



Delivered to My Shadow Unicorn Alphas

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: The world is a very predictable place—and I like it that way. I get up every morning at seven, arrive at work at nine, leave at five thirty, and spend my evenings either doing little chores or projects at home or at book club or the library. Other worlds belong between the covers of books, not in real life. And I've had my heart broken once, not looking for a second painful fracture.

So, when I receive an email regarding my enrollment in a dating app, I assume it's spam and block the address. Done and dusted. Except it's not. An app has somehow downloaded itself onto my phone during book club. Appalled, I show it to the girls...who are so intrigued, they talk me into letting them look it over and before I know it, they've filled out all the information and signed me up. I knew I should stick to nonfiction book clubs. These girls have romance on the brain. And I can always just ignore any attempts to contact me...as if anyone would be interested in my boring self. Except that before I even leave the app, I get a message from two unicorns? What does that even mean?

And, as my club friends point out, how can I not at least reply... Delivered to My Shadow Unicorn Alphas is book 21 in the super sweet with building heat Mail-Order Matings Series. Delivered to Shadow Unicorn Alphas features a human woman who believes magic and love are only in books and a pair of the most magical beasts in the world, shadow unicorns, who are prepared to share their sparkles with their mate. Of course, Mazzy promises a happy ever after. If you like true mates, Fate taking a hand, adorable babies, and a mixed mating from two very different paranormal worlds

Total Pages (Source): 24

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

Chapter One

Amber

I joined a book club because I needed to do something besides work and watch television. It wasn't my first attempt at a hobby, at making myself a more interesting person. Just the most recent. And for a research librarian who read all day for a job, book club was probably a cop-out. But I'd tried knitting, crocheting, tennis, golf, and even pickle ball only to determine I was the worst at all of them. Even with lessons involved. And the quilting debacle? I imagined the local granny who attempted to teach me would require therapy to recover from the experience.

A person needed a hobby. My mom was adamant of that and asked me every Sunday when she called. What did I "do" that week? She seemed under the impression that the reason I was single was because my life was so dull.

I found my work stimulating, loved helping people locate helpful information. Every day people called, emailed, or came into the big downtown branch where I had my office in search of facts for term papers, genealogy projects, scientific work... Legal matters. Everything. And I thought that was exciting. But my mom? She kept insisting I find something interesting to do. A second thing I could do well. Not because I thought I'd find my life partner by now. Or because I needed to find one at all. Something to make me more intriguing to a man.

"You could take French cooking classes," she urged. "Or ballroom dancing. Join a bowling league."

Sometimes I wondered how she even met my dad with her ideas. And her belief that a woman was nothing without a man.

Sure, if I were to meet someone I liked, I wouldn't hate that, but unlike Mom, I didn't see them as the answer to all of life's issues. But I did need to have something to tell her about when she called, and I'd pretty much run out of things to try and suck at.

Reading, I could do. And I'd spotted a flyer on the grocery store community board. A book club featuring paranormal romance, meeting on a weeknight at various members' homes. I read a ton of those things, and while I'd never been a fan of tearing books apart to find all the hidden meanings, I hoped this would be a gathering of those who enjoyed reading about sexy wolves and bears and the women lucky enough to meet them. It was all fantasy, of course. Why would a shifter settle for an ordinary human with no superpowers at all?

They wouldn't.

The few I knew were at work, all wolves, and they were all happily mated to other wolves.

But I loved reading about them. So, I showed up at the next meeting and discovered I was surrounded by women—and a couple of men—who loved the fantasy. They brought treats of various kinds, homemade and so good! They were welcoming but didn't push me to share until I was ready. I was very quiet that first night, but the second one, I was a little more comfortable and made a couple of comments. It helped that the book was by one of my favorite authors. I didn't know how good it would feel to share my guilty pleasure.

The third week, I baked cookies to bring with me, even though I didn't have nearly the skill level of the others. Everyone was very kind about my offering, never mentioning that a few were underdone and others too brown.

“Okay,” said Cindra, the leader for tonight, “who wants to share their thoughts about the hero in our story?”

“I do!” Jenny, a pretty blonde with sparkling blue eyes, raised her hand like in school. “I have some big thoughts about him.”

Considering how gorgeous she was, I had been surprised she had time for book club instead of being on dates every night of the week. But Cindra said Jenny had a bad early marriage and was still healing. She herself was widowed, and the others, including the one guy who was a guy who preferred guys, all seemed to be either turned off by men or not interested at the moment, but that worked for me.

I wasn’t here to pick up someone. Just to discuss the week’s book. The conversation launched while everyone talked about the alpha jackal in the story and his ego. They seemed in agreement that he was a narcissist who thought only of himself and of the heroine, a human woman, as an accessory. Someone whose only value lay in how she added to his life, his pleasure. Whose overprotectiveness held his female back.

Up until now, I’d enjoyed the meetings, but this time, I didn’t agree at all. He was a magnificent male whose embrace held safety and heat. Maybe it was just me, but sometimes taking care of myself every minute of the day and night got tiring. Having a hot jackal who kept the hyenas of the world at bay didn’t sound half bad.

“I don’t think he’s too bad,” I blurted out just as my phone chimed in my pocket.

“Could you please silence your phone?” Cindra asked.

“I am so sorry.” Pulling out the device, I smiled apologetically to the rest of the women. I knew the rule and had simply forgotten. But when I glanced at the screen, my face must have shown something.

“What’s wrong?” Jenny asked.

“Nothing, it’s just...have any of you heard of the Mail-Order Matings dating app?”

“Oh, just an ad,” Cindra scoffed. “Anyway, about the jackal...”

“No, wait.” Jenny held out her hand, and I passed her my phone. “I have heard of it. It’s a shifter dating site.”

“Come on, Jenny,” said Gwen, an older divorcee. “I love our stories, but you don’t believe in shifters for real, do you?”

“Don’t you?” She studied my screen and shook her head. “This isn’t a pop-up ad. It’s an actual app. When did you download it?”

“I didn’t.” At least not on purpose. “Do you think it’s for real?”

My paranormal-reading club mates passed my phone around, a real breach of phone etiquette, I thought, but by the time it got back to me, they were all wound up and excited. Demanding I fill out the bio and see what happened. I got caught up in the moment and let them help me set everything up. Because even if some of them were nonbelievers, I was not.

I had to be out my mind, but it certainly was an opportunity to become less boring.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

Chapter Two

Juven

“How can you read in the dark?” our neighbor Gillian asked. It wasn’t night, for the record. I simply lounged against the trunk of a tree, minding my own business as the clouds of a summer storm had rolled in.

“It’s the perfect amount of light,” I answered, barely glancing up from my novel. Shaman, my bond brother, and the only other shadow unicorn in existence around here, liked the shorter books. He preferred to plow through three or four a week. I liked to take my time, pouring myself into one long, wonderful story for up to a month at a time.

“A storm is rolling in.” Her head tilted up toward where dark clouds rolled along the sky. Thunder vibrated the earth; streaks of lightning lit the spaces in between.

“It is. I should get in before it ruins the pages.”

One of her reddish eyebrows rose. Gillian was a witch. A good one by all accounts. Most of her talents lay in the kitchen, and we reaped the benefits of our camaraderie. Baking lay at the center of her talents, along with a warming winter stew. “You should be out finding your mate.”

“Yes.” I got up and dusted off my pants.

“You’ll find her. Don’t you worry. Oh, I’m baking a loaf of cranberry pecan bread

tonight. I'll bring you two over a loaf. I baked a ton this morning."

"Thank you, Gillian. I'm sure Shaman is cooking up something that would go perfectly with it."

We parted ways as lightning flashed and thunder rumbled louder. Gillian pretended to be afraid of the storm but soon, if we glanced out the window, we would be able to see her dancing underneath the fresh plops of rain, a smile on her face, a youthful glint in her eyes. We wouldn't peek though. Gillian preferred her rain dances in the nude, and we had learned to give her privacy.

"We should run tonight. It's the perfect time," Shaman said as I went into his domain, the kitchen. I managed our finances and took care of the mundane things he didn't prefer while he made magic in the kitchen.

But that didn't mean our life was ordinary.

"After the fair, of course."

"Of course." Our kitchen was alive with the sounds of Shaman's cooking. Most shifters and magical kind celebrated the summer solstice on one day but here, in the mystic mountains, we celebrated the turning of the seasons for a week. At least.

Tonight was a community feast. A small one, compared to what was to come, but each one was special.

"Gillian mentions us finding a mate more and more," I said, nibbling on a lemon bar laced with a river of strawberry jam.

"It can't be louder than the mentions in my head. That beast of mine wants his mate. And you know it can't be just anyone. Fate has already chosen. All we have to do is

find them.”

I chuckled but there was no humor in it. “Simple as that?” I asked.

“Yes. Simple and complicated as that. Did you drop off Fiona’s package?”

Fiona was a wolf shifter who had just given birth to triplets. She didn’t live far from here and had always given to the community in her own way. She took in orphans of all kinds. Some who were shunned by humans. Some rejected by shifter parents for not being alpha enough or strong enough. No reason made sense. They were babies. Babies.

Fiona welcomed them all to her home, so, when she had some of her own, we made sure she was taken care of. Noone would know it was us. We made anonymous donations to the community fund for her and, this morning, I’d dropped off groceries and baby clothes in the hour before dawn.

It was the least we could do.

After all, Fiona’s mother took me in when I was only a teenager. My parents were slaughtered for their horns. They had lured the human hunters away from me so I didn’t die.

Shaman came from a different line of unicorns, but we were so similar that our bond was instant.

We lived under the shadow of that sacrifice. The best thing we could do was be generous and live as best we could. Our families had left us money. We had that. Plenty of it.

What we needed were mates.

But living in the mountains where we were hidden from society didn't give us a lot of opportunity to meet someone.

"I dropped off the package."

"That's good. Thank you."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

We had moved on from the mate subject quickly. It was a sore spot for us both. We unicorns had a limited time to search and I feared living in the mountains, despite the peace, was stopping us from finding our mates.

We couldn't just live in a city and let anyone find out about us.

There had to be a way for us to find our mates.

Chapter Three

Amber

I left the book club meeting with half a dozen leftover cookies and a knowledge I had been the reason we had to discuss the same book the following week. Instead of continuing to talk about the book we were reading, the whole group had become absorbed in playing a game of what-if. As in, what if Amber dates a wolf/bear/dragon/goblin. Cindra had the goblin idea, but I had not checked that as a possibility. Too many fairy tales read as a child where the goblin played an unpleasant or scary role for me to be willing to date one. They all had me imagining the possibilities, picturing myself with a wolf shifter in my bed and a bunch of cubs rolling around my feet. It happened in the books we read...why not in real life?

All the way home, I had to try to stay focused on the road while imagining a date with different types of beings. A wolf who always opened the car door for me. A lion roaring with approval at my new dress. A dragon flying me to his cave to meet his sister's hatchlings. A world had opened up before me where nothing was out of the realm of possibilities. But by the time I got home, it was all sounding a lot less

possible and a lot more like something out of the pages of a romantic fantasy.

Why would they want me? The heroines were usually beautiful and smart and unique in some way. Unless I were to meet a jaguar shifter who needed some research for a doctoral thesis, there were going to be too many other females who could attract their attention.

Leaving my cookie plate and keys on the counter, I padded into the bathroom and turned on the taps, adding a generous pour of plumeria bubble bath to the tub before going into my bedroom to undress. I returned and sank into the scented froth, the bubbles tickling my nose. A romance heroine would probably have brought a glass of wine, maybe lit a candle, turned on soft jazz, but the bath alone was a rare luxury for me. Not because I couldn't take one every evening if I chose but because I rarely pampered myself.

