



Once Upon a Dance Club Wish (City Wishes & Enchanted Dreams #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The card says 'Make A Wish.'

After several failed relationships, Nelson Connor yearns for a long-term boyfriend who will one day become his husband. Sure he won't find anything more than a one-night stand at the dance club his friend dragged him to, Nelson makes his wish as he leaves. But he doesn't expect to step out of the club into a meadow far from the city. And he definitely doesn't expect to meet a smexy man who claims to be a turtle shifter wanting to take him into the "Enchanted Forest" to meet his fated mate.

It all seems so unreal, but with no place of his own and no job due to corporate downsizing, Nelson doesn't have anything promising to go back to. He decides to follow the turtle shifter into the forest.

Did Nelson finally find the happy ending he's looking for? Or will he try to escape back to his world when he learns the conditions of staying in the Enchanted Forest?

Total Pages (Source): 21

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:53 pm

Nelson

Friday night. Instead of going out with my boyfriend or agreeing to work late, I sat at home. Because I didn't have a boyfriend. Or a job for that matter. Not anymore.

"Let's go to Hung tonight." Jack, my ex from two relationships ago, tossed a pillow at me. "I'm tired of you wallowing in self-pity. You're bringing me down with your deep, dark mood, and I might just have to kick you out if you don't get over yourself."

He'd been nice enough to let me move into his spare room when I found out my last ex had an open relationship with me and several others without letting me know. Jack and I remained friends after our breakup, but we couldn't live together. That's why we ended our relationship in the first place. I hadn't planned to stay with him for more than a month, but I didn't expect to be suddenly unemployed. Corporate downsizing cut all special programming and left our local news channel with one daily news hour, getting rid of over one hundred employees, including myself.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Fine. Let's go. And by some miracle, maybe I'll meet a man who will sweep me off my feet and want to spend the rest of his life with me."

Jack gave me a tight-lipped smile as he raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe you can find a guy to fuck this pity party out of you so you can start looking for a new job and a new place to live on Monday."

I doubted I would find a guy at Hung who could fuck me that well, but going would give Jack a chance to hook up with someone new, thus making him more tolerant of

me. I'd already been searching for a new apartment, but it was hard to find one in my price range without needing a roommate. And the loss of my job came as a sudden lurch to that task. I hadn't had time to fully process the breakup and loss of my home before the next huge life change. I thought that was the one secure part of my life I didn't need to worry about.

After changing into a pair of white skinny jeans that showed off my ankles, and a baby-blue button-down short-sleeved shirt—not typical dance club attire, but it was the only effort I was willing to put into the evening—I met Jack at the door. He'd already called our ride, and it wasn't long before we were on our way to the biggest gay dance club in our city.

Once we arrived, the line to get in was already halfway down the block. The other businesses on that side of the street had closed for the evening, except the coffee shop down on the adjacent corner. Maybe I should have gone there instead. A cute barista was better than a dance-club-fuck boy any night or day. But I'd promised Jack.

In line, we greeted some of the usual patrons we saw whenever we went to Hung. A man in a hooded robe with a corded belt around his waist came strolling down the line, catching my attention. He looked like some kind of religious radical who would tell us we were all going to hell for being gay. I looped my arm through Jack's and tried to move us closer to the wall to avoid the attention of this guy. But when he reached us, he stopped and stared at me, his wrinkled face prevalent behind his bushy white beard.

With his hands behind his back, he tilted his head then smiled. "You look like you could use a change."

I nearly laughed in his face. I'd had plenty of changes in my life recently, and I was sure there were plenty more to come. I didn't need any help in that department.

When he reached into his cloak, I stepped back, worried what he might pull out. I still couldn't eliminate the chance of him being some extremist who wanted to educate me on how to save my soul. But instead of a weapon, he withdrew a business card.

“When you're ready.” He handed the card to me.

With shaking hands, I took it from him, though I didn't bother looking at it before shoving it in my pocket with my phone.

Jack scoffed. “He may not have been as rude as they usually are, but that doesn't mean you have to keep his card. It probably has a number for a conversion therapy place.”

It would have been nice if the old man had offered me a job, but I was simply thankful he hadn't harassed me or anyone else in line.

When I glanced behind me to see if he was giving out cards to others in the queue, I couldn't spot him. He'd disappeared.

“Where'd he go?” I asked Jack.

“I don't know.” He rested his hands on my shoulders and pushed me forward. “But the line is finally moving. Let's hope we get inside before it stops again.”

Jack abandoned me only minutes after we'd gotten inside. He'd already zeroed in on the bear—a big, burly, hairy guy—whom he wanted to take home for the night. Thank goodness for noise canceling headphones. I went to the bar to wait for what felt like forever just to get a drink. Once I had my gin and tonic, I left the crowd to locate a spot on the edge of the dance floor with a good vantage point.

Prior to my last relationship, I would have easily found someone in the club who attracted my attention, but with changed priorities, no one I saw held any appeal. I no longer desired one-night stands but craved a longer, lasting relationship. Wasn't even interested in flirting and fooling around unless it would lead to a deeper connection.

Questioning why I'd agreed to go to the dance club, I considered leaving. I intended to finish my drink then head back to the apartment to get some sleep before Jack arrived home with his newest daddy.

As I took the last sip, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Had one of the servers been watching me that closely? When I turned to hand him my empty glass, I realized my mistake. The young man—probably barely legal enough to get into the club—stared at me as if he were a lion eyeing a baby antelope separated from its mother. He was cute, with dyed-blond wavy hair and tanned skin. His tight blue jeans and black mesh shirt revealed he worked hard to maintain his figure. Definitely my type when I was closer to his age.

“Can I get you another drink?” He leaned into me to speak, and when he pulled away, his eyes sparkled and he smiled, revealing adorable dimples. “Or maybe you'd like to dance?”

No more drinks, especially from someone who appealed to my inner, carefree, immature self. Dancing with him could be fun and it wouldn't be a waste of my night.

“Let's dance.” I set my glass down on the table at the edge of the dance floor then headed toward the mass of swaying and grinding bodies.

As we approached the crowd, my younger admirer placed his hand on the small of my back before beginning to bop to the beat. He was a great dancer. Not sure what he saw in me though. He could have any number of guys in the club, including a multitude closer to his age. But he was enjoyable, so the question didn't linger too

long.

After a few songs, I was ready for a break. If the guy wanted to dance with someone else, I would give him the opportunity. Maybe he could find someone he had a chance of convincing to take him home.

“Thank you.” I rested my palm on his bicep and gave him a light squeeze. “That was fun.”

“Where are you going?” He grabbed my wrist and yanked me into his chest. “You’re mine tonight. I already claimed you.”

Claimed? My body tensed as my heart raced. Who did he think he was, some het who listened to a few too many alpha male podcasts?

“Yeah, I’m not interested.” I tried to push off his chest, but his hold was too tight.

“That’s not what your body says.” He slid his hand between us, palming my cock.

“Hey, Nel, how’s it going?” Allen, one of my former coworkers, passed by with his boyfriend. Enough attention to get the pushy young punk to let go of me.

“Good.” I smiled briefly, more thankful for the interruption rather than the reminder I’d lost my job. “Just needed to get out after everything that happened this week.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Allen remained with us, dancing in place, as if he knew I needed his presence there.

Yet, I didn’t want to stop him from having a good time. “I... I need to use the bathroom.” Or find a way out of the place without the pushy dude following me.

The young punk clasped the back of my arm. "I'll go with you."

I shook him off, still glad for the audience so he didn't try anything else. "No, you go buy me a drink for when I return." Which would never happen.

Before he could object, I hurried away, heading in the direction of the bathroom then slipping through the shadows of the club until I reached one of the emergency exits.

"You okay?" the bouncer asked from nearby.

"Just looking for a quick exit." Taking a hasty glance behind me, I tried to check if I'd been followed.

"You got a ride?" The bouncer stood behind me, hiding me simply with his size. "Or is anyone aware you're leaving?"

"Thank you for your help." I pulled my phone out of my pocket. "I'll send my roommate a text and let him know I'm heading home."

The bouncer nodded.

After texting Jack, I stepped toward the door, but the bouncer stopped me. "Here. You dropped this."

He handed me the business card the hooded man had given me while we were in line. I had not bothered to look at it until that moment. On one side, it read: Make a wish . On the other side, the text was too small for me to read without my glasses.

Make a wish?

What I really wanted was a stable job and relationship, to no longer have to move

every time one coupling ended or another began. I took a deep breath as I stepped out into the cooler night air. “I wish I could find a man who would love me and whom I would love for the rest of my life.”

Suddenly, a wave of vertigo hit me, as if I’d been knocked off-balance by an invisible force. The door slammed shut behind me, quickly blocking the loud music from inside. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing my senses to right themselves again. I needed to be fully aware of my surroundings out in the alley. I’d only had one drink. Yet, when I opened my eyes, the sight before me left me even more confused.

Instead of escaping into the alley behind Hung, I’d somehow ended up at the edge of a forest. Behind me, the emergency exit in the large brick building had disappeared, giving way to a meadow of tall grasses that swayed in the breeze. Plus, it was daytime. It should be dark. The moon should be out instead of the sun.

Shit, had that punk slipped me something, leaving me in a delusional state?

A couple steps into the forest, I sat on a fallen log. Probably not the best decision with white pants on, but none of it was real anyway.

With my eyes closed, I massaged my temples and took a few deep breaths. That’s when I noticed a difference in the air. In an alley, I expected the combined scents of exhaust, sewage, and a sampling of many food sources. Yet, wherever I’d ended up smelled of moist earth and vegetation with slight floral notes blown in from the meadow.

I can’t really have ended up here, right?

Then, blurry and glowing like a mirage, I spotted a figure walking toward me. A man, naked in all his glory. With his thick thighs, warm-brown skin, and a lightly haired wide chest, he was quite a sight to behold. Yes, definitely a dream.

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Holden

I liked living in my turtle form rather than my human one. With my hard shell and soft underside—unlike the delicate skin of my other profile—I didn't worry about hurting myself in the Enchanted Forest. Plus, I always had my house with me, painted in its own distinct pattern. I was faster in the water than on land, but I never had any need to be in a hurry. Yet, there was something about lying on a log in the sun in my human form, soaking in the bright star's rays that I couldn't experience as a turtle.

As the security officer of the area, I never had much to do. I had to break up the occasional fight between shifters or other magical creatures, but everyone got along for the most part. We rarely had anyone arrive from the outer-world—only our wizard friend, Ahmed Proudfoot, who only stopped by here and there. He preferred to live among the full humans for some reason I would never understand.

A sudden pop and puff of smoke startled me from my thoughts. In fear, I quickly shifted to my turtle form, noticing a hooded figure blocking the sun before I tumbled off the log and tucked myself deep into my shell. Yes, I was a security officer, but beings didn't just appear out of thin air.

Miffs! Ahmed did. And I'd made myself look foolish in front of him.

Wind whooshed past the holes in my shell as I was lifted into the air. Then something knocked on my shell.

“Holden, please come out. I need to talk to you.”

When my feet touched the bumpy and rough surface of the log once again, I shifted back to my human form. “Sorry.” I should have known better, but Ahmed usually only came to see members of the forest council. Never me. Miffs, and I stood naked before him. I sat on the log, crossed my legs, and covered my genitals. Always wearing a dark cloak and other outer-world clothing, he was the only being I’d met who made me conscientious of my nudity. “Um, what are you doing here? I mean, how can I help you?”

He’d assigned me the position of security officer, but I was sure my reaction had proven why I no longer deserved the title. I would be replaced then reassigned to compost duty.

Ahmed chuckled at me. “I have come bearing wonderful news.” After fanning out a handful of something that looked like it came from the outer-world, he passed one to me. “I’ve been handing out these enchanted cards to those in the outer-world I think would make great mates for all of you in this world. Men who seemed more likely to thrive in the Enchanted Forest and accept the changes that would happen to them. And I wanted to let you know before they start arriving.” He glanced around the meadow and along the perimeter of the forest. “Possibly any moment now.”

“Okay.” I nodded, ready to perform my duties instead of hiding in my shell. Though, along with the sudden alertness, a strange weight settled into my heart. “I will take them to Banir as they arrive.” Of course, the Head and other forest council members would be given mates first. It was their right. And I would have to watch as they started their families. Something I never realized I’d wanted until it suddenly became possible. Though, if those brought to the Enchanted Forest by Ahmed’s magical cards proved anything like the possible mates he’d procured with his last scheme, we’d be lucky if even one of them chose to stay in our world. Walter, along with several others, had arrived when I was only a hatchling, but he’d been the only one who remained with us. The rest had returned to their own world.

Ahmed took hold of my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you, my friend.” He began to walk into the forest then paused before looking back at me. “And be sure not to shift into your turtle form when they arrive. Your shell may be pretty, but it’s your human form that will land you a mate. And don’t let them drink from the pond! You have wells for that.”

A mate for me? I didn’t have time to ask Ahmed if that’s what he meant. He disappeared in a puff of smoke as quickly as he’d arrived.

Within moments, another pop sounded nearby. I expected to see Ahmed again. Maybe he decided to demote me after all. But, instead of the wizard, I spotted a strange being in the meadow. A human. One of the possible mates had already arrived. I walked over to him, not sure whether to consider him dangerous. He might be angry he’d been transported to our world. Or terrified by his new surroundings. Either way, I expected him to lash out at me. I would in his circumstance. Though maybe, before I greeted him, I should put on some clothes first. Ahmed told me he wore clothes to fit in among outer-worlders, and it would be best if I did, too, when greeting them.

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Nelson

With a yawn, I stretched out on the bed. I didn't feel the weight of any blankets on me, probably having kicked them off again. Yet, where I usually knocked my knuckles against the headboard, I touched only empty space. No, not quite. There was something there, but it brushed against my hand like grass. Tall, dry grass.

I jolted upright and tried to take in my surroundings through my half-open eyelids. I wasn't used to being alert as soon as I woke up. But then again, I usually didn't wake up in...what was this? A meadow?

Wait! I'd dreamed I was in a meadow like this one, and there'd been a naked man. A very hot naked man.

I glanced around. Was I dreaming again? That little punk at the club must have slipped something into my drink for me to be so out of it. Because I saw a beautiful meadow filled with white, yellow, pink, and purple flowers. Behind me stood a majestic forest filled with lush maples and poplars, along with full pines and spruces. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the tinkling of running water. How did I end up in such a place?

