiosity as to whether he'd seen her again and also because he missed the happiness he'd seen in his friend while the young woman had been present.

"It's been three months."

"Four," Eddus replied.

He glanced from his friend to his beverage, suddenly conflicted as to whether or not he wanted to continue drinking it or not. He'd gotten used to the weekly questions and usually dismissed them, knowing that they came from a good place. As crass as Mo could be at times and as unfiltered as he usually was, Eddus knew that he really meant well.

"Four months, Ed," Mo said. He was quiet until Eddus met his gaze again.

Eddus appeared to be looking at something behind his friend. He was remembering leaning into the pixie ring with Abbi. He thought of it often after her departure, whether he wanted to or not.

It had been months since Eddus had watched as Abbi vanished in front of him when she stepped into the faerie ring. And although Mo knew nothing about the ring, he had a point.

At first, Eddus had given it little more thought than that of questioning if it had actually happened. Then he thought about the fact that it had actually happened. He'd missed Abbi from the moment she left, and over time, the feeling had only grown. He often thought about their time together. He thought about how it seemed to have flown by. She'd been with him for almost three weeks, but looking back, it felt like only days.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 127 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus wondered, as he had several times, why the girl had stayed with him – not so much why she'd accepted his invitation to come to his flat, but more than that. Why had she chosen to spend three weeks with him? Reflecting on the time they'd spent in each other's company, while he was fascinated with her and probably would have been even without her having been from another world, he still could not see what it was about him that held her interest.

Nothing they'd done in their time together had been in any way spectacular. In retrospect, all their activities were mundane at best. They were everyday outings, not even all that special. But at no time during them had Eddus even once felt that she had been bored with him or like she wanted to be somewhere else.

On the contrary, she always seemed to be happy when she was with him, almost as if she were living each moment in the moment. Strangely enough, Abbi had often seemed happy just talking with him, which is mostly what they'd done. She answered his questions and gave him explanations about everything he'd inquired about, as though it was exactly what she wanted to be doing.

But he still couldn't figure out why she had stayed. Why him? He was nobody, really. Just a guy. And as it turned out, she was a faerie – a pixie. She was literally from a world, or realm, as she called it, different from his own.

Eddus was still a bit foggy on how it was possible. He couldn't quite wrap his mind around a different world, completely separate from the one he knew and lived in. And he could in no way fully accept that she had told him that in her realm she was physically different. He could see no proof of it, but he would have given anything to have seen what she meant.

But having seen inside the faerie realm, even if only for a few minutes, and then watching as Abbi disappeared when she stepped over the barrier of that realm, he couldn't deny any of it, no matter how hard it was to believe.

And it *was* hard to believe. Every part of it. From the moment he met her, everything seemed surreal. Every moment, from that encounter on the sidewalk corner down the street from the pub to the moment four months ago when her hand disappeared as he held it, felt unreal. If it weren't for the fact that he'd personally experienced each of those moments, he may not believe that they had actually happened.

He could remember it all. He could recall everything they'd said to one another. Looking back, every answer to every question he'd asked her he

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 128 2025/03/16 14:46

could remember almost word for word, but only as if it were a dream he was trying to make sense of.

Suddenly aware of the crispness of the midnight air, the back of his head began to have a dull, spacey feeling, and Eddus could feel himself slipping further into soberness. He looked around the clearing he stood in, still unable to see anything except what was directly in front of him in the faint light given off by his phone.

For a moment, he looked again at the ring of mushrooms in front of him before carefully turning and retracing his steps. Once again, at the mouth of the clearing, he turned off the light on his phone. He made his way toward the glow given off by the lampposts along the path in the distance, where he sat down on the bench that he and Abbi had stopped at so many months before.

He'd come to the park many times in the months since Abbi left, in hopes of bumping into her again. He'd been from one end of the park to the other and not seen any sign of her. He had seen several other rings of mushrooms and often wondered if they, too, led into the place Abbi had shown him or if they went somewhere else. Remembering what she'd said to him, he always refrained from getting too close to them.

As he sat on the bench in the cool night air, Eddus closed his eyes, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Recalling the conversation from earlier with his roommate, he began to wonder just what he'd hoped to accomplish by coming here. He wasn't likely to run into Abbi at this time of the night.

Perhaps Mo did have a point. It had been months since he'd had any contact with Abbi, which, as Mo had pointed out, in an implied way, could have been a sign in itself.

Maybe the young woman was gone. Really gone. It was possible. As much as he hated to, Eddus had to admit that it had all been too good to be true. She was a beautiful young woman. How long could he have expected things to go on? He was a human, and she was a faerie. He knew nothing about faeries other than the faerie-tales he'd heard as a child.

He'd wondered several times during her stay with him what she saw in him. While she'd never once seemed bored or indifferent while they were together, perhaps it was not what she wanted in the end.

Maybe... It was possible.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 129 2025/03/16 14:46

Then again, maybe it was the alcohol. He'd had a few that night and a few more while he and Mo had been speaking, mostly because his roommate had been doing shots while they talked and kept insisting Eddus drink with him. His best friend meant well. But then again, they'd both been drinking.

'You're my human.'

Abbi *had* said that she would be back. She promised. And she'd made a point of telling Eddus that she kept her promises. She could have been acting, but she seemed a little hurt when he'd told her that he had been beginning to think that he wouldn't see her again. To his knowledge, she'd never said anything to him that wasn't true or that she didn't mean, so there was no reason to think she would not keep her word.

Closing his eyes, Eddus breathed in deeply. He could feel the effects of the drink wearing off, and he felt tired. The night air felt good, and he began to doze. He drifted into the darkness, slowly lowering his head as he sat. His mind blanked as it slipped into unconsciousness.

'I have never taken anyone into a pixie ring... with or without permission.'

Eddus started, suddenly awake. He could see the pavement in the glow given off by the lamppost beside the bench on which he sat. Raising his head, he looked around with a feeling of hope. He was alone on the park bench. Turning, he saw nothing behind him but the darkness of the park. He had no idea how long he had slept.

It was Abbi's voice he'd heard. Looking around again, confirming that he was alone, Eddus lowered his gaze again to the ground, feeling deflated. He'd heard her voice as though she were standing right next to him.

It was like a dream, but it wasn't a dream. It was too familiar.

'I have never taken anyone into a pixie ring...'

Eddus felt a slight sense of nostalgia as, all at once, her words came back to him. He could still see the look of distress on her face as she spoke.

'I should have asked first... No one is supposed to bring anyone into our realm without first being granted permission...'

Although she seemed uncertain, she also hinted that she might face consequences for having shown him the barrier between their worlds.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 130 2025/03/16 14:46

'It could *go unnoticed, or this might be the last time I ever see you, Eddus Brandt...'*

Without thinking, Eddus stood up, peering in the direction of the clearing of trees he'd been in earlier. He felt cold, and there was a knot in the pit of his stomach. Until now, he hadn't really given much thought to that part of their conversation that day.

Could she really have been punished for having shown him the pixie ring?

Fumbling with his phone to turn on its flashlight app again, he started back in the direction of the clearing.

Perhaps the reason she hadn't been back was that she had gotten into trouble for her actions that day several weeks before. She said that no one was supposed to be brought into the realm without permission.

Eddus stopped momentarily, again at the mouth of the clearing. He had no idea what kind of repercussions Abbi could have faced. She'd only given him a peek into the ring, but afterward she told him in no uncertain terms that he was not to disturb any pixie ring he may encounter. Could they punish her for that? Would they? He would never tell anyone.

Pointing his phone light in the direction of the pixie ring they had entered, Eddus began carefully navigating the rings between himself and it. Stopping at the ring's edge, the phone's light shining onto the ground inside of it.

It occurred to him that he may not even be able to cross the barrier without Abbi with him. He didn't know anything about the pixie ring or how it worked, but he was going to try. Apart from Abbi, Eddus didn't know anyone inside of it, but he had to let them know that he would never tell anyone about what he'd seen for as long as he lived. He would swear it. He would forget that he ever knew about it. Abbi didn't need to be punished for having shown him.

Eddus turned off the light on his phone, quickly pushing it into his back pocket. Taking a deep breath, he clenched his fists and lifted his foot. He half expected that when he stepped forward, nothing would happen and that he would find himself standing inside a ring of mushrooms in the dark clearing.

Closing his eyes, he stepped forward.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 131 2025/03/16 14:46



Instantly, the sound of music met his ears. Music and voices. For a few moments, he stood absolutely still, hoping that perhaps his presence would not have a large impact.

That was not the case.

Everything ceased. The music stopped. The hustle and bustle all but vanished. The only thing that could be heard were small movements from all around.

Eddus opened his eyes, looking around. He was surrounded by people, all looking at him curiously. A few shuffled around, attempting to get a better view. Most of them, as far as he could see, had wings.

The surroundings were much as he'd remembered them being from when he'd looked into the pixie ring with Abbi. He was inside the domed barrier he'd seen weeks before. Again, there was a gathering. Those present seemed to have been drinking and dancing. The only difference was that all those present had stopped what they were doing in order to have a look at the newcomer.

"Hello..."

Eddus slowly raised his hands in front of him, his palms facing those around him. He tried to take a step backward, but his back met something solid. The translucent dome that was the barrier surrounding the area was now a solid wall.

"I think you may be lost."

One of the beings in front of him stepped forward from the crowd. A slight man with bright green eyes and hair more red than brown, he wore a black waistcoat over a blue long-sleeve shirt, somewhat like a button-down. He stood slightly taller than Eddus' shoulder. The tips of his wings stood about a head and a half taller than he was. Both his sleeves had been rolled up neatly to just over his elbows. Keeping eye contact, he approached both slowly and cautiously, his face bearing no particular expression.

"What's your name?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 132 2025/03/16 14:46

"Ed..." Swallowing hard, Eddus caught his breath, unable to utter more than a single syllable. A murmur wafted through the crowd, mostly too soft to be heard, but he did catch the name being repeated several times.

"Do you know where you are, Ed?" the small man in front of him asked. He looked around, gesturing with his hand. A few other men had stepped forward as well, standing just behind him.

"Yes and no," Eddus said after a moment, trying his best to sound calm.

With his back to the wall that was the barrier, he began to feel boxed in. Not breaking eye contact with the man with whom he was speaking, he tried to be aware of any movements that the slight man's companions were making. Others in the crowd behind them began to disperse.

The man in front of him shook his head slightly, a half-smile on his face. His eyes flashed, the colour of them intensifying momentarily.

"Well, is it a yes, or is it a no, Ed? Your answer could greatly impact what we do with you from here."

"Well, I know I'm in City Park... or I was..." Eddus started. "And now I'm inside of a pixie ring."

Again, a murmur could be heard, and those surrounding him exchanged looks.

"So you do know where you are." The man's brows rose for a moment in surprise.

"While I'm not exactly sure where this is, I do know where the pixie ring I stepped into is located."

"But you are aware, Ed, that what you stepped into is, as you called it, a pixie ring, and that it is how you came to be here?" His brow slowly knitted as he spoke.

"I am," Eddus replied. "May I ask you a question?"

"You may."

"May I have your name?"

"You may call me Dain," the green-eyed man told Eddus, looking at

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 133 2025/03/16 14:46

him suspiciously. There was another soft mummer from within the crowd behind him.

Eddus inhaled deeply.

"Dain, I'm looking for someone. She's from here. I think she might be in some sort of trouble. I just need to make sure she is okay, and I will leave."

"I don't think that's going to be possible, Ed."

"Please, Dain, I would be most grateful for any help. I just want to know that my friend is okay."

"I do not know who your friend is, Ed. I do, however, know that you are not going to be leaving any time soon, even should you find whom it is you are looking for."

"Excuse me?"

"You're going to need to come with me."

"We could make him run." One of the men behind Dain looked around, his eyes momentarily flashing. He smiled at those he stood beside. His wings twitched behind him.

There was some muttering in hushed tones by those around the man, but it was silenced when Dain raised a hand.

"There will be none of that," he said firmly. "Ed will go before the queen. So long as he comes with me without a scene, there is no need to coerce him."

"But he shouldn't be here. This is no mistake. There are rules. Let's make Ed-"

"There will be no running." Turning to the man who spoke, Dain looked around him. "I am a captain of the guard and the only member of the guard currently present. I will escort this human to someone on duty, and we will decide what needs to be done. No one is to utter his name again, in his or my presence."

Giving Eddus a nod, he indicated that he start walking. The crowd parted as he followed the small man.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 134 2025/03/16 14:46

Looking back, Eddus could see a glow coming from something rather large just outside of the pixie ring's barrier. It seemed to be coming from the ground just outside of the ring of fungi. Following Dain to a doorway leading out of the area they were in, he paused as he realised that the glow was coming out from underneath the object on the ground.

As Dain touched his elbow, indicating they continue walking, Eddus patted his pocket, which he'd put his phone in. It was empty. The phone must have fallen out when he stepped into the pixie ring. What he'd seen was the light from the screen of his cell phone outside the translucent barrier.

"This way." Dain kept a hand on Eddus' elbow as they exited the area domed by the barrier and made their way through a passageway connecting one hallway to another lined with doors.

They entered through a door leading into what could have been a hotel lobby. Beings of differing heights and colours, both winged and non-winged, seemed to come and go from a number of other doors, some stopping at what appeared to be a desk with several people behind it who seemed to be giving directions to those who came to them.

The winged man at his side led Eddus through a door and up a winding staircase. He then guided him about halfway down a hallway lined with doors, where he halted their walk, in front of an open door.

"You'll stay in here until such time as you are fetched to be taken before the queen, where it will be decided what to do with you."

Some of the doors that lined the hallway were open, while others were closed. Besides simple crème white doors, they were not numbered, and did not have windows. It began to dawn on Eddus that this was a holding area of sorts.

"What are you saying? Do you mean I can't leave?"

"That is what I am telling you, Ed."

"Am I in trouble of some sort?" Eddus' eyes met Dain's. "Have- have I done something wrong?"

"You're not supposed to be here, Ed. Your intrusion into this realm is a rather serious matter." He gestured to the open door, indicating Eddus should enter.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 135 2025/03/16 14:46

"Intrusion...? I'm not – I just need to find my friend."

"You've said as much," Dain nodded, "and I do believe you. That is one of the reasons that I didn't hand you over to the others, which is what would usually happen to a human who comes here uninvited. Had I not been present when you showed up, things could have gone very differently. This is the best I can do until you've been to see the queen."

Eddus stepped through the doorway, wondering how many humans actually came into pixie rings, invited or not. The room he entered was small but well lit. Along the left wall was a bed. It had two pillows and was made up with what appeared to be a dark comforter. On the opposite wall were a rather comfortable-looking cushioned chair and a side table. In the far corner was a small table and chair in a nook just big enough to accommodate the table. In the opposite corner was a door that he guessed led into a bathroom of sorts.

It could actually have been the guest room in a house, had it not been for the fact that it had no windows and the inside of the door had no handle.

Eddus turned to face the doorway and the winged man standing just outside of it, slowly closing the door.

"Dain?"

"Yes?" The door stopped moving, and the man on the other side of it peered back into the room.

"I'm grateful that you believed me and that you didn't let the others take me."

"Usually, I would not have intervened."

"But you did."

"I do believe that you are looking for someone." Dain nodded thoughtfully, meeting Eddus' gaze, his green eyes studying the human.

"One more question, if I may..."

"Of course."

"You said that one of the reasons you interfered earlier was that you believed me," Eddus said. "Were there other reasons for not letting the

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 136 2025/03/16 14:46

others who were there take me?"

"Yes. One reason, really: You're polite."

The door opened again, and Dain stepped back into the room, the tips of his wings just missing the underside of the door frame. He looked up at Eddus.

"It's not often that we get an unexpected visitor from your world, but it does happen. We can tell who comes by accident and, less often, who comes out of some form of curiosity or looking for some adventure. You're not here by accident, but you do seem to genuinely be looking for someone. It's your manner that's convinced me that you are not just here on a whim and that you do believe your friend is in this realm."

"She is. Her name is Abbi. I think it's short for Abigail."

"It doesn't sound like anyone I know." Dain's lips pursed as he shook his head. He turned again toward the door. "I don't know that I can be of any help."

"Light hair and slightly shorter than you." Eddus took a step towards the door as Dain exited.

"It's a big place, Ed. The realm is a lot bigger than you can understand. And there are a lot of us here."

The door closed silently, followed by the quiet click of the lock.



"Ed, you stand accused of trespass, the knowing and wilful unauthorised entry of a human into our realm."

Shortly after being escorted to the room, a uniformed member of the guard collected him. There was no talk between himself and the guard as he was escorted down a long corridor and through another door. Then they were outside.

Eddus had stopped walking to take in the view but was urged forward by a stern look and an audible grunt from his escort, who stood much shorter

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 137 2025/03/16 14:46

than he, and although unarmed, still managed to have an air of authority about him.

The cloudless sky was so bright that it made his eyes ache. He was on a city street unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Besides buildings of architecture he'd also never seen, there was nothing that looked like technology in sight. Absolutely nothing. Even the lampposts lining the street were just that – lamps on posts. Each post had hooks on either side of it that held a lamp that looked like it needed to be physically lit with fire each night.

The buildings were constructed of what seemed to be a solid, smooth stone with a mother-of-pearl finish. Each one was a different colour. No two that he could see were the same. Between the buildings and as far as Eddus could see behind them, there were trees. They looked much like the trees in his own world.

As they walked, Eddus wondered what time it was here, as it had been the middle of the night when he'd stepped into the pixie ring. He then remembered how much time had passed when Abbi had shown him the pixie ring, and began to think about just how much time might have passed in his own world while he'd been here.

Groups of both winged and non-winged people congregated, curiously watching the human walk next to a guard, unrestrained, from the door he exited, along the street. Some hovered just above the crowd in order to get a better look, the rapid movement of their wings creating a humming sound.

Doing his best not to make eye contact with anyone, he wondered for a moment if any of the non-winged beings present were also human. Keeping pace with the guard beside him, he glanced from left to right. Those in the growing crowd all seemed to blur together as he passed them.

Turning off of the street, they took a pathway that led under two large stone arches and up the wide staircase, entering a large set of doors that lead into what looked to be a perfectly square building made of the same stone the others he'd seen, but it had no windows. Once inside, they walked the length of a massive hallway that appeared to be made of some sort of marble.

From the outside, the building had not looked as big as it did inside. The foyer they'd entered was wider and longer than seemed possible. And there were many more people present that Eddus would have thought possible. They were coming in and out of doorways that lined one side of the hall. Others congregated outside of a very large door at the end of the hall. The crowd made way as he and the guard approached the large, closed door.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 138 2025/03/16 14:46

Eddus waited, as instructed, until the door silently opened and he was ushered in.

He stood on a large, white, perfectly square slab of stone that he'd ascended a set of steps to reach. Before him was a panel of three in identical apparel, seated and facing him. His guess was that they were the heads of the guard or held some high position.

The room was large and open. It too, was much bigger than seemed possible. The ceiling alone seemed to be higher than the building had looked from the outside. Eddus did his best not to think about the obvious impossibility of the spatial difference, as he had no idea what to expect from the three in front of him.

Behind him was a large crowd of gathered spectators, seated in a sort of gallery, come to watch him being questioned. Evidently, word of his arrival had travelled, as the number of those gathered was much larger than that of the people present when he'd stepped into the pixie ring. Quickly, he scanned the gallery for any sign of the face he'd come in search of before turning again to face those in front of the platform on which he stood.

"It is true," Eddus said to the person who had spoken, listing the charge against him. He hoped that by being honest and answering all the questions asked of him, he could get help in finding Abbi.

There was a pause as the three spoke quietly among themselves.

"We're told that your presence here is under a circumstance that needed to be brought before us."

The person seated in the middle of the three spoke again. She was small– less than half the height of an average human being– but perfectly proportionate. Her short hair was a dark blue, her skin was pale, and she had wings. She looked like a picture from a fairytale book Eddus might have read as a child.

"We're led to believe that yours is a unique case that would require consideration beyond the usual forms of action that we take to rectify situations in which our realm is disrupted by intruders."

"I do hope so..." While he didn't exactly know what actions the speaker was referring to, Eddus could only guess from the reference he'd heard when he arrived to making him run and Dain's comments about handing him over to those who were present when he arrived that it had something to do

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 139 2025/03/16 14:46

with mob justice. “It was mentioned that I would be taken to see the queen.”

“This is where you will present your case so that we can judge whether or not it warrants leniency and decide how to proceed with you.”

For a moment, Eddus stood silently, looking at the three seated beings in front of him, who in turn watched him almost expectantly. The area was quiet. All that could be heard was the occasional shuffle of feet or an inaudible whisper from someone in the crowd behind him.

“Please, I’m – I don’t know how to address you.”

Eddus was careful not to add an apology to his statement for fear that it might anger someone on the panel and hurt whatever chance he may have at the leniency that had been mentioned.

The small faerie was quiet. She regarded Eddus with a serious face for a moment before nodding.

“Beagan. You may address me as such-”

“There are no titles, and there is no need to address anyone here by name. You have only to state your reason for having come here.” The individual speaking sat on the left side of the three. Slightly taller and heavier-built than the faerie next to him, he had no wings. His skin was dark and textured, as though he spent most of his time exposed to sunlight. His ears were long and pointed, drooping to the sides.

Eddus could not venture a guess as to his age based on his appearance. Glancing back and forth between them, he was not sure how to respond.

“I am here in search of a friend of mine. Her name is Abbi. We met some time back.”

“You may indeed know a faerie of the realm,” Beagan commented. “And although interaction between faeries and humans is not common, it does occur.” She paused for a moment, glancing at each of her counterparts. “How long have you and this faerie known one another?”

“She’s a pixie. She said she’s a pixie. And I’ve known her for maybe six months, more or less,” Eddus replied.

“That would be six months in your realm.”

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 140 2025/03/16 14:46

The third member of the panel spoke flatly, more of a statement than a question. With pale blue skin and long, straight black hair, her extremely thin build was accentuated by her perfect posture. She turned her head slightly to regard Eddus with a cool, blank stare.

"I suppose so, yes," Eddus said, not quite sure what she meant. He quickly examined the woman who had spoken.

She was the tallest of the three on the panel. From where he stood, it looked as though she could have easily been as tall, if not taller, than himself. She sat, not making a move, with her hands folded on her lap, her bare feet on the floor. Except for the colour of her skin, she could easily have been taken for a tall and attractive human, perhaps a swimmer or a runner.

"You've come here to find someone whom you only barely know."

The speaker's gaze shifted from Eddus as she turned to regard the other two sitting next to her, murmuring something softly and receiving their replies, equally quiet.

Beagan glanced at her colleagues as their conversation came to an end– first one, then the other, and then to Eddus.

"This friend, I take it, you are certain is fae?" she asked. Otherwise, you would not have entered our realm and risked the consequences thereof."

"Fae?"

"She is a faerie, is she not?"

"She said she's a pixie."

Beagan nodded thoughtfully.

"Abbi said that she might be in trouble, in which case I think that I could be partly to blame. I just wanted to see that she is okay." Eddus nodded. He was reluctant to mention that Abbi had shown him the inside of the pixie ring. "I just need to know that she is all right. Then I'll go, and I promise you'll never see me again."

"This is not your world, Ed. If this "Abbi" has done something to warrant a punishment here, it has nothing to do with you." The small faerie stood and approached Eddus, looking up at him. "You may have come into this realm with good intentions, but ultimately, you have broken our laws. These laws

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 141 2025/03/16 14:46

were made and agreed to long ago by both the fae and the human race. We will present your case for judgment and pass a ruling. You will be housed in the room you were taken to until such time. I trust that it has not been too unpleasant?"

Eddus looked at her in surprise, to which she gave a questioning look.

"If I am not being too bold," he said, "I'm being held prisoner, and you ask me if it is unpleasant?"

"There are no prisoners in this realm, Ed. Until the queen's decision, you may not be able to move about completely freely, but I think you will find your treatment to be much better than that of any prisoner's."

"And after?"

"It is up to the queen's judgment if you are found guilty or not and in what way you will be dealt with. But Ed," Beagan's expression softened momentarily, "you will never be held prisoner in our realm."

"I have no complaints about where I am being kept," Eddus told her. He suspected there was more to what she said about there being no prisoners, something that she deliberately neglected to say.

Beagan gave a slight nod, and Eddus felt something touch his elbow. He turned to see the same guard who had escorted him in.

Back in the room, Eddus was lying on the bed, trying in vain to rest. He would close his eyes, but his mind raced, and he could do nothing to calm it.

There was a light tap at the door, followed by a short pause and the click of it unlocking. He jumped to his feet as the door opened slightly.

"Excuse me. You have a visitor," a voice from outside told him.

Eddus said nothing, stunned at both the idea of a visitor as well as it being announced in such a courteous manner. He stood watching the door, not knowing what to do or expect.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 142 2025/03/16 14:46

The door remained unmoved, and after a short moment of silence, the voice spoke again.

"May I admit them?"

Again, Eddus remained silent, staring blankly at the door for a moment before it occurred to him that he needed to give an answer.

"Well... Uh, of course, yes."

The door opened a bit more. Backing through it and speaking in hushed tones to someone outside of it, the being's wings did not quite come close to touching the underside of the door frame. The door closed and clicked locked. The visitor paused for a moment and then slowly turned around.

"Abbi!"

Eddus rushed to her, hugging her with his arms around her waist and lower back. She returned his embrace, holding tightly to his neck. For several moments, neither said anything as they held one another.

Abbi then shoved Eddus' chest, pushing him away from her.

"Why?" She glared at him, a look of bewilderment behind her anger. "Why?"

Abbi wore a simple, strapless black dress that came just above her knees. Her hair was in a tight bun at her neck, as it usually was. Eddus shook his head, unable to speak. He stood gazing at her in amazement, bordering on disbelief. She looked exactly as he remembered her. He'd committed to memory every detail, every feature, except one...

"You," he managed.

Eddus faced Abbi. He was sitting in the chair in the corner. Abbi sat in front of him on the chair that had been at the table. She'd helped him sit when he'd stumbled, almost falling. For several minutes, he lay back in the chair, his expression blank.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 143 2025/03/16 14:46

Abbi had pulled the other chair in front of him and sat patiently until the colour had come back to his face. He blinked a few times before making eye contact with her. She stroked the side of his jaw with her fingers.

"Eddie?"

"You," he said. "You have wings."

It was Abbi's turn to be taken aback. The corner of her mouth curled as she watched as Eddus slowly came back to reality, stifling her urge to laugh.

"What do you think?" she asked, turning her head slightly and glancing at her shoulder.

"I like them," Eddus stammered, blinking in surprise, still in shock. He looked at her wings, then back at her. "You're beautiful. They- They're beautiful! You're wings..."

Eddus took a deep breath, then pursed his lips.

"You know, most of us here have wings." Shaking her head, Abbi chuckled softly. She looked down at her lap.

A look of alarm washed over her, and she withdrew her hand, raising her head quickly.

"Is this why you came? To see these?" Glancing again at her shoulder, she then scowled at Eddus.

"No, Abbi."

"I would have shown you my wings, Eddus. I would have found a way to-"

"That's not the reason I came." Eddus cut her off, but he couldn't seem to find the words to continue.

"Are you ok?" Abbi asked him suddenly. Her scowl was replaced by a look of concern. "What happened to you when you came into the ring?"

"I'm all right." Placing a hand on her shoulder, Eddus smiled at her. "It was a little disorienting. One of the people present when I came in was a member of the guard. I'm not sure what he saved me from when he took me away from the rest of the crowd there, but he brought me here."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 144 2025/03/16 14:46

"Have you been in here ever since then?"

"Well, no, I was taken to some sort of courtroom."

"So, you've already been before the queen?"

"I didn't see a queen, but there were three judges, I think," Eddus told her. "And there were a lot of people watching in the seats behind me."

"What did they do to you?"

Eddus shook his head, not sure what she meant.

"They didn't do anything to me. They just asked me a lot of questions."

