

# Pixie

He wore his hair long, so people thought that the looks he got were his own fault. He wore his hair long to hide the points to his ears and the way they betrayed him at every turn. He wore his hair long because it reminded him of home. He wasn't sure what the humans hated more: his long hair or his pointed ears.

Night on the Border City never got truly dark. When he'd arrived under a blanket of darkness, the first floods of fluorescence had felt like a cage pinning him where he stood, but he'd grown accustomed to jumping between them like a man avoiding puddles for fear of wet feet. It was safer there. In the shadows he could be just like them.

He heard the bar before he saw it – a buzz of electricity and a hive of writhing bodies. The smell of burning liquor permeated out of the concrete walls and the sting of neon lights on his eyeballs reminded him that this place wasn't for him, but he stepped into the light regardless. *Fun*, he recited, *we're going to have fun*.

"Flint!" a familiar voice called out.

Sarah was as human as they come – small and solid with dyed pink hair cut just below her chin. Her expression was glassy with drunkenness, but her smile was real when she made room for him in their huddle.

“Happy birthday,” he said, allowing himself to be pulled into a sloppy hug. Alcohol on her breath, shrill laughter from elsewhere in the queue, the humming of electricity. He pulled back, flattening his hair over his twitching ears. *Fun.*

“Pixie!” Jack roared, as though the punching hug he tugs Flint into transforms the slur into some kind of irony. Flint ignored the comment, steadied his ears, and smiled his greetings to the rest of the group. They were Sarah’s friends more than his, and they still let their gazes linger on the petal pink of his lips, but they had been the first in the city to describe him as exotic rather than alien.

He let them stare.

To Flint’s disappointment, the queue moved quickly. Beside the door, the bouncer fed group after group into the mouth of the club. He wasn’t paying them any attention. His eyes were on Flint.

“You’re sure this place is cool?” Flint asked, pulling his coat around him in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. Sarah grinned up at him sloppily.

“Your hair is gorgeous,” she said warmly, plucking a strand off his shoulder and stroking it between her fingers.

“Is this place... you know...?” he repeated uncomfortably. Sarah blinked.

“Oh yeah,” she reassured him with a shrug. “Leefa was here a few nights ago. Do you know Leefa?”

Flint knew Leefa for no reason other than the fact that Sarah asked this every time the other elf came up in conversation.

Before he was forced to come up with a reply, the group ahead of them were ushered inside. Sarah jumped restlessly forwards, grinning up at the bouncer like they were good friends and ignoring the way he glared down at Flint as Flint stared at his feet.

“You,” the bouncer said, thrusting a fat finger in Flint’s direction. Flint looked up at him; the hard set of his jaw didn’t camouflage the smell of fear radiating from the man. “Any magic inside and you’ll regret it.”

“Of course,” Flint stuttered, eyes down and hands stuffed in his pockets as he bit back an anger as familiar to him as breathing.

With a final glare, the bouncer pulled back the velvet rope and allowed them entry.

The second he stepped through the doors; Flint remembered why he avoided clubs. The smells, the burning spots of light, the noise of music and movement and shouting layered over his consciousness, constricting his ribs in a vice. He stood in the doorway like a moth in a tornado, gripping onto whatever it could find.

Sarah’s hand found his and he turned into it, shutting down everything else. *Fun, fun, fun*, he recited like a mantra. She dragged him through the crowd, snaking between clusters of people until she found herself at the bar, where a bartender with a pierced eyebrow lingered his gaze on Flint’s mouth for a moment longer than it took for him to order red wine. He pushed the glass across the bar with a wink and Sarah rolled her eyes.

“Typical,” she sighed, slipping the tiny straw of her rum and coke into her mouth.

She led the way to a dark corner where Jack had nabbed them a table right next to a speaker. Flint felt his ears twitching beneath his hair, but none of the group were paying him any attention. They were staring at the dancefloor, commenting on the attractiveness of various clubbers, so Flint let his attention wander. The wine, he realised, was an import from across the border. It sat on his tongue like a drop of honied sunlight and revelries that spanned for days. Joy bubbled up inside of him with each sip, and when Jack nudged him for attention, he didn’t even mind.

“I bet this lot have nothing on the girls back home?” he said asked with a laddish wink in the direction of the dancefloor.

“I’m going to dance,” Flint said in response, shimmying out of his seat and giving Sarah a hand to her feet.

Sarah burrowed through the crowd into the middle of the dancefloor, and the rest of them followed like a chain of paper dolls. Flint let the music take him. It didn’t matter that it was all drums and noise. Dancing was in his blood. It was the closest thing to magic the humans had discovered, and he let it take him out of the club, out of the city, and somewhere closer to the forests of his youth. With the wine on his lips and the music pulsing through him, he could almost pretend.

A hand pressed against his hips, pulling him into a clumsy rhythm with someone behind him. Flint opened his eyes and the fireflies of his memory dimmed to obscurity behind the lasers flashing overhead. The hand on him tightened as Flint tried to pull away, and a pair of lips pressed close to the ears hidden beneath his hair.