I checked my body to ensure someone hadn't harvested my organs then dumped me far away from the city. No, everything felt intact. And I didn't feel groggy like I had been drugged. Just confused. I had no idea how I'd arrived there.

So, if I was in the same meadow, where was the naked guy?

I stood and wiped off my pants. Yep, white was a bad idea. They were ruined forever.

When I looked around, I couldn't see a single soul. Yet, I heard plenty of birds chirping.

I tried to make my way toward the sound of water, hoping it would lead me to some answers.

“Oh, you're awake.”

I leaped from my loafers, shocked by the sudden voice. I hadn't seen anyone before, and I was sure I wouldn't have missed a whole person. Yet, there on a log to my right, slightly hidden behind a bush, was the same, sexy man from my dream. Only he had clothes on. The bare minimum with a pair of cloth underwear tied with a string rather than using elastic to hold them up. Probably more eco-conscious, so that was a plus.

Had he brought me to this place? I ran my hands through my hair—likely a mess from sleeping on the ground—and tried to recall if he'd told me his name. My mind blanked. I couldn't remember a thing. I needed answers.

“Did you bring me here? Did we...have sex?” It had been a while since I'd been with anyone—no one since my ex—so I really wanted to remember something like that. Though I didn't feel like I had been fucked. Probably hadn't even been out of my clothes.

He sat up before standing, only slightly taller than myself, but he was rather muscular with adorable laugh lines in the corners of his golden eyes. Yes, I definitely would want to remember sleeping with him.

“No, we did not have sex. You are not for me.”

His words came like a punch to the gut. I didn't know him, but he'd rejected me already. Then worry quickly took over. If I wasn't for him, who was I for? Was I being trafficked? How did that even happen? And why in the middle of nowhere? I'd had one drink, left early, and ended up in the wilderness. "Where are we and how did I get here?"

"You are in the Enchanted Forest, and you made a wish that brought you here."

I would have laughed if terror hadn't clenched my gut. "I didn't wish my way to any enchanted forest. Who brought me here? And how?"

"Did you receive a card from a hooded man?"

I thought back to the previous night, of standing in line and the strange man who approached me. "Yes."

"And did you make a wish while holding that card?"

I gulped. The world didn't work like that. I couldn't travel somewhere simply by making a wish. Could I? "I wished for a man who would love me for the rest of my life."

"Then that's how you ended up here, in the Enchanted Forest." He gestured toward a path I hadn't seen earlier. "There are plenty of men here who will love you for the rest of your life. Shall I take you to them? Give you a tour? I can get you something to eat if you're hungry. Or some water."

I suddenly realized where I was. A commune. And the believers called it the Enchanted Forest. That made logical sense but still wasn't a situation I wanted to be in. I needed to ask more questions, find out more information so I could get out of there. Fast.

“Wait, wait, wait.” I had to figure this out before I was forced to meet the others in the commune. “Why is this place called the Enchanted Forest?”

A smirk played across the other man’s lips like he thought my panic was amusing. “There are magical creatures who live amongst these trees as well as many shifters.”

I didn’t know if he was placating me or if he was really high. “Shifters, huh?”

He nodded as if he truly believed they existed. “Have you ever met one?”

I didn’t know how to answer, not wanting to turn him into an angry addict. “Can’t say I ever have.”

He stuck out his hand for me to shake. “Well, you have now. I’m Holden, a turtle shifter.”

I shook his hand, not wanting to seem rude. “I’m Nelson.” Yikes, I probably should have given him a fake name. “You actually turn into a turtle?” Of all the animals to believe you turned into, a turtle would not have been high on my list.

“Yeah, do you want to see?” He untied his underwear before I had a chance to answer and let them fall to the ground, like being nude was the norm. Though maybe it was, in the forest.

I gulped, unable to say a word, too busy taking in the amazing figure of the guy in front of me. Holden. How did he believe he was a turtle? What a waste of such a gorgeous body.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Outer-worlders. Are you all the same?”

I had no idea what he meant, but suddenly a shimmery glow appeared around him.

Smoke rose off his skin before his entire body began to shrink and transform. The color of his skin changed first; a dark green with red, orange, and yellow lines up and down his arms and legs. Then his stomach hardened as he continued to shrink. A shell formed out of his back, almost like wings, but not really. At one point, he looked like a kid dressed in elaborate costume, like one of those martial arts turtles on television. His face changed last, his neck elongating while his nose and ears seemed to disappear. His eyes slid to the side. And with a light thud, he fell to the ground. As a turtle.

I pinched my arm. Hard. I needed to be dreaming. Because shifters didn't exist in the world I'd lived in all my life. And if I wasn't there, I was somewhere else completely. A commune was easier to wrap my head around than what Holden had told me and what I'd just witnessed.

My chest ached. I'd watched a man turn into a turtle. I gasped for air. I was in an enchanted forest. My knees weakened and I fell to the ground. Somehow, I had wished myself there.

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Holden

Miffs. Something was wrong with Nelson. I didn't know much about outer-worlders, but I knew I couldn't help him in my turtle form. I quickly shifted back and put on my clothing. The material was awkward and itchy, but I'd worn the thing they called underwear to make the newcomer more comfortable. Apparently, it wasn't enough.

I crouched down beside him. "What's wrong? How can I help you?" I didn't know whether to rub his back, make him lie down, or rush him to the healer.

"You're a shifter." He sucked in a heavy breath. "I just watched you change from a human into a turtle."

"Yes and no." I nodded, unsure what he was getting at. "I was born as a turtle, but the magic of this world allows me to take a humanlike form." He'd never met a shifter, so I thought a demonstration of what I could do would be an appropriate introduction. But maybe it was too much for him. Too soon. Ahmed hadn't left me specific instructions for when the outer-worlders arrived.

"But you still shifted forms." He hugged his knees to his chest and began to rock back and forth. "That should be impossible. This can't be real. I have to be in the middle of an elaborate dream, but I can't wake up."

"It's not a dream." I decided to rub his back, hoping that would at least calm him a little. I couldn't take him to Banir in such a state. The leader wouldn't be happy that I already upset the outer-worlder who could end up being his mate. "There are many shifters in the Enchanted Forest. I can introduce you to the others, too. Would you

like to go now?”

“No.” He shook his hand, palm toward me. “I need a minute. Or several. Maybe some water. Do you have any water around here?”

Water. I could do water. I stood up, ready to get some from the pond. Then I remembered what Ahmed had said. Switching directions, I headed to the well. I worried about leaving Nelson on his own, but he didn’t seem dangerous. And I hadn’t observed any weapons on him. Hopefully, he would be okay for the moment.

Making a mad dash for the well, I hadn’t realized until I arrived that I would need something to put the water in. Luckily, someone had left behind some containers tightly woven by Marcel, a mallard duck shifter. And I didn’t have time to search elsewhere for a clay cup.

A woven bowl probably wouldn’t hold all the water, but it would get some to Nelson if I hurried.

When I returned to the outer-worlder, he had some strange device in his hand and held it up in the air while pacing between the meadow and the forest. “There is no signal anywhere.”

Signal? What kind of signal was he looking for? I shrugged. I doubted he would find anything up in the sky. At least not until nightfall when the stars came out to help guide us.

I didn’t think I would ever understand what happened in the outer-world and was glad it wasn’t the other way around, where we had to leave the Enchanted Forest to find a mate.

“I...have some water.”

Nelson's body tensed as if I'd startled him.

"Sorry." I held the bowl of water out to him, the bottom wet, but most of the liquid had remained inside. "This is all I could get in a hurry, but there is more to eat and drink in the village."

"Thank you." He scooped some water into his hands to drink before splashing more onto his face. "I'm still finding all this hard to believe. It feels like a dream. I know I said that many times already, but it's the only way I can try to understand things I always believed weren't real or were impossible."

"I think I can understand that. Your world would be just as confusing to me." I rubbed my hand behind my neck, unsure how to get him moving so I could take him to the council. I did not believe force was appropriate or warranted in the situation. He was cute, so I didn't mind spending time with him, but I didn't want to get into trouble with the council for not bringing him to them right away.

His eyes grew wide, and his cheeks flushed as he let out a soft moan. My cock bobbed in response to the sound.

Okay, maybe cute wasn't the right word. He was alluring, and I was tempted to hide him from the council and keep him for myself. Nelson must have seen the shift in my clothing as his line of sight darted down my body before he gasped.

I quickly covered my erection. "Sorry. That was inappropriate. I must get you to council."

"And what if I don't want to go?" With his arms crossed, he pouted in a way that made my shaft even harder. Almost painful.

"Then I will be forced to put you over my shoulder and carry you to the village." I

had to get him there one way or another. Regardless of my body's attraction to him, he wasn't deemed to be my mate.

The corner of Nelson's lips turned up in a half smile. "Maybe that's what I want." He put his forearm to his forehead. "After all, I do feel weak."

I couldn't deny the outer-worlder what he wanted. And if it was the only way to get him moving, I had to carry him. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I heaved him over my shoulder before we started on our way. As we got closer to the village, he began to wiggle, so I held my palm to his backside, ready to give it a tap if needed. Yet, my touch settled him quickly enough.

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Nelson

I couldn't believe a hot, nearly naked man had me on his shoulder, and carried me through a forest with his hand on my ass. If this wasn't some kind of strange fantasy, it was pretty close to one. If only Holden would stop at the clearing ahead, have a blanket magically appear, and ravage me on top of it.

It was a disappointment every time he recited I wasn't meant for him. I wasn't sure if he kept reminding me or himself of that fact and it made no sense to me anyway. If I hadn't arrived in this place to meet him, why was he the first shifter I'd met? It wasn't like he seemed attached to anyone.

Though his shoulder dug into my stomach, I didn't ask to be let down. His touch was exactly what I wanted at that moment. Only, I wanted it everywhere on my body. We reached the village too soon. I could tell we were there when the pathway widened immensely. Instead of trees and bushes, I saw huts and fire pits.

I hadn't expected the village to be like that, though I should have, with all the fantasy novels I read as a teenager. While I once believed I wanted to live like that, I came to prefer hotels over the glamping experience. Yet, the village in front of me was full-on rugged living. No oven for cooking. No running water. And definitely no pillowtop mattresses. Though I hadn't seen inside any of the huts. Wasn't sure I wanted to. Maybe I should have tried harder to find that card I'd used to get there so I could wish my way home. Yet, that place held no appeal either. Sure, it had amenities the Enchanted Forest lacked, but I didn't have a job, a home, a boyfriend, or even a family to return to. Jack might realize I was missing after a few days, but I doubted he would put too much thought into my disappearance. At least the place I'd wished

myself to had beings who wanted me there.

Right after Holden set me down, I adjusted my clothes so they weren't stuck in crevices that pinched off important parts of my body. I worried I was overdressed if everyone wore the same type of clothing as the turtle shifter. All those I saw in human form seemed to sport only one piece of clothing, sometimes a tank top or T-shirt, or a pair of shorts. Some donned shoes or covered their heads with a random hat, yet no one had been completely naked like Holden had been when I'd first arrived.

As I watched the beings crossing our path—always sure to say hello to Holden and greet me as a newcomer—I wondered what type of shifter they were and the location of the other magical creatures my guide had mentioned.

Suddenly, the village seemed to hush when a man in a royal purple robe exited one of the huts. He had gray, wavy hair and was tall and lanky. I wasn't sure how he had the power to walk with the heavy-looking garment, but as soon as he saw me, his face lit up and he started in our direction. A minotaur came out behind him, his nostrils flared, and his fists clenched. I grabbed Holden's arm and slid behind him, not wanting to get in the way of that creature.

"Ah, Holden!" The man held out his arms as I leaned to the side to catch a glance of him. "You found our first outer-worlder and brought him to me. Thank you, my friend."

Though I felt his muscles tighten, Holden still bowed to the man. "Of course, Banir. The outer-worlders are coming here to be mates of the council members."

So that's what he'd meant when he said I wasn't intended for him. Yet, I didn't like the option in front of me. I wanted to stay with Holden, wherever he lived.

Banir walked around us, his hand on his chin, as if inspecting us. “Ah, I think he will give birth to some fine children to myself or one of the other council members. What’s he called?”

Birth children? Um, that wasn’t possible for any person I’d ever met who was assigned male at birth based on their genitals. “My name is Nelson, and I can’t have babies. My body doesn’t work like that.”

The man scoffed and waved off my concerns. “See that he understands how things work around here,” Banir said to Holden, completely ignoring me. “And give him a tour of the village before bringing him back to my hut for the evening. We will see who he is most compatible with in the morning.”

Suddenly he was right behind me, his groin pressed to my ass. “Or maybe I won’t wait and simply claim him as my own. If he can behave.”

I jumped away from the leader, my stomach roiling like I was about to hurl. I went from a young creep at the dance club who thought I was his, to an old creep in the Enchanted Forest with the same mentality. Banir wasn’t the type of man I’d wished for. The dream I thought I was in took a sharp turn into nightmare territory.

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Holden

I still didn't understand how Banir had been appointed leader of the council. And what leader needed a minotaur as a chaperone? That should have been a big indicator he wasn't suited for the position. If he treated every outer-worlder as a breeder instead of as a being, none of them would want to stay.

"Nelson, come." I cringed at my own words, shamed I had spoken to the outer-worlder as if he were lesser. "If you want to come with me, I will give you a tour of village."

He rushed to my side before placing his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go. Get me away from him."

Nelson seemed to want to get away from Banir as much as me, but what did that indicate about his prospect of staying in the Enchanted Forest? I needed to introduce him to other members of the council and make the village appealing to convince Nelson to remain in our world. I needed to show him what I loved about it. Though that would be difficult in some areas considering his size and the fact he couldn't shift into a smaller creature.

I took him to the community garden first. "This is where we grow the majority of the food to feed our village." We walked among the fruit trees to start with, the apple blossoms having recently opened, promising a new batch of the sweet, red goodness. "There is a total of four large plots of land we work on, but not all at the same time. That way, we constantly have a supply of food. Ahmed has told us about the different weather seasons you have in the outer-world, but we don't have them the same as you

do, so we have a continuous growing period.”