"Did they ask you your name?" Abbi sounded panicked.

"No, they already knew my name. I told Dain my name when he brought me here," Eddus said.

He explained to her that Dain was the guard of whom he'd spoken and relayed the conversation that they'd had during their walk to the cell, where Eddus had waited until he was fetched and taken to be questioned.

"What did you tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is important, Eddus. It's so important. Exactly what did you tell this Dain when he asked for your name?"

"I gave him my name. Ed." Shaking his head, Eddus could not decipher the worry that Abbi displayed.

"You're sure you said Ed?"

"Yes."

"Not Eddus?" Her voice lowered as she spoke his name.

"I'm sure."

Relief flooded Abbi's face. She looked toward the ceiling, closing her eyes and exhaling a long sigh. She then opened her eyes and leaned in very close.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 145 2025/03/16 14:46

"That is all you will tell anyone," she said fiercely. Her voice was just as hushed as when she'd spoken his name, and she spoke slowly and deliberately, a pause between each word. "You are Ed, from the human realm, and that is all!"

Eddus shifted his gaze. Her face was right next to his. Her eyes snapped to his, and she raised her brows.

"Don't give anyone your name," she said.

Her tone had softened. She again closed her eyes, pressing her forehead to his. Her hand found his, and she gave it a soft squeeze.

"I won't," Eddus said. "But why?"

"Promise me!"

"I promise." Her words puzzled him, but he was sure there was a reason behind them. There had to be something to make the carefree and playful girl he knew seem so anxious. "I promise."

For a moment, neither of them said anything. As they sat leaning against one another, Eddus felt himself start to calm for the first time since he'd entered the pixie ring. He hadn't exactly found Abbi, but they were together again, and that was all he cared about.

"Why are you here, Eddus Brandt?" Abbi spoke barely above a whisper.

"I had to see you again. I had to know that you were all right."

Eddus spoke before he could even think about the response. The feeling that he wanted to answer her was automatic. It was so strong that he hadn't hesitated, although this time he did not feel that he'd said more than he intended, as he usually did.

"But why? There's nothing wrong with me. I'm fine," Abbi said. She pulled back, looking at him with a puzzled expression. "I promised that you would see me again."

"But you also said that you could be in trouble." Eddus placed his hand on her forearm. "You said that it could be the last time you ever saw me."

"What?" Abbi straightened in her chair, eyes wide.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 146 2025/03/16 14:46

"The day we met in the park. After you showed me... you said that you could be in trouble."

In her expression, Eddus could see that she was thinking. Her brows knitted as she looked down, recalling their time together. She slowly shook her head, then quickly looked up at Eddus, her eyes meeting his.

"No, Eddie..." Abbi spoke softly. She sounded horrified. Her eyes welled, and a tear rolled down her cheek. She shook her head again, lowering her gaze. "No, I was fucking with you. Eddie, I didn't mean it!"

Taking her hand again, Eddus rose from his seat, gently pulling her to her feet. He put his arms around her, kissing the top of her head as she lay it against his chest.

"What do you mean, Abbi? I had to see you. I had to make sure that you weren't in any trouble."

"You shouldn't have come here," she said softly.

"I had to. It's been months since I last seen you. I had to know that you were all right."

"I never should have said that to you. Of course I would have come back to you! I promised you that I would." Abbi raised her head, looking at him with a worried expression. Eddus could see the fear in her eyes. "You can't be here. You're in danger. You're not one of us..."

"But you said that I may never see you again." Eddus brushed her tear-streaked cheek with the back of his fingers.

"I shouldn't have said that. You can't be in this realm. I never meant for this to happen." She glanced away and then back. "I told you that you can never disturb a pixie ring-"

"I love you, Abbi."

"Wh- What?" Abbi stammered.

Eddus looked steadily into Abbi's bewildered, tear-filled eyes. Taking a deep breath, his heart raced as he held her gaze and then continued, not giving her time to respond.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 147 2025/03/16 14:46

"I'm in love with you, Abbi. I don't know how. I don't care how. I know it's crazy, but I think I've loved you since the night we met." He spoke quickly so that she could not interrupt him. "I couldn't live with myself if I thought you'd been punished for showing me the pixie ring that day in the park. I couldn't let it fall only on you."

For a few moments, neither of them said anything. Abbi stared up at Eddus with a stunned expression and a far-away look in her eyes. She slowly turned her head, shifting her gaze to the closed door.

"I have to go," she said blankly, as if in a daze.

She blinked a few times, a tear rolling down her cheek. Stepping away from him and glancing toward the door, she quickly crossed the room in its direction as Eddus watched her in confusion for a brief moment before hurrying to stop her.

"Abbi, wait!"

Reaching the door, Abbie tapped on it once with her knuckles before turning to face him, the far-away look still in her gaze.

"You asked me why I'm here," Eddus told her, "and that's why. I needed you to know."

The door opened a fraction.

Abbi closed the short distance between them. She traced his jawline with her fingertips. Standing on her toes, her lips met his, and she kissed him. As she lowered herself back onto her feet, she tilted her head slightly, still looking at him.

"You're not one of us," she said softly, turning towards the door and pushing it open enough to exit.

Eddus numbly watched the door slowly close behind her and listened to the click as the catch of the lock fell into place.



The lighting dimmed in the windowless room.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 148 2025/03/16 14:46

The natural-looking light that illuminated its white walls changed to a soft ambient glow, leaving everything in shadow, save for the space above the small table in the far corner of the room, which remained lit.

With no idea what time it was or even how much time had passed, Eddus felt a small panic set in until he realised what had happened. His alarm was quickly abated when nothing followed the dimming of the lights.

Taking a step to the bed, he sat down, legs aching. He tried for several minutes, bending and straightening them, to ease his complaining muscles, but with very little relief.

Until the lowering of the lights around him, Eddus had been standing in the exact spot he'd been in as he watched Abbi leave. And except for the pain he felt from standing for what had obviously been a long time, he still felt as numb as he had when Abbi made her exit. Laying down, he closed his eyes, though his mind raced.

'You're not one of us.'

Abbi's words echoed in his mind. The way her whole demeanour had changed when he told her about his feelings for her – the very reason he'd come looking for her – was burned into his memory. Her vacant, stunned expression – it was like she had completely shut down.

But what had he expected? His mind posed the question, followed by a barrage of thoughts in response for every reason why he should, at the very least, not have said something so bold. He should have known how the younger woman would react, in this of all places.

Trying to come up with thoughts in defence of himself seemed like an exercise in futility. Each time he tried to produce reasons that said what he had was for the best, his brain fired back, not only shooting down the defence but also bringing up bigger reasons for not even attempting to come into this realm to begin with.

Abbi's words again came back to him.

'Of course I would have come back! I promised you that I would.'

He hadn't known her all that long, but she'd made it a point of telling him that she kept her promises.

'I told you that you can never disturb a pixie ring.'

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 149 2025/03/16 14:46

It had been months, and she *had* mentioned the possibility of facing some kind of trouble as well as consequences for having shown him her little part of the forest.

The only thing he'd wanted to do was check on her well-being. He couldn't stand the thought of Abbi being in some sort of trouble for having shown him the pixie ring. They hadn't even fully entered it. The thought that he may never see her again…

Had he been foolish to entertain the attention of someone so much younger than himself? Perhaps it was no wonder she had run away earlier.

Eddus argued within himself, both with the echoes of the conversation he'd had with Abbi as well as with his own reprimanding mind. The overwhelming thought began to creep its way in, taking root and negating all other reasons.

Two sharp knocks at the door jolted him, quieting his inner voices. Eddus opened his eyes in time to see the door open a fraction. He stared at the thin black line between the door frame and the door itself, unsure of what to do or expect next. Slowly, he sat up, turning to the edge of the bed and placing his feet on the floor.

"Ed… Ed, are you awake?" a voice just outside the cracked door asked.

Eddus was silent for a moment. His head felt fuzzy, and he had to ignore remnants of his thoughts from moments before. He had to think to place the voice.

"Dain?"

"Yes, Ed, it's Dain."

There was a pause. Eddus said nothing; his eyes fixed on the door.

"May I come in, Ed?"

"Yes! Yes, of course!" Eddus quickly got to his feet. "Please do come in."

The door moved silently on its hinges, opened by the guard using his foot. He held a small tray in front of him. The soft lighting brightened slightly as the guard crossed the threshold into the room.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 150 2025/03/16 14:46

"Good evening," he said, tilting his head toward the table in the corner and starting toward it. "May I?"

Eddus glanced from the table to the tray in Dain's hands. "Yes, of course. Thank you."

Dain stopped mid-stride for a second before continuing and setting the tray down on the table. Although unsure of it, Eddus thought he saw the faerie guard tense his entire body when he paused. He felt a sharp stab of guilt at the slip.

Dain straightened himself before turning around. His appearance differed from the memory Eddus had of him. It was obvious that he was now on duty, as he now wore the same uniform that the guard wore who had escorted him to his hearing, if it could be called that. He smiled as he looked up, his intense green eyes meeting Eddus'.

"I thought you might be hungry."

On the tray behind him, Eddus could see a plate containing some greenery as well as small cakes of some sort. Beside the plate was a glass containing something that resembled milk.

"I also hoped that you might speak with me."

Eddus paused, unsure if what he was hearing was merely a statement or some form of request. When Dain remained silent and unmoved, Eddus stepped past him, pulling the small chair away from the bigger chair, where he and Abbi had sat facing one another earlier.

"Um, yes. Please sit with me."

Eddus gestured to the bigger and more comfortable of the two chairs. Dain quietly took a seat in the chair indicated to him. Eddus sat on the smaller chair, looking at Dain expectantly.

"I trust you are well here."

"I certainly can't complain." Eddus shook his head, laughing lightly. "This is much better than I would have ever envisioned a prisoner being treated."

Dane looked at him sternly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 151 2025/03/16 14:46

"Have you had much experience as a prisoner?"

"Well, no. Hence, why I can only imagine."

"You're not a prisoner here, Ed."

"That's what I've been told." Eddus smiled, nodding as he looked around the small room.

"You shouldn't be here that long. I hear that you were seen this afternoon. I was able to make you a priority."

"I was taken and questioned shortly after you left. And I do appreciate it, Dain. I appreciate everything that you've done for me."

The guard shrugged his shoulders.

"I am glad for that," he said. "Ed, I came here to tell you something, and I want to preface it by saying that I really don't like being the bearer of bad news."

Eddus leaned forward in his seat.

"You spoke of a friend that you came here looking for. I've been asking around and had others ask as well, but we've not had much success." Dain shook his head, his lips tight. "We asked about anyone by the names you gave me, as well as questioning anyone we found by those names. Our searches have been fruitless. Nobody seems to know you or of you."

Eddus opened his mouth to respond, but the guard carried on.

"Look," he said, "this doesn't mean that your friend isn't in the area. I do need to ask you something, though. Where you crossed into our realm, it wasn't coincidental, was it? Did you somehow know to cross the barrier where you did, or was it a random choice? This realm is as big as your world, if not bigger. If you simply stepped into a random ring, you could literally be on the other side of the world from the person you seek."

Eddus smiled, though it felt rather forced.

"It's not something that needs to be worried about, Dain. I found her."

"Did you?" Dain leaned back into the chair, looking mildly surprised.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 152 2025/03/16 14:46

"Yes. Well, no. I guess you could say that she found me. She came to see me here earlier."

"Ed, that is fantastic."

"Yes. I guess the news about my being here got around fast. And it turns out that she is fine."

Thinking back on how their encounter had ended, Eddus did his best to keep smiling.

"I had the feeling you could be trusted," Dain said. "I had a feeling about you when we met. The fact that you found her can only help your case for having come here, as well as hasten your return home."

"I still don't know what it is you kept me from going through when I arrived, but I just want you to know how grateful I am that you did."

"I'm happy that you found who it was you were looking for, Ed. I should be going." The faerie got to his feet. His wings opened slowly and closed, as if on their own. "I believe that you're a good human, a good man. I like your manner. As I said, you're very polite, and I do hope for your sake that this all works out."

Eddus rose from his chair. He extended his right hand. Dain hesitated for a moment and then grasped his hand with his own. He gave a single nod, which Eddus returned.

The guard then walked to the door, where he knocked once and it opened. He looked back, one hand on the door.

"Eat something, Ed. And get some sleep. More food will be brought to you tomorrow. If all goes well, you should only be here a couple of days," Dain said, disappearing through the door, which closed behind him.

Picking up the small chair he'd been sitting on by its back, Eddus carried it to the opposite corner. As he approached the small table, the lights in the room dimmed again, except for the one over it.

The food on the tray was simple but arranged nicely on the plate, and a light scent met his nose.

It was not unpleasant, but Eddus had no appetite. He made his way back to the bed. Untying his shoes, he removed them before lying down. He was

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 153 2025/03/16 14:46

exhausted. His legs still hurt, and his head felt thick. Turning onto his side, toward the wall, he closed his eyes.



Behind her, Abbi heard the door click shut. She took a few moments to watch the human lying on the bed. He was asleep, facing the wall, despite the room's lights having been restored to full brightness for some time that morning.

Quietly approaching the side of the bed and careful not to make a sound, she looked at his face, smiling at how peaceful he seemed. She reached for his shoulder, but refrained from touching him, not wanting to disturb his slumber. She was relieved to know that he could rest in such foreign surroundings, and it was obvious that he was not ready to wake.

Moving carefully, Abbi stepped away from the bedside, looking around the room. As she did, she caught sight of the table in the small nook along the far wall. Her body went cold as she realised what it was that she was seeing. Her heart raced within her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

From where she stood, she could see the tray with the plate of food on it. Moving as quietly as she could, she approached it, scanning the tray's contents carefully. She then leaned heavily with both hands on the back of the small chair, exhaling a sigh of relief.

She touched the edge of the plate. As far as she could tell, nothing on it had been touched. Closing her eyes, she smiled and then withdrew her hand. Leaning again on the chair back, she lowered her head, closing her eyes tightly, and gave another sigh while silently reprimanding herself for not thinking to bring Eddus food earlier.

Returning to his bedside, she again watched him sleep. She fought the urge to sit down on the edge of the bed or to lay down behind him and put her arm over him.

Standing still for a moment longer before turning away, she walked to the chair in the corner of the room. Perhaps she'd sit and wait for him to stir, as she did not want to leave.

After her departure the day before, she'd been up all night and had something she had to tell him. There was so much that he needed to know.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 154 2025/03/16 14:46

There was so much he was not aware of.

Sinking into the soft, cushioned chair, the long night caught up with her. She gazed again at the sleeping human on the other side of the room. Allowing herself to lean back, she closed her eyes as her head met with the softness of the chair.



"I do hope that you were not too uncomfortable."

Abbi's eyes sprang open, and she gasped aloud, sitting up quickly. The sound of conversation had coaxed her awake, and as she came to, she remembered where she was. Wincing at the stiffness of her body from having fallen asleep in the chair, she looked around.

On the other side of the room, she saw Eddus standing near the door. About a pace away from him was someone else. He was fae, but she didn't recognize him. He stood about a head shorter than Eddus. And he wore a guard's uniform.

Both men were looking at her, an expression of concern on the human's face and a surprised and curious look on the guard's.

Eddus then smiled, taking a step in her direction.

Looking from the two men standing by the door to the table at the other end of the room, then back at them, Abbi remembered what she'd seen before she'd fallen asleep. Alarmed, she jumped to her feet. Looking again at the table, she took a step toward it.

Taking inventory of its contents, she exhaled the breath she held. On the table was the same tray she'd seen earlier. Nothing had been touched, as far as she could tell. She turned toward the two, who still watched her questioningly.

Quickly, she crossed the small room in the men's direction.

"Abbi, are you alright?" Eddus asked her.

The pixie did not answer but stepped past him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 155 2025/03/16 14:46

"It's Dain, right?"

The guard straightened himself as Abbi approached and then nodded in response.

Closing the distance between them, Abbi came to a stop just in front of him. They spoke quietly, their voices hushed but not so quiet that Eddus was unable to make out their conversation from where he stood.

"Is there something the matter? Something I can do for you?" Looking apprehensive as well as uncomfortable with how close to him she stood, Dain took a small step away from the pixie in front of him.

"I'm worried about something," Abbi said curtly, leaning forward as the guard stepped back.

The expression of uneasiness on the guard's face immediately changed to concern, and he nodded, inclining his head.

"What's troubling you, Abbi?"

As a member of the guard, it was his job to help anyone with a concern.

Shifting herself out of the way, Abbi tilted her head in the direction of the tray with food on it sitting on the small table. She looked at Dain, who shook his head, not grasping what she was trying to get at.

"The food, Dain," Abbi said to him, again inclining her head slightly in the direction of the table.

"I brought that in last night. I thought perhaps Ed may need some refreshment." Dain spoke plainly, casting a glance in the direction she'd indicated and then to Eddus. "Was there something wrong with what I brought to you?"

Eddus shook his head, unaware of what the contents on the plate had to do with anything.

"Was it not to your liking?" Dain asked.

"The food is from this world, Dain," Abbi interjected, her brows raised slightly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 156 2025/03/16 14:46

"Oh." A look of realisation came over the guard's face, and he inhaled sharply, looking at the tray in the corner wide-eyed. "Oh…"

"Yes."

"Abbi, you know, it may not even be a problem. It could just be the stories. It may not even affect humans. We don't know for sure…" Dain spoke quickly, a look of uncertainty on his face.

"Well, can we please not test that out on *this* human?" Abbi said, looking towards Eddus.

Dain nodded and quickly went to the table, collecting the tray. He turned to Eddus.

"You didn't eat, did you?" he asked, a look of concern on his face.

"I was a bit upset."

Shaking his head, Eddus glanced at Abbi, then watched a look of relief come over Dain, who crossed the room quickly and tapped on the closed door with his elbow. As the door opened, Dain nodded thoughtfully.

"I'll get this out of here," he told them.

Eddus sat down on the bed as the door clicked shut.

"Abbi, what the hell is going on?"

"How long was I asleep?" Abbi turned to look at Eddus, who shook his head. "How long did you let me sleep?"

"You must have still been sleeping when I woke up. I didn't even know you were here," Eddus said, shaking his head. "What was that all about?"

He looked past her at the door, still bewildered.

"What time is it?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 157 2025/03/16 14:46

Again, Eddus could only shake his head. He had no idea what time it was.

He'd only awoken a little while before, feeling groggy and still facing the wall. His mind raced as the events of the previous day came back to him.

Thinking back on everything that had happened was more like remembering a fantastic dream than recalling actual events. If it weren't for the fact that he awoke in the same room... He'd closed his eyes again, trying not to think about it.

A knock at the door startled him, and he rolled over, sitting up on the edge of the bed, in time to see the door open slightly. The visitor was Dain, who entered upon Eddus' invitation. They'd only spoken for roughly a minute before Abbi awoke.

Abbi turned her head to look at the door.

"It doesn't matter," she said, and sat next to Eddus on the bed, taking his hand in hers.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

Abbi looked at him blankly for a moment. Her questioning eyes went wide with surprise.

"The time, Eddie... it doesn't matter." Abbi shook her head. "There's something I have to tell you!"

"What just happened, Abbi?"

The pixie opened her mouth as if to say something, then slowly closed it, pursing her lips.

"I should have brought you food last night," she said, lowering her gaze, her brows knitted. "I didn't even think about it. I rushed out without thinking about what could have happened."

'You're not one of us...'

The blank expression on Abbi's face as she'd left the room the night before flashed into the forefront of Eddus' memory, her words echoing in his mind. He said nothing. After their encounter the previous evening, he had no idea what was going on.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 158 2025/03/16 14:46

Raising her head, Abbi's eyes met his. She looked deflated.

"I should have thought to bring you something to eat," she said in a regretful tone. Her grasp on Eddus' hand firmed for a moment.

"I don't understand," he said. "Why does it matter who brought the food? I couldn't eat anything anyway."

"Yes, but if you had..."

Abbi's expression was a mix of seriousness and worry. Eddus could not even guess what she was thinking.

"You can't eat anything here, Eddie," Abbi spoke after a few moments of silence. She then shook her head, clearly searching for what she was trying to say. "No, I mean, of course you can eat, but only if I bring you the food. Please, I don't want anything to happen to you."

"What is it that could happen, Abbi? What did Dain mean when he talked about stories and not being sure? What is it you are unsure of?"

"Well, there is a chance that- there's a chance that you could die."

Abbi began to look lost and uncomfortable.

"Die?" Eddus felt a cold alarm grip his insides. There was a buzzing in his ears that seemed to throb inside of his head, and he had to struggle to catch his breath. He couldn't imagine that the guard who'd helped him from the moment he'd arrived could possibly try to kill him. "Do you mean it could be poisoned?"

"Eddus, no!" Abbi looked up at him with a horrified expression. She shook her head. "Nobody in this realm would try and poison you. That's not our way."

The look in her eyes made him instantly regret his question.

Eddus glanced at the door for a moment, his mind racing. While he did feel a slight relief at hearing this, it still didn't give him the answer he wanted. If it wasn't poison, he still needed to know what he was in danger of.

"You're the first human to have come here uninvited and stay for any period of time in hundreds of years. The few humans who have crossed

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 159 2025/03/16 14:46

the barrier between our worlds were never here long enough to require anything to eat."

Abbi paused, having been speaking rather quickly. She took a deep breath before continuing.

"There are stories about how our food affects humans. It's been said that for a human to eat anything from this world, he would starve himself if he went back to yours. It's not known why, but it's been suggested that the realm itself affects our food. Perhaps it was a protection placed on the food in this realm after humans tried to come here by force. It would make them want only the food here, so that, should they go back to your world, they would starve and perish." She paused. " What Dain was referring to was the fact that we don't know for sure because we've only ever heard the stories."

"But why? How can you not be sure? How can you not know?"

"As I said, nobody really knows. No one even knows how old those stories are. It would have been for the protection of the realm. I mean, I'm sure that someone, somewhere, knows. It could just be legend, but when I saw that he'd brought something for you to eat..."

Eddus sat in stunned silence, not knowing what to think. At another time, he might have dismissed what Abbi was saying as fantasy, but he couldn't. Not after everything he'd experienced since stepping through the pixie ring.

The young woman telling him these things was the same woman who had stayed with him for two and a half weeks. She'd fallen asleep next to him every night. She now sat opposite him on the bed in a world that was not his own. And she had wings. He couldn't believe any of this, but he couldn't dismiss anything either.

He was relieved that nobody was trying to kill him, and in light of what he'd just been told, he was also relieved that he'd been in too much of a state to eat anything before he'd fallen asleep.

"I was afraid that..." Abbi's voice faltered. She squeezed Eddus' hand, looking at him pleadingly and placing her free hand on his leg. "I will bring you food, Eddus. But please, *promise* me that you won't eat anything given to you by anyone else."

"I promise." Eddus nodded, gazing at her distantly.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 160 2025/03/16 14:46

He still felt cold and numb. Tilting his head slightly, he looked from her face to her hand, still holding his, and then again to her gaze.

"Eddie." Abbi said, her expression sombre. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"Did I say too much?" Eddus asked quietly.

Abbi's brows creased as she shook her head. Her eyes searched his.

"When we were last together, I told you that... well, what I said..." Eddus said, studying her face and inhaling deeply.

"I don't understand," Abbi said, lowering her gaze with a slight look of worry.

"Well, I think that perhaps I may have said more than I should have."

Abbi again shook her head, her expression becoming one of uncertainty. She thought back on the previous day, when she'd seen him last. Releasing his hand, she stood up, taking a step away from the bed.

"Did you not mean what you said?"

Eddus blinked at her in surprise, watching her blink back the tears in her welling eyes. He quickly stood up and took a step toward her, but Abbi took another step back as he approached and raised her hand just in front of her, palm facing him.

"Abbi, I think you've misunderstood me."

"Did you not mean what you said?" she asked again, her bottom lip quivering slightly.

If ever there was a time Eddus truly felt like he should make an apology, it was now.

"I meant every word of what I told you," he said. He was now more confused than when he'd watched her leave the room the day before.

"You did? You mean... you do...?" Relief flooded Abbi's face. Dropping her hand, she stepped toward Eddus, tears streaming down her cheeks as she looked up at him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 161 2025/03/16 14:46

"Love you," Eddus said, gingerly wiping her cheek with his thumb. Cautiously, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Yes, I do love you."

For a few moments, they stood in silence. Eddus rested a hand on Abbi's shoulder, who leaned her head forward against his chest. He watched her shoulders rise and fall as she took several very deep breaths.

In light of her emotional reaction to things, he began to wonder if it was not he that had misunderstood something, although he still could not at all understand what had happened the day before or what had just happened.

"Why would you say that, Eddus Brandt?"

Eddus closed his eyes. While he felt the familiar urge to answer her question, he felt unsure.

"Because I do... I said it because I love you."

Opening his eyes, he found himself looking into the face of the pixie in front of him. Her brows still creased, she shook her head, peering up at him with a curious and pleading look.

"Wait, what did I say?"

"You said that you'd said too much. What did I misunderstand, if you meant what you said to me?"

Relief washed over Eddus, and he smiled, kissing Abbi's forehead again.

"Abbi, I did, and I still do, mean what I said to you last night. Every word," Eddus said. "I do love you. I do. But, when you left so quickly after we talked, I thought that maybe I shouldn't have said it."

"How was it too much, then, if you meant it?"

"I don't know, Abbi. The way you looked at me. What you said before you left. Did I say something wrong?"

"No, Eddie," Abbi said, shaking her head and thinking again on their last encounter. "Not at all. And I shouldn't have left like that. I know what I said, but that was why I had to leave you."

"What?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 162 2025/03/16 14:46

"I had to go and find out a few things. I think I've found a way to save you."



"What do you mean 'a way to save me'? What do I need to be saved from?"

"You're in so much danger, Eddus!" Tears sprang from both her eyes, rolling down her cheeks.

"What? What danger?"

"You shouldn't be here." Shaking her head, Abbi began to turn away.

Eddus placed a hand on her shoulder, turning her again to face him. He could see the urgency and fear in her eyes.

"What are you talking about, Abbi?"

"Eddus, they're going to kill you." Abbi's jaw clenched.

"What? Who?" Upon hearing her words, Eddus felt himself suddenly go numb. He removed his hand from her arm, taking a step back. "You said that nobody was trying to kill me."

"I can't let it happen. I won't."

"Abbi, what are you saying?"

"I'm sure you've been told that there are no prisoners here, Eddus."

Eddus nodded. He had been told this by two separate people.

"Think about what that means. In this realm, if someone is found to be innocent, they are set free. If they're found to be guilty, they're put to death."

"But Beagan said – "

"Who? Eddus, there is no Beagan! I don't know who it was you spoke with when you went before the queen, but you can be sure that wasn't her

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 163 2025/03/16 14:46

name. Beagan is a word that means small. It wasn't her real name, Eddie. It's a fake name!"

"But she said they would take my case to the queen."

"There is no queen, Eddus! Not in the way you think." Abbi took his hand, meeting his gaze, and shook her head. "The queen is a collective, not a singular person. There hasn't been a queen for thousands of years. But that doesn't matter right now. I don't want you to die!"

Eddus stood there, stunned, looking down at the young woman in front of him.

"But-"

"Eddus, what we call the queen's ruling is a decision based on the opinion of those who currently live in this realm. When a ruling is handed down by the 'queen', it is for the good of the fae, passed by the fae. And they will protect this world, no matter what. You didn't come here by mistake. You knew that the pixie ring would bring you here."

"I only wanted to make sure that you were all right." Eddus sank slowly onto the bed. "I told Beagan – or whoever she is – that I'd leave and never come back."

"Eddus, they'll never allow you to leave."



"Are you sure? About this, I mean."

Eddus kissed Abbi's forehead. They'd been sitting side by side for several minutes in silence, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Eddus, I have been up all night looking into it," Abbi said. "It was part of the reason I had to leave you so quickly."