Yeesh, how could I think a vampire would find me sexy when I made so little effort. I lay back and closed my eyes, pushing aside anything more than the warmth seeping into my muscles. When I climbed out and reached for a towel, wrapped it around me, I'd come to a conclusion about the whole app thing.

Mostly, I was open to meeting any kind of a paranormal creature just for the experience. Would romance blossom? Probably not. I hadn't had much luck in the human world, and I couldn't imagine being more interesting to someone who could turn into a tiger, but it sure would be fun to meet them. I crawled into bed, too tired even to read, my eyes closing almost as soon as I clicked the bedside lamp off.

Sometime later, I woke from a dream whose details I couldn't summon even in the moment. But a faint feeling of magic hung over me, likely as a result of joining that silly app. I plumped my pillow and rolled over, with no hope of getting back into the dream and seeing where it led. Or where it had been even.

After ten minutes or so, racing thoughts making it clear I wouldn't be getting to sleep under any circumstances—at least not soon—I reached for my phone on the nightstand charger. A little surfing sometimes helped me get drowsy.

But instead of watching videos, I opened the Mail-Order Matings app. If it was a scam, what would it serve? I paid my bills, but I didn't have enough money to be worth catfishing. And it just felt like a real site. I'd joined a few over the years but never was contacted by anyone I wanted to meet in real life. It would be a lot of work to fake something this realistic.

If I were to show up next week and tell the book club girls that I had a date with someone really exciting...a shifter? What would they say? Would my mom even believe me if I told her?

And what could it hurt? I scanned bio after bio, not just shifters but anyone different from me. Which wasn't hard because there didn't seem to be many ordinary humans there. And then I spotted a unicorn. Were they real?

Only one way to find out for sure. Crossing my fingers and possibly my eyes, I typed a message. Would you like to chat? Only after hitting send did I realize I was not only possibly waking him up but also sounding desperate or maybe creepy. It was the middle of the night, after all. I searched for an undo function without success. About to put my phone down and bury my head in my pillow, I received a reply.

Sure!

Tentatively, I typed, Are you really a unicorn?

Haven't you seen my bio? I'm the sparkly white unicorn with the longest horn in the whole app.

Was a long horn a euphemism for something else? Or a sign of it like hand/foot size in humans? I was not going to ask that. Instead, I said, What do you do?

Do? The typed word even looked confused. I like to run on the beach and ride roller coasters. But it says all that in my bio.

I mean for a career?

He launched into a description of his job, which, somehow, was the most boring one in the world. It involved data, which I usually found interesting but even with his long sparkling horn, he was duller than me and had not, as he finally admitted, run on the beach or ridden a coaster since high school.

At least it made me sleepy.

I added some things to my bio, hoping for something a little more interesting to talk about. Looking for two or more mates. Just out of curiosity.

Chapter Four

Shaman

Juven handled most of our financial stuff but, once in a while, I tried to make myself useful and checked everything over. He invested well for us, and we had enough for a lifetime and even more and could be generous with our means.

I clicked on the email icon and saw a few updates from distant family. There weren't many of us, so, though we lived far apart, we stayed in touch.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

I was answering one of my cousins when a pop-up caught my attention. I nearly clicked on the X to make it go away until I read the contents of the ad.

An app that helped people find their mates. Mail-Order Matings.

Could it be that simple?

Download an app. Find a mate. If so, why hadn't we heard of it before? Probably because we lived in the mountains, far from the threat of hunters or any chance of finding our mates.

Juven didn't like technology. He utilized it for what we needed, but that was about it. I, on the other hand, embraced it.

I wasn't getting any younger, either. The curse of being a shadow unicorn was that we had to find our mates before turning thirty, and I'd just had my twenty-ninth birthday. Time was running out for us. We went about our day as if our mate would simply show up, but no one showed up in our community. Females who wanted a unicorn as a mate didn't stumble into the haze that wove between the trees up here. It was time I did something about the issue at hand.

I downloaded the app on my phone and lost a good part of my day signing up and filling out the answers to the questions. Would I be open to sharing a mate? Would I be willing to be a part of a reverse harem?

If it meant finding my fated mate? I didn't know. Those were questions that went unanswered. Once I found her, I would have to explore what that meant for our

future, though I couldn't imagine sharing. I'd never known a unicorn who had more than one mate.

I turned off my phone and retreated to the greenhouse. Shaman had gone to the small city at the base of the mountain for supplies. While we tried to keep our community as self-sustaining as possible, there were things we simply couldn't make or keep. The basics—bread, meat, vegetables, and fruits—we had. But for chocolate and other important items, we had to outsource. Plus, Juven would shop for others on his monthly trip.

In the greenhouse, my vegetables and herbs flourished. We were in the middle of a blistering summer, and my tomatoes proved the point. Ripening at a fast pace, they would provide a perfect complement for dinner.

Plucking the suckers from my tomato plants, I heard my phone beep. Not a regular text message but a new sound. Huh.

Perhaps a notification from the new dating or mating app.

Crossing to the other side of the greenhouse, I picked up my phone and saw that I had a match.

Already? Only a few hours since I signed up. Could this app find a potential mate so fast?

Her name was Amber. She had long, black hair and even darker eyes. She wasn't smiling in the picture, but mischief sparkled in her eyes.

Mate. This is our mate. Find her.

“Mate? This is the first person I matched with. It doesn't happen that easily. Does it?”

She is ours.

Ours. His and mine, though we were one, we were also separate beings. Two sides of the same coin. Sure, she was beautiful, and I felt an instant attraction, but I didn't fully trust my unicorn at this point. He was desperate for a mate. There was a deep-rooted need for him to ensure our line continued.

I read on. She was smart. Listed some causes she was interested in. She was in a book club and put her favorite movies as Lord of the Rings, the trilogy. If that wasn't a sign, I didn't know what was.

At the bottom of her profile was a link to send Amber a message.

I hovered my thumb above the button, ready to send her a message, when I saw a point in her profile I'd overlooked. Two or more. She wanted two or more mates.

This was what I was afraid of. Unicorns, and especially shadow unicorns, weren't polyamorous and didn't get into reverse harems. We simply didn't.

Even if I considered sharing a female, it would only be with Juven, the one person in the world I trusted absolutely. And two males to one female would most certainly guarantee offspring. Wouldn't it?

Goddess, no. There was more to mating than offspring and the continuing of my line. I wanted love and companionship and someone to hold at night. Would that be the same if Juven were holding her too?

I had to find out. No more matches needed. Amber was the one for me.

Chapter Five

Juven

Someone was shoving my shoulder and, since I was dead asleep, that person was going to get a piece of my mind. “What?” I yelled out after scenting Shaman.

He was my brother in all ways but blood, but he was in trouble.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

“I met someone. I think she’s my mate. My animal knows she’s my mate, but she wants more than one, and there’s only one person in the world I would share a mate with, and—”

“What?” I asked, thinking this was a dream of a dream of a nightmare.

“Stop saying what.”

The click of the light by my nightstand made me sit up and pay attention. Shaman didn’t make a habit of waking me up in the middle of the night, so this might be an emergency. But he said something about mate?

I rubbed my eyes and tried to get my brain moving. “You met someone? Where? I went to the city all day.”

“I...downloaded an app.”

Shaman should really get to the point. First a mate and now an app? “Start from the beginning. Don’t leave anything out.”

“I downloaded an app. It’s for finding your mate. I found her, but she wants more than one mate.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Because there’s no one else I would even think about sharing a mate with. Can I sign you up? Do you want to see her picture?”

“Picture? No. It’s the middle of the night.”

“So, can I sign you up? It’s free.”

I wanted him to do whatever it took to make him go away. I valued my sleep more than most things in life. “Fine. Sign me up. Is it all about this one person?”

“Amber. That’s her name. She’s perfect. Beautiful. Smart. She’s it for me—maybe for us. Can I sign you up or not?”

“Will you leave me in peace?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Go for it.”

I drifted off into dreamland again.

The next morning, I shot up in bed. My memory of the night before was hazy, but I recalled some of the major points.

Mate.

Amber.

Dating App.

Sharing a mate?

I threw off the covers and noticed my phone wasn’t on my nightstand. Oh yeah, he was signing us up.

“Shaman!” I yelled and padded down the stairs to the kitchen where the smell of coffee and blueberry biscuits filled the air.

“I’m here. Hope you’re hungry. I’ve been trying this blueberry butter swim biscuit recipe.”

“Did you sign us up for some kind of mating app? Someone named Amber?”

His smile grew, and all the recipes and coffee were long forgotten. “Yes. You said it was okay.”

“It is? I don’t know. Tell me everything.”

He reached for the coffee and, Goddess bless him, he let me get through half a cup before continuing. “I signed up for the Mail-Order Matings app because we’re almost thirty and our chances of meeting our mate up here in the mountains are slim to none.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

“When did you do all of this?” I asked, picking up my phone and seeing the new icon.

“Yesterday.”

Maybe I was still dreaming. “You downloaded this app, signed up, and found a mate for not only you but us in one day? I’ve been underestimating you.”

He chuckled. “I couldn’t believe it myself. I was on the app only a few hours. She was the first person we matched with. I saw her and...”

“Amber? Did I remember that correctly?” I asked.

“Get on the app. I thought it was a fluke. Maybe even a mistake but, when I signed you up, she was the first match for you as well.”

I sat on the stool and brought up the app. The icon at the top said I had new notifications and the first one was a match—Amber. “She’s beautiful.” I scrolled through her profile, not believing it myself.

“And smart and interesting and...”

Mate.

My unicorn whispered the notion. The word was muttered so quietly that I barely noticed the sound. “This all could be a farce, Juven. Is this even real?”

That was me, always the doubting one.

“I checked out the app. It’s legit. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of relationships that started on this app.”

“Did you google her pic? What if it’s one of those catfishing situations?”

Juven sighed and took the biscuits from the oven. We were desperate to find a mate or mates, but we couldn’t just jump into something that would only break our hearts.

Our unicorns were desperate. That was all.

“Shaman, it’s real. Amber is real.”

“Okay, let’s say she is. What do we do now?”

“We send her a message. I’ve been holding off because she wanted two mates.”

Two mates. The female knew what she wanted. I liked that. Still, I had reservations. Maybe this would go no further than a few messages.

“There’s no one else I would ever trust with my mate but you. Go on. Send her a message.”

“You have to as well.”

I scoffed. “Okay. Let’s make this happen.”

We got on the app and sent her messages, but the doubt lingered. I wanted it to be real. Amber was stunning and seemed smart. And then there was the thing about my animal speaking to me.

I sure hoped this didn't get our hopes up and then break our hearts.

Chapter Six

Amber

I woke late the next morning, having been awake in the middle of the night. As I lay in bed watching the sun filter through the leaves of the tree outside my window, the previous evening seemed like a dream. A dating app showing up on my phone for no reason, could have been a scam. After all, the internet was one big ad for anything and everything.

I'd have just blocked it and moved on with life if I hadn't been in the middle of a group of people as into the paranormal as I was. But they were intrigued, too, and one thing led to another.

Could any of it really have happened?

Only one way to be sure. More awake now, I reached for my phone on the charger, but it wasn't there. I eventually found it under the blankets where I must have dropped it when I fell asleep.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

Taking a deep breath, I brought up my home page and found the icon for the Mail-Order Matings app. Right there on the screen. And when I opened the app, there was a notification waiting for me to see. I was surprised that I hadn't heard it come in—must have been really out.

I hoped it wasn't from the unicorn wanting to give me more details about his job. I needed to get to work soon, and he would just end up putting me to sleep. Again.

But instead, the message was from someone new. In fact, two messages, one from each, and while they were unicorns, they described themselves as shadow unicorns. In their human forms, they just looked like very hot guys, but when I researched for a ridiculous amount of time, I found some very interesting facts about shadow unicorns.