I paused for Nelson to ask questions or simply to take in the information. But instead of looking around or wanting to learn more about our world, he stared at the ground a few feet in front of himself with his fists clenched, as if struggling in his own mind. That didn’t bode well for him to become someone’s mate. The notion made my stomach roll, as I really wanted him to stay.

“Nelson, this is Lee. He is a satyr, and one of the council members. He does all the planning for the gardens to ensure we always have food, and coordinates the villagers to work the fields.”

The outer-worlder snapped from his trance and held out his hand to Lee. And while I understood the gesture as a greeting from Nelson’s culture from my encounters with Walter, the original outer-worlder who stayed, Lee did not.

I straightened my hand and moved it up and down to demonstrate to the satyr the expected response, but instead he shrugged, and Nelson returned his arm to his side with a heavy sigh. Miffs, I didn’t know why Ahmed had thought of me to fill the position of security officer. Before that designation, I’d been a worker under Lee’s supervision, harvesting one field or another. I would likely not get a chance to do that again if Nelson refused to stay. Nope, compost duty waited for me.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, I took the outer-worlder to many parts of the village, introducing him to as many other council members and villagers as possible. Anyone and everyone to show not all the villagers acted the same as Banir. But, like when he’d met Lee, Nelson either seemed lost in his thoughts, or cultural differences got in the way of a smooth greeting.

With one last place to visit before I took him back to Banir’s hut, I hoped the community builders fascinated Nelson enough to keep him in our world a little

longer. We came upon their current project, the beaver shifters busy constructing a larger hut for the community healer to see patients.

“Wait.” Nelson stuck his arm in front of me, as if I was somehow in danger in my own village. “They are shifting as they work.”

“Yes.” I guided his arm away from me and down to his side, amused by his fascination with the idea of shifting forms. “If they need their teeth or tail, they’ll be in beaver form. But if they need strength or height, they’ll look like you.”

His mouth hung open, and his eyes were wide with wonder as he watched them work. It was the most focused he’d been all day. Until he started to yawn.

“I guess we should return now.” Though I didn’t know if I’d convinced him to stay, I had nothing else to show him. Taking him to the pond with me wasn’t an option any longer since everyone knew he’d arrived. “Banir will have food and a bed prepared for you. In the morning, it will be decided whose mate you will become.”

His face wrinkled as he rubbed his forehead. “I still don’t understand how I can be someone’s mate. My anatomy doesn’t make it possible for me to bear children. Where I come from, we have females for that.”

“Right.” I sighed, having forgotten I’d yet to explain that part. “Remember that card you used to wish your way here?”

“Yep.” He nodded.

“Did you happen to read the fine print on the back?”

He shook his head. “I need glasses to see print that tiny, and I left them at my apartment.”

I had no idea what glasses or an apartment was, but that meant I had some explaining to do, a chance to keep Nelson from Banir a little longer.

“If you haven’t figured it out already, there is a lot of magical energy flowing through the Enchanted Forest. It helps us to shift, helps our crops to grow, and so much more, like traveling between worlds.”

He bobbed his head up and down. Hopefully that meant he understood the information I’d presented him with up to that point.

“But each being here is only allowed to use one type of magic. All the shifters use theirs to transform. Lee uses his to grow our food. And it can be used for more depending on the being. When outer-worlders arrive, they are somehow able to bear our children.” Walter could explain everything to him better, but I had to get Nelson to Banir first. That was my task.

He scrunched his face. “Wait, so I am able to become pregnant now?”

I chuckled. “No, it takes time, and there’s usually a ceremony involved. At least, that’s what I’ve been told. It’s been a long time since an outer-worlder appeared here.”

“But why not bring a human female here?” He leaned against the tree. “They already have the anatomy for that.”

I dug my toes into the ground, preparing to give him the full explanation. It was best he knew how desperate we were. “We tried. They became infertile in our land. It was an accident that we learned your males can grow wombs here. Everyone talks about it in the village. When Ahmed unintentionally sent the wrong person here, Conall, our leader at the time, found him in the meadow. His name was Sam. All Conall’s previous female mates were sent back to your world, but he and Sam fell in love. It

wasn't about procreation. And then, by some miracle, Sam became pregnant. That's when Ahmed changed who he looked for in a mate for our kind. Yet, we haven't had much luck in convincing outer-worlders to stay. Though, without them, we have no way to continue our lineage, and all the shifters will disappear from the Enchanted Forest once those of us left perish."

"Oh." He fumbled with his hands. "So, you really want me to stay?"

He had no idea how much, but my wants didn't matter. I chewed on the side of my cheek, contemplating how to answer him. I needed him to understand the severity of our situation, but still wanted to assure Nelson he had a choice. "I hope there will be others who wish their way here, but you are the first outer-worlder to arrive since I was a child."

His face drained of color and his eyes went glassy before he collapsed to the ground. Miffs, I wasn't good at my job at all. I scooped Nelson up in my arms and rushed him to the healer.

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Nelson

When I opened my eyes, I couldn't see the sky or even the trees above me that were there when I'd passed out. Instead, I stared at the mud and straw ceiling of one of the huts in the village. At least, I thought I was still in the Enchanted Forest. I hadn't yet woken up to realise it all to be an elaborate dream.

Not ready to move, I listened to the conversation happening nearby. One voice was definitely that of Banir, the head of the forest council, whom I did not want as my mate or anywhere near me. The other sounded familiar, someone I'd met since arriving, yet I couldn't place them. Neither of the voices belonged to Holden though. I may have just met him, but I longed to be with him rather than any other being I'd met during my tour of the village. Why couldn't I be his mate? If I was stuck in the forest for the rest of my life, and they needed my help so bad, I should, at least, get to choose my mate.

"Ah, it's good to see you awake again." Rauh, the healer whom I'd met in passing during my tour of the village, rubbed a cold, wet cloth over my forehead. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to wake until the morning. Thought maybe you'd fallen asleep instead of passed out as Holden claimed."

"Where is Holden?" I scratched out, my throat completely dry.

"At the pond." Rauh picked up my hand and placed a clay cup filled with water into it. "He has other responsibilities to tend to. Now, drink up."

I took a mouthful simply to ease my thirst, quickly realizing it wasn't water in my

cup.

I nearly spit out the concoction that tasted like a mixture of mint, vodka, and ginger with the thick consistency of cough syrup. But the healer gave me a threatening look as if he knew what I was tempted to do with it, so I swallowed right away. The drink did relieve my parched throat and helped to clear away the brain fog that came with waking up. But it left the worst aftertaste. My stomach heaved, ready to dispel all its contents though I'd barely eaten in the last twenty-four hours. That was, if time worked the same in the Enchanted Forest as it did in my world.

I managed to stomach another mouthful before I handed the cup back to Rauh. "I'm good. I feel better. Can you show me to the bathroom?"

The healer pressed his palm to his forehead. "That's another thing we forgot in the plans. There are a lot of things we forgot you outer-worlders desire." He tapped his finger to the side of his head. "We have an outhouse though. I'll take you there."

Rauh held me around the waist to support me as I got to my feet. Once I stood on my own, he let go and motioned to Banir. "I'm taking him to the outhouse. We'll be back shortly."

Banir simply waved his hand, dismissing us as if he didn't care. All the more reason I didn't want him for a mate. He hadn't shown any concern for my health and still hadn't spoken a single word directly to me. I was glad to leave the hut, yearned to run as far away as possible, but I did need to use the washroom. And hopefully that time would help me come up with a plan to shake my escort. Rauh had been nothing but kind to me, but he would take me back to Banir, too. As Holden had done.

My chest felt hollow without the turtle shifter's presence. I thought I might have been able to learn to live in the Enchanted Forest with Holden by my side. But he'd left me, shredding all possibility of me wanting to stay.

The outhouse was less of a bathroom than I'd expected. Instead of the plastic booths I was used to seeing at outdoor events, or even a wooden shack, the washroom Rauh escorted me to was a hollowed-out space in the trunk of a tree with a wooden bench positioned above a hole in the ground. And the stench brought the medicine Rauh had given me back up my esophagus to my throat.

I looked at him then back at the space. "Um, this is it?"

The healer nodded. "I told you we forgot some infrastructure for you outer-worlders. There was a time when we didn't have huts. But Walter made do with this since he arrived."

I gulped, not having met Walter when Holden took me for a tour of the Enchanted Forest. Did he keep me away from him on purpose? Was Walter confined somewhere to pop out babies for these shifters? But I hadn't seen any young children, either. Maybe he couldn't bear children, and they locked him up for that reason. Or worse. I really needed to return to my world. I couldn't stay there. Not as their prisoner. "Hey, can you give me some privacy? I'm not used to having an audience when I do this." Rauh didn't need to know about the public urinals in my world.

"Sure." He turned around and started down the path the way we'd come. "Let me know when you're done."

I nodded, though he likely didn't see, and I had no intention of returning with him anyway.

I had to duck to fit into the alcove, and, luckily, I relieved myself quickly. But I wasn't prepared to leave. I had to recall images of every place I'd been in the forest and figure out a way to get to the meadow where I had first arrived.

Leaving the trunk, I got on my hands and knees and drew a map in the dirt with my

finger. The huts, the gardens, and where the beavers were busy building. Though I couldn't be sure of the accuracy of my picture, I had to try to escape anyway.

I stood and dusted off my knees. Then I ran. Trying to avoid the village, I dashed in between trees, over fallen logs, and through various ground vegetation. I wasn't quiet. And loafers weren't the best footwear to run in, but I had no choice. I had to leave.

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Holden

After a long day of taking care of the outer-worlder, I wanted nothing more than to eat and sleep. Nelson would be fine with Banir and Rauh, or so I told myself over and over as I snacked on algae and those squishy snails that seemed to repopulate every time I left the pond.

Though I was supposed to be on alert for the arrival of any new outer-worlders, I had already spent too much time in my human form for the day. I needed a break. After eating, I planned to take a nap on the partially submerged log at the other end of the pond from my favorite land log. Logs are life for us turtles.

I surfaced to catch a beetle that had probably fallen out of a tree and onto the water. Not as flavorful as usual. Though nothing I ate since returning to the pond had tasted all that appealing.

About to make my way to my sleeping spot, I glanced toward the forest and saw him. Nelson. The outer-worlder who was supposed to be with the head of the forest council. What was he doing out wandering around by himself?

My heart raced, hoping he'd come to see me, but I couldn't let him be on his own, not when he'd only just arrived and had fainted twice already. Plus, he would never be mine. I had to accept the fact. I swam to the edge of the pond then shifted into my human form.

"Jeez!" Nelson held his hand to his chest. "It startles me every time I see you do that."

I wanted to laugh, but I was more worried about his presence and his condition. “What happened? Why are you all the way out here? Did you get lost?”

Nelson’s eyebrows raised as he glanced anywhere but at me. “I guess I kind of got lost.” His voice rose up an octave at the end.

“What do you mean kind of ?” Nobody kind of did anything.

“I...I was looking for the meadow. I thought it was around here somewhere.” Pointing his fingers together, he smiled, but it didn’t come close to reaching his eyes.

“And why are you trying to get to the meadow?” It seemed like a lot of work to get Nelson to talk sometimes. I hoped not all outer-worlders were like him. Though that may have been what Banir preferred in a mate.

He sighed. “I can’t stay here. I need to wish my way back to my world. And while I like you, I don’t want to be kept a prisoner of anyone in the Enchanted Forest.”

Okay, that was more than I had expected him to say. I took a moment to process it all before I responded. “And why do you believe you would be kept prisoner here? I told you Ahmed would take you back if that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.” He crossed his arms and nodded his head with finality.

Not a great start to the new batch of outer-worlders coming to the Enchanted Forest. My chest constricted at the thought of him leaving, but I led Nelson to the edge of the meadow where he’d arrived, and I called to Ahmed. I would rather Nelson return to his own world than for him to be unhappy in the forest.

With a poof, the wizard appeared, his cheeks flushed and his hair frazzled. “Oh, yes, hello.” He ran his fingers down his long white beard. “What can I do for you?”

“I want to go home.” With his arms still crossed, Nelson pouted.

It was a look that made me want to kiss his cheek or tickle him just to see him smile again. Strange because I’d known from the moment he’d arrived that he wasn’t intended for me, but I would do anything to see him stay.

Ahmed stared at Nelson then gasped as if startled. “What are you doing here already?”

Nelson furrowed his brows. “What do you mean already ? You gave me the card and I made my wish. Then I ended up here.”

Ahmed slowly shook his head. “I didn’t expect you to use the card so soon. I thought you would be too stubborn to use it right away. Seems I underestimated you.”

“Well, you underestimated me in thinking I would want to live here.”

Nelson’s words hurt a little. I didn’t understand what was so horrible about the world I lived in, especially since I’d shown him all my favorite parts of the village and introduced him to my friends.

“Why?” Ahmed sat on the ground and motioned us to join him. “What do you not like about the Enchanted Forest?”

“Banir, for one. He’s a pompous ass and I don’t want to be mated to him.” Nelson returned to his feet. “And another thing, I don’t want to be kept locked away to pop out babies like Walter. I don’t want to be a prisoner.”

Ahmed leaned back and released a booming laugh. “Oh, my dear outer-worlder, you’ve got it all wrong.”

I lowered my head, certain Nelson's misgivings were all my fault. "I'm sorry."

Ahmed clutched my shoulder and squeezed "No, no. It seems I didn't prepare you properly for our guests. The first person they should meet is Walter. He can explain this enchanted world to them as an outer-worlder."

"And, Nelson." Ahmed stood and rested his hand on the outer-worlder's shoulder. "I really did not expect you to wish your way here so soon. Because you were never intended to be Banir's mate. I picked someone else from your world I thought would be better suited for him."

Nelson's face wrinkled into the same expression I was sure I wore. Confusion. "What do you mean? Who am I meant for? I still don't want to be with anyone from the council."

Ahmed winked with a mischievous smile. "Tell me, my dear boy, who is it you would stay here for?"

I glanced at the outer-worlder, waiting for his answer, hoping I had helped convince him to stay in some way. But he would not look at me. Maybe I should have dressed after getting out of the pond. Yet, it was too late; my clothes were still at the pond.

Nelson wrinkled his nose before he chewed on his bottom lip. "There is only one person. Being."

My heart raced. At least he had made a connection with one of us. But whom? Perhaps Rauh with the amount of time they'd spent together. But why had Nelson run, then? Why was he ready to return to his world if he had already been in the presence of his desired mate?