“Come on, baby girl,” a voice whispered. “Don’t be shy.”

The voice smelled like smoke and beer. Flint tried to pull away again, searching the crowd for Sarah or the others. All he saw was writhing humans. The hands stayed on him, moving in time to the music, tugging and squeezing at him. Beneath his skin, he felt the magic sparking, ready for him. He pushed it down and with one last tug, Flint pulled away. He broke free of the grasp and turned to look up at his assailant. It was a human, no older than Jack, but with heavy lids and blown irises.

“What the-,” the man shouted, cocky grin devolving into a crude snarl.

“Sorry,” Flint said, dropping his eyes and making himself small. He felt the ghost of fingers rubbing his ribs, the marks pressed into his flesh invisible to the human eye, but the breath still warm against his face.

“Fucking pixie,” the man spat, pushing Flint from him and into a crowd of dancers. He stumbled, catching himself with a speed and grace he usually hid. The man surged forwards, grabbing him

roughly by the front of his shirt. “What are you doing here, pixie? Trying to steal some kiddies? Using magic to get laid? Fucking creep.”

“No, I-,” Flint stuttered, but everywhere the man touched was sparking with his own power barely concealed beneath his skin. The human dropped him with a jerk, and he let himself drop against the floor, sticky with years of spilled drinks. Magic ripped like pain up his arm as he caught his fall, sparks grinding into the concrete for escape.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, he saw that hate and fear on the human’s face. He saw and smelled it on the bouncer. He saw it reflected in every new person he met, burned into his memory from the second he crossed the border. Worse still, he saw it in eyes like his back home – impossibly blue and hatefully cold.

Under the weight of the memory, he didn’t hear footsteps thundering towards him, or the screams of the parted crowd. He did feel the press of the boots over his fingers, and the rough hands heaving him to his knees only to kick him back to the floor. Beneath his hair, his ears pressed tightly against his skull, betraying his terror. Flint willed them to be normal, willed his heart to stop racing, and the magic to bury itself further inside. It didn’t work.

Young men with cruelty in their expressions flanked the first man. Flint couldn’t tell who landed which blow, but they came at him, hands and feet kicking and clawing as he clenched aching hands into fists to short-circuit the electricity beneath. One of the men grabbed a fistful of his hair, tugging his scalp with a thousand pinpricks of agony. Flint followed, unable to do anything else. His delicate frame held desperately to itself, floating above the ground like a broken bird and his heart fluttered like wings.

He heard more screams, and when he inched open his eyes, he saw Sarah, surrounded by people who looked more-or-less just like her, terrified and powerless. Her eyes weren’t on him, however – they flashed to something else, and when Flint looked up, he saw it too.

A knife.

Flint struggled, fluttering and writhing in their grip, trying to break away as calloused hands held him still, tugging at his hair like a leash. The man with the knife approached until the space between them was nothing but the smell of smoke and beer.

The knife cut through his hair like silk, and he listened in horror as every strand tore away from him. Strand by strand, cut by cut until finally they were done with him. They dropped him to the ground against the shards of himself, blood and tears staining the golden feathers all around him.

A hand touched shoulder. It was gentle, nothing like the hand that started all of this, but it tore through him. The waves of magic stormed inside, crashing against the shore of his skin, ending in the wake of a hollow cry as Sarah helped him to his feet. He didn't dare to lift his hands to his head, but he felt the cold air outside the club against his neck all the same.

They lowered him gently to the ground, and somewhere in the back of his head Flint could recognise that they were talking to him. His ears were ringing from the quiet. Cars passed, people chatted, a dog barked somewhere in the distance. He heard none of it.

"I saved as much as I could," Sarah said softly. "We can probably get it made into a wig or something?"

Flint looked up at her then. Her palms, raised to the sky, filled with knots of golden hair stained with blood and alcohol. It didn't look like hair, really. It looked like a wounded animal, held inside the safety of Sarah's hands, brightly lit beneath a streetlamp.

The laughter simmered inside him until it filled him and bubbled out in choking sobs. His bloodied lip split anew as a smile wrestled itself on his face. The laughter sounded like a song, bursting from him like magic, saccharine and foreign. Around him, the humans stared down at the sight of him, worry and fear mingling in them in equal measure. Flint looked back at Sarah and her

scraps of his hair, and the magic ripped through him. Sarah screamed, looking down into her palms as the strands of hair burned to ash inside a dancing blue flame.

Heads turned from all directions; the sound of elven laughter too enthralling to deny. Flint paid it no mind. He just laughed on, ignoring the onlookers. He laughed until the laughter turned sour in his mouth, and his aching ribs screamed, and his friends grew more scared of him than for him. He sat in the spotlight of the city's street, ears sticking out through butchered hair, and all at once he remembered what it felt like to be home.

**THE END.**