Most of the “research” I found was more fantasy than science. They were believed to be extinct by most. But after everything I'd seen so far, I was ready to believe they were still around. I even found a few pictures, although they were almost as blurry as Bigfoot shots in the woods.

A glance at the clock told me I didn't have another minute to waste in online searching. I didn't like to be late for work, and I'd already used up most of the time I could spend in the shower, meaning, my hair would not be styled very much. But as I shampooed, I wondered what it would be like to meet these guys for real. Even if they hadn't had a second form with three horns—three horns!—they were better looking than anyone I'd ever gone out with. Certainly the kind of guys who showed up at clubs with models on their arms.

I combed conditioner through my hair, wondering what had made them contact me. What about boring me would attract them? All those books I read about paranormal romance, the shifters wound up with their mates. And mates were sent by Fate. Supposedly the app was matching people with their fated mates, although I'd pushed that thought aside for the most part because it didn't just apply to the shifters?

Not to humans?

I rushed to dress, grateful that as a research librarian, I wasn't in the public eye much and didn't have to get very fancy. Nice jeans and a blouse, low boots, and I was ready to run out the door with my damp locks on my shoulders.

All day, as I data mined for clients, I thought about the messages I'd received from the two dark unicorns. I wished I'd had time to reply to them, but as it was, I didn't even get to take lunch. And by the time I left the library, I was half excited and half ready to be disappointed. If they were like the other unicorn in personality, I would definitely cross unicorns of all kinds off my dating possibilities list.

And who ever thought I'd say something like that?

Not me!

That alone made me a more interesting person, didn't it? A little?

Chapter Seven

Shaman

I was so preoccupied with Amber and this app that I'd burned our burgers for lunch and forgotten to turn off the sprinklers in the greenhouse. I was beside myself. This app was a menace. It showed us all kinds of possibilities for a mate, but the one I

wanted, the one we both wanted, well, she didn't reply.

It was time to talk about it either way.

"Her profile says she works, Juven. She has a job. Maybe she works a late shift and she's not in a position to check her phone." He offered the excuses, hoping to calm me down. Through our bond of brotherhood and friendship, I could feel his unicorn vibrating with anxiety.

I truly believed Amber was our mate. Not a chosen one either. Our fated mate.

"I know you're right but I can't stop checking the app."

"Let's distract ourselves. How about we go over to Tucker's place? He needs his fences mended. His sheep got out again last night."

He braced his hands on the counter of the island and nodded. "Yeah. That's what I need."

We got dressed for outdoor work and walked down the mountain a bit to our friend Tucker's home. He raised most of the animals in our community with the exception of rabbits. Rabbits were raised by Elizabeth. We worked together to make sure everyone had everything they needed. We lived in peace and harmony. Everyone was included, and we celebrated and mourned together. All shifters should live like we did, in my humble opinion. Humans as well. But there were fragile egos and nonsensical laws that caused division and pitted people against one another.

Which was why we made our home here, in the mountains, under the shroud of fog and the peace that came with it.

"We should've thought this out more," I said before we opened Tucker's gate. From

here, I could see where his sheep had breached the fence. Not a big deal to mend but more than one person could handle.

“Thought what out more? He needs help, right?”

I chuckled. “I meant about the app. About Amber. We should’ve talked about it.”

“We did talk about it, Juven. I talked about it to you last night and then this morning. What’s there to talk about anyway? She’s there. A match on the app and my unicorn...”

“He wants to mate. Period.”

“That’s not it and you know it. He’s never called outmatebefore. Not before her. And there’s a reason you and I are best friends. Why we chose to live together instead of on our own. Can’t you see?”

I did, but it was hard to admit. Especially when not hearing from her was having such a big impact on me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

Him and me. It was taking a toll on my thoughts. I obsessed about being ready for that sound from my phone that might never come.

“There are other matches,” he answered as we walked up to Tucker’s cottage. He would never ask for help, but we did what we could for others.

“There are no other matches, Shaman. There’s Amber and...I’m not explaining this again.” It was rare when Juven took a tone with anyone but especially not me.

“Then let’s keep busy and wait. We’ve waited this long for a mate, we can wait a few more hours.”

Couldn’t we?

We made quick work of Tucker’s fence and then helped him get all his sheep back inside. We were rewarded with cheese and some of his mate’s strawberry cobbler. We never expected payment or anything in trade for our help, but we had the best neighbors around.

That night, Juven went to his room early, muttering something about leftovers for dinner so I didn’t have to cook. Probably so I didn’t burn our supper, wrapped up in my thoughts about Amber and the what-ifs, which were many.

Against my better judgment, I got on the app and checked our message. Just in case. The message had been read but she didn’t reply. I thought up a thousand excuses, trying to think positively, but the proof was in the pudding. She wasn’t responding and we had no idea why.

Her failure to respond probably had nothing to do with us at all.

She had a life. A book club. A job. Friends and family, probably. Maybe she'd gotten on the app and then lost hope as I had. Then again, I didn't have a lot of faith in it in the first place.

I sighed, looking at her pictures. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. And there were a lot of women on this app.

A lot.

For myself and for Juven, I took a chance and sent her another message. A second message. Desperate? Maybe. Persistent? Yes.

I looked out the window and saw Juven change into his unicorn and take off into the night. He was frustrated and upset, and running was the best way to relieve some of that.

If Amber was our mate, and Juven was sure she was, she would answer. Otherwise, this was it for us. No mate. No children. Our line would end here.

Chapter Eight

Amber

Despite my cocky attitude when leaving work, when I got home, the first thing I did was pull my phone out of my bag and plop down onto the sofa to check the app. The desire had been building from the moment I climbed in the car, but parking at the side of the road to do so seemed too needy.

Besides, what was I checking for? Two shadow unicorns had taken the time to say

hello to me, and I hadn't replied. So unless I was going to hear from someone else, they would either be waiting to hear back or have lost interest. And that shouldn't bother me nearly as much as it did because my previous unicorn experience hadn't been inspiring.

I wasn't dull if I was chatting with unicorns late into the night and then not bothering to reply to two of the rarest kind of all, was I? This was a great story to tell at book club, although probably not Mom, who I didn't think believed in shifters and if she did, might be worried about me marrying them. She still hoped I'd marry someone from her church. But I could leave out the unicorn part and tell her I'd signed up for a dating service, and she'd be reasonably happy with that.

So, done deal, and I didn't need to do anything else to convince people I was more than someone who spent her day buried in books and the internet doing research. No more necessity to prove myself as an interesting person. Amen. The end.

Except...maybe I never needed to prove it to them. Sure, Mom wanted me to meet someone, but who else had ever called me boring? Nobody but...dammit! Nobody but me. And one conversation with a unicorn duller than me was not going to prove anything to the person who was dissatisfied with me.

Ugh! I hated to admit it. Me. It was me.

If I didn't let go of expectations nobody but me had and stop judging myself, how would I ever take steps forward in life? These two unicorns thought I was worth chatting up, and it was time I replied. At least see if they were still interested in talking to me. What was the actual time frame when a person should reply to someone on a dating app?

Having spent plenty of that time in my head, I swiped the phone screen and opened the app. Another notification had come in, but I hadn't heard it. I understood sleeping

through the first one but not the other. A check of settings showed that I had somehow silenced notifications from apps. Not the only time I'd managed to do that. I adjusted the setting and opened the notification.

Shaman, one of the shadow unicorns, had sent a follow-up message. Nothing pushy, just hoping I'd gotten their previous notes and hoping I would like to talk soon. Nothing from the other guy, Juven. How odd. Or maybe not. What did I know?

Beyond the fact that I wanted to talk to these unicorns as soon as possible.

What should I say?

Hi, Shaman. Thanks for the follow-up. I did get your first message, but I had to get to work, so I didn't have time to reply this morning. Isn't your friend going to say hi?

A long moment passed while I wondered if they might keep me waiting just because I had done that to them. Sure, I had to work, but they had feelings too and might have been anxious.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

Then the message came. Absolutely. He'll be sorry that he missed your reply. He's out on a gallop, but he'll want to join as soon as he gets back. Want to video chat?

Panic. I'd been hunched over books and screens all day and hadn't even done my hair or put on makeup this morning. The picture I used for the app was a rare good one. The camera in general did not love me, and I suspected video chat would be no better.

Amber?

I'm sorry. Yes, I'd love to video with you, but I just got home. Can you give me a few minutes to freshen up and get a cold drink first?

And eat. He sounded like one of those protective alphas in my books.

I skipped lunch. Why was I telling him that?

Promise me you'll have some dinner before you come back on to talk with us? Why was it so sexy that he said that? I read too many novels!

Still, I will. Give me a half hour. I could throw a frozen dinner in the microwave while I did something with my hair, which I had pulled up into a messy ponytail at some point during the afternoon.

Take as long as you need.

I will.

Thirty minutes later, I'd flat-ironed my hair and put on some eyeliner, mascara, and lip gloss, wishing I had foundation or something, but I so rarely dated, I hadn't worn any makeup at all in a bit. I used the last five minutes to gobble the ramen I made when I didn't find anything better in the freezer.

Then I tried to find the best place to sit so I was lit decently, something I'd proven really bad at with work calls, and dialed the number he'd sent me while I was primping.

Chapter Nine

Juven

When I got back to the house from my run, Shaman was in the living room on the phone with someone. On a video call.

"Hey, Juven. We got a call from Amber."

I stopped in my tracks. Shaman's smile told me he was sincere, but he sounded so nonchalant about it. Oh, by the way, our mate is on the phone.

"She is?" I asked. "I mean, we did?"

"Hello, Juven." Her voice slipped through my consciousness and settled right in my heart. More than ever, I knew she was ours. We'd never considered sharing a mate, but now that Amber was on our radar, I had no second thoughts about it. Okay, I did, but there was no denying how she affected me and my animal.

"Hello." I went over and sat next to Shaman. "You didn't answer before."

Her black hair had some silver streaks in it. I could see them now. And no matter how

beautiful she was in her pictures, it was nothing compared to how gorgeous she was in person.

“I was at work. The night shift is the worst but when I got on to answer, I saw Shaman was online. I was...disappointed to hear you weren't there.”

My chest warmed. She liked us too. Of course she did. It was fated. Or she was the first female we'd interacted with in a while and we were horny.

My human brain doubted everything.

“I was running.”

“As your unicorn? That must be incredible.”

“It's one of my favorite things,” I answered. She sighed and covered her mouth to yawn. We were keeping her up. “You're tired,” I commented.

“I am. I arrived at work, buried myself in research, and before I knew it, the library was closing. I have a mountain of notes to get through, but I don't have the energy to look at it anymore.”

I felt awful. All day, I'd wondered if she was rejecting us with failing to answer our messages, but it was just like Shaman told me. She was working and busy. How silly of me. She was human and wasn't blessed with a trust fund like we were. She had to work to live, while we worked because we wanted to and none of it for pay.

“I'm sorry we're keeping you up,” Shaman commented. I didn't want to end the video chat with her, but my animal didn't want her to be tired. He already cared about her well-being.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

“It’s really no problem. Really. I was hoping to reply when I got home and then I saw another message from Shaman.”

I glanced at Shaman but said nothing. He hadn’t told me he sent another message. He was completely smitten with Amber already. “I’m glad you decided to contact us. You were our first match.”

“Oh?” she asked. “You sent all of your matches messages?”

Laughing, Shaman shook his head. “Only you, Amber. We were drawn by your profile, not to mention your beauty.”

A lovely blush bloomed on her cheeks. I took in her surroundings, trying to get to know her better with little information. Her apartment, I guessed from the smallness of it, was sparsely decorated. Comfortable and feminine but not a lot of things. The biggest piece of furniture was a huge bookshelf that was stuffed to the brim with covers of all colors. The titles ranged from what looked like romance to autobiographies and everything in between.