"Well?" Ahmed prodded. "Who is it?"

Digging the toe of his shoe into the ground, Nelson quickly glanced at me, his cheeks red, before turning away again. "Holden."

My heart beat erratically as I tried to process Nelson's response. He wanted to be my mate. Was that what he'd meant earlier when he said he liked me? Of all those I'd introduced him to, he'd taken to me. I worried how Banir and the rest of the council would respond. While I liked Nelson, too, found him very appealing, I never saw him as a possible mate because I didn't believe I would have an opportunity to be with him. But it seemed I was the only mate he would stay for. Miffs, I was in trouble.

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Nelson

I waited for Holden to say he wanted me as his mate. Still not sure if I would remain in the Enchanted Forest, I knew I had no desire to stay or be paired with anyone else. But, without a response, I expected to return to my life in the outer-world. In both, I had no place of my own and no job to keep me occupied. And my heart would be broken—again.

“Holden?” The wizard snapped his fingers in front of the turtle shifter’s face. “Any response?”

He blinked hard before he swallowed. “I didn’t know I was allowed. What will Banir do when he finds out?”

Ahmed slapped Holden’s back. “You let me talk to him. In the meantime, take Nelson here to see Walter, and prove he’s not being held captive.”

Holden nodded quickly. “Okay.”

He’d seemed so confident before, when he assumed I would be Banir’s mate, but that confidence turned to fear. Maybe even terror. Was he afraid of me?

Starting to walk in the direction of what I assumed to be where Walter lived, Holden stopped abruptly. “But I don’t have a place for you to live.” He glanced behind me to the wizard. “Ahmed, where will he live? Outer-worlders don’t sleep in ponds.”

“There are many new huts recently built.” The wizard smiled at him like a parent

would to a child. “It will be an adjustment for you both.”

Holden glanced at me before giving a determined nod. “Okay, let’s go introduce you to Walter.”

On our hike through the woods, Holden’s initial fear seemed to ebb away. At first, he was several feet ahead of me, only slowing down occasionally to ensure I still followed. It gave me a great view of his bare back and ass, but the distraction caused me to stumble a few times. When we reached a path, his pace changed and he walked beside me, causing other parts of his body to capture my attention.

“Of all the beings I introduced you to, you really picked me?” He shook his head slightly before he rubbed the back of his neck. “Are you sure?”

I reached over for his hand and threaded my fingers through his until he finally relaxed his grip. Focusing on his face and the path ahead, I tried to convey my thoughts. “You were kind to me from the moment I arrived. Except when you left me with Banir.” I meant the last part to tease him even if I was still bitter about it.

He slowed down and scuffed his foot in the dirt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Pulling myself closer to him, I brushed my shoulder against his. “That’s okay. But I have a better reason to stay now since I can be your mate.” I paused, letting go of him. “That is, if you want to be with me.” I shouldn’t have forced him into something with me the way I thought they were going to force me to be with Banir. He might not have any attraction to me at all.

He spun in my direction and gulped, his semi-erect cock bobbing with the motion. “I’m not sure what I have to offer. Whether I’ll be a good mate. I’ve never lived in a hut.”

“And neither have I.” Though I had the urge to palm his cock and kiss his full lips, I didn’t want to be like any of the creeps I’d left behind. Instead, I reached for his hand once again. “This is all new for me, too. We can figure it out together. Especially the pregnancy part, because I’m still not sure how that works, but I’m willing to give it a try with you.”

His eyes shimmered as his smile widened, and he squeezed my hand. “Okay. Walter and Oscar’s place is just up ahead.”

Instead of another hut like I’d expected, the home we came upon resembled a cabin with a covered porch that spanned the front, and a pile of wood off to the side of the place. Two men sat on Muskoka chairs out front while two young children, maybe three and five years of age, raced around the yard, chasing each other as they shifted. At first, the shifting seemed normal for this world, until I realized they weren’t shifting into the same animal. One was a rabbit, while the other appeared to be a badger.

As we got closer, the children rushed up to us. “Hi, Holden,” they echoed.

“Who is this?” the taller bunny shifter asked.

The younger darted in front of his older brother. “And why does he have so many clothes on his body?”

Holden squeezed my hand. “This is Nelson. He is from the outer-world, and he would like to talk to your father about what it’s like to live here with us.”

They both gave me a once-over before darting toward the cabin. “Daddy, Daddy! An outer-worlder is here to see you.”

“Finally.” The one I assumed to be Walter waved as we approached. “Ahmed came

through at last.” Walter was bald with a broad, heavy build, and when he stood to greet us, I realized he was expecting another child. With a pair of black, loose-fitting cotton shorts and a tank top, he wore less than me but more than anyone else I’d met in the Enchanted Forest. “I’m so glad to meet you. I’m Walter, and this is my new mate, Oscar.”

I was stunned by the word new . I paused for a moment before sticking out my hand to shake Walter’s. “I’m Nelson.”

Oscar seemed to understand the custom, too, unlike anyone else I’d met since arriving. He was tall and lanky with a full head of jet-black, wavy hair, and matching facial hair kept neatly trimmed. I realized at that point, all the shifters I’d met either had scruffy beards, or, like Holden, no facial hair at all. I wondered if it related to what kind of shifter they were.

“I will leave you two to talk.” Oscar gestured to the chair he’d been sitting in before stepping to the door. “Come with me, Holden, and we’ll prepare some snacks and drinks.”

I was already impressed with Oscar, though still wondered if he was a badger, and if he wasn’t, what that meant for me, and Holden as my mate.

Walter chuckled as I sat down. “I know exactly what you’re thinking, so I’ll tell you right away. Winston is the father of my first child. He was the head of the forest council at the time, but we weren’t a good match. And he isn’t a good parent.” He shimmied in his seat before rubbing his belly. “Sorry, this one is active right now.”

I nodded, trying to remain calm, even though I was taking in so much information about this world, including how he got pregnant in the first place.

“When Banir became the head, he thought he would become my mate since Winston

and I were no longer together, but I refused him. That's why he's so bitter." Walter winked at me. "Don't forget that. You always have a choice here, no matter what some of these beings try to tell you."

"Anyway, I was with Colton after that, a shy badger. I think I hooked up with him to piss off Banir even more. Colton was good to me, but he had a hard time adjusting to living here. I told him to return to his underground borough. Still visits every now and again, but only to see the kids.

"Oscar took me by surprise. He works at the community garden. I always saw him there, and he was so kind to me and my children. I fell in love with him."

The smile on Walter's face made my heart flutter. It was possible for an outer-worlder to live happily in the forest, but would I find the same happiness with Holden, or would he be the first of many? I didn't want to go through all those breakups again. Especially with children involved.

Holden brought out lemonade for us and the kids. He smiled at me, but it didn't reach his eyes, like he was worried. Or maybe he didn't want to be my mate after all.

"I just wanted to find my forever someone," I blurted out. "That's what I wished for to come here."

Walter tilted his head and gave me a tender smile. "You and Holden seem to have a connection. He's a nice enough guy, but I've never seen him so concerned about anyone before. I can see it in his body language. He wants you to be okay. If you two can adjust to all the changes, you'll be good together."

"How big of a change was it?" I held out my arms, gesturing to the land in front of me. "This seems very much from our world, but it's not like this in the village."

He ran one hand across his belly while he took a drink. “The builders are good at their jobs. You just have to tell them what you want. Those from this world have never been to ours, so they don’t know what we’re used to living in. And Ahmed can bring many things here if you ask.”

“But is it worth it? Would you still stay if you had to do it all over again?” I needed to know while I still had the chance to return before this world changed me.

“Nelson, I had nothing to return to.” He sighed. “Even though I was plucked from our world against my will, at least here, I felt wanted. It wasn’t perfect at first, but it is now.”

Oscar came out then with a tray of fruits and vegetables. He leaned down and kissed Walter before calling the kids in to get something to eat.

When Holden came out with another tray, it made me hope we could one day have the same thing. I wanted to stay and try.

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Holden

We stayed at the home of Walter and Oscar late into the night. Nelson had so many questions. And while I did as well, our hosts answered them without me having to say a word, as if they knew my thoughts, or simply remembered what it was like for them in the beginning.

Eventually, Nelson fell asleep, his soft snores unlike anything I'd heard before. At the pond, I was used to the sounds of crickets, frogs, and other animal shifters throughout the night, but not the quiet noises that came from outer-worlders.

I reached to shake him awake, but Oscar put his hand on my shoulder. "Leave him be."

"He can stay there," Walter whispered. "He seemed so exhausted and is still probably overwhelmed. Oscar can get him a blanket."

Before the couple retired for the night, they made sure Nelson would be warm. I laid on the porch beside him in my turtle form, ready to shift back if need be.

When morning came, we thanked Walter and Oscar for their hospitality, and I received a list from Walter. "This is what you need Ahmed to bring from the outer-world to help with Nelson's adjustment here. I know it's a change for you, too, but you have no idea how different our world is from this."

I nodded, wanting to do anything to make Nelson's transition easier. Spending time with the couple and their children made me realize exactly how much I wanted a

family of my own.

As we made our way into the village, an unease crept over me. I worried whether the others would accept Nelson being my mate. They didn't really have a choice, but would they make him want to leave instead?

Nelson took my hand in his, a gesture that comforted me more every time he did it. "Where do you think our hut will be?"

I shrugged, unsure and dreading which one we'd be assigned to. "The new huts are all centered together in the main part of the village. But there are older, abandoned homes, originally built for the previous outer-worlders who came here, that are spread out around the forest."

"I want one of those." Nelson squeezed my hand, giving another spark of contentment. "Is there one near your pond?"

I paused for a moment, sure I had seen one somewhere close. "I think so. It's not on any of the routes I normally take, but I'm positive there is. Maybe on the other side from where I met you."

"Then let's claim that one." Still holding me, he leaned into my side and kissed my cheek. "I had a dream about us, and our future family. Now, I can't wait to get started."

I wished I shared his confidence, knew what he saw in that dream. I did want the same thing but worried about all the obstacles we still had to conquer to make it possible.

Throughout the day, Ahmed popped back and forth between worlds, bringing armfuls of items from the outer-world to help my future mate adjust. And Nelson tittered about in the hut we'd found, arranging and rearranging it all. His doubts and worries had all vanished as he whistled while fluffing what he called a pillow that later ended up on his bed.

"It's not what I'm used to." Nelson lay on the bed with his arms and legs spread. "But it's way fluffier than the last few beds I've slept on. Almost feels like a nest."

Something deep inside of me rumbled to life at the mention of nesting. I yearned to join Nelson on that bed, remove his clothes, and give him a reason to nest. The urge was so strong. But too many others still lingered around our new home for me to get cozy with him.

As the sun set on Nelson's third day in the Enchanted Forest, I found him once again on the bed, sleeping while curled up among blankets and pillows, and with only a pair of briefs on. He had adjusted so well, much better than me.

Inside the hut, without Nelson to distract me, my chest tightened, and the walls seemed to close in on me. I was used to living and sleeping outdoors and didn't know if I could acclimate to a new way of living. Would I eventually get used to it? Or would I have to leave Nelson the way Colton had left Walter?

I sighed, trying not to fret too much. The outdoors still existed. I wasn't trapped inside. To prove it to myself, I stepped outside and took a deep breath. Yep, still there. But it wasn't enough. The pond called to me. Before I knew it, I sat on my favorite log and stared at my former home. I didn't need to go in the water. Simply being there helped loosen the tightness in my chest.

"You okay?"

Startled, I turned around to find Nelson behind me. He'd put his shirt back on, but nothing else, and his hair lay completely flat on one side while sticking out in multiple directions on the other side.

"Yeah." I shuffled over on the log to give him room to sit if he wanted. "I couldn't settle. I'm sorry."

He sat beside me and rested his head on my shoulder. "You don't have to be sorry. I get it. I was worried I wouldn't be able to sleep, either. But I guess exhaustion caught up with me. Until I heard you leave."

"Sorry."

He kissed my cheek. "I don't mind if you come down here. But expect me to come with you sometimes. I want to know all parts of you, not only when you look like me."

I rested a hand on Nelson's thigh, his closeness somehow able to calm me better than anything else. "Tell me about your world. Tell me what it's like to be mated there."

Closing his eyes for a moment, he took a deep breath. "Well, being mates with another guy is illegal in many parts of my world. Though not where I'm from. And as I mentioned before, it's not possible for anyone born as a male to become pregnant. The only way for them to have kids is to go through a huge legal rigmarole to adopt a child. Though most gay couples I knew never wanted kids."

"Oh." I ran my palm up and down his thigh, enjoying the softness of his skin while not fully understanding his words.

"When I was in what I thought was a long-term relationship, we dated for a bit then we moved in together. Or he asked me to move in with him."

“Dated?” That word stuck in my mind. “What do you mean by that?”

He shifted on the log though held my hand in place on his thigh. “I mean, it usually started by getting a meal together, seeing a movie in the theater, roller skating, dancing at a club... Then we usually ended up at one of our places where we had sex. Though sometimes we didn’t even make it there.”

His body warmed under my touch, though I had no idea why, still trying to figure out what he’d said. “Movie theater? Roller skating?”

He giggled and kissed my cheek. “That’s what got your attention, huh? Well, a movie theater is a large building where they play a visual recording of a story on a large screen so many people can watch it at the same time.”

“These dates commonly occurred with many people around? When we moved into the hut today, I couldn’t wait for everyone to leave us.”

“In my world...” He weaved his fingers through mine like he had the day before when heading to Walter’s. “Sometimes it’s safer to get to know someone when there are lots of people around. At least until you learn whether you can trust them. There are many people in my world who plot to harm those of us in the queer community.”

“So, do you want me to go get others from the village? Until you can trust me?” I wanted to do right by Nelson, even if I still wasn’t used to the new living arrangement.

“No!” He squeezed my hand and moved it farther up his thigh. “No need for that. I trust you. We’re already at the moving-in-together stage.”

I thought back on what he’d said about dating. “I think we missed a step.”

“We did.” He slipped my hand farther up his leg until I felt his hardness. He kissed my cheek then down my neck, his breath sending heat straight to my groin and provoking my own erection. “We skipped the sex part, the mating.”