His stomach knotting in pain, Eddus closed his eyes, feeling lost. He clenched his jaw as his mind raced. Everything he'd just been told came back to him all at once. He could not have imagined anything like this when he stepped from his world into the faerie ring.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 164 2025/03/16 14:46

"I love you," Abbi said softly. She took a deep breath.

Eddus looked down at her in surprise. It wasn't something he'd expected to hear. He'd only told her his feelings the day before.

"I do... love you, you know," she said. "And I don't want you to die."

Eddus didn't respond. He tilted his head, touching his cheek to the top of her head. Had this been another time and place, had it been a different situation... Instead, he felt hollow and uncertain. He couldn't process the thought that his life might be getting shorter with each passing minute.

"Eddus, mate with me." Lifting her head from his shoulder, Abbi turned to face him.

A look of concern came over him. Eddus remained still, looking into her serious face.

"Mate with me," Abbi said again.

She watched him shake his head in confusion and thought quickly for another way to express what she was saying.

"Marry me, Eddus. It's what I've wanted to tell you since I came back. If we can successfully create a mate-bond, then we are linked to one another forever."

"Marry you?" The words sounded foreign to him even as Eddus said them. His mind raced.

"Yes. Marry me. Become my bonded mate."

"But you just said that they are going to kill me." Eddus shook his head.

He felt like the room was spinning; he could hardly comprehend the words. It wasn't something he could even think about in the current circumstances. He looked away, staring blankly at the floor.

"How?" he said. "I can't marry you."

"Eddus..."

"I love you, Abbi."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 165 2025/03/16 14:46

"And I love you, Eddie-"

"You don't understand. It's because I love you that I am here and in this predicament in the first place. If you had said those words to me under different circumstances, Abbi... But if what you're telling me is true... I couldn't do that to you." The words spilled out of him.

Abbi opened her mouth to respond, but Eddus raised a hand, stopping her, and continued.

"What kind of person would I be? How could I tell you that I love you? How? How could I marry you, knowing that at any time now, I might be taken away and killed?" he asked, still looking away.

"I do love you, Eddus. And- and I have to save your life. It's you who don't understand. I used the word marry, so that you could comprehend it in your words. A mate-bond is so much more than a marriage. It connects and binds us to each other forever. Not in some legal way, not like a human marriage. This is a connection between us that cannot ever be broken. It links us to one another – our hearts, our minds, our senses. We become one spirit."

Abbi took his hand. They sat in silence for a few moments.

"And when they kill me?" Eddus shook his head miserably, a knot forming in his stomach. "How could I think of doing that to you? How could I even consider becoming connected to you as closely as you've said, knowing that soon I might die? If what you're saying is possible, how could I?"

Abbi lowered herself to her knees on the floor in front of him, placing herself in his line of vision. She watched his face, unable to imagine all that could be going on in his thoughts. He hadn't come into her world out of curiosity or with any selfish or malicious intent. His only concern was for her safety, which had only been spurred on by a single statement she had made and then completely forgotten about. He didn't deserve any of this.

She thought about the time they'd spent together before she'd returned to her realm. She recalled creeping into his room at night to crawl into bed with him. She thought about waking up together with him in the mornings, the deep connection she'd felt being with him, and hoping that he'd felt it as well. She thought of their physical encounter the night before she returned. She longed to be with Eddus, back in his flats above the warehouse.

Abbi's chest tightened while she watched the conflict in his gaze. Patiently, she sat looking at him until she saw him regard her again, his

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 166 2025/03/16 14:46

eyes focusing on her face.

"You don't have to die," she told him with a hopeful smile. "This is also what I was looking into last night. If we successfully form a mate-bond, we'll be one, connected. We'll be seen as one in this realm. You'll be one of us by the laws of this realm, and by those laws, we do not put one of our own to death."

Abbi watched Eddus again retreat into thought, his gaze shifting. She placed a hand on his, watching his jaw tighten, the muscles below his temples clenching several times, his eyes seeing something past her. She only wished that she could know what he was thinking.

Eddus again felt lost as he looked at her attempting to smile reassuringly at him.

"How old are you, Abbi?"

"Eddie..." The smile vanished from her face, and Abbi took her hand off of his shoulder, leaning back a little.

"How old are you?"

Abbi shook her head.

"Abbi..."

"The difference in our ages doesn't mean anything here," she said softly. It was again clear that it was not something she wanted to talk about.

He'd noticed it before but always dismissed it; something about the topic made her uncomfortable. Eddus sat forward on the bed, looking at Abbi with a worried expression, while a sudden feeling of alarm began to creep into his chest.

"Things are different in this realm." Abbi touched his cheek, which he involuntarily pulled away from. The pixie's eyes widened, and she raised herself on her knees, looking up at him, her own expression now worried. "What's the matter, Eddus?"

"We weren't in this realm when we... I was worried just now about how I could marry you and then widow you. I was worried about how we could mate, or however we refer to it, but now I'm concerned that... I worry that... How old *are* you, Abbi? Have I broken a law?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 167 2025/03/16 14:46

"Eddus."

"You never actually told me your age." Eddus looked at her, his heart starting to race. He began to have an ill feeling deep in his stomach.

Abbi bit her lip as she leaned slightly towards him, her brows rising slightly.

"Abbi, are you over eighteen?" A worried look on his face, a chill ran down Eddus' spine as he remembered the night before the pixie left.

At this, Abbi's eyes widened, a look of shock on her face. She began to laugh so hard she had to put an arm on Eddus' knee, laying her forehead on it. She shook her head as she laughed, still resting it on her arm. When she did look up, a tear rolled down her cheek, and her eyes danced. She tried not to laugh again at his bewildered face or at the memory of his question.

"Eddus, I promise you have nothing to worry about."

Abbi used her arm to press against Eddus' leg and stood up. She touched a fingertip to his lips, still shaking her head.

"Abbi, I have to know." Eddus looked up at the pixie, not sure what to make of her response. His chest was still tight and there was a wrenching feeling in his gut. "Especially now."

Abbi's eyes still danced as she gazed at him, narrowing them.

"Please, Abbi."

"I'm thinking," Abbi told him. "Give me a moment."

"What is there to think about?" Eddus watched her face. "How old are you?"

Abbi's brows knitted for a moment, her eyes shifting down and to the left. She then let out a short laugh and bit her lip again. She smiled at Eddus, who stared at her questioningly.

"Eddie, I passed eighteen a hundred and eighty years ago," Abbi said finally.

"W-what?" Eddus stammered. He felt himself get light-headed as he tried to process what he'd just heard.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 168 2025/03/16 14:46

"I told you that things are different here." Abbi's smile faltered, and there was an uncertainty in her voice as she watched Eddus carefully, gauging his reaction.

"Are you... fucking... Are you fucking with me again?"

Abbi shook her head slowly. She took a small step back. Eddus stared at her with a look of disbelief.

"You're how old?"

"Two hundred," Abbi said, biting her lip, a look of worry in her eyes, "and two."

"Now you're fucking with me." Eddus chuckled nervously, shaking his head. "Right?"

"Three..." Abbi looked down at the floor.

"What?"

"Two hundred and three...?"

Eddus pulled back. He blinked, his head spinning.

"You're- What? Wait, what? Abbi, how old are you?"

"I did tell you that I'm older than you think." Wringing her wrist, Abbi shuffled her bare feet uncomfortably.

Unable to form words and barely able to comprehend what had just been said to him, Eddus stared at the pixie, his mouth ajar and confusion visible on his face. The whole atmosphere had changed.

Just moments before, he'd been told that his life was in danger but that there was a way for him to escape death. And although he didn't quite understand everything that Abbi had told him, he could see that it was something that she had complete faith in. On the surface, it should have been something to be excited about.

Now, he could barely remember a thing she'd told him as he tried to grasp this new bit of information. He had wondered several times, going back to the very night that he'd met Abbi, about her age. He'd asked her on more than one occasion.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 169 2025/03/16 14:46

Until now, he'd been curious due to an internal ethical debate. Until now, he had worried that their friendship and their very association might have been inappropriate. But-

"I'm two hundred and three years old, Eddus Brandt, in your realm."

Abbi dropped to her knees in front of the human, taking his hand in hers. She pressed her lips to the back of his hand.

Eddus again shook his head, still unable to speak. His gaze travelled from her wings down to the back of her head. With his free hand, he brushed a lock of her hair to the side.

Slowly, Abbi raised her head. Her eyes glistening with tears, she watched Eddus for a moment. He did not meet her gaze.

"I'm sorry, Eddie," Abbi whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not possible." Eddus' blank eyes shifted to her face.

It was the same face he'd seen every day for the weeks she'd spent with him. The same youthful features that had at first made him constantly question whether or not she was old enough to be associating with, and that same look in her eyes that suggested something else.

"It can't be possible."

Abbi dropped her gaze, then looked again at him, her eyes pleading with him.

"Eddus, I promise I wasn't deceiving you. I just couldn't lie to you and give you a false number, so I avoided the question. I did tell you that... I didn't mean to..."

Abbi closed her eyes for a moment, a tear rolling down her cheek, before she opened them again.

Nodding blankly, Eddus stared past her. Slowly, a smile formed on his lips, and he began to laugh. A chuckle at first, he pursed his lips before laughing out loud, unable to keep it in. Closing his eyes, Eddus leaned his head back, still laughing quietly. He took a deep breath and then exhaled. He then looked down at the bewildered girl on the floor in front of him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 170 2025/03/16 14:46

"Eddie?" Abbi leaned back just enough to look at Eddus again, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

"I've been so concerned from the moment I met you."

"Why?"

"Abbi, I asked you so many times."

"My age..."

"Yes."

A look of realization washed over her face and she gasped, her eyes widening..

"Just how old- How *young* did you think I am?"

Abbi lowered herself, sitting with her feet under her. She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes, and giving Eddus a sidelong look, letting go of his hand.

Eddus' face fell as he shook his head.

"Did you really think I was –" Abbi had to search for the word, "*under-aged*...?"

"No! I didn't know, Abbi. I-" Eddus inhaled sharply, his chest aching as he did.

"Eddus," Abbi's brows knit. She leaned back slightly. With a perplexed look, she lowered her head, glancing from left to right. "I stayed with you for weeks. We slept in the same bed. We... we..."

A look of surprise and then horror came over Eddus. His heart raced. He shook his head, pulling his hands towards himself, watching Abbi's shoulders begin to shake.

"Oh my god, Abbi! No! I didn't – I never would have – I'm so-"

"Eddie, no!" Abbi slowly raised her head. Her lips were pursed, and she was trying not to smile. Her shoulders shook again as she stifled a laugh. "Please, don't. I'm fucking with you! Really."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 171 2025/03/16 14:46

Closing his eyes, Eddus exhaled slowly, feeling cold. His chest ached as he breathed out. His heart raced. He tried to slow his breathing while thinking about and simultaneously trying to forget what had just been said. For a moment, he wondered if anything she'd just told him was true or not.

He took several deep breaths, trying to quell the sickness he felt in the pit of his stomach.

"Eddus, you're shaking." Abbi's hand squeezed his, at which Eddus tried to pull away. Her smile waned as she watched him take several more deep breaths, and she tightened her grip.

Keeping his eyes closed, Eddus remained silent, trying to breathe calmly while searching for something to say. He again felt ill. His entire life, or what may be left of it, was now engulfed in turmoil, which was only compounded by thinking about it. And yet Abbi could somehow still make light of things.

"Eddie?"

Shaking his head again, Eddus' shoulders slumped as he slowly exhaled a long breath. He did his best to calm himself when, slowly, something dawned on him.

"You said if..."

Opening his eyes, Eddus looked past the pixie toward the chair in the corner on the opposite side of the room. His heart still beat so rapidly that he could feel it in his throat and he still struggled to put her teasing out of his head.

"What?" Abbi blinked in surprise.

"Before... you said 'if ' we successfully form a bond." His expression was unchanged, and he continued to gaze vacantly past her. "I don't know what that means, but what if...?"

"Eddie, please don't worry about that. I shouldn't have said it that way. I should have said when," Abbi told him. "Please forget what I said. I would not have brought this up if I thought that anything could go wrong. I meant 'when'. It's very rare that a bond is unsuccessful between two people who love one another."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 172 2025/03/16 14:47

"But it does happen?"

"Do you trust me, Eddus Brandt?"

"I do," he said, unsure of his answer after everything that had just transpired.

After a moment, he looked into Abbi's eyes. Her gaze was unwavering, though full of emotion. He slowly nodded.

"Of course I do," he told her.

"Then please, trust me. I'm responsible for all of this, and I won't let anything happen to you." She stood, leaning down to kiss him, before adding, "I love you. When you told me that you were in love with me, I had to go make sure, but this will work. It will save your life. And I want this. I do want it. I am so sorry I got you into this."

As her words sank in, Eddus blinked in surprise. He nodded slowly and kissed her again, touching her cheek with his fingertips.

"I have to go now, Eddie. There are some things I have to get so that we can perform the mate-bond ritual." She touched her forehead to his, closing her eyes. "I will be back as soon as I can."

Rising to her feet, Abbi walked to the door, tapping against it. As it opened slightly, she turned to look at Eddus, who still looked lost in all of this, once more before she exited the room.



"There is something that I need you to know before we can do this."

The room's lighting had dimmed a short time after Abbi had returned to the room. She'd been away for some time. For a long time after she left, Eddus sat waiting, expecting that at any moment the door would open and she would enter accompanied by some sort of priest or holy man.

She was gone for what seemed like hours, which allowed Eddus time to be alone with his thoughts. Those thoughts took no time in flooding his mind, making him question his decision and wonder if he was doing the right thing.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 173 2025/03/16 14:47

'Consider marriage as an escape from punishment? How could you possibly... What kind of person could do such a thing?'

The situation was impossible. His own inner voice brought up everything from the comparison of someone marrying out of convenience to the fact that he still saw the young woman he'd just agreed to marry as hardly old enough to really know what marriage really was, even in light of how old she said she was.

Eddus had, of course, fought back against that inner voice, arguing mentally that not only had it been Abbi who'd suggested the union but also that the only real convenience of the situation was that there was a chance that he may not be put to death. Although still confused, he had no reason not to believe her about the danger to his life or her age, for that matter. In the short time he'd known her, she had only ever spoken the truth.

He struggled to quiet his mind, which made her absence seem longer.

When she did return, Abbi told him that everything was ready and that she had been to the human world. With her, she had a small cloth sack containing some food: two bread rolls and two pieces of fruit. Besides food, the small sack contained a length of thin, white linen and a small, double-edged knife made of some sort of black glass. A solid piece of glass, its blade's length was almost as long as a hand's width, and its hilt was wrapped in a braided rope.

They sat in silence as Eddus ate, Abbi watching him with a little smile on her face. When he finished, she pulled the small chair in front of the other. They sat as closely as they could manage, facing one another. Abbi took the knife and the linen out of the cloth sack.

Eddus watched as she laid the knife in her lap and unrolled the long strip of linen, which she also laid across her thighs.

"I need to tell you that I love you, Abbi."

When Eddus spoke, Abbi paused, looking at him in the shadowy dusk of the room. She leaned forward, taking his hands.

"And I do love you." Abbi smiled, her eyes flashing in the hushed light.

Eddus shook his head.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 174 2025/03/16 14:47

"I have to say this. I need you to know it," he said. "You need to know before we go through with this that I do love you. I do truly love you. I know I told you before, but I you need to know it. I *am* in love with you. And you have to know that I would not marry- or mate- with you for the sole purpose of staying alive. I want you to know that. I need you to know it."

"I do know it, Eddus Brandt, I do. And I know it because you're here." Abbi's face became sombre, and she swallowed hard. A tear rolled down her cheek, falling to her lap. She closed her eyes for a moment. "I also know that if it weren't for what I said to you that night, you never would have come here. But the fact that you're here-"

"I need you to know that it is more than that," Eddus said. He inhaled deeply, studying every detail of her face. During her absence earlier on, he had come to a realisation that had helped him to argue reason with his thoughts.

He could see himself asking Abbi to marry him had their relationship continued. He didn't know if he actually would have asked the pixie, or how long it would take to get to that point with her being gone for long intervals. He did love the girl he'd met standing barefoot on the sidewalk that night, and he could see their relationship progressing to that point.

Eddus squeezed her hands gently. Watching her silently as she sighed and opened her eyes, he waited for her gaze to meet his. She looked down at her lap and then back at his face.

"And now, there's also something I have to tell you, Eddus. And please don't think that I ever tried to trick you," Abbi said quietly. She inhaled deeply. "There's something you have to know before we can mate-bond."

Eddus' brows knit together in concern as he watched her quickly turn her face away from him. She pulled her hands from his grasp, using the back of her left hand to wipe her tear-streaked cheeks.

"What is it, Abbi?"

"Issabella," Abbi said, taking a deep breath.

"What?"

"Eddus, I promise you that I wasn't trying to deceive you."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 175 2025/03/16 14:47

"You just said that, but I don't understand."

"My name, Eddus," Abbi said, avoiding eye contact, "is not Abbi."

"It's not? What-"

"My name is Issabella."

"Abbi..."

"Issabella."

Eddus leaned back in the chair, staring through her. His head began to ache. Between the idea of marriage, Abbi's age, and now this, it actually hurt to think.

"Eddie, I'm so sorry."

"You always tell me not to apologise," he said blankly.

"Eddus..."

"What? Why? How can you say that you weren't trying to deceive me?" The question was uttered before he even realised what he was saying.

"Eddus, I couldn't give you my real name!"

Eddus ran his hands through his hair, massaging the back of his skull, the dull ache becoming a throbbing pain.

The young lady sitting across from him shook her head, her eyes finally meeting his. She reached forward, touching his knee. Eddus' gaze shifted to her hand, which she slowly removed.

"I couldn't give you my true name, Eddie. It was never meant to mislead you." Abbi could see the hurt and confusion in his eyes and his expression. "You don't understand. Names hold power. Giving someone your name gives them a certain power over you. So to protect ourselves, we don't give our real names."

Eddus shook his head, weary bewilderment on his face.

"No one in this realm will ever give you their real name. The guard you met is not named Dain. The faerie you spoke to is not Beagan. We protect

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 176 2025/03/16 14:47

our names so that they cannot be used against us."

"But you know my name," he said slowly.

The pixie nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"I do. I know I do, Eddie. And it is one of the things that most drew me to you – your trust in giving me your name so freely."

"You said your name is Abbi. You told me the night we met. You even told Stiles it was short for Abigail."

"I told you to *call* me Abbi." She looked uncomfortable as she spoke. "And when Stiles asked if Abbi was short for Abigail, I did tell her that it was, because it is."

Eddus didn't speak. He didn't move. In his mind, he replayed the night he'd met her. Every detail of the encounter he'd committed to memory. What she'd just said was true. After asking him to guess her name, she told him to call her Abbi. She never actually said that it was her name. Still, he couldn't help feeling misled in some way.

"Is Issabella your real name?"

The girl sitting opposite him, with her head down and fidgeting with her hands, was the reason he had come to this place. She was supposed to somehow become linked to him in a way that was stronger than marriage and for the rest of his life, and he hadn't even known her real name. He really knew nothing about her.

"It is, Eddie. I promise you that it is my name. My true name. And you knowing that name gives you more power over me than you know. More than anyone has ever had. The giving of our names to one another is the first step in the mate-bond. By giving it to you, I am surrendering to you, Eddus. I'm giving to you the only thing that is truly mine, in the trust that you will never misuse it." Issabella raised her head. "You don't know what it meant to have been freely and openly given your name when we met. Apart from my own, it is the most treasured thing in my possession."

"What's your last name?"

The pixie shook her head, not breaking eye contact with him.

"Your family name."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 177 2025/03/16 14:47

"Eddus, I have no last name, no family name."

"How is that even possible? Everyone has a last name," Eddus said. The ache in his head intensified. He did not understand at all. "You just said that your name isn't Abbi, and now you have no last name?"

The knot reformed in his gut, and he began to wonder if all of this had been a foolish idea.

"I don't have a last name." Tears fell from her eyes onto the linen strip across her lap as the pixie leaned toward him. "I promise I don't. I'm Issabella. Just Issabella."

It was impossible to comprehend that the woman he loved, whom he had crossed into another world for and now may be facing death for, had withheld her real name from him. It should have been a deal-breaker, no matter the circumstances.

"That's a custom of your world, Eddie."

"Nobody here has a last name?"

"No." She looked so small, sitting across from him, looking at him with worried guilt. "Eddie, I'm- I'm just Issabella."

Taking her hand, Eddus nodded. He looked at her hand in his, his eyes traveling up her arm, her neck, and the membraned wings behind her. He put thoughts of the dishonesty he'd been subjected to and the feelings that accompanied it aside. Everything he knew and everything that he was struggled to push those thoughts and feelings back to the forefront, but he knew that he had to look past them.

He had to tell himself that there was nothing about the situation he was in that he knew for sure. He'd stepped from a spot in a park he had visited all of his life into a whole different world. The beautiful young woman in front of him was not young at all, as he had thought. She had wings, which was impossible but was physical proof that he could not let what he thought he knew be the deciding factor.

He studied Abbi's face as she tried to hold his gaze, tears running down her face. His brows furrowed slightly for just a moment as he tilted his head. She glanced away as he leaned toward her.

"There's a bit of green in your eyes."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 178 2025/03/16 14:47

"Wh- what?" She quickly met his gaze again with a bewildered look.

"Your eyes..." Eddus had been looking her at expression, and there was no deception that he could detect. He was not sure why he'd voiced the observation.

"Eddus, I-" Shaking her head in confusion, the pixie lowered her gaze, looking from left to right.

"Abbi-" Eddus took a deep breath. He closed his eyes for a moment, then corrected himself.

"Issabella," he said, the name sounding as foreign to his ears as it felt to say it and as foreign as his next words. "Marry me..."

Upon hearing him say her name, Issabella slowly raised her head.

"Mate with me." Using the words she had spoken to him earlier, Eddus' heart pounded within his chest. He struggled to keep his breathing normal. His feelings were in a storm of conflict, but he made up his mind.

The woman in front of him was silent. For a moment she didn't move, before throwing herself forward and embracing him, the items on her lap falling to the floor.

Eddus put his arms around her, and she held him tightly, leaning against him. Again, his mind raced as he took her onto his lap. He gently rocked her while she sobbed quietly, her forehead tucked firmly into the crook of his neck.

Gently stroking the back of her head, Eddus closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. The smell of her hair, the warmth of her body – it felt right to hold Abbi, even if it was not her name. She was still the same woman; he had held her every night for weeks, falling asleep with her in his arms and many times waking in the same position.

He still could in no way wrap his mind around anything that was happening. He was here, in another world, a young woman with wings on her back sitting on his lap. He struggled to believe that any of this was actually happening to him.

The only thing that did not seem surreal at this point was the feeling he felt at this moment while his eyes were closed and he held her.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 179 2025/03/16 14:47



"There are three things that have to be done in the ritual establishing a mate-bond," Issabella said.

For a long time, Eddus had held her, swaying her gently until she'd calmed. Even after her tears had ceased, he'd continued to hold her until her breathing had steadied. Her body relaxed in his arms, and until she kissed his neck and then his cheek, he thought that perhaps she'd fallen asleep.

Having again taken the seat in front of Eddus again, she collected the knife and the strip of linen from the floor. "They must be done in order."

"I think I'm ready." Eddus felt his heart quicken as he wondered what the ritual entailed.

"Eddus-"

"I'm ready."

Issabella remained silent for a moment. As her eyes locked on Eddus', she pursed her lips and then tried to smile, giving a slight nod.

"First, there are the words we have to say," she said, taking a deep, wavering breath. "We must promise ourselves to one other. It's kind of like the vows in a marriage, in your realm."

"What are they? What are the words?"

"There are traditional words, but I do not know them all." Abbi shook her head. "But what we say is not as important as the meaning behind them. It is the promise itself. We don't need to *recite* anything, but it must be words that you mean, for the bond to be successful. This bond is forever."

Leaning forward, Abbi pressed her right temple to Eddus' left, her check against his, her mouth by his ear. She put her arms around him.

"I'll go first," she said softly. "I don't know all of the words. Usually, one would have time to learn them before the mate-bond ritual. I'll use the words that I know as well as my own. They're not exactly like the traditional ones, but I want you to listen, and, please, know that I mean everything that I say to you."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 180 2025/03/16 14:47

Nodding, Eddus placed the fingertips of his right hand against her cheek as she began to speak.

"I belong to myself alone," Issabella paused, taking a deep breath, "but today, I am giving myself to you. My freedom is no longer mine alone, for today I am yours, in my life and in my death. I will be your shelter, and you will be mine. I will never cause you unrest. I will honour only you, and it is for your eyes that I smile. Please, take me as your equal, and I will serve and love you."

She paused again.

"This is my promise to you, Eddus Brandt."

There was a long moment of silence. Issabella smiled as she felt Eddus' breath on her neck. She quickly kissed his temple, just in front of his ear.

"It's your turn, Eddie," she whispered.

"I don't know what to say. I don't even know how to follow that."

"Don't follow it. Just speak. You will know what you want to say."

Eddus nodded. He waited another moment and then began:

"Abbi- Issabella- I love you. I promise you that I love you with everything that I am. I promise you that anything I have is yours. You are all that I can think about. I will love you, and I will always treat you as my equal."

Eddus felt the pixie's arms tighten around him.

"Did I do it right?" he asked doubtfully.

"It was perfect." Isabella nodded, her cheek still against his, and gave what sounded like a contented sigh.

As they parted slowly, Issabella kissed him again. She placed her right hand on his right forearm, just below his elbow. Grasping it, she indicated that he do the same to her.

"Help me to do this, Eddus," she said, lifting one end of the linen strip that had been draped evenly across her lap. Each using their left hands, they wrapped the cloth strip around their clasped arms until all of it had been

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 181 2025/03/16 14:47

wound except for two short tails that hung loosely to either side.

"Is this like a hand-fasting?"

Eddus looked at their arms bound side by side, and then at Issabella, who smiled at his questioning expression.

"Yes," she told him. "In a way, it is. This is where we physically form our mate-bond with one another."

With her left hand, Issabella lifted the black knife by the hilt, the blade pointing down. She held the blade's tip above the cloth holding their arms together, at about mid-forearm, and locked gazes with Eddus.

Closing her eyes, she took a breath before plunging the double-edged blade through the linen and between their arms, the sharp edges cutting into them both simultaneously. After a moment's pause, she quickly withdrew the blade, letting it fall to the floor.

Eddus inhaled sharply as he felt the blade open his skin. His hand squeezed Issabella's forearm tightly, and his eyes met hers as she opened them.

Biting her lip, she lowered her gaze, and closed her eyes again.

Eddus watched her lips purse as she slowly lowered her head. A feeling of worry and dread crept into his gut, and he began to wonder if something had gone wrong. She didn't look as though she were happy.

Issabella exhaled slowly.

Her grip on his forearm suddenly tightened, her nails digging into his flesh. She gasped, crying out loudly. Looking up quickly, her eyes glowed brighter than Eddus had ever seen them. She put her hand behind his head, pulling him to her, and they shared a long kiss.

At the site of the knife's entry, Eddus felt an intense heat, so hot that he could almost not focus on kissing her, and he clenched his jaw.

As Issabella pulled slowly away from him, her eyes continued glowing brightly while she began unwinding the cloth from around their arms, letting it fall between them.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 182 2025/03/16 14:47

Once freed, Eddus drew back his arm, astonished that there was no blood on either the cloth or his skin. He looked and saw that there was also no blood on Issabella's arm. Across his forearm, where the blade had met his skin, was a slender mark, about a finger's length. It was slightly raised, similar to a scar. It seemed to glow from beneath the skin, a light blue.

Issabella produced her arm, holding it out for Eddus to see the identical mark on her arm. The closer she moved it to him, the brighter it glowed.

She laughed quietly at the look of disbelief on the human's face as he moved his arm closer to and then further away from her own, watching the marks get brighter and dimmer. Placing a hand on his, she stopped him from moving.