“Thank you. You two aren’t so bad yourselves. What do you do for a living? I didn’t see any jobs listed on your profiles.”

I didn’t know what to say. Of course, the truth, but I also didn’t want her to think that we were some spoiled brats who sat around and made trouble so we didn’t get too bored.

Shaman took over, thankfully. “Our parents left us a good amount of money when

they passed. We don't have to work, but we spend our time trying to help others in our community. We have a thriving greenhouse, and we keep busy."

"Oh, wow. That sounds incredible. Living on your own timelines."

"We think so. We try to keep a loose schedule anyway. Do you always work long hours, or do you have some time off?"

Amber smiled, and nearly everything in me melted. "I work on my own schedule. I'm contracted by companies for research. Nonprofits, students, anyone who needs information and doesn't have enough time to find it. I can take time off whenever I like, though, as long as I hit my deadlines."

"That's good. At least you can work when you want to. I wonder how close you are to us. The app hides your location." Shaman was so eager to meet her. He had been vocal about Amber being our fated mate, but I had my reservations. It all seemed too easy—too convenient. Maybe I was being negative, but mates didn't just show up on an app out of nowhere.

"Oh. Here, let me share it. I read in the rules that when we make a connection, we have the option of sharing our location."

The app popped up a notification. It gave Amber's address and then asked if we wanted to share ours as well. We did, of course.

Amber lived only about a half hour away from us. We'd even gone to her city a few times, though it wasn't where we usually went for supplies.

She had been there, only thirty minutes away and we hadn't seen her.

"We are so close!" she said.

“We are.” My stomach gathered into a knot. This was the moment. If she declined, I would be heartbroken, but I had to know. Shaman even more than me. “So what do you think? Would you like to go out on a date with us, Amber?”

She leaned back in her chair and smiled. “I really would. Have a place in mind?”

Chapter Ten

Amber

It’s just a date. No big deal. I’ve been on dates before.

But not with unicorns. Two. Unicorns.

I’d suggested a restaurant I enjoyed, not too expensive but good food and a pleasant atmosphere. They did well enough, but no lines out the door or reservations required. Nobody ever pushed people to rush with their meals or finish up a conversation, which I thought made it perfect for our date.

Also, I didn’t have the wardrobe for fancy evenings out, and I didn’t want to have to go buy something if I could avoid it. I made a good living, but I suppose I’d gotten in the habit of being thrifty as a woman on her own. Saving for retirement and for emergencies of all kinds made me feel in control and safe.

So, on the day before our big date, I found myself in the middle of my room with my entire closet emptied out on the bed. My plan to avoid buying anything new wasn’t looking very promising. I had work clothes, jeans and shirts, some nice slacks for the times when I had to meet with clients or attend meetings. Low-heeled shoes, a couple of blazers and cardigans in black, white, and gray.

How long since I’d been out with a man? And what had I worn then? I didn’t even

remember. Somehow my past relationships, if they could even be called that, had not gone very far. While my friends were oohing and aahing over the boys we knew, most of them left me cold. I'd even wondered if I might be interested in girls, but one coffee date proved that wasn't it. Some people just never found a partner, I supposed, and I might be one of those.

I had a good life, for sure, with a job I found interesting, a nice place to live, my books—and now my book club as well. With these unicorns coming to meet me, I was more excited and nervous than I'd ever been in the past.

Could it be that I always was going to be attracted to shifters? Or...or...these particular shifters? Fated mates were only for them, right? Not for simple humans. Except, sometimes, in the romances, the human girl did have a fated mate. Those were my very favorite tales. I never was drawn to the Vikings or princes or other types of romance.

And now, out of nowhere, I was going on a date with not one but two shadow unicorns. Magical beings. I once again surveyed the items laid out on my bed. Well made, intended to last. Mostly earth tones, gray and brown and beige, white and black. Appropriate for blending into the library stacks.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:34 am

But not in the least appropriate for a night out with two of the sparkliest beings on the planet. If they were indeed sparkly, being shadow unicorns and all. But whatever they were, they deserved a little effort on my part. Not the time to be cheap.

It was time to shop. And not at the conservative shop where most of these things came from. I swore they had nothing that wasn't neutral there except maybe black—was black a neutral color?

Our city was not large as such places go, but we did have many stores, most of which I had not visited, but I climbed into my car and headed for the outdoor mall. I'd been there for lunch with friends and such various times and even gone into some of the stores with them while they purchased clothing very different from what I typically wore.

The weather was lovely this time of year, with warm breezes and flowers blooming in hanging baskets all along the pathways. I'd never been here after dark, and I'd been a little concerned that I might not find the stores open, but it was much livelier than when I'd been here for lunch.

Strolling along the brick pathways, I window-shopped, looking for just the right kind of place to buy an outfit for my date. Many were clearly geared to teenagers, others for children, and some for men. There was even a branch of the store I usually shopped at, and looking at the shoppers inside made me wonder why I was shopping like a middle-aged matron. Suddenly, all the clothes that had felt so comfortable and so right were all wrong.

I watched a woman at least twice my age trying on a sweater I'd bought just a month

ago and thought I loved, but now wished I'd never even seen.

Shaking it off, I made a sharp right into the next shop, one whose window display featured bright colors and fitted styles. Surely, I'd find something in here that would work for my date. The racks inside were filled with sundresses, shorts, bathing suits, and tops that were half an inch too long to be called crop tops. Similar to the teen stores with a little more of a sophistication and accommodation to the fact that women in their late twenties were built just a little different than fifteen-year-olds.

The other shoppers were about my age, but they already wore clothing that was age appropriate, unlike me. For a second, I panicked, afraid I didn't fit in, but then a cheerful young shop assistant bounced up to me and smiled. "You look like you need an update, STAT."

She couldn't have said anything better.

"I agree. Suggestions?"

"Trust me?"

I looked her up and down. She was a few years younger than me, but she was dressed beautifully in a pair of jeans that fit as if they were made for her. Without trying to strangle her. "If you'll tell me where you got those shoes?"

My shopping angel locked me in a dressing room and brought in armloads of clothes in beautiful colors and styles. I left with five big bags, directions to a shoe store down the way, and an appointment with her hairstylist for the next morning. I was going to take the day off work and spend it primping. I had lots of vacation time saved up.

Chapter Eleven

Shaman

“You changed again?” Juven asked as I came down the stairs. Again. The back of my neck was wet with perspiration, not only from nervousness but from the exertion of changing clothes so many times. Juven had seen three outfits, but I’d changed at least a dozen times.

“Yes. Knock it off. I’m nervous.”

“I know, but she’s either going to like us or she won’t. She’s not going to reject you based on jeans or khakis. If she does, do we really want her?”

I scrubbed a hand down my face. Oh, great. My forehead was sweaty as well. We would have to crank up the air conditioner in the truck so I didn’t look like I’d barely survived a monsoon on the way.

Both of us had been texting Amber since the other night. Not the video calls that I wanted, but it was good to keep in contact with her—get to know her better. We had a group chat, as well, and I secretly thought that was how this relationship would work out, if it did. We would each have a connection with her and then all of us would have a bond together. The transition would have some hiccups, but I thought we could make this work.

We would have to if Amber was our fated. I didn’t have to be reminded that we were running out of time by the second.

“She’s not going to judge me by my clothes but I’m judging myself. This isn’t just some date. This is the date.”

Juven sighed and gave me a one-armed shrug. He was still on the fence about Amber even after seeing her on video. His unicorn, in my opinion, would have to see her in

person. Scent her. Get a feel for her presence, before deciding if she was ours. Mine knew from the second I saw her. We weren't the same, but I hoped to the Goddess he caught up soon.

"We'll see. Let's go before we're late." My friend had never cared if we were late to anything. He arrived when he wanted to. I wasn't calling him lazy, but he did what he wanted, when he wanted.

She was getting to him.

"Let's go."

We stayed mostly silent on the drive down the mountain and to the east, to the city where Amber lived. We passed restaurants and ordinary places like the market and the gas station, and I wondered if she went there. Of course she went to a market and to fill her tank, but I imagined her going to those specific places.

Man, I was a goner.

"We still managed to be here early," Juven said.

I let out a sigh. This was tough. What if he met her and still wasn't convinced? What if he wasn't her fated, but I was? Would she accept only me? Her profile said two or more, but would she mate me and then try and find another to be her second?

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

My brain rattled with the possibilities and other than Juven being her other fated, all I saw was heartbreak.

Rejection was the worst of the fates for most shifters but especially tragic for unicorns. We were devoted to our mates on a baser level. Our unicorns lived for our mates. Sure, it happened like that in shifter novels, but we set the bar.

Amber would be the moon of my night. The sun of my day. The planet I revolved around.

Sounded creepy when I said it in my head. Might want to keep that to myself tonight.

“Let’s go in and wait.”

Staying in the truck and waiting for her to arrive seemed odd.

Inside the self-serve restaurant, I scoped out the menu but didn’t place an order yet. I’d never been to one of these places. There were no waiters or waitresses. The food arrived in a window. Made by a faceless person in the back. Or maybe by robots. Who knew? The city was always a splash of cold water compared to our life in the mountains.

“Is that her?” Juven asked. I watched as Amber got out of a small car that looked like a wind-up key belonged on the back.

“It is.”

“I’ll grab some drinks.”

I didn’t ask how he knew what Amber would want. She walked into the restaurant and her smile brightened the already fluorescent overly lit place. “Shaman, it’s so nice to meet you, in person.” She extended her hand and I nearly toppled over.

I grasped her soft, lithe hand and sucked in a breath. Yeah, she was mine, and I was head-over-heels hers. “It’s nice to meet you too. Juven is grabbing some drinks. Should we find a place to sit?”

“Sure. How about that booth in the corner?”

She sat on one side and I chose the opposite, scooting over to give Juven a place next to me.

Seconds later, he showed up with a tray of all kinds of drinks—enough for a football team. I expected him to introduce himself, but instead, he stared. His hands trembled. He nearly dropped the whole tray. I barely caught it before he did.

“Amber, this is Juven.”

“Juven, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

The only reason Juven managed to sit down was because I watched as his knees trembled. I might’ve fallen for Amber at first glance, but Juven? He’d found his fated mate too. And he nearly collapsed with the power of it.

Chapter Twelve

Amber

On the way to the restaurant, I sent a text to a friend. Just out of caution, since I was meeting strangers. I was already following the other rules of safe dating by meeting Juven and Shaman at a public place, driving myself to and from. After all our texts this week, they didn't feel like strangers, but safety was ingrained.

I had indeed spent the day primping, beginning with the visit to the hairstylist who, upon hearing I was getting ready for a big date, insisted that I also have a mani-pedi and get my legs waxed. By the time I left the salon, I felt polished from head to toe and carried a bag of cosmetics they sold at the front counter. All of that and my new dress, a blue, green, and gold patterned V-neck that showed more cleavage than my usual style. It had flowy sleeves and a fluttery skirt. My sandals had three-inch heels, my hair lay smoothly over my shoulders, and I had followed an online makeup tutorial to make the best use of my purchases.

I barely recognized myself in the mirror, but it all gave me a boost of confidence that had held until I opened the restaurant door and saw one of the men waiting for me. For a second, I almost turned and ran, but then I dug in my high heels and lifted my chin. You spent a lot of time and money for this moment and you are not going to show this man, this unicorn just the back view of the dress.

I closed the distance between us, put on a fake-it-till-you-make-it bright smile, and held out my hand. "Shaman, it's so nice to meet you, in person." He took mine in his and my knees went weak. I thought that was just something from books, but only his firm grip held me in place.

"It's nice to meet you too. Juven is grabbing some drinks. Should we find a place to sit?"

"Sure." I glanced around for an empty table. It was more crowded here than usual. "How about that booth in the corner?"