With a groan, I tamped down the urge to rip off his underwear and bend him over the log while I made him mine. “But we’re not...we haven’t had our ceremony.”

In one swift motion, he moved to straddle me, his shirt having disappeared without me noticing. With his hands on my shoulders, he rubbed his hot shaft against mine, only a thin piece of clothing in between. “In my world, meetings that produce offspring don’t always happen right away, but it’s important to get a lot of practice in beforehand.”

“Okay.” If he needed practice, I could do that for him, especially with it getting more difficult to resist my own urges. Letting instinct take over, I breathed in his foreign and intoxicating scent while I trailed my fingers down his back then tucked them beneath his briefs. Cupping his ass, I pulled him closer and kissed his neck and along his collarbone.

With every soft moan, I continued to explore his body, each movement by instinct alone. While I knew how to bring myself pleasure, I had never had the opportunity to find the same gratification with anyone else. Yet, it seemed easy with Nelson. Easy and right.

I slid my finger over his puckered hole, and he jumped on my lap.

“Oh, lube. Do you have lube?”

I stilled, completely confused as to what he referred to.

He pressed his palm to his forehead. “Why would you? You don’t have any clothes,

so no pockets to carry anything. I'm sure Ahmed brought some from the outer-world, but I can't be fucked without any. Tried it before and I hurt for days."

Nelson rambled on about how things were done in the outer-world, and I worried he would decide to return there after all.

Suddenly, he kneeled in front of me and wrapped his fingers around my shaft. "But we can do other things out here."

In an instant, his mouth surrounded the head of my cock and he ran his tongue over the very tip. My body filled with an intensity so much stronger than the magic I used to shift between forms. I gripped the log, trying to remain upright.

Then he bobbed his head up and down, taking more of my cock into his warm mouth each time. I felt the rough strength of his tongue caressing the shaft and head of my cock with forceful sweeps. His saliva coated my length, allowing his movements to be smooth and purposeful. But when my cock hit the back of his throat, my hips thrust forward on their own accord. Nelson gagged and pulled back, tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry." I kneeled on the ground beside him and pulled him into my embrace. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

He smiled at me, saliva around his mouth shining in the moonlight. "It's okay. You're not the first guy to do that."

"But I don't want to do anything to make you cry." Oscar had told me to always keep Nelson happy.

"I've had guys get off on having me choke on their dick, but I'm glad you're not one of them."

I really didn't understand the outer-world at all but hoped I could be a good mate to Nelson. "What else should we do, then? To make up for skipping over sex?"

His grin widened, and he had sparkles in his eyes. The same way I saw Walter look at Oscar the other night. "Lie down."

I obeyed his order, my back flat on the grass between the log and the edge of the pond where the reeds grew.

Nelson shuffled out of his briefs before he shimmied up my body to straddle my hips. His cock and testicles rested over mine, the weight of them bringing conflicting feelings of peace and an intense need. I struggled to remain still, letting him take the lead to show me what he liked and wanted.

"Oh, how I wish we could do more. I have a feeling you will feel really good seated deep inside me."

I shuddered at the thought, hoping we didn't have to wait too long to experience that.

Nelson licked both of his palms and spit into one before wrapping his hands around our shafts. He held them firm together then started moving his hands up and down. The softness of his cock against mine contrasted to the texture of his hands and his varying grip strength.

Pleasure danced through my body, firing every synapse. I couldn't speak, found I could barely remember to breathe, simply enjoying the sensations courtesy of my future mate.

Nelson rocked his hips over me, ramping up the fire under my skin until I couldn't hold it in any longer. I burst, the rapture boiling over in my groin and leaving through the tip of my cock.

I gasped for air, overwhelmed by the intensity of my first release with another being.
When I caught my breath, I knew I had to grant Nelson the same gratification.

Nelson

As I opened my eyes, a wave of contentment washed over me. Living in a hut in the Enchanted Forest without the amenities I was used to wasn't what I'd expected when I'd made my wish upon leaving Hung. However, I did find someone whom I believed would love me for the rest of my life. I rolled over to cuddle into Holden, the shifter whose children I would one day give birth to. Only I couldn't find him. I sat up and glanced around the hut. It was devoid of him, like the bed.

I sighed. He'd probably returned to the pond after he carried me back to our new home the night before. Or maybe he had to help settle a dispute in the village. Holden had been in the bed with me when I had fallen asleep, but I didn't know how long he'd stayed.

After relieving myself in the makeshift toilet built for me the day before, I trudged to the closest well to gather some water for washing up and to make coffee. Instant coffee had come a long way from the crunchy grounds in the jar available when I was a child, but it still wasn't the same as a freshly brewed pot. Yet, instant cold coffee, the French Vanilla flavor I'd requested, remained the only option available to me to get that morning caffeine jolt.

With a cup of tasty java, I headed to the pond to find my mate. Looking out over the water, I saw many striders on top of the sparkling ripples, dancing across the surface in between the lily pads. But I didn't see a turtle. Not even the head of one poking out of the pond. Maybe he'd gone elsewhere because he'd always come to the shore any other time I'd come down there.

I finished my coffee on the way back to the hut then decided to visit Walter. He was my next best option to find Holden without having to go into the village where I might encounter Banir. The head of the council hadn't seemed happy about me choosing Holden over him and everyone else on the council. I didn't want to ruin my happiness first thing in the morning.

When I reached the country cottage, no one seemed to be around. Not even the kids played outside. About to concede and head for the village, I heard a scream from inside.

I ran toward the house before the thought crossed my mind, not even considering the danger I might encounter. The front door had no lock, so I rushed inside then paused at the scene before me. "Oh my gosh, are you okay?"

Walter sat on the floor, his legs bent and back supported by a wood-framed couch. Sweat beaded across his forehead as he breathed in and out in short puffs. His children hid behind the couch, only their mops of hair and wide eyes visible as they peeked over the top.

"No," he groaned before clenching at his stomach. "I'm in labor."

"Oh." It took a moment for his words to process in my mind. "Oh, no. Where is Oscar? What can I do?"

"Oscar is working at the community garden." He winced, pushing on one side of his large belly. "I need Rauh. And Oscar. And a bucket of water."

"Okay." I hurried out the door to do what Walter asked of me. I had no idea how to deliver a baby or how to comfort his children. And calling 9-1-1 wasn't an option in the Enchanted Forest. So, I grabbed the metal bucket off the porch and raced toward the village.

I located Oscar first. “Walter’s having your baby right now. Go home, and I’ll get Rauh.”

He didn’t say a word, simply nodded at me before taking off toward his home. To find Rauh, I had to go farther into the village, where there seemed to be some kind of gathering happening. I tried to avoid it, slipping along the outer perimeter of the huts until I found the one belonging to the healer. But he wasn’t there.

I dreaded going back out, sure I would have to encounter Banir at some point since he made himself hard to avoid. If Walter wasn’t in labor, I would sneak back to my own hut, but I’d promised to help.

As I approached the crowd, I saw Rauh standing among them all. Luckily, he stood on the edge closest to me, so I approached him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He gasped as he turned toward me. “Nelson! I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“Walter is in labor. He asked me to fetch you.”

“Oh.” His eyes widened as his mouth fell open. “I must get to him right away.”

Upon the healer’s departure, I took in the scene in front of me. It seemed to be some kind of ceremony. And Holden stood in the center of the crowd, with Banir there, too, dressed in his ceremonial robe. Someone stood between them, a being I didn’t recognize. Yet, with his perfect makeup and high-end fashion I could never have afforded, he had to be an outer-worlder. An outer-worlder who held Holden’s hand as Banir droned on and on about something.

My stomach twisted as vices clenched my chest. I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe as I watched Banir bond my supposed mate with the new outer-worlder. A sob escaped from deep within me, and that seemed to snap me out of my trance.

I had to get away, had to flee. I would return to the meadow to call Ahmed and demand he send me back. The only being in the Enchanted Forest I would have stayed for just bonded with another. I thought we had something special, but what I felt obviously wasn't reciprocated if he chose to be with another. My wish hadn't come true. The wizard had lied. His cards were duds. I wanted to return to my own world as soon as possible.

As I ran, the bucket I carried smacked me in the knee. I remembered my promise to Walter. He'd been nothing but kind to me, so I had to fulfill my last obligation to him before I left.

At the well, I pumped water into the bucket as tears streamed down my face. I'd really hoped things with Holden would have worked out. I hadn't known him long, but I'd really put a lot of faith in my wish.

No more. No more wishing on birthday candles or the first star I saw in the sky. And definitely no more throwing coins into fountains. All a waste of time and money, hoping for things that would never happen.

With a full bucket, I trudged back to Walter's place, my body feeling empty in comparison. Sure, it had taken Walter three tries to find his perfect mate, but I didn't want to wait around to find the next. I would return to my world, somehow find the funds to move across the country, and start over. I was willing to do it in the forest, so I could do it there, too.

As I approached the cottage, I wiped the tears from my cheeks. Maybe that was what I needed to realize all along; I needed to get away from what I knew to find the happy ending I wanted.

A shifter I recognized, but couldn't remember their name, met me at the door and took the bucket from me. The kids raced out the door then, hooting about another

baby and no longer seeming terrified about their father being in labor.

The youngest tugged on my hand. “When are you going to have a baby?”

I gulped, swallowing the lump in my throat and trying to keep my tears at bay. “I...I don’t know.”

He shrugged. “Maybe the other outer-worlder will have a baby soon. Holden brought him here early in the morning. They woke us up before Daddy started having the baby.”

The vices tightened once again, my heart shattering to pieces. I had to leave right away. Yet, when I turned around, I saw Holden heading up the path toward us. And he was alone.

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Holden

I hadn't planned on leaving Nelson in bed. Hadn't planned on having him wake up alone. I definitely hadn't planned for everything that happened after. Ahmed had admitted he hadn't fully instructed me on what to do when outer-worlders arrived, but he did say to take them to see Walter before anyone else.

So, when I heard an outer-worlder shouting as I dozed off beside Nelson, I knew what I had to do.

When I reached the meadow, the man caught me by surprise. Instead of appearing with only the clothes he wore, like Nelson, the new outer-worlder popped into our world with cases and bags filled with belongings. His face seemed to sparkle in an odd way, like diluted magic had changed his appearance.

"Yoo-hoo!" He waved his hand like he had a hard time keeping his wrist straight. "I'm here. I've arrived at the entrance to the Enchanted Forest, and I'm ready to meet my mate."

I tried to smile at him, but it was a weary effort due to my tiredness from moving the day before and my want to be back in bed with my future mate. "Hey, I'm Holden, Security Officer for the Enchanted Forest. I will take you to meet Walter, the first outer-worlder who came to live here, and then to Banir, the head of the forest council."

"Oh, Banir, what's he like?" The man leaned forward and cocked his head to the side. "Is he looking for a mate? I like a man in charge."

“Yes, yes, he is.” A burst of energy rushed through me with the hope this outer-worlder was the one Ahmed had chosen to be Banir’s mate. Then maybe the head of the council wouldn’t be so patronizing toward Nelson and me.

I picked up some of the belongings the man had brought with him. “Follow me and I’ll take you to meet Walter now.”

“Tell me...” He tapped my shoulder from behind. “Do all the people of the Enchanted Forest wear as little as you?”

Miffs, that had been one thing Nelson had commented on when he’d first arrived. Maybe I needed some outer-world clothing for when I greeted their residents. I was thankful I’d at least remembered to wear my garment. “Yes. We don’t find the need for a lot of clothing.”

The man gave an excited giggle. “Oh, just like going to a Muscle from the Jungle show. I’m going to love it here.”

Walking ahead, I tried to figure out what the man was talking about but had no clue. I needed to ask Nelson when I returned to him.

Though asleep when I arrived, Walter still got up to talk to the new outer-worlder. Lonnie, according to Walter. I’d forgotten to ask his name in my sluggish state. After leaving the very pregnant former outer-worlder to get some more rest, I grabbed the luggage again and led Lonnie toward the village to meet Banir. He seemed to have no reservations about living in our world or being mated to the head of the council. Though I wondered if that would change when he met the squirrel shifter.

Chauncey, the minotaur guard of Banir, stopped us as we approached the leader’s hut. “He’s sleeping. What do you want?”

I nudged my hand toward Lonnie. “New outer-worlder has arrived. And he is anxious to meet Banir.”

Chauncey scowled. “This isn’t going to be like the last time, is it? Because there’s no point in waking him only to be disappointed.”

Lonnie stepped forward, placing his finger on the minotaur’s wide chest. “I’ll have you know that Banir will not be disappointed with me. I came here to be his mate. So let me meet him.”

Chauncey’s eyes widened. “You are definitely not like the other outer-worlder. A good challenge for Banir, I think.” He disappeared inside the hut before coming back out moments later with the head of the forest council. “May I present to you, Leader Banir.”

“It is my honor.” Lonnie bowed, stretching one leg out behind him and one arm across his chest. “I must say, as leader of this place, you deserve much nicer accommodations. Perhaps a hut double this size for our future family. Or maybe a living space built up in the trees.”

Banir’s attraction was instant, him suddenly calling for an immediate mating ceremony. I didn’t have time to return to Nelson to tell him what was happening, too wrapped up in preparing Banir and Lonnie to be instantly united before anything or anyone could come between them.

At some point during the ceremony, I saw my future mate, but only for a moment. After we’d left the new couple to do the actual mating on their own, I heard talk that Walter had gone into labor. Guessing that to be the reason Nelson had come to the village in the first place, I left after him, hoping to catch him at the home of the original outer-worlder, and help where I could.

As I reached the clearing in the woods, I headed up the path toward the cottage. I spotted Nelson outside, chatting with Walter's children, probably keeping them occupied while their father gave birth to another. When he spotted me, his bottom lip quivered for a moment before he clenched his fists, and his eyes set in hard determination. Had something happened to the baby?

I quickened my steps until I reached him. "What happened? Is everything okay?"

"I guess so." Nelson scowled before glancing down at his feet. "Walter's having a baby. I'm sure you'll have one soon with your new mate."

"New mate?" My mind raced, trying to understand his words. "I don't have a new mate. Only you. Whenever you're ready."

With his hands on his hips, he shifted his weight to one side. "Then who was the guy you brought here early this morning? The one I saw you with in the village? You were holding his hand during your mating ceremony. Shouldn't you be with him now?"