"I told you that the bond would be successful," she told him softly, still amused by his expression, "but there is still one thing we have to do to for our mate-bond to be complete."

Issabella stood and took Eddus by the hand, pulling him from the chair in which he sat. She led him away from the corner they'd been in, towards the centre of the small room. They stood facing one another, hand in hand. Eddus watched her carefully, but she only smiled, shaking her head.

"There is one more part to the ritual," she said, taking a deep breath. Her gaze shifted to the bed, and then she looked up into his eyes. "We've done this part before."

The lighting in the room brightened, and Eddus opened his eyes.

Slightly arching his back, he stopped mid-movement, not wanting to wake Issabella, who slept soundly on her side, her head on his arm. They lay uncovered on the bed where they'd fallen asleep the night before.

Turning to look at her, he smiled as he watched her sleep, her hair partially covering her cheek. Behind her, against his hand, he felt the edge of and part of the surface of one of her wings.

He could feel her soft breath against his arm as well as the warmth of her unclothed body against his own. Her hand and arm rested on his chest; her torso was against his side, and one leg over his thigh.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 183 2025/03/16 14:47

Looking to the ceiling, Eddus closed his eyes, remembering the events of the previous night. He smiled again, this time as he thought about the sleeping woman beside him.

Somehow, she was now his wife, for lack of a better word. He didn't know exactly what their relationship would be called in the faerie realm. He still didn't fully understand it. He didn't know if he could even believe it or not. It all felt like a dream.

There was a movement against his chest. Issabella sighed, her fingertips brushing his skin as she opened and then closed her hand, followed by the movement of her head against his arm.

Turning, Eddus looked into her amber eyes as she opened them. She smiled as he brushed her hair across her cheek, behind her ear.

"Good morning," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did." Surprised at his own answer, Eddus paused for a moment as a realisation came over him. "I can feel you."

"Of course you can, silly; I'm right here." Issabella lightly drew circles on Eddus' chest with her fingernail.

"No, it's more than that. I can't explain it," Eddus said. He kissed the centre of her forehead. "I can feel you here beside me, your skin touching mine, but it's something deeper than that. There's a feeling inside my chest and even in my mind. It's almost a vibration."

Issabella propped herself up on her elbow.

"A good vibration?" she asked playfully, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Well, it's not unpleasant. It's almost like excitement, but it's not the excitement that I feel. It's not my own, if that's even possible. I can't explain it."

"It's our mate-bond." Issabella said, taking his hand and placing it on her chest. He could feel her heartbeat beneath his fingertips. "I told you that we would have no trouble forming it. And what you're feeling is my joy, Eddus, as I can feel yours. Happiness, sadness, and anger – we are now connected. We may not know what the other is thinking, but we can feel what the other feels."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 184 2025/03/16 14:47

"How do you know this?"

"The mate-bond?" Issabella pressed Eddus' hand against her chest, kissed his shoulder, and then looked up at him, her eyes studying his. "We learn about it from an early age, though it is as new for myself as it is for you." She kissed his arm again, laying her head against his chest with a sigh. "I just know a little of what to expect from it."

"I can't believe this is real."

Issabella smiled as a thought that came to her. Eddus was now truly her human.

Eddus turned his head, looking up at the ceiling again. He liked the idea that he could feel what she felt inside. That vibration in his chest, although unlike anything he'd ever felt, was comforting, knowing that it was her. He liked knowing that the feeling was her actual happiness. It did occur to him how it might be unnerving should she be upset or angry, but for the moment, it was the best thing he'd ever experienced.

Her cheek again on his shoulder, Issabella sighed again and closed her eyes, also contented by what she felt through their newly formed bond. Through it, she could feel his heartbeat as she listened to it. She could faintly hear it, but she also felt a light energy that pulsed inside of her with each beat. And although she knew a bit about it, the mate bond was as new to her as it was to the human beside her, and was better than she'd ever imagined.

She could also feel in him what she guessed was a conflict of at least two vibrations of differing emotions, but didn't give it much thought. Their bond was something he knew nothing about. His having differing feelings about it was understandable.

In normal circumstances, the two of them would seclude themselves for about a month after forming their bond. This period was something like a honeymoon, but it also gave a newly mated couple time to become acquainted with and accustomed to not only the shared emotions but the other experiences of their newly formed and unique mate-bond as well.

Issabella thought it unfair that her mate would not be afforded this time. While she had also never experienced the effects of a mate-bond, she had, throughout her life, heard about it and what it entailed and, in some ways, knew what to expect and how to identify it. She tried not to feel a pang of guilt at the thought, not wanting Eddus to pick it up.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 185 2025/03/16 14:47

From the doorway came the sound of two soft knocks. Eddus quickly tried to sit up, but with Issabella laying on his arm, he couldn't. Issabella reached across him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him onto his side, close to her. Uncovered and unlothed, they lay facing each other. Her back to the door, Issabella's eyes flashed, and she smiled at him mischievously.

Behind them, they heard the door click as it opened, followed by a pause. Eddus glanced over Issabella's head at the door, his heart racing.

"I didn't realise that you weren't alone." The sheepish-sounding voice belonged to Dain. "You've been summoned to go before the queen. I'll come back shortly."

The door closed, followed by a few moments of silence as Issabella and Eddus could only look at one another. Issabella still wore a smile from moments before, though now she smiled in amusement at the look on Eddus' face. She kissed him quickly before getting off of the bed, freeing his arm.

Eddus watched for a moment as she stepped into her dress, where it lay on the floor, and pulled it up and on before he got to his feet. Watching as she began tying her hair neatly at the top of her neck, it amazed him that she could step into a dress that had been discarded on the floor overnight and look as perfect as she always had. He fumbled as he tried to quickly dress, his mind beginning to race as he thought about the guard outside and what it was that the queen would say.

Issabella suddenly no longer wore a smile or looked amused but had a panicked and slightly stricken expression. She watched Eddus as he pulled his shirt on, and then she shook her head and spoke softly but quickly to him.

"I have to go," she said, some urgency in her voice. "I thought that we would have more time before you were summoned."

"What do you mean? More time for what?" Eddus looked at her as he sat down on the bed to put his shoes on.

"Eddus," Issabella knelt next to him, "I have to go. There is someone I need to try to speak to as quickly as possible. I thought we'd have more time. No one knows yet that we've mate-bonded. It needs to be known before a ruling is made!"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 186 2025/03/16 14:47

She quickly went to the door, knocking once and exiting as quickly as she could. Eddus watched the door close behind her. He wondered for a moment what the outcome of his summons would result in, either with or without the knowledge of their union being known.

After tying his shoe, he stood, smoothed his shirt with his hands, and walked to the door, where he paused, waiting for it to open. After a few moments, Eddus raised his hand to the door, hesitating for a moment to look again at the mark on his arm, which now only glowed faintly. He knocked against the door once to indicate that he was ready.

A moment later, the door clicked open a fraction. He waited for it to be opened by Dain or another member of the guard who would escort him to see the queen, but it remained unmoved, only slightly open.

Cautiously, he pushed the door, which opened easily. Glancing from left to right, he stepped slowly out of the room and into the hallway. There was a soft click behind him as the door closed again.

Turning to the closed door, he saw that it had no handle or doorknob on the outside, just as on the inside. There was no keyhole, either. Running his hand along its smooth surface, he wondered just how it worked.

Other doors lined the passageway; some were closed, others were open, indicating an empty room. They all appeared to be of the same design, with no fixtures or keyholes on either side. Thinking back, he remembered each time the door had opened when he'd been visited.

He slowly raised his hand, closing it. Looking around to make sure he wasn't being watched, he tapped the door twice with his closed fist. He stepped back in surprise as there was a click, and the door opened, a thin line appearing between it and the frame.

Eddus nervously looked left, then right, not touching the door. Stunned, he took another step back, not looking away from the thin opening. After a few more moments, the door slowly closed on its own with a soft click.

"Ed!"

Startled, Eddus turned quickly, his heart racing, to see Dain walking toward him. He didn't move, not knowing what to expect upon being found outside of his room.

"I wasn't hurrying you. I hope I didn't interrupt anything." Dain gave

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 187 2025/03/16 14:47

Eddus an embarrassed smile. He then noticed the confused look on the human's face. "Is everything alright?"

The faerie guard approached him, stopping a few paces away. He looked at Eddus with a concerned expression.

"You look like something is wrong," he said.

Eddus blinked at him in surprise.

"The door opened for me."

"That is how doors work," Dain laughed.

"No, I tapped on it from inside, and it just opened." Eddus shook his head, looking back at the door.

"Well, I should hope so. How else have you been coming and going?" Dain's brows knitted as he looked at the human.

"I haven't been coming and going."

"Are you ok, Ed?" The guard put a hand on Eddus' arm, looking at him questioningly.

"I'm fine, Dain," Eddus said slowly, "but coming and going?"

"Coming and going. You know, entering and exiting." Stopping abruptly, a look of surprise and confusion washed over the guard. "Ed, how long has it been since you've been out of this room?"

"Well, not since I was taken and questioned just after I got here."

Dain gaped at him in disbelief. Under his breath, he said something Eddus could not understand, most likely in another language. His expression changed from surprise to almost what one could have taken for guilt, and he shook his head, staring at the human.

"Did I do something wrong?" Eddus asked, trying to read the guard's behavior.

"That was almost four days ago, Ed!"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 188 2025/03/16 14:47

"You told me to stay here until someone came to get me."

"Only until you were taken to see the Queen." Dain put his hands together, pressing them to his lips and inhaling deeply. He slowly shook his head. "You're not confined to this room."

"You mean, I could have come out at any time?" Eddus stood, looking at him blankly.

"Until the Queen's ruling, yes. You cannot leave the realm, but this isn't a prison, Ed."

Eddus turned again to the door, knocking twice against it. The door opened. He turned to Dain, dumbfounded.

Eddus looked around as he was walked through the large door. The hall he entered was the same one he remembered coming to on the day of his arrival, though it had the appearance of being much bigger. This time there were no spectators sitting in the seats behind the square platform he was again led to.

Once again, he stood, looking at three identically attired faeries. They were the same three he'd come to when he was questioned days before. Beagan was again sitting at the centre of the three. They watched in silence as he climbed the steps onto the platform and said nothing for several moments after.

"Your name."

It was Beagan who spoke. Eddus looked from the faerie to her colleagues but said nothing.

"Your name." Beagan spoke again. She looked directly into his eyes.

Eddus took a deep breath.

"You already know that my name is Ed."

"Ed is not your name," Beagan said. "You may be called Ed, but that is not your real name. In light of what you have come before us to hear, it

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 189 2025/03/16 14:47

would be best for you to tell us your true name."

"How do you know it's not my name?"

"There are ways." Beagan's stern expression remained unchanged.

"Were you listening to me while I was in my room?" Eddus spoke without thinking, anger rising in his chest.

He looked from the short faerie to the others sitting on either side of her. The thought that he might have been being spied on had never occurred to him.

"Of- of course not. Nothing like that would ever happen here," Beagan stammered, a genuine look of surprise on her face. Quickly composing herself, she glanced at the older faerie beside her, who gave a slight shrug, his wrinkles deepening as he frowned. "And your response just gave us the answer."

There was silence in the large room. For several moments, no one spoke as the human looked angrily at the three faeries, and they looked back at him.

"So, your true name is not Ed."

The tall woman with pale blue skin spoke after the long pause. She'd been sitting motionless, her gaze fixed forward, until she spoke – again, more of a statement than a question. Turning her head slightly, she shifted her gaze to the human standing before the panel, his look of anger slowly fading.

Eddus felt numb. He recalled what Abbi had said to him the first time she'd come to see him. He remembered her tone and the look in her eyes. He remembered his promise to her. His legs felt weak beneath him, as though he might fall, but he said nothing.

Beagan looked to either side of her at the two others, receiving a single nod from each. She slowly walked to the square he stood on, looking up at him.

"Very well. Ed, you were accused of, and have admitted to, the trespass and the knowing, wilful, and unauthorised entering of our realm," she said. "For this and for the safety of our realm, it is the queen's ruling that you never leave this place."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 190 2025/03/16 14:47

"What does that mean?" Eddus asked, the words catching in his throat. He suddenly had terrible cotton mouth, and a painful knot in his chest.

"Extra time was taken to present your situation. It is recognised that yours is different than most, but in the end, the queen must protect the realm, and this cannot be the exception."

Feeling his blood run cold, Eddus looked at the other two. The male held his gaze for only a moment before looking away. The tall, slender female again sat motionless and expressionless.

"The queen's ruling is a death sentence in accordance with the laws of our realm."

By the faerie's expression, it was clear that she did not like having to convey the ruling. She looked away for a moment.

"You really should rethink giving us your name. By telling us what your true name is, your death does not need to be a painful one." Beagan's voice had softened and there was almost a pleading in her tone. She shook her head, looking again to her colleague.

Eddus hardly heard the last statement. He instantly felt sick as Abbi's- or Issabella's- face came to mind. She'd been right. She had told him that this would happen. They were not going to let him leave.

He didn't know where she'd gone, but it obviously hadn't had an effect on the ruling. Or she had been too late...?

A wave of guilt engulfed him. This was exactly why he should not have agreed to marry her. He would now be doing just what he'd told her he couldn't do. Shame for letting himself have hope washed over him.

Abbi's face was all he could see. She had been his sole purpose for coming into the faerie realm.

His legs buckled, and he fell forward onto his hands and knees, his vision blurring as his eyes welled. Everything then faded into darkness. There was a hollow feeling in his head and a ringing in his ears. His last memory was the feeling of his side meeting the ground, followed by a sharp pain to the side of his head, just before he lost consciousness.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 191 2025/03/16 14:47



"On your feet."

It was an order, but the way it was given suggested reluctance, and there was no force behind it.

The ground beneath him was cold and hard, yet Eddus could feel the loose soil between his fingers. Eyes closed, he inhaled deeply, struggling to catch his breath. The feeling of his heartbeat pounded in his temples as he panted. His cheek rested against the cool grit of the ground on which he lay, its olfactory aroma filling his senses. The damp petrichor was thick but, at the same time, almost refreshing, and he had no desire to move his fatigued limbs.

It was not the first time Eddus had stumbled or fallen to the ground. Upon coming to, having lost consciousness after being sentenced, his wrists had been bound tightly with ropes, and he'd been led out of the hall through what he'd guessed was a rear entrance. Two winged guards then led him for some distance, through a wooded area, to a large and secluded opening with no grass, where they wordlessly took flight.

The ropes looped tightly around each of his wrists were pulled and he'd had to run faster and faster until his legs gave out, unable to keep pace. The two leading him each held a rope. Hovering above him, the rapid movement of their wings, which kept them suspended, created a hum that he could not ignore – a maddening drone that seemed almost to deafen him.

"I can't," Eddus gasped. "Please- please let me rest."

With no concept of time and no way to judge its passing, Eddus was completely at a loss. He'd been again and again forced to run with no rest. His every muscle ached, and those in his legs cramped, threatening to seize. He opened his eyes as he felt one of his wrists move, and then the other, the ropes around them being pulled.

One of the guards touched down, kneeling beside him. He gently touched Eddus' shoulder.

"It will only be worse if you don't stand up."

The guard who made the statement did not sound malicious, but rather like he was performing a duty he'd much rather not be doing. The guards

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 192 2025/03/16 14:47

had been made aware that the human had refused to give his true name. Both knew what that meant.

Eddus peered blearily up at the winged being above him who had spoken. Struggling to his knees, he grimaced in pain. He clenched his jaw, refusing to make a sound indicating his discomfort. He didn't know how anything could be worse than the exhaustion and pain that wracked his body, but he was told the same thing every time he fell.

Getting to one knee, he pushed with all his strength, staggering to his feet. The guard beside him said nothing more, resuming flight. No sooner had he gotten up, the two hovering faeries started forward, pulling him forward with a jerk. He made it a few steps, his feet dragging the ground, before he collapsed again, his body unable to move.

There was a short pause, and Eddus could hear the two guards conversing, although he could not make out what they were saying.

The rope on his right arm was pulled, rolling him onto his back, and then both arms were lifted, pulling him upward. The joints in his shoulders seared with pain, and a groan escaped him as Eddus felt himself being pulled from a sitting position to his feet and then off the ground.

Hanging limply by his arms, Eddus managed to open his eyes enough to see the ground getting further away. He closed his eyes as he began to feel the sensations of moving faster through the air and being swung side to side. His own weight tore at his joints, stretching the muscles in his back intensely as he swung in the air.

Groaning in pain, Eddus let his head hang, slumping forward. He tried to cough, wincing as his shoulders spasmed to the point that he could hardly inhale a breath. The muscles in his neck joined those in his shoulders in cramping, and Eddus opened his eyes just enough to watch the ground far below him blur as his eyes watered and a tear fell from them.

All at once, the force suspending him disappeared. For an instant, he floated weightlessly. Drawing in a breath of relief, he succumbed to exhaustion, immediately asleep. Then, just as quickly as he'd fallen into darkness, he was jolted into consciousness as the right side of his body collided with the ground.

Shooting lights filled his vision when his head struck the earth, followed by a pain that enveloped him so heavily he could hardly breathe. Choking

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 193 2025/03/16 14:47

on the dust and loose soil he inhaled as he gasped, the muscle in his right thigh cramped violently.

Eddus tried to curl into a foetal position but was prevented as his arms were pulled out to the sides, his ropes having been picked up again by the two guarding him.

Writhing on his back, he fought to straighten his leg while he simultaneously gagged so hard that he lurched forward, the back of his head slamming into the ground as he came back to his original position. He spat red, blood trickling from his mouth.

For a moment, Eddus struggled as hard as he could to pull his outstretched arms to his body, but the ropes were held fast. Gasping, he feebly raised his head, looking towards his right arm, at the thin blue mark on his skin, before he expelled the short breath he'd been able to inhale.

Closing his eyes, he slowly lowered his head to the ground, though it was intensely painful to do so. He unsuccessfully tried to control his breathing and relax, his leg still straining.

The image of Abbi's face momentarily flashed into his mind. Or was it Issabella? Alarm gripped him. He couldn't remember. Had she given him a different name? Could he have dreamed it all? He couldn't be sure he'd actually seen her, as it seemed so long ago. The only proof he had that she had actually been with him was the mark on his forearm.

The ropes around his wrists were again pulled tight, jerking him into motion, and he was dragged for some distance across the hard and rough ground. Flat on his back, he was pulled, his shirt tearing and his skin burning as it was abraded on the hard earth. The back of his head occasionally hit the ground he was pulled across.

After what seemed like an eternity, his back burning and bloodied from being dragged so far, he was again hoisted into the air. His body was carried higher and higher as he hung lifelessly beneath the two guards.

Again, he was dropped, crashing to the ground, where for several moments he couldn't move. Feebly, he tried to turn his head, which rested in an uncomfortable position, to the side, where he'd fallen, but he could not. Summoning what little strength he had left, his fingers moved, slowly closing into weak fists before his weary muscles gave out.

His ropes were again picked up, though not pulled as tightly as before.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 194 2025/03/16 14:47

Eddus was vaguely aware of the moments that followed, in which nothing happened. His throat ached as he tried to swallow, the taste of blood and bile and dirt in his mouth.

The two holding him slackened the ropes, lowering his arms to the ground. Eddus did not attempt to move them but tried his best to focus on his breathing. He didn't want to give any reason for them to be stretched tight again.

The tension in his side and back persisted, but the muscle in his thigh had begun to ease its hold. Eddus began to drift, not so much out of consciousness but more in and out of the pain he felt.

Something was being said, but the monotonous hum of the faerie guards' wings drowned it out. The relentless thrum seemed to surround him, a constant pressure in his mind compounding the relentless pressure at the back of his skull. A wave of nausea washed over him. If the guards would only come to the ground and stop the noise for a moment – just a moment – make it stop.

All at once, he could no longer hear the buzz of the guard's wings. The silence that followed was so heavy that Eddus struggled to draw breath. His body tensed in anxious anticipation.

"Stop this!" A voice pierced Eddus' senses, sending a sharp pain through his head, and every hair on his body stood on end. It was not the voice of either of them holding him captive, but a third voice. A female. There was an air of frenzy to her voice, a tone suggesting terrified anger. "You must stop immediately!"

"You're not permitted here." The guard to Eddus' left barked. "You interfere with the carrying out of sentencing passed down by the queen!"

"You have to stop," the new voice persisted.

"Leave this area, or you will be taken into custody to be held accountable for interfering in the queen's ruling."

"You can't do this! You're hurting him," the new voice pleaded. "You're hurting us!"

"What's this? What are you saying?" The guard on the right side of Eddus spoke. "Do you know this human?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 195 2025/03/16 14:47

"He is my bonded mate. He is *my* human!"



Time felt as though it dragged on and on.

Issabella watched the closed door at the other end of the room in which she sat. She was waiting for some form of communication from those who had placed her there.

After finding Eddus and intervening in the punishment being carried out on him, she was taken and questioned, demanding an explanation for her actions and claims. The three she was taken before were not those who had interrogated Eddus and handed down the order of his punishment upon conclusion, as each case the panel was selected at random.

She'd been met with a barrage of questions. The matter of Eddus, in particular, had stirred up much attention. He was not the first human to have entered the realm without having been invited. He was not even the first to knowingly enter the realm. His, however, was a unique circumstance in that he'd not only entered fully aware of his actions but had entered for the sole purpose of trying to keep a faerie of the realm from some perceived danger.

In most cases, a human unknowingly entering a ring would have a powerful glamour applied to them. This would fill their minds with constant, outlandish images and notions of fancy. They would be kept awake until physical exhaustion set in and the person lost consciousness. He would then be taken back to the human world, somewhere away from the pixie ring he had entered. He would be left in some random public place, where he would wake, usually with a headache akin to a hangover and memories of a most strange dream.

The few times that the realm had been entered by a human who knew that he was entering the faerie realm, it was dealt with more harshly. The sentence was ultimately death, as he could disclose the location of the realm and how to enter it, thus placing at risk everyone within the realm.

The human would be forced into performing some sort of physical task, usually running. This would be enforced by the person being pulled at an exhausting pace while a glamour would be used to keep him moving, usually by tricking his mind into believing it was having fun.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 196 2025/03/16 14:47

Long ago, this had been referred to as dancing, as music or drums would be played while the person ran. In most cases, the human would experience some form of insanity before the end. Muscles would seize and tear from overuse and cease functioning despite the addled brain's urges, and the body would collapse from the damage.

The human would then be thrown or dropped, sometimes repeatedly, from some height, rendering him broken and unconscious. The glamour would then be removed from the mind, at which time shock would quickly descend on it and the over-exhausted body, if it hadn't already, and the human would succumb.

Eddus was sentenced to the latter. In his case, having not given his true name, a glamour could not be used, and he was subjected to all of the physical pain inflicted on him.

Issabella had refused to speak or cooperate in any way until she had seen for herself that Eddus was being treated and allowed to rest. She had been placed in the room beside his for a short time, before being taken for questioning. She could not see or communicate with him, but through the mate-bond they now shared, she could sense that he was sleeping and not in any more distress than had already been caused to his weary and injured body.

Wrists bound, she was led before the Queen, a panel of three, where it was quickly ordered that her restraints be removed. Being a pixie, she was a natural inhabitant of the realm and would not be treated otherwise until such time as the queen handed down judgment.

"Your name."

Hesitating, Issabella stood before the panel, looking between the three of them unflinchingly. They were comprised of two pixies and an elf.

"Your name." It was more a command than a request. "Those in the gallery cannot hear you. We have erected a barrier so that what is said at this time cannot be heard."

Around the square stone she stood on, as well as the three seated in front of her, could be seen a translucent but shimmering dome. Turning her head, she could see those seated in the gallery behind her leaning forward in their seats, craning to get a better look at what was going on inside.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 197 2025/03/16 14:47

"This is the Royal Hall, and this is a royal inquisition. All questions here are by authority of the Queen. As a fae and a being of this realm, you must answer truthfully. Should you not answer, you will be regarded as an enemy of the real and treated as such."

Shaking her head, Issabella remained silent. Her cheeks warmed, and she blinked back tears, trying not to show the fear that welled up inside of her.

"Very well. You will again be restrained and then confined until such time as the Queen rules on this, your violation of our laws."

A chill crept up her spine, and Issabella took a deep breath.

"No! Please..." she said desperately.

"Do you wish to speak?"

"Issabella..." There was a slight tremble in her voice and a tightness in her chest that hurt with each beat of her heart. A feeling of cold fear stole over her as she realised that she'd gone against everything she knew to be right.

"Again, please."

The being seated in the centre of the three, an elderly elf with sharp eyes that looked like he missed very little around him, leaned forward. With an elbow on each of his knees, he rested his chin lightly on his hands.

"Issabella," she said a bit louder, though still trying to keep her voice hushed. She found it difficult to breathe. Eddus should have been the only one to know her true name.

"Your name is your own, and will not leave this hearing. But understand that should we suspect anything you say of being false, you can be made to tell us the truth."

This was in reference to the fact that the three present now knew her true name and that she could now be coerced.

"From this point on, what is said will be a matter of public record and for all to hear."

As the elf spoke, the shimmering dome around them seemed to fade away and it disappeared. The murmur of those seated could be heard. It

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 198 2025/03/16 14:47

rose for a moment, then died down. The speaker waited for it to quieten before continuing.

"You are accused of interference in the carrying out of the queen's judgment. What could you have possibly hoped to accomplish in doing this?"

"I hope to save the human who was sentenced." Issabella again fought to hold back her fear.

The elf nodded, looking to the pixie seated at his left, who murmured something. He then glanced to his right, receiving a nod from the second pixie.

"Any judgment handed down by the Queen is final. You are fae. You know this. The human broke our laws when he knowingly crossed the barrier between our worlds without knowledge or consent. He is now in possession of knowledge that places everyone in our realm in danger, yourself included. If he ever reveals how to access our realm, should he cross the barrier again into his world, we are all at risk."

The elf spoke slowly, looking directly into Issabella's eyes.

"Furthermore, to intervene in the carrying out of a sentence ordered by the Queen goes against our laws as well, as any judgment handed down by the Queen is for the good of all in our world."

"I know this," Issabella said, setting her jaw, determined not to look away, "but I must ask – I must beg – that the queen reconsider."

The pixie to the right of the elf touched his shoulder, whispering into his ear. The elf turned quickly to face her with a look of mild surprise.

"It is said that when you interrupted the carrying out of his sentence, you claimed this human as your own."

Clenching her fists to keep her hands from shaking, Issabella spoke.

"I did, and he *is* mine." She raised her right arm, holding it out, to show the panel her inner forearm and the mark it bore. "We are mate-bonded, in word, in blood, and self."

The gallery behind her erupted in gasps and indiscernible whispers, the chatter becoming louder as the moments passed.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 199 2025/03/16 14:47

"The hall will come to order!" The elf sprang to his feet. He looked around, wide-eyed, at those seated behind Issabella. "Order!"

The crowded gallery showed no sign of even hearing the elf. The noise of those present whispering amongst themselves grew. The elf strode forward toward Issabella, a look of irritation on his face.

"We are finished here," he told her, his eyes scanning those in the gallery behind her. "You may go, though we would suggest that you stay in the room you were taken to while awaiting this meeting rather than your own dwelling until the queen has made her ruling."

"I will be in the room next to it with my bonded mate." Issabella spoke so as to be heard above those behind her, hoping that her voice did not shake.

"I'm afraid that will not be possible at this time."

"But we are mate-bonded!"

"While that is known to the Queen at this time, until the Queen rules again, your bonded mate has already been sentenced. And while awaiting either the carrying out of his original sentencing or the handing down of a new sentence, he must be kept in confinement, seen only by those treating his injuries."

"But... our laws," Issabella said as calmly as she could, her heart racing. "I need to be with him. He needs me."

The elf shook his head sympathetically.

"His room must and will remain locked. This is a unique situation, and until such time as the queen again passes down sentencing, Ed is, for all intents and purposes, a prisoner of this realm."