We sat on opposite sides, and a moment later, Juven returned carrying a tray with at least a dozen drinks. This restaurant had all sorts of bottled sodas and seltzers. I always had a hard time choosing, and this wasn't going to help. And then the tray wobbled in his grip, and Shaman had to catch it. It was so endearing, my anxiety sank down about three levels.

Shaman eased the tray to the tabletop, grinning. "Amber, this is Juven."

"Juven, it's nice to finally meet you."

He sat next to Shaman, the two of them giving me space, and waved to the array of bottles. "They're going to bring over some glasses with ice."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“I think you got one of almost everything.”

“If you want beer or wine, they have that too,” he said. “But the tray was too full.”

“No, really.” I reached for an amber bottle. “I don’t drink much, and I love root beer. How thoughtful of you to pick up all these for us. I’m not sure where we’ll put the food, though.”

“Oh.” He looked abashed for a moment then brightened. “I guess we can put some of them on the ledge behind us.”

“Good idea.” I held up my hand for a high five, which they both gave me. It tingled more than usual. “They aren’t as fast as you might think around here, so if we want to eat in the next half hour, we’d better order.”

“I don’t see any menus,” Juven said. “Do we go ask for one?”

“No, there’s a chalkboard with today’s offerings near the window where you got the drinks. Every day is different, so we should go up and choose.” It was one of the best things about this place. The chef was totally in control. I slid out of the booth. “Let’s see what they have.”

There were always fresh seasonal foods here, and we made our selections then went back to the booth with a buzzer that would let us know when our meals were ready.

When we sat down again, I was afraid I might feel uncomfortable or we wouldn’t find anything to talk about, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. Our texts had just

touched on our lives, and they wanted to hear all about my work and my likes and dislikes and about my childhood. Everything I had to say seemed to interest them to the point I had a hard time finding out about them.

That was until toward the end of the evening. After we finished our meals and split a slice of mulberry cheesecake, Shaman reached for my hand and grew serious. “I like you a lot, Amber, and I wish I could offer you all the time in the world, but in my line, we have to mate by thirty, or we don’t do it at all. And I am the last in my line. And I’m closing in on that birthday soon.”

“No pressure,” I said through a nervous giggle. “Can I think about where we go from here?”

We said good night at my car, and I drove home, torn. I’d never met anyone like them, and I was intrigued. I wanted to know more about them, spend more time together, but I didn’t like to feel rushed.

I was used to the idea of dating for a long time before marrying, but mating was different, in the fiction I read and, apparently, in shadow unicorn life. These guys were hot, they were sweet, they were tall, and they wanted to know if I was interested in considering mating with them. Soon.

Just wow.

The rush factor scared me.

Chapter Thirteen

Juven

The drive home was more silent than the one into the city. My brain was hazy. My

skin tingled from her grazing touch on my hand over a half hour ago. My body buzzed with knowing. She was our mate. Our mate.

Ours. All ours. Go back and get her.

She was human, of course. Her instincts weren't like ours. There was no beast or other half inside her shouting truths our human minds disputed. It would take time for her to get to know us, and I couldn't refute the way she paled when we told her time was running out for us. Mostly for Shaman.

Humans didn't rush love or even like.

We would have to meet somewhere in the middle if this was to work.

It had to work. After seeing my mate, I knew I wouldn't survive a lonely life without her.

"We need to talk," I said as Shaman reached for the handle on the truck door.

"I think so too. Let's go inside."

We strolled into the living room and sat down in our usual spots, me in my chair and him at the corner of the couch. He flicked the lamp on but neither of us said anything. At first.

Finally, I blurted, "I'm a goner."

Not the most eloquent way to tell him I'd completely fallen for Amber, but there it was.

"Yeah, me too."

I sighed. “I think...before this goes too far...we need to talk about how this will work.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“I haven’t even heard of a throuple among our kind, have you?”

Shaman shrugged. “Not a throuple but there were reverse harems in the histories. There was a greater chance of getting the female pregnant. Four or five men. One female.”

“Huh. I never read the histories. I listened to stories but that was about it.”

Juven’s father was a historian. Made sense that he knew more than me about unicorn relationships.

“Let’s talk about logistics.”

I blew out a breath. “Before we do that, I just want to say something. You are my best friend and I consider you a brother. You know that. No matter what happens, I don’t want to lose you. I trust you completely. This isn’t going to be easy, but we’ll work through it, right? Amber is worth it.”

My best friend nodded. “I agree. I told myself when I signed you up that there’s no one on this earth I would trust with my mate except you. Maybe that’s why we decided to live together. We were fated to share a mate.”

“Makes sense. So...”

It was time to talk about the nitty-gritty. Assuming wouldn’t work in a situation like this. We had to make things clear. Of course, we would have to set everything straight with Amber as well, once she was comfortable enough to talk about these

things.

“This really should be talked about with Amber.” Shaman had a point.

“I know. And we will. What happens in the bedroom, it’s up to her. But...what if she wants...”

Shaman laughed. I had no clue what was funny but something cracked him up. “I’ve never seen you so shy, Juven. I know you read those romance novels. Come on. If we can’t talk about these things, then we’re already in trouble.”

I shook my head. He was right. I read enough of them to stock a castle. “Fine. And you’re right. This is all in her hands. But...if she wants to mate with us both at the same time...”

“Then we mate our female. Period. But no swords crossing. I love you as a brother and that’s it.” He grinned.

I cracked up. “Deal. Same for me. What about jealousy?”

“Do you think there will be any?” Shaman cocked his head to the side. “If she’s ours, and she is, then obviously there will be times that you are with her only and I am with her alone and then together. As long as we make sure everyone’s needs are being met, I don’t see why that would be an issue. If you two are happy, then I will be happy for you. I could never envy your happiness.”

“And the baby?”

“Oh, we’re going there?” Shaman asked. “What about them?”

“Will we care whose baby she has?” I pictured Amber swollen with pregnancy.

Having our baby in her arms. Even if Shaman had another mate, their little one would be like my child as well. “You know what? I wouldn’t care. They will be raised by Amber and two loving fathers. That is all that matters.”

“You’re right. It really doesn’t matter. And maybe magic will happen and our child will have a mix of DNA. Wouldn’t that be something? As long as Amber is okay and any children we have...I think we would be the best dads. We complement each other.”

“So we’re doing this?” I asked. “She is our mate and we’ve decided?”

Shaman leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. “Yes. If she’s willing. I know she’s ours. And I don’t really want to fight you over our mate.”

I busted out laughing. “Oh, I’d win.”

“You’re full of shit. I’d totally win.”

A lightness filled my chest. The heaviness of having to find a mate and on my unicorn’s timetable, lifted, leaving me with hope and happiness. “We’re lucky, you know?”

“How so?”

“We found our mate and even though we are best friends, we will now have a family together. What friends can say that?”

Shaman nodded. “Not many. I can’t imagine my life without you or her.”

“Then let’s set up another date. Our mate is waiting and we are running out of time.”

Chapter Fourteen

Amber

Juven and Shaman lived only about a half hour away in the mountains. It was so odd that I'd never been to their area, but when I was growing up, my family trips were in the opposite direction. Listening to the unicorns describe their home made me want to see it. So, when Juven texted to invite me to dinner, I gladly accepted. I was still concerned about the need for speed, but I was also very interested in getting to know them better.

They also offered to come and pick me up, but while I was more comfortable with them and wouldn't worry about getting in a car with them, it seemed unfair for them to leave their home and drive to mine then back again. Especially since they were being kind enough to cook dinner for me.

Leaving the city and heading toward the mountains, I was glad I'd bought more than just one dress in my shopping spree. Turned out, I didn't need my jeans to have an elastic waistband quite yet, and the pair I chose to wear tonight looked much better on me. I'd caught a glimpse of admiration from both of the guys on our last date, and I hoped to see it again. My indigo tank top was just low enough for me to wear a rose quartz pendant I had received as a gift from my mom at college graduation.

It truly was just a half hour from my home to theirs. They'd lived there for years, in a world that sounded incredible. Most of the trip was highway, but after leaving the community at the foot of the mountain, I took a two lane that wound up to their scattered community. Not many homes were visible from the road, and those all had their own style, for lack of a better word. I'd gone from the city to an enchanted village.

My unicorns lived in one of the larger homes, all its windows glowing with golden light. If they worried I'd have a hardtime finding them, they had nothing to be concerned about. As instructed, I pulled into the driveway and parked.

Before I could open my door, Juven had already done it for me. He offered me his hand to help me out, as well, and I accepted his assistance. Considering I'd gotten out of my car on my own every time until now, it felt remarkably natural. "Welcome to our home." He closed the door and guided me up a path to a set of steps. "Shaman is cooking. We hope you like pot roast with homemade noodles."

"You can make noodles at home?" I was about to embarrass myself, but I just kept talking. "I thought they had to be extruded or something, from a machine."

"Maybe some shapes do, but we're not having anything that complicated. He's very good at making them, though."

"It sounds wonderful. I don't do a lot of cooking just for me." Also, I wasn't very good at it, and the frozen dinners and ramen tasted better than what I could do.

"That's why he needs me." He waved me ahead of him into the foyer. "I provide a service by giving him a reason to cook."

"Keep telling yourself that." Shaman met us in the living room and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "So nice to see you, Amber." He had a white apron tucked into his waistband and the look worked for him. "If I didn't cook, we'd eventually starve. But as it stands, the neighbors we like to help out often gift us with farm produce like meat, cheese, veggies, fruit. So if you like dinner, you have our neighbors to thank."

"If dinner tastes half as good as it smells, you're going to have a hard time getting me to leave."

Juven slipped an arm around my waist and turned me to face him. “So, our evil plan has worked. Shaman, we may have trapped ourselves a mate.”

“Something about kidnapping and the mountains and...hmm. Should I be scared?”

“You haven’t tasted the food yet.” Shaman started back to where he came from, presumably the kitchen. “You might not even like it.”

Oh, I liked it. Juven set the table, making me sit down while they did all the work. Was this how mates really treated their female? I would be spoiled in a day! The pot roast was tender, the mashed potatoes smooth and buttery, and peas tiny and sweet. There were rolls, clearly home baked, and Shaman set a cake on a stand on the counter for after.

Not that I had room. I had to beg off dessert for a while. Juven brewed a pot of coffee and put it in a carafe for whenever we got to the cake. “It’s not that I don’t think I’ll love it,” I assured him. “It’s that I’m going to bust the button off my jeans if I try right away. Shaman, you’re a great chef.”

“Thank you.” He stacked dishes by the sink. “What would you like to do now, then? Watch a movie, maybe?”

“Could I...are you too full to...” They were watching me with concern. Probably thought I was going to suggest something crazy. “Shift into your other forms?”

Chapter Fifteen

Shaman

My unicorn whinnied inside me. Of course he wanted to show our mate his form, but humans were scared of things that went bump in the night and while I thought our

unicorns were beautiful, they weren't exactly the ones out of princess fairy tales. Our hair was black as night, and we had three horns, which was why we shifted in the shadows or under the cover of night only.

"Are you sure?" I asked, taking her hand in mine. "Our forms, well, they can be jarring to some."

She bit down on her bottom lip, and I wanted to do that for her. Feel her plump lips between my teeth. Learning what made her writhe in passion. "If this is getting serious, and I think it is, then I should know all the parts of you, right? I won't take pictures or tell anyone, I swear."

"We trust you, Amber." Juven placed his hand over her other one. "We don't think you're going to expose us or anything. Shifters and humans, well, they can sometimes be scared of us. It's one thing to imagine a unicorn in your mind, but we don't have rainbow hair or glitter under the sun. Some see us as evil or dark entities. We just have a different hair color."

"I want to see you. I have since the night I was talking to Juven and he said you were out galloping around."