"Lonnie?" I wanted to laugh at the misunderstanding but decided against it with the hurt and anger radiating off Nelson. "He's with his actual mate right now, completing the ceremony. He arrived last night after you fell asleep. I did not want to leave you then, but it's my responsibility here."

Nelson crossed his arms. "So, who's mate is he, then?"

"Banir's." I reached out to cup his elbow for some kind of contact before pulling my hand away again. "They had an instant attraction. Chauncey and I were surprised."

After wiping his palms on his pants, Nelson pouted. "You were holding his hand though. I thought..."

“I was also holding Vern’s hand on the other side. It was part of the ceremony.” One I hoped to have with my own future mate very soon.

“Oh.” He shuffled forward until he was close enough for me to pull him into my arms.

I did. “I’m sorry I left without saying anything and didn’t have a chance to return to you before the ceremony.”

He rested his head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry I thought you’d chosen someone else.”

I kissed his forehead before shaking my head. “Only you. I’m likely to meet a lot of outer-worlders with Ahmed’s cards working to bring you all here, but you’re the only outer-worlder for me.”

He looked up and we kissed until I felt a tugging on the string of my garment. I glanced to my side to find Walter’s oldest child there.

“Is that how a baby gets in his tummy?”

Nelson and I chuckled together.

“No.” I ruffled the little guy’s hair. “It involves a whole lot more. Once I’m sure your daddy and your new sibling are okay, I’d like to take my future mate home to practice.”

Nelson squeezed my hand and smiled. “I think that would be a great idea.”

Nelson

Practice makes perfect, a saying from the outer-world. And we did practice. A lot. But no amount of practice made me one hundred percent ready to go through with the mating ceremony, to commit to the Enchanted Forest, and allow my body to change in order to carry a baby or babies.

After some pleading from me, Holden convinced Ahmed to appoint a second security officer so they could trade off in rotation. I didn't want to have a baby with Holden if he was on call all the time. With the new arrangement, when Holden was on duty, I went to Walter's to help him with his new son and with the other two children. When I finally decided I wanted to commit my body to the Enchanted Forest, the experience would be good practice for raising my own children. In the meantime, Holden and I got to know each other better. He liked sex shortly after waking up, while I preferred it right before going to sleep. He yearned for the quietness of our home or the pond, but I would suck him off in the village if we had a tree to hide behind. He liked a lot of kissing while I rode his cock, and while I enjoyed that, too, I liked to use my mouth in many other ways. I praised him for being a principled lover, never leaving me to finish on my own as past lovers had in the outer-world.

I knew I wanted to be his mate. I had no doubt. It was becoming a parent that terrified me. Raising a child proved terrifying enough as part of a community, let alone being the person with the most responsibility in rearing one. I hadn't grown up even entertaining the idea, simply impossible for a man to get pregnant in my world. I became more and more comfortable with the concept, until one day, as I held Walter's baby, Joseph, in my arms, I decided I was ready.

When Holden met me that evening after his shift, I stopped him before we took the route to our home. “Let’s go to the village. I want to see Banir.”

His eyebrows quickly knit together as if angry and confused until they lifted into his forehead when he finally understood my meaning. “You’re ready?”

I nodded. “Yep, I want to officially be your mate and have your children.”

Holden

Taking his hand in mine, I tried not to race toward the village. Nelson had made up his mind, and I didn't want to wait to get the process started.

Instead of the hut I'd taken Nelson to when he first arrived, we headed toward Banir's new home, in the trees. Much had changed for the head of the forest council since his mate had arrived, including his personality. He did everything to keep Lonnie happy, and the outer-worlder seemed to do the same for him. Something I never expected to happen. And when we walked up the steps to their new home, we were met by a very pregnant Lonnie, instead of Chauncey, the minotaur assigned to be my relief security officer after being dismissed from his previous position.

"It's good to see you, Nelson. Holden." Lonnie smiled softly, a completely different glow on his face, as he rubbed his belly. "What brings you up here? Has a new outer-worlder arrived?"

I shook my head as Nelson stepped forward.

"I'm ready for the mating ceremony. I'm ready to be mated to Holden."

Lonnie smiled wide as he clapped his hands together. "I'm so happy for you. Let me get Banir, and we can make all the arrangements."

Two days later, after I'd finished my shift, I met Nelson in the center of the village.

He wore a white shirt and matching pants that Lonnie had believed would be perfect for the ceremony. His clothing rippled in the light breeze as I held his hand, with Lee on my other side. Banir and Ahmed stood in front of us, and the rest of the forest council joined us in a circle around them. Others from the village stood behind to bear as witnesses.

“Do you, Holden,”—Banir started the ceremony— “understand that by mating with an outer-worlder, you are responsible for them and any children they may bear in the future?”

“I do.” Even though I knew two of Walter’s previous mates had reneged on their commitment to him, I didn’t plan to do the same to Nelson.

“And do you, Nelson of the outer-world, understand that once you are mated, the magic of the Enchanted Forest will change your body to make it possible for you to bear children? So, you are not only making a commitment to Holden but to our world.”

“I do.” My mate squeezed my hand as he spoke.

“Do you, members of the forest council, promise to accept this union and bear witness to the magic that will unite them?”

“We do.” Many voices echoed in unison with no objections.

“And do you, beings of the Enchanted Forest, promise to accept this union, bear witness to the magic that will unite them, and help raise any children that will be born of this coupling?”

“We do!” Many hoots and hollers followed the chorus of voices.

Ahmed stepped forward, placing his palms on top of our heads. “With the magic granted to me by the Enchanted Forest, I declare Nelson of the outer-world and Holden of the Enchanted Forest to be mates. May the magic keep you happy and healthy and bring us many babies.”

More cheers erupted as the crowd tossed flower petals into the air. Our ceremony had been slightly different than the one I’d attended for Lonnie and Banir—Lonnie’s doing, I guessed—but none of it mattered in comparison to the part of the ceremony that came after.

“If you’ll excuse me.” I picked up Nelson and rested him over my shoulder, the way I had on the day he’d first arrived. “I’m going to take my mate home and finish our mating without all of you around.”

Through the chuckles, it was Nelson’s moan I heard after I tapped his butt. And, even with him over my shoulder, I’d never run home so fast, anxious to complete our ceremony and have Nelson making that noise many more times as we progressed from practicing to creating new life.

Nelson

Though the ceremony was far more casual and lacked a reception, the mating ritual was the same as a wedding in the outer-world in that we were expected to consummate the bond afterward. Though I had a feeling our bond depended on it.

Holden panted heavily by the time we reached our hut. I hadn't expected him to run, but the way he'd held my ass on the way made me eager to feel his thighs slap my butt as he pounded into me. If he would have stopped earlier to catch his breath, I wouldn't have given him the chance to finish the ceremony at home.

We tumbled into the hut and tossed off the little clothing we wore—something I had adjusted to since arriving in the Enchanted Forest.

Holden pulled me into him, and I jumped, wrapping my legs around his waist. We kissed, our lips prodding and pleading as our tongues danced in desperation, both of us eager to complete the ritual. Holding me tight, he kneeled to the floor before laying me onto our mattress pad. Our initial one was replaced that morning, the new one supposed to signify the start of our life as a mated couple. As with the ceremony, I didn't know how much of the customs were original and how many new traditions had been weaved in by Lonnie.

Yet, none of that mattered as my finally official mate kissed his way down my stomach as his fingers trailed down my sides. I moaned, enjoying every touch, and already hard. So hard. I didn't know if I would last until he was seated deep inside me. One pump—or maybe one kiss—of my cock, and I would go off. I didn't know if it was the magic of the ceremony or simply my own heightened senses, but every

touch from my mate felt wondrous and amplified my desire.

As Holden planted kisses across my stomach, where I would one day carry his babies, he ran a finger across my puckered hole. And it was wet. Wet!

Had I produced so much precum that it had dripped all the way down to my asshole? Or had I done something much worse? Something that would ruin the ceremony.

I scrambled back into the corner of the room, hoping I didn't leave a messy trail. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Holden narrowed his eyes at me, seeming confused rather than disgusted. "For what? I thought you were ready. All that slick—"

"Slick?" I'd overheard the term before but had no idea what it meant.

Holden smiled, reaching out for me. "In this world, once the mating ceremony happens, our mates don't need lube. You produce slick on your own."

I rolled my eyes and huffed out a breath. "Add that to the list of things people from my world need to be told before the mating ceremony."

He raised his brows, seeming to be trying hard to hide a smile. "Now that you know, can we get back to it?"

I fake pouted but crawled toward his outstretched arms. "I guess we'd better. Seems like my body is already changing."

Holden

I'd never had my instincts fight for control of my body with such force. But every

part of me, from my head to my toes, pulsed with the need to mate with Nelson, to plant my seed deep inside him while leaving a mark on him so everyone in the forest knew he was mine. They already knew, but a mark meant he was staying, that he was changing to be in this world with me. I wanted to spend my life making sure he never regretted that decision. Something I planned to start by officially claiming him.

As I held out my arms for him, hoping to convince him to come out of the corner, I made note of the slick issue. I thought he would have heard Walter and Lonnie talk about that change to their body, but I'd been wrong.

The pout he displayed did not match the sparkle in his eyes as he crawled toward me. He wasn't mad, but I couldn't imagine experiencing the same changes to my own body. The first time I'd shifted from turtle to human had been strange enough. But I had been so young, I barely remembered it. Nelson's own change was proving to be more extraordinary. He couldn't shift forms, but his whole body would change in order to produce offspring, something no one born in the Enchanted Forest had been able to do.

Nelson nuzzled into my neck and kissed along my collarbone, making my body tense with need. "Since I'm so slick for you already, why don't you fuck me right now? Plow hard into me, the way I like it."

I didn't wait for a second invitation, laying him on the mattress before leaning into his spread legs. I lined the tip of my cock with his oh-so-wet pink hole then pushed inside. Not hard at first. I didn't know how fast his body was changing, and I never wanted to hurt him.

As he gripped my biceps, he leaned his head back and moaned. "Feels so good. Amazing."

I took that as a sign to let my instincts take complete control, to stop thinking and

simply mate as we were intended. I withdrew until only the tip of my cock remained inside him then thrust hard.

His moan was louder, and he clung to me even tighter. “Yes.”

I let go completely, simply thrusting in and out, over and over with all that I had until I felt the fire consume my body, ready to release. Leaning closer to Nelson, I latched onto his neck, preparing to mark him.

He held me tight against him. “I am ready. Make me yours.”

The fire swept through me and released out of my cock like a flashover. I didn’t realize I had bit into Nelson’s neck until I felt his palm against the back of my head, holding me against him.

I let go and sat up, awareness creeping back into my mind. I still had to ensure my mate released. When I looked down between our stomachs, I realized he already had.

Trailing my finger along his belly, I looked into his eyes. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

He smiled as tears slipped down his cheeks. “I’m good. I’m more than good.”

“Are you sure?” I slipped out of him before laying beside him. “Why are you crying?”

He wiped his cheek and sniffled. “Because I feel like my wish, the one I made to get here, has come true. You’re the one I wished for.”

My heart warmed in a way I’d never believed possible before that moment. Nelson was what I had wished for, too, but never believed possible. But we had found each

other and would someday soon start a family.

Nelson

A few months had passed since I'd arrived in the Enchanted Forest. At least, it felt like that much time had passed. Though our days and nights did not coincide with the outer-world. When I wasn't helping Walter and Lonnie with their young ones—Lonnie already having birthed a litter of two—I worked with Marcel as a weaver, making baskets and thatched roofs for the community. When Holden and I had time off together, we made love as much as possible. He had me orgasming so much I felt like I never had a chance to come down from the high of being with him.

Not until I remembered I'd yet to get pregnant. Walter and Lonnie told me they both felt the transformation happen in their body as they suddenly had a womb to carry their mate's children. Yet, I felt nothing. Other than the ability to produce slick, my body hadn't changed at all. I worried my bond with Holden wasn't strong enough, or that this world was simply rejecting me. After all, my mate mark looked more like a bruise than the evident bites on the necks of my fellow outer-worlders.

Holden never mentioned his disappointment, only made me feel like I was the most special person in his world. However, I could see it in the passing glances of the others in the village, especially since the last outer-worlder who'd arrived demanded to return only hours later. He'd refused to be tied down to a mate, and in no way did he want to change his body for anyone. Ahmed had been shocked by his response, sure the man would have taken to the Enchanted Forest differently.

As I transversed the steps from Banir and Lonnie's home, exhausted from chasing kids around and simply wanting to curl up in my blankets, I worried I was the problem. In my world, there were women who weren't able to get pregnant, and some

of them tried in vitro fertilization to have a baby. The Enchanted Forest didn't have that technology. I had to face the facts. Maybe I wasn't receptive to their magic.

I had just reached the ground when a sharp pain shot down my spine. If weapons existed in the Enchanted Forest, I would have thought someone had shot me. Another slice of agony took hold, this time across my abdomen. My legs buckled. On my hands and knees, my head pounded. My vision blurred. Bile rose to my throat, and I had no strength to hold it in.

Voices echoed around me, but I couldn't make out a single one. I fell to my side, landing in a pile of my vomit, but I could do nothing to stop myself before I blacked out.

When I came to, I opened my eyes to the worried faces of Holden and Rauh. Somehow, I had been stripped, cleaned, and carried to my sleeping pod. I no longer felt like I would hurl, but sweat beaded across every portion of my skin.

Then I felt another pain across my stomach. I clutched my belly with a groan and turned onto my side.

“What's wrong with him?”

I heard the panic in my mate's voice as he spoke to the healer. I wanted to know, too, especially if it led to death. There weren't many outer-worlders in the Enchanted Forest, and Rauh was never trained in our physiology. He only knew magic to heal. But if some outer-world disease plagued me, I would never find treatment in the forest.

Holden

I held Nelson's hand as the healer used cold cloths infused with peppermint oil on my

mate's forehead and neck to help reduce his fever and make him feel better. Though nothing seemed to work, my mate going in and out of consciousness as drops of water continued to bead up on his chest and arms no matter how many times I wiped them away.

"I think his body is rejecting the magic." Rauh placed two fingers on Nelson's neck, where my mate mark resided. "His heart rate is elevated and erratic."

"What can I do for him?" I did not want Nelson to suffer, yearned for him to get better. I would do anything for him.