After her escort had left her alone in the room, Issabella waited. She sat staring at the door until she could no longer remain still. She was not sure how much time had passed, only that it seemed like an eternity.

Going to the door, she tapped on it. Hearing it click, she didn't wait for it to open but pushed it impatiently, stepping into the passageway. Hurrying

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 200 2025/03/16 14:47

to the closed door of the room next to hers, she knocked twice against it.

Nothing happened. There was no click from within it, and the door did not open. She knocked again, a bit harder, but again, the door gave no response. Her breathing began to quicken, and her pulse sped as she tried in vain a third time.

Issabella placed her hand on the closed door. She could feel that her mate was on the other side. Panic setting in, she looked from the opening at one end of the passage she stood in to the opening at the other. She couldn't understand why the door should remain closed. Eddus would not try to escape and was in no condition to do so. She needed to be with him, if not to comfort him, just to see that he was resting and all right.

Turning, she ran out of the passageway and down the stairs. She made her way outside, where she stopped for a moment to catch her breath. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she needed to find out why she wasn't being allowed in to see her mate. She'd been before the queen and was no longer being 'held'. Being Eddus' bonded mate, they should not be kept from one another. She needed to see him, and he did not need to be alone while in recovery.

Issabella scanned the area, shaking her head. On the street, faeries walked or flew, going about their business. She watched the people as they passed with little hope of seeing a familiar face. She knew the chances were small.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she let out a long and heavy sigh. Blinking back tears of frustration, she saw something familiar. A bit further than halfway down the street, Issabella recognized one of two large stone arches towering over the walkway into the Royal Building, where she'd been to see the queen and been questioned about her intervention in Eddus' punishment.

Her heart felt like it jumped in her chest as an idea came to her. There had to be someone within the building that she could speak with.

Taking a step back, she then jumped lightly off the top step of the stairway that spanned the entire length of the building she'd just exited. Her wings spread, then moved at such speed that they could not be seen but only heard, humming as they carried her through the air towards the arches.

Touching down, Issabella's bare feet met the soft grass of the ground outside of the Royal Building. She began running as soon as she landed, past

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 201 2025/03/16 14:47

the arches, along the pathway, and up the stairs. Pausing at the entrance, she smoothed her dress before rushing in.

Once through the building's doorway, Issabella started towards the large doorway at the end of the massive hallway. She knew little about the building. She of course knew that it housed the Royal Hall, where certain matters were taken before the queen. Beyond that, she knew very little, except that she'd been taken through that doorway to be questioned, and she exited it when she was taken to her room next to Eddus'. In her mind, it was through those doors that she would get answers.



"Abbi?"

Issabella scarcely heard. So focused on getting to the large doors at the end of the foyer, she didn't even notice that someone had begun walking next to her, let alone hearing her name being called.

"Abbi!"

A hand on her shoulder caused her to stop suddenly, the voice's owner nearly colliding with her. Issabella turned to see Dain in his guard's attire.

"It's Abbi, right?"

Issabella breathed deeply, catching her breath. She gave the guard a sidelong look.

"I think you know that Abbi is not my name," she told him, narrowing her eyes.

As one of the queen's guards, he likely knew her name after her audience with the queen. She glanced at his arm, then again at his face. She didn't like the guard or trust him.

"It's what Ed called you; it's what I'll call you." He paused for a moment before removing his hand from her shoulder. "Does he know that it's not your name?"

"We share a mate-bond," Issabella said hotly. "What do you think?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 202 2025/03/16 14:47

"The mate-bond, of course. That hadn't occurred to me."

Issabella turned away from him, facing the direction she'd been going when he stopped her, though she did not start walking again.

"What are you doing here, Abbi?"

Issabella looked up at the large door at the end of the hall, then turned sharply to face the guard, the tears she'd turned away to hide spilling down her face. Dain's eyes widened, and he quickly looked around them, glancing toward the doors and then again at Issabella.

"Abbi- "

Issabella raised a hand, silencing him. Her hand closed into a trembling fist.

"I need answers," she said through clenched teeth.

"What answers?" Dain reached forward, touching Issabella's arm. She pulled back, avoiding his hand. "You'll only find trouble if you enter the Hall without a summons. Please speak with me instead."

Issabella shook her head, taking a small step back, away from the guard. She again looked in the direction of the doors to the hall, then wiped the tears from her cheeks, first with one hand and then the other. She shook her head again.

"Abbi, please don't. I can't let you go in there."

"Of course you can't," Issabella said bitterly. "You work for the queen."

"Please sit with me." Dain gestured toward the side of the foyer in which they stood. Along the wall outside the door leading into the Hall were benches, used by those waiting to enter. Closer to the door, the benches were occupied, but further from it, they were empty. "I want to help you. I want to help Ed. At least let me try to answer your questions."

Issabella looked again toward the door. She would probably not even make it into the Hall, and even if she did, the likelihood of her getting to speak with someone before a guard escorted her out and took her into custody was very small. She would then probably face some form of harsh disciplinary action that would further keep her from Eddus.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 203 2025/03/16 14:47

At the same time, she did not really want to have anything to do with Dain. In her mind, he seemed to be playing for both sides. He worked for the queen. While it was his job to do whatever that job required, he also seemed to have taken an interest in Eddus. It was possible that he was just a nice guy, but it was also possible that he was keeping tabs and reporting what he saw.

Her emotions a turmoil of conflict, Abbi nodded slowly. She turned toward Dain, who gestured again to a bench at the side of the foyer. They made their way to it and sat facing each other, not saying anything.

Dain studied Issabella's face as he patiently waited for her to be the first to speak. She sat, looking down at the ground in front of her, one hand clasping the other on her lap. On her face was an expression that, on the surface, looked like anger, but if one were to notice the look in her eyes, it was apparent that she was worried, confused, and scared. She kept her head down, not looking at the guard.

After a few moments, Dain took it upon himself to start the conversation, as he was unsure how long she would hold out.

"Abbi, please speak with me. You were about to risk the consequences of walking into the Royal Hall while it is in session. That is a very serious offense. What is wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Issabella scoffed. She spoke coldly, her eyes distant. "You mean besides that you tried to kill my mate? My bonded mate! He is one of us, by our own laws, and you tried to kill him!"

"I didn't have anything to do with Ed's sentencing or the carrying out of that sentence, Abbi," Dain said to her calmly. "And if it had been up to me, he would have received any and all leniency allowed. Although rather misguided, I know his intention in coming here was only to help you. I know that he was truthful about that intention from the moment he arrived. And to be fair, the sentence was unfortunately handed down before it was known that the two of you had mate-bonded. His case is being taken before the queen again to decide how to proceed now that it is known."

Issabella said nothing, only continued to sullenly look at the ground just in front of her.

"Abbi, I want you to know that I had nothing to do with what happened to Ed. I only ever wanted to help him."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 204 2025/03/16 14:47

"The door is locked," Issabella said quietly.

Dain remained quiet, unsure of what she was saying. After a moment, Issabella turned her head, looking at him, her eyes still distant. He met her gaze.

"The door is locked," she repeated, shaking her head. "His door is locked..."

Dain nodded slowly, the meaning of her words occurring to him.

"It's locked because he was sentenced by the queen, but the sentence was not carried out. It was locked for the protection of the realm. He is the first prisoner here in thousands of years."

"I don't care about any of that!" Issabella spoke, looking at the guard in frustration and clenching her jaw. "I can't get in to see Eddus!"

"Eddus?"

The guard tilted his head slightly. His brows knitted as he looked at her questioningly.

Issabella paled as realisation overwhelmed her, and she gasped sharply.

"Fuck!" Issabella cried out, her voice echoing in the foyer. Eyes welling, tears flowed down her cheeks. The pixie put her face into her hands, sobbing and shaking her head.

Several of those passing by, as well as those sitting on the benches closer to the Hall, turned in the direction of the outburst to regard her with curiosity and concern. Dain looked at those closest to them, raising a hand towards them and glancing towards Issabella. They nodded slowly and then carried on with their business.

"Abbi?"

Issabella shook her head, sobbing harder. Her hands still cupping her face, she pulled her elbows in towards her stomach, slowly sinking forward onto her lap.

The guard looked on, unsure of what had just happened or how to proceed. More passers-by slowed or even stopped to see what was going

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 205 2025/03/16 14:47

on. A few seated on the benches had stood up, inching closer to catch a glimpse, concern on their faces.

Keeping his hand low, Dain tried to wave those gathering away, but with little success. Feeling exasperated at the onlookers, he wanted nothing more than to take the distraught pixie somewhere that they could talk privately.

Cautiously, he extended his arm and touched her shoulder gently, at which Issabella sat up instantly, recoiling from his touch. Using her feet, she pushed herself back on the bench away from him, shaking her head. Several of the gathering onlookers dispersed quickly at her sudden movement, casting glances back at the two on the bench.

"Abbi, what is it?" Dain raised both hands in front of him, palms toward her.

He moved back on the bench just slightly to give her space. His expression was one of unsettled bewilderment, while hers resembled that of a child severely reprimanded.

She looked as if she'd just realised some irreversible consequence of an action and was both terrified and overcome with grief. Wide-eyed, she looked at Dain, her tears still flowing, then lowered her gaze, looking around her as if she were not sure of where she was.

Dain could see that she was clearly in shock. Whatever had happened, whatever realisation she'd come to, had shaken her quite badly.

Getting to his feet, the guard took a step toward her. Issabella appeared not to notice his movement at all. Her shoulders slumped, and she'd not shifted her gaze from the floor.

"Abbi…" As Dain slowly approached her, Issabella raised her eyes, peering up at him. She acknowledged his presence but with no real recognition in her gaze. "Come with me, Abbi. Let me get you some water."

He held out his hand, which she took absent-mindedly. Placing his other hand on her arm, Dain helped her to her feet. They walked slowly to an open door on the other side of the foyer, a soft light filling the room as they entered. In the centre of the room was a table with chairs on either side of it, used for consultations before one was taken into the Hall to see the queen.

Issabella took a seat in the chair that Dain led her to, where she sat motionlessly while he quickly fetched a glass of water. Closing the door,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 206 2025/03/16 14:47

he placed it on the table in front of her and sat in the chair opposite her, looking at her with concern.

"Abbi."

"Two days." Issabella grasped the glass, staring at it blankly. "Not even two whole days."

"I don't understand," Dain said, leaning forward on the table.

"It hasn't even been two days, and I've betrayed him." Issabella raised her head to look at Dain, a tear escaping her eye.

"Eddus..." Dain spoke under his breath the name he'd heard her say, beginning to understand.

"Don't!" Abbi shouted. Pushing the glass away from her, its contents sloshing down its sides and onto the table, she stood quickly, her expression changing. Her amber eyes darkened to black as she leaned over the table, glaring at him, her jaw clenched. "Don't you speak his name. Not now, not ever!"

Her sudden movement startled the guard, who jerked backward in his chair, blinking at her in surprise.

As quickly as her anger had come on, it dissolved. She placed both hands on the table; the amber colour of her eyes returned, and she blinked, her tears falling into the puddled water on the tabletop.

"Please," she pleaded, hanging her head. "Don't..."

She sank slowly back onto her chair. Turning her forearm, she looked down at the blue mark there. She traced the sign of her mate-bond with her fingertip.

"I won't say his name." Dain now understood fully her behaviour, and he could see her anguish at having let her mate's name slip. He hadn't realised that it was the human's true name when she'd said it earlier.

"You shouldn't even know that name." Issabella spoke softly.

She'd not only spoken his name, giving away the one thing that she alone possessed in this realm and her most treasured possession, she had given it to a member of the Guard and the very people that wanted him dead. A

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 207 2025/03/16 14:47

tear fell into her lap, and she shook her head.

"It's all that I had. And I betrayed him."

"You still have it, Abbi," Dain said softly, shaking his head. "You said it in distress, by accident, and I am the only one who heard it."

At these words, Issabella began to sob uncontrollably. She put one arm on the table, laying her head on it, and the other she used to cradle the back of her head with her hand.

Dain was at a loss. Her reaction puzzled him deeply. What he'd said was meant to be helpful and reassuring to the girl, but it had obviously only made matters worse. He didn't know what to do. He could try to console her, but with words only. It was clear from her previous reactions that she was either opposed to physical contact or that she didn't like it when he, himself, made physical contact with her.

"Abbi."

He watched her sympathetically, her head still on her arm.

Her breathing evened out, from short and sharp gasps to longer, deeper breaths. Inhaling deeply, she wiped her eyes on the back of her arm and raised her head. Dain quickly removed a folded handkerchief from the pocket of his uniform and gingerly held it out to her.

"You can't understand," Issabella said, taking the cloth from him. She dabbed her eyes, her gaze fixed on the surface of the table. The light of the room, though not overly bright, hurt her head, and she felt the urge to lay down. "You couldn't."

"I want to understand," Dain said softly. "I want to help you. Please, Abbi, make me understand."

"He gave me his name the night we met." Issabella inhaled deeply. She sighed, raising her eyes to look at Dain. "I knew his name just a few moments after meeting him for the first time. His true name."

"I'm still not sure I follow. Ed is human."

"It doesn't matter. He trusted me. He told me his true name before he even asked for my name."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 208 2025/03/16 14:47

Dain nodded. He stood, taking a few paces before turning towards the table again. He was beginning to realise what she meant and why she was so upset: Until moments ago, she was the only being in the realm that knew Ed as Eddus.

In a world where one's name was guarded and kept safe from anyone except those a person trusted implicitly, and sometimes known by no one other than the bearer of that name, the knowledge was considered special to the point of preciousness, especially by those mated individuals.

"Are you mate-bonded?" Issabella asked Dain. She wiped her cheek with the handkerchief before continuing without awaiting a reply. "Does anyone else in the entire world, apart from yourself, know your mate's name?

Dain felt a pang of guilt, although he'd had nothing to do with her revealing Ed's name and very little to do with how it came to be that she'd said it.

The mate-bond between Abbi and the human was new. Only days old, and she'd accidentally uttered his name in the presence of another. He couldn't imagine the devastation he would have felt had their roles been reversed.

"Does he know?"

"How could he possibly know?" Issabella snapped. Her face flashed anger at the faerie, and she quickly looked away from him, the bun tied at the back of her neck coming undone, spilling her hair down her back. "He's unconscious, and his door is locked! This never would have happened if I'd been able to get in to see him!"

"That is not what I meant," Dain said. "Does he know how you feel and how much you value knowing his name?"

"Of course not." Issabella spoke softly, shaking her head. Her wings trembled as she exhaled a wavering breath. "He's human. I did try to explain it to him the night we formed our mate-bond, when I gave him my true name. I told him that his name was the most treasured thing I had. I don't know if he could ever fully understand."

A silent moment passed.

"How did he take finding out that your name is not Abbi?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 209 2025/03/16 14:47

Issabella quickly looked up at him, restraining the urge to speak out in anger. As much as she objected to him and did not want to speak to him, Dain had stopped her from doing something that would have had severe repercussions. And he was the only person with whom she could talk, and possibly the only one with any sort of answer.

"What do you think?" She held out her arm, the blue line in the middle of her forearm up, so that he could see it.

"You're right; I should not have asked you that."

Dain's hand went instinctively to his own arm, running his finger across the mark of his mate-bond under the sleeve of his uniform. He felt as though he'd asked too personal a question. It was not his business. The bond between Abbi and the human was obviously successful.

Shaking a slight feeling of embarrassment as he sat down again, Dain folded his hands on the table in front of him, watching as Issabella lifted the glass and sipped the water. She then dipped the corner of the handkerchief into the liquid in the glass and began to wipe her face.

"Abbi." Dain waited until Issabella had folded the cloth she held and placed it on the table. They sat for a moment in silence. "I can't undo what is done. I know that it was never meant for me to hear what you said. But I will make this promise to you here, and I would promise it again in front of Ed, that nobody outside of this room will ever know his true name. If I could, I would give it back to you so that, again, only you knew it. I don't care that I work for the queen. I promise you here that I will take his name with me to my grave."

"You promise?"

"I promise it on my own name and on the secret of the true name of my bonded mate," Dain said solemnly. "It will never leave this room. Ed doesn't even have to know."

Issabella shook her head. She knew what he meant. If Dain were to truly take the knowledge of Eddus' name with him to his death, then Eddus could live his whole life and never know anything about it. But there was no way that she would do that to him. She couldn't.

"He will know as soon as I am able to tell him." Issabella closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she sighed. "I doubt he'll ever fully understand, but

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 210 2025/03/16 14:47

he deserves to know. This is all so new, and I know so little about being mate-bonded, but I could never keep anything from him."

Dain only nodded, silently chiding himself for suggesting that the day's events be kept secret from the pixie's mate. The only thing that softened the shame he felt was that he'd offered it as an option due to the circumstances. At the time, he could fully understand if she kept it to herself, as he would keep any knowledge of it to himself.

When he considered again how things would be if their roles were reversed, though, the thought of trying to live with that guilt not only repulsed him, but he was appalled that he'd even entertained the idea.

"I have to see him, Dain."

Opening her eyes, Issabella met the guard's gaze.

"Please, get me in to see him."

"I don't know if that's possible, Abbi. The door is locked by order of the queen. No one is to go in or out, except those watching his recovery, until a decision has been made about what is to be done with him."

"Please."

"I will ask about what can be done," Dain said, shaking his head. "But this is a very rare situation. Ed is the first prisoner in the realm for longer than anyone can remember. There was a lot of debate as to how to treat this."

"You have to let me in," Issabella pleaded, her eyes filling with tears again. "Lock the door behind me. I won't leave. I'll stay with him for as long as it takes. I have to be there when he wakes up. I have to tell him..."

"I don't know what they'll allow, Abbi. I cannot make any promises."

"I have to be there when he awakes, Dain! I have to speak to him the moment he wakes up." Issabella's voice sounded urgent. She leaned forward, grasping his folded hands tightly. "There is something he needs to know."

"Abbi?" Dain blinked at her in surprise, looking to their hands.

"Dain, he needs to know that I'm carrying his child!"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 211 2025/03/16 14:47

"We have summoned you here today to deliver the queen's second ruling in this matter of Ed's trespass into our realm."

The statement was made by a dwarf with white hair. His face was pinched and wrinkled. The top of his head was bald, while the sides and back of his head were covered in long, thin, and wiry tufts. He breathed slowly, taking deep breaths, as he looked first at Issabella, then at those present behind her.

The Hall's gallery was again crowded with beings of the realm. They'd come to witness the ruling concerning the only occurrence in recorded history in which a sentence handed down by the queen had not only been interrupted to the point of not being carried out, but warranted reconsideration.

"For your part in the matter: the interference of the Realm's Guard in carrying out a sentencing in accordance with the queen's ruling, it has been decided that you will receive leniency," the dwarf said, wetting his lips with his tongue. "Leniency is granted in that your actions were taken to stop harm coming to your bonded mate. This is indeed an unusual situation. Our laws are on the side of one bonded mate doing whatever necessary to prevent harm to their partner. Your actions, though against our laws about preventing or interfering with the carrying out of the queen's ruling, were deemed to have been done so in order to prevent harm to your bonded mate and will not be held against you."

Issabella nodded silently, her heartbeat quickening. She looked from one side of the panel to the other, at each of the fae seated there in turn. While she wasn't sure what to expect further, this news gave her hope.

"In light ofp circumstances that were unknown at the time of his sentencing, the queen has been forced to reconsider the sentence that was handed down previously." The old dwarf's gaze rested on Issabella as he spoke, stroking the white beard on his chin.

There was a long pause.

"Should Ed not be present, as he is the subject of this ruling?"

Eddus had only woken three days before, and although magic had been used to repair his injuries as much as possible, he was in no shape to move much at all as his broken bones were not yet fully mended.

"It is the decision of the queen that it is sufficient that you hear the ruling

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 212 2025/03/16 14:47

and convey it to him, as he is physically unable to be present. You are his bonded mate, are you not?"

"I am," Issabella told him coldly. "We are successfully mate-bonded. We share the mark of our bond. I carry his child."

The dwarf straightened in his seat. He turned and began speaking in hushed tones to the two others. To his right sat a youngish-looking brownie with silver hair, while to his left, a sprite, just over two hands tall in height.

The sprite stood momentarily on the stool she'd been seated on, then took flight. She flew to the right side of the dwarf, where she hovered while talking to her colleagues. The crowded gallery behind Issabella was filled with murmurs and whispers.

Ignoring those behind her, Issabella watched the three in front of her converse for a few moments. The sprite flew back to her seat, where she landed softly, then sat again, cross-legged. All three of them looked at Issabella.

"The queen is aware of your condition." The old dwarf scowled, shaking his head. "It is regrettable that the union, as well as your gravidity, were not previously known by anyone within the realm prior to Ed being sentenced."

Taking a deep breath, Issabella tried to calm the anger that surged within her chest. She blinked back tears of frustration as she felt her face get hot.

"Ed's ruling and sentencing came the morning after we'd formed our bond," she said, trying not to let any emotion be heard but unable to prevent the spite in her voice. "I only realised it that day. There was hardly time to make an announcement."

"It was most unfortunate." Nodding, the dwarf stroked his beard again, twisting the ends of it between his fingers and thumb. While his face remained expressionless, his eyes seemed to watch Issabella with sympathy, or perhaps pity.

"The queen is aware now of the situation and has come to a new decision as to what is to be done."

The brownie spoke, his accent not so thick as to not be misunderstood but strong enough that what he said came across very direct, and with no room for question.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 213 2025/03/16 14:47

"The new ruling will see Ed remain in this realm long enough to recover. He will be here to see your child's pod produced before he is returned to his realm."

At these words, tears spilled down Issabella's cheeks, and she clenched her jaw to keep from sobbing openly. Her anger still bursting inside at the fact that Eddus was not present for the ruling, she also felt an indescribable relief at hearing that he was not to be put to death.

"But," the brownie continued, "upon his exit, Ed will be banished from the realm. He will never be permitted to return to our world. His original sentence will be carried out should he ever return. And furthermore, it is the queen's ruling that for the protection of our world, your child will never leave the realm."

The brownie's words took a moment to register. Issabella's blood suddenly ran cold as she realised what she'd heard. She had a feeling in her solar plexus as if she'd received a blow. Her gut wrenched, and a feeling of nausea washed over her.

"No," she said, her voice weak. She fought to keep her legs from buckling under her. "How-"

The hall was silent. Everyone present was quiet after the brownie's announcement. They all watched Abbi expectantly.

"The queen's decision is for the safety of our realm and for everyone in it."

The brownie's words were again direct, even matter-of-fact.

The old dwarf's eyes closed, and he inhaled deeply. Exhaling slowly, he turned toward his colleague, shaking his head at him. He then turned his attention again to the pixie standing before the panel.

"This ruling is not ideal," he said, "but it is the only ruling that could be reached that would insure the realm's safety while letting Ed - your human - live."

"But there's no danger to the realm." Issabella found her voice, though when she spoke, she sounded to herself like a child pleading. "Eddu – Ed would never tell anyone about us."

"It is the queen's decision. It must be this way."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 214 2025/03/16 14:47

"His child..." Issabella stammered, feeling cold and weak. Her hands moved to her abdomen, almost as if on their own. "...our child. If Ed is banished and our child can never leave, he will not get to see – my mate will never know his own child!"

"Banishment is half the price of his life," the dwarf said softly. "The ruling that your offspring remain in the realm is the other half. If Ed is to live, he cannot be allowed to return. But his being outside of our realm still places us all in danger. If our world were exposed, it could cause irreparable damage to us all. For Ed to remain alive, your child must remain within our realm as insurance."

"What?" Issabella was light-headed. She could barely collect her own thoughts, let alone understand what was being said to her. "Insurance?"

"As I said, it is not ideal," the elderly fae said. His lips pursed for a moment, and there was a sorrow in his eyes. "But for as long as your child is not allowed to leave the realm, it is hoped that Ed will never divulge our whereabouts, if for no other reason than to protect his bonded mate and his offspring. This is the closest thing to a guarantee that we have that he will not expose the realm."

"How will he ever know his child?"

The dwarf shook his head again, a pained look on his face.

"It is the queen's ruling, if your mate is to live," the brownie said again, his accent no less thick but his words softer, as if he now understood the impact of their meaning.

Issabella said nothing more. She felt nothing.

"Ed... Ed, are you awake?"

His eyes shooting open, Eddus gasped in pain as he bolted forward in the chair he was seated in. Sleeping where he sat, he had not heard the knock at the door or its opening.

He groaned softly, exhaling slowly as he sank back into the chair. His

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 215 2025/03/16 14:47

right hip, lower back, and side spasmed, and he grimaced as he watched the door swing open.

Eddus expected to see Dain enter the room, but it was Issabella who walked through the doorway. He felt his gut sink as she entered.

Her head down, she paused just inside the door, looking at him for a moment, before shaking her head and lowering her eyes again. She then silently walked to the bed, where she lay down in a fetal position with her eyes closed.

The chair in which he sat was just beside the bed, having been moved from the other side of the room. During the past few days, he and Issabella had taken turns sitting there while the other sat or lay on the bed as Eddus was slowly recovering.

Issabella had laid down facing him. She'd been crying. Eddus could see it in her face. Her cheeks were puffy and flushed, and her eyes were red. There were streaks left on her skin by her tears. He could just reach her from where he sat, and he touched her hair. She withdrew, pulling her chin toward her chest.

"Ed."

Eddus jumped, pulling his hand away from Issabella and looking toward the door. Dain stepped into the room. He wore a green waistcoat over a white collarless shirt that laced up the front. It was clear that he was not on duty.

"May I come in?"

He glanced uncomfortably from Eddus to the bed and back again.

Glancing at Issabella, Eddus nodded, unable to form words. The guard took a step further, and the door clicked shut behind him. The two of them looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

"I had to make sure Abbi got back to you all right. I was present when she received the ruling," Dain told Eddus. "When she left the Hall, she was not well. It was like she didn't know where she was."

They both looked at the pixie lying on the bed. Other than when she'd pulled away from Eddus' touch, she hadn't moved. She remained in the fetal position, her chin tucked in and both hands on her stomach.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 216 2025/03/16 14:47

After a moment, Eddus looked at Dain.

"How bad is it?"

"Ed," Dain's brows knitted as he broke Eddus' gaze, looking away, "it's not for me to tell you what happened in the Hall. It's not my place. Abbi was in a bad space, and I had to make sure she got back to you."

Eddus nodded slowly. He wanted to thank Dain but stopped himself. He still didn't quite understand why expressing one's thanks was not looked upon as something good. He was grateful to Dain for having seen Issabella back to the room, but he did not know how to appropriately convey it.

"Will you stay for a while?"

"I really shouldn't be here, Ed. You should be alone with your mate. You need to talk."

"Please, Dain..."

Both men looked toward the bed. Issabella lay in much the same position, but her eyes were open, and she looked up at them. The whites of her eyes were red, and she looked weary. She breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled, lifting her head slightly.

"Please stay," Issabella said. Her voice was weak.

Dain stepped forward, taking a knee so that he could hear her.

"Please. I can't- Please tell him. I can't-"

Issabella's eyes widened, and she gasped, sitting up with an alarmed look. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she almost fell trying to get off the bed and past the guard before running to the door of the washroom. She entered the small room, closing the door behind her.

Looking uncomfortable, Dain glanced at Eddus. They both turned to look at the closed door. From inside, they could hear muffled sounds of retching followed by her coughing.

Eddus struggled to stand but was unable to.

"You shouldn't walk," Dain said, standing.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 217 2025/03/16 14:47

Slowly, he approached the washroom door, knocking on it gently, but there was no response. He looked at Eddus, who was still turned in his chair, craning to see, and shook his head.

He then disappeared from Eddus' sight for a moment and returned carrying the chair that had been at the desk in the corner nook. He placed the chair facing Eddus and sat down.

"Let's give her a few minutes," he said, feeling uneasy as the two of them sat looking at one another.

It was Eddus who broke their awkward silence.

"How bad is it, Dain?"