"Okay. Let's go outside. It's dark already." I was surprised how easily I gave into her. She was my mate. I would have to get used to giving into her wishes. It came with the territory. If she wanted to see our other forms, then she would. If she became scared, I would shift back immediately and console her.

Once outside, Juven made a suggestion. "What if we shift one at a time in case you get frightened? Maybe it would be better that way."

"Whatever you two are comfortable with. I know you are worried about my reaction, but I think I will be fine."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

Juven was right. “I’ll shift first. Please know that I would never hurt you. My animal could never hurt you, Amber. He would never hurt his mate.”

There. I said it. It was silly to deny myself from calling her my mate out loud. She was our mate. It was simply the truth.

“I don’t think you would hurt me. Whenever you are ready.”

I took my shirt off and then my pants. I didn’t have shoes on because we were in our house. I stopped at the boxer shorts because we didn’t know each other that well yet. One day we would, and I would be able to strip naked without any hesitation in front of her. And she would in front of me. Of us. This would take some getting used to—for all of us.

Reaching inside me for the connection my animal and I shared, I gave him permission to come forward and take over our form. We were not like other shifters in our phasing in and out, either. We didn’t experience pain or the shifting of bones or the stretching of muscles. Our shift happened as a snap of the fingers. A tingling along my skin. The sound of wind chimes in my ears as the magic took hold. I did feel the piercing of my horns through my skin, but it was far from painful—almost pleasurable.

One second, I was in charge, and the next, my unicorn was. A peaceful exchange of power. A submitting of consciousness to the entity inside us who we trusted more than ourselves.

Being a unicorn shifter was the best thing in the world.

I could still hear my mate, but it would be my animal that did most of the communication. We had never communicated with a mate like this, so it was a good experience for us both. This was the first of many times.

“Holy...” Amber’s voice caught my animal’s attention. I looked at her with fresh eyes. This beast saw her as a queen. His queen. Our queen. She had a glimmering aura around her body. “Shaman, you are such a magnificent unicorn. I...”

Juven chuckled. “Shaman, you managed to take her breath away. Wait until she sees mine.”

I snorted in his direction. No unicorn was more beautiful than another. We were all heart stopping, if I did say so myself.

“Nonsense. I bet both of you are... Can I touch you?” Amber looked from me to Juven and back to me. Of course, I couldn’t answer her with words but instead, I walked closer to her and dipped my head in front of her body. I was surprised she wanted to touch me but even more that she hadn’t taken off running in the woods or toward the nearest vehicle to leave. She was here. Steady but heart beating a mile a minute. The second her fingers touched my mane, I knew. The clouds of my human thinking cleared. All doubts vanished. Any hesitation removed. Amber was our mate. The only one for us. “You are so soft. The strands of your hair so smooth. Is it cliché to want to touch your horns?”

I huffed out another breath through my nose. She could touch me anywhere she wanted to.

“He doesn’t mind,” Juven said with a low chuckle. “Trust me.”

“What about you? Or are you going to shift one at a time? Still concerned I’ll be afraid of you?”

We'd underestimated our mate. She was strong and capable and didn't flinch once.

"I think we're safe, Amber."

In seconds, Juven stood beside me. He was a little taller and leaner but mostly, we were the same. His black hair shimmered with turquoise and plum colors as the light from the moon shined down on us. Other than our families, this was the first time we'd shifted in front of someone else.

"I feel so mundane next to you two. You are both incredible."

I moved forward and got down on one knee.

"What?" she asked.

I lay down and motioned with my head toward my back. I hoped she got the point. Otherwise, I would have to shift back, explain that I wanted her to ride on my back, and then shift back. Some of the romance might be lost.

"You want me to get on your back?" she asked. "Is that okay?"

Juven walked up behind her, nudging her lower back with his snout. "I guess that means yes."

She climbed on me and fisted some of my mane in her hands.

Then we took our mate on a long, night run. Juven took her on his back after a while but soon, her yawns echoed through the forest.

Time to let her go again. My heart broke a little bit every time she did.

Chapter Sixteen

Amber

I came close to asking to stay over that night when I met their unicorns. It was far too soon. I'd never slept with anyone on the first date, or the second. Their human sides were incredibly sexy and tempting, but the unicorns reached another part of me that I hadn't even known existed. I asked to see them partly because it seemed polite. Their unicorns were part of them, and if they wanted me for their mate, I should greet them.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

The pictures on the internet were, first of all, really blurry, and they looked like they were a solid black, but in real life, in the moonlight, that darkness held so many colors. I could have sat and petted their soft muzzles and stroked their sides all night. I couldn't read their minds, exactly, but they were sending waves of emotion washing over me that spoke without words. I'd never felt so wanted, so cared for. Never met anyone who was so sure I was their everything. My parents were great, but this was different.

It wasn't that they were inviting me into their world. As far as two very special unicorns were concerned, I was already there and just had to recognize the fact. And then they let me ride them. Something I'd thought only virgins could do—darn fairy-tale legends. It wasn't anything I could describe well because you absolutely had to be there to experience it. And there was no way I'd share this part of these males with any other female. They weren't just animals, horses to be ridden by anyone. Sitting on either of them was a spiritual experience. Or maybe ecstatic? Or both. And they'd never let anyone ride them before. The unicorns communicated that to me.

It was almost more than a human girl could take in without being overwhelmed.

When we got back to their house and they were in their two-legged forms again, it was almost time for me to go home. I was very tired, but we had not yet had dessert and since Shaman had gone to the trouble to make the cake completely from scratch, how rude would it be to leave it untasted?

After the first slice, I had a second. We chatted some more and they asked if I had any questions about what I'd seen. I didn't, right then, but promised to make sure to text if anything came up. The cake was dark chocolate with ganache filling and dark-

chocolate frosting as well. Incredible. And when I said so, he was so humble and sweet, just happy I'd liked it. I even carried a piece home with me and had it for breakfast in the morning.

Leaving the mountain paradise was hard, but I had things to do, a job and responsibilities. I'd always enjoyed my job, but that day, it didn't take up too much of my mind. Most of it was in the mountains with two unicorns galloping through the forest with their dark manes and tails blowing in the breeze, carrying me off like a fairy princess in a story.

I really did spend too much time reading. But since I'd met my unicorns, I hadn't so much as picked up a novel. Whenever I had spare moments, I was spending them daydreaming. What was it like up there in their mountain area all day? They were not the types to lie around and eat bonbons, and they had mentioned more than once how the people up there helped one another. How the food we ate had come from those farmers and others. It was a system a person could dream of. They didn't need money, of course, but many in their position wouldn't care about that. They'd just goof off or maybe travel the world.

I had a big project to work on, that day, for a doctoral student who had realized at the last moment that they had left out a key research angle and needed some citations they had skipped. It was anything but stimulating, though, and by the time I got home, I was dragging from the boredom.

Until I got the text from Shaman. It was so nice having you here for dinner. Is there any chance you'd come over for a day and a night and experience what it's like here in this community? If you're considering being our mate, you might want to know if you enjoy it here.

I was starting to reply when he went on. Not trying to imply anything more than a visit.

They were such gentlemen. What a great idea! When would you like me to come?

Chapter Seventeen

Juven

“She loves it here,” Shaman said with a huge grin on his face. “Did you see how happy she looked?”

Amber was upstairs, in our guest room, getting dressed for the summer solstice party our community had every year. She had taken to our community like she had been here for decades. She spoke to everyone so kindly and with such sincerity that everyone was putty in her hands. Especially Shaman and me. I knew one thing, if she decided she didn’t want to live up here, we, would move. I didn’t want to live one more day without her.

I packed up all our offerings for the shared supper. Strawberry lemonade bars. Homemade honey cake with a clementine drizzle. A caprese salad with tomatoes from my garden. Everyone would bring something if they could and, if they didn’t for one reason or another, we would all share. Because that was what life was for. Sharing with the people you cared about.

Personally, I looked forward to Tucker’s lamb kabobs and Gillian’s elderflower lemonade. Some dishes stayed the same and some were surprises. Our celebrations were the best times of the year. Summer solstice was my second favorite. Fall equinox would always be at the top of my list.

“Is this okay?” Amber appeared at the top of the stairs, a pair of shoes in each hand while she bit her bottom lip. I couldn’t wait to touch those lips with my own. She had on an apricot-colored halter jumpsuit that had embroidered marigolds on it. It flattered her curvy figure, accentuating her waist as it cinched in. Her black and silver

hair was piled up on the top of her head and she wore the cutest earrings that looked like dried pieces of citrus.

The embodiment of summer solstice.

“You look fantastic,” I said and bounded up the stairs. I bent slightly to kiss her rosy cheek.

“Thank you, Juven. What about shoes? I couldn’t decide.”

Shaman waited at the bottom, though I was sure he would rather be up here as well. He was giving me some time with her, even a small moment. “No shoes, sweetheart. Not tonight. Tonight, we ground and get reconnected with the earth.”

“Oh. I have a lot to learn.” She sprinted back to her room and came back with no shoes.

“I can carry you to the truck if you like. We wouldn’t want you to step on anything.”

She touched my chest. “Such a flirt. I hope there’s dancing tonight. I’d very much like to dance with the both of you.”

“As if we’re letting you dance with anyone else. Come on. If we hurry, we can get a good spot under the oak tree.”

Amber didn’t let us carry her. Instead, she held some of the food and helped everyone set up the table with the offerings.

We set up a large picnic blanket and, though we wanted privacy with our mate, that would have to wait. Everyone in the community wanted to spend time with Amber as well. She asked questions and listened with bright, wide eyes as everyone explained

different facets of our home.

While talking to people, she leaned on Shaman or me or held our hands. Either she liked to touch us, or she knew that we shifters needed the connection of our mates, almost as much as our next breath.

Once the bonfires were lit and the toasts were made, some people gathered and began to play songs. Everyone in our community had their talents and we happened to have the best band in town, or the mountain.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“May I have the first dance?” Shaman asked, standing to help her up.

“I was wondering how long it would take you. Of course. I’d love to.”

I watched as they got up and turned an upbeat song into a slow dance. While they had their time together, I cleaned up some of our dinner mess and helped the others picking up. Some of the little ones had sparklers and were writing their names in the darkness.

This was life. Not working. Not worrying. Not fretting over nonsense. This was living. Spending time with the people you loved. No one in need. Sharing yourself and your blessings. Peace. Music. Celebration.

I couldn’t imagine giving this up, but I would if it meant a lifetime with my mate.

While I helped Gillian slice the pies, I felt Amber’s touch on my arm and turned to see her. She had a slight sheen along her forehead.

“You’ve been busy. Want to dance with me, Juven?” Damn, I did love it when she said my name.

“Absolutely.”

Hand in hand, we walked to near the bonfire where couples were swaying to the music. I pulled her in close, and we began to move as though we’d practiced for years.

“Are you having a good time?” I asked, stroking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“I am. This place is fantastic. What you all have built. It’s incredible. Like a utopia.”

“I’m so glad you like it, Amber. It’s important to us that you love it here. Makes it even better when you’re here.”

She nodded. “It’s so different from the city. And honestly, from being a human. It’s peaceful and there are no rigid rules. No expectations. Just freedom to be who you are.”

“That’s why we moved here. That and to keep ourselves hidden.”

We danced a few rounds in sweet silence until she wrapped her arms around my torso and squeezed, getting my attention. “So, how long is it going to take before you kiss me?”

“You read my mind.”

With my finger curled under her chin, I lifted it slightly and pressed my lips against hers—gently at first and then with more pressure. Moaning quietly, she licked at my bottom lip. I lifted her up and deepened the kiss, not caring if we had an audience. When I let her down, she started to retreat, but I kept my hands firm on her back. “Not yet, baby. We don’t want to make a scene.”