"If he was pregnant, I would say he's in the process of giving birth." Rauh rubbed my mate's back. "But since he's shown no signs of pregnancy, I think he might have to return to his world. If he stays, the magic might end his life."

My heart broke at that prognosis. I didn't want to lose my mate in either way. I loved him. I wanted to be with him forever. "There must be something else we can try. He's been here for ten nothams. If he is rejecting the magic, wouldn't he have shown signs before now?"

The healer's faced winced as he shrugged. "I don't know."

Though I understood Rauh's answer, him having experience with only two other outer-worlders, it held no comfort or satisfaction. "Is there anything Ahmed could bring back from the outer-world that would help him? Anything at all?"

The healer switched out the cold cloth before opening Nelson's eyelids and his mouth for reasons I didn't understand. "I have to know what is wrong with him before I can properly treat him. So, maybe a text of outer-worlder diagnosis? That is, if I could even read the outer-world language."

My heart ripped a little more. I did not want to have to say goodbye to Nelson in any way. He'd wished his way into my life, and I'd wished for him only moments before he'd arrived. We were meant to be together. I had to do something to keep it that way.

"Let me go summon Ahmed. He lives among the outer-worlders. Maybe he can tell us something or get Nelson what he needs." I couldn't sit there and watch Nelson suffer. While I wanted to remain by his side, I would never forgive myself if I lost him but did nothing to stop it.

Holden

I stood in the meadow, waiting for a sign, for the ripple of magic in the air that appeared just before a being made the crossover from the outer-world to the Enchanted Forest. But it never came. No matter how many times I screamed or cried out for the wizard who'd brought my mate to me, Ahmed never appeared.

Helplessness consumed my body like a vice, and I slumped to the ground. The meadow used to comfort me, remind me of the day I'd first met Nelson. But with Nelson so ill, the area only brought sorrow. I would never wish I hadn't met my mate, but I wasn't ready for our time together to be over.

Suddenly, I felt the air swell before a pop indicated someone had crossed into our world. I glanced up, expecting to see Ahmed, desperate for his help. But, instead, it was an outer-worlder in a pair of boots that went all the way up his waist, gloves made of the same material covering his entire arm, and a large-brimmed hat with netting around the edge that hung down and covered his face.

The last thing I needed to worry about was a new outer-worlder. But, even with my mate so ill, I still had the responsibility to make them welcome in the Enchanted Forest. Chauncey had stayed on duty as long as he could but needed some time to sleep.

"Where am I?" The outer-worlder lifted the net from his face and glanced around with curiosity rather than the fear I'd seen in Nelson when he'd first arrived. "And how did I get here? This isn't the habitat I was assigned to."

I breathed in quick, ready to answer, but he spoke again before I got the chance.

“And who are you?” His facial features wrinkled in confusion as he looked me up and down. “I know we’re all for leaving the environment as natural as possible, but aren’t you worried about all the ticks and mosquitoes out here? You’re barely covered. My workplace guide told me to keep every part of my body covered while out in the field.”

“I’m Holden, and this is the Enchanted Forest.” I reached into the pocket of the shorts I wore and took out one of Ahmed’s cards. “And you wished your way here by using a card like this.”

With a chuckle, he slowly shook his head. “You must think you’re funny. I’ve never seen a card like that, and I never made any wish. I was just doing my turtle tally up at the South Arrow Conservation Park. I ducked around some reeds to see if there were turtles on the log on the other side, and I ended up here, this place you call the Enchanted Forest.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. How had he arrived if not by wishing on a card? Had Ahmed found some other way to send outer-worlders to our world? “Um, turtle tally?” Although I had many questions, that was the only one I managed to voice.

He sighed. “Yes, I count turtles as part of my co-op position with the Turtle Conservation Center, my summer placement while I study herpetology.”

“You...study turtles?” There had to be some reason this guy had arrived in our world, but I had yet to figure it out. I was a turtle, though I wasn’t the one who needed help.

“Yes.” Another heavy sigh. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me you’re a turtle shifter since this is the Enchanted Forest.”

“Actually...” With the sarcasm in his voice, I decided to show him instead of spending precious time trying to convince him to believe me.

Once I was in my turtle form, he took several steps back. When I poked my head out of my shell, his eyes were wide and his face pale.

“You...you really are a turtle shifter.”

I returned to my human form to get the answers I needed. “Yes, and I think you were sent here to help me. What’s your name?”

“Chelone.” He slowly shook his head. “But I don’t know how I can help you. I don’t know anything about shifters.”

“No.” I gestured him to follow me. “But you know turtles, and I think you’re Ahmed’s way of telling me what’s wrong with my mate.” At least I hoped that was the reason for his arrival.

Nelson

I clutched my lower abdomen, sure my stomach was trying to eat me from the inside. Rauh had no idea how to help me and couldn’t even give me pain medication to bear through it all. So, I passed out when the pain became unbearable. The next time I returned to consciousness, I awoke to find Holden gone and Rauh asleep. Must have been nice to be able to sleep or to leave. I would have left, returned to the outer-world, had I been able to stand. Though I had no one to return to and no job to pay for medical care to treat whatever I had.

“We’re here!” Holden burst into the hut, frightening Rauh awake. He had someone with him. An outer-worlder. A much younger outer-worlder.

I tried but couldn't mutter a word as another bolt of pain stretched its way across my belly.

Holden knelt onto the sleeping pod beside me and brushed hair off my forehead. "This is Chelone. He's a student studying herpetology and specializes in turtles."

"Great," I said through clenched teeth. "You've replaced me already."

"No!" Holden clasped my hand. "No, I would never do that. But I think Ahmed sent him here to help you."

I almost rolled my eyes but winced instead with a new slice of agony. "I'm not a turtle."

"No, but your mate is." The turtle kid moved closer. "And he explained to me on the way here what you're experiencing. I think you're egg bound."

"What does that mean?" I didn't have the patience or energy for an advanced lesson on turtles.

Holden squeezed my hand. "He thinks your body is trying to lay eggs."

"That's right!" Rauh jumped from the chair he'd dozed off in. "You wouldn't be pregnant the same as the other outer-worlders because your mate is not a mammal. It all makes sense now. Why didn't I see this before?"

"That's exactly what I explained to Holden." The kid knelt by my feet. "But I fear you might have a stuck egg. That's why you're hurting so much instead of them coming out on their own."

I squeezed Holden's hand with another shot of pain. "Then please help me. I don't

know how much more I can take.”

Turtle dude shuffled closer. “May I touch your belly?”

I nodded, hoping he had a solution. That was all I wanted.

He pushed and twisted my stomach, never flat to begin with, but it had gotten slightly bigger since arriving in the Enchanted Forest. Never enough to make me think I was pregnant, I had always blamed it on the delicious stews the bear shifters made on their weekly visit to the village.

“Some turtles can hold onto fertilized eggs for up to two years,” Turtle guy said. “I’m not sure how long you’ll hold onto yours, but I’m sure you’re egg bound now with all the symptoms. If you’ve never laid eggs before, it could be why these ones are stuck.”

“How do we get them unstuck?” Holden asked before I could.

“I mean.” Turtle guy shrugged. “I could stick a finger with some lube into your vent to see if I could get it unstuck.”

If I hadn’t been in so much agony, I would have laughed at the awkward expression on his face.

“But soaking in a warm bath for about twenty minutes could do the trick. My sister just had a baby, and I know that helped her. Though that was a slightly different situation, I know other students at my school mentioned doing the same for ducks.”

Rauh jumped to his feet. “I’ll get the beavers to build a quick trough. We’ll start a fire and warm up some water and get it all ready.”

With his departure, I had some hope I wasn't dying of some strange disease, and that I would be able to give Holden—and the forest—children. Whether or not my eggs were fertilized didn't matter, only that my body had changed, that the magic had worked on me. Though, with the amount of sex Holden and I had, I wouldn't be surprised if they weren't already fertilized and containing tiny turtle shifters. I simply had to get them out.

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Holden

“Well, thank you for all your help, and for saving my mate.” I held out my hand to Chelone, hoping it was the appropriate gesture for the situation. Nelson had taught me more about hugs, handshakes, high fives, and fist bumps, but I didn’t meet many outer-worlders to practice the various greetings with.

When he took my hand in response, with a firm but not too tight grip, I knew I’d chosen correctly.

“Glad I could help. This was definitely an experience I doubt anyone else in my program, or even my school, has ever gotten.”

I chuckled, sure he was correct unless other worlds like mine existed somewhere. “Well, I know we all appreciate all you have taught us, and especially Rauh, if problems arise in the future.”

Chelone shrugged. “I’m not a medical doctor, or even a veterinarian. But I do really enjoy working with reptiles, so that helped.”

More than he would ever understand. “And, hey, you got to meet shifters.”

“And a wizard.” Ahmed appeared beside me, making both Chelone and I jump.

Chelone furrowed his brows. “Hey, I’ve seen you before.”

The wizard grinned. “Yes, I thought you might be useful in our world someday, and I

was right.” He handed the hepatology student a card. “And if you decide you’d like to return someday, just use this.”

Chelone tucked the card in his pocket, underneath his odd pants. “Well, I’ve enjoyed not having to worry about all the bugs, but I don’t think I will return anytime soon. I have a lot going on in my world right now. But one never knows what the future holds.”

“That’s right.” Ahmed winked at me before turning his attention to the student. “You’d better put all your gear back on. I’m returning you to the spot you left from.”

“But...” Chelone wrinkled his face in confusion as he pulled his arm straps up over his shoulders. “Hasn’t a whole day passed since I left? I should be at home today. It’s my day off.”

Ahmed rested a hand on the young man’s shoulder and guided him closer to the meadow. “Time here passes differently than in the outer-world. It will be like no time has passed at all for you. And you might not even remember your time here.”

That was the last I heard from them before they both disappeared into the air. Hoping no other outer-worlders arrived until Chauncey replaced me on shift, I rushed back to my hut.

Walter met me at the door, his finger to his lips before glancing behind him to the sleeping area inside. “Nelson dozed off not that long ago. He’s so excited to have laid eggs, but the whole ordeal has exhausted him so much.”

I stepped inside to find my mate curled around the nest he’d made from blankets, three blueish-white shiny eggs inside. “I bet he was worried about sleeping without me here.”

Walter nodded. “You make him feel safe, which is a good thing, but he’s also fiercely protective of those little ones already. I’m so happy for the both of you.”

I smiled, my heart so warm with pride. If Nelson had never laid eggs, I still would have been happy to spend the rest of my life with him, but he seemed to want them more than anything. I was happy he had been able to lay them, even though he did require help in the beginning.

Walter rubbed my back. “Now that you’re here, I’m going to return home to ensure my little ones haven’t tied Oscar to a tree.”

I chuckled, though hoped he only joked. “Thank you for staying with him.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Walter reached for the door. “I appreciate all the help Nelson has given me since he arrived. And I enjoy having other outer-worlders to talk to.” He waved before heading out.

I closed the door behind him then made my way over to my mate. Carefully, I crawled onto the bed, taking the spot on the other side of the clutch. I brushed the sweaty strands of hair from Nelson’s forehead before leaning forward to kiss him there.

Without opening his eyes, he smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi, my love. Rest now. I’m here.”

His smile widened for a moment before he relaxed into the pod and snored softly.

It was hard to believe we would soon be parents, chasing after little ones like the other mated couples. But for that time period, our only responsibility was to care for the tiny eggs between us.

Nelson

Waiting was an impossible task. I'd had to wait in my former life in the outer-world as a production editor. Wait for people to send me the digital video footage I needed. Wait for approval from my higher-ups. And wait for an air date from the broadcasting channel. But none of that proved as difficult as waiting for my eggs to hatch. No one knew how long it would take my babies to come out of their shells. Not even Chelone could give us an estimate of the time they needed to incubate before he left. Though he did mention I shouldn't have to sit on them like a bird, if I kept them wrapped. And I was ready for my babies to crack their way out. Or I thought I was.

The three eggs I laid were originally each the size of a large grapefruit but grew a little bigger before the shells changed from opaque to a solid white. They also hardened from the jellylike substance to a covering more solid and dry. Yet, I worried they were more delicate, more susceptible to cracking, like a chicken egg back in my world.

Because we had no idea when they would hatch, I barely left the hut. Only when Holden was there and awake to watch over them would I venture out to enjoy the sunshine, or occasionally to visit the community garden. Yet, I never left for long. Luckily, no other outer-worlders had arrived since I'd laid my eggs. Though Holden still had other duties to attend to, he remained with me as much as possible, making sure I slept and ate.

Offers had come in from others in the village to watch our eggs for us, but I refused them all. I wanted at least Holden or myself there when they hatched, so they could imprint on us. Not someone who wasn't their parent.

As I finished the last bite of the latest meal Walter had dropped off for me, Holden came into the hut, naked since he wasn't on shift. He walked over and kissed my forehead. "Okay, the tub is filled and ready for you to wash up."

"Thank you." Ever since that trough had been built to help me lay my eggs, I used it as a tub to wash up. It was easier to use than the makeshift shower that simply felt like a bucket of water being dumped over my head. Also, we planned to use it one day to hold our babies as they learned to swim. And Holden never once complained about filling it up for me. He saw it as part of his duty as my mate. I glanced up and kissed him on the lips. "You really are the best mate I could have ever asked for."

He pulled me up and wrapped his arms around me. "You're wrong. Because I have the best mate."

I wrinkled my nose as he grinned playfully and rocked us back and forth.

"Wanna get dirty before I wash up?"

He slid his hand under the waistband of my boxers and cupped my ass. "I'll get dirty with you anytime. I'm already getting hard thinking about what I want to do to you."

Reaching behind me, I cleared a spot on the table, anxious for him to take me.

Holden leaned forward, kissing my lips, down to my neck, and across my collarbone.

My body buzzed with need. More focused on the eggs lately, we didn't have as much sex as we used to when we were practicing, and I had craved him inside me so much, I was dreaming about it.

With both hands under my boxers, Holden pushed them down and let them puddle at my feet. He lifted me up onto the table and moved between my spread legs.

A chill of excitement raced down my spine. I wanted him to fuck me so bad, I was sure I was already wet with slick. When he ran a finger around my hole, my suspicions were confirmed.

“Oh, you’re eager for me, my love.”