He groaned softly as he forced himself to sit up straight and then leaned forward toward the guard.

Dain shook his head.

"It's not good," he said. "Look, Ed, this is a personal matter. I really shouldn't be the one telling you about it."

"Dain, how long do I have?"

"Ed..."

"How long?"

"The queen has given you until Abbi produces her pod."

The thought of what he was telling the human made Dain's stomach churn, and he felt sick. He winced, shaking his head as he watched as Eddus sat staring blankly in front of him, his breathing heavy. His insides lurched as he tried not to imagine what the human must have felt at being given this news.

Eddus set his jaw. Using the thumb of his right hand, he wiped away a tear from his cheek.

"Well, I guess that it's better than it could have been." Raising his gaze, Eddus watched Dain turn his head away. "At least I'll get to see our child born before I die."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 218 2025/03/16 14:47

At these words, Dain quickly looked at Eddus again in disbelief. He stared at him, slowly shaking his head.

"Ed, no-" Dain had to stop talking and swallow hard. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm the feeling of illness that overwhelmed him. Everything Eddus had just said was wrong.

"Dain?" Eddus met his gaze.

"Ed, you're not going to be put to death."

"What are you saying, Dain?"

"We don't put our own to death, Ed."

Eddus thought for a moment, a puzzled look on his face.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The queen's previous decision was overturned when it was revealed that you and Abbi are mate-bonded. By our laws, you cannot be put to death. You are now fae."

"I'm- what?"

"You're fae, Ed. From the moment your mate-bond was formed, you and Abbi became one. You are one of us."

"But you said I had until the baby was born." Eddus felt a chill run down his spine. He'd only just found out about Abbi's pregnancy a few days before and could still not fully believe it.

Dain shook his head, a pained expression on his face. He suddenly felt queasy as he thought about the implications of what he was about to say.

"Ed, you've only got until Abbi produces a pod."

"What does that mean, Dain?" Eddus' heart began to race. "What is a pod? Isn't that when she gives birth?"

"Producing a pod is only the first part of the birthing process." Issabella's voice was weak. She slowly stepped out of the small washroom, closing the door behind her.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 219 2025/03/16 14:47

Walking slowly between them, she took a seat on the edge of the bed. She walked slowly, as if in pain, as she moved.

Dain placed his head in one hand. He felt guilt at feeling relief that he would not have to finish telling Ed the bad news.

"I will produce a pod," Issabella said, taking Eddus' hand. "It's like an egg, but not the same. Our child will be inside of it, where it will grow until it is ready to be born."

The lights in the room dimmed, an indication of the time of day. Issabella watched Eddus closely as he processed what she had just said. His confusion was apparent, and he looked at Dain.

"Then what does it mean that I only have until the pod comes?" Eddus asked, looking quickly at Issabella, who shook her head, tears running down her face.

"Ed, you'll be sent back to your realm." Dain took a deep breath. "You're being given until Abbi makes the pod, partly so that you have time to recover and most likely so that she can accompany you back while the pod remains here."

Eddus slowly leaned back in the chair. Closing his eyes, he inhaled sharply at the pain he felt as he moved. He didn't quite understand all that he'd just been told, except that he was not to be put to death.

Issabella lifted her hand, still holding his, and kissed the back of his hand. She held his knuckles against her cheek, trying her hardest to hold back her emotions.

Eddus opened his eyes. He looked at Dain, who said nothing, only turned away from him. He then looked at Issabella, still holding his hand to her cheek. With his free hand, he gently cupped the back of her neck.

"Then it's not so bad," he said slowly. "They're going to let me live, right? So I won't be here when our baby is born, but I'll come every chance I can."

Issabella dropped his hand, covering her face with both of hers. She made no noise, but it was clear by the way her shoulders heaved and her small frame quaked that she wept uncontrollably. Eddus touched her knee and then looked toward the guard.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 220 2025/03/16 14:47

"Ed, you can't come back," Dain said through gritted teeth. He took several deep breaths, composing himself. "You've been banished from the realm."

Eddus lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling in the dim light. There was no possible way he could sleep. Aside from the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach at the news he'd received, he felt wave after wave of sorrow, pain and fear that vibrated through his entire body. He could only guess that it was the link he now shared with Issabella.

He was distressed by the feeling. Combined with what he was experiencing at the same time, it was quite overwhelming. While the sensation was similar to what he himself was feeling, it was distinctly different in that he could feel that it was not his own. With each breath she drew, he could feel her fear and sadness, as well as an intense despair, which added to the guilt he felt.

He wondered what she could feel coming from him and if it only compounded what she already felt.

His right arm touching the wall, he'd given as much room as he could to his pixie mate, who lay beside him, still wearing her dress.

She'd fallen into an exhausted slumber almost immediately upon laying her head down, one hand on Eddus' chest, her back to the edge of the bed. Her eyes darted behind her closed eyelids, and her breathing wavered. Her wings trembled from time to time while she slept.

Issabella had been an emotional mess while she, or rather, Dain, told him of the queen's new ruling and what it entailed.

They explained to him how the price of his being allowed to live was twofold: how his being allowed to live hinged on the assurance that the child Issabella carried was never to be allowed to leave the faerie realm.

Eddus had broken down completely when he realised that his banishment from the faerie realm and his unborn baby's confinement to it meant that he would never know, or even see, his child.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 221 2025/03/16 14:47

Dain left shortly after. There was really nothing more to be said. He excused himself, saying that not only was it late but also that the two of them needed time alone together. There was no more help that he could offer, and he had someone waiting up for him as well.

For a long time after his departure, Eddus and Issabella sat together. He sat in the chair that he'd begun to feel confined to, and she on the floor in front of him. They sat in silence. On her knees, Issabella leaned against his left leg, her cheek resting on his thigh, her eyes closed.

Eddus carefully undid Issabella's hair, tied low at the back of her head, letting her hair fall down her back and over the base of her wings between her shoulders. He ran his fingers through her hair, watching as her breathing slowed.

Her body would jolt suddenly as she just began to fall asleep. She would inhale sharply, her eyes springing open. Each time, he'd smile down at her, still stroking her hair and tell her to close her eyes again.

On the last such occasion, her breathing had slowed, becoming deep and regular for several minutes before she awoke with a start. Eddus coaxed her off the floor, telling her that she needed to lie down.

Nodding, she silently got to her feet, then assisted him from the chair onto the bed, where she lay facing him. Eyelids heavy, she kissed him and let her head sink into the pillow. She was unconscious within moments.

With no concept of how much time had passed, Eddus lay wide awake in the shadowy light. The conversation he'd had with Dain and Issabella replayed in his mind again and again.

Each time he recalled what was said, it came in a different order, but no matter how he recalled it, the meaning was the same. He would never be permitted to come back to this place. He would never get to see the child he'd only found out about a few days before. And if he understood things correctly, he'd never even meet his child.

His chest ached. The thought brought on questions concerning whether or not he would ever see Issabella again, and if so, how often?

Would she be able to visit him? Would she bring him pictures of their child or show their child pictures of him? Would the pixie even have the time to venture into the human world while trying to raise a baby on her own?

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 222 2025/03/16 14:47

Placing his right hand gently over the small hand resting on his chest, Eddus turned his head to look at Issabella. As he watched her brows twitch ever so slightly and the movement of her eyesbehind thier closed lids, he could only wonder what she was seeing in her dreams. He felt a slight relief at the realisation that, having fallen into uninterrupted slumber, the turmoil he felt through his link with her had begun to abate, if only a little. Grateful that she could now rest, he gently kissed her forehead.

Turning his arm slightly, he could see the mark across the middle of his forearm. The glow of the blue line was brighter than normal, being in close proximity to hers. The blue light below his skin still amazed him, both for the fact that it somehow glowed and for the fact that the thin line was one of only two that were somehow linked only to one another.

His eyes resting on the mark on his arm, he began to feel a nagging doubt. Agreeing to become Issabella's bonded mate was not the right thing to have done. He truly did love her, and to be married to her should have been the happiest thing he could have experienced. But the uncertainty of the future could not let him enjoy the feeling. Where he should have been happy, he felt guilt at having put the young lady he'd fallen in love with in this situation.

The tiny woman beside him whimpered, inhaling sharply and then let out a wavering breath. Eddus recalled how badly he'd felt before they had mate-bonded at even the thought of making her a widow.

'What kind of person would I be to tell you that I love you and then marry you, knowing that at any time I might be taken away and killed...'

In light of the circumstances, it would have been better had he just faced the consequences of entering the faerie ring.

His life had now been spared, and Issabella was not going to be left a widow. Instead, she would be a single mother, married to a man who would never be there for his child. She was now linked to a man that she may or may not ever see again. As if he couldn't feel any worse about things, if he had understood what she'd told him, she would somehow be forever linked to him.

The situation now included not only the two of them but also the life of an innocent child. It was so much worse than if he'd been sentenced to death again. In retrospect, he knew that, alive or not, they'd made a terrible mistake.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 223 2025/03/16 14:47



Home no longer felt like home. In fact, nothing quite felt right after coming back. The city in which he lived and had grown up no longer held any familiarity. The streets he knew, the shops he used to visit, the various places he used to frequent, and even the home and business he'd made for himself were all now so foreign.

Eddus felt as though he had come back to a place he'd once known in another life. And in a way, he had. He was a different man than the one he'd been when he left.

While everything looked as it had before he left, being back in the city did not feel the same. It was all so foreign now.

In the three months he had been in the faerie realm, over two and a half years had gone by in his own world. And while everything still looked like what he knew and may very well have been similar to what he'd left, it had all changed. His entire world was now different.

He'd not known much about the difference in time between the realms, and upon returning, he was unaware of just how much time had passed.

It was late in the morning, perhaps midday, when Eddus and Issabella stepped out of the lift. Eddus paused, tightening his grip on Issabella's hand, as the elevator's door slid closed behind them.

The paint was still peeling off the walls of the small foyer. Not much here had changed, it seemed, in his absence. They entered the communal lounge and kitchen area that was the top floor of the warehouse he owned. Everything was so familiar, and yet he felt as though he were a stranger in his own home.

Eddus noted the closed doors to both his flat and studio as they walked past them toward the kitchen.

A pizza box sat on the table's surface. Beside it, a half-finished glass of chocolate milk and a square container of chocolate powder, with a spoon resting across the top of it. Condensation had run down the glass onto the table.

Using a finger, Eddus lifted the lid of the box. Its contents, about a third of a pizza, were still slightly warm. He closed the box and turned his head,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 224 2025/03/16 14:47

looking at Issabella.

"Ed?"

Both he and Issabella looked toward the voice.

In the furthest corner of the room, coming out of her flat, Stiles didn't bother closing her door. She crossed the area as fast as she could, coming to an abrupt halt a few paces away from the opposite side of the table, staring in disbelief.

"Hey," Eddus said after a few moments.

"Don't you 'hey' me, Eddus Brandt. What the fuck! Where the fuck have you been?" Stiles turned her gaze to Issabella. "Has he been with you? What the fuck?"

"Where are Mo and Jay?"

"They're at work. They –" Stiles shook her head. "Don't change the subject, damn it!"

"Calm down," Eddus chuckled. "I know I've been gone longer than expected, but it's only been a few-"

"Years, Ed!" Stiles approached the table, pulling out one of the chairs. She sat down, shaking her head, still looking at him wide-eyed. She looked as though she'd seen a ghost. "It's been almost three years…"

"What?" Glancing quickly at Issabella, Eddus felt his stomach lurch. He put his hand on the table to steady himself, his legs suddenly weak. Beside him, Issabella turned a chair for him to sit in, which he almost fell onto.

"Where have you been, Ed? The last time I saw you was- " Stiles looked back and forth between the two on the opposite side of the table. "Two years, Ed! That was like two years and… eight months ago, I think. What the fuck!"

Eddus caught his breath. He knew that he'd been in the faerie realm for at least three months, from what he could gather. It had taken almost that amount of time for his legs, hip and ribs to heal, as well as for the pod that Issabella produced to come to term. He was aware that there were a few days beyond that to be counted as well, but not knowing exactly how much faster time moved in the faerie realm, he had no idea that so much time had passed in his absence.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 225 2025/03/16 14:47

"I didn't realise," he said, unable to think of any way to answer.

"You didn't realise you'd been gone for two and a half years? Where were you?"

"I- I can't..."

"Ed, Mo and Janice filed a missing persons case." Stiles shook her head, her brows knitted. "We were all questioned about your disappearance. We all thought – we thought you were dead!"

Issabella placed a hand on Eddus' shoulder, and she looked up at him. She could feel his confusion.

"Abbi, has he been with you?"

Issabella looked from Eddus to Stiles. She nodded, biting her lip.

"Where the *fuck* have you guys been?" Stiles spoke to both of them, her cheeks flushed. "We looked everywhere for you!"

Closing her eyes, Stiles took several deep breaths. Her lips thinned, and she clenched her jaw as a tear rolled down her cheek. She shook her head and wiped it away angrily before looking at Eddus.

"Couldn't you have at least called us? Let us know that you weren't going to be back for a while. Let us fucking know that you were alive!"

Although Stiles' words were reprimanding in nature, her tone was one of exasperation. The emotions she fought not to show came through in her speech as well. Her voice broke, and she wiped her eyes as she spoke, as though determined not to let them see.

"Ed, the police gave up looking for you over a year after your missing person case was opened. They said it's now an unsolved cold case."

"I'm – I don't know what to say." Eddus felt terrible watching Stiles struggle with a barrage of thoughts and emotions.

"Where the hell were you? How hard could it have been to let us know where you were?" Stiles looked from Eddus to Issabella, not wiping away the tear that rolled down her cheek. "It didn't occur to either of you?"

"It's my fault." Issabella said. She touched Eddus' elbow.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 226 2025/03/16 14:47

Stiles shook her head. She opened her mouth to say something but was cut short.

"You're right, Stiles," Eddus said. "There is no excuse. Has it really been two years?"

"Yes, Ed," Stiles told him angrily, "and it's closer to three years. You disappeared off the face of the planet for almost three years now. Nothing, Ed! Nothing! For all we knew...

Her lips pursed, and another tear rolled down her cheek.

Eddus nodded. He glanced at Issabella with a serious look, then back to Stiles.

"As I said, there is no excuse, Stiles. I'm- I'm sorry," he said. He could sense Issabella's discomfort, and not just because her grip tightened slightly on his arm. There was a flutter in his chest as he spoke, and he had to make an effort not to show how uneasy it made him. Even months after forming their mate-bond, he wasn't used to being able to feel the emotions she felt.

"Fuck sorry, Ed! You're damn right; there's no excuse." Stiles got to her feet. "Now get over here!"

Issabella nudged Eddus forward, who stood motionless. He took a few steps around the end of the table, stopping in front of his roommate.

She glared at him for a moment and then threw her arms around him, crying into his shoulder. Eddus blinked in surprise and then returned her embrace. He turned his head to look at Issabella.

"I missed you so much," Stiles said, not releasing him from the hug. "You're such an asshole. Mo is so going to kill you when he gets back."

"Mr. Brandt...?"

Eddus quickly looked up from the magazine he had been lazily browsing through.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 227 2025/03/16 14:47

A uniformed policeman glanced down at the picture of Eddus paper-clipped to the file folder he held, then back up.

"Please, just Ed," he told the officer as he stood up, picking up a folder on the chair beside him, as well as a walking stick. After returning, he'd begun using it to alleviate the limp he still walked with, though the injuries from his time in the faerie realm had mended.

"You can come this way, Ed." Motioning toward the hallway behind him, the policeman turned to allow Eddus to pass, then walked just behind him. "It's the last door on the right."

The room they entered was dimly lit. A fixture hanging from the ceiling held two fluorescent tubes, one of which glowed steadily while the other flickered constantly. A desk, covered in stacks of papers and file folders like the one the officer held, took up most of the room. A fan sat on a small table in the far corner, humming as it pushed a lazy breeze toward the desk.

The officer walked behind his desk, nodding to the chair in front of it. Eddus sat down in it, leaning his cane against the edge of the desk.

"I am Officer Cotes. What can I do for you, Mr. Brandt- Ed?" The policeman corrected himself, taking a seat in what appeared to be a rather old wooden swivel chair. He placed the file he held on the desk, opening it and briefly skimmed its contents before he looked across the cluttered work surface.

"I'm really not sure." Eddus shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head. "I've been away for a while, and I believe that in my absence, a mistake was made."

Officer Cotes nodded thoughtfully.

"What sort of mistake are you referring to?"

Laughing nervously, Eddus shook his head again.

"I was told that a missing persons report was filed while I was away. And as you can see, I'm right here. So, I guess I need to have that report closed, or unfiled, whatever that entails."

"I can certainly help you with that, Mr. Brandt, but first, I'll need to see some ID."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 228 2025/03/16 14:47

"Sure." Eddus blinked in surprise. He leaned forward in the chair, retrieving the wallet from his back pocket. Pulling out his driver's license, he handed it across the desk.

Cotes took the license. His eyes scanned it for a few moments before he turned it over, studying the back just as intently. He turned it again and held it up, comparing the photo on it to the man sitting in front of him.

"Eddus, is it?" The officer handed the plastic card back to its owner.

"Yes." Eddus fought the urge to grimace at the mispronunciation of his name. "But as I said, please just call me Ed."

"Are you aware that this license expired last year, Ed?"

Officer Cotes seemed to be watching him intently. Perhaps he wasn't sure he believed that Eddus was who he said he was. The policeman handed the card back to him.

"I wasn't. As I said, I've been away. I guess I'll also be renewing it while I'm here," Eddus said, looking at the date printed on his license. It hadn't occurred to him to check. He looked at the officer with a nervous smile. "I didn't drive here, if that makes you feel better."

Officer Cotes nodded slowly, looking at Eddus for a moment, then at his file again.

"Ed," he said slowly, "this is a rather curious situation. Most of the time, when someone shows up to close out a missing persons case on themselves, it's a spouse that ran off with a lover or an overzealous gambler who decided to stay a day or two longer at the casinos. A week, maybe two, is about the time a person usually stays 'missing'."

Inhaling deeply, Eddus nodded, turning his license over in his hand. He found humour in the thought that he may have been away with a lover. While he hadn't, the person with whom he'd been with was now his wife, which he refrained from mentioning. He didn't want to field the questions he knew might follow.

"Almost three years, Ed. That's an awfully long time."

"I know."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 229 2025/03/16 14:47

"Usually, after two years, if we close a missing persons case, it's because we find a body." Cotes looked across the desk at Eddus. "A dead body."

"Well, I'm not dead." Eddus laughed nervously again.

"I can see that. But where it gets a little hazy is that you seem to have completely disappeared for so long." Cotes tapped the file in front of him with his finger. "Nobody saw or heard from you during that entire time. We looked. We checked in the surrounding cities and even the immediately surrounding provinces, but with no luck. No hotels. No car rentals. No airports. Not so much as a hit on a credit card."

"I don't have a credit card."

"That's not important." The officer behind the desk folded his hands in front of him. "Considerable time was spent looking into your whereabouts. We questioned the people who know you. We even flagged your bank account, which, as of the last time it was checked, only had money coming into it but nothing coming out of it."

"Tenants and roommates mostly," Eddus nodded, "and a few investments."

"Where were you, Mr. Brandt? You know what? It's really not any of my business. It's not important. Just know that I'm not the only one who is going to ask you about this." Cotes sighed, shaking his head. "When it gets out that you've turned up, the other officers who helped work your case may also call on you. There may be an official request that you reimburse the force for some of the funds spent while searching for you. Hell, the media may get wind of it. And I'm sure that the people who filed this report are more than curious to know where you've been."

"They are." Eddus exhaled slowly. He shook his head, looking down at the floor.

"Where were you, Mr. Brandt?" Cotes asked.

Eddus met the officer's gaze, shaking his head again.

"Look, Ed, you really need to tell me something. As I said, it's not my business, but this is no small matter." Cotes leaned back in his chair. It creaked loudly as he did. "There are a lot of people who are going to want to know, and you need to have an answer. After this much time, a missing person just up and walks in out of the blue. Look, you're not in any trouble,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 230 2025/03/16 14:47

but you have to admit, this is a curious situation."

"I understand."

"I don't think you do. And I'm not going to be the only one who thinks this. There are going to be a lot of questions, and the biggest one is going to be where you were, followed by whether or not you really are who you say you are. You know, an expired license with your picture on it is a long way from solid proof."

"I went away for a while. That's all I can really say. It's not against the law for me to take some time for myself." Eddus shook his head. He did understand what the officer was telling him, but at the same time, he knew that he couldn't tell him the truth. "I also have my birth certificate, current bank statements, and electric bills, as well as the original ownership papers of my property with me."

"You're right; it's not against the law. But it is a valid question, Mr. Brandt." Detective Cotes again tapped Eddus' file. "You've been gone for almost three years, and nobody seemed to have had any idea of your whereabouts. And had it not triggered a formal investigation, nobody here would question anything except perhaps why you waited so long to renew your license."

There was a pause. Officer Cotes' gaze did not waver as he looked at the man across the desk from him. He was beginning to feel annoyed but wanted to keep his composure. He didn't like being asked to close files without all of the details, and nothing about this one seemed to make sense.

Eddus remained silent, as he couldn't think of anything to say.

"As it stands, to close out your missing persons case, I must first verify your identification. Following that, I am required to perform a personal welfare check on you before I can officially close your file. And so long as they all check out, the documents you mentioned will most likely be able to establish your ID, but it would be of help for you to come up with something here."

"I went away." Eddus said, his mind racing. It hadn't occurred to him that it would be so difficult.

"With someone..." The officer commented.

"With someone, yes."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 231 2025/03/16 14:47

"I see. And may I ask who this person you went away with is?"

"No," Eddus said softly, Issabella's face flashing to the forefront of his mind. "Should it really matter? I met someone. We left. I was away for a bit longer than I anticipated. Besides, the fact that we were together, she has nothing to do with this. I wasn't kidnapped; I left on my own accord. And as you just agreed, I didn't break any laws."

There was a long silence. The officer's brows knitted, and he exhaled a long breath.

"Ok," he said.

"Ok?"

"Ok." Cotes closed the file in front of him. "I get it, Ed."

"You do?"

"Yeah," Cotes said flatly. He shook his head. "People are often reported missing when they have in fact eloped or just run off without saying anything. The timeline is a little different in this case, but as far as I can tell, that's what happened here."

"I appreciate that," Eddus told him.

"Do I believe that's the whole truth? No. I think that there's more to the story. Maybe a lot more. But I'm not going to press you for details you obviously don't want to share." Cotes folded his hands. "It's not my job. My job here is to do a well-being check and then put this to rest."

He sighed, glancing from Eddus to the file on his desk.

"As far as I can see, you seem to be all right physically. By speaking with you here, I can tell that you seem mentally stable. So as far as I can tell, your well-being is fine. I'm going to have a look at your documents and then close your file, but don't be surprised when you get contacted by this department at a later time for some follow-up. You may want to prepare yourself for what others may well ask."

"I really do appreciate this, officer." Eddus retrieved a small stack of papers from the folder on his lap. He turned the corner of each, one by one, checking to make sure everything was there before handing it to the officer.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 232 2025/03/16 14:47

"You've said as much. It's really none of my business, Mr. Brandt, but try letting someone know where you're going the next time you decide to up and run off. It'll save us both a lot of hassle."

About a half hour later, after having Eddus sign the appropriate documents, the officer said that the missing person's file would be considered closed. On his way out, Eddus was directed to a desk, where he applied to renew his driver's license. Officer Cotes spoke briefly with the woman behind the desk, confirming that he had just verified Eddus' identity.

His head spinning as he exited the police station, Eddus stopped for a moment to lean wearily against the station's brick wall. His insides were in knots, and at that moment he wanted nothing more than to wake, and find that this was all a dream.

Upon entering the diner, Eddus paused to look around. A young looking waitress gave him a smile as she hurried by, carrying a tray holding plates of food. A quick glance around, and he walked toward the far corner booth. At least the diner appeared not to have changed in his absence.

Sitting down, he looked first from the empty bench across from him to the door, through which he'd come in, and then toward the entrance to the kitchen at the far end of the diner. He folded his hands on the table in front of him, his gaze settling on the table. Memories began coming back to him – memories of sitting at this very booth with his friends. Mornings, afternoons, and nights, they'd met here, sitting at this very booth.

"Well, isn't this a surprise!"

Eddus looked up, startled. He'd been so deep in thought that he hadn't noticed someone approach the table. Wearing a wry smile, Janice stood looking at him.

"You've been gone a long time, Ed."

"So I've heard." Eddus smiled at the older woman. "Hello Janice. I thought that perhaps I'd come in on your day off."

"Now there's a thought, hun. What's a day off?" Janice chuckled as she spoke. "Are you expecting someone?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 233 2025/03/16 14:47

"Not at all."

"May I sit with you?"

"Of course." Watching as she sat down, something donned on him. "Are you just coming on?"

"I wish!" Janice laughed. "I've been on since five thirty this morning. Twelve-hour shifts every day now. And that's a short day."

"I just noticed you weren't wearing your uniform."

"I haven't worn a uniform in almost a year now." Janice raised a hand, getting the attention of one of the wait staff, and held up two fingers.

Eddus shook his head, not sure what she was getting at.

A few moments later, a waitress set two coffee cups on the table and filled them. She smiled at Janice, who gave her a nod, and the girl hurried away.

"I don't just work here anymore, hun." Janice picked up the cup in front of her, sipping at the coffee in it. "I own the place now. The previous owner put it up for sale and retired to some island."

Eddus blinked in surprise.

"Janice, that is fantastic! That's such great news!"

"Thank you," she said, "but I don't know how fantastic it is anymore. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since I took over. I must have been out of my mind."

"It's still wonderful, Janice." Eddus stopped himself before telling her not to thank him.

He pressed his lips in a thin smile as he thought about his wife, his mate, who was so far away from him and whom he'd not seen in weeks.

"Enough about me." Rolling her eyes, Janice chuckled again. "Tell me, where the hell have you been, hun?"

"I don't even know where to begin." Eddus stared at the steaming liquid in the cup in front of him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 234 2025/03/16 14:47

"Well, where have you been? Start there."

"Janice, I can't really say."

"Why not? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, but at the same time, a very big yes." Shaking his head, Eddus laughed, thinking back on what now seemed more like a dream.

Strangely, a dream did seem a more apt description than a nightmare, despite all he'd been through. He'd been held prisoner while somehow not being held prisoner at all. He'd been married and then sentenced to death, both within the same twenty-four hours. His death sentence had been overturned, and he'd been banished from an entire world. And then he came back to find out that years had passed in his absence, which he thought couldn't have been more than a few months.

"It's hard to explain," he said, "but I went away with someone for what I thought was only a little while, and I took a little trip that ended up being a bit longer than I expected."

"Ah."

Janice nodded. She didn't say anything further, but from the expression on her face, she was intrigued.

Eddus could see that the long nights the waitress, now owner of the diner, had spoken of had taken their toll. She looked older than he remembered, especially around the eyes. He had to remind himself that quite some time had passed since they'd last spoken, which made him wonder just how old he looked.

"Do you remember Abbi?" Eddus spoke slowly, careful to use the name she'd given him the night he'd met her.

Janice's eyes widened in surprise.

"The shoe-girl?"

"Yes, the shoe-girl."

Eddus sighed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes as he recalled the morning after he'd met Abbi.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 235 2025/03/16 14:47

"The one you came in with that night a few weeks before you went away?"

"That's the one."

"She must have been some kind of special to keep you away for over two years, Ed."

"She was," Eddus said, then quickly corrected himself. "She is."

He looked at the street outside the window, then at the table in front of him, tapping the handle of the coffee cup with his fingernail. It had been twenty-eight days since she'd returned to the pixie ring. He could almost no longer feel that vibration within himself that was her heartbeat. The mark of their bond on his forearm remained a dull blue but no longer glowed from under his skin. Her absence had left him feeling empty from the moment she crossed the barrier between their realms.