Her eyes got wide. “Oh. Oh. Glad to know I have that effect on you.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m a hot-blooded shifter, and you’re my mate. Beautiful. Kind. Loving. I can’t help myself.

“I hope you know that I really care about you and Shaman too.”

“We can feel it,” I answered, pressing her hand to my chest. “Our animals can too.”

I noticed everyone around us was packing up and gathering their young. The bonfire was only embers and the moon was at the peak of the sky. “It looks like everyone is going home.”

“It’s getting late. Let’s follow their lead.”

We brought Amber home and at the top of the stairs, we all paused. I didn’t want to sleep alone, especially when our mate was under our roof, but she wasn’t ready. We were taking all of this at her pace. She would let us know when she wanted to mate, just like she found me when she wanted to dance.

“Good night, mate,” Shaman whispered and was the first to walk away.

“Good night, Shaman. Juven.”

Still, she hesitated, but I moved first to go to my room. Hardest thing I’d ever done.

Chapter Eighteen

Amber

Next morning, I left bright and early because I had to go to work. But when I came downstairs, prepared to thank them and leave, I found the table set for breakfast, Juven sitting there with a cup of coffee, and Shaman standing at the stove scrambling eggs.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“Hi.” I felt shy having slept in their home, even if I hadn’t slept with them at all. “Smells great in here.”

“Oh, that’s the cinnamon rolls,” Shaman said, setting down his spatula on the counter. “They should be just about done.”

“Let me get them for you.” Juven hopped up and grabbed a pair of oven mitts. “It’s the least I can do.”

“And the least is the most he does in the kitchen,” intoned Shaman.

The two of them went about finishing breakfast, mostly Shaman but Juven did help him. They poured me a mug of coffee and told me to stay at the table and keep them company while they cooked.

I settled back with my mug and watched as the two of them teased and joked, such a cheerful picture in the morning, and something I could easily imagine enjoying every day. “I feel like I should be helping somehow.”

“No way.” Juven topped off my cup. “We’re here to spoil you and make you miss us every minute we’re apart.”

“That’s not fair, being so wonderful all the time. How am I supposed to consider whether I am ready to mate with you both if you do nothing but make me happy?”

Shaman’s arched brow answered that question. He brought over a plate of cinnamon rolls and drizzled frosting over the warm buns. The scent made my mouth water

almost as much as the sight of the two of them without shirts on. Another sneaky move. They were irresistible. So, why was I trying so hard to resist them? Sometimes I made no sense to myself.

Sitting with them at the table, we talked about the solstice party, and they filled me in on who various people were at the event. Also, what they were. Quite a variety of shifters there.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to look at someone and know if they are a big cat, a wolf, or a bear?”

“Sure, you will.” Juven patted my hand. “It just takes experience. Until then, we’ll be glad to help you figure it out if you want. Now, more eggs?”

I was definitely going to be late for work, but I didn’t really care.

I returned to my boring life because what choice did I have? After spending time seeing what Juven and Shaman’s life was like, I’d remembered why I answered their message to start with. I’d known how boring mine was. Not a secret to anyone. And I thought I knew why I felt the way I did.

Juven and Shaman had shown me how they lived, and I was completely confused. They did everything for nothing. Or maybe that wasn’t it at all. Their friends did give them things in thanks, but the main reason they did it was out of a sense of community. They didn’t take money because they had enough put away that they didn’t need to. I wondered how many shifters lived in a similar way, but it wasn’t a question I could ask without being rude. Or maybe not one I even needed the answer to.

I didn’t see them the rest of the week. At work, I spent long hours researching things, something I used to love, but that suddenly felt lonely. Or maybe I felt lonely. Since

I'd left their home, there was no sparkle on anything I did. We did speak on the phone, but I knew there wasn't much more time for Shaman before his birthday, and it was unfair of me to make him wait while I was undecided.

Book club night came, and I almost didn't go. For one thing, I hadn't read the book, and for another, I wasn't sure what kind of company I'd be, but I couldn't stand being alone one more night, so I pulled it together and headed on over after work.

Everyone was all atwitter about the new book, but when I came in, they all turned to stare at me. I knew what they wanted to know, but I wasn't prepared to talk about it. It was too raw, and I didn't know what I was going to do, so I told them about the first unicorn, and they all laughed at his lack of real sparkle.

Then they returned to talking about the book. The hero was a real alpha protector, my favorite kind of hero. The heroine was human and in a bad spot. I honestly wasn't sure what her tragedy was because my mind had begun to move in a different direction. Unlike the girl in the story, I had not been in the middle of tragedy when my heroes showed up, unless you considered having no real joy in life a tragedy.

Every time I saw them, I was a different person. I wore my bright fun new clothes and laughed and ate good food and was learning what it meant to be part of a real community. And all of that was just side notes to the real thing. I was living my own real-life romance and I was taking a chance of losing them because I couldn't decide?

Beauty, happiness, fun, community, and two wonderful, kind guys who liked me for me. What the heck was wrong with me?

I made my decision right then.

It was time to live.

Chapter Nineteen

Shaman

Juven was back to being a brooding unicorn. His furrowed brow. His downturned mouth. The way his shoulders slumped as he walked. He was acting as though Amber had rejected us. She hadn't. She just hadn't given us much hope that she was ready to be in our lives.

Not the same thing in my book, but my best friend was slouching and being grumpy anyway.

"I think we need to spruce up the guest room. If she comes here to stay, we want it to be the best it can be for her."

"Be practical, Shaman," he said across the island from me. "She left here. After all day of having a great time and kissing us and dancing. She said she loved this place and our community and to what end? She left. Packed her shit up and walked out the door like this was some Airbnb she stayed at on vacation."

"That's not true and you know it," I argued.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

He shrugged one shoulder. “Fine. I need something to occupy my mind anyway. What do you want to do first? Do we need to make a trip into town?”

“No. I don’t think so. How about we go over to Gillian’s shop. She has some beautiful quilts on display. There might be one big enough to pass as a comforter. And the rest just needs to be cleaned. Maybe stop at Tucker’s mate’s shop and pick up some of her handmade soaps and lotions? Have some things in the bathroom? We want her to feel at home here.”

“Let’s go, then.”

We spent the day going from shop to shop, procuring things that we thought Amber might like. Soaps. Lotions. Some foot cream. Salts for the bath. Gillian had a new quilt she’d just finished. It boasted every color imaginable and would look perfect in Amber’s room. Amber dressed in such pretty, bright colors, she would love it.

Amber’s room. The thought sobered me. We were planning and plotting for our mate, but Juven was right. There was a chance she would never come back. Call us up. Burst our bubble. End this edge of fantasy we’d been leaning on.

She could end our lives and our line and shatter our hearts with one sentence.

Then again, our fate wasn’t her responsibility. She needed to look out for herself first. Her happiness would be the only consolation if we were rejected. I could take the pain if only she went on to live a happy life.

We went into her room to prepare for our mate’s return, if that ever happened. The air

was filled with her scent and even Juven's demeanor softened around it. We washed and changed her sheets. Put the quilt on the bed, taking time to fluff the pillows and make it nice.

"You have no doubts?" Juven asked as he turned off the main light and flicked on the lamps making the room glow with a cozy warmth.

"I don't. It feels like her decision is taking a lifetime, but that's because she's human and we are in a time crunch. She's not. This is her life. Once we are mated, it's like marriage for humans. It's a big decision, and I'd be more worried if she wasn't taking her time to think through it. What if she jumped into this and then realized she didn't want us? I can't imagine which one would be worse. She has to be sure."

Juven nodded. "I didn't think of it that way. Maybe her taking her time is a good thing."

I nodded. "I really think it is. We have to trust her."

My phone blared with a new ringtone at the same time Juven's did. My heart flip-flopped. There was only one person who called Juven and I at the same time.

Amber.

"Hello?" we both said at the same time.

"Hi. Are you both okay?" she asked.

We answered that we were, even though my best friend most certainly was not.

"That's good. I was wondering if it would be okay if I came up tonight. There's something I need to talk to you both about."

My voice froze in my throat. Juven answered for us. She had news. News that could make or break us. “Amber, you are always welcome in this home. You don’t have to ask if you can come.”

“Okay. I’m leaving in about five minutes. Can I stop and get you anything? I’m in the city and close to a market.”

Finally my throat began to work again, though my breaths were shallow. “We have everything here, mate. Bring yourself. That’s all we need. Be safe, please.”

“I will. See you soon.”

Juven and I hung up, and I collapsed into the chair near the window. “She’s coming. I can’t believe she’s coming. What if she’s on her way to reject us?”

“Listen to your unicorn,” I replied, giving and taking the advice at the same time. “What does he say?”

Juven closed his eyes, and a slow smile formed. “He says she’s ours. She loves us as much as we love her. She’s on her way to tell us that.” He opened his eyes and nodded. “Until she gets here, I don’t have it in me to argue. How about we go get some dinner ready for our mate?”

“Now we’re talking. I know exactly the meal she’d love.”

Chapter Twenty

Juven

After our bellies were full of arguably the best breakfast for dinner Shaman had ever made, we sat back and talked. The conversation flowed. The laughter filled our home.

Our mate was right in front of us, and yet she felt miles away.

There was a space between us only she could push through.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“You said you wanted to come here and tell us something,” I said, not able to contain my interest any longer. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be abrupt, but I can’t hold it in. If you have something to say to us, a word that would determine our future, please, Amber. End our worries.”

Amber’s chin quivered. Shaman sucked in a breath. This was it. She came here to reject us, to break our hearts, and somehow I knew it. I should’ve never consented to Shaman getting on that app.

We would not only miss out on the fulfilling life filled with love and companionship and deep friendship that came with a fated mate, but we would be alone until we died. Because if I couldn’t have Amber, I would have no other.

There would be no chosen mate for me. Maybe for Shaman, but never for me. I was the last to believe all of this was possible but, once I did, I was a goner.

“Say it, please.” Shaman wasn’t a beggar, but there was no pride with a mate.

“I came here tonight to tell you both that I’ve decided...about us.”

“And?” I pressed.

“And I want to be your mate.”

I shot to a stand. My heart stammered in my chest. My breath caught. Throbbing between my temples ramped up. Didshe say what I thought she said? Had I heard right? “What did you say?”

She let out a laugh. “I said I want... No, I think I need to be your mate. Both of you. And it has nothing to do with how old you are or a timeline. There’s a rush in my heart, but it has nothing to do with your line of unicorns.”

Gripping the chair, I looked at my best friend. He’d gone pale, but a bright smile lit up his face. “You want us? As your mates? Both of us.”

Amber’s grin faded. “Yes. That is...unless you changed your mind. Juven doesn’t seem happy.”

Shaman nailed me with a deadly stare. “Are you not happy? Our mate is telling us she wants to be ours and you’re not happy?”

I coughed on his lie. He didn’t know what he was talking about. “I’m stunned. Shocked. I can’t feel my fingers.”

Amber snorted and got up from her chair. Walking over with sway in her hips, she took my hands in hers and placed them on her chest, right above her breasts. “How are they now? Can you feel my heart beating, mate?”

“Mate?” I asked, choking on the word. We called her that because there wasn’t a doubt that she was our fated, but the word coming from her? Hearing that ended me.

“Yes. Is it okay if I call you mate as well? You are mine, right? Both of you?”

Her skin burned under my fingers and I burned everywhere else.

“We have belonged to you since the moment we met, Amber.” Shaman spoke for me.

“That’s what I came here tonight to tell you. That I’d decided. I want to be yours. And I presumed some things as well.”

Shaman came over and stood behind Amber. The air around us crackled with passion and anticipation. The love and need so thick in the air, I could taste it. Shaman put his hands on her waist and squeezed. “What did you presume, love?”