“Fu-uck, just take me already.” I couldn’t wait, everything in me craving the release I knew Holden would give me.

I rested the backs of my heels on his shoulders and wiggled my ass closer to his cock. “I need you in me.”

His brows flicked up and he gave me a wry grin. “There’s something about your outer-world mating language that gets me excited.”

After lining the tip of his cock with my hole, he grabbed my thighs and ever so slowly pushed his way in. “But I’m going to take my time with you today.”

I let out a heavy breath. He knew his long, slow strokes tortured me, yet, he kept the same steady rhythm over and over, leisurely stroking my cock in the process and rubbing his thumb across the tip. While I enjoyed every minute of our connection, it wasn’t what I wanted from him.

I moved my legs off his shoulders and wrapped them around his back, keeping him seated deep inside me so I could simply feel his fullness. “C’mon. Please, I need this.”

“Okay.” With a grin, Holden pried my legs from his waist and held them bent against my stomach. His stroke started long and slow again, but his speed quickly increased until his balls slapped my ass cheeks. Clutching my hips, he pulled me into him as he plunged in deep. The fire in my belly grew with every thrust and my head spun with

pleasure. I was so close to release.

“Mine,” he grunted, slamming into me so hard, I had to grip the table to keep from falling off.

He placed one hand on my chest and spit in the other one before taking hold of my cock. “I can feel how close you are, my love. I want us to go together.”

After mimicking his motions inside me with his hand a few times, he pulled out and held our cocks together. It was like our first time all over again. Only, it didn’t take as long before I let go, my pleasure releasing all over his hand as I gripped the table harder. He continued to pump us both until he bellowed, shooting out his own orgasm onto my chest.

With his hair appearing damp, and his chest covered in beads of sweat, Holden looked as spent as I felt. He braced his hands on the table and leaned over me, panting. “That was... You were...”

And that’s when we heard it. The first crack.

No time to enjoy the post-sex euphoria, I pushed Holden off me and nearly fell off the table in my rush to get over to my eggs. Upon close examination, I noticed one of them had a tiny fracture on its side and the egg seemed to vibrate from within. Only one though. The other two laid as still as they had for the last sixty days.

Holden came over and handed me a wet cloth. “Why don’t you go wash up? I’ll keep an eye on them. It’s likely to be a while before any of them make their way out.”

I used the cloth to wipe myself off, but I didn’t leave my clutch. “Chelone said they could take up to twenty minutes to hatch, but this one seems anxious to get out. And if one started, the others will be coming soon.”

“O-kay.” Holden sighed. He knew I wouldn’t budge.

I’d waited for the moment of their hatching for months.

“I’ll go get the nursery enclosure ready for them.”

Since I hadn’t laid my eggs in a hole the way turtle mothers would, my babies wouldn’t have the moisture and protection of the soil around them to keep them safe until they were strong enough to swim or shift for the first time. Chelone had said to keep them in a moist but not wet enclosure that wouldn’t dry out their egg sacs and would keep them from wandering off. He also told me not to help them out of their shells, a command I found very hard to follow.

I wanted to break into those shells and bring my little ones out to meet them for the first time. I had to sit on my hands to resist the temptation.

After placing the prepared enclosure beside our bed, Holden handed me a glass of water and joined me on the sleeping pad. “Any progress?”

I shook my head. “The egg is still moving, but there’s nothing more than a crack.”

We watched and waited until, finally, the crack turned into a little hole, our little one’s caruncle poking through. And the other two eggs began to move at the same time.

I gripped Holden’s hand. “They’re coming.”

We watched and waited over the next hour as the eggs hatched. As each of our little ones came out, we carefully lifted them from their shell, making sure their egg sac remained attached. We held them close to say hello then transferred them into the nursery. They didn’t move much once inside, but they’d just endured a hard journey

out of their shells.

Knowing they were all safe in the enclosure, I took that time to have a bath, a temporary reprieve from parent worry since I couldn't do anything for them at that moment. Though I knew while I relaxed in the tub, Holden watched them as closely as I would have to ensure nothing happened to our little ones. I truly loved my mate.

Holden

As Nelson gathered our little ones and placed them in the travel carrier he had woven specifically for them, I stood back in admiration. Over the last few weeks, he'd adapted to being a parent of turtle shifters with complete ease. My mate had no issues with digging up grubs or visiting the community garden with our little ones, to get them food to eat. From the instant our babies had hatched from their shells, Nelson was obsessed with making sure they had everything they needed. Sure, it meant less time for only the two of us, but we didn't need any more fertilized eggs to make an appearance until our first three were old enough to have some independence.

Once our babies had lost their egg sacs, we exposed them to water to get them used to swimming. At first, we put a platform in their nursery container and added an inch of water. They curiously walked down the ramp until they'd reached the edge of the water then dove right in. No hesitation from any of them. When they grew a little bigger, we did the same with the trough. Only, with more water and a bigger platform. Since that space was big enough, I joined them in my shifted form. The first time since I was a hatchling that I'd swum with other turtles.

But it was time to take our young ones to the pond, to let them experience a new and more natural environment. A place and time where they could get to know me and what it meant to be a turtle.

Nelson closed our children in the case and put on his hat. "You're going to make sure they return, right? You're not going to let them stay in the pond?"

"I promise they will all return with us for dinner." With a kiss, I hoped to reassure my

mate once again that our children wouldn't leave him once they visited the pond. He feared no longer being needed, and of all of us leaving him alone in the hut, never to return. It had taken me several days simply to convince him to let his little boys go for an afternoon swim.

He released a heavy breath before taking my hand in his. "Okay, let's go."

Though he walked slower than usual, Nelson never suggested returning to the house. And when we reached the pond, he sat on our favorite log to watch me swim. Carefully, he picked each of our children out of their spot in the carrier and set them onto the ground.

Still worried Nelson might change his mind, I gave him a quick kiss and squeezed his hand before I shifted to my turtle form. Our children clicked and squeaked when I joined them, anxious to visit the pond where I once lived.

Two of them followed me down the bank toward the edge of the pond, but the other remained closer to Nelson, more reluctant to leave him.

"Come on, little one," I clicked at him. "Your daddy will wait right there for all of us to return. He's not going anywhere." That I was sure of. Not until we were all safely back in front of him.

The little one twisted his neck back to look at Nelson then pushed his way across the dirt to join his brothers.

Once in the water, we practiced floating for a bit then gliding across the surface of the water. I showed them the best spot to wait for bugs to drop into the water and let them snack on a couple ants that had demonstrated the location perfectly.

Then we began to dive. A lesson I couldn't teach them properly in the trough.

Our eldest found it tough to get his body to submerge, unable to coordinate his front and back legs to overcome his buoyancy. But our youngest, who'd wanted to stay behind with Nelson, excelled at the process. He kept diving to the bottom and surfacing to click at his brother who hadn't yet made it down.

"Keep trying," I squeaked to the oldest. "You can do it." I knew he could.

Eventually he did. I decided to take them to my favorite spot to find shrimp and snails to eat. I didn't want to spoil their dinner or keep them underwater for too long and worry Nelson, so we surfaced after a quick taste of the new cuisine and found a rock to sunbathe on.

When we returned to Nelson, he smiled with tears in his eyes. "Did you all have fun?"

Our little ones squeaked and clicked, sharing their favorite spot in the pond, as I shifted back to my human form.

I helped Nelson put our children back in their carrier before we all headed back to our hut. With my arm around my mate, I pulled him into my side. "Thank you for letting us go there today."

He gave me a sad smile. "It hurts that there are things you get to do with our boys I will never be able to do. But I'm glad I was at least there to watch. I just worry about them going down to the pond on their own, and me not knowing where they are."

I rubbed his back. "I will teach them the rules of the pond as my pops taught me." I didn't know if they would always obey the rules, but I would do my best to keep Nelson from worrying about them too much.

That night, with our little ones nestled in their nursery, and Nelson and I cuddling on

a sleeping pod, we all slept soundly, exhausted from our first family outing.

Nelson

Back in the outer-world, I'd always heard the adage: "Kids grow up too fast." I'd never paid much attention to it, never planning to have children of my own. Yet, since the hatching of my three little ones, I related to the saying more every day.

Though they had yet to shift, my boys had grown to half the size of their father's turtle form. Every day, it became routine to take them with me to the community garden, where I would gather the ingredients I needed to make the evening's dinner. On the way home, I stopped by the pond, where Holden would meet us and take the boys for an afternoon swim.

Sometimes I stayed, especially in the beginning. But most of the time, I returned home on my own to prepare dinner.

We hadn't named our boys yet, Holden telling me the tradition was to wait to have a naming ceremony after their first shift. So, while they kept me busy, no longer satisfied with remaining in their nursery during the day, I waited to see their human form just as I had for them to hatch. And though I did have names picked out for each of them, Holden refused to hear them as he believed I would change my mind once I saw them in their shifted human form.

For the evening meal, I prepared a salad of romaine, carrot tops, parsley, dandelion leaves, and clover for the boys, and a bean salad with vinaigrette dressing for Holden and me. No meat in the Enchanted Forest had been something to get used to. There were bugs and crustaceans available, but I passed on those.

I had just placed the food on the table when the door opened.

I turned around, expecting to see Holden with the carrier, but a little boy who seemed to be around three years of age with light-brown skin and a mop of brown, curly hair came rushing inside. I didn't see the other kids in the Enchanted Forest as often as I used to before I'd laid my eggs, but I was sure the boy in front of me wasn't any of them. Had a young outer-worlder gotten hold of a card and somehow wished his way to the Enchanted Forest?

The boy stood in the foyer and smiled at me. "Hi, Daddy."

I gasped and my heart skipped a beat as the identity of this child hit me. "Um, hi." I shuffled closer to get a better look at him, made him turn around and lift his arms. Was he really one of my boys? "You shifted."

He nodded with exaggerated movements. "Poppa said to surprise you."

I placed my hand on my chest. "Well, I am surprised." In many ways. I hadn't expected my young boys to be the size of preschoolers and already be talking. I mean, I talked to them all the time, and they responded with their clicks and squeaks, but I hadn't expected them to resemble the boy in front of me. Though I did see the same nose and eyes as Holden.

"Where is your poppa?"

He shrugged and looked back at the door. "Coming," he squeaked out.

All along, I thought I would be prepared to see my boys in their human form, but instead, I stood and stared at him. Had his brothers shifted, too, or was he the first? And which of my boys was he? I couldn't tell.

"Well, come and sit down." I gave him a long hug then helped him up onto a chair.

We didn't really have enough room at the table for all five of us, but I would make it work. I got my boy a plate full of salad and placed it in front of him. "Eat up. I am sure you need it after your first shift."

He shook his head. "Poppa let us eat lots of snails and shrimp today."

Strange. Usually, Holden didn't let them spoil their dinner. Had he known they were ready to shift?

A few minutes later, Holden walked in with another of our sons in his arms and the other wrapped around his leg both shifted to their human forms as well. "It was an eventful afternoon at the pond."

"Looks like it." I wanted to be happy they'd finally shifted, yet a wave of sadness washed over me at not being there for their first time.

When I reached for our boy around Holden's leg, he climbed up into my arms. "Daddy." He squeezed me tight, and tears welled in the corners of my eyes. Each new milestone in their lives filled me with intense joy and a looming fear. All three of my boys were so precious to me, but I had no idea how to raise them to be happy turtle shifters with no other turtle shifter parents around to help me. Holden and I were on our own.

After we set them up at the table with food in front of them, my mate and I leaned back against the counter.

I nudged him in his side. "You let them eat more than usual. Did you know they were going to shift today?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "No. I knew it would be soon, so I've been letting them eat a little more in preparation, but I would have asked you to stay if I'd known."

“Where they...okay?” I had no idea if it hurt the first time or if it was possible for them to get stuck in the middle of a shift.

He released a heavy breath and jerked his head to the side. “They really caught me by surprise. I shifted as soon as I got out of the water. And they did the same, as if they had already done it several times. Though I think the younger two got scared when it happened. That’s why I sent our eldest up ahead. He had no issues and was anxious to show you he had shifted.”

“Okay, good.” I breathed out my relief before I faced Holden and placed my hands on his shoulders. “Can we please have the naming ceremony now? I’m tired of referring to our children by the order they hatched. Plus, I’m positive the names I picked for them work no matter what form they take.”

“Sure.” With a smile, he placed his hands on my hips and leaned forward to kiss the corner of my mouth.

The contact sent tingles down my neck and under my tongue and made me crave an intense practice session with him. But we had three little boys to think about, young ones who couldn’t be confined to a nursery container while their parents fooled around. Finding alone time had become a little trickier.

“We just need one witness for the ceremony.” Holden brushed his thumb along my cheek. “Who would you like it to be?”

Several names passed through my head, but I had no idea how to choose and found it hard to concentrate under his intense gaze that I was used to before one of our practice sessions.

At that moment, someone knocked on our door. I went to pass Holden to answer it, but my mate got there first, opening the door only wide enough for his body. Though he blocked me seeing the person outside, I still heard who it was.

The wizard.

“I felt a disturbance in the magic and thought an outer-worlder had arrived and wanted to return already. But Chauncey says no one has appeared today. So, I thought I’d check here next.”

Holden opened the door to the wizard and the minotaur behind him. “Our boys shifted for the first time today. And you’re right on time to be witnesses for their naming ceremony.”

Their appearance made me happy. I didn’t have to wait any longer to officially name our children. Plus, I didn’t have to choose one person out of the many who were important to me in the Enchanted Forest.

The naming of our children wasn’t as extravagant as our mating ceremony. Holden and I stood together behind each of our boys and with our hand on their head, I called out the name I had picked. Our eldest son, I named Ashwin after a character on my favorite show back in the outer-world. Ellis, the name for our middle son, came from my grandfather who’d passed before I reached middle school. And our youngest was named Oswald after a friend from my childhood who had moved away. All connections to the outer-world while living a new life in the Enchanted Forest.

That night, as the five of us tried to fit together on the sleeping pod, I realized we’d have to expand our hut or move as Walter and Lonnie had in preparation for their expanding families. Yet, there was something so content about all of us in one space. When I had wished my way to the Enchanted Forest, I was simply looking for someone to love me. And while I had found that love during my time in the new world, my love for others in the Enchanted Forest had grown even more. And I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.