"Are you two still together? Pardon my assumption, but I've known you for a while, and I just can't see you going away with someone for such a long time unless there was something there."

Nodding slightly, Eddus lifted his cup, attempting to conceal the smile that he still couldn't keep from coming to his mouth when he thought about his wife and the mate-bond he shared with her.

It seemed to be the only thought that kept him sane after all he'd been through, first in the faerie realm and then having to say goodbye to her, not knowing if or when he'd see her again. The thought of how close he had been with her, sharing not only physical intimacy but now a connection that he could see as well as should be able to feel... it gave him hope.

Janice's sharp eye caught his smirk as he tried to hide it. She quietly watched him take longer to sip his coffee than was necessary and finally put his cup down, avoiding her gaze for a moment. After a brief silence, he looked at her.

"I'll tell you something, but you have to keep it to yourself," Eddus said.

"Who am I going to tell, hun?" Janice laughed. She shook her head, glancing at the table for a moment.

"Abbi and I are still together."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 236 2025/03/16 14:47

"And why is that a secret, Ed?"

Eddus took a deep breath.

"Janice, Abbi and I are married."

"No shit..." Janice said, almost under her breath. She blinked a couple of times, and then smiled at him. "Now, *that* is wonderful news! Congratulations, Ed!"

Eddus had to hold back the urge to laugh. He'd never heard Janice swear in all the time he'd known her. He picked up his coffee cup, trying again not to smile too broadly.

"Will the missus be joining us?"

His smile faded, and Eddus carefully set the cup back down in front of him.

"Not right now." He said, shaking his head. "Not for a while now."

The older woman sipped her coffee, taking note of the change in Eddus' demeanour.

"It's none of my business, hun, but is everything ok with you two?"

Eddus gripped the coffee cup handle between his finger and thumb, shifting it back and forth where it sat on the table. He quickly decided against mentioning that Issabella was expecting. Sighing, he glanced at Janice with a half-hearted smile.

'Yes," he said, "but then again, no."

"Is that why you're back? Trouble in paradise?"

"It's complicated."

The back of his head began to ache dully, and Eddus wished that the topic of conversation was anything but what they were talking about.

His relationship with Issabella was complicated and probably would have been so even without the current circumstances. While one might find the notion of a human and a pixie falling in love to be a story of faerie-

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 237 2025/03/16 14:47

tales, knowing now what he knew, even if he'd never entered the faerie ring, it was not.

"I miss her." Eddus pursed his lips as he realised what he'd said.

"How long has it been, Ed?" The elderly woman watched him sympathetically. "How long have you been away from Abbi?"

"Almost a month." Abashedly, Eddus looked across the table. "I know, right? Just a month."

Janice smiled thinly but said nothing.

"We've been through a lot recently. And again, it's complicated."

It occurred to Eddus as he spoke that, while it had been relatively recent for he and Issabella, it had, in fact, been a much longer time here.

"Ed, if you're still together after this long, I'm sure that whatever it is, you two will be fine."

"I hope you're right." Eddus nodded. "You know, Janice, I don't know what I'm saying. Of course, you're right. I'm just feeling sorry for myself."

"It can't be all that bad, can it?" With a concerned look on her face, Janice tilted her head. "I only met the young lady once, but I could tell that she was sweet on you. And she wasn't the only one. I could see that you were fond of her as well. I could see it in the way you looked at her and the way you spoke with one another. Now, three years later, you tell me that you married her. Whatever it is, I'm sure things will get better."

Saying nothing, Eddus lowered his gaze. Something else had just occurred to him as well: He really had no idea just how long he and Abbi had been mate-bonded. He had, of course, given some serious thought to trying to figure out the time difference between the realms. He did have an idea but couldn't be certain. The older woman had mentioned that it was over two years later, but in his mind, everything was still so fresh.

Janice smiled warmly.

"You and I go back a ways now," she said. "I don't know your Abbi, hun, but I do know you. I've never known you to jump into anything, and I doubt that this was any different. I can't see you getting yourself into something that doesn't work out in the end. Every marriage has its rough patches, Ed,

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 238 2025/03/16 14:47

especially when you marry someone younger. But if I know you, things will turn out fine."

In that moment, Eddus could have hugged her. Every uncertainty that had been present before was still there, but it helped to hear her reassuring words.

"Janice," he said, "I'm glad that we were able to talk."

"It's good to see you again, hun."



"I've told you before, Abbi did *not* leave me."

"My mistake. I misspoke. How long has it been since you were last with your wife this time?"

"It's been a while."

"How long?"

"Four months, eleven days, and about nine hours ago, I said goodbye to her."

He leaned back on the couch he sat on, leaning his head back until he was looking at the ceiling. For Eddus, the time he'd spent with Issabella had flown by. He could almost feel the passing of each minute since his mate had last held him tightly and kissed him before stepping again into the faerie ring, once again crossing the barrier between their realms.

She'd stayed with him for about a month this time. It was the longest she had been away from their child since she was born. It was only about three days in the faerie realm, but the new mother could not stay away from her child any longer.

"And your daughter?"

"Elizabeth," Eddus said softly, mostly out of habit.

Although he no longer needed to prompt himself, he'd started saying it years ago as a reminder not to use his daughter's true name in the presence

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 239 2025/03/16 14:47

of others. It was Issabella's idea to let him choose what to call her until she could choose for herself, though she'd reluctantly agreed to his choice.

There was a pause as he inhaled deeply, then let the breath out slowly.

"Yes, Ed, Elizabeth. How is your daughter?"

"Why do you do this, Dr. Thornton?"

"I'm only asking about what's been happening in your life since our last session."

"Why must you ask me that question in particular? Every time we meet. You know that I've never seen Elizabeth."

"So you've said." The therapist paused, adjusting her glasses, her eyes resting on the face of the man lying back on the sofa in front of her. She folded her hands over her lap. "You also still refer to her as an infant each time we speak of her."

"Yes."

"Almost like a newborn."

"Yes." Opening his eyes, Eddus sighed, staring at the ceiling.

"You've only ever referred to your daughter in that way."

"And?"

"Elizabeth cannot be a newborn, Eddus."

"Ed..."

"Ed," Dr. Thornton leaned forward, "you've been coming to me for over ten years. In that time, we've often spoken of your wife and your child. And whenever you've spoken of her, Elizabeth has been a baby."

"She is a year and a half."

"Ten years, Ed."

Eddus turned his head toward the therapist.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 240 2025/03/16 14:47

"You first spoke to me of your daughter ten years ago."

Eddus said nothing, looking at her.

Dr. Thornton inhaled deeply. She frowned as she exhaled before speaking.

"This," she said. "This is not healthy."

"What do you mean?"

"For years, you have spoken about a wife who is never here. You've always spoken of your daughter as an infant, and I have indulged you. It's unhealthy, and I think it has gone on long enough."

Eddus turned his head to look at the ceiling again and closed his eyes, reprimanding himself for ever having brought up the topic.

He couldn't speak about his daughter with the therapist. In the little that he'd said over the years, he had protected her real name, mentioning her only as Elizabeth. Initially, after accidentally mentioning her, Eddus refrained from speaking of her unless asked directly by the therapist.

Issabella, he was always careful to call Abbi. Over the years, Eddus had told the therapist about how he'd met his wife and that their marriage had happened rather hastily, but had taken special care not to go into too much detail.

As far as he could tell, Dr. Thornton most likely believed that the marriage had been due to his wife's pregnancy. There was never any mention of where anything except how they met had taken place. And there was certainly never any mention of realms or faeries.

"It was our agreement," he said softly.

"Yes, it was."

"I continued to see you because you agreed that no matter what I said, no matter how far-fetched, you would listen, advise, and not ask questions."

"I haven't asked you a question."

Eddus said nothing. He felt a tired annoyance building inside. The therapist had not asked a question in so many words, but he could feel her

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 241 2025/03/16 14:47

hinting. He inhaled deeply and sighed.

"Eddus- Ed- I must be honest with you. For ten years, I haven't been able to tell if this is some kind of fantasy or a delusion. Perhaps it's a coping mechanism for the loss of a loved one. You speak so convincingly that I honestly can't tell. A whirlwind romance, a spur-of-the-moment marriage, and an unplanned pregnancy... It's not uncommon. And it's not impossible. But then your wife leaves just before your baby is born, and you're not allowed to see your daughter, though you do still have contact with her mother." Dr. Thornton shook her head. "As per our agreement, I've never asked questions or taken any notes. I don't know what this is, but I have worried for some time as to what the effect of my entertaining this is having on your well-being."

Eddus' jaw tightened for a moment. To hear it in such a way did not sit right with him. It was he himself who'd left, even if it was forced. Issabella had done nothing wrong, but the only way to explain why she wasn't with him was to let the therapist believe that it was she who had left.

"I'm fine, doctor." Eddus said blandly, staring at the texture of the office ceiling tiles.

"You're not fine, Mr. Brandt. We have been meeting for a long time now, and I have watched you slowly decline year after year. I am convinced that our arrangement not only does nothing to help you, but it can also be seen to have been a harmful factor in your mental health."

"You're right, you know," Eddus blurted in exasperation. A tear escaped the corner of his eye, rolling down his temple to his ear. He shook his head angrily, as if trying to dismiss his emotion. "It's not healthy. I know it's not. But this – talking to you for all these years... It's the best I can do. And yes, it *is* a coping mechanism. I'm trying to cope with the fact that there are months, sometimes years, between the extremely short periods of time that I get to be with the woman I love. And, yes, I did lose someone, though she's not dead. I have a daughter whom I have never even seen and never will. Her first words... her first steps – I don't get to watch her grow up. I will die having never met my own child. These talks are all that I have!"

The therapist watched her patient, who sat up, shaking his head, his brows furrowed, and his jaw clenched.

"Are you sick, Ed?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 242 2025/03/16 14:47

"What?" Bewildered, Eddus turned his head to look at her.

"Are you ill? Have you been diagnosed with, or do you have some terminal illness that you've not told me about?" Dr. Thornton removed her glasses, leaning forward slightly in her chair with a look of concern on her face.

"What- no! I'm as healthy as I've ever been."

The two of them were silent for a few moments, looking at one another. Eddus could see the questions behind the therapist's gaze. His outburst had not been intentional, and by the time he realised what he was saying, it had already been said.

For just a moment, the feeling of déjà vu washed over him. It was only a feeling, but one he hadn't experienced in years, since when he'd first spoken to Issabella, answering her questions, when he had only known her as Abbi.

Déjà vu was quickly replaced with a kind of sad anger, both at having said more than he should have and at it conjuring up old feelings. Shaking his head again, Eddus leaned back again looking at the office ceiling for a moment before again closing his eyes.

"I only ask because I want to understand," Dr. Thornton said gently.

She chose her next words carefully, not sure how or even if to proceed. Her next words could shatter her patient's delusion, if that was indeed what he was experiencing. She had to tread carefully.

"You're in your fifties, Ed. You have your health. There is still plenty of time for you to get to know your daughter. There is plenty of time for you to see Elizabeth grow to be a woman."

"I don't want to talk about this."

There was a pause as Dr. Thornton again thought about how and what she should say next. She could see that her patient was in an uncomfortable space, and she didn't want to upset his fragile state too much. At the same time, she also knew that if she didn't push him, he could close off in future. The result of ten years of therapy boiled down to this conversation. She realised that at this moment she could be walking the fine line between breakthrough and breakdown.

"Ed, we need to speak about this. You opened this door. You pushed your

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 243 2025/03/16 14:47

own boundaries today. Until this point, when you spoke of your daughter, Elizabeth was only the name of your child that you'd not met. You only ever talk about her as if in passing. Please. Tell me about her. Why is it that you think things are so bad that you have ruled out any possibility of having some sort of relationship with her? You've said that you still see her mother from time to time, so what's to say that in time you can't also see your daughter, as well as make up for lost time?"

"This was never part of our arrangement." Eddus sat up quickly on the edge of the sofa. He looked at the therapist sternly. "Our sessions are not supposed to go like this."

"On the contrary, Mr. Brandt."

The therapist sat calmly in her chair, not wanting to show any response to her patient's sudden actions, though her heart was racing.

"This is exactly what therapy is about. Sometimes it does take a long time to make a breakthrough and come to terms with the obstacles in one's life, but ultimately, the goal here is to help you overcome those obstacles and be able to live comfortably."

"I don't come here to come to terms with anything." Eddus shook his head, looking down at the floor. "I'm here because this is a place where I can speak and know that what I say won't leave this room. I come because you agreed *not* to ask questions. There is nothing to come to terms with. There is no changing it. I did something a long time ago, the consequences of which I have to live with."

"Are you in trouble, Ed?" Dr. Thornton watched her client sit with his head down. "Did you get into some sort of trouble, and that's why you cannot see your daughter?"

"I have to go..."

Eddus stood, picking up his walking stick. He had again said much more than he intended. He walked slowly to the office door, not looking at the doctor.

"We don't have to talk about this right now, Ed."

Dr. Thornton rose from her chair. She turned to look at him, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. He'd paused, his hand on the door handle, but didn't turn around.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 244 2025/03/16 14:47

"You've taken a big step today. And as you mentioned, nothing you tell me will ever go beyond these walls."

Eddus turned the door's handle, pushing it open slightly.

"You need some time to cool down and think about things," the therapist said, hoping to calm her patient. "Shall we schedule a date for our next session?"

"No." Eddus shook his head as he pushed the door open. "I don't think we'll be seeing one another again."



The silence of the early morning hour was shattered by what sounded like a frantic knock on a door.

Stiles eyes opened with a start. She looked around her. The television was on, casting shadows in the glow given off by its screen in the darkness of the lounge.

Again, there was a pounding.

Stiles sat up quickly on the sofa she'd fallen asleep on. The sound was not coming from the television, which was barely audible. She turned her head quickly toward the door in the corner leading to the small foyer just outside. Standing, she took a step toward the door as the knock sounded again.

Turning off the television, Stiles hurried to the door. She blinked as she squinted through the peephole into the small, brightly lit corridor on the other side and then unlocked the deadbolt, opening the door.

"Abbi?"

Issabella stood on the other side of the door, her hand still raised.

"Stiles." She blinked as a look of surprise crossed her face. "Did I wake you? Is Eddus sleeping?"

"Abbi-"

"I know it's late, and I do regret waking you, but I must see him!" Issabella

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 245 2025/03/16 14:47

stepped in. Her eyes danced as she looked past Stiles in the direction of the door to Eddus' flat. "I have only the best news! It couldn't wait!"

"You can't…"

Stiles shook her head, reaching for Issabella's elbow but missing as she skirted her grasp. She pushed the door closed, turning quickly, and was able to touch Issabella's shoulder.

"I'll just duck in and surprise him."

Issabella glanced at her shoulder and continued walking past the studio towards Eddus' flat.

"Abbi!"

Stiles followed closely on Issabella's heels. As the two of them reached the door, she grabbed Issabella's arm, spinning her. They stood face-to-face. Her brows knitted, and her blue eyes locked gazes with Issabella. She shook her head.

"Abbi, he's not there."

"I'll wait for him inside. I'll surprise him. I have such good news," Issabella said excitedly. "Where is he? When will he be back?"

Stiles shook her head, releasing Issabella's arm. Her shoulders slumped, and she took a step away from her.

Issabella watched her with confusion and concern. Neither of them said anything for a few moments.

"He's not there, Abbi."

"Stiles?"

"We didn't know how to reach you."

"Reach me for what, Stiles? What's the matter?" Issabella felt a cold dread start to form in her stomach. "Where is Eddus?"

Stiles shook her head, chewing her bottom lip to keep it from quivering. As she dropped her gaze, a tear rolled down her face to the corner of her mouth.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 246 2025/03/16 14:47

"I'm sorry, Abbi..."

"Stiles!" Issabella began to feel panic and fear in her chest.

Stiles stepped forward, reaching out to touch her arm, but Issabella jerked away.

"Stiles, where-?"

"Abbi, he's dead."

"What?"

Issabella's left hand slowly moved to her right wrist, then slid slowly to the middle of her forearm. Her eyes dropped as she lowered her head to look at the spot on her arm where her hand rested. From under her thumb, she could see the mark of their mate-bond. It was a dull grey-blue.

She had been so used to the feeling of their bond being faint due to their distance and being in different realms. She'd been so caught up in the excitement of obtaining the news she'd come to share with him that she had not felt when Eddus' bond had gone cold.

She slowly shook her head as her whole body went numb, and she began to shake. Her chest constricted, and then her throat.

Rushing forward, Stiles caught Issabella, helping her slowly to the floor as her legs gave out from under her.

"We didn't know how to reach you," Stiles said miserably. She held Issabella's limp body close in an embrace, although she knew there was no comfort in it.

Issabella sat trembling with her forehead against Stiles' shoulder. Arms in front of her, her left hand was still on her right forearm. Her breathing came in short gasps, and she couldn't catch her breath.

"How?" Her voice scarcely a whisper, Issabella struggled to speak.

Stiles shook her head. Her embrace tightened, holding Issabella closer to her.

Issabella pulled away. Her face was ashen. Her expression bleak and her eyes glassy, she met Stiles' gaze. She seemed to look right through her. Her

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 247 2025/03/16 14:47

bottom lip quivered each time she inhaled.

"How?" she managed a second time. "I was here a few days ago…"

Her voice fell away as it occurred to her that while she'd been away for just over a week in her own realm, much more time than that had passed in the human world.

"When?"

"It's been months since you were." Stiles' voice cracked. She shook her head, looking bleak. Her eyes were red, and tears flowed down her cheeks. She looked away, shaking her head again, trying her best to choke back a sob.

Issabella's eyes did not follow Stiles' movement. Not moving at all, her gaze remained straight in front of her, fixed on nothing, as the two women sat in the dark shadows outside of Eddus' flat. The only source of light was from the fixture left on over the sink in the kitchen.

"How did it happen?" Issabella's voice, flat and lifeless, was barely audible.

Receiving no reply, after a moment of silence, she spoke again.

"Please…"

Raising her head, Stiles face wore a pleading look. Her jaw clenched, and she pursed her lips again.

"Abbi, I can't."

"Stiles, how did my-" Her voice cracked, and she drew in a deep, wavering breath. Their eyes met. "How did Eddus die? Please, tell me."

"I don't know."

"Stiles, please…"

"I don't know, Abbi," Stiles stammered, closing her eyes. "We don't know. They… don't know. When he was found, they couldn't say for sure, but-"

She stopped talking; the words caught in her throat.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 248 2025/03/16 14:47

Issabella's eyes brimmed, and a tear fell.

"Abbi, you don't want to hear this."

"Tell me," Issabella whispered.

"They found him in City Park early one morning. He had been gone for weeks. We thought perhaps he had gone away with you again." Stiles took a deep breath. Her face still held a pleading expression. For a moment, she looked at Issabella, who slowly shook her head.

"What happened?"

"Honest, Abbi, nobody knows what happened to Ed."

Stiles touched Issabella's hand.

"What does that mean? How can nobody know?"

Stiles inhaled sharply.

"Initially, they thought that he'd been the victim of a mugging that had gone bad. He'd been hurt badly."

"Initially?"

Dropping her gaze to her lap, Stiles then looked into the expectant face of the woman in front of her.

"When the police found him, they thought he'd been attacked," she said, "but he still had his wallet and phone. His clothing was torn, and his phone had been smashed in his pocket like he had fallen on it. He had several broken bones. Before the autopsy, they thought that it could have been a robbery that somehow got out of hand, but the coroner said that it was unlikely."

"I don't understand... What are you saying?"

Stiles shook her head, clenching her jaw.

"It looked like his hands had been tied."

Issabella sat motionless.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 249 2025/03/16 14:47

"Abbi, you don't need to hear this," Stiles said uncomfortably.

She had tried so hard to put the whole thing out of her mind. She felt ill thinking about it and wasn't sure she could continue speaking about it.

"No," Issabella said weakly, lowering her eyes, "no, I don't. But I do need to know what happened to Eddus."

Stiles clenched her jaws several times before continuing, speaking between gritted teeth.

"The coroner called it a murder. Detectives questioned Mo and Jay, and I. They questioned anyone who knew Ed."

Pressing the back of her hand to her mouth, she sobbed quietly.

Issabella's temples throbbed. Her eyes ached, and the front of her head hurt like she'd been hit in the face, while in the back of her head, she felt an empty, almost dizzy sensation.

"But they couldn't think any of you had something to do with it." Her voice was weak.

"No," Stiles wiped at her face with her fingers, "we were told that it was routine for anyone who knew a victim to be questioned, but that we are also not to leave the city."

Issabella said nothing, slowly shaking her head.

Stiles' face crumpled, and she wept again, trying to contain her emotion. Issabella reached forward and pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear, her hand coming to rest on her cheek.

Pressing her cheek gently against the hand touching it, Stiles then shook her head, pulling away with a shudder.

"What is it?"

"I'm so sorry, Abbi!" she cried out. "They didn't know whether to call it murder or suicide!"

"Suicide? But Eddie would never-" Issabella shook her head. She couldn't speak the words. The back of her head began to ache, and she felt cold pins and needles throughout her body. "How could anyone think that?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 250 2025/03/16 14:47

Stiles could not look up. She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply.

"He left a note."



The grain of the wooden boards that made the tabletop was neither rough nor smooth, and it blurred in and out Issabella's vision as she stared blankly in front of her.

She sat motionless on the chair Stiles had led her to, having helped her to the table, before disappearing to her flat to fetch Eddus' letter. Her gaze had first rested on the lifeless, grey mark on her forearm, the symbol of her mate-bond. There was no soft glow from under her skin. That faint sensation, like a buzz, that was Eddus' heartbeat, was not present. Her chest wrenched at the emptiness she felt, and she struggled to breathe.

Forcing her eyes to the table's surface, she tried not to think of how she'd been so preoccupied that she'd neglected to notice not only when the bond had all but disappeared at Eddus' death but at what must have been the distress he felt leading to it. However faint it might have been, she would never forgive herself for not sensing that something was terribly wrong.

Head throbbing and cheeks burning, Issabella was unable to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that surged through her. As little as she'd known about what being mate-bonded really meant, she'd failed miserably. Her vision blurred as she stared at the tabletop, trying her hardest to steady her breathing and not cry again. Her eyes hurt. Her headache pounded on and her heartbeat pulsated in her temples, yet she felt nothing but emptiness.

"Abbi?"

Turning her head, Issabella looked at Stiles blankly, who stood at the table's edge, a folded piece of paper and an envelope in front of her. She slowly shifted her gaze to them for a moment before returning it to the grain of the wooden table.

"Will you read it to me?" Issabella asked, not looking up.

There was no reply. After a few moments of silence, the sound of water running came from the open kitchen. Issabella looked up to see Stiles filling a glass of water at the sink.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 251 2025/03/16 14:47

Turning the faucet off, Stiles picked up a second glass and carried them both back to the table, setting one in front of her.

"Please, drink some water." Stiles looked at her sympathetically.

Issabella slowly moved her gaze from the girl across the table from her to the glass and shook her head.

Stiles tilted her head, looking at Issabella for another moment. She then lifted her own glass to her face. Pressing the cool glass to her cheek, she closed her eyes, exhaling a long breath. She took a sip of the water and then took a seat, picking up the folded piece of paper.

The two of them sat in silence as Stiles unfolded it, placing it on the table in front of her and smoothing it out with her hand. In the dim light, her eyes scanned the paper before she looked up at Issabella, her lips pursed and sadness in her gaze.

"Please..." Issabella's eyes were fixed on the letter.

Nodding slowly, Stiles pursed her lips, then began:

"To my three closest friends, Mauro, Johan, and Amanda."

She paused, meeting Issabella's questioning gaze.

"He'd never called us by our actual names."

At this, Issabella felt another pang of guilt. Having only ever known Eddus' friends as Mo, Jay, and Stiles, she couldn't help but feel that she was now somehow wrongfully in possession of this information, as the letter was not addressed to her.

"For years, you have been not only my friends," Stiles continued, her voice shaking, "but the closest thing to a family that I have known in quite some time. I regret that our time together must come to an end. I'm sure that you are all aware that in the past few years, my well-being has become increasingly worse. I am not well, and I have been on a long and darkening path. It is not anyone's fault but my own. Unfortunate and irreversible circumstances have brought me to this place, and it is time for me to put a stop to my own personal decline.

I am leaving to you everything that I have in this world. The flats, the building and it's proceeds in trust, I have had legally transferred into your

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 252 2025/03/16 14:47

names. My lawyer will see to the details. It is not much, but it is yours. I have no need of it where I am going.

I apologise for the person I have become, and I thank each of you from the bottom of my heart for putting up with me and not pushing me away. I could not possibly repay you for your kindness and friendship. Your constant companionship has been one of the most precious things in my life.

Please know that what I am doing is best for every one of us and that when this is all said and done, I will be in a much better place.

-Eddus Brandt"

As soon as she had read the final words, Stiles pushed the piece of paper aside, withdrawing her hand quickly. Looking away, she closed her eyes and wept, shaking her head as if trying to unsee the words she had just read.

"But it makes no sense." Issabella's voice shook, and she again stared blankly in front of her. "Why-"

"You don't know how bad it was." Stiles spoke after a few moments. She sighed, lowering her head. "You didn't see what we saw."

But he wouldn't..."

Issabella almost gagged on her words as their daughter's face came to mind.

"No, Abbi, never. He didn't. You can't think that! He wouldn't-" She didn't look up, but there was a slight relief in Stiles' tone. Whatever relief she may have felt quickly dissolved, and she began to sob again, tears pouring down her cheeks.

She pushed the second envelope across the table to Issabella. It had a single word written on it: Abbi.

"What is this?"

"He left two letters," Stiles said, after taking a moment to compose herself.

"What does it say?"

"I don't know. We didn't open it," she said, taking a deep breath, "and

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 253 2025/03/16 14:47

the investigators didn't open it after reading the first letter. They said that it wasn't relevant."

"Not relevant?"

"They said that Ed was suicidal, but that he was most likely attacked before he could..."

She couldn't finish the sentence. Putting her elbow on the tabletop, Stiles put her forehead in her hand.

"God, I have tried so hard to forget all of this!"

Not wanting to know what was inside it, Issabella touched the corner of the envelope. She couldn't imagine it containing anything but more bad news, though after hearing the contents written in the first letter, she couldn't see how it could be worse. Nothing inside the envelope could make any part of the situation better.

"I can't," she said, glancing across the table at Stiles, who now watched her wearily.

"Abbi."

"I don't want to know what it says. Nothing inside this envelope can help."

"Abbi..."

"I- I don't know-"

"Abbi!" Reaching across the table, Stiles touched her hand. She took a deep breath. "I was only going to say that you don't have to read this. You don't need to. I don't even know why I gave it to you. You've already heard what was in the first one. If you don't want to know, no one would blame you."

"I know..." Nodding her head slowly, Issabella spoke sullenly. "And I don't want to read it. I really don't. But I have to. I was going to say that I don't know if I can do it alone. I don't want to read it by myself."

She looked first at Stiles and then at the envelope on the table.

"No, Abbi, please don't make me read it. I don't know if I could take it."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 254 2025/03/16 14:47

Looking at the envelope as though she were afraid of it, Stiles lowered her head.

"Please... It was so hard for me to read his first letter to you. I don't think I could read, or even hear, another one."

"Just stay with me. Please." Issabella again touched the envelope. "You don't need to read it, and I will not read it aloud. But I have to know what his last words were. I need to know his last words to me."

Gingerly, she slipped her fingers into the envelope, withdrawing the folded piece of paper inside. Taking a deep breath, she opened the letter. In silence, her eyes carefully scanned the handwritten words.

Stiles watched as the colour drain from Issabella's face, and her eyes dim as she stared at the paper she held. As her hand began to tremble, Issabella inhaled sharply – a half gasp, half sob – and the letter fell to the table.

"Abbi, what is it?"

"Eddie wasn't suicidal," she said, tears spilling from her eyes and landing on the wooden tabletop. Her face fell, and her hand flew to her mouth.