Amber tilted her head back to lean on Shaman’s shoulder. “I brought a bag. Not just for one night but for a few. I took some days off.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked, moving my hands up to frame her face.

“Because I don’t plan on leaving the bed or this house for that long.”

Shaman sucked in a breath. “Just because you are our mate doesn’t mean we have to...it doesn’t mean we have to mate tonight.”

She turned to face him and leaned against my front. “But what if I want to. What if I’ve been thinking about it all day and night? What if I dreamed about it, couldn’t imagine myself sleeping tonight unless it was in your arms? What if I’m desperate for your hands all over me?”

Shaman looked up at me. “We can’t have our mate desperate for anything, can we?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then take me to the bedroom. Doesn’t matter which one.”

“That we can do.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

Instead of walking, I scooped her up in my arms and rushed upstairs, Shaman on my heels.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked once more, still in a bit of a stupor.

“I’m aching for both of you, Juven. Please, don’t make me beg.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Amber

I didn’t know whose room Juven carried me to, nor did I care. My body was on fire, aching with need for them. Thousands of books I’d read where shifter females said things like that, but until flames licked my body, until these two were actually licking my body...I hadn’t really believed it was possible.

At some point, my clothing had disappeared like magic. Maybe it was something unicorns could do. “Good trick,” I murmured, shivering as their hands and mouths explored my body. All of it.

Juven lifted his head. “Trick?”

“Getting me naked without noticing,” I said, pulling him back down to my breasts where he’d been sucking gently while running his nails down my side and back up, awakening cells I had no idea were erogenous zones.

He nipped at my nipple, chuckling, which took me as close to orgasm as I’d ever

been without going over.

“You took it all off yourself,” Shaman chided, between kisses on my lips, cheeks, nose, forehead. “We could barely control you, wild thing.”

“Mmm, really?” How could I not remember if I did.

“You’ll never know.” He took my earlobe between his teeth and tugged. “But does it matter?”

No, it did not matter in the least. What did, was that they were also naked, and while Juven moved to the foot of the bed and tugged me down. He knelt and lifted my legs over his shoulders. The tip of his tongue teased my pussy, little licks and flicks before he buried his face and proceeded to show me a real unicorn trick. His fingers pumped inside me, one, two, maybe three, scissoring outward, preparing me for him. I hadn’t enough experience to recognize that the cock he wielded as well as Juven’s that, as he straddled my shoulders, brushed my lips, were larger than most. And my “enough” experience was barely that.

I opened my mouth wide, letting Juven plumb the depths, the tip grazing the back of my throat. Wrapping my arms around his hips, I held on for a ride controlled by two unicorns who had told me they’d never shared a female before but who were certainly good at it.

Shaman focused his attentions on my clit, licking, sucking and finally closing his teeth on it, just enough for a faint sting to join the pleasure of my rising orgasm. His fingers left my pussy and glided to my back hole, where no man had gone before. I whimpered around Juven’s cock as Shaman teased the ring of muscles with fingertips plenty wet from the juices he’d coaxed from my willing body.

Lifting his head, he stopped me just short of reaching the peak. His busy fingers

delved deeper. “Do you like that, mate? That’s good.” Then he returned to my clit and with one strong suck sent me tumbling into darkness sparked with all the colors of their unicorns’ blackness. Shadows. Shadow unicorns.

Before I could catch my breath, Juven pulled out of my mouth and flopped on his back, Shaman lifting me to straddle his friend’s hips. All the stretching had helped, and the two guided me down until Juven filled me.

“Relax, mate,” Shaman said, resting a hand on my back and easing me down to lie on top of Juven. “It might hurt at first.”

“What do you mean, I—” My words were cut off when Juven laced his fingers through my hair and kissed me. It was all so much, but somehow not too much.

Until I felt the coolness that had to be lube working my other hole even wider, fingers driving in and out, and I didn’t hate it. No...maybe one day I’d even let them try to...

Oh no. That day was today. Shaman’s cock prodded the slippery muscle and while I tried to decide whether to protest, while Juven kissed me and Shaman encouraged me to relax and push down, I found myself impaled on two unicorn horns, well, cocks, but they were big enough to be horns. And nearly hard enough.

When both were balls deep, they paused, giving me a chance to adjust. I was still unsure, and I started to tell them no, that this wasn’t what I wanted, but then they began to move and my second orgasm rolled over me, leaving me weak and clinging to Juven while they moved in tandem. In and out, slow then faster, stretching me to the point I didn’t think I’d survive it, but it felt so good.

The next climax started before the last one finished, and I lost count, just held on, hoping to retain some sanity and that this wasn’t the best erotic dream ever. Then, minutes or hours later, both of them paused, then drove once more, and they came at

the same time, sending me into that shadow unicorn darkness, black and all the colors in the world exploding around me. The next pain was sharp and on both sides of my throat.

Marking me, I thought and then the sparks went away, leaving only darkness. If I was dying, what a way to go.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Shaman

Amber and Juven were still asleep upstairs. My unicorn woke me at sunrise with a mission. We'd had quite a night and it was my job to make sure we were all nourished—for more.

Since we'd had a filling dinner of breakfast foods, I decided to go with something lighter for breakfast. A simple sweet potato pecan loaf and pineapple, coconut milk smoothies. Easy but perfect for replenishing energy.

I waited until I heard movement upstairs before starting the blender. It was possible my best friend was enjoying our mate by himself and, while there wasn't a streak of jealousy inside me, I didn't want to hear the details. The shower upstairs turned on and, soon, I heard my mate's footsteps.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“Good morning,” she said as she came in, dressed in nothing more than one of my shirts. Her hair was wet from the shower.

“Good morning, mate,” I said and curved my hand over her shoulder where my mark lay under the cotton.

“I woke up and wondered where you were. Juven was snoring.”

“He does that sometimes. Are you hungry?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I am. What did you make for me? You’ll have to teach me how to cook some things you like. I don’t know how to make much.”

“We have time to learn,” I said, kissing her plump lips.

“Yes, we do. I have stuff to do. End my lease. Move my things in.”

“Don’t worry. You have two mates to help you with anything you might need.”

“Thank you.”

We ate breakfast together on the back porch in the sunlight. Once she was full, she sat on my lap and kissed me like she had the night before. I would have to learn the meaning of all her different kisses. What a great thing to study.

“How do you feel about making love outside?” she asked, nibbling on my neck.

“I feel that’s something we need to explore.”

“Me too.”

“Aren’t you sore?” I asked, bypassing the shirt and grasping her hips as she turned to straddle me.

“Deliciously so, but I can’t help myself.”

How could I deny my mate what she needed?

We made love right there on the back porch, the trees and mountains our only witnesses. She lay on my bare chest afterward, breaths heaving as she came down from the climax—both of them.

“Let’s go wake up my other mate. I’m sure there are things to do around here.”

I chuckled. “There are plenty of things to do, but we don’t have to work today. We can relax and just be with each other.”

“But I’m here now. I want to work in the greenhouse and cook and help people like you do. If I’m going to live here, I want to jump in.”

“Then let’s go wake up those lazy bones of his. We’ll do whatever you want today.”

“Thank you, Shaman. I’m so lucky we met. Never thought an app would lead me to such happiness.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amber

Their home was fully furnished and most of my stuff was the neutrals of my old life, so I donated them, packing up only my grandmother's dressing table and all my clothes and most of my kitchen items. Which didn't amount to much. But Shaman was teaching me to cook, and it turned out I liked it.

Only a half hour away, I supposed I could have stayed at my job, but then Juven asked me straight out if I wanted to. He was concerned about the drive in the winter when there would be snow at their elevation, but he said if it was something I wanted to do, they'd drive me when the weather was bad.

I started to tell him that of course I wanted to keep working at the library. Honestly, I liked it very much but when I considered how it tied me down, I realized that it was time to make a full change. So, I turned in my two weeks' notice, and my boss was appalled. I hadn't even known she was aware of me in particular. I worked with my clients and didn't raise any kind of fuss, blending right into the walls.

"Amber, you can't leave."

I blinked at her. "I can leave. In fact, I am going to. I'm moving."

"How much of your work do you do with the actual books?" she asked. "Versus the internet?"

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:35 am

“Why are you asking?” Information for my replacement maybe?

“Because you do the work of three other employees, and people constantly request you. So, how much in the stacks?”

“Over the past few years, it’s really been shifting. I do almost everything online, now. I hope that was all right.”

Miss Pierce stood from behind her desk and came to sit next to me. “You are our most valuable researcher, and if you do most of your work online, would you consider working remotely?”

I was shocked. “Is that allowed?”

“It never has been before, but things are changing. If I can arrange it, would you consider staying on and working from home?”

I thought about it for a moment. “How about part-time until we see how it all works out,” I said.

“Yes.” Miss Pierce nodded. “As an experiment, and then maybe we’ll do more.”

We were never going to do more. I had other things to do, but it was a great start. “Thank you, Miss Pierce.” I reached for her hand and shook it. “It’s good to know my work is valued here. I’m not going to be too far away, so I can come in if I really need to every now and then. I’m moving to the mountains.”

“What prompted the change?” she asked. “If you don’t mind telling me?”

“I’m in love, and we’re going to live together,” I told her. “Changing my whole life.”

My mates were waiting outside when I got off work, and we went and picked up the last of my things and headed off to the mountains and our new home. While I was at work, they’d cleaned the apartment for me, so I’d get my whole deposit back. Not that I was messy, but things always looked dusty with the furniture gone.

When I locked the door behind me for the last time and left the key in the mailbox, I thought I’d feel sad or something, but all I felt was happiness.

And anticipation. We not only were going to start a new life; we wanted to have a baby right away. We were going to be a family.

Moving to their home and they want to have a baby right away.

Epilogue

Shaman

I was the last of my line. There would be no more after me. Or so I’d grown up fearing. But my mate, our beautiful mate, had fixed that. I sat on the porch, watching our triplets playing in the yard, wearing only diapers as they gamboled on the meadow grasses we’d planted for nature and their little feet. Not even two years old, they were already showing signs of wanting to shift, playing together more like baby unicorns than children.

My parents would have been so happy to see them. It was hard to tell whose DNA created which, and I never intended to find out. Why would I? Juven and I had been friends for a long time, and now we were mated to the same woman. A human who had taken a life we liked and made it one we loved. Halfway through her pregnancy,

she decided she'd done enough librarian work for a while and quit but some of the clients she'd worked with followed her online, and she did some projects for her favorite people. Not commercial work anymore, mostly students, just enough to "keep her hand in," as she said.

But these three were a handful, and once the new babies were born, we'd all be too busy for much else beyond helping out friends from time to time. Twins, this time, the healer said, after tsking at how quickly we were having more babies. We'd take a break after this, we promised, but Amber had never been more beautiful than she was today, sitting on a lounge chair, sipping a green smoothie while our children frolicked around her. She wore her hair up in a haphazard bun, her colorful maternity dress bringing out the color in her cheeks. When she moved in, she lost her makeup kit, and we'd told her not to bother buying more. We loved her as she was, and all that fuss was for women with less confidence than our mate.

Fate had found us the perfect female to be the matriarch of our family. Years from now, we'd have a yard filled with children and grandchildren. But for now, we had three little guys who needed to have lunch, and as the family cook, that was my responsibility. I went into the kitchen and got out some eggs and cheese for omelets. Sippy cups, divided plates so the strawberries and melon bits wouldn't get into the eggs. Feeding this family was the best job ever.

Amber sailed into the kitchen, followed by the triplets and Juven. They got the boys into their highchairs and ready for lunch while I finished cooking. Overcome by a burst of love, I kissed the babies and their mom then gave my friend a big hug.

They all laughed and returned my affection, not pausing in their day's activities for such emotions, used to living in the happy world we had created for our family.

Our little slice of heaven in the mountains.