"Abbi?"

Issabella shook her head, unable to speak. Her hand pressed firmly against her mouth, she wept so hard she could barely breathe.

"Abbi!" Stiles sprang from her seat, rushing to Issabella's side. She tried to put an arm around the sobbing girl's shoulder, but she didn't move. Issabella only shook her head before slightly pulling away.

"What's the matter, Abbi? What does it say?"

Issabella shook her head again, her hand falling to her lap.

Stiles reached in front of her for the letter.

"Stiles, don't-" Issabella managed, but Stiles had picked it up and was already reading. She could do nothing but wait.

"Abbi, what is this? What does this mean? What was Ed waiting for?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 255 2025/03/16 14:47

The questions came rapidly. Unable to come up with the answers, Issabella could only shake her head. Her eyes ached, and her neck was so tight that it caused pain at the back of her skull. She turned to look at Stiles.

The note had been simple:

Dearest Issabella,

I cannot do this any longer. I can no longer wait. I am coming to you. I know the consequences, but I have to try. If you are reading this, please remember me to Ealasaid. I love you both more than I could ever put into words.

Eddus Brandt

"Abbi...?"

"I can't explain." Abbi turned to look at Stiles. There was nothing to tell her that she would understand.

"Who is Issabella?" Stiles asked. "And who is Ealas- "

Issabella's eyes went wide, and she felt panicked.

"Elizabeth," she said quickly, interrupting Stiles.

Her heart raced, and she did her best to calm her breathing. She couldn't have her daughter's name uttered aloud, even by a friend.

She reached up and gently took the letter from Stiles' grasp. Folding it, she slid it back into the envelope, and placing it on the table, letting her fingertips rest on it. She glanced timidly Stiles, who pulled the chair next to her out and sat.

"I don't understand, Abbi. Who is Issabella?" Stiles looked down at the envelope for a moment.

"Me," Issabella said softly. She met Stiles' questioning gaze. "It's me."

"Abbi, I don't..."

"I'm Issabella." She took a deep breath. She felt weak and physically ill. She could think of no other answer to could give. "Abbi is not my real name."

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 256 2025/03/16 14:47

"It's not?" Stiles looked again at the envelope on the table.

"No..."

"Should I call you- "

"No!" Issabella jumped, having startled herself as well as Stiles with the volume and assertiveness with which she spoke. She shook her head. "Please don't. I don't go by that name."

Stiles looked bewildered. "But why?"

"Abbi is my- second name."

Issabella said quickly feeling a sharp pang of guilt, because she was being dishonest. But it wasn't completely untrue. Abbi was the name she'd chosen to go by in the human world.

"And who is Elizabeth?" Stiles spoke the name slowly, as if trying to get the pronunciation correct. Having read the name in the letter, she was unsure.

"I... I... I can't," Issabella gasped.

The guilt she felt changed from a light pang to a full-on wave that engulfed her. She'd been so careless as to let her daughter's name be not only read, but almost spoken. The secret that was only to be known between herself, Eddus, and, of course, their daughter, was now known to someone who had no business possessing the knowledge.

Issabella's vision blurred, and she tightly closed her eyes as the thought that she'd betrayed everyone she'd ever loved crept into her mind. Her entire world had just crashed down around her.

She used the back of her hand to wipe her eyes. Feebly pushingh herself to her feet, she grabbed the envelope containing Eddus' letter to her.

Stiles quickly stood, placing a hand on her shoulder, but Issabella stepped away from her, almost knocking over the chair she'd been sitting on. Unable to see clearly, she began to walk towards the door leading out to the lift, stumbling as she moved.

"Abbi, please don't go. I'm sorry!"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 257 2025/03/16 14:47

Stiles followed her to the short hallway leading out.

Abbi fumbled with the door and stepped out into the small foyer. She pressed the button for the lift several times.

Stiles placed a hand on Issabella's shoulder, who stood facing the lift door. Her head down and her back to Stiles, Issabella gave no notice.

As the elevator slid open, Issabella stepped into the lift and turned around. She slowly raised her head, meeting Stiles' gaze. The whites of her eyes were red, and she shuddered as she slowly took a deep breath. Neither woman spoke as the door slid closed.

Alone in the lift, as it began its descent, Issabella reached forward and pulled the emergency stop button before dropping to her knees, the envelope slipping from her fingers and falling to the ground. Leaning against the metal wall of the small lift, she wept frantically until she'd expelled the breath from her lungs and began coughing violently.

Falling to the floor, she gasped, trying to catch her breath between sobs. She felt as if she'd lost everything, and just when everything was supposed to come together.

After several minutes, she calmed herself and tried to steady her breathing. She pushed herself up using her hands. Getting to her knees, Issabella reached above her to the lift's panel, pushing the red emergency stop button in and causing the lift to lurch into motion once more.

Unable to stop the tears, she leaned again against the wall and closed her eyes for what seemed only a moment before the lift came to a halt and the door opened.

For a moment more, Issabella sat on the lift's floor, looking out into the small but well-lit foyer of the ground floor. Summoning all her willpower, she retrieved the letter from the floor. As she got to her feet and stepped out onto the linoleum, she pushed the button to send the lift back up, and watched the door slide closed again.

Once outside, Abbi looked up the side of the building to the third floor. With a feeling of being utterly lost, she turned and began walking along the shadowy pavement, dimly lit by the street lights of the shipping district.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 258 2025/03/16 14:47

"Here we are, ma'am."

A youngish man in a slightly ill-fitting suit looked at Issabella and then again in the direction he pointed.

The cemetery's assistant administrator had offered to take her to Eddus' grave. They'd ridden in silence in a golf cart along a paved pathway for several minutes, past row after row of granite stones, before coming to a halt. After exiting the vehicle, the young man led Issabella a little further up, checking the small numbered plaques beside the path and at the head of each row with the small piece of paper he carried.

"Would you like me to show you to the grave you are looking for, ma'am?" he asked gently.

Issabella shook her head.

"No, but I am grateful for your help."

The young man nodded, glancing at the ground for a moment.

"Would you like me to wait here for you, to drive you back?"

Again, Issabella shook her head.

"Very well. Please let us know if you need anything." The assistant administrator bowed his head slightly and then turned in the direction of the golf cart.

He got in, maneuvered a short three-point turn, being careful to keep the vehicle on the pathway, and then slowly drove off in the direction they'd come from.

Though Issabella watched until the cart was out of sight, her mind was far away, and she didn't really register it leaving or even that it was gone. She turned to look at the long row of headstones that the assistant administrator had pointed to, but quickly looked elsewhere.

The sun was high overhead. The morning was bright and clear, but there was still a crisp chill in the air. Issabella looked out over what seemed an endless sea of headstones. She knew she had to do what she'd come for, although now that she was here, she was not sure if she could.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 259 2025/03/16 14:47

Taking a seat on a stone bench to the side of the pathway, opposite the row she'd been shown to, Issabella leaned back against the cold, hard backrest. Inhaling deeply, she looked up, lifting her eyes toward the cloudless sky. She slowly exhaled and lowered her gaze until it stopped on the paved surface in front of her.

As had become its habit, her left hand slid up her right forearm until her fingertips came to rest midway between her wrist and elbow. She missed Eddus. She missed the human she'd fallen in love with – her human, the man who had crossed the realms, unaware of and with no thought of the consequences to himself.

Abbi missed her mate's vibration, though it had been almost non-existent during the long periods of their separation. She'd known the feeling for such a short time before he'd returned to the human world. And although she'd come to see him as many times as her mothering duties would allow, it wasn't enough. At times, the bond they shared was all that kept her going.

She missed it. She missed him. She had been told all her life that the mate-bond was forever, in life and in death. But now that Eddus was gone, so was the link. She longed for even the faintest of vibrations, to the point that the lack of feeling his link at all was like constant physical pain.



Eddus Brandt, 1955–2009

The stone at the head of the grave was small and simple. Issabella stood on a narrow footway between the rows, at the foot of her bonded mate's resting place. Her gaze rested on the stone marker.

She felt ill as she read the engraving, her chest tight, as though her heart itself ached. How could his entire life be simplified to only a name and two numbers, separated by a dash?

"Eddus..." Issabella's breathing was laboured as she softly spoke his name. She felt odd speaking it aloud, knowing that he was not there, although his body was roughly two meters away, beneath where she stood. "Eddie, I – I can't believe – I don't know how to deal with this. I can't..."

Glancing up from the grave, Issabella looked around awkwardly, suddenly self-conscious. There was no one, as far as she could see. Except

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 260 2025/03/16 14:47

for the other bodies within their graves in the cemetery, she was alone. She knew that nobody could hear her, but she felt wrong and guilty for speaking his name like this. She felt exposed.

She also knew that this was the only way. Eddus couldn't hear her, but being with him, in whatever capacity this counted for, was the best she could hope for. She had so many feelings and so much that needed to be said, and she had to say them to him directly.

"Ealasaid is so beautiful." Issabella spoke in a hushed voice, again looking around to make sure she was still alone.

Her stomach clenched as guilt washed over her. There was still no one to be seen, and therefore no one to hear her say the child's name. At any other time, she would not have dared to utter it, but here and now, she could not bring herself to call their daughter by another name in Eddus' presence.

"She is such a happy child. I see you every time I look at her. I keep the photograph of you that you gave me beside her bed. The other night, I showed it to her. She grabbed it and said, 'dah-dah'..."

Issabella had just spoken, the words pouring out of her. She inhaled sharply and quickly pressed her hand against her mouth as tears blurred her vision. She'd told herself that she was not going to cry, but her tears flowed freely at the thought of her now-fatherless child.

In her mind, she saw her infant's smile and the way her daughter looked at her; the same way Eddus had. The idea that her little girl might have had to grow up never having met her father had been overwhelming, but the thought that the child's father was now gone forever was devastating.

"Eddie, my love, I need you to know that I never gave up!" she cried out suddenly. "On you, on us – I never stopped... I petitioned the queen over and over. Dain helped me. Sometimes I wrote several times a day, every day after you came back here."

Trembling, she dropped to her knees, both hands over her mouth, and wept. Her body quaked with each sob until she could no longer take a breath and had to remove her hands from her mouth. Gasping, she leaned forward, placing her hands on the ground. With her eyes closed, she slowly took several breaths through her mouth, tears dripping from her cheeks and the tip of her nose onto the grass over Eddus' resting place.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 261 2025/03/16 14:47

"It's not fair." Issabella's voice was weak and shook as she spoke. "It's not! It was too late- I was too late."

She leaned back, sitting on her feet. Eyes closed, she raised her head and inhaled deeply. As she did, her stomach convulsed, and she lurched forward, heaving so hard that the muscles in her abdomen cramped. Retching, she gasped for air, choking as the two occurred simultaneously. She lowered her head to the ground, resting it on her right arm.

Emotion poured out of her, and she sobbed into the back of her arm, both hands in tight fists, clenching the grass she lay on. Her eyes hurt. Her head ached, and her body felt weak and fatigued, like she'd been hit in the solar plexus. Her knees burned where her bare skin met the grass and the earth under them, supporting her weight. The sweat on the back of her neck was uncomfortably cold in the morning breeze.

Slowly, and using what felt like all of the strength left in her, Issabella first raised her head, looking at the bottom edge of the gravestone through tired and bleary eyes. Catching a cough in her throat as her insides churned again, she swallowed hard to prevent the sick feeling from again welling up into her throat. She slowly raised her body until she was again sitting. Hands trembling, she loosened her grip on the tufts of grass she'd been holding, then, one grasping the other, she placed them on her lap.

"Eddie, I am so sorry," she cried bitterly. "I had it, you know. I had the news we'd waited so long for. When I came to your house that night, it was to tell you that the queen had nullified your original sentence. They issued a new ruling: that if you were willing to stay in our realm, that is, to agree not to come back here, you could come and be with us, Ealasaid and I... Eddus, the queen was going to let you come home!"

Her mouth dry, she swallowed, again fighting that feeling in the back of her throat. The word home seemed so cold and foreign as she said it. While home for her would always be with her daughter, she could no longer refer to the faerie realm by that word.

She wanted nothing more than to leave the pain and sorrow of the human realm forever. And while she bore no hatred for the realm itself, she knew that there was no possible future for her there. She could easily refuse to ever return to the world of humans, but she also knew that it would mean being confined to that of the fae.

And she *would* confine herself to the faerie realm for their daughter's sake, though she couldn't bear the idea of living in the realm responsible

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 262 2025/03/16 14:47

for the death of her human, her bonded mate. While the thought of it filled her with anger and even hatred of her own world, that nagging thought at the back of her mind would constantly remind her for the rest of her life that she, ultimately, was to blame. Eddus had only come into the faerie realm because of something she had said.

Issabella shook her head, trying to push the thought out of her mind. With Eddus no longer in it, Issabella desperately wanted to leave the human world and hoped that her grief would not follow her. At the same time, she knew that Eddus' permanent absence from her life would only compound her heartache.

Pushing the fingers of her right hand between the black fabric of her dress and her left breast, she retrieved a piece of parchment. It had been folded three times and then folded again in half. It was sealed with scarlet-red wax.

Holding it with both hands, Issabella gazed at the wax seal holding the folded paper closed, rubbing her thumb over the Royal Seal of the Fae pressed into it. On it, the queen's new ruling had been put in writing so that it could be taken to Eddus physically. The name 'Ed' had been hand-written just above the seal in what almost looked like a type of calligraphy.

"I've kept this with me from the moment I received it," Issabella said, "and I came to show it to you as soon as I could make arrangements for Ealasaid."

Her voice trailed off, and she was quiet for a moment as she fought not to think about the night she'd found out about Eddus' death. Glancing from the parchment she held to the headstone, she nodded slowly. Breaking the seal, she unfolded the parchment. On it, in the same handwritten penmanship as was above the seal, was written the queen's new ruling.

Issabella sighed wearily.

"Ed," she read aloud, though softly. Her voice was flat as she struggled not to show any sort of emotion. "This document is to serve as physical notification of the reversal of the Queen's ruling."

Clenching her eyes closed, Issabella inhaled a long and wavering breath. Using the back of her left hand, she wiped the tears from her right cheek, then her left. She opened her eyes, looking at the parchment she held. Blinking back her tears, she began reading again, her voice faltering:

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 263 2025/03/16 14:47

"After much deliberation, the Queen's ruling that one, Ed, the human who wilfully crossed the barrier between the realms without permission or invitation and was then banished from the realm with the sentence of immediate death upon return, is hereby invalidated and now void.

A new decision has been reached, and after careful consideration, it is the Queen's ruling that Ed be permitted to return to the Realm of the Fae to reside with his bonded-mate and their child, providing that he agrees to remain within the Realm henceforth-"

Issabella's hand slowly dropped to her lap, still clutching the letter. She pursed her lips, shaking her head.

"There's more," she sighed, "but it doesn't matter now... It goes on to explain that the decision was reached after several appeals had been made, including the ones Dain made on our behalf."

Again, she fell silent. She placed the paper on the ground just in front of her.

"I misjudged him, Eddie. I was wrong about Dain." Issabella began speaking, her words again spilling out.

She then spoke quickly. She was trying to explain something she deeply regretted. In truth, she felt ashamed when she thought about her distrust of the faerie guard in the beginning.

"From the start, he only ever wanted to help you. He helped me, too, with what to write in my appeals to the queen. He wrote appeals of his own and submitted them with mine. He took Ealasaid and I to meet his mate and asked about you every day. He is quite possibly the reason for the queen's... He- He-"

She felt a chill start at the back of her neck and slowly move down her spine, causing her to shudder.

"He doesn't know..."

Issabella's gaze dropped to her lap, and then she looked at the grave marker.

"Dain doesn't know that you- Eddie, he was so happy when the queen issued the new ruling. He came to tell me about it even before I was

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 264 2025/03/16 14:47

summoned to be told about it. He wanted so much to be there when I brought you back."

Squinting up into the bright and cloudless sky, Issabella shook her head, unable to prevent the tears that spilled down her cheeks again. For several minutes, she wept, unable to hold back her response to it all.

Exhausted, she again felt sick and physically fatigued. Every muscle in her body trembled in pain, and she swayed for a moment before falling forward, catching herself using her left hand. Bending her elbow, she lowered herself to the ground and rolled onto her left side. She laid her head down on the ground, the grass against her temple. Tears still flowing, her stifled sobs were audible only as whimpers.

Looking toward Eddus' headstone, she reached toward it with her right hand, then lowered her arm to the ground. Her gaze came to rest on the dull grey mark – that of her bonded link to the man in the grave that she lay upon. There was a cold emptiness inside of her that was her mate's absence, and she knew it could never be filled. Closing her eyes for a few moments, Issabella tried to steady the waver in her breathing. She could feel the pounding of her racing heart in her ears and an ache in her chest.

Weariness began to set in, and Issabella felt herself start to fade into unconsciousness as the heaviness in the back of her head began to throb. She forced her eyes open, her arm once again in view. The throbbing grew until the pressure in her head was almost the only thing she could feel, and her eyes became heavy. As they closed, through her tears she thought she saw the slightest glow from beneath the mark on her arm.

Issabella gasped, slightly recoiling, startled awake by the feeling of something touching her shoulder.

Turning her head, she raised her right hand in an ineffective attempt to shield her eyes. Though the sun was low in the sky, the light was almost blinding. There was a sharp pain across her forehead, pulsating in her temples.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 265 2025/03/16 14:47

Coughing, she blinked at the blurry shadow that seemed to hover to the side of her. Her left side was stiff, compounding the ache she felt throughout her entire body.

"Are you alright?"

Issabella closed her eyes, lowering her head again to the ground. She let her hand drop and held a breath as she laboured, pushing herself into a sort of halfway sitting position, a small groan escaping her as she exhaled.

Opening her eyes as she rose, her gaze focused on Eddus' headstone. All the emotions, all the guilt, came crashing back, and she quickly turned her head away.

"Ma'am?" The voice was hesitant.

"...Abbi..." Issabella spoke vacantly, looking in the direction of the voice.

Crouched beside her, with a concerned look on his face, was Allen, the assistant administrator who had driven her earlier.

"Abbi, ma'am," the young man said, "is everything ok? We're getting ready to close the cemetery for the evening. I was making my rounds, and I saw you here."

Staring at him with a faraway look in her eyes, Issabella said nothing.

Allen quickly removed his suit jacket. He stopped just as quickly, holding the jacket with both hands in front of him and looking at her uncertainly.

"May I?"

Issabella's empty gaze moved to the jacket the assistant administrator held, her brows knitting, then back to his face.

"My apologies, ma'am," Allen stammered. "You're shivering."

Issabella looked again at the garment. Her entire body did feel cold, and she was trembling, though not because of the temperature. She nodded slowly, remaining motionless as Allen gently placed the jacket over her shoulders.

Slowly getting to his feet, so as not to make too sudden a movement, Allen adjusted his glasses. He looked sympathetically at the girl sitting on

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 266 2025/03/16 14:47

the ground in front of him. He'd dealt with grieving visitors many times. Cautiously, he held out his hand to her.

"May I help you up, Abbi?"

Issabella turned her head towards the grave marker and nodded, exhaling through her mouth. She looked up at the assistant administrator for a moment, then took his hand, managing a thin smile as he helped her to her feet, though her eyes remained dull.

"Are you alright, ma'am?"

Allen watched her carefully, making sure she could stand on her own.

"No..." Her eyes resting on her hand, still in his, Issabella shook her head sadly. "I will never be alright."

Nodding silently, Allen glanced from Issabella to the headstone, reading the name on it.

"Did you know him well?"

"He is my... husband." Issabella hesitated, making sure not to use the term bonded mate. She slowly looked up, though not meeting Allen's gaze.

After a moment, he spoke, shaking his head, instantly feeling remorse at having asked.

"I am so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Brandt."

Issabella inhaled sharply and bit her lip, dropping her gaze. A tear rolled down her cheek.

In all the time, albeit short, that she had been Eddus' bonded-mate, she had never been referred to by his last name.

The thought had never occurred to her that, while she knew and treasured having and knowing his true name, it now truly belonged to her as well. At least it did in the human world. She was now Mrs. Eddus Brandt, and she would be for the rest of her life.

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment, more tears following the first. Pursing her lips, she opened her eyes, blinking several times.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 267 2025/03/16 14:47

"Please accept my sincerest apologies, Abbi, Mrs. Brandt, ma'am."

Allen stumbled over his words, his face warming. With his free hand, he touched Issabella's elbow, feeling pity for the grieving widow. He closed his eyes for a moment, then removed his hand from her arm.

"I did not mean to upset you."

"Please, don't apologise."

Issabella swallowed hard. Drawing in a breath and then slowly exhaling, she met his gaze, her eyes red and still brimming with tears.

The assistant administrator had apologised several times, to which Issabella had not said anything, but this time she could not allow him to continue.

What he'd just unknowingly given her was more than he could possibly know.

"You truly don't owe me an apology."

"Yes ma'am." The young man broke eye contact with her, still wearing an apologetic look.

"I don't want to keep you from your rounds."

Issabella stumbled as she took a slight step backward. She wasn't sure how much longer she could remain standing. Weak and hurting all over, her head ached so badly that she couldn't keep her balance.

"Careful, ma'am."

Allen quickly grasped her hand to steady her. He paused for a moment, then let go as she turned her head back towards the grave.

"Just a moment, please," Issabella said. She knew that she had to leave, but she couldn't go without saying goodbye.

Allen watched as she slowly knelt at the foot of her husband's grave, speaking too low for him to hear. Her face crumpled, and she leaned forward with her hand on the ground. Alarmed, he started toward her, but she raised a hand, stopping him.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 268 2025/03/16 14:47

"I have to go now, Eddie," she said quietly to the headstone, lowering her hand. "I don't know when I will be able to come back here. But I want you to know that my only reason for ever coming back to this realm will be to come here. You are the only thing in this world I will ever come back for."

Her fingers slowly closed until she held the grass beneath her hand tightly. Taking a deep breath, she opened her hand again until it was flat on the ground.

"I love you, Eddus Brandt. I will always love you."

Slowly, Issabella got to her feet, shaking. With her left hand, she touched the grey mark on the inside of her forearm with her fingertips.

She kept her eyes on the headstone for a moment, tears again spilling down her cheeks, then looked down at her hand.

"I will always have this," she whispered, squeezing her forearm.

She turned to face Allen, avoiding looking directly at him.

"Your letter, ma'am..." Allen glanced at the ground behind her.

Looking at him, Issabella shook her head and took a step forward. Her hand trembled as she held it out.

Taking her hand, the administrator inclined his head toward the piece of parchment on the ground but said nothing more. He led her slowly up the row and to the golf cart.

Epilogue

As she came to the corner, Issabella stopped walking, her hand half-raised to press the button on the lamppost at the crosswalk. Catching her breath, her hand dropped to her side, and her vision blurred. She tried desperately to blink back the tears that instead spilled down her cheeks, overflowing as her eyes welled.

The sun had set, and she stood in the light given off by the street lamp above.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 269 2025/03/16 14:47

As numbness washed over her like a wave, she stood paralysed, staring at the button, unable to move even to dry her eyes. Her head dropped, and she could see her bare feet as she stood motionless. Half gasping, Abbi inhaled a wavering breath, holding it for a matter of moments before exhaling.

She was standing in the exact spot she had been the night that Eddus called out to her and gave her the shoes she'd forgotten in the theatre.

Her legs felt weak, and she raised her hand in time to catch the lamppost to keep herself from falling.

It was here that she'd met the human. Her human. It was here that he'd fallen in love with her, and it was here that she'd fallen for him.

Feebly, she stepped off of the sidewalk and into the street, still unable to see through her tears. There was a screech as a car came to a halt right beside her.

Issabella flinched, jumping with surprise. Numb and cold, she turned to the vehicle. Gently extending her arm, she touched the car's bonnet with her fingers.

"Oh my god, I am so sorry!"

The driver of the car had quickly gotten out of his vehicle and began frantically asking if she were all right. Another car stopped, and its driver got out, curious.

"Are you ok?"

The driver of the car she stood in front of approached her cautiously, reaching toward her.

Withdrawing her hand, Abbi looked at him blankly, tears still running down her cheeks. She slowly began backing away from him, shaking her head in silence. Turning, she ran across the street, gasping as she misstepped and almost fell when she reached the other side.

As she began again running in the direction of the entrance to City Park, she heard the driver again call out to her but did not look back. She didn't slow her pace until she'd passed the place where she'd kissed Eddus goodnight the night they'd met.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 270 2025/03/16 14:47

Sobbing openly, she walked through the entrance to the park, stepping off the pavement onto the grass. Dropping to her knees, she cupped her face with both hands and lowered her head to the ground, but only for a few moments. Summoning everything in her, she got back to her feet, forcing herself into motion.

For several minutes, she walked in a daze. All of her effort in continuing forward, she slowly made her way further along the path.

Slowing to a stop, Issabella shuddered as a chill ran down her spine. She'd made her way slowly along the park's paved pathway, walking in the grass just beside it. Inhaling a breath that seemed to catch in her throat, she closed her eyes. The emotion that she'd fought to quieten as she walked now began to well up again in her chest.

Just ahead, about ten paces from where she stood, was a lamppost beside the path. In the glow beneath it, there was a park bench. It was much like the many benches and lampposts along the paved pathway that ran through the park. It was like them, but this one was different.

In the tree line across from this bench was the clearing where she'd stopped Eddus from stepping into the pixie ring. It was in that clearing that she'd shown him her world. The bench in front of her was where she'd told him that she was, herself, a pixie.

It was in the glow of the lamppost in front of her that she had tried to calm him, telling him that he'd not been hallucinating. It was where she'd apologised for having given him a burden he'd never asked for. And it was where she'd...

Closing her eyes tightly, Issabella pressed a fist to her mouth as she wept, biting down on the skin of the back of her hand. She leaned forward weakly and put her other hand on her leg in an effort to steady herself.

A few paces from where she stood, she'd uttered the words that had prompted Eddus to cross into her world.

'...this might be the last time I ever see you, Eddus Brandt...'

The words echoed in her memory, faintly and yet deafeningly. She hadn't meant it. She'd forgotten even saying them until she found out why he'd come to find her.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 271 2025/03/16 14:47

Stomach clenching violently, she fought not to be sick as she remembered that night. It seemed so long ago. Stumbling forward, she turned away from the path and away from the bench.

Eddus was dead. The man she'd loved because of his kindness and trust. And it was because of her. Had she not been so careless with her words...

Issabella stumbled as she made her way in the dark toward the clearing in the trees as quickly as her feeble legs could carry her. She couldn't stay here. Her thoughts haunted her, especially now, here in the park.

Without Eddus in it, the human world held nothing more for her. She could never return. She had to get away from this place – back to her child, back to her own world.

Stopping short just as she reached the opening in the trees, Issabella again struggled against a sick feeling as a cold realisation enveloped her. The world she was returning to was the very place where her human, her mate and the father of her child, had been killed.

It was the fae – her own people – that had killed him for having come to be with his mate and their child. He'd only crossed into her world for no other reason than to ensure the well-being of one of the very people from that world. He was never a threat.

Her chest ached sharply as she gasped for breath, followed by a small whimper. For a moment, Issabella couldn't move. Her world crumbled within her as the sickening the realisation set in that Eddus had been executed on what couldn't have been more than a day before she'd been given the letter granting him permission to return.

Feeling numb and completely lost, Issabella stepped forward into the darkness of the clearing. Stifling a sob, she thought back on her day in the cemetery. She knew she'd never go back. She could never come back.

Nearing the edge of the pixie ring, she sighed wearily, looking at the ground inside of the ring of mushrooms in front of her.

The human world held no place for her, and her own realm, with the exception of her child, held nothing that she ever wanted to be a part of again.

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 272 2025/03/16 14:47

Biting her bottom lip, she lifted her bare foot and stepped forward through the barrier separating the two worlds.

The End

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 273 2025/03/16 14:47

Pixie Ring no cover print cs5 274 2025/03/16 